

Efforts to conserve the dying tradition

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It wasn't long ago when people visiting the memorial choeten or the weekend vegetable market in Thimphu could see men dressed in a red gho with red kabney, singing spiritual songs of devotion and realisation to the listeners accompanying the miniature stupas called Tashi Gomang.

These men are known as Lam Manips, the custodians of the Tashi Gomangs. Today, the number of these custodians has dwindled down to two senior Manips: Manip Kunzang Tenzing, 72, and Manip Kinley, 84.

With them, this unique 379-year-old tradition is now on the verge of extinction.

Under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother Kesang Choeden Wangchuck, Dr Thierry Mathou and Tshering Tashi started the Tashi Gomang Project to record, conserve and revive the Tashi Gomang and the Lam Manip tradition to ensure the continuity of this tradition.

On November 5, an exhibition titled Tashi Gomang: A National Treasure of Bhutan was held at the Royal Textile Academy (RTA).

The Tashi Gomang Project has been able to record 34 known and registered Tashi Gomangs in the country, out of which 29 was showcased at the exhibition.

These 29 Tashi Gomangs were conserved and restored by the Central Monastic Body, Department of Culture, Thangka Restoration and Conservation Centre and the skilled Bhutanese craftsmen of Department of National Properties for six months before they were returned to their respective places.

Tashi Gomang literally means stupa of 'auspicious multi-door'. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, a Tashi Gomang is the third of the eight stupas that represent the eight important events in the life of Lord Buddha.

Although there are no written records of the Tashi Gomang and the tradition of Lam Manips, there are several oral stories relating to the origin and tradition of the Tashi Gomang.

Origin of Tashi Gomang

It was around 1637 when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel started the construction of Punakha Dzong. Several events happened that time. Protective deities would aid the construction works during the day while evil forces would demolish the structures that was built at night. Zhabdrung, having already confronted with such situation, would meditate to find a solution.

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A drama on Tashi Gomang is held during the opening of the exhibition at the RTA

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While he was meditating, a *dakini* known as Dechen Gyem appeared to him, Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

"The *dakini* told Zhabdrung to build a Tashi Gomang to subdue the evil forces. After seeing the vision, Zhabdrung summoned the best carpenters. None of the carpenters knew of Tashi Gomang or how it looked like. A carpenter suggested Zhabdrung of a man living in Balip, a neighbouring village. He was known as Zow Balip, an incarnation of Vishvakarma (the divine craftsman)," Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

Zow Balip had never built a Tashi Gomang before. Zhabdrung instructed Zow Balip to sleep in his presence for three consecutive nights. In his dreams, Zhabdrung told him that he would be able to see how to built the dzong and a replica of Tashi Gomang, Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

"Zow Balip is said to have dreamt that he visited Ralung monastery in Tibet and Guru Rinpoche's Zangdopelri palace. There he was able to see and understand the dimensions of the structures he had to built. Zow Balip was finally be able to build the Tashi Gomang," Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

When the Tashi Gomang was built, Zhabdrung is said to have added his own touch. He carved various Buddhist figures the size of his thumb. Upon the completion of the Tashi Gomang, the building of the dzong resumed without any hindrances.

Today, the Tashi Gomang built by Zow Balip and blessed by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel is placed in the *utse* or the main tower of the Punakha dzong, Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

The Tashi Gomang is the main attraction of the exhibition.

About Manip Kunzang Tenzing

Manip Kunzang Tenzing was born and brought up in Nyala village in Trongsa. At an age of eight, he was enrolled in his village's lhakhang where he received monastic education for the next 13 years. After that, he studied in Semtokha dzong for four years.

After completion of his studies, he returned to his village. There he worked as a caretaker of the lhakhang.

At the age of 55, he became a Lam Manip and continued his duties for the next 20 years. During his stay in his village, he travelled all across Trongsa carrying the Tashi Gomang.

Manip Kunzang Tenzing, then, had to travel to Thimphu for medical treatment. He brought his Tashi Gomang with him and lives in Namseling today.

Manip Kunzang Tenzing displays his Tashi Gomang to the public only on auspicious days. From whatever he earns, he gives Nu 4,000 to Danglha lhakhang, which is used to conduct rituals at the lhakhang.

Even at an age of 74, Manip Kunzang Tenzing said he can still carry the Tashi Gomang, which can weigh up to 20 kgs.

It's disheartening to know that this unique age-old tradition is going to die with elder Manips like us, Manip Kunzang Tenzing said.

"Such efforts and initiatives to preserve the Tashi Gomang are crucial. I'm thankful to Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother and others for undertaking such measures to preserve and revive the Tashi Gomang, which are on the verge of disappearance," Manip Kunzang Tenzing said. "I'm happy that I can teach young Manips and help Bhutanese rediscover this important part of our cultural heritage."



Manip Kunzang Tenzing trains a new batch of Manips who will continue the tradition

The exhibition is held to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel to Bhutan, who is credited for introducing the tradition.

The exhibition will be opened for three months.

RTA in collaboration with the Tashi Gomang Project, Central Monastic Body, Department of Culture and the Thangka Restoration and Conservation Centre is organising the exhibition.



Manip Kunzang Tenzing