

# Encircling Transnational Peace through Khaita – Joyful Dances

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates how Khaita- Joyful Dances promote an understanding of peace from a transnational and Buddhist perspective. Khaita dances have been created by the Buddhist Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu as a practice of presence and collaboration, promoting an inner attitude of peace spreading from the individual to the group. Peace is hereby understood as a multi-faceted, intra- as well as interpersonal, dynamic state perceived and experienced not only by the intellectual mind but also through the body and subtle energies.

This article is structured in three parts. First, I will explore peace theory in the context of Khaita. Second, I will illustrate the peace understanding promoted by the Tibetan artists through examples from the Khaita songs. The Tibetan song lyrics thereby express the wish for unification amongst Tibetans and the desire for (world) peace. Third, I will investigate the principles of accessible participation, equality as well as collaboration as parameters for peace experiences through examples from the Khaita practice sessions as well as Khaita Kordros, circle dances. The circle dances thereby offer an easy, non-hierarchical immersion in a diverse group of dancers and require presence and self-observation.

**KEYWORDS:** transnational peace, peace theory, circle dance, Tibetan dance, Buddhism

“How can we have peace if we don’t have peace in ourselves?”  
(Namkhai Norbu)

## 1 Introduction

The official Khaita – Joyful Dances (short: Khaita) website states: “Since 2011, Khaita Joyful Dances have spread all over the World to share joy with all its citizens, to share values of respect, solidarity and peace.” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021e) And further: “People from all over the World danc[e] together to promote a message of peace and tolerance.” (ibid.)

Khaita is a translocal and transcultural dance practice founded in 2011 by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar and Dzogchen Master Namkhai Norbu<sup>1</sup>. The Tibetan word “Khaita” translates as “melody of the space” or also “harmony in space” (Norbu, 2018: 93). Khaita consists of approximately 240 dances that have been created under Namkhai Norbu’s supervision in collaboration with his students of the International Dzogchen Community. The International Dzogchen Community consists of thousands of people interested in Namkhai Norbu’s Dzogchen teachings in over forty countries. Due to the internationality of the Dzogchen community, Khaita can be considered a translocal and transcultural phenomenon that draws on specific elements of Tibetan culture. Khaita practices, meaning dedicated sessions of singing and dancing, have become an integral part of the daily activities of Namkhai Norbu’s students.

Because of its translocality and -culturality, Khaita is often associated with a peace practice. For this reason, Alkis Raftis, the president of the International Dance Council, claims that “Khaita dances totally embody the spirit and ideas of UNESCO and the UN by bringing together people from all over the world. People who, thanks to dancing, promote peace, harmony, and understanding.” (Raftis in International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021)

Raftis asserts Khaita as a peace practice for two reasons: First, he emphasizes Khaita dancers’ harmonious collaboration across cultures and nations, partaking in peace promotion as “citizens of the world” (Raftis in Granger, 2016: 17). Second, he states that Khaita offers an answer to non-peaceful circumstances:

This world in the present situation in which we have so many problems with terrorism, with lack of respect for human rights, with illiteracy, with discrimination, with the economic crisis and so many other ills, it is important to get away from all of this and present an answer to it. You [Khaita practitioners] are an answer to that. (ibid.)

Thereby, he refers to both Khaita’s attempt to promote the study of Tibetan language and preservation of cultural elements and the joyful dance practice that proposes a diversion from everyday problems. Raftis further praises the theory behind the Khaita dances, combining the physical practice with an embeddedness in a broader cultural context. By this, he refers not only to the dance movements of Khaita but also highlights the meaning of the song lyrics.

Khaita started with Namkhai Norbu searching for songs by Tibetan artists on YouTube and selecting them according to their melody and lyrical meaning. The Tibetan was then

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<sup>1</sup> Namkhai Norbu (1938-2018) is considered a great Tibetan scholar and master of the ancient Dzogchen Atiyoga teaching. Atiyoga, which translates from Sanskrit as “total perfection”, is “the natural condition of each of us and if recognized naturally it leads to compassionate and nonviolent lives” (International Dzogchen Community, 2021). Namkhai Norbu first came to Europe in the 1960s to teach Tibetan and Mongolian Languages and Literatures at the University of Naples and soon after, on the request of numerous people, started giving Dzogchen teachings to a group of Italians. Eventually he founded the International Dzogchen Community. Until his death, Namkhai Norbu travelled around the world to teach. To find out more about Namkhai Norbu and his legacy see: <https://dzogchen.net/>

transcribed and translated into English and the songs were grouped into three Khaita collections<sup>2</sup>. Namkhai Norbu further commented many of the songs, drawing on his expertise as a Tibetan culture and language scholar as well as a Buddhist master. As I will show, many Khaita songs include an explicit message of peace.

Furthermore, the Khaita dances, in particular the circle dances, or ‘Kordros’, function as methods for experiencing peace. At least this is what Namkhai Norbu intended them to be: practices to observe oneself, be present and relaxed in the given circumstances and develop inner peace that may then spread to the group of dancers. Thereby, three parameters become relevant, namely the accessible participation in the circle dances, the equality and non-hierarchy of all dancers that is encouraged by the circle formation as well as the choreographic request of collaboration and cooperation.

What has become clear so far is that Khaita is promoted explicitly as a peace practice by its own channels and has also gained official recognition as such by the International Dance Council. It has further been stated that the Khaita songs are carries of peace messages as well as that Khaita circle dances help to promote peace experiences. However, it remains unanswered so far how this is done. In this article, I therefore want to discover if and how the Khaita practice promotes peace. How does it foster harmonious collaboration? In how far do the circle dances function as tools for peace experiences? How do the song lyrics support the argument of peace promotion?

In the first part of my paper, I will theorize peace. Thereby, I will follow the approach of many peaces, assuming that there is not a singular definition for peace. I will in particular focus on Wolfgang Dietrich’s transrational<sup>3</sup> peace perspective as well as Namkhai Norbu’s peace concept of ‘evolution’. With these two theories in mind, I will then proceed to the second section of this article and focus on Khaita’s peace lyrics as presented in the songs. Thereby, two groups of peace songs will become apparent, the first one focusing on Buddhist viewpoints and the second revolving around the call for Tibetans’ unification and collaboration despite differences. In the third part of this article, I will then explore the Khaita practice and describe exemplary circle choreographies to illustrate how Khaita dances promote peace.

## 2 Peace Concepts

Peace has a multitude of meanings. There is not a single definition that summarizes all its connotations. It is relational and contextual. Padmendra Singh Rawat’s summary gives an insight into its numerous understandings, depending on perspective and situation:

A child gets peace in the arms of his/her mother. A partner gets peace of life when his/her hand is held by his/her who works along all the difficulties of life with him/her. A homeless gets peace under a shelter. A beggar gets peace with the piece of bread. The fire of hunger gets peace with food. Love gets peace in the heart of someone. An old aged gets peace in the words of respect. A relation gets peace with the pillars of trust and understanding. And at last, a soul gets peace when meets in the eternity. (Rawat in Valdez, 2014: 89)

Besides these different concepts of peace that depended on perspective, peace is also an institutionalized term. The European Commission, for example, understands peace as

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<sup>2</sup> The Khaita App (see: [khaita.com](http://khaita.com)) provides a clear overview of all the dances and their systematic divisions into the three collections of *Message from Tibet* (T), *Barsam* (B), and *Mekhor* (M). (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021d) In the following, I will provide the abbreviated group name as well as the numeric indication in the footnotes when referring to Khaita songs that correspond to the system used in the Khaita App.

<sup>3</sup> As I will explain, transrational peaces combine concepts of transpersonality and -rationality.

security and nonviolence. Its mission, as stated on the website, is “to reduce their [countries’] vulnerability and build their resilience and political stability” by supporting the establishments of democracies, civil administration, separation of powers as well as preventing and fighting violence (European Commission).

Peace definitions differ widely across various cultures, history and perspectives<sup>4</sup>. Besides peace as mental concepts, peace is often experienced as something corporeal or spiritual, which makes a description in words particularly challenging. This suggests that there are as many definitions of peace as there are individuals, or, as Ivan Illich states, “each person’s peace is as distinct as each people’s poetry” (Illich in Facci, 2017: 37).

Arguing that there is more than one peace understanding and criticizing singular peace perspectives that exclude other viewpoints, Wolfgang Dietrich questions the use of ‘peace’ in its singular form<sup>5</sup>. He proposes a theory of multiple ‘peaces’ or peace families. They are equally valid and become relevant in specific circumstances, depending on time, place, culture and individual perception. His peace families are called energetic, moral, modern, postmodern and transrational peaces.

The classification of these five peace families does not attempt to be complete but provides insights into the different interpretations of peace from cultural and historical perspectives while not denying other peace understandings. The peace understanding I will follow corresponds to Dietrich’s transrational peace perspective.

## 2.1 Transrational Peaces

Transrational peaces combine the concepts of transpersonality and transrationality to allow for individual and non-comparable experiences of peace. They understand peace as something that “everybody can only experience for herself/himself, the harmony that is only true, just, or secure if it is also really felt” (Dietrich, 2012: 255). As such, transrational peaces reach beyond the limits of a singular person and give space to peace experiences as incommunicable thoughts, feelings, sensations and intuitions. (Facci, 2017: 97)

Transrational peaces do not negate or compete with other peace understandings but integrate their elements in a pluralistic approach. Paula Ditzel Facci states:

It [a transrational perspective] embraces the achievements of the interpretations of peace throughout history and culture (energetic, moral, modern, and postmodern) and twists them, emphasizing relationality and balance. Thus, transrationality integrates the transcendental experience from the energetic approach, in the moments of spirituality, intentionality, and interconnectedness of everything, conforming the aesthetics of peaces. Truth, justice, and security are integrated in their referential, deflated of their absolute claim to an ultimate norm. (ibid.: 101)

As such, transrational peaces transgress the limits of modernity and postmodernity and recombine elements of the other peace families. Rationality, the main determinant for modern peaces, is not denied. Yet transrational peace understandings unfold components beyond rational thinking in favor of a more holistic approach. Spiritual experiences and natural opposites, as common for energetic peaces, are validated but are not seen as the ultimate or singular truths. Incommunicable feelings, thoughts and sensations are recognized. In contrast to the proposal of moral peace understandings, transrational peace perspectives do neither regard God nor institutionalized peace contracts as the normative rule givers for peace. However, they do not deny their relevance for individual experiences of peace. They follow

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Wolfgang Dietrich’s *Interpretations of Peace in History and Culture* (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Johann Galtung, often referred to as the ‘father’ of peace studies, famously defines peace as either negative or positive. ‘Positive’ peace, on the one hand, is thereby understood as the presence of desirable states, both on an individual as well as a societal level, and includes concepts of harmony, justice, equity etc. (Valdez, 2014: 89) ‘Negative’ peace, on the other hand, refers to the absence of war or violent conflict. (ibid.)

postmodern peace perspectives in their approach of treating multiplicity and plurality of meaning and experiences distinctly and respectfully.

What results in a transrational peace perspective is a synthesis of the other peace families. It recognizes and integrates all earlier understandings of peace, yet neutralizes their universalistic claims and focusses on small, 'unspectacular', individual peace experiences. (Dietrich, 2011: 13)

Transrational peaces are contextual and relational. As such and with their claims of inclusivity, they do not fall into the trap of colonial thinking or discriminate against other peace understandings. Peace becomes a dynamic, intra- as well as interpersonal continuum that does not have a perfected or finished state. It is a relational and highly contextualized experience that may be perceived differently by each person.

The starting point for transrational peaces is the individual perception of peace, which means that "human beings' relations among themselves and to their whole *Mitwelt* [(social) environment] are at the center of interest for this kind of peace research" (Dietrich, 2012: 267). As I will show in the following, this corresponds to Namkhai Norbu's peace concept of 'evolution' that also departs from the individual.

## 2.2 Namkhai Norbu's 'Evolution'

Khaita is the result of the dedicated work of Namkhai Norbu. Until his death in 2018, he continuously highlighted his intention of bringing together people, foster their collaboration and thus contribute to peace in the world through the means of Khaita. Thereby, his underlying peace concept is called 'evolution'. In many conferences, books and meetings Namkhai presented this concept that, according to him, has the potentiality to evoke and foster sustainable peace.

Two principles are important for evolution, thus peace: Self-observation and presence. Presence can thereby be considered a prerequisite for self-observation, since without awareness for one's present circumstances, self-observation cannot happen. As I will show, these principles are emphasized in the Khaita practice.

Just like in a transrational peace perspective, the concept of 'evolution' highlights the importance of starting peace from oneself. This stands in contrast to 'revolution' where others or the outside are seen as something that needs to be changed:

[H]ow can we have peace in this world when everyone is limited and will not open up a little, always thinking of 'me', 'we', etc. Political parties are the same, countries are the same. If we need peace, we need evolution and evolution must develop in the condition of the individual, not revolution. We always have the idea that we want to change someone. This is called revolution, but it doesn't work and it has no benefit. (N. Norbu, 2013: 2)

In contrast to seeking revolution, Namkhai Norbu advocates evolution. Thereby, present self-observation starting from the individual may lead to (world) peace. He illustrates this with the example of counting:

Just as in counting to a million one must begin counting at the number one, so to benefit society, one must begin by working on oneself. Each individual must truly take responsibility for him or herself, and this can only be done by working to increase one's awareness, to become more fully conscious, more the master of oneself. Change on a small scale can bring about change on a wider scale. (C. N. Norbu, 2000: 164-165)

Namkhai Norbu's goal is to offer his students tools for self-observation so that they might discover something about themselves and the world around them:

When we observe ourselves, we can discover how many limitations we have, how these limitations create many problems, and we can free ourselves from those problems. We no longer go behind or

believe in our inventions and become free from all these limitations. [...] The final goal is that we observe and discover that limitation is not good and in that way we are conditioned by it. (Namkhai Norbu in Granger, 2016: 17)

Khaita, he argues, thereby serves as a joyful practice of self-observation. When dancing, one has to focus on the present moment. Amongst other things, dancers must integrate bodily coordination, music, the space around as well as other dancers. This leaves little space for distracting thoughts. Things from the past or future projections lose their relevance, as the present moment requires full attention. Dancers can further observe their thoughts and emotions while dancing, noting, for example, when they feel stressed or relaxed, when they compare themselves to others or when they cooperate with them while dancing.

### 2.3 Buddhist Peace Understandings

Namkhai Norbu was a Buddhist Dzogchen<sup>6</sup> master. As such, his understanding of peace and his concrete instructions for its achievement that revolve around the parameters of presence and self-observation align with Buddhist thought. Though not calling it evolution, the spiritual leader of Tibetans and Buddhism, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, promotes the same peace principles as Namkhai Norbu: “Without inner peace, without inner calm, it is difficult to have lasting peace.” (The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, 2006: 59) Peace is seen as something manifesting in the individual which then spreads to the world. As a point of departure, one must observe oneself and foster a compassionate, kind and loving heart to reach peace. “Through internal change, [...] peace [can be] brought to society. Self-examination is most important, and thus the Buddhist theory of self-responsibility is useful as it entails self-examination and self-control in consideration of both one’s own and others’ interests”, states the Dalai Lama (The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, 2006: 36).

Tibetans are predominately Buddhist. Because of the Khaita lyrics, the peace understanding of Tibetans Buddhists is of particular relevance for my research. Khaita songs are sung by Tibetan artists in Tibetan and mostly talk about topics relevant for Tibetans. Peace is thereby a reoccurring topic of the lyrics.

After having clarified transrational peace understandings, connected them to Namkhai Norbu’s concept of evolution and embedded it in the context of Buddhist peace perspective, I will now proceed with the analysis of Khaita as a peace practice. I will thereby start with an investigation of the Khaita lyrics as carriers of peace messages and then focus on the dance practice and circle dance choreographies.

## 3 Khaita Lyrics: Messages of Peace

There are many Khaita songs that explicitly talk about peace. Khaita songs are performed by Tibetan artists in Tibetan and focus on issues particular to Tibetan culture and experiences. They can be found on YouTube as well as on the Khaita App. With regard to Khaita’s peace message, a mixture of Buddhist peace concepts, most of all the path of nonviolence<sup>7</sup>, and calls for the unifications of Tibetans can be observed in the Khaita lyrics.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Visionary Encounters*, Dzogchen is described the following: “Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means ‘total perfection’ or ‘absolute completeness’ is the name of a spiritual teaching found in both the Bön and the Ancient Buddhist traditions of Tibet, where it is considered the highest path of realization, due to its direct and clear presentation of the nature of mind as the source of all phenomena of existence and to its special methods for accomplishing its potentiality” (Clemente, 2016: 1)

<sup>7</sup> Buddhism is generally understood as a universalistic religion of peace, compassion and nonviolence. For more insight into Buddhist peace perspectives, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo’s “Shi Wa: A Vajrayana Perspective” (2011).

The Khaita song corpus consists of 3 collections, *Message from Tibet*, *Mekhor* and *Barsam* in which numerous songs explicitly address peace. For the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on *Message from Tibet* only<sup>8</sup>.

In the following, I use exemplary songs to illustrate the peace concept promoted in Khaita lyrics. Thereby, I group the songs according to whether they, first, speak about peace from a Buddhist viewpoint or, second, address the unification and collaboration of Tibetans as a way to peace.

### 3.1 Buddhist Peace Lyrics

The first group of peace lyrics that can be found in *Message from Tibet* explicitly expresses the wish of Tibetans for (world) peace. The songs thereby promote the Buddhist values and behavior of nonviolence and the desire for all sentient beings, including animals, to be happy.

For instance, in “Dzamling Zhide”<sup>9</sup>, which translates as “World Peace”, the lyrics sung by three Tibetan women say:

The light of love and kindness radiates everywhere, sustaining everything with its heat. Wishing fortune and prosperity for all beings, we perform these songs and these dances. The white immaculate khatag<sup>10</sup> held in our hands becomes the white dove of peace. Standing on the summit of the globe [the region of Tibet is the highest in the world], on the top of our round world, we make a prayer of auspiciousness: may there be peace and happiness throughout the world, may all beings be happy! (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021c)

The song can be interpreted as a prayer, wishing happiness and peace for all beings. At the same time, it follows the peace concepts as promoted by Buddhism: Peace starts from the individual – here represented by the collective ‘we’ –, which then has the potential to spread to others.

In “Dzamling Zhide”, peace, the desire to spread it and the wish for people to be happy concretely manifests through the performance of singing and dancing (“we perform these songs and these dances” (ibid.)). Peace is thereby represented as actively evoked through singing and dancing.

Using songs and dances as symbols for auspiciousness and happiness is a common motif in the Khaita songs. In “Kampai Tashi Nyima”<sup>11</sup> / “Auspicious day for the Khampas”<sup>12</sup>, for example, the singers repeatedly say: “An auspicious sun has risen, today an auspicious sun has risen. Today, let’s happily perform a circle dance! Remembering our intentions as we circle, today let’s sing an auspicious song!” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021f) Though not stated explicitly in this song, the intention that should be kept during singing and dancing is implied as good, wishing happiness and peace for all beings.

A similar prayer for peace can be found in “Changphud Ngapa”<sup>13</sup>, translated as “The Fivefold Offering of Choicest Chang”<sup>14</sup>:

I make the fifth offering of chang to the entire world, may the people of the world obtain the glory of peace! I make the fifth offering of chang to the entire world, may the people of the world obtain the glory of peace! May the people of the world obtain the glory of peace! (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021a)

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<sup>8</sup> As the chronologically first Khaita compilation, consisting of 108 songs, *Message from Tibet* is representative of the entire collection of songs and provides good insights into the topics and atmospheres of all Khaita songs.

<sup>9</sup> T3.8

<sup>10</sup> Khatag is a Tibetan white silk scarf used, for example, in welcome ceremonies.

<sup>11</sup> T9.10

<sup>12</sup> ‘Khampa’ is a person from the Kham region in Tibet.

<sup>13</sup> T8.7

<sup>14</sup> Chang is a Tibetan alcoholic beverage made from barley or rice.

In this case, not songs and dances are used as a symbol for offering peace but chang, traditional Tibetan beer. Toasting together hence functions as a symbolic peace offering. Peace hereby again starts from the individual spreading to others. Following Namkhai Norbu's concept of evolution, the person must thereby be in a peaceful state themselves to make their wish effective and beneficial.

In addition to these examples of explicit prayers for peace, some Khaita songs specifically address the Tibetan way of peace (politics) that corresponds to Buddhist views. In "Meypoi Zijid"<sup>15</sup> / "The Grandeur of our Ancestors", the singer Tsewang Lhamo, for example, states that "nonviolence and peace are the shared hope of the Tibetans" (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021h). Similarly, in "Dongmar Bodba"<sup>16</sup> / "Ruddy-faced Tibetans", the lyrics claim that "the sacred, nonviolent Dharma"<sup>17</sup> is the path to tread" (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021b).

Thus, Buddhism, with its principle of nonviolence, is used as a prescriptive path for Tibetans in the Khaita songs. The Tibetan artists connect themselves with the image that all Tibetans practice Buddhism, hence orienting their lives along the teachings of the Dharma. Considering that Khaita is practiced mostly within the context of a Buddhist community, this is of particular relevance. Furthermore, the reoccurring description of peace concretely experienced while singing and dancing is an important indication for Khaita circle dances.

### 3.2 Tibetans, Unite!

The second group of peace songs in *Message from Tibet* revolve around the call for the unification of Tibetans. This means that both Tibetans from the three different regions<sup>18</sup> and Tibetans living abroad in various countries are asked to collaborate and unite their forces in peaceful ways.

"Thundrilgyi Rangdra"<sup>19</sup>, which translates as "The Sound of Unity", serves as an excellent example for this. The first stanza of the lyrics, with the other two following in a similar style, says:

Tibetans, unite, unite! Thinking of the sadness on the faces of your fathers.  
Tibetans, unite, unite! Tibetans from Amdo, Kham and Central Tibet unite! Tibetans from Amdo, Kham and Central Tibet unite, unite! Unite, unite! Thinking of your mothers' tears, Tibetans, unite, unite! Tibetans of the Land of Snow, unite! We are children of the same parents. We are the heirs of one people. The ruddy-faced Tibetans! (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021)

The song refers to Tibetan's shared history and ancestors. As such, similarities between Tibetans from the three regions rather than their differences are highlighted. It is claimed that Tibetan people, regardless from which area, have the same sadness and fears, hopes and aspirations and must unite to preserve their cultural heritage.

In a commentary to this song, Namkhai Norbu stated that "if I could, I would make an anthem out of this song" (N. Norbu, 2017: 74). For him, "Thundrilgyi Rangdra" is a perfect example of people unifying and collaborating, focusing on common goals rather than on distinguishing features (ibid.).

Songs such as "Rangwang"<sup>20</sup> / "Freedom" further emphasize the performers' wish for Tibetans to unite: "Freedom is the basis of happiness and joy. Therefore, brothers and sisters of the Three Regions of Tibet, let's agree to combine our forces together tightly, and

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<sup>15</sup> T6.5

<sup>16</sup> T4.1

<sup>17</sup> Dharma means Buddhist teachings.

<sup>18</sup> The three different regions of Tibet are Kham, Amdo and Central Tibet (or U-Tsang).

<sup>19</sup> T2.7

<sup>20</sup> T5.2



collaborate with those who foster progress. This is my hope.” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021i)

Similarly, the male singer Trinley Gyatso asks Tibetans to unite in “Yarkul”<sup>21</sup> / “Request to all”:

Tibetans! Brothers and sisters of the Land of Snow, brothers and sisters, if we care about our people, let’s stay united! Let’s stay united! Let’s stay united! Let’s stay united! If we don’t loosen our hold on the iron mountain of fraternal unity, this is our happiness, ruddy-faced people<sup>22</sup>! [...] Send[] auspicious messages of peace into the wind. (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021m)

Happiness and hopes for a future in freedom are thereby projected onto the unification of Tibetans.

Even though these songs specifically talk about Tibetans and often implicitly refer to the conflictual (political) situation with China<sup>23</sup>, they can be understood symbolically for all people, cultures and nations. During the Khaita practice, it is thus encouraged not to regard the songs and their meaning as foreign to one’s own culture but understand them as examples for people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. After all, if people from different places in the world focused more on what unites them rather than what separates them, there would be less (political) conflicts. As such, peace experiences can be generated.

Therefore, I argue that if Khaita dancers are aware of the symbolic meaning of the Khaita songs, the intention and strive for peace is clarified, emphasized and reinforced. When maintaining this awareness and inner attitude during the singing and dancing as well as collaborating with other dancers, Khaita may thus become a concrete method and practice for the experience and promotion of peace.

After having investigated Khaita songs according to their peace messages, I will now focus on the Khaita dance practice. Thereby, I concentrate on circle dances since they bear most potential for experiences of peaces.

## 4 Khaita Kordros: Experiencing Peace

I propose that Khaita Kordros<sup>24</sup>, meaning circle dances, can be used as effective tools for the promotion of transrational peace experiences. For this argumentation, I rely on three parameters: accessible participation, equality and collaboration. I will demonstrate these principles with dance examples from the Khaita collections as well as experiences from my field research in the sites of the International Dzogchen Community<sup>25</sup>:

Accessible participation, equality and collaboration connect to Namkhai Norbu’s peace concept of ‘evolution’. All three of them foster as well as require each dancer to observe themselves, focus one’s attention and stay present. Following the idea of evolution,

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<sup>21</sup> T10.4

<sup>22</sup> Because of their reddish skin color, Tibetans often use ‘ruddy-faced people’ to refer to Tibetans.

<sup>23</sup> I do not wish to express a political opinion about the situation of the Autonomous Region of Tibet within the People’s Republic of China. I am aware that the conflictual past that, amongst others, caused the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to flee Tibet in 1956 is still subject of political discussions today. Here, I solely describe and interpret the Khaita lyrics by Tibetan artists.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Kordro’ is Tibetan and means circle dance. On the official Khaita website the following explanation of Khaita Kordros is given: “KORDROS (KOR = CIRCLE + DRO = DANCE) are simple circle dances, mostly inspired by modern popular dances coming from different region[s] of Himalayan area. These dances have their own character, movement and style. We study them and bring to Khaita Joyful Dances paying respect to the ancient rich culture of celebrating life together.” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021e)

<sup>25</sup> As part of my field research, I spent several weeks in the places of the International Dzogchen Community - in Dzamling Gar, Spain as well as Merigar, Italy - to observe and participate in the Khaita activities, including daily practice sessions, performances and courses.

peace can manifest as a result of the Khaita practice when it is danced with awareness. Furthermore, individual peace experiences, as recognized from a transrational peace perspective, may arise due to feelings of collectivity, empathy and joy arising while dancing.

Khaita is not always danced in circles. There are numerous choreographies that require formations of lines and some that have no specific formation at all. However, I will focus on Khaita circle dance choreographies here as a means of peace promotion. Thereby, I align with the current state of research that agrees on the numerous benefits of circle dances, one of them the potential experience of peace.

#### 4.1 Circle (Dances)

A 'circle' is not only a geometrical shape but also a popular symbol. It is often used across disciplines - religion, psychology, art etc. - and carries linguistic connotations such as 'life cycle' or 'vicious circle'. It is generally used to represent totality and completeness, with no beginning and end, and as such is associated with perfection and eternity. A circle is characterized by harmony arising from its perfectly round shape, without curves or edges. (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018: 28)

With reference to dance, circle dances are among the oldest forms of dance<sup>26</sup>. They have been used to build and stabilize relationships, typically during rituals, festivities, and ceremonies across different cultures and traditions. Circle dance formations are special because they cannot be formed alone. At least three people are needed to form a circle. Provided the space, an unlimited number of people can join the circle. This highlights the circle as a symbol of collaboration and unity, with an unlimited potential of quantitative members.

Scholars from various disciplines have investigated circle dances (see Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016; Borges Da Costa, 2012; Nowicka, 2016; Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018; Shannon, 2019). What their findings have in common is that circle dances in their various forms have the potential to overcome isolation, promote feelings of interconnectedness, strengthen communities and enhance general well-being<sup>27</sup>.

Anahātā Iradah, for example, who conducts research on Dances of Universal Peace, sees circle dances as an answer to people's desire for connection: "We long to connect. [...] We long to get enough distance from our problems and responsibilities that we can see them through an expanded lens of interconnectedness [...]" (Iradaha, 2016: 178)

Because of this quality, circle dances are often used intentionally and effectively in societies to build and stabilize communities. Phuntsog Wangmo illustrates this by naming three concrete purposes of circle dances in Tibetan culture: first, the fostering union of people from different villages and towns; second, the welcoming of new members to the community such as people from young generations and third, the passing on of cultural knowledge. (Phuntsog in Shang Shung Institute. School of Tibetan Medicine, 2021: 32:40 ) All of these three aspects assert circle dances as integral means of cultural community building<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Archeologist Yosef Garfinkel, for example, provides evidence that people have danced in circles since prehistoric times. (Garfinkel, 2018: 284)

<sup>27</sup> From a therapeutic perspective, Anna Borges da Costa and Diana Cox have found that circle dances have the potential to improve quality of life. They argue that they enhance general well-being and have positive influences on lifestyle and health aspects (Borges, Cox: 205). Amongst others, they address aspects of emotional and physical health states, self-esteem, spiritual experiences, resilience, empathy, relaxation, mood swings and cultural as well as social engagements. Elena Karampoula and Heidrun Pandorfer (2018) further provide an overview of the use of circle dances in different medical studies, in particular noting health improvements for people suffering from dementia and other cognitive impairments.

<sup>28</sup> See also Eva Nowicka's research (2016) on Siberian Circle Dances that connects with Victor Turner's concept of 'communitas'.

Hence, researchers from different disciplines agree that circle dances have the potentiality to improve physical and emotional states, establish and reinforce connections between dancers, help to overcome feelings of isolation and foster collaboration amongst the dancers. As such, they also bear the potential for the rise of peace experiences that start from the individual and, through cooperation, may spread to the group.

## 4.2 Accessible Participation

“Khaita Joyful Dances are open to all! Anyone who is interested, or even simply curious, can learn it!”, it states on the Khaita website (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021e). The Khaita community, as mentioned in the introduction, mainly consists of students of Namkhai Norbu. However, all people are welcome to join the practice, even if they might never have heard of Namkhai Norbu and Dzogchen or are unfamiliar with Tibetan culture and Buddhism.

Khaita is a translocal and transcultural dance practice that is open to all people regardless of ethnic or cultural background, religion, age, gender or previous dance experience. Therefore, Khaita dance circles usually consist of diverse people. What they share is at least the wish of dancing together.

In my field research in the places of the International Dzogchen Community, I observed that there are several dedicated Khaita dancers who join the daily practice sessions of two hours regularly, some even every day. As a consequence, they master the choreographies and movements well. Hence, they often serve as reference point for others to follow during the dances. Some people join the practice only occasionally which means that they are confident with some but not many dances (as mentioned earlier, Khaita consists of 240 dances). Regularly, there are also ‘newcomers’ to Khaita. They are welcomed to the practice and invited to dance. Even though they might feel overwhelmed with the unfamiliarity of the movements, the people and the space, they become equal members of the practice as soon as they enter the dancing circle. This is a consequence of the circle formation, since all members are equal in a circle.

## 4.3 Equality

There is no hierarchy in a circle. Each dancer has the same relevance in a circle, as a harmonized circle only consists of equal members. Each dancer is observable and can simultaneously observe everyone else.

Usually, Khaita choreographies are organized in way so that dancers face inside the circle towards the center. Some circle dances, “Phayul Amdo”<sup>29</sup> or “Phayul Markham”<sup>30</sup>, for example, also have parts where dancers face outside the circle. This is often challenging for people who are less familiar with the choreography as it is more difficult for them to follow others.

Through their choreographic structure, many Khaita choreographies emphasize the aspect of looking at each other during the dance. Presence is required: if one is not aware of the others and the space around, it is likely that the circle formation will not be kept or that movements do not correspond with the group or the music.

The choreography of “Riwo Chak”<sup>31</sup> (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021j), for example, plays with different body orientations within the circle. In the introductory phrase, dancers face each other. When the singer’s voice can be heard, the dancers turn their body towards the circle and move two steps clockwise along the circle. They then quickly change

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<sup>29</sup> M1.4.08

<sup>30</sup> B5.02

<sup>31</sup> M1.4.06

their body alignment back to the center of the circle and perform two taps with the right leg. Facing towards the center allows them to see not only the person in front of them but everyone in the circle. With four steps, the dancers then move to the inside, to the center of the circle, reducing the distance between them. Hereby, it is necessary to look at each other as otherwise the circle formation of the smaller, inside circle would not work. With a basic step<sup>32</sup>, dancers then raise both arms towards their heads with slightly bent elbows and bring them down again with another basic step. They then retreat to the original circle formation, change their body orientation towards the circle and move clockwise along the circle. They then once more quickly change their body towards the center and back again towards the circle. The movement phrases then repeat until the end of the dance.

Without looking at each other and being aware of an equal distance between the dancers, the choreography of “Riwo Chak” cannot be successfully executed. Everyone is responsible for keeping the formation. With only one dancer being out of place, the circle loses its form. As such, each dancer is equally important in Khaita circle dances. This implies agency and requires of self-observation.

#### 4.3.1 The Role of Instructors

Equality within circle dances does neglect the fact that knowledgeable dancers are needed to guide dancers with less experience or newcomers through the choreographies. There are certified Khaita instructors<sup>33</sup> who, together with other expert dancers, fulfill this role. Instructors are thereby responsible for guiding the practice sessions and serving as reference points during the dances. ‘Newcomers’ and less experienced Khaita dancers are encouraged to look at the instructors and imitate their movements<sup>34</sup>.

Thus, expert dancers and instructors are necessary to make the dances successful<sup>35</sup> and easily accessible for everyone. Collaboratively, by uniting different capacities, Khaita choreographies work. While instructors may be more experienced and as a result more coordinated in their movements, they are positioned equally in the circle to someone who joins the practice for the first time. Newcomers are part of the group as soon as they enter the Khaita circle.

#### 4.4 Collaboration

Keeping a circle formation while dancing, especially without holding hands, is challenging. It requires attention to one’s own placing in relation to the group. Without being aware of where one is located in space and where the other dancers are respectively to oneself, a circle

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<sup>32</sup> The most fundamental step of Khaita is called ‘basic step’ and consists of a combination of simple weight transfers with constant energy investment and elastic and swinging modulation. The right foot thereby steps behind the body, which leads to a transfer of weight to the left leg, before the right foot steps forward in front of the dancer and slightly kicks up towards the head on the fourth count of the movement, shifting the weight back to the left leg. The upper body is relaxed and the arms follow the movement, meaning that the right arm swings in front of the body and the left arm swings behind the body when the right foot steps back, creating a diagonality similar to walking. When the right leg performs the kick, the left arm is in front of the body. The movement happens more or less in place and is rather fast paced.

<sup>33</sup> In 2016, Namkhai Norbu authorized around 60 instructors to teach Khaita after candidates successfully passed an exam.

<sup>34</sup> Instructors usually put a bracelet of five-colored-ribbons around their right hand that functions as an indication for dancers to follow them and also highlights the movements of the right hand. Like this, instructors are easily recognizable for newcomers and less experienced dancers, even in big circles with many dancers.

<sup>35</sup> When referring to ‘successful dances’ I do not mean to imply that dances cannot be successful, in the sense of beneficial, joyful etc., if some movements are not executed correctly. Here, I solely refer to the choreographic intention of the dances that is met when the steps and movements of all dancers are coordinated and precise.

formation will not be successful. This again connects to the principles of collaboration, self-observation and presence that Namkhai Norbu emphasizes in his teaching.

Dancing together in a unified circle means that the focus of the dances lies on the group and not the individual. Self-expression thereby fades into the background of collectivity. The group becomes more important than the individual. This fosters feelings of togetherness, compassion and cooperation.

Khaita choreographies often structurally require collaboration between dancers. An example for the principle of collaboration in Khaita circle dances, or Kordros, is “Sa Kyidpo Jig”<sup>36</sup>. “Sa Kyidpo Jig” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021k) is a simple circle dance from the Tibetan region of Amdo. In repeated phrases, dancers thereby stretch their arms in front and behind of their bodies at the height of their shoulders and move with simple steps of weight shifts clockwise along the circle. The left arm is stretched towards the dancer in front and the right arm towards the dancer behind. The upper body is oriented towards the left side of the body, towards the dancers in front. Hands between the person dancing in front and behind might slightly touch but it is not required. When all dancers execute this movement precisely, meaning that their arms are stretched well and align with the hands of the other dancers in front and behind (this is challenging when dancers are of different heights), it looks as if an additional circular line in the formation of a circle is drawn between the dancers. This represents unity, completeness and totality.



Screenshot from “Sa Kyidpo Jig”(International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021k)

“Sa Kyidpo Jig” demonstrates well how very simple movements (stretching the arms in front and behind oneself) can create a powerful image of unity when all dancers collaborate. It is not possible to have the same effect alone or just with two people.

Further examples that illustrate the principle of cooperation in Khaita is the formation of collaborative mudras<sup>37</sup>. “Machen Gangir”<sup>38</sup> (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021g), for instance, starts and ends as a circle dance but in the meantime requires a formation in two lines with two people in the front and the others aligning behind them. In the dance, there is a repeated mudra that symbolizes the mountain, the Anyemachen Mountain in Tibet<sup>39</sup>. The mudra is thereby formed with a partner: The dancers from the two lines walk towards each

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<sup>36</sup> M2.6.01

<sup>37</sup> Mudras are symbolic hand gestures that represent specific meanings. They are common in various Asian dance styles and often require precise practice to master.

<sup>38</sup> M2.4.05

<sup>39</sup> Namkhai Norbu comments the following about the Anyemachen Mountain: “In East Tibet the most important mountain is Anyemachen. Anyemachen is also the seat of the guardian Anyemachen, we have rites, prayers, many things. Anyemachen is considered a very important sacred place. It is also a very high mountain and not only high, but also very large. Recently the American researchers announced that Anyemachen is higher than Everest, they recognised now. So, it is a fantastic mountain in east Tibet, near Amdo and Golog, in this part.” (see commentary International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021g)

other to the center and raise the respective arm that is closer to the partner. Dancers positioned in the right line hence raise their right arms, dancers from the left line their left arm in the direction of their heads and towards the partner. The elbow is stretched, the fingers point upwards. The fingertips of the two dancers touch, creating a triangular shape with their arms. This represents the mountain.



Mountain mudra from “Machen Gangir”(International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021g)

Similar to the simplicity of the movements in “Sa Kyidpo Jig”, the movements that each dancer executes to form the mountain mudra in “Machen Gangir” are easy. However, they only become effective in collaboration with another dancers. Self-observation and presence are required: If one dancer is not positioned correctly in space, raises their arm too high, too low or in an incorrect direction or is not in the correct timing of the music, the mudra will not work and lose its effect. Only when dancers are attentive and precise in their movement execution, the image of the mountain is created.

## 5 Conclusion

I suggest that Khaita can be regarded as a peace practice because of the following four arguments: First of all, it brings together people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As such, Khaita’s translocality and transculturality represents collaboration beyond differences. This can be considered a fundamental peace element.

Second, there is a precise peace theory behind Khaita. Embedded in a broader Buddhist context, Namkhai Norbu calls it ‘evolution’ which aligns with transrational peace perspectives. Peace is thereby considered as starting from the individual, requiring self-observation and presence.

Third, the Khaita lyrics performed by Tibetan artists spread a message of peace that follows the Buddhist path of nonviolence, the wish for all sentient beings to be happy and calls for the unification of people. Keeping this intention during Khaita singing and dancing has to potential to emphasize and reinforce the promotion of peace.

Fourth, Khaita circle dances, Kordros, promote principles of self-observation, presence and collaboration. The choreographies thereby structurally require focus on the given circumstances and the collaboration with other dancers. Furthermore, regardless of experience, Khaita dancers are equal and depended on each other when dancing in circle formations. As such, Khaita Kordros may enable peace experiences.

In this article, I provided an overview of Khaita as a peace practice and its underlying peace theory. With examples from songs and dances, I illustrated the principles of self-

observation, presence, collaboration that lead to peace experiences starting from the individual. Transrational peace theory and Buddhist peace concepts have thereby guided my peace understanding.

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