

THE MONASTERY ARTS AND CRAFTS OF SIKKIM

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Perhaps it will not be an outward and downward brink statement that most of the Mahayayana Buddhist Lamas are artisans by birth or become artisans following highest degree of practice with vehement devotion and steadfastness under strict guidance of Omzes or senior priests of the monasteries.

During mid 17th century AD an eminent Tibetan lama Riwochhe Lha-Tsum Chem-po introduced Lamaism in this celestial Himalayan ambience along with Lama Kartok Kuntu Zangpo and Rigd-sin Ngadagzempa Chenpo Phuntshog Rigzin. By his ascendancy Lha-tsum-chempo searched a man named Phuntsog as per guidelines of Guru Rimbochhe or the wizard priest Padma Sambhava and enthroned Phuntsóg Namgye as Chho-gyal (Dharma-rajá) of Sikkim Amid large number of sects and sub-sects in Lamaism, only Nyingma-pa (Primitive and unreformed style of Lamaism) and Kargyu-pa (represented by Karma-pa) sect gained prominence in Sikkim Both the sects have numerous gompas and lhakhangs throughout the length and breadth of Sikkim. At present there are more than one hundred and thirty gompas or monasteries in Sikkim. Some of them are centuries old while some others are recently built. Old or new, Nyingma-pa or Kargyu-pa, all the monasteries of Sikkim exhibit certain exquisite works of art and craft. The resident lamas of each and every monastery are trained in some particular form of art of which torma sculpture, thanka and mural painting and drawing of mandala are most preponderous. Besides, the artisan lamas also practice ceremonial mask making and carving of religious artifacts in wood.

Torma Sculpture

Use of torma is typical of lamaistic Buddhist culture as prevalent in

Sikkim. Torma is an object of offering made to the deities and demons. Torma is sculpted with great skill and expertise by the artisan lamas. The sanctum sanctorum of a monastery looks incomplete without these decorative offerings.

Generally the tormas are offered to propitiate the malevolent spirits who are believed to exercise evil influence on human life and mind. Apart from appeasing the enraged demons and dakinis (Khando), they are also used to usher in the blessings of peaceful guardian deities and goddesses (Lhamo). Torma offering is as necessary as the offering made by means of butter-lamp, incense, water and food (tshok) during every puja.

The art of making torma is not every lama's cup of tea. Only those with deft hands and a very sound knowledge of religious scriptures are hand-picked by the omze. Before being allowed to sculpt torma, the artisan lama must learn the procedure as written in Guru Rigzin Jigme Ling-pa's book *Jigling-Sumboom*. The book was written sometimes in the 17th century and it is still as relevant and revered. The book contains detail geometric description of the form and structure of torma and its usages. Every torma sculptor has to follow the rule of torma making word by word. It is needless to say that the tormas are sculpted under the strict supervision of the omze. Quite often the omze himself sets the basic structure so that the intended form gets the right shape. He sits throughout during the work of other artisan lamas and gives the finishing touch. Torma sculpture requires deft hands as well as a lot of patience. Every artisan lama must pass the test of patience to be able to sculpt a full-fledged torma single-handed. For trainee lamas, a dice of torma (torpay) is kept in every monastery but a skilled lama hardly uses the torpay. By the time a lama attains the status of omze, he learns the process by heart and produces them without consulting the book.

Tormas are of different shape, size, colour and medium. The shape of torma depends upon the requirements of a particular puja. Sometimes they look like a miniature chorten (stupa), sometimes they resemble some deity and quite often they look like a decorated candle or cake. The size too varies from a few centimeters to a meter according to the puja specifications. As for colour, there are two basic colours used on the body of torma, namely, red and white. While white colour signifies an offering made to evil spirits, the red colour symbolizes offerings of guardian deities. Any other primary colour, especially blue and yellow can also be used to decorate a torma. The most interesting aspect of torma sculpture, however, is the medium used. It carries a lot of significance for the worshippers.

Medium of torma sculpture: Torma can be sculpted with three different

mediums These are i) tsampa (roasted barley or rice flour), ii) vegetable oil and paraffin, and iii) clay and paper pulp. The medium used determines the longevity of a torma.

Torma may be made to last a day, a week, a year or several years. According to duration and purpose of puja, the tormas are termed as Then-tor, Drup-tor, Lo-tor, and Ten-tor.

i) **Then-tor and drup-tor:** Then-tor and Drup-tor are tormas made with tsampa. Then-tors are prepared for daily worship and are disposed of at the end of the day. The Drup-tors are made to last a week or so because some particular ceremonies continue for seven days or more. While the Then-tors are usually fed to birds and stray animals, the Drup-tors are often offered to the sacred fireplace.

ii) **Lo-tor:** The tormas that are made to last a year are called Lo-tor (Lo=year). Lo-tors are offered to the deities and demons to ensure overall well being of a monastery or a household, Lo-tors are sculpted from a mixture of vegetable-oil solids and paraffin. The advantages of this medium are many: firstly, in the cool climate of Sikkim, it solidifies almost readily, secondly, it lasts for a reasonably long period, and thirdly, it can easily be offered to the sacred fire after the culmination of puja.

iii) **Ten-tor:** Ten-tors are very long lasting. These are sculpted from a mixture of clay and paper pulp. Ten-tors can be preserved in gompas and household altars for several years. The clay used to make ten-tor is not available in Sikkim. The lamas procure this clay from abroad. The paper pulp however, is indigenously prepared from a particular type of handmade paper produced from the bark of orgali or anemone. Ten-tors are fine specimens of monastery art.

The art of Torma-making: Once the medium of torma is selected in accordance with the requirements of puja, the first task is to prepare the dough. It is quite simple and easy to prepare the dough of tsampa, but one requires great skill to get the dough of right consistency in case of the other two mediums. To make a torma of vegetable oil solids and paraffin, the ingredients need to be heated and mixed finely until the right consistency is achieved. For clay torma, it is very important to knead the clay with paper pulp. The pulp is derived painstakingly from orgali, a local handmade paper. The stickiness of clay and smoothness of the paper pulp are important determinants of the quality of the medium.

Plate. No.1. Omze of Chorten gompa preparing torma.

After the dough is prepared the tormas are shaped either with the help of dice or free hand. Before colouring and decoration, the tsampa and clay tormas are dried in sun. The vegetable oil-paraffin torma does not require sun, because it solidifies readily after cooling. The process of dyeing of this torma is also easier. Colour can be added to this medium directly during heating and different shades of a colour can be achieved simply by reducing or increasing the amount of colour to be mixed with the dough. There is hardly any use of brush in colouring this kind of torma.

The base colour of a torma may be white or red. White tormas are offered to the peaceful, benevolent deities while red tormas are offered to the demons or malevolent spirits. Both these colours are derived from natural ingredients. The white colour is derived from white earth or rocks like chalk, talc or lime stone. The red colour is extracted from the bark of a tree called mukche. The process to extract the colour is quite elaborate. First of all the bark of mukche is shredded into pieces. The pieces are then pounded with pestle till a fine batter is prepared. The batter when mixed and boiled over fire produces red dye.

Plate No. 2. Torma offering of Kargyu-pa sect

After the base colours are applied, the tormas are decorated with fine designs using other primary colours, namely blue and yellow. Once colouring is over, some other decorative accessories are added to the torma. Tiny hard-board cuttings in the shape of flower, leaf, moon, sun, fire, etc. are attached on the body of torma. In case of vegetable oil-paraffin torma, these fixtures are made of the same medium in different tints. These finishing touches are normally given by the omze.

In the gompas of the Nyingma-pa sect, the tormas are made to resemble the idol of the deity or demon for whom the offering is being made. The idol is usually made of vegetable oil. Such tormas are also decorated and wrapped with colourful silk scarves.

There is no doubt the art of torma making is esoteric and intricate. Unless a person is well versed in Tibetan religious readings, it is impossible

for him to know the intricacies of this apparently simple-looking art form.

THANKA PAINTING

Thangka is a painted scroll depicting religious deities, tutelary duties demons and the life stories of Avatars. These can be seen in every monastery and house of the Mahayana Buddhists. Buddhas and the lamas and their lay followers firmly believe that the thankas are equivalent to or even more effective than the idols of the deities in bringing happiness and blessing for a person, a family or an institution. Thankas are widely used for three basic purposes: i) to bring happiness for a departed soul, ii) to ward-off sickness or trouble, and iii) to ensure concentration during a particular religious practice.

A lama or a lay artist can paint a thanka. In most cases, lay followers commission a lama after a death in the family or at times of sickness and trouble. After a person's death, his relatives engage lama artist to name the appropriate deity from the astrological texts so that the departed soul can have blessings for a happy re-birth. The deity must be painted on a scroll within a period of 49 days after the death, because, the Mahayana Buddhists believe that this is the period of transition before the next incarnation occurs.

The lay people are also advised by the lama to keep 'good-sign' thankas at home to remove obstacles or ward-off sickness. It is commonly believed that the thanka-painting of Tara protects a family from unforeseen or impending obstacles while the portrayal of Amitayus ensures good health and long life. Other than these, a devotee may commission a lama to paint a thanka of his guardian deity or of any other theme of his choice to ensure overall well-being of the family and surroundings. It is considered as a good deed to commission a lama to create a work of sacred art and the deed adds to his merit.

The lamas also paint the thankas for their own use. The trainee lamas paint thankas for the purpose of education and religious practice. A thanka is a useful aid, especially for the trainee lamas, to bring concentration during meditation. They also practice their recitation of prayers in front of a thanka which acts as a focus. The lamas often paint them as a substitute of the images kept in the main prayer hall of the monastery and keep them in their living quarters to prepare their lessons and perform sundry religious duties under the watchful eyes of the deities. The thankas not only act as a source of inspiration or an object of worship, quite often they are used as reference

materials by the lamas engaged in higher religious studies.

Thankas are widely used due to some practical convenience; for a wandering lama, a traveler or a trader it is much easier to carry a scroll painting than to carry a tabernacle or an idol box. Quite often, the lamas and devotees commission the artists to paint special thankas for the purpose of worship during travel. For the lamas intending meditative retreat, a thanka of particular deity is indispensable.

Thankas are also used during religious processions and some other public ceremonies. During a religious procession, the senior lamas carry and display the thankas at the head of the procession. These are also carried along with marriage and funeral processions. Special ceremonial thankas kept in larger monasteries are unrolled during religious festivals and holy occasions.

The art of thanka-painting: In Sikkim two distinct traditions of thanka-painting are followed, they are:

- i) ***Karma Gardi:*** It is the finer form of thanka painting. According to this tradition, a light cloth and light colours are used to paint thanka; here the line drawings are always fine and thin while the colours used look more natural.
- ii) ***Mendi:*** The mendi tradition is exemplified by the brighter and thicker thanka paintings. The fabric of this type of thanka must be thick and slightly coarse. The colours used for this are derived from bright mineral pigments.

Plate. No. 4. Thangka painting of Kargyu-pa sect.

To paint a thanka, first of all the fabric is selected. A thanka may be painted on cotton, linen or silk. However, plain cotton cloths are most widely used to paint a thanka. Fineweave cotton or silk cloths are used by the followers of Karma Gardi tradition while slightly heavier cotton with coarse weave are recommended by the Mendi practitioners.

Before the painting process starts, the fabric is washed to avoid shrinking afterwards. The washed piece of cloth is then fixed to a wooden stretcher frame so that no crease or crack appears after painting. In fact two frames are used to stretch the cloth, one inner and the other outer. Thin sticks of bamboo or strips of wood are used to make the inner frame. The thin sticks are hemmed

with the edges of the cloth with widely spaced stitches. The outer frame or the stretcher is usually bigger and made of stronger stuff. It leaves a few centimeters between the inner frame and itself. A strong cord is used to tie the inner frame with the stretcher in winding loops passing through the gaps of stitches of the inner frame and over the frame of the stretcher. The painter takes utmost care to do this so that proper alignment and tension of cloth is maintained. Once the framing is completed, the painting surface or ground is prepared. For this, gesso, a fine mixture of chalk and resin is applied on the cloth surface. The cloth is sundried after coating with gesso. After drying, the surface is thoroughly rubbed with a piece of stone (gzi) to get a fine polish. The rubbing and polishing process is repeated till the painter is satisfied about the texture of the painting surface. It can be mentioned here that the artisan lamas never compromise with the quality of their works of art. To achieve the best results, they repeat the process for nth time. Their patience in this regard is remarkable.

After the canvas is prepared, the painter lama recalls specific directives given in the book of Buddhist iconography and also keeps by his side a standard sample of the theme to be depicted. Before starting to sketch, he divides the canvas into the required number of square or rectangular blocks for each figure to be drawn. If the standard example and the canvas to be painted are of same size, stencil can also be used to transfer the outline drawing. The dotted outline transferred from the stencil is developed into solid lines with Chinese ink. In absence of stencil, the artist sketches the figures one by one inside the assigned blocks. Then he adds the background features, namely sky, clouds, hills, trees, meadows, backdrop, etc.

While painting a thanka the colouring starts from the background. First of all the sky is coloured with shades of blue. Next step is to colour the landscape features such as the hills. The valleys, meadows, trees etc. in different shades of green. While using these two colours, all other features in the shades of blue or green are also covered; After completing the background features, the painter starts working on the figures in bright red, orange and yellow. After the primary features are covered; he concentrates on smaller and finer details for which he uses pink, brown, white and gold.

Plate. No. 5. Thangka painting of Nyingma-pa sect.

In olden times almost all colours were natural pigments derived

from different minerals. For example blue pigment to colour sky, water and other blue features was derived from azurite, while the green pigment to colour landscape features was derived from malachite. Native vermilion and cinnabar were used to colour orange and bright red. Yellow ochre, white chalk or calcium compounds and carbon blacks were used to colour the features in yellow, white or black. Black ink was derived from soot and glue. Finally, gold dust was used to colour gold.

Till date the red and white pigments are derived from nature while most of the other colours are substituted by synthetic paint. In rare cases, the central figure is still decorated with pure gold leaf or dust. However, use of pure gold depends upon the wish and financial capability of the patron.

A thanka painter may take three to ten days to complete a normal size scroll. However, depending upon the size and composition, he may take several weeks to produce an exquisite work of art. Since most of the painting work takes place in daylight, and the colouring process progresses step by step, it takes considerable time to finish a standard thanka.

After the colours dry, the painter has to scrape the whole painting to attain a smooth surface, the thick layers of paint are scraped with a sharp knife; however, scraping is not required for the Karma Gardi or fine and light thankas. After scraping the thanka is dusted thoroughly. A tsampa dough is rubbed on the scraped surface to remove the fine dusts of paint.

Finally, the painting is mounted on silk or Chinese brocade or a finely embroidered material and attached to the rolling rods at the top and bottom.

MANDALA

Mandala is an integral part of tantric Buddhism. None of the puja rituals of a gompa is complete without the mandala. Mandala or the 'Magic circle' represents the universe. It is a cosmic plan as well as a celestial palace where the deities reside. It is an endless circular space where the deities, yakshas, dak-dakinis are supposed to sit and respond to the call of the worshipper. Mandalas are one of the most intricate and awe-inspiring works of lamaistic art. They exemplify the talent and knowledge of the artisan lamas. The meticulousness with which a mandala is drawn clearly shows the perfectionism of the lama artists.

Mandalas are always drawn by the lamas. Other than monasteries, these can be seen in some houses of the lay followers or even on lands

acquired by followers to construct their houses. The artists perform the duty of creating mandala for them on special request.

The basic features of a typical mandala are protective circles comprising bands of fire, vajra, lotus petals etc. ; four portals of the celestial palace and the seat of the deity at the centre. Several figures are placed around the seat of the central deity. The size of a mandala depends upon the number of deities to be worshipped. A most remarkable feature of mandala worship is that here along with the guardian deities, scores of other gods, goddesses, dak-dakinis are invoked and each of them has his or her assigned seat. Unless and until a lama artist is well-versed in tantric worship rituals and is perfectly aware of the placement of the deities and demons inside the mandala, he is not allowed to create a mandala. The lama teachers firmly believe that the deities respond to the call of the worshipper only if they are fully satisfied in regards to their seat, the style of invocation and prayer.

A mandala is not only an object of puja. It also acts as a therapeutic tool and a medium of meditation by which a patient can be healed or a practitioner can reach the higher realms of self-revelation. The most classical mandala is represented by the Kalachakra. According to the lamas of Sikkim monasteries, the mandalas can be divided into four categories. These are: i) Redy,-Kilkhor, ii) Dwchen-Kilkhor; iii) Lolang-Kilkhor, iv) Samten-Kilkhor. Of these, the first two are more commonly practiced in Sikkim. These are briefly discussed below:

1. Making of Mandala: The 'ready' Kilkhor (ready made mandala) is a kind of ready made and portable mandala which can be used for daily ritual at gumpa or home. The larger monasteries keep wooden blocks of mandalas for particular deities. Different colours, (but more commonly black) are applied on the block and a sheet of paper or fabric is evenly spread on it. A heavy, rounded roller is run on the paper or cloth once from top to bottom and again from bottom to top. The imprint of the mandala is thus readily transferred on the sheet. After drying, the mandala is ready. Quite often when a devotee buys a land for the construction of his house he intends to perform bhumi puja so that no evil spirit casts an evil eye on his land or homestead. For this purpose, along with the guardian deity, the dakinis (khando) too are invoked by means of mandala. The ready-kinkors are widely used for such puja.

2. Dwechen-Kilkhor: These are meant for long-drawn rituals or puja, e.g. the puja of Kalachakra. The creation of dwchen-kilkhor start much ahead of the time of puja. This type of mandala is extremely elaborate, fine and

complex. It requires years of training to be able to create a dwchen-Kilkhor. It also requires high degree of esoteric knowledge, extreme meticulousness, perseverance and a very neat hand.

Plate no. 6. Mandala of Kalachakra puja

The first and foremost task before the creation of this mandala is to select the place. The selected place is usually raised above the ground-level and purified; the purification process of land is called sna-dok. Purification is compulsory not only for the place but also for all the ingredients to be used, such as water, grains of rice, mustard, sand etc. Purification ensures the removal of all evil spirit. The process of purification is quite elaborate. It requires milk, butter, saliva and urine, curd and cow-dung from a pedigree cow. The cow should be the progeny of such cows which provided all the above mentioned items for mandalas during their life time and are declared sacred. The selected cow should be flawless in every respect. All its body parts and sense organs should be flawless in every respect. All its body parts and sense organs should be blemish-free. Moreover, the cow must be purely vegetarian in the strictest sense. It is believed to be found only in high Himalayan pastures. The aforementioned items of purification must be collected before they come in contact with earth. If any of them touches the ground, that will be rendered unfit for purification. The five items are to be mixed with sacred water and smeared on the place to be purified. This medium of purification is known as ba-chung-nga (nga=five). Owing to the scarcity of ba-chung-nga, most of the monasteries preserve this in the form of tablets which can be diluted in the sacred water for purification and render the process faster as well easier. Other ingredients used for smear are camphor, kesara, nutmeg, white and red sandal wood. These five items are purified and powdered to prepare Dri-sang (varieties of essence). The Dri-sang is wet-grinded and applied on the area identified for mandala. Once the area is dry, the creation of mandala starts.

Plate no.7. Decorated mandala of Kalachakra puja.

To sketch the mandala the such medium is used that can be erased if needed. The sketching always starts from the centre and proceeds from east to west or north to south. This instruction cannot be violated by the artists. There are two valid reasons for this.

i) The directives of mandala creation clearly states that the work will proceed from left to right or from top to bottom. The artist is bound to

follow the directives to the minutest detail.

ii) If the work starts from the bottom to the top, it causes some practical problem. The lower section may get spoiled while working on the upper.

To colour the mandala a particular type of pen is used. There is no use of paint-brush in mandala. There is neither any use of ink or liquid paint to colour a mandala. The tube of the pen is filled with coloured powders derived from minerals or dried vegetable dye or pigments brought from market. In stead of a regular nib the pen has a pointed head with a small opening through which powdered colour is poured with a gentle stroke of hand. The artist masters the art of stroking with such perfection that only required amount of specific colour is poured onto the specified surface.

After the colouring business is over, the artist adorns the mandala with precious and semi-precious stones like ruby, coral, turquoise etc. The artisan lamas believe that unless the homes of the deities are richly furnished, they may not feel at ease. A finished mandala is always a luxurious and highly prized work of art. It may take several days or even weeks to finish a properly done mandala. Normally a group of lamas under the leadership of the omze or a senior lama work to create a dechen kilkor.

On the day of the ceremony or puja, the lamas of sangha assemble together and invoke the gods in the accompaniment of horns, drums and cymbals so that they appear and take their seats in side the mandala. Once the puja is over, the lamas thank the deities, request them to leave the mandala and after that destroy this fine work of art.

MURAL PAINTING

Mural painting on the walls, ceilings and frames of windows or doors inside a monastery is a regular feature. These are found especially on the walls of the shrine hall. The 16 great saints (Arhats) with whom Buddha Sakyamuni entrusted his doctrine are found to adorn the wall of shrines. Quite often the Jataka fables and many stories related to the gods, goddesses and saints are also depicted.

The mural paintings are not mere depictions of the images of gods, they are excellent manifestation of monastery art and are as valued as the thankas or scroll paintings. The images of the meditating saints, their disciples and the illustrated stories of their lives create an atmosphere

of silent reverence and evoke piousness in the mind of the beholder. The colourful illustrations also ease the sombre gloom of the dark chambers to a large extent.

Plate no. 8. Window decoration of Pema Yangtse monastery.

The artisan lamas require special training to paint a mural. Although the process is not much different from that of the thanka-painting, the enormity of scale may be disadvantageous for a regular thanka artist. A mural artist must learn the skill of enlargement and should be adept to work on a hard, static surface.

Before painting a mural, the working surfaces, i.e. the walls are coated with a layer of plaster of Paris or a mixture of lime and glue. The texture and stains on the wall are finely rubbed with sand-paper to make it blemish-free.

The painters usually follow a model drawing of the image or the scene to be painted. Square grids are drawn on the model to help maintaining proportion on the enlarged version. The working surface is also divided into equal number of grids. Sketching starts from top left corner grid, and proceeds towards right. After finishing a row from left to right, the artist takes up the next one below. For this he uses a flexible ladder or a fixed scaffolding if the working surface is very large and requires several hands. The bits of figures in the grids of the model are graphically enlarged and drawn on the wall with charcoal.

Plate no. 9. Artisan lama in front of a mural painted by him in Ralang monastery.

After the completion of sketching, the artist prepares the colours, colouring medium and paint brush. Most of the basic colours are derived from crushed mineral pigments. Herbal dyes are also used to paint murals. In Sikkim the red dye is almost always extracted from plants. The powdered pigments need to be mixed with glue and water. The colouring medium or the glue is derived from hide. In some cases, linseed oil is also used as a medium, but it is not very popular with the mural artists. They feel comfortable to work with pigments diluted in glue and water which has much similarity with the present-day distemper. Sometimes they apply thinner to create wash-effect. The pastel shades are achieved by mixing white with the four primary colours and re-mixing them. These days the mural artists of Sikkim liberally use the synthetic paints. However, they still use Tibetan

mineral pigment to paint the eyes of the deity, which they believe, cannot get life without this. Depending upon the size and nature of the mural, different types of paintbrushes are used. Most of these paint brushes have cat, goat, yak horse hair or rabbit.

Colouring too starts from top left to right and continues downwards. Like thanka-painting, here too, an order of colour is maintained. First of all, the colour blue is used to paint the sky and other blue features. Different shades of blue are used to show the gradation of sky from the zenith to the horizon. The higher areas are always coloured dark while the horizons are palest and often merge with the landscape shades. All other blue features are also painted simultaneously. After blue, it is the turn of green. Green colour is applied on the hills, meadows, forests, hedges, trees and the foreground represented by an empty field. The artists start working with the deepest green first and gradually move to the areas of lighter shades. Next come the turns of red, orange, yellow and so on and so forth.

The mural pictures are usually one-dimensional, but sometimes they are given three dimensional effect. For these, a thick medium of glue is used to make the paint thicker. If this is applied on a flat surface, the features look raised, and produce a three-dimensional effect if viewed from a distance. However, this must be done within the permissible limits as set by the old masters. The chief object must be painted in accordance with the instructions given by them so as to produce a true copy of the model given. It may take one to three years to complete a mural depending upon the intricacy of the sketch, size of the hall, availability of light and other working facilities.

Mask-making

Although masks are not used for everyday puja, they are no less important. Masks are used during every ceremonial dancing of the resident lamas of a monastery like Gutor Chaam, Losar, Dubchen and Tsechu puja. Masks are made for four guardian Amitabha Buddhas and all other lesser gods, goddesses, yakhas, dakinis, etc. Different masks are used for different ceremonies.

According to the artisan lamas of Sikkim monasteries, characteristically there are four kinds of masks : i) masks with serene expression (ziwa), ii) masks with mixed expression of serenity and anger (Sim-zimatrau), iii) masks with angry expression (Tro) (wrathful) and iv) masks with animal expression (Gonen-Tshog).

Unlike tormasculptors, thanka or mural painters, mask-makers are not found in every monastery. Because, all the monasteries may not have mask-dance ceremony. In Sikkim only a handful of monasteries arrange lame-dance where wearing of mask is necessary. Hence the art of mask-making is taught and practised only in those monasteries where the resident lamas have to take part in dance.

The art of mask-making: Masks are usually made of wood and clay mixed with the fibers of jute, cotton or handmade paper pulp. All the ingredients should be mixed in right proportion. The dough of this mix is cut into small pieces with the help of a chopper and again kneaded with hand. A locally available herbal glue (pin) is added to the dough to bind the ingredients. The dough is then flattened with a roller pin which is again pressed with a hot iron to tune it so that cracks can not develop afterwards. Next a sheet of wet handmade paper and a thin fabric is spread on the top and bottom of the flattened dough. This is again pressed with an iron. When the dough is partially dry, saw-dusts of red sandal wood mixed with pin is smeared on the dough so that the surface of the mask is textured.

After this, the lama either uses his hand or a dice to give the right shape of the mask. The masks are usually made larger than the standard size of human face so that they are fitted on any person during dance. Dancing masks should also contain lesser amount of clay so that they are not too heavy. Such masks have larger proportion of paper pulp or fibre. Once the image is transferred on the mask, it is sun-dried. Although sometimes they are dried on a charcoal oven, especially during the monsoons when the sun become a scarce commodity, it is not advisable because cracks may appear during oven-drying process. However, the artist checks the drying mask from time to time and mends the cracks before it is completely dry. On the other hand, drying under sun, though time consuming, ensures crack-free surface. Regarding colour, there is hardly any difference in the pigments or dyes used for tormas, mandala, thanka or mask. The masks are invariably painted with bright hues of red, green, blue, yellow and black. Masks may also be made to use for purposes other than lama dance, namely, for decorative purpose.

To conclude, it can be said that the arts and crafts of the Sikkim monasteries are not much different from those of Tibet, because the Mahayana Buddhism or more precisely, Vajrayana has its roots in Tibet. Quite often, the significance of the monastery art forms is not grasped by

the lay people and they fail to acknowledge the amount of skill and labour involved in creating these exquisite works of art. True, for an uninitiated torma, mandala, thanka or a ceremonial mask, do not bear much significance, but the aesthetic aspect of these exotic art forms cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

However, one limitation of the lama artists is the fact that they always have to follow the guidelines set by the old masters and there is absolutely no scope of using their own artistic imagination. This is the reason why most of these works look like exact replicas of each other. Although there is no dearth of (prescribed) variety, the artisan lamas and their patrons prefer to stick to some basic forms.

But one must admit that the strict discipline that is rigidly followed by the lama school of art makes it free from dilution. The distinctiveness of the tradition is religiously maintained to keep the purity of these art forms. They are exclusive and doubtlessly educative for those interested in religious studies.