



Regular Research Article

Chhau Dance: Cultural Trait of Purulia District, West Bengal, India

Bhutia Tshewang Namgyal¹, Sinha Sanghamitra², Sinha Malavika^{*3}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Jogamaya Devi College

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, PRMS Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal

³Principal, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, Chhatna, Bankura, West Bengal

* Correspondence author: msinhageography@gmail.com

Abstract

Culture is pervasive and fundamental to the human condition. Culture is the entirety of conduct and belief; it encompasses both normative and taught behaviour. The Chhau dance of Purulia, West Bengal, India, is included in the study. It's a self-defence martial art. It's the dance with an earthen mask. The several kinds of drums are performed as background music in Chhau dance. It's an athletic and acrobatic Indian dance that's done at Hindu festival. The various attributes of dance such as choreography, costume, and lyrics have been discussed. The Chhau dance of Purulia is included on the list of intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO. The dance is distinct due to its rigorous training and accuracy, and it is a dance of heroic gesture. Purulia's Chhau dance is regional not related to the specific community. Instrumental-music, dance, and martial arts are all combined in Chhau dance. It connects the various communities and their technical expertise and skills. The Chhau dance with conciliatory (with mask) actorish gestures is the cultural trait of Purulia, West Bengal.

Keywords: chhau dance; chhau mask; chhau crown; chhau choreography; chhau costume.

1. Introduction

Felix M. Keesing defines culture as “the totality of learned, socially transmitted behavior” [1]. There is a coherent relationship between the cultural, geographical space (the territorial identity of culture), and human community (the cultural characteristic of a particular human group). Culture is ever dynamic. Culture is the entirety of conduct and belief; it encompasses both normative and taught behaviour. Three pillars of culture include lifestyle, thinking process and social expression. The lifestyle comprises the food habit, clothing pattern, and economic practices etc; thought includes the political, philosophical, and psychological perspectives of human-being and the social expression includes language, music, literature, and craft etc; [2]. The Chhau dance of Purulia is the liaison of old and contemporary living chronicles of regional crafts and artisans, local natural resources, regional believes, sense of community integration and evolving identity. Its conveys' complex narrative, expressing the theme of life. The Chhau dance fosters a sense of belongingness. It connects both the geographical area (Purulia, West Bengal) and the aboriginal of Purulia. Purulia is the realm of the Chhau dance. Although the gesture and pattern of the Chhau dance are different from those of

Purulia, they are still performed in Mayurbhanj, Orissa, Jharkhand [3]. The Chhau dance of Purulia is one of the dances that is listed as part of UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage [4]. It's a virtual form of time capsule, holding within its step stronger of tradition of generations. Therefore, the Chhau dance is a cultural trait of Purulia, West Bengal.

2. Materials and Methods

An empirical survey served as the study's foundation. The study covers the processes of earthen mask preparation, crown preparation, and costume preparation of Chhau dancers. The Chhau crown's measurement has been obtained. The dancer's measurement ratio and height ratio have been presented graphically (Fig.No.1). The study includes various dance poses of Chhau. On a survey of the literature, the entire study was built. The Purulia district gazetteers provided the historical context of the dance and dancers. Male artists are the primary performers of Chhau dance. The dance involves jumping and rotating. Thus, the most popular motions are 360-degree rotations in both the vertical and horizontal directions. Consequently, the dancer's most crucial tricks are the synchronization of their leg swings and body rotations. Accurate measurements of the width and height of the crown are necessary preconditions for leg swing and rotation. Measurement related data have been collected by measurement of physique of eight Chhau dancers (male).

The average height of the dancers varies from 176 to 182 centimetre. Measurements pertaining to hand and leg swings have been collected. The leg's swing zone was marked with chalk (drawing a straight line), measurements have been taken with the help of measuring tape, and all data were recorded by the metric system. Each individual crown's height, radius, and width have been measured. The dancer's crown measurement and the male dancer's torso measurement are assessed, and the proportion is presented on the graph (Fig.No 1). The height of the crown corresponds exactly to the 1:1 ratio of the belly button to the crest of the crown and the height from toe to belly button Figure 1. The leg swing is precisely timed to the dancer's height (throughout the performance). The movement of the neck and chin of the dancer is the 1/20th ($180/20 = 9$ cm) of the height of dancer. The length from the top of the crown to the belly button and the length from the toe to the belly button are precisely equal (1:1). The Chhau crown is made to fit the specific dancer's body type. Typically, the width of the crown is equal to the 1:1.6 length ratio of belly button and the chin. The radius of the crown is 1/8th of the dancer's height and precisely equal to the solder's width (1:1) Figure 1.

2.1. Objective:

The study aims to express comprehensive knowledge about the Chhau dance of Purulia. It covers the posture, lyrics, costumes, mask, and crown style of Chhau dance, and related to the attributes of the dance.

2.2. Study Area

Purulia is the westernmost district of the Indian state of West Bengal and the extended edge of the Chotanagpur plateau. The geographical extension is $23^{\circ} 42' 00''$ to $22^{\circ} 42' 35''$ N and $86^{\circ} 54' 37''$ to $85^{\circ} 49' 25''$ E. The unequal distribution of rainfall and undulating physiography are inherent to Purulia. The Purulia is a slightly undulating, eroded plateau. The dominant water courses are the Damodar, Subarnarekha, and Dwarakeshwar but all are formidable and torrential. The district of Purulia is a drought-prone district in West Bengal.

3. Results

Chhau is a martial technique for self-defence. The Purulia indigenous people inherited it [5]. It's a traditional athletic and acrobatic dance form. It is presented at Hindu festival. While Jharkhand and Orissa also practice a similar type of traditional dance, Purulia's Chhau is distinct in terms of choreography and costume design [6]. Chhau dance is the combination of melodrama and pantomime drama [7]. There are still many unanswered questions regarding the origin of Chhau dance and dancers. Phonetically, Chhau is comparable to Bengali counting system number six (Choi)

[5]. Six animal poses are depicted in the Chhau choreography: ox, lion, monkey, peacock, cat or tiger, and wolf. The term "Chhau" has a military meaning and it derived from the phrase cantonment area (Chauni). It is a kind of entertainment-based military dancing exercise and simulated warfare.

According to Witharana (2014), the Sanskrit word Chāya, which signifies shadow, is linked to the word Chhau [8]. The word Chamba, (to dim or conceal), is also linked to the Chhau originates. Real faces are never shown to the public; the mask and crown are essential components of the Chhau dance. Thus, Chhau was classified allegorically as mask-mime dance play. There is another meaning for the word "Chhau" in colloquial Bengali, particularly in Purulia dialect. Chhau is the quality or sudden method of attack, such as stealing or snatching.

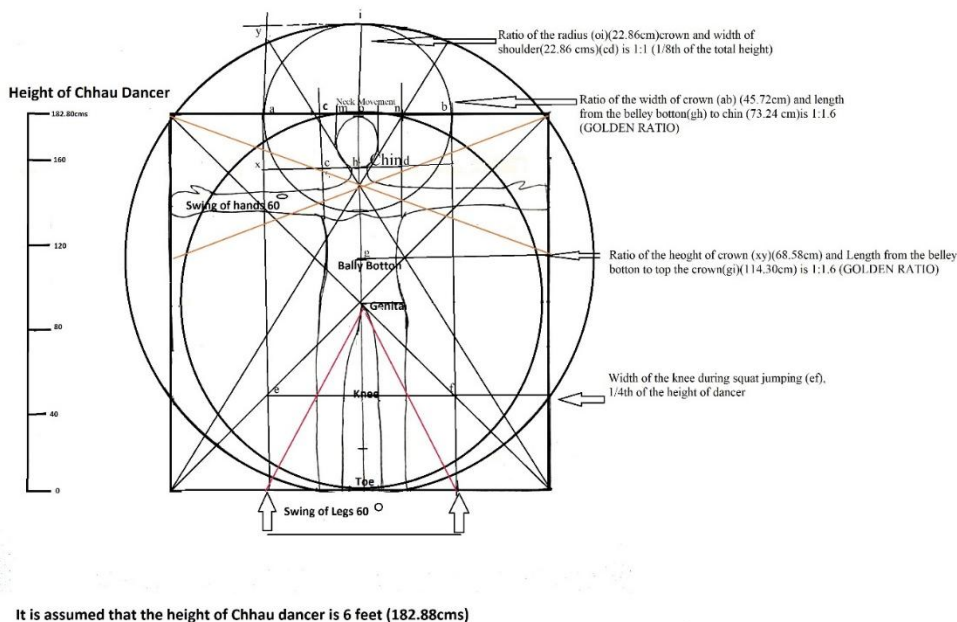


Figure 1 Measurements of Chhau Dancer

3.1. Chhau: Jumping Dance

The Indian Ministry of Culture included Chhau to its list of classical dances [9] after dance anthropologist Drid Williams proposed it as a classical dance [10]. In 2018, the World Trade Organization registered the Chhau mask in GI fame [11].

The Chhau dance has two facets; zoomorphic (animals and birds) and anthropomorphic (deities, devils, and human figures). In melodrama, the Chhau is a leaping dance. It differs greatly from both ballet and Masai dance [12]. The walking and jumping on the toe, legs, and hands swing make dancers alluring to the spectators [13]. The choreography of Chhau consists of a series of movements such as circular walking (chhak), one-legged pirouettes (pirkiti), gigantic jumps (ulfa), steady walking (chal), and flying somersaults (urhamalak) [14]. Dancers often adopt the following positions: squatting, folding of the knees, toe pointed out, feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart on a flat base, hand projected out at an angle of 30 to 45 degrees, and thigh parallel to the floor or angled above the knees. These postures are similar to the posture of a bodybuilder or weightlifter. The dancer keeps the distance between two legs exactly one-fourth of the height of the body. The width of the crown and the gap between the legs have a 1:1 ratio (Fig. No. 1). Stunts performed in dance are the running, bouncing on the palm and toe, jumping in the squat, rolling backward and forward in the handspring vault (somersault), and 360-degree vertical spinning. As a result, the Chhau dancers keep their height and body weight perfectly balanced (Fig. No. 1). The pantomime-mask dance was the cultural legacy of the Greco-Roman era [8]. The pantomime dance-drama was a seductive and glitzy kind of show. Indian mythology serves as the basis for the plot [15]. Pantomime in dance; it was the tradition of 6th-century BC across the Mediterranean countries [8]. It is still unclear how pantomime dance originated in India, with its distinctive beauty and the use of masks [14].

The Chhau dance showed the way to the Indian aerobics. It is traveling with severe amnesia.

Purulia was declared a Jangalmahal (country of forests) by the British Government. It was the region of Chhaur uprising (1779–1794). The clans of Bhumij, Dom, Bgdi, Bauri, Kurmi Mahato, Sardar, and the unmistakable disciples of the Chhaur uprising were related to the the Chhau dancer's. Both Chhau and Chhaur share a phonetic similarity and lexicological analogy with one another. The Jain tradition had something to do with the word "Chhaur." Bengali poets of the Middle-Ages employed the term chhaur. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee claimed that the "Ayaranga Sutta" preserves Jain heritage. It was said that the people living in Ladha and Swabha (Purulia) were untamed and rude [16].

In the colonial perspective, Britishers identified the dance of the Churlish community as a Churlish dance. Later on, it was transformed into the vernacular as the Chhau dance [16]. The colonial counter-insurgency hid the Chhau dance's previous position and history [17].

Chhau Music: There is an audible accompaniment to the Chhau dance program. The flute, dhol, dhamsa, and senahi are the instruments that Chhau musicians play the most frequently [7]. The Chhau dance typically does not include any vocal music. Instead of adhering to the traditional seven sounds of Bhairav (or pure Bharav), the Chhau lyrics follow the fundamental sound of Bhirav rag. Bhairav exudes a bold demeanor that conveys gravity and a devout outlook. The words "Ga, Ma, Dha (komol), Dha (vadi sound and komol), Pa, and Ga, Ma Re (komol), Re (samavadi sound and komol), and Sa constitute the Chhau lyrics. The Keharwa and Dadra tal [rhythm cycle] are followed by the Chhau lyric [18]. The Chhau lyric often used the Dadra Tal, which has three or six beats. The Dhol and Dhamsa and Nagara are the regional variants [19] of drums and those are used during Chhau dance. The Dhamsa is prepared by the Dom community and they use the untanned skin of buffaloes or cows. Playing the dhamsa requires two thick wooden sticks. Dhamsa measures 52 centimeters in height, 61 centimeters in top diameter, and 9 centimeters in (circular) lower plate. The Damsa should be positioned inclined on the ground. The barrel drum, or dhol, is played with the palm of the hand. In the past, Chhau musicians produced a powerful sound by playing the singa (horn). Around eleven at night, the Chhau dance performance takes place.

Chhau-Masks: Chhau dancers appear in front of an audience in conciliatory and actorish gestures [20]. The earthen (mud) mask, which is well-decorated and three-dimensional, is a native feature of Purulia. The Sutradhar family, who are Hindu carpenters, prepares the traditional mask. The components of the earthen mask are paper, mud, china clay (Kharimati), and pure water [21]. In earlier days, the old and used cotton and thin bark of Bamboo or bark of Palm trees were used instead of paper. There are multiple steps in the mask-making process such as coating, layering, and sun-drying. The outer surface is made up of thin layers of white clay (China clay), the intermediate layer is made up of layers of liquid-glutinous mud, and the first coating is made up of layers of papers and glue. The earthen mask is molded by using an antique wooden facial structure. Old cotton or paper is soaked in pure water and pasted, one by one, above the wooden mold, homemade adhesive that has been used (greatly diluted) [19]. Above the sturdy wooden mold, the paper coating procedure is repeated five to seven times before drying in the sun. The fine alluvial soil has been collected and dried up. To obtain the finest part of mud dust, the fine and dry mud dust has been squeezed. To make the sticky liquid mud, a specific ratio of fine mud dust and coal ash is combined, and then pure water is added. This process takes 24 to 48 hours to fully solidify. Mud coating and sun-drying procedures continued (up to 8–10 layers) over the first coating (up to 5–7). The smooth surface of the mask is achieved by applying a thin layer of liquid mud [22]. In the Neolithic period, people began to build smooth walls by applying thin, sticky liquid mud. Today, the Neolithic method of mud plastering earthen huts is still used in rural India. The face mask is made of kaolinite, which is soft, white clay. Natural skincare ingredients like kaolin and kaolinite are still widely used in Purulia for traditional textiles. When water is added to kaolin, it takes on a plastic-like consistency and maintains its shape when the pressure is released. White clay is used to produce the mask's three-dimensional features, which are painted latter. When the mask has completely dried, the coloured mask is taken out of the mold [23]. After the nose and eyes of the mask are precisely drilled to fit the dancer's facial structure, the mask is adorned with a high degree of accuracy and precision. The dancer's face, forehead, frontal cranium, and parietal bone are all covered by the mask. Every mask worn by Chhau, captures the character's prevailing mood. Chhau, the personification of Eastern Indian mask dance, depicts the expression of the figure the dancer is

portraying.

Costume and Chhau Dance: The Chhau dancers are dressed in glistening, vibrant clothing. The most prevalent colours among the variety of colours are red, yellow, green, black, and purple. Although dancers who represent gods frequently wear yellow dresses, the gods also frequently wear crimson and green. The loose pajamas make up the lower portion of the chhau outfit, while the full-sleeved kurta is worn on top. Beads, silver foil, zinc foil, sola (*aeschynomene*), etc. are used to adorn the top. The Chhau dancers wear long, straight hair wigs. The dancer's hairstyle is determined by the character of the melodrama. The Chhau dancers wear long, vibrant heel cut-out socks that cover their toes and calves. The dancers are supported and stabilized by the specially knitted socks. The Chhau costume's main attraction is its intricately designed crown. The crown resembles the one worn by Lord Jagannath of Puri. The crown is fan-shaped and semi-circular in shape, and it looks extremely beautiful. The dancer's height determines the crown's length and width (Fig. No. 1). It adheres to the golden ratio's proportion (1:1.6) [24]. Base of the crown is prepared by Bamboo, while Peacock fans and Sola (*Aeschynomene aspera*) are used to decorate.

Theme of Chhau Dance: The characters in Hindu literature and Hindu mythology serve as the basis for the plot of the Chhau dramatization. The Chhau dance portrays legendary figures in stark contrast, such as dharma and adharma, battle and peace, and good and evil. In dramatic moments, the Chhau dance symbolizes the triumph of virtues and morality. It proceeds as follows: three episodic presentations, a sequenced introduction to each character, the development of the conflict between opposing qualities, and the eventual triumph of virtue. Ashutosh Bhattacharya opined that Chhau is a tribal war dance and it's an aboriginal culture of Purulia but it is defined under the veil of Hinduism [14].

3.2. Animals and Chhau Dance:

Deities are constantly connected to an animal's mode of transportation in Hindu mythology, or polytheism [25]. The dancers appears with specific costumes and masks to portray animal creatures such as lions, tigers, bears, goats, buffalo, monkeys, and peacocks [26]. Paper pulp is utilized in the manufacture of animal and bird masks. The zoomorphic feature of Chhau, which consists of animals and birds, represents the rolling and scratching position on the ground. In Chhau dance, the lion dance is special. The Chhau dance's lion dance [27] illustrated the parallels between the East Asian (Bali, Indonesia) and Chinese lion dances.

3.3. Pupil of Chhau Dance:

The Chhau dance is not exclusive to any one community; rather, it is peculiar to a certain region. The Chhau dance, which involves an earthen mask, serves to unite the Purulia natives. The local Tanti (weaver and tailor) community makes the dress; the Sutradhar (carpenter) community makes the mask; the Malakar (small clan of the carpenter community) community makes the crown; the Byen and Dom (community's livelihood related to skin of the dead animal) community makes the lyric; the Sutradhar (carpenter) community makes the wig; the Dom community makes the musical instruments (community prepared musical instruments, specially drums); the dance is performed by the Dom, Bgdi, Bauri, Kurmi-Mahato, Sardar people, etc [7]. There is no liaison of Chhau dance and dancers to the higher caste. The unorganized segments of society, such as agricultural labourers, small farmers, seasonal forest product dealers, tiny craftsmen were the performers of Chhau-melodrama.

4. Discussion

4.1. The message of Chhau Dance:

The Chhau, a dance of heroic gesture known as *veera rasa*, symbolizes the triumph of virtues and morality in the end. The colour yellow represents *veera rasa*, or heroic feeling. A social message of values and morality triumphing over evils is communicated through the Chhau dance. Establishing the righteous is not a simple task; humans must overcome obstacles in order to do this. Every Chhau dance ultimately illustrates the idea that goodness and truth will always triumph against evil,

regardless of how strong it may be. The triumph of good over evil is the central theme of Chhau dance. Focal message of melodrama is the truth always triumphs, and virtue always triumphs over the evil.

The Cahhu dance is the ancient aerobic drama dance of heroic gestures. The audience is presented with the Chhau dancers in stunning, mimetic costumes that are hidden [13]. There are six fundamental native Indian aerobics steps in the Chhau dance. The loud music and native lyrics are essential components of Chhau dancing. It creates an environment of pseudo-war. It is an indigenous dance of Purulia, and Chhau is not a dance exclusive to any one people but rather a culture distinct to a certain area. Karkanas notes [22] that the preparation method for the mask is distinct and bears similarities to the Neolithic mud plastering technique. The size of the crown depends on the height of the dancer (Fig. No. 1) and it follows the principle of the golden ratio [24]. The Chhau dancer of Purulia maintains a balance between body weight and height. The dance is distinct from other jumping dances due to its rigorous training and high level of precision [21].

5. Conclusions

The Chhau dance is a cultural web that links the various communities and their craft-skills. Diverse social groupings and their lifestyles (social pluralism), fundamental beliefs (pluralism of values), are included in Chhau dance and it's an example of plurality. It is not limited to differences in confession and religion (religious pluralism). Chhau connects the Bayen (musicians) community, the Dom community (makes musical drums), the Kumbhakar community (specializes in clay modelling for anthropomorphic and zoomorphic mask preparation), the Sutradhar community (skill in bamboo and wooden crafts), the Malakar community (well-known for ornamentation and decoration), the Karak community (skill in China Clay mining and related work), and so on. As a result, Chhau represents not just Purulia's culture but also the diverse range of abilities and crafts of the region's native. The Chhau dance is a martial art form in which several groups showcase their distinct abilities. The many crafts of the Purulia aboriginal people come together to perform Chhau, which is a reflection of society's pluralistic nature. It's a flawless fusion of Indian martial arts, Indian mythology, Dadra or Kwahawa tal (bit), instrumental lyrics, and Bhirav rag (not pure). It delivers a timeless message of morality and humanity. Eastern India's cultural landscape is embodied in the Chhau, a beautiful semi-circular crown dance performed with earthen masks. The Chhau; an earthen mask dance with a gorgeous semi-circular crown and it is the cultural panorama of eastern India. The Chhau dance with conciliatory (with mask) actorish gestures is the cultural trait of Purulia, West Bengal.

References

- [1] Das, R., *Mime, movement and masks. The narrative technics of the traditional Indian dance*, in R. Rieger (Ed.), *Bewegungsfreiheit: Tanz als kulturelle manifestation (1900–1950)*, Austria: Karl Franzens Universitat Graz, 2017.
- [2] Mahato, P. P., & Mahato, K. C., *Collective wisdom and excellence related to world views on forest, biodiversity and nature-man sprite complex of the indigenous people of Eastern India*, New Delhi: Concept Publication Company, 2007.
- [3] Cardinala, S., "Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization for Development and Tourism: A Case of Purulia Chhau Dance," *Material Culture Review*, vol. 82–83, pp. 43–58, 2015.
- [4] UNESCO, "Browse the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, May 2, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists#2010>
- [5] Chatterjee, D., "Mask and Costume of Purulia Chhau," *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 221–238, 2019.
- [6] David, M., Bonds, A., Bethe, M., Pauka, K., & Mceker, L., *Costume and Make-up in Traditional Asian Theatre, Handbook of Asian Theatre*, London: Routledge, 2016.

- [7] Chatterjii, R., "Purulia Chho Discursive Space and the Constitution of Culture," in M. D. Muthukumarswamy & M. Kaushal (Eds.), *Folklore Public Sphere and Civil Society*, New Delhi: IGNC, 2004, pp. 37–54.
- [8] Witharana, W., *Usage of Arenas in Kolan and Indian Chhau Theatre*, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, 2014.
- [9] Guha, R., "The Prose of Counter Insurgency," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, vol. 12, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- [10] Dasgupta, B., *European Trade and Colonial Conquest*, vol. 1, London: Anthem Press, 2005.
- [11] Guest, A. H., *Your Move: A New Approach to the Study of Movement and Dance*, vol. 1, London: Routledge, 1983.
- [12] Drid, W., *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- [13] Bengal's Chau mask acquires GI fame, *The Hindu*, May 8, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/bengals-chau-mask-acquires-gi-fame/article24028259.ece>
- [14] Atto, A., *Politics of Cultural Amnesia: A Case Study of Machhani Folk Dance Form of Purulia*, Bhubaneswar: Folklore Foundation of India, 2016.
- [15] Acharya, I., "Aestheticizing without Agenda: A Counter Reading of Western Approach of Chhau Dance," *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 89–97, 2013.
- [16] Reck, D., "The Music of Matha 'Chhau'," *Asian Music*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 8–14, 1972.
- [17] Buckland, T. J., *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007.
- [18] Rowland, I. D., & Howe, T. N., *Vitruvius: Ten Books on Architecture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [19] Karkanias, P., "Late Neolithic Household Activities in Marginal Areas," *Journal of Archaeological Science*, vol. 33, no. 11, pp. 1628–1641, 2006.
- [20] Goldberger, M. E., *A Conservation Study of an Anasazi Earthen Mural Art of Aztec Ruins National Monument*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1992.
- [21] Descola, P., *Beyond Nature and Culture*, London: Routledge, 2013.
- [22] Shapiro, S. B., *Dance in a World of Change: Reflection on Globalization and Cultural Difference*, Champaign, USA: Human Kinetics, 2008.
- [23] Moor, E., *The Hindu Pantheon*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1810.
- [24] Mascia, L. L., "A Vitruvius Inspired Criterion for the Construction of Polygons," *Nexus Network Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 533–545, 2016.
- [25] Yap, J., *The Art of Lion Dance*, vol. 1, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Joey Yap Research Group, 2017.