Cradled by the majestic Himalayas, the breathless beauty of Sikkim's landscape lends an air of magical unreality to it. With one hundred and ninety-four monasteries, Buddhism is the prevalent religion and way of life in the state. Folk songs and dances form an vital part of Sikkimese culture, some describing the beauty of the natural surroundings, some depicting the harvest season, and others performed for good luck and prosperity.
Singhi Chham

Mount Khan-chen Dzongpa (Kanchanjunga) is the third highest peak in the world. This towering creation of Nature is sacred to the people of Sikkim. It has been decreed the guardian deity of Sikkim by Guru Rimpochhe (Guru Padmasambhava). This majestic mountain stands guard over the land holding in its crevices the sacred mountain peaks known as the Five Treasures. Its associate peaks look like the legendary snow lion, fierce and fiery, with a gorgeous mane hued in turquoise. This mythical beast is
considered an important cultural symbol of the state and is elaborately depicted in the 'Singhi Chham' or the Snow Lion Dance. The Sikkimese people believe that if one sights the animal it brings good luck. This dance, bringing alive a cultural symbol of good luck, is specially associated with the Bhutias of Sikkim.
Yak Chham

High in the mountains, the Sikkimese herdman's best friend on the ragged slopes is the wooly bovine, the yak. Yaks are the sole means of transportation, besides providing milk and meat for sustenance during the long winter months. Its thick mane is woven into cloth that acts as protection against the biting cold, its rich milk is churned into cheese and butter and its strong fibre is woven into blankets.

This dance depicts the movements of the yak and the simple pastoral lifestyle of the herdsmen of the mountains. The dancers don the costume and mask of the yak, and tune their steps to traditional songs and instrumental music.
Sheo

Sheo is a Nepalese folk dance that is performed during Vasant or the season of Spring. As new leaves or buds appear on the trees, young hearts are filled with love and longing. The young boys express their love to their beloveds. Through their songs, they compare the beauty of the girls with the beauty of spring and propose to them. When (after a substantial amount of coaxing) the girls accept the proposals, they dance together with the joy of Spring in their hearts.

Tamang Selo

Tamang Selo is a traditional Sikkimese folk dance patronised by the Tamangs, a Nepali community of the state. A traditional musical instrument of the Tamangs, called the Damphu, accompanies the dance. Young and old come together to take part in this spellbinding dance, which is full of fun and vigour, and depicts the colourful lifestyle of the people of Sikkim. It is performed during the Dasain or Dusserah festival, and expresses the joy and happiness of the people.
Maruni Dance

The Maruni is a rare dance form that has its roots in ancient Nepalese culture, and is associated with the Festival of Lights - Diwali. The songs that accompany this dance have a variety of themes ranging from mythology to everyday life; some depict heroic events from the lives of Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva and other Gods of the Hindu pantheon, others deal with simple day to day incidents of the people of Sikkim. The dancers move rhythmically, balancing copper thaalis on their palms with lit diyas arranged on them. Sometimes the Maruni Dance is performed to the accompaniment of the nine instrument orchestra known as "Naumat Baja".

Earlier, the dance used to be performed by young boys dressed as girls. Two accompanists, one playing the madal (mridanga) and the other acting as the prankster (Dhatu Waray), were also part of the troupe. The Nepali Brihat Shabda Kosh (Royal Nepal Academy) and the Nepali Shabda Parichaya (Mahananda Sapkota) carry elaborate descriptions of the Maruni Dance. Today both boys and girls take part in the dance, singing as well as playing the instruments, attired in resplendent costumes and ornate jewellery.
Kinchhum-Cha-Bomsa

Through this popular folk dance the scenic beauty of Sikkim is beautifully expressed. The Lepchas of Sikkim thank God for their beautiful “Ney Mayal Lyang” (hidden paradise on earth). The snow-covered mountains, the falls, rivers and brooks, luxuriant valleys with vast green meadows, serene monasteries, sacred caves and holy lakes lend sanctity to this wonderful land. The young boys and girls perform this dance wearing their colourful traditional costumes. The dance is accompanied by traditional music and singing.

Chu Faat

This is an ancient dance of the Lepcha community of Sikkim, performed in honour of Kanchanjunga and its four associate peaks. The dance is performed on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar every year. Dancers hold butter lamps and green bamboo leaves during the performance.

Damsang-Lyang

The Lepcha community of Sikkim is a community of very hardworking people. Many of them are involved in agricultural activities for a major part of the year. To lighten the burden of their work, they go around the villages singing and dancing. Through the dances, they depict the graceful movements of different birds and insects.
**Sherpa Dance**

Sikkim's Sherpa Dance is a unique dance form. Though the costumes and headgear worn by the dancers are similar to Tibetan costumes, the foot movements and language of the songs are very different from each other. The songs praise the colourful flora and fauna of the terrain and the dances depict the lifestyle of the Sherpas. The Sherpas are very attached to their land and proud of their heritage. Through their songs, the religious and God-fearing Sherpas thank God for the beautiful Mount Everest which protects their land. Through their prayer dances, they pray for peace and happiness all around.

**Ghantu**

The Ghantu dance is a Sikkimese folk dance patronised by the Gurung community of the state. This ancient folk dance form depicts the lifestyle of the people of the land. This dance, which is full of fun and vigour, is performed by young girls in traditional costumes and headgear.
**Denzong Neh-Na**

Sikkim is a land steeped in religion. This beautiful land with its bounty of gifts from nature, has received the blessings of saints and sages through the ages. Guru Rinpoche, the patron saint of Sikkim, had blessed this land and said that the people had hidden treasures in the hills and valleys. These hidden treasures are not precious metals or gems, but scriptures of teachings. In the Denzong Neh-Na dance, the sanctity of the land is highlighted through the songs and the movements.

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**Sangey Chham Dance**

The Sangey Chham is an annual ceremony observed by all the monasteries in Sikkim. This grand festival lasts for two or three days, on the concluding day of which, the dance is performed. The statue of Lord Buddha and religious scriptures are taken out in a palanquin, for everyone to see, and people from all walks of life join in the dance. The dancers wear traditional Sikkimese dresses.
Nyongri-Nyot

Cultivating maize is an important agricultural activity in Sikkim. The Nyongri-Nyot Dance depicts the entire process of ploughing the fields, tilling and sowing the seeds, weeding and harvesting the crops. The dancers hold different traditional implements in their hands, making the dance a visual representation of the agricultural process.
Gayley-Yang Dance

The Gayley-Yang Dance depicts the hospitality of the people of Sikkim. The young girls of the village perform this welcome dance to receive honoured guests. To pay respect to the guests, locally made beverages like Chhang and Bangchhang are offered to them. Melodious songs accompany the dance.
Chabrung Dance

The Chabrung is an indigenous drum of the Limboo community of Sikkim, and part of their traditional and cultural identification. Legend goes that the almighty God, Tagara Ningwaphnis, created the earth and man. The creation of man came about through a woman named Tigenjungoa who gave birth to a pair of twins, one a man and the other a tiger. The man-brother, Namasami, made the Chabrung using the skin of his bestial sibling. Whenever the sound of the Chabrung drum resounds in the air, these brothers are remembered. As the male members of the tribe perform this dance, they remind all around them that good always triumphs over evil.
Masked Dances of Sikkim-Monastic Dances

Sikkim's spectacular masked dances, the Chhams, are performed by monks in the courtyards of the Gompas (monasteries) to celebrate religious festivals. The theme and style of the dances are different, but they all portray the triumph of good over evil. Lama Dances are an inherent part of prayer meetings and not performed as a form of entertainment. Lama Dances not only depict spiritual life but also display martial art techniques. The origin of the Chhams lies in a dancing cult for exorcising demons and human enemies. The dancers, attired in rich satin and brocade costumes and wearing vividly coloured dragon, animal and bird masks begin their dance with slow movements in large circular formations.

The commencement of the Chham is announced from within the Gompha by the steady drone of a trumpet-like instrument, the Kangling. The notes of the Kangling are reciprocated from outside the Gompha by the blowing of long copper horns, the Radongs. Cymbals, ceremonial drums and gongs sound in rhythmic unison, to announce the start of the dance.

On Losoong, the Sikkimese New Years Day, the Black Hat or Kali Topi Dance is performed by the Lamas. The dance has its roots in a twelve century old fascinating legend, of King Lang Darma who was slain for suppressing Buddhism in Tibet by Lama Pal Dorje, disguised as a Devil dancer, wearing a black robe and riding a white horse blackened with soot. Within this story are the elements of the masked dance itself - the rooting out of evil and the victory of good.

As the dancers file into the monastery courtyard, incense bearers circulate amongst the audience, purifying the
atmosphere. In the actual performance the principal figure is Mahakala and it is his presence that evokes other protective deities. The dancers wearing the masks of stags, yaks, tigers, lions and the mythical winged Garuda, walk with graceful, measured steps. The dancers enact the destruction of apostasy, symbolized by an effigy which is chopped to pieces and scattered.

In the **Khang-chen-dzod-nga Dance**, Kanchendzonga is portrayed as a fiery, scarlet countenanced deity, with a crown of five skulls, riding the mythical snow lion. The Enchey Chaam is performed on the 18th and 19th days of the 11th month of the Buddhist calendar corresponding to the months of December-January. The Kagyed Dance is performed on the 28th and 29th day of the 10th month of the Tibetan calendar, around December. The dance performed by the monks, symbolizes the destruction of evil forces and prays for peace and prosperity. Rumtek Chham performed on the 10th day of the 5th month of the Tibetan calendar, corresponding to the month of June, presents the eight manifestations of Guru Rimpoche. The Gouther (winter) Chaam is performed in the month of February, two days before Losar.