

DOUBLE SIGHTING

By Karen Greenspan



Orange-robed monk musicians seated with their blue hand drums inside the orchestra tent

SOME people keep a life list of all the birds they have successfully identified. My list is of sacred dances and the festivals where they are performed. With that in mind, I had travelled to the Bumthang Valley in Bhutan to attend the local *tshechu*, or sacred festival. On a crisp, clear morning we hurried along the village road packed with cars, pedestrians, and the occasional cow, to attend an once-in-a-lifetime *thongdrol* consecration

at the *Jampa Lhakhang* (Temple of Jampa, or Maitreya - the Buddha of the Future).

The massive fifty-by-forty-foot appliqué silk tapestry in brilliant jewel-tones – with a huge, seated image of Buddha Maitreya surrounded by an inner circle of Buddhas and deities and an outer constellation of lineage holders – was unfurled from tall poles on the temple grounds. Usually these tapestries are displayed once a year during the early

hours of the final day of a *tshechu*. Then they are carefully lowered, folded, carried in a coordinated procession, and stored in a long, casket-like box before the sun's rays can damage the rich colours and fine fabric. If you are really lucky, you might even see a couple of sacred dances performed before such a dazzling backdrop

A *thongdrol* is a type of mandala, a sacred diagram or space, used to promote spiritual

process. It is considered such a potent symbol and meditation aid that it has the power to liberate merely upon seeing it. In fact, the word “*thongdrol*” actually means “that which liberates upon seeing”. In this case, the “liberation” referred to has to do with becoming free from the suffering caused by the five poisons of the mind: hatred, attachment, ignorance, pride, and jealousy. Simply looking upon the enlightened beings pictured in the work of art is deemed to extend their awareness to the viewer. The sacred dances themselves are considered a form of *thongdrol* — liberation through seeing — for they are embodied mandalas of the deities and their divine qualities.

I was struck by this notion of a spiritual transformation accomplished by seeing something, and more so, by looking at dances in particular.



Brand new thongdrol commissioned for Jampa Lhakhang picturing the seated Buddha Maitreya in the center

We now know from scientific research that the architecture of the brain responds to and alters itself through the mere viewing of dance. In *Dancing to Learn: The Brain's Cognition, Emotion, and Movement*, dance anthropologist Dr Judith Lynne Hanna articulates the vast and complex relationship between dance and the phenomenon of neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to adapt and reorganise

itself in response to new information. Simply observing movement generates new brain cells that connect to growing neural networks thereby improving cognition. Hanna explains that in the evolutionary process “attention to motion is critical for survival to cope with eating or being eaten, social bonding...”

To cap this amazing network of interconnections,



Marchang ritual – an offering to the deities that is included in many Bhutanese ceremonies



Stream of devotees in front of table overflowing with offerings making prostrations to the officiating lama



the discovery of how mirror neurons in the premotor cortex of the brain are activated both when performing an action and when observing the same action performed by another, demonstrates how we catalyse empathy – the ability to identify with or understand another person’s feelings or condition. “Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran, in his TED Talk “The Neurons that Shaped Civilization,” asserts, “Mirror neurons dissolve the barrier between you and someone else,” the cornerstone of Himalayan Buddhist philosophy – no separate, inherent self; we exist only as a result of interdependent causes, conditions, and relationships. This organic reality is what the Buddhist teachings, highly refined meditations, and sacred

dances seek to nurture, build upon, and map onto the greater social fabric. We humans are biologically wired to be moved to empathy by watching dance. How did the ancient Buddhist masters know?

The Jampa Temple had never had a *thongdrol*. The piece was commissioned three years ago and funds were raised for the project, which took two years to complete. As this was a first for the community, it would certainly enhance the upcoming festival and many more for years to come.

A sense of the sacred is always within reach in this landscape abundant with fluttering prayer flags, temples, *stupas* (reliquary structures), and Buddhist shrines in most private homes. It is, therefore, customary to consecrate any

Buddhist image, large or small, with an elaborate ritual to invite the deities and wisdom beings into the objects and seal their presence. This is done so the sacred objects can bestow blessings and merit upon those who venerate them.

People had come from near and far to Jampa Lakhang for the day of rituals. An altar overflowing with orchids, fruit, brass bowls of water, and food offerings stood in front of the *thongdrol* with splashes of cranberry red-robed monks standing on both sides. Throughout the morning, a steady stream of devotees made the requisite three prostrations to the head lama (always to the lama or guru first, as he is the conduit to the teachings of the Buddha) and then to the Buddha Maitreya pictured in

the *thongdrol*.

Others circumambulated the temple spinning prayer wheels and chanting *mantras* (sacred syllables repeated for their transformative resonance). Inside a white tent, the orchestra of orange-robed monks with tall, red ceremonial hats sat on the ground beating their round, blue hand drums with hooked sticks. The deep hypnotic drone of the chant master and the blasts of the five-foot-long *dung* (telescoping brass horns) along with the clouds of incense smoke, stirred the senses out of the mundane.

Drums beating, horns blaring, and cymbals crashing announced the beginning of a sacred dance. Bhutanese culture is deeply connected with the notion that dance was our (humans') first language,

and they employ it to express their most fundamental ideas — moral values, the sacred, welcome, good-byes.

At the four corners of a rectangle in front of the great *thongdrol*, stood four bare-chested dancers in orange, above-the-knee, tiger-skin skirts and red wrathful masks crowned with five skull figures. Each dancer held a torch consisting of a bundle of burning sticks in one hand and carried a bag slung over a shoulder containing a powder they threw on the lit torches to keep them aflame. They jumped, swooped their torsos in arcs from side to side, and leapt around, clearing away contamination and defilement in a *cham* (sacred dance) called *TraGeg* (pronounced Tra-gyeh). “Tra” means enemy and “Geg”

means negative spirit.

This dance of expelling obstacles and negativity is believed to have been originally introduced by Guru Rinpoche (the Tantric mystic credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet and Bhutan from India in the eighth century) and later rediscovered as a revelation called *tercham*, or treasure dance. In Bhutan, there is an entire category of *cham* called “treasure dance”— part of the greater treasure tradition through which it is believed that Guru Rinpoche and several disciples hid “treasures” for discovery by future generations during times of spiritual need. *TraGeg* is performed specifically at consecration ceremonies for new temples, statues, paintings, stupas, or any new construction.



The four dancers represent the guardian deities of the four cardinal directions. According to Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, Director of the National Museum of Bhutan, this *cham* ritual is included at consecration ceremonies to remove contamination from the ego, pride, or attachment the artists, builders, or sponsors may have imparted upon the project.

Once the negativity has been driven out by means of the dance, a head monk performs a purification rite, pouring saffron water from a ritual ewer (with the peacock feather top) and invoking blessings from the enlightened beings for the newly constructed object. A symbolic multi-course meal of butter tea, fried rice, lentils, boiled safflower, fruit, and *doma* (a preparation of betel nut and lime paste wrapped in a betel leaf) – all served by monk novices to the presiding monks, musicians, dancers, and community benefactors continued for a very long time.

The morning of consecration concluded with a famous sacred dance, *Dramitse Nga Cham*, in which droning horns and the steady rhythm set by the cymbals ushered in the sixteen animal-masked dancers led by the dancer wearing a mask of the snow lion. With dynamic energy, one-by-one, each



On the final day of the tshechu at Jampa Lhakhang, dancers perform Pacham, a sacred treasure dance, before the thongdrol

dancer bounded into the dance space and began spinning and swooping their torsos in arcs. After each dancer made his spirited entrance, he joined the circle of already present dancers who were moving quietly in the background until all the dancers had joined the circle.

For this *cham*, the dancers wear yellow swishy skirts made of multiple layered kerchiefs gathered at the waistband and carry a drum (or *nga*) in their left hand and a hooked stick in their right. They perform their steps while beating the drum of *dharma* (Buddhism) for all to hear and have a skilful way of flipping the drum this way and that before each drumbeat. *Dramitse Nga Cham* is considered to be another treasure dance, envisioned during the meditation of Kunga Gyeltshen, a great treasure revealer, and recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of

Intangible Cultural Heritage.

So, yes, it was a most lucky day or, as the Bhutanese would say – auspicious. I had the unexpected experience of viewing *cham* before a magnificent *thongdrol* – a double *thongdrol*! And I could now anticipate this double sighting again on the final day of the *tshechu*.



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