



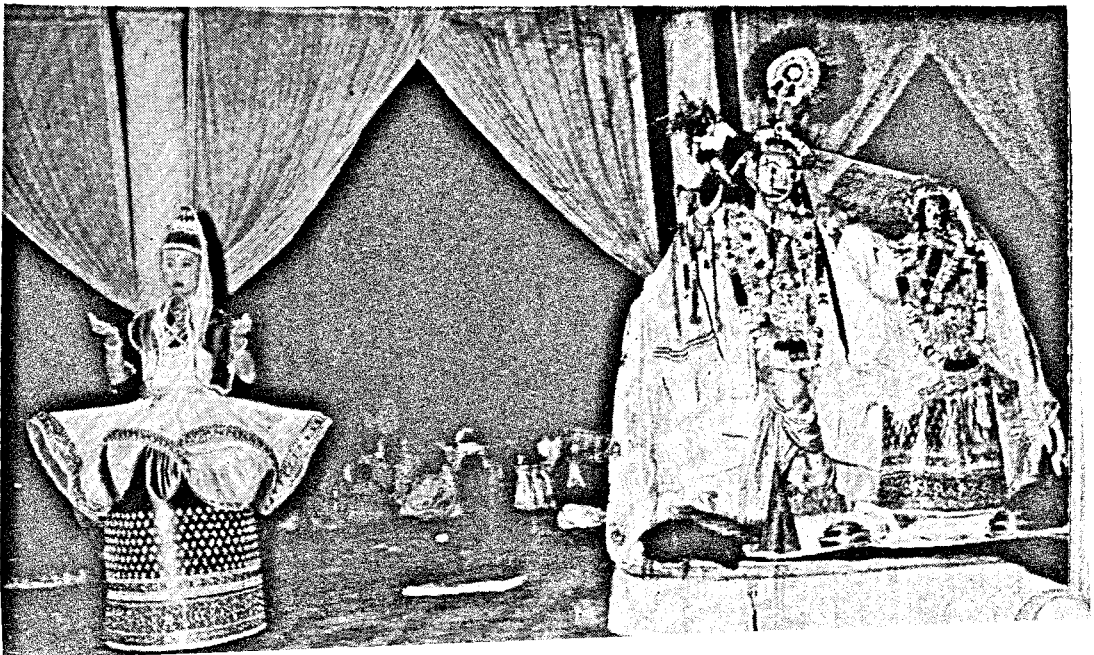
# DANCE AND RITUAL IN MANIPUR

*Text and Photographs*

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*Getting into the Ras costume.*

*Ras Mandap of the Govindji temple, Imphal, where  
Sakhis dance round the images of Srikrishna and Radha.*





*While one Sakhi dances the Ras others await their turn squatting inside their stiff and colourful skirts.*



*The Ras dance, with Srikrishna, Radha and the gopis.*



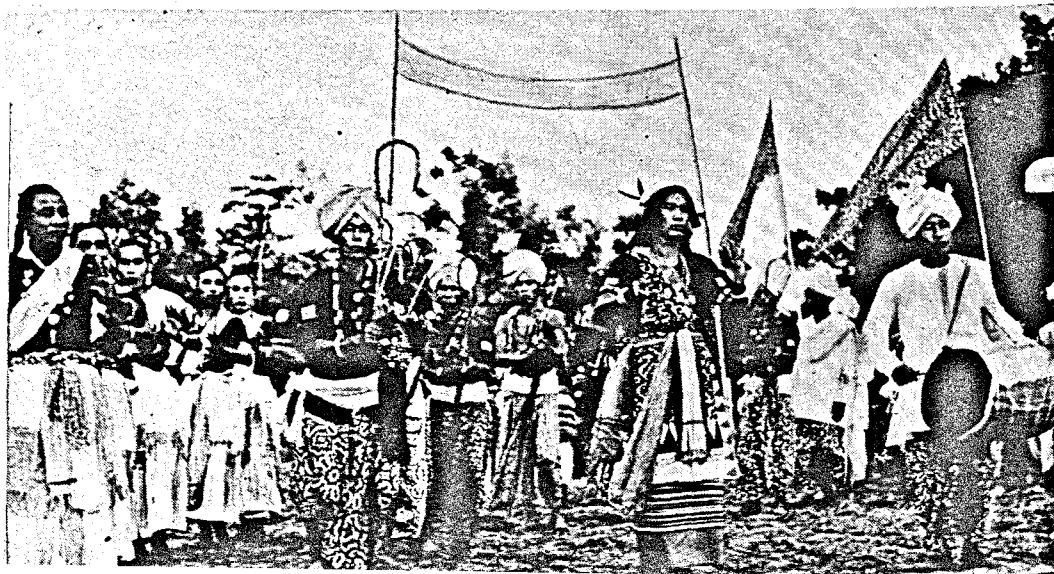


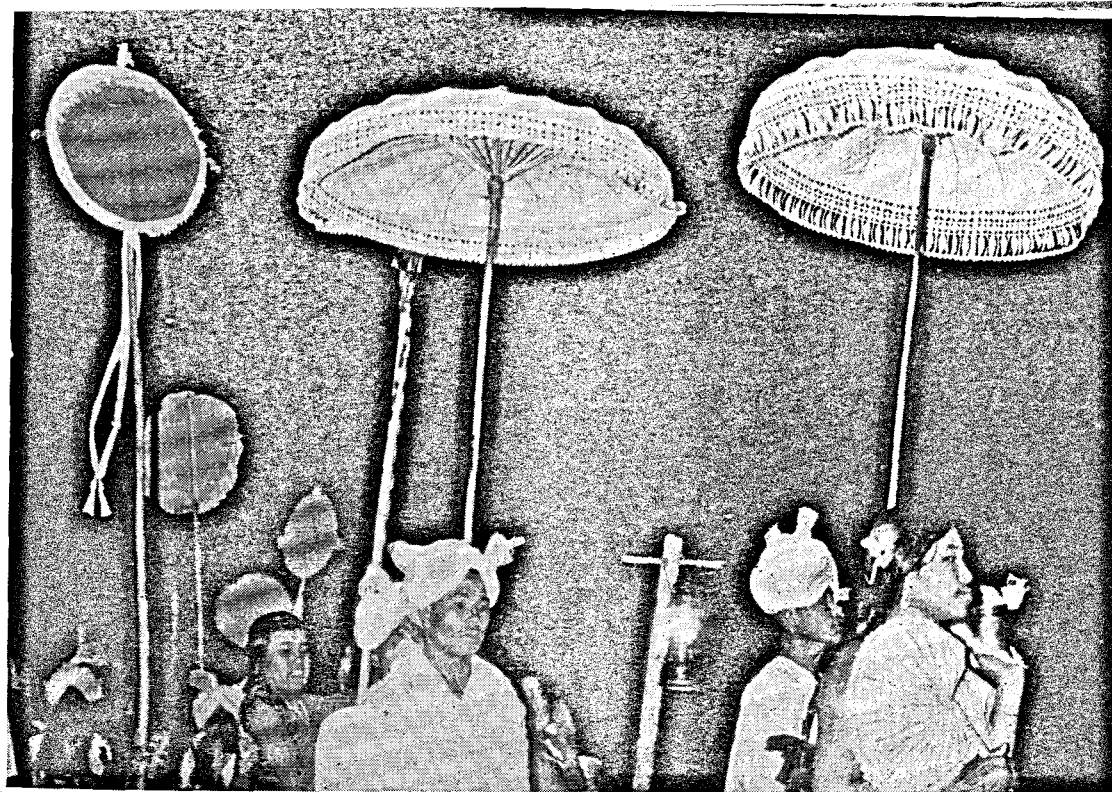
Left :

*One of the hundreds of Umang Lais, or shrines of native deities, before which the Lai Haraoba dance is performed.*

Below :

*The Lai Haraoba procession is headed by musicians, drummers, and maibas and maibis—priests and priestesses professing the old Meithei religion.*





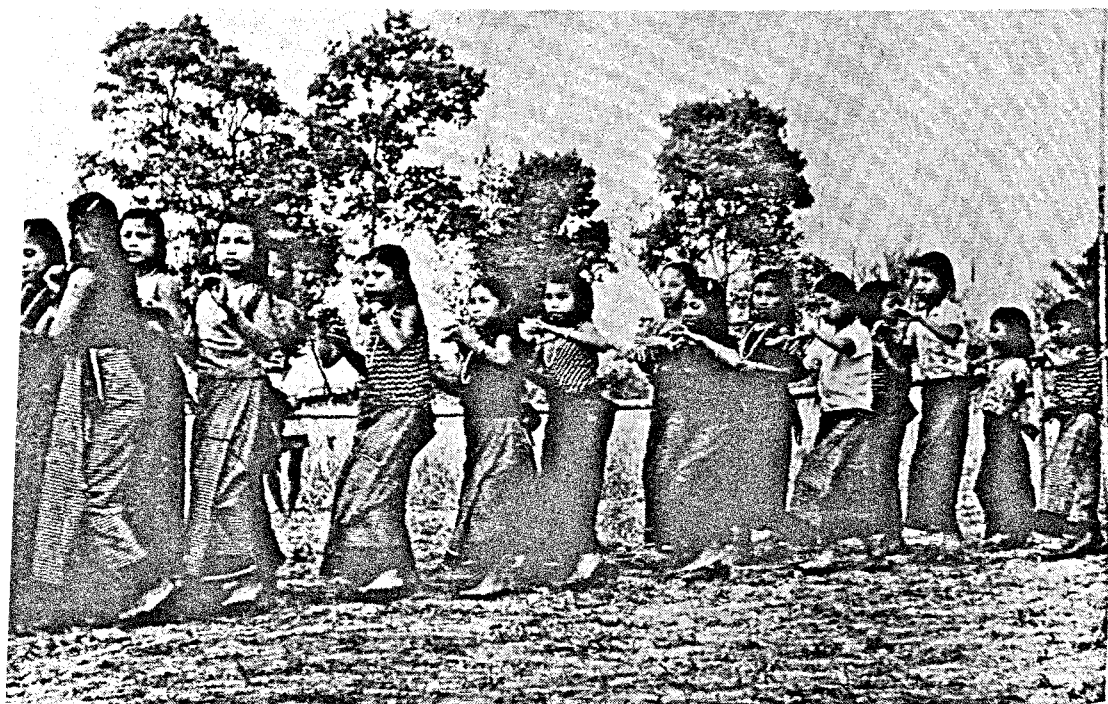
*Carriers of sacred emblems, fans, vessels, parasols and banners  
comprise an essential part of the Lai Haraoba pageant.*

*The ancient gods of the Meitheis are propitiated through the Maibi Jagoi,  
danced by professionals whose tradition is rather like that of the devadasis.*





*Above : The Lai Haraoba usually commences late in the afternoon and continues till the early night. The proceedings go on for days together. Below : The rear of the Lai Haraoba procession is composed of young girls who arrange themselves according to age, in diminishing order. Right : Pena, string-and-bow instrument, peculiar to Manipur, an essential to the Lai Haraoba accompaniment.*









Left :

*Khamba Thoibi, a dance based on the celebrated lovers of that name in Manipur legend.*

Below :

*In another version of the Lai Haraoba, men dressed as ancient warriors and women as princesses dance together.*

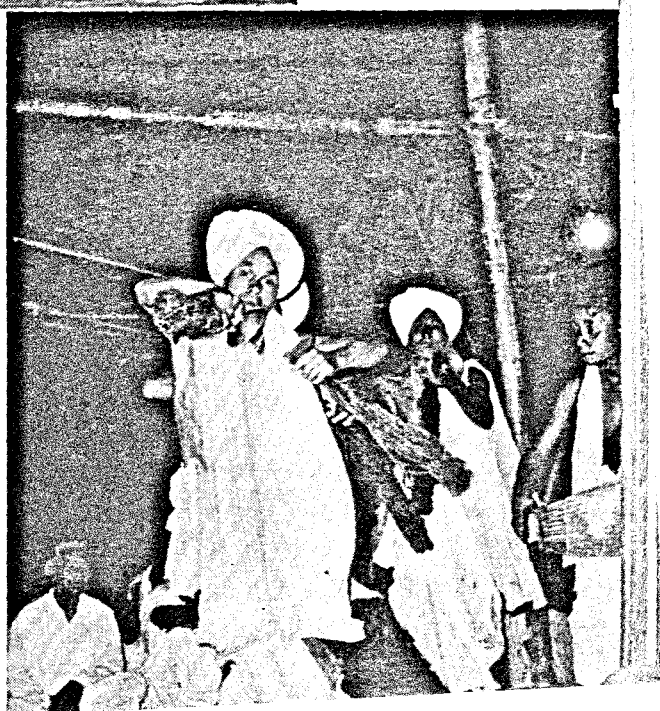






*Above: The Sankeertan, a ritual in dance and song, is performed on all occasions of religious significance, such as birth, marriage, death and Shradha.*

*Right: The Kartal Cholom, a part of Sankeertan, is danced with cymbals in the hands.*





*The Pung Cholom, a part of the Sankeertan, danced with a drum, by a single dancer or by as many as a hundred performers.*

*Nestling securely in the fond embrace of the rugged ridges that demarcate the Indo-Burma border on one side and the Assam Hills Districts on the other, the tiny State of Manipur has, through the ages, evolved and preserved its own distinct traditions of art and culture, including a variety of dances and related rituals, which collectively go under the name of 'Manipuri Dance'. Dance and music verily run in the blood of the Manipuri people, and it is rare, indeed, to find a Manipuri who cannot dance or sing.*

*The Manipuris have always been a simple and an intensely devout people, content to live in a world of their own. They have a rich lore of legend and mythology, and this includes a number of stories which reflect the people's love for dance and music. Song and dance are, in fact, so inextricably woven into the pattern of their life that the Manipuris regard themselves as having descended from the Gandharvas, the celestial musicians and dancers.*

*The very origin of their dance is ascribed by the Manipuris to celebrated deities. Legend has it that once, when Lord Krishna was enjoying the mystic 'Ras' dance in the company of his beloved Radha and other milkmaids, Lord Siva and his consort Parvati happened to see this performance. Delighted, Siva and Parvati decided to arrange a similar entertainment for themselves. Siva went out in search of a suitable place, and finally selected Manipur, and it is here that he and Parvati performed and enjoyed their 'Ras' dance.*

*Countless centuries later, the same dance was performed again, but this time by two mortals, Prince Khamba and Princess Thoibi, believed by the Manipuris to be the incarnations of Siva and Parvati respectively. This dance came to be known as 'Lai Haraoba', which is the most ancient dance of Manipur, performed to this day.*

*The principal dances of Manipur today are the 'Ras' dances. The tradition of these dances began early in the 18th century, but they attained maturity and perfection only about forty years later, during the time of King Bhagyachandra, a great lover and patron of the arts. There are four main types of 'Ras' namely 'Maharas', 'Kunjaras', 'Vasantaras' and 'Nityaras' but there are also certain off-shoots, such as 'Nartak' and 'Nritya'. The Ras dances all pertain to Lord Krishna and all the performers are women and girls, except in the case of Krishna who is sometimes impersonated by a young boy. Closely related to the 'Ras' dances are the 'Parengs' which are generally performed at the beginning of a*



'Ras'. There are several kinds of 'Parengs', the more popular ones being 'Brihdaban Pareng' and 'Bhangi Pareng', and the themes of all of them revolve round Krishna.

The different dances are intended to be performed at different times in the year, and in Manipur such performances invariably take place in the 'Nat Mandap', a dance hall annexed to practically every temple in the State. The costume of the dancers is colourful and glittering in the extreme. While Krishna generally appears in a yellow dhoti and wearing various ornaments and garlands of flowers and a crown bedizened with peacock feathers, his companions—Radha and the milkmaids—wear red or green bulging skirts studded with bits of mirror, dark velvet blouses and flimsy, translucent white veils which cover the face.

The 'Ras' dances of Manipur are essentially lyrical, and they all have extremely graceful and liquid, even sinuous, movements, coupled with soft and light steps in which the heel practically never touches down. The dancers for the most part sway to the sides or spin at one place, with the hands close to the sides with effortless ease and with a more or less fixed, benign, angelic expression on the face. The central figure of the dance is, of course, Krishna, and as his companions dance round him they often take poses and positions which give the effect of well-composed tableaux. Like the dance, the accompanying music, too, is long-drawn and languorous.

Next to the 'Ras', the important dance of Manipur is the 'Lai Haraoba'. The main performance of 'Lai Haraoba' takes place in April or May every year, in the village of Moirang, hallowed by its association with the immortal lovers Khamba and Thoibi, to whom reference has already been made.

When performed in the traditional manner, the 'Lai Haraoba' can be described as an elaborate ritual punctuated with various dances. The performances generally take place on the village greens and in front of the shrines of local, animistic gods. Every day, from about three in the afternoon till sundown, men and women, young and old, dance together, and the entire celebration may last ten days, or even more. The male dancers appear dressed as ancient warriors, while the females don the attire of the temple priestesses of Manipur. In its actual rendering, the 'Lai Haraoba' attempts, in a vague and rambling manner, to unfold and re-enact the story of the creation of the world, and this it does

*through a series of loose-knit movements and dances, some of which are symbolic, some suggestive, and some even lewed or ludicrous.*

*Apart from the 'Ras' and 'Lai Haraoba', the Manipuri dance also incorporates certain numbers, known as 'Choloms', which are quite vigorous and which often display quick and sharp movements of the body and dexterous footwork. Important in this category are the 'Mridanga Cholom' which is performed by several men, all of whom dance together and play the drum as they dance, and the 'Kartal Cholom', in which a number of men or women dance together, all the while showing the patterns of rhythm by striking small tasselled cymbals which they hold in their hands.*