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Art, Ritual, and Representation:
An Exploration of the Roles of Tsam Dance in Contemporary Mongolian Culture

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Abstract

Tsam, the sacred and complex Buddhist ritual dance, although only introduced to Mongolia in the 19th century, established itself as a significant ceremony before being halted by the purges and destruction the communist era. The 18 years of religious freedom that democracy has heralded have resulted in tsam's successful reestablishment as a religious ritual in a growing number of monasteries across the country. Tsam has also taken its place as an icon of Mongolian culture for foreigners, a cornerstone of many performance groups' representation of Mongolian cultural heritage. As based on interviews with performers, administrators, designers, and audiences of performance groups and monks and lamas involved in tsam in monasteries, as well as a month's experience apprenticing in the studio of tsam mask maker Bochchandas, I was able to explore multifaceted relationship between these two equally important but exceptionally different forms of tsam dancing. This paper, in coordination with a series of documentary photo essays, will explore and explain the ways the artistry of the aesthetic of tsam is the primary link between these two categorizations of the dance in their separate cultural spheres.

Introduction

Anyone learning about Mongolian Buddhism doesn't have to undertake their study for long before they encounter information about the tantrically-based mask dance ritual of tsam. Deeply embedded in Buddhism, and therefore necessarily in Mongolian culture as well, the meditative ritual has marked important occasions since the 19th century. The communist government's quest for total annihilation of the Buddhist religion from Mongolia and complete extraction of it from the culture has proven clearly unsuccessful, as, since the advent of democracy, the religion has rapidly been on the rise with tsam dance at the head of its iconography. The contemporary role of tsam dance is inextricably connected with the contextualizing history of the communist era.

In this paper, I suggest that the social environment created by the eighty-year long status of satellite communist statehood strongly influenced the position of tsam dance holds in Mongolian culture today. Communist's convictions about the universal validity of their system of government gave them the capacity to compartmentalize forms of Mongolian culture and either label it as art – ridding it from any meaning but aesthetic and detaching it from cultural context – or employ it as a tool in political propaganda. The advent of democracy found fundamental aspects of Mongolian culture devoid of traditional meaning, and the first groups established to preserve and reestablish Mongolian culture on its own terms continued the emphasis on the aesthetic, maintaining the status of religious aspects of Mongolian culture as fine art. Tsam dance, therefore, entered the realm of representation of cultural history and became a dramatic and striking dance.

Simultaneously, however, tsam, as a fundamental aspect of Buddhist monastic life slowly worked to reestablish itself in Mongolian religious culture, with the first complete ritualistic tsam dance in over 6 decades being performed with the help of knowledgeable Tibetan lamas who visited Amarbayasgalant Monastery in 2002. (Amarabayasgalant Monastery Tsam Dance DVD) I theorize that this dynamic of having ritualistic and representational tsam, instead of degrading the nature of the dance, actually works greatly in its favor to preserve and uphold the sacred tradition it by keeping ritualistic tsam dance isolated from the global context and international audiences so that it can more solidly reestablish itself within Mongolia before having to grapple with issues of international representation.

From a month's work of research centered in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, I was able to delve into the contemporary world of tsam, exploring the dichotomy these two divergent forms. They operate in completely different spheres of existence—one seeks to perpetuate an ancient, meaningful dance that is firmly grounded in a religious context, while the other serving an artistically representative performance of this ritual. They are linked together principally through the artistry of the costumes, which both monasteries and performing groups get from the same sources of the handful of skilled craftspeople and artists knowledgeable about how to create the forms of the masks and costumes. From my experience apprenticing with tsam mask-maker Bochchandas in his studio, I was able to detail how traditional methods and technologies are blended with modern art philosophies and techniques.

Research Methodology

Tsam dance is a historically-rooted, expansively influential, religiously complex, and highly integrated aspect of Mongolian culture. As such, an emic ethnographic exploration using participant-observation presented itself as the most sensible methodological outlook from which to launch a study. Approaching such a broad subject matter using a quantitative methodology would do nothing to indicate the contemporary social environments of tsam dance; only through integrating myself as fully as possible within all facets of tsam dance could I begin to understand its contemporary status in Mongolian culture. As articulated by ethnographer Dr. Fetterman,

The insider's perception of reality is instrumental to understanding and accurately describing situations and behaviors. Native perceptions may not conform to an objective reality, but they help the fieldworker understand why members of the social group do what they do. (Fetterman, 30)

My search for a participant-observation experience related to tsam led me to an apprenticeship with fine artist and mask masker Bochchandas, who offered to teach me how to make tsam masks following the traditional techniques both he and Buddhist monks employ in mask construction. From the world of the studio, I was able to become intimately involved in the steps of creating a mask and learn about the environment which facilitated such an endeavor.

I supplemented this over month-long process firstly with series of interviews and conversations with Buddhist studies scholars who provided me a clearer portrait of the history and meaning of the dance. Then, I conducted interviews with monks and lamas from Gandantegchinlin, Dosjoilin, and

Amarbayasgalant, the three main monasteries in Mongolia that do tsam dances, so that I could become more knowledgeable about the culture of monastic life and tsam restoration. To explore the other main realm that tsam dancing exists in, that of performing groups, I talked to administrators, dancers, designers, and audiences from the two principal performing groups in Ulaanbaatar – Moonstone and Tumen Ekh – and observed their productions. I also conducted surveys with performance group tsam dancers and audiences of the performances. To supplement my knowledge of the mask part of the costumes, I explored and talked to designers at Torgo Fashion Salon and the Mongol Costumes Museum, both of which create tsam clothing on commission. Finally, I visited all museums and institutions in Ulaanbaatar that display tsam regalia and talked with curators about the history and significance of the artifacts. From these explorations, interviews, performance observations, and surveys, in addition to my daily participant-observation work constructing tsam masks, I was able to piece together a partial image of the contemporary world of Mongolian tsam.

Mongolian Monastic Tsam Dance: A Historical Survey

Tsam dance is nearly as old as Buddhism itself. Established in Shambala, India in the 7th century B.C. as a compellation of Indian literature, local folk stories, and Buddhist philosophy (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview), it trailed behind the religion as it spread across and firmly established itself in many Asian cultures. Similar to the religion in which it's based, in each new context it encountered in each country it traveled to, tsam fluidly adopted local customs and integrated elements of the cultural essence into its production. After leaving the

Indian subcontinent, the most significant transformations to the dance occurred in Tibet, where Buddhism was fused with Bon Shamanism, and their performances, rituals, and beliefs were integrated together. It also influenced and was affected by the cultures of Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and China. (Face Music, website) By the time it was introduced to Mongolia from the Fifth Dalai Lama in Tibet in either 1811 (Altan Hoeg, personal interview) or 1827 (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview) during the third wave of Buddhism¹, centuries of philosophical musings, hundreds of myths from an equal number of diverse cultures, and elements of local religious cosmologies had all seeped into and preserved themselves in the performative ritual of tsam. As Dr. Dulam, Professor of Symbolism at the National University, simply described, “Everything is involved in tsam.” (Dulam, personal interview)

Motivated by the political power Buddhism could hold over Mongolia and his relationship with Khan, The Fifth Dalai Lama formally created a sutra which

According to Lhagvademchig, PhD candidate in Anthropology at the National University of Mongolia, “Mongolian historical books state that Buddhism had spread and developed in Mongolia in three periods.” (Lhagvademchig, thesis excerpt) The first of these lasted from the 3rd century B.C.E. until the 13th century, where it rose to be the state religion of Mongolia in the Toba Wei State, which lasted from 386 until 581 A.D. In the era of the Mongolian empire, in the 13th until middle of the 14th century A.D., Buddhism rose again to be interrelated with the state, proclaimed by Khubilai Khaan as the official Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368). Additionally, out of need for state unity, Mongolian rulers initiated political alliances with Tibetan religious leaders. The third spread of Buddhism lasted from the 16th to early 20th century as an attempt to revive the religion despite the fall of the Yuan Dynasty. Significantly, this period saw the establishment of the role of Dalai Lama by Altan Khan (1507—1588 A.D.), who invited Tibetan Lama Sonam Gyatso (1542—1589 A.D.) to his monastery and bestowed the newly constructed title upon him. “Following his [Altan Khans’s] support of Tibetan Buddhism, other Mongolian Khans sought to use the Tibetan Buddhism as a tool for reunion of the Mongolian state.” (Lhagvademchig, thesis excerpt) Such an alliance probably inspired the official transfer of tsam dancing from Tibet to Mongolia, yet another reinforcement of the integration of Buddhism into Mongolia. I hypothesize that that future texts will discuss the contemporary post-democratic period, as Buddhism seeks to reconstruct itself based on ancient tradition and historical heritage, as a Forth Wave of Buddhism to Mongolia.

described how Tibetan tsam should be refined to best fit with the culture of Mongolia and the second wave of Buddhism that was already present in the country. In the monastery of Urga (contemporary Ulaanbaatar) the first tsam was performed for Manchurian Emperor Djia-tjing. Although only in existence in Mongolia for a few centuries, tsam is considered to have reached its, “most highly developed state” (Amarbayasgalant Monastery Tsam Dance DVD) in the country because of the elaborate way it expanded from the complex history that already preceded it. In no country prior had tsam consisted of masks so immense, costumes so elaborate, rituals so complex, or reached such impressive heights of popularity as it did in Mongolia. (Batpurev, personal interview)

Due to the immensity of its production, tsam dances were located only within monasteries with the resources available to undertake such a massive ritual. Tsam likely reached such great heights in Mongolia in part because of the social environment that encouraged the existence of Buddhist monasteries as safe-havens of Mongolian culture in light of the 200-year Manchu reign over the country.² Instead of having their children attend the Manchu schools to enter a life of servitude, Mongolian parents were much more inclined to enroll their children

² This is the main interpretation of the relationship between Buddhism and the Manchurian state that I encountered. However, conversely, I read texts that theorize the Manchurian state encouraged the existence of Buddhism because of its ability to unify and uphold the Mongolian state, and the Manchurian nobility and Buddhist high-rank lamas were in solidarity to uphold power. In his book *Modern Mongolia*, academic Morris Rossabi explained how some support for the communist government, in fact, stemmed from the fact that people believed that, “...the USSR had saved Mongolia from continued Chinese rule. In the late seventeenth century, under the Qing dynasty (1644—1911) the Chinese had invaded and brought Mongolia under their control... With the support of the Buddhist hierarchy and elements of the Mongolian nobility, China had ruled and exploited the Mongolians until 1911.” (Rossabi, 31) In my opinion, it is likely that monasteries, at different levels of their hierarchy, likely both upheld the power of the state and preserved Mongolian culture.

in monastic institutions, where they could either stay their entire lives studying the religion or simply gain the benefits of good education. As the Face Music database about tsam articulates, “The fact that many pupils wanted to be educated in these well-organized schools guaranteed the survival of these monasteries.” (Face Music, website)

Due to the fact that there were so many vowed and ordained monks, the status and title of monk or lama lost some of its holiness, but the power of the monasteries as establishments of learning exponentially flourished and became permanently integrated with Mongolian cultural heritage. However, although at the peak of Buddhism’s power in Mongolia in the late 19th century, there were more than 100,000 monks in the capital city of Ikh Khuree alone, and monks comprised almost 1/3 of the male population (Lhagvademchig, personal interview), the intellectual elitism of the monastic structure was rigidly institutionalized, with position being considered a marker of spiritual and scholarly worth. Tsam was a key phenomenon necessarily entrenched in the hierarchical and political world of Mongolian Buddhist monastic structure and life that both required popular large monasteries and rigid ladders of social status.

Sacred knowledge of tsam dance was carefully guarded from many of entry-level ordained monks. In the Buddhist educational structure, tsam is located within the category of the five Minor Sciences, along with poetry, astrology, medicine, and art, subjects studied by monks with a strong background in and deep knowledge of the religion who had at least graduated to attain the rank of *gitling*. Those monks seeking to gain knowledge of tsam dancing would be well

acquainted not only with basic skill sets, such as Tibetan language, but also with the complex philosophy of mind that serves as the basis for the Buddhist cosmology. (Batpurev, personal interview) For these prepared students, a structure of tutelage and mentorship would begin. Even though capable of reading the words of the Tibetan text, their meaning is considered only truly comprehensible when shared by a knowledgeable teacher, another inherent structural element that perpetuates and upholds the hierarchical system of learning. Lama Batpurev, who has performed the character of the White Old Man at Amarbayasgalant Monastery, said that, “It’s not for lack of knowledge of the Tibetan language [that monks require a mentor], but the art is something that simply...must be taught.” (Batpurev, personal interview) Only very gradually was more knowledge and wisdom made accessible as one ascended the structure of the lama-hood. (Batpurev, personal interview)

For the great majority of Mongolians, however, only simplified and incomplete descriptions and explanations at basic levels of complexity and depth were disseminated. Based on any number of cultural, historical, or spiritual factors established by the monastery—commonly on a combination of age, gender, and rank in lama-hood— rules about access to information made and enforced because of the subtle sacredness of Buddhist information and the potentiality for its misinterpretation. Lama Altan Hoeg explained that, “It is not allowed by the monastery regulations [to access information about tsam] because people might understand it in a wrong way and it might give wrong expressions, wrong thoughts.” (Altan Hoeg, personal interview) Knowledge, it was explained to me in

numerous conversations with Lamas at the monasteries of Dosjoilin and Gandan, is a sacred entity that one must work to attain and only access when prepared to receive it.

Tsam is, “dance-meditation” (Batpurev, personal interview), a ritual that consists of monks incanting powerful tantras and prayers while performing in and embodying elaborate iconographic deity costumes. The most essential foundation of tsam is therefore intricately interrelated with the overarching cosmology and belief system of the Buddhist religion. “In order to study and understand the Buddhist religious music and dance of tsam,” Dr. Gantuya, Buddhist Studies Professor at the National University of Mongolia explained, “you must understand its philosophical doctrine. People ask [to learn about that] which is specific of Buddhist dance and music, but these specifics of Buddhist dances and music are underpinned by philosophy. If there isn’t philosophy, if it isn’t based in Buddhist philosophy, this is not Buddhist tsam.” (Dr. Gantuya, personal interview) At its most foundational level, the dance of tsam illustrates a physical manifestation and representation of the Buddhist world, a metaphor for the conflict that exists in an individual human mind as it struggles to reach enlightenment. This individual universe is inhabited by a panoply of both ferocious and benevolent *devas*, or gods, which represent the good and evil forces and inclinations in conflict within the mind. (Gantuya, personal interview) “In Buddhism,” Lama Chantal of the Center for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition explained, “everything is about mind. Only through increased

consciousness can one rid themselves of the sufferings of existence and reach enlightenment.” (Chantal, lecture)

Instead of simply representing this intricate balance and illustrating the mind’s struggle, however, the dance serves multiple religious and political purposes. Principally, the goal of undertaking tsam dance is to erase all bad energy from the area in which it is enacted. These sins can be divided two separate ways in correlation with Mongolian number symbolism and Buddhist astrology. The three main forms of sins are divided by actions living beings do, and include spoken word and physical action, which are dictated by the third, more important, of thought and mind. Any of these can be manifested into the five-fold division of wrongdoings which consists of anger, stupidity, jealousy, bad thoughts, and too much desire, and are represented by the five skulls crowning many of the tsam mask’s heads. Over the course of its performance, all evil energy generated from the sins and immoral reflections of the viewers inherent in their nature as living beings is concentrating within the performance space and then obliterated, leaving the audiences’ and performers’ minds purified to recommence their search for enlightenment. (Altan Hoeg, personal interview)

Performing tsam is considered more meaningful than other types of dance because of the deep layers of meaning it possesses and many purposes it completes.

Consequentially, the dances’ immediate religious and spiritual results can be felt by viewers and performers as they experience a sense of great peace. This peacefulness and clarity of mind creates an ideal environment where new

knowledge and wisdom can be conferred, part of the logic behind having conflicts of the mind represented by a plethora of *deva* characters that simultaneously serve the purpose of teaching audiences about the powers of the assortment of gods that inhabit the Buddhist mythical universe. (Alten Hoeg, personal interview) With Buddhism playing a major political force in this period Mongolian history, tsam served to provide accessible teachings for the masses which benefited the state's agenda of using the religion to reunite the state against Manchu control. (Lhagvademchig, personal interview) Although the essential meaning embedded within tsam was not disseminated to Mongolian laypeople by the monasteries, the information instead shared was carefully selected to encourage devotedness by highlighting the more superstitious elements of the Buddhist universe. As described by the documentary of Amarbayasgalant Monastery's tsam dance,

The tsam transforms the location where it is played out into a mystic channel ground where the ignorance that is the root of rebirth is extinguished. It confers increased spiritual wisdom and blessings on the spectators by imprinting them with spiritual knowledge either considered too complex or too profound to be taught directly to common people. It's a form of Buddhist teaching through visual experience and iconography. (Amarbayasgalant Monastery Tsam Dance, DVD)

Monasteries commonly chose to articulate to the tsam viewers that the masks were, "gods turning into reality and coming from heaven to give blessings to people so it would certainly effect their life for good" (Alan Hoeg, personal interview) and tsam dancing was meant to be a joyous and celebratory event.

Another benefit derived from performing the sacred ritual of tsam dancing is the purification of the land. Viewers and their surroundings in equal measure benefit from the elimination of bad energy, and Mongolian tsam, because of its

integration of local spirits and deities, is inextricably connected with the location on which it is performed. The area on which the dance takes place becomes a threshold between the worlds of sky and earth, and both good and evil spirits and gods from above and below manifest themselves to reenact their ancient, epic chronicle of battle. When the dance is completed and the side of good is found victorious, the physical location on which the tsam has been performed is purified, and all bad energy removed. Having such sanctified ground brings good energy and luck to the entire monastery. (Enkjerel, personal interview)

Preparation for the major ritual of tsam was an immense undertaking for a monastery, marked by a three months training period, with the final month and three days increasing in intensity of both practical and ritualistic reading required. Astrological reckoning by the lunar calendar determined when tsam dances should be performed, but they were also done in accordance with other major Buddhist festivals and holidays, as in Tibet. These included the Butter Festival, an Autumn festival of dairy product offerings to the gods, the Celebration of King Langdarma's Death, the reenactment of legend of the monk Paldorje who saved Buddhism from the Tibetan Shamanistic king by dressing in huge black robes and performing for the anti-Buddhist ruler until he came in close enough range to be shot with a bow hidden up his sleeve, the Celebration of Tsongkhapa's Ascension, a recognition of the founder of Yellow Sect Buddhism, the Festival of the Eight Saint's Death, a ceremony for the eight Buddhist saints of Kumbum Monastery murdered by Chinese army commander Mien Kung Ye,

the founding day of the monastery, New Years, and Buddha's Birthday. (Face Music, website)

Once it was determined that a tsam dance would be performed, the most high-ranking heads of the monastery would decide which of the monks would be selected to perform which roles. Although performing tsam was part of the duty and work of a monk because of the good service and public wellbeing that resulted from the performance, being selected was often seen as a great honor. The process of meditating on and embodying a god was not only excellent for one's karma but also an important learning experience that increased a lama's knowledge and wisdom. The criteria for the selection process are extremely exacting, based on careful calculations of individual's astrology. (Gantuya, personal interview) However, it was qualified for me that the selection process also exists within a more abstract philosophy. Altan Hoeg of Dosjoilin Monastery explained, "When the time comes, if it's going to be happen, then it will happen. So if it's not going to happen, no matter how hard you try, it's not going to work out." (Altan Hoeg, personal interview) Also, it's often the case that monks in the miniature universe of a monastery illustrate in their daily lives the traits of different deities or possess some resemblance to different characters; these aesthetic and personality elements of likeness are considered with the selection process as well. Aesthetic was considered also in terms of scars and markings on a monk's body, which can be reconnected to astrological predictions and prophecies. (Enkjerel, personal interview)

Although the actual dance itself takes under a days' time, the preparation to create the right environment for tsam is long and complex. Due to its sacred nature, much of the preparatory ritual is secret; however, I was permitted to learn about the overarching structure of the preparation. It firstly consists of a 21-day period of formal tutelage of the monks performing, which involves reading and studying sutras and the monastery's book of tsam from an experienced mentor and meditating. For this period, these are the monk's only tasks, and they consume themselves within learning about their characters. (Hosbier, personal interview) Each Mongolian monastery has a book which contains a Tibetan language text that documents each movement of each character in a tsam dance, and describes its meanings and significance, as well as the meaning and importance of each character and their role; it is this sacred text that they primarily focus their studies from. (Batpurev, personal interview) Monks learn sutras and prayers that help them develop a relationship with and deep understanding of their *deva* character, and chant other tantras that protect them from the emotional and mental difficulty of embodying such powerful entities. During this period, the monks study both independently and together, physically preparing themselves for the difficult task of performing the physically tiring sacred motions in the more than 30 kilogram costume (Bochchandas, personal interview). Actual rehearsals of the exact movements must be carefully monitored, however, because of the power and significance behind experimenting with enacting the motions. (Hosbier, personal interview) Dancer Hosbier explains,

When the monk, when the dancer is performing this dance, they should, while they're performing, the monks should read a sutra, become the emotion of that character, and they should fit each other. The person who is dancing needs to show to other people the impression of the image of the god. You must display these gods and that's pretty hard. Everything begins from the mask. So it's very important to start correctly from the beginning. It starts the moment when you put the mask on your face and when you so much as bend your hand, move your head, it actually shows another impression, has another meaning. You need to feel your mask every moment. It's sort of a lot to experience. (Hosbier, personal interview)

As the tsam dance approaches one month away, the performing monks enter a ten-day solitary meditation where they must "sit without seeing the sun and without going outside" (Altan Hoeg, personal interview). During this time, they meditate for all of the gods portrayed in tsam dance, but reflect with special emphasis on the image of the deity that they will embody. The entire monastery becomes invested in preparing for the tsam dance; those monks not performing make offerings of dairy products, water, and grains, especially millet and barley, to please both local spirits and Buddhist deities. According to the traditions at Amarbayasgalant, such offerings should be, "limitless in number." (Amarbayasgalant Tsam Dance DVD)

The ground upon which the tsam dance will be performed, known as the *tsam-ra* (Kohn, 58) is sanctified through incantations and dairy product offerings. Seven concentric circles are drawn in this final month out of chalk, four of which alternating ones of which are used for dancing. (Sunshine Mongolia Festivals, website) (See Image 1) In the innermost of these, the *bailing* or *tzoh*, a sculpture of red triangles of dough made from barley, flour, and butter, is placed. When the tsam is performed, all the bad energy from sin will be channeled into this physical

entity, which, at the end of the performance, is burned. (Amarbayasgalant Monastery Tsam Dance DVD) The next-largest circle is where the *dschag* perform; around them is the location of the *chambon*. In front of the *chambon* are the masked deities, which are finally surrounded by 15 *shanak*. (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview) The upper left-hand corner of the consecrated land is where the at-least 24-person (Taivanjargal, personal interview) Monastic Orchestra sits in two rows with percussion instruments in the front row and wind instruments and cymbals behind them. (Face Music, website) To the north of the circles is a monastery, temple, or enclosed building where monks can don their costumes, begin their performance incantations, and enter the space of the dance. (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview)

The final three days leading up to the performance are filled with the most important rituals. Lamas in the monastery converge to pray and invite Erleg Nomun Khan, also known as Damdin-Tshojoo, the Lord of the Underworld and Hells (See Image 2), into the sacred dance circles that they have prepared by performing the god's sutras. Due to the primary importance of the character of Damdin-Tshojoo, he would be played only by, "the most flawless monk of the monastery." (Face music, website) Those monks performing in the approaching tsam recite the "magic incantations" (Amarbayasgalant Tsam Dance DVD) to ask the spirit of their character to come and help them during the performance. According to Altan Hoeg, tsam dancer of Dosjoilin monastery, "he [your character] is coming to you in reality [if you perform the incantations at the proper time]." (Altan Hoeg, personal interview) The second night before, main

instruments of the monastic orchestra, the *ganling* (See Image 3) and the *bishgool* (See Image 4), are played to declare the coming of the tsam dance. The final night before the performance for audiences, the mentor or teacher of the upcoming performance's tsam dancers enacts his own tsam inside a monastic building for no audience, dressed as the character of the the Blue Shanak. The secret dance meditation is the final request to the powerful Elig Khan to come and become part of that monasteries performance the following day. In his meditative routine, he makes a series of offerings to the Lord of the Underworld to, "lure him" (Amarbayasgalant Monastery Tsam Dance DVD) to the monastery.

The actual ritual of tsam dance is the conclusion of many months worth of spiritual, mental, and practical preparatory work assumed by many monks and lamas. As professional dancer and Dosjoilin Monastery choreography assistant Hosbier explained, "We cannot assume that the performance of tsam mask dance is only that what we see. It requires a lot of different things. The performance, the show, of tsam mask dancing, it's only one part of the tsam mask dance, what's needed to really do tsam mask dance." (Hosbier, personal interview)

That part which is for audiences and that can be seen, though, is undoubtedly the most important, as all those many extensive rituals lead up to the ideal moment and place where interaction between spirits and humans can occur and the ancient, circular mythical drama of spiritual purification is be reenacted. The final, actual event of the dance of tsam itself, traditionally performed with the scared Buddhist number of 108 characters, is about four hours in length. (Enkjerel, personal interview) In reality, there is no one definitive type of tsam

dancing. In fact, tsam is an umbrella term for Buddhist mask dance, within which there is much diversity and variation. Historically, tsam divided itself between two branches: the now-extinct Milaraspa tasm, which consisted of spoken, theatrical morality plays, and the more performative “fancy costume tsam,” which perseveres to this day. It is known as either *Geser*, *Jahar*, or *Erleg Nomun Khan* Tsam. (Face Music, website) In Mongolia, this fancy-dress tsam became personalized to each region and monastery in which it was performed, based on a policy of integrating already-present local spirits and beliefs. As a country of Shamanists, there existed a panoply of local spirits which inhabited and protected the land where Buddhists constructed monasteries. When land had to be sanctified and prepared to do a tsam, monks saw this shamanistic menagerie as a part of the physical location that must be consecrated to create an acceptable performance space. Dr. Dulam explained,

In tsam, it’s something that is being performed in a certain location. You just get the permit; you establish good rapport with the local spirits. And after that you perform the tsam and of course when you show the respect to local spirits then you are well received by the audience too. Mongolian were approaching tsam dance very creatively because they would always introduce figures that represented local spirits, masters of mountains or waters and so forth. And that is why tsam performed in one place would be very different from tsam performed in another location. For example if you compared tsam that was performed in Khuee, it was referred to actually as Khuree tsam, the capital tsam, if you compared this tsam dance to the tsam of Bayanhonogor, my origin, my place of origin, from the monastery over there they will be very different... In order to perform tsam in a certain location you should make happy the local spirits... (Dulam, personal interview)

Enkjerel of the Tumen Ekh National Song and Dance Ensemble, who extensively studied historical tsam for her master’s thesis, also reiterated that, “It carried the...cultural heritage of the region.” (Enkjerel, personal interview) This whole

process of cultural evolution as tsam and Mongolian cultural beliefs melded together created a fantastic form of ritual performance unique to Mongolian society and landscape.

Although countless varieties of tsam mask dancing exist in Mongolia, they all follow a similar structural form. First to appear are the two white skull-mask characters called Khokhimoi (also known as Durteddagva or Citipati) (See Image 5) As with all the tsam mask characters, they enter in a pair representing the dichotomy of male and female. (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview) Their purpose includes, on an aesthetic level, to familiarize audiences with “the conception of death,” as acceptance of the ephemeral nature of existence is an important realization for someone on the Noble Eightfold Path. (Snelling, 55) In the dance, the Khokhomoi serve as both literal and spiritual crowd control. Audiences are kept from getting too close to the dancers and, “demons are expelled when they are interrupting” by the use of magical skull-topped striped rods. They navigate the space using small, hopping, circular movements that coordinate with the sounding of cymbals. (Face Music, website)

After their introductory motions, the dancers enter in gendered pairs. The arch of the dance itself follows the actions of the monks embodying gods as they interact with each other and good wins victory over evil demons as shown through their specific gestures, movements, and by means of the prayers and tantras monks recite while enacting them. Every motion carries with it a complex set of meanings, and is associated with the tantric prayers being recited by the meditating, dancing monks.

Completing these motions are ten principal characters, and many divisions of groups of figures, including good and evil gods and goddesses, servants and lords, historical figures and mythical creatures. One of the principal figures of Mongolian tsam, addition to Damdin-Tshojoo, the Lord of Hells, is his wife, Zamindi (see Image 6) with whom he enters with at the height of the performance. Both character's masks are dark blue in color, and feature the third eye of wisdom and a five-skull crown, suggesting the sins they will exorcise. Another major character is that of the extremely powerful god Ochirvaani, the Protector of the Religion, who has compiled the capabilities of all other deities. (See Image 7) He wields a thunderbolt to defeat his enemies and treat sinners with harshness. Portraits hung around the space of the tsam dance have his likeness, and he often dances in front of another layer of self-representation.

Other major, extremely powerful gods lead up to the entrances of Damdin-Tshojoo and the important event of Ochirvaani's dance. These include Jamsaran, the God of War, a character introduced over the centuries of tsam's development not present in India (see Image 8); his often coral-encrusted red face is meant to symbolize power that must be paid homage to, and he is often seen holding a human heart. Namsrai, the God of Wealth, a golden-masked ancient figure from India (see Image 9) and Gongor, white-masked God of Eliminating Poverty and protector of the religion (see Image 10), are tied in with color symbolism, with gold representing wealth and white standing for goodness and peace, and dance in a similar manner to all important, powerful deities: with slow, forceful series of movements. When performing, their masks hardly move. In contrast, the popular

but comparatively not-powerful, comic relief character of the Tsagaan Uuvgon White Old Man (see Image 11), requires sloppy, waddling motions using little dance skill to complete the role. Other especially prominent figures include a pantheon of vibrant animalistic characters fill the role of the servants of the God of Death, and include the energetic characters of Bugu, the deer (see Image 12) Makhi, the bull (see Image 13) as well as the location-specific protectors of the sacred mountains that surround Ulaanbaatar: Khangard, the Bird, the Drunk Old Man, the Wild Boar, and Dog's Head. All of their motions are faster and highly choreographed. (Face Music, website)

With this extensive cast of diverse characters at its head, tsam continued to grow, flourish and develop in accordance with the social and political trends of the individual monasteries. One of the most radical innovations to Mongolian tsam was pioneered by the controversial Danzan Rabjaa, Lama of the Gobi, who disregarded some of the ritualism associated with tsam to expand it as performative entertainment in the mid-19th century. As I was able to observe in the Danzan Rabjaa Museum in Dorngovi, Rabjaa created a new character and associated costume for Ama, the spirit of the land. Expanding from tsam's interrelationship with environment, Rabjaa pushed the limits of Buddhist ritualism to introduce a new female deity which dispersed location-specific messages and encouraged appreciation for female power. (Altangerel, museum tour)

With the exception of some conflicts between high ranking lama authorities and new thinkers stemming from such innovations, tsam remained an unwavering religious, social, and political force until the 1930s, when the radical

cultural shift of Communist mentality hung in the air. Before the purges and destruction of the entire monastic culture that completely stunted the possibility of preserving the tradition of tsam, tsams are said to have been performed between 110 (Nyam-Ochir, personal interview) and 128 (Altan Hoeg, personal interview) times over the county.

After the death of the last khan of Mongolia, Bogd Khan, in 1924, the Russian troops that had already taken up occupation of the country to address the hostile takeover of the eccentric Red Baron and serve to protect the Chinese border moved into a far more prominent position. After a number of political deliberations and negotiations, Mongolia's status as the world's second communist state was declared. (Otgonbayar, lecture) Russia's motivation for making Mongolia its' satellite were numerous. The first, and most apparent, was part of its fundamental mission to convert the entire world to a communist system of government. The expansion of their governmental structure's empire was an obvious priority. As the second communist state and with an international audience carefully monitoring the actions of the Russian nation, the success or failure of communism in Mongolia would reflect upon and significantly influence communism's reception generally. For the Russian government, pouring money, resources, and time into Mongolia in order would be obvious and necessary. If successful, the global status of communism would be much more stabilized. (Otgonbayar, lecture)

Mongolia was not a country whose history had set it up to smoothly transition into a communist state. With a strict hierarchical structure of nobility

based on wealth left by the Manchus, radical cultural transformation would have to go underway to make Mongolia compatible with the communist policies it would soon adopt. If, as Marx so famously asserted, religion is indeed the opiate of the masses, Mongolians would be drug abusers in the worst degree: religion and spirituality were fundamental aspects of the Mongolian worldview. (Bum-Ochir, lecture) However, instead of trying to eliminate from Mongolian culture abstract questions of being grounded in spirituality, the government attacked the most obvious manifestation of those complex beliefs: the monasteries. With power and wealth that almost equaled that of the recently terminated monarchical government, the network of Mongolian monasteries presented a vast and obvious target for the communist fist to fall hardest as a center of all the collectivist state government was officially against: wealth, unequally distributed power, elitist knowledge, and complex religion. The government's Mongolians had religious deeply integrated into their lives and belief systems, many of those foreign-educated elite class of Mongolians who rose to power in the Mongolian People's Republic Party were intent followers of the ideals of communism and attacked with vigor and passion Mongolia's religious tradition of Buddhism. Although devastatingly successful at preventing Mongolian monastic life, Choibalsan, the "Mongolian Stalin," who ordered for the destruction of the first monasteries in 1937, was likely much less productive in creating a dent in Mongolian Buddhism. As Dr. Kollmar-Paulenz suggests, "Religion never ceased to exist in Mongolia. Even in the communist era many Mongolians found a way to practice religion secretly. Today even former party leaders admit to having practiced Buddhist rites

or to consulting astrologers during the time when the practice of religion was officially forbidden.” (Kollmar-Paulenz, article.)

While Mongolians continued practicing Buddhism outside of the jurisdiction of the monasteries, simply continuing to live their lives with Buddhism as a part of it, the fact still exists that, at the end of that year, over 700 of Mongolia’s monasteries either shut down, razed and completely destroyed, or repossessed, and their sacred artifacts destroyed, burned, or sold. Over the course of the communist regime, over 17,000 monks and lamas were murdered. (Bekhat, museum tour) This intensity of inconceivably massive campaign would have been the only way to seriously combat the presence of Buddhism in Mongolia and, at least on the surface level, was completely successful. Monastic life screeched to halt and those monks not killed absorbed into the layman’s lifestyle. Only Gandanthechlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar was left to function at a highly monitored level as a form of cultural protection, to serve as a historical example of an outdated and naive way of life, and for the interests of the miniscule number of visitors allowed to enter and observe the country. The important monasteries of Kharkhorin, Erden Dzuu, and Bogd Khan were also preserved, but emptied, and declared places where religious activity was strictly prohibited. (Kollmar-Paulenz, website)

Monks across Mongolia, but particularly at the Choijin Lama Museum and Khamin Khiid, furiously worked to hide, bury, and preserve the sacred artifacts of their monasteries, with varying amounts of success. Still the Danzan Rabjaa Museum of Dornigovi is awaiting proper facilities and funding to instigate the

removal of some forty remaining boxes of artifacts hidden in the desert before the monastery's hostile takeover. (Altangerel, museum tour) The majority of the artifacts came under the jurisdiction of the Mongolian government, however. Those important Buddhist artifacts not simply destroyed, exported to Russia for museum displays, or melted for metal were maintained in the museums of Ulaanbaatar as relics of an ancient past. Without captions or context, tsam masks and costumes could be observed, but only for their aesthetic value. Tour guides of the museums were either totally uninformed about the meaning of the artifacts or provided propagandistic material that described Buddhist art only through the communist lens. As tour guide Chimgee described to me, "Artifacts were put in cases, glass cases, and they sat there, showing the old things, the things past. Sometimes, visitors would come through, I would give them tours, and they would ask so many questions and I, I wouldn't know the answer! So, um, maybe I would say about the masks, the tsam masks, perhaps I would be able to talk about how they were, um, Buddhist, and that it was a very good things these were no more because the monasteries were very corrupt and bad places." (Chimgee, personal interview)

With Buddhism formally declared nonexistent and kept under careful monitoring of the state, it was brought to a complete stop. Monks and lamas knowledgeable about the traditions of the dance had either died as victims of political persecution or exiled from their religious occupation, left to slowly get older and be unable to share the secrets of their religion's traditions with the new generation of Mongolians. Not again until 1986 only the faintest whispers about

tsam heard, all seemingly in the context to critique to ritual as backwards and naïve. The memory of such magnificent performances were not to be soon forgotten, however, and its power as a social and political symbol not unrecognized by the communist government. Believing the meaning behind the dance to be obsolete and interested in promoting an image of Mongolian culture, 1986 the government funded a documentary to be done about tsam dance which, marked the first performance since 1937. This tsam dance was done without any of the rituals associated with the dance, but was instead a compilation of those ex-monks and laypeople who remembered the motions directing professional artists in costume. (Enkjerel, personal interview)

At this time, other elements of Mongolian culture were being compartmentalized and commodified, too, especially traditional dance and morin khuur, the horse-head fiddle. Mongolian arts were placed into the communist structure of institutionalism, giving them a formality, officially, and cutting them of their original, meaningful contexts, thus rendering them only representational of their original purpose and value. The National Morin Khuur ensemble, founded under the communist period, was filled with musicians who were taught morin khuur as a classical instrument at the Music and Dance College, which just celebrated its 75th Anniversary. Without the nomadic herding world so fundamentally interconnected with the instrument, the morin khuur has lost much of its original value. Morin khuur was played in performances representing Mongolian culture but, outside of the college, was practically nonexistent. Increasingly, these communist institutions came to represent an unpracticed,

fading element of Mongolian life. (Mend-Ooyo, lecture) By 1990, Mongolians were frustrated with the censorship, corruption, secrecy, and satellite status of the communist government and ready to implement change. December 10, 1989 marked the beginning of peaceful protests decades in the making that transformed the country into a democratic and independent nation. (Rossabi, Chapter 1)

As this shift occurred and an open environment in which to create art was established, artist and scholars of all types immediately leapt into action with plans for cultural revival and the chance to play a role in the construction of how a uniquely Mongolian identity – that did not involve a governmental policy of communism – would be constituted. Unlike fine arts expression, supported now with greater competence since the fall of communism by the Union of Mongolian Artists (Bochchandas, personal interview), the forms of Mongolian performance had no institutional support structure of any kind, except for the shells of those cultural performance organizations founded under the communist era; it seems to me that this is what Tumen Ekh (founded in 1989) and Moonstone (founded in 2002) based their models on.

The concept of these cultural variety show groups, which construct self-representational snippets of society, transferred over to the democratic period, where productions documenting what the performers considered distilled highlights of Mongolian culture were compiled. Both directors of the two most prominent and reputable groups spoke to the needs of foreign audiences to have access to a vocabulary of images representing Mongolian culture first and

foremost.³ It is curious that the initial thoughts of the organization’s founders – Tumen Ekh’s rich benefactor, Luna, and Moonstone’s collective of Music and Dance College dancer’s organization— was for the needs of tourists to see an image of a relatively lost Mongolian culture instead of working to reestablish it among, for example, Mongolian youth, or reintegrate it into the new democratic Mongolian life. I theorize perhaps that, because of their establishment immediately parallel with the rise of democracy, the performance artists, as university educated, lifelong city-dwellers, were more conscious of the ramifications their new governmental status would attract and thought therefore more of the international attention Mongolia would soon receive than of their internal cultural needs, thus turning their main focus outwards. It is in these performance groups that the first instances of tsam mask dancing appear again, alongside folk dances, long songs, morin khuur, hoomi, and other performative icons of Mongolia’s rich cultural history.

In a completely different cultural sector, religion returned to Mongolia in full force. According to Dr. Kollmar-Paulenz of the University of Berne, Switzerland, “Buddhism has experienced a massive renaissance” among the

³ In response to the question “What was your organization’s initial, original goal?” Enkjerel responded that, “The main goal of that time was to promote the cultural heritage of Mongolians to foreigners, to foreign tourists mostly... so they made decision to promote the culture of Mongolia by this performance group. The main goal for now, the main goal is to promote culture, to develop it, show it, and to spread it in every corner of the world.” (Enkjerel, personal interview.) Along the same vein, Taivanjargal explained, “Now the main goal of the founding of this organization is to show the Mongolian performance arts and the skills and abilities of the Mongolian artists to, to the foreigners” (Taivanjargal, personal interview.) Both also claimed to have been the first private organizations – emphasizing their status as independent businesses – in the field of cultural performance, although Tumen Ekh clearly wins the claim.

majority of the population (Kollmar-Paulenz, article) with the advent of democracy. Most Mongolians consider themselves Buddhists to some extent, and support has poured into reconstructing monasteries. The road to the reestablishment of Buddhism in Mongolia, however, has been wrought with difficulties. One of the principal problems is the lack of teachers (Kollmar-Paulenz, article)—with a generation gap in the Buddhist scholars lost, continuing knowledge and traditions requires the importation of Tibetan scholars. This exchange between Tibet and Mongolia will surely reconstitute what used to be uniquely Mongolian Buddhism in ways that cannot yet be guessed. However, it is very much because of this substitution of Tibetan Buddhism that the possibility of reinstating the magnificent dance of tsam became possible in the early 2000s. Although tsam in the past was necessitated by affluent and successful monasteries, although still humble in wealth and size, monasteries are able to reinstate tsam as part of their yearly rituals.

Ritual and Representation: Comparison of Monastic and Performative Tsam

Within the city of modern-day Ulaanbaatar, the ritual of tsam is being perpetuated primarily in two ways. The first of these is in the monasteries of Dosjoilin and Gandan, where monks have apprenticed with exiled Tibetan lamas to restore the original power and glory of Mongolian tsam dance. The second is in the realm of performing troops. As tracing the more contemporary history of tsam performances has revealed, these two forms of tsam have very divergent origins and operate in varying cultural sectors. The fact that most everything about them is also different, then, is not surprising. The tsam of performance groups is a

reflection, representation, and demonstration of the meaningful religious ritual and, as such, stands apart as a performative endeavor of replication. As an art, the series of complex religious ritual preparations, Buddhist philosophy, and sanctified performance space are replaced with the intricate series of rehearsal, and backstage preparations, acting, and performance theory, and the realm of the theatrical space.

In Ulaanbaatar, there are numerous groups that create cultural variety shows for foreign travelers. Only the biggest and most popular include tsam, for a combination of monetary restraints and difficulty in coordination. Of the four – Moonstone, Tumen Ekh, Xahtan Ekh, and the UB Ensemble— I was able to conduct in-depth studies on the two most prominent, and my analysis stems from my interactions with these, especially interviews with, Taivanjargal and Enkjerel, respective long-time dancers for and now administrators of Moonstone and Tumen Ekh. Performance group's shows range at about an hour in length and feature about eight five minute vignettes that highlight different aspects of Mongolian culture, some with a brief English language introduction for context. Almost all tourist organizations bring their visitors to the performances of one of these groups for a compact summary hour of Mongolia's cultural treasures. Due to the huge number of tourists who come through Ulaanabaatar, the summer months of May until October feature at least daily productions of the same set of vignettes; during the busiest month of August, it is not uncommon for either group to do as many as 4 consecutive performances each day.

In their original variety show highlighting different performative elements of Mongolian culture, Moonstone did not include tsam dancing. Only after four years, at the specific request of tourists who, “were more interested in traditional things and ritual dances,” (Taivanjargal, personal interview) did they begin to include tsam in their productions. Tumen Ekh, too, encountered international audience’s great interest in tsam dance and sought to satisfy their interest by expanding the length of their tsam show from five to ten minutes. In contrast, though, tsam had always been part of Tumen Ekh’s vision of what a show of Mongolian traditional arts would consist of. However, “the program is always changing year by year,” Enkjerel explained, “So according to the change in the society, according to the fashion, we change programs.” (Enkjerel, personal interview)

Formation of what constitutes these groups’ representation of national cultural identity is in many cases dictated in part by the tourist viewers, the effect of which has yet to be realized. A significant way that the performances have transformed since the advent of democracy is the elimination of modern/contemporary dance pieces; along with the original, traditional cultural performances were a series of modern/contemporary dance pieces in both groups, which were quickly founded to be unpopular, and were dropped from the schedules due to lack of interest from tourists. This points to the interest of tourists in primarily historically generated culture and a lack of recognition for Mongolia’s place in modernity, and reveals how both performance groups think

of themselves as platforms to display the individual abilities and skills of contemporary artists.

Otherwise, the desires to properly represent what the organization believes to be an accurate image of Mongolian culture and appease the interests of tourists in Mongolian culture seem, at the moment, to be reasonably compatible. How performance groups will respond if tourists continue to probe into secrets of tsam out of their jurisdiction will yet to be seen. Already, in a series of services I administered to tourists after seeing Moonstone and Tumen Ekh productions, over half of the viewers mentioned an interest in knowing more information about the specific details of the dance. Another main concern was the fluid concept of authenticity; dynamics of how the concepts of “authentic” and “inauthentic” are cross-culturally understood will likely come to the forefront of conversations about the construction of shows in the future. At the moment, however, both performance groups seemed to think the only reason they wouldn’t seek to put on huge, complete tsam performances was simply lack of tourist interest. Taivanjargal explained, “...not every tourist would be interested to see this performance for that many kind of hours, and also it requires lots of funding, lots of...work, lots of time,” (Taivanjargal, personal interview) a sentiment echoed by Enkjerel. In fact, the major difference between the tsam done in monasteries and performance groups, by their own reckoning, is that of simple logistics—“real” (Enkjerel and Taivanjargal, personal interviews) tsam consists of many monks who can properly prepare, whereas they have limited casts, time, and funding.

Instead of performing a whole tsam dance, Moonstone researched tsam and decided on five central images with which to represent the ritual—those of the Old White Man, Namsari, the God of Wealth, Damdin Chojijil, the Lord of Death, Jamsarang, the Red Protector, and Hangart, the Bird of Ulaanbaatar. Interestingly, all the research, planning, and coordination of tsam dance done by both these groups delicately sidestepped monasteries—the location of tsam dances—altogether. This mix is of both evil and good characters, to balance the pantheon represented in tsam, and includes two key figures unique to Mongolia, those of the spirit of Ulaanbaatar and the shamanistically-inspired Old White Man. For all these characters, they extracted the key movement scores enacted, and mixed them together into the performance now shown at least once a day to groups of visitors to Mongolia. The music of tsam has been taught to Moonstone’s performers, but is rarely played live because of the inability of musicians to do speedy enough costume changes. Recordings from monasteries—from which the musicians listened to by ear and taught themselves—are used as a replacement when the performers are busy readying themselves for their next entrance.

Tumen Ekh adopted a different methodology, starting the basis for their performance using an actual piece of Khuree Tsam, from which they have elaborated. Unlike Moonstone, they had decided tsam a significant enough ritual to be originally included in their variety show, and were in fact considering making it a major element to celebrate the freedom of religious expression. While they replicate the main beginning section of Khuree Tsam, and the motions they

use are built from the monastic choreography, the complexity they've given the movement is greater. Enkjerel explained that

The movements are totally similar but we have added some dancing elements to...since it is created for the public, for foreigners for people who came here to see a dance...it couldn't be just like [the tsam dance] movement--it should be a dance. So we turned tsam mask dancing into a [artistic] dance, gave it dancing features, more scenic features to the characters. So the moves are a little bit changed because some elements are added. A person just normal person wouldn't recognize the difference...But the person who is experienced and who have a deep knowledge of tsam mask dancing of course would recognize the small things." (Enkjargal, personal interview)

in addition to the differences of performance space, rituals and rites done surrounding the tsam dance, and lack of meditation. This creative interpretation of the movements of tsam for the entertainment pleasure of tourists was not received well when I interviewed viewers about their opinions. "Of course I want to see it exactly as it is, for real," one British visitor exclaimed. (Elliott, personal interview). Then he proceeded to ask my opinion: "Tell me; I have to know. How authentic really was it?" (Elliott, personal interview)

Although the main structure of preparation for tsam dance is completely nonexistent for performance groups, a few small rituals and beliefs have perpetuated. For example, I was told both places carefully store their masks according to the proper monastic standards of above waist-height, covered by a piece of cotton cloth. (See Image 14) Furthermore, both forbid women to dance, as is traditionally done; however, the fact that the choreographer is female is overlooked. Some myths and legends have been generated among the performance groups, due to the nature of constantly presenting such an important religious performance; Enkjerel provided an anecdote where she shared that every

dancer who has performed the role of Namsari has received some of the benefits as would be worthy of the God of Wealth. However, in regards to the danger and curse that could come from embodying the gods incorrectly and not following the rules of the monastery, Enkjerel was dubious, saying

About this curse and about this bad luck, I don't much believe in that because I'm of the strong belief that if the thoughts of the person who's performing this mask and who's choreographing, who is creating this art, if the thoughts are good then the result would be good, and it wouldn't hurt anybody by performing. So I don't believe in something that could happen to me or my performers. (Enkjerel, personal interview)

Although at first Taivanjargal told me monks at Dosjoilin Monastery instructed their dancers on how to do tsam, she later specified her statement and explained a choreographer who had studied tsam was, in fact, the one who instructed her dancers. Hosbier, MA candidate at the National University for Anthropology and professional dancer, was trained by the infamous Sandaksuren, a major un-ordained layperson participant in the 1986 tsam dance film. He summarized his 10-year experience training to perform many different characters of tsam, saying that it,

...requires lots of energy from the dancer, lots of feelings. The person needs to feel the mask, the situation. You need to give life to the dance because it's always done the same way. You're the one who needs to move it, bring it life, represent the gods to life. And this art is, this ritual is very complicated. It's very difficult because the gods, the roles, the images, they could be in many variations. They might be cruel, or peaceful, tranquil gods, or jealous characters. There are many variations. (Hosbier, personal interview)

Although this likely mirrors, in some ways, the opinions of monk dancers, their main emphasis is on the meditation to become their character instead of any emphasis on acting or performing theory. For example, while performing tsam,

Lama Darambazar described that he felt, “very calm” (Darambazar, personal interview) because of the dance’s meditative nature. The way they perform, it appears, is supposed to generate naturally from the religious preparation undertaken. Hosbier’s perspective, in contrast, approaches how to best illustrate the dance of tsam through the lens of a performer, thinking critically about how one animates the motions to reveal the character’s personality.

Like Hosbier, the performers for groups are all trained in and venerated because of their status as professional dancers. As such, many attend university for the either Modern or Folk Dance. Tsam, regardless of past experience, is always something the dancers, once having been auditioned and accepted to the troop, must learn. The movements score of Moonstone, Taivanjargal explained, is not difficult for the skilled dancers to master, but dancing in the heavy and hot masks and costumes makes it an impressive feat. Furthermore, through a series of surveys done with tsam mask dancers at performance troops and interviews, I was able to learn that dancers found it difficult to embody the characters. One performer told me, “It was hard to know no-one could see my face, so I was this thing, and I couldn’t really tell what...I didn’t quite know what my body was showing.” (Bat-Erdene, personal interview)

Although side-stepping the monasteries for collaboration on the representation of tsam in some respects, Taivanjargal assured me that the monks and lamas were not inherently against their performances. She said they believed Moonstone to be, “the promotion of the Buddhist culture to the foreigners, that’s why it’s acceptable to them.” (Taivanjargal, personal interview) I am certain,

however, that opinions vary by individual monk or lama depending on their beliefs about the state of Mongolian Buddhism. Those monks who prioritize the spread of Buddhism more than adherence to the ritual rules of conduct (including the ultimate sacredness of the masks, the inability of anyone but lamas to perform the dance, or the spiritual power of the ritual) might indeed accept these productions as a piece of the modern world, although I have encountered no such opinion personally.

Opinions about performance groups in the world of Mongolian tsam dance can be equally subdivided into two main dichotomized categorizations: those that believe it's acceptable and those that believe it's not. The first were those that served to validate Taivanjargal's belief in her legitimacy to run a non-religious group that shows tsam, and include many monks (Darambazar, personal interview and Batpurev, personal interview) and informed scholars (Lhagvademchig, personal interview). Those in this school of thought believe that any representation of tsam dance can only positively encourage the image of both the Buddhist religion and Mongolian culture. As Lhagvademchig explained, "at least people see what the masks are and are keeping up the tradition." (Lhagvademchig, personal interview) The opposing standpoint to this is shared by more religiously traditional monks, including Altan Hoeg, who believe the power of tsam dance as a spiritual practice to be dangerously degraded by the nonreligious context to the point where those uninformed performers are put in serious spiritual jeopardy. One of the performers from Moonstone seemed nervous about this possibility, describing how, "putting on the mask is eerie. It makes me feel, like, uneasy. I can

tell, it seems to me like, the dance is really Buddhist, really religious. Powerful. But I don't know, I can't say...I'm a Buddhist, of course. I don't want to upset any gods or make them angry.” (Gambold, personal interview) These differences in opinion highlight the different fundamental contexts from which opinions are generated. One demonstrates a worldview more interested in the representation of the Mongolian nation and the Buddhist religion to a global context, and the other is consumed by the cosmology of religious faith. Although fairly incompatible because of their rootedness in very different sets of priorities, these differences in belief do not seem to have caused any conflict. I have not even found so much as a discussion of this issue between performing groups and those religious practitioners with reservations. If performance groups continue their international travels⁴ and tsam's popularity increase, I hypothesize such a conversation will be generated as much from audience's concern as the monk's convictions.

In some ways, through my observations, it appeared to me that, regardless of being ethically valid or immoral, performance groups actually serve to preserve tsam. Without these groups, I doubt the broken monasteries would have been able to handle the flood of outside observers interested in experiencing the generation-long inaccessible Mongolian cultural heritage. As artists sprung to create opportunities immediate as democracy was established, aesthetic and performative representation of tsam became prominent and highly accessible to

⁴ Tumen Ekh and Moonstone have both traveled extensively across the world, promoting and performing Mongolian culture. Tsam dance has been an element in all of these productions. Moonstone quickly listed off Thailand, Vietnam, Canada, Russia, Japan, North and South Korea, England, and France on its list, and Tumen Ekh has also performed in America and other countries in Europe. (Taivanjargal and Enkjerel, personal interviews)

tourists and visitors. I conjecture, based on how Taivanjargal and Enkjerel discussed the constant thirst of tourists for more knowledge about what they consider “traditional” and “ritualistic” culture, that if not for performance group visitors would have infiltrated the world of monastic tsam in pursuit of understanding it, in the process destroying the sacredness before it even had chance to reestablish itself as a ritual. Tourists I spoke with after performances seemed to mirror that this might have been the case. “Mongolia is the edge of the world, the farthest away you can get,” German tourist Jenny explained,

You dream of exotic things when you come here, I’m being totally honest with you now. For me, that dance we saw in there was one of those things I kind of expected to find. Beautiful, exotic, colorful, meaningful, so interesting! ...Of course I want to know more about it, of course anyone who comes here would. This [Moonstone performance group] show was awesome, but I want to be surrounded by the...by Mongolian lifestyle, in the middle of the country, and see this for real. That’s the kind of thing people, well the kind of thing I came here to look for. (Jenny, personal interview)

Although foreign interest in Mongolian culture seems appreciated by the monasteries and performance groups I visited, such interest, I expect, would have overwhelmed shaky monasteries. Now, with the performance groups representing tsam, monasteries have their undertakings shielded from prying eyes of thousands of curious visitors, and it has safe space to be revived. Tsam likely would not have been able to reestablish itself if not for these performance groups.

Part Three: The Aesthetic Link: Mask-making as Art, Ritual, and Representation

Although these performance groups protect tsam as it is recreated once more, it is clear monastic and performance groups have very little in common. The implications of having one’s representation of a cultural activity for

foreigners be an inaccurate and incomplete depiction of that which they are interested in are wide-ranging. Gradually, from nearly a month's work of participant-observation doing fieldwork and learning the craft of maskmaking in Bochchandas' studio, in addition to my fieldwork interview sets, I realized the one place where monastic and performance tsam coincide in contemporary culture is that, simply, of aesthetic. The appearances of the costumes and masks of tsam – regardless of the meanings behind them— is relatively consistent, due to both the nature of the dance itself and the homogeneity of the characters represented, but also because of the infinitesimal number of artisans knowledgeable about the methodology behind making tsam masks and costumes. There are three individuals capable of making Mongolian tsam masks the whole world over, for example. (Bochchandas, personal interview) Those select few who have pioneered to reinvent the aesthetic of tsam, and have shared it indiscriminately with both performance groups and monasteries, continuing the common aesthetic of the dance despite the countless internal differences. Please see attached CD for photo essay. All images were taken with a Canon 20-D digital single-reflex lens at f5.0, 1/50.

Part Four: Conclusion, Implications, and Plans for Further Research

From the time I have invested in exploring the world of contemporary tsam, I have been able to theorize the arch of historical trends relating to the dance. Since the advent of democracy in 1990, tsam dance has begun to reestablish itself once more in the monasteries it flourished in so gloriously in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, during the communist period, tsam dance –

along with many other Mongolian traditional arts – were slowly and gradually compartmentalized away from their culturally contextualizing roots. The clearest manifestation of this phenomenon is the existence of performance groups, organizations of formally educated and skilled musicians, dancers, and traditional artists who create multi-component performances which condense their culture into easily accessible pieces, wherein the division between insider/outsider couldn't be more apparent. Cultural performance tailored for the wants and needs of its viewers exist in a dynamic of fluidity and mimesis, where questions of performance authenticity, fascination with the traditional, and self-representation, and national image quickly arise.

At this moment, monastic and performance group tsam are radically different entities, with performance group's tsam presenting an image of the dance far removed not only from its meaning but also style and form. Whether this trend will continue, creating a widening gap between performative and ritualistic tsam, or whether conversation will open between the two entities has yet to be seen. Based on their connective thread through the relative homogeneity of the costumes, I theorize that the outcome of these two tsams's interrelationship will be navigated through how the next generation of mask and costume makers will operate. Whether monks and lamas take over the task of costume creation or whether it stays in the realm of fine arts will determine whether the relations between monastic and performative tsam are made completely obsolete or are perpetuated.

The trends of Buddhism and tourism in Mongolia will also influence the two tsams's interrelationship significantly, with successful monasteries perhaps choosing to include tsam tourism operation under their tasks. Already Erden Zoon and Gandan have orderly systems that handle the presence of tourists and visitors, and I see a more structured organization system that integrates the presence of interested visitors a conceivable possibility. Performance groups already are not adverse to constantly transforming their programs – and the image of Mongolian national identity – based on the desires of their viewers. For them, tsam could either rise to the forefront or slowly drift from their season programs.

This research has served as a wide-ranging survey done with the motivation to explore and discover the various sectors of Mongolian culture in which tsam plays a part. Over this month, through apprenticing with tsam mask maker Bochcharas, and speaking with scholars, performance groups, and monks and lamas, I have been able to realize the surface exterior of the location and status of tsam dance today.

Now, with an understanding of its locality in monasteries and performance groups, and the presence of theoretical themes of art, ritual, and representation, I hope to spend this summer in Mongolia carefully undertaking a project that does more than just scratch the surface of these issues and questions. Speaking with more people in every sector of contemporary tsam dance is the absolutely integral next step to move my research from the realm of theoretical musings to possible conclusive realizations about the status of tsam dance in Mongolian culture, from which I will hopefully be able to form some more well-supported opinions about

the plethora of issues I have recently been exposed to. However, as Hosbier, decade-long tsam dancer and choreographer said, “Tsam dance is an ocean. I’m just standing...with the waves lapping my feet.” While I’m still well on the shoreline, I am compelled to think of how tsam will take its place in the canon of global performance.

Glossary of terms:

Bailing/Tsoh: Red triangles formed of dough made by a combination of barley flour and butter crowned by a skull, used during a tsam dance to collect bad energy. The bailing is placed at the center point in the tsam dancing circles. At the end of the dance, it is burned and the bad energy eliminated.

Bishgool: An instrument in the Monastic Orchestra played during a tsam dance. The bishgool, along with the gatling, is played two nights before a tsam dance to proclaim that the dance was upcoming. The Bisgool was controversially made from the femur bone of a 16-18 year old virgin woman.

Chambon: the main, unmasked tsam dance character

Blue Shanak: the character performed for no audience the night before a complete tsam dance by the mentor and teacher of the monk-dancers. He entreats Damdin-Tshojoo to come and be part of the monastery's tsam dance the following day, making offerings, including a human skull, to lure him.

Damdin-Tshojoo: the main character of tsam dance and the primary dancer within Mongolian tsam, he is the Lord of the Underworld and Hells.

Dschag: the innermost circle of dancers closest to the bailing in the tsam-ra

Durteddagva: the Mongolian name for Khokhimoi, the skull-faced character in tsam mask dancing that opens each performance and symbolizes the underworld

Erleg Nomun Khan: the Mongolian language name for Damdin-Tshojoo, Lord of the Underworld and Hells, the main character of tsam dancing.

Erleg Nomun Khan Tsam: the type of tsam performed today most commonly performed today in Mongolia. It is the same as Geser and Jahar Tsam.

Deva: a Buddhist god or deity

Gongor: a character in tsam dance; the patron saint of poverty elimination.

Geser Tsam: the type of tsam performed today. Same as Jahar and Erleg Nomun Khan Tsam

Jahar Tsam: the type of tsam performed today. Same as Geser and Erleg Nomun Khan Tsam.

Jamsaran: Known as the Red Protector or the God of War, Jamsaran is a deity not represented in the Indian canon but instead an introduction during the

diasporic travels of tsam. His mask is well known and venerated, as it was traditionally covered with hundreds of precious corals to create his ferocious ambience.

Khangard: One of the Four Local Lords, Khangard is the bird-spirit of Ulaanbaatar. Normally a minor character, since tsam's reintroduction his iconography has increased in importance.

Khokhimoi: a character in tsam mask dancing, also Durteddagva or Citipati

Linka: A dough sculpture made with fast-rising yeast formed in human likeness that would expand over the course of a tsam dance, representing how it was being filled up with all the bad sins and energy of the place. The end of the tsam dance would include the character of Shiva/Bugu, the deer, ceremoniously tearing apart the linka with a sword.

Makhi: One of the servants of the Lord of Hell, and an ecstatic dancer in tsam performances

Milaraspa tasm: an extinct branch of tsam dancing that consisted of performing spoken morality plays

Monastic orchestra: the 20-24 person orchestra of traditionally Buddhist instrumentalists who perform during tsam. The repertoire includes two rows with percussion instruments in the front row and wind instruments and cymbals behind them. They play on the outside perimeter of the performance space.

Moonstone Performance Group: A Ulaanbaatar-based performance group founded in 2002 that presents a self-constructed five character representation of tsam dance in their variety show.

Namsrai: the God of Wealth, Namsrai is an ancient character who has traveled from India. In Mongolia he holds importance and popularity for the audience but not as major status in the performance itself. He bestows good wishes and dances blessings for viewers during Mongolian tsam performances.

Ochirvaani: The ferocious protector of the Buddhist religion is seen in association with his lightning bolt, which he throws on the unfaithful. He dances in front of his own likeness during the dance.

Shanak: The only unmasked characters in tsam mask dancing, they dance in the outermost circle of the tsam-ra.

Sutra: a Buddhist text

Tantra: An form of learning and system of Buddhist knowledge generally attributed to the of the Vajrayana school, which relies on the practice of mantras, rituals and visualizations of deities. It also often employs the use of teacher/student mentorship relationships as key to unlocking the doors to enlightenment, an element seen clearly in tsam dance training.

Tsam: The Buddhist religious masked meditation-dance introduced from Tibet.

Tsam-ra: the sacred pattern of circles on which a tsam dance is performed. It consists of four concentric circles. The most central of these contains the bailing; next, the dschag perform immediate around it. Following that circle are the Tschambon characters. The third largest circle is where the masked characters perform. Lastly, the Chanak perform on the most outer circle. To the north and left of the tsam-ra the monastic orchestra plays in two rows.

Tumen Ekh Performance Group: An Ulaanbaatar-based performance group founded in 1989 that creates variety shows distilling Mongolian culture for foreign viewers. They create more complicated and aesthetically pleasing dance sequences for a section of Ikh Khuree tsam.

Tunchin: a horn-like instrument in the Monastic Orchestra played during a tsam dance

Zamindi: As the wife of Damdin-Tshojoo, the two characters enter together near the height of a tsam performance.

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