

## Sumthrang Kangsöl

Sumthrang Kangsöl is the annual festival held in the village of Sumthrang in Ura valley. The Sumthrang Temple is the venue for the festival and the religious nobility of Sumthrang organizes the festival.

### Sumthrang Lhakhang

Sumthrang Lhakhang, located in Ura Gewog in Bumthang, is one of the earliest religious establishments in central Bhutan and probably the first centre for the practice of Vajrakila teachings in Bhutan. It was founded around 1200 CE by practitioner of Vajrakila teachings from the Nyö Clan called Nyö ton Thrulzhik Chöjé (approx. 1179-1265), the son of Nyö Gyelwa Lhanangpa. Since its establishment, the temple has been a vibrant center of religious and cultural life and served as a source of religious culture and traditions for most of the central and some parts of eastern Bhutan. Sumthrang, thus, is a very important religious, cultural and historical center in Bhutan's history. As one of the earliest religious centres in the country, it houses some of Bhutan's oldest and most sacred relics.

### The Founder

Nyöton Thrulzhik Chojé was a scion of the Nyö lineage in the 18<sup>th</sup> generation. His father was the master Gyelwa Lhanangpa of Nyö lineage and mother Lhacik Dechokma. He was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the fourth lunar month of the Earth Pig Year. Local oral stories describe his prophetic journey from Tibet to Ura and the foundation of the temple. After trying at a place before Sumthrang and finding Sumthrang to possess the landmarks for his temple establishment, he founded Sumthrang Samdrup Chödzone, now popularly known as the Sumthrang Lhakhang in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The surrounding village the Sumthrang gradually developed around the temple.

### Sumthrang Kangsöl

*Kangsöl* (མཚན་མཆོད་) literally means the fulfillment and supplication. The community fulfills the wishes of the spiritual deities by making amends for wrongdoing and lapses and supplication for their protection and support. The prayers especially made to the Vajrakila deities and their retinue in order to seek their blessings and protection for the lineage and the community, and their speedy action to promote the teachings of the Buddha.

This ritual of making amends and supplication is conducted with many offerings of food, drinks and other items. While the core of the ceremony consists of meditation practice

involving visualization of the Vajrakila or Dorjé Phurpa (དོར་ཇེ་ཕུར་པ་) deities and the recitation of mantras, it is also a festive event with a robust culture of fun and enjoyments.

Traditionally, Sumthrang Kangsöl is held annually between the 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> days of the tenth lunar month, which is considered as the month for 'tantric practitioners to hurl wrathful-cakes' (ལྷགས་པ་རྩོམ་འཕེན་གྱི་ལུས་). In recent times it is sometimes held on the same days of ninth or eleventh lunar months according to the convenience of the organizers.

Sumthrang Kangsöl is probably the first religious festival in Bhutan. It was first conducted in Sumthrang after the establishment of Sumthrang Lhakhang in 1220s. Sumthrang Ngacham (ལྷན་འཕུངས་ཇ་འཆས་) is supposedly the first ever mask dance choreographed and performed in Bhutan.

The Sumthrang Kangsöl consists of tantric rituals, recitation of mantras associated with the wrathful Buddha Vajra Kila, performance of mask dances and festive fun in the evenings, when lay people and priests go around the village on alcohol rounds known as Changkor.

### **Sumthrang Kangsöl Programme**

The Sumthrang Kangsöl is conducted for five days with programme of activities, which follows the ritual text of the Vajra Kila practice. In the morning the priest begins the ritual and recitation of the Kila practice and during the daytime, they perform mask dances. The priests again conduct rituals and religious practice in the temple until evening.

The First Day of *Tagön* (ལྷ་གོན་) or Preparation:

The first day is day for preparation of activities for rest of the festival. On this day, ritual dough figures called *tormas* are completed on this day and the shrine is fully laid out and arranged as per the tradition. In the evening, the ritual of exorcism or *gektré* (གཞགས་བསྐྱེད་) is conducted. This ritual dispels all evil forces so that the community is freed from evil and the *kangsöl* completes without obstacles. The ritual of exorcism involves a mask dance inside the temple performed by two or four dancers wearing the male and female *ging* masks. After the dance in the temple, a procession consisting of lamas, the *ging* mask dancers, and the villagers visit each household in Sumthrang village to drive out all evils from the houses and the neighbourhood. The procession meets at a location astrologically confirmed by a priest, where a *homkhung* structure for bonfire is built from hay and old bamboo baskets on a pole in a conical shape. The *homkhung* is burnt to create glorifying flames to burn or expel the evils.

The Second Day of *Tsan Cham* (བཅོན་འཆས་):

The second day of the festival is dedicated to the Sumthrang's tutelary deity, Draktsen

Dorjé Dradül (བླ་བཙན་རྗེ་དྲཱ་འདུལ་), a mountain god belonging to the class of *tšen* (བཙན) spirit. As is the case every day, Vajra Kila ritual and practice begins at around three in the morning of the second day. On this day, the ritual and recitation of Vajra Kila practice focuses on the constructive visualization practices to develop selfless Vajra Kila form in the practitioners.

The main proceedings of the day consist of gratification of and supplication to Draktsen Dorjé Dradül, in order to make amends for any failure and supplicate him and his retinue for protection and support. Therefore, the dance of Draktsen and his attendants is performed as the main dance on this day. After breakfast, the priests perform the special ritual of Draktsen. Following the ritual, at the point when the invitation of the Draktsen Dorjé Dradül and his attendants for the feast of offering begins, the huge image of Draktsen Dorjé Dradül is received in a procession in the temple with the mask dance of his attendants: the kings of four cardinal directions.

Later after Draktsen ritual and the mask dance of Draktsen in the temple is completed, the mask dance for the day is performed outside in the courtyards after lunch. The dances performed are:

1. Sidpa Phomo or the Sumthrang Gadpo Ganmo Dance
2. Shinjé Sacha Phomo Cham Dance
3. Tacham, the horse dance of Draktsen's attendants; the king of four directions.

The Third Day of Draklé:

The performances of ritual inside the temple on the third day remain the same as previous days, while another set of mask dances are performed in the courtyard. The Vajra Kila ritual and practice on this day includes the violent activity (དྲཱ་ལམ་) of liberation and subjugation. Therefore, in the later part of the day in the evening the *daplé* (གདམ་ལམ་) ritual or the action of 'piercing the evils' by the dagger of Vajra Kila is performed. After Breakfast, the following mask dances are performed.

1. Sacha Chung Dzam
2. Gomazhi
3. Chaging (Throwo Chui Cham)
4. Tsoging (Thromo Chui Cham)

In the evening, as part of the ritual exhorting the Buddha Vajra Kila for speedy action, a Libation ritual known as the Püchang Gutsi (ཕུང་ཆང་དགུ་ཚེ), or nine-fold alcohol offering. The alcohol used is carefully fermented from nine different cereals for this specific event. The Püchang — the first portion of alcohol — is offered in a cauldron said to have been discovered by Tertön Pema Lingpa. After the libation ceremony, the incumbent chojé (ཚོ་ཡེ་) or religious lord begins to offer his apologies for any misconducts and shortcomings to the deities or the dharma protectors followed by supplication and request, using an

impressive liturgy, to be more active, strong and powerful to execute their duties. The Püchang is then offered to all those gathered in the temple.

The püchang is followed by *daplé* where the incumbent *chojé* dressed as tantric master with black hat subjugate the evil. An effigy of the evil laid in a triangular box is brought out by four dancers with masks of lion, tiger, wild dog and the wild boar known as the *gomazhi* (མགོ་མ་བཞི།) or the door guardians of the mandala of the Vajra Kila deity. The box is placed on a black sheet of a cloth, which the door guardians hold at the four corners. The *chojé* in the form of *ngagchang* (སྔགས་འཇམ་) or tantric master, following the text for the ritual, performs the piercing and crushing of the evil forces. The ritual ends with offering of the remains of the evil to the mandala of Vajra Kila and his retinues.

The Fourth Day of Nga Cham:

The proceedings on fourth day remain the same as the previous days for the ritual and practices in the temple by the priests. As part of the public spectacle, the Sangwé Ngacham Dance of Sumthrang is performed. This dance is connected to the Ngachung Sangwé Drukdir, a small sacred drum that helped the founder locate Sumthrang. The following mask dances are performed on this day:

1. Sha Dzam
2. Durda Cham
3. Zhanak Nak Cham
4. Sangwé Nga Cham
5. Nyulema (Zhawri in local term)
6. Chung Zhi

The Fifth Day of Torgyab:

The *torgyap* (གཏོར་རྒྱུ་), or exorcism by hurling a ritual effigy, takes place on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the ninth lunar month, and is generally attended by large crowds. This is another event associated with exhorting the speedy action during Kangsöl festival. Termed as *phanglé* (ཕངས་ལམ་) or action for casting in the context of Vajra Kila ritual, it is an activity of throwing the wrathful effigy, which represents a wrathful divine force to scare away and destroy the evil forces, which harm the Buddha's teachings, the practitioners and the patrons.

The ritual effigy is taken in procession to the place where *homkhung* is erected using a pile of hay, old bamboo baskets and a pole. Following the ritual text, the six dancers, the two *garuda* and four *gomazhi* or door guardians together with the tantric master in the form of black hat dancer throws the main wrathful cake of Vajra Kila into the flaming *homkhung*. The procession returns to the temple courtyard reciting the words of victory, and all of those gathering perform the victory dance in rejoicing. The Kangsol's main rituals concludes in the temple with *trashy monlam* (བཏམ་མེས་མོན་ལམ་) or prayers for auspiciousness.

## Mask Dances of Sumthrang Kangsöl

Mask dances of Sumthrang Kangsöl are unique to Sumthrang. Only some temples in the east and central part of Bhutan, which used to be the branch of Sumthrang perform some items of Sumthrang's mask dances. Based on its history and the biographies of the *chojés*, it is likely Sumthrang Kangsöl is the first annual public religious festival in Bhutan and its mask dances perhaps the first mask dances of Bhutan.

While Sumthrang's Sangwé Ngacham choreographed and introduced by the founder himself, is probably the first mask dance of Bhutan, other mask dances of Sumthrang seem to have been added in the subsequent centuries by the other lineage holders of Sumthrang as the festival progressed. Yet, these later introductions still predate most of the popular mask dances of Bhutan and it is without doubt that the Sumthrang's mask dances were performed before the famous dances associated with Pema Lingpa, which are popular across Bhutan.

All the dances except the *Tsancham*, which is the dance of the tutelary deity of Sumthrang, are dances, which are based on the forms, action and concepts of the Buddha Vajra Kila and his retinues. The mask dances are therefore unique to Sumthrang and passed down through the generations of Sumthrang chojé lords and their community of priests.

The mask dances of Sumthrang include:

### 1. Sangé Ngacham (གསང་བའི་རྩ་འཇམ་), the Secret Drum Dance

Exclusive to Sumthrang is a dance performed by 12 men with masks of 11 animal heads including two dog-faces. It was choreographed by Sumthrang's founder Nyöton Trulzhig Chojé as a symbol of his gratitude and homage to the small sacred drum, which helped him locate the destined place of Sumthrang. The drum is called Ngachung Sangwa Drukdir (རྩ་ཇུང་གསང་བ་འབྲུག་གླིང་) or the small secret drum with dragon's resonance. Its choreographic steps relate to the Vajra Kila deities performing the dance of the victory over evil and is considered the *tercham* (གཉེན་འཇམ་) or esoteric treasure dance of Sumthrang. This and the black hat dance are probably the only two dances performed in the days of the founder in 1220s after he established his seat in Sumthrang.

### 2. Tsencham or Tacham (བཅོན་འཇམ་/རྟ་འཇམ་), the Horse Dance

This dance is performed by dancers representing the kings of four directions riding a horse each of four colours: white, yellow, red and green. These four kings are not the same as the common kings of four directions that one can see in mural paintings at the walls of *dzongs* and temples. The four kings in Sumthrang's *tsencham* are the attendants of Sumthrang Draktsen, the local *tsan* deity of Sumthrang. While Draktsen has been a deity of Sumthrang from the immemorial time, he was recognized and elevated as a deity after Nyöton Trulzhig Chojé founded his seat. Draktsen played many important roles as the special spirit of Sumthrang. The dance of *tsencham* was first introduced in

the Sumthrang's Kangsöl by the 6<sup>th</sup> Sumthrang *chojé*, Jamyang Drakpa Özer (ca. 1382-1442). He was said to have composed the steps and choreography of the dance after the Draktsen and his four attendants performed the dance for him at one occasion.

### 3. Zhanak Ngacham (ཞམ་ཆམ་འགམ་འཇམ་):

Performed by ten men, it is the representation of tantric practitioners of the ten forms of Vajra Kila. It depicts the story of Vajra Kila yogis subduing the evil forces. Although it is difficult to tell when it was introduced, this dance might have been performed since the time of the first Sumthrang Chojé the founder himself, as he was the only Vajra Kila practitioner who established a centre for this practice in Bhutan. Alternately, it could be the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sumthrang Chojé, Vajra Düpa (ca. 1262-1296), who may have introduced the dance along with the two other mask dances that have a similar steps and are credited to him.

### 4. Tsoking (ཚོགས་གོང་):

This dance of 10 male wrathful deities of Vajra Kila mandala was first started by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sumthrang *chojé* Vajra Düpa who saw the dances in his vision of the great Copper Coloured Palace of Guru Rinpoché. He is also said to have made the scroll paintings of the Vajra Kila for Sumthrang where the main scroll was said to have a painting of the *chojé's* face. He was said to have posed with wrathful face saying that the Dorjé Zhonnu or Vajra Kila should look something like this.

### Chaging (ཅམ་གོང་):

This is the dance of the ten female forms of wrathful deities of Vajra Kila mandala, which is also the dance introduced by Chojé Vajra Düpa.

### Chungzhi (ཇུང་བཞི་)

Originally from Sumthrang, the Chungzhi is performed in Ura Yakchö after it was taught to Ura dancers by Gaden Lam. Until it was taken to Gaden and later performed in Ura Yakchö, it was performed only in Sumthrang. The dance consists of two parts, first the Nyeleyma (ལྷ་ལེ་མ་) or Zhawri, the dance depicting the evil force and the dance of four male and female *garuda* who represent the enlightened force, which destroy the evil.

### Gomazhi (གོམ་བཞི་)

This is the dance of the four door guardians of Vajra Kila mandala. The dancers carries out an effigy of the evil forces which has to be subdued. They place it in the middle of the ground for the subsequent dance to offer the remains, which in Sumthrang's case is done during the Tsoking cham.

### Sachak Shinjé (ས་བཅག་གཤིན་ཇེ་)

Dance of a pair of dancers wearing mask of bull heads, its performed in the morning of the first day before other dances. It is performed to sanctify the atmosphere and the surrounding from evil forces so that the following performances are not disturbed. This

dance is performed also in other *dzongs* and monasteries but Sumthrang has some unique steps related to Vajra Kila ritual and practices.

#### Sacha Chungzam (ས་བཅག་ལྷུང་རྩམ་)

This is an exclusive dance performed with four dancers wearing *garuda* masks in the morning of the second day before other dances with the purpose of sanctifying the ground.

#### Sacha Shadzam (ས་བཅག་ག་རྩམ་)

This is performed with four dancers wearing stag masks in the morning of third day before any other dances. It also performed to sanctify the surrounding.

#### Durdak (དུར་བདག་)

This dance of the guardian of cremation grounds is performed widely in Bhutan although Sumthrang has some unique steps. The dancers carry out the effigy of evil to be destroyed by the Zhanak Ngacham dance that follows.

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