

The Thakālis, Bon dKar and Lāmāist Monasteries

ALONG THE KĀLI GANḌAKI

The Ancient Salt Route in Western Nepāl



The Lamaist and Bon dKar Monasteries of Pāncgāon and Bārahgāon

Chhairo Gompa of Chhairogāon

A fine juniper grove on the north eastern bank of the Thāk Kholā serves as an ideal

sanctuary for the Chhairo Gompa (dGon-pa Tshe-rog). The Chhairo Gompa stands on the

border line of the rainshadow area of the Upper Kāli Gaṇḍaki Region. The juniper, the leaves of which are used as incense (Tib. *bsans*; pron. Sang), is a sacred tree for the Buddhist population of the Himālayan region and Tibet. Hence, the appellation, Candanbāri Gompa (=Gompa of the sandalwoods), is not only befitting, but also indicates the popularity of this Gompa. Some years ago, the author was acquainted with early edicts of Prime Minister Bhim Sen Thāpā (1803-1836) which disclosed another title, Chhaharā Gompa, and the village as Chhaharāgāon.¹ This is apparently a reference to the waterfall (Nep. Chhaharā) in the near vicinity, though this is a secondary designation and is seldom referred to these days.

The Chhairo Gompa is said to have been founded by a Tibetan Lāmā, the Illustrious (sKu 'S'ogs), Chh'iwang Ṭhilen, who came from dKar-gTa-so, a Brug-pa foundation in Kyirong. He was invited by a noble family of Mārphā, along with Dheor Sek-pa, to establish Lamaist monasteries in the early nineteenth century. The latter founded two Kagyut-pa monasteries; one in Mārphā and another at Gārphu in Lo.² The existence of Chhairo Gompa in the early 1800s is obviously supported by two royal edicts of Bhim Sen Thāpā. The founder, sKu 'S'ogs Chh'iwang Ṭhilen, is held with high esteem by the Nyingma-pa school throughout the Himālayan region of Nepal, and is believed to have inspired a large followings. One Lāmā of this school, Rig-zin Dorje, is credited with having established another Candanbāri Gompa at Phulung in Rasuā district in the early 1960s.³ This monastery, often referred to as Phālang/Phulung Ghyāng, lies at an altitude of 11,750 feet enroute to Gosāin-kunḍa or lake in central Nepal.

Judging by the historical and doctrinal perspective, Chhairo Gompa stands next only to the sKu-tshab-gTer-Ingā monastery of Ṭhini. Although both monasteries are within Pāncgoān, the former has been completely neglected due to an ongoing boundary dispute with Thākasātsae which claims the land of Chhairo Gompa. This discord between the two

neighbours is attested in several royal edicts of King Kirti Bam Malla of Parvat, Chimang Bem-chag and it possibly appears in the records of Mārphā village (Mārphā Bem-chag). These sources thus provide a window onto the intricate history of the Thāk Kholā region.⁴ Gelōn Sailā, the last Lāmā to serve as abbot, who is said to have descended from the line of the founder's younger brother, passed away on Mangseer (= November), 1988, after long illness.

Despite its remarkable setting and reputation, the Chhairo Gompa is in a lamentable condition, attended inconsistently by village elders and lay caretakers. In 1986, a grant worth 20,000 rupees was made available to Chhairo Gompa through the 'Remote Area Development Committee' of the Ministry of Pancāyat and Local Development to carry out repairs on the roof, walls and courtyard of the monastery. Ironically, this proved disastrous, for all of the precious frescoes attributed to the founder artist, sKu 'S'ogs Chh'iwang Ṭhilen on the south-east and north-east walls, were obliterated to the core. The frescoes of Chhairo Gompa are the oldest existing works of the Thāk Kholā region. Therefore, Chhairo Gompa quite deserves a thorough conservation strategy as it has been under constant threat from the Thāk Kholā from the north-west and antique thieves, while a cause for even greater concern is the anti Buddhist sentiment of the southern neighbouring populace.

The Altar

A centrally located clay image of Śākyamuni, the presiding deity of Chhairo Gompa, is flanked on either side by two of his great disciples, Ānanda and Śāriputra. A life-like clay idol of the founder, sKu 'S'og Chh'iwang Ṭhilen, is ascribed to the right corner of the altar, while the left corner is laden with diminutive clay idols of donors and devotees who are rendered in the attitude of adoration. Another gilt-bronze of the founder is displayed in front of Śākyamuni. Among other relics, are two gilded bronze icons of

Tārā, and a gilt bronze of Vajrasattava in their causal sitting postures.

The Frescoes

The existing frescoes on the south-east and north-west walls are solely the work of sKu S'ogs Chh'i-wang Thilen. Other frescoes on the south and north-east walls survived until covered with earth by local workmen in 1986. These frescoes are executed in the sMon Bris, but the influence of the Ū Birs is clearly felt in some of the paintings. The author learned of the involvement of Bal Bris (or Nepalese style) on the south-eastern wall. The frescoes are blackened with smoke and a crust of dirt from butter-fed lamps and incense. It may well be surmised that the frescoes of Chhairo Gompa are the oldest examples of an interbred style of Tibetan painting extant in the Thāk Kholā region.

Main Chapel Walls

North-East Wall, L. to R.

The frescoes are wholly obliterated beneath layers of smoke and are therefore unidentifiable. A dark blue-bodied Seng-ge-gDon-mā is seen above a seated figure of a

Lāmā close to the entrance, but being covered thickly with earth, they also stand at the brink of extinction.

North-West Wall., L. to R.

The All Good Lord, Samanta Bhadra is depicted in Yab-Yum position with his mystic consort, a fair bodied Kutu-bzang-mo; the divine couple rests on an oval-shaped field or pedestal amidst clouds. A diminutive figure of some high Ge-luk-pa Lāmā in the attitude of argument, is set below the divine couple. This maybe the Third Pan-Ch'en Lāmā, dPal-ldan-Ye-sh'es (1737-1780). A fair-bodied four-armed Lokeśvara is executed in extreme detail next to this divine couple whose two right arms hold a goad (Skt. Aṅkuṣa; Tib. K'ags-Kya) and a white lotus, while the upper and lower left hands display the gesture of protection and clasps a Pāśa (Tib. Z'ags-pa), or noose. He is sitting in the diamond posture on a yellow lotus flower, and is followed by T'rak-pô, the Fierce Master. Another portrait of a youthful Lāmā which probably depicts the endower himself, is seen below the Fierce Master. His right hand displays the argumentative attitude (Skt. Vitarka Mudrā), while the left is drawn close to the naval holding a vase filled with the 'Water of Life' (Tib. Tshe-bum). An elderly Ņyingma Lāmā, may be the founder himself, is shown in the attitude of argument also.

The Chapel of the Lotus Born One

A modest looking chapel in the complex adjacent to the main chapel of Chhairo Gompa is exclusively devoted to the Lotus Born One, Padmasambhava, of whom an exquisitely painted clay image dominates the chapel. The expression on his broad face is intense and haunting. This image is believed to have been fashioned by (Khaipa) Chh'ekoup whose works may be found in Lha K'añ Gompa of Nāgung and in the Ḍolpo region west of Thāk Kholā. The frescoes are attributed to the first Thakāli artist, Kamal Dhoj Tulāchan; they were painted during 1952-53, at an advance period in his career as Khaipa of sMon Bris. There prevails

great similarity between the work of this chapel and that of the main walls of Chhairo Gompa.

The Frescoes

The depiction on the north-west wall shows various wrathful manifestations of the Lotus Born One with or without mystic consorts in standing and sitting postures. The Guru, Sange Dhaḍog (Seng - ge-sGra-sGrog), Yab-Yum Tsokye Dorje in sitting posture and Guru, Dorje Dōlō (rDo-rje-Gro-lod), are followed by an unidentified ecclesiastic in sitting posture displaying a Vajra and a 'vase of

water of life' in his right and left hands. Another earthly manifestation of the Lotus Born One who is clad in royal attire, clasping a ritual knife ornamented at the hilt with the Vajra emblem, while one more set of ritual knives is stuck in his green waist-band. He is venerated as *bLo-ldan mChog-srod* (pron. *Lōdan Chōgsre*). Three other fierce manifestations of Lotus Born One on the south-east wall are, unidentifiable due to dirt and damage caused by some unskilled renovator, and leakage from the ceiling. Other depiction probably showing *Yab-Yum Lokapāla* in standing position and *Kubera Vaiśravaṇa* hoisting a banner in his left hand as he looks to the right. The two other fearsome aspects of the Lotus Born One, are presented with their respective *Yum* in standing position on two separate lotus pedestals. A seated ecclesiastic in the attitude of *Dharma cakra*, is probably *Guru, Nang-sic sil-nen* who is followed by a *Yab-Yum Lokapāla* and a fair-bodied seated *Khadāksri Lokeśvara* which strongly/ emphasises serenity and tender heartedness.



20. *Lokeśvara* with noose : Existing frescoes in the *Chhairo Gompa*, exemplify the hybrid style of Tibetan art. The works are assigned to *SKu S'ogs, Chi'wang Ṭhilen*, a *Lāmā* from *dKar-gTa-so* monastery of *Kyirong*.