



DANCES OF MANIPUR: UNDERSTANDING THIGALNAW DANCE OF THE VAIPHEIS

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to study and understand *Thigalnaw* Dance of the Vaiphei tribe is a very unique one in its origin, composite style, symbolic meaning, and popularity. It articulates the origin, symbolic meaning, significance and development of the dance and also the popularity of the dance in the contemporary period and also brings forth its significance in understanding the socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe. It also pushes forward the need to give due recognition by the concern authorities (local or state government) and take steps to preserve and promote this beautiful asset of the state. The materials are collected from the review of related literature, records of Leilon Vaiphei Cultural Troupe and personal interview.

KEYWORDS

burial ceremony, *Thigalnaw* dance, Vaiphei, traditional dance

INTRODUCTION

The hills and valleys of Manipur are adorned with rich traditions and cultural heritage. Traditional dances contribute significantly to this richness and beauty. Important festivals of the state such as the Sangai Festival for the whole Manipur, *Chavang Kut* of the Kukis, *Lui Ngaimi* of the Nagas, etc. are important occasions in which denizens come together to converge and showcase their rich cultural. Traditional dances have been the center of attractions for such celebrations. Traditional dance are dances which naturally evolved, rather than having been created, established or define artificially or arbitrarily, and handed down through generations with cultural elements in it. Most of these dances depict their culture, beliefs, and occupations and are very close to nature. Each tribal community takes pride in showcasing them as it means showcasing their rich cultural identity. The tribals of Manipur have many popular traditional dances peculiar to their tribes. However, if not for few tribal dances like *Hansengav*, *Toonaga Lomma*, *Heng Naga Toona*, *Cheraw*, (NCERT 2017, Gajrani 2004), other dances are rarely documented, studied in depth nor systematically popularized. They are left unexplored and remained confined to the particular tribe, mostly unknown to the outside world. As a result there are many indigenous practices; knowledge, traditions, and culture at stake because of the fast modernization which affects all sections of the society. The scenario is the same for most tribal communities across the globe. In addition to this concern, some of the traditional dances have also become so much distorted that they are very far from the original versions. There is also the growing popularity of new styles of cultural dances, as they termed it, Kuki-Chin groups, in the form of choreography, dancing to the tune of some contemporary patriotic songs. While appreciating the initiative taken by the youngsters to promote and popularize their cultural identity through those dances it is also disheartening to see the original traditional dances of the tribes being neglected or forgotten by them. They often do not take to heart to learn original traditional dances which are rich in culture, meaning and symbols. If the rich traditional dances are not studied, documented and preserve properly there is a growing fear that it will slowly lose ground in the face of modernization. All these issues call for systematic studies of the traditional dances to preserve and popularize them without losing its inherent traditional essence and significance.

Understanding the Concept of Dance

The urge for movement in human beings is a natural phenomenon that already started in the womb. When vocal communications in the form of languages were still in-existent signs and symbols, movements and gestures might have been used as the only and powerful means of communication. "Movement precedes language and thought and gesture immediately emerges as the means for expressing the human need for communication," wrote Chaiklin & Hilda (2009). The spontaneous movements and gestures in a coordinated manner took the form of dance. Thus, dance can be understood as the codified form of those movements and gestures.

In common parlance, dance is often defined as a way of human expression through movement. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English by A.S Hornby (7th Edition) explains dance as a series of movements and steps that are usually performed to

music. However, (Pusnik, 2009) opined that limiting dance just to the physical component overlooked much any symbolic meaning and multiple roles that dances have for the society in which they appear. Anthropologists view dance as a cultural practice and social ritual whereby dance is seen as a means of aesthetic pleasure and a means for establishing ties and specific structures in the community (Radcliffe-Brown 1994). Highlighting the other symbolic meanings of dance apart from physical movement Pusnik quoted Polhemus, "Societies create dances and that dance is actually a 'metaphysics of culture', because a culture of specific society is embodied in the forms of material and physical culture, and the latter is also stylized and schematized in the form of dance." A deeper understanding of dances will lead us to know that it goes beyond the functional purposes of the movements. "It expresses emotions, moods or ideas; tell a story; serve religious, political, economic, or social needs; or simply be an experience that is pleasurable, exciting, or aesthetically valuable (Haokip, 2013)."

A community is identified and differentiated based on their cultural traits and indigenous practices. Royce (1982) in the Anthropology of Dance demonstrated that social identities can be coded in dance and see the inseparability of dance from social and cultural context. Many studies on culture take place in the realm of either text or objects, the former in literary forms and the latter in historical monuments or arts or visuals. "By enlarging our studies of bodily "texts" to include dance in all of its forms - among them social dance, theatrical performance, and ritualized movement we can further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movements (Desmond, 1994)". In the Far East, which includes India, dance has always been part of the religious and spiritual life of the people (Chaiklin & Hilda (2009). The domestic life of Indians is characterized by the presence of dance and music at every stage. "Dances are an important part of tribal life and are intricately interwoven and embedded in the social and cultural life of different communities in Mizoram," wrote Robin (2018). The same goes for the people of Manipur.

Understanding Thigalnaw Dance

Thigalnaw Dance is one of the traditional dances of the Vaipheis who are a recognized tribe under the Constitution of India under 'Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe Lists (Modification) Order 1956' in the state of Manipur. They are found in different parts of North East India, Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and in the Kabaw valley and Chin State of Myanmar. The tribe is blessed with many beautiful traditional dances such as *phitlam*, *salu lap lam*, *dakcha lam*, *thazinglap lam*, *sukta lam*, *lampak lam*, *thigalnaw lam*, etc. The Zillai (Vaiphei Students' Association) General Headquarters took the initiative to preserve the original versions of these dances by producing a documentary video entitled '*Vaiphei Nam Lam*' which was released on 31st May, 2019. The dances are performed to the accompaniment of songs and traditional instruments like *phit* (bamboo whistle), *guashem* (similar to bagpiper), *khuang* (drum) *dakpi/dakcha/dakbu* (gong/s) *lhemlhei*, *sial ki* (mithun's horn) *pengkul* (trumpet), etc. Among these *thigalnaw lam* with its unique composite style, beauty and grandeur has been enthralling.

Traditional dances can take the form of art, a ritual, and recreation. Ritual dances are also called Religious dances because of their purpose and meaning connected to religious beliefs. *Thigalnaw lam* is a ritual dance connected with death ceremonies. To understand the dance it is important to know what *thigalnaw* is and how the dance evolved from it. In the *dawibom ho Khang* i.e. pre-Christian era, of the Vaipheis there were many beliefs, practices, and rituals connected with death. *Thigalnaw* was one of such practices. S. Prim Vaiphei (2014) explained *thigalnaw* in the following way. "The Vaiphei traditionally bury their dead towards the end of the front courtyard. Once the grave and coffin were ready the dead body was put inside the coffin and '*thithaak na*' literally means '*farewell to the dead*' ceremony took place. After that, the dead body was carried from the house to the grave. Some men (minimum two), holding a shield on the left hand and spear or bow on the right hand, went in front of the coffin. As in battle, they protect themselves with the shield humming '*hum...hum*'. Behind them was the *than lam hawngpa* meaning *grave way opener*. They were followed by the people carrying the coffin and funeral party. The practice is called '*thigal naw*'." Mr. Henkhulun of Leilon Vaiphei Village in an interview said, "*Thigalnaw* was done at three points – the first one as they move out of the house, the second one in the mid-way and the third and last at the cemetery or burial place. He further stated the belief and purpose of *thigalnaw* saying, "The Vaipheis believed that after death the soul of the dead travels to '*mithikhua*' meaning '*village of the dead people or heaven*'. On their way *Kulsammu*, a mythological female evil character, used to disturb them and delay their journey. The purpose of *thigalnaw* was to safely reach the soul to *mithikhua* without being disturbed by the *Kulsammu*. It was performed only for men who achieved a respectable position in the society or those who performed *chawn* during their lifetime." From the practice of *thigalnaw* evolved the *thigalnaw* dance, a combination of two words *thigalnaw* meaning '*driving off the death's enemy*' and '*lam*' meaning '*dance*'. Therefore '*thigalnaw dance*', technically means '*dance of driving off the death's enemy*'. The death's enemy here is believed to be the evil spirits which according to the traditional beliefs have entered the dead person's body and took control of it. The purpose of the *thigalnaw* was to drive off that evil spirits from the dead person. After the evil spirits are driven away it is believed that they cannot enter again into the person's body anymore. Not only that when there is plague or epidemic suspected to affect the village or locality the dance was performed to prevent the disease from affecting the village (Thanglenlal & Vaiphei (2010). A clearer picture and description of the dance is also given by Joseph Suantak (2010) in his book 'The Vaipheis; Their History and Culture'. He not only explains what the dance is about but also described the steps of the dance and how it was usually performed. As given by him "*thigalnaw* is a kind of farewell dance usually performed before the burial of a dead male member of a village who attained a prominent figure in the social stratum. The dance would be performed only by selected adult males of the village the number of which should not exceed twenty. Traditionally, as rule, dancers are separated into two rows, if twenty, ten each in a row. One their right hands one spear each, and on the left hand a shield made up of buffalo hides, mithun hide, or matted bamboo and cane. When the dance took place it is called '*Gal lam homna*' meaning, '*clearing/opening the path*'. The dancers from side to side shuttle to and fro with short steps, crouching slightly they leaped and jerked their feet backward bumping their buttocks and would grumble "*Hum...hum...hum*". At the same time, waving their shields and spears to and fro, up and down. Along the way to the burial ground, the dancers led the funeral party and they ceased dancing only when they reached the *khull/than* or grave where the rest of the rites were discharge by the *thiampu* (minister). *Thigalnaw* dance is accompanied by all types of primitive (prefer traditional) musical instruments, but no single rap, dirge or waltz except the grumbling sound of '*Hum*'. Strictly speaking, the dance and music make the atmosphere eerie and appalling. Yet, the dance was alluring to the eyes, and the thundering and creaking noise of the instruments were sweet and lulling to the ears."

The dance in its present form (as performed by Leilon Vaiphei Cultural Troupe) requires about 30 men (20 as the main dancers, 3 as bawler, 3 to beat the small gongs, 2 to beat the big gong and 2 to lead the singing) and five to seven ladies, and a full set of dancing material. The number of dancers can vary, except for the number of main dancers which should not exceed twenty, as there is no hard and fast rule to have fixed number of dancers. The dancing materials includes a dummy coffin, big gong, set of small gongs, drum, spear, shield, a big wine pot, bamboo water jars, bamboo cups, a traditional gun, a log of wood, dao, bamboo basket, etc. .

The men are dressed like a warrior with *puandum* wrapped on their

waist and shoulders, head covered with traditional headgear, and wear *sa aw*, a tradition necklace for men, on their necks. They hold spears with their right hands and shields with the other. The women dressed with a traditional wrapper called *ponve* wrapped from the chest and wears a traditional necklace called *khi*. Their hairs are braided and wrapped around their heads.

As the stage or dancing floor opens a man is seen bawling with a gun (*thiknang*) in his hand. He is the person who performs the role of '*than lam hawngpa*' (grave way opener) in the traditional burial ceremony. He weeps; shouts and chants saying "*Lamlon lamlon lamlon...Kapu ahung e kapu ahunge, Kua man akham thei lo kapu ahung hi... Tak chapa*" Free translation "*Lamlon* is a word use in bawling. *My grandpa is coming, my grandpa is coming. None can stop his coming, my grandpa is coming... Tak chapa* is a word used in a bawling. They are followed by two men carrying a dummy coffin accompanied by the main dancers and the drummer. These men take the role of the men who performed *thigalnaw* in the traditional burial ceremony. They are followed by two/three ladies, one carrying wine pot in a basket and the other carrying water pots with the baskets, singers and gong beaters. They all entered in bereavement and some even weeping for the death. The dance is performed to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments like drum, big gong and set of small gongs. The *dakbu* comprise of three small gongs with different pitches and when beaten in a particular rhythm gives a particular tune. The Leilon Vaiphei Cultural Troupe with their innovations put lyrics to the tune and sings during the dance. The lyrics goes like "*Athi lhammol pheilam a, luanlhi tawh khau bang chiang e*" meaning '*to the plain road of the dead's cemetery, let me go with tears like a rope.*'"

The dancers are separated into two rows, if twenty, ten each in a row. One their right hands one spear each, and on the left hand a shield made up of buffalo hides, mithun hide, or matted bamboo and cane. The dancers from side to side shuttle to and fro with short steps, crouching slightly they leaped and jerked their feet backward bumping their buttocks and would grumble "*Hum...hum...hum*". At the same time, waving their shields and spears to and fro, up and down. The dancers dance with much love for the dead person and with a sense of anger and aggression to the evil spirits that killed and enter the person's body. Three men keep bawling (*kitom*). With a *dao* (knife) in their hands, they cry, chant and cut whatever item that is in front of them out of anger to the evil spirit and sense of love for the deceased. Amidst their bawling, they shout and question in anger "*Namtim Khawvaiphei laiyah bang ahem eithat a hi. Bang ati hit thi jeng thei kahi amua?*" Free translation, "*Who has killed me in Khawvaiphei? How is it that I can just die like this?*" There are other words utter or chanted by the bawlers like, "*Namtim Khawvaiphei laiyah, bang ati kapu/kapa eitha peh jeng-u hem? Thingbul suangbul kalho khel ahem kapu eitha peh jeng u?*" Free Translation, "*Why and how did they kill my grandpa/father in this Khawvaiphei? What mistake have I committed that you just killed by grandpa/father this way?*" The bawler then cries and chants this line, "*Aw, kha e eingai ten la aw...navplen khuangvo eitin tin, keila aw... dalen khuangvo kahi e.*" Free translation, "*Those who hear me from far might think that I am beating the drum of merriment, but alas! I am only beating the drum of bereavement.*" The dead person being the descendant of Pu Suantak, the chief of Khawvaiphei, the bawler cannot accept the fact that death can take away his life easily. According to the Vaiphei history, Khawvaiphei was a very big and prominent village in Chin-Hills, Burma (now Myanmar). It was a village where all nations (the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups) once lived (Prim, 2014). The ladies distribute wine to the dancers and bawlers. They also console the men not to cry and mourn over the dead person saying, "*Kap kiuvo nauapa, athi masa chu chawng masa ahi e*" meaning "*Don't cry brother, those who died first will get embalm first.*" In the course of the dance, the man with the gun chants some words and pulls the trigger of the gun to drive off the evil spirit and to open the way for the spirit of the deceased. In this way, they bellowed over the death of their loved one. (The description of the dance here is according to the dance performed on 1st November 2013 during the State Level Kut celebration and ZoFest 2018.)

'We recognize different cultural groups through the distinctive movement and dances that each has evolved relevant to its geography and way of life (Chaiklin & Hilda, 2009) and *thigalnaw lam* of the Vaiphei speaks volume about their distinctive culture and beliefs. A careful observation and analysis of the dance will help one to recount and understand the traditional practice of *thigalnaw* unraveled through the dance. It also helps one to appreciate the rich culture and tradition;

beliefs and practices of the tribe being manifested in it. The dancers are taught not only the movements but also the story, myth, belief and cultural symbols behind the dance. This knowledge could bring out the true spirit of the dance in the dancers. One also gets goosebumps and is filled with awe in seeing the dancers performing in full gusto.

In Manipur, this dance is mostly performed and popularized by the Leilon Vaiphei Cultural Troupe. The troupe has been dancing in various places and occasions and begged trophies and laurels. The troupe performed at the State Level Kut Celebration at 1st Manipur Rifles Ground, Imphal in 2013 and Thomas Ground, Kangpokpi, 2018 both organized by State Level Kut Celebration Committee. On both the occasions the troupe received an excellence award from the Kut committee. They received another award for excellent performance in the Cultural Meet held on 16th May 2013 conducted by Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council. In 2014 and 2018 the troupe got an excellence award in the All Manipur Tribals Cultural Meet held at Tribal Research Institute, Imphal. The troupe danced at the 70th Zomi Namni Celebration 2018 at Lamka Public ground and in the same year in December they performed during ZoFest held at Reiek Village, Mamit District, Mizoram organized by Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) mesmerized the delegates who come from different parts of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The latest award won by the troupe was the First prize (cash and citation) in the Cultural Dance Display Category on the 70th Republic Day State Level Celebration, 2019 at Imphal. Apart from these the troupe had performed at various festivals and functions of the tribe like *thazing lap*, *awl-len*, Zillai Conferences and other state-level festivals and functions (Kamminlal, n.d). One may question why only the Leilon Vaiphei cultural troupe got the privilege of dancing? Well, the complexity of the dance requires vigorous training of so many men and women and also the materials used are difficult to carry around. This herculean task could not be managed by any simple group.

CONCLUSION

Aristotle, in the Poetics (translated by Ingram Bywater and published in 1920), stated dance as a 'rhythmic movement whose purpose is to represent men's characters as well as what they do and suffer.' *Thigalnaw lam* is a symbolic representation of the Vaipheis' religious beliefs on death and ceremonies related to it. It is not just simply a combination of a few steps or movements. It is rather the representation of the rich Vaiphei culture, beliefs, and identity. The uniqueness of the dance lies with the fact that no other community, not even the cognate tribes, has a dance similar to this. It uniquely belongs only to the Vaipheis. Due to the change of faith from *dawibom* (a kind of animism) to Christianity, the beliefs on death and practice on burial ceremony has undergone tremendous changes. This change has also affected the *thigalnaw lam*. The dance which was supposedly performed during burial ceremonies has now moved to the stage; from a ritual dance to recreational dance to some extent; from the village level to the state and national level and so on. The role of Leilon Vaiphei Cultural Troupe in nurturing and popularizing the dance is highly commendable. Unfortunately this culturally rich and aesthetically pleasing dance is still yet to find its place in the list of important dances of Manipur. It will be a very much appreciative step for the government both at the local and central to give due recognition to beautiful and important dance and preserve its cultural richness. The preservation and promotion the dance will enrich the cultural richness of the state and the country.

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