

## **THE GURU DRAKMAR CHAM- A RITUAL DANCE PERFORMED BY THE NYINGMA LAMAS OF PEMAYANGTSE MONASTERY IN SIKKIM**

Kajal Pradhan

---

Religion is a key institution of human society and has served it in various ways. The North Eastern states of India are characterised by a rich socio-cultural diversity and Sikkim, which falls in this region, exhibits manifold communities and ways of life and practices influenced largely by their religious belief systems. Since time immemorial the Sikkimese have maintained a close relationship with god and the natural environment that surrounds them. They express a dedication to bonds of family and community and express loyalty to their respective cultural practices of which religion forms an integral part.

The present paper attempts to provide a description of the Guru Drakmar Cham, an annual ritual dance performed by the Pemayangtse lamas, and tries to bring out the ritual significance of the Cham as an integral element of Tibetan Buddhism in practice in Sikkim. It attempts to highlight the different functional aspects of the dance in the social life of the members and to the maintenance and reinforcement of the social order, beliefs and the overall schema of devotion of its adherents. The paper focuses on the contribution of the dance towards the corroboration of the tradition bound relationship between god, man and nature and the various challenges posed towards this traditional practice by forces of modernity that are affecting the god-man relationship.

Religion is a social reality and the roots of god-man relationship can be traced to the most primitive human societies. The evidence of the earliest existence of the religious behaviour among humans has been said to be found in the burial rites of the first Homo sapiens around 300,000 years ago. The importance of religion as a social fact that forms culture and the significant place held by it even in modern societies is widely recognised by sociologists, anthropologists and social scientists. Societies have always organised their world in their own meaningful ways, however irrational it may seem to an outsider. The major human concerns of death, suffering and pain or the crisis of human life have been elaborated mostly by religion. Having responded to the human need for meaning and explanations of the unexplainable and inescapable occurrences in life, religion has endowed people with the knowledge of the general universal order. The traditional way of life and practices of the people in particular and a significant portion of their worldview and value systems which are collectively shared, enacted and embodied in various aspects of culture is directly impacted by religion. The invocations of the supernatural for human welfare and the various religious representations are an evidence of how deeply religion is embedded in the socio-cultural life of the people.

---

*Address for communication:* **Kajal Pradhan**, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, NEHU, Shillong, Meghalaya, *E-mail:* [pradhankajal26@yahoo.in](mailto:pradhankajal26@yahoo.in)

### **The Cham**

The cham is a ritual dance performed by Tibetan Buddhist lamas in greater or lesser degree of variations in all the monasteries '*Gonpa*' belonging to the different Tibetan Buddhist sects. It is a traditional religious dance or a dance of the '*chos*' or dharma. The public ritual of devotion involves a rich symbolism and from every household in the village where the monastery is located at least one member takes part in the ritual. The ritual becomes an auspicious occasion for collective participation helping in integrating and strengthening the bonds of social cohesion within the Tibetan Buddhist community. Like all rituals that are symbolical of religious concepts, the cham also functions to communicate to the audience certain central values of Tibetan Buddhism. It serves to symbolically express the Tibetan Buddhist concept of cosmology which relates to existences in various realms which is basically grounded on the Buddhist concept of 'karma'. Wojkowitz account of the cham shows us that similar dances constituted an important part of traditional Tibetan religious ritual performed by the '*Bon*' priests who are popularly identified as the Black Hat clergy (1976:1). Tibetan Buddhism clearly exhibits many such syncretic elements that ensued out of the interaction between the native and the invading Buddhist beliefs and practices. The cham ritual performed in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Sikkim exhibit many elements of this ancient native religious tradition which were assimilated into the clerical practices of scriptural Buddhism.

The origin of the cham dance as a Tibetan Buddhist ritual is supported by many legends. One such legend claims that the first cham was performed by Guru Padmasambhava (the Lotus-born or Guru Rinpoche) who is considered as the chief deity among the Tibetan Buddhists. It was on the request of King Srong Detsan of Tibet, that the learned Guru from Nalanda came and established Buddhism in Tibet in 747 A.D. According to legend the cham was performed by Guru Padmasambhava when he built the first monastery at Samye in Tibet where he installed the first chapter of lamas (priests). The master performed the dance to subdue all the evil spirits and demons lurking in the land who were hostile to the Buddhist Dharma. The spirits and demons of the land were subsequently tamed and coerced into submission. They were bound under oath to become protectors of the dharma and included as lower ranking deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

The religious tradition thus has had, in the past, saints who have come to new lands and liberated it of its demons and evil spirits. The local country gods of folk religions is stereotyped and distorted as demons and evil spirits. Interestingly, apart from Padmasambhava and his eight forms '*Gurushangyad*' who usually form the chief figures represented in the chams, the gods and deities being invoked or reproached do not belong to the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (potential Buddhas) but usually belong to the lower level deities, the Dharmapalas or Guardian deities who previously were local country gods of the

animistic folk religions or spirits and demons of the place. The Pang Lhabsol cham is an annual state ceremony of Sikkim where the chief deities invoked and honoured are the mountain deity *Dzongka* and his subordinate *Yabdud* who previously were the local mountain gods of Sikkim (Steinmann 1996: 197).

Wojkowitz provides another account of its origin where the cham is believed to have been performed by a Tibetan Buddhist clergy *dPal gyi rdo rje* to kill the Tibetan king *Glang dar ma* who was responsible for almost wiping out Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet in the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Lama *dPal gyi rdo rje* disguised himself as a black hat (*Bon*) clergy and first caught the kings' attention by performing the mystic cham in front of the royal palace and then shot the king with a bow and arrow which he had hidden in the long sleeves of his robes (Wojkowitz 1976: 1). The long sleeved ceremonial robes worn by the lamas who perform the dance could be a tradition remnant of this event when the enemy of the dharma was killed. The public ritual performed by the lamas within the vicinity of the temple is an important part of worship rituals performed in honour of a deity during which the deity is paid homage by the lamas and the villagers who gather on the appointed auspicious day.

Lamas perform the ritual on which depends the destruction of evil forces that obstruct the dharma. This manifest function remains a major preoccupation of almost all Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Similar to most Tibetan Buddhist rituals, the cham is primarily performed in Sikkim an Indian state located in the eastern Himalayas in the North eastern part of the country with an aim to ensure longevity, a healthy life and good fortunes for the members as well as general peace, prosperity and welfare for the villagers as well as Sikkim as a whole which is considered as a holy land by its people. This shared notion of holy land gives a broad common framework of meaning and to an emergence of a sense of common regional identity and solidarity in the context of a common locality, history and a shared concern for well being for its inhabitants which loosely holds the Sikkimese people together. Within the village in Sikkim, a culture of caring among fellow villagers is carefully nurtured and the bonds of kinship are usually very strong. Duties and responsibilities to family, clan and village are important and individual needs are almost excluded. The religious community in this respect helps in the social inclusion and integration of individuals through village and community as well as household rituals performed by the ritual specialists. Feasts have been an important part of such occasions where the entire village community is invited.

The monastery or '*Gon-pa*' which houses the shrines of a multitude of deities belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is the pivot around which all the religious activities of a Buddhist revolves. It is a sanctified abode of worship and of all religious activities. A monastery is built usually in a solitary place a little farther from the villages usually on a hill top and forms the centre for the religious education and professional socialisation of the lamas as well as their place of

residence. The lamas are the chief carriers of the Tibetan Buddhist culture and tradition and rituals are an important part of their activities performed in the monastery as well as all rites of passage for the Buddhists. The lamas are recruited primarily from the Bhutia (Lhopo) and Lepcha (Rongs) communities of Sikkim and from some groups belonging to the Nepali community inhabiting Sikkim. They belong to families who live in the villages surrounding the area where the monastery is located and the monastery is deeply embedded in the life of a Tibetan Buddhist and the lamas are central to their entire existence and prospective salvation. In a Buddhist life and philosophy, the monastery and lamas occupy a dignified place and therefore their significance is central to Tibetan Buddhist culture and identity.

In Sikkim, the larger monasteries hold the cham ritual twice a year under the patronage of the religious community. It becomes an auspicious occasion attended by the villagers and pilgrims. The community presence is vital during the ceremonial worship of deities and the performance of the ritual in honour of the deities. Both men and women of the surrounding villages come to the monastery and participate in the preparations for the ritual that take place many days before the worship ritual. The *Gonpa* committee consisting of the senior lamas both celibate and householder or village lamas, for example the head lama (*Dorje Lupon*), chanting master (*umzed*), disciplinarian (*chutimpa*) and other office bearers in the monastic organisation along with the important senior personages from the village play a major role in the proper management of the activities in preparation of the ritual. The committee is formed to meet and deliberate over the matters of the monastery and requirements of rituals such as this and its success. The believers contribute in the form of *dana* or donation in cash or kind. These generous acts are held important for every member and are believed to generate good karma necessary for a good rebirth in the higher realms. This practice undoubtedly reflects the deep religiosity possessed by the Tibetan Buddhist community.

The cham is an expression of devotion to deities. For the lamas devotion is transformed into meditation which is an important part of their daily routine. During the cham meditation transforms into physical expression in the form of various dance movements and mudras which are then offered to the deity. It is a symbolic art with each step in the dance carrying an inherent meaning and the lamas represent various divinities and their retinues. The part taken up by a lama in the cham ritual depends on his skills, learning, age and knowledge. The chief deities are personified by the senior lamas and ritual masters like the *Dorje Lupon*. The abbot of the monastery (*Dorje Lupon*) is also a ritual master or chief priest and he presides over all religious ceremonies. The *Dorje Lupon* is a qualified person with learning and personality and in the cham he takes the role of the chief divinity. The ritual specialists are believed to possess knowledge and direct relation to the realm of gods and become indispensable in the dance. For the ritual worship to be fruitful

the dancers are required to possess knowledge of the underlying meanings conveyed in the dance steps. The lamas have to possess knowledge of the various ritual acts, body movements, mantras and ritual purity to perform the dance. Days before the worship starts the lamas observe a number of purificatory rules and abstain from taking particular kinds of polluting food like garlic and meditate on the deities to be worshipped. In the past it is believed that the dancers used to be high lamas possessing *Bodhichittas* (Direction of heart towards Bodhi/ Supreme Knowledge) who had reached a high level of purity and who possessed vast knowledge and supernatural powers like those possessed by the deities. They had the ability to end suffering of all beings by spreading wisdom and well-being. Today the dancers are lamas who have at least completed the stage of a novice in the monastic structure which reveals a hierarchical framework of grades within which the religious profession of a lama is set.

The lamas form a distinct social category altogether. The significance of the monastic dance ritual in the Tibetan Buddhist religious culture is evident from the fact that the lamas are trained for the dance under the supervision of the senior lamas of the monastery only after the novice attains the position of a junior lama, the status that of a fully ordained monk. This status is acquired usually after two or three years after admission and after having passed three examinations held in the monastery in which they have to recite by rote memory firstly the *Menlom Chozchey*, secondly the *Kunchok Chedi* and *Thukje Chennpo* and thirdly *Regzin Sogdup*, the different mantras to be chanted at different kinds of auspicious or inauspicious occasions. The successful passing of the examinations and the consequent consensus to eligibility secures an individual the membership to the *sangha* (monastic community) as a lama. The ordination ceremony is performed in the presence of other members of the *sangha* to mark this change in the status of the individual. It brings a change in the social personality of the individual and marks the conferring upon the individual the ritual purity and right to learn and perform the dance along with other privileges associated with the status. The cham, besides being a part of the lamas monastic training and socialisation has functioned to initiate and integrate the new members into Tibetan Buddhist concepts and the lamas way of life. The ritual dance represents a part of the collective life of the religious community and expresses their shared knowledge, values and emotions which are vital for the sustenance and expression of their collective practices as an organised group.

### **Pemayangtse Monastery**

Out of the many, some of the prominent monasteries in Sikkim belonging to the Nyingmapa sect are Pemayangtse, Tashiding and Phensang. The Pemayangtse monastery is the premier monastery founded by Nyingma lama, Gyalwa Lhatsun Chennpo and the first Chogyal Phuntshok Namgyal who are the key figures in the founding of the kingdom of Sikkim in 1642 and establishment of Tibetan Buddhism

as the new religious order in Sikkim (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 29-30). However a durable monastery was raised only in 1705 by the third Chogyal Chador Nyamgyal. The word Pemayangtse means “The Perfect Sublime Lotus” and was built in honour of Guru Padmasambhava, the Lotus Born. The monastery is built on a hilltop 7 kms from the Geyzing, the west district headquarters and about 2 kms away from the town of Pelling in West Sikkim. In the past the monastery had been Royal chapel (*gtsug lag khang*) of the Chogyals (kings) with their earlier palace at Rabdentse located a kilometre away from the monastery. The Pemayangtse lamas would be recruited from families of pure Bhutia blood, “descendants of the founding ancestor of the Lhopo’s original group of noble clans to which the rulers also traced their descent (Khye Bumsa, the first mythical migrant who came from Tibet to Sikkim in the thirteenth century)” and were referred to as ‘*Tsang*’ which means pure (Vandenhelken 2002: 60). The requirement of purity of blood for membership to Pemayangtse and the high social status of the Pemayangtse lamas in turn could have also motivated and reinforced the rules of endogamy among the Lhopo community (Bhutias) of Sikkim. The notion of purity gave importance to an individual’s birth usually to Bhutia aristocracy. It throws ample light on the high status of a Pemayangtse lama and the associated prestige and privileges given to them. Of late this rule does not hold strong due to increasing number of young individuals opting for more lucrative secular professions out of the villages than a religious profession and with increasing number of inter-community marriages taking place, Bhutias having a Nepali or Lepcha mother are also admitted into Pemayangtse.

One finds the centrality of the Pemayangtse monastery in the Sikkimese society given the political structure in which the lamas were the Chogyals foremost religious and political guides. The lamas were a social force capable of exercising considerable political power during the Bhutia monarchy that spanned for over 300 years. The establishment of the premier monastery was a mark of the emergence of the Bhutias as a dominant group and their hold not only over the political but also of the religious institution in the kingdom. With the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975 and the fall of the monarchy the religious affairs of the State are under a new system of state control which has systematically eroded the traditional hold the Pemayangtse lamas had over the kingdom, society and their own monastic affairs.

Despite all these external forces impacting new emerging trends in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the lamas and the *gonpa* have strongly persisted alongside the changes. They still remain indispensable in the life of a Buddhist and rituals remain a focal point of their religious activities. The important chams performed by the Nyingmapas are the Kagyed Cham and the Guru Drakmar Cham. In Sikkim, the Guru Drakmar cham is widely performed in the monasteries of Pemayangtse, Phensang, Inchey, Dolung, Mangan, Shipgey and Labrang. The ritual dances performed in Pemayangtse are believed to have been started by the Lama Jigmed

Pao of Tibet, the third reincarnation of Gyalwa Lhatsun Namkha and by the third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal around the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The choreography of the chams and ritual music of the monastery is borrowed from Mindoling Gonpa in Tibet.

### **The Guru Drakmar Cham**

The Guru Drakmar cham is a sacred dance of worship that is performed to personify Guru Drakmar, the angry manifestation of Guru Padmasambhava. The Pemayangtse monastery, the second oldest monastery of Sikkim, belonging to the Lhatsunpa sub-sect of the Nyingmapa order holds the sacred Guru Drakmar Cham which lasts for 2 days on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the Tibetan lunar calendar which corresponds to the month of February, as a concluding part of the annual ritual worship of Guru Drakmar which lasts for about 5 days and leads to 'Losar' the Tibetan New Year. The cham is based on the treasure text Terma Le-tho Ling-pa discovered by Tertön la-tshon-pa in Kongbu in Tibet and its choreography was introduced by Linkyot Rinpoche during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

On this auspicious occasion, Guru Drakmar is worshipped and propitiated for his blessings. For a Tibetan Buddhist the Guru Drakmar cham forms a ritual worship from where he derives everything that is needed for his life that is blessings for good luck, long life, protection, happiness and prosperity in the present as well as a security for good birth in the next life. The rich symbolism conveyed in the dance represents a totality of their worldview and ethos. The Tibetan Buddhist vision of a cosmic order which relates to various existences in several planes or hierarchical realms of heaven and hell, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, gods etc is basically grounded in a concept of evolution from existence in hell to heaven. This evolution takes place depending on an individual's karma leading upto the final goal of emancipation or *nirvana*. The Tibetan Buddhists believe that the deity as personification of the primordial or universal force sustains the divinity in all sentient beings and guides them towards the final goal of salvation. This sacred enactment of the cham serves to reaffirm the Tibetan Buddhist dogmas and moral codes laid down in the sacred texts for the attainment of liberation. Thus the cham forms an important ritual where the whole concept of god-man-nature relationship is conveyed and reinforced.

The ritual dance becomes an expression of a social order which is validated by its reference to a cosmology and sovereignty that is manifested in the entire schema of devotion and worship of the sovereign deity Guru Padmasambhava (the Lotus Born) and in the offerings brought to Guru Drakmar, the spirit manifestation of Padmasambhava in his fearful aspect. According to legend, when Guru Padmasambhava first arrived in Tibet he took the fearful form to defeat all hostile forces, demons and spirits of the land that stood on his way when he was establishing Buddhism (Waddell 1895: 26). Tibetan Buddhists look upon Guru Drakmar, a deity with a majestic appearance, with awe and reverence and his wrathful

appearance is believed to induce fear in all evil forces. The ceremonial worship of Guru Drakmar is thus observed with the manifest function of suppressing the evil and demons and all the enemies of the faith.

The ritual dance forms an integral part of almost a week long worship of Guru Drakmar. In the main temple shrine an enormous effigy of Guru Drakmar is raised by the lamas and placed there. For several days until the final day the lamas invoke and worship Guru Drakmar and without this initial worship, the cham is said to have no significance on its own. The cham therefore becomes an essential part of the main worship performed in the temple (*dukhang*) which includes various ritual acts that are vital to the whole ritual worship including the worship of the protectors (*Kangso*) and the worship of Guru Drakmar which begins at 4 am and lasts till 6pm during the entire ceremony.

During the ritual, a mandala is inscribed and the deities are invoked. The lamas chant the mantras from the scriptures accompanied by sacred monastic music and various yogic postures. Ritual offerings of libations '*sergyem*' of milk, rice, fruits, incense '*Lhap-Sang*', water bowls and butter lamps '*chimmey*' are made to the deities of all four directions, dharma gurus and local deities of Sikkim, who are symbolised in the form of *tormas* (ritual cakes made of barley mixed with butter) placed high in the altar. The word '*serkyem*' means libations or gold like offerings of food, clothing and drinks made to please the divinities. The ritual dance takes place for two days and consists of twelve stages or twelve dances on the first day and seven stages on the second and concluding day.

The first dance performed in the ritual is the *Rolcham*. Before the *Rolcham* begins, jokers '*atsaras*' enter wearing clown masks and during the whole ritual they make the audience laugh and serve them refreshments. This light humour is a means of recreation and is done with the purpose to keep away any negative emotions. Then 12 to 15 lamas dressed in their clerical robes and red hats emerge from the temple and enter the area marked for the ceremony. The lamas take slow circular dance movements, some of them holding cymbals '*rolma*' while some beat drums, held by the left hand and beaten with a long thin stick which is curved at the tips, held by the right hand. A flagstaff is made to stand in the centre and the dancers move along a circular path marked around it consisting of two concentric circles. The first circle is called the *chamkor* and the inner circle is called *chamkor yispa*. The dancers move in a slow procession in short clockwise and anti-clockwise turns in a clockwise direction symbolising the act of circumambulation. On the flag which stands in the centre are mantras inscribed on it and the Tibetan Buddhists believe that the wind carries the mantras to all directions spreading well being to all sentient beings. The broad base of the flagpole serves as an altar for *tormas*, offerings and ritual weapons which are used during the ritual. All the chams of the Pemayangtse monastery are performed in this circular area marked in front of the main prayer hall.



The term *Rolcham* is derived from the Tibetan word 'Rol' meaning chant and 'cham' meaning dance. During the *Rolcham* the lamas welcome the majestic Guru Drakmar and other deities. The lamas prepare and purify the ceremonial area for the deities to manifest and bless the audience and the ceremony. The dance movements of the lamas depict the area as a heavenly abode of the deities. The senior lamas who are seated in a sheltered area chant from the sacred scriptures along with the junior lamas clashing the cymbals and blowing the trumpets and conch shells. During any Tibetan Buddhist ritual, the use of sacred monastic music is central and is considered as an offering of divine music to the deities. The sacred musical instruments *dungchen*, *gyaling*, *dung kar*, *rolmo*, *gachen* are played by the lamas seated in rows and musical beats serve to indicate the rhythm of the dance movements.

After the *Rolcham* the *Tsamchey* is performed by a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 15 lamas. The lamas perform the *Tsamchey*, wearing their ceremonial wide sleeved robes (*chamguye*) of different colours, ornaments (*gencha*), carry the sacred dagger (*phurpa*) and put on different kinds of animal and bird headed masks. The word 'Tsam' in Tibetan means border and 'Shey' means beyond. In the *Tsamshey*, the lamas demarcate the territory of the dharma where the deities and illuminated ones reside beyond the secular where evil finds a safe haven. Then four lamas enter wearing masks of various bird and animal heads and perform the *Shayag*, *Namding* and *Thakchobalop* each of which depict different kinds of animals and birds of the lower realms which inhabit the earth and sky. The first *Shayag* depicts the four creatures deer (*sha*), yak, bull (*Kyung*), ox (*lang*). The *Namding* depicts ariel creatures while the *Thakchobalop* depicts terrestrial creatures.

In the next part of the ritual the lamas perform the *Shanag Dorlop*, *Dhurram Shinkyong* and the *Thowa Thomo*. The dance taken together serves to communicate the concept of life, life after death and rebirth and the notion of a transitional stage of 49 days (*Bardo*) that exists between death and rebirth which is central to Buddhism and in particular to Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhists believe that during this period the dead man's consciousness travels through many illusory stages between the threshold of death and rebirth. This belief is expounded elaborately in the Bardo Thodol scripture which literally means 'Liberation by Hearing on the After-Death Plane'. The Bardo Thodol scripture written by Guru Padmasambhava embodies the wisdom of the key doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism. One finds the significance of the Bardo doctrine in the life of a Tibetan Buddhist by virtue of the fact that a person's next life and possible nirvana depends on the Bardo ritual performed by the lamas for the deceased. The sacred text links the deceased man to the divine and the lamas. The relation of an individual with the divine, his dharma gurus and the dharma teachings is not severed with death and the *lama* has the power to reach out to the dead man's consciousness and instruct and guide it towards a favourable rebirth or *nirvana*.

During the rituals pertaining to the death ceremony a lama is called to chant the from the Bardo text in the presence of the corpse for a 49 days. During the Bardo period the dead man's consciousness encounters 42 peaceful deities (*shewas*) and the 58 wrathful deities (*thowa thomo*) who show the way to liberation. It is an important religious doctrine that expounds a notion of existence after death and the operation of the laws of karma during the transition. It is believed that witnessing the Guru Drakmar Cham provides 'Liberation through Seeing'. The ritual dance serves to initiate the living members to the Bardo state and the faithful who are gathered to witness the cham believe that during their own Bardo state they will be able to remember the wisdom and instructions they have gained through the cham and thereby attain a favourable rebirth or possibly even liberation.

In the *Shanag Dorlop* the central figure personified is Dharmaguru Guru Padmasambhava or *Vajrasattwa*. For the Tibetan Buddhists the word *Vajrasattwa* is synonymous with Bodhic wisdom, the provider of wisdom and true knowledge. The word *sha* means 'hat' and '*nag*' means black therefore it represents the Black Hat dance. It is performed by the ritual master *Yab Dorjee Lupon* who officiates and presides over the entire worship. In his absence the abbot selects his assistant *Dorchung* to perform the role. He enters the ceremonial area in slow dance movements from the temple with his front facing the temple. He dons a black ceremonial cloak and a black hat with a skull mounted on the top which is a garb belonging to the Black hats and symbolises the peaceful form of Guru Padmasambhava. After the supreme deity is invoked the deity manifests himself which marks the beginning of the ritual worship. The dance of the *Dorje Lupon*, who personifies Guru Padmasambhava, depicts the legend of the Guru who performed the Black hat dance when he arrived in Tibet to spread the dharma and enlightenment to a seemingly "irrational" lot. After the black hat dance the *Dorje Lupon* moves towards a sheltered area within the courtyard known as *chamra* where he sits in a meditative state blessing and presiding over the entire ritual.

Thereafter the lamas perform the *Dhurram Shingkyong*. In this dance the lamas dressed in skeleton outfits emerge from the temple and enter the circular area. Wojkowitz observes that the dance of the skeletons forms one of the main features of all chams (1976:11). In the chams the skeletons are symbolic of the Buddhist ideas of the impermanence, emptiness and illusory nature of everything worldly. It portrays aspects of the concept of the futility of life and all existence as being karmic and illusive. Then the lamas dressed in skeletons outfits place a small effigy of a corpse '*linga*' symbolising ignorance on the ground below the flagstaff. The '*linga*' forms an indispensable ritual object upon which certain magical rites are performed. Thereafter the skeleton dancers take several dance steps around the '*linga*' and one of them lifts the black shroud covering it and casts it in the air to expose the effigy. The *asataras* come and play with the effigy of the corpse who is depicted as their child.

After the skeleton dance the Black Hat dance continues. This time around 15 lamas dressed in the ceremonial robes and black hats enter with their backs facing the courtyard in slow dance movements. Two lamas stand in front of the temple gates and blow the flageolets and lamas who are seated in the courtyard beat the drums and clash the cymbals. The lama dancers personify the 42 *shewa* or peaceful tutelary deities with *Bodhichittas* who guide the deceased during the Bardo. Their number according to the Bardo text is originally 42 but due to the lack of space and available lamas in the monastery only 11 or 15 lamas personify the 42 deities. The *Shanag Dorje Lopon* joins the black hat dancers and the *atsaras* make worship offerings of *sergyem* thrice to the all the deities. The black hat dancers along with *Dorje Lopon* who leads them, then waves a black cloth thrice in the air which is an act of conjuring up of all the enemies of the Buddhist dharma. It is then symbolically placed within the dough figure (*linga*). Accompanied by monastic music the seated lamas chant mantras and the dancers perform the rite of brandishing a *phurpa* (dagger) before the *linga*. Thereafter the dancers pierce the figure with the *phurpa* and mutilate its body. This act is said to stimulate the destruction of enemies of the faith.

After the *Shanag Dorlop* the lamas perform the *Thowa Thomo*. The *Thowa Thomo*, is performed by lama dancers in even numbers of 8, 10, 12, 14 or 16. The lamas wearing masks of angry dispositions personify the 58 terrifying monstrous deities (*Thowas*) accompanied by their shaktis or divine spouses (*Thomos*) who are encountered during the later stage of the Bardo. The angry deities are believed to appear when the consciousness of the deceased gets caught up in the whirlwind of karma and tends to overlook the Bardo instructions. When the deceased subject resists enlightenment towards which it is directed by the peaceful *shewas* and chooses to take rebirth in the lower realms the wrathful deities *Thowa Thomo* appear and coerce the consciousness of the deceased towards knowledge of its true divine nature and hence salvation. The *Thowa Thomo* is followed by the *Showa*. In the *Showa* a lone deer headed masked dancer enters and further mutilates the *linga*. For the Lamaists the deer is a symbol of purity of thoughts and therefore guards the dharma. The act of cutting the *linga* destroys the deluding effects of the six senses of the body. The senses lead to the 5 karma generating poisonous emotions of passion, aggression, ignorance, pride and envy which he offers to the deities of all directions. The concept of purification remains central to the dharma and the dance to this end elucidates the need for the purification of emotions and gaining of the 5 wisdoms which is a pre-requisite for awakening and the attainment of liberation.

In the monastic life of a lama the five negative emotions are continuously and gradually purified by following the ethical and moral codes or *Chayig* composed in conformity to the codes of conduct found in the Vinaya Sutras that govern monastic life. The monastic establishment ensures consensus and conformity to

the codes of conduct laid down by the Buddha which is a necessary condition for achieving a higher state of spiritual development. The lamas believe them to be the commands of the Buddha (*Buddhavachana*) and form an important part of a lamas collective way of life influencing all social interactions and relationships among themselves, with the divine, nature and man. Tibetan Buddhism is based on the observance of these codes of morality laid down in the scriptures and the lamas as a group are bound together by the sutra and practice. The shared notions and way of life performs the integrative function of binding together the lamas and the lay followers into a “moral community”. The first day of sacred dance is brought to a close with the lamas performing the *Rolcham* again. The lamas request the deities to return back to their respective heavenly abodes after which the lamas and the gathering of believers enter the temple and perform the remaining rites of worship.

The second day of the Guru Drakmar cham begins with the performance of the *Rolcham*, *Tshamchey*, *Shayag*, *Namding*, *Thakshabalop* of the previous day. These dances are followed by the performance of the *Rongcham* which forms a significant part of the Guru Drakmar Cham as an essential component of Tibetan Buddhism in practice in Sikkim. The *Rongcham* is believed to have been composed by the third king of Sikkim, Chogyal Chador Namgyal in honour of *Takpoo* or warlike demons (Risley 1875: 13). The *Rongcham* was composed out of a spiritual text revealed to the Chogyal by an angel in his dreams. The term *Rongcham* means the dance of ‘*Rongs*’ referring to the native Lepchas. It word ‘*Rongs*’ means hill or ravine people, representing the homeland of the Sikkimese with a wide range of hills of moderate to high altitudes, snow capped peaks, fertile valleys, rivers, lakes and streams. Sikkim is referred to as *Beyul Demojong* meaning ‘Valley of rice’ and according to legend was discovered by the Tertön Rig-‘dzin rGod-ldem ‘phrucan (1337- 1408) who is attributed to with the writing of several guides to the hidden lands located in Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. It follows certain Tibetan legends regarding many mythical hidden lands or paradises located in the Himalayan stretch known as ‘*Bayul*’ (Giacomella 1991: 241). According to the tradition of the Nyingmapas the paradises were discovered by Guru Padmasambhava. He blessed these lands and made them inaccessible to be rediscovered later by the virtuous and destined when the dharma and the faithful needed to seek refuge from enemies. According to Namgyal and Dolma, the oracles attributed to Guru Padmasambhava mentions *Bras- mo ljongs* in Sikkim as the most sacred of the hidden lands (1908: 10).

The spread of Buddhism to new lands considered as paradises favourable for the flourishing of the dharma where it is protected from the enemies explains the establishment of the dharma in socially relevant terms. Given the social context in which the diffusion is embedded in, in which the superior enlightened dharma belonging to advanced civilizations encounters the native “irrational” religions

with its own set of gods and spirits it becomes apparent that Tibetan Buddhist deities dominate the deities of primitive religion of the host country. Tibetan Buddhist legends represent the encounters and spatial relations that were carved out of these interactions. The rationality of an advanced religion is able to bring wisdom to the seemingly unenlightened people of the new land. Such encounters are depicted in many of the legends depicted in the *cham*. The *Rongcham* signifies the spread of Dharma in the land of Sikkim and the consequent well being of its inhabitants.

With the end of the *Rongcham*, the lamas make invocations of Guru Drakmar after which a larger than life sized effigy of Guru Drakmar wearing a red coloured wrathful mask makes its animated public appearance. The dancer donning the giant effigy over him emerges out of the temple in slow dance movements and enters the circular area along a path which is previously marked for his movements. The huge size of the effigy induces among the audience an atmosphere of complete awe and reverence. The dance cannot be performed without him being propitiated within the main temple complex. On this occasion The Guru Drakmar mantra is chanted a thousand or a ten thousand times. The dancer taking up the role of the Guru Drakmar has to be a knowledgeable lama and must have the physical ability to carry the giant effigy over him. According to a legend, Rinpoche had a vision in which he was commanded by Guru Padmasambhava to go forth on a mission of finding a *terma*. While on the search for the *terma*, the Rinpoche stumbled miraculously upon it in the cave *Kanu sanpo* where a boulder behind which it was hidden miraculously fell off revealing the sacred text of Guru Takpoo to the Rinpoche. Within the text was the description of the present larger than life size of Guru Takpoo, his mask and the mode of rituals. The Guru Drakmar effigy, its mask and rituals associated with his worship are based upon the specifications provided for Guru Takpoo and is followed till date with only a few variations. The purpose of the ritual however has remained the same in spite of the variations. After the dance the dancer representing Guru Drakmar moves towards the sheltered area where Shanag Dorje Lopon is already seated and sits there to bless and witness the days ceremony.

Following this the *Rongcham* dancers enter and perform again. As the dance proceeds a few lamas wearing their clerical garbs also join the dancers. They then assist the dancers in spreading a square piece of paper upon which is drawn a figure of a man representing ignorance and negative qualities, forces that pose as an enemy or obstructions to the dharma. The paper is tied on all four corners by a thin thread which is pulled at the ends by the dancers and other lamas. The paper stretches above a metal pot of boiling oil placed over a fire. The lamas then burn the paper using long sticks which are torched at the ends. The magic rite is accompanied by chants and playing of sacred music. The dancer personifying Guru Drakmar enters to perform again at the end of which he leads a procession of

dancers as well as *Shanag Dorje Lupon* into the main temple. The *Rongcham* dancers appear again and perform dances individually or in pairs and make their exit from the circular area.

At the close of the cham and worship in honour of Guru Drakmar the sacrificial cakes '*tormas*' are carried out of the temple altar by a procession of the black hat dancers, lamas, villagers and pilgrims led by Yab Dorje Lupon. A *tsi-pa* lama or astrologer consults the horoscope and identifies the spot where the *tormas*' are to be taken. Upon reaching the spot the Yab Dorje Lupon takes a bow and arrow and shoots in the direction identified by the the *tsi-pa* lama which is believed to cause the final destruction of evil. Meanwhile other lamas cast the *tormas* one after another chanting mantras associated with the respective deities. This is done with a view to sending the deities to destroy the enemies of the dharma and spread wisdom and well-being in all directions. After the *tormas* are cast the banners of victory '*gyaltshen*' are held high and waved as a sign of victory to the deities and then the procession heads back not less than 71 steps towards the monastic courtyard which marks the boundary beyond which lies the sacred space. The 71 steps that has to be taken is in accordance to the instructions given in the *terma* and is symbolical of having cast the *tormas* far away.

After this the procession heads back to the monastery courtyard and upon reaching there, the lamas bring out the remaining *tormas* and say prayers following which they are placed on a high place in the monastery area. This acts as a reminder to the guardian deities to be the protectors of the faith and the reaffirmation of the Tibetan Buddhists to uphold the teachings of the Dharma gurus. A deep hole is then dug in the courtyard where the remains of the *linga* and the burnt sketch are then buried and properly sealed with mud using the *Vajra Dorje*. A stone is then placed over it and covered with metal vessels. The banner of victory is stuck to the ground while everyone present shout 3 times the words "*keki soshu har gyalho*" which means "victory to the gods". A lama lays a heap over it and then it is set on fire which symbolically consumes all the evil. With a by a shot of gunfire and shouts of joy the assembled group celebrate the end of the ritual which signifies the victory of the dharma.

The lamas followed by the assembled devotees enter the main temple. The senior lama says a prayer of blessings '*tashe*' for the members, entire community and the land. After the prayers are said, mantras chanted and grains of rice are sprinkled, the members consume the *thi* or sanctified water which is offered to them by the *kunyer* and *chinyer* grade of junior lamas. The sacred *Gyokyut*, a huge 150 year old silk *thanka* (painted scroll) of the Sakyamuni Buddha is brought out by a procession of junior lamas carrying it over their shoulders accompanied by the monastic music and chants by senior lamas. It is then unfurled and hung in front of the *dukhang* for everyone assembled to have a view of it. It is displayed once every year on the occasion of the religious ceremony of Guru Drakmar cham

for the well being and long life of the faithful who have come together for the ritual. This concludes the worship ritual of Guru Drakmar.

The entire religious community participates in the ritual which becomes a ceremonial occasion of devotion. The villagers provide their services to the monastery for the preparation of sacrificial cakes (*tormas*) which are made out of rice flour and water. For this special occasion the dust of 5 metals like gold, silver, copper, iron and brass are also added to the dough. These *tormas* symbolise Guru Drakmar and various other deities belonging to the group of dharma palas as well as the local deities of Sikkim. They are placed in the main temple altar (*chodsom*) within the main prayer hall (*Dukhang*) where offerings of water bowls, flowers, incense and butter lamps are made before the images of Buddha Sakyamuni, Guru Padmasambhava and his eight forms, Avalokiteswara '*Chenrazi*' and the dharma gurus.

Tibetan Buddhism which belongs to the Mahayana form of Buddhism focuses on social relationships based on compassion. The sacred Guru Drakmar dance is performed with this compassionate motive to remove the bad karma of all beings which is the foremost responsibility of the ecclesiastics towards the community. The commitment of the believers to a life of compassionate living is reinforced by the ritual. The cham is considered as an auspicious occasion and viewing it is believed to bring merit for a better future. A shared cognitive state of interrelatedness under the karmic laws is created and the notion that all beings from saint to the lay and all beings in all realms possess the same inherent true divine nature binds the religious community together. Indeed it is seen that the fearful deity Guru Drakmar is a personification of extreme compassion. The fearful form is taken when suffering beings existing in the deluded state of karmic interrelatedness resist awakening and human passions stand as an obstruction to the path shown by the Buddha.

Similar to the medieval English mystery plays popular during the 13<sup>th</sup> century before drama moved onto the secular sphere, the cham is performed by the lamas in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries under their patronage. The cham functions to symbolically depict the visions of the cosmic order and esoteric teachings such as of the above Bardo teachings which otherwise is conveyed secretly, by word of mouth, only to the initiated subjects. The beliefs and teachings mentioned above which are embodied in the scriptures have been preserved, conveyed through the means of such rituals and handed down from generation to generation for the benefit of sentient beings by the monastic community. They are passed down from teacher to disciple and through a lineage of saints and initiated lamas belonging to various lineages or sects. It also affirms the exoteric moral codes laid down in the Buddhist doctrines to the assembled group who share similar values and being performed under divine sanctions it serves to uphold the dharma.

The expenses of the ritual are borne by the lamas. The income of the monastery is dependent on its property, mainly its lands which are cultivated or rented out. The tax collected and profits incurred out of its lands is used on the repair of the monastery, student's education and boarding, on their essential needs, medicine as well as all religious ceremonies, procuring of images of deities, offerings and scriptures, etc. The performance of household and community rituals for the villagers also supplements to the monastic income in terms of collectively owned service fees. The ceremony is also sponsored by laymen (*sbyin bdag*) who are a significant part of the community. The Tibetan Buddhist concept of 'donor' or (*sbyin bdag*) refers to lay devotees having relational service ties with the monastery. For the religious services provided by the lamas, they offer '*dana*' or donation which remains vital for the sustenance of the religious community and for the upkeep of the monastery. Their presence is conspicuous in the entire ritual. The generous acts are in line with the belief in selfless meritorious acts of good karma which the Tibetan Buddhists believe ensures a better life in the next birth and liberation in the future births. This clearly shows the extent of the inter-dependency of the monastery and lamas on the '*(sbyin bdag)*' and vice versa or of the religious with the secular.

The monastery is also strongly embedded in socio-cultural and economic life of a Buddhist which is guided by their religious traditions. According to Sinha they spend a large part of their earnings in the maintenance of the monastery and in the performance of religious rituals (1981: 193). Most occasions for important domestic and lineage group activities are concerned with the performance of religious rites by the lamas which are usually very expensive affairs. The sustenance of the monastery and traditional livelihood of the lamas is dependent on the villagers who are the benefactors. The villagers take the services of the lamas at various occasions throughout the year for the performance of life-cycle rituals, rites concerned with the protection of an individual from illness, danger and natural calamities, for curing and correcting faulty actions that cause imbalance in the relationship with the supernatural as well as for prosperity at the level of the individual, family, clan and community. Apart from these individual, household and community rituals the lamas also perform daily, monthly and annual rituals in the monastery some of which are public occasions of devotion. A large part of the day for a lama apart from religious study as well as the layman is set aside for worship and propitiations of deities, cleaning and arranging the altar, lighting the butter lamps, reading from the texts, making offerings to the deities, doing prostrations and circumambulations.

The participation of the community in the ritual introduces the young into the religious beliefs and practices of the group. The ritual performed in the presence of a gathering of believers binds the Buddhist community with a sense of shared relation to the doctrines. During the ritual a collective psychological connection to



the state of nirvana conveyed in the dance is induced among the assembled and a sense of security is created among the members with the prospect of salvation. For the believers the Guru Drakmar cham is a time honoured ritual practiced since the time of the forefathers of the Lhopos. It functions to reinforce dedication and loyalty to the teachings laid down in the scriptures which assures the members a good birth and ultimately liberation to the initiated members. The traditional practice therefore amounts to upholding and protecting the Tibetan Buddhists as a group. The cham in this respect comforts and sustains them and accounts for the rich cultural heritage of the Buddhists in Sikkim as it is true for Tibetan Buddhists elsewhere.

### **Emerging Trends**

Unfortunately, the important monastic ritual of cham is gradually dwindling and many of the smaller monasteries no longer perform the cham due to the decrease in the religious observance among the younger generations and lack funds and of governmental support. After the end of the monarchy which ended its patronage of the monasteries and the lamas, the lamas have been left to largely fend for themselves. Many of the smaller monasteries have become autonomous and are not equipped financially as well as in membership to take up the ceremonies of such a scale. Over the centuries many of the younger generations have migrated out of the villages to towns and cities for better educational and livelihood prospects leading to a decrease in the number of attendance. At present the total dynamics of their social life has also changed along with their perception about the dependency on the supernatural for their well being. With emerging trends observed within the last couple of years, the age-old relationship that existed between the Buddhists and their deities has been affected.

The primary factors for change this transformation may be identified as modernisation and globalisation. Modern education, economic and industrial development, increase in population, new cultural influences, technology and changes in attitude, etc have accounted for the changes taking place today. The ritual being of immense cultural significance, today there is a growing concern for its revival, preservation and transmission to the new generations taking up the religious profession. Today the lamas have taken up the responsibility of carrying forward the traditional practice. To cite an example, the lamas of new Rumtek monastery belonging to the Karma Kagyu sect perform a traditional Tibetan opera dance originally performed by the lay. The *Lhamo* dance is a opera dance performed by the lay that depict stories of glory of past Buddhist kings and courts of Tibet and on some occasions life stories of high lamas. Today the lamas perform the dance since the lay youth are no longer interested in continuing their forefather's legacy. Glorifying Buddhist kings, high lamas and Buddhist ethics no longer enchant them. In the face of such unfortunate events of complete discontinuation

the lamas today perform the *Lhamo* dance in the monastic courtyard of Rumtek monastery.

The Guru Drakmar Cham was earlier performed only in the Pemayangtse monastery therefore the sacred ritual was attended by people who came from neighbouring Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sukhia Pokhari in the state of West Bengal and from Sombarey, Okharey etc. in Sikkim. The devotees would travel for 4 to 5 days on foot with great hardship to receive the blessings. Believers would come in large numbers and with no sheds to accommodate the pilgrims, they would pitch tents and sleep in any vacant spot in the monastery area and food stalls would be setup for the devotees. At present a decrease in the attendance of devotees has been noticed who are pre-dominantly villagers from nearby villages and most of them stay for a short while and head back to their villages. Moreover with the decreasing number of monks in the monastery the dance is performed not only by lamas who possess a deep understanding of the meanings underlying the rites but also by lamas who are not very knowledgeable. Thus it is seen that community participation is diminishing even though the dance symbolises an important aspect of the Tibetan Buddhist practice and belief.

However despite the social-cultural, economic and political changes and modernisation of Sikkim, the lamas as a group have endured and the tradition of the cham continues. The monastery and the lamas who are the carriers of Tibetan Buddhist culture are still attributed central importance in the life of a Buddhist and the Guru Drakmar cham continues to be an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism in practice in contemporary society in Sikkim. Over the centuries the lamas have performed the cham and till today serves the community well. They express a keen interest in the continuation of the practice and have faith in the efficacy of the ritual and continue to hand it down from generation to generation.

### *References*

- Orofino, Giacomella. (1991). 'The Tibetan Myth of the Hidden Valley in the Visionary Geography of Nepal', *Instituto Italiano per l' Africa e l' Oriente*. 41(1/4): 239-271.
- Namgyal, Thutob and Dolma, Jeshay. (1908). *History of Sikkim*. Translated from Tibetan by Lama Dawa Kazi Samdup. Unpublished
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. von. (1976). *Tibetan Religious Dances*. The Hague. Mouton.
- Risley, H. H. (1875). *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Gangtok: Sikkim Nature Conservation Foundation.
- Sinha, A. C. (1981). 'Resource Distribution and Multiple Ethnic Identity in Sikkim', in Haimendorf, C. Von. Furer (ed.), *Asian Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective*, pp 193. New Delhi: Sterling.
- Steinmann, B. (1996). 'Mountain Deities, the Invisible Body of Society- A Comparative Study of the Representations by the Tamang and the Thami of Nepal, the Lepcha and Bhotia of Sikkim', in Blondeau, A. M and Steinkellner, E (ed.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult of Tibet and the Himalaya*, pp 197. Wien: Verlag de Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

- Vandenhelsken, M. (2002). Pemayangtse Buddhist monastery in Sikkim (Oriental Himalayas, India): a monastery into the world, PhD dissertation, Paul Valery University, Montpellier III.
- Waddell, L. A. (1974). Buddhism & Lamaism of Tibet. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers.