

A BLACK HAT RITUAL DANCE

– Cathy Cantwell

Tibetan “Black Hat” ritual dances are a central feature of many Tibetan “chams” (ritual dance performances). This paper examines a Black Hat dance at a small Tibetan refugee monastery in northern India, in the light of a consideration of the overall meaning and significance of the Black Hat dance in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition⁽¹⁾.

“BLACK HAT” RITUAL DANCES : ORIGIN AND MEANING

Little historical work has been done on “chams”, and even though ritual dance manuals exist — for example, the Fifth Dalai Lama's “chams-yig” (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976) — which are clearly dependent on much older written sources, inevitably, in the context of complex ritual performances, much was left to oral instruction and is inaccessible to historical research. Handbooks such as the above-mentioned “chamsyig” were intended as detailed commentaries on and further clarification of an orally transmitted tradition, for the benefit of the ritual practitioners themselves, who would have been familiar with the basics of the tradition as it existed at that time. Thus, for instance, when the Fifth Dalai Lama talks of the Black Hat costume (ibid. : p.114-119), it is difficult to determine how closely it corresponds with the modern version (see below). Nonetheless, ritual forms can be remarkably persistent⁽²⁾, and in the case of ‘chams, there is no doubt that many dance sequences have been preserved exactly for centuries⁽³⁾. The tradition itself claims an Indian Vajrayāna origin for ‘chams, and in the absence of convincing proof otherwise, there would seem little reason to doubt this claim. The Fifth Dalai Lama is clear that the complex Vajrakīlaya dance described by him, much of which is performed by Black Hat dancers, derives from Indian Buddhism. He states (p. 113) that it is connected with the origins of the Tantra, and that moreover, it played a significant role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet : Guru Padma performed the dance to prepare the ground at bSam-yas for the first Tibetan monastery.

Both the Fifth Dalai Lama (p. 115) and contemporary Tibetan monks and bla-mas say that the Black Hat costume is that worn by the Vajra Master, and the Black Hat dances display his activities. In some cases - as my example below - such activities consist of relatively simple symbolic demonstrations of the Vajrayāna transmutation of the emotional poisons, but there are innumerable variations. In the “Root” section of the Fifth Dalai Lama's Vajrakīlaya ‘chams alone (p. 115 ff.), the Black

Hat Vajra Master meditates on and mimes in turn the attributes and activities of all the principal deities of the Vajrakīlāya maṇḍala, and a similar process seems to characterise the Black Hat Vajrakīlāya 'chams at the 'Brug-pa bKa'-rgyud monastery at Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh.⁽⁴⁾

There is a further dimension to the symbolic significance of the Black Hat dance in the contemporary Tibetan context. According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz (*ibid.* : p.1, 80, 93), popular tradition equates the Black Hat costume and dance less with Buddhist India than with the ancient Bon-po priests, and in the mythical⁽⁵⁾ account of dpal gyi rDo-rje, the Buddhist monk appropriates the "black" Bon-po garb while remaining inwardly "white", for the purpose of protecting the Buddhist teaching in Tibet⁽⁶⁾. Nebesky-Wojkowitz is a little ambivalent about the actual origin of the Buddhist Black Hat costume. He mentions this oral tradition without critical comment on the first page of the book, while later (p. 80) arguing that the informants who rather identified the Black Hat dancers with tantrics are more likely to be correct. Yet his justification for this - that the Black Hat dancers have important roles and are often senior bla-mas-relates to the dances' contemporary significance rather than to derivation. Nonetheless, he clearly states (p. 93) that the costume has no particular similarity to the ancient Bon-po dress. It would seem to me that the identification between the Black Hat dancers and Bon-po religious specialists is not a statement of historical fact but rather a symbolic association, in which the Vajra Master brings under control and transforms the most sophisticated indigenous Tibetan powers, through the Vajrayāna ritual activity.

THE BLACK HAT COSTUME

Details of the costume — such as the colours of and designs decorating the robes — may vary, not only from monastery to monastery, but within a single 'chams performance. Thus, at the Tashi Jong 'chams, on the ninth day of the Tibetan month, the Black Hat dancers wore a relatively simple version of the costume, with different coloured robes to correspond to the various directions of the maṇḍala, while on the eleventh day, much more elaborate costumes with robes of intricately patterned silks were worn.

However, the basic elements of the costume are standard. They consist, firstly, of a robe ("phod-ka") reaching to the ankles, with long wide sleeves, a small poncho-shaped brocade garment on top, and high boots. Also necessary is a long black apron, decorated with an embroidery of a three-eyed wrathful face with a border of skulls and

vajras, expressing the presence of the Vajrayāna deity concerned, his wrathful activity, and the identification between the deity and Vajra Master who wears the costume. The apron has tassels at the bottom in the five colours of the five Buddha families. The dancer has black spots on his cheeks, presumably identified with the spots of blood which decorate the wrathful herukas in Tibetan iconography. Beneath the hat is worn a "wig" ("skra-brdzus"); in the Rewalsar case, this was a black headband with long black tassels hanging from it. In this way, a monk, as a "mantra practitioner" ("sngags-pa"), symbolically displays the long hair of a yogi. Usually (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *ibid.* : p. 94-5), the six bone ornaments and a round breast-plate "mirror" adorn the costume, and the Fifth Dalai Lama lists these as essential attributes (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *ibid.* : p. 114-115), but they were not represented in Rewalsar.

The black hat itself (see diagram) is attached onto the head with a strap under the chin. The Fifth Dalai Lama (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *ibid.* : p. 114-117) explains its shape as a representation of the realms of conditioned existence. The main cupola is like the central mountain (Meru), ornamented with the sun and moon, and threads of the five different colours mark out the eight major and four minor continents. The silk trailer hanging from the back of the hat represents the "tree of paradise" in the god realm. The various shapes above the main cupola symbolise the elements (a triangle for fire, a square for earth, etc.) in the same way as in the symbolism of the stūpa (Govinda, 1976 : p. 84-98; and 1969 : p. 182-186). The elements also correspond to the five Buddhas and their families, and "water", "air", "fire" and "earth" can also represent the four activities ('phrin-las). The text says that the hat's "secret meaning" is that its various emblems "seal the 'sky'" (Nebesky-Wojkowitz has "heaven") "Nam-mkha" means sky or space, and in Vajrayāna imagery, it is the attribute of the female consort, which symbolises the Dharmadhātu, the sphere in which Realisation arises. Thus, the hat both represents Samsāra, and the means, through the Vajrayāna, of its transformation into the display of enlightenment, and it is therefore an appropriate attribute of the Vajra Master. Another explanation of the hat is that it demonstrates "the three worlds", only in reverse order : the formless world where only the mental sense is present is the fur-trimmed brim : the world of form of some of the higher god realms is the crown; while the ornaments and decorations above are the world of desire, as experienced by some gods, people, animals and so on ("Garcham" : p. 20-21). Although rather different from the Fifth Dalai Lama's exposition, the general principle is the same, that all the elements of Samsāra are used in the Path, having been "overturned" or transformed.

The most striking visual adornments of the present day hat are the peacock feathers and the pair of snakes. The Fifth Dalai Lama's text mentions "gdengs-ka", ("hooded snakes" or Nebesky-Wojkowitz has, "snake-shaped ornaments") as a necessary adornment, but it does not discuss its symbolic significance, nor the peacock's feathers. It may be that the exact design of the hat has changed since the Fifth Dalai Lama's time, or that these features were included amongst the additionally listed, "objects possessing spiritual powers". However, in discussing an alternative hat which can be used, "the eye of the peacock's feather, having the roundish shape of a jewel" is included, and, "behind it stand up either five or three snake heads made of silk" (ibid. : p. 116-119). In terms of the explanation of the "Garcham" booklet, the peacock feathers would represent the world of the senses. Presumably, the imagery is related to the Vajrayāna symbolism of the peacock's colourful tail being dependent on the defiled foods it consumes. Again, the snakes could also carry the implication of the Vajrayāna transmutation of the emotional poisons, for the snake is used in Buddhist teaching to represent hatred and aversion⁽⁷⁾. Both the snakes, and the skull which is between the heads of the snakes, are "wrathful" images, indicating the Vajra Master's mastery over life and death, which arises when all attachment to "self" is destroyed.

THE BLACK HAT DANCE IN REWALSAR

There are two annual occasions when the Black Hat dance is performed at the rNying-ma-pa monastery in Rewalsar. The first is the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth Tibetan month, when, as the culmination of the sMad-las ("Lower activity") practice of rDo-rje Gro-lod, in which the accumulated negativity of the old year is expelled, there is a "Casting of the gTor-ma" (gtor-rgyab") ritual, in which the senior monk who casts the gtor-ma, dons the Black Hat costume⁽⁸⁾. Secondly, on the tenth day of the first Tibetan month, a group of monks perform the dance in the context of the "Guru mTshan bryad 'chams" — the "Dance of the Guru's Eight Aspects"⁽⁹⁾. Here, the Black Hat dance serves as the foundation for the arising of Guru Padma's forms and emanations — an invitation through a purification of the outer and inner mental environment. Although, as I have noted above, there are innumerable Black Hat dances, many which are extremely long and complex, in the Rewalsar case, the Black Hat dance on both occasions consists of the same sequence of four dances. When performed as part of the tenth day 'chams, the four dances follow each other consecutively, each merging into the next, while at the end of the twelfth month, the dances are fitted

around the structure of the gtor-rgyab ritual, and also incorporate extra dances necessary for the "Casting".

The first dance is called, "Lam-sgron", "Lighting the Path", and it is followed by "Drag – 'chams", "The Ritual Dance of Wrath". On both the occasions of the twenty-ninth day and the tenth day 'chams, these two dances take place in the courtyard, beginning the 'chams. On the twenty-ninth day,⁽¹⁰⁾ the senior monk who took the part of the Black Hat dancer, emerged from the temple to dance after the "Great Red gTorma" and the weapons to be cast had been carried out and set down on tables, and the other monks had already filed out and taken up their positions in the courtyard. The dance commenced to the sound of all the monks' instruments.

The nine Black Hatted monks who danced on the tenth day, were led into the courtyard by a procession of monks from the nearby 'Bri-khung bKa'-rgyud-pa monastery (the small rNying-ma-pa monastery not having enough monks), who, walking around the courtyard, played all their musical instruments at the same time as the rNying – ma-pa monks sitting alongside the arena, who were to provide the textual and musical accompaniment. The procession halted opposite the temple doorway, and after a couple of minutes of continuous music, the nine dancers filed out and the monks opposite stopped playing their instruments. The "Lam-sgron" dance began to the accompaniment of the beat of the cymbals and music of the horns.

As the dancer circled around the courtyard in a clockwise direction, the procession of monks walked ahead. The "Lam-sgron" dance might more appropriately be described as a graceful walk; with slow steps, the monks moved forward, and every few steps, they turned and made a "mudrā" with the phur-bu (ritual dagger) they held in their right hands, and bhāṇḍa (skull-cup shaped vessel) they held in their left hands. They continued forward, and after the next few steps, turned in the opposite direction, made a mudrā, and so on.

The dance demonstrates the "peaceful" ("zhi-ba") nature of the Enlightened Mind, and the performance of the ritual activity ("phrin-las") of "pacifying" the emotional defilements. The Black Hat Vajrayāna practitioner should be established in meditative equanimity, and their movements are slow and peaceful. The phur-bu and bhāṇḍa, carried throughout the Black Hat dances, are symbols of "upāya" and "prajñā"; more "wrathful" equivalents of the standard vajra and bell. The phur-bu is associated with the piercing quality of clarity ("gsal-ba"), while the bhāṇḍa represents the expanse of the Dharmadhātu. In uniting them,

the monks demonstrate the overcoming of ignorance. The sexual imagery (the phur-bu displaying phallic potency and the bhāṇḍa, the "womb" from which spring all the Buddhas) is explicit in Tibetan thinking and adds to the forcefulness of the symbolism. The transmuted passions are, thus, employed to overturn the emotional defilements.

"Lam-sgron" led into the "Drag-'chams" — "The Ritual Dance of Wrath" — after one circuit of the courtyard had been made. Still to the instrumental accompaniment of horns and cymbals, the dancers began this faster dance which involves hopping and whirling around. This dance is a contrast to the first, displaying the transformation of the peaceful nature of Enlightenment into its wrathful Vajrayāna emanations and the Vajra Master's ritual activity of "destroying" which is necessary to overcome persistent negativities. In the context of the sMad-las ritual, the Black Hat dancer meditates on himself arising as the wrathful form of rDo-rje Gro-lod.

Together, these two dances establish the presence of the Enlightened Mind and its manifestations. Then, the following "gSer-skyems" offering acts as a foundation for the main ritual — in the case of the tenth day 'chams, this is the arising of Guru Padma and his emanations and retinue, while on the twenty-ninth day, this is the Casting ritual. A "gSer-skyems" — "golden drink" offering — is an offering often made in the beginning stages of a ritual, and does not always entail a special dance — usually, when performed in the Rewalsar monastery, the monks chant the offering verses while the Master of Offerings ("mchod-dpon") simply holds up the offering in the appropriate goblet and dish. Frequently made to dharmapālas, particularly local earth deities, a "gSer-skyems" provides the basis for a ritual, by satisfying the local powers, who in return, add their forces to the ritual activity. In this case, the gSer-skyems offering is extracted from the Gro-lod sMad-las text, ⁽¹¹⁾ and it is directed not only to the dharmapālas, but to the, "Vidyādharas ... Root and Lineage Gurus; Sugatas, and peaceful and wrathful deities of the mandala powerful and wrathful deities of the Padma family". Along with their retinues of protectors and local deities, they are requested to accept the offering and generate their "enormous power" ("mthu-dpung")¹² in the practitioners. This "power" is inwardly activated in the dancers through their meditation on the "offering", which is a giving up of any remaining egocentricity to Enlightenment and its activities. The outer ground and inner mental environment are thus "purified". Having performed the offering on the tenth day, the "invitation" to the Guru and his aspects is complete, while on the twenty-ninth day,

the Black Hat monk, visualising himself as Gro-lod, is prepared for the actual "Casting" of the gtor-ma.

The nine Black Hat dancers in the tenth day performance, stopped after the "Drag-'chams", while two young monks from the 'Bri-khung bKa'-rgyud-pa monastery, acting as assistant mchod-dpon, distributed the kind of offering goblets ("phud-skong") usually used for offerings to dharmapālas, to all the dancers in turn. The goblets were then filled with rice grains and black tea, representing the offerings delighting the senses, which are transformed into amṛta. The dancers held the goblets in their right hands and their phur-bus and bhāṇḍas together in their left hands. The monks seated alongside recited the textual instruction to meditate on the offering becoming inexhaustible substances delighting the senses, followed by the syllables of consecration, "Om ĀḤ HŪṀ". After this, the cymbals were played, and they were joined by the horns and drum. The monks who had led the procession also played their instruments. Then, the dance began, while the monks recited the offering verses, very slowly with a drum beat and the cymbals played on each or every second syllable. On the last line of each verse, the cymbals were crashed and joined by the horns and drums, which were played for about half a minute. The dance continued for a while with the cymbals and drums keeping the beat. To make the offering, the dancer holds the goblet in the right hand, and as he whirls around, the offering substances are scattered in all directions. First each dancer performs fairly swift revolutions, on one leg and then on the other, and then the whirling movements gradually become slower for a while. Finally, they speed up, pause, and then begin again. During the course of the dance, the goblets were refilled once, and then at the end, they were collected up, and the Black Hat dancers again took their phur-bus in their right hands for the final Black dance.

In the case of the twenty-ninth day ritual, the sMad-las text instructs that this dance should take place at the site of the Casting; at Rewalsar, it was done both in the courtyard and at the actual "Casting" site. The same procedure was followed in a "gTor-rgyab" ritual described by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975: p. 497-498), and it may be that the text was summarising a standard practice. First in the courtyard, the mchod-dpon provided the Black Hat dancer with the goblet filled with tea and grain, and the dance was performed with the textual and musical accompaniment as on the tenth day. The goblet was also similarly refilled. Then, there was a procession to the place where the gtor-ma was to be cast, the Black Hat bla-ma following men carrying the gTor-ma and weapons, and with his right arm stretched out, he pointed ahead with his right hand

in which he held the phur-bu. The other monks and spectators walked behind. Once everyone was assembled on the main road leading from the village, at the place overlooking the cremation grounds, where the cone-shaped "hom-khung" of sticks and grasses had been constructed, the gSer-skyems was repeated.

Another dance was then done, while the monastery' slob-dpon (Master of Ritual) chanted the verses from the sMad-las text (p. 11-11b) in which rDo-rje Gro-lod generates masses of wrathful emanations for the purpose of Casting the gTor-ma. This was followed by various "Weapon dances" ("Zor-'chams") : as each verse was recited, the Black Hat bla-ma danced, holding the appropriate weapon, and then throwing it. After he had cast the main gTor-ma, he remained still, making hand gestures (mudrā), and meditating on the Protection Maṇḍala. He then accompanied the monks to the monastery's main gateway within which an offering to the "Established Ancient Protectresses" ("brTan-ma") was made, followed by the "dance" of subduing ("bro-brdung")⁽¹³⁾. For this, he made subduing madrās with his phur-bu while the usual recitations and ritual activities were performed by the other monks. Finally, as the mchod-dpon went ahead to open the temple doors and the other monks stood by in the courtyard, he danced back to the temple performing the "Dance of Return" ("Log-'chams"), the final dance in the set of four.

On the tenth day, the dancers proceeded quite rapidly around the courtyard for the fourth dance; the movements are not in any way boisterous, but most of the steps lead straight around the arena. The whole dance is performed to the beat of four, played on the cymbals, accompanied by the horns. The basic steps are three sideways steps to the left, with the right leg lifted to the left on the fourth count, and then after swirling around, three sideways steps to the right, with the left leg lifted to the right on the fourth count. They swirl around again and repeat the sideways steps to the left, and then do four hops forward to the same beat. Finally, they lift up and sway their arms together across the front of their bodies. With the fourth movement, they turn and begin the sequence again, with some minor variations each time. As they completed the circuit around the courtyard, one dancer returned to the temple after each sequence of movements. The music and the speed of the movements gradually quickened as the last few dancers moved back to the temple.

The significance of this "Dance of Return" was explained to me as simply representing the "return" to the temple. Certainly, the dance is a return of the temple, or from the meditation perspective, a return to the Dharmadhātu sphere. However, "log" may also signify reversal as well

as returning. In one of bDud-'joms Rin-po-che's texts on rDo-rje Gro-lod,⁽¹⁴⁾ the deity is described as making the postures of a "log-'chams", which could imply that he reverses or inverts the worldly "dance" of the emotions. This idea of reversal would seem to fit the final Black Hat dance, since from my observation of the steps (above), it is clear that it involves turning in one direction, dancing, and then turning around and dancing in the other direction.

CONCLUSION

At the rNying-ma-pa monastery in Rewalsar, the Black Hat dance is made up of four separate dances, which are performed in the same order in the context of two different ritual occasions. In both cases, the first three dances are preparatory to the main ritual which follows — on the twenty-ninth day, the Casting of the gTor-ma, and on the tenth day, the Dance of the Guru's Eight Aspects. Although these rituals are completely different, the Black Hat dances in which the Vajra Master demonstrates the presence of Realisation and the purification of the outer and inner environment, are an equally appropriate foundation. The final dance completes the Black Hatted bla-mas' ritual activities, but on the twenty-ninth day, when the entire Casting ritual is performed by the one Black Hat "Vajra Master", this is only done after the main ritual, while on the tenth day, the main dances of Guru Padma's emanations follow.

The first three dances establish the presence of Enlightenment and generate the power of its activities. The fourth dance both completes the sequence of these foundation dances, and is perhaps also directed at symbolically transforming experience, and in particular in the context of 'chams, perception. All the dances use the sense of perception to invert the normal working of the ordinary confused mind; whereas usually, sight is used to perceive objects of desire, hatred or indifference, here, it is used to engender an experience — if only a glimpse — of the display of the Enlightened Mind⁽¹⁵⁾.

NOTES

- (1) Fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted from 1981-1983, at Rewalsar in Himachal Pradesh, India, funded by the Social Science Research Council, London. Further information can be found in Cantwell, 1989.
- (2) IND1 = This is a general point which writers from Robertson Smith (1894) to Maurice Bloch (1986) have made — for one example from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, see Robert Mayer, 1991.

- (3) The Guru mTshan brgyad 'chams, for example, derives from the visions of Guru Chos-dbang (1212-70) and has been passed on without any dependence on a dance manual, since that time (see Cantwell, forthcoming).
- (4) Khampa Gar Monastery, District Kangra, H.P. I observed the 'chams which takes place from the ninth to the eleventh days of the second Tibetan month in April 1982. The monastery's booklet, n.d., "Garcham", contains further information.
- (5) Here, I use the word "mythical" in the anthropological sense, to refer not to a false account, but rather one which regardless of historical validity, has an important symbolic value.
- (6) In his account of dPal gyi rDo-rje's assassination of the "anti-Dharma" king Glang Dar-ma (Norbu & Turnbull, 1976 : p. 173-4), Thubten Jigme Norbu is explicit that the King was attending a Black Hat dance in which the Buddhist monk participates in order to disguise himself and his purpose. Thus, he has the opportunity to shoot the King, and on escaping, he turns the black cloak inside out, revealing its white inner colour.
- (7) Wrathful herukas are sometimes depicted with five types of snake adornments, which are said to overcome aversion.
- (8) See C. Cantwell, 1985, or for more detail, 1989 : supplementary paper, "The Ritual which expels all negativities".
- (9) See C. Cantwell, forthcoming. This paper also contains information on the general tradition and meaning of 'chams.
- (10) The following accounts are based on observation in 1982.
- (11) bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral Ye-shes rDo-rje : "bDud-'dul dbang-drag rdo-rje gro-lod kyi smad-las rdo-rje'i thog-char" : p. 3, line 4 — p. 3b, line 3.
- (12) "mThu" : This word of "power" has the sense of a power of an inherent nature, an innate energy (see Das, 1970, p. 600).
- (13) bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral Ye-shes rDo-rje, "bDud-'dul dbang-drag rdo-rje gro-lod kyi las-byang dngos-grub 'dod-'jo" : p. 10.
- (14) bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral Ye-shes rDo-rje : "bDud-'joms khrag-'thung padma'i srog-sgrub zab-mo ithi" : line 2.

- (15) I have written at greater length on the spectator's viewpoint see Cantwell, forthcoming, or 1989, Section 5.2.3.5.

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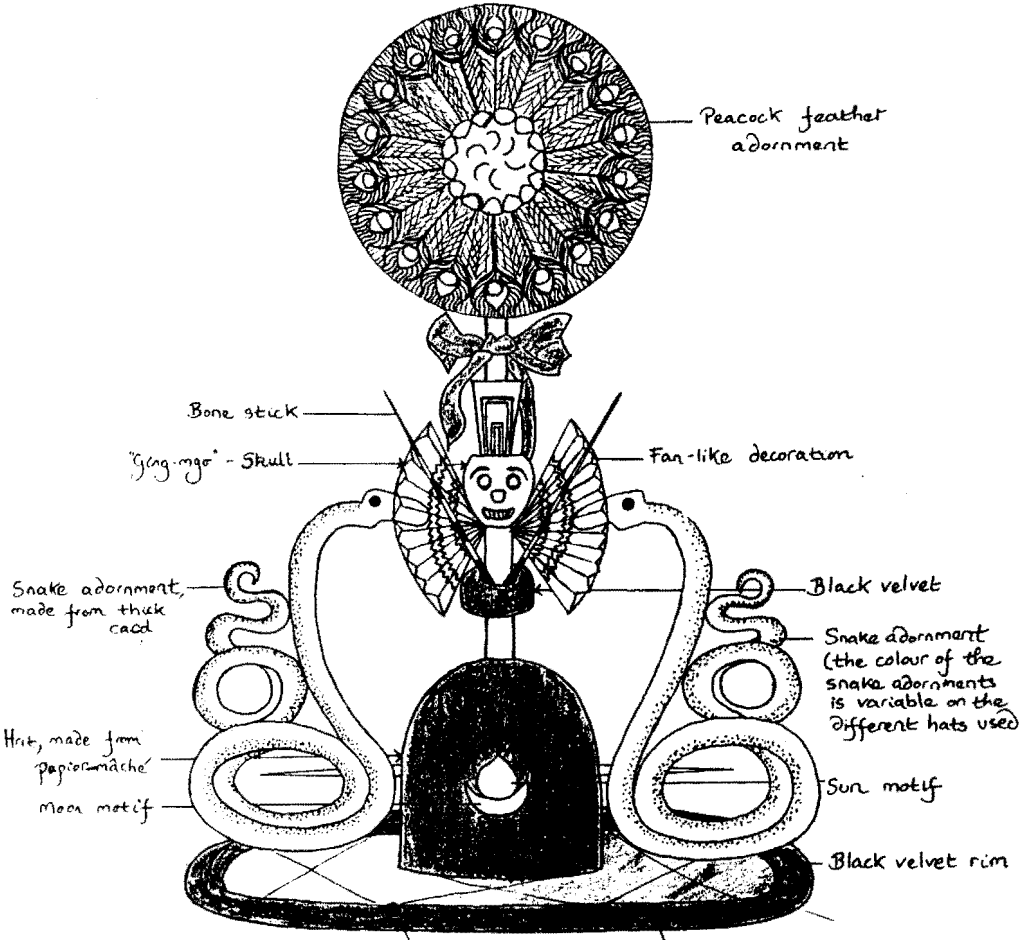
bDud-'jom 'Jigs-bral Ye-shes rDo-rje ; From collected texts on rDo-rje Gro-lod (printed in Manali, H.P., India) :

"bDud-'joms khrag-'thung padma'i srog-sgrub zab-mo ithi".

"bDud-'dul dbang-drag rdo-rje gro-lod kyi smad-las rdo-rje'i thog-char".

"bDud-'dul dbang-drag rdo-rje gro-lod kyi las-byang dngos-grub 'dod-'jo".

A Black Hat (Zhva nag)



View of Hat from behind

