



Zeliangrong Folk Dances: The Cultural Symbolism and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract: Folk dances are vital expressions of a community's cultural identity, encapsulating its history, traditional values and customs, and relationship with nature. Among the Zeliangrong Nagas of Northeast India, these dances serve as living narratives that portray myths, social customs, and communal values. Tribal folk dances display a significant role in community bonding, fostering unity and a sense of understanding and belonging. This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural richness embedded in the Zeliangrong folk dances through detailed analysis of three major forms: the tribute dance, the Hecha Lim (Python Dance), and the banyan-hornbill dance. Each dance combines symbolic movements with poetic lyrics and rhythms, reflecting admiration for individuals, romanticism, and the harmonious interplay between humans and the natural world. The tribute dance celebrates exemplary individuals through metaphors of hospitality and benevolence, while the Hecha Lim reveals youthful romance through the sinuous, coiling gestures of the python. In contrast, the banyan tree dance uses nature imagery to emphasize feminine grace and communal joy. These dances, performed during festivals and social gatherings, are not only entertainment but also vehicles for moral teaching, oral history, and ecological reverence. This study highlights how Zeliangrong folk dances maintain continuity of tradition while fostering collective identity, showcasing the deep interconnection between people, culture, and the environment.

Key Words: Zeliangrong folk dance, ethnic identity, oral tradition, Python dance, tribute song, community bonding, symbolism, cultural heritage, nature, romance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Folk dances are integral part of intangible cultural heritage, embodying a community's collective memory, beliefs, values and customs of the people. They function as a medium of storytelling and communal expression, passed down through generations. They often depict the community's history, myths, and legends, showcasing their unique perspective on the world. Folk dances play a significant role in community bonding, bringing people together and fostering a sense of belonging, understanding, sharing, unity and celebration. They are often performed during festivals, special occasions, and community gatherings, displaying the community's rich cultural diversity and creativity. In the case of the Zeliangrong community—comprising the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei tribes of Northeast India—folk dances reflect not only ethnic identity and oral traditions but also their harmonious coexistence with nature. This paper delves into the cultural significance of Zeliangrong folk dances, covering three major folk dance of the community, highlighting how they encapsulate historical narratives, romantic expressions, and environmental metaphors through dynamic performances. The present paper is based on both oral interviews with prominent village elders and secondary data from the existing literature such as journal, books, blog pages and pamphlets. Oral interviews done with the following village elders of Peren Village- Mrs. Kidoheile Ntang, Mrs. Heiraisile, Mrs. Lunghingdaile and Mr. Adung Disong, to enrich the present work.

2. FOLK DANCE AS CULTURAL NARRATIVES

2.1. Tribute Dance: A Song of Reverence

The folk dance of the Zeliangrong tribe is always accompanied by a song. The song of the folk dances is a vibrant expression of admiration and reverence for an individual, the inspiration drawn from the beautiful movements of animals, birds and insects. Here is one such dance that praises the greatness of a person expressing admiration and reverence for an individual who has made significant contributions to the community or achieved great feats, or holds



great position in the village or community. The lyrics are a testament to the person's greatness, highlighting the achievements, contributions to the society, and benevolence, and the impact they have had on the lives of others.

Here I would like to present an analysis of a popular folk dance among the Zeme Nagas. The song begins by praising the individual, the tribe, community or the Almighty, as the lyrics of the tribute song can be for anyone. The person being attributed with praise and admiration can be anybody worthy of praise for his achievements, accomplishments, contributions to society, love and compassion, sacrifices, etc. In the song lyrics, we have young boys and girls dressed in their beautiful, colourful attires, adorn with headgears, necklaces, arm bands, bracelets, birds feathers in their hands, showcasing their cultural heritage and identity. People from different backgrounds and ages have gathered together at a person's place for celebration, for festival or have gathered together for a special occasion or celebration. The situation can be anything. The gathering of the people highlights the community's diversity and unity.

The interpretation of the song goes something like this. It sings about a person who is a friend of all. The house of "friend of hundreds" in this song is really lofty, hundreds and hundreds of people throng to his house unceasingly. His house is a place where people from diverse backgrounds and communities converge, finding solace, entertainment, and a sense of belonging. This imagery underscores the man's exceptional ability to bridge gaps and foster connections among individuals from varied walks of life. This man or friend can be likened to a prominent figure, such as the chief of a State or a respected community leader, whose abode serves as a beacon of warmth and hospitality. Furthermore, this character can be metaphorically compared to the divine, symbolizing a higher power that welcomes all to his place with open arms irrespectively. Just as people from all tribes and communities flock to the friend's house, individuals from all walks of life are drawn and flock to the divine presence, finding comfort, guidance, solace, happiness and fulfilment. This parallel highlights the themes of inclusivity, generosity, and boundless compassion that define both the friend and the divine. The song continues to beautifully draw a parallel between the natural and the human connection. Just as the mpingbe/nlakbe (butterflies) are drawn to the vast Mbeiki(Barak river), circling and fluttering and dancing around it, the house of this remarkable individual also magnetically draws people from all spheres of life. The dancers fluttering like the butterflies dance with light, carefree steps. The imagery vividly captures the warmth and hospitality that defines their home. The comparison here extends to the dancers themselves, who likened their gathering to perform to the butterflies' behaviour, highlighting themes of togetherness, joy and celebration, natural affinity and connection.

The song, then go on to beautifully capture the scene with vivid imagery- the comparison is made between falcons soaring in the sky and the youths dancing gracefully. The song, then invites the people to come out and witness this spectacular display of dance, drawing parallel between the beauty of the falcons as they circle the azure blue sky and the beauty of the dancers' movements. This shows that just as the falcons effortlessly and gracefully circle the sky, the dancers coordinated movements are also graceful. The falcons' aerial acrobatics create mesmerising sight in the sky, similar to the dancers' skilled and artistic performance which captivates the audience. Falcons soaring in the sky embody freedom, which mirrors the dancers' carefree spirit which captivates the audience. The song's message is one of invitation and appreciation for the art of dance. The dance is performed to the beating of nsung (drum) and ntoi (cymbals, finger cymbals). As the music beats faster, the dancers' movements too become more energetic and expressive, their steps and gestures become faster, weaving a mesmerizing narrative that transports the audience to a world of joy and celebration. The drums provide a driving force, propelling the performance forward with enthusiasm impossible to resist.

Translation of the Tribute Song

*"A friend to all, his house stands lofty,
The flow of guests never ebbs, hundreds visit in endless parades.
As in Barak's vast river, like swarm of butterflies hover,
We dance and flutter, our spirits light and free.
Our land, beneath the celestial skies, where falcons soar,
We dance gracefully like the majestic flight of the falcons.
Come; behold our dance, a spectacle of joy for your eyes."*

The song is therefore an invitation to all to come and witness an extraordinary dance as the young boys and girls in their beautiful traditional attire come out to dance just like the butterflies that circle beautifully the Barak river; just like the falcons that fly gracefully fly in the sky.



2.2. Hecha Lim (Python Dance): Romance and Playfulness

Another prominent Zeliangrong folk dance is the *Hecha Lim* or Python Dance, characterized by its playful and romantic tone. It is performed during any community gathering, with young boys and girls forming circles, imitating the sinuous movements of a python. The dance symbolizes unity, romantic longing, and emotional connection. This is a dance that is not restricted to any festival or occasion, but can be performed in any gathering. Songs and dances were sung and performed when youths (male and female) gather in the 'rehangki' (morung). The song of this dance can be explained in this way:

The youths gathered in the morung, stands together hand in hand. The song begins saying our clan's/khel's boys taking center stage is performing the original Python dance. It is mentioned original python dance as it is said that there are a variety of pythons. This dance is a unique interpretation inspired by one species of pythons, i.e the original python. As the dance begins, the dancer says 'I'll take hold of my beloved's hand and we will move together. This conveys a sense of tenderness showing the boy's sense of tenderness, suggesting a romantic tone. The young boys and girls all danced together holding hands, and they are all moving in circles, and the wish in the song is that this line of boys and girls holding hands would not break, and that this would last forever. The dancers mesmerizingly imitated the python's movements, swaying their heads and bodies in fluid motion. With arms raised above their heads, they mimicked the python's sinuous (the python's smooth, curving motion) gestures, as if weaving a hypnotic spell.

After singing that they do not want the line of dance to break down, the song's lyrics go on to weave a romantic spell, with the dancers yearning to curl up close to their beloveds. The song goes like this "Nebumkang bowang n-nei lei", meaning "I would like to curl up close to the bosom of my love". Therefore as they dance, the long line of dancers transforms into a circle, their movements slowing as they entwine, mimicking the python's signature curl- a tender, protective embrace, symbolising the lover curling up to his beloved in a warm embrace. So the performers display to us their bodies moving in tender, sinuous curves, and finally wrapping themselves in love's gentle fold. In our traditional folk dance, songs often incorporate personal references, yet maintain a sense of respect and community. For instance, during festivals, joyous celebration, an auspicious or important event, or if a girl is getting married, or if a feast or celebration is hosted by an imminent person, they might be affectionately referred to as 'the aunt of' and add a name. Here the name of the niece is used. For example, 'Suipeule nai, Sampungle nai, Gumsile nai' and the list go on. The 'nai' here means aunt, and the other is the name of the niece. This is to show her role in the family, or her connection to the community. Therefore, the song continues saying that the tip of the breast of Suipeu's aunt is bright yellow, and her nebum, i.e, breast is compared to the golden wax that is obtained after the honey has been extracted. This 'tega' means the yellow wax. This is traditionally used by the community women when weaving.

The song then continues to sing that the clan's boys loves her, and therefore do not want the line of holding hands to break. The song is a fun filled love song to go along with the movements of the python. The comparison made to the parts of a girl is made to match the shiny skin of the python, thus also fulfilling the desire of the boy to curl up to his beloved when they form a circle, curling up together in an embrace, after which they open out again repeating the same movement. Here the lover's desire to curl up to the bosom of his lover is compared to that of a python curling or coiling its long body. It is used to describe a romantic gesture, and the python symbolises a specific idea of wishful romance. Here the literary devices simile and metaphor has been used as the lover expresses that he would like to go close to the bosom of his beloved like a python coiling, and another image is that of the dancers –lovers coiling in an embrace, and therefore their love was a python's gentle coil. And this is shown through the movement of the dancers as they all formed a tight circle from a big circle.

2.3. Nature-Inspired Dance: The Banyan Tree and the Hornbill

Another folk dance centers around the image of the *banyan tree*, a traditional symbol of strength, beauty, abundance, and rootedness. In the accompanying song, the hornbill is depicted flitting from branch to branch, drawn by the tree's fruitfulness—mirroring the dancers' graceful steps. The hornbill, revered in Naga culture, symbolizes elegance and freedom. This folk dance can be translated this way. Ngabang ringdi meaning, the majestic banyan tree stands tall, laden with an abundance of fruit. The hornbill (herie), attracted by this bounty flies up to the banyan tree and flits from branch to branch, tree to tree, savouring the sweet fruit. With agile wings, it flutters between the tree's sprawling limbs, plucking and devouring the ripe fruit with relish. Seeing how beautiful the hornbill looks as it flits from one tree to the other, seemingly dancing on wings, and therefore invitation is made to a girl to come out and dance, calling her as Daudau's aunt, or Sampungle's aunt, (the girl is addressed as the aunt of her niece as the girl is not directly addressed). The song continues, Sampungle nai, (Sampungle's aunt) come and dance. May your steps be also as light as the bird's



flight, your graceful steps beautiful as you move around with joy and enthusiasm around the big, sturdy, beautiful banyan tree.

3. Summary

Across the folk dances of the Zeliangrong, a recurring theme is the deep relationship between humans and the natural world. Animals such as butterflies, pythons, and hornbills are not merely decorative metaphors but are essential elements symbolizing joy, sensuality, and connection with the nature. These Zeliangrong Naga dances celebrate biodiversity, seasonal cycles, and the coexistence of humans with nature. Zeliangrong folk dances are vibrant testaments to a community's soul. The folk dances of a community often serve as a vibrant reflection of the intricate relationships between humans and the natural world. Through dynamic dance movements and poignant songs, these performances beautifully portray the interconnectedness of humans with animals, birds, bees and other creatures. The dance movements in these folk dances often mimic the natural world, with performers embodying the characteristics of various animals and birds. We see them flap their arms and hands like wings, or sway their bodies like animals. These folk dances tell stories of the relationships between humans and animals. This emphasize the importance of coexisting with nature, respecting the habitats and roles of various creatures. It also shows their connections, their dependence on each other. The dance movements also show us of how humans have long been fascinated by the elegant movements of animals and birds, often drawing inspiration from their natural behaviours and incorporating these elements into various forms of expression, including dance, art, and literature. As repositories of indigenous knowledge and cultural pride, Zeliangrong folk dances must be preserved, studied, and celebrated for the invaluable heritage they represent.

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