

Dancing on the demon's back: the *dramnyen* dance and song of Bhutan

By

ELAINE DOBSON

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

For a few days in October, in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the population of the tiny country doubles as visitors from neighbouring countries in the sub-continent, and from across the world, gather to witness the great Buddhist, three-to-five day, annual, religious, dance-drama festival or *tsechu*. A *tsechu*¹ celebrates the great deeds that were performed by the religious saint and teacher, Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche² or Ugyen Rinpoche). *Tsechus* are held on the tenth day of a lunar month. The exact month depends on the location. Every valley has its own *tsechu*, usually with some identifying traits. These festivals reinforce the social life of the community and offer opportunities for making or renewing friendships, having picnics and drinking, or trading. In Bhutan, villagers who have moved to the larger towns are expected to return for the festival and they will often sponsor a major part of it. *Tsechus* accrue status for the monasteries and villages that stage them, and spiritual merit for those who are their sponsors. The spectacular dances that form these *tsechus* are known as *cham*. The subjugation of evil and the purification and protection from demonic spirits are important themes in the *tsechu* and dances which represent these themes are usually interwoven with those which are morally instructive or didactic and those that proclaim the victory of Buddhism and the glory of Padmasambhava,

Although many dances in Bhutan are thought to have originated from Indian Tantric dances or the animistic dances of the pre-Buddhist Bön religion, it is Padmasambhava, who is acknowledged as introducing Tantric Buddhism and its ritual dances, or *cham*, into Bhutan in the eighth century. Padmasambhava is said to have received, via visions, instruction regarding the dances from a succession of deities. His method of converting and subduing the opponents of Buddhism was by performing rites, reciting mantras and performing a dance of subjugation in order to attract, and subsequently conquer, the local, angry gods. In Tibet, “Padmasambhava

¹ Literally “day ten”.

² Literally “precious teacher”.

used dancing to chase away and eliminate demons that were preventing him from building the famous Samye monastery (775 CE). He again used dances when he was summoned to Bhutan to save the dying king, Sindhu Raja. When he arrived in the Bumthang valley, Padmasambhava performed an entire series of dances in a wrathful form. The fearsome divinities . . . were subjugated and Sindhu Raja was restored to health”³ and consequently made a vow to rebuild the temples and help the spread of Buddhism throughout the country. Padmasambhava also arranged the first festival (*tsechu*), of ritual dances in Bumthang. The eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (of which Padmasambhava is the human form) were presented together with the eight forms of dance necessary to destroy evil powers

This paper examines the *dramnyen cham* (Tib. *sgra snyan 'cham*), a ritual dance which is led by a *dramnyen* player, and the *dramnyen choeshay*, a religious song, and their connections with the founding and spread of the *drukpa* (dragon) *kagyü* branch of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan. The Bhutanese *dramnyen*, is a long-necked, fretless, double waisted lute. It is also the most ornate and colourful of the Himalayan lutes. It is painted with religious symbols and its pegbox is a distinctive C shape with a carved finial of the head of a *chusing*, a sea monster. Sometimes long tassels are hung from the *chusing's* horns making its appearance even more frightening. The *dramnyen cham* is a dance of subjugation, which proclaims the victory of Buddhism over obstacles or negative forces. The dance is also a notable exception to the general exclusion of stringed instruments in monastic music in Bhutan, and is usually the first or final dance of a *tsechu*.



Dramnyen, as played in the rehearsal.

³ Robert Dompnier, “The Royal Academy of Performing Arts.” *Tashi Delek* (Nov-Dec. 2000) 14.

At the beginning of the thirteenth-century, monks from southern Tibet helped further establish the *drukpa kagyü* sect of Mahanayana Buddhism in Bhutan. It is this which is specifically celebrated in the *dramnyen cham* and the *dramnyen choeshay*, also concerns the saint Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorji (1161-1211). The *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* commemorate Tsangpa Gyare's victory over a demon, which was obstructing the entrance to a secret valley, on a famous pilgrimage route to Tsari in Tibet and close to the northern border of Bhutan. A recent account of the story is told by Ap Dopoe, a former monk and the recently retired, Bhutanese court musician⁴

When the religious and family friends of Tsangpa Gyare arrived at Tsari they met a demon in the form of a frog which turned into a yak and prevented the party from proceeding. In order to remove this obstacle Tsangpa Gyare jumped on the yak's back and performed a *dramnyen* dance and said 'If anybody wants to compare himself to me, the son of the glorious Drukpa Lineage, let him come'. Then the frog changed itself into a rock but, in spite of this, the saint, as if the rock was mud, impressed his foot into it. Thus the frog was subdued. It offered its life to serve Tsangpa Gyare and he accepted. The frog was established as the guardian deity of that place, the Turquoise Lake, and Tsari was opened up for pilgrimages. Even today, Buddhists undertake pilgrimages to Tsari, and by simply reaching that place are said to achieve enlightenment.⁵

In the sixteenth century, the Bhutanese *drukpa* leader, Kunkhyen Pema Karpo, wrote a detailed narrative of Tsari that includes the following descriptions of Tsangpa Gyare's dance and song and subsequent pacification of the demon.

After taking hold of the *gling[-chen]*⁶ in his right hand and a walking stick in his left, Tsangpa Gyare performed a dance . . . [and sang the following]:

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,
Is not wandered by all and sundry.
I have abandoned worldly activities,

⁴ Information from the National Museum in Paro also tells this story describing the demon as "an underground serpent spirit". A similar story appears in Tashi Wangmo [F.P.Imaeda] *Thimphu Tshechu: Festival Programme*. Thimphu: Bhutan Tourism Corporation, [1998] 32-33.

⁵ Ap Dopoe (Dawa Penjor), personal interview, 19 September, 1998. See also Victor Chan, *Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide* (Chico, California: Moon, 1994) 210-211

⁶ A herb believed to bestow paranormal powers when eaten.

I have self-luminosity of mind itself.

It's a place to fling down life and limb.

It's a place to remove hindrances whose causes are outer and inner.

It's a place to make an analysis of cyclic existence (*samsara*).

It's a place to weigh ascetics [and their accomplishment] in the balance.

It's a place for thoroughly understanding the mind.

It's a place to preserve the clear light with the mind.

It's a place to receive the two levels of paranormal powers.

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,

Is not some minor monastery up behind a village.

This *gling-chen*, which is a paranormal power[-producing] substance,

Is not the spittle for smashing demons and demonesses.

The clerical siblings of this assembled Vajra[yana] family,

Are not [the type of] ascetics who roam around the marketplace.

Tsangpa Gyare made those words resonate in his mind. Because he [then] struck his walking stick on a rock, it went in as if being pushed into mud. Even nowadays the imprint of that [stick] is still found there.⁷

Later they came to Frog Turquoise Lake where the path was blocked by a terrible frog as strong as a yak, and it would not let them pass. Without hesitation Tsangpa Gyare leapt onto the frog's back, trampled it violently and it changed into a boulder and stayed that way. Clear footprints appeared on the boulder and the demon was overpowered.

⁷ Padma dKar-po (1527-1592), *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. In *Collected Works (gSun-'bum) of Kun-mkhyen Padma-dkar-po*, vol.4. Darjeeling, 1973, ff. 207-74 and

_____ *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. Darjeeling, 1982 translated by Toni Huber in "What Is A Mountain? An Ethnohistory of Representation and Ritual at Pure Crystal Mountain in Tibet. Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Canterbury, 1993: 73-74.

The *dramnyen cham* dancers' costume shows a connection with this story. It goes back the time of Tsangpa Gyare who wore it as he subdued the demon.⁸ This costume, of the armed Tibetan monks who acted as the bodyguard to the *drukpa* high Lamas, consists of elaborate and heavy, woollen clothes; a long black, red-lined Tibetan-style robe, or *chuba*, together with long, colourful, felt boots. The leaders of the dance will add a brown folded jacket. Under the *chuba* a red, yellow or white brocade or striped shirt, with red and gold brocade collar and red and white or green cuffs, is worn. A coiled head band of red, yellow, green, blue and white stripes represents the traditional helmet. The colours represent the five Tibetan elements, fire, ether, earth, water and air. A warrior's sword, a prayer box which is decorated with one of Buddhism's eight auspicious symbols such as the endless knot (representing the endless cyclic existence), and a small banner (another auspicious symbol representing victory), are carried round the waist. Two small gold and silver, intricately decorated shields which can be round or square-shaped (approx. 15 cm across), are worn on the chest and back. From these hang a gold and silver "face of majesty" (Skt. *kirtimuka*). The *kirtimuka* is often found on armour, helmets, shields and weapons of war.⁹ A large bone ring is worn on the left-hand thumb. Bone ornaments are associated with rites of forceful activity.¹⁰ A turquoise ring and prayer beads are worn on the right hand.



Dramnyen cham performance at Thimpu *tsechu* 1998

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Nyingmapa saints, Dorje Lingpa (1346 – 1405), and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) also used dancing to subjugate demons and overcome obstacles that

⁸ Information collected from the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro. There a full costume and the very large *dramnyen*, used in the Paro *tsechu* for this dance, are held.

⁹ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999) 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216, 318.

were preventing the spread of Buddhism in Bhutan. They built monasteries, discovered many religious treasures and composed the dances that they had received in visions, of Guru Rinpoche's paradise.¹¹ However, it was the arrival of the great leader, organiser and legislator, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), that brought the *drukpa* sect to its political and religious peak at the time of the unification of Bhutan [1616].¹² Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel composed both the words and music for the *tsechu* dances that are performed today, including the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay*. The dances that were performed in various great monasteries throughout the country were documented. Ngawang Namgyel's work, *Gar-Thig-Yang Sum*, indicates how religious dances and popular dances should be choreographed and performed.

Any *cham* performance is primarily a meditation in movement and an offering for the deities. Through his actions, augmented by chants, music and costume, the dancer assumes the role of the deity he is representing, thereby elevating his awareness to a higher spiritual plane. Every gesture (Skt. *mudra*) the dancer makes is not only symbolic, but has power in itself. Padmasambhava is believed to have made rocks explode and the king of Tibet's robe catch fire by the power of his gestures.¹³ Only monks or the male members of the King's special dance troupe from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts are permitted to perform the *cham* and the *dramnyen cham* is no exception. The reason for the prohibition of female performers in this dance can be explained by the sacred nature of the dance and the fact that women were banned from entering the upper Tsari pilgrimage circuit.¹⁴

Although the *dramnyen* is regarded as a secular instrument and stringed instruments are not part of the monastic orchestra, *dramnyens* are depicted on *thankas* (religious wall-hangings), or placed as offerings. Sharchop Gyalpo (Skt. Dritarashtra), the guardian king of the eastern direction, is identified in religious iconography by the *dramnyen* he carries. The *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are instances when the *dramnyen* is permitted to be played in the monastery or *dzong*, albeit the courtyard of such.

¹¹ Schicklgruber, Christian and Francoise Pommaret eds. *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods* (New Delhi: Bookwise, 1997) 188-189.

¹² Pommaret, 98.

¹³ Jamyang Norbu, "cham: the sacred dance of tibet," *Dranyen* 8, 1 (1984) 7.

¹⁴ Huber, 140-154.

Three different performances of the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are the focus of this study:

1. an audio recording, made by John Levy in 1971, of part of the first *dramnyen cham* and the first and third verses of the *choeshay* (which will be referred to as Levy),
2. a personal video recording of the complete rehearsal of the combined *dramnyen cham* and *dramnyen choeshay*, performed on open ground outside the auditorium at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, for the *tsechu*, in 1998 (which will be referred to as the rehearsal), and
3. a personal video recording of the complete *choeshay* as performed at the public *tsechu* in Tashichodzong, Timphu in 1998 (which will be referred to as the *tsechu*).

In the rehearsal, the structure of *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* is based on three sections of the twelve verses of a song, each of which is introduced or separated by the passages on the *dramnyen*. The all-male dancers wear their everyday, traditional dress. The dance is continuous, even during the singing, but the *dramnyen* is not played with the singing. The dance begins with thirteen dancers, in two lines, who are led into the courtyard by the *dramnyen* player. While dancing, he plays a simple, three-note motif, C# F# C# (I), which is repeated twice, to allow for the entry of each pair.¹⁵ With their arms raised the dancers move forward to form a circle, while the melody pattern changes to a faster one in which each note is repeated e.g., three to six times (II). The dancers turn, smacking their arms and then stamping. The melody then becomes more extensive encompassing the pentatonic scale, C# E F# G# B (III), and is repeated five times ending with a stamp. All the time the dancers are moving mostly clockwise, in a circle, slowly turning and bending forward and leaning backwards, moving to the centre of the circle and then back out, and turning again. The main part of this section develops the repeated-note, pentatonic patterns so the range extends down to the lower G#. The dance tempo quickens and a more regular metre is established. Apart from the introduction and coda, the *cham* can be interpreted in simple duple time. This can be discerned from the accent of the notes. The first note of each duple beat is accented by virtue of its longer duration and the plucking technique of the *dramnyen* player. This plucking technique involves the *dramnyen's* seven strings (*thag*) that are tuned in two double courses and one triple course. The seventh half-length string is tuned an octave above the middle unison strings. One of the other courses is usually tuned an octave apart e.g., g G c' c c f f. The instrument is plucked with a long (c. 6cm), tapered (from c.75mm wide), attached plectrum. The plucking motion is 'down-up' and one string of a course is plucked at a time i.e.,

¹⁵ The C# is a quarter tone flat.

one string is plucked with a downward motion and the other (usually of the pair) with an upward motion. The downward motion is always stronger and louder than the upward motion and *dramnyen* players in Bhutan emphasise this feature in both their explanation and performance. A summary of the first dance section exemplifies the complicated repetition of patterns and shifting pitch centres which carry through the entire piece.

Melodic patterns and repeats	Pitch centres	Characteristics
<i>Exposition</i>		
I (x 27)	C#	introduction, dancers enter and later raise alternate knees up high
II (x 5)	G#	repeated note patterns
I (x 5)	C#	
II (x5)	G#	slight embellishment
I (x 5)	C#	a stamp at the end
II		expanded
I (x5)		stamp
<i>Development</i>		
III		widest range, some repeated note patterns from II, dancers turning and bending
IV	C#	stamp, slow tempo, repeated C#s while dancers perform on the spot
	G#	quicker dance tempo
V	C# - E	regular metre
VI	C# - F#	transition to song

Finally, when the dancers slowly lower their hands, the first verse of the song begins.

The songs of glorious Bhutan/
 Have met their match!/
 It is said that he is the greatest of all./
 Happiness and joy arise!/
 Happiness and joy arise!

The lamas and noble monks/
 Have met their match!/
 It is said that he is the greatest of all!
 Happiness and joy arise!

The chief in their mansions/
 Have met their match!/
 It is said that he is the greatest of all./
 Happiness and joy arise!¹⁶

Levy presumed that these words referred to the Shabrunge. They are clearly celebratory and could equally refer to Padmasambhava or Tsangpa Gyare. The song belongs to the *shay* category i.e., it is a series of stanzas, sung in a folk-style, that dates from the seventeenth century armed monks. However, this *shay* is also a religious song.

The celebratory and triumphant music of this first song section consists of four phrases and a refrain, which is an extension of the preceding phrase and a link to the next: A A, B B, C C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D, Refrain. The pitch centre, a lowered E, lies three semitones above that of the *dramnyen* part. The phrases consist of decisive, ascending figures followed by longer, flowing descending ones. Often, the descending phrases are ornamented with lower mordent or appoggiatura embellishments (*nyenku*). Such decorations are also common in the *dramnyen* music. All three sung sections are heterophonic and often there is a softer echo on a repeated phrase.

The second song is shorter than the first, but the third song is much longer. To the continuing circular movement, new dance steps are added and these define each song. In the first song, the

¹⁶ Levy, op cit.

dancers stand on one leg with the other raised (as if ready to stamp on the demon). In the second song the dancers, while crouching, step over their feet, right over left and left over right, in what is known as a crossed *dorje* (diamond sceptre) step. These occur twice between the more staid dance steps and give the illusion of dancing and balancing on the back of the yak or frog demon. This dance also includes soft stamps and standing still (while the *dramnyen* plays fast repeated notes). The third song's dance is emotionally intense and slow moving. The dancers appear to be in a state of meditation. The defining step is where the dancers raise their arms, with one pointing forward, and they bend forward while standing on one leg. This illustrates the disciplining and controlling of the demon. At the end the dancers form one line, stamp and turn and come off in pairs, remove their headbands and bow, and finally the *dramnyen* player exits playing the three-note motif of the introduction.



Dramnyen cham rehearsal at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Chuba Chu, Bhutan, 1998.

In the *tsechu* performance of the *dramnyen choeshay*, the *dramnyen* instrument and its solos were completely absent. The dancing and singing were continuous and, like the rehearsal, lasted thirty-two minutes. In the *tsechu* the *dramnyen cham* would have been performed separately, and on a previous day. The dance was the same as at the rehearsal except that the dancers entered in threes, which compensated for the larger circumference of the dancers' circle in the larger

courtyard. The full costume was worn which added the illusion of power (over the demon), into the dance.



Dramnyen cham performance at Thimpu tsechu 1998

The more extensive ornamentation of the *dramnyen*'s melodic lines in the Levy recording is the most noticeable difference between it and the other two simpler versions. Mordent-type patterns occur on almost every other beat. This is not unexpected in this older version. The simplification of such *nyenku* by younger players is noticeable in many recent performances of traditional Bhutanese songs and *dramnyen* accompaniments.

The symbolic association of costume, dance steps and gestures with Tsangpa Gyare's victory, and the *dramnyen* with a guardian deity, is obvious. But why is the *dramnyen* chosen to accompany this *cham* and *choeshay*? Firstly, it is well known that the *dramnyen*'s beautiful sounds attract demons and that the role of the fearsome *chusing* on the *dramnyen*'s pegbox is to

dispel any such demons.¹⁷ Secondly, in most *cham* a cymbal player is the dance master who, through a repertoire of different techniques, including single and repeated note patterns, conveys the steps to the dancers. In the *dramnyen cham* the *dramnyen* appears to take on the cymbal's role, cueing the movements and keeping the dancers together with notes reminiscent of cymbal patterns. In the *choeshay* the *dramnyen* is no longer essential as the music of the song serves this purpose. Thirdly, its sound provides a reference beat over which the dancers appear to have a floating movement. When the dancers' steps fall either side of the *dramnyen* note they 'transcend the beat' thereby emphasising the meditational and mystical quality of the music. The *dramnyen*, then, not only serves the kinetic and rhythmic aspects of the dance, but it also acts as a symbolic transcendence of power over the demon and a link between the secular and sacred world.

Works cited

Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Boston: Shambhala, 1999.

Chan, Victor. *Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide*. Chico, California: Moon, 1994.

Dompnier, Robert, "The Royal Academy of Performing Arts." Tashi Delek. Nov-Dec. 2000: 12-27.

Dorji, C.T. *History of Bhutan Based On Buddhism*. Delhi: Prominent Publishers, 1994.

Norbu, Jamyang. "cham: the sacred dance of tibet," *Dranyen* viii, 1 (1984): 3-8.

Padma dKar-po (1527-1592), *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'i ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. In *Collected Works (gSun-'bum) of Kun-mkhyen Padma-dkar-po*, vol.4. Darjeeling, 1973. Trans. Toni Huber in "What Is A Mountain? An Ethnohistory of Representation and Ritual at Pure Crystal Mountain in Tibet. Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Canterbury, 1993.

_____. *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'i ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. Darjeeling, 1982 translated by Toni Huber in "What Is A Mountain? An Ethnohistory of Representation and Ritual at Pure Crystal Mountain in Tibet. Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Canterbury, 1993:

Pearlman, Ellen. *Tibetan Sacred Dance: A Journey into the Religious and Folk Traditions*. Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2002.

Pommaret, Françoise. *Bhutan*. Rev. ed. Trans. Elizabeth Booz. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 1994.

¹⁷ Ap Dopoe, personal interview, 1998. *Dramnyen* means "beautiful sound"

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Rene de. Oracles and Demons of Tibet – The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities. [Reprint] Taipei: SMC, 1956.

_____. Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the ‘chams yig. Ed. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf. Mouton, The Hague: 1976.

Schicklgruber, Christian and Françoise Pommaret eds. Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods. New Delhi: Bookwise, 1997.

Schrempf, Mona. “Tibetan Ritual Dances and the Transformation of Space.” *The Tibet Journal*. xix, 2 (1994): 95-120.

Wangmo, Tashi [F.P.Imaeda]. Thimphu Tshechu: Festival Programme. Thimphu: Bhutan Tourism Corporation, [1998].