

The Cham Dance

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Summary: At the end of each Tibetan year Dzongkar Choede performs the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony — its own masked dance, not a general Tibetan form. It was instituted by Lachen Chöpal Zangpo (1371–1439), ritual chaplain to the kings of Mang-yul Gung-thang, after his meditational deity Vajrabhairava appeared to him in the form of a yak; at the centre of the dance an oversized yak still transforms into the deity in front of everyone. Historically a rite for turning back armies, it is now dedicated to the long life of the Dalai Lama and the welfare of the Tibetan people. Monks train for it from about thirteen, in ordinary robes, for years before they are given a mask — because what they are learning is visualisation, not choreography.

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The Gyutor Yak-Zang Ceremony

Once a year, at the end of the twelfth Tibetan month, Dzongkar Choede performs the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony: a masked ritual dance with a tormo offering, given as a year-ending thanksgiving to the Dharmapalas with prayers for longevity, health, prosperity and peace in the world. The Abbot, the monastery staff and the entire Sangha take part, and the dancers undertake two days of preparatory practice beforehand.

The date is not incidental. Gutor means the offering of the 29th, and across the Tibetan world the closing days of the year are given over to clearing the negativity of the departing one: effigies of dough, representing obstacles and impurities, are carried out and cast away. Days later the new year begins. The monastery is not staging a spectacle that happens to fall in February. It is clearing the year, on the day the year is cleared.

The Yak That Is Not a Yak

The dance is not a general Tibetan form that this monastery happens to perform. It is Dzongkar Choede's own, and it begins with something one man saw. Lachen Chöpal Zangpo (1371–1439) was the great teacher of Dzongkar and ritual chaplain to the kings of Gung-thang. His meditational deity was Vajrabhairava — Yamantaka, the wrathful form of Mañju ·!+, the bodhisattva of wisdom — and in a

vision that deity appeared to him in the form of a yak.

That is what the dance carries. At its centre an oversized yak, the most ordinary thing in a Tibetan landscape, transforms in front of everyone into Vajrabhairava. The monastery's own account is that Chöpal Zangpo instituted the dance from this vision, and an independent historian of Tibet, working from old written sources, records the same Cham: a great yak becoming Vajrabhairava. Two lines of evidence, six centuries apart, describing one transformation.

Chöpal Zangpo belonged to the Rwa family, whose ancestor Rwa Lotsawa was among those who first brought the Vajrabhairava teachings to Tibet. The yak that discloses itself as Vajrabhairava is his own lineage, appearing in the shape of the country he lived in.

What the Dance Is

Cham enacts the victory of wisdom over ignorance and of compassion over harm. It is a tantric ritual meant to purify the ground, dispel obstacles and restore balance, and it is performed only by trained monastics.

What Yak Zang was historically for is unusually specific: the present abbot describes it as a rite of *dmag zlog*, the turning back of armies. Chöpal Zangpo's duties at the Gung-thang court included exactly this kind of protective work for a small kingdom with real enemies. In exile the intention has been redirected rather than abandoned, and recent performances have been dedicated to the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the welfare of the Tibetan people.

Alongside the yak, the cycle of roughly ten dances brings out Palden Lhamo, Damchen Chögyalmo with her retinue, and Mahakala Trakshé, the monastery's own principal protector. Afterwards come the closing Gutor rites and the hurling of the *torma*.

The training begins around thirteen or fourteen and takes years — and for those years it is done in ordinary robes. The costume and the mask are the last things added, not the first. What is being learned in the meantime is not choreography but visualisation: a monk dancing Cham holds himself as the deity he represents. That is what separates it from theatre. Nobody is portraying anything.

Masked dance is practised across all the Tibetan schools, but Yak Zang is local: it belongs to Mang-yul Gung-thang and to this monastery, and it came out of Tibet in 1972 with the monks who survived. Cham depends on more than texts — on step patterns, timings, musical cues, the handling of masks — all of which live in the bodies of the people who perform it. Fewer than five percent of the six hundred monks of the old monastery survived. That this dance is performed at Hunsur every year is not a small thing.

The figures who appear are often fierce, which puzzles visitors. They are not demons, and they are not guardians standing between you and some external harm. An account of what their ferocity is actually for belongs here, and will follow.