

Have we missed the chance to read Pagar's books?

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An old local saying in lower Thimphu valley goes: “Don’t read the books of Pagar temple, don’t beat the drums of Tshamdrak and don’t blow the horns of Chizhi temple.” (*Pagar gonpai cho ma lhag, tshamdrak gonpai nga ma dung, chizhi gonpai dung ma phu*). The proverb sums up the strengths and specialisations of these three main monastic establishments and its purport is to not compete with these temples in their respective expertise. The art of drum making was Tshamdra’s strength. Beside, the temple also claims to have a special drum which was discovered as treasure by its foremost hierarch Ngawang Drukpa (1682-1748). Chizhi, the Sakya establishment, possesses a set of large ritual horns, also believed to have been extracted as a treasure in Dagana. It excelled in the art of blowing the horns.

The strength of Pagar temple, which was tragically destroyed by fire this week, was its production and recitation of books. Since the days of its founder, Kuenga Gyatsho (1702-76) and his student Chokyi Gyatsho (1759-1812), Pagar was well known as a centre of excellence for books. At least three sets of *kanjur* were produced during the life of the two hierarchs alone. Kuenga Gyatsho’s biography tells us how the difficulties he faced in borrowing a set of *kanjur* to be read in his new temple inspired him to produce his first printed *kanjur*. He undertook a long and expensive campaign to raise paper from Bhutan and then had the paper taken to Tibet to have the *kanjur* printed in Narthang. When the books arrived, they were received in Pagar with an elaborate ceremony and further embellished with gold illuminations, textile and wooden covers, decorative labels, handmade ropes and shelves. A generation after him, his student Chokyi Gyatsho did almost the same thing. Locals, today, even believe that one whole volume of *kanjur* was produced with paper from a single plant.

Pagar was a thriving centre of book production and learning. Not only were the lamas of Pagar producing books in Pagar but they also took part in other major book projects of the 18th and 19th century western Bhutan as scribes and editors. Pagar was also renowned for its tradition of annual recitation of *kanjur*. Thus, it is a terrible loss for Bhutan that the literary heritage of this temple may have been now entirely reduced to ashes. As part of my efforts to digitally preserve Bhutan’s written heritage, my team started the digital photography of Pagar’s books last year but the team was chased away by a local monk defying the permit from the Central Monastic Body. The ownership of the temple was then in a transition; today, the temple is in cinders. It is a strong reminder for us to do something urgently about our priceless heritage. The *Nyingma Gyubum* which was saved in digital copies is perhaps all we have left now of Pagar’s literary legacy.

Contributed by Karma Phuntsho