

the iconography of chiwong gomba

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This simple descriptive paper is offered in the interest of all the visitors - scholarly, local, or curious - to the old but still very active monastery of the southern Solu region, Chiwong Gomba.¹ Although primarily intended as a take-along guide to that most striking, but often least understood, feature of the monastery, its paintings, let me first frame this paper with a brief description of the monastery in its setting.

The Sherpa residents of Solu call this monastery Chiwong Tela (Upper Chiwong") to distinguish it from the village of Chiwong below. At 9685 ft., the monastery stands on top of a dramatic cliff overlooking a large part of the Bene and Solu river valleys. Bare rock and tall evergreen trees provide an effective setting. The main gomba sits over the sheerest part of the cliff where it commands a wide sweep of the countryside below. This gomba contains the gomba proper and a large paved courtyard that lies to the cliffside of the main gomba entrance. The gomba is itself an impressive structure: everywhere two full (and in places even three) storeys high. Most of the ground floor is occupied by the main altar room. Upstairs there are several other rooms: another altar room, the high lama's receiving room, and the Protector's room (generally not open to casual visitors, and never to women). Overlooking the courtyard is a balcony ornamented with 100 running-feet of religious paintings.

Most of the male recluses' residences are outside the main gomba building, which they face from a respectful distance to the right and to the rear. Substantial and attractive, but sadly vacant and falling into disrepair, these residences are clustered on the steep hillside and bordered by vegetable and flower gardens. From the front of the main gomba a wide trail winds down to the valley below. On the steep terrain its switchbacks form a series of distinct levels in the approach to the monastery. On the first level below the gomba are a few more male monastics' houses, the large main-wheel house with the house of its female monastic custodian, and the spacious but unused schoolhouse. From this level a gate and a set of stairs lead down to the next level. Here there is a large stone-walled pen for the monastic herd to the right of the trail and a small house built in the center of the trail to hold the molded clay tokens placed there to protect the health of the person for whom they were offered. Farther down the winding trail are the female monastics' houses, small wooden cabins clustered about the collapsing house of the monastery's founder. This means they are also near his private gomba, which, if not lavishly refurbished, has a new roof, is kept clean, and is where the female recluses primarily study and worship. Here

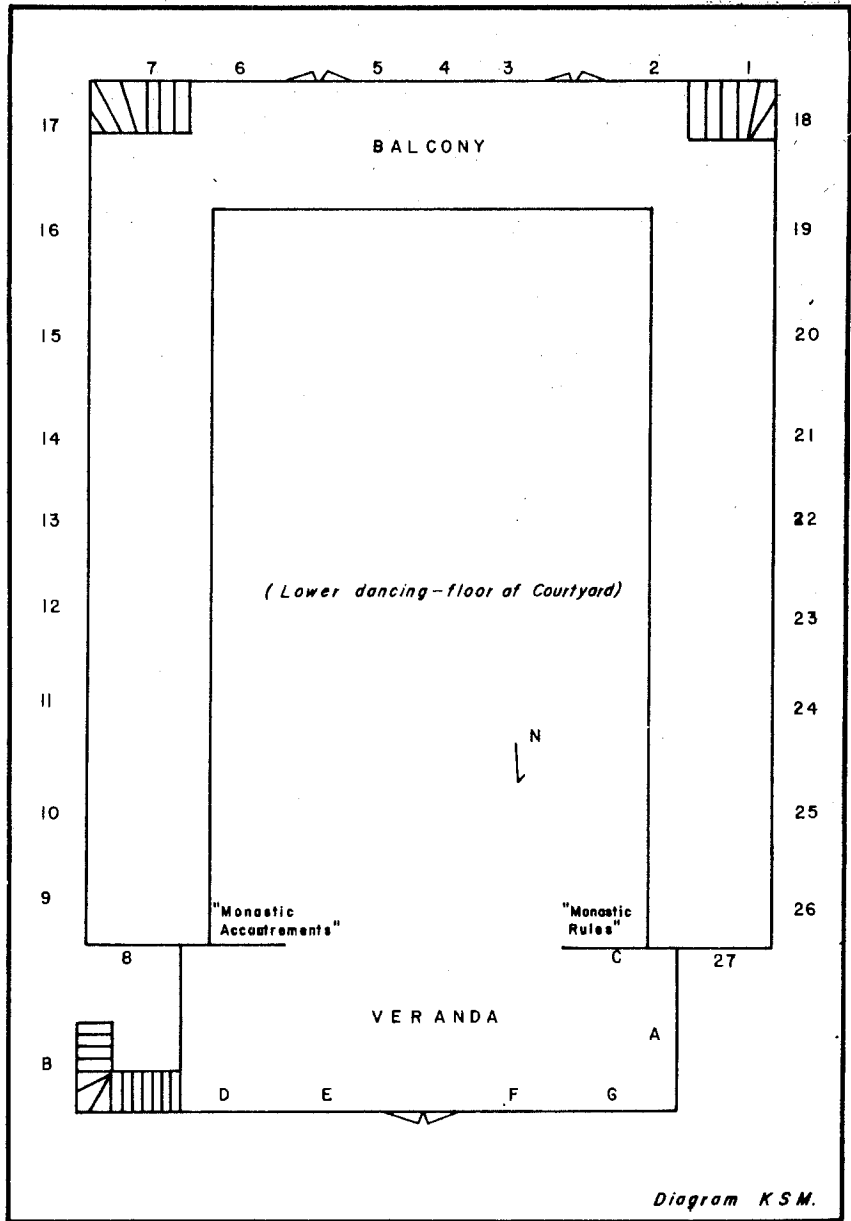
there is another large main-wheel. It is old and dilapidated, but can still be circumambulated, and it too serves the women's community. Near the main gate stands an old stone choten. Together they are the first glimpse one gets of the monastery when approaching it from the valley below. The monastic lands extend beyond the area described here. In fact, the lands given to the monastery are quite extensive. Besides providing the monastery with firewood and grazing lands, they contain other sites of great importance to the gomba, such as the spring on the slopes below where the Main-rimdu tormas are disposed of and, high on the rocks above, the cremation grounds.

The whole scene, from the stark white choten at the main gate, past the great gomba, to the prayer flags fluttering at the very top of the mountain, derives its order not from the laws of geometry but from the seep of the land, punctuated by the shifting mists. When the monks stand on the top of the gomba roof and sound their fifteen-foot brass and copper horns, the monastery has a romantic dignity that is at the same time removed from and yet attending to the Sherpa scene below.

The original work on the paintings was done in 1924 A.D. under the patronage of the monastery's founder and first sponsor, Sange Lama, of Phaplu's powerful lama clan segment. The paintings themselves were done by Kapa-s Omdze Nuri of Pikyongma (between Chiwong and Phaplu) and Pouri of Pangkarma (above Junbesi).

The paintings inside the main gomba is protected from the worst weather and, although darkened and worn somewhat by age, is still the work of those initial painters.³ Those on the walls of the veranda and balcony around the main courtyard must withstand weather changes directly. The severity and speed of such changes is exacerbated by constant air turbulence caused by the Chiwong cliff and by the tendency of the rough-plastered walls themselves to sweat beneath the paint's varnish. As a result, these paintings have had to be replaced three times. The first two repairs were both executed under the direction of one of the original painters, Kapa Pouri. The most recent restoration was done in 1974 by Kapa Pagyeldzin of Pangkarma who also did much of the painting at Thubten Chosling (the monastery above Junbesi) and is Solu's most highly respected living painter.

Repair work, besides restoring the beauty of the monastic paintings, is an important source of religious merit and social prestige for all involved, but especially for the main patron or sponsor. In 1974, it cost Tsering Tenzing Lama, also of Phaplu's ascendant lineage, 12,000 rupees to pay and feed the painters and assistants, and to keep them supplied with tea and paints over a period of several months. The finest work is that of the raised veranda at the entrance to the main gomba; it alone took six people two months to complete.

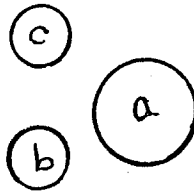


The monastic paintings are not, however, simply an exercise of skill on the part of highly trained painters or of power on that of the wealthy and prestigious patrons. The paintings themselves are not mere representations of divinities of the Solu Sherpa pantheon, but are, in fact, embodiments of those divinities. Their restoration is thus a rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the divine presence in the monastery. Before they can be effaced and once again after the new work has been completed, a mirror is held up in front of each painting as part of a ritual insuring that the divinities embodied therein will not depart from their representations.

The diagram presented here represents the courtyard of the monastery. Each of the paintings is numbered and will be identified in sequence below. Names are given as pronounced in contemporary Sherpa⁴ with parenthetical recognition of Tibetan names and transliteration⁵ where possible.

On the south wall of the upper balcony over the main entrance from the cliffside into the courtyard:

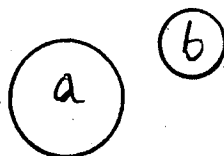
1. Three divinities:



- a. Yul lha: The territorial divinity of Numbur (22,825 ft), the western of the two primary peaks of the Womi Tso (Dudh Kund) Himal, visible from much of Solu, and worshipped in Kangsung to protect herds and household. Also called Tashi panjing by the Tschipsung Lama of Chalsa, yul lha actually being a whole class of divinities. Solu Sherpas, however, seldom refer to the number divinity any other way.
- b. Chhu tsing: The territorial divinity of the Womi Tso, the 'Milk Lake' at the base of the Himal above Solu, worshipped annually on the full moon of Sawan or (Janai Purnima). Mounted on a kLu, she is also called Jomo tungnung karmu.
- c. Jam-yang: Tibetan Buddhist god of knowledge with the flaming sword that cuts through ignorance. (Tib. 'jam-pahi dbyans).

2. Lhamu nurkyima.

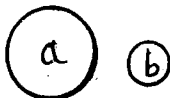
3. Tsong-go gwozin: A Gelugpa lama whose books are said to have been thrown out of his monastery by the Chinese only to have flown miraculously back to their original place to await the return of their master.
4. Sakya tubpa: The historical Buddha. (Tib. bc'om-ldan-'das).
5. Guru Rinpoche: The great saint of Tibetan Buddhists, also called Guru Padmasambhava 'lotus self-born', Lo-pon 'teacher', and Uryen or Uryen Rinpoche after the place of his birth.
6. Dzambala: Called the Buddhist Harica and portrayed always with a mouse.
7. Two divinities:



- a. Dala datak karwu: Local divinity portrayed mounted on a horse and worshipped primarily in the Sang, a ritual of purification performed preparatory to any major undertaking of religious significance including marriage and house-building.
- b. Dol-jang: Green Tara, one of the two forms of Dolma or Tara, associated with Chenrezig or Avalokita.

On east side Wall:

8. Sangye dorje chhang: Vajradhara, 'holder of the thunder-bolt.' (Tib. rDorje chang).
- 9-16. The eight forms of Guru Tsenge: Padmasambhava's eight manifestations, painted in series with smaller figures in between, thus:



- 9.a. Guru Pemadzikne Hsilchoke variant of manifestation elsewhere. (Tib. pad-ma 'byun^o gnas)?
- b. Chenrezig: The great bodhisattva Avalokita. (Tib. spyan-ras-gzigs).

10. a. Guru Padmasambhava.
b. Dol-jang.
11. a. Guru Nyimawoser: 'sun-ray' (Tib. nyi-ma 'od-zer).
b. Chenrezig.
12. a. Guru Sakye: variant elsewhere called Sakye senge, (Tib. sakya seng-ge), 'lion of the Sakyas'.
b. Dorje sampa: Vajrasattva.
13. a. Guru Padmagelwu: 'lotus-king' (Tib. pad-ma rgyal-po).
b. Chaktur: Changma dorje or Vajrapani (Tib. p'yag-na rdor-je).
14. a. Guru Ludingchosing: 'thoughtful coveter of the best' (Tib. blo-ldan mchog-sred).
b. Chaktur.
15. Guru Senge Datuk: 'roaring lion' (Tib. seng-ge sgra-sgrogs).
16. Dorje Tulu: 'adamantine sagging belly'⁶ (Tib. rdor-je grod-lod).
17. Chaktur: Changma dorje or Vajrapani.

On west side Wall:

18. a. Tu-kar.
b. Lhamo Yangjomma: Goddess of wisdom (Tib. Yan^o c'an-ma).
19. Lhamo Yangjomma.
20. Chham-pa: The future Buddha, Maitreya. (Tib. Byams-pa).
21. Jam-yang.
22. Chham-pa.
23. Chenrezig.
24. Senge mela.

25. Mitukpa: Celestial Buddha of the east, Akshobhya. (Tib. mi-skyod-pa).
26. Sangye Wopogme: Celestial Buddha of the west, Amitabha. (Tib. 'od-pag-med).
27. Dorje Sempa: Vajrasattva.

Two front paintings to right and left of main veranda:

To left: "Monastic rules".

Above: Rules regarding acceptable places to sit, places to hang clothing, etc. Note that the very uppermost row pictures what should not be done, while the second row shows how it should be done.

Below: Rules regarding gomba construction and proper monastic housing.

Bottom and lower right side: Instructions on the right ways to sit to meditate, including how to keep from dozing (such as having an assistant equipped with a poker or pacing back and forth holding onto a meditation bar) and what to do for aching legs (such as the various positions for stretching the legs).

To right: "monastic accoutrements".

Instructions for the proper forms and kinds of meditation bars, water filtering devices, shoes, tea-cups and -strainers, clothing and blankets.

On the veranda at the entrance to the main gomba:

- A. Sipa kolo: The well-known representation of the 'wheel of life' showing, at the center, the three roots of evil and causes of rebirth, represented by pig, bird and snake; then six wedges showing the six possible realms of rebirth (from the top clockwise): that of the gods (Sherpa Lha-yul), of the titans (Sherpa Lha-ma-yin), of the spirits (Sherpa Thun-di-yul), hell (Sherpa Nye-li-tho-wa), of animals (Sherpa Lhaam), and of humans (Sherpa Mi-yul); ringed by illustrations of the twelve symbolic stages of life (Sherpa Ten-til-chhik-nyi).
- B. Timbu namshi: Illustration of cooperation showing a bird perched on a hare, sitting on a monkey, sitting on an elephant, each the respective incarnations of (top to bottom) Chomden, Shariphu, Mangal, and Kungawa, who figure in popular religious stories.

C. Mi-tse-ring: The 'long-life man' of one of the most popular acts in the annual Mani-rimdu festival, here represented with the five other forms of long-life: deer, water, bird, cliffs, and trees.

D-G. The fierce protectors of the four directions, collectively called the Gelcchen geshi (Tib. rgyal-c'en de-z'i) and, although in Tibetan each has a distinctive name, Sherpas commonly refer to them simply as:

D. Chang-gi gelwu: 'king of the north'

E. Shar-ki gelwu: 'king of the east'

F. Lho-i gelwu: 'king of the south'

G. Nup-ki gelwu: 'king of the west'.

Rather than belabor either the beauty of monastic painting or the inaccessibility of its meaning in simple terms for non-Tibetan scholars, this paper should end here-in the hopes that for some perhaps, this brief exposition has been informative without being confusing, and for others, at least, a shorthand reference to the organization of the divinities with whom they are already more familiar than I represented at one of Nepal's active monasteries.

Footnotes

1. Spelled Jiwong and described by Snellgrove (1957). He gives the literal transliteration as spyi-dbang and translates it as "universal consecration." Dbang may also be translated as 'power' or, loosely, 'power-bestowing blessing.'
2. Based on Tyssen House (Fritz Thyssen Stiftung) maps.
3. The paintings of the interior of the gomba have been described in detail by Snellgrove (1957). They will not be discussed further here.
4. Sincere thanks to the Gyeken of Chiwong Monastery, whose knowledge of the paintings he so patiently shared; any errors in the transmission of his knowledge are, of course, mine.
5. After Wadell (1939).
6. These eight translations from Snellgrove (1957).

Bibliography

Snellgrove, David L. Buddhist Himalaya: travels and studies in quest of the origins and nature of Tibetan religion. New York: Philosophical Library, 1957.

Waddell, L. Austine. The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism. Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1939.

