Chapter V

FESTIVALS

It is impossible to give a clear conception of the religious philosophy of the Meeteis without a study of their important religious festivals. Through the organized worship of the gods the individual shares in the unity and harmony of the social order. Religious festivals foster the growth of spiritual consciousness and seek to establish an essential kinship between man and god. The ancient Meetei festivals contained, though no doubt in a magical fashion, the germ of mystic and sacramental religious forms. They are observed even now and have brought about some changes in the observance of the Hindu festivals. Some of the main festivals of Meetei origin will be examined in the chapter to throw light on the traditional religious beliefs of the people. In this connection an extensive exposition of Lai Haraoba will be given because all the indigenous elements of the Meetei religion are preserved in this festival.

(a) CHEIRAOBA

Cheiraoba is the New Year's festival which takes place on the first day of the month Sajifu (March).\(^1\) The word Cheiraoba is considered to be derived from Chahi (year) and Laoba (declare), or Chei (stick) and Laoba (declare). Traditionally Cheiraoba means the declaration of the commencement of the new year by holding a stick with a bell

\(^1\) Parratt, S.N., op.cit., p.46
fixed on its top. The holding of this festival shows the significance of Time which is represented by Chahi (year). As this festival is held on the first day of the first month of Meetei Thapalon (calendar), the festival is now popularly known as Sajifu Cheiraoba. It is also called Kurak-Langtaiba (Kumgi Lakyel Taiba) - the festival that marks the joining of two years - the passing and the coming year. This festival has close connection with Chahi, the year, that represents the Time which carries within its mighty womb all things and beings in this universe with all their fortunes. He who knows the twelve months of the year, the thirty days of the month, the seven days of the week, and one full course of the day with its three great divisions into Mangang, Luwang and Khuman, is one who knows the Divine - the Supreme Reality - the Ultimate background of the universe. This whole Infinite Time is represented by Chahi (year) which is again represented by months. The months are represented by the weeks, and the weeks by days. Thus the Whole Time is ultimately represented by a day which has three great divisions into Mangang, Luwang and Khuman. A Day is called Nongma. Nong means the Supreme Lord, the Lainingshing Heiyi, the only One Tengbanba Mapu. He is wise who knows the full course of a Day, Nongma (Nong Ama) with its three divisions and prays to the Almighty Father at the setting in of each division. But these days constitute weeks; the weeks constitute the month; and the months constitute the year, the Chahi. It is in the course of a year that one collects all that will make him live. In a way Chahi is taken
to be a divine fruit given to mankind for his livelihood in a particular time span. Thus the Meeteis give so much importance to Chahi that they hold a festival during the joining of the two years, the passing and the coming one, in the name of Cheiraoba with prayer and worship to the deities of their belief to guard them against death and diseases, and bring prosperity and peace for the coming year. Though in the ancient times it was held under a different name Kurak Langdaiba, from the time of Naophongba, 439 A.D. this festival was held publicly on the first day of the first month of the year through announcement of the commencement of the year by the Lakpas (Divisional Officers). The announcement was made by holding a long bamboo stick with bells fixed on top of it. For this reason the festival came to be known as Chei Laoba (Chei = stick, Laoba = announcement). People cleansed their premises and households in honour of the coming year. They performed a number of Laithous - worships and prayers to gods and goddesses both inside and outside the residential premises. This practice continued till the time of king Kyamba who introduced the system of Cheithaba in place of Cheilaoba. In Cheithaba a person was selected for the purpose by a process of comparing his individual horoscope with that of the king. He was held responsible for any calamity that might befall the king, the state and the people. His function was to save the king and

1. King Kyamba reigned in the second half of the fifteenth century.
the nation from disaster. The year was named after this Cheithaba person as a mark of honour to him. Cheithaba literally means the counting of sticks (Chei means stick, Thaba means counting). The year is represented by the stick and counting of the year is done in terms of the stick. The Cheithaba person is usually selected from among the close associates of the King born under the same star with the King. During the ceremonial the outgoing Cheithaba prayed for the prosperity of the king and the people and the incoming Cheithaba promised to bear on his head all the king's sins and misfortunes and all the calamities threatening the people. The symbolism of the stick was described by Higgins in his account of the Cheithaba for the year 1926:

"Let all the evils such as war and battle, enmity and struggles, fall down at the advent of the new year in which the seasons of the ancient god Pakhangba, who is the head of gods, fallen from the sky at a happy place, and the god Chingshomba the white, who reigns in the north east, are invested with the ceremony of Cheithaba, in which the Cheithaba man performs it with a stick on his shoulder - the stick which exempts the Cheithaba man from the burden of public work when he is seen to carry it on his shoulder on the public road - the stick which can make one conquer great and small kingdoms

2. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 10
in battle, the stick which is attached to the bamboo tube in the time of coronation at Kangla, the stick which is used by warlike young men in fight, the stick which was the hilt of the sword of the god Thangjing, the stick of which the head is known at the first touch, the stick that opens the door of the earth and fills up the underground pit in the month of Sajibu, in the reigns of all kings according to ancient custom.  

With this Cheiraoba Festival, some important laithous (prayers and worships to deities) are associated. Singtek Singthaba is taken to be of great importance by the Meeteis since this Laithou is connected with the life and death of human beings in that year. It is the traditional belief of the Meeteis that there is Lai-Khundin (Assembly of the deities) on every Saturday of the month of Lamta, the last month of the year. In this assembly the number of sticks representing those persons who would die during the coming year is counted by gods. On the eve of Cheiraoba there is the ceremony of requesting the deities to spare their lives. This ceremony is called Singshatpa (Sing = stick, and Shatpa = take out or withdraw) which means withdrawal of lives from the divine counting. Normally it is done at Heibokching, a small hill to the south of present Imphal. Certain offerings are made to the deities to please them; one cloth for Lainingthou (male deity), one cloth for Lairemma (female deity), one canopy,

1. Quoted from Parratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 47
some iron and gold, fifteen bamboo tubes filled with kabo
akhingba (puffed rice), fruits and flowers, an earthen pot of
molasses and ten candles made of bees wax. After the
performance of appeasement rites the maibas remove from the
sticks those representing people whose lives have been
reprieved.¹

The Meeteis celebrate another ceremony called Saroi
Khangba (Saroi = the evil spirits, Khangba = propitiation) on
the day of Cheiraoba. This is the rite of propitiation and
appeasement of the sarois, the evil spirits. This is done by
the elderly ladies of the locality. From each home edible
items such as rice, vegetables, sweets and others are collected
and offered to the tutelar deities, Koubru, Marjing, Wangpuru
and Thangjing, in order to propitiate the Sarois who are
perpetually hungry, and demand food from human beings. The main
objective of this Saroi Khangba is protection against death and
illness.

On the eve of Cheiraoba houses are thoroughly cleaned
and old utensils are replaced by new ones. During the festival
special worship of Sanamahi and Leimatê is performed. Further
a rite is performed at the gate of the house for long life and
prosperity of the members of the family. Three portions of
rice are offered for the Cheithaba of the past year, the
Cheithaba of the present year and that of the coming year. The

¹. cf. Mashil Singtek Singshat Puya
deities who are said to partake of these offerings are Irammaba Tumaba (Lord of my land), Kumsana Kumliklai (chief for the year), and Iram Shenba Tushenba (guardian of my land). This ceremony is really a prayer to the Supreme Lord who is the all-encompassing Time.

One of the main features of Cheiraoba festival is the performance of Ushil. Fish of a particular type (Ngamu) are set loose in the pond, each one representing a particular member of the house. By observing the movements of the fish, it is predicted whether the coming year will be pleasant for the person or not. When this ceremony is carried out by the Maibas, the fish represents the king. It is followed by offerings of money, fruits and flowers etc. in order to secure the prosperity of the kingdom.

On the seventh day of Cheiraoba another ceremony of divination is held in the region between the Iril river and the village of Kongba, east of Imphal. There are two sacred places in the area: one for Angom Pokpa and the other for Ningthem Pokpa – both facing the south. The materials found in digging a particular spot are carefully collected and preserved in a piece of cloth. After it is carefully tied, it is hung on the neck of the Maiba, the priest who performs the ceremony for the king and the state. Then it is carried to the temple of Yumjao Lairembi (the goddess of the Royal Home) at the palace, and then it is preserved in an earthen
jar. For consecutive five days offerings will be made to the deity. The offerings consist of one shareng (a long white fish), gold and silver discs, customary flowers and fruits. After five days the jar is opened and the contents are observed by the Maibas and then predictions concerning the king and the state are made. All the materials will again be brought to the place wherefrom they have been collected. This filling in of the hole takes place in the month of Sajifu. The two rituals are given the names Kongba Leithong Phatpa (digging the hole at Kongba) and Sajifu Leikhun Phunba (closing up the hole in Sajifu) respectively. Even in the pre-historic days long before the reign of Nongtalai, the first historic king in 34 A.D. this tradition of performing rituals in honour of the coming year was held. The festival was celebrated at that time in the month of Wakching. Wakching was then regarded as the first month of the year following the movement of the sun from the north to the south, called Khayum by the Meeteis, and from the south to the north called Laiyum. The tradition is still maintained in the Meetei Khunai. The holding of the said function in the month of Sajifu is considered to be due to the doubling of the month in Wakching. Since then it has been held in the month of Sajifu taking it to be the first month of the year.
Lai Keithel Kaba was originally a festival held in the ancient days for maintaining good relation, peace and harmony among the deities and human beings. It was believed by the Meeteis that on this occasion the divine ladies sold heads of human beings and cats, and these things were purchased by the deities and human beings for a grand feast. The function was originally known as Lai Keithel Kaba (attending the divine market). The ceremony was later modified by Nongtalai who performed it on the 20th day of the month of Lamta at Kangla where Khwai Nongcheng Piba had great influence and Kanglei Khonba Pakhangba revealed himself on this day.

Since then the festival was known as Yek Luktin Thourara held for the purpose of bringing good relation, and harmony among the different groups of people organised into yek: that constitute the present Meetei society. As desired by his wife Laisna, Nongtalai organised Sagol Kangchei, play of Kangchei - a form of Polo as a part of the programme. To commemorate this ceremony of their forefathers Taotthingmang and Yoimonela.

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Sagol

1. Kangchei "is hockey-on-horseback, a game formerly peculiar to Manipur, but which of late years has spread over, and become popular throughout a large portion of British India. This is the game named Polo in England which is now so fashionable". (Brown, R., Statistical Account of Manipur, p. 79; See also Hodson, T.C., The Meitheis, p. 49)
on the advice and supervision of Thongak Kurumba Maichou
organised the said function. In 1779 A.D. Ananta Shai, the
uncle and minister of king Bhagyachandra, performed this
important traditional ritual to bring about peace and harmony
among the different groups of people divided due to the
propagation of Hindu religion. A blend of the old and new
faiths was made. The new religion was given a traditional
foundation.

(c) CHINGKOI IRRUPPA

Chingkoi Irruppa (bathing in the Chingkoi) is a
popular festival and is associated with removal of sin through
ritual bathing. Chingkoi is a small rivulet that flows around
the Nongmaiching hill to the eastern part of the Imphal valley.
From the point of view of the ancient tradition of the Meeteis,
this hill is taken to be the abode of the important Meetei
deity Nongpok and his consort Panthoibi. Their legends
enriched the Meetei culture, tradition, religion and philosophy.
A holy dip into the Chingkoi rivulet was made a religious duty
by king Naethingkhong as he and his men took a bath in this
rivulet out of repentance for and in memory of a Seloi girl
named Pattanga who died instantaneously in his palace out of
shame as she was treated by Naethingkhong as mother, though
she once saved him from grave danger at the hands of the
Sheleis and Langmais (hill tribes of the Nongmaiching hill)
and the king fell in love with her and promised to marry her.
Since then it has become a tradition for the Meeteis to take a holy bath in the said rivulet in the month of Lamta to be free from the sin committed in their life. But when Hinduism became the religion of the Meeteis under strong royal patronage, Nongpok and Panthoibi were identified with Siva and Durga respectively. The Nongmaiching was then treated as the abode of Lord Siva and Durga, and climbing this hill after a holy bath in the Chingkoivivulet became a tradition.

(d) MERA MONTONGBA

Mera Montongba is a festival held for five days commencing on the full moon day of Mera. It is a festival in which people worship Lord Sanamahi and Pakhangba along with the seven Lainurahs (divine girls), nine Laipung thous (divine youths) and the Umanglais. Sanamahi as the presiding deity represents the essence of the life of the universe, that which dwells in everything and being, and Pakhangba as the outward ruling deity of the created universe. Sanamahi is the Thawailel - the Thawai of the Thawais (the supreme life essence) and Pakhangba is the Milel, the shadow or image of the Lord. Since the Thawai and the Mi always go together, Sanamahi and Pakhangba are worshipped together in order to bring about a sense of completeness in the mind of the worshipper. This festival is celebrated to realise the ultimate significance of the two main aspects of the Ultimate Reality, the potential essence of all things and beings on the
In this festival two main seats are prepared: one for Sanamahi and the other for Pakhangba. There is one plantain tree in front of these two seats. By the side of it is placed an ishaifu (a pot filled with water). Around it seven seats of different colours are prepared. On the inner seats—on the right Lainingthou Sanamahi is placed and on the left Pakhangba is placed. On the seven seats around, the seven Lai-Nurahs are placed. Around this arrangement nine seats are again prepared for the nine Laipungthous. The flag used in this function is the Yek/Salai flag of the Mepteis having seven different colours. Candles of wax and smoke of Khoichu-Lailham (local herbs used as incense) are used in this ceremony. Divine hymns are sung according to traditional formalities. First, Lainingthou Sanamahi is worshipped and then Pakhangba. It is followed by the worship of the seven divine girls and then the nine Laipungthous. The seats of the deities are made of Saiba wood (a local tree). The wood to be used in this religious function is collected from Heibokching, taken to be a sacred place.

The display of Sanamahi and Pakhangba surrounded by the seven Lai Nurahs in the inner circle and then the nine Laipungthous in the outer circle shows that the multiplicity of the deities is on the circumference and not in the centre of the circle. Inwardly it is the worship of the One God.
Tengbanba Mapu. He is what His devotees wish Him to be. He has no form; no name, and no attribute as He is above all these things. He has no beginning and no end. It is this One which is shown by the different Meetei Puyas as the ultimate background of all, from whom everything comes out, in whom everything dwells and to whom everything retires. It is this Supreme Being who is worshipped in Mera Men Tongba festival with a deep religious and philosophical insight into His two aspects: Sanamahi and Pakhangba.

Traditionally the Meeteis believe in 361 Uamagnais. But these Uamagnais are but different manifestations or traces of the One Supreme God. They have been assigned several names only when they are taken severally and individually, such as Wangpurel, Marching, Thangjing, Lai-Ishing Chaiba, Okmarel and so on. But this does not mean that they are different. They are but diverse aspects of the same principle, Tengbanba Mapu, having no specific name and form.

(e) MERA HAOCHEONGBA

Mera Haocheongba is a great festival of the Meeteis in the plain and of the people in the surrounding hills. The hill people are called Haes. This festival is a social get-together of all people in the land. It was held regularly in the month of Mera till the advent of the British. All the chiefs of the different tribes in the hills came down to the valley to attend
the festival and paid tributes to the King of the Meeteis. The noblemen and courtiers and the chiefs of all the Salais and other dignitaries used to receive the hill brothers in the function which was usually held in the south western compound of Kangla, the palace. The king of the plain used to serve the hill chiefs and their men in a grand feast according to the hill custom with meat and wine. Both the plain and hill people attending the function exchanged their goodwill and love for each other and joined the sports held on the occasion of the get-together.

Captain E.D. Dun, a political officer in Manipur, wrote that this Mera Haochongba was the third public festival of importance in this country. He gave an account of the festival held in 1886. It lasted for one day; it was a gathering of the hill tribes under the Manipur Government. It was a curious sight on account of the great number of different tribes assembled, with their curious dress and weapons, differing from each other in feature and language, but all unanimous in one particular, to get drunk as speedily and remain so as long as possible. The hillmen indulged in feats of strength before the king of the Meeteis. They also indulged in war dances and sham fights. The sports of the day concluded with a feast, at which they were regaled with the flesh of cows, buffaloes, dogs, cats etc. The flesh was dried and preserved for this feast.¹

¹ cf. Dun, E.D., Gazetteer of Manipur, 1886
Hiyang Kummei is the famous boat race festival which takes place in the month of September on the moat which surrounds on three sides the king's enclosure. All means are permitted to the competitors, including attempting to overthrow the other boat. "The boats used in the races are two in number, of great length, and hollowed out of a single tree; the rowers number about seventy men, each with a short paddle. Besides the rowers are several men attending to the steering and urging on the crew ... . There are no rewards for the races, they being rowed merely for the honour of the thing."¹ Dr. Parratt refers to another boat race² which takes place in the month of Langban on the canal by the Bijoy Govinda area of Imphal and confuses this Heikru Hitongba with Hiyang Kummei. In the former, as the name Heikru suggests, particular emphasis is laid on the Heikru fruit; the headman (hitongba) of the boat wears a garland of Heikru fruits which cannot be eaten until after the race. The religious significance of the boat race is very obscure in spite of many references to it in the Royal chronicles. It is believed that the race was originally carried out before a lai in the pre-Hindu period.

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¹ Brown, R., Statistical Account of Manipur, p. 82
² Parratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 45
The Lai Haraoba is a unique festival which embodies the ancient Meetei religious beliefs. It "mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their intensest."\(^1\) The Meeteis believe that gods after fulfilling the wish of Tengbanba Mapu to create the world of things and beings under the guidance of Atiya Sidaba and Leimalel Sidabi expressed their happiness. Lai Haraoba is a festival of "the marry-making of the gods and goddesses."\(^2\) It means literally 'enjoyment of the gods'. Wakoklon Puya says, "Gods became happy at the creation of the earth by the will of the Supreme Lord."\(^3\) The Leithak Leikhalon Puya also makes reference to the expression of divine happiness and pleasure when the primal elements came out from the womb of Atingkok with the cry, "Abei the Hoirou Hoirou Hoirou Nakese", and Atingkok sang in happiness"Ha Hoi Hoi Ha Ha Ha. Hoi Hoi Ha Ha Ha Herinlinla Herinla the rinla hayute Khulaita Haiyase Heiyase Ashibu Thoina Haraopa Leipane. Tahou Hou He Hou Heiya Naketa".\(^4\)

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2. Ibid.
3. Wakok Hilel Thilel Salai Amaillon Pukok Puya, p. 43
4. Leithak Leikhalon, pp. 13-14
Still today this unintelligible Hoirou Hoiya cry marks the beginning of Laipou Chongba dance in every Lai Haraoba.

There are different views on this important festival of the Meeteis. According to Y. Tamphajao Lai Haraoba is but an expression of the whole human life from birth to death. Human enjoyment is the reflection - the very image of divine happiness. This pleasure of the gods is expressed as Lai Haraoba.¹ Shri H. Kulabidhu Singh in his article 'Mera Men Tengba' regards Lai Haraoba as a combination of the words, 'Lai', 'Ha' and 'Laoba'. 'Lai' means the gods, 'Ha' means the chaks (Heiyi, Haya, Kenna and Langba); and 'Laoba' means 'to declare'. Thus Lai Haraoba means the declaration of the chak orders by gods.² The Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya makes reference to this as Chakpalon.³ Heiyi chak means the period of becoming a child in the father; Haya chak means its coming to the mother; Konna chak means the child's being in the mother's womb; and Langba chak means the coming out of the child from the mother's womb into the open world. Thus according to H. Kulabidhu the remembrance of this Chakpalon and the creation of the universe by gods who emanated from the Supreme Being, the Tengbanba Mapu, constitutes the

¹ Tamphajao, Y., Meetei Lai Haraobagi Wangu Lon, p. 3
² Meitei Harao Kumei, pp. 37f
³ Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya, pp. 37-38
The Meeteis say that the human body is a divine place. The Supreme Being is seated within the body of man along with other deities manifested from it. The traces and manifestations of God are collectively termed as Umanglais - the common and popular deities of the Meeteis having their abodes in different parts of the land. It is at the place of these deities that the festival of Lai Haraoba is being held annually or at the interval of years. The festival takes place in the Meetei month of Kalen (April, May) and lasts over a week. It commences on one of those days of the month which contain the numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8.

As has been mentioned earlier the Meetei Umanglais are only apparently pluralistic as in the ultimate analysis all the Umanglais are but the different manifestations of the same God, Tengbanba Mapu. This is clearly evidenced by the common address made to the participants of Haraoba in any Laibung: "Lainingthou Lairembigi Manaisa" (Oh, Servants of Lainingthou and Lairembi). Here Lainingthou and Lairembi are the two aspects - male and female - of the Supreme God. In fact in a particular Haraoba we are not worshipping the particular deity, but the Supreme Deity in His manifestation as Lainingthou and Lairembi. The individual names of the deities in question serve the purpose of pointing to the place where the Laiharaoba festival is held. Thus the main feature

1. Parratt, S.N., op.cit., p. 56. Usually the first day of the month is avoided.
of Laiharaoba remains intrinsically the same everywhere. Certain outward local differences in style and presentation are not however ruled out. Considering these local differences S. N. Farratt attempts to make a broad classification of Laiharaoba into three main forms: Kanglei form as prevalent in the main valley, Moirang form in Moirang particularly in the Laibung of Thangjing and Chakpa form in the areas where the Chakpa Lois inhabit. Kanglei form is taken mainly from the Haraoba style as carried on at the palace; Moirang form of Haraoba is taken from the Haraoba of Thangjing in Moirang; and Chakpa form is the Haraoba which is basically the Loi observance in purely old primitive style. She also points out that inspite of slight variations, the basic pattern remains always the same regardless of the Lai (deity) in whose Laibung (courtyard) the festival is performed. Substantially in the Laiharaoba festival of any Laipham what is being displayed first is the creation of the universe particularly heaven and earth. Then are exhibited the creation of living beings particularly the creation of human beings as revealed in Chakpalon and then the growth of the human being into adult manhood, and so on. The ancient divine romantic legend of Leinung Haraoba and Nongthangleima and that of Nongpok and Pantheibi are reflected in the Laiharaoba dances and songs.

1. Farratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 54
In view of the performance of the festival in honour of certain gods, like Pakhangba of the Mangangs, Thangjing of the Meirangs, Oknarel of the Khumans etc. taken to be divine ancestors of particular yeks, Dr. Parratt says that the festival "was originally an ancestral ritual." While attempting to prove it she draws parallel of it in Kuki ancestral ritual as noticed by Shakespeare which has, however, some similarities with the Meitei way of ancestral ritual. What she wants to emphasize here is that Lai Haraoba was originally an ancestral ritual like Apokpa Khurumba (ancestral worship). But it is to be pointed out here that Ancestral worship like Apokpa Khurumba basically differs from Lai Haraoba though in both there is the worship of the ancestors as deities. In Apokpa Khurumba there is the predominance of private interest of the family alone while in Lai Haraoba, there is the general interest of all people. From this it is clear that Laiharaoba is not merely an ancestral ritual as Shakespeare and Parrati suggest, but a search for realisation of the Supreme God in and through the multitude of the deities who are but His different traces.

On the preceding day of the festival the shrine is cleansed, the courtyard is prepared, and candles are lighted in the night at the shrine and at every home of the locality as a measure to ward off evils that may cause hindrance to the festival. The representation of the Lai is prepared and placed

1. Ibid., p. 53
on a wooden throne in the shrine, and is properly adorned with clothes by the Maibi, the priestess. To quote S.N. Farratt in this regard, "The Lai itself is represented in several different ways but never by an image. The original representation of Lai was by a pair of bamboo tubes, which may have contained relics. At a later stage of development the Lai came to be represented by brass or wooden masks, with cloths placed below and above as though they were dressed. The simplicity of representing the gods has not been compromised, however. For in recent times a piece of wood or iron was used, and today coins and bamboo tubes are still used, for cultic purposes. The absence of images indicates that Hindu iconography had not influenced Meetei worship at all at the time when this rite received its present form."¹ The Meetei deities have no specific forms because they are believed to belong to the original Being who is formless and boundless.

The calling up of the Lai from water is called Lai Ikouba. This is the ceremonial beginning of the festival. As Tamphajao says, it is the putting in of life to the temple which is otherwise lifeless in the absence of the Lai.² Some cultic objects are used for this, each of which has specific name and function. The main items are as follows: (1) Turel Heiruks - Fruit offerings to be made in the water (it consists

1. Ibid., p. 56
2. Tamphajao, Y., Meetei Laiharaobagi Wangulon, p. 3
of one bunch of banana, one betel leaf and one betel nut and several other fruits and sweets; (2) Two Ihaifus: one for Lainingthou and the other for Lairembi - (Ihaifu is an earthen pot in which is placed a banana leaf thrust out at the neck of the pot and then bent down and tied with handwoven thread of a fathom's length. The thread for Lainingthou has nine strands and that for Lairembi only seven); (3) Two Leiyoms, one for Lainingthou and the other for Lairembi (Leiyom is a package of Langthrei buds covered by three layers of banana leaves tied with the thread from Lainingthou's Ihaifu. Lainingthou's package has fourteen buds facing downwards while Lairembi's package has only seven buds facing upwards); (4) Khayoms of Lainingthou and Lairembi (Khayom is a package of rice, egg and three buds of Langthrei covered by seven layers of banana leaves. The Khayom of Lainingthou is tied with nine strips of bamboo while that of Lairembi is tied with seven bamboo strips. As in leiyom, the langthrei buds in Lainingthou's Khayom are placed facing downwards while those of Lairembi are placed facing upwards); (5) Six khudeis (locally made thin cloth having a length of about 6 ft and a breadth of about 1¼ inches) for use in tying the Ihaifu and the Lai and also for use in Anam Athou (warding off evils); (6) Konyai or gold and silver pieces.

After all these things have been prepared, all men should go in a procession to the place of water from where the Lai is to be called up. The Maiba and Maibis should lay four
pieces of banana leaves with coins on them. There the two Lai bearers should stand facing the temple. The maibi wraps the Ihaifus properly in a cloth and ties them round the necks of Lai-bearers. She then dances to the tune of the pena (a kind of one-stringed fiddle). The maiba and the maibi lead the procession with the musicians. Then come the two men bearing the swords of the god, followed by women carrying brass vessels and the Lai-bearers and attendants. Reaching the place the maibi performs the rite called yuhkhangba - pleasing the Lai with Yu (beer) in bamboo containers which are nine for the Lainingthou and seven for the Lairembi. Then Turel Heiruk is offered in the water. After this with appropriate hymns the maibi offers Konyais to the lai and throws them into the water. There is then the invocation of the Lai by the maibi: '(Name) come, your people will celebrate your haraoba'. After this she takes the Khayoms of Lainingthou in her right hand and that of Lairembi in the left hand and offered them to the Lai in the water. She takes the Ihaifu of Lainingthou in her right hand and that of Lairembi in the left and performs three dance movements facing the guardian deities of the four directions, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbaren and Koubru. The Ihaifus are then handed over to their bearers. The maibi then takes out the thread (hiri) from the Ihaifu and ties a short stick (hirichei) with the Leiyom three times. Taking every precaution so that the hiri does not fall to the ground she passes the hiri over her shoulder. Covering her head with
white cloth and holding the bell in the left hand she takes the leiyoms in the right hand and immerses them in the water, all the while chanting the traditional hymn of creation. Then she becomes possessed by the Lai and utters the words of the Lai. It was all to the accompaniment of pena tune until the bell of the maibi stops ringing. The maibi, while she is possessed by the Lai, delivers many divine oracles, foretelling many happenings that would take place in the community in the near future. When this is over the Maibi wraps the Leiyoms by their proper threads and places them in the appropriate Ihaifus. Then the event of Higaba (disembarking) follows. With the cry Hi-Hi-Hi the Lai is called up from the water and the procession back to the shrine takes place in the correct order. At the Laibung (the court yard of the god) there takes place the event of Anam Athou Kokpa, the process of warding off the evils and also of purification. All the persons in the procession step over the things placed for the purpose of dispelling evils, such as baskets of rice, salt, ginger, duck, pigeon, fish and eggs. Then the whole procession comes to the shrine with the lai. The maiba and maibi approach the lai representations which have been deposited at the shrine and with the leiyom touch that portion of the divine representation which is supposed to be the navel of the lai. The two ihaifus are then placed on the side appropriate to the male and female deities. The leiyoms are unwrapped by the maibi. Nine langthrei buds from Lainingthou's Leiyom are placed before him and seven buds
from Lairembi's leiyom are placed before her. Between the two deities nine buds are kept for the Almighty Father, Atiya Sidaba. The musicians play their instruments with sweet songs to wake up the lai from divine sleep. The maibi possessed by the lai relates many riddles and narratives beginning with the cry hoi.

Laipou Jagoi is the main item of Haraoba. It is the cultic dance representing the birth of the deity. The main Laipou dance begins with the Hoirou Hoiya cry by the Maiba or Pena singer. The maibi with the Langthroi buds between her fingers leads the rows of participants. She displays a creation dance depicting the lifting of the earth from the bottom of water. After this there is Meesemlon - the making of the human child - its coming down from heaven to the father and then staying in the womb of the mother, and then ultimately coming out from the mother's womb. All these things are depicted in the form of dance movement. Then the dance depicts the construction of a house for the human child. It is followed by the Paosa play based on the legends of the past traditions of the land. The legends of Lainingthou Khorifaba, Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, Ningthou Tukaoba and Sannalombi etc. are displayed. In doing all those things, dance, songs and discourses are the media of expression. After the depiction of the ancient traditional legends the dance shows the process of jhuming cultivation - preparation of the land, sowing the seeds, growth of the plant and harvesting. Not only the food
crops, but cotton plantations are also portrayed. The cotton flowers ripen and are then harvested. Raw cottons are collected and dried. The process of making threads is followed by weaving the cloth which is offered to the lai for the prosperity of the people. All these things are danced out in the Laipou using appropriate languages and movements of hands and legs. After this Jhuming performance there will be Fishing Dance which symbolizes the gathering of the spirit of the lai. From among the participants the maibi stands out and makes patton\textsuperscript{1} dance performances in which she imitates the catch of life fish, the Thawais, through the use of long.\textsuperscript{2} Evil spirits are symbolically driven away and the spirits of the lai are brought in.

All the participants then move in the pattern of the coiling of Pafal, the divine snake. This is called Lairel Mathek dance. The whole movement is in a single row and there should not be any break in the line. Nine folds are there in the Pafal curve, and the participants form the nine folds completely. After this the whole row is divided into two, that of Lainingthou and that of Lairembi. Then the participants in the said formation proceed to the temple and make the last prayer to the deity for the day. As to the Lairel Mathek (python fold) dance there are many opinions. Some say that this is an indication of the manifold generations of mankind from the

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Pat-ton means the edge of the lake.
  \item Long is a fishing basket made of bamboo.
\end{enumerate}
One Common Ancestor - a move from One to many. At any rate Pafal has a significant place in the religious beliefs of the Meeteis. It is addressed as the bearer of one layer of the earth in creation. It is called Taopiloinai the mother bearing all within its womb as given by Atingkok, the ultimate father - the common ancestor of all things and beings, divine and human. The ancestral deity Pakhangba is also characterised as a snake. The coiled snake appears on the royal flag. Thus the symbol of snake plays an important role in the life of the Meeteis. The ritual of Saroikhangba is performed to propitiate the evil spirits who are believed to be watching the festival. Rice, fruit, flower, Kabok etc. are offered to them. In performing this ceremony the maibi uses the sword of the deity and drives the evil spirits towards the south where Lai Wangpurel, the guardian of the evil spirits, resides.

A very significant ritual performed before the end of the festival is the choosing of a wife for the lai (lai nupi thiba). When the maibi is possessed by a lai, she utters oracles and sings ancient hymns. She selects the girl for the lai with the help of the hockey stick. She strikes the ball and any virgin who is hit is chosen as the wife of the lai for the year. The girl so selected offers fruits and flowers to the lai and joins the maibi in leishi jagoi and later becomes a maibi. At the end of the festival the ritual of sending the

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lai back to heaven is performed. Holding the sword of the lai, the maibi dances and sings. The pena is played and the song describes how out of a tree a boat is made for the lai to ascend to heaven. Through rhythmic clapping by the participants, the lai is conveyed to his abode.

The religious festivals have kept alive and preserved the ancient Meetei culture despite various pressures to erase it. They constitute a valuable source of information about the traditional religious beliefs. They reveal spiritual truths concerning man and the universe. The festival of Lai Haraoba mirrors the kinship between man and god. It is not mere merry-making but a guiding light for the people. God is not transcendent. Humanity is the highest medium through which God expresses His creative joy. Lai Haraoba embodies the aspirations of the Meeteis and leads us to an aesthetic vision of the world in which harmony prevails over discord and divergence.