



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Overview on the Narratives of Gyasa Balsa with reference to Tibetan Theatrical Play

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Introduction

The Tibetan indigenous writing on “Zlos gar” (Dance and Drama) was introduced by Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) through his less-studied *Rol mo'i bstan bcos* (Treatise on Musical instrument) and *Zlos gar rab dga'i jug pa* (The Entrance to Ecstasy of Dance & Drama)¹ who was well known to the Tibetan academicians as a pioneer of secular literature in Tibet.

It is said that the ancient Tibetan “Zlos gar” (Dance & Drama) or play known as *'Bag dkar po* (Tib. White Mask) has evolved some 1300 years ago.²

We find in the early historical literature such as in *sBa bzhed* (The Intention of sBa bzhed)³, that during the reign of King Trisong Detsen (Wylie: Khri srong lde btsan, 742-797) in the 8th century, there exists the tradition of primitive type of dance, drama & songs which would be base for the future Tibetan folk dance, drama and songs.⁴

Thangtong Gyalpo and Lhamo Opera

In the 14th century, Mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo (1361-1485)⁵ for the sake of raising fund for the construction of bridge, innovated a new form of opera now popularly known as Ache Lhamo. Most favourite traditional play and the public entertainment, Lhamo opera held the very unique position in the Tibetan folk

¹ Tabho, Gyaye. *Bod kyi rtsom rig lo rgyus skal bzang mig sgron*, mTsho sngon: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Vol. II, p. 729, 2002.

² *Ibid.*

³ Tashi, Tagla Phuntsok (ed.). *bTsan po khri srong lde btsan dang mkhan po slob dpon padma'i dus mdo sngags so sor mdzad pa'i sba bzhed zhabs btags ma bzhugs so*, Dharamsala: Tibetan Educational (now Cultural) Printing Press, 1968 (this text used to be a rare in India during 1960's. The editor has edited this text on the basis of copy published in Paris by French Tibetologist R. A. Stein in 1961 and the copy within the possession of Burmeok Athing or Burmeok Densapa of Sikkim).

Of the sBa bzhed (Phonetic; Ba-shay), sBa here refer to sBa gsal snang (Phonetic: Ba Sel-nang) who was one of the prominent ministers of King Trisong Detsen and bzhed literally means Intention or Perspective. As this historical document is written according to the perspective of minister sBa gsal snang, it is therefore, called sBa bzhed (8th century), and this text is one of the earliest documents on which all the later historical documents such as i) Bu-ston's *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* (14th century), ii) Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltsen's *The Clear Mirror* (14th century), iii) Chos byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston (16th century) of Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, iv) *Bod kyi deb ther rdzogs ldan gzhon nu'i dga' ston dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs* (17th century) of the Great 5th Dalai Lama, v) *rGyal rabs dpag bsam ljon bzang* (18th century) of Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Paljor etc. are based.

⁴ Tabho, Gyaye. *Bod kyi rtsom rig lo rgyus skal bzang mig sgron*, mTsho sngon: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Pp. 729-730, 2002.

⁵ Jungnay, Koshul et. al., The date of Thangtong is based on *Gangs can mkhas grub rim byon ming mdzod*, p. 787, mTsho sngon: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992.

art that is loved by the Tibetan monks and the lay community today. Thangtong Gyalpo himself taught dancing steps and singing of arias (*Tib. rNam thar*) to seven of the young intelligent and adorable ladies who were all engaged in the labour work of bridge construction. The dance are performed with the accompanying of drum and cymbal. Led by Thangtong Gyalpo, the troupe of newly formed opera travelled towards central Tibetan regions to demonstrate the Lhamo opera. The performance gained a public applaud especially the audience were so impressed by the beautiful appearance and the sweet melodious voice of young lady performers. Hence, the opera is known as Ache Lhamo literally means “adorable like goddesses” referring to this young beautiful ladies.

Ache Lhamo is a unique classical theatre of Tibetan people which is perform by accompanying with traditional Tibetan style drum (*Tib. rNga*) and cymbal (*Tib. sBub*) has been performing since its inception in the 14th century till today.

With regard to the Tibetan traditional dance, the accompanying musical instruments are very few. However, there are certain unique system in the Tibetan dance especially in opera like Ache Lhamo. In the performance of Ache Lhamo opera, 1) mDo, (Anchoring), 2) gZhung (content of play), and 3) bKra shis (Auspicious) are the three steps involved in the Tibetan traditional opera. i) mDo is somewhat similar to preliminary of opera performance which is resemblance to the Salutation of any composition or writing. Here the anchor steps on the stage and offer prayer and pay homage to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (Triple gems) and give the introduction of the respective play.

mDo comprises of i) rNgon pa'i sa 'dul (Taming of the earth by hunters)⁶, ii) rGya lu'i byin 'bebs (Auspicious Gyalu)⁷, and iii) A lce lha mo (the lady performers wearing *Rigs lnga*).

ii) gZhung refer to the content of play that is to be performed and iii) bKra shis (Auspicious) is the final step that concludes the performance with auspicious. With this procedure and system of performing arts demonstrate the uniqueness of Tibetan folk play and the sentiment of Tibetan people. It is said that the costumes and mask of rNgonpa were initially designed by the great fifth Dalai Lama, based on his dream.

The *Zlos gar* (Dance & Drama) genre of literature is much later than the *Zlos gar* itself. During the reign of Drogon Choegyal Phagpa in the 13th century, the Sanskrit play *Nāgānanda nāma nāṭaka* (*Tib. Klu kun tu dga' ba'i zlos gar*) attributed to King Harṣadeva (*Tib. dGa' ba'i lha*) was translated into Tibetan by Indian Pandita Laksmikara and Tibetan Lotsawa Shongton Dorjay Gyaltzen.⁸ The other Sanskrit play that was rendered into Tibetan is *Lokānandanāṭaka* (*Tib. 'Jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i zlos gar*)⁹ of Candragomin. It was translated by Indian Pandita Kīrticandra and Tibetan Lotsawa Yarlung Drakpa Gyaltzen (contemporary of Thangtong Gyalpo) in the 14th century.

As compare to other Sanskrit Buddhist texts, the literature of Sanskrit play could not influenced much in the Tibetan literature as it was regard not that much importance by the Tibetan though it is regarded as one of the five minor sciences of learning.

⁶ Hunters refer to the male performers of Lhamo opera who dance with wearing mask.

⁷ Gyalu (Wylie: rGya lu) refer to two male performers wearing big yellow called 'Bog tho without mask holding sticks in their hand.

⁸ Tangyur Peking edition, Vol. 128, Pp. 269-283

⁹ *Ibid.*, Pp. 255-269.

It is not known that whether the script of play (Tib. 'Khrab gzhung) was exist while Thangtong Gyalpo innovate the opera. It is believed that the first script of play is that of Chogyal Norsang's play which was based on *Sudhana kinnaryāvadāna*, (Tib. Nor bzang gi rtogs pa brjod pa)¹⁰, the 64th chapter of *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* (Tib. Byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa'i dpag bsam gyi 'khri shing) of Kṣemendra.¹¹ Dingchen Tsering Wangdue was responsible for this work who modified according to the Tibetan disposition and her way of life in the 16th century.¹² It was initially performed after the successful completion of renovation of Potala Palace during the reign of Desi Sangyay Gyatso (1653-1705). After this Choegyal Norzang play became very popular all over Tibet.¹³

Rechung Ü-pheb (Wylie: Ras chung dbus phebs) *Rechung's Travel to Central Tibet* was also one of the earliest script of play in Tibet. Gradually the popular eight play of Tibetan Lhamo opera came into existence. Apart from these eight play, there appeared few play namely *rGyal bu sprin gyi bzhon pa*, *rGyal bu dad pa brtan pa*, *Rāmaṇa*, *bZod pa'i dbang phyug*, *sByin pa chen po* etc.¹⁴

The popular eight plays of Ache Lhamo (Tib. A lce lha mo'i rnam thar brgyad) are: i) Choegyal Norsang, ii) Drimey Kunden, iii) Sugkyi Nyima, iv) Gyasa Balsa, v) Pema Hoebar, vi) Cungpo Donyoe Dondrup, vii) Drowa Sangmo, viii) Nangsa Hoebum.

The eight stories of Lhamo opera play are mostly extract from *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* literature, Tibetan historical accounts, and ancient Indian Buddhist lore. The tradition of Ache Lhamo opera is also perform in eastern part of Bhutan. There are few Lhamo opera troupe in Tibet namely, Kyurmolungpa, Gyangkara, Chungpa etc.

Out of these above eight play, the narratives of Gyasa Balsa will be highlighted here.

Gyasa Balsa script is based on the historical accounts of 7th century King Songtsan Gampo's successful marriage proposal for Nepalese princess Bhrikuti known in Tibetan as Bal-sa Tri-tsun (Wylie: Bal bza' khri btsun, literally Nepali consort) and Chinese princess Wencheng or popularly known as Gya-sa Kongjo (in Tibetan) of T'ang Dynasty of China. Accounts of Trials of minister Gar Tongtsan, the chief suitor of Chinese princess in favour of Tibetan King Songtsan was reflected in this play.

¹⁰ Peking edition of *Tangyur*, Vol. 129 (Photo offset version published by Tibetan Tripitaka Association, Japan). See *rTogs brjod dpag bsam 'khri shing*, "Nor bzang gi rtogs pa brjod pa", Dharamsala: Tibetan Cultural Printing Press, 1986, p. 242.

¹¹ *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* of Kṣemendra was jointly translated into Tibetan by Indian Pandit Lakṣmīkara and Tibetan translator Shongton Lotsawa Dorjay Gyaltsen in 13th century.

¹² Dorjee, Lobsang, (translated from the Tibetan by C.B. Josayma and Migmar Tsering), *The Tibet Journal*, "The Folk Opera of Tibet", Dharamsala; LTWA, Vol. 9, No.2, Summer, 1984, P. 22.

¹³ Patse and Lhagyal Tshering, *Bod kyi rtsom rig byung 'phel gyi lo rgyus dang khyad chos*. Ziling: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1999, p. 377.

¹⁴ Tabho, Gyaye. *Bod kyi rtsom rig lo rgyus skal bzang mig sgron*, mTsho sngon: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2002, p. 732.

Introduction of Gyasa and Balsa

The Gyasa Balsa (Wylie: rGya bza' bal bza') script of the Lhamo opera is based on Mani Kabum (Wylie: Ma ni bka' 'bum).¹⁵ Mani Kabum is one of the earliest Tibetan traditional accounts that narrates the various activities and *sādhana* of of *Avalokiteśvara* (embodiment of Buddha's compassion) including the biographical accounts of King Songtsan Gampo. But the Gyasa Balsa accounts that narrates the suitors from neighbouring countries asking for princess of T'ang emperor hand in marriage, and accounts regarding the few rounds of intelligence test among the suitors are in fact does not record in the ancient Tibetan annals and Chinese annals. Hence, judging from the composition of the accounts, it may perhaps draw from the *Jātaka* of Buddha reflect in the sutra known as *Damamūko nāma sūtra* (Tib. mDzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo, The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish).¹⁶

Narrative of Balsa (Nepalese Princess)

The King Songtsan Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po, 617-650) the 33rd in the Tibetan royal lineage in the seventh century AD was enthroned at the age of thirteen and while he turned sixteen years of age, the plan for his marriage was made. Then led by his prominent minister Gar Tongtsan (mGar stong btsan) along with one hundred caravan on the horseback set off for the kingdom of Nepal in order to ask for the Nepalese princess hand in marriage with the Tibetan King. The King handed over him five gold coins (Tib. gSer gyi dong tse)¹⁷ and told the minister Gar Tongtsan, "This is a token of our invitation". Again King gave him a precious stone *lapis lazuli* (Baidurya) helmet studded with rubies and advised, "Offer this to the Nepalese king Angśuvarma as the bride-price for the princess.

The Nepalese king Angśuvarma initially refused to accept the marriage proposal from the Tibetan suitors and told Gar that go back to Tibet and asked your king whether he can establish the laws based on Ten Virtuous actions (Tib. dGe ba bcu'i chos) or not. If he can do so, I will certainly accept his proposal. In this way, the Nepalese King asked three consecutive questions to which minister Gar showed the answers which was already prepared by King Songtsan Gampo. As the King declared that if the suitors could able to give the answers accurately he would then accept the proposal and out of fear and nervous, the Nepalese King was reluctant to accept the proposal of Tibetan ministers after all the three questions put by him were correctly answered.

He offered a dowry for Princess Bhrikuti's (Tib. Bal bza' khri btsun) marriage such as images of Akśobhya Vajra (Tib. Jo-bo Mi-kyō Dorjay) which was none other than the image of Shakyamuni Buddha with the height equal to eight years old boy, goddess Tara made of sandalwood (Tib. Can ldan 'phags mo sgrol ma), 'Phags pa wa ti bzang po, Maitreya (Tib. Byams pa chos 'khor) etc.

¹⁵ Mani Kabum is generally attributed to King Songtsan Gampo and it is said to be discovered from the hidden treasure by Drubthob Ngodub and Shakya Sangpo.

¹⁶ Tabho, Gyaye. *Bod kyi rtsom rig lo rgyus skal bzang mig sgron*, mTsho sngon: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Vol. II, p. 762, 2002. *Kangyur Peking edition*, Vol. 40, Pp. 54-123.

¹⁷ Some accounts mentioned hundred gold coins.

In addition to these, the King offered a great deal of precious stones and wealth from his treasury which could be loaded on the seven elephant backs and many masterpieces of handicrafts made by Nepalese artists. A great deal of her Nepalese servants and her white mule was also dispatched.

Hundreds of horsemen accompanied with a princess Bhrikuti to see her off till the Nepal-Tibet border known as Kyidrong. A great deal of Tibetan caravan reached Kyidrong to receive the Princess and her retinue. The Princess was escorted to Lhasa safely and both the King and the Princess were so excited to meet each other for the first time. Soon after her arrival in Lhasa, a grand royal wedding ceremony was arranged and thereafter the king and queen lived very happily with most of the time engaged in the spiritual activities and the well-being of the general public.

Narrative of Gyasa (Chinese Princess)

After a few years later, the king Songtsan Gampo once again sent one of his intelligent ministers Gar Tongtsan along with several other ministers to the Chinese kingdom of T'ang dynasty for the sake of asking the Chinese T'ang princess Wencheng (Tib. Gyasa Kongjo) for the hand in marriage with King Songtsan Gampo.

Led by his minister Gar Tongtsan (mGar stong btsan) along with one hundred ministers on the horseback set off for the kingdom of T'ang dynasty in order to ask for the Chinese princess hand in marriage with the Tibetan King. The King handed over him seven golden coins, (Tib. gSer gyi dong tse) and told the minister Gar Tongtsan, "This is a token of our invitation". Again King gave him a precious armour studded with rubies, and advised, "Offer this to the Chinese emperor as the bride-price for the princess. He again gave him full *dre*-measure of gold dust (Tib. gSer phyé bre gang) as a provision for travelling.

As predicted by the King Songtsan Gampo to his minister Gar, the Chinese emperor will ask three consecutive questions to which you should give these three letters one by one respectively.

When minister Gar Tongtsan and his team of suitors reached the Chinese kingdom of T'ang Dynasty, the ministers of Dharma king of India, the warrior king of Gesar, the Persian king of wealth, the king of Uighurs had already arrived there, each accompanied by one hundred horsemen, for the purpose of asking Chinese princess hand in marriage for their king. Thus, suitors with the number of five hundred horsemen representing the five neighbouring countries arrived before the Chinese emperor at the same time.

The Chinese emperor T'ang Taizong initially refused to accept the marriage proposal from the Tibetan suitors and told Gar that, 'Go back to your country and ask your king whether he can establish the laws based on Ten Virtuous actions (Tib. dGe ba bcu'i chos) or not. If he can be able to do so, I will certainly accept his proposal. In this way, the Chinese emperor asked three consecutive questions to which minister Gar handed over the scrolls in which answers to all three questions were already given. As the King declared that if the suitors could be able to give the answers accurately he would then accept the marriage proposal. But despite the answers were given as per questions, the Chinese emperor declared that the test will be conducted for all the suitors. The emperor announced the eight series of tests and the most intelligent and the sharpest wits who could prove his best talent in this test will be the winner and his king will get my daughter. Finally,

Gar proved to be the most intelligent suitor and out of disappointment, the Chinese emperor was reluctant to accept the proposal of Tibetan ministers.

He offered a dowry for Princess Bhrikuti's marriage such as images of Śākyamuni Buddha, and Jo-ho Śākyamuni (a Buddha with the height equal to twelve years old average boy), Chinese astrological literature, literature of arts and crafts etc.

Soon after the Chinese princess arrival in Lhasa, a grand royal wedding ceremony was arranged. The Lhasa city was packed with people from all walks of life came from far and wide to catch a glimpse of beautiful princess and attend the welcoming ceremony of the princess and her retinue.

From these narratives of Gyasa and Balsa, we could understand that Tibet was a rich and powerful nation in terms of military power during the 7th century. We also know the bravery and mighty of King Songtsan Gampo as well as the extraordinary wit and wisdom of Tibetan minister Gar Tongtsan through this play. The accounts also highlighted and praised the bilateral relationship between Tibet and Nepal as well as between Tibet and China.

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