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From Mount Tsari to the *tsechu*: Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance

Elaine Dobson

For a few days in October, in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the population of the tiny country increases two-fold as visitors from neighbouring countries in the sub-continent, and from across the world, gather to witness one of the great, annual, Buddhist, three-to-five day, religious, dance-drama festivals or *tsechus*. A *tsechu*¹ celebrates the great deeds that were performed by the religious saint and teacher, Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche² or Ugyen Rinpoche). *Tsechus* are held on the tenth day of a lunar month. The exact month depends on the location. Every valley has its own *tsechu*, usually with some identifying traits. These festivals reinforce the social life of the community and offer opportunities for making or renewing friendships, having picnics and drinking, or trading. In Bhutan, villagers who have moved to the larger towns are expected to return for the festival and they will often sponsor a major part of it. *Tsechus* accrue status for the monasteries and villages that stage them, and spiritual merit for those who are their sponsors. The spectacular dances that form these *tsechus* are known as *cham*. The subjugation of evil and the purification and protection from demonic spirits are important themes in the *tsechu* and dances. These themes are usually interwoven with those that are morally instructive or didactic and those that proclaim the victory of Buddhism and the glory of Padmasambhava,

· Senior Lecturer, School of Music, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

¹ Literally “day ten”.

² Literally “precious teacher”.

Although many dances in Bhutan are thought to have originated from Indian Tantric dances or the animistic dances of the pre-Buddhist Bön religion, it is Padmasambhava who is acknowledged as introducing Tantric Buddhism and its ritual dances, or *cham*, into Bhutan in the eighth century. Padmasambhava is said to have received, via visions, instruction regarding the dances from a succession of deities. It is held that his method of converting and subduing the opponents of Buddhism was by performing rites, reciting mantras and performing a dance of subjugation in order to attract, and subsequently conquer, the local, angry gods. In Tibet, “Padmasambhava used dancing to chase away and eliminate demons that were preventing him from building the famous Samye monastery (775 CE). He again used dances when he was summoned to Bhutan to save the dying king, Sindhu Raja. When he arrived in the Bumthang valley [of Central Bhutan], Padmasambhava performed an entire series of dances in a wrathful form. The fearsome divinities . . . were subjugated and Sindhu Raja was restored to health”³ and consequently made a vow to rebuild the temples and help the spread of Buddhism throughout the country. Padmasambhava also arranged the first festival (*tsechu*), of ritual dances in Bumthang. The eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (of which Padmasambhava is the human form) were presented together with the eight forms of dance necessary to destroy evil powers

This article examines the *dramnyen cham* (Tib. *sgra snyan 'cham*), a sacred dance which is led by a *dramnyen* player, and the *choeshay*, a religious song also accompanied with dance, and it explores their connection with the founding and spread of the *Drukpa* (dragon) *Kagyü* branch of Vajrayana Buddhism in Bhutan.

³ Robert Dompnier, “The Royal Academy of Performing Arts.” *Tashi Delek* (Nov-Dec. 2000) 14.

At the beginning of the thirteenth-century, monks from southern Tibet helped further establish the *drukpa kagyü* sect of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan. It is this that is specifically celebrated in the *dramnyen cham* and the *choeshay*. The *choeshay* is also associated with the saints Yeshe Dorji (1101-1175) and Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorji (1161-1211). These two saints are sometimes mistaken not only because of their similar names for one another, but also because of the similar miracles they performed in overcoming demons, and the description of their dances. However, the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* more specifically commemorate Tsangpa Gyare's victory over a demon, which was obstructing the entrance to a secret valley, on a famous pilgrimage route to Tsari Mountain, which is in Tibet and close to the northern border of Bhutan.

In the sixteenth century, the Bhutanese *drukpa* leader, Kunkhyen Pema Karpo, wrote a detailed narrative of Tsari that included descriptions of firstly, Yeshe Dorji's dance and song, and then Tsangpa Gyare and his subsequent pacification of the demon.

After taking hold of the *gling[-chen]*⁴ in his right hand and a walking stick in his left, Yeshe Dorji performed a dance . . . [and sang the following]:

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,
Is not wandered by all and sundry.
I have abandoned worldly activities,
I have self-luminosity of mind itself.

It's a place to fling down life and limb.
It's a place to remove hindrances whose causes are
outer and inner.

⁴ A tall herb like wild onion that the Tsari people believed bestowed them with paranormal powers when eaten.

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It's a place to make an analysis of cyclic existence
(*samsara*).

It's a place to weigh ascetics [and their
accomplishment] in the balance.

It's a place for thoroughly understanding the mind.

It's a place to preserve the clear light with the
mind.

It's a place to receive the two levels of paranormal
powers.

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,

Is not some minor monastery up behind a village.

This *gling-chen*, which is a paranormal power[-
producing] substance,

Is not the spittle for smashing demons and
demonesses?

The clerical siblings of this assembled Vajra[yana]
family,

Are not [the type of] ascetics who roam around the
marketplace.

Yeshe Dorji made those words resonate in his mind.
Because he [then] struck his walking stick on a rock, it
went in as if being pushed into mud. Even nowadays
the imprint of that [stick] is still found there.⁵

⁵ Padma dKar-po (1527-1592), *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. In *Collected Works (gSun-'bum) of Kunmkhyen Padma-dkar-po*, vol.4. Darjeeling, 1973, ff. 207-74 and _____ *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. Darjeeling, 1982 translated by Toni Huber in "What Is A Mountain? An Ethnohistory of Representation and Ritual at Pure Crystal Mountain in Tibet." Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Canterbury, 1993: 73-74.

Kunkhyen Pema Karpo's account of Tsangpa Gyare, and his conquering of the demon blocking the route to Tsari, describes it as happening "one generation later" than Yeshe Dorji's.

. . . when gTsang-pa rGya-ras [Tsangpa Gyare] was sitting in meditation at Jo-mo Kha-rag . . . the sky-goer Seng-ge'I gDing-pa-can appeared to him on three different occasions and prophesied, "rGya-ras-pa, because the time has come to open the door to the place of Tsari, go there!" He thought, "Is this really necessary?" and as a result, . . . at about sunrise on the mountain peak of Kha-rag, the great accomplished one (*mahasiddha*) Gling-ras-pa⁶ appeared in a dwelling tent of five kinds of rainbows and [said]:

rGya-ras my son, hurry your meditation without delay!

In the *mandala* which is manifest as Tsari,
There is the sky-goer's rDo'i-snying-phug (Stone Heart Cave).

There is *gling-chen* which bestows paranormal powers when eaten.

There is the empowerment of the mother-goddesses and sky-goers.

The Buddha that requires no cultivation is in that place.⁷

After that, Tsangpa Gyare announced his intention of going to Tsari. The most important part of the journey, as far as the *choeshay* is concerned, occurs when they reached "Frog Turquoise Lake where the path was blocked by a terrible frog

⁶ Gling-ras-pa Padma rDorje (1128-88) the teacher of Tsangpa Gyare.

⁷ Padma dKar-po in Huber, 74-75.

as strong as a yak, and it would not let them pass.” Without hesitation Tsangpa Gyare leapt onto the frog’s back, trampled it violently and it changed into a boulder and it stayed that way. Clear footprints appeared on the boulder and the demon was overpowered.

Although Tsangpa Gyare performed many such miracles, it is this story that is usually related in association with the *choeshay* and its dance of subjugation.⁸

An account of the story is told by Ap Dawpel, a former monk and retired, Bhutanese court musician and painter.⁹

When the religious and family friends of Tsangpa Gyare arrived at Tsari they met a demon in the form of a frog that turned into a yak and prevented the party from proceeding. In order to remove this obstacle Tsangpa Gyare jumped on the yak’s back and performed a *dramnyen* dance and said ‘If anybody wants to compare himself to me, the son of the glorious Drukpa Lineage, let him come’. Then the frog changed itself into a rock but, in spite of this, the saint, as if the rock was mud, impressed his foot into it. Thus the frog was subdued.

⁸ Information from the National Museum in Paro also tells this story describing the demon as “an underground serpent spirit”. A similar story appears in Tashi Wangmo [F.P.Imaeda] *Thimphu Tshechu: Festival Programme*. Thimphu: Bhutan Tourism Corporation, [1998] 32-33 and Dompnier, Robert, “The Royal Academy of Performing Arts.” *Tashi Delek*. Nov-Dec. 2000: 12-27. Matthieu Ricard in *Monk Dances of Tibet*, Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1999: 17-18, quotes from the “biography of Tsangpa Gyare” (no details given) which describes the demon as a “turtle as big as a yak” and the lake as “the lake of the turquoise turtle”. Given that Tibet is land-locked, ‘frog’ is the more realistic translation.

⁹ Ap Dawpel was the *champen* (mask dance master) in Talo, his hometown. He is regarded as the ‘father of Bhutanese music’.

It offered its life to serve Tsangpa Gyare and he accepted. The frog was established as the guardian deity of that place, the Turquoise Lake, and Tsari was opened up for pilgrimages. Even today, Buddhists undertake pilgrimages to Tsari, and by simply reaching that place are said to achieve enlightenment.¹⁰

The *choeshay* and *dramnyen cham* dancers' costume shows a connection with this story. It goes back the time of Tsangpa Gyare who wore it as he subdued the demon.¹¹ This costume, of the armed Tibetan monks who acted as the bodyguard to the *drukpa* high Lamas, consists of elaborate and heavy, woollen clothes; a long black, red-lined, Tibetan-style robe, or *chuba*, together with long, colourful, felt boots. The leaders of the dance will add a brown folded jacket. Under the *chuba* a red, yellow or white brocade or striped shirt, with red and gold brocade collar and red and white or green cuffs, is worn. A coiled headband of red, yellow, green, blue and white stripes represents the traditional helmet. The colours represent the five Tibetan elements, fire, ether, earth, water and air. Three objects are carried around the waist. They are a warrior's sword, a prayer box, which is decorated with one of Buddhism's eight auspicious symbols such as the endless knot (representing the endless cyclic existence), and a small banner (another auspicious symbol representing victory). Two small gold and silver, intricately decorated shields, which can be round or square-shaped (approx. 15 cm across), are worn on the chest and back. From these hang a gold and silver "face of majesty" (Skt. *kirtimuka*). The *kirtimuka* is often

¹⁰ Ap Dawpel, personal interview, 19 September, 1998. See also Victor Chan, *Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide* (Chico, California: Moon, 1994) 210-211

¹¹ Information collected from the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro. There, a full costume and the very large *dramnyen*, used in the Paro *tsechu* for this dance, are held.

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found on armour, helmets, shields and weapons of war.¹² A large bone ring is worn on the right-hand thumb. Bone ornaments are associated with rites of forceful activity.¹³ A turquoise ring and prayer beads are worn on the left-hand.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the saints of the Nyingmapa sect, Dorje Lingpa (1346 – 1405), and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), also used dancing to subjugate demons and overcome obstacles that were preventing the spread of Buddhism in Bhutan. They built monasteries, discovered many religious treasures and composed the dances that they had received in visions of Guru Rinpoche's paradise.¹⁴ However, it was the arrival of the great leader, organiser and legislator, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), that brought the *drukpa* sect to its political and religious peak at the time of the unification of Bhutan [1616].¹⁵ Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel composed both the words and music for the *tsechu* dances that are performed today, including the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay*. The dances that were performed in various great monasteries throughout the country were documented. Ngawang Namgyel's work, *Gar-Thig-Yang Sum*, indicates how religious dances and popular dances should be choreographed and performed.

Any *cham* performance is primarily a meditation in movement and an offering for the deities. Through his actions, augmented by chants, music and costume, the dancer assumes the role of the deity he is representing, thereby elevating his awareness to a higher spiritual plane. Every

¹² Robert Beer, *The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999) 69.

¹³ *Ibid*, 216, 318.

¹⁴ Christian Schicklgruber, and Françoise Pommaret eds. *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods* (New Delhi: Bookwise, 1997) 188-189.

¹⁵ Françoise Pommaret, *Bhutan*. Rev. ed. Trans. Elizabeth Booz. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 1994: 98.

gesture (Skt. *mudra*) the dancer makes is not only symbolic, but has power in itself. Padmasambhava is believed to have made rocks explode and the Tibetan king's robe to catch fire by the power of his gestures.¹⁶ Only monks or the male members of the King's special dance troupe from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts are permitted to perform the *cham* and the *dramnyen cham* and the dance that accompanies the *Choeshay* are no exception. The reason for the prohibition of female performers in this dance can be explained by the sacred nature of the dance and the fact that women were banned from entering the upper Tsari pilgrimage circuit.¹⁷

Dasho Sithel Dorji gives the words of the *choeshay* (song) in his *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*.¹⁸ The words also describe in detail the movements for the accompanying *cham* (dance). They are divided into eleven "Steps" or stanzas: 1. Chos zhay [Choeshay], 2. Receiving Scarf, 3. Coming of the Pious One, 4. Has Come and Arrived, 5. The Rainbow-coloured Flower, 6. The Peaceful One, 7. The Magical Lasso, 8. The Rainbow-coloured Peacock, 9. The Outer Boundary Wall, 10. The Chinese Lady (Jaza Amai Samdrup), 11. Tashi, The Good Fortune. The dance movement descriptions at the end of every stanza, except for the last, are identical.

Right turns, three and three,
Left turns, three and three.
One right, one left;
One shift, two shift, three shift,

¹⁶Jamyang Norbu, "cham: the sacred dance of tibet," *Dranyen* 8, 1 (1984) 7.

¹⁷Huber, 140-154.

¹⁸Dasho Sithel Dorji, *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*, trans, Dorji Wangchuk (Thimphu, Bhutan: KMT Press, 2001) 2-10.

First Step - Chos zhay

With the lineage sons of Palden Drukpa
If anyone would challenge, let him come;
From the right turn,
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are
achieved.

With the disciple monks of the various lamas
If anyone would challenge, let him come;
From the right turn,
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are
achieved.

With the various kings and his capitals
If anyone would challenge, let him come;
From the right turn,
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are
achieved.

Right turns, three and three etc.

The fifth stanza refers directly to the Zhabdrung.

Fifth Step – the Rainbow-coloured Flower

There is fortune where the rainbow-coloured
flowers bloom;
The garden is filled with their rays.
There is fortune where the rainbow-coloured
flowers flourish:
Offer them to Zhabdrung, the Precious One.
All the rainbow-coloured flowers,
Blossoming into a thousand petals.
Right turns, three and three, etc.²²

²² Dasho Sithel Dorji, 5.

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The *dramnyen cham*, is a dance that proclaims the victory of Buddhism over obstacles or negative forces. The composition of the words and music is again attributed to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The dance is also a notable exception to the general exclusion of stringed instruments in monastic music in Bhutan, and is usually the first or final dance of a *tsechu*. The outstanding feature of this dance is that a single performer plays the *dramnyen*, while dancing alongside others in a circle.

The Bhutanese *dramnyen*, is a long-necked, fretless, double-waisted lute. It is also the most ornate and colourful of the Himalayan lutes. It is painted, or carved and painted, with religious symbols, such as Dharma wheel, the Three Jewels, and Yangchenma – the goddess of melody – and cloud motifs. Its peg box is a distinctive C shape with a carved finial of the head of a *chusing*, a sea monster. Sometimes long tassels are hung from the *chusing's* horns making its appearance even more frightening. Although the *dramnyen* is regarded as a secular instrument and stringed instruments are not part of the monastic orchestra, *dramnyens* are depicted on *thankas* (religious wall-hangings), or placed on the altar as an offering. Sharchop Gyalpo (Skt. Dritarashtra), the guardian king of the eastern direction, is identified in religious iconography by the *dramnyen* he carries. The *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are instances when the *dramnyen* is permitted to be played in the monastery or *dzong*, albeit only in the courtyard of such.

Three different performances of the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are the focus of this study:

1. an audio recording, made by John Levy in 1971, of part of the *dramnyen cham* and what he describes as the first and

third stanzas of the *choeshay* (which will be referred to as Levy),²³

2. a personal video recording of the complete rehearsal of the *dramnyen cham* performed on open ground outside the auditorium at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, for the *tsechu*, in 1998 (which will be referred to as the rehearsal), and

3. a personal video recording of the complete *choeshay* as performed at the public *tsechu* in Tashichodzong, Thimphu in 1998 (which will be referred to as the *tsechu*).

In the rehearsal, the structure of *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* is based on three stanzas of a song, each of which is introduced or separated by the passages on the *dramnyen*. The all-male dancers wear their everyday, traditional dress as shown in the photo. The dance is continuous, even during the singing, but the *dramnyen* is not played during the singing. The dance begins with thirteen dancers, in two lines, who are led into the courtyard by the lone *dramnyen* player. While dancing, he plays a simple, three-note motif, C# F# C# (I), which is repeated twice, on the entry of each pair into the courtyard proper.²⁴ With their arms raised the dancers move forward to form a circle, while the melody pattern changes to a faster one in which each note is repeated three to six times (II). The dancers turn, smacking their arms and then stamping their feet. The melody then becomes more extensive encompassing the pentatonic scale, C# E F# G# B (III), and is repeated five times ending with a stamp. All the time the dancers are moving mostly clockwise, in a circle while slowly turning and bending forward and leaning backwards, moving to the centre of the circle and then back out, and turning again. The main part of this section develops the repeated-

²³ Levy, op cit.

²⁴ The C# is a quarter-tone flat.

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note, pentatonic patterns so that the range extends down to the lower G#. The dance tempo quickens and a more regular metre is established. Apart from the introduction and coda, the cham can be interpreted in simple duple time. This can be discerned from the accent of the notes. The first note of each duple beat is accented by virtue of its longer duration and the plucking technique of the dramnyen player. This plucking technique involves the dramnyen's seven strings (thag) that are tuned in two double courses and one triple course. The seventh half-length string is tuned an octave above the middle unison strings. One of the other courses is usually tuned an octave apart e.g., g G c' c c f f. The instrument is plucked with a long (c. 6cm), tapered (from c.75mm wide), attached plectrum. The plucking motion is 'down-up' and one string of a course is plucked at a time i.e., one string is plucked with a downward motion and the other (usually of the pair) with an upward motion. The downward motion is always stronger and louder than the upward motion and dramnyen players in Bhutan emphasise this feature in both their explanation and performance. A summary of the first dance section exemplifies the complicated repetition of patterns and shifting pitch centres which carry through the entire piece.

Melodic patterns and repeats	Pitch centres	Characteristics
<i>Exposition</i>		
I (x 27)	C#	introduction, dancers enter and later raise alternate knees up high
II (x 5)	G#	repeated note patterns
I (x 5)	C#	
II (x 5)	G#	slight embellishment
I (x 5)	C#	A stamp at the end
II		expanded
I (x 5)		stamp

Development

III		widest range, some repeated-note patterns from II, dancers turning and bending
IV	C#	stamp, slow tempo, repeated C#s while dancers perform on the spot
	G#	Quicker dance tempo
V	C# - E	regular metre
VI	C# - F#	transition to song

Finally, when the dancers slowly lower their hands, the first stanza of the song begins.

Dasho Sithel Dorji gives a detailed translation, which clearly refers to the Zhabdrung. It begins with an offering, and then gives the three song stanzas.

Melodious Words

Offering to the Lama, the Buddha and the Dharma,
Offering to the Three Precious Ones, the best refuge
for all.

Before the Lord of Lhasa, again and again I offer
this melody.

The Wordings of the Dranyen [sic] Dance
The peaceful Sage who resides in the deep
sandalwood forest of Druk Yul,
His straight and immovable body is the life-tree of
Palden Drukpa.

This Buddha who has woken up from the sleep of
ignorance

Lives surrounded by five hundred Arhats
Who have conquered the enemy of Delusions.

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In the centre of this prosperous place, Druk, the
peaceful land,
Is found Gadhen Choeki Phodrang, the Happy,
Religious Palace.
Skilfully adorning his head with the Indian Payzha
cap,
Is one who looks like Lama Rechungpa:
O, is it he or not?
Please tell the truth; tell the truth.
Is one who looks like Lama Rechungpa;
O, is it he or not?

The thousand, golden pealed [petalled] lotus
blooming in the Great Mountain Lake
Is a prophecy that a thousand and two Buddhas
will come to serve the sentient beings.
The Blue Cuckoo is the happiest among birds.
The reason for its melodies comes from its own
mind.
Let good luck come, the goddess of good luck.
Let good luck come, the goddess of good luck.
Let good luck come to the whole country in general;
Let good luck come to this place in particular.
This happy state is called Happiness; let it come
from the right
This peaceful state is called Peace; let it come from
the left.
The tunes for these three calls be matched in
melody.²⁵

This song belongs to the *shay* category i.e., a series of stanzas, sung in a folk-style that date from the seventeenth

²⁵ Dasho Sithel Dorji, 12-14.

century armed monks.²⁶ However, this *shay* is also a religious song. The celebratory and triumphant music of this first stanza or sung section, consists of four phrases and a refrain, the latter being an extension of the preceding phrase and a link to the next: A A, B B, C C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D, Refrain. The pitch centre, a lowered E, is three semitones above that of the *dramnyen* part. The phrases consist of decisive, ascending figures followed by longer, flowing descending ones. Often, the descending phrases are ornamented with lower mordent or appoggiatura embellishments (*nyenku*). Such decorations are also common in the *dramnyen* music. All three sung sections are heterophonic and often there is a softer echo on a repeated phrase. The second sung section is shorter than the first, but the third is much longer. To the continuing circular movement, new dance steps are added and these define each section. In the first, the dancers stand on one leg with the other raised (as if ready to stamp on the demon). In the second the dancers, while crouching, step over their feet, right over left and left over right, in what is known as a crossed *dorje* (diamond sceptre) step. These occur twice between the more staid dance steps and present the illusion of dancing and balancing on the back of the yak or frog demon. This dance also includes soft stamps and standing still (while the *dramnyen* plays fast repeated notes). The third sung section's dance is emotionally intense and slow moving. The dancers appear to be in a state of meditation. The defining step is where the dancers raise their arms, with one pointing forward, and they bend forward while standing on one leg. This illustrates the disciplining and controlling of the demon. At the end the dancers form one line, stamp and turn and come off in pairs, remove their headbands and bow,

²⁶ For further information on *shay* see Sonam Kinga, "The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs, *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 3, 1 (Summer, 2001): 134-175.

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and finally the *dramnyen* player exits playing the three-note motif of the introduction.

In the *tsechu* performance of the *choeshay*, the *dramnyen* instrument and its solos were completely absent. The dancing and singing were continuous and, like the rehearsal, lasted thirty-two minutes. In the *tsechu* the *dramnyen cham* would have been performed separately, and on a previous day. The dance was the same as at the rehearsal except that the dancers entered in threes, which compensated for the larger circumference of the dancers' circle in the larger courtyard. The full costume was worn, which gave an additional illusion of power (over the demon), to the dance.

The more extensive ornamentation of the *dramnyen's* melodic lines in the Levy recording is the most noticeable difference between it and the other two simpler, later versions. Mordent-type patterns occur on almost every other beat. This is not character with older versions of traditional Bhutanese music in general. The simplification of such *nyenku* by younger players is noticeable in many recent performances of traditional Bhutanese songs and *dramnyen* accompaniments.

The symbolic association of costume, dance steps and gestures with Tsangpa Gyare's victory, and the *dramnyen* with a guardian deity, is obvious. But why is the *dramnyen* chosen to accompany this *cham* and *choeshay*? Firstly, it is well known that the *dramnyen's* beautiful sounds attract demons and that the role of the fearsome *chusing* on the *dramnyen's* peg box is to dispel any such demons.²⁷ Secondly, in most *cham* a cymbal player is the dance master who, through a repertoire of different techniques, including single and repeated note patterns, conveys the steps to the dancers. In the *dramnyen cham*, the *dramnyen* appears to take on the

²⁷ Ap Dawpel, personal interview, 1998. *Dramnyen* means "beautiful sound"

cymbal's role, cueing the movements and keeping the dancers together with notes reminiscent of cymbal patterns. In the *choeshay* the *dramnyen* is no longer essential as the music of the song serves this guiding purpose. The third quality the *dramnyen* gives to the *cham* is that its sound provides a reference beat over which the dancers appear to have a floating movement. When the dancers' steps fall either side of the *dramnyen* note they 'transcend the beat' thereby emphasizing the meditational and mystical quality of the music. The *dramnyen*, then, not only serves the kinetic and rhythmic aspects of the dance, but it also acts as a symbolic transcendence of power over the demon and a link between the secular and sacred world.

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Photographs



Figure 1: Tsari Mountain (Photo: Ray Kreisel)



Figure 2: Dramnyen cham costume, Thimphu tsechu, Bhutan
(Photo: the author)



Figure 3: Dramnyen as played at the rehearsal, Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Thimphu (Photo: the author)



Figure 4: *Dramnyen cham* rehearsal at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Chuba Chu, Bhutan. (Photo: the author)



Figure 5: *Dramnyen cham* performance at the Thimphu tsechu, Bhutan. (Photo: the author).

