Architectural Documentation and Virtual Reconstruction of Samtenchoeling Monastery Ruins at Chumme, Bumthang Bhutan

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Abstract Monasteries have played significant role in the birth and spread of Buddhism in Bhutan since ancient times. Bumthang district in central Bhutan has some of the ancient monasteries in the country and many of them are in need of restoration and conservation however due to lack of proper documentation the government and the scholars are not aware of them. The ruin of Samtencholing Monastery at Gaytsa Village under Chumme Gewog is one of the important Buddhist sites in the cultural landscape of the country. This study documents the existing ruins and traces the original form of the monastery and connects it to Kunkhen Longchen Rabjampa the founder of the Nyingthig (heart essence) tradition in Bhutan, one of the greatest of all Nyingma masters of Mahayana Buddhism. The paper attempts to reconstruct the monastery’s ruin to its original form through drawings and three dimensional views. The research recommends the need to restore the monastery to enrich community vitality and boost pilgrimage tourism in the locality.

Keywords: architectural documentation, Kunkhen Longchen Rabjampa, ruins, restoration, Samtencholing monastery


1. Introduction

Monasteries are important components of Bhutan’s cultural heritage. Most of the ancient monasteries connect to the great religious masters and founders of the Buddhism that is practiced in the country. Further to their religious role, monasteries also became centers of education, culture and art (Olschak, 1979) [1]. The ancient monasteries are also the main pilgrimage sites and tourist attractions (Rogers, 2012) [2]. Bumthang district in central Bhutan which also regarded as the spiritual heartland of the country because it has about 170 ancient monasteries including some of the oldest and sacred ones (Phuntsho, 2013) [3]. However some of the monasteries in the district are in urgent need of repair and restoration. They are also vulnerable to disasters like earthquakes, fires and vandalism (Dargye, 2003) [4]. Many of them lack of proper documentation and research because of which scholars and policy makers are unaware of them (Dujardin, 2000) [5]. Therefore documentation of these ancient treasures is the first step to bring them to public domain and seek funds for intervention. This study is based on the physical evidences of the Samtencholing Monastery ruin at Gaytsa Village under Chumme Gewog and the oral history provided by the local respondents. It attempts to trace the original form of the monument and visually reconstructs with drawings and computer generated three dimensional views based on the above evidences.

2. Geographical Location

The monastery is strategically located in the ridge of the Samteling hill one km to the north-east of Gyatsa village in Chume valley under Bumthang district at a distance of about 230 kilometers from Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. The GPS data from Google Earth are 27°33’ by 90°44’ at an altitude of 2600 m. The setting of the monastery offers a panoramic view over the communities of Gyatsa, Buli, Urug and Domkhar (Figure 1). The nearest road is the Jakar-Trongsa highway, which passes through the Gaytsa community, and it takes around 45 minutes by walk to reach the monastery through the Urug valley followed by a steep climb of the ridge.

3. Overall Description of the Ruins

The Samtenchoeling monastery ruins are a complex of buildings and spatial organization linked together in a unique design. The ruins maintain the original setting and retains significant portion of the original walls and other building components, which helps scholars to understand forms and functions of the monastery. The complex in its present form indicates a fusion of a cluster and Dzong (fortress) designs types with the incorporation of two courtyards on the either side of the main temple. There are
three entries into the temple complex (Figure 2). The two man entries are located at South East and North East corner of the complex. They open into a large spacious stone paved courtyard measuring 14.7 x 13.9 meters. The third entrance is a low doorway located at the Southern end of the boundary wall courtyard which is a lawn measuring 11.3x7.4 m on the eastern side of the complex. The complex encloses the stone paved courtyard on three sides leaving it open towards the East. On the South side stands the ruins of the main monastery and on the western and northern end of the side of the stone paved courtyard is the owner’s residence which is still used today. The northern wing of the complex houses the caretaker’s kitchen and open store while the ruins of a rammed mud towers over the residence. The complex is a two story rammed mud structure built on random rubble masonry foundation. The remains of the floor joists are evident in many places and most of the door window openings are still intact. The timber components of the monument are completely absent in the main monastery and completely intact in the caretaker’s residence.

3.1. Description of the Main Monastery Floor Plans and Facades Ruins

The main monastery has a rectangular plan measuring 22.7 x 13 meters made up of a 0.8 m wide rammed mud wall. A section of the wall forms a part of the monastery at the Eastern and Northern sides, whereas rest of the wall forms the compound wall of the monastery (Figure 2). The main monastery has a rectangular plan measuring 11.3x 8.5 meters and is bordered by the two courtyards on North and South. It is divided almost into two halves by a 0.7 m wide rammed mud wall. It is enclosed with a 1.6 m wide circumbulation passage which is filled with undergrowth connects to the South. The monastery can be accessed with a flight of four steps from the stone paved courtyard.

The first floor follows the ground floor in the layout. The prayer hall was located on the Northern side while the other half housed the main shrine of the temple. The central section of the first floor has a very wide opening. It is said that that there were three open able doors leading into the main from the prayer hall. The Lama’s (Priest) residence was on the first floor on the North side of the courtyard and there was a balcony connecting his residence to the monastery. The North façade of the main monastery had a balcony for viewing the mask dances during festivals.

The Eastern façade consists of a portion of the outer wall till a height of 3.7 meters which it has the remains of two small window openings and the burnt remains of the structure holding decorative timber windows. The ruins of the main monastery wall show the remains of two bigger windows, of which one is intact and one is partially damaged. The Western façade consists of a portion of the outer wall till a height of 3.7 meters and the ruins of the main monastery wall has no openings and the red band characteristics of Bhutanese monasteries is still intact. The north façade consists of a portion of the outer wall till a height of 3.7 meters leading to the circumbulation passage. The ruins of the main monastery wall show the remains of two smaller windows of the ground floor which is still intact whereas the remains of two windows of the first floor are partially damaged. The ruins of the main entrance door to the monastery are partially intact. The façade bears the brunt remains of the timber balcony facing the courtyard. The South façade has a 2.7 meter wide opening in the wall at the ground floor level and it widens to a 4.4 meter opening at the first floor level. The ruins of a small window are partially intact at the first floor level.

4. Religious and Social Importance

The monastery is the residence to the descendants of Longchen Rabjam of Künkhyen Longchen Rabjampa meaning ‘Possessor of the Great Expanse of Knowledge’ who was one of the most important Buddhist personalities to visit Bhutan. Renowned as a peerless teacher, practitioner, and scholar, Longchenpa is widely recognized as one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters ever to live. His contribution of 24 volumes of collected works on Tibetan Buddhism, Philosophy, logic, literature,
history and astronomy are studied by all the schools and traditions even today.

Figure 3. A. The South view showing the low entrance and the main monastery in the background. B. The view of the main monastery as seen from the stone paved courtyard. C. The south east view. D. The South West view. (Photo by author).

He was born on the tenth day of the second month of the Earth Monkey Year of the fifth Rabjung (1308) at Teo Drong in the Tra valley of Yuru Dra province of central Tibet. It is not recorded when he came or returned from Bhutan but when he came to Bumthang, only few people practiced Buddhism and people found it hard to believe him and follow his teachings. It is believed he settled in Samling village in upon his arrival in Bumthang (Penjore, 2005)[6]. He met a religious professor Mifam Jamgyen, who allowed him to stay in a meditation center above the Samling, and the place got the name Tharpaling (the land of Liberation) but it is Samling village below Tharpaling where Longchen is believed to have settled first. He set up a Dratshang there and propagated the teachings of Buddha. He was the founder of the Nyingthing tradition in Bhutan.

The other most important of his contributions towards Buddhism in Bhutan was the construction of eight lings or large monasteries. They include –

I. Tharpaling in Chumme.
II. Shingkhar Dechenling in Bumthang
III. Tang Ugyencholing in Bumthang
IV. Kunzangling in Lhuntse
V. Khothang Pemaling/Rinchenling
VI. Menlok Kunzangling in Wangle
VII. Nyenlong Drechagling
VIII. Paro Samtenling

During his stay in Bhutan, he lived mostly in Tharpaling Monastery and hid many treasures like KuenZang Gongdue in Tharpaling before he left for Tibet. According to scriptures, he was reincarnated as the great Terton Pema Lingpa in order to reveal the remaining parts of his treasures for the benefit of all sentient beings.

5. Significance of the Site Selection

History of ancient monuments in Bhutan is often associated with fascinating mythical tales which helps people connect to the place and adds spiritual landscape to the monument. It reinforces the oral society which the country was once upon a time. The story of this residence monastery is no different. Legendary story says that the Samling range resembles a snake; the monastery was built over the heart of the snake deity so that it will not harm the people of neighboring communities below.

6. Social Significance

The monastery was a place of social and religious significance and acted like cohesion of community vitality and togetherness to the neighboring communities. As per oral history a three day annual mask dance festival used to be held in the monastery which was started by Longchen. On the eastern side of the main courtyard people used to erect a temporary gallery during festivals.

Monks from Samling household hosted the festival and Domkhar village provided dancers, Gytsa community contributed firewood and water, while workers such as cooks came from Urug. Pilgrims for the festival had to be provided with free food. Before it was destroyed by fire in 1981, there used to be a bi-annual Samling Mani festival with Pema Lingpa’s mask dances, alternatively with that of Bulti Mani in the neighboring Bulti Monastery.

7. Fire Accident

As with most of the other historic buildings in Bhutan, the glory of Samtenchoeling Goemba was lost due to a fire accident around 34 years ago. Without documentation on the incident and subsequent investigation most of the information is available only from the oral sources about the tragedy that took place on the 16th day of the 11th month of Water Pig Year (1983) in Bhutanese calendar.

It is said that a dumb helper to the main priest used to live nearby. His house got damaged in a minor earthquake and he shifted his home to a temporary shed beside the Southeast entrance to the complex. Respondent’s information say that on that day at around 7:30 Am., the helper started the fire in his shed to dry his gumboots and had gone out. The fire spread through the shed into the decorative timber windows and into the entire complex. When people from the neighboring villages reached the scene it was too late, moreover there was no water available nearby and it would take half an hour to fetch water from the nearby source. However some of the important statues of Kunkhen Longchen Rabjampa and Pema Lingpa and important administrative documents could be saved and are kept with the descendants.

8. The Virtual Reconstruction

The virtual reconstruction drawings was prepared based on the existing drawings prepared using AutoCAD software. As photographs were not available before it was destroyed by fire, the respondents provided the information regarding the original form of the monastery. This was consistent with the physical evidences available at the site. The three dimensional views were prepared using AutoCAD software and google sketch up software.
9. Conclusion

More than three decades after the unfortunate fire accident, the freestanding walls and open to sky the ruins awaits attention and conservation of what remains. The descendants reported that the monument is crumbling every year due to weather conditions and lack of funds for maintenance.

Modern Conservation charter calls for minimum and reversible intervention in any historic building. Providing a simple roof over the ruins, filling the wide wall cracks and clearing the weeds and grasses will arrest the monument being razed to the ground. However in a Bhutanese social and religious context it is suggested that the Division for the Conservation of Historic Sites under the Department Of Culture prepare a restoration plan in consultation with the local community and local government. The monument is burnt, not the spirit and the history of the place. The restoration of the monument would enrich community vitality and boost pilgrimage tourism in the locality.

References