

Tibetan Performing Arts

By Tara Dhar Hasnain



The ngonpai don, showing male and female dancers

On 7 July this year, in connection with His Holiness the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), based in Dharamsala, India, performed in Singapore.

Tibetans are very fond of music and dancing to mark both secular and religious occasions. As Ms Tsering Yankey, the director of TPIA, said, "Dance and music are an integral part of the life of the Tibetan people. They are not just an entertainment for us, but also a means of worship and celebration." They depict and embody the Tibetans' way of life, their belief-system, religion and culture. Whether it is the grand enthronement ceremony of a high lama, or a layman's marriage, or even mundane activities connected with farming and construction, there are songs describing the nature of each of these events. Many of Tibet's customs and traditions are passed on this way.

A number of the songs and dances were composed by eminent Buddhist masters and carry messages of universal love and compassion, mutual respect, tolerance and peace. They often express gratitude to religious teachers for their blessings and teachings and show respect to Mother Nature for her many gifts to mankind. Such Buddhist attitudes are

often conveyed through these art forms.

There are many types of dances in Tibet; ritual dances are performed during important religious festivals and functions. Such dances represent the overcoming of negative actions and the prevention of evil spirits from harming people and the environment. Ceremonial dances are performed during important state functions as an integral part of the whole event. There are also folk dances from the different regions of Tibet – Dotoe, U-tsang and Domed. They portray the social life and heritage of the common people. Each dance showcases the attire, hats, even boots and masks unique to a particular region. The musical instruments used as accompaniment to the dances are mainly the *dranyen*, a lute, the *piwang*, a fiddle bow, the *gyudmang*, a dulcimer, and the *lingbu*, a bamboo flute.

One of the most important forms of the Tibetan performing arts is Tibetan opera, *lhamo*. This was founded in the 14th century by a famous yogi, Thangtong Gyalpo, in order to convey Buddhist teachings to the general public in a memorable and dramatic manner, comparable to the Mystery and Miracle plays of medieval England. Tibetan opera is seen as a vehicle for spreading the teachings of the Buddha

(Buddhism was Tibet's state religion until the Chinese took over in the 1950s). Thangtong Gyalpo was also a skilled engineer. He used the opera performances to raise money to build many iron bridges in Tibet,



The gyudmang, dulcimer, photo courtesy of TIPA



A song sung to the accompaniment of the fiddle bow



Dance of the nomads from Kham Province in eastern Tibet



The concluding dance of the evening, called *ngonpai don*

helping to transform many remote villages into a network of interlinked communities.

In our times, such work is being carried on by TIPA. The institute was established by the Dalai Lama soon after he fled Tibet and took refuge in India in 1959. This makes TIPA, with its objective of preserving and promoting Tibetan culture, one of the first Tibetan institutes to be established in exile. The institute organises the Tibetan Opera Festival which lasts for 10 days each year, does research on various forms of Tibetan folk dance and music and produces DVDs and CDs for worldwide distribution. It also conducts dance and music teacher training courses for Tibetan schools in India and for the Tibetan Diaspora, especially for youths. TIPA has toured many countries and is often hailed as the cultural ambassador of Tibet.



The piwang, photo courtesy of TIPA

The performance in Singapore on 7 July was distinguished by the dancers' enthusiasm, the stunning visual spectacle and colour of their costumes, jewellery and headdresses, and their remarkable energy.

At the start, the curtains parted to reveal a huge backdrop of the famous Potala Palace of Lhasa, the residence of the Dalai Lamas and a breathtaking example of traditional Tibetan architecture. It houses some sacred Buddhist temples, hundreds of statues, important documents, painted murals, thousands of *thangkas* and Buddhist *sutras* (sermons). It is now a UNESCO World Heritage site, and has deep symbolic significance for Tibetans the world over.

The first item was a song called *Drugchu Yangden* in

praise of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, composed in 1970 by his tutor, Trijang Rinpoche. This was followed by a host of beautiful, colourful, high-energy dances, interspersed with a few songs, to change the tempo from time to time. There was a ceremonial group dance from the Lhoka southern region of Tibet, traditionally performed during important social and religious ceremonies. The costumes worn by the male dancers were similar to those worn by Tibetan government officials before 1959. This was followed by a song sung to the accompaniment of the fiddle bow. In the second half, the singers used the sound made by their boots to change the rhythm to a quick-stepping one, similar to Cossack dances. Professional minstrels – musicians and dancers – used to be a regular part of the entertainment at the parties and banquets of the Lhasa nobility. They played two main types of songs, *nangma* and *toeshay*. These were accompanied by a simple

orchestra and the quick-stepping dance called *truk-shey*.

Another very interesting dance was that of the nomads from Kham Province in eastern Tibet. This was called *bod shar chok ki relpa*. *Relpa* means 'dreadlocked hair' in Tibetan and *bod shar chok* means 'from eastern Tibet'. These dancers used to travel from place to place, singing songs in praise of great Tibetan yogis and Buddhist masters such as Marpa and Milarepa. It was believed that their performances brought good luck to the villages they visited.

All the other dances were also stunning for their vigour, the quick changes in tempo, as well as the short solos by individual dancers. But the one that left a deep impression on most spectators was the concluding dance of the evening, called *ngonpai don*. It enacted the ritual normally performed at the beginning of the *lhamo*, or Tibetan opera cycle, and is meant to purify the site on which the opera is to be staged.

It started with masked male dancers, called *ngonpas* or hunters, who represented the enlightened Tibetan Buddhist deity Vajrapani. The masks were impressive examples of intricate paint-work and art. After some initial moves just by the men, they were joined by ladies wearing five-panelled crowns, with large rosettes at the ears. They represented *dakinis*, or celestial beings, a word often translated as 'sky dancers'. It is believed that watching the whole sequence of this ritual dance will ensure a year of good health and well-being for everyone. Their movements were very graceful.



Ceremonial group dance from the Lhoka southern region of Tibet

The dance ended with everyone on stage tossing handfuls of *tsampa* (ground and roasted barley) in the air, to request the *bodhisattvas* (enlightenment-oriented beings) and deities to bring peace and prosperity to all sentient beings on earth. The performance ended with the ritual presentation of *khatas*, white scarves, to those who had arranged this show, giving the Tibetans the opportunity to showcase their performing arts and their cultural traditions in Singapore.

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