



“LAILAM THOKPA”

A perspective on the sightseeing ritual of Awang Sekmai Lai Haraoba Festival

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Abstract : This paper attempts to understand the Lai Haraoba festivals of Manipur with its various types and elements including rituals, physical movement, song and dance sequences etc. It also focuses on the daily rituals of Ibodhou Koubru haraoba. Out of the various rituals, this paper aims to find out how Lailam Thokpa process help understand the aware of gods' creativity and its philosophy in our society. It also makes an effort to bring to light the beautiful culture and rich heritage of the Awang Sekami.

Index Terms – *Lailam Thokpa, Awang Sekmai Lai Haraoba, Merry Making of God, Ibudhou Koubru Haraoba, Culture, Lailam Thokpa ritual.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Every community has various traditional festivals which observing since their immemorial time. It reflects their customs, belief, culture, way of life, etc. to the present. Lai Haraoba is celebrated by Meitei (also known as Meetei) community of Manipur located in the extreme eastern corner of India. Lai Haraoba (Lai means deity and Haraoba, to be happy or rejoicing) has been interpreted as the merry-making of the Gods and Goddess. Again Moirangthem Chandrasing opines that it is the happiness of the Lai (God) or to make the God happy.

The festival displays the recollection of stories regarding the creation of the Universe, the creation of mankind, house construction, agricultural activity, weaving, way of life, and beliefs through the semiotics of dance, song, and physical movement along with material and non-material aspects of culture. S.N. Parratt writes “As it stands the Lai Haraoba is evidently a composite festival and consists of diverse origins” The core nature of this festival is to invoke the soul of the Gods and to please them through a systematic oral-physical tradition once a year and the people are blessed in return. M. Macha Chaoreikanba⁴ states that it serves not only as a ritual to please the Gods and Goddesses for the growth, betterment, productivity, and better safeguard of the

mankind, but also it provides a social space in which education is imparted regarding the universe and mankind, livelihood and worldly affair, does and don't through various tangible and intangible symbolic representation, physical movement, dance, and song sequences, etc. So, it is a kind of dedication to the welfare of the whole community.

II. CLASSIFICATION OF LAI HARAوبا

Many scholars have classified the types of Lai- Haraoba on the basis of certain distinctive features and characteristics. N. Kullachandra Singh⁵ classified it into three types- Kanglei Haraoba, Moirang Haraoba and Chakpa Haraoba. Again, Joychandra Singh⁶ divided it into six types- Chakpa, Kakching, Kanglei, Moirang, Andro, and Sekmai Haraoba. There are also other scholars who classified it into 4, 5, or 7 types. However, it is generally accepted the 3 types of Lai- Haraoba namely, Kanglei Haraoba, Moirang Haraoba, and Chakpa Haraoba.

- 1 Kanglei Haraoba- It is mostly observed in the valley area of Manipur. Kanglei Thokpa or Lai Nupi Thiba ritual (searching for God's wife) is an integral part of Kanglei Haraoba.

- 2 Moirang Haraoba- It has three main distinctive features (a) Yumphamba (b) Lam Thokpa and (c) Khong Chingba. It is particularly celebrated at the place of Moirang.
 - 3 Chakpa Haraoba- It is a specific form of Lai – Haraoba where fire has a special place during the ritualistic celebration. It is performed in many places and there exist certain differences within the same category. W. Lukhoi mentions that Koubru and Loyalakpa are the important deities of Chakpa Phayeng haraoba, but other deities are also worshiped at different places of Chakpa.
- Each Lai-Haraoba has distinct rites and rituals. However, the spirit and philosophy are the same.

III.METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study has adopted a descriptive research design. The necessary data have been collected from available primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews (IDI). For the secondary sources cover the seminar papers, edited volumes, etc.

IV.AREA OF THE STUDY

Awang Sekmai village is one of the scheduled caste villages in Manipur. It is situated in the northern part of Manipur and is approximately 18 km away from the capital city of Imphal. It is predominantly inhabited by the 11 Sagei (lineages): Angom, Ayangbam, Chandam, Khwairakpam, Laimayum, Laishangbam, Maharabam, Moirangthem, Thangjam, Usham, and Yumlembam. They are considered and believed to be the descendant of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first recorded king of Kangleipak (presently changed to Manipur).

V. THE FESTIVAL OF AWANG SEKMAI HARAOPA:

The community of Awang Sekmai celebrated a number of festivals and Lai Haraoba is the most important one. Awang Sekmai Haraoba is also known as Ibudhou Koubru Haraoba which is annually celebrated by the community of Awang Sekmai on an auspicious day either on Monday or Friday of the month of Fairel (February/March) and continued for about 2 weeks. The time duration of the celebration is decided by the pandit (priest/scholar) of the village.

The festivals consist of various sections.

- 1 Laiphi Suba – a ritual of washing the religious clothing of the deities performed at the nearby river on the 3 days prior to the Lai-Haraoba festival.
- 2 Yaam Suba – It is performed on the next day of Laiphi Suba where the rice pounder makes the rice turn into rice flour is called Yaam Suba. And the rice flour was offered to Lord Koubru and Loyalakpa (son of lord Koubru).
- 3 Laiphi Setpa – This ritual is the dressing up of the deities to be done just one day before the initiation of Lai Haraoba festival and placed in the Khagemba Loisang (traditional assembly). There are 12 numbers of gods and goddesses in the Awang Sekmai Haraoba.

The above 3 different rituals are an integral part of the Ibudhou Koubru Haraoba. From the first day celebration, there are various rituals which can be broadly classified into:

1. Lai Ikouba/ Ikum Itaba (first day of the festival)
2. Laibou chongba / normal days of the festival.
3. Lailam thokpa/a ritual process of sight-seeing.
4. Lairoi/last day of the festival.
5. Lairoi nonganba /day after the end of Lai Haraoba.

So far, in most of the available literature, Awang Sekmai Haraoba is discussed in the category of Chakpa Haraoba, although it has a unique and specific form. Prakash Singh included Awang Sekmai Haraoba in the type of the Chakpa Haraoba. Further N. Kullachandra also categorized it into the Chakpa Haraoba. However, Joychandra Singh and Rakesh Singh interpreted Awang Sekmai Haraoba as one of the prominent types of Lai-Haraoba. It occupies first the order of the Lai-Haraoba festival. None of the Lai-Haraoba can be celebrated, until and unless Sekmai Haraoba is celebrated. N. Sanajaoba mentions the song “Awang Koubru Asuppa Iyel Khunda Ahanba” which means north Koubru the primacy, the primeval place of the settlement, which describes the theory of the creation has been sung in all the Lai-Haraoba and folklore.

5.1. IN THE MORNING SESSION:

Lai Ikouba/ Ikum Itaba- The calling up of the souls of the deities from the water is called Lai Ikouba/ Ikum Itaba. It is the first day ritual of the Lai Haraoba festival. O. Bhogeshore Singh states, “Ikouba is a prayer to the Almighty to send up His supreme soul. The aim of the Ikouba ritual is to bring God into a state of

activity. It is performed either at the special sacred place situated near the temple of Goddess Koujengleima or the Sekmai River. This ritual procession began from the temple Shrine and end up at the river. It is attended by phamnaiba (male), phamnaibi (female), Maiba (Priest), Maibi (Priestess), Pena khongba (Pena player), along with the villagers and Lai Eshei Shakpi (Womenfolk singers). The 6 married women carried the souls of the deities in the Ihaifu/Ishaifu (an earthen pot) from the river to the main shrine. On reaching the temple shrine, the soul of the deities was installed on the idol and placed inside the special sacred seat of the temple. Then, the Laroi/Shanglen (youths) performed the Sairen Chanba ritual (animal sacrifice) in which a mature boar along with a cock was sacrificed to the deities. Rakesh Singh states that sacrificing Sairen Pig of Sekmai Haraoba predicts the bad and good omens of the coming year for the state. The Maibi was performed Saroikhangba (offering of food at the 4 corners of the temple to appease evil spirits. With it, the morning ritual was concluded.

5.2. IN THE AFTERNOON SESSION OF THE FIRST DAY OF LAI HARAوبا:

All the attendants were assembled at the temple of the Goddess Koujengleima (second wife of Lord Koubru) and offered various fruits and articles. It is also followed by Sairen Chanba with a cock a supplementary hen. Then it is offered to the Lod Koubru and Goddess Koujengleima. With this, the ritual observance for the Goddess Koujengleima was closed for the ensuing year.

VI. LAIBOU CHONGBA

From the 2nd day of the Lai-Haraoba festival, the daily rituals will remain the same except on the day of Lai Lam Thokpa and the Lairoi (the last day of the festival). The daily programme will be divided into 3 sessions namely the morning session, afternoon session, and evening session.

Every morning during Lai-Haraoba, the Pena Khongba played the Yakairol (awakening song) for the deities. Then, Maibi delivered the oracle. Simultaneously, the Laroi Shanglen (Youths) performed the Khausaba (dance with Spear and Shield). Then, the villagers will have offered various fruits and articles to the deities. With this, the daily morning rituals ended.

In the afternoon session, the Maibi performed Chumsa Jagoi (dance) and the Lei-Langba was also done. The Laroi Shanglen along with Maiba performed Hoi-laoba (shouting of Hoi).

Then in the evening session, all the participants including Phamnaiba, Phamnaibi, Maiba, Maibi, and Pena Khongba were assembled in the courtyard. The important daily ritual programme of this session is Laiboula thaba (laying of plantain leaf) in the middle of the courtyard, the performance of Laiching Jagoi (initiation dance) by the Maibi, the singing of Hoirou Haya Laoba (S.N. Parratt¹⁸ explains that the words express the desire of the Lai for intercourse) performed by the Pena Khongba, the Khayom Jagoi (a type of dance) accompany by the song of Anoirol (it conveys the evolution of dance), Laibou Khuthek. (It is an elaborate dance and song sequence) which included Hakchang Saba, Nungnao Jagoi portrayed the creation of various parts of the human body till childbirth, Yumsarol dance (the construction of a house) enacted by various hand gestures and movements, the Panthoibi dance (which depicts the romantic dance of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi), the Paosarol (singing erotic songs) led by the Maiba and Maibi. Then, Wakol Laoba was performed and it is followed by Hoi Laoba. After this, the Leisem Jagoi (dance) was performed by the attendants of the deities. Finally, the Saroi Khangba was done by the Maibi in the corners of the four directions and the daily rituals of the Lai Haraoba festival were closed.

VII. LAI LAM THOKPA:

Lai Lam Thokpa is also known as the sightseeing day of the Ibudhou Koubru Haraoba. It is held either on Monday or Friday during the Lai Haraoba celebration. On this day, the idols of the Koubru and his consort Nungangleima along with Loyarakpa (son of the Koubru) and his wife Nungthenleima were carried out on a palanquin by the Lai Puba (attendants of the God) and the evening programmes were held outside the temple. This ritual is held at the ground of Koujengleima (a place near the temple of Koujengleima) which is 500m away from the main temple.

In the morning, 11 numbers of bamboo poles were cut down to erect in the temple courtyard. This ritual is called Uttangwaa/Uchiwaa yungba. The five poles were erected in the middle of the courtyard in a square shape and one pole in the middle represented the guardians of the four directions (such as Koubru, Wangbren, Thangjing, and Marjing) and the Salairen (the first progenitor of the clan) respectively. Then, 6 bamboo poles were also erected on the two sides of the temple. After this, long straps of Tairen (toon) leaves made by the women folk were wrapped around all bamboo poles in the form of a garland. It is customary to tie up with all the poles. Then, the Nongdol Khayom/Leiyom (a packet of plantain leaves in which rice, egg, nongpoklei buds, coin, etc. are placed) was hung in the middle of the Salairen pole which keeps higher than the other. It signifies the Salairen also known as Sawang, the God of Chakpa is greater than the guardians of the four

directions. The four Chomjao (a bunch of three/five eggs) were also hung at the remaining four poles. After this process, the various fruits and articles were offered to the deities and then the Maibi delivered the oracles accompany by the Khousaba and the big drum of the deity. Then the Saroi Khangba was performed by the Maibi to end the morning session.

In the afternoon session, all the attendants of the deities cleaned up the palanquin and make decorated to place the four idols for the ritual process of sightseeing. During this session, the Sairen Chaba (eating of cooked Sairen meat) was also performed by the Laroi Shanglen. Tangkhul saba (the man representing the Tangkhul tribe) also arrived during this period. In the evening, the Phamnaiba, and Phamnaibi other participants were assembled in the

temple courtyard and selected some male and female youths for the specific duties in the process of Lai lam Thokpa. Two male youths bear the ritual dagger. A male dispersed the puffed rice during the procession and some Laroi Shanglen youths performed the Khousaba. There is also included the bearer of God's stick known as Langkachei. And two male youths carrying the Chong-Pe (the huge white umbrella and the canopy of the God) were also included. Lai Pot Pubi (virgins who bear God's articles) also consisted in the procession led by the Maibi.

Before proceeding with the ritual process of the sightseeing, the Maibi performed the Lai Ok Jagoi (dance) and the Khousaba also performed and then started the procession during the procession the women folk rendered the Singkum Eshei:-

Ha lambu hanba lainingthou-O
Sana Chonglen Khanduna, dolai lengjao tongbadi
Lainingthou keidouruke haibanode
Saban lamthokluge
Poirei lamyengluge hangonode20 (khwairakpam Tombi)

The above song signifies the exchange of questions and its reply between Koubru and his wife Nungangleima. It is asked where he is going in his best attire and the reply is given thus I am going sightseeing and don't ask me about it. The song is sung repeatedly.

Laiok Jagoi (dance) and Khousaba are also performed during the journey. On reaching the spot, Laiok Jagoi and Khousaba are performed again and the various fruits, egg mounted on rice, along with other articles were offered to the Goddess Koujangleima. The Maiba prepared the seat of the temple and placed the four deities. Then it is followed by laiboula thaba (laying of sacred plantain leave on which Nongpok Lei are placed) by the Maiba. The Laroi Shanglen performed the Hoi laoba and then the remaining sequences are the same as performed in the daily ritual process of the evening session which is already mentioned above. However, some specific rituals process are included in the day of Lai Lam thokpa while the performance of Panthoibi Jagoi(Dance). W. Lukhoi20 also mentions the dance form narrating the story of Nongpok- Panthoibi through song is called Panthoibi Jagoi. During this dance performance, the big drum of the deity in the Khagemba Loishang was beaten to give the signal of Tangkhul Saba who exited from the said loishang and the childless couple offered articles to him and seek their blessing to have a child. Tangkhul saba was rushed from the Khagemba Loishang up to the spot of the Lai Lam Thokpa and then he entered in the ground during the performance of Panthoibi Jagoi(dance). He shot the arrows in the four corners of the ground to drive out evil spirits and then he joined the Laibou dance with his wife Nurabi (played by a Maibi). Here, Tangkhul and Nurabi signify the Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. During the performance of Laibou Khuthek (dance sequence), Tangkhul Saba performed the Khoi Lokpa (harvesting of honey from bee hive), Meiba chingba (making/setting fire) respectively through various dance movements. Then, he again joined the Laibou dance. The Maibi performed the Thawai Mami Khonba (recollection of souls) ritual for the end of the Laibou dance sequence. It is followed by Hoi Laoba, then the Maibi performed the Lairen Mathek Chatpa (depiction of the coiling design of Pakhangba/Python) in dance form by the group. After completion of this dance, all the participants stood in two lines for male and female to perform the ritual of Lou Yanba (digging of the field with a spade by the Tangkhul Saba) through body movement. While this ritual performance, all the participants hold the Langkachei (God's stick) and rendered the Louyan Eshei (song of farming) led by Maiba. During the singing of Louyan Eshei, Tangkhul Saba performed the Louyanba (digging with a spade) in the form of dance accompany by Pena (a kind of fiddle) music also.
(The Louyan song is :-)

The Louyan Song signifies Nongpok Ningthou (Tangkhul Saba) has pushed away all evils and misfortunes towards the southern direction that may come to the village in the ensuing year and had brought in welfare and prosperity towards the northern direction, it means that they have been blessed well by the deity. In another way, it signifies that the village had been plenty and prosperous from the day and will continue thus

by having abundant children and enjoying happy lives. Thus, the Lai-Haraoba festival is a kind of fertility rites in order to bring growth and development of the community. H. Thambal Sharma²¹ states the Lai-Haraoba is performed for the growth and expansion of village or community and the long life of the King. Then, the Nurabi scattered the Panao Singnao (sacred articles including ginger, yam, paddy, etc.) to the ground and the participants collected the articles to have blessing. It is followed by the ritual of plantation of paddy with holding dry straw by the participants. After this ritual, Tangkhul Nurabi prayed to the deities and then the villagers prayed to the Tangkhul Nurabi. With this the ritual process for the Koujengleima ground was end. All the participants were stood in two lines led by Maibi to return to the main temple. Before proceeding the return journey, the Maibi performed the Laiok dance and Khousesana also continued. During the return journey, Laiok dance and Khousesaba are performed and the womenfolk rendered the Hikumlakpa song (the song signifies the deities are coming on the boat) till the courtyard of the Main temple. When all the participants reached at the gate of the temple, they were greeted by burning of pinewood. It is followed by Laiok Jagoi and khousesaba. Then, a man scattered the puffed rice at the verandah of the temple. After this, the Maiba prepared the seat of the four deities and placed them on the previous fambei (seat). At that moment, the khousesaba was again performed and the articles of the deities carried in the sightseeing process was taken inside the temple. Next is followed by the dance sequences of Kanglei Haraoba by the Maibi in front of the deities.

The dance sequences are included –Hakchang Saba (creation of human body), Nungnao Jagoi (dance enacting child birth), Yumsarol (house construction), Pamyantlon (cultivation dance), Fisarol (weaving dance) respectively. After the completion of above dance sequences, the process of the (sightseeing) Lai Lam thokpa was concluded.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

This study helps us to know that Lai Haraoba is the enactment of the deeds of the gods by the people of Meitei community through non-material and material aspects of culture to achieve their blessings. It was also considered that Lai Lam Thokpa ritual serve a huge purpose in describing the various way of life, in the society since their settlement on this earth. The study also confirmed that this ritual is an unavoidable part but, in some cases, Lai Lam Thokpa is performed on the last day of the Lai Haraoba. The God Koubru has hidden his second wife, Goddess Koujengleima from society due to prevailing dominant social-cultural norms and restrictions. It is also considered that the people of Awang Sekmai not only uphold their rich culture and tradition but also emphasize the importance of the Lai Lam Thokpa ritual to reflect one's cultural heritage.

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