

Masked Dance of Sumthrang Mountain Deity

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Abstract

Masked Dance of Mountain Deity (*Tsän Cham*) of Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzong in Ura, Bumthang is a unique performing art that has been inherited since the 15th century. When the 23rd 'Nyörab Jam'yang Drakpa Özer ('Jam-dbyang grags-pa 'od-zer; 1382–1442) planned to slip away to Tsari (Tibet) for meditation clandestinely, the *Drak Tsän* Dorje Dradül appeared and beseeched lama to stay at Sumthrang, simultaneously performing this masked dance along with four of his retinues. Consenting to the plea made by the deity, the lama then taught the dance to his disciples. The dance then became part of annual festival called Sumthrang Kangsöl held from 25th Day of 9th Month of the Bhutanese lunar calendar for 5 days. The dance is known by various names: Lha Cham (dance of god), *Tsän Cham* (dance of mountain deity), and *Ta Cham* (dance of horse) as the masked dancers ride horses. Today, some episodes of this dance is performed at Zhongmä lhakhang in Lhuntse Dzongkhag as this lhakhang was built by Jam'yang Drakpa Özer. This paper will try to give detailed information on this unique festival, especially the *Tsän Cham* as it is critically endangered. Further, it will also try to bring out the historical accounts of the lhakhang and other associated sites. This paper will be based on limited available manuscripts, historical publications and other written sources which will be further supplemented with the existing myths and legends that are available.

Introduction

Bhutan having embraced its culture as one of the core lifelines of every Bhutanese has ensured its sovereignty and independence since time immemorial. Due to this attributes

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and also because of the wind of change creeping into Bhutan lately, culture is given due importance in preservation and safeguarding of its values and forms, so as to pass on to the future generations. To safeguard and ensure protection and promotion, culture is identified as one of the four pillars of Bhutan's guiding developmental philosophy of Gross National Happiness, besides incorporating a separate Article in the Constitution of Kingdom of Bhutan.

Bhutanese culture is closely associated with religion that the people of Bhutan seek their solace from. As Buddhism is being widely practised by the inhabitants of Bhutan, the cultural forms, values, and beliefs are deeply embedded in the Buddhist principles. As a result, the places or elements of historical and religious importance have also a great significance in its culture as well. Thus, these three subjects are inseparably blended, particularly from the advent of Buddhism in the 8th century.

As culture was given utmost importance in any spheres of activities in the country, it primarily focuses on the tangible aspects of culture, such as movable and immovable cultural properties as it is generally susceptible to the natural and human-induced disasters. But with modernisation and globalisation gaining its heights in the Bhutanese society, it has posed a great threat to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that has been transmitted through generations to generations orally or aurally. It has forced the ICH bearers and holders to be awake and devise necessary counteractions, which is why various mechanisms are in pipeline to uphold those invaluable heritages.

Amongst five domains of ICH categorised by UNESCO, ICH element on cultural expression of a local festival specifically on *Tsän Cham* or Masked Dance of Mountain Deity of Sumthrang in Ura, Bumthang under the Performing Arts will be singled out in this paper. The performance of this masked dance has been challenged by lack of human and financial resources to carry forth the age-old tradition of Sumthrang

lhakhang. So, it is hoped that this paper will help to preserve and promote the masked dance through dissemination of historical, cultural, religious and spiritual importance and significance of this masked dance.

Brief Account of Sumthrang in Ura, Bumthang

Bumthang is located in central Bhutan. It is the hub of religious and spiritual sites and festivals. It has 111 lhakhang (lHa khang; temples) and *gönba* (dGon pa; monasteries), 300 *chöten* (mChod rten; stupas), 36 '*menchu* (sMan chu; medicinal water), 46 *drubchu* (sGrub chu; sacred spring) and 12 '*ne* (gNas; pilgrimage sites).¹ Some great Buddhist masters even coined a term that “Bumthang is the hidden valley of gods.” Bumthang Dzongkhag² has four Gewogs³; Chokhor Gewog, Tang Gewog, Ura Gewog and Chumey Gewog. Ura Gewog alone has nine lhakhang in good condition, including Sumthrang lhakhang. Bumthang Dzongkhag is a high altitude Dzongkhag with an elevations ranging from 2400 to 6000 metres above sea level. Therefore, majority of people depended on subsistence livestock farming, but due to global phenomenon of rising temperatures, people are now inclining towards agriculture farming as their main source of income. In 2004, Bumthang even commenced cultivating paddy. The population of Bumthang was 16,116 in 2013.

Situated at an elevation of 3,100 metres above sea level, Ura village is 50 kilometres from Jakar Dzong in Bumthang on the east-west highway. Particularly in Ura, majority of people depends on livestock as it is the coldest Gewog amongst the four. Sumthrang⁴ village is located on a gentle slope above

¹ Bumthang Dzongkhag at a Glance, 2013

² Dzongkhag is district. Bhutan is divided into twenty Dzongkhags and further sub-divided into 205 Gewogs.

³ Gewog is sub-division under district or sub-district (Drungkhag).

⁴ There are two accounts in deriving this name: when the founder of the Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzhong threw mini-drum into the sky to look for the destined site, the drum landed at the current site with a sound “So-’Brang” (So-drang). Hence the name of the place became So-drang and later it became Sumthrang. In another account, the

Pangkhar village at about 5 kilometres away from Ura village. Sumthrang village has about 18 households.

Founding of Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzung

At about 47 years of age, 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje (1179–1265) approached his root master who prophesied that his destined place would be in Mon (Bhutan) and the lineage of 'Nyö Gäwa Lhanangpa (1164–1224) and the work of tutelary deity Dorje Phurpa would firmly flourish there. In one week's time in a trance, he envisioned his future seat: a village where the flowers bloomed even in winter; scree formed a swastika symbol in the east as a sign of firmness and stability; as a sign of purity and everlasting lineage, flowing of milk-like rivulet in the west; as a symbol of expanding Buddhism, presence of rocky mountain resembling religious texts in the north; as a symbol of spreading its fame, a conch-shaped land in the south; and finally, at the centre of these four directions stands a four-sided stone pillar which bears potion during special occasions.

He then set forth to Bhutan with his sacred religious objects of body (sku), voice (gsung), mind (thugs), qualities (yon tan) and activities (phrin las). When he reached on the Mönla Karchung pass, *Hor dü* (demon) tried to impede his journey, resulting in subjugation and claiming the life of the demon. So 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje carried the skull and chest skin of the demon, which can be seen in the Samdrup Chödzung even today.

He crossed the pass and reached Sumpa in Ngang village of Chökortö (Bumthang). He built a stupa (chöten; kChod rten) and meditated there to confirm the envisioned place but since there was no sign of that envisioned place, he left in search of the right place, leaving behind one set of sacred religious

name of the place was based on the three routes converging at the place; *gSum* (sum) denotes three and *Phrang* (Thrang) denotes path or route.

object even though the public of that place requested to extend his stay.

He came across a pass which then was named Zhangma La on account of being too tiresome to reach on its summit. Just below the pass towards Ura, remains of a stone seat (Zhugthri; bZhugs khri) and two hitching posts to tie his horses can still be seen under a *Abies densa* tree. The search of a right place was disrupted by negative forces, and he landed on the side of Shingkhar in the east rather than in Sumthrang. Since the environment resembled to his clairvoyance, he camped in close proximity to Shingkhar village below a cliff. But darkness enveloped the encampment and became night filled with stars in the sky although it was day time. So, he surmised that it was not the right place, and even the name of the place became Mumbrag from the word ‘*Mendra*’ meaning ‘supposedly not’. So under such a confused state, he took out and hit the mini-drum called ‘*Ngachung sangwai drukdir*⁵ that gave a sound “*som-drang*” and flew away towards north. At this miracle, he followed behind and reached a pass from which he could clearly see the envisioned place with all its signs and symbols. So he exclaimed it is nice to see the right place and hence the name of the pass became Thonglek La (mThong legs la; mThong- see, Legs- good, La-pass). Today, it is called Tonglek La due to pronunciation variations over the years.

When ‘Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje reached at the four-sided stone pillar, the mini-drum also landed with a sound “*som-drang*.” He then meditated and had vision of his Activity God Dorje Phurpa and also subjugated the mountain deity of the locality, Dorje Dradül, who committed to carry out any activities of the Chöje⁶. At the site, there was a lake source from which a white lady emerged and offered the land and a stone with a conch on it. He then built the temple on that

⁵ Religious mini-drum which is a Thukten (thugs rten), sacred mind religious object of ‘Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje

⁶ A noble family or a person who upholds and practices one or more Buddhist traditions.

land in 13th century and named as Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzung.

Route Followed from Tibet to Bhutan

Although it is not very clear where he really was when he commenced his journey, 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje set off to Lhasa to offer his prayers to Jowo, and then after visiting Tsari, he set off to Mön (Bhutan). He reached Mönla Karchung pass where *Hor dü* (demon) was subjugated when it tried to impede the progress of his journey to the envisioned destination.

After crossing the Mönla Karchung pass, he descended to Ngang in Chökortö in Bumthang. He tried to settle at Sumpa but devoid of any promising omens, he resumed his journey in search of the right place, even disregarding the plea made by the community for his presence there.

He felt refreshed when he saw an enormous pass in a distant east. He reached at the top of the pass, which is now called as Zhangma La. A stone seat and two hitching posts to tie horses are still seen on the pass under an *Abies densa* tree on the way towards Ura from that pass. On resuming the journey, Lama and the entourage were duped towards Shingkhari due to evil forces' ruse. At Sa-tsham Pokto, on the apex of the boundary mountain of Sumthrang and Shingkhari, a chunk of Tibetan grass, *bötsa*, is grown from faeces of horse which still grows there. He then camped in close proximity to Shingkhari village that resembled his envisioned place at Mumbrag – cliff in the north and water in the west. Since the signs did not favour him, he followed the mini-drum or 'Ngachung sangwai drukdir's sound and direction. The entourage reached a pass from where he could clearly see the envisioned place with all its signs and symbols depicted in that land, and the name of the pass became Thonglek La. 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje and his entourage safely reached at the destined place at Sumthrang in Ura.

Founder of the Samdrup Chödzong

'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje alias Dechok, the founder of Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzong was the 18th 'Nyörab⁷ lineage holder. He was born to the 17th 'Nyörab, Gäwa Lhanangpa and Lhacik Dechokma on the 15th Day of the 4th Month of Earth Pig Year of the Lunar Calendar in 3rd Rabjung corresponding to 1179. At the age of 15, he started receiving teachings, empowerments and transmissions of 'Nyö tradition from his father and uncle. Besides, he received special education on secret tantric form of Vajrayana and teachings, empowerments, and pith instructions on Dorje Phurpa from 'Ngagchang 'Neljor Tsemo (sngags 'chang rnal 'byor rtse mo) of Chimphug Drak'mar Kewtshang (mChims phug brag dmar ke'u tshang). He then underwent intensive solitary meditation practice into the mountains and other secluded retreat places for nine years that triggered visualization of his deities, masters and dakinis.

At the age of 47, when he visited his master during the visit of Samyā and Yarlung in Tibet for merit-making on account of his mother's death, the lama instructed him to establish his dharma activities in Bhutan. Thus accordingly, he followed the route to Bhutan and founded Samdrup Chödzong in Sumthrang, Ura.

As per the vision that he had experienced in a state of trance, he followed to Shing'nyer and built a lhakhang. Upon completion, he meditated there and experienced the same

⁷ Lineage of 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje from 'Nyö Je Jathul Karpo who was the first 'Nyörab lineage holder. Literally, *sMyos* ('Nyo) refers to 'psychosis,' and *Rabs* (Rab) refer to 'series or successive.' Hence, when these two words are combined, it becomes *sMyos rabs* ('Nyörab), and it literally means 'successive 'Nyö lineage.' This lineage is said to have started from a single parent who lost all his/her (some texts mentioned that it is a king, while in some text, a queen is mentioned) three sons in a tragic incident. Due to this unbearable loss, he/she became mentally unstable. However, an intercourse with a god progenerated a child, and the lineage extended from this became widely known as 'Nyö(rab).

miraculous omen of blooming flowers in winter. Even today, although the *Sew shing* shrub is grown in the village, it does not bloom in winter except at the two lhakhangs.

After leaving a lineage holder at the request of public, he passed away on the day of Lord Buddha's Descent from Tushita Heaven in 1265, leaving a son named Zhikpo Trashig Singge (zhig-po bkra-shis; 1237–1322).

Lineage of 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje

'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje is the son of Gäwa Lhanangpa, whose root spiritual master was Drigung Kyobpa Jigten Gönpö (1143-1217), the founder of the Drigung Kagyü⁸, and his father was 'Nyö Drakpa Pel (1106–1183). Gäwa Lhanangpa propagated Lhapa Kagyü, sub-sect of Drigung Kagyü in western Bhutan. However, Gäwa Lhanangpa's lineage traces back as far as the 'Nyö Je Jathul Karpo. The following is the successive lineage from first 'Nyö Jathul Karpo until the present lineage holder 'Wangdra Jamtsho, the 45th 'Nyö Chöje, where Gäwa Lhanangpa is the 17th 'Nyö and his son 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje is the 18th 'Nyö as given below:

1. 'Nyö Je Jathul Karpo (gNyos [myos;smyos] rje bya-thul dkar-po),
2. 'Nyö Je Tsänpo (gNyos rje btsan-po),
3. Sengge Shok (Seng-ge shog),
4. Takhar (rTa mkhar),
5. Je Zhang De (rJe Zhang sde),
6. Dring De ('Bring sde),
7. Dringchung ('Bring chung),
8. Palyön (dPal yon),
9. Tshulyön (Tshul yon),
10. Guru,
11. Lhaphen (lHa 'phen),
12. Thugä alias Pangla Meshor (mThu-rgyal alias sPang-la me-shor),

⁸ Sub-sect of Kagyü tradition

13. Yöntän Drakpa (Yon-tan grags-pa; 967–1072),
14. Tsangtsha Dorje Lama (gTsang-tsha rdo-rje blama; 1008–1086),
15. Pelgi Sengge (dPal-gi Seng-ge; 1054–1120),
16. 'Nyö Drakpa Pel (gnyos grags pa dpal; 1106–1183),
17. Gäwa Lhanangpa Sangge Rechen (gnyos rgyal-ba lhanang-pa sangs-rgyas ras-chen) alias Ziji Pel (gZi-brjid dpal; 1164–1224),
18. Dechok (bDe mchog) alias 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje (gNyos-ston 'khrul-zhig chos-rje; 1179–1265),
19. Zhikpo Trashi Singge (zhig-po bkra-shis; 1237–1322),
20. Vajra Dūpa alias Phurpa Tshering (ba-zra 'dus-pa; 1262–1296),
21. Dewai Penjo (bDe-ba'i dpal-'byor; 1291–1359),
22. Pelden Singge (dPal-ldan seng-ge; 1332–1384),
23. Jam'yang Drakpa Özer ('Jam-dbyang grags-pa 'od-zer; 1382–1442),
24. Namkha Samdrup (Nam-mkha bsam-grub; 1398–1459),
25. Jangsem Zhonü (Tshenchen) (Byang-sems gzhon-nu'i mtsan-can; 1422–1494),
26. Pelden Zangpo alias Trashi Gäpo alias Shri Bhadra (dPal-ldan bzang-po; 1458–1518),
27. Tshungmä Drakpai Tshenchen (mTshungs med grags-pa'i mtsan-can; 1474–1523),
28. Zhonu Tempa (gZhon-nu bstan-pa; 1489–1537),
29. Sang'ngag Tandri/ Sangdak Tshenchen (gSang-sngags rTa-mgrin/ gSang-bdag mtsan-can; 1506–1569),
30. Pema Tandri/ Pema Tshenchen (Padma rTa-mgrin/ Pad-ma'i mtsan-can; 1539–1609),
31. Dungdzin Karma (gDung-'dzin karma; 1567–1631),
32. 'Ngödrü Gätshä/ 'Ngödrü Jamtsho (dNgos-grub rgyal-mtshan/ dNgos-grub rgya-mtsho; 1610–1666),
33. Pema Chörab (Pad-ma chos-rabs; 1627–1687),
34. Gelek Tendzi (dGe-legs bstan-'dzin; 1667–1746),
35. 'Wangchen Norbu (dBang-chen nor-bu; 1701–1775),
36. 'Wangdra Jamtsho (dBang-drag rgya-mtsho; 1730–1748),
37. Lha'wang Chöjin Zangpo (Lha-dbang chos-sbyin

- bzang-po; 1748–1808),
38. Thrinlā Jamtsho (Phrin-las rgya-mtsho; 1777–1825),
39. Damchö Singge (Dam-chos seng-ge; 1792–1816),
40. Tshultrim Dorje (Tshul-khrims rdo-rje; 1809–1872),
41. Norbu 'Wangä (Nor-bu dbang-rgyal; 1841–1891),
42. 'Namgäl Khandro (rNam-rgyal mkha'-'gro; 1869–1888),
43. Künzang Ngödru (Chos-rje kun-bzang dngos-grub; 1887–1953),
44. Tshewang Tandri (Tshe-dbang rta-mgrin; 1910–1973),
and
45. 'Wangdra Jamtsho (dBang-grags rgya-mtsho; b.1949)
– Present lineage holder.

Origin of *Tsän Cham*

The *Tsän Cham* was conceived by 23rd 'Nyörab Jam'yang Drakpa Özer, the younger of the twin brothers. When he planned to leave Sumthrang clandestinely to Tsari (Tibet) for meditation, *Drak Tsän* Dorje Dradül appeared and performed a masked dance along with four of his retinues, requesting the lama to stay at Sumthrang.

Lama then taught the same dance to his pupils and was instituted at Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzone. Thus, this festive celebration became annual event and the masked dance was known as *Lha Cham*, 'dance of god.' However, some call it as *Tsän Cham*, 'dance of mountain deity,' as the dance was presented by *Drak Tsan* Dorje Dradül of the Sumthrang cliff. Some even call it as *Ta Cham*, 'dance of horse,' as the masked dancers ride horses. However, these entire different names refer to a single entity of dance performed at Sumthrang lhakhang. In any case, since this masked dance was originated from the mountain deity of that community, it is considered as extremely sacrosanct. This *Tsän Cham* is performed during the annual festival held from 25th Day of 9th Month of the Bhutanese lunar calendar for five days.

Today, some episodes of this same dance are performed at Zhongmä lhakhang in Lhuntse, while the internal sacred dance of *Drak Tsän* is not performed there.

Composer of the Cham

Jam'yang Drakpa Özer and Tenpai Nima were born as twins to the 22nd 'Nyö Pelden Singge and mother Jangchu Dräma. The twin brothers were born on the 15th Day of the 1st Month of the Water Dog Year of the 6th *Rabjung* corresponding to 1382. They were the 23rd 'Nyö. Jam'yang Drakpa Özer was the younger twin. From his elder brother, Tenpai Nima, the royal families of Bhutan are descended.

At the age of 3, his father passed away and had to learn reading, writing and other teachings particularly empowerments, oral transmission, and admonitions on *Künzop* (samvriti [satyam]; totally obscured truth) and *Döndam* (Paramartha [satyam]; absolute truth) from his father's disciple. From the age of 6 until his brother's departure to Tibet at the age of 29, the twin brothers presided over their father's throne on rotational basis. At the age of 15, his mother and brother knotted him with Bum Kima ('Bum sKyid ma) of Ngangpai Dung (Ngang pa'i gdung; aristocratic of Ngang in Chökortö) lineage and gave birth to a son Namkha Samdru.

At the age of 18, he left for Tibet and received teaching on Kagyü (bKa' brgyud) from Karmapa Dezhin Shekpa (Kar ma pa bDe bzhin gShegs pa; 1384–1415) and Bodong Künkhen Jigdre (Bo dong Kun mkhyan 'Jigs bral; 1376–1451). At Druk Ralung, he obtained ordination from Jamtrul Yeshe Rinpoche ('Jam sprul Ye shes Rin po che) and received teachings on *Chakchen Chödrü* (Phyag chen chos drug; the six practices of Maha Mudra) and went into retreat for three years in the mountains of Ralung. However, at the age of 23, his brother Tenpai Nima had dispatched a message regarding their mother's poor health. Instantly, he returned to Sumthrang. Residing there for few months, then he left to Sikkim, India. At Drakar Trashiding (Brag kar bKra shis lding), he met with

Rigdzin Gödemchen (Rig 'dzin rGod ldem can; 1337–1408) and subsequently received teaching on great secrets of Buddhism. He then entered into meditation for three years, mastering the accomplishment of his mind from complexities and fabrications. At the age of 28, he returned to Sumthrang via Paro. In the following year, when his brother left for Tibet, he took charge of the throne and gave teachings to over 200 pupils around the country. He also built monastery in the middle of the Sumthrang cliff from the gifts accumulated from his devotees. The monastery is known as Nubling *Gönba*. Today, it is under renovation. Besides, he also tamed the demonic naga of Kazhi cliff in Kurtö and built a *chöten* and a lhakhang. He also renovated Khibur [Khyi-nyal] and constructed Zhongmä lhakhang in Lhuntse Dzongkhag. He pioneered in opening the place of pilgrimage at Shingkhari Cliff in Kheng Zhemgang and constructed a temple along with its inner relics and objects. Moreover, he also built lhakhangs and appointed a *'la-tshap* (acting lama) each at Wamling, Khomshar, Radi, Kalamti, Drokar, and Goshing in Kheng Zhemgang, and established a great deal of activities of vajrayana Buddhism.

At that time of the period, Sumthrang has gained popularity in terms of disciples and devout patrons as far as Lhodra in Tibet, Pethang in India, and Sikkim. Thus, some of these places even today have to invoke the same deity of Sumthrang and perform *Ta cham* of Sumthrang, where the Sumthrang Chöje had the custom of visiting those places for religious purposes. As a result of spreading popularity in and outside Bhutan, he realised that all such name and fame are subject to hindrance in establishing collective merits. So he preferred going to Tsari in Tibet for meditation. Concocting this idea, he tried to slip off from Sumthrang clandestinely. But *Drak Tsän* (Mountain deity) Dorje Dradül appeared before him and requested him to stay, to which he acquiesced.

He then submitted all his time for the prayers, having attended to the calls of other's welfare and finally at the age of

61 in the Water Dog Year of the 7th *Rabjung* corresponding to 1442, he passed away leaving behind miraculous relics.

Tsän or Mountain Deity Worship in Bhutan

Bhutanese worship *lha* (lHa; deity of heaven, god), *'lu* (Klu; Skt. Naga; netherworld being with human body joined to reptilian lower body), *tsan* (bTsan; mountain deity), *sabda* (Sa bdag; deity of land), *'näda* (Nas bdag; lord of the soil or earth), *zhida* (gZhi bdag; lord of the settlement), *kä lha* (sKye lha; natal deity), *dra lha* (dGra lha; protector deity), *sok lha* (Srog lha; life deity), *pho lha* (male god), *mo lha* (female god), *'ü lha* (Yul lha; deity of the village), and other deities and spirits. These practices came into force during Bon practices and pre-Buddhist beliefs, which is continued till today as Buddhism assimilated Bon in some aspects.

Broadly, there are two levels of numinous beings: enlightened beings (nang and gsang ba'i chos skyong) and haughty and wrathful deities residing within the six spheres of existence. The deities identified above will fit into this category of beings. They are the protector of the people ('jig rten pa'i srung ma/phyi'i chos skyong). These latter numinous beings reside in the landscape that is broadly stratified into three vertical layers: heavenly level (extra-terrestrial), the intermediate level (terrestrial) and underworld level (subterranean). *Lha* occupies extra-terrestrial level, human beings or *tsän* in the terrestrial level, and *'lu* in the sub-terrestrial level. Except for the heavenly gods, the abodes and citadels of these deities and spirits are sacred groves, rocks and cliffs, trees, hills, mountains, confluence of rivers, lakes, waterfalls and other unexploited areas on earth. Since these beings are worshipped as some sort of god, the sites are characterized by minimal human interference. Any interference and pollution to their abodes and citadels might result in unleashing storms of epidemics and diseases to the people concerned or to the community as a whole. During such cases, two types of invocation rites are performed: typical ritual for deities by monks based on invocation-text, and shamanic recitations or oral utterance through the medium of shamans like *pawo*,

pamo and *'neljom*. Even if such curses are not inflicted to the community and its people, invocation rites are performed once or twice depending upon their traditional practices. The deity-invocation involves yearly sacrifice of oxen, yaks, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry birds in early days. But now, Buddhist masters have substituted the sacrifice of live animals toward symbolic sacrifice with offerings of model or effigy of the animals, although a small piece of meats are required for the *tshō* (banquet offering).

These deities and spirits were subjugated by Guru Padmasambhava and other great masters in the service of dharma and to protect people and their habitats.

The *Tsāns* are fierce warriors, spirit residues of historical kings and heroes. Hence, *Tsān* is a fierce, red, helmeted warrior dressed in a kingly and knightly robe. *Tsāns* are usually found located atop crags, cliffs, waterfalls, or mountain passes. Similarly, the rocky cliff above Sumthrang lhakhang is considered the abode of *Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül*. The deity was subjugated by 18th 'nyö 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje, the founder of the site and converted him to protect dharma and people. Today, not only by the Sumthrang Chöje and its locality but the followers and monasteries that are closely affiliated to Sumthrang lamas worship the *Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül* for his protection and blessings.

Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül of Sumthrang

Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül of Sumthrang is regarded amongst the 'twenty-one laymen' (dGe bsnyen nyer gcig), which affirms that *Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül* of Sumthrang is also one of the deities, who was subjugated by Padmasambhava. However, it is not known which one is the *Drak Tsān Dorje Dradül* from the following twenty-one laymen. Yet it could be Tsari Dorje Dūdül or one of its retainers as 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje left for Bhutan after visiting Tsari.

'Nyenchen Thanglha, the powerful mountain spirit and the twenty-one non-humans in his retinue were not only bound

under oath but were caused to take the Buddhist layman's vows. The twenty one consists of four king (rGyal po) spirits; four section leaders (sDe dpon); four generals (dMag dpon); four demons (bDud po); and five workers (Las mkhan). The 'twenty-one laymen' (dGe bsnyen nyer gcig) are:

1. 'Nyenchen Thanglha Dorje Chokrab (gNyan chen thang lha rdo rje mchog rab),
2. Tisi Dorje Gangkar (Ti si rdo rje gangs dkar),
3. 'Magā Pomra (rMa rgyal spom ra),
4. Mangkhar Gang (Mang mkhar gangs),
5. Bulê Gang (Bu le gangs),
6. Jang Targoi Gang (Byang star go'i gangs),
7. Phoma Gangjo (Pho ma gangs jo),
8. Kulha Khari Gang (sKu lha kha ri gangs),
9. Tsang gi Jomo Kharag Gang (gTsang gi jo mo kha rag gangs),
10. Dorje Gangwa Zangpo (rDo rje gang ba bzang po),
11. Gätse Dumgang (rGyal rtse dum gangs),
12. Lachi Gang (La phyi gangs),
13. Tshering Gang (Tshe ring gangs),
14. 'Nanam Gang (sNa nam gangs),
15. Tidro Gang (Ti sgro gangs),
16. Odê Gungā ('o de gung rgyal),
17. Yarlha shampo (Yar lha sham po),
18. Sälje Gang (gSal rje gangs),
19. Howa Gangzang (Ho ba gang bzang),
20. Tsari Dorje Dödül (Tsa ri rdo rje bdud 'dul), and
21. Kongpo lai Gang (Kong po la'i gangs).

Distinctness of the *Tsän Cham*

Every community in Bumthang has its own time of festivity that is associated with the masked dances as an annual event like any other communities in the kingdom. Unlike masked dances of Pe'ling tradition and *Bö cham*⁹, Sumthrang has a

⁹ Generally, tantric [mask] dance is categorized into two: gods and humans. The mask dances performed by humans were termed as *Bö cham* ('Bod 'cham). Moreover, in olden days, the mask dances were

unique masked dance for its own community, composed by descendants of Gäwa Lhanangpa, 23rd 'Nyö Jam'yang Drakpa Özer. As the masked dance was performed by the *Tsän*, mountain [or cliff] deity, it is considered as a sacred *Tercham* (dGongs gter gyi 'cham; Mind Treasure Dance) that should be performed sacrosanct with special religious and spiritual significance rather than for mere public entertainment. This is the mind treasure of Jam'yang Drakpa Özer. It is performed by five masked dancers riding on a horse including the *Drak Tsän* Dorje Dradül himself with the Four Great Kings (who guard the four cardinal directions) – east, west, north, and south of their community.

Essence and benefit of the *Tsän Cham* Performance

The *Tsän Cham* is performed at Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzhong since the time of 23rd 'Nyö Jam'yang Drakpa Özer in 15th century. The core rationale behind this performance is to propitiate and reaffirm the relationship of the member of the community and the *Drak Tsän* Dorje Dradül, and to thank the successive lamas for their great contributions to the welfare of the community and the nation. Apart from these fundamental themes, there are few derived significances from this annual function.

It is a time for the local community to thank *Drak Tsän* Dorje Dradül and other deities for the prosperous year that they relished and welcoming their blessings and protections in the upcoming year. The festive is observed and celebrated to rejoice after perspiring efforts in their domestic livelihoods, such as farming and herding of animals. The time of the occasion assures them with bountiful stock as it coincides with the autumn season which is a harvesting hour of the people. Hence, it is fairly right to note that the moment is celebrated lavishly with grand feasts on the account of their bountiful harvest of the year, and engage themselves in social gathering, a moment where one's loved and dear ones can

mostly performed by Bö Garpa ('Bod sgar pa). Hence, it is popularly known as Bö Cham.

wine and dine from one pot under the same roof after a long separation, promoting social cohesion and community vitality.

The festive event also bears paramount spiritual values. People, not only from the locality but from around the country, try to make their presence during the festival to not only witness the unique masked dance of the *Drak Tsän* but also to get blessings from the masked dance and other sacred religious objects and relics that exist in the lhakhang since 13th century. It is an opportune occasion to access oneself to the living heritage such as relics and antiques of the past 27 successive lamas of the Samdrup Chödzone.

After attending the festive events with unwavering spiritual beliefs and commitments, it benefits the public with abundant yields, favourable weather, and excellent health, besides promoting harmonious living. In short, it results in a very prosperous year and harmonious living with the neighbours. These opulent consequences are no doubt attributed to the blessings of the deities of the vicinity.

Costume of *Tsän Cham*

Tsän Cham is performed by five masked dancers riding on a horse including the *Drak Tsän Dorje Dradül*. Each pony has a porter or syce each. Hence, the exact performer involved in this dance in the ground is ten. But it requires many more personnel behind the curtain. It requires monks to perform the religious activities inside the temple and few playing the religious instruments to make it more ritualistic and spiritual in nature. Out of five masked dancers, the leader is *Drak Tsän* and other four are the retainers of the *Drak Tsän*. The four retainers represent the Four Great Kings, who guard the four cardinal directions – east, west, north, and south of Sumthrang but the sceptres of the four retainers differ from

the Four Great Kings of the universe (rGyal chen sde bzhi; Catur Mahārāja)¹⁰.

Drak Tsän is exhibited in a dark red (or brownish) mask with red robe riding on a white-heeled black horse (rTa nag rting dkar). He holds a spear-headed small flagpole and a snake in his right hand while clamping a black bird (bTsan Bya) in his left hand. He has got wrathful appearance. Four of his retainers have plain expression wearing identical costume to that of their face colour. They wear white, yellow, red, and green costumes. The white masked dancer who guards east has got a lasso in his hands, while yellow masked dancer who protects south firmly holds bow in his left hand and arrow in his right hand. The red coloured masked dancer who defends west has a sword in his right hand and the green coloured masked dancer who shields north holds spear in his right hand, while their left hands are apparently empty. These four masked dancers have got same colour of horse (mask) as to their own costume colour.

During the masked dances, like in any other religious masked dances performed in Bhutan, it also involves similar religious musical items such as *Jali* (clarinet), *Dungchen* (large trumpet), *'Nga* (big drum), *Dribu* (bell), *Draru* (double-headed hourglass drum), and religious texts to invoke deities.

Proceedings of the Tsän Cham and the Annual Festival

The annual festival of Sumthrang village was held from 25th to 29th of the 10th month in olden days as the month was considered as 'month for hurling of ritual-cake for tantric practitioners' ('Ngagpa zor phang gi dawa). But now it is

¹⁰ In Buddhist faith, they are the Guardians of Four Cardinal Directions of the Universe. The Four Great Kings are:

1. Defender of the Area in the east (Yul khor Sung; Dhritarashtra);
2. Noble Birth in the south (Phak Kyepo; Virudhaka);
3. Ugly Eyes in the west (Chän Mi Zang; Virupaksha); and
4. Son of He who has Heard Many Things in the north ('Namthöse; Vaishravana).

rescheduled in the 9th month on the same date because of some management inconveniences. The most unique and sacred part of this festival is the masked dance of its *Drak Tsän*, hurling of ritual cake and exhibiting the sacred religious objects of Sumthrang Chöje, Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje. The annual festival is widely known as Sumthrang Kangsöl (bsKang gsol). This is to appease tutelary deities with religious offerings.

First Day Kangsöl – Tagön

This foremost day of the five-day religious festival is known as *Tagön* (sTa gon), preliminary ritual. The programme begins towards the evening of the 25th day of the 9th month of Bhutanese lunar calendar. The religious performance is commenced with the *Gekträ* (bGegs bskrad) performance, exorcism ritual for evil spirits, to clear obstacles for dharma activities. In accordance with the exorcism ritual, male and female masked dance of *Ging* is performed by two dancers inside the temple. Thereafter, the entire procession of lamas, the *Ging* masked dancers and the people move to all the houses in Sumthrang village, performing the ritual and dance. The masked dancers hold a bunch of fire each with tinder composed of sawdust mixed with kerosene. While lama swing religious bell reciting prayers and toss gravels and grains, the crowd following them will shout and whistle to expel the evil forces and bad lucks. Once all the houses have been visited and expelled the obstructing forces, they gather at the *Hom khung* spot to burn the negative forces in the triangular shaped *Hom khung* made from firewood piles.

Second Day Kangsöl – Tsän Cham

The second day of the festival is dedicated to the Mountain Deity of Sumthrang. Vajra Kila ritual performance commences as early as 2am and the masked dance program begins at sunrise in following sequence.

1. *Sipa Phomo* – Sumthrang *Gadpo Ganmo*
2. *Shinje Sacha Phomo Cham*
3. *Tsän Cham* (dance of Drag Tsän Dorje Dradul) is

- performed in the lhakhang
4. *Ta Cham* (Dance of the Tsän's four retinues) is performed in the courtyard of the lhakhang

Third Day Kangsöl – Drak lä

The ritual performances inside the lhakhang remains same but in the courtyard following masked dances and programmes are carried out for the public exhibition:

1. *Sacha Chung dzam*
2. *Zhana*
3. *Chaging* (Throwo Chui Cham)
4. *Tshoging* (Thromo Chui Cham)

Besides these dances at the show, there is a *Phüchang Gutsi* ceremony, Wine Libation Ceremony. The wine is specially brewed with utmost care from nine different cereals for this annual occasion. During this event, the *Phüchang* (the first sacred offering of wine) is contained in the priceless cauldron discovered by Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) from Membar Tsho (Burning Lake) in Tang, Bumthang, which is exhibited only for this occasion. After the wine libation ceremony, all the priceless thangka (scroll-paintings) of the Dharmapalas of 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje will be displayed when the incumbent Chöje offers his apologies for any kinds of misconducts and shortcomings during the year and the *Phüchang* will then be offered to the lama, (lay) monks and the people.

This day is marked with another important function called Drag lay (Drag las; fierce operation) or Drawo Drel (dGra bo bsgral; crushing enemies) ritual. It is a profound ritual of the Vajrakila. During this performance all the evil forces and elements are summoned and crushed with the Phurpa (three sided ritual dragger) and their spirits are liberated. This ritual along with the yogic dance which is part of the ritual is a special tradition of the Sumthrang Chöje lineage and it demonstrates of their tantric heritage.

Fourth Day Kangsöl – 'Nga cham

The day four of the Kangsöl is dedicated to the most sacred Mini-drum called '*Ngachung sangwai drudir*, a valued possession of Sumthrang lhakhang. The following masked dances are performed for the public:

1. *Sha dzam*
2. *Durda Cham*
3. '*Ngachung Cham*
4. *Chung zhi*
5. *Pholä Molä*

Fifth Day Kangsöl – Tojap

The *Tojap* (gTor rgyag) or hurling of large ritual cake event is held on 29th day of the 9th month. During this event a large crowd of people including lama and monks will move to the *Hom khung* spot along with two Garuda and four *Goma zhi* (divine guards) of Vajra Kila. They will perform ritual and dance, and crush all the negative forces and liberate their spirits. After the event, whole procession will return to the temple courtyard and perform dance of divine rejoicing. Then gathering inside the temple, lama and monks will perform conclusion ceremony with *Trashi 'Mölam* (Auspicious Prayers). With this, the five day *Kangsöl* festival will come to an end until the following year. However, on the 1st day of the following month, *Tang ra* (gTang rag), thanksgiving ceremony is performed for the deities.

Other Masked Dances Performed at the Festival

Besides the *Tsän Cham*, there are other masked dances performed at the festival to make it more elaborate and enjoyable one. The masked dances have their own significances as follows:

1. *Caging cham* – it is a dance of ten wrathful form of Vajra Kila (throwo chui cham) which represents a male deity, Dorje Zhonu (Phurpa; Vajra Kila). It is performed by 10 performers. The dance of *Pawai Ging*

(dPa' bo'i ging) was seen in the Pure Land (Dag pa'i zhing) in a trance by 24th 'Nyö Namkha Samdru, and hence he instituted the same dance which came to be known as *Caging*.

2. *Tsho Ging cham* – the female form of Phurpa is known as '*Neljom* (rNal 'byor ma), and hence the dance is known as *Thromo Chui Cham*. It is performed by 10 performers. The dance of male and female Phurpa was performed to invoke [Dorje] Phurpa, Activity Deity of 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje.
3. '*Ngachung cham* – invented and performed in tribute of '*Ngachung sangwai drudir*.
4. *Zhana cham* – the Black Hat Dance is performed to sanctify the ground. It is also known as '*Ngak cham* (sNgags 'cham), the dance of tantra. Since the lamas of Sumthrang were tantric practitioners, the dance is performed in this connection.
5. *Chung zhi & Yulima cham* – the dance of four Garuda emanated from Vajrapani. These dances are performed to suppress the deity of land and the nagas.
6. *Dre cham* or *Ke cham* – Dance of Phurba Goma zhi
7. *Durda cham* – the dance of the Lords of the Crematoriums.
8. *Sha dzam cham* – it is a dance of stags. The stag dance portrays the subjugation of the Wind God by Padmasambhava.
9. *Pholä Molä cham* – the dance of the Noble Man and Lady which concludes the five day Tshechu.
10. *Gadpo Ganmo cham* – it is a dance of old man and woman. It represents clown (Atsara) as well.

Other Religious Ceremonies at the Lhakhang

Besides this main festival, there are other religious ceremonies performed for the wellbeing of the community and country at large in Sumthrang lhakhang. These are:

1. On the 15th Day of the 1st Month – a ritual ceremony in honour of *chösung* and *yidam* Phurpa is performed. However, in olden days *Phurbi Drupchen* (Religious

Ceremony on Great Accomplishment of Vajrakilaya) was performed.

2. On the 10th Day of the 4th Month – Tshechu on *Gongdü* and *Treu chö* (birth anniversary of Padmasambhava) is observed.
3. On the 15th Day of the 5th Month – A ritual rite called *Sersung Chodpa* is performed to prevent hailstones from damaging crops.
4. On the 10th Day of the 8th Month – A *Tshepakme Throwo* is performed for long life.
5. On the 22nd Day of the 9th Month – the day is marked as Lord Buddha's Descend from Tushita heaven, *Lhabab Düchen*. Since Gyäwa Lhanangpa also died on that same day, *Kuchö Bumde* in honour of Gyäwa Lhanangpa is performed.
6. From 25th to 29th of the 9th Month – Annual Sumthrang Tshechu is held as presented above. In olden days it was held in 10th Month as it was considered as 'month for hurling of ritual-cake for tantric practitioners' ('Ngagpa zor phang gi dawa).
7. On the 1st Day of the 10th Month – a day-long *Tangra*, thanksgiving ceremony is performed in honour of the deities.
8. On the 26th Day of the 10th Month – Invocation of deities called *Lhachö* is held.
9. Finally, on the 1st Day of the 11th Month – Lay monks, *Gomchens* used to go for alms in olden days for their subsistence but now they spent their days on various activities ranging from business to religious wanderings.

Relics and Sacred Objects

Besides other sacred religious objects of *Ku* (body), *Sung* (speech), *Thu* (mind), *Yöntän* (qualities) and *Thrinlā* (activities), the most valuable mini-drum, '*Ngachung sangwai drudir* and bamboos from Tsari in Tibet, *Tsari Nyukma* (Kila wang) are still in the temple. It was brought by 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje when he left for Bhutan. Although the *Kila wang* is exhibited to the public on the 10th Day of 8th Month every year

coinciding with *Tshepakme Throwo* ritual, however, the priceless mini-drum is prohibited for public exhibitions.

In addition, the temple also houses '*mardung* (dead bodies) of Döndrup Zangpo, Pema Lingpa's father and '*Ani* Drupthop Zangmo, sister of *yab* Döndrup Zangpo.

Other Religious Sites Associated with the Dzong and the Successive Lamas

Gön 'Langdrang

'Langdrang monastery was located near Sumthrang lhakhang. Today the place is called as Kibthra Bung and it is covered under forest but the ruin of the monastery is still seen. Although the monastery was said to have constructed during the time of Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzong, during the time of Tenpai Nima (1382–?) the monastery was destroyed by fire. Tenpai Nima is the father of Döndrup Zangpo and grandfather of Tertön Pema Lingpa.

Sumthrang Durthrö

During the time when Pelden Zangpo alias Trashigyalpo alias Shri Bhadra (dPal-ldan bzang-po; 1458–1518) was 61 years of age, he told his disciples to cremate his body on the tortoise-like stone near the Samdrup Chödzong towards Gön 'Langdrang. He informed that if they find footprint of Goddess of Crematorium on the stone after his body is cremated, it would be tantamount to the Cool Grove of Cremation Ground (Dur khrod sil ba'i tshal) and whoever is cremated on that stone will not have to bear samsaric sufferings but would be directly liberated to higher realms.

After the death he was cremated there at the present spot but when the disciples came to collect the ashes after three days, it had already been taken by dakinis. But to their surprise, they have seen a footprint left on the stone. Since then the Crematorium (Durthrö) of Sumthrang became so popular.

Shing'nyer

Shing'nyer or Shinjar is located 15 kilometres away from Sumthrang towards Jakar, Bumthang. As envisioned, 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje built the Zhongar or Shing'nyer lhakhang. *Sew shing* (*Rosa sericea*???) shrub grows just below the lhakhang which blooms white flower even in winter season although it is very cold.

A lady from that village offered a venomous drink to 'Nyötön Thrulzhik Chöje. Knowingly 'Nyötön drank and poured the remaining on the stone table laid before him on which the cup was placed. Instantly, the stone table broke down due to the power of the venom. Lama then pointed his *phurpa* (vajra) on the other side of the valley and the forest caught fire, which exhibited his miraculous power shown against the venomous lady. Even today the *zhukthri* (stone seat) and the broken stone table can be seen in Shing'nyer.

Conclusion

In this paper, as the country is witnessing lots of robbery and pilfering cases of the sacred religious and other priceless items, the details of relics and other sacred religious items are not reflected. So, anyone spiritually motivated to know more about the relics and sacred objects may kindly visit Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzong in Ura.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage element on cultural expression of a local festival, particularly on *Tsän Cham* or Masked Dance of Mountain Deity of Sumthrang in Ura, under the performing arts not only bears cultural heritage but also spiritual significance that involves lots of beliefs, faith, respect and commitments from the performers as well as from the spectators. This specific ICH element which was on the verge of disappearance due to constraints in human and financial resources to carry forth is hoped to be safeguarded and promoted by writing this piece of information. However, the ICH element bearer is coordinating with the community members in finding masked dancers and other possible

resources to safeguard and promote in the interest of its long history of tradition and for the future generations.

By researching and writing this paper, it is hoped that not only will it preserve and promote this particular masked dance but also disseminate the historical, cultural, religious and spiritual importance and significances of this particular masked dance to the national and international folks.

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Oral Source

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Masked Dance of Sumthrang Mountain Deity

Pe'ling and 'Nyörab Lineage



