Chapter IV

Pre-Vaishnava Socio-religious Festivals

Introduction:

In the preceding chapter we have discussed several types of traditional social institutions which reveal the ancient social, religious, and also the politico-economic system of the pre-Hindu Meiteis. There are also a number of socio-religious rituals and festivals, authentically Meitei in origin, which have been observed since time immemorial. All these are not simply festivals performed for fun and entertainment but primarily are rituals conducted regularly for the welfare of the people and the society. Even after the Meiteis became Hindus, they continued to observe them according to their traditional rites and ceremonies.

Lai-haraoba: Nature and Meaning:

Among the various rituals and festivals the Lai-haraoba is the most important one which embodies almost all the entire culture of the pre-Hindu Meiteis. Till today the Lai-haraoba is celebrated throughout the valley of Manipur with great pomp and enthusiasm. It represents the Meitei concept of the creation of the world and the making
of the human body, the beginning of civilisation and other finer arts such as dance, music, etc., and also man's obligation to God. It is believed that the well-being of the society depends upon the proper observance of this ritual. Hence the hymns and incantations, songs and dances etc., of the Lai-haraoba, are observed with most meticulous care so as to avoid any mistake in the process. Col. McCulloch's remark "it is performed with fun and merriment with no sense of awe among the worshipers."

is the result of a false and superficial observation. Till today every Meitei looks upon the lai with the highest degree of reverence mixed with fear and awe. However, the lai of the Lai-haraoba has never been considered as dreaded as the Nats of Burma. The Nats are generally regarded malevolent spirits who may be hostile and destructive at any time unless propitiated with offerings. But the lai of Lai-haraoba is considered benevolent and, it is believed, never becomes malevolent unless offended.

Literally, the lai means god and haraoba may be taken to mean to be pleased, to rejoice, etc. Col. Shakespear describes it as a festival for "pleasing of the God."

While some others, viz., Nilakanta Singh interpretes

it is the "merry-making of the gods and goddesses." Of these two interpretations, the former seems to be the more appropriate one. The meaning of Lai-harāobā may be understood in the light of the age-old proverb:

laigi makhei phanglagā harāo-i,
meegi makhei phanglagā shāo-i.

God is pleased when His Divine works are fully executed while man is angry when his actions are exposed

In the Lai-harāobā, the very Divine activities such as, the bringing forth of other gods and goddesses, the creation of universe and man, the romantic episodes of the gods and goddesses, etc., are depicted through various dances and songs accompanied by hymns, incantations, etc. It is believed that by doing so the Lord would be pleased and He would shower prosperity and happiness on the people. It would be unfair to say that the Lord had performed these teleological and benevolent works out of the merry-making impulses. So Lai-harāobā is not simply a mere festival but primarily a ritual held to honour and glorify the Almighty Lord, the creator of all things and beings. It is, in fact, an important religious observance of the Meiteis.

Again, the lai of the 'Lai-harāobā' has been conventionally known as umanglāi (literally, umang means forest, and lāi means god). But from this conventional name

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the umanglāi must not be interpreted as forest god. It appears that the name umanglāi has been so called as thickets of trees were usually found in the shrines of the lāi. These shrines were originally kept in sacred and secluded areas in and around the villages to avoid any kind of human pollution. As plants and trees naturally grow up abundantly in such reserved places, it looks like a forest (umang) and hence the lāi has often been called umanglāi.

Although there are a number of shrines in different parts of Manipur having definite local names, the central theme of all the lāi-harāobā is the same i.e., the worship of the Almighty Lord, the Sidabā Mapu. The Sidabā Mapu may appear in the form of both man and woman. He takes the form of the Lord if the hair is coiled on the crown of the head. He looks like a man if the lock of hair is tied on the sinciput (lumāng). He appears in the form of the woman if the hair is tied on the occiput (lutung). If his limb is divided into two halves, the right half takes the form of a male and the left half symbolises the form of a female. That is why He is described as Lāiningthou-Lāiremma (God-Goddess). In the Lāi-harāobā, when the Māibā or the Māiti announces, "O servants of Lāiningthou-Lāiremma", the reference is to the Almighty Lord.

6. Thiren Meiramliba, (MS).
There is also no indication of the Lai-harāobā being an ancestral ritual as Dr Parrat has held. It is true that some of the ancestors of the clans or families who were later on defied became lāis and 'Lai-harāobā' has been performed in their abodes or shrines. These defied deities, were, however, regarded as the varied manifestations of the Lord. Though Lai-harāobā is performed at their shrines apparently in honour of them, it is, however, the Almighty Lord that is intrinsically worshipped and prayed. That is why the basic principles and the theme of all Lai-harāobā are the same. Moreover, in the rites and ceremonies conducted in the Lai-harāobā, no elements of ancestor worship are noticed.

The Origin:

The term 'Lai-harāobā' is derived from 'lāi-hoi-lāobā', which is connected with the myth of creation. The ancient text, Pudil, mentions that the Eternal Lord, Sidabā Mapu being desirous of creation ordered his progeny Atiyā Sidabā to create the world. As he was sent on this errand, he was henceforth called Asibā. But Asibā was ignorant of the process of creation. He, therefore, asked the Lord as to how the objects of the universe were to be created. The Lord, thereupon, opened his mouth and revealed

all the images of objects to be created and asked Asībā to create them to the likeness of the images. Asībā was afraid to see them and requested the Lord to close His mouth. Asībā, however, thought within himself to take out all the things that were inside the body of the Lord. He, therefore, flung into the body of the Lord and drove out all the things out of the belly of the Lord by singing:

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a hei he hoi rou
hoi rou nā ge dā
hoi rou ne se e
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This song sung by Asībā is called hoi rou.

But the objects were unwilling to move out of the body of the Lord. The Lord perceived this and, therefore, made another form which resembled Himself and made it seated face to face with Him. When the Lord opened His mouth, the objects inside His belly saw the form and thinking that the Lord was there, they came out singing and singing. The Lord received the objects driven by Asībā singing:

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a hei he heityā heityā
heityā heityā heityā nā ne se e
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This song sung by the Lord is called hayā.

The objects while coming out of the body of the Lord sang the following song:

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hoi hā hā hā
hoi hoi hā hā hā
heril lillā herillā
hayute khullēite
heiyā he heiyā he
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The song of lai-hoi-laoba sung in every Lai-haraoobā is but a reproduction of the songs mentioned above. In the lai-hoi-laobā the Maibā sings:

hoi hoi ha ha ha
hoi hoi ha ha ha
heril lillā herillā
hayute khullāite
heiyā he heiyā he
adubu thoina haraoba leibara?

Then the participants respond as 'leibeneda hou, hou he hou hayā nāge dā'

Thus, the Lai-haraoobā ritual can be traced back to the myth of creation and all Lai-haraoobas are but in imitation of the manifold Divine works and activities of the Almighty Lord.

Local Variations:

There are three main types of Lai-haraoobā, viz., the Kanglei, the Moirāng, and the Chakpā. The Moirāng form is confined to Moirāng, only especially the shrine of Thāngjing, and the Chakpā form is limited to the said community; whereas the Kanglei form is practised throughout the rest of the state. The differences in observance of these

9. The language of these songs is so old that it is very difficult to render them into English.
forms are confined to the addition of some items or in giving some emphasis on certain other items of the festival. The basic pattern and the theme of these different types are, however, the same. Of these three types, the Kanglei form is the most dominant one and those who understand this type can easily know the remaining types. In view of this, only the Kanglei, is enumerated here which may be presented in three different stages.

The First Stage:

The first stage of Lāi-harāobā consists of the various rites performed on the first day of the ritual.

Lāi-phamdengbā: Lāi-phamdengbā is the installation ceremony of the Lāiningthou and the Lāiremmā at the Lāishang (temple). This usually takes place the day before the commencement of the Lāi-harāobā. There are no images of the lāis. However, for the convenience of the worshippers, the lāis are represented by certain symbolic objects such as bamboo tubes or bamboo baskets or carved-out wood images. In the case of Khamlānobā of Kakching, a piece of iron represents it. Now-a-days, the use of brass or wooden masks are very common. Col. Shakespear writes "As a rule there is no sacred image, but at a pleasing a brass mask draped with cloth is used to visualise the god to his worshippers." They are,

then, placed on the dais inside the laishang after having dressed up well. This ceremony is called the lai-phamdengba (the installation of the lai).

**Lai-ikauba** : Lai-ikaubā is the rite for conjuring up the spirit of the lai from water. For this a procession in two rows led by Māibās (ritual conductors) and Māibis (ritual conductress) accompanied by penā khongbā (fiddle players) and others goes to the edge of a river or a tank. just before the start of the procession, the Māibis dance the laibou jagoi (opening dance) to the tune of penā khongbā. Several cultic objects are used in the lai-ikaubā and the procession consists of the following in order.

1. Two men with one lighted torch or a bundle of faggots in their hands.
2. Two men with lai-thāng (the sword of the lai) in their right hands.
3. Two girls with kwāisel (spittoon in the right hand and a fan in the left hand each).
4. Two girls with khudeisel (betel nut container) in their right hands each.
5. Two persons known as lāipubas (bearers of God and Goddess) holding each a small pitcher containing leiyóm (bouquets), hirilang (white cotton thread) and hirichei (a piece of stick). The hirichei is hung suspended from the necks of the pitchers wrapped with a piece of cloth.

One each of the two earthen pitchers are meant for the God and for the Goddess. The pitcher meant for the God consists of a bouquet of nine lāngthrei matols (veronia
divergens benth composite) for the Lainingthou and another five for the Almighty Lord. These are tied to the hirichei by the hirilang in nine ply, the end of the thread being tied round the neck of the pitchers. Similarly, in the pitcher for the Goddess, a bouquet of seven lāngthrei matols is tied in seven ply to the hirichei.

6. Two bearers of chongs (white ceremonial big umbrella).

7. Two women bearing two senpots in their right hands and seats (small carpets) being hung from their left shoulders followed by village elders and young persons in the same tuo rows.

On reaching the edge of the water, the processionists stand in two rows facing the water. On the bank: an offering consisting of a chang (odd in number) hand of bananas, flowers, fruits, kaboks (puffed rice), etc., is made, to the lāi. This offering is known as hiden heiruk thābā. This is followed by a rite called konyāi thābā in which a Māinā puts two pieces of gold and silver in his right palm and recites an invocation praying the God and Goddess to come down from the seven layers of heaven and to come up from the seven layers of the earth. The gold and silver pieces are then dropped into the water as an offering to the God and Goddess. If the coins do not sink direct into the bottom of the water, it is considered to be a bad omen.

Konyāi thābā is followed by another rite called 'khayom lakpā! Khayom is a packet usually wrapped by three
layers of plantain leaves containing uncooked rice, egg, langthrei matol, gold and silver. A Raiba or Raibi holds one khayom meant for the Lainingthou which is tied by nine pieces of bamboo twigs in the right hand and another khayom meant for Lairemmä tied by seven pieces of bamboo twigs in the left hand. The khayom meant for the Lainingthou is for the ether world and that of Lairremä for the nether world. This is called 'leithak-leikhā-lākpā.' Holding the two khayoms, the Māibi or Māibi recites a hymn praying to lāi to accept the offerings and to make an appearance. Then flipping the water with fingers to remove any evil influence, the Māibi and Māibi immerse the two khayoms into the water.

The Māibi then performs the rite of leirāi yukhāngbā. This consists of an offering of rice-beer to the lāi. For this, nine short bamboo tubes for the Lainingthou and seven such tubes for the Lairremā are stuck on to the ground beside the water. The Māibi again performs a rite called sharoi-khāngbā by offering food to the attendants who accompany the God and the Goddess.

Now the Māibi takes the two pitchers (ichāichus) from the two lāipubās and holding the pitcher of Lainingthou in her right and that of Lairremā in the left, she performs a dance facing, by turn, the four directions presided over by the guardian deities of the directions, viz., Thānjing (south western side), Mārjing (north-eastern side), Wāngbren (south-eastern side), and Koubru (north-western side). Both
the pitchers are, then, returned to the two laipubas.

After the Maibi removes the two bouquets of flower (leioms) along with the two hiricheis from the pitchers held by the laipubas. The leioms are tied along with the hiricheis three times with thread (hirilang). Covering her head with a sheet, the Maibi crouches beside the water. Holding the leioms by the right hand and ringing a handbell by the left hand and chanting the hymn of leihourcl (account of creation of earth), the Maibi gently moves and dips the leioms into the water. It is at this stage that the spirits of the Lainingthou and Lairemmā are believed to enter the leioms. This is known as 'lāi-themgatpā'. As soon as the lāi entered the leiyom, the Maibi gets possessed by the lāi (lāitongbā). She is now in a trance and utters predictions. If the Maibi continues in this supersensible state long, the Maibā, by chanting certain incantations, sprinkles water on her head with the leaves of tāiren tree (cedrela toona). This brings the Maibi back to her senses. The Maibi then separates the leioms of the Lainingthou and Lairemmā. Taking the leiom of Lainingthou, the Maibā puts it into the pitcher meant for it, while the Maibi puts the leiom of Lairemmā into the pitcher meant for it.

The God and the Goddess, after being conjured up and duly appeared, are then carried in a procession towards laishang. This return procession is also arranged in two
rows as before. Before the start of the procession, the Maibi, takes the irangpool (a pitcher) from the woman who bears it and fills the same with water and returns it to the same woman who then carries it to the temple along with the procession. Leading the procession, the Maibi dances in front to the tune of the cena singers. This procession of bringing the lai into the laishang is called lai-hikabā. On reaching the court yard of the temple, the leiyoms from the ikauphu are taken out and they are put inside the ishaiphu. At the middle of the yard, dry leaves of khoiju and laikham plants with some quantity of fresh husk of paddy are burnt in an earthen plate in order to scare away the evil spirits. In the meantime, the Maibā sings a sacred hmun called " khoiju lam-ok." A little closer to the laishang, two ducks one on each side, are kept over which the processionists tread. This is known as 'ngānu khonggān'. In the verandah of the temple, a basketful of paddy is kept with a ring of cane, a ring of small dry fish, two cakes of salt placed like pyramids, two coins, and some quantity of ginger on the paddy. In the laishang, the Maiba and the Maibi take out the leiyom, hiri-lang and hirichei of the God and the Goddess respectively from the pitcher. Holding the respective leiyoms, the Maibā and the Maibi, each of them followed by three attendants of respective sexes proceed to the dais where the Maibā touches the naval of the God five times and the same procedure is
followed by the Maibi in respect of the Goddess. This rite is called the 'lāi-thawai-hoppā' (infusion of life into the lai). The Maiba then cries aloud hi hi; o, o, o; and mutters ha, ra, sa; ra, sa, ha; ha, sa, ra.

Thereafter, the Maibi offers flowers to the lai. She first places the five pieces of lāŋthrei meant for the Almighty Lord in between the God and the Goddess invoked. The nine pieces of lāŋthrei and the seven such pieces are placed before the God and the Goddess respectively. Then, the five pieces of lāŋthrei are separated from each other, three of them are placed before the God and the remaining two before the Goddess. The nine pieces of lāŋthrei are then offered to the nine leberrgfehētā who are on the right side of the God and the seven pieces to the seven lāinurās who are on the left side of the Goddess. This rite is known as 'lāi-hunbā'. This being over, an offering of fruits, sweets and other edibles on plantain leaves is made to the God and the Goddess. Then the pena khongbā starts singing lullaby on the pena, while the face of the lai is covered by the Maibi ceremoniously. This is called 'lāi-māikuppā'. This completes the first and also the most complex part of lāi-harāobā.

The lāi-Ikaubā depicts how the Lord who was in the water after the universe was destroyed came up to the land after this world was created. According to Chandra Singh, the 'egg' in the rite of khyom lākpā represents the Lord himself.
and the three lāŋthrei leaves attached to the egg signify the three attributes of the Lord, viz., the creator (leishembā), the preserver (leingākpā) and the destroyer (leitākpa). The rice in the khayom (packet) indicates the innumerable objects lying around the Lord and the gold and silver pieces, the inseparability of the God and the Goddess.  

The Second Stage:

The different aspects cited in this stage are performed on each of the subsequent days except the last day of the ritual.

Yākeiron: The next morning, the penā khonobā sings the yākeiron (awakening hymn) on the penā to awaken the lāi from deep slumber. The song being over, the Maibi takes off the cloth with which she kept the lāi enveloped on the previous day. Flowers and fruits are offered. Then, the Maibi performs the lāimang phambā (uttering predictions while in a trance sitting in front of the lāi) and ringing a handbell, she utters the desire of the lāi while she herself is in a trance being possessed by the lāi.

Lei-lāngbā: In the evening, the ūāibā, the Māibi and the villagers participate in the function. The

leiroi-hanjaba (supervisor of flowers) and the leiroi-hidang (assistant supervisor of flowers) go simultaneously to the temple along with their staff with flowers. The flowers held by the leiroi-hanjaba and the leiroi-hidang are meant for the God and the Goddess respectively. While offering them, the Maibí chants:

Oh God, Oh Goddess, your leirois have brought flowers to offer to you. Kindly accept them and look at them with your lotus-like eyes.

The flowers thus offered are taken out by the Maibí and she gives back the God-blessed flowers to the leiroi-hanjaba and those of the Goddess to the leiroi-hidang. The leiroi-hanjaba and his party place some of the flowers at the foot of the God's chonn and then to the drum and the remaining are distributed to the Maibí, penā khongbā, leiroi (suppliers of flower), shinglooi (suppliers of wood) and lāroi (suppliers of plantain leaves) and other males attended on the function. Similarly the leiroi-hidang and his party place some of the flowers at the chonn of the Goddess and then distribute the flowers to the Maibí and other women who attended the function. If the king and queen are present, the flowers are first offered to them. This distribution and offering of flowers is known as lei-langbā.

Hoi-lāohan : Hoi-lāohan is conducted by the Maibí. He sings the song of hoi-lāohan as mentioned above and the
participants respond when their turn comes.

Laibou-la-thaba: After hoi-laoba, the two laipubas and others as in the order stated in lai-ikauba come up to the laibung (courtyard) in two rows. Each of the two laipubas stands upon two pieces of plantain leaves. In the centre of the haraopung the Maibi places three plantain leaves one upon the other. This is known as laibou-la-thaba. A white cloth is spread over the plantain leaves. Placed on that cloth the Maibi offers langthrei flowers to Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Koubru. Similar flowers are offered to the Almighty Lord and also to the Lainingthou and Lairemma. While this is being done, it is a taboo to walk in between the deity and the laibou-la (the plantain leaves).

Lai-happa: The Maibi takes out one flower each from the flowers of the God and Goddess offered by her and places them separately on two pieces of plain clothes to be wrapped and tied. The cloth containing the flower is tied up and hung down suspended from the neck of the two respective laipubas. This process is known as lai-happa.

Laiching Jagoi: The Maibi performs a dance known as laiching jagoi (inviting the spirits of the God and Goddess from the temple by the dance of Maibi).

Hoirou-haya: The party consisting of laipubas and others headed by the Maibis move round the laibou-la
anti-clockwise in two rows three times and then comes to a stop. The pena khongbā then starts the song of hoirou-hayā. While the pena khongbā is singing, the Māibi warns the people not to move their limbs. After hoirou-lāobā the pena khongbā begins to sing the hymn of anoirol. While the pena khongbā is singing anoirol, the Māibi and other participants move around the lāibou-lā in a circle. Then the Māibi dances at the lāibung and this is followed by hakchāng shābā.

Hakchāng Shābā: Hakchāng shābā (making different parts of the body) is also called lāibou khutthek. It is a song and dance performance depicting how each and every part of the body is made. There are altogether sixty-four dance poses but the last two stages signify the prayer to Atiyā Sidābā for the infusion of life into the body. The Māibi announces to the votaries of Lāiningthou and Lāiremmā, "Let us start the making of the body." The participants respond, "Yes, Yes." The Māibi demonstrates through dance poses and songs the making of the different parts of the body by putting her hands on the different organs of her body. The Māibi also demonstrates the birth of the child, the cutting of placenta, the bathing, the sucking, the father giving the name and glory of the Lord to the child, the lulling of the child, its growing into manhood, etc.

Yumsāron Khutthek: The Yumsāron khutthek (the making of house) depicts the different stages of the
construction of the house. The selection of the site, the
paring hunbā (making geometrical calculations like the measurements of the length, breadth and diagonal line of a house before its construction), the laying of the foundation stone in an auspicious hour, the placing of yumbiren (main pillars), suktu (wooden beams resting on ukhokten and yumbiren), khānnan (beam resting on two main pillars), leikhāng (a runner resting on the pillars of the wall, yāno (ridging), hundāng (rafter), and the roofing and walling of the house are all portrayed by the Maibi and other participants in song and dances. When the building of the house is completed, it is then offered to the lāi.

Pānthoibi Jaqoi: Pānthoibi jaqoi is also a song and dance presentation depicting the romantic accounts of the divine couple, Nongpok Ningthou and Pānthoibi. The episode forms a vital part of the Lāi-harāobā as it is connected with the very origin of Lāi-harāobā. This dance is considered to usher in prosperity and welfare to the people. The Maibi dances with the participants and at the same time sings the romantic lore of the divine couple to the tune of pana khongbā.

Pamyānbā: The Pānthoibi jaqoi is followed by another dance called pamyānbā. This depicts how man for the first time began to practise the art of cultivation. It is shown through various dance techniques and songs in an
antiphonal manner led by the Maibi. Thus the clearing of the ground, the digging, the sowing of cotton seed, the gradual stages of its growth, harvesting and collecting, the process of spinning, the making of garments, the washing of the garment and its subsequent offering to the God are shown through dance and song.

Long Khonbā: The portrayal of the agricultural practices is followed by long khonbā which literally means the catching of fish with a long (a fishing basket). But the term is not to be understood in its literal sense. It rather implies symbolically the gathering of the spirit of the lai. It is believed that while the Lāi-harāobā is performed the lai is thought to come out from the laishang to the courtyard. Hence, at the end of the laibou jagoi, the Maibi performs the long khonbā to gather the spirit of the lai. While the Maibi is performing this dance, the penā khonbā sings the mikourol (the lore of calling back the soul). After the dance, the Maibi proceeds towards the laishang and holding the long (fishing basket) with both hands as if she is bringing the spirit of the lai with it, she invokes the lai to move inside the laishang chanting:

O Lāiningthou, O Lāiremmā, thy servant is not catching fish but gathering thy five souls, six with the shadow.

Lāiren Mathek: Another important aspect of the Lāi-harāobā is the lairen mathek dance (dance in the shape
of the curves of python). The dance is connected with the Pakhangbā symbol (God Pakhangbā in His snake form). It is a communal dance led by the Māibi arranged in single file. The movement follows the Pakhangbā design in a curved and circuitous pattern. The continuous line is not broken nor does anyone leave the file until the movement is completed. The Pakhangbā design is also called Pāphāl.

Lāi Kanglei Thokpā: Subsequently another important rite called lāi kanglei thokpā is held usually on the 5th, 7th, 9th or on succeeding odd days. The rite is performed by the Māibi depicting how God Khoriphābā played muknā (Meitei style of wrestling) and Kangjei (Meitei style of hockey) and then set out in search of his bride. The Māibi first portrays, through dance movements, the muknā match between Khoriphābā and Loyārākpa. Then she announces that the match is drawn. Holding a Kangjei stick, the Māibi then imitates the playing of the game of Kangjei by striking the ball. Finally, singing a romantic lore, the Māibi proceeds to find the bride of the lāi with the help of the Kangjei stick and veiling herself, she ceremoniously hooks a girl with the Kangjei stick. Thus the girl becomes the wife of the lāi. This is called lāi matu thibā. But this aspect is now given up in some of the Lāi-hārāobā due to the mounting social disapproval. However, being an essential rite, the Māibi portrays the act by herself.
The Final Stage:

This is the concluding day of Lāi-harāobā and is marked by such important sections as the louyānba (digging the field) the ougri hangel chongbā (a war-dance) and the lāi nongābā (the sending of the lāi back to heaven). In the morning the penā khongbā sings the song of awakening and in the meantime the Māibi uncovers the lāi. Then fruits, flowers and other articles are offered to the lāi. The Māibi performs lāimang-phambā (predictions made sitting in front of the lāi) and announces the desire of the lāi.

In the evening, the usual daily programme is performed. In the night the Māibā sings the hymn of anam-athou. The sāren-katpā, offering of live animal or fish is then performed. This may be done in the evening also.

Louyānba: Thereafter, the Māibi performs louyānba through various songs and dance-movements accompanied by seven women attendants. The Māibi appears in the costume of a Tāŋkhul by putting a scanty dress with a basket hanging over her shoulder and a hoe in her hand. First, she sings a lengthy hymn before the lāi praying for the welfare of the land, the people and the king. This is followed by loutāron ishei, a hymn sung on the first day of digging the field. While the digging is in progress with the accompanying song, viz., louyān ishei, (a cultivation song), a Māibā dressed as a Tāŋkhul nipā (nipā=man), wearing a
very scanty dress, appears on the scene. The Tāṅgkhul obstructs the cultivation claiming that the land belongs to him. Quarrels follow over this but soon they know the identity of each other and together they resume the process. The Māibi follows them by portraying the sowing of the paddy-seeds.

The Māibi, dressed up as a Tāṅgkhul woman, represents the goddess Pānthroibi and the man, god Nongpok Ningthou. After Pānthroibi had left the house of Khābā, she was once cultivating on the Nongmāiching hill lying to the east of Imphal. To avert detection from the pursuing Khābās, Pānthroibi was disguised herself as a Tāṅgkhul maiden. Meanwhile Nongpok Ningthou, in the course of his search for his beloved, came in the guise of a Tāṅgkhul. Not knowing that she was the very person whom he was looking for, Nongpok Ningthou questioned her right of cultivating other man's land. Deeply offended, Pānthroibi at once disclosed her true identity. The couple were then reconciled and united.

The loutānbā also reveals the traditional agricul­
tural rites performed by the Meiteis since time immemorial. Even today the Meiteis perform the rite of loutānbā and other agricultural rites. The episode further reveals the close and intimate relationship between the Meiteis and the Tāṅgkhuls since very ancient days.
Ougri-Hangel-Chongbā: The Māibā stands inside a circle of participants consisting of an equal number of men and women, holding firmly four long ropes in their hands. The Māibā then chants a long lyric during which the participants must not move their hands and feet nor should the rope be allowed to fall on the ground. An important aspect of the event is the observance of certain ritualistic restrictions. All the participants must be free from mating-relationship and must not eat any food considered unclean since the day before and that they must not wear any unclean cloths. The pair of man and woman who head their respective rows, besides observing the above restrictions, must be persons who got married according to the correct norms of marriage and that all their children must be alive. The chanting of the lyric being over, the Māibā then sings a song and the participants respond him. They also perform the thābal chongbā dance by gracefully stepping their legs one after another in a rhythmical style.

Lai-nongāba: The last section of the concluding day is the lāi-nongābā, the sending of the lāi back to heaven. As on the lāi-īkaubā, wherein the lāi was supposed to have arrived on a boat (lāi-hikābā) the lāi is supposed to go back to heaven, his original abode, on a boat.

All the participants stand in two rows, some holding all the cultic objects of the lāi as they did on the opening day, while some others hold symbolic oars. Then the Māibā
chants uyanlon (the lore for felling trees) to fell a tree in order to make a boat for God. This being done, the Māibā and the participants portray the rowing of the boat accompanied by a song. Thereafter, the Māibā and Māibi enter inside the laishang. There, the Māibi begins to chant a hymn by ringing a small bell in her hand. Then the Māibī starts the singing of nongārol lyric for sending the lai to heaven. In the meantime outside the laishang, the pena khongbā plays on the pena while the participants clap their hands rhythmically with the song of the Māibā. In this way the lai is sent back to his original abode.

The Lāi-nongābā being over, the rite of lāi-tethābā is performed. All the various offerings such as cloths, rice, vegetables, fruits, etc., are distributed as per the customary regulations under which the lion's share goes to the Māibā, Māibi and pena khongbā. Then the dais is cleaned and a new sheet of cloth is spread over it. Placing two sheets of cloths over it, one for the Lāiningthou and other for the Lāiremma, the Māibi repeats the rite of leihunbā. Then, a long sheet of cloth is spread over the dais and the two pitchers of the lai are kept upside-down over the cloth. This ritual is called lāi-tethābā.

Finally, a rite called saroi-khāngbā is performed by the Māibi to ward off the evil spirits, who have been loitering and watching the Lāi-harābā, by offering them rice,
flour, sweets, fruits, vegetable salads (heibi manā singju), etc. On the next day after the Lāi-hārāobā, it is customary to organize a competition of various types of traditional games and sports, such as the muknā, kāngjei, lamchel, etc. These were once a regular feature of the ceremony during the days of the Rajas who patronised such games. But now these interesting features are observed without the original enthusiasm and interest except in some of the major Lāi-hārāobās.

We may now conclude that the Lāi-hārāobā is not simply a mere festival for fun and entertainment. It is the most important ritual of the Meiteis since time immemorial. Nor is it simply the merry-making of the gods and goddesses. The Lāi-hārāobā is, as a matter of fact, performed with a view to please the God and other deities by executing their divine works, viz., the creation of the universe, man, etc. By doing so, it is common belief that they would be pleased and, therefore, would bless the people with prosperity and happiness.

Further, the Lāi-hārāobā represents almost the entire cultural and religious system of the pre-Hindu Meiteis. In fact, the Lāi-hārāobā has been a very important aspect of their religious observance and everyone worships the lāi with the highest degree of reverence. The Meiteis became Hindus around the beginning of the eighteenth century and most of
their ritual and festivals have since been influenced by the new faith. But Lai-harloba still remains almost undiluted and unpolluted by Hinduism. The Brahmans are forbidden to play any role in this ritual. Everything in it is conducted by Māibās and Māibis. In Lai-harloba, the myth of creation of the world, the life-cycle of man, the beginning of civilisation, the system of religious beliefs and practices, dances, music and songs are all blended together into a unified process.

Sharoi-khāngbā:

Sharoi-khāngbā is one of the most ancient and the first among all the rituals held during the Meitei calendar year. It is an appeasement-rite in which offerings are made to the guardian deities and other attendant spirits requesting them to ward off the evils and calamities that might befall the community during the coming year. The rite is performed on the first Saturday of the month of Lamdā (February-March). Lamdā is regarded as being the first month of the year and hence it is also known as Cheihouthā 12 (the first month of the year).

There has been an age-old belief that on the night of the first Saturday of the month of Lamdā, all the umanglais assemble together and make a list of the name of those who are going to die during the ensuing year. Those who are included in the list of names die and those who are not die in church.

12. Tharon (MS).
in the list of death are counted by their names, each of them being represented by a piece of stick. This counting of those who would die with pieces of stick is known as shingtek-shingthābā, (counting with pieces of wood). As it is believed that those who are included in the shingtek-shingthābā would die during the year, the deities are worshipped with offerings of food so that the lives of those represented by the sticks would be spared. Such an appeasement-rite is known as sharoi-khāngbā. The word 'sharoi' ordinarily means the attendants of the principal gods and goddesses, and 'khāngbā' denotes the offering of food. But in the ritual, not only the sharois but also the principal gods and goddesses, viz., the nine laibangthous and seven lāinurās, and the guardian deities of all directions are worshipped; and their blessings are invoked for the prosperity and welfare of the community in the coming year.

Sharoi-khāngbā is usually performed by elderly women at the outskirts of the villages where two or more roads meet. There, various articles, such as, seven kinds of fruits, similar number of flowers, rice flour, salads prepared from the leaves of heibi plant, fermented fish, cotton swab, tobacco leaves, rice, salt, chilly, etc., are offered to the sharois and other deities. Over and above the above items, certain articles like, a sareng fish, earthen pitcher, khābei (ladle), chekap(tongs), yotsabi (a three-legged iron device put in the fire-place) and the leaves of khoiju and leikhām
plants inside an earthen vessel are included in the case of sharoi-khāngbā performed by the palace Māibās at the outskirts of the four villages viz., Khurai, Wāngkhei, Khwāi and Yāiskul. While offering those articles, the following hymn is chanted:

he làibangthou māpan làinurā taret, umanglāi, sharoi humphumāthoimak nakhoigi nachinjāk heīram taret leiram taret kabok nāchan taret pukyu wāiyu heibi mana shingju chang chāk tāibang panbanā chārī thaklibā pumnamak pirabane, mashi chādunā kum ashīgi phatta-houdi pumnamak ngākpiyu shenbiyu. 13

0 nine làibangthous, 0 seven làinurās, umanglāi, and sixtyone sharois! we offer you all edible things. Please take our offerings and shower upon us happiness and prosperity, removing all the evils and calamities that might befall us this year.

This being over, all the ten guardian-deities of different directions are worshipped, one after another, uttering their respective prayers. First of all, God Koubru is worshipped. All these deities are worshipped for rich crops and for prosperity and well-being of the people.

Though a simple ritual, sharoi-khāngbā plays a vital role in the traditional Meitei religion. The rites involved in this ceremony reveal some of the religious beliefs and superstitions of the ancient Meiteis and these beliefs are still current among them. Till today in almost all the social and religious ceremonies, the ritual is performed to ward off some evil influence and also to invade prosperity for the people.

13. As cited by N. Khelchandra Singh in his Sharoi-khāngbā(MS).
Cheirāobā:

The Meiteis, since time immemorial, have been observing a festival on the last day of each year to ring out the old year and to ring in the new year. This festival comes off in the month of Sajibu, a corruption of Sachiphoi (March/April). In ancient days, when astronomical knowledge of the common people was rather poor, it was the responsibility of the king to announce the end of the outgoing year and the beginning of a new year to all the people through some devices. A man riding on horseback used to proclaim the news throughout the kingdom by ringing a bell tied on a long pole. The bell was tied on the top of a bamboo pole (khok wāshāng) with a flag on top of it. This heralding of the end of the year with a stick is, therefore, called cheirāobā (chei=stick, lāobā=to announce).

This customary mode of heralding the event came to an end in 1484 A.D. during the reign of King Kiyāmbā (1467-1508 A.D.) when he abolished the old system of heralding the end of the year with bell and stick and instead introduced a new system called cheithābā. Cheithābā literally means abandoning of the stick (chei=stick, thābā=to abandon). Under the new system, a man was selected to perform the task of cheithābā by which term the man was also known. The personal name of the cheithābā was given to that year. The name of the first cheithābā appointed by King Kiyāmbā in
1484 A.D. was called Hiyāngloī, and that year was henceforth called Hiyāngloínā cheithābā kum (year) after the name of the cheithābā. Since then, each succeeding year has borne the personal name of the cheithābā by virtue of which a particular year could be distinguished from the rest.

It is the responsibility of the cheithābā to bear all the collective sins and evils of the king and the people so that no catastrophe might befall upon them. For bearing such social and moral responsibilities, the cheithaba was in former days, entitled to enjoy certain privileges such as exemption from the state service of lāllup gift of land and various other benefits. Normally the cheithābā is selected from among the Meitei community. If the cheithābā is to be selected from among the Loi community, his admittance into one of the panas of the Meiteis is essential. Such admittance into the Meitei community is accorded only with the sanction of the king. This process is called pānā thokpā.

As the cheithābā has to bear all those responsibilities noted above, the prosperity of the country during the year is also thought to depend upon him. Hence, the cheithābā is selected after examining his background properly. The cheithābā ceremony is still performed on the

morning of the chérāoba at the palace. The two cheithābās, the outgoing and the incoming, after bowing down to the king take their respective seats, facing the king with a view to carry away the sins and evils of the king and the kingdom. First, the outgoing cheithāba sits on the right side and the incoming on the left. The actual ceremony begins when the outgoing cheithāba addresses the king by declaring thus:

*eibu* shijabā ibungo lāiningthou nonghouren athoubā tāibang sorāren namu ponghanba-O, nanā einā pūbā kum ashibu nanā ītāona pūbā kum ashinā leimā ningthou punshibā, chāk-hong ngāhongbā, lenhong thumhongbābu lepnā thoiūā oirashano.15

O my lord, the heavenly king thy servant is carrying away all your sins and misfortunes and those of the kingdom during the last year. May your prosperity and that of the kingdom in the ensuing year grow more than that of the past year when my friend, the new cheithāba takes up the responsibility.

Then the two cheithabas embrace each other before the king and, now, it is the turn of the new cheithāba to declare the oath:

*eibu* shijabā ibungo lāiningthou nonghouren athoubā tāibang sorāren namu ponghanba-O, nayu tubi yoinongta Nongdā Lairen Pākhangbā, Angoubā Langmāiningthou Kainou Chingsomba, chingu animakki Loidam makumshapu meinawaī tengnā shama nayu ningthouron khudingdā Kongbā leithong phātpā, Sajibu leikhun phunbā, Thāngjing makhoklang khoklang macheikhang pākhang huyen lān pāmbanā landakhok, Kanglā meichankhok, huyen lamúami lamachāo phānā chei, Shināi nanirongbana khoklang kamū-chei, sharik khing khang thāngnā leirak

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15. As cited by N. Khelchandra Singh in his *Sajibu Chérāoba*, (MS).
thoukāi cheibu khoklāng lengdā thongnā cheithābā kum, loidām kumjā anoubānā chei kārākāpā ashidā phattā houdī shābāo lāmbāo kallāk yeknā pumnamakti thārei lamleidā tarasano. Wārem lanlem kunchin lānchin, michei mipāo hāithi shonāi tinhung lāithung pumnamakti nadāirem eina tāngja lūdā thongnā pujārāge. Eibu shijābā ibungo lāiningthou nongthouen athoubādi numitkum mashongchāo, thābāgum māngān nāi, kumjā tekhouā thāja nounā punshi chari kui wāngam khongdon shang, tānθhong mayung kui, lemthong maphei pākpa poirei khunhong leihongbā, khunjāo leichāobabu lepnā tānphangeina.16

Hodson had given the English version of the above cheithaba oath thus:

O son of heaven, Ruler of the kings, great and ancient Lord, Incarnation of God, the great Lord Pākhāngba, Master of the bright Sun, Lord of the plain and Despot of the Hills, whose kingdom is from the hills on the east to the mountains on the west, the old year perishes, the new cometh. New is the sun of the new year, and bright as the new sun shalt thou be, and mild withal as the moon. May thy beauty and thy strength grow with the growth of the new year. From today will I bear on my head all thy sins, diseases, misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in battle against thee, all that threatens thee, all that is hurtful for thee and thy kingdom.17

Then the two cheithābās would exchange their seats, that is, the new cheithābā sits on the right side and the old one on the left. The new cheithābā is given a number of gifts. In earlier days a pari (two and a half acres) of land was given to the cheithābā. The outgoing cheithābā is also presented with gifts. Once the ceremony is over, the new cheithābā must keep himself away from the sight of the king.16

Cheirāobā is a day of neatness and cleanliness for the whole community. It is an auspicious day and no other work is done on it except its proper observance. Everybody must keep neat and clean all his personal belongings, houses are cleaned and sometimes repainted. All the utensils and vessels in the house are washed clean. Earthenware is thrown away and replaced by new ones. All kinds of garments, curtains, bed-sheets, etc., are washed. Besides the physical cleanliness, it is also a day for the observance of moral and spiritual cleanliness. There has been a strong belief among the people that the incidents of the particular day would influence the events of the coming year.

Cheirāobā is also a day of worship and prayer. Various rites are also performed for the welfare of the king and the community. On the night before the cheirāobā, the Māibās of the palace visit the Heibokching (a hill) and perform the rite of shingshatpa (the taking out of the stick). This is an appeasement rite of the deities for sparing the lives of the king, queen, nobles and others who might have been included in the shingtek-shingthābā performed by the deities on the first Saturday of the month of Lamdā. Hence, the Māibās also perform the shingtek-shingthābā and then shingshatpa. On the morning of the day, the Māibās of
of the palace also perform the rite of sharoi-khāngbā on the four lamāibungs (corners) of the palace.

On the day of cheirāooba, God Sanāmahī and Leimaren are worshipped in every household. In the morning the woman of the house after having bathed and put on new clothes make offerings of uncooked rice, vegetables, fruits and live ngamuses (Ocophalus puntatus). Omens are read from the offering of the fish. If the fish remains calm and composed, it is considered to be a good sign which predicts that the family would be happy in the coming year.

In every household a sumptuous meal with varieties of dishes is prepared. When it is ready and before any member of the family partakes of it, a portion of it is offered to the deities requesting them to accept the offering and praying to them to prevent any misfortune from befalling the family in the next year. The offering is made by the eldest male member of the family just outside the gate, by uttering the following words:

Lammābā, Tumābā, Lamshenbā, Tushenbā, Lamngāk Tungākpa, Lamsen Tushenbā, Hanbā kokchāo, Hanu Lāikham, lāibangthou māpal, lāinurā taret, Umanglāi, sharoi humphumāithoimak kumshī kum ashigī nañāinā katcharibashi chādunā ngākpiyu shenbiyu namingdi pangan kou-i.

O deities—Lammābā, Tumābā, Lamshenbā, Tushenbā, Lamngāk Tungākpa, Lamsen Tushenbā, Hanbā kokchāo, Hanu Lāikham, nine lāibangthous, seven lāinuras, Umanglāi and sixtyone sarois

18. As cited by N. Khelchandra Singh in his Saiibu Cheirāobā (MS).
please accept and eat my humble offerings of food and protect and look after us.

This offering is known as lai-chāk-thābā. Then, the food prepared in each household is exchanged among the sāgeis. After this all the members of the family sit together and partake of the meal. In the past it was customary to spend the next five days in a festive mood by playing the game of kāng and no work was done during this period. This is known as shilhenbā.\footnote{Tharon, (MS).} Shilhenbā is still observed but only for a day.

The age-old customary ritual of cheirāobā plays a very important role in the social and religious life of the Meiteis. The ritual is closely connected with the worship and adoration of Sañāmahī, who occupies one of the most prominent places in the Meitei pantheon. The cheithābā, who carried away the sins of the king and the kingdom also occupies a unique position in the social life of the Meiteis. Till today, the horoscope of every new-born child records the particulars of the cheithābā of that year.

Kongbā Leithong Phātpā:

Closely connected with cheirāobā is another ritual called kongbā leithong phātpā. The ritual is performed by the Māibās of the palace on the seventh day of the month of
Sajibu (March/April) at the holy places of Lāiningthou Pureirombā and Pākhangbā. The places are located to the south of the main road leading to the village of Top Khongnāng Makhong and in between the rivers Iril and Kongbā. There are two small mounds in the open and the one lying to the east is the sacred place of Pureirombā and the other lying to the west is that of Pākhangbā. Beneath the two mounds there are two stone slabs symbolishing the two gods, Pureirombā and Pākhangbā.

Every year, in the morning on the said day, the Māibās of the palace worship the two gods with offerings of cloth, uncooked rice, sareng fish, vegetables, fruits, flowers, two small bundles of lāngthrei plant, etc. While the ritual is performed, sacred hymns like anam athou, nāheiron, apoklon, iru lāison, atāi lāison are recited. Then the food offered to the gods is cooked and eaten by the Māibās at that place. The mounds are then dug out to locate the two stones. The contents in the earth and the insects found thereon are examined and based on them predictions concerning the affairs of the king and the kingdom are made. This digging out of the hole at Kongbā is known as kongbā leithong phātpā or kumgi lākyen tāibā. On the day of this ritual, it is a taboo to do any earthwork by the people of

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
the four sub-divisions, viz., Khurēi, Wēngkhei, Khwēi and Yāiskul.

The digging up of the hole being over, the two bundles of længthrei plant consecrated to the gods are wrapped up separately by pieces of clothes and brought to the palace by the Māibās. These bundles are, then, kept at the temple of Yumjāo Lāiremma in the palace, each bundle inside a jar. On the fifth day the jars are removed. The signs are read once again and from these the good or the bad of the kingdom is predicted. These articles are then buried. This is called Sajibu leikhun phunbā. The ritual of Kongbā leithong phātpā seems to be an ancestral ritual of the two major clans of the Meiteis, viz., the Ningthoujā and the Angom. The two gods worshipped in the ritual, viz., Pākhangbā and Pureirombā were the ancestors of the Ningthoujā and the Angom clans respectively. The ritual is still performed every year by the Māibās for the welfare of the community and the state.

Kurāk Lamdāibā:

While Kongbā leithong phātpā is exclusively performed by the palace Māibās for the king and the kingdom in general, kurāk lamdāibā is performed by other Māibās and village elders so that no catastrophe might befall their villages. In this ritual, offerings are made to the guardian
deities of the area and prayers are offered to them for the prevention of sickness and suffering of the villagers, protection of their crops from insects and their cattle from epidemics. The ritual is held on an auspicious day of the month of Ingā (June/July). But the nature and timing of Kurāk lamāibā vary from place to place. Even between the Loi communities of Andro and Phayeng villages, the variations are quite noticeable though the theme of the ritual remains the same. In Phayeng, the ritual is performed two times, in the morning and again in the evening. It is conducted by a group of five village elders called Shingthāpham. As in other parts of the state, at Phayeng also, the ritual is performed on an auspicious day of the month of Ingā. On the day of the ritual the people of the village are cautioned to keep indoors till the completion of the ritual. The entrance into and the exit from the village are closed. Outsiders who stay in the village must leave the village, at least, for the day.

At Phayeng, in the early hours of the day, the village officials plant a branch of changbā (a plant) at the main entrance of the village symbolising its closure. Should an outsider enter the village willingly or ignorantly, he will be kept confined till the ritual is over. An announcement is also made advising the villagers to remain inside their respective homes. This announcement is called
'yepte laoba'. If any villager is found roaming through the lanes in disregard of the warning, he will be similarly punished. As soon as the beat of the community drum is heard, the imposition is lifted. The ritual is repeated again in the evening. The ritual is performed not by the village elders but by the lenglous, the care-takers of the deity. Eggs, fowls and a black dog are offered to the deity. This offering is called shābā sheiren katpā (offering of foul and dog).

But, in the village of Andro, the ritual is held on the first Friday of the month of Mera (September/October). A feast is arranged out of the contributions of the villagers at the site of the ritual. The village Khullākpā (the village Chief) and the Luplākpā (an official of the village) contribute a chicken each. The actual ceremony, however, begins after the feast. An official of the village called 'Yupānbā' sacrifices the fowls to the deity. Among the important personages who participate in the kurāk lamāibā are eight lounihans (title holders of the village) and seven officials of the village, viz., Khullākpā, Luplākpā, Khunjāhanbā, Khābam Lākpā, Yupānbā, Pākhanglākpā, and Nahārākpā.

In the rest of the state, the ritual is performed by the Māibās of the village. Various items such as seven fowls, puffed rice, flowers, fruits, pans, cloths, etc., are
offered to the deity. The Mēibā, with a long sheet of cloth hanging on his left shoulder, and kneeling with his left knee touching the ground and facing the north recites a lengthy hymn invoking the blessings of the deity for the prosperity and happiness of the village-folk.

This customary ritual once observed in the villages throughout the valley of Manipur is rarely practised in the urban areas. But in the remote villages, the ritual in its old and true spirit is still observed by the villagers.

Rice Rituals:

As elsewhere in other parts of the eastern world, rice is the staple food of the Meiteis of Manipur. It is, therefore, natural for them to perform rituals in various stages of its cultivation for the healthy growth of paddy and good harvest. The 'lāi' especially connected with the ritual is 'Phou-oibi', the goddess of paddy.

In Manipur, the ploughing season starts from the fifth day and continues till the end of the month of Phairan (January/February). On an auspicious day of this month, the cultivators of Manipur before the commencement of regular ploughing perform a rite called 'lou-tābā' (the first working day in the paddy-field) in which Phou-oibi and other deities connected with the crop are worshipped with offerings invoking their blessings for a rich harvest.
On the day of lou-tābā a cultivator, before proceeding to the field, makes a prayer to Keirunghanbā (the god of the granary) by saying:

O Keirunghanbā, allow thy servant to perform the lou-tābā in thy field.
Please protect the plant from insects and other diseases and bring the crops in abundance.

Then, he proceeds to the field with a spade or a dagger silently and after worshipping Lourunghanbā (the god of the field) with offerings of rice, flowers, etc., he digs out a small portion of the area in each of the four corners of the field. The digging commences from the north-western corner (koubru) of the field and then the other corners like the south-western (santhong), south-eastern (meiram) and finally the north-eastern (chingkhei) are dug up. While digging the field, a lengthy song called loutā-ishei is sung. Then, omens are read from the objects found in the digging. If live objects are found, it is believed that there would be good crops in the ensuing year. If hollow paddy, empty snail and dead insects are found it is considered bad. Today, the cultivators of Manipur generally perform the rite of lou-tābā, but the customary practice of performing the rite with due offerings and sacrifices is rarely seen these days.

In former days, it was customary for the kings of Manipur to carry out the rite before the general ploughing actually commenced. A more or less similar custom was also
prevalent among the Chinese and the Burmese. It was customary for the Chinese and Burmese monarchs to go out once a year to plough the fields. In Burma, the ceremony of ploughing by the king was a big festival which took place in the beginning of June, about the time when the south-west monsoon usually broke in Mandalay. 22 Col. Shakespear has given the following account of the rite of lou-tāba once carried out by the kings of Manipur before ploughing was commenced: "Phou-oibi is first invoked and offerings of plantains and other fruits and vegetables are made to her at each corner of a specially prepared piece of land, which is divided into three plots in each of which a little paddy is sown. If all plots flourish equally, the year will be uniformly good; but, if the first plot sown thrives best, the latter portions of the year will not be so good as the first; similarly, if that sown last does best, the cultivators are encouraged to hope that, however, humbly the year may begin, it will end well." 23

When the ground is ready for sowing, the cultivator again performs a rite at the time of sowing the seeds. Facing the north-west direction, he keeps a fistful of seeds on the ridge of the field and prays to the deity, uttering:

23. Shakespear, op. cit., p. 446.
O wanggon Lourunghanba, please don't allow the insects to enter my rice field and endow my field with a good harvest.

Then, taking another fistful of seeds, the cultivator again prays to Phou-oibi saying:

Yoibu Tampha Lāiremmā Loimom Phou-oibi imā ibemma phou nanggi namingdi sanāba kou-a, nāpi nanggi namingdi iriba kou-a.25

O mother goddess, Yoibu Tampha Loimom Phou-oibi; o paddy, thy name is called sanāba; o grass, thy name is called iriba.

The seed in the hand is then sown by uttering 'maru-hing' (maru=seed, hing=to live).

As soon as the crop is matured, the cultivator again performs a rite before cutting the paddy. Offerings of fruit, vegetables etc., are placed at each corner of the field. The cultivator also invites his friends to assist him in the harvest and he arranges food for them. But before eating the food, a portion of it is first offered to Phou-oibi. This offering is made by one of the most elderly persons present. He is called Phou-rungba (master of the rice). Then the rice-goddess is worshipped by the Maiba by chanting a lengthy invocation requesting the goddess to make the paddy

24. As cited by Shri Pebam Ibomcha Singh, orally to me.
25. Loc.cit.
increase in volume on the threshing mat. After the invocation, the cutting of the paddy starts. The offerings are then eaten up by all present. This pre-harvesting rite is now rarely observed.

"Today every cultivator invariably performs a simple rite on the closing day of harvesting. In the morning of the day the cultivator goes to his field along with the members of his family, friends, etc., and before the threshing certain offerings are made to the goddess. For this a sheaf of paddy is placed on the ground facing north-wards or eastwards in which direction the threshing mat is also spread. A piece of clean cloth or a winnowing fan used in harvesting is placed over the sheaf of paddy. The offerings usually consist of a hand of banana (chang thokpā, i.e. odd in number), betel nuts and leaves, sacred lāngthrei matols, rice, sugar cane, fruits, etc. The offerings are placed facing the threshing mat where the paddy is to be gathered before it is carried home for storage. Behind the offerings, a cloth usually white in colour is hung between two poles. It is believed that the goddess graces the floor of the mat which explains why the offerings are placed facing the threshing mat. In the meantime great care is taken to prevent the occurrence of certain mishaps such as trespassing of the mat by cows and other animals or by anyone with shoe, sickle, dagger, fire, etc. It is believed that the occurrence of such events would make the goddess afraid and
run away from the place. If such cases occur, a rite called 'Phoumi-kouba' (calling back of the goddess) is performed to placate the goddess to remain. Another type of mishap considered to be more serious than any other form of mishap is the theft or burning of paddy before it is removed from the field. The rite performed in such circumstances is called 'Phou-kouba' (calling back of the paddy). It may be performed either in the field or in the house. For this, food and other articles such as a hand of banana (odd number), a sareng (white in colour), ginger, seven kinds of fruits, seven varieties of paddy, vegetables, winnowing fans (yāngkok and humāi), thrashing stick, phouinthok (an implement used in thrashing paddy), gold and silver pieces for konyāi thābā, are offered to Phou-oibi. The paddy so collected from the field must not be stored in the granary before the above rite is duly performed. Water is sprinkled with the leaves of tāiren (cedrela toona) tree on the paddy. Khoiju leikhām okpā (i.e., making smoke of khoiju and leikhām leaves) must also be done near the door of the granary. If theft or fire occurs in the granary itself, a similar rite is repeated but its name is called kot-lāi-khurumbā (kot=granary, lāi=deity, khurumbā=to pray).

The rice-ritual which has been conducted by the Meiteis since ancient period is still observed though certain aspects of the rituals have now been given up. The rythmic agricultural songs once sung in every stage of
cultivation, viz., ploughing, sowing, cutting and harvesting, are now seldom heard in urban areas. But in the remote villages of Manipur one can still hear the chorus with its sweet melody. Similarly, as mentioned above, the offerings and sacrifices which once formed an essential part of such rituals are now omitted to a certain extent though the performance of these rites is still prevalent.

Rituals for Invoking and Stopping Rains:

While all the rituals described above have been conducted regularly every year, rain rituals are performed only when there is prolonged drought. Being an agricultural community, adequate seasonal rainfall is a must for them, the failure of which means disaster to the people and the kingdom. Hence the Meiteis, since time immemorial, have adopted certain rituals to counteract the occurrence of such phenomenon. These rain-compelling rituals, though performed only when they are needed, once occupied a very vital part in the social life of the Meiteis in which the people from all walks of life from the king and queen down to the commoners participated. According to T.C. Hodson, "The great characteristics of the rites of the pre-Hindu system is the management of these rites by the Māibā, the Pibā or in more important cases by the Raja who is, in fact, regarded not only as a living Deity but as the head
of the old state religion and the secular head of the whole people."  

The commonest and perhaps the earliest form of rain-compelling ritual is the nong lāobā (nong=rain, lāobā=to cry a loud). This ritual is performed at night by elderly menfolk who go out in the open roads and at a selected spot. The ritual is initiated by the Māibā, the traditional priest by chanting hymns to invoke rain. All the participants in this ritual have to strip themselves naked and curse one another in filthy language to the fullest extent. In extreme cases of drought, the ritual was, in former days performed with the king playing the major role. In times of extreme drought womenfolk also performed rain-invoking rituals in which they went out at night and gathered in a field outside the town and stripped themselves and threw their paddy pounders in a neighbouring pool or river and then returned home.

Another method of ancient rain-compelling ceremony was the dragging of the hiyāng hiren (royal racing boat) ceremonially through the mud of the empty moat of the Rajas enclosure in which the king and the Angom Ningthou (the chief of the Angom clan) sat together in the boat and indulged in abusing each other. It was also believed that while the hiyāng hiren was in the water, rain was sure to fall. Hence, 

in times of drought, the boat was put in the river with accompanying rites conducted by the Māibā.

The ceremonial pouring of water through bamboo pipes from the top of Kanglā or throne-room for five consecutive days to a particular spot lying just outside the sacred enclosure of the old palace, where the heads of the enemies were buried, was also believed to be a sure method of getting rain. Another method of invoking rain was to pour water on the shrine of Yumjāo Lāiremma at the palace ceremonially by the king, his wives and servants thereby exchanging filthy abuse all the times. 27

There is still a strong belief among the Meiteis that the worship of a flat stone lying on the top of Nongmaiching hill is a sure method of invoking rain. In former days, the kings of Manipur, in times of extreme drought used to climb the hill and thereon they performed a ceremony by pouring water, collected from a small stream lying at the foot of the hill, over the said flat stone. There is also a small cave at the top of the said hill where several other stones are lying. It is still believed that the worship of these stones is one of the surest ways of getting rain. There is a popular legend about the origin of these stones and the reason why the people worshipped them in times of prolonged drought. According to Col. Shakespear,

27. Shakespear, op. cit., p. 454.
a certain woman having no children once worshipped God Sorārel and prayed for nine sons. She gave birth to four children but all of them were stones. Being ashamed of her stone-children, she left her home with them but on her way she had to cross the flooded river Iril. Unable to cross it along with her stone children, she abandoned them on the bank of the river while she herself managed to cross it. Thereupon, the abandoned children cried loudly. The place was henceforth called Nunglāobi (crying stones). Afterwards, five more children were also born to her but like the former, all were of stone. The woman then abandoned these five stone children at the places where they were born and returned to look after her first four children. She asked Sorārel on what she was to feed her children. Sorārel thereupon told her that he would stop the rain and they could live on the offerings made by the people to obtain rain. Getting this assurance from Sorārel, the woman and her four stone children went to a cave at the Nongmāiching hill.  

These stones were and still are regarded very sacred and must, on no account, be touched. These are still under the care of two guardians called Nonglambu, one each from the families of Hijam and Salam of the Angom clan. In times of drought when the rain-rituals are performed, the Māibās with the Nonglambus and their men go to the cave  

wearing clean cloths and carrying rain shields. Offerings of food for each of the stones are made. Then one of the Nonglambus removes one or two or even three of the stones. While removing them each of the stones is carefully wrapped with clean cloths. In this way they are carried to the Iril river and submerged. After the rain has come, the stones are returned to their original place.

The rite at Nongmāiching hill is usually observed simultaneously with similar other rites performed in different places. The following is a text from Cheitharol Kumbaba regarding the performance of rain-rituals in three different holy places of god simultaneously,

Ingā thādi irainā hālle, humni nongmāijingdā nong chude hāidunā Māibā Pandit ojhāsing-gā Nonglambugā Nungkhong Nunglāobi, Aronnung, Khambā Yāngdei lātli, nipānni nong chui-a

The first day of the month of Ingā was Friday. As it was not raining, on Sunday, the third day of Ingā, the Māibās and Nonglambus worshipped Nungkhong Nunglāobi, Aronnung and Khamba Yāngdei with due offerings. And on the eighth day of the month there was rain.

Another process for making rain in times of drought is the rite performed at Nongjukhong, a place to the south east of Lāngjing, a hill to the west of Imphal. There the Māibās make various kinds of offerings and chant a lengthy invoking song called nonglāo ishei. The popular belief is

that if the rain-god is thus worshipped, the rain would pour down and even the Lāngjing hill would be drowned.

Just as the Meiteis performed rain compelling rites in times of drought, they also practised various other methods of rain-stopping in times of excessive rain. A common practice employed by the Meiteis to stop incessant rain is the worship of house-hold god Sanāmahi with hymns and various other kinds of offerings, keeping a lamp in front of the deity burning all through the day and night.

Another means employed for stopping rain is a rite performed by the Māibās. A frog is caught the day before the rite and it is kept in confinement in a basket in the south-western corner of the house. On the morning a Māibā performs a rite involving the frog with accompanying hymns and incantations.

These are the different variations of rain-invoking and rain-stopping rites adopted by the Meiteis since time immemorial. These are, no doubt, primitive means. But, in spite of the advent of modernism and the gradual passing away of the old superstitious ways of life, the Meiteis have recourse to most of the rites enumerated above in times of extreme drought and incessant rain.