DANCING THE GODS:  
SOME TRANSFORMATIONS OF 'CHAM IN REB KONG

Dawn Collins

Introduction

This chapter perhaps raises more questions than it answers and, in any case, I hope will identify some possible avenues for future research into the transformations of Tibetan ritual dance ('cham') in contemporary Reb kong. The performance of ritual dances can be viewed as being practiced within the context of rituals found in the Indic Tantric traditions from which many Tibetan Tantric practices derive. Traditions of ritual dance include those found in the Newar cities of the Kathmandu valley, in which masked dancers in trance annually represent wrathful goddesses, the Navadurgā. Embodying these wrathful Aṣṭamātṛka deities, dancers may drink the blood of sacrificed animals and wield real swords. Other examples of masked dances are found in the teyyam rituals of Kerala and the bhutam rituals of Southern Kannada in which low caste dancers are said to be possessed by wrathful deities, such as Bhairava, Kālī and Cāmuṇḍā. There is an antinomian aspect to these practices, reflecting that found in early Tantric traditions such as the Śaivite and the Siddhas, in which practitioners deliberately engage in behaviour signifying a radical rejection of

---

1 The initial impetus and idea for this chapter came during fieldwork in Reb kong during 2009, and I would like to thank Dpa' mo skyid for her invaluable assistance at the village 'cham, which has resulted in the ethnographical section and Gerald Roche for his input during that period, throughout the process of writing this chapter, and for the use of his images to illustrate it (for a collection of his images of Reb kong 'cham see http://www.flickr.com/photos/geraldroche/sets/72157629558658273/). I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Frederick Williamson Memorial Fund for the doctoral studies and fieldwork from which period this chapter derives. I also wish to thank Nicholas Sihlé and Geoffrey Samuel for their valuable comments during and after the conference 'Unity and Diversity: Monastic and Nonmonastic Traditions in Amdo', Cardiff University, 30 Sept–2 Oct 2011, and on earlier drafts, Geoffrey Samuel for posing questions for me regarding my topic on his 2010 visit to Reb kong, and Mona Schrempf for her insightful and detailed comments on an earlier draft.

2 Tibetan names and terms are given according to Wylie's system of transliteration.

3 For studies, see Freeman 1993, 1994, 1999 and Flood 1997 (Samuel 2008: 319).


5 See Samuel 2008: 319ff for examples of other similar masked ritual dance traditions and studies concerning them.
the norms of behaviour in society, thereby demonstrating their freedom to live outside of its constraints. The antinomian character of the lifestyle of the Indian Siddha practitioners from whom the Vajrayāna Tantric practice found in Tibetan regions can be said to originate (cf. Samuel 2005: 57), underlies a meditative practice involving the transformation of individuals and their environs into that of deity and deity abode (manḍala) respectively, the ritual assumption of such divine power entailing its own dangers for practitioners. Tantric ritual practice is thus characterised by such dangerous elements; powerful forces encountered by ritual specialists qualified to embody them for the good of communities.

Tibetan communities, both Buddhist and Bon po, in the Tibetan regions of the People’s Republic of China glossed here as the Tibetan Plateau, in the Himalayas and in Diaspora, perform a variety of dances known as ‘cham or gar as part of ritual practices. The ritual dances termed ‘cham are said to originate in the dreams of great lamas or treasure revealers (gter ston), as perhaps is reflected in contemporary manifestations such as the ‘vajra dance’ currently practiced by students of the Buddhist teacher Nam mkha’i nor bu Rin po che. The ‘cham dances evoke deities, including both enlightened Buddhas and local protector deities, mythical heroes and historical figures. The latter recall origins for such dances as found in Tibetan historiographies, such as the tale of the eighth century Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava’s dancing to subdue malevolent spirits creating obstacles to the foundation of Bsam yas, Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery, or the monk Dpal gyi rdo rje’s ritual killing of the anti Buddhist king Glang dar ma in 842 whilst dancing (Berg 2008: 77–78). ‘Cham texts and practices differ widely (Cantwell 1985), yet are mostly associated with Tantric ritual. These Tantric ‘cham are mostly performed by male dancers (monks or lay practitioners), who appear in costumes visually representative of the deities, often after ritually invoking and identifying with them through meditative practices. These dancers embody the deities.

---


7 As Samuel comments, particularly in earlier societies devoid of audio-visual technology, the evocation of such deities in masked ritual dances must have had “some real purchase on the collective psyche” (Samuel 2008: 318). See Gutschow and Bāsukala 1987; Ilkis 1987; van der Hoek 1994; Korvald 1994 (Samuel 2008: 315ff).

8 An example is that of the great historical figure and gter ston, Padma gling pa (see Gayley 2007: 114, n. 72; Schrempf 1999: 200), and many other examples can be found in the Bka’ byrgyud tradition’s stories about 17th century lamas.

9 This dance came to the master in a dream and was subsequently taught by him to his students. See http://www.dzogchen.ee/_vadzratants.htm (last accessed 14th June 2013).