

How Mongolian Tsam Dance Has Become Mobile Through Natsag Gankhuyag

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the Mongolian Buddhist masked ritual dance, in the Khalkh-Mongolian language called Tsam, has been re-introduced into the Mongolian religious field. Nowadays, a couple of Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia perform the Tsam once a year. Based on narrative interview material, this article examines the revival of the cultural Mongolian mask dance Tsam by the artist N. Gankhuyag. Theoretically drawing on performance theory as developed by Richard Schechner, it aims to contribute to an understanding of “Gankhuyag’s Tsam” as a mobile cultural artefact that contributes to a revival of a cultural tradition outside the monastic context in today’s Mongolia.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Mongolian Buddhist masked ritual dance, called Tsam in Mongolia,¹ has been re-introduced to the religious life of the Mongolian people. Nowadays a couple of Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia performs the Tsam once a year. The historical and contemporary aspects of the Mongolian masked dance include a special focus on a religious ritual theatre (Forbath 1936, 115, 267; Bleichsteiner 1937, 199; Heissig 1979, 271; Khürelbaatar 2002, 308; Batmunkh 2010, 44, 59, 93, 127; Baasansüren 2011, 82; Kollmar-Paulenz and Batmunkh 2015, 638 ff). The religious aspect of the ritual dance is represented by the Monks (Forbath 1936; Bleichsteiner 1937, 200 ff, 114; Pozdnev 1978, 505 ff; Ayako 1997, 20; Khürelbaatar 1999, 74–88; Batmunkh 2010, 62–63, 94; Bareja-Starzynska 2012, 153, 156; Kollmar-Paulenz and Batmunkh 2015, 652 ff), but the work of the Mongolian artist Gankhuyag (b. 1961) is focused on the artistic performance. He has been making Tsam-masks since 1988, starting during the Communist time. In this period, religion, traditions, culture and of course the dance were shunned topics (Bawden 1989, 377, 433; Weatherford 2012; Teleki 2015, 318).

I still wonder, how he has learned during this hard time to build the Tsam masks in the traditional Mongolian style from papier mâché (Tsultem 1989). Is this the only way to revive the Mongolian Tsam mask dance? How can Schechner’s ritual theory

¹ This mask dance, which has been in Tibet for about a millennium, is widespread in Buddhist schools and the Bon religion. In its centre stands the cult of the Dharmapālas, the Buddhist “protectors of the teachings”. It is a ritual of banishment and destruction of evil forces. Mongolian Tsam is derived from the Tibetan word cham (chams, i.e. dance). Both variants cham and chams are used. In Mongolia, the dance is called “Tsam”.

be applied to Gankhuyag's Tsam performance? Did the Tsam Dance become mobile through the founding of the Khan-Bogd² Ensemble by Gankhuyag?

In order to open these issues, I use the narrative interview as an approach. The method was developed by Fritz Schütze in the late 1970s (Schütze 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987). It has retained to be a basis method in biographical research (Lehmann/Kurth 2011, 137). Therefore, this research starts with the life story of the artist Gankhuyag.

I conducted several interviews with the artist in the form of the "Stegreiferzählung". (Lehmann/Kurth 2011, 137). In connection with the *Stegreiferzählung*, Gankhuyag's elaborated and detailed descriptions unfolded an interesting narrative about how it could come to the revival of a lost cultural tradition. In addition to situations of early childhood, coincidental events, and an awakening interest in the forbidden Tsam, he reintroduced the traditional method of making Tsam masks (Rintschen 1967, 45; Heissig 1989, 178, 240), dating back to Zanabazar (1635–1723) (Tsultem 1989; Corner 2006, 4; Uranchimeg 2016, 60).

Later on, he also stitched the corresponding costumes and in conversation with old monks he even reactivated the choreography of the Tsam performance (Galli 2009, 81). The ensemble Khan-Bogd, which was founded by him, presented the Tsam. Such dances are not performed on a religious-ritual level, therefore this Tsam dance is pure performance.

Performance theory was developed by Richard Schechner. On the one hand, the pair of terms "effectiveness and ritual" aims to change the participants, on the other hand the concept of "entertainment theatre" aims just to entertain the participants (Schechner 1990, 68 ff). Schechner is concerned with the experience of collective celebration, using processes that lead back and forth from the ritual to the theatre. In the movement from ritual to theatre, the ensemble of performers and viewers break apart and turn into a crowd of individual observers. With the motivation of Performance Studies as an independent academic discipline, Schechner extended the field of investigation of theatre studies to all kinds of performances, making his findings adaptable in, for example, anthropology or musicology and, besides these disciplines, other areas of responsibility just as rites in social life or politics (Schechner 1990, 97; Erika-Fischer 2009, ii; Bräunlein 2012, 100).

In this article, I apply Schechner's performance theory (Schechner 2003, xvii, 290) to the "Gankhuyag-Tsam" to see if it applies not only to historically evolved structures, but also to the attempt to revive a culture or tradition. Finally, it will be examined what the performance theory at the mobile level of "Gankhuyag's-Tsam" can contribute to a concept how to revive a cultural tradition.

² See <http://news.gogo.mn/r/214997>: "Хан богд" чуулгыг 1997 онд байгуулж дэлхийг тойрон 40 гаруй улсад аялан тоглолт хийж, Монголынхоо соёлыг сурталчилсан. <http://bi-bid.com/khanbogd.htm>: "The ensemble was founded by Natsag Gankhuyag in 1997. Since then, the Khan Bogd Ensemble has travelled to various destinations in the world, delivering the taste and experience of Mongolian music, art and culture to the wider audiences of France, Germany Belgium, Denmark, Luxemburg, Switzerland, and the United States."

Interview in the Form of the “Stegreiferzählung”

Gankhuyag was born and raised in Mongolia, where he has lived until 2002. His parents are both Mongolian artists with a strong passion for visual, iron, and wooden arts. Early in his childhood his parents introduced him to the fine arts of traditional handcrafting and many great artists have tutored him since then. When he was working at the Union of Mongolian artists, he earned acclaim as a painter and papier mâché artist, creating objects for traditional performing art groups. Furthermore, he learned to become a specialist of the traditional Mongolian style of sculpture,³ called “mongol uran barimal” (Tsultem 1989). Gankhuyags mother Scham Khand (1934–1987) was a master of appliqué and art embroidery. His father Baasan Natsag (1924–1972) was a master of sculptures and jewellery art. Khand and Natsag often worked together as a team by developing images first sketched by the husband and then appliquéd by his wife on a textile product.⁴ In this way, the couple followed a traditional creative process in everyday life. A master artist would produce a first design, which would be further developed by a second artist, resulting in monumental all-day items (Tsultem 1989) and clothes for children and created out a productive teamwork. During the time of the socialist regime Khand and Natsag collaborated in this traditional way, producing images with themes, that were acceptable for socialist censorship (Galli 2009, 83). In 1972, his father Natsag died and so Gankhuyag and his elder siblings took over their father’s role⁵.

Gankhuyag’s choice of a life path was guided by his passion for traditional art and Tsam dance. The making of masks was deeply influenced by his family background. Gankhuyag’s passion manifested itself after his graduation from a sculpture building class at the College of Fine Arts. During the study at this College, he visited the Museum of Chojjin-Lama⁶ (Bawden 1997, 9 ff; Teleki 2011, 43 and 2015, 192) and

³ Mongolian sculpture is based on Önder Gegeen Zanabazar (1635–1723). His self-made sculptures show the characteristics of a deified human being, with particularly beautiful faces, in deep contemplation with great bliss and peace. Tsultem mentions Strikethrough in the introduction part of his 1989 book, and Gankhuyag confirmed it too.

⁴ Interview with Gankhuyag, 21 January, 2018; see also: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/could-a-mask-makers-quest-to-see-the-dalai-lama-bring-about-world-peace/2015/04/27/>

⁵ Interview with Gankhuyag on 21 January, 2018: “Unfortunately, my father died during this time. As alone parent my mother was responsible for several children. We helped her to earn a living. 4.” (M.B: Did you learn sewing and carving when you were a 10-year-old boy?) (N.G: “Yes, it’s like this: In the beginning, there was only sewing and sewing my mother around at home. My father earned his living with carpenters, but he died very early. Though we children helped our mother to continue earning a living. I have three elder siblings. They learned tailoring from my mother and sewed clothes for the younger siblings. We did not buy our clothes in the shop, because my mother made them for us, and the big ones learned that from my mother. Then it was my turn. Though we have taught ourselves sewing and tailoring with the help of my mother and the siblings.”)

⁶ Werner Forman and Bjamba Rintschen (1967, 129): Rintschen described the masks in this museum: “Die Masken stammen aus einem Kloster der westlichen Mongolei. Dieser Adsar hat die Kulte der Götter und ihrer Abbilder überlebt: Stoisch ruht er aus im zum Museum gewordenen Tempel des Staatsorakels.“ (The masks come from a monastery in western Mongolia. This Adsar has survived the cults of the gods and their replicas: he rests stoic in the temple of the State Oracle, which has become a museum.)

the Fine Arts Museum Zanabazar in Ulaanbaatar, which has been putting up the Tsam masks and costumes and had a special place for this type of sculptures of Mongolian art (Tsuitem 1989) as Gankhuyag further comments:

As I was a student, it was a duty to visit this museum and the Zanabazar Museum. But photographing was forbidden at that time. Though I knew that these Tsam masks are made of papier mâché and came from the last century. That impressed me very much. At that time, I secretly wished to try to make such a mask someday. I became an independent artist in 1986 because I can provide for myself this way. I tried this during the evening study. The following year, I founded "Bi and Bid" as my own studio in the Bogd Museum. In the Bogd Museum I rented a room with two colleagues and a brother of mine. In this museum many tourists came and so I sold my art.⁷

When he rented a room in this Bogd Museum in 1988, Монгол Кино⁸ started to produce the film “Цам” there. The Venerables Sereeter and Danzan (1916–2004) (Charleux 2007; Altankhuu 2007; Majer 2008) and Daschzeveg⁹ took part in producing this movie as eyewitnesses of the year 1937, when they had danced this Tsam dance. Gankhuyag was there, and he had renovated these old masks for this film and had learned¹⁰ more from these venerable monks. Therefore, Gankhuyag’s work is very important to preserve the old traditional Mongolian Tsam dance. It is interesting to note, that he completed the whole cycle of creation of the dance: He not only made the Tsam dance masks, but also produced the costumes and was responsible for the choreography of the dance.¹¹

⁷ Interview on 21 January, 2018.

⁸ <http://news.gogo.mn/r/214997> [accessed 21 March, 2018]

⁹ Gankhuyag had spoken about this monk. He was Gankhuyag’s Guru and he had learned from him the original religious Tsam text. Furthermore, this monk appeared in this documentary film (see the interview from January 21, 2018 and the 1988 or 1989 film (Gangaa 2003, 28).

¹⁰ Interview on 21 January, 2018: BM:” When exactly did you make your first Tsam masks? During the difficult time?” Gankhuyag:” Unfortunately, in 1987 my mother died. Therefore, I visited the lama, who came from the province, where my parents come from, to have a Sudur read for my mother. This lama was called Dashzeveg. He studied medicine and lived in Ger district in Ulaanbaatar. This is how I first learned from him that there is an old book with Tsam instructions. Through this book, I understood how to make religious masks. This book was written by a Mongolian scholar named Agwaankhaidav (1779–1838) in Tibetan. My Guru-Lama Daschzeveg had tried to explain everything to me in Mongolian. In 1988, I started my studio in the museum and in the same year the recording of a Tsam film started. This is how I learned from the old monks, who in their youth in 1937 witnessed the Tsam or worked in it or helped to restore the masks. The masks were in the museum. It was a dream to touch the museum pieces with my hand. The threads are made of real gold. I met the monk Sereeter and the famous artist Danzan as well as my Bagsch Daschzeveg. I learned a lot about the Tsam from them. Some dancers from the Tumen Ekh ensemble participated in the process.

¹¹ Interview with Gankhuyag, 16 February, 2018: “In 1997 six artists presented the Tsam dance.” Over the years 1997–2007, he completed 108 Tsam masks and costumes. “At the Sukhbaatar Square in Ulaanbaatar a Tsam Performance took place. In 2002, I emigrated to the USA. I teach young artists and represent the Tsam dance. To this end, as an artist abroad, I present paintings and sculpture of the Mongolian Tsam dance.”

Schechner's Performance Theory Applied to the "Gankhuyag-Tsam"

Richard Schechner has been increasingly dedicated to the processual aspect of the performance since the 1980s. He distinguishes seven phases: training, workshop, rehearsals, "warm-up", the actual performance, fading out, post-processing (Schechner 1990, 26; Balme 2009, 177). These performance phases derived from the study of the theatre commune "Squat" (Schechner 1978, 24–25). This theory is not applicable to the current western theatre industry (Balme 2008, 177).

However, the performance of the annual Tsam ritual in front of a monastery in Mongolian Buddhism corresponds to Schechner's "small society" (Balme 2009, 177). It is always the monks of this monastery who prepare meditatively and practicing their roles (Ayako 1997, 20; Khürelbaatar 1999, 74-88; Altankhuu 2007; Galli 2009, 81-99; Batmunkh 2010, 62, 63, 94; Bareja-Starzynska 2012, 153, 156), similarly to the "walking stage" (Kotte 2005, 283) and also the "Khan-Bogd"¹² corresponds to this type.

This ensemble was founded by Gankhuyag in 1997 and eight artists presented the Tsam dance. Gankhuyag always depicts the Tsagaan-Üvgün, the "White Old" (Ritschen 1967, 91; Khürelbaatar 1999, 81; Gangaa 2003, 33; Charleux 2007, 46; Batmunkh 2010, 13; Birtalan 2013). He said that, in 1992, he and his group (Bi and Bid) spent some time in Eastern Europe and went to Switzerland in 1997 where he had organized a Tsam-exhibition. As part of the exhibition tour, six artist colleagues from the "Chinggis Khan-Variety" presented in the Khan-Bogd Ensemble the Tsam dance. And he had danced the "Tsagaan Övgön". After that, they were again in France in 1999 where Mongolian monks from the Gandan Monastery portrayed the Tsam dance¹³ (Charleux 2007, 46–47; Galli 2009, 84). He completed many Tsam masks for foreign museums¹⁴ (Galli 2009, 84).

Ganhuyag was very fortunate to have been taught by the honored Lamas Sereeter, Danzan, and Dashzeveg about the art of Tsam masks made of papier-mâché and the choreography of the dance rituals of the Khüree Tsam. This dance includes an elaborate three-day ritual with prayer, chanting, meditation, mudras, costumes, masks, and stylized fighting movements. The ritual is performed to battle evil spirits, drive them away and clean mind and soul.

Gankhuyag also played in various mystery plays and cult dances. Play and ritual are seen as opposing ends of performance, but they are still similar. According to Schechner, play is intrinsically motivated while ritual is extrinsically motivated (Schechner 2003, ix). The role of freedom in a performance is described in positive and negative terms. For Gankhuyag, it is very positive.

¹² <http://bi-bid.com/khanbogd.htm> [accessed 21 March, 2018]

¹³ Interview with Gankhuyag on 21 January, 2018

¹⁴ For a list of the tour see: <http://bi-bid.com/khanbogd.htm> [accessed 21 March, 2018]

In 2007, Arjia Rinpoche¹⁵ (Thubten Lobsang Jigme Gyatso) was appointed by H.H. Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso to head the Tibet Center in Bloomington, Indiana.¹⁶ After taking over the leadership of the center into a Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Centre [TMBCC] in Bloomington (Arjia Rinpoche 2010, v), Gankuyag exhibited his 108 Tsam masks. Arjia Rinpoche asked him to perform a Tsam dance. Gankhuyag agreed and, in this performance by the Khan Bogd-Esemble Gankhuyag, presented the “White Old [man]”.

How this freedom is actually applied can be illustrated by the meeting between Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and Gankhuyag. Usually, people get a blessing from the Dalai Lama, but in this case, it was the other way around. The Dalai Lama received a blessing from Gankhuyag.¹⁷ There are different rules in a performance, but in the center, there is always some sort of freedom. Gankhuyag illustrates this point of theatre performance, where an actor is first confined by the physical space, then by the conventions of theatre, but finally, underneath all of that, the actor has freedom and fan (Schechner 2012, 18).

Tsam Dance Has Become Mobile

To understand what “mobility” really is depends on one’s perspective (Sheller Mimi 2011, 1). This means that the concept of mobility brings together technical, planning, and social factors as well as the interaction between the artists, the dance, and the culture. Between “staying at home” and “travelling around” there is a huge range of overlapping lifestyles. The central idea of social mobility is that a person moves from one social position to another (Pollak 2001, 1). Applied to the religious context of the Tsam dance. A religious Tsam performance begins with the rehearsals of selected monks and non-public rituals at the monastery to activate the Linga (Kollmar-Paulenz and Batmunkh 2015, 643 ff). The performers of the monastic Tsam are high-ranking monks who memorize the Dhāranis according to the individual deity and participate in the preparatory rituals of the wrathful guardian deities. The preparatory phases are followed by a public performance in front of the monastery yard. Therefore, this Tsam is immobile. This religious status changes with the performance in Gankhuyag’s Tsam. Because under his guidance the performance takes place in a non-monastic place.

Therefore, the work of Gankhuyag has made the Tsam-dance mobile.¹⁸ In 2007, Gankhuyag completed 108 Tsam masks and costumes. In the summer of 2007, for the first time since 1937, a Tsam performance with all 108 Tsam figures took place in

¹⁵ Arjia Rinpoche, Lobsang Tubten Jigme Gyatso was born 1950 in Dolon Nor or Amdo. When he was two years old, he lived as abbot of the Kumbum Monastery, see <https://www.tmbcc.org/> [accessed 23 March, 2018]

¹⁶ See <https://www.tmbcc.org/> [accessed 23 March, 2018]

¹⁷ See <http://news.gogo.mn/r/214997>: there is a picture with His Holiness, the Dalai-Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), and Gankhuyag [accessed 21 March, 2018].

¹⁸ See <http://bi-bid.com/khanbogd.htm>.

Ulaanbaatar.¹⁹ The performers were professional Mongolian dancers, some of whom had already participated in the 1988 documentary on Tsam. In October 2007, during the visit of the fourteenth Dalai Lama at the TMBCC of Bloomington, Gankhuyag had another performance of the 108 Tsam dance, but there were only 30 professional Mongolian dancers, including dancer Enkhgerel and Dolgorsuren. They represented the important protector deities of Tsam, the other Tsam figures, such as the Raven and the two heroes, were performed by civil American friends of Gankhuyag. He had brought all 108 masks to the US from Mongolia with a container. Since 2007, he has been presenting the 108 Tsam masks in America and Europe, along with Tsam performances. For financial reasons, a return of these masks to Mongolia has not been possible, but in the meantime, Gankhuyag created a second collection of 108 Tsam masks and costumes. They are located in his Mask Museum in Mongolia.²⁰ In the twenty-first century, the mobile Tsam dance moves between different places in the globalized world.

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¹⁹ Interviews with Gankhuyag on 22 October, 2018 and 19 February, 2019.

²⁰ See <http://news.gogo.mn/i/8068> [accessed 23 October, 2018].

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