

## A GLIMPSE ON THE LAI-HARAObA FESTIVAL OF MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical significance and evolving role of Lai-Ekouba within the Lai-Haraoba festival of Manipur. Lai-Ekouba, literally interpreted as “Calling up the Lai from the water,” is a ritual of immense importance in the indigenous Meitei/Meetei religion, Sanamahism, as revealed by detailed analysis of historical records and ethnographic studies from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Imphal Valley. This study underscores how the ritual serves as both an introductory ceremony practice and a reinvigoration of the cultural and religious activity of the Meitei/Meetei community. Drawing on scholarly sources including Chanu (2012), Devi (2018), and numerous journalistic and ethnographic accounts (Singh, 2022; Sahapedia, 2022), this paper explores the historical evolution, ritual practices, and socio-religious functioning of Lai-Ekouba. The paper is structured into several sections. Ultimately the study illustrates that Lai-Ekouba is not only a ritualistic reenactment of celestial invocation but also a process that has continually shaped the religious practices and cultural expressions of the Manipuri people.

**Key words:** Lai-Haraoba, Lai-Ekouba, Historical significance, Meitei/Meetei community.

### INTRODUCTION

The Lai Haraoba, literally translating to "merry-making of the gods" or "pleasing of the gods," is an ancient and deeply significant festival of Manipur, primarily celebrated by the Meitei community (“Lai Haraoba Festival”). This vibrant celebration is fundamentally associated with the worship of traditional deities, known as Umang Lais (forest deities), including prominent figures such as Thangjing, Sanamahi, Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou, and Leimarel, as well as revered ancestors (“Lai Haraoba Festival”). At its core, Lai Haraoba is a sacred recounting and reenactment of the Meitei creation story, illustrating the genesis of the universe and the intricate evolution of plants, animals, and human beings (“Lai Haraoba Festival”). This cosmological narrative is often linked to the primordial "Lai-Hoi-Laoba," the resounding "hoi" shouted during the universe's revelation (Jneis, 2025).

Beyond its religious tenets, Lai Haraoba functions as a pivotal cultural cornerstone, embodying a profound vision of human and social life that mirrors the realities of daily existence, particularly emphasizing agricultural and fertility rites. It is recognized as the earliest form of traditional theatre in Meitei society, where performance itself serves as a philosophical expression of the Meitei worldview. The festival actively promotes kindness and harmony within the community, playing a crucial role in perpetuating ancient rituals and cultural practices in the modern era (“Lai Haraoba Festival”). The festival's narrative is intricately linked with the evolution of human beings and their fundamental needs for food, clothing, and shelter, highlighting the practical and spiritual interconnectedness of life (Jneis, 2025). A deeper understanding of Lai Haraoba reveals it as a comprehensive cultural and philosophical text.

The festival's repeated reenactment of creation, human evolution, and the establishment of civilization through activities like cultivation, house-building, and weaving, signifies that it is more than a mere celebration; it is an active, embodied narrative (Admin et al., 2028). This performative aspect means that every element of the festival, including its costumes,

contributes to a holistic, living "text" that transmits complex cosmological and societal knowledge. The costumes are not simply adornments but visual chapters in this dynamic narrative, making their study indispensable for grasping the Meitei intellectual and spiritual heritage.

The Lai Haraoba festival is not monolithic; it manifests in four primary types: Kanglei Haraoba, Moirang Haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba, and Kakching Haraoba (Admin et al., 2028). Each variant possesses distinct regional practices, honors specific deities, and incorporates unique costume elements, reflecting the localized expressions of this overarching cultural tradition.

## THE RITUALISTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF LAI HARAoba COSTUMES

Within the intricate performances of the Lai Haraoba festival, costumes transcend their functional role as clothing to become integral elements of ritual and storytelling ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)"). These traditional garments are not merely aesthetic additions but are crucial in conveying the spiritual narratives and historical accounts central to the festival's purpose. They serve as a tangible reflection of the rich cultural heritage of the Manipuri region. Traditional costumes are explicitly utilized during the dramatic plays that narrate and enact the histories of revered deities such as Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou (Admin. "Lai Haraoba Festival." *BYJUS*, 14 Dec. 2022). Artisans meticulously create these ceremonial attires, ornaments, and decorative pieces specifically for the rituals, emphasizing their sacred and purposeful design (Dutta, 2025). The traditional clothing and accompanying jewelry not only enhance the visual spectacle of the festival but also profoundly signify respect for the ancestral deities and cultural heritage (Dutta, 2025). The entire festival is, in essence, a vibrant "visual display of Meitei customs and traditions" ("Lai Haraoba | Sahapedia").

The costumes function as a visual narrative, illustrating the profound interaction between human and divine realms. As the festival reenacts the creation of the universe and the subsequent evolution of human life, including activities like house-building and weaving (Admin et al., 2028), the attire worn by participants helps to concretize these abstract concepts. The detailed descriptions of characters like Nongpok Ningthou, who appears in a specific "Thangkhul costume" complete with traditional wrap-around, diagonally tightened upper garment, and headgear adorned with animal horns and flowers, demonstrate how particular garments embody mythical figures and their roles in the creation narrative (*LaiHaraoba*). This deep integration means that the costumes are a form of "living scripture," making complex cosmological ideas and historical narratives palpable and accessible to the community through visual and performative means. The deliberate choice of materials, colors, and motifs within these costumes contributes significantly to this intricate visual language.

## GENERAL ATTIRE OF PARTICIPANTS

While the priesthood don's specific ritualistic garments, other participants in the Lai Haraoba festival also wear distinct traditional attire, contributing to the overall visual richness of the event. During rituals such as Lai Ichouba, both men and women, including boys and girls, participate dressed in "proper costumes" (Admin et al., 2028). Devotees attending the festival are frequently observed in "colorful traditional outfits," often carrying baskets of offerings for the deities (Milaap, 2017).

**Female Participants:** Women typically wear a traditional skirt known as a *phanek* and a dark-colored velvet blouse. (Milaap, 2017). Their hair is styled in a special manner, often

adorned with roses and a crown of feathers on the forehead (Milaap, 2017). Some female dancers wear a *Potloi*, a long, fitted, barrel-shaped skirt made of heavy silk or cotton fabric, elaborately decorated with intricate embroidery (floral or geometric patterns), sequins, and tiny mirrors ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)"). The *Potloi*, also known as *Kumil*, is usually paired with a velvet blouse and a translucent veil ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)"). A short, fine white muslin skirt might be worn over the embroidered *Potloi*. Generally, women wear a *phanek* and an *innaphi*, a delicate wraparound for the upper body (Dutta, 2025). The *phanek* itself is a hand-woven sarong made from cotton, silk, or other fabrics, often block-printed or striped, and worn with a blouse and an upper cloth. A more elaborate variant, *Mayek Naibi*, features heavily embroidered or embellished bottoms, typically in traditional colors. Additionally, *Lai phi* is a distinct white *phanek* with a yellow border, while *Chin phi* is an *Innaphi* with intricate yellow borders on a white base, worn during special festivities (Sanyal, 2024).

**Male Participants:** Men commonly wear a white dhoti, a dark velvet jacket, and garlands (Milaap, 2017). Their attire is completed with a decorated turban, which may include a peacock feather (Milaap, 2017). Male dancers often wear a dhoti (also known as *dhotra* or *dhora*) with a velvet jacket or a *kurta*, and those portraying Krishna may wear a crown of peacock feathers. Some male dancers perform without an upper garment, wearing only a colored silk dhoti (*Lai Haraoba*). Drummers, known as *Pung cholom* performers, specifically wear white dhotis and turbans (Rotary News, 2025). This diversity in general participant attire, alongside the mention of "filmy dances" performed to "suit the taste of modern audience" (*LaiHaraoba*), suggests a dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary influences. While strict traditional attire is maintained for ritualistic roles, the broader participation allows for some adaptation. This adaptability demonstrates the festival's resilience as a living tradition, capable of incorporating new elements while preserving its core cultural and spiritual essence.

### ATTIRE OF THE PRIESTHOOD: MAIBAS (PRIESTS) AND MAIBIS (PRIESTESSES)

The Maibas (priests) and Maibis (priestesses) are the central figures and principal performers in the Lai Haraoba rituals, guiding the community through the complex ceremonies (Admin. "Lai Haraoba Festival." *BYJUS*, 14 Dec. 2022). They are revered as embodiments of purity (*Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre*) and serve as crucial mediators between the local deities and humans ("Neglected History of a Dwindling Identity | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Regional Office New Delhi", 2021). Their distinctive attire is a visual manifestation of their sacred roles and spiritual authority.

### MAIBA ATTIRE

The Maibas' ritualistic dress is characterized by its simplicity and symbolic color. Typically, a Maiba wears a white dhoti, known as *Fojjom* or *Pheijom* in Manipuri, for auspicious occasions (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). This is complemented by a shawl, referred to as *Lamthang Khullak*, draped over their body. A long jacket, often made of velvet, covers the upper torso (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). The ensemble is completed with a turban on the head (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). While most sources describe a full outfit, some indicate that male dancers may perform without an upper garment (*Lai Haraoba*, [https://www.indianetzone.com/lai\\_haraoba\\_indian\\_ritual](https://www.indianetzone.com/lai_haraoba_indian_ritual)). The *Pumyaat*, a kurta stitched from silk or cotton, is also worn for auspicious events. The consistent use of white in the

Maiba's attire aligns with the broader symbolism of purity within the priesthood (Phurailatpam et al., 2024).

**Table 1: Maiba Attire Components, Materials, and Symbolism**

| Component Name           | Primary Color          | Primary Material | Key Features/Embellishments               | Symbolism/Significance                     |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| Dhoti (Foijom/Pheijom)   | White                  | Cotton, Silk     | Plain, sometimes a border                 | Purity, auspiciousness, ritual cleanliness |
| Shawl (Lamthang Khullak) | White                  | Not specified    | Not specified                             | Part of ritual ensemble, purity            |
| Jacket                   | Dark                   | Velvet           | Long, sometimes gold threads              | Ritual formality, distinction of role      |
| Turban                   | White                  | Not specified    | Decorated, peacock feather (general male) | Ritual authority, ceremonial headgear      |
| Pumyaat (Kurta)          | White, Cream/Yellowish | Cotton, Silk     | Generally no design                       | Worn for auspicious occasions, purity      |

The Maiba's white attire, while sharing the purity symbolism with the Maibis, also reflects traditional male ritual authority and support roles. Historically, only men were designated to follow the *maiba* tradition (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025). Their roles primarily involve providing ritual assistance, playing musical instruments like the *pena*, and performing ritual chants. The establishment of the *Maiba Loishang* (an institution for male shamans) in the 16th century further formalized these male priestly structures (IGNCA's *Workshop on Maibi Culture of Manipur* | IGNCA). Thus, the shared white attire visually unites the priesthood in their sacred duties, while subtle differences in their garments denote their distinct, complementary roles within the ritual hierarchy and the gendered division of spiritual labor.

## MAIBI ATTIRE

The Maibi's attire is particularly distinctive, designed to emphasize her role as a spiritual conduit and embodiment of purity. A Maibi typically wears a white full-sleeve top or blouse (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). Her lower garment is a white *phanek* (a straight, ankle-length skirt), specifically known as the *Pungong Phanek*, which is wrapped like a skirt and features a prominent red border (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). An additional white waist cloth, known as *sarong phi*, is often wrapped over the *phanek* (Srivastava et al, <https://static.fibre2fashion.com/articlresources/PdfFiles/54/5355.pdf>). A white shawl, or *inaphi*, usually made of fine cotton and sometimes adorned with "handwork," completes her upper attire. The Maibi's hair is characteristically styled in a high ponytail (Phurailatpam et al., 2024). The *Reshom Phurit*, a velvet shirt embellished with gold threads and small brass

pieces on the sleeves, neck, and front, is also mentioned as part of the Maibi's dance costume during Lai Haraoba.

**Table 2: Maibi Attire Components, Materials, and Symbolism**

| Component Name           | Primary Color  | Primary Material | Key Features/Embellishments | Symbolism/Significance  |
|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Top/Blouse               | White          | Not specified    | Full-sleeve                 | Purity, ritual cleanliness  |
| Phanek (Pungong Phanek)  | White          | Not specified    | Red border                  | Purity, feminine identity, (potential vitality/creation symbolism of red) |
| Waist Cloth (Sarong Phi) | White          | Not specified    | Half-length, over phanek    | Part of ritual ensemble, purity   |
| Shawl (Innaphi)          | White          | Fine Cotton      | Handwork                    | Purity, ritual adornment  |
| Reshom Phurit            | Not specified  | Velvet           | Gold threads, brass pieces  | Worn during dance, ceremonial distinction                                 |
| Hairstyle                | Not applicable | Not applicable   | High ponytail               | Distinctive feature, (potential spiritual energy symbolism)               |

The consistent emphasis on white in the Maibi's attire is directly linked to the "ritual purity needed for the vehicle of the lai". This color visually sets them apart as sacred figures, embodying purity and serving as a conduit for divine energy (*Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre*). The Maibi's white attire signifies a liminal state and active spiritual channeling. Their role as mediators between the local deity and humans often involves experiencing spirit possession ("Neglected History of a Dwindling Identity | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Regional Office New Delhi", 2021). The intricate hand gestures (*khut-theks*) performed during their dances, which re-enact creation and human development, are an extension of this spiritual channeling. Thus, the white attire is more than a symbol of purity; it visually represents their sacred function as a direct channel for divine energy, marking them as being in a state of transition or connection between the human and spiritual realms, which is essential for the performance of creation myths.

While the *phanek* itself is symbolic of feminine identity and is considered sacred, the specific symbolism of the red border on the Maibi's white *phanek* is not explicitly elaborated in the provided sources (*Phanek Mayek Naibi: Wearing the Meitei Identity*). However, in many cultures, red symbolizes vitality, creation, or energy, which would align with the Maibi's central role in reenacting creation and fertility rites. Similarly, the high ponytail is a distinctive feature of the Maibi's appearance, though its explicit symbolic or practical meaning is not detailed.

The historical evolution of Maiba and Maibi roles and attire reflects broader socio-cultural shifts. Traditionally, the *maiba* tradition was exclusive to men, while *maibi* (spirit mediumship) was open only to women (Wikipedia contributors, “Lai Haraoba”, 2025). However, historical accounts mention that male Maibas experiencing spirit possession would traditionally adopt women's clothing and be referred to as 'male maibi' or 'mother maibi,' a practice now eroding. The decline in participation of *Nupa Amaibis* (men shamans) in Lai Haraoba since the late 1990s is attributed to modern influences such as globalization, gender-based prejudices, and cultural imperialism (“Neglected History of a Dwindling Identity | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Regional Office New Delhi”, 2021). This indicates a significant shift in traditional gender roles and societal acceptance, directly impacting costume usage and the performance of rituals. This evolution highlights that costumes are not static artifacts but dynamic cultural elements that adapt and are vulnerable to external forces.

## TRADITIONAL MANIPURI TEXTILES: MATERIALS, WEAVING, AND MOTIFS

The textiles used in Lai Haraoba costumes are deeply intertwined with Manipuri cultural identity, reflecting a rich heritage of craftsmanship and symbolic expression.

### COMMON FABRICS AND WEAVING TECHNIQUES

The primary fabrics utilized in Manipuri textiles are silk and cotton. While silk, including Muga and Tasar varieties, is produced within the state, cotton is frequently procured from outside. Raw materials such as *Lashing* (cotton balls) and *Kabrang* (silkworm cocoons) are fundamental to the weaving process, with some yarns even derived from the bark of the *Santhak* tree (Fibre2Fashion, 2025). Weaving is a highly valued skill in Manipur, traditionally dominated by women, and a loom is often included as part of a bride's dowry, symbolizing self-reliance and productivity in marital life (Sanyal, 2024). Tribal textiles are commonly produced on a *loin-loom* (back-strap loom), a traditional method where the warp is secured to a fixed point (like a wall or poles) and the other end is tied to the weaver's waist (Sanyal, 2024). The *extra weft technique* is employed for creating transparent fabrics like *Wangkhei Phee* and for weaving various intricate motifs (Sanyal, 2024). The act of weaving itself holds profound cultural and religious significance. It is believed to be a "replica of the cosmic process" during the dance of creation, where Maibas and Maibis even simulate the sounds of spinning and weaving (*Textiles of Manipur* | IGNCA). The *Paam yaanba* dance performed by Maibis ritually depicts the entire agricultural and textile production cycle, from cotton cultivation and processing to weaving and offering the finished cloth to the deity, underscoring the sacredness of textile production. This deep connection means that each step and design in weaving is linked to legends, functions, dances, and ceremonies (Sanyal, 2024).

### KEY MOTIFS AND THEIR SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

The textile motifs woven into Lai Haraoba costumes and other Manipuri fabrics are direct visual representations of Meitei cosmology, history, and daily life, functioning as a form of visual literacy. These patterns are not merely decorative but serve as a complex system of communication.

**Moirang Pheejin (Temple Design / Yarongphi):** This iconic motif consists of a series of triangular patterns topped with a line, resembling a temple design. It is directly inspired by the divine fangs of Pakhangba, a revered python-like guardian deity, and is believed to offer protection to the wearer (Fibre2Fashion, 2025). The triangles are typically arranged in odd-numbered steps (e.g., 3, 5, 9, 11) and extend towards the center of the cloth (Fibre2Fashion, 2025). This motif is commonly found on *phaneks*, *innaphis*, and *Moirang phee* sarees (Sanyal, 2024).

**Khoijao (Big Hook) Motif:** Characterized by circular patterns encompassing a large hook-shaped symbol, with alternating upward and downward facing outward corners, flanked by narrow embroidery strips (*Phanek Mayek Naibi: Wearing the Meitei Identity*). It is initially printed on cloth and then meticulously embroidered with silk threads. This motif is historically associated with royalty, appearing on *wanphak phurit* (jackets for royal ladies and rewarded women) and *saikakpa phurit* (sleeveless shirts for brave warriors) (*Phanek Mayek Naibi: Wearing the Meitei Identity*).

**Hija Mayek (Boat Form / Cross-section of Timber):** This pattern mimics the cross-section of timber and was conceived by a royal carpenter. It is specifically associated with death ceremonies and was historically reserved for mourning, known as *lukhra phanek* (widow's *phanek*) (Sanyal, 2024). It typically features black and white stripes (*Phanek Mayek Naibi: Wearing the Meitei Identity*).

**Animal Motifs:** Common animal designs include *shamu* (elephant), *shagol* (horse), *iroichi* (buffalo horn), *wahong* (peacock), and *Nga* (fish) (Sanyal, 2024). These motifs are frequently found on shawls like the *Angami Naga* or *Sami Lami Phee* (Sanyal, 2024). Additionally, horses, swords, and spears are incorporated as motifs for borders in sarees and other garments, particularly those used in rituals.

**Cosmological/Natural Motifs:** Celestial bodies such as the sun (*numit*), moon (*tha*), and stars (*Thawanmichak*) are represented (Sanyal, 2024). More intricate patterns include *thamachet* (moon crescents), a pot symbolizing the divine mother, and various seeds (cucumber, apple). Floral, leaf, and creeper patterns are also prevalent, often stitched with fine silk threads.

**Other Motifs:** *Likli* (bottle designs resembling a loom accessory) and *Maibung* (resembling wood grains) are popular. The *Phiruk* motif, a geometric pattern inspired by a double-woven bamboo storage basket, represents a contemporary innovation rooted in local traditions (Sanyal, 2024).

**Table 3: Significant Manipuri Textile Motifs and Their Meanings**

| Motif Name                  | Description of Pattern  | Associated Symbolism/Meaning                            | Common Garments/Contexts                            |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| Moirang Pheejin (Yarongphi) | Series of triangular patterns with a line on top; resembles temple design; woven in odd-numbered steps. | Protection (Pakhangba's fangs), divine connection.      | Phaneks, Innaphis, Moirang phee sarees.             |
| Khoijao (Big Hook)          | Circular patterns with large hook-shaped symbol, alternating orientation; flanked by narrow embroidery. | Royalty, valor, status.                                 | Wanphak Phurit (jackets), Saikakpa Phurit (shirts). |
| Hija Mayek                  | Pattern mimicking cross-section of timber; black and white stripes.                                     | Mourning, death ceremonies, historical association with | Hija Mayek Naibi (widow phanek).                    |

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
|   |  | widows.   |   |
| Animal Motifs (Shamu, Shagol, Wahong, Nga, Iroichi)                                     | Elephant, horse, peacock, fish, buffalo horn figures.                                  | Strength, grace, fertility, specific clan/tribal identities.                    | Angami Naga (Sami Lami Phee) shawls, ritual garments. |
| Cosmological /Natural Motifs (Numit, Tha, Thawanmich ak, Thamachet, Pot, Seeds, Floral) | Sun, moon, star, moon crescents, pot, cucumber/apple seeds, flowers, leaves, creepers. | Creation, divine mother, nourishment, life cycle, prosperity, warding off evil. | Various garments, often embroidered.                  |
| Likli   | Bottle designs resembling a loom accessory.  | Connection to weaving, domestic life.   | Shoulder bags, bed covers.                            |
| Maibung   | Resembles grains of wood.  | Natural patterns, organic forms.  | Bed-covers.   |
| Phiruk  | Geometric pattern derived from bamboo storage basket.                                  | Innovation, traditional crafts, marriage ceremonies.                            | Phaneks.  |

The explicit links between these motifs and elements like Pakhangba's fangs, celestial bodies, and daily objects demonstrate a direct translation of cosmological beliefs and natural observations into textile art. The inclusion of motifs derived from mundane items like loom parts and bamboo baskets illustrates how everyday life is integrated into the sacred visual language. Furthermore, the use of specific motifs on garments awarded to royalty or associated with significant life events signifies social status and cultural importance. This intricate system means that the textiles and their motifs are a powerful non-verbal communication system, reinforcing cultural identity, transmitting ancestral knowledge, and visually narrating the Meitei relationship with their environment, history, and the divine. The very act of weaving, viewed as a "replica of the cosmic process," imbues these textiles with inherent spiritual significance, making the preservation of these weaving traditions fundamental for the continuity of Meitei cultural memory.

## ORNAMENTS AND ACCESSORIES IN LAI HARAoba

Beyond the woven garments, a rich array of ornaments and accessories further enhances the visual and symbolic depth of Lai Haraoba costumes. These pieces are not merely decorative but serve as a complex system of social, ritual, and cosmological markers.

## DESCRIPTION OF TRADITIONAL JEWELLERY

Participants in the Lai Haraoba festival adorn themselves with delicate jewellery and intricate flower garlands, contributing to the festival's striking visual appeal (Milaap, 2017). The designs of these ornaments are often unique to the Manipuri region.

### Necklaces:

- *Likchow*: A multi-layered gold neckpiece featuring conical beads, sometimes set with colored gems. It is worn by brides and during festivals (Rawat, 2025).
- *Meikhumbi*: A necklace typically made of gold or silver, adorned with pearls or gemstones ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)").
- *Kontha*: A large and bold necklace crafted from gold, pearls, or beads, primarily worn by brides.
- *Thengri*: An ancient coin-shaped pendant, now popular across all age groups, though historically reserved for royalty or priestesses.
- *Khayang Kharai*: A broad, beaded necklace often worn by tribal women.

### Earrings:

- *Khownappi*: Lightweight gold earrings featuring elaborate floral or geometric designs with dangling tiers (Rawat, 2025).
- *Koktombi*: Gold or silver earrings decorated with pearls or gemstones ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)").
- *Thappa*: Large, circular gold or silver earrings with intricate floral motifs, worn by brides.
- *Samji*: A delicate gold earring, often shaped like a flower or leaf, worn by young women and festival performers. The *Nupang Samji* variant signifies a special ritual role during the potent Lai Haraoba festival.
- *Kajeng Lei*: An earring made of beads and metal, worn by girls, symbolizing their transition to adulthood.

### Bracelets/Bangles:

- *Pasuan*: A type of ankle bracelet made of gold or silver, often adorned with bells ("Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)").
- *Chura*: Sets of bangles made from gold, silver, or glass, worn on the wrists and forearms.
- *Kharu*: A thick, rigid bangle made of gold or silver, typically worn in pairs, featuring intricate engravings and floral patterns, primarily by brides and married women.
- *Khubak Isei*: A traditional Manipuri bangle, usually crafted from gold or silver, worn in multiples, and often gifted as part of a wedding dowry.
- *Khong-phi*: A thick, ornate gold or silver bracelet with floral motifs, worn by married women and believed to bring good luck across generations.

### Headgear/Head Jewellery:

- *Feichom*: A small, circular gold or silver ornament with pearls or gemstones, worn on the forehead. (“Manipuri Dance: History, Costume, Features and Famous Dancers (UPSC Notes)”).
- *Khangoi*: Gold or silver head jewellery, embellished with pearls or gemstones, worn on top of the head.
- Roses and a crown of feathers are also used to adorn the forehead.
- *Matha Patti* or tiara-like ornaments are worn by brides, intricately designed with gold embellishments and pearls, symbolizing purity and prosperity.
- *Leitai*: A silver crown-like ornament for the head, worn by Meitei brides and priestesses.<sup>41</sup>
- *Kokyet*: A flat disc-shaped ornament that signals nobility.

**Other Accessories:** Maibis often carry and ring a hand-bell during rituals. Maibas perform a ritualistic act of throwing gold and silver coins (symbols of earth and sky) into water (Admin et al., 2028).

### MATERIALS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Manipuri jewellery is primarily crafted from precious metals such as gold, silver, and brass. Additionally, materials like shell, glass beads, and even animal bones are utilized, particularly among the hill communities, reflecting regional variations in resources and aesthetics.

The wearing of jewellery in Lai Haraoba, and in Meitei culture broadly, extends far beyond mere beautification. It is a deeply symbolic act that conveys respect for the gods, marks significant life milestones, and indicates an individual's clan or family identity. For instance, the *Matha Patti* symbolizes purity and prosperity for brides, while the *Khubak Isei* bangle represents unity, prosperity, and the everlasting bond of marriage. The *Khownappi* earrings are worn as a mark of grace and cultural pride. Certain pieces, like the *Kokyet*, signal nobility, and the *Kajeng Lei* earring marks a young woman's coming of age. The *Khong-phi* bracelet is believed to bring good luck across generations.

The intricate patterns found in Manipuri gold and silver jewellery are frequently inspired by natural elements such as flowers, leaves, and creepers. Local folklore posits that these designs are not only aesthetically pleasing but also possess the power to attract prosperity and ward off evil spirits. Historically, access to certain ornaments was restricted to royalty or priestesses, signifying their elevated social and ritual status. However, following Indian independence, many designs became more widely accessible to common families.

**Table 4: Key Ornaments and Their Cultural Significance**

| Ornamen<br>t Name | Main<br>Material(s) | Common<br>Wearer(s)<br>)            | Key<br>Features/Design          | Cultural<br>Significance/<br>Symbolism |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Likchow           | Gold, Gems          | Brides,<br>Women<br>(Festivals<br>) | Multi-layered,<br>conical beads | Elegance, festival<br>staple           |

|                |   |  |   |   |
|----------------|---|--|---|---|
| Khownappi      | Gold, Emeralds/Rubies                   | Women                                  | Floral/geometric, dangling tiers, lightweight | Grace, cultural pride   |
| Heibi Mapal    | Gold                                    | Women                                  | Thick, plant-like necklace                    | Protection, healing, prosperity                               |
| Kharu          | Gold, Silver                            | Brides, Married Women                  | Thick, rigid bangle, intricate engravings     | Special occasions, marital status                             |
| Feichom        | Gold, Silver, Pearls/Gemstones          | Women                                  | Small, circular, on forehead                  | Adornment, elegance   |
| Koknam         | Gold, Silver, Pearls/Gemstones          | Women                                  | Nose ring (right nostril)                     | Traditional adornment   |
| Pasuan         | Gold, Silver, Bells                     | Women                                  | Ankle bracelet                                | Movement, rhythm  |
| Khangoi        | Gold, Silver, Pearls/Gemstones          | Women                                  | Head jewelry (top of head)                    | Adornment   |
| Thengri        | Gold-plated disks, Semi-precious stones | All ages; formerly royalty/priestesses | Coin-shaped pendant                           | Traditional charm, historical status                          |
| Samji          | Gold                                    | Young women, Festival performers       | Delicate, often floral/leaf-shaped            | Importance in Lai Haraoba, special ritual role (Nupang Samji) |
| Kajeng Lei     | Bead, Metal                             | Girls                                  | Earring                                       | Transition to adulthood                                       |
| Khayang Kharai | Beads, Silver, Shell                    | Tribal women                           | Layered, chunky beaded necklace               | Tribal identity   |
| Leitai         | Silver, Jewels                          | Meitei brides, Priestesses             | Crown-like headgear                           | Bridal adornment, priestly status                             |
| Khong-phi      | Gold, Silver                            | Married                                | Thick, ornate                                 | Good luck,  |

|                   |                     | Women  | bracelet, floral motifs          | marital status                  |
|-------------------|---------------------|--------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Matha Patti/Tiara | Gold, Pearls        | Brides | Intricate headpiece              | Purity, prosperity              |
| Kontha            | Gold, Pearls, Beads | Brides | Large, bold necklace             | Connection to heritage          |
| Khubak Isei       | Gold, Silver        | Brides | Bangles, worn in multiples       | Unity, prosperity, marital bond |
| Thappa            | Gold, Silver        | Brides | Large, circular, floral earrings | Bridal adornment                |
| Nath              | Not specified       | Brides | Delicate nose ring               | Elegance                        |
| Payal             | Silver              | Brides | Anklets                          | Grace, femininity               |

Jewelry in Lai Haraoba functions as a multi-layered symbolic system, communicating social hierarchy, life stages, and protective spiritual beliefs. The specific pieces worn by individuals, from Maibis to general participants, clearly indicate their social status and life transitions. The explicit symbolism for prosperity, purity, unity, protection, and warding off evil demonstrates their deep ritualistic and spiritual significance. The use of natural motifs for protective purposes further links these ornaments to the Meitei's profound connection with nature and their cosmology. This indicates that the selection and wearing of specific ornaments during Lai Haraoba are highly intentional acts, reinforcing the wearer's role within the ritual and society, and invoking specific spiritual benefits.

## REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN COSTUME AND PERFORMANCE

The Lai Haraoba festival, while sharing a core purpose and structure across Manipur, exhibits notable regional variations in its performance and, by extension, its costumes. Four main types of Lai Haraoba are widely recognized: Kanglei Haraoba, Moirang Haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba, and Kakching Haraoba (Admin et al., 2028). These distinctions are not merely geographical but reflect localized deities, historical narratives, and unique ritual practices.

**Kanglei Haraoba:** Primarily observed in the valley areas of Manipur, excluding Moirang, Kakching, and Chakpa-practiced regions. (Admin et al., 2028). This variant centers its worship around the deity Pakhangba. A distinctive feature of Kanglei Haraoba was the ritual of *Kanglei Thokpa* or *Lai Nupi Thiba* ("God searching for a consort"), where a Maibi would symbolically "hook" a girl from the crowd to dance. However, this ritual has been discontinued in modern times due to practical issues, such as damage to participants' jewelry and clothing. This adaptation highlights how practical considerations can lead to changes in ritual performance and, consequently, in the specific costume elements required. Kanglei Haraoba also incorporates significant theatrical elements.

**Moirang Haraoba:** Celebrated specifically in Moirang, this form honors Lord Thangjing and is often referred to as Moirang Thangjing Haraoba ("Lai Haraoba Festival"). It is unique in its cyclical performance, divided into three forms—Khongchingba, Lamthokpa, and Yumphamba—which are performed sequentially over three years (*Lai Haraoba*). Moirang Haraoba is known for its extended duration, sometimes lasting up to a month. The traditional

*Panthoibi Jagoi* dance in this variant has often been replaced by the *Khamba-Thoibi Dance*, which enacts the popular Manipuri folktale of the legendary hero and heroine. This shift reflects the integration of beloved local narratives into the festival's core performances (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025).

**Chakpa Haraoba:** This category encompasses the Haraoba festivals celebrated by various Chakpa communities in villages such as Andro, Phayeng, Khurkhul, and Sekmai. A notable distinction of Chakpa Haraoba is the prevalence of animal sacrifice, a practice not found in other forms of Haraoba.<sup>3</sup> The hand movements in Chakpa Haraoba are described as simpler, and the overall structure is less complex compared to other variations (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025).

**Kakching Haraoba:** Celebrated in the Kakching area, this variant primarily honors the deity Khamlangba. A unique ritual feature of Kakching Haraoba is the *Ngaprum Tanba*, performed on the final day, which is not observed in other forms of the festival (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025). The existence of these distinct regional variations demonstrates the localized nature of cultural practices within the broader shared tradition of Lai Haraoba.

Each type, with its specific deities, narratives, and ritualistic nuances, influences the particular costumes and their symbolic representations. This indicates that while core elements of the festival remain consistent, there is a degree of flexibility and adaptation in how Lai Haraoba, and its associated costumes, manifest regionally, reflecting local history, community identity, and evolving social dynamics. The "Thangkhul costume" worn during the reenactment of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi's story, for instance, highlights the incorporation of specific tribal aesthetics into the festival's narrative, even if the primary performers are Meitei (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025).

## HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND PRESERVATION CHALLENGES

The Lai Haraoba festival, with its deep roots in pre-Vaishnavite Meitei culture, has undergone a continuous process of evolution, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts in Manipur. While its precise origins are debated, with theories pointing to Koubru Ching or Langmai hill, its antiquity is undeniable, predating the reign of Pakhangba in 33 AD. The festival's history is chronicled in ancient manuscripts known as *Puyas*, which trace Meitei origins back to the 1st century CE.

Over centuries, Lai Haraoba has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Its traditional dance gestures, for instance, significantly inspired the classical Manipuri dance form, including the renowned Ras Lila, following the introduction of Vaishnavism in the 18th century. This cultural exchange is evident in the occasional replacement of the *Panthoibi Jagoi* with the *Khamba-Thoibi* dance, and even the incorporation of "filmy dances" to appeal to modern audiences. Such adaptations, while ensuring the festival's continued relevance, also highlight a dynamic tension between tradition and modernity (Wikipedia contributors, "Lai Haraoba", 2025).

However, these socio-cultural shifts have also presented significant preservation challenges, particularly impacting the costumes and the roles of ritual practitioners. The traditional practice of male Maibas (priests) cross-dressing in Maibi (priestess) attire when experiencing spirit possession, a practice that historically blurred gender lines in ritual, is now eroding. Furthermore, the participation of *Nupa Amaibis* (men shamans) in Lai Haraoba has notably declined since the late 1990s. These changes are attributed to "new influences like globalisation, aged old regressive practices like gender-based prejudices and myths or cultural imperialism" (Phurailatpam et al., 2024).

More broadly, the decline of traditional Meitei rituals, including aspects of Lai Haraoba, is a concern driven by modernization, urbanization, globalization, religious assimilation, cultural exchange, and political transformations. These external pressures directly affect the continuity of traditional costume production and usage. There is a documented scarcity of trained Maibis and Maibas, who are the primary custodians of the festival's oral traditions and ritualistic performances. Compounding this, there is a limited number of skilled artisans capable of producing the intricate traditional costumes, headgear, and masks. This shortage poses a significant risk of knowledge and skill decline without systematic transmission or documentation. The challenges faced by Lai Haraoba costumes are symptomatic of broader threats to intangible cultural heritage in the face of rapid societal change. Efforts are being made to revive and preserve these rituals, recognizing their importance in maintaining cultural identity and community cohesion (Mishra et al., 2007).

## CONCLUSION

The dress and costumes of the Lai Haraoba festival are far more than mere garments; they are profound cultural artifacts, deeply interwoven with the Meitei community's cosmological beliefs, historical narratives, and social structures. This report has demonstrated how each element of attire, from the sacred white vestments of the Maibas and Maibis to the intricately woven motifs on textiles and the symbolic jewellery, serves as a vital component in the festival's performative reenactment of creation and human evolution. The consistent use of white for the priesthood signifies their ritual purity and role as intermediaries, while the diverse motifs on textiles act as a visual lexicon, communicating complex narratives of nature, mythology, and societal values. Regional variations further underscore the dynamic and localized expressions of this rich sartorial heritage.

However, the analysis also reveals that these living traditions are not static. They have evolved over centuries, adapting to new influences while striving to maintain their core essence. This ongoing evolution, particularly in the face of modernization, globalization, and shifting gender roles, presents significant challenges. The dwindling number of skilled artisans and ritual practitioners poses a direct threat to the authentic transmission and continuity of these intricate costume traditions. Therefore, the preservation of Lai Haraoba costumes necessitates not only the safeguarding of material heritage but also the active support and revitalization of the knowledge systems, weaving techniques, and ritual practices that give them meaning. Understanding these costumes is crucial for comprehending the full depth of Meitei cultural identity and the enduring power of their ancestral traditions.

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