

DANCES OF
ARUNACHAL
PRADESH

NIRANJAN SARKAR



This book presents a detailed description of the dances of twenty-one major tribes, spread over the five districts of Arunachal Pradesh. This is the first substantial book on the dances of Arunachal, which have been admired but not studied so far.

Shri Niranjana Sarkar, Assistant Director of Research (Culture), who is working in this area for more than a decade, has attempted in this book not only to present the various dance-movements, but also to relate each dance to the social context of the community performing it. This book, therefore, is of interest to the general public as well as to the scholars interested in the study of Indian dance.

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DANCES
OF
ARUNACHAL PRADESH

By

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Assistant Director of Research
(Culture)

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

ARUNACHAL PRADESH ADMINISTRATION
SHILLONG

1974

1990
22-3-76

Published by
Shri M. P. Hazarika
Director, Information and Public Relations,
Arunachal Pradesh Administration,
Government of India,
Shillong-4.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Price: Rs. 12.85

1974



792.31954163 ✓
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ARUNACHAL PRADESH ADMINISTRATION

Printed by Sri K. K. Ray, Navana Printing Works Private Limited,
47, Ganesh Chunder Avenue, Calcutta-13.

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PREFACE

Dance in India has variegated forms. It is like a necklace composed of beads of varied hues, shapes and sizes. Dance in Arunachal Pradesh is only one of those beads, the totality of which make the heritage of this art in India.

This book attempts to give an account of the dances of the different communities of Arunachal Pradesh. This region is divided for administrative purposes into five districts—Tirap, Lohit, Siang, Subansiri and Kameng. The tribes, whose dances have been described here, are the Tangsas, Singphos, Wanchos and Noctes of Tirap; the Idu Mishmis, Digaru Mishmis and Khamptis of Lohit; the Padams, Minyongs, Gallongs, Khampas and Membas of Siang; the Apatanis, Daflas, Hill Miris and Tagins of Subansiri and the Akas, Mijis, Monpas, Sherdukpens and Khowas of Kameng.

Many tribes avoid performing the ritual dances out of season as they are apprehensive that such performance might vex the deities, who would punish them by visiting them with calamities. So it was not possible to witness all the ritual dances of all these communities and that explains the occasional unevenness of details. In such cases, I had to make best with what information was available from the local informants. I shall feel amply rewarded if this book, notwithstanding its shortcomings, helps the reader to have a general appreciation of this art in this part of India and inspires specialists and experts to make further research.

I take this opportunity to record my gratitude and thankfulness to the Arunachal Pradesh Administration for providing me opportunity to study this art in Arunachal Pradesh. This Administration has consistently followed an enlightened policy of encouraging anthropological research and thereby bringing to light the cultures of the people of this hitherto little known part of India. I am indebted to the informants of the various communities whose dances have been described here, as without their help and co-operation, this work would not have been possible.

I am specially grateful to Shri B. Shastri, Director of Research, Arunachal Pradesh, for his valuable suggestions in the preparation of this book. I am also grateful to Shri I. M. Simon, Deputy Director of Research (Philology), Arunachal Pradesh, for his kindly going through the manuscript and making valuable suggestions and corrections. I have benefited from some of the notes prepared by Miss M. D. Pugh, when she was in this organization. I also record my gratitude to the late Dr Verrier Elwin for his scholarly encouragement.

Shillong,

May, 1972.

NIRANJAN SARKAR

INTRODUCTION

Dance is the stylized rhythmic movement of any or all parts of the body to express some emotions, ideas or to narrate a story. When a dance is accompanied by significant gestures and attempts the narration of a series of events, it becomes a pantomime.

The dances, performed by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, have been broadly divided into four groups. The first group is the ritual dances which form part of a ritual. This group may again be divided into five subgroups. The first subgroup includes those dances which form part of the various rituals performed to secure prosperity, good health and happiness of the dancer, his family, village or the whole community. The second subgroup comprises those dances performed in ceremonies related to agriculture and domestication of animals to secure a good harvest and increase of domestic animals respectively. The third subgroup is associated with the funeral ceremony when the soul is guided by the priest to its abode in the Land of the Dead and to prevent it from haunting its old residence. It is generally believed that if the soul returns to its old home, the bereaved family suffers diseases and deaths. The fourth subgroup consists of the fertility dances. These are magical in the sense that the imitation of the movements of coition is believed to promote fertility. War dances make the fifth subgroup, which are on the decline with the stoppage of internecine feuds and raids. In the old days, when an expeditionary party was successful in killing an enemy or more, the victors used to perform a ceremony on return, so that the spirit of the slain could do no harm to the slayer. Only among the Idu Mishmis, the victim's family also used to perform rites praying for success in taking vengeance. Dance formed a part of this ceremony. Some of the tribes still perform this ceremony with the dance, when a tiger is killed. Its purpose is to prevent the spirit of the tiger from harming the slayer. The war dance used to be prevalent among almost all the non-Buddhist tribes.

The second group is the festive dances which form the

recreational part of a particular festival. The third group is the recreational dances which do not form part of any particular festival or ritual. These are performed on occasions which inspire its participants to express their mirth through these dances. The fourth group is the pantomimes and dance-dramas which narrate a mythical story or illustrate a moral. So these are educative in purpose. The Buddhist tribes have a large repertory of these.

Myths about the origin of dance are present among the Tangsas, Singphos, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Tagins, Monpas and Sherdukpens. The Tangsas and the Singphos learnt dance from the monkeys and the inhabitants of the sun and the moon respectively. The myths of the Apatanis, Hill Miris and Tagins explain the origin of the war dance. The myth of the Sherdukpens tells how the Ajilamu pantomime was created to facilitate the rescue of a woman who was enticed away. The Monpas believe that the Ajilamu pantomime was created to facilitate the construction of a bridge over a river linking two villages. A legend tells how the monastic dances of the Monpas was first performed to facilitate the construction of a monastery.

The Buddhist tribes i.e., the Khamtis, Khampas, Membas, Monpas and Sherdukpens have organised parties of dancers for their pantomimes and dance-dramas. The members of such a party are given regular training. The other tribes do not have any such arrangement. The boys and the girls learn the dance movements by imitating the movements of the elders.

Among the Buddhist tribes, the dancers of the pantomimes put on magnificent masks and colourful costumes. In the Solung Ponung festival of the Padams, the Miri, who leads the dance, wears a skirt of generally red colour, two bunches of tiny bells on two sides of his chest and a *dumling* on the back of his head in addition to his usual dress. The *dumling* is an ornament which looks like a flower and is made of shavings of a creeper with beads inside. In the Elong dances and the Epak ceremony of the Padams, the Miri, if he is a man, wears a skirt in addition to his usual dress. In the Solung festival of the Minyongs, the Miri wears a red skirt over his loin-cloth and a *dumling* on the back of his head. In the Luman Ponung dances of the Minyongs,

if the Miri is a man, he may put on a red skirt over his loin-cloth. In the Nuiya dance of the Digarus, the priest, in addition to his usual dress, puts on a forehead-band decorated with a few tiers of cowries, an extra sword and a necklace studded with tiger's teeth and a few metal bells fitted at its bottom. In the ritual dance of the Idu Mishmis, the priest, in addition to his usual dress, wears an apron with special designs, a head-band decorated with two or three tiers of cowries and a necklace studded with the teeth of tiger and bear. In the war dance, present among several tribes, the dancers wear the war-dress. But the greatest imagination is shown by the Wanchos and the Noctes in contriving their dancing costumes. They skilfully use beads of different colours, wild boar's tushes, hornbill's feathers, cowries, coins, dyed goat-hair, etc., in designing their superb costumes.

The Wanchos, Noctes, Padams, Minyongs and Gallongs play no musical instrument to the accompaniment of the dances. The Singphos, Apatanis, Daflas, Tagins and Hill Miris play gong during dancing. All the subtribes of the Tangsas play gong while only four of the subtribes (Longchang, Ponthai, Saban and Moglum) play drum in addition to the gong. The other subtribes also used to play drum, but with the cessation of the Khatang ceremony, they have stopped playing the drum. The Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khowas, Mijis and Akas play drum and cymbals. The Akas sometimes play a stringed instrument also. The Khampas and Membas play trumpet, drum, cymbals, clarion and conch shell in their pantomimes. The Khamptis play drum, gong, cymbals and flute. The Digaru Mishmis play drum, gong and occasionally cymbals. The Idu Mishmis play drum, another type of small semi-globular single-membrane drum and sometimes horn-bugle.

Before the advent of the Administration, each tribe was almost exclusive in their affairs and inter-tribal intercourse was very limited. The members of each tribe used to act at the kinship and village levels and on special occasions they used to act at the communal level. But after the advent of the Administration, the communal exclusiveness is gradually loosening and now all the communities are involved in the great vortex of developmental activities. The members of different communities are

mixing together in schools and colleges, markets and offices and also on national celebrations. In the celebrations of the Independence Day, Republic Day and on the occasions of receiving among them important persons from the many walks of the national life, persons of the different communities gather together. Dances of the different communities form an important part of such celebrations. Their active participation and others' keen appreciation of their dances on such important occasions help to sustain their pride in their lovely dances.

These are new opportunities when members of one community can observe the dances of other communities. Now there is a distinct possibility that members of one community may find one or more dances of other communities very appealing and on their return to the village may try to perform those dances for sheer fun. The Khowas nowadays perform some dances of the Sherdukpens for merriment. The Ponung dances of the Padams have spread to the Minyongs and then to the Gallongs. Now the Hill Miris are adopting the Ponung dances. There are also cases when a tribal community has come in contact with another community hailing from outside Arunachal Pradesh and adopted their dance. After the Chinese occupied Tibet, a large number of Tibetans crossed the international border and came to Arunachal Pradesh. The Sherdukpens have come in contact with the Tibetan refugees. The Sherdukpen girls have picked up many recreational dances of the Tibetans and perform these dances with vivacity. The Daflas had no woman's dance. Now the Dafla women perform a lively dance which, in all probability, have been adopted from the Nepalese. These dances, adopted from other communities, are performed on jovial occasions for merriment.

These examples of natural diffusion of dance-traits show that the dances, which are recreational and not ceremonial, are diffusing from one community to another. This augurs well as it is helping to make their dancing more varied and richer and their life more delightful and livelier.