



THE PLEASING OF THE GODS
MEITEI LAI HARA OBA

SAROJ N ARAMBAM PARRATT
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The Lai Haraoba ('Pleasing of the Gods') festival is the greatest single key to the religion, culture and history of the Meitei people of Manipur. It is a vast complex of oral literature, music and dance, ceremonial and ritual, which presents a unique pre-Hindu world-view which has remained almost unchanged for over a thousand years, and which in its aesthetic sensitivity reveals the heart of Meitei culture.

Saroj and John Parratt's is the first study in English of the Lai Haraoba, and seeks to examine the festival within the totality of Meitei culture. The first part of the book outlines the Meitei religious world, and presents in depth analyses of the oral literature of the festival, its music, and its dance. The central part gives a translation of the oral text, with explanatory notes, along with a description and explanation of the accompanying rituals. Part three offers an interpretation of the festival.

The Pleasing of the Gods is a substantial addition to recent studies on north-east India. By adopting a poly-methodological approach the authors have produced a book which will be of considerable value not only to students of religion and social anthropology, but also to specialists in oral literature, dance and ethnomusicology.

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Introduction

The subject of this book is a small ethnic group situated on the borders of India and Myanmar. The state of Manipur comprises an area of some 8500 square miles, the heartland of which is a fertile valley, roughly 36 miles north to south and 18 miles across. To the south of the valley is Lake Loktak, the largest freshwater area in north east India and into which the main rivers drain. The valley is surrounded on all sides by ranges of hills, which are inhabited by different subgroups of the Nagas (to the north) and Kukis (mainly, but not exclusively, to the south). Politically Manipur is bounded by Myanmar to the east, and the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram to the north, west and south respectively. The Meiteis, on whom this study is focussed, largely inhabit the Valley of Manipur, and comprise roughly two-thirds of the state population of just below two million. In both language and in the high development of their culture they are distinguished from the their Naga and Kuki neighbours, who are classed as 'scheduled tribes' by the Indian constitution.

Geographically Manipur is part of the continental south Asiatic region and shares in its agricultural economy (Needham 1986:34). Among its important agricultural products are rice, tea, citrus, musaceous plants, the morus alba (silk-worm mulberry) and bamboo, and some of these plants feature prominently in the offerings made at the Lai Haraoba festival. In common with most south-east Asian countries (and in contrast to northern India) Manipur is what Goody (1993) has called a 'flower culture.'¹ Orchids are especially abundant, together with fragrant flowers of

south-east Asian origin such as the gardenia and several types of jasmines and magnolias. These are also used as offerings to the deities. The Meiteis have distinct affinities with so-called 'Indonesian' cultures (ie. those ranging from China eastwards) especially in the traditional techniques of rice cultivation, weaving and iron-working². It is also significant that the Meiteis have a 'boat-culture' which has similarities with Thailand and Myanmar³.

Edmund Leach, in his classic study of highland Burma, regards it as certain that from at least the beginning of the Christian era the Chinese used a number of trade routes from Yunnan into India. He posits that small military garrisons were set up at strategic points along these routes, and that these in turn gave rise to colonies in those areas where rice could be successfully cultivated (Leach 1954:38). Although there is no solid evidence as to the exact location of these trade routes, it seems very likely that the fertile Valley of Manipur (which today sits astride a main highway from India to Burma) could have functioned in as such a settlement⁴. These Thai-Shan settlers were certainly not the first inhabitants of Manipur⁵, and there is clear evidence for the presence of autochthonous 'proto-Meiteis', people called in the Manipuri traditions 'Chakpas' and 'Lois', well before the main migrations proper⁶. The migrations evidently took place in waves, as different clans settled in different parts of the valley. These migrant groups constituted the yeks, a term which might be rendered as 'extended clans' or, more loosely, 'tribes.' The yeks, traditionally believed to have been seven in number, eventually came together under the leadership of the most powerful, the Meitei or Ningthouja (ie. 'royal') yek. The name Meitei thus came to be applied to the nation as a whole. Other important yeks, some of which retained a form of independence until quite late, were the Moirangs (situated in the south of the valley around the southern end of Lake Loktak), the Angoms (which generally provided the principal queen), and the Luwangs. It is, we believe, clear that the Meiteis came into Manipur from the east, not from the Indian subcontinent. Racially the Manipuris are Mongoloid, and their language is usually classed as 'Tibeto-Burman', a language family which is generally thought to have

originated in China (Luce 1940)⁷. The importance of nongpok, the direction of the north-east, in the Meitei mythology also supports an eastern origin.

Meitei traditions themselves trace the settlement of the land back to the first century. The Manipuri State Chronicle, the Cheitharol Kumbaba, dates the reign of the first king, Pakhangba, at 33 AD. While the early parts of the chronicle are legendary in style⁸, there seems to be no good reason to doubt that some groups of the Meitei at least occupied the valley early on in the Christian era. Largely due to the conversion of Rajah Garib Niwaz, who reigned from 1709 to 1751, Vaishnavism became the state religion and the pre-Hindu traditional religion suffered some persecution. The focus of resistance to hinduisation was the traditional maibas and maibis ('priests' and 'priestesses') but eventually a modus vivendi was reached between the old and new religions.⁹ The maibic religion continued to play an important role in state and individual life. Furthermore, those areas more remote from the capital at Imphal (the Kangla) proved much more resistant to the royal pressures to convert, and it was in these villages of the autochthonous Chakpa and Loi that the old religion was preserved in its most uncorrupted form. Here, for example, blood sacrifice continued to be made, and the Loi were even regarded by stricter Meitei Hindus as equivalent to outcastes¹⁰. Nonetheless Hinduism in Manipur was never very strict. Since on conversion all Meiteis became kshatriyas caste distinctions were virtually non-existent, Hindu food rules were not rigidly observed and, most important of all, the old religion never lost its strong hold upon the people (Parratt 1980:135-179). The brahmins were incomers from Bengal¹¹ and though they made strenuous attempts to gain power over the people this was never in any way absolute. Even the giving of the sacred thread was the prerogative of the rajah rather than the brahmins. Today the authority of the brahmins has reached a low point. An important reason for this has been the resuscitation of Meitei culture and political identity, which has led to a reaction against Hinduism as a symbol of a perceived 'foreign' Indian dominance. Freedom movements for the independence of Manipur

began well before 1947¹² and one result of these has been to emphasise the distinction of Manipur from mainstream India. Politically Manipur was not part of British India¹³ and its rajah only acceded to the Indian union (despite a good deal of popular disquiet) in 1949. Reaction against control from Delhi is evident not only in continued underground activities but also in the increasingly strong affirmations of Meitei culture in contradistinction to those of India proper. One aspect of this has been the vigorous resuscitation of the archaic Manipuri script (*the meitei mayek*). While there are still apologists for the cultural dependence of Manipur upon the Indian sub-continent, it would probably be true to say that such voices are increasingly becoming a minority. Influential Meitei scholars and leaders have reacted against an 'integrationist' philosophy, and are seeking for their historical cultural roots towards the east rather than the west. It is our conviction that a study of the *Meitei Lai Haraoba* goes a long way to substantiating such a position.

The *Lai Haraoba*, which may be translated as 'the pleasing of the gods', is probably the greatest single key to Meitei history and culture. Despite two and half centuries of Hindu dominance, the maibis and maibas, largely through the rituals among which the *Lai Haraoba* stands supreme, have successfully preserved the essence of the Meitei civilization and world-view. The festival is a vast complex of oral literature, ceremonial and ritual, dance and music, which enshrines the soul of the people, and which demonstrates their extraordinary aesthetic capacity. A festival of such complexity presents the researcher with many problems, not least that of methodology: no one methodology would be sufficient to do it justice. We have accordingly sought to make use of a number of different approaches - of literary and historical criticism, phenomenological description, more technical analysis of dance and music. But primarily the *Lai Haraoba* is an act of worship. It is a *religious* event which can only be properly understood in terms of the Meitei experience of the *lai*, the deities, as the ultimate realities. The only secure basis for an adequate interpretation is one which takes seriously the spirituality of the *Lai Haraoba* as a

ritual intended to bring about interaction between the world of the lais and the human world, and to embrace both within the wholeness of a sacramental universe¹⁴.

NOTES:

1. In the Lai Haraoba there is a special official, the *leilangba*, who is in charge of the collection and distribution of flowers: the village guardian (*khulakpa*) at the Lai Haraoba for Khamlangba, the lai associated with iron, is actually recompensed in flowers.
2. Leach (1954:247) comments: 'The only reasonable assumption is that these widely dispersed culture groups have many similarities in material culture because they all originally borrowed from the same source.'
3. While it is true that Lake Loktak necessitated the widespread use of water transportation by the southern Meitei groups, the land-locked valley with its small rivers can hardly have produced the elaborate use of large barges which are a prominent feature of Meitei religious, royal and social life. It seems reasonable to suppose that they brought their boat building technology with them from their place of origin.
4. Pemberton (1835:37-38), who was of the opinion that the Meiteis came originally from north-west China, traces these routes with some degree of probability (155-6,171). He noted that before the deterioration of relations with Ava trade was carried on along these routes between Manipur and Yunnan (35, 140).
5. Kumar Singh (1988) gives much archeological evidence for settlements as early as 1500 BC,
6. see further Additional Note on the meaning of Tangkha, and compare Luce and Maung (1939). The important Chakpa/Loi villages for the observance of the Lai Haraoba are Andro, Phayeng and Kakching. A full list of Chakpa/Loi villages is given by Higgins (nd:73) who also notes that they previously had their own languages..
7. Very early Greek and Indian sources use the term 'Kirata' to describe peoples of Mongoloid stock who occupied parts of north east India. The precise meaning of this term is uncertain, though Chatterji (1950) includes the Meiteis within this category: see also the earlier study of Nyberg *Kirata, a study on some ancient Indian tribes in Le Monde Oriental* vol 30 1936, 90-169.
8. It becomes much more structured from the reign of Kyamba (1467-1508) and it is generally accepted that in his reign the chronicle became

truly a 'court chronicle' and was written up at the time of the events it describes: it is in archaic Manipuri script.

9. For a full discussion of the relationship between Meitei religion and Hinduism in Manipur see Parratt (1980 and 1989).
10. Banishment to Loi villages was a punishment for certain crimes and equivalent to losing caste.
11. called *mayangs*, 'foreign westerners', which today is something of a term of opprobrium for those from the Indian sub-continent.
12. For a useful survey see Phanjoubam Tarapot *Insurgency Movement in North East India*, Delhi 1993, 1-85.
13. For an account of the crisis which led to British *de facto* (though not *de jure*) control of Manipur see John & Saroj Parratt *Queen Empress vs. Tikendrajit: the Anglo-Manipur conflict of 1891*, Delhi 1992.
14. Consequently we reject as inadequate reductionist views of religion such as those adopted, in relation to neighbouring Burma, by Leach and Lehman. Our approach follows generally the lines of H.W. Turner's proposals in his important paper *The Way Forward in the Religious Study of African Primal Religions* in *Journal of Religion in Africa* XII/1 1981.