**TSAM (RELIGIOUS MASK DANCE)**

Tsam dance is a part of secret tantric rituals. Although its origin is traced to Tibet, the tsam dance is enriched with various Mongol cultural elements, namely the creative imagination and aesthetics of Mongol craftsmen, the roles of heroic figures of folk myths and epics, and elements of shamanism and arhaic religious phenomena. These Mongol elements give the dance its own Mongol character. Tsam is a complex art of religion and culture, practiced as an integration of body, language, and intellectual genius into a single meaning with the help of dance movements and the charm of religious chanting and meditation.

There were different types of tsam dances practiced in monasteries across Mongolia, such as Tsam of Erleg, Tsam of Tara, Tsam of Geser, Tsam of Milalaib, Tsam of Gurbazar, Tsam of Naidanjüeg, Tsam of Zegi Gombo, Begaizin Dormo Tsam, Tsam of Man, and Tsam of Bukh. Among these tsam styles, the Tsam of Erleg Nomun Khan, or sometimes called Jakhar tsam, was the most widespread type. It was properly transmitted from generation to generation with complete costumes, masks and customs.

In 1811, Jakhar tsam was first performed on stage in Ikh Khuree (the former capital of Mongolia). Subsequently, it was performed 127 times until it was prohibited in 1937. In 1992, after 62 years, the ritual was revived and choreographed at the Gandantegchenling Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, in accordance with the traditional style. The tsam dance in Ikh Khuree was choreographed every year on the 9th day of the last summer month. It commenced at sunrise and continued until sunset. Over the day, around 108-128 different roles were performed, representing upper, middle and under universes with costumes of different colours, masks and sizes. Each and every movements of the tsam dance has their own names. Every character in the tsam ritual performs its individual actions either to invoke, bless, or demolish a spiritual essence through the appropriate musical rhythms. The religious orchestra consists of ikh buree (grand trumpet), khen-

gereg (big drum), bishgür (shawm), tsan (cymsbals), ganlin (human-bone trumpet), dun buree (conch trumpet), duudaram (gong-chimes), and damar (double-headed hourglass drum).

Among the types of Khuree tsam performances, there are versions with specific Mongol characteristics. For instance, Tsagaan övön (Old White Man), regarded as ‘Ornii uut nasi ikh tenger’ (Great heaven of earth with long life) is an original Mongol role that cannot be found elsewhere. He is the master of land, water and man, a spirit that existed in shamanism long before the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia. Also in Khuree tsam, there are roles of four deities called as Khansahta Dövön Lus or Donsh Döröv, representing the spirit masters of four surrounding mountains of the capital city.

They are Garuda (mythic bird in Buddhist tradition), the spirit master of Bogd khan mountain in the south, Gakkhai khansahta (Pig snout), the master of Chingeltei mountain in the north, Nokhii khansahta (Dog snout), the spirit of Bayanzuurk mountain in the east, and Khur Uulii övön (Old man of the Black mountain), the master of the Songinokhairhan mountain in the west. Other characters specific to Khuree Tsam are a Crow, and two heroes, Büüveibaatar and Shijirbaatar, with armour and weapons, reminiscent of ancient warriors, who are protectors of offerings from the Crow.

The tsam dance art is closely linked to the tsam mask crafts. One of the examples is the famous coral mask of Red Deity, presented in the chapter concerning the traditional craftsmanship. Besides wrathful deities, there are also calm and peaceful characters such as Tsagaan övön (White Old Man) and Khasin Khaan (Khasshin the King). The example of the Tsagaan övön mask, which shows a happy and humorous face, is one of the most important creations of the Mongol tsam. It embodies a meaning in its actions and movements.

Japanese researcher Kimura Ayako, who conducted comparative studies on tsam masks of different countries, stated: "Compared to tsam masks of other Buddhist countries, the Mongol Khuree tsam masks are the biggest in terms of size with the best design and most exquisiteness of costumes and decorations. Also, its ritual has the widest and the most in-depth meaning among tsam dances of neighbouring Buddhist countries. Therefore, the Mongol tsam is one of the most precious ones among the others."