

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

The *Amaibis* of Manipur: The custodian of the Meitei cultural memory

Nameirakpam Jacquelyn

Research Scholar, Tripura University

Email: jacquelynnnameirakpam5@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.4.289](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.289)



Article info

Article Received: 01/11/2025
Article Accepted: 05/12/2025
Published online: 12/12/2025

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the role of the *Amaibis*¹ of Manipur (Northeast India), tracing their significance from the myth of Meitei creation to their place in the contemporary society. The paper emphasises their role as preservers of the cultural memory of Manipur. It examines the *Amaibis* as mentioned in the traditional manuscripts known as *Puyas*.² These *Puyas* are the storehouse of Meitei cultural knowledge. Unfortunately, the language is archaic and difficult to understand. Therefore, many scholars who have written about the cultural practices of Manipur have ignored them. The present paper attempts to rectify this gap in research and bring forth the roles and tasks of *Amaibis* as discussed in the *Puyas*.

Key words: Meitei, *Amaibi*, *Lai Haraoba*, *Puyas*, Cultural Memory

Manipur forms a part of the North Eastern region of India which consists of eight states, namely Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Sikkim. Manipur was a Princely State until the invasion by the British at the Anglo Manipur War of 1891, and the Kingdom got its independence in 1947. It merged into the Indian Union during the reign of King Bodhachandra after signing the Merger Agreement on 12th September 1949 in Shillong.

Three distinct communities inhabit the state of Manipur namely the Nagas, the Kukis and the Meiteis. The Meiteis are the predominant community having its own

language and a script known as Meitei *Mayek*. A brief genealogy of the emergence of a unified Meitei Kingdom would be necessary for understanding the societal set up of the Meiteis. Before the emergence of a unified Meitei Kingdom under Nongda Laien Pakhangba in around 33 A.D., the Meitei Kingdom consisted of seven distinct clans which were autonomous. These seven clans or lineages were Ningthouja, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Kha Nganba and Sarang Leishangthem. The establishment of the Meitei Kingdom at Kangla under Nongda Laien Pakhangba was an event of great historical importance in the evolution of the Meitei Kingdom of Manipur. The rise of the

¹She-Shamans

² Ancient scriptural text

Kingdom was an outcome of the struggle between various ethnic groups and clan chiefdoms in the valley. The Khabas were a powerful tribe who ruled at Kangla before the rise of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. The leader of the Khabas, Khaba Nongchenba challenged the claim of Pakhangba. (Kamei 93)

In the Meitei tradition, the Pakhangba mentioned above is considered to be both a human as well as a deity. The long tradition of *Amaibi* is associated with the myth of creation. *Amaibi* is often translated as She- Shaman or Priestess. According to the *Leithak Leikhalon Puya*, the Sky Father of the Meiteis took the initiative of creating the celestial forces and all the living beings including human beings. The earth mother of the Meiteis Ema Leimarel Sidabi was responsible for energising whatever was created by the Sky Father. The two sons, Asheeba and Pakhangba were to initiate for the inhabitation of the land. As Asheeba, the elder son took the initiative for the inhabitation of the land, he was prevented from carrying out his task by Pakhangba, his younger brother. In order to distract Pakhangba, Atiya Yaibirel Sidaba³ creates Nongthang Leima. Therefore, according to the ancient belief system, Nongthang Leima is considered the first *Amaibi*. The *Laichat Laiyat Puya* mentions of the manifestations of Nongthang Leima beginning from Panthoibi to thirty other Goddesses.

For the Meitei community of Manipur, the *Amaibis* have been connoisseurs of Meitei culture since time immemorial. The she-shamans are categorized into *Amaibis* and *Maibis*. *Amaibis* are ritual functionaries and they should be the chosen ones. One does not become an *Amaibi* by choice but she has to be chosen by the deity who will eventually possess her. A *Maibi*, on the other hand, is not ordained but

becomes one by learning all the skills involved for initiating a task.

The *Mashil Ne Puya* talks of the institutions of Yoirel Loishang⁴, Amaiba Loishang⁵ and Asheiba Loishang⁶ being established during the reign of Lainingthou Naothingkhong and during the reign of Lainingthou Loyumba, the three institutions were regrouped as the Amaiba Loishang. As such the *Amaibis* functioned under the patronage of the monarch.

The *Amaibi* or she-shamans are categorized into three groups according to the deity they serve: 1) Phura. 2) Nongmai. 3) Sanglen. The Phura *Amaibi* has to serve Guru Nongshaba deity and has to confine her ritual performance within the stretch of land covering the western side of the Imphal river and southern side of Nambul river. The Nongamai *Amaibi* has to serve the Yumjao Lairembi deity and has to confine her ritual activities within the regions on the eastern side of Imphal river. The Sanglen *Amaibis* on the other hand has to serve Ibudhou Pakhangba and the region within the southern side of Nambul river, northern side of Koubru hills, eastern side of Imphal river and western side of Kangchup hill is the ritual jurisdiction of a Sanglen *Amaibi*.

The record of the *Mashil Ne Puya* further mentioned the role to be taken up by the different functionaries under the Yoirel Loishang. The *Amaibi* or the She-Shaman was to perform different rituals like *laipoutinpou*, *lai tin khaiba*, *saroikhangba*, *leiraiyookouba* and *yelling thaba*⁷ (*Mashil* 213). The *Metpigi Mashil*⁸ was responsible for delivery of babies and also acted as baby whisper. She was given a cloth as a reward. The *Metpi Laibigi Mashil* on the other hand was a physician who was to take care of all ailments including *tinthunglaithung*- ailments caused by supernatural forces (*Mashil Ne* 175).

³ Sky father

⁴ Institution of she-shamans

⁵ Institution of she-shamans

⁶ Institution of singers

⁷ Names of different rituals performed to ward off negative energies

⁸ Category of she-shamans, healers and midwives

The *Amaibis* and *Maibis* have been revered since ancient times and have performed important roles as advisors to the ruling monarch and other functionaries of the independent Princely Kingdom.

Briefly some *Puyas* can be discussed to bring forth the role of the *Amaibis* (she-shamans) in the early phase of the Meitei society. The *Poireiton Khunthok Puya* mentions Chingkhong Poireiton⁹, the younger brother of Thongarel Asheeba, Prince of Khamnung Sawa and Leima Leinao Tabi transmigrating with a band of men and women which included *Leinung Hikappi Yaikappi*, *Yimaibi Liri Lifongbi*, *Mangoibi Tungoibi* and *Yimaiba*.¹⁰ *Leinung Hikappi* and *Yaikappi* were to arrange materials to ward off any evil spells that were to befall the group. *Yaimaibi Liri Lifongbi* and *Mangoibi* were to burn *khoijuleikham*¹¹ leaves to dispel any evil omen. *Yimaiba*, the he-shaman was to gather in all the souls of the transmigrators to prevent them from falling sick, prevent death and any other misfortunes which include encounter with a wild animal. (Hemchandra translit., Poireiton 27)

The *Numit Kappa Puya* also mentions the role of the she-shamans, Chakpa Lamlang Amaibi and Tubi Nangyek Chanu Panthoibi's role in the restoration of cosmos. The incident of the shooting of an arrow by Khwai Nongchempam Piba, led to the death of Taohuireng Ahalba and his horse, Samadol Ayangba. Darkness has ushered in Poirei Leibak after the incident of the shooting of Taohuireng Ahalba and his horse and the hiding of Sana Khomadol Atolba. Darkness reigns in every household. Parasitic insects have overtaken the greeneries of the land. Migratory birds have also stopped their routine migration. All agricultural activities have also been halted. (Hemchandra translit., Numit 13)

The congregation of Ningthou Pongba Tara and Leima Tara¹² requested the she-shamans Chakpa Lamlang Amaibi and Tubi Nangyek Chanu Tampa to initiate a dream communication to persuade Sana Khomadol Atolba to come out of his hiding and restore order and therefore cosmos.

The *Panthoibi Khongul Puya* mentions Panthoibi, a Mangang Princess a Pre Christian Amaibi, who was responsible for uniting the forces of the Sky Father and Earth Mother. According to the *Panthoibi Khongul Puya*, Tampha Wangamlen Panthoibi was born to Mangang Ningthou Lairen Taoroinai and Yoibu Khoimom Lai Namung Namungbi. Panthoibi married Taram Khoinucha, son of Khaba Srokchonba and Manuteknga. After being married to Taram Khoinucha, Panthoibi reunited with her former paramour and faced various ordeals before finally settling at Langmai hills, the abode of Nongpok Ningthou Chingsomba. (Hemchandra translit 163)

The Meitei community later deified the couple, and a shrine was built in their honour and the first organized *Lai Haraoba*¹³ is believed to have been organised to honour the divine couple. Panthoibi, as the name suggests means one who ruled in a period of plenty, who was free and nobody could prevent her from exercising her will. Panthoibi as the spirit medium, was also the first dancer to initiate the *Uplei* and *Longlei* dance. Her method of appeasement of the ancestral forces was through a system of dance. The Panthoibi dance represents the movement of the Amaibi's body in order to reach out to the deity and communicate with the deity and bring his messages to the community who are their worshippers.

Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt in her book, *The Pleasing of the Gods: The Meitei Lai Haraoba* says, "The *Lai Haraoba* is an oral tradition and not a literary one and its

⁹Believed to have migrated from eastern Tibet

¹⁰Names of people who had supernatural powers.

¹¹*Gonyothelamus Seski Pedaris*

¹²Congregation of ten kings and queens

¹³ A ritual performed annually to please the Gods

preservers were not scribes but the religious school of the *Maibis*, *Maibas* and *Pena Khongbas*" (20). It is in the ritual of *Lai Haraoba* that the role of the *Amaibis*, can be witnessed to the fullest. The ritual of *Lai Haraoba* of the Meiteis is one of the unique contributions of the community and is performed every year to remember the myth of creation and inhabitation of the land. The ritual is divided into three phases- *Ikouba*¹⁴, *Laibou*¹⁵ and *Lairoi*¹⁶. In the *Ikouba* cycle, after the deity is invoked, the she-shaman enacts the *Nongthang Leima Jagoi*¹⁷ at the four cardinal directions remembering the incident of *Pakhangba* and *Asheeba*. Also, the task of preparing all the items to be used for the different stages of the ritual are prepared by the she-shaman like the *khayom*¹⁸ packets, the arrangement of the flowers and the dresses and costumes to be worn by the male and female deity. In the *Laibou* cycle, which is the second stage in the ritual, the she-shaman enacts the *Panthoibi Jagoi*¹⁹ which involves the depiction of the different stages of the birth of a baby, the weaving of clothes, the planting of vegetocultural items and also jhum cultivation of paddy, the construction of houses to mention a few which was taught by *Panthoibi* in the first organised *Lai Haraoba* at Langmai Hills are still performed annually through dances movements known as *Panthoibi Jagoi*. The *Lairoi* cycle which is the last stage of the ritual also depicts the *Amaibis* as agents of cultural memory through performances of songs and dances. The *Loutaba* interlude is enacted by an *Amaibi* dressed as a *Tangkhul Nurabi*²⁰ accompanied by seven women, reiterating the archetypal jhum cultivation done *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok Ningthou* at Langmaiching. The *Amaibi* sings the *Louta Eshei*²¹ in the ritual which is symbolic

of the transformation from chaos to cosmos. The various songs and dances initiated by the *Amaibi*, facilitates, "Return to cosmic night, the pre formal, the waters, in order to ensure the complete regeneration of life and hence the fertility of the crops" (Eliade 147).

It can thus be argued that through the performances of the *Amaibis* in the form of songs, dances, the experiences of humans of the present age is shown as the experiences of our ancestors. The various songs, dances functions as mnemonics of the cultural memory of the Meiteis. The verbal art of song and dance performed the collective memorization of past acts. Certain truths and social experiences were memorized in the form of verbal art of song. Each of these song and dance traditions, after having its valid philosophy, formed a part of the belief system of the Meiteis and its importance will be reiterated through performance.

Under the institution of the *Amaiba* *Loishang*, *Yoirel*²² was responsible for the organization of ritual practices and represented the forces of wind, *Amai* was the male counterpart of the female and represented the forces of fire, the *Ashei* represented the forces of water. In the festival of *Umang Lai Haraoba*, the five elements of the sky represented by the male deity and earth represented by the female deity, wind, fire and water are activated through various rituals accompanied by the verbal art of song. Through the performances of the *Yoirel*, *Amai* and *Ashei* in the ritual of *Lai Haraoba*, the oral tradition of the Meitei community is made a "living tradition" and stands on a solid footing even with the introduction of writing and literary tradition.

¹⁴Invoking the soul of the deity

¹⁵Enactment of the myth of creation and inhabitation

¹⁶ End of the ritual

¹⁷ Type of dance

¹⁸Offeringsconsisting of rice, egg, flowerswrapped in banana leaves

¹⁹ Type of dance

²⁰Tangkhul lady

²¹ Harvest song

²² She-Shaman

References

- Ashokkumar, L. (2016). *Ariba Manipuri sahityagi (Sheirol) paring*. G.M Publications.
- Ashokkumar, L. (2016). *Manipuri natkkipuwari*. Laiphrakpam Ibempishak.
- Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*. Oxford University Press.
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *Cosmos and history: The myth of the eternal return* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harper and Brothers.
- Eliade, M. (1958). *Patterns in comparative religion* (R. Sheed, Trans.). Sheed & Ward.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt.
- Hemchandra, C. (2005). *Panthoibi khongul puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2007). *Mashil ne puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2008). *Leiroltengtha puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2009). *Thangwairon puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2010). *Leithak leikharol puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2011). *Naothing khongkhulkaba puya* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Hemchandra, C. (2013). *Laisra pham* (Trans.). Cultural Research Centre.
- Kabui, G. (1991). *History of Manipur: Pre-colonial period*. National Publishing House.
- Melitsky, E. (1998). *The poetics of myth* (G. Lanoue & A. Sadetsky, Trans.). Routledge.
- Parratt, S. N. A., & Parratt, J. (1997). *The pleasing of the gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*. Manipur Research Forum.
- Parratt, S. N. A. (2013). *The religion of Manipur*. Spectrum Publications.
- Reena, L. (2020). *Early Manipuri society: History, society and the Puyas*. Akansha Publishers.
- Singh, C. M. (2021). *A history of Manipuri literature*. Sahitya Akademi.