

# REENACTING FOUNDATIONAL STORIES AS COMMUNAL PERFORMANCE

FRANÇOISE POMMARET



Fig. 1 Ritual Dance Mask of Guru Dorje Drolo; Bhutan or southern Tibet; ca. 19th century; papier-mâché, polychrome, fabric; 14½ × 13½ × 10-1/8 in. (36.8 × 34.3 × 25.7 cm); Bruce Miller Collection; photograph by John Bigelow Taylor

## RITUAL DANCE MASK OF GURU DORJE DROLO

Bhutan or southern Tibet  
ca. 19th century

## SUMMARY

Anthropologist Françoise Pommaret introduces a fearsome mask worn during ritual dances in which performers become the deities, granting blessings and taming demons. This mask shows one of the eight forms of Padmasambhava, a legendary yogi and magician who played a key role in converting the lands of Tibet and Bhutan to Buddhism. Dancers identify themselves with the religious hero and reenact his deeds, bringing blessings to the community. Such masked dances, known as *cham*, are performed at festivals across the Himalayan world.

## RITUAL DANCE (*CHAM*)

This mask of Guru Dorje Drolo is one of the most important manifestations of the legendary master Padmasambhava. It belongs to a set of seven other manifestations who are represented during the dance of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Tsengye).

Ritual dances, called *cham*, are an essential component of Himalayan Buddhism. They are performed during festivals, in a courtyard or indoors. Danced by monks or laymen, they can involve the wearing of masks. Their choreography and names vary according to the Buddhist sects and the regions, but their aims are broadly the same: celebration of Buddhism or a great saint, subjugation of evil spirits, teaching of Buddhist principles, liberating the faithful from their negative karma, and blessings. Dancers follow a strict practice under a dance master, who has a dance guide with steps and musical notations. The dancers must become the deities they represent. The spectacular dance costumes, made of colorful heavy brocades, are kept during the year with the masks in a specific room of the monastery. The dances form a very important part of the socioreligious binding of a community. At the time of the year when they are performed, the community comes together for religious purposes, but also for social interaction and enjoyment. From Mongolia to Ladakh, Tibet, Bhutan, and all the other Buddhist parts of the Himalayas, ritual dances constitute the apex of the year.

## WHO IS PADMASAMBHAVA?

Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rinpoche “the precious master,” or the second buddha in the Himalayan world, is a religious hero who has attained an iconic status, difficult for a Westerner to measure. His life, of which few historical details remain, has been embellished and transformed, and the resulting account is full of great deeds, transformations, and miracles. It is believed that there is hardly any place in the Himalayan world, from Mongolia to Bhutan, through Tibet, Sikkim, and Nepal, which has not been blessed by his presence. He is the protagonist of ritual dances, the subject of paintings, large appliques and embroidered thangkas (fig. 5), statues and biographies.

The places that he has blessed by his visit retain physical marks in the landscape. Over time they have become important pilgrimage places, such as Yanglesho and Halasi Maratika Caves in Nepal, Samye Monastery and Chimpu Mountain in Tibet, and Taktsang and Senge *Dzong* in Bhutan, to name some of the most important.



Fig. 2 Some of the important places blessed by Padmasambhava that have become destinations for pilgrimage

According to his biographies, Padmasambhava, or “born from the lotus,” was born in Oddiyana, today Swat region in Pakistan, in the eighth century and was a Buddhist tantric master with extraordinary powers. King Tri Songdetsen (742–ca. 800), unable to build the first Buddhist monastery in Samye because of interference from local deities, invited Padmasambhava to Tibet. Through his magical powers, Padmasambhava subdued them, and the monastery was completed. He went on to tame most of the local deities throughout Tibet and the Himalayas, and converted the whole region to Buddhism. He became the patron saint of the first religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, known as the Ancient (Nyingma) tradition.

The first historical text to mention the master comes from Dunhuang manuscripts dating from the tenth century. In particular, Pelliot tibétain 44, a text devoted to the deity Vajrakila, describes Padmasambhava’s time in India and Nepal before he went to Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Another Dunhuang manuscript, Pelliot tibétain 307, relates how he subjugated local female deities in Tibet and bound them by oath to protect Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Some texts are even attributed directly to the master.

Taming local deities and binding them to protect Buddhism is a trope that would become prevalent in the later texts and biographies of the master. The story of the construction of Samye is found in a historical text of the tenth to eleventh century, *The Testament of Ba* (Tibetan: *Bazhe/Wazhe*), and then full-blown biographies were devoted to him, the *Zanglingma* in the twelfth century, followed by the *Padma Katang* in the fourteenth century. These texts have legitimacy in the Tibetan Buddhist world because their origin is linked to Padmasambhava. They were discovered by treasure revealers (*terton*) and therefore belong to the treasure texts (*terma*) that are supposed to have been hidden by Padmasambhava himself to be rediscovered later by predestined masters and propagated among the people. The *terma* texts, which also include numerous religious texts and objects, constituted a large, revelatory genre particularly associated with the Nyingma tradition, and new *termas* are still being discovered today. Each time a *terma* was discovered, the place became a holy place because it had been blessed by Padmasambhava; such places are strewn throughout the Himalayan world.

The figure of Padmasambhava has also developed a number of manifestations related to specific liturgical texts, generally focused on the taming of obstacles and demons. The iconography of these manifestations is incredibly rich and varied, and contributes to the incredible popularity of the master and his status as not only a religious but also a cultural hero.

The most popular of these manifestations are a series of eight that correspond to eight miraculous activities of his life.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE EIGHT MANIFESTATIONS OF PADMASAMBHAVA AND THE RITUAL DANCE TRADITION**

Although the treasure revealer Nyangrel (1124–1192) had visions of several Padmasambhava manifestations, it was his incarnation, Guru Chowang (1212–1270), himself a treasure revealer of the thirteenth century, who first codified Padmasambhava in eight manifestations (Guru Tsengye): Shakya Sengge, Pema Jungne (Padmasambhava), Nyima Wozer, Sengge Dradrok, Dorje Drolu, Tsokye Dorje, Pema Gyelpo, and Loden Chokse. These manifestations are ubiquitous in the temples of the Nyingma tradition (fig. 3), and they have their own ritual dance, an elaborate choreography.



Fig. 3. Three of the Eight Manifestations of Padmasambhava: Senggye Dradrok, Nyima Wozer, and Pema Gyelpo; Gantey Monastery Tsechu, Bhutan; photograph © F. Pommaret, October 2017

The origin of the dance is also attributed to Guru Chowang,<sup>4</sup> who while meditating is said to have visited the Copper-Colored Mountain (Zangdok Pelri), the paradise of Guru Rinpoche, and observed the dance there. An important text he discovered, the *Lama Sangdu*, a *sadhana* and practice on Padmasambhava, was the basis for this dance (fig. 4), which became very popular in Nyingma and Kagyu monasteries in the Himalayan world.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 4 Bhutan, "The Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche | ལཱ་ཏཱ་མཚན་བརྒྱུད་, guru tsen gyé", *YouTube*, October 6, 2020, 48:20, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=v9PNQKEBFiw>

The dance is usually performed during the religious festivals dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, which fall on the tenth day of a lunar month. Called Tshechu, or "tenth day," the festival corresponds to an important date in the life of the master (fig. 5), especially the tenth day of the fifth month of the year, which is his birthday. In Bhutanese sites such as the Paro Dzong Monastery, the festival can last several days, up to the fifteenth of the second lunar month. According to John Ardussi, it was the Fourth Temporal Ruler of Bhutan, the great Tenzin Rabgye (1638–1696), who introduced the Tshechu tradition and this dance to the Drukpa Kagyu monasteries of western Bhutan in the late seventeenth century, after sending a monk to observe the Tshechu in Tibetan monasteries.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 5 Giant appliqué scroll representing Padmasambhava and his Eight Emanations; Paro Tshechu, Bhutan; photograph © F. Pommaret, March 2017

The ritual space is considered a purified place cleansed by the tantric dances, and the dance of the Eight Manifestations of Padmasambhava (Guru Tsengye) is usually performed at the end of the day, once the space has been cleansed by other dances (figs. 6 and 7). In Bhutan, the Eight Manifestations under which Guru Rinpoche manifested himself on various occasions enter the dance space in a procession with the principal aspect of Guru Rinpoche, shaded by a parasol. Certain other aspects are accompanied by their retinues and small celestial beings.



Fig. 6 Dance of Guru Dorje Drolo; Gantey Monastery Tsechu, Bhutan; photograph © F. Pommaret, October 2017



Fig. 7 See the Tsechu festival in Nimalung Dratshang in Chumni, Bhutan captured by Marie-Noëlle Frei-Pont in the film made in 1974-1982 (1:09:07-01:18:46 ). Reproduced with permission. Travel with Claudio, "Country Life in the Bumthang Valley Bhutan 1974 – 1982," *YouTube*, February 20, 2023, 1:22:14, [https://youtu.be/K3Bjr8K\\_DEw](https://youtu.be/K3Bjr8K_DEw).

The principal aspect of Guru Rinpoche is seated, whereas each of the other aspects, with the exception of Padmasambhava, dances before sitting next to the principal aspect. Then a public blessing takes place, and the fervor of the people is fully demonstrated: the faithful press forward

to receive a thread of blessing, not from a monk who represents Guru Rinpoche but from Guru Rinpoche himself, incarnated as a human being. The dance area is transformed into his paradise, and celestial beings adorned with bone ornaments dance and sing his praises. The dance concludes with a final procession and the exit of all the aspects of Guru Rinpoche.

The dance, like others associated with Guru Rinpoche, brings “liberation through seeing” (*tongdrol*). It is considered a great blessing to watch the dance, but it is important to do so with an active mind and the aspiration of being reborn in the paradise of Guru Rinpoche. It is so powerful that today in Bhutan, elderly people watch the Tshechus live on television while praying.

### **THE GURU DORJE DROLO’S MASK**

The mask shown here belongs to a series of eight; another example is the mask of Nyima Wozer, from the same collection.<sup>7</sup> Dorje Drolo, the “Liberated Diamond Thunderbolt,” wears a wrathful dark red mask, a garland of skulls around his body, and a long reddish garment made of heavy brocade. He holds a diamond-thunderbolt (*dorje*) and a ritual dagger (*purba*).<sup>8</sup> He earned this name after vanquishing evil spirits, especially the Drekpa “arrogant ones” who were creating obstacles to Buddhism at Taktsang Temple in Paro and Senge Dzong in Kurtoe, both in Bhutan. Dorje Drolo is followed by an entourage of fearsome deities. His movements are powerful, and his whirling and stomping evoke strong subduing actions and inspire fear.

This exceptional varnished polychrome mask in papier-mâché and fabric could be from Bhutan or southern Tibet and dates to the nineteenth century. Making such a mask would be a painstaking task, starting with the preparation of the papier-mâché support, composed of pulped paper, generally from the plants in the genus *Daphne* or *Edgeworthia*, and glue obtained from animal hooves. This would be followed by carving, painting with pigments extracted from leaves or minerals, and varnishing with the shellac resin (the secretion of an insect, *Laccifer lacca*).

Dorje Drolo has a maroon face made dramatic by a crown of five skulls, which represent the transmutation of five negative afflictions of human nature into five wisdoms; three protruding

eyes; a bulbous large nose; beautifully carved eyebrows; and a short beard made of little flames. The mouth is the focal point of the mask, as it is opened wide in rictus, the canine teeth transformed into fangs and the upward-curving tongue ornamented with flames. With the mask sitting elevated on his head, the dancer sees through the mouth. At the back of the mask, threads fasten it onto the head, which is protected by several layers of cloth. Several thick, colored strands of fabric are attached at the top of the mask. They symbolize the hair, and the dancer deploys them like a mane by shaking his head vigorously.

Every feature of the mask, from its color to its facial expressions, is meant to inspire fear and awe, not to the devotees, but to the spirits that Guru Dorje Drolo subjugates. To a Buddhist from the Himalayas, the mask of Guru Dorje Drolo immediately evokes not only Padmasambhava in his most wrathful manifestation, but also several cultural and religious layers or meaning, forming a specific religious landscape in the mind of the devotee. The mask is not a work of art in the Western sense, but an object of devotion.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Dalton, “Padmasambhava,” *Treasury of Lives*, 2015, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Padmasambhava/7442>. Pelliot tibétain 44 is in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Paris.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Dalton, “The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet: A Study of IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot Tibétain 307,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 4 (October–December) (2004): 759–72. Pelliot tibétain 307 is also in the BnF.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete overview of Padmasambhava’s life and deeds, see Elena Pakhoutova, ed., *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Delmonico/Prestel, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Cantwell, “The Dance of the Guru’s Eight Aspects,” *Tibet Journal* 20, no. 4 (1995): 47–63.

<sup>5</sup> Jakob Leschly, “Guru Chowang,” *Treasury of Lives*, 2007, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Guru-Chowang/5588>.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Ardussi, “Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye and the Founding of Taktsang Lhakhang,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 55n12: “ff. 193.b–194.a, 237.b–241.b, *Lho’i chos ’byung*, ff. 42.b, 56.b; *Lho’i chos ’byung* 2, f. 121.a; *LNDRR, Nga*, f. 133.b. In 1687 Tenzin Rabgye sent one of his Nyingmapa assistants to Tibet specifically to study the Tshechu traditions at various monasteries, particularly at Gong dkar, sNe’u dong, and Lho brag. Upon his return a book was written on the dance, music, and costumes, and the first full three-day performance of Tshechu dances took place at Tashichhodzong in 1690. It is possible that Tshechu traditions were independently introduced into central and eastern Bhutan at an earlier date.”

<sup>7</sup> Elena Pakhoutova, ed., *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Delmonico/Prestel, 2018), fig. 1.17:32.

<sup>8</sup> For the iconography of Dorje Drolo, see Elena Pakhoutova, ed., *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Delmonico/Prestel, 2018), figs. 1.13:28, 1.21:35.

## FURTHER READING

Ardussi, John A. 1999. “Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye and the Founding of Taktsang Lhakhang.” *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 1, no. 1, 36–63.

Cantwell, Cathy. 1995. “The Dance of the Guru’s Eight Aspects.” *Tibet Journal* 20, no. 4, 47–63.

Pakhoutova, Elena, ed. 2018. *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*. Exhibition catalog. New York: Delmonico/Prestel.

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