

# Tracing the Newārī Cultural Heritage of the Tsum Valley

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## Abstract

*This research paper documents the cultural heritages associated with Newārī art and architecture that exist in the Tsum Valley. This article plans to trace out the tangible heritages reflected in an art and architectural forms, as well as local belief and values with such tangible forms that living in the Tsumbā community. This art form shows the cultural linkage between the Newār of Nepālamandala and the Tsumbā of Tsum valley. This study also presents the expansion of Newārī art, culture and oral traditions, and explores historical accounts highlighting the direct and indirect presence of Newārs from Nepālamandala in the Tsum Valley in different purposes, remarkably as artists and traders. A key objective of this paper is to document and preserve the endangered oral tradition related to the Newā, many of which are gradually disappearing from the Tsumbā community. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that the richness of Tsum Valley in Buddhist cultural heritage underscores the significant contribution of Newār artists and traders for the enrichment that has still insufficient studies. The findings of this paper are expected to serve as a valuable reference for the future scholars and to encourage further studies in similar Himalayan Buddhist communities of different regions.*

*Keywords: Cultural heritage, Newārī art, Tsum Valley, Tsumbā community, Nepālamandala, Traders, Ranjanā Script, Buddhist Cultural heritages*

## Introduction

Tsum Valley, known as differently as a hidden valley (*beyul*), violence free (Shyagya) region is located within in the Trans-Himalayan region, middle of Himalaya range in Gorkha, Nepal. It is the last human settlement valley of Gorkha District situated in complete isolation from outer society with only one exit point connecting the boarder to Tibet. The valley is a part of *Beyul Kyimolung* which is one of seven identified *Beyul* that introduced by Guru Padmasambhava in 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that Guru Padmasambhava introduced to this be-yuls for the welfare of the future generation and safe (secured) place for the practitioners when warfare, strife and difficult circumstances arise (Bunch of Lotus 74-75).

Tsum is also a part of the sacred landscape known as *Beyul Kyimolug. Tibetan for Valley of Happiness*, or the Happy Valley. *Beyuls* are a series of hidden Shangri-Las created in the eight century by Padmasambhava himself. Ancient texts describe *Beyul Kyimolung* as being in the shape of a massive lotus flower that blooms across

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this Himalayan region (Jane 98).

The Kathmandu Valley (Nepālamaṇḍala) is also known as Bal-yul in the Tsumbā language spoken by the people of the Tsum Valley. In this context, the inhabitants of *Balyul* are referred to as *Balpo*, a term that primarily denotes the Newār people of the Kathmandu Valley. Many similarities can be found between the two valleys from multiple aspects, including spiritual traditions, the richness of living Buddhist heritage, myths, legends and cultural practices. Sufficient studies have been attempted in Newārī art, architecture, artisan in Tibet. Not only in the artists, the Newārī art and architecture also about the Newārī merchants, traders in Tibet since the early Lichchavi period.

Geographically, the valley is located just about 90 miles northwest from Kathmandu valley. The main accessible entrance from Kathmandu to Tsum valley is northern side through Tibetan land since ancient time. Trade route and pilgrimage route was through Tibet. There was geographically challenging to enter in Tsum valley from low land of southern. According to the field observation, many sayings about *Balpo*, their arrivals and art are still living in Tsum valley. The valley can be found as rich store of the Buddhist heritage but no study has been conducted yet about the Newārī heritage in Tsum valley. This study focuses on the Newārī tangible heritages and narratives about such heritages still living in the Tsumba community.

## **Literature Review**

There are several research studies previously carried out in different perspective in different subject areas. Generally, such researches have been conducted in anthropological, sociological, ethnographical, and environmental aspects. Though there are sufficient possibilities to focus on Buddhism, Buddhist Heritages, Buddhist practices, Buddhist treasures in the valley, limited studies have been done in these fields.

Scholar Nadine Platcha in her PhD dissertation, mentioned (as quoted by Ehrhard), Tsum Valley is a hidden land, which is easy to access from Tibet as it lies near the Nepal-Tibet border. The main characteristic of such a strip of land is that it can be a secure place to live in. Helambu and La-phyi are also similar hidden lands facing the border area. Similar characteristics of many hidden lands located like the Tsum valley surrounding the borderland of Nepal and Tibet are found as quoted by Ehrhard (Platcha 43).

The prominent scholar *Keith Downman* through his book *A Buddhist Guide to the Power Places of the Kathmandu Valley* has introduced Asura-yi-brag-phug as the significant cave of Yangleso where Guru Padmasambhava attempted the Vajrakīlāya (rDo-rje Phur-ba) *sādhanā*. From this *sādhanā*, illustrious Guru gained the *mahāmudrā-siddhi* destroying the obstacles and obstructive spirits (Keith 52). The scholar, Jane Marshall in her book named *Searching for Happy Valley* highlighted

the Tsum as a part of *Beyul*Kyimolung introduced by Guru Padmasambhava where he kept the sacred Buddhist treasures (Jane 98-99).

Tirtha Mishra in his book entitled *Bhotmā Nepali Pahichān ra Parākram*, describes about the appointment of the Thakālī among Newārī traders who coordinated between the representatives of Nepal Government and Newār traders (Mishra 114). He has highlighted that the Newar traders were Buddhists. Some of them were ordained monks and some *khachārā* themselves who later became monks. It was to justify that even their following generations were also ordained (108).

Harshamuni Shakya writes in his article entitled "*Bhot ra Nepal bichko Dhārmik Sambandha*", *Bhaskarvarna Mahāvihār*, 2006). He argues that King Tsrong Chen Gampo invited the Nepalese Artists, who contributed there skilled in establishing the Chuglākhāng Vihāra. In that time, there was strong friendship relation was between Nepal and Bhot. According to this articles, there were 10 thakalis, and 32 total merchants in the city of Lhasa (Shakya 31-33).

Eminent scholar in Newār Buddhism *Todd T. Lewis* who studied Newārī culture in depth, has written a book entitled *Narratives and Rituals of Newār Buddhism* (2000 A.D). He has presented the term Newārī as a modern English neologism for the Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Kathmandu Valley. He has described two emic terms preferred by Newār, i.e. *Newā: Bhaya* or *Nepal Bhasa* in Sanskrit also expresses the pre-Shah period's boundary of Nepal as the Kathmandu Valley. In this literature, the writer has presented the Newār as the exceptionally able artisans, adapting to the Indic Ideals. Their arts have beautiful expressions in the form of metal icons, stone and wood sculpture, multistory wooden architecture and painting. Since the past millennium, Newār artisans have employed across Tibet and their workshops in the valley supplied the needs of the devotional goods that accompanied the expansion of Buddhism across the Tibetan plateau (Todd 12).

Again, in similar vein, *Todd T. Lewis* writes in *A Chronology of Newār-Tibetan Relations in the Kathmandu Valley* that there seems to be a deep cultural relations between Nepal and Tibet with the changing fortunes of Buddhist tradition across the region since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. At times, Nepalese Buddhist teachers and viharas were instrumental in enriching Buddhism in the Tibetan highlands. There was a trans-Himalayan Buddhist relations built by traders, monks, artisans, and pilgrims throughout this era. The Kathmandu Valley was the corridor as an important entry and its socio-cultural evolution for the Indian and Tibetan highlanders was shaped by those who migrated from both directions (Todd 149-166).

Newār Buddhist culture in *Nepālamandala* is a well known heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. There is a long history of trade, business, pilgrimage, Buddhist art in cross

boarder and many parts of Tibet from Nepal. There are many reciprocal cultural exchanges in Tibet borderlands and *Nepālamandala*. There have been studies on social, anthropological, heritage conservation, culture and so on but no studies has been found in the *Nepālamandala* on the culture of Tsum valley. Therefore, from the point of view of this research gap, the following questions are drawn out for the setting of it's objectives.

Reviewing these various relevant literatures written by different prominent scholars, it's conclusion justifies that the rationality of this research paper and also identify the research gaps. These research gaps help to set the research problems. The literature, reviewed here has showed the relations of the Kathmandu Valley and Tibet through the Buddhist arts, traders, Guru Padmasambhava's *sāadhanā* but no literature has specifically focused from the perspectives of the Tsum Valley society and culture.

From these identified research gaps that the following research questions has been set out to be addressed in this research.

## **Research Questions**

The discussion and conclusion will provide answers to these questions for the interest of the readers at large.

- i. What are the Newārī cultural heritages of *Nepālamandala* which are existing in the Tsum valley ?
- ii. How can these heritages be categorized in terms of their types and features?

## **Research Objectives**

Based on the research questions drawn out as guided by the research gaps, major objectives of this study are set out as follows:

- i. To trace out the Newār cultural heritage of *Nepālamandala* that is existing in the Tsum valley
- ii. To analyse the impact of such an historical asset left by the Newar tangible heritage on the Tsum Valley culture.

## **Research Methodology**

This study has been conducted using the available qualitative data from the primary sources, The secondary data have also been used to support the primary sources. Study area, household Lamas, heritage conservation activist, class notes are the major sources of primary data. Furthermore, direct observation of the study area, interviews to key persons like household Lama, heritage conservation activists,

use regularly maintained field notes, notes taken from regular classes and informal communications to the local leaders are major tools used for collecting the primary data. The evidences collected from primary sources are both verbal and mute.

There are some relevant study and publications done by prominent scholars previously. From such secondary sources, the secondary data are collected. It has supported as a strong prove to make more reliability to the primary data. All collected data from both sources are qualitative in type. The collected data are presented in descriptive and analytical method. The inductive method is applied for analysing the data.

## **Limitation**

This research work is limited within the Tsum Valley of Gorkha District, specially in the upper Tsum. Though there are many oral sayings, stories found in Tumba community, this study is based on Newari types of tangible evidences and local believes and sayings related those evidences which are still can be directly observed.

## **Wooden Windows of Chi Phug Gumbā**

French scholar Sylvain Levy has presented the Newār people as a popularly skilled craftsmen in the field of wood craft, metal art, image art and also as a professional traders. The Newārs are artist by birth who adopted to the Indian art used in monasteries, royal palace and their artistic style expanded in Tibet and China. The padoda style monastery in the Bhot can be said as the vernacular unique style of Nepal. Even Christian missionaries also highly appreciated the Newār artists in the field of their artistic capability (Levi 158).

During the reign of King Tsrong Chen Gampo, Nepali princes Bhrikuti brought Mahayani Buddhist texts, the metal images of Akshobhya Buddha, Maitreya Buddha and Tara. Likewise, the begging bowl made by sandalwood. (Joshi 4) In the leadership of the famous Araniko, eighty artists visited Tibet and most of them were from Patan. The reputed city of Fine Arts, (90). Newāri art and architecture, specially the wooden art expanded in Tibet during that time. Such artistic reflection can be found used mostly in general buildings, Buddhist physical structures like stupas, monasteries and Kānīs (village entrance gate), white pagoda, the multitier monuments were constructed.

Contribution of Nepali Artisans building the Chuglākhāng monastery in the invitation of Bhot King, Tsrong Chen Gampo is one of the significant example that shows the expansion of Newāri art in Tibet. Likewise, Jhyamling Chuglākhāng, Avalokiteswora Karunāmaya monastery and pagoda style many other monasteries in Pangsing village near by Kyirong also stand as the solid examples of Nepali

Buddhist art and architectural expansion in Tibet (Shakya 31).

To come into the main topic, here are century old historical monasteries in the Tsum valley, Mu Gumbā, Rajen Gumbā, Gumbā Lungdang, Puren Phug Gumbā, Chi Phug Gumbā are examples of historically representative Gumbās. The images of Manjushree, Guru Padmasambhava, Arya Avalokiteswara, Taras are installed in the Dukhang of all these monasteries.

Interestingly, Chi Phug Gumbā which is older than thousand years has been considered as an icon of the Newāri wood art of the Tsum Valley. From the direct field observation, one can see the typical Newāri lattice window and even one entrance (door). It is completely different from other monasteries in its crafting style. Even in that two-story monastery, the style of the window is very different from each other. According to the main Lāmā of the monastery, Khangsar Lābrāng, the window was crafted by *Balpo* artist (See Photo no. 1).

According to the Lakpa Nurbu Lāmā from the upper Tsum, the window was installed later in course of it's renovation. (See note I). There was found one Newāri style wooden door during the field observation which was installed in the temporary kitchen of the monastery. According to the oral saying of the Tsumbā people, the wooden window and door were also made by the *Balpo* artists (Conversation with Lakpa Nurbu Lāmā, 15th January, 2026). In terms of style, such windows are very rare and can be found in unused condition in their private houses. From this fact, it appears that though the uses of window and door is found in the ordinary house, it can be identified as the sample of the Newāri wooden craft in Tsum valley.

## **Unique Style House of the Nile Village**

In the entire Tsum Valley, there is an unique settlement of villages and similar architectural style houses. All the houses are separate but has located near to each other. Certain households located together are similar as the settlement in different villages. Each household has a compound including the house and some wide space. Almost all the houses have only two floors - the groundfloor and first floor. Generally, the ground floor is used for animal and the upper floor is used for human settlement. All the houses are made by locally available materials like stone, wood and mud. Stone and mud used for the wall, mud and wood for the flooring of the first floor, wood for the strong pillars, wooden and flat stone in the roof.

This kind of unique style of building can be observed physically still today in Nile village, last village of the Tsum valley. According to the local people, there were few such similar structural buildings with same architectural style but only one can be seen now. According to the situation found during the field observation, the building has a completely different feature than other general houses with unique height and

materials used. The structure seems comparatively narrow but tall in height. Wood and mud has been used less in comparison to other general houses. No windows can be found in such tall houses. According to the structure of this house, it can be more or less justified by the statements of Sylvain Lévi, the Newār use to settle in tall and narrow structure with high density of population (Levi 158). Even the unique feature of traditional Newārī settlement of the Kathmandu valley justifies this value (See photo no. 2). In discussion with Nima Lama, present Chairman of the Tsum Nubri Rural Municipality, the unique house was built by *Balpo* to stay for some time while on their trading trips (See note II, as he heard from the ancestors)

Nadine Plachta says in her reserch that (she has drawn information from the local people) there was omce a big lake and it began to be covered by countless Artemisia trees and the lake gradually disappeared. The stems of those trees were used by locls as strong timber and useful for construction of buildings. It enabled them to use in the construction of tall houses in the past. According to the local people, the three-storey houses in Nile village is a remnant of those long forgotten times (Plachta 40). In other context, a three story building featuring with a shrine hall, the family's residence and storage rooms and the building is still located in the Nile village (114). That is forced by the lack ot enough timber or skill, some people resorted to continue living in the historic buildings as legacy from the past.

## **Ranjanā Script and it's Uses in *Nepālamandala***

*Māne* refers the six syllabus *mantra* in Bhot language. There is an interesting story regarding this *mantra* in the Tibetan king Lha-Tho-Thori's time, 3<sup>rd</sup> CE., cascade containing five precious things i.e. Karmasataka, Karandyabyuha sutra, golden stupa, chintāmanī dhāranī and six syllabus mantra felt down in the roof of his palace. The king saw this event in his dream that they are very precious things but the real meaning of all that things will understand by the king only his fifth generation. His fifth generation is King Tsrong Chen Gampo (Class note: MA 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Surendraman Bajracharya, TU, 2064/04/17).

There is nothing mention about the script used in that *māne mantra*. As it's significant potentiality in the field of history, culture, archaeology and others, Nepal can be regarded as high position. Different types of scripts has been developed here. Among them Ranjanā and Kutaxara scripts are popularly using in Tibet, China, Mangolia and many other countries (Joshi).

There are nine different types of script inscribed in the stone which can be considered as unique script developed in Nepal. The stone inscription of using these different scripts of Hanumandhoka palace in N.S.774 justifies that all scripts had been

developed in Nepal in the Pre-Lichchavi period (See Photo no.3). Among those script, Ranjanā also a significant one. The term Ranjanā means happy or joy (Kasaa 113). It was massively used since 11<sup>th</sup> C.E. to 18<sup>th</sup> C.E. to write the precious Buddhist texts. Popular Buddhist text like Prajnaparamita and others has been written using the gold and silver. In other aspect, it uses mostly in an auspicious action. This script seems to be used as a *mantra* in Gumbās, stupas as a *māne mantra* in sanskrit language i.e. *om ma ne padme hum*. The Buddhist text written by golden color which exhibits in Tham Bahi every year in *Gupunhi* (Janai Purnima) also written in this script (113). From this fact, it can be proved that Ranjanā script is unique script using in Newār community of *Nepālamandala*. Almost all the Himalayan monasteries in the *Nepālamandala* used the Ranjanā script in six syllabus *mantras* in the entrance gate, in the wooden pillar and wall of shrine hall. Even in the outside of the *Māne khorlo*, *Māne Lhakor* also use the Ranjanā script.

### Uses of Ranjanā Script in the Tsum Valley

Ranjanā script, a special feature of the Newar culture of Nepal is popularly used in the ancient texts, inscription in the monasteries of entire Himalayan region of Nepal through various mantras inscribing in the monasteries, stupas, *māne khorlos*, *māne dungyur*, wooden pillar, ritual objects.

There are hundreds of Ranjanā script used in the wooden pillars, and the gateway to the monasteries in Tsum Valley. There are six syllabus mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* in Ranjana script. Some monasteries have used this as a wall painting form inside the shrine hall. The local people of the Tsum valley also believe them as the auspicious symbol to the *māne mantra*. There are different materials for inscribing the mantras but meaning is same. And also in the stupas, *māne khorlo* established inside the monastery premises are also inscribed by the mantra using the Ranjanā script with Sambhota script. Though the inscribing in different ritual objects and wall painting inside the monastery, even materials also different but color is used only golden, no other colors seems (See photo no. 4).

*Mandang* also the popular Buddhist structure in Himalayan region of the Nepal. It is built in the centre of the main pathway near the villages. It divides to the pathway into two parts with different distances. People follow the spiritually established rules walking through left side. According to the local people, it was the trade route as well as pilgrimage route. Such *mandangs* are built using only stone, no other materials uses. There can be see that most of the stones using in *mandangs* inscribed the *māne mantras* using sambhota scripts' in Bhot language. Some stones inscribed by Ranjanā scripts' in Sanskrit language. In some stones, both languages' in both scripts are inscribed with artistic form (See photo no. 5).

There are numerous *māne khorlo*, *māne lhākhor māne dungyur* inside and monasteries and even the open areas in the pathways. Different types of *māne* i.e. made by mettal, wood, lather are found in the valley but objective of the *māne* and believe towards that object is not vary. Same *mantra* is inscribed in any types of *māne*. Not only outside those objectives but also even keep in it's inside, thousand times of such mantras writing in Nepali paper. Whether inscribed inside the objects or keeping inside the objects with diverse ways, the same mantras use in Ranjanā and SamBhota script (See photo no. 6).

One other important part of Buddhist heritage of the Himalayan Buddhism is *Kānī*. It has been regarded in Tsumbā community as auspicious gate to enter the village. According to the local value and belief, anybody who enter to village from southern direction need for the purifying of any negative spirit or stop to enter in the village. Similarly, one can achieve the good fortune who are going out from the village for the special purpose. There are dozens of *Kānīs* older than century, newly constructed and renovated in Tsum valley. The ceiling of *Kānīs* are richly and meaningfully painting of various Buddhist's panditas and deities. Though establishing with same objective, deities and Panditas are different (See photo no.7).

Based on these various fact and evidences in different places and Buddhist objectives, Ranjanā script as a significant heritage in *Newāri* literature in Nepalmandala is sufficiently using in Tsum valley since long time before.

## Conclusion

Though Kathmandu valley and Tsum valley are geographically not so far. Tsum valley is isolated and remote location surrounded by high Himalayan mountains and difficult to access. The continues cultural relations through the Buddhist art, architecture, Buddhist texts, scripts, expansion liberty for Newār merchants in Tibetan villages surrounding the boarder areas, well trade relations since long time before we can reach quite near of fact, Newārī traders, merchants and artists also obviously reached in Tsum valley. Wooden window and door of Chi Phug, unique architectural building of the Nile village and sayings of local people clearly support the expansion of the *Newāri* art and arrival of Newār artisans in the Tsum valley. As findings of massively using of the Ranjanā scripts inscribed the Sanskrit six syllabus mantra as inscription, paintings in monasteries, in flat stones using in *mandang*, painting as various mantras in the ceiling of the *Kānīs*, inscribed in the Buddhist objects like *māne khorlo*, *māne lhakor*, bell show the living *Newāri* cultural heritages in Tsum valley. In addition, the paintings of various mantras like six syllabus mantras and others in wooden pillars, beams, entrance of monasteries also the proves that Ranjanā scrip is popularly using in the monasteries.

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## List of related photos

Photo no. 1: Typical Newārī Style Wooden window of Chi Phug Gumbā of Tsum valley and Hanumandhoka, Kathamandu



Photo no.2: Unique building in Nile Village



Photo no.3, Stone Inscription of Hanumandhoka palace



Photo no. 4, Photo of wall painted *mäne mantra* in Ranjanā script in monastery



Photo no. 5: *Mantra* in Ranjanā script inscribed in flat stone using in *mandangs*

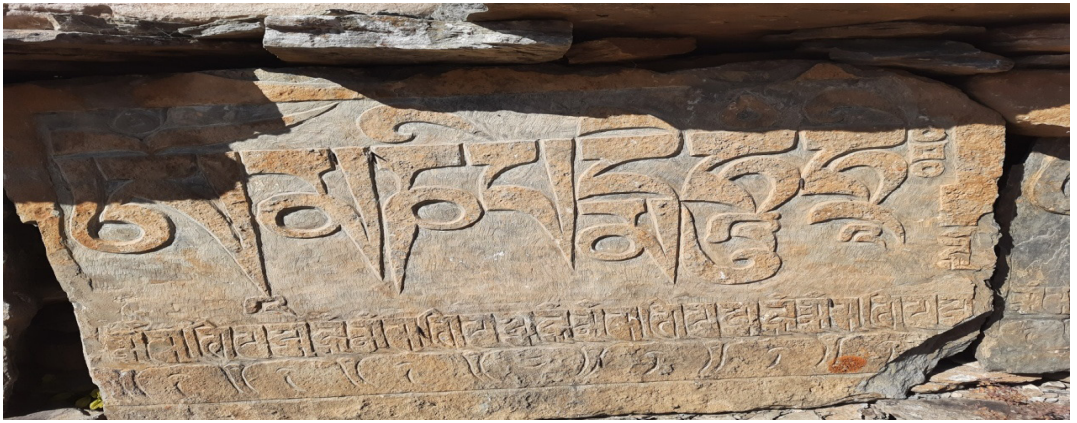


Photo no. 6: Mantra in Ranjanā script using in māne lhakor



Photo no.7: Mantra in Ranjanā script using in Kānī

