

A NOTE ON THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF LAIBOU JAGOI OF MEITEI LAI-HARAOPA

M. Jitendra Singh

Before the question of symbolism of 'laibou jagoi' is discussed, a few words may be said about what 'lai-haraoba' of the Meiteis, who constituted the majority of the Manipuri population. It may be said that lai-haraoba had its origin in the ancestral ritual in which the offerings or sacrifices were made only by the members of the group to their ancestor or ancestors. In course of time, with the political unification of the valley and the emergence of a kingdom under the Ningthouja dynasty, 'lai-haraoba' developed into a complicated and composite ritual festival performed in honour of the traditional deities of the Meiteis. The word 'lai-haraoba' means, according to S.N. Parratt, literally 'pleasing the god'.¹ J. Shakespear used the phrase, 'the pleasing the god'.² But Moirangthem Chandra Singh stated that lai-haraoba carried both the meanings $\bar{3}$ 'pleasing the god' and 'the pleasing of the god'.³ Whatever its meaning, the ritual was intended for the growth and expansion of the group or the community. In short, it was a fertility rite.

The date on which lai-haraoba takes place depends largely upon the season. It must be at the moment when good season seems to be close at hand that this ritual is celebrated. Thus, the ritual is carried out after the harvest and before the monsoon sets in Manipur, where the main occupation of the people is rice cultivation facilitated by seasonal rains, at the 'laipham', which is said to have been the burial grave of the lai or the god, who had at one time human existence, or at an important place connected with the life and history of the lai. The lai was originally represented

by a pair of bamboo tubes and at a later stage of development, by brass or wooden masks with cloths placed below and above as though they were dressed. A reference in Cheitharol Kumbaba to the burial of nine lai in the year 1726 also made it clear that they were represented by masks. In the early period, temples, made of bamboo and thatch with a cross on its frontal ridge, were erected temporarily for the purpose of the ritual which lasted a little over a week.

In the Meitei society, lai-haraoba is said to have four main forms, namely (1) Kanglei, (2) Moirang, (3) Chakpa, and (4) Khamlangba. The differences in observances between them are minor and the basic pattern is always the same and, in opinion, so also the essence. Here, in this paper, these differences between them, though minor, will not be discussed, as, we think, this is not the right place, but only the laibou jagoi, which is common to all the forms given above.

Laibou Jagoi is one of the main items on the programme of the lai-haraoba festival. This is also known as laibou-khuttek. Laibou has been interpreted as a corruption of lai pou 'birth of the lai'. Khuttek is the movement or gesture, generally, of the hands, and in its meaning, it is equivalent to jagoi, a Meitei word for dance. Laibou jagoi was preceded by laiboula thaba. This was the laying of offerings by the maibee, the priestess, in front of the lai. The offerings were made first to the maikei-ngakpas, the guardian-gods of the four directions, namely (1) Thangjing of the south-west, (2) Marjing of the north-east, (3) Wangbren of the south-east, and (4) Koubru of the north-west and finally to the lai, in whose honour the ritual was carried out. Then, the maibeas arranged the congregation participating in the laibou jagoi in two queues - one of the male and another of the female, and asked them to stand quite and rest

till the shouting of 'hoirou haya' was over. This was done by the 'penakhongba' ('pena' is a traditional music instrument and 'khongba' is the man who plays on this instrument) putting on his 'pena' the following lyric: O hoirou O nage. Hoirou hoirouye nageda, Laiyingthou O hoirou ne se shum. Ha haya a, haya, haya a, haya he nageda a yoibubeedi haya ne." According to S.N. Parratt, 'Hoirong' is properly the rectum, but it presumably means vagina, the first line "O hoirou, O nage" means "let me have intercourse."¹⁰ She further explains that the words express the desire of the lai for intercourse.¹¹ O. Bhogeshwar has given quite a different meaning of 'hoirou haya'. According to him, "... the Supreme God of the Universe, having wished to create the world, commanded His son Ashiba to create the world. Being at a loss how to carry out his father's order he asked his Father how to create the world. At this the Supreme Father opened His mouth and showed the design in which He wished the world to be created. On seeing that, Ashiba went inside the belly of his Father and called out all the objects from inside by shouting 'hoi'. From this shout 'hoi' the term 'hoiron' was derived. His Mother 'Leimaren Shidabi' received all those objects that Ashiba brought out from inside the entrails of his Father by shouting 'hoi'. From this incident the term 'haya' came into use."¹² This is, perhaps, a philosophical version of much later period. In our opinion, 'hoiron haya', in the context of the text given above, carries the sense of sexual intercourse. This shouting of 'hoiron haya' was followed by dance. This portrayed the building of the various parts of human body. The body shown here was that of the female. It might have been because of the reason that it was the female organ that produced the child. The formation of the child, the growth of the various parts/organs of the body in the womb of its mother and the infusion of soul into the body were represented by the 'maibis' and the congregation in 64 movements or

gestures.¹³ This is known as 'laibou jagoi'. The gestures used throughout are extremely simple and the steps¹⁴ very elementary; but it is artistically executed.

Now, the problem is how, why and when 'laibou jagoi' came to occupy an important place in this ritual festival. It is not easy to give the answer to the problem. But the only answer that we can give is that 'laibou jagoi' must be connected with the creation myth, which contained the creation of land, vegetables, various creatures and finally of human being. A critical study of this myth, keeping in view the political and social development in the valley of Manipur, would certainly suggest a possible answer to the problem.

The representation of the making of various parts and organs of female body right from the conception to the birth of the child would have stimulated all those attended the festival sexuality. This might result in the increase of the population that the group or the community required in its political and economic activities in olden times.

Secondly, 'laibou jagoi' would have certainly made the worshippers believe that mankind was created by one creator god. This might have given a profound effect in their attitudes towards one another that they all were members of the same human community.

Thirdly, this part of the periodic ritual festival (lai-haraoba) might be taken as a beginning in building the cult of Ashiba, popularly known, in the later period, as Sanamahee, as one creator god. This was, perhaps, the demand of the society developed in the fusion of the various salais (tribes or clans) into a political whole. Therefore, these gestures and dramatic representations, though appeared odd and absurd, was not without a profound and

human meaning. "It is doubtful whether any other form of dance in the world exists for the same purpose as 'Jagoi' does."¹⁵

Lastly, it may be said that a critical study of the movements in depicting various parts of human body in 'laibou jagoi' may provide some idea for those interested in the study of the controversial origin of archaic Meitei script, which is being read as 'kok' (head), 'sham' (hair), 'lai' (forehead), 'mit' (eye) and so on.

Notes & References

1. S.N. Parratt, **The Religion of Manipur**, Calcutta, 1980, p.53.
2. J. Shakespeare, "Religion of Manipur", **Folk-Lore**, Vol. XXIV, No. IV, 1913, p. 428.
3. M. Chandra Singh, "Preface", Ng. Kulachandra's **Meitei Lai-Haraoba**, Imphal, 1963, p.1.
4. S.N. Parratt, **The Religion of Manipur**, p. 56.
5. L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh, **Cheitharol Kumbaba**, 1967, Imphal, p. 75.
6. S.N. Parratt, **Religion of Manipur**, p. 54.
7. **Ibid.**, p. 61.
8. **Ibid.**
9. Ng. Kulachandra Singh, **Meitei Lai Haraoba**, 1963, Imphal, p.25.
10. S.N. Parratt, **Religion of Manipur**, see footnote, p. 61.
11. **Ibid.**, p. 61.
12. O. Bhogeshwar, 'Lai Haraoba': Its Philosophical Meaning and Significant Value, **The Backbone**, Vol. I, No. III, 1982, Imphal, p. 20.

13. Kulachandra, **Meitei Lai Haraba**, p. 38.
14. Louise Lightfoot, **Dance-Rituals of Manipur, India**, 1958, Hongkong, p. 22.
15. **Ibid.**, p. 20.