

The Old Man ‘Mitshering’ at Nyima Lung Monastery

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Special stage performers called *atsaras* wearing clownish masks are a common feature in religious festivals across the country. In their whimsical, and sometimes bawdy way, they serve various purposes like introducing dances, managing the performing arena, helping in crowd control and basically keeping the audience entertained through the long performances.¹ However, a similar but easily distinguishable performer is the *Mitshering* which is seen in some monastic festivals of central Bhutan like Nyima Lung. The performer wears an easily identifiable mask that is completely different from the *atsara*. The mask clearly depicts a very old man with long white beard and a wrinkled face. He is adorned with a unique costume: he wears the dress of a monk and a mixed red and white scarf with fringes like those worn by the local leaders called *Gup*. The old man carries a staff in his hand, which helps him to stand upright.

Enquiries were made with senior monks in the monastery about the rendering of his name, character and responsibilities in the dance of the Guru’s Eight Aspects. The monks knew him only by the name ‘Old man’ (*Mi tshe ring*), though they explained his responsibilities (see below). Religious specialists were also consulted for this paper in several other monasteries on whether a similar character with

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¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976: 82.

the same name was present in the dance of the Guru's Eight Aspects in their respective monasteries. However, they all rendered his name differently and provided different explanations. Some said that he is known as Gyalpo Hashang (*rGyal po Ha Shang*), whom they believe is a patron of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche); however, this character is not prominent in other monasteries.

According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Hashang is sometimes presented as the chief deity, where he is respected by offering scarves, while at other times he is ridiculed by the *atsaras*.² He also explains that Hashang is identified as "a representative of a Chinese Buddhist sect who tried to spread teachings of his school in Tibet, but was defeated in a religious dispute by Kamalasila," and this is the reason why he is ridiculed by the *atsaras*. In a similar vein to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Richard J. Kohn states that long life man known as Hashang in the *cham* originated from Chinese, as he asserts that "Hva Shang or *ho shang* in Chinese is a generic term for Buddhist monks."³ Hashang is also presented in the annual festivals at Kumbum, Tashilhunpo and Choni in Tibet.⁴

A figure with similar characteristics portrayed in Mongolia is known as Cagan Obo, 'White Old Man' (*rgan po dkar po* or *dkar rgan* in Tibetan). The 'White Old Man' is seen in all Mongolian temples and the figure takes part in the ritual dances at New Year (Tsagan Sar). It is said that "the thirteenth Dalai Lama initiated this figure and introduced it into the New Year dance of Potala, and from there, the figure has spread to other *cham* in Tibetan and Himalayan countries." Cagan Obo is also said to have been originally a divinity of pre-Buddhist Mongolian folk religion.⁵ Jam Fontain⁶ states:

² Ibid.

³ Kohn, 2001: 204.

⁴ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976: 83.

⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976: 83.

In the Mongolian Tsam festival, the 'White Old Man' represents the ancient shamanistic gods of Mongolia who were absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon but who were assigned a role of only secondary importance. Tsaghan Ebügen is the Protector of Cattle, who can prevent various animal diseases. Though definitely of Tibetan origin, he has assumed both the appearance and the function of Shoulao, the Chinese God of Longevity. Armed with a staff with a handle or a finial in the shape of a dragon, the White Old Man performed the role of a buffoon. This may indicate that the Lamaist hierarchy tried to undermine the prestige of this representative of pre-Buddhist shamanist beliefs. In some monasteries, Tsaghan Ebügen was even humiliated and ridiculed as one of the hated and despised Chinese. Moving along the edge of the Tsam square, he performs his caricatures of the solemn dances. He also "kills" a "tiger" and performs numerous tricks with the four "lions." That he is associated, like his Chinese counterpart Shoulao, with longevity is evident from popular superstition. Those who were hit by the sticks of the Lords of the Charnel Grounds were believed to die within the year. Only by receiving another hit by the staff of Tsaghan Ebügen, could they again be ensured a longer life.

I assume that the figure of the old man originated according to the explanations above. There seem to be several similarities between the characters, though they are rendered by different names according to the local beliefs and traditions. The meaning of the name *Mitshering*, prominent in Nyima Lung monastery, is similar to that of the Mongolian name.

⁶ Fountain, 1999: 52. Hanna Havnevik informed me about this Mongolian tradition and the work of Fountain.

The old man 'Mitshering' at Nyima Lung

In the Nyima Lung monastery, *Mitshering* is believed to be the one who knows the detailed histories of Padmasambhava, as described in the following. *Mitshering* enters the courtyard after the eight aspects of the Guru are seated in a row. He bows down before Guru Rinpoche three times. According to Buddhist belief, to bow down is to show homage and respect to the higher ones, which Peter Harvey considers to be among the most common of the Buddhist devotional acts.⁷ When the old man enters the courtyard, the clown-like character known by the name Zhonu Loden, the holder of the parasol of Guru Rinpoche in the procession, starts criticizing and making fun of him, asking several funny questions; this corresponds to the explanation by Nebesky-Wojkowitz.⁸ Thereafter, a question and answer session between Zhonu Loden and *Mitshering* ensues. Before presenting that, however, I will discuss the meaning of *atsara* in general and of Zhonu Loden in particular in Nyima Lung monastery.

As in several religious theatrical performances, the buffons play an important role in the *cham*. Their movements in the dance are not governed by any rule. Sometimes they seem to go beyond the limit but try to stay within the boundary.⁹ On one hand, the role of the *atsara* is to entertain the audience with any kind of joke. Their spoken words usually have a sexual overtone, corresponding with their ornaments, which represent the male genital. On the other hand, the *atsaras* have the task of readjusting the masks and costumes, and correcting the steps of the other dancers in the course of the dance.¹⁰

Atsara is known in Sanskrit as *Acarya*, which signifies a Master in philosophy also known as Drubthob (*sgrub thog/thob pa*), A 'highly accomplished one,' and usually

⁷ Harvey, 1990: 172.

⁸ Ibid.: 83.

⁹ Pommaret, 2006 : 37.

¹⁰ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 82. *cham*

denotes accomplished tantric yogins. The clowns are believed to be from the noble family according to the orally transmitted tradition. The character *atsara* is believed to represent an accomplished master coming into the human, worldly existence in the disguise of a clown in order to uplift the worldly beings to enlightenment through jokes according to the people's tradition and beliefs.¹¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz mentions that the name *atsara* also represents the Hindus. He claims that *atsara* is a figure designed to "ridicule the priesthood of Hinduism."¹²

The name of one of the *atsaras* in Nyima Lung monastery is Zhonu Loden. He is believed to be young and intelligent by nature, at least in Nyima Lung monastery. He wears the Bhutanese men's dress *gho* (*bgo*) while the rest of the *atsaras* wear pants and jackets typically designed in accordance with their characters in the dance, showing their entities. Zhonu Loden is the one who holds a parasol for Padmasambhava in the course of the procession of the Guru's Eight Aspects in the courtyard.

Padmasambhava is a character well known to the entire Buddhist population in Bhutan, though most of the audience remains in the dark about what he is supposed to have accomplished. He is believed to be the main hero of the myth and the role model of yogis, and he is worshipped most by the Nyingma adherents. This assertion corresponds to Kohn's statements in his description of the Mani Rimdo festival in Tibet and Nepal.¹³ In the following, I will present the details of the question and answer session between the *atsara* and *Mitshering* in the *cham* performance of the Guru's Eight Aspects, according to the tradition of Nyima Lung monastery.

¹¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976: 82.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kohn, 2001: 197.

The dialogue between the Clown and Old man

gZhon nu blo lden

Zhonu Loden says

ha ha mgo la mtshar dkar ma gyon rung/ /

Ha! Ha! You do not need to wear aesthetic cloth on your
head,

dgun 'khyabs ba mo 'di na med/ /

There isn't any winter frost here

lcang dkar dbyugs pa ma bzung rung/ /

You needn't hold the white staff of a willow tree

sgo khyi btsen po 'di na med/ /

There isn't a powerful, harsh dog here

ldem ldem gom pa ma spo rung/ /

You need not walk in a graceful way,

bro gar 'chams sa 'di na men/ /

This isn't a place for dance

rgan po sa cha gang nas yin/ /

Old man, where are you from?

da nang 'ong ba gang nas 'ong/ /

Today, where are you coming from?

do nub 'gro ba gang du 'gro/ /

Tonight, where are you going?

don dag gang gi don la 'ong/ /

For what reason are you here?

mi rgan gyis

The old man says

ha ha go la yag po gyon lugs la/ /

Ha! Ha! One who wears a nice dress,

lo rugs cor 'go can zhig 'dra/ /

Looks like a disgusting man

kha rgyag rtse mo mkhas lugs la/ /

One who is articulate enough,

ma rabs blo rig can zhig 'dra/ /

Is like a contemptible low-class people

mgo nag rgas pa phya lugs la/ /

A black head with the behaviour of an old man

grog po ngan pa can zhig 'dra/ /

Is like an evil friend

bzang ngan pha gcig bu la yod/ /

There is good and bad even between sons of the same
father

gzhon nu sha rgyas khrag rgyas dus/ /

Youthful times of development

khyod las lhag cig nga yang yod/ /

I have some more aspects than you

kha mig dbang po gsal ba'i dus/ /

When the senses are clear/explicit

khyod las mkhas cig nga yang yod/ /

I have more good qualities than you

nga 'chi med ngo mtshar gnas nas yin/ /

I am from the land of deathless wonderers

da nang 'khor ba'i gnas nas 'ong/ /

Today, I am coming from the land of cyclic existence

do nub mthar pa'i gling du 'gro/ /

Tonight, I will proceed to the land of happiness

Pad ma byung gnas mjal du 'ong/ /

I am here to see Padma Jungne

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gzhon nus.....

*sprul pa'i sku mchog pad ma byung gnas 'di ring 'dir byon
pa gang nas yin khyod rang gis shes song?*
Do you know where the miraculous Padma Jungne comes
from?

rgyas pos.....

*ha ha... gnam la 'ja' 'tshon snga lnga'i 'od kyis gur spubs
cing//*
Ha! Ha! The sky is pitched with the tent of the glow of a
five-coloured rainbow

bar snang la me tog sil ma'i char babs//
In the middle, the drizzling rain of flowers

*sa gzhi la au ldum wa ra'i me tog 'khrungs tshul dpag na,
sprul pa'i sku mchog pad ma byung gnas 'di ring 'dir byon pa
thag chod do//*

If I see the blooming flower of Udumvara, the miraculous
Padmasambhava has definitely come here today.

gzhon nus.....

mi rgan khyod rang la lo ngo gang tsam red?
Hey! Old man, how old are you?

rgyas pos.....

*he he mi rgan nga rang lo ngo nyi stong dgu brgya sum cu
so gnyis yin la//*
Ha! Ha!... I, the old man, am two thousand, nine hundred
and thirty-two years old.

**Zhonu Loden bows down and pays respect, and
receives the blessings from the old man**

yang gzhon nus...

kho sangs rgyas sha kya thub pa dang lo ...yin pa 'dra//
Oh! Then his age must be equivalent to a Buddha.

*he he.... mi rgan tshe ring po zhig re 'dug pas rgyas can
zhig yin gyi red pas/ nga tsho la sprul pa'i sku mchog pad ma
byung gnas kyi nam thar dang ngo sprod mdor bsdus zhig
bshad rogs gnang dang//*

Hey! You seem to be a long-lived person and more enlightened being, so could you please tell us the condensed biography and introduction of the miraculous Padmasambhava?

mi rgan nas...

*sprul pa'i sku mchog pad ma byung gnas dngos 'dir
bzhugs yod pas/ nges vajra gu ru'i lung drang mi dgos kyang/
da kha mi mangs thabs med rogs kyis dri nan//
wa mi rgyal ka med dr'i 'gram lcags//
khyi mi bzugs thabs med rkun mas nag bur//¹⁴
zer ba'i dpe ltar/ khyod kyis dri dus nged kyis bshad dgos
te/drin bshad dgos/ slab na slob dgos te zer ba ltar red/ da
kdo tsam zhig bshad na//*

As miraculous Padma June himself is present here, I do not feel that I have to explain about him. However, I have no way as I am asked to do it...

Then the old man narrates the detail story of Padmasambhava.

¹⁴ These citations/dialogues are actually found in the text called *Lugs kyi nam bshad* (Buddhist philosophical text). However, it seems that some of the informants do not seem to be aware of these verses. Some of the informants believe that these dialogues are orally transmitted from the past and became the culture and tradition in Nyima Lung monastery, and in the Eight Manifestation Dance of Padmasambhava.

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