

**THANG TA: MARTIAL ART OF MANIPUR
ANIMATION DRS
AN SPL - 72**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the project work done in relation to my graduation film and submitted as a written report to the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay is a record of the original work done by me under the guidance of Prof. Nina Sabnani.

Unless otherwise stated, the contents of this report in the form of text and images are entirely my own. The views expressed in the document as part of the written submission of the project are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay.

Saurabh Vashistha
May 2016

Approval

The Report Committee for Animation Design, Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report on:

Thang ta: The martial art of Manipur

By

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Saurabh Vashistha
May 2016

INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by the Manipuri culture and wanted to explore it. Through the internet I found out about Thang ta, one of the two martial arts that originated in India. But even on the internet there was not enough information about it. I wanted to know more. So I decided to do a visual ethnographic study of Thang ta. My aim was to observe and study the art form and the life style of people who practice it. I wanted to find out how the art form originated, stories and lore behind it and the art form in the present time and document it in form of sketches, photographs and videos.

As an animation student it would help me know about the behavior of people and the way they interact with their surroundings and more importantly it would help me sensitize myself and the people around me to be more sensitive towards the culture.

The first few days in Imphal went by uneventfully, trying to adjust to a new place, food, time schedules, transport. I asked around about Thang ta. Everyone seemed to know about the art but I was not able to find someone

who practiced it. On the third day I heard from a friend about the indigenous sports festival that was taking place in Manipur University. That is where I saw Thang ta performance for the first time. I talked to a master who seemed more than willing to talk about the art. Unfortunately he was very busy throughout my trip and we couldn't meet again. So one night while going back to my hotel I got to talking to the taxi driver who happened to know the principal of a school where Thang ta is taught. He gave me his number, I took an appointment with them and went to the school the next day.

This was something common in my experiences at Imphal. Most people I met in Imphal would know about Tang Ta and tell you stories of someone they know, who has learned Tang Ta.



Thang ta performers demonstrating sword and shield style combat during Manipur indigenous sports festvie at Manipur University (MU)



Performing two sword style, MU



The journey in Manipur with Thang ta

THANG TA

Huyen Langlon is an Indian martial art from Manipur. In the Manipuri language, huyen means war while langlon or langlong can mean net, knowledge or art. Huyen langlon consists of two main components, namelythang-ta or armed combat and sarit sarak or unarmed fighting. Thang Ta “The Art of the Sword and Spear” integrates various external weapons - the sword, spear, dagger, etc. - with the internal practice of physical control through soft movements coordinated with the rhythms of breathing. It is part of the great heroic tradition of Manipur. All that can be gleaned of huyen langlon’s ancient history comes from hymns and legends. Folklore links the creation of huyen langlon and its related dances with the native animist gods. Manipur was a valley protected from neighbouring Hindu, Burmese and Chinese kingdoms by hills. The tribal people of the hills were divided into seven related clans, known as yek, salai, or pana. These were the Moirang, Luwang, Mangang, Khuman, Angom, Khaba-Nganba and Sarang Leishangthem. Before their integration into a single unified Meitei community, these clans each ruled separate

principalities over which they fought amongst each other. The earliest written record of huyen langlon is the Chainarol-Puya which details the ethics of duelling. The fights took place under strict rules of conduct, and to violate them was both shameful and sinful. When a fighter is challenged, the day for the bout would be fixed to allow for time to prepare the weapons. Allowing the opponent the first chance to fire an arrow or hurl a spear was considered particularly courageous. The duel itself was not necessarily to the death, and usually ended once first blood has been drawn. However, the victor was still expected to behead the loser. Either before the duel or before the beheading, the fighters would share the meals and wine prepared by their wives. If it had been so requested beforehand, the loser’s body may be cremated. Heads were taken as trophies, as was custom among the headhunters of northeast India. Various taboos existed such as not killing an opponent who runs, begs or cries out of fear, or anyone who pleads for protection.



The ritual



The culture



The art

Thang Ta the art, culture and daily life

Thang Ta, according to the Gurus, is about building physical as well as mental fitness. They believe that the art evolved as a need of the hour, when Manipur was surrounded by forests and there was no peace between the various clans. He believes that the changes in the generation and the restless mindset of the new generation does not affect his students. He believes that Tang Ta makes them mentally disciplined which distinguishes them from other children. The first stage of learning Tang ta is attaining mental discipline by submitting yourself to spirituality. The next step is building the physical stamina. Two sessions of training happen at the Tang Ta school every day. Students return from school and from 4 to 6 pm, they undergo the training. Good character is considered primary to learn Tang ta according to the Gurus. Good character refers to concentration, obedience, respect towards elders. Good food also has to be a part of a performers life. Good food refers to vegetarian food. The meitei food stance According to the master, a lot of posture and

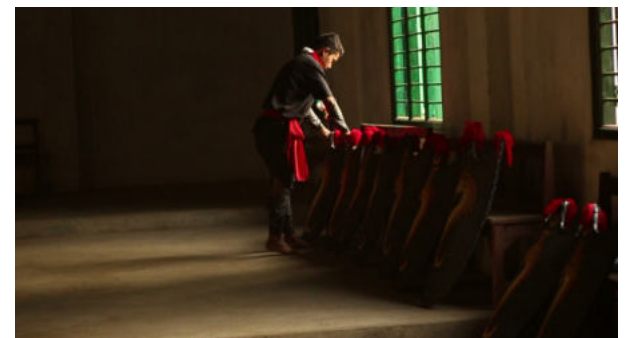
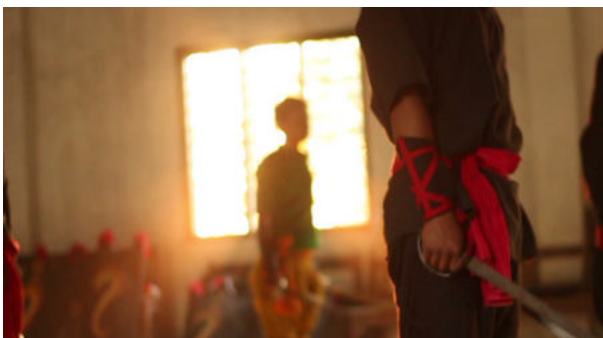
poses in daily life and even in some dance forms have evolved from Tang ta. For example the master believes that when even while eating food the Manipuris sit in a posture which can easily turn into a defense posture if anyone were to attack. Many hand movements and leg stances in local dance forms have said to have originated from this martial art form.



The students practicing Thang ta after school



Practicing with stick before using swords



The students ready to practice, the master ready with the beats. First comes *Sarit Sarak* (movement without weapon) and then practicing with weapons and shields. After the practice all the equipments are kept back as they were.



Two men against one Thang ta performance, MU



The female warrior has found a safe place to rest for the night while she is praying two men from an enemy tribe find her and attack her. She counters them with full force

Huyen Llalong Manipur Thang ta Cultural Association

About the school

Huyen Llalong Manipur Thang ta Cultural Association, is situated in Irilbung, Manipur and is the first school to teach Thang ta. The school was established by Padmashree awardee late. Guru G.Gourakishore Sharma. The area surrounding the school was empty except for a police station and a long line of people in front of an Inner Line Permit office. Further you would start noticing conversations around the interline permit and offices where people gather for petitions for the implementing inner line permit all over Imphal.

office of Guru G.Gourakishore Sharma which is kept locked and preserved in his memory. This room is treated with utter respect and most people are not allowed to enter it. We were given permission to take a look inside this office room.

The infrastructure

The school looked like a government school with brick walls as well as thatched walls. It had a small ground in the middle surrounded by classrooms, office, hostel building (under construction) and a hall in the back where students learned Thang ta in the evening. There is a room, which used to be the study/



Huyen Lalong Manipur Thang ta Cultural Association, Irilbung, Manipur



A small temple inside the auditorium where students practice

PEOPLE

The first day we went there we were greeted by the principal of the school Mr. Shanta who introduced us to the head Thang ta instructor, Gurumanyam Biseshwor Sharma. Even though he was busy and did not expect guests on that day he was eager to meet us. As soon as we met him and told him about our research project, he took us home in his car. His father's shraad pooja was going on and he offered us food in his kitchen. He gave us a small introduction about Thang ta and left us in his study to just watch the videos and documentaries made about his father Sri. G.Gourakishore Sharma. His room was filled with books on Manipur, literature, Sanskrit and religion.

After the pooja he took us to a Vaishnavite temple that was established by king, Meidingu Pamheiba who brought Hinduism to Manipur and told us how the temple roof was built in pure gold once upon a time. Afterward he took us to the Manipur cultural association and introduced us to government officials and then he dropped us back home.



Closing ceremony at indigenous sports festival, MU

G.Gourakishore Sharma

Born on April 15, 1936 at Keirao Awang Leikai, Manipur, Shri Gurumayum Gourakishor Sharma is a distinguished Thang-Ta Guru of Manipur. He had his training in the Art from his father late Gurumayum Sanajaoba Sharma.

Subsequently, he sat at the feet of various eminent gurus of Manipuri Martial Arts including Angom Leiren Singh, Hijam Ibohal Singh, Mutum Maipak Singh, Chanambam Birahari Singh, and G. Sana Sharma, his brother. The family had a long tradition of martial arts and Guru Gourakishor imbibed the Manipuri martial art of Thang-Ta as easy as breathing. From his early childhood he showed great skills in the art and participated in festivals and tournaments.

Later on, he felt that his life was destined for the propagation of this art and with this realization he devoted his career tirelessly in its promotion. Opportunities fell at his feet one after another and he seized them for the survival of this art. He established a school on the vicinity of his home at Keirao and imparted training to the young boys and girls who were interested in

preserving this art-form, besides his own practice in the field.

Ultimately, his efforts were recognized by the people and honors came to him at the mere stroke of his hand. Shri Bodhachandra Singh, the late Maharaj of Manipur honored him with the award of Gold Medal and traditional Manipuri Dress. In 1978, Manipur State Kala Akademi recognized his talents by bestowing Fellow on him.

Since then his students continued to show the arts at various international arenas like Seoul, Canada, Free Town, Dakar, Ajerbedjan, Tunisia, Butan, Burma, London, Egypt, Switzerland and USA etc.

One of the most proactive teachers of Manipuri Martial Arts, Gourakishor had published books on the indigenous tribes of Manipur like the Aimol, Maring and Chiru etc. He has written scripts for plays such as Govinda Nirupan, Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (Seven years of Devastation), Haokhong Shimaikhu etc.



G.Gourakishore Sharma in traditional garb



His office is now preserved in his memory

SHRI GURUMAYUM BISESHWOR SHARMA

Born in 1983 at Keirao Bitra Awang Leikai, Imphai, Shri Gurumayum Biseshwor Sharma is one of the most talented and promising artistes of Manipuri martial art, Thang- Ta.

Son of the illustrious guru of Thang-Ta Padmashree G. Gourakishor Sharma, he has not only inherited the undying love for the Manipuri martial art Thang-Ta from his father but has successfully carried forward the baton.

Initiated into the art form by his father at a young age, Shri Biseshwor's early years have been shaped by his father to flower into a top artiste.

Besides his father, Biseshwor has learnt under other masters such as G. Sana Sharma, Padma Shri recipient N. Khelchandra Singh, K. Biren Singh and K. Sanathoba Sharma.

At the age of 32 years, in the past 25 years, he has performed in over 500 events within the country and in more than 30 countries of the world which include - Canada, Switzerland, Japan, Algeria etc.

From his Childhood he has received several scholarships awarded by different Cultural departments of the Govt. of Manipur as well as

the Govt. of India.

Presently he is a visiting Faculty at the National School of Drama - New Delhi, expert Committee Member - Text Book Syllabus Committee of Thang-Ta in the Council of Higher Secondary Education - Manipur and of the Manipur Government arts and culture department.

When not conducting workshops or performing, Biseshwor teaches at the Huyen Lallong Manipur Thang-ta Cultural Association in Imphal East, the institute founded by his father in 1958.

He told us that ultimately a student of Tang ta should never forget that it is the heritage of the art form which is bringing you fame and not you as an individual. He believed that the art form is bigger than the individual.



Gurumayum Biseshwor Sharma







THABA DEVI

Puthem Ningol Louriyam Ongbi Thaba devi was born on the 30th oct, 1963 at Keirao Makha Leikai, Irilbung, Imphal. When she was about 8 years old she started her training in Thang ta and Acrobatic under the supervision of her father late. Puthem Ahanjao Singh. Then she got further training in Thang ta from Gurumanyum Gourakishor Sharma.

When she was young she did not enjoy training with her father. At the age of 12 she started performing and got praised for it and slowly she started enjoying thang ta. When she got married she had to leave thang ta behind because societal reasons, but seeing that thang ta made her so happy her husband asked her to start training again. She started teaching the martial art to students under the banner of performing organization of Art and Culture, Keirao, Khunou, Irilbung, Imphal East.

She has some complaint with the government as they do not give her enough support like the other thang ta schools get. Thaba devi's

group mixes thang ta with acrobatic in their performance. The group's main aim is to study and research of all aspect of cultural heritage of Manipur. She give salary to her students and even pays for their school so that students would concentrate on the martial art without worrying about anything. She claims that she can still take five grown men in a fight at her age.



Oja Thaba devi



Before performance

THE FOOTBALL EVENT

There was a Tang Ta performance by Tanba Devis group which was supposed to start by 4pm. It was at Oinam, in a ground, as a part of the inaugural ceremony of a 4-men football game. Tanba Devi and her team wanted to pick us up and take us to the venue themselves. Even though we were late by almost half an hour, she insisted on us travelling with her, in her car. On the way, they even stopped at the Nambol market (famous for its food) and bought us the famous pakodas and snail fry. We reached the even and were told that we had to be on the dias as special guests. Our names were announced and we were asked to sit with the dignitaries. MLA was the chief guest and there were several speeches from several important politicians. There was police to protect the politicians and later on when the performance was about to start people of that area started pouring in. People of all age groups, children and women crowded around the bamboo fence to watch the performance. There was a curious ritual. The dignitaries and guests who were watching the performance

from the dias would walk unto the performers every now and then and throw currency notes at them (as though showering them with 10 rupee notes). These notes would be picked up by the organisers and returned to the people who threw them and they would repeat the process throughout the performance. The explanation provided to us were that this was meant to encourage the performers and encourage performers. Later on, the guests would give a small amount as a gift to the performing team as a token of appreciation.



Performer balances himself on four sharp spears



Audience of all age group enjoyed the performance



Performers displaying their acrobatic skills



Walking on glass



Balancing act



Practice for sword



The audience were mesmerized by the performance. Many of them were inspired to practice thang ta and embrace their culture

STUDENTS

Students who practice Thang ta show excellent discipline. Students as young as nine year old are brought to the school by their parents. It is up to the master to accept them as a disciple. Some aspire to become doctors, police women, some want to join the army. But wherever they go and whatever they become they want thang ta to be a part of their life. Another big motivation factor for the students is scholarships. There are a lot of scholarship opportunities in Tang Ta from the Center for cultural resources and training, New Delhi, Manipur kala academy etc. In addition to this, several awards and prizes are there for the performers. It also gives several opportunities to travel outside the state. This is a major motivation for students to start training. There is a focus on these even within the schools.

Abum Sharma

Abum was fascinated by Tang ta after seeing Tang Ta being performed. He and his friend joined classes and he couldn't keep up with the training and left his dream of mastering Tang

Ta for 2 years. He then came back and started learning again. He said it is emotionally difficult for him to fight his own friends and wound them during training. He said it was an enriching experience to travel outside his home town for performances.

He has attempted for the scholarship thrice and got through in 2011. Winning the scholarship enables him to focus on Tang Ta without worrying about how to support himself. He is running a shop currently and wishes to join the army in the future.



MY EXPERIENCE

The first day when I came here all I had was some information from the Internet. As I spent time with the people of Manipur I realized that thang ta is more than just an art with visual beauty. It is a part of their life and culture. It was a common sight to see small children playing with wooden sticks and plastic bats swinging them as if dancing to the rhythm of thang ta. People all over Imphal from all tribes were eager to help us, give information about thang ta and often the conversation would lead to the current champion of Manipur- Mary Kom. On the last day of our trip we realized that we were staying one kilometer away from her.



When our trip was over I felt that I have always been in Manipur, as if it was my home. I still feel nostalgic when I look at this picture



A 42 year old ninja trapped in a 7 year olds body named- "Naam Nahi Hai".



The last photo that the photographer clicked, showing the reason behind his uneventful death :)

