

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



*Looks like a beautiful peacock resting on the ground.
From Thangdzong, Punakha Dzong towers above,
Its windows shining like silvery white mirrors
The bridge of Pungthang Dzong
Is like a gold and silver bridge
The footpath with flags on both sides
Is like a path of white silken scarf leading to heaven
Resembles a beautiful peacock resting on the ground.*

2.1.2.2. The Songs of the Courtiers

Boedra is of more recent origin. The courtiers were called *boe garpa* and those with talents performed dances for the monarch and his family. Though the versified compositions are the same as *zhungdra*, with identical themes of praise and adulation, the melodies and dances are livelier. Boedra literally means ‘the voice of courtiers’ and this song and dance tradition was popular in the court of the third king. Musical instruments like *dranyen* (seven-stringed lute), *chiwang* (two-stringed fiddle), *lingm* (six-holed flute) and *yangchen* (dulcimer) are played to accompany the songs and dances of the well-dressed male performers.

The best example of boedra is perhaps the song that praises the intent and purpose of the reconstruction of Trashi Choedzong (‘Fortress of the Glorious Religion’) in Thimphu. Known as the father of modern Bhutan, the third king of Bhutan was a man of action and vision, both initiating the process of bringing a traditional society into the modern age and at the same time placing great emphasis on the need to preserve those aspects of the traditional culture that gave Bhutan its unique identity. Among his many achievements was the

reconstruction of Trashi Choedzong into a modern seat of government. The boedra is as follows:

*Trashi Choedzong, the massive dzong
Is the capital of Bhutan;
The independent country [of Bhutan]
May it be auspicious!
The independent country [of Bhutan]
May it be prosperous!
The one sitting on the right is
H.H. the Je Khenpo, the supreme religious head
Through the state of his exalted (unbiased) mind
Through the condition of his perfected/ impartial
mind
May the Dharma be spread widely!
The one sitting on the left is
The Chief of Armed Forces;
Through the state of his wrathful mind*



May the external enemies be vanquished!

The one sitting in the middle is

His Majesty the King, the religious and secular head;

Through the state of his compassionate mind

May his subjects be led to prosperity!

2.1.2.3. Rigsar — the Contemporary Genre

The most recent, and perhaps the most prolific, among all song types is the *Rigsar*. Literally meaning ‘the contemporary genre,’ or ‘new idea’ rigsar dates back to the 1960s. While the traditional songs are highly formal, rigsar is more personalized and allows for expressions of emotions, for example in love songs, most of which are outside the matters of faith. This genre has more latitude in its composition and singing style, and therefore allows greater freedom to the artist. The popularity of this genre is growing these days as it fits in well with the changing forms of artistic expression in modern Bhutan and is an important component of the commercial film industry. However, some compositions, like their predecessors, are hymns and praises to the saints, kings and the country. A good example of rigsar is ‘*Miwang Nga Da Gyalpo*’ composed in praise of the fifth king on the occasion of his marriage in 2011 and sung by popular rigsar singer, Namgay Jigs:

His Majesty the King, the People’s King

Ascending the golden throne is the luck of the people of Bhutan

The karmic connection of previous lives has brought us together like parents and brothers and sisters.

Our gathering together today will never be forgotten

May the Blessings of the Triple Gem grace the people of Bhutan with the eternal reign of the Wangchuck Dynasty

Like the never diminishing rays of the Sun;

His Majesty the Fifth King

The monarch of the glorious dragon country

Ascending the golden throne is the fortune of the people of Bhutan;

We, the people of Bhutan, come together like parents and brothers and sisters

Work together to develop the glorious dragon country;

May the Blessings of the Triple Gem grace the people of Bhutan with the eternal reign of the Wangchuck Dynasty

Like the never diminishing rays of the Sun.

2.1.3. The Dances of Heroes and Warriors

2.1.3.1. The Dances of Folk Heroes

Zhey literally meaning ‘dance’ is a traditional folk dance, having specific affiliation to Bhutan. There are zheys connected to the four districts in Bhutan: Paro (Wuchu-bi Zhey), Thimphu (Wang Zhey), Gasa (Goen Zhey), and Trongsa (Nub Zhey). Though the basic theme and significance of the zhey in all the four districts is more or less same, there are subtle variations among them such as dress code, and the steps and movements of the dance. This folk dance is performed only by menfolk, on special occasions like traditional ceremonies and tshechu.

This genre of folk dance is typically performed by a group of men singing and dancing simultaneously, and it often requires rigorous movements and rapid rhythm. While performing, the dancers tread firmly, gradually intensifying the pace of their steps. This genre of folk dance has a specific number of steps, with a specific dedication for each step.

Goen Zhey

Goen Zhey is performed by people of Goen, in Gasa district. This dance is the oldest of the genre and was first performed in a place named Bangdekharas as a way of receiving Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal when he first arrived in Bhutan. The following stanzas describe the arrival of Zhabdrung, escorted by Lam Namgye of Obtsho. These are significant verses.

From the east, there always rises a sun; but the sun that rises today is much warmer.

From Tibet, lamas have always come; but the lama who comes today brings more blessings.

The dance is today performed by twenty one dancers (comprising one lead dancer and twenty other dancers) during Gasa Tshechu. The lead dancer wears a *chamok* (helmet) and colourful silk scarf, while other dancers wear a *kopak* (headband) and a plain white scarf. Each dancer wears a red woollen *gho* (robe), black *tego* (undershirt), *yuelham* (traditional boots), and a *pata* (sword). It is said that the costumes for the Goen Zhey are similar to battle gear worn by warriors during troubled times in the past.