

Genauigkeit  
:  
Schöne Wissenschaft

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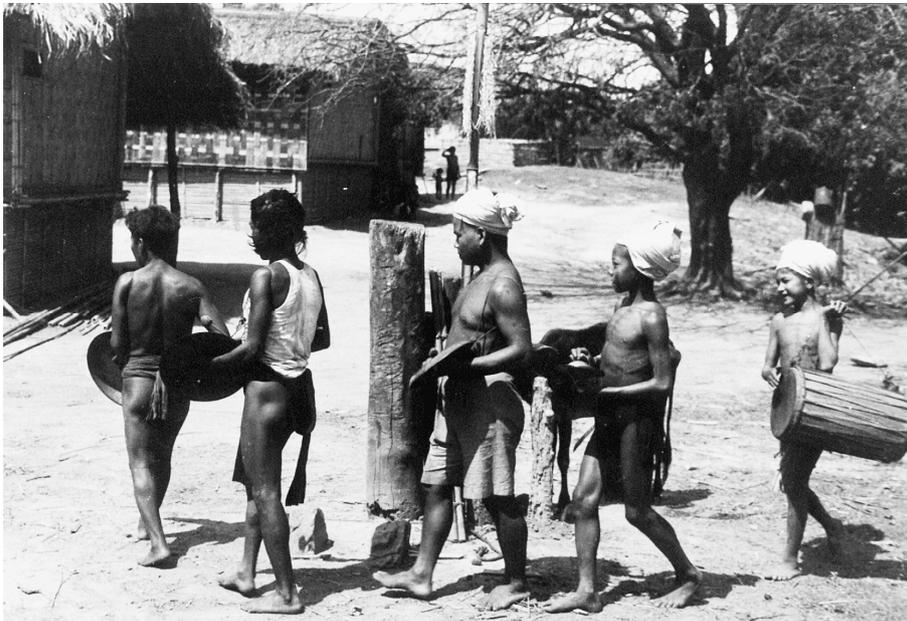


# Ethnographical Notes on Dancing among the Mru of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (formerly East Pakistan, now Bangladesh)

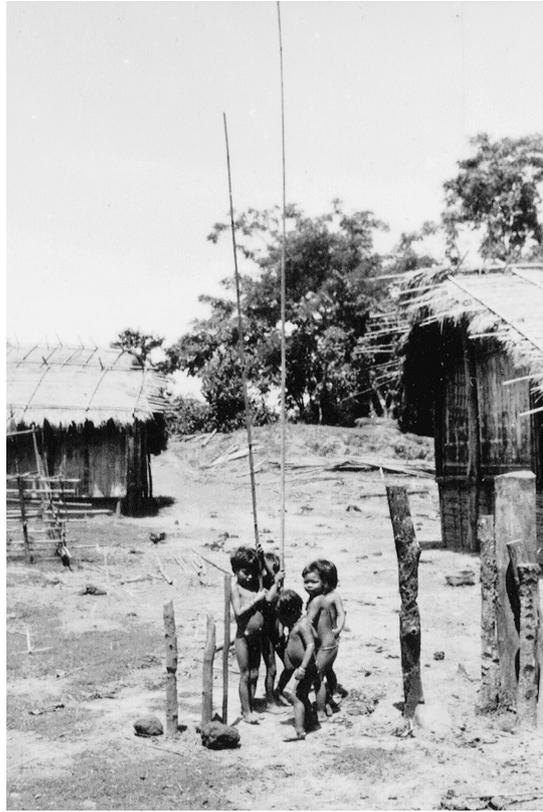
Lorenz G. Löffler

## The Significance of the Dancing

Very few *cia-hot-poi* (cattle-stabbing-feasts) are over in one day. Even when there is only one animal to be sacrificed, the feast will normally last two days. The first *ner-khôngma* (strong, rapid beat on the plate gongs) does not take place until the evening of the first day, and the second *ner-khôngma* and the killing of the animal are left until the next morning. The night of the first day and the whole of the second day are devoted to dancing, which is the real attraction of the cattle feasts. The other ceremonies can pass more or less unnoticed in the general hurly-burly. Eating, drinking, and, most importantly, dancing are the real business. Dancing is more than a social pastime: it is an integral part of the occasion. There is no dancing at any other time.



*Tarông* with three plate gongs, cymbal and drum. Photo: L. G. Löffler



Children dancing around their own *ling-pu*. Photo: L. G. Löffler

The Mru enthusiasm for feasts begins in childhood. *Plai* (›dancing‹) is a normal part of children’s games, and in September 1956 in Tapwüa-Kua, my own interest in dancing made *plai* the game of the moment. The older children helped: they set up a *mong-töng* to serve as a gong stand, and they made ›cattle‹ from pieces of banana tree and bamboo sticks, and then tethered them to the *ling-pu* (sacrificial post).

After a while, Mowai Catumma started to feel uncomfortable. On 25.09.1956 he declared that if the children did not stop, somebody would have to give a real feast, because all that dancing round the sacrificial post would call up the spirits, who would seize one of their parents. Eventually, a solution was found: the children set up a piece of wood to serve as their own ›sacrificial post‹, well away from the real one. Soon after that, however, they started to lose interest in *plai*. Part of the reason was that I went off on a longer voyage.

This story suggests that if the young people really wanted to dance, they could do so, provided they kept away from the sacrificial posts. I was told, however, that they would be ashamed to do this. The young men are fond of meeting in

someone's house to ›rehearse‹ with their instruments (*plung*). If they ›rehearse‹ night after night even though no feast is planned in any of the surrounding villages, this exerts a certain social pressure on their elders. The young people badger the adults, who eventually start to look around for someone who might be persuaded to hold a feast. If a particular householder looks as though he might be in a position to do so, he soon comes under pressure from the entire village. Meanwhile, every evening, the pipes sound in his ears; and he might even wonder whether the spirits are hearing them too ...

The social importance of the dancing is more apparent than any religious significance. It is true that the *cam-pua* (›strolling‹ by unmarried men) gives young people from different villages a chance to get to know each other better. For the girls, however, who do not leave their hamletvillages for the *cam-pua*, the dance feasts are almost their only chance to visit other villages and broaden their horizons a little before marriage. Their only other opportunity is when they accompany their family to wedding feasts.

A feast is a much more exciting prospect than young men getting together in the ›spinning room‹. During a feast, the normal weekday routine is overturned, and for the men – more so than for the women, who generally do not drink much – it brings a supply of alcohol, which creates a certain mood and heightens their sense of adventure. The dancing is the main reason for attending a feast. It is in fact a medium of social communication, the significance of which goes far beyond the dancing itself.

As early as the 1950s, Mru dancing took on an additional function amongst the Mru living around Banderban, the headquarters of the administration. People no longer danced only at cattle feasts. Around Banderban, people now danced at other times, not because they wanted to do so, but under pressure from foreign authorities. Pierre Bessagnet (1957), for example, visited the village of headman Dewai, accompanied by a male member of the Bohmong family. (I was told that Dewai usually spent his time in Banderban, sucking up to the authorities, with whose backing he harassed his own people.) Bessagnet wrote that at the end of their visit »young boys and girls performed a dance in our honour«. <sup>1</sup> On 12.12.1955 we – Dr. Kauffmann and I – saw our first Mru dancers in Banderban, where they danced a few dispirited rounds in front of the Bohmong's palace, in honour of his Punyah day. In January 1956, the Public Relations Officer of the Banderban Circle <sup>2</sup> brought a Mru dance group to Dacca, the capital of East Pakistan, where it was to appear as a ›folk dance group‹. In 1964, there were pictures of Mru dancers in travel brochures for the Chittagong Hill Tracts and on postcards sold in Chittagong. This did not necessarily mean that the old customs had broken down; these performers may have



Mru dancing. Photo: C. Mouchet

broken their own rules under outside pressure. In 1964, the area was closed to foreigners. After it was re-opened in 2000, the Mru were still dancing as documented by Céline Mouchet.

### The Dancers

When the harvest is poor and times are hard, a whole year can pass without any dancing in a neighbourhood. In better times, however, all the larger villages can afford a feast every year, and there are times when one can go straight from one feast to another. In January and February 1956 in the Pantola-Mouza, the following feasts were held: 27.01 and 28.01, Longrau-KP, one cow; 29.01 to 1.2, Yöngtu-HP, two buffaloes and three cattle; 2.02 and 3.02, Menring-KP, one buffalo and two cattle; 4.02 and 5.02, Kingdöi-KP, two buffaloes and one head of cattle.<sup>2</sup>



*Plai* with three groups of dancers in Kabari Menring's hamlet. Photo: L. G. Löffler

When so many feasts are held over a short period, there is competition to attract the dancers. The more visitors one has, the greater the honour. Unfortunately, the large feast given by headman Yöngtu attracted no more dancers than an ›ordinary‹ feast. In Menring-KP, however, the feast given by Duitong, the Karbari's older brother, drew more dancers than I ever saw at any other feast. Duitong apparently stood higher in the visitors' favour than Yöngtu.

Sometimes more visitors arrive than the feast-giver expected or wanted. On 13. 07. and 14.07.1956, Khamcöng Khongtör held a feast that caused him serious hardship and obliged him to borrow money. The feast was held at a time when not a single other feast was planned in the neighbourhood, not even a small one. Large numbers of young people came from the neighbouring villages and ate up the small amount that the host had to offer, given that times were hard. Khamcöng received them half laughing, half crying.

The Khumi of Betchora-Mouza had only limited contact with larger Khumi groups, and in consequence they forgot their own dances. They were not yet

sufficiently assimilated to the Mru to have taken over the Mru style of dancing. Since they too believed that there is no good feast without dancers, they invited Mru from the neighbouring villages to dance for them (K. Lenten Camthang, 17.02.1957).

Young Mru who go to dances do it for their own pleasure, but it benefits the feast-giver too because their coming brings him honour. If only a few dancers turn up at a feast where dancing is to be expected, this brings disgrace on the feast-giver.

Whether the feast is large or small, the feast-giver must give presents to the young people to thank them for coming. If boys from another village come to the feast *cam-hom-plai* (›seeking-gang-dance‹, that is, they come as a group), and if there are at least three to five of them, without instruments, they must be given a bottle of rice spirits (*plai-hom-arak*, ›dance-gang-spirits‹). If the boys bring their instruments but come without girls, they are given a pot of rice beer (*plai-hom-yu*). (They may bring gourd-pipes, *plung*; drums, cymbals, and so on are not permitted.) If they bring girls too, they are given an extra bottle of *plai-hom-arak*. The visitors from each village are rewarded separately: if visitors from another village are not given their arak or beer, the people of that village will bear a long-lasting grudge against the feast-giver and all his own villagers. If dancers from the feast-giver's village subsequently attend a feast in the village whose people were not properly rewarded, these dancers will be treated in kind.

The feast-giver obviously cannot accommodate all the young people and other visitors in his own house. They therefore stay with relatives, taking with them any friends who have no relations in the village. This means that the visitors stay in family groups, or even in village groups, and the players of the dance pipes must rely on being able to meet in someone's house, for example the feast-giver's house, or the Karbari's, to tune their pipes. They spend the whole afternoon of the first day in these tuning sessions, and they re-tune their instruments before every appearance. The girls spend the time combing their hair and making themselves beautiful. When evening comes, everyone waits for the first eight *taröng* rounds, which are the signal for the dancing to start.

### The Rules of the Dance

Dancing to the gourd pipes (*plung-plai*) starts at the end of the first day, usually just before midnight. By 3 a.m. at the latest, the players and the dancers tire, and usually go away and sleep. If the feast is a large and successful one, however, they may keep going until sunrise, then leave to eat and have a short sleep until



The youngest girls form a «tail» at the outer end of the line. Photo: L. G. Löffler

the dancing starts again between 10:00 and 11:00 on the second day. After a break for lunch, the dancing recommences between 15:00 and 16:00. There is a further break for dinner towards 18:00. The dancing ends between 20:00 and 21:00 with the *kim-pün* (climbing up into the feast-giver's house).

Very few young people take part in all the 12-15 hours of dancing. The young men partake of the alcohol quite freely, and are often sleepy on the second day, so there can be delays while a band is mustered that is fit to play. Some of the permitted spells of dancing may even be left out altogether. The greater the number of the young men present, the better the chances of long bouts of dancing.

Sometimes the *plung-plai* starts straight after the *taröng* (the ceremonial circling, to the music of plate gongs, cymbals and drums). More often, hours elapse before it starts. A kind of hooting sound made on the gourd pipes (*plung*) announces the arrival of the dancers, who move into position as they approach. They are then ready to start dancing in their circles at the *ling-pu* without having to stop to regroup. The circles always move clockwise, as in the *taröng*. The blowing of the *plung* then becomes rhythmic, and the *taröng* instruments, played in *ner-cham* (slow beat of the plate gongs), join in to complete the band.



Some old women are ›dancing‹. Photo: L. G. Löffler

After a few minutes, the ›hooting‹ starts again. When it does, the regular, rhythmic steps give way to small running steps, until the strong beat starts again about half a minute later.

The boys and the girls dance in two groups facing each other. The girls always move backwards and the boys forwards. The girls dance in a row with the older ones on the left, i. e. closest to the *ling-pu*; the younger ones, who may be less than ten years old, are on the outside. This means that the little ones have the longest distance to cover, so even if they know the dance steps, they usually have to run to stay in the row. The girls hold hands, elbows slightly bent, and clasping each others' fingers (*taprak*).

The boys follow. They move in no particular formation, though the players of small pipes usually go in front, while those with larger pipes follow. The boys who are playing plate gongs, cymbals and drums may follow behind, or go on ahead, or run around amongst the others. They are allowed to play their instruments whenever they like.

The players do not need to be especially skilled, but there must be the proper number of them. They change frequently; the children can take turns with the instruments, and the older men, who are often a little drunk, like to relive their dancing days. Men almost never dance without an instrument, and the gourd

pipes are only played by *klangwüa*, or unmarried men. Except for the children, those who do not have pipes must wait until others hand theirs on. In the meantime, they may join in by whistling through their fingers (*rai-wik*).

The girls do have some ›instruments‹ of their own: they use the rattles on their legs to set the beat, and they wear chains with coins that rattle in time with their body movements. The women are subject to the same rule as the men, namely that married people cannot join in the main part of the dancing. However, the older men may join in at any time if they are playing *taröng* instruments, and the married women have their chance on the second day, when they have their own special dance.

The dance for the married women is held at all the larger feasts, and may be held at smaller ones. It takes place during the *plung-plai*, and only the old women take part. They do not join the girls' line. In Menring-KP, they formed a row of their own and danced forwards, while the girls and the women danced backwards behind them. In Rümpöng-KP, they danced backwards in the middle of the whole formation, holding on to the enclosure surrounding the sacrificial animals. They danced slowly, and were overtaken by the other dancers. When older men played the *taröng* instruments during the dance of the old women, they danced facing them, just as the young men dance facing the girls. I felt that the dance of the elders must have some special significance, but if this was the case, I was not able to discover what it was.

### Dance Steps

The dancing is in  $4/4$  time. The first beat is emphasised and is extended slightly, which seems odd at first because it is not accompanied by a dance step. On the second beat, the girls step backwards on one foot, and the boys step forwards. On the third beat, the girls bring the second foot level with the first; the boys do the same on the fourth beat. These steps are then repeated, starting with the other foot. The whole sequence occupies two bars of the music.

The girls bend their knees on every beat, emphasising the first and the fourth. Theoretically, on the second beat, the boys move forwards on to the right foot when the girls move backwards on to the left, and vice versa. In practice, however, this often breaks down because the boys are not in an ordered group, and are not tied to a set sequence of steps. The boys can also step sideways instead of forwards. Those on the inside may be obliged to do so, when there is not enough space in front. They can step to either side, depending on where there is most room. While the girls bend their knees on each step, the boys bow on

the forward steps, so that the tubes of the gourd pipes move up and down. This is the basic sequence of steps for the rhythmic dancing. Variations can be introduced, depending on the skill of the dancers.

During the periods when the rhythmic playing stops and is replaced by the hooting on the gourd pipes, the girls abandon their step sequence and move backwards with tiny running steps. When they do this, they cover a larger distance than when they dance the step sequence. They then move forwards towards the boys, who retreat a little. This surging to and fro is repeated several times, until finally the girls run rapidly backwards, with the boys following close in front of them. The youngest girls, who are at the outer end of the line and have the greatest distance to cover, change places with the boys, who would otherwise stride along in the centre of the circle, and move forward too quickly.

The rhythmic playing of the *plung* and *taröng* instruments then starts again, the pace slows down, and the girls re-form their row, with the oldest in the middle. The smaller ones eventually find their places again at the outer end of the line. During the hooting on the gourd pipes, the tall girls in the middle of the circle may jump up and down on both feet instead of running in small steps. This means that the little ones on the outside do not have to move so far.

The girls can vary the rhythmic part of the dance by taking small steps forwards and backwards instead of doing the knee bends. They take four small steps forwards on beats 4 and 1, then four larger steps backwards on beats 2 and 3. The change of direction is accomplished by moving the foot that has just taken a step forwards on the extended first beat back again on beat 2, after a short knee bend. The girls move backwards at some speed. This is too much for the men to keep up their step sequence, so they simply use walking steps (Tapwüa-Kua, 29.05.1956 and 14.07.1956).

The sequence just described can be doubled to eight steps forwards and eight steps back. When the girls take eight steps forward, the boys have to stop and are pushed to one side.

The girls take the initiative in varying the steps. The young men, especially those playing the large gourd pipes, need to stay in their less vigorous sequence, because if they move too quickly, the wax holding the gourd pipes together may fall out, creating additional air holes in the instrument. There is always one boy or another standing outside the dance, busy resealing his pipes.



Dancing in Nongneng. Photo: L. G. Löffler

In Nongneng-KP (Rümma area, 12.03.1957) I saw the girls performing a variety of dance steps, including the following:

- 1) jumping backwards with both feet on every beat.
- 2) the same, but turning alternately to the left and to the right. Adjacent pairs of girls turn in opposite directions, so that they face each other then turn their backs to each other.
- 3) putting one foot in front of the other on every beat, changing foot at each step. This is strenuous and tiring, because they are moving backwards at the same time.
- 4) one foot stays still, while the other moves forward and strikes the ground three times. On the fourth beat, this foot is drawn back with a knee-bend, and the dancers change feet on a backward jump.
- 5) on a sequence of four beats, the dancers step back with the left foot, stamp with the right foot, step back with right foot, and stamp with the left foot. This is a slow and leisurely step.

Before the guests climb upgo into the feast-giver's house (*kim-pün*), the dancing may end with a circle dance. The big girls at the inner end of the line stop dancing backwards and move suddenly forwards, between the sacrificial post and the boys. They break through the group of gourd players and move towards the younger girls at the outer end of the line. Keeping hold of each others' hands, they form a ring beside the sacrificial post, thus enclosing some of the players. The other young men continue playing outside the ring. The whole thing happens so quickly that the boys really are ›caught‹.

The ring now approaches the feast-giver's house, circling slowly, and breaking up at the log stairway so that dancers and players can climb up into the house. The circle is re-established inside. The girls face the centre of the room and form a circle, and as many of the players as possible form a second circle inside the first. As usual, everyone dances clockwise. The remaining players stay outside the circle and are pushed into the corners. There are no dance steps now: the dancers simply stamp as hard as they can, which makes the floor vibrate and the whole house shake. The floor of a good Mru house must be strong enough to withstand this treatment. If the feast-giver has any doubts about his floor, he would be well advised to have it renewed before the feast. Another tactic is to set out a large number of beer pots and assemble a good number of guests in the house. This leaves less space for the young people to indulge their high spirits.

<sup>1</sup> Bessaignet 1958, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of administrative terms (like ›Circle‹, ›mouza‹, ›K[arbari]P[ara]‹, H[eadman]P[ara], etc.) cf. the last pages of my book, Löffler 1990.

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