Dance of a Tibetan Lama in exile

Shanny Rann
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway
shanrann@gmail.com

Abstract

It is not very often that monks are spotted dancing in costumes. This paper is as much about the rarity of such a performance as it is the sanctity of *'cham* (also referred to as Tibetan Sacred Dance) that has been in existence for over a thousand years. Too little is known about the origin of the dances, the meaning and significance of them, not to mention how they have come to survive over the centuries and their evolution as a form of ritual. My research project focuses on the *'cham* performance of the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa, a highly revered reincarnate lama of seventeen times, who currently resides in India as a refugee. Through fieldwork observations and interviews, I hope to provide a rare insight into the ancient all-male ritual that has withstood the erosion of time and space.

Keywords: Tibetan, monks, exile, Karmapa, *'cham*

It is not very often that monks are spotted dancing in costumes. This paper is as much about the rarity of such a performance as it is about the sanctity of *'cham* (also referred to as Tibetan Sacred Dance) that has been in existence for over a thousand years. Far from being just a simple monk, His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa[1], Orgyen Drodul Trinley Dorje (hereby referred to as Karmapa) reigns over the seat of the Karma Kagyu lineage in Tibetan Buddhism and has been hailed as the potential successor to the present Fourteenth Dalai Lama as the Tibetan people's next spiritual leader. On 20 February 2012, prior to bringing in another new year, Karmapa performed *'cham* for the first time in India. His performance was part of a prayer ceremony known as *Mahakala Puja*, which precedes the celebration of the Tibetan New Year to drive away evil spirits. The dance is also dedicated to removing obstacles on the dharma path of liberation. The grand event was attended by eight thousand devotees from all over the world (Kumar, 2012). To date, the video of Karmapa's dance has amassed close to one hundred thousand views[2] on YouTube (http://youtu.be/61rLEm6-HGM).

If it is true that Tibet 'suffers a lag of more than three thousand years behind China' (Norbu, 2001, p.17) due to its isolating geography, then *'cham* could reveal a prehistoric state far beyond what we experience in the name of dance today. Laments about dance being written out of history do little justice to the often-overlooked dances outside the purview of Western aesthetics. The widespread acknowledgement of dance as Western dance theatre makes Joann Keali'inohomoku's claim of an anthropologist looking at ballet as ethnic dance (1970) jarring yet valid because the definition of dance has been silently codified since its introduction to academia. To write histories of dance as a cultural practice is to connect dance to the ways we have survived as human beings. It is just as problematic to initiate the first chapter of dance history with European court dances as it is with Asian tribal dances when the subject in question delineates an art form dating back to pre-civilisation. The predicament of dance history lies not only in

the marginalisation and negotiations of power, but more profoundly in the silent annihilation of its primordial roots.

Given the existence of *'cham* for over a thousand years, it remains a form of dance rarely heard or written about except for the pioneering work by Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1976). It has been claimed that 'among the cultural achievements of the Lamaist world, the origin and history of the sacred dance are perhaps the least documented' (Houseal). Current studies on *'cham* have described the structures and symbolism of the dance, but nothing has been written about the dance as 'situated aesthetic bodily practice' (Thomas, 2003, p.93) or about the dancers as moving bodies behind the costumes and masks—who they are, what makes them individual as dancers, how they are moving onstage. When Cathy Cantwell, one of the handful of Tibetologists interested in *'cham,* wrote her thesis in 1989 on the practice in Rewalsar, India, she shared her hopes for analysis of the music and dance to complement her research:

> Not being a musician, an analysis of the music and chanting which is central to all the rituals was out of the question; I have only recorded which instruments were played at specific points, and other such general information. The same is true for the dance movements: I was capable of making general descriptions and classifications of the types of movements, but could not record each step. Perhaps my inadequacies may suggest directions for possible further research. (Cantwell, 1989, p.36)

Dance studies have always been concerned with the histories and biography of the individual dancer. They brought the dancer's identity and body to the forefront from behind the costumes and the façade of the performance. To date, dance theories effectively:

> constitute a fluid body of ideas, analytical techniques, and vocabularies that focus on questions that scholars in other fields do not ask—questions such as how bodies consume space, how they relate to each other, how their actions both represent and constitute meaning, and what the relationship is of observing bodies to acting bodies, including the scholar's body' (Morris, 2009, p.93).

This project sets out to be one of the first few attempts to describe *'cham* from a dance scholar's perspective as opposed to that of a Tibetologist or anthropologist. By bringing light to the topic in question, I hope to drive home the point that it is equally important to look at not just dancers' bodies, but *any* body that dances, including a monk's.

The methodology

This paper is a result of my fieldwork experiences in India from February to April 2013, which are part of what has been a four-year project following the Karmapa. From a traveller to a devotee, I have since returned to the community in the name of dance. However, I have never danced in the field. Neither do I rely on dance to establish rapport with the Tibetan monks. My lived experience in the field remains

etched in my body and gradually shapes my way of life even when I am away from the field, just as 'some memory will remain as known by heart still inhabiting and affecting my body, still potentially dynamically corporeal' (Ness, 2001, p.81). The monks teach me to be a better person, not a better dancer. What I can give back to the community that matters to them is perhaps not my writings on their dance ritual, but my devotion as a Buddhist.

Throughout this project, I experience the difficulty of assuming the roles of a dancer and a female researcher all at once. It is not just about me as a dancer writing of a somatic experience outside my body, but also as a woman writing about an all-male ritual. While underscoring the need for embodied experience, there is no place for a female dance scholar on a dance floor that is meant for only initiated monks. At times I felt almost paralyzed in the field by the dilemma of putting to use my '"subjective" bodily engagement...to make sense of another's somatic knowledge' (Sklar, 2000, p.71), which is highly guarded and kept at bay from me. Forbidden from the dance tradition, I struggle to tackle the 'I' persona as a kinaesthetically empathetic source, dancing and reflecting on sensation and meaning. How can I use my body as a means of access to embodied cultural knowledge 'as temporally and spatially dynamic, situational in its meaning, and creative in the interstices of personal and communal histories that reach across experiences of researcher and researched' (Buckland, 2006, p.14) when it is not the right type of body?

In an attempt to overcome my shortcomings, I applied the tools of Dance Form Analysis 'to identify the structural units of a dance text, to disclose their hierarchical organisation and to show the rules according to which they function as organic parts of a dance system' (Giurchescu and Kröschlova, 2007, p.22). This exercise helped me to understand the dance without embodying the movements. It also raised pertinent questions before entering the field to corroborate my findings with the performers' knowledge. Due to the focus of this paper, I will omit my structural analysis of the dance.

The interview

In February 2013, exactly a year after the performance was enacted, I journeyed to India to interview Karmapa. I had been closely following his news over the internet and voraciously reading up on *'cham* prior to my fieldtrip, yet I was still filled with doubts upon my arrival in India. I questioned my eligibility as a budding dance scholar to approach the subject outside the spheres of religion. Two years ago, I had chanced upon the Karmapa during my first trip to India. The meeting was unexpected and unplanned for, but meant to be in ways that I could only imagine then. Needless to say, my first encounter with the Karmapa left a deep impression. What seemed so far-fetched between dance studies and a lama figure would eventually shape my fated journey of return. After a wait of six days, I was scheduled for a private audience with Karmapa. Security was tight around the holy man and one had to submit all the proper identification documents as required. Politics has woven its way into his sacred abode and for the sake of this research I have chosen to keep the controversies surrounding Karmapa at bay. Red tape aside, meeting the Karmapa was quite an experience in itself. Many have developed an instant devotion upon seeing his face, whether in person, in print or on screen. This was

not the first time I was going to see him, but I felt nervous nonetheless. The other people waiting around me seemed equally tense. I scribbled my questions on a notepad and repeated them in my head over and over again. When it was finally my turn, I was ushered into Karmapa's room by a security officer. I held a yellow *khata*, the ceremonial scarf, in my hands and inched my way towards him with a deep bow from my waist. I was surprised how difficult it was at that moment to walk with a bent upper torso and realised I must have made a rather awkward entrance. Karmapa towered over my submissive posture as he slid the *khata* over my head.

I did not bother to introduce myself—either my 'I'dentity must have melted spontaneously in his presence or all superfluous talk was eroded under the piercing eyes of Karmapa. I jumped right to the purpose for my visit and asked for his blessings to write on his first *'cham* performance in India for my Master's thesis. I had carefully avoided informing him the nature of my research for fear he would blatantly dismiss me. I later realized this anxiety of dance research not holding weight outside dance studios and theatres obviously was the working of my own mind and had nothing to do with the person I was interviewing. Moments of what seems like a lifetime of silence hung between my question and his answer, which weighed over me much more than just flying halfway around the globe to make sense of my intended research. Karmapa adjusted himself in his seated position and pondered with his eyes lowered, not looking at me. I discerned a slight grin on his face, but perhaps I imagined it out of my eagerness for his consent. That moment of silence brought out the devotee in me, that pious side which has been quietly hidden away underneath my intellectual pursuits. I have been told that a scholar should always be differentiated from a practitioner, that they have different goals to attain and one must not be confused in one's choice of path from the start.

Karmapa broke the silence finally with his comment that it is difficult and that very few people are learned about it. This was followed by his verbal approval for me to write on the topic. I must have been elated by his response but no emotions came out, except for the sweat that would not stop trickling from my forehead. In front of the Karmapa, one is known to experience a blank state of mind. To avoid lapsing into a stupor, I quickly fired my second question on why he decided to dance in India for the first time. He replied that it was mainly for two reasons; the first being the many auspicious reasons that came together during the occasion, enabling the *Mahakala Puja* to be held on a full scale for the first time since his exile in India began twelve years ago .

Secondly, the monks today seem to have lost the deep understanding for the meaning of *'cham*. If the dance does not appear to be spectacular, they get distracted easily and lose interest. Karmapa wanted to revive the importance of the dance ritual in the Kagyu lineage following the tradition of the previous Karmapas. He stressed that the dance brings benefit to the audience depending on their level of faith and devotion. If they do not understand the meaning of the dance, they will not get the blessings; instead, doubt might even arise in them. At that point, Karmapa got up from his seat and told me to make another appointment for further questions. I scurried backwards out of the room in my bent-from-the-waist posture after having my photo taken with Karmapa by his official lama-photographer. My first interview with Karmapa on *'cham* lasted nearly ten minutes.

The performance

On the 29th day of the last month in the Tibetan Water Snake Year of 2140 (20 February 2012 on the Western Gregorian Calendar), prior to bringing in another new year, Karmapa performed *'cham* for the first time since leaving behind his homeland twelve years before. His performance was part of a full-length *Mahakala Puja*[3], also to be performed for the first time on such a mammoth scale outside of Tibet, convening all monastic communities of the Kagyu lineage. The *Mahakala Puja* is a prayer ceremony that precedes the celebration of *Losar*, the Tibetan New Year, and is dedicated to removing obstacles on the dharma path of liberation. Since the second Karmapa, *Karma Pakshi*, the protector deity *Mahakala* has been linked to the Karmapas who are renowned for performing the corresponding *'cham* in preparation for the New Year. The dance, translated as '*The Jewel-like Tradition Embodying All'*, culminates a night-long ritual of chanting and meditation (Levine, 2012).

This particular performance of *'cham* was exceptional in many ways. The present Karmapa is known to be unconventional in his teachings, calling upon his disciples to abandon all external formalities to work from the inside to be a good Buddhist. For this occasion, he reformed the structure of the dance ceremony to suit the modern times and to cater to the international audience. *'cham* usually takes place outdoors in the temple courtyard, referred to as *'cham-ra* (dance enclosure), but this performance was enacted on a stage pavilion. The stage was at once an altar with three deities and a performance platform for the monk dancers, materialising as a three-dimensional mandala with its round edges. The statues were ten-feet-high, representing the powerful dark blue *Bernagchan* in the center, *Mahakali* mounted on her blue mule to his right and a brown *Vajrasadhu* on his mount to the left. Behind the Karmapa's seat was a visual lineage of the Sixteenth Karmapa followed by the First Karmapa, *Dusum Khyenpa*'s statue, and leading up to the Buddha. The statues of the deities were not wheeled out into the courtyard between acts of dance but were stationed on the stage from the beginning. They were only unveiled at the right point of time.

This particular *'cham* performance was a pastiche of ten different dances revolving around the tutelary protective deity of *Mahakala*. Karmapa's solo was fifth on the list and featured the climax of the dance. His dance was known as '*Go-Ma'* or Dance of the (Female) Gate Keeper or Gate Protector, composed by the Fourteenth Karmapa, Thekchok Dorje. The four female gatekeepers among the forty-two peaceful deities are *Ankusha, Pasha, Shrinkhala* and *Ghanta* guarding all directions in the mandala (Four Female Gatekeepers). Movement patterns in *'cham* are usually very symmetrical—a turn to the right will always be followed by a turn to the left to symbolize the inversion of perception. Throughout the dance, Karmapa's torso was kept upright as in the sitting meditation pose with the spine straight as an arrow. His jumps were weighty and he turned in tight circles. His facial expression was extremely solemn in reflection of his steadfast concentration on every move.

Nothing in the grace of his arm gestures however suggested the violent act of killing that was being represented. In this dance, Karmapa would eventually destroy the *linga*, the effigy of negative forces, with four different implements symbolic of the four female gatekeepers. The implements were 'the hook of mindfulness, the noose of Knowingness, the iron chain of One Pointedness of Mind and a bell of release' (Negi,

p. 62). Each implement made up a section of the dance. There was a different set of movements for each implement corresponding to the respective gatekeeper; even the way of holding it was highly codified. With the hook, which is linked to *Ankusha*, or the 'Horse Face', the movements were energetic with frequent jumps. The turns were bigger and head dives lower. For the second implement of the noose, which represents *Pasha*, or the Sow Face, the movements were closer to the ground with fewer leaps and turns. The third implement was the chain, related to *Shrinkhala*, the Lion Face while the last implement of the bell, to *Ghanta*, the Wolf Face. Each section of the dance ended with a double kick then a huge leap forwards on one foot to strike the *linga*. By the last implement, Karmapa appeared to be tired from the exhausting dance.

After the dances of the four implements, Karmapa was handed two brown feathers that he held in both hands. He stood still, closed his eyes and went deep into meditation. Like a wizard casting a spell with his wands, he repeated hand gestures of swaying the feathers over a pot of burning incense, which was then placed directly beneath where Karmapa was standing. All these acts were in preparation for the final act of killing. Clenching a silver dagger in both hands, he closed his eyes in deep concentration and recited mantra. When he was ready, he sank the tip of the dagger into the *linga*, piercing the heart of all demons. The dance was almost over now that the demons had been conquered and liberated. In the short exit dance of victory, Karmapa recollected his bow and arrow and was barely seen by the audience as his retinue of monk attendants, musicians and incense bearers formed a tight circle around him. When all was complete, the whole retinue left the stage in the same way they entered. The dance lasted a little over an hour.

When it comes to a high lama, it is more important who dances rather than what is danced. The persona of the dancer far eclipsed what he was doing on stage. No judgment was made on the performance as the audience watched in awe and silence. Furthermore, the art of dancing personalised the divine persona of the Karmapa. When Karmapa danced, the entire hall was still except for the bellowing of trumpets, beating of drums and clashing of cymbals. A witness commented that the moment Karmapa appeared on stage, it was as if the entire audience went instantly into *samadhi* meditation. Other comments from the audience included: 'The power of his presence and his first movements took my breath away' as well as 'Grace and power flowing effortlessly from him' (Levine, 2012).

In my second short interview with Karmapa, I asked him how one judges a *'cham* performance. He replied, it is a dance for oneself and not for others. Herein resides the fundamental difference between sacred and profane dances wherein the gaze is directed inwards in the former and not projected outwards as a means of capturing attention. It is thus inappropriate to write a review of Karmapa's performance in the manner one would for a dance theatre—the requirements and expectations are markedly at odds. The way one views or judges *'cham* can only determine one's devotion and spiritual attainment rather than one's mastery of the form of art.

'cham in a community temple attracts local people from near, but *'cham* by an esteemed spiritual lama easily draws throngs of devotees from near and far. More than performance, Karmapa's dance constitutes a presence and a cause for bringing a brand new community together across cultures and boundaries, including

Tibetans and Chinese from mainland China. It does not 'signify a spectator event but a participatory individual and communal event' (DeMarinis, 1993, p.200). With monks dancing in a circle and lay audience watching from the perimeter, the whole community convenes to form 'both a literal and symbolic means of containment, a perimeter within which it is safe to move and to risk the sharing process responsibly … [transforming] the dance [into] an enactment of intrapsychic process and communal activity of releasing and containing energy' (DeMarinis, 1993, p.201). Nothing in *'cham* calls out to the audience to pity the plight of Tibetans. In its solemn enactment, 'it is announced modestly, and offered up to any and all who are willing to commit to being there' (Foster, 2011, p.187). In bringing a new community together, the demarcation of self and other is broken down, even for that momentary union in time.

Conclusion

Writing about people in exile is hardly a neutral affair. There are so many entities encroaching upon the Tibetan people today, each with its own agenda. My initial intention of contributing in a 'good' way towards the Tibetan culture and religion was challenged by a piercing comment from my Tibetan friend: 'You have become one of them'. While I am not impervious to how doing fieldwork exposes one to the judgments of others, it strikes me as incongruous to think of anthropological fieldwork as war-like, in Claude Levi-Strauss' words, amidst all the peaceful emanations of the Tibetan lamas. Yet here I am, bearing witness to this opening of virginal lines of communication between peoples and cultures, even between those not known to be in political clash. Much contemplation is required on my part to realise how ethnography 'precludes text-making enterprises that achieve anything other than the creation of novel openings or perhaps the enlargement of existing opened wounds' (Ness, 2001, p.79). Being kept at bay from the community might be the antithesis of a good anthropologist, but there are boundaries that simply cannot be transgressed in a traditional, all-male, religious community. Still, I persevere on this research journey, echoing the notion of 'all ethnographic work [as] inherently in motion, unfinished, partially true, in James Clifford's terms committed and incomplete' (Ness, 2001, p.68).

I started out my research with the naïve notion of preserving the dance since it has been constantly reiterated that the 'absence in the West of any reliable form of notation until the 20th century resulted in a relative paucity of dance traditions when compared to other art forms' (Mackrell, 2014). I was further spurred on by serious preservation efforts of organizations such as Core of Culture which claims that the existence of *'cham* is threatened by various factors including a decreasing number of realized masters and the dispersion of peoples fleeing war. Upon embarking on my fieldwork, I find the practice of *'cham* to be thriving among the Tibetan monastic communities in exile. Quite the contrary from what I was prepared for, I quickly realized that culture is never more salient than in troubled times and that Tibetan culture, like any other, is dynamic and breathing.

> Calling for its "preservation" automatically brings forth the need for it to be defined, which in turn evokes a stuffed-and-mounted item fit for a museum. Tibetan culture does not need to be frozen in time, but Tibetan

> cultural life needs to be protected from measures that repress literary and artistic expression (Sperling, 2000, p.36).

Even in their harsh state of exile, the Tibetans are not giving up on their age-old wisdom. Much remains to be uncovered about the ancient practice of *'cham* in its unyielding survival against the erosion of time and space.

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1. The controversy of the present 17th Karmapa arose over the recognition of two Karmapas by different authorities. They are, namely, Orgyen Trinley Dorje and Trinley Thaye Dorje. In this paper, I refer to the former who is recognized by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government.

2. The number of views last recorded on 30 November 2014.

3. The cult of Mahakala, very important throughout Tibet, and of the wrathful protective deities constitutes the focus of Tibetan masked dances (Berg, 2008, p.171).

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

Biography

Shanny Rann is an Erasmus Mundus scholar in dance knowledge, practice and heritage. A pilgrimage to the Himalayas inspired her foray into the study of sacred dances in the region. She is currently studying the performances of *'cham* in exile by His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa. She holds a liberal arts degree from Simon Fraser University and MA in Dance from York University, Canada.

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