‘Pleasing the Deities’: A Religious Festival of the Meiteis of Manipur

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Abstract: This article attempts to make a critical appraisal of ‘Lai Haraoba’, an indigenous religious festival of the Meitei people living in Manipur, India. It seeks to get a deeper understanding of how this religious festival plays a significant role in the socio-cultural lives of the people. Data for this study were collected through interview and observation methods. Fieldwork in this connection was conducted during the period from February to August 2018 at Uyal village in the Thoubal district of Manipur. Meitei indigenous religion began to experience Hindu influence in the 18th century AD when Meitei kings adopted Hinduism and propagated it to their subjects. Despite Hindu impact upon the Meitei society and its culture, the festival of Lai Haraoba has been maintaining its indigenous character through its ritual functionaries. This religious festival is closely connected with various cultural elements and belief system of the Meitei people. It also helps them get away from stressful daily lives and stay connected with divine service. Furthermore, the festival serves the social function of maintaining a cohesive structure. It encourages integration, conformity, and belongingness by bringing community members onto a common platform and participating in collective activities. People also have deep respect and reverence for this festival and wish to preserve their forefathers’ traditions. The festival is a living tradition helping the people stay connected to their roots.

Key words: Manipur, culture, religious festival, cultural identity, social solidarity.