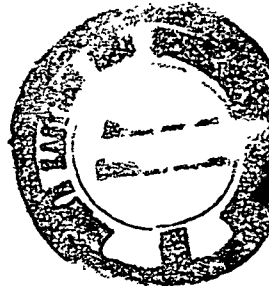


**A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF
THE WORSHIP OF UMANG LAI (FOREST GODS)
IN MANIPUR**



A THESIS PRESENTED FOR THE
Ph. D. DEGREE OF
GAUHATI UNIVERSITY

LEITANTHEM DEBEN SINGH



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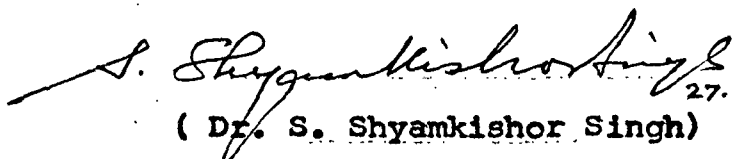
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This is to certify that Shri Leitanthem Deben Singh has prepared his thesis "A Philosophical Study of the Worship of Umang Lai (Forest Gods) in Manipur" under my supervision and that he has fulfilled all the requirements under the Ph. D. regulations of Gauhati University in submitting the thesis.

The thesis is the result of his own investigation and he has not submitted this thesis or a part thereof for any other degree of any other University.


(Dr. S. Shyamkishor Singh) 27.5.91

Research Guide.

C O N T E N T

Preface

- I INTRODUCTION** 1-20
- II THE WORSHIP OF LAI (DEITIES)** 21-42
- Historical background - Meaning of the term "Lai" - Yumlai and Lamlai - Worship of Yumlai (household deities) - Lamlais (outdoor deities) - Umang Lais and Nats.
- III LAI HARAOKA AS A RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL** 43-67
- Meaning of Lai Haraoka - Forms of Lai Haraoka - Worship of Pakhangba - Maibas and Maibis (Priests and Priestesses) - Family deities - Ancestor worship - Religion and Magic.
- IV RITUALS OF LAI HARAOKA** 68-107
- Important stages of Haraoka rituals - Daily programme - Leisemba jagoi (dance of creation) - Laibou - Mikon thakonba (calling up spirits) - Chong Khong Litpa ritual - Lairen Mathek Chatpa - Kanglei Thokpa - Lairoi - Ongri Hangel Chongba - Hijing Hirao ritual.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS 108-145

Introduction - Legend on the origin
of the Salais - Legend of Creation -
Myths connected with Atiya Guru
Sidaba and Soraren - Legend of Khamba
and Thoibi - Legend of Henjunaha -
Khongjongnubi Nongaron - The story of
Sungod and two maidens.

**VI OTHER RITUALS ANCILLARY TO WORSHIP
OF DEITIES** 146-170

Theoretical background- Saroi Khangba
- Cheiraoba and Cheithaba - Nature
worship and the Tree Cult - Ancestor
worship.

VII CONCLUSION 171-185

Bibliography 186-195

Photos on Laiharaoba

PREFACE

The objective of this thesis is to study worship as the active phase of religion with special reference to the worship of Umang Lai (Forest Deities) by the Meitei people of Manipur. The study is mainly philosophical with interdisciplinary bias. In the course of the study, references have been made to a number of anthropological and sociological theories in an attempt to analyse and interpret the traditional religious belief of the Meiteis.

I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my learned teacher Dr. S. Shyamkishor Singh, Head of the Department of Philosophy, Manipur University, for his kind supervision and help at every stage of my research work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Worship is the fundamental and inalienable aspect of religion. As the active phase of religion it includes cult and taboo, rites and devotion, feast and penance. As an attitude it involves the sense of awe and love, dread and adoration. As belief it has many dimensions because it ranges from myth to philosophy, from passion for ideas packed with imagination to the respect for truth. Since the object varies from the deity to the devil, we have different forms of worship, such as, devine worship, ancestor worship, devil worship, idol worship, nature worship, snake worship, tree worship, etc. Thus, worship touches upon the physical, psychical and the socio-cultural dimensions of religious behaviour.

Belief and worship are the inseparable practical side of religion. No definition of religion can be regarded as complete in which the motive of worship is left undetermined. In the wide sense, religion may be defined as "the worship of higher powers from a sense of need". Belief in higher powers, and the worship offered to them do not, alone, constitute religion; faith arising from the sense of need must also be there. Feeling, belief and will - together constitute religion both in the

lowest and in the highest form of culture and civilization. Even the primitive people living in entire isolation will not seek benefits without some sense of attachment. When this sense of attachment appears in the human heart, the first gleam of religion appears in human life and in the society in which man lives. Where the sense of human weakness and deficiency has inspired man to hold communion with a higher power, there religion has made its appearance.

Religion is a link between man and God, and the essence of religion has always been understood to be the establishment by man of a relation between himself and the Almighty Infinite Being. William James was right when he defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine".¹ Each religion possesses its own doctrines, creeds and rituals. But there is one feature which is common to all, namely, God. God is the centre of all religions. } ✓

What rank
attain?

1. William James - Varieties of Religious Experience,
P.32

Since religion generally refers to beliefs, attitudes, practices, feelings and moods, rites and cults play very important roles in the development of a religion. The rites may be magical or religious, positive or negative, attractive or repulsive, participative or ascetic, although, however, they may sometimes overlap each other. They may be either simple or complex depending upon the level of civilization of the people professing the religions. Not all ritual observances are regarded as religious worships since magical rites are usually placed in another class, just as the marriage rites and similar other rites bearing social value may be regarded as religious incidentally. To be regarded as religious worship, rituals should have the sanction and recognition by a religion. The rituals should also be directed towards an object. In religion, God is ordinarily considered as the object of worship. Wherever men placate unseen foes or make offerings to hidden friends, there worship is present and divinity recognised.

The level on which man places his Deity depends upon the level of his imagination as well as the sophistication of his cultural attainment. As intelligence of man grows, the edification of human sentiments is

accompanied by the elevation of the objects of regard. The trivial objects which attract the feebler animist or fetishist give place to the more inspiring or more dignified forces of nature, which become the spirits that move in wind and wave, that rise as luminous heavenly stars, or circle through the year on the swift feet of the seasons. Nature worship is to the fount of the imagery by which we represent to ourselves the augustness and sublimity of divinity. In the end we feast our imagination of things spiritual with selestial rather than terrestrial phenomena, through the natural projection of that recognition of the beneficence of light which makes us also liken our most intimate spiritual inward gift to an "illumination". The metaphor of light is equally incvitable when applied to wisdom and to grace.

There are also other images which define the objects of adoration. Foremost among them are kinship terms, which are the natural titles of Gods. "Father Heaven" and "Mother Earth" (in Manipuri language "Ipā Sorāren" and "Imā Leimaren", respectively) have each a doubt title to reverence, for the kinship expressed adds to the sublimity and beauty of nature the whole context of humanity in its most winning character, which

behind this lies the whole mystery of procreation which is central to all the early stage of religious veneration. These two factors, namely, human kinship and natural sublimity are dominant. Also, gods have been likened to warriors, judges, lords, kings, etc.; but in their supremacies the light of heaven and the love of the parents have always been their final attributes. Moreover, in the primitive societies the object of worship is also treated as a power that transcends man's own power.

Thus, in order to trace the origin of religion, by that matter the origin of worship, we have to refer to the basic nature of man in terms of his physical and mental needs, and man's intimate relationship with his parents as well as his near and dear ones. We have to go back to man's roots in the past. As the great German philosopher and indologist Professor Max Muller has rightly stated : "Religion may change, and it has changed, as we know; but however much it may change, it can never be severed from its deepest roots, and it is in these deepest roots that we ought to seek, as it seems to me, the true essence of religion".²

2. Max Muller, Natural Religion(Gifford Lectures, 1889), Collected Works of Max Muller, Asian Reprint, New Delhi, 1979, p.104

There are several stages in the development of man's religious beliefs and practices, just as there are stages in the development of human culture and civilization. According to Max Muller, the beginning lies in man's percepts, that is, in the perception of things with which he has direct perceptual experience, and then at a latter stage concepts or general ideas are formed out of the things perceived. This is the psychological process. He writes, "It is one of the most interesting subjects for the historian of religion to see how the more abstract concepts of superhuman beings was slowly evolved out of such concrete and full concepts as Dyaus, sky, Agni, fire, Vāyu, wind, Sūrya, sun. Instead of the more general concept coming first and being gradually invested with differentiating attributes, history shows that the differentiated and almost dramatic characters came first, and, by being divested of their various attributes, left behind them the more general, but, at the same time, more exalted concepts of beings or superhuman beings. There is no trace whatever, so far as I know, of any of the early nations having first elaborated the concepts and names of superhuman beings, and then having connected them with various attributes. Among most nations also, so

far as historical evidence enables us to judge, a belief in many superhuman beings preceded a belief in one superhuman being, and for a long time what seem to us two contradictory beliefs, a belief in one and a belief in many Gods, were held to be perfectly compatible in the same religion."³ Between the particular and the general, it is the former which comes first, although from the logical standpoint it is the general which comes first. Before man could speak even of the infinite sky or Dyaus, he must actually have perceived something infinite, and must have been brought in sensuous contact with something not finite like everything else; but to conceive an infinite being is a very different process. Religious thought began with the naming of a large number of clearly marked and differentiated beings, such as, sky, Dawn, Thunder, Lightning, Storm, Mountains, Trees, etc., and that the concept of the superhuman beings arose afterwards, as a concept common to all, when divested of their characteristics differences. In the Veda we are confronted with such strongly marked characters as Dyans the bright sky varuna, the dark sky, Agni, the fire, Ushā, the dawn, Marut, the storm. These characters, in their material aspect at least, offered themselves to the yeyes and ears of those who framed their names and believed in their existence.

3. ibid, pp.127-8

Mere superhuman beings, without definite attributes, never presented themselves to their sense, and could never have found an entrance into their intellect.⁴ Dyans in the Veda was originally a name of the sky, but of an active and subjective sky. The purely material characteristics of the sky are still there, faintly visible; but they slowly vanish. Ultimately, the name only remains. This name coupled with pita, father, appears in the earliest Aryan prayers, as Dyanshpitā, Jupiter, Heaven-father, and in the end in the language of philosophers as the Supreme Being.⁵ What applies to the name of Dyans, applies like-wise to the name of other gods. They are names of material objects or phenomena of nature. Gradually, they lose their individual character, and in the end stand before us sublimised into superhuman beings or personal agencies. As Max Muller says, "The germ of the superhuman .. of the infinite element, was there from the first, but it was involved as yet in sensuous perception, not yet evolved in a conceptual name."⁵ The infinite is the necessary complement of the finite in every human mind. It was involved in the first perceptions, though it may

4. ibid, p.130

5. ibid, p.131

have taken thousands of years before the necessity was felt to give it its final expression, as the Infinite of the Unknown, or the Beyond. Similarly, when we speak of the cause of the world (using the idea of cause), we could in the childhood of our thought and language have said no more than 'the father or progenitor of heaven and earth'. Later on, human thought and language reduced the begetter to a maker or creator.

Max Muller has rightly maintained that "Nature, Man and Self are the three great manifestations in which the infinite in some shape or other has been perceived, and every one of these perceptions has in its historical development contributed to what may be called religion."⁶ These three come within the field of Natural Religion. The three classes of objects in nature, namely, the tangible, semitangible, and intangible objects, contain germs of religious development. The first may give rise to animism and fetishism ; the second class has supplied ample material for what we call demi-gods; while the third class contains germs of most of the great gods of the ancient world. Further, the

6. ibid, p. 164

infinite discloses itself not only in nature, but likewise in man, looked upon as an objects, and also in man looked upon as a subject. Similarly, the self or the soul of man is viewed as the infinite, as and when it is projected and considered as the subject which is abiding and continuous.

A theoretical stance very close to that of Max Muller has been adopted by some recent anthropologists who carry on their studies within the broad purview of cultural ecologyⁿ. Cultural ecology is one of the important current theoretical strategies, which subscribes to the view-point that an intimate relationship exists between a cultural and its surrounding environments. Marshall Sahlins has treated cultures as human adaptations to a number of typical external conditions. Human beings have sufficient capacity to adapt to the ecology for the sake of their existence. Following Julian H. Steward, the pioneer in the field of cultural ecology, a number of American and European social anthropologists like Redfield, Laura Thompson, Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, Morton Fried, etc., have emphasised the role of man's interaction and adaptation with his physical environment in the development of his culture. Among the Indian anthropologists, L.P. Vidyarthi's concept of 'nature-man-spirit complex' has provided a

sharp and useful tool in understanding and describing the cultural matrix of the tribals in India. Vidyardhi's 'nature-man-spirit complex' is very similar to Max Mullers 'Nature, Man and Self' in the development of Natural Religion, as mentioned in the above paragraph.

In his famous work, The Maler : A Study in Nature-Man-Spirit Complex (Calcutta, 1963), Vidyardhi emphasised the close relationship between the religious beliefs and practices of the Maler tribes to their basic drives and anxieties encountered by them within the bounds of their natural environment. There are nature spirits, both beneficent and evil, and the spirits of their deceased ancestors which need to be placated in order to tide over the unrelenting anxieties that surround subsistences, health and sex. They are afraid of the evil nature spirits, which may cause abortions, sickness, death, starvation and other calamities. These must be avoided, propitiated, and guarded against through the practice of sorcery, sacrifices, offerings, and the performance of many other rituals.

In support of Vidyardhi's conceptual framework, Ramesh Chandra, in a research paper entitled "Ecology and Religion of the Kinner",⁷ formulated the hypothesis that "Religion, both as a dogma and as a way of life

7. Included in R.S. Mann(ed.), Nature Man Spirit Complex in Tribal India, (Ranchi Anthropology Series-3, 1980), Concept Publishing Co, New Delhi, 1981

helps in maintaining a well adjusted plane with the ecology thus satisfying people to fulfil their requirements - in terms of (1) driving remedial treatment to their problems, and (2) achieving psychological satisfaction". Through the case-study of the religious practices of the Kinner people living in the North-Western Himalayas, Ramesh Chandra initiates with the argument that culture has a great bearing on ecology, especially through adaptation. Harder ecological conditions contribute to strong religious faith. He also maintains that various social and religious institutions in any society are largely shaped in the framework of need - direct or indirect at different levels - of the people to which terms given for their recognition are adjustment and/or adaptation.⁸ The life-cycle of a group of people, especially among the tribals, is determined mainly by their cultural ecology. Thus, the concept of 'Nature-Man-Spirit complex' banks upon the theme of cultural ecology and functionalism in the study of man and his culture.

The above standpoint from cultural ecology and functionalism is different from the view that primitive religious had their origin in animism. The famous

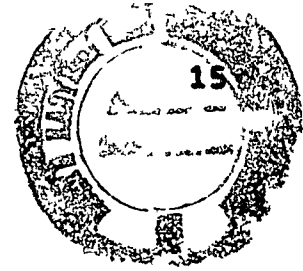
8. ibid, p. 270

anthropologists, Edward Tylor in his book Primitive Culture, held the view that religion had its origin in primitive man's belief that non-physical substances like soul inhabited the physical and inanimate objects like stones, trees, etc. Animism, derived from the Greek word Anima meaning soul, is a belief in the non-physical, transempirical substance existing independent of body. This fact was seen confirmed by dreams in which man saw somebody talking to him, who had died recently. Thus it is claimed that dreams convinced the primitive man of the existence of spirits. According to Tylor, this conviction became the basis of religious beliefs. Taylor's theory has not been accepted by the scholars because we cannot come to the general conclusion that all religions had their origin in animism, although animism is an important aspect of the early religions. The primitive people were imaginative. They used to believe in things and events that struck their fertile imagination. But since the origin of man's faith in the supernatural being is very complex, it cannot be taken to be a mere figment of imagination. Nor can it be accounted by mere chance factors. We have to take recourse to a number of factors - psychological, ethnological, sociological, etc., keeping the nature-

man-spirit spectrum in the background. The modern sociologists are right in making the basic unit of their study, not the individual personality but the network of relation among people binding them together in cohesive groups called societies. According to the scheme evolved by such eminent sociologists as Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, etc., man performs his acts within four sub-systems - the first is the cultural system of meanings, intentions, norms and patterns of human behaviour; the second is the social system which deals with the patterns of interaction and order among the social groups; the third is the personality system which deals with the individual goals of the members of the society; and the fourth is the organic system directed to the biological needs. Thus, human action has to be studied from different perspectives since there are many dimensions of man's life and activities. Durkheim and Max Weber's studies on the sociology of religion have brought to light the intimate relation between economic system and the practical ethics of a community.

Hence, we have to adopt inter-disciplinary method in the study of human society, culture and religion. Our approach has to be sociological, historical,

103185



comparative, semiological, and philosophical. We have to study man in the context of his society, as an inalienable member of the society he lives in. We have also to carry on our studies from the historical perspective. Besides this, a comparative study of the structural and functional aspects of different societies and cultures will also help us in the better understanding of a society and its cultures. Moreover, the study of symbols, especially religious symbols, and their meanings, help us a great deal in our study. Levi-Strauss and many other sociologists have attached importance to the semiological approach. Lastly, the philosophical study, more particularly, the approach of philosophical anthropology, will help us in understanding man and his society in the context of reality as a whole, which includes within its ambit nature, man, spirit, and god.

Modern approaches to the study of religion have thrown great light on the phenomenon of man's religious faiths and practices. Religion is complex, intricate and full of paradoxes. It includes such facts as beliefs and dogmas about natural and supernatural beings, hopes, fears, the affirmation of life and the struggle against death, sacrifices, rituals, celebrations, mystic retreats, ethical codes, etc. So, we find different theories dealing

with different aspects of religion taking into account the conative, volitional and cognitive elements in religious experience. William James rightly talks about the 'Varieties of religious experience'.

A synthetic approach, incorporating the good points from the psychological, anthropological, sociological, and philosophical theories, will be an ideal approach in the study of religious practices.

The main objective of our investigation in the present thesis is the study of religion in general, and the study of worship as the active phase of religion in particular. As we have pointed out at the very outset in this introductory account, worship occupies an important aspect of man's religious beliefs and practices. In the course of our study, we shall keep in mind the intimate relation between nature, man and spirit involved in man's religious beliefs and practices.

We have chosen the worship of 'UMANG LAI' (Literally, Forest Dieties), among the Meetei people of Manipur, who form the majority community of Manipur, a state situated on the north-eastern boundary of India. Geographically, Manipur is a small state surrounded by the hills. It has a total area of about 8,000 square miles.

with a population of nearly fifteen lakh people. It is a land-locked area surrounded on the east by Burma, on the west by Assam, on the north by Nagaland and on the south by Mizoram. In the middle of the mainland lies the valley of Manipur, better known as the Imphal Valley, having a total area of 700 square miles only. This valley is flat and fertile inter-spersed with meandering rivers and dazzling lakes, of which Loktak lake is the biggest one in the north-east India. It is on this beautiful valley that the Meiteis who belong to the Mongoloid group of people have settled since the pre-historic times and established a kingdom to which the hill tribes belonging to the Naga and the Kuki groups owed their allegiance. Manipur was an independent country ruled by the Meitei Kings until 1891, when the British annexed her after fighting a bloody war with the Manipuris. From 1891 to 1947 the British extended their administration to Manipur, although the authority in respect of customs and religion was vested upon the Maharajah of Manipur. After the British had left India, Manipur again became independent under the rule of the Maharajah, who was the head of the state with a Durbar to advise him under a new constitution of Manipur. Later, Manipur was merged to India in 1949 along with

the other princely states of India.

Manipur has a long history and tradition. It has a rich cultural heritage. This heritage, which has in the present days enriched the great Indian tradition, was mainly the contribution of the Meitei people. These people speak Manipuri or Meiteirol, a language belonging to the Tibeto- Burman family. This language is now-a-days recognised as one of the major Indian language. It has a rich literature with traditional script which is about one thousand years old. Manipur is famous for her dance, music and rich culture, which is the contribution of the Meiteis in particular.

Hinduism was introduced to the Meiteis in the eighteenth century A.D., although there are traces of Hindu influence since very early times in Manipur. Before the majority of the Meiteis were converted to Hinduism in the eighteenth century under the directive of the Kings, the Meiteis practised their traditional religion. The nature of this traditional religion and religious practices will be the subject-matter of this thesis and as such it will be dealt with in detail in the subsequent chapters. Hinduism in the form of

Vaishnavism was the state religion of Manipur among the Meiteis since the later period of the eighteenth century. Tribal people in the hills and plain practised their primitive cult till the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European missionaries introduced Christianity in some hill areas. Since then Christianity became popular among the tribals, and by now majority of the tribals have become Christians. "The Muslims came to Manipur as early as the seventeenth century. They speak Meitei language. They settle in the valley mainly on the bank of the rivers, where the Meitei Kings gave them land, and entrusted them with the task of the cultivation of vegetables, and also the work of looking after the royal horses. Out of the total population of about 15 lakhs the Muslim population is about one lakh, the tribal population about five lakhs, and the Meitei population about nine lakhs.

Majority of the Meiteis profess Vaishnava Hinduism. Yet all the Meiteis, Hindus as well as non-Hindus, and the scheduled caste Manipuris known as the Lois still take active part in the ceremonies and rituals involving the worship of the Umanq Lais. Hence, the worship of these traditional dieties has formed important

aspect of the traditional religion beliefs and practices of the Meitei people of Manipur. It is in this context that the present study has been undertaken.

In the next chapter, we shall present an account of the nature and kinds of the Umanq Lais, and their worship.

CHAPTER - II

The Worship of Lai (Dieties)

Historical background

The formal initiation of the Meiteis to Vaishnava Hinduism took place in the early eighteenth century, although Hinduism in the form of the worship of Vishnu dates back to the fifteenth century A.D. According to the Manipuri historian R.K. Jhalajit Singh, "Charai Rongba was the first Manipuri King to be formally initiated to Vaishnavism. In Mera (about October) 1703 A.D., a Brahmin named Krishnacharya alias Rai Vanamali arrived in Manipur from Sweta Ganga, Puri. He was accompanied by his wife Krishnamayi, two Shudras, and a Brahmin named Balabhadra Brahmachari. On Wednesday, the 5th of Sajibu (April, roughly) 1704, Krishnacharya formally initiated the king to Vaishnavism".¹ Jhalajit Singh's observation is based on the Manipuri royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba and the old historical work Ningthourol Lambuba written in old Meitei script. It is also based on the family chronicle of the Brahmins called Bamon Khunthok. This account is also mentioned in the learned work of Pandit-raj Atombabu Sharma, entitled

1. R.K. Jhalajit Singh - A Short History of Manipur, p. 115

Pakhangba. It was, however, during the reign of king Kyaamba in the 15th century that the worship of Vishnu was introduced. The afore-said historian writes, "One of the most important events in the reign of Kyaamba is the beginning of Vishnu worship in this hill-girt country at the extreme end of India - - - - - Choupha Khek Khomba (king of Sahn in Upper Burma) presented a small image of Vishnu to Kyaamba at the time of concluding the friendly treaty. Some Brahmins well acquainted with the worship of Vishnu were already in Manipur. Kyaamba requisitioned the service of one such Brahmin and began the regular worship of Vishnu." ² It may be mentioned that the Shan people, in those days, were Hindus. The temple constructed for Vishnu is still there at a place named Vishnupur, 18 miles south-west of Imphal. The migration of the Brahmins to Manipur from different parts of India like Gujarat, Kharadah, Kanpur, Assam, Sylhet, Nanda Gram (Uttar Pradesh), etc., was encouraged by King Kyaamba. A learned class of people named the Lairik Yengbams (literally, people who study books) were also allowed to settle in Manipur, and they were entrusted with the task of clerical works and the maintenance of the official records. The Brahmins gradually introduced

2. ibid, p. 83

the Hindu scriptures among the people, and thus, the influence of Hinduism was spread by and by. In the subsequent years more and more Brahmins came to Manipur and in due course they were absorbed to Manipuri society. Some other people belonging to different Hindu castes also were allowed to settle in the valley of Manipur and they were amalgamated to different Meitei clans. Such people are known as "Nongchup Haram" since they hailed from the western direction, across the territory of Manipur. Some people belonging to the Shan tribe in Upper Burma, the Kabows, and people of Burmese origin also became Meiteis. Such people are known as people of "Nongpok Haram" because of the fact that they came from the east across the border of Manipur. Likewise, some members of the hill tribes of Manipur were voluntarily merged to the Meitei society. In this manner the majority community in Manipur called the Meiteis is an amalgam of people hailing from different ethnic groups within and outside Manipur. These different people who formed the Meitei community contributed towards the development of Manipuri culture, including the religious beliefs and practices, and also in evolving various traditional socio-cultural, political and religious institutions of the Manipuri.

Meaning of the term "Lāi"

In Manipuri (Meitei) language, the word "Lai" means "Deity". It applies to both God and Goddess. It is the word which may be applied to the Hindu words "Deva" or "Devata". It is also used as the root word out of which such compound words as "Lāiningthou" (literal meaning- king god), and "Lāirembi" (literally, Goddess) are formed. Likewise, such compound words, signifying dieties, as "Yumtāi" (Household diety), "Lamtāi" (Outdoor or local diety), and "Umang Lāi" (from Umang means forest, lai means God; hence, "forest diety" or "forest god"), are also used to apply to various Gods and Goddesses belonging to different habitats. These different uses of the term "Lāi" imply the polytheistic character of the traditional religious belief of the Meiteis. However, their religion cannot be regarded as animism, although there are to be found traces of animism as it is the case with all polytheistic religions. T.C. Hodson is perhaps hasty in his generalisation that the traditional religious belief of the Meiteis is animistic.³ It is true that the Meiteis believe in the anima, the spirit, believed to be present in the objects

3. T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis; section IV

of nature, and also in the spirit of their deceased ancestors. But such belief in the spirits alone do not constitute their religion. They believe in the Almighty, who is the Creator and Sustainer of the World. Further, when they worship their deities they have an intimate personal relation with their deity, as it is done in the case of all the major religions of the world. They regarded themselves as parts of the whole Creation with which there is inalienable relationship in every aspect of their existence. Their entire life cycle and the rituals associated with it are intricately knit up with the whole of Creation. Thus, their religious beliefs is founded upon a philosophy of life and the universe.

"Yumlāi" and Lamlāi"

Regarding the religious belief of the traditional Meitei people, Hodson writes, "It is possible to discover at least four definite orders of spiritual beings who have crystallized out from the amorphous mass of animistic Deities. There are the Lam Lai, gods of the country-side who shade off into Nature Gods controlling the rain, the primal necessity of an agricultural community; the Umang Lai or Deities of the Forest Jungle; the Imung Lai, the Household

Deities, Lords of the lives, the births and the deaths of individuals, and there are Tribal Ancestors, the ritual of whose worship is a strange compound of magic and Nature-worship. Beyond these Divine Beings, who possess in some sort a majesty of orderly decent behaviour, there are spirits of the mountain passes, spirits of the lakes and rivers, vampires and all the horrid legion of witchcraft".⁴ While we agree with Hodson's classification of the deities, we have reservations about his remarks about the animistic nature of the traditional religious belief of the Meiteis. As we have pointed out already, there are, no doubt, elements of animism in it. Magic and witchcraft are also involved in it, because man's early religious belief and practices go side by side with them. But as our thesis develops, we shall show that the traditional religion of the Meiteis is not exclusively animistic. It may be said that Hodson like other British and Christian writers looked at the traditional religions of the non-European ^{with} ~~and~~ great prejudice. Like other British administrators he looked down upon the religious beliefs of the Manipuris. His prejudice was not limited to the religion of the Meitei people only, but it was extended to the religious beliefs of the

4. ibid., p. 96

Indians as a whole, including Hinduism.

In another paragraph Hodson tries to drive home his point by citing some points from Jevons' Introduction to Plutarch's Roman Questions. Hodson writes, "Competent ethnologists declare that the conception of divine beings as "Gods" connotes, firstly, the relationship of members of a family, subject to one head, who may be Lord of all or attenuated as merely primus inter pares; secondly, their representation in human form; thirdly, the association of moral benefit with their worship; fourthly, their presentation as idealized human beings; and fifthly, their occupation of a definite place in a definite cosmogonic system. Practically all these characteristics are lacking in Manipur. Indeed it seems to be clear that deities like Panthoibi, Yumthai Lai, Laimaren, and Sena-mehi, are merely names of class spirits, for every householder is virtually the priest, of these deities, just as in ancient Rome every household had its Vesta. There are images of deities hewn from stone, but the more powerful Deities, if we except Govindji, the God of the Royal family are represented by rough stones, which Manipuris regard not exactly as the image of the Deity, but as his abode".⁵ Against the

5. ibid, p.99

above view of Hodson, we have to say that all the five points mentioned to be involved in the conception of god as divine being are present in the traditional religion of the Meiteis. This will be evident from our account of worship as practised in the religion of the Meiteis in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Worship of Yum-lāi (household deities)

"Yum-lāi" are the deities who are given due niche in every household and worshipped daily with reverence. They are virtually the grihadevatas of the Hindus. The Meiteis, irrespective of their professed religions, that is to say, whether they are Vaishnava Hindus or non-Hindus, worship them.

The Meiteis reserve three important places inside their houses for the deities. Regarding these three abodes of the household deities Late Iboonghal Singh, a Manipuri scholar of repute, writes, "First is Phungalairu which is a small hole with a mouth above it, dug just to the west of and close to the said Phunga. Older generation bow down every day before this lairu and keep their valuables in this hole. This hole was so much respected and feared that even a thief did not touch it. Next is Sanamahī Kachin, situated at the South Western

corner of the house. This God is called Sanamahi. The conservatives everyday and others excepting one percent of the Gouradharna-intoxicated persons, and fanatic Veishnava occasionally worship it with puja materials. They occasionally give food to the God. The third one is Leimaren whose place lies near the wall just to the direct north of the Phunga. She is not worshipped often but she must be worshipped on the first day of the Manipuri year called Cheiraoba. And at the time of Tinlaithaba, on the occasion of the ceremonies of a marriage she has got a share. This worship is nothing but a religion of Vedic inspiration. The Dravid, Astatic and Aryans who came to Manipur long before the introduction of mixed religion in India which was subsequently called Hindu religion (Hinduism) brought the spirit of this religion to Manipur and professed it. Those Gods are worshipped by every home privately in their respective houses. Their state religion lay in the Laiharaoba which might shortly be defined as performing ceremony and festival for the Umanglais".⁶

Of the three abodes of deities, the first one, namely, Phungga Lairu, is the sacred place where Fire God

6. L.Iboongohal Singh, Introduction to Manipur, pp. 28-29

is worshipped. The Phungga is the fire-place which is located at the middle of a typical Manipuri house. The Meiteis, like the Vedic Hindus, worship the Fire God, Mei, the Manipuri counter part of the Hindu God Agni. Many Manipuri scholars, including Panditraja Atombapu Sharma, are even of the opinion that the ethnic name Meitei had its origin from the worship of Mei(Fire) by the Meitei people. The worship of fire probably had been introduced by Poireiton, the chief of the immigrants who came to Manipur from the east about the year 33 A.D. The historian R.K.Jhalajit Singh writes on this matter thus: "Fire was worshipped in every home. In the centre of the dwelling house, fire was kept burning day and night. The Manipurians addressed the brightly burning Fire as the substitute of the Sun".⁷ The same historian further remarks, "The Manipuri method of worshipping Fire reminds us of the Vedic Aryans. Some hymns in the first Anuvak of the sixth Mandala of the Rig Veda clearly shows that the Vedic Aryans worshipped Fire inside the dwelling house also. Other hymns in the Mandala compare the brightly burning Fire to the Sun and allude to the belief of the Vedic Aryans that at sun-set, the Sun enters the Fire and as a result Fire burns brightly at

7. R.K. Jhalajit Singh, A Short History of Manipur, p. 20

night. It may be remembered that next to India, Fire was the most important Vedic God."⁸ Thus, the worship of Fire by the Meiteis is of pristine origin. Traditional Meitei families see to it that fire is always preserved in the Phungga, the fire-place. So as to keep the fire burning the eaderly womenfolk burn paddy husk even after the burning of fire-wood, etc., has been done for domestic purposes. The Meiteis attach great religious importance to the worship of fire at the Phungga.

Community worship of Fire has even now been practised by a group of Manipuris who are known as Andro. The Andro people are listed as scheduled caste Meiteis, who settle at the eastern foot of the Nongmaijing hill situated on the east of Imphal town. They preserve fire throughout the year at a sacred fireplace on the outskirts of their village. Every family is given assignment to keep the fire burning. They take up their task by turns with seriousness. Every year before the setting in of monsoon season they observe a festival with rituals and in that festival they worship their God Panam Ninghtou (King Panam), who is the Fire God. We shall write more about this festival in the chapter on "Lai Haraoba".

8. ibid, p.21

The two remaining places for deities in the Meitei house are meant for Sanamahi and Leimaren. Sanamahi is the God who is the eldest son of Guru Sidaba, the Supreme God in the Manipuri pantheon. Leimaren is the wife of Guru Sidaba. Although the Meiteis worship a large number of Gods and Goddesses, they believe in one supreme Being at the head of their pantheon. This Supreme Being is Guru Sidaba (Guru, the Immortal). He is believed and worshipped as the Creator of the things and beings in the whole universe. The Meiteis keep this supreme Being in the inner core of the hearts; they do not assign any specific earthly abode for him because Guru Sidaba is all-pervading, omni-present, omni-^{to}point and omni-scient. They worship Him in the morning in the form of the Sun, and utter His name when ^{they} ~~to~~ go to bed to sleep.

According to Manipuri legend, and also in some old Manipuri works written in the old script in archaic Manipuri, Guru Sidaba, who is also called Atiya Guru Sidaba ("Immortal Guru of the Heaven"), had two sons by name Sanamahi (alias Kuptreng) and Pakhangba (alias Sentreng) by his consort Leimaren Sidabi ("Immortal Goddess of the Earth"). Sanamahi was the elder and Pakhangba was the younger of the sons. Sanamahi was bright like gold

(in Manipuri, "Sana" means gold. "mahi" means liquid ; hence, literally, "Sanamahi" means "Molten Gold") and strong. Pakhangba, the younger brother, was very intelligent. It so happened that Guru Sidaba wanted to test His sons. He, therefore, ~~called~~ His two sons and told them that the one who could circle the world at the shortest time would be made to rule the world. The two sons agreed and set on to circumvent ^{the} world. Sanamahi, the elder son, being the stronger of the two sons, started running very fast to make the circle. The younger son Pakhangba, before he started with his task, bowed down respectfully to his Father and Mother. Leimaren, the Mother Goddess, had very soft corner for Pakhangba. She wanted to help Pakhangba in the venture. So, she secretly taught her son Pakhangba that his Father was the Almighty Creator who is Boundless. Hence, it will be a difficult task to circumvent the world. Instead, she told that the whole universe is represented by the ^{the} throne of his Father. She asked him to circumvent it, so that he would be the first to fulfill the task assigned by his Father and to become the king of the world. Pakhangba, being wise, realised the most secret of true knowledge from the words of his Mother. So, he circled the throne of his Father seven times, and at the end bowed down to

his Father and declared that He (Guru Sidaba) is the Lord of the whole Universe and as such His throne represented the Universe. Guru Sidaba was very much pleased with His son Pakhangba's wisdom, and He made him King of the World. He was also called Pakhangba because he was the one who knew his Father.

When Sanamahi came back after circumventing the world, he found that his brother Pakhangba was already on the throne. He became furious. His anger increased when he came to know that his brother was made king without any difficulty. He became violent and charged at his brother and Mother. But Guru Sidaba pacified him and gave him the authority to rule in every household. This is why Sanamahi is revered and worshipped in every household. He is worshipped in all important occasions in the life cycle of the individuals in the family especially at childbirth, marriage ceremony and ceremonies performed at the time of the death of someone in the family. Besides, He is offered pujas requesting to bless the family at times of weal and woe. Leimarel, the Mother Goddess, is also given an important place of reverence in the household, because she is the Goddess of the bounty and fecundity. She is the Annapurna -

Lakshmi. She is worshipped especially on the new year's day. She is also worshipped now and then with the prayer to bring about welfare in the family and success in life. Before they go out for important mission, the family members pray to Sanamahi and Leimarel.

The legend of Sanamahi and Pakhangba circumventing the world on the advice of Guru Sidaba is similar to the legend of Kartikeya and Ganesha circumventing the world on the advice of Siva and Parvati as mentioned in the Siva Purana. The two legends may be regarded as parallel legends. The possibility of the Siva Purana legend influencing the Manipuri legend cannot be ruled out, although we do not find any concrete evidence in favour of such influence. It may be mentioned that there are many other legends in Manipur which go parallel to the legends of Siva and Parvati. One such legend is the story of the love affair and subsequent marriage of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi about which we shall discuss in detail in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. It may not be out of place to say that Tantric elements are present in the religious belief and practices of the traditional Meiteis. There are ample examples to show such elements especially in the rites, rituals and religious symbols

used in the worship of the Lais (Deities) by the Meiteis. These Tantric elements are clearly evidence in the worship of the Umang Lais. We cannot, however, come to the hasty conclusion that Tantricism was practised in ancient Manipur, because of the paucity direct evidences by way of written literature and archaeological findings. There is enough room and scope for carrying on further research works in this area. There is the possibility that the people who migrated to Manipur from the rest of India in the olden days might have introduced the legends along with the Tantric cult. There is the possibility of the exchange of cultural ideas and religious faiths in the hoary past between Manipur and the outside world. Moreover, from the fact that Tantricism in some form or other has been spread far and wide, in Tibet, China, Japan, Ceylone, the Far East, etc., the possibility of Tantric influence in Manipur cannot be ruled out.

Lam-Lais, the Outdoor Deities :

In Manipuri language "Lam" means outside the home and the homestead land. This term is contrasted with "Yum" or "Imung" which means the home and indoor. "Lam" again may mean "local", that is, pertaining to a specific area or locality. Hence, the term "Lam-Lai" means the deity who governs a particular locality - the guardian

deity of a locality. It also connotes those deities whose habitat lie outside the home and the homestead land. The term "Lam Lai", therefore, denotes a large number of Gods and Goddesses in the Meitei pantheon belonging to a heirarchy of deities ranging from Lainingthou Pakhangba, the great son of Guru Sidaba, the first Lord of the World, to the great ancestor of a particular family or clan, and the petty local deities who can create troubles for the people of a locality now and then for the failure of the people to appease them. (The Meiteis believe in both the good and the bad deities- Aphaba Lai and Phattaba Lai).

All the Umang Lai or the Forest Dwelling Deities come under the class of the Lam Lais, because they are believed to have their sacred abode in some specific reserved forests, wherever large plots of land are available on the outskirts of the village or inside the village for keeping the forests. There are a number of reasons for the people to reserve big plots of forest lands for the Umang Lais. One reason is expediency and convenience. The Umang Lais are regarded as community Gods and Goddesses, and as such, they are worshipped by the people of the entire village in a ritualistic festival called Lai Haraoba at a

particular season of the year. The village people construct a temple for the deity and worship only once a year. The villagers choose a big plot of land for the deity because a large number of people will gather before the temple to dance and perform the rituals on the occasion of Lai Haraoba festival. Secondly, the people regard the deities with fear and reverence. In order not to arouse the anger of the deities by polluting the sacred abode of the deities through the wrong deeds and behaviours of the people, they reserve plots of land which have been kept sacred, and nobody is allowed to throw or keep unclean things in those lands. People abstain from polluting the area for fear of the punishment of the deities. Thirdly, the village people in the olden days lived with nature. They lived in harmony with their natural environment. They had a deep sense of the preservation of the environment. So they planted big trees in the reserved forest, consciously or unconsciously, to maintain the ecological balance. Nobody is allowed to cut the trees from the reserved forest. Animals and birds find their natural habitat in these forest. The people generally do not kill the animals in these forests. They are treated with love as the denizens of the gods and goddesses who rule over the locality. Thus, an ideal place

has been created for the natural growth and survival of the fauna and flora of nature within the reach of human habitats, thereby, creating a congenial atmosphere wherein man lives harmoniously with the denizens of nature.

The creation of forest lands to serve as the abode of the local deities is found in many parts of rural India. The villagers in different parts of India reserve land for the gramadevata, the village God. The village people worship there on festive occasions as community ritualistic festival. They dance, offer food, perform puja with joy and merriment in order to appease their Gods and Goddesses who in return bestow fecundity and happiness to the people of the village. These practices are common in ~~the~~ Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc.

"Umang Lais" and "Nats"

There are certain points of similarity between the worship of Umang Lais by the Meiteis and Nat-worship by the Burmese, although there are differences too. The practical everyday religion of the Burmese people is the worship of Nat. In daily life, from birth to marriage and death, the Burmese worship Nats or spirits to avert or mitigate calamities. At the extremity of every village

there is a Nat-house for the guardian Nats of the neighbourhood, in whose honour feasts are held at regulated seasons. Certain feasts in honour of the Nats were formally recognised by the former Burmese Court, and even the king and ministers patronised and took part in those feasts. Burmese people believe that every human being and every conspicuous object of utility has a guardian spirit. When people die, it is said that they become spiritual bodies requiring spiritual food. In order that these spirits or Nats may not harm the living, the Burmese make certain offerings to them.

The Nats are the supernatural beings derived from three separate sources: (1) The tutelary spirits that fill the earth and all that is thereon, man himself and all the creatures, objects and places among which he lives and moves and has his being; (2) The ghosts and spirits of the departed, akin to the ancestor-worship of the Chinese and Indo-Chinese races to the North and East; (3) The supernatural beings of the Buddhists, celestial, terrestrial, and infernal, probably owing its origin to India. According to an eminent Burmese scholar Muang Htin Aung, the Nats and their worship represent a mixture of three distinct cults, namely, nature-worship, ancestor-

worship, and demon-worship.

The Meiteis of Manipur also attach great importance to nature-worship and ancestor-worship. But they do not worship demons as such, although they believe in evil spirits who are appeased by offering food and performing certain rituals. Further, they believe in the spirits of the grand natural objects and phenomena. But they do not worship the spirit of each and every object of nature. Among the Umang Lais worshipped by the Meiteis some are the gods governing the hills, mountains, rivers, and lakes. Some are the gods of natural phenomena. Some Umang Lais are the great ancestors of particular families and clans who possessed superhuman qualities and prowess. Ancestor worship is common among the hills tribes of Manipur also.

But there are differences in the way the Nats are worshipped by the Burmese and the way Umang Lais are worshipped by the Meiteis. The Nats are worshipped out of fear for the harm they may bring about among the people due to their displeasure, likely to be ^{caused by} their omissions and commissions. On the other hand, the Umang Lais are invoked and worshipped by the community to bring about fecundity and prosperity to the people.

They are worshipped and addressed as Father-God and Mother-Goddess. There are certain philosophical implication behind the worship of Umang-Lais by the Meiteis. We shall devote more space on the worship of Umang Lai in what follows.

Thus, the Meiteis worship a number of Lai or Deities belonging to different denominations with divergent backgrounds ranging from the spirit of the grand natural phenomena to the spirit of the ancestors, and ultimately to the Supreme Almighty Lord "Atiya Guru Sidaba" who is the Creator and sustainer of the entire Universe. It may be observed that in their worship and the performance of religious rituals they exhibit the intricate matrix of Nature-Man-Soul (or Spirit). The intimate connection between man and nature is very much in the background of the act of worship. In the course of invocation of their gods and goddesses, they eulogise the superhuman attributes of the deities. The metaphors and similes used to enumerate the fine attributes of the deities and their superhuman deeds are all derived from their daily commerce with nature and her fine qualities.

CHAPTER - 3

Lai Haraoba as a religious festival

Meaning of Lai Haraoba

The intricate and elaborate rituals associated with the worship of Umang Lais are performed in Lai-Haraoba, the religious festival of the Meiteis, which is an important socio-religious institution embracing and embodying the entire life-cycle of the people within the ambit of such basic social institutions as the family, marriage, clan, kinship, etc. The rituals are elaborate and rich in artistic contents. They are also complex and involve deep philosophical thoughts which are expressive of the psyche of the Meitei people in respect of their attitude towards life and the world. It will, therefore, be wrong to characterise the traditional religion of the Meiteis as mere animism, mere ancestor worship, mere fertility cult, and so on. Because religion as such is a complex institution, and much so Meitei religion is a very complex one. As a philosopher of religion has said : "Religion is too complex a phenomenon to be accounted for by the growth and spread of a single custom. Worship, of however primitive a character, is not the expression of a single thought or a single emotion but the product of thoughts so complex, so powerful, as to force an expression in the same way in which a river, swollen by

streams coming down the mountains from various directions, overflows its banks".¹ This observation is true of the religious rites in Lai Haraoba as it is equally true of the worships in other established religions.

Lai Haraoba literally means the rejecting of the gods and goddesses (Lai=Deity, and haraoba=to be merry or to make merry). Some scholars interpret it as "the pleasing of the gods".² In this ritualistic festival the village community led by the priests and priestesses (known respectively, the Maibas and Maibis) perform various ablutions and other rituals in offering foods, fruits and flowers to the divinities with the accompaniment of songs and dances. Such offerings, prayers and rituals are performed primarily to gain favour from the deities by blessing the people with material prosperity and long life, free from disease and untimely death. It is believed that the deities will be happy and pleased by the offerings and prayers coupled with melodious songs and rhythmic dances of both men and women. It is great religious festival which depicts the rich cultural heritage of the Meitei people.

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1. M. Jastrow, The Study of Religion(1901),p. 185
 2. Saroj Nalini Pratt, Religion of Manipur,p.53, following Colonel Shakespear

Origin of Lai Haraoba

An eminent Manipuri scholar expresses the view that the word "LaiHaraoba" is derived from "Lai hoi laoba", which means "the chanting of hoi by the gods".³ The same scholar says that this religious institution is of pristine glory and as such it is inalienable from the cultural life of the Meiteis. It means "making the gods happy" so that they may shower blessings and happiness to the people. It is said that the festival in which the participants in the dance rituals chant "hoi", "hoirou", "haya", came into being in imitation of the gods who were chanting "hoi" at the time of creation of the Universe. Hence, the festival of Lai Haraoba, it is believed, is as old as the history of the Meiteis.

Elaborating on the above-mentioned theory about the genesis of Lai Haraoba, Pandit Kulachandra Singh, the author of Meitei Lai Haraoba, refers to the legend of creation. Ashiba, the divine agent of Guru Sidaba the Supreme Lord, who was entrusted with the task of creation, after completing the creation of the world, was at a loss when he was asked by the Guru to create the living creatures. At this Guru Sidaba opened his mouth and showed to Ashiba all the living beings whom He wanted to create. Ashiba was happy to see them

3. M. Chandra Singh, the royal Pandit, in his Forward to, 1963
Pandit Kulachandra's book Meitei Lai Haraoba, Imphal,

all, and by way of fulfillment of his task of creation He had driven out all the living creatures out of the mouth of Guru Sidaba by rhythmically shouting "hoi". These creations of Ashiba peopled the earth and thus the task of Ashiba was accomplished. In the Lai Haraoba rituals the ritualistic drama of creation is enacted and the participants shout "hoi" by way of the imitation of the God who shouted in the same manner at the time of the creation of the living beings on earth.⁴ Pandit Kulachandra says that the ultimate aim of Lai Haraoba is the attainment of Purusharthas, the ultimate values, namely, Dharma (righteousness), Artha (Wealth), Kama (Pleasure), and Moksha (liberation) by expressing ritualistically the act of creation and the subsequent activities of mankind in their life-cycle, through the medium of dance and song.⁵

It is, however, difficult to trace the beginning of Lai Haraoba in historical times. The royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba, and the genealogy of the kings called Ningthoural Lambuba does not furnish precise information about the period of the origin of Lai Haraoba festival. Some local scholars place the beginning of Lai Haraoba in the seventh or eight century A.D. But we find no concrete evidence in this regard. Some again, try to associate the

4. Kulachandra Singh, Meitei Lai Haraba, p.1.

5. loc cit

origin of this festival to the legendary story of romance between Khamba and Thoibi, the tragic hero and heroine of Moirang on the bank of Loktak Lake. As Saroj Nalini Pratt observes: "As it stands the Lai Haraoba is evidently a composite festival and consists of episodes of diverse origins. It is possible that it was originally an ancestral ritual. The fact that the Haraoba is performed in honour of certain gods (for example Pakhangba, Thangjing and so on) whom we have suggested deities of certain of the yeks (clans) makes this a possibility".⁶

Regarding the origin of Lai Haraoba, a Western connoisseur of Manipuri dance writes: "Let us examine the rituals of the Meiteis and try to understand their history! Can they remember the story of Creation? The story of Creation is one dear to the hearts of the Meiteis. Even till to-day it is on the lips of the old people. It is found contained in the most important Meitei ritual, the "Lai Haraoba", which records the history of the early Ages or "Chaks". There are four Ages - the "Hayye Chak" (corresponding to the Hindu 'Satya Yug') which is roughly before 200 B.C. The second Age is the "Haya Chak" (corresponding to Hindu Treta Yug or Vedic period) which is roughly 2000 B.C. to 5000 B.C. The third Age is the "Kona Chak"

6. S.N. Pratt, *ibid*, pp.53-4

(Hindu Dwapur Yug) about 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. The fourth Age is the "Langba Chak" (Hindu Kali Yug) or present Period".⁷ The songs, chantings and mantras of Lai Haraoba were recorded in the minds of the priests from times immemorial and they were transferred from lips to lips in the subsequent generations. This is the reason why even now the Maiba (priest) and Maibi (priestess) go on chanting mantras after mantras, go on singing songs after songs depicting the life cycle of the people from the creation to the establishment of social life. The pena Khongba (the singer who plays on a stringed musical instrument called pena) is the balad singer of Manipur who narrates and eulogises the attributes of the deities for hours.

The royal Pandits and scholars of Manipur generally believe that the origin of Lai Haraoba has to be traced to the rejoicing of the Gods and Goddesses at a place called Koubru.⁸ Koubru is a hill on the north-western direction, about 25 miles from Imphal. It is believed that the first human settlement in Manipur started on this hill. Scholars maintain that more than one thousand years ago, the valley of Manipur was waterlogged since water from the surrounding hills and mountains collected in the valley, and since there was no outlet for the water. So the early settlers took up their abode on the elevated land mass. There are several

7. Louise Lightfoot, *Dance Rituals of Manipur, India, 1958*, p.12.

8. W. Lukhoi Singh, *Lai Haraoba*, p.3.

evidences still now for human settlement on Koubru hill. There is a flat land on top of the hill, and on the side of the hill-top there is a long tunnel wherein probably the early settlers lived. Koubru is also believed to be the abode of God Koubru, the devine Sentinel of the north-western territory of Manipur. He lives there with his divine consort Kounu. Itis believed that in memory of the rejoicing of the Gods and Goddesses with Koubru as the presiding God, Lai Haraoba festival came to be observed every year at different parts of the valley of Manipur, especially between the months of March and June. The festivities are performed in those places which are believed to be the haunting places or abodes of the deities.

Forms of Lai Haraoba

There are local variations in the performance of the rites and rituals of Lai Haraoba. Four forms of Lai Haraoba are generally recognised as distinctive. They are - Kanglei Haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba, Kakching Haraoba, and Moirang Haraoba.

The areas covered by the whole town of Imphal and its suburbs are known as Kanglei. The Haraoba performed in these areas are under the direct supervision of the Maibas and Maibis of the Palace Department of Customs,

which is known as "Maiba Loisang". It may be mentioned that under the agreement signed between the representative of the Government of India and the Maharajah of Manipur on the occasion of the merger of Manipur to the Union of India in 1947, it was agreed that the Maharajah shall be the custodian of the traditional custom of Manipur. Following this agreement customary practices are governed by the Maiba Loisang or the Pandit Loisang of the Palace.

The Chakpa form of Haraoba is performed by the Loi people who belong to the scheduled caste community since the merger of Manipur to India. The Lois are the settlers of Fayeng, Kaodruk, Leimram, Khurukhul, Sekmai and Andro villages of the valley of Manipur. Within the Chakpa form, the Andro Haraoba is distinctive.

Kakching is a small town on the Indo-Burma Road about 20 miles distant from Imphal town. It is on the southern part of Manipur. The villages around the town of Kakching belong to the people of Kakching whose Lai Haraoba is distinctive in that it varies from other forms of Haraoba in certain ritualistic details.

The Moirang form of Lai Haraoba is observed by the people of Moirang, a place on the south-western part of Manipur which is about 28 miles far off from Imphal

town on the Tiddim Road. Moirang is on the bank of Loktak Lake and it formed a principality under a chieftain about 500 years ago. The guardian deity of Moirang is God Thangjing. He was the ordainer of the destiny of the Moirang people and the author and divine director of not less than seven tragic episodes including the famous romantic episode between Khamba and Thoibi more than one thousand years ago.

For the purpose of Lai Haraoba, the village of Manipur have been grouped under ten categories, namely, Kanglei, Langloi, Lanloi, Thangwai, Khuroi, Ngagnoi, Kege, Laanloi, Tharoi and Selloi.⁹ During the time of the Rajahs, on the other hand, the valley of Manipur was divided into four panas or divisions, namely, Ahallup, Naharup, Laipham, and Khabam Panas, for the purpose of administrative convenience. Imphal was further divided into four sub-divisions, namely, Khwai, Yaiskul, Khurai and Wangkhei. High officials mainly drawn from amongst the members of the royal family were in charge of these sub-divisions.

It is believed that there are altogether 364 Umang Lais. Pundit Kullachandra Singh, however, in his book Meitei Lai Haraoba, gives a list of 421 Lais. He claims that his account is based on the work called Umanglai Khunthok

9. Kh. Chandrashekhhar Singh, Lai Haraoba Laisol, pp 1-2

("Origin of Umang Lais"). Lai Haraoba festival is not performed for all these deities. Among the deities in whose honour Lai Haraoba is observed, some are under the direct supervision and service of the royal palace, whereas some are either under the service of the entire village or the service of a particular family or clan.

Among the Gods, Sanamahi, Pakhangba, Soraren, Nongpok Ningthou, Koubru, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren, Loyarakpa, Khoriphaba, Khamlangba, etc., are prominent since they are either the guardian deities for the entire Meitei people or the gods guarding the frontiers (Hindu, Dig Devata) of Manipur. The prominent among the goddesses are Laimarel, Panthoibi, Yumjao Lairembi, Phou Oibi, Lai Khurembi, Kondong Lairema, etc. Most of the other gods and goddesses are the ancestral deities or the guardian deities of the particular families or clans.

There are seven clans (or Yeks) among the Meiteis. They are Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Sarang-Leisang and Khaba Nganba. More than three hundred family titles come under these seven clans. Of these seven clans, the first three have special importance since they are directly descended from the three divinities - Mangang Guru, Luwang Guru and Khuman Guru - who govern the three

divisions of time (Hindu- Teen Sandhya). Mangang governs the morning, Luwang the midday to just before sunset and Khuman the evening time to the night. Each of the clans had a chieftain in the past. But Mangang was the Dominant clan since the royal family belonged to this clan. The guardian deity of the Mangang clan is Pakhangba. The Mangang clan is also known as Ningthouja clan because the Nighthou of King belonged to this clan. There are pibas or heads for every clan. Headship of each clan is decided by the law of primogenitor.

Worship of Pakhangba

Regarding the worship of Pakhangba by the Ningthouja clan, S.N. Pratt¹⁰ writes :

"The clearest example of a tribal ancestral deity we have is Pakhangba. Pakhangba is connected explicitly with the ruling Ningthoujas. He is characterised in three different ways :

- 1) as a man, the unifier of the Meiteis;
- ii) as a deity, brother of Sanamahi and son of Atiya Guru Sidaba;
- iii) as a snake.

10 S.N. Pratt, ibid, pp. 10-12

The human side to Pakhangba is indicated in the Cheitharol Kumbaba. According to this account, Pakhangba arrived in Manipur during the period of the successive migrations associated with the name of Poireiton. The Ningthourol Lambuba (9-10) expands on this with characteristic poetry:

'Lairen(Sovereign) your rightfulldwelling is the Palace land; Chief of all the lands which are good... in which cattled room, as your ancestor the great Sovereign came like the spreading heat of the sun, so you, Lairen, spread your fame from beneath the shade of the royal canopy and made the last of the ranges of Hanching Mountain your settling place'.

'There is another side of Pakhangba's character however. The Ningthourol Lambuba describes him in exalted terms, and both chronicles state that he was 'god by day and man by night'. A further set of traditions exhibits him as a full deity. Some of these myths seem to have been subjected to Hindu influence; but others look as though they might have arisen in the traditional Meitei society.

The two most important of the myths make Pakhangba the brother of Sanamahi, and both sons of supreme God Atya Guru Sidaba(=Immortal celestial Guru). These myths ascribe a divine origin to Pakhangba

The third aspect of Pakhangba is as the snake. The snake symbol appears in many guises. As the coiled snake it appears on the royal flag; the same pattern called Lairen Mathek is also danced out during one part of Lai Haraoba

On the above account of Pakhangba, we have to make the observation that we should not confuse between the Divine Pakhangba and the human Pakhangba. The former is a deity in the Meitei pantheon, being the second son of Atiya Guru Sidaba, the Supreme Being. He is represented by the ritualistic symbol of the coiled serpent whose form is the same as the Kundalini pattern of Tantric Symbolism. The human Pakhangba was the mighty King who ruled for many years in Manipur from 33 A.D. onwards. He is supposed to be the great ancestor of the ruling dynasty.

Maibas and Maibis (priests and priestesses)

For each one of the 364 Umang Lais a temple has been constructed. These temples are located in the midst of the village greens. The villagers do not unnecessarily enter into the temple compound for fear of offending the deities for intruding. People enter into the temple only at the time of the annual festival after performing purificatory rituals by the village elders and Maibas and Maibis. The temples are typically Meitei in structure. They are quite

distinct from the larger Hindu ones and the Brahmin priests of the Hindus have no connection (even no access) with them. The ceremonies at the temples are conducted by the Meitei priests and priestesses called "Maibas" and "Maibis". Maibas are adept at the ritualistic lore and they generally belong to the palace customs department or the Maiba(Pundit) Loisang. The Maibis are also experts in ritualistic practices. They are also adept at the ritualistic songs and dances. Moreover, they function as "mediums" between God and man. They utter the oracles by invoking the deity by chanting mantras. The pronouncement of the oracles(or Deva vani) are known as Lai Pao (Lai= God ; pao = voice or information). For this purpose, the Maibi sits in front of the temple covered with a white cloth holding two bells in hand and invoke the deity by chanting mantras and very soon the Maibi is possessed by the spirit of the deity. This possession is known as Maibi Lai Tongba. Then the Maibi will utter the intentions of the Lai and prophecy what will happen to the people in the villages. Such phenomenon of possession of the priestesses is also found in other parts of India especially among the village folks. The Maibis are also regarded as soot-sayers and some of them are much sought after by credulous people.

The Maibis always put on white cloths like the Devadasis of Assa and they abstain from taking certain food items. The Maibis are generally ^{drawn} ~~down~~ from amongst the womenfolk who suffer from psycho neurotic disturbances. Some among the menfolk become Maibis. When they become Maibis they keep their hair long and behave like women in nature. They also put on white clothes.

Family deities

Each one of the deities is tended by a particular community. At a certain time during the Lai Haraoba ritual, only one particular community of a special family title or surname is allowed to take part. The general public in most cases watches but does not take part. The heads of the particular family (peeba), man and wife, stand immediately opposite to the images or idols of the deities, that are generally made of brass. The instalation of temples by the Meiteis for their great ancestors who have been defied after they have left their earthly life for heavenly abode should be regarded as a form of ancestor worship. On this matter Louise Lightfoot writes :

"This ^{re}venge of the Meiteis for their early ancestors, the founders of their race, is of great ^{value} to the research student. Evidently at an early date in Hayee Chak Age,

about 363 families existed with their family shrines, and to this day these shrines exist though there are now 700 surnames among the Meiteis, and of course many non-Meitei families too in Manipur. The Meiteis believe that the spirits or the Lais and Lairembis associated with these shrines can be called up by mediums (Maibeas); and therefore, once a year, the Maibeas call up the spirits of the early ancestors, and the people arrange a grand function whereby the spirits can enjoy themselves as in the days of yore. Hence the name "Lai Haraoba" or "Spirits' Pleasure".

It is found that the names of the Lais and Lairembis tally with historical records preserved in old scripts written in the Haya Chak concerning events in the earlier Age or Hayee Chak. The staunch old beliefs of the Meiteis account for their determination to return to their country and continue their old customs despite many cruel raids from outside which depleted their population and caused the settlement of Meiteis in Assam and Burma. The Meiteis love their ~~own~~ land which they have always called "Sana Leipak" (= Savarna Bhoomi = Golden land), "Manipur" being a name given by non-Meiteis. They consider their annual Lai Haraoba of great importance to the welfare of "sana Leipak" which they believe is in the hands of God and the first spirits he created in their land."¹¹

11. L.Lightfoot, ibid, pp 13-14

Ancestor worship

From the worship of Umang Lai pertaining to ancestors of particular families or clans it is quite evident that ancestor-worship is prevalent among the Meiteis. Many societies have a reverence for their ancestors. This reverence is often attributed to the simple fact of having descended from them, and with a sense of obligation towards them. Ancestor worship in ^{some} form is there among the Hindus ever since the Vedic times. The rites and rituals performed by the Hindus at the time of Saradha ceremony for someone who died in the family make offering to the forefathers also by reciting Vedic mantras. The tarpanas and pinda offerings to the forefathers also are instances of reverence to the forefathers. According to Hinduism, a Hindu has three debts in life (Rinatraya). One of them is debt to the forefathers, and by way of repayment of this debt, he should make offerings to his forefathers daily.

Ancestor-worship is often based on an association of ideas.¹² A Jagga ancestor requires sustenance; he therefore insists on sacrifices and afflicts his neglectful descendants. Some of the African tribes have a typical

12. Raghuvir Sinha, Family to Religion, p.129

procedure to determine the cause of illness. They divine by some rudimentary method, which ancestor is actually offended, to discover what he actually wants, and when this is known to offer him a bull or goat. Ancestor-cults are highly characteristics of the old world. It was widely practised in China, Japan and the countries of South-East Asia. It was prevalent among the Naga people and other tribes in the North-Eastern India. "The members of an old Chinese clan worshipped the human ancestor, or supposed ancestor, of their group as a powerful protector. To make this worship effective, they even erected crude stone or wooden statues of him, consulted him by divination, prayed for his assistance and thanked him with sacrifices. The modern Chinese practice of general ancestor worship has grown largely out of this simple belief".¹³ The Nagas erect large stone or wooden megaliths in memory of the heroic achievements of their ancestors. This practice is called by the Meiteis Urong Khinba (Urong=forked trace; Khinba=to erect). Primitive people were eager and enthusiastic in their attempt to propitiate the spirits of their forefathers. If we take this point into account, James Frazer is to some extent right when he said in his Golden Bough that "religion is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man"

13. *ibid* pp. 129-130

which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. The Meiteis worship Apokpa (=Forefather or Ancestor) when they are faced with calamities and also to alleviate from sorrows and sufferings as well as to bring about peace and prosperity to their families.

Regarding the practice of ancestorworship among the Meiteis, T.C. Hodson writes: "The worship of the clans which, seven in number, compose the Meitei nation or confederacy, clearly consists in the adoration and propitiation of the eponymous ancestors of the clan. The name of the tribal Deities is given as Luang pokpa, or ancestor of the Luangs, Khuman pokpa, ancestor of the Khumans, apparent exceptions to this being the tribal Deities of the Ningthouja and Angom clans, which are called Nongpok Ningthou, or the King of the East, alias Pakhangba, whom we know from other sources to be the reputed ancestor of the clan in question(the Ningthouja), and Pureiromba. The aliases of the other tribal Deities are Poireiton, for the Luangs; Khamdingou, for the Khaba-Nganbas, Thongaren for the Khumans, and Ngangningsing, for the Moirangs; and Nungaoyumthangba, for the Chengleis.

.....

In the case of the ancestor of the Ningthouja clan, Pakhangba, we have the curious superstition that he still sometimes appears to men, but in the form of a snake, which reminds one of the Zulu belief that their ancestors assume the shapes of harmless brown snakes. Another instance which may help to explain the Pakhangba worship is afforded by the classical instance of the Romans, who held that the 'genius' of every man resided in a serpent. Cicero (De Divinatione, 1, 18, 36), tells how the death of the serpent which was the genius of the Father of the Gracchi, presaged, and was soon followed by, the death of Tiberius. Recent investigations prove that the genius was the 'external soul' so familiar in folk tales of primitive peoples. Here the snake is the external soul of the Raja, the piba of the Ningthouja clan, and the head of the Meitheis". 14

Hodson writes about the religious practice of the Lois as follows : "Lois worship Sena Mahi, and Leimaren the Imung Lai, and offer up pigs, dogs, ducks and fowls to them. The Sun God is worshipped by the people of Fayeng Loi in Sajibu (April), when they offer up a white fowl and a white pigeon. At Andro Loi, offerings are made to both Sun and Moon, the latter being worshipped

14. T.C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, pp 99-100

every month on an auspicious day in the last quarter of the moon. They offer up each year a pig in honour of the Umang Lai or Deities, who control the prosperity of the crops, as Rain and weather gods. Panam Ningthou and Pureiromba are their Umang Lai, while Kaubru is the Umang Lai of Fayeng and of Sengmai, where they told me he was the Lam Lai or God of the country-side. They also worship the clan God, whose names coincide with those of the Clan God of certain Meithei clans. Fayeng Lois assert that their ancestors were Mengkhong-ba and Hameng-mitpa."¹⁵
 (Meng-Khongba= cat voiced and Hameng-mitpa= goat eyed)

Religion and magic

Umang Lais are generally dreaded for their supernatural and extra-ordinary powers. It is widely believed that if they are provoked and offended they cast spell and bring about devastation and death. Louise Lightfoot recounts the following stories. "Here it is interesting to note that some Lais are more powerful than others. A notable example is "Eechoom Lairembi" whose shrine is some ten miles from Imphal on the way to Sanahal Lokchao. This shrine lies in a small 'island' of forest surrounded now by ricefields, and not far from the roadway During the recent Japanese invasion in 1942, many

15. *ibid*, p. 103

trees were cut down by the Military for firewood, or because it was thought that the tree might be sheltering the enemy. An American soldier begin to fell a huge old tree in Echoom's little 'island'. He was warned by the local people that the Lairembi would be angry, but he persisted and felled the tree. The same night he became suddenly ill and died".¹⁶ This story has been corroborated by the local people. There are many other incidents of similar kind when the military people during the war offended the Umang Lais and met with devastating consequences.

Another incident referred to by the aforesaid authoress is about the famous Lai Khamlangba of Kakching. "He was the first drummer of the Meiteis and is the patron of all "Poong Yeibas" (drummers). Evidently he has a strong sense of fun; and, when his spirit is called up from the water (as all spirits in Manipur are), and carried in a "Dolai" (a chair carried on two poles), to the shrine, the two men carrying this Dolai are sometimes wont to stagger about unsteadily and are pulled out of their course this way and that. I am told that an English Officer Major Colt felt sure that the two men carrying the Dolai were pretending. "I and my Clerk will carry the Dolai", he said, "and prove that these men are fooling you." So they lifted up the

15. L. Lightfoot, Dance Rituals of Manipur p. 14

Dolai poles, but, to their surprise, they were pulled back towards the water and right into the water. They staggered out again, muddy and convinced and Major Colt presented fifty rupees to the shrine. This incident occurred in 1924 or 1925".¹⁷ Such incidents are common during most of the Lai Haraoba festivals. Sometimes the ceremonial umbrella becomes too heavy to be carried, sometimes the Maibi becomes wayward, sometimes some of the participants unconsciously go out of their ways, and so on.

Lai Wangbren of Sugnu about 35 miles south of Imphal is also a prominent God, who is dreaded by the people for His supernatural and magical powers. He is the god of rain and flood (His counterpart in the Hindu pantheon is Varuna). There is a salt brine well (Thoomkhong) near His temple dedicated to the God. No outsider is supposed to encroach on that spring. "But some members of the Governor of Assam's hunting party walked over this outcrop. A local man, seeing the unfortunate incident, remarked "You should not have done that! Surely now there will be a death!" The Governor himself became unaccountably ill and died next day near Wangbren's spot".¹⁸ The Governor referred to in this account is the late Governor of Assam Sir Akbar Hydri.

17. *ibid*, p.15

18. Quoted by R. Sinha, *Family to Religion*, p. 147

There is something mysterious, something which cannot be explained by ordinary common sense and by science. Some sort of magic is associated with people's faith in the Umang Lais and their worship. Perhaps James Frazer is right when he wrote in his Golden Bough that there is an intimate relation between religion and magic. He said, "When spell is transformed into prayer, magic yields to religion. Much of magic is on par with religion, both are based on similar intellectual attitudes; as both want to 'unravel the mystery of the world. While magic explains the ways in which things happen in terms of hidden face, religion does it in terms of deities, spirits and powers". Thus the Meitei and other people in the traditional societies have a good cause for propitiating the supernatural spirits, whether in the form of Nature Spirits or in the form of the spirits of their deceased ancestors. We can learn many things about the noble deeds and achievements of the Lais from the songs contained in the Lai Haraoba and from the old manuscripts (Pooyas) written in script decipherable by Meitei Pundits.

Thus, Lai Haraoba as a religious festival has special significance and value in the socio-cultural life of Meiteis. As a community festival wherein there is mass participation,

it serves as a factor for social cohesion and harmony. The entire village makes elaborate arrangement for the festival which takes place from one week to a fortnight's duration. It is also a cultural institution because the traditional artistic songs and dances have been preserved and nurtured for centuries in the Lai Haraoba festival. It is a religious institution which is founded upon the abstruse philosophy of the Meitei people.

In the next chapter we shall deal with the ritualistic aspect of Lai Haraoba and its significance.

CHAPTER - IV

Rituals of Lai Haraoba

The religious rituals associated with the worship of Umang Lais in Lai Haraoba festival are very elaborate. From the day the organisers consult pundits for an auspicious day for inaugurating the festival, the people make hectic preparations for the observance of the festival. As we have pointed out already there are some variations among the four forms of Lai Haraoba referred to in the last chapter. But the differences are mainly on the details and not on the essential programmes of the festivals. Local variations are unavoidable in matters of detail. The basic patterns are more or less similar to all forms of Lai Haraoba.

Important stage of Haraoba rituals

According to S.N. Pratt, there are seven important sections or stages in the observance of the festival.¹

They are :

1. The Lai Ikouba : This consists in the calling of the Lai up out of the water.

2. Laibu Jagoi : a dance with antiphonal singing representing the life cycle of the Lai.

1. S.N. Pratt, *ibid*, pp 54-55

3. The Panthoibi Jagoi : a dance depicting the romantic tale of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi.
4. Lairen Mathek : a community dance in which the circular pattern representing the python is danced out.
5. Ougri Hangel : a further community dance designed to bring wealth, which leads into
6. Thabal Chongba: 'dancing by moonlight' in a circle.
7. Nongkaroi : the sending of the lai back to heaven.

"Various other episodes may be included; further communal dances, comic interludes, the rite of saroi Khangba designed to ward off evil spirits, and (at least in earlier times) sporting events. But these are not of the essence of Lai Haraoba".

"Some of the seven elements listed above were almost certainly independent entities at some stage in the development of the festival. The Lairen Mathek dance is limited to the Kanglei Haraoba and is connected with the python manifestation of Pakhangba. It was almost certainly originally connected with the Ningthouja Yek alone. The episode of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi is always danced in Tangkhul costume, and therefore the possibility of a Tangkhul origin for this section cannot be ruled out. In support of this it should be noted that the cultivation

process of jhuming, which figures in this dance, is specifically Naga one. Ougri Hangel is said to have been introduced by King Loiyamba(11th Century A.D.), and this is supported by the Cheitharol Kumbaba(p.5). The Thabal Chongba which has been referred to above in connection with Yaosang, may well have been a spring dance. The Laibu Jaqoi, whatever its origin, now stands as a separate entity depicting the life cycle of the lai, and is not necessarily connected with any of the other sections of the festival. There remain the lai ikouba and nongkarol, which evidently go together as the beginning and the end of the festival, the calling up of the lai and the sending of him back to heaven. The first is a lengthy process, which will be described below. It begins with the calling up of the lai from the water and is followed by other rites at the laipham(the place of worship). A prominent feature of this part is the lai-procession of the principal maibi, in which state she utters oracles. This section of the Haraoba may well have been the core around which, with the later additions, the present complicated festival grew up."

Pundit Kulachandra Singh in his book Meitei Lai Haraoba arranges the programmes of the festival on the first days as follows :

1. Lai houba: the beginning of the rituals;
2. Lai phi setpa : Changing new clothes of the Lai;
3. Lai Ikouba : calling up the deity from the water;
4. Laithemgatpa: coming of Lai from the water to the temple(Lai Ikarakpa);
5. Purification by Maibas and Maibis;
6. Pena singer(ballad singer) narrates the attributes of the Lai;
7. Maibis Lai pou : Oracle(prophecy) of Maibi;
8. Saroi Khangba: Warding off evil spirits by the Maibis.

Daily programme

The daily regular programme of worship after the first day shall be as follows:

In the morning the ballad singer(Penakhongba) will sing awakening song(Yakairon). He will sing "Hayi Haya Hayum", and the song about the creation of the world. After the awakening of Lai, the Maibi will say oracle (Laimang Phamba) and spread the message of God and Goddess. Then food will be offered to Lais.

In the afternoon the Maibi initiates the session of ritualistic dance for the evening. This will be followed by the offering of flowers to the deities. Then the Maiba

with some people putting on ceremonial dress will sing "Hoi", This is called "Hoi Laoba". Next programme is the Laibu dance(Jagoi). After this the other items mentioned already will follow.

The shrine is well-decorated with white clothes. Umbrella(Peh), poles with several rings of white cotton cloth cut in lacy design and huge fans(Hoomai) of white cotton cloth are present and above the masks of the Lai and Lairembi in the shrine, hungs a Thakal' (Canopy) of white cotton cloth cut in lacy design. White cotton cloth is worn by the Maibeas and by the men bearing the decorations. "White is the favourite colour of the Meiteis, but the second favourite colour is moss-green, and tight-fitting jackets of green velvet are worn by the Maibis and their accompanists, the Pena Khongba".

Leisemba Jagoi(dance of creation)

This Maibi dance has special significance. The Maibi enacts the story of Creation of the World. She tells how the Universe was void with watery appearance, and how Guru created the material of the spheres with the help of nine Laipoongthous(male gods) who received it from Him and gave it to the seven Lainuras(goddesses). These spirits again threw the material out into space. Guru

finished creation in seven periods. Accounts of the creation of man comes under an important part of Lai Haraoba called "Laibou".

The Maibi continues how Guru and His Spirits cause love to be aroused on earth, and thus creation of human beings goes on. The formation of the child in the womb of its mother is related by the Maibi. The gestures used throughout are simple, but they are artistically executed. The birth of the child after passing through the gestation period is portrayed dramatically. The Maibi announces the event by shouting, and the people respond to the Maibi's lead. We reproduce below the episode from the translation given by S.N. Pratt.

Maibi: The child has turned, bring in the mat.

People: It is brought.

Maibi: Let the midwife come in.

People: She has come, has come.

Maibi: The blood has come, the water is broken.

People: It has broken, has broken.

Maibi: The child has come, the head has come first.

I can see the head. The child is born.

People: Is born, is born.

The responsive singing continues through the stages of the cutting of the placenta, the bathing of the new born child, and its feeding at the breast. The child begins to grow.

Maibi: The child grows daily, he is moving his arms and legs.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Let the child grow^d, while the cucumber is growing and the sun is high, you child of Soraren.

People: You, daughter of Soraren, grow while the cucumber^{*} is growing and the sun is high.

Maibi: The child is growing, has grown up. He is big, he says he will build a house, he wishes to wear clothes.

People: Let us dress him (Maibi portrays the dressing of the child)

Maibi: Let us dance, ya ya hoyo hoyo.

People: Hoya ya.

Then follows the yumsarol khuthek which depicts the building of the house. The various stages of planning, digging the foundations and building are danced out. The house is then offered to the Lai. The singing goes on. The Penakhongbas sing the song of offering while the Maibis open their folded

* ("Thabi"; means Sun also)

scarves in front of the altar with the gesture of offering a house to the deity.

The enactment of the construction of the house through the gestures of Yumsarol Jagoi (Jagoi=dance) is as follows:

Maibi: Oh! the followers of Lai-Ningthou (or Lairembi)!

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Let us build a house for our Lord.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Let us choose a suitable plot of Land.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Make the hand gesture of choosing a plot of land.

(People: express in gestures).

Maibi: Let us find an auspicious day for the foundation.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Let us level the ground.

People: Yes, Yes.

(The Maibis make gesture of leveling).

Maibi: Let us make a design of a room.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Now, Let us fix the pillars of wooden posts.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Let us start to build the house.

People: Yes, Yes.

Thus, the Maibis express the building of the house through gestures, and after the construction dance is over, the house is offered to the deity.

After the Yumsarol Jagoi is finished, the Maibis start other dances depicting chores of settled life in the family, the struggle in search of food and clothing by undertaking cultivation, weaving, etc. Different dance-gestures depict the life-cycle and the modes of living in the early human society. The dances are accompanied by songs, exchange of jokes and comic interludes. The people laugh now and then, and enjoy the dramatic enactments, the songs and dances.

Next is the Panthoibi Dance. Two Maibis lead a group dance of womenfolk. Through dance gestures they enact the sequences of fruit gathering, digging earth with spades for cultivation, sowing of paddy seed, harvesting, sowing of cotton seed, picking of cotton, spinning and weaving, etc. The penakhongbas and dholak drummers accompany the dance sequence.

The Panthoibi Jagoi also depicts the romantic tale of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. The story of Panthoibi is narrated in an old work called Panthoibi Khongkul.

Panthoibi was a beautiful woman with divine attributes. She was married to Khaba. One day while she was cultivating in the farm on the Nongmaiching hill she met Nongpok Ningthou the divine King of Nongmai hill. Although she was already married she fell in love with Nongpok Ningthou. The episode is enacted in the Lai Haraoba as follows:

The Maibi announces the arrival of Nongpok Ningthou, King of the East.

Maibi: Oh followers of Lai!

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Your Lord has come. Show respect to Him.
Serve Him, fan Him.

People: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: Place a mirror before him so that He may admire Himself.

People: Yes, Yes.

(They look at their palms as if they were looking at mirror).

Maibi: Comb hair.

(People act as if combing).

Maibi: Offer Him fruits.

People: Yes, Yes.

(They act as if they offer fruits).

Then the group goes on dancing in merriment.

The Pena player (the ballad singer) sings Anoirol. The Maibis, the Maiba and woman of different age groups follow the Pena player and dance in a circle round the courtyard and proceeds towards the altar and bow down to the deities. Anoirol chanting has special ritualistic significance and it is taken to be very important. It narrates the story of pristine glory and the prosperous settlement of people in different places. This song is considered as purificatory and auspicious.

Another important dance ritual is the fishing episode (Long Khonba) with the fishing basket (long). The fishing is regarded in a symbolical manner as the gathering of the spirit of the Lai. The Maibi begins with the words:

'Now that the weaving of cloth is completed and has been offered to the Lord, let us gather the spirit of the Lai. Now the long, (fishing basket), grandmother Laisanas long, grandfather Pakhangba's long, let us hold this important long, let us chase away the evil spirits, let us take in the five spirits (five prans, which become six with the addition of the image (shadow) ".

| "Thawai Mangamak Miga thana tarukmak" |.

The Maibi dances in the tune of Pena, imitating the gathering of fish inside the fishing basket. As the long is pushed away the Maibi symbolically chases away evil spirits.

Laibou

A very important item of the daily programme is Laibou Chongba (Laibou ritualistic dance). This is considered as the most important part of the daily ritual. No one is allowed to leave the courtyard where the ritual is performed after the Laibou has started. The Maibis make special arrangement for the Laibou. The participants stand in a procession in the following order:

- First row: Lai Pubas (Men who carry the Lai).
- Second row: Two young men bearing chong.
- Third row: Two women.
- Fourth row: Four girls.
- Fifth row: Four girls.
- Sixth row: Two men holding swords.
- Seventh row: Five Maibis in a row, accompanied by two Pena singers and drummers.

Before the procession begins, the Maibis bring out the spirit of Lai through a long hiri (ritual thread made

of cotton fibre), and the Lai Pubas receive in their white cotton shawl and take them close to their chest. When the Laibou procession starts, the Lai Pubas move first. They are under the protection of two big white umbrellas. The procession stands with its back to the temple. The five Maibis faced the Lais (now with the Lai Pubas) and dance holding Langthrei leaves between their fingers and making specific gestures of touching and stepping on the soft, newly created earth.

The principal Maibi exclaims:

"Ho ! the servants of god"

Group: Yes, Yes.

Maibi: The "Hoirou Haya" is going to be sung.

Don't move.

(Now the procession is at a halt).

The Pena Khongba sings:

"O, hoirou O nage| hoirou hoirou nage|
Hoirou hoirouye nageda, Laiyingthou O hoirounese
soom|"

(At this point the participants should not move at all).

"Ha, haya aa, haya haya aa, Haya he nageda,
Ah, yoibubigi hayane".

(The Maibi starts dancing Khayom Jagoi)

The Pena singer, then, sings Anoiron and the Maibis dance Hakchang Saba Jagoi (Dance expressing in hand gestures the creation of the body of the baby in the womb).

It may be mentioned that the Laibou Jagoi is the expression of fertility cult. The Hoiron Laoba is interpreted by the scholars as the sexual act of intercourse between the opposite sexes and the conception of the child in the womb of the mother. The Laibou Khutheks, the hand gestures of Laibou, (Sanskrit- "hastas"), are 64 in forms and they represent the making of the different parts of human body and subsequently putting soul in the body by the divine grace. After the making of the different parts of the body, the Maibi dances to give finishing touch (Hakchang Langbumba). Then she begs Atiya Guru Sidaba, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, for the soul of the baby. And after getting the soul from the Lord, it is put into the body by means of hand gesture.

Then the Maibi exclaims: O, servants of Lai!

Group : Yes.

Maibi : The body has the soul and

it is time for the baby to be born and
look at the earth. Build a house for the
baby.

Group : Yes, Yes, we have built.

(The Maibi dances depicting the building of a house).

Maibi : She (the expectant one) has entered the
delivery room.

Group : Yes, Yes.

Maibi : The labour pain has started.
Find me a mat.

Group : Yes, Yes, we have brought one.

Maibi : Midwife, go inside.

Group : Yes, Yes, She has gone inside.

Maibi : Waves of water have come out.
The membranes are torn.

Group : Yes, Yes.

Maibi : We see the head of the child. The Maibis
hold their scarves and make a gesture of giving birth to
a child. The principal Maibi exclaims:

"The baby is born !"

The Maibi makes a gesture of cutting the umbilical
cord. She asks for a wooden bowl.

Group : Yes, Yes, we have brought one.

Maibi : Pour the water.

Group : Yes, Yes.

Maibi : Let us bathe the baby.

Group : Let us, let us bathe.

The Maibi makes the gesture of wiping the baby.

Maibi : Let us cover the child with a cloth.

Group : Yes, Yes.

The Maibi makes a gesture of covering the baby with cloth.

Maibi : Call the father to give a name in the baby's
ear.

Group : Yes, Yes. He has come.

Maibi : Let the baby take mother's milk.

Group : The fountain of milk has come.

The Maibi makes a gesture of nursing the baby.

Maibi : The baby is growing up. The baby has
started moving hands.

Group : Yes, Yes.

Maibi sings : "Ting Ting Chaoro" (grow up, grow
up gradually)

Maibi : The baby has grown up just like the father
and the grand father. He wants to dress up.

Group : Clothe him. Yes, Yes.

The Maibis dance with the gestures of clothing the baby.

They also sing joyously in a melodious tune.

A Manipuri scholar, Yumnaba Tamphajao writer in his book Meitei Lai Haraobagi Wanqulol (Philosophy of Meitei Lai Haraoba) that ~~La~~^Libou means Lai=God, Pou⁸ prominent. Prominent Lai means "Yoimayai taodalba" the Sun-God. Laibou, the Sun God is represented by the circular plantainleave in the middle of the courtyard where the ritual is performed. Three leaves of Langth~~wei~~ plant are put on the plantain leave. These represent the three periods of one day, namely, Mangang, Luwang and Khuman. It signifies that man's life is governed by these three times- on one day he is born; on one day he lives; and on one day he dies. Hence, the three leaves represent human life. It also signified that we live within time, and the movement of time(i.e. the wheel of time) synchronises with the revolution of the earth round the sun. This revolution is further represented by the dance form of Laibou in which the dancers dance in a circle. In Manipuri, dance means "Jagoi". "Jagoi" is derived from "Chat-Koi" (literally, Chat=go; Koi=round), "going round". So, "Jagoi" or "Chatkoi" represents the phenomenon of the earth moving round the sun, which the only God whom we can see with our own eyes, and who does the work of creation (because without sunlight no living being can survive). The movement of the earth round the sun once in 365 days has

been represented by the 365 steps of Lai Haraoba dance. The above interpretation of "Jagoi" has been supported by Panditraja Atombapu Sharma in his books Manipur Purabrita, Pakhangba and other works. It is because of its profound philosophical meaning that the Lai Haraoba has occupied important place among the socio-religious institutions of the Meiteis.

The Maibis dance different forms of dance depicting house construction, cultivation of food crops and cotton. They dance, running, jumping, sitting in different poses, depicting all kinds of domestic activities, such as, washing of clothes, carrying of water, drying of clothes, etc. They dance with inspiration and with ecstasy.

Then the Laibou procession starts again. Many girls and married women join and perform Thougal Jagoi (Dance of rendering service to Lai). After one round in the courtyard, the Maibis leave the procession and come to the middle of the ground and holding their chadars make a gesture of bowing. The group now stand quietly. The Maibas also come to the middle of the ground.

In his book, Manipur Sanatan Dharma, Panditraja Atombapu Sharma interprets Laipou as Lai-Pokpa (birth of Lai) or the birth of God. The birth of God in human form

is expressed in the hand gestures of dance. In the Laibou Jagoi (dance) the movement of the Sun (Aditya) is imitated by the Maibis by revolving leftward. ~~The~~ Panditraja maintains that the worship of the sun forms a part of the traditional religion of the Meiteis, and the dance ritual performed in Laibou Jagoi is an important aspect of the worship of the Meiteis.

Mikon-tha-konba (callingup spirits)

After the Maibis' Laibou dance is over, all the participants gather together, and the Maiba chants mantra to call back the souls (Hindu-Pranas) of all the villagers. The Maiba also prays to the Lais for the peace and prosperity of people in the village community.

The Maibis then sing erotic songs symbolising the sexual union of the Lai (God) and Lairembi (Goddess). Maibi sings "One catches ngamu (a kind of fish whose head looks like male genital organ); another catches ngahou (carp fish representing female sex organ)".

People understand the erotic import of the song and laugh. Other erotic songs suggesting sexual acts follow. These songs may sound vulgar to an outsider. But they have ritualistic significance, because they refer to

the fact that procreation (which is a form of creation) is the result of the sexual union between God and Goddess, the divine partners in the act of the creation of all the living beings in the world. One may interpret the dance episode and its philosophy from the Tantric standpoint. The Meiteis believe that all creation is the result of the union between Paa (Father) and Pee(Mother) - the Yin and Yang in ancient Chinese Philosophy. This is the reason why so much importance has been attached to the sexual union between Lainingthou and Lairembi at this stage of Lai Haraoba. The Maibis also dance Paphal Jagoi to depict the sexual act.

Chong-Khong-Litpa ritual

Two Maibis take up the hiri(ritual thread) which is laid on a piece of white cloth on the Laibou La Plantain leave). The hiri is believed to be haunted by the spirit of the Lai (Hindu-Jivanyas). Four men holds a sheet of white cloth at four corners like a canopy, each holding a chong on a pole. The two Maibis with the hiri in their hands started to dance, moving in and out under the canopy, coiling around each of the poles at the four corners in the direction of the four guardian Lais of the valley, namely, Koubru, Thangjing, Wangbren and Marjing. The coiling pattern

of Pakhangba (which is similar to Kundalini Tantric Symbol) created a complex movement. While the two Maibis were dancing to depict the coiling of the snake, the other Maibis sing to the pena music and drums. They sing with joyous mood spanking each other's buttock with erotic gestures. The two Maibis return the hiri to the men who carry Lai. The members of the procession stand up and the Maibas and Maibis join them, the Maibis forming another Pakhangba pattern (Kundalini design).

The Maibas and Maibis lead the procession rapidly encircling the four posts of the chong, going in and out of the white canopy following the complex Pakhangba design. The movement of the dancers in the pattern of Pakhangba is called Lairenmathek Chatpa (going like the coil of serpent).

This is followed by Thabal Chongba dance in which mostly boys and girls participate. All other participants may also join. In the past people of all age groups (except minor children) participated in this dance. "Thabal Chongba" literally means "Jumping or dancing in the moonlit night." Thabal Chongba as a part of the Lai Haraoba dance is the expression of joy and happiness in group dance form in which men and women, boys and girls are hand in hand and make rhythmic movement in a circle. The dance is vigorous and ecstatic.

Thabal Chongba dance is also performed as an important part of the Meitei festival of Yaosang (Hindu-Holi or Doljatra) which is held in the Meitei month of Lamda (March). Thabal Chongba dance commences from the full moon night of Lamda (Hindu-Chaitra Mas) and it continues for about one month now-a-days. In the past it was observed for about nine days and it was performed with religious fervour and the element of ritualism was present, although for the young men and women the performance was mainly for merriment. Usually, the boys and girls found their life partners in their meeting and dancing together in the Thabal Chongba.

After the Thabal Chongba item is over in the Lai Haraoba, the Laibou rituals come to an end. The Maibis and Maibas pray, and the spirits of the Lainingthou and Lairembi are taken back from the Laibou La to the shrine amidst chanting of hymns.

Lairen Mathek Chatpa

The Maibas and Maibis, then, lead the participants in making a ritualistic movement in the form of various serpent coils. At least five different forms of serpentine movements are followed in a procession. This is known as Lairen Mathek Chatpa ("making serpentine movement").

"Lairen in Manipuri is "Python". The pythons are not only dreaded but they are believed to possess divine powers. Lai Pakhangba is believed to assume the form of python in its coiled form which resembles the Kundalini chart of Tantricism, as we have mentioned already. It is also believed that in its coiled form, the Pakhangba puts his tail into the mouth. *(Please see the enclosed picture)*

After the serpentine movements are over the Maibi says "for the welfare of the people let the participants joins their palms against the palms of their partners; let each pair clasp together, join together". Everybody responds in agreement and each pair of participants clasp their palms together.

Then the singing of "Wakol-lo! Wakol-lo !" by the Maiba begins and the participants repeat the song. The ritualistic song is as follows :

Wakol-lo, Wakol-lo.

Wakonna Kappa Likappa,

Wakon tanoi noi.

Thoiding-O Thoiding-O,

Thoiding makere.

Hangam-O Hangam-O,

Hangam makaram.

Kabok-O Kabok-O

Kabok Makaram.

Ching dagi wakonna

Tamda tage hairedo

Wakon fase lifase.

Wakon Kanoi noi.

Tamdaga paiba wainuna,

Chingda paige hairedo.

Wainu inem nem.

This song is significant in the sense that it expresses the phenomena of progress and prosperity, joy and happiness, not only among the people but also among the fauna and flora of nature.

With this song the day's programme is completed. The daily programme is invariably wound up with this song. But on the last day of the Haraoba, instead of the words "Wakon fase lifase" ^{*the participants should sing "Wakon fase*} the "lithase", and instead of "Wakon Kanoi noi", they should sing "Wakon tanoi noi". Unless this procedure is followed, it is believed that mishaps may befall the village community. This is a matter of belief among the people. Rationalists may set it aside as mere superstitious belief.

The serpentine movement of the participants signify that the act of creation is unending. The coiled form of the serpent(Lairen) signifies time which is without beginning and end, that being represented by the swallowing of the tail by the mouth. The throwing to and fro of phibul(ball made of cloth) between two Maibis signify the exchange and union of sperm and ovum between male and female for the creation. The clasping of palms among different pairs of participants also signify the union act which ~~is~~ meant procreation. We have already mentioned that Lai Haraoba is connected with fertility cult. This point is further supported by the declaration of the Maibas and Maibis that the Haraoba dance rituals are mainly performed for the progress and prosperity of the village, and also for heralding the birth of babies by doing away with disease and death ("Khunjao Leichaonaba, Chakhong ngahongnaba ne"). Thus, prayers and offerings are made to the deities to bring about joy and happiness to the people. Life in the early society was simple. Their search for food, clothing and shelter was simple. Usually they go to nature in search of them. There is a relation of give and take between nature and man. Thus, Lai Haraoba rituals depict the life cycle of the people.

Kanglei Thokpa

On the fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh day of the Lai Haraoba festival a programme called Lai Kanglei Thokpa is observed. In the Meitei mythology Lord Khoriphaba is described as an expert in the game of polo, which originated in Manipur. The legend says that Khoriphaba was not allowed to participate in the polo match of the Lais, because he was still unmarried. So Khoriphaba came out in search of a bride. In the past the Maibi went among the spectators, a polo hockey in hand in imitation of Lai Khoriphaba, and picked up a maiden from amongst the spectators. The Maibis sing depicting Khoriphaba's search for a bride.

"Yubi Chinglai Leima,
 Ya Kadeng nganbidi isanou
 Sanoudagi iya tampha inemmacha pamubi,
 Ngasi Korou numitta
 Sanou mar Khonggul lirakpabu,
 Ukhidreko isanou
 Sanou tampha inemmachabu
 Leikai pambal Landuna
 Kumbi meiroubabu chatkhibara
 Uraktareko ishanou,

.

.

Tampha inemmachabu

Chenglou sakpu Ubara ?

Koloi Paodambiyuda."

This song may be freely translated as follows:

"My beloved maiden of the hills,

The pearl whom I am unable to part with.

I followed your foot prints

But I failed to find you.

Sweet one have you gone to another village ?

Or, have you gone to fetch fire from your neighbour ?

Or, have you gone to wash your hair on the river bank ?

Or, are you combing your beautiful hair inside your father's
house ?

Or, have you gone to play the game of Kang seated between
two village brothers as a piece of decoration,
In the midst of your maiden friends.

Or, are you pounding rice in your father's courtyard
Tying a belt round your slender waist,
And a napkin tied on your head ?

My beloved ! I have not seen you for a long time.

Tell me where you are."

The above romantic song and the dance gesture becomes ecstatic and vigorous. The Maibis, then, enact the game of polo, stick and ball in hands. The Maibi becomes too ecstatic and subsequently she becomes possessed by spirit and due to the power of divinity she says Laibou (oracle). This is considered important during Kanglei Thokpa since the Maibi prophesise and foretel^e the future of the villagers and the community.

Lairoi (the last day of Haraoba)

From the ritualistic standpoint Lairoi, the last day of Lai Haraoba has special importance. The ritual performance is lengthy and it continues until dawn. People in large numbers come and offer fruits, flowers and dakshina coins (and currency notes). The spectators for the evening programmes are also many.

The main rituals are more or less the same as those of the preceding days. The recreational items of dance duo (especially Khamba-Thoibi dance) and group dances in greater numbers are the attractions of the cultural programmes. The dancers are mostly girls, young men and women.

The Maibis arrange the ingredients for the ritual in front of the altar, such as lamp, incense, flowers,

leaves of tairen, langthrei, fruits, pot of water, heaps of paddy, rice, our for sailing boat, etc. Besides, for the night item of Ougri Hangel Chongba dance, four long ropes should be put on a big plantain leaf, fifty nattas (made of reed or bamboo) should be placed on plantain leaf for the God, another fifty nattas should be placed on plantain leaf for the Goddess. A ringing bell for the Maibi should be put on plantain leaf; the handle of the bell should be tied by white cloth kept long on either side. Fifty pieces of plantain leaf in front of Lainingthou and another fifty pieces of plantain leaf in front of Lairembi should be set apart. The Maibas and Maibis shall put the offerings on these leaves for purification, with chantings. Such hymns as Yumdai Nakseng, Naheirrol, Lambuba Lamitlon, Pongning, Tutourol, Tutenglon and Atai Laisol should be sung.

On the south-western corner of the Lai Haraoba arena some paddy straw should be spread out and on that three plantain leaves should be placed one upon the other. Over that a white sheet of cotton cloth sewed in the middle should be folded thrice should be kept. On that cloth the Laibou Leihul (Langthrei leaves) should be put. On the Leihul offered to Laiyingthou Laiyingthou's dagger should be placed, and on the Lairembi's leihul, Lairembi's

dagger should be placed. Two flags should be placed on the sides of the daggers. Then the Maibis will dance, while the drummers will play drum and the Pena singer will play on Pena.

When the Maibis start dancing, fire should be lit on the four corners of the arena. The fire should be kept burning till the function is over. Nobody should trespass over the four corners. Trespassing will bring about misfortune. The remedy for the trespassing (Lamlanba), if there be any should be prayer by offering fruits to the deities. People take special care lest the Lais are offended by avoiding the prohibitions and customary injunctions.

After the initial dances are over, the Maibis will make Lairel Mathek (Python coil) movement and proceed towards the corner where the daggers are kept. One of the Maibis will take up the two daggers and touch different parts of her body in the same way in which the Maibis touches different parts of body with hand, when she dances the body-creation dance on other days. Another Maibis will take up two flags and dance touching different parts of her body. In this manner the two Maibis will proceed in turns towards the remaining corners of the arena and dance by touching different parts of their bodies either by the

daggers or by the flags. After this they will dance round and round by swinging the daggers or the flags. After dancing for some time they will come to the centre of the arena where the Laiboula is placed. The Maibi holding the dagger will clash the two daggers together. In doing so no spark should be allowed to be emitted, that is to say, the clashing should be done slowly. Similarly, the Maibi holding the flags should come to the centre and clash the flags together. In this manner they should rush to the different (opposite) directions and clash the daggers and the flags separately. Then the Maibis will sing the following duet song sung by the Nongpok Ningthou (the God of the East in the garb of Tangkhul Naga) and Goddess Panthoibi who comes with a ihuming spade in hand and a basket on her back.

"O light-footed Lord of the East,
 Wearing forked head-gear on the head,
 Wearing flowers on your ear lobes,
 With Knitted cane on your legs and arms,
 You wear the look of a Tangkhul.
 Go back, go back".

Singing so, the Maibis will clash the daggers on the flags. Again they sing :

"I will not go back, O Maiden.
 Can the wind be entraped ?
 Can the snake be pricked by spikes ?
 Does water need munching for swallowing ?
 Can the grasshopper be hit by arrow ?
 Oh! Oh! I will not retreat from here ".

"O Lord of the East !
 If you want to marry me,
 Bring seven male mithuns
 With seven plateful of coins,
 And offer them to my father and mother,
 And ask for my hand in marriage.
 I am willing to give my consent".

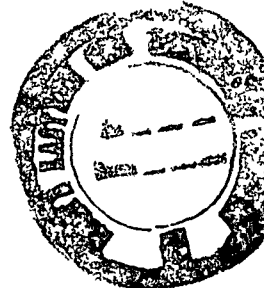
" O Maiden, I am not going back.
 If you love me,
 Send your father and mother dear.
 Let them offer three to me.
 I am willing to marry you, O Maiden".

Then the two Maibis will clash their daggers and flags
 three times. After this the daggers and the flags shall
 be placed in their original positions.

This programme shall be followed by the singing of cultivation (jhuming) songs. The Maibis will change dress for farming and her seven associates will also wear farming dress. They will perform cultivation dance by singing all the way. The first song shall be song requesting the Laibis for pardon in the case of omissions and commissions likely to be caused during the course of the Lai Haraoba rituals. Then they will go on singing different cultivation and harvesting songs. Towards the middle of the song the man playing the role of Tangkhul Naga will proceed to the arena from the North-Eastern direction. The song is as follows :

" This is father's farm
 Go on digging the ground;
 This is grand father's farm,
 Go on digging the ground;
 Let us go on digging.
 For the King's Long life,
 Go on digging;
 Let us go on digging.
 For the prosperity of the village
 Go on digging;
 Let us go on digging.
 For the abundance of grains

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Go on digging,

Let us go on digging.

This is the farm that gives long life,

Go on digging.

Let us go on digging.

.

. *

In the above manner the strain of the song will go on. After this there will be duet song between the Tangkhul and the Nurabi (woman in the guise of Goddess Panthoibi) by exchanging romantic words. Then, the Tangkhul addresses three times as "O Nongmai Nurabi, O Nongmai Nurabi, O Nongmai Nurabi". This is followed by a quarrel between the Tangkhul and the Nurabi. The Tangkhul says "Don't cultivate in this farm". The Nurabi says " I shall cultivate". The Meitei Lamboo comes out and settles the dispute. Then they all start cultivating together. But they were bitten by the wasps. The Tangkhul lit fire by rubbing bamboos and killed the wasps. The hive was collected and they relished the meats of the wasps together.

Another song called "Louka Isei" will be sung by the group praying to the God and Goddess to bless the villagers with progress, prosperity and long life.

Ougri Hangel Chongba

The rope dedicated to the Lais (as mentioned already) will be held by equal number of men and women (generally 20 to 30 on each side) in a circle. A Maiba stands at the centre of the ground. Maibi ties up the two ends of the rope and fixes her bell on it. On the side of Lainingthou menfolk will hold the rope, and on the side of Lairembi womenfolk will hold the rope. The man who leads the men's group and the woman who leads the women's group should be married people who lead a happy life with children all intact. The Maibi should tie their hands to the rope with cloth so that the rope may not slip away from their hands.

After the ritual of Ougri Hangel begins nobody should drop the rope. The men and women joining the ritual should observe austerity for one full day and they should put on clean clothes and lead clean life during that time. The Maiba who is standing at the centre turns his face towards the shrine and lead the singing ritual. The Maiba asks the participants not to ~~move~~^{move} their limbs while the Ougri song is singing.

The ritual song of Ougri is sung for the progress and prosperity of the community. The Maiba sings :

"Hoirou haya/ Hoirou haya/
 Haya haya /
 Haya soy, haya soya/ haya so/
 Ingso, Ingso, Ingso
 He hup/ he hup/ he hup/ "

The Maibi sings one line and then the group repeats the same. The participants respond without making any movement.

The above song, sung rhythmically, is mantra. The similarity in tone with Tantric mantras may be noted. The song has hypnotic influence and psychological effect. This song is followed by more songs beseeching the Almighty to shower blessings upon the King, the Queen, the prince and princess and everybody within the country and the village. The language is old archaic Meiteirol. It is difficult to know the exact meaning of the song. It is sufficiently lengthy. It is lyrical and its poetical beauty is superb. After this song the Maiba announces that the participants can move their limbs.

This is followed by Thabal Chongba dance by the group, singing.

The following forms part of the lyrical song:

"Ke Krek Ke/ Mo Mo /
 Yangel Samba / shaw shaw /
 Tokpaga Kambaga /
 Keiga Yenga /
 Yenkhong fatte chasillo /
 Laigi yenni chafade / "

This song represents the fight with the evil spirits and as such it has special ritualistic significance.

Then for the welfare of the country as a whole the Maiba will sing "Ningthourol" ballad. This will be followed by Mikon Thagonba (collecting or pacifying the soul) ritual.

The Maibi will distribute the pieces of plantain leaves offered to the God among the male participants, and those offered to the Goddess shall be distributed among the female participants. The bell fixed to the rope shall be removed and following the instruction of the Maiba the rope shall be rolled up and the man and woman who lead the groups of opposite sexes shall proceed towards the altar and offer the rope to the deities.

More songs will follow the Ougri Hangel ritual. Such songs as "Khenchore Khenchore", "the Paosa tilluk - the song of Laiyingthou Lairema", "Thing Kore, Thing Kore" shall be sung. The songs are wound up by clapping together.

Hijing Hireo ritual (The ritual of bringing boat)

The stage is now set for farewell and for sending Laiyingthou and Lairemma back to the heaven. The groups of men and women shall stand in two rows - menfolk on the side of Laiyingthou, and womenfolk on the side of Lairemma. They will hold their respective equipments, such as sword, chong, umbrellas, etc., as was done in the early processions. Besides each one of them shall take in their hands, at the level of his or her waist, one reed offered already to the deities as if they are making boat. The Maiba will, then, sing the song of cutting tree for making boat. Then the participants bring down the tree which now turns into a boat after hewing it down in the form of boat. The Maiba sings :

"Hayi ye aa haya

Hayi ye aa haya

Hayi ye aa haya

.....

Wakyei hijgangnungdagi
 Khoiyum Kanglei masumang asida
 Leitong tanga younaba
 He he he haya masa chingthokse
 Hih Hih Hih ! "

Saying these the menfolk without changing their steps shall enact pulling boat three times. Then the womenfolk will pull three times.

The Maiba sings about the origin of the boat and narrate the stories of the deities who used the boat for rowing. The Maiba then asks the participants to row the boat. The Lai pubas bring out the deities from the shrine. After deities are on the boat, they will row the boat accompanied by the songs of Pena Khongba. The Maibi rings the bell. The song sung at the time of rowing boat declares that the rowing of the boat with the deities on it is meant for the progress and prosperity of the community and the state. The Maiba sings the "Higa Ishei", the song depicting the ascendance of the God and Goddess to the Heaven on boat. The fruits offered to the deities are distributed among the participants.

The Maiba and Maibi enter into the shrine, makes an enclosure of the altar with white cloth and extinguish

the lamp. The Maibi rings the bell and chant mantras. The Maiba sings "Nongkarol", the song depicting the sojourn of Laiyingthou and Lairembi to Heaven.

After the God and Goddess leaves for Heaven, the Maiba and Maibi folds the costumes and ornaments offered to the deities and keep them in the boxes. This store-keeping of the items is called "Lai Tethaba".

The Maibis then ward off the evil spirits. The ritual for this purpose is called Saroi Khangba. The door of the shrine will be closed. The door should not be opened for five days. The rituals for Lai Haraoba comes to a close.

The day after the closing ceremony, there will be sports competition among the youths. Race, wrestling, etc., were regular items of competition in the past.

Thus, Lai Haraoba is an important social, cultural and religious institution of the Meiteis. It contains the story of the early ancestors of the Meiteis. It also beautifully preserves the rich cultural heritage of the Meitei people.

(Please see The photographs enclosed at the end).

CHAPTER - V

Myths and Legends

Introduction

Religion has its intellectual as well as its emotional and volitional aspects. This does not mean that religion had its origin in man's effort to find an intellectual solution of the problems of life and reality. As Edwards has said, "Conscious reflective thought is a relatively late feature of human evolution, and emerged as the instrument of the will to live rather than of a pure, motiveless will to know".¹ Coe has rightly stated that "Religion is not a product of intellectual leisure but of the grind of existence- a grind that ever seeks to transform itself into freedom and joy".²

Some element of cognition or belief, however, must be present even in the most elementary stages of the religious life. As thought develops it soars on the wings of creative imagination. A highly developed type of imaginative thinking is that so abundantly exemplified in mythology. A myth is an attempted explanation in terms of the imagination of the origin

1. D.MiAll Edwards, The Philosophy of Religion, p.87

2. Quoted by Edwards, loc cit

of religious practices which has sprung up spontaneously long before the myth itself. It is a form of picture thinking; it is science and theology in the form of tales. Mythology differs essentially from science and philosophy in its more pictorial mode of presentation and its freer use of poetic personifying language.

Symbols, myths and legends play very important role in the development of a religion. Religion involves a body of beliefs, and these beliefs themselves are expressed verbally and assume the form of a system of thought. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim emphasizes the importance of two kinds of social phenomena, symbols and rites. Much of social behaviour is addressed not to things themselves but to the symbols of things. In totemism, for instance, prohibitions apply not only to the totemic animals or plants are represented. Similarly our social behaviour is continually addressed not only to things themselves but to the symbols of these things.³

Durkheim also works out an elaborate theory of rites; he distinguishes the different types of rites and their general functions. He distinguishes three kinds of

3. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J.W. Swain, Free Press of Glencoe, 1948

rites; negative rites, positive rites, and rites which he calls piaculae, or rites of expiation. Negative rites are essentially interdicts: prohibitions against eating or touching. They develop in the direction of all religious practices of asceticism. Positive rites are, on the other hand, rites of communion; they are intended to promote fecundity and productivity. These rites, whether negative, positive, or piacular, all have one major function of a social order. Their aim is to uphold the community, to renew the sense of belonging to the group, to maintain belief and faith. A religion survives only by practices-which are both symbols of the belief and ways of renewing them.⁴

Almost all the societies have a historic past of which they feel proud of and through which they often claim their origin. Men have invented many stories interwoven around their socio-religious act, either performed in the history or desired to be performed in this age. These become the cultural pride of the people which they celebrate with utmost enthusiasm and give it most vivid expression.

4. Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought-2*, Pelican Book, 1967, p.64

These thoughts often align with magico-religious beliefs which explain the supreme role of supernatural force in the contemporary world. They thus form an integrated whole in which myth and miracle become complementary to each other. The effects of mythology extend beyond the purely magico-religious^p sphere. Mythology, thus, provides a charter for many of the existing social and religious institutions. The charter of mythology thus becomes an indicator of a people's socio-religious beliefs and explicit behaviour.

Levi-Strauss has done some good work in the sphere of myths. Since 1963, Levi-Strauss and his associates have published a variety of 'structural analyses of myth'. His 'La Geste d' Asdiwal' has appeared twice in French, and its English translation, 'The Story of Asdiwal' has been published in The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism.⁵ It is a story of Asdiwal which comes from the Tsimshian Indians known to us in its four versions, collected by Franz Boas some seventy years ago. Levi-Strauss has analysed it in a new way structurally. His contribution to the structural study of myths in this respect is extraordinary.

5. Edited by Edmund Leach, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, (London, 1968)

Verrier Elwin has also worked extensively on the myths of different tribal people of India, especially of Central India, Bastar, Orissa, Assam and NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh). His contribution in the sphere of mythology is superb. He has beautifully narrated the mythical element of tribal cultures. Elwin, in discussing the significance of myths in relation to religion remarks that "tribal religion is built up from an elaborate mythology". He maintained that myth, at its best, is to be regarded as a recognition of the drama of human existence. Its ultimate aim is not the wishful distortion of the world, but rather serious comprehension and envisagement of representing metaphorically a world-picture and insight into life generally, and may, therefore, be considered as primitive philosophy or metaphysical thought.⁶

Basing his belief on this interpretation of myth, Elwin remarks, "If this is true, as I think it is, it means that the NEFA tribes have their own philosophy of religion, even though it is expressed in poetic or metaphorical form.

"In the tribal Puranas, as we may call them, we find a strange sense of history, a pride in the descent

6. Refer to Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1958)

- *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (Bombay, 1955)
- *Murias and their Ghotul* (Bombay, 1941)
- *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (Bombay, 1954)
- *Myths of Middle India* (Bombay, 1954)

of the race from a great ancestor, the record of historic deeds and most interestingly, traces of a belief in the value of supreme self-sacrifice for the good of mankind. A noble king dies out of pity for the sufferings of the world. A great personage, on whose belly men once lived, dies so that by its death, the earth and sky may be perfected. The idea is crudely expressed, yet this deep and notable ideal is there, that one may die that all may live."⁷

Myth comes very near to religion, it often forms an important part of the latter. To quote Elwin again, "Tribal religion is associated with a social ethic that unites the tribes in its discipline and undoubtedly makes for a certain nobility of conduct. The great tribal virtues are discipline, devotion to work, generosity and hospitality, truth, kindness. Many tribes, while permitting considerable freedom to the unmarried insist on a high standard of marital fidelity. The folk-tales of the tribes that have come under Buddhist influence stress the general virtues of mercy and compassion."

Mythology thus plays a very important part in the religion of a people. It serves as an index to

7. Verrier Elwin, A Philosophy of NEFA, (Shillong, 1959) p. 212

understanding the origin of many social and religious institutions, and the element of faith in them.

Magic, science and religion, thus, fosters man's belief in the destined role during the crises of his life, reassuring him about a more powerful supernatural force than his own that may perchance mend his destiny.

We have at length discussed the relevance and importance of the study of symbols, myths and legends in the study of religion. We shall, now, discuss the myths and legends associated with the worship of Umang Lais.

Legend on the Origin of Salais

Legend says that Atiya Guru Sidaba wanted to find out which of his two sons, Sanamahi and Pakhangba, recognized Him not only as his father but also as his Guru. So to put their knowledge and devotion to test He took the form of a "dead cow" and floated down the river- Sanamahi (Kuptreng) disliked the dead cow, but Pakhangba (Shentreng) realized that it might be the God in disguise. So Pakhangba approached the dead cow and addressed it thus: "It is unusual for a dead cow to move

its tail". Wishing to reveal His identity Atiya Guru Sidaba moved the tail again. The two brothers now fully realized that the dead cow is Guru in disguise and pulled it out of the water. Then Guru took His real form and said to Pakhangba : "You know your father Guru well. So let your name be Pakhangba". (Pā= father, Khang-ba= to know). From that day onwards Shentreng came to be known as Pakhangba. Kuptreng was called Sanmahā because of his beautiful and radiant appearance.

The carcass of the cow was then distributed among the seven clans or salais as follows:

Kuptreng got as his share, the neck which was white.

His salai came to be known as Angom (from angouba= white).

Shentreng received the beautiful eyes. Hence, his salai was called Ningthouja (from ningthiba= beautiful).

Pammaringba got the top portion of the head and his salai was called Luwang (from lu=head).

Leishangtao received the front legs and his salai was called Khuman (from Khumang=front legs).

Konsouren received the stripped belly; so his salai was called Moirang (from marangba=stripe)

Ashangba got the lower portion of the head. So his salai came to be known as Khaba (from Kha=left) Tumanganba received the red heart, and so his salai was named Nganba (from ngangba=red).⁸

The appearance of Atiya Guru Sidaba as the dead cow floating along the river is symbolic. It is the real test of the knowledge of Sanamahi and Pakhangba. The philosophical significance of this legend is that God manifests Himself in the most ordinary thing even, and that one who has real knowledge of Him can find Him in the most insignificant things ~~also~~ and he does not feel disgusted by the most obnoxious object considering that God manifests Himself in all the things and beings of the world. The sharing of the different parts of the cow by the seven clans again signify that each one of them is the part and parcel of Atiya Guru Sidaba.

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the eminent linguist and scholar, has referred to Hindu parallel to the above legend. He maintained that this myth finds its parallel in the Vedic hymn according to which the Brahmin emanated from the mouth of the primeval being, the Kshatriya from his arm, the Vaishya from his thighs and the Sudra from his feet

8. Mutum Jhulon Singh, Manipur Itihas, 1947, p.6.

9. S.K. Chatterjee, "Kirata-jana-Kriti: The Indo-Mongoloids, their contribution to the History and Culture of India" Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950, 16(2), pp 143-235

Legend of Creation

Before the creation of the earth there was only water throughout the world. The Almighty Lord Atiya Guru Sidaba produced nine Gods called "Laipungthou" and seven goddesses named "Lainuras" as His agents for the execution of the task of creation of the earth. The nine Laipungthous brought earth from the heaven and relayed to the Lainuras, who in their turn dropped the pieces of earth into the water. The seven Lainuras performed their duties dancing all along. At regular intervals after they had completed forming a mound of earth (Leipung) on the water they took rest and drank wine. Each such intervals for rest was called "yuthak" (or drinking time of yu, wine). Working, then, resting at regular intervals after making eight mounds, 64 mounds altogether were formed. Now, the 64 mounds combined together formed our planet Earth.

According to Pandit Raja Atombapu Sharma, " a mean solar day consists of sixtyfour "pungs" (a pung = $22\frac{1}{2}$ minute being the time taken for the creation of the earth by the Laipungthous and Lainuras. The period of eight pung, that is, 25.5X8 minutes is called "yuthak", that is the time of drinking yu.¹⁰

10. Pandit Raja Atombapu Sharma, Manipur Sanatan Dharma, 1952, p.1

In the Lai Haraoba dance the creation of Earth by the Laipungthous and the Lainuras is depicted through dance gestures. The Panditraja maintains that the creation dance of Laiharaoba illustrates the "Adityastuti" of the RG Veda (10/6/72/9).

"O Gods! you were on water before the creation of the world. Your rhythmic steps in dancing produced very hard dusts i.e. earth.

O Gods! at first, you remained enveloping the whole world as the clouds do. At that time you all dragged the sun which had remained covered in the sky, so that he might give light."

Eight sons were born by Aditi. She joined the Gods with her seven sons. Her eighth son Maratanda was left in the middle of the sky to cause the birth and death of all living beings.

The parallel between the Meitei myth and the Vedic verse suggested by Panditraja Atombapu Sharma seems to be a matter of coincidence. But there is no denying the fact that there are many similar occasions between the Hindu and the Meitei mythical stories.

Myths connected with Atiya Guru Sidaba and Soraren

Saroj Nalini Pratt in her book Religion of Manipur (Chapter II), has given the following accounts about Atiya Guru Sidaba and God Soraren.

"The name Atiya Guru Sidaba means literally 'Sky-Guru immortal'. It is not clear whether this identifies the deity with the sky itself, i.e. 'the guru, the immortal sky', or whether the sky is to be taken as the dwelling of the deity, i. e. 'immortal celestial guru'. The ultimate differences are perhaps not great; what is clear is that the Meitei, in common with the people of many other cultures, associated their supreme God with the heaven (Eliade 1957, Chapter II).

What S.K. Chatterjee (1950:225, also Jhulon (1947:2-3) has called 'pre-Meitei' myth regarding creation by Atiya Guru Sidaba is recorded in the Leithak Leikharol.

Atiya Guru Sidaba decided to create man. A deity called Kodin emanated from him. Kodin was asked to create a creature which by virtue of its birth would be subjected to death. Kodin then created seven frogs and seven apes and placed them before Atiya Guru Sidaba. But He was not pleased. The Atiya Guru Sidaba stood up

and told Kodin to make something exactly like His shadow. Kodin accordingly created a new shape but he was powerless to endow it with life. Then Atiya Guru Sidaba gave it life. So man came into being. He let loose the frogs into water, and the apes into the hills. Man then came to live in the valley.

Then Atiya Guru Sidaba created the Sun (Numit) and the Moon(Tha) in the form of man. The Sun obtained the name of Konjin-tu-thokpa (i.e. he who emerges from the corner) and the moon Ashiba(i.e. death); afterwards Atiya Guru Sidaba vanished from the earth.

In this myth the high god creates through a demiurge, which is again a common element in the mythology of many peoples. He then withdrew from the earth, having little or no direct dealings with men, neither worshipped nor invoked. He remains, however, as a kind of vague providence, guaranteeing the good order of the universe.

Another deity, Soraren, later came to be identified with Atiya Guru Sidaba. Soraren may originally have been a family god. K.B. Singh* (1964: 203) notes that he is still offered an axe, his special weapon, by the

* K.B. Singh, "Traces of Pre-Hinduism in Meitei Society", 1964, Folklore 5:201-206

Sorensangbam clan. According to Jhalajit Singh, his temple is situated at Thoubal. An alternative account of the origin of the god is given by Shakespeare** (1913: 444). According to this observer Soraren (here called Sorarel) was a sky god who was worshipped in the Loi village of Phayeng, where he is claimed to be the ancestor of the villagers. A yearly offering is made here by the maiba of a white duck and white pigeon, which are strangled and then consumed by four men who have undergone certain ritual purifications. At Andro, where people profess a relationship to those of Phayeng, youthful lovers appeal to Soraren to help them gain the attentions of the girls of their choice (Shakespeare 1913:445). Soraren himself is said to have had an eye of beauty and a way with the ladies, so that the lovers ought not to appeal in vain. The amorous nature of Soraren is confirmed in a legend, also recorded by Shakespeare (1913:424), of the abduction of a maiden of the Longjam Yunnak by Soraren. A similar fate befell a girl of the Konthoujam family. Soraren promised her that none of her kin should die, and this promise somehow came to be known to her relatives. To entice her to return to earth they killed a dog and cremated it with full rites under a sevenfold canopy. The girl was unable to detect the deception and became

** J.Shakespeare, 1913, "The Religion of Manipur" Folklore 24:409-55

very distressed, fearing that some relatives had died. Soraren tried to reassure her, but she would not be comforted and returned to earth. Before she left she was warned not to eat with the family. However she was given a meal including rice beer (yu) beneath the canopy, so that Soraren would not see. But as soon as she partook of the meal Soraren spat on it and withdrew the ladder to heaven so that she was unable to return to her husband.

It is difficult to regard the identification of Soraren with Atiya Guru Sidaba as original. Soraren appears to have been a lesser deity of doubtful repute who, because of his association with the sky, came to be identified with the deusotiosis.

Later myths connected with Atiya Guru Sidaba with the seven Lairembis (Goddesses) and with the origin of the seven yeks. According to S.K. Chatterjee these goddesses were married to the seven planet gods, and the offspring of these unions became the progenitors of the yeks (1950: 225). The Manipuri tradition given by Jhulon (1947:4) elaborates this. According to this account the Lairembis accompanied Atiya Guru Sidaba to earth. He then called the Sun and the moon, who appeared together with five

other lais which had the heads of a buffalo, an elephant, a deer and a tiger. These lais are identified with the days of the week. The short book Apokpa Thounirol (a manual concerning worship to be offered to the founding ancestors) confirms the legend." Thus, Goddess Lairibi married the Moon associated with Nongluntha (Sunday), whose offspring was Kuptreng who became the ancestor of Angom salai (clan). Leirong Leitongbi married the Sun associated with Ningthoukaba (Monday), whose offspring was Shentreng clan. Goddess Thoinu married Mars (who was a buffalo headed God) associated with Leipakpokpa (Tuesday), whose offspring was Pamaringba the ancestor of Luwang clan. Tonthagngu married the planet Mercury (elephant headed God) associated with Yumsakeisa (Wednesday), whose offspring was Leisangtao, the ancestor of Khuman clan. Chenuleima married the planet Jupiter (deer-headed God), associated with Sagonsen (Thursday), whose offspring Konsouren, the ancestor of Moirang clan. Tharolongbi married the planet Venus (who was a tiger-headed God) associated with Irai (Friday), whose offspring Ashangba became the ancestor of Khaba clan. Khamjiknu married Saturn (tiger headed God) associated with Thangja (Saturday), whose offspring Tumangba became the ancestor of Nganba clan.

Later on when Vaishnavism was adopted as the state religion in the 18th Century A.D., the yeks (clans) came to be

identified with the Brahmanical gotras¹¹ Thus :

Angom = Bharadwaja, or Kausikagotra

Ningthouja = Sadilya

Luwang = Kashyapa

Khuman = Maudgalya

Khabanganba = Naimisya or Bharadwaja

Moirang = Atreya

Chenglei = Bharadwaja

With the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur, the Brahmin scholars and the Meitei scholars found out many other parallel myths and legends, thereby paving the way for bringing in the traditional Meiteis to the Hindu mainstream.

Legend of Khamba and Thoibi

As we have stated already, there are four great Lai-Regents, "Maikai Ngakpa" Lais, who are the sentinels of the four frontiers of the valley of Manipur. Their names are-Koubru, Thangjing, Marjing and Wangbren. Each one of these Lais have myths and legends about their origin and great achievements.

Among the legends associated with these Lais, legends connected with Thangjing have special significance

11. S.K. Chatterjee, ibid., p.225

inasmuch as they form major source of ancient and mediaeval Manipuri literature. The story of Khamba and Thoibi occupies important place in Manipuri literature.

"Moirang Lalji" is the name for the South West direction in Manipur, and is the abode of Thangjing. Moirang with its temple to Thangjing is a very important place for the Lai Haraoba. The clothes once worn by Khamba are still preserved at the temple of Thangjing. God Thangjing is respected as the director of the destiny of the people of Moirang. The legend of romantic affair between Khamba and Thoibi, which is distinctive by its tragic episode, is considered as the "Lila" (play) of Lord Thangjing, just as other tragic stories are believed to be Thangjing's Lila. The story goes as follows:

Thoibi was the only daughter of Jubraj Chingkhuba, the younger brother of Chingkhutelheiba, King of Moirang. She was famous for her superb beauty. As her uncle, the king, was childless she was treated with great love and affection in the royal household.

Khamba, the hero of Lord Thangjing's divine play, was the son of Puremba, a great hero and nobleman of the Khuman clan, who exhibited great acts^{of} chivalry at the service of the King of Moirang. But as providence determined Khamba's

father and mother died young leaving ^{behind} Khamba and his elder sister Khamnu. The two orphans were very young when their parents died. The little girl Khamnu looked after her baby brother by doing odd jobs in various households of the locality. Thus, with the passing of years they grew up to adult-hood.

One day Khamba went to the bazar at the very hour when the Princess Thoibi was doing her marketing. The Princess took note of Khamnu's strange face, for she knew her not and asked her many questions and gave her gifts of food and jewellery. After some days Khamnu met Thoibi again, who bade her come afishing with her on the Loktak lake.

When the king heard that Thoibi and her companions wanted to sport on the lake, he gave orders that no man might go on the lake. So Khamnu told Khamba of this and left him at home the next day. As he slept, in his dream the Goddess Panthoibi came to him in the guise of Khamnu, and bade him get the vegetables together. Khamba woke and wondered if he had indeed seen his sister or if it was a dream. But the God Thangjing put it into his mind that he had indeed seen his sister. So he went down to the lake and got a boat there and rowed out, but in a wrong direction, so the God spread a veil of cloud over the hill. Anon a storm

arose and blew the boat towards the place where Thoibi was fishing. On a sudden Thoibi turned and saw Khamba standing close to her. She was astonished by his handsome and virile appearance. Khamba also was thrilled by her divine beauty. In their hearts, they cherished to unite. It was love at first sight.

Thoibi asked Khamnu if she knew the stubborn man who dared disobey the orders of the king, but ^{Khamnu} ~~Khamnu~~ denied all knowledge of him. Khamba stood there not knowing what to do, but when he heard his sister's voice, he went nearer, and Thoibi saw that Khamnu was wearing a piece of cloth which matched the cloth that Khamba tied on his head, and that Khamba wore the bracelet which she herself, but a day before, had given to Khamnu. Then Khamnu owned that he was her younger brother, and Thoibi was gracious to him and gave him of her sweetmeats, and bade him go home lest the wrath of the King visit him.

When Thoibi had returned to the palace she bade Khamnu went her the place wherein she lived. So they went to Khamnu's house and Thoibi saw that it was big house but worn out due to long negligence. Khamba remained hiding behind a mat. Then Thoibi saw the mat and asked Khamnu what was behind the mat. Khamnu replied that it was the

abode of the God Khumanpokpa, the guardian God of the Khuman clan. Thoibi prayed to the God aloud requesting for the fulfillment of her heart's desire. Khamba laughed and came out from his hiding. Khamba, then, sent out his sister to bring some fruit. In the meantime Khamba and Thoibi bound themselves by a mighty oath before the God Khumanpokpa, and each vowed love to the other. Then Thoibi called Khuman sister and bade Khamba go out among the folk and show himself to the King's officers. So Khamba went out and joined the young men who were learning to wrestle. An elder who stood by, saw the strength of Khamba and bade him wrestle, and he joined into the wrestling, but Khamba was not thrown for all that the other knew many devices whereby he had often thrown great men. As it fell out, there passed by Nongthonba, the minister of the King, who stopped and asked the name of the young man whom the champion could not throw down. Nobody could tell his name. Then he asked of Khamba his name and the name of his sire. Khamba told him, his name, but could not tell his father's name for he was a baby when his father died. He, however, explained that his sister might know his father's name. At last the minister remembered Khamba's face since it resembled his father's face. Khamba's father happened to be a good friend of the minister. The minister

was very happy and he sent his womenfolk and servants to Khamba's house. Khamba and Khamnu, now were under the care of Nongthonba, the minister.

Khamba was, then, introduced to the King, and the King, being pleased in discovering the worthy son of one of his great nobles, gave Khamba presents and asked him to be at his service. Khamba was also introduced to the Jubaraj, but the latter was not so pleased for he wanted to give his daughter Thoibi in marriage to another healthy and rich youth named Nongban Kongyamba, who was the son of the Chief of Angom clan.

As was the custom in those days, the King asked the two youths Khamba and Nongban to go to the hills and gather beautiful flowers for offering to God Thangjing, whose Haraoba festival was going on at that time. Thoibi prepared tiffin for Khamba and wished that Khamba should bring beautiful flowers for Thangjing.

Khamba and Nongban set out to the hills for picking flowers. Nongban was very wicked and cunning. So he sent Khamba at a place where there was no flower trees. When Khamba reached that place, to his utter dismay, he found no flowers, and he was disappointed. But Lord Thangjing

wanted to help him, and thus, led him to a place where there were plenty of flowers. Khamba picked up the choicest of the flowers. The two youths came back home and prepared themselves for offering the flowers to Lord Thangjing the next day.

Next day, The King, the Queen, the Jubraj and other nobles and ladies gathered at the courtyard of Lord Thangjing. The king was very pleased with Khamba when he brought beautiful flowers and offered them to Thangjing. Khamba also offered some of the flowers to the king, queen, and their officers and ladies. Then they watched a wrestling bout between Khamba and Nongban. The king was surprised when Khamba defeated the Champion Nongban in the wrestling. Again there was a race between Khamba and Nongban, in which Khamba had won. At the destination of the race there was kept a huge lion statue with a horn. Thonglen, the army chief of the king, who happened to be a friend of Khamba's father shouted to Khamba, "Here is the lion thy father touched, leap up and break his horn," and Khamba saluted the king and leapt up seven cubits high and broke the horn of the lion. Then Nongban Kongyamba came up and in his turn greeted the king. Yet the king was more pleased with Khamba and gave him a gold embroidered coat, and the Queen gave him

rich apparel, and the King's ministers heaped gifts upon him. Nongban was very much envious of Khamba.

Then Nongban thought over how best he might work evil upon Khamba. But he could not work out an evil plan. One day he met some women belonging to the land of Khuman who told him that they could not fish in their area because of fear for a ferocious bull who attacked people. When he learnt about the bull Nongban hit upon an idea. He feigned that the God Thangjing had given him the gift of ~~div~~ divination. He said that God Thangjing had the desire for the flesh of the ferocious bull that roamed in the reeds that border the waters of Ikop and Waithou lakes and wished that Khamba should catch the bull. Nongban thought that if Khamba approached the bull for catching him Khamba would be killed by the bull and that Nongban would become the champion in wrestling again and win the hands of Thoibi in marriage. The King believed in the divination of Nongban and bade Khamba to catch the bull and offer him to God Thangjing. Khamba obeyed the king's order. Khamnu, the sister of Khamba was very much worried. She, however, told Khamba how to catch the bull, for perchance the bull belonged to their father Puremba. Khamba advanced towards that place where the bull was grazing. He overpowered the bull and caught him by the horns and tied him with an old rope which was

used by Puremba to tie the bull many years ago. He pulled the bull and brought it to Moirang where the King and the nobles witnessed the great deed of valour. Nongban asked Khamba to give the rope of the bull so that he might claim that the bull was caught by him and not by Khamba. But the bull attacked him and he fled in fear. Then Khamba offered the bull to Lord Thangjing. To this act of heroism the King lauded Khamba, gave valuable gifts to him, and even promised that Thoibi will be given in marriage to him.

Chinghuba, the father of Thoibi wanted that Thoibi should be married to Nongban and not with Khamba. So he hatched a plan with Nongban to kill Khamba. Khamba was called out at night, tortured him and allowed him to be dragged by the King's elephant. Khamba was almost dead but for the care with which Khamba was tied loosely to save his life. Goddess Panthoibi came in Thoibi's dream and asked her to save her beloved's life. Thoibi came out with a knife in hand and rushed towards the market-place of Moirang where to her dismay she found Khamba being dragged by the King's elephant. When she came forward shouting all the culprits including Nongban ran away. She untied the rope that bound Khamba and took him to his house.

Khamba was badly wounded and Thoibi nursed him for some day at his house. After some days Khamba was well.

Thoibi's father, Jubraj Chinghuba was angry with Thoibi for her love of Khamba and for nursing the wounded Khamba. He chided her not to go to Khamba's house. He also arranged for the marriage of Thoibi to Nongban. But Thoibi did not give her consent to that marriage. Out of frustration and anger Chinghuba sent her to exile in a border village called Kabow where she spent very hard life toiling all the time like a slave. She pined for her beloved and was love-lorn. Khamba also felt the pang of separation.

After many years Chinghuba felt sorry for his only daughter and decided to bring her home. He asked Nongban to wait for Thoibi on her way. On her way she met Nongban. She wanted to escape from him. So she pretended illness and told Nongban that her peculiar illness will disappear if she ride a horse. Nongban let Thoibi drive his horse. Thoibi rode the horse away and Nongban was left far behind. Thoibi rode the horse straight to Khamba's house. Khamba came out and received Thoibi with great joy. The two lovers were united after a long time. Nongban was disappointed, and Chinghuba, although angry with Thoibi, felt his helplessness.

in arranging marriage between Thoibi and Nongban, because Thoibi was steadfast in her love for Khamba.

At this time a man-eater tiger was at rampage at a place called Khoirentak. The tiger killed a poor girl named Kunjamala who was ill-treated by her step-mother. The villagers came to the king and as the custodian of the life and property of the people requested him to kill the tiger. The king thought that it was a good occasion for deciding the fate of Thoibi. The king called both Khamba and Nongban and told that whoever can kill the man-eater tiger will be married to Thoibi. The two heroes agreed and both of them went towards the place, holding spear in hand, where the tiger remained hiding among the reeds. The area was enclosed by armed people. The king, the nobles, Thoibi and officials of the king witnessed the event from an elevated platform. Khamba and Nongban came to the spot where the tiger was lying hidden. Suddenly, the tiger jumped upon Nongban and he was fatally wounded. Then Khamba rushed towards the tiger and speared him to death. There was jubilation among the crowd who witnessed the chivalrous scene. The king, being well pleased, gave the hand of Thoibi in marriage to Khamba. Thus, the two lovers were united in wedlock. But their happy conjugal life did not last long. God Thangjing desired that they should

be united in heaven, and not on earth, so that their love may become immortal. One day Khamba wanted to put Thoibi's love and fidelity for him to test. So he came disguised as somebody else and teased her from behind the wall. Thoibi who was faithful to her husband Khamba was annoyed by that act of misbehaviour and thrust a spear through the wall. Unfortunately, the spear pierced through Khamba's heart and he died. Soon Thoibi realized her mistake and came out. But she was dumbfounded to see Khamba in a pool of blood. When she came to her senses Khamba was already dead. Out of intolerable grief she committed suicide by thrusting a knife into her heart. Thus, there was a tragic end to the lives of the two lovers. But their love was immortalised through songs, dances and literary works. Even now Khamba-Thoibi dance is very popular and this dance item is invariably performed in all Lai Haraoba festivals.

People believe in the providence of God and the events in the lives of the people are considered as the divine play. In the legend of the romantic affair of Khamba and Thoibi as well as in other tragic stories of the lovers of Moirang, people believe that the tragic episode are predetermined by Thangjing. People further believe in future birth. They believe that man is reborn

to finish the works which they could not complete in the previous life. They further believe that truth will prevail ultimately. They consider God as the moral governor.

The traditions of Moirang had been inseparably linked with God Thangjing. There is no proper record of the actual year of the installation of the present temple of this God at Moirang. But it is definite that the people of Moirang looked up to the deity for blessing and protection in all matters. Some historians are of the opinion that Thangjing was a super-human personality who was considered as the real incarnation of God, who actually lived and established the kingdom of Moirang about three thousand years ago. His death did not lessen his position in the minds of the people who continued to worship him as their deity. To the west of Moirang, there is a hill range known as Thangjing Ching. This hill is considered to be the original home of Lord Thangjing. Upto this day people go on pilgrimage to the sacred spot on the hill top to pay homage to Lord Thangjing on fixed days of the year. It is believed that he ruled the Moirang Kingdom from the height of the hill. Later on, as the valley got dried up more people settled on the bank of Loktak lake where they found it convenient to look for their prosperous livelihood.

Subsequently, a temple was installed at Moirang on the bank of the lake and annual Lai Haraoba festival was observed in honour of Thangjing. Thangjing plays an important part in the socio-religious and cultural life of not only the people of Moirang but of the Meitei people as a whole.

Legend of Henjunaha

Another legend associated with God Thangjing is that of Henjunaha, a handsome youth of Moirang who lived with his widowed mother. This young man had a fast romantic affair with a girl from the village. Lord Thangjing so ordained that their lives on earth should be cut short to immortalize their love for each other. The intention of the God was ~~at~~ known to the people of the village through the oracle of the Maibi.

It was the dreaded night of the first Saturday of the month of Lamda (Chaitra month), the night in which the Gods and Goddesses assemble to decide the fate of the mortals. Henjunaha arranged a tryst with his sweetheart at the game of Likon sannaba to be held at that night between the boys and the girls at a particular house of the village. But Henjunaha was requested by his mother

with tears in her eyes not to go out of his house on that night because she had a bad dream and saw evil omen. Henjunaha was bound to obey his mother for he loved her much, although he pined with the desire to meet his beloved. But he could not sleep at all at the thought of his girl. He was waiting eagerly for the day-break, for the evil gods and goddesses cannot do much harm to him when the day breaks. The Gods, however, deceived him when at the dead of night he heard the cawing of the crows and the chirping of the birds. Thinking that it was already dawn, Henjunaha silently came out of the house without the knowledge of his mother. Unfortunately, when he crossed the compound of his homestead land he realized that it was mid-night. He was afraid of what will befall him. However, he was running towards the house of his beloved holding a stick in hand. The evil spirits took the opportunity and hovered over Henjunaha, and when Henjunaha almost reached the house of his beloved, he was overpowered by the evil spirits. Henjunaha called the name of his beloved and expressed his sorrow for not being able to meet her to say his last words. His beloved heard his voice in her dream and suddenly woke up. She rushed out of her house and was stunned to find him dead. She was overcome by her grief

at the loss of her beloved and committed suicide with the conviction that she will be united with him in the heaven. This is the story of the tragic end of the two lovers. This tragic episode, according to the legend of Moirang (known as Moirang Kangkeiron), is believed to be the lila (play) of God Thangjing. There are certain other tales of unfulfilled romantic affairs between young men and women, which are believed by the people to be the divine play of Thangjing.

There are stories in Manipuri legends and folklores about maidens turning into supernatural beings and spirits after passing through hard life or through the association of the deities. Some are as follows:

Khongjongnubi Nongarol

Khongjongnubi is the constellation called the Pleiades in English and nongaron means the lore of ascending heaven. The story is derived from an old work written in archaic Manipuri.

Long, long ago, six girls went to a lake to buy fish. On the bank of the lake they met six young men who used to fish in the lake and sell the fish for their livelihood. The youths said to the girls, "To-day we

have not caught any fish at all. Stay this night here with us". The maidens replied that they could not stay there without the consent of their parents. The young men insisted on their staying there. They told them that if the parents of the girls punish them for their misbehaviour they would go together to heaven where they would live together at the abode of God Soraren. They further asked the girls to meet them on the fifth day. Then they spent the night together in the hut constructed near the lake.

When the girls came back home the next day, their fathers and brothers turned them out of their homes for their improper conduct and for having love affair with people whom they regarded as untouchable in those days. Unable to bear their shame and misfortune, the six girls came to that place where the six young men asked them to come on the fifthth day. But they could not find the men anywhere. Not knowing what to do, as they were driven out of their homes and as they could not find their lovers, the six girls began to climb the lofty hills on the north-western fringe of Manipur valley (perhaps the Koubru hill) on their way to the heaven, everytime looking for their lover's coming. After proceeding for a long time they took rest and ate the refreshment that they

brought. At that time there was rain from a passing cloud and they were drenched. There was sunshine very soon and they proceeded on their journey. They climbed higher and higher. At last they reached the peak of a mountain as high as the sky, and saw God Soraren on the heaven. They offered flowers to the Lord. The God asked them why they had come there. The girls narrated their pathetic tale thus: "O, Ruler of rain-clouds ! Distributor of water and King of Gods ! Our fathers and brothers have beaten us. They tore our hair and turned us out of home for having love affair with some young men while going to buy fish. The young men and we promised one another to go to heaven together to reach your feet; but we came before the appointed day and left them behind". Then the girls knelt and bowed down to Soraren. God Soraren took pity on them and turned them into the stars of the Pleiades.

Meanwhile, the six youths came to know that the six girls had already left for heaven. With heavy hearts, they followed their lovers to heaven. They climbed the same hill and at last they came to heaven and bowed down to Lord Soraren. Soraren asked them why they had come to the land of the Gods. The youths replied, "The six girls have come here to meet us and live here as man and wife".

Thereupon, Soraren said, "In this Kingdom of Gods above the clouds, no man shall look upon a woman as wife and no woman shall serve a man as her spouse. However, you may remain here. For one day and only one day in a year towards the close of Kalen (Jaistha mās) and the beginning of Inga (Ashad mās), you and your sweet hearts may descend to Earth for cohabitation and your offsprings shall be cicadas".

So the young men also stayed in the heaven. Every year towards the close of Kalen and the beginning of Inga, the six girls and the six young men go to the Earth to produce their offspring, the cicadas.

There is a book entitled Thawanmichak Khenchanglon a work of mediaeval times written in archaic Manipuri about the origin of the constellations. The Meiteis were acquainted with the names of 26 constellations in that book of stars or constellations, and certain stories are associated about their origins just as there are stories about the origin of the Nakshatras or constellations in the ancient texts of Hindu astrology.

The story of sun god and two maidens

This story is about the love affair between the sun God and mortal girls. The story is known as Soubon Lairema Loutaron. It is as follows:

One day a village Chief sent his two daughters to the rice field to begin the agricultural operation for the year. While the two girls were digging the field with their spades, the sungod travelled across the sky on his winged horse. The God heard the two sisters singing his glory and came down on his winged horse holding a whip of bright copper wires. Enamoured of the girls, the sungod asked the girls, "How many clods have you dug up during the last five days?" The two beautiful maidens were bashful, and could not give answer to the sungod's question. In the evening, the sungod who was a busy handsome youth reached the western sky. The two girls too came back home.

The two girls told their father about their meeting with the sungod and about the question he put to them. The father said to them, "His question amounts to asking you whether I have died. If he puts the same question again, ask him how many hoofprints his horse has made during the last five days. I will go to the field with you to-morrow".

The next day, the girls went to the field with their father. He hid himself at a corner of the field under an umbrella. The sungod too came galloping on his horse in the sky. As usual he came down to see the girls. Then the girls asked the god, "How many hoofprints has your horse made in

the last five days?" The sungod could not tell and he felt embarrassed. He saw at that moment the girl's father hiding beneath the umbrella. At once he knew that the girls were tutored and prompted by their father to put that question to him. The sungod rushed towards him and the horse trampled on the man. The poor fellow was now turned into a crab and it went down the river. It is believed that upto this day the crab bears on its back the hoofmark of the sungod's horse.

Thus, there are legends and folktales about the relationship between Gods and mortal human beings. Like the Greek Gods and Goddesses, the Umang lais sometimes meddle in human affairs. But the people believe in some form of "the Law of Karma" and have firm conviction that good deeds bring in reward and evil deeds arouse the anger of the gods and they will ultimately end in severe retribution from the divine. This belief forms the basis of morality in the traditional society. The value-system of the traditional Meitei society is closely linked with the fear of punishment from the Lais for wrong and unjust actions. At the same time they look upon the Lais as the paradigm of cardinal virtues and the repository of lofty ideals. This is clear and evident from their enumeration of the attributes of the Lais on the occasion of the invocations to the deities.

CHAPTER - VI

Other Rituals ancillary to the worship of Deities

Theoretical background

According to Emile Durkheim, religion consists of two basic things, namely, beliefs and rituals. Beliefs are static while rituals are dynamic. It is because of their dynamic nature that they become important in the life of the people. Beliefs basically depend upon rites which bring conformity with nature. In his treatise on religion Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1912) Durkheim suggested that even the primitive man has a philosophy through which he tries to understand the supernatural. Durkheim's ideas to some extent seem to conform to study of the religious life of the people of North-East India in general and the people of Manipur in particular.

The geographical situation of this region is very hard, and conditions of life in the past have been so hostile and ~~severe~~^{severe} that in course of history only the strongest have survived. The people in fighting against the order of nature not only seem to have remained consoled by the belief that all illness is caused by a malignant influence of the supernatural but they had also to invent

their own medicines to protect themselves against the threatening diseases. They had also taken the help of magic and propitiating symbols and rituals to ward themselves from the evil influence of the malignant aspect of nature. Ultimately they had to make their own philosophy of life which could give them a moral force to fight the various odds of nature, a philosophy which would foster their belief in truth, honesty, and a proportionate sense of justice. They have given their religion a philosophy which can see a universal role of supernatural in the destiny of man, and which invariably warrants an heirarchy of gods, deities and spirits in shaping their small and big fortunes and prosperity in life, and each of these performs a definite function of its own sphere.

The religion that is thus shaped in such environmental conditions is a religion which generally does not seek inordinate principles of life and nature, but it is a religion which allows a more powerful role to the supernatural forces and a larger area of operation. And in this it seems to harmonise man's utter need with the environment. It also accords subordinate position to man in his relation to both natural and supernatural forces. He is all dependent upon the mercy of this

supernatural being. The freedom of man has been curtailed by the supernatural forces operating above him. He stands in a surrendering relationship to the supreme God, and a comparatively submissive rank below Him. His relationship to other deities below the rank of God is a relationship of awe and reverence. He raises his prayers to invoke the blessings of the supreme supernatural who is all benign so that it may counteract the malevolent influence in nature and benedict the humanity. It is believed that the benivolent supernatural is capable of looking after the welfare of all mankind. The belief in the benevolent and the malevolent influence seems to be based on the general principle of dichotomy in the universe which divides all things and all human orders into two, namely, the good and the evil, the virtuous and the malicious.

The deities are the supernatural powers commonly worshipped and supplicated to for most of the wordly things. A reference to higher gods can only be made in times of crisis or as an appeal against the deities. The deities since they guide most of the phases of human activity, are supposed to be nearer to men. They excercise a closer influence over their destiny.

Ceremonials have formed important part of man's social and religious life. The history of the world shows

that man made elaborate arrangements in different forms to express, to rejoice and to celebrate his personal achievements, social events or religious performances, and thus by social participation united his individuality to the social bond.

In our account of the worship of the Umang Lais in the Lai Haraoba festival, we have explained how the Meiteis have given expression to their attitude towards the supernatural deities in their attempt to give vent to their feelings and sentiments aroused in the course of their life within the typical natural surroundings in which they lived. Now, we have to refer to certain other ceremonials and rituals which are associated with the worship of the Lais, and which play very important role in their social and national life.

Saroi Khangba

Saroi Khangba is an ancient ritual of the Meiteis held in the spring time. We have already referred to this ritual in our discussion on Lai Haraoba. It is held on the first Saturday of the Meitei month of Lamda which falls in February-March. The ritual is performed by elderly women generally at the crossroads or at specific localities believed to be haunted by spirits. It is mainly propitiation

ritual for pleasing the seven Angels (or Hellois) and other evil spirits (Tinmus and Laimus). It is believed that unless they are appeased, these malevolent spirits may cause harm and even devastation to the crops and by spreading epidemics among the people.

The old women of the village collect rice, vegetables, dry fish, etc., from different households and offer them to the Hellois (Angels) and their associates (Saroí ngarçois), the evil spirits. They are requested not to bring about disease and death to the village. The womenfolk sing and dance to please them. They are further asked to take the offerings and go back to their respective habitats given to them by Guru, the Lord. Even a warning is given them by one woman holding the traditional weapon, thang (dagger), and tem (a heavy stick) used for weaving. She brandished the weapons towards each direction from where the Hellois and Sarois may come.

Cheiraoba and Cheithaba

Cheiraoba is an important spring-time festival of the Meiteis. It is the New Year's festival held in the Meitei month of Sajibu (Vaishakh) in March-April which is the first month of the Meitei calendar.

The name Cheiraoba literally means shouting or heralding the approach of the new year with a stick in hand. Now-a-days, nobody shouts with a stick in ^{hand} for the year to be proclaimed by the heads of the four panas, who each wore the distinctive colour of their own pana. They rode on horseback, carried bells attached to the top of long sticks and announced the beginning of the New Year. Hence, the festival received the name Cheiraoba, "announcing year by stick". The practice of shouting with stick was discontinued in 1485 A.D. during the reign of King Kyamba and a new institution called Cheithaba was introduced in that year. One man substituted the four pana head officers. He became known as Cheithaba, and that particular year came to be named after him. The Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle refers to years by mentioning the names of the persons who executed Cheithaba.

According to T.C. Hodson Cheithaba is derived from Chahi taba (Chahi=year, taba=falling; literally "falling of year"), and Cheiraoba, from Chilouba, which means taking salt (Chi=salt, louba=take). Now Chahi-taba is an imaginary word which is never used in Manipuri, there being no such word in Manipuri.

As for chi, it is not a Manipuri word. In Manipuri salt is called thum or noinu. The fact is that the festival Cheiraoba has no essential connection with salt although salt is also offered to Sanamahi on this day. The giving of salt as one of the items of reward distribution in the traditional competitions like race, wrestling, etc. because in ancient times salt was a prized commodity. The real meaning of Cheithaba, it seems, is Chei or Chahi=year, thaba=count, that is, one who counts the year. As a matter of fact the task of the Cheithaba is to count the year.

The Cheithaba has to be a Meitei; Brahmins, Loi and non-Manipuri cannot become Cheithaba. He is selected by a process of comparing his individual horoscope with that of the King, and his basic function is to avert disaster or harm from falling upon the King and nation.

The installation of the Cheithaba takes place on the eve of the new years (the last day of the Meitei month of Lamda before the King and nobles. The Cheithaba for the previous year sits on the King's right and the incoming Cheithaba on his left. During the ceremonial both use the old Meitei language. It is somewhat like taking over and handing over charges in an office. The two Cheithaba change places, and then the outgoing Cheithaba addresses the King as follows:

"King Lainingthou, the coming year is my friend's year(name). Let the King and queen live long, let it be more prosperous than the past year in the production of rice, fish, other foods, and salt, and let it be richer in every thing".

The new Cheithaba then kneels before the king with folded hands and declares:

"King Lainingthou, from today I bear on my head all they sins, diseases and misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in battle against thee, all that threatens thee, all that is bad and hurtful for thee and thy Kingdom".

The British Officer, Mr. Higgins, has given the following account of Cheithaba for the year 1926:

"Let all the evils such as war and battle, enmity and struggle fall down at the advent of the new year in which the seasons of the ancient god Pakhangba,

who is the head of gods, fallen from the sky at a happy place, and the God Chingsomba the white, who reigns in the north east, are invested with the ceremony of heeithaba, in which the Cheithaba man performs it with a stick on his

shoulder- the stick which exempts the Cheithaba man from the burden of public work when he is seen to carry it on his shoulder on the public road-the stick which can make one conquer great and small kingdom in battle, the stick which is attached to the bamboo tube in the time of coronation at Kangla, the stick which is used by warlike young men in fight, the stick which was the hilt of the sword of the god Thangjing, the stick of which the head is known at the first touch, the stick that opens the door of the earth and fills up the underground pit in the month of Sajibu, in the reigns of all Kings according to ancient custom".¹

In the olden days national calamity was supposed to be taken over ritually by the Cheithaba and he was even punished for the occurrence of any calamity. Hodson² records that in 1898 a deputation approached the Political Agent with the request that the Cheithaba for that year be punished, since there was a severe cholera epidemic, for which he was considered responsible. In return for the onerous responsibility, the Cheithaba enjoyed certain privileges. He was exempted from the forced labour demands, called Lalup, prevalent

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1. J.C. Higgins, Notes on Meithei (Manipuri) beliefs and customs recorded from various sources, (School of Oriental and African Studies, London, Ms 95074) p. 50
 2. T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis, 1901, p.32

in those days, and also received gifts and a pari (about $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres) of land rent free for life. The restrictions which were placed upon him on account of his task involved abstention from fishing, cultivation and carrying out his trade; further he was not allowed to use a cutting tool lest he might lose blood and thereby bring calamity upon the nation as a whole. One of his main ritual functions was to make offerings on behalf of the king to the traditional Lai and to the Hindu gods.³

The following is the English translation of the recitation made by the Cheithaba before the king and his nobles on the occasion of Cheiraoba.⁴

"My Lord and King, the foremost among emperors and the best of men! Continuously following the method of calculating the month and the year introduced by Your Majesty's ancestor Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and Kainou Chingsonba of Angom clan, the chief of the Nongmais, we have been performing the rites of Kongba Leithong Phatpa and Sajibu Leiphun Phunba regularly in every reign of Your Majesty's predecessors on the throne.

3. S.N. Pratt, Religion of Manipur, pp 48-9

4. Translated by R.K. Jhalajit Singh, A History of Manipuri Literature, pp 92-3

"This year is the year of giving up the Khok stick- the stick we used to bring from Thangjing Hill for carrying in lanes and by-lanes on state duty leaning it against the shoulder and fastening bells to its branches, the kind of bamboo used by warlike youths for making weapons and for capturing prisoners of war with.

"At this popularity of the new method of calculating the month and the year, may all evils, malice and enmity vanish!

"But as for the foremost emperor, our lord and king, may he be powerful like the sun and glorious like the moon! May he spend the new year and the new months with fresh mind! May he live long and be prosperous and may the land of the Meiteis smile with plenty and prosperity!"

Thus, the Cheithaba was praying for the long life, happiness, prosperity, power and glory of the King as well as for the progress and prosperity of the people.

To this day, preparations for Cheiraoba include a thorough cleansing of the house, in which old utensils are thrown away and new ones take their place (or the old ones, if they are made of metal, are washed to make them

shining). The houses and gardens are also well decorated and cleaned. The removal of the difilement of the past-year is thus ensured and the new year is heralded with superb cleanliness. This practice is also prevalent in other parts of India on the occasion of the new year festivals.

Several items of food are cooked elaborately in every family and they are distributed among the neighbours, and there is joy and merriment in sharing and enjoying the sumptuous lunch. In the afternoon people climb the hills. This practice is distinctive to Manipur, although in Bengal on the occasion of "Chrak Puja", people climb on higher places.

On the last day of the previous year, a religious ritual is performed at Heibok Ching (Heibok Hill) situated near the Manipur University Campus. This hill is one of the historically important and sacred spots of the Meiteis. The ritual performed on this spot is supposed to involve the prediction of who will die in the coming year. The Maibas perform a ceremony of Thouniba (prayer) to the Lai, which is called by the name of shing-shatpa, meaning "the pulling out of the sticks". It is believed that on the first Saturday of the last month on the year (Lamda thanqja

ahanba), the Lais gather and count the number of people who will die in the coming year with the help of counting sticks. During the Thouniba or shing shatpa ceremony, the Maibas beg the Lais to spare the people who have been ordained by the Lais to die by enlisting them among "the would be dead" people. The thouniba calls for certain offerings, which consist of a complete set of garments intended for the Lainingthou (God) and Lairema (Goddess), seven bamboo barrels of Kabok (puffed rice), milk, an earthen pot of molasses, a piece of cloth which must have a join in it, pieces of iron and gold, seven candles made of beewax. In addition certain food offerings are required : flour, seven different kinds of fruits, seven different kind of flowers, various offerings of vegetables and rice, etc. These are offered to the God and Goddess. After the rite is over, the Maibas can then remove from the sticks those representing people whose lives have been reprieved by the Lais. These sticks, each of which is about a ^{palm}~~span~~ in length, are removed and tied together with a coin by a hand-woven string. Both articles are then wrapped in a new cloth and handed to the individuals whose lives they represent.⁴

The Maibas and Maibis from the royal palace also perform another thouniba (Hindu=puja) at the shrine of Thongak Lairembi, an important goddess associated with the dead and the departed (literally, Thong=door, ngakpa=to guard; Thongak Lairembi=the Goddess who guards to door to the abode of the dead. It is believed among the Meiteis that after death, the spirit of the departed washes its feet at Khonghampat about four miles west of Imphal), and passes to Makoi hills^{*}. From there they proceed to the Numbul stream, cross it, and further proceed to the shrine of Thongak Lairemba at the foot of the Langol Hill. Here they refresh themselves with water kept in the shrine in two big earthen jars, one for the children and the other for the adults. Every year on the Cheiraoba day the Maibas and Maibis remove the shrine and offerings of cloths, fruits and flowers are also made. The possessed Maibi tells the oracle of the goddess. Thongak Lairembi is still very much dreaded by the people.

Another ceremony of prognostication is also carried out by the palace Maibas on the seventh day after Cheiraoba. This takes place at two laiphams

* The passage of the spirits of the dead has been described in the following words: "Thongak ashi then, Makoi nungon ching Waba phere lao"

(spot of the deiteis) between the Iril river and the village of Kongba, east of Imphal. These places belong to the ancestors of Angom clan (Angom Pokpa). The ritual is performed with the offerings consisting of gold, silver, a raw fish known as sareng (by way of saren chanba or animal sacrifice), and some other items of offering. The divination takes the form of the digging up of the earth at a certain place and scrutinising for omens. The contents of the dug earth, the insects found, etc., are wrapped in a cloth, which is then carried by the Maiba around his neck to the shrine of the Yumjao Lai in the palace. Here it is deposited and opened five days later, when the signs are read and predictions about the king and affairs of the state for the coming year are made. The hole at the Laiphams from which the earth was taken, is filled in again. The rituals are given the names Kongba Leithong Phatpa ("digging the hole at Kongba") and Sajibu Leikhun Phunba ('closing up the hole in the Sajibu').

On the occasion of Cheiraoba, special worship of Sanamahi and Leimarel, the household deiteis, is also carried out in every family, as we have mentioned already. Such Umang Lais as Nongsaba and Pakhangba are also offered fruits and other items of food. A further rite is carried out at the gate of the homestead compound of each house.

Here three portions of rice, together with certain side dishes are set out. These are offered to three Lais, namely, Irramba Tumaba (He who is the Lord of my land'), Kumsana Kumlikla ('One who is chief for the year'), and Iram Shenba Tushenba ('He who is the guardian of my land or locality').

An interesting form of divination called Ushin Shinba is also carried out in every family. Fishes are set loose in the water, each one representing a particular person of the family. A particular type of fish (ngamu, Ociocephalus harcourtbutleri) is used for Ushin. By the movements of the ^{fish} it is known whether the coming year will be prosperous or not for the person represented by the fish; if it swims straight away, good fortune will come, but instead, if it turns back its head or if it lingers then misfortune may be anticipated. When the Ushin is carried out by the Maiba for the King, the ceremony is followed by the offering of a pot filled to the brim with water, flowers, fruits, betel nut and pan leave and a small amount of money. The offering is made to the Lai to secure the prosperity of all the people of Manipur.

The practice of Ushin was made in the past in Burma and other South-East Asian Countries. Perhaps it is a part of the Buddhist doctrine of doing no injury to

the living beings and the show of love for the living. But in the case of the Meiteis, the fish is made to go with the misfortunes that may befall an individual man in the coming year. It is quite likely that the Buddhist practice of setting free the fishes in water, has been followed by the Meiteis for ceremonial purpose of divination for the year.

Nature Worship and the Tree Cult

We have already referred to the worship of the natural phenomena and their spirits. On this matter T.C. Hodson wrote : "Indra, the Sky God, has his counterpart in the Meitei system, where the Deity Sorarel possesses all the attributes generally assigned to Indra, with whom he is now identified by the ingenious Hindus. The lofty hills which surround the valley are named after the Deities whose abode they are held to be. Koubru, on the north-west, looks down on the plain of Kaithenmanbi, the meeting place of the spirits, and thither annually, in olden times, the Raja used to go in state to propitiate the Deity. When the thunder bursts on the summit to the mountain, men say the God fires his cannon; when they see in winter the snow fall on the topmost peak, the God is spreading his cloth. There are Thangjing, Marjing, Laiching, and the sacred hill

Nongmaiching, which seems to be derived from Nong=sun or rain, mai=face or in front of, and ching=hill, and to mean the hill that fronts the rain or sun".⁶ There are many prayers and offerings to the spirits (Lais) of hills, rivers, trees, etc.

Tree worship or the Tree Cult is very much prevalent among the Meiteis. Dr. K.B. Singh, a Manipuri scholar, in a paper entitled "Vestiges of Tree worship among the Meiteis" (Folklore, 5,1964) points out that among the Loi people of Manipur tree worship is seen even now. For them the most sacred tree is the tairen (cedrela toona), whose leaves are used in various ceremonial purifications by all the Meiteis. Tairen is considered by the Loi people as sacred and it is regarded as the abode of the spirits or Lais. The tairen is still used by the Maiba for cultic purposes. A twig of tairen is waived by the Maiba during his incantation for the exorcising of evil spirits, and such twigs also play a significant part in the Lai Haraoba. It is also believed that tairen leaves possess medicinal properties, and they are used in the treatment of patients, like the neem leaves which have medicinal value. When a person has contacted an infectious disease, such as small pox or measles, a branch of tairen is hung on the door of the

6. T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis, p.11

house as a warning to others. During the ritual bath of the patient after recovery a tairen twig is dipped in water and sprinkled upon the person. A similar practice is followed during the rite of Yumsengba, cleansing after childbirth. The tairen leaves are dipped in the water and sprinkled on the mother and the baby, and also on different furnitures of the household. The tairen tree is compulsorily used either as the pillar or as the frame for the construction of a typical Manipuri house. The religious significance of this particular tree has been widely recognised.

The worship of trees had been very much practised among the Assamese people and the tribal people of the entire North-Eastern region. In ancient Burma also it was prevalent since the Burmese people believed that the Nats, the spiritual beings, lived on the trees. The tree cult was there among the Naga people also. As in the rest of India, the Meiteis also considered the banyan tree to be sacred and they offered pujas to the old and big ones and placed coloured flags on them.

In the royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, there are several references to the worship of trees. Between 1576 A.D. and 1665 A.D., in the chronicle, there are twelve

references to tree worship. The ritual dedication to the tree is called U hongba. The word U means tree, and the word hongba means initiation or inauguration, that is, the tree is made sacred through ceremony. Similar, dedications we find in the case of a newly excavated village pond. In that case, the ceremony is called pukhri hongba (pukhri=pond). After Hinduization of the Manipuris the ceremony of Tulsi hongba (Tulsi= basil plant) was also practised with grand offerings to the sacred tulsi plant.

In the case of U hongba, the ceremony was performed either by the King or the Queen or by the officials or by persons of some importance in the locality in terms of power and wealth. The practice of tree worship seems to be an ancient one in Manipur.

In addition to tree worship, the practice of sacred stone-worship and snake worship were also followed in the olden days. Big stones were erected in some sacred places. Stones represented some deities. The goddesses of the market places were usually represented by big stones and they were worshipped.

There are certain puyas (or purans) dealing with the places where sacred stones are kept. They are called Nungoirons, written in the old archaic Meitei scripts. The following account is given in an old manuscript entitled Shagokshading:

- i) At Nungjengmacha there is the tongue of Pakhangba transformed into a stone having supernatural power.
- ii) At Khoibaching there is the God Nongshaba in the shape of a round stone. It is for the King only. The sages will excavate it. It is at a depth of 6 cubits.
- iii) At Thayonglok there is a stone conch of Mahadev. Its spot is at the ascent of the Khangba Ching.
- iv) In the Chinga Hill there is a precious stone with the sun and the moon on the top and underneath it. There is also a manuscript of the genealogy of the five Gurus.

The aforesaid manuscript, which probably was written during the time of King CharaiRongba in the early eighteenth century is an almanac of buried treasures and stones. There a reference is made to Mahadev, thereby showing that it was

written after the Hindu influence became very strong. It also tells us that Siva worship was prevalent in Manipur in the time of Charai Rongba (1697-1709 A.D.).

In an article entitled "The Religion of Manipur" published in Folk Life (1913) J. Shakespear gives an account of blood sacrifice. His account is based on the report of a Lai manai ('slave of Lai') of Wangpural. The manai, who was paid, was taken by the Raja and the Senapati to Wangpural's shrine, and as mantras were recited, some blood was extracted from his foot, and his hair and nail cut. These were offered before the Lai and subsequently buried in the place (Laipham). During the ceremony the manai was tied and not permitted to move. Shakespear maintained that prior to the annexation of Manipur by the British in 1891, such sacrifice of blood was common, the victim usually being waylaid by the maibas in some remote place at night. The victims were believed to die soon afterwards due to loss of blood and the psychological impact. Perhaps such sacrifice is the vestige of human sacrifice which was prevalent in the olden days. However, we do not get direct evidence of human sacrifice, except rumours of the sacrifice of men or women to appease Gods and Goddesses during the excavation of canals, the construction of big bridges, and also during

such natural calamities as flood, etc. It is said that one village maiden by name Thambalnu was sacrificed to God Wangbren, the god of floods, about four hundred years ago at a place called Yairipok about fifteen miles south of Imphal. She is still remembered by the people as Yairipok Thambalnu. Till about forty years ago the people of Manipur were afraid of killers known as Churanhaba, who wore red garments and roam about searching for vulnerable people like children for sacrifice to the deities.

We have already mentioned about the possible Tantric influence among the Meiteis in the olden days. We have also stated that some of the deities (Umang Lai) had their origin outside Manipur, possibly from the rest of India. Mention may be made of such Goddesses as Kalka, Lai Khutlembi (Goddess with many hands), Kasa, etc., whose counterparts we find in the Hindu pantheon. It is quite likely that Goddess Kalka is Kali, and Goddess Lai Khutlembi (or Lai Khurembi) is Durga. Perhaps these Goddesses were introduced in the Meitei pantheon with the increase in the influence of Hinduism in Manipur which date back to the 15th Century or even earlier. There are also evidences for the use of some Tantric mantras in the use,

for example, of such words (sabdās) as kling, sling, sring, etc. which are Tantric, and in the use of such letters as , , (ha, ra, sa). The practice of blood sacrifice and such things, probably came from Bengal, although the traces of animal sacrifice to the Umang Lais are there in the traditional religious ^{tree}pract~~ice~~ of the Meiteis.

Ancestor worship

While discussing the kinds of Lais we have already referred to the Sagei Lai or Sagei Pokpa Lai who are the ancestors of the Sagei or clan. The Sagei Lai are always male and female (the Lai and Lairembi). These are generally regarded as the progenitors of the Sagei. The Sagei Lai are kept in the custody of the head(piba) of the clan and represented by two bamboo tubes, which are kept in a basket. The contents of these tubes are not displayed and are a closely guarded secret. They are usually relics, preserved from the original progenitor. The Yumjao Lairembi of the palace, however, is represented by a doll made of cloths (Lai phedibi), who is dressed and looked after by the Maibi. In other cases the Lai is represented, as at the Lai Haraoba, by a brass mask with a cloth placed beneath it to represent the body of the Lai and another cloth on it to represent a turban.

Annual offerings called Lai Chaklon Katpa are held in any month of the year except the Meitei month of Poinu (December) or Wakching (December-January), which are harvesting months in which the Rice Goddess Phouoibi is worshipped. Each clan, however, has fixed a particular month for the worship of their Lai as a matter of convention.

The offerings and prayers to the Sagei Lai on the occasion of Lai Chaklon Katpa is strictly restricted to the members of the clan. Even the Maiba or the priest who makes the invocation of the Lais by chanting their attributes and achievements are deprived from partaking food offered to the Sagei Lais. After the elaborate details of the offerings, prayers, Maibi's oracle, etc. are over rice is cooked by the head of the clan. The sareng fish which has been offered to the God and Goddess is also cooked in a new pot without adding turmaric^l. Several other items of curry are also cooked. These cooked food are offered to the Sagei Lais. After that the members of the clan eat the food offered to the Lais. The rituals for the offerings and worship are to some extent similar to those of Lai Haraoba except that the Lai Chaklon Katpa is held one-day only, and also that it is confined to a particular clan only since the deities worshipped are the ancestors of the clan.

Chapter 7

C O N C L U S I O N

In the preceding chapters we have given a detailed account of the worship of the Umang Lais. We have also discussed the nature and significance of the rites and rituals from the sociological and philosophical perspectives. We have taken up worship, which is the practical side of religion, to be of primary importance for the study of the traditional religion of the Meiteis. The reason why we have focused our attention on worship in our study is that an inter-disciplinary study of religion can be undertaken with great advantage when we study this active phase of religion.

As we have mentioned in the Introduction of the thesis, our approach is inter-disciplinary in so far as we study the religion of the Meiteis from the sociological, historical, comparative, semiological and philosophical standpoints. We study the group of people, called the Meiteis, and their society, through an analysis of the way in which they worship their deities, thereby, looking at their religion from the functional perspective. This type of analysis can be summed up in the form of the question : What function or role does religion play in the social and individual life of the people? This is the approach of

the functionalists among the sociologists. We have referred to the works of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Levi-Strauss and others to bring to the fore different theoretical models for the study of religion.

We have also suggested certain points in respect of the intimate relationship between nature, man and spirit in the religion of the Meiteis as evinced from the worship of the Umang Lais (literally meaning "The forest dwelling deities"). The manner in which these deities have been given special abode, generally on the outskirts of the village, suggests that the people want to maintain sanctity to the abode of the deities, and that they want to avoid human pollution of the holy shrine. Again, in planting trees around the shrine, the Meitei people in the past kept up high sense of maintaining the balance of nature. In preserving reserved forests in honour of the deities, they realized the importance of social forestry. In terms of ideas, the present day programme of social forestry is not something new; it was not only conceived by the Meiteis for several centuries in the past, but they also translated the idea into social action.

The Meiteis entertained polytheistic belief because they believed in many deities or Lais and worshiped them in the annual festivals called Lai Haraoba. Some of the

deities preside over natural phenomena. In this respect, they are very similar to the Vedic gods and goddesses in respect of their nature and attributes. Some of them are local natural deities, being the governors and governesses of different localities. Some again are regents of different directions, who serve as divine sentinels to the frontiers of Manipur. These gods are called Maikeli Ngakpa Lai. In addition to the Nature Gods and Goddesses, there are also ancestor Gods and Goddesses who represent the spirits of the leading ancestors of different families and clans of the Meiteis. As we have mentioned already, there are about 364 Umang Lais. Majority of them happen to be ancestors of different clans.

Thus, we find that nature-worship and ancestor-worship are two very important forms of worship among the traditional Meiteis. We have compared these forms of worship as practised by the Meiteis with those practised by people in the Vedic period and also with the ancient religious practices of the people of China, Japan, Burma and other south-Asian countries. We have also referred to the similarity as well as the difference between the Burmese worship of the Nats and the worship of Umang Lais by the Meiteis.

But the religious practice of the traditional Meiteis is not confined to nature-worship and ancestor worship. As in the case of the higher forms of religion, the Meiteis believe in the existence of a supreme Being, called Atiya Guru Sidaba. This supernatural Almighty God is believed by the Meiteis as the ultimate creator and sustainer of the whole universe. He is also considered as the ordainer of man's destiny. People with some amount of spiritual culture show deep veneration to this god-head, and worship Him for self-realization and salvation.

Considering these elements in the religious practice of the Meiteis and the intricate and sophisticated ways in which the rites and rituals are performed during the ritualistic festival called Lai Haraoba, we are bound to conclude that the traditional religious belief of the Meiteis constitute a higher form of religion, which is much higher in status than the religious beliefs of the various tribes of people inhabiting the hills of Manipur and the neighbouring states.

We have already refuted the view of the British anthropologist, T.C. Hodson that the traditional religion of the Meiteis is animistic. Our contention is that Hodson's view, which is based upon insufficient and misleading reports

from the second-hand sources, is misleading and biased. Moreover, Hodson appears to be ignorant of the real meaning of the term "animism", which was adopted by E.B. Taylor in his Primitive Culture. It is highly erroneous to regard the religion of the Meiteis as animistic.

While attempting to understand the real nature and status of the religion of the Meiteis we may profitably follow George Galloway's classification of religions¹ into three kinds, namely, (1) tribal religion, (2) national religion, and (3) universal religion. Let us study, then, under which of these three forms of religion the religion of the Meiteis belong.

In the tribal religion, small and limited social groups of people belonging to a particular blood relationship form a compact social body. The group, then, forms customs sanctioned by the authority of tribal tradition, to which the individual renders obedience as a matter of course rather than as a matter of personal conviction. On this level man's interests are determined by the constant and severe struggle for existence, the search for food, the need of self defence against natural perils and the attack of enemies. Hence, the tribe does not rise

1. G. Galloway, *Philosophy of Religion*, 1914, Ch.2.

above material wants, and his religion remains on the same low plane. The interests that underlie his religious customs, are those connected with food-gathering, marriage, birth, sickness, death, initiation, war, protection from beasts and from the weather. Man's spirit at this stage is subject to Nature and dominated by bodily needs, and the idealistic element in his nature stands in the background of his consciousness. But even now there is a deep emotional response to the invisible forces of the world, and a finding of the secret of life, "not in the things which are seen, but in the things which are not seen".²

We may call the religion of the primitive people polydaemonism - the worship of many spirits. The whole world is thickly populated by invisible beings who may at any moment make their presence felt to man's advantage or disadvantage. There can be little doubt that the source of the idea is to be found in dreams. To people living on this level a dream is as true a representation of reality as the experience of their waking moments. The spirits which people the world may be divided into three classes : (a) those belonging to the natural objects - rivers and lakes, mountains and seas, trees and rocks, birds and snakes, etc. Not all these objects, however, are worshipped.

2. D. Miall Edward, The Philosophy of Religion, p.96.

Animism by itself does not constitute a religion. It is only when certain spirits are selected out of the untold multitude as beings to be propitiated and prayed to that we have religion. The spirits selected are such as appear to the tribal to be possessed of power superior to his own, especially power to do him harm.

(b) The tribals also worship the spirits of the dead. They believe that the soul continues to live after death, and that its power for good or evil is greatly enhanced by death. Ancestor worship is very widely spread throughout the tribal world. It is not the original form of religion. But it seems rather to be a specialized form of spiritism representing an advance on mere Nature worship. It has the merit of being distinctly social and tends to strengthen the family bond.

(c) The tribals also worship the great nature spirits. The great objects of Nature, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth itself, have also their spirits and evoke worship. It seems true that the lesser objects of Nature, those more nearly concerned with their daily wants, occupy the attention of the more primitive peoples far more than the grand, awe-inspiring heavenly bodies. But as the human spirit achieved higher levels, The Nature spirits on the grand scale came to be worshipped

and were elevated to a class above the ordinary world of spirits. Some have maintained that lurking at the back of the savage mind is a conception of a supreme spirit over and above them all. But this conception has not properly been brought to the fore and given primary importance.

(2) National religion. When a number of tribes are fused together and become a nation, either through the pressure of the fear of a common enemy or through the conquest of many tribes by a stronger tribe and the consequent assimilation of the weaker by the stronger, there is a great widening of man's mental horizon and a deepening of his life. The development in social organization is accompanied by a corresponding development in religion.

The chief religious development which accompanies the movement from tribal to national life is the movement from polydaemonism to polytheism. And this represents a real and important advance. The change to polytheism consists in the process by which the nature spirits come gradually to be anthropomorphized i.e., to be invested with human beings with proper names... It means that the local nature-spirits themselves were gradually elevated to the status of Gods, dwelling in heavenly regions above the world, while yet their original connection with

natural objects was not at once forgotten. By degrees, indeed, the ancient association of the gods with natural objects was in very many cases forgotten, and the gods, now ethicized and humanized, become patrons and heads of certain departments of life or of the state, such as war, love, agriculture, art, fate, etc.

We cannot ~~always~~ determine the precise naturalistic origin of a national deity, but sometimes we can do so. For example, it is clear that the Vedic Agni is a fire-god and the Persian Ahura a light-god. The Babylonian Marduk and the Egyptian Ra are sun-gods; the Greek Zeus and the Latin Jupiter are heaven-gods; the Germanic Odin and the Vedic Indra are storm-gods. In these cases the naturalistic basis served as a nucleus around which religious imagination wove the outline of a personality.³ Many other well-known instances of anthropomorphic national gods with proper names might be given such as the Egyptian Osiris, the Greek Apollo, the Latin Mars, the Vedic Veruna, the Indian Vishnu, the Hebrew Yehweh. Once the gods became invested with august personal attributes, it was natural for human thought to elevate them above the world of mortal beings and to place them in a kind of super-world, half material, half spiritual, where together they form a

3. G. Galloway, ibid, p.113.

society of gods and goddesses living lives full of dramatic incidents, mutual jealousies, love affairs, and many other events leading to interesting stories. These stories about the gods are called myths. Perhaps there are certain elements of truth in R.B. Braithwaite's theory of religion, according to which religious statements express an intention to carry out a certain moral policy, and, that this intention is psychologically energised and strengthened through religious stories which need not be true.⁴ Myths are stories in which the doings of some god or gods are narrated. They are the product of the reflection of the human mind about the gods and to the world. Mythology is largely an attempt to give the reason of things, but in the concrete and dramatic forms natural to the imagination rather than in the abstract forms of pure thought. It seeks to explain the origin of the religious ritual and ceremonies of agriculture, of civilization, of the world, and the reason for natural phenomena like the dawn and sunset, spring and autumn, rains and storms, etc. Mythology, however, should not be identified with religion. It is only one element in religion - we may call it the intellectual element or rather theology in pictures. Mythology is not religion nor the source of it, though

4. R.B. Braithwaite, Article on "An Empiricist View on the nature of religious belief."

it is closely associated with it, even as poetry, philosophy and theology are not religion, though they are often very closely associated with it. Worship comes before mythology, and there are developments in mythology which are not of religious interest. When the spirit of man begins to outgrow the mythological stage, men do not throw the myths away as worthless. They rather try to interpret them as allegories or parables.

We may mark two important movements in the development of national religion, namely, (i) the moralization of the gods, and (ii) the movement in the direction of monotheism. These two movements prepare the way for universal religion.

When the spirits began to be elevated above the level of the natural world and physical forces to a realm more or less supernatural, and when human attributes began to be ascribed to them, then the way became open for more adequate conceptions about the gods, as just and good beings, examples to men of the highest virtues, and guardians of the moral order which rewarded the righteous and punished the unrighteous.

The movement in the direction of monotheism is an advanced step in the development of religion. The transition

from polytheism to monotheism may take one of the three forms :

(a) There is a tendency to exalt one God over all the others in the pantheon. The analogy of the social order among men was applied to the relation of the gods to each other. To the monarchy on earth it was thought there corresponded a monarchy in heaven. There is an element of unity in the world of gods and spirits, based on the supremacy of the monarch god. Yet the supreme god is not the only god. This type of belief may be called Monarchianism.

(b) The movement towards unification is also seen in what Max Muller has called Henotheism. Here, though many gods exist, the worshipper in the act and attitude of devotion concentrates his attention so intensely on one particular deity that that deity seems for the time at least to swell out into a universal power and to absorb all the others... It is in ancient Vedic literature that Max Muller discovered this tendency. At one time it may be the goddess Aditi, at another time the god Varuna or the god Mitra, to whom are ascribed the greatest cosmical functions, and all other gods for the time being fall into the background.

(c) Another form of the movement from the many to the one is the speculative tendency to reduce all the gods to modes or appearances of a single divine substance. This leads to pantheism rather than to monotheism proper.

(3) Universal religion.. In the universal religion, religion becomes less a matter of national ritual and more a matter of inner conviction and personal experience. When religion is a matter of internal state of mind and heart, and not a matter of birth right or external ritual, it is already incipiently universal. If the condition of the covenant between God and men are inner and ethical, then it is open to all who are prepared to conform to these conditions. The Vedantic religion, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are great universal religions.

In the light of the above classification of the religions and our discussion on the worship of the Umang Lais particularly in the Lai Haraoba ritualistic festival, we may conclude that the religion of the Meiteis is a higher form of religion, higher in status than the tribal religions. It may be regarded as a national religion, similar in many ways to the ancient Greek and Roman religions, Egyptian and Babylonian religions and Vedic religion. The Meiteis who have a glorious history and rich cultural heritage is not a mere tribe but a nation who have brought the different tribes of Manipur together.

The religion of the Meiteis is polytheistic with tendency towards henotheism. The Meiteis believe in the heirarchy of gods and goddesses. At the top of the heirarchy they place Atiya Guru Sidaba as the Supreme Being. Such deities as Sanamahi, Pakhangba, Soraren, Koubru, Wangbren, Marjing, Thangjing, etc. come under Guru Sidaba, since He is the Creator of the Universe.

The other gods and goddesses are not only anthropomorphised, but personality is accorded to each one of them. They are further regarded as the repository of the moral qualities and virtues.

Another distinctive feature of the religion of the Meiteis is that the deities are worshiped in ^{pairs}~~apils~~ of god and goddess. Such form of worship in pairs is considered by scholars to be very ancient and it is found in India, China, and many other religions of the ancient civilized world.

Further, the rituals performed during Lai Haraoba festival show clear evidence of fertility cult. Moreover, the rites, rituals, symbols, etc., adopted in the festival are very similar to those of Tantricism. We have referred to this point in several places of the thesis. There is no denying the fact that tantrik element is present in the traditional religion of the Meiteis.

✓ The religion of the Meiteis is founded upon a system of philosophical thoughts. It is based upon a cosmology and theory of creation. The entire life cycle of the people is depicted through songs and dances during the Lai Haraoba festival, which is an elaborate socio-religious and cultural festival of the Meiteis. The artistic culture of the people has been carefully preserved in this annual festival wherein the entire village community participate for the welfare of the community as a whole, as well as for the individual's spiritual edification.

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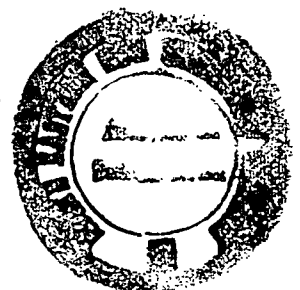
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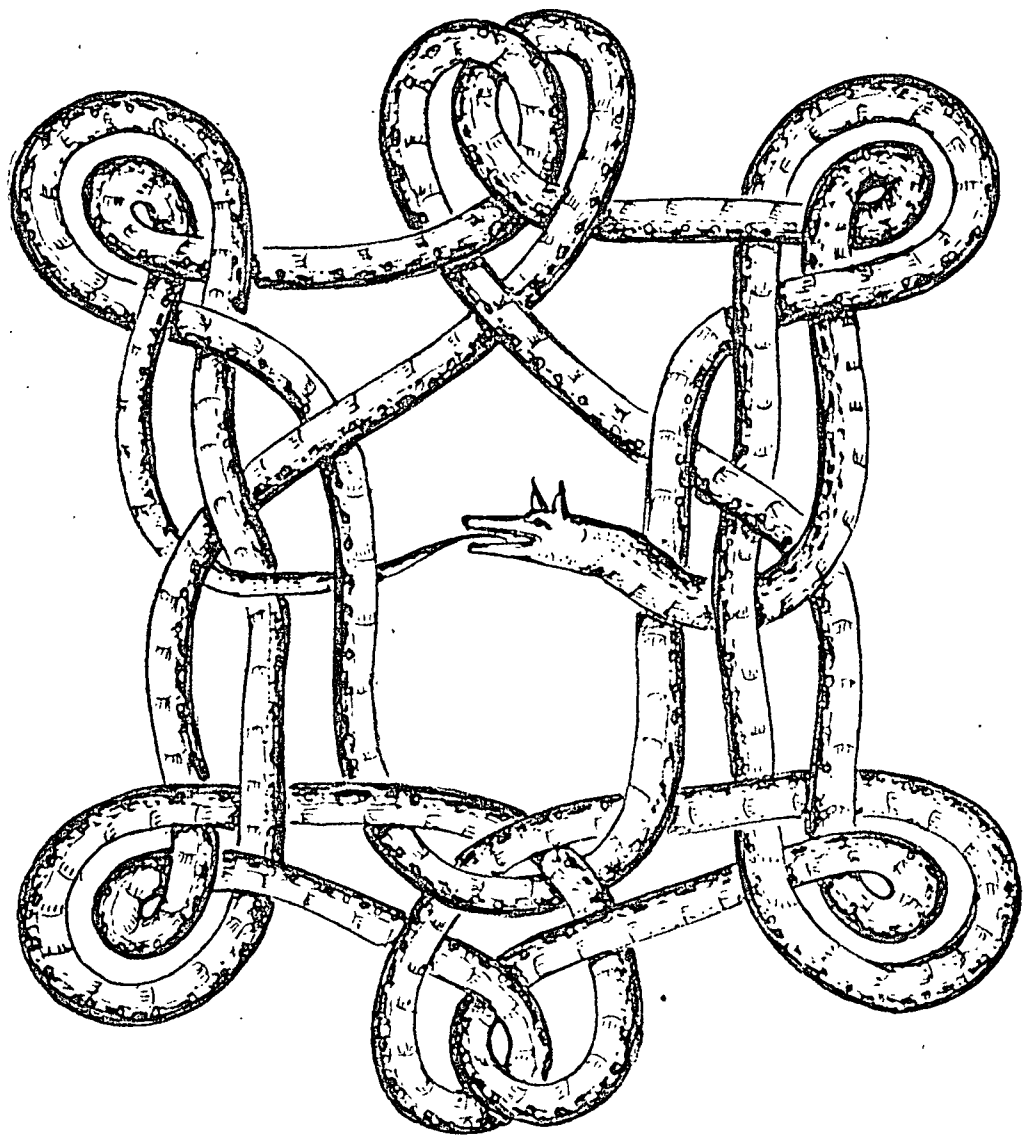
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Pakhangba Paphal

(cf. Tantrik Kundalini Symbol)



Pena Khongba singers

(Ballad singers singing the glory of Gods)



Maibis Dance to the tune of Pena



Maibis depicting creation through hand gestures



Maibi's incantation



Lai Haraoba procession



A stage of Laibou ritual