

# The ephemerality of things described through the tibetan skeleton dance

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Tibetan Skeleton Dance is a type of Cham dance commonly performed at Monlam, the ten day Tibetan prayer festival beginning on the Tibetan New Year, as well as at cemetery rituals, although these dances are very private and impossible to observe. Cham dance as a musical tradition may have had its beginnings as early as 637 AD before the language of Tibet was even fully developed, although ancient Tibetan dances were probably quite different from those one might observe today.

The Skeleton Dances, both Yama Dharmaraja Cham, and Durdak Cham is a representation of Tibetan Buddhist teachings of impermanence. The dance is meant to remind the audience of the ephemeral nature of all things, including oneself and one's state of mind. The dance and the music teach the audience how an acceptance of this ephemerality lead to joy and happiness accompanying a better understanding of life. Part of the idea of the dance is also to dismiss evil, especially when the dance is not performed celebratorily, but rather as a preparation for burial or ceremony. The dance depicts two Dharmapalas (deities who attend to cemeteries and burial grounds, and are thought of as protectors of truth) who move in unison, and dismiss the evil spirits in a series of leaps, spins, and wreathing hand motions.

Although the dance is primarily focused on the dancers, the music is essential to the nature of the dance, for without music, the Dharmapalas are not able to move in unison or conjure the forces necessary to defeat the evil spirits. Tibetan Skeleton dancing is usually accompanied by longhorns, drums, trumpets, cymbals, and muted or whispered chants by either the monks depicting the Dharmapalas, or specific members of the cham

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orchestra. The longhorn, or Radong of which there are two used in most traditional cham dances has a low, somewhat mournful sound that is said to help in assembling the protector deities for the ceremony. Kanglings or human thighbone trumpets (replaced by metal flageolets in more contemporary rituals) are occasionally present in burial chams, and drive out evil spirits and influences. All cham orchestras use at least one frame drum and a pair of cymbals. These two work in unison to call protector spirits and plead for them to stay. The cymbals also provide a skeletal sound effect which punctuates the dancers' movements and helps to communicate the mood of the dance to the audience.

The majority of cham music is homorhythmic; the main cymbal player, or cham pon(indicated by a rainbow scarf) controls the pulse, and the frame drum and horn players follow. The longhorns and trumpets essentially function as percussion in much of cham music since only one note is sounded, and articulation and accentuation of the notes lines up with the rest of the cham orchestra and the dancers' feet. Throughout the dance, the pace of the music changes as does the type of movement of the dancers arms. The dance usually starts out with an introduction of the Dharmapalas, after which the dance speeds up, climaxes, and recedes, ending with the exit of the Dharmapalas and a small epilogue. This structure represents the spirits present during the ceremony.