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**AN INTRODUCTION TO POONG: A TAI-KHAMPTI DRAMA FROM  
ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

**Mikta Mansai**

*Assistant Professor*

*Indira Gandhi Govt. College, Tezu*

*Arunachal Pradesh*

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**Abstract:**

*Poong is a performance based art form mainly found among the Khampti community of Arunachal Pradesh. The main objective of this research article is to generate knowledge of this art form, and also to understand its religious, social, dramatic significance. Poong is an old art form that goes back to as far as 12<sup>th</sup> century but it is difficult to say as to when and how it came into existence. This unique theatre form known in its local dialect as Poong denotes 'Story' but it is widely called and understood by the people as drama performed during religious rituals and ceremonies. It is an open-air theatre. The stories enacted are mainly drawn from early birth of Buddha and from Jataka tales. Different theatrical aspects like stage, character, script, costumes, music, dance, and other such important elements form an integral part of Poong. The ongoing change and modern ways have proved detrimental to its survival. However, amidst such threats, Poong has stood the test of time.*

**Keywords:** *Drama, Performance Art, Socio-Cultural Worldview, Change, etc.*

Culturally distinct and historically old, Khamptis, the indigenous community of Arunachal Pradesh, is known for its century old practices that are rich and rare at the same time. Among others, the performance art form called *Poong* deserves a special mention for making one of the most significant contributions to the living art forms which for decades together have stood the test of time. The history of Khamptis as belonging to the Shan group of Tai race of Southeast Asia, trace their roots from Yu-nan province of China to Burma which date back to as early as 6<sup>th</sup> C. AD. Their present transposition is the result of many upheavals that took place in their political and social life. As were the predicament, they migrated to Assam during 1750-1850 AD (Gogoi, 1966). A set of same group emigrated to Arunachal Pradesh and established themselves as one of the major tribal groups presently inhabiting district Namsai. Khamptis speak the Chinese Siamese language belonging to the Indo Chinese form of speech.

*Poong* is an open air performance based theatre form practiced by the Khampti tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. It enjoys a unique etymology. Although, it is difficult to trace back its origin which goes back to as far as 12<sup>th</sup> century in history (Gogoi, 1966). Some experts say the word *Poong* does not refer to 'drama' in the true sense of the term. It actually means 'story'. Another word Khai-Poong means 'to tell a story'. The 'dramatization of a story' refers to Pya - Poong or simply *Poong* which is the most commonly addressed term used by the native people. Another important term is Keincha. This term is referred to the books which contain the drama. Since the origin is not known it is therefore unimaginative to consider the variants in meaning of these terms as an incomplete definition for the word when applied to *Poong*. This word has become an identity of this theatrical tradition and at the same time the only term which people understand and address. The theme is mainly drawn from the Jataka tales (Phungchen in Tai language). The performance of *Poong* begins



during the period which is commonly called *Potwa* after the end of the religious cycle called satang in the month of October. The whole drama takes no less than six hours to complete, and therefore could go on for the entire night.

*Poong* is a performance based art form, where religious theme constitutes the essential element while other aspects such as dance, music and song form an integral part. They accentuate the play. In one play, there can be 20 to 25 characters. A *Poong* may consist of 500 to 1000 dialogues (puk). *Poong* is rich in language. Since the language used in it has its bearing on the poetic verses which cover at least ninety percent of the composition and rest is written in prose which is either drawn from Pali or Sanskrit. Stories are drawn from the last ten births of Buddha that depicts his ten different births and incarnation and other stories from Jataka tales. Some stories are thematically social in context but they are very few in number, such as stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. The pristine and unspoiled Khampti literary language called 'Lik Tai' has given *Poong* a different identity. The poetic composition makes it difficult for people to understand the meaning which is highly refined and complex.

One who writes *Poong* is highly regarded in Khampti society. In Khampti, writer is addressed as Chau-mo. Khamptis believe Chau-mo receives the inborn talent from Saraswati (Goddess of Learning). Any great or famous *Poong* writer is addressed as Chaumulung. Some famous writers who are known for composing masterpieces are Late U Sassanna Bhikku, Late Chow Jiong Namchoom, Pangkha and the living writer Chow Nantising Longkan. Many great *Poong* do not find any mention of its author. Hence, these authors remained anonymous throughout their life. For a Chau-mo, to write an original script for the drama it takes no less than three months to compose one single *Poong* story which may be of thousand lines or more. It's a sad thing to say that many literatures on *Poong* are lost today. This happened due to people's ignorance and irresponsibility toward safeguarding these valuable manuscripts. There are some stories which came into its present form through oral story telling.

Language is one thing and the form that is adopted for writing is another. *Poong* is always written in the form of a song. It is through song that the time and space is symbolized. There is variation in the tone of the dialogue which again depends on the character that is being portrayed. There are three kinds of folk songs which are used in different occasions, each having distinctive musical tones – such as *Khamfoi*, *Khampali* and *Khampung*.

Actors who perform in *Poong* come from different social status, provided they fulfil the requirements and can act and deliver him on the stage. Actors are usually men. Women do not participate, however an all women *Poong* performance was first witnessed in the year 1996. No such performance was ever repeated thereafter. *Poong* performance takes place inside the vicinity of a monastery (Chong), or outside it but within the boundary of the village. The performance area is an open space. While the concept of stage is fairly a recent one, most dramas are performed in the open space. Unlike many other folk/ or classical theatres in India, there is no such ritual as sanctifying the area where *Poong* is to be performed. But before the performance, prayers are given to the lord for his blessings. The praying first begins with the performers paying their first homage to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha- the three gems of Buddhist doctrine. The director, actors, choreographer, musicians and prompter forms an integral part of *Poong*. In many situations, in the absence of a choreographer, the director takes it upon himself to guide the actors.

Many *Poongs* are enacted in the dance form. Without rhythm and movement there would be no *Poong*. Musical instruments are also heavily used during the performance. These musical instruments are borrowed from the Buddhist monastery and once the drama is over they are returned to the monastery. Costumes worn during the performance are either self-made by the troupe, or borrowed from families. Actors wear local attires such as sarong worn by male, tight fitted jacket



with embellishments, sheen shirts and in some dramas a loincloth is also worn. Depending on the identity of the character, a particular character will sometimes be seen wearing a crown to represent a king or prince that he portrays. Unlike olden days when dresses worn for all the performances used to be same and more close to day today life, cloths worn by actors these days are more colourful and stylized keeping with the change and what is now readily available.

Music and dance has its own individualistic taste. In several of *Poong* dramas, each character is identified by the music and dance solely crafted for the performance. In some, actors carry the musical instrument during the performance act. Another important highlight of *Poong* is the use of mask to portray evil character such as the demon.

As per the tradition, one village troupe travels to other villages to perform the same drama if the troupe is cordially invited. But this act of kindness existed during the olden days. In current times, such movement of drama troupes is hardly seen.

As an art form, *Poong* is the amalgamation of both devotion and creative impulse. However, in the case of *Poong* the devotional aspect is most commonly seen. The actors willingly participate to show their respect and devotion to lord Buddha, while some see it not only as a dedicated virtue but a great opportunity to showcase their acting skills.

Culture is the manifestation of a community life. It may be different from one another but born out of nature's necessity to create a common living condition. One cannot draw the line between traditional belief and creative joy. It offers both and yet it nonetheless hinders the growth of the art form. Since *Poong* is restricted to a certain religious cyclic occasion, it could never merge with the larger cultural demand of the times, and for the same reason several other attributes that makes it a distinct art form could never be known outside its own community.

Change is a natural phenomenon. In many theatres, across vast regions, different sort of changes have occurred over the years such as the use of prose in place of poetic language is an emerging trend that is seen today. *Poong* has witnessed an increased use of prosaic language in writings. Although in some people's opinion this change is not in the interest of this art form, but there are others who believe this is a welcome change that can help *Poong* survive in the changing world. *Poong* is no exception to the reality that modern influence has cleverly invaded this age old art form. In the present times of social media and the likes, for younger generation *Poong* has little to give in terms of entertainment.

*Poong* performances require financial assistance. Gone are the days of lore when people would come together in common spirit and everything will be provided by the people. Today, cost of materials, basic needs of the troupes have to be borne by the troupes themselves. Not many people come forward to lend assistance. Many villages where *Poong* was once very actively organized, has now come to an end due to lack of financial assistance and support. Nonetheless, some villages where consciousness toward the preservation of its artistic heritage has found a strong response, are actively producing memorable dramas every year.

*Poong* for many is an act of catharsis: an experience of spiritual purgation, for both the doers and the seers. They seek and find meaning in these stories. Though the change has given this art form a setback, it is still alive both in people's memory and in practice. Its vastness cannot be sufficiently explained in few pages. *Poong* as an art form represents a society and its tradition that abounds itself in creativity and spirit.

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