

Invocations
Dances
Lai Loukatba Ritual
Lai Jagoi Ritual
Khamba Ritual
Lai Katba Ritual
Arti Ritual
Songs to Krishna
Songs to Ima Leimaren

RITUAL MUSIC OF MANIPUR / FOLKWAYS FE 4479

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RITUAL MUSIC OF MANIPUR

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A KABUI Hill-Tribe Chief of Manipur Hills.

RITUAL MUSIC OF MANIPUR

INTRODUCTION BY LOUISE LIGHTFOOT

Manipur is a small North East Frontier Territory of India. Since ancient times it existed as a separate kingdom lying between Assam and Burma. Late in the nineteenth century it came directly under the rule of the British, and in 1947 with the coming of India's independence, it was joined with India and is now governed directly from Delhi.

The oval plain portion of Manipur is about 800 square miles in area and about 3000 feet above sea-level. This plain is cut off from the neighbouring countries by some nine rings of mountains which occupy nine-tenths of the area of Manipur Territory, and which are inhabited by tribal people - mainly of Naga and Kuki types. Old caravan routes passed through Manipur, and today the India-Burma Road runs through it from north to south.

The Plain of Manipur, an old lake bed, is inhabited by people called the Meiteis who, since ancient times, have developed a distinctive religious culture of their own. About 250 years ago Hinduism came up to Manipur from Bengal, and the majority of Meiteis now belong to the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism. The old religion, "Meiteism," is practised alongside with "Vaishnavism."

The ancient Meitei ritual called Lai Harouba is conducted by priestesses (maibeas) and is performed by the people on an open green before the shrine of their ancestors, a race of demi-gods descended from God. The maibeas call up the spirits of these ancestors from the rivers and pools and transfer them to the masks placed in the shrine. The ritual is then performed with the idea of giving pleasure to God and the ancestors (lais); hence the name Lai Harouba (God-pleasing). The Meiteis have features of Mongolian type.



At Moirang Lai Harouba Ritual.
(Men's Dance)



Ksh. Ibetombi as "Sri Rhada"
in the "RAS" Ritual.

They believe that creation began in their own fertile and beautiful valley, and their Lai Harouba tells the story of Creation.

Meiteis believe that from time to time the gods dwell within human beings, and these human beings are called sayons. Such two people, Khamba and Thoibee, lived in Manipur 800 years ago. Their pathetic love-episode forms the subject matter of the great epic, "Moirang Parba," and their resting-place is at Moirang near Lake Logtak at the shrine of Thangjing. Ritual dances, commemorating Khamba and Thoibee, are frequently seen in Manipur.

When Hinduism came up to Manipur from Bengal, introduced by disciples of the saintly Chaitanya of Bengal, King Bhagyachandra of Manipur composed a dance-ritual named "Ras" as a form of devotion to Shri Krishna (reincarnation of Vishnu of the Hindu Trinity) and Shri Radha. Ras and the Lai Harouba are the two most important rituals of Manipur. Shorter Hindu rituals like "Arti" are performed several times a day before the shrine of Shri Radha Krishna. In the evenings there are many songs and recitations given in the Mandops adjoining the shrines, and group dances by men, women and children are also enjoyed.

SIDE I, Band 1: DEVOTIONAL SONG TO
IMA LEIMAREN

This song is to Ima Leimaren, the Earth Mother and consort of Guru Atiya Sidaba, the Sky Father Immortal. It is sung by a maibee (priestess) accompanied by an ancient bowed instrument called a pena - a predecessor of the violin. The string of the pena, and also its bow-string, is made from strands of horse-tail hair. The resonator attached to the stem is a pumpkin shell or a cocoanut shell. There are no tuning keys. The string is moistened and stretched downward by the wrist. The back of the bow is decorated by little metal bells which jingle and give the basic rhythm of the melody according to the wrist-work of the player. Much of the ritual song language is archaic and not well understood even by the maibeas themselves.

SIDE I, Band 2: INVOCATION TO IMA
LEIMAREN

A hand-bell called sharik is rung continuously by the maibee under her head-veil to help induce a trancelike state while she calls up the spirit of the Earth Mother for adoration at the shrine.

SIDE I, Band 3: LAI LOUKATBA RITUAL
MUSIC

A maibee dances while calling up a spirit. The dance may be seen near pools or rivers or on the way to a shrine. The choreography is interesting and the maibeas are often fine dancers capable of great endurance. Usually the dance is accompanied by pena only. In this case dholok drum and bells have been added.

SIDE I, Band 4: LAIPOU JAGOI RITUAL
MUSIC

Women-devotees dance at the shrine of the Lai Harouba. The procession advances slowly and gracefully around the green led by dancing maibeas and dancing pena players. Sometimes a flute-player is also seen dancing.

SIDE I, Band 5: KHAMBA RITUAL DANCE

This is a virile dance in commemoration of Khamba. Traditional Moirang costume is worn and the pena player sings of the great deeds of Khamba. The dance is performed at the Lai Harouba.



At Moirang Lai Harouba Ritual.
(Women's Dance)



Masques of ancestors in the shrine.

SIDE II, Band 1: LEI KATBA RITUAL

Accustomed from childhood to dance before the shrine at the Lai Harouba, many maidens of Manipur achieve a standard of performance which cannot be easily imitated. These devotional dances are considered among the finest classical dances of India. The maidens dance solo or in lines of two, three, four, etc. Old love songs are played which are considered pleasing to the presiding ancestral spirits.

SIDE II, Band 2: SONG OF IMA LEIMAREN

The Earth Mother advises her son Pakhangba. The Meitei style of song probably originated in "calling" songs sung from one hilltop to another. New songs are framed within the same old melodies.

SIDE II, Band 3: PALACE SONG

This song, with pena accompaniment, is sung when the King of Manipur is retiring at night. It is an old palace ritual, and the archaic words are to soothe the King and bring on slumber. It is the duty of every pena player to learn the ancient songs and serve in the palace at times. The custom continues to the present day.

SIDE II, Band 4: ARTI RITUAL MUSIC

Arti Ritual is performed several times a day at the shrine of Shri Radha-Krishna. The

devotee invokes the deity and asks the deity to be present in the image, which he then worships. He purifies the five senses, offers sandalwood paste, flowers and incense. He rings a handbell while waving the sacred flame around the image. He fans it with a whisk, offers prayers and finally prostrates himself. Other devotees dance while playing cymbals and drums (kartal and meitei poong).

SIDE II, Band 5: KRISHNA ABHISAR
(Excerpt from Ras Ritual)

Shri Krishna goes forth dancing, with flute in hand.

SIDE II, Band 6: BASOK SONG

A young girl sings in the mandop adjoining the temple of Shri Krishna. Her song includes dialects from other parts of India from whence Shri Krishna worship came. She then speaks the explanations of her song in Manipuri language. An audience sits around her. This is a popular form of religious art in Manipur.

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For further information about Manipur rituals see "Dance-Rituals of Manipur, India" by Louise Lightfoot, Hong Kong, 1960.

Photographs by Louise Lightfoot