

# From War to Enlightenment

**A Bhutanese ritual reenactment celebrates a historic battle stratagem.**

By Karen Greenspan

**IN 1616**, the Tibetan lama Ngawang Namgyal barely escaped with his life. His entitlement to the throne of the Drukpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism was being challenged by a rival contender. The claim to leadership, and to the honorific title of Gyalwang Drukpa, rested on being recognized as the current reincarnation of the founder of the lineage, Tsangpa Gyare, who lived from 1161 to 1211. The powerful Tsang ruler of Tibet favored the rival candidate and sent armed soldiers with a warrant for Ngawang Namgyal's arrest. The lama fled to Bhutan, having received a vision, in a dream, that the guardian deities invited him to seek refuge there. In what proved to be a provocative act, he took with him a precious relic, a figure believed to have emerged from a vertebra in the cremated remains of Tsangpa Gyare. Ngawang Namgyal entered Bhutan through the northern region of Laya, and was welcomed with a local folk dance performed in his honor. In the years that followed, however, Tibetan forces repeatedly invaded Bhutan in their deter-



Image of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (center), surrounded by other iconic Buddhist figures: A lama who found refuge in Bhutan from successional rivalries in Tibet in the seventeenth century AD, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal is revered as a great spiritual, cultural, and military leader and is regarded as the founder of the Bhutanese state.



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mination to retrieve the venerated relic, which was supposed to be held by the rightful leader of the lineage.

In Bhutan Ngawang Namgyal is known by the title of *zhabdrung*, which means, "at whose feet one submits." He is credited with establishing the Drukpa Kagyu order as the principal school of Buddhism in Bhutan (Kagyu being one of the main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism). He is also credited with unifying and founding the Bhutanese state and with instituting a dual system of government (secular and religious). Among his celebrated feats was using a ruse

to repel, in 1639, a Tibetan invasion of the Punakha valley, where he was in residence and holding the relic. The large Tibetan force camped in the fields alongside the Mo Chu (Mother River), readying to attack. The Zhabdrung and his outnumbered local militia, the *pazap*, were stationed inside the valley's great fortress and monastery, the Punakha Dzong. But the Zhabdrung devised a stratagem that tricked the Tibetans into retreating empty-handed. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal marked the triumph by

gious ceremonies for several days inside the temple of the Punakha Dzong. These include constructing a mandala from sand, artifacts, and relics; prayers; and performing sacred dances as an expression of gratitude to the nation's



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Spectators cross the bridge in anticipation of witnessing the final day of the Punakha Drubchen, a series of rituals, historic reenactments, and dances initiated by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The events, in appeasement of one of the main protector deities of Bhutan, also celebrate a defeat of Tibetan forces in 1639.

guardian deities. The final day, which falls on the ninth day of the first month of Bhutan's lunar calendar (usually in late February), is a public occasion, in which designated members of the community dress up as warriors to reenact the historic battle. Citizens and tourists alike flock to observe the events.

**ON** the climactic last day, I am clothed to blend in with the throngs of villagers from the Punakha district who are gathering in attendance. The men are outfitted in their finest ceremonial long-sleeved, wraparound, belted robes, the women in long wraparound skirts and blousy silk jackets. Their multicolored woven fabrics mix with the cranberry robes of the monks, making for an eyeful.

I walk across the covered wooden bridge that spans the Mo Chu, entering the grounds of the Punakha Dzong. As I approach the entrance to the massive structure (also known

The bridge across the Mo Chu (Mother River) in Punakha Valley leads to the Punakha Dzong, the valley's fortress-monastery.

introducing the Punakha Drubchen, an annual period of rituals and sacred dances appeasing Mahakala, one of the main protector deities of Bhutan.

In commemoration of their transformative victory over the Tibetans, every year the Je Khenpo, Bhutan's head abbot and spiritual leader, and the Central Monastic Body, comprising more than 250 monks, perform private reli-





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Within the dzong courtyard, citizens costumed in battle gear perform a zhey, a ceremonial dance of praise. They represent the pazap, the local militia that protected Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal from Tibetan forces in pursuit of a sacred relic that he held.

as the Palace of Great Bliss), I see three village men dressed up as warriors at the top of the dzong's wooden stairway, originally designed to be lifted up in times of war, making the fortress impregnable to invaders. They chant and dance while two men continuously pull the thick ropes that ring the two dzong bells. Others set off firecrackers and shout war cries, thus filling the air with the sounds, smoke, and smell of gunpowder and warfare. Their dance (called *Beh*) is derived from a martial drill and training sequence. As they chant their war song, they balance first on one leg (rising up on the ball of the foot several times), and then the other—a display of mind-body strength and control. The simple steps followed by a turn, with a fist raised, signal that the war games have commenced!

These warrior dancers, 136 in all, are dressed up in black-and-

red battle gear, some with metal helmets decorated with flags, and are equipped with iron swords and shields as well as bows and arrows. They represent the pazap militia, the group of peasant warriors that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal could call up on short notice, since the fledgling nation could not afford a standing army. As in earlier times, today they are men from the eight great clans of the region between Thimphu (the capital city, some fifty miles to the southwest) and Punakha. Each clan sends 17 people to participate: 14 warriors, 1 cook, 1 head warrior (general), and 1 village headman. These symbolic regiments have been camping out together in the vicinity, practicing for two weeks prior to participating in the Drubchen rituals and the final day's reenactment.

I join the spectators who are entering the dzong by the staircase and assembling in the



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Pazap soldiers perform folk dances in the dzong courtyard, next to a giant urn filled with an offering of *chhang*, a Bhutanese alcoholic brew, which was collected for the occasion from every family in the community.

courtyard. There I wait with the other early birds as the soldiers finish their dance on the staircase and enter the courtyard. After several contingents of soldiers have gathered in the courtyard, they form a circle for a *zhey*, a slow dance of praise and spirituality that is identified with the coming of the Zhabdrung. Their chanting voices grow louder, gathering volume as additional soldiers keep arriving to join the circle. The leader chants a line and the entire group responds in chant. Performing the twenty-one sections of this men's ceremonial dance, these villagers, old and young, chant and move as one.

A group of little red-robed monk novices comes skipping through the entranceway to join the action. The warriors gather into a tighter circle, holding pinky fingers. They sway side to side while their arms swing easily up and down. The rhythm starts slowly, then gradually builds.

Various ministers of Parliament start to arrive, easily identified by their special colored ceremonial sashes. Looking very official, they stand outside the circle of dancers, conversing with the head monks. The courtyard is now filling up with spectators. We are all waiting for the Je Khenpo, who will officiate at the Casting of the Relic ceremony, commemorating Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's ingenious battle strategy.

**ALL** eyes are trained on the courtyard balcony as the district officials enter and take their places, followed by the yellow-robed Je Khenpo and his assistant head monks. The Je Khenpo takes his seat on his central yellow satin throne. The pazap warriors turn to face their spiritual leader in three tight lines stretching across the width of the courtyard, chanting and swaying in a stationary dance, linking pinkies or at times performing hand gestures.

Now the warrior dancers form two rows facing each other for the *chhang* offering ceremony. Chhang is a Bhutanese alcoholic brew; collected for the event from every family in the community, it is displayed in the courtyard in a vast, decorated metal urn. It will be offered to the deity Mahakala to invoke protection and benefits for the community for the coming year. Mahakala and other guardian deities are a holdover from the pre-Buddhist Bon religion that was present in the Himalayan region when Buddhism took hold in the eighth century AD. Buddhism overcame the resistance of the Bon power structure by absorbing its pantheon of deities, treating them as converts to and fierce protectors of the new faith.

In turn each of the eight headmen performs *Lemah*, a solo dance and chant before the Je Khenpo. Moving

forward through the two rows of soldiers toward the giant urn, the dancer first bows, then points his bow and arrow to the four directions. He then proceeds forward



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Pazap warrior dancers perform their martial drill sequence, a dance called *Beh*, as they exit the dzong.

and backward with a series of carefully placed steps, intoning a narrative chant in praise of his particular clan deities and recounting details pertaining to his clan's district:

It is an auspicious time here, and everything is as it should be. We have come to Punakha together with our deity . . . to participate in the Drubchen. Last year we had a wonderful time at the Drubchen, and this year we will do the same at this time of the auspicious waxing energies of the first part of the month.

The chhang ritual, performed by the pazap soldiers, head monks, and Je Khenpo, continues inside the temple. Meanwhile, the crowd starts moving out the great doorway of the dzong to find places on the outer grounds to watch the next act. (I am reminded of summer theater productions I have attended in parks, where the audience traipses along with the actors from location to location for each scene change.) Everyone is now sitting or standing in anticipation. Some horses, having been brought and saddled, are ready and waiting. Two monks start the steady chime of the dzong bells. The pazap warriors chant and dance the martial *Beh* once again on the grand stairway, this time wielding swords in their raised fists. They sing:

When Mahakala becomes incensed with anger, he turns into the wrathful Raven-Headed Mahakala, and then he roars like a thunder-dragon; that is when his shouting voice most protects the Buddhism of Bhutan. All evil spirits are vanquished. . . . Beware!





Young monks form part of the procession leading from the dzong to the shore of the river, where the final events of the Punakha Drubchen take place.

The wrathful lyrics conclude with a fierce war cry as the pazap warriors descend the great stairway. This goes on for what feels like forever—which indeed reenacts the Zhabdrung’s strategy. The pazap fighters performing the dance move down the stairway, then run around the back of the dzong to perform it over and over again, emulating the undersize Bhutanese militia that repeatedly marched out of the dzong, circled around to the rear, and reentered through a hidden back door to emerge again. Thus they fooled the Tibetan soldiers, lying in wait across the Mo Chu, into fearing that the Bhutanese had many more troops than they actually did.

Finally, a general in white-skirted costume with a tall, fringed, wine-colored hat descends the stairway, mounts a waiting horse, and is paraded around the central flagpole by his men, who carry a multicolored parasol above his head. Afterwards, his men lead him and his horse down to



The Je Khenpo, the nation’s head abbot and spiritual leader, assumes his active role in the day’s events. He wears Black Hat ritual attire, befitting a master of the esoteric practices of Tantric Buddhism.

the bank of the river. The other generals repeat this dramatic exit.

When the final pazap contingent has left the dzong grounds and crossed the wooden bridge to the opposite side of the Mo Chu (where the Tibetans had been camped), the entire monastic body parades in formal procession down the grand stairway and out of the dzong and assembles along the near bank of the Mo Chu. This climactic scene is a rainbow of color, as the monks wear ceremonial red hats and carry colorful banners, flags, and *torma* (ritual offerings of flour and butter sculpted into intricate, multi-colored forms). The monk musicians wear robes of vibrant hues in silk brocade and play drums, cymbals, conch shells, and trumpets, filling the air with sound. The entire community follows the procession and then splits, depending on which side of the river they want to view the event from.

**THE** main actor is the Je Khenpo, who performs the Casting of the Relic ceremony, which Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal initially performed. It reenacts the legendary action that capped the triumph over the Tibetan forces. The Je Khenpo is dressed in the Black Hat costume—worn by the Zhabdrung in some artistic depictions. Its distinguishing wide-brim, round black hat is strapped to his head and topped with a mirror, skull figure, and peacock feathers, each element a symbol replete with meaning. Over his black robe is an apron adorned with the electrifying and wrathful face of Mahakala. This costume is worn by accomplished masters of Tantric Buddhism, an esoteric practice for which Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal is renowned.

The Je Khenpo, accompanied by a monk carrying a resplendent parasol to shelter him, is at the center of the procession. They stop at a certain point by the river where the Zhabdrung performed this same ritual in the seventeenth century. A monk prepares a silver goblet with offerings—sands collected from the mandala that had been constructed



Pazap warrior dancers parade their mounted general around a flagpole outside the dzong.

as part of the Drubchen rituals inside the temple. The Je Khenpo pours them into the flowing water.

I see several underwear-clad young men in the river. I am told that the water is freezing at this time of year. In the grand finale of this historical reenactment, the Je Khenpo tosses a basketful of oranges, one by one, into the river. They symbolize the substitute relic that the Zhabdrung cast into the Mo Chu, tricking the Tibetans into believing the sought-after relic had been thrown into the river and lost forever in the current. With their morale already dampened by thinking themselves outnumbered, and then having no hope of securing the relic, the Tibetan warriors retreated.

Not discouraged on this day are the hardy Bhutanese swimmers, who quickly cut through the icy cold waters and pounce on the orange orbs, believed to bring blessings for the coming year. One successful swimmer makes his way to his happy family waiting on shore, and is rewarded for his efforts with a preparation of betel nut and lime paste wrapped in a banana leaf. The Bhutanese love to chew betel nut, which makes teeth and lips an orange-red.

The monks’ procession returns to the dzong, as do the pazap contingents. In a final dramatic flourish, the generals on horseback circle the flagpole, led by their soldiers. At the base of the great stairway leading into the dzong, the soldiers lift the generals off their horses and carry them aloft up the stairs and into the courtyard for celebrations.

**LATER** that afternoon we return to the courtyard of the dzong and sit under the magnificent Bodhi Tree, a fig tree propa-

gated from the fig tree under which the Buddha sat until he attained enlightenment. As gentle breezes blow through the leaves, we catch some of the rehearsals for the *tsechu*, or sacred dance festival, that will begin the next day. Large painted backdrops for the production, *Zhabdrung Zednam* (“The Coming of the Zhabdrung”), are being hung and unfurled. A huge throne for the Zhabdrung character is moved into place by pazap reenactors who performed all morning. Now they are stagehands moving props for sacred dances.

A group of local residents who volunteered to perform in the *tsechu* is rehearsing a famous dance-drama, the “Dance of the Stag and the Hounds.” In this culture, which transmits its history, values, and beliefs through dance, the volunteers will be performing the story of the beloved saint and yogi from the eleventh century, Milarepa, who converts a merciless animal hunter to the Buddhist view of respecting all life as interdependent. Only a few hours ago this courtyard was filled with war cries and gunsmoke, and now Punakha continues the journey from war to enlightenment.

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