

A Study on Historical Background and Authority Declination of Mongar Ngatshang Naktshang in Eastern Bhutan

Choki Wangchuk¹

Abstract: This article discusses the Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang, the unique traditional three storied building at Chokpa village under Mongar Dzongkhag in eastern Bhutan. The Naktshang was the historical and culture legacy of 10th Zhongar Dzongpon Dasho Kunzang Wangdi. It also had political significance during the early 20th century that cannot be seen anymore. Upon close review, it is one of the historical sites which can be preserved and maintained as a cultural heritage due to its traditional architecture design and outlook. But it is still unknown in the history of Bhutan and even none of the researchers have attempted an in-depth study. Hence, this article explores the background history of Naktshang, its relation with noble family and declination of its authority based on the data collected through interviews and literature sources.

Keywords: Naktshang, noble family, authority, residence, property, power declination

Introduction

In Bhutan, scholars and historians have written extensively about higher ranking leaders such as Zhabdrung, Desi, Religious Abbots, Tertons and members of the royal family. However, the contributions made and roles of *Pon Nyikem* (those officials who earned the title of Dasho) have received significantly lesser scholarship. National literature reveals a trend in which scholars and researchers focus near exclusively on key leaders, allocating less importance to those serving under them. Because of this some of the historical, cultural, and political roles played by other officials remains unrecognized, including the Dzongpons of different Dzongkhags. Their contribution and role in shaping the nation make sense; it is comparable to the role served by some of the Desi due to their dedication, loyalty and effort they placed to shape the nation. Furthermore, they have left a significant legacy on historical, cultural and religious sites such as Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang, Tsakaling Naktshang, Khalong Naktshang, Ngalhakhang

¹ Choki Wangchuk is a researcher who devotes most of his time to learning Bhutanese culture and tradition through exploring traditional wisdom. He earned his BA. Honours in Bhutanese and Himalayan Studies in 2021 from the College of Language and Culture Studies. He can be reached at chokiwangchuk1997@gmail.com.

Naktshang in Bumthang Chokhor Tey, Bartsham Naktshang in Tashigang and Tsakaling Naktshang at Mongar, which could be preserved and promoted as heritage sites.

The houses built by the Royal families as a side residence are known as palaces. The houses built by Noble family lineages and Dzongpons as their residence in the 19th and 20th century were known as Naktshang. Naktshang came into popularity during the reign of 2nd Druk Gyalpo Jigme Wangchuck. Among many historical and culture sites, Ngatshang Naktshang is one which was built by Zhongar Dzongpon Kunzang Wangdi in 1931 at Ngatshang Chokpa in Mongar. The Naktshang was beautifully designed and located in the village called Chokpa, adjacent to Ngatshang Primary school about 200 meters below the Trashigang-Mongar highway. However, the Naktshang remained unknown and unheard to most people in the country, as none of the researchers has explored it till date. As a result, the significance of the Naktshang was also left unknown. Thus, this study brings the Naktshang into purview by discussing its background history, its relation with other noble families, the authorities of Naktshang and the factors that led to decline authority in the late 20th century.



Figure 1.0 View of Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang. Photo by Choki Wangchuk, 2020

Background history of Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang

The history of Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang dates back to the early 20th century. It was built during the reign of 2nd King Jigme Wangchuck. The former Gup, Ugyen Lhundup of Ngatshang, mentioned that Trongsa Poenlop Jigme Namgyal had sent Agay Dorji Penjore from Trongsa Jagitsawa as the Zhongar Dzongpon. The reason for appointing Dorji Penjore as the Zhongar

Dzongpon was because his forefathers had served the nation as key leaders (detailed later in the section on family lineages). During the reign of Trongsa Poenlop Jigme Namgyel, Kunzang, the grandfather of Dorji Penjore, had served as Dungsam border security official (ས་རྒྱུང་པ་). Due to his loyalty and sincerity dedicated to his leader Jigme Namgyel, his son Henchung was appointed as Dronyer (chief protocol) under him at Trongsa Dzong. Henchung, the father of Dorji Penjore, has also served with the utmost loyalty and integrity and this entitled his son Dorji Penjore to be appointed as a Zhongar Dzongpon. Lopen Kizang Thinley (2009)² stated that Dorj Penjore was the ninth Zhongar Dzongpon. The idea or the strategy of appointing trusted person in vital posts, which was initiated and implemented by Zhabdrung, continued during the 19th and 20th century. Even today one can see Dorji's family lineages are still serving the nation as key leaders in various fields.

The early location of Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang carries many historical significances. During the reign of ninth Zhongar Dzongpon Agay Dorji Penjore Dungsam Pemagatshsel was also under the jurisdiction of Zhongar Dzongpoen. To get himself a rest on the way and also to setup his side residence for his family, Nagtshang Chokpa was found the best place. Ngatshang Chokpa is placed where it was located on the way which connects Zhongar and Dungsam Pemagtsel. Another logic behind this location was that the richest and most powerful people among the Ngatshang community called Khochi Baila and Boga were residing nearby Chokpa village. They were probably the most influential persons in that particular community with a title of Khochi. On the other hand, the two Kochis had offered the land of Chokpa to him with the intention to develop a close relationship.

Right after their offering, Agay Dorji Penjore had built a small hut to prepare for shifting cultivation. However, the hut was destroyed by fire while burning the bushes in preparation for cultivation, which made him leave the place until his son took care of it. One narrative, however, holds that local people might have burned the hut intentionally because his presence was perceived to be a burden for people residing nearby in view of taxation. This made Dorji Penjore decide that Chokpa is not a favorable place for his family and he shifted to Batsakhar, building another temporary house that can be seen as ruined today. Batsakhar is located a few kilometers away from Chokpa which looks adjacent. Later, his son Kinzang Wangdi, who succeeded as tenth Zhongar Dzongpoen, built Naktshang there at Chokpa in 1931 as his side residence. Thus, he was credited for establishing Naktshang at Ngatshang Chokpa. According to Lam Kezang (oral communication, 2019) the head carpenter was a famous Zowo from Chaskhar, whose name was Zowo Dhaza. People from Serzhong, Gangmung, Balam, Themnangbi, Chaskhar, Thanrong, Ngatshang, Chali, and Tsakaling had contributed labor force to construct that Naktshang.

Ngatshang Chokpa can also be credited as one of the trade hubs for peoples in the east with Tibetan traders. There was an old trade route which connects Tibet and Samdrup Jongkhar. Samdrup Jongkhar was the trading center for eastern Bhutan from olden days and still people consider it as a trading center. If we trace the route travelled by Prince Tsangma during his exile

² རྫོང་སྐར་ཚེང་དང་ རྫོང་སྐར་ཚེང་གི་ཆགས་རབས་རྣམས་འབབ་པའི་ཚུ་རྒྱུན་ནང་ལུ་བཀོད་དེ་འདུག

from Tibet to Bhutan passing Kurizampa to Sherizampa and then to Tashiyangtse, the same route became used by Tibetan traders and even the Bhutanese officials and traders, until the arrival of an open road connection. Just a few kilometers above the Sherizampa the Ngatshang Chokpa was located exactly on the way. Following the way, People from Tibet used to come for trade to exchange products made of copper and bronze. In addition, Chokpa is a place where Tibetan traders camped, and this can be added to the history of our trade relationship with Tibet. Imaeda (2013) states that until British trade with Bhutan in the 18th century, Bhutan had maintained close trade relations with Tibet. The role of two Khochis are again highlighted as a host for Tibetan traders. The Tibetan traders seem impressed by the beautiful environment with open fields and abundant availability of fresh water. Interestingly, even the name Chokpa is said to be derived from this trade in copper jerk which in Tsanglakha is termed as 'chok', or so said Ugyen Wangdi the Mang Ap of Ngatshang Gewog. However, during the 2nd National Research Seminar conducted at Taktse College in December 2020, Khenpo Nima Shar insisted that in Tibetan context Chokpa is referred to as residence, which is built with high storied on meadow surface. The origin of this word therefore requires further verification. Whatever it might be, both perspectives are linked with Tibetan traders and this concludes the derivation of its name as Chokpa.

At present, Naktshang can be seen as a three storied building, which was well designed with the toilet attached to every floor. Out of three, the top floor was used as the Alter (shrine room). The walls were beautifully decorated with mural paintings of Buddhist figures. *Chugchi zhey* (eleven head Buddha) was the main statue, with many other statues to the sides. People believed that anything belonging to Naktshang were well taken care of by local deities. Moreover, we can find an inner chapel (goenkhang), which was locked by late Zhongar Dzungpoen Kunzang Wangdi, and it is said that people still do not know what is there inside that goenkhang. Dzungpoen Kunzang Wangdi used to command to officials and people working under him from the second floor. The second floor consists of five compartments. It was used as a meeting hall, guest room, sitting room, bed room and his office. A very dark and fearful basement was used as store and also used as lock-up room. From this we understand that Naktshang was used not only as a side residence but also as administrative unit. Moreover, it has been used as the store where taxes collected from the people were kept and then sent to the government. We can still see the three big wooden boxes in the basement approximately 3 meter in length and 1.5 meter in height; those were used to store the agricultural products and collected cereal taxes from the people. On the right side, attached with the kitchen, there is a small house used for dyeing the thread. Now it has been converted to keep rice and maize grinding machine.

The authorities of Naktshang can be compared to landlords in past. This indeed suggests the existence of past feudalism. For instance, Dzungpon used to give his land to the people for share cropping that seems helpful to the tenants. However, people called for *wula* (labor contribution) carrying their own pack lunch to work for him seem unfair. Dzungpoen Kinzang Wangdi owned more than 50 acres of land, comprising of both wetland and dry-land after constructing Naktshang at Chokpa. Besides the hardship people faced during the construction of Naktshang,

people were enforced with *wula* (labor tax). According to Phuntsho (2013, p. 546) the taxation burden had become even worse with the labor tax. On the other hand, it was the only way to boost the economy of the nation during those days. People were charged different taxes beside labor tax according to what they produced. The agriculture works were carried out by the people of different villages. For instance, the paddy plantation work was carried out by the people of Chaskhar and maize plantation was carried out by the people of Themnangbi. Moreover, people of Serzhong and Ngatshang community were made to harvest the crops cultivated by the people of Chaskhar, and the people of Themnangbi. During his call upon labor contribution at least a minimum of 20 to 30 people used to gather according to Aum Yangki, one of my informants. In this case, people nearby operated as his servants. Those servants were coordinated by the different officials serving under him. Some of the posts serving under him were Zimnangpa (who was head official), Changarp (serving food and look after store), Kadrepa (advisor), Tshempoen (tailor), Ta sopa (who look after horses), Dungchapa (one who grinds the maize and rice), Thakhem (weave cloth for his family) and singer for entertainment. However, with the passage of time the power and authorities declined.

In the past Naktshang had been managed by Dasho Kinzang Wangdi. As per Jamtsho (2020, p. 63),³ his majesty the third king pursued significant social reforms which included the revising of taxation systems. Moreover, in 1953 His Majesty fixed the number of land holding to thirty acres and those indentured servants were freed with the aim of self-reliance. The landless people were provided with land and given the opportunity for resettlement (Dorji, 2008, p. 63). These led Dzungpon Kunzang Wangdi to release almost 30 acres of his land to those servants who served under him. As a result those servants had chosen for a new settlement except the family of Tsempon Rabgay who is still serving and caring the Naktshang as a caretaker. Further, his death in 1954 meant the collapse of the power of Ngatshang Naktshang. After his death, Ngatshang Khochi Baila and Boga cared for the Naktshang for almost a year. Thereafter, however, they left the Naktshang. During this course, it was taken care of by his brother-in-law Pema Tshewang from Jaray, Lhuntse. Outside works were taken care and coordinated by Tshempoen Rabgay, who is from Mongar Chali, He brought many other servants from Chali to work under Dasho Kinzang wangdi at Ngatshang. Moreover, he had served as attendant (*garpa*) under Dasho Zhongarpa Kinzang Wangdi. Later, after the death of Pema Tshewang, Tshempoen Rabjay who was the tailor (Tshempoen) of Dasho Zhongarpa Kunzang Wangdi continued to manage the Naktshang. Eventually, Sangay from Chali who was the grandson of Tshempoen was the next caretaker. However, Sangay died at a very young age. Currently, the Naktshang is taken care by Aum Yangki, wife of Sangay. Her family was shared five acres of land as an inducement. Her role is just to take care of the Naktshang. The land which belongs to Naktshang is now used for Hazelnut plantation for contact term of ten years. In the present, the Ngatshang can be seen

³ རྒྱ་ནག་གི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལོ་འཛུགས་ལྟར་ལོ་འཛུགས་ལྟར་ སྤེལ་སྤྱོད་འཛུགས་མེད་རྣམས་ཀྱི་མགོན་པོ་ཉེར་དོན་ཅུང་གི་ལ་ཕྱི་ལྷོང་གསལ་བྱ་ ཅུ་བའི་འབྲུང་རབས། འབྲུག་གི་ལམ་སློལ། (༡) ༥༧-༦༥། འབྲུག་དང་རྟི་མ་ལ་ཡུ་གི་ཞིབ་འཛོལ་ལྟེ་བ། རིག་གཞུང་མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ། རྫོང་གསལ།

as a normal house without any differences from other houses.

The Jagitsawa lineage and its relationship with Noble Families

Taktserla Chhoje

The lineage of Taktserla Chhoje can be traced back to Kuenga Gyeltsen, the grandson of Terton Pema Lingpa. As mentioned by Ngawang Jamtsho (ལྷེ་སྲིད་འཇིགས་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་མགོན་གཉེན་རྟོན་ལུང་གི་ས་
ཁྱིམ་གྲོང་གསལ་བྱ་བའི་འབྲུང་རབས། 2020) the two noble families of Jatsawa and Tsaktserla Chhoje had a close relationship from early period during the time of Henchung (father of Zhongar Dzungpon Dorji Penjore) who served as a Dronyer of Jigme Namgyel. Dema the daughter of Henchung from Jagitsawa was married to a Dorji from Taktserla Chhoje. After that, their relationship flourished until the Jagitsawa was left as ruined in the mid-20th century.

Chungkar Chhoje

According to Ugyen Lhundup (formal Gup of Ngatshang gewog) an oral accounts, the lineage of Taktserla Chhoje from Trongsa Jagitsawa in central Bhutan has brought the Naktshang at Ngatshang. He narrates that during the reign of second Druk Gyelpo Jigme Wangchuck, Agay Dorji Penjore from Trongsa was appointed as the Zhongar Dzungpoen. Later, he got married to a Tendrel Chezom who belongs to Chungkhar chhoje who is at Dungsam Pemagatsel and gave birth to five Children. They are Rigzin Dorji, Kunzang Wangdi, Tandin Jamtsho, Zangmo, and Dorji Tshomo. There he got misunderstanding with his wife's family and thought of building a side residence. During the time, Ngatshang Kochi Baila and Boga have invited him to Ngatshang saying that they have got plenty of land to build side residence said Ugyen Lhendup the formal Gup of Ngatshang gewog. There he acquired more than 50 acres of land. He has built a small hut as his side residence at Ngatshang Chokpa (where the Naktshang is presently located) which was later caught by the fire. His decision then got diverged to build his side residence at Batsakhar²¹ leaving the Chokpa. As per his decision, he built the side residence at Batsakhar and kept his second wife Aum Langamo from Bumthang. From Aum Langamo, they have four siblings. The residence was named as Baksakhar Naktshang which can be seen as a ruin today. On the other hand, Kunzang Wangdi (1885-1954) who is second eldest son of Agay Dorji Penjore has later rebuilt his side residence at Chokpa in 1931 which is presently known as Naktshang. Kunzang Wangdi was popularly known as Dasho Zhongarpa to the people of Mongar district since he has served as Zhongar Dzungpon. His parents were Agay Dorji Penjore (formal Zhongar Dzungpon) and mother Tendrel Zangmo who is from Chungkhar, Pemagatsel.

⁴ Few Kilometre away from Ngatshang Chopa.

Buli Chhoje

According to Lam Kezang,⁵ during our oral conversation, Dorji Tshomo one of the daughters of Dzongpon Dorji Penjore was married to a Buli⁶ Trulku Khachab Namkha Dorji who was the incarnation of Yudrak Nyingpo born to the noble family of Bumthang Buli Chhoje. They gave birth to Zhenphel Drodul Dorji Tenzin in 1921 who succeeded as AjaLam.⁷ According to Rinzin Wangchuk (2004), the family of Buli Chhoje had a grave tragedy due to a matrimonial conflict with the Wangdichholingpa. They were sent on exile to Dungsam. However, a few years later, Buli Trulku managed to reach at Aja Nye due to his predestined destination. He was then widely known as Aja Lam. Knowing the fact that Aja is very cold in winter; he built a house in the lower base of Aja called Yarab for his family. He also came to be known as Yarab Lam. Later, his son Drodul Dorji Tenzin was married to a Pema Lhazom and gave birth to Lam Kezang Chhophel. In present days Khalong Naktshang is maintained and taken care by Lam Kezang.

Kurtoe Ney Chukpo

As mentioned by Palden Lhaden,⁸ Zhongar Dzongpon Kinzang Wangdi married his first wife Kencho Budar from Kurtoe Ney Chukpo and gave birth to two children. They are Choden and Gyaldron Thinley Dorji. There he has built another Naktshang beside Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang which can be seen as ruined today. Later, his son Dasho Gyaldron Thinley got married to Karma Lhatsho of Bumthang Zangling Lama Clan and gave birth to Formal Prime Minister Jigme Yozer Thinley.

Jarey Zhelngo

According to the Dechen Zangmo,⁹ Zhongar Dzongpon Kunzang Wangdi got married to a Kunzang Choden from Lhuntse Jarey Zhelngo and gave birth to six children after the death of his first wife Kencho Budar. They are Sonam Jamtsho, Sonam Youden (wife of formal Dasho Gunglen Lam Dorji) Kezang Dolma, Dechen Zangmo, Kelzang Jigme and Yangchen Lhamo. At present Dechen Zangmo is taking care of the Chungkhar Nagtsang. Dasho Kunzang Wangdi married third wife Dechen Dolma from the same family who was sister of second wife. She gave birth to two daughters namely Jigme Wangmo and Palden Lhaden. Jigme Wangmo got married

⁵ Chief Executive Officer at Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts. Oral communication on wechat, 12/01/2020.

⁶ Buli is a name of a monastery at Bumthang Chumey.

⁷ Aja is sacred site of Gura Padmasambhava. It is located at eastern Bhutan, Mongar.

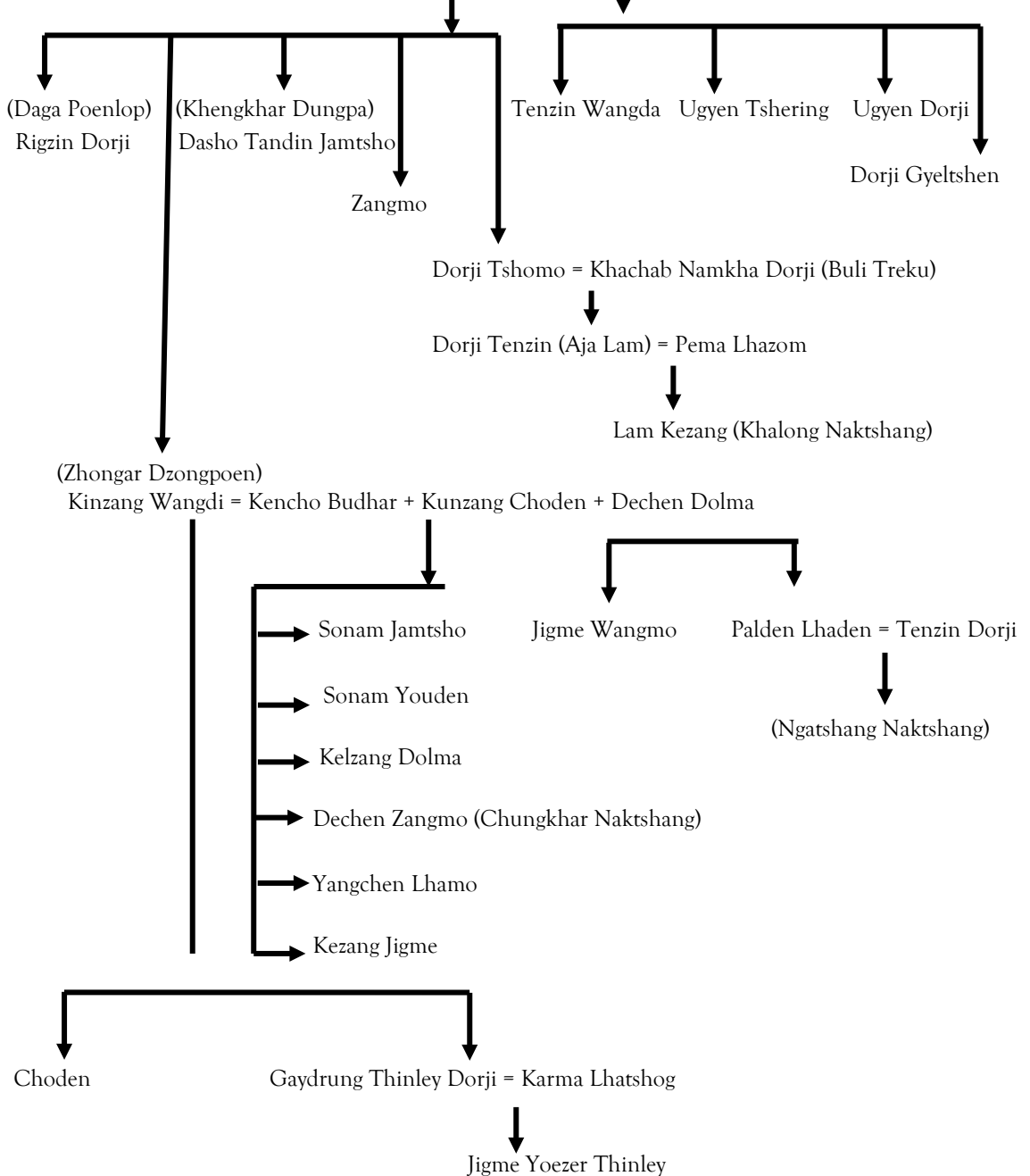
⁸ Oral communication on 25/12/2019. Daughter of Dzongpon Kinzang Wangdi. She is the owner of Ngatshang Naktshang.

⁹ Oral conversation with daughter of Dzongpon Kinzang Wangdi on 25/12/2019. She is the owner of Chungkhar Naktshang.

to the Dasho Ompardan and settled presently at Semtokha Thimphu. Pelden Lhaden, elder sister married to Tenzin Dorji and also lives in Thimphu. However, the two sisters own the Naktshang.

Family Tree of Zhongar Dzungpoen Dorji Penjore

Tendrel Chezom (Chungkhar Chhoje) = Dorji Penjore = Langamo (Bumthang)



Conclusion

The history of Ngatshang Chokpa Naktshang traces its initial founder to the 10th Zhongar Dzongpon Kunzang Wangdi. He can be remembered in the history of Zhongar through the three traditional storied building. The Naktshang was used as tax stores, guest house and offices besides a side residence. People near by the Ngatshang community were burdened by taxes, especially the labor tax. The power of Naktshang was exercised almost for twenty five years after the establishment in 1931. However, with the passage of time, the authorities of Naktshang have declined following the reformation initiated in 1953 by the third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. The social reform has largely affected the authorities of noble families and Naktshangs of the eastern and central Bhutan. On the other hand, people serving under the jurisdiction of noble families and Naktshangs were freed from the feudal system and they were blessed with free land for a new settlement which led to decline power and authority of noble families and Naktshangs in Bhutan. Currently Ngatshang Naktshang is owned by Palden Lhaden daughter of Kunzang Wangdi. Since Naktshang is privately owned, government support for preservation is deemed more complex. However, given the historical and cultural importance of this place, steps are recommended to prevent the Naktshang from reducing to a ruin.

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- ཀུན་བཟང་མིན་ལས། (དཔར་བེངས་དང་པ་ ༢༠༠༩ དང་། བེངས་གཉིས་པ་ ༢༠༠༩) གཞིང་སྐར་རྫོང་དང་ མོང་སྐར་རྫོང་གི་ཆགས་
རབས་རྣམས་འབབ་པའི་རྒྱ་རྒྱུ། ཤར་རྫོང་གི་འཁོར་ལོ། ༡༩༩-༡༩༩༡། འབྲུག་རྒྱལ་ཡོངས་འགྲེམས་སྟོན་ཁང་། སྤེལ་
ངག་དབང་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (༢༠༡༠) སྤེ་སྤིད་འཇིགས་མེད་རྣམས་རྒྱལ་གྱི་མགོན་གཉེར་རྟོན་ཅུང་གི་པ་ཁྱིམ་གྲོང་གསར་བུ་ཅ་བའི་འབྲུང་རབས།
འབྲུག་གི་ལམ་སྟོལ། (༡) ༤༤-༤༥། འབྲུག་དང་རྟི་མ་ལ་ཡུ་གི་ཞིབ་འཚོལ་ལྟེ་བ། རིག་གཞུང་མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ། གྲོང་གསར།