

THE REFLECTION OF MEITEI SOCIAL NORMS AND SYSTEMS (KHUNNAILON) IN KANGLEI HARAOPA

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Abstract

The topic "The Reflection of Meitei Social Norms and Systems (Khunnailon) in Kanglei Haraoba" covers a vast domain. Among the various distinct types of Umanglai Haraoba (festival of forest deities), which is a core cultural tradition of the Meitei ethos, Kanglei Haraoba stands out as the primary and most prominent form. The majority of the rituals and ceremonies performed during Kanglei Haraoba are deeply rooted in the foundational social systems and structures of Meitei society. Grounded in these societal systems, Kanglei Haraoba embraces and preserves all crucial aspects of life—including birth, existence, death, religious beliefs, traditional dance and music, rituals, social etiquette, and life-cycle philosophies. Many strict customs governing marital alliances and familial lineages are distinctly reflected in Kanglei Haraoba.

This study is undertaken with the belief that analysing and exposing the facets of Khunnailon embedded within Kanglei Haraoba will provide a more comprehensive framework of thought for generations to come. Recognizing the vital academic necessity to bring these structured transmissions of Meitei social values—passed down generation after generation through Kanglei Haraoba—to the general public, this topic has been systematically analyzed and presented. The methodologies employed in this study consist of: Gathering material from secondary sources such as ancient manuscripts; Conducting literature reviews and data collection from relevant published books; Collecting primary data through direct interviews with cultural experts and practitioners; and referencing digital e-resources.

Keywords

Meitei, Kanglei Haraoba, Khunnailon,

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Introduction

The Umanglai Haraoba (in short, Laiharaoba), a ritual festival or the performance of ceremonial rites to appease the Umanglai (sylvan deity), is counted as the unique contribution of Meitei to the domain of world culture. Among the different types of *Umanglai Haraoba* ritual festivals performed by the Meiteis, *Kanglei Haraoba* is a major variation. Within the broader spectrum of *Umanglai Haraoba*, the *Kanglei* type is considered the primary, central, and most extensively celebrated form. In contrast, other localized variations exist: *Moirang Haraoba*, *Kakching Haraoba*, and *Chakpa Haraoba*. *Kanglei Haraoba*, being the most comprehensive form, is celebrated throughout most localities, villages, and neighbourhoods across Manipur, as well as in Meitei settlements outside the state—most notably in Assam, Tripura, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The term *Khunnailon* can be defined and interpreted in various ways. Scholars worldwide have offered their respective definitions for social systems and structures. To arrive at a complete understanding of *Khunnailon*, it is necessary to first clearly define *Khunnai* (society). A collective of different groups, clans, or villages living together is called a *Khunnai*. Linguistically, this Meitei word is a combination of two components: *Khun* (village/settlement) and *Nai* (to bring together/integrate). A place where a collective group of people settles is termed a *Khul* or *Khun* by the Meiteis. The act of uniting or integrating is known as *Nai*. The continuous practice of uniting and organizing these processes is called *Naiba* or *Naishinba*. Therefore, the vast integration of such settlements and communities is termed *Khunnai*. Within a society, many rules are established regarding what must be done, what must not be done, what is acceptable, and what is unacceptable. This structural body of rules is called *Khunnailon*—a word formed by joining *Khunnai* (society) and *Kanglonon* (rules/codes). Hence, *Khunnailon* refers strictly to the structural laws and customs of a society that sustain and keep that society alive. The reflections of our social systems and lifestyle practices are entirely mirrored in *Kanglei Haraoba*. Just as the Meitei social system is reflected in *Kanglei Haraoba*, the specific regional and community practices are mirrored in their respective forms: Kakching's traditions in *Kakching Haraoba*, Moirang's customs in *Moirang Haraoba*, and Chakpa societal norms in *Chakpa Haraoba*.

If we retrospectively analyse the historical phases through which the collective identity of the land we know today as Manipur was forged, the profound significance of *Khunnailon* in shaping this unified identity becomes clearly visible. In the efforts of modern Manipuri to construct this collective identity, the administrative codes and social systems introduced during the reign of King Nongda

Lairen Pakhangba in the 1st Century AD remain monumentally important. During the era of Meidingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the numerous smaller tribes and fragmented groups that were scattered across the land were systematically integrated based on their respective proximity and commonalities. They were organized into the *Yek Taret* (the seven primary clans) and given permanent settlements.

Once those smaller groups capable of integration were systematically unified, they coalesced into the major *Yek Salai* categories: Angom, Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Sarang Leishangthem, and Khaba Nganba. This unified collective identity of clans came to be known broadly as the *Meitei*. This integrated identity of various groups forms the primary foundational bedrock of Manipuri society. Although modern Manipuri society has undergone numerous transformations in its collective structure, the core social systems and values that were structured during those ancient formative periods remain deeply integrated within our modern, evolving society. Because the social norms of this community have survived as a living, breathing system, they provide numerous vital elements that continually aid in strengthening the collective identity of the Manipuri people. For instance, the celebration of *Umanglai Haraoba* stands as a paramount tradition in reinforcing the collective bond of the Manipuri people. While *Umanglai Haraoba* is inherently a core festival of the Meitei community, it is historically performed and celebrated collectively with various co-existing communities of the land—including the Kabui, Tangkhul, Chothe, Maring, Kom, and Anal tribes. This collective participation represents the active role that our social system plays in building a unified Manipuri identity, as *Umanglai Haraoba* is a vital manifestation of our society's structural soul.

The Interrelationship between *Kanglei Haraoba* and Society

Kanglei Haraoba is an inseparable, non-detachable element of Meitei society. The entire structural customs and social systems (*Khunnailon*) of this community are dynamically intertwined with *Kanglei Haraoba*. Because of this profound bond, *Kanglei Haraoba* can be perfectly described as the true mirror of Meitei society. The primary unbreakable connections that link this festival to the society include: Birth, Life, and Death, Religious Belief Systems, Traditional Dance and Music, Ritual Offerings and Devotion, Social Taboos, Permissibility, and Prohibitions, Occupational Craft and Trade Systems, Traditional Attire and Ornamentation, Social Etiquette and Discipline, Life Philosophies, Language and Ancient Vocabulary, etc. In addition to these, traditional knowledge like medicine, astronomy/astrology, physical culture/martial systems, domestic management, construction of houses, history, geography, economics, literature, theology philosophy, and statecraft/public administration, etc. are all vital areas of our social

knowledge that have been deeply integrated with *Kanglei Haraoba* since ancient times. In short, *Kanglei Haraoba* is the universe of knowledge in Meitei society.

1. The Relationship with Birth, Life, and Death

Kanglei Haraoba provides detailed representations and philosophical explanations regarding the birth, existence, and life processes of human beings, as well as the various animals and domestic creatures that co-exist with humans—such as cattle, ducks, chickens, dogs, and cats—while offering collective prayers for their well-being and multiplication. How we humans were originally created and born into this worldly realm is graphically and sequentially demonstrated through the sacred ritual dance known as *Hakchang Shaba* (the creation of the body). During this performance, the choreographic sequence symbolizes how the formless soul enters the womb of the divine mother, takes physical shape, and gradually constructs a complete human body. The ancestral traditions regarding how a child is conceived and born into this society are clearly demonstrated through this body-creation dance sequence in *Kanglei Haraoba*. Birth is not viewed as a phenomenon restricted solely to human beings; every living entity possessing a soul undergoes the process of birth. Following the *Ikouba* water-summoning ritual in *Kanglei Haraoba*, the sacred hymn chanted before the ritual *Leifu* emphasizes how the supreme forces govern the entire cycle of birth, existence, death, and destiny.

The ritual performance of *Mikon Thakonba* (soul-calling) enacted by the *Pena* player and the *Maibi* is another vital sequence that directly tells the detailed story and philosophy of birth and the origin of human life. Beyond the concept of birth, the vast majority of the rituals in *Kanglei Haraoba* are deeply centered upon the narrative of sustaining and celebrating life. Regarding the finality of death, the festival incorporates the singing of *Nongarol* (hymns of heavenly ascension) during the last ceremony. The subsequent ritual of *Lai Tethaba* (dismantling the temporary altars) is built entirely upon the cultural belief that once a human completes their worldly role and play, the soul must ultimately return to the permanent realm of the supreme ancestors.

2. The Relationship with Religious Belief Systems

Kanglei Haraoba is a grand ritual festival inextricably linked with the core indigenous religious systems of the Meitei people. The foundation of Meitei religion primarily involves the worship of supreme ancestors, lineage deities, and parental spirits, alongside the deep veneration of Mother Nature. The community treats natural elements like the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, Fire, Water, Wind, the Earth, and the Sky as living deities. In addition, massive mountain peaks, ancient grand trees, and sacred boulders are systematically worshipped as seats of divine power. Alongside

these natural elements, the vital life force and soul of living entities are also deeply revered. The structured codes, rituals, invocations, and philosophical beliefs surrounding this entire spectrum of worship are what constitute our religion. The ultimate, singular objective of this religious framework is to guide individuals on the path of absolute truth and righteousness.

Procedures such as performing *Ushin Shinba* (scapegoating rituals to ward off misfortune), executing *Saroi Khangba* (feeding and appeasing peripheral spirits), and offering *Sharel Katpa* are vital religious milestones within *Kanglei Haraoba*. Through all these elements, we can clearly understand that *Kanglei Haraoba* is not merely a secular entertainment festival that incorporates dance; rather, it is a grand, sacred ritual celebration built upon profound spiritual philosophy, designed explicitly to demonstrate and preserve the social structures and norms of our community.

3. The Relationship with Traditional Dance and Music

From another analytical viewpoint, *Kanglei Haraoba* can be defined as a grand institution that is expressed primarily through classical dance and musical compositions. The highly structured, rule-bound dances and their corresponding musical melodies serve to articulate the profound, inner philosophical meanings of the creation myths and social codes. These various choreographic stages are executed alongside elevated levels of intellectual and spiritual thought. Observing this comprehensive framework, wise scholars and art experts have universally agreed that the true historical origin of Meitei classical dance and music lies entirely within the institution of *Lai Haraoba*. The entire ritual narrative of *Kanglei Haraoba* is displayed visually through dance. The gradual growth of the soul within the mother's womb, the development of the physical human anatomy, the birth of the child, the art of cultivation, the craft of spinning thread and weaving cloth, and the construction of houses are all systematically and elegantly demonstrated through précised, highly advanced, and classical choreographic sequences. The vast majority of the dances integrated into *Kanglei Haraoba* are functional dances meant specifically to depict and reinforce our social systems

In addition to dance, vocal and instrumental music plays a monumental role in *Kanglei Haraoba*. Musical compositions serve as the primary medium to convey prayers, humble supplications, expressions of deep reverence, and ritual offerings before the deities. Just as dance and music share an inseparable bond, there exists an absolute, unbreakable triad between this society, its music, and *Kanglei Haraoba*. In ancient times, there existed a wide variety of musical styles, genres, and singing techniques. Lyrical texts like the *Ougri* and *Khencho* preserve the oldest methods of how ancient chants evolved into highly structured vocal melodies.

4. The Relationship with Ritual Offerings and Devotion

Kanglei Haraoba is a grand institutional framework that demonstrates the exact rules and structural protocols governing ritual offerings and divine devotion. If one wishes to understand the precise historical methods, etiquette, and structures of offering and devotion practiced by this society, observing *Kanglei Haraoba* is an absolute academic necessity. The festival incorporates diverse forms of devotion expressed through classical dance, vocal music, the offering of fresh seasonal fruits and flowers, and the recitation of sacred hymns. Throughout the multi-day celebration of *Kanglei Haraoba*, the purification ritual of *Saroi Khangba* is performed at multiple intervals to feed peripheral spirits, ensuring that the main celebrations remain completely free from any negative interferences, accidents, or cosmic obstructions. Sacrifices and token meat offerings are presented to the deities to seek their divine protection, ensure collective happiness, and read cosmic signs by observing the physical state of the offerings. These continuous acts of systematic devotion prove that *Kanglei Haraoba* maintains an unbreakable bond with the core spiritual and devotional customs that define Meitei society.

5. The Relationship with Social Taboos, Permissibility, and Prohibitions

A massive, detailed framework of rules regarding what is permissible and what is strictly prohibited is intricately woven into *Kanglei Haraoba*. These social rules and prohibitions form the defensive boundaries that a society guards to protect its core traditions. Individuals who violated exogamous marriage laws were legally banished to remote penal colonies) or completely stripped of their social standing. Within the arena of *Kanglei Haraoba*, the list of ritual prohibitions is extensive. During the *Ikouba* water-summoning procession, *Laipoura* procession and *Thang Katpa*, it is strictly forbidden for anyone to cross directly in front of the holy procession.

In addition to these behavioural codes, there are strict rules regarding what kinds of flowers and fruits can or cannot be offered to specific deities. There are highly stringent customs stating that individuals who have committed endogamous clan taboos, pregnant women, individuals stripped of their clean social standing due to specific offenses, outcaste women, people with chronic physiological desecrations, are absolutely prohibited from handling sacred objects like the deity's ritual finials or performing ceremonial service. These established rules regarding what is spiritually permissible and what is forbidden, what is accepted and what is unacceptable, constitute one of the fundamental pillars connecting Meitei social order with the *Kanglei Haraoba*.

6. The Relationship with Occupational Craft

The Meitei people possess a long, richly documented history as an industrious community with a highly organized division of labour and occupational guilds. Within the processional sequences of *Kanglei Haraoba*, the entire narrative of human labor, craft specialization, and industrial history is systematically demonstrated through dance movements and ancient spoken verses. Among the choreographic sequences that depict these human industries, classical dances like the *Yumsharol* (house construction), *Pamyanlon* (cultivation), *Phisharol* (textile weaving), and *Longkhon Jagoi* (fishing techniques) are highly prominent. The most magnificent manifestation of this industrial narrative is found within the performance of *Loutarol* which graphically depicts the entire process of clearing land, tilling soil, sowing seeds, cultivating paddy, harvesting crops, and offering prayers to ensure a bountiful agricultural yield.

The traditional clothing, processional umbrellas (*Chong-Pe*), woven baskets, and artistic implements crafted specifically for use within the festival grounds serve as living proof of the intricate historical relationship that connects *Kanglei Haraoba* to the traditional economic and craft systems of our society.

7. The Relationship with Social Etiquette and Discipline

Thaksi Khasi (social etiquette, moral discipline, and behavioural protocol) forms one of the most vital foundational elements for the survival and continuity of any society. The celebration of *Kanglei Haraoba* acts as a living repository that preserves and enforces these strict, unbreakable rules of social discipline and etiquette. The sacred festival grounds can be understood as the ultimate public school where the community's *Thaksi Khasi* is systematically taught and absorbed. Whether it is in actively participating in the rituals, watching the public performances, maintaining dress codes, or interacting with the ritual managers, an absolute sense of order, hierarchy, and discipline is strictly maintained. Every single ritual action executed within the festival is grounded entirely within the framework of *Thaksi Khasi*. Because it is a sacred celebration executed in strict accordance with ancestral codes, *Kanglei Haraoba* and *Thaksi Khasi* share a permanent, inseparable relationship.

8. The Relationship with Life Philosophies

Every individual human being residing in this world carries their own unique life journey and philosophy of existence. While various global philosophers and scholars have offered diverse definitions of life, the sacred hymns, ritual dances, and processional structures of *Kanglei Haraoba* explain the true essence and philosophy of human life with absolute clarity. The loud, rhythmic *Hoi* chants (*Hoi Laoba*) intoned at the start of the daily dances symbolize the continuous flow of the

vital life force and the sequential generation-after-generation transmission of human lineages. The metaphorical questions and answers regarding the fishing dance (*Long Khonba*), catching of fish serve to articulate the profound philosophies of marital union, family building, and the continuity of lineages. The basic requirements of human existence—including the food we consume, the clothes we weave, the houses we construct—alongside our spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and the codes of collective living are all fully integrated into the structural fabric of *Kanglei Haraoba*.

9. The Relationship with Language and Ancient Vocabulary

Language forms the most vital core element that defines the identity of any ethnic group or community. When a community seeks to assert its distinct identity, preserving its native mother tongue remains an absolute necessity. Within the celebration of *Kanglei Haraoba*, the archaic forms of our language are permanently preserved and spoken through the medium of *Lairol* (the language of the deities) and *Tinrol* (the language of the spirits). *Kanglei Haraoba* acts as a living archive that keeps these archaic linguistic roots alive and functional in modern times. Throughout the festival, one encounters a beautiful linguistic blending where archaic terms are systematically combined with evolving vocabulary. Similarly, a deep linguistic integration between archaic vocabulary, medieval structures, and contemporary linguistic forms is consistently visible. This specific stanza from the *Pausha Eshei* demonstrates not only the harmonious blending of different historical layers of our language but also illustrates how complex parables, proverbs, and ancient riddles are dynamically utilized.

Conclusion

Kanglei Haraoba is a grand institutional celebration built entirely upon the foundational social systems and structures of the Meitei people. Almost every single ritual component, artistic dance, and processional movement visible within the festival grounds is grounded completely within our *Khunnailon*. All these elements have been beautifully designed based on the cultural values, traditional beliefs, and social laws of Meitei society. The grand institution of *Kanglei Haraoba* serves to explicitly define, manifest, and preserve the social systems and structures (*Khunnailon*) of Meitei society, while systematically transmitting these values to every succeeding generation. In all academic efforts to analyse and understand the core cultural traditions of this land, *Kanglei Haraoba* is universally recognized as the most vital, foundational reference point. Through a rigorous study of this subject, several vital historical findings have been unearthed: the absolute necessity of *Khunnailon* in sustaining a society, the precise functional spaces that social norms occupy within *Kanglei Haraoba*, the immense historical roles played by ancient rulers in structuring these social laws, and the

organized methods through which they implemented these codes across the kingdom. Furthermore, the study highlights how *Kanglei Haraoba* comprehensively embraces the strict social prohibitions of our community, preserves the ancestral rules of lineage exogamy, and stands as an irreplaceable pillar in defining the genuine identity of Meitei society. Although *Lai Haraoba* can be studied from diverse academic perspectives—including art history, ethnomusicology, and religious studies—analysing the festival primarily through the lens of social systems exposes the deep, diverse structural codes that organize Meitei society.

With the continuous passage of centuries and changing times, the structural purity of *Kanglei Haraoba* has inevitably faced external pressures and impacts. In modern times, minor alterations can be observed in the visual textures, musical instrumentation, traditional attire, and processional modes of the festival. In some instances, changes have been introduced under the pretext of making the presentation more visually appealing or due to the inevitable influences of modern modernization. To ensure that these modern changes do not cause *Kanglei Haraoba* to drift away from its true ancestral essence and structural purity, apex cultural organizations—such as the **Umanglai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL)**—have consistently made rigorous, highly dedicated efforts over recent years. During critical historical phases when public awareness regarding social values and traditional structures threatened to decline, these cultural institutions stepped in at the right time, ensuring that *Kanglei Haraoba* continues to receive the necessary systemic protection and structural preservation.

There is an urgent, highly critical academic necessity to conduct deep, exhaustive research into the reflections of social systems within *Kanglei Haraoba* and compile these findings into a comprehensive book. If the modern generation occasionally shows a declining interest in the preservation of *Lai Haraoba*, it seems entirely from a lack of deep awareness regarding the true philosophical depth and societal value of the festival. If the profound interrelationships linking *Kanglei Haraoba* to our society, alongside the vital social laws it preserves, can be systematically explained and brought to the general public, it will inspire deep reverence and pride for this grand tradition. Therefore, it is a vital duty for all of us to ensure that the general public is fully educated on the core significance of *Kanglei Haraoba*, thereby keeping the social norms and systems of Meitei society alive and uncompromised for all times to come.

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