

## 2.1. PERFORMING ARTS

A country's identity is defined by its culture and tradition. Among the most visible aspects of these features is the tradition of performing arts. A country's performing arts reflect its core principles and values. That is why in Bhutan the various types of its performing arts are truly representative of its diverse, yet inclusive Buddhist values and ethos. From mask dance to traditional songs, all the performing arts form part of the tradition that has moulded the Bhutan's identity since the teaching of enlightenment was brought to the country in the 8th century by the Indian Buddhist sage, Padmasambhava, known in Bhutan as Guru Rinpoche. Furthermore, the system of governance which was developed in the 17th century under Bhutan's unifier, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651) was also based on Buddhist principles. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal instituted the governing system of *choesi zungdrel* (dual system of government combining both religious and temporal affairs) and made *Punthang Dewachenpoi Phodrang* (the blissful palace of heaped jewels) in Punakha as the capital. He then systematized the culture of the state, including court etiquette and the tradition thereof. In celebrations, the Zhabdrung sponsored lavish state ceremonies signifying the emergence of a new state with a unique and distinctive identity that would not submit to any of its powerful neighbours with their ancient civilizations. Since that time, the distinctive tradition of the performing arts of Bhutan has been fashioned and gradually refined over many years.

However, the Bhutanese performing arts, like every other facet of Bhutanese culture, were given further enhancement with the 1907 establishment of the Wangchuck Dynasty, which is not only known for its benevolent rule, but also for great patronage of art and culture. These forms of intangible arts have been greatly consolidated and enhanced through the reigns of successive monarchs. Today, the performing arts are the defining features of Drukylu, 'The Land of the Thunder Dragon.'

Traditionally, the performing arts are categorised into *gar cham* (mask dance) and *lu* (song).

These are discussed fully in this chapter, along with regional and folk dances and songs, drama, and more recent developments of the performing arts in the modern era. In recent years a vibrant film industry has emerged and new productions on traditional themes and/or the retelling of traditional tales have been surprisingly well received by the youth of modern Bhutan. However, discussion of film, though warranted, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

### 2.1.1. The Mask Dance

*Gar cham* or mask dance is a tradition that has prevailed for as long as the country's history. *Gar* literally means the movement with some twisting of the body while *cham* means movement of hands and legs. Therefore, *gar cham* means dance performed by combination of twist of body and movement of hands and legs. Mask dances are normally performed during an annual ritual called *tshechu* (described in Chapter Three), which means the 10th Day, considered to be the birth day of Bhutan's patron saint, Padmasambhava, commonly known as Guru Rinpoche

Tshechu and *gar cham* are not only splendid theatrical performances of the highest order, they also have significant spiritual and cultural connotations. For the lay onlookers whose perceptions are obscured by delusions, watching the mask dancers perform their roles as symbolic manifestations of higher beings and deities, enables them to appreciate the values of human life and encourages them to pay homage to the sublime beings. That is why mask dances are an integral part

of the Bhutanese cultural identity. These dances are but dramatization of the teachings of enlightened spiritual masters for the benefit of sentient beings of the three realms. These dances are said to have the power to liberate beings who are merely watching them performed. Therefore, of the six ways of liberation, mask dances are considered as "thong droe" meaning liberation by watching.

Mask dance was first introduced by Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century, when he came to Bumthang at the invitation of Sendha Gyalpo, the King of Chagkhar, to subjugate Shelging Karpo, the local deity. Guru Rinpoche subjugated Shelging Karpo by miraculous dances performed by his manifestations. By the middle of the 15th century, the treasure revealer, Pema Lingpa had introduced a new set of sacred mask dances, the *Peling Ging-Sum* (the three dances of *ging*, or emanations of Guru Rinpoche, in the Pema Lingpa tradition) comprising *Jug ging* (dance holding stick), *Dri ging* (dance holding sword) and *Nga ging* (dance holding

drum). In the 17th century, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal introduced mask dances with Drukpa special characteristics like the dance of Mahakali which is performed during annual festivals dedicated to the deity.

**Physical Gestures:** As an art form, dance may appear to be similar to any other performing arts, but the Bhutanese mask dances not only provide joy and happiness, but also enable the spectators to acquire spiritual merit and liberation from the worldly woes. The mudras and gestures are symbolic of the nine skills of dancing, eight divine manifestations of peaceful and wrathful deities, which remind people of their spiritual and moral duties and obligations. To acquaint oneself with the identity of each mask in the dance is considered beneficial for individuals when in the intermediate state after life.

**Visualization:** A mask dancer should visualize his body to be that of a divine being while performing the dance. He should visualize his speech to be the sound of mantras and make it powerful enough to dispel obstacles on the path to human enlightenment. He should envision his mind as the repository of the three types of meditation (embodying right concentration, right mindfulness and right view) and the four sublime states (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity).

**Significance:** At the mundane level, the mask dances entertain people and at the same time reaffirm the devotion and commitment of human beings to lead morally sound and honest lives. At the ultimate level, they serve as the means for liberation from the worldly sufferings and the attaining of final enlightenment. People of all ages like to watch mask dances during festivals with devotion and respect. Foreign visitors also show the same amount of respect for the Bhutanese dances and Bhutanese dance troupes are often invited to perform in other countries.

In general, gar cham is broadly classified in three categories as follows:

**Truelpai dzuthruel gyi cham** are dances of magical manifestations. This kind of dance has its origin in the supernatural and spontaneous appearance of dancers typically associated with Guru Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche took many miraculous forms while taming malevolent and adverse forces during his conversion of the elements in such places as Bumthang and Samye. Thus, dances like Guru Tshengye (Dance of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche) are called *truelpai dzuthruel gi cham*.

**Kater dagnang gi cham** or dances passed on by manifestations of gurus and tutelary deities in visions, are those performed by luminaries such as Tertoen Pema Lingpa and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in their meditative visions upon instructions from their spiritual gurus and tutelary deities. Dances are also composed by *tertoens* (treasure-revealers) to aid their discovery of treasures. Peling Tercham (Treasure Dance of Pema Lingpa) and Thimphu Lhamoi Drubchen Cham are the examples of this dance.

**Namthar lu zhizhagpai cham** or dances based on biographical stories or accounts, are creations based on the biographies of famous spiritual personalities like Jetsun Milarepa (a Tibetan Buddhist saint) from whom the dance *shawo shachi* (Dance of the Stag and Hounds) which also incorporates the drama *acho phento* (the Hunter and Servant Dance) emanates. Another famous dance is *pholay molay* (Dance of the Noblemen and the Ladies) which was composed based on the biography of King Norzang, a mythical king in Buddhist literature.

Gar cham in Bhutan can be best understood as *tsun cham* (mask dance of monks) and *boe cham* (mask dance of laity).

#### 2.1.1.1. Dances of the Monks

*Tsun cham* literally means dances of the monks. The dances of the monks are usually performed in accordance with the rhythm/lyrics of the chanting of ritual prayers. The cham performed by the monks cannot be performed by laymen but the cham performed by laymen can be performed by monks if the situation demands. The monks performing *tsun cham* should be fully ordained monks, but those performing *boe cham* need only take the vows for that particular day. The dances that are performed by the monks are:

##### 2.1.1.1.1. Black Hat Drum Dance (Zhana Nga Cham)

Poisonous and infectious afflictions can obstruct accomplishment in Buddhism. To overcome them, the Masters of the Vajrayana tradition use skilful means. The dancers beating their drums proclaim victory over the evil spirits. Zhana Nga Cham represents this process of good prevailing over evil. The sound of the drums represents religion and the subtle form of Buddha's teachings. Zhana Nga Cham is performed on occasions where great works are planned; one such occasion, for instance, was when the Glorious Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal consolidated the country. The elements of earth, water, fire and air, are pacified by the performance of this dance, thus making them fertile and supportive



of the initiatives. The dancers wear large black hats, felt boots and colourful long brocade garments.

#### 2.1.1.1.2. Dance of the Terrifying Deities (Tung Ngam Cham)

It is said that Sutrayana and Vajrayana vehicles are the ultimate refuge for all sentient beings. However, there are human and non-human beings that harm or cause obstacles to the transmission of teachings, and therefore, in order to subdue these beings that do not readily submit to peaceful means, Guru Rinpoche took wrathful forms to get the better of them. This is what is depicted in the dance, Tung Ngam in which one of



the dancers represents Dorje Drago, the terrifying form Guru Rinpoche assumed to subdue enemies of the doctrine. The performers are representations of the deities of Gongdue (Embodiment of Realization). Attired in beautiful brocade robes and felt boots, they wear terrifying masks.

#### 2.1.1.1.3. Wrathful War Dance (Ging Tsholing Cham)

This dance was introduced in the 15th century by Pema Lingpa, to whom it was revealed in a vision. When King Thrisong Detsen of Tibet was building Samye monastery in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche applied his supernatural powers and manifested in the form of Ging, representing immense positive force to combat and subdue the evil spirits that were hindering the construction of the monastery, which was an important part of establishing the teachings of the Buddha. The dance depicts Zangdo Pelri, the paradise of Guru Rinpoche. The enlightened sages of India and Tibet are seated in a row on his right and the scholars are seated on his left. In the intermediate areas are the 108 treasure discoverers who are his incarnations and his 25 disciples including King Thrisong Detsen. The inner dance, called the Ging dance, is performed by an assembly of spiritual heroes, deities and dakinis in their peaceful and wrathful forms. The outer dance called Tsholing is performed by the the Tsholings, terrifying deities seen as protectors of the religion. After they have destroyed the evil spirits symbolised by an effigy in a black box they are chased away by the Ging, who then perform a victory dance while beating their drums. The Tsholing dancers wear long colourful dresses and terrifying masks, while the Ging dancers wear imitation tiger skins and terrifying masks with a flag on the top and carry drums in their left hands and drumsticks in their right. This dance symbolises the victory of good over evil.





#### 2.1.1.1.4. Dance of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (Guru Tshengye)

Guru Rinpoche is a highly realized being who took many miraculous forms in order to benefit the world in general and the region of Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan in particular. In the dance of Guru Tshengye, he took the following forms:

1. *Guru Tshokye Dorji*: When Guru Rinpoche miraculously took birth from the lake Dhanakosha and became the son of King Indra Bodhi; he came to be known by this name.
2. *Guru Shakya Singye*: When Guru Rinpoche left the pleasures of the palace to seek the path of Dharma in the cave of Maratika, he was known by this name.
3. *Guru Loden Chogsed*: When Guru Rinpoche had mastered all the instructions of the Sutras and Tantras in the sacred places of India, he was known by this name.
4. *Guru Pema Sambhava*: When Guru Rinpoche took the mystical consort *Lhacham Mendarava*, her father, the King of Zahor took offence and set him on fire. However, the fire miraculously turned into a lake of lotuses. Due to this feat, Guru Rinpoche was known by this name.
5. *Guru Pema Gyalpo*: When Guru Rinpoche returned to the domain of Ogyen, the evil ministers tried to kill him along with his parents. However, they were defeated and subsequently converted to Buddhism.

Guru Rinpoche was known by this name as a mark of accomplishing this feat.

6. *Guru Nima Oezer*: When Guru Rinpoche wandered through the eight great charnel grounds including the legendary *Sewa Tshal*, giving teachings to dakinis and taming the evil forces, he was known by this name.
7. *Guru Singye Dradrog*: When Guru Rinpoche prevailed over forces opposed to the Dharma in the centre of the world, Bodh Gaya, by accomplishing miraculous feats, he was known by this name.
8. *Guru Dorje Drolu*: When Guru Rinpoche flew on the back of a tigress from Singye Dzong in Kurtoc to Tagtshang in Paro, concealing sacred objects and prevailing over evil forces, he was known by this name.

#### 2.1.1.1.5. Dance of the Sixteen Wisdom Consorts (Rigma Chudrug)

When the demonstrations of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche have been completed, all sit in order alongside Guru Rinpoche. Then the dance of the wisdom consorts (that is, dakinis) takes place. During this dance 16 dakinis, representing different aspects of the four classes of dakinis (i.e. each class has four different aspects) sing and perform two dances in front of the Guru and his various manifestations. Therefore, the *Rigma chudrug cham* is a representation of the offerings made by these dakinis. The dancers wear long brocade dresses with aprons of carved bone ornaments. They dance unmasked, wearing elaborate headdresses,



first holding drums, then small hand bells and hand drums.

While the dakinis are dancing, the onlookers come forward to pass in front of the Guru and his manifestations and receive blessings. People who witness this performance with deep faith, as if they are in the midst of the real dakinis rather than their representations, are believed to be guaranteed instant enlightenment. After completing their dance, the dakinis lead the whole entourage out.

#### 2.1.1.2. Dances of the Courtiers (Boe Cham)

These dances performed by laymen are called *Boe Cham*. In the past, they were performed by men enrolled in the cadre of all-purpose attendants known as *boe garpas*. In earlier times, Boe Cham were performed in the dzongs, temples, and monasteries and during religious festivals, but during the reign of the third king they began to be performed outside the religious festivals. Boe cham dances are no longer performed by garpas, but by other laymen. The chams performed by laymen are:

##### 2.1.1.2.1. Dance of the Four Stags

This dance called *sha zam cham* was revealed in the 8th century by the first Namkhai Nyingpo and is a re-enactment of an auspicious incident in the life of Guru Rinpoche. The dance refers to a contest in which Guru Rinpoche subdued the King of the Wind, Sabdag, who was the ruler of the earth spirits and had been causing much trouble and unhappiness amongst the people of those times. As a mark of this achievement, Guru

Rinpoche went around the world riding on a great stag that had been Sabdag's mount to restore peace and happiness. As well as being a subjugation dance to ward off evil influences, the dance is seen as having a beneficial effect on those who witness its performance. The bare-chested dancers wear stag masks, cloud collars and knee length silk skirts.

##### 2.1.1.2.2. The Three Ging Dances of Pema Lingpa

The Peling Ging Sum Cham (the three dances of ging, or emanations of Guru Rinpoche in the Pema Lingpa tradition) comprise a set of three sacred mask dances considered to have been introduced by Pema Lingpa, to whom they were revealed on a visit to Zangdo Pelri.

The Buddha's teachings (Mantras and Sutras) by which one achieves ultimate happiness for all sentient beings in the three different worlds (Khamsum) are hindered by evil spirits (*nyulema*), the non-human beings. While visiting Zangdog Pelri, Pema Lingpa witnessed how Guru Rinpoche miraculously subjugated the evil spirits by means of the three Ging dances. This was the secret teaching that Pema Lingpa received from Guru Rinpoche. On this account the Peling Ging Sum Cham is considered extremely sacred and those who witness it are said to accumulate much merit. The three dances, Jug Ging (dance holding stick), Dri Ging (dance holding sword) and Nga Ging (dance holding drum), are performed in sequence.

The most special characteristic of the Jug Ging is their ability to see and perceive the evil activities and obstructions caused by the Nyulemas in all the three worlds. Jug means baton or wand and the Jug Ging use their wands to sense the direction where evil lies. Using their psychic senses and supernatural powers, the Jug Ging capture the Nyulema, render them spiritually powerless, and then imbue them with wisdom and compassion. This is the message portrayed by the **Jug Ging** dance.

The **Dri Ging**, who carry swords, subjugate evil with their weapons. They separate the Nyulemas from their evil lords, purify their Karma, take away their power and wealth and then liberate them to celestial realms.

In the third dance, the **Nga Ging**, who each carry a drum (nga), perform a victory dance for having overcome the evil spirits, beating their drums frantically to mark their victory over evil forces and the resultant infinite spread of the Buddha's teachings.

The dance is performed during the tshechus to bring good luck and happiness to all beings and liberate them

from the world of sufferings into the Buddha realm. It is highly regarded as a treasure dance, since it emanates from treasure-revealer Pema Lingpa, and merely witnessing it during religious festivals is said to increase one's merit and help to repel evil influences. The bare-chested dancers wear cloud collars, knee-length skirts, and masks. In the first part of the dance they carry sticks, in the second part they perform with swords, and in the third part they carry hand drums.

#### 2.1.1.2.3. The Treasure Dance of Pema Lingpa

Prior to the consecration ceremony of Lhundrup Choeling Monastery in Bumthang, Pema Lingpa was said to have dreamt of five brothers claiming to be from the world of *Tongsum* (where beings live for three thousand years) performing a dance. They told him that he should learn this dance and perform it during the consecration ceremony for the temple. Pema Lingpa remembered the steps of the dance even after he woke up. He wrote down the steps and made his followers learn the dance. This sacred dance later came to be known as *Peling Tercham* or *tshangmai ging cham*. It is performed to ward off evil spirits, to please higher beings and spirits, and to bring everlasting peace and happiness to the people on earth. The dancers wear white serene looking masks and knee length yellow skirts. Each carries a little bell and drum.

#### 2.1.1.2.4. The Dance of the Stag and Hounds

The birth of the *Shawo Shachi Cham* dates back to the 11th century when Jetsun Milarepa, the great yogi from Tibet, converted Gonpo Dorji, a fierce hunter, into a follower of the Dharma. The dance is usually performed over two days, on the first and second days of a tshechu. The first part incorporates a lot of joking and humour

as the hunter makes preparations for a good luck ritual to be performed prior to his hunt. The moral of the story is revealed in the second part, where the events take place at Milarepa's hermitage.

The essential story goes as follows: While Milarepa is meditating in a cave known as Katya in Nyishangkurta (on the present day border between the Tibetan autonomous region of China and Nepal), he hears hounds barking somewhere outside. In a short while, a stag glistening with sweat bounds into the cave and looks towards Milarepa as if to seek his protection. Milarepa sings a song to calm the terrified stag, which then peacefully lies down on the right of the great yogi.

Soon afterwards, two ferocious red hounds come rushing inside the cave in hot pursuit of the stag. Milarepa also calms them by singing a song and the stag and the hounds lie side by side near Milarepa. The merciless hunter known as Gonpo Dorje soon arrives in pursuit of his hounds, and steps into the cave armed with his bow and arrows. The sight of his hounds and the stag sitting peacefully together beside Milarepa infuriates the hunter, for he thinks that the great yogi has used some kind of black magic on the animals. He shoots an arrow at Milarepa but the arrow slips from his bowstring.

Milarepa then sings the hunter a song to calm his mind and open it to the Dharma, but the hunter remains uncertain whether Milarepa is a saint or else a practitioner of black magic. Gonpo Dorje inspects Milarepa's cave, and upon seeing nothing in it but an empty bowl is surprised. He is overwhelmed by feelings of profound respect for Milarepa, feels deep remorse for all his past sinful actions and vows never to commit such acts again.



Gonpo Dorje becomes an ardent follower of Buddhism. In his next life, he is reborn as the mind reincarnation of Milarepa's disciple, Khilarepa. The Shawa Shachi Cham basically reveals that a person like Gonpo Dorje can also attain enlightenment if he relinquishes his sinful life and practices the Dharma.

#### 2.1.1.2.5. The Guitar Dance

Although referred to in English by this name, the stringed instrument is in fact a lute, not a guitar. *Dranyen Cham* was introduced to rejoice in the peaceful and happy state of the country and to celebrate the founding of the Drukpa Kagyud School of Buddhism in Bhutan by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal who unified the country under his benevolent rule by defeating both internal and external enemies. The Zhabdrung, recognised as an incarnation of both Avalokiteshvara and Guru Rinpoche, taught people to place their faith in the triple gem (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), and gave Bhutan a distinct cultural identity. He blessed the people and brought peace and prosperity to the country.

The dancers wear heavy woollen dress (traditional felt boots, long black skirt, yellow shirt and brown coat), a sword across the waist and a headband. One dancer holds a traditional Bhutanese seven-stringed lute, called a dranyen, and plays this to keep time for the dancers.

#### 2.1.1.2.6. The Dance of the Noblemen and Ladies

This dance is a kind of play with much lewd joking and clowning to entertain the onlookers. The literal meaning of *Pholay Molay* is noble men and noble ladies. Other characters include *atsaras* (clowns), an old man and an old woman and 16 attendants. The story goes like this: Once there lived a king called Norzang in the Kingdom of Ngaden in Northern India. The king had 500 hundred queens of which one (Yidrogma) had been presented to him by a hunter's son. The son of the hunter had acquired the queen as a reward from the serpent spirit for saving his life, and subsequently offered her to his king. King Norzang fell in love with this queen which made the other queens jealous.

In the dance, the other queens conspire to kill her. To fulfil their mission, they seek the help of the court priest, Hari, who performs black magic on the father of the king. The king's father has a very bad dream. He consults the court priest who, with his bad motives, tells the king that the kingdom would soon be invaded from the north if they didn't start the war first. The king's father, fearing to lose his kingdom, sends his son Norzang at the head of the army.



King Norzang and his beautiful wife had to part, which was the intention of the cruel queens and the court priest. King Norzang leaves a white scarf and his ring with his wife so that she can always remember him. The king goes to the battle field accompanied by the protectors of faith, guardian deities and tutelary deities. At the end the king emerges victorious.

The king returns from the battle field in victory since the enemies are not aware of the fake prophecy of the court priest. He returns home to find that his beautiful wife has disappeared. In the absence of the king the cruel queens and the priest tried to kill her, but since she was a dakini, she flew away to heaven. The king brings the



queen back to earth and after settling scores with the people who tried to harm them, the king and his dakini queen lived happily thereafter.

The Kay cham (accompaniment dance by the courtiers) illustrates how the king is helped by the deities and protective spirits in the battle. The drama also shows cutting off of a nose to show how conflicts can occur even between husband and wives who love each other so dearly. It is to show that surrendering yourself to the temptations of the world brings unhappiness and sufferings in life. Seeking refuge in the triple gem can only bring happiness. The moral of the story relates to the Buddhist doctrine of universal law which says that there is no real essence in worldly things.

In a cruder popular interpretation, this is a dance about two princesses left with an old couple by two princes when they go to war. The princesses and the old woman are led astray by some atsaras. When the princes return they are very angry and cut off the women's noses in punishment. Finally, everyone is reconciled and the princes and princesses get married.

The main characters in the dance drama wear white masks, rich costumes and jewellery and felt boots. The old man and woman are dressed according to their station in life; the 16 kay cham mask dancers wear silk skirts and each carries a sword in his right hand.

#### 2.1.1.2.7. The Drum Dance of Drametse

*Drametse Ngacham* is the most popular mask dance performed throughout Bhutan during festivals held in honour of Guru Rinpoche. There are several versions of how the dance was first introduced, but it is commonly thought that the dance was first introduced by Khedrup Kuenga Gyeltshen in Ogyen Thechog Choling monastery in the 16th century. (Many believe this sage to be a brother of Pema Lingpa's granddaughter, Ani Choeten Zangmo who settled in Drametse after naming the place.) It is believed that while he was on meditative retreat, through his intense powers of concentration Khedrup Kuenga Gyeltshen was able to visit the celestial palace of Zangdog Pelri, where he witnessed the heavenly attendants of Guru Rinpoche transform themselves into one hundred wrathful and peaceful deities and perform a dance using drums and drumsticks. From this vision Khedrup Kuenga Gyeltshen understood that Guru Rinpoche wanted him to use this medium of dance to help sentient beings defeat the cycle of birth and rebirth. He carefully noted down the choreography of the dance and introduced it in Drametse.



The dance is performed by sixteen male dancers wearing knee length yellow skirts and masks of different animals and birds and the twelve animals of the Bhutanese horoscope. The dancers carry a large hand drum in the left hand and a drumstick in the right. It is performed in two sequences, a calm version and a wrathful one. By witnessing the dance, one becomes familiar with the appearance of the animals which are supposed to meet us in the intermediate state after death. The significance of Drametse Ngacham is manifold: its performance helps the Mahayana teachings to flourish, brings peace to sentient beings, prevents calamities and internal strife, and brings good fortune to the country.

In 2005 UNESCO proclaimed Drametse Ngacham as a Masterpiece of the World Intangible Heritage.

#### 2.1.1.2.8. Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds

*Durthroe Dagmo Chezi Cham* commonly known as *Durdag Cham* or just *Durdag*, depicts how a person who believes in religion and desires the spread of religious teachings is lead to a higher state of life through single-mindedly passing along the white path. It is believed that the lords of the cremation grounds take vows to protect the Dharma teaching and its practitioners. They guard the Mandalas of the Tantric







Deities and unwaveringly protect them by making the evil forces powerless or else by destroying them. Those spirits that are not destroyed are then offered to the higher deities. The four dancers wear white short skirts, white gloves, white boots and white skull masks. By witnessing the cham one can be reminded of the need to believe in religion and practise the Dharma.

#### 2.1.1.2.9. Dance of the Judgement of the Dead

The *Raksha Mangcham* is a spectacular dance introduced by the highly revered treasure revealer Tertoen Karma Lingpa. The dance is based on the Bardo Thoedrol (Book of the Dead), a text which was hidden in a cave by Guru Rinpoche and then rediscovered in the 14th century by Karma Lingpa. The dance is closely associated with the soul of a person after death. When a person dies, his/her soul is believed to enter an intermediate state, or bardo, which is between death and rebirth. In that stage, the Buddha appears in a multitude of both peaceful and wrathful forms to guide and liberate the confused soul to eternal peace. It is said that these appearances of the Buddha are recognised as one's saviours by those who believed in the Triple Gem while living as human beings in the earthly world. A person who did not believe in the Triple Gem, on the other hand, would find the appearances frightening and tend to run away from them, not recognising that they are manifestations of the Buddha, because that person is blinded by the ill-deeds performed during his/her life before death.

The whole dance is a theatrical show in a court of justice. However, one should always remember that the individual characters are all manifestations of the one Buddha. The Lord of Death plays the supreme role of passing judgment according to one's deeds. The most trusted *Raksha Lango* (Ox headed dancer) is the Minister of Justice who strictly follows the principles of cause and effect relationship of the good and bad deeds. The loyal *Phag Gochen* (Wild hog headed dancer) maintains the records of sinful and meritorious deeds of all beings. The *Chung Gochen* (Garuda headed dancer) clutches a hammer in one hand, representing the destruction of evil, while its other hand holds a crooked sword symbolizing the dispelling of the three poisons of ignorance. The *Singye Gochen* (lion-headed dancer) holds an iron chain in one hand which symbolizes the bond of love, and a noose in the other hand representing mercy. *Domgyi Gochen* is a bear-headed dancer who carries a sword in one hand and a gut noose in the other to show the need to eliminate selfishness and cultivate wisdom. *Drulgyi*



*Gochen* (snake-headed dancer) holds in his hand a mirror of fate in which the images of both sinful and virtuous deeds of a person are reflected. *Trelgyi Gochen* (monkey-headed dancer) carries a balance scale to weigh sins against virtues.

When closely observed, this dance of the intermediate state is easy to follow. One can see how judgments are passed by the Lord of Death on *Digchen Nyalwabum*, a sinner and on *Khimdag Palkyed*, a virtuous householder.



#### 2.1.1.2.10. Dance of the Heroes

*Pa Cham* was introduced in the 15th century by Tertoen Pema Lingpa. While in a mystic state, he had travelled to Zangdog Pelri (the copper-coloured mountain, abode of Guru Rinpoche) and had seen the Guru Rinpoche there, seated in the centre of a limitless mandala of rainbows and surrounded by an assembly of sages, heroes and heroines (i.e. dakas and dakinis, spiritual, non-human beings) and tutelary deities, dancing in the forms of the emanations of both peaceful and terrifying deities and singing harmoniously together. Pema Lingpa introduced this dance so as to lead those who witness it into the presence of Guru Rinpoche. *Pa Cham* is the dance performed in a peaceful form for the benefit of sentient beings.

The dancers do not have masks. They wear knee-length yellow skirts and on their heads they wear golden, five-pointed crowns, on each of the five faces of which is represented one of the five meditational Buddha families of tantric Buddhism. Long strands of black thread hang below the crowns, as the dancers are representing long-haired dakinis. They perform the dance barefoot. Each carries a small bell and a small drum.

#### 2.1.1.2.11. The Religious Dance

*Choe zhey* is a dance in honour of Drogoen (protector of beings) Tsangpa Gyare, the 12th century founder of the Drukpa Kagyud tradition, who opened for pilgrimage the access to Tsari Mountain, one of the three most important sacred mountains of Tibet. The deity residing at Yu Tsho (Turquoise Lake) was obstructing the pilgrims from visiting Tsari, a journey they wished to undertake to accrue merit for both their present and future lives. When the deity transformed itself into a



frog as strong as a yak and tried to obstruct Tsangpa Gyare from going any further, without any hesitation he leapt onto the frog's back, crushed it and turned it into a boulder. Thus, the deity was overpowered and then converted into the guardian deity of the sacred place. The *Choe zhey* commemorates Tsangpa Gyare's victory over this deity. The dancers wear elaborate and heavy woollen attire and a special head-gear, a wreath-like coiled headband of red, yellow, green, blue and white stripes, which symbolises that the dancer is not an ordinary person but one who has attained mystic powers. The lead dancer wears a brown jacket. This dance normally marks the formal end of a festival and is performed just before the *Trashie Lebi* or farewell dance.

#### 2.1.1.3. Regional Mask Dances

Different lamas and spiritual masters established their monastic seats in different places. They also composed different dances which are now displayed to the public at particular times and on auspicious days. The following are mask dances performed in different regions of the country.

##### 2.1.1.3.1. The Deity Dance of Sumthrang

*Tsen Cham*, the mask dance of the mountain deity of Sumthrang Choedzong in Ura valley, Bumthang, is a unique dance dating back to the 15th century. It is also known by different names such as *Lha cham* (dance of the gods), and *Ta cham* (horse dance). *Tsen Cham* was first introduced by the 23rd Nyorab Jamyang Drakpa Oedzer, who belonged to the Sumthrang *choejay* (religious lineage). In those days it was customary for the Sumthrang *choejay* (head of the lineage) to visit Lhodrak and Pethang in Tibet, and also Sikkim. When he realized that he was gaining popularity that could be

a hindrance in establishing collective merit, he decided to leave for meditation at the sacred mountain of Tsari in Tibet. At that time *Drak Tsen* (deity of the cliff) Dorje Dradul (Indestructible Conqueror of Enemies) appeared and performed a mask dance requesting the lama to remain at Sumthrang. Dorje Dradul of Sumthrang had been subjugated by Guru Rinpoche and converted into a protective deity of this holy place to guard the Buddha Dharma. The Choejay was so inspired that he taught the same dance to his disciples and it later became a tradition at the Sumthrang Samdrup Choedzong. This dance was further introduced in the monasteries of his disciples and patrons in the Kurtoe and Kheng regions. The Sumthrang Tsen Cham is now one of the main mask dances performed during the annual festival held at the 13th century Sumthrang Samdrup Choedzong monastery in the ninth lunar month each year.

#### 2.1.1.3.2. Dance of the Five Sisters of Long Life

*Tshering che nga* is the dance of Tsheringma and her four sisters, the protective deities of Beting Monastery near Ura in Bumthang.

In the 12th century Jetsun Milarepa became popular for his powers of healing and for helping people attain enlightenment. The five dakinis wanted to test Milarepa's level of meditation. They did everything possible to distract Milarepa, but failed. Convinced by his level of attainment, the dakinis decided to become his followers and served him with great devotion. They performed the tshering che nga dance for him, and this dance is still performed by the people of Ura at their annual winter festival held in the first month of the lunar year, as a mark of their devotion to Tshering Che Nga.

#### 2.1.1.3.3. The Pig Dance of Tamzhing

*Phag Cham* was composed in the 15th century. At that time Tertoen Pema Lingpa was looking for a suitable place to build a monastery according to a prophesy he had received in a vision. A pig miraculously indicated the place at what is now known as Tamzhing, where there was a patch of level ground appropriate for the construction of the monastery. To mark this auspicious occasion, Pema Lingpa introduced the pig dance as the first item in the series of mask dances mounted during the consecration ceremony of the monastery, formally known as Tamzhing Lhundrup Choling or Temple of the Good Message. The performance of the pig dance continues to this day at the annual Tamzhing Phala Chodpa (Tamzhing Festival of the Boar or Pig) held in the 8th lunar month.

#### 2.1.1.3.4. Thangbi Ber Cham

This *ter cham* (treasure dance) is a sacred dance to commemorate the acknowledgement of the protection received from *Bernag*, the local deity of Tsurphu in Tibet. When the second Karmapa, Gyalwa Karma Pagshi Rinpoche (1204–1283), was held captive by the Chinese king during the 13th century, Bernag pretended to be in a deep sleep and refused to wake up despite several calls from Karmapa for his help. But when Bhutan's protective deity, Palden Lhamo, added her plea that he should render help, he immediately woke up and without delay set off for China. As he had left in haste he was not even dressed properly. Reaching his destination, he thrust his knife into the ground near the king's palace, and threatened to destroy it. Frightened and intimidated, the king responded by releasing Gyalwa Karmapa and asked for forgiveness for his wrong deeds.

The fourth Zhamar Rinpoche of the Karmapa School came to Bumthang from Tibet in the 15th century, bringing with him this *ter cham* (treasure mask dance) tradition from Tsurphu, where the dance used to be performed annually. In 1470 he built a sacred monastery in Thangbi in honour of the protective deity and blessed the place. After founding Thangbi Gomba he introduced the dance there. Hence, this *ter cham* is as highly regarded in Bumthang as it was in Tibet.

#### 2.1.1.3.5. The Lion Dance of Jampa Lhakhang

*Singye Cham* literally means lion dance. It is said that the *Jowo Jampa* (Maitreya Buddha statue from which the present name of the temple is derived) was brought from Lhasa to Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang on the back of a snow lion, arriving on the 15th day of the 9th month. Upon reaching the lhakhang, the Jowo spoke and said that a tshechu should be observed there every year on that particular day. Since then the lion dance has been performed every year during the Jampa Lhakhang Tshechu.

#### 2.1.1.3.6. Dekiling Ter Cham

*Dekiling ter cham* is performed once every three years on the 17th day of the 4th month of the lunar calendar. It is held at Choechong pang (dharma protector ground) in front of Dekiling Goenpa starting at 6 p.m. and ending at midnight. (The Goenpa is in Nindukha village which falls under Kana geog in Dagana, and is about 20 minutes' drive from the road point now.) All local people, with the exception of children below the age of six, the disabled or handicapped, the elderly and/or frail and those who are sick are obliged to attend the performance of the treasure dance.

All the men in the community are supposed to gather naked in a row encircling a bonfire made by the women. Even male outsiders visiting from elsewhere are expected to abide by this customary practice of the community. The hosts of male guests who fail to participate in the *ter cham*, must pay a fine of one *zom* (barrel) of alcohol or grain. The women are expected to witness the show to judge the size of the men's penises. The size of the piece of meat given to the men later is in proportion to the size of their respective sexual organs.

This naked dance is performed in the belief that the act will ward off evils and misfortunes brought by *kharam* (malicious talk). Every household, especially in the rural villages, would at least have either a phallus painted on the outer walls of the house or a phallus post (*kharam shing*) erected at the entrance door or gate.

The men all gather at Dekiling Goenpa and at 6 p.m. start moving from there to a nearby place called Zingkhar (water pool), where they take off their clothes. On returning to Dekiling Goenpa they get the blessing from the protective deities there, and then they go from house to house around the village in their newly naked state. At each house visited, the woman of the house must offer tea and alcohol to the men. After the last house has been visited they again gather at a place called Lunsigang (windy hillock) and do *bey* which literally means brandishing a sword. From there, they return to Choechong pang where the bonfire has been lit and gather around it for the *cham*. They perform a dance around the fire wearing only *changkhu* (wreaths made from a shrub locally known as *kema* (i.e. rhododendron cinnabarinum) on their heads. They do not wear masks.

#### 2.1.1.3.7. The Yak Dance of Tang

The *yak cham* of Tang is held in honour of Guru Rinpoche's treasure guardian, Rinchen Goenyak who is also the cattle deity. The upper Tang valley is considered



to be the territory of this deity, who appears in the form of a yak. The yak dance is one of highlights of the festival popularly known as Namkha Rabney (consecration ceremony) held on the 9th to the 11th of the 10th lunar month to commemorate the founding of Namkha Lhakhang. Yak *cham* is performed on the third day to pay respect to Rinchen Goenyak and bring peace and harmony to the valley.

#### 2.1.1.3.8. The Yak Dance of Shingkhar

The *Shingkhar yak cham* is performed for the public during the Shingkhar Rabney festival which is held annually over five days from the 15th day of the 10th lunar month, at Dechenling Lhakhang in Shingkhar. A *choe yak* (sacred yak) is believed to have appeared from a lake at Chuling Singma. It is believed that some local deities transform themselves into animals to show their presence, so following its extraordinary emergence from the lake, Choe Yak was regarded as the protective deity of the region. Thus, the yak dance of Shingkhar is performed every year to appease this protective deity.

#### 2.1.1.3.9. The Yak Dance of Merak and Sakteng

The Yak Dance of Merak and Sakteng is performed during annual festivals of the Merak and Sakteng communities. There are two versions for the origin of this yak dance. In one version, it is said to be an enactment of the legendary tale of Thoepa Gali, who is venerated by some as the God of Livestock, while the other version says the dance is performed to pay due respect to the yak as the principal means of livelihood for the community. Both versions are acceptable as the mask dancers represent both Thoepa Gali and also the nomadic life of the community. Yak *cham* are performed in other parts of the country, but either as the manifestation of great masters or tutelary deities trying to confront the evil forces or else to appease deities, whereas the Yak Cham



of Merak and Sakteng is performed to honour the yaks who give the community food, shelter and clothing. It is to show the community's respect for the yaks. The songs in the series of episodes during the performance of the yak dance provide description of life of nomads. However, most people believe that it is based on the legendary tale of Thoepa Gali.

#### 2.1.1.3.10. The Dance of Sister Lhamo

*Achey Lhamo* dance means the Dance of Sister Lhamo. It is an enactment of a story derived from King Norzang's biography. The supreme god in heaven had a daughter called Yithro Lhamo who married a king called Norzang on earth as had been foretold. King Norzang had five hundred wives including Yidrogma who was an extraordinarily beautiful and kind-hearted queen. The other queens became jealous of her and decided to kill both her and the king. The dance depicts the failure of the queens' attempt to kill them both through first sending the king to war and then trying to devour the heart of Yidrogma in his absence. However, both King Norzang and Yidrogma overcame these evil plans and lived to rule the kingdom in peace and prosperity.

It is believed that King Norzang was a reincarnation of the Buddha, and had come to spread the teachings to sentient beings and to liberate them from their deluded acts. Thus the Achey Lhamo dance is performed annually so that the people witnessing it may be liberated from their sufferings.



#### 2.1.2. The Folk Dance

*Zhabthra* is a performance combining *lu*, *gar* and *dro*. As already noted, *lu* means song, and *gar* means bodily movement in an artistic manner. *Dro* (or *bro*) means footsteps. The last two collectively result in the display of 'chagya' (movement of hand and gesture, footsteps) in accordance with the tune of the song.

The expression of feelings through song seems to be as old as human existence itself. Songs of an overtly religious nature are believed to have been introduced in Bhutan by Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century when he came to Bumthang and bestowed his blessings there. Much later, in the 15th century, Drubthob Thangtong Gyalpo is believed to have introduced songs and dances, also formalising these into *zhaerig chusum* (the thirteen classes of songs and dances). With the coming of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 16th century many other forms of songs and dances followed. Songs of Bhutan are based on compositions which praise the celestial beings and their human manifestations such as saintly monks and benevolent kings, and their abodes, including both man-made and natural wonders. Our traditional dances play an important role in the religious and social life of the Bhutanese people.

There are three types of dances in Bhutan namely *zhungdra*, *boedra*, and *rigsar*, as described below:

##### 2.1.2.1. The Archetypal Bhutanese Song and Dance

The genre of *zhungdra* songs and dances represents the indigenous Bhutanese performing arts. The literal meaning of *zhungdra*, is 'the voice of the centre' and is typically characterized by highly glorified verses sung to a long and meandering melody. The women who sing the verses stand in a straight line with their hands joined together and face the main guest(s) of the occasion, the first of whom was the glorious Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. One of the most popular *zhungdra* is the archetypal *Drukgi Puna Dechen*, eulogising Punthang Dechen Phodrang (the Palace of Great Bliss), the grand fortress of Punakha where the formation of the Land of the Thunder Dragon was proclaimed to the world.

*Punthang Dechen of Druk Yul*

*Resembles Trashi Gomang (Auspicious Many-doored Stupa)*

*Like a beautiful peacock resting on the ground*

*Is like a strong foundation*