

R. GNANASEKARAN

## Tibetan Opera: A History

**ABSTRACT:** *The history of Tibet can be traced back to thousand years ago, but the written history dates back to 7<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Songtsen Gampo. The first human who appeared in the highest plateau was surrounded by mountains and forest. They were known as Tibetan. Meanwhile, Tibetan Opera reflects the past and keep the history, cultural, and religion of Tibet alive. The word "Lhamo" in Tibetan denotes Goddess. Tibetan Opera was known as "Lhamo". Because it was believed that when Opera was first performed, there were seven ravishing girls who sang with high-pitched voice in an open air and Thang-stong rGyalpo played the accompanying cymbals and drum. The audience thought that the goddesses hailed from heaven to make a performance. Contemplated by the exquisite voice and beauty, the audience applied the name "Lhamo" to this form of performance. Thang-stong rGyalpo was the pioneer of "Lhamo". Introducing this kind of performances was mainly for collecting funds that was necessary for the completion of building the Iron Bridge. Further, he collected seven beautiful sisters who were excellent in singing and dancing. Thang-stong rGyalpo trained the seven sisters exactly the same way as the performances of Goddess Khadoma (Dakini) whom he had seen in his vision. Thang-stong rGyalpo and the seven beautiful girls travelled and performed in various Provinces of Central Tibet appealing for funds. Since then, "Lhamo" became a theatrical performance of Tibet.*

**KEY WORD:** *Tibetan opera, "Lhamo", Goddess, performance, Thang-stong rGyalpo, Central Tibet, Dalai Lama, and Buddha.*

**RESUME:** *"Opera Tibet: Sebuah Sejarah". Sejarah Tibet dapat ditelusuri kembali ke ribuan tahun yang lalu, tapi sejarah yang tertulis kembali ke abad ke-7 pada masa pemerintahan Songtsen Gampo. Manusia pertama yang muncul di dataran tertinggi dikelilingi oleh pegunungan dan hutan. Mereka dikenal sebagai orang Tibet. Sementara itu, Opera Tibet mencerminkan masa lalu dan menjaga sejarah, budaya, dan agama orang Tibet secara hidup. Kata "Lhamo" dalam bahasa Tibet menunjukkan Dewi. Opera Tibet dikenal sebagai "Lhamo". Karena diyakini bahwa ketika Opera itu pertama kali dipertunjukkan, ada tujuh gadis menggairahkan yang menyanyi dengan suara bernada tinggi di udara terbuka dan Thang-stong rGyalpo menyertainya dengan memainkan simbal dan gendang. Para penonton menyangka bahwa Dewi itu berasal dari surga untuk membuat pertunjukan. Dikontemplasikan dengan suara merdu dan keindahan, penonton mengenakan nama "Lhamo" untuk bentuk pertunjukan itu. Thang-stong rGyalpo adalah pelopor dari "Lhamo". Memperkenalkan jenis pertunjukan itu terutama untuk mengumpulkan dana yang diperlukan bagi penyelesaian bangunan Jembatan Besi. Lebih lanjut, ia mengumpulkan tujuh saudari-saudari cantik yang sangat baik dalam menyanyi dan menari. Thang-stong rGyalpo melatih tujuh saudari-saudarinya itu dengan cara yang persis sama seperti pertunjukan Dewi Khadoma (Dakini) yang telah dilihat dalam penerawangannya. Thang-stong rGyalpo dan tujuh gadis cantik itu berkeliling dan tampil dalam pertunjukan di berbagai Provinsi Tibet Tengah untuk mengumpulkan dana. Sejak itu, "Lhamo" menjadi pertunjukan teater dari Tibet.*

**KATA KUNCI:** *Opera Tibet, "Lhamo", Dewi, pertunjukan, Thang-stong rGyalpo, Tibet Tengah, Dalai Lama, dan agama Buddha.*

### INTRODUCTION

Tibet is often known as the roof of the world. It is seated on the highest plateau and is surrounded by Himalayas. As His Holiness, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama describes that the Tibetan plateau, 2.5 million square

kilometer or 9,650.00 square miles, ranges over the highest mountain on earth, sandy desert, immense gorges, two-mile-high fertile plains, densely forested valleys, and vast treeless plateau. Tibet just up like a high altitude island rising from the lowland

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*About the Author:* R. Gnanasekaran is a Ph.D. Scholar at the Department of Linguistics, Puducherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, Lawspet, Puducherry 605008, India. His e-mail address is: [gnanasekaranpdy@gmail.com](mailto:gnanasekaranpdy@gmail.com)

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around it. It is the highest and largest plateau in the world (Laird, 2007).

As Tenzin Dolma gives the geographical description of Tibet, she describes Tibet as a beautiful country with unique environment, plants, animals, and mountains. The mountains were the Snow Mountain, Rock Mountain, and Pasture Mountains. The rivers were so pure and crystal clear that Tibetans fetch drinking water from the river and it tastes sweet. The most important rivers outside Tibet were originated from Tibet. They were Mapcha Khabub, Tachok Khabub, Sangey Khabub, and Langchen Khabub. As Tibetan historian, Shakaba, writes as follows:

The four great rivers follow from Toe Ngari Province. As far as Tchok Khabub is concern, it passes through the Tsang Kyuchi River, finally enters Assam – the eastern part of India and Bangladesh. This river is called *Bharamaputra* River in India. Mapcha Khabub passed Purang province and enters Utter Pradesh and is called *Ganga* River. Langchen Khabub passes through Toe-Dapa Lethargey Kinnaur (South Province of Tibet), and enters Punjab, Rampur and it is called *Satlej* River in India. Sangey Khabub passes Toe-Gar and Kashmir and finally enters Pakistan. This River is called *Indus* River (cited in Maher, 2014).

Nature of Tibet boasts the world's highest most intact vertical eco-system. Tibetans have been living on spiritual greatness to attain Buddha hood. They live for the next life rather than living for the present. They offer prayers for the final liberation-enlightenment of every sentient being.

## THE HISTORY

The history of Tibet can be traced back to thousand years ago, but the written history dates back to 7<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Songtsen Gampo. The first human who appeared in the highest plateau was surrounded by mountains and forest. They were known as Tibetan. As the population increases, they formed a chief to guide the rest. Civil war broke out in between 575 and 600 AD (*Anno Domini*), and the single kingdom transformed into many states and each state is guided by their own chiefs. For

example, Nomadic herder on the mountain and the farmer looks for their chief for the guidance and protection.

Pious Tibetans believe that their kings had hailed from heaven and flew back to their heavenly realm at the final stage of earthly existence. In 127 BC (*Before Christ*), Nyatri Tsenpo was declared as the first King of Tibet. He is said to have come from heaven and his physical appearance was unlike any other beings, his hands were webbed, and his eye lid closed from the bottom. Tibetan believes that their Kings have some connection to heaven. So, rather than dying they ascend directly to heaven. This was what is said to have happened to Nyatri Tsenpo.

Tibetan's myth of the person having connections with the heaven is visible in the drama of Tibetan Opera (*cf* Kunsang, 1975; and Calkowski, 1991). The main characters were the incarnation of God's and Goddess. Though they were the incarnation of God and Goddess, their death or the ascending towards the heaven like the Kings do in real life were not portrayed in Lhamo, but the drama ends by the happy union of the family and the realization of *Dharma* and the propagation of Bodhisattva throughout their kingdom by the leading character (*cf* Fantin, 1976; Schuh, 1976; and Dorje, 1984). They possess a deep love for their religion, people and every being, and are prepared to make highest sacrifice for the maintenance of the teaching of Bodhisattvas. These repertories kept the Tibet's past alive (Habib, 1966).

The age that marked the rise of the Tibetan nation to power and unity was the age of the third king called, Songtsen Gampo. He was born in Earth Bull year. At the age of thirteen, he ascended to the Yarlung throne and became the King of Tibet. The written history of Tibet dates back to his reign when he struggled to unify the kingdoms. He sends some scholars to India to study Sanskrit. Among these scholars, the one who came back alive was Thumi Sambhota, who invented the Tibetan script based on Sanskrit that Tibetans read and write.

The war for national unification was the greatest plan and the defeated troupe that

joined Yarlung dynasty's army, made the Tibetan army the greatest military force. Songsten Gampo did much to create a unified Tibet and changed his capital into Lhasa. After the unification, his vassals swore allegiance to Songsten Gampo, as follows:

Never will be faithless to Emperor Songzen Gampo, to his sons and his descendants [...] whatever they do!  
Never will we seek other overlords among other men!  
Never will we be at ease with others who are faithless!  
Never will we interfere with food and mix poison with it!  
Never will we address the first word to the Emperor!  
Never shall there be [...] envoy towards our comrades!  
Never will we act unfairly towards those who are subject to us!  
Never will we be disobedient to whatever command the emperor may give! (cited in Laird, 2007:30).

Songtsen Gampo was first of the three great religious kings that characterizes Tibet as a unified empire. As the nation rises, Tibetan enjoyed peace, harmony, and prosperity. Songtsen Gampo's death was associated with the famous Buddha statue that was placed inside the large clay of statue in Jokhang temple. Songtsen Gampo, being the manifestation of Chenrezig, dissolved as thin rays into that statue.

During the Cultural Revolution, 1967-1977, many temples along with the Jokhang temples were all destroyed. Tibetans were forbidden to worship in the Jokhang temple. Anything representing cultural identity of Tibet was eradicated and created false history of Tibet. The Chinese website states "Songtsen Gampo admired the cultural of Tang dynasty, and was eager to form an alliance with that powerful empire. In 641, Emperor Taizong sent princess Wencheng to him as his bride" ([www.history-cultural-china.com](http://www.history-cultural-china.com), 23/9/2014).

With a shrewd purpose in their mind, the information about the Tibetan King and its contact with the China is made fiction. The related events were carefully selected to create fictitious information based on that

event and regarding it as a fact. As Edward Hallett Carr writes: "The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions, and so on, like fish on the fish monger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him" (Carr, 2008:3). This is what Chinese do to dissolve the identity, culture, and the history of Tibet. Cooking up fake information had misled many innocent readers.

This time, their purpose is very clear. From the fictitious story behind the true marriages of king Songtsen Gampo and the princess Wencheng, it becomes very easy to defend another creation of fictitious information related to Tibetan Opera (Zhiqun, 1988). They claim that Tibetan Opera has the influence of Chinese art of song and dances.

Since Tibetan Opera is one of the richest performing arts that reflect Tibetan culture, identity, religion, and the history, it becomes significant soul of Tibet. Thus, Opera becomes their main target to wipe out the Tibetan culture and without its modification, the culture of Tibet will remain alive (*cf* Migot, 1958; Dewang, 1967; and Attisani, 1999). Thus, along with the faking of the history of Tibet, its culture, the performing art was also made fictitious that brings close connection to the Chinese Opera.

The fictitious stories that defend their lie are: (1) Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo, admired the culture of Tang dynasty; (2) King Songtsen Gampo was eager to form an alliance with the Tang dynasty; and (3) Songtsen Gampo greatly admired music and dance of Tang dynasty introduced by Princess Wencheng; (4) Songtsen Gampo arranged training for a sixteen beautiful girls in a combined form of art of Tang style; and (5) Tibetan folk of music and dancing to entertain the Princess Wencheng (*cf* Jamyang, 1982; and Hill, 2006).

The entire lie defended another lie and it becomes a chain of lies. Their purpose of saying that king Songtsen Gampo admired the culture, music, and the dance of Tang dynasty is that they wanted to modify the pure performing art of Tibet which carried the culture, religion, and the history of

Tibet (*cf* CIMS, 1960; and Samuel, 1986). By modifying and altering this soul performing art of Tibet and making it more like the Chinese Peking Opera, it becomes easier for them to claim that Tibet as part of them and gradually to eradicate the culture and identity of Tibet.

Facts: (1) King Songtsen Gampo created a unified Tibet; (2) the same year China was in chaos. Sui dynasty fell and Tang dynasty emerged that ruled China from 618 to 907; (3) as a unified and independent empire, Tibet was the most serious threat to the dynasty's existence for two hundred years, from 620 to 820; (4) Tibetan was the only conquerors who sacked the Tang capital and installed a puppet ruler during this period; (5) Songtsen Gampo was the manifestation of Chenrizig and some of his plans were part of Chenrizig's master plan for Tibet; (6) While praying, he saw some auspicious sign that lead to his proposal of marriage with the Chinese and the Nepalese Princes and he wanted to get the famous statue of Buddha from the Princes of Chinese and Nepalese; (7) His master plan was to govern, nourish, and to allow Buddhism to spread within; (8) the arrival of the Nepalese Princess and the Chinese princess marked the first building of Tibetan temple, Jokhang, and Ramchoe as they brought along with them the statues of Buddha; (9) as far as the dances and the music were concerned, Tibetan Opera dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, many centuries after the end of the reign of Kings and Queens. It had no connection to the statement that Chinese website talks; and (10) He is the key and the greatest figure in Tibetan history, Tibetan and foreign records show that these achievements are neither exaggerated nor mythologized (Laird, 2007:37).

#### THE LINEAGE OF TIBETAN MONARCHY

The lineage of Tibetan monarchy continued till the reign of king Lang Darma, who was assassinated in 842 AD (*Anno Domini*). There had been continuous war between China and Tibet. Kings of Tibet ruled not only the plateau of Tibet, but also ruled most part of western China in the eighth and ninth century. Nor did China

ever occupy Tibet. At times, they signed a formal treaty, stating that both Tibet and the China will respect each other's border and from either side of the country, there shall be no war or invasion.

Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Detsen, and Tri Ralpachen are the most illustrious and the great kings of Tibet. Trisong Detsen was the great-great grandson of Songtsen Gampo. These three kings contributed much to unify Tibet and to establish Buddhism throughout Tibet. However, the king Lang Darma was the follower of Bon religion. In order to terminate Buddhism, he destroyed the monasteries. When he died, two of his wives quarreled for the property and once again Tibet was decentralized with many tiny kingdoms.

In 1207, Mongolia occupied Tibet, China, Korea, and the territories reaching Europe; but in 1350, Tibet regains its independence and China in 1368. There is no point in the Chinese claim of merging China and Tibet as one under Mongol empire. Tibetan got their independence from Mongol sixteen years before the Chinese got their independence from Mongol empire.

Thirteenth century of the Christian calendar was the turning point in the history of Tibet. For the first time in the history of Tibet, the Priest chieftains began to rule Tibet. He was known as Drogon Choegyial Phagba, the ruler of all the three *Cholkhas*. In 1409, Tsongkhapa founded the Gelukpa sect. He has built his first Ganden monastery in 1409 and also Drepung monastery in 1416. The most famous Tibetan Shoton festival, originated in Drepung monastery, where the people from Lhasa were invited and the Lhamo troupe from various regions would come and perform Tibetan Opera (*cf* Theodore, 1972; and Mackerras, 2005).

Between 1543-1588, Drepung's third incarnation of Gelukpa sect, Gedun Drupa (the disciple of Je Tsonkhapa) was Sonam Gyatso. In 1578, when Tibet was submitted to Mongol leader Atlan Khan, the titled "Dalai Lama" was first conferred to Sonam Gyatso. In 1640, Gushri Khan, descendant of Atlan Khan, conquered Tibet. In 1642, Gushri Khan makes the fifth *Dalai Lama* to be

the first temporal and spiritual ruler and in return, Gushri Khan was titled as the King of Tibet. However, he returned to Kokonor and unified Tibet. Since then Tibet has been ruled by the *Dalai Lama*.

In 1652, the emperor of China invited the fifth *Dalai Lama* to China as his religious instructor and welcomed the *Dalai Lama* as the ruler of Tibet. For some years, Tibet and China seek each other's guidance. China sought spiritual and Tibetan sought patrons for her *Lamaism* from China and posted two *Ambans* (resident representative of emperor with a small military escort) in Lhasa.

Tibetan never thought that the two *Ambans* would impose their authority to sign agreements on Tibet's behalf for a trade with British. Tibetan government disregarded the agreement and Tibetan army had to fight with British troupe. While losing the fight, Tibetan government signed the agreement in 1904. Tibetan began to expand its international relation during the reign of the thirteen *Dalai Lama* and made number of international agreements.

In 1724, Qing dynasty put Amdo (eastern part of Tibet) under their rule and annexed it in their province (Qingyou, 1990). In 1910, Qing government invaded Tibet and *Dalai Lama* was forced to flee to British-India. After the fall of Qing dynasty in 1911, *Dalai Lama* returned to Tibet and expelled *Ambans* and all the Chinese troupes. Tibet was once again declared an independent nation. Being weary of the struggles, Tibetan retired to the solitude world and cut all the international affairs.

From 1913 to 1949, Tibetan maintained very limited contact to the rest of the world and no foreigners were allowed to enter Lhasa. In 1947, Tibetan delegation attended a conference of all Asia countries, which was held at Delhi, India, and the Tibetan national flag displayed along with the flag of other nation. Tibet enjoyed complete independence under the perfect peace, happiness, and prosperity. The nation made no effort to modernize and to strengthen the government and their army.

During the reign of Sontsen Gampo and the following king, especially Trisong Detsen, Tibetan had been the greatest and

the most dreaded warriors. Gradually, when Buddhism got firm in the land of snow, dreaded and the fiercest warrior put down their weapon and dedicated their life to the path of peace and enlightenment. This time, Chinese took advantage of the poor peasant, the religious, and the peaceful society.

The invasion of Tibet began in 1949 and Tibet reached its age of crises. In 1950, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> *Dalai Lama* was only sixteen years old, when the government of Tibet requested the *Dalai Lama* to take over the responsibility of government. As *Dalai Lama* expresses, as follows:

I hesitated, but then the national Assembly met, and added its plea to the cabinets, and I could not refuse my responsibilities. I had to put my boyhood behind me, and immediately prepare myself to lead my country, as well as I was able, against the vast power of Communist China (Lama, 2008:83).

Chinese defeated the small army and disastrously fell Tibet under the Chinese control. In 1950, Tibetan delegation was forced to sign the seventeen-point agreement promising measures for the peaceful liberation of Tibet. This time, the Chinese wanted to occupy Tibet and claim it as part of their territory and to transform it into Communism. The *Dalai Lama* wrote to Chinese authority asking for the restoration of peace and friendship, but was in vain. Tibetans seeks help from India and Britain, but was not granted. The letters to the UN (United Nations) for the acceptance of UN membership was diplomatically turned down. As the *Dalai Lama*, in the book entitled *Into Tibet*, said as follows:

[...] in the winter of 1949 and 1950, when something could have done, we approached every one, India, USA (United States of America), Britain, the United Nations, but no one helped us. At the same time, the Americans had no courage to formally recognize Tibet as an independent nation [...]. It was according to their master plan: what is best for Britain, what is best for America [...] did not come forward to recognize Tibet as independent. The courage was not there (cited in Laird, 2007:131).

His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> *Dalai Lama* met Chairman Mao Zedong several times for the

negotiation and in their last meeting, Mao Zedong tried to manipulate the young *Dalai Lama* by saying: "I understand you very well but, of course, religion is poison. It has two great defects: it determines the race; and secondly, it retards the progress of the country. Tibet and Mongolia have both been poisoned by it" (cited in Lama, 2008:118).

Tibetans rest in peace in solitude with Buddha and remain isolated from the rest of the country. The result was the lack of modern equipment and training. Thus, when Chinese armed with latest military equipment began to invade Tibet, Tibetans plea the United States of America for military aid, but was crushed. When the Chinese were convinced that Tibetans were not receiving any military assistance from any foreign power, bands of military began to move in strong forces and seized Tibet. In 1959, His Holiness the fourteen *Dalai Lama* was forced to fled to exile in India.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, Tibet was an independent nation with its own history, flag, currency, religion, and culture. It is a distinct and a unique country that enjoyed complete *de facto* independence until 1949. Tibet has its own culture which is different from China. Their performing art is one of the most unique cultures of Tibet. It displays the history of Tibet and the audience often gets transports to the independent Tibet before the invasion of China. Hence, Tibetan Opera reflects the past and keep the history, cultural, and religion of Tibet alive.

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