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SHAPING THE CULTURE, HISTORY POLITICS: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ON THE ROLE OF *LAI HARAOBA* FESTIVALS IN MANIPUR

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Lai Haraoba is a ritual festival of Meitei people of Manipur which represents one of the most sacred culturally significant indigenous traditions of the region. More than a religious festival, *Lai Haraoba* serves as a living repository of Meitei history, culture, politics cosmology where collective memories social values are preserved transmitted across generation. The songs performances of *Lai Haraoba* embody a unique per-Hindu worldview that highlights the sacred ritual performance, oral poetry, music dance show the close relationship between the people sacred tradition. The popularity of *Lai Haraoba* in contemporary Meitei society is not only religious but also deeply political. The festival has become a statement contributing to the strengthening of Meitei politicization identity consciousness. This coexistence of indigenous beliefs external religious practices reflects the dynamic process of cultural negotiation, adaptation identity formation within Meitei Society. By examining *Lai Haraoba* as a cultural text, this paper explores how the festival shapes sustains Meitei cultural identity, historical consciousness socio-political understanding. It argues that *Lai Haraoba* functions not only as a ritual performance but also as a medium through which the Meitei people negotiate heritage, collective memory cultural continuity in a rapidly changing modern society.

Keywords: *Culture, Festival, Meitei, Ritual*

Introduction

Culture is one of the most difficult concept in the human, social science there are many different ways of defining it (Hall, 1997). Culture has different meaning ways of expression for different situation society. The creation of culture depends on participation, knowledge, understanding goals that create an integrated thematic cultural stems from their desires history shared fate. Cultural forms do not magically appear, but arise from contextualization (Fine, 2018). So, Culture is a the self contained self determined system that is brought by daily social process through religion, festival, family, economy polity. The stronger the bond between the culture the individual the more consensual is the individual's perception of social structure (White, 1994).

This paper looks at one expression of culture, the *Lai Haraoba* festival of the Meitei people of Manipur. The festival is usually described as a religious ritual, it is that. It also carries the community's account of its own past, its ideas about gods, land nature, the way its members are placed in relation to one another. For this reason it is a good place to see how Meitei identity is made kept. It is also a place where change is easy to see. Funds are now raised through donations by organizing committees, the number of events attached to the festival has grown, the institution that supplies ritual specialists is losing capacity. The paper asks what the festival does for Meitei socio-political identity at present how its changing form affects that role.

Manipur: Manipur is a small state, which has a rich varied culture tradition deeply rooted in customs, rituals, norms (Brara, 1998). With different cultural art form tradition Manipur can easily be differentiated from the rest of the nation. The cultural heritage of Manipur can be said to be complicated but quite rich unique. Kangla which is in the center of Imphal valley was the ancestral abode of the king, a worship areas also scared shrines of Manipur, the area functioned as the central site for both political religious place of Manipur till now also providing a symbolic gesture by different ethnic groups.

Meitei: The term *Meetei* was first recorded in the *Cheitharon Kumpapa*, the royal court chronicle of the kings of Manipur the only historical source prior to the arrival of the British. During the reign of *Meetingu* (king) Konthoupa (490-568 CE), *Meetei* was use referring to the *Pakhangpa* group (ancestor-founder of the *Meeteis* lai, divinity) who were referred as immigrants by the *Poireiton* group (the autochthonous people of the land). The term '*mee*' referred to 'people' '*atei*' referred 'other', meaning 'other people' (Parratt, 2005).

According to the various books scholars (Brara, 1998; Parratt, 2005) the historical narratives suggest that several kingdoms were ruled by different clans/tribes. The *Mangang/Ningthouja* were the clans/tribes that originally settled in the plain, along with other inhabiting tribes/clans together, following with a series of inter tribal conflicts, the *Mangang* clan established political control over the tribes some other hill tribes by gaining political supremacy also established cultural racial supremacy. The conquered seven tribes/clans were subsumed under the collective name "Meitei" formed an independent kingdom.

Literature Review

Lai Haroba: Performance culture reflects share beliefs idea within a society people sense a belonging through participation connecting the past present through experiences with inherited knowledge, collective memories social values. *Lai Haraoba* festival reflects the culture collective memories, ritualize presentation of values that influence the moral ethical dimension of Meitei community. *Lai Haraoba* can be translated 'the pleasing of the god' it is one of the greatest festival to know Meitei history culture (Parratt,1997)

Lai Haraoba is a ritual festival involving collective memories, music dance oral literature, *Maiba* (priests) *Maibi* (priestesses) are the most important functionaries of this festival. It gives the element to communicate between god human existence in a joyous ritual celebration to seek blessing from god for that particular year, for the society each individual to give peace, harmony abundance. *Lai Haraoba* is a composite cultural identity of the Meitei people finds its fuller expression by means of the reenactment of the Creation myth, ritual invocation calling upon the divine power to get infused in the *Lai* (deity) who stands for two principles, a male a female. Partly it recreates the cultural memory of the very creation of the earth living beings emerging from the vast emptiness on land, in water, in air in environment.

It has four main forms i) *Kanglei Haraoba,* which is the most common mostly celebrated in the valley region of Manipur, ii) *Moirang Haraoba* celebrated only in Moirang region located in the southern part of the valley, iii) C*hakpa Haraoba* is celebrated by the *Chakpa* group of Meitei community located in different areas, iv) *Kakching Haraoba* is celebrated in the Kakching area located in the east of Imphal valley. All this have unique certain kind of practices customary practices, ritual observation according to their places located. Lai Haraoba is worshiping celebrating the cosmic universe of Meitei the ethos of the society celebrating including the *Umang Lai* (Umang=forest, Lai=god) deities sacred groves connects cultural identity natural environment.

Socio-political Identity of *Lai Haraoba:* *Lai Haraoba* serves as a living repository of Meitei history, culture, oral tradition, cosmology where collective memories social values are preserved transmitted across generation. The *Maibas Maibis* play as a medium between the living the spiritual world by giving oracles they are consider as god-gifted (possessed). During the festival period locality of that particular area were behold with some traditional norms restriction of some food to eat which indicate the belief of traditional values of god. People of the locality join together to celebrate the festival ritual function wearing the traditional dress offers fruits, flowers seasonal vegetable to the god as seek blessing for the betterment of the locality their own family. The *Maibi* delivered oracle known as *Laipao Chenba* (*Lai*=god, *pao*=news, c*henba*=delivering) fully possessed for the well being of the locality if the chanted oracle have any indication of offering of particular things, then the locality perform exactly what was told in the *Laipao.* Ch. Manihar Singh (1996) stated that "*Lai Haraoba* has been there since time immemorial to present the composite culture of the land be it myth of creation, religious faith, dance, music, traditional costumes or indigenous sports".

Brara (1998) examines the intertwined relationship of early Meitei society with myth, legend history, where the people's perception of gods, kings ancestors are not separated but collectively embedded within a historical consciousness. The magical feats a mystical aura appear as an integral part of historical understanding of Meitei society. *Lai Haraoba* is the central ritual through which the relationship between humans, deities natural is renewed. *Lai Haraoba* is the composite culture of Meitei community. As a ritual *Lai Haraoba* is the binding force of the society, a social religious activity collectively shared by a community which performed annually, it reconnects cosmological narratives of creation, agriculture, biodiversity settlement through dance, song symbolic gestures.

The *Lai Haraoba* today considered a cultural festival as a long-drawn-out ritualistic community activity revolving around the several *Umang Lais* celebration. But the whole ritualistic festival is built on the principle of establishing a series of correlation between the microcosm the macrocosm. The festival ensures the well-being of a society to restore order where myth stands for the guidance protection of a society the norms value of human well being.

Lai Haraoba comprises folk songs, folk dance symbolically expressing the creation of man from conception to his manhood passing through stages of growth, initiation, socialization, romance, house making, weaving, fishing, farming, so on. It is a combination of ritual performances, taboos, prohibitions along with songs, dance, folk drama, community games.

The ritual narrative of *Hijing Hirao Khon*, an old ritual song about the levitation of life to the higher reality represented by a boat leaving for a higher journey. The Songs chant play a crucial role in articulating environmental values. *Hijing Hirao Khon,* sung towards the end reflects reverence for nature ethical responsibility towards forest living beings (Kshetrimayum, 2014). Which indicate oral ecological texts, instilling values of care, restraint respect. Sacred groves are the oldest forms of community based on conservation, protection in the formed of belief, ritual moral obligation. Culturally embedded ecological systems where forest are not merely resources but sacred spaces intertwined with social life cosmology which often coexistence reciprocity between people, forests deities. Meitei *Lai Haraoba* is not to be looked at as a simple ritual festival because of the many fold ideology of Meitei culture which gives a way of looking at interpreting the living world displayed collective memories. *Lai Haraoba* is also a institution through which the social, economic political organization of Meitei society was expressed maintained through

collective participation from different section of the society including the royal authorities, traditional functionaries local communities. The responsibilities among the organizers the collective contribution of money, rice, materials voluntary labour reflect the cooperative economic structure of the community in sustaining the festival.

In the contemporary *Lai Haraoba*, the materialistic values have been increasingly influenced, the organization committees shifted the traditional arrangement to more modern community structure (Chanu, 2014). The mobilization of funds through donation makes it more political, which makes the traditional cultural festival more political. The increasing event in the function makes the ritual practices into commercialization, declines the aesthetic value of traditional function. Nevertheless, initiatives are undertaken by cultural organization to preserve foster the traditional value of *Lai Haraoba.*

The works reviewed above describe what *Lai Haraoba* is: a collective ritual that carries Meitei cosmology, history ecological values. They say less about how the festival works as a source of identity under present conditions, when donations, organizing committees formal institutions have entered its organization. This study takes up that question through the objectives stated below.

Conceptual Framework

The study uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which explains the continuity of cultural heritage, identity formation the transfer of inter-generational knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu describes cultural capital in three states. Embodied cultural capital is knowledge skill held by a person built up over a long period of learning. Objectified cultural capital is held in material things such as costumes, instruments texts. Institutionalised cultural capital is knowledge that an institution recognizes, usually through a qualification or a formal position. Bourdieu also treats the different forms of capital as convertible into one another, so that money, for example, can be turned into standing in a community. The Discussions section uses these ideas to read the findings against the two objectives.

Objectives of the Study

1) To examine the role of *Lai Haraoba* in shaping Meitei socio-political identity in contemporary society.
2) To analyse how the changing contemporary ritual performances negotiate cultural heritage, collective memory the continuity of Meitei traditions

Methodology: This study has been conducted on qualitative method. Primary data has been collected from *Maibas Maibis* of Manipur *Pandit Loishang Maru Loishang (*institution of Maiba Maibi), faculty students of Umang Lai Haraoba Deparetment, Manipur University of Culture. Secondary data has been collected from variegated forms of articles published in international national journals, books etc. Interviews (unstructured), focus group discussions, field notes, non-participant observation are the methods to collect the Primary data, which are conceptually associated with their experiences as well as cultural practitioners.

Discussions

The respondents describe *Lai Haraoba* mainly as a way in which the Meitei community forms a collective identity. Religious belief, cultural memory shared practice come together in the festival, taking part in it is how people place themselves within the community. This agrees with the literature, where the festival is described as the composite culture of the land (Singh, 1996) as the ritual through which the relationship between people, deities nature is renewed.

In Bourdieu's terms, a large part of what holds this identity together is embodied cultural capital. The *Maibas Maibis* carry the knowledge of ritual procedure, chant the delivery of oracles such as the *Laipao Chenba*, the songs dances pass on the community's account of creation its attitude to the forest from one generation to the next. Objectified capital appears in the traditional dress offerings that the festival uses. A person who dances, brings fruits flowers, or keeps the food restrictions of the festival period is acting on this shared stock of knowledge, by doing so is recognized as a member of the locality.

The political side of this identity shows in how the festival is organized. The responses point to a hierarchy, in the past at present, in which the nobility the better-off sections of the community gave larger sums of money so displayed their status, while women showed their role by taking part in the rituals. Read through Bourdieu, the larger donations are economic capital being converted into prestige women's ritual participation is a different kind of contribution, based on practice ritual knowledge rather than money. The festival expresses a common identity also assigns people positions within it. Whether the two kinds of contribution carry the same standing in the community is a question the present data do not settle.

Ritual authority is a second source of ranking. The locality acts on what the *Maibi* announces in the oracle, the *Maiba Maibi* are regarded as god-gifted, so these specialists have a recognized say in how the festival is conducted for the locality. Their standing rests on the community's acceptance of their knowledge of their role as a medium between the living the spiritual world.

On this evidence the festival shapes Meitei socio-political identity in two ways. It supplies the shared knowledge practice through which people recognise themselves as Meitei it gives that identity an internal order of status, gender roles ritual authority.

The responses show that the way *Lai Haraoba* is organised performed has changed, that people close to the tradition are concerned about it. Organizing committees have replaced the earlier arrangement, funds are raised through donations, the number of events attached to the festival keeps growing. Spending public display now get more emphasis, this overshadows ritual values, symbolic meaning cultural knowledge. On Bourdieu's account, economic capital is coming to count for more in the festival than the cultural capital the festival exists to pass on. The older pattern, in which households gave money, rice, materials labour, was cooperative. Donation based funding is closer to fundraising, since control of funds brings influence, the festival has become more political, as noted earlier.

The second concern is the passing on of knowledge. The *Pandit Loishang* has traditionally selected identified the *Maiba*, *Maibi Pena Khongba* who are sent for the festival, the responses say that its institutional capacity to do this is declining. The knowledge these specialists hold is embodied capital. It exists only in people takes long training to acquire, so a thinner supply of trained specialists puts at risk what carries collective memory in the festival: the chants, the oracles, songs such as *Hijing Hirao Khon* with their teaching on care for forests living beings. A costume or an offering can be replaced. A chant that no one has been trained to sing cannot.

There are also efforts to hold the tradition in place. Cultural organizations have taken up initiatives to preserve its traditional value, as noted in the review. The Umang Lai Haraoba Department at the Manipur University of Culture, where part of the data for this study was collected, points to a related change. Knowledge that was handed down through the *Pandit Loishang* the festival itself is now also taught in an academic setting. This is a move towards institutionalized cultural capital. It may help the knowledge survive, but it also raises the question of who counts as a knowledgeable person, since recognition by the *Pandit Loishang* a university qualification are different kinds of authority. How the two relate was not examined in this study.

The change in ritual knowledge, in the way it is passed between generations, is often read simply as adaptation to modernization. The responses suggest that a closer reading is needed. Donation-based funding, display-oriented events, a weaker *Pandit Loishang* a thinner line of ritual specialists are specific changes in how the festival is run who holds knowledge. Each of them affects ritual practice, community attitudes traditional institutions in a different way, each has to be examined for what it does to the preservation of the festival's cultural essence, instead of being treated as one process called modernization.

The festival therefore does negotiate heritage, memory continuity, but not on equal terms. Knowledge is being kept alive through committees, cultural organizations a university department, while the pressure of money display pulls the other way.

Taken together, the two objectives point to the same process. The cultural capital held by ritual specialists shared through performance is what makes *Lai Haraoba* a source of Meitei identity, the changes in funding, organization training are altering the conditions under which that capital is passed on.

Conclusion

On the first objective, the study finds that *Lai Haraoba* gives Meitei socio-political identity its shared knowledge practice, its ritual authority its internal order of status gender roles. On the second, it finds that changes in funding, organization the training of ritual specialists are altering how heritage memory are passed on, that the continuity of the tradition now depends on how these changes are handled. *Lai Haraoba* represents the collective cultural historical identity of Meitei community, including gender roles, economic cooperation, social relation political structure. The contemporary transformation by modernization raises concerns about the decline of its ritualistic significance. Social sustainability is essential for strengthening the community bonds collective identity while cultural sustainability required preservation of ritual practice, language, performing arts indigenous knowledge. Rather than viewing modernization as a threat it is important to critically engage with contemporary changes ensuring adaptation does not undermine the fundamental essence of traditional values. Sustaining *Lai Haraoba* gave an opportunities to reinvigorate to foster the cultural continuity by ensuring cultural continuity identity formation of Meitei self.

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