

## The Tsam Festival



**Yellow Dharmapàla** Polychromed papier-mâché mask, gilt-bronze ear pendants; late 19th-early 20th century Chojin Lama Temple Museum, Ulaan Baatar This mask was worn by a lama in the role of Protector of the Law (Dharmapàla). The menacing quality of the Dharmapàla was given additional emphasis by attaching a silk appliqué demon's mask to the back of the mask. The spectator would thus always be confronted by a threatening countenance.

A **Tsam** ceremony was held at the beginning of the year to exorcise evil. It consisted of a series of masked dances and often had a narrative content. Tsam (in Tibetan, Cham) means masked dance, and local variations of the festival were once practiced in Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, China and Mongolia, but only in Ladakh and Bhutan and at a few remote, inaccessible monasteries has it been protected from destructive politics and the impact of Western civilization. In Tibet, Mongolia, Transbaikalia, and China the festival either fell victim to the ruthless Stalinist suppression of Buddhism in the 1930s, or more recently to the vandalism unleashed by the Chinese Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong. Today in Mongolia efforts are being made to revive the tradition, with elderly monks who survived persecution teaching young monks the rituals and choreography of Tsam.

While the use of grotesque masks in the Tsam dances creates an impression of going back to high antiquity, the festival is in fact a relatively recent tradition. Among the southern Mongol tribes, the annual dance seems to have been adopted during the second half of the eighteenth century. At the capital of Urga (near present-day Ulan Baatar) it is said that these dances were first performed in the monastery of Bogdo Gegen ("Living Buddha") in 1811. A variety of sources allows us to reconstruct the outlines of the Tsam in Mongolia. This is of special interest because this type of sacral performance attained during its brief life span in this country a level that was never equaled in any other. Tsam masks of Mongolian production, for example, are exceptionally large and have an artistic expressiveness only rarely matched in other countries.

Although Tibetan and Mongolian manuals exist which detail the iconography and outline the choreography of the Tsam, eyewitness accounts of early Western travelers imply that the dances actually differed in many ways from the manuals. Indeed, it is these accounts, together with photographs and even a few early films, which allow us to gain an impression of the character of the Tsam festival and the sequence of its dances. A collection of undated glass negatives of photographs taken during the Tsam festival in Ulaan Baatar by an unknown photographer and preserved in the National Archives of Mongolia provides an important source of information.



Kashin Kahn and his sons at the Tsam festival in Ulaan Baatar (before 1937)

A rare collection in the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St. Petersburg of polychromed wooden figurines representing the different roles in the festival enable us to reconstruct the actual use of the impressive masks and colorful costumes. In addition to the masks, a very small number of large *tangka* paintings, displayed

on tall masts during the festival, as well as some bronze sculptures, and ritual implements were saved from destruction during the religion repression of the Soviet regime and later Chinese Communist regime. They constitute the few remaining artifacts of Tsam rituals. Most of them now belong to collections of the national museums of Mongolia and many are being shown abroad for the first time in this exhibition.

In the rituals of the Mongolian Tsam festival, tantric and much older shamanistic traditions of dance merged in harmonious fashion. Mongolian shamanism may have owed its great vitality and dynamism to the fact that it had already absorbed all kinds of tantric elements when Buddhism first reached Mongolia. The

shamanistic influence, as it manifests itself in the Tsam festival, is therefore a multi-layered phenomenon, the different strata of which cannot always be clearly distinguished.



The two Citipati patrol the perimeter of the Tsam square in Ulaan Baatar (before 1937).

In Urga, the Tsam festival was held in an open space in which seven concentric circles were drawn in chalk inside a clearly marked square. In the center of these circles, an open tent or canopy was erected in which was installed the *zor*, a pyramid made of dough and crowned by a skull. At the beginning of the ceremony, the *lingka*, a doll made of dough, was placed next to the *zor*. The dances started with a performance by two Citipati, that is figures wearing skull masks and skeleton costumes. The two characters represent the Lords of the Charnel Grounds and through their dance rituals and the mantras they repeated, the pavilion and objects enshrined in it were transformed into a mystic Charnel Ground where the desire that is the root of rebirth is extinguished and where higher knowledge can be obtained. A host of others including the White Old Man, a sometimes buffoon-like character who represents fertility, and Khashin Khan and his eight sons, who represent a sort of reception committee for the other dancers, are members of the standard Tsam repertory and play out their roles. Afterwards, other groups of characters wearing demonic masks appear and dance around the *zor*, banishing all evil by driving it into the *lingka*. At the same time the soul is delivered from the grip of demons. The festival is concluded by a lama wearing a stag mask who tears apart the *lingka* with his sword. The *lingka* was made of fast-rising dough. This

allowed the audience to clearly see the belly of the doll expand during the duration of the ceremony, creating a dramatic and convincing effect.

The concentric circles drawn on the ground around the *zor* and the *lingka* created three bands that were used by masked dancers, separated by bands that were left unused. The innermost circle was reserved for the Master of the Dance. The dances were accompanied by a small orchestra consisting of wind and



Dharmapalas at the Tsam festival in Ulaan Baatar (before 1937)

percussion instruments. Just outside the southern end of the square a huge *thangka* representing the supreme deity Vajrapani was displayed. In front of this, a shrine to the same deity was placed. In the third and outer circle only the *shanag*, or Black Hats, danced. The *shanag*, the only participants in the ritual not to wear masks, represent the earliest stratum of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion called Bonpo. Bonpo, like popular Mongolian religion, had unmistakable shamanistic characteristics. The final character to appear in the Tsam square was Yama, God of the Realm of Death and Supreme Judge of the Dead whom the Mongols call Erlig Khan. He usually appeared wearing a Buffalo mask, with a lasso for catching souls in one hand and a skeleton-shaped scepter in the other. His arrival at the head of the possession constituted the climax of the ritual. Mongolian masks symbolizing the actual presence of a deity never have their eyes pierced. The performers therefore had to look through the mouths of the masks, adding extra height to the performer. As the temporary residence of gods and demons, masks are like statues and treated as sacred objects. When not in use, they were stored in monasteries and paid homage to in daily rituals.