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Pitt Rivers
MUSEUM
Anthropology and World Archaeology



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Disciples of a Crazy Saint The Buchen of Spiti

Photographs by

Patrick Sutherland



The servants of the
Lord of Death waiting
to perform a play about Hell.
Langsa, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2007.



A detail from a *thanka*
describing the realms of Hell,
shows victims being boiled alive.
Sagnam, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2010.

Exhibition curated by **Patrick Sutherland** and **Christopher Morton**

Photographs © **Patrick Sutherland**

Design by **Thomas Nicolaou**



Nyima Dorje performs as the deaf mother of the “crazy saint” Drukpa Kunley.
Mane, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2007.

9 December 2010 – 3 July 2011

Long Gallery, Pitt Rivers Museum

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The Buchen of Spiti are ritual experts, actors and disciples of the fifteenth-century “crazy saint” Thang Tong Gyalpo. They are famous for performing the Ceremony of Breaking the Stone, an elaborate exorcism ritual described by the tibetologist George de Roerich in the 1930s. Stone breakings are still commissioned in Spiti to combat illness and when houses are being built.

Buchen also enact a local form of the Tibetan Opera: Buddhist morality plays, delivered for the edification of village audiences, illustrating karmic principles through the dramatised biographies of Tibetan saints. The stage offers a space for uninhibited speech and earthy humour. Even the most harrowing stories can have comic interludes.

I visited Spiti several times in winter in order to join the Buchen on tour. I photographed their plays, the behind the scenes preparations, and the audiences. I wanted to capture the flavour and feel of the Buchen performances and the valued social role they play, as honoured guests within their host villages. I enjoyed the intimate connection the



Gatuk Namgyal dressed as the elephant keeper from the play *Drimed Kunden*. Sagnam, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2010.

actors have with an audience crowded into an animal pen in the freezing cold. I relished the slapstick and absurd humour, the prayer and deep emotion, the dancing and partying. When I recently gave back some of these images, one Buchen told me that my photographs were so awful that they had torn them up and thrown them in the fire. Even allowing for the Buchen propensity for joking this seemed an extraordinary response, and became the stimulus for this project.

I returned in 2010 with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, carrying an archive of my own images of the Buchen taken over the last decade, as well as historical material. My aim was to negotiate a form of documentation that had value to both the Buchen and to me. In discussions, one Buchen, Sangey Gatuk, contrasted my unposed black and white reportage images with the colour portraits that villagers have in



Pema Namgyal dressed as a beggar from the play *Drimed Kunden*. Sagnam, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2010.

their albums and on their walls. The latter are much more formal encounters, accorded the privileged status of uncommon events in a community where ownership of a camera has, until recently, been rare. For the Buchen, these portraits visually manifest their pride in their identity.

Much of what I had photographed they viewed as superficial. Buchen denigrate their improvised performances, the locally specific, unique, unwritten and intangible elements of Buchen



The Elephant, a scene from the story of Prince *Drimed Kunden*. Lara, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2004.



Two Buchen dressed as beggars perform the story of *Drimed Kunden*. Lara, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India. 2004.

theatre. They dismiss all this as mere entertainment, the filler between what is important – the stories as described in the written texts. Perhaps my work concretised the ambivalence felt by both the community and the Buchen themselves about these performances, and compromised their self-identification as serious religious practitioners. Drama, spectacle, sexuality and joking are all essential elements of this local theatre, but not necessarily legitimised by text. There is a conflict between their sense of themselves as religious practitioners spreading the Dharma and their bawdy performances.

The form that this exhibition has taken, juxtaposing portraits and images of performances with details of *thanka* paintings, has emerged from a process of collaboration with the Buchen themselves, incorporating their own ideas about how to produce and present a visual record of their theatre, rituals and social role.

Patrick Sutherland is a documentary photographer and Reader in Photojournalism at the University of the Arts London. He has been photographing in Spiti since 1993. His work has been exhibited internationally and is archived in the British Library.

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