



Songs as Performance Texts: Indigenous Singing Traditions and Collective Memory in *Kanglei Haraoba*

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to explore the significance of the indigenous singing tradition sung in the repertoire of *Kanglei Haraoba* (a sub-type of the *Lai Haraoba*). Literally, the *Lai Haraoba* means the merry-making of the Gods which is celebrated mostly in the months of *Kalen* (May-June). The *Lai Haraoba* of Manipur embodies a strong cultural repository of theatre, song, dance and ritual from the very early time till the contemporary present day. In Manipur, there are four types of the *Lai Haraoba* traditions which are the *Kanglei Haraoba*, the *Moirang Haraoba*, the *Chakpa Haraoba* and the *Kakching Haraoba*. It is a living tradition which is the pride and progenitor of many traditional singing and dancing heritage of the Meitei community of Manipur. The paper seeks attention towards the rituals and performances of the *Kanglei Haraoba* consisting of the songs like the *Pena Sheishak* and *Khullang Eshei* and songs sung during the episodes of the *Lai Nupi Thiba* and the *Tangkhul Nurabi*. These songs are sung not only for ornamentation or the entertainment purpose but they are the very essence of the whole performance of the ritual festival. In fact, they serve as the performance texts of the repertoire of the *Lai Haraoba* tradition. Therefore, these songs are essentially performed in every forms of the *Lai Haraoba* performances in Manipur and they are the fundamental element of this tradition for its continuity and growth. The paper also argues that memory also serves as an organic tool to store the nuances of this living tradition. Eventually, through this paper, we have arrived at a conclusion where people of today's generation who will be intended



to learn and foster the values and importance of these traditional songs as the cultural heritage preserving and nurturing it for the next generation.

Keywords: *Lai Haraoba, Kanglei Haraoba, Lai Nupi Thiba, Pena, Pena Sheishak, Khullang Eshei*

Relevance of the Study

The *Lai Haraoba* is considered as the seedbed of the varied forms of songs and dances in the life of Meitei community in Manipur. Even the famous classical dance of Manipuri, popularly known as the *Ras Lila* or Manipuri Dance has been influenced by the *Lai Haraoba* in terms of movements and gestures. Regardless of the forms of art in Manipur, whether the folk arts or the classical arts; there is always a deep connection and synthesis with the tradition of the *Lai Haraoba*. In spite of its religious, ritual and spiritual fervour, the songs and dances performed in the *Lai Haraoba* are the performance texts and serve as a literary source by itself. Thus, songs sung in the *Lai Haraoba* are the vital elements which cannot be separated and isolated from the whole performances in this traditional art. Therefore, it is mandatory to understand, learn and follow the customs of singing and performing it in its genuine form without any adulteration. Moreover, we should be very cautious while performing these songs because they will be observed and followed by today's generation which will be retained for the generations to come.

Research Methodology

The present paper relies mostly from the primary sources of data collection and employed qualitative research. While conducting the research, qualitative research tools like participant observation, interviews, field-visit and ethnographic documentation are implemented. The research is also conducted through historical research in which the researchers used secondary data collection like reviewing historical records of books, seminar papers and souvenirs. Moreover, the research is carried out mainly from the information provided by the actual performers like the *Amaibas* (the priests), *Amaibis* or *Maibis* (the priestesses), *Pena Khongba* (the Pena player) and many well-known gurus and teachers.



Objectives

1. To study the diverse folk songs performed in the tradition of *Kanglei Haraoba*.
2. To examine the various forms of folk songs with reference to their singing styles, narratives, musical instruments, and cultural meanings.
3. To analyse the relationship between dance and songs in the performance of *Kanglei Haraoba*.
4. To explore the aesthetic significance of folk songs and their contribution to the ritual and performative traditions of *Kanglei Haraoba*.

Introduction

Manipur, though a small state has its own rich culture and traditions including dance, music, martial art, literature and sports. It is a land surrounded by ranges of hills with an oval shaped valley in the middle. The distinctive landscape makes it a unique place and thus influences the culture and tradition of the land. From the earliest time, the community of Meitei has their traditional belief system, religious customs and practices including dance, music and rituals of their own. These traditional systems have deep philosophical meanings and aesthetics that is conveyed through the folk singing traditions of the Meitei community which is a product of these rich and varied traditions.

Folksong is a living form of oral literature. It has short lyrical poem usually transmitted by words of mouth from generation to generation. As a result, folksong constitutes a large section of various elements that composed folklore and also expresses one's heart feeling most effectively, making us delighted and relaxed. Thus, it acts as an entertaining medium which give leisure and comfort from exhaustion if sung along in the time of hard works. Besides these, they also have elements that indirectly give impacts like valuable information related with our religious faith, the beauty of the natural world, history and wise maxims etc. Furthermore, it is a medium through which things which cannot be said openly but can be expressed easily.

Folksong, though its origin remains unknown, is a type of song with deep feelings and emotions usually sung by people from immemorial time till today and it has been passed down orally from generation to generation. According to the book *Manipuri Khunnung Eshei*



Khomjinba (1999) by Laishram Birendrakumar, the Meitei folksong is an aged old creation involving numerous people who remains anonymous. It contains the expression of the thoughts, feelings of joy and sadness, hope, desire, etc. of different groups of inhabiting the land. Important folksongs include songs sung in relation with the lake, paddy fields, pasture, tending the cattle, farming and other works and household activities. Besides this, there is a deep feeling of connection between folksongs and nature. The original imagination poems of the folksongs which were composed by illiterate composers about the moon, the stars, open field, the Loktak Lake, flowers, trees and the birds are being poemed once again but the educated writers/poets of today will find hard to attempt with perfection.

Folksong is closely related with the culture and religions of the society. The aesthetics contained in it and happiness given by it is high thought of philosophy. The art of music gives a high class of feeling which again gives us two ways of feeling such as “sensible” and “super sensible” feelings. It means that the thought as born from the music gives a simple feeling of joy and beauty at first, but later it gives a deep and unforgettable taste of feeling to one's soul and then creates aesthetic joy and beauty of the music. This beautiful thought of aesthetic joy is also part of cultural philosophy, because it consists of a complete emotional, quality and beauty of music.

Vibrant folksongs sung during the celebration of the *Kanglei Haraoba*

The folksongs of traditional music of Meitei consist of many beautiful tunes and many oscillating rhythms of music. In this paper, especial focus will be made on the ritualistic performance of *Kanglei* type of the *Lai Haraoba*, *Pena* instrument, *Pena-Sheishak*, *Lai Nupi Thiba* and *Khullang Eshei* respectively.

The *Lai Haraoba* of the Meitei community is regarded as a very important ritualistic performance. It is performed and celebrated accompanied by songs and dances which symbolize and re-create the creation myth of the earth as believed by the Meitei through various performances. There are many philosophical elements and ethnic religiosity found in the tradition of the *Lai Haraoba*. One of the most significant aspects found in this ritualistic traditional festival is on the theme of how human beings live through the different stages of



life. These are depicted through diverse dancing movements from the very initial stage of human evolution to the becoming of the adults or human's existence and sustenance till death. For instance, by performing and depicting the womb of the mother, giving birth to a child, the period of becoming a man, indulged in love, learning the art of agriculture, weaving and involved in different aspects of life of humankind right from the birth till death. Eventually, it imparts the moral values and knowledge of human existence and survival.

In "Lai Haraoba- Art of Living" by Ngangbi Chanu, she discusses the four different kinds of *Lai Haraoba*:

- a) **Kanglei Haraoba**- *Kanglei Haraoba* is predominantly observed in Imphal and its surrounding regions. Among its distinctive features is the ritual known as *Kanglei Thokpa*, which is unique to this form of *Lai Haraoba* and is not found in any of the other traditions. This ritual distinguishes *Kanglei Haraoba* from the remaining forms of the festival.
- b) **Moirang Haraoba**- *Moirang Haraoba* is celebrated in the historic region of Moirang in honour of *Lord Thangjing*, the principal deity of the area. The festival is generally held during the month of *Kalen* (May-June). It comprises three principal ritual divisions: *Yum Phamba*, *Khong Chingba*, and *Lam Thokpa*, each representing a distinct stage in the ceremonial observance.
- c) **Chakpa Haraoba**- *Chakpa Haraoba* is the traditional form of *Lai Haraoba* practised by the *Chakpas*, one of the oldest social groups within the Meitei community. The *Chakpas* inhabit several regions of Manipur, including Andro, Leimaram, Koutruk, Khurkhul, etc. A distinguishing characteristic of this form is that its prayers, hymns, and ritual chants are performed in the *Chakpa* language, commonly referred to as *Chakparon*, thereby preserving the linguistic and cultural identity of the community.
- d) **Kakching Haraoba**- *Kakching Haraoba* is celebrated in the Kakching region and possesses several distinctive ritual practices. She also states that prior to the commencement of the festival, the *Leilangba* and his attendants undertake a ceremonial journey to Purum Khul to collect a sacred flower known as *Nungarei*. Unlike the other



forms of *Lai Haraoba*, the *Ekouba* (invocation of the deities) is performed by the *Maiba* (priest), who enters the water as part of the ritual. The festival concludes with a unique ceremony called *Ngaprum Taanba*, or the ritual hunting of eels, which marks the final day of the celebration.

Although the ritualistic performance structures of these four kinds of *Lai Haraoba* are different, the underlying philosophy is almost the same. It is also necessary to examine as to where and how *Pena* as an indigenous musical instrument figures in them as dealing with the theoretical implications of the Meitei cosmogony such as certain as a juncture of Man and divine relation or communication.

Pena is the androgenic form of Supreme Lord and his consort (*Lainingthou-Lairembi*), the slightly round shaped resonator (*Maru*) is the “Divine Mother” while the bow (*Cheijing*) is the “Father God”. It has the anthropomorphic forms of the first as the female principle and the later as the male principle. There is a saying in Manipur that, as long as there is a continuity of the rhythmic musical sounds produced by the contact between the two bunches of string of *Pena*, the alternate cycles of birth and death will go on and thus the continuity of human race will continue so. Thus, *Pena* is the personification of the “Divine”.

Talking about the *Pena Maru*, it consists of nine different parts namely *Maru*, *Pungmai*, *Uyek*, *Utong*, *Khongding-Shamei*, *Chumbuli*, *Tengkhal*, *Samai*, and *Nura Khwaangchet*. With regards to *Pena Cheijing*, it consists of nine parts namely *Tetnou-Yotkon*, *Sarik*, *Khuroulang*, *Konthong*, *Mon*, *Khongding Shamei*, *Khubikhaang/Khutpai Phee*, *Cheikhok*, thread to tie up *Khubikhang/Khutpai phee*.

Among the four kinds of the *Lai Haraoba*, here is a brief account of *Kanglei Haraoba*. In this vast indigenous tradition, the *Pena* instrument holds a special place in every aspect. On top of this, there are segments where the *Pena* player plays and sings at the same time. This is being executed by the *Pena Asheiba*. Right from the beginning segment till the very end of *Kanglei Haraoba*, this instrument is crucial and inseparable.

In the tradition of *Kanglei Haraoba*, there are altogether nine musical types of *Pena Sheishak* (distinctive styles of performing the *Pena*). They are: -



- a) **Leimarel Sheishak** – This style of singing is performed by the *Amaibi* during the afternoon session of *Lai Haraoba*, specifically in the initial part of *Jagoi Oakpa* segment. A short verse of this style is provided below:

Chingu lai-o lainingthou khoi-yum lai-o lairembi

Chingu kanglei nashumang khoi-yum nanggi nathoubung.....

- b) **Panthoibi Sheishak** – This is sung while the *Amaibi* performs the *Panthoibi Jagoi*, accompanying the ritual dance.

Numidaang waigee matamda numitna chingya thaanglakle

Chinggi meinabu tamyaa theng tamgi meinabu khongmeinem.....

- c) **Nongthangleima Sheishak** – This style is sung when the *Amaibi* performs *Phibul Sanaba* at the four cardinal directions as part of the ritual sequence.

Lainingthou: Aa.....ha

Thang thang thangnaro 2

Roso thangnaro.....

- d) **Ayangleima Sheishak** – This is performed during the *Long Khonba* segment and is sung at each of the four cardinal directions.

Paya chepli longnida

Shanggainidi yainap-long.....

- e) **Kalen Seiding Sheishak** – This style is rendered by the *Pena Asheiba* while chanting the sacred *Hoirou-Heiyaa* hymns.

Aahoirou. Naa.....

Hoirou hoirou.....naa.....ah

Hoirou hoirou he eh nagedaa.....

Laiyingthou hoiroune se-ne

Aa.....heiyaa.....ah.....

Heiyaa heiyaa.....ah.....ah

Heiya heiya he-eh nagedaa.....

Yoububiyo heiyane se-ne shum



- f) **Hepli Thangyei Sheishak** – This style is sung at the beginning of the *Anoirol* segment. This manuscript talks about the origin of Meitei dance and its connection to Meitei cosmology. The *Pena Asheiba* recited or sings the *Anoirol* verses in rhythmic form.
- Hayi-ngeida noibadi meina waina noiye*
He taangna samngei nida noibadi malem mada noiye.....
- g) **Hepli Pabot Sheishak** – This style is performed by the *Pena Asheiba* while the *Amaibi* enacts the movement of lifting a baby for growth and prosperity.
- Sorarengi mapaari; thabina kaaringei kahouro*
Numitna waangleingei waanghouro epa machum taaro.....
- h) **Sikaplon Sheishak** – This is sung during the vocal sections of *Thourniron*, *Yum Katpa* (the ritual offering of houses), and the ceremonial offering of clothes.
- Chinggu khoiyum lainingthou*
Yoibu khoimom lairembi.....
Sana sanglen saaba loijare.....
- i) **Lam-In Sheishak** – This is a distinctive style of *Pena* playing performed by the *Amaibi* during the *Khayom Jagoi*, before the *Yakairol* segment. It is not actually sung during the *Lai Haraoba* performance.

These nine musical forms of the *Pena* are very important songs of the *Kanglei Haraoba*. These songs portray hymnal prayers of God, love dalliance, love messages, catching fish through *Long Khonba* (a sequence of catching fish), *Anoirol* (a type of song), heroic themes and lamentations. They have their distinctive musical performance of the *Pena Asheiba* right from the ritual recitals of the ritual of wakeup call up to ritual lullaby of God and Goddess bear testimony to deep philosophical and spiritual in depths. *Pena* therefore, has been one of the music-religious paths (*sadhana*) for the gradual spiritual uplift man of the Meitei community.

In *Kanglei Haraoba*, the segment of the *Lai Nupi Thiba* is a special episode in which the *Amaibi* with possessing the spirit of divine God in searching his consort partner with dance and music. This ceremony takes place in a big open space with dance called *Laiching Jagoi*. During the *Laiching Jagoi* performance, the *Amaibi* who poses the spirit of the deity, plays the game



of *Mukna* (wrestling) with *Loyalakpa* (a deity). It will be followed by the movement of *Kaangjei* (polo) game which will be enacted by the possessed *Amaibi*. During this crucial segment of searching his better half, a melodious song will be rendered. The mallet would hit one of the ladies from the audience or participants as the better-half and then jointly present a dance that make the lady to put on a new attire for the deity and thus wind up the *Lai Nupi Thiba* segment. Hence, there will be no one who will not be tempting or charming to hear this song which is sung with high tunes and high vibrating and melodic rhythms and besides the beauty of words and inner idea of song makes the song more beautiful. Here are a few lines form the song:

"*Tubi chinglai leima kadeng nganbidi esanou sana tampha enemachou pamubi Ngashi korou numitta sanougi marnibu khonggul lirakpabu uraktareko eshanou.....*"

Here in this episode of the *Lai Nupi Thiba* of *Kanglei Haraoba*, the *Amaibi* sings many attractable songs by looking far away at all our four directions in search of his consort partner. This song shows the images of our traditional internal features of Meitei's culture followed from our ancestor's time like the tradition of taking fire from the neighbours, washing of hair with *Chenghi* (a kind of solution made from rice) at rivers by women, playing of *Chephei Kang* (a kind of traditional game of Manipur), carrying of paddy over the head with *Pheija* (a kind of soft stand made by clothes) etc. are being mentioned in these songs.

Among the folksongs mentioned above, folksongs based on love and affection is also known as *Khutlang Eshei* or *Khullang Eshei*. The word *Khullang* means a work done by a person in return for a work done to him by another person in the form of mutual aid. Referring to folksong, the work is applied to song sung along with a question, the reply of other person in the form of song since it contains characteristic of what is being termed *Khullang*. As a result, the type of folksong on the theme of love and affection sung in term between two persons is known as *Khullang Eshei*.

Khullang Eshei signifies the nature of love song between lovers in due course of communication of their feeling and emotions usually composed indirectly by finding



semblance of these emotions in natural occurrence relating to animals and bird, insects, flowers, etc. though the intended message is kept concealed briefly at the end.

The melody and lyrics of *Khullang Eshei* is not pre-planned. It takes the form of conversation in the presence of the lovers face to face with questions and their answers supplied instantly by them using to the most apt language and situation. This song is sung in a high scale expressing one's feeling and emotions. The origin of this song can be traced to the story in Meitei genesis in which *Nongthangleima* (a female deity) and *Haraba* (a male deity) in their first meeting engaged in what is known as *Paosa Eshei* when *Haraba* constantly spoils God's plan of the creation of the universe, *Guru Shidaba* (the Supreme Lord) produced *Nongthangleima* to keep *Haraba* bewitched and during this the creation of the universe was completed. *Paosanaba* is a type of song sung in the forms of verbal exchange of words between two persons.

The lyrics of this song are composed of analogically rich language expressing theme of love and affection. This form of folksong is abundantly used in the practice of *Kanglei Haraoba*. Thus, with analogical implications expressing amorous feelings between persons in a high note.

As mentioned above, the lyrics of *Khullang Eshei* is beautifully composed by means of using a well-chosen language full of analogical references to natural things in order to express the intended ideas and meanings in an indirect way. The words chosen are of full and deep internal meanings by which is one can convey amorous ideas beautifully making them suitable and appropriate sound to the listener.

Khullang Eshei is a unique form of composition of Meitei with their own rhyme. It will not be an exaggeration to say that *Khullang Eshei* is one of the most beautiful ways of poetic expression usually accompanied with the soothing sound of *Pena*. In the musical aesthetic values content in the song of *Khullang Eshei* as conveyed by Laishram Birendrakumar, there are four musical forms. They are mentioned as Musical medium, Musical form, Musical message and Musical response. The vocal of singer to sing a song much have the quality creative impulse and the song must be sung from the corner of the heart and more over of it



he/she must have the quality of instant creativity of words. As these aesthetic qualities are in *Khullang Eshei*, the various time of singing of *Khullang Eshei* can be able to draw the heart of listener in deep to the song. Few lines from the songs of *Tangkhul Nurabi* episode of the last day of the *Lai Haraoba*.

“Tangkhul:

Chingsomgi khunudi lamleima

Lamgi khunudi tharammi....

Nurabi:

Chingshangnidi ashukpa naralnidi angamba tamna

Nakyeikhol malangmaktabu paodambadi”

Manipuri folksong is one of the fields with no boundaries of various songs which are used in due course of time and places. Not only having inner ideal meaning but these songs also gives various proverbial ideas determining the cultures which are belonging from the beginning. As mention in brief, it shows clearly indigenous culture or rites and praying of Gods, the professions of livelihood from the beginning, the ways of love, behaviours, believes, etc. and thus we can able to know how we are originated inside the waves of our unique culture.

Role of Memory and Collective Memory in *Kanglei Haraoba*

Astrid Erll conceives collective memory as a dynamic cultural process through which societies remember, preserve, and reconstruct their shared past. According to Erll, memory is not confined to the individual mind but is mediated through cultural forms such as rituals, performances, oral traditions, music, and symbolic practices. These "media of memory" enable communities to transmit their history, identity, and worldview across generations. Viewed from this perspective, *Kanglei Haraoba* functions as a significant medium of collective memory in which the Meitei community continually recreates and reaffirms its indigenous cultural heritage.



This tradition preserves the collective memory of the Meitei people through its ritual performances, songs, dances, and ceremonial enactments. Rather than merely entertaining the audience, the festival recreates the Meitei cosmogony, narrating the creation of the universe, the emergence of human life, and the development of social and cultural practices such as agriculture, weaving, courtship, and community living. These ritual enactments transform historical and mythical memories into lived experiences, enabling every generation to participate in the remembrance of its ancestral past. In Erll's terms, the festival operates as a cultural memory medium, where memory is embodied through performance rather than preserved solely in written texts.

The oral traditions embedded in *Kanglei Haraoba* further illustrate Erll's concept of memory transmission. The various forms of *Pena Sheishak*, *Lai Nupi Thiba*, and *Khullang Eshei* preserve hymns, myths, ritual knowledge, and social values through continuous oral performance. Since these songs are transmitted from one generation of performers to another through observation, participation, and practice, they become living repositories of collective memory. Their repeated performance ensures that the community remembers not only religious beliefs but also indigenous knowledge, traditional occupations, ecological relationships, and everyday customs.

Erll also argues that collective memory contributes to the formation of cultural identity. In *Kanglei Haraoba*, the annual repetition of ritual performances reinforces a shared sense of belonging among the Meitei people. The participation of the *Amaiba*, *Amaibi*, *Pena Asheiba*, and the wider community transforms individual memories into a communal remembrance, allowing cultural identity to be continually reconstructed. Through this process, the festival becomes a living archive.

Conclusion

From the above discussions, it can be concluded that *Kanglei Haraoba* is more than a ritual festival; it is a living repository of the Meitei community's collective memory, where



indigenous knowledge, cosmological beliefs, cultural values, and artistic traditions are continuously preserved and transmitted through performance. The study demonstrates that the songs performed during the festival particularly the *Pena Sheishak*, *Lai Nupi Thiba*, and *Khullang Eshei* are not merely musical accompaniments but constitute the very performance texts through which the community remembers and re-enacts its ancestral past. Embedded within these oral traditions are memories of creation myths, social customs, ecological knowledge, ethical values, and everyday life, making them indispensable to the continuity of Meitei cultural identity.

Viewed through Astrid Erll's theory of collective memory, *Kanglei Haraoba* emerges as a dynamic medium of cultural memory in which remembrance is embodied through ritual, music, dance, and oral performance rather than through written records alone. The annual repetition of these performances transforms inherited memories into lived experiences, allowing each generation to actively participate in reconstructing the cultural past. Consequently, memory in *Kanglei Haraoba* is not static or archival but performative, continually renewed through communal participation and ritual practice. The festival thus exemplifies Erll's proposition that cultural memory is sustained by symbolic media that connect the past with the present while shaping the future of a community.

In an era marked by rapid globalization, changing religious practices, and the gradual decline of oral traditions, the preservation of this tradition assumes renewed significance. Safeguarding its songs, performance practices, and ritual knowledge is essential not only for conserving an intangible cultural heritage but also for protecting the historical consciousness and indigenous epistemology of the Meitei people. Future research should therefore focus on systematic documentation, digital archiving, and interdisciplinary approaches that integrate folklore, performance studies, ethnomusicology, and memory studies. Such initiatives will ensure that *Kanglei Haraoba* continues to function as a vibrant cultural archive, enabling future generations to inherit, reinterpret, and sustain the rich collective memory and identity of the Meitei community.



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