



The Cham Dance

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Summary: At the end of each Tibetan year Dzongkar Choede performs the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony — its own masked dance, not a general Tibetan form. It was instituted by Lachen Chöpal Zangpo (1371–1439), ritual chaplain to the kings of Mang-yul Gung-thang, after his meditational deity Vajrabhairava appeared to him in the form of a yak; at the centre of the dance an oversized yak still transforms into the deity in front of everyone. Historically a rite for turning back armies, it is now dedicated to the long life of the Dalai Lama and the welfare of the Tibetan people. Monks train for it from about thirteen, in ordinary robes, for years before they are given a mask — because what they are learning is visualisation, not choreography.

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The Gyutor Yak-Zang Ceremony

At the end of the twelfth Tibetan month, Dzongkar Choede performs the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony: a masked ritual dance with a *torma* offering, given as a year-ending thanksgiving to the *Dharmapalas*, with prayers for longevity, health, prosperity, and peace in the world. The Abbot, the monastery staff and the entire Sangha take part, and the dancers undertake two days of preparatory practice before appearing.

The date is not incidental. *Gutor* means the offering of the 29th, and across the Tibetan world the closing days of the year are given over to clearing the negativity of the departing one: effigies of dough, representing obstacles and impurities, are carried out and cast away. Days later the new year begins.

So the monastery is not staging a spectacle that happens to fall in February. It is clearing the year, on the day the year is cleared.

The Yak That Is Not a Yak

The dance is not a general Tibetan form that this monastery happens to perform. It is Dzongkar

Choede's own, and it begins with something one man saw.

Lachen Chöpal Zangpo (1371–1439) was the great teacher of Dzongkar and ritual chaplain to the kings of Gung-thang, in the western Tibet where the [monastery was founded](/en/about/history). His meditational deity was Vajrabhairava — Yamantaka, the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. And in a vision, that deity appeared to him **in the form of a yak**.

That is what the dance carries. At its centre an oversized yak — a farm animal, the most ordinary

thing in a Tibetan landscape — transforms, in front of everyone, into Vajrabhairava. Whatever

else happens over the course of the day, this is the moment the ceremony exists for.

The monastery's own account is that Chöpal Zangpo instituted the dance from this vision. An

independent historian of Tibet, working from old written sources rather than from the monastery, records the same thing: a Cham associated with Chöpal Zangpo in which a great yak becomes

Vajrabhairava. Two lines of evidence, six centuries apart, describing one transformation.

There is a further thread. Chöpal Zangpo belonged to the **Rwa** family, whose ancestor Rwa

Lotsawa had been among those who first brought the Vajrabhairava teachings to Tibet. So the yak

that discloses itself as Vajrabhairava is not an arbitrary image. It is his own lineage, appearing to him in the shape of the country he lived in.

Chöpal Zangpo's dates, his role at the Gung-thang court and the yak transformation are recorded

in Tibetan historical scholarship; the vision is described by the monastery's present abbot, Khen Rinpoche Thubten Tsering. The tradition speaks of a **vision** (**gzigs snang**)

rather than a dream. The exact date and place are not established, and the monastery's own

biography of Chöpal Zangpo — compiled by his disciple in 1466, and republished by the Dzongkar

library in 2018 — has not yet been read on this question.

What the Dance Is

Cham enacts the victory of wisdom over ignorance and of compassion over harm. It is a tantric ritual — meant to purify the ground, dispel obstacles and restore balance — and it is performed only by trained monastics.

What Yak Zang was historically *for* is unusually specific. The present abbot describes it as a rite of *dmag zlog* — the turning back of armies. Chöpal Zangpo's duties at the Gung-thang court included exactly this kind of protective work for a small kingdom with real enemies. In exile the intention has been redirected rather than abandoned: recent performances have been dedicated to the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and to the welfare of the Tibetan people.

Alongside the yak, the cycle of roughly ten dances brings out Palden Lhamo, Damchen Chögyalmo with her retinue, and Mahakala Trakshé — the monastery's own principal protector. Afterwards come the closing Gutor rites and the hurling of the tormas.

The training begins around thirteen or fourteen and takes years. For those years it is done *in ordinary robes*. The costume and the mask are the last things added, not the first.

What is being learned in the meantime is not choreography. It is visualisation: a monk dancing Cham holds himself as the deity he represents, and the steps are the outward part of an inward practice he has spent years preparing. That is what separates it from theatre. Nobody is portraying anything.

Masked dance is practised across all the Tibetan schools, but Yak Zang is local: it belongs to Mang-yul Gung-thang and to this monastery, and it [came out of Tibet in 1972] with the monks who survived. Cham depends on more than texts — on step patterns, timings, musical cues, the handling of masks — all of which live in the bodies of the people who perform it. Fewer than five percent

of the six hundred monks of the old monastery survived. That this dance is performed at Hunsur every year is not a small thing.

The figures that appear are often fierce, which puzzles visitors. They are not demons, and they are not guardians standing between you and some external harm. They are benevolent deities — forces embodying energies or qualities such as love and kindness. But when these qualities are distorted, their energies turn wrathful and, as a karmic consequence, turn against us: love becomes possession, and kindness becomes overbearing control.

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