

An Account of Historical Background and Significance of Chokhor Nyi Lhakhang in Punakha

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Abstract: Since its establishment, Chökhör Nyi Lhakhang has played an important role in the local culture of Punakha, Bhutan. It has served as a community temple for religious activity, for the living and the dead. However, the temple is struggling financially and from a lack of local participation, which is a common trend across Bhutan, marking a decline in traditional culture and knowledge. This article seeks to contribute to the preservation of Bhutan's fading local cultures by discussing the history and functions of the temple in the lives of its surrounding community.

Keywords – Temple, Gomo, Chöje, Lhakhang, Jamgön, Seula, chokhor, Punakha, Nyungne

Introduction

Chökhör Nyi Temple is located in Seula Village in Chubu Gewog², Punakha, Bhutan. The two-story temple faces the Punakha valley and was built in traditional Bhutanese architectural styles with extensive woodworks and masonry. Its main entrance is a wooden gate, which opens onto a stone courtyard that can accommodate 20 to 30 people. On one side of the courtyard, there is a latrine. Another gate leads inside the temple. On the ground floor, the temple has a living space for devotees. Concrete steps and a small wooden ladder lead to the top floor. On the right side of the wall, near the entrance, a faded mural of Guru Rinpoche can be seen. A room attached to the main temple on the left side is kept as a *lama's* room (especially for rituals), and religious texts are kept on the sides of the principal statue. The shrine is old and housed in window-like structures, behind which are placed the main statue and shelves that hold faded Holy Scriptures. The temple also has an attached kitchen separated by a veranda.

According to Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering (2008), Chökhör (ཚོ་ཁོ་མོ་ Wyl. chos 'khor) means 'Wheel of Dharma,' and Nyi (གཉིས་) is the number two (གཉིས་; Wyl. gnyis) in Dzongkha. However, there is some confusion concerning the spelling of Nyi. According to Tshering (2002), the Nyi in this temple's name should be spelt nying (སྙིང་, Wyl. snying ་) which means 'heart', which would

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² A *Gewog*- (block") a Bhutanese administrative unit comprised of a group of villages.

make it ‘the Temple of the Heart of the Wheel of Dharma’. Another near homophone is *ney* (ལྷནས། Wyl. *gnas*) which is a sacred place, making it ‘the Temple of the Sacred Place of the Wheel of Dharma’. No definitive written documents disambiguate the spelling of the temple’s name; however, the owner of Chökhör Nyi Temple, Karma Gyeltshen (personal communication, April 27, 2021), affirms it should be the number two, which various accents pronounce differently. Thus, one possible translation of Chökhör Nyi ‘the second turning of the wheel of dharma.’³ This rendering has some contextual justification since the main Dzong,⁴ located in the valley, is called Chökhör Dorjiden Monastery, which translates ‘Vajra Seat for the Turning Wheel of Dharma’ (Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering, 2008).

Even though the temple is relatively modest in size and historical significance, it has its own compelling story and plays an important role in the community. Therefore, it is imperative to document the temple for posterity before the sources of its oral history—village elders—pass away and leave the temple in obscurity. This is especially important because the younger generations are generally unaware of the temple’s sacredness or why the temple has been important in many people’s spiritual and cultural lives. Thus, if we first shine a small light on the temple, we may also create conditions for future researchers to study it in-depth and contribute to the knowledge of Bhutan’s unique cultural sites.

This research entailed field visits to the temple, which includes direct observation and participant observation during the Nyungne as well as recording the oral testimonies of local informants, especially senior citizens, and referring to limited primary and secondary written sources related to the temple, such as the autobiography of Jamgön Ngawang Gyaltshen⁵ (1647–1732), *Play of the Omniscient: Life and Works of Jamgön Ngawang Gyaltshen. An Eminent 17th–18th Century Drukpa Master* (Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering, 2008).

Historical Background and Significance of Chökhör Nyi Temple

The temple is built on a slope near the Namgyaltse Lhakhang,⁶ around 30 minutes’ walk from Chökhör Dorjiden Monastery⁷ in *Seula*. It is not known why the Chökhör Nyi temple was built on that particular hill. However, some assert that the land in *Seula* belonged to the *Jamgön* lineage,

³ According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Buddha transmitted his teachings in three phases with different emphases: 1) The Four Noble Truths, 2) emptiness, 3) Buddha nature.

⁴ *Dzong* are large fortresses, which often double as monasteries.

⁵ Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltshen, regarded as an emanation of the Buddha *Maitreya*, was born in 1757 in Gon Amorimu (dgon a mo ri mu) to the *Obtsho* family. After Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltshen passed away in 1742, a *Jamgon* incarnation lineage would arise with Jamgon Yeshe Dorji (1757-1805). Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltshen’s contributions in the field of arts, crafts, and ritual practices in Bhutan are considered to be of enormous importance even today.

⁶ Namgyaltse Lhakhang was founded during the 14th and early 15th century by Jamyang Sonam Gyalpo, a member of the important aristocratic *Obtsho* family.

⁷ Chokhor Dorjiden Monastery was established by Jamgon Ngawang Gyeltsen in the year 1715.

which will be discussed below. With *Namgyaltse* Temple at the top of the mountain, there may have been geomantic or aesthetic reasons for building *Chökhör Nyi* on the slant of the same hill. However, Karma Tshering, ex-principal of *Chökhör Dorjiden* Monastery, affirms that when *Chökhör Nyi* was built, it was under the administration of *Namgyaltse* Temple (2002), although there is no documentary or archaeological evidence of when it was built, nor is it mentioned in any one of the biographies of the *Jamgöns*.

The temple's main relics⁸ are the organs of *Chöje Ngawang Thinley*, which are ensconced inside a statue of the renowned Bengali master, *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha*⁹ (Wyl. *Jo bo rje dpal ldan a tisha*, Skt. *Atīśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna*) (982–1054). In a focus group discussion, some six interviewees expressed the shared belief that during the cremation of *Chöje Ngawang Thinley*, his heart, tongue, and eyes were not scorched. According to Karma Tshering (personal communication, February 2019), the present statue of *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha* contains the hair of *Chöje Ngawang Thinley*, imbuing the temple and statue with powerful blessings. An ex-monk of *Chökhör Dorjiden* Monastery, *Sangay Tenzin* (personal communication, April 29, 2021), claims that there were two main reasons for installing a statue of *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha* at the temple, despite *Atisha* not being a central figure in *Bhutan's* prevailing *Drukpa Kagyu* and *Nyingma* lineages. The first reason is that most of the studies and practices of *Chöje Ngawang Thinley* were based on the *Kadam*¹⁰ (Wylie: *bka'gdams pa*) teachings established by *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha*. The second is that *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha* is believed to have been a previous incarnation of the aforementioned *Jamgöns*, although there seems to be no written source corroborating this. Even though the provenance of the relics cannot be confirmed, this is not uncommon; every temple has a relic that plays an important role in people's lives as the object of their veneration and spiritual aspirations. For example, in *Taktse Lhakhang*¹¹ in *Trongsa*, the main statue is of *Jowo Shakyamuni* with ornaments, which is considered to be very auspicious, as it is a kind of

⁸ Buddhist relics generally entail what remains after the human form has been destroyed and the material substrate has been purified by the funeral pyre. It also assumes that keeping and worshipping relics extends the presence of the deceased (Germano & Trainor, 2012).

⁹ *Jowo Jé Palden Atisha* (982-1054) said to have introduced new traditions in Tibet; moreover, he founded the *Kadam* lineage and reformed *Vajrayana* Buddhism. Through his foremost disciple *Dromtönpa*, *Atisha* gave the teachings of the stages to the path to enlightenment, known in Tibetan as *lamrim*, which were passed down to subsequent generations, including to the great *Je Tsongkhapa*. *Tsongkhapa's lam-rim* texts, following the structure and content of *Atisha's* tradition, remain the cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhist teachings to this day. In the new millennium, *Atisha's* clear and practical methods are taught in places as diverse as India Europe, the US, and Australia (*Atisha's Life Story*, n.d)

¹⁰ The *Kadam* is an important lineage of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism brought to Tibet by *Atisha*. The name *kadam* suggests that “all the *ka*, or Buddha's teachings, are *dam*, or instructions, for helping an individual to become enlightened.” The term evokes “the style of teaching that *Atisha* established in Tibet.”¹ The *pa* refers to a person who follows this style of practice (*Dorji Gyeltshen*, Personal Communication, April 25, 2021)

¹¹ *Taktse Lhakhang* is located at *Taktse* in *Trongsa*.

replica of the holy Shakyamuni statue in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Tibet—established in the seventh century by the Emperor Songtsen Gampo. Trongsa people also call the Jowo Shakyamuni statue ‘Jowo sthupa sJa Delma’ because of a story that states that we can still feel warmth in the chest/heart of the statue. One of the distinctive features of the statue is believed to be that, on auspicious days, light shines from its heart like sun rays.

A *Seula* community focus group stated that the first temple was supposedly built by Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712–1770). However, the temple was destroyed by a fire and supposedly renovated in 1943 in honour of another Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1916–1950) by Nep Dorji and his brother Richen,¹² who belonged to the *Seula* Family/*Obtsho Chöje*¹³ (Karma Gyeltshen, personal communication, April 27, 2021).

It seems that succession in the ‘Obtsho family initially followed the familiar ‘uncle-nephew’ arrangement to transmit their lineage of esoteric teachings. During these centuries, the founder’s descendants and relatives intermarried locally, increasing the lands under their possession and systematically assuming the title of *chos-rje* (Ardussi, 1999). Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering (2008) affirm that Jamgön Ngawang Gyeltshen (1647–1732) is considered an emanation of Buddha Maitreya. The rebirth of Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712–1770), who was the nephew of Jamgön Ngawang Gyaltshen, along with the reincarnation of Jamgön Ngawang Gyeltshen, occupied high positions of governance such as *Desi*¹⁴ and Je Khenpo in Bhutan. Following this pattern, since Chöje Ngawang Thinley (the earlier, *yama* 1712–1770), there have been seven Chöjes in the Obtsho family lineage. The present one is the seventh Chöje, Mipham Chokyi Nyinjed (b 1983–).

Chöje Ngawang Thinley (the latter, *chima* 1916–1950) became the 60th Je Khenpo¹⁵ of Bhutan at 25. Chöje Ngawang Thinley was born into the Obtsho¹⁶ family lineage of Amorimu in 1916. He studied under the supervision of Lopen Penjor, Tshenlob Ngodrub, Ridag Sizhi Namgyal (the 58th *Je Khenpo* [1927–1931]) and Kenchen Chokyi Wangchuk (the 59th *Je Khenpo* [1931–1940]). At 31, he resigned and went into an extended meditation retreat. He is the third reincarnation of Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712–1770),¹⁷ who was also a nephew of Jamgön Ngawang Gyeltshen (1647–1732) (Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering, 2008).

¹² Both of these men were maternal uncles of the 3rd Jamgon Trulku Gyaltshen (1902-1926).

¹³ *Chöje* (*chos rje*) are religious aristocrats who control western Bhutan (Ardussi, 1999). There are two Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712-1770) and Chöje Ngawang Thinley (the latter one, *chima*, 1916-1950). The first became the 11th Je Khenpo, Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712-1770) from 1762 to 1769 and the latter one was enthroned as the 60th Je Khenpo from 1940 to 1946.

¹⁴ *Desi* was the title of the secular (administrative) head in Bhutan

¹⁵ The seat of the Je Khenpo, is the head of Bhutan’s Drukpa Kagyu lineage.

¹⁶ The Obtsho family draws its lineage to the first *Desi* of Bhutan, Tenzin Drugye (1591-1655). Later, a residence for lay relatives of the Obtsho *chos-rje* was established in the hamlet of Amorimu, located below the crest of a ridge several miles northwest of *Seula* (Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering, 2008).

¹⁷ Of these two Chöje Ngawang Thinleys, however, this temple is renovated in memory of the latter Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1916-1950) although the initial temple was built by Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1712-1770).

In addition to the principal statues and shrine objects associated with the figures above, there is a gold statue of *Damchen Gomo*, revered as a local deity of Seula and the principal guardian deity of the Jamgön lineage and familial relations. Damchen Gomo's main seat is Namgyaltse (Dargye, Sorensen & Tshering, 2008). There is an apocryphal custom, common throughout Bhutan, prohibiting women from touching or even coming near the golden statue of *Damchen Gomo*. The Deputy Chief Research Officer at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Kunzang Dorji, supposes that oral transmission has prohibited women from entering the inner sanctum (*gyenkhang*) housing the statue from generations past. He explains that the practice is not meant to discriminate against women but to maintain the sanctity of the *gyenkhang* and prevent the defilement of the deities in line with ancient Indian ideas about ritual purity. Based on these ritual customs, some monks assume that women carry certain impurities that demand their banishment from the *Gyenkhang*. Most significantly, it is presumed that if a woman is menstruating, entering the *Gyenkhang* would contaminate the shrine, displeasing the deities. Women under certain circumstances are alleged to outrage the deities so that they would stop protecting the country, resulting in natural catastrophes, disasters, and adversities (Dema, 2017).

Until recently, *Chökhör Nyi* Temple also housed a *Zambala*¹⁸ statue and a *Thutey Chorten*¹⁹ (Wyl. *thugs rten mchod rten*), a reliquary stupa built for the relic of Chöje Ngawang Thinley (1916–1950). However, these sacred objects have been brought with the owner to Yebesa village, mainly to ensure their security. The temple owner, Bokum, states that these relics are especially valued as they have been with the family for generations, protecting them against all adversities (personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Social and Cultural Functions

Currently, only morning and evening offerings are performed at the temple. Appeasement of the local protective deities and regular funerary and purificatory practices are not observed due to lack of manpower. Presently, the temple owns around 40 acres of land contributed by the devotees of *Jamgön* and *Chöje*. Just over 20 years ago, around eight households settled at Seula, supposedly brought by the previous *Jamgön* and *Chöje* to work on the aristocratic estates (Bokum, personal communication, January 12, 2019). However, there are only two households permanently living at *Seula* today, and these people have other options for funeral rite venues. However, earlier in its history, *Chökhör Nyi* Temple served as the main local community temple for rituals, especially for the dead.

Funerary and purificatory rites, historically, have been important to nearly all Buddhist communities. According to Buddhist doctrine, human beings take rebirth over an infinite

¹⁸ *Zambala* is commonly known as a deity of wealth and enrichment, it is believed that if anyone keeps a painting of *Zambala* in their home, they will be blessed with prosperity.

¹⁹ *Chortens*, known as 'stupas', they are religious monuments housing relics of the Buddha or other enlightened saints.

number of lifetimes in the six realms of existence as gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. Transmigration across realms depends on a being's actions and consequences, or karma, the doctrine of cause and effect (Obeyesekere 2006:1–2). Practitioners see the value of the rituals in their efficacy to purify enough karma to positively affect one's present life and ensure a human rebirth (Gutschow 1999; March 1979; Ortner 1978).

Every year in the seventh lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar, the host arranges a head monk and eight other monks to lead 16 days of *Nyungne* practice attended by 15 to 20 people from all over Punakha, Gasa, and Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhags. The owner makes logistical arrangements, and the expenses of the *Nyungne* and temple are covered from the harvest of land owned in the name of *Chökhör Nyi* Temple. Wangchen Rinpoche (2009) explains that *Nyungne* is a profound practice involving keeping strict vows of silence and fasting for two-and-a-half-day cycles. Translated as 'abiding in the fast' or 'subsisting on little', *Nyungne* is said to be effective in healing illness, nurturing compassion, and purifying negative karma. The owner of the temple and its affiliates trust that hosting such a religious activity will purify their negativities and benefit all sentient beings.

Practitioners believe that offering a meal to a *Nyungne* practitioner is like offering a meal to an eighth-level bodhisattva—a deed that produces considerable merit. There is a general belief that if also believed that if one offers a meal to a *Nyungne* practitioner on the day the practice ends, the merit is equal to offering a meal to five hundred solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddhas*). The merit of offering a meal to someone who merely took the eight precepts is equivalent to making such an offering to an *arhat* (Wangchen, 2009, para.95). The *Nyungne* practices at the temple conclude with the rites commemorating Chöje Ngawang Thinley's *mahāparanirvāna*.²⁰

Conclusion

There are many temples in Bhutan scattered around the countryside. The people have not documented or appreciated those temples because of accessibility issues and changing cultural priorities. Although these temples may not have great national or international significance, they are important for preserving and promoting the culture of that particular locality.

Chökhör Nyi Temple is one of those temples not accessible by a road that has played an important role in the functioning of its surrounding community. Only 20 years ago, funerary rites in and around *Seula* took place in the temple. However, it has become difficult for the private owners to maintain the temple and cover its expenses today, especially during the *Nyungne*. Furthermore, lately, the temple has been prone to bear attacks in which the door, ceiling, and windows have been damaged.

Before the senior citizens of *Seula* are all gone, there is a need to record their knowledge of such sites and the related cultural practices. They are the link that connects us to the past and the community's rich cultural history. Current trends indicate that younger generations of

²⁰ *Mahāparanirvāna* ("Great Nirvāna") refers to the anniversary of the passing away of an enlightened being.

Bhutanese do not have much knowledge about their culture and history because they live in an outwardly oriented virtual and technological world. Suppose such sacred and holy sites are not given historical and anthropological attention. In that case, there might come a time when all these will disappear, and there will be very few reference points of our history and culture.

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