

Norbu Tsering

ACHE LHAMO IS MY LIFE



This is still the only existing document concerning the life of Master Norbu Tsering (1927-2013), artistic director of Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts for many years. It was edited by Antonio Attisani by means of various interviews between 1991 and 1998. Some other written sources have also been used. In June 1998, the Master corrected the manuscript, with the careful help of Sonam Phuntsok, his successor as dance master. Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy met the Master in Dharamsala (Nov. 1998), asked some more questions and elucidated several passages. David Bryant checked the English, respecting the style of the conversations. The English version was published by © Legenda (Torino 1999) as a homage to Master Norbu Tsering. All the printed copies of the booklet have been presented to TIPA.

A. Attisani has published several essays and some books on *ache lhamo*, one of them regarding its ancient roots and history (*A ce lha mo — Studio sulle forme della teatralità tibetana*, Firenze: Olschki, 2001), and another on its life after the Chinese take-over (*Uno strano teatro*, Torino: Legenda, 2001).

This is an updated and augmented version. May 2016. © 2016 Antonio Attisani (E-mail: attisani@gmail.com).

Cover: Master Norbu Tsering as *gyalu*, Eighties, photographer unknown (gift to the editor).

This page: Master Norbu Tsering in his last days (Dharamsala), photographer unknown.



My parents

My father was from Chongye, a place near Lhokha, about twelve miles south of Tsethang.¹ My father lived in the plains, while my mother was from the inner part of the valley, from Naru. In Chongye, there was a band of young men and women who organized a well-known *lhamo* group which they called the *dhob-dhob*.² Since my father had a very good voice and was good in singing *namthar* (opera arias), he participated in all its performances in the region. He gradually became popular for his singing, acting and dancing. As his popularity spread, it finally reached the ears of the then Tibetan Government officials. They asked my father to join a proper *ache lhamo* group, the Kyormolung-pa, as a full-time professional. Once you were good in artistic skills in Tibetan opera you could join dance troupe, except for monks and soldiers. My father was good in dancing and singing and was skillful in maintaining the pitch for tuning a melodious tone. In his youth he performed as a common actor, but as he grew older all the youngsters started to like him and took him as their model actor.

My parents Tsering Phuntsok and Nyima Dolma had six children. I, Norbu Tsering, born in Lhasa in 1927, was their first son.

My beginnings

I had to learn the art of *lhamo*. I was quite small and was carried on back and lain in the lap. I roamed Tibet with my parents. My first master Gyalo Tseten was from Lhoka, Tsedeshö. Then, the teacher of the Kyormolung opera troupe was Tsema Genba. Gyalo Tseten was too old to become the teacher but he was excellent. He was very authoritarian and had an excellent voice. He was the main teacher for young teachers of our troupe. He was in opera since childhood and knew orally about all the different styles of the opera traditions and was a good performer. He was the actual authority on the opera traditions and he had a lot of power in guiding and directing the artists, so I was lucky to be able to learn and study under him from the age of eight. He thought me also while in bed. He would teach me a *namthar* and I had to repeat it: the next morning I had to recite what I had learnt in the evening. If I couldn't do that he would punish me. Gyalo Tseten was good in acting as a clown and arousing laughter. Besides this, he was also a good singer and was skillful in maintaining the right pitch for the songs. In his youth he could play any character. Later, as he aged, he would play the characters relevant to his age. During his old age he would act the Old man in

¹ Chongye is a village in the Yalung valley, the cradle on Tibetan civilisation, especially important in the imperial period, VII to IX century.

² *Dhob-dhob* is a slang word for monks who generally don't had interest in studies and were famous, and even feared, for their rough and unconventional behaviour. It was not the *lhamo* troupe from Chongye, which name was Pundün (*phyongs-rggyas spun-bdun*), that performed in Shotön.

Drowa Sangmo; in *Sukyinyima* he was the character of Aku Ngonpa (Uncle Hunter). He taught the young artists all the necessary skills.

Before His Holiness was enthroned on the Lion throne (*Sertrinyasöl* ceremony in 1948) the Shotön, which earlier took place in Norbulingka, was staged at the regent Reting's residence. Except for the place of performance there was not a slightest difference; we shouldered the same responsibility while staging at Reting monastery as we did at Norbulingka.

During the Shotön festival a play on the previous life of Padmasambhava³ was staged. The actor featuring the character of Padmasambhava (The Lotus Born) at the end is a small child hidden in a lotus, who later comes out as the lotus opens. So, since I was good in singing *namthar*, I was chosen to play the child Ogyen Rinpoche. I was made to sit in the lotus with a *damaru* and a bell and as the lotus opened I had to sing a *namthar*. The play concluded with my *namthar*. This was my debut as a child performer. It was my father who taught me how to perform, as also did the master Tsema Genpa, chief of the Kyormolung-pa. Tsema Genpa was not a artist of high calibre but he was good in *namthar*. He had one brother, named Lhawang Ngodup, who was the drum beater (*ngadung*) with the same company.

I performed in Shotön for many years. If we did not perform we were levied with severe penalties.

I learnt a lot from Gyalo Tseten, my first and main teacher, but it was from my father that I learnt most and absorbed the qualities of a *lhamo* artist. Unfortunately, when I was sixteen, my father passed away. The main teacher for me was Gyalo Tseten, whereas the master of the company was Tsema Genpa. His father guided him.⁴ The main teacher is in charge of you, even if you learn from others.

Ama Thang Sang

My father told me the story of Ama Thang Sang,⁵ the major actress of the Tibetan theatre, and of our company, the Kyormolung-pa. He explained to me how Ama Thang Sang founded the present- day Kyormolung-pa *lhamo* company. Kyormolung is the name of the place where the Ngari Rinpoche monastery stands. Before the formation of the group by Ama Thang Sang, it was merely a band of local performers. Later as young men and women

³ The play is *Pema Woobar*.

⁴ Gyalo Tseten's father was from Tsethang, and part of the group of people who had to make special cloth (*terma*) for the government (a sort of compulsory labour in the old Tibet). He was also part of an amateur *lhamo* troupe (Tsudruk Lhamo) founded by the great teacher from the Kyormolung troupe Migmar Gyaltsen. That's why the Tsethang Tsudruk troupe was so good. Gyalo Tseten's father was named Tsering Chomphel, and was forced to come into the Kyormolung troupe just because he was so good.

joined in, it turned into a *lhamo* company. This band became popular and took the name Kyormolung-pa. These people came to participate in Shotön but, as most of them were farmers, they had to attend to their crops. Hence they could not devote time and effort for regular practice. This caused the standard of Kyormolung-pa's performances to deteriorate. Ama Thang Sang lived in another place, west of Kyormolung. She was rich and sponsored many young boys and girls to learn opera skills. She formed one troupe which gave performance in Kyormolung during the same period as the monastic dances. She was the Hunters' teacher, not only an actress.

Later the government at Lhasa came to hear about the reputation of Ama Thang Sang's troupe. At the same time, due to lack of patronage, the previous group was becoming poor. So the government decided to test the skills of the two companies to be included in the Shotön festival. Ama Thang Sang's troupe was selected and the other actors were sent back to their fields. So during the Shotön, she was made to perform instead of the previous Kyormolung-pa. The people in the audience mistook it for Kyormolung-pa and called that group Kyormolung-pa. The former troupe was disbanded and replaced by the new one who inherited the name. It was during the time of the great XIII Dalai Lama that the master of Kyormolung-pa group and Ama Thang Sang were summoned and made to perform in Norbulingka. Ama Thang Sang's performances turned out much better than the master's. His Holiness then decreed that Ama Thang Sang perform the *lhamo* for the Shotön festival. Thereafter, Ama Thang Sang performed also on important festive occasions. Earlier, during the Opera shows, the disbanded Kyormolung-pa performed after Chungpa and Gyangara. Later Ama Thang Sang's company performed in its stead. Ama Thang Sang was the only woman to organize an opera troupe and was the only female artiste to perform in Norbulingka in front of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She was excellent as an actress and she was at the same time a teacher of opera. Though I did not see her, my father used to say that after her death they could hear her voice of *namthar* from the burial ground. One high lama later said some prayers to stop her spirit from singing.

The Kyormolung-pa

Kyormolung-pa was run by Kundeling, a big monastery, the most powerful *labrang* aside from the Tibetan government.⁶ Between of the *lings* (monasteries) of the lamas of Kundeling, Tsomöling, Tengyeling and Tsechokling, Kundeling was the most powerful one. It was the patron of our opera troupe. Each troupe had its own patrons. During the Shotön the groups had to perform compulsorily as a form of taxation. So our expenses were paid by the

⁵ *Ama* means *mama* and is employed as a familiar and respectful word as part of the names, as *Ache*, that means *elder sister*. In fact she was called also Ache Thang Sang.

Kundeling monastery. After the Shotön, we had to perform the same again at Kundeling. As the Norbulingka Shotön concluded in the seventh month of the Tibetan year, each troupe would then perform again at their patrons' houses. Lastly they would perform for the *yabshi* (His Holiness' family) and the *kashag* (government).

Anyway, at my time Kyormolung-pa was a poor company and was totally different from troupes like Shangba or others. The various groups were named after the region to which they belonged, like Tashi Shöpa, Pündünpa, Nyemo. After the Shotön they would resume their agricultural works. For the participating groups there were exemptions from certain regular services to the government. Our group comprised people collected from different places of Tibet, while a group like Shangba Lhamo performed for Shotön and after its completion returned to their place of origin and carried on their farming. They had houses and fields. They practised only when the festival time came near. But Kyormolung-pa did not have any of these. When the festival ended, the Treasury Department of Tibetan government asked us where the troupe would like to go and perform. The group, having then conferred on the matter, decided the place and informed the Department. Sometimes we went to Lhokha and sometimes to Kongpo, Tsang or other places. If we were asked by the government to perform in a certain place we had to comply. If we found a potential artists at a certain place, we had to report this to the government and the artist could join our troupe. Some of us made business at the same time, just to have some extra incomes.

Theatre and government

Tsechak was a body that worked as a coordinating committee for all the *lhamo* groups.⁷ When Kyormolung-pa performed at Norbulingka it was the Tsechak that managed and paid for the costumes, as also for the other groups. When the four groups – Gyangara, Chung-pa, Kyormolung-pa and Shang-pa – performed at Norbulingka, the officials of the Treasury Office managed everything. They were headed by Choe-dhong, a high official who managed the costumes and other accessories. There was a woman for make-up, and tailors and others to assist the artists. Except for the costumes of *ngonpa* (Hunters), *dakini* (fairies) and the others already owned by the four groups, they were concerned in all the preparations of brocade clothes: costumes for old men, women, kings and queens, and others like the girl Sukyinyima. If the show required costumes for characters representing high noble leaders, the organizers themselves had to manage every detail of the requirements with respect to jewels and ornaments. For example, in Kongpo the organizers managed every detail

⁶ The *labrang* is the private quarters of the Lama (of Kundeling, in this case), who became regent.

⁷ In fact Tsechak Lekhung was the Treasury Department of the government. It was responsible for the entire organisation of the Shotön: texts, costumes, accessories etc. They also had to control over the correct performance of the plays.

themselves for the opera, for they believed that performing with costumes owned by the organizers would remove obstacles and therefore rich people would voluntarily lend their best costumes and ornaments. In those days, the artists prepared the costumes. The best tailors were called for making the costumes, the best hairdressers for the beautiful plaits. The various costumes for the artists were measured and made by the master tailor. When we were performing at Norbulingka, the above detailed preparations were made in advance. Things were less complicated in the shows at the other places.

The Department instruct us to practise the performances well, at first during the festival. As the first full-time professional *lhamo* group of Tibet we earned our livelihood by staging performances at different places. As a special privilege, we had a government decree with us. We were also given full power to recruit youngsters (except for soldiers and monks) who had good voices and were skillful in the art of *lhamo*, and train them to become performing artists. We also had some other privileges. In some districts there were rivers and areas where ferrying and grazing was prohibited. But during Shotön festivals, we had an access even to these restricted rivers and grasslands. When heading forth for the Shotön festival, we could not be halted on our way to avoid delay. Prior to Shotön we were authorized with certain exceptions and privileges. Our boat was not allowed to be stopped by others. We were also allowed to send our animals for grazing to restricted pastures. We had to report soon after for the Shotön. If there was a delay, an immediate inquiry would be conducted and any responsibilities for the delay would be punished. The Government decree also directed the districts or towns to help us in staging performances. So, wherever we performed, they extended help and support. They also collected a little amount from all the people, which they gave us as a reward at the end of our performance.

During Shotön, all twelve groups gathered and met each other. But, for the rest of the year, we went on tour. On our tour we sometimes did reach their place and perform. They would extend support, give presents and host feasts for us.

We were professionals performing in different regions throughout the year, that's why we were considerably better than the others.

The individual artists also engaged in business. They made merely petty sales and did not run any big enterprises. So when it comes to financial status, I feel that we were the poorest. Furthermore, Kyormolung-pa had quite a large number of performers: in villages, not only men and women but even the children participated in some shows. But in Lhasa only male artists performed since, as everybody knows, no women were allowed to take part. In any case, the living standards of the performers were very poor. And the government officials, as well as others, considered the troupe of Kyormolung as beggars.

Styles and dialects

Kyormolung-pa was popular for their gesture and fast movements. On the other hand their dialect was that of central Tibet, which was easy for audiences to comprehend. The other groups were different and less fun. In particular, Gyangara was infamous for its monotony. After the Shotön, the twelve groups performed in Lhasa for five days. After the fifteenth day of the festival the performers usually performed outside the main circle, where the residences of Tsarong, Langdue, Taring and Deka-thachi were. We had to skip those shows during the Shotön, that is up to fifteenth day of the festival, because they were localized outside the circular road. Before the above date the performances were free in the inner circle of the city.⁸

As for style and patterns, Kyormolung-pa's was more or less the same as others, since all the opera groups based their performance on a common text. All the opera texts were kept by the Treasury Office. If we were to perform one particular story we would be given the relevant text for study. During the reign of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, one text would be maintained in the hand of His Holiness, though I don't know if that was done during the time of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. If we made mistakes we would be penalized. If there were two companies performing the same opera story, the only difference regarded the skills and precision of the performance, besides difference dialects used. As we mostly staged our performances in Lhasa and the region of Ü, we mostly performed in Lhasa dialect. As I said, the most outstanding feature of Kyormolung-pa performance was its sense of humour and satire. And the dance movements were really fast and swift. And through the use of Lhasa dialects, the people of Lhasa, Lhokha and nearby could clearly understand the play as well as the *namthar* sung. Audiences found it hard to understand Gyangara, Chungpa and other groups, since they were from Tsang, and spoke in Tsang dialect.

The four major companies wore the same mask, while Tashi Shöpa, Pündün-pa, Nyemo, Darong, Nangtse and others wore white masks with blue, black or white patterns. Their eyebrows were either pointed slightly upward or downward. They also wore a shawl with a colourful flower on their shoulders, which had its own significance.

Groups like Darong and Nyemo performed *lhamo* basing it on texts like *Nangsa*, while Tashi Shöpa mostly performed *Norsang*. The Pündün-pa performed it in Yarlung, in a land below Chongye, in a village called Pündün in honour of the seven brothers.⁹ There were almost thirty five families there, and the seven brothers are said to have originated there. So,

⁸ Actually there were performances from the first to the fifth or sixth day in the Norbulingka's park, from the sixth to fifteenth day in Lhasa, and after the fifteenth day outside the Lingkör.

⁹ *Pündün* means "seven brothers", the ones who are said to be performing the Hunters, the *ngonpa*, along with *lhamo*. There is sometimes confusion between the *pündün* (the seven brothers) who took part in the legendary troupe of Thangtong Gyalpo and the *pündün* (the seven relatives) who appeared in a dream of the Fifth Dalai Lama to celebrate his enthronement.

when the twelve groups came to perform, the Pündünpa performed first, since it had been the first Tashi Shöpa troupe of Tibet.

As for The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society (as TIPA was called until 1981: *Bod kyi zlos tshogs-pa*), we performed Tashi Shöpa in the beginning. I knew a little about it from Tibet. I taught it to The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society. Later it spread everywhere. Now everyone performs it. Schools come to learn it from here. Even the monks now perform Tashi Shöpa when going on tour abroad, as I have heard. They must have learned it from one another.

Actresses and feminine roles

I had now reached the age of 26 or 27. Previously I had been performing as a dakini and I became quite famous. Since I was different from all the dakini impersonators, His Holiness the Dalai Lama knew me and recognised me immediately. That year at Shotön, my teacher, since I was old for the role, asked me to perform the male *ngonpa*. While performing as *ngonpa*, His Holiness couldn't see me, as I was wearing the mask, so he enquired about me. When he was told that I had been asked to play the *ngonpa* role he replied: . So His Holiness, right on the spot, at one corner of the stage, made another actor wear the male costume and made me wear dakini's costume. From henceforth, His Holiness declared that I should impersonify the dakini role and not that of *ngonpa*.

I enacted feminine roles in plays on occasions other than Shotön. Since we were quite popular, the districts and the places we visited asked us to perform in feminine roles. Sometimes acquiescing to the special request made by the people, we had to take feminine roles. We could not object and had no choice but to perform.

I was first given the name of when I was young and performing in Lhasa. While staging at a public place, I took the role of a Lhasa prince. In the play the *namthar* started with the words . Thereafter, the people of Lhasa called me by the name Laba.¹⁰ *Laya* actually referred to the members of the Tibetan cabinet, secretaries, chief justices and all the other officials. The Tserung rank includes the four chief secretaries of His Holiness. We sang *namthar* to each of the *kashag* (cabinet), and secretary. But for the Tserung we did not sing *namthar* since they were novice monks. There were two offices: *tsega* (monk officials) and *shoga* (lay officials).

Approaching my twenties, my voice began to be too strong for female roles and I started interpreting male ones (interpreting female roles, however, you learn something that lasts

¹⁰ As Norbu Tsering started his melody with “La-yi”, people called him “La-yi”, which later on became “La-ba”, a kind of nickname for the person who sings “La-yi”. But there is also another version of the nickname. As an infant, Master Notbu Tsering used to imitate the elders singing “La la la la...”. So he was called “Lala”, and then “La-pa”, the one who sings “La”.

forever). The first male role I took as an actor in the play *Pema Woebar* was the king Dawa Senge. Earlier while performing in the courtyard of Norbulingka, it was mostly our master Tashi who played king Dawa Senge, as he was very fond of the role. Later, while staging a play, His Holiness, on seeing me perform as a dakini and also as a minister of king Dawa Senge, directed me to take the role of the king. Since Master Tashi had a very good voice, and being teacher, the government did not want to offend him, but at the same time wanted a younger man to act as the prince. Therefore, that year two roles of the same character came on stage. Since there was only one set of costumes for the role, I performed in costume while Gegen Tashi sang the *namthars* in the background. It happened when I was twenty years old, and Gegen Tashi was old and his hair had turned grey. In that year I performed the role of King Dawa Tashi, while Gegen Tashi sang the songs.

One thing must be said, as many people today affirm that there were no actresses. It is not true. There were actresses in ancient Tibet. They performed with their husbands and even children. Only in Norbulingka did women artists not perform. Ama Thang Sang was perhaps the only female artiste to perform in Norbulingka in front of H.H. the Dalai Lama. There were many actresses in our group. Almost every actor had a wife and some of these wives performed. Tashi's wife, for example, was an excellent actress: she played the main roles in *Sukyinyima*, *Drowa Sangmo* etc. If the wives did not perform they did not get their share of pay. Therefore they strove hard in their performances. And it is a fact that the women of Kyormolung-pa were renowned for their performances. In total, there were around forty artists. The other companies had not as many actresses as Kyormolung-pa since they performed mainly during Shotön. In Norbulingka the women were not allowed to participate, but they could perform in Sera Shotön (since in Sera they did not perform inside the monastery but outside, in the Sera picnic grounds, so women were acceptable).

After Shotön

The Shotön festival at Norbulingka drew to an end on sixth day of the seventh Tibetan month. After this we performed at Kundheling's place. During our stay in Lhasa, Kundeling provided us with food and a little amount as pay. And the next day we performed at Yabshi Taktse (His Holiness's family). After Yabshi, we would perform at the residences of Kalon Rampa, Surkhang, Kabshepa and others until the fifteenth day of the month. After performing for the kalons, we performed at the places of families such as Tsomöling, Shide Monastery, Meru, and others. They would ask us to perform for half a day *zigpü* (*gzigs-phud*, offering) performances. Performances on historical images drew quite a lot in income; and the half-day performances drew less. For the half-day performance we staged the Hunters, Gyalu and Dakini.

At that time, in Tibet there were only three *kalons* (ministers). After presenting to each of them we would then perform for the Kundeling and such others. We were given high rewards like sacks of rice and grain. They would also give us meat and butter. The sacks were wrapped in brocade.

We performed at our best for the Kundeling, for they were our sponsors, though there were rumours that we were less enthusiastic in the Lhasa shows. If, for any reason, we were sick, we had to give prior notice otherwise we would be punished for the incompetence. Exceptionally, some actors earned their living by storytelling. *Lama mani* was the class of storytellers who told religious stories. I remember that Gyangara artists performed at the Shotön and after that they returned to Gyangar Chönzong. Since they did not have a vast area of farm-lands, they left for Tsang and other regions to work as *lama mani* from the fourth Tibetan month, leaving behind their wives and children in their houses situated below the Gyangar monastery. They dressed in red robes. Kyormolung-pa did not have any *lama mani*. It is because the people of our place were so poor that they could not afford to educate their children (as you know, a *lama mani* had to read).¹¹

There were other kind of performers. For example, during the regency of Reting there was one man who had been his horse breeder but who was later promoted to the position of his secretary; later on he turned to be a scholar of high calibre, and he was also good in opera performance and participated in several shows. He was from a rich family. We called him Aku Tönpa.¹² There were also good *namthar* singers among khampas. There is one old person here in Dharamsala who was a popular singer of *namthar* in Tibet. He was well known and was invited by many people for the recitation.

As for myself, I haven't any knowledge on the epic about Gesar of Ling. I have only heard other people read the epic. I also tried to memorize some lines and sing. In Kyormolung we did not have a Gesar storyteller, because there were hardly any literate persons at our place.¹³

Touring Tibet

After Shotön, the rest of the year we toured a region. Once we toured Kongpo and performed in the upper and lower regions of Kongpo. The next year we went to Lhokha, either to upper or lower region of Tsang. We performed and at the same time we made some

¹¹ The entire story of the *lama mani* and the storytellers of Tibet awaits reconstruction. In this case we must add that some Gyangara monks actually say that the actors who went to Shotön were not the same as those who toured the country as *lama mani*, even if they were monks from the same Gyangar Chönzong monastery.

¹² He was nicknamed as the Aku Tönpa, as the popular hero in a series of stories involving jester and satire.

¹³ As far as we know, in recent classical Tibet there were no relations between storytellers and lhamo performers.

commerce. We always returned to Lhasa in the sixth month of the Tibetan year. So we did earn our livelihood through our performances and practice.

Our performance was slightly better than the Lhamo Shangpa. The reason is because we were full-time performers and could devote all our time and effort to practicing *ache lhamo*. It helped us better our performance. We were preferred by audiences not only for our sense of humour and swiftness but also for our costumes, though Chungpa also had good costumes (they were given during the time of His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama), even if only the seven masks of Hunters. The reason why the Kyormolung-pa had many good masks was that they had a special sponsor for that. As for myself, Dodza Rinpoche of Kundeling was very fond of me and he sponsored my costumes. Another member of our troupe was sponsored for his costumes by Dema Rinpoche.

When we reached a place, we first approached the relevant officials of the district or village to seek their help and support in staging our play. Some of the district officials were really kind. On request, they would announce our arrival to the people and would ask the people to contribute things, whether it be flour, cereals or whatever, for us. After having performed for about three days, they would present to us with the things collected as well as gifts sent by individual officials. The host would ask us in advance as regards which particular opera we should perform. If it was for three days, they would tell us which particular to perform on each day. If we had seven *namthars* to recite then only two would be recited due to lack of time. At the performance for His Holiness' mother and father, we had to report in time for the presentation of the show, otherwise we would be punished.

Occupied Tibet

In the 50s, after the Chinese invasion, Kyormolung-pa was asked to establish itself and perform as a professional company. Chinese attitudes towards the company were quite good. Once they invited us to a Sino-Tibetan performance. We had to perform at Drungchelingka, a picnic spot for aristocrats. At that time, all the Tibetan and Chinese government officials were seated and we were asked to perform. Since we were ordered, we had no choice but to perform. We were presented with quite a large amount of money by both Tibetan and Chinese officials. On such occasions, it was customary for the Tibetan aristocrats to fling money rolled in scarves at us. The Chinese also threw money at the end of the performance. Of all the plays, the Chinese took greatest interest in the historical play *Gyaza Bhelsa*, the story about the Chinese and the Nepalese queens of king Songtsen Gampo. They then asked Kyormolung-pa to perform this particular play several times. They had special liking for it, since it depicted the Chinese queen.

I went to China once, in 1956, for an official cultural exchange involving twelve from our group (Kyormolung-pa). At that time, they stressed the need for representatives of the Tibetan people: the representatives of all the counties under Communist Chinese rule were invited to Peking. We were told that a body of Tibetan representative had yet to be set up. At the request of the Chinese government, the then Tibetan government kalon Leyu-shag summoned us and told us that we must go to China. We were then asked to gather at Tsedrung Lingka, the picnic spot of the monk officials of Potala Secretariat. A Chinese man and a woman chose the members from among us. None of us wanted to go, for we were all fearful that once we reached China we would not be allowed to return to our country. Since I and my four brothers Tsering, Tseten Dorje, Penba Tsering and Tapsang had good physical appearances, we were chosen as members. And the remaining members of the chosen team were also young and looked good.

One of us, very skilled in whirling dance, remained in Peking for several months. The others, having returned, were asked to enter the Chinese dance company, but they declined.

It took four months to go and come back.

His Holiness had just returned from his visit to Peking and went to India on a pilgrimage. On reaching China, we were given an audience with Mao Zedong, Tu-li, Tu-tsu and Liu Shao Chi. The main presentation was a Chinese dance, because the Chinese made up the majority. In between their performances, we danced the yak dance, and performed some scenes from *Norsang*, *Sukyinyima*, and *Hunters*. I was the hunter during the aforesaid opera show at Peking. Dance companies from all the states of China had come to present their own items.

At that time, they asked me to remain, but I returned to my place. Because of my disobedience I was warned by the higher office that I would be penalized. In reality, they did not actually penalize me. During the annual opera festival, when a new hunter character was required, His Holiness asked about my whereabouts of me and I would be called and warned by the higher office.

1959: the breakdown

On the first day of the second Tibetan month, I heard a sudden cry and uproar in the Barkor Street. The cry was that every Tibetan should gather at Norbulingka. I saw everyone racing towards Norbulingka. I also followed them. Reaching there, I saw scores of people gathered at the entrance. On our way down there, we saw the Khenchung of Chamdo Phagpa Lha disguised in monk's robes, coming up on a motor-cycle. After a while, as we were waiting at the entrance of Norbulingka, we saw him arriving, this time wearing a red *chupa*, a woollen cap a white mouth-cover (mostly worn by Chinese) and riding a bicycle. Since the

main entrance was packed with people, he rode towards the northern gate. Because of his up and down movement and his wearing a mouth-cover, everyone suspected him as being a Chinese spy. Then the abbots of the great monasteries of Sera, Ganden and Drepung arrived at the gate of Norbulingka. At that time I saw someone being caught. It was Khenchung. Despite his efforts to hide behind the abbots, the people fell on him with stones and sticks and killed him on the spot.

Then I and my friend, along with many others, returned home. On our way back, we saw the kalon of Samdrup Phodrang coming down the road in a Chinese vehicle. The enraged people threw stones at him. One hit his forehead and wounded him. After the upheaval, I, along with my friends and some women, returned back to our place. It was at the beginning of the uprising.

I knew quite early that His Holiness had escaped to India. This was because a security guard of His Holiness, who was also a member of the Drapchi military force, stayed in my home. The night Kundun escaped, he came to my house and wore my clothes, leaving behind his uniform. At present, he is in Mussoorie refugee settlement and looks after my house.

During the Chinese night attack on Potala palace we were not able to shoot back, since it was pitch dark and visibility was poor. The bombing of Norbulingka also damaged the private chamber of His Holiness, but the courtyard was damaged heavily. The military camp further south of Norbulingka was damaged to some extent by the Chinese attack. Many trees in Norbulingka had already been uprooted or cut down by the Chinese. According to people working in Norbulingka, an unexploded cannon ball was found on the bed of His Holiness, in his private chamber. Some of the people labouring in the Norbulingka said so. There were also lot of hand grenades with four wings littered here and there in the courtyard, which had not exploded.

I fought the Chinese with my friends at the Tsuglagkhang, the main temple. No Chinese were to be seen. Still we fired. Many of our friends were killed. People like Depön Jinpa and others who lead us had already escaped. Few of us stayed behind and patrolled by night. We did not know that the whole of Lhasa had then been captured. At one point, a Chinese speaker admonished us in Lhasa dialect to surrender. But we couldn't surrender, because we were held behind by a khampa warrior from Chating region. The khampa stopped us at the gate and warned us that he would shoot us if we surrendered. He did indeed kill some of those who surrendered. Later, with the help of the temple caretaker, we made a plan to escape that night. The same night, when the khampa was staying upstairs, we escaped by the Thromtsikhang Street. I and my sister's son went to Tromsikhang (in Lhasa) and took refuge in an old woman's house. As we come out of the house the next day, we were captured by

the Chinese at gun point. We were made to kneel down and raise our hands. They took us through the Barkor Street and finally to Samdrup Phodrang. The Chinese controlled all of Lhasa. Finally, we all surrendered to them. One Tibetan who was with us was killed for daring to go outside that night.

Five *lhamo* artists – Tenzin Kalwang, Topgyal, Gyaltzen, Tsering Gyenpa and myself – were arrested and imprisoned by the Chinese.

Concentration camp

We were taken to a Chinese office in Sandrup palace and kept there for some time, and then held captive in the house of the Tsarong family for seven days. Afterwards, we were taken to Norbulingka and kept there for days. We were interrogated every day and night. They cross-examined us. At that time, we saw them divide prisoners into groups: aristocrats, monks, soldiers, commoners and the like. I and many others like myself were grouped into a new division. We were of minor charges. The Khampas and Amdovas were sent to the northern region of Tibet to build railway tracks. After twenty days, we were taken in a truck by policemen carrying guns to Nangchenphang for labour. There, all the captives were kept in tents pitched on a huge ground and every morning we were interrogated on who had sent us to fight the Chinese and who had supplied the weapons. We replied that we were voluntary fighters. I said that the gun I had was mine. Without trial, we were subjected to forced labour in extreme conditions and no visitors from Lhasa were allowed to see us. The Nangchenphang concentration camp was about twenty-five kilometers from Lhasa, on a small hill near the Kyichu river. There were about 15,000 people in the camp as labourers: men and women, old and young. All of us had to transport heavy stones on our shoulders (eighty times per day, according to my calculations).

Nobody was allowed to visit prisoners. My wife knew where I was and came from Lhasa on foot. She was dragging herself on the ground, and every day came to the camp showing a picture of me and asking. She looked sick and was really bad. An officer, after some presents, allowed us to meet. Her eyes were swollen with sand inside. I was authorized to talk to her. She gave me cigarettes, dry meat and bread in a container which I took without any words. The accompanying security guards checked the contents before putting her gifts in my hands. I told a Muslim who was with me to tell her to go to a place where a close relation of mine was staying. Afterwards my wife stayed near the camp, always trying to bring me some food and meet me; in this she was helped by some Tibetans and even by some members of the Chinese army, who told her not to worry and that it would have been only a question of some months.

In prison, the aristocrats were treated as the worst criminals, while the khampas, soldiers, monks and ourselves were regarded as having committed lesser crimes. We were sent to Nangchukha to work at a hydro-electric construction. We had to work every day of the week. In the night there were lights installed at the work site. When we had finished the work, like making walls, then we would be treated specially with some liquors and liquid butter the next day. In those moments we were, in fact, treated well.

I was imprisoned for nine months. During my imprisonment, my wife underwent lots of problems and difficulties.

In 1960, the Chinese wanted to perform a Shotön festival with the same pomp and gaiety as we had done for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In 1959, there was no Shotön, due to the situation following the uprising and the escape of the Dalai Lama. Gegen Tashi said that he and his colleagues would perform only if the five of us who were imprisoned in Nangchenphang were released. On explaining the important roles we played, the Chinese finally accepted the request. We were the first Tibetans to be released. Then we joined the company. That year, great preparations were made: so careful that even the flower vases were arranged in the same way as during the time of His Holiness. We were ordered to play *Nangsa Woebum*, and I played the role of Dakpa Samdup. The Chinese really wanted to stage the Shotön again. They tricked us by saying that His Holiness would have come. All the Lhasa crowd came back to Norbulingka. Only the Kyormolung-pa played *lhamo*. The play *Nangsa* was altered: we had to show the dark days of feudalism in Tibet, in a section of the play. The other groups who played were amateurs from Lhasa, offering songs and dances to president Mao and the Party.

Escape to India

In 1961 I came in India. This is how it happened.

An opportunity to escape came from the fact that my wife obtained a Nepalese passport because her father was of Nepalese origin (her mother was from Shigatse).

After our release, my wife and I were sent every morning by the Chinese to collect excrete, carrying our own spades and shovels. Since after the invasion the Chinese had proclaimed the equality of all, irrespective of sex, when my brother-in-law returned after acquiring from Lhasa the Nepalese passport we began to hope that my wife would also get a Nepalese passport. We came to know a Nepalese, and he assured us that due to the equality of the sexes she would get one easily. After the festival in Norbulingka, when I returned to my place, the Chinese ordered me and a friend to accompany a group of PLA officers for

hunting. It took us a month and when we returned I found that my wife had got the passport easily.¹⁴

I was given a Chinese passport, but this passport could not be used for travel to India for exile. We were forced by the Chinese to divorce, as according to their law we were of two different nationalities. I didn't comply on the grounds that during the , when there was suppression, we nevertheless remained as a couple. And, with the opening of the new society, if we were to stay apart it would have been very unfortunate. We told this to the Chinese.

Anyway, we were now wondering about escaping. Many people advised me not to go to Nepal because I would be persecuted by the Nepalese police if I went there. They told me that my wife was a Nepalese citizen and would be taken care of in Nepal by her kin, while I had all my relations in Tibet and would be better among Tibetans. Following the advice of an old Nepalese man, I answered that we stayed as a couple during the difficult moments of the old society and it would be unfortunate to separate in the new liberated society. One morning, the Chinese called us to a meeting and told me that I would be released immediately to Nepal as my wife was a Nepalese citizen. I was asked to pack my blankets and I carried the luggage and left with my wife Tsamcho. During the period before leaving, you could not get in touch with anybody else. That would have been dangerous for them, above all. I could receive only the visit of a brother, by night.

I took with me only with a good *chupa*, nothing of the previous life. We went south in a truck, then by foot to Gantok and then to Kalimpong. There it was very complicated to arrange for my passport: the help came from Department of Education, who guaranteed for me, asking me at the same time to collaborate with the Lhamo Association established there. I stayed in Kalimpong for five or six months, teaching Tibetan opera to the troupe. Shortly after our escape, Tashi died in Lhasa.

Then we moved to Darjeeling. There was a society in Darjeeling which had some people I know. They invited me to join the society and I would be enrolled in the membership. That society was organizing lot of fêtes and games like darts, and I was in charge of the security during the fêtes. In that club, all the members were Tibetans. My duty was to watch if the police was coming. They gave me housing and a good salary. During that time, the Department of Education sent a representative to find me and invite me to Dharamsala. I was called by the Tibetan government in exile to teach the opera *Drowa Sangmo* at the Tibetan drama school in Dharamsala. That was in 1965.

¹⁴ Master Norbu Tsering refers to his wife as “sister” – *ache* is a Lhasa dialect affection word – and to his father-in-law as “our father”, that according to the colloquial Lhasian language.

Restarting ache lhamo

When I first arrived in Kalimpong, in 1961, a reconstructed opera group was already operating there. It was founded by our government in 1959 and called . It was rather a school. Since my wife's passport was valid for only fifteen days, we had to return before the permit expired. There were many others like us; many of them left for Dharamsala and Nepal. I also decided to follow, but a couple of days later the Kalimpong group came to see me with presents of tea, *chang* and *khapse* (Tibetan doughnuts) as a reception for the request to start the opera company, asking me to stay. They said they had collected some donations to make costumes and strengthen their company. They also expressed their sadness saying they did not have anyone to teach *ache lhamo* and asked me to join as a teacher. To this I objected, saying I could stay in India for only a short period. Despite this, they wrote to the Education Department of the Tibetan Government in exile. The Department sent me a letter directing me to stay and work for the Kalimpong group. As for the passport problems, the Kalimpong group agreed to shoulder the responsibility.

I was not the only actor of Kyormolung-pa who fled Tibet; there was another one named Phusam (Purbu Samdhup). We performed together in Kalimpong. Later he sought a job in a factory and went. Last year (1997), I saw him again for the first time, when he came in Dharamsala for a treatment; then I knew that he was living in Sakya settlement. This year he came to see the Shotön, to visit his sister and meet me. We were close friends in Tibet.

When I first joined the Kalimpong troupe, the reconstruction of the *lhamo* was not a difficult task because there were several good performers from Sakya Lhamo Company¹⁵ and others. I faced real problems when I came to Dharamsala, as I'll tell later.

In Kalimpong, I and my students gathered in a big school building every Wednesday. We brought our own food with us. I related the stories to them, which they noted down and brought out in texts. Since there were many artists who earlier had staged performances in Tibet, the *lhamo* there was excellent. While I was teaching opera in Kalimpong, there was with me an artist who suffered from epilepsy. When we came to Darjeeling, he was using his expertise in shoe making while at the same time teaching opera. Later he resigned because of his age and resettled in Sakya settlement.

I taught opera by first telling the story, then the cast, then the songs of the different characters: that is, according to the strict rules of the traditional and original text. We had to keep the *shung* like a mother, something original and pure. When acting and doing other things, like the words of the *namthar*, if the words seemed difficult and hard to understand we could change them keeping the meaning intact and making them easy to understand. As

¹⁵ Sakya Lhamo Company was an excellent company in Tibet, the company where from came the teacher Tashi, the last teacher of Kyormolung-pa.

for acting, whether I had to act like a man or a woman, a child or an old man, I knew the right movement since I had been acting since I was a child. In Tibet, I was also considered among the best in beating the drum. I knew most of the theatrical things. Everything was done according to the traditional way.

In Kalimpong I taught five plays: *Drowa Sangmo*, *Sukyinyima*, *Pema Woebar*, *Norsang* and *Nangsa Woebum*.

I first moved from Kalimpong to Darjeeling. I was very poor then. I taught around for years but did not even draw a penny as salary. I also faced many difficulties in looking after my family. In Darjeeling, the Men-par¹⁶ extended great support and help and also accepted to look after the welfare of my family. After staying there for a short time, I planned to return to Kalimpong. In the meantime, the Education Department had sent Dhungkar, who was the Director of the Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society in Darjeeling. He had brought along a letter asking me and my family to come to Dharamsala. My daughter's leg was fractured when we made the journey to Dharamsala. I remember, it was in the year 1965. I performed in front of His Holiness for the first time in the same year. We staged *Drowa Sangmo*, the first opera to be performed in Dharamsala,¹⁷ as an offering (*zigpü*) for His Holiness. He was accompanied then by His two tutors, Kyabje Ling Rinpoche and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche. After the performance His Holiness, seeing my daughter's fractured leg, asked me about it. His Holiness advised me to take my daughter on the date marked on the plaster to TCV clinic for its removal. But, from that day onwards, I felt the plaster naturally loosened; it finally fell off before the due date. My daughter had totally recovered.

...and finally Dharamsala

I taught first the play *Drowa Sangmo* (1965) and the Kongpo song *Pemo-Thang*. Then I produced *Sukyinyima* (1966), including the episode *Drogpa and Drogmo* with slight changes. Thirdly, I produced *Pema Woebar* (1967) and other songs such as Tashi Shöpa and others. Following this I produced the song *Tsewai Rigzin Wangmo* (*Dear Rigzin Wangmo*, from the name of a lady) and found more songs in the Tibetan settlement of Bylakuppe, south India. In that settlement there were Tibetans from all over Tibet. There were some Tibetans from a place called Lachung near Gangtok. They taught something to me and I taught that at the Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society. Starting in 1968 there were difficult economic problems in the Society; many of us had to go away and seek for regular work, even the director Phuntsok Namgyal Dhukang. I went back to my settlement in

¹⁶ *Menbar Kyidu* was the name of a Tibetan association for help to Tibetans, based in Darjeeling.

¹⁷ Until then, the troupe had played mainly historical plays with songs and dances.

Bylakuppe. Many Tibetans from Dharamsala were there and I was among them. I stayed there for a while until they called me, saying that they wanted to present *Norsang*; this I created with Chakdampa Orgyen, a monk from Drepung. Then I returned and produced it. Since I had visited many places in Tibet during my tour performances I knew some of the local songs. Through sincere effort, I taught the artists of the Society everything I knew. Unlike the present day, when students are given basic education while young, the students of earlier times were wholly freshens. It took around three or four months to learn an opera. During that time, I stayed in my settlement and visited Dharamsala three or four times for teaching. Then came the moment when Mr. Thubten Samdup, the present director of the Drama Society, asked me to stay on as a residential master (1978). He said that during my presence the performance had gone well, but that after my departure everything had started to turn worse. He asked me to leave Bylakuppe, where I was a farmer, and stay in Dharamsala. But I objected to this, relating to him the problems and difficulties I had faced for three years during my earlier stays. Despite his earnest request, I did not accept, but told him that I would decide after discussing it with my wife. The same year he came to the settlement and asked me to shift to Dharamsala. He even asked me to transfer my children from the settlement school to Dharamsala. He also told me that the Society would have looked after the welfare and education of my children. Then the Home Department which looked after the settlements, the Education Department, and The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society deliberated over the issue and finally directed me to shift to Dharamsala.

As I've already explained in brief, I faced some difficulties during these early years. When the Drama Society first started, the standard of the institution, as also of its members, was very poor. At that time, most of the performers were young and did not have a big family to look after, whereas I had a wife and four children. I drew a monthly salary of only twenty-five rupees. It was hard for me to feed my family with that meagre sum. At that time, my wife's sister extended help to us by occasionally sending us 200-300 rupees. We used everything we got for food. Finally, unable to sustain myself and my family, as I said I had to join Bylakuppe (1979). There were also other problems at The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society, and that's why we sought an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He made a good speech on the opera. He also said to me that the *ache lhamo* is one of our main cultural items. He said he had heard that *lhamo* had been preserved well and hoped that it would be improved in the future. He gave the suggestion that I should pick up some good teachers from the Tibetan settlements. Then His Holiness directed me to stay. I related my difficulties in looking after my family, and that I wished to go to the settlement and farm, but I also assured my sincere service to Him. He answered that it was proper to go to the settlement first. So, leaving Mr. Lutsa behind, I left for the settlement. Lutsa was a soldier in

the Gurkha army of Nepal. He was a soldier serving in the Nepali mission in Lhasa. Near the Nepali mission, four brothers from Nepal had set up a place where you could gamble, play *karamba*,¹⁸ hear music, drink tea, have sex. Lutsa used to go there whenever he had time. He grew addicted to smoking marijuana and also learned to play the mouth-organ there. He also became very skilled in playing the Tibetan guitar. So he also sometimes used to come and play mouth-organ in the Nangma Kyiduk. He had already gone on a Khatsara passport.¹⁹ When I arrived in Kalimpong, they all were there. In Kalimpong, they had the same business as in Lhasa. We knew each other very well from Lhasa. One day he came to me and said that he had received a letter asking him to come and teach at The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society. I said that this was very good, because he knew so much. I said that if he could use what he knew it would be very good. After that, he said that he would have gone. Then a person from The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society came to fetch him. There is only one year difference between me and Lutsa. Lutsa arrived a year before I arrived. I arrived later. Then we stayed together. Lutsa died in 1983.

Five months after reaching the settlement, I received a letter summoning me back to Dharamsala (1979). As directed by His Holiness, I was asked to make *Norsang*. At that time there was a certain Chagtama Ogyen who said he had mastered *lhamo*.²⁰ The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society had first requested him to teach, but since he did not know any role other than the role of the physician in the play, I was called to teach. For around three or four months I stayed in Dharamsala teaching *Norsang*. Then I returned to my settlement. I was again summoned after a month or two. They then told me that they had decided to go for a tour to the settlements to stage operas. I participated in the tour performances. Then, returning to my settlement and staying there for a few months, I was again called to take part in a tour to Mussorie, Dehradun and other places. It was in the year 1969. Since then I regularly made visits and took part in the Society performances.

In Dharamsala I first made *Gyaza Bhelsa* (1984-85), which took a whole year. Then we also went on tour to nearby places to stage performances. *Gyaza Bhelsa* ran well. Then I made *Nangsa Woebum* (1985). Then they instructed me to teach the play *The Brothers Donyoe and Dhondup*. I had not learnt this play, but since I had seen it performed in Tibet I was well acquainted with the style and pattern. As for the songs and the *namthar*, I learnt them during my early years. So I taught them by going through the texts. The artists read the

¹⁸ Pushing coins on a small board with talcum powder.

¹⁹ Half Nepali, half Tibetan.

²⁰ To summarize some dates: Norbu Tsering stayed from 1965 to 1968 in Dharamsala and from 1968 to 1979 in Bylakuppe; from the letter, however, he came to Dharamsala two or three times per year to stage *lhamo* and *dögar* (*zlos gar*, dances); from 1979 (the actual director was Thubten Samdup) he was with the TIPA.

texts and I made the necessary corrections. That year we succeeded in the producing *Chung-po Donyoe - Dhondup* (1985).

Each play of the traditional repertory raises a lot of important questions, not only on the artistic level. For example, I remember the 1981 debate on *Norsang* and the sort of censorship requested by the kagyupa order. That was a very intriguing question.²¹

In staging the play we did not make any changes, but during an official meeting Jamyang Norbu was accused that the fire scene of the offering puja disgraced the Ogyen Rinpoche. They said this puja should not be done, and the scene cut. The question was raised by an kagyupa parliament member and supported by Alak Jigme from the Department of Education. When we performed it in Norbulingka, we did it in the same way. Jamyang Norbu came up to TIPA²² in the evening and said what should be done. We discussed it. The next day we had to perform *Norsang* at Gangkyi (the secretariat of the Tibetan Government in exile, Dharamsala). We decided to perform it in such a way, expressing our displeasure at their criticism. We made it up by night. Amchod (Amchö Hari Nagpo), the character who made the puja, was acted by Techung, and the speaker by Tiny. Through their dialogue, Techung was to come out and start to speak in front of all the officials sitting in the tents above, looking at them. Alak Jigme was a person with a very red face. Then Techung interrupted himself and started running back, being afraid, and Tiny called him back. Tiny asked him what happened. Techung replied that a person with a red face did not let him sleep at night, and that he had seen the person with the red face in the tents above. Tiny was to lead him out and asked Techung to start the puja. When they discussed how the puja should be done, Techung said that he couldn't do anything since, whatever he did, he had to face problems and difficulties. Tiny still entreated him strongly. Techung replied that although his puja was done in a true style, as in Norbulingka, he feared he might be beaten with a stick if he made the puja here. They started disagreeing. Techung said that he had brought an old radio when he came into exile in India and that he would turn it on so that no one would be harmed or hurt. So he played this *Dil Dekhe dekho* (a popular old Hindi film song). After this, nobody said anything. Laughing and then silence in the audience. Everybody understood.

That was perhaps the most important episode of that kind, but there were others. When I acted in *Drowa Sangmo* in Kalimpong, I had the role of the Butcher and a khampa criticized me. He said that our depiction of khampa drinking wine and not paying the bill and showing his swords was wrong. We used to say in Lhasa and Norbulingka: you ask me to drink wine,

²¹ On that see Marcia S. Calkovsky, "A day at the Tibetan opera: actualized performance and spectacular discourse", *American Ethnologist*, XVIII, 4, Nov. 1991, pp. 643-657.

²² It was Jamyang Norbu who in 1981 coined the name Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), although in Tibetan the name remained the same, *Bod-gzhung zlos-gar*.

I will say of course. But if you ask me to pay the bill, I will cut your neck with my sword. So when I said this in Kalimpong, they called me and asked if khampas did such things in Tibet. I replied that I didn't know but I said that we acted and pronounced the same words when performing in Norbulingka and other places. I said that there was also a reply by the servant Sema Rago (in *Drowa Sangmo*) which runs . I said that this was the text. I said I acted in the role of the Butcher called Shenpa and not Khampa. I said that khampas dress in fine clothes. And I finally asked why, when the show had been performed in Norbulingka, they hadn't criticized it.

New lhamos

After this, the same director Jamyang Norbu asked me to make the famous play *Chaksam*, about the saint Thangtong Gyalpo. So in that year, 1984-5, I produced *Gyaza Bhelsa*, *Nangsa Woebum*, *Chung-po Donyoe - Dhondup* and *Chaksam*: four plays.

As for *Chaksam*, the story was written by Jamyang Norbu, but the main part of the direction, like acting and the variation of singing the *namthar*, was done by me in strict accordance with the traditional way. There are several *Chaksampa* (iron bridges) in Tibet, built by Thangtong Gyalpo. Jamyang Norbu asked me to organise the folk opera according to this story line. So there were three men, representing the three regions of Tibet, going on a pilgrimage (they presented different variations of tenor) and, when they arrived in Tibet, I depicted the tradition of sowing and harvesting crops in Tibet.

After this, in 1993, I made the play *Thepa Tenpa*, taught me by a Meru monastery monk now living in the Mungod settlement. His name is Gen (mean: elder) Sherab Jungney. When he was young, he had acted as main character of the play. Meru monastery used to perform this opera. We called him and he told the story to us. I made some corrections and changes to this opera. The original story was given to us by this monk who had acted as the main character in the play at Lhasa, 1940. As for the monk, he did not know anything other than his own role, so I included some of the parts which he had forgotten, like how the old man or woman or young man should act.

At that time, I was on my vacation in New Delhi. They made phone calls and sent letters calling me back to Dharamsala. When I came to Dharamsala, the monk and Mr. Tiny had already made a draft of the play. When I returned, I went through the draft and also keenly dictated the dances and *namthars*. The monk did not know much about the dances and songs except for those related to his character. Through my experience, I taught the dance steps and movements of males and females, old men and women and also other characters like Kushar Ling, Meshar Ling, Yangshar Ling, Mae Lenang and others. I also taught them how to

maintain the pitch of the sound. I had then created seven *lhamos* – i. e., fixed the text, the melodies and the movements.

Then I prepared *Drimekunden*, finished in the year before we performed it before the people, that is 1997. I started working on it in 1988 or 1989, when I got the written text of the opera. I got some educated persons to read and I also sometimes tried to read it. It took almost three years. I knew the acting and the way of performing it and other details because when I was small, I saw it being performed in Kongpo and I remembered some part of it. I knew the notes of the *namthars*. I went through the text narrating the life story of the king, besides doing other works. So we were able to perform it last year. It was a good presentation. At times, I took part in the performances during the tour in the West. Besides teaching, I also look after and guide my students: this is my responsibility, since I am one of the oldest in TIPa. I also assist those, especially from the West, who are interested in the tradition and culture of Tibet. I have assisted many scholars, also relating everything I know.

Most of the historical plays were dictated by me. It is different with the new plays like the present-day *Milarepa*. In this case, somebody has written the libretto. In particular, a certain Tom. He is in Switzerland and wrote most of it. Then there is Lhagen. Lhagen is presently living in USA. We wrote down all the old *shungs*. We called Tsering Migmar to do the final writing. He was then unemployed and staying at McLeod Ganj. We engaged his service to copy all the shung (historical plays) into a new book. The acting is done in *ache lhamo* style. We had to teach the different variations in facial expressions only. Other things like *namthars*, melodies and acting are known by all. This is not a new thing. Milarepa is a *kagyupa*. So we had to study how the dress of a kagyupa was at that time. The place is Nyalam in Tibet. So we had to study and get to know the dress of old and young people in Nyalam. There are many Tibetans from Nyalam in India, so we had to make the dress like what they used to wear. For lama, we have white lower robes and a hair band; they have a small drum in their hand. We have to act like a lama when performing in the role of lama. There are different lamas in *Sukyinyima*, *Drowa Sangmo* and in other operas which are all different. So, according to the character they play, there are different ways of acting. We made no changes after coming into exile: all the things that appear in different operas are in the original *shungs*. As for *Milarepa*, we do not know about the play being performed when we were in Tibet.

In this opera, we have even kept the original dresses of the kings. Usually we have kings wearing shining brocade dresses and other decorations but, as this event took place in a village, the king wears an ordinary dress like any other villager. We have kept the original reflections of a village in Tibet. As for scenery, we made caves for meditating and the building of the temple of Lhodrak: Sekar Guthok.

During the rehearsals, all of us discussed what should be done and what should not be done.

Other destinies

When we were asked to perform during the grand ceremony in Lhasa, the other major companies like Chungpa, Gyangara and others were nowhere to be seen. Afterwards the companies seemed to have been completely dissolved. On coming to India, I searched for the artists of Chungpa and Gyangara, or singers from Tsang. I saw only one young Chungpa artist, in Kalimpong. I informed to the then director of The Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society, but nothing happened. There was also a female lead singer named Migmar, who was popular for her album *Nangma*. I also spoke of her presence in Manali, but I did not know the reason why she could not come to Dharamsala.

My brother Tseten Dorje was good in the art of *lhamo*. When I came here, he was not yet well known and popular. He was very good at beating drums. Most of his roles entailed young men. He was also very good in those roles. Then he worked in a Chinese opera group. When I left Tibet, he was not educated. Now he has become very good in Tibetan. He had studied by himself and become very good. Now, although he is retired from the Opera of Lhasa (*Zang-qü-tuan*), people still ask him to teach. So, like me, he is still teaching. I won't be able to say in which field he is excellent as he became good only after I came to India. He used to be very intelligent. At the time of my leaving Tibet, he was very good at beating the drum and used to act in the roles of Pema Woebar and Lhasa Gyalpo. So he studied under the Chinese and became very knowledgeable. There are many other artists left, some of whom are really good. He became one of the best of them. As in my case, he had acted since childhood, from the age of nine or ten.

Like me, he also had a strong determination to preserve *ache lhamo* in its original form, but the Chinese did not let him stage the original plays, they made him perform some fabricated versions in which they included lots of their propaganda. Since he was well-trained in the original *lhamo*, he did not like the changed version. Dissatisfied with the changed versions, he tried to join the Shöpa but he couldn't. Earlier, when Maye, the instructor of Shöpa Lhamo, died, they requested him to join the company after his retirement. Though his service was over, the Chinese did not let him leave.

He visited India in the year 1985, when His Holiness gave Kalachakra initiation at Bodhgaya. He had also brought along with him the scripts of three different plays and told me that he had been directed by the Chinese to give me these scripts, including *Drimekunden* and others, and bring back from me as many scripts as he could. Knowing this, I did not take

the scripts he brought along, nor did I part with even a single one of my own, telling him that I had no scripts worth presenting to anyone.

My brother Tsering passed away in 1993. Like me, he was a member of the *lhamo* association (an opera artist with Tseten Dorje).

My younger sister Kantsuk is now old and lives in Lhoka, where she is engaged in *lhamo* and its revival.

My younger brother Penba Tsering was also in opera. When I left Tibet, he went to school and is now in service with the Chinese administration somewhere between Gyantse and Shigatse.

My brother Tapsang passed away at the end of 1993; he was working in western Tibet. He studied and worked with the Chinese administration in Nangchu. Thereafter he left work and later died with alcoholic problems.

Lhasa and Dharamsala

I also saw present-day artists staging performances through cassettes. I saw and heard the tuning of their *namthars* and the patterns of their drum beats. They have often a good voice and are also skilful in raising the pitch of the voice. But when they perform the major plays such as *Drowa Sangmo*, *Pema Woobar*, *Nangsa Woebum* and others, they do not respect their distinctive tunes but mix the whole thing up. The vocals are good, but their mixing of different styles is indeed despicable.

Several good actors came here. One lady said she acted in the role of Drokmo (female nomad) in the Shöpa troupe of Lhasa. An actor said he had studied under Maye (a great *lhamo* teacher) in Shöpa. A year back, a lady came saying that she also used to be in the Shöpa Lhamo. So let's say something about the Shöpa Lhamo troupe. After the fighting in Lhasa ended, four dance groups were set up. There were the West, East, South and North dance groups. The West troupe was known as the Shöpa Lhamo. When they first set it up, the people were really, really good. They were excellent at the time. All the famous actors were there in the Shöpa: Tekhang Chegang, Sholkhang Tsewang, Kundeling Drukchung, Chagdo estate Ani (nun). All famous and well-known. They passed away one by one. Maye had been a teacher for the Kundeling monks.

As you know, there are many different styles or variations of singing *namthars* in Tibetan opera. Each *namthar* is different in each opera. When performing *Norsang* there is a different melody, or tone, when performing *Gyaza Bhelsa* there is a different note, when performing *Sukyinyima*, there is a different melody, when performing *Drowa Sangmo*, there is a different melody, when performing *Pema Woobar* there is an altogether different note. So when we say that we are staging *Sukyinyima*, everybody knows how the note of the

namthar in that opera should be. These different opera notes of the *namthars* are not allowed to be mixed. When performing *Sukyinyima*, the note of the *namthars* of *Drowa Sangmo* must not mixed with *Sukyinyima*. When performing *Pema Woebar*, the note of the *namthar* in other operas must not be mixed. We sing the *namthars* of each opera to different notes. I asked the lady from the Shöpa Lhamo to sing *namthar* with some of our good female *namthar* singers. This lady had a really good voice. But she mixed together the notes of the *namthars* from all the operas. One of our teachers, Chime Youdon, asked her whether performers mix the notes of the *namthars* from different operas in Lhasa and said that the Dromo song she had sung had the note of the *Sukyinyima* in it. The lady replied that in Lhasa they mix the notes of the *namthars* from different operas together and no differentiation is made if somebody has a good voice. She explained how, in Tibet, the present masters do not care much the tones and pitches of the *namthars* of different operas. The *namthars* can have different notes and the same words. But they have to be sung differently. When performing *Nangsa*, there is a lama *namthar*; one should sing it like a lama giving real religious teaching and move the people religiously. Butcher *namthar*'s should be sung in a way that audiences are frightened, since butchers are frightening. Notes are different like this. When singing the *namthar* of a person who always sowing dissension, it should be sung like a typical person of this kind. It should be done in such a way that people can recognize easily from the *namthar* what the character is like (good, bad, holy etc).

But, you know, changes depend also upon ideological questions.

In the 60s I saw a *Nangsa* remade in TAR. We were performing it at the same time. It was completely changed. When we perform *Nangsa*, prince Drakpa Samdup and Nangsa marry by force as Nangsa is interested only in religion and not in marrying, but as the king of the region orders it, she has to marry. Ani Nyimo goes to the king and lies to him that not only has Nangsa given the crops to the yogi but also has an affair with him. So Drakpa Samdup's father, who is the king, goes to beat Nangsa. She becomes bedridden and stays in her room. In the meanwhile, lama Shakya Gyaltsen disguises himself as a beggar with a monkey to make Nangsa become attracted to religion. When Nangsa asks him which is the best place to engage in religious activities, where is a good monastery to go, he replies that there are many good monasteries and that if she wants to engage in religion, then there are certain lamas. So, deciding to engage in religion, she gives her jewels to the beggar. All this is seen by the king. He then beats her again. Due to so much beating, Nangsa dies. Well, in the Chinese version, Nangsa and the monk were made lovers! *Nangsa* was completely changed by the Chinese until the very end, where Nangsa kills her husband instead of obtaining his conversion. As far as I know, from video and personally, the voices were good but the plays were really degradable.

The future of lhamo

If I think about the future of *lhamo* and that of TIPA I feel satisfied. In exile there has been great development in our art. Unlike the earlier days, the students now take more interest in it. There is hardly anyone who does not have any knowledge about *lhamo* as a performing art. Even the commoners take interest. At present I think that there cannot be an end to this art because we have greatly preserved it *as a performing art*. We also have preserved all the traditional plays in written form, but we have a great number of audio and video recordings of these *lhamos*, songs and dances. And, last but not least, we have also produced some good performers who I think will preserve *lhamo*. Take my student Techung for instance.

Many children are arriving in TIPA, but due to his karma Techung was very much interested in studying *lhamo*, *namthar* and other things. Techung used to be perfect in whatever I taught him, no matter how long it took him. So he became good because he used to learn by himself even during his spare time. At the beginning I taught him. But later he learned by himself. Later he became one of the best. Once I thought that when I will no longer be here, he could be a teacher, but he went to USA.²³ There, too, he gathered Tibetans and taught *lhamo* and performed it. Techung is successful there and that's good for all of us. He formed a group and taught *Sukyinyima* to them, which they staged several times. Even in Europe, *lhamo* is preserved in its original form by someone. So, since present-day artists are making sincere efforts to pass on their art to the new generations, I don't think that there will be an end to *lhamo*. When I die, the other masters will preserve it, and I am sure the younger generations will follow their steps in the reconstruction and preservation of *lhamo* as a performing art. So I don't see an end to *lhamo*.

But I do see the end of my work. I personally taught to my students. I also entrusted it to some of the good artists and teachers like Tiny, Chime Youdon and Sonam. They really do a good job. Now I am retired. TIPA asked me to stay as the advisor. So I stayed as advisor for two years. Actually, an advisor has just to watch the show and make some corrections here and there. But hoping to make the students learn more in two years, I taught them very dedicatedly and sincerely although my age and health do not allow me. Now the two years have finished. Again I received a letter requesting me to stay for two more years, saying that the previous two years had been very good. As I could not say no, I had to agree. It all depends on the students learning what I have taught and practising it; then they will become good. But if they don't study and don't take interest when I am teaching, then they will not

learn and my time and energy will be wasted. I want to teach what I know during the two years.

I am satisfied. Among the males, Sonam is the best. I have now passed on most of the major responsibilities to him. Then there is Chime Youdon. She is also good. Lobsang Tiny, who is here since 1974, is also good. I have plans to make Sonam replace me when I am no longer here. Tiny is good. He is a very curious person, someone who wants to know everything. He is also very creative. But he has a weak body. He cannot act like a young man. Anyway, he is good in every field.

Chime Youdon, here from 1977, is the best among the girls. She knows the female parts of the opera very well. She can teach. Even when I am not here, the three of them can teach very well. They might face some problems when making a new *shung*, but they know all the things that I have taught.

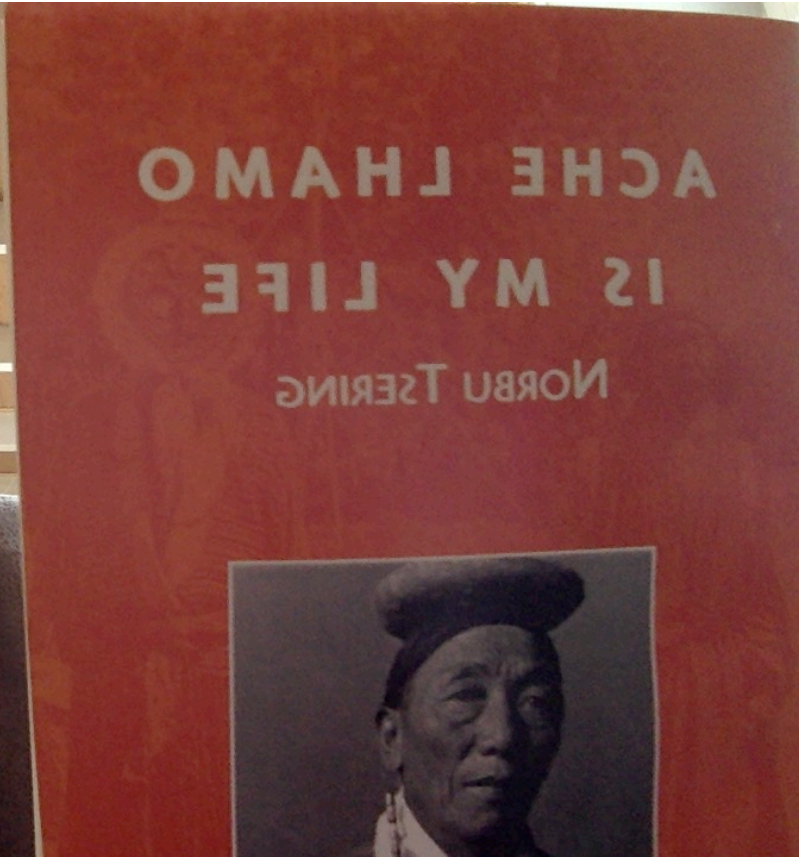
Artists like Sonam will become good teachers because, although they are teachers, they don't have the pride of being a teacher. When there is a problem, they at once come to ask me. When they come to ask, I tell them what I know. That helps. Some people, when they become teachers, think they know everything and have much pride. These persons will not improve. Techung also became good because he used to come to me whenever he had a problem.

My sons – from eldest to youngest – are Youdrön Lhamo (presently in TIPA), Tseten Lhundrub (presently in Tipa), Chime Drölma (who has left TIPA), and the girls Dawa Drölma, Tsering Yangrom and Namgyal Lhamo. These were born in India. In Tibet, two other sons and two daughters died when they were very small.

I really don't know if a westerner could perform the *ache lhamo* properly. At first he does not know the language... He can probably learn how to act. But whether he will be able to perform exactly like the Tibetans is not certain. One foreigner came here to master the art of singing the traditional *namthars*, but she was not able to do it like a Tibetan. She later said that it is something within a Tibetan to sing in this unique way. People say that Tibetans in Tibet have better voices than Tibetans in India, but there is not a single Chinese who can sing the *namthar* better than a Tibetan. When a Shöpa Lhamo teacher came to visit India, he said that there are three things the Chinese cannot do: they cannot do religious activities, cannot carry corpses and cannot sing the Tibetan *namthars*. He said that he had taught a Chinese how to sing *namthar* for fourteen years and still he was not able to do it. The variations in Tibetan singing cannot be done by foreigners, but the acting can be done.

²³ Techung, who was the of the most skilled of the young TIPA performers and a good researcher, departed to USA, where he did his own music (group Yarlung) and then worked with the Chaksampa Company. He was also among the organisers, with the Milarepa Fund, of the two great Tibet Freedom concerts in New York.

Finally, in these days, many *lhamo* associations in exile such as Bandara, Orissa, Mainpat, Nepal and Bylakuppe have started coming regularly to the Shotön festival in Dharamsala. I have also been actively involved in advising on *lhamo* in schools, and recently an association has started in TCV in Dharamsala. With the blessing of H.H. the Dalai Lama, I have seen and I am convinced that our theatre will once again return its highful place in the hearts of Tibetans and that it will not disappear. When I die, I will die peacefully because I have been able to contribute my best for the preservation of the performing art during this most difficult and crucial period of our history. My admiration goes also to the friends in the West who are very able to document all our efforts and make *ache lhamo* better known to ourselves and to the world.



*Spotlights on the Tibetan Theatre**

Walter Church

Fondazione Giorgio Cini

L'opera tibetana — Un teatro vivente

Tibetan Opera — A Living Theatre

Venezia, May, 5-8th 2001

The event organized by the Cini Foundation, together with the Biennale Teatro, the contribution of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (Rome), of the East Asia Studies and the Arts Departments of the Venetian University Ca' Foscari and the Fundação Oriente of Lisbon, has been widely recognized as the first authoritative meeting, on a world level, on the subject of the Tibetan theatre *A che lha mo*.

A long and patient work has been carried out by the "Venezia e l'Oriente" Institute of the foundation, under the scientific guidance of Antonio Attisani and Ramon N. Prats, and the direction of the sinologists Alfredo Cadonna and Ester Bianchi.

The Tibetan Opera — a Living Theatre was the title of the event, held in Venice from May 5th to 8th 2001.

On the first day, there was the official opening of the exhibit of *ache lhamo* masks and costumes from the Jacques Pimpaneau's collection, which has been acquired by the Fundação Oriente, and the presentation of a short documentary *On the traces of a lost theatre*, by A. and R. Attisani, which shows, among others, some historical pictures of *lhamo* performers taken decades ago by Fosco Maraini (also interviewed on his memories, as Luciano Petech), Giuseppe Tucci and others. The afternoon was scheduled a successful conference of Ven. Thubten Wangchen, actual director of the Tibet House in Barcelona, while in the evening there was the performance of some Tibetan artists in exile: Nelung Tsering Topten and Lodroi Seykejhang are living in Switzerland, where they try to keep alive the memory of the Tibetan opera and folk culture, while Tenzin Gönpo is now a well-known actor and singer, trained at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) and currently living in Paris. The two have executed several chants from various operas, while Tenzin Gönpo has given a short play showing the various aspects of the *lhamo* performance. With them, were on the stage the Master Norbu Tsering, now retired but still active in Dharamsala, and Lobsang Samten, the

* Published in «The Tibet Journal», XXVII, 1-2, Spring-Summer 2002, pp. 253-255.

artistic director of TIPA. That performance has been recorded and a CD made available by the Biennale (e-mail: dtmpress@labiennale.com).

The following day has been devoted to a practical seminar. The Belgian tibetologist Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy was introducing the actors. In the first part, Norbu Tsering and Lobsang Samten have explained how they did learn the art of *lhamo*, and especially the first has deeply impressed the audience with the souvenirs of his first steps, in Tibet previous 1959. The afternoon, a twenty Italian actors and actresses have been guided by Tibetan colleagues in learning a full *lhamo* sequence. By this, everybody could understand how difficult is to obtain that sort of naturalness and lightness, that is the first characteristic of the *lhamo* as it is perceived by foreign observers, and how skilled in vocal and choreography must be the Tibetan interpreters. Unfortunately, in this session and in the followings could not take part two other Tibetan actors from Lhasa: Dorje Damdul and Tseten Dorje, the last being the younger brother of Master Norbu Tsering and the two having taken different ways at the very beginning of the Sixties.

The lhasan artists were officially invited by the Italian institutions and had obtained their visa, but some weeks before the date, the Chinese embassy in Rome “disappeared” and it was impossible to obtain any news of them. The Chinese arrogance manifested itself, this time, with the silence, but the Italian and international press, as well as some televisions all over the world, have covered the fact and underlined the further violation of human and cultural rights. As a matter of fact, among the participants of the symposium started a very interesting discussion on “cultural crimes” in Tibet, a subject for future meetings.

On May 7th, the symposium started with the first session, *A theatre beyond history*. A. Attisani briefly introduced the topic, explaining how in the last decade the *lhamo* has emerged again in the cultural scene, why it is an important theatrical tradition to be known in all the world, which is the state of the studies and what should and will be done, from that day further on. The first speaker was Rakra Tethong Rinpoche and immediately the atmosphere was very attentive, both for his special personality and for the things that he was going to tell. As a young monk of Drepung, Rakra Tethong did know and was especially fond of the *Gyang khar wa* (Gyangara) theatre company. His remarks on that topic will remain in the annals, also due to the lacking of other sources. But one must underline his “revelation”, that is the explanation that the famous *Zho ston* (Shotön) festival, told by everybody since today being the “Yogurt festival” was in reality a “Celebration of the Morning”, as *Zho ston* is a short form of *Zho gae ki ga thon*.

Following to him, Erberto Lo Bue has given a very interesting speech on an apparently strange topic. He has studied the *Srid pa'i bar do'i dge sdig rang gzugs bstan pa'i gdams pa sridpa bar do rang grol* (the *Yama's judgement*), an ancient text included in the *Bardo thos grol*

volume, and suggested that it may well represent one of the earliest religious drama performed in Tibet. It appears as a mystery play rather than a religious ceremony. Of Indian background, it has reached Central Tibet during the 8th century and spread in the rest of the country in the 15th century.

As Tashi Tsering, the Amnye Machen's director who did help the organization of the event, could not arrive personally in Venice, his paper was read by somebody else. The Tibetan scholar has gone through five biographies of Thang Stong Rgyal Po (Thangtong Gyalpo) and tried to single out elements where we could hope to find references about *ache lhamo*, but could not find any mention. The same happened with the related written sources. Going deeper and deeper with investigations, passing from the oral traditions and the text recited by the Hunters (*rngon pa'i don*), Tashi Tsering lined up a few arguments which throw some doubts as to the paternity of the *ache lhamo* tradition. The term seems to be first used for a performance at Dga' ldan pho brang (Ganden) ceremonies in 1691, while in 1755 we find a list of seventeen *ache lhamo* troupes from various places, aristocratic estates and monasteries from Central Tibet. Tashi Tsering has finally proposed his personal view, as of today, of the *ache lhamo* as it is known today.

In the afternoon, Jamyang Norbu and Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy have given their speech on the situation of the Tibetan theatre after the Fifties, both in exile and in occupied Tibet. The first has been for some years the TIPAs director. He knows very well the situation of the crucial beginnings and that of today, and could relate as well on the diaspora artists that are currently operating in different countries. His point of view on the Tibetan cultural politics in exile is very severe, but his criticism to the present underestimation of the lay culture is motivated and respectful of the traditional heritage. The Belgian scholar, who lived more than two years in Tibet, has given an account divided in four analytical themes. She has retraced the state of the performing arts in the region over the last fifty years and has showed how the historical events have affected *lhamo*; then she described the most important troupes of the actual TAR and pointed out the significance of the renewed Shotön festival; finally, she compared the production of the state *lhamo* troupe and that of one of the most prominent amateur troupes, which consider itself to hold "the" genuine traditional style.

The following session was supposed to be dedicated to Dorje Damdul and Tseten Dorje, who should have met the audience for a conference on "Being actors in Lhasa today", but – as we told – they were forbidden to come. A video shot by the sinologist Jacques Pimpaneau in 1997 was showed and commented by the author. The documentary is about the Shotön festival in Lhasa and one can see both the changes due to the vulgar Chinese ideology about the true "life of the people", and those non-professional artists that keep at least the right voices and movements.

On May 8th, Ramon Prats was the president of the important session devoted at first to the operatic aspect of the *ache lhamo*. Again, Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, this time with the essential collaboration of Tenzin Gönpo, one of the most prominent *lhamo* singers of the younger generation, gave a speech on *Characterisation, ornamentation, glottalisation: explorations of the art of the lhamo singer*. Here, many artistic skills are necessary for the narration in prose, *lhamo* solo songs, chorus, dance, folk songs uttered on the slow dances and comic improvisations, all aspects of an unique performing art, that some young Tibetan artists – unfortunately scattered in the entire world – represents at its best.

The session continued with Anne-Marie Blondeau. The French tibetologist, who has been the first to consider the *thangka* (painted scrolls) as a source for invaluable information concerning also the *lhamo* tradition, focused a neglected but non secondary aspect of the Tibetan performing customs: the *lama mani* (story singers). Showing many slides of some of these storytellers in activity today, Blondeau could offer some more information on the way they recite and on the actual revival of the tradition.

In the last session, the indologist Alessandro Grossato spoke about the *Natyasastra*, the ancient hindu treatise that has influenced also the performing arts of the Tibetan plateau, while the sinologist Isabella Falaschi has presented the only surviving mural painting of a Yuan age's performance, in which one can retrace some Tibetan influences or traces, and finally Bonaventura Ruperti has given his speech on the narrating voice in Japanese puppet theatre.

But the most touching moment was already to come. Norbu Tsering, Lobsang Samten, Tenzin Gönpo, and Jamyang Norbu exceptionally as a cymbal player, have improvised a show. It was one of the last public performances of the great Master Norbu Tsering, who gave his blessing to the younger performers. Everybody in the audience could perceive the extraordinary occasion and the touching singing and dancing of the Master, who was finally submerged and embraced by the applause of some hundred persons that filled up the solemn main hall of the Cini Foundation, on the San Giorgio island.

The Master was happy and for a while looked no more tired, after days and nights of working and talking, specially with his colleagues. All the guests signed and offered him a letter of thanks, in which he is defined «a jewel of the Tibetan culture».

We could stop the report on this touching note, but it is useful also to emphasize the work which is continuing. For an example, one should remind that a recording has been made of some opera songs chanted by Norbu Tsering and Tenzin Gönpo, and this will constitute an important document of their non-common and different skills (contact@tibetanmusic.com); one must remember also that the Cini will provide the proceedings of the symposium in 2002 (most of the texts will be published in English) [it was never done, *ndr*]; and finally that A. Attisani has just published two books on *ache lhamo*, the first regarding its ancient roots and

history (*A ce lha mo – Studio sulle forme della teatralità tibetana*, Firenze: Olschki, 2001), and the second concerning its life after the Chinese take-over (*Uno strano teatro*, Torino: Legenda, 2001).

As one sees, once again something of such an importance to Tibetan culture did not happen in Tibet, but on the other side of the world: something that will be written in the Tibetan cultural annals has happened in Venice. Anyway, if we consider that Venice has always been a bridge between West and East, we can be optimistic, at least symbolically, and tell “Next time in Lhasa!”