



Cultural Resilience and Transformation: Real-Time Impact on Lai Haraoba Dance in Manipur

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Abstract

The Lai Haraoba traditional dance holds a pivotal role as a cultural cornerstone in Manipur, Northeast India. This indigenous dance form is a manifestation of artistic perfection, embodying a profound vision of human and social life. Rooted in the rural society of Manipur, this traditional element reflects the realities of daily life. This research aims to investigate the impact of real time life on the creation of Lai Haraoba. Utilizing the dance as a primary source and other culturally relevant Indian dances such as Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Odissi as secondary sources, our study reveals a focus on societal well-being, particularly in the context of agricultural development. Data collection and analysis were conducted in line with defined problems, objectives, and plans, employing a qualitative research method. Our findings illuminate the presence of enduring values within Lai Haraoba, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries. The dance embodies humanist characteristics, emphasizing common humanity, respect for individuality, and the propagation of human values.

Key Words: Artistic perfection, Cultural element, Human values, Profound vision, Well-being

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the research

The *Lai Haraoba* traditional dance, deeply ingrained in the culture of Manipur, Northeast India, represents more than a mere artistic spectacle. It stands as a cultural cornerstone, embodying the essence of a profound vision of human and social life. Rooted in the rural society of Manipur, this Indian dance form is a living testament to the historical and cultural evolution of the region, mirroring the intricacies of daily life within its graceful movements and symbolic gestures.

Originating from the rich Manipuri folklore, *Lai Haraoba* has been a vital part of communal celebrations for centuries. Its significance extends beyond entertainment, encapsulating elements of religious and cultural rituals, with a particular emphasis on agricultural and fertility rites. As communities come together to dance, they not only display artistic perfection but also partake in an ancient tradition that weaves together spiritual beliefs, societal cohesion, and a profound connection to the land.

In the face of a rapidly changing contemporary landscape, marked by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting cultural dynamics, the role and relevance of traditional art forms like *Lai Haraoba* come under scrutiny. This research seeks to delve into the heart of this ancient Manipuri folk theatre, exploring how the dance adapts and transforms in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by modern life.

The nexus between *Lai Haraoba* and agricultural development forms a central focus of this study. As Manipur undergoes shifts in its economic and agricultural paradigms, understanding how this traditional dance form intersects with the evolving realities of rural life becomes imperative. By utilizing *Lai Haraoba* as a primary source and drawing insights from other culturally relevant Indian dances such as *Kathak*, *Bharatanatyam*, and *Odissi* as secondary sources, our research aims to uncover the dance's role in promoting societal well-being, particularly in the context of the rural landscape.

The methodology employed in this study combines a qualitative research approach with a meticulous framework of defined problems, objectives, and plans. Through the lens of *Lai Haraoba*, we aim to explore the impact of contemporary life on its creation and the enduring values it carries, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries. The dance emerges as a repository of humanist characteristics, emphasizing common humanity, respect for individuality, and the propagation of essential human values.

1.2 Objective of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the cultural significance of *Lai Haraoba* thoroughly. This will be achieved by examining its historical background, analyzing its performance elements, and interpreting its symbolism. Through this detailed study, we aim to uncover how *Lai Haraoba* contributes to shaping the Manipuri identity and influences societal norms and values in Manipur.

1.3 Statement of the problem

This research on 'Cultural Resilience and Transformation: Impact of Real-Time Life on *Lai Haraoba* Dance in Manipur' addresses challenges threatening the preservation of Manipuri cultural heritage. Globalization and modernization raise concerns about the potential dilution of *Lai Haraoba*, necessitating an exploration of the impact of external influences on its diminishing popularity. The study focuses on economic viability, documentation gaps, generational shifts, and community engagement to propose strategies for ensuring the continued vitality of *Lai Haraoba*. By addressing these challenges, the research aims to contribute valuable insights for preserving this ancient folk theatre as a cornerstone of Manipuri cultural identity.

1.4 Significance of the research

The research on "Cultural Resilience and Transformation: Impact of Real-Time Life on *Lai Haraoba* Dance in Manipur" is highly significant. It addresses the urgent need to preserve Manipuri cultural heritage by examining the challenges faced by *Lai Haraoba* and proposing strategies for its continuity. Beyond academic contributions to cultural anthropology, the study offers practical insights into community empowerment, economic sustainability, archival practices, and educational initiatives. Additionally, it holds implications for tourism and cultural promotion, providing a foundation for policy recommendations that can shape the future of *Lai Haraoba*, ensuring its vitality as a cornerstone of Manipuri cultural identity.

2. Materials and Methods

Our exploration of *Lai Haraoba* employs a comprehensive research methodology, predominantly grounded in qualitative methods to deeply understand the nuances of this ancient traditional Manipuri folk theatre. We conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork by immersing ourselves in live *Lai Haraoba* performances. This immersive approach allowed us to observe intricate details, vibrant expressions, and the cultural vibrancy inherent in each presentation, providing rich, qualitative insights into the performances.

We engaged in in-depth interviews with practitioners, performers, and cultural experts. These interviews were designed to uncover the techniques employed during *Lai Haraoba* performances and to unravel the cultural significance embedded in each ritual and artistic expression. The qualitative data gathered from these conversations enriched our understanding and provided perspectives that extended beyond immediate observations made during fieldwork.

Likewise, a qualitative historical analysis was conducted by delving into texts, records, and historical documentation. This analysis traced the evolution and continuity of *Lai Haraoba* over time, contextualizing present practices within the broader historical and cultural landscape of Manipur. This retrospective examination contributed to our understanding of the roots and transformations of *Lai Haraoba*.

By centering our research on these qualitative methods—ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and historical analysis—we aimed to construct a nuanced

narrative that captures the cultural heritage of *Lai Haraoba*. This qualitative approach ensures a deep and holistic exploration, shedding light on the cultural, historical, and performative dimensions of this ancient folk theatre from multiple perspectives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Historical and cultural background of *Lai Haraoba*

In the *Meitei* society *Lai Haraoba* is considered as the earliest form of traditional theatre. Its evolution is linked with the evolution of the *Meitei* society. *Lai Haraoba* is a cultural phenomenon represented in the various social and ritual practices, the energy and motivation for the cosmogony awareness and welfare of the people. It is the unfoldment of universe in human performance where people organized and make deliberate attempts to appease the elemental deities. In the pre-Hindu *Meitei* society, beliefs and rituals were institutionalised that gave birth to one of the most ancient ritualistic performance - *Lai Haraoba*. It is a strange mixture of ritual and dance of *Meiteis'* folklore and mythology. *Lai Haraoba* is a rite of intensification - a powerful and all-encompassing ritual repeated again and again for the welfare of the community. In this ritual the creation of the cosmos and the world are enacted to remind the people how they are created at the beginning of time. In this remembrance the *Lai Haraoba* festival is performed to propitiate the *Lais* or deities and the people are blessed in return.

Different scholars and writers have given different interpretation regarding the meaning of *Lai Haraoba*. *J. Shakespeare* interprets *Lai Haraoba* as pleasing of gods. (Shakespeare, 1913, p. 428) According to *Louise Lightfoot*, *Lai Haraoba* is interpreted as spirits pleasure. (Lightfoot, 1958, p. 12) *T.C. Hudson* views *Lai Haraoba* as the rejoicing of the gods. (Hudson, 1957, p. 104) *E. Nilakanta* opines it as the mery making of the gods and goddess. (Nilakanta., 1982, p. 36) However, *S.N. Paratt* denies the using of *Lai* in the active form and fully supports *J. Shakespeare* view of the pleasing of gods. (Saroj Nalini Paratt & John Paratt, 1997, pp. 175-176)

Till date there is no historically authentic evidence to show how and when *Lai Haraoba* started. Traditional scholars are divided in their views regarding the origin of *Lai Haraoba*. The first group strongly put forward their views that *Lai Haraoba* first originated on top of the *Koubru Hill* (believed to be the earliest settlement area of the *Meiteis*) recounting the acts of the different deities involved in the act of creation for the future generation to cherish it. The second group of traditional scholars opines that *Lai Haraoba* was first performed at *Langmai hill* (now known as *Nongnaiching Hill*). This viewpoint was based on the *Meitei* text "*Panthoibi Khongul*" taking it as the sole authority. *Moirangthem Chandra Singh* dated the first performance of *Lai Haraoba* in pre Christian, pre-*Pakhangba* period during the time of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi*. (Chaoreikanba, 2023)

The first performance of *Lai Haraoba* was believed to have performed in honour of these divine deities by the *Khabas*, one of the ancient seven clans of Manipur, with elaborate rituals. Prof. Gangmumei Kabui highlighted the basic features that claimed the historicity of *Khaba* clan nuling at *Kangla* in Pre-*Pakhangba* times. (Kabui, 1991,

p. 149) Ningthoukhonjam Khelchandra Singh supported the traditional Meitei text *Panthoibi* Khongul on the origin of *Lai Haraoba*. (Singh N. K., 1969, p. 75) He brought out the reference of *Saphaiba* who was first engaged to *Panthoibi* and later married to *Khaba Tarang Khoinucho* and father in law *Sokchrongba Khaba* chief at *Kangla* in *Langba chak*. (Singh, 1969) *Saphaiba* was dated in the *Langba chak* (3rd stage in indigenous age span) in the *Thiren layet* text. The author thus claims the possibility of dating *Panthoibi* in the *Langba chak*.

The first performance of *Lai Haraoba* was most probably during human generation as cited to be in the times of *Khaba* rulers at *Kangla*. "The *Khabas* believed to re-enact what they saw in the *Nongmaiching* hill when all the deities gathered and celebrated the coronation of *Nongpok Ningthou* (Singh, 1969, p. 75) Many of the traditional scholars associated the origin of the *Lai Haraoba* with the *Leisemba* myth (*lei* from *leibak*=earth, *semba*=to create or creation myth of the universe). They supported the original source of *Lai Haraoba* as expressed in the ancient *Puya*- "*Lai hoi loaba*" which means rejoice for the God. (Chaoreikanba, 2023)

3.2 Mythical Origins and Cultural Significance of *Lai Haraoba*

According to the creation myth, after completing the creation of the earth by *Aseeba* (or *Sanamahī*) on the advice of his father *Atiya Guru sidaba* (immortal father sky), *Aseeba* was confused regarding the making of mankind. *Atiya guru sidaba* opened his mouth and showed all the living beings as he himself symbolized the universe. *Ascba* pulled out the living beings by shouting '*hoi*'. This was known as *Lai hoi laoba* and constituted the central theme of the *Lai Haraoba*. (Kullachandra, 1963, p. 1) Thus, the evolution of *Lai Haraoba* was generally treated within a close knitted ritual and mythical framework. Many traditional scholars in spite of the drawbacks popularized this theory.

The search for material evidence as to whether *Lai Haraoba* is discovered either in rock painting, traditional architecture, pottery and literary remains are on. This is not possible because of the very nature of the culture itself, which is predominantly wood and bamboo material based civilization i.e., brittle and breakable. So, what remains as authority of the *Lai Haraoba* are the few old texts (ancient *Puyas* or manuscripts) and a rich oral tradition, which serve as its main sources. Apart from taking models from outside, the study of the rituals are important, as it becomes an ethno-archaeological material to understand the rich and variant living traditions.

The texts of the *Lai Haraoba* were never maintained properly in written form but transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. In all these years the ain ritual officiate i.e., *Amaiba* (priest), *Amaibi* (priestess) and *Pena asheiba* were credited for preserving the oral tradition of *Lai Haraoba*. (Sharma, 2023) Traditional records or books of scholars were based mostly on the secondary information. They took bits and pieces from the surviving *Puyas* or archaic manuscripts as most of them were destroyed in war or religious persecution or lost in obscurity. The Available literal sources were full of mythical, legendary tales and the presence of later period's interpolations and reflections.

It is indeed very difficult to trace and date the origin of *Lai Haraoba* with historical accuracy. But with much clarity it could be assumed that the present day *Lai Haraoba* festival had its roots in the ancestral worship and various agriculture associated rituals. It developed through the process of time with stylized standardization. The essence of this festival was spread to other clansmen apart from the royal power or *Ningthoujas* and thus maintained their own *Lai Haraoba* festival adapting the local characteristics. Therefore, there are differences in the types of *Lai Haraoba* practiced in many places but the soul of the festivals remaining the same. (Chaoreikanba, 2023)

In the primitive communal life, the seasons, sunshine, rain, nature, men, etc., were never alienated from each other. The people felt that they were much part of the ongoing season. People were fully aware of the interplay of natural forces like rain, flower, vegetable, etc and regarded the "earth" as feminine. The Mother Earth was seen in an organic model. The Earth was female in terms of behaviour and energy but not anthropomorphic. The Earth's behaviour was treated like the same human organic function of the human organisms. As pregnancy was needed to give birth, summer was the time when impregnation occurred and the growth of rice plant was considered as the birth of a child to the farmers. In this period when rain poured down heavily the whole time span was considered as an impregnation season due to the potent aspects and capacity of the earth to procreate. During this impregnation season, different fertility oriented ritual were performed. (Devi, 2023)

The emergence of the *Lai Haraoba* thus possibly could be related to the agricultural rites or rituals. It is quite certain that the present form could be due to the year's long sophistication in the conduct of many associated rituals as it is never a one time or one event. In later period, the metaphysical principles were developed purely in terms of intellectual and spiritual sophistication, with emphasis on the whole ontology of life experiences shifting to this new belief. One can, thus, assume that *Lai Haraoba* had its origin in the ancestral ritualistic tradition of the *Meiteis*. Along with growth of agriculture, the form, belief and structure of the rituals became more sophisticated and it led to the development of theatrical communication. The people themselves gave structure and worked out the *Leisemba* myth. So the question rose why *Leisemba* was performed? Who all were the actors? To study *Lai Haraoba* in terms of theatrical experience and to see the objective context, these questions need to be answered.

The *Lai Haraoba* as an institutionalised ritual structure organised by the State that could have developed from the micro familial ritual system based on the ancestor worship. The *Meitei* society is based on kinship and lineages. The *Yek* (clan) consists of a number of *Sageis* (lineages). A clan normally consists of a number of actual lineages. Each *Sageis* trace descent from a common ancestor and take their *Yumnak* or surname of the family. The *Piba* or the head of the *sagei* is the eldest male member. (Paratt, 1980, pp. 3,4) Each *Sagei* has its own *Sagei Lai* or *Sagei Apokpa* (deity considered as the founder of a particular *Sagei*) and annually the ritual of "*Apokpa khurumba* (praying or obeisance to the *Apokpa*- ancestor Father Deity) is observed in honour of the ancestral deity of the lineage. The *sagei* members headed by the *Piba* observe the rituals. The core rituals are same like the *Lai Haraoba*. Communal feasting, *Lai Chaklon Katpa*, in honour of the ancestors are observed and served as a great occasion to maintain lineages solidarity. Many such lineages and ancestral

deities are elevated to the status of "*Umang Lais*" (ancestral deities) and "*Umang Lai Haraoba*" is performed to propitiate the concerned deities.

The close association of *Apokpa Khurumba* rite with *Umang lai Haraoba* argument can be strengthened again with the interpretation that almost all the *Umang Lai Haraoba* are attended by a particular community (only direct descendants to take part) in the core ritual. The head of the lineage stands immediately facing the male and female masks in the shrine with the firm belief that the presiding male and female deities are their ancestors. Although J. Shakespeare and T. C. Hodson regarded *Umang Lais*' as "Forest Gods" and "deities of the foresee respectively. S. N. Paratt argued that "*Umang Lais*" were never regarded as limited to forest areas only. (Paratt, 1980, p. 9) Most of these scholars freely translated the literal meaning of the words *Umang Lai* and took importance to the literal meaning. However, it would not be fair to signify *Umang Lais* as forest spirits or Sylvan deities or emphasised the close connection with ecology as it has deeper implications of being clan or lineage ancestors.

There are 364 recognised *Umang Lais* (Lukhoi, 1989, p. 1) but if counted could be more than 400 at present. The numbers are increasing with every community or group starting to worship their ancestral deities. As a result there are numerous *Umang Lai* sites almost belonging to every adjacent *leikais* in extended households in valley area. The deified ancestors or deities include ancestors of *Yeks* or clans lineages, *lairembis* or guardian spirits believed to have existed in human form but deified due to their unnatural death, eternal missing ones, deified kings, and nobles. (Achoubisana, 1991, pp. 11,12) Instances are found where Hindu gods like *Ramji* and *Shankar Dev* are worshipped adopting the chrome and rites of *Lai Haraoba*. This could be because of the adaptation of the emigrants into the Meitei society, culture and religion. (Singh, 1983, pp. 41,42) *Lai Haraoba* ritual performances are observed for these deified ancestors or deities. But all the *Umang Lais* are not honoured with *Lai Haraoba* celebration. Though all the *Umang Lais* varied, the concept of primeval immortal father as depicted in the *leisemba* myth is traced and manifested in the *Lai Haraoba* festival. (Devi N. H., 2022)

Lai Haraoba is a creation of Cosmos reproduced in the performing art - the way how the universe, God, Goddess and men were created and human beings took to settlement, agriculture, building houses, establishment of family, biological continuity, etc. All these are reproduced in the form of *Lai Haraoba* as a performing art and joyfully celebrate the primeval creation. It is a celebration of existence and the act of creation. In universal extended level or cosmic level view, *Lai Haraoba* is an enactment of cosmic drama and then how life originates after the cosmic creation of the universe. (Chaoreikanba, 2023)

The origin and establishment of cosmos is generated by the union of the supreme male (Pa principle) and supreme female (Pi principle) principles. This huge, great, cosmic, sexual act is ritually acted in the *Lai Haraoba*. The concept of fertility and cosmos sexualise are greatly emphasised in *Lai Haraoba*. Men celebrate to manifest this cosmic action by facilitating the union of "Father sky" and "Mother earth" through the medium of ritual functionaries for procreation vitality, abundance and healthy community life it also depicts the entire life cycle of birth of men enhancing

the beginning of the beginning. (Devi, 2022) The community participatory *Lai Haraoba* performance has a code of conduct and stringent norms to be followed seriously. The fulfilment of the already laid down decorum in spite of its community involvement is one of its chief distinctive characteristics. On the other hand, it is quite essential to identify the presence of various elements of theatre in the traditional *Lai Haraoba* theatre form to understand the unique pre Hindu theatrical art.

3.3 Ritual Preparations and Attire for *Lai Haraoba*

The *Lai Haraoba* celebration begins in the early summer season before the rains come pouring in to give fertility to the earth. It is performed after fixing an auspicious date by the authority of the village or locality with prior permission of the *Pandit Loishang* some parts of Manipur, notably *Moirang* (45 Km. from Imphal) it is held continuously for a month. It can last for only one day too. However, the number of days of performance is fixed in odd numbers -1, 3, 5, 7 or 9 days. The sole authority of *Lai Haraoba* can be the village as a community or a particular lineage or by the royal authority during monarchical times. As space is an important element in any theatre form likewise *Lai Haraoba* ritual space is to be dealt minutely to understand the structure of *Lai Haraoba*. Ritual space in ancient times might be in community's open forested environment where the deity dwells. The "*Laishang*" (shrine) faces towards the East or South. The thrones or altar of the deities are placed in the centre of the shrine. The shrine is small and built at the edge of an open "*Laibung*" (courtyard of the God), either rectangular or square. It is the most important space amongst others for the conduct of daily rituals with community participation. The "*laishang*" and the "*laibung*" are held sacred and most cleaned because purity is essential for entering the precincts of the deities. (Devi, 2023) The Married Women wear *Mayek naiba phanek* (a striped *phanek*) over their breast with white innafis (white, starched and almost transparent cloth). They tie their waists with a cloth called *kwangchet*. Girls wear *phanek* on their waist with blouse and almost thin transparent innafis. They decorated themselves with flowers and jewelleryes. It is a common sight to decorate their long tresses with *Leihou* tied to the hair strands. Men wear white dhotis with *kurtas* and *kokyet* (turbans). It is compulsory for the male participants to wear the codified attire during the festival. (Devi, 2022)

3.4 Community Offerings

During the festival the community members in the early morning assemble at the shrine to offer seasonal offerings including flowers and fruits. The already offered fruits and flowers are distributed to the performers and audiences. The Fruits mainly bananas (preferably chang taba or odd numbers), papaya, sugarcane, gooseberries, heining (a kind of plum) etc., are used for the offerings to the deities. Puffed rice, uncooked rice, dried fish, fermented fish, flour, etc., are offered according to the needs of specific ritual (Sharma, 2023).

3.5 Ritual Objects and Regional Variations in *Lai Haraoba* Performances

Various Objects are needed for the procession. Some of the ritual objects are not used directly in the enactment of the rituals but as motifs connoting intrinsic meanings. They are- two *ihafus* (pots one for *Lainingthou* and the other for *Lairemma*), One

ishaifu (carthen pot to be filled with water for cleansing), One *naheifu* (pot), Swords, Chong & Pe (umbrella type), *Shenpot pida* (type of carpet), *Senkha* (pan-box), *Koashel humai* and fan) and *Lepsum* (rice pounding pestle). The ritual objects are allotted to the selected persons with their own roles. Two *Lai pubas* or bearers of the deities carry the two *ihaihus*. A married woman carries the *ishajifu*. She has an important role to play in the ritual efficacy. The other participants are given the remaining ritual objects.

In spite of the essence and main rituals of the *Lai Haraoba* being the same, there is some regional variation in the performances (slight difference in the song, dance, and ritual sequences) of the *Lai Haraoba* on this ground; it is broadly divided into four types.

- *Kanglei Haraoba*-For Imphal and adjoining areas.
- *Kakching Haraoba* -At *Kakching* (in honour of *Lainingthou Khamlangba*).
- *Moirang Haraoba* -At *Moirang* (celebrated in honour of lord *Thangjing*).
- *Chakpa Haraoba*-*Sekmai*, *Andro*, *Phayeng*, *Khurkhul*, etc. (All non-Vaishnavite villages)

Most of the deities worshipped are either progenitors of clans or nobles later deified. The worldview of the community can be better understood by examining its performing structure particularly the *kanglei Haraoba* in this chapter. The structural studies will also enable to understand the elements of theatre in *Lai Haraoba*. The performance text within the structure will reveal the theatrical performance of *Lai Haraoba*.

3.6 Rituals and Themes in *Lai Haraoba*: A Celebration of Agricultural, Fertility, and Mythological Dimensions

Agricultural Rites: Celebrating the Cultivation Cycle

At the core of *Lai Haraoba* lies a rich of vibrant rituals and performances that intricately celebrate the diverse stages of the agricultural cycle. Through captivating dance and melodious music, *Lai Haraoba* becomes a ceremonial expression of gratitude and reverence towards nature. More than a mere artistic display, it serves as a profound acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between the Manipuri community and the land. The performances seek divine blessings for a fruitful harvest and enduring prosperity, with each movement and note symbolizing a dance of interconnectedness with the natural world.

Fertility Rituals: Emphasizing Prosperity and Growth

Fertility rites constitute a pivotal element within the intricate *Lai Haraoba*, embodying a deep-rooted desire for growth and abundance across all facets of life. These rituals transcend symbolism; they are enacted with a profound belief that their performance will usher in prosperity and ensure the continuous cycle of life. Through intricate choreography and symbolic gestures, *Lai Haraoba* becomes a poignant expression of hope, emphasizing interconnected themes of agricultural

bounty and human prosperity. In doing so, it creates a cultural symphony that resonates with the rhythms of life.

Mythological Connections: Deities and Folklore in *Lai Haraoba*

Lai Haraoba unfolds as a living canvas of mythological references, vividly portraying ancient tales and folklore through captivating artistic expressions. Gods, goddesses, and ancestral figures are invoked with reverence, creating a vibrant tableau that immerses the audience in a world of mythical narratives and spiritual connections. The performances transcend entertainment, becoming a dynamic storytelling medium that transmits cultural heritage through the re-enactment of mythological events. In this artistic rendition, *Lai Haraoba* serves not only as a celebration of tangible aspects of life but also as a conduit for preserving and transmitting intangible cultural legacies across generations. The synthesis of myth and performance creates a captivating journey into the spiritual and narrative dimensions of Manipuri culture, enriching the collective cultural identity.

Participants: Role of Priests, Dancers, Musicians, and the Community

The intricate performances of *Lai Haraoba* come to life through the collaborative efforts of a diverse group of participants, each playing a pivotal role in the cultural symphony. Priests assume a central position, guiding and leading the rituals with profound spiritual significance. Skilled dancers, with their graceful movements, and musicians, wielding traditional instruments, breathe vitality into the performances. The active involvement of the community further enriches the experience, fostering a profound sense of unity and collective celebration. *Lai Haraoba*, therefore, stands not only as a staged spectacle but as a communal endeavour that weaves together the talents and energies of its participants, embodying a shared cultural expression.

Music and Instruments: The Significance of Traditional Instruments

Music forms the soulful heartbeat of *Lai Haraoba*, with traditional instruments playing a crucial role in setting the rhythm and tone of the performances. The resonant beats of the *Pung* (drum) and the melodic chiming of the *Kartal* (cymbals) infuse the air, creating a mesmerizing auditory backdrop to the visual spectacle. These traditional instruments carry a cultural legacy, each note echoing the traditions of Manipuri folk art. The unique sounds and melodies of these instruments contribute to the enchanting ambiance of the folk theatre, immersing the audience in a multisensory experience that transcends mere performance and becomes a cultural journey through sound and movement.

3.6 Cultural Significance of *Lai Haraoba*: Nurturing Social Cohesion, Agricultural Prosperity, and Spiritual Emphasis

Social Cohesion: Fostering Community Bonds and Unity

Lai Haraoba emerges as a cultural cornerstone, playing a pivotal role in fortifying social bonds within the Manipuri community. As a collective celebration, it serves as a powerful catalyst for bringing people together, fostering a profound sense of togetherness and shared identity. The collaborative nature of the performances

becomes a symbolic expression of unity, cultivating a strong sense of belonging among both participants and the audience. Through *Lai Haraoba*, the community transcends individual experiences to collectively revel in the richness of their cultural heritage, creating a tapestry of social cohesion.

Agricultural Prosperity: Seeking Blessings for a Bountiful Harvest

Lai Haraoba assumes immense significance for the farming communities in Manipur, intertwining cultural expressions with the practicalities of agrarian life. With its agricultural rites, the folk theatre becomes a conduit for seeking divine blessings for favorable weather, bountiful crops, and overall agricultural prosperity. The performances are imbued with a sense of hope and anticipation, as the community collectively engages in rituals to ensure a fruitful harvest. *Lai Haraoba*, therefore, becomes a cultural beacon that not only celebrates but actively contributes to the agricultural well-being of the community.

Spiritual Emphasis: Strengthening the Connection with the Divine

Beyond its role as entertainment, *Lai Haraoba* carries profound spiritual significance, serving as a conduit for strengthening the connection between the earthly realm and the divine. By invoking deities and ancestral spirits, the performances create a sacred atmosphere that transcends the mundane. This spiritual emphasis fosters a profound connection, not only between the performers and the divine entities but also between the audience and the spiritual realm. *Lai Haraoba*, in this context, stands as a platform for spiritual expression and devotion, offering a sacred space for the community to collectively engage in the divine narrative that permeates their cultural identity.

3.7 Challenges and Revival Efforts of *Lai Haraoba*: Navigating Modern Threats and Fostering Cultural Resilience

Modern Challenges: Threats Faced by *Lai Haraoba* in Contemporary Times

In the contemporary landscape, *Lai Haraoba* grapples with a spectrum of challenges stemming from the currents of modernization and evolving cultural dynamics. Among these challenges are the palpable decline in interest among the younger generation, financial constraints that impede the seamless execution of performances, and the looming risk of losing traditional knowledge and practices that form the essence of this ancient folk theatre. These challenges collectively pose a threat to the authenticity and continuity of *Lai Haraoba* in the face of rapidly changing times.

Cultural Resilience: Initiatives to Revive and Preserve the Art Form

Despite the hurdles, commendable cultural resilience efforts are underway to revive and safeguard *Lai Haraoba*. Various stakeholders, including cultural organizations, educational institutions, and grassroots community initiatives, collaboratively contribute to the preservation of this cultural treasure. These efforts are multifaceted, involving documentation, educational programs, and promotional activities that collectively aim to not only revive interest but also instil a sense of

pride and ownership within the Manipuri community. By teaching, documenting, and promoting the art form, these initiatives strive to ensure the continuity of *Lai Haraoba* for future generations.

Global Awareness: Efforts to Promote *Lai Haraoba* on the International Stage

Recognizing *Lai Haraoba* as an invaluable cultural heritage, concerted efforts are being made to elevate its presence on the international stage. Cultural exchanges, participation in global festivals, and leveraging digital media platforms are employed to enhance awareness and appreciation of this unique folk theatre beyond the borders of Manipur. By showcasing *Lai Haraoba* on the global platform, these initiatives not only attract international interest but also foster a sense of global recognition for the cultural richness embedded within this ancient tradition. Through these global endeavors, *Lai Haraoba* stands poised to transcend geographical boundaries, ensuring its place as a revered cultural heritage not only in Manipur but on the world stage.

4. Conclusion

In the exploration of "*Lai Haraoba* (Agricultural and Fertility Rites): An Ancient Traditional Manipuri Folk Theatre," we have delved into the rich rituals, themes, and cultural significance that define this unique cultural heritage. From celebrating the cycles of agriculture to embodying the desire for prosperity and growth, *Lai Haraoba* emerges as a living embodiment of Manipuri traditions, intricately weaving together agricultural, fertility, and mythological dimensions. However, our research has also revealed significant challenges facing *Lai Haraoba* at present. The decline in interest among the younger generation, financial constraints, and the risk of losing traditional knowledge underscores the urgency of preserving this ancient folk theatre. Yet, amidst these challenges, our study illuminates the resilience and dedication of cultural organizations, educational institutions, and community initiatives actively working to revive and safeguard *Lai Haraoba*.

As we conclude, it is evident that the continuity of *Lai Haraoba* rests not only on addressing the challenges but also on fostering a collective sense of responsibility and pride within the Manipuri community. The global promotion of *Lai Haraoba* amplifies its significance beyond regional borders, creating a shared awareness of this cultural treasure. In the spirit of cultural preservation, our research serves as a catalyst for proactive measures. By documenting, teaching, and promoting *Lai Haraoba*, we contribute to the ongoing efforts to ensure its vibrancy for future generations. The journey of *Lai Haraoba* transcends entertainment—it is a profound cultural legacy, a testament to the resilience of tradition in the face of modernity.

As we envision the future, we remain optimistic that the collaborative endeavors highlighted in this research will fortify *Lai Haraoba's* place not only within Manipuri cultural identity but also on the global stage. Through these collective efforts, we hope to see *Lai Haraoba* continue to thrive, bridging the past with the present and ensuring its revered presence in the cultural heritage of Manipur for posterity.

5. References

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