

Kangchendzönga:  
Secular and Buddhist perceptions of the mountain deity  
of Sikkim among the Lhopos<sup>1</sup>

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One day, my teacher Lopen Dugyal<sup>2</sup> mentioned that there are many more spirits and deities inhabiting the environment in Sikkim than there are human beings. Indeed, nearly every mountain, hilltop, prominent rock, mountain pass, crevasse, valley, old tree, lake, river and stream seems to be the abode of some supernatural being. The mountain deity inhabiting<sup>3</sup> the peak of Mount Kangchendzönga (*gangs chen mdzod lnga*)<sup>4</sup> is considered to be their chief and his worship is an important aspect of rituals everywhere among Sikkimese Buddhists. The deity, usually simply referred to as Dzö-nga, can be invoked in various capacities and rituals held in his honour may take many forms. This multiplicity of identities not only helped create a national symbol among a complex multi-ethnic society when Sikkim was still an independent kingdom<sup>5</sup> but as we will see, still serves to unite all levels of ritual tendencies within the Lhopo community.

The political dimension of mountain deities in terms of national identity in Tibet has been discussed by Samten Karmay and Dzö-nga is no exception in this respect. Karmay distinguishes between two types of mountain cults. The first is the secular and unwritten tradition of the laymen whereby the mountain deity is the object of propi-

1. The descendants of the Tibetan immigrants who came to Sikkim in different waves from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards and established the kingdom in the 17<sup>th</sup> call themselves Lhopo (*lho pa* people from the South) but are generally referred to as Bhutia, Sikkimese or even Denjongpa. The term 'Bhutia' however is misleading as it can refer to any Buddhist highlander of Tibetan origin living in the Himalayas, and the term 'Sikkimese' may lead to confusion considering that the Lhopo are now a minority in the state. Consequently, I will hereafter refer to them as Lhopo which seem to be the term that they themselves prefer.
2. Dugyal Acharya Bhutia was simultaneously my teacher, informant, research assistant, translator and friend during the whole period of fieldwork research carried out in his village of Tingchim.
3. It should be pointed out that although Sikkimese do worship Kangchendzönga, they do not worship the mountain itself but the deity who inhabits that mountain.
4. *Kang* means snow, *chen* means great, *dzö* treasure and *nga* five.
5. The Kingdom of Sikkim was a protectorate of the British Government from 1890 until 1947. It was integrated into the Union of India and became its 22<sup>nd</sup> State in 1975.

tiation for mundane pursuit by the local people. It is “a survival of the ancient traditions which the spread of Buddhism never totally effaced. Indeed, it is deeply rooted and more marked among Tibetan communities in the border areas, where the Bon religion is often dominant and where encounters with people of different cultures who display their own national aggressivity are a daily experience” (1998 [1994]: 429). The second type are the mountains which are the object of veneration and pilgrimage in a Buddhist sense, not just by local people but from people coming from other parts of the country because they are considered to have been the dwelling places of early saints where *terma*<sup>6</sup> (*gter ma*) treasures have been found or may still be hidden. Usually, mountain deities will not be the object of both cults but those that are, seem to have recently been included in the Buddhist pantheon (1998 [1996]): 432-3).

Both cults, or at least some of their aspects, still seem to exist among the Lhopos. Aspects of Dzö-nga and other Sikkimese mountain deities that do not originate from the monastic establishment are generally ignored in favour of Buddhist identities that have been promoted, for political and other reasons, by Tibetan and Sikkimese lamas since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, secular aspects of the mountain deity are still prevalent in some Lhopo village rituals such as Tingchim<sup>7</sup>. While the shamans (see below) in Tingchim will invoke Dzö-nga as a *pholha* (*pho lha*, father god or lineage protector) following the secular tradition of mountain deities, the village lamas will usually, although not exclusively, invoke him as a high Buddhist deity. I argue that, at least until recently, this divergence of opinion was not a source of conflict between lamas and shamans within the village but a source of unity which found its best expression in the performance of rituals where all ritual specialists jointly officiated and invoked Dzö-nga for the welfare of the community.

It should be stressed that unless otherwise specified, all the material

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6. For the Nyingmapas, *ter* or *terma* are spiritual treasures, sometimes objects such as images but usually texts attributed to Guru Rinpoche who hid them so as to be later physically discovered or revealed in other ways by Buddhist practitioners called *tertön* (*gter ston*).
  7. Tingchim is an agricultural village of 54 landowning Lhopo households located in Sikkim's North District (this does not include its landless Nepalese population). The village lies on the eastern bank of the river Teesta at an altitude of 1300 meters, half way between Phodong monastery and Mangan, the North District headquarters.

presented here applies to Tingchim village<sup>8</sup> and is not intended to be representative of the Lhopo community of Sikkim as a whole. Variations in ritual procedures, terminology and other aspects of culture between Lhopo villages and areas within Sikkim can be significant from a Sikkimese viewpoint.

### 1. The ritual specialists of Tingchim village

Rituals are today performed in Tingchim by three types of ritual specialist: 1. The non-celibate village lamas (Kargyu and Nyingma)<sup>9</sup>; 2. The *pawo* (*dpa' bo*) and the *nejum* (*rnal 'byor ma*), the male and female shamans of the Lhapos; and 3. The *bönben bongthing* (*bon ban*)<sup>10</sup>, a spe-

8. After several visits to Sikkim, I returned in October 1993 to carry out fieldwork research in Tingchim proper between June 1994 and December 1995 with two additional fieldtrips to the village in May and December 1996. The research results are available in my doctoral dissertation *Buddhism and Shamanism in Village Sikkim* (SOAS, 2002). The research on which this article and the dissertation are based was generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Frederick Williamson Memorial Fund, Cambridge, and the Additional Fieldwork Award, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. This essay was written in 1999 while in residence in Kathmandu. I am indebted to Charles Ramble for encouraging me to write on the subject of Sikkim's sacred landscape and to Lionel Caplan for his much appreciated comments on an earlier draft.
9. Strictly speaking, the use of the term 'lama' in this context is incorrect as this term is normally reserved for particularly learned Buddhist ritual specialists. Two terms are normally used in the village: an initiated lama will be called a *trapo trigpo* (*grwa pa bsgris pa*) or simply a *trapo*, i.e. a lama who has accepted the discipline of the Sangha and is now a full member of the lama-community of his village. Before his initiation, a student is referred to by the term *chopo*, or a man of Dharma (*chos pa*). I have nevertheless kept the use of the term lama or lama-student to refer to the village's *trapo* and *chopo* because of its widely accepted use in English publications.
10. *Bönben*, is the Sikkimese pronunciation of the words spelled - *bon ban* - possibly a short form and a reversal of the Tibetan words - *ban sde bon sde* - 'the monk who is a part of *bön*'. However, for Tingchim villagers, *bönben* simply means 'the one who can recite the oral texts of *bön*'.

*Bongthing* is a term borrowed from the Lepcha language which is often used to refer to the *bönben* of the Lhapos who are thought to act like the *bongthing*, the male ritual specialist of the Lepchas. According to Jest (1976: 307), "*tin* is an established Lepcha word for lord. See Mainwaring (1878: 152). *Bon* means mouth (Mainwaring 1878: 261) and one may consider the possibility of a connection with the Tibetan term *bon*".

cialist who performs the offering rituals for the supernatural beings of the locality. The *pawo* and the *nejum* specialise in maintaining good relations with the *pholha molha* (*pho lha mo lha*, father god mother god), the Lhopos' ancestral deities and lineage protectors through possession and offering rituals while the *bönben bongthing*, who never gets possessed, maintains good relations with the ambiguous supernatural beings who inhabit the local territory<sup>11</sup>. On very rare occasions, he may still do so through the offering of an animal sacrifice<sup>12</sup>.

All ritual specialists usually officiate independently, but sometimes jointly or successively, so as to serve the villagers' ritual needs. In addition to their regular annual rituals, the *pawo*, *nejum* and *bönben bongthing* as well as the village lamas will all regularly be called in separately to officiate in village houses in order to divine the cause of illness and perform curing rituals so as to appease the offended local supernatural beings thought to be responsible for the patient's suffering. To accomplish this, the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bönben bongthing* will draw their ritual powers and protection from the *pholha molha*, while the village lamas will draw theirs from the supra-worldly deities of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tingchim villagers collectively refer to the ritual knowledge of the *pawo*, *nejum*, and *bönben bongthing* as *bön* (*bon*). What they call *bön* has probably little relation with the Bön religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet and certainly no relation with the tradition of the modern Tibetan Bonpo monasteries. In Tingchim, the term *bön* refers to specific oral ritual texts that are chanted and considered to be the core of the *bön* specialists'

11. Explaining the different categories of supernatural beings who inhabit or travel through the landscape from the viewpoint of Tingchim villagers as well as their relation with them would go beyond the limits of this essay. Among these are the *degyed* (*sde bregyad*) eight categories of spirits, particularly *lu*, *tsen* and *dü* (*klu*, *btsan* and *bdud*), the *la tsen* or spirit of the mountain pass (*la btsan*) and the *ajo anyo* (*a jo a nyo*), some Lepcha supernatural beings that have been adopted by the Lhopos. Unlike the lineages' ancestral deities or *pholha molha* who may also have their abode within the local territory, these local supernatural beings are considered wild or only partly tamed and for this reason are considered ambiguous. In Tingchim, they are referred to as *nö po* (*gnod pa*) as a group, 'those who cause obstructions, damage or trouble'. In this article, I will simply refer to them as the local supernatural beings.
12. The *bönben bongthing's* role in Tingchim is reminiscent of that of the *lha bon* of the Khumbo in east Nepal, a priest specialised in the worship of clan and land deities (Diemberger 1997), the *lha bon* of Baragaon in southern Mustang and that of the *aya* (*a ya*) in central Tibet who are equally responsible for the propitiation of local gods and the making of 'red' offerings (Ramble 1996, 1998 and Ramble, in press).

ritual knowledge. It may also refer to knowledge that has been imparted directly from the supernatural either during possession rituals in case of the *pawo* or *nejum*, or through inspiration or dreams in the case of the *bönben bongthing*<sup>13</sup>. Samuel has suggested that “While there are some grounds for using the term Bön for the early religion of Tibet (...), there are few for applying it to the cults of the local gods and spirits as they exist today, and I shall avoid using Bön to refer to this contemporary ‘folk religion’” (1993: 12). Although I agree with Samuel as well as with Per Kvaerne who adds that the ancient Bon religion was neither animist nor shamanistic (1998: 61), I will nevertheless use the term *bön* to refer to Tingchim’s ‘folk religion’ (Tucci 1980), ‘nameless religion’ (Stein 1972) or ‘pagan tradition’ (Ramble 1998: 124) since this is the term that is used by the villagers themselves. However, *bön* as practised in Tingchim should not be perceived as the survival of an archaic form of pre-Buddhist ritual practice but as a living tradition concerned with this-worldly matters in terms of health and fertility which has evolved in interaction with Buddhism and the ritual specialists of neighbouring ethnic communities such as the Lepchas, the Limbus and the Bhutanese.

The lack of anthropological literature based on fieldwork research among the Lhopos has contributed to them being perhaps misrepresented through the writings of Tibetan lamas and other Buddhist elite or indirectly, through the publication of a series of monographs that focused exclusively on the Lepchas (Gorer 1987 [1938], Morris 1938, Siiger 1967, Foning 1987) or the relation between the Bhutias (Lhopos) and the Lepchas centered around the monastery (Chie Nakane 1966), or more recently, on the socio-politics of the state and its history (Basnet 1974, Sinha 1975, Rose 1978). This lacuna has contributed to maintain an image of the Lhopos as a Buddhist population that arrived, built monasteries and converted the indigenous population. But what these writings tend to do, is omit to acknowledge the existence of the commoner Lhopo villagers who didn’t belong to the Sikkimese Buddhist and aristocratic elite<sup>14</sup> and had a very limited understanding of Buddhism. Until recently, some of

13. This local definition of *bön* is similar to the probable etymology suggested by Diemberger when referring to the *lha bon*, a ritual specialist of Khumbo not far from Sikkim in eastern Nepal. In this case *bon* is thought to mean ‘to pray, to chant’ (Diemberger 1989: 424).

14. A discussion about the different Sikkimese clans and lineages, their origins and status is given in my dissertation, *Buddhism and Shamanism in Village Sikkim* (2002).

these Lhopos lived of herding, hunting, gathering and slash and burn cultivation, in some cases side by side with the Lepchas in villages far removed from the six premier monasteries of the state<sup>15</sup> and the Palace which were the centres of religious and to some extent, political power.

Tingchim was such a village where until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, every patri-lineage had its own *pawo* or *nejum* responsible for the lineage and its households' rituals needs. Although villagers considered themselves Buddhists, there were no lamas in Tingchim and people were dependent on the *pawo*, the *nejum*, the *bönben bongthing* and an ambiguous specialist called *nagshong* (*sngags 'chang*)<sup>16</sup> who all officiated at the rituals performed either for the benefice of the individual, the household, the lineage or the village. Buddhism was primarily confined to the important monasteries, their surrounding villages, the capital and the Palace. Tingchim lay on the northern edge of the Phodong 'parish', the closest monastery<sup>17</sup> that also acted as the centre of local administration and tax collection, and where no men from Tingchim were lamas. Located some fifteen kilometres south of the village, the monastery was visited only once a year by Tingchim villagers on the occasion of the exorcistic rituals and annual *cham* ('*cham*) dances held just before Losung, the Sikkimese farmer's new year. Buddhism then gradually took over as the main ritual practice of the village in three distinctive phases. First, the Lachen Gomchen encouraged two or three aspiring lamas to undertake meditation retreats in the 1910s. By the 1920s, there were seven of them who performed rituals such as funerals for the benefit of individuals while all household, lineage and community rituals were still in the hands of the *bön* specialists. The second phase was marked by the passage of Sakya Lam Tshoda who stopped in Tingchim at the end of the

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15. The most important monasteries of Sikkim are Pemayangtse, Tashiding and Phensang for the Nyingmapa, and Rumtek (not to be confused with the Karmapa's Dharma Chakra Centre), Ralang and Phodong for the Kargyupa. The premier monastery is Pemayangtse as it was responsible for the performance of the royal rituals and annual monastic *cham* ('*cham*) dances performed at the Palace's chapel.

16. The *nagshong* or "the holder of tantra knowledge" was a ritual specialist thought to have mastered Buddhism's tantric powers as well as the ritual skills of the *bönben bongthing* and the *pawo* that did not require possession.

17. Phodong monastery, the first to be built in the North District, was established as late as 1740, a whole century after the foundation of Sikkim as a Buddhist kingdom.

1920s to help take control of an epidemic in the village. As part of the remedy, the Sakya Lama instructed the village lamas to perform the annual Buddhist rituals on a regular basis within the village's prayer hall which since the construction of Tingchim's first prayer hall at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century had been the meeting place for the older women of the village to pray. Lamas received training from the Phodong monastery on how to perform these rituals and from that point Buddhism stopped being individualistic and became an occupation of the community where the villagers' participation, both in presence and in contributions, was required. During the third Buddhist phase, which was initiated by the arrival of Tibetan rinpoches in Sikkim following the Chinese take over of their country in 1959, the transformation of the village's ritual practice continued following the influence of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa who tried to eliminate the practice of animal sacrifice<sup>18</sup>. Buddhism effectively took over from *bön* as the community's official ritual practice when in the early 1960s, the annual *mong chö* (*mang* gathering *mchod* offering) village ritual, which required the sacrificial offering of an ox, was abandoned and replaced by the Bumkor (*'bum bskor*), a community ritual whereby the Buddhist scriptures are taken out of the village's prayer hall to bless the village houses, as the village most important ritual of the year.

Gradually, Buddhism timidly imposed itself and came out as the better and most prestigious ritual practice while still accommodating *bön* and without even openly trying or succeeding to eliminate the practice of *bön* in its totality. The Lachen Gomchen's, the Sakya Lama's and the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's efforts were all directed at specific aspects of *bön* such as possession rituals or animal sacrifice without trying to eliminate the ritual complex as a whole. The 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa is even said to have encouraged the Tingchim Lhopos to maintain their ritual offerings in honours of their *pholha molha* or ancestral deities. Today, the village lamas, the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bönben bongthing* are thought to generally get on and work together for the welfare of the people. We will see that this tolerated co-existence finds its best expression in the annual Chirim (*spyi rim*, general ritual), where lamas and *bönben bongthing* momentarily officiate together

18. Before the early 1960s when the practice was abandoned following the influence of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa who provided a substitute Buddhist ritual for Tingchim villagers, up to 60 oxen a year were sacrificed as part of curing and other rituals. The practice has since been somewhat rekindled, and chickens and goats are now very occasionally sacrificed with the hope of saving the life of dangerously ill relatives.

within the precinct of the village's prayer hall. Their tolerated co-existence also found expression in the past during state rituals performed at the Palace's chapel (*gtsug lag khang*) at Gangtok.

## 2. Dzö-nga as a secular mountain deity

Although Dzö-nga, as a well subdued protector is no longer thought to be inflicting suffering on human beings, keeping good relations with him, as much for the *bön* as for the Buddhist specialists is considered important. As the head of all supernatural beings of the land, if properly propitiated, Dzö-nga can help keep malevolent forces under control. Thus, all will perform regular rituals aimed at maintaining good relations with the mountain deity so that he may later be invoked in time of need. But depending on the particular altar, Dzö-nga will either be included among and invoked along with the Buddhist deities of the lamas on the *nesol* (*gnas gsol*)<sup>19</sup> and other ritual altars, or will be included as a secular mountain deity among the *pholha molha* of the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bönben bongthing*. Kangchendzönga as *pholha* has a number of identities; he is considered the chief of all local supernatural beings of Sikkim, the owner of the land (*gzhi bdag*)<sup>20</sup>, the warrior god or *dablha* (*dgra lha*) of the Sikkimese people, the witness deity and, among certain lineages, the provider of sons. He is among the most important *pholha* on the altar and manifests himself during possession rituals as a powerful and protective landlord. Dzö-nga also has a number of Buddhist identities that are discussed in section 5 below.

The *pholha molha* can be divided into two general categories. The first are indigenous pre-Buddhist supernatural beings such as Dzö-nga as well as *bön* and Buddhist religious figures who act as lineage protectors. The second category are male and female ancestors of the same patrilineage or, in some cases, legendary characters who, for reasons usually difficult to trace, came to be worshipped as 'ancestors'. The first category of lineage protectors, with a few exceptions, are more or less shared by all Tingchim lineages and are associated with different localities, either in

19. The *nesol* (offering to powerful sacred places) is an offering ritual to Kangchendzönga and all the deities of the land. The ritual is a celebration of Sikkim as a sacred hidden land.

20. Samten Karmay translates *gzhi bdag* as 'owner of the base' (1998 [1996]: 432).



Yarlung, Chumbi, Ha or Sikkim<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, the second group of *pholha molha* consists of real or fictitious ancestors and vary from one patrilineage to another. These ancestors are said to reside in the *bön* paradises called *rigdzin ne* (*rig 'dzin gnas*) for men and *metok padma ling* (*me tog padma gling*) for women, both located at Ne Dorje Ku, a sacred location between Ha and Chumbi. All *pawo* and *nejum*, along with other villagers who have distinguished themselves through their kindness, wisdom, wealth or power, are said to gain access to these paradises after death. It is from these places that they later communicate with their descendants, giving them general advice and predictions, through the medium of the *pawo* and *nejum* during possession rituals.

The powers the *pholha molha* are propitiated for and can bless their descendants with are the ability to provide sons and good harvests, to avert death in case of illness, to predict obstacles and misfortunes, to create a platform for discussion and arbitration in case of quarrels and to protect members from curses (*byad kha*). These favours are indirectly implored through various rituals during which the *pholha molha* are first invited and introduced to the audience, then spoiled with their favourite offerings. Later, they may be thanked once these blessings have been conferred.

Although perceived differently, we will see that Dzö-nga remains a common denominator, or a meeting ground of their respective pantheon, of Tingchim's *bön* and Buddhist ritual specialists and the recitation of the *khelen*<sup>22</sup> (*khas len*), their common ritual practice. The *khelen* and its structure are the base of all *bön* offering rituals. Countless versions of these invocations are in existence and are chanted at various ritual occasions in honour of the protectors of the country, the ancestral deities, or the supernatural beings of the local territory. They may be chanted by the lama, the *pawo*, the *nejum*, the *bönben bongthing* or even by some village elders, not only in village houses but also at the village prayer halls, the monasteries and until recently, at the Palace. Although these recitations are considered a *bön* tradition, some *khelen* have been written down and included in Buddhist rituals. They always have four sections: purification, invitation, offering and dismissal.

21. This first group of lineage protectors (*pho lha*) as found in Tingchim may vary considerably from those of other Lhopo lineages in Sikkim. Among other descent groups, Dzö-nga may not be given the importance he is given in Tingchim and no *torma* may be specifically dedicated to him on the altar.

22. *Khelen* (*khas len*) and its honourific form *shelen* (*zhal len*) mean 'expressing' or 'addressing'.

### 3. Dzö-nga as *pholha* in the rituals of the Lhopos of Tingchim village

The most common regular rituals in honour of the *pholha molha* are the bi-annual harvest rituals held at *biatsi* ('*bya' rtsis*), the summer harvest of rice, and at *natsi* (*nags rtsis*), the winter harvest of wheat. These are performed in every single Tingchim household without exception. During *biatsi* and *natsi*, the *pholha molha* are offered the first fruit of the harvest as a bi-annual recognition, honouring and thanking them for their help and protection which ensure the prosperity and continuity of the lineage. These harvest offerings are the only recurring occasion where rituals are held successively by all three ritual specialists: the *pawo*, the *bönben bongthing* and the lama. The *pawo* will make harvest offerings to the *pholha molha*; the *bönben bongthing* to the *ajo anyo* (*a jo, a nyo*)<sup>23</sup>, Lepcha supernaturals that have been adopted by the Lhopos; and the lama will perform a ritual offering called *kongso* (*bskang gso*)<sup>24</sup> in honour of Kabur Kangtsen - the *tsen* (*btsan*) of the snows - a feared and untamed mountain deity who is considered to be the owner of all the harvest rituals in Tingchim.

A *pawo* is not the mouthpiece of a specific deity such as the prestigious Tibetan oracles who act as the exclusive medium to powerful protectors such as Pehar (Prince Peter 1979). Although a *pawo* has a tutelary deity who will assist him in his duties, he is there for all the *pholha molha* and local supernatural beings, so all may have the chance to use him as a medium so as to interact with the villagers and ask for and obtain the recognition or the offerings they crave. A genuine *pawo* is thus chosen as their servant by a consensus of all supernatural beings involved. Unlike Ladakh and among other Tibetan speaking people<sup>25</sup>, the lamas are not consulted nor play any role in the identification, initiation, training or performances of the Sikkimese *pawo*, and Sikkim appears to be a rare case where the monks' and monasteries' influence on the *pawo's* ritual practice has been minimal.

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23. *Ajo* means grand-father and *anyo* grand-mother. Both terms are borrowed and adapted from the Lepcha language.

24. *bskang* means to fulfill and *gso* means to refill, to replenish. Together *bskang gso* means to replenish (make offerings) until satisfied.

25. For the influence of the monastic establishment on the mediums of Tibetan speaking people, the assimilation or eradication of their practice, see Day (1990) for Ladakh, Ortner (1995) for the Sherpas and Berglie (1976) for *pawo* among Tibetan refugees.

The *pawo* is usually the first to perform his part of the harvest rituals called *lha tchö* (*lha mchod*). Before the *biatsi* or *natsi* ritual can start, the *pawo* will prepare the rice *torma* depicting the *pholha molha* of this particular household which always include Dzö-nga<sup>26</sup>, and display the appropriate offerings. All the rituals performed by the *bön* ritual specialists are based on the *khelen* oral ritual text that will be chanted during the performance. Whether they include trances or not, or whether they are dedicated to the *pholha molha*, the *ajo anyo* or other local supernatural beings, the basic structure of the rituals remains more or less the same. In brief, the performance has four parts: first, there is a short purification of the ritual specialist himself, followed by the *song bön* (*bsang bon*) which is a longer purification of the location and the offerings through the burning of incense. The core section is the actual invitation called *den ju* (*gdan bzhugs*). Here the *pholha molha* and local supernatural beings are individually praised and invited to leave their abode in order to come and bless every single offering displayed for the occasion. This is when the attributes and powers of each are revealed or reminded to present villagers and when the *pawo* would get possessed if he was officiating. When addressing the audience through the medium of the *pawo*, the *pholha molha* will usually express their pleasure over witnessing the performance of the ritual held in their honour, and may offer some prediction or advice for the general welfare of the household or the health of one of its member. Each share of the display of grain, flowers, butter lamps and *chang* is then individually offered to each during the *tsi büil* (*rtsis 'bul*). The lineage protectors and other beings are then given a farewell called *shäksö* (*gshegs gsol*) and are asked not to bring any disease to the people living upstairs or to the cows staying downstairs, nor to provoke fires in the summer and floods during the rains.

The *pawo's* ritual offering is followed by that of the *bönben bongthing* for the *ajo anyo* and other local supernatural beings such as the woman of the house's particular protector (*zhang lha*)<sup>27</sup>. It may also hap-

26. As previously mentioned, Dzö-nga may not have a *torma* specifically dedicated to him as a *pholha* among other Lhopo descent group elsewhere in Sikkim. He may be included in a general *torma* dedicated to all the protective land deities (*yul lha gzhi bdag*) of the lineage or failing this, to my knowledge, will always at least be invoked in the *khelen*.

27. A bride will be followed to her new home by a protector called *shang lha* who comes from her *ashang* (*a zhang*) or maternal uncle's house. A girl's maternal uncle may have more long term responsibilities towards his sister's daughter than towards his own daughter.

pen that the *bönben bongthing* will himself perform the *pawo's* as well as his part of the ritual if it so happens that the household does not require the mediumship services of the *pawo* at this particular moment. Most *anyo* live in the attic of the Lhopo houses where they are made offerings of grains and ornaments. They are regarded as the protector of the house, its food stores, animals and material possessions. One particular *anyo* is the owner of the cardamom plant, the cash crop of the Lhopos, and is given an offering ritual in the fields before the harvest is taken away from her. These *ajo anyo* are still considered partly untamed and the *bönben bongthing* may invoke his own *pholha molha* including Dzönga for protection while dealing with their darker side. Their state of semi-wildness is shared by a long list of supernatural beings who inhabit the local territory and who are thought to provoke illness and misfortune if offended by the presence of pollution (*grib*) generated by certain human actions such as quarrelling between relatives, lying, destroying particular objects of nature or burning meat. They are made offerings as part of a bargain contract with the hope to appease them through flattery by pretending to elevate them into the ranks of the ancestral deities. Thus, the *ajo anyo* are honoured at harvest rituals as protectors and providers, and are each represented on the altar, not by rice *torma* aligned on a wooden plateau as in the case of the *pholha molha* but by miniature bamboo pots with a straw similar to the ones used to drink chang. These pots are filled with fermented grains, wrapped in a piece of banana leaf and decorated with butter in the same way as the Lepchas do<sup>28</sup>. In front of each pot or *ajo anyo* are displayed specific offerings according to each *ajo anyo's* taste. These offerings are displayed on a square piece of banana leaf and offered to the *ajo anyo* by the chanting of a second *khelen* where each *ajo anyo* and other local supernatural beings is individually invoked and invited to receive his share of the offerings. The altar and the offering for the *ajo anyo* will be laid slightly lower than that of the *pholha molha*.

The *pawo* and the *bönben bongthing's* performances are followed by that of the village lama. The harvest *kongso* ritual is only held in honour of the troublesome mountain deity Kabur Kangtsen in the many Tingchim households where he was sent to create problems by an unscrupulous ritual specialist a few decades ago. He is given a harvest ritual in the same way that the *ajo anyo* are honoured with the hope to

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28. The Lepchas and the Limbus erect similar altars (Gorer 1987 [1938] and Sagant 1996: 378).

tame them through flattery by pretending to elevate them into the ranks of the ancestral deities. Rituals held for partly tamed supernaturals are always meant as a bargain contract. But in the case of Kabur Kangtsen, not only is he given the honours of a pseudo-*pholha* as the owner of the harvests, he is also treated as a pseudo-Buddhist deity and given an entire Buddhist ritual by a village lama. In theory, while performing the *kongso*, the lama first invokes the high Buddhist deities presiding over the ritual so that they may help him remind Kabur Kangtsen of his submission vows to Guru Rinpoche and thus return him on the right path of the Dharma. But in the second part of the ritual, as a precaution, the feared Kangtsen is offered little pieces of meat on the altar and the *khelen*, which is fundamentally a *bön* oral tradition, is chanted by the lama in addition to the written ritual text. The *khelen* will invoke a list of over twenty local supernatural beings starting with Dzö-nga as the chief of all supernatural beings of the land, coming down the mountain towards the village including Kabur Kangtsen and finishing with those who inhabit the house. These are followed by the invocation of a list of twelve previous *bön* ritual specialists of the village. After the oral *khelen*, the ritual text is resumed with the *degyed serkyem* (*sde brgyad gser skyems*, libation) and the *tsog* (*tshogs*) offering. In this case, it may be unclear whether Dzö-nga is invoked as a Buddhist or as a secular mountain deity, a differentiation which probably depends on the inclination of the lama holding the ritual. Considering that Dzö-nga is neither represented by a *torma* on the *kongso* altar nor is he invoked by the written text as he will be in the lama's *nesol* (see below), it is reasonable to believe that he is here invoked as a secular mountain deity and head of all the supernatural beings of the land during the oral *khelen*.

These harvest offerings are mainly a formality, a thank you ritual for the new harvest where the *pholha molha*, the *ajo anyo* and Kabur Kangtsen are offered some freshly harvested grains by chanting the *khelen*. Their main purpose is to maintain good relations with them so they don't withdraw their protection but keep dispensing their blessings. While the harvest rituals are the only regular events where the *pholha molha* and Dzö-nga as a secular mountain deity are invoked, many other rituals which I list below are held in extraordinary circumstances.

One of the most important moment of a wedding is the chanting of the *khelen* when the *pawo* or the *bönben bongthing* invites the *pholha molha* (which always includes Dzö-nga) of both the bride and the groom to witness and legitimise the alliance. The union of husband and wife

may only gain recognition once the *khelen* has been pronounced. After the birth of a first son, an important offering ritual is held by the *pawo* or the *bönben bongthing* in honour of Masong (*ma sangs khyung 'dus*) and the other *pholha* of the patrilineage<sup>29</sup>. The head and back leg of an ox are offered to give thanks for this first son who will now perpetuate the lineage. Masong, the most important *pholha* or lineage protector in Tingchim, is a mountain deity residing on the mountain range separating the Bhutanese Valley of Ha and the Tibetan Valley of Chumbi close to Sikkim. The help of Dzö-nga, along with that of the other *pholha molha*, may also be invoked in case of serious illness, in resolving disputes among kin members, in sitting as supernatural judge, in helping liberate the kidnapped soul of dead relatives (*gshin 'dre*), for protection before going to war (*dgra lha*), when apologizing after destroying objects of nature, and when seeking protection from curses. The Sesung Gomchen (*ser bsrung sgom chen*, hail protector great practitioner), the most enigmatic lama in Tingchim, has no other responsibility but that of controlling the weather and protecting the ripening crops of thirteen surrounding villages against hail, something he has been doing for twenty-five years. For this purpose, he invokes the help of a number of deities including Kangchendzönga in helping him control those supernatural beings responsible for rain and hail.

But the *pholha molha* are given their greatest honour during the *pawo's* initiation ritual and annual retreat called *tsam che* (*mtshams bcad*) when the *pholha molha* are made to interact with their descendants through the medium of possession over a period of four days. During these séances, villagers receive advice and predictions regarding the cause of illness, upcoming obstacles or proper behaviour. During the *tsam che* that I attended in 1994, Dzö-nga as well as his consort addressed the audience a number of times, first to introduce himself and then to join in on a debate which was taking place between a lama in the audience and the *pholha molha* over the merit and demerit of *bön* versus Buddhism. Addressing a lama who was the first to have recently returned to the village with the Acharya (MA) Buddhist degree, Dzö-nga as a *pholha* told him "not to break his vows" which in this context meant that he shouldn't lose faith in him by rejecting these trance sessions as phoney, or at best, as a lower form of religion compared to the high Buddhism which he had been studying. This

29. For Tingchim villagers, the *pholha* Masong is the main provider of sons while for some Sikkimese, this role is fulfilled by Dzö-nga (see below).

couldn't have been a better example to illustrate how, at the village level, Dzö-nga has maintained his identity as a *pholha* or secular mountain deity.

#### 4. Dzö-nga as witness deity

Sikkim's history relates that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Kye Bumsa (*gyad 'bum gsags*), the Tibetan ancestor of the Sikkimese kings or Chogyals (*chos rgyal*)<sup>30</sup> who was then ruling in the neighbouring Chumbi Valley, came to Sikkim with his wife in search of the Lepcha patriarch and *bongthing* Thekong Tek. The couple was childless and requested the Lepcha *bongthing* to perform a ritual where Dzö-nga was invoked so that they may be blessed with a male descendant<sup>31</sup>. Upon their return to Chumbi, the couple had three sons who later became the ancestors of a number of Lhopo lineages, including that of the Sikkimese royal family. For this reason, it is said that Dzö-nga came to be regarded among some Lhopos in Sikkim as a *pholha*, or male ancestral deity who may bless the patri-lineages with male descendents<sup>32</sup>.

When Kye Bumsa and his wife later returned to Sikkim to express their gratitude and perform a thanksgiving ritual for their sons, a blood brotherhood was sworn between the Tibetan Kye Bumsa and the Lepcha Thekong Tek where the local deities of Sikkim were invoked to witness their alliance and many animals were sacrificed in order to cement the alliance (see Namgyal 1908: 18). This is how Dzö-nga later came to be worshipped and invoked as a witness deity during the national Buddhist ritual of Pang Lhabsol (*dpang lha gsol*, offering to the witness deity) held at the Palace's chapel at Gangtok by the Pemayangtse lamas, when dignitaries and representatives took a solemn oath in the presence of the protective deities of Sikkim, to serve the country. This 13<sup>th</sup> century ritu-

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30. Chogyal (Dharmaraja) or the king who rules according to the Dharma, is the title of the Sikkimese kings. It was temporarily replaced by the title of Maharaja when Sikkim became a British protectorate and later reinstated during the reign of late Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal.

31. The annual worship of Dzö-nga was of course celebrated by the Lepchas long before the arrival of the Tibetans.

32. In Tingchim, although Dzö-nga is regarded as an important *pholha*, it is still Masong (*ma sangs khyung 'dus*), the mountain deity of the inhabitants of the valleys of Ha and Chumbi where the Lhopos resided before coming to Sikkim, who is regarded as the chief provider of sons.

al of blood brotherhood performed between the Lhopos and the Lepchas is considered to have been the first Pang Lhabsol. However, lamas who dislike animal sacrifice, usually advocate that the first Pang Lhabsol had been performed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Lhatsün Namka Jigme (1597-1650), the chief propagator of Buddhism to Sikkim, when he performed a thanksgiving ritual for his safe journey across the Himalayas as related by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: 402). This divergence of opinion is a direct reflection of the gradual change of identity, from *pholha* to Buddhist deity, Kangchendzönga had been undergoing.

This change of identity becomes particularly evident during Pang Lhabsol's *pangtö* (*dpang bstod*) victory *cham* where Dzö-nga's lay warrior-dancers praise the witness deity and invoke him as their Buddhist warrior god (*dgra lha*), celebrating the subjugation of enemies<sup>33</sup>. But in this case, the meaning of enemy is particularly intended as the enemy of the Dharma and the monasteries, and consequently, the enemies of the Buddhist kingdom and its righteous administration. Indeed, it is mentioned in the *nesol* (f.55-58), that Jigme Pawo (1682 - ?), the third incarnation of Lhatsün Namka Jigme, reminded Dzö-nga of his oath taken before Guru Rinpoche that he would prevent enemies from entering Sikkim, particularly anyone who came here with the intention of changing the structure of the administration as it had been established by the three lamas who consecrated the first Chogyal at Yuksum in 1642<sup>34</sup> and set the borders of the new kingdom. For this reason, some say that Dzö-nga can no longer be invoked for personal gain but only for the welfare and prosperity of the Buddhist kingdom. But this was not always so. Not too long ago, the warrior dance would still be performed by lay dancers in Tingchim on other occasions than Pang Lhabsol where Dzö-nga was invoked as a secular mountain deity. And Waddell equally mentions that Dzö-nga is "worshipped by all the laity once at least during the year for overcoming their individual enemies. Usually the whole village in concert celebrates this worship: the men carrying swords and shields, and they dance and leap about, concluding with a great shout of victory" (1894: 354).

Karmay mentions that "By the mountain cult I mean particularly the secular worship of the mountain deity (*yul lha, gzhi bdag*), who is usually depicted in the style of a traditional warrior and is worshipped as an

33. This *cham* was designed by the third Chogyal, Chagdor Namgyal (1686-1717) when he established the Pemayangtse monastery upon his return from Tibet.

34. Some argue that the Tibetan year actually corresponds to 1641 or even 1646.



ancestor or an ancestral deity for protection” (1998 [1994]: 426). Dzö-nga’s identities as lineage protector or ancestral deity (*pho lha*), related to fertility of the lineages and the fields, owner of the land, personal warrior and witness deity as well as other secular representations among the Lhopos are today easily overshadowed by his Buddhist aspects which will be discussed below and which were promoted by Lhatsün Namka Jigme, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Nyingma lama who opened the gate to the *beyul* (*sbas yul*) or hidden land of Sikkim where he is considered to have been the chief propagator of Buddhism.

### 5. Kangchendzönga becomes a Buddhist mountain deity

As in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche is said to have tamed all the supernatural beings of the land during his eighth century visit to Sikkim and to have bound them through solemn oath into being protectors of the faith and to refrain from causing harm to sentient beings. By this act, and by having hidden spiritual treasures (*ter*) to be discovered in later times, Guru Rinpoche is seen as having brought Buddhism and a civilized way of life. But depending on the context and the person’s point of view, the taming of these malevolent beings can either be read as a metaphor for the taming of the mind, of society, of the environment or even of the country (Ortner 1978: 99, Samuel 1993: 220). Indeed, Karmay has mentioned that “The subjugation of the spiritual inhabitants of the country is an extremely important part of the process in the Buddhist conversion of the people who believed in their existence. It was mainly for the need to create a sacred environment in accordance with Buddhist ideals of the universe” (1998 [1996]: 446). Although converted to Buddhism in the eighth century, it is only from the 14<sup>th</sup> that Dzö-nga’s identity as a defender of the faith and keeper of treasures was promoted by Tertön Rigzin Gödem (1337-1409). And it is only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following Lhatsün Namka Jigme’s visit to Sikkim, that Dzö-nga became the object of the second cult previously mentioned within Sikkim, when mountains are the object of veneration and pilgrimage in a Buddhist sense because they are considered to have been the dwelling places of early saints where treasures have been found or may still be hidden (p.432-3).

Rigzin Gödem is thought to have been the first high lama to visit Sikkim where he is said to have meditated and discovered powerful sacred sites and spiritual treasures, including a prophetic text about the

hidden land of Sikkim<sup>35</sup>. He is said to have made his discoveries known in Tibet by attaching letters to the necks of vultures (Namgyal 1908: 13). He built Sikkim's first known 14<sup>th</sup> century monastery at Pawo Humri, a hill top between Yuksum and Silnon in West Sikkim of which only the ruins can still be seen today. Although he was the first Tibetan lama known to have come to Sikkim, his visit did not result in the establishment of a major lineage based on the transmission of a particular teaching<sup>36</sup> nor did it result in the establishment of a political entity. For these reasons, it is Lhatsün Namka Jigme (1597-1650), the Tibetan Dzogchen master referred to as Lhatsün Chenpo who is instead regarded as the chief propagator of Buddhism in Sikkim.

When Dzö-nga was subdued by Guru Rinpoche and appointed keeper of the land and its treasures, he was not to let anyone enter and discover Sikkim's sacred sites and spiritual treasures unless this person was the right one to further the intentions of Guru Rinpoche. When Lhatsün Chenpo arrived from Tibet, it is said that Dzö-nga first tested him before appearing to him in the form of a white goose and giving him the permission to open the gate to the hidden land. In his welcoming discourse, Dzö-nga revealed the various places of sacred nature and old people believe this to have been where the *nesol* ritual was composed (Namgyal 1908: 24). The *nesol* is a celebration of Sikkim as a hidden land or *beyul* and an offering ritual to Kangchendzönga and all the deities of the land. It is one of the most important and most often performed rituals in Sikkim, as much in the monasteries as in the villages' prayer halls and private houses. When Lhatsün Chenpo arrived in Yuksum from the north, he met with Kathog Rigzin Chenpo and Nadak Sempa Chenpo, two great Tibetan Nyingma lamas who had entered Sikkim respectively from the western and southern gates<sup>37</sup>. Together, they founded the kingdom and enthroned Phuntsog Namgyal of Gangtok as Chogyal or king who rules according to the Dharma, thus

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35. The treasure text discovered by Tertön Rigzin Gödem is called 'The Prophetic Mirror of Sikkim' (*'bras ljongs lung bstan gsal ba'i me long*) and is concerned with Guru Rinpoche's predictions about the establishment of Sikkim.

36. With the exception of the lamas of Tashiding and Silnon monasteries who till today, follow the teachings brought to Sikkim by Rigzin Gödem (*byang gter thugs sgrub*).

37. The kingdom of Sikkim was established by learned Nyingmapa lamas who fled the religious war between the Gelukpas on the one hand, and the King of Tsang and the Kargyupas on the other which led to the rise to power of the Gelukpas and the unification of Tibet.

entrusting him with both temporal and spiritual powers.

Lhatsün Chenpo discovered many texts but is especially remembered for his teaching and empowerment of the *rig 'dzin srog sgrub*. According to this text (f.51b)<sup>38</sup>, Dzö-nga may be invoked as either of the following three aspects which are said to have been ascribed to him by Guru Rinpoche: 1. as *ka sung (bka' srung)* or the one who faithfully carries out the orders of Guru Rinpoche and who has promised to protect the words of the Buddha; 2. as the owner of the sacred locations, the local territory and the spiritual treasures as well as the five treasures (*mdzod lnga*, see below) hidden within his peaks (*gnas yul gter gyi bdag*); and 3. as an emanation of the king of the north or god of wealth (*rgyal chen rnam thos sras*), red in colour, wearing an armour, riding a snow lion and carrying precious stones, a spear, a turban shaped hat and a banner of victory over his head symbolising eternal victory over the evil forces<sup>39</sup>. The god of wealth is his highest manifestation and in this capacity, Dzö-nga is considered a *yeshe lha (ye shes lha)*, a supra-worldly deity of the Buddhist pantheon as opposed to a deity of the impermanent world (*'jig rten gyi lha*). According to the same *rig 'dzin* text (f.52), Dzö-nga's has three manifestations: outer, inner and secret. As his outer manifestation, he is half-*lha* half-*tsen* and has the capacity of conquer them all (*phyi ltar lha btsan*). As his inner manifestation, he is a great monk who has taken lay man's vows and resembles a disciple of Sakyiamuni Buddha with a bowl and a walking stick (*nang ltar sprul la'i dge bsmyen*). As his secret manifestation, Dzö-nga is the king of *nöjin (gsang ba gnod sbyin rgyal po rnam thos sras)* by the name of *rnam thos sras* or god of wealth.

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38. The main offering rituals to Dzö-nga are given in the *rigzin srog drup* as well as in the *nesol*. However, descriptions of Dzö-nga are available from much earlier sources and were reproduced in later texts. According to Lha Tshering of Tashiding, Khenpo of the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies at Gangtok, the best descriptions of Dzö-nga are given in the *bla ma dgongs 'dus lung bstan bka' brgya ma*, a text ascribed to Guru Rinpoche and revealed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Tertön Sangay Lingpa (1340-1396).

39. According to Dr Rigzing Ngodup Dokhampa of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, to mention the significance of only a few of Dzö-nga's attributes and costume, the banner of victory fluttering over his head diadem and the spear signify eternal victory over the evil forces, the gems symbolise which brings all that one wishes for, and his red colour symbolises loving attachment of sentient beings with sublime feeling of compassion (Pang Lhabsol, souvenir 1989, Sikkim Tribal Youth Association page 8-9).

Another important text known as the ‘hidden land of rice’s guide book to sacred places’<sup>40</sup> (*sbas yul ’bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig*), is a more recent compilation based on some three earlier texts<sup>41</sup> prepared by Jigme Pawo. These texts give descriptions of Demojong, the area directly to the south and surrounding Mount Kangchendzönga in West Sikkim which has the highest concentration of powerful sacred sites and hidden treasures within Sikkim. Demojong is described as a paradise on earth with an abundance of fruit, vegetables and self growing crops, and clues are given in the text on how to reach Beyul Demoshong (*sbas yul ’bras mo gshongs*)<sup>42</sup>, the elusive hidden land, the entry of which is located somewhere within Demojong. It is said that in the upper part of Demojong lives the mountain deity Kangchendzönga, who like a king sitting on a throne, is the owner and protector of the land, its people, its powerful sacred sites and spiritual treasures. Kangchendzönga’s five peaks are the repository of five treasures: the first contains salt, the second gold and turquoise, the third Dharma scriptures and other precious objects capable of increasing one’s wealth, the fourth contains arms and the fifth medicine and different types of seeds. It is believed that all these treasures will be made available to the Sikkimese people in times of need. The centre of Demojong is Drakar Tashiding (*brag dkar bkra shis lding*) where Guru Rinpoche is said to have given many teachings. In the four cardinal directions of Tashiding are four miraculous caves where one can attain extraordinary powers. In the east is *shar tchok bä phuk* (*shar phyogs sbas phug*), the hidden cave of the east; in the south is *khandro sang phuk* (*mkha’ ’gro gsang phug*), the womb of the celestial female deity; in the west is *ugyen dechen phuk* (*o rgyan bde chen*

40. A *neyig* (*gnas yig*) or guide book gives descriptions of the powerful sacred sites as well as clues to the hidden treasures.

41. According to Khempo Lha Tshering, the *sbas yul ’bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig* has been compiled from the following main sources: 1. Tertön Rigzin Gödem’s 14<sup>th</sup> century prophetic text (*’bras ljongs lung bstan gsal ba’i me long*); 2. a text discovered by Tertön Sangay Lingpa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (*bla ma dgongs ’dus lung bstan bka’ brgya ma*); and 3. a later guide book discovered by a lama who never came to Sikkim by the name of Tertön Dorje Dechen Lingpa of Doma Göñ (*mdo mang dgon*) monastery in Kham who had been the first incarnation of present Yangthang Rinpoche of West Sikkim.

42. ‘*gshongs*’ as in Demoshong means valley of rolling hills, while ‘*ljongs*’ as in Demojong means land or country. While Demojong is the heart of historical Sikkim, located around and below Mount Kangchendzönga, Demoshong remains a true hidden land. Some people are said to have caught glimpses of it through an opening in the rock while travelling through the mountains although the entry could never be found again.

*phug*), the cave of great happiness; and in the north is *lhari rinchen nying phuk* (*lha ri rin chen snying phug*), the cave of god's precious heart. Nearby, the plateau of Yuksum where the first Chogyal was crowned just below Kangchendzönga, is considered to be a natural altar in front of the sacred mountains, caves, lakes and rivers where ritual offerings can be made. All of these locations are today pilgrimage destinations for all Sikkimese Buddhists.

Sikkim was, and in many ways is still regarded by its Buddhist inhabitants as a sacred hidden land or *beyul*. The following words of Tertön Dorje Lingpa (1346-1405) and Tertön Ratna Lingpa (1403-1478) quoted from the *History of Sikkim* summarize how most Lhopos still think of their country's potential. Tertön Dorje Lingpa described Sikkim as "a veritable paradise on earth, created by a miraculous supernatural power into a vast and magnificent palace where everything calculated to produce beauty and grandeur have been provided on the grandest imaginable scale" (Namgyal 1908: 9). The *History of Sikkim* also tells us that the land was initially blessed by Chenresig and Indra, followed in the eighth century by Guru Rinpoche who "exorcised the land of all evil spirits, and rid it of all obstacles that would tend to obstruct or disturb the course of devotional practices" (Namgyal 1908: 10). Prophetic books were compiled and hidden by him in rocks so as to be rediscovered in later times. Treasures were hidden in one hundred and eight secret mines and stores to render this land productive, healthy and harmonious as well as to facilitate the spread of the Dharma. Tertön Ratna Lingpa qualifies Sikkim as "the best of all the sacred places of pilgrimage as it will come to be resorted to in the end of the evil times (...) everyone assembled to bless this sacred land: they took possession of it, blessed it and sowed all kinds of seeds in it. Then they hid treasures, appointed keepers and uttered hundred prayers (...). Every cliff, peak, cave and hilltop has been consecrated for devotional purposes. Persons who practise devotion in any of these blessed places are sure to attain siddhi powers and the highest knowledge and perfection temporally and spiritually" (Namgyal 1908: 10-11). The *History of Sikkim* adds that of all *beyul*, Sikkim is said to be the most sacred and sanctified, the king of all sacred places equalling paradise itself. Sikkim is described as the land of medicinal herbs and curative waters<sup>43</sup> as well as a golden trough where anything

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43. There is a number of curative hot springs (*tsha chu*) in Sikkim all recommended for bone and skin disorders although each is said to have additional specific curing properties.

one wishes to sow will grow. It is mentioned that people who come here will not suffer incurable diseases and will not feel hunger as there are 105 different kinds of fruit and 360 types of edible plants. It is added that in Sikkim, wisdom, love, kindness and compassion grow spontaneously within oneself.

One cannot help but think that such descriptions of Sikkim as a treasure house could have been written as an encouragement for Tibetan people to come and settle, perhaps in order to populate these empty hills on the unprotected borders of Tibet. There are many legends regarding the existence of similar *beyul* across the Himalayas and Tibet, and Samuel (1993: 517) has pointed out that in the Nyingma tradition, *beyul* had been “set aside by Guru Rinpoche as a refuge to be discovered at an appropriate time in a rather similar way to the discovery of the *terma* texts (...). Some of these *beyul* were quiet refuges set aside for meditation but others, like Sikkim and Pemaköd, were places where lay people could settle to escape political turmoil”. Indeed, many Tibetans are thought to have taken refuge and migrated to Sikkim as a result of the religious wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## 6. Dzö-nga and the rituals of the village lamas

The *nesol* ritual, which is the Buddhist ritual of the land *par excellence*, is a celebration of Sikkim as a *beyul* and an offering ritual to Dzö-nga as the greatest deity of Beyul Demojong. It is one of the most important and most often performed rituals in Sikkim, as much in the Nyingma monasteries as in the villages’ prayer halls and private houses. There are different versions of this ritual in existence and the lengthiest and most orthodox will be performed by the lamas of Pemayangtse monastery, Sikkim’s premier monastery. An important difference between this lengthier version and the shorter one as performed in Tingchim, is the fact that its *khelen* has been standardised and put down in written form thus giving it an aura of sanctity and orthodoxy.

Whenever the lamas of Tingchim gather at the village’s prayer hall in order to celebrate the important days of the Tibetan Buddhist calendar, the *nesol* will be performed at some point during the morning session, whatever main ritual texts is also being read on that day. In such case, two altars, each with their respective set of *torma* will be prepared; the higher one for the Buddhist deities of the main ritual and a lower

smaller one for Dzö-nga and the other deities of the *nesol*. It will only be performed on its own within the prayer hall when someone from the village returns from an important pilgrimage in order to apologise to the deities of the land, in case any polluting or disturbing actions may have been performed by the pilgrim while visiting powerful sacred places. The *nesol* will be performed in private houses whenever lamas are called to hold a major ritual, for example at weddings, as part of the rituals performed during funerals, when a new house has been completed (*khyim gsar bkra shis*), or whenever a household wishes to offer a *tsog* ritual during the winter for its general welfare and prosperity. But usually, the *nesol* is performed on its own in private houses as a *shapten* (*zhabs brten*)<sup>44</sup>, when someone is sick and a ritual specialist has recommended it as a cure. In such cases, the *khelen* will specifically invoke, in addition to Dzö-nga and the usual supernatural beings of the land, the entity that has been identified as the cause of the ailment, and little pieces of meat previously obtained from the butcher will be presented on the altar.

In the household performance of the *nesol*, the top shelf of the altar will have the usual Buddhist deities *lama*, *yidam* and *khandro* (*bla ma yi dam mkha' gro*)<sup>45</sup> presiding over the ritual. On the next lower shelf are a row of ten smaller *torma* representing the Dharma protectors and the higher territorial deities of Sikkim such as Dzö-nga who do not reside near Tingchim but, for the most part, have their abode in the sacred area of Demojong in West Sikkim. On the left of these ten *torma* are the *tsering shenga*, (*tshe ring mched lnga*) the five celestial female deities. In a third lower row in front of them are twenty smaller *torma* representing various general categories of local supernaturals including one for Ajo Dongbong, the legendary Lepcha *bongthing* and interestingly, another *torma* for all previous *nagshong* of the village who best symbolise the result of the encounter between *bön* and Buddhism at the village level. Looking at the *nesol* altar and its inherent hierarchy, the top row represents the tantric deities who stand for Buddhism's highest and purest form which from the villagers' point of view is best understood and dealt with by the learned lamas of the monasteries and the Tibetan rinpoches. The second row of

44. A *shapten* is a general term used to refer to any ritual performed in order to strengthen the life force of a person.

45. As *lama*, Guru Rinpoche dispenses blessings; as *yidam*, Guru Drakpo (*gu ru drag po*) dispenses powers; and as *khandro*, Seng Dongma (*seng gdong ma*) gives protection. These manifestations of Guru Rinpoche are represented on both, Nyingma and Kargyu altars in the rituals of village lamas in Sikkim.

*torma* for the local deities and protectors of Sikkim as a whole are associated with the village lamas since they are the most important and tangible high deities of the land from a Sikkimese villager's perspective. The lowest row representing the worldly and ambivalent local supernaturals, from the villagers' point of view, are still the domain of the *bön* ritual specialists who are themselves present on the altar.

But it is in the Chirim ritual which used to be held in Tingchim until 1994 on the occasion of Pang Lhabsol, that the relation between *bön* and Buddhism in the village has perhaps found its best expression. The Chirim is the only annual ritual where momentarily, the *bönben bongthing* and the village lamas jointly participate in the performance of a community ritual within the village's prayer hall. First, in front of the prayer hall and with the help of villagers, the *bönben bongthing* builds a long frame of bamboo on which a series of at least six set of offerings are laid out, each for a particular group or individual *ajo anyo* and other supernatural beings of the land with the usual offerings of grain, flowers and eggs. Inside the prayer hall, the lamas perform the *nesol* and at the appropriate moment, the lamas call the *bönben bongthing* inside the prayer hall so that he personally chants the oral *khelen* section of the *nesol* for Dzönga and all other higher deities of the land, after which the *bönben bongthing* returns outside to perform his own offering and *khelen* for all the *ajo anyo* and other less important supernatural beings not specifically covered by the *nesol*. While the lamas invoked the higher supernatural beings of the land and the *bönben bongthing* the lower ones, it is considered the *bönben bongthing's* duty to send them all back home, and especially send back the troublesome ones after making them promise not to come back to create obstacles for villagers until they are called again next year to receive their new offerings. The bamboo frame covered with offerings is then taken to the lake and a village feast follows at the prayer hall. Today, the Chirim ritual is still occasionally held, not as a regular annual ritual at Pang Lhabsol, but as a community *shapten* whenever a number of villagers suffer of dysentery during the monsoon.

## 7. Dzö-nga and the state rituals

The combined participation of both *bön* and Buddhist ritual specialists must have found local expression in many similar ways throughout Sikkim. In Tingchim, the *pawo* and the *bönben bongthing* regularly perform together while the village lama sometimes joins in when his par-



participation is required in the performance of complex curing rituals. The following examples, illustrating the tolerance and respect the Chogyals showed towards the *bön* ritual specialists within their Buddhist kingdom, may be interpreted in different ways. Some believe that expressions of this amiable co-existence were encouraged by the Chogyals as a diplomatic measure to encourage the happy co-existence of the Lhopos and the Lepchas, and the Chogyals' popularity. I believe that, at least in the early days, these were more the expression of a *laissez-faire* attitude and of the true nature and belief of the Lhopos, which the Chogyals themselves were not exempted from.

During the time of the Kingdom and apparently until the late 1980s, some *bön* ritual specialists were invited to discreetly participate at the following state functions and officiate at certain personal rituals of the royal household which were described to me by Captain Yongda who had been one of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal's last ADC. On the occasion of the harvest rituals for the Chogyal's fields, a Lepcha *bongthing* would come to the Palace and offer a *khelen* for the *ajo anyo* and local supernatural beings who inhabit the area of the Chogyal's former palace at Rabdentsi as well as of the current Palace at Gangtok. The royal household's *pholha molha* were made offerings to on a separate occasion by Jowo Bönpo from Nako-Chongpung village whose family responsibility it has been for generations. Jowo Bönpo's ritual performance was held around the time of the *kagye cham* (*bka' brgyad 'cham*) dances held at the Palace's chapel just before Losung, the Sikkimese farmer's new year<sup>46</sup>. In addition to the offering ritual for the royal family's ancestral deities, Jowo Bönpo also performed two additional rituals<sup>47</sup> following written *bön* text. Around the same time, before the *kagye cham* began, in a little room next to the Palace's chapel, a Lepcha *bongthing* would discreetly hold an offering ritual, it is said hopefully without the Pemayangtse lamas taking notice as they would probably object to its performance. In its *khelen*, the Lepcha *bongthing* made offerings to the

46. For a description of these *cham* dances see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1976: 24-6).

47. The first ritual is called *yangku* (*gyang bkug*) and is held with the purpose of increasing a person's or a household's *yang*, the element which is thought to be beneficial for the production of wealth, children, animals, house, etc. The second is called *sinen* (*sri mnan*), a ritual performed to suppress the arising of negative forces. I was told that only Jowo Bönpo of Nako-Chongpung village and late Bönpo Lhatchöpo of Kyoshing village would perform these rituals following *bön* texts in Sikkim, these rituals being performed by Buddhist lamas in all other villages.

Lepcha ancestor Thekong Tek and his wife including Dzö-nga and all the local supernatural beings of the land<sup>48</sup>.

Pang Lhabsol was the most important ritual of Sikkim held at the Palace's chapel and simultaneously in every monastery and village prayer hall throughout the kingdom. Pang Lhabsol was the national ritual of the land, held at the end of the monsoon in early September, the main day falling on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar. This was the occasion when the royal family and the *lhade mide* (*lhade mi sde*, the traditional council of the monk body and the lay body), which consisted of the abbots of the monasteries, the landlords (*kaji*), the ministers, the main appointment holders and the representatives of the people, would renew their vows to serve the country. On the first floor of the Palace's chapel, on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>, a senior monk of Pemayangtse monastery would first invoke Dzö-nga and all the deities of the land to stand as witnesses. During this *khe-len* which also invoked the previous Chogyals and named the sacred locations of Sikkim, an apology was made for deeds done against the plants, the streams, the rivers and the rocks and a request made for freedom from obstacles, diseases, famine and war, for the protection of the royal family, and for the people and the land to be graced with wealth, good harvest and timely rainfall. The assembly then took the vow, in the presence of the protective deities of Sikkim, to carry out the intentions of the four lamas who founded the kingdom at Yuksum and not to do anything against the interest of the country or its righteous administration. As we have seen, Pang Lhabsol was also a celebration of the blood brotherhood which was sworn between Khye Bumsa, the ancestor of the Chogyals and the Lepcha chief Thekong Tek in the 13<sup>th</sup> century where Dzö-nga was for the first time invoked to witness their alliance. A finely dressed woman then held the *chang* of which a few drops were sprinkled on the altar, the members of the royal family and the *pangtö* dancers after which members of the royal family offered silk scarves to the life-size effigies of Dzö-nga and Yapdü (*yab bdud*), the guardian of Sikkim's southern gate. The *pangtö* dancers then sprinkled some rice in the air and left followed by the assembly. This ceremony was followed by the *pangtö* and the monastic *cham* dances which have been described by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1976: 19-24, 1993: 402-5). The *pangtö* is essentially a victory dance,

48. Nebesky-Wojkowitz mentions a similar ritual held at the royal palace by a Lepcha *bongthing* on the occasion of Pang Lhabsol (1976: 21-2).

where lay men carrying sword and shield, praise the witness deity and invoke Dzö-nga as their warrior god while celebrating the subjugation of enemies. It was followed by a series of *cham* danced by the Pemayangtse lamas wearing elaborate brocade dresses and masks with Dzö-nga and Yapdü as the central deities to make appearances. A red and a black horse dedicated respectively to Dzö-nga and Yapdü participated in the *cham*; never ridden by anyone throughout the year, these horses are said to suddenly grow restless at a precise moment during the rituals as if mounted by the deities. While the rituals were being held at the Palace's chapel a Lepcha *bongthing* would perform a ritual for Yabdü at his abode above the Teesta, south of present day Sikkim. In the evening, the dignitaries and representatives who participated in the morning oath taking session, assembled again at the Palace ground for the annual chanting of the national anthem<sup>49</sup>.

In Tingchim, as in many other Sikkimese villages, Pang Lhabsol was observed by first sending offerings of *chang* or grain to the Chogyal through their representative which was to be part of the *tsog* for the rituals at the Palace's chapel that were going to involve a large number of lamas over several days. In exchange, the representative was fed and sent back with a maund (40 kg) of salt for the village. Offerings were also sent to the Phodong monastery where rituals were being held. Back home in the village, Pang Lhabsol was celebrated at the prayer hall with the lamas' and the *bönben bongthing's* performance of the Chirim. Although villagers usually did not attend the rituals in Gangtok, the sending of their representative with an offering of grain, the receipt of the salt for the village from the Palace and their own simultaneous performance of the *nesol* in honour of Dzö-nga, Yapdü and all the deities of Sikkim, effectively linked Tingchim to the Palace, the land and all other Sikkimese villages through the performance of a national ritual. In this way, Dzö-nga played an important role as a national symbol and it is said that all ethnic communities, whatever their origins and whether Hindu or Buddhist, used to recognise and worship Kangchendzönga if they considered themselves first and foremost as Sikkimese.

In the early days of fieldwork in Tingchim, I expected to witness a lama-shaman encounter similar to that described by Mumford whereby the traditions of the Gurung shamans and Tibetan lamas in Gyasumdo

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49. This partial description of the Pang Lhabsol ritual is based on a few people's rendition of the events as they remembered them. The main contributions are from T.S. Gyaltzen and Captain S. Yongda.

were interacting as rival regimes (1989: 10). However, such confrontation in Tingchim did not present itself and instead, the ritual cooperation between lamas and shamans unfolded as a well integrated ritual complex<sup>50</sup>. Although each ritual tradition in Tingchim, in theory, corresponds to a particular ritual field dominated by a specific altar and specialist performing distinct ritual offerings, these are not to be regarded as separate belief systems and practices. Rather they should be perceived as complementary elements that have moulded each other through decades if not centuries of interaction. Any *bön* or Buddhist aspect of this pantheon may be invoked in the process of village ritual life, usually independently but sometimes through regular and curing rituals that require various levels of cooperation such as in the Chirim. Rivalries are rare and, until recently, not explicitly between *bön* and Buddhism since at the village level, all equally recognise the pantheon of the other while being fundamentally Buddhists. The chanting of the *khelen* remains the ritual performance shared by all which best symbolises this creative encounter. And whether performed by the lamas as part of the *nesol*, by the *pawo* for the *pholha molha* or by the *bönben bongthing* for the *ajo anyo* and other ambiguous supernatural beings inhabiting the territory, the *khelen* will be chanted to please or appease the deities of the land and seek the protective blessings of Kangchendzönga.

## 8. Conclusion: The progressive influence of high Buddhism

For the Lhopos, although Dzö-nga's Buddhist identity was revealed and promoted by Lhatsün Chenpo in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the mountain deity did not shed his secular identities immediately. The taming has been a slow process and Tingchim villagers still annually sacrificed an ox for Dzö-nga and all the local supernatural beings of Sikkim until the early 1960s. Nebesky-Wojkowitz also quotes a Sikkimese source as saying "If... danger from tigers arises, then this is magic due to the dissatisfaction of *mDzod lnga stag rtse*<sup>51</sup>. Sacrifice a white yak. If no white yak is available, then make an offer as a substitute the image of a white yak made of butter and long like an arrow" (1976: 20). These examples suggest that, in

50. For a discussion about the lama-shaman relation in Tingchim and the views of other authors on the subject in the context of other Tibetan cultural regions see my dissertation *Buddhism and Shamanism in Village Sikkim* (2002).

51. Dzö-nga is often referred to as Dzö-nga *tak tsi* (*stag rtse*) or tiger peak.

the eyes of the Lhopos, Dzö-nga retained the ambivalent character of an untamed mountain deity for much longer than it is suggested in the scriptures. But today, the taming process seems just about complete. Although Dzö-nga's secular identities are still honoured by the village lamas in Tingchim, he is never found to be at the root of someone's illness or misfortune and blood will no longer be offered to him directly. Nevertheless, the debate over his identities is still ongoing. When discussing these with a rinpoche in Gangtok, he thought it impossible for Dzö-nga to take possession of the *pawo* in Tingchim and address the audience. In his eyes, as god of wealth, Dzö-nga was too high a Buddhist deity and could not possibly descend from his heavenly abode upon the body of a village *pawo*. The rinpoche concluded that the possessing entity had to be an imposter.

Similar ideas are slowly finding their way back to the village as the lama-students return to the village after studying under the supervision of Tibetan rinpoches and knowledgeable lamas who established educational institutions or found employment in Sikkim following the taking over of Tibet in 1959. As the well educated lama-students take the place of their fathers in the ritual hierarchy of the village and the *bön* ritual specialists pass away, so are their rituals being forgotten, and with them, the identities of the *pholha molha* and the supernatural beings of the land including that of Kangchendzönga.

And so it would seem that Karmay's observation that usually, mountain deities were not the object of both secular and Buddhist cults, has gradually taken place in Sikkim. From ambivalent *pholha*, Dzö-nga progressively became a Buddhist deity.

Thus, following his 17<sup>th</sup> century conversion, Dzö-nga's warrior aspect as a *pholha* seems to have simply been gradually reoriented, from defending the person, the lineage and the territory against worldly enemies, towards defending the Dharma, the monasteries and Sikkim as a newly established Buddhist kingdom against potentially untamed subjects of the king. And his qualities as a worldly provider of grains and male descendents, replaced as a provider of Buddhist scriptures and other spiritual treasures.

More recently, Dzö-nga seems to have found new protective roles on Sikkim's ritual platform of the 1990s. Now a minority in their ex-Kingdom, the Lhopos are increasingly being faced with threats to the survival of their language, culture, and economic and political rights. These threats have led to the need to assert their unity and original Sikkimese,

or 'sons of the soil' identity which has found perfect expression in the worship of the deities of the land and its sacred locations. Such rituals clearly highlight the Lhopos' ancient relation with the land and effectively distinguish them from Tibetans and people of Nepalese origin who, as recent immigrants and uprooted people do not recognise these supernatural beings. The monasteries, the spiritual treasures, the sacred sites and their rituals are the only thing left to the Lhopos which confers on them a sense of identity and a focus for their past history.

In this context, Buddhist rituals in honour of territorial deities have undergone a certain revival among politically conscious Lhopo lamas. The best example is that of the lamas of Pemayangtse monastery, who in 1994, took it upon themselves to resume, within the precinct of their own monastery, the performance of the Pang Lhabsol ritual which had been suspended some years before at the Palace's chapel. More recently, preserving the sacred sites and spiritual treasures located at the heart of Demojong was the object of a campaign against the construction of a 30 megawatt hydro-electric power station to be built on the sacred Rathong Chu river at Yuksum in West Sikkim (Schaefer 1995). The *nesol* specifically mentions not to destroy hills, rocks and cliffs within Demojong and the sound of the blasting of the dynamite at the project site had a powerful psychological impact on the Lhopos; it was as if the deities' abodes were crumbling to pieces. In this case, the preservation of Demojong became a rallying issue for the Lhopo community to unite and wake up to the fact that they were losing their identity and strength as a community because of personal financial and other political interests. During the campaign, the *nesol* ritual, held in honour of Kangchendzönga and all other supernatural beings of the land was repeatedly performed in many houses throughout Sikkim. The rituals were held in an effort to appease the deities following the destruction of the sacred land or with the hope of invoking Kangchendzönga's blessings for the success of the campaign.

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