

## Yak Dance of Merak



Yak dance performed at Samten Chöling temple on the first day.

The Yak Dance (གཡལ་ལྷུང་ལྷོང་) of Merak and Sakteng are performed in honor of Thöpa Gali (ཐོཔ་གཡི་). The exact origin of this yak dance is still not known but there are two versions of the story giving the origin of the dance. In one version, it is said to be an enactment of the legendary tale of Thöpa Gali, who is venerated by some as the God of Livestock. The other version says the dance is performed to pay due respect to the yak as the principal means of livelihood for the community. Both versions are suitable as the yak dance represents both Thöpa Gali and also the nomadic life of the community.

It is not known who composed the performance of the yak dance in the history of the nomadic communities of Merak and Sakteng. Some people say it was first performed in the place called Tangchen in the area of Mount Pema Kogsum, when people of Merak and Sakteng migrated from Tshona, Tibet to the present villages. Many people say that it had been created based on the legendary tale of the Thöpa Gali, who is believed to have discovered a yak. The Yak Dance was performed annually on the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the Bhutanese calendar at Samten Chöling Lhakhang in Merak for one day and then at Trashy Chöling Lhakhang in Gengo on the following day.



Yak dance cham performed at Trashi Choling lhakhang in Gengo on the next day.

The yak dance is presented to the public during annual festival to reenact the life of Thöpa Gali and also to preserve and promote the nomadic cultures by giving due respect to the yaks. The songs in the series of episodes of the yak dance during the performance provide succinct description of the life of the nomads. The Yak Dance has nineteenth steps, with a specific purpose for each step:

Step one: Porab is for offering incense fumigation.

Step two: Chöpa is about offering made to various deities in the form of dance and song.

Step three: Zhengrab is the song-beseeching the yak to wake up.

Step four: Yanglu is a song from distance sung by dancers, when they proceed to the main function ground.

Step five: Ngachi Drukchi

Step six: Trashi Chom

Step seven: Tshangrab is a purification dance, where incense is burnt and water is sprinkled to purify any contamination.

Step eight: Phodrang Töpa is a song in tribute of the castle.

Step nine: Jacham is a dance of a bird and handling of eggs.

Step ten: Nimai Drojam is a dance that shows how the sun shines and yak basks in it.

Step eleven: Shawai Partsi is a dance that demonstrates the skill of stag's movement.

Step twelve: Dombai Shingtsa is a dance that demonstrates the skills of bear in climbing trees.

Step thirteen: Nyamai Kokyo is a dance step that represents the swimming skills of the fish.

Step fourteen: Ae Dang Meme Cham is a dance of an old woman and an old man.

Step fifteen: Kugpai Torgya is a wordless yet humorous performance done with sacrificial ritual cakes.

Step sixteen: Ko Tsalug is a dance that depicts ways of searching a *ko*, female offspring of *dzomo*, which is a female offspring of female yak.

Step seventeen: Gopai Shogdro is a dance that shows how vulture bird flies high into the sky

Step eighteen: Trashi Zhelzom is a dance on dispersing and meeting from the four directions.

Step nineteen: Dracham is a dance performed at last when it is dusk and demonstrates a war with various evil forces. In the end, the yak declares victory over all evil forces and the yak dance comes to an end.

Yak dance is performed by five men but there are also other performers such as Apa called Nyagpo Zhidar (ནག་པོ་ཇི་དང་), Nadzi (ནག་ཇི) called Thöpa Gali (ཐོ་པ་གཤི), Nachung Au (ན་རྩུང་ཨུ) called Habo Dargyé (ཉ་པོ་དར་རྩུས་), Nachung Nou (ན་རྩུང་ནུ) called Gawa Samdrup (དགའ་བ་བསམ་གྲུབ་) and Kugpa (རྒྱལ་པ་). The other performers are the two people in the wooden yak frame, a drummer, a cymbal player, Jacham (བྱ་འཆས་), Edang Memé cham (ཨང་རྒྱལ་དང་མེ་མེ་འཆས་). In total, there are 12 participants.

It is said that Thöpa Gali was from Kongpo in Tibet. He was badly treated by his family members and forced to surrender his family properties when his parents endowed their properties to his two elder brothers. He became very worried about the decision taken by his parents and he requested his family members one by one for his share of property inheritance. He was shocked after he was given with useless items such as an old leaky hat, a frayed-collar raincoat, a lasso without a loop, and a pair of worn out traditional leather boots by his father-Nyagpo Zhidar, mother-Sholma Samkyi, and two brothers Habo Dargyé and Gawa Samdrup. Thinking at these useless items, all his hopes were shattered and his future looked very bleak. He set forth on his unclear journey crossing plains and mountains, leaving behind his parents and their properties. He finally reaches on the apex of mount Silma, offering him a panoramic view, which cleared all his displeasures. He then found out a beautiful lake at the foot of a great snow-clad mountain. When he was enjoying its magnificence, he saw a white bird flying into sky from the lake. He went there and studied the spot, where he found different colored eggs.

Thöpa Gali picked up the white egg, polished and then broke it. A celestial yak appeared but God Indra declared his ownership of the yak. He then broken the spotted egg and a spotted female yak emerged, when the mountain deity Kebu Lungtsen claimed yak.

Thöpa Gali then carefully broke the black egg, from which a black female yak emerged. He had ownership of the yak which was willing to be domesticated. Then, the female yak gave birth to a male yak. After the birth, Thöpa Gali tried to obtain milk from the yak with various techniques. Thöpa Gali had become a yak herder after succeeding in milking the wild animal. He raised and grazed his yaks on alpine meadows depending on the seasons. He also used yak hair tent to house himself along with his yaks. Later, Thöpa Gali mastered the practice of nomadic life and became so successful. It is said that, in the end, Thöpa Gali is said to have attained enlightenment. The people of Merak and Sakteng worship Thöpa Gali as the God of Livestock, Norlha (ནོར་ལྷ།). This is how the people believe that the yaks came into existence in the communities of Merak and Sakteng.

Yak dances are performed in other parts of the country, dedicated to the manifestation of great masters or tutelary deities trying to confront the evil forces or else to appease deities. However, the Yak dance of Merak and Sakteng is performed to honor the yaks who give the community food, shelter and clothing. It is to show the community's respect for the yaks.

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