


Endangered Archives Documenting Buchen Performance Materials

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his article describes recent fieldwork undertaken in Spiti with funding from the British Library Endangered Archives Programme:¹ a project to photograph Buchen texts (Tib. *dpe cha*), *thangkas* (Tib. *thang ka*) and other performance-related materials.² The Buchen are ritual and religious practitioners, actors and storytellers from Pin Valley, widely known for performing the Ceremony of the Breaking of the Stone.³ John Coldstream's one hundred year old photographs are perhaps the earliest images of a Buchen stone-breaking, a tantric exorcism ritual once more widely staged across Western Tibet.⁴ One Coldstream image depicts the dramatic climax of the exorcism, the moment just before a stone is cracked and its entrapped demon vanquished.

¹ Pilot project EAP 548 (2012) and major project EAP 749 (2014): "*The narrative and ritual texts, narrative paintings and other performance-related materials belonging to the Buchen of Pin Valley, India*". The research was undertaken with the assistance of two fieldworkers: Dechen Lhundup, an ex-monk from Tabo, and Thakpa Tanzin, a monk from Key monastery. Fieldwork materials, consisting of digital photographs and notes, are deposited with the British Library and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala and are viewable on the Endangered Archives Programme website.

² I have been photographing in Spiti since 1993 but first became interested in the Buchen in 1998 when I photographed Mémé Rigzin performing a stone-breaking ceremony and subsequently recorded Mémé Tsering Tobgye singing with his brother.

³ The ritual was thoroughly described by Roerich (1932) and substantially contextualised by Dollfus (2004).

⁴ John Falconer, Lead Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at the British Library first drew my attention to the Coldstream photographs of Spiti, which were donated to the library by the Coldstream family. John Coldstream was a British colonial settlement officer based in Kullu 1910–13. Settlement officers had a responsibility to map out and document settled land in order to identify ownership and facilitate the raising of taxes.



Fig. 1 — Photograph of the Ceremony of Breaking the Stone, by John Coldstream, 1910-13. Neg 1191/4, Courtesy of the British Library.

A Mémé (Tib. *mes mes*, lit. grandfather) Buchen is lifting a large boulder high above his head prior to smashing it down on a slab of rock lying across a man's chest.⁵ In the background are examples of the type of material we were investigating. On a stone wall, covered in a cloth, hang two thanngkas.⁶ A wooden box stands before the paintings, supporting a statue of Thangtong Gyalpo (Tib. *thang stong rgyal po*),⁷ butter lamps, offering bowls of water and barley, and a bell. At its base is a pair of cymbals. Partially obscured to the left of the box is a musical instrument, a kokpo (Tib. *ko phongs*). Both Mémé Buchen sport complex headdresses.⁸ They wear long robes, Tibetan boots, necklaces and other adornments, and have daggers tucked into their waistbands.

⁵ Mémé is the common local descriptor for head Buchen.

⁶ In previous fieldwork, I attempted and failed to locate these paintings, but the left hand image is clearly the painting of the story of Nangsa Öbum (Tib. *snang sa 'od 'bum*) we found in Gungri (Tib. *dgung ri*) monastery. Gungri is the principal monastery in Pin Valley, belonging to the Nyingma (Tib. *nying ma*) school of Tibetan Buddhism.

⁷ For an exhaustive description of the extraordinary life of Thangtong Gyalpo; see Stearns (2007).

⁸ The headgear (Tib. *thod*), consisting of a simple woollen cap adorned with numerous detachable multicoloured silk streamers, is a familiar identifier of Mémé Buchen.

Buchen also perform simple folk plays, which parallel the principal stories of the Tibetan Opera (Tib. *a lce lha mo*). These include Indian *Jātaka* tales of previous lives of the Buddha and biographies of Buddhist saints (Tib. *rnam thar*). The performance of these tales is undertaken for the edification of the audience, communicating fundamental Buddhist concepts of karma and impermanence, albeit through the medium of entertainment. Buchen performances could be considered a marginal or peripheral form of the Tibetan Opera. Like Lhamo, they involve acting, narration, dance, social commentary, comedy and slapstick, occasional songs and music.⁹ But unlike Lhamo, most Buchen performances are primarily spoken, regular actors are exclusively male and there is no orchestration.¹⁰ Buchen theatre is significantly less polished than contemporary Lhamo performances in Dharamsala or Lhasa. The makeshift, non-professional quality of these plays, staged in animal pens in the depths of winter by villagers using minimal props, is part of its appeal. However, it is my impression that these Buchen theatrical performances are threatened and perhaps disappearing.¹¹

As a reportage photographer primarily interested in photographing people, the actual process of copying objects excited me little. But the quest to discover these objects and interview their owners presented opportunities to elicit memories and place the material into a wider social and historical context. We contacted the ten active Buchen households and asked them each to suggest where else to find other Buchen-related materials. The inactive or dormant households we were seeking were mainly an unknown territory to

⁹ The relationship between the texts used by Buchen as the basis for their plays and the texts used for Tibetan Opera performances of the same stories requires further investigation.

¹⁰ Female characters, in identifiably female clothing, are primarily performed by the male Buchen, adding to the comedic quality of many enactments. Minor and non-speaking female roles in larger plays are sometimes undertaken by women from the host village.

¹¹ The number of Mémé Buchen and potential Buchen troupes in Pin has increased significantly in recent years. There were five groups in 1998 but this had grown to ten groups by 2016. But the winter tours of Buchen theatre, during which the troupes travel through Pin, Spiti and Upper Kinnaur, are becoming uncommon as the audience for their particular theatre decreases. In contrast, performances of the stone-breaking ritual are regularly staged for tourists and for cultural programmes: Buchen troupes have recently performed for such events in Delhi and Dehra Dun.

us.¹² Most individuals we interviewed were happy to discuss their family histories, lineage and beliefs, and to let us digitise their material, but some dormant households were extremely vague about their distant Buchen connection.¹³

The concept of ownership of Buchen material seems fluid. There is a well-established culture of borrowing and sharing material and many households talk of items lent out and never returned.¹⁴ It is clear that there are fewer thangkas than one might expect, given that Buchen ideally display a thangka related to every story being performed. There are also few original texts. A small amount of material has been sold, and some informants recalled being offered cash for objects like daggers and statues. We were also informed that some damaged, incomplete texts have been burned and some very old, damaged thangkas have been interred in stupas.¹⁵

Buchen Objects

We attempted to document every Buchen performance-related material object. Conches (Tib. *chos dung* or *dung dkar*) are common.¹⁶ They are used to summon audiences or announce the arrival of a touring Buchen group at the outskirts of a village. There they will be met and treated with honour and respect by village women who will offer beer (Tib. *chang*) and yoghurt (Tib. *zho*).

¹² These are households with an inactive Buchen lineage, several of which hold Buchen materials. Two dormant households with thangkas were already known to me from undertaking fieldwork for the AHRC funded project *Disciples of a Crazy Saint*.

¹³ Three households refused to let us photograph materials. Another household requested an exorbitant fee of one million rupees for copying work.

¹⁴ Borrowing and sharing is clearly essential to enable many Buchen troupes in Pin to perform. There is a shortage of material, a limited number of texts, thangkas and key performance objects. However modern Western style texts (Tib. *deb*) of most Buchen stories can now be found in many Buchen households and newer objects are also appearing.

¹⁵ These are the most fragile of Buchen materials and possessing incomplete and unused texts or thangkas is locally regarded as causing bad karma; it is thus preferable to burn them or give them away.

¹⁶ Conches are locally understood to be powerful instruments linked to the realm of the nagas.



Fig. 2 — (left) Charm box containing an image of the wrathful tantric deity Tamdrin. (right) Pema Namgyal and Mémé Chettan Dorje performing a comic interlude during a stone-breaking ceremony. Lara 2004.

Mémé Buchen wear charm boxes (Tib. *ga'u*) in performance. Most larger boxes contain an image of the wrathful tantric deity Tamdrin (Tib. *rta mgrin*, Sk. *Hayagrīva*), who protects the wearer and is the deity visualised by the Mémé Buchen during the stone-breaking ceremony. These rituals are still occasionally commissioned by villagers or monasteries in Pin and Spiti when constructing a new building.¹⁷ Historically, they were commissioned to combat outbreaks of disease.¹⁸ The sword dance is a dramatic section of the ceremony, culminating in the head Buchen leaping on to the tips of the swords, placed under his belly, in his armpits, his cheek or even an eye socket.

We discovered numerous pairs of these swords (Tib. *ral gri*). Daggers (Tib. *rdo rje phur pa*) are also very common. Some informants suggest that Thangtong Gyalpo broke stones with a dagger when exorcising demons¹⁹ and the dagger is used to make a series of circular and stabbing movements during stone-breaking ceremonies. In tantric rituals they are associated with the curing of disease, exorcism and the vanquishing of demons.²⁰

¹⁷ When on tour the Buchen will always undertake the exorcism in the host village. It is seen as beneficial not only for the household which has commissioned the performance but generally for the whole community.

¹⁸ Roerich (1932: p.28).

¹⁹ Roerich, in contrast, states that Thangtong Gyalpo used "another stone similar to a magic dagger" (1932: p.29).

²⁰ Müller-Ebeling et al (2002: p.55) .



Fig. 3 — The late Mémé Tsewang Rigzin preparing to dance with swords during a stone-breaking ceremony. Sangnam 1998.



Fig. 4 — A pair of swords complete with scabbards (Tib gri shubs).



Fig. 5 — A brass dagger. Unusual as most daggers we located are iron, adorned with faces of a wrathful deity.

Tongkas (Tib. *thong ga*, lit. chest) are ornamentations consisting of four carved pieces of conch shell, held together with strips of cloth and string, often decorated with brass buttons or silver coins. They are worn on the chest of performing Mémé Buchen.²¹

²¹ Interestingly, early historical photographs of Buchen stone-breaking ceremonies show Buchen performing without tongkas. Neither of the two Mémé Buchen captured in Coldstream's photographs from Pin Valley are wearing them. The photographs accompanying Georges de Roerich's 1932 article document two separate stone-breaking ceremonies, but again neither of the Mémé Buchen is wearing a tongka.



Fig. 6 — Tongkas.



Fig. 7 — Mémé Gatuk Sonam invoking demons during a stone-breaking ceremony. Lalung 2006.



Fig. 8 — Metal and clay statues of the crazy saint Thangtong Gyalpo.

We discovered a substantial variety of metal or clay statues (Tib. *sku 'dra*) of the crazy saint Thangtong Gyalpo, sometimes painted, sometimes clothed.²² A common depiction holding links of chain in his right hand, references his iron-bridge building activities.²³ There are numerous local stories about the power of these statues and their embodiment of the presence of Thangtong Gyalpo. One informant asserted that the face of the statue in his possession would darken with displeasure and lighten with happiness during recitations. One non-Buchen householder narrated the tale of his large red sandalwood statue of Thangtong Gyalpo. It apparently flew from Tibet, landed in a field in Spiti and spoke to a passing farmer who took it in. Buchen talk about borrowing this statue, but when they try to leave the village it becomes too heavy to carry. Another elderly Buchen recollected seeing a ghostly emanation of Thangtong Gyalpo emerging from his statue in Tibet.²⁴

An informant from Mud remembers travelling with his father to Chung Riwoche (Tib. *gcung ri bo che*) to visit the Thangtong Gyalpo statue.²⁵ At Mount Kailash they met the reincarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo who he remembers as a very dark-skinned bearded man,

²² Thangtong Gyalpo, the 14/15th century Tibetan Mahāsiddha, is widely regarded as the founder of the Lama Mani and Buchen tradition, along with his student Ranapatta (Tib. *ratna bha dra* Skt. Ratnabhadra). Buchen see themselves as having a spiritual lineage connection back to Thangtong Gyalpo, and through him to Chenrezig (Tib. *spyen ras gzigs* Skt. Avalokiteśvara) the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Thangtong Gyalpo is viewed by the Buchen as a manifestation of Chenrezig. All Buchen performances, whether plays or stone-breakings, present a statue of Thangtong Gyalpo placed on a wooden box 'altar'. As audiences gather for a performance, women will bring bowls of barley grains as an offering to Thangtong Gyalpo, offerings which also function as a payment to the Buchen. Buchen mix the role of spreading the Dharma through the medium of entertainment with the economic necessity of making a living. Larger plays bring larger audiences and more generous donations of barley, which is cashed in before leaving the village.

²³ Thangtong Gyalpo is widely referred to by the epithet Iron-Bridge Man (Tib. *lcags zam pa*). See Stearns (2007).

²⁴ On the other hand, when I asked Mémé Chettan (Tsetan) Dorje about his relationship with Thangtong Gyalpo he laughed and told me he was a living human being and Thangtong Gyalpo merely a lump of metal.

²⁵ Chung Riwoche monastery is situated by the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river near Ngamring in the Tibetan province of Ü-Tsang. It is well over 500 miles from Spiti.

with his long hair tied in a topknot.²⁶ Another informant recalls his father meeting the reincarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo who was encamped outside Lhasa.

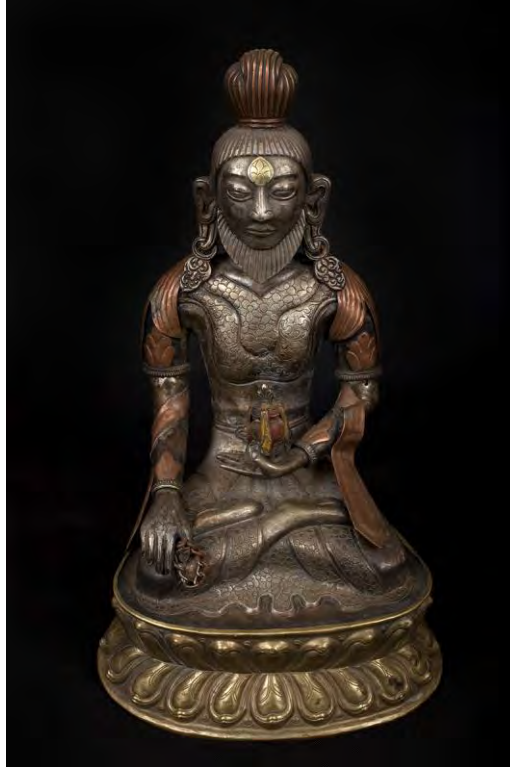


Fig. 9 — Statue of Thangtong Gyalpo holding links of iron chain in his right hand.

Tengam (Tib. *rten sgam*) are double-doored wooden boxes with rectangular vertical corner uprights that form feet at the bottom and turrets at the top of the box. Some are plain, some ornately carved and a few painted.

²⁶ All the statues of Thangtong Gyalpo in Pin depict him with hair drawn up into a topknot. Mémé Buchen used to wear their hair uncut in long dreadlocks, as can be seen in the Coldstream photographs, but this has become uncommon. The spiritual head of Gungri monastery, Yomed Tulku (Tib. *g.yo med sprul sku*), is encouraging Pin's Mémé Buchen to wear their hair long again. He regards the vow to refrain from cutting their hair once they have first entered retreat as an essential element of their tantric initiation.

The upper corners are sometimes decorated with white, red, yellow and blue flags (Tib. *dar lcog*) just like a real Spiti house.²⁷ Buchen carry the reliquary box, containing a statue of Thangtong Gyalpo, on their backs, as they walk from village to village.²⁸ Women who flock to greet the arriving troupe used to compete for the honour of carrying Thangtong Gyalpo into the village.

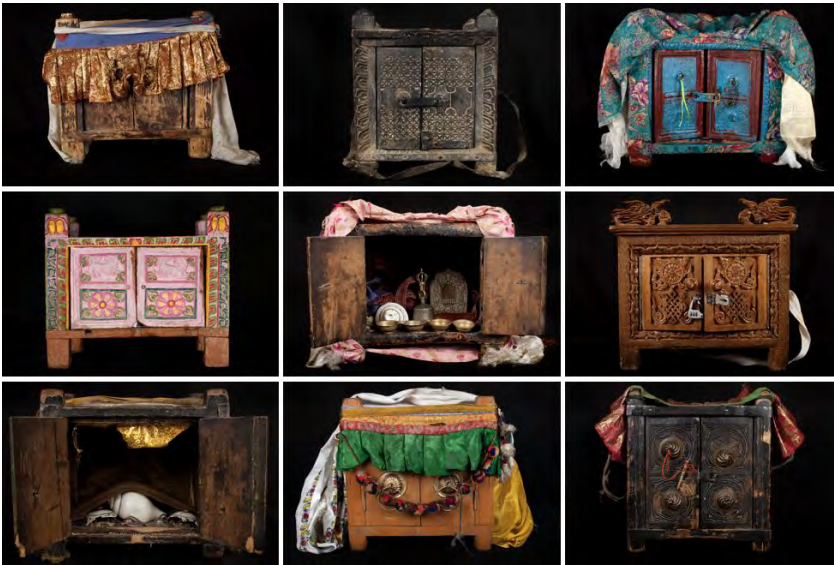


Fig. 10 — Tengam, double-doored wooden boxes.

The kokpo is a horse-headed musical instrument with three pairs of strings, a regional form of the Tibetan dranyen (Tib. *sgra snyan*). Strummed with a plectrum, it provides a soft, low rhythmical accompaniment to songs and the basis for Buchen-led dances, to which the shuffling or stamping of feet adds an extra sonic and percussive dimension. One beautifully preserved older example that we located is carved from a single piece of wood and still has the original wooden pegs for tensioning the strings.

²⁷ Some informants spoke of their Tengam as Thangtong Gyalpo's home. These boxes also function as portable altars.

²⁸ Perhaps echoing the Charles Bell photographs of Lama Mani carrying a Tashi Gomang Chorten (Tib. *bkra shis sgo mang mchod rten*); see Sutherland, P. and Tsering, T. (2011: p.90).



*Fig. 11 — (left) A kokpo, a horse-headed musical instrument with three pairs of strings, which is strummed with a plectrum.
 (right) A piang, a wooden, triple-stringed, horse-headed instrument which is held in a vertical position and bowed like a fiddle.*

Modern instruments are made by locally-based Nepali woodworkers or purchased outside the valley. Mémé Buchen lead the dancing that follows many theatrical performances and at the nightly parties that punctuate their winter tours.²⁹ Playing the kokpo is regarded as an essential Buchen skill. One informant, who spent two or three periods in retreat in a cave and also memorised key texts, never managed to complete his training as a Mémé Buchen.³⁰ Critically he failed to master the kokpo and consequently could not lead the community in dance.

Piang (Tib. *pi wang*) are widespread across the Tibetan world but uncommon in Spiti; few younger Buchen own or can play the instrument. This wooden, triple-stringed, horse-headed instrument is held in a vertical position and bowed like a fiddle to accompany singing and sung prayers. Its plaintive, scratchy sound commonly echoes the melody as Buchen and villagers sing together, calling out and responding.

One villager in Mud recalled a Lhamo-like troupe of seven men and women who performed a simple play in the village over fifty years ago. Musical accompaniment was provided by a single instrument, a solitary piang. They came from Tibet, spoke in a language the villagers could not understand, and wore long, wide-sleeved costumes. They were treated respectfully, given money and barley. Wandering Tibetan theatre groups would occasionally reach Spiti and Buchen would also tour into Western Tibet.

Prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Buchen would travel on foot as far as Purang where, as recently as 2010, monks at Khorchags monastery remembered visiting troupes from Pin Valley performing the stone-breaking ritual and sword dance. Now they mainly tour around Pin and Spiti, Kinnaur and occasionally Ladakh. Their audience is changing and their theatre performed less frequently, but they are seeking new audiences. The Chinese occupation curtailed

²⁹ Many plays end with the audience, led by the head Buchen, dancing to the rhythm of the kokpo and chanting *Om maṇi padme hūṃ*, the six syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara.

³⁰ Mémé Buchen go through a process of training, including substantial time in retreat, under the guidance of senior lamas from Gungri monastery as well as being mentored by experienced senior Buchen. Trainees are expected to perform in all the villages of Pin before they are accepted by the local community and allowed to tour further afield. However, the late Mémé Rigzin failed to observe these rulings but was still regarded highly in Pin as an impressive and potent performer.

Buchen travelling to Kailash, Chung Riwoche, and Lhasa as well as Western Tibetan groups entering Pin. What has been lost is not just the potential income and material benefits but the wider cultural connections with distant populations and communities, opportunities for pilgrimage and gaining merit, and a concomitant loss of Buchen experience, influence, and status. Such tours could last several months. One informant from a dormant household revealed how the necessity of spending long periods away from home precluded him from becoming a Buchen; he was the sole breadwinner for a small family.³¹



Fig. 12 — Mémé Tsering Tobgye holding a kokpo. Par 1998.

³¹ Several informants mentioned how arduous the life of Buchen could be, travelling away from their families for months at a time, often remunerated for their performances in barley and old clothing.

Buchen tour their theatre in winter when roads may be snow-blocked and passable only on foot.³² Consequently, they travel light.³³ All troupes perform the popular story of Drimet Künden (Tib. *dri med kun ldan*), particularly a scene with a dancing elephant, and some carry a painted cloth which is pinned to the forehead of the animal.



Fig. 13 — A painted cloth which is pinned to the forehead of an elephant, its image of the wish fulfilling gem illustrating a key element of the story of Drimet Künden.

Its image of the wish fulfilling gem (Tib. *yid bzhin nor bu*) illustrates a crucial element in the story of the compassionate prince who gives away his father's kingdom's wealth to the needy, his children to a childless couple and eventually even his eyes to a blind man. The rest of the elephant body, fashioned from cloth and osiers is constructed in situ. Parrots and horses, key props for danced episodes of the same story, are also assembled locally.

³² Though Buchen now commonly travel by vehicle to Ladakh, Upper Kinnaur and throughout Spiti, material to be carried is still kept to a minimum.

³³ Even the complex headgear, emblematic of the Mémé Buchen, folds away, its multi-coloured silk streamers bundled together tightly.

A few troupes have masks, made from animal skin or cloth, including one mask of the crazy saint Drukpa Kunley (Tib. *'brug pa Kun legs*). But there is an established tradition of improvisation and many facial disguises are created from barley flour or dough, marked with soot or oil. Touring troupes also rely on community support. Costumes for male and female characters including hats, jewellery and other props denoting monks, brides, grooms, old men and women, princes and merchants are sometimes found locally within the host village. Such borrowing establishes a closer connection with the participating community, some of whom are drawn into the larger plays and performances as extras or as the butt of humour.



Fig. 14 — Palden Dorje dressed as the elephant keeper in a scene from the story of Drimet Künden, Lara 2004.

Much Buchen performance is comedic. Dolls appear as props in Buchen birth scenes, emerging to the groans, grimaces and pains of a man in labour.



Fig. 15 — (left) A cloth mask of Drukpa Kunley.
 (right) A Teletubby used in comedic Buchen birth scenes. This doll did not fit the British Library Endangered Archives Programme criteria for being endangered and the image is not in their digitised archive.

Five-lobed crowns depicting the five Buddha families (Tib. *rgyal ba rigs lnga*) are worn in the stone-breaking ceremony. The older, painted hats are made from cloth, primed and stiffened with wheat paste. The project was interested primarily in the old and endangered, the focus of all Endangered Archive Programme funding. I personally embraced the modern and improvised, copying all items with equal care, including five-lobed crowns constructed from cardboard boxes.

One dormant household owns a wooden printing block (Tib. *shing par*) carved with male and female demon figures, each with their feet chained together.³⁴ This unique item is used to make paper or cloth prints for attaching to the stone in stone-breaking rituals.

³⁴ The current owner's grandfather also carved printing blocks for Gungri monastery.



Fig. 16 — An old, painted five-section cloth crown depicting the five Buddha families.



Fig. 17 — A modern cardboard five-section crown.



Fig. 18 — A wooden printing block carved with male and female demon figures, each with their feet chained together, used to make paper or cloth prints for attaching to the stone in stone-breaking rituals.

The stone-breaking ceremony involves the invoking of and entrapment of demons. Some Buchen use photocopies derived from prints from this block or draw demon figures directly on to the stone surface. Drawn images often explicitly depict the sex of the two demons.

Buchen Thangkas

Buchen thangkas are primarily narrative paintings. They are a visual version of the storytelling texts, used as an illustrational aid, perhaps aimed originally at non-literate village audiences.³⁵ It is revealing to compare the Buchen narrative thangkas en masse. Of the two dozen or so paintings we located and documented, eight portray the story of Drowa Zangmo (Tib. *'gro ba bzang mo*), four show scenes of hell, probably depicting the tale of Delok Lingza Chökyit (Tib. *gling bza' chos skyid*),³⁶ three the story of Pema Öbar (Tib. *padma 'od 'bar*), three the story of Nangsa Öbum and two the story of Drimet Künden. Additionally there is one painting representing the story of Guru Chöwang (Tib. *gu ru chos dbang*).³⁷ We also discovered two thangkas of the wrathful protector deity Tamdrin.

In contrast to the densely symbolic thangkas found within Spiti's monasteries and prayer rooms, these visual stories are direct and relatively simple in their expression. They present innumerable illustrative and instructive scenes, fragmentary narrative extracts enmeshed within a complex and imaginative topography of environmental forms, architectural spaces and sky, arranged around a central deity. The earlier and later elements of the written story overlap in a format that compresses the narrative chronology within a restricted two-dimensional graphic space.

The commonest thangkas, those of Drowa Zangmo, can be divided up into three groups of related paintings. The first group

³⁵ Buchen use of an iron pointer (Tib. *lcags mda'*) to pick out key scenes depicted on a narrative thangka whilst describing a story prior to a performance, closely echoes the wider Tibetan tradition of Lama Mani storytelling.

³⁶ Delok (Tib. *'das log*, lit. returnee from the death realm).

³⁷ The thangkas parallel the story described in the written text, operating as both illustration and visual interpretation. The stories of all of the narrative thangkas listed here also exist within Spiti in the form of an old handwritten texts. Each story also forms part of the repertoire of simple 'plays' performed by Buchen. There are other plays within the Buchen repertoire for which no known old text or thangka exists locally.

consists of three almost identical versions of the same *thangka*.³⁸ The visual interpretation of the written narrative and its manifestation in terms of the placement of key pictorial scenes within the vertical space of the painting are the same.



Fig. 19 — Details from two narrative thangkas illustrating the story of Drowa Zangmo.

The style and quality of the drawing, the scale of figures and quantity of detail within the scenes, the depiction of human and animal forms in terms of gesture and posture, as well as the

³⁸ Such copying is clearly the customary process for replacing worn and faded *thangkas*. However, Sonam Angdui, a *thangka* painter living in Kaza, the administrative centre of Spiti, told me that he prefers to work directly from the original text for such paintings. Perhaps the earliest of these three versions, all of which he painted, is a completely original work composed purely as a response to the written narrative. Buchen *thangka* paintings are delicate objects and subject to damage as they are rolled up and carried in bags on long journeys. They are exposed to sunlight, dust, wind and precipitation during performances. Many *thangkas* in Pin show signs of heavy use, i.e. loss of pigment, holes and tears in fabric, and staining. In another example of copying, Blondeau (1986), refers to two Lama Mani *thangkas* in the Musée Guimet in Paris. They are from the collection of Jacques Bacot gathered in Eastern Tibet around 1910, one a 'garish' copy of the much faded older painting.

depictions of specific details of landscape, match each other precisely. Actual disparities between the three scrolls are partly to do with age and consequent loss of pigmentation in the oldest image but also to do with variations in the pigments chosen for details of clothing, skin colour and elements of the landscape. The position of the explanatory written texts that accompanies each scene varies somewhat more.

Clearly decipherable are several key elements of this well-known tale, including the birth of Drowa Zangmo; the King searching for his lost dog during a hunting trip; the furious and evil demoness Queen; Drowa Zangmo's flight to the realm of the five *dākinī* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*); the presentation of animal hearts to the demoness Queen who is feigning illness and has demanded the hearts of Drowa Zangmo's children as the only possible cure; the children's abandonment in a forest with fruit trees and a poisonous snake; their abduction and attempted murder by being thrown from a cliff; Drowa Zangmo's manifestations as a parrot and as a pair of fish; and the killing of the Queen by an arrow fired by Drowa Zangmo's son.

The second group is of two paintings that are equally clearly connected, one evidently copied from the other.



Fig. 20 — Details from two narrative thangkas illustrating the story of Drowa Zangmo.

But one is more richly detailed, presenting a more complex visual narrative, the other a very significantly simplified version of the story; some key scenes have been carefully copied and others left out. The overall graphic structures are the same, with nearly identical visual interpretations and placement of key narrative scenes, depictions of landscape, and buildings. One painting, the simpler form, has a small number of explanatory written captions, the other has none.³⁹

The final group of three are, perhaps, less obviously connected. They reveal their similarities only when examined in some detail.



Fig. 21 — Details from two narrative thangkas illustrating the story of Drowa Zangmo.

They are older, well used and consequently stained and creased. One has a central figure of a blue wrathful deity, one a red wrathful deity (both are Tamdrin) and one a Buddha figure. The overall structural arrangements of shapes, scenes, figures, and architectural details in two is definitely comparable, with variations in detail but with great overall similarity of form, grouping and gestures. The third thangka has very similar structure in the bottom right and left of the painting but is different in the top half. It is badly faded and accordingly trickier to read.

³⁹ The simpler reproduction may have been constrained by financial issues. The commissioning of a thangka is expensive in Spiti and the amount of detail requested is reflected in the final cost. It is noticeable that some modern thangkas are unmounted, again substantially reducing the cost of production.

Like this last group, the two thangkas of Drimet Künden bear comparison in the overall structure and in many of the individual scenes but many of the characters are located in slightly different positions on the painting. Colours are changed and some scenes are quite different. Overall one seems to be a simplified version of the other. Some scenes show obvious and very direct copying but with substantial space for individual interpretation. Others seem to show an overall similarity of structure and shape but vary substantially in the placement of key figures.

In contrast, the four depictions of Hell, the story of Delok Lingza Chökyit, seem very different. The depiction of the Lord of Death (Tib. *gzhin rje*), the process of the judgement of the dead, the depictions of torture by the servants of the Lord of Death, of boiling, impaling and freezing are all treated differently. There are some broad structural similarities but no real evidence of a clear process of copying. Some of the paintings are quite beautifully drawn, rich in detail and subtle in their depiction of story details. Others are quite crude in comparison. It is clear that there is an established tradition of employing trained thangka painters to produce or copy narrative paintings, but I wonder whether some of these thangkas may have been produced by the Buchen themselves.

We also located three thangkas of Nangsa Öbum. One, brought back from Purang in Western Tibet by Mémé Gatuk, is very beautifully drawn and has been unused for decades.

Nangsa Öbum is one of the most widely known and popular stories in Tibet, illustrating the difficulties of living within the material world whilst trying to follow the Dharma. It tells of Nangsa's struggle against expectations, social conventions, secular power and material wealth. She was a beautiful and extraordinary *dākinī*, born as a human into a simple country household to a childless and elderly village couple. She dreamed of devoting her life to the Dharma. A powerful regional Lord, a widower, spots Nangsa at a festival and cajoles her to into marrying his son. Nangsa's sister-in-law turns out to be jealous, cruel and resentful, and spreads malicious rumours about her. Nangsa works hard and dedicates herself to her husband and child but is berated for giving alms to lamas. She is overheard talking to a beggar – actually a lama – in her rooms and accused of being unfaithful to her husband. Beaten to death, her body is wrapped in a white shroud and taken to the mountains. Nangsa subsequently appears before the Lord of Death

where she witnesses the realms of hell and graphic scenes of suffering and torture. However, she is judged to be pure and blameless and instructed to return to the world of the living and to continue to practice the Dharma. The visual representation of these details from the written texts can be easily located within the narrative *thangka*.



Fig. 22 — Narrative thangka illustrating the story of Nangsa Öbum.

Buchen Texts

Buchen read the complete texts of such stories to winter gatherings. Occasionally they read sections during theatrical performances.

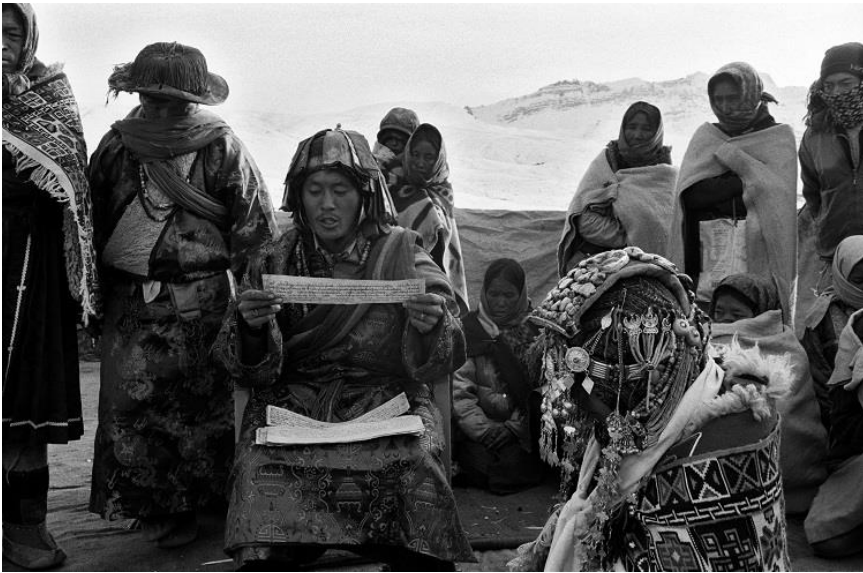


Fig. 23 — Mémé Gatuk Sonam reading from a text in a performance of the play about the marriage of King Songtsen Gampo (Tib. srong btsan sgam po). Langsa 2007.

A narration of the story of Nangsa Öbum which I attended had the audience weeping loudly at the harrowing description of Nangsa's suffering. Yet the same story, performed as a play, included an obscene and uproarious comedic interlude in which a long-tailed monkey, covered in rough sacking, appears on all fours and starts to dance to the music of a kokpo, eventually rising up to reveal its substantial red genitalia, much to the amusement of the audience.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ A phallus also appears as a prop in performances of the story of Drukpa Künley. The phallus we photographed was carved from wood but other phalluses are made from stuffed animal intestines. The 'obscene' elements of Buchen performance might well have other associations apart from the comedic. For a Bhutanese parallel; see Chhoki (1994).



Fig. 24 — A wooden phallus that is used as a prop in some performances of the story of Nangsa Öbum.

Performances creatively reimagine the written texts, dramatising and frequently embellishing very minor and peripheral elements of the story. Many comic scenes are shared by different troupes and form part of the Buchen intangible performance tradition.

We documented many texts, hand written or woodblock printed unbound pages on handmade paper, which are often incomplete or have replacement pages. Photocopies are also in common use and modern story books are now widespread. There are few original texts but these include a short biography of Ranapatta, a Tamdrin text, the stories of Drowa Zangmo, Nangsa Öbum, Karma Wangzin (Tib. *Karma dbang 'dzin*), Guru Choswang, Pema Öbar, Drimed Künden, Zhuki Nyima (Tib. *gZugs kyi nyi ma*), Gelongma Palmo (Tib. *dGe slong ma dpal mo*), Lingza Chökyit, Gyalsa Belzey (Tib. *rGya bza' bal bza*), and the advice given to Gyalsa Belzey by her mother before her marriage (Tib. *'dzangs yig*).

The commonest original text we found is the story of Delok Lingza Chökyit, which exists in several old copies.⁴¹ The story illustrates karmic principles. It describes her descent into hell where she witnesses the judgement of the dead before returning to inform the world of the living about what potentially awaits them at the end of their lives.

⁴¹ For an excellent analysis and description of several delok texts; see Cuevas (2008).



Fig. 25 — A text of the story of Lingza Chökyit (Tib. *Gling bza' chos skyid*).

In a thangka image that illustrates this narrative, a line of people await judgement. Above them the Lord of Death weighs out their good and bad deeds on a scale as one of his servants observes their lives in a karmic mirror. Several people have black ropes attached to them, indicating that the judgement will be negative because they have a surfeit of negative deeds in their life. They will be dragged down into the monstrous realms of hell to be boiled, frozen, impaled or tortured in myriad ways.



Fig. 26 — Detail from a narrative thangka illustrating the realms of hell in the story of Lingza Chökyit.



Fig. 27 — Mémé Gatuk Sonam performs as Yama, the Lord of Death, in a play describing the judgement of the dead, based on the story of Lingza Chökyit, Langsa 2007.

Buchen theatrical performances parallel that depiction. In the village of Langsa, two servants of the Lord of Death have captured a man with their black ropes and dragged him in front of the judgement tribunal. A set of scales holding black and white pebbles measures out good and bad actions and a karmic mirror reflects his life. Villagers witness the proceedings and have brought offerings of bowls of barley grains placed in front of the altar. Audiences sometimes give clothes to the Buchen during Lingza Chökyit performances. Such gifts are believed to help the deceased, trapped and suffering naked in the freezing waters of cold hell realms. The clothes are an offering to Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Conclusion

It is their tantric training during their long periods in retreat that gives Mémé Buchen their power to perform the stone-breaking ritual, to summon, entrap and banish demons.⁴² This power gives them

⁴² Mémé Buchen are required to spend significant time in retreat under the tutelage of senior monks from Gungri monastery. During these periods of isolation, they are trained in yogic techniques, the memorising of texts and the visualisation of deities. It is not until they have undertaken extensive retreat that they are allowed to perform. (see Dollfus 2004).

status and respect. The stone-breaking is associated with the banishment of disease and Buchen more generally with healing. On tour, Buchen perform apotropaic prayers against 'slander and gossips' (Tib. *mi kha*), culminating in loud clapping to drive away evil spirits. They occasionally offer healing by blowing a mantra over the face of a sick person. In Kinnaur, clippings of Buchen hair taken from visiting performers was once used for its magical healing properties. It would be burned if the goats and sheep stopped giving milk or the smoke would be blown over the face of a woman who had become possessed. One dormant household remembered a relative whose cremation ashes contained auspicious egg-like relics. Another talked of a relative they called Delok Mémé, i.e. a grandfather who apparently died then came back to life for a month.



Fig. 28 — Detail from a narrative thangka illustrating the realms of hell and the judgement of the dead in the story of Lingza Chökyit. At the top right is a depiction of a Buchen like figure turning a prayer wheel.

Buchen are seen to have instrumental power in their relationship with the netherworld, having the potential to intervene in the afterlife. Consequently, they are given small payments by relatives of

the recently deceased to mention them in prayers. There is a local belief that the Buchen can guide the dead out of the realms of hell.



Fig. 29 — Detail from a narrative thangka of the story of Lingza Chökyit. A figure with prayer wheel is leading people out of the realms of hell.

Buchen trace their lineage through Ranapatta to Thangtong Gyalpo, and through Thangtong Gyalpo to Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. One Mémé Buchen explained that local villagers believe that the Buchen can protect people in the afterlife, to reduce their suffering in hell. But, as he elucidated, it is in reality Chenrezig who can protect them, and who can lead them out of hell. Therefore, he suggested, people have to visualise the Buchen as Chenrezig.

It is locally understood that those in hell who chant the sacred six syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara can hear the sound of a Buchen prayer wheel being turned and by following this sound, can find a path out of hell and escape.

Similarly, the story of Guru Chöwang describes how chanting the sacred mantra in hell released his mother, until that point a non-

believer. Prayer wheels, the sound they produce, and the chanting of the mantra are key ingredients in these beliefs. Several of the Buchen prayer wheels we discovered are equipped with a small hook on which to catch an individual at risk of disappearing into hell. A hook that “draws the faithful to the Dharma” as expressed in the biography of Ranapatta:

“This white conch I carry in my hand
 Is a sign I’m a son of the Great Compassionate One.
 The undiminished lineage is Ratna Bhadra’s lineage
 The undiminished teaching is the teaching of the six-
 syllables
 The undiminished Dharma is the lotus in bloom
 And I am a bee on my rounds around the kingdom.
 I am the Lochen who lectures on karmic cause and effect,
 The hook who draws the faithful to the Dharma,
 And the guide who leads the sinful to the path of repentance.
 I am the source from which the Lochen-s spring.”⁴³



Fig. 30 — Buchen prayer wheel (Tib. mani chos 'khor) equipped with a hook.

⁴³ From the biography of Lochen Ranapatta quoted in Sutherland, P. and Tsering, T. (2011:86).

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