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## **Theatricality in the Dance form of *Ajilamu* in Arunachal Pradesh: An Overview**

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### **Abstract**

*Ajilamu is a ritualistic dance form of some indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The Shertukpen and Monpa Buddhist tribes perform Ajilamu on the occasion of their local festivals and life-cycle ceremonies. The implication of this Ajilamu dance among these Buddhist tribes is to convey the message related to moral values of the society. This article aims to explore the correlation between dances of Buddhist tribes and theatrical performance with reference to Ajilamu dance form of Arunachal Pradesh. Its aim is to critically evaluate the contemporary form of the Ajilamu dance as a dance drama or a pantomime. The present paper is an attempt to explore the various theatrical elements in Ajilamu dance, a living, long standing cultural dance form.*

**Keywords:** Buddhist tribes, Ajilamu dance, Namthar Book, folklore, pantomime, theatrical performance.

### **Introduction**

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The State of Arunachal Pradesh has 26 major tribes and a hundred -odd sub-tribes, each of which is known for its unique cultural norms and folk dance forms. Prominent tribes with unique dance cultural heritages include the Shertukpen, the Monpa, the Bugun, Khamaba, the Memba, Kamti and Singopho . *Ajilamu* is a famous folklore based dance form of Arunachal Pradesh. It is essential to note that most of the Arunachal Pradesh's tribal norms and beliefs often have their roots in Buddhist tales. Usually, the traditional dance performances are held to celebrate natural phenomena such as the arrival of spring and of greenery after a harsh and white winter. One can say that tribal dance forms in Arunachal Pradesh are an important part of every ceremony, ritual or even a festival. For instance, the *Ajilamu* dance form serves to present spiritual consciousness and value system of the Buddhist tribes of Monpa and Shertukpen during the spring festival. There is a distinctive religious dimension to all the traditional dance forms of Arunachal Pradesh. One can rightly attribute the traditional saying that dance forms of Arunachal Pradesh like the Khamti dance, the Yak mask dance, the Zik dance, the Ho and *Ajilamu* usually represent happiness of the tribal soul.

*Ajilamu* dance form is a living cultural tradition of Monpa and Shertukpen tribes who are found predominantly in Tamang and West Kameng districts of Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a cultural practice passed from generations to generations through the *guru-shisya* (Teacher-Student) tradition. Young boys from the community are sent to the jungle wherein they are coached by the dance master in an *ashram* (Hermitage) for 5-6 years to perfect the ritualistic



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masked dance. A public performance of *Ajilamu* coincides with community's religious rituals and festivals such as *Torgaya*, *Wang*, *Khikasba*, *Choekar* etc. Usually, there is an oral narrative which accompanies the dance performance. Such narratives are based on either Buddhist legends or traditional orators which glorify the victory of good over evil. The nature of the songs is mostly spiritual, philosophical and mythological with a good dose of the supernatural magical elements. The *Ajilamu* dance performance takes place over 3-4 days. First comes the *Ho*(bird) dance performance followed by the *Zik*(deer) dance performance. Third comes, the Yak dance performance. Lastly comes, the masked dance performances of the king Choeygal Norjang and queen, the Goddess Yutho Lamu.

*Ajilamu* dance performance is a unique performing art tradition of Monpa and Shertukpen tribes with its roots in Buddhist folklore. The *Ajilamu* -dance theme is sourced from the book of *Namthar*. The name of *Namthar* is a contraction of *Nampar Tharpa*, a word which means "Mukti" or complete liberation. The book of *Namthar* is part of *Nampar Tharpa* anthology of stories dealing with Buddhist saints/sages from Indo-Tibetan region. This anthology focuses on ways to gain enlightenment and to live harmoniously with nature. The central characters are *Mahasiddas* or *Yogis* whose lives revolve round attainment of spiritual enlightenment. All the stories aim to highlight the key points of an enlightened life without focusing much on chronological events.



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## **Aim of the study**

Dance is an integral part of any theatrical performance as it involves communicative movement, improvisation of theme and performance based on a chosen storyline. Often, one finds evidence of ritualistic folk dance forms inspiring traditional and modern dance drama. Truly, every dance performance is situated within the historical and social beliefs of a community in which it flourishes. In context, the present study focuses on theatrical elements of *Ajilamu* dance performance from Arunachal Pradesh. By doing so, the present study explores the possibility of modernizing an indigenous folk tradition which is unique to the North-East region of India.

## **Methodology**

In order to understand the theatrical adaptation of folklore inspired *Ajilamu* dance performance of the Buddhist tribes of Monpa and Shertukpen, the present area -specific study was carried out in Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. In this study, qualitative methods were used to collect the empirical data among the selected tribal groups using observation (both participant and non-participant) and interviews with the key informants from each tribe for eliciting information on *Ajilamu* dance performance and its materials.

## ***Ajilamu* as a dance drama or a pantomime**



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In contemporary times, one finds that popular performances of *Ajilamu* are a dramatic renditions of the legend of King Choeygal Norjang and his righteousness. One needs to remember that this legendary story is narrated by the Buddhist monk named Thangtong Gyalpo, a Buddhist monk. This is a symbolic tale of righteous acts and human effort triumphing over greed and envy. As a dance -drama, *Ajilamu* unfolds as a pantomime act in four parts through the characters of a cruel king Shakpajonu, the water and rain Goddess Chukna Rinchin, the tantric magician NyapaHunleMebar, the fisherman Naypa Panglezimpa, the monk Dangsung Rimpoche, the immortal Goddess, Yutho Lamu , King Choegal Norzang, King Cheogal's mother, King Cheogal's many queens and his latest queen, the Goddess Yutho Lamu. The first part of the storyline in *Ajilamu* masked dance performance is the episode of King Shakpajonu's tyrannical rule and a grave consequence of his rule, namely the consequence of the rain and water Goddess Chukna Rinchin abandoning from the kingdom. The tantric tries to capture the Goddess but in vain. In the second part of the storyline, one witnesses a battle between the powerful but selfish tantric NyapaHunleMebar and the ordinary but selfless fisherman Nyapa Panglezimpa in which fisherman Panglezimpa emerges victorious. As a winner, this ordinary mortal receives an immortal gift. However, he is confused about how to use the immortal gift. This mortal confusion and curiosity leads to the third part of the *Ajilamu* dance storyline. In this act, the fisherman comes know that he has got the company of immortal goddess as a gift through the monk Dangsung Rimpoche. The mortal fisherman realizes that he would not be able to use the



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gift in an optimum manner. So, he gifts the immortal Goddess to the benevolent King, Cheogal Norzang. Thus ends the third part of *Ajilamu* dance performance. Lastly comes the episode wherein King Cheogal successfully gains the hand of the heavenly being, Goddess Yutho Lamu. There is also the subplot of jealousy among the other queens of King Cheogal, who unsuccessfully plot to destroy Goddess Yutho Lamu. Thus, *Ajilamu* dance performance is not a mere dance but a colourful pantomime of Goddesses, of supernatural beings, of kings, of confused, of vested interests and of human foibles as well. There is much song, noise, suspense, comedy, phantasmagoria in the legendary storyline of King Cheogal Norzang, who symbolises a benevolent, happy folk hero, who follows the Buddhist belief of doing good for mankind always.

As a typical dance drama, *Ajilamu* performance has a *sutradhari* (a narrator) who retells an epic storyline in linear or a nonlinear narrative, has public discourse through the arguments and counter-arguments presented by masked actors who depict legendary characters such as king, queen, demon, magician etc., apart from music and dance performance. There is much action on stage to engage audience in a moving, powerful emotional experience of reliving the tale of victory of good over evil. A unique folk innovation is in the use of songs to edify the Buddhist community's faith in good virtues and in the victory of righteous behaviour and thought. Comic asides and satirical comments of the *sutradhari* are also a key feature of *Ajilamu* performance. Interestingly, the *sutradhari* moves among the audience and makes comic asides or satirical comments to involve audience in self-critiquing. Each dance performance of *Ajilamu* includes



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folk tales as well as ancient Buddhist legends into its storyline. One also finds critiquing of the sins of anger, greed, of ignorance and of evil thought. All the above elements justify the critical evaluation of *Ajilamu* dance performances as dance drama and not as folk dance form alone.

## **Elements of acting and theatre/ dramatization/ dramaturgy in *Ajilamu* dance form**

*Abhinaya* (acting) is a language/medium/ art through which one tells a story to the audience to educate and entertain them. Acting is an art of representation/portrayal. Acting/drama is also the act of portraying/representing events of life on stage. Acting is not a mere representation of the visible behaviours or external events. It is also a medium to depict the inner thoughts or the workings of the mind. Acting/drama has been defined differently by different scholars and practitioners at different points of time. Some have defined drama/ acting as a visual and verbal depiction of a story/ an act of telling a story through words and expression while some others have defined it as an imaginative physical art form . Another way of looking at drama/ acting is as a way to represent the dilemmas of the mind. A wholesome way of defining acting would be to consider it as an art form to tell a story through words and expressions and as an imaginative physical art form which can also portray the inner thoughts.

While considering an actor's perspective on portraying a story, it is better to bring in the perspective of the playwright as well as of the audience. This is necessary as an actor presents a story to the audience, on stage, through a combination of song, music, fine-arts and dramatic



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devices. The audience engages with the actor's emotions and performance and thereby experiences *rasa* (emotion). Thus, the audience is impacted by actor's feelings and thoughts. It is not necessary that all the aspects/ elements of a play performance are needed to experience *rasa*. For instance, audience can experience *rasa* through song and music elements of an act/ performance.

## ***Rasa* (Emotion) theory and *Ajilamu* dance form**

When one critically applies the *rasa* theory to the instance of *Ajilamu* dance form, one finds that the audience experiences *rasa* by engaging with the dance and song performance of actors. As a natural corollary, it would be more appropriate to consider *Ajilamu* art form as a dance drama instead of a mere dance performance for it contains the dramatic elements of a musical, a play of several acts of story-telling of legendary personages/characters portrayed masked actors who are dressed in apt, colourful costumes. To categorize *Ajilamu* tradition as a mere dance form is reducing its unique dramatic elements and its scope as living theatre form.

## **Similarities between *Ajilamu* dance performance and Greek theatre**

Ancient Greek theatre originated as a form of ritualistic song and dance performance to worship Goddess *Dinoyesus*. Gradually, this religious ritual transformed into early Greek drama. In a similar strain, the ritualistic song and dance performances of *Yak* mask dance, *Zick*, *Ho* and *Ajilamu*, which are modes of popular worship to Buddhist *Mahasiddas*, can be considered as





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the pioneers of traditional dance drama with folk roots from Arunachal Pradesh. There are many similarities in dramatic elements too. For example, both ancient Greek drama and *Ajilamu* dance performances.

## **Didactic elements in *Ajilamu* dance form**

The *sutradhar*, or the storyteller who is dressed up as a superhuman (half man-half animal), he also wears a mask and he plays a didactic role in *Ajilamu* dance performance. At times, the male *sutradhar* walks into the audience area and cracks jokes, humours them and involves the audience in self-reflection on the present situation of human life; these asides/ monologues have didactic purpose as his words are intended to teach values. This didactic approach of the *sutradhari* is akin to Bertolt Brecht's technique of engaging audience by asking questions to the audience during the play. According to Bertolt's alienation theory, audience are often alienated from truths of life. So, Bertolt intended to critically engage his audience with a combination of emotional and critical interrogation of human condition. Similarly, the *sutradhari* in *Ajilamu* dance performance brings about critical self-reflection through discourse with audience on topics from culture in everyday life.

## ***Ajilamu* art form in contemporary times**

There has been a long standing debate whether *Ajilamu* ritualistic performance can be considered as a dance drama and thereby a performing art form. The fact however remains that there are



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distinctive elements of pantomime in *Ajilamu* performances in terms of storyline adaptation, discourse rendition, physical movement, use of stage-craft, agency of masked actors and engagement of audience to achieve *rasa*.

Next, cultural mores and trends change and with time, art forms also undergo changes and adaptation. Similarly, *Ajilamu* has evolved from being a ritualistic dance to a popular dance drama performed during the spring season. Importantly, the spiritual ethos and folk innovation of oral narrative has remained intact in the contemporary performance.

When one considers the theatrical possibilities of *Ajilamu* performance, one can adapt the songs into dialogues. This adaptation has the potential to raise the status of *Ajilamu* dance as a contemporary performing art form in the realm of North East Indian theatre. It would also help in preserving traditional folk heritage while balancing contemporary tastes of musical drama.

## **Conclusion**

In contemporary times, there is a growing critical opinion on performing arts as the most developed art forms of human civilizations due to its capacity to ennoble us of human value education. In this regard, *Ajilamu* performance certainly deserves critical categorization as a pantomime art form because of its edutainment function. *Ajilamu* dance performance not only entertains the audience but educates them with the need to be rooted in human values and exhorts



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people to fight against evil through the legendary stories of King Choegyol Norsang, Buddhist *Mahasiddas* and Indo-Tibetan *Yogis*.

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