



Dance and Society in Mizoram

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Abstract

Dance has always been a major activity in Mizoram, playing significant roles in shaping the social and cultural edifice of various communities. From time immemorial, different types of dances are performed on various important events such as feasts, ceremonies, sacrificial rituals and on other important occasions. Dances are strongly interconnected to their social, religious and cultural life. These dances are also associated with varied forms of origins, myths and traditions. In the contemporary period, the most popular dances are Cheraw, Sawlakia, Sarlamkai, Chawnglaizawn, Chheih Lam, Chai Lam, Khuallam and so on. However, the contemporary understanding and performances of dances are no longer the same as compared to the earlier understanding and notion of dance, mainly due to the coming of Christianity which brought about tremendous changes in the society. This paper is an attempt to analyze the significance of dance in the society and how it has always been a central part of their cultural milieu.

Keywords: Dance, Traditions, Mizoram, Christianity, Culture.

Introduction

Dance is basically a moving and expressing form of art which is performed in a rhythmic way to music or sound within a given space. It is also a form of expression and communication and has always been an important means of social interaction in various communities all over the world.[‡] Mizoram, formerly known as the Lushai Hills has a variety of traditional and community dances as well.

There are numerous types of dances all over the world representing the social, religious and regional traditions of various groups which are often depicted on stone, pottery,

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‡ Sondra Hosrton Fraleigh. (1987). Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetic. Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh. P- 23.

artifacts and other archaeological objects[§]. Mizoram, however, due to having a recorded and documented history which dates back to only a century or so^{**}, depends heavily on oral tradition as the main source of material in studying and dealing with the historical background of the various dances.

Mizoram despite being one of the small tribal regions located in North East India has a rich cultural background and traditions. India being one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse nations in the world has a composite form of vibrant traditional dances which differs from one region to another depending on the residing tribes. Similarly, the various dances of Mizoram also appear to differ and do not seem to have any form of links or similarities with the many other bright and colourful dances of the other parts of India, especially the non-tribal areas. On the contrary, one of the most popular dances in the post-colonial period, *Cheraw* (also popularly known as Bamboo Dance), has been found to be somehow similar to that of the Filipino tribal folk dance called *Tinikling* and additionally other tribal dances of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. This admittedly makes it debatable whether these dances have the same origin or not. At the same time, there are also other tribal dances of India where bamboos are used as equipment and props in dancing but in different ways as compared to the *Cheraw* dance of Mizoram.

Since the pre-colonial times, various traditional events, ceremonies and festivals were often considered to be incomplete without the performances of these dances and this remains the same even in the present day. Dance, having important roles in the community, religious sacrifices and customs of the various tribes clearly indicates how much they loved to dance. Apart from those ceremonial dances, there are also other types of dances which were merely for entertainment purposes. The traditional dances of Mizoram originated from various tribes such as Lusei, Lai, Mara, Paite, Hmar, Ralte, etc. Nevertheless, this paper will highlight the dances of these various tribes based on the categorization of their importance and the definitive roles that they played in the beliefs and socio-cultural life of the people since the pre-colonial period.

Dances in Mizoram

Despite having only a total of over a million populations according to the 2011 census, Mizoram still has a rich and vibrant culture and traditional customs simultaneously. The most popular and common types of dances in the contemporary period are *Cheraw*, *Chawnglaizawn*, *Sawlakia*, *Rallu Lam*, *Sarlamkai*, *Chai Lam*, *Chheih Lam*, *Khuallam*, etc. which are strongly believed to have originated from different tribes within Mizoram. It is quite difficult to trace the exact origins and history of these dances. However, most of them are said to have been practiced since the settlement of the various tribes in the Chin Hills area which were then continued during their migration towards the west until they settled in the

§ Yosef Garfinkel. (2014). 'Archaeological of Dance'. P- 5. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316978947_Y_Garfinkel_Archaeology_of_Dance_In_Soar_K_and_Aamodt_C_edds_Archaeological_Approaches_to_Dance_Performance_pp_5-14_BAR_2622_Oxford_Archaeopress.

** H. G. Joshi. (2005). *Mizoram: Past and Present*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications. P- 9.

present Mizoram where these dances are further adopted and incorporated as the cultural dances.

It must be noted that in this paper, the various types of dances will not be separately highlighted or categorized according to their origins or chronological order but will instead be dealt according to their significances and roles they played in the society which will mainly be reflected from the time of performances. Besides, it must also be noted that most of these dances have always been performed inter-exchangeably amongst the tribes residing in Mizoram depending on the requirements or desire in times of special events and ceremonial occasions, particularly since the colonial times.

Musical Instruments

Different types of traditional musical instruments were used when performing the various dances. The most popular instrument used by various tribes was *khuang*^{††} or traditional drum where the dancers would be dancing to the rhythmic beat of it. This is in fact the most commonly used instrument in Mizoram since the pre-colonial period, especially while singing and dancing.

Apart from *khuang*, other instruments such as *darkhuang*^{‡‡} and *darbu*^{§§} were also frequently used. Cymbals were believed to have been used simultaneously at times. Till today, *khuang* is an instrument which has always been included when performing these dances proving its value among the people of Mizoram.

Dress

Undoubtedly, uniformity in the dress of the dancers who performed the various dances during festive seasons and other important occasions did not seem to have existed especially during the period prior to the colonial era. It is believed that the performers would simply wear the best dresses that they owned which were likely to be the casual wrapped clothes or traditional *puan* which was one of the few types of clothing available during those early days. Dancing during such occasions was one of their rare chances of getting all dressed-up. Additionally, women were often seen with a “picturesque head-dress” while dancing and on gala days as mentioned by Colonel J. Shakespeare in his book, *The Lushai Hills*^{***} which is believed to be the vibrant head-gear worn particularly by women called *Vakiria*^{†††}.

Dance and Society

To understand the importance of dance in the society of Mizoram and their linkage with each other, it is necessary to emphasize on the various roles dances played. These roles

†† A traditional drum made from dried animal skin.

‡‡ A traditional big single gong.

§§ A traditional set of small gongs consisting of three gongs.

*** Lt. Colonel J. Shakespeare. (1861). *The Lushai Kuki Clans* (reprint 1975). Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute Department of Art & Culture. P. 11.

††† A traditional multi-coloured headgear for women for dressing their head during traditional festive seasons.

differed from one dance to another depending on the occasions where dances were performed. The roles also differed from one tribe to another as a particular type of dance could have different significance among various tribes. Dances were not randomly performed anytime or anywhere unlike the contemporary period.

So, it would be looked into the various significant occasions and ceremonies where dances were mandatorily included as a part of their traditional custom.

Death Ceremonies

Surprisingly, one of the most common occasions where dance played an important role was the death ceremonies. Dance was used as a part of their traditional custom for bidding farewell and wishing safe journeys to the dead people who were on their way to the *mitthi-khua*^{†††} or *pialral* (paradise). One of such dances was *Cheraw*, originally known as *Ruakkhatlak* by the Lai tribe, which was only performed by them at the ceremony called *Ngandam* made for the people who died due to *raicheh*^{§§§}, a special ceremony observed for the dead people in the village for their souls to reach the *mitthi-khua* safely and peacefully without being disturbed and chased around by the evil spirits on their way.^{****}

Another type of dance performed particularly for the dead was *Chawnglaizawn*^{††††}, another Lai dance where there are two types such as the *Zahau* and *Halkha* dance. Both of these dances are considered to be *Chawnglaizawn* but their significance and roles differed from one another. The *Zahau Chawnglaizawn* was performed by the *Zahau* clan in times of death ceremonies while it was merely for entertainment purposes and informal events for the *Halkha* clan.^{††††}

The performance of *Chawnglaizawn* during death ceremonies took place in times of the death of the village chief. It was performed by his most trusted servant next to the body of the chief. Supposedly, this loyal servant of the late chief was to follow him even to *pialral* or paradise (most definitely *pialral* in the case of chiefs according to the traditional belief) and this dance was specially performed in order to indicate his loyalty towards his late master. Through performing this dance, he bid his final farewell and promised him that he will always protect him, follow him everywhere he goes and serve him faithfully no matter what happens and that he will always remain his truthful servant eternally even in the afterlife.^{§§§§}

Festivals and Feasts

††† Land of the dead people where common people are destined to settle after death.

§§§ A woman who died while delivering a baby.

**** T. Chalngingluaia. 2017. *Zaalte (Lai Hnam Robawm)*. Lawngtlai: The Art & Culture Department, Lai Autonomous District Council. Pp. 27, 28.

†††† Originally spelled and pronounced as *Cawnglaizawnh* by the *Lais*.

†††† Tribal Research Institute. 1985. *Mizo Lam Thenkhatte*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, Department of Art & Culture. P- 111.

§§§§ T. Chalngingluaia. 2017. *Zaalte (Lai Hnam Robawm)*. Lawngtlai: The Art & Culture Department, Lai Autonomous District Council. P- 15.

Both feasts and festivals are one of the most important and anticipated occasions for the Mizos in the earlier period. These were joyous moments which they waited eagerly and celebrated by the whole villagers with great enthusiasm. Traditional dances were always included in these special occasions. At the same time, unlike the contemporary period, there were only few dances which were particularly performed depending on the type of festival celebrated. For instance, *Chai lam* is a Lusei dance which is said to have been performed only during a festival known as *Chapchar Kut* which is also the reason why it is believed that there is some kind of link between them. *****

Another dance is *Chawnglaizawn*. Even though this dance is said to have been performed only during the funeral of the chief among the Lais, there are also other arguments stating that this dance was also used to be performed during the *Khuangchawi* ceremony, which could only be hosted by the rich and well-to-do people either by hunting the required animals to attain the title of *Thangchhuah* or hold a public grand feast, as well.

Other tribes also have this type of dance which they would perform only during the festive occasions. A dance called *Beila* is a Mara dance which was exclusively performed at a grand series of feasts known as *Beibei* while singing the *Bei hla* or *Bei* songs simultaneously. †††† This type of dance could be seen among the *Hmar* tribe where dances like *Sikpui Lam* and *Tangkawnga Vailak Lam* were performed only during the celebration of their main festival called *Sikpui Kut* and no other events.

There is also another Lusei dance called *Khuallam*, which literally translates to ‘dance of the guests’. According to McCall, this dance was performed in groups, out in the open courtyard on the very occasion of the *Khuangchawi* ceremony by the guests. These guests were usually the relatives of the host from their neighbouring village who were specially invited to attend the *Khuangchawi*. He also mentioned that this dance was performed under modern conditions in order to portray an entry to the village †††† and it is further believed that they were often joined by the villagers of the hosts as well.

War

Another significant role played by dance in the early society of Mizoram was during the celebrations of war victory. These types of dances are generally known as war-like dance where such types of dances include *Sawlakia*, *Sarlamkai* and *Rallu-Lam* as known by Mara, Lai and Lusei respectively. These three dances are considered to be similar. Since the early tribes were at frequent wars and conflicts with their neighbouring tribes or between the villages, war had a profound place in shaping the society.

***** Tribal Research Institute. 1985. *Mizo Lam Thenkhatte*. P-1.

†††† K. Zohra. 2013. *The Maras: Indigenous Tradition and Folk Culture*. Guwahati: Scientific Book Centre. P-166, 167.

†††† A.G. McCall. 1947. *Lushai Chrysalis (reprint 2015)*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, Department of Art & Culture. P- 188, 189.

These war-like dances were performed at the *rallu-aih*^{§§§§§} or *Ia*^{*****} ceremony. Whenever they defeated the enemies and won victory, the *pasaltha* or the warrior would bring the head of the slain back to the village as a proof of his victory over their enemies for which the *rallu-aih* or *Ia* ceremony was held for around five days straight.^{†††††} This was necessarily done in order to appease the evil spirits of the slain. Another reason was for the total subjugation and the transfer of the spirit of the slain to the slayer even in the next life at *pialral* or paradise where the enemy would serve him forever.

It is believed that it was usually performed by the warriors who brought home the triumphant trophy where they would dance round and round the head of the slain along with their war weapons like gun, sword and so on to the beat of the various musical instruments like *khuang*, harmonized with gongs by others groups of men.^{#####} On the contrary, it is also argued that non-warriors and women were likely to participate in the dance as well. However, it was undoubtedly an enjoyable and fervent moment for both the warriors and the villagers as well.

Sacrificial Ceremonies

In a way, the previously mentioned dances can also be considered as a part of their sacrificial ritual ceremonies. Furthermore, there are also other dances which were performed during *sa lu-aih* ceremonies. The *sa lu-aih* ceremony is tantamount to the *rallu-aih* ceremony but the difference is that this ceremony was held for the animals which they hunted themselves, particularly tiger which was considered as *sapui*.

Additionally, there is also a dance called *Hranglam*, a Hmar origin dance which was performed during a small celebration of the success of their animal hunting. In this dance, they would bring the head of the animal and dance around with it. This dance is also known by the Luseis as *Salulam*.^{§§§§§§}

Social Entertainment

There are also other dances which were for mere social entertainment purposes such as *Topum Lam*, *Chheih Lam*, *Awkhypa La*, *Chawnlam*, *Paikawng Lam*, *Lamtleng*, etc. Unlike other dances, these dances did not play any particular roles or significance in the society but were merely for entertainment and social gatherings. This includes dancing with friends, neighbors, relatives and other community gatherings. The Mizos have been known to be sentimental and nostalgic people since the earlier times due to which they would often gather together where they would sometimes drink *zu* (alcohol or traditional local rice beer) and enjoy *sa* (meat) while they sing and dance for the whole night at times. It was at those times that the mentioned dances were usually performed. To sum it up, these are the types of

§§§§§ As called by the Lusei tribe.

***** As called by the Mara tribe.

††††† Tribal Research Institute. 1985. *Mizo Lam Thenkhatte*. P- 100.

K. Zohra. 2013. *The Maras: Indigenous Tradition and Folk Culture*. Guwahati: Scientific Book Centre. P- 160.

§§§§§ Tribal Research Institute. (1985). *Mizo Lam Thenkhatte*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute Department of Art & Culture. P- 77.

enjoyable dances performed by the villagers, both men and women for their entertainment during beer parties, funfair and other informal social gatherings.

Also, it was a very common and usual thing, especially among the elders of the village, to socially gather together at one of the houses in their village without any specific reasons or sometimes in order to solely lessen their loneliness as they had more free time than anyone else. In other cases, it was also for the purpose of comforting and lessening the sadness, nostalgia of the people longing for their bereaved relatives that passed away. At such times, they would sing and dance all throughout the night and enjoyed the moment. *****

Conclusion

From time immemorial, dance has always played a significant and definitive role in the socio-religious and cultural part of the central society. Besides, it has also acted as a practice for completing and showcasing the traditional customs and values of the society among various tribes within Mizoram to the point those important ceremonial and festive occasions were often considered to be incomplete without the inclusion and performance of the various dances.

Since dance is for all types of people with different age groups and gender, it has been enjoyed by men and women, younger and older people who would dance to the harmonic and rhythmic beatings and striking of the musical instruments or to the folk songs or chants. Other than the significant roles they played in the festive occasions and ceremonies, dance also acted as a form of providing comfort and solace to the people who are facing hard and difficult times and also as a form of entertaining themselves during their social gatherings.

However, with the passage of time, the roles and significance of traditional dances have begun to decline and lost their relevance in the central part of the society. This was mostly due to the result of the colonial intervention and further, the advent of Christianity which brought about tremendous transformation in the early religious beliefs and values. Additionally, this was also partly contributed by education aided by the missionaries. Since the new beliefs and ethics taught by Christianity and the existing traditional beliefs contradict to one another, this led to the degradation of the significances of the traditional dances which were inextricably linked with the traditional beliefs, customs and social values in many ways. At the same time, it must also be noted that there are also many social and cultural benefits to the transformations led by the advent of Christianity as well even though it has changed the earlier understanding and notion of dance in the society.

Despite all these changes, dance still plays a huge and important role in society even in the contemporary period. It has been viewed as more of a cultural practice. Till today, dance is always included in important functions and festivals which are observed and celebrated both inside and outside Mizoram. Cultural dance/ folk dance has become an important practice for keeping the values of traditions alive and is one of the most important

***** Interview with Hniangkhara in September, 2019.

platforms for showcasing the traditional customs and practices to a wider audience even to the world outside of Mizoram.

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