



Wind Horse Travel

Thimphu Festival Description, Schedule and their significance.

Thimphu Tsechu Festival

Thimphu Tsechu Festival is preceded by three-day Dromchoe(only open to Bhutanese).

Like most festival, this four day Thimphu Tsechu festival is held to honour Guru Rinpoche, who in 8th century contributed to diffusion of Tantric Buddhism, in whole of the Himalayan regions. It is held from 9th till 11th of the 8th month of Bhutanese calendar in Autumn.

Following is the description of dances, their religious or cultural significance and the approximate sequence or order in which it is held. Between the mask dances, there are some folk singing and dancing as well, which are not listed here.

Even if you are not one of Wind Horse Tours Guest, please feel free to use this as a Guide to visiting a festival in Bhutan. Most dances are same or similar in every Tsechu in Bhutan and even with those of Tibet.

Day One

The Dance of the Four Stag (Shacham)

This shows how Guru Rinpoche subdued the God of the Wind, who created much unhappiness in this world and rode the stag which was the Wind God's mount. The dancers in the role of stags wear yellow knee-length skirts and masks of horned deer.

Dance of the Three Kinds of Ging (Pelage Gingsum)

This is the visual representation of Zangtho Pelri, the heavenly paradise of Guru Rinpoche, as seen by Pema Lingpa. The dancers show how to subdue the demons that are creating obstacles to religion. Although the demons are fleeing throughout the three worlds, the Ging (beings that are emanations of Guru Rinpoche) with the sticks can find them, thanks to their knowledge. They catch them with the hook of

compassion, beat them with the stick of wisdom and tie them with the noose of compassion.

The Lords of the cremation grounds bring a box that contains the mind and the body of these demons. Then the Ging with the swords purify the atmosphere from evil deeds that are caused by the demons. After the demons have been vanquished, the Ging with the drums, dance with happiness. For the dance with the sticks the Ging wear animal masks, and for the dance with the swords and the drums, they wear terrifying masks.

Dance of the Heroes (Pacham)

When Pema Lingpa arrived at Zangtho Pelri, he saw Guru Rinpoche sitting among his assistants, in the centre of a limitless mandala (mystic geocentric figure) which

was made of lines of rainbow beams. This dance is to lead the believers of the human world into the presence of Guru Rinpoche. The dancers wear yellow skirts and golden crowns without a mask. They carry a small bell (dri-lbu) and a small drum (damaru).

Dance of the Stag and the Hounds (Shawo Shachi)

This dance represents the conversion of Buddhism of the hunter Gonpo Dorji by the Saint Milarepa. It is performed like a play in two parts. The first part takes place on the first day, and the second part is on the second day of the Thimphu festival. The first part is quite comical; the hunter's servant appears and jokes with the clowns. Then comes the hunter, crowned with leaves, carrying a bow and arrows and accompanied by his tow dog. The servant jokes very irreverently with his master who, before going hunting, must perform some

good-luck rituals. The priest who is called, performs the ritual in ways contrary to the Buddhist tradition, while the atsaras (clowns) and the servant go on with their jokes.

Dance with Guitar (Dranyeo Cham)

This is a cheerful dance to celebrate the diffusion of Drukpa lineage in Bhutan by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The dancers carry swords and are dressed in a circular head-dress, with heavy woolen clothes, felt boots, a long black skirt, yellow shirt and brown coat. One dancer carries a guitar called a dranyen.

Day Two

Black Hat Dance (Sha-na)

The dancers wear brocade dresses, wide brimmed black hats and black aprons with an image representing the protecting deities whose images are kept in the goenkhang (chapel). The black-hat dancers assume the appearance of yogis who have the power of killing and recreating life. It is believed that the gestures of the dancers' hands are transformed into mudras (sacred mystic gestures) and their feet, which pound the earth, form a mandala. The dancers first build a mandala and then cut the demons into pieces. Thus, they take possession of the earth in order to protect it and they dance the spe-

cial thunderbolt step to impress their power on it. Because of its importance, Shabdrung himself used to perform this ritual. This is a ground purification rite, also performed for the construction of dzongs, temples and chortens. Its aim is to conciliate the malevolent beings of the ground in order to take possession of the site from them.



Dance of the 21 Black Hats with Drums (Shaa Nga Cham)

In honour of the victory of religion over the enemies, the black hats beat the great drums of Buddhism. The sound of the drums represents the religion itself, which cannot be represented in any other way because it has no visible form. The dancers wear large black hats, felt boots and a long, colourful, brocade dress.

Kyecham

An accompanying dance is performed by dancers carrying swords and wearing knee-length yellow skirts, bare-feet and animal masks.

Dance of the Noblemen and the Ladies (Pholeg Moleg)

This dance depicts events in the life of King Norzang. It is a comical and very crude play rather than a dance.

The actors are two princesses, elderly couple and the clowns

(Atsaras). The prince goes out for war and leave the princesses in the care of the old couple. As soon as they depart, the clowns frolic with the princesses and corrupt the old woman who is also misbehaving. Upon the return of the prince (s), scandalised by the behavior, the noses of the princesses and the old lady are cut off as punishment. Then a doctor is called to put the nose back, but the old woman smells so much that the doctor has to use a stick because he does not want to approach her. Finally, the prince (s) marries the princesses and everything is reconciled.

Dance of the Drums from Dramitse (Dramitse Nga Cham)

The learned lama Kuenga Gyeltshen, son of the treasure finder Pema Lingpa, during his meditation, had a vision of Guru Rimpoche and his celestial paradise-Zangtho Pelri. The attendants of Guru Rimpoche take on the form of 100 kinds of peaceful and terri-



Dance of Stag and Hounds

fying deities. Wielding a big drum and curved drum stick in their hands, they perform a dance that leave lasting impression upon Lama Kunga Gyeltshen. Kuenga Gyeltshen goes to Dramitse Goemba, in eastern Bhutan, where his sister Choiten Zangmo, is a nun and establishes the tradition of this dance that he saw in his vision.

Dance of the Stag and the Hounds (Shawo Shachi)

This is the conclusion of the dance staged on the first day and is more serious and religious. Milarepa appears, wearing a long white dress and a white hat, holding a pilgrim's staff. He holds his right hand near his ear and sings in a soft voice. The dogs, the stag and the hunter arrive and Milarepa converts them with his song. The conversion is symbolised by a rope that the dogs and the hunter have to jump.

Day Three

Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds (Durdag)

This dance was composed by the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The dancers represent the protectors of the religion who live in the eight cremation grounds on the external edges of the symbolic Mount Meru. They wear short white skirts, white boots, and white skull masks.

Dance of the Terrifying Deities (Tungam)

This dance is performed with the aim of delivering the beings by showing them Zangtho Pelri. The costumes are beautiful brocade dresses, boots and terrifying masks. This dramatic dance has a very deep symbolic meaning, namely that a sacrificial murder is performed. First the dancers representing the gods try to enclose the bad spirits in a circle and in a box. Once this is done, Guru Rimpoche, in the form of Dorji Drakpo (fierce Thunderbolt), kills them with a *phorbu* (ritual dagger). He thus saves the world from them and delivers them into salvation at the same time.

Dance of the Rakshas and the Judgement of the Dead (Raksha Mangcham)

This is based on the Bardo Thodrol (Book of the Dead), a text hidden by Guru Rimpoche and rediscovered Karma Lingpa in the 14th century. This is one of the most important dances of the tshechu and is watched carefully by many old people in preparation for their own death. When all beings die, they wander in the Bardo (intermediate state) waiting to be led by the love of the Buddha into the pure fields where no suffering exists. However, the Buddhas assume both peaceful and terrifying forms. Those who didn't adore the Buddhist doctrine do not recognize the Buddhism in their terrifying form and are frightened and can not be led into the paradises.

Shinje Chhogyel, Lord of Death, estimates the value of the white and black deeds during the Judgement. Also present are the White God and Black Demon who has records of every being from birth, and all the helpers who emanate under numerous forms. These include; the ox-headed justice minister, the wild hog-headed helper who takes account of the black and white deeds, the Khyung-headed bird who holds a small sword to cut the root of the three poisons (ignorance, envy, anger), and a big hammer to destroy the rocky mountains of sins, a lion-headed helper holds a lasso representing love and an iron chain representing compassion, the fierce bear-headed helper holds the magical noose binding the means and wisdom together and a saw to cut selfishness, a serpent-headed helper holds a mirror reflecting all actions, and the monkey-headed helper weighs them on a scale. All these helpers are called rakshas and they separate the black actions from the white actions of all beings. The frightening Court of Justice cannot be avoided by the damned beings. But after enduring certain sufferings, their sins are washed away and

they are purified. This dance shows everyone that if they devote themselves to virtuous actions, they will be sent immediately to the pure fields and paradises and when after life, when they have to cross the Bardo and meet the helpers and the assembly of peaceful and terrifying deities, they recognize them as incarnations of Buddha and are delivered from the frightening Bardo.

The dance is like a play and lasts over two hours. First is the long dance of all the rakshas, the helpers of Shinje. Then Shinje himself appears, symbolised by a huge puppet holding a mirror. The White God and the Black Demon enter with them. The judgement begins. The Black Demon and his helpers perform a dance. The sinner, dressed in black and wearing a red hat, is frightened and tries to escape but is recaptured each time. From his basket a freshly severed cow's head is taken, implying that the sinner was responsible for killing it. As the judge weighs his actions, the White God sings of the merits of the man and the Black Demon expounds the sins. Finally a black strip of cloth symbolising the road to hell is spread and the sinner is sent to hell.

After a general dance everyone sits again. Another man arrives, clad in white and holding a prayer flag and a ceremonial scarf. The same scene is re-enacted and at the conclusion, a white strip of cloth, symbolising the road to heaven, is deployed. Fairies elaborately dressed in brocade and bone-ornaments come to fetch him. At this point, the Black Demon, furious at having lost this being, tries to grasp the virtuous man but the White God protects him.

Day Four

Dance of the Tamshing in Bumthang (Bumthang Ter Cham)

On the occasion of the consecration of the Tamshing Monastery in Bumthang, treasure finder Pema Lingpa had a dream and composed this dance to depict what he saw. The dance is performed in white, peaceful-looking masks and knee-length yellow skirts, carrying a little bell and drum. When this miraculously discovered dance is performed, all the demons in the country are appeased and the Gods rejoice.

Dance of the Lords of Cremation Grounds (Durdag)

The same as the dance performed on day three.

Dance of Ging and Tsholing (Ging dang Tsholing)

On the occasion of the consecration of the Samye (the first Monastery of Tibet), Guru Rimpoche initiated this dance to show the gathering of people, the Zangtho pelri (celestial paradise) . When the ging and tsholing perform this miraculous dance, they demonstrate their magical powers in order to discourage the demons. The ging wear orange skirts which hang like a skin, terrifying black and orange masks with a flag on top and holds a big drum. They represent the assembly of heroes, deities and fairies (khandroma) as well as the various male and female terrifying deities. On the outside dance the tsholing, who represent the protectors of religion, wearing long colourful dresses and terrifying masks.

The dance is a ceremony of purification before the arrival of Guru Rimpoche. People whistle to chase away bad spirits and the Ging hits everybody on the head with their drumsticks to chase impurity out of the body. After having destroyed the evil spirits (symbolised by an effigy in a black box), the Tsholing are chased away by the Ging who then stay alone to beat their drums and perform a victory dance.

Dance of the Eight Manifestation of Guru Rimpoche (Guru Tshen Gye)

The eight different forms of Guru Rimpoche are represented in this dance. With Guru Rimpoche are his two consorts, Mandarava on the right and Yeshe Tshogyal on the left.

This dance is a play and a dance at the same time. People believe in the manifestation of Guru Rimpoche during the dance. Guru Dorji Drakpo enters first, dressed in a colourful brocade dress and wearing a terrifying red mask

The eight manifestation enter as follows:

Tshokye Dorji in a brocade dress, a peaceful-looking, blue-green mask and carrying a small thunderbolt, Loden Chogsey in a red brocade dress, peaceful whitish mask, carrying a small drum and a bowl, Padsambhava wearing a red and yellow monk dress, white mask and tall red hat, Guru Rimpoche, himself, under a canopy, wearing a golden mask (accompanied by fairies – khandroma, as attendants, symbolised by small children with white masks).

Shakya Senge is wearing a red and yellow monk dress, Buddha-like mask with blue hair, and carrying a bowl.

Padma Gyalpo in a red brocade dress, orange bearded mask with white tufts of hair, carrying a small drum and a mirror

Nyima Yoezer wearing a golden brocade dress, yellow bearded mask with blue tufts of hair, and carrying a trident and Sengye Dradrok in a blue brocade dress and terrifying blue mask, followed by his retinue who also wear frightening blue masks.

Guru Rimpoche sits under a canopy, followed by Shakya Senge, while all the other manifestations dance turn by turn as people rush to be blessed by Guru Rimpoche. When the manifestations finishes their dance, they joins and seat with Guru Rinpoche.

Then appear 16 fairies who sing and perform two dances in front of the Guru and his manifestations. They dance, first holding drums, then small bells and small drums. They have brocade dresses and carved bone-ornaments. After these dances, everybody goes out in a long procession.

Religious Song (Chhoeshey)

This dance is performed to commemorate the opening of the gateway to the pilgrimage site of Tsari in Eastern Tibet by Tsangpa Jarey, founder of the Drukpa School. The costumes are similar to those in the Guitar Dance: elaborate and heavy woolen clothes, long black skirt, yellow shirt, folded brown coat, felt boots, a circular head-dress and a sword.