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“Huyen Langlon, a martial arts form from Manipur”

(This term paper submitted to St. Joseph's college in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor in Arts)

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Introduction:

Huyen Langlon also commonly known as “Thang-Ta”, is a traditional martial arts form originating from the state of Manipur. The martial arts form has been carried on through generations. The martial art form is practised by the Meitei community of Manipur. The name consists of two words in the Meitei language, ‘Huyen’ means war and ‘Langlon’ refers to art or knowledge. Huyen Langlon has now subsequently been developed into its internationally renowned form due to its restructure and renovations made by various distinguished Gurus of the art form.

According to History, Manipur had a long-lasting period in its history of independence. This independence was due to the capability of the combat strategies and skills of the warriors. Huyen Langlon consists of two different components: Thang-Ta, this is the armed combat form and it involves two primary weapons which is 'The Thang' meaning sword and 'Ta' meaning spear. Thang also various other weapons rather than this but the two primary weapons mentioned in the name of the art form are the ones stated above. The second component of Huyen Langlon is known as 'Sarit Sarak', this is the art of unarmed combat. It encompasses wrestling (known as 'Mukna'), hand strikes, kicks, acrobatics, etc.

Many forms of wars between its feudal clans, constant wars with the neighbour Burma and various other kingdoms roughly brought Manipur even in the brink of devastation. But the much-appreciated desire of the people of Manipur to remain independent against all the odds stacked against them made a remarkable spot in the development of their renowned martial tradition of Huyen Langlon, which has now popularly come to be known as Thang-Ta.

Thang-Ta not only focusses on the physical aspects but also helps in providing assistance in developing personality. Thus, the sole purpose of this research is to give an awareness and education about this ancient martial arts form, the history behind it and how it can help the human body both physically and mentally.

History of Huyen Langlon

Origin of Huyen Langlon



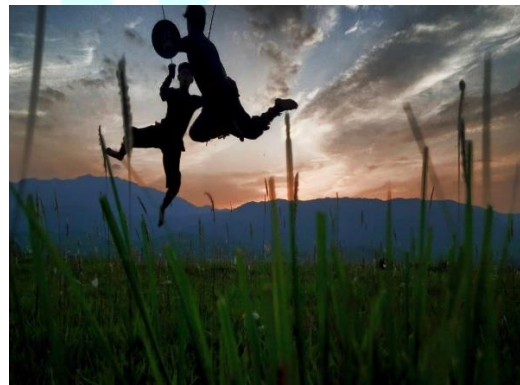
The origin of Huyen Langlon dates back to the myth and lore days. There is an ancient myth of 'Teen-Sidaba', whose different limbs and bones were turned to different weapons such as swords, spears and various other traditional weapons used by the Meitei people during combat. Which in turn marks the origin of Huyen Langlon and the history of its origin. The earliest written records of this ancient martial arts come from the 'Puya' and other manuscripts written by the forefathers of the Meitei

community passed on through generations. The ancient text 'Chainarol' (dual combats of two individuals) describes the ethics of battles, duels and combats amongst highly skilled warriors among other clans which features high discipline, strict rules and codes of martial conduct. These involves the warriors risking their lives in battles for the sake of their clans, motherland or kingdoms.

All of the ancient history of Huyen Langlon stems from hymns and legends. Many different forms of folklores and dances related to the native gods originates with its roots from practices included in Huyen Langlon. Before the unification of the state of Manipur into one integrated community of the Meitei communal group, it was state divided between seven different feudal clans namely Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Kha-Nganba, Angom and Sarang Leishangthem. These seven different feudal clans have seven different swords differing in their

shapes and sizes in accordance to the different rituals and ancestral worship forms. These swords are laid out during the ancestral worship of these different clans. Due to these reasons relating to the culture and worship of the religion, Thang-Ta despite being weapons of wars have cherished association with the spiritual life of Meitei and their culture. These different swords of the different feudal clans are: ‘Chak Thang’ sword of Mangang, ‘Tondumba Thang’ sword of Luwang, ‘Tonkakpa Thang’ sword of Khuman, ‘Pukak Thang’ sword of Angom, ‘Tokpanba Thang’- sword of Moirang, Laithang chinaiba- sword of Khanganba and Khunthok thang- sword of Sarang Leishang.

Conduct during the ancient Thang-Ta duels



During the ancient times skilled warriors often used to challenge each other to fights or duels to prove the strength of one another. Warriors who have a fame for their skills are often challenged to fights. These fights have various ways on which they are conducted, the fighters agree to abide by various strict rules of conduct and upon the violation of which is considered shameful and unethical.

Before the initiation of a bout, the challenger has to give the warrior he challenges a formal invitation for the fight. After the challenge is accepted, the two warriors would set a day for the bout to take place and a time for preparation of weapons would have enough time for preparation of their weapons for the fight. The rules of conduct also have a term that the warrior who allows his opponent to give the first hit for example throw the first spear or fire the first arrow shot is believed to be brave and courageous. It was not necessary that duels have to end with a fatal outcome. In most duels, the fight ends with blood is drawn from a warrior, with the warrior who had drawn blood considered as a loser. However, the person who won is expected to behead the person who lost to him. The fighters or warriors would share a meal and wine prepared by their wives either before the fight or before the beheading of the loser. According to agreements before the fight, the cremation of the body of the person who lost may be conducted. The warriors would take heads a form of trophy, which was also the custom of the headhunter Nagas and other headhunter tribes in Northeast India. There are also certain rules stating not to kill opponents who ran, begging for the victor's mercy and pleading the protection of the winner.

Various wars and historical events associated with Huyen Langlon

Manipuri faced numerous wars from many various other kingdoms, Burma and finally the British army. Meitei people have used Thang-Ta for the protection of their kingdom against many invaders from neighboring kingdoms (The Chinese, Burmese, etc.). During the seven years devastation of Manipur in 1819 where the Burmese took over the kingdom and reigned over the citizens of Manipur in terror for seven years, a brave lord of the Ningthouja dynasty named Herachandra used only a few of his followers to defend the kingdom against the vast and heavily equipped Burmese empire. He used various guerrilla warfare techniques to attack the Burmese soldiers and cut their path for supplies. The knowledge of Huyen Langlon and the skills associated with it made these brave warriors be able to stand against the Burmese during the time.



Fig. Anglo-Manipuri war

The last battle associated with Huyen Langlon is the Anglo-Manipuri War fought against the British in 1891. Paona Brajabasi, a brave patriot renowned to this day for his skills and bravery during the war fought alongside few Manipuri soldiers to defend the British army who came bearing much advanced weaponry such as guns and canons with hundreds of soldiers. Paona Brajabasi is said to have remarkable skills of Huyen Langlon, cutting dynamites in air before the sparks could explode. The war was eventually lost but the British empire experienced a fierce battle and lead them to take various actions to ensure the Manipuri people do not fight back to regain their kingdom. Even possession of weapons such as swords or spears were liable to severe punishment of death or exile from the kingdom. The war leaders were executed in front of the public. However due to the love of their culture, secret households and schools made efforts to ensure the survival of the art. Their efforts lead to saving this ancient Martial Arts from extinction.

The form of Huyen Langlon or Thang-Ta that we see now is due to the efforts of the people during that time to save and preserve our culture despite the threat of prosecution by the British rule.

Techniques and practices of Huyen Langlon:

To start the practice of Thang-Ta, a ritual known as ‘Boriba’ has to be conducted after selecting an auspicious day for the ceremony. After the ceremony has been performed, the student may begin with other steps. There are certain disciplines that a person skilled in Huyen Langlon has to follow. These rules include only using his knowledge for the protection of the kingdom, never use it for personal gains etc.

The techniques of Thang-Ta are as follows:

Training is initiated with stepping patterns and body positions. After this the student may begin with sword strikes. The main stance in sword wielding is the Lion Posture where the person leans his body forward stretching one leg backwards and the other bent on the front. The feet should be around shoulder width apart and maintain a 45-degree angle. This stance is said to emphasize ‘Phidup’ or a coil which enables a springing action. Various skilled persons also perform stunts such as slicing watermelons off a person’s body without harming the other person and this has to be done blindfolded. Performance art of Thang-Ta include two people engaging in sword combat which has to be done with proper choreography in order to avoid injury.

As the training progresses, spears which is considerably more difficult than swords are taught. Spear emphasize ‘Phanba’, an opening out of the body in two different forms. The first form ‘Nongphan’, stimulates the expanse of the sky and ‘Leiphal’, which stimulates the expanse of the ground. During the ancient duels, spears are used for both close combat and ranged combats where the fighters throw spears at each other after deciding who throws first, the person who hit their opponents being the winner. The spear uses more of the lower body strength of the wielder while swords draw upper body strength. Only students who have completed their course in weaponry and are considered to be skilled weapon wielders can start learning ‘Sarit Sarak’ or unarmed combat. Huyen Langlon not only includes learning how to fight. It also includes several other physical exercises such as breathing exercises known as ‘Ningsha Kanglon’, ‘Layeng Kanglon’ health and traditional medical practices, ‘Hirikonba’ meditation, ‘Thengouron’ sacred dances, etc.

Research Through Innovation

Modern Sparring Matches of Huyen Langlon



Fig. Cheibi Chainaba

The sparring matches should be organized in a 30-foot circular arena. Sparring consists of two different methods which are ‘Phunaba ama’ and ‘Phunaba anisuba’. The competitors would wear either white or black dresses and be properly equipped with head body guard during the matches.

During the sparring in ‘Phunaba ama’, the competitors have to wield a two foot long ‘Cheibi’ (stick/cudgel) sheathed with leather on one hand and a ‘Chungoi’ made of leather on their other hand. One match will consist of two rounds which are 3 minutes long. There would be rest of one minute in between the rounds. A time keeper, one referee, six scorers and one or two judges would also be allocated for a match.

In ‘Phunaba Anisuba’, the other conditions are similar to that of ‘Phunaba Ama’, but the use of kicks are allowed and shield would no longer be wielded by the competitors. The sparring matches use ‘Cheibi’ (cudgels) to replicate swords and these matches are called ‘Cheibi Chainaba’.

Relation of Huyen Langlon with Other Martial Arts Forms

Manipur shares geographical vicinity with many other nations associated with a huge cultural integrity and well renowned martial art forms such as China, Thailand and Myanmar.

These countries are famous for their martial arts such as Kung-Fu of China, Muay-Thai and Krabi-Krabong of Thailand, Bando and Banshay of Myanmar. These various forms of martial arts have some resemblance to Thang-Ta. Thang-Ta also have some resemblance with various martial arts in India such as Kalaripayattu in forms of weaponry.

There is a legend about the Chinese coming to Manipur to learn more about Thang-Ta after a Meitei king by the name of Meidingu Mungyamba (1562-97) defeated a Chinese Martial Arts experts sent to Manipur by their king to challenge a bout was defeated by the Meidingu Mungyamba.

Conclusion

The Ancient Martial Arts form Huyen Langlon of Manipur which has been practiced by the Meitei community in India from the time of myth and lore was almost brought to extinction during the British rule in Manipur. Due to the persistent efforts and determination to save their cultural integrity, the people of Manipur were able to keep their Martial Arts form in spite of all the odds that were stacked against them. With proper assistance from the concerned authority, the art can be brought up in global scale and can become as popular as the various martial art forms known all over the world such as Taekwondo, Kung Fu, Karate, etc. Thang-Ta was recently added as a part of Khelo India in December 2020 along with along with three other indigenous games of India.

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