CHAPTER V

TRADITIONAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND CULTURE OF THANG-TA
(I)

We may now discuss the traditional code of conduct as well as some other aspects of the culture of Thang-Ta that have made their imprints indelible. Combating an enemy was not simply an event where physical prowess was counted for as a singular means. A world of moral codes of conduct all bound to a belief system was also involved on the part of the warrior and the warrior had to strictly follow the laws set by the tradition. Any breach of traditional laws could bring harmful aftermath to the warrior or to his near and dear ones, or to the entire community. Wild animals were equally considered as enemies. Saturol Lanturol, Sapharol Lanpharol an ancient manuscript elaborates on the rules and laws a warrior had to follow when he is in a combative situation. Valiant heroes and warriors of the past who had successfully fought many battles and captured ferocious wild animals were strict disciplinarians who followed the traditional laws and codes of conduct without any breach. Capturing or killing of animals or foes
had to be carried out without causing any breach to the laws and codes of conduct set by the tradition. *Saturol Lanturol Sapharol Lanpharol* makes mention of another interesting example. According to this source-book, if a foe happens to shed tears in his eyes it is called *'Lal-Nungshi'*. In this case prayers should be offered to by invoking related spirits as a form of giving atonement to the soul of foe being killed. If this is not done, it is believed, a very undesirable misfortune or a tragedy could be fallen to the family of the victor.

Another ancient book *Takhel Ngamba* details on the kind of foes who should not be killed although fallen in the hands of the victor. It records that a foe who have fled from the battlefield or who have disarmed himself should not be killed. An opponent who have taken refuge of the top of a tree or who have dipped and taken refuge under water shall not be killed. Further a foe who pleads biting a handful of grass or one who plead, with folded hands shall not be killed. Again, one who is stripped of his clothes or one who is apparently scared of confrontation shall not be killed.

The act of an animal or a foe gnawing the lower lip or gnashing while falling is termed *‘Samailong Lanmeilong’*. If a victim happens to die with this kind of expression it is certainly taken for an ominous sign indicating that the victor or some of his
near and dear ones could suffer from epilepsy, paralysis, or insanity. So a proper ritual of appeasing the departed soul should be done. If an animal or foe crackles, roars or shouts while being killed is called ‘Sapharol Lanpharol’. For this case also proper ritual offering should be done in the name of the dead. If this is not done, it is believed, the killer or some of his near and dear ones shall suffer from epilepsy, loss of limbs or blindness. Falling of an animal or a foe quietly in peace is termed as ‘Lanpouthan’. Offering of any kind is not necessary. Instead, obtaining of royal honour and riches like golden bangles, royal garments and flags etc. are foretold and these opportunities could be expected for generations of descendants to come. Again, if a victim happens to fall on the ground lying on his back facing the sky or reclining on the left or right side of his body then it is termed as ‘Athok-Achong’. A quick subsidence of the fight is evident. If an animal or a foe falls with its/his legs towards one it is called ‘Sajit-Lanchenba’. It is a sign telling that the scuffle is over. In this case one should pay offerings and sing ‘Ougri’. If a warrior abides by the codes of conduct one shall be deemed conversant with the codes of the battle.

Now we shall discuss the capturing of wild animal or a foe alive which is called ‘Sapharol Lanpharol’. The act of an animal or a foe covering its/his face leaving the body exposed and hiding
its face in the bush is called 'Shaming-kang Lanming-kang'. Such a foe or animal does not deserved to be captured. The act of capturing an animal or a foe when both are fully armed and rush towards each other is termed as 'Sachin-tan Lanchin-tan'.

Capturing of an animal or a foe by pretending of inflicting no harm to the captor is called 'Shamang Lammang'. A warrior is not expected of capturing such an animal or foe because it could bring misfortune to himself or to his near and dear ones. If a victim happens to urinate or defecate uncontrollably while combating or while being captured it is called 'Shaphahou - lanphahou'. It is a good sign for the warrior foretelling the possibility of having numbers of sons and of acquiring a healthy amount of wealth and royal honours. However, if the victim happens to be with empty stomach while capturing it is called 'Shatok-lantok'. It foretells loss of wealth and misfortune which could befall to the warrior's near and dear ones. Capturing of birds like Nonggoubi (pied - crested cuckoo), Wakambong (yellow), Mongba (wren), Pebet, Langmei (hornbill), etc. is called 'Saphalom lanphalon'. It foretells doom and destruction to the person and his near and dear ones. It is forbidden to capture, rebuke or thrash an animal or a foe that approaches with grass in their mouth. If such an animal or foe is captured or killed the captor will suffer from
leprosy. Such kind of breach of code of conduct is called 'Shaset-Lanset'.

A warrior well-versed in the art of Thang-Ta is one who is equally well versed in all the codes of conduct set by the tradition. He has to master the contextual aspects in which the art of Thang-Ta situates. Because the art of Thang-Ta is meaningful when it is supported by the context. A warrior has to master the codes of conduct and has to assert himself in maintaining it without any breach. However, to err is human and there is every possibility of a warrior making a breach out of oversight. In this case also the tradition has prescribed another rite as healer. The belief is that if this rite is performed the breach in the codes of conduct would be patched up and any unfortunate outcome like leprosy, insanity, loss of limbs cannot be fallen to the one who has made the breach. This kind of rite serving as a healer is called 'Sachak Lan-Chak Thakpa' or 'Enbun Huiroi Chanba'.

The rite of Lanchak-Thakpa is performed in front of the house beneath the verandah in the northeastern corner. This is an area which has got an immense ritual significance and this area is called 'Nak-tha' in Meitei language. At this place some amount of rice is
cooked and an item of curry is prepared. The person who is performing the rite and for whom a helping hand from the spiritual world is sought should put on a costume that is black. This costume is to be worn in a style called ‘Khaon’. He should be holding the same Thang with which he had killed the foe or he should be holding at least one Thang in representation of one original. The cooked rice is made into a ball. The person concerned would be standing with his lips apart and facing the east. He would invoke the spirits of the dead and feed them. He would then pull out the prepared meal in between his legs. He would be chanting a hymn with the following words, ‘Lanhing-tok-kou-e, Tak-khro-chatlo’ and draw four lateral lines on the ground representing alternate walls of spirits and human being starting from the farthest corner and ending closest to the self. He will draw three more lines starting from near his position. These three walls represent spirit first, next human and next spirits respectively. Then he will sing a specific song ‘Sapha Lanpha Eshei’. The following is an excerpt from the song.

\begin{verbatim}
Turel-lai-maru achouba
Lan-phare lan-ture-kanano ?
Ei-nida Nongmai-ching-nida
............... etc.
\end{verbatim}
"Oh the great source of the father, the grandfather
Someone has been captured
Some one has been defeated
It is one, the Nongmaichig Hill"

If some people suffer from epilepsy, insanity or any other kind of illness mentioned above and if the same people believe that they are suffering as their forefathers had not done such kind of a ritual, then they have another kind of invocation suitably prescribed for them to appease the spirits of the deceased. Such a ritual is not organised at home. It is organised far away from the organiser's residential area. It is organised on the graveyard of a person who died on a Saturday.

In this case also rice and curry are prepared at the 'Nak-tha' and seven dishes are prepared on seven small pieces of plantain leaf. Seven small flags or pennants of different colours, including a white and black are also included as compulsory items for the ritual. Beside these items seven lamps made of wax and another seven Tang-gas \(^7\) with fruits and seven areca-nuts and betel leaves are also compulsorily included. The organiser of the ritual would place all these items on a Dhan-shifter which is locally known as 'Yangkok'. The organiser is dressed on a black 'kha-on'
seven of you leave this world after feasting on these meals. Had for 'Khamnung and Shawa'\textsuperscript{8}. May you spirits get mingled with the primordial spirits.

The victorious ancestor should also be invoked. Then the organiser should draw four lateral lines with sword representing alternate walls of spirits and human beings ending towards self, should cross the above four lateral lines. As mentioned before the rite is performed at the grave of someone who died on a Saturday. However, the graveyard where the rite is organised should be preferably somewhere at the boundary of the village. After completion of the rite the man should come back from the grave after saying 'Saming-kang, Lanning-kang, Sapon-than, Lan-pon-than may you remain here'.

(II)

\textit{Leichillon}\textsuperscript{9} (reading of cloud) is an art of reading various signs given by the continuously changing forms of cloud in the sky. Similar to sapharol-lanpharol the art of Leichillon forms a major part of the martial culture revolving round the art of \textit{Thang-Ta}. A warrior trained in \textit{Thang-Ta} had to be equally well-versed in the art of leichillon. He should be able to read various signs given
same as mentioned above and he is equipped with a shield, a spear and a sword. He then takes out the *Yangkok* containing the ritual items and moves through the Nak-tha while moving through the *Nak-tha* he will summon the spirits of the deceased for whom the rite is organised. He summons the spirits by chanting a specific hymn prescribed for this. Literal meaning of the hymn follows:

Come you spirits of my father’s or forefathers’ who had gone to heavenly abode kills, perished while hunting or combating in the fields of battle.

You are now feasted.

On reaching the graveyard he will place the *‘Yangkok’* and lay out the ritual items he has brought on the grave. Earlier we have mentioned that this is a graveyard of a person who died on Saturday. After placing the items on the ground of the grave he will chant a hymns that literally means as follows:

Thou presiding deity of today breeds today and renders it dead. These are entrusted to thee, the spirits of the victims of my father or forefathers.

The hymn furthers continues as -

Ye, kills of my father or forefathers - Chaoba, Muba, Hongba, Kala, Atomba, Tollen, Tonjao all
by the clouds and he should be able to make decisions accordingly for his own advantage. Following is an excerpt telling us on Leichillon in a shortest but in most precise and convincing way.

Clouds sailing high above the skies are of seven colours. There are signs indicated by these soaring clouds. Oh!

Ye human learn the ways of wisdom. Learn to read the elements. The clouds foretell something that could be happening as one sets out for the battle. The same holds true for day-to-day events one is facing everyday and for the state as a whole.

There are various meanings cloud could be communicating to us through its different shapes.

1. If clouds assume the form of a lion facing the enemy, it is for sure that the battle is won. So, follow the onslaught of the lion.

2. If the cloud faces the enemy taking the form of a python head for an all out attack to scatter the enemy forces. This is a definite indication of victory and winning the day.
3. When clouds that look like elephants, pythons and lions are noticed with broken necks and visage, the battle is confounding. It is going to be a hard engagement. Your army loses if these forms turn towards your host. The army sets scattered. If the clouds of the enemy forces clash with ours the side of the winner cloud will be victorious.

4. If the cloud soars upright in the form of a serpent it foretells a prolonged conflict extending across the whole length of the current year. So one is supposed to plan the battle carefully.

5. If apparition of clouds in the shapes of fish do appear in the sky it indicates that your army fights like true heroes. It is a good sign.

6. If the cloud forms the shape of a bull as the time of the army setting out for the battle it foretells lose of men and scattering of the army. It is certainly a bad sign.

7. If the clouds look like burrows it indicates a heavy loss of lives and defeat in the battle.

8. If the clouds assume the form of a peacock, it indicate prosperity. Enemy will pay tributes.
9. If apparitions of cloud in the form of lion or ranges of mountain it tells that the war is going to be an ingenuous engagement between two opposing groups and the one which is persistent will come out as a victor.

10. If the clouds flying overhead the enemy camp take the forms of human beings with amputated limbs or figures as if abandoning of weapons then these are signs of early victory. So, rush in for the attack.

11. If the soaring clouds look like battle gears then avoid the field. Your own army turns tail.

12. If the clouds form multitude of birds and beasts or otherwise, or batter formations it indicates trouble and disunion among the soldiers. The state also will suffer.

13. If the clouds above the enemy clash with those above the native forces and if the enemy wins it is a bad sign which is ominous. The side that chase the other will certainly win the battle.

A warrior or a master in the combative art of Thang-Ta was one who should be able to foresee the unseen future. For this he had to master the art of Leichillon. With the help of the ancient
wisdom elicited from this art of leichillon a warrior had to plan or
manoeuvre his combative skills. So, to obtain favour from the
supernatural forces believed to be in control of our fate and the
world the ancient warriors had to invoke the primordial beings who
gave birth to clouds. He had to chant specific Mantras before he set
about reading the clouds.

Meiteis considered tiger to be the wildest of the wild animals and killing or capturing of a tiger was considered to be a
heroic achievement. One who could courageously do it was honoured with prizes most precious. Keifaron is an ancient
manuscript, chronicling hundreds of instances of killing or capturing of tiger. It records most of the eventful occasions which are classic
and historical. Like the royal chronicles Cheitharol Kumbaba,
Chada Laihui and Ningthourol Lambuba this manuscript, Keifaron
was not a work done by a single author. The present manuscript is
rather a continuation of an already existing serial of writing called
Keifaron. Many eventful occasions of capturing tigers by
distinguished heroes and kings are added from time to time. To be
able to capture a tiger was a heroic deed in itself and the person who
accomplished such a task was befittingly called a hero and such a
hero is honoured by recording the events as a part of the history in
Keifaron
Wherever a tiger is reported to have sighted the people around are informed of the presence of the wild animal through a traditional form of sending message called 'Meihum Morok Chenba'.\textsuperscript{11} Except for women and children all menfolk will gather around the appointed place where the tiger is supposed to be present. They are armed with every sort of possible weapon. But \textit{Lambu-Ta} a kind of spear is best for this kind of event. \textit{Lambu-Ta} is specifically meant for catching and capturing of wild animals and it was part of the tradition for every man to master in its use for confronting wild animals. Apart from \textit{Lambu-Ta} nets of some sort were also used in catching a tiger.

A man who could capture a tiger was richly rewarded by the King. If a tiger was overpowered it was considered the bravest feat of all hunting sports. There were different kinds of awards given for his show of courage. The award for capturing of an animal was a red flag, whereas the award for winning a battle was a white flag.

\textit{Keifaron} records the event of capturing tiger as early as the third century A.D. with a report of the king \textit{Yaimongba} (1150-1163) capturing a tiger at \textit{Leikoi Ching}.\textsuperscript{12} It could be observed that successive writers have included different eventful occasions of
capturing or killing a tiger and this practice of historically recording the events has continued till 1886-1890 the period Meidingu Chinglen Lanthaba or Maharaja Surchandra. This manuscript written in archaic Meitei language explains in detail when and where the heroes captured tigers. In celebration of their victories that manuscript also clearly states accounts of the ancestral origin and clans of the maternal side of the brave heroes. A person ignorant of ancient Meitei language and script would find it impossible to have access into the world of meaning underlying in the manuscript.

(III)

*Laiharouba* is another very important area of the Manipuri culture, in which the art of *Thang-Ta* has established a close relationship and one will find at very difficult to ignore this area of study. Since very early times in the cultural history of *Manipur, Laiharaoba* has been serving as the right platform for the players or artistes of *Thang-Ta* showing their skill in public. This is not simply for the public or the audience alone. But, a *Thang-Ta* performance done as a part of the *Laiharaoba* festival is also an offering organised to appease the presiding deities. Apart from this aspect of relationship between *Thang-Ta* and *Laiharaoba* we find another role of *Thang-Ta* in *Laiharaoba* which is of great ritual significance. Apart from its utility value which is functional *Thang-
Ta is also serving as a very important ritual item defending the community from evil spirits or from the worst possible forms of happenings like epidemic and other natural calamities. So Thang-Ta has got a great ritual significance and purpose apart from its utility values we find specifically in the context of war.

*Laiharaoba* has its origin in the tradition of ancestor worship followed by the Meiteis. This community festival gives us some ideas of the way in which the primitive Meiteis struggled for a collective life of the community against the odds of nature. It is performed with a firm belief that they could ensure a normal social life by continuously maintaining a process of productive relationship between man and nature, man and supernatural forces and among various dimensions of time in the life of the community.

Basically a fertility rite through which the primitive Meiteis sought the favour of local Gods and Goddesses to promote biological pro creativity in the community. They thought that a successful observance of this ritual could lead to fertility in the life of man, animals and to a good harvest. They further believed that the ritual could bring about a healthy communal life free from disease, epidemics and atrocities of war and wild animals.
Literally Laiharaoba means 'Pleasing of the God'. The word Lai stands for God and the word Haraoba means pleasing. But, to interpret Laiharaoba as 'Pleasing of the God' as J. Shakespear has done in his article 'The Religion of Manipur'\textsuperscript{14} is too literal and it fails to represent the whole world of the festival and the philosophy behind it. It is true that during the ritual performance of Laiharaoba the Lais are called up either from the water or from the sky and the people of the community please the Lais by dining, dancing, chanting and singing. T.C. Hudson also express almost the same opinion. He, however, prefers Laiharaoba to mean 'Rejoicing of the Gods'.\textsuperscript{15} A local Manipuri scholar Mr.E.Nilakanta frames his words in a different way. But the meaning goes almost similar to the meanings expressed above. He calls it 'Merry-making of the Gods and Goddesses'.\textsuperscript{16}

There is another interpretation of Laiharaoba. It takes the concept of Laiharaoba back to the mythological origin. Most of the local scholars who take part in Laiharaoba as one of the ritual functionaries share this view. The point they make is that Haraoba is a corrupt derivation of the word Hoi-Laoba and it should be Lai-Hoi-Laoba\textsuperscript{17} instead of Laiharaoba. Lai-Hoi-Laoba literally means shouting of Hoi by Lai. According to the myth of creation of the
Meiteis God *Asiba* created the earth in accordance with instruction of his almighty father *Atiya Sidaba*. After creation he was confused as to what should be the next step. Understanding his son's bewilderment the supreme father opened his mouth widely and showed the whole world of living beings who were supposed to populate the earth. God Asiba (also known as *Sanamahi*) was happy to get the hint from his father and called out the living beings shouting *Hoi*. So, Pundits belonging to this school of interpretation believe that *Laiharaoba* is derived from *Lai-Hoi-Laoba* and that it is a ritual performance based on the myth of creation popular among the Meiteis.

There are at least 364 (three hundred and sixty four) shrines of *Lais* scattered all over the valley and established in separate sanctuaries preserved for each of them. Generally it is a small patch of land with a temple built in an area surrounded by a cluster of trees. It is usually in area in front of the temple that the festival of *Laiharaoba* is organised annually. *Lai* thus honoured or appeased with *Laiharaoba* festival are mostly are ancestors and ancestresses deified later by the people. Meiteis do not organised *Laiharaoba* for each and every deified ancestor or ancestress. But some who were really powerful and significant in the life of a
particular *Yek* (clan) or *Sagei* (lineage) are honoured by organising *Laiharaoba* in their honour.

Local scholar divide *Laiharaoba* into four different groups. They are 1. *Kanglei Haraoba*, 2. *Moirang Haraoba*, 3. *Chakpa Haraoba* and 4. *Kakching Haraoba*. Although some differences are there in performances the philosophy underlying the performance are all similar and sections like *Ikouba*, *Laipou* and *Lairoi* which maintain a structure of continuity are there all through the four different groups of *Laiharaoba*. On the other hand *Laiharaoba* could be organised in a simplified form and it could be completed in one day. It is organised at the family level in honour of the *Sagei Lai* or clan deities. This kind of shortened form of *Laiharaoba* is generally called *Laichaklon Katpa*. So *Laiharaoba* performances which are organised in a big scale are those which are done for all Yek or larger clan groups. Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, in their book say that the Lai Haraoba is nothing but to please Gods. In fact *Laiharaoba* is a festival organised by the human beings to please the Gods and Goddesses who once populated the earth during the time of creation.  

*Ikouba* is the first ritual segment performed on the very beginning day of *Laiharaoba*. Its main function is to call up the soul
of the Lai from the water and infuse it to the iconic brass masks installed in the temple. In the afternoon of the beginning day of Laiharaoba a procession of participants divided into two files will leave the shrine or Laibung and proceed to a spot by a river or a pond selected for the purpose. The leader of the procession is an elderly woman having a good background by way of a proper marriage and the birth of a son as her first child. She carries on her head an earthen pitcher called Ishaifu. She is followed by two young men carrying swords (Thang) and shields in their hand as a mark of giving protection and repelling evil forces. They are followed by two maidens carrying brass-plates called Shemkha. They are again followed by two other maidens one carrying a fan and the other carrying a ceremonial brass container called Koushel. They are followed by two male members of the clan called Pibas\(^{19}\) carrying earthen pots hanging down from their necks with the help of white clothes. These pots are called Ishaifu. These pots are used for the purpose of carrying the spirits of the deities to be called up from the water. The Pibas are followed by two male members carrying big ceremonial umbrellas called Pe, and by two married women carrying a mat made of reeds and a rice-pounding pestle of wood. They are followed by a large number of people belonging to the community.
The most important ritual they perform on reaching the waterside is called up the spirits of the Lais from the water. For this the Maibi or priestess will take the two Ishaifus from the two clan-Pibas and dance seeking blessings from four guardian deities Thangjing, Koubru, Wangbren and Marjing. After this she gives back the two Ishaifu to the Pibas. She will unwind the thread contained in the two Ishaifus. She will hold the two ends in her right hand and chop it in the water. Meanwhile she will be ringing a handbell in her left hand. The belief is that the spirits of the Lais come up into the pitcher through the two threads. After this main ritual the procession comes back to the shrine and on arriving at the shrine the Maibi will unwind the threads again and the two ends of the thread will touch the navel portion of each of the two brass masks. This is a process of infusing the devices in the shrine with the spirit of the deities. Once the Ikouba is performed the shrine is now governed by a strict code of ritual laws. It is believed that all the principal Gods and Goddesses, the two presiding deities including various evil spirits have all come from their nether world and now they are normatively present in the shrine to enjoy the festival human beings are organising.

From the next day onwards the same procession which took out the Ikouba will perform another ritual performance called
Laipou. Laipou is performed every day. Many learned scholars who were well informed of the intricacies of Laiharaoba contented that nine variations of Laipou were performed in the early days\textsuperscript{20}. However these are no longer practised. Instead of the nine variations we find that only five variations were normally performed from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century onwards. These five variations became the prime source of inspiration from King Bhagyachandra in creating the five Bhangis for Raas Lila. These five Bhangis still remained as the most important sequence of attraction in Raas Lila. The five variation of Laipou which gave rise for creating five Bhangis are the following: (i) Khunthok (ii) Khunung Haraoba (iii) Kanglei Haraoba (iv) Chakpa Haraoba and (v) Moirang Haraoba. Through this performance of Laipou the community is re-enacting the creation myth on how this world came into being and on how the living beings came to populate the earth. It also re-enacts in detail the building up a human being in the mother's womb limb after limb.

The final day of Laiharaoba is called Lairoi. Same as before Laipou is performed also on this day But few episodic performances are added on this day of Lairoi. The main ritual of this day is the sending up of the Lais to their nether world. Maibies perform this ritual with Maiba (priest) and Penakhongba (Pena player) helping her. She sings here a song called Nongkarol.
Meiteis always wish for a successful observance of *Laiharaoba*. They try every possible means not to commit any kind of breach of the ritual laws. It is here that *Thang* (sword) plays a very important role. *Maibies* appease evil spirits by giving proper offerings to them so that they do not harm the *Laiharaoba*. It is called *Saroikhangba*. Apart from appeasing it is also a threat. Because during this ritual of Saroikhangba *Maibies* always accompany a *Thang* threatening the evils. More than this *Maibies* will set fire some dry fodder in all four corners of the performance area and by the side of that fire they perform a dance holding two swords in her hand. It is called *Thang Jagoi*. By performing this the *Maibi* is driving out the evil spirits from the precincts of the *Laiharaoba*.

People use to offer many secular performance items as a matter of appeasing the Gods and Goddesses. Dances, skits, dance-drama etc. are performed. And, here right from the early times it has became almost a customary for the artists of *Thang-Ta* to perform their own items in front of the deities and the audience gathered at the shrine. *Laiharaoba* provided fertile ground for the people, the *Thang-Ta* artists in particular to nurture and carry further this art of *Thang-Ta*. 
(IV)

Beside Laiharaoba many other performance traditions such as *Nata Sankirtana*, *Raas Lila*, *Poong-cholom* (movement with drum), *Pala-cholom* (movement with symbol) etc. have a very close relationship with *Thang-Ta*\(^2\). This is perhaps because these art forms which came to be evolved in later part of the history of the Meitei culture founded on the tradition of *Thang-Ta* and these were earlier a part of the cultural life of Meiteis. The dance movements, the rhythms, the gestures all seem to have been prompted by the intricacies of *Thang-Ta*. So, it is not difficult for a *Bhakta* or a *Nata* performing *Nata Sankritana* to perform *Thang-Ta*. The contexts are different in the sense that a *Nata* performing *Sankritana* is supposed to be a devout Hindu propagating the name of Hari to the people. On the other hand a *Thang-Ta* artiste and the art he practices are supposed to be an embodiment of the pre-Hindu animistic life of the Meiteis. Such is the difference between a *Nata* and a *Thang-Ta* artists. But the text they practice work on the same principle founded by the *Thang-Ta*. The only major difference apart from costume is that a *Nata* performs with *Kartal* (symbol) or *Poong* (drum) whereas a *Thang-Ta* player performs with *Thang* (sword) or *Ta* (spear). Basic principles involved in most of the movements of other Manipuri dance, specially the complex movements of the
Mridanga-player (drummer playing on the drum called Poong) have close associations with the movement principles of Thang-Ta. Other example among others that could be cited at the very outset in support of this argument is Khujeng leibi. Khujeng leibi, a kind of wrist movement is of Southeast Asian origin in character and is usually performed by harmonious movements of both the hands. This kind of wrist movement is found used both in Thang-Ta and Manipuri dance. The only difference is that Khujeng-leibi Ahanbi, which is another form of wrist movement is not found in Manipuri dance. Bodily gestures, postures and positions we find in the section called Pala Cholom of Nata-Sankirtana have similarities well-founded on the body positions and postures of a Thang - player in performance. The intricate footwork of the Nata (Sankirtana performer) resonates the foot work of a Thang-Ta artiste performing on Ta (spear). In fact, the step, stance, posture, gesture etc. are quite identical. For instance, Thongkhong Shaba Mukna, Khong Thanggatpa, Khongshitpa of Thengou are all similar with the Pala Cholom. Late Guru Gulapi Singh\textsuperscript{24} initiated a study on this interrelated aspect.

This use of Thang-Ta as a frame of reference in the recreation of new forms of art is a very intriguing area of the cultural history of Manipur. Thang-Ta which was evolved long
before the advent of Hinduism came to be functioning or a very fertile source of inspiration for recreating new forms of art based on Hindu scriptures in the eighteenth century and after. This exemplifies the fact that the martial art of *Thang-Ta* was a formidable part of the life of the Meiteis and it had to come out automatically as a frame of reference without much conscious effort given to it. *Thang-Ta*, although it was evolved with the pre-Hindu belief system as its soul had its own secular standing, a text or a grammar which could travel beyond religious boundaries. It is this, text or grammar that had left a wide ranging, a ramification in the cultural life of the Meiteis. The body of a Meitei, its corporeality is not autonomous from its culture. The body bears all the qualities of culture, with the culture of *Thang-Ta* being the dominant factor. The movement, the rhythm it carries, the alertness etc. of a *Thang-Ta* artiste are all there inherent in the body. Because, these are something culturally conditioned in a long historical length of time. So, the body of a Meitei is not a neutral or autonomous entity. It is a cultured body or a body which is culture-specific.

But such an art of *Thang-Ta*, in spite of the wide spread ramification it has given to the cultural life of the Meiteis, came to be waning very fast from the cultural life of the Meities since the Britishers banned any form of practice of *Thang-Ta*. The Meiteis
strongly felt the conspicuous absence of *Thang-Ta* during the British and they looked back to this forgotten tradition with a sense of nostalgia. The incoming trend of western education and the awareness created by the new democratic of government for the people by the people, all these new ideas and awareness came out as an antithesis for this aged-old art. But still people wanted to continue cherishing this art by reviving it with a new idea of body — culture, health and nationalism inherent in the art. It was almost felt for certain that this form of old art could no longer be effectively used in the battlefield when modes of war and weaponry had changed. But still they loved the art so much that they wanted to revive it and retain it by associating the idea of sports, body-culture and health inherent in the practice of this art. So, in the first session of the first ever political organisation of the Manipuries the *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha* held on the 30th May, 1934 a historic resolution was passed.22

The resolution No. 8 read:

"The Martial arts of *Thang, Ta* and *Mukna Kangjei* is a scientific way of defending oneself and for promoting health for the people of Manipur. The Manipuries were once famous for these arts. Now the practice of these arts is declining, it
has become almost extinct. As a result, the strength and physique of the Manipuri people slowly declining. It would be good and useful to revive these arts to strengthen the innate spirit of Manipuries. For this:

(a) It is necessary to establish clubs and communes with qualified Gurus for teaching these arts.

(b) It is resolved that a competition in these arts be held on Brabubahan Jayanti.

*Proposer*: Shri Somorendra Singh, B.A.

*Supporter/Seconder*: Shri Atompapu Sharma, Bidhyaratana.

The members present in the conference strongly felt the need of reviving this art. They expressed that the Meiteis were still alive because of the practice of this art and that wherever and whenever the survival of the Meiteis was questioned it was *Thang-Ta* which strongly defended the community. They further expressed that *Thang-Ta* and such exercise like *Mukna* and *Satjal* were all the scientific means of keeping a community healthy, active and alive. They felt that the identity of Meiteis were now precariously threatened and that the Meiteis were now losing the courage they usually had in the past.

In the annual report presented in its second session in Tripura in 1935-1936, Shri Hijam Irabot Singh, General Secretary,
Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha stated that in response to the resolution taken in the First Session Shri Sanatomba Rajkumar and Shri Sanahal Singh Rajkumar had submitted the written form of *Satjal* as the first phase. Shri Hijam Irabot expressed that he had thoroughly digested and examined the book titled *Freehand skill—First Phase of Satjal* and it would be published in the general interest of the Manipuri people.

It is thus evident that it was from the early part of the 20th Century when the Britishers were still ruling Manipur that the Meiteis have been trying to revive this art. But it came to be partially successfully only when the government in free India started funding *Thang-Ta* organisations for the preservation of this art and when the government started honouring the Gurus of *Thang-Ta* with state and national awards. Thus, *Thang-Ta* has left an indelible imprint in the cultural life of the Meiteis not merely in performance traditions but it has also deeply conditioned our physical habits and spiritual life.
Foot Notes

1. 'Saturol Lanturol, Sapharol Lanpharol' MS. in the custody of N. Khelchandra Singh.

This is an interesting book on moral codes of battle as well as hunting of animals. It mentions: A game or a foe felled tears in the eyes is termed 'Lal Nungshi' invoke the spirits and pay offering to atone. Otherwise the whole family shall perish.

The act of an animal or a foe gnawing the lower lip or gnashing while falling is termed 'Samailong Lanmai-long'. Pay offerings, otherwise posterity shall suffer from epilepsy, paralysis, and insanity.

If an animal or a foe cackles roars or shouts while being felled is called 'Safalon Lanfalom'. Pay offerings in the name of the dead. Otherwise, the offerings shall suffer from epilepsy, loss of limbs or Blindness.

Falling down of an animal or a foe quietly in peace, is termed as 'Lanpontham'. Offering of any kind is not necessary. Instead obtaining of royal honour and riches like golden bangle, royal garments and flagger etc. upto a long time of one's descendants are foretold.

Again, if an animal or a foe falls down laying on the back, facing the sky or inclining to either side, it is termed ' Athok-Achong. A quick subsidence of the fight is evident. If an animal or a foe falls on the face, with its/his legs towards one, it is called 'Shajel-Lanchenba'.

Now, we shall discuss the capturing of an animal or a foe alive which is termed as 'Sapharon Lanpharon'. The act of an animal or a foe covering its/his face leaving the body exposed and hiding its face in the bush is called 'Shaning-Kang Lan-ning-kang'. It is not deserving to capture such an animal or a foe. The act of
capturing an animal or a foe when both the antagonists are fully armed and rush towards each other is termed as 'Sachin-tam Lanchin-tam'.

Capturing an animal or a foe in pretense of inflicting no harm or capturing will be done, is called 'Shamang Lammang'. It is undesirable and misfortune is foretold for the self and his descendants. The act of urinating or shattering without control while combating or capturing an animal is called Shaphahou-Lanphahou. A plenty of offsprings, full of riches and honour are foretold for the captor. And act of fasting while capturing an animal as a foe is called 'Shatok-Lantok'. Loss of wealth and misfortune to his wife and children are imminent.

Capturing of 'Nongoubi' (the pied crested cuckoo), 'Wa-Kambong' (yellow fittern), 'Mongba' (wren), 'Pe-bet', 'Lang-Mei' (hornbill) etc. is called 'Shaphalom-Lanphalom', doom and destruction to the descendents is foretold.

It is forbidden to capture, rebuke or thrash an animal or a foe that approaches biting a piece of grass. If such a animal or a foe is capture or killed, the captor will suffer from leprosy. Such an act is called 'Shaset-Lanset'.

2. Takhel Ngamba; O. Bhogeshwor, 1986, p41

3. (a) According to the book *Panthoibi Khongul* it is an ancient hymn of the Meiteis. It is also known as 'Leiroi-Nongloi' song. It is almost impossible to trace back its origin, although it has been sung from time immemorial. In *Panthoibi Khongul and Laishra Pham* it recorded the Pakhangba sings Ougri at Kuchu on Monday. Pakhangba and Laishra became the king and the queen. The time Pakhangba ascended the throne was 33 A.D. Hence, we can assume that the song is more than 2000 years old. Even today
Ougri is sung in the Lai-Haraoba of Meiteis. A piece of extract from the song.

The main theme of the verse Ougri is to praise the Sun God by chanting his various names. Ougri is preserved with great care. Conjugal relations, one day a head of participating Ougri Eshei, at the Lai-Haraoba is strictly forbidden for both man and woman. Ougri consisted of two verses, one is for good and prosperity and the other one is for evil and destruction.

(b) Thengourol (MS.) Manuscript in Meitei Mayek Script in the custody of N. Khelchandra Singh.

The MS Thangourol deals with sword rituals with movements performed an intricate diagrammatic pattern of Pakhangba,(coils of ancestral serpent dragon). There are different forms of Thengou of which same are principally efficacious, with the result that are of bringing welfare of the country and some other which enable the destruction of the others. As for instance, a perfect performance of Akao Thongou in believe to bring about abundance of rice and fish and food and plants. On the other hand, Lankak Thangou, when properly done, brings hazards of wars, destruction of camps, and internal turmoil.

The MS deals with the ritual costumes essential for the performance of unusual shortening of life span of the performer. It also deals with the auspicious days on which a particular kind of Thangou is to be performed and the name of the governing deity to whom prayer is to be offered.

4. 'Sachak-Lanchak Thakpa: Khunung Lichat Sajat': Ed. Late Pandit Madhop & N.Khelchandra Singh.

There are occasions when the killer of the foe or captor of the animal or even his descendants suffer from senile tremor, epilepsy, paralysis and insanity. To be free from such a misfortune
the captor or killer invokes the spirit of the dead, offers food and sings a particular song termed 'Sapha Eshei Lanpha Eshei' by the north-eastern side of the porch of his dwelling house to atone the spirits. This act of purification is called 'Lanchak Thakpa' or Enbum Huiroi Chanba'.

Lanchak-Thakpa is the ratite appease the spirits of the vanquished. It is performed by the north-eastern corner of the verandah which is termed as 'Nak-Tha' by the Meiteis, cook rice in an earthen pot, and curry in another, just beneath the verandah of the Nak-tha. Roll up the rice like a ball. Dress oneself with a black 'Khaon' and arm with a sword or weapon used in the killing. Invoke the spirits of the dead and feed them. Then pull out the food between your legs. Face to the east. After chanting the following words, 'Lanhing-tok-kou-e, Tak-Kro-Chatlo' draw four lateral lines representing alternate walls of spirits and humous stonting from the farthest ending closest to self. Cross three other lines drawing away from self representing three walls spirits, Hermans and spirits respectively.

5. **Nak-tha**: All the dwelling houses of the Meiteis face eastward, in which direction they have a large open verandah. Two pillars support this open side of the verandah. Nak-tha is the space between the left wall and the left post by the north-eastern side.

6. **Sapha Lanpha Eshei**: Song or hymn sung as atonement for undesirable killing of animals or enemies.

7. **Tang-Ga**: Plantain leaf which is cut into round pieces as plates for the purpose of placing fruits, sweets, pam etc.

8. **Khamnung and Shawa**: The Meitei regarded for as the resting place of departed souls
9. *Leichillon* (MS.); in the custody of N. Khelchandra Singh.

Manipuri martial culture involves the study and invocation of the different elements. A specific area of study is the reading of the clouds for signs. Clouds sailing high above the skies are of seven colours. There are signs indicated by the soaring clouds. The clouds show sure signs as one sets out for the battle as well as on the field of battle. The same holds true for day-to-day events and for the state as a whole.


This book written in ancient archaic Meitei language explains in detail when and where the brave heroes captured the tigers. The book also clearly states even the ancestral origin and clans of the maternal side of the brave heroes.

They remember that whenever a tiger was reported to have been seen in a locality, the people there relayed the existing message through 'Meihum Morok Chenba' where by except the children and very old people, all the men armed themselves and mobilised at the reported place and tried to capture the tiger. The King rewarded the person who captured a tiger.

*Keifaron* is a book written on the capture of the tiger by distinguished men of courage. It is, rather, the continuation of an already existing work called *Keifarol*, into the content of which every single episode of the capture of a tiger by distinguished heroes or the King himself was added by the prevalent scholars from time to time. The capture of tiger in this land is learnt from oral traditions.

11. *Meihum Morok Chenba*: A symbolic message relayed from house to house in the emergence of a tiger
12. **Leikoi Ching**: It is a small hill/rocks situated in the southern side 30 km. apart from Imphal town.


   Lai Haraoba is a unique festival, which embodies the ancient Meitei religious beliefs. It 'mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weakness, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their interest'. The Meiteis beliefs that Gods after fulfilling the wish of Tengbanba Mapu to create the world of things and being under the guidance of Atiya Sidaba and Leimlel Sidabi expressed their happiness. Lai Haraoba is a festival of 'the merry-making of the Gods and Goddesses'.


17. Sircar Manjusri Chaki, Delhi, 1984 p.130 :- The day Ashiba (Sanamahi) completed the creation of earth, he became confused. The Guru opened his mouth and showed the image of his creation. Asiba then exclaimed, 'Lai Hoi Lauba'. Lai Haraoba is the imitation of this ...

19. Eldest male member of a clan is known as a 'Piba'. It is a traditional customary post and the person is essential for clan ritual and ceremonial performances.


21. Shri Shri Gobinda Thouram Shinang (Nata Ishei) by Late (Khangembam Gulapi Singh), 1972, Imphal