



# Cultural Survival and Transformation: The Maibis of Manipur in a Changing World

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## ABSTRACT

The Maibis are female priestesses of the traditional Meetei religion known as Sanamahism. They occupy and continue to play a crucial role in the social, cultural and religious life of the Meeteis in Manipur. They are the ritual specialists, traditional healers, divine mediators, custodians of myths, dances, lore, and oral traditions. However, with the forces of modernisation, globalisation, and religious transformation, the Maibi tradition has undergone several changes at present. Drawing from traditional manuscripts, scholarly works, and articles, this paper examines the traditional roles of Maibis in a historical and cultural context. It also explores how the Maibis continue to negotiate, adapt, and maintain their traditional roles amidst shifting social values, religious pluralism, and state policies.

**Keywords:** *Sanamahism, Maibi, Women Priesthood, Indigenous religion, Cultural Transformation*

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## Introduction

The Maibi occupies an important ritual and cultural position among the Meetei community in Manipur. She serves as the spiritual mediator between humanity and the divine. The female priestesses of the traditional Sanamahi religion, Maibis are ritual specialists who perform religious rites in the Lai Haraoba festival. She also dances, chants, and narrates the creation myths and cosmology of the Meetei belief system during the festival. Maibis are custodians of Sanamahi religious rites, oral traditions, dances, and myths.

However, the fast-changing modern world has brought about significant transformation in the traditional institution of Maibi. The forces of modernization, combined with the spread of Vaishnavism and Christianity have altered the religious fabric of Manipur. The maibis have to face and adapt to the changing modern trend while continuing to maintain their traditional roles.

It is against the backdrop of these changes that this paper aims to examine the processes of cultural transformation, adaptation, and survival of the institution of Maibi.

## Methodology

The present study uses library-based research methodology drawing largely from available literature and secondary data relevant to the institution of Maibi. The approach is qualitative in nature, which aims to synthesise scholarly perspectives with empirical findings in order to arrive at informed conclusions. This study primarily uses data from secondary sources such as books, oral histories, and articles.

## Objectives

The major objective of this paper is to understand the origin of Sanamahi religion and the roles and responsibilities of the Maibis in preserving and perpetuating this indigenous religion. Further, it also aims to highlight the major challenges and issues that the institution of Maibi is facing at present and how it manages to overcome, adapt, and transform itself and survive the changes.

## Maibi in the context of Manipuri history and culture

The institution of Maibi flourished among the Meetei community, with its age-old culture, ancient traditions, rituals, and belief system, which is rooted in the mythology and cosmological worldview of

Sanamahism. Lai Haraoba is the most important ritual of the Meeteis and Maibi is the most significant performer in this ritual. Lai Haraoba festival is seen in Meitei-populated areas across the length and breadth of Manipur. Describing the multiple roles of a Maibi in Meitei society, Singh (2018) writes “A Maibi is like a female shaman, priestess, clairvoyant, ritual dancer, singer, fortune-teller, ritual expert, ritual healer, and one of the guardians of Meitei traditional religious lore”. Regarding the origin of the institution of Maibi, Singh (2018) writes “It has been reported that the institution of Maibi was there in the royal palace since the period of Meidingu Thawan Thaba, who was the ruler of the Meitei kingdom from 1195 to 1231AD. It is also reported that Chakpa Lamlang Amaibi was the oldest Maibi, who was also the head of the institution.” The Maibis also act as herbalists, engaging in healing, midwifery and ethnomedicine. Shamom (2012) writes, “Apart from being religious counsellors and providing oracles, *maibis*, with their knowledge of the functions of various herbs and vegetation found in Manipur – which they learn from more experienced *maibis*, although some claim to have discovered plant uses through a divine power – also act as healers and midwives.”

In the Lai Haraoba rituals, the oldest female Maibi is the leader or Guru and she is more important than her male counterpart and at the same time, only a female Maibi can be possessed by the Lai (deity), who can deliver the oracle. Thus, in a traditionally patriarchal society, Maibi enjoyed respect as well as legitimacy within the community. A Maibi usually undergoes rigorous training and apprenticeship under an “Ima Guru” (a senior and experienced Maibi) before she becomes fully acquainted with the life, knowledge and skills of a Maibi.

The reign of Meitei King Pamheiba from 1709 -1748 saw an unprecedented upheaval in the religious life of the Meitei community. Forced conversion into Hinduism, religious persecution and syncretism of the Meeteis and the Sanamahi religion took place during this period. All forms of Meitei beliefs, traditional institutions, about 120 sacred Puyas of Meeteis written by Meitei Maichous (Pundits) were collected and burnt (Gokulchandra, 2012; Kabui, 2003). Hence, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Vaishnavism either replaced or merged with Meitei traditional practices and beliefs in most parts of the valley and the role of Maibis relegated to the background. However, Lai Haraoba rituals continued unabated, preserving and maintaining a parallel religious system rooted in pre-Hindu beliefs. Thus, Singh (2018) writes, “Despite more than two and a half centuries of Hindu influence and dominance in the Meitei society and culture, the Maibis and Maibas, largely through this festival, have successfully preserved the essence of Meitei civilization, religion, culture, and worldview.”

### Cultural transformation and adaptation

In modern society, the growth of urbanisation, expansion of education and advancing technologies have brought about certain shifts in the way people viewed the institution of Maibi even though they still command respect in ritual context. Despite religious transformations, Maibis adapt and accommodate to the changing circumstances and continue to preserve their sacred traditions.

The emergence of an organization called “Apokpa Marup” in 1930, under an Assamese Meitei Hindu named Naorem Phulo, marked the beginning of the Sanamahi revival movement (Sanatomba, 2012). This was followed by the establishment of “Meitei Marup” in 1945 in Manipur, which began propagating the old faith by denouncing the evils of Hinduism (Sanatomba, 2012). The recent interest in reviving the Sanamahi religion has sparked renewed interest in the activities, roles, and contributions of Maibis in Meitei society. Thus, Sanamahi revival movement and initiatives taken up by some scholars, individuals, and cultural organisations in Manipur continue to uplift the Maibis.

Today, many Maibis took active participation in educational programmes such as workshops, seminars, cultural exchange programmes, positioning themselves as well as reframing their knowledge within academic and cultural heritage discourses. Further, social media and digital platforms portrays the performances of Maibis not merely as acts of traditional ritual but also as an important cultural heritage of the Meeteis. These clearly show that Maibis actively negotiate and adapt to changing circumstances and maintain their age-old position in society.

### Contemporary Challenges

Referring to the process of becoming a Maibi or Priestess, Hodson (1993) maintained that any woman who had a ‘Call’ from the deity may become a priestess, and her incoherent language and trembling are evidence of being the chosen one. One of the major problems that the Maibi tradition is continually facing today is the decreasing number of younger women readily joining the profession. This declining apprenticeship may be due to the demanding and rigorous training and sacrifice with limited financial support. Further, although the maibis are respected yet many families do not approve or encourage their daughters to become a maibi. In this regard, Samom (2012) writes, “the awakened woman in the nascent stages of becoming a *maibi* is often stigmatised. Her family will keep her hidden from public view out of the fear that if her awakening becomes known, then no one will marry her. Even though they’re revered, there are superstitions linked to *maibis*, for instance, one is that the husband of a *maibi* will not live long. The family’s fear is fuelled by the fact that maibis consider themselves married to the gods, and although many of them get married, or become awakened after marriage and having children, the call to serve their gods often supersedes their roles as wives and mothers.”

While the Maibis dedicate themselves to the service of deities, their only source of livelihood comes from the service of the deities, donations, offerings and fees given by devotees for performing rituals (Singh, 2018). The Maibis do not bargain for the fees they receive, and they always accept whatever their clients offer to them with gratitude (Singh, 2018). Singh (2018) further observed that many Maibis are sole earning members in their families and they support their families by the nominal resources they get in lieu of their services. Thus, lack of a steady income is another major issue Maibis are facing today. The rapid expansion of modern formal education, modern medicine, and science has emphasized the importance of rationalism, often dismissing ritual practices as superstitions and devaluing traditional healing practices and rituals.

### **Cultural commodification and tourism**

The living rituals and traditional institutions of the Maibis are also being promoted frequently for tourism-related performances and cultural displays. Hence, the Maibis also found themselves maintaining a delicate balance between commodification of the Meetei cultural heritage and the need to adapt to the ongoing transformation.

### **Modern healthcare, Education and Urbanisation**

Modern education, professions, and aspirations also gave a big blow to the traditional healing practices of the Maibas and Maibis. The traditional knowledge of healing using indigenous medicinal plants and herbs, preparation of the concoctions, and methods of application were usually kept as a family secret and were passed down from one generation to the next. However, several factors, including the aging of healing practitioners, changing patterns of diseases, and the preference of younger generations for modern occupations, are slowly fading traditional healing practices, which are on the verge of extinction (Meetei, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The Maibi is an inevitable stakeholder in the religious, cultural, and social landscape of Manipur. The institution of Maibi in Manipur represents a vivid instance of cultural resilience in the midst of modern transformation. The continuity of Maibi tradition shows the dynamic relation between tradition and modernity. On one hand, various forces of modernization continually challenge the very existence of this age-old tradition, yet on the other hand, it also brings about new avenues for recognition and reinterpretation of traditional and indigenous knowledge. Religious revivalism, modernization, educational and health care expansion and cultural modification are reshaping the world of Maibi in complex ways. The continued existence of Maibi is a testimony not merely of survival but also of creative transformation and continuity of cultural identity in contemporary Manipur.

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