Zhanag Black Hat Dance

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The Zhanag (བྲག་ཏིང་) or Black Hat dance is one of the most popular sacred cham dances without mask seen in Bhutan and other parts of the Buddhist Himalayas. Named after the black hats which the dancers wear, the dance has a deep spiritual significance and is performed as an act of religious ritual and practice, and not as a piece of entertainment.

The dancers of the Zhanag dance are dressed in long silk robe called phoego (ཕོའ་དྲོག་), which is tied around the hip from within using a special prop so that the robe whirls smoothly and elegantly when the dancers perform whirling movements. The robes are made of different colours of silk brocade and have striped patterns on the main body as well as the sleeves, which have a very broad end. The dancers wear the dorji gong (རྒྱུན་གོང་) shoulder cover and a dark lhamo apron with the wrathful face on it and tassels at the bottom. Inside the robe, the dancers wear their usual clothes and a pair of pink trousers. For the Zhanag dance, when people can afford, the dancers normally wear the traditional boots made in Bhutan.

The most defining characteristic of the dance costumes is the black hat, which has a flat circular base on which are sometimes drawn tantric diagrans or mantras. The central part is the copula which is fitted on the dancer’s head and tied with a strap going under the chin. The copula has many features including dome shapes and stacks of sun disk and moon crescent in some cases, skull heads and a decorative apex of a mirror, vajra or jewel, often ornamented with peacock feathers. On the two sides of the central stakes are motifs of snakes, dragons, foliage, flames, scarves, etc. The copula represents the cosmic mandala of the three worlds of desire, form and formless realms or the Mt Meru surrounded by the continents and sub-continents. It illustrates how the master who wears this hat transforms the ordinary world into field of enlightened energy.

The Black Hat dance is an enactment of one of the most esoteric and powerful practices of Vajrayâna Buddhism. Based on Mahâyâna Buddhism and its theory of altruism to take all sentient beings to liberation, but equipped with exceptional expedient methods, tantric Buddhism advocates using violent and terrifying methods out of ruthless compassion in order to tame unruly beings. The black hat dancer represents a master of tantric or Vajrayâna Buddhism who has the spiritual power to subjugate a demonic force and transform the negative energy into a positive one. In order to enhance the fierce aura presented by the attire and movements, the forehead and the cheeks of the dancers are marked with soot to create a terrifying visage and the face is partially obscured with long hair of tantric priests in contrast to the shaved monks. The terrifying outfit and movements of the black hat dancer represents the use of force and fear, albeit out of compassion, to help a evil force stop committing further evil by putting an end to it. It does so through the practice of compassionate killing known as ‘liberation’ as the consciousness of the victim is liberated while its ordinary personality is slain.

To indicate this ritual of killing and the offering of its remains to the terrifying enlightened forces, the dancers wield a phurpa (ཕུར་ཕབ་) dagger and black scarf called yabdar (ཡབད་རི) in the right hand, and a bhânda skull cup in the left hand. On an esoteric level, the dagger and the cup symbolize the union of wisdom and method but in the actual ritual, the dagger is an instrument for the killing and the bhânda cup to serve the remains of the victim to the wrathful Buddhas. The killing, in theory, is the elimination of all sense of duality and grasping, and the consumption of the remains the dissolution of ordinary empirical experience in the state of reality or dharmadhatu. In the middle of the Zhanag Dance the dancers are also given goblets to offer libation to a wrathful Buddha often dressed as a black hat dancer.

The Black Hat dance is, thus, a presentation of the tantric ritual of slaying the unruly demonic forces. It is also said to have been performed as an enactment of a historical instance of such a practice. After the last great Buddhist king of Tibet, Tshibo Tsalphu, was assassinated in 836 CE, his brother Darma ascended the throne. Tibetan Buddhist historians claim that Darma carried out a calculated persecution of the Buddhist faith during six years of his reign. Unable to bear the destruction of Buddhist heritage by the former kings, Darma killed Lhalung Pelkyi, a meditating tantric monk, is said to have come in the guise of a dancer in dark robes with white inner lining and long and broad sleeves. He is said to have hid a bow and arrow in the sleeves and come riding a white horse which he painted black with charcoal.

Approaching the king, he performed a spectacular dance to distract the king and in the process, said to have shot the king dead with his arrow. He then took off on the horse through the river which washed away the charcoal. He also turned the robe inside out. Thus, when the king’s men hunted for a black rider on black horse, people only reported seeing a white rider on a white horse. He is said to have eventually escaped to eastern Tibet where he settled with other Buddhists. Today, the Black Hat dance, in its costumes and purpose of eliminating an evil power, is seen as a reminder of the heroic deeds of Lhalung Pelkyi Dorji for the sake of the Buddhist faith.

In Bhutanese festivals, the Black Hat dance, which represents this tantric subjugation of evil means by terrifying activities out of compassion is commonly known as Sachog Zhanag or the Black Hat dance for the consecration of the land. The dance symbolizes the extermination of negative forces from an area where spiritual activities are to take place. Another Black Hat dance is performed with small drums which is known as Zhanag Ngacham or the Black Hat dance with drums. This dance symbolizes the celebration of successful liberation and subjugation of the evil, and the victory of good over evil.

The Black Hat dance, like most other dances, is performed by the monks and lay priest in the monasteries and villages. In the government centres and dzongs, the state monks perform the Black Hat dance. As a display of esoteric tantric practice, the dancers in theory must be experienced tantric practitioners, who are capable of carrying out such practice.

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Further readings:

If STI symptoms are present, it is advised to visit the nearest health facilities:
- Heavy or foul discharge from vagina, penis, or anus
- P ain while urinating or having sex
- P ainful or swollen testicles

Info courtesy - WHO, Country Office