



Ache Lhamo, the Socio-Religious Opera of Tibet and the Narrative of Prince Drimey Kunden

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Introduction

Traditionally in the Tibetan classics, there enumerated a Five Major Sciences of Knowledge (Tib. Rig gnas che ba lnga) and Five Minor Sciences of Knowledge (Tib. Rig gnas chung ba lnga). The art of Dance & Drama (Tib. Zlos gar) is the component of one of the Five Minor Sciences of Knowledge. In fact, this tradition of enumerating the different sciences of knowledge within the five major and minor sciences nomenclature has originated from the Indian Sanskrit literature which is known as *pañca vidyā sthāna*. Tibetan scholar translated this term literally as Rig-pae Nae-nga (Wylie: Rig pa'i gnas lnga) in Tibetan language.

The influence of Indian Buddhist culture & Sanskrit literature is deeply rooted in the Land of Snow, a Tibet in all aspects of Tibetan culture namely Tibetan ideology, Tibetan psychology, Tibetan faith, Tibetan way of life, Tibetan rituals, Tibetan arts and crafts, Tibetan almanac, Tibetan poetry, Tibetan language & grammatical terminologies, Tibetan lexicography, Tibetan folk tale and Tibetan religious dance.¹

Further, the influence of Indian Buddhist culture in the lyrics of Tibetan folk songs & dances, and the contents of stories in Tibetan folk opera such as Ache Lhamo Opera (Tib. A lce lha mo'i 'khrab gzhung) the performing arts of U-tsang province of Tibet is an extraordinary and remarkable.

Ache Lhamo Opera

The much developed Tibetan folk opera popularly known as Ache Lhamo is the socio-religious folk opera originating in the central part of Tibet and annually performed during the Shotön festival (literally yogurt festival) which falls in the seventh month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. It was founded by the great saint of 14th century Tibet known as Drubthob Thang Tong Gyalpo (Wylie: Grub thob thang stong rgyal po, 1385-1509/1464). He was born to a farmer family in Shigatse county in U-tsang province of Tibet. After spending few years of studying in the local monastery, he went to Lhasa the capital city of Tibet for his further monastic education.

¹ Cham (Wylie: 'Cham) or now popularly known as Mask dance as all the performers use to wear a mask while performing a dance. This mask dance belongs to the *Vajrayāna* tradition has originated in the eighth century.

What caused Thang Tong Gyalpo to introduce such a folk opera? The legend² goes as, on one fine day while he was at the river bank in Lhasa, he saw many poor people could not afford to pay a fare for riding a boat in order to cross the river. He was moved by this pathetic situation and out of sympathy he made a request to ferryman to allow these poor people to ride in his boat free of charge to which the ferryman got so furious and hit Thang Tong Gyalpo with the oar so hard that he was fell into the river. This incident made him to take a firm conviction of building the bridge across central Tibet. So to collect the resources for making bridges, he need the money and this caused him to innovate a Lhamo opera for fund raising show to support his bridge project whereas in Bhutan, they have their own version of narratives about why Ache Lhamo opera was founded by Thang Tong Gyalpo. Bhutanese legend says Thang Tong Gyalpo was compelled to introduce Ache Lhamo opera in order to distract the devils from demolishing the bridges in the night time that was constructed during the day time. He is said to have built 108 bridges in Tibet and Bhutan which are made of iron and wooden. In Bhutan, there are eight bridges out of 108 built by Thang Tong Gyalpo.

Recognized as the living fossil of Tibetan culture, the Tibetan Lhamo opera contains the socio-religious elements which has a distinctive features and characteristics of Tibetan culture. Lhamo opera was developed from the ancient folk plays, dances, songs etc. Thus by taking model from such folk traditions, Thangtong Gyalpo has created a new opera which gave birth to Lhamo opera.³

Ache Lhamo literally means goddess because of the fact that seven sisters who perform the lhamo opera initially were so adorable like fairy. Legend goes as from the labourer of building iron bridges, Thantong Gyalpo picked up seven beautiful young girls who were good at singing a song and dances. Thangtong Gyalpo himself trained them in the dance, songs etc. while Thangtong Gyalpo and his troupe including seven sisters travelled to perform this newly created opera in central Tibet for fund raising, the audience became spellbound as they see the so adorable young girl's performing dance and singing in a melodious voice like a fairy. Hence, this Lhamo opera later came to be known as Ache Lhamo opera (Tib. Lha mo'i zlos gar) which literally means goddess or fairy.⁴

One of the most popular in the U-tsang province of Tibet, the Lhamo opera begins with a prayer ceremony, such as purification of the stage (ground) by hunters (Tib. Sngon pa with mask) called *Sa sbyangs* (lit. Earth purification) followed by the blessings of Gyalu (Wylie: rGya lu), called *rGya lu'i bhyin 'bebs* in Tibetan and concludes with auspicious (Tib. Tashi) and blessings. Prior to the beginning of the Lhamo performance, the statue or Thangka painting portrait of Thang Tong Gyalpo will be brought with a procession of performers to place it in the centre of the venue/stage. Lhamo is performed in the open ground under the big Tibetan traditional tent lasted a day long.

² There are variations in legendary accounts within the Tibetan tradition with regard to the cause of Thang Tong Gyalpo to introduced Lhamo opera.

³ C.B. Josayma & Migmar Tsering, *Tibet Journal*, "Lhamo: The Folk Opera of Tibet", Dharamsala: LTWA, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer), 1984, Pp. 13-22

⁴ 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. 375

The Eight Play of Ache Lhamo Opera

Among the Tibetan dance and opera, *Rechung's Wandering to Central Tibet* (Tib. Ras chung dbus phebs) is regarded as the earliest one which is gradually followed by eight play.

i) Choegyal Norsang (Wylie: Chos rgyal nor bzang, ii) Gyalbu Drimey Kundan, (Wylie: rGyal bu dri med kun ldan) iii) Sugkyi Nyima (Wylie: gZugs kyi nyi ma), iv) Gyasa Baesa (Wylie: rGya bza'bal bza'), v) Pema Hoobar (Wylie: Padma 'od 'bar), vi) Cungpo Donyoe Dondrup (Wylie: gCung po don yod don grub), vii) Drowa Sangmo (Wylie: 'Gro ba bzang mo), viii) Nangsa Hoebum (Wylie: sNang sa 'od 'bum). These stories are the anonymous work of Tibetan Lhamo opera.

In the later period, there appeared a few noted troupe of Lhamo opera in central part of Tibet who would perform a selected one from the eight stories of Lhamo. For example, the troupe called Kyormolung pa (Wylie: sKyor mo lung pa) usually perform Sukyi Nyima, Pema Hoobar and Drowa Sangpo stories. Gyalkara troupe (the monk performers) would perform Choegyal Norsang and the troupe known as Chungpa plays the Drimey Kunden. Till 1959 in Tibet, Lhamo opera used to be played by both lay performers and monk performers (especially of Kyormolungpa troupe)

The eight contents /stories that were adapted into Lhamo opera is one of the precious jewel from the treasure trove of Tibetan literature. These eight stories basically contains the characteristics of spiritual and didactic nature which is so inspiring and impressive. It encourages the general public into the spiritual world through its contents of stories which is based on moral ethics.

Out of these eight plays of Lhamo opera, some are based on *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* while others are based on Tibetan folk story and historical accounts such as

i) Choegyal Norsang: Chorgyal Norsang story was based on the 64th chapter of *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* (Tib. Byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa'i dpag bsam gyi 'khri shing) entitled *Nor bzang gi rtoga pa brjod pa*⁵ of Kṣemendra which was jointly translated into Tibetan by Indian Pandit Lakṣmīkara and Tibetan translator Shongton Lotsawa Dorjay Gyaltsen in 12th century.

After the *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* was translated into Tibetan in the 12th century, Choegyal Norzang story became popular all over Tibet.⁶

ii) Drimey Kunden. The source of Drimey Kunden story is from the *sūtra* called *Āryajinaputrārthasiddhisūtra* (Tib. 'Phags pa rgyal bu don grub kyi mdo)⁷ and from the 24th chapter of *Āvadānakalpalatā* named *Viśvāntarāvadāna* (Tib. Thams cad sgrol gyi rtogs pa brjod pa),⁸

iii) Sugkyi Nyima (Wylie: gZugs kyi nyi ma): There are scholars who maintained that this story of Sugkyi Nyima is based on legendary Sanskrit play *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* of the great poet Kālidās. But my study

⁵ 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

⁶ 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

⁷ Peking edition of *Kangyur*, Vol. 40, p. 73 (Translator(s) not mentioned)

⁸ See *rTogs brjod dpag bsam 'khri shing*, "Thams cad sgrol gyi rtogs pa brjod pa", Dharamsala: Tibetan Cultural Printing Press, 1986, p. 115

suggests that Padmāvatyavadāna (Tib. *Padma ldan gyi rtogs brjod*) the 68th chapter from *Āvadānakalpalatā* has served as the model or basis for Sugkyi Nyima play.⁹

The introduction part of the text Sugkyi Nyima reads as

*“bram ze gzugs kyi nyi ma’i bstan bcos ’di nyid sngon bod du lo tsa ba bai ro tsa na dang
she’u lo tsa ba gnyis kyis bsgyur pa las”*¹⁰

English translation:

*“This text of Sugkyi Nyima was previously translated (into Tibetan) by Vairocana and
She’u Lotsawa”.*

So from this above quoted passage of the introduction part of story, we come to know that it was translated by Tibetan translators Lotsawa Vairocana in the eighth century and subsequently Sheu lotsawa in the eleventh century.

iv) Gyasa Baesa: It is 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.

v) Pema Hoobar and vi) Cungpo Donyoe Dondrup: The story of these two Lhamo opera has taken from the ancient Indian Buddhist folk lore having a didactic and spiritual message.

vii) Drowa Sangmo: It is the folk story popular in Mon Tawang situated in southern part of Tibet (now it is the integral part of India and located in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh).

viii) Nangsa hoebum is the historical fact actually took place at Nyangtoe in Gyangtse, the U-tsang province of Tibet in the 11th century.

There will be all the nine expressions of drama (Tib. Gar gyi nyams dgu) in the Lhamo opera such as i) beautiful (Tib. sGeg pa’i nymas), ii) ugliness (Mi sdug pa’ nyams), iii) violence (Tib. Drag shul gyi nymas), iv) humour (Tib. bZhad gad kyi nyams), v) fierceness (Tib. ’jigs su rung ba’i nyams), vi) Heroic (Tib. dPa’ ba’i nyams). vii) excitement (Tib. rMad pa’i nyams), viii) compassion (Tib. sNying rje’i nyams) and ix) peacefulness (Tib. Zhi ba’i nyams). Performances are made by having all the parts such as dance styles, the dialogue, the melodies etc. in accordance with expressions.¹¹

Prince Drimey Kunden

Out of eight stories of Lhamo opera, the contents of Drimey Kunden will be focus in this paper.

⁹ “Sakya Pandita maintained that Sukgkyi Nyima play has taken its model from the “*Padma ldan gyi skyes rabs*” as quoted in *Bod ljongs zhib ’jug*, 1994, 1, p. 80

¹⁰ Migmar (ed.), *gzugs kyi nyi ma’i rnam thar*, Xinhua: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1999, p. 1

¹¹ 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

Prelude

With a great compassionate towards under privileged and destitute, the prince Drimey Kunden offered without any attachment all kinds of valuable things especially the most precious jewel called *Norbu Gö-dö Pungjom* (Wylie: Nor bu dgos 'dod dpung 'joms) similar to *Cintamani* and due to which he was declared a sentence for 12 years of exile in the far remote. On his way to exile in Dü-ri Hacang Kemkem (Devil Mountain called Hacang Kemkem), he again gave his wife and two children to Brahmin disguised as a beggar and finally even his own eyes to the blind Brahmin.

Plot

Long ago, at the great city called Bheta, there was a king called Sa-kyong Drakpa (Wylie: Sa skyong grags pa) and his beautiful queen Genden Sangmo (Wylie: dGe ldan bzang mo) gave birth to a son Drimey Kunden who was a very kind hearted.

When Drimey Kunden reached at the age of five, he accomplished all the five sciences of knowledge including calligraphy, performing arts and so forth.

Then the princess of King Dawa Sangpo (Wylie: Zla ba bzang po) of Pema-can's empire, Mande Sangmo (Wylie: Mande bzang mo) got married with Drimey Kunden. The princess was very attractive, open minded & generous, kind hearted, paying profound respect and having a genuine love towards the king.

Few years later, the elder son Leg-den (Tib. Legs ldan), the younger son Leg-pal (Tib. Legs dpal) and the youngest among the siblings, the daughter Leg-zema (Wylie: Legs mdzes ma) were born.

At some point of time, the prince Drimey Kunden was deeply concerning and pondering over the grave situation of destitute beings who are stricken with suffering. Having deeply saddened and seeing no essence even a slightest in the activities of cycle of existence, requested the king that he may be allowed to give the treasures from the treasure house of the king in order to eliminate the sufferings of the destitute beings.

In response to his request, the king permitted Drimey Kunden to give the wealth from the treasure house according to his wish. Drimey Kunden then began to distribute the wealth collected in the treasure house to the destitute people.

The contemporary of king Drimey Kunden was the king Shingtri Tsanpo (Wylie: Shing Khri btsan po) of remote country/land called Jema Shingdrung (Bye ma shing drung) whoi was a non-believer and have no faith in the religion. He made an announcement to his subjects thus, "As I have heard that the king Drimey Kunden of Bhe-ta generously donate limitlessly and impartially, so anyone who could able to ask for Wish-fulfilling Jewel (Tib. Nor bu dgos 'dod dpung 'joms, lit. Jewel that fulfils all wishes and overcome the arm forces) that is preserved in the treasury of king Drimey Kunden, I will offer him the half of my kingdom". Having announced so, the aged Brahman called Gawae Lodoe accepted that he could do the begging of the jewel.

So he proceeded towards the palace and appeared before the king Drimey Kunden. He then directly begs the Wish-fulfilling Jewel to which the king immediately and joyfully offered the jewel in order to fulfil the demand of aged Brahman.

This news was soon informed to the father of king Dri-mey Kunden by one of the cruel ministers called Tāra mzes. By hearing such shocking news, the father king became so furious, and then he narrated how the Jewel was offered to King himself by Amitābha Buddha and how Amitābha Buddha was offered by the queen of Nāga.

He further explained the reason that this Jewel is the cause of flourishing political and economic situation of the kingdom. Having narrated and explained thus, the father king declared that Dri-mey Kunden should be expelled and remains twelve years in exile in Dü-ri Hacang Kemkem (Wylie: bDud ri ha cang skem skem, literally rendered as Devil Mountain called Hacang Kemkem) as the punishment of giving away the Jewel.

Dri-mey Kunden along with his wife Mande Sangmo took three of his children and proceed towards the Dü-ri Hacang where there is a great risk of ferocious animals.

On the way to Dü-ri Hacang, Drimey Kundan came across three Brahman. These Brahman begged three of his children for their servant. Without any hesitation, he gave all the three beloved children to the Brahman.

As he continues walking further, he came across two Brahman on the way. The duo Brahman approached Drimey Kunden and requested, “Please give us your wife Mande Sangmo as we don’t have any relatives and servants to serve us”. To satisfy the wish of duo Brahman, Drimey Kunden gave his beloved wife without any hesitation.

So, in this way, he remain alone on his way to exile in Dü-ri Ha-chang. While he arrived at the place called Hö-dü Lung on the way to Dü-ri Hacang, he met with a blind Brahman who asked him to give his two eyes. The Drimey Kundan filled with overjoy and prayed thus, “I have offered you my eyes which is hard to give, May you fulfil your wishes and see the three worlds”. Having said so, he gave his eyes to the Brahman.

After the completion of twelve years of exile in Dü-ri Hacang, Drimey Kunden while he was returning back to his home, he met again all the previous Brahman. They brought back all the three children and wife Mande Sangmo to return them to Drimey Kunden as all of them were deeply inspired by the sacrifice and meritorious acts of Drimey Kunden.

Drimey Kunden regained his eyes with the blessings and power of truth.

The king Shing Tri Tsanpo of Jemey Shingdrung also returned back the Jewel to Drimey Kunden.

The king, ministers and the people of Bheta came to receive Drimey Kunden and his families at the distance of seven Pagtshey (Wylie: dPag tshad)¹².

Five years after returning home, the Drimey Kunden and his wife Mande Sangmo transformed into red and yellow flowers in the end. The two of his sons continued to rule over the country far better than before.

¹² Pagtshey (Wylie: dPag tshad) in Sanskrit is *Yojana* is a measure of distance used in ancient India. According to the Abhidharma tradition it is a measurement of length equal to eight *krośa* equal to 500 armspans; the distance of about 1 kilometer. (Source Rigzin, Tsepa, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*, Dharamsala: LTWA, 1986, p. 164, & p. 53)

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