

Rituals & Sacred Arts

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Summary: At Dzongkar Choede ritual is not performance and the sacred arts are not decoration: both are disciplines in which a philosophical position is carried out with the body. At the end of each Tibetan year the monastery performs its own masked dance, the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony, instituted six centuries ago after a vision of Vajrabhairava in the form of a yak. Sand mandalas are built grain by grain through metal funnels, then swept inward to the centre and returned to running water. In the tantric chant of this tradition a single voice sounds a chord. Butter sculptures are made in the knowledge that they will melt, and the monastery's incense is produced and sold as a working trade.

Tags:

CHAM

SACRED ART & RITUAL

SEVEN PILLARS

Read the original page at: <https://dzongxpan.xpandinghorizon.com/en/seven-pillars/rituals>

Embodied Philosophy: Rituals and Sacred Arts

In an era where experience is increasingly mediated by screens, Dzongkar Choede keeps a tradition in which philosophy is not merely thought but physically carried out. Ritual and art here are not decorative exhibitions or museum relics. They are disciplined practices meant to train the mind, settle the environment, and carry realisations from one generation to the next.

Every gesture, every sounded note, every line drawn in coloured sand encodes a philosophical position. Practising these arts is how intellectual understanding is joined to physical and sensory experience — and the mastery cannot be hurried, automated or simulated. It demands unhurried presence, which is most of the point.

What the Cham Dance Really Is

Once a year, at the end of the twelfth Tibetan month, the monastery performs the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony: a masked ritual dance with a tormo offering that closes the old year by clearing it.

It is not a general Tibetan form that this monastery happens to perform, and it is not a spectacle. It is Dzongkar Choede's own dance, instituted six centuries ago by Lachen Chöpal Zangpo after his meditational deity Vajrabhairava appeared to him in the form of a yak — and at the centre of the ceremony, in front of everyone watching, an oversized yak still becomes the deity.

Monks train for it from about thirteen, and for years they train in ordinary robes. What they are

learning in that time is not choreography.

The Architecture of Impermanence

The Tibetan name for a sand mandala is *dul-tson-kyil-khor*: mandala of coloured powders. Making one takes days or weeks of work, laying coloured sand through metal funnels called *chak-pur*, drawn across a ridged surface so the vibration releases a few grains at a time.

But the sand is not where it starts. The ground is consecrated first, with chant and dance, before a single grain is placed. And when the pattern is complete it is consecrated again, with mantra and blessing, as an offering.

Then it is destroyed — and the destruction is as carefully structured as the making. The sand is swept inward, to the centre, undoing every distinction the pattern made, until it is one grey pile. That is carried to running water and poured in, so the blessing travels outward.

The dissolution is not an epilogue. It is part of the work, and the direction of the sweeping is the teaching.

Sacred Sound

In the tantric chant of this tradition a single monk sounds a note so low that its overtones separate and become audible on their own. One throat produces a chord. A listener hears two pitches, sometimes three, and only one person is singing.

The two Gelug tantric colleges, Gyume and Gyuto, are the great homes of this style, and they diverged: until the sixteenth century both used what is called the mountain-cracking voice. Gyume kept it. Gyuto developed the ocean-rolling voice. Two colleges of one school, two ways of making the sound, both carried forward.

Around the chant sits the ritual orchestra — the long telescopic *dungchen* horns, whose sound is likened to an elephant's call; the reed *gyaling*; conch, cymbals, drums and handbell. The music coordinates the breath and attention of the whole assembly into a single shared rhythm.

Butter Sculpture

Alongside the ceremonies run the arts of the workshop. The monastery has taught *thangka* painting, in which pigment is ground by hand and figures are laid out to proportions fixed by canon rather than by the painter's eye.

Butter sculpture is one of the most demanding of the Tibetan arts and one of the most conspicuously temporary. Coloured butter is worked by hand into ornaments, figures and offerings of real intricacy, and the monks who make them work in the cold to keep the material from softening as they go. Dzongkar Choede makes a great deal of it, and makes it well.

Everything produced this way is made in the knowledge that it will not last. The skill is considerable, the result is beautiful, and nobody expects to keep it.

Incense-Making

The monastery's incense-making is a working operation rather than a craft class. Ingredients are ground, blended and rolled, produced at volume, and sold to customers outside the monastery.

It supports the community and gives young Tibetans a trade — one of the practical foundations that allow the study, prayer and ritual to continue.

An Invitation to Witness

We invite visitors not as consumers of an exotic performance, but into a shared space of slowness, silence and attention. To witness a ritual here is to step outside the pace of the ordinary world for a few hours and find a tradition that is entirely alive.