

The Story the Old Man of Gadan

I am not Grimaldi, or Charlie Chaplain or Mr Bean but I am a comical character in my own right. I have a dark wrinkled face and I wear a heavy long-sleeved Tibetan tunic tied with a silken sash at my waist. Around my neck is a short woollen mantle. My face, people say, evokes a sense of mystery, antiquity, mischief and conviviality, all at once. A wisp of white hair hangs on my forehead to remind you of my age and wisdom and I wield a large phallus on my right hand to prove my masculinity. Even the clapper of the *chalang* bell I carry is a tiny penis.

Despite the comical and senile appearance, I am the driving force in Ura's annual Yakchoe festival. I am the host, the master of ceremonies, and the holy clown from the first day to the last. I am responsible both for entertaining the crowd and for the smooth running of the festival. For this, many people praise my character as a combination of the sacred and profane, wit and wisdom, humour and responsibility. The five days of Ura Yakchoe is a stressful and hectic time for me. I am fully alive then. For rest of the year I remain sequestered in meditation in the quiet sanctum of Gadan temple.

Each year, on the opening day of the festival, the priests of Ura come to my residence to invite my guru, Gadan Lam, and our holy relic. Long ago, they claim, the relic was presented to an old woman in their village by Guru Rinpoche and it brought them good health and prosperity. They wanted to keep it forever but the relic had other plans. It "flew" out of the village to Gadan. Ever since, they came each spring to take the relic back to their village to imbibe more blessings. I accompany my Lama and the relic to Ura, at the head of the procession, enjoying the reception they arrange for us year after year.

Some people ask me about my ancestry. All I know is I am from Gadan, a place above the village of Ura. My memory fails to recount the origin of my own being beyond that. There are no written or oral records of the dates, motives, purposes and significance of my persona. I may represent a human patron of the holy relic, with multifarious roles to play. My frock is archaic and very different from current Bhutanese dresses and it may indicate a costume people wore in the old days. The *chalang* I carry is a Bonpo ritual implement. So I may even have a Bonpo past.

There are a few other comedic characters in the region who resemble me in facial complexion and costume. They are also called *Gathpo*, the Old Men. The clowns who play with me during the Yakchoe festival and appear in other Bhutanese festivals are of a different category. The most senior of them, who works as my apprentice, has a red face with a red phallus hanging on his forehead. They are known as *atsaras*, from the Sanskrit word *acarya*, and I hear they have a dubious history of being parodies of wayward Indian monks who came to Tibet in search of gold. Thus they represent charlatanry, quite different from my type of honest characters. Now they grotesquely imitate the crazy wisdom saints of India who lived the care-free lives of enlightened experience.

Given my distinguished place and central role in Ura's Yakchoe festival I strive to make the festival a success. I rise before daybreak to wake up the priests for their prayers and, at sunrise, lead the village on their breakfast rounds. When the public performance starts and crowds of shy villagers in their best clothes and eager tourists with cameras around their necks fill the temple ground, I emerge at the beat of

clashing cymbals leading a file of *atsaras* to perform a bawdy dance. "Old Man! Tell us about your journey," demands the main priest. I present a narration in an idiom and style befitting a paradoxical mystic.

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When I descended from the summit of the White Peak, a hundred damsels waited on me, but I had no company at night.

Each time I swing my hips salaciously my audience explodes into laughter. I then mingle with the crowd to exchange greetings and crack jokes, but times have changed now. Today, I face the challenge of maintaining tradition while keeping pace with modernity. Many of my audience now come from distant lands, speak foreign languages, and have a strange sense of humour. It is becoming increasingly difficult to entertain them without learning a few modern tricks.

"I am also from the US," I once told an amused American woman. "George Bush is my brother but mine is bigger than his." I wielded my wooden phallus. The joke went down well and she laughed. When I asked her "How old are you?" she frowned. People are difficult to understand. Today, it is not just a mono-cultural performance I put on but a multi-cultural discourse I have to follow. The world converges for the festival and globalization has brought me new challenges. Even the perception and emotions of our own people have changed and the robust sense of humour is dying. With modern education they have become sophisticated and sensitive, complex and constricted. With their newly acquired sensitivities, some even take offence at my age-old pranks.

There are also social changes affecting the smooth running of the festival. With creeping materialism, people have no time to run or watch the festival at leisure, and rising individualism is eating away the tradition of communal solidarity. It is becoming increasingly difficult for buffoons like me to keep people interested in the festival. Vanities and new trends like game stalls are taking over our folks.

Yet, true to my character, I maintain my humour and happiness. I drink and dally all day long and play my part with professional flair. From opening chants to farewell songs, from morning prayers to eulogies to the phallus, from fondling women's bosoms to pulling men's legs, from the trifle to the most trying moments, I play my buffoonery as well as I could. At the end of the festival each year I earnestly pray that the festival, the village, the country, and the world will flourish until eternity.

But an old clown can only make a heartfelt wish. The future lies in the hands of the real players.