

Gender, Ritual, and Symbolism in the Pajok Dance of the Bangru Community of Arunachal Pradesh

Chera Esther

*Research Scholar of Journalism and Mass Communication
North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong Campus, Meghalaya*

&

Karen L. Donoghue

*Assistant Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication
North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya*

Abstract: *This paper delves into the Pajok dance of the Bangrus, a Nyishi sub-tribe in the Kurung Kumey district. This dance carries a ritualistic element and is performed during the Longte festival and other special events believed to invoke either a blessing or a curse. This paper aims to shed light on the worldview of the Bangrus through the Pajok dance. Using in-depth interviews and secondary data analysis, the paper explores the portrayal of gender in the Pajok dance, particularly the role of men in the performance.*

Keywords: Gender in Dance, Indigenous dance, Pajok dance, Patriarchy Society, Ritualistic Dance

In Indian society, patriarchy is predominant, with men traditionally assuming leadership roles within the family and occupying more prominent positions in social engagements. This hierarchical structure reinforces the connection between gender roles and reflects the widening disparities shaped by societal norms. These deeply held beliefs are rooted in patriarchal traditions, which define 'a social structure where the actions and ideas of men are dominant over those of women.'¹ The sociological concept of 'habitus,' coined by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to how people perceive and respond to the social world through their habits, skills, and character.² Soman extends this concept to patriarchy, suggesting that 'habitus can be applied to patriarchy where it should be perceived as a guideline, directing social relations.'³ Through this lens, patriarchy becomes not just a social structure but a lived experience embedded in everyday practices and interactions. The concept of patriarchal structure has been practised for generations in Indian society, and women are assigned roles

in their everyday lives, such as cooking and household chores. The term '*paraaya dhan*', meaning 'someone else's wealth,' is often used to describe women, reinforcing deep-rooted gender inequalities and limiting women's freedom. This label implies that women are seen as a burden and must remain silent in matters of society or family. After marriage, the husband assumes control, confining the woman to household duties and family care. This reflects the pervasive gender disparity, where men are expected to 'fulfil financial needs,' while women are tasked with 'caring for emotional needs.'⁴

The Nyishi, one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, India, inhabit a vast region stretching from the Sub-Himalayas' eastern reaches to the Greater Himalayas' southern slopes.⁵ This tribe covers seven districts of Arunachal Pradesh: Kurung Kumey, Kra Dadi, Keyi Panyor, Kamle, Pakke Kessang, East Kameng, and Papum Pare. In the patriarchal society of the Nyishi tribe, a man is the head of the family and can have more than one wife, and the family's lineage is traced through the male descendants. Since time immemorial, polygamy and child marriage have been practised in the Nyishi society, but now, such practices are discouraged by the present generations.⁶ However, 'the women of the Nyishi families were/are expected to share almost every privilege with man,'⁷ and the community welcomes and values women's opinions in any significant decision in family matters. Barthakur explores the perception within Nyishi society that 'a woman is not treated as a burden but as an asset to the family.'⁸ However, despite this view, taboos surrounding womanhood persist. One such taboo, still strictly observed, is the prohibition against women participating in ritual activities during menstruation.⁹

In such a patriarchal set-up, dance serves as a reflection of the community's worldview, performed during festivals, rituals, and entertainment. As Kaeppler noted, dance can be considered 'art, work, ritual, ceremony, entertainment, or any combination of these, depending on the culture or society that produces it.'¹⁰ Likewise, for the Nyishi people, dancing and singing are integral, functioning as a 'powerful means of community and clan integration.'¹¹ Showren asserts that 'The Nyishi dance forms are of pristine origin,'¹² while also highlighting the restrictions placed on women in these cultural expressions. He notes, 'There are certain specific dances, such as *ruphi*, *bhossar*, and other ritual-related performances, that are exclusively performed by men.'¹³ In this scenario, we observe clear gender distinctions embedded within the traditional dances of the Nyishi community, highlighting how specific performances are gendered and reserved exclusively for men. Acknowledging the inherent hierarchy in gender, Jackson and Scott define gender as 'a hierarchal division between women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices.'¹⁴ This division has perpetually existed in the Nyishi society, placing more restrictions on women than men. Many rules bind women's conduct in the familial and social sphere. These hierarchical divisions also permeate Nyishi dance, highlighting the importance of studying performances like the Bangru

Pajok dance, which men exclusively perform. The *Pajok* dance is steeped in taboos and restrictions, governed by specific rules its performers must diligently follow. Performed solely by the Bangru sub-tribe of the Nyishi community, which resides in the Sarli circle of the Kurung Kumey district, this dance form holds a unique place within the larger Nyishi culture but remains distinct to the Bangru people. Most performers come from Sape village, located in the Polosang area of Kurung Kumey district, Arunachal Pradesh. The *Pajok* dance is showcased during the *Longte* festival and other significant events. However, its exclusivity and the importance placed on its sacred restrictions make it deeply significant to the Bangru people. Examining this dance form provides an insight into the community's identity and beliefs. The paper examines patriarchy within the Nyishi community and its influence on traditional dance, specifically exploring the impact of societal preconceptions and gender on Bangru *Pajok* dance performances.

Review of literature:

Gender space in dance

Understanding the gender aspects of dance requires recognising how different dance forms interact with and occupy space. Dance is often presented in a standardised format, incorporating structured choreography and established patterns. Kaeppler defines dance as a creative form that manipulates human bodies in time and space, intensifying formalised movement.¹⁵ Dance highlights gender in how it 'can negotiate, construct, and perform gender identities'¹⁶, evident in the dancers' elaborate movements and gestures. The expression of dance through physical or symbolic space, embedded in the structure, conveys symbolic ideas within a physical arena. Martin views dance as transcending mere physical movement, asserting that 'Displays of gender are not just representations of women and men.'¹⁷ Instead, they embody broader cultural notions as different societies interpret and express gender through performance in ways that align with their unique worldviews.

Physical space dictates specific movements, assigning gestures and roles often delineated by gender. In the Philochoros' dance performance, men have more freedom to use their bodies flexibly with movements such as high kicks, cartwheels, or handsprings, while women are typically assigned supporting roles.¹⁸ Among the Hopi tribe of northeastern Arizona, the girls usually 'dance with downcast eyes and never lift their feet high from the ground.'¹⁹ In contrast, male dancers use their flexed bodies, torsos, and knees with the weight on the entire foot.²⁰ Within the Munda tribal community of India, tribal dance fosters a dual division; however, gender-specific dances exhibit a degree of fluidity, inviting participation from both men and women.²¹ Vatsyayan discussed traditional dances from northeastern India, highlighting the unique physical spaces associated with each dance, which vary across different communities. For example, in the *Nongkrem* dance of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, girls dance

in the centre, using minimal space, while the men's movements are larger and more expansive.²² By contrast, the famous Bagurumba dance of the Bodo tribe of Assam is characterised by unbound movements of girl dancers, indicating more joy.²³

A space representing specific ideas is known as a symbolic space, where the dynamics of gender interaction are deeply embedded in a 'hierarchical division' and seamlessly woven into broader social and cultural contexts.²⁴ In Polynesian tradition, dance is seen as a universal activity unconfined by gender boundaries,²⁵ demonstrating a fluid and inclusive approach. Similarly, Tajik traditional dance showcases gender parity, where men and women convey flirtatious gestures and gazes, signifying social interactions.²⁶

However, Mahdavian also highlights the exclusion of older women due to societal beauty standards, illustrating how perceptions of gender and age influence dance.²⁷ In contrast, Hawaiian dance, though predominantly a female pursuit, enforces cultural taboos, such as the exclusion of menstruating women.²⁸ Meanwhile, in Hopi culture, male participation in dance takes precedence, with premarital and marital status defining female involvement.²⁹ The Owigiri dance resembles courtship, with a tacit rule barring married individuals from participating, emphasising the act's sacredness.³⁰ In Tajikistan, domestic objects are integrated into dance movements, reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal structures.³¹ These examples reveal how symbolic spaces in dance reflect and reinforce societal norms, shaping gender roles through physical and cultural expressions.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the Bangru community's worldview as reflected in the Pajok dance.
2. To analyse the construction and representation of male gender roles through the Pajok dance.

Methods of the study

This study employs a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews with key informants from the Bangru community. An unstructured interview format allows for a more fluid and open-ended exploration of the subject matter. The key informants were selected from former and current Pajok performers, focusing on individuals residing in the villages of Sarli and Sape in the Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh. These participants were chosen for their cultural knowledge and direct involvement in the tradition. Secondary data was also incorporated to provide a broader context and enhance the understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the Pajok dance within the Bangru community.

Specific thematic frameworks were applied to analyse the cultural relevance and the role of men in the Pajok dance, offering a structured approach to

examining the performance's meanings and how it reflects and reinforces gender roles.

Findings and discussion

The dances performed by Nyishi men primarily revolve around hunting and war, a theme evident in their movements as they use a sword and shield because their attack motion is ferocious.³² Their dexterity is showcased as they dance with swords and shields, mimicking battle preparations. This resonates with the Maori warriors' use of their tongues to demonstrate ferocity and intimidate adversaries³³ as well as with Polynesian men, who use their bodies as percussion—chest-thumping, foot-stamping, and arm and ankle-slapping—all of which highlight gendered elements in their dance traditions.³⁴ These examples demonstrate how spatial dynamics influence the distribution of symbolic and physical space within a dance performance. The geographical context fosters diversity in dance styles, with gender associations shaped by the social and cultural realities of the community. The gestures and movements in these dances carry deep meanings; as Kealiinohomoky observes, gestures 'refer to specific individuals, places, and occurrences.'³⁵

Folk dances are 'typically performed by members of a specific community who often share a common culture and lifestyle.'³⁶ The Pajok dance, unique to the Bangru community residing in the Sarli Circle of Arunachal Pradesh's Kurung Kumey district, is a prime example of such a cultural expression. This traditional dance, performed exclusively by the men of the Sape and Pisa clans of the Bangru community, was initially known as Bangru *Gongbye* in the local language. Earlier, the Pajok dance was performed in grand marriage ceremonies to bestow blessings on the newlywed couple, and the dissertation of Tame Ramya mentions that the Bangru *Gongbye* is 'a marriage dance of the Bangrus consisting of a fertility dance.'³⁷ The Pajok dance is popularly known as Bangru Pajok in the Nyishi belt of Kurung Kumey district and holds significant symbolic meaning for the Bangru community.

Unfortunately, several factors have contributed to the decline of the Pajok dance practice among the Bangru people, including the spread of Christianity and the financial burden of hosting large-scale wedding ceremonies. Another crucial factor is the role of the priest, or *Nyibu*, as only priests with the specific knowledge and authorisation to conduct the dance rituals are permitted to oversee the selection of Pajok performers and determine the dance's suitability for ceremonial occasions. Regarded as a ritualistic dance form, the Pajok dance is believed to carry both blessings and curses and is accompanied by strict taboos that selected performers must observe. This emphasises the essential role of the priest in maintaining the dance's sacredness and passing down its rituals through generations. According to former Pajok performers interviewed, while grand weddings were once typical, only a few—two in their memory—featured the Pajok dance. They noted that the number of authorised priests

knowledgeable in the symbolic significance of the Pajok dance has significantly declined, with many taking this specialised knowledge to their graves. This reduction in performances has led to a gradual decline in the knowledge and practice of the Pajok dance, which the priest traditionally guided for ceremonial purposes.

The role of the priest in selecting performers through a special ritual reinforces the sacredness of the dance. A former Bangru Pajok performer, Sape Tani, explains:

“It is performed in big marriage ceremonies, and only after looking at the mangal (auspicious sign) does the priest reveal whether to perform the Pajok dance or not. The priest heads the rituals, and for that, he must know the whole Pajok dance narrative so that he can conduct the ritual to ensure the possibility of the Pajok dance being performed at the wedding.”³⁸

The Bangru community regards Pajok as holy, much like believing in a deity's unseen yet powerful presence. Similarly, they believe blessings are hidden within the dance, and mocking it is said to bring dire consequences.³⁹ However, the context in which the dance is performed presently has changed. Instead of being performed at big marriage ceremonies, the dance is now showcased at special events such as Longte festivals, Nyishi Day, and Statehood Day.

One notable aspect of the *Pajok* dance is its complexity. Performances can last up to two hours, with dancers incorporating numerous steps that reflect events connected to nature, making it physically demanding for the participants. Often, they become fatigued from trying to fit every aspect into a single performance. Unlike other Nyishi dances, which ‘do not involve formal training or special attire,’⁴⁰ the Bangru Pajok stands out by requiring formal training from experienced dancers. This departure from traditional Nyishi dance practices highlights the importance of preserving the dance's value and ensuring its profound significance is understood. The training process keeps the tradition alive and ensures that performers appreciate each movement's cultural and spiritual significance. A Bangru Pajok performer, Mama, states:

“I learnt from an elder who is now old and unable to perform. After the old performers died, they began to teach us. Not all of them died; those who remained taught the newcomers, which is how they passed on their knowledge to one another. With the passing of knowledge, we now understand what the dance and accompanying actions mean.”⁴¹

Another striking aspect of the Pajok dance is the exclusion of the women. In contrast to the Meitei culture of Manipur, where female Maibis, priestesses of the Meitei religion, have access to oral indigenous religious scripture, using ‘the female body through her dance as a religious text,’⁴² the Pajok dance context reveals the exclusion of Bangru women from the training process and the generational knowledge passed down through this dance. Gender roles in

dance are profoundly shaped by the cultural and social contexts rooted in historical and mythological traditions. An oral tradition continues to thrive, with important values transmitted through dance, which serves as a medium for communication and a tool for dispersing knowledge through its movements.

The Pajok dance, with its restricted access to women, demonstrates the imbrications of gender and knowledge transmission with cultural practice. The dance embodies a traditional value system, reinforcing cultural practices and offering insight into the historical background of the Bangru community. By maintaining these rituals, the dance becomes more than mere performance—it serves as a living archive of community identity and a method of passing down essential cultural knowledge.

Initially, the Pajok dance was performed during wedding ceremonies and consisted of twelve steps, a section of which is a war dance. This war-like aspect of the performance reinforced the exclusion of women, as it was seen as too physically demanding for them. Tadi mentioned that one of the characteristics of Nyishi women's dance movements involves 'swaying of the hips,'⁴³ which creates a gentle and more gracious movement. An interview with a Pajok performer revealed that women are not allowed to participate because 'the movements are rough and tough, so they would not be able to perform.'⁴⁴ The physically intense and highly energetic movements of the Pajok dance form require substantial stamina, which is considered unsuitable for women and becomes increasingly challenging for male performers as they age.

This exclusion of women from the Pajok dance reflects broader cultural expectations that associate certain behaviours with specific genders. While female dancers are expected to embody beauty and grace, male dancers are seen as needing physical strength and endurance. Such assumptions reinforce the heteronormative culture that defines gender disparity.⁴⁵

Another justification for excluding women from the Pajok dance is rooted in traditional beliefs about menstruation. Women were seen as unfit to participate in this sacred performance because menstruation was considered ominous. The Pajok dance, regarded as holy, can only be performed by those who have acquired the necessary knowledge and training, with strict rules and restrictions governing who can participate.⁴⁶ In addition to gender restrictions, there are other social prohibitions; for instance, parents of newborns and pregnant women need to observe certain taboos for some period, as it is believed to bring consequences to the family if it is not maintained correctly.⁴⁷

Dance dynamics can be seen in conjunction with a variety of other factors. To comprehend the dynamics, one must be familiar with the cultural practices and traditions passed down through the generations. The Pajok dance form is associated with goodwill and fertility, as it contains the movements of animals of mountains, fish, butterflies, tornadoes, and others. Incorporating combative gestures and animal movements symbolises the inclusion of tribal norms. It presents the idea of a patriarchal society in which men play a significant role in

upholding tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the patriarchal dynamics within the Bangru community are evident in the Pajok dance form, which imposes restrictions on women's participation while positioning men as the primary performers. This exclusion highlights the central role of gender norms in shaping the cultural practices surrounding the Pajok dance. The steps, movements, and gestures in the Pajok dance are so forceful and physically demanding that it would be difficult for women to perform them with the same level of precision as men. The dance reflects how patriarchal ideologies have been deeply ingrained, perpetuating beliefs that have been accepted as truths over time. While this view might be partially valid, it is essential to note that the oral traditions surrounding the Pajok dance have remained unchanged across generations, as the village priest historically oversaw them. This raises the critical question: Why are only men allowed to perform this dance?

Answering this question is complex. A conversation with a former Pajok dancer revealed that the ritualistic aspect of the dance is a crucial reason women were never considered for participation in the dance. The selection process is highly ritualistic, and not all men are chosen to perform, adding further exclusivity. While there is a clear gender bias in the selection process, it is notable that women are excluded from consideration entirely. Men, on the other hand, are at least recommended by elders for possible inclusion, highlighting an apparent disparity in opportunity based solely on gender.

Another way to examine the gender perspectives in this dance is through its visual interpretations of the movements and gestures, many of which, as mentioned previously, are vigorous and intense. Each step in the Pajok dance is carefully orchestrated and guided by the priest, who plays a vital role in maintaining the dance's ritualistic authenticity. The dancers' preparation is equally demanding; they must hunt for animals and gather materials from the jungle, incorporated into their attire under the priest's supervision. Women are not seen as fit for the high levels of commitment and discipline required by the performers.

In conclusion, the Pajok dance requires significant dedication and physical stamina from its performers, who must invest ample time in perfecting the complex movements. Within the patriarchal Bangru community, however, time is a scarce resource for women, who are traditionally tasked with household responsibilities, making their participation in such a demanding practice even less feasible. The dance's exhausting nature often limits the performers to showcasing only a few of the twelve symbolic elements in a single performance. This visual representation of knowledge—conveyed through distinct steps, gestures, and attire—demonstrates how cultural and symbolic meanings are incorporated into the performance. The Pajok dance not only embodies the core

values of the Bangru community but also highlights the gendered aspects that shape participation and role allocation, reflecting the broader societal structure.

Notes and References (End Notes)

1. Uthara Soman, 'Patriarchy: Theoretical postulates and empirical findings', *Sociological Bulletin*, 2009, p.253
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Press University, 1977, pp.72-95
3. Soman, *Patriarchy*, p.262
4. Chetali Shekhawat and Garima Shrivastava, 'Dance like a Man: A Cinematic Exploration of Gender Roles and Biases Prevalent in Indian Society.' *Global Media Journal -Indian Edition* 12, no. 1, 2020, p.2
5. Tana Showren, *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An ethnohistorical study*, Regency Publication, New Delhi, 2009, p.13
6. Minoti Barthakur, *The hardworking Nyishi women of Arunachal Pradesh*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010, p.17
7. Showren, *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh*, p.78
8. Barthakur, *The hardworking Nyishi women*, p.45
9. Showren, p.80
10. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *Folklore, Cultural performances and popular entertainments: A communications-centered Handbook*, ed. Richard Bauman, Oxford University Press, 1992, New York, p.197
11. Showren, p.89
12. *ibid.*, p. 90
13. *ibid.*
14. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Gender: A sociological reader*, Routledge, London, 2002, p.1
15. Kaeppler, *Folklore, Cultural Performances*, pp.196-7
16. Johnson Rajkumar & Rajkumari Lilapati Devi, 'Gender, Dance and Identity: Exploring the Intersections in The Chosen One' *IIS Univ.J.A.* 12, no. 3&4, 2023, p.108
17. Carol Martin, 'Feminist analysis across cultures: Performing gender in India', *Women & Performance a Journal of Feminist Theory* 3, no. 2, 1987, p.40
18. Hoppu Petri, 'Folk Dancers Cross-Dressed: Performing Gender in the Early Nordic Folk Dance Movement', *Journal of Folklore Research* 51, no. 3, 2014, p.326
19. Joann Kealiinohomoku, 'Hopi and Polynesian Dance: A Study in Cross-Cultural Comparisons' *Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 3, 1967, p.353
20. *ibid.*

21. Sem Topno, *Musical culture of the Munda tribe*, Concept Publishing, New Delhi, 2004, p.64
22. Kapila Vatsyayan, *Traditions of Indian Folk Dance*, India Book Company, New Delhi, 1976, p.86
23. Vatsyayan, *Traditions*, p.89
24. Jackson and Scott, eds., 'Gender,' pp.1-2
25. Joann Kealiinohomoku, *Hopi and Polynesian Dance*, p.349
26. Emelie Mahdavian, 'Gendered Nostalgia: Tajik Traditional Dance and the Logic of Nationalism', *Asian Theatre Journal* 35, no. 2, 2018, p.344.
27. Mahdavian, 'Gendered Nostalgia,' 338.
28. Kealiinohomoku, 'Hopi and Polynesian Dance,' 350.
29. Kealiinohomoku, p.348
30. Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye & Rudolph Kansese, 'Dance as a means of communication: The Owigiri dance experience.' *The Dawn Journal* 2, no. 1, 2013, p.330
31. Mahdavian, p.339
32. Vatsyayan, p.93
33. Kealiinohomoku, p.347
34. Kealiinohomoku, p.354
35. *ibid.*, p. 347
36. Rajkumar and Devi, 'Gender, Dance and Identity,' p.107
37. Tarh Ramya, 'An ethnographic study of Bangrus of Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh', M.Phil diss., Rajiv Gandhi University, 2011, p.37
38. Interview with Sape Tani, 11 May 2024
39. Interview with Pisa Tabin, 11 April 2023
40. S. D. Choudhury, *Arunachal Pradesh District Gazetteers, Subansiri District*, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar 1981, p.163
41. Interview with Sape Mama, 12 April 2023
42. Rajkumar and Devi, p.111
43. Nabam Tadi, 'Folk media in Arunachal Pradesh', PhD thesis, Rajiv Gandhi University, 2020, p.100 <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/329961>
44. Interview with Sape Mama, 12 April 2023
45. Aurélie Condevaux, 'Gender and Power in Tongan tourist performances.' *Ethnology* 50, no. 3, 2021, p.237
46. Interview with Pisa Tabin, 11 April 2023
47. Barthakur, pp.44-45