

## The Bjipi Pawo Dance

The Bjipi Pawo (འབྲུག་པའི་དཔལ་ལོ་) dance is a unique piece of Bhutanese performing arts. It is performed as part of a procession during an important reception or event. The term Bjipi Pawo is generally thought to refer to young (འབྲུག་པ་) heroes (དཔལ་ལོ་) or valiant youth. Some scholars go to great length to explain the different kinds of youth based on Buddhist concepts and argue that the warriors are considered young or child-like in terms of their spiritual strengths in comparison to the enlightened saints. However, a few other scholars argue that the term is Jinbeb Pawo (འབྲུག་འབྲུག་དཔལ་ལོ་) or the heroes who bring forth blessings. Jinbeb refers to the phase of a Buddhist meditation ritual when the Buddhas and deities are received to the space where the ritual takes place. The deities are believed to come with a retinue of many youthful valiant beings as escorts. The Zhingzhi Pema ritual in Bhutan is a good example of such reception of deities.

There are no old written sources about the Bjipi Pawo dance. Oral accounts, which have been recently written down both in Dzongkha and English, claim that the dance started sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Jigme Norbu, one of the incarnations of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, was installed as Desi ruler of Bhutan. Bhutan was at that point going through around that time a major civil strife which has divided the country into two camps. While one party under the brothers, Dorji Norbu, and Chakpa Sangay, from upper Wang ruled from Punakha, another party under Tashi Dorji, Wangchuk Gyalpo and Jigme Norbu ruled from Thimphu. Thus, there were two governments ruling from two different capitals.

Jigme Norbu (1831-61), who was the leading incarnation of Zhabdrung and the foremost religious figure of his time, was first with the Punakha faction until he was smuggled out, still a child, to be with the Thimphu faction. His father, Tenzin Chogyal, the *ponlop* governor of Trongsa, lost his life in the conflict between the Thimphu and Punakha factions soon after Jigme Norbu joined the Thimphu camp. In the summer of 1850 and at the age of 19, Jigme Norbu was installed as the Desi ruler in Thimphu, about which he remarked that “he was made a horse herder even before he is capable of being a goat herder.” His staunch supporter Agay Haap Tshutrim Namgyal, the *ponlop* of Paro, is said to have designed the Bjipi Pawo dance as a security measure during his coronation as the Desi ruler. The well-

armed dancers are made to perform a dance in the ceremonial procession while also keeping a sharp eye to spot and avert any assailants.

The two dancers are dressed as medieval warriors, each wearing a thick raw silk *gho*. In the lower part, they wear a white skirt, and silk scarves in five colors are crisscrossed over their shoulders and torso. They wear a diadem on the head and carry a long sword for battle on their back and traditional pouches for cups and coins. Thus, they are dressed and equipped like medieval soldiers but also has the implements of a local *pawo* or shaman. They beat a medium size ritual drum as they dance. When the procession moves, they prance, jump and run forward and backward in a rhythmic dance along the procession line but do not cross the line of the procession. This movement in the guise of a dance, it is said, was mainly put in place to spy on any attempts of ambush or lurking assailants.

Once the procession has reached the point of ceremonial reception and the guests have taken the allocated positions for the offering of *marchang* libation, the dancers perform three chapters of the dance: the peaceful, semi-wrathful and wrathful chapters. The chapter of peaceful dance starts with the verse:

ཐང་ལ་བདེ་བ་ལེགས་སོང་། །འ་དབའ། བད་མའི་པད་ཐང་། །ཐང་ལ་བདེ་བ་ལེགས་སོ། །བད་མའི་གི་པད་ཐང་།

The ground is good, Aye! The ground is the lotus ground.

The subsequent verses refer to the auspicious water of crystal-clear nectar, the auspicious gathering of valiant warriors, the auspicious tree of the tall cypress and the auspicious bird of the heavenly crane.

After the peaceful chapter, the dancers move around the container for libation while performing the semi-wrathful dance. The lyrics start with the verse:

ལྷ་མ་ལ་མི་བཞུགས་ང་། །གཅིག་བཞུགས་རྒྱག །ལྷ་མ་བཞུགས་རྒྱག་ཟེར་ན། །མོ་རྒྱན་གྱི་གྲུ་བ། །

Does a lama reside? Aye, a lama resides. Lama, the guru of Orgyen resides.

The next two verses describe the vase on the lama's hand and the hat the lama is wearing. In the third chapter of wrathful dance, the lyrics begin:

རྩ་བྱ་འཕུར་དགོ་མནོ་ལྷེ་ང་། །འ་དབའེ། །གཤོག་རྩོམ་ཐབ་ཐབ་འབད་དོ། །རྩ་བྱ་འཕུར་དགོ་མནོ་ལྷེ། །གཤོག་རྩོམ་ཐབ་ཐབ་འབད་དོ། །

The heavenly bird wishes to fly, Aye! Its wings are fluttering. The heavenly bird wishes to fly; its wings are fluttering.

The subsequent verses depict the bird's wish to eat food, drink water, look up to heaven and ask for blessings. The Bjipi Pawo dance, thus combines poetic spiritual inclination of the Bhutanese character and a martial spirit of a medieval religious warrior. A unique performance, it continues to enrich Bhutan's ceremonial events although its alleged original purpose of spying and thwarting ambushes and lurking assailants, so common in medieval Bhutan, is no longer either applicable or achievable today. As a symbolic cultural performance, the number of dancers has now also increased to four and new rules are being set on number of dancers and the type of guests for whom they perform.

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