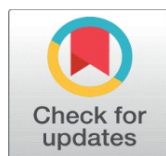
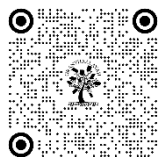


NERA HAOCHONGBA & ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Dr. N. Dinesh Singh 

¹ Dept. of History, Biramangol College, Sawombung, Imphal



Corresponding Author

Dr. N. Dinesh Singh,
ningdine@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Manipur is a small state but it has a rich cultural heritage besides its varieties of games and sports both indoors and outdoors. Among the games and sports, polo, which has now become an international game, originated in this erstwhile an independent kingdom. There is also a kind of game called Yubi Lakpi which is similar to Rugby. Boat races are held annually in the presence of the king and his noblemen. As for festivals, hardly a month passes without a festival or two. The festivals include, inter alia, Mera Haochongba, Yaoshang, Ningngol Chakkouba and Lai Haraoba. Mera Haochongba is celebrated on the 10th of Mera, a Manipuri lunar month which falls in September/October. During the reign of King Pamheiba, another festival known as Kwak Tanba was introduced and it was celebrated on the same day and it created some inconvenience. So, the celebration of Mera Haochongba was changed to the 15th of Mera while the newly introduced festival was celebrated on the tenth of the same month. Some scholars say that this festival was introduced during the reign of King Pakhangba (33-154 CE) though there are no written records. However, records clearly prove that this festival had been celebrated during the reign of King Loiyumba (1074 CE – 1122 CE). This festival is related to the tribute of the hill men to the King of Manipur. They brought vegetables grown in the hills and precious or rare collections in their possession. They were accorded warmly in the palace and fed to their heart's content. This festival aims to have unity and integrity of the then kingdom which has now become an Indian state.

Keywords: Intangible, Lallup, Mera Haochongba; Ningngol Chakkouba, Shanthil Hanba, and Tribute

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, replete with historic events, was once a small but independent kingdom where 74 kings ruled one after another till the British occupation of the kingdom in 1891. Since then it became a princely state with Churachand, who was a minor then, as its first king. Though its lost freedom was restored in 1947 when the British left Manipur, unfortunately its freedom was short-lived as it was merged with India in 1949. Thus Manipur became a state of the Indian union.

Despite its size, the state has intangible assets such as oral histories and legends, written histories, festivals, religious rites, and folk songs. It has its own games and sports either indoors or outdoors. Most of the outdoor games were associated with war as it was always engaged in war on any front, be it Burma or Tripura or China. To name a few, Mukna (wrestling), Mukna-kangjei (Hockey combined with wrestling), Kangjei (hockey), Yubi lakpi (a kind of rugby), Lamjel (race), Sagol lamjel (horse race), Sagol kangjei (polo), Heeyang tanaba (boat race), etc. Every male between 15 and 60 of age had to keep themselves always fit for war. As such, these manly games and sports were regularly held as a war drill.

Though the state was engaged in war almost every year, people celebrated festivals bountifully. Hardly a month passes without a festival or two. A few of them may be mentioned as follows:

1. **Loidam Kum Saba.** This religious festival, that exists no longer, was celebrated, defying the chilly winter weather of **Wakching**, the 10th month in the Manipuri calendar, which corresponds to January, in remembrance of Leimarel Shidabi, the Supreme Mother Goddess of the Meiteis.
2. **Ukai Kappa.** This festival was celebrated in **Fairen**, the 11th month of the Manipuri calendar, and it corresponds to February. It is a kind of exorcism, the practice of evicting evil spirits. In order to drive out the evil spirits, the king along with his nobles would shoot arrows at the targets which were erected earlier for the purpose at particularly selected different locations. By celebrating this festival, it was believed that the king and queen would live long and the state would prosper.
3. **Chinggon Then Kaba.** This festival, which was celebrated in Fairen, ceased to exist. 'Then' [pronounced as |θen|] in Manipuri language means a flat/plain area on the hills or at the foot of the hills. The king along with his skilled warriors would scale on the 'Then' and perform 'Akham Thenggou', a form of dance using a spear that is closely related to the Manipuri martial arts using a spear. Such a dance can be performed only by one who is highly skilled in Manipuri martial arts.
4. **Mera Shanduba.** This festival was celebrated in Mera, the 7th month in the Manipuri calendar that falls in October-November. Cattle would be fetched some days prior to this festival and it would be put at a place called Punggraijam and fed with salt for five days. On the festival day, the cattle would be brought before the king and rituals would be performed by the priests. After this Shanthil hanba would spear the cattle so that it falls. Then the cattle would be placed on a flat stone where its head would be chopped off. Thus the festival began.
5. **Heeyang/Boat race.** This festival lasts for five days and is held in Heeyanggei, the 6th month in the Manipuri calendar and it corresponds September-October.
6. **Ningngol Chakkouba.** It is celebrated in Heeyanggei, the 8th month in the Manipuri calendar and usually falls in November. In this festival, all the married women will be invited to their maiden homes by their father and brothers for a feast at their maiden homes. It is specially arranged for reunion of family members who have been long separated due to marriage.
7. **Sajibu Cheiraoba.** It is celebrated in Sajibu, the first month in the Manipuri calendar which falls in April. On this festival every Meitei household family will prepare several dishes and they will offer a portion of them to the spirits for blessing for that year. After this they will share them with their neighbours. It marks the beginning of the year.
8. **Yaoshang.** It has merged with holi and lasts for five days. Every age group participates in this festival. The best part of the festival especially for the boys and girls is Thabal Chongba, a kind dance.
9. **Lai Haraoba.** This festival can be celebrated in almost all the seasons and is related to the creation of the universe. It is performed generally by priests and priestesses though people participate in it.

There are many other festivals too, but to mention all of them will be improper here due to the limitation of space in this article. So, let me come to Mera Haochongba.

Mera Haochongba is an important Manipuri festival celebrated on the 10th of Mera, the 7th in the Manipuri calendar. As per records in **Khunung Lichat Shajat**, an ancient Manipuri manuscript, previously it was celebrated together with Mera Shanduba on the 10th of Mera. But the latter ceased to exist. During the reign of Pamheiba (1709 CE – 1748 CE), another festival called **Kwak Tanba** associated with rituals was introduced and the same was celebrated on the 10th of Mera, the day on which Mera Haochongba was celebrated. The co-occurrence of the two festivals on the same day created much inconvenience to the organizers. So, the celebration of Mera Haochongba was changed to the 15th of Mera while the newly introduced festival was celebrated on the tenth of the same month.

That when Mera Haochongba was introduced cannot be ascertained. Some scholars claimed that the festival was introduced during the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the Meitei king who ruled from 33 CE to 154 CE. However, there are no documents available to prove this assertion. Nothing of this king introducing the festival is mentioned neither in the Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur nor in the Ningthourol Lambuba in which all the

activities of the kings are recorded. Besides, this festival is related to **Loipot Kaba/Loipot Katpa** (payment/offering of annual tributes to the king by his subjects residing in both the hills) and plain and there are no manuscripts that tell about the relationship between the hill tribes and king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Hence, the claim is baseless.

As per records in the ancient manuscript named **Shanglon**, it is said that payment of tributes by the hill tribes began during the reign of Loiyamba (1074 CE – 1122 CE). As the festival is associated with payment of tributes, the introduction of the festival before the reign of king Loiyamba is quite improbable. Another ancient manuscript called **Mashil** mentions that “Wine was offered by Tingsang as tribute on the occasion of Haochongba” during the reign of king Khagemba”. Thus, it is ascertained that this festival was already in existence during the reign of king Khagemba (1597 CE – 1652 CE). This manuscript also tells the names of the villages which will pay tributes as well as the items to be paid. From these aforesaid points, it can be safely deduced that the festival of Mera Haochongba was introduced in between the reign of King Loiyamba and king Khagemba, that is, in between 1074 CE and 1652 CE.

Since the festival is related to the hill tribes’ payment of tributes to the Meitei kings, we need to give a little account of the system of paying tributes that prevailed in Manipur. It is cited above that payment of tributes by the hill tribes to the Meitei kings started during the reign of king Loiyamba. During Mera month, when the harvesting of crops was over, the Chiefs of the hill tribes of Manipur along with his retinue would descend the valley and pay tributes to the king consisting of vegetables, crops and other articles such as swords, ornaments and traditional clothes, etc. The items of goods to be paid annually by each tribe or each village are recorded in the **Mashil**. For example, the villages viz., Chandrakhong, Shikhong, Ningngel, Fanjakhong, Waikhong, Karong, Sarang-ngaikhong, Keithelmanbi, Nungbangkhong, Itham, and Monthou are known as Thumloi (meaning villages that pay salt as tribute) and they paid salt as tribute to the king. Here, it must be noted that Loipot kaba (tribute) is different from Athenpot kaba. The former is compulsory payment of tribute and non-payment of this is liable to be punished while the latter is a voluntary payment of goods to some high ranking persons.

Payers of tributes in the valley are known as Tamloi. They were :

1. Kei, 2. Tingsang, 3. Andro, 4. Moirang, 5. Sekmai, 6. Langloi, (supplier of yarn), 7. Laroi, 8. Yilam, 9. Uroi, (supplier of timber and its products), 10. Wangnu (now known as Wangoo), 11. Nungmu, 12. Kumfi (now known as Kumbi), 13. Konyang, 14. Kakching, 15. Mayang Ningthounai, 16. Mayang Leimanai, 17. Thumloi

These Tamlois used to pay tribute on the occasion of Mera Haochongba. Tributes from Kabo valley were paid through five Chiefs namely, Tamu Lakpa, Londong Lakpa, Mangsha Lakpa, Octong Lakpa and Samjok Lakpa. But this tribute from Kabo valley was not paid on the occasion of Mera Haochongba.

Names of villages in the hills that pay tribute:

1. Chothe, 2. Langte, 3. Khunbi Chalam, 4. Mayailam Aimol, 5. Tangkhul Kharup, 6. Tangkhul Awanglup, 7. Itham, 8. Maring, 9. Khoibu, 10. Lailam Chingsang, 11. Kharam Chingsang, 12. Makasang, 13. Phairong, 14. Tarao, 15. Moyon, 16. Monsang, 17. Purum Ningthounai, 18. Anal, 19. Kamson, 20. Wangkheiroi, 21. Luhuppa, 22. Makeng Thangal, 23. Nurathemba, 24. Tumnoupkopi, 25. Mayangkhang, 26. Thummayon Khunou, 27. Thummayon Khullel, 28. Tokpa Khullel, 29. Thonnamba, 30. Nongfou, 31. Changoupung, 32. Langka, 33. Tulai, 34. Makhui Lalloi, 35. Makhan Khullel, 36. Makhan Khunou, 37. Kabui Chingmai, 38. Ireng Khul, 39. Kangchup Khul, 40. Karakhul Awang, 41. Konsakhul, 42. Natokpa, 43. Kabui Anouba, 44. Ichum, 45. Nungpa, and 46. Lafok Saram

The nature and the components of the Loipot (tribute) varied generally from tribe to tribe and from village to village. But it should be noted that the payment of tribute by the hill tribes were very light and nominal unlike the kaangkat (taxes) paid by the people in the valley.

It is worth mentioning that generally people in the valley do not pay tribute as they had a system called Lallup. In this system, males who had attained the age of fifteen but not exceeding sixty had to render service sans remuneration to the king for ten days out of every forty days. Thus a member of the Lallup had to work without remuneration for 90 days in a year. Any member failing to do so would be fined so that a person could be hired as his substitute. The kind of work may vary according to the ability of the member. A member could render his service as a labourer, soldier, artisan, builder, revenue collector, or writer.

Coming back to the festival, it is a one day festival held at Kangla in front of the Uttra. In this regard, Late Pandit Shri Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh pointed out the exact venue of the festival as below:

“Prior to 1891, Mera Haochongba festival was held at the plain ground situated to the west of the Kangla-Sha which once stood in front of the Uttra, and to the north west of the Lakthong (a wicket), and to the south west of the Nunggoibi

and to the eastern side of the passage near Nungjeng Pukhri (a pond) running from the southern gate to the northern gate."

Just before the day of Haochongba, the hill chiefs accompanied by a band of nobles and followers came down from their respective habitats and arrived at the capital with their respective Loipots. They also brought with them the best of their customary dresses, ornaments, weapons and other decorative objects which were expected to be worn in the celebration before the king.

The chiefs of the hills and their followers were clad with their colourful traditional costumes. Some of them would put on headgears adorned with plumes, ivory armbands and glittering necklaces made of cowries and other smaller pearl-like shells. When all the hill men and other Meitei nobles had assembled, the festival would begin. It was a custom that the king should inaugurate the festival. In the course of the festival, each tribe would exchange greetings and pleasantries and make friendship with one another. They would also demonstrate their skill in dance and martial arts and war dances, hunting techniques and their traditions. It was in fact a colourful sight. The king would present, as prize, honorary dresses and other objects to each of the villagers according to their rank and file and these prizes were taken gravely.

Then games and sports followed. Each tribe would compete their strength and skill in games like weightlifting, carrying heavyweights, race, shot put, etc. exhibiting their skill, strength, courage, endurance and agility. It must be mentioned that no Meiteis would participate in the games. When the games were wound up, a grand feast would be served, in which the hillmen indulged in drinking.

The king provided all their necessities such as food, accommodation, etc. properly. The chiefs of the hills and their followers would be served with flesh of meat of different species of animals specially arranged for the festival. The management of the festival including the catering and hospitality was handled by Haomacha Loisang in consultation with the Hao Lambus.

Two British writers namely R. Brown and Captain E. W. Dun, who were once posted in Manipur, wrote about Mera Haochongba in their books. In his book **Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur and the Hill Territories Under Its Rule**, R. Brown seemed to be awestruck by the huge crowd that gathered in the festival that had a lot of significance. He might have not expected to find such a festival in a hilly region where mostly tribals dwell. His appreciation of the festival is worth quoting. Here are his lines:

Hawchongba. - This festival called Hawchongba, in October, lasts for only one day; it is a gathering of the hill tribes under the Manipuri Government, and it is a curious sight on account of the great number of different tribes assembled, with curious dress and weapons, differing from each other on feature and language, but all unanimous in one particular, to get drunk as speedily and remain so as long as possible. The hillmen indulge in feats of strength before the raja, such as carrying heavy weights, &c. They also indulge in war dances and sham fights. The sports of the day conclude with a feast, at which they are regarded with the flesh of cows, buffaloes, dogs, cats, &c., which may have died in the valley. The flesh is dried and preserved on purpose of this feast.

The writing of the second British writer, Captain E. W. Dun is a similar copy of the above paragraph by R. Brown.

The festival has its own significance which shows the far-sighted vision of the king who had introduced it. The significance the festival can be listed as:

1. In the days of yore, the means of communication was very poor. As such, hill people in different hills did not have the facility to make friendships with one another. For example, it would be a very big problem for a Hillman living in Ukhrul to make friends with another hillman living in Churachandpur. As such they remained isolated from each other though they were subjects of the same king. However, with the introduction of this festival, there appeared the opportunity to gather and make merry even though it occurred once in a year.
2. It gives a platform for the skilled persons to show their strength and agility and get recognition.
3. It also gives a chance of cultural exchange among the people of Manipur.
4. It immensely helped in developing Manipur as a nation.
5. It gives the king an opportunity to have an observation and survey of his subject to see if their allegiance remains intact. This is a must for the king in order to rule peacefully.

Thus, the festival, though it lasts only one day, is very important for the state.

But, time has brought a change of wind in this festival. The festival Mera Haochongba has lost its original name and it has become Mera Houchongba. The meaning of these two names - Haochongba and Houchongba are not the same and quite different. It is not known why its name has been changed. It is feared that the significance of the festival may also disappear in due course of time. Efforts should be made to prevent changes in the significance of the festival.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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