

A Study on The Monastery And Oracle of Wanla, Ladakh: A Historical And Cultural Insight

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Abstract: *One of the most important historical and architectural sites, of the most unknown era of Ladakh is the monastery of Wanla. Situated in the middle of the village on a ridge, the three-story temple, along with a fort and small chapel dedicated to the Oracle of Wanla and Guru Padamsambhava, stands. This paper examines the art and architecture of the monastery which was built in the first half of the 14th century, and explores the cultural history of the Oracle of Wanla through oral histories and folklore, which play a significant role in the spiritual practices of the village. This study is based on historical analysis, archaeological understanding, local interviews, and photographic documentation which helps us examine the relationship between material culture and oral tradition.*

Keywords: Wanla monastery, Oracle of Wanla, Art & Architecture, Oral tradition, Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

Located in Wanla village of Leh district, Ladakh, we have monastery of Wanla (of early 14th century), 11th century fort of *Lha Chen Naglug*, Chapel of Lonpo of Wanla or Oracle of Wanla and a newly placed sculpture of the Lonpo of Wanla *Tashi Norbu*. There is a saying in Ladakh that once the upper Ladakh was ruled by Gyapa Cho, while Lower Ladakh by *Bhag darSkyab*. *Bhag darSkyab* the founder of the Avalokiteshvara temple was inspired by *Lotsava Rinchen Zangpo's* establishment of Alchi, Sumda and Mangyu monasteries in Lower Ladakh and decided to built a temple inspired by them. It is also said that he even travelled to Kashmir with *Lotsava*, learned ayurvedic medicine, and became an ayurvedic doctor. The monastery serves only as a temple and does not provide monastic education like Lamayuru monastery.

The Oracle of Wanla was the prominent chief ruler of Wanla and the surrounding villages. He was a descendant of *Bhag darSkyab*, brave, honest, courageous, and intelligent. Due to his assassination, his spirit wondered, and he took the oath of not taking rebirth for 500 years and will serve the people of Ladakh in Oracle form. He still serves the land, and the tradition continues. This paper explores the art and architecture of the temple and gives importance to the living traditions of the Oracle of Wanla. The study also collects significant stories of him which are narrated by the people of Wanla village and will take you to the site through pictures of them. Here, I want to extend my thanks to the Achi Association for putting in huge efforts to conserve and restore Wanla Temple, fort, and the wall paintings inside the temple.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based mainly on ethnographic fieldwork, literature review, and photographic documentation to provide a comprehensive analysis of the historical and archaeological significance of the Wanla monastery, as well as exploring the cultural significance of the Oracle of Wanla. The interviews conducted with the locals, lamas and people associated with the monastery and Oracle of Wanla, provided, insight into the oral histories surrounding the Oracle and the religious practices associated with the monastery. In addition, proper photo documentation of the murals, paintings, religious artefacts, and architecture was taken. Further research papers and books were thoroughly reviewed and incorporated into this study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Historians such as Alexander Cunningham who have their considerable writings on Ladakh, do not discuss Wanla Monastery in their writings. They do, however, mentioned the village itself and the river of Wanla (Cunningham, 1854, pp. 21,88,151). In his works,

Cunningham talks about the physical, political, and historical history of the region and a bit of religion. This somewhat reflects that the early trend in Ladakhi historiography writing was more on the physical and political aspects of the region; and giving cultural or religious dimensions less attention.

However, there are numerous studies of A. H. Francke on Buddhism in Ladakh, its art and architecture and is also regarded as a pioneering Tibetologist for his work on the region but a very little information has been given on Wanla monastery by him, regarding Wanla his work focuses primarily on the Wanla chief/king *Lha Chen Naglung* (Francke, 1905, p. 92) and site's architectural features, according to the literature I have studied thus far of him. In the 1950s and 70s the art historians (such as Giuseppe Tucci) took keen interest in the region of Ladakh and the Western Himalayas and centred the trend around the architectural and artistic features of the sites. By the 1980s, academic research moved towards ethnography and cultural anthropology, researchers like David Snellgrove and John Crook focusses on the ritual and social functions of Buddhist monasteries in everyday life and community of Ladakh.

To have a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural, historical, and social dynamics of the region contemporary scholarship has developed into a highly interdisciplinary field, including polity, art history, anthropology, and religious studies. Now, the modern works that I am aware of and have seen studies on Wanla monastery are: Christian Luczanits in his paper *The Wanla Bkra Shis Gsum Brtsegs* which aims to emphasise the significance of Wanla monastery in the context of Western Tibet's history and art. This study attempts to provide a historical context for the temple and an overview of its art by examining its inscription and artistic decorations. Further this paper also talks about the styles and school affiliation of the monastery (Luczanits, *The Wanla Bkra Shis Gsum Brtsegs*, 2000).

Gerald Kozicz in his work *The Wanla Temple*, presents the findings of a through architectural survey. This study describes the monastery's building techniques, material composition, and structural measurements, as well as the unique geometric form of the monastery. Kozicz analyses the gumpa's original form, later modifications, and the effects of structural deformations using digital blueprints and a three-dimensional model. He also highlighted the necessity of art historical studies to precisely date and contextualize these changes (Kozicz, 2000). Another great work on the Wanla Monastery was done by the Kurt Tropper. His work *The Historical Inscription in the Gsum Brtsegs Temple at Wanla, Ladakh*, examines a significant historical inscription found in the Gsum Brtsegs Temple in Wanla. He points out that although previous research has referenced it, it has not been fully edited, translated or analyzed. Scholars such as Francke and Konchok Sonam were among the earlier researchers who worked on the inscription, but they provided unclear information. Further the paper discusses the work of Vitali and Luczanits, he also emphasizes the significance of a comprehensive understanding of the inscription's text and context, for highlighting it for studying the cultural and historical narratives of the region (Tropper, 2003).

Christian Luczanits once again came up with a proper detailed book on Wanla named *The Interior Decoration of Wanla*, in which he gave an in-depth study of the art, architecture, and religious significance of Wanla monastery, which is associated with the *Drigung Kargyu* School in Ladakh. It explores the site's interior decoration, which includes

woodwork, sculptures, murals, and its historical context. Luczanits places Wanla Gumpa in the broader tradition of Tibetan Buddhist art and highlights its religious and cultural importance through an analysis of its artwork and iconography (Luczanits, 2015).

Furthermore, Nils Martin presented a full dissertation on monuments in Wanla: *The Wanla Group of Monuments: 14th-Century Tibetan Buddhist Murals in Ladakh*. His work won 2023's Khyentse Foundation Award for an outstanding PhD dissertation in Buddhist Studies. Based on nine years of research, his work combines Tibetan literary sources, art history, iconography, and archaeometry. Martin documented many endangered sites in Wanla dating to the 14th-15th century A.D., and he also noticed that these monuments constitute a cohesive group constructed by a network of artists, influenced by the diverse teachings of the Drigung Kagyu lineage (Khyentse, 2023). Unfortunately, this dissertation is not accessible to the general public; however, Martin's under Project Himalayan Art wrote an article on Wanla Monastery under the title *A Landmark Monument in the Art History of Ladakh*. In this article, he talks about a brief history of the temple, which was constructed by *Bhak Darskya*, and explains how this monastery holds a significant historical and artistic value in Ladakh. He further added that this temple was constructed in the early 14th century and was a witness to the changing political, religious, and economic landscape of Ladakh around the first decades of the 14th century, a time in Ladakhi history that is dark or generally little known. He also discusses about the murals and iconography of the temple which reflects both Tantric and Kagyu Buddhist doctrines (Martin, 2023).

John H. Crook's paper, *The Indigenous Psychiatry of Ladakh, Part ii: Narrative and Metanarrative in the Cultural Control of Dissociative States in the Himalayas*, explores spiritual possession in Ladakh, with an emphasis on the relationship between societal control and regional spiritual customs. He examined how Tibetan Buddhist frameworks handle trance possession experiences, particularly for men. He gave the *Lonpo* of Wanla as a prime example of the study. *Wanle Lonpo*, is a historical figure in the history of Ladakh, who became a spirit and possessed men for the welfare of society. Crook claimed that people like the poor *lha.pa* elevate themselves in society by channelling the *Lonpo*, whose soul, after decades of roaming, appears through these belongings. Such ownership can elevate marginalized people but it is regulated by Buddhist rituals to preserve social order and prevent disruption (Crook, 1997).

The above literature offers a comprehensive understanding of Wanla's Monastery and Oracle, with an emphasis on the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and Kashmiri art. Scholars have extensively discussed the socio-religious context and development of monastic art and architecture. However, specific studies focusing on the unique tradition of the Oracle of Wanla remain limited, so this paper aims to add the oral narrative and history of Wanla Oracle and also highlight the art, architecture, and the artefacts present in the premises.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE WANLA GOMPA

The artworks preserved in the Wanla monastery offer important insights into how Central Tibetan Buddhist art was received and adapted in the Western Himalayas (Luczanits, 2000, p. 116). Three stories and the temple has

three niches at the back and along the sides that hold the enormous standing sculptures of the 14th century (the first half of the 14th century). The temple can be entered through a veranda at the entrance (fig.1). The second floor is similar to an open balcony with windows all over, and a small light room placed on the top of the ceiling of the second story serves as the third floor. Three large sculptures are present in the three chambers of the temple. The eleven headed form of Avalokitesvara (fig.2) stands in the middle position which is approximately 5m, on the left-hand chamber stands the Maitreya Buddha, and on the right stands the Sakyamuni Buddha. A group of small clay statues can be found on the gallery on both sides of the main image, and some contemporary sculptures are placed in front of the central image.

The murals are there in all three stories and in the niches. The murals are arranged so that, as you enter from the entrance to the back, they become more inclusive of the specific tantric element (Martin, 2023). The motifs and murals of deities are a mixture of gods that were prominent in the earlier western Himalayan monuments, along with newer iconographic themes (Luczanits, 2000, p. 119). The eleven-headed with thousand arms Avalokitesvara is depicted on the wall, with the hands displaying various characteristics and gestures. Tantric elements, assemblies, and sexual unions of the deities are also shown. Further, eight forms of Padmasambhava and eight pronouncements, mandala of the deity Chakrasamvara (fig.3), one thousand images of various masters and disciples of the Drigung branch of the Kagyu tradition (Tonyot, 2023). As noted by Nils Martin, the paintings in Wanla Temple show a shift in art from being influenced by Kashmiri traditions to begin influenced by Central Tibetan styles.

The temple also has a comprehensive inscription (fig.4) describing the history of its construction. According to this inscription, the castle of Wanla existed prior to the foundation of the temple, and it was the residence of a minister's four sons. It also states that the eldest *Bhag dar Skyab* laid the foundation of the temple (Luczanits, 2000, pp. 116-117) and his youngest son was instructed by the Drigung monastery's authorities (Petech, 1978). The inscription elaborates that the artwork in the temple includes all aspects of Buddhist teachings and deities both old and new, displayed on the walls.

The outer structure of the Wanla gompa appears similar to the Alchi *Sumtsek* (the three-story temple), but its iconography, architectural conception, and the style of its artwork differ to a large extent (Martin, 2023). The architectural characteristics suggest that the Wanla Temple underwent gradual transformation over several decades, evolving from a single-story building to its final shape. This illustrates how temples in the Himalayas are modified to meet changing religious and artistic influences (Pabel, 2014, pp. 318-337).



Fig.1: Front side of the 3-story temple

ORACLE OF WANLA

There is limited documented research on Wanla Oracle or Wanle Lonpo, unlike the extensive studies on other oracles of Ladakh such as the Matho Oracles the *Rongbtsan dkar and dmar* (*Rongbtsan dkar* white and red Oracles) and Oracle *Taklha Wangchuk*. Most knowledge about the Wanla Oracle is preserved through oral traditions and legends, and the majority of my research on the Oracle of Wanla is based on interviews and oral narratives collected from the residents and lamas of Wanla Village.

The Oracle of Wanla, *Tashi Nurbu Dadul Wangchuk*, was the descendent of the Chief of Wanla *Bhag dar Skyab*. He is said to have lived contemporary to King *Jamyang Namgyal* (16th century) (Namgyal, 2024). He took control of Wanla Village and became its Lonpo (Chief) in the 15th century, as mentioned in an article by Reach Ladakh (Dolma, 2024, p. 1). According to Morup Namgyal, there are no ancient written sources mentioning the Wanla Oracle, but oral history and folklore strongly affirm his existence and also states his coeval to *Jamyang Namgyal*.

Several stories surround Wanla Oracle. Mr. Morup narrated that Wanle Lonpo once met a high priest and prayed for knowledge, wisdom, and power. His wish was granted and even his horse gained the ability to fly. Using this power, within hours, he used to reach Taru village, where on a big rock he grew coriander on the rock, from sand using his power and ate it with *Kholak* (Ladakhi staple food), fed his horse, and then flew to Leh and returned within a day (in Tibetan Tantric practice, it is called Swift-footedness).

Tashi Dorjay, an elderly villager, was kind enough to help me. Maymay lay patiently listens to me and agreed to give me an interview for the paper. He recalled a story passed down by his grandfather and narrates: Lonpo Tashi Nurbu was brave, wise, and full of courage. Once he embedded his sword into a pillar during a meeting at the Leh palace, and then sat down on the blade. Maymay Tashi narrated another incident or story related to the demise of Lonpo; he stated that when Lonpo was in Nubra valley, he entered a meditative state and left his body temporarily. When his soul returned to the body, he saw that his head had been cut by someone, and he could not return to it. He then vowed not to take rebirth but to serve the people as an oracle for 500 years.

Furthermore, I managed to interview *Lama Deldan Namgyal* of Wanla Hinju. He narrated a story different from what everyone was saying, he said, once *Tokdan Rinpoche* (head of *Drigung Kagyu* lineage for Ladakh) was going to Photaksa from Tibet, on his way he met the spirit of Wanle Lonpo. Seeing the spirit, *Rinpoche* comes down from the horse to greet Lonpo's spirit. He was also accompanied by an elderly person, when *Rinpoche* requested him to come and meet the Lonpo, he refused to come down from his horse; this made Lonpo furious and threw the person from his horse. *Rinpoche* calmed Lonpo's spirit and instructed him to protect and help people of Ladakh in need, and he will be given daily offerings by the people of Wanla, and a chapel was built for him. From then onwards he served people of Ladakh in the form of an Oracle when in need. *Lama Deldan Namgyal* also told me a story related to his demise, once Wanle Lonpo was taken to Nubra to accompany the king for war. Reaching Nubra, the king deceived him and left him in the Kuri village of Nubra in a poor household and took his horse. Wanle Lonpo *Tashi Nurbu* thought that until the king comes back, he will go in deep meditation and will go to meet *Singye*

Chogyal by leaving his soul from the body and will come back in no time. He handed the body to the people of the house in which he was living and told them to take care of it until he returns, that is for seven days. When his soul came back in search of the body, he sees that his head was cut out from the body and was placed in a stupa of Kuri by the king of Ladakh, and his horse was buried under Koyak bridge in Nubra.

I had some more interviews with the locals, but most of them were saying or narrating the same stories related to the Oracle of Wanla. Additionally, I learned that earlier the oracle takes the body of an elderly named Tubzi Norphel, and after him Padma Churup was blessed with this power. The Oracle is called only when people need help and protection. Apart from the oral narratives, we also have the statue of WanleLonpo (fig.4) in the chapel, holding the sword of Manjushri in the right hand and a bow and arrow in the left hand, sitting on his horse. There is also a stone in the temple which is regarded as his cap. On the right of his temple a chapel of Guru Padmasambhava is newly built.

CONCLUSION

The perspectives of the local community, who have been the custodians of these traditions for generations, have played a key role in shaping our understanding of how the monastery continues to function as a living spiritual centre. It is fascinating to see how a temple built by *Bhag dar Skya* and his descendent still being worship, demonstrating the lasting importance of their legacy as well as the role of the temple as a place for spiritual devotion. The continued worship reflects the link between historical lineage, architectural history, and the present religious practices, this also shows how history continues to have a significant impact on the present.

Lastly, the Oracle of Wanla is quite different from other major Oracles in Ladakh, as most of them are protective deities but Wanla's Oracle is a spirit of a Chief of Wanla who made his last testament to not take rebirth for 500 years and would serve the people of Ladakh in need, the tradition of Lonpo appearing in Oracle form continues till date. His 16 ft. high statue was newly installed at Wanla Monastery and was inaugurated and blessed by *Chetsang Rinpoche* on 10th June 2024. The statue symbolizes courage, integrity, strength, and wisdom, honouring the legacy of *Lonpo Tashi Norbu Dadul Wangchuk*.

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Note: All pictures are taken by the author



Fig.2: Eleven Headed Avalokitesvara



Fig.3: Mandala of the deity Chakrasamvara



Fig.4: Inscription



Fig.5: Statue of WanleLonpo or oracle



Fig.6: Fort of *Bhag dar Skya* 11th century



Fig.7: Rangion (naturally made) cap of lonpo