

## Tibetan Sacred Dances

Alexandra BELIBOU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Entering the world of Tibetan spirituality, we observe a multitude of rituals that involve movement and music, used by the monks for various therapeutic and ritualic purposes. The history of Tibetan dance – the Cham tradition - runs in parallel with the history of Buddhism on this territory. Information on these rituals and dances is found in very few Tibetan documents, almost none in European works, and recently in several works printed in English. This can be explained by their oral transmission in special schools, as well as in secret initiations. As the title mentions, in this article, we will discuss the sacred dances of the Tibetans and not the folk ones. Thus, in the following pages, we will mention some of the dances practiced within the sacred rituals by Tibetan monks.*

Key-words: *Cham, sacred dances, ritual, Tibet, monks*

### 1. Introduction

Tibet is located in Asia, north of the Himalayas, being the highest region on earth (4,900 meters), therefore called the Roof of the World<sup>2</sup>. This land is thought to have been inhabited for at least 21,000 years. Around 3,000 BC, the population mingled with many North Chinese people. The first historical documents speak of the Zhang Zhung culture, associated with the Bön religion, prior to Tibetan Buddhism. The first ruler to unite several regions under the name of the Tibetan Empire was called Songtsän Gampo (604–650 AD), followed by several dynasties that established Tibetan Buddhism as the official religion (Goldstein 1994, 26).

Entering the world of Tibetan spirituality, we observe a multitude of rituals that involve movement and music, used by the monks for various therapeutic and ritualic purposes. The history of Tibetan dance runs in parallel with the history of the entry of Buddhism into this territory. Information on these rituals and dances is found in very few Tibetan documents, almost none in European works, and recently in several works printed in English. This can be explained by their oral transmission in

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, alexandra.belibou@unitbv.ro

<sup>2</sup> <https://oak.ucc.nau.edu/wittke/Tibet/Plateau.html>, accessed 25 October 2020.

special schools, as well as in secret initiations (Pearlman 2002, 10-16). As the title mentions, in this article we will discuss the sacred dances of the Tibetans and not the folk ones. Thus, in the following pages we will mention some of the dances within the sacred rituals practiced by Tibetan monks.

## 2. Discussion

The sacred dances of Tibet are also called Cham dances or rituals. This ancient dance possesses many levels of meaning and are seen as a practice for purification and overcoming negative obstacles. It is believed that the great religious master Padmasambhava first performed a type of Cham dance to purify the ground for the building of Samye monastery. *“Accompanied by monks using traditional Tibetan instruments, the Cham dancer performs solemn movements passed on in oral instruction from master to student. The dance is like a meditation in action. Each gesture has significance, creating a sacred space where the dancer concentrates on specific centers and chakras throughout the performance”*<sup>3</sup>.

Cham dances have three stages - the first is the introduction, the second is the preparation and the last is the fulfillment or generation of the dance. During the introduction and conclusion, the dancers practice meditation and invoke the desire for all beings to be well. If the dances do not aim at invoking the good of all, then they become a simple artistic act without a sacred nature.

A sacred dance can last for days, with up to seventeen distinct sections. During these dances, the performers focus on the elements of nature (earth, water, air and fire), visualizing with the eyes of the mind certain representative deities called yidams, various forms of Buddha. The ground on which the ritual takes place is sprinkled with barley juice, before the dancers enter the blessed space. Then, the monks form a mandala in which the deities and protectors of the earth are invited, a space free from negative forces. Often, in the center of the meditation symbol is placed a figure of a dead man, a suggestion of the ephemeral, so that later this element is destroyed and offered as food to the deities. Sometimes animals are introduced into the dance, and if they tremble, then it is a sign that the gods like the proposed sacrifice.

Many dance steps have specific names, depending on the movements of the feet and hands, like "Lotus wide open", "The movement of walking" or "Lotus jumping". Hand gestures are called mudras and come from the Indian tradition, in which they demonstrate the correct form of honoring a guest. The eight mudras

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.namgyalmonastery.org/the-rituals/ritual-dances/>, accessed 4 October 2020.

are: argam - invitation, pande - foot washing, pushpe -flower, dupe - incense, aloke - lamp, gande - mirror, race - taste and shabde - sound. The thumb and forefinger represent wisdom and compassion, while all ten fingers symbolize the wind or its energy. The higher the dance evolves in terms of the requirements and concentration of the mind, the more subtle the gestures of the hands, sometimes almost imperceptible (Ricard 2003, 15-28).

Costumes and colors have a special symbolism in Cham dances, sometimes having two or even three meanings at the same time. The colors of the costumes and masks may change from one region to another, but there is a basic concept in terms of their significance: red –fire, energy, power, white - water, peace, yellow - earth, wealth, development, green - air, blue-space and black-anger.

## 2.1. The Black Hat Dance

Every year, on the 29th of the twelfth month of the Tibetan calendar, a ritual considered beneficial to all the inhabitants, performed for the health and saving of human lives, takes place at Namgyal College in Dharamsala. This ritual is performed only by Tibetan monks, accompanied by drums and specific trumpets. The monks follow the trumpet player, holding incense sticks in their hands and sprinkling holy water, stored in a special vessel, using a peacock feather. The monk dancers wear heavy black hats, holding swords and shields while performing the Black Hat dance.

This dance has an interesting history, based on an incident in ninth-century Tibet. Lang Darma came to the throne in 838, after the murder of his brother. Practicing a religion other than Buddhism, he killed thousands of Buddhist monks, destroying many temples. In 842, a monk named Lhalungpa Pelgyi Dorje appeared in the capital, wearing a black robe and a large hat of the same color. He begins to move strangely, following this gesture being invited to the court of King Lang Darma. At the climax of the performance, the mysterious dancer kills the leader with an arrow and runs away on a black horse. Legend has it that he escaped from the hands of the emperor's guards, crossing a river that washes the soot from his horse, revealing its true color - bright white and turning his robe on the other side, which is also white. His deed is praised and considered by Buddhists to be "*an action performed for the benefit of all beings*" (Pearlman 2002, 10).

This ritual is performed in honor of the dancer with the black hat, as most Tibetan dances are based on incidents in Tibetan history. The role of the Black Hat dance is to unleash the performer of anger, helping him to gain inner peace.



Fig. 1. *Costumes in The Black Hat Dance*

## 2.2. The Skeleton Dance

Another dance in the Cham tradition is called the Skeleton Dance, which has the role of sharing the idea of ephemerality of all aspects of life and reminding of mortality. The skeleton is a symbol of the phenomenon of body decay and disintegration, but also of the change of various moods and physical states.

The solo dancer is dressed in white or red, holding three or five skulls around his head, tied with colored fans placed on his ears. There are other skeleton group dances, but those are secret and most often take place in the cemetery. The latter are not performed in front of an audience, but are performed only in monasteries<sup>4</sup>.



Fig. 2. *Costume for the Skeleton Dance*

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wilderutopia.com/traditions/tibetan-skeleton-dance-cemetery-protectors-of-truth/>, accessed 17 October 2020

### 2.3. The Deer Dance

In the Tibetan tradition, the deer represents a male protector deity whose movements help to gain spiritual development. The Deer Dance is supposed to come from Tser Gontham Monastery, near the Kyichu River. The dance is performed by a single monk, who wears a colorful costume, wearing a deer mask. The other monks accompany the dancer with specific instruments.



Fig.3. *Deer Dancer*

### 2.4. The White Old Man

Another ritualic dance that has the role of giving strength to the dancer and energizing the body in such a way as to feel young, is called The White Old Man, the only dance that allows the performer to speak. The thirteenth Dalai Lama dreams of choreographing this dance on his way to Mongolia, being the most recent Cham dance inserted in the tradition of Tibetan sacred dances. The dancer is dressed in a white robe, wearing the mask of an old man and a cane, with which he is supposed to kill a tiger, thus regaining the energy of youth. In Mongolia, there is also a legend about this old man with a long white beard, named Tsaghan Ebugen, a shaman who rules the mountains, the land and the waters.

Tibetan sacred dances have been known in Mongolia since 1811, the first monastery to practice such rituals being Urya. The expression of the dances is adapted to the Mongolian territory, so that the monks do not use masks and are often not accompanied by an instrumental music. Brain Baumann writes: *“the legendary Mongolian Gelug White Old Man at its centre, a phenomenon which also existed in all Asian regions which Tibetan Buddhism had penetrated, including Amdo and Kham in Tibet and the Ölot, Buryat and Khalkha of Inner Mongolia,*

where the tradition of the White Old Man had become very common. Having been branded a vestige of the feudal past in the twentieth century, the tradition could only be taken up again in public from the late 1980s. Its dance routines were derived from Gelugpa ritual, combining solemn rite with joyful entertainment. Donning large masks and brilliant costumes, the White Old Man holds guard over the retribution being meted out over a sinful world, chasing all wrong and evil out of the minds of the common people” (Baumann 2019, 35).

### 2.5. The Kalachakra Offering Dance

A type of ritual in which the dance is performed exclusively with the hands, is The Kalachakra Offering Dance. The dance is performed in order to promote peace in the world, by worshiping the four gates of a mandala built on sand. This sacred ritual involves only the movement of hands, that is why it is called a Ghar tradition and takes place in secret in monasteries. The fifth Dalai Lama distinguishes between the Ghar and Cham dance: “When chiefly the hands move, this is called ghar, and when mainly the feet move this is known as chams” (Pearlman 2002, 54).



Fig. 4. Kalachakra Offering Dance Costume

### 2.6. Musical instruments used in the Cham rituals

Tibetan musical instruments have a well-defined role in each ritual, so we find trumpets of different sizes, including *radong*, a long wind instrument, which is played continuously in rituals and *dung*, another type of trumpet that is used to performs solo sounds, accompanied or not by other instruments specific to Tibetan sacred music.

When announcing an important event or the arrival of a personality in the monastery, the sounds of the *rGyaling* and *rGaling* instruments are used, both producing sounds resembling the oboe. The drums are called *rGna* and are used in rituals to invoke protective deities, and the largest drum is borrowed from the Bön tradition and used to communicate directly with evil forces. There are drums of smaller sizes called *damaru*, which are played by rotating the wrist, the sounds being produced by hitting the surface of the drum with leather knots. Usually, the one who keeps the rhythm of the *damaru* plays the *ghanta*, a kind of bell that is operated with the left hand. This bell is meant to invite deities among Tibetan monks.

The thigh bone serves as material for a musical instrument called *rKangling*, being a small horn that is used in certain rituals, without the accompaniment of other instruments. *Rolmo* are cymbals that are held horizontally, hit by each other, while *silnyen* are also cymbals, but operated vertically. Other percussion instruments are metal gongs or discs called *ting-ting* (Helffer 1994, 235-237).

### 3. Conclusions

The sacred universe of Tibetan monks is vast and calls for research. Unfortunately, the bibliography on this subject is quite poor. With an indissoluble link between dance movements, meditation, specific music, costumes and colors, Cham-type rituals speak about the spiritual history of the people of Tibet, as well as the transcendental beliefs of the monks.

Beyond contemporaneity, the ritual practices of Tibetan monks seem to us to be beyond time and space. The preservation of these traditions is a goal, ensured by educating, over the years, the young monks, who are obliged to follow the traditions that are hundreds of years old.

### References

- Baumann, Brian. 2019. "The White Old Man: Géluk-Mongolian Canopus Allegory and the Existence of God." In: *Central Asiatic Journal*, ed. by Lars Peter Laamann, 35-68. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Goldstein, Melyvn C. 1994. "Change, Conflict and Continuity among a community of nomadic pastoralists—A Case Study from western Tibet, 1950-1990." In *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, ed. by Barnett and Akiner. London: Hurst & Co.

Helffer, Mireille. 1994. *Mchod-rol: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine*. Paris: CNRS Éditions.

Pearlman, Ellen. 2002. *Tibetan sacred Dances: A Journey into the religious and folk traditions*. Rochester: Inner Traditions.

Ricard, Matthieu. 2003. *Monk Dancers of Tibet*. Boston: Shambhala.

<https://www.wilderutopia.com/traditions/tibetan-skeleton-dance-cemetery-protectors-of-truth/>, accessed 17 October 2020

<https://www.namgyalmonastery.org/the-rituals/ritual-dances/>, accessed 4 October 2020

<https://oak.ucc.nau.edu/wittke/Tibet/Plateau.html>, accessed 25 October 2020