

Meitei Umanglaiharaoba and the Order of Nature

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Abstract

While the debate between climate change activists and sceptics continues, we sure know that *nature* has suffered exceedingly at the hands of human beings. It is a complicated issue, and we can only blame ourselves and our attitude towards nature for such a knee-jerk response to the crisis at hand. In this paper, the author explores nature as Manipuris/Meiteis perceive it in the traditional Manipuri faith system and the sub-system called *umanglais* and their appeasement festival called *umanglaiharaoba*. Nature in the Meitei faith system is inclusive of all living and non-living organisms. They consider nature as a source for their survival and subsistence. The author believes, quite contrary to popular belief that human beings have created chaos of culture after separating themselves from the order of nature. The dichotomy of doctrinal and non-doctrinal faith systems has also put up an extended argument regarding nature and its place in human discourses. It is to be seen how nature is placed in *umanglaiharaoba* and other associated rites and rituals and explore how much space and traction nature has lost over the centuries in the said activities and practices.

Keywords: faith system, umanglai, umanglaiharaoba, nature, culture, Manipuri/Meitei

Lai Haraoba or *umanglaiharaoba* means 'pleasing the ancestral deities'. *Lai haraoba* is a Manipuri's religious dialogue between him/her and his/her creator. It is also a reminder of his/her position in the cosmos. The process of evolution and creation of life is at the heart of this yearly ritual. It also depicts the everyday life of a Manipuri in every aspect of existence, such as health and procreation, agriculture and livelihood, sports and recreation, and other such activities. Most importantly, *umanglaiharaoba* produces a discourse on man's reliance and dependence on nature/forest/environment.

During the *laiharaoba* festival, village women carry basketfuls of chosen fresh fruits and flowers towards the sacred ground to be offered to the deities every day. These fruits and flowers are offered to the presiding deities for their blessings. In the local parlance, the phrases such as *heikatlakattamba/ heithaba-leithaba* (offerings of fruits and flowers) and *heiruk-leiruk* (baskets of flowers and fruits) exist in their ecologically sensitive minds and habits as well as behind and between the rituals that surround and define them. When the blossoms of flowers appear on every tree and plant, and when orchids appear on the tree branches, everyone knows that the season of *laiharaoba* has come. The sight and smell of summer just before the tilling season somehow captivates the entire valley of Manipur and throws everyone into a trance, rejoicing and appeasing the deities who have protected the people and reinvigorated the land. Every Manipuri enters into an 'ecological essence' during and after the festivity period because the idea of a sacred grove where the deities reside signals a higher consciousness of man and nature relation and interaction. Therefore, nature was never seen by Manipuris as a resource that men must exploit to make lives better but be closer to it and be thankful. The equal treatment of men and nature is at the core of every animistic faith system. Moreover, the *umanglais* are a combination of animistic and ancestral worship systems with very elaborate rites and rituals.

Umanglai is a conflation of two words. *Umang* and *lai*. *Umang* means 'forest', and *lai* means god or deity. So the British administrators translated *umanglai* as 'forest god'. However, the British translation of the first part *umang/forest* is a misnomer. The problem is that the indigenous scholarship on *umanglai* has found both the terms *umang* and *lai* unforgiving and excessively complex. This complexity arises from the multi-layered and multifaceted concept of both terms.

The Meitei codes of *umang* are both inward and outward. It is to say that the term denotes what is inside of a human body, and the environment in which the body subsists. *Umang* is the source, the spring, and the structure upon which all the other superstructures rest. It is also the architecture of the universe. In functionalist terms, an *umang* is the source of our subsistence and other fulfilments. The concept of an *umang* is beyond romanticising forests/groves or attributing psycho-mystical characteristics to it. We often find the veneration of trees and plants in other cultures and religions. It is valid for Manipuri culture too. Manipuris do venerate trees, but the way they do is beyond symbolism. Instead, it is fraternal and interactional. As the ancient text of chants called *Umanglon* or the ‘Dialectics of the Forest’ suggests, the human body is as much a cosmic composition as a tree or a stone or any other object interacting and coexisting in the same universe. Then, how come human beings claim themselves to be the masters of other organisms in the same cosmic setup! This argument may sound very idealistic and rustic. However, situating nature at the centre of every discourse is evident in the texts and rituals of the Manipuris.

Something to bear in mind is that all these ideas and interpretations point to a time when human needs and sustenance were dictated by the balance of rain, soil, and sun. So, people reckoned the sacrality of the sky and sanctity of the earth. In other words, the sky represents the father, and the earth represents the mother. It is basically what Western scholarship calls *primitive culture*. The way we treat nature and its place in our understanding of the world around us is different from the Western paradigms. Here, one may look into Levi Strauss' argument on nature from the perspectives of scientific and primitive thinking. He argues, “We are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature – I don’t need to elaborate this point, it is obvious enough – while, of course, myth is unsuccessful in giving the man more material

power over the environment. However, it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe. It is, of course, an illusion” (17). The Manipuri notion of nature is not about trying to understand it or be its master. It is about integrating oneself with nature, developing and entering into a secular relationship with nature.

Manipuris are essentially animists and ancestor worshippers. Interestingly, the *umanglaiharaoba* is celebrated annually to show appreciation for protecting the land and the people from calamities and other misgivings in the previous year and to seek blessings for the current year. Every *umanglai* is propitiated with the same spirit and fervour. *Lai Haraoba*, a religious and social activity, besides being the repository of different facets of Manipuri culture, is the ‘veritable source of a variety of songs and rituals’ (M. Singh 12-13). Many *puyas* (manuscript tradition of the Manipuris), including *Panthoipi Khongkul*, *Pudin*, *Leithak Leikharol*, and other such religious texts, give accounts of the origin of this annual fertility and prosperity festival. The religious festival is a ritual dance enacting the cycle of life (from foetus to birth, birth to habitation, copulation and procreation, cultivation and handloom, and handicraft) as envisaged in the manuscripts *Leithak Leikharol*, *Leishemlon*, *Pudin*, and other such texts. This ritual dance also depicts *leishem-nongsem* (creation of heaven and earth) by gods and goddesses. Meiteis believe that this ritual dance propitiates their gods and goddesses, and they believe that the divine forces will bless them in return. Hence, the festival is variously known as 'pleasing of gods', 'appeasement ceremony', and 'fertility rite'. Rituals associated with the *Lai Haraoba* are very long and conscientious, involving *maibas* and *maibis* (he-shamans and she-shamans), *pena*¹ performers, *langden*² players, and with the participation of many men and women in this enactment of the creation of human progression.

Apart from the *umanglais*, other *lais* are protecting the land and the people. It is to say that the term *lai* also has many connotations and interpretations. When a *lai* resides in a Manipuri house, the *lai* becomes *yumlai* (*yum*=household+*lai*). The term *lamlai* (*lam* = open space + *lai* = god/deity) is used when the presence of a *lai* is perceived at or on a certain geographical space/area like a meadow or an open space. The clan god/deity is known as *sageilai* which is again a conflation of *sagei* = clan + *lai* = god/deity. *Maikeingakpalai* (*maikei* = direction + *ngakpa* = to protect + *lai*) is a tutelary or guardian deity. Other *lais* are believed to have resided in hills, rivers, lakes, trees, and non-human objects in this cosmos. Above all these *lais*, there are other *lais* associated with the Meitei creation myth.

To make matters worse, Manipuris also use the term *lai* to denote evil spirits (malevolent) and good spirits (benevolent). The kings of Manipur were also referred to as *lai*. Entering into the nether world/afterlife is again referred to as *lαιοiba*, which means to become a *lai*. So while conceptualising a way to remember and pay homage to the nine great souls who assisted the first king of Manipur (previously known as Poirei) in the historical time, the rituals were initiated.

There are nine *umanglais*, who were the original *lais*. They are:

1. Nachi Laiying Thouhanba
2. Nachi Khaningthoubom Hanba
3. Chingpan Yoinaohanpa
4. Khoiyum Laiyingthou Khamlangba
5. Hongnem Luwang Ningthou Punshiba
6. Khoiyum Laiyingthou Chakhaba
7. Pithanglenyai
8. Khoiyum Laiyingthou Muwa Ningthou Atonba

9. Khoiyum Laiyingthou Thnagwai Mara Ningthou/Koubaren Ahanba³

They were the nine gallant deputies of Pakhangba, the first king. As stated above, there is a possibility that they were deified and worshipped as guardian spirits who would protect the land from enemies and natural calamities. Later on, more and more *lais* emerged. Manipuri *Umanglais* are said to be 364 in number. However, if we consider only the *khufamyabalais* (deities with symbolic representative masks)⁴ such as *Koubru*, *Loiyalakpa*, *Wangbren*, *Khorifaba*, *Soraren*, and *Nongshaba*, there are not more than 150 *lais*. These *lais* must belong to a *laichat* (ways in which the rites and rituals involved must be identified). Any *Umanglai* must adhere to the intricate norms laid down under one *laichat* in the propitiating act, which lasts several days. This categorisation of *lais* is strictly for the festival called *laiharaoba*. But, when we say 364 *lais*, we do not mean only 364 *lais*. The first book on *Lai Haraobaby* Ngariyanbam Kulachandra Singh and published in 1963 lists 421 *Umanglais* in Manipur. In a survey conducted by Umanglai Kanba Lup (UKAL) in the year 2016, they recorded some 700 *umanglais* in Manipur.

Umanglais are classified broadly into five groups:

1. Deities Associated with the Creation Myth: Pakhangba, Marjing, Koubru, etc.
2. Ancestral Deities: Poireiton, Khamlangba, Puthiba, etc.
3. Clan and Domestic Deities: Laishram Ereima, Usham Soraren, Tongbram Lairembi, Thongam Thongnangningthou, Soibol Lairema, Hijam Lairema, etc.
4. Royal family members who became deities: Tabung Ningthou, Naothing khong, Khagemba, Mungyamba, Khubomba, etc.
5. Desanskritised Hindu Gods: Ramji Ningthou (of Thinunggei), Senkudeva (of Yumnam Huidrom), and Kalika

6. Deified individuals who met violent death: Nonggabi, Tarung Lairembi, Yumjao Lairembi, Ereima, etc.⁵

This classification is based on the origin of the deities. There is another classification of *lais* based on the presence or absence of the *Lai Haraoba* festival. They are:

1. Appeasing *Lais*: *Umanglais* with the appeasing festival called *Lai Haraoba*
2. Non Appeasing *Lais*: *Umanglais* without the appeasing festival: Samurou Lakpa Pakhangba, Meijrao Lakpa, Kakmayai Lai, Purik Puraba, Wangbren of Wanggoi, Nongdon Lairembi (was there at Wangkhei), Takyen Lairembi, Tarung Lairembi of Langgol.

It clearly shows that not every *lai* is propitiated or appeased. One of the profane and sacred aspects of *laiharaoba* is that a *lai* must be accompanied by his or her consort/wife/husband to be appeased once a year during summer (June – July). For this and other reasons, *laiharaoba* is seen as a fertility rite where the sacred and profane merge and gestures, movements, and language become incredibly suggestive. That said, the purpose of *laiharaoba* is to seek blessings from the spirits concerned for death and disease-free village (for populous villages), a bountiful harvest, and long life for the king and the citizens of the land. Every *umanglai* (ancestral/tutelary deity) has a *laipung* (the sacred spot where the *deities* reside) surrounded by indigenous trees of various kinds. Practically, such a *laipung* is a miniature forest. But, sadly, the natural image of an *umanglai* is disappearing rapidly as mandaps or roofed structures which Eliade calls ‘earthly reproduction of the transcendental model’ (58) have replaced natural abodes and sacred grounds. The story emerging from such a shift is that of a man’s relation *vis-à-vis* nature reduced to a mere mental image from some distant past

suppressed by immediate modern necessities such as comfort, crowd control, lighting, sound management, and broadcast/live streaming.

Mircea Eliade argues that ‘nature is never only “natural” because the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness’. It is not simply a sacrality *communicated* by gods, as is the case, for example, with a place or an object consecrated by the divine presence. The gods did more; “*they manifested the different sacred modalities in the very structure of the world and of the cosmic phenomena*” (116). But, the tradition of considering nature as a constituent element that makes up the universe was challenged by the new religions which focused on God-heads and Goddess-heads. It is to say that the proselytising efforts of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity at various stages impacted the local belief system. Interestingly, British part-time anthropologists who worked on the various facets of Manipuri life in the colonial period (1891-1947) made many observations on the society, polity, economy, religion, literature, and folklore of the kingdom. J. Shakespeare's observation is fascinating. He noted:

Manipur figures as a Hindu state in the list of the Feudatory states of India, and Hinduism is the State religion, but when we have said this, we have by no means stated the whole case, for alongside Hinduism we have the worship of the *Umanglais* or Forest gods and various other distinctly non-Hindu cults, which are practised by good Hindus as well as by those who have not yet abandoned the faith of their forefathers. Even the best Hindus in Manipur, except perhaps a few of the holiest Brahmins, cannot be said to have abandoned the ancient faith; instead, they accepted the Hindu Pantheon in addition to the old gods of their own country (419).

Manipuris never abandoned their faith despite many proselytising efforts over the centuries. Various sects of the Hindu faith came and proselytised Manipuris, but none could make them discard *umanglais* and Sanamahi worship. In other words, the process of Sanskritization/Aryanisation/Hinduisation/‘Hindu method of tribal absorption’ of Manipuris was never accomplished. Hence, there flourish two parallel faiths in Manipur. This 'dual faith' trend, accumulated through time, has had an adverse effect on the way a Manipuri communicates with the 'higher being'. Shakespeare further observed:

Krishna and the other Hindu gods are served by Brahmans, while the local gods have their priests and priestesses, known as *maibas* and *maibis*. The Raja is the recognised head of both religions. As a Hindu, the Manipuri calls in the Brahman on occasions of births, marriages, and deaths and observes the Hindu festivals, but in sickness, he consults the *maiba*, and he worships the gods of the hills and rivers of his country as his forefathers did before him (411).

The dual/parallel religion system has been an existing trend since the 18th century in the valley of Manipur among the Meitei tribe.⁶ The following considerations can be construed from this existing trend. First, Hinduism was a state-sponsored/imposed religion. Second, *Sanamahi*, *umanglai*, *sageilai*, and *yumlai* worship are religious practices by choice. And, third, there emanated a symbiosis of two religions in which a Manipuri adopts Hinduism but retains the old rituals. In such an amalgamated religious environment, it is pretty evident that the superimposition of the symbols of Manipuri faith by the symbols of other religions is bound to come about. The changing face of *Umanglais* and their vestiges can be better understood, by keeping two things in mind; the marriage of the two cultures (especially Manipuri and Hindu), and the predominantly consumerist culture of modern times.

Rituals unify groups, organise societies, organise knowledge systems, build a ‘shared emotional focus’ (Collins 112), legitimise power structures, and open up channels for symbolic communication with the spirits. It has always been the human effort to realise a connection or establish communication with the higher spirits in some concrete and verifiable acts/performances.

For Manipuris, a large number of ritual performances are centred on nature. Thus, nature got integrated into their faith system, discourses, and arts. Their prayers are offered to nature and many of its marvels. They sing for hills, rivers, trees, birds, flowers, and other non-human elements in their environment. They pray to the forces of nature for the right amount of rain, cool and calm wind, and enough sunshine to dry crops, meat, and fish. They understand the importance of seasons, so songs and dances are prepared to welcome them. They regard directions as having enormous strength to protect and shield them from epidemics and natural calamities, so their appeasements are done with appropriate rituals. They remember how they lived with nature in their ancestral environment, so they offer to the forces of nature their produce. They believe in the energy of the sky and the energy of the earth. From their interaction with nature, they form their knowledge systems, rules, and taboos. Their ethos and worldviews developed and thus got expanded. Songs and dances performed in the green fields and jungles started finding an audience at courts and enclosures. These interactions in the form of performances became the cultural expressions and heritage of Manipuris.

In *laiharaoba*, one of the most essential components is the *umang* or the grove. This natural abode (synonymously used here as ‘sacred grove’) in the context of Manipur is described as:

A sacred grove is different from other kinds of greenery for the reason that it is dedicated to a specific deity has its philosophical connotations, and indeed exhibits nature as 'sanctified'. A sacred grove in Manipur is not just a stand of trees in a religious context but also one that sanctifies the primal relationship between man and nature: man's search for his origins, his endeavours to multiply, his fight for sustenance, what he is to other members of his society, and his everyday activities (K.P. Singh 7).

One may call it 'tribal custom', but no Manipuri dares to cut a tree from any natural abode for fear of the *lai*'s rage. Or, any old tree from any jungle, for that matter. Manipuris believe that the trees have souls, and one must make offerings to the tree itself if one feels that it is necessary to cut it. The finest example is found in the text of *Hiching Hilao*.⁷ This long narrative poem has these lines:

At the dell of the hill
 They have seen the majestic tree.
 The earth that bears the regal tree
 Has been cleared and wiped clean by the Luwangs
 Chosen ripened fruits, and
 Freshly plucked flowers,
 Shiny silver that personifies the father
 Red gold from the earth that embodies the mother, and
 Placed on the *changbi la*⁸ are eggs on the whitest rice
 For the offerings to be made to the tree.

[author's translation]

Hiching Hilao, which is an integral song sung in *Lai Haraoba* is a lament of Irok Laicham Chanu, the mother of trees, for her departing son (*Uningthou*). The cry of the mother tree reverberates the hillock throughout the night. She laments that her mighty son would be cut the next day and dragged down the cleft to make the king's *Hiyang Hiren* (literally chief of boats and also royal boat). This ritual song encourages an egalitarian attitude on the part of Manipuris towards other members of the ecosphere. Manipuris believe that other members of the ecosphere have their intrinsic values. Hence, they worship trees, rivers, hills, and groves, among others, in their primal religion. The offerings made include rice, eggs, flower, fruits, pieces of silver, and gold. A *maiba* must make the offerings by chanting to the tree for forgiveness – a form of communication between the living and non-living forms. Nungbal Wangmit Khutheiba and Luwang Wang Manao Silheiba, who are entrusted to cut the tree by Luwang Ningthou Punsiba to make his *Hiyang Hiren*, first clear the ground around the tree and make the offerings. J. C. Higgins also recorded such an offering made to the tree in 1930:

Before the trees (u ningthou) for the Maharaja's new racing boats are cut, four maibas will go and do puja by the trees. The goddess placated will be IROK LAIJA LEIMA, the mother of trees. A clearing will be made around the tree, various offerings will be made, and a white male buffalo, a white male goat, and a red cock will be released (19).

Manipuris have followed a long tradition of venerating plants and trees. They believe that trees deserve respect and adoration. There are many examples of ancient Manipuri (pre-Vaishnavite period) authors attributing human feelings to the objects of nature, such as trees, rivers, plants, mountains, etc. It was their habit of sharing happiness and sorrow with them, becoming one with them. They treated natural objects as one of their family members. There are *puyas* written on flowers (*Leirol*), on forests (*Umanglon*), and the age-old tradition of revering

plants and trees in chants and rituals.⁹ The human approach to objects of nature was an essential constituent in early Manipuri literature. This supposedly strange ritual is a show of respect for a fellow organism. It is an act of employing a method to exploit the idea of nature as a vital force, both in writing and oral/performance literature.

The values and purposes accorded to nature stem from Manipuri's understanding of the 'order of nature' and the possible catastrophes if that order is disrupted. Such a belief system is called animism and does not conform to the ideas and ideals of the world's established (doctrinal) religions. There is a 'green ideology' in this pagan belief. In a world threatened by ecological disasters, one must introspect and see if there is anything heathen about protecting plants and trees and other natural objects by venerating them and protecting them? The ecologically literate Manipuris understood the umbilical cord attaching the human forms to non-human forms in an ecosystem. Realising and celebrating the inborn affinity between human and non-human forms cannot be viewed as a tribal culture. In the context of the present ecological crisis, this ancient knowledge and tradition of safeguarding natural abodes/sacred groves are practices communities can adopt and follow.

Citing Bhogeshwar, Dr N. Pramodini writes, "The reference to tree cult can be noted from the text *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* that on the instruction of Luwang guru Naothingkhong performed the ritual function of trees (35). Culture is an outgrowth of human beings' learning and adapting to their ancestral environment. The story of human development/progress is a story told retrospectively on how human beings have adapted to the immediate environment from time to time. In a world which practices a predominantly materialist consumer culture, one must introspect one's relationship with nature as a means to understand one's identity, choices, lifestyle, and, above all, the self. The changing times have

produced an obliterated culture, however postmodern our thinking is, giving us 'representations' instead of the 'real' ones. Distortion and elimination of cultural/historical images/artefacts have resulted in replacing the 'real' ones with the 'representational' images. The loss of *umang* (natural abode/sacred grove) from the *laipung* (sacred spot/ground) and the changing face of *Umanglai Haraoba* can be seen as such a disruption. This elimination of cultural codes enshrined in the very fabric of the Manipuri worldview will disrupt an entire cultural entity's socio-cultural and environmental history. Sadly, we are erasing and distorting the rich ancestral tradition of safeguarding nature. We may have an end number of interpretations of nature; idealist, metaphysical, religious, etc. However, in a world where god is monotheistic and absolute nature is, as Raymond Williams puts it, 'His minister and deputy' (285). Our attitude towards nature is shaped by our religious orientations and cultures, which have emerged as a by-product of that faith system.

Our greed and overt consumerism have alienated us from the biological fundamentals of our existence; we live in artificial environments that disconnect us from ecological realities. These age-old cultural and religious practices/institutions are obscured by new faiths and their so-called 'superior' values and ideals. However, this ancient culture has been protecting our ecology for many centuries despite the demands of development.

Endnotes:

1. A traditional Manipuri stringed instrument
2. Manipuri drum
3. From Wayenbam Lukhoi, Pandit Yaima, Pandit Loishang

4. When a group from within a clan or a village migrates to a new place, such symbolic masks of the mythic ancestral deities are carried along and worshipped in the same manner as propitiated in the place of origin.
5. Different scholars classify *Umanglais* under various categories and groups.
6. The spread of Hinduism began in the 15th century in Manipur by Migrant Hindus, but the consolidation of the Vaishnavite school of Hinduism happened during the reign of Garibniwaz (1709-1748), and the king adopted Vaisnavism as a state religion.
7. *Hijan Hirao* is a lament of a 'mother tree' for her 'son tree' which/who is to be felled down the next day. This lament is a ritual song sung on the concluding day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival, which is observed throughout the valley of Manipur.
8. A kind of plantain leaf used at religious ceremonies and social occasions is believed to have been brought by Poireiton.
9. These chants and ritual songs were not written down, and they are only performed by *maibas* (high priests).

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