

Chaam Dance The Ancient Art Form of Sikkim



Ashish Shankar (Sunar)

Research Scholar, Department of Music, Sikkim University

Abstract

Art forms including dance, music, handicraft, theatre, etc. are prevalent throughout prehistoric communities. The lives of Indian people are inextricably linked to dance folk music and other artistic forms. The indigenous ideas and feelings are evidently represented in their artistic creations. This paper is about the study of one of the Ancient Art form in Sikkim "Chaam Dance". Chaam Dance is a colorful masked and costumed dance that is connected to Buddhist festivals and some sects of Tibetan Buddhism. The dance is accompanied by music performed in the monasteries by monks on traditional instruments. Libraries, online databases, published materials including books and journal articles, participant observation and interviews were some of the resources used for this study. As the traditional dances are not written down and are transferred from person to person through rigorous practice, Chaam is in danger owing to the dwindling number of monks. Many academics believe that Chaam will disappear over the next 100 years as families in the Himalayan region are shrinking and fewer kids are becoming monks. There is a risk of losing the ceremonial art form of the Chaam because there are no written records of them. Therefore, the Chaam could vanish completely if it is not sent or recorded. Therefore, studying Chaam must be given top attention.

Keywords :- Chaam Dance, Buddhist, monasteries, monks, Sikkim

Research Paper

Introduction

Sikkim was an independent kingdom ruled by the Chogyals until 1975. It is the 8th north-eastern state and 22nd state of India and is rich in both bio-diversity and culture. It is regarded as holy land blessed by Mt. Kanchenjunga. According to the tradition popular in Sikkim Guru Padmasambhava is said to have stepped in Sikkim which makes the land purified. We find different communities, culture, religion and customs especially Bhutia, Lepchas and Nepalese, they intermingle freely in Sikkim, and some are in different stages of development, some are at the verge of assimilation and others at different stages of extinction, thus, very difficult to segregate their original belief system. (Gurung)

In the eighth century AD, Guru Padmasambhava brought Mahayan Buddhism to Sikkim. Buddhism was declared the official state religion, and monasteries, hermitages, and stupas were constructed under the patronage of the Chogyals of Sikkim. The majority of Sikkimese Buddhists belong to the Sakyapa, Kagyupa, and Nyingmapa sects of Mahayana Buddhism, which are

also known as the Red Hat Sects. Later immigrants from Tibet, on the other hand, are followers of the Mahayana Buddhist Gelukpa sect also known as the Yellow Hat Sect. Mahayana Buddhism is practiced by a portion of the Gurungs, Tamangs, Lepchas, Sherpas, and Newars also known as Shakyas among the fourteen hill tribe races of Sikkim, Bhutia, and Tamangs. (Subba)

Buddhism is a well developed religion, and plenty of Buddhist literature is available in Sikkim. The Chaam dance or the sacred dance explores the significance and symbolism of the sacred and ritual dances of Buddhism. Since Buddhism entered the mythical land of Sikkim, Buddhists here have shown their spiritual devotion through dances as well. Only since the tragic diasporas of the Sikkim people have outsiders been privileged to witness these performances. To many they still remain mysterious and enigmatic.

Methodology

This study has employed a qualitative approach. Field interviews, participant observation data gathering from primary and secondary were used in this study.

Chaam Dance An Overview

"Chaam" literally means "religious dance." This is a holy dance with a rich history that originated in monasteries. It's a tantric yoga ritual that involves specific meditation exercises. From mental visualization to physical actualization, there is a process involved. Chaam calls for total mental focus and a sense of unity with the imagined deity. During the joyous moments in the monastery courtyard, only the monks are capable of performing Chaam. Chaam dancers portray a variety of animals, deities, and demonic entities. The monks visualize and call upon the guardian deities during days or even weeks of meditation. Then they put on elaborate dance shows in which they adopt ancient dancing moves and imagine themselves as gods. They pull evil from the congregation and the surroundings by calling out the holy chant over and over. To further imply a different identity, dancers wear ornate masks and elaborate costumes made of vibrant silk colors.

History/ Origin of Chaam Dance

The Chaam is an ancient ritual mask dance that is only done by monks in countries located in the Himalayas on the Asian continent. Although the exact origins and history of this art form are unknown, Tibet, Bhutan, India, and Nepal are the places where it is most strongly ingrained. The Tibetan word "Chaam" literally translates to "A Dance."

According to historical accounts, "The Saint Guru Padmasambhava" performed the Chaam for the first time in the Samye Monastery in Tibet between 760 and 770 A.D. He was invited by King Trishong Detsen to fight an evil demon that was impeding the monastery's construction. Evil spirits would destroy the day's labor every night. He sketched lines on the ground and began to call upon his tantric power, which keeps evil spirits at bay from all sides. He put on a Janak garment, draped the ground with five colored threads, and started dancing while making Tantric Mudras and calling on the Chaamara Gods. (Sarit K. Chaudhuri, Sammera Maiti and Charisma K. Lama)

Mask Dance : Chaam In Sikkim

Chaam dance can take many forms but one of its most popular them see is commemoration of Padmasambhava. The mask dance usually consists of two parts: the first honors and pays homage to the eight aspects of Padmasambhava. The second part of the performance shows "Maha Dongren", a horned

masked figure, slaying the demonic force. "The Chaam dance is performed in the court yard of monasteries by the Buddhist lamas residing in the monasteries of Enchey Gompa, Rumtek Gompa, Chuten Gompa and Pemaynagste Gompa". This dance's principal themes are offering sacrifices to the god, slaying the wicked monarch, shielding the populace from the fury of illnesses, epidemics, and natural disasters, and assuring the region's residents' wealth, health, and happiness. The lamas do a slow, circular dance to the sounds of long pipes, cymbals, and drums while donning large, colorful masks and strange facial expressions. "The masks are produced by the lamas using papier mache, wood, and a little layer of plaster. Typically shown are Yama, the god of death, and his minions, Padmasambhava, the god of wealth, and the protector of horses and other animals. (Vashistha)

Mask Dance of the holy Mt. Kanchenjunga

Buddhist mask dances are performed in a variety of vibrant and exquisite ways in the monasteries of Sikkim. Every year, in August or September, Sikkim celebrates a festival known as "Pang Lhabso," which falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the Tibetan calendar.



The festival features a mask dance honoring holy Mt. Kanchenjunga, the land's guardian goddess. The mask dance is mainly performed to invoke the protecting deity of the land and propitiate the deity to bless the land with prosperity, tranquility and good harvest. A monk a

guardian deity of the land and propitiate the deity to bless the land with prosperity, tranquility and good harvest. A monk a guardian deity of the eponymous name as the mountain on which he is believed to reside, perform an awe inspiring mask dance. A week prior to the dance , the lamas of Pemaynagste monastery in Sikkim, where the festival takes place offer prayers, invoking “Dzonka” the popular name for Kanchenjunga to protect the land and look after the people then they perform the dance with resplendent costumes and colourful mask and the choreography is spectacular. Kanchenjunga itself is reflected by the dancer by wearing a red mask mounted with five human skulls, on top which are mounted flags. Kanchenjunga’s Supreme commander called as “Yabdu”, wears a black mask, while the warriors who accompany them are attired in the traditional Sikkimese battle dress, complete with helmets, swords and shields. The dramatic entry of Mahakala, the protector of the dharma, or faith, is the one of the highlights of the dance. It is the Mahakala who commands Kanchenjunga and Yabdu to defend the faith and bring peace and prosperity to Sikkim.

Kayged Festival: Black Hat Dance and Makakala Dance

Different figures are depicted in the Sikkim dances using a distinct set of colorful masks. Among the characters depicted in the Padmasambhava dance, which depicts the defeat of the demons, are Yama, the God of Death, and Guru Trakpo, the black sorcerer despised by mankind. The Kayged celebration, also known as Dussehra in the local communities, is Sikkim's harvest festival. The Mahakala is exalted in this festival. During this occasion, two different types of dances take place: the Black Hat Dance and the Mahakala Dance. The Mahakala is the guardian, not God. . There is a popular belief regarding the Black Hat dance.

It was believed that “Monk Pelgyi Dorje” while mediating in mountain retreat was inspired to kill King Langdrama, Bon Tibetan King who was destroying Buddhism. Thus he smeared himself and his white horse with coal then put on a fur coat inside. He tucked a bow and arrow in the long sleeves of his Chaam dress and rode to Lhasa. There are several versions to the story. In one, Pelgyi Dorje performed Chaam dance to attract the attention of King Langdrama. Having achieved that , he shot him to death and fled and he rode to lake or river depending on the version, washing away the coal from himself and his horse turning his black face and black horse whit. He then turned his jacket right side out and

got away. In one of the rituals, the head priest does the black hat dance, meditates and collects all the negative forces around him and puts it into clay idol of a baby, which signifies demon.

Deer Dance

The masked dance is particularly colourful. From depicting human faces, demon faces and heads of different animals like the deer, the tiger and even the crow, this dance will interest all. Each mask represents a manifestation of the “Mahakala”.



Deer Dances have different meaning depending upon the context. When a Deer dancer as part of a group, he is one of the many protector deities, and assigned to cut up the Torma offering and rid the New Year of negative forces. But when he dances alone, he represents the deer tamed by the 11th century Buddhist saint Jetsun Milarepa. Milarepa, a great mountain Yogi was meditating in his cave when a terrified deer appeared before him. Moved by his fear, he recited verses on the meaning of impermanence. The deer, now calmed approached him. Then a fierce dog showed up looking for deer Milarepa again recited verses of impermanence. The dog became completely tame. Suddenly a hunter named Kyerab Gompo Dorje showed up. He was enraged to see his dog so tame and friendly. The hunter shot an arrow ant Milarepa, which fortunately missed. Being an excellent shooter, Gompo Dorje realized it was no accident that his arrow missed, and that this Yogi was either a saint or a magician. Milarepa again recited his verses on impermanence and the hunter was so moved that he

offered up his bow and arrow, his dog and finally his own body. The dance depicts the deers gratitude towards Milarepa and appreciation for his newfound friendship with the dog. This dances thought to have come from Tser Gontham, a small Kagyu monastery by the Kyichu River. Deer especially stags, were also very important to the Buddhist, their antlers often showing up in ancient dismembered offering.

Apart from Deer dance we witness various dances that revolve around other animals also during Chaam dance such as Yak dance, Lion, Peacock and the mock cockfight. The Lion and Peacock dances are performed by Monpas, and all the animal dances, depicting a story, capture gait and movements of animals. Besides this dances its mesmerizing to watch Mei Tshering walking with soothing long white hair and long white beard mask movement who depict the God of long life, he will be accompanied by his tow little sons and a two Doves are slowly does the movement in the courtyard of the monasteries and goes and offer his blessing from the head of the monasteries known as "Rimpoché". At the end of every Chaam the monks performs a Shijoe, which is a chanting prayers dedicating the merits of the Chaam to the well being of all living being.



Findings

Away from Sikkim, the famous Chaam dances from Tibet, Ladakh, Bhutan also provide a marvelous spectacle. It is performed by Lamas in the monastery courtyard to celebrate religious festivals; these dances demonstrate perfect footwork and grace. Costumed

lamas with gaily painted masks, ceremonial swords and sparkling jewels, leap and swing to the rhythm of resounding drums, trumpeting of horns and chanting of monks. Nowadays, Chaam attendance is at an all time high, both amongst locals and tourist. However, Buddhist elders speak of old times when people would sit perfectly still, without speaking, through the entire performance. Now many people treat the rituals more like concerts or fairs, many people move around during the performance, and talk on cell phones, and just beyond the walls at several festivals is a thriving market of hawkers and food vendors, etc.

The Chaam Dance is performed by Buddhist Male Monks in the monasteries. There are basically two categories in which the monks are classified. They are as follows:-

- i. **The Dancers:** - Chaam dancers represent various deities and demons, as well as animals. The monks meditate for days and even weeks beforehand, visualizing and invoking the protective deities. Then they stage elaborate dance performances during which they visualize themselves as deities and perform ancient dance movements. Dancers are robed in elaborate costumes of bright coloured silk and elaborate masks to further suggest an alternate identity. Sometimes they dance holding the ritual instruments.



- ii. **The Instrument Accompany Men :-** Monks accompany them, in instrumental music ensembles, playing traditional instruments. There is a leader present who keeps time with cymbals, while others play wind instruments or drums.



Buddhist Belief in Chaam

Buddhists believe that through Chaam people can recognize gods in heaven, which they will encounter after death. It is believed that after death, the soul does not immediately takes rebirth, it moves here and there in the world some days. During this period we encounter many gods and spirits, so, through “Chaam” people can recognize god in heaven and select the right path for taking new birth.

Chaam in Past, Present and Future

Original Chaam performances included little footwork. Monks in costumes and masks walked slowly about the monastery grounds, making intricate mudras. Only in later times did movements of the lower body steps develop. It was believed that in the beginning Chaam mystical and musical essence was strictly kept from any spectators and even the greater part of the monks.

In the present scenario Chaam Dance has not been restricted to religious ritual act but has become a public attraction. Chaam Dance has been kept open to public and all the individual who are interested to see the ancient art form can participate as an audience to witness the religious ritual ceremony dance form in different monasteries.

According to the analysis Chaam Dance has hardly changed its form and has been continued its typical style from ages. If we assume about the future perspective The Chaam Dance will remain the same and format will be as disciplined as it was in the past and is in present. But due to gradually decline in the number of monks in the present time there is a possibility of extinction of this traditional art form.

Conclusion

Chaam is in danger due to the declining number of monks as the ancient dances are not written, they are passed from person to person with intense practice. As the families in the Himalayan region are getting smaller and fewer children are becoming monks, many scholars predict that Chaam will fade within the next hundred years. There is no written record of Chaam thus there is a danger of losing the ritual art form. Therefore, if the Chaam is not passed on or documented Chaam may disappear forever. Hence documentation of Chaam must be the highest priority.

The task of the state government should be to ensure that the intangible cultural heritage is valued, preserved and developed and to maintain the long tradition art forms.

Awareness programmes has to be introduced by the concerned authorities for the new generation regarding the preservation of native art forms. The Government should try to introduce native art forms in school from the primary classes itself. Government has to encourage artist and resource persons who are working on the process of promoting folk culture by proving every possible support. The preservation of native art forms is very much important because it unites people together gives common interest to one another in their society.

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