Chapter 4: Expressive World of the Hmar Women: Performing Folk Arts

4.1. Defining Performing Folk Arts:

Performing Folk Arts is one of the most important sectors in the study of folklore and folk life. It "primarily concerns traditional music, dance and drama" (J. Handoo 2000, 18). The word 'performance' in the growing new thought of folkloristic, may be said to be associated with every delivered item of folklore, irrespective of its generic applications. However, in the present context, meaning of 'performance' is given only to those folklore and folk life items that are consciously performed and the art forms carried on by individuals and groups from one generation to another. This includes conscious art forms like dance, drama and folk music. If we compare this set of conscious art forms with other folklore items like telling a tale, it is discernable that the latter set of art form looks more casual in nature than the former. This idea is endorsed by Richard M. Dorson who says, "They are more casual in nature than the conscious presentation of these arts by individuals or groups with folk instruments, dance costumes, scenario props" (Boro 2001, 19).

4.2. Different sub-genres:

The most important genres of Performing Folk Arts sector are said to be folk dance, folk music and drama. Depending on the availability of genres with the tribe under study, this chapter focuses on two performing folk arts genres – folk dance and folk music. Dramatic form of art as a unified genre is non-existent in the artistic heritage of the tribe. But this does not necessarily mean that the tribesmen are totally ignorant of a dramatic form of expression. A minute observation of their folk dances reveals that their dances are intensely endowed with veritable dramatic performances. The dancers wear colourful and elaborate costumes. While dancing the selected dancer or dancersexaggeratedly chant some of the lyrical lines in the form of rhetorical dialogue. The Hmar folk dances generally involve singing, dancing and mimetic acting reflecting in the most exaggerated way the occasions celebrated. The dialogue form is both functional and aesthetic in regard to its effect.
4.3. Musical Instrument:

According to Bruno Nettl, "Folk and primitive music have traditionally been described in terms of several distinct elements of music, such as scale, mode, melodic contour and meter..." (Dundes 1965, 175). Traditional music is generally without written or printed musical score; it is passed on by ear and performed by memory down from generation to generations. Musical instruments of the tribe generally do not cross generic barriers as they are reserved mainly for use in singing and dancing. Of all the instruments, *khuong* (drum; Fig.4.1) and *zamluong*, also called *darkhuong* (gong; Fig.4.2) have the maximum usages: the beating of them can serve as signaling tidings – good, bad or neutral.

The Hmars are rich in culture. Cultural embellishes are being identified in the Hmar tradition of revering dance forms, festivals and music. The Hmars show their expertise in these conventional folk dances, folk songs that nicely represent events of adventure, battle, love, victory, and other experiences throughout history. Their culture is enriched with brilliant tribal songs and dance forms. Varieties of musical instruments decorate their orchestra. They play a kind of drum called *Khuong* during their tribal dance and song performances. Some of the other musical instruments are *Theihle* (bamboo flute; Fig.4.3), *Seki* (set of mithun horn; Fig.4.4), *Darbu* (set of small gongs of different size with different rhythmic sound; Fig.4.5.), *Ruo Jingtang* (guitar made of bamboo; Fig.4.6), *Pheiphit* (a set of three whistle made of bamboo producing different sound; Fig.4.7), *Ruo Khuong* (a guitar like instrument made of bamboo, struck with a stick; Fig.4.8), *Darmang* (flat brass gong), *Darkhuong*or *Zamluong* (a big and heavy brass metal gong to give a majestic sound; a gong) *Chawngpereng* (a bamboo pipe instrument), *Rawsem* (flute made of dried hollow gourd and small sized bamboos; Fig.4.9), *Darbenthek* (cymbals; Fig.4.10), *Theikhuong* (a big hollow bamboo generally comprising two internodes with a node at the extreme end; Fig.4.11) *Darlai Pàwng* (heavy gong of brass metal), *Hna Mút* (Leaf instrument; Fig.4.12), *Ruo Tawtawráwt* (Fig.4.13) and *Um Perkhuong* (Fig.4.14). Many of these musical instruments are generally played by men. “Of these, one of the *pheiphit* whistles is played by women” (Lalramhnem). “*Khuong* is played by women mostly when dances are performed during marriage ceremonies”
(Sumneizir). "Regarding musician, there is no restriction and no convention in favour of a particular sex. Both men and women can play them. Women participants often played Darbenthhek, Pheiphit, and Theikhuong" (Lienchangwtho). "Of all these musical instruments, phngtang and rawsem are considered male-oriented instruments" (Lienchangwtho).

4.4. Folk Dance:

Folk dance is called hnam lâm. This is one important field in the performing folk art sector. Singing and dancing together constitute features of festival celebrations of the Hmars. The tribe has a variety of Lâm (dance) forms which are performed by men and women, young and old with great enthusiasm during their various festival ceremonies and occasions. The origins of many of Hmar folk dance can be traced back to pre-historic times. The dances are illustrative of the different events of socio-cultural life of the tribe. They are performed on different occasions serving as expressive commentaries of the solemnized occasions. Most of the dance forms, perhaps those which were profusely connected with old religious practices accompanied by lavish drinking of zusa symbolizing old values of life, have been forgotten due to discontinuation. I have classified the various dances into different sub-headings. Some of the dance-forms are still in practice while many of them have remained oblivious:

4.4.1. Festival Dance (Nipui Lâm):

As has been given the details in Chapter 2 (2.3.4), the festival dances of the Hmars can be divided into two main categories: Dances for Individual and General Festivals. During Individual Festivals, the young men and women mainly perform dances like Dârlâm, Chawnlâm, Hlakawi Lâm Chawngchên Lâm and Hlachawm Lâm. In Assam, Chawnlâm (Fig.4.15. i and ii) is one of the most common dances performed during individual festivals. It is performed with the accompaniment of various folk musical instruments like khuong (drum), dârhu (a set of gongs of different size and rhythmic sound), thihle (flute) and two other instruments called rawsem and chawngpereng. "A female participant used to beat the drum ( khuong)" (Sumneizir). Thiek includes Khuol Lâm and Lal Lâm or Vai Lâm to the social festival dances of the tribe. To him
*Khuol Lām* (guest welcoming dance) is performed by young men and women as a gesture of warm welcome to the distinguished guest who comes to visit their village. This dance is also performed during *inchawng* festivals in honour of the host. *Lal Lām* (royal dance) is performed on occasions of coronation of new village chief or other high officials for the entire community is endorsed both by Dr. Bapui (Bapui 2011, 106) and Dr Thiek (Thiek 2013, 316). One of the informants managed to recall three lines of *Khuol Lām* song,

“A mi iengzat tam sienkhawm,
Ka Pu........(name of the quest) chau,
Ama inpakin ka lām ie” (H.V Sunga)

(Among multitudes, I dance to glorify the one and only Sir.......)

“During *Chawngchen Lām*, a dance which is performed to glorify the host (Fig.4.16), a female participant used to beat the drum and *dārbu*” (Lienchawngtho).

*Sikpui Lām* (Fig.4.17.i and ii) constitutes the general festival of the tribe. I have not included here other dance forms though they too carry feature of general festivals, because they all are occasion-specific. They are placed under different sub-categories of this section.

This grand and elaborate festival requires at least a fortnight during which the participant group- children, young and old, men and women- performs at least eight types of Sikpui Dance and sings about one hundred and twelve songs (Thiek 2013, 309) with zeal and gusto. Eight of the sub-titled dances are: *DurIe Lām, Thlawrán Lām, Lamtluong Lām, Ketet Lām, Anranlai Lām, Thlawrán Lām, Sim Sak Lām, and Palsawp Lām*, also called *Tīnna Lām*. The festival may continue for a longer period. In both the singing and dancing the Dances, the women folks take active participation.

*Sikpui Lām* is beautifully begun by young men and women standing alternately in horizontal line. Each female in line holds the hand of the nearest female’s from across the back of the male dancers standing near her. Male dancers too, form a chain by holding the hands of their neighbouring male dancers’ from across the back of the female dancers standing near them. Viewed from their back, their posture looks
immensely beautiful like a beautiful lattice. They together sway their legs to and fro following the rhythmic beats of the drum. The dancing styles of all the Sikpui Dances differ from one another. (Faihriem 2002, 26)

4.4.2. Victory Dance (Hnena Lâm):

The occasions for performing Victory Dances have been enumerated in Chapter 2 (2.3.5) of this work. The dances that fall within this category of folk dance are- Hranglâm (Fig.4.18.i and ii). Hranglâm is called by different nomenclatures according to the nature of the hunting expedition. If the community celebrates the head of the bagged animal, it is called Salu Lâm. If the celebration is for head of enemies, it is called Rallu Lâm. Pheiphit Lâm (Fig.4.19.i and ii) is another common victory dance form that is performed for any of the occasions. Pheiphit dance is another form of victory dance that is beautifully performed by male and female dancers who are positioned alternately. Dancers alternately sway their legs to and fro to the rhythmic beats produced by the instruments. The dance is performed mostly during Sa In-Ei ceremonies. Pheiphit being a set of three musical instruments, the dancers- male and female- play them as they dance in the dancing ground. “There are three types of Pheiphit Dance- Lamtluong, Saruol Pheikhai and Sai Khupsuk” (Lienchawngtho).

Hranglâm is the most ancient dance form of the tribe. It is performed in honour of successful hunters and great warriors. In the past, women folks hardly took part in the dance. They joined their male counterparts in chanting the songs. In modern days, they are active participants in the dances. Dancers sway their right and left legs with arms akimbo as they move forward in a round circle to the tune of the song-accompanied music.

4.4.3. Young Ladies’ Frolic Dance (Nuhmei Inlêna Lâm):

As described in Chapter 2 (2.3.8), the Hmar young ladies perform traditional frolic dances under starry sky at moonlit nights. Some of the dances that fall within this dance category are- Fahrel Tawk Lâm (Pestle Dance; Fig.4.20.i and ii), Kawl Tet Lâm (Loom Dance) and Inchāwm (Jumping). Thiek (Thiek 2013, 317, 319 & 320) maintains that there were folk dances traditionally performed only by women. He
names them as Faithlák Lăm, Vaki Fachawi Lăm, Chembe Insui Lăm and A Vakáwl Uo Zuong Lăm (Hornbill Dance). Faithlák Lăm “is a small basket or receptable for measuring rice. It is a group dance. Each dancer carries a faithlák completely filled with rice on her head and dances in an admirable balancing art.” Vaki Fachawi Lăm, he claims, is a parrot dance. It is “a group dance performed by girls in imitation of parrot’s movements during the harvest season.” Chembe Insui Lăm is very popular and hair-raising dance as claimed by Thiek. “The dancers dance over the sharp edges of daos or daggers with extra-ordinary skill.” A Vakáwl Uo Zuong Lăm Uo (Hornbill Dance; Fig.4.21.i and ii), another frolic dance of young ladies, requires at least four dancers. The dancers cross their right or left legs one another forming more or less a square. Then they dance with their right or left legs as they clap their hands and sing the song, ‘A vakáwl uo zuong lăm uo.....’ meaning, ‘hornbills are dancing.’

Fahrel Tawk Lăm, one of the most frequently performed dances is a pestle dance that is beautifully rhythmic and is associated with little acrobatics. This dance is popularly known as Bamboo Dance as because bamboo poles are often used in place of pestles. It is a beautiful dance form where dancers, generally female, step in and out of the striking pestles with their beautiful costumes. Pestles are horizontally placed in perfect parallel to each other. Each of other two participants holds and continuously strikes the extreme end of both the pestle pole in a regular rhythmic way. More dancers can participate if number of striking pestles is increased. Other participants sit around and sing the Fahrel Tawk Lăm Song (given in Chapter 2). Kawl Tet Lăm is a dance solely performed by women dancers with shafts of country loom in imitation of the mechanical movements of weaving in a country loom. This dance form has also been out of practice now. In North Cachar Hills district, Kawl Tet Lăm is called Fahrel Tãwìk Lâm whereas Dr. Thiek disputes the notion that Kawl Tet Lăm should be confused with Fahrel Tawk Lăm. He says Kawl Tet Lăm is a deviation of Fahrel Tawk Lăm.
*Incháwm Dance* is performed under moonlit nights. The songs are given in Chapter 2. Two straight lines of female participants stand face to face keeping a wide space in between. Each line can comprise three/ four or five (depending on the space of the dancing ground) participants. As they sing the song, one line jumps forward and backward to be followed by the other line in the same fashion. This dance form is immensely frolic by nature. Being a young frolic dance performed for amusement, this dance does not require any costumes or additional ornaments.

**4.4.4. Hunter Dance (Ramlèng Lām):**

The Hmars have two types of Hunter Dance which is reflective of their hunting expedition movements. The dances are called *Feitung Täwl Lām* by Dr. Bapui and Dr. H. Ŭhiek, and *Sāwl Bula Lām* by Sri L.Chawngtho. These hunter dances are performed during *Sa In-Ei* ceremonies. With spears in hands, dancers of this dance form imitate the physical movement of a hunter during hunting. These two dance forms have gone into oblivion.

**4.4.5. War Dance (Indo Lām):**

*Vaituksi* is the name of Hmar War Dance. This is one of the discontinued folk dances of the Hmars. “Each of the dancers carries a shield in his left hand and a sword in his right. He brandishes the sword and moves the shield swiftly as he dances” (Bapui 2011, 106). Ŭhiek remarked that this dance form is forgotten since long.

**4.4.6. Agricultural Dance (Lo Lām):**

A jhum-work related dance called, *Fapâr Lām* is exclusively performed by a woman. It is also called *Tuol Lām*. In the evenings of corporate work days in jhum-field, each of the *lawmnus* (female work-partner) and *lawmpas* (male work-partner) carries a load of firewood called *fapâr thing*. Together, they walk back amidst singing and dancing and, they proceed toward the house of the host. In front of the host’s house, they unload themselves and sit together on the ground forming a circle. Then they sing *Tuol Lām Hla* (also called *Fapar Lām Hla*). In the middle of the circled chain, one *lawmnnu* dances *Tuol Lām* (*Fapâr Lām*). This is a beautiful entertaining sight to watch. Every night of the corporate work days is a night of mini-celebration.
Lawmpas and lawmnus celebrate a drinking feast dancing “Liendâng Lâm, Zawntui Lâm and Khienghar Lâm” (L.Chongtho Hmar 1987, 25). Chawngtho claimed that Khienghar Lâm is called Puma Lâm (Fig.4.22.i and ii) by some, including the Biates, one of the sub-tribes of Hmar.

4.4.7. Marriage Dance (Molawm Lâm):

On occasions of marriage ceremony, the Hmars sing common occasion-related songs and perform dances in the houses of the new bride and the groom. The dance is performed by two groups of dancer- one active dancer in the middle and the other group encircling the lone dancer. In a strict sense of the term, the lone dancer is the dancer while the other group of participants forming the circle can be called the public-cum-audience. But since this supposedly non-participant group too comes out of the general public to participate in the dancing activity, it may be clubbed as passive group of dancer. The active dancer in this folk dance category is generally male while the passive group consists of men and women. The two groups of dancers sing the songs (given in Chapter 2) “with the new bride generally beating the drum” (Sumneizir). This is one of the discontinued forms of dance.

Besides these dance forms, a well-renowned Hmar writer Dr. Thiek claims that there were other dance forms and he names them as Lâmpalak and Pår Lâm. “Pår Lâm is performed with rawsem; there is no accompanying song” (Ngulkhumchawng).

Conclusion:

In all the occasions, there is no instance where male alone sing and perform folk dance without their female counterpart. Even in single dancing occasions where only a single male dancer dances in the middle of the dancing ground, female participants either sit or stand around him singing thereby playing the role of less active participants. On dancing occasions involving a single female dancer, the singing males are still participants, though less active than the dancer. But many of the traditional dance forms have died out most probably due to “the tribe’s perception
that those dances are associated with paganism” (Dr. Hrilrokhum Thiek). The spirit of Hmar traditional dances is deeply intertwined with drinking zu and recognition of indigenous gods and goddesses. The wholesale conversion of the Hmars to Christianity in the early part of the 20th century which is internally linked with the tribe’s unconditional acceptance of the new set of beliefs and practices is perhaps one of the reasons for discontinuation of most of the dance forms. “The Christian missionaries used to repeat mainly one statement to convert the Hmar men. They would say, ‘Trim your hair, break your wine pot and follow Jesus Christ. You will only then be saved’ ” (H.Thangzo).

The Hmar men used to keep long hair then. This simple way of teaching and convincing the tribe in the fashion of this verbal form must have been supported by Biblical verses like 1 Corinthians 11: 14 that allege a long hair for man as a disgrace for him and, Biblical verses like Ephesians 5: 18 that warn against getting drunk on wine which leads to debauchery. The early male converts strictly regulated their life to the tune of this new teaching. Drinking zu, considered taboo, was then taken seriously as very offensive that would even lead one’s soul to hell after life. “Any man, who would, after conversion, taste a zu even with his fingers, was considered fit to be ex-communicated from the church” (The Evangelical Free Church of India 2010, 87). While these were the basic concerns of the new teaching, all of the Hmar traditional dances are profoundly associated with lavish drinks and ritualistic thanks-giving to the pagan gods and goddesses. In modern days, except the Sikpui Lām, there are literally no occasions to facilitate the performance of the other dance forms. The traditional gods and goddesses have been replaced by Jesus Christ; zu, the basic spicy ingredient that renders festive look to the social celebrated-occasions has also now been substituted by tea. Perhaps, because of the disappearance of these two basic indigenous items from the tribe’s social festive gatherings, most of the dance forms have gone into oblivion.

Endnotes:

1. It’s a triumphant festival hosted by an individual marking his successful bagging of a wild animal.