

THANG TA

The martial art of manipur

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TION

inated by the Manipuri
explore it. Through the
ut Thang ta, one of the
iginated in India. But
re was not enough
wanted to know more.
al ethnographic study
to observe and study
style of people who
nd out how the art form
re behind it and the
ime and document it in
graphs and videos.
it would help me know
people and the way
surroundings and more
o me sensitize myself
ne to be more sensitive

hal went by
djust to a new place,
nsport. I asked around
e seemed to know
ot 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 Mani



The journey in Manipur with Thang ta

an martial art from
i language, huyen means
glong can mean net,
langlon consists of two
lythang-ta or armed
r unarmed fighting.
Sword and Spear”
al weapons - the sword,
the internal practice
gh soft movements
hythms of breathing. It is
radition of Manipur.
f huyen langlon’s
om hymns and legends.
n of huyen langlon
ith the native animist
ey protected from
nese and Chinese
ibal people of the hills
related clans, known
ese were the Moirang,
nan, Angom, Khaba-
hangthem. Before
ngle unified Meitei
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

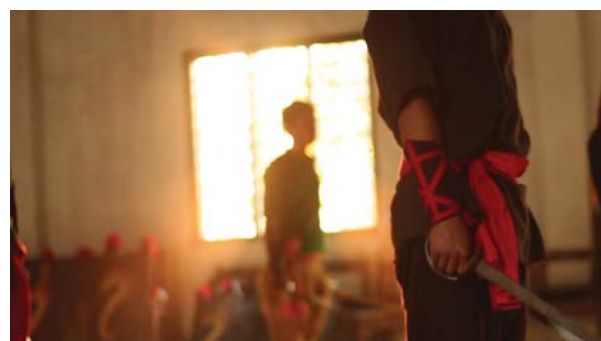
the art, culture and daily life

the Gurus, is about
as mental fitness.
evolved as a need of
was surrounded by
peace between the
s that the changes in
restless mindset of the
t affect his students.
makes them mentally
uishes them from
stage of learning Tang
discipline by submitting
the next step is building
o sessions of training
hool every day.
hool and from 4 to 6 pm,
g.
ered primary to learn
Gurus. Good character
obedience, respect
od also has to be a
Good food refers to
itei food stance
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



The students ready to practice, the master ready with the beats. First comes *Sarit Sarak* practice all the equipments are kept back as they were.



The female warrior has found a safe place to rest for the night while she is praying two m

ong Manipur Thang ta Cultural

Thang ta Cultural
in Irilbung, Manipur
teach Thang ta. The
y Padmashree awardee
re Sharma. The area
was empty except for
g line of people in
rmit office. Further
conversations around
offices where people
he implementing inner
al.

e
government school
as thatched walls. It
e middle surrounded
stetel building (under
in the back where
ta in the evening.
used to be the study/

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.



Huyen Lialong Manipur Thang ta Cultural Association, Irilbung, Manipur

ere we were greeted
chool Mr. Shanta who
d Thang ta instructor,
Sharma. Even though
expect guests on that
et us. As soon as we met
our research project,
ar. His father's shraad
he offered us food in his
all introduction about
is study to just watch
ntaries made about his
re Sharma. His room was
hipur, literature, Sanskrit

us to a Vaishnavite
hed by king, Meidingu
Hinduism to Manipur
ple roof was built in
me. Afterward he took
al association and
ment officials and then
e.



Closing ceremony at indigenous sports festival, MU

Shore Sharma

t Keirao Awang Leikai,
m Gourakishor Sharma
-Ta Guru of Manipur. He
rt from his father late
Sharma.

the feet of various
uri Martial Arts
Singh, Hijam Ibohal
Singh, Chanambam
na Sharma, his brother.
dition of martial arts
nbibed the Manipuri
s easy as breathing.
l he showed great
cipated in festivals and

life was destined for the
nd with this realization
lessly in its promotion.
feet one after another
he survival of this art.
on the vicinity of his
arted training to the
o 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

GURUMAYUM BISESHWOR SHARMA

tra Awang Leikai,
Biseshwor Sharma is
and promising artistes
Thang- Ta.
u of Thang-Ta
hor Sharma, he has not
ng love for the Manipuri
n his father but has
ard the baton.
n by his father at a young
ly years have been
ower into a top artiste.
wor has learnt under
Sana Sharma, Padma
ndra Singh, K. Biren
Sharma.
the past 25 years, he
00 events within the
n 30 countries of the
nada, Switzerland,
as received several
different Cultural
. 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



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Ongbi Thaba devi was 63 at Keirao Makha. When she was about her training in Thang under the supervision of her husband, Oja Singh. Then she got the Thang ta from Gurumanyum.

She did not enjoy training. At the age of 12 she started training for it and slowly she became a. When she got married she was left behind because of her training that Thang ta made her. She asked her to start teaching the martial art under the banner of performing Thang Culture, Keirao, Khunou,

with the government. She got enough support like other women 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 aspects of cultural heritage of Manipur. She gives 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

BALL EVENT

performance by Tanba
supposed to start by
in a ground, as a part
any of a 4-men football
er team wanted to pick
venue themselves.
te by almost half an
travelling with her,
they even stopped at
ous for its food) and
akodas and snail fry.
d were told that we
special guests. Our
and we were asked
s. MLA was the chief
veral speeches from
cians. There was police
s and later on when
out to start people of
g in. People of all age
men crowded around
atch the performance.
al. The dignitaries and
ing 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



Performers displaying their acrobatic skills



Practice for sward



The audience were mesmerized by the performance. Many of them were inspired to practice

Thang ta show excellent young as nine year old are their parents. It is up to them as a disciple. Some are police women, some are wherever they go and they want thang ta to be their big motivation factor for scholarships. There are a lot of opportunities in Tang Ta from the forces and training, New Army etc. In addition to prizes are there for the several opportunities. This is a major reason to start training. There is training within the schools.

Thang ta after seeing his friend. He and his friend couldn't keep up with the 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.



ENCE

When I was here all I had was the Internet. As I spent time in Manipur I realized that I was an artist with visual skills in my life and culture. It was the small children playing with plastic bats swinging to the rhythm of thang ta. Children from all tribes were eager to learn about thang ta and how it would lead to the current generation. Mary Kom. On the last day I realized that we were staying in her.



When our trip was over I felt that I have always been in Manipur, as if it was my home.



The last photo that the photographer clicked, showing the reason behind his un

