

SECULARISM AND THE BUDDHIST MONASTERY OF
PEMAYANGTSE IN SIKKIM¹

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Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma's² account of the founding of the kingdom of Sikkim, shows us a politico-religious system in line with the concept of separate spiritual and temporal domains such as encountered in Tibet.³ However, this concept is very distinct from the Indian notion of secularism, which can be formulated as a privatisation of the religious sphere.⁴ Indeed, the absolute separation of the lay and religious domains appears to be equally problematic in both Sikkim and Tibet.⁵ The functioning of the royal monastery of Pemayangtse in Sikkim clearly demonstrates that there can be many interpenetrations of these two domains (that we can also refer to as conjugation), and which are not at variance with certain Buddhist concepts. The relationship that existed between Pemayangtse monastery and the kingdom of Sikkim represents one of the forms of this interpenetration in the Tibetan cultural area.

When considering the functioning of Pemayangtse today and in the past, I will examine the relationship between the monastery and the

¹ This paper is adapted from my doctoral thesis entitled: *Le monastère bouddhique de Pemayangtse au Sikkim (Himalaya oriental, Inde) : un monastère dans le monde*. This thesis is the result of two years of fieldwork in India (1996-1997 and 1998-1999), financed by an Indo-French grant from the French Department of Foreign Affairs and the ICCR, Delhi. My long stay in Sikkim was made possible thanks to the Home Ministry of Sikkim and the Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, Gangtok.

² *History of Sikkim* (Namgyal: 1908). This text can be considered as a hagiography (Steinmann: 1998). It has the twofold interest to be based on ancient sources and to be written by witnesses of more recent, related events. Its hagiographic character is also interesting because it shows the ideology which determines its authors' reading of history. Its context must be taken into account: it was the end of the nineteenth century, while Sikkim was a British protectorate and its authors, the king and the queen of Sikkim, were under house arrest. The threat to the Sikkimese monarchical power is probably one of the determining factors of the conception of the Sikkimese ancient history which appears in this text.

³ See D. S. Ruegg: 1995.

⁴ On this notion, see for instance T.N. Madan: 1991.

⁵ *Op. cit.*: 11.

political power. First, I will focus on Pemayangtse as a monastery of royal lamas, then on its role as an institution, and finally on its relationship to the land itself.

Pemayangtse: a monastery of royal lamas

In the account of the founding of the kingdom of Sikkim, the spiritual and temporal domains are presented as separate, but also closely interrelated. According to it, the first king of Sikkim, Phuntsok Namgyal was enthroned by three Tibetan religious men of the Nyingmapa school (Tib. *rnying ma pa*)⁶, the school of the old tantras: Lhatsun Namka Jigme (1597-1654?), or Lhatsun Chenpo, Kathog Kuntu Zangpo and Ngadak Sempa Phuntsok Rigzin⁷, who consecrated him 'ruler according to the *dharma* principles' (*chogyal*, Tib. *chos rgyal*). The coronation of the Sikkimese Chogyal remained a religious ceremony (Tib. *gser khri mnga' gsol*, literally 'the installation on the power of the golden throne') until the fall of the monarchy in 1975. Moreover, the Buddhist populations of Sikkim regard their country as a holy place, and the joining together of the political and religious domains is made manifest in the Tibetan name of Sikkim, Denjong (Tib. *'bras ljongs*), which designates at the same time the kingdom and the holy place.

The story of the founding of the kingdom of Sikkim as told by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma supports Chie Nakane's analysis according to which 'The establishment of *gonpa* has been part of the political scheme of the central government from the beginning of Sikkim history.'⁸ Phuntsok Namgyal and the three Tibetan religious men are said to have jointly founded the first political and religious

⁶ The terms preceded by the mention 'Tib.' are Tibetan terms transliterated according to the Wylie system (1959). The transliteration is indicated only at the first occurrence of the term.

⁷ Lhatsun Chenpo was a Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) master. He is regarded as the chief propagator of Buddhism in Sikkim (A. Balikci-Denjongpa, 2002: 22). His dates of birth and death differ in the sources. See *Gazetteer of Sikkim* ([1894] 1989: 248), Tulku Thondup Rinpoche (1986: 90), R. A. Stein 1981: 54, and Thudob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma (1908: 34). Kathog Kuntu Zangpo belonged to the Kathogpa lineage (Tib. *ka' thog pa*) of Kathog Dorje Den monastery in East Tibet. Neither L. A. Waddell (*Gazetteer of Sikkim*) nor Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma give his dates of birth and death. Ngadak Sempa Phuntsok Rigzin came from the Dorjeta monastery (Tib. *rdo rje brag*) in Central Tibet. He introduced the North Terma (Tib. *byang gter*) in Sikkim.

⁸ 1966: 219.

institutions in Yoksam after the enthronement of the Chogyal, the latter taking care of the construction of the royal palace, and the religious men of one monastery each. This account probably refers to the role of the religious institutions in the centralisation of Lhopo's political power in Sikkim.⁹ Indeed, after settling in Sikkim, the Lhopo converted the local populations, such as the Lepcha, to Buddhism and dominated them.¹⁰ These conversions were simultaneous to the establishment of the centralised political power,¹¹ and probably even served it.

However, the notion of separation of the temporal and the religious domains¹² appears on several occasions in the descriptions of this time. To begin with, the three Tibetan religious men choose a 'layman' or 'donor' (Tib. *sbyin bdag*, literally 'the owner of the donation')¹³ to rule the kingdom. The relations between the king and the Buddhist religious men, and generally between the lay population and the religious men, as revealed in the account can be found in the entire Tibetan cultural area: the religious men furnish the religious services for which the laymen make donations to accumulate 'merits' (Tib. *bsod nams*) in order to increase the fruit of their actions in a future life.¹⁴ The Sikkimese Chogyal is the donor *par excellence*, as were the kings of ancient Tibet or of Zanskar.¹⁵ Theoretically, he cannot be a religious

⁹ The name 'Lhopo' is the one more often assumed by the ethnic group that migrated from Tibet and Bhutan to Sikkim, probably from the thirteenth century onwards. The Chogyal of Sikkim belong to this group. The Lhopo are generally referred to as Bhutia, but this term is problematic because it designates all the Himalayan groups originally from Tibet and because, according to its definition given in the Census of India 1991, this category includes some ethnic groups with which the Lhopo do not identify. A. Balikci-Denjongpa justifies her use of the term 'Lhopo' by the fact that the name 'Sikkimese', also given to the Bhutia, may be confusing in a context where they now represent a minority of the total population of Sikkim (2002: 5). I will consequently refer to them as 'Lhopo', this term being more precise than 'Bhutia'.

¹⁰ B. Steinmann, 1998 and 1996. See also C. Nakane, 1966: 215.

¹¹ B. Steinmann, 1996: 186.

¹² According to Tibetan literary sources (twelfth century onward) retrospectively dealing with the royal Tibetan period, the temporal and religious orders were clearly distinguished ideologically: the king was in charge of the political, economical and juridical affairs while the monks dealt with the supra-mundane sphere (D. S. Ruegg, 1991 and 1995, I. Riaboff, 1997: 307). This literature is not contemporary with the period that it describes and is coloured by Buddhism. It may have been used as a model of kingship by the authors of the account of the founding of the Sikkimese kingdom.

¹³ *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, 1989: 249 and Thudob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, 1908: 27.

¹⁴ R. A. Stein 1981: 152.

¹⁵ I. Riaboff, 1997: 108.

man¹⁶ and does not have any spiritual power although the support and the protection of the religious community and the promotion of Buddhism are a part of his charges. He is indeed the protector of the doctrine, which, in turn, guides his political actions as the term 'chogyal' indicates. By saying that Phuntsok Namgyal took care of the construction of the royal palace while the religious men built the monasteries, Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma actually meant that the religious and temporal functions were separated.

However, Phuntsok Namgyal and Lhatsun Chenpo would have together chosen the locations of Pemayangtse monastery¹⁷ and of Rabdentse, the second capital of the kingdom, on a hill situated to the south of Yoksam. Pemayangtse was only erected as a durable institution in 1705, under the third Chogyal's rule, Chagdor Namgyal (1686-1717). It was built on a peak (as its name indicates: Tib. *pad ma g.yang rtse*, 'the happy lotus peak') dominating Rabdentse a few hundred metres below, and was obviously the royal chapel of the palace (Tib. *gtsug lag khang*).

Phuntsok Namgyal and Lhatsun Chenpo would have set the functioning principles of Pemayangtse. The monastery was intended to play a unique role in the kingdom: its lamas would be the king's spiritual masters (literally 'root master', Tib. *rtsa ba'i bla ma*). Thus, while founding the monastery, the first Chogyal and its religious master institutionalised the relation of chaplain and donor by which they were already linked.

However, according to Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma's History of Sikkim, it seems that the functioning principles of Pemayangtse were only set during the third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal's reign once the institution was in a position to perpetuate itself. The authors relate that after Jigme Pawo's (1682- ?) departure (the incarnation of the third Lhatsun Chenpo and Chagdor Namgyal's spiritual master):

Raja Chagdor Namgyal and Khanchen Rolpai Dorji [the Pemayangtse abbot] founded the present Pemionchi monastery, about an arrow's flight to the east of the site of

¹⁶ Two Sikkimese Chogyals were however lamas (Sikyong Namgyal, 1819-1874, and Sikyong Tulku, 1879-1914). However, they acceded to the throne because their elder brothers had died.

¹⁷ Thudob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma wrote: '*Lha-bTsun and the Maharaja, together selected the sites of the Rabdentse palace, the Pemiongchi monastery, besides building several other places of worship [...]*' (1908: 34).

the old monastery, founded in the time of Lha-tsun. Raising a conscription of the middling son of every three sons in a house from amongst the Bhutea community of the subjects, they were enrolled amongst the priesthood in the monastery, which thus became an influential body of priesthood.¹⁸ They established the schools of exposition and devotional rituals. They borrowed from Mindol-Ling monastery in Tibet, all the forms of psalm chanting, Mandala inscribing and dancing.¹⁹ They also had a book of priestly discipline framed in accordance to the requirements of the Vinaya part of the Kah-gyur [Tib. *bka' 'gyur*]. Henceforth the Pemionchi Lamas were to be the chief spiritual guides of every succeeding Raja. [...] He endowed the Pemionchi monastery with external and internal ornamentations, requirements etc., on a large scale. Then he framed the laws and rules for them. Next he enforced an importance upon the 108 Trapas [lamas]²⁰ of the Ta-Tsang ['pure lamas'], and appointed 108 families as their chief laymen, for supporting the 108 Lamas, called Garnas, who bound themselves by oath and on bond to be faithful. Thus did the Raja purely fulfil the duties of a really righteous Ruler, whose aim was to rule according to the dictates of religion.²¹

The Pemayangtse lamas attribute their 'code of conduct' (*chayig*, Tib. *chad yig*) to Jigme Pawo²² even though the above shows that a code of discipline in accordance with the *vinaya sūtra* was implemented by the king only after the lama's departure. If the 'code of conduct' of the Sikkimese religious community considered as the

¹⁸ The second son's conscription system secure the human reproduction for a religious institution, and thus makes it durable. The appointment of donors had the same function. According to the text, it was the conscription system which made Pemayangtse as an 'influential body of priesthood'.

¹⁹ The introduction of the Nyingma teachings from the monastery of Mindoling (Tib. *smin grol gling*) was most probably initiated by Jigme Pawo since it was his affiliation monastery. Mindoling, located in the East of Central Tibet, transmits the teachings of the Drukpa (Tib. '*brug pa*) and Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) sub-schools.

²⁰ The term 'lama' designates in Sikkim all Buddhist religious men, being or not a spiritual master. I will hereafter use it to refer to different types of Buddhist religious men, as it is in use in Sikkim.

²¹ 1908: 42-43.

²² This text would be part of a political history written by Jigme Pawo.

oldest in Sikkim had been composed by Lhatsun Chenpo, another one (Tib. *'bras ljongs chad yig*) was written in 1870²³ by Chogyal Sikyong Namgyal, a lama who acceded to the throne because his eldest brother had died. The above quotation shows that the composition of a religious 'code of conduct' is a part of the actions that a 'righteous ruler' has to carry out for the development of Buddhism. It is part of the framework that permits a religious institution to perpetuate itself. The Pemayangtse lamas' idea of their *chayig's* composer might reflect an actual need to emphasise the separation between the religious and political domains, as we will see below. According to them, the measures described by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma are indeed part of the Chogyal's role although the latter cannot interfere on the spiritual aspect of monastic life.

The notion of '*Ta-Tsang*' which appears in the above quotation also illustrates the interpenetration of the spiritual and temporal domains. The term of *ta-tsang* can have two meanings: the 'nest of lamas' (Tib. *grva tshang*)²⁴, which designates the study section of an important monastery, or the 'pure lama' (Tib. *grva gtsang*). The second meaning refers to the Pemayangtse lamas' nobility: a man's father and mother should both be descendants of the founding ancestor of the Lhopo's original group of noble clans (Khye Bumsa, the first mythical migrant who came from Tibet to Sikkim in the thirteenth century) to be allowed into the monastic community of Pemayangtse. He is consequently referred to as '*ta-tsang*'. Purity is a religious notion²⁵ used in this context to symbolise Pemayangtse lamas' social status, and to describe the relations that permit its acquisition.²⁶

The same descent rule determines the status of Khye Bumsa's lay Lhopo descendants within the Pemayangtse area. Khye Bumsa is regarded as a common ancestor to the Chogyal's family and to the Lhopo descent groups called 'the twelve major Lhopo clans' (Tib. *lho rigs rus chen bcu gnyis*). The number twelve is ideal; these clans are in reality more numerous. When a Lhopo descends from Khye Bumsa through his father and mother, he is a member of a 'pure clan' (Tib. *rus gtsang*, *rus* literally means 'bone') and thus belongs to the social strata

²³ This text, that I read in English, was translated by Khenpo Chowang Acharya of the Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, Gangtok, from the original Tibetan text kept in the royal library.

²⁴ In Tibetan, *grva pa* refers to novices. In Sikkim, it is regarded as equivalent to 'lama'.

²⁵ During rituals, lamas purify (Tib. *sangs*) the offerings that were touched by 'pollution' (Tib. *sgrib*).

²⁶ As it is in Dolpo: C. Jest, 1975: 257.

called 'yarip' (Tib. *ya rigs*, literally the 'above strata'), which distinguishes itself from the 'ourip' strata (Tib. 'og rigs) or 'low people'. Thus, the Pemayangtse lamas and lay Lhopo from high clans belong to the same social strata. The first bear the title of 'yab', a term which can mean 'father' but can also be a contraction of the Tibetan word 'yar pa', equivalent to *yarip*. The Pemayangtse lamas share the title 'yab' with the Sikkimese landlords known as *kazi*.

In the Pemayangtse area today, this rule of status acquisition still determines the choice of husband and wife, and the 'above strata' is almost endogamous. Some high status young Lhopo still pretend to marry women from the same status as themselves so that their son may become a lama of Pemayangtse. While the clan organisation is losing its importance in other parts of Sikkim, the admission rule to Pemayangtse has led to the preservation of the social organisation and hierarchy of the area. The monastery is in this way again implicated in the temporal domain.

If Chagdor Namgyal 'enforced an importance upon the 108 Trapas of the Ta-Tsang', as Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma explained, the formulation of this rule is attributed to Lhatsun Chenpo. The Pemayangtse lamas descent rule was probably related to their close association with the Chogyal. These lamas were not only the Chogyal's spiritual guides, they were the sole lamas entitled to hold the rituals for the king and his family: the coronation, the funerals and the marriages of the royal family. They were also the only Sikkimese lamas empowered to perform the three major public annual ceremonies at the royal chapel: Panglhasol (Tib. *dpang lha gsol*) on the seventh month, Dupchen Kagye (Tib. *sgrub chen bka' brgyad*) on the tenth month, and Guru Tamar (Tib. *gu ru drag dmar*) on the twelfth month.²⁷ Moreover, one of the Pemayangtse lamas had a political function: he was nominated by his head lamas to sit in the Royal Council. He was later referred to as 'councillor' or 'executive councillor'.²⁸

Being the only Sikkimese lamas empowered to enthrone the Chogyal, the Pemayangtse lamas had the monopoly on the legitimisation of royal power. Thus, the admission rule to Pemayangtse permitted to confer this task to the king's close kin. Access to the royal lamas' functions was restricted to a small group of clans which already had access to political power and who monopolised the highest religious and political functions. The founding of Pemayangtse might

²⁷ These three ceremonies were the occasion of ritual masked dances (Tib. 'cham).

²⁸ Pemayangtse has not been the only Sikkimese monastery to send such a representative. See Thudub Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, 1908.

indeed have been done with the intention to surround the king with his most faithful Lhupo subjects who could help him reinforce his power on ethnic groups reluctant to political centralisation. The functioning rules of Pemayangtse can perhaps be explained in the light of ethnic conflict, as one of my informants, a lama from Gangtok, suggests:

The Pemayangtse lamas are the only ones entitled to give initiation (Tib. *dbang*) to members of the royal family. When this rule was established, there were some Limbu and Lepcha. Pemayangtse was then built to protect the royal lamas' lineages. If members of other ethnic groups could enter Pemayangtse's religious community, and thus be in position to initiate the king, this would have brought misfortune.

Pemayangtse monastery did not cease to exist with the fall of the monarchy in 1975. Since then, a seat in Sikkim's Legislative Assembly has been reserved to a representative of Sikkim's religious community (referred to by its Sanskrit name *saṅgha*), and the entire lama population of the State elects this member. Apart from this important change, the admission rule to Pemayangtse has remained unchanged, and the Pemayangtse lamas continued to perform the three annual ceremonies in the royal chapel until the early 1990s.²⁹ This is an indicator that the royal lamas' role is perhaps more concerned with the whole state rather than with the king's person. Moreover, the royal lamas' training is not the only reason for Pemayangtse to be, the monastery is also the lamas' religious institution.

The Pemayangtse lamas' ways of life: between religious life and life in the world

Nowadays, none of the Pemayangtse lamas have been ordained into celibacy (Tib. *dge slong*). They relate however that Lhatsun Chenpo initially conceived Pemayangtse as a celibate monastery. We have also seen that, according to Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, Chagdor Namgyal implemented a code of conduct in Pemayangtse in accordance with the *vinaya* (Tib. '*dul ba*) *sūtra*. It is more precisely in

²⁹ The reasons for the suspension of Panglhasol at the royal chapel will be discussed below.

accordance with the *vinaya sūtra*'s section called *prātimokṣa* (Tib. *so sor thar pa*).

But if most of the Tibetan Buddhist schools consider the *dge slong* ordination in accordance with the prescriptions of *prātimokṣa* as necessary in order to engage upon the two paths opened to a lama (the way of Enlightenment and the way of *tantra*), it is however not considered a necessity among the Nyingmapa.³⁰ Chagdor Namgyal might have been led to introduce the *prātimokṣa* prescriptions in Pemayangtse after his journey to Tibet where he became close to the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyamtso (1683-1705 or 1706).³¹

Rather than following the *sūtra* tradition, the Pemayangtse lamas explain that they follow the *tantra* tradition upon which the Nyingmapa school particularly insists. The system of ritual actions combined with meditation practices that constitute what is called *tantra*³² has both supra-mundane and mundane purposes, the former to access the state of Buddha, and the latter to bring prosperity, fertility, healing, abundant harvests, etc.³³ The Pemayangtse lamas consider the seniors of the monastery as 'tantric masters' (Tib. *sngags pa*) independent from monasteries – which is not the case of the Pemayangtse lamas as we will see – who are tantric ritual specialists and often householders.³⁴

We can differentiate here between two types of religious men who are theoretically in opposition³⁵: the religious man living 'in the world', which means living in society with other men (he is married and householder); and the celibate lama, a religious man living 'out of the world', detached from society, and whose life is entirely devoted to religion. In Pemayangtse, these two types of religious men coexisted diachronically and synchronically.

The possibility the Pemayangtse lamas have of getting married is however seen as a recent one. And according to my informants within the Pemayangtse area, a lama is a non-married man who shares his life between meditation and ritual practices. The survival of this religious man could mean that there were still some celibate lamas in Pemayangtse until recent times, a fact that was confirmed by my eldest informants. But these accounts also reveal that all the ancient lamas were not necessarily celibate. Some Families in the area do actually

³⁰ G. Tucci and W. Heissig, 1973: 149.

³¹ R. A. Stein, 1981: 56-57.

³² R. Gombrich, 1984: 14 and 86, D. L. Snellgrove, 1987: 173.

³³ *Op. cit.*: 235.

³⁴ P. Kvaerne, 1984: 262, R. A. Stein, 1981, and G. Tucci and W. Heissig, 1973: 152-153.

³⁵ See L. Dumont, 1966.

descend from Pemayangtse lamas. Rather, it means that the prescription of celibacy could be avoided. This possibility of getting married does not contradict Nyingma notions of religious life. They give more importance than other schools to the dogma according to which 'everything is in the mind' (Tib. *sems tsam*, 'nothing but thought')³⁶, which means that the illusory character of what we perceive can be better experimented while being in contact with society. As Pemayangtse lama told me: 'It's more important to be a good practitioner than a non-married man.' Thus, it seems that even in the past, various ways of life coexisted between the two 'out of the world' and 'in the world' extremes. But the 'out of the world' way of life of the lama still needs to be explained. Some retreats are still practised in Pemayangtse today, but it is said that in the past, the lamas lived almost all year in the retreat houses (*tasha*, Tib. *grva zhag*) surrounding Pemayangtse's main temple until old age or a health problem prevented them to live within the cold of the height and the lack of comfort of the *tasha*. They also devoted more time than today to meditation.³⁷

The location of Pemayangtse itself reveals its early function as an institution for lamas living in retreat from the world: it was an 'isolated place', the first meaning of the word '*gonpu*' (Tib. *dgon pa*) now being translated by 'monastery'. Apart from Rabdentse, the closest buildings to Pemayangtse are recent: the village of Pelling as the highest part of Nako were built in the 1960s; Tikjuk, developed with the settlement of administrative offices, is even more recent. In the past, almost one and a half hour walk was required to reach Pemayangtse from its closest village, Chumbung.

Some constructions around the monastery are a reminder of rules that are no longer followed. Below the monastery is located Jetsun Mingyur Palden's throne (Tib. *khri*), the wife of a Mindoling abbot who came to seek refuge in Sikkim during the eighteenth century. She gave religious teachings to the Pemayangtse lamas on this throne because women were not allowed into the monastery. The monastery's border

³⁶ G. Tucci and W. Heissig, 1973: 57.

³⁷ They are four forms of meditation practised during retreats in the *tasha*: the '100, 000 prostrations' (Tib. *phyag 'bum*), the '100, 000 long *mantra*' (Tib. *yi dam brgya ring* ou *yid kyi phyag rgya*, 'concentration on the deities' attributes'), the '100, 000 long *mantra* with offering of *mandala*', and the '*yoga guru*' (Tib. *bla ma'i rnal 'byor*). Each form requires a two month retreat, eight months being necessary to complete the whole cycle. It is said that nowadays, all the lamas have to practice at least once a year the '100, 000 prostrations' and the '100, 000 long *mantra*'. It takes four months, usually practised during the summer.

was marked by a *chorten* (Tib. *mchod rten*) called *tabab chorten* (Tib. *rita 'bab mchod rten*), 'to get off the horse'. The visitors had to walk from this point, deaden their animal's bell with a cloth and remain quiet.

Between 1996 and 1999, the period during which I was residing in Sikkim, the number of candidates to the ceremony of integration (Tib. *sgrig chug*, literally 'to enter into the rule') into Pemayangtse's religious community was increasing.³⁸ This ceremony is generally held during childhood and initiated by the family. Today, only part of the adult lamas lead a way of life comparable to those of the past, while an important section leads a lay life-style.³⁹ However, an intermediary category composed of lamas who went through religious studies does exist. These were earning their life teaching the Lhopo dialect (Tib. *lho skad*) or iconography (Tib. *lha 'bri pa*). Some of my informants in the area jokingly referred to these three categories as 'full time lama', 'part time lama' and 'modern lama'. These expressions are descriptive enough to be taken seriously. These categories did not previously exist as the use of English highlights it.

Concerning the 'full time lama', if they devote less time to the monastery and to meditation than in the past, they are still considered officiants of tantric practices. Their studies in Pemayangtse trained them in the performance of ritual.⁴⁰ In addition to the regular monastic ceremonies, the Pemayangtse lamas hold rituals with both supra-mundane and mundane purposes, the latter generally being sponsored by lay donors, for instance in the case of exorcistic rituals (Tib. *zlog thabs*).

A lama can deepen its first training by asking an elder lama the 'speech' (Tib. *lung*) and initiation (Tib. *dbang*) to a text to be able to meditate (Tib. *sgrub*, literally, 'accomplish' or 'achieve'). He can also

³⁸ During this ceremony, the boy takes some lay practitioner's vows (Tib. *dge bsnyen*). Even in the past, the fully ordained celibate lama's vows could only be taken from the age of fifteen with the family's consent.

³⁹ The study of the 'State of Sikkim, electoral roll 1995, Assembly constituency - 32 Sangha, block: Pemayangtse Gonpa', made with the help of Lupon Chungpo of Pemayangtse, reveals that of 111 adult lamas, 31 % led a religious life, 15 % were studying in a monastic university, 21 % were teachers, and 33 % led a lay life-style. Thus, lamas involved into the religious life were still the most majority.

⁴⁰ They first learn Tibetan writing and then memorise some religious texts. This course of study is called *chos rgyud* or the 'transmission of religious tradition' and takes several years. This is followed by liturgical practices (Tib. *cho ga phyag len*) accompanied by religious acts (Tib. *mchod*).

continue his studies in a monastic college.⁴¹ The specialisation he will acquire will help him be more in demand as a lama by laymen or to become a teacher. The men who went through the ordination ceremony in Pemayangtse but did not receive a religious education do not officiate at rituals. However, as the other lamas, they have to fulfil a series of functions or service for the community known as ranks (Tib. *go gnas*).⁴² Today, these ranks link each lama to the monastic community as they did in the past. Thus, there are no independent lamas attached to the monastery. These 'modern lamas' however cannot reach the highest positions in the monastic hierarchy or fulfil the permanent ranks. But they have to take part in the annual ceremonies where the whole religious community gathers (Tib. *tshogs 'dzoms byed*, literally 'to meet in assembly'). Nowadays, Guru Tamar ceremony is the only ritual fulfilling this gathering function for the reason that it takes place during winter vacations.

The Pemayangtse lamas' way of life has obviously changed in the recent past. We can recognise a gradation between the 'out' and 'in the world' way of life that was already existing in the past. But recently, this gradation has become closer to the worldly way of life with the 'full time lamas' no longer being celibate and the 'modern lamas' leading complete lay lives.⁴³

Several reasons can explain the choice made by some men to teach or to lead a lay life after they took religious vows. First amongst them, according to my informants, is economical: it is difficult for a lama to properly earn his life by performing rituals and a certain area can only support a limited number of lamas. Indeed, while the donors' numbers have decreased, they also involve themselves less in religious activities and rarely support lamas undergoing retreats. Nowadays, only the most

⁴¹ There are two in Gangtok: the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, a government institute, and Prince Wangchuk Namgyal's college (Tib. *bshad grva gtsug lag khang*). In these institutes, the lamas study canonical Buddhist texts (Tib. *bka' 'gyur* and *bstan 'gyur*). Some of the Pemayangtse lamas also studied in Siliguri, Sarnath, South India and Nepal. In the past, Pemayangtse lamas went at least once in their life to Mindoling to complete their training. Political conflicts between Tibet and Sikkim due to British intervention at the end of the nineteenth century might have caused the end of these travels.

⁴² For the detail of these ranks, see *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, 1989.

⁴³ The expression 'lay lama' seems contradictory. The title 'yab' is usually attributed to the men who went through the ordination ceremony, whatever life they may now lead. The use of this title reveals that belonging to Pemayangtse's religious community, if only formally, conveys a certain social status. However, most of these 'modern lamas' do not consider themselves as lamas.

experimented lamas, which also means the eldest, are enough in demand by lay donors to earn their life performing rituals.

Concerning the decreasing number of donors, it might be due to a change of values: the distance from the world a lama has to maintain is no longer considered an important value. The lama's family life is another reason that prevents him from leading a religious life. And the lama's religious life is often considered as a remnant of the past; the use of the expression 'modern lama' to designate laymen who took religious vows indicates that the 'normal' lamas are 'not modern'.

The change in the Pemayangtse lamas' way of life is however deplored and is considered to result from the fall of the Sikkimese monarchy. With the Chogyal, the monasteries have indeed lost their protector and main donor. The integration of Sikkim in the Indian Union has opened the doors of Sikkim to a market economy in which money is an essential value. It has also introduced the Indian notion of secularism, which leads to a privatisation of religious institutions, thus a loss of resources and prestige for the monasteries as we will see below. The following section, describing Pemayangtse's relations with the land over time, will also illustrate the possible depth of the relations between the religious and temporal domains.

Pemayangtse and the land

Pemayangtse is a part of the group of Sikkimese monasteries called *gyen chen* (Tib. *dgon chen*) or 'major monastery', a status which partly comes from their possession of lands. The regular income of a monastery is referred to as 'support of *dharma*' (Tib. *chos gzhi*)⁴⁴, its product being devoted to religious activities.

According to Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, in the past, Sikkimese monasteries did not possess lands given by the Chogyal, but each were authorised to collect contributions from certain villages named to support them. They could also possess lands given by donors. Monasteries and lamas were exempted from labour services to the king and did not have to pay any contribution to him, as it was in ancient Tibet.⁴⁵

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a piece of land in the Plains which had first been given to a celibate lama by Chogyal

⁴⁴ S. C. Das translates this term 'endowment for the support of a religious institution' (1989: 433). In Tibet, the *chos gzhi* were the religious estates (P. Carrasco, 1959: 86).

⁴⁵ See P. Carrasco, 1959.

Gyurme Namgyal for services rendered to the State was later transferred in perpetuity to Pemayangtse monastery, with the agreement of the king 'On the condition of their performing a periodical ceremony for the sake of the deceased's and the Ruler's future welfare'.⁴⁶

In the course of time, Pemayangtse was given the right to collect some taxes on the territory situated between the four rivers Khale-chu, Rigne-chu (Rangit), Rathong-chu and Rimbik. The date of this donation does not win unanimous support. It would be during Chagdor Namgyal's rule for some informants, after the departure of Gurkha forces in the beginning of the nineteenth century for Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, or in 1888 according to a letter written by Chogyal Sikyong Tulku (1879-1914) that I could read in Pemayangtse.

Within the framework of the British's Land Settlement Program implemented from 1889 onward⁴⁷, five Sikkimese monasteries⁴⁸ acquired a function similar to those of the landlords or managers of landed estates. The monasteries could collect taxes on their respective estates, pay back the house tax (Tib. *khyim skyed*, Nep.⁴⁹ *duri khazana*) to the government, but unlike the landlords, could keep the whole collected land revenue for religious activities. Their other rights and duties were equal to those of the landlords: collection of sharecropping (Nep. *adhiya*) and farm rent (*kutiya*) on private lands (as it might have been before British intervention); water tax (Tib. *chu skyed*), in addition to land (Tib. *sa skyed*) and house taxes on small landowners; market and trade taxes; cardamom tax; wood and pasture taxes on non-cultivated monastic lands. They also had the right on tenants' labour services.

Monasteries also had to implement justice. On the Pemayangtse estate, as in any other monastic estate I suppose, the leading head was a group formed by the three head lamas of the monastery, the 'ritual master' (Tib. *rdo rje slob dpon*), the 'prior' (Tib. *dbu mdzed*) and the 'discipline master' (Tib. *chos 'khrims pa*) collectively referred to as *udorchosum* (Tib. *dbu rdor chos gsum*). The tax collection was carried out by 'tax collectors' (*mandal*) entitled by the *udorchosum*, and the management of the estate was supervised by the monastery's secretary (Tib. *drung yig*) also referred to as 'adda lama' from the name of his

⁴⁶ Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, 1908.

⁴⁷ This date is indicated by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma (1908, annexe: 37). L. E. Rose dates the British reforms in Sikkim after 1890 (1978: 214).

⁴⁸ It was the five *gyen chen*: Pemayangtse, Ralang, Rumtek, Phodang, and Phensang.

⁴⁹ 'Nep' means 'Nepalese'.

office in Gyalshing (*adda* means 'gathering place' or 'justice court')⁵⁰. Indeed, according to different informants, justice was either dispensed by the secretary, the *mandals* or the *udorchosum*. The disagreement on this matter perhaps indicates that this function is nowadays considered to contradict the lamas' role while it was probably not the case in the nineteenth century.

The monastic estates were maintained after the abolition of the Sikkimese landlord system in the early 1950s. The Pemayangtse estate remained under the direction of the *udorchosum* while other monastic estates were transferred to the Chogyal's Private Estate Ministry. As in the case of others, the monastery kept the land revenue following a governmental program of subsidies for religious institutions.⁵¹

Between the 1950s and 1973, the monasteries' rights over their landed estates were gradually transferred to the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department. As far as Pemayangtse is concerned, the Department paid back to the monastery part of the taxes it had collected till the 1980s. At the end of the 1990s, a group of Pemayangtse lamas was claiming back the taxes collected from this date onward and the right to collect taxes themselves. As other monasteries, Pemayangtse has few donated private lands, the revenue of which is devoted to a specific regular monastic ceremony.

My informants in the Pemayangtse area explain each right the monastery had since the nineteenth century according to a Buddhist framework: a group of lamas was directing the area rather than individual lamas; the collected revenues were devoted to religious activities and never for personal benefit or justice was implemented through intermediaries. They nevertheless agree to say that Pemayangtse had been the government of the area. The monastery thus had some political power (in the ancient Greek sense of the term 'politic' or city management). It could have been considered as a branch of the Chogyal's government while Gangtok was, at the time, a very distant place.

But the necessity to justify the political role the monastery had seem to me a recent one. This power had been conferred by the British and not by the Chogyal, but we can suppose that this was not in contradiction with the Buddhist conception of the lama/king relation at this time. The question of an absolute separation between the spiritual and temporal domains might have arisen only recently and the introduction of this question into Sikkim might lead my informants to

⁵⁰ A. C. Sinha, 1975: 24.

⁵¹ L. E. Rose: 221.

justify each right Pemayangtse monastery had. The question that remains is, following G. Tucci and W. Heissig⁵², whether the secularisation of the monastery has led to reduce the distance between the lamas and the world.

Conclusion

The question of separation of the spiritual and temporal domains arose recently in Sikkim with a polemic concerning the restoration of the performance of Panglhasol at the royal chapel. In an article published in the weekly *Sikkim Observer* in July 1997⁵³, Prince Wangchuk Namgyal gave his opinion explaining why Panglhasol could not yet be restored: 'These ceremonies [for the public good] should, whenever possible, be performed by monks who have achieved a certain level of practice, a state which our younger monks will take quite a few years to achieve through qualified guidance.' In this article, the Prince conveyed his desire to enhance the Sikkimese lamas' training and level of practice.⁵⁴ However, this article also implied that Sikkimese lamas, including Pemayangtse's, were more village lamas than tantric practitioners, and were thus too much involved 'in the world'.

The Prince's viewpoint and its expression is in line with a Chogyal's role and his royal ancestors' actions towards Sikkim's religious life and institutions. He defends an orthodox vision of Buddhism and this vision is not necessarily in line with some Sikkimese lamas' way of life. In the area I studied, Buddhist practice is indeed very much in demand to intervene in worldly matters.

These different concepts of religious practice may be ancient ones. There is indeed an important difference between the Sikkimese Chogyal, close to Tibet by tradition and kinship, and some Sikkimese lamas who might have had to deal with non-Buddhist religious practices and whose relation with Tibet had been cut decades ago. But these differences are also probably exacerbated by the political context: following its integration within India, Sikkim had to adopt the Indian Constitution in which 'secularism' is inscribed. We have seen that this notion could be understood as a privatisation of the religious sphere or

⁵² 1973: 150.

⁵³ Entitled 'Pang Lhasol pujas should be performed by qualified monks and organised by the public', 5th of July 1997, first page.

⁵⁴ Prince Wangchuk Namgyal devoted himself to years of meditation before founding a monastic college in Gangtok along with a meditation centre.

'The process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'.⁵⁵ If the Indian Constitution also guarantees to all citizens the right to choose, practice and propagate his religion, and secularism is in this way defined as a 'inter-religious understanding',⁵⁶ this concept of society is very different from the Sikkimese one. In addition to this, the implementation of secularism has led to the loss of economic rights and resources for the monasteries. Consequently, if the secularisation of Pemayangtse monastery in the nineteenth century has probably led to a sliding of the lamas' way of life toward the world, it seems that the secularisation of Sikkimese society since the 1970s has but contributed to the same movement.

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⁵⁵ Peter Berger, 1973 quoted by T.N. Madan, 1991: 394.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*: 409.

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