

LIVING SPACES AND MEMORIES / K. Choden

/ VOICES FROM THE PAST / STRUCTURES WE SEE TODAY / OTHER STRUCTURES AND RELIQUARIES / LU KHANG: VISIBLE HOMES FOR
INVISIBLE SPIRITS / THE BUILDINGS THAT HAVE DISAPPEARED /

Voices from the past

The main structures of the *nagtshang* complex as it stands today are just about a century old, with the older buildings having succumbed to the earthquake of 1897. It is said that the earthquake happened in the early morning, before sunrise, while the caretaker was in the temple making the daily water offering at the altar. According to an oral tradition kept alive by the descendants of the caretaker, he was in the midst of filling the offering bowls when the earthquake occurred and the temple began to collapse. It is believed he was saved by a miracle: He was thrown out of the temple window and survived to tell the story. Equally miraculously, while the building crumbled and fell, the altar and all the statues in the temple stood intact, so they could be reinstalled in the new temple.

Another person who liked to talk about the history of Ogyen Choling and share her memories of its former glory was a relative of the *nagtshang* household, who we knew as *Aie Yudon Tsomo*. We remember her as a beautiful, vivacious woman who charmed everybody with her exquisite voice and graceful dancing. She was also a great storyteller, and we liked and admired her greatly. She used to say she was a young child at the time of the 1897 earthquake, and she was one of the few people we met who actually recalled it. Whenever she talked of her childhood memories of the *nagtshang*, she invariably included the story of the earthquake (Box 5.1).



FIGURE 5.1: AIE YUDON TSOMO

Box 5.1: AIE YUDON TSOMO'S RECOLLECTION OF THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE

Aie Yudon Tsomo, a grand-niece of *Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji*, must have been a young child during the earthquake of 1897 but the trauma of the quake remained with her all her life:

“When the tremors began, all the people left their houses in fear and terror and gathered in a clearing some distance away from the buildings. There was a tremendous thundering and rumbling, followed by a thick column of dust that rose into the air. The dust obscured the sun and stayed in the air for a long time. And when the dust finally settled, there was a huge heap of rubble in the place of the *nagtshang*.”

The Ogyen Choling *nagtshang* and all other buildings had been razed to the ground. Only the *chamkhang*, or dance house, located between today's temple and the main *utse*, withstood the quake. *Aie Yudon Tsomo* remembered little else about the natural catastrophe itself, but she recalled the man who began rebuilding the *nagtshang* shortly after the disaster: her uncle, *Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji*. He was already an old man by then, but she remembers him as a small man with a beard. The *ghos* in the museum that are believed to have belonged to him seem to confirm his small stature. We learned from our parents that he was a scholarly person who excelled in astrology.



FIGURE 5.2: THE CHAMKHANG TODAY, THE ONLY BUILDING THAT SURVIVED THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1897

Reconstruction of the buildings began in 1898, starting with the temple. The entire complex was completed in 1903. Unfortunately, there is no written or oral record of the names of the head mason and carpenter. There is, however, an oral tradition that says the painter of the temple murals was from western Bhutan, while *Trulku* Nuden Dorji states that the painter was from Tibet. The latter seems more likely, as the paintings are recognized by experts to be in the Tibetan style. The painter executed some of the most beautiful paintings on the walls of the main temple, *tsug lhakhang*, and the temple in the central tower, *utse lhakhang*, which remain the pride of Ogyen Choling *nagtshang* today. Noticeably, the anteroom that serves as the entrance to the *utse lhakhang* has only simple paintings, which in comparison look rather incomplete, as if they were done in a hurry.

According to some oral sources, this difference in styles was caused by a misunderstanding

between the patron and the artist, with the latter refusing to complete the paintings and just walking away. Whether this account is the invention of a creative storyteller or whether this actually happened, we will never know. What we suspect is that the story was created by the villagers to show that the masters in the *nagtshang* could be defied by the people they employed.

The exact spot where the rebuilt *nagtshang* was to be situated was determined following astrological calculations by *Dzongpon* Ugyen Dorji himself. The placement of the building was also checked to ascertain the most harmonious arrangement. The positions of the bodies of water bodies, the mountains surrounding the valley, and the effect they would have on the buildings and occupants, were determined through a system of geomancy. The three-peaked mountain to the northwest of Ogyen Choling called *Wengmed Phunsum*,



FIGURE 5.3: WALL PAINTING, ANTEROOM OF UTSE LHAKHANG

or the Three Tibetan Sisters was seen to have a negative impact on the buildings. We were told that some stones were brought from these mountains and used in the foundation; this act would have been accompanied by rites of subjugation and neutralization to negate any negativity. While it cannot be ascertained why this particular mountain was seen to wield negative power over the building, we cannot rule out the possibility that the legend of the mountain's origin may have been a factor: This mountain is clearly visible in the northwest of the valley, the three peaks standing close together. We were told that these were originally three sisters who worked for a powerful lama in Tibet. One day the three of them ran away from their master and stole the lama's pet dog, which appears as an additional small peak, like a child being carried on the back of one of the sisters. When they reached the Tang valley, they were happy to see such a beautiful place – but they were also suddenly reminded of their own home and the master they had abandoned. The simple act of turning back toward Tibet and remembering the lama turned them into a three-peaked mountain. As fantastic as the story may sound, the mountain is a symbol of

disloyalty and betrayal and, thus, a potential negative influence. In Buddhism, *damgyen*, or the breach of loyalty and trust between a lama and his disciples, is considered a most heinous form of betrayal.

According to tradition, when any kind of structure like a house, bridge or temple is to be built, a groundbreaking ceremony must be performed. This ceremony is to appease the spirits believed to be the original owners of the ground, symbolically seeking their goodwill and blessings. This was important to ensure that there would be no accidents or misfortunes during construction and to bring stability to the buildings and prosperity to their occupants. For this ceremony a round container with a narrow neck made of copper, brass or earth, called *sater*, would have been filled with nine “original grains and cereals” (*dru na gu*) that were given to humans by the Bodhisattva Chenrezig.²⁰ These grains included, rice, barley, wheat, two kinds of buckwheat, peas, mustard, millet and soya beans. Precious jewels and cloth of every kind would also have been put into the container, which would then have been placed in the centre of the spot where the building was to be erected.

²⁰ Choden 2008: 34

Box 5.2: AIE KESANG REMEMBERS



FIGURE 5.4: AIE KESANG

Aie Kesang is 84 years old and bent with age. She is no longer fully mobile, and so her days are spent sitting on her porch, sunning herself and reciting her prayers. Sitting with her back to the sun, she can look directly at the nagtshang, and she often remembers her long association with it and the family. Aie Kesang enjoyed the trust of three generations of mistresses of the house. She recalls that she was inducted into service at age 12. She also vaguely recalls our great-grandmother Aie Tsedon as a big woman with greying hair. She has a clearer memory of my grandmother Aie Keba, but she spent most of her adult life with my mother. In fact, she clearly recalls the day our mother, Dorji Drolma, came to Ogyen Choling as a young bride from the valley of Chumey in 1948. Aie Kesang, who was barely 20 at the time, was chosen to be one of the young ladies in the reception line. Each woman had to hold an auspicious Buddhist symbol to welcome the bride and bring good fortune. The wedding took place in the month of June, which would have been the start of the rainy season, and it had rained the whole day. My mother, the bride, entered the house in the pouring rain. When she tells the story of that day, Aie Kesang can still feel the chill of her wet clothes clinging to her body and dripping with water!

In the years that Aie Kesang worked in the nagtshang, she was charged with different responsibilities at different times. We can remember her working as the manager of alcohol production, the in-charge of flour production and in-charge of the wool house. Processing of alcohol was a full-time activity for Aie Kesang to ensure that the household was never without the brew. In her days as the manager, we remember being impressed when she proudly showed us her system of arranging the cylindrical bamboo containers of alcohol on the stone slab floor. She would have the containers arranged in a line based on the potency of the alcohol. In our memories of her as in-charge of the flour house, she always appeared to be busy in the storeroom measuring out the flour, surrounded by a thin film of flour dust rising in the air.

When she was in-charge of the wool, we used to follow her into the wool room, which could be entered through a door under the stairs in the west gate entrance. In the dark room cluttered with spinning wheels, baskets and boxes stuffed with wool and yarn, she sorted out the wool into an order she devised. She would stand in the shaft of light that came into the partially dark room through the narrow window; then she would peer at the wool in her hands to discern the colour or texture. Today, the main electrical distribution box is located in this room. What Aie Kesang notices most now is that people no longer show deference for the nagtshang. “These days, men have the upper part of their gho open and women wear all sorts of headgear and alien clothes when they go into the nagtshang.” In the old days, proper dress code was just one of the many signs of the respect toward the nagtshang. “Yalama!!” she exclaims. “How things have changed.”

The structures we see today

Prayers would have been chanted and *lhabsang* – the fumigation rite of burning branches of juniper and pine or aromatic plants – would have been conducted, together with the ritual of *thruetur*, a symbolic cleansing with water and offering of libation. We were told that *Dzongpon* Ugyen Dorji had water collected from nine major rivers of the country for this water ceremony.

One story about the rebuilding of the *nagtshang* that has endured over time concerns a tragic mishap during the construction. The accident happened just a few hundred metres from the village. A group of women who were digging for mud to plaster the stonework were killed when the roof of the hole in which they had been working caved in. The place where the accident took place has since then been known as *duthrue om*, or cremation gorge. Regrettably, such accidents occur even today while digging mud for construction sites; the most recent incident in the village occurred in 1999 and claimed the lives of two people.

The main temple: *tsug lhakhang*

Because the main temple, or *tsug lhakhang*, was the most important building within the complex, it was the first to be rebuilt after the earthquake of 1897. Substantial investments were made by *Dzongpon* Ugyen Dorji and his family for rebuilding the temple, as is evident from the *karchag* (see Box 5.3). Most of the construction material was wood and stone, which would have been freely available. Thus, we can assume that the listed costs were mostly for labour, food, and materials and labour costs needed for sculpting the statues. It can be inferred that similar expenses must have also been incurred for the other buildings. It has been recorded (in *Trulku* Nuden Dorji's text of genealogy) that some of the most revered lamas of the time who happened to be in the region were invited to the consecration of the new *lhakhang*. The list includes Tobden Shacha Zangpo, Dungu Jigmi Thinlay, Tsatrul Kunzang Choeying Dorji and *Terton* Zilnon Namkhai Dorji. Although we know almost nothing about these lamas today, we know that all of them were root teachers to family members and highly revered.

The *tsug lhakhang*, a two-storied building, is located north of the *utse*. In the *tsug lhakhang* there are four shrines, three on the first floor and one on the ground floor. The very rare paintings on the wall of the entrance room on the first floor are of the mythical kingdom of Shambhala. This kingdom is associated with Tantric meditational deities and is said to exist in the direction of the north. A popular lay belief holds that in the future, the world will be destroyed because of humans' uncontrollable greed. Eventually, a king of this mythical land, Shambhala, will come and save all.

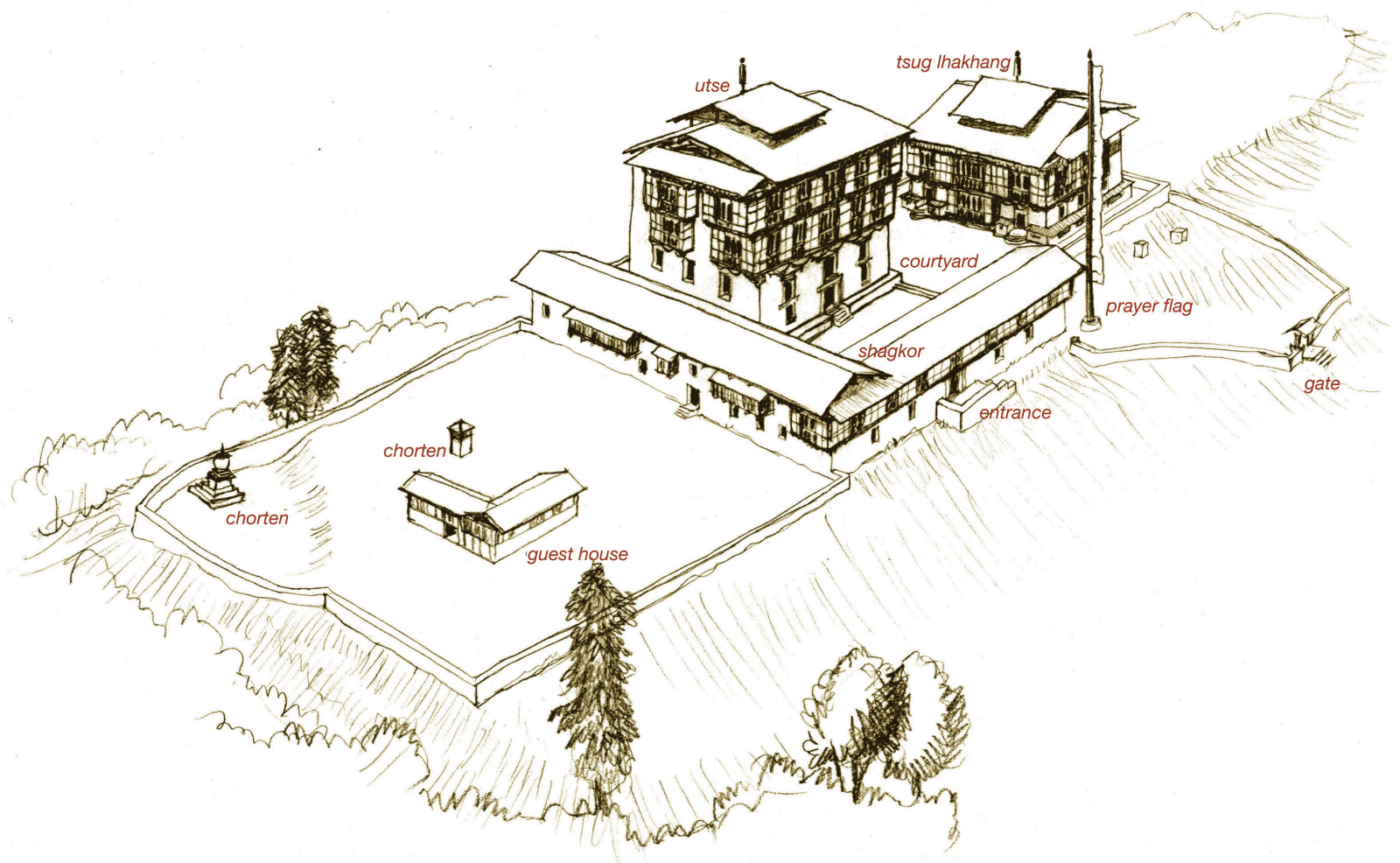


FIGURE 5.5: SKETCH OF TODAY'S STRUCTURES

Starting from the ground floor, we will briefly introduce each of the shrines in the temple:

Drolma lhakhang (ground floor): The shrine on the ground floor is dedicated to Drolma, or Tara, a female meditational deity regarded as the embodiment of all the Buddhas' enlightened mind and activity. She is associated with compassion and pristine cognition and is often referred to as the "mother" of all Buddhas. Chenrezig (*Avalokestessvara*), or the deity of compassion, shed a tear on seeing the suffering in the world, and Drolma was born out of this tear. It is believed she has taken a vow to attain Buddhahood in a female form. She has 21 manifestations, and the clay statues in the altar represent them all. On the left side of the shrine

is a statue of Dorji Phagmo (*Vajravarahi*), a female meditational deity also known as the "Indestructible Sow." This statue was sculpted out of the silver jewellery belonging to *Ashi Yeshe*, mother of *Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji*, who built the statue in memory of his mother.

The wall paintings also show the 84 *Drupthobs*, or *Mahasiddhas*, who had attained spiritual accomplishments. Other paintings represent the various stages of Buddha Shakyamuni's life.

A painting of Dorji Lingpa is shown with the patrons from Ogyen Choling, who are depicted

Box 5.3: COST FOR BUILDING THE TEMPLE

translated from the original karchag above the stairwell of the tsug lhakhang). Although it was not the norm at the time to pay wages for labour, the carpenters and masons were paid for their efforts. However, the ordinary workers had to make do with meals that were given to them. The details of the expenditures incurred are as follows:

- 300 Ngultrums (silver coins) and 13 Mathrams (copper coins).
- 5,205 Zongs (cloth pieces).
- 2 horses
- 2 Patangs (swords).
- 9 Jandums (tea containers).
- 1 Khoryug (large butter lamp)
- 1 Bagh (block of brick tea).
- 40 loads of butter (maybe 30 kg per load)
- 815 Dres of salt (Dre is a unit of measure for grains and items such as salt, by volume and not weight)
- 11,608 Dres of rice
- 240 Dres of Kongbo (millet)
- 2,841 Dres of wheat
- 14,406 Dres of buckwheat
- 9 loads of chilli
- 7 measures of Shingmar (oil extracted from a wild nut, may have been measures of about 2 kg each)
- 4 loads of animal fat
- 10 loads of fish
- 122 slaughtered/butchered cattle
- 89 pigs
- 32 Dzhos of Drangser, or refined first-class gold (dzho is a unit of measure for gold dust)
- Seven Dzhos of Tshaser, or second-class gold
- 4 Jaguma (basically, a container)
- 80 Sangs of brass (sang is a unit of measure for metal, equal to 333g)
- 14 loads of iron
- 4 Thribams of gold leaf (one thribam consisted of 10,000 pieces of gold leaf)
- 404 Poru of Dzangtshoen (poru is a unit of measure for the imported paint known as Dzangtshoen). This was usually obtained in the form of round balls.
- 35 Kha of brocade and silk cloth pieces (kha is a unit of measure for cloth)
- 4 Kha of Mennyeng (a very rare and expensive form of silk)
- 4 pieces of Nangdzoe (yet another form of silk)
- 4 pieces of Dhardzoe (the best kind of silk ceremonial scarf)
- 88 pieces of Tsetroe

The accumulated cost of all the above was calculated following the rates prevalent at that time and amounted to 27,249 Mathrams. Moreover, the gifts that Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji gave to the workers and offered to the Lamas cost him a total of 64 million Mathrams. The justification for investing such a huge sum was: 1) to strengthen and ensure the continuity of the hereditary lineage handed down to him; 2) to help the Nyingmapa lineage of Buddhism to flourish; and 3) to benefit and accumulate merit not only for himself, but for all sentient beings, helping them to transcend their previous transgressions.



FIGURE 5.6: STATUE OF DORJI PHAGMO (VAJRAVARAHI) IN THE DROLMA LHAKANG

making offerings to the master. Images of the deity of victory, Tsugtor Namgyalma (*Ushnishavijaya*) and the deity of longevity Tsepame (*Amitayus*) are also depicted. The other prominent figure painted on this wall is that of Sangye Menlha, or the Medicine Buddha. He is blue in colour and holds a medicinal plant called arura (*myrobolan*) in his right hand. The bitter nut of this plant is said to be one of the main ingredients in all indigenous Tibetan and Bhutanese medicine.

Jowo lhakhang (upper floor): In the main shrine room on the upper floor, the principal statue is that of the 12-year-old historical Buddha

(*Shakyamuni Jowo*), who lived in India around 500 B.C. The Jowo is flanked on the right by an image of Guru Rinpoche and on the left by Dorji Lingpa. To the right of Guru Rinpoche is the father of Dorji Lingpa, and on the left of Dorji Lingpa is *Trulku* Chogden Gonpo, the reincarnation of Dorji Lingpa. The 108 volumes of the *Kangyur* are stored in cupboards on either side of the altar.

The paintings on the walls depict themes of Bardo, or the experience between death and rebirth, as explained in the texts of the Nyingmapa and Kagyu lineages. The paintings on the adjacent wall illustrate the mandala of *Zangdopelri*, the Copper Heaven of Guru Rinpoche. The Guru Rinpoche in the centre of the mandala is shown as Guru Padma Jungnay, or the Lotus Born Guru. Other paintings include that of Sangye Tenshak, which consists of the 35 Buddhas of repentance, and of Guru Rinpoche in the form known as Nangsi Zilnon, Prevailing Over Appearances and Existence.



FIGURE 5.7: THE ALTAR IN THE JOWO LHAKHANG



FIGURE 5.8: ENTRANCE DOOR TO THE GOENKHAND

Goenkhang (upper floor): The altar of Gonpo Maning, the personal protective deity of the family and villagers, can be accessed through the main shrine room. It is housed in a room with a partially blocked door. Following the prevalent tradition, entrance into this room is unconditionally restricted to family members and villagers of Ogyen Choling.

Dorji Sempa lhakhang (upper floor): The third shrine on the same floor is the shrine of Dorji Sempa (*Vajrasattva*), the Bodhisattva of purity, who personifies the purity of awareness of the ultimate reality. There are 1000 paintings of Dorji Sempa on the walls. A mandala with the *yabyum* form of Dorji Sempa is painted on

the ceiling; the term *yabyum* means “father-mother” and refers to the depiction of male and female deities in sexual union. This figure is a symbol of the integration of the male and female components of the spiritual path. The male represents compassion and active engagement, while the female represents wisdom and depth of understanding. Final enlightenment happens only when these two aspects are fully united with each other. This shrine was commissioned by *Trulku* Nuden Dorji in memory of our parents, his brother Kunzang Dorji and his sister-in-law Dorji Drolma.

Mani Dongkhor, the giant prayer wheel, is located on the ground floor on the right side of the main entrance. This prayer wheel has often served as a refuge for older people in the village and family members of the *nagtshang*: When people are too old to work in the fields, they come to sit at the wheel and turn it to accumulate merit. Because of the constant use of the prayer wheel over the years, it had to undergo major repairs in 2009.

The central tower (*utse*)

The stately central tower is four storeys tall, with an east-facing entrance. A stone ledge runs around the base of the entire building. The ledge was most probably made for aesthetic reasons, but it also has a practical function. Most of the people who had to carry the sacks of grains or other luggage into the stores in the *utse* rested here by setting down their luggage on the ledge before they entered the building through the big door. It is also used to sit on, as well as to temporarily store baskets, grains and vegetables.



FIGURE 5.9: PATRONS OF OGYEN CHOLING MAKING OFFERINGS TO SHABDRUNG (UTSE LHAKHANG)

All of the ground floor and parts of the first floor were used for storing grain. Some rooms on the first floor were used as stores for household utilitarian items as well as working equipment. These included agricultural, wood and stone working tools, as shown today in the museum. One room was used for storing saddles, saddlecloths and other paraphernalia for riding and pack animals. Tents, ropes for tethering the pack animals and materials for packing and repairing saddles were further stored here.

The second floor was designed as residential quarters with attached toilets used by visiting dignitaries such as members of the Royal Family and religious personalities. The

dignitaries who stayed in these quarters included the Second King, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck (several visits); Their Majesties the Queens Ashi Phunthso Choden and Ashi Pem Dechen (late 1950s); and other members of the Royal Family. Important lamas like Dzogchen Khenpo, Beyul Rinpoche (early 1900s) and the previous incarnation of Lama Namkhai Ningpo (in 1960), along with Jadhey Jangchub Dorji, Lama Pezang and Beza Guru Lama (1950s) have blessed these rooms with their presence.

The third floor was built with attached toilets and was occasionally used as living quarters by family members, but as far as I can remember most of the space was used as stores. The most important space on this floor is the *utse lhakhang*, dedicated to Tsepame. The main statue, Tsepame, is flanked by the deity of victory (Namgyal Neljorma) on one side and by Drolma on the other side. On the extreme right is the special altar dedicated to Mahakali, the female protective deity of the family and villagers, who is affectionately known as *Ama* (Mother) Palden Lhamo. One of the most beautiful renditions of Guru Rinpoche and his eight manifestations can be seen in this temple. On another wall is the painting of Demchok Khorlodampa (*Lakramsavara*), one of the highest Tantric deities, and a remarkable painting of *Shabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), who unified Bhutan, surrounded by the lamas of the Drukpa Kagyupa lineage. One of the few pictorial representations of *Dzongpon* Ugyen Dorji is also shown here, making offerings to the great *Shabdrung*.

From my earliest memories the attic was a favourite haunt for my brothers and their friends. This was the space that held all sorts of



FIGURE 5.10: GURU RINPOCHE (UTSE LHA KHANG)

materials that roused their fantasies of battles and wars. Artefacts such as arrows, slings and large catapults, as well as round boulders to be used with the catapults, were stored there until we opened the museum. Over the years, many of the items were taken away by young boys eager to play their war games. Fortunately, we were left with enough materials to display in the museum.

The last level just below the roof is the *jamtho*. This space, enclosed with bamboo matting, was used exclusively for drying meat and other animal parts. I can recall the huge amounts of horns and skins stored here; I knew that skins could be used for all sorts of purposes. Much later I learned that these useless-looking

horns had many uses. Besides being used as containers for oil, salt and pepper, they were carried by soldiers who went to battle. They could be toasted in an open fire and scraped with a knife and the scrapings could be eaten. This may have been a substitute for protein. They were, of course, commonly used for making handles for knives, and sometimes the tips of the horns were cut off, adorned intricately and used for storing snuff. During food shortages, villagers also could toast and eat them as the soldiers did.

The Shagkor

This is the two-storied building enclosing the *utse* from the east and south sides. The building



FIGURE 5.11: VIEW THROUGH THE *GORKHA* INTO THE FLAGSTONE COURTYARD

was used as a residential space for the family as well as for visiting relatives. The main entrance to the complex is through a large east-facing door, known as the *gorkha*. Entering through this door, one comes into the flagstone courtyard in front of the *utse*, which extends north into the courtyard of the *tsug lhakhang*.

Another passage through the *shagkor* to the courtyard is known as the secret door, *sang go*, and sometimes as the west door, *nub go* (actually southwest). This door was probably referred to as secret because its usage was restricted to family members and only a few select attendants. In the passage a flight of stairs leads to the upper floor of the *shagkor*.

The rooms on the ground floor of the *shagkor* were mostly used as stores. I can remember the grain store and next to it the storeroom for the flour, containing huge boxes filled with bitter and sweet buckwheat flour, roasted barley flour, and wheat flour. It was from here that the flour store in-charge measured out daily rations for workers, family members and visitors alike. This room is today used as a grain store. There were separate rooms for storing wool and salt.

The *tsa zodh*, or salt store, contained huge boxes of rock salt from Tibet. Lumps of salt crusted on the floor, and the room always felt damp because of the hygroscopic nature of the salt. I remember how the dampness in the room soaked both the wooden and stone walls, creating a constantly cold atmosphere.

The upper floor was the main area used as the family's living quarters. It is in this part of the complex where I spent most of my childhood, and of which I have the most nostalgic memories. In my earliest recollections, the corner room, *zurgom*, on the north end of the east wing was used as a guest room, and in the late 1950s, when the family acquired a Singer sewing machine, it was used as a tailoring room. Once the sewing machine was installed and the first tailor, *Meme Ngolay*, was trained to use it, the rhythmic sound of the foot pedal as he worked on the machine became associated with the room. People often went to look and marvel at the miracle of a sewing machine or to beg to have a piece of clothing stitched. It was the first sewing machine in the Tang valley. Today this room is used for meetings by the Ogyen Choling village community.



FIGURE 5.12: SITTING ROOM

The largest room, *zimchung chedpo*, in the upper floor of the east wing, was and is still occasionally used as the sitting and dining room. This was where the family gathered for meals, entertained guests and where the patriarch, my father and later my uncle, conducted his administrative affairs. The family altar, or *choesham*, was in the next room, where the east wall joined the south wall.

The upper floor of the south-facing wing had attached toilets that could be reached from several rooms. A series of five rooms were mostly used as bedrooms, but sometimes also as store rooms or even as a kitchen. Our parents' bedroom for most of their time together was the room next to the altar room. After the death of my father, my mother moved to the next room. She even installed a loom in one room so that she could weave sometimes. In the middle part of this wing is a passage and the landing for the stairs from the *sang go*. From the landing there is also a flight of stairs that leads to the attic.

In addition, from the landing one could go west and reach another room sometimes used as a store and other times as a bedroom, with a south-facing balcony referred to as a sunroom, or *ninchung*. The last room was also a bedroom with a veranda that was used as a bath house.

A later addition to the room, made during my father's time was a toilet on the south side, accessed through a door made through a pre-existing window. Perhaps because it caught the last rays of the afternoon sun, this was a room that had often been used as a bedroom, including by our father and his brothers when they were children. For some time this room also was used as a bedroom by our parents, and I was told that my brothers and I were born in this room. One of my younger brothers died as a child, from whooping cough, in this room. Based on the astrologer's reading, his little body could not be taken out through the door, and so an opening had to be made in the wall on the north side through which his body could be removed. In my earliest memories this room was, however, no longer used as a bedroom but had a small stove and was used as a private family kitchen by my mother. Although the family cook prepared our meals, mother also liked to cook some specialties herself, such as the occasional Himalayan monal (pheasant), the rare fresh fish, and fresh off-season vegetables.

The attic (khobsang): The attic on the south wing was built to have a higher ceiling than the east wing. Here the space was high enough to comfortably walk around, while the east wing was so low that we could only move while bending down. In my early memories, there



FIGURE 5.13: THE FAMILY CHOESHAM

were two rooms in the south wing partitioned with bamboo matting. One of these rooms was a storeroom for vegetables and household materials such as baskets, oil lamps, and later hurricane kerosene lamps (and anything else that was needed in the house but not in immediate use). The second room was occasionally used as a bedroom during the summer. During stifling summer nights, residents, especially the grandmothers, used this room because it was cooler and breezier. After my father died, my mother stored many of his personal effects here, including his bedding and clothing. I suppose she did not want to deal with his intimate belongings every day, but at the same time she did not want to get rid of them totally. Since she too died just two years later, her dilemma did not last long. I do not even know what happened to the clothes. I don't know why or exactly when, but during one of our long absences from home (while I was in school in India during the 1960s and 1970s), the partitions of the room were torn down and the contents disappeared.

Whenever I think of the attic, I see the numerous spinning wheels stored there, stacked on top of the wall that formed a ledge under the roof. I also think of the numerous times my friends and I would eagerly look through the many boxes and baskets. Most of what we found consisted of old documents, discarded household artefacts and utensils, but there were times when we found small glass beads

and an occasional piece of coral or turquoise long forgotten in the corner of a box. But the mysterious storekeeper *Aie Khomba's* presence created a spooky atmosphere (see Preface), and I felt the surreptitious nature of my presence in her space was an intrusion.

The dance house (Chamkhang)

This two-storied house is located in the courtyard between the *tsug lhakhang* and the *utse*. A wooden ladder leads to the upper floor, which has two rooms and a toilet. The rooms were used by visiting relatives and the 10th Thuksay Rinpoche, the reincarnation of the spiritual son of the master Pema Lingpa. He and his family used these rooms when they first came to Bhutan in 1959 after escaping the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Thuksay Rinpoche probably had nostalgic memories of this house, because even after the house had deteriorated and was in poor condition, he insisted on staying there when he came to Ogyen Choling (he last visited in 2007), calling it "my house." Because it is known as the dance house, we can assume it was built to accommodate the monk musicians and dancers when mask dances were still performed. The ground floor, which opens toward the courtyard where the dances must have been performed, was probably used as a changing room. We can imagine that the opening was closed with a curtain during performances so that the performers could dress and enter the courtyard from behind the curtain. This is still





FIGURE 5.14: *CHORTEN*, BUILT IN MEMORY OF *DZONGPON UGY-EN DORJI*

the practice in many temples and *dzongs* where mask dances are performed. When the roofs of other buildings in the complex were re-fitted with iron sheets, we chose to retain the wooden shingles in the Dance House in recognition and appreciation of the age of this building. Although the building is in need of major renovation and repairs, we plan to restore it without altering any of the original features.

Other structures and reliquaries

As children we learned to locate ourselves in the compound using existing religious structures as landmarks. These religious structures were the common Buddhist funerary and sometimes commemorative structures: *chorten* (stupa), *lu khang* (abode of subterranean spirits known as *lu* in Bhutanese and *naga* in Sanskrit), *chukor mani* (water-run prayer wheel) and *mani dangrem* (prayer wall). We also learned of the significance of each of these structures. There were some to which we felt a close and comfortable association, while we had an instantaneous ambivalence and trepidation for others. Some structures were built as memorials for ancestors or had endearing stories connected to them, but others were the abodes of dubious spirits and had to be treated with a caution and respect often verging on fear. Still others were the homes of spirits who possessed the dual personalities of *neypo*, host, and *du*, demon (in Bumthangkha, *neypo ning dud shratpala*, host and demon mixed). They were the ones we really dreaded and kept away from as far as possible. These spirits are extremely sensitive. Any human behaviour they perceived as harmful, such as urinating in

their premises, cutting down plants or trees, or simply walking past them, could be the cause for strong retribution that could result in illness or even death.

Entering the village from the southeast side, one must pass by the most important water-run *chukor mani*. This was the main place for collecting water for the entire village before the introduction of piped water in the 1980s. Anyone coming to the village had to pass by the water spout that comes out of the *chukor mani*. The original water spout was a hollowed-out tree trunk that bifurcated, with the water flowing out of two phallus-shaped spouts; the phallus is a widely used symbol of auspiciousness and also a symbol to ward off malicious gossip. The tired traveller would gratefully drink the water from here and refresh himself or herself by washing at the spout. Visitors were greeted here by the villagers, who were invariably there collecting water for their kitchens, washing their clothes or bathing. Farmers would come to the water spout to wash themselves after their day in the fields and let their cattle drink from the pool below the spout. The large stone ledge built around the front part of the *chukor mani* serves as a table for placing the water-carrying utensils or simply for sitting on and watching people or socializing with those who came to use the water. Directly above this *chukor mani* is a replica of it. We are told that this was built by *Trulku* Nuden Dorji in memory of his brother and sister-in-law, my parents. Further up is another *chukor mani* of smaller size. This may have been the earliest of the three *chukor mani*, and the houses located near this one are identified as those near the *zarkhang*, or water spout. In my earliest memories in the 1950s, every morning the temple caretakers had to

collect water from this spout to be offered in the temples.

If you turn left toward the *nagtshang* once past the main water spout, you will see a group of religious structures. The first is a relatively small *mani dangrem*, followed by a *chorten* and a bigger *mani dangrem*; all three were built as memorials to ancestors of the *nagtshang*. These structures may actually be older than the *nagtshang* itself. The last in this line of structures is a *chorten* built in the late 1980s by the present generation in memory of the two uncles, *Dasho Ugyen Wangdi* and *Trulku Nuden Dorji*

Once inside the *nagtshang* courtyard, you will see two structures located between the *tsug lhakhang* and the *chamkhang*; these are a *jangchuk chorten*, built in memory of an ancestor. Originally this type of *chorten* was built to commemorate Shakyamuni's defeat of the temptation and attack by Mara. Next to it is a memorial *chorten* built in the late 1960s for our parents by *Trulku Nuden Dorji*.

Coming through the *nub go* (west door), the *Lhamoi chorten* – sometimes called the *Lama chorten* (See chapter 2: The lama and choeje families of Ogyen Choling) – is located in the compound under a pear tree. At the boundary of the compound is the most beautiful *chorten*, built in memory of *Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji*. Elders say that this *chorten* was originally located on a spur that dips down into the valley, but that it was shifted to its present site about 70 years ago. Because the reliquary objects inside the *chorten* were considered quite exceptional, concerns over its security were one of the main reasons for its move. Sadly,

there is a thriving and hungry international market for Buddhist antiques and artefacts, making *chorten* vandalism a looming reality; we worry constantly over our *chorten's* safety. As has happened to scores of *chortens* in Bhutan, thieves may break into the structures to steal the precious artefacts, which can be statues, personal belongings of the deceased, eating utensils and jewellery, including the rare and highly prized etched agate known as *dZi*.

Toward the north of the village, near the cremation gorge, is another *jangchuk chorten*, built by one of the most respected religious personalities in the village, *Lopon Tseten*, who died in the 1970s. *Lopon Tseten* was a gentle lay monk who was wise and learned; he served as the village astrologer for a long time. He also was a teacher to the *nagtshang* family for two consecutive generations. Although he did not actually instruct us, our parents invited him as a guest during the ceremony on the day when we received our first lessons. As a gesture of goodwill and continuity, he wrote the alphabets on folios for each child to learn.

Lu Khangs: Visible homes for invisible spirits

The small, house-like structures made of stone and mud, and painted white with a band of red around the top part, are the homes of the subterranean spirits known as *lu*. The structures, if not the spirits, share the same space as human beings, so their presence is always conspicuous in villages across



FIGURE 5.15: LU KHANG

Bhutan. In Ogyen Choling there are several such structures in and around the *nagtshang* compound, as well as in the village. As soon as you enter the main gate of the *nagtshang*, *lu khangs* are visible near the wall outside the main temple. The one under the evergreen tree (*Euonymus* species) is relatively small, but its *lu* is still powerful and commands respect. Some years ago, while the temple roof was being changed from wood shingles to iron sheets, a stone accidentally fell on the *lu khang* and broke a part of the roof. Soon afterward, the temple caretaker became very ill and the divinations pointed out that the *lu* was angered because its abode had been damaged. The temple caretaker was being held responsible for the desecration, and he began to recover only

after he repaired the damaged roof, painted the *lu khang* and carried out propitiations. Not far from this is another *lu khang* under a giant oak tree. Although this *lu khang* is well-protected by the tree, anxiety is always high at the time of the annual flag-hoisting ceremony when the big *lhadar* is taken down and raised again. With the smallest misstep, the *lhadar* could brush against the oak tree and damage the *lu khang*. In front of the eastern side of the *shagkor*, under another oak tree, is yet another *lu khang*. At one time there was even a *lu khang* actually housed in the oak tree. The structure, constructed at a fork in the tree, gradually got destroyed as the tree grew. This particular *lu* is said to have followed one of the brides who came to Ogyen Choling, but the resident *lu* did not allow it space on the ground, so its abode had to be lodged in the tree.

Further south from here, under an enormous pine tree, is a small *lu khang* – the home of a particularly ferocious *lu*. There is perpetual dampness around the base of the tree, and we were told that this is because there is a pool of water underneath which is the *latsho*, or water of life, for the *lu*. This *lu* is territorial and was thought to be antagonistic to human settlements near it. Some years ago, in an attempt to find out the age of the trees in the compound, we took a sample from the blue pine under which the *lu khang* is located. The age of the tree was determined to be about 270 years. Intriguingly, the unwary dendrologist became very ill soon after the exercise, and he declared he would not touch another tree in the compound. The *lu* probably thought that the act of drilling into his tree was a gross intrusion into his habitat.

Some distance to the west is yet another *lu khang* dedicated to a malevolent spirit known as a *lu dus*. This *lu khang* is located in a sparse forest of oak trees. Being of a malevolent nature, it is often viewed with apprehension and animosity, as it is believed to cause illnesses in people and cattle. Any form of desecration to this *lu* causes serious illnesses among the villagers. Sometimes, when there is an illness in the family, villagers come to check the area around the *lu* to see if it has been desecrated in any way, either intentionally or inadvertently. Bones of animals may be found near the *lu khang*. These are taken to be the main pollutants and must be removed.

The largest and most detailed *lu khang* is in the compound near the main temple. It has special significance, as this *lu* was closely linked to Tsokye Dorji. According to Bhutanese cosmology, every human being is a gift to the human world from the world of spirits of the sky, earth or subterranean elements. Tsokye Dorji was believed to have come from the subterranean world, with links to the *lu*. According to a legend, when Tsokye Dorji came back to Ogyen Choling from a trip outside the valley, he was greeted by a woman at the water spout who said, “You are the son of the *lu*,” and then disappeared. Thus, Tsokye Dorji, who had been previously known as Wangchen Dorji, came to be popularly known as Tsokye, which had a direct reference to *tso*, meaning a lake or a pool of water. As a sign of this connection, it is said that a pool of water used to instantaneously form wherever he was; for example, one story tells that when he became governor of Trongsa in 1850, a pool formed in the Mangde River. Pools of water are considered to be the natural habitat of the *lu*, and the pool of water was thus

his *latso*.

At the time of Tsokye Dorji’s death at Ogyen Choling, where he had lived after his retirement, it is said that the *latso* in the courtyard of the temple moved under the present temple and is no longer visible, although people have insisted that they sometimes heard the sound of the water under the temple. As a mark of their belief in and respect for this legend, his descendents have built a home for the *lu* in the courtyard in front of the temple. Within the *lu khang* is a large container filled with water. The container of water represents the original pool. This *lu*, like most others in the compound, belongs to the category of benevolent subterranean spirits, or *lumo karmo*, givers of wealth and health and protectors of those who propitiate and worship her.

Lastly, there also is a *lu khang* in the *utse*, inside one of the granaries on the ground floor. I have a vague memory of the story of its origin; long ago, in the place where the *lu khang* is now, a white snake was often sighted. With the understanding that snakes are personifications of the *lu*, a home was built on the spot where the snake was usually seen. Although the story seems like a fantastic tale, ever since I can remember I have always felt some trepidation and anxiety on entering that particular granary. There is certainly some inexplicable presence in this room.

The buildings that have disappeared

Whenever I try to picture the home I left behind in 1962, two buildings on the eastern side, in

front of the *shagkor*, appear vividly in my mind. These buildings were probably torn down shortly after Picture 5.15 was taken in 1978. I am tempted to draw a correlation between the dwindling powers of the *nagtshang* family and the shrinking number of buildings in the compound. The untimely demise of my parents, which coincided with the momentous social reforms in the country, left Ogyen Choling without anyone with the necessary will or wherewithal to steer it through its changing circumstances. Those were the most difficult years in the modern era for Ogyen Choling. Both our parents had died, and the inheritors of the property, my brothers and I, were still minors in schools in India. Ineptitude and apathy became the order of the day. Buildings were often repaired by using materials from other buildings. The villagers too took advantage of the circumstances: stone walls that surrounded the property were dismantled and the stones taken away to construct houses in the village.

The two buildings that no longer exist consisted of the common kitchen (*mang thabtsang*) and a room for cooking grains for fermentation (*kham thabtsang*). The *kham thabtsang* also doubled as a bath house. Large cauldrons made from brass and copper were used for heating water, and a wooden tub would be placed near the stove. Family members bathed in the wooden tubs in front of a blazing fire. When I close my eyes and think of our baths, I can still feel the heat of the almost-boiling water and see the blaze

of the fire as we were given the most thorough and pore-tingling scrubbing by the attendants. Such thorough baths were necessitated by their infrequency. Next to this room were a distillery and a storage room for alcohol. This room also was used for storing the barrels in which the grains were allowed to ferment. Immediately next to the storeroom was the family kitchen.

Having the family kitchen so far from the living quarters would have posed logistical problems, but the fear of fire made it necessary. Attached to the kitchens were store rooms that were nearly always empty; all rations and ingredients for each meal were issued from stores in the main house on a daily basis. The stewardship of the storekeeper, or *nyerpa*, was supervised by the mistress of the house.

The second building that is no longer there was the *tarey*, or stable. My brother Ugyen Rinzin's fondest memories are of the horses in the stable. He still nostalgically recalls: "The horses could be seen as I looked out of the east-facing window of the *shagkor*. It was a building with a loft where the hay for the horses was stored, and from where the hay could easily be dropped into the wooden troughs for horses. The stable had only partial walls, so they could be seen directly from the window. Only the ridinghorses were kept there, tethered for the night. The pack horses were kept in the pastures, and only brought home when they were needed. The stable boys had to bring the

horses every morning to the front of the house, and they were harnessed to the wooden pegs in the walls. Our father either supervised from the window or personally groomed them regularly. He loved the horses, and took great joy in their grooming and pride in their pedigree and appearance. During the day, the horses were taken to the nearby meadows unless they were required for riding. Quite frequently, father and some of the attendants rode the horses and raced them. He did this to keep them healthy and in good shape with the proper exercise.”

At some distance from the horse stable was a house with four rooms, sometimes used by visiting relatives and at other times as a weaving house. Between the kitchen structures, the stable and the *shagkor* was a patch of land used as a garden for both vegetables and flowers. Our parents had made a stone pathway fenced on both sides with bamboo matting. This pathway led directly to the private family kitchen. The common kitchen and the alcohol distillery rooms could be accessed from the north side.

The mortar shed (*tsom brang*): This shed was located in the west field (*nobgothang*) under the cypress tree. In this shed was a row of about 6 to 8 wooden mortars. The workers had to come in the early pre-dawn hours with their wooden pestles to pound the paddy into rice. This shed disappeared, as did so many other structures in the compound, without being noticed.

The manure shed (*yudbrang*): This shed was close to the west end of the *shagkor*. It was filled with manure from the horses and sheep, which was used for fertilizing the garden but also for fermenting the dye baths for colouring fibres, especially wool. Holes were dug into the manure pile, and cauldrons containing the dye baths were buried in them. The constant heat from the manure helped the fermentation process.

On the spot where the guest house is today, we have been told, there used to be a large three-storied building made of rammed earth. This was the residence of Tsundrue Gyaltshen. After his death during the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1865, it probably fell into a state of neglect and was later abandoned. Later, it was used as a stable for mares until it was completely torn down.

In mapping the buildings of Ogyen Choling, we felt it was important to also say something of the buildings and structures that occupied the space during different times but have now disappeared. According to the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence, everything is transitory. Even at Ogyen Choling, we are reminded of the truth of impermanence, and the constantly changing nature of life, through the disappearance of the buildings and structures in the complex.





