## **Tercham: A Sacred Dance of Sakteng**

The people of Sakteng say claim the story of *tercham* (()) begins in the court of the Emperor Trisong Detsen (()) Sakteng has its origins as part of an elaborate annual ritual performed by the emperor to safeguard his domain from natural calamities and diseases. The ritual was performed for a month by hundreds of monks from across the empire, beginning with teenaged male participants chosen by King Trisong Detsen's astrologer.

The youths were stripped naked and paraded through the city, accompanied by an enormous altar edifice to be discarded at a distant location in the southern part of the kingdom. People gathered in the streets to curse, spit, and fling flour and ash at the participants in the belief that all their collective misfortunes would be borne away by the sacrificial youths.

On arriving at the pre-ordained location, the altars were thrown into a gigantic bonfire and the participants, after being briefly fed and feted like kings, were exiled with instructions never to look back or return to the kingdom. Over time, the number of youths displaced from King Trisong Detsen's empire formed communities and eventually reached Bhutan, known then as Lho Monyul (عَرَّا العَرَابِينَا), or the land to the south. These are the settlements, legends say, now known as Sakteng, Merak and Chaling.

Commemorating the poignant story of this diaspora, the naked dance called the tercham, is a unique mask dance performed in Sakteng, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the fifth lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar. The *tercham* of Sakteng, also known as *terkong cham*, is performed only once in three years as the main event of the five-day-long Mang Kurim (SARAWER) to dispel misfortunes and evil spirits.

Males between sixteen and sixty years of age are chosen as tercham dancers. It was mostly chosen from the Naksipas  $(aqr) \in c$ , or yak herders of Sakteng. They are required to register their names well in advance of the performances on a piece of paper, which is then folded and given to a Dodampa (addates), or dancer guide. The Dodampa will pick twelve of the folded pieces of paper to declare the names of candidates for the dance. It is believed that the family, parents and relatives of the present-day dancers are assured protection from all forms of adversity for the coming three years. After the selection process, the participants are taken to the Borangtse Lhakhang, where they are required to swear an oath of secrecy. Their enlistment is maintained in confidence by the temple caretaker (eqrectored addet). The identities of the dancers are concealed even among the participants themselves. The temple caretaker blesses each dancer by sprinkling saffronscented water on their heads and the dancers undergo strict spiritual procedure that includes abstaining from sexual intercourse. The dancers receive *srungma* (eqcar), an amulet, and *khadar* (eqcar) an white silk scarf, from the temple caretaker. The temple caretaker then opens a large wooden box and hands each dancer a mask carved from wood and a silken scarf or *dorjé gong* ( $\in \mathbb{R}$  is to wear throughout the next two days.

On day one, the *tercham* dancers emerge from the temple hall, wearing masks and the dorjé gong. The dancers are joined by other dancers representing the yab-yum (argan) or male-female principles of Vajrayana Buddhism. Tercham in Sakteng is performed towards dusk while those in Jampé Lhakhang and Nabji-Korphu take place closer to midnight. After several hours, performed in the temple's courtyard, the entire troupe of tercham dancers, including the yab-yum performers, proceed to the villages where they are eagerly welcomed to confer blessings on the residents' homes. Entire families, male and female, young and old, greet the dancers and escort them inside the house, offering them food and served three types of local brew; bangchang (arcitection), a kind of home ale drink made from millet, singchang (هجنهج), a kind of draught beer and changkö (هجنمة), a thick soup of fermented rice prepared with butter, eggs and amaranth seeds. Such offerings to the naked dancers are believed to quell misfortunes, sickness and untimely death in the coming three years. The dancers repeat the proceeding in every house in the community, travelled in a barefoot to all surrounding villages and displaying laudable commitment continued wellbeing and to dispel evil and misfortunes in their community. At night, the dancers return to the secret house, where they enjoy a few hours' respite before the next day's performance.

The origins of the Sakteng *tercham* are unknown, and the scriptures containing its origins were lost to fire. Unlike in Nabji-Korphu and Jampay Lhakhang, *tercham* in Sakteng is more elaborate in terms of wearing masks that revered as the key relics of Borangtse Lhakhang. In 2001, the government official, Dasho Drungpa of Sakteng, issued an order to change the dress code of naked dancer, instructed the dancers to wear short pants for the sake of modesty. Three years later, when the Borangtse temple caretaker and the dancers reopened the box, they found the *dorjé gong* were riddled with holes, destroyed by insects. They reenacted the festival in its entire unadorned splendor, minus the intrusion of the official dress code.

The end of the festival brings the naked dancers back to Borangtse Lhakhang, where the participants reunite in the temple sanctum to relinquish their respective masks and *dorjé gong* to the temple caretaker. The temple caretaker recites special prayers invoking local deities to bless everyone bringing the proceedings to a close. The temple caretaker painstakingly replaces each wooden mask and *dorjé gong* in their traditional resting place for the next three years until the re-emergence of the naked dancers. Finally, people offer tea and wine to the dancers and Lama, expressing their gratitude for warding off misfortunes in the community for next three years.

Sonam Chophel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.