

The *Meitei* Mythic Facet as an Epistemic Entity

Ancient civilizations 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 seeks to show that the Meitei myths serve an epistemic function for the Meitei community. This shall be attempted through an attempt to understand the Lai Haraoba that performs 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 future. Likewise, myths act as the 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 cultures 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* means “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” (Lanczowski, Baumgartner, J.B., Fries, 1974). Myths are primarily regarded as narratives of the deeds and endeavours of the gods and spirits and 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, p. 195).

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, dramatize 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 intend to show how the Lai Haraoba of the Meitei community embodies the culture of the Meiteis, and moreover, how it reflects the epistemic aspect, as inscribed in the dance and music, which is performed during the festival. I have used mythology as a philosophical tool and the relevance of myths to express my points.

Relevance of Myths

When discussing myths, it is crucial to understand their subject matter, origin, and, ultimately, their function. According to Carl Jung, “Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings and anything but allegories of physical processes.” 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 civilization. So, 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 somehow 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).

According to the myth, Hades, the King of the Underworld, abducted Persephone. Demeter loved her daughter unconditionally, and she was really 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 ‘*Haloi Taret*’, roughly translated as ‘seven divine maidens’, one can raise the inevitable question of how mankind and society at

1 large perceive insurmountable female beauty and its assumed dangers and
 2 associated evil temptations. “Haloi Taret are a part of the belief system and the
 3 creation stories of the Meitei Cosmology. The narratives surrounding the
 4 mystery and magic of Haloi Taret represent them as a symbol of exquisite
 5 beauty, danger, and insanity” (Yumkhaibam, Haloi Taret: Dangerous Beauty,
 6 Ecological Balance and the Male Submission, 2019). Haloi Taret are
 7 spectacularly gorgeous female spirits of the ether who are invisible and lurk
 8 around the earth, especially at unusual hours of the day and night. It is believed
 9 that humans who have an encounter with Haloi Taret cannot think rationally;
 10 rather, they enter into a mysterious realm that only the affected humans/ victims
 11 and the Haloi Taret can access. They make their ‘victims’ lose their sanity and
 12 become bereft of their reason; however, they do not eliminate their fallen
 13 victims. Although they prey on both males and females, the Halois tend to prefer
 14 men more. “It is believed that humans’ encounter with *Haloi Taret* stems from
 15 the *Haloi Taret* gaze...In this trajectory, both the particular individual as an
 16 object of Haloi Taret's gaze and the resultant encounter are partly chosen and
 17 partly accidental. In this sense, can we call the humans “victims” ?”
 18 (Yumkhaibam, P. 2). Interestingly, the Halois use magic and create illusions to
 19 make food for the affected males: the purpose for executing such an act is to
 20 secure and retain them using food as a means to capture and cast them under a
 21 deep hypnotic spell. This can be explained by understanding the myth that the
 22 mysterious encounters of Haloi Taret with humans were initiated by the Halois
 23 to satisfy their hunger for food. To further supplement this statement, “In the
 24 creation moments of the Meitei cosmology, while trying to create human form,
 25 various spirits and creatures were created before humans were ultimately
 26 created. Haloi Taret were among those creations. Finally, a question arose – how
 27 would these creations survive? Sitapa Mapu determined that in the natural
 28 scheme of survival, the other creatures would survive on the food offerings made
 29 by the humans” (p. 2). The notion that female beauty has, since time
 30 immemorial, controlled, destroyed, manipulated, and intoxicated mankind at
 31 large has always been the narrative on which society functions. This conception
 32 and understanding have fueled man in committing various crimes, sins, and
 33 atrocities against women, and have controlled women’s bodies, sexuality, and
 34 agency, and have created a demarcation of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ women. In an
 35 intriguing remark, Rubani Yumkhaibam observes that, “The narrative of *Haloi*
 36 *Taret* is an astute reversal of the male gaze. Males are not free from the lurking
 37 power and gaze of *Haloi Taret*” (P. 3). And curiously enough, these overarching
 38 stunning beauties by the name of Haloi Taret can also be perceived as women
 39 who are not only exquisitely mesmerising, but who are also independent, self-
 40 sufficient, powerful and fearless beings who can challenge man’s power,
 41 rationality, authority and control. Therefore, one can systematically and
 42 philosophically utilise mythology to understand the structure of patriarchy and
 43 its effects.

44 In *The Stranger*, also known as *The Outsider*, Camus uses the myth of
 45 Sisyphus to explicate his philosophical concept of “The Absurd”. Sisyphus
 46 rolling the big boulder up the hill over and over again, only to roll it back up

again, is a symbolism that portrays the picture of the repetitive yet challenging life that we live. Nonetheless, Camus consoles by asserting that one must always think that Sisyphus is happy. The esteemed existentialist philosopher, such as Camus, utilises the tool of mythical characters and myths to drive his philosophical argument of the absurdity. This reflects how significant myths are, even though they seem to be outdated and archaic. However, myths have an important place in discerning reality, although it depends on how one interprets them.

The Exposition of the *Lai Haraoba*

The Meiteis/Meeteis predominantly settle in the valley of the state of Manipur, 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, *The Coils of Pakhangba*, 2017, p. 2). 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 too ancient 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, p. 13). 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, p. 59). 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 classical dances of India. (Yumnam, 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 *ishaifu*), a ritual pot, while the male counterpart, Atingkok, is almost a deus otiosus” (Parratt & Parratt, 2018, p. 2). 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 Loishangs or institutions, 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 (Ibemhal, 2006), 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 & Parratt, 1997, p. 34).

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). (Stanford Encyclopedia).

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" (Yumnam, Conflict of Tradition and Modernity With Respect to Maibi Institution: A Philosophical Inquiry, 2021, p. 65). 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, *Yelhou Jagoi*, 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, p. 128). 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" (Yumnam, p. 77). 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" (Yumnam, p. 77). 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" (Schilbrack, 2004, p. 131).

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” (p. 133), 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 (Yumnam, p. 78). 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” (Performance as Philosophy in the Context of the Lai-Haraoba, 2018, p. 129). 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 bodily gestures. 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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