Chapter II
Religious Beliefs and Practices

Religion is one of the most important institutions of human society. Though religion has a distinct identity, it has close links with other aspects of society such as polity, economy, and kinship. Religion has evolved in history through a process of assimilation of beliefs, rites and organization. It is in fact the expression of the manner, and type, of adjustment effected by people with their conception of the supernatural.\(^1\) At the center of almost every religion lies the idea of the supernatural being, which is omnipotent, infinite or extraordinary. Religion is about man’s relation to the super-natural power(s) and the various organized systems of belief and worship in which these relations have been expressed.

Religion has exercised the most profound influence over man’s thoughts since time immemorial. According to Makhan Jha, even today when man has made tremendous progress in the field of science and technology, he is utterly restless in his quest for some unseen powers, which may give him some inspiration and solace.\(^2\) We may argue that religion exercises powerful influence on the processes of socialization and social control. The way in which we relate to each other is very often influenced by our religious beliefs since religion is a shared system of beliefs, practices and a range of moral prescriptions of a group of people. It is an important part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. Religion contributes to social cohesion by uniting human beings together, but in certain situations it sows hatred and conflict among them.

The belief system of the Lois are reflected in the system of knowledge. This knowledge is handed down from generation to

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generation to reveal the purpose of the existence of the supernatural or the divine forces which are held sacred. The Lois worship various gods and goddesses that are invoked on different occasions of their social life. According to their belief system, the Lois perform these rituals repeatedly. The religious beliefs of the Lois are closely tied up with different myths. Myth as it exists in Loi society is not merely a story told but has a strong influence of reality. The sacred story of the Lois lives in their rituals. Myth performs an indispensable function, it expresses, enhances, and codifies their belief system. It safeguards and enforces morality and vouches for the efficiency of ritual.

Different scholars have come up with different classifications of rituals. According to Emile Durkheim, ritual is the set of practices which distinguishes beliefs about the sacred from those of the profane. For him, rituals are not necessarily stereotyped sequences of behavior: rather rituals can be loosely defined as organized and spontaneous sequences of action. For Evans Pritchard, there are two types of rituals, viz., confirmatory and piacular rituals. Confirmatory rituals are concerned with the changes of social status and also the interactions of the social groups. This form of rituals are also concerned with solidarity and integrity of various social groups for the continued existence of the community. Piacular rituals are 'performed in situations of danger ... often thought of as being brought about by some fault', and in them propitiation and expiation are prominent. These rituals are concerned with the moral and physical well being of the individual or the social group, for example, sickness, epidemic etc.

Looking at these classifications in the context of the Lois it may be noted that some of the rites are sometimes so intimately intertwined with each other that it is impossible to distinguish one rite from the other. Hence it is not possible to strictly divide the

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4. Ibid.
rituals according to these classifications. The Lois have rituals of various types that are related to curing of sick, rites for good health and children, rites to increase food crops, festive celebration where the whole community is engaged in the festival, and most importantly rituals related to rites of passage. Rituals performed at the time of birth, marriage, death help the individuals to adapt to the change brought by these events.

The Lois express their beliefs, practices and a range of moral prescriptions in everyday life. The *Lai Haraoba* festival of the Lois emphasizes the need for collective worship and such festivals and rituals bring people together. A number of rites and rituals cover the entire life span of the Lois from birth to death. Like many other societies, the Lois also believe in some super-natural power. The rituals performed by the Lois are aimed at solving day-to-day problems of life. The Lois believe that by proper performance of religious rituals or observances, they would obtain good health, long life, children, material well-being, success in hunting, rain, good crop, victory in war and now-a-days even for success in examination.

**Gods and Deities**

The Lois worship several gods which gradually get dissolved into one Supreme God. The conception is similar to Spencer’s view that with the growth of knowledge, people’s beliefs in God changes from polytheism to monotheism. The names of various gods worshipped by the Lois are *Tengbanba Mapu, Yaibirel Sidaba, Ipuroi Sidaba*, to name a few. To the Lois these are the manifestations of the Supreme God, *Atiya Sidaba* or *Atingkok*, the infinite expanse, which embraces all within him. The Lois believe that the whole world is created by the Supreme God. They also believe that in order to create the world of living beings, *Atiya Sidaba* manifested himself in the form of two beings. The right side of his body remained as *Atiya Sidaba*

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and the left side became **Leimaren Sidabi** (the mother Earth). The two sides together, as husband and wife, created the earth and subsequently became the supreme father and mother for the whole world. According to **maiba** (priest), L. Jugol Singh, **Atiya Sidaba** ordered the 33 crore⁸ deities to create human beings. The first being made by the deities turned out like a frog. Then he ordered the deities to put the creature in the water so that it announces the coming of rainy season by croaking. **Atiya Sidaba** again ordered the deities to make human beings, who appeared like monkeys. When they showed these to **Atiya Sidaba**, he was not pleased with what he saw. He told the deities that though they looked like humans they are not human beings. Therefore, the monkeys were dispatched to the jungle. Then the thirty-three crore deities confessed to the Supreme God that they could not make human beings. He then instructed them to make human beings exactly like his shadow.⁹ After completing the creation of human beings, the deities showed them to **Atiya Sidaba** who said that though they looked like human beings, they failed to show any sign of feeling, hunger and thirst. **Atiya Sidaba** then added five souls and a shadow, which gave life to the beings created. Thus a combination of fire, water, air, sky, earth, and shadow went into the creation of the human beings. Similar information has been provided in the books written by M.C. Sircar,⁰ and S.N. Parratt.¹¹ However, the views of these writers seem to be based on different sources of information.

⁸. The Lois believe that there are around 33 crore deities.
⁹. The thirty-three crores quoted above by the maiba is similar to “Sanamahi deity” mentioned in M. Kirti Singh’s book, *Religious Developments in Manipur in the 18th & 19th centuries* (1980:48-49). He writes that: “The myth relates that he [Sanamahi] created the universe, mortal beings, frogs, animals, etc. He created man in the image of the Almighty father. The Guru fused intelligence into it in order to adore Him”.
Origin and Worship of Household Deities

The divine couple Atiya Sidaba and Leimaren Sidabi had two sons, named Sanamahi, and Pakhangba. One day, Atiya Sidaba decided to give his throne to one of the sons. He called his two sons and said to them: “my children, I have decided to leave this world so I want one of you to become the king and inherit the throne”. But, Atiya Sidaba put a condition to his sons that they both should compete in a race and the one who returns first after circling the universe seven times would be appointed as a king. Sanamahi started his journey of circulating the earth. But his younger brother, Pakhangba, due to his physical weakness, could not imagine circling the whole universe. Hence, Pakhangba got worried and took the secret advice from his mother on how to act. His mother, Ima Leimaren, being in favour of him, advised him that circulating his father’s throne seven times is equivalent to circulating the whole universe seven times. Accordingly, Pakhangba took seven round of his father’s throne: the Guru (Atiya Sidaba), who himself is the symbol of the universe, since the world was created after his image. After completing the seven rounds, Pakhangba asked his father to give him the throne since he had fulfilled his command. When Sanamahi returned after touring the world, he bowed before the figure of his brother seated on the throne, mistaking him to be his father. On finding that the figure he bowed to was his brother, Pakhangba, Sanamahi was very angry and demanded his right to reign, and challenged his brother’s usurpation of the throne. Pakhangba took refuge among seven goddesses (Lairembis), who protected him from his brother’s wrath by encircling him. Sanamahi challenged him by

12. The story was narrated by maiba Ph. Punshi Singh of Khurkhul.
declaring that if his advisor was a male, he would kill him or if the person was a female, he would marry her. Atiya Sidaba pacified Sanamahi by saying that though he could not inherit his throne he deserved to be the King of every house, thereby giving him the status of a deity to be worshipped in every household of the Meiteis which included the household of the Lois also. Sanamahi's mother Ima Leimaren also became a household deity along with her son.

The legend shows us how Sanamahi and Ima Leimaren are accepted as household deities by the Lois. The myth signifies the power of honesty and respect towards the elders as shown by Sanamahi for his family, because of which he is still considered the main deity in every Loi and the Meitei household. Scholars like Parratt had written that Sanamahi subsequently married his mother as he promised.14 During the present fieldwork in the Loi villages, quite contrary to the views of some authors, it has been observed that there is hardly any Loi who considers Sanamahi and Leimaren to be husband and wife but as mother and son. In fact, whatever offerings are made to these two deities the worshipper always offer them to Leimaren first and then to her son, Sanamahi because offerings are usually made first to the elder in the Loi society. In this context, we are reminded of what Radcliffe Brown said: "Thus, we find very frequently that a person is expected to adopt an attitude of more or less marked respect towards all his relatives of the first ascending generations".15 At the same time Pakhangba is worshipped as the supreme ancestral deity of the Ningthouja clan while Sanamahi is worshipped by every household of the Lois, Meiteis and also by some households of the Kabui tribe.

Besides the household deities, the Lois worship natural objects such as the sky, sun, moon, stars, fire, hills, rivers, lakes and old trees for protecting them from ill luck, harmful mishaps and dreaded diseases. The Lois also worship the god of rain and thunder under the name of Soraren, which means the chief god (Sora-God and ren—the chief or the highest). But in their day-to-day life they mainly worship the household deities, the countryside deities and also the village deities. Broadly the deities can be classified into three categories: the household deities (Imunglais), the countryside deities (Lamlais) and the village deities (Umanglais).

In a Loi house, there are four important deities: Lainingthou Sanamahi, Leimaren Sidabi, Phunga Lairu or Imoinu (the fire place) and Apokpa who are regarded as household deities since they occupy a definite place in a Loi house. When a person builds a house, he earmarks specific locations to keep these deities which are selected by throwing a coin made of imitation silver or gold. At the time of shifting to a new place the deities are brought from the father's house. Whenever a Loi is going on a long journey, he/she worships the household deities as well as the village deities, so that no harm should come during the journey.

Lainingthou Sanamahi

Lainingthou Sanamahi (literally the name means liquid gold) is the most revered household deity. Each house of the Lois has a place for this deity in the southwestern corner and the orthodox pray to him everyday at sunset and at critical hours of their life. In this context, Brara notes: "the way that gold is the most precious of all metals, similarly Sanamahi is considered most essential for the existence of

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16. Lainingthou (Lai = god, ningthou = king), Lainingthou means the king of the gods.
all living beings. He is the spirit dwelling inside each being.” In the month of *Sajibu* (March-April), *Cheiraoba* (the new year day of the Lois) is celebrated where *Sanamahi* is worshipped as the most important deity. *Sanamahi* plays an important part in other religious ceremonies also. Raw vegetables, fruits and other eatables are offered to *Sanamahi* and other household deities. Cooked or roasted foods are not offered because they are considered to be impure. Bhagyachandra Singh states: "the Lois offered sacrifices of various items to *Sanamahi* including pigs, ducks and fowls, besides rice and fruits.”

Today also the Lois are said to offer pigs and fowls but at Khurkhul, most of the time the villagers offer fish (*ngamu*) to the household deities. The number of fishes offered to each deity is three. And even if one of the fishes assigned for offerings to the deities happen to die, the dead fish cannot be eaten before the offerings are made since the fishes are kept as a share of the deities. Usually in such offerings a *maiba* is called to conduct the ceremony and *maiba* would utter some hymns while making the offerings.

**Leimaren Sidabi**

Another important household deity is *Leimaren Sidabi* which is regarded as the Supreme divine mother. She is also called *Malem* (mother earth) who guides and blesses every living being. *Leimaren Sidabi* is considered to be the mother of all human beings and is addressed as *Ima (mother) Leimaren* by people. As noted earlier, whenever there is a ceremony in the house, offerings are made to her first. *Leimaren* has a place in the Loi house near the northern wall. The people of Sekmai keep a sacred pot, filled with water as a symbol

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of her, whereas such practices are found to be absent at Khurkhul. The top of the pot is covered with three layers of plantain leaves, and bamboo stripes are used to fasten the pots tightly. A string of leaves is tied around the neck of the pot. A female member of the household replaces the water on the day of Cheiraoba,\(^{19}\) for doing which, she must take a bath and remain in a state of purity. Though Leimaren Sidabi is worshipped at critical hours of life, whenever prayers are offered to other household deities, she forms a part of it. On important occasions like marriage, she is worshipped with equal importance with the other household deities. While fruits and flowers are offered at the time of ceremonies, incenses are offered everyday. Every female deity is considered to be her manifestation in one way or the other.

**Phunga-Lairu**

The next important household deity is the Phunga-Lairu. Phunga is the sacred fireplace situated in the western part of the house. Fire is always preserved in this place with husks and other materials. The Lois believe that the continuous burning of fire will bring prosperity, success and long life. Usually a tripod symbolizes the phunga. It is believed that three deities Mangang, Luwang and Khuman reside near the tripod. Besides these three deities, the most important deity is Phungalairu or Imoinu which is much respected and also feared. People of older generation bow down before this deity everyday. At Sekmai, cooked food is offered to Phungalairu at every meal before anyone consumes the food. The villagers believe that those who offer food to this deity will always have sufficient food and clothes in the house.

Phunga-Lairu or Imoinu is usually referred as the grandmother (Iben) and is believed to be another form of Leimaren Sidabi. Just like goddess Laxmi of the Hindus, Phunga-Lairu is regarded as the symbol

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\(^{19}\) Cheiraoba: New-year day of the Lois is called Cheiraoba.
of wealth and prosperity. She is worshipped on the 12th day of *Wakching* that falls usually in the English month of January. This ceremony is performed by a *maiba* by offering fruits, incense and lights, though sometimes fish or chicken are offered on this ceremony. According to Yaima, an ex-pundit of Sekmai, on this day food should be cooked in the *Phunga* itself. After that, the cooked food is offered to the deity. The deity is usually worshipped to achieve success in life and for the well-being of the family members. This deity is also considered as the controller and regulator of the conduct and behaviour of human beings.

Fire is one of the most important and powerful elements daily required by human beings and the Lois consider fire to be of supreme importance. No one is allowed to take out fire at odd times of the day. Most of the people do not observe this belief nowadays but it is strictly adhered to when a family shifts into a new house. The fire is kept burning at least for five days at the time of formal entry into a new house. In this context, Kirti Singh observes: “This belief had some points in common with the Vedic conception of fire as the guardian deity of a dwelling house and the Vedic attribute of fire as the giver of wealth”.20 In a particular Loi village called Andro, there is a place where fire is kept burning all the time in a hut protected by the villagers. This fire is considered to be sacred and is thus worshipped by the people. Every family in the village supplies firewood by rotation to keep the fire burning in this particular place. Since the fire has been kept burning for centuries, people use the ashes of this fire as medicine. Today the fire from Andro is used to ignite the torch of any inauguration ceremony of sports and other cultural festivals organized by the state. As a sacred fire, it was used for lighting the lamps at the coronation ceremony of the Meitei king.

Ancestor Worship

The ancestral spirits of each family and clan are worshipped under various names such as Sagei Lai (ancestor of a particular clan), Apokpa (progenitor of a clan), Ibudhou Purel Nakakpa (Great grandfather) and Kasarel (a common name for the ancestral spirits) etc. Worshipping the ancestors is called Apokpa Khuramba. Ancestor worship has been in existence among the Lois since time immemorial as an extension of respect to the older generations in the society. The Lois also believe that without the blessings of the ancestors, success in any walk of life would be difficult. Thus, they worship the ancestors on every occasion in their life. In real sense, ancestor worship is a part of the kinship system constituted as it is by the relations of living persons to their deceased kindred, and affecting as it does the relations of living person to one another.

Different clans (salais) have different names for its progenitor. The names are Pakhangba for the Ningthouja salai, Pureiromba for the Angom salai, Poireiton for the Luwang salai etc. whose rituals require specific materials. There are two types of ancestor worship: – 1. Sagei Apokpa Khuramba, which implies the worshipping of the ancestors of the lineage (sagei) members. For example, at Sekmai there is a particular place for every lineage specially reserved for worshipping the ancestors and is called Sagei Apokpagi Khubham. The ceremony meant for the whole lineage will be performed in this place or performed in the house of the oldest member of the lineage. 2. Worshipping the ancestors of the household (Yumgi Apokpa Khuramba) is practised by each household as a closely-knit group. There is a place reserved for the ancestors (Apokpa) in the southeastern side of a Loi house near the foundation stone (Jatra Makhong).

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Some of the items used during ancestor worship are a bunch of bananas which should be in odd number, buds of a sacred plant (langthrei maton), leaves of a sacred tree (tairen), a white cock or a pig, root of the bamboo (wakhok), root of the tree (ukhok) and a piece of cloth to make a figure of the ancestor (phijang khanba). As the maiba recites the holy words in praise of the concerned deity the worshippers sprinkle the space with water and offer pieces of gold, silver and sweetmeats to the deity.

Ancestor worship is a very detailed ritual, which must be precisely observed. On an auspicious day, invitations are issued to the deceased through the members of the lineage in the name of the person whose death had last taken place. Only the male members and women married into the sagei participate in such ceremonies. Married daughters of the sagei are not allowed to attend the ceremony or to eat the food offered to the deities since it is believed that they might take away the happiness and joy of the lineage or household. Many people at Sekmai reported that they hardly attend the worshipping of the ancestors of the sagei. Many of them expressed the view that ancestors of the sagei are worshipped only once in the lifetime of a person. However, this view was contradicted by other villagers saying that worshipping of ancestors is regularly carried out once in a year.

Some of the informants also revealed that they practise ancestor worship at home every year in which three generations of the ancestors are worshipped. They believe that the ancestors of the household (Yumgi Apokpa) look after the welfare of the family. Other villagers gave different versions by saying that the ancestors (apokpa) are worshipped anytime whenever the sign of ancestors is seen. By this, they meant that if any unusual things are seen in a plant or a tree situated near the house they take it as a sign of an ancestor. For example, if the apex of the maize plant, pumpkin or cucumber bears twin fruits or if the plantain flower happens to grow right in the

middle of the plantain tree, people think that these are the signs of ancestor. Villagers belonging to different lineage groups have expressed such views. It can be seen that different lineage groups follow different patterns of ancestor worship; while some worship ancestors annually others worship them once in a while or when the occasion demands.

Ordinary people confessed that they do not have much idea about who their first ancestors were. Whatever offerings they make are directed to the deceased of the previous three generations. The ceremony is performed during *tarpan*, which falls in the Manipuri month of *Langban* which coincides with the English month of September or October at Khurkhul whereas it is performed on any auspicious day at Sekmai. During the ceremony, the Lois address the deity as the great grandfather or great grandmother depending on the sex of the deity propitiated, thereby seeing themselves as their grandchildren. This ceremony is usually observed to attain good health, material prosperity and well-being of the descendants of the deceased as well as to invite the deceased to share a meal with their children and grandchildren and to live happily in the other world.

**Directional Deities**

The tradition of the Lois reveals that they also worship different deities associated with the four geographical points of the earth, viz, *Wangabren* of the South, *Marjing* of the North, *Nongpok Ningthou* of the East, *Thangjing* of the South-West, *Loiyarakpa* of the West and *Koubru* of the North West. These deities are worshipped with attention, care and reverence.

**Wangbren**

*Wangbren* is a deity which resides in water and regarded as the guardian of the southern part of Manipur. According to L.Bhagyachandra Singh: “While entering *Wangbren*’s abode for prayer and worship, people should not speak unclean words, should not
spoil the trees and plants growing there”. This deity is worshipped out of fear since he can drown people and create floods. He is anger and terror personified and depicted as a deity riding a black tiger. Therefore, Wangbren should be kept in good humour and worshipped with all devotion.

**Nongpok Ningthou**

*Nongpok Ningthou* is considered to be the guardian of the east. The *Nongmaijing* hill situated to the east of the Imphal valley is regarded as his abode. Traditionally, it is believed that *Nongpok* made the valley fit for human habitation after the great flood. Even today the divine romantic legends of *Nongpok* and *Panthoibi* in their seven incarnated generations are often narrated to satisfy the romantic emotions of the people. *Nongpok Ningthou* superseded other gods and became the central deity of *Lai Haraoba* festival.

**Thangjing**

*Thangjing* is the protector of the south-western direction. The original abode of this deity is in Moirang in the hill that bears its name. The people of Manipur owe much to Moirang for its culture and literature about love, legends and stories that are attributed to god *Thangjing*. Some authors regard Thangjing as the God King from whom the people of Moirang have descended. He is addressed as the creator and the preserver of the people of Moirang and a temple is also dedicated to him there.

**Loiya Lakpa**

The main shrine of this deity is located at *Leimaram*. This deity is popularly known as *Loiyalakpa panganba* (*panganba*-powerful). There is a story behind his symbol of power. In the battle between the gods and the evil spirits, *Loiyalakpa* showed great courage and

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28. Ibid., p.51.
destroyed the evil spirits. People believe that this deity, like other deities, determines the fortune of the people in a particular year.

**Koubru**

Koubru peak is the abode of the deity called Koubru. The peak thus bears the name of the deity. In mythic times, in which man and god are believed to have lived together, it is said that the gods used to have meetings at Koubru hill. According to some scholars, the spiritual beings used to meet annually in the abode of Koubru. According to tradition, Koubru is considered to be the place of supreme eminence, which is very much connected with the life and growth of the Lois. Koubru is the deity of Sekmai and Phayeng Loi villages. People worship Koubru in their everyday life with great reverence. According to Parratt, king Khangemba (1597-1618), during his reign, offered 100 each of buffaloes, goats, sheep, cattle, geese, pigs, fowls, pigeons and dogs to Koubru, so that his life may be prolonged.²⁹

**Marjing**

As a deity, Marjing is associated with the North and is considered to be the protector of animals. At a later period of time, this deity was found to be associated with the game of polo (*sagol kangjei*). According to tradition, ‘polo’, which is one of the most popular games today in Manipur, was played originally by gods. It is believed that the gods played polo for the first time during the Lai Haraoba festival to express their joy. That is why people invoke and worship Marjing with a polo stick and a ball when an animal in their house becomes sick.³⁰

Thus, these deities, which are associated with specific geographical directions, are worshipped by the people with great reverence. It is believed that worshipping them would save the people from disease, death and disasters. Besides the above-mentioned deities, the villagers also worship innumerable deities such as *Phou-

²⁹ Parratt, op.cit., 1980, p.29.
³⁰ Brara, op. cit., 1998, p.149
oibi (the goddess of granary), Ireima (goddess of water) etc. The form in which a worship is performed depends on the instructions provided by the priestess (maibi), who is believed to have communication with the gods. The worships are, however, usually conducted by the priests (maibas) according to the utterances made by the maibis during their state of trance. The Lois observe such religious practices as part of a tradition which has come down to them in the course of generations of history. According to observations made in the field, the villagers practise various rites not because they are fully conversant with the deeper significance of the rite but because their ancestors did so. In this context we are reminded of what Troisi writes: "...in this sense rituals are objectifications. They are elements of external social reality which exercise a constraint over the individual. Participation in ritual provides the individual with a sense of social solidarity and personal security".31

**Iratpa or Blood Sacrifice**

Many ambivalent or contradictory attitudes towards blood are found among various religions of the world. Blood is often perceived in dichotomous terms: sacred and profane, constructive and destructive, repulsive and attractive. In many primitive societies, blood is identified with soul substance: of men, of animals and of plants. According to Malinowski, sacrifice in general is a form of gift giving, a sharing of food with the spirits or divinities, a ritual rooted in the psychology of gift.32 The functions and forms of blood sacrifice are varied for different religions in different communities.

The word **Iratpa** in Manipuri means sacrifice of a living being which involves the shedding of blood. As a matter of fact, animal, bird and fish are commonly sacrificed by the Lois. The sacrifice is conducted according to the oracles predicted by the maibis, based on the desire of the deities. The most commonly used items of fish in

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32 Ibid., p.148.
sacrifice are *ngamu* (loach) and *ngakra* (clarias batrachu) while the most commonly used animals are chicken, duck, pigeon and pigs. While sacrificing the animal(s), the *maiba* utters phrase like: "you living being protect the life of the persons (in question) from the tragedies by substituting for them and laying down your life on their behalf".

According to Parratt: "It is significant that the deity to whom the sacrifice was offered by the Loi of Andro, Panam Ningthou, was regarded as the special deity of Meitei king, who was himself obliged to provide the sacrificial animals. Among these was a buffalo or mithan, which used to be sacrificed on the occasion of the *Lai Haraoba* of the god". Furthermore, when danger to a Meitei king was suspected, he would send a pig and a cock to be sacrificed at Andro to *Panam Ningthou*. In the famous Manipuri legend, *Khamba* and *Thoibi*, *Khamba* (the hero of the story) caught a wild bull and offered it to the deity, *Thangjing*. The legend signifies that animal sacrifice was performed from the early days and the attendants were permitted to eat the sacrificed animal. This practice somewhat stands parallel to Malinowski's observation of sacrifice as an act of sharing food. Robertson Smith was the first to point out that sacrifice is a meal in which the worshippers who offer it share along with the god to whom it is offered. According to him, sacrificial banquets have the object of making the worshipper and his god share the same sacrificial meal so as to form a kinship bond between them.

Thus, there is no doubt that in the pre-Hindu period, even the Meiteis used to perform animal sacrifices. Even human sacrifice was considered to be in practice. There are several references in the chronicles about bringing back the head of the enemies in earlier times, but there are no evidence to suggest that these were meant as

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34. Troisi, op. cit., 1979 p.121.
35. Ibid.
ritual offerings to the gods. During the monarchical period in Manipur, the removal of the heads of slain foes was treated as bringing the trophies of war and proof of their bravery in battle.

There is also another tradition shared by the Lois and the Meiteis regarding the existence of Churanthaba, a person sent out to seize or kidnap children after dark in some unfrequented spot for killing. The belief was that the kidnapped child was to be sacrificed at the time of construction of a bridge to tame the evil spirits so that the lives of many people could be saved in future, otherwise peoples’ lives may be in danger if the bridge suddenly collapses. The act also has the implication of a propitiatory offering so as to appease the deity by offering him sacrifice as highlighted in the foregoing discussion.

**Tree Worship**

Tree worship has been a very popular practice among the Lois of Manipur. Sacred trees like phoebe hensiana (*uningthou*), urena lobeta (*uhal*) and ficus religiosa (*sanakhongnang*) are dedicated with proper rites. The rites were observed by the kings, public dignitaries or the women of the royal household for the welfare of the people. The sanctification of a tree, after a formal inauguration, is known as *uhongba* or *ushil sinba*. During the ritual, a cloth is tied around the tree. It is believed that if the tree was barren the barrenness will be cured after the ritual. The Lois also take recourse to tree worship in times of illness. They believed that after the ritual, the fate of a short-lived man or sick person is transferred to the tree, which will carry the sufferings of the concerned person. According to Kirti Singh: “It rests on the law of substitution, which prevails up to this time not only among the Manipuris but also the world over”.

The Lois consider the oldest tree in a compound as a deity (*lai*). The oldest tree of the household is not allowed to be cut indiscriminately. If necessity demands that the tree be cut it is not cut

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36. Ibid., p.123.
38. Ibid., p.68.
as and when the family members want to do so. Before cutting the tree, the family consults the *maiba* who performs the required ritual by offering some specific materials seeking the tree's forgiveness and requesting it to protect the family from any danger that might be fallen on them and subsequently, the family members cut the tree.

K.B. Singh points out that among the Lois, tree worship may still be seen. For them, the most sacred tree is the cedrela toona (*tairen*). Worship of this tree consists of bowing or sometimes offerings fruits and flowers to it. According to Kirti Singh, the Lois regard the tree as an actual deity, although it may perhaps be more plausible to suggest that the *tairen* is thought to be either the symbol or the abode of spirit. Parratt writes that: "The *tairen* is still used by the *maiba* for cultic purposes, and in this aspect of the cult, the Lois have preserved an original Meitei pre-Hindu ritual". The statement given by Parratt suggests that the Lois and the Meiteis had similar practice of worshipping the tree, *tairen*, before the Hinduisation of the Meiteis. A branch of *tairen* that is dipped in the water is waved by the *maiba* during his incantations for the exorcising of evil spirits from the sick person who is believed to be possessed by the evil spirits.

There are numerous references in the royal chronicle, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, which show that tree reverence was very common during the pre-Hindu period. However, there is no reference to the deity to whom the tree is dedicated (if any), or whether the tree was thought to be associated with particular known deities. In the villages where the study was conducted, it has been observed that the villagers practise tree worship in a very different way. In a particular family, if ceremonies have taken place twice in the same courtyard, such a phenomenon is considered to be a bad omen. In order to avoid any ill-fated event or tragedy from occurring, the owner of the house usually performs the third ceremony in which marriage

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40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 113.
takes place between a banyan tree (khonang) and a pond (pukhri). This is performed by the maiba for the welfare of the members of the house in order to protect them from any misfortune. The banyan tree is considered to be the male while the pond is the female and this ceremony replaces the actual ceremony that takes place in the particular family.

One maiba narrated a myth about how the worshipping of the tree started among the Lois. Once upon a time, a tribal woman was selling winnowing fans under a banyan tree. A man bought the winnowing fan but ran short of money; so he told the lady that he would pay her later. The lady agreed to his promise but after sometime she died. The man could not give the rest of the money since she never came again. Though he was an honest person who had never cheated or deceived anybody in his life after sometime he also forgot about the matter. One day he had a dream in which he was going to meet the king of the dead (jom ningthou or yama raja) in order to ask him to prolong his life. On the way, he met the lady from whom he had bought the winnowing fan. She asked him where he was going and when he replied that he was going to meet jom ningthou to request him for longer life. She told he would not be able to meet jom ningthou since he has not paid her for the winnowing fan he had bought. He made some reply which angered the woman and she took out a knife and scratched his back with it in the shape of a winnowing fan. When he woke up the next morning he discovered that the experience was only a dream.

After taking his bath he went to the gate of his house where there was a banyan tree and to his amazement saw that the bark of the tree had been cut off in the form of a winnowing fan. He perceived this as a sign that the tree had saved his life. As a show of gratitude he decided to sanctify the tree and consulted a maiba about it, who conducted rituals by offering milk, fruits, betel nuts and leaves, a

43. The story was narrated by maiba L. Jugol Singh of Khurkhul.
small flag and burning wax. During the ritual, the *maiba* uttered the following words: “You, banyan tree, carry all the sufferings in place of the human beings who suffer them”. Since then, the practice of tree worship began. Though there has been a ritual attitude towards some plant and tree, the Lois do not worship the tree as their totem. They do not have the totemic system of worship. The Lois also have some sacred flowers such as *langthrei*44 and *leishang lei*45 which are included in most of the prayers performed by the *maiba*.

**Spirits and Witchcraft**

Despite various changes that have taken place among the Lois, the belief in spirits still strongly persists. People are in constant fear that harm may befall on them from dangerous female spirits. Like the Azande of Southern Sudan, the Lois believe that a *hingchabi* (witch) performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines.46 M.C.Sircar says “*hingchabi* is believed to live inside some women who project their supernatural selves into the bodies of victims and cause illness, mental affliction, bad luck, and even death.”47 The field survey has shown that villagers always throw a part of whatever they eat as a share of *hingchabi* so that they will be protected from the possession of the spirit. However, whenever a person is possessed by a *hingchabi*, the victim is not even aware of it, only the priest and priestess can identify it. When a person is found to be in a state of sickness, the family members call for the *maiba* (priest) who after checking the pulse of the sick person, declares whether the person is in possession of spirits or not. The priest then asks the family members to consult the *maibi* (priestess) to hear her oracle. After hearing the oracle the priest or any member of the family offer the items of food demanded by the priestess. If the sick person does not recover after performing the rituals he/she is taken to the hospital. Sometimes, it so happens

44. *Langthrei*- a small medicinal plant used by the Lois while offering to the deities.
45. *Leishang lei* is a kind of flower (seligenella species)
47. Sircar, op. cit., 1984, p.119
that when a child is in gripping pain and cries, the child is considered to be possessed by the spirit. Again like the Azandes, the Lois believe that witchcraft is not only a physical trait but also inherited.\textsuperscript{48} Since there are only female witches in the Loi community people believed that daughters inherit the spirit of \textit{hingchabi} from the mother. The sign of possession of the spirit is that those who posses it usually look beautiful and get attracted by the males.

The priest explained that \textit{heloi} is the most powerful female spirit who could cause disease to women and men alike. Women may get disease in their sexual organ and men can become insane as a result of the attacks of the \textit{heloi}s who generally appear as beautiful \textit{leishabis} (maiden).\textsuperscript{49} In order to prevent this, the priest appeases the spirit by offering animal faeces and some specially prepared ritual food called \textit{saram-ngaram}. It is believed that while the \textit{heloi} is a wandering spirit, a \textit{hingchabi} resides in the body of a woman.

That belief in the power of spirits continues to exist among the Lois is clear from the fact that many villagers claimed that they had seen spirits in the guise of dogs, human beings and so on. The most common one is the sound of somebody knocking at the door. Other incidents taken to be the work of spirits are sand stones thrown at the passers by or in someone's house usually at late night. The sound of crying of babies in far off places (heard frequently near the riverbank), and shaking of the bamboo trees when there is no wind, are also some of the signs that are said to occur frequently which are considered by the people as symptoms of someone in the locality practicing witchcraft against somebody.

Given below are some of the stories narrated by the villagers during the study. A man named Th. Tomchou, who is about 54 years old, revealed that he met a ghost near his house.\textsuperscript{50} Though he had not seen the face of the ghost properly, he noticed that it was black in

\textsuperscript{48} E.E. Evans Pritchard, op.cit., 1937,p.23.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p.120.
\textsuperscript{50} The interview was held on 23\textsuperscript{rd} March 2001 with Th. Tomchou Singh at Khurkhul.
colour having the features of a human being but failed to recognize the exact form. Though he had seen the ghost three years back, nothing happened to him so far. A similar incident was narrated by, Joy, a truck owner. As he was returning home after watching a late night movie he saw a lady waving at him to stop his vehicle, but when he looked towards that object, the lady had disappeared. Joy informed that he had come across such incidents many times specially when he was plying trucks on Dimapur-Imphal highway.51

Another man, called Tomchou (an ex-pradhan of Khurkhul), along with his friends once saw a group of dogs, which were red in colour.52 While they planned to catch the dogs, the colour of the dogs suddenly changed into white. One of his friends said he saw a black dog among the whites while the other one whispered he could not see anyone. When they were trying to catch the black dog, all of them disappeared. This led them to believe that someone played witchcraft against them.

The belief in spirits is closely associated with the belief in witchcraft. In the past, people from other villages used to be afraid of Khurkhul village, as this place was widely known for the practice of witchcraft. Many people believed that there were many incidents of death particularly among the priests because when two priests are in enmity, customarily they provoke each other by showing off their knowledge in the form of witchcraft or black magic. Villagers preferred to keep silent about such incidents even though they were aware of it. In present times, such incidents are very rare. But there are many villagers who still believe in evil spirits when family members fall sick. In such cases the villagers consult the priests. The villagers believe that some of the maibas in an attempt to test their power use black magic by sending evil spirits to attack others. Sometimes there were

51. The interview was held on 4th October 2001 with Kh. Joy Singh at Sekmai.
52. The interview was held on 2nd October 2001 with Phuritsabam Tomchou Singh at Khurkhul.
cases of priests losing control over the spirits and thus these spirits get wild and attack people.

**Ritual Specialists: Maibis and Maibas**

The *maibis* and *maibas* are considered as the ritual specialists. The *maibas* also act like the Shamans. There are two types of *maibis*. The first type of *maibi* go into a trance and predict the future of the individuals while the other type of *maibi* do not go into a state of trance but act as midwives. However, the popularity of the second type of *maibi* is decreasing because of the availability of modern medical facilities. In general, the *maibus* and *maibas* perform propitiatory rites for the welfare of the individuals and communities in times of critical hours. They usually dress in white because white is considered to be pure.

As ritual specialists, the *maibis* play important role in the realm of Lois’ religious life by virtue of their possession of prowess endowed by god. *Maibus* serve as mediators between gods and human beings. They deliver oracles in their state of trance, predict the future of the individuals and play important role in any ceremony. In earlier days, a *maibi*’s oracle was held in high regard by the king. Prior to any expedition, or in times of crisis, the king would consult a *maibi* who he addresses as mother (*Ima*) to seek advice.53 The words of the *maibi* were believed to be the words of god and were obeyed with great sincerity.54 Though the roles of *maibas* and *maibis* have decreased in the modern time, they continue to play important roles during religious ceremonies and rituals. For example, many people consult them when there is sickness in the house or whenever they face any trouble.

A person cannot become a *maibi* by choice. The *maibus* are believed to be appointed by the gods to intercede on behalf of human beings before gods. The *maibus* derive their power from the deities that possess them. Though the *maibus* are possessed by different deities, in

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certain cases the same deities possess many maibis. The role of the maibi, however, is not confined to women alone, some male members can also become maibis. However, there are no male maibis in the villages under study. Persons showing symptoms such as dislike of certain food items, convulsions or having matted hair are taken as exhibiting signs of becoming maibis. Otherwise, those who are suffering from such symptoms are suspected of having the state of mental imbalance. There is no age limit for a person to become a maibi. A person can become a maibi in an early age but unmarried girls are not encouraged by the parents to become maibi, usually not until they are mature enough to serve the gods.

Interestingly, at Sekmai, today villagers reported that persons who show symptoms of becoming maibi are not encouraged to become one by their family members. One informant expressed the view that though there are maibis at Sekmai, they are not original people of Sekmai but immigrants who had settled down in their village.

The extracts of interviews conducted during the fieldwork are furnished below to have a clearer understanding of how a person becomes a maibi. One respondent named Irungbam Leichon, aged 51 years, became a maibi about 10 months back i.e. in 2000.55 According to her, before she became a maibi, she was very short tempered and easily got angry without any valid reason. The first time when she went into a state of trance, she was crying and ran to the house of an elder maibi located nearby. The elderly maibi waved a bell called sarik on her head and asked her which deity had possessed her to which she replied that Nongpok ningthou deity possessed her. The younger maibi considers the older maibi as her mother who is sent by god and calls her mother (ima) maibi. She also claims that she loves her more than her own mother and feels like going to her residence very often. Perhaps this is not unusual given that the persons who become maibi learn the oracles or prophesies from the senior maibis and maibas.

55. The interview was held on 31st October 2001 with Irungbam Leichon Devi at Khurkhul.
Junior maibi in this instance informed that she is in the learning stage. She has been trying to learn the lairon (language of God) by writing it down from other senior maibas and maibis. Right now, she hardly goes out to perform rituals apart from making predictions (senmit) by throwing 4 coins in 4 directions. Among those who come to listen to her oracles, many consider her predictions to be true.

Another maibi reveals that before she gets into the state of possession, some kind of a lump comes up from the navel inside her body. This, she claims, signifies the moving of the god towards the upper part of her body. Almost everyday at least 10 to 20 people come to listen to her oracles at her house. But among those who come to hear the prophesies of the maibi are female members only. The maibi can fore-tell the purpose of visit of the person who come to listen to her without asking the concerned individual. The maibi can make out whether the person has come to listen to the oracles of the dead or living, (probably because those who come for the news of the dead would bring something to offer to the deceased without which the gods refuse to say anything). While foretelling about the dead persons, the maibi says that she can see the shadow of the dead person vaguely near the outer part (churitapham) of her house.

Interestingly, the maibi generally receives her clients only three days a week on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday since the gods usually possess her on these days. These days are also considered to be strong days. There are also fixed timings for meeting clients. The maibi sees the senmit only in the morning and early evening and avoids the afternoon. The reason for avoiding afternoon is that they are simply unable to predict since they cannot see anything at that hour. The villagers expressed the view that the predictions of the new maibis regarding any purpose are somewhat true but they also believe that in the course of time, they start lying to people.

56. The interview was held with Louriym Ahanbi on 9th April 2001 at Sekmai.
57. Men never go to listen to the oracles of the maibis.
Maibis have to refrain from certain food such as: gnakra (clariasbatrachus), gnakchrau (Lepidocephalichthysberdmorei), gnasep (macronsbleekari), ngaprum (Monopterualbus), ngarin (mastacembelus manipurensis) and any fish or animals that have horns. They also cannot use the wood of some trees such as heimang, nongkhrang, kurao, ureirom as fuel. To emphasize the importance of these restrictions the maibis interviewed stated that if they happen to eat such foods or use the tabooed trees even un-knowingly, they immediately experience form of uneasiness, such as fear or discomfort in the eyes.

Although the maibis spend most of the time outside their home performing the rites for the welfare of the people as their profession demands, no social stigma is attached to them. The maibis charge Rs.10 for one senmit. For those rituals that consume time they are paid Rs.50 to 100 but there is no fixed amount. It may be noted, in present times, maibis have become almost professional in money matters. However, one maibi, Kh. Khonarei, a 70 year old lady, reported that initially her husband was odd to say that he was a maibi’s husband.58 Later on, the feeling disappeared. Significantly from the money earned as a maibi a substantial amount goes towards the maintenance of the daily household expenses and in the construction of their house. Though she became a maibi after her marriage and had children by then, she went through a period of training like any other maibi. She states: “When god takes possession of me, I deliver whatever message he wants me to say to the person who comes for consultation. However, I do not remember anything I said while I was in a state of trance; for at that time I became oblivious of my own existence”.59 When not in a possessed state, the maibi in question is like any other woman looking after her children, grand children and other family matters.

58. The interview was held on 2nd October 2001 with Kh. Khonarei Devi at Khurkhul.
59. Ibid.
Maiba

The maibas act as priests and medical practitioners and also perform magical ceremonies. Some of the maibas have been spending years studying and looking for jungle herbs and roots of medicinal values for the treatment of sickness. The maibas are the traditional physicians who cure people of their physical as well as psychological or spiritual illnesses. As in the case of the shamans, the maiba may be described as the "primitive religious specialists". As there are different kinds of rituals and prayers for every kind of disease or ailment, the maibas have to learn these from the elders. Unlike the maibi who is believed to have been selected by gods, the maiba take up the vocation of their own will. A person can also become a maiba by heredity or succession. The powers of maibas may sometimes be used for sorcery, witchcraft, or revenge, either on the maiba's initiative or at the behest of another.

During the period of training as a maiba, a person has to learn maibalon (language of maibas), study the science of reading pulses etc. from elder maibas, who are already practicing as professionals. At the time of learning, the disciples follow their teacher from house to house, observing how the mentor examines the sick person or performs the rituals. Only after a man becomes a full-fledged maiba, do people start calling upon him in times of sickness or ritual occasions. Maibas go from house to house where treatment or prayer is to be carried out. He participates actively in rituals and treatments. According to Hodson: "The maiba is for the most part a medicinal practitioner with a good deal of empirical knowledge, which he supplements with brazen ingenuity, but he is also a rain doctor to whom men turn for help after the failure of all methods".

It needs to be emphasized that the position of maiba is not confined to the illiterates today. Even educated persons become maiba. Heikham Damar Singh, a 64 year old matriculate, was a school teacher and has been a maiba for the past 20 years.

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60. Hodson, 1908, op. cit., p.110.
61. The interview was held on 3rd October 2001 with H. Damar Singh at Khurkhul.
became a *maiba* as a result of his wife’s illness. Every now and then, he needed to call a *maiba* for his wife’s treatments, in the process ended up becoming a *maiba* himself. However, unlike other men who mostly learn from particular teachers, he did not have a teacher from whom he took instruction. He observed the treatments conducted by the *maibas* out of curiosity and personal interest. He read many books related to rituals and herbal medicines. With the acquired knowledge, he cured a number of people. He also claimed that many times he had cured people whom the doctors had given up hope and predicted that death would soon occur to them. But, despite his success, he modestly expressed that his ability to cure people who are in a dying state, could be sheer luck or a coincidence.

Another *maiba*, 80 years old Louriyam Jugol Singh, states he became a *maiba* at the age of 36. His wife is a *maibi* who is 2 years younger than him. He declared that he learnt the vocation from three teachers by following them wherever they went for over a decade. This way he went to many places in Manipur as a disciple following the elder *maibas*. After this short apprenticeship, he could cure patients suffering from problems related to sorcery, stomachache, skin diseases, etc. He also performs animal and fish sacrifices, tree worship, and other forms of worship related to traditional belief. He, however, lacks the knowledge of black magic. He also revealed that there are intense conflicts between *maibas*. For example, if one *maiba* is left to treat a patient and cannot cure the sick person, it is difficult for the family of the victim to call another *maiba* as the latter would not come in the presence of the former. Driven by competition, even use the knowledge of sorcery or black magic against each other.

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62 The interview was held on 15 February 2001 with Louriyam Jugol Singh at Khurkh.
63 He does the treatment of certain diseases such as irregularity of menstrual periods, diseases, such as boils and scabies. He makes medicines from herbs, stems, and also by using the livers of animals such as bear, monkey, cat, firefly, etc. He also says that the *maiba*’s supposed to use the liver of the firefly, but actually it is the liver of a human being. Firefly is such a small fly that extracting its liver is a difficult job. He also told the researcher how the doctors often take out liver of persons who die accidentally and use it in making medicines. During the process of making medicine, the *maibas* also recite some mantras in the medicine they prepare. However, he says that he cannot cure communicable diseases like tuberculosis, since it has more to do with the people’s habit of consumption of food and drinks.
and in the process even harm the sick person they are supposed to
cure.

Though the maibas do not have fixed charges, these days they
are paid not less than Rs.10 for a prayer and more for complicated
diseases. Some of the maibas get as much as Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 per
day. What contributes to the continued popularity of the maibas (and
maibis) is the Lois’ belief that illness is not only caused by natural/
biological factors but also a handiwork of witchcraft and spirits.

Several conceptions about the causes of illness are found in the
study area. The most widespread is that of nungsit changba, where
the air of a witch (hingchabi) enters the body of a person and make
the victim sick. Illness caused by soiren (spirit of dead infants) and
apat-apom (skin disease) believed to be caused by evil powers are also
prevalent.

In case of persons suffering from nungsit changba, to cure the
affected person, the maiba offers the food which the witch wanted to
eat. A maiba Ph. Punshi narrated that once a daughter of a sick
patient, who had been hospitalized, said that her mother’s condition
was not improving.64 The patient happened to be a relative of the
maiba, who went to visit the patient in the hospital and while feeling
the pulse of the patient, he could make out that she was suffering
from nungshit changba. He enquired her what she had eaten before
falling ill. She told him that she had eaten some fried peas. From this
the maiba surmised that the witch wanted to eat fried peas. The fried
peas to be offered to the witch was arranged by her family members
while the patient was still in the hospital. The maiba offered the foods
to the witch’s spirit calling her by uttering the following words:
hingchabi kotchabi anabada ot neiranu chaningba thakningba
chabikhro aduga chatkhro. The words invite her to take her share of
food and request her to go back where she belongs and not to trouble
the patient again. The priest said that within two days of the ritual the

patient became alright and is still alive. He further said that doctors
do not know much about the working of the witch’s air (nungsit) and
no priest can prevent it. Persons suffering from nungshit changba
usually show symptoms of stomachache, dizziness, and such cases
can be cured only by the priest.

The other popular belief concerning disease is related to the
power of the spirit of stillborn and dead infants. The spirits of such
infants are known as soiren. If a particular household is passing
through a phase of ill luck, misfortune and miseries, the maibis often
predict that the family is being troubled by the powers of soiren. These
spirits have the power to trouble humans if the fetus or body of dead
infants are disposed off without giving them the proper mortuary
rituals. As such, abortion is considered to be very bad not only for the
family but also for the whole lineage, because the fetus taken out from
the mother’s womb is left in the hospital without fulfilling the
necessary rites conducted at the time of cremation. To ward off such
eventualities the elderly women in the family would advise the
younger ones to bring the residue home after abortion so that proper
rites can be performed so that the spirits would not trouble them
later.

Another idea prevalent among the Lois is that diseases are
caused by some evil powers residing in places like paddy field,
streams, rivers, lakes, swamp etc. and harms the person whoever
comes into contact with them. If a person suffers from skin related
diseases like boils, scabies, measles, rashes etc., he/she tries to find
out the solution by consulting a maibi. The maibi ascertains the cause
of the illness and based on the predictions, offerings consisting of rice
and sacred flowers are made to appease the evil spirits with the hope
that it will cure the illness.

In general, the Lois believe that any kind of illness is caused by
the supernatural forces. Hence, in order to avoid any sickness, an
individual approaches the maibas and the maibis as personal spiritual
advisors. The importance of maibas and maibis has declined to a
certain extent, because of people's awareness of science and rationality. Yet many informants disclosed that they consult both the *maibas* and doctors simultaneously, especially when the sick person is in a critical state. *Maibas* also play an important role at religious and public celebrations and are highly respected by the people. Any ritual is incomplete without *maibas* and *maibis*. However, even though their positions are regarded as important and they play key roles on ritual occasions, today few youngsters want to become a *maiba* or a *maibi*. This has led to a general feeling that a few years from now it will be difficult to find *maibas* and *maibis* even in villages.

In addition to the rituals discussed above, which broadly relates to the propitiation of household and directional deities, ancestor worship and curing of diseases the Lois also participate in community based rituals in which the whole village is involved. One such ritual is *Lai Haraoba*, the details of which are discussed below.

**Lai Haraoba**

The *Lai Haraoba* is one of the most important traditional festivals, which gives us a glimpse of the life and art of the Manipuri society. Some authors explain the meaning of *Lai Haraoba* as the time when the gods express their enjoyment or pleasure. *Lai Haraoba* has been a prime ritual of the Loi religion performed by almost all the villages in the valley. The *Lai Haraoba* mirrors literally the entire culture of Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of Manipuri people. In the words of Y.Tamphajao: "*Lai Haraoba* is but an expression of the whole human life from birth to death. Human enjoyment is the reflection of the very image of divine happiness. This pleasure of the gods is expressed as *Lai Haraoba*". All members of the Kingdom, including the ruler and the ruled, participate in it under the direction of *maibas* and *maibis*. M.Husain opines that: “in the *Lai Haraoba* rite, the deity is worshipped in his

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own peculiar place as the chief deity of the universe without interferring at all with the claims of any other god". According to pundit Achouba (the chief of the Meitei faith), there is a belief that if Lai Haraoba is performed improperly, without following the correctly prescribed rituals, and merely for merry-making, it will bring disorder, misery and death to the country. The major theme of the Lai Haraoba is to request the gods to bless the country with prosperity. Another view related to Lai Haraoba is with regard to the creation of the universe. Pundit Kulachandra in his book 'Meitei Lai Haraoba' writes: "When Guru opened his mouth and showed all the living beings, which shall live in the earth, Asiba (a deity) exclaimed with joy and this is called Lai Haraoba". These are some of the myths related to the origin of the Lai Haraoba festival. Besides the above textual interpretation of Lai Haraoba, the local people have their own way of looking at it. According to them, the festival is celebrated for increasing the population, for abundant availability of food crops and for the protection of people from evil and for longevity of life. The festival of Lai Haraoba signifies the close relationship between man and god and it acts as a guiding light for the people. Lai Haraoba leads us to an aesthetic vision of the world in which harmony prevails over discord and divergences. It is a form of community worship being performed in honour of the gods. The village deities are believed to be the protectors of the village. Lai Haraoba expresses the entire life cycle of human life. It also depicts the growth of human being into adulthood and so on. The dances performed in Lai Haraoba is connected with the creation of the earth, for example, while dancing, the dancers lift up their hands towards the sky as a symbol of the union of earth and sky. Thus, the festival of Lai Haraoba expresses the creation of the cosmos. Priests and

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priestesses are the main performers during *Lai Haraoba*. However, the prominent role played by the priestesses during *Lai Haraoba* is noteworthy. The festival is so profound that its customs, traditions, norms and practices are still observed in minute details. Durkheim said that religion establishes group solidarity and harmony and cements the network of social relations in a given society\(^7\) and in this context, the social function of *Lai Haraoba* is to bring about social cohesion and solidarity amongst the people in general. The festival contributes to the integration and cohesive relationships among the members. It serves as a kind of cementing force among different sections of the society.

*Lai Haraoba* can be classified into three main forms though there are minor differences between them.\(^7\) These are 1. *Kanglei haraoba*: this form of *Lai Haraoba* festival is carried out at the palace, 2. *Moirang haraoba*: this form of *Lai Haraoba* festival is mainly carried out at Moirang in honour of god, Thangjing, and 3. *Chakpa Haraoba*: practiced in the Loi villages. The *Lai Haraoba* practised by the Lois are considered to be the most authentic and original in character, devoid of any outside influence. Though there are slight differences in the procedure of *Lai Haraoba* from place to place, the main feature of the festival remains intrinsically the same everywhere. However, certain differences in style and presentation cannot be ignored. Thus, in the two villages, where the study has been conducted, the practice and customs of *Lai Haraoba* followed are slightly different from each other though the main rituals and core objectives are the same.

The celebration of *Lai Haraoba* usually starts from the northern side of Manipur, where the god Koubru resides. Thus the *Lai Haraoba* festival first starts at Sekmai because the village deity of Sekmai is Koubru\(^7\) followed by Khurkhul and other Loi villages. *Lai Haraoba* is

\(^7\) Parratt,op. cit., 1980, p.54.  
\(^7\) The people of Sekmai also said that Koubru is not the original god of Sekmai. Before they came to Sekmai, an ethnic group called 'Yaroi' had settled in the present area and Koubru is the deity of Yaroi and the actual deities of Sekmai were Wangbaren, Ikok Ningthou etc. Subsequently, they started worshipping the deity of 'Yaroi' and their deities together.
celebrated both at Sekmai and Khurkhul in the month of *Phairen*, which coincides with the English month of February/March. The festival ends in the southern villages of the state such as *Moirang, Phugakchao* and *Sugnu*.

People of Sekmai believe that if *Lui Haraoba* starts in some other village other than Sekmai, then natural calamities or some bad incidents would occur in their village and other parts of the State. It could, however, be argued that since the month of *Phairen* is at the end of Manipuri calendar one wonders how *Lai Haraoba* of Sekmai is considered the first one to be celebrated in a year. The response given by former Pundit of Sekmai *Lai Haraoba*, Y.Yaima, to this query is a convincing one. According to him, though the month *Phairen* happens to be at the end of the Manipuri year, it is in fact the beginning of a new spring season. People of Sekmai thereby argued that unless *Lai Haraoba* is first celebrated in their village, there is a possibility of many people dying because such incidents had happened before. Thus, the *Lai Haraoba* ceremony is celebrated annually for around ten days at Sekmai. In contrast to Sekmai, *Lai Haraoba* is celebrated only once in two or three years at Khurkhul. According to the villagers, the reason for not celebrating *Lai Haraoba* every year is because of the heavy cost involved, which drains away their budget, since the village temple is situated at a distance of a kilometer from the village. They also pointed out that since earlier times there were no such rules that *Lai Haraoba* has to be celebrated every year. Though there is no annual celebration the villagers worship the village deities with awe and reverence. The villagers of Khurkhul reported that about 55 years back, every *sagei* used to celebrate *Lai Haraoba* festival. In those days the village *Lai Haraoba* could not take place before the celebration of the *sagei Lai Haraoba*.

In preparation of the *Lai Haraoba* ceremony, news is sent by the village officials to the villagers so that the villagers can make arrangements and procure the various items required for the ceremonies, such as bamboo and hay and also to collect contributions
of money from the villagers. Male members mainly carry out the various activities though females also participate. For example, at Khurkhul, male members between the age group of 23 to 40 years are responsible for keeping vigilance of the temple area at night during *Lai Haraoba* ceremony and to clean up the place in and around the temple. This age group is also responsible for making the hut. The age group from 41 to 63 years is responsible for bringing the bamboo stripes to make the hut. Those aged 64 years and above are exempted from such duties and so are their wives though the latter may be below 64 years of age. In the past, different huts were made for different officials, priests and priestesses but now a days, the huts are made of bricks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets. In Khurkhul, there is a pond in the courtyard of the temple called *pakhangba kom* (Kom=pond). The villagers also clean up this place where they believe a snake used to appear at the time of *Lai Haraoba*. Only the officials who carry the title of *Pakhangba* could tame the snake.

*Lai Haraoba* festivals that took place at Sekmai and Khurkhul at the time of fieldwork in February 2001 were a fascinating experience. In the *Lai Haraoba* festival, what is being displayed first is about the creation of the universe, particularly heaven and earth. The sequence of events can be described as follows:

1. **Preparation of liquor:** Three days before the *Lai Haraoba* the women of Sekmai village distill 'Pukyu', a kind of country liquor at the house of either *Khullakpa* or *Luplakpa* (village officials).

2. **Yam suba** (grinding the rice into powder): The activity takes place in the house of *Khulakpa* and *Luplakpa* (village officials). On this day, the powdered rice (*yam*) is brought to the temple by some women and the village officials look after the making of the baskets for keeping fruits, meat and other requirements.

3. **Lai phi shuba** (washing the clothes of the deities): The clothes worn by the deities are washed in a river by the womenfolk on an auspicious day just before the festival. The washing of the clothes is done according to the status of the gods, starting from higher gods to the lower gods or from the most important deity to
the lesser important ones. 4. Lai phi shetpa (clothing the deities): The clothes are adorned by the males for the male deities and by the females for the female deities. 5. Sha phaba: Some years back, the villagers used to hunt animals for sacrifice to the deities before Lai Haraoba festival. However, in present times, pigs are no longer hunted but bought and kept in the village court (Loishang). One day before the Lai Haraoba, the pigs are brought to the temple for sacrifice to the deities.

In Sekmai, there are 12 main deities, namely, Koubru, Kounu, Loya Lakpa, Thoudu Nunghel Leima, Nongpok Ningthou, Panthoibi, Sarailen, Toibi Leima, Ikok Ningthou, Leisana, Tampha Lairenbi and Leimaren Sidabi. In addition to the above deities, there is another deity called Koujengleima and her shrine is located away from the rest of the deities. She is believed to be another wife of Koubru and is worshipped with equal importance with the other deities. During Lai Haraoba, the figures of Koubru, his wife, son and daughter-in-law are taken to her shrine and a day is specially assigned to celebrate in her honour.

In Khurkhul there are 6 deities namely, Koubru, Kounu, Loyarakpa, Thiba Marangambi, Ishing Chaiba, Nunghel Leima. The Lai Haraoba of Khurkhul is however, celebrated in the name of Ichum Lairembi which is believed to be manifestation of these six deities. Brass or wooden masks represent the deities and clothes are put on the upper and lower part of the idol as though they are dressed. At Khurkhul, all the goddesses are placed on the right side of the gods which is unusual in other Lai Haraobas. In Andro, another Loi village, at the time of Lai Haraoba of Panam Ningthou (village deity of Andro) no outsider is allowed to enter or participate during the festival.

On the first day of Lai Haraoba, there is a ceremony called Lai Ikouba (calling out the souls of the gods). A procession led by a priest

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73 Koubru and Kounu are regarded as the deities of Khullakpa. Lai Ishing Chaiba and Thingba Maram Ngambi are regarded as the deities of Luplakpa while Ishing chaiba and Thoudu Nunghel Leima as the deities of Khunjamba.
and priestess made their way to the river to call out the souls of the gods and goddesses from the water. They are accompanied by two women carrying fruits (heiruk), another two carrying pots (nahaiphu), two men playing musical instruments (pena) and two another playing the rhythmic movement with a drum, some girls carrying the deities on their shoulders and some boys and girls carrying umbrellas (chong-pe) for the deities. These are further followed by two men who perform spear dance (khousaba) in front of the deities, and by the village officials. While making their way to the river, whenever they had to cross a stream the maiba offers Khayom (a food packet consisting of rice, sacred leaves and eggs wrapped within layers of banana leaves) to the deities. On reaching the destination, the maibi calls out the souls by using a thread. As this goes on, the musicians (pena khongba) play on their instruments. After that, the maibis perform a dance facing the guardian deities of the four directions, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbaren and Koubru, accompanied by womenfolk singing hymns. Lastly, the pots are filled with water from the river and the procession makes its way back to the shrine. The beatings of drums announce the return of the deities from the river. Elderly women wait for the arrival of the deities with torch of fire in their hands near the gate of the temple. Then, the deities are placed inside the temple on a wooden throne. Buds of a sacred plant (langthrei maton), a mound of rice with eggs placed on top are kept before the deities. Along with these articles, seasonal fruits, vegetables and other items are placed as offerings. In addition to the village deities, the offerings of the above mentioned articles are also made to nine other gods (Laipangthous) and seven goddesses (Lainuras). The maibas and the maibis wash the hands and the feet of the deities and after that, they wash themselves up. The worshippers then put on clean ceremonial clothes. The atmosphere is kept away from pollution and uncleanliness. This is followed by the ritual of anam aha kokpa, whereby a maiba sprinkles water from a pot containing sacred leaves (tairen) to ward off evils and to purify the people present at the ceremony.
Next, the *maibis* dance in front of the deities followed by a spear dance (*Khousaba*) by a male. Then, the *maibis* go into a state of trance and predict the future of the village. Later the youths of the village sacrifice pigs before the deities. After that, different types of country liquor, ('*pukyu* 'and 'waiyu') cooked meat, boiled rice and curries are offered to the deities. Sometimes, after the offerings are made, the pundit removes the offered food as a sign that the deities had consumed the food. The day ended with the villagers consuming the offered items, with the largest share of the meat going to the village officials.

On the second and subsequent days of *Lai Haraoba*, the musicians wake up the deities by playing on the musical instrument. The *maibis* then go into a trance to predict the future of the villagers. After that, the deities are taken to a place called *Nungpak thabi* where their blessings are solicited for the success of the *Lai Haraoba* ceremony. The pundit conducts the rites by offering fruits and flowers while young girls dance after having requested the deities to allow them to dance during the festival. The deities are then brought back to the original place. From this day onwards, the villagers can start their activities of celebration such as dance and dramas, which they have prepared for months. The famous legends of the kingdom such as *Lainingthou Khoirifaba*, *Nongpok Ningthou-Panthoibi*, *Sannalembi* and *Khamba-Thoibi* are played out by the participants in the form of dance and songs.

On the third day, after waking up the deities, the priests and priestesses and other followers go to a hill called *Ingel ching* to request the deity which resides in the hill for the *Laibou-chongba* (a kind of dance accompanied by a hymn) and also request the hill people to participate in the ceremony. But the role of the hill people is usually played by two of the villagers who dress in their costume. From this day onwards, people perform *Laibou-chongba* every evening till the last but one day before the end of the festival. The dance of *Laibou*
chongba is headed by musicians (pena khongba), followed by the priestess, then the man who dances with a spear (Khousaba) then the village officials and their wives, then the villagers who play the role of hill people, and then whoever wants to participate in the dance. Pregnant and women in menstruation cannot participate in the dance or other religious ceremonies as they are considered to be unholy during this period.

On the 4th, 5th and the 6th day of the Lai Haraoba till the second last day of the ceremony, the deities are woken up in the same fashion. However, fruits and flowers offered to the deities are changed everyday and the pots are filled with fresh water. Devotees from far and near gather with their offerings for the fulfillment of their wishes, such as cure from some disease or solution to other problems. All members who are married out of the village should send their offerings to the deities during the festival.

As indicated earlier, an interesting feature of the Lai Haraoba festival is the prediction of the future by the maibi. After chanting and ringing the bell the maibi goes into a state of trance and delivers oracles predicting the future of the state and also the future of individuals. Adding a touch of modernity to the rites the maibi uses the microphone while delivering the oracles.

In the Lai Haraoba festival at Khurkhul where the author was present, the maibi while in the state of trance made three predictions about the fate of some persons in the village. The first one was on an elderly woman from the northern side of the village who was sick and whose family members were worried about her. The maibi assured the relatives not to worry and everything would be fine. But to achieve

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74. The pena khongba sings the divine songs followed by the village officials and some of the village youths sing the song rather loudly and beat the big drum with full of joy and appiness. The wordings of the divine songs used during Laihouchongba are "Ha Hei Hei Ha Ha Ha, Hoi Hoi Ha Ha Ha Herin Linla Herinla Hennla, Hayute Khulaiite Heiyase Tahou Hou He Hou Haya Naketa". The content of the song expresses the joy of the people to the creator of the living beings.

75. During the Lai Haraoba ceremony, the village youths beat a big drum which is called pungjao and it can be used only during the Lai Haraoba festival and it is kept inside a hut by hanging just opposite to temple.
this the *maibi* suggested the members of the household would have to offer a meal to the deity called, *Beitarani guru*. The *maibi* directed the family members to offer living fish at a particular place on the southern side from where the house is located. The purpose of conducting this rite, which is called *ushin*, is that the fish would absorb the ill fate faced by the patient and her condition would be improved. Further, the *maibi* predicted that the fate of the dying person would be decided within three months. Even though the *maibi* said not to worry, her last word was that it would be difficult to say that the sick woman would remain till her younger child is settled down.

The second oracle is about a woman who has three sons. In this regard, the *maibi* predicted that the last son of the woman is going to be in trouble and is going to meet evil spirits at the meeting point of the three lanes in the village. In this case, the *maibi* suggested that foodstuffs consisting of rice and meat should be offered to the tree that grows at the southern side of her house and only then the deity can protect the child from the trouble.

The third oracle is about two women who came from far off places to listen to the oracle of *Ima Ichum Lairembi*. On this occasion the *maibi* began by saying: “Before you entered into the temple, you were feeling so bad that you do not have fresh fruits and vegetables to offer me”. Further, she went on: “your house is facing lots of problem, there are lots of infighting going on in your house because your household deities are not appeased by the owner of the house”. The *maibi* advised, “You worship your household deities with proper rituals, then your house will become more peaceful”.

Among the crowd, who came daily to listen to the oracles during the festivals, the most conspicuous were the elderly women. The people may be skeptical about the predictions made by the *maibi* but most women generally comply with the suggestions made by the *maibi*, such as offering prayers with the help of a *maiba* to appease the deities so as to ward off from the trouble that awaits them.
During the *Lai Haraoba* festival, one can sense the festive mood of the villagers from morning onwards. One can see that most of the village girls have prepared the cultural dance programme for months under a dance teacher to perform in the ceremony. The performers are mostly from the village but sometimes outsiders also take part in the dance or drama programme. At Sekmai, professionals are often called to perform the dances and dramas. Village girls and young married women are generally engaged in arranging the clothes and gold jewellery worn during the functions. They compete among themselves to wear the best clothes and ornaments to the various functions. Women and girls wear their colourful traditional clothes. Besides the usual cream and oil, modern makeup such as lipsticks and eye colouring form part of their beauty gear. The boys who participate in *Lai Haraoba* must compulsorily wear dhoti and *pumyat* (a shirt up to the knee length), while those who do not participate in the programme but come only to watch could attend in shirts and trousers.

A day before the *Lai Haraoba* festival ends, the deities are taken back to the same place from where they had been brought for the festival, with offerings of fruits and sweetmeats. As usual, the boys and girls perform the dance which is called *Jagoi Thindokpa* (to return the dance back). At Khurkhul, the village officials, along with their wives, also perform a special dance called, *Kaothrenbi Chongba*, which is performed in accompaniment of hymns. While dancing to the rhythm of the tune of the song, the male participants stand on the eastern side and the female participants on the west. Though the villagers do not know the meanings of the song, it is sung during *Lai Haraoba* as an integral part of the ritual. On this particular day, other programmes are not performed except the above-mentioned rituals.

On the last day of *Lai Haraoba*, there are no longer any entertainment programmes, though the morning rituals are observed

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76. The lyrics of the songs are *Kaorthrenbi_Kaorthrenbi, Kaona maton wainashi,Kao hung Kao,Kao hung Kao.*
as usual. Pigs are sacrificed on this day and cooked food and meat are offered to the deities. Also as usual, new fruits and vegetables are offered. Then, the wives of the village officials along with other women of the village sing the hymn *(Lai Ishei)* called *Nongaron* (*Nongaba* means to die) to mark the end of the festival. On this day, the deities and the people bid farewell and the gods are requested to rest till the next ceremony takes place. Then the clothes used by the deities during the festival are taken by some of the village officials and kept in their houses till needed again.

The festival comes to an end with a feast by the members of the village who participate in the *Lai Haraoba* and the performance of the ritual called *saroï-khangba* to ward-off the evil spirits who are believed to be watching the festival. After the feast the *maiba* performs the rite of offering foods such as rice, fruit, flour and parched rice along with sacred plants like, *langthrei* and *heibimana* at the four corners of the courtyard to propitiate the evil spirits.

The village officials, priests, priestesses, musician and pundit play the most important role during *Lai Haraoba* festival and special seats are kept for them during the festival. The village officials at Khurkhul have to stay back at night inside the premises of the temple but their wives have to return home. This is to ensure that the officials refrain from sexual acts as these are considered to be impure during the festival of *Lai Haraoba*.

Notwithstanding the strong solidarity among the people there are also signs of fragmentations within the villagers during the festival. The researcher met many people who did not participate in the ceremony though they believe in the village deities and regularly worship them whenever the need arises. The reason for abstention is due to the infightings that had occurred for the post of village officials in the recent past. Apart from political rivalry, some people abstained from taking part in *Lai Haraoba* festival because of conflicts with the modern day commitments. For example, A. Kunjo Singh of Sekmai stated: "My son is studying in Delhi but I have to call him back home
to participate in *Lai Haraoba*. Since we do not want to interrupt his study we have decided not to participate in the festival at all." The village officials on the other hand, do not seem to understand the problems faced by the people today. In their view, since *Lai Haraoba* needs lots of manpower particularly the youth to run around and organize the functions, they could not allow only the fathers to come and enjoy the festivals or have the good meals in which his son could not give his labour since he stays away from the village.

Such conflicts considerably undermine the unifying force traditionally played by the *Lai Haraoba* festival. The record manuscript of *Lai Haraoba*, maintained by the Lai Committee of Khurkhul, shows that the rules and regulations followed by their ancestors for *Lai Haraoba* were stricter in the earlier days. They wonder whether the conflict of interest visible today is because of the diminishing power of the gods and goddesses. To accommodate the changes the villagers resorted to flexibility. Henceforth they can remove or modify rules observed during the festival by making a request to the gods and goddesses one year in advance.

What is significant about the account of Loi religion presented above is that many of these were shared with the Meitei of pre-Hindu Manipur. In fact, most of the myths and rituals focused in the thesis are so deeply enmeshed with the Meitei tradition that it is impossible to separate the two. This explains why some informants hold the view that the Lois were/are the original Meities. To understand how the change has come about and its effect on the religious life of the people a brief look at the emergence of Hinduism in the state would be appropriate at this juncture.

**Emergence of Hinduism in Manipur**

In early 17th and 18th centuries, there was a vigorous movement of Hinduization in the northeastern region of India, which

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77. The interview was held with Angom Kunjo of Sekmai on 14th October 2001.
78. The response was given by village officials of Sekmai, Laisangbam Lokhol Singh and Laimayum Dhananjoy on 30th April 2001 at Sekmai.

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was also felt in Manipur. During this period, three different forms of Vaishnavism were witnessed viz, Nimbarka school or Nimandi, Ramananda school and Chaitanya school (known popularly as Gouriya). It is worthwhile to trace the historical background of the advent of these different cults of Hinduism. Saivism or Saktism, along with Tantrik rituals, enjoyed some sorts of prominence as early as 8th century A.D. as evident from the copper plate of King Khongtekcha (763-773 A.D.). The worship of Vishnu or Vaishnavism began in the 15th century during the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.). But conversion of the royal Meitei families into Hinduism took place during the rule of King Charairongba (1697-1709). However, this could not create much impact on the common people. In addition, the migration of the Brahmin community into the Kingdom of the Meitei kings also contributed to the spread of Hinduism.

Charairongba was the first Meitei king to formally embrace Hinduism in 1704 A.D. However, chronicle records show that despite his conversion and propagation for the spread of Vaishnavism, he could not entirely make a break from the traditional Meitei religious beliefs and practices. It required a man of deep religious commitment and revolutionary spirit, like Garibaniwaz, to bring about a religious reform in a conservative and tradition bound society like that of the Meiteis. It was Garibaniwaz or Gopal Singh (1709-1748), the son of Charairongba, who raised Vaisnavism to the height of a state religion. He donned the sacred thread from the hands of his preceptor and declared himself as a Kshatriya. He ordered all his subjects to don the sacred thread and adopt the Vaishnava customs. The king offered charity to all the kith and kin of the Brahmin community and they were given respectable place in the royal durbar. The Brahmins exerted their influence in the social and religious ceremonies held either by the royal household or by other Meiteis in the kingdom.

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According to Kabui: "Propagation of a new religion was started with full vigour after 1720 under the active guidance of Shantidas (a vaishnava preacher from the neighbouring district of Sylhet) who converted the great Manipuri King Garibaniwaz." It is noteworthy that the advent of Hinduism marked the erosion of Meitei culture and tradition. Under the instigation of Shantidas, the king collected the books and ancestral records, written in old Meitei script, and burnt them all at Kangla. He prohibited the use of the Meitei script and replaced it with Bengali script. He forced the people to embrace Hinduism and those who violated Hindu dietary laws were severely punished. In an attempt to replace the ancient faith with Vaishnavism, the king resorted to oppressive methods. The king declared eating of beef and other meat as taboo in his kingdom. Similarly, the rearing of pigs and poultry farming were banned in the capital area. But there were a few sections of the population who did not convert to Hinduism and retained their traditional belief and custom and even continued to rear livestocks. This section of people took refuge on the foothills of Manipur in order to escape from the displeasure and punishment of the king. In the course of time, they also came to be known as the Lois.

The royal chronicle, 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' records that in 1724 A.D., the king exhumed the bones of his ancestors and cremated on the banks of the Ningthee river (the choice of this location could have been prompted by the desire to have the ashes scattered over the water). From that time onwards, cremation became the customary method of disposal of the dead. Hindu calendar was also introduced during this period. The encomium went to King Garibaniwaz who took a patronizing lead for the radical Sanskritisation of the social, cultural and racial identity of the Meiteis. The zenith of Vaishnavite glory was achieved during the reign of King Bhagyachandra who constructed the famous temple of Govindajee. The shrine of this temple was

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81. Ibid., p.253.
82. Ibid.
adorned with the idol of Lord Govindajee, carved out of a sacred tree brought from the Kaina Hills in 1780 A.D. Wooden images of Krishna, Radha and Nityanda were also carved and installed in many places. In the 19th century, Vaishnavism made further progress under the patronage of King Gambhir Singh (1825-1835), and his son, Chandrakriti Singh (1851-1886). The latter's reign is often regarded as the epoch making era of Vaishnavism in Manipur. During this period, the state witnessed considerable awakening of the Vaishnavite music and dance.

Again, according to Kabui: "The process of Sanskritization in Manipur had multifaceted expressions in the realm of political organization, religious worship, social organization and even in the historical and literary studies". For instance, the kings were coronated to the throne with the Hindu titles of Maharaja; temples were built for Hindu gods and goddesses like Rama, Hanuman, Krishna, Kali, Ganesh etc. This, however, does not mean the complete disappearance of the earlier practices. Side by side, the old Meitei religious beliefs and rituals were in vogue. Influence of Hinduism on the Lois

With the advent of Hinduism the ruling Meitei aristocracy and well to do commoners started to identify themselves with the Kshatriya castes. These along with the Brahmins who migrated into the land in the 15th century constitute the bulk of the Hindu population in Manipur. The Lois were neither absorbed into the Kshatriya caste nor into the Brahmin caste. In this context, Manipur Gazette had recorded that: "As a corollary of the new social order organized on the caste line, the chunk of people who had been excommunicated from the social mainstream under the designation 'Lois' came to be treated as being exterior to the caste Meitei society."
This, however, does not mean that Hinduism has had no influence on the Lois. Although, realistically speaking, the large majority of the Lois of the present study area remained outside the pale of Hinduism, some section driven by the desire to emulate the lifestyles and social status of the Meitei embraced Hinduism. The process, however, came at a heavy price. In the formal initiation of the Lois into Manipuri Hinduism, the Lois had to change their dietary habits and after a period of probation had to obtain the permission of the king to wear the sacred thread. They were not immediately given the full privileges and status associated with Hindus. In this context, Hodson writes: “Much disgust was excited among the orthodox Hindus by the claims of the Loi villages to be allowed to style themselves Hindus when the Census officers asked them to state their religion.”

The movement for the up-gradation of the Lois into Hindu Meiteis may be term as “Meiteisation” which is similar to the term ‘Sanskritisation’ used by M.N. Srinivas to imply the process by which a low caste Hindu or tribal group changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of the high or twice-born caste. For the purpose of acquisition of the Meitei status, it is expediently obligatory on the part of the Loi people to wash their hands off all the inherent Loi traits, taking of meat and liquor, and other traditional customs that point to their low status identity, and to acquire the traits that go with high status Meitei identity. It is said that the "money loving king" also helped some to move up in the hierarchy. Johnston states that "A man belonging to a hill-tribe, for instance, could, if the Rajah chose, at any time receive the sacred thread of the twice-born castes, and on payment of a small sum of money be admitted as a Hindoo (=Hindu) and was thenceforth called a khetree". It has been reported that some of the Lois accepted

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85 Ibid.
86 M.N.Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India (Bombay :Orient Longman), 1972, p.6.
87 James Johnstone, Manipur and Naga Hills, (Delhi : Cultural Publishing House), 1896,p.84.
Vaishnavism with the sole purpose of acquiring the high status of the Meitei Hindu by giving money to the king.

M. Sanahal Sharma, a Manipuri Brahmin of Khurkhul, narrated the story of how some sections of the Khurkhul Loi got converted into Hinduism, locally called Goura dharma, to escape the harsh laws of the village. According to Sharma, his father was the first Brahmin who settled in the village in 1933 A.D. There were disagreements between the villagers with regard to the administration of the village and also over the position of the headman and other officials who were in charge of the village administration. The rules of the village were very strict that anybody who violated them was punished severely by being blind-folded and hand-cuffed and placed under a big drum called pungjao (pungjao is still there in the village) where the villagers could beat him with cane sticks. At that time, some sections of the villagers did not want to be under the leadership of the village head; so they decided to convert to Hinduism. For this purpose, they approached the then King Churachand Maharaj to allow them to convert to Hinduism. For this purpose, they approached the then King Churachand Maharaj to allow them to convert to Hinduism. The king discussed the matter with the Brahma Sabha and the Sabha permitted them to embrace Hinduism. Conversion, however, did not come without a fee. According to R. Constatine: “Before World War II, the amount fixed for the process of up-gradation was Rs 81. The person pays the amount and a kind of purification ceremony follows. For the person concerned, it is a re-birth without dying”. Thus, people were able to convert to Hinduism by offering money to the king. Accordingly, around 20 individuals of three different sageis (lineage), namely, Usham, Phuritsabam and Ngangbam of the village changed their religion in the presence of Churachand Maharaj. The king himself came to attend the initiation ceremony called laiming louba in Manipuri, which was organized for the first time in the village. Some of the individuals who got converted to Hinduism were Rupachandra,

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88. Council of Brahmins.
89. Constantine, op.cit., 1981, p.42
Mangolsingh and Lokhon. Rupachandra got the title *sevok ahan*, which means the first convert, given to him by King Churachand. A special seat was reserved for him in the palace and the locality he settled in is called *sevok leikai*.

Initially, the Hinduised Lois used to stay together in a particular locality called *sevok leikai*, but gradually spread to other parts of the village. Some of the converts migrated to urban areas of Manipur. Those who got converted to the new religion had to take an oath by standing on a slab which is regarded as the witness. Those who converted to Hindu religion had to promise to follow Hindu dietary laws and customs and should not take alcohol or meat that is prohibited by Hindu customs. The king purified this section of people and their descendants three times by giving them the sacred thread called *lugun thangba* in Manipuri. The Hinduised Lois were in need of a Brahmin to perform the Hindu rites and rituals. They requested the king to send a Brahmin but none of the Brahmins wanted to go to the village since their numbers were small. They were also scared of the villagers’ knowledge of black magic and witchcraft. However, conversion went on and the numbers of converted Lois were on the rise. At last, the king ordered the Brahma Sabha to send a 16 year-old Brahmin called M. Tolen Sharma to Khurkhul. According to Ch. Budhi Singh: “as a mark of consummation of the new religious identification, a Hindu temple was installed in each of their (Loi) villages with one Brahmin family or so attached there to officiate the Hindu ritual way of life of the villagers”. The Hinduised Lois offered him a place to stay and a small temple with a *mandap* (a big *pandal* in front where all religious festivals are celebrated) as ordered by the king. As a mark of gratitude towards the Meitei king, the Hinduised individuals of Khurkhul offered plantain trees to the palace during festivals like *Krishna Janamma, Thourani Janamma* and *Rathajatra*.

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The descendants of the new converts are supposed to follow the norms of local Hinduism practised by the Meiteis, by performing the *laiming louba* (initiation ceremony) and taking the sacred thread on an auspicious day, at any age, but usually before marriage. Both the ceremonies are compulsory for men but women have to undergo only one ceremony, i.e., *laiming louba*. As followers of Hinduism, the converted Lois apply *chandan* from the forehead up to the nose or simply on the forehead.

As stated at the outset, the above account refers to only some section of Lois and is not representative of the entire Loi society which, till the process of scheduling, remained external to Hinduism. Indeed many scholars, including Hodson, Nabakumar, Budhi Singh, and Bino Devi have pointed out that when Garibaniwaz introduced Vaisnavism as a State religion, the Loi communities did not embrace it as their religion. Bino Devi, in particular, after critically analyzing the religion of the Lois, pointed out that if the Lois had embraced Hinduism, along with the Meiteis, they would not have been looked down as degraded and low caste people. She further writes that the Loi community was isolated from the Meiteis because of their beliefs and practices in traditional religion. The author seems to focus only on one aspect of the issue, ignoring the other facts. As already mentioned above, the Loi population consists of not only those who refuse to convert into Hinduism but also those who violated social customs and traditions and committed crimes against the kings. However, it is a fact that those who refused to convert into Hinduism were pushed into the degraded position of Lois. In this context, T.C. Hodson writes: “The religious changes introduced by

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Gharib Nawaz (Garibaniwaz) were the occasion of wholesale deportations to Loi villages.95

The degradation of the Lois was further reinforced with India's independence and subsequent integration of Manipur into the Indian union whereby unHinduised Lois who remained outside the Meitei fold were conferred with Scheduled Caste status, which not only officially recognized them as Hindus but also added an ideological colour to their subordination. Before that, while the Lois were put under forced segregation and obliged the Meitei kings with their obeisance and fixed occupation of distillation of wine, rearing fowls and pigs that the Vaisanavite Meitei considered as degraded there was no ideological stigma attached to their position. But with scheduling the Lois have been pushed to the bottom rung of the ritual ladder.

Theoretically, the concept of Lois as Hindus is a recent development, since only in 1956 the Lois were categorized as Scheduled Caste. But it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the Lois of the study areas have been categorized as Hindus without formally converting into Hinduism. Whereas, for all official purposes, such as filling up forms or identifying their religion for the Census the villagers declare themselves as Hindus, in practice, Hinduism has had little influence on their life. To be sure, a small section of the Lois started to adopt Hindu practices in an attempt to integrate themselves with the Meitei society. Yet their religious life reflects the dominance of traditional elements. For instance, Swasti Puja is performed alongside the traditional ritual yupanthaba and a maiba would be called to preside over the ritual instead of a Brahmin. Thus, notwithstanding the process of Meiteiization, Hindu rituals have not replaced the traditional rituals.

Further enquiry into their religious beliefs and practices reveals that many of the Lois neither keep idols of Hindu gods and goddesses in their house nor worship them. There are no Hindu temples located in the villages except the one in the Brahmin's house. They also told

95. T.C.Hodson, op.cit., 1908, pp.9-10.
the researcher that they neither go to the temple of the village Brahmins nor to other Hindu temples. In addition, the Lois do not observe some of the ceremonies performed by Meitei Hindus such as *laiming louba*\(^{96}\), signifying transformation of the stage of childhood to adulthood, *lugun thangba*, ceremony for wearing the sacred thread etc. The Lois have more faith and belief in their household deities, village deities, etc. Unlike the Meitei Hindus, they offer meat and liquor to these deities. They also sacrifice pigs, chickens and fishes to propitiate these deities. Tree reverence forms an important feature of their religion. The belief in evil spirits and witchcraft strongly looms in the minds of the villagers. *Maibas*, village pundits and *maibis* are their important ritual specialists rather than the Brahmins. Frequently, the Lois offer oblation to these deities and ancestors to propitiate their spirits so that they would protect them from grief and miseries.

The above account supports the view that the Lois are unconverted Hindus. Animistic beliefs and practices, rather than Brahmanic Hinduism, play a significant role in the daily lives of the Lois. This adherence to their tradition has not only helped the Lois to preserve their religion but also their distinctiveness from the Meitei (who are immersed in Brahmanic Hinduism).

**Christianity**

Apart from Hinduism, another religion which has made its appearance among the Lois is Christianity though the faith is confined to a very small section of the community. Christianity started spreading in Manipur from 1894 onwards under the proselytization of William Pettigrew. Before reaching Manipur, Pettigrew already had learnt Manipuri language (*Meitei loi*) during his stay in Cachar during 1891-1894. With the permission of the acting political agent of Manipur, Pettigrew started working in Manipur by establishing schools in the valley in an attempt to spread Christianity. However, his attempt to convert the Vaisnavite Meiteis was not

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\(^{96}\) *Laiming louba* ceremony is also used in another context. If a Loi wants to convert to Hinduism they have to go through a purification ceremony called *Laiming louba*.  

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successful because Hinduised Meiteis took Pettigrew's preaching as a deliberate attempt to impose upon them the colonial government's religion. Fearing trouble, Maxwell, the political agent tried to maintain the neutral religious policy of the British by issuing an ultimatum to Pettigrew to work in the hills or stop his missionary activity. Consequently, Pettigrew was allowed to work at Ukhrul among the Tangkhul Nagas. In the hills too, the villagers looked upon Christianity with suspicion initially fearing that the new religion would affect their traditional beliefs and practices. To win the confidence of the people, Pettigrew established schools where Christian teachings were offered along with secular education. Along with these, dispensaries were set up and medicines were distributed. This way the missionaries adopted an integrated approach to spread Christianity and made it attractive. The schools attracted a large number of students from far and near villages, and slowly, many converted to Christianity. Soon conversions occurred on a large scale. Wherever missionary schools were established, churches also came up in the same complex. Today, more than 90% of the populations in the hill areas of the State are Christians, indicative of the wide success of the missionaries. At present, Christianity is not confined to the hills alone. The impact of missionaries is evident even in the valley, facilitated by the large number of missionary schools.

M. Kirti Singh observes: "The Hindu orthodoxy, under the king of Manipur and the rigidity in absorbing the Hill peoples favoured the missionaries to convert the people from a low caste background such as the Scheduled caste groups, the Andros, the Phayengs and the Yaithibis."\footnote{M. Kirti Singh, Religion and Culture of Manipur (Delhi: Manas Publications), 1988, p.59.} He further notes that the decision taken by the Lois, while accepting Christianity, was usually at the family, community or village level.\footnote{Ibid.} On the contrary, it is being found that none of the Loi villages situated on the foothills of Manipur accepted Christianity either in the community, village or family level. In fact, those
individuals who adopted Christianity have been expelled from the lineage (sagei).

Notwithstanding the strong reservation against Christianity, its impact is not lost on the Lois though its spread in the Loi villages has been a recent phenomenon. M. Kirti Singh99 and Constantine100 state that Purum Singh and his family of Phayeng Loi village were the first to adopt Christianity. The authors, however, did not specify when Purum Singh and his family were converted. If he was the first person who converted to Christianity then it would have taken place in the late 19th century since the spread of Christianity in the State started around that time. However, according to information provided by the villagers of Sekmai and Khurkhul, Christianity made its appearance in their village only in the later part of the 20th century. They point to the date of establishment of churches in their villages to support this view. It was only in 1979 that a church was established at Sekmai, and in 1993 at Khurkhul. However, it cannot be ignored that a few Lois might have already converted to Christianity before the churches were established in the villages.

Presently, there are around 50 converted Christians at Sekmai, whereas at Khurkhul the number of converted individuals is 36. At Khurkhul, there is a pastor, sent from Churachandpur district. According to the information given by the converts there was no forceful conversion. Though the pastor and his wife converse with the villagers about their religion from time to time, conversion has been a matter of individual choice. The converts go to the church every Sunday for worship and on every Wednesday practise Bible study and choir singing. 101 Unlike the Lois converted to Hinduism, Christians no longer worship the household deities or any other deities but believe only in Jesus.

101. Other sagei members expelled those who got converted to Christianity since it was a violation of sagei traditional religious norm.
This has resulted in the expulsion of converts from the lineage. Today, however, the expulsions are mostly confined to the realm of rituals. Evidence shows that while the converts and non-converts keep away from each other's houses during religious ceremonies, the converts are not totally ex-communicated. The converted contribute Rs 50/100 on ceremonial occasions such as Christmas and offer fresh fruits or vegetables grown in their courtyard at the beginning of the season. Some offer money, while others offer pigs and chicken but they do not sacrifice meat in front of Jesus. The offered items are usually sold off and the money kept for the maintenance of the church and the animals are kept for festival feasts. A 32 year-old woman, a convert from Sekmai, said that her marriage in the church is not approved by her parents. She is not even allowed to enter either her parental house or of her lineage members as her marriage ceremony was performed according to the church rules. She and her husband did not want to pray to the household deities as worshipping deities is against the Christian religion. A similar story was narrated by another woman, aged 35 years, who stated that her marriage in the church was accepted only much later by her parents and relatives. Though some of the converts face harassment and humiliation at the hands of the non-converts, they staunchly stick to their new faith. Romoni reported that the villagers would tease her about her converted status. People are always sarcastic in their tones while talking about the converts. On their part, the Christians show little faith in priests during sickness or religious ceremonies. Rather they call the pastors for prayers.

In a discussion with a converted Christian, A. Sidamjao, who was recently ordained a pastor, it was revealed that he had gone to Andhra Pradesh for two-and-a-half years for his pastoral training, sponsored by an organization called ‘Harvest Team’. He was an

102. The interview was held with Khwairakpam Romoni on 6th April 2001 at Sekmai.
103. The interview was held with A. Kullamani Devi on 7th April 2001 at Sekmai.
104. The interview was held with Khwairakpam Romoni on 6th April 2001 at Sekmai.
105. The interview was held with A. Sidamjao on 6th April 2001 at Sekmai.
assistant pastor at Sekmai church for a year, and for the past four years he has been the pastor of Khongampat church (a Meitei locality). Responding to the researcher's question on how he was converted into the new religion, he declared that a Christian man introduced him to Jesus by offering him the New Testament. After reading the holy book, he was convinced that Jesus was God's Messiah who shows the path of truth, eternity, and saves people from their sins. After converting into Christianity, he came to know the path, the goal and direction to follow, which he was unaware of before his conversion. He believes that Jesus is his Savior and Lord and serving him brings peace to his mind.

Conclusion

An examination of the Lois religious system reveals that they have their own system of belief, which is deeply rooted in their mental cognition and physical surroundings. Lois religion has a rich repertoire of rituals not only covering the life span of the individual from birth to death but also encompasses their entire cultural, political and economic life. They believe that the careful observation of these religious rituals would reward them with good health, long life, children, material well-being, success in hunting, rain, good crop, victory in war and now-a-days, even for achieving success in examinations.

The Lois believe in many gods and goddesses which are invoked on different occasions of their life. A Loi house is the shrine of many deities. The belief is that the deities look after the welfare and prosperity of the household. Ancestor worship coupled with the worship of directional deities is an integral part of their religious life. Blood sacrifice, tree cult, and belief in the power of spirits and witchcraft comprised other elements of their cultural life. To carry out the various rites and ceremonies, the Lois have ritual specialists known as maiba and maibi (priests and priestesses).
One of the most elaborate and widely celebrated rituals observed in the study is *Lai Haraoba*, a community based festival which signifies the close relationship between man and god. Lai Haraoba is interpreted as an expression of divine happiness and performed with due sanctity and decorum. It brings together all sections of the society and thereby acts as a binding force and helps to overcome emerging divergences and dissension within the community.

The chapter contains a brief discussion about the conversion to Hinduism by a few of the Lois. Lois who got converted to Hinduism have to change their dietary habits and wear sacred thread. Though they were not immediately given the full privileges and status of orthodox Hindus, it has been observed that some of the Lois accepted Vaishnavism with the sole purpose of acquiring the high status of the Hindu Meitei by giving money to the king. Officially, the non-converted Lois are also Hindus since they are included in the Scheduled Castes category. The chapter also traces the origin of Christianity in Manipur and its inroad into the Loi society. Although the impact of Christianity in the society as a whole is minimal, it tends to generate conflict within the family since converted members refrained from carrying on with their traditional religious practices.