

## FEMALE SPIRIT-POSSESSION RITUALS AMONG THE MEITEIS OF MANIPUR

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*This original version of this paper was accepted for and delivered at the annual conference of The British Association for the Study of Religions at Harris Manchester College, Oxford in 1997. That year the theme of the association's conference was Religious Experience*

### Introduction

The Indian state of Manipur is situated on the north eastern border with Myanmar. It comprises around 8,500 square miles, the heartland of which is a fertile valley, the home of the Meiteis. Unlike the Christianized Naga and Kuki groups to the north and south, the Meiteis were Hinduized some two and half centuries ago. They have a highly developed culture: Manipuri dance, based on pre-Hindu ritual, is one of the schools of Indian classical dance, and there is an extensive written literature in the ancient Meitei script.

The Hinduism introduced into Manipur during the 18th century CE was mainly of the Bengal Vaishnavite type, and it gained power largely through the patronage of the kings of Manipur. Resistance to Hinduization was fierce during the earlier period, and centred upon the pre-Hindu Meitei religion.<sup>1</sup> This religion was never extinguished and eventually reached a modus vivendi with Hinduism. In recent times Meitei religion has undergone something of a revival, partly due to its role as one focus of resistance to the policy of integration pursued by successive Indian governments.

Meitei religion<sup>2</sup> centred on the veneration of deities known as *lai* (the same term being used for both male and female, as well as for the singular and plural: here the anglicised '*lais*' will be used to denote the plural). The *lais* bear some general similarity to spirit beings in other Asian cultures, such as the *nagas* of the Indian subcontinent, the Thai *phii*, Buddhist *yaksas*, and especially the *nats* of Burmese religion. *Lai* is usually regarded as an abbreviated form of *umang lai*, literally 'deities of the forest' (*u* = tree, *mang* = in the midst of). There is some evidence (especially with regard to certain rituals) to indicate that some of the *lais* may have been associated with trees, but this seems to be a residual element from a very early period, and today none of the most important *lais* has such a connection. *Lai* has no exact equivalent in English, but 'divinity' or 'deity' would be a better rendering than 'god or goddess.' The emphasis is upon the numinous, the supra-normal in contrast to human world. This qualitative distinction is made explicit in the multiple praise names which are given to the *lais*.

Although there is a *lai* who may be regarded as a 'high god', associated with the heavens, *Atingkok* or *Atiya Sidaba*, he is almost a *deus otiosus*. For the purposes of ritual, his female counterpart, *Leimaren* ('queen, chief goddess'), is much more important. In the utterance associated with the spirit possession of the *maibi* (the *leihourol*: see below) *Leimaren* is associated with the deep waters. She is also, however, an earth goddess. In this capacity she is called *Malem Leima* ('Mother Earth') and is offered gold coins symbolising the colour of the soil.<sup>3</sup>

The most important male *lai* is *Pakhangba*, who is the serpent deity. As he was originally the ancestor-god of the Ningthouja clan, which eventually gained ascendancy over the Meitei people, he has become accepted as the deity of all Meitei.<sup>4</sup> His spouse is *Laisana* ('the golden *lai*'). In the invocation of *leihourol* she is also associated with the waters. It seems clear that there has been some conflation between the two female *lais*, *Leimaren* and *Laisana*, probably as a result of the fusion of two originally distinct religious systems.

Some *lais* are associated with natural phenomena, but the most important group is that of the four 'guardians of the directions'. These are invoked by name in many of the ritual prayers of the *Lai Haraoba* (the 'Pleasing of the Gods') festival which will be described more fully below. The *lais* always appear as a male-female duality. Each male *lai* has his female consort, 'from whom he is never parted' according to the *Yakeiba* ('awakening', the morning lyric of the festival).

### The Maibis

The religious functionaries of the traditional Meitei religion are the male *maiba* and the female *maibi*. These terms were translated by the earlier British writers on the Manipuris as 'priest and priestess', but this is not entirely accurate. As well as functioning as priests and priestesses, invoking and making offerings to the *lais*, they are also expert singers and dancers who preserve the oral religious traditions and rituals. The female *maibi* is more important than her male counterpart.<sup>5</sup> She plays a more prominent role in the rituals and it is only the female *maibi* who becomes possessed by the *lai* and can deliver the oracle. Traditionally any male *maiba* who did experience spirit possession had to dress in the women's clothing of the *maibi*,<sup>6</sup> would be spoken of as a 'male *maibi*' and would be addressed as *ima maibi* ('mother *maibi*'). The practice of cross-dressing is now becoming eroded, and at the present time male *maibas* have begun to adopt some of the *maibis*' ritual roles while retaining their own dress.<sup>7</sup> This would seem to indicate a move towards male control of religious functions which traditionally belonged to women.

A woman becomes a *maibi* through direct possession by a particular *lai*. In earlier times this could happen at the *Lai Haraoba* festival during a complex ritual called *Lai Nupi Thiba* ('taking a wife for the deity').<sup>8</sup> Usually, however, the *lai* selects the new *maibi* by progressive signs of possession. These may begin at a very early age, even as young as seven years, and indeed the younger she is, the better *maibi* it is believed she will become. Initial signs usually include symptoms of illness, and then of abnormal, even hysterical, behaviour. A senior *maibi* then diagnoses the cause as the *lai*'s making known his or her will to possess the girl, who then undergoes a period of training and instruction. During this time she is taught the sacred oral texts and the complex rituals and dance steps associated with the festivals. The ability to fall into trance then becomes ritualised. *Maibis* may be possessed by many different *lais*, though it is more often major 'national' deities rather than local *lais*.<sup>9</sup> Possession by female *lais* is not uncommon, though these usually prefer a male host.

*Maibis* may marry, and for all intents and purposes can live a fairly normal family life. They are in no sense deviants.<sup>10</sup> They belong to one or other of the Meitei *sagei* (clans, extended families) and are integrated into society as a whole. A *maibi's* husband generally seems to accept his wife's status as a vehicle of the *lai*. The *maibi* occupies the left (outside) of the marriage bed (the place normally taken by the husband), but on particular nights sleeps alone and is visited by her *lai*. On such occasions the *lai* is believed to appear in human or animal form, and *maibis* report experiencing the sensation of sexual intercourse.

The dress of the *maibi* is distinctive. The *phanek* (straight ankle length skirt) must be white, unlike that normally worn by Manipuri women, which has horizontal coloured stripes with a heavily embroidered border. An additional white waist cloth, of half length, is wrapped around the body on top of the *phanek*. The shawl (*inaphi*), usually of fine cotton, must also be white. A long sleeved white blouse completes the ritual dress. White as a colour for religious specialists is found in many societies, and here presumably indicates the ritual purity needed for the vehicle of the *lai*. Manipur falls into the category of what Goody has termed 'flower cultures',<sup>11</sup> and the *maibi* will also decorate her hair with frangipani, miniature magnolias, jasmine, orchids or other small scented flowers.

### **The *Lai Haraoba* Festival**

The public role of the *maibis* is seen most dramatically in the festival of *Lai Haraoba* ('the pleasing of the gods'). *Lai Haraoba* is the most authentically Meitei of all the traditional festivals, and the one which preserves its dance, oral literary and poetic traditions in their most pristine form. As one leading Meitei scholar puts it,

Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strengths and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their intensest.<sup>12</sup>

It has remained largely uninfluenced by the Hinduism which has dominated Meitei society for more than two hundred years. It is especially significant that while animal sacrifices were replaced by bloodless offerings in most forms of the *Lai Haraoba* (almost certainly under royal duress rather than popular opinion) the oral text still includes references to *sa* (meat, flesh).<sup>13</sup>

*Lai Haraoba* is essentially an area festival which is celebrated in honour of the deities associated with a particular locality, yet at the same time invokes and honours the more important *lais* of the Meitei people as a whole. It is a vast complex of ritual, music, dance, prayer and song. Though the Meitei have a written script which goes back at least a thousand years, the text of the *Lai Haraoba* is oral. This suggests not only that it antedates the earliest writing in Manipur, but that its essential core was sacred lore passed down by word of mouth from *maibi* to *maibi*. An analysis of the oral text shows that it contains a number of different literary genres, including songs for prosperity, dancing songs, riddles, and love lyrics. By far the most important, however, are the liturgical prayers, which are always spoken by the *maibi* or *maiba* alone. It seems very probable that these formed the core around which several other oral traditions gathered.

The complexity of the *Lai Haraoba* renders it susceptible to a number of different interpretations. On one level it is the invocation of clan and village deities, requesting them to be present for the duration of the festival, and worshipping ('pleasing') them through the

singing and dancing of the devotees. At the same time there is little doubt that it is also a fertility festival. It takes place during the spring and includes several lyrics and ritual actions which have both veiled and explicit sexual imagery and here are also prayers for increase. There are also rites and prayers for protection (including one spectacular dance by *maibis*, which takes place at night, with swords and flaming torches). However, if the liturgical prayers constitute the earliest core of the oral text it seems likely that the element of spirit possession and giving of oracles is the most original. This would accord well with the *maibi*'s pre-eminent role as a medium. Thus *Lai Haraoba* has clearly developed over a long period of time, and has incorporated the traditions not only of the seven *yeks* (extended clan, or tribal groups) which today make up the Meitei nation, but also those of the pre Meitei autochthonous *Chakpa* peoples.<sup>14</sup>

*Lai Haraoba* takes place over several days. The *lais* have to be present in their shrine for the daily rituals. On the first day they are called up from the waters – a river or sometimes a pond<sup>15</sup> – and ceremonially brought to the shrine. The following day several cycles of rituals are performed, and these are repeated on subsequent days. On the final day there are additions to the ritual cycles, and then the *lais* are returned to their place of origin. While the *maibis* play a leading role in all of the rituals in the festival, we shall limit ourselves in this paper to a description and analysis of the beginning of the festival during which the *lais* are invoked and take possession of the *maibi*.

### Preparatory Rituals

The shrine (*laisang*, 'house of the gods') is rectangular in shape. It was traditionally a temporary thatched structure, though today shrines are often quite substantial, and made of brick with a corrugated iron roof. The front is half-open but is closed at night by wooden doors, when the *lais* 'sleep'. The roof above the entrance is decorated by a *chirong*, crossed front beams in the shape of horns. The 'throne' of the *lais* is a simple bench in the centre of the shrine. On this are placed the representations of the two *lais*, male and female, in whose honour the particular *Lai Haraoba* is to be celebrated. *Lai phisetpa*, the 'clothing of the *lais*', is usually done the night before or early in the morning of the first day of the *Lai Haraoba*. Originally the *lais* were portrayed simply by an object associated with them; now they are most commonly represented by masks. The *lais* are not images; there is no representation of the body, except that wicker baskets are used which may be 'dressed' in their clothes. The clothes must be new, and consist of the traditional Meitei dress – a waist cloth, shirt and turban for the male *lai*, a blouse, *phanek* and shawl for the female. The female *lai* wears a bridal head-dress and gold ornaments. These represent the temporary 'body' of the *lais*, but as yet they are inanimate. To bring them to life the *maibi* must bring their 'souls' from the waters. While there are a number of pairs of ritual objects used in the *Lai Haraoba* the most important are the *ihai fu*, small earthen pots which are the symbolic 'containers' of the *lais*. Banana leaves are placed inside the pots so that they protrude above the rims. They are then turned down and tied with a thread of pure hand-spun cotton (the *hiri*). Attached to the other end of the cotton are the *leiyom*. These are packets containing three layers of banana leaves and buds of the *langthrei*<sup>16</sup> plant. The *hiri* is wrapped around them and they are then placed into the pots. The pots are attached to scarves, which are then tied around the necks of the two men (*laipuba*, 'lai-bearers') who are to carry them. In addition there are two other packets, called *khayom*. These are made of seven layers of banana leaves and contain rice, a fertilised egg, and three *langthrei* buds. These are tied together with strips of bamboo. The rice and fertilised eggs symbolise life. The *khayom* are the embryos from which the *lais* will emerge.

Once the shrine is ready, a time is set for the rite of *lai loukatpa* or *lai ikouba* (literally, 'picking up' or 'calling out' the *lais*). A procession is formed by the shrine consisting of two lines, one each for the male and female *lais*. The officiating *maibi* leads, followed by other *maibis* and the *maibas*, and the musicians. The most important of these are the *penakhongbas*, players of the *pena*, a small one-stringed fiddle. The *penakhongbas* are religious professionals, who play a major role in the chanting and singing of the lyrics at the *Lai Haraoba*.<sup>17</sup> After them come the women and men bearing the possessions of the *lais*, the *laibearers*, and a woman carrying a larger pot (the *naheifu*) for collecting water for the cleansing rituals.<sup>18</sup> On arrival at the waters the procession stops; the *maibi* then makes an offering of food, which is scattered on the waters.<sup>19</sup>

### The Possession Ritual

A second offering, this time of silver and gold coins, called *konyai*, follows. The gold coin represents the (female) earth, the silver the (male) sky. As the *maibi* casts them into the waters she utters the lyric *konyarol* <sup>20</sup>:

O waters, abiding alone, the primeval waters,  
 All six dark layers and five bright layers,  
 Have been joined together by the *maibi* of the (goddess of) the waters,  
 Our respected sister<sup>21</sup>, (seated) on the river bank  
 You are being appeased, Sovereign God (name), and Divine Goddess (name),  
 So that this *haraoba* may be performed for you;  
 All your servants, the whole village,  
 Have offered in the waters the gold and silver pieces.  
 From within the waters, leaving your royal and pleasant house,  
 We beseech you to come up through the string of the *hiri* on this day.  
 O waters, the silver (coin) has appeased the heavens  
 And the red gold (coin) has appeased the earth.

She then offers the two *khayom* packets in the water. The *khayom* for the male is held in her right hand, that for the female in her left. After the prayer below is uttered they are immersed three times and then released into the water. If they are sucked downwards it is regarded as a good omen, if they float the portent is bad:

Incarnate Lord, Python Deity Pakhangba, O golden one:

Goddess of the waters, Ruler of the rivers:  
 Golden Goddess (Laisana) fair and beautiful one:  
 For you, Lord and Lady, in order to call up your souls,  
 We have poured the rice on the finest of banana leaves,  
 And on it have placed the fertile egg and the *langthrei* buds.  
 We do not offer you the ordinary *khayom*, we offer you your own *khayoms*,  
 And we have tied them with the seven bamboo strips.  
 Which (represent) the seven days of the week.  
 We offer you the *khayoms* as they are tied thus.  
 Lord and Lady, we beseech you,  
 Ascend from within the *khayoms*, riding along the *hiris*.

The *maibi* can now perform *laithemba* (or *lai themgatpa*), that is 'coaxing' the *lais* from the waters. She removes the *leiyoms* from their respective pots by slowly unwinding the *hiri* threads. To make sure that the threads do not touch the ground she passes them over her shoulder. Then she covers her face with her shawl and crouches beside the water. Holding her handbell in her left hand, she rings it continuously. Taking the two *leiyom* in her right hand, she immerses them in the water and agitates them. She chants *leihourol*, the song

which celebrates the creation of the universe by the *lais*. The *pena* plays slowly at first, gradually accelerating as the lyric proceeds.<sup>22</sup>

From the five layers of creation,  
The six layers of creation,  
From the depths of the belly,  
From the root of my tongue,  
From the depths of my being,  
From the crown of the head:<sup>23</sup>  
Behold, that which is from the depth of the earth,  
Which begins to grow, putting forth its shoots,  
Yet is still unrevealed, like an unopened flower.<sup>24</sup>

O gods of the four directions, with the four gods of the cardinal compass points,<sup>25</sup>  
The sixty descendants, all of you, to the far corners of the earth:  
Let me address the Mother, let me cry to the Sovereign King!  
The deep breathing of possession has now begun!  
(Come) from above, from beneath, from the three layers (of the universe)!  
O Omniscient Lord and Lady of the navel of the earth<sup>26</sup>  
(Descend) from your mountain abode which is high above,  
To which no mortal can reach.

There follows a passage describing the playing of the *penakhongba*. The bow of the *pena* represents the male *lai*, the body of the instrument is the female *lai*. The touching of the hair strings of the bow and of the body represents the mingling of the male and female divine principles in creation. The lyric continues:

I (the *maibi*) am holding my bell in my hand and moving it in a circle.<sup>27</sup>  
It is I who serve you,  
I who cause the river (of your message) to spread out,  
I who am engulfed in the fire (of your word);  
I, the daughter of the Mother Goddess, and not others, who have learned this skill;  
I, the *maibi*, who is yet to receive your oracle,  
Give me a message like new clothes.  
Do not give me a message like an old cloth, or like a faded flower.  
Give me a new message like the fresh flowers in your hair.  
The gracious words of the Mother must not ascend to the heaven,  
They must fall upon the ground<sup>28</sup>  
I, the Mother's daughter<sup>29</sup> will utter your message.

The *maibi* begins to feel the onset of possession. She first experiences the sensation of 'the hair standing on end', then her body begins to shake, increasing in violence. The oracle is felt as a weight within the stomach, a burden centred upon her navel. This is called in Manipuri *lai tongba*, literally 'the *lai* sitting upon' the *maibi*. The *lai* now begins to speak through the *maibi*:

O *maibi*, why does your flesh creep?<sup>30</sup>  
And your hair stand on end as the quills of the porcupine?  
Be calm, let not your flesh creep!

The *maibi* responds:

Overcome my fears<sup>31</sup>, utter your oracle to me, give me your message!

If the *maibi* seems to be losing control the male *maiba* may blow across her head and sprinkle her with water from the pot for purification. The *pena* has now ceased playing, and as the *maibi* goes into a trance state the *lai* begins to speak through her. The oracle is delivered in archaic Manipuri, and follows a set liturgical formula which begins with the praise names of the *lai*. Since this form of the language is no longer generally understood it

needs to be interpreted by the *maiba* for the benefit of the hearers. The content of the oracle concerns the village or community, or the particular individual who is offering the *Lai Haraoba*. It is delivered in the form of a command. In Manipuri the form of speech is of the kind used by a master to his servant, or by an elder to a younger person, and it indicates the subordinate status of the one addressed. The command however also implies an option: the freedom of choice of the person addressed is assumed, and the command is conditional: 'if you bring your offering (usually of fruit or flowers) I (the *lai*) will bless you and/or avert calamity'.<sup>32</sup>

After the oracle has been delivered and the *maibi* recovered her composure she completes the ritual for bringing the *lais* from the waters. Placing her handbell beside her on a banana leaf (none of the sacred objects must touch the ground) she draws her hand along the two *hiri* strings, symbolically motioning the *lais* up from the waters.<sup>33</sup> The strings are then wrapped around their respective *leiyom* and replaced in their pots. The *lais* are now ready to be transported back to the shrine. The *leiyom* are subsequently taken out of their pots at the shrine and made to touch the navels of the representations of the *lais*, symbolically giving them life or 'soul.'

### **The Maibi and the Mother Goddess**

Female mediums are common in many cultures, though it is difficult to fit *maibic* possession into any comparative pattern. In neighbouring Myanmar there is a class of female ritual functionaries known as *nat meimma* (spirit women), also called *mibaya* (queens), a word which appears to resemble *maibi*.<sup>34</sup> However, there are very significant differences between them, especially as concerns their ritual role in the public festivals. In Burmese religion the spirit-wife explicitly re-enacts the story of her *nat*: she dresses in the *nat's* special costume, and she must observe the particular dance-steps (some quite vigorous) which belong to him. None of this is the case with the *maibi* at *Lai Haraoba*. Here the dance steps and hand movements, all based on the spiral and circular movement, are gentle and gracious; they do not tell any stories, nor do they vary according to which deity is being honoured. The *Lai Haraoba* does not tell the life-story of any of the *lais*, and it is not in any sense a narrative re-enactment.<sup>35</sup> The characteristics of the female functionaries of the *nats* and the *lais* are now quite different.

Similarities between the *maibis* and female shamans (especially those of Korea) are also slight, and it would be misleading to apply the term shaman to the *maibis*. They do not wear typically shamanistic dress or decorations, such as animal skins or masks. They are in no sense 'masters of the spirits', nor do they exorcise<sup>36</sup> or claim to bear away the misfortunes of their clients. Those cases from parts of tribal India which Eliade understands as examples of what he would class as shamanism bear virtually no relationship to *maibic* possession.<sup>37</sup> The *maibis'* role as mediums, which is only one (though arguably the most important) among the several functions they perform, is essentially to be a pronouncer of oracles, both for the community and, on occasion, for individuals.

Why is the function of mediumship confined to females in *Meitei* religion? Above we rejected a common assumption often made by anthropologists that women assume the role of mediums as a compensation for their marginalisation in society generally, and that women mediums tend to be socially deviant. This does not apply in Manipur, where the influence of women in the family, society, and political life was (and is) considerable – it is not without significance that some of the most effective protests against British imperial policies, subsequent central rule from Delhi, and atrocities committed by the Indian army,

have taken the form of *nupi lai*, women's mass demonstrations. Explanations of women's spirit possession on the basis of sociological theories derived from quite different societies seem superficial. It is more likely that the explanation for the supremacy of the female over the male in Meitei religion lies in the Meiteis' own mythology and tradition.

It is evident from the oral texts which concern spirit-possession that the source of the oracle lies in the female *lai* Ima (Mother) Leimaren. Leimaren's position, as we have seen, is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand she is associated with the otiose high-god of the skies *Atiya Sidaba*<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, in the possession text she stands alone. This is quite unusual in Meitei religion, where the male and female *lais* are almost always conjoined. While the mythology is very complex, it seems to us probable that the female principle, which represents the broad aspects of fertility in the 'red earth' and the deep waters, was more important in the religion of the original inhabitants of the valley of Manipur, and that it retained some of its pre-eminence after the Meiteis occupied the valley.<sup>39</sup> One aspect of the pre-eminence of the female goddess is found in mediumship, and the oracle is always regarded as coming from the Mother Goddess. This is explicit in the phrase from the *leihouron* that

the gracious words of the Mother must not ascend to the heavens.

In an alternative version of this text, used by a different group of *maibis*, the Mother Goddess is explicitly invoked:

You Mother, who are delicately born, last born of the *lais*, on this round crown, on this head rest, be seated awhile; give us your oracle clearly ...

The imagery here is of the goddess descending upon the head of the *maibi*, as it were taking possession of her mind, and controlling her (see above, note 22). There is, furthermore, another strand in Meitei mythology which regards the first *maibi* as the actual incarnation of the Mother Goddess Leimaren. This figure is called '*Khabi*' from the verb *khaiba*, meaning 'to discern.' During *leihourol* the *maibi* describes herself as '*khabi*', 'the primeval *maibi*', who though

not so skilled as to be able to discern between one segment and another<sup>40</sup>,

receives this discernment for delivering the oracle from Leimaren. She is described as '*the maibi, the Mother's daughter.*' Leimaren, the Mother Goddess, is thus the progenitrix of the *maibic* schools, and the *maibi* herself as Leimaren's representative, is also addressed as '*ima*' (mother). There is also substantial evidence that other goddess figures of Meitei mythology have been drawn into this complex, including the *Panthoibi*<sup>41</sup>, originally probably a typical south-east Asian Rice-Goddess, who became the heroine of romantic and erotic poetic myths.

This brief discussion of female possession texts and rites points to elements which argue for the primacy of the feminine in Meitei religion. It seems likely that the earlier Meitei cosmology was based upon reverence for the female earth and deep waters, personified as the goddess *Leimaren*, and that the present male/female dualism represents a later development. If this is the case, the role of women as mediums is best accounted for on historical, rather than on sociological, grounds.



## NOTES

1. See Saroj N. Arambam Parratt *The Religion of Manipur* (Calcutta 1980) pp. 135ff, and 'Garib Niwaz, Wars and Religious Policy' in *Internationales Asienforum* 20 (1989) pp. 295-302.
2. On the Meitei religious system see especially T. C. Hodson *The Meitheiis* (London 1910) pp. 96ff, J. Shakespear 'The Religion of Manipur' in *Folk Lore* 24 (1913) pp. 209-255, Parratt *The Religion of Manipur* pp. 9ff.
3. Leimaren is also regarded as a household *lai* who has a special place in the Meitei house in the centre of the north wall, where traditionally an earthen pot, full of water, was kept for her. According to one myth Atiya Sidaba wished to appoint one of his two sons, who according to this genealogy were Pakhangba and Sanamahi (another household deity), to the kingship. Pakhangba, on the advice of his mother Leimaren, gained the throne through a stratagem, and as a punishment Leimaren was forced to marry Sanamahi. This myth shows signs of Hindu influence and is therefore relatively late. Part of its rationale is no doubt to make a connection between the two household *lais* (Leimaren and Sanamahi), but it also seems to reflect the same kind of absorption of the more ancient goddess figure, Leimaren, by a later (possibly patriarchal) religious system represented by Pakhangba and Sanamahi.
4. There is a rich mythology surrounding Pakhangba, and the spiral and circular movements in the *Lai Haraoba* dances, called *paphal*, symbolise his role as serpent deity. There may be some connection with the *nagas* of north India, though it seems to us more likely that the origins of Pakhangba should be sought further east, possibly in the Chinese dragon symbol.
5. There is another type of *maibi* who function as mid wives, but these have no ritual role and are never (as the ritual *maibis* are) addressed as '*ima*' (mother).
6. There are parallels in many cultures to male mediums cross-dressing.
7. We recently observed a *Lai Haraoba* at which the *maiba* assumed the role, which traditionally belongs only to the *maibi*, of drawing the *lais* from the waters: see below.
8. In this ritual the *maibi* strikes a hockey ball with a double-headed stick, and the direction in which the ball lands indicates the young woman selected to be the new *maibi*. Hockey here seems to be substituted for polo, a game which is associated with certain of the main *lais* and which (at least as far as its British form goes) had its origins in Manipur.
9. There is an annual family clan celebration, called *Yumjao Lai Chaklon Katpa*, at which the *lai* of the clan (*yum*=house, *jao*=great) is remembered. Here the *maibi* becomes possessed by the clan *lai*. The oracle is not necessarily confined only to the *sagei* (extended family group) but can also concern the area where the *lai* happens to be situated. This is a short festival which lasts only one day. The *lai* is not called up from the waters, there is no dancing and the *penakhongba* is not present.
10. M. Chaki-Sircar *Feminism in a Traditional Society* (Delhi 1984) p. 168 follows a common anthropological interpretation that women mediums are socially maladjusted, and calls *maibis* as 'deviants'. This is scarcely correct. She modifies this view on p 217.
11. J. Goody *The Culture of Flowers* (London 1993) – unlike much of north India. It is perhaps significant that many of the flowers used as offering to the *lais* are of East Asian origin.
12. E. Nilkanta Singh 'Lai Haraoba' in *Marg* 14/4 (1961) p. 30. For a full analysis of the festival and the oral texts see our *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba* (New Delhi 1997).
13. Animal sacrifices still take place among the Chakpas (see following note) and in some of the more remote areas.
14. The prehistory of the Meitei is complex. The most likely reconstruction is that the Chakpa were earlier inhabitants of the valley of Manipur who were subjugated by the various Meitei *yeks* which came in from the north east, probably from the first century AD onwards.

15. In some archaic forms of the *Lai Haraoba* the *lais* are called up from the land.
16. A small evergreen shrub, growing up to about twelve inches in height and cultivated in gardens. It has no identifiable medicinal, culinary or hallucinatory properties. The 'buds' are not flowers but the incipient new shoots. As an evergreen, langthrei symbolises continued life and virility.
17. *Pena* music is based upon seven motifs which the player extemporises and combines. Traditionalists argue that the *pena* is the only original instrument for the *Lai Haraoba*. Drums are regarded by purists as later additions, which have detracted from the *senza misura* style of *pena* playing.
18. The water is collected into the *naheifu* from the same spot at which the *lais* are called up.
19. This rite is called *leirai yuhangba*, 'the offering of *yu* (rice wine)' and as the name implies was originally an offering of liquor. The *lais* mentioned in the prayer that accompanies this offering are the four gods of the directions, Soraren, the sky god, Thangaren, god of the underworld, the *lais* of that particular area, and the *lais* addressed as a group ('the three hundred and sixty one'). The offering now consists of rice flour, puffed rice, fruit, flowers, and shredded leaves of a plant called *Heibi*, which are mixed with chilli, salt and dried fish.
20. ie. the uttering (-rol) for *konyai hunba*, the 'offering of the *konyai*'. The oral texts of the liturgical prayers present several translation problems. Some words are archaic and now no longer used, their true meanings being not properly understood even by the *maibis*. There are variants of the lyrics according to the three different orders of *maibis*.
21. The term used here is *inama*, the respectful mode of address used by a woman for her older brother's wife.
22. The penakhongba ceases playing as possession takes hold, before the *lai* speaks through the *maibi*.
23. The imagery here seems to be of the *lai's* 'sitting upon' the *maibi*, and controlling her as the rider controls the horse.
24. Imagery for the creating of the universe.
25. In Meitei mythology the four guardians of the direction occupy the intermediate points of the compass. Here eight deities are intended.
26. The navel of the earth in Meitei mythology is the central valley of Manipur, where creation is believed to have begun.
27. The dance movements, including the movement of the hands, are dominated by the spiral or circle. This is replicated in the circular movement of the bell in the *maibi's* hand.
28. ie the oracle must come to the people.
29. *Or I, the priestess of the primordial earth*. The earth is the female deity Leimaren.
30. lit. *your hairs stand up*.
31. lit. *hold down my hairs*.
32. The *maibi* will use the terms *katchouhei* (*katpa*=offer, *chou*=I, the *lai*, am telling you this as a favour, *hei*=a form indicating the higher position of the one speaking, either *lai*, king or master). The *lai's* words will include the word *toubige hei* (*touba*=to do, *-bige*=by the favour of (the *lai*)), and the addressee responds with *toujage*, from the same verb, but the suffix has a subordinate sense, 'by the mercy of the one who commands'.
33. This is called *hiri sikatpa*, 'drawing (the *lais*) through the *hiri* strings.'
34. See M.E. Spiro *Burmese Supernaturalism* (New York 1967) pp. 108-126, J. G. Scott (Schway Yoe) *The Burman: his life and notions* (Arran 1989, reprint of 1882) p. 241.

35. The only references to narrative mythology in the oral text are in love poems which obliquely refer to *Nongpok Ningthou*, 'the king of the east', and his lover-spouse. *Panthoibi*. Aside from these two, and the ancestral deity Pakhangba, there is little evidence that the *lais* were believed to have led an existence on earth.
36. The *lais* are never exorcised: evil spirits (*saroi ngaroi* – a completely different category of beings) may be appeased, but this is done usually by the male *maiba*.
37. M. Eliade *Shamanism* (London 1964) pp. 421ff. There are closer similarities to classical shamanism among some tribal peoples in Manipur and neighbouring Myanmar (see J. Parratt & S. N. A. Parratt 'Kabui Messiah: the Jadonong movement in Manipur' in *Internationales Asienforum* 3/4 1995 pp. 290-1, F. K. Lehman *The Structure of Chin Society*, Illinois 1965 p. 175).
38. It is very probable that Soraren, a sky god mentioned quite frequently in the earlier strata of texts, was either a more ancient name for Atiya Sidaba or else – more likely – the sky god of the pre-Meitei autochthonous peoples who later became assimilated to Atiya Sidaba.
39. There are numerous examples, especially from southern Africa as well as Asia, that conquerors assume the most important aspects of the religious cults of those people they subdue by absorbing the 'gods of the land' into their own religious systems. In *leihourol*, given above, we seem to have a three fold invocation: Pakhangba (the serpent deity of the Ningthouja clan and subsequently of all Meiteis), the 'Goddess of the waters' (ie. Leimaren), and Laisana ('the golden goddess'). Atiya Sidaba has been fused with Pakhangba, but Leimaren has resisted fusion with Pakhangba's spouse, Laisana.
40. The image is of the segments of a citrus fruit.
41. Also called *Phou-oibi*, and under this name especially associated with the Cachar region.

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RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 32

February 2002

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ISBN 0 906165 43 1