

The Meitei Mythic Facet as an Epistemic Entity

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Ancient civilisations had their own intriguing set of myths and mythologies, no matter how outlandish or perplexing they seem to be. Humans developed mythology to explain their place in the world they found themselves in, and the phenomena discerned in the natural world. Thus, they served an epistemic function. History is said to be the bridge that connects the past with the present and points the road to the far future. Likewise, myths act as the seminal bridge that forms a link between the world of humans with that of the gods or spirits, and additionally form the substratum of religion and culture. This paper aims to demonstrate that the Meitei myths fulfil an epistemic obligation for the Meitei community, which possesses a rich corpus of mythologies, a vibrant culture, distinct rituals, and colourful festivals. This paper shall attempt to understand the Lai Haraoba that executes the creation myths of the Meiteis as a performative worldview, as a philosophy performed.

Keywords: *Epistemic aspect of myths, Lai Haraoba, Meitei, Mythology, Worldview.*

Introduction

History bridges the distant past to the evolving present, which then points the road to the unseen future. Likewise, myths act as the cardinal bridge that links the world of humans with that of the spirits, divine and not-so-divine. They form the substratum of civilisation, religions, and culture; they define traditions and beliefs, thus creating an integral part of understanding a community's worldview. Myths unravel the history and reflect the philosophy of that particular community. They perpetuate the world and play a significant role in deciphering and interpreting the intricate structure of reality. The term “mythology” is derived from the Greek *muthos*, meaning “story” and *logia*, “knowledge”. The word “myth” originally meant “word,” understood as a definitive and authentic statement. “Myth is the 'word' that announces the true state of things, what is factual, what really happened” (Baumgartner et al. 1974). Myths are primarily regarded as narratives of the deeds and endeavours of the gods and spirits, as well as historical accounts with formative and creative values: an actuality loaded with power and authority. “For myth, the difference between the behaviour of the gods and that of man is only a difference in degree, not of principle. As a result, mythical thinking tends to see the divine and human spheres closely linked to one another. The world and work of the gods as reported by myth constitute both the essence and the norm for the world of man” (1974).

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Myths, unlike fables, make a truth-claim or at least a semblance of it. Fables are instructive tales that teach morals about human social conduct. They are transparently fictitious. Fables end with a specific moral message. In comparison, myths are without this didactic aspect. Myths are usually difficult to translate into direct prescriptions for action in everyday human aspects. Myths can be understood as an expression of how people feel about the world, about each other, and their bodies. Mythology and the human body are intertwined with each other. The human body plays an important part in mythology. Hence, the body is primarily taken as the point of reference. For instance, “Adam’s rib” and “Achilles’ heel” are myths that are associated with the human body. There are myths that are merged between the natural and the supernatural, embodying creative and alternative forms of missing or extra body parts. Additionally, some myths tell us about certain creatures who drift between human and beast, corporeal and incorporeal, mortal and immortal, sacred and blasphemous, spiritual and somatic. Mention may be made of the curious amalgamation of mythic creatures such as the sphinx, the winged angel, the centaur, the griffin, the goat-headed Satan, and many others. These blended combinations of human bodies and animal bodies symbolise enigma, absurdity, and incongruity. Myths also, in a way, dramatise the experiences of human lives. The magnificent Greek goddess Artemis guides the young to the entrance of adulthood. Little girls offer their childhood toys to the goddess when they transition to the phase of adulthood. It is also believed that married women give offerings to Artemis at the time of marriage and after childbirth. Myths play a significant role in understanding the world. In the myth of Achilles’ heel, the sea Goddess Thetis dipped the body of her son, Achilles, when he was an infant in the sea, to bestow invincible strength and might. However, she did not dip the heel that she was holding. This became his vulnerable spot, and he died in the Trojan War, struck by an arrow in his heel. This myth of Achilles’ heel signals a message and a philosophical vantage point — that humans tend to value what is vertical (the head, which faces the sky above, or something that is away from the ground or the earth), more than the horizontal (the heel which touches the ground or the soil or something which is in proximity with the earth). This indicates the hold that hierarchical thinking has on humans. This myth sheds light on how some parts of the body are ranked over others. This implies how undeniably true that the heel of the human body is perceived as the lowest and the most ignored part of the body. In Western philosophy, this can be explained as the understanding of the superiority of the mind over the body.

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the *Lai Haraoba* of the *Meitei* community embodies the culture of the *Meiteis* and how it reflects the epistemic aspect, as inscribed in the dance and music performed during the festival. I have utilised mythology as a philosophical tool to illustrate the relevance of myths in expressing my points.

A Brief Elucidation of the *Meiteis*

Manipur, affectionately referred to as ‘the jewel of India’ by the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, is an alluring beauty that encompasses over 20,000 square kilometres, featuring a mix of magnificent green valleys and lofty blue mountain peaks. The *Meiteis*, also known as *Meeteis*, are, according to the eminent Manipuri author, Ch. Manihar Singh, “By appearance, physical structure and commonness in their general attitude to life, the Manipuris settling both in the hills and the plain are Mongoloids, speaking diverse sub-branches of the Tibeto-Burman language” (2003, p. 5). *Meitei* society is an idiosyncratic amalgamation of the indigenous *Meitei* religion, that is, Sanamahism, and Brahmanic Hinduism. The cultural values of the *Meiteis* are distinct from mainstream Hinduism in the country. So, there has been a heated confrontation between the two religions for a long period of time. It is a historical fact that the *Meitei* population has undergone a massive wave of Sanskritisation in the early eighteenth century. But the intriguing element to ponder here is, in the analysis of Circar (1984, p. viii), “while Meitei society may be viewed as a field of conflict and compromise between two diametrically opposing forces— the process of Sankritization and the resistance to it from the indigenous tradition—because of the strong position of Meitei women in the extra-domestic world, Sanskritisation here (unlike in many Indian societies) largely failed in curtailing the role of women vis-a-vis men”. The syncretisation of both Hinduism and the original religion of the *Meiteis* is quite remarkable. The two religions coexist to date, forming a new kind of religion and culture. This is reflected very evidently in the *Meitei* culture, dance, literature, and arts. The *Meitei* community is affluent in culture, arts, and literature written in the ancient *Meitei Mayek* script. The elegant Manipuri dance, derived from the Pre-Hindu religion, is one of the schools of Indian classical dance, which is adored and admired all over the nation and internationally (Parratt and Parratt 2002).

The social design of the *Meitei* society furnishes men as the predominant fathers and husbands. Nevertheless, the contribution of women in socio-economic spheres often challenges the subordination. The structure of a society is beyond complexities, which are covered with multiple layers of operations and frameworks, all ardently enmeshed in social, economic, cultural and religious webs. In Chaki- Sircar’s observation, “There is an expression of feminism in Meitei patrilineal culture which encourages women to be individually self-reliant and collectively powerful without necessarily involving a sex war” (1984, p. 184). Nevertheless, one can observe the distribution of household chores to navigate how patriarchy is internalised in the gender roles practised: cooking, cleaning, washing, and maintaining the house are all handled by the women, while men are traditionally expected to earn money and secure the financial affairs of the family.

The Relevance of Myths

When discussing myths, it is crucial to understand their subject matter, origin, and, ultimately, their function. Robert A. Segal, in *Theorising About Myth*, brings to light Jung's definition of myths: "Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings and anything but allegories of physical processes. (1999, p. 67). Myths are to be considered as symbols, and not literally. Hence, the function of myths is to satisfy the psychological requirement for contact with the unconscious: not with the external world but with the human mind. Carl Jung believed that myths and dreams were expressions of the 'collective unconscious', which is the section of the mind that contains memories and impulses that are unaware to the individual. As per Jung, this is common to the whole of mankind. It is different from the personal unconscious, which is the experience of the individual. Jung asserts that the unconscious contains archetypes, or universal primordial images and ideas, which convey central ideas that embody the human species in its totality. To put it in other words, myths are expressions of knowledge and wisdom that have been represented in all human civilizations, either by evolution or through spiritual process. As per the Jungian outlook, the common origin in the collective unconscious gives an explanation of why myths from all around the globe have striking resemblances. If we look closely at Jungian analysis of classical mythology, the main gods and goddesses are expressed as 'archetypes' (an inherited idea in the psychology of Jung that is derived from the experience of the race and is present in the unconscious of the individual), which is a prevalent aspect in every human civilisation. So, in Greek mythology, the primary Olympian gods are portrayed as expressions of archetypes of various stages of life evident in the family life: Zeus, being the patriarch, and Apollo, the young man, depicting manhood and independence.

Myths reflect reality. And it can be said that the myth of Demeter and Persephone is still relevant today, although it has many interpretations by feminist philosophers. Demeter, the goddess of grain and agriculture, is worshipped along with her daughter, Persephone, the goddess of Spring. The "Hymn to Demeter" is presumed to have been used at ceremonies in celebrating the goddess's glory, at her shrine in Eleusis, in Athens, Greece. The hymn narrates the significance of Eleusis, which is the place where Demeter searches intently for her daughter, Persephone:

Thereafter, for nine days, did the Lady Demeter
wander all over the earth, holding torches ablaze in her hands.
Not once did she take a ambrosia and nectar, sweet to drink,
in her grief, nor did she bathe her skin in water. (Nagy 2012, lines 47-50).

According to the myth, Hades, the King of the Underworld, abducted Persephone. Demeter loved her daughter unconditionally, and she was infuriated when Hades took her away. There was a colossal conflict between Hades and Demeter. Zeus intervened to stop it. He proposed that Persephone stay with her mother for half

of the year in Olympus and spend the remaining months with her husband in the underworld. This myth expresses a strong and indomitable bond between mothers and daughters and can be considered a source of strength and a bond of affection. But since there are many interpretations and revisitations of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the Hymn is interpreted as an account of rape, which represents the intrusion of men into the peaceful lives and loves of women, the triumph of patriarchy, and the limitation of religion based on the feminine principle.

In the Meitei myth of '*Haloï Taret*', roughly translated as 'seven divine maidens', one can raise the inevitable question of how mankind and society at large perceive insurmountable female beauty and its assumed dangers and associated evil temptations. "Haloï Taret are a part of the belief system and the creation stories of the Meitei Cosmology. The narratives surrounding the mystery and magic of Haloï Taret represent them as a symbol of exquisite beauty, danger, and insanity" (Yumkhaibam 2019). *Haloï Taret* are spectacularly gorgeous female spirits of the ether who are invisible and lurk around the earth, especially at unusual hours of the day and night. It is believed that humans who have an encounter with *Haloï Taret* cannot think rationally; rather, they enter into a mysterious realm that only the affected humans/ victims and the *Haloï Taret* can access. They make their 'victims' lose their sanity and become bereft of their reason; however, they do not eliminate their fallen victims. Although they prey on both males and females, the Haloïs tend to prefer men more. "It is believed that humans' encounter with *Haloï Taret* stems from the *Haloï Taret* gaze...In this trajectory, both the particular individual as an object of Haloï Taret's gaze and the resultant encounter are partly chosen and partly accidental. In this sense, can we call the humans "victims"? (2019). Interestingly, the *Haloïs* use magic and create illusions to make food for the affected males: the purpose for executing such an act is to secure and retain them using food as a means to capture and cast them under a deep hypnotic spell. This can be explained by understanding the myth that the mysterious encounters of Haloï Taret with humans were initiated by them to satisfy their hunger for food. To further supplement this statement, "In the creation moments of the Meitei cosmology, while trying to create human form, various spirits and creatures were created before humans were ultimately created. Haloï Taret were among those creations. Finally, a question arose – how would these creations survive? Sitapa Mapu determined that in the natural scheme of survival, the other creatures would survive on the food offerings made by the humans". The notion that female beauty has been, since time immemorial, controlled, destroyed, manipulated, and intoxicated mankind at large has always been the narrative on which society propagates. This conception and understanding have fueled man in committing various dreadful crimes, sins, and atrocities against women, and have effectively controlled women's bodies, sexuality, and agency, and moreover, have created a stringent demarcation of 'bad' and 'good' women. In an intriguing remark, Rubani Yumkhaibam observes that, "The narrative of *Haloï Taret* is an astute reversal of the male gaze. Males are not free from the lurking power and gaze

of *Haloi Taret*". And curiously enough, these overarching stunning beauties, by the name of Haloi Taret, can also be perceived as women who are not only exquisitely mesmerising, but also independent, self-sufficient, powerful, and fearless beings who can challenge man's power, rationality, authority, and control. Therefore, one can systematically and philosophically employ mythology to deduce how patriarchy and its intricate structure operate.

In his *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973), Clifford Geertz observes that the Balinese cockfight "is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves". Weaving stories, telling and retelling them, involves deciphering them, interpreting them to make sense of a complex network of relations. These relations include the physical, the social, and the spiritual, among others. Likewise, the mythologies we inherit and perpetuate serve a function in making sense of our place in the world. It functions to explain and instruct how to act through the agency in which one is placed, and also indicates possible transcendence. Henceforth, the pertinence and applicability of myths are evident. To supplement my stance further, I would also refer to Albert Camus's esoteric book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. To explicate his enigmatic concept of "The Absurd", the author paints the imagery of Sisyphus rolling the big boulder up the hill over and over again, only to roll it back up again, which is a symbolism that portrays the picture of the repetitive, meaningless and challenging life that we live. Nonetheless, Camus consoles by asserting that one must always think that Sisyphus is happy, implying to create our own meaning of life. The esteemed Novel laureate, existentialist philosopher and novelist, such as Camus, utilises the tool of mythical characters and myths to drive his philosophical argument of absurdity. This reflects how significant myths are, even though they seem to be outdated and archaic. Myths have an important place in discerning reality, although it depends on how one interprets them. Recounting Levi-Strauss's statement, "And it is only by treating the myth as if it were an orchestral score, written stave after stave, that we can understand it as a totality, that we can extract the meaning out of the myth" (2023).

The Exposition of the *Lai Haraoba*

The *Meiteis/Meeteis* predominantly settle in the valley of the state of Manipur, also known as 'the land of gems' (Kamei 2015), North-East India. They speak *Meiteilon*, which is classified as a Tibeto-Burman language. Myths form an essential part of *Meitei* culture: "The valley has a mythological significance for the *Meeteis*, and is interpreted in terms of the human body. Mount Koubru in the north-west, the mythological place of origin of the *Meeteis*, is seen as the head, the valley itself the body, Loktak as the belly, and the various rivers as its arteries" (Parratt 2017). One essential characteristic of commonality that connects one *Meitei* to another is their participation in the *Lai Haraoba*. "The *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 interest” (Singh, 1961, p. 30). The *Lai Haraoba* is a social and religious festival of the *Meiteis*, which is reverently celebrated annually in different parts of the valley of Manipur at the herald of the summer season. Commemorated with multifarious Indigenous songs and enchanting dance movements, this festival of “the pleasing of the gods”, which is fundamentally an act of worship, is kindred with the myth of creation. It is interesting to note that the *Lai Haraoba* is beyond archaic that it is difficult to trace its specific date of origin: “Its origin is lost in dim antiquity, though we come across a faint description of it in the manuscript *Panthoibi Khongul* in which there is an account of how the members of the *Khaba* community paid homage to *Nongpok Ningthou*, the presiding deity of the *Langmai* Hills and *Panthoibi*, his consort by erecting a temple” (Singh, 1996). The crucial aspect of the *Lai Haraoba* is reflected in the eloquent ritual dances performed by the *Maiba* (male high priest) and *Maibi* (female high priestess). Their graceful hand and body movements exhibit the cycle of creation of the lives of humans: from the foetus’s existence in the mother’s womb to birth, to habitation, and extend to the construction of houses, cultivation, and weaving of clothes to be offered to the gods. The festival of *Lai Haraoba* is an ‘art of enactment’: it is celebrated and enacted in the same manner every year and in the years to come (Yumnam, 2021). In the words of Gadamer, “Enactment is the festival’s mode of being, and in the enactment, time becomes the nunc stans of an elevated presence in which the past and the present become one in the act of remembrance. For surely the festival of Christmas is more than a festival of the birth of the saviour who was originally present nearly two thousand years ago” (Gadamer 1986). It would be deemed correct to state that the *Lai Haraoba* is far more than a festival of pleasing the gods. It is art in itself, as the exquisite dance of the maibi is the provenance of the classical dance of Manipuri Ras, which is one of the prestigious classical dances of India. (2021).

It is intriguing to note that, “The female supreme *lai* Leimaren has a significant place in the Haraoba and is symbolised by the *leimaren chafu* (or *ishai fu*), a ritual pot, while the male counterpart, Atingkok, is almost a *deus otiosus*” (Parratt and Parratt 2018). The festival of pleasing the gods is celebrated in honour of the numerous deities of the *Meiteis*, which includes honouring the clan (*yek*) deities, or the gods of the local village, but the most significant haraoba is honouring all the larger clan deities, for instance, the gods *Pakhangba* and *Thangjing*. The pivotal tripartite performers and preservers of the *Lai Haraoba* are the *Maibi*, the *Maiba*, and the *Pena loishang*. Without these three, the *Lai Haraoba* festival is impossible. The *Maibi* plays a key role in the festival of pleasing the gods. One cannot naturally or by training become a *Maibi*, but one has to be chosen. The *Maibi* of the *Meitei* of Manipur has, in some interpretations, been understood as a shaman; however, the term ‘*Maibi*’ has no exact parallel English translation. *Maibis* are exclusively adorned in white *phanek* (a long ankle-length wraparound), a white long-sleeved blouse, and a white *inaphi* (shawl); an additional white waist wrapper is also worn on top of the *phanek*, and the long black hair is decked with pretty flowers. To quote, “This dress, however, does not show the classic

characteristics of shamanistic clothing, such as the use of animal skins and decorations, and masks. Nor do they act as ‘masters of the spirits’, or exorcise. Thus, it seems to us better to avoid the term shamanism in connection with the maibas and maibis” (Parratt and Parratt 1997).

Dance of the *Maibi* as Philosophy performed

As time progresses, the idea of what it signifies for an artwork to represent something, or to signify something, has drastically widened in the history of philosophical aesthetics. Although the art of dance is more intimately related to music and theatre, it is nonetheless a philosophy of representation.

In applying the concept of representation to dance, Carroll and Banes (1999) identify four types of representation in which one thing can “represent” something else: 1) unconditional representation (here cultural codes enable the audience to recognize the referent); 2) lexical representation (such as the use of gestures to stand for certain ideas); 3) conditional specific representation (where some particular background knowledge is needed to understand it as a representation); and 4) conditional specific representation (where the spectator is simply informed that *x* is supposed to stand for *y* and they therefore see it that way). (Conroy and Bresnahan 2025).

Although much of the literature review and anthropological approach has been extensively made on the *Maibi* phenomenon, its philosophical aspect hasn’t been explored as it deserves. One can discern the idea that the subtle rhythm and dance movements of the *Maibi* reflect philosophical and metaphysical elements, as there is philosophy in performance. Dance and art are philosophies in themselves: “The metaphor of the cosmic womb from which the cosmos germinates has representation in the hand gestures of the *Maibi* in the *Lai-Haraoba* dance. *Maibis* perform the moment of the release of creative energy at the beginning of the cosmos” (2021). Not only do they preserve the oral religious traditions, but the *Maibis* also invoke the *lais* (gods) and make offerings to them. They act as mediums of the gods and are conferred with oracles, which they disclose to the people. In the *Lai Haraoba*, the *Maibi* executes a worldview. In the documentary “*Yelhou Jagoi*” by the renowned director Aribam Shyam Sharma, one can grasp the worldview executed by the *Maibi*. The *Maibi* uses 364 *khutheks* (hand gestures) in her dance to re-enact and recreate the myth of the creation of the universe. She dances eloquently, recapturing the release of the creative energy: her torso begins to move gently, breaking off the serene stillness and dancing slowly, retrieving the primal cadence. The dance starts with the depiction of the creation by seven female goddesses and nine male gods.

The dance gestures and announcements of the *Maibis* depict the growth of the child in the womb, his limbs and organs shaping slowly, his birth and his growing up; his activities – the building of the house, cultivation of the land, weaving of cloth, fishing, and so on (Sharma 1992).

Understanding a worldview is understanding reality: A worldview is not only associated with “a people’s understanding of its social environment but also to its understanding of an even more inclusive environment, reality itself” (Schilbrack, 2004). The dance of the *Lai Haraoba* is led by the *Maibi*, and the *Meitei* community follows her dance steps and imitates her graceful movements. It is paramount to note that, “Here, through the act of dancing, the participants come to know that they belong to the community. As Schilbrack puts it, the ritual body, here, in this case, the dancing body, comes to know metaphysical truths “in the flesh”. These metaphysical truths inform authentic existence” (2021). To participate in the celebration of the *Lai Haraoba*, the dances, and its rituals is to reflect and imitate how the Gods “act and behave” (2021). To further supplement this remark.

Such metaphysical knowledge, inscribed on bodies through ritual, is also practical knowledge. This ritual knowledge of reality is used to shape conduct, to get people to act “properly”, as “we” act, as “true humans” act, or as the Gods act. In this way, ritual metaphysics is used to alienate a range of possible behaviours as not in accord with ultimate reality, and thereby to fabricate authentic human beings, authentic in the sense that their behaviour is authorized by the very nature of things” (2004).

Conclusion

In the *Lai Haraoba*, the body is engraved as texts through the medium of dance gestures and movements. “But these texts are metaphysical texts”, for they are metaphysically informed bodies dancing in tune with the metaphysical truths that the bodies attempt to represent, express, convey, and manifest those truths through the art of dancing (2024). And dance is possible through the agency of bodies, which guides us in making sense of the world and reality. Furthermore, rituals have a noetic element. In the words of Yumnam, “Every time the *Maibi* performs in the *Lai Haraoba*, they are remaking a world of the *Meitei* which is already there. While dancing, they are actualizing each of the *Meitei*’s worldviews. Each moment performed is a lived experience for the *Meitei*” (2018). Human bodies are not mere bodies, but rather are embodied with meanings and symbolisms. We grasp knowledge and comprehend it, not solely through our minds, but also through our bodies, senses, feelings, and through expressions of dance and motion. Therefore, one can conclude that the dance gestures in the celebration of the pleasing of the Gods of the *Meitei* community undeniably possess metaphysical as well as epistemological aspects. Thus, the *Lai Haraoba* acts as a pivotal source of knowledge for the *Meitei* community.

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