

ARTICLE

DEATH RITES AND DANCE PERFORMANCE AMONG THE SAORAS OF ODISHA: A FUNERAL MARCH AT THE FESTIVAL OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES?

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Abstract: This article documents the choreutic ritual tradition among the Lanjia Saoras, an indigenous community of Odisha. The funeral dance, a kind of itinerant procession covering the sacred sites of the village and its surroundings, consecrates the renewal of the alliance between the living and the dead. The arrival of modernity has, however, overwhelmed many of the old customs and this performance, once reconnecting the community with the ancestral land, is rapidly transforming. The article highlights the contrast between the traditional ritual gestures and the contemporary performances held in occasion of the capital's tribal festival (Ādivāsī Melā), where these dances are repeated *ad infinitum* devoid of their original religious meaning. The funeral dance, proudly displayed in traditional costumes by indigenous delegations that come to the metropolis (Bhubaneswar), it is almost a cry of despair, a yearning for identity of an indigenous culture that is now rapidly disappearing.

Keywords: Saora, dance, choreutic performance, Odisha, Adivasi, funeral

Introduction: Some considerations on dance in tribal India

The symbolic and ritual use of dance in the Indian Subcontinent is so diverse and widespread that we cannot but restrict ourselves here to some general considerations. Acting as a rhythmic order, the dance of gods and mythical heroes contributes to the cyclical adjustment and the organization of the world. In a very general way, ritual dances are a means to re-establish the relationship between the earth and the sky - whether they invoke the rain, love, fertility, victory: rendering possible a synthesis between the human and the divine. The prototype of the cosmic dance in India is the Tāṇḍava of Śiva Naṭarāja who, surrounded by a circle of flames, represents at the same time the dissolution of the universe and the germination of the new world, the

destruction of the old and the reintegration in the beginning of the new cycle (Eiss 2013:19). Taking an overall view, we can say that, according to Indian culture, theatre and dance – which constitute the central theme of such treatises on aesthetics as Nāṭya Śāstra and Śilpa Śāstra – form the regulatory element of the cosmic antithesis between *devas* and *asuras*, gods and antigods, and also the means of human transcendence. In the current era, the Kali Yuga or the dark age, dominated by violence and ignorance, humanity would be without any possibility of salvation were it not confident in the teaching of various texts of Hinduism, with particular reference to Tantra. In relation to art, among many sources, the myth of the dialogue between the king Vajra and the sage Markandeya is particularly renowned. The Viṣṇudharmottara *Purāṇa* (III. 86-66) tells how king Vajra consulted the saint (ṛṣi) Markandeya about the way of salvation (Kramrisch 1976: 425;

Delahoutre 1994: 12-13). The sage replied that only the images preserved in the temple could provide union with God. Therefore, the contemplation of art can be considered as a way of transcendence for man. On the basis of that, King Vajra requested to learn the art of sculpture from the sage, in order to acquire happiness through the worship of the gods. Markandeya replied that there is no sculpture without painting. Moreover, there can be no canon for painting without the knowledge of dance: here it seems to be the basis of the aesthetic experience (Beggiora 2015: 33).

But can it be appropriate today to apply theories of classicism and doctrinal elements of the Hindu world to the reality of the indigenous peoples of contemporary India? By virtue of centuries of coexistence side by side both within the jungles and on the plains, it is possible to at least imagine an exchange of elements, a flexible relationship that has favoured a kind of bidirectional cultural osmosis. Dynamics existed in the past based on this interaction, which probably only in colonial times crystallized into that social marginalization of minorities, with which even today India is coping. This opinion was held by Baydyanath Saraswati (2003: 3-10). I recall him during the days of my PhD; the famous anthropologist – by this time very elderly and retired to private life as a *sannyāsin* in the *kṣetra* of Benares – used to await me on the porch of his house for our long discussions. He tried to analyze the complexity of the village, contemplating it carefully in its structure. Every part, through the symbols of local culture, ends up most likely representing the characteristics of the whole cosmos. Maps of the villages of India show meanders and zigzags in their tracks, but the locals live their world as a continuum

of countless circles. These are conditioned by seasonal periods, subordinated to the rise and fall of the lunar cycle, influenced by the position of the sun at the equator, their rotation scheduled according to the climactic year, which in turn determines the timing of subsistence work in rural centers (Tribhuvan, 2003: 11-16). Hence the simple observation that the cycle of life, the cosmic cycle of the ages of man (*yugas*), symbolizes the cycle of growth and decline of the human religiosity. It is interesting to note in this context that the ritual dances of indigenous peoples of India often develop through circular movements, or in semicircles, where in many cases the men's group stands opposite to the women and faces them with a rocking motion. Some apparently complex steps in fact, involving demanding stretches, with sweeping gestures toward the ground, in most cases symbolize sowing activities, the harvest, the work in the fields. In addition to such dynamic movements there is – both in Hindu and in the Buddhist context – the so-called *pradakṣiṇa*, or clockwise circumambulation around the sacred place of prayer or to the deity. Even in the animistic praxis similar dynamics are expressed through ritual. As soon as a fracture manifests itself in the cosmic equilibrium, such as an illness or a natural disaster, it is immediately necessary to try to propitiate the village deities. Among the Saoras of Odisha, the topic of our field, the shaman makes a circumambulation around the outer edges of the village to prevent the entry of malevolent forces. A ritual quarantine is then imposed on members of the community and access is no longer permitted to outsiders. Here again, then, a kind of circuit is created but this time of a social type, inscribed in a community matrix: a *maṇḍala* symbolizing again the cosmos.

The reiteration of the tribal dance can thus be read as a projection symbolizing the strength of the group: a self-organizing system capable of maintaining harmony through music and removing chaos from human or non-human life as it is potentially intended. The tribal people of India, therefore, look at the world as a plurality. Their numbers increase or decrease according to a geometric ratio. So there are lineages, families, clans, warrior phratries, hunters, crafts guilds: individuals in constant relation to each other. The dispersion or contraction of these ongoing relationships create micro-circuits supported by exogamous marriages, learning groups, creative communities, places for meeting in which to develop knowledge, or festivals, or even sacred sites for festivals and celebration of rituals. When we assert that the Indian tribal world is actually a composite reality emerging through a certain complexity, so we allude to social clusters organized through levels originating from historical, geographical and cultural objectiveness: the universe-village forms a unicum that encompasses a variety of worlds and overlapping dimensions. These are societies that to this day identify themselves within a great tradition, which continues to live its identitarian synthesis through dance (Khokar 1987; Deogaonkar and Deogaonkar 2003).

Living the dimension of dance entails living inside a circle aimed at strengthening and enhancing the social dynamic of the village. Likewise, the circle is the *imago aeternitatis* par excellence, the cohesion between empirical reality and the supernatural.¹ Again through dance, men bring to bear what appears to be their highest faculties, namely the

awareness of mimicking the cosmic journey.

The German ethno-musicologist, Curt Sachs, referred to dance as the 'mother of all arts.' No other art form has boundaries so broad: it involves the body, the mind, the soul, the need and the desire to dance (Sachs 1963). Over the centuries, people have recognized dance as an important communication tool and dance has been a means, since the dawn of time, of expressing with maximum intensity man's relationship with nature, society and religion.

Since the early days of anthropology, despite its peripheral status within the discipline, dance has emphasized its own social cohesive and integrative function in non-Western societies (Boas 1944: 5-20; Malinowsky 1922: 25). Dance acts, therefore, as prayer, sacrifice, devotion, gratitude, and ritual. In all of these formulations, dance was envisioned as a system of communication that could be analysed through the category of etic and emic, the semantic of body language or the sharing of emotions (Chakravorty 2011: 138; Kaeppler 2000: 119). Movements and choreographies were analyzed to find underlying systems that cannot be observed but must be derived from the social and cultural construction of the specific world. In other words, existing in memory and recalled as movement motifs, as imagery and as a system, movements are used to create compositions, producing social and cultural meaning in performance. Humans dance in front of what is mysterious, unfamiliar, supernatural, since this is a means to get in touch with what is unknown. Words can indeed explain the simple and understandable events of daily life, but not the subtle dimension that transcends the human. If the word could

verbally express this empathy with the sacred, there would be no need to dance. It is, rather, precisely clear in the context of the indigenous cultures of India how dance celebrates every moment of liminality: from the ordinary ceremonies of social transformation, rites of initiation, weddings, passages to adulthood, to the greatest mysteries marking the time span of human existence, such as birth and death (Turner 1967; 1969: 95; Van Gennep 1981).

But today as we are facing a period when traditional cultures are vanishing, so also the heritage of knowledge of indigenous minorities is disappearing in conformity with the processes of modernization. Paradoxically, dance remains as a mere footnote of past folklore. Therefore, this essay aims to highlight the contrast between traditional ritual gestures and the contemporary performances held on the occasion of tribal festivals in Bhubaneswar - the capital of the Indian state hosting our research - where these dances are repeated *ad infinitum* devoid of their original religious meaning. Nevertheless, such a performance seems to be the only way for the tribal minorities to reaffirm their existence and distinctive culture. From this perspective, the performative model of culture shifts the central analytic focus of dance studies from movement systems and cultural cohesion of shared symbols to the ongoing processes of cultural contestation and change (Krystal 2011: 3-15; 27-39).

A case study on indigeneity: the Lanjia Saoras

The Indian subcontinent has one of the highest percentages of indigenous peoples in the world. According to the most recent census (2011), they compose nearly one-tenth of the total population amounting to more than 100 million.² The criteria for

classification of ethnic minorities who are now designated *Scheduled Tribes* are: geographical isolation, backwardness, distinctive culture and marginalization from other cultures. Among these are included today the latest community of hunters and gatherers (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014: 25).

The use of different definitions for indigenous peoples was witnessed in colonial times, many of which are reported also in Indian literature and in the oldest texts of Hinduism. Classic names are *vanavāsī* (forest dwellers); *girijan* (mountain people); while *ādimjāti* (the primeval caste) and *janjāti* (more widespread in Nepal) probably indicate some possible connection with the concept of caste (Nathan 1997: 114-116). Today the terminology is quite fluid. Many people in the north-east, that is, the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, seems to prefer the obsolete term 'tribal,' or better 'indigenous people,' while others, such as people in Middle India self-identify as *ādivāsīs* (*ādi* - the first; *vāsī* - dweller). The term had currency in the Gandhian period and is today synonymous with aboriginals, the original inhabitants of the subcontinent (Sanganna 1963-64: 3-5). Although the root meaning of the neologism 'ādivāsī' would seem to imply that *ādivāsīs* are the first settlers of the Indian sub-continent, persistent historico-cultural exchanges within local groups make it difficult and perhaps even futile to identify any group of people in India as primary settlers (Guzy et al., 2015: 14). Some *ādivāsīs* might in fact be primary settlers in a specific area, but others are certainly recent newcomers who have replaced the initial inhabitants.

The inequality among the different communities in terms of development and access to means of subsistence, resulted in the formation in the 1960s of a sub-category: the Primitive Tribal Groups, today PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group). The Government identified about 70 groups, today increased to 75, thanks to more accurate census procedures.

Apart for the adaptation processes of groups today clustered near urban centres, and the mass of indigenous people employed as workforce in intensive agriculture, the traditional subsistence methods of the *ādivāsīs* are quite backward and in many cases these recall the Bronze Age. The most widely used technique in this proto-agriculture, a feature of a large percentage of communities, is the nowadays heavily criticized practice of *jhum* cultivation, or slash and burn. This practice has led to a sedentary or semi-sedentary lifestyle in the great majority of these communities. Despite the great changes brought about by modernization, we can identify hunting and gathering activities integrative to horticulture and proto-herding, or 'encapsulated' in the context of agro-pastoral societies.

Our case study concerns the Lanjia Saoras (or Hill Saoras), a small ethnic group with a distinctive culture of great relevance, living in the Central-Eastern Indian state of Odisha. They are part of the so called Savara grouping (alternatively also spelt as Soras or Sauras), one of the largest indigenous tribes of India, including ethnic subdivisions inhabiting areas of the neighboring states of Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar. According to the Census of India of 2011, their number amounts to a total of 534,751. Among these latter, the Lanjas are a small

minority of only 5,960 individuals. The Indian Government currently classifies them in the subgroup of PVTGs on account of the peculiarities of the territory in which they live, the low level of demographic growth and in general the backwardness of the techniques and methods employed for their subsistence. Living in small groups of villages, they inhabit the plateau rising from Gunupur towards Pottasing, in the Rayagada and Gajapati districts of Southern Odisha (19°6'0" North, 83°58'0" East). Clan organization is absent among the Hill Saoras, but the endogamic society is divided into exogamous extended families (*birinda*) claiming descent from a common ancestor. Their subsistence economy is mainly based on agriculture cultivating rice on terraced fields, relying on the slash and burn technique (*jhum*) sporadically supplemented by activities of hunting and gathering. The language spoken by Lanjia Saoras is Saora/Sora, a Munda language descending from Austro-Asiatic stock, classified as part of the South Munda family (*Ethnologue* ISO: 639-3 srb).

Moreover, perhaps thanks to the fact that they have lived throughout history in relative isolation in the jungles of the highlands, from a cultural point of view, the Lanja Saoras are renowned both for the peculiarities of a particularly vigorous shamanism and for the deep symbolism of their cult of the dead. The *kurans*, or shamans in the Saora language, are the intermediaries between the village community and the ancestors or the subtle entities that inhabit the forest (*sonum*).

Fieldwork was carried out discontinuously in Odisha's tribal areas, over a period of fifteen years (1998-2013), as part of research projects sponsored by Italian universities and governmental development projects.

The cult of the dead and choreutic accompaniment

The Lanjia Saora have a shamanistic religion strongly centered on the cult of the dead. One of the key concepts of this shamanism is *sonum*, an umbrella term encompassing all of the subtle entities, from the forest deities, to the ancestral forces that govern the natural manifestations. But the *sonums*, in the sense of 'memories', are also the totality of the dead with which Saoras weave continuous dialogues that are at the heart of communication between natural and supernatural, between the community and its own ancestry (See also Vitebsky 1993).

The *guar*, or funeral ceremony, takes place twelve days after the cremation of the deceased (which usually occurs one day after death) and is considered by the Saoras to be the most important funeral ritual. Ashes are buried in the *ganuar*, the place where memorial stones for the commemoration of the ancestors are erected; the bigger the stone, the greater the importance of the deceased. The ritual requires the sacrificial killing of a buffalo, a psychopomp animal that will guide the deceased towards the *kinorai*, the abode of the ancestors. Usually the beast is struck with a sharp axe blow to the neck, once the head is severed, the meat is then boiled and consumed collectively at the funeral banquet.

According to the Saoran culture, the megalith and the buffalo are a kind of passport to the afterlife. Since the soul of the deceased is imagined disoriented and in pain, therefore in need of several items, relatives should ensure large number of different types of offerings. The whole *birinda* offers him food, alcohol, tobacco,

clothes and everything that might be considered useful in his new chthonic existence.

The spirits of the dead (*rauda*) are destined to a chthonian dimension called *Kinorai*, the world of the dead, which extends below the earth's surface.³ This dimension – a fairly typical element of the indigenous cultures of India – is a kind of reflection of real life, but in some way contiguous. On the surface the jungle – the dimension of wild nature, the kingdom of spirits and animals (the abode is typically the trees or waterfalls of the local sacred geography), the place of dynamic and creative potential, of chaos – is in some way opposed to the domesticated space of the village, inhabited by men, the dimension of order. This underlies the dynamics of permeability/communication across a complex cosmological structure. On so-called cataclysmic days, when the memory of ancestors is celebrated, the deceased who have reached a happy dwelling in the subsoil, are conversely called to return to their original village, in order to strengthen the ancient covenant between the living and the dead. They pass through the gaps between the two parallel dimensions, which are conceived in Saoran shamanism as: the place of cremation, the mortar at the foot of the main pole supporting the roof of the hut and the *ganuar*, or place of erection of megaliths.

In the immediate post-mortem period, the souls of the dead are fearful, and wander the forest seeking to return to their villages of origin. This is a particularly dangerous phase because, as is commonly believed in many cultures, if they do not receive the appropriate funeral rites, they may become larvae or spectra, embodying the dynamic of revenants (*kulba*). During

the funeral, a bamboo structure is constructed containing all the property of the deceased. This looks like a miniature hut, situated on top of a heap of earth, with cloth walls and a roof made with an umbrella. Clothing, utensils, pitchers, weapons, etc., are placed inside. This is considered a sort of transitional house from which the soul of the dead can attend the ceremony, and this will be the starting point for the trip to the underworld. It is interesting to note that all items are inverted: it is a clear symbolism of the nature of the journey. Similarly, during annual commemorations (such as *karja* rituals) permanent structures in wood are intended as huts for clan ancestors. These are set up with items that belonged to the deceased and the shaman enters a trance (*me?er*) in front of them.



Fig. 1: Regingtal village, *kuramboi* (shamaness) in trance during funeral ceremony.

The moment of trance is crucial to the celebration, since it is through possession, that the spirit of the dead can communicate with the living, and at the same time its 'formal' presentation to the afterlife takes place. The *kuran*, or shaman (*kuramboi* if female) introduces the deceased to the ancestors and wishes that he will be accepted. Whispering the name is a way to affix the soul of the dead who

will be identified as a member of his own *birinda*.

In many indigenous communities, during funeral ceremonies, there is a tradition of making offerings of food to the dead. Among the Lanjia Saoras, little bundles of food are prepared as viaticum for the dead; they are the equivalent of the *pinḍa* in the Hindu tradition. Within the food offerings, typically the shaman proposes the contextual symbolism of blood and wine: three droplets of blood and three droplets of *alin*, the local palm wine,⁴ are deposited on bundles with rice/cereal flour figures before being closed in *siali* leaves⁵ and sealed with bronze rings.

While in trance, the *kuran* is seated in front of the *ganuar*: the stones form long rows, abutting each other. This presents the idea that he talks with the dead or, as it were, with their hypostasis. In fact, the community gathers around to listen and support the shaman. There follows a formal request to the most recently departed to accept the new member of the family. In response, the spirits of the deceased possess the body of the shaman and, through him, they receive plenty of alcohol through libations made with a typical carved pumpkin and tobacco smoke.

This long digression on funerary rituals is necessary to understand the importance of dance (*tangseng/tənoŋ'se:ŋən*) and how it is deeply connected with the dimension of ancestry. Although the scene of the shaman singing his chants in front of the megaliths appears fairly static, this contrasts with the dynamism of the dances that bind together each section of the rite as a kind of leitmotif. In a dancing procession, the relatives of the deceased

pass through the forest to arrive at the place of funeral. Other dancers perform in a circle around the place of sacrifice, and again in a circle the villagers celebrate the memory of the deceased in front of his hut. Likewise, in the subtle dimension, the deities and ancestors are imagined as being summoned in a dancing procession. This is quite clear from the translation of the invocations. One of the most common themes is precisely the summoning of the spirits in a single line, from the forest (*tirinbarran*), from the hills (*ekolan*), tutelary entities (*manaji*) and ancestors (*ildaji*) are called to form a procession (*gelgelsitonan*) and to dance towards the village. A topos regards the footprints. The shaman can see the rows of footprints left by the dance of the spirits. They are encouraged to follow each other, step by step, and vice versa they should make sure that other evil spirits are not following in line after them. Some liturgies provide consecutive recitation of the names of shamans or village leaders of previous generations; this offers the suggestion of a mnemonic chain linking the shaman to the forefathers. For reasons of space we must defer here to another source for the reading of our translations (Beggiora 2010: 129-48). Moreover, examining the classical murals of Saora, namely *anitals* (*'i:di-tal*), these often portray patterns of dance and choreutic performances. As explained elsewhere (Beggiora 2015: 13-47), this is not a decorative motif, but describes by means of pictorial transposition a subtle/oneiric vision of the coming of *sonums*.

Once they arrive at their destination, human and non-human dancers (*tangseng maranji*) dance (or so they are envisaged) in a circle around the *ganuar*, proceeding then to the house of the dead. On the other hand, if a man dies in his own village,

and it is not necessary to move the corpse, they dance in a circle for hours in front of his house. At the end, the departing soul formally receives a white robe (the colour of death, symbolizing also rebirth) that the shaman wears around his head and shoulders, representing acceptance. If everything has been carried out without a hitch, the soul can undertake the long process of transformation into an ancestor, becoming a tutelary of the clan.

Dance as ritual

The first significant study on the Saora people dates back to the mid-20th century; in his *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955), Verrier Elwin has shown how this indigenous culture was emblematic of the *ādivāsī* reality of the Indian Subcontinent. The only discordant note – no pun intended – is that Saoran dance in particular would prove to be the most ungraceful of all India, so much as to reveal an apparent poor attitude on the part of this particular group. This sort of mystery makes the study even more intriguing and can only be solved by putting the performance in relation to its ritual value. As a whole, its evolution is absolutely chaotic and cacophonous: this is its peculiarity. The dance in fact did not come into being as a form of recreation; it was not invented simply for pleasure. From the very beginning, it was a serious business. Its forms depend on the function it fulfils in Saoran society (Elwin, 1955: 214). In primis, as we said, it is more a procession than a dance, and moreover this procession consists of a serious piece of ritual conduct.

Although this may also be applied to other tribal communities, we can observe that Saoras have a unique style differing from other neighboring *ādivāsī* groups. The

dance itself is of a simple character, well adapted to its peripatetic purpose. The choreography is confused; everyone participates: men, women and children; infants are kept tied with a strip of cloth and pressed against the breast of the mother who does not hesitate to jump into the group. There are no predetermined steps, but everyone hops and stamps while advancing clockwise, occasionally twirling on themselves or turning in reverse. Men in traditional dress jump with feet together brandishing and waving their weapons in the air. Among the Saora there exists the peculiarity that, to dance, it is necessary that each person brings something in his hand to wave in the air, as well as the musicians who hold their instruments. As Elwin (1955: 216) describes:

‘There is no singing but everyone carries something (a stick, a sword, a bunch of peacock feathers, an umbrella) and weaves it on the air. The band mingles with dancers blowing trumpets, horns, clashing cymbals, beating drums and gongs, and boys whistle piercingly with one knuckle in the mouth. From time to time they all raise the arms and weapons on the air and give a great shout.’

Peacock feathers are connected to a myth of origin that tells about the death of one of the daughters of Kittung, a primordial deity with a fundamental role in the creation of the world. In honour of the daughter, the god celebrated the first funeral ritual dancing like a peacock and adorning himself with its feathers (Elwin, 1954: 628). This element clearly connects the dance with the funeral ceremonies. Even umbrellas, in some sense, are not just everyday tools but, as we have seen before, can be used in ritual function. It is still customary to swing swords and axes

in the air while the dancers rotate at the same time on themselves. Considering the strong consumption of alcohol often reached in these cases, I sometimes found the situation somewhat worrying; but ultimately the safety of all has always been preserved by the *tangseng galanmar*, the head of the dances, who has the task of setting the basic rhythm, expanding the circle when it shrinks too much and directing, roughly speaking, the pace of all the dancers.

During my stay in Rayagada, I attended many dances performed for different kinds of ceremony. In truth, I did not note major differences between a dance performed on the occasion of a funeral and another performed on the occasion of a marriage (although someone has drawn my attention to the existence of a vast repertoire). All proceed according to an itinerant pathway, which in most cases means that the dancers move along a circumference.



Fig. 2: Regingtal village, altar (with tools of the dead).

The musicians follow the procession; while the percussionists usually march towards the inner side, those who play wind instruments and cowbells of various types follow the procession jumping, dancing

and waving their instruments in the air. I noticed that, in these contexts there is some care in working out the rhythm session, perhaps an innate and natural inclination. The Saoras play a number of percussion instruments ranging from large drums of cow skin (*debding*), to various kinds of instruments, whose sound box is derived from the processing of fruits, gourds, shells and carved wood (*tudum*).⁶ The rhythms are always frantic, sometimes with syncopated variants. Variation in depth additional to the capacity of the instrument is occasionally provided by means of pressure exerted with the hand on the tensed skins. The actual percussive effect, on the other hand, is provided through the use of wooden sticks and rods according to the case.

The same cannot be said for the wind instruments; apart from a series of small trumpets to whom is reserved the exclusive task of improvisation, the attention is still captured by the imposing horns that Saoras blow continuously.⁷ In dancing processions there is the main horn which is followed, in turn by three or four others marching behind. These instruments are really bulky and produce a squeaky and deep sound, depending on the air pressure developed inside them. The musicians proceed waving the horns in the air and jumping; but as soon as the principal horn fits into the rhythm, the others echo it with a certain delay. Under these conditions, we cannot think that all musicians are in time and the wind session is always uncoordinated. The whole is dominated by the sound of cowbells producing a general cacophony.

The overall view, in itself quite grotesque, is perhaps the most effective representation of the emotional feeling of Lanjia Saoras during the celebration of

these ceremonies. In other words, although it may however sound like a cliché, this spontaneity is what is habitually understood by 'tribal dance.' Everyone, naturally and effortlessly, relaxes and lets themselves enter into the collective emotional climate thus developed, which in other times would probably have less meaning. The fact that there is no discrimination and that children, not yet able to walk and firmly tied to their mother's breast, are included in the performance indicates how the sense of these communicative manifestations is developed within the family. In conclusion, as a proof of the lack of artificiality of the act, we note that, during the celebration of a *guar*, once the dances have started, it seems no longer possible to stop them. The dancers, tireless, continue to dance throughout the duration of the ceremony and the following night, regardless of the hours or days that it requires.

It is clear that the itinerant aspect, more than the musical performance, is important here. For normally, the Saoras dance in order to escort someone or something. Movement is intended between villages or from one place to another. Just to mention some other occasions, they escort a buffalo to a sacrifice and afterwards they dance on its blood; they dance to fetch a menhir for the *ganuar* or escorting the water carrier to the well at the funeral rite.⁸ They can also escort the remains or the ashes of a dead person from the place of death and cremation to the village of origin, zigzagging through the jungle if necessary. Lastly it is quite clear that this gesture has a clear connection with all moments of liminality, and in particular with funeral rituals. The aggressive pace and warrior

pantomime clearly has an apotropaic value against real or subtle enemies.⁹

I collected an ancient legend telling of a woman who had lost her husband away from home. As is customary, the body was burnt in one of the cremation sites, but when she came to collect the bones and the ashes it was no longer possible to locate them. So the husband's spectre (transformed in a *kulba*) began to haunt her every night, asking to be taken home. The woman replied that she was not able to find the humble remains. The ghost taught her to dance thus in a circle around the cremation site, so she was able to identify the few bones that were still remaining. After closing the remains in a jug, the wife brought them home with a dancing procession; here she could devote the *guar* to the deceased, sacrificing a buffalo and erecting the megalith. The ghost was pacified and the dance was born: the symbolism of this myth appears abundantly clear.

Conclusion

After the change of economic policy in India (1990-91), great changes have impacted the subcontinent; a boost to modernization has arrived also in Odisha, particularly in the last twenty years. Indigenous traditions are fast disappearing as a result of various factors such as urbanization, globalization and industrialization. Traditional costumes are increasingly rare, and they are worn on very special occasions. Further to that, Christian missions, in the name of evangelization, are significantly contributing to the homogenization of most *ādivāsī* communities. Tensions between converted and unconverted communities were often reported in Saoran territory, also because religion is

increasingly used as a tool of social control over the indigenous masses. It is not by chance that among christianised *ādivāsīs*, the wild dance, with weapons and frequent abuse of alcohol is considered a major sin: not so much because it is seen as a dangerous pastime, but because it acts as part of a cultural (tribal) identity that is to be deleted (see also Gundlach 2004: 139-140).

Government policies on tribal affairs have too long wavered between the attempt to preserve the cultures of the jungle and the dynamics of development. Today, despite the existence of a certain awareness about the importance of this intangible cultural heritage, the focus is increasingly moving towards a modernization and integration process of these people, threatening an eventual disintegration of their local identities. It is noteworthy that at the same time, as a sort of repercussion to this deplorable trend of annihilation of *ādivāsī* culture, throughout the state interest in the 'tribal' dance is experiencing a moment of genuine revival. People realize that it is an endangered, if not yet vanished, tradition and that it must be protected by some means. So the Government of Odisha and many NGOs organize exhibitions, festivals – like this annual event of *Ādivāsī Melā* in Bhubaneswar – celebrating the bare survival of indigenous culture. A workforce of tribal origin is often employed in this new dynamic, with the task of mass production, reinterpreting the traditional patterns of dance in a modern way.

These kinds of events have therefore been established in order to fulfil a recreational and entertainment purpose, which generally loses contact or memory itself of the original meaning of the dance. Paradoxically, dance is still recognized as

an art form, but its roots seem to melt away in the common oblivion. Today the dancers recite, interpreting with a bitter and forced smile that which was once a funeral march but which has now lost its profound ritual value. These are purely folkloristic performances for national and foreign tourists. On the other hand, this same style conveyed outside the community becomes the desperate cry of the indigenous communities that affirm their right to exist in the contemporary world. The ancient funeral dance, proudly displayed in traditional costumes by indigenous delegations arriving to the metropolis, expresses almost a yearning for identity of an *ādivāsī* culture that is now rapidly disappearing. The sad circle of dancers on a town stage, under neon lights, in front of a clapping audience, seems to recall the dance of Śiva in his circle of fire. The Natarāja put an end to the old world to begin the next cosmic manifestation. This dance in a circle appears to be the funeral march of an ancient culture, the last gasp of a world struggling to survive, while simultaneously marking the beginning of a new era in which the Saoras (like many other minorities) will have to fight for their rights and the acknowledgment of their identity.



Fig. 3: Regingtal village, funeral dance.

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Notes

¹ As an example, for indigenous people of India, as well as for the Buddhist or Hindu communities or even for mixed groups, usually the houses are facing east or north. This is because the south is universally associated with death, the kingdom of the dead, and at the same time the sun sets to the west. Likewise, in funeral rituals, the pyre for cremation or grave for burial have an opposite orientation, still following the same orientation criteria according to the cardinal points.

² To be exact: 104,281,034 ST persons, constituting 8.6 % of the country (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013: 1-10).

³ Or *Kinorai desa* (similarly to the loose Hindi term *deś/deśi*: land, country, people); the country of the dead.

⁴ In Odisha, commonly named as *salap* or *salpo*, produced by the fermentation of juice of the sacred plant *Caryota urens* (Beggiora 2016: 193-210)

⁵ Also known as *mahul patta*, is a giant creeper of the Indian jungle, *Bauhinia vahlii*.

⁶ *Tudum* is a small drum with one skin from one side. Both terms, *tudum* and *debding*, undoubtedly have an onomatopoeic sound. The percussionist and the art of playing that particular instrument are known respectively as *tuduman* and *tudumgal* for the small drum and *debdingan* and *debdingal* for the big one.

⁷ When I moved among the villages there was often a crowd of children who accompanied me. I saw that everyone was making strange gestures in the air, and it was explained to me that they mimicked the transport of horns playing at doing a kind of dancing parade.

⁸ Here, as in the rest of the Indian world, water establishes a passage occurred in liminality: the ashes of the pyre are sprinkled with water, the *menhir* is ritually washed to consecrate it, etc.

⁹ Gongs and horns - the uproar in general - are demon scarers.