

# Can Pollution Bring Balance to the Hidden Land? Fibreglass Interventions in the Ecology of Sikkimese *Cham*

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## Abstract

*Cham*, a distinctive masked ritual dance, is undertaken biannually at Pe-mayangtse Monastery, a Buddhist institution in Sikkim, a Himalayan state in northeast India. These ritual performances are intended to dispel negative forces and create the conditions of prosperity and health for all of the beings – including humans, spirits and deities – resident in Sikkim’s sacred landscape and throughout the cosmos. The efficacy of ritual dances is intertwined with the context of the performances and the materiality of the dancers’ costumes. This article will engage debates over *cham*’s changing materiality. In particular, it will focus on the recent introduction of fibreglass masks in Pe-mayangtse’s ritual dances to explore connections between changing ecologies, notions of toxicity and pollution and ritual economies in Sikkim. While Buddhist authorities express anxiety about the substances involved in creating fibreglass, they also appreciate its affordability and durability. Artists who work in fibreglass see the material as a fast way to work. The dancers, on the other hand, express concern about how changes in the physicality of dancing with these masks may interfere with ritual efficacy. These debates are illustrative of broader concerns about the impact of changing ecosystems on interdimensional relations in the Himalayas.

**Keywords:** *Sikkimese Buddhism; ritual dance; ecological balance; pollution; ritual efficacy; fibreglass; interdimensional relations*

## Introduction

*Cham* (*‘chams*)<sup>1</sup> is a form of ritual dance found throughout the Tibetan plateau and the surrounding areas of the Himalayas and Inner Asia in Buddhist and Bön religious communities. Often featured in photographic essays and postcards of the region, for the lamas,

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dancers and patrons involved in the staging of these performances, *cham* functions as a conduit for communication and transformation between the human realm and the realm of the deities, spirits and other forces. During *cham* performances, dancers wear masks typically made of wood and costumes made from silk in order to take on the persona of deities and spirits from important historical moments in Buddhist history. There are many different versions of these dances, but they have several features in common. These dances take place outside monasteries on specially demarcated ritual circles. During the dance, the performers step and turn in rhythm with music played by other monastic musicians. As they make their way around the circle, the dancers transform the space inside of the ritual circle, which becomes a microcosm for the universe. The dance expels negative forces and obstacles and creates favourable conditions for all beings in the region and throughout the cosmos to prosper.

Reacting to the 'exotic' costumes worn in *cham*, British colonial officers and explorers called them 'devil dances' in their Orientalist renderings of the Buddhisms of the region, or as many called these traditions, 'Lamaism' (Martin 2017). In more recent times, these dances have continued to be exoticised and interpreted differently by diverse audiences. Within Buddhist communities, *cham* dancers have to negotiate different audiences and expectations between ritual accomplishment and performing for spectators as these performances are highly sought after by tourists. In Sikkim and elsewhere, *cham* is nowadays performed for audiences made up of tourists and locals at festival occasions, with additional pressure from local and national state tourism authorities to stage them for cameras in order to maintain patronage (David and Samuel 2016; Schrempf 1997; Vandenhelsken 2011).

Since the colonial period, scholarly understandings of *cham* have become more rich and complex. Anthropologists, Buddhologists, Religious Studies scholars and Theatre Studies scholars have delved into different readings of *cham* as a multifaceted ritual tradition found throughout many Buddhist communities in the Inner Asian and Himalayan region. Important studies of *cham* include overviews (Cantwell 1995; Samuel and David 2016) including detailed descriptions of the dancers' masks and costumes (for example, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956 and 1976). However, apart from a study on Bhutanese *cham* textiles (Altmann 2016), the studies do not engage with the materiality of the costumes.

The new material and economic conditions of capitalism have directly impacted religious and cultural life ways throughout the Himalayan region. Kajri Jain has connected industrial developments with the popularisation of large concrete statues in India (Jain 2021). Hildegard Diemberger and Samanta Skrivere (2021) have recently written about the impact of the entrance of plastic into the cosmopolitics of the Nepal Himalayas. In this article, I will focus on the significance of changes to ritual materiality by considering *cham* costumes, and more specifically masks, at Pemayangtse Monastery in the West District of Sikkim, a small Indian state in the eastern Himalayas. I will consider these changes on a smaller scale by looking at the appearance of fibreglass *cham* masks at Pemayangtse since 2007. Historically, the masks used in ritual dance were made of wood, carved by local artisans, and this knowledge and process was part of the broader preparation process connected to *cham*. The use of fibreglass has been lauded by some due to its aesthetic beauty, lower cost than other forms of craftwork and resilience against the elements and the passing of time. However, others have expressed concerns about the processes undertaken in the making of fibreglass and, in particular, the pollution that this process generates. This article will explore these different views to question how a polluting material can constitute a sacred object that transforms and purifies the sacred landscape, asking: Can pollution bring balance to the Hidden Land? What happens when ritual objects made from substances that are inherently toxic are employed in ritual life? Does this toxicity impede the efficacy of these rituals? To examine these questions, I will consider the perspectives of three different groups: the lamas and monastic community at Pemayangtse who organise the *cham* performances and are responsible for procuring the material goods to do so, the artisans who make the masks and the dancers who wear the masks. I will show how different members present in the staging of *cham* have different concerns related to ritual efficacy that do not automatically equate pollution with toxicity. My research is based on over two decades of ethnographic and historical research into the Buddhist cultures of west Sikkim, my own recollections of participating in *cham* as a child and member of the Pemayangtse community and extensive interviews in Sikkimese Bhutia and Nepali languages about *cham* carried out during *cham* performances and at other times during the year.

## *Cham* and the Clearance of Pollution

The performance of *'cham* becomes itself a "great mandala of action," where dancers acting as Black Hat figures (*zhwa-nag*) or wrathful protectors of religion (*chos-skyong*) and empowered by their being first "subjugate the earth" (*sa-btul*) – a means of taking over space – usually translated with more neutral phrases, such as "cleaning the ground" or "preparing the site." Step by step then, they accumulate in circular dance movements their destructive power in order to expel the so-called "evil forces" (Schrempf 1994: 95-96).

In anthropologist Mona Schrempf's important analysis of *cham*, it is both transformative of the space and connected to the space in which it is performed. It takes place within monastery boundaries and therefore is connected with the history of monastic sites; but it also transforms those sites into *mandalas* and the dancers into deities who take on the challenge of summoning positive forces and destroying negative ones. This transformative element of *cham* is often overlooked. *Cham*, often translated as lama dances or masked dances, are among the most well-known ritual forms of Buddhist traditions found in Tibet, the Himalayas and Inner Asia. In *cham*, dancers dress up as and at times believed to channel deities as they undertake dances in a circle. They begin within the monastery, move outside to circle the monastery and especially demarcate a space that becomes a microcosm for the universe (Cantwell 1995; Kohn 2001; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976).

For the lamas and the monastic community in Pemayangtse, *cham* is a central part of the ritual calendar, which they are responsible for maintaining. *Cham* takes place twice a year: the Guru Dramar *cham* (*Gu ru drag mar 'chams*) that takes place during the New Year at the beginning of the first lunar month; and as part of the rituals of Pang Lhabsol (*Dpang lha gsol*) that propitiates the mountain deities of Sikkim that takes place in the seventh month of the lunar calendar (Dokhampa 1989). The Guru Dramar *cham* and the Pang Lhabsol are important rituals intended to purify and bring balance to the sacred landscape. According to Buddhist systems of cosmology, sacred space is known as *ney* (*gnas*) and is animated, home to deities, spirits and other trans-dimensional beings who are also resident in the landscape (Huber 1999). For this reason, I translate *ney* as sacred habitat as a way to acknowledge this enchanted environment.

In Sikkimese Buddhist cosmology, Sikkimese Buddhists participate in the patronage and performance of ritual actions that are intended to keep all residents, seen and unseen, prospering in the sacred habitat

by balancing the five elements (air, water, earth, fire, space) (Bhutia 2021). What pulls this balance out of order is *drip* (*sgrib*), a force accumulated through a variety of means, including association with death, sex, illness, birth or any action that further connects humans to the cycle of suffering and reincarnation (Sanskrit: *samsara*). *Drip* obscures or threatens the ritual order of balance (Schicklgruber 1992). In west Sikkim, *drip* is understood to be mundane as well as connected to transcendental issues: for example, places that are dirty include toilets, places where there is disease or other sites for potential physical as well as spiritual contamination, such as places connected to birth or death, important moments in the cycle of *samsara*. For this reason, the term pollutant is an appropriate translation for *drip*, as dirt or contamination is caused by spiritual and physical pollution of different forms. In the Sikkimese context, spiritual and physical pollutants often overlap and can have similarly deleterious and toxic impacts on the human and nonhuman and enchanted space around them.

Religious objects (*rten*) such as masks worn in *cham* are, due to their connection with spiritual transformation, on an opposite end of the spectrum from *drip*. They are associated with purity (Sikkimese Bhutia: *zangpo*), in contrast with dirt or pollution. Fibreglass is toxic due to its manufacturing process and is therefore a pollutant. However, the use of this material in *cham*, a ritual process that is intended to clear pollution and other obstacles (Classical Tibetan and Sikkimese Bhutia: *bar chad*), raises questions about whether this toxicity is inherent or whether it too can be transformed.

It is not my intention to posit that the adoption of fibreglass in *cham* represents some kind of loss of tradition due to modernity. Other scholarly discussions of *cham* have been critical in this way (see Ahmed 2005). Instead, I understand the adoption of fibreglass as the latest moment in a continuing history of ecological change in Sikkimese Buddhist material culture. Fibreglass has been incorporated into the material culture of other communities around the world (Chan 2012; Jensen 2012: 146; Kaell 2017) and has generated debates about authenticity and efficacy in other settings such as Mesoamerica (Cook and Offit 2008; Hughes 2016). Taking an approach that acknowledges and is embedded within local ecologies requires us to be attentive to the inevitability of change, but also to question the repercussions of new forms of pollution and toxicity into the sacred habitat. It is not the adoption of new materials that causes anxiety for different participants in the staging of *cham* but the nature of the materials that are being adopted. For the Buddhist

authorities who organise the *cham* and train the dancers, the changing nature of *cham* mask materials are concerned about the toxic pollutants that are part of the process of making fibreglass. Different elements of traditional craftwork changed due to the availability of the types of wood, metals and other materials. In this way, the arrival of fibreglass and other forms of plastic that are made from toxic pollutants represent further examples of material adaptation in ritual traditions. Such adaptations have allowed Pemayangtse to survive and prosper and continue its historical duty to maintain good relations of care between humans and the environment (Gagne 2018).

### **Masks as Conduits for Transformation: The Perspective of Pemayangtse Lamas**

Until 1975, Sikkim was a Buddhist kingdom, ruled by a Buddhist monarch, and Pemayangtse was the royal monastery that enjoyed patronage from the kings and surrounding agricultural regions. As the royal monastery, it also had satellite institutions throughout the region that followed traditions that had developed from the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism that dates back to the original establishment of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century CE. Since Sikkim was absorbed into India in 1975, Pemayangtse has continued to have an important social and spiritual role in surrounding local communities, including those who are not Buddhist. It has also been a politically powerful site, as many members of the Buddhist lama community at the monastery have kinship connections with local surrounding communities. Pemayangtse is not a celibate institution, so references to monks in this article should be understood as non-celibate ritual specialists, administrators and teachers at the monastic school where children are trained in astrology, ritual and other forms of Buddhist knowledge (Vandenhelsken 2003; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2021). In recent years, Pemayangtse has become a tourist attraction and the monastic community is responsible for managing tourist facilities and visits along with their busy ritual schedule.

In the past two decades, Sikkim has become a popular destination for domestic tourism, and the *cham* dances have responded by becoming a much larger spectacle. This has coincided with the development of key infrastructure in the state that has been funded by the Indian government to placate and absorb this geopolitically strategic border area. These changes are often represented as state-led development

and manifest in the abundance of new concrete structures and, more recently, religious statues (Jain 2021; McDuie-Ra and Chettri 2020). Buddhism has not been demographically dominant since the late nineteenth century. Despite the huge growth of Hinduism, Christianity and the appearance of New Religious Movements, Islam and Sikhism, Buddhism remains an important attraction for Sikkimese tourism, and there is a noticeable overemphasis on Buddhist narratives about Sikkim's landscape, often at the expense of opportunities for other communities to develop their own tourist ventures (Arora 2009; Chettri 2015).

This article focuses on Sikkimese Buddhist cosmologies, but as Sikkim is a diverse state (Chettri 2017), these cosmologies are often interconnected and overlap with other religious and ethnic traditions. However, some of the concepts here are shared elsewhere in other parts of the Himalayas, the Tibetan plateau and Inner Asia, such as concepts of sacred habitat, the five elements and pollution. The local context impacts how these concepts are understood and practised. In Sikkim, that local context must be understood from the perspective of Sikkim as the Hidden Land, a site especially demarcated for Buddhist practice. Sikkimese Buddhists across different ethnic groups understand Sikkimese history to be part of broader prophetic cycles. In the eighth century, Buddhist teacher Guru Rinpoche visited Sikkim and demarcated it as a Hidden Land (*sbas yul*) that would provide refuge for Buddhists in times of crisis to be 'opened'. It is believed that at an appropriate time Sikkim would be a hospitable place for Buddhists to settle after a spiritually accomplished Buddhist practitioner paved the way – and, importantly, set up relationships with local communities that would allow for Tibetan settlers to establish themselves. Hidden Lands are found throughout the Himalayas, but the opening of Sikkim was a long process contingent on the establishment of a strong relationship between Tibetan settlers and Indigenous Lepcha communities (Lha tshe ring 2002; Tshe ring 2008).

The monastic community at Pemayangtse is made up of descendants of a series of twelve clans of the Sikkimese Bhutia ethnic community (or, as they call themselves, Lhopo) who are thought to have migrated from Kham in the thirteenth century. In the seventeenth century, Pemayangtse was established by Tibetan yogi Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme (1597-1650/4), and since then, the monastic community has been composed of men from the surrounding community. In the past, they were the interlocutors between the guardian deities of

the landscape and the human residents of Sikkim and had the ritual responsibility of undertaking the two *cham* performances mentioned above, namely Guru Dragmar (around the time of the new year to clear obstacles) and Pang Lhabsol (to give offerings to the mountain protector deity) as part of broader ritual events that are focused on the wellbeing of the Sikkimese state. In a sense, Pemayangtse and other Buddhist and Indigenous religious institutions and communities were endowed with the responsibility to maintain the Hidden Land. Part of this maintenance includes rituals such as *cham*, which help to ward off pollution and other actual and spiritual obstacles.

This responsibility of maintaining ritual balance and warding off pollution includes organising the *cham* dances. The performance of these dances entails collecting necessary ritual implements and costumes. In the past, local Buddhist artisans from different ethnic communities were commissioned by the monastery to carve and paint the masks and stitch the clothing. These masks and clothing are part of broader iconographic and material regimes known as 'power objects' (Gentry 2017) or *ten (rten)*. These are not regular objects. By representing powerful forces such as deities and positive, generative power, they are seen as agents capable of transmitting and sharing that power (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022).

In 2007, a local patron donated two fibreglass masks to the monastery. This was, at the time, a novelty for Pemayangtse where ritual materials had all been made from traditional materials including wood and brass. Fibreglass was invented as a material that could be used for commercial and industrial purposes in 1939. It is made from the 'dry mixing of silica sand and limestone, boric acid and a number of other products such as clay, coal and fluorspar' (Vaughan 1998: 131). Fibreglass can be moulded to fit many shapes, but is considered comparatively easy to shape. It can be painted easily and gives the impression of being glossy and shiny. For this reason, it is used in a wide variety of settings, though its toxicity means it cannot be used everywhere. It is relatively resilient to temporal degradation and the elements, but as it ages it requires maintenance. When it was first introduced, many people saw it as a great alternative to wooden masks, which needed more time and skill to shape and were vulnerable to insect, rodent and humidity damage. These fibreglass masks were used over the next decade.

Eventually, some of the other antique masks had to be retired into storage as members of the communities became concerned that they



**Figure 1.**  
**Kanchendzonga**  
**fibreglass statue**  
**sculpted by Utpal**  
**Paul.**

*Source:* Photo by  
Chopel Dorjee Bhutia,  
2021.

were looking worn and that, if they were to break or rot, they would be lost as examples for future generations. Senior members of the monastic administration decided to have new masks made, and they also wanted to make two statues of the main protector deities of Sikkim, Kanchendzonga and Yabdud, which were required for ritual offerings.

According to Khenpo Wangyal, a senior administrator and teacher at the monastery school, the monastery could not find a local artisan to make new masks. Instead, they contacted a fibreglass sculptor, who was renowned for his work with Hindu statues but had recently also started to work with Buddhist material culture.

The monastics did not agree on whether or not fibreglass was a good replacement for traditional materials. Khenpo Wangyal, an administrator and a teacher at the monastery school, told me that ordering fibreglass masks seemed cheap and efficient. However, some of the more senior lamas in the monastery and visiting Rinpoches

(incarnated teachers) had expressed reservations over the pollution generated in fibreglass production. He recalled one Rinpoche's specific warning, which he relayed to me in Sikkimese Bhutia language:

It is good to continue the *cham* lineage, but this new substance is impure. It generates pollution [*drip*] and is not made from natural products. Therefore, these masks should not be the first choice. If you can find an artisan from Bhutan and local wood, that would be preferable.

This quote demonstrates the concern that the Rinpoche had with the materiality of fibreglass, in particular how its manufactured origins render it unnatural and polluted in ambiguous ways. He recommended the efficacy of traditional forms and materials of production.

According to these lamas and Rinpoches, the impurity of fibreglass could affect the efficacy of the *cham* and the monastic community's intention when they staged the *cham*: that is, generating favourable circumstances for all sentient beings. Here, the pollution they expressed concern over was both spiritual and physical. The physical pollution was generated by the toxicity of the materials used to make fibreglass and the fibreglass itself. The spiritual pollution came from the unnatural circumstances of production and the harmful elements of this material substance that could bring suffering to beings – quite literally, as it is toxic. Due to these concerns, these Buddhist authorities cautioned Pemayangtse lamas against recommending fibreglass statues to the lay community. Khenpo Wangyal recalled that one lama he had spoken to referred to fibreglass as 'dirty' (Sikkimese Bhutia: *dzogo*), which he interpreted to be both physical and spiritual dirt that was approximate to pollution or *drip*.

Yet other concerns also influenced the way Buddhist authorities approached fibreglass. The lama that was the most critical of fibreglass also recognised that for some people who could not afford domestic shrine implements made from precious metals and traditional materials, fibreglass was an accessible, cost-effective alternative. Fibreglass has the added benefit that it does not break as easily as wood, packed mud or other traditional materials, and as scholars have noted, it is 'impervious to fungal, bacterial or insect attack' and 'can maintain its strength in humid environments' (Vaughan 1998: 134-135). The visiting lama was therefore emphatic that Pemayangtse lamas should not directly criticise fibreglass objects as they may have been all local laypeople could afford, but he urged them to find alternatives if possible.

## **Masks as Livelihood and Merit: The Perspectives of Artisans**

A key reason that Khenpo Wangyal and his colleagues decided to approach a fibreglass sculptor was that they could not find a local artisan to make new wooden masks or clay sculptures. These carving traditions have historically been transmitted through family lineages and apprenticeship systems. This training has included education in Buddhist iconography and, at times, contemplative practices that include visualizations of Buddhas and other deities. These practices are important to establish the artist's motivation. This motivation is not simply to produce an aesthetically beautiful piece, but also a piece that can be efficacious in a ritual setting (Lhadrepa and Davis 2017). As has been noted by scholars working on Sikkimese handicrafts, modern industries and new educational opportunities, particularly those leading to government jobs, have meant that many families have ceased to transmit these traditions (Sherpa 2019). It is now very hard to find a traditionally trained artisan with the knowledge of wooden masks from Sikkim. When I interviewed traditionally trained artisans from the older generation, they lamented that their children had not been interested in learning the traditional arts, instead opting for other apparently more lucrative careers in business, bureaucracy and education. Traditionally trained artisans are relatively rare in contemporary Sikkim, and most of the people who work on large commissions are from Bhutan or Nepal.

In this context, fibreglass has emerged as a cheap and fast alternative to traditional arts whose lineages were broken and did not have the masters for wood carving and clay sculpting. When inquiring into procuring fibreglass religious items, Pemayangtse lamas came across a young artisan named Utpal Paul in Siliguri, the nearby Indian border town. Paul was a talented sculptor with a wide range of iconographic skills. Although he was not Sikkimese or Buddhist, his knowledge was transmitted through a family lineage, as his father was a clay sculptor of the Hindu deities Durga and Kali. Paul had also learned about sculpture and iconography through carving Hindu clay deities. As with Buddhist deities, these images are created by artisans and then animated through rituals (Venkatesan 2020). In the last two decades, many sculptors throughout India have taken up fibreglass to make Hindu sculptures. This motivated Paul to begin to work with fibreglass. He works out of a small studio, making the fibreglass by hand and producing statues from it. He began to make Buddhist objects when he was enlisted to work on another artist's



**Figure 2.**  
**Fibreglass masks**  
**for *cham* sculpted**  
**by Utpal Paul.**

*Source:* Photo by Utpal Paul, 2021.

commission for a large Sikkimese monastery. A Bhutanese lama came to stay with him in order to train him and provide him with an overview of Buddhist art. It was during a three-month intensive apprenticeship, as Paul explained to me during an interview, that his appreciation and knowledge of Buddhist art blossomed. He now feels confident to craft sculptures and masks that feature Buddhist iconographic elements. In early 2021, Paul started his own studio in Siliguri after he became frustrated that his efforts were rarely recognised when he was hired to work on commissions led by other artists. In his studio, he receives direct commissions and trains other artists. The studio also functions as a base for his Youtube channel where he shares his work.<sup>2</sup> He told me that he felt his exposure to Buddhist art was ‘what I have been born for’. As he described, making it has given him purpose, joy and a livelihood.

Paul crafts fibreglass masks and statues by hand in his workshop and does not wear protective gear. I asked him if he had any health concerns

regarding using toxic substances to make his artwork. He responded that whilst he had heard there were toxins in fibreglass, they were minimal, arguing that the ultimate fate of these objects – to function as sites for accumulating religious merit – made the risks to his health worthwhile. For Paul, any physical pollution of toxicity would be cancelled out by his motivation and creation of powerful religious objects.

## **Masks as Forms of Embodiment: The Perspectives of Dancers**

When new masks are brought to the monastery, an important measure of their efficacy comes from the dancers who wear them and how they perform in the masks. At Pemayangtse, youth, agility and dedication are all important characteristics for dancers, who often have to wear heavy silk robes and move in circles for long periods of time without stopping. Younger members of the monastic community – boys and men aged between twelve and forty – are recruited to learn *cham*. There are a number of different roles for dancers, and many of the monks who participate are not dedicated monastics based permanently at the monastery, but instead are young local Bhutias who have taken monastic admission but have not received Buddhist education. Participating in *cham* may be one of their best opportunities to engage with religious life at the monastery.

During the Pang Lhabsol festival, it is considered a great honour to be selected to wear the mask of Dzonga, the name for the protector deity Kanchendzonga (Balicki-Denjongpa 2001). Huge and striking with its powerful visage, the dancer who wears this mask is seen to physically represent, and at times to channel, the treasured mountain protector deity of the state. In 2017, Yongda Bhutia, an entrepreneur in his thirties, was selected. Yongda has an impressive height measuring over six feet tall. Yet in spite of his considerable stature, he is humble, kind and far from intimidating. Taking on the mask and role of Dzonga, he was transformed. Yongda had been taught to perform *cham* by his great uncle, the Dorje Lopen or ritual master of the monastery. Initially, he had started doing Pangtoed *cham*, which is performed by laymen in Pang Lhabsol who dress as warriors making an offering. Yongda decided as an adult to be admitted to the monastery as an expression of his Buddhist belief and respect for his ancestral traditions. He had been taught to complete prayers and visualisations of Buddha and other deities before he danced. This contrasts with some young dancers, who considered dancing to be a physical exercise or an expression of Sikkimese Bhutia identity. In 2017, Yongda was the first dancer to use the Kanchendzonga mask.

Fortunately, Yongda had the strength to carry it because, as he relayed to me in Sikkimese Bhutia language when I interviewed him in 2021:

It was so heavy! The mask by itself was seventeen kilograms. It was extremely difficult to see, very hot and hard to breathe. At the beginning, I felt fine and focused on my moves. But as the dance went on, it became more difficult due to the weight of the mask.

Yongda noted that his previous experience of dancing had been quite different as he was able to concentrate and focus more on his movement. Under the weight of the new mask, this focus and fluidity were disturbed by his efforts to stay balanced. He focused his energies on performing the steps as majestically and correctly as he could in order to honour Kanchendzonga and to bring about the aspirations of the ritual through correct action. As Yongda explained, he was not concerned about impurity or pollution of the materials used to make the mask itself, but instead was troubled by the pollution that might be created through an incorrect performance.



**Figure 3. Yongda Bhutia performing Kanchendzonga.**

*Source:* Photo courtesy of Yongda Bhutia, 2017.

Despite the weight of the mask and the difficulty Yongda had to overcome to perform it, his dance was successful. Another dancer, Gikdhal, noted how impressively Yongda had performed. He had the opportunity to try on one of the fibreglass helmets made for the dancers that had come from Siliguri and noted its beauty. However, Gikdhal agreed that it was very heavy, though he was not sure of the exact weight, and also shared that he did not think that it was as comfortable to wear in comparison with the softer, worn-in wood (which was, by comparison, around five kilograms). The nature of fibreglass means that once the mould is set, it is not malleable. This means that the helmet is unlikely to become more comfortable for dancers to wear, though it will retain its shining and gleaming appearance provided it is kept clean. This contrasts starkly with wood, which becomes worn and softer over time, even if the paint wears off more quickly.

Aesthetic considerations do seem to be a major reason that some favour the adoption of fibreglass masks. However, their usability is questionable due to their considerable weight. Despite this, human audiences remain riveted to the aesthetic spectacle. Khenpo Wangyal, Yongda and Gikdhal agree that fibreglass or not, the masks have the central function of enabling 'connectionwork' between the ritual and its participants, which was the point of *cham* (see Williams-Oerberg 2021). Humans are not the only audiences that Pemayangtse dancers have to think about. What about the non-humans, towards whom the ritual is aimed? Does the materiality of fibreglass - the toxic substances from which it is made, its weight and rigidity - impact the ability of the guardian deities and spirits to recognise and interact with *cham* dancers? And how does this impact the efficacy of the ritual more generally?

It is difficult to ascertain this. In the study of Himalayan sacred landscapes, many scholars have found that local Indigenous and Buddhist communities connect environmental degradation - including so-called natural disasters - to human morality and, specifically, moral decline (Gagné 2018; Gergan 2017). Included within the rubric of what it means to be a good person, in the opinion of Buddhist communities, is the appropriate attention to ritual performance. Following this line of argument, any change to *cham* - whether it be material or performative - can be interpreted as being capable of bringing imbalance to the universe through the introduction of pollution in the form of toxic materiality into an environment. This imbalance is wrought by offended or harmed guardian deities or by the departure of these guardian deities altogether. In the past three decades, the landscapes of Sikkim have been irrevocably and rapidly altered by large-scale hydroelectric

projects, deforestation, unplanned urbanisation and the local impacts of climate change (Gergan 2017; Lepcha 2020). Within Sikkimese Buddhist perspectives, there is a reciprocity to this environmental change. It has been caused by declining human morality due to greed and a lack of respect. However, environmental change is also understood to have caused decline and contributed to social disharmony, illness and a variety of other ailments. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *cham* was not performed in 2020, 2021 and 2022. This has been understood as a local manifestation of the global devastation of the pandemic, but some community members are also concerned about the spiritual ramifications for the wellbeing of the human and non-human residents of the land if the environment is not brought back into balance and the nonhuman residents of the sacred habitat are not acknowledged. Balancing the environment appears to be even more difficult than balancing a heavy helmet made by a newly-introduced material.

## Conclusion

The fibreglass masks that have been taken up for ritual use in Pemayangtse *cham* performances represent broader concerns about ritual efficacy and environmental change in contemporary Sikkim and, in particular, the presence of different forms of physical and spiritual pollution. Adopted due to their accessibility and convenience, fibreglass masks have made striking aesthetic interventions in *cham* traditions at Pemayangtse Monastery in west Sikkim. Since their arrival in 2007, they have also led to the rise of new questions about efficacy, pollution and toxicity and the ability of new forms of plastic to fulfil the aims of *cham*: to bring balance to the cosmos. This article has discussed the perspectives of different people who have connections to the masks. The lamas of Pemaynagtse, who are responsible for the ritual, have pragmatically accepted the necessity of using fibreglass for reasons of cost and accessibility, but express concerns about its toxicity and how this can impact ritual efficacy in the sacred habitat of Sikkim. The artisan, who created these masks, took up fibreglass sculpting with great enthusiasm, arguing that any toxicity can be cancelled by the spiritual outcomes generated by the use of the masks and statues they produce for all beings across dimensions. The dancers, who are ritually transformed by wearing the masks, express reservations over the physically different experience of wearing heavy fibreglass and wonder about the spiritual impact this may have on the *cham*, even if the masks appear more colourful. And, then there is the audience, who continues to attend and give patronage to *cham*, without much discussion of material

change. Yet, there is a missing set of voices from this narrative: the guardian deities and beings who are embodied by the masks. At their pinnacle is Kanchendzonga, Sikkim's mountain protector. In recent years, the recession of Kanchendzonga's glaciers, changing monsoon patterns, earthquakes and a global pandemic have led Buddhist communities around Pemayangtse to wonder about whether the protectors may be unwell or have departed. The monastic community at Pemayangtse and local farmers in the area have expressed concerns that these changes indicate that the cosmos is out of balance, but there has not been a consensus as to whether impure fibreglass and its toxicity have played a role in this. Perhaps returning to Tantric ideals of the power of embracing impurity can be helpful for understanding these changes at a time when we live in a 'permanently polluted world' (Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo 2018). Maybe the adoption of new forms of materiality (even toxic ones), interconnected as they may be with broader local and global changes, can in fact be part of generating new potential pathways for bringing the sacred landscape back into balance, rather than creating more pollution. Only time will tell, as the popularity of fibreglass grows as broader socio-economic, environmental and spiritual changes transform the Hidden Land.

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## NOTES

- 1 This article focuses on Sikkim, a multiethnic, multilingual state. The forms of Buddhism practiced in Sikkim draw from Classical Tibetan language literary corpuses. In this article, I employ the widely used Wylie transliteration system for terms from Classical Tibetan Buddhist texts which I place in italics in brackets after they first appear. Terms in other languages are marked.
- 2 Utpal Paul's Youtube channel can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5L37O8IEe2JJEIk7HBqDHw> (Accessed on 1 February 2022).

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