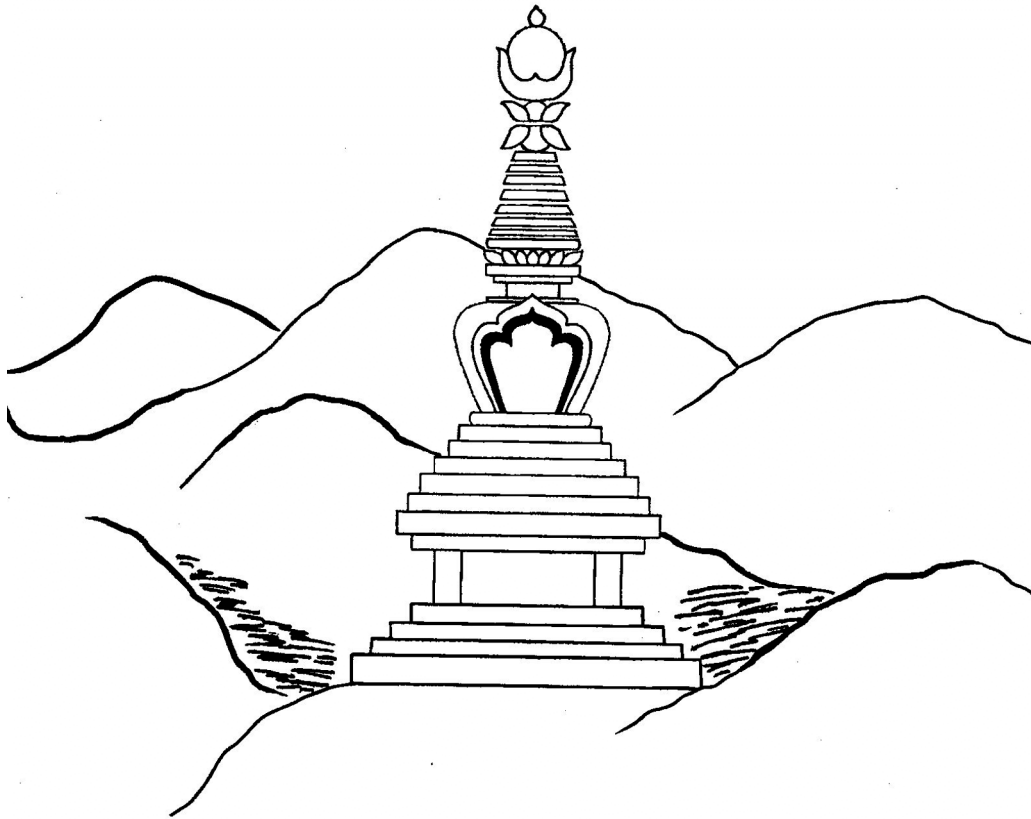


Bulletin of Tibetology



VOLUME 45

No. 2

VOLUME 46

No. 1

Special Issue

2010

The Bulletin of Tibetology seeks to serve the specialist as well as the general reader with an interest in the field of study. The motif portraying the Stupa on the mountains suggests the dimensions of the field.

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The Bulletin of Tibetology is published bi-annually by the Director, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim.

Annual subscription rates: South Asia, Rs150. Overseas, \$20.

Correspondence concerning bulletin subscriptions, changes of address, missing issues etc., to: Administrative Officer, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok 737102, Sikkim, India (directornitsikkim@gmail.com). Editorial correspondence should be sent to the Editor at the same address.

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PRINTED IN INDIA AT VEE ENN PRINT-O-PAC, NEW DELHI

BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

Volume 45 Number 2 2009

Volume 46 Number 1 2010

**THE DRAGON AND THE HIDDEN LAND:
SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL STUDIES ON SIKKIM
AND BHUTAN**

BHUTAN-SIKKIM PANEL AT THE 12TH SEMINAR OF THE
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR TIBETAN STUDIES,
VANCOUVER 2010

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION:
ALONG THE CROSSROADS OF BHUTAN AND SIKKIM

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Sikkim and Bhutan, whilst unique and diverse, share a number of social, cultural, geographical and historical similarities. Both countries were formed on the southern periphery of the ‘Tibetan world,’ in the seventeenth century as a result of religious hostilities in Central Tibet. For Bhutan this was sparked by a disputed succession in the ‘Brug pa branch of the bKa’ brgyud, leading to the flight of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. For Sikkim, the growing superiority of the dGe lugs pa school forced three lamas to abandon their patrons in search for the mythical Hidden Land. For much of their history Sikkim and Bhutan have shared a zone of contact through which, today, runs a common border. As this zone of contact lacked the precise definition of the current border, it became a region of exchange and interaction. On these cross-roads stands the abode of Ma sang khyung ‘dus (bdud), an important ancestral deity for Lhopo clans of Sikkim and the Ha pas of Bhutan. Similarly the languages of the valleys of Sikkim and the western valleys of Bhutan are close enough to be mutually intelligible, indicating, as Balikci has noted, that the rigidity of the current border has more to do with more recent political developments than distinct social, ethnic, cultural, or religious differences of the populations on either side (2008:73). No more is this clear than in the case of the Lepcha people. The ancestral homeland of this community straddles the borders of Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and West Bengal. Similarly the migrations of Ha pas from Bhutan penetrated as far west as the valleys around Sikkim’s premier monastery of Pemayangtse.

Geographical proximity and socio-cultural connections do not always guarantee political friendship, however. A zone of contact and exchange can also be a zone of conflict and competition. Indeed, the history of the political relations between the two countries, at least up until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has been characterised as much by war and conflict as it has by peace and alliance. The Chumbi Valley and the region of the Lepcha kingdom of Damzang (near modern

Kalimpong), became the scene in which the political ambitions of both countries were set. But to reduce the entire range of social, religious, linguistic and cultural connections between the people of Sikkim and Bhutan to the political ambitions of their rulers would be a reflection of only a small part of our knowledge of the shared history of these southern Himalayan peoples. Nor does it help us to understand, in their entirety, the current socio-cultural issues shaping and facing the contemporary societies of Sikkim and Bhutan.

It was from this wider all-inclusive approach to research on Sikkim and Bhutan that this volume emerged. On the basis of a series of discussions with colleagues working in Bhutan and Sikkim, most notably Françoise Pommaret, Anna Balikci, John Ardussi, Alex McKay and others, at the *Buddhist Himalaya* conference, convened in Gangtok by Alex McKay and Anna Balikci in 2008, the idea emerged to hold a specific Sikkim-Bhutan panel at the twelfth seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, in Vancouver during the Summer of 2010. The honour of chairing and organising that panel *Sikkim and Bhutan: Past and Present* and of editing its proceedings fell to the current author. This panel was subsequently followed by the Bhutan-Sikkim panel, chaired by Jenny Bentley, at the thirteenth IATS conference in Ulaan Bator in 2013.

Both those panels had a multi-disciplinary flavour. The focus on the geographical regions and peoples of, or historically associated with, Sikkim and/or Bhutan allowed ethnographers, historians, and sociologists to share their knowledge with each other and discuss themes and events that had or continue to have implications for the region, the Kingdom of Bhutan or the State of Sikkim. This current volume is intended to reflect the discussions that emerged from the first Sikkim-Bhutan panel.

One element of those discussions was the need to explore ‘the Sikkim-Bhutan interface.’ That involves the study of the relationships and connections of the people and states of the regions of Sikkim and Bhutan both in the past and in the present. Geographically, the Sikkim-Bhutan interface includes, in addition to the contemporary states of Sikkim and Bhutan, regions historically significant to both states. Today this would include Darjeeling/Kalimpong, Chumbi Valley, Eastern Nepal, The Doars, The North-West Bengal plains regions associated with the kingdoms of Cooch Behar and Vijaypur. Essentially the recognition for the need to study the ‘interface’ is a long-needed acceptance of the fact that studies limited by contemporary, or for that

matter past, political boundaries do not always allow for the full study of a given theme or phenomenon.

This is clearly illustrated in the first paper of this volume by the current author. In this paper the author highlights several notification permits (*lag khyer*) issued to the Sikkimese Commander during the Sino-Nepalese War by Bhutanese authorities. These documents grant the recipient a series of economic and political benefits within regions bordering Sikkim but considered to be Bhutanese. The discovery of these sources, the author argues, challenges conventional understanding of Sikkim-Bhutan relations in this period and questions the validity of state-centric historical approaches to a region where there existed considerable social, political and economic overlap.

This political reality of overlapping authority, semi or undefined borders and the social, ethnic and religious connections which traversed this un-demarcated region proved frustrating for British colonists, who understood power and authority in terms of geographically defined polities. Indeed key to the defining of the current political boundaries of Sikkim and Bhutan was the influence of the British Empire in India. From the late nineteenth century both Sikkim and Bhutan began to be increasingly influenced by the north-easterly expansion of British India, a process which drew both these countries away from their historical, cultural and linguistic roots in the north and into the British sphere of influence. Of course these two countries experienced this process differently. For Bhutan, the presence of the British could be kept at a distance but not ignored and certainly not crossed. Sikkim, on the other hand, was fundamentally changed by the British in ways which set the country upon a path towards its ultimate integration with India. The history of British involvement in Sikkimese affairs began positively with collaboration during the Anglo-Gurkha Wars 1814–16 and the signing of the Treaty of Titalia restoring lands lost by Sikkim to Nepal in the conflicts of the 1770s–1790s. These good relations were short lived however, as not long after the ‘grant’ of the Darjeeling hill to the British in 1835, not only did the manner of acquiring the grant leave a bad taste in the mouth of the Sikkimese king, but also the process of developing the hill town threatened Sikkimese interests. This conflict of interests ultimately led to war, defeat for Sikkim and the signing of the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861.

It is this period which is the focus of Alex McKay’s article in this volume. Using the vast archival sources of the British Indian administration McKay explores the complex historical context leading up to the Anglo-Sikkimese conflict of 1861 and the signing of the

Tumlong Treaty. Through a thrilling narrative and the careful use of compelling evidence he illustrates the reasoning for British interest in Sikkim (as a possibility for trade with Tibet and China). However, he argues that the actual conflict of 1861 emerged from the clash of two characters The Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell and the Sikkimese Dewan, Tokhang Donyer Namgyal and as such can be considered an anomaly in the 70 year process leading to the British invasion of Sikkim in 1888-89.

As well as being a period of colonial influence, nineteenth century Sikkim and Bhutan were both characterised by internal conflict and the rise of factional alliances grouped around a handful of influential aristocratic families. Françoise Pommaret explores this situation in her paper on alliances and power in Central Bhutan. Specifically, she addresses the relationships of power, wealth and religion with regards to the way in which a number of families in Central Bhutan built upon religiously influential decent lineages, formed alliances and concentrated power and wealth. Crucial to this development, Pommaret argues, was what Bourdieu classed as symbolic capital; that is, capital which adds prestige, honour, and attention through socially recognised symbols.

Power in Bhutanese society is also a key theme in the next chapter by Richard Whitecross though he focuses on the contemporary period. Specifically, he looks at social regulations, the development of a legal system and how it, as well as general regulations, impacts the everyday life of Bhutanese people. Drawing upon ethnographic research he explores how people, understand, view, and use the growing web of regulations in Bhutan and how in turn this process of legal and regulatory expansion is indicative of the growing reach of the modern Bhutanese state into people's everyday lives. These regulations often appear as what he terms "Official Graffiti", such as written signage and information posters scattered around Thimphu.

The effectiveness of Official Graffiti to spread information and regulate behaviour can, however, be called into question in a country where illiteracy is a significant problem. The use of cartoon posters is one way in which this has been achieved in Bhutan and elsewhere in South Asia. Håkan Sandgren's contribution to this volume examines another innovative method used by the Bhutanese health authorities to spread information on HIV/AIDS: festival jesters (*atsaras*) during the Cham dances of the Tshechu festivals. In this chapter he outlines some of the challenges facing Bhutanese authorities generally in spreading information throughout remote areas of the country and the use of *atsaras* specifically in the HIV/AIDS information campaign. On the

basis of interviews and observations at several festivals he assesses the extent to which this information drive and the use of *atsaras* as social messengers specifically has been successful in informing the public about the risks of HIV/AIDS and the use of condoms for its prevention.

As Bhutan negotiates its path in a world becoming increasingly tied to globalisation and the impacts and challenges of modern life, traditional socio-cultural elements survive such as the Bhutanese love for chilli. In the next paper Akiko Ueda, explores the importance of this spice and how the Bhutanese love for consuming chilli has led to the development of social, economic, and cultural factors which combine to facilitate transactions to ensure access to this important commodity. She has shown that while traditional debates surrounding food security focus on the economic aspects, in the Bhutanese context (where different strategies exist) a more integrated approach is necessary which brings into focus not just social relationships but the ability of individuals to take advantage of them as part of a wider strategy to secure access to chilli.

These papers on Bhutan in more modern times illustrate some of the issues experienced by the modern Bhutanese state as it faces its next period of transition. The next three chapters draw our attention towards Sikkim and how traditional ideas either continue to have an impact upon modern society or be shaped and altered by the same. In the first paper Anna Balikci-Denjongpa introduces the Padim of Lingko – a Lepcha Shaman in the Dzongu region of northern Sikkim – and her ongoing project to document the ritual traditions of practitioners that are often overlooked by scholars more interested in more ‘standard’ religious practice. Her paper begins with an endearing story of her interaction with the Padim, highlights some of the activities of her visual anthropological project, and gives a good overview of the ritual repertoire of the Padim and his life. She concludes by highlighting some of the challenges for the continuation of rituals performed by practitioners such as the Padim of Lingko. In part these challenges, she argues, result from changing economic and educational opportunities which draw young Lepchas from rural environments and the growing dominance of more organised religious practices.

In the penultimate paper of this volume Jenny Bentley, highlights another Lepcha ritualist. In this paper, however, he is a quasi-historical character in a popular Lepcha folk narrative of contest. In this narrative he challenges the Buddhist saint Guru Rinpoche to a series of spiritual competitions which serve initially to highlight the superiority of the Lepcha ritualist before transforming into a series of prophecies regarding

the rule of the Lepchas by Tibetans. Whilst the story, like many involving Guru Rinpoche across the length of the Tibetan world, may seem a little farfetched, Bentley argues that the accuracy of the narrative in history is largely irrelevant and obscures more interesting questions. Indeed, questions like why this narrative has become popular in Lepcha civil society, she argues, are more important than whether the narrative is of ancient origin. Here she echoes Bruce Lincoln by arguing that oral histories and myths actually are important not because of a truth assertion they may or may not carry but rather because of their social importance. In short the relative popularity of a given narrative illustrates the way in which “different fears and opinions prevalent among the society are channelled” and enables us to gain insights into the debates and dynamics shaping a society and culture particularly with regards to the “identity formation and negotiation” of the Lepchas in modern Sikkim.

The final paper takes the issue of ethnic identity and politics in Sikkim further. Mélanie Vandenhelsken challenges the argument that ethnic belonging and solidarity in Sikkim has been the driving force in political action in the state. Instead she highlights the historical construction of ethnic categories and the role of politics in defining ethnic categories. Applying the work of Brubaker to the Sikkimese context, Vandenhelsken argues that ethnic categories are commonly represented and institutionalised by states rather than them being pre-defined and natural. This proves to be quite an interesting distinction in the Sikkimese context where much work has focused on ethnic identification rather than categorisation. As such Vandenhelsken’s paper presents a fresh approach to understanding ethnicity in Sikkim; an approach which combines the history of ethnic categorisation with the contemporary ethnic situation where varying ethnic communities strive for increased benefits in the state’s affirmative action quota system.

Today, and despite efforts to resist (at least in some quarters) dominant discourses of development and globalisation, the people of Bhutan and Sikkim are being shaped by the wider ripples of global politics and economics. As both places continue their path in an ever-changing world, where tradition collides with modernity, it is necessary and desirable to comprehend the forces at play: both those with historical roots and with more contemporary ones. It has been one of the intentions of this volume to illustrate that whilst Bhutan and Sikkim are being influenced by contemporary change, the developments of the past continue to reverberate into the present.

REPAYING A 'DEBT' WITH LAND, GRAIN AND TAXES:
YUG PHYOGS THUB AND HIS SERVICE TO BHUTAN DURING
THE SINO-NEPALESE WAR¹

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INTRODUCTION²

This paper presents two notification permits (*lag khyer*) issued, during the height of the Sino-Nepalese War, in the years 1790-1791 by Bhutanese authorities, granting Yug Chogthub Barfungpa (Yug Phyogs thub 'Bar spungs pa) rights and privileges in Bhutanese territory. They can be found in the Sikkimese Palace Archives now housed in the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology under the catalogue numbers PD/9.5/005 and PD/9.5/007.³ They bring to light several things unrecorded in the conventional historical works of Sikkim and Bhutan and which complicate our understanding of Sikkim-Bhutan relations in this period. In particular they provide evidence that suggests Bhutan did not remain entirely neutral during the Sino-Nepalese Wars and that the Sikkimese General Chogthub had been instrumental in quashing an internal rebellion in Bhutan.

This paper explores those two issues by presenting the two documents in translation (edited transliterations and facsimiles appear in the appendix to this paper) and by placing them in their political-historical context. The paper then continues with a short commentary

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- ¹ I would like to thank Tashi Densapa, Director NIT, Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa for their assistance during my time in Sikkim. Thanks to Dr John Ardussi for some useful comments regarding the documents in this text and special thanks to my close colleague Dr Hissey Wongchuk. The research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust (UK) and I would like to thank Bridget Keer and Jean Cater for their help and assistance during the two years of this project. Whilst I am always grateful to those who have contributed comments and suggestions to this paper, all errors remain my own.
- ² For the ease of the reader all Tibetan names have been phoneticised in text with transliterations (Wylie) in brackets at the first occurrence. In the translations of the documents all Tibetan terms, names and otherwise appear in transliteration.
- ³ There is a third document which is similar in content to the two published here in the Sikkimese Palace Archive, file number PD/5.5/001, which will be published at a later date.

on the two documents highlighting the usefulness of archival materials for historical studies generally and for the relationship between Sikkim and Bhutan in particular.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND¹²

Sikkim, Vijaypur and the Gorkha Kingdom of Nepal

The Sikkimese General and later Chancellor (*phyag mdzod*) Yug Chogthub was, possibly, the most important Sikkimese military official of the eighteenth century, if not the entire history of the Namgyal dynasty. His birth and early life remains unknown, though we know from fragmentary Sikkimese sources such as *The testimony of the Barfung clan* (Palace Archive document number PD/9.5/003 and hereafter *Testimony*),⁴ a text which spans almost a hundred years of the history of the influential Lepcha Barfung ('Bar spungs) family, that he was a son of the famous Chancellor Gawang (Ga dbang is referred to as Kawang in *The History of Sikkim*). 'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs (hereafter BGR), which is more commonly known by its English title of *The History of Sikkim* (HoS) and which is the first point of reference for those studying Sikkimese history, is also an important but inconsistent source for the study of Chogthub's life. The first reference to him in that work appears on page 46 of the British Library edition of the typescript and page 112 of the 2003 Tibetan edition, where he is referred to by his Nepali alias i.e. Satrajit for his seventeen victories over the Gorkha army.

As a son of the Sikkimese Chancellor Gawang, Chogthub was born into the Barfung clan, which had ruled Sikkim directly since the 1740s. In that period members of the Barfung clan placed, with Bhutanese and Tibetan assistance, the puppet king Namgyal Phuntsho (rNam rgyal phun tshogs c.1733-1780?) upon the throne after a prolonged civil war known as the Second War of Succession (see Mullard 2013: 181-184 for details). In the intervening years the Barfung family had extended its influence to the North Bengal plains and what is now Eastern Nepal. It was through its support of Buddhi Karna Sen, Chancellor of Vijaypur, and his coup to remove the king of Vijaypur, Kama Datta Sen, in 1769 (Shamsher and Bikram 1966: 60-65 and *Testimony*) that Sikkim became drawn into the political conflicts of Eastern Nepal. In particular, it was the murder of King Kama Datta Sen by Buddhi Karna Sen which provoked his cousin and King of Nepal, Prithvi Narayan

⁴ This document is due to be published in a paper by the current author in 2015.

Shah, to order an invasion of Vijaypur with the intention of destroying Buddhi Karna Sen (Acharya 1973: 82). This compelled the Sikkimese to protect their interests in Vijaypur and necessitated direct conflict with the Gurkhas.

Chogthub began his career as the joint leader (with his elder brother rNam rgyal tshe ring) of the Sikkimese force in the Limbuwan-Gorkha War (1771-1774). During that campaign he fought in the Battle of the Arun in 1774, known in Nepalese sources as The third battle of Chainpur, to protect Barfung influence over Vijaypur, the annual tribute from the Limbu Chieftaincies, and their control of Ilam established during the reign of the first Sikkimese king, Phuntshog Namgyal (born c.1604). The defeat of the Limbus, the fall of Vijaypur and the signing of the Limbu Gorkha treaty of 1774 forced Buddhi Karna Sen into exile in Sikkim (Acharya 1973: 85) and Sikkim lost its influence in the area between Lingtum⁵ and the Kankai River (*Testimony*: 132-133).

Acharya then claims that shortly after the fall of Vijaypur in July 1774, Ilam was voluntarily ceded to the Gorkha commander Abhiman Simha Basnyat by Sikkim, once Basnyat had written to the king of Sikkim, demanding the extradition of Buddhi Karna Sen (*ibid.*). Yet he himself notes that there was some delay before Ilam was finally annexed to Nepal. The death of Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1775, may well be the major cause of this delay indicating that the Sikkimese throne was in no hurry to cede that territory and casting considerable doubt over the voluntary nature of the loss of Ilam. Indeed in Sikkimese sources it notes that a year after the fall of Vijaypur a border settlement conference was held between representatives of Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim in Walung. A treaty settling the Sikkim-Nepal border at the Kankai River was signed on the 13th day of the sixth month of the Wood Sheep year: 15 July 1775 (HoS: 47).⁶

That date is more or less confirmed by Nepalese sources, though they indicate that Tibet and Nepal were the chief signatories (Pradhan 1991: 127). In addition the *Testimony* recalls a more likely series of events in which it notes that shortly after the signing of this treaty limiting Sikkimese influence in the east of the Kankai River region, the Gorkhas invaded and seized lower Ilam (*Testimony*: 134). Indeed, so frustrated were the Sikkimese with this development, that they

⁵ Lingtum here should not be confused with Lingtam in Sikkim as it refers to Lingam on the banks of the Arun tributary of the Sapta Kosi River in Eastern Nepal.

⁶ The calculation of the western date is based on the tables found in Schuh 1973 [2012]: 428.

requested Tibetan mediation, who in turn responded by contacting the Gorkha demanding compensation of 100 *dharni* of gold (equal to 227 kg)⁷ as per the rules of the Wood Sheep year treaty. The demand was ignored (*Testimony*: 134-139).

It is not clear what happened in the years immediately following the loss of Ilam in 1775 (HoS: 47) as both Nepalese and Sikkimese sources are silent. *The History of Sikkim* does mention that another conflict broke out after the loss of Ilam in which a leader (Pradhan identifies him as a Magar commander in the Gorkha forces) named Purna Ale⁸ invaded Sikkim as far as lChags khung, near modern Namchi, before being repelled by Tshangs rin 'dzin Brag dkar pa (HoS: 47). This, however, seems to be an error as according to other sources such as *Testimony* and document YA8 of the Brag dkar Collection (published in Schuh 1978), these events occurred in the Earth Monkey year i.e. 1788 and not the Wood Sheep year (1775) as it was part of the attack on Sikkim during the Sino-Nepalese Wars (see below).⁹

The confusion lies in the fact that *The History of Sikkim* treats the various conflicts between Sikkim and various forces from what is now Eastern Nepal and North Bengal as a conflict between the 'nations' of Sikkim and Nepal and that these various conflicts were a single episode. Whereas a study of other sources shows that there were, at least, two separate events with very different motivations. In the first series of conflicts in 1769-1775 military action against Sikkim by different forces from what is now Eastern Nepal was motivated by Sikkim's involvement in the political affairs of Vijaypur and the Limbu regions and as such were influenced by the concerns and political desires of local leaders (included those of Bhutan), whereas the campaign starting in 1788 was linked to concerns which sparked the Gorkha-Tibet Wars of 1788-1790 and 1791-1792 (hereafter collectively referred to as the Sino-Nepalese War).

To simplify, the main issues that ignited conflict between Nepal and Tibet were; 1) the intentional devaluation of Tibetan coins minted in Kathmandu; 2) Gorkha desire to control and monopolise trans-

⁷ This weight is currently valued at \$8.8 million.

⁸ Purna Ali (Purna Ale) is referred to by Nagendra Singh as a Magar commander in the Gorkha army (1997:161).

⁹ See also Mullard 2003: 60. In which the following quote is given: *When in the times of the sde pa Tshangs rin 'dzin in the sa sprel year [1788] Gorkha troops attacked and in the times when the troops of the Iho po and Lepcha departed against the enemies of the [Buddhist] teachings, the brother Brag dkar sde pa Tshangs rin 'dzin departed first as the military leader. [And] after[wards] he forced the Gorkha troops back over rNam rtse, Chong thang and Sing la* (YA8 lines 12-13).

Himalayan trade; and 3) High trade taxes and tariffs imposed on Tibetan traders in Nepal. Sikkim and Tibet had signed a trade agreement in 1784 which effectively a) diverted trade from Nepalese routes to the Chumbi Valley thus avoiding Nepalese taxes and tariffs and b) weakened Nepal's attempts to monopolise Himalayan trade (Mullard 2003: 59, and Pradhan 1991: 130-131). This treaty combined with the Sikkimese king's unique and historical diplomatic relationship with the Tibetan government, meant that Sikkim soon became embroiled in this conflict. Indeed one of the first battles of this conflict occurred in Sikkim when a two-pronged attack was launched by, the above mentioned, Purna Ale and one Johar Singh, who was the son of the famous Gorkhali general Kehar Singh Basnet and the Subba of Morang at the time (Pradhan 1991: 132). In 1788 Purna Ale launched a pre-emptive attack on Sikkim through Ilam and up to Namchi, whereas Johar Singh invaded from his base at Vijaypur. By 18 September 1788 Johar Singh had captured the Sikkimese Palace of Rabdentse (Rab brtan rtse), causing the flight of the royal family and disorder in Sikkim.

The likely reason for this attack on Sikkim was to knock Sikkim out of the war early so that the main force could invade Tibet without having to fight on an eastern front to protect its flank. Admittedly this strategy was initially successful as not only was the Sikkimese capital of Rabdentse occupied but also one of its leading generals, Tshangs rin 'dzin Brag dkar pa, died in battle, leaving the Sikkimese military severely weakened. Yet in the following year Chogthub had regrouped and led an army largely composed of Bhutanese soldiers to lay siege to the palace and eventually forced Johar Singh to retreat back to Vijaypur. According to *Testimony* Chogthub and his younger brother killed both Purna Ale and Johar Singh whilst they were retreating, though this cannot be verified in other sources.

Sikkim and Bhutan

The Barfung family, like Sikkim as a whole, has had a mixed relationship with their Bhutanese neighbours. The hostility between Sikkim and Bhutan began in the early eighteenth century when, following the death of the second king of Sikkim (Tensung Namgyal born 1646 reigned c.1670 – c.1699), a war over the Sikkimese succession broke out. The second king of Sikkim had married three women, one from Tibet, one from Limbuwan, and one from Bhutan. Pendi Wangmo, a daughter from Tensung Namgyal's Bhutanese wife,

sought to take the Sikkimese throne with the military support of a Bhutanese force. This brought her into direct conflict with Prince Chagdor Namgyal, the son of the Tibetan wife. The Bhutanese invaded Sikkim around 1700 and captured the palace, whilst the prince fled into exile in Tibet. In the process Yugthing Arub (the great-grandfather of Chogthub), who had facilitated the flight of the prince, was captured by the Bhutanese and imprisoned in Bhutan. By the 1740s, however, the relationship between the Barfung and the Bhutanese had shifted once more when the Sikkimese Chancellor Garwang, the grandson of Arub, had formed an alliance with Bhutan to suppress the Second War of Succession and position his candidate on the Sikkimese throne. In return the Bhutanese were granted local tax rights in Gangtok, where they stationed a small garrison (Ardussi 1977: 539 and Phuntsho 2013: 330).¹⁰

This period of peace was short lived. According to *Testimony* in their attempts to gain influence in Vijaypur the Barfung and Bhutanese were soon on opposing sides in the conflict between King Kama Datta Sen of Vijaypur and his Chancellor Buddhi Karna Sen. This resulted in a temporary loss of tribute from Vijaypur up until the murder of King Kama Datta Sen in 1769. Whilst tribute payments resumed, both the role of the Barfung and Buddhi Karna Sen in the assassination had reached the ears of Privthi Narayan Shah. Bhutan, on the other hand, had relinquished its claim over Vijaypur in 1772 and the Bhutanese Regent sDe srid bSod nams lhan grub (more popularly known as Desi Zhidar), who, according to Karma Phuntsho, was a divisive figure in Bhutanese history, formed an alliance with the Gorkha Kingdom (Phuntsho 2013: 367). Desi Zhidar was both directly and indirectly the cause of several internal rebellions in Bhutan from the 1770s-1790s.

THE DOCUMENTS

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Recently, regarding whatever such assistance and protection [given] successively by word, thought, and deed, to the Bhutanese *Chos rje* by the Chancellor Phyogs thub, father and son, has been reviewed. For example, upon hearing the news of the internal rebellion in Rin spungs

¹⁰ Interestingly the enumeration of the taxpayers of Gangtok were included in the 1747 coronation document which the coronation gifts to 'Jigs med grags pa; a synopsis of which appears in an appendix to John Ardussi's thesis (1977: 536-539). See also Ardussi 2011 for an overview of Sikkim-Bhutan relations from the seventeenth century.

(Paro), without regard for life or limb [he] came, and, thinking himself only a mere servant, and with selfless devotion [he] restored peace. Because of such actions, the Emperor and the Dalai Lama, in order to arrange the collection of food and to set the quantities for the sustenance of Phyogs thub, gave voice to the following. The trapper of the above mentioned lord is permitted to reside in India for some years and from Ramring Phyogs thub is permitted to collect the summer taxes, winter taxes, grains and produce harvested from the flood plains including whatever measures (*sha li*)¹¹ of unhusked rice that can be afforded; and he is allowed to go without any disturbance and restrictions to the plains in the winter season for the purpose of conducting trade. In addition once all his Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu subjects who came down to 'Dam sang, rDar ling, gSang sbas and rDzong gсар etc. have been enumerated by Phyogs thub, if they are settled it is necessary that all of them are certainly given over to the lord and heir.¹² Whilst Phyogs thub resides in Kalimpong and until he goes back to Sikkim, it is necessary to supply the chancellor with, from rDar ling kha and within five actual months,¹³ expenses for clothes at the prevailing rate; within four months the Tibetan taxes, two portions of food, and to satisfy his life two bamboo containers of fish, a single *khal* of purified butter and whatever type of Tibetan or Indian salt measuring 15 *bre*. Just as it was written in the red seal of the sovereign, regarding [the place] called Ri nag grung,¹⁴ the District lords, the stewards etc. all the high and low subjects must follow, without error and partiality, whatever Yug Phyogs thub commands in addition to the actual contents of this communication, which has been issued as a certificate of permission (*lag khyer*) [to him] by the great government. Issued from the Bhutanese Rin spungs [Paro], on the noble day of the 3rd day of the 11th month of the Iron Dog year (1790).

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Not only in former times but also recently the *Chos rje* received steadfast and sufficient support from Yug Phyogs thub father and son at

¹¹ This likely refers to a unit of measurement used in Bhutan. According to data collected by John Ardussi, one *shali* is equivalent to one *'bre*

¹² The indication here is not that these people are physically handed over to the lord, rather the *'phrod [pa]* i.e. the receivables (taxes and services) should be submitted to Phyogs thub.

¹³ Compare *zla lnga la* with *ngo zla lnga la*. The latter, in my opinion, makes explicit that the payment should be made within five actual months of the document rather than by the fifth month of the year.

¹⁴ This is the region around modern Rhenock in eastern Sikkim.

the battle ground. Thereafter, the Gorkhas being consumed by desire for the Hidden Land (of Sikkim) caused [his] exile from the country and whilst depending [only] upon the adherence to the dual traditions of Bhutan [with] continual virtue and sincerity. In this year he [Chogthub] was in Phag ri district in the territory of the Tibetan government when an account of the grievous [situation] was dispatched in a letter. At that tumultuous time when there was conflict in Ringpung (Paro), without caring about his life he defended Ring spungs. As soon as peace was concluded, Phyogs thub asked whether [he] would be allowed to stay in Kalimpong so as to take care of his subjects that reside there. And he requested that he be able to rule whatever people who fled from Damzang and Darling regions [during the war]. [Lacuna 18 syllables]. The king has, for a few years, granted and placed part of the plains estate of Ram lteng under Phyog thub's authority, so as to provide for his livelihood, whilst [he] resides in the private plains estates of the king. So whilst Phyog thub continues to reside in Kalimpong, the summer and winter taxes, and the grains taxes from this estate in the plains, as per the previous tradition, can be collected by Phyogs thub. [...unclear sentence] During the long winter trade on the plains nobody, whether they be high or low, can cause [him] disturbance on the road.

During the Gorkha war, The Sikkimese people fled from the Sikkimese regions to Damzang, gSang sbas, rDha ling [lacuna 17 syllables]. After Phyogs thub has completed the examination of the commoners and traders, those commoners who are under his authority should be identified and those people remaining [who are not under him] should be returned back to their original places. Also the high and low officials of rDar rdzong have to abide by the commands and, without hindrance, do whatever is beneficial. As Phyogs thub resides in Kalimpong and is unable to return to Sikkim within the tenth month items from sGar rdzong should be given to him and after 15 months one *khal* of Tibetan rice, the two types of food, two bundles of fish, one *khal* of butter, 15 *bre* of either Indian or Tibetan salt should be given to Phyogs thub. The Tibetan government have endowed Phyogs thub with the Ri nag [estate] and made the resolution that whilst Yug Phyogs thub cannot return to Sikkim, and for the time being, no new appointments to Ri nag can be made from Dhar rdzong. The Bhutanese Chos rje has ordered that it is obligatory to follow the above authorization, until it is possible for Phyogs thub to return permanently to his own land, and that, in the meantime, all others are forbidden from that appointment at Ri nag. This decree was virtuously issued from the Bhutanese palace of

bKras shis chos gling on the x day of the x month of the Iron Pig year (1791).

COMMENTARY

The role of Bhutan in the Sino-Nepalese War, particularly the alliance between Nepal and Bhutan at that time, is briefly discussed in Karma Phuntsho's recent book *The history of Bhutan*. This alliance was largely regarding Sikkim. Particularly, the Gorkhas wanted to prevent Bhutan from exercising, what Phuntsho surprisingly calls, its "claim of suzerainty" over Sikkim after a Gorkha invasion (Phuntsho 2013: 367-368).¹⁵ More critically put, the Gorkhas didn't want Bhutan to aid Sikkim in the event of an invasion. Nepal did indeed invade, as noted above, causing the flight of the Sikkimese royal family and a prolonged war with Nepal. Bhutan, according to Phuntsho, was not involved in the war except to provide "humanitarian aid of rice, tea and 1,200 silver coins" to the king (ibid.).

In a book, the size and scope of Karma Phuntsho's, it is difficult to present a detailed account of every event in the shared history of Bhutan and Sikkim. Instead a detailed picture of this period can only really be achieved through the analytical study of primary sources, which in Tibet and the Himalayas normally come in the form of administrative materials.¹⁶ The documents presented above do not, of course, provide a definitive understanding of Bhutan-Sikkim relations in this period; but they do present information that can contribute to our wider knowledge of the events and connections between the Sikkimese and Bhutanese: information which otherwise would have been overlooked if relying upon more conventional historical works. In addition they also provide important contextual information relevant to later periods of Sikkim's history, which may help us move away from a state centric interpretation of events. An important example is the series of border conflicts between Bhutan and Sikkim in the nineteenth century over the possession of Rhenock (Ri nag), which is understood

¹⁵ It is surprising that Phuntsho (2013: 368) states uncritically that Bhutan had a historical claim of suzerainty over Sikkim. The diplomatic and political relationship between Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan was incredibly complicated and as such it is very difficult to maintain the use of language, which brings to mind a relationship of vassalage.

¹⁶ The dependence upon secondary sources such as biographies (*nam thar*), local chronicles (*lo rgyus*) or histories (*rgyal rabs*), whether compelled by a lack of other sources or otherwise, has often meant that Tibetan historical research has often lacked the approach to source criticism more commonly found in other fields of history.

in texts like *The History of Sikkim* ('*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*) as a conflict between states. This contrasts with the information found in the documents above which indicate that one of the causes of the disputes likely resulted from the individual acquisition of a temporary land grant, which, we know from other sources, became inherited and permanent. In addition the documents show that there was no problem with granting a piece of land to a person who, in later times when the concepts of territoriality and the emerging national character of the state became intertwined, may well have been defined as 'foreign'.

The documents provide two major reasons for the benefits being granted to Chogthub. Firstly, both documents highlight a rebellion in Paro (Ring spungs). According to both documents as soon as Chogthub heard of this conflict he came to Bhutan and suppressed the uprising. Whilst the documents lack details on both who led the uprising and what the main causes were, it seems likely, given the history of Bhutan at that time, that the rebellion was related to one of the conflicts initiated by followers of the former Bhutanese Desi Zhidar. Phuntsho has noted that after Zhidar had been removed from the office of Desi in 1773 a number of violent insurrections led by his supporter occurred in 1773, 1775 and 1783 (2013: 352 and 370). Whatever conflict Chogthub may have been involved in, it is clear that both documents claim that the benefits that he received from Bhutanese regions were repayment for his service to Bhutan during the Ringpung rebellion. Secondly, they both indicate that a communication was received from Tibet. In PD/9.5/007 this letter was written in the name of both the Emperor of China and the Dalai Lama, whereas PD/9.5/005 notes that it originated from the Tibetan government. That document also details that this letter related to the grievous situation of the Sikkimese caused by the Gorkha invasion of Sikkim, the first document is less explicit. Both documents, though they differ in the details, agree that the two major reasons for issuing Chogthub with certificates of authority were his service during the Ring spungs rebellion and the receipt of a communication from Tibet.

The benefits granted to Chogthub can be divided into two main types. The primary benefits include minor supplies for his sustenance whilst he resided in Kalimpong, specifically measured amounts of food and clothing (rice, fish, butter and salt). As far as we can tell, as it is not clear when in 1791 PD/9.5/005 was issued, he was granted these foodstuffs annually in 1790 and in 1791. The secondary benefits are more substantial. He is granted with freedom to move between Kalimpong and the plains; authority over all Lhopo, Lepcha, and

Limbu subjects who had settled in the main regions around Kalimpong ('Dam sang, rDar ling etc); tax collection and trade rights from, as well as authority over, the plains estates of Ram ring/Ram lteng; and, perhaps, most importantly his endowment of the Rhenock estate by the Tibetan government was endorsed by Bhutan. The last being particularly important as whilst Rhenock may have been considered by Tibetans as a part of Tibet it was effectively, given its proximity to the Bhutanese stronghold of 'Dam sang near Kalimpong, controlled by Bhutan from at least the 1740s onwards.

Interestingly, Kumar Pradhan remarks that the Rhenock spur was granted to Sikkim in the early 1770s when a treaty was negotiated between Sikkim and Bhutan, after a Bhutanese force found themselves surrounded by the Sikkimese military when attempting an attack on Vijaypur (Pradhan 1991: 111). He goes further to remark that Rhenock was in fact annexed by Bhutan from Sikkim in 1706, presumably as part of the First War of Succession. Unfortunately Pradhan does not refer to a source of evidence for these two statements. For whilst it may have been the case that Rhenock was granted to 'Sikkim' around 1770, his statement regarding the Bhutanese annexation of the same in 1706 cannot be accurate. For if we accept the statement in the collective works (comprised around 1735) of Jigme Pawo ('Jigs med dPa' bo) that the Bhutanese invaded Sikkim, during the First War of Succession, from Sa ljongs we must likewise conclude that Rhenock, which lies to the east of Sa ljongs, would already have been under Bhutan prior to the invasion of Sikkim in around 1700 (JPKB: 51). At close inspection of the usual sources it is clear that Pradhan was relying upon the English typescript of BGR (compare Pradhan 1991:111 to HoS British Library edition: 45) and I have yet to find any credible source verifying the details of that particular event. That being said, given the geographical location of the Rhenock range, which marks the current border between not only Sikkim and Bhutan but Tibet as well, it was an area of conflict between the two countries and it is not inconceivable that it may have, at different times, been under the authority of all three countries. In any event the gift of Rhenock to Chogthub in 1791 marked a significant concession, for not only was it a sensitive region because of its position on the border lands but also because it was located upon the trade route to Jalep La.

Given the value of this grant as well as the other benefits granted to Chogthub by the two *lag khyer* they cannot really be regarded as part of the humanitarian aid noted by Phuntsho (2013: 368). Firstly, these benefits were not issued to the Sikkimese king – indeed the Sikkimese

king is conspicuous in his absence in the two documents – but were instead granted to the leading Sikkimese military commander of the period. Secondly, Chogthub was granted full control of all Sikkimese people in Western Bhutan. Of course we do not know who these people were; they could have equally been refugees as they could have been soldiers in his army. Either way they could have provided an additional source of revenue and potentially a source of military personnel. Thirdly, he was granted tax collection rights and authority over estates on the plains. It is likely that these particular benefits were of considerable value, if the Bhutanese plains were as fertile as the Sikkimese plains estates were in the 1840s.

Records of tax revenue from the Sikkimese plains estates in the 1840s show a pre-expense annual income in excess of Rs. 26,000 which, when adjusted on the basis of nominal GDP inflation, amounts to Rs. 32 million today (see PD/1.1/040 as noted in Mullard 2013: 195-196). The figures in that document are for a combined plains region of seven identifiable estates and two unidentifiable places, whereas Chogthub was only granted at the most two estates, though only one of those (Ram Iteng) can be identified with any degree of certainty. Ram Iteng is probably modern Ramsai, which is located on the flood plains between the Jaldhaka and Tista Rivers in the Maynaguri Block in Jalpaiguri District. Although the name is slightly different from that found in the Tibetan texts, PD/9.5/007 does locate the estate on the flood plains and given that most of the region to the west of the Tista was probably under the control of those allied close to the Gorkhas and that Bhutan and Nepal agreed the Tista as their common border it seems likely that the estate given to Chogthub would be to the east of the Tista.

Much of the flood plain regions of what are now upper Jalpaiguri were originally part of Baikuntapur – the ancestral lands of the Raikat rulers of Jalpaiguri, a scion of the Narayan family who ruled Koch (Cooch) Bihar. Yet by the time these documents were issued the northern flood plains were at least legally under Bhutanese authority. The brief history is that in 1772 this family had allied with the Bhutanese to attack Koch Bihar proper, before the British intervened and established a protectorate over both the Raikat and Cooch Bihar (Hemanta Kumar Rai Barma, 1988: 5 – 6). In the process Bhutan lost the northern floodplains and it was not until 1777 that this region of modern Jalpaiguri District was restored to Bhutan by the Dinajpur Council (Phuntsho 2013: 361).

Unfortunately tax records for this area are not currently available for this particular estate. We do know that from 1772 the Raikat paid an annual tribute to the British agent in Rangpur of Rs. 30,000 (Ray 2013: 30) or around Rs. 37 million at today's value and that at least until 1777 this included the estate of Ramsai. Of course a single estate in the north of Jalpaiguri would not account for that figure no matter how fertile it might be. Instead and until more reliable records come to light we can only rely on comparable data from estates to the west of the Tista.

As was noted above the combined revenue for the seven identifiable estates and two unidentifiable places amounted to Rs. 32 million at today's value but there was a considerable range in the annual income of the individual estates: the smallest identifiable estate (that of Naxalbari) only produced annual revenues of Rs. 224,000, whereas the largest and most fertile estate (that of Panisali) produced Rs. 5.1 million. The figure for Naxalbari is unusually low as the other six identifiable regions produced figures in the millions. The two unidentified places also produced more revenue, though not by much, at Rs. 294,000 and Rs. 629,000 respectively (PD/1.1/040 lines 2-11). The median income of all nine regions is that of Ranibun (modern Ranidanda), on the western floodplains of the Mahananda, at a figure of Rs. 1.8 million.

Whilst we cannot say with certainty what the annual value of the Ramsai estate given to Chogthub was, it is possible to infer from the above figures of the estates on the western side of the Tista River that it is not unlikely that estates like Ramsai on the eastern side of the same river would be commensurate in value. Assuming that to be the case it is likely, given the figures above, that the grant of the estate of Ramsai was not of inconsiderable value.

This of course raises the question of why such a valuable gift would be granted to Chogthub. If the documents above are to be believed these gifts were both in payment for services rendered to the Bhutanese during the rebellion of Ringpung and a response to a request for assistance originating in Tibet. There are two other possible reasons for Bhutanese assistance to Chogthub. It could be likely, given that most of Sikkim west of the Tista had been occupied by Gorkha forces, that Chogthub occupied, along with his army, the region to the east of the Tista: an ideal location from where he could launch attacks into Sikkim, but technically safely within the borders of Bhutan. With the occupation a *fait accompli* the Bhutanese had no choice but to confirm his possession of the region as a face saving measure. In this scenario

the Bhutanese are essentially passive and given the history of Sikkim and Bhutan seems improbable. A more likely case is that the Bhutanese granted Chogthub control over the regions of Kalimpong, Rhenock and Ramsai as a way to help support the Sikkimese war effort without violating the letter (but not the spirit) of the 1788 neutrality agreement with Nepal. In part this would have, likely, resulted from pressure from Tibet and China; but to identify the same as the sole reason for providing such financial assistance to Chogthub, would be to devalue both the role of domestic politics in Bhutan as well as Bhutanese 'foreign policy' interest in the process. As far as the latter is concerned the reasoning is simple: Bhutan would prefer a weaker neighbour like Sikkim over an expanding one like Nepal. The former is a more complex but was likely connected to Chogthub's role in quashing the Ringpung rebellion, as mentioned in both of the documents above.

FINAL REMARKS

Whilst the two documents presented in this paper raise more questions than they answer, they also provide valuable insights into the relationship between Chogthub Barfungpa and the Bhutanese authorities. In the first instance they highlight the fact that Bhutan's role during the Sino-Nepalese Wars cannot be limited to humanitarian assistance as the value of the support given to Chogthub was substantially more than that recorded in other sources. This in turn, together with the evidence for Chogthub's activities in quelling the Ringpung rebellion in Bhutan, suggests that the relationship between Sikkim – or at the very least a man who was fighting for the survival of Sikkim as a kingdom – and Bhutan is more complicated than secondary sources like BGR would have us believe. In such historical works, the past is understood from a national or at least quasi-national perspective, whereas the examination of primary sources such as the two in this paper suggests that such a perspective is not always relevant. The gift of Rhenock, parts of Kalimpong, and the Bhutanese Indian estates to a man actively pursuing the liberation of a rival kingdom serves as an important example of that fact. It is this man and his activities that these documents also illuminate, and this cannot be overlooked for whatever reasons that the lands and taxes were granted it is perhaps important to remember that they were granted to a single man. A man who, perhaps as a result of this assistance, managed to keep Sikkim in this war and eventually regain much of the territory lost to the Gorkhas.

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APPENDIX: TRANSLITERATIONS AND FACSIMILES

PD/9.5/007

1. da lam_ phyag mdzod phyogs thub pha bu'i skor la snga phyi rim par sgo gsum tha dad nas re ltos skyabs 'jug sogs gang yang
2. chos rje 'brug par tshol zhing_ de ma zad rin spungs nang zing skabs kyang gnam thod¹⁷ pa'i med la lus srog tu ma ltos par
3. 'ong ste phyag mchi¹⁸ bsam pa lhag med kyis khus¹⁹ pa'i yag gso bcas la_ gong sa rin po che nas kyang spyang rgyangs brtse gzigs chen
4. pos phyogs thub pa'i zad gos²⁰ kyi thun 'debs dang_ lto thus bcas la gong zhabs kyis²¹ sger rgya sngon rgya gar lo khi sdod_ skul [?] kyi ram
5. ring gyi zur rgya de nas_ dbyar khral dang_ dgun khral_ 'bru dang_ gyam²² dngos po ci 'byor shal li chum bcas phyogs thub rang
6. gis 'sdus chog pa dang_ dgun gyi dus su rgya phyogs tshong 'grul byed par yang ched phra du nas kyang lam rgya med par 'gro chog
7. pa dang_ 'dam sang_ rdar ling_ gsang sbas_ rdzong gsar phyogs gang du_ kho pa'i mi ser_ lhogs²³ pa_ mon pa_ tsong yur
8. pa sogs babs pa tsi²⁴ yod kyang lhag med phyogs thub rang nas tsad²⁵ gcod byas rjes_ yin pa nges 'grongs²⁶ sa yin tsho yod ris lhag med
9. nar bdag por²⁷ 'phrod²⁸ nges sprod dgos rgyu dang_ phyogs thub pa ka len spur gnas te 'bras ljongs su ma log bar ngo zla lnga la rdar
10. rdzong nas lo gos phyag mdzod rang la gla gnyer thang²⁹ dang_ zla bo 4 la bod kyi khral_ phyogs thub rang lto gnyis skal_ sro³⁰ brgyags
11. nya sbal ril 2 dang_ mar khu shel khal re_ tsha bod tsha dang rgya tsha gang rung bre 15 bcas byin dgos rgyu dang_ ri nag grung zer ba
12. de yang gong sa'i dmar tam du 'khod pa ji ltar dang_ gzhan yang phyag mdzod phyogs thub kyi rims pa³¹ gang yang gzhung sa chen po nas lag
13. khyer du gnang ba'i dan khra 'di don la rdzong bdag_ gnyer pa sogs che phra kun nas spang glangs³² 'chugs med du yod pa gyis_ zhes
14. lcags khyi zla 11 tshes 3 bzang por 'brug rin spungs nas dge

¹⁷ thos

¹⁸ pyi

¹⁹ gus

²⁰ zas gos

²¹ kyi

²² Abr. gyam kha: flood plain

²³ lho

²⁴ ci

²⁵ tshad

²⁶ grong

²⁷ This should probably read nor bdag por i.e. to the heir (cf. PD/9.5/005 line 14).

²⁸ Khral?

²⁹ This phrase is similar to gla thang which means "the prevailing rate of fees/fares/wages" cf. Goldstein: 209 entry for gla thang.

³⁰ srog

³¹ In this case this is clearly an archaic form of 'brims pa; i.e. to hand out/distribute

³² blang

PD/9.5/005

1. da lam_ yug phyogs thub pha bu 'di dag snga nas kyang chos rje khrug sar skyal sdeng khrong zhus pa ma tshad_ rje su sbas gnas kyi chags rkyen lta bus
2. gor snying gis yul thon byung ba nas bcas[?] kha zhe med pa'i blo 'phral phug dge 'brug bstan pa gnyis su [?] gzung ba'i blo gtod ring_ 'di lor kho rang phag
3. rir khul du dga' ldan gzhung sar zhu yig gi lam nas bslab don zhus te {'dudza?} dus kyang_ ring spungs zing rkyen skabs shar dus pa kyags? stabs su lus brag
4. la ga bltos pa'i kha zhe med pa'i phyag gyir rgyur thag zhu khul zhig dang_ zing rkyen zhi 'phral phyogs thub rang zhabs 'jags kyiis zhu sbyor la de sa
5. rang gi mi ser yod ri kyi 'tsho skyong dang bcas ka len spur sdod chog pa_ 'dam tshang_ sdar ling gi cha khul kho rang gi mi ser lti? yod? yul thon gyi
6. ris kyang slar bdag 'dzin byed chog pa zhig zes zhu nan che bas_ lta bzhig gang bshad ldad? {lacuna±18}
7. gshis lto brgyags kyiis 'tsho thabs la_ zhabs pad rang gi sger rgya sngon rgya gar lo khi sdod shul gi ram lteng gi zur rgya der da lta ga rgyam zhabs pad nas bskos
8. gnang bzhig bzhag pa de rang dang_ phyogs thub sa ka len spur nam gnas bar du_ rgya gzhi de nas dbyar khral dang dgun khral_ 'bru khral_ gyam dngos po
9. zhi 'byor dang shal li'i chum? sngar lugs bzhin phyogs thub pas? rgyugs chog par bkrin bskyangs yod_ sgr'i gzun dang gyur la tshong khe spo yang ba rgyal ba? bded song gnyis?
10. rgya phyogs su tshong 'grul byed par_ dbyar sgang la lung pa spyi thog nas tshong 'grul? byed mi chog pa de rang la cha gnas dgos pa dang_ dgun tshong ring rgya phyogs su tshong
11. 'grul lam gang der byed chog par che phra su nas kyang lam 'gag rgya sdom med par btang chog_ gor kha'i khyur zing skabs 'bras ljongs 'di sa'i cha khongs nas
12. yul thon gyi ring gyi thor rjong gsar dang 'dam tshang_ gsang sbas_ rdha ling? gsang brgyag? {lacuna ±17} tshong mur gyi mi ser bcas pa
13. babs sdang? yod kyang che gra gang yang lhag med phyogs thub rang nas rtsad gtso byas rjes_ dengs rang gi mi ser yin nges gdon mthong nges shes 'grongs ris lhag
14. med nor bdag po'i lag sar 'phrod pa byas sprod dgos rgyur_ rdar rdzong sa dang 'di gnyer sogs las tshan che phra gang nas kyang bka' la gnas te rnyad gtsor med
15. pa'i thog_ grogs ram ci? phan la 'bad dgos rgyu dang_ yang phyogs thub pa ka len spur gnas te 'bras ljongs su phyir log ma byung bar_ ngo zla bcu? {lacuna+4} sgar
16. rdzong nas lo gos phyogs thub rang la bla gnyer thang dang_ zla bo bco lnga la bod gras? khyal_ phyogs thub la khro gnyis skal dang_ sro brgyags nya bhal ril gnyis
17. dang mar khu shel khal re_ rgya tsha bod tsha gang rung bre bco lnga bcas byin dgos rgyu_ gzhan yang ri nag spung sa zer ba de yang da thugs la dge 'brug ?
18. gnyis nas spung bya sa re de ltar yin byung_ dga' ldan gzhung nas ri nag de phyogs thub par gnang 'dug pa dang brgyun_ phyogs thub pa slar 'bras ljongs su ma log
19. bar Dhar rdzong nas spung gsar bskos byas mi chog par re zhig mdzad yod_ phyogs thub kyang slar rang gnas tshangs su tshud pa byung ba nas btsam re ri nag spung
20. sa de'i bsko bzhag chos rje 'brug pa rang gis snga krol ltar byas pa las gzhan gyis byed mi chog pa'i bka' khra lcags phag zla tshes la 'brug bkris chos kyi
21. pho brang nas bris pa dge

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“A DIFFICULT COUNTRY, A HOSTILE CHIEF, AND A STILL
MORE HOSTILE MINISTER”:
THE ANGLO-SIKKIM WAR OF 1861

ALEX MCKAY

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INTRODUCTION

Many gaps in our knowledge of 19th century Sikkimese history have recently been filled in.¹ This paper attempts to add another piece to the jigsaw by examining the previously neglected history of the events of 1860-61, when British forces marched into Sikkim. The royal archives Saul Mullard has been cataloguing are silent on this period except for a Tibetan language copy of the eventual Treaty, and the *History of Sikkim*'s account is superficial.² This paper consequently relies primarily on the records of the British imperial government, which do, however, enable us to gain some insights into Sikkimese perspectives.

BACKGROUND

Following their victory in the 1815 Anglo-Nepal war, in which the Sikkimese had assisted them, the British returned to Sikkim territory

I would like to dedicate this paper to my friends and colleagues, the late Yap Tashi Tobden and Khendzong Yapla (Tsering Wangchuk), tragically killed soon after the NIT Golden Jubilee conference in Gangtok in 2008. The loss of the two local figures perhaps most concerned with the Sikkimese Bhutia history is a major one.

- ¹ See in particular the articles by John Bray, Tirtha Misra, Pema Wangchuk, and Alex McKay in *Buddhist Himalaya*, the Proceedings of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Golden Jubilee Conference, edited by Alex McKay and Anna Balikci-Denjongpa; Gangtok, 2011.
- ² Personal communication, Saul Mullard (to whom my thanks are due for organising this panel at the IATS seminar in Vancouver 2010). His Highness the Maharaja Sir Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshay Dolma, *History of Sikkim* (Kazi Dousandsup; trans.), printed in Gangtok, 1908, p.66 describes the 1860-61 campaign only briefly, noting that when the Superintendent of Darjeeling came up to Rinchenpong with Tseepa Adan (Chebu Lama), “a few skirmishes took place ... the Superintendent was obliged to return to Darjeeling for reinforcements and came back with a force under Col. Gauler [sic] as military officer and the late Sir Ashlay [sic] Eden (then Mr Eden) as Political Officer as far as Teesta.”

that it had lost to Gurkha conquest in preceding decades. In return the British obtained, by the 1817 Treaty of Titalia, influence over Sikkimese foreign relations; the right of return of fugitives from British justice; and protection for British Indian merchants from exorbitant taxation. This Treaty actually lapsed from desuetude,³ but Sikkim naturally regarded the British favourably in the period after 1815, and in 1835 granted their request to use the hamlet of Dorje Ling (rDo rje gling) as a sanatorium.

As Hope Namgyal (i.e.: Hope Cooke, the American wife of the last Chogyal of Sikkim), argued, traditional Sikkimese understanding was that their land belonged to the King, even when he granted others the rights to use it.⁴ The 1835 grant to the British was thus conditional in Sikkimese understanding. When it became clear that the British had actually annexed Darjeeling, relations between the two parties deteriorated. But the British payment of an annual subsidy of Rs 3,000 to the Chogyal from 1841, increased to Rs 6,000 in 1846, seems to have partly resolved the issue—although in Sikkimese understanding this was probably seen as rent for Darjeeling.

Such cultural misunderstandings played an important part in the subsequent conflict, but equally important were the problematic personalities of the leading men on each side. For the British the key figure was Dr Archibald Campbell. Appointed Superintendent of Darjeeling in 1839, he is credited with being the prime mover in its development. A member of the Bengal Medical Service, and previously medical officer at the Residency in Kathmandu, Campbell's appointment was consistent with the medical impetus behind the establishment of Darjeeling as a Hill Station, but in the late 1820s he had also been involved in mediating the Kotapa rebellion, during which many Darjeeling Lepchas reportedly fled to Nepal to escape Sikkimese rule. In Darjeeling, Campbell was the British official in closest contact with Sikkim, which maintained a representative, the *vakil*, in Darjeeling.

The 7th Chogyal (*chos rgyal*)—or in British terminology, the Raja—Tsugphud Namgyal (gTsug phud rnam rgyal), ruled from 1793. He was thus elderly by 1861 and actually lived in the Chumbi Valley, where he increasingly devoted himself to religious matters. Political

³ Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet 1766-1910*, London, Routledge, 2nd revised edition, 1986, p.39.

⁴ Hope Namgyal, 'The Sikkimese theory of landholding and the Darjeeling grant', *Bulletin of Tibetology* 1966 (3.2), pp.46-58; this article cites a number of documents from Sikkim archives and is essential reading in this context.

power in Sikkim largely devolved to his Chief Minister, or Dewan.⁵ That religious preoccupation, incidentally, is seen by Sikkimese as appropriate to the ruler's position, but in British understanding political rule was a secular concern, so that was another of the cultural misunderstandings between the two states.

A number of problems between the two powers during the 1840s and '50s were due to the different legal systems in use. Sikkimese tax defaulters, debtors (including landlords owing rent to the Chogyal), what the British referred to as 'slaves' and other such persons could take refuge in Darjeeling, where the British refused to return them. Similarly those considered criminals by the British found refuge in Sikkim. There were, incidentally, labour shortages in both areas, and with control over labour rather than land critical to political power in the Himalayas, this may be an unconsidered factor here, one encouraging settlers on both sides, even those of dubious backgrounds.

In 1847, Sikkim's Dewan, Ilam Singh, who was trusted by Campbell, died. He was replaced by Tokhang Donyer (*mgron gnyer*) Namgyal, a Tibetan married to the Chogyal's daughter by a concubine.⁶ As a Tibetan and a layman, he was a divisive figure, remembered in Sikkim under the name Pagla Dewan, or 'Mad Dewan.'⁷

The most prominent representative of the factions opposing him in Sikkim was Tseepa Adan, known to the British as Chebu Lama. The Adan clan claimed origins in Kham, but had long intermarried with Lepchas, and at least today, consider themselves Lepcha. Chebu Lama appears to have been the most prominent representative of the factions opposed to the Tibetan Dewan, and in foreign affairs Chebu Lama favoured accommodation with the British where the Dewan favoured Tibetan policies of excluding foreign influence. Further complicating the issues was the fact that Chebu Lama apparently wanted the position

⁵ Technically a more appropriate term would be Lord Chamberlain as his rank was actually *mgron gnyer* (Lord Chamberlain) and not *phyag mdzod* (Chancellor). Technically the rank of *mgron gnyer* was lower (politically) than that of *phyag mdzod*, and one must assume that Namgyal eclipsed the *phyag mdzod* in his influence over the Chogyal on account of his affinity with Tsugphud Namgyal through his illegitimate daughter. It may also be the case that as he was in daily contact with Chogyal as his position put him in charge of the royal household, his influence was greater than the *phyag mdzod*, much like that of the Groom of the stool in medieval England. I am indebted to Saul Mullard for this point.

⁶ FO371 / 2318 (Foreign Office, Public Record Office, London), "Chiefs and Leading Families in Sikkim" 1915. This concubine was the maid servant of his second wife. I am indebted to Anna Balikci-Denjongpa for this reference.

⁷ Whether this term derives from the British or the Sikkimese is uncertain.

of Dewan for himself, and problems with the succession to the throne brought his ambitions in direct conflict with Dewan Namgyal.

The Tibetan Dewan supported the claims of a younger illegitimate son of the Chogyal, the Changzod Karpo, who was his wife's brother. It appears that Chebu Lama, however, wanted the Chogyal's legitimate elder sons to marry and produce an heir, although both were monastics. After the death of the first son Labrang Kyabgon (also known as Labrang Kusho) Chebu Lama persuaded the Dalai Lama to free the second son, Sidkeong Namgyal (1819-1874), from his vow of celibacy in order to produce an heir. He married in 1848, but failed to produce an heir, and the machinations around the departure from monastic codes of conduct seem to have damaged Chebu Lama's relations with the ruling Chogyal.⁸

In the following year, 1849, Sikkim posted a new pro-Dewan *vakil* in Darjeeling. Dr Campbell then made his infamous visit to Sikkim and Tibet with Dr Joseph Hooker, the botanist. Campbell hoped to discuss the new *vakil* with the reclusive Chogyal, and also had a long-standing desire to see Tibet. Prevented by the Dewan's men from reaching Tumlong and meeting the Chogyal, Campbell and Hooker, who were accompanied by Chebu Lama, succeeded in reaching Chumbi. But after being refused entry to Tibet, Campbell was arrested by the Dewan's men, bound and held for six weeks. (Hooker was also arrested, but was allowed to continue botanising, indicating Campbell and Chebu Lama were the real targets of this action.) British protests secured their release in time for the party to return to Darjeeling on Christmas eve, 1849, and the Dewan seems to have regarded the matter as closed; he actually accompanied Campbell's party back to Darjeeling in order to trade some ponies!⁹

The British government actually had little sympathy for Campbell's suffering, considering him the architect of his own misfortunes. But some response to his arrest was necessary for reasons of prestige. The annual payment to Sikkim was stopped,¹⁰ and 640 square miles of the Sikkim Terai linking Darjeeling to the Bengal plains' districts was annexed and placed under Darjeeling.¹¹

⁸ Lamb, *British India ...*, pp.72-73: *History of Sikkim*, pp.94-95. The exact details and chronology are difficult to reconstruct with certainty.

⁹ Lamb, *British India ...*, p.76.

¹⁰ *History of Sikkim*, pp.66, 68.

¹¹ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Logos Press, New Delhi, 1999; (First published, 1907), pp.24-25.

Dewan Namgyal subsequently lost influence in Sikkim, and Chebu Lama became *vakil* in Darjeeling. But the Dewan's eclipse was temporary. Within a few years he had re-established his position in Sikkim, and Campbell, in addition to his presumed personal desire for revenge on his former jailer, continued to be frustrated by the legal shortcomings of relations with Sikkim. As the British put it, "some subjects of the Rajah ..., who eventually turned out to be relations of the Dewan, kidnapped on various occasions, within the British territory, subjects of the British Government."¹² Of course from the Sikkimese perspective, those 'kidnapped' were Sikkimese subjects fugitive from Sikkimese justice, and their 'kidnapping' was not only within traditional Himalayan judicial practices, but was in any case from what they saw as their own territory.

In the wider context, the regional situation in 1860 should be noted. The Second Opium War between Britain and China was fought between 1856 and 1860, ending in British victory with the signing of the Peking Convention in October 1860; so China saw her power being diminished by an expanding British Empire. Nepal invaded Tibet in 1856, in which year the 12th Dalai Lama was born. Tibet was thus ruled by a Regent, from Reting, whom internal opposition forced to flee to China, and the Regent died on his return journey after the Emperor intervened.¹³ So it was an unstable period in Tibetan history, with the Chinese Ambans apparently the main power in Lhasa, and Tibet's relations with Sikkim must have been heavily influenced by the Amban's isolationist policies, and fear of British intentions must have been a powerful force in their understanding of Tibet's relations with Sikkim.

For the British, however, the events of 1857-58, the 'Indian Mutiny' were uppermost in their minds. While that conflict did not reach into the Himalayas, knowledge of it spread widely, and it was a serious blow to British prestige in the region.

Campbell's invasion

On 1 November 1860, Campbell made a decisive move. Having obtained authority to occupy a small portion of Sikkimese territory to

¹² J.C. Gawler, *Sikkim. With Hints on Mountain and Jungle Warfare: Exhibiting also the facilities for opening commercial relations through the State of Sikkim with Central Asia, Thibet, and Western China*, Bibhash Gupta, Calcutta, 1987 (first published, 1873), p.9.

¹³ W.D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History*, N.Y., Potala, 1984, p.186.

obtain, “satisfaction for insults and injuries done to British subjects, and for the violation of British territory”, Campbell led an attack on Sikkim.¹⁴ Accompanied by Chebu Lama, he marched into Sikkim with a force of 100 local troops from a sappers and miners unit. Campbell seems to have had another 80 men from that force available, but prudently stationed them on the frontier with Nepal to prevent the Gurkhas taking advantage of the situation.¹⁵

Unfortunately for Campbell, his force was ill-equipped for combat. Lacking military experience, and lulled by the good reception the mission received from local people, Campbell’s forces were routed by a surprise attack on November 27th. What was described as a “mixed force of Thibetans and Sikhim Bhooteas” under the Dewan’s command, forced their hasty retreat. Weapons and supplies were abandoned in the panic. Campbell fled back to Darjeeling after what was clearly a massive blow to British prestige in the region.¹⁶

Asked to explain why, “he allowed himself to be so completely deceived”, Campbell suggested that the Dewan, empowered by knowledge of the Anglo-Chinese war and hoping for support from the Chinese at Lhasa, had launched what Campbell always referred to as a ‘treacherous’ attack. But China’s defeat was surely certain by then, and as even the Government of India noted, no treachery was apparent; Campbell had simply been attacked by a hostile force in enemy territory.¹⁷ He was judged to have committed a,

grave error... in sending so small a force into the Sikhim territory
No presumption of the friendly disposition of the people ... ought to
have suffered to blind the British agent to the danger of sending a

¹⁴ (British) Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP:), *Copy of Extracts of despatches relating to the Sikhim Expedition*, Printed by the House of Commons, 1862; A.R. Young, Secretary, Government of India (hereafter; GoI) to Hon Ashley Eden (hereafter; Eden), 28 December 1860.

¹⁵ PP: Secretary, Government of Bengal to Secretary, GoI, 13 February 1861, enclosing Campbell to Secretary Government of Bengal, 2 January 1861.

¹⁶ Gawler, *Sikkim...*, pp.9-10.

¹⁷ PP: Secretary, Government of Bengal to Secretary, GoI, 13 February 1861, enclosing Campbell to Secretary Government of Bengal, 2 January 1861; Secretary, GoI to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 22 February 1861.

detachment of 130 men¹⁸ into a difficult country, ruled by a hostile chief, and a still more hostile minister.¹⁹

Campbell's reputation suffered greatly, but in the context of the times his initiative forced colonial government intervention to protect British prestige and interests on the frontier.

Gawler and Eden's mission

Within weeks, Lieutenant-Colonel John Cox Gawler²⁰ was appointed to command a force of nearly 2,000 men equipped with rockets and a mountain gun; giving it the firepower Campbell's force had lacked.²¹

Gawler's orders were to,

...extract ... satisfaction for insults and injuries done to British subjects, and for violation of British territory... The discredit which we have suffered by the ineffectual attempt at coercion, and by the retreat of the Superintendent ..., must be removed, and an end must be put to the presumption which manifestly it has engendered in the Rajah's people.²²

¹⁸ The precise number of Campbell's force is difficult to ascertain; the total of 130 may include coolies, etc, O'Malley, *Bengal District...*, p.25, gives the figure as '160 natives and a complement of English and non-commissioned officers.'

¹⁹ PP: C. Wood, Secretary of State to Governor General, 23 March 1861; also see, Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

²⁰ Colonel J.C.Gawler (1830-1882) was later Keeper of the Crown Jewels; his publications include, *Dan, The Pioneer of Israel*, W.H. Guest, London, 1875, and 'British Troops and Savage Warfare: with special reference to the Kaffir wars' in *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 17, 1873. Gawler is now a prominent figure in the New Age. He was Jewish, the son of a Colonel who had written a history of Jews in Britain, and his 1875 book *Our Scythian Ancestors Identified with Israel* is much cited on the net. It claims to identify the Scythians as a lost tribe of Israel who became the Scots and thus provide the British Royal family with a Jewish origin. This idea was later followed by L.A. Waddell, Younghusband's Chief Medical Officer and pioneer of Tibetan Buddhist studies. General Mainwaring with his idea of the Lepchas as one of the lost tribes of Israel is another relevant name here. The construction of such ideas by the imperial officers in this time and place seems remarkable and worthy of further investigation.

²¹ Gawler was described by Government as, 'an officer of tried experience in dealing with an uncivilised enemy'; PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860; also see Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.1.

²² Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.10; also see copy of his instructions of 28 December 1860, pp.87-88.

In other words, this was about *prestige*; Campbell's retreat threatened the prestige of the British Empire, and with the Mutiny still fresh in mind, British power had to be clearly demonstrated. This, it was considered, could, "...be done only by showing promptly that resistance to us is hopeless."²³

The Hon. Ashley Eden²⁴ of the Bengal Civil Service was appointed Political Officer on the mission which Gawler described as being intended to "counteract the political effect which [Campbell's failed attack]... will have upon Thibet and Bhotan."²⁵ In London, the Secretary of State²⁶ regretted but approved the need to invade a "semi barbarous state, the complete subjugation of which can add nothing to the military or political greatness of the empire".

It was made clear that the chief targets of the mission were the Dewan, and—if he proved uncooperative—the Chogyal; for the British was uncertain of his position. "Atonement ... manifest to all" required the surrender or banishment of the Dewan—"the chief cause of the aggressions", and an apology and compensation from the Raja. If both fled, the mission was to ensure, "the destruction of their residences and property".²⁷

Eden, the Political Officer, was instructed to "spare no precaution or exertion to befriend the people who are believed to be for the most part opposed to the acts of their rulers."²⁸ Well, was there a division between ruler and ruled? The British had good intelligence on Sikkim; Gawler studied Hooker's maps and his *Himalayan Journals*: "Never" he wrote, "was an officer commanding a force favoured with a fuller, more able, or more lucid report of a country and its inhabitants than I was by the study of Dr. Hooker."²⁹

In addition, Chebu Lama had a crucial role on the mission. He recommended the route to be taken, and was the only person capable of diplomatic correspondence with the Sikkimese. Coolies—the

²³ PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

²⁴ The Honourable Ashley Eden KCSI, CIE, ICS (1831-1887), 3rd son of Lord Auckland, educated Rugby and Winchester; posted to India 1852, Governor of Burma 1871-77, Lt-Governor of Bengal 1877-1882, Secretary of State's Council for India, 1882-87.

²⁵ His actual appointment was as 'temporary Envoy and Special Commissioner in Sikkim'; PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

²⁶ Sir Charles Wood (1800-1885), 1st Viscount Halifax, Eton & Oxford, Liberal M.P.1826-66, Secretary of State for India 1859-1866.

²⁷ PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

²⁸ PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

²⁹ Gawler, *Sikkim...*, pp.2-3; also see PP: Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal to Eden, 18 February 1861.

responsibility for whose recruitment was given to Dr Campbell, proved hard to obtain—which further discredited Campbell. Most of those used were actually Chebu Lama’s ‘ryots’ [ie; tenant farmers]. For organising the coolies the Lama initially received Rs50 a month, until Eden deemed it inappropriate for him to receive wages. Instead, at the conclusion of the mission he was given a gold watch and chain and Rs500.³⁰

So, with Hooker, Chebu Lama and perhaps Campbell as informants, how did the mission view the divisions in Sikkimese society? They considered that,

The Lamas ... are said to be generally well disposed to us, and... are more likely to understand our power and the importance of coming to terms with us, and to influence the Rajah and the governing powers to this effect, than any other class.³¹

So they recognised monastic power in Sikkimese society. They also drew a simplistic distinction between Bhutias and Lepchas that ignored the actualities of local identities. The two groups were said by Eden to be divided by the succession dispute, with Lepchas supporting the Chogyal’s monk son and the Bhutia’s supporting the Dewan’s relative. They saw power as being largely in Bhutia hands, for it was observed that the, “Lepchas do not want to fight ... but their children and cattle are in the hands of the Bhooteahs.”³² Using a common imperial strategy, Eden wrote that, “I hope that one party may be played off against the other”.³³ He also hoped to use the Lepchas to catch the Dewan, and wanted to offer a reward for his capture (although that was not approved until after the mission had ended).³⁴

Of particular interest is Eden’s statement that, “[t]here are with the Dewan about 80 or 100 Thibetan fighting men, and this small body

³⁰ Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.57; PP: Eden to Government of Bengal 7 February 1861; Secretary, Government of Bengal to Eden, 15 February 1861; Under-Secretary, GoI to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 16 April 1861. The forms of payment may relate to status (middle ranks receive salary, elites get rewards) or be due to Chebu Lama’s position as a Buddhist monk, and thus barred from salary according to *vinaya* rules of monastic conduct.

³¹ PP: Secretary, GoI to Eden, 28 December 1860.

³² PP: Eden to Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal, 12 February 1861.

³³ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 22 January 1861.

³⁴ PP: See comments on reward in Under-Secretary, GoI to Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal, 2 February 1861, and Secretary of State to Governor General, 24 April 1861.

appears to keep the whole of Sikkim under his power".³⁵ These Tibetan troops are nowhere else referred to, but it is not impossible that Dewan Namgyal had a levy of Tibetans, whether they were really 'fighting men' or a personal bodyguard from his estates in Chumbi is another matter. But Eden also noted that villagers at Teesta, "belong principally to Thibet, but partly to Sikkim, paying revenue to both sides."³⁶ This suggests there is still much we don't know about the nature of the Sikkim-Tibet relationship, although that high culture in both states was heavily Sinified is suggested by Eden's statement after he had finally met the Raja. He described how, "[t]he whole appearance of the Raja's house and furniture, the nature of the ceremonies, and the dress of the Raja and his people, were thoroughly Chinese."³⁷

The campaign

Having despatched a letter to the Raja of Sikkim containing their demands, the British waited five days and then, on 1 February 1861, Gawler's forces marched out of Darjeeling en route to Tumlong, the then Sikkimese capital. Gawler hoped that, "the instructions from Government will be to give the enemy his first lesson in 'Tumloong', ... and if necessary to destroy it."³⁸ After a march which Eden described as "probably one of the most difficult and fatiguing which has ever been made by European troops in this country," they reached the Rangit river, which they crossed at night after hastily building a 120 by 10ft [approx 40 x 3 mtrs] floating bamboo bridge. This took the Sikkimese forces by surprise, and they withdrew from their base across the river under rocket fire.³⁹

As the British marched on to Teesta, the opposition fell away, fleeing their bases at Namchi and Temi, where on 17 February Eden was able to report the news that Dewan Namgyal had fled to Tibet.⁴⁰

³⁵ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 22 January 1861.

³⁶ PP: Eden to Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal, 12 February 1861.

³⁷ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 14 March 1861.

³⁸ Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.11.

³⁹ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 5 February 1861.

⁴⁰ PP: Eden to Government of Bengal, 7 February 1861; Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 17 February 1861. Despite his exile, the Dewan continued to be involved in Tibetan affairs until his death in 1888, see for example, *History of Sikkim*, p.69 concerning his mediation with Bhutan in a criminal case. He was actually permitted to re-enter Sikkim in 1873 to meet the British envoy, J.W. Edgar, whom he impressed; see J.W. Edgar, 'Report on a visit to Sikkim and the Thibetan frontier', Calcutta, Government Press, 1874, pp.9-10.

On the 26th, the Sikkimese were reported to be pulling down their fort at Neh, “where they had repulsed the Gurkhas in ‘the old war’ [1815]”, and hostilities were effectively over.⁴¹ There had been no sustained battles, just a few exchanges of fire with a handful of British wounded. Sikkimese casualties also seem to have been very low and Eden later wrote proudly of how victory did not need to mean inflicting huge casualties on the enemy.⁴²

Eden had actually formed a good impression of the Sikkimese; one which foretold British impressions in the 20th century, if not in the era of John Claude White. Eden wrote that,

In frankness and open-heartedness, [the Sikkimese] appeared to me to approach the European standard more nearly than any other oriental race. They are free from all scruples of caste, truthful, hospitable, and in many respects far more civilised than the natives of Hindoostan.⁴³

Once Dewan Namgyal had fled, the campaign was effectively over. The Sikkimese went to great lengths to fulfil the demand that they return property abandoned by Campbell’s retreating forces, prisoners taken at that time were handed over to the British, and villagers, who had initially hidden in the jungle when the invading force arrived, now set up markets to sell fresh fruit and other produce to the soldiers. Eden received a “submissive and friendly letter” from the Raja, who had ordered his *vakils* to obey Eden’s wishes.⁴⁴

Eden thus prepared a Treaty to end hostilities formally. The Chogyal was still in Chumbi, and when informed that he or his monk son should come down to Sikkim to sign a treaty, abdicated the throne in favour of his son. According to the *History of Sikkim*, this was because Chebu Lama “sent up the Phodrang Lama purposely to say that if the Maharaja’s son ... came down then the treaty would be favourable to the Sikkimites.”⁴⁵ That would seem to be Chebu Lama’s initiative rather than the British, and an indication of his inclinations.

The new Raja, the 8th Chogyal Sridkyong Namgyal, came to Eden, stating that he would reside permanently in Sikkim and move his capital to a place more convenient for trade and relations with Darjeeling. So at Tumlong on 28 March 1861, in a monastery near the

⁴¹ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 26 February 1861

⁴² PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 8 April 1861.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 28 February 1861.

⁴⁵ *History of Sikkim*, p.67; also see Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 21 March 1861.

new Rajah's house,⁴⁶ the Treaty of Tumlong was signed. Its main features—typical of those made by the British with neighbouring states—were an extradition agreement, free trade and travel between the two powers, and Sikkim's consent to maintain the road the British planned to build up to the Tibetan frontier. But most unusual for an international agreement was that the fate of single individual (other than a ruler), was also specified; the Treaty's 7th article stated that Dewan Namgyal and his immediate family were barred from Sikkim.

Sikkim was also charged Rs7000 to compensate for losses suffered in Campbell's initial invasion. Campbell presented claims for Rs10,836 of personal property lost by his force. Eden noted that;

He has furnished no details of the items ... neither do the claims appear to have been investigated or established by any proof. I do not think that the Sikkim Durbar can possibly pay anything like this amount; it exceeds the revenue of ten years.⁴⁷

The Bengal Government asked Campbell to explain the claims, which it felt, "do not stand upon any strong grounds."⁴⁸ Eden considered the sappers and miners' claims to have thrown away cash and jewellery "manifestly absurd", adding that, "[t]he more I hear of the details of this flight, the more disgraceful does it seem ... men so thoroughly undrilled and disorganised should not have been detailed for this duty."⁴⁹ None-the-less, presumably to keep the soldiers contented in this post-Mutiny era, the indemnity was only reduced to what Eden's figures would suggest was seven year's state revenue.

But as Eden's tone indicates, Campbell was clearly on the outer.⁵⁰ While renowned as the 'Founding Father' of Darjeeling, his Government found his actions in regard to Sikkim an embarrassment. The Secretary of State agreed Campbell's explanations for his failed invasion were "unsatisfactory",⁵¹ and Eden's appointment as Envoy to

⁴⁶ Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.73; the name of the monastery is not given, but is probably Phodong.

⁴⁷ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 17 February 1861.

⁴⁸ PP: Secretary, Government of Bengal to Under-Secretary, GoI, 6 March 1861.

⁴⁹ PP: Eden to Secretary Government of Bengal, 26-2-61,

⁵⁰ Dr Campbell (1805-1874), left his position as Superintendent in Darjeeling in 1862 according to Charles Darwin, see Duncan M. Porter, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin; Volume 14*, London 1866, p.39, n2; Ram Rahul, however, in 'Sikkim of History', *International Studies*, 15.1, 1976, pp.15-28, gives his date of departure as 1864. [Accessed copy, 17 June 2010; www.isq.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/15/1/15.pdf]

⁵¹ PP: Secretary of State to Governor General, 30 April 1861.

Sikkim, with Campbell simply ordered to give Eden all assistance,⁵² clearly indicate his superiors had lost all faith in him.

Throughout the mission, Campbell had continued to be an embarrassment. He suggested that the Bhutanese might ally with the Sikkimese, a suggestion promptly dismissed. British relations with Bhutan were then the responsibility of the Political Officer in Assam, and the Government of Bengal informed the Government of India that it did not, “think that our relations with Bhootan should be entrusted to the hands of Dr Campbell.”⁵³

During the campaign, Campbell began reporting rumours circulating in Darjeeling of an imminent attack on the town by the Sikkimese. Eden initially dismissed the rumours,⁵⁴ and when they recurred he complained that the, “state of considerable alarm from some imaginary foe” tended to “lower our character in the eyes of the natives”.⁵⁵ That brought a repost from the Government of Bengal warning Campbell against upsetting Darjeeling residents, and cuttingly suggesting he dispense with any informant giving him such information.⁵⁶ Campbell, as noted, was also blamed for the lack of coolies, but ultimately his retreat in November 1860 was obviously considered unforgiveable, not least by Eden. The Political Officer forwarded a statement by two British Indian employees who had been captured by the Dewan’s forces. In it they stated they had been questioned by the Dewan as to, “why the burra sahib (i.e.; Campbell) ran away from his camp. Is this the bravery of a man or a woman?”⁵⁷

The Sikkimese

As noted, the British sources describe different factions in Sikkim; the Tibetan Dewan with his Bhutia supporters and perhaps his own armed forces, and the Lepcha and monastic groups. They claim that the succession dispute brought these differences into the open; for the succession would shape Sikkim’s future, which was what these divisions were primarily concerned with.

⁵² PP: Secretary, GoI to Superintendent Darjeeling, 28 December 1860.

⁵³ PP: Superintendent Darjeeling, to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 20 December 1860; Secretary, Government of Bengal to Deputy Secretary, GoI, 27 January 1861.

⁵⁴ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 29 March 1861.

⁵⁵ PP: Eden to Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal, 12 February 1861.

⁵⁶ PP: Secretary, Government of Bengal, to Superintendent Darjeeling, 15 February 1861.

⁵⁷ PP: Statement by Tareeny Sunker Mojoomdar and Abdul Eshak to Eden, 21 February 1861. Eden could have suppressed this had he chosen to do so.

The British Indian prisoners noted, describe their capture by one Dalhong Yaboo, and detention by Padong Shenga, who handed them to the Dewan. At Tumlong they were put in the stocks, “through the wickedness of Nambuck Bhootea”, but the Beri Khazi released them and sent them to Yangang with the permission of the Tachong Lama. They were then passed around other monastic establishments. Here, their statement that, “most of the Lamas of the monasteries are very wicked and obedient to [the Dewan]”, seems to contradict Eden’s earlier assumption of monastic support.⁵⁸ But it may simply indicate divisions within the monastic establishment.

Of others we may identify, Lasso Khaji (La sogs blon po) had been in touch with Eden from the start of the mission and, “had throughout held aloof from the war party”.⁵⁹ His house was burned down by the Dewan’s men, but he was subsequently rewarded by the British.⁶⁰ The Gangtok Kazi came over to the British in time to be rewarded also, but as a General (Ru dpon) in the Sikkimese army, he had originally been listed along with “Singlam Soubah” and “Kabi Kazee” as among the Dewan’s party.⁶¹ The Pemayantse ‘abbot’ also opposed to the Dewan,⁶² as did the “Chota Dewan” (‘little’ Dewan), a cousin of Chebu Lama whose name is not mentioned but who was thus an obvious figure for Eden to cultivate.⁶³

After the Treaty, Chebu Lama, who Eden considered, “the most intelligent and enlightened native I have ever met”, became Dewan.⁶⁴ Eden stated that, “[s]o long as he remains in that post there is no fear of any policy being adopted hostile to British interests.”⁶⁵ But Chebu Lama’s reputation at court had suffered, whether from his ostentatious support for the invading forces, as a result of his role in the marriage of Sidkeong Namgyal, or because of his role in Sidkeong Namgyal’s ascension. The *History of Sikkim* records another issue, that Chebu Lama appropriated “a large part of the annual payment” from the British, which was resumed in 1862 and increased to Rs 9,000 in 1868.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 8 April 1861; also see Gawler, *Sikkim...*, p.41.

⁶⁰ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 29 March 1861.

⁶¹ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 17 February 1861; Eden to Under-Secretary, Government of Bengal, 12 February 1861.

⁶² PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 22 February 1861.

⁶³ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 28 February 1861

⁶⁴ But he apparently also remained (in Darjeeling) as *vakil* – perhaps he divided his time between Darjeeling and Tumlong?

⁶⁵ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 8 April 1861.

He is also said to have taken “the lion’s share” of Rs 20,000 the British gave the new Chogyal to get him out of debt.⁶⁶

The British, however, could now deal directly with the new Chogyal. (The old Raja, who remained in Chumbi, died in 1863.) Eden was satisfied that “... under the advice of Cheeboo Lama, an entirely new state of things will now be inaugurated in Sikkim.”⁶⁷ And Anglo-Sikkimese relations did improve during the 8th Chogyal’s reign, which was marked by his visit to Darjeeling to meet the Lt-Governor of Bengal in 1873 and the subsequent visit to Sikkim by the then Deputy Commissioner in Darjeeling, J.W.Edgar, who hoped to gain a formal trading agreement with Tibet. Only after the Chogyal’s death in 1874 did Anglo-Sikkimese relations again deteriorate.

Consequences and subsequent events

It is no coincidence that in February 1861 the Government of India sanctioned a British mission to Lhasa (although it was eventually cancelled on the advice of the British authorities in China).⁶⁸ Opening Tibet to British Indian trade was already one of the main objectives of officials such as Campbell,⁶⁹ Hodgson in Nepal, and the missionaries around Tibet’s frontiers. Sikkim seemed the ideal route to Lhasa, and in summing up Gawler and Eden’s mission the Government of India observed, “...a satisfactory conclusion [and] a fair prospect of extended commercial intercourse with Sikkim, and with the hitherto inaccessible country beyond it.”⁷⁰

Certainly the 1861 Treaty increased Sikkim’s opening to the world, or at least to the colonial state, with a number of travellers, surveyors, and road-builders entering the country in the ensuing decades. Sikkim now became the main focus of British efforts to reach Lhasa. Here we might note that Gawler’s book appears in most bibliographies under the title *Sikkim. With Hints on Mountain and Jungle Warfare*. But there is actually more to the sub-title, which continues, *Exhibiting also the*

⁶⁶ *History of Sikkim*, p.67.

⁶⁷ PP: Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 14 March 1861.

⁶⁸ Lamb, *British India...*, pp.90-92.

⁶⁹ Gawler and Campbell submitted a Memo to the Secretary of State for India in April 1873 which recommended establishing a consular agency in Chumbi, and ‘eventually ... sending an envoy to Lhasa...’; Gawler, *Sikkim...*, pp.104-05; see re this memo, Lamb, *British India...*, p.105.

⁷⁰ PP: Under-Secretary, GoI to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 7 May 1861.

*facilities for opening commercial relations through the State of Sikkim with Central Asia, Thibet, and Western China.*⁷¹

In 1861 the British recognised that annexing Sikkim would be of no economic or political benefit. What they sought, and Campbell forced, was agreement over trans-border legal issues and the opening of trade and access to Sikkim and Tibet. But in expelling Dewan Namgyal the 1861 Treaty also forced Sikkim to conform more closely to modern state models, in which a single authority has a monopoly over foreign relations and the use of legalised force within its fixed territory. No longer would the ruler of Sikkim live in Tibet.⁷²

We should also note here Alastair Lamb's conclusion that the 1861 campaign was, "without a doubt one of the factors leading to the Bhutan war of 1865". Bhutan gave asylum to many of the Dewan's followers in 1861, something Eden's failed mission to Bhutan in 1863 was intended to discuss.⁷³

CONCLUSIONS

The British-Indian take-over of Sikkim, which culminated in the war of 1888-89, was a process occupying some 70 years. The events of 1860-61 were actually something of an anomaly in that process. Conflict arose due to the 'Mad Dewan's' assumption of power in Sikkim and the incompetence, and no doubt injured feelings, of Dr Campbell. The British military campaign was more a show of strength than a conflict and the treaty that ended it was largely a restatement of the 1817 Treaty. The war hastened the end of the 7th Chogyal's reign, as well as Campbell's career—but had little lasting effect, for the relationship between British India and Sikkim again deteriorated as British moves towards Tibet intensified in the 1870s and '80s.

That the British marched into Sikkim in 1861 was not from any desire to annex Sikkim, or even to take the power there that they gained in 1888. The key factor was prestige; the expulsion of Campbell's forces, little more than a failed police operation, none-the-less damaged British prestige in the Himalayas and Indian Empire so recently shaken by the Mutiny. Restoring prestige demanded victory.

⁷¹ The book is largely composed of official despatches, and makes little mention of Tibet, so perhaps that was added when it was published in 1873 because it had then become a more formulated aim.

⁷² Ironically, when the British Political Officers lived in Gangtok after 1888, they also tended to leave Sikkim for Tibet for several of the rainy months, usually travelling to Chumbi and Gyantse to inspect the Trade Agencies there.

⁷³ Lamb, *British India...*, pp.81-82.

Trade with Sikkim was of little or no importance, and free trade there was only important if, as the British hoped, Tibet was opened to trade via the Sikkim route. But the fact that the Dewan held a trade monopoly in Sikkim⁷⁴ may have been another factor behind British efforts to remove him. In regard to economics, incidentally, we might note how quick local farmers were to sell their produce to the invading troops. That mirrors reports from the Younghusband mission, and perhaps sheds light on the interests and identity of that class.

The role of information gathering in the imperial process is now well-known. In that context the scientific studies of Joseph Hooker are given political consequences by the use of him as a leading guide to the country by Lt-Colonel Gawler.

In conclusion, we might note that the health of Gawler's troops remained "excellent".⁷⁵ This is in stark contrast to the later Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865, for reasons I can shed no light on.

⁷⁴ O'Malley, 1999:24.

⁷⁵ PP. Eden to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 17 February 1861.

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ALLIANCES AND POWER IN CENTRAL BHUTAN:
A NARRATIVE OF RELIGION, PRESTIGE AND WEALTH
(MID 19TH-MID 20TH CENTURIES)¹

FRANÇOISE POMMARET
CNRS Paris & ILCS, RUB, Thimphu

Introduction

The socio-economic reforms initiated by the Third King 'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug (1928-1972) in 1953, namely emancipating the serfs and giving them lands and putting a ceiling of 25 acres of land per household, were unprecedented bold moves for a monarch at that time. It allowed a peaceful socio-agrarian revolution and rendered possible the evolution from a 'feudal' state² to a modern state. Although these reforms were implemented without any major opposition from the noble families which had most of the large estates, it did cause a complete reframing of the socio-economic layout in Central Bhutan. This was a move which, in effect, deprived the noble families of Bumthang (to whom, interestingly, the king was related) of their traditional socio-economic powers and privileges.³

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- ¹ Before starting this paper, I would like to acknowledge and thank all my friends from Bumthang and the family of O rgyan chos gling (long. 90.89, lat. 27.61, alt. 3,000m) which has supported and encouraged my research on their own estate for many years now. Without their insight and assistance this article could not have been written. This paper is based on fieldwork, interviews and historical Bhutanese sources such as the *sMyos rabs* of Lama Sangngag and the short unpublished *gTer chen rdo rje gling pa dung brgyud O rgyan chos gling chos rje rim brgyud* written in 1972.
- ² We will not enter in the debate regarding the concept of 'feudal' which has been much discussed by Tibetologists and sociologists. On this question, Saul Mullard's introduction in his book on the Sikkimese state (2011) is most illuminating. The use of 'feudal' is based here on Bhutanese historians' use and on the fact that parts of Bhutan were characterised by a lord-serf relationship. The nature of this relationship will be outlined in this article.
- ³ An excellent analysis of these reforms can be found in Kinga (2009: 221-224) where he quotes a resolution of the first National Assembly in 1953: "It was resolved that henceforth all the serfs under any landlords should be allowed to cultivate the land on contract basis as per the following arrangement. If the total produce from the land is 20 pathis [*pathi* is a Nepali word; the Dzongkha word would be *bre*. FP], the serf should pay 12 pathis and retain 8 pathis. However the landlord should not provide the yearly livery as done earlier. If the serfs do not desire to undertake cultivation on contract basis but still desire to stay with their landlords, the landlords must keep them

This article is an attempt to present the socio-religious and economic patterns of the upper class families in Central Bhutan at the height of their power from the mid 19th century until the reforms of the 1950s. It is very much a work in progress and a preliminary exploration of the relationship between religion, power and wealth in Central Bhutan from the mid 19th to the mid 20th centuries. It investigates how a handful of families of prestigious religious descent concentrated power and economic wealth and consolidated their socio-economic and politico-religious importance through a pattern of marital alliances and religious reincarnations. The material wealth brought by specific marital alliances, including generally lands which complimented the other landholdings, was necessary to cater to the religious needs which in turn conferred prestige, and legitimated political power. By analysing the socio-religious and economic capitals as well as the social network of three ruling families known as *Chos brgyud gdung brgyud* of Bumthang in Central Bhutan from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century, I will try to provide a template or a master narrative for the socio-economic and politico-religious set up of Central Bhutan until the mid 20th century.

I will argue that this is, in Central Bhutan, a case of reproduction of an elite class and the individual players seemed to have developed a ‘habitus’ to quote the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This theory seeks to show that “social agents develop strategies which are adapted to the needs of the social worlds that they inhabit. These strategies are *unconscious* [my emphasis] and act on the level of a bodily logic.” Bourdieu thus sees habitus as an important factor contributing to social reproduction because it is central to generating and regulating the practices that make up social life (Bourdieu 1990: 54). Bourdieu sees symbolic capital (e.g., prestige, honour, attention) as a crucial source of power. Symbolic capital is any species of capital that is perceived through socially inculcated classificatory schemes.

Bumthang was not an isolated place as we would tend to see it today. It was part of the religiously vibrant regions of Central Bhutan (Bumthang and Krong gzar) and lHun rtse (also referred to as sKur stod) which had a long association with Tibet and especially with the province of lHo brag, the ‘Southern Rock’ which was endowed with important monasteries and a strong *gter ston* presence. Located in Tibet, its border to the south is today common with part of the northern

as servants and not as serfs. Serfs who are neither willing to undertake cultivation on contract basis nor to stay with their landlords should be taken over by the government.”

border of Bhutan. When considering these regions, the geographical set-up should be kept in mind and that the 'southern valleys,' including Bumthang and lHun rtse, were much closer to Central Tibet than the eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo.

The present-day lHun rtse district and Krong gsar district were economically, historically and linguistically closely tied to Bumthang. Many Tibetans seem to have regarded Bumthang as a safe place of exile and a 'hidden country' (*sbas yul*), a characteristic common to other borderlands of Southern Tibet. The story of the exile of the Tibetan royal scion Khyi kha Rva thod in the valleys of sTang and Chos 'khor, Bumthang is still alive in the oral as well as written traditions. Similarly, the story of the origin of the lords from U rva valley in Bumthang seems to point to Central Tibet, following the route to Bhutan via lHo brag, and the very important pre-Buddhist Tibetan deity 'Od lde Gung rgyal still worshipped in U rva seems to suggest that this was the case.

Lamas and aristocrats were joined by traders, ordinary pilgrims or even runaway miscreants who travelled the ancient path. Bhutanese had summer pastures on the Tibetan plateau and traded easily with the northern region: rice, madder, stick lac, paper, bamboo wares, and medicinal herbs were exchanged for silk, dried apricots, dried mutton, sheep-skins, wool, borax, and salt. The main market place in Tibet for central Bhutanese was lHo Stag lung near the Yamdrok (Yar 'brog) lake but Bhutanese also travelled as far as Lhasa for trade and pilgrimage. For example, 'Jigs med rnam rgyal, the father of the First King, travelled this way when he was a 'master-trader' (*tshong dpon*) of the Krong gsar rdzong and posted in mTshams pa near the Monla Karchung (*Mon la dkar chung*) pass which forms the border between Bhutan and Tibet.

The importance of Bumthang in the geo-cultural context of Central Bhutan and Southern Tibet, regions linked by a perilous but well trodden route through the high Himalayas, results from a combination of religious and historical occurrences, enhanced by an intricate pattern of lineages and a physically mobile society.

The socio-religious and political capital

In central Bhutan the collective term of *Chos brgyud gdung brgyud* is applied to define the upper social strata of families who have both religious and noble lineages and the term perfectly reflects the reality as

we will see in this paper. The head of the family is called a *chos rje* and this term is by extension also applied to his family.⁴

Testimonies of the feudal and religious set-up typical of central Bhutan come to light during the annual festival of the *bKang gso*, which takes place in O rgyan chos gling in the sTang valley of Bumthang in the autumn from the 8th to the 10th day of the 9th month. As it has been stated earlier:

This festival is the occasion when the ancient allegiance of the villagers to the *chos rje* family and to [mGon] po Ma ning; their protective deity as well as his entourage of local deities, is symbolically renewed. It is through the religious commitment and economic well-being of the *chos rje* family that the ceremony, which will bring to all the protection of the deities, can be performed. For the *chos rje* family, while it is a time when they renew their personal allegiance to [mGon] po Ma ning and the local deities, the ceremony confers prestige upon them: it reiterates their religious importance and their socio-economic status to the villagers; it proves their sense of duty towards the inhabitants of the territory by pleasing the deities for the benefit of all; it also allows them to redistribute wealth for the well-being of the territory through the offerings, the food, the alcohol and the cash money distributed to the lay-practitioners and to the villagers during the ritual (Pommaret 2007: 135-158).

If rituals partly served to legitimise the lords' rule over a valley, it was just a reminder, as the real legitimacy came from the religious ancestry of the families. The Bumthang region was divided into four valleys: Chu smad, Chos 'khor, sTang and U rva. U rva presented a slightly different socio-religious set-up and will not be included in this article. However, Chu smad, Chos 'khor, and sTang shared the same characteristics, at least from the mid 19th century. They were in the hands of large estate owners whose legitimacy originally rested on a prestigious religious ancestry and who intermarried within the same social class, thus reinforcing their socio-religious capital as well as their economic capital; an idea which will be examined in more detail below.

⁴ In Bhutan the title *chos rje* is given to descendants of a prestigious cleric and it also implies generally the possession of a temple and of an estate (*gzhis ka*). It therefore may also carry an economic connotation, depending on the size of the estate, and before the advent of the monarchy, local political power. In today's Bhutan, the title *chos rje* is still prestigious and is the term by which the upper social strata families' heads are referred to in Bumthang. Also in Bhutan, traditionally, villagers had no family names as such, but families are referred in some regions by the names of their houses.

It is now necessary to follow the simplified genealogical chart enclosed here.

Bhutanese historiography in this case traces the origins of the most important families of Central Bhutan in the 19th century to great religious figures or to the *gdung* generally associated with the Tibetan royal family.⁵ For example the family of Chos 'khor Bya dkar, is said to descend from sPre'u rdo rje, a brother of Lha lung dpal kyi rdo rje who found refuge in Bumthang in the 9th century, and Padma gling pa (1450-1521), the treasure-discoverer; whereas the family of sTang O rgyan chos gling is said to descend from both Padma gling pa and another important treasure-discoverer rDo rje gling pa (1346-1405); the family of Chu smad sPra mkhar descends from a lady from the *gdung* family said to be a descendent of the Tibetan royal scion 'Od srungs through Lha dbang grags pa whose distant descendent married *Thugs sras* Zla ba rgyal mtshan (1499-1586) one of Padma gling pa's son (Aris 1986: 50-51, translating the *rgyal rigs*).

Their ramifications extend to lHun rtse where important families belonged to Padma gling pa lineage via his son Kun dga' dbang po in Dung dkar as well to the treasure-discoverer Ratna gling pa's (1403-1478) lineage in Chu sa; these lineages went as far as Dgra med rtse in Eastern Bhutan, an important monastery founded by *A ni* Mchod rten bzang mo, also a descendent from Padma gling pa. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, marital alliances were formed between these estates producing either estate lords, reincarnated lamas, wives (*mna' ma*) or husbands (*mag pa*) for other estates.

Thus O rgyan Phun tshogs who was the *chos rje* (religious lord) of the monastery of gTam zhing in Chos 'khor founded by Padma gling pa in 1505, married Rin chen dpal mo from the Bya dkar *gdung* family in Chos 'khor. O rgyan Phun tshogs was also the Krong gsar *dpon slob* in the 1850s commanding the fortress of Krong gsar in central Bhutan which had jurisdiction over the whole of Central and Eastern Bhutan. His brother 'Phrin las went as *mag pa* to marry Ye shes of sTang O ryan chos gling whose brother brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan became the Bya dkar *rdzong dpon* before being killed during the 1865 Anglo-Bhutanese war. Ye shes and brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan's father was *sKu gzhog* mTsho skyes rdo rje, a descendent of the treasure-discoverer Rdo rje

⁵ However Ardussi (2004: 69) refutes this interpretation and proposes that “the *Gdung* people of Bhutan, including the *Ngang Gdung* ancestors of the Bemji Chöje and those of *Gdung Glang dmar* would have left Lhobrak and Chumbi and settled in Bhutan not during some vague era of the 8th – 11th centuries, but during the climactic events of 1335-58. Their dispersal between east and west would have occurred not in Bhutan but earlier in Tibet where they were known as *Shar Dung* and *Lho Dung*.”

gling pa (1346-1405). *sKu gzhog* Mtsho skyes rdo rje became Krong gsar *dpon slob* after O rgyan phun tshogs and left the post to 'Jigs med rnam rgyal in 1853. mTsho skyes rdo rje's wife, sGrol ma, seemed to have come from bKra shis g.yang rtse in Eastern Bhutan. Her exact village can so far not be traced but it might have been Ngang mkhar where the mKho'u chung (pronounced 'kochey') family, descendent of Kun dga' dbang po, Padma gling pa's son, was settled.

One of Ye shes' and 'Phrin las' son was O rgyan rdo rje who became Bya dkar *rdzong dpon* at the turn of the century and married Bsod nams chos sgron and Tshe ldan, two sisters from Chu sa in lHun rtse. O rgyan rdo rje and his wives had three children: 'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug who inherited the estate of O rgyan chos gling and married Skyid ba a lady from ra med rtse in Eastern Bhutan; 'Phrin las who married a lady from Chu sa in lHun rtse; and Thub bstan rgyal mtshan *alias* dpal 'bar who was the 9th Pad gling *Thugs sras*, the reincarnation of Pama gling pa's son, Zla ba rgyal mtshan.

'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug and Skyid ba had three sons: Kun bzang rdo rje (1925-1962) who inherited O rgyan chos gling, O rgyan dbang bdus (1927-1989), and *Sprul sku* Nu ldan rdo rje (1930-1985) who became a monk, first in Min sgrol gling monastery in Tibet, and later in life the abbot of the monastery of Nyi ma lung in Chu smad. This monastery had been built in 1937 by Mgon po rdo rje, the Chu smad *gdung* of sPra mkhar,

In the mid 20th century, the relation between O rgyan chos gling and sPra mkhar was reinforced when the elder brother Kun bzang rdo rje married Rdo rje sgrol ma from sPra mkhar, herself daughter of mGon po rdo rje the Chu smad *gdung*, and therefore a niece of the two queens of the Second king. Incidentally the second brother O rgyan dbang bdus married, in a second marriage, Chos skyid dbang mo, the elder daughter of the Second King 'Jigs med dbang phyug (1905-1952) and of his junior Queen Padma bde chen, whose father 'Jam dbyang was the lord of sPra mkhar.⁶ In a way sPra mkhar estate in Chu smad appears at this generation as a 'wife giver' as one lady went to O rgyan chos gling while two others, Phun tshogs chos sgron (1911-2003) and Padma bde chen (1918-1991) were married to the Second King. We will come back to their lineage later.

⁶ The alliances between U rva, the other valleys of Bumthang and Tshakaling in Eastern Bhutan will be examined in another article.

The Chos 'khor and Chu smad valleys of Bumthang

The dBang dus chos gling estate was established in 1857 by 'Jigs med rnam rgyal (1825-1881), Krong gсар *dpon slob* (from 1853 to 1866, taking over from mTsho skyes rdo rje from O rgyan chos gling), 49th temporal ruler (*sDe srid*) of Bhutan (1870-1873) and father of the First King. Himself from Dung dkar in lHun rtse whose lineage was established by a son of Padma gling pa, 'Jigs med rnam rgyal married Pema chos skyid, the daughter of O rgyan Phun tshogs, the gTam shing *chos rje* and the Krong gсар *dpon slob* who contributed to his political career, and of Rin chen dpal mo, from the Bya dkar *gdung* family as mentioned earlier. Pema chos skyid's brothers were the 8th Pad gling *gsung sprul* Kun bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma (1843-1891) and Padma bstan 'dzin (d.1882) who also became Krong gсар *dpon slob*.

Padma bstan 'dzin's wife's identity is not documented in historical texts. Oral tradition has it that she may have been from the temple of U rug in Chu smad valley associated with Rdo rje gling pa; while another tradition says that she was Ngos grub padma from the Padma gling pa's lineage of gTam zhing. It is of course possible that he had two wives. Padma bstan 'dzin had a son 'Chi med rdo rje and a daughter Rin chen dpal mo. Both married their paternal cross-cousins, Ye shes chos sgron and O rgyan dbang phyug, the children of 'Jigs med rnam rgyal and their paternal aunt Pema chos skyid. Rinchen dpal mo died in 1899 without giving male offspring to O rgyan dbang phyug, who after being Krong sa *dpon slob*, became the First king of Bhutan in 1907.

The son of O rgyan dbang phyug's sister, Ye shes chos sgron, and of 'Chi med rdo rje was recognised as the 9th Pag gling *gsung sprul* Bstan 'dzin chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1894-1925) and went to his monastery, lHa lung in lHo brag. Phun tshog chos sgron and Padma bde chen, the two queens of the Second King were the 9th Pag gling *gsung spru*'s nieces as their mother bDe mchog was the 9th Pad gling *gsung sprul*'s sister and had married 'Jam dbyang, the head of the noble family (*gdung* or *shal ngo*) of sPra mkhar in Chu smad valley as we saw earlier. The queens' half-brother was mGon po rdo rje (1906-1950?) who would inherit sPra mkhar and built the mansion as it is today as well as the Nyi ma lung monastery in the 1930s.

Their mother bDe mchog also had a son, 'Phrin las rnam rgyal, out of wedlock from a lama from Kham, Khyung sprul Rinpoche.⁷ 'Phrin

⁷ Khyung sprul Rinpoche usually refers to Khyung sprul Rinpoche 'Jigs-med nam mkha'i rdo rje (1897-1955). He was probably the most renowned Bonpo pilgrim of his time after travelling across Tibet, India, Nepal and Bhutan for more than 50 years. See (Kværne 1998: 71-84). According to Kværne, Khyung sprul Rinpoche was a

las nram rgyal (1906-1979) was closely associated with the Second King and one of his children is the present 10th Pad gling *sgung sprul* Kun bzang pad ma rin chen nram rgyal born in 1968, and abbot of dGra med rtse monastery in Eastern Bhutan.

As for 'Jigs med nram rgyal's brother, Dung dkar rgyal mtshan, who succeeded him as Krong gсар *dpon slob* in 1866, he married Sangs rgyas lha mo, also from gTam zhing and one of their children was Kun bzang 'phrin las who became successively the lHun rtse, the Thimphu, as well as the dBang 'dus pho brang *rdzong dpon*. He was therefore the cousin of the First king O rgyan dbang phyug and one of his most trusted allies.

Kun bzang 'phrin las married Sangs rgyas sgrol ma whose brother was the 7th sGang steng *sprul sku*, bsTan pa'i nying byed (1875-1905). The sGang steng *sprul sku* were and are the reincarnation of Padma gling pa's grandson, Padma 'phrin las (1564-1642) who established Sgang steng gsang sngags chos gling monastery in the Phobjikha valley in the Black mountains and who was the son of *Thugs sras* Zla ba rgyal mtshan. Interestingly, the elder brothers of Sangs rgyas sgrol ma and the 7th Sgang steng *sprul sku* were recognised as the *Zhabs drung* 'Jigs med chos rgyal (1862-1904) and Kun dga' grags pa, the *sprul sku* of rTa mgo monastery in Western Bhutan. The parents of Sangs rgyas sgrol ma and of the reincarnated lamas were Seng ge sgrol ma from dGra med rtse and Kon mchog dbang 'dus (1845-1894) from gTam zhing, both of them being from Pad gling lineages.⁸

The son of Kun bzang 'phrin las and Sangs rgyas sgrol ma was recognized as the 8th Sgang steng *sprul sku*, O rgyan 'phrin las rdo rje (1906-1949). However when he was the chief of lHun rtse rdzong, Kun bzang 'phrin las is said to have had from Tshe dbang lha mo, a noble

staunch celibate and travelled to Bhutan in 1920. He meditated in sPa gro, and then was called by the king to his palace (most likely in Bumthang) but his biography does not mention an encounter with bDe mchog, the king's niece, much less the birth of a son. Another article (Alay 2011: 204-230) does not give any information on that topic.

Present day sources in Bhutan cannot confirm this attribution either and 1906, the date of birth of 'Phrin las nram rgyal does not tally either. The search for the Khyung sprul rinpoche who came to Bhutan continues.

⁸ dKon mchog dbang 'dus was called as *mag pa* to dGra med rtse and besides Seng ge sgrol ma also married her sister sKal bzang chos sgron from whom he had five children. Among them, the best known are the Nyi zer *sprul sku* Kun bzang rig 'dzin, the rTa mgo *sprul sku* Kun dga' dbang phyug and the historian *Dge slong gnyer chen gregsp* Tshe ring rdo rje (1896-1983). This eminent progeny is famous in Bhutan (see Lama Sangngag 1983: 356-364). Their genealogy will be explained in a forthcoming article.

lady from sKur stod Khol ma (Lham Dorji 2008: 19, Padma Tshedwang 1994: 532), a daughter brTson 'grus lha mo *alias* Gle mo (d.1922), also known as *Khol ma phyug mo* 'the rich lady from Khol ma.' However her father's identity is not well established.⁹ Whatever the reality might have been, in 1903 Gle mo became the wife of the First King O rgyan dbang phyug, and in 1905 the mother of the Second King.

To summarise this protracted description,¹⁰ we observe that during one century, five reincarnations of Pad ma gling pa's lineages appear in these noble families and that at each generation cross-cousins or second cousins alliances were made. Moreover at least one man in each family at each generation became holder of a powerful official position in the state officialdom: *rdzong dpon* (district chief) or *dpon slob* (district governor).

The economic capital

Chu smad, Chos 'khor, and sTang estates were heavily dependent on lower altitude valleys to complement their economic resources: Chos 'khor and Chu smad on Krong gsar and Zhal sgang, while sTang depended on lHun rtse. These lower altitudes regions provided vital ecological resources: forests for the cattle to graze in winter and paddy fields for rice. The economic links were reinforced by marital alliances in these regions.

In the first half of the 20th century, the estate of O rgyan chos gling was largely self-reliant, owing to its large land holdings and herds of cattle, sheep, goats and yaks in upper Tang valley and in lHun rtse.¹¹ Like all the other estates in Bumthang, agricultural and animal husbandry activities as well as the menial labour, including carrying loads and fetching water, depended on a bonded labour force which was divided in several categories. These categories "consisted of serfs [*zab* – uncertain etymology, may be *Za pa*, those who eat with the masters] who owned neither land, nor property and depended completely upon the generosity of their masters who fed, clothed and

⁹ Lama Sangngag (vol.II, 2005: 181) writes that brTson grus lha mo's father was Phun tshogs nam rgyal, the chief of Lhun rtse rdzong. Unless Phun tshogs nam rgyal is another name for Kun bzang 'phrin las, the identity of the father of brTson 'grus lha mo is so far not well established. As for *Slob dpon* gNag mdog (1986: 200), he does not say who her father is while he mentions her mother.

¹⁰ For clarity purposes, we had to concentrate here only on certain branches and descendents of these families.

¹¹ An article on the economy of O rgyan chos gling is forthcoming.

sheltered them; and *drap* (uncertain etymology) who owned some land and livestock of their own. Below the aristocracy were the tax-paying households (*khelpa*, Tib. *khral pa*) who paid heavy taxes to the government and enjoyed a higher social status than the serfs” (Choden 2008: 5).

The *zab* are well described by Kinga. The *zab* were “owned by aristocratic families. These serfs owned neither lands nor wealth. Their livelihood totally depended on the generosity of their masters. They were fed and clothed by them. They lived in huts built around the main house of the master” (Kinga 2003: 13). About their origin Kinga writes that they were “of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Indian origin. Unlike taxpaying households, [the position of a] serf was hereditary in nature” (Kinga 2003: 13).

Another kind of labour was provided by the *drap* families who had some land of their own and lived in their own house but had labour obligations to their masters. Some noble families in Bumthang also benefited from households called *suma* or *zurpa*, who chose to seek protection and pay taxes in form of labour and other goods to these families rather than to the central government. Kinga (2003: 49) writes about the consequences of the 1950s reforms on the local noble families:

Aristocratic families lost ownership and control over the serfs. Their position was further weakened as the number of hands required for farming their fields or looking after their cattle almost disappeared. They could not sustain their erstwhile economic position, as shortage of hands on farms and cattle never yielded produces [sic] comparable to the quantity and variety they enjoyed earlier. Therefore, family members of the local nobilities found themselves taking over the work done by the serfs. Today they are on equal footing with farmers.

Like all the other noble estates of central Bhutan, O rgyan chos gling enjoyed the labour and services of all three categories discussed above.

However, as prosperous as O rgyan chos gling was in the first half of the 20th century, it still needed to trade and barter with Tibet and India as well as rely on the low altitude north-east valley of IHun rtse where it owned paddy fields and winter pastures (Choden and Roder 2006: 18-19). There was always movement of people and mule trains along the mountain paths, carrying foodstuff and commodities, and O rgyan chos gling had to maintain horses and mules in its stables. Moreover, one or two trade caravans went to Tibet and to India every year. The Assamese towns of Kokrasar, Bongaigaon in India and Hatisar (today Gelephu) in

Bhutan were winter trade destinations whereas trade with Tibet occurred in late spring or early autumn and O rgyan chos gling was used as a storage place in between trips to India and Tibet.

Until the 1950s and the closure of the northern border, this triangular barter trade was carried out, like in many regions of the Himalayas. From O rgyan chos gling it took roughly twelve days to go to India while it took a week to Tibet. Commodities imported from India included cotton, broadcloth, tobacco, areca nuts, metal tools, guns, sandalwood, leather as well as silver and English porcelain and in the mid 20th century, record players and records as well as photographic equipment.

Some of the goods from India were kept for the family needs while some were sent to Tibet to be bartered along with Bhutanese products: textiles, medicinal herbs, paper, madder, indigo, and rice. From Tibet came salt, silk, borax, tea, gold, Chinese porcelain, carpets, and dried mutton. Salt was the most important item and mTshams pa on the Bhutanese side of the border was the main salt trading station. A bigger market was in Long do, on the other side of the Monlakarchung pass, and still further in lHo Stag lung in central Tibet near the Yamdrok lake.

Kunzang Choden vividly describes the trade patterns and goods in preparation of the Losar festival (Choden 2008: 30-31):

As early as the 7th month of the Bhutanese calendar, our family's merchants would go to the seven days annual trade fair at Taklung Tshondu, close to the lake Yamdrok in Tibet. Fine brick tea, rock salt, borax, and sheep pelts were imported and set aside for Losar. The sheep pelts were an important food item in the old days. The wool was pulled off from the pelts and processed into thread. The hides could be made into different recipes and eaten as delicacies. Whole legs of mutton, wind dried and preserved in the frigid Tibetan temperatures, had been traded against rice, chili, brown sugar, madder, hand woven fabrics and handmade Bhutanese paper. These goods were fastidiously carried over the high ice and snow bound passes, a journey of several days into the Tibetan trading centers. Although some rice was taken as far as Lhasa to be exchanged for special items most of the rice was actually exchanged at Tsampa (mTshams pa), a small settlement at the northernmost part of the Choekhor (Chos 'khor) valley of Bumthang. The merchandise from Tibet was carried back to O rgyan chos gling by porters, mules and yaks. Candies and biscuits from India—the nearest border towns were Khorasar in West Bengal and Godama in Assam—added variety to the displays. Weeks before Losar the family's yaks and pack mules

had carried many measures of rice, pulses and cereals from our estates in sub-tropical lHun rtse (sKur stod), east of Bumthang in today's lHun rtse district. Depending upon the harvest, from year to year, as many twenty or as few as five to six porters would be required to carry the more fragile and perishable goods like fruits and vegetables on their backs and trek through treacherous terrain for two to three days to reach O rgyan chos gling.

The region of lHun rtse was more than a trade destination. The Rodongla pass (4,100m) on the eastern mountain range of sTang valley led into lHun rtse and the descent was precipitous. In Pemai (alt. 3,000m) and Ungar (1,800m) lands served as pastures for O rgyan chos gling cattle in winter; Ungar people used the same land for growing maize during the summer when the cattle migrated back to Bumthang.¹² Further east in Gorgan, lands also belonged to O rgyan chos gling, and because of its altitude (1,400m) and good water supply, Gorgan was the estate rice basket. Sugarcane, chillies, tropical fruit, rattan products, betel leaves and rattan ropes were also provided by the lands in lHun rtse.

From lHun rtse one could then go to lHo brag or bKra shis g.yang rtse in Eastern Bhutan, and then on to mTsho nag and Tsa ri for pilgrimage in Tibet. Therefore the trail via Rodongla was a major historical route right until the 1970s.

The noble families also provided 'food security' for the villagers who, in case of poor harvest or at the lean season from March to July, could borrow grains from their stores. The borrowing period was for one year and the interest was 3 *bre* (1 *bre* = around 1,5 kg) on every 20 *bre* borrowed (Choden and Roder 2006, Choden 2009: 66).

Moreover as we have seen earlier, the high official positions that the men of these families held indirectly contributed to the economy of their own families in way of labour or corvées and in-kind resources which were taken from the taxes that the tax-payer population paid to the district.¹³ These resources could be, amongst others, stones, timber, paper, ink, cheese, butter, textiles and vegetable dyes.

A kind of redistribution of the wealth took place through rituals or other functions as we can understand from the *bkang gso* ritual at O rgyan chos gling¹⁴ where there is a display of wealth and the prosperity of the *chos rje* household is a guarantee of the prosperity of the villagers.

¹² Oral information Kunzang Choden, July 2010.

¹³ On the complex tax system, see (Ura 1995).

¹⁴ (Pommaret 2007).

The symbolic capital

At this stage of the article, it appears obvious that families who accumulated such a social, religious, political, and economic capital had a high level of symbolic prestige. Known by the honorific term of *Drag shos* and *A shi (A lce)*, men and women of these families were respected and had what one could call a 'social bonus' which can still be seen today to some extent from the deferent behaviour and gestures of people not belonging to their class of *chos brgyud gdung brgyud*. Taking off caps or head scarves, body slightly bent while in their presence, low tone of voice, waiting to be talked to, sitting or standing close to the entrance, this etiquette is still observed today in central Bhutan. However, in the past, this prestige and reverence had to be continuously worked for by the noble families who had to take care of their villagers and keep their standing. Otherwise they would run the risk of having villagers leave their estates and seek protection with another noble family. This would be considered for the noble family as a complete loss of prestige and a humiliation.

Being patrons to high lamas was one of the most prestigious and visible action and the benefit of having such important religious figures staying in the mansion also reverberated on the villagers who could take this opportunity to receive blessings, empowerments and names, as well as boast to others that such or such lama was staying on the estate.

Etiquette was extended to the guests as, in the mind of the people, the guests could only be from the same social strata. This attitude was compounded by the fact that noble families had access to rare objects, brought or purchased for them with great difficulties by guests and relations: porcelain, British guns, jade, Chinese silver coins, brocade, and binoculars. These rare items only reinforced their prestige and their position as 'elevated beings.' However, they were expected in turn to behave in a manner befitting their status, and show compassion and kindness.

Although it was a non-egalitarian feudal relationship with all its injustices, there was a sense of pride among the villagers if their lord was more powerful than the others. This could be explained by accrued material prosperity deriving from power, but also taken as a sign that the family was protected and blessed by its guardian-deity, a feeling which cannot be underestimated in Bhutan. This feeling relates to the concept of *gong g.yog* ('master-servant') where *tha/mtha dam tshig*, the loyalty to one's place, lamas and lords is central (Phuntsho 2004).

In a country where houses were scattered, and clustered villages hardly existed the palaces and manors in which the noble families lived, represented the power and their symbolic importance was paramount. The English terms ‘palace,’ ‘mansion’ or ‘manor,’ are widely accepted when describing the royal and noble residences in Bhutan. The term *pho brang* which exists in Tibetan, was used in some occurrences but there seems to be no blanket generic term for palace, mansion or manor in Dzongkha.

The seat of state power has always been associated in Bhutan with the term *rdzong*, the semantic range of the word going much beyond the architectural definition. For the families of noble religious descent (*chos rje*), their residences were traditionally called either *rdzong* or *sngags tshang* (also written *snag tshang*).¹⁵

Conclusion

This position in a traditional feudal society implied a certain number of rights and duties and some still survive today in spite of major social and economic changes in the country. Since the 1960s, without any formal or spoken agreement, the villagers and the *chos rje* family, conscious of their respective leverage powers, have manoeuvred within their socio-religious and economic spaces. They constantly negotiated compromises between the traditional and the modern socio-political structures, progressing generally by consensus rather than frequent confrontation.

Moreover although the political concept of *Chos srid gnyis ldan* applies generally to a state, it was, as seen in this paper, also internalised and operational at regional levels in many parts of the Himalayas including central Bhutan.

Alice Travers wrote in her conclusions on the aristocracy of central Tibet that it appears that the biological factor was relegated in second place compared to the noble status and where adoption and taking in a son-in-law (*mag pa*) were a common practice (Travers 2006: 214).¹⁶ In

¹⁵ The term *ngagtshang* (*sngags tshang/snag tshang*) seems to be used only in the Bhutanese context and applied to large houses which were residences of religious lineages. We very tentatively propose that because the householders were married, they were considered *sngags pa*, hence the term but this does not tally with the second spelling.

¹⁶ “Ainsi bien que le discours privilégié comme dans d’autres noblesses les liens de sang comme idéal pour la transmission lignagère, la fréquence et le contexte des pratiques d’adoption et de mariage en gendre dans la société tibétaine confirment que le biologique est relégué au second plan face à des relations plus fortes : d’une part,

the upper strata families of central Bhutan, however, it seems that the biological lineage was more important, and although the *mag pa* practice was common, adoption was not. The biological descent reinforced the links between the different families and was used in selecting important incarnations of the same religious lineages. This could partly be explained in central Bhutan by the emphasis on the ancestors, be they religious figures or from the Tibetan kings' ancestry.

It seems that the noble families of central Bhutan provide a clear template for Bourdieu's theory that is "the social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing *a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships* of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119) They provide on the span time of a century a fascinating network in central Bhutan of marital alliances and reincarnations within the same lineages, capitalising the political, religious, economic and therefore symbolic power while resting their legitimacy on prestigious ancestry.

celle qui unit les lignages, avec les obligations d'échange qui en découlent ; et d'autre part, l'appartenance au groupe noble tout entier. Les modalités de recrutement des héritiers montrent que, plus que l'appartenance au même sang, c'est le statut noble qui fait d'un individu l'héritier potentiel de tous les lignages nobles" (Travers 2006: 214).

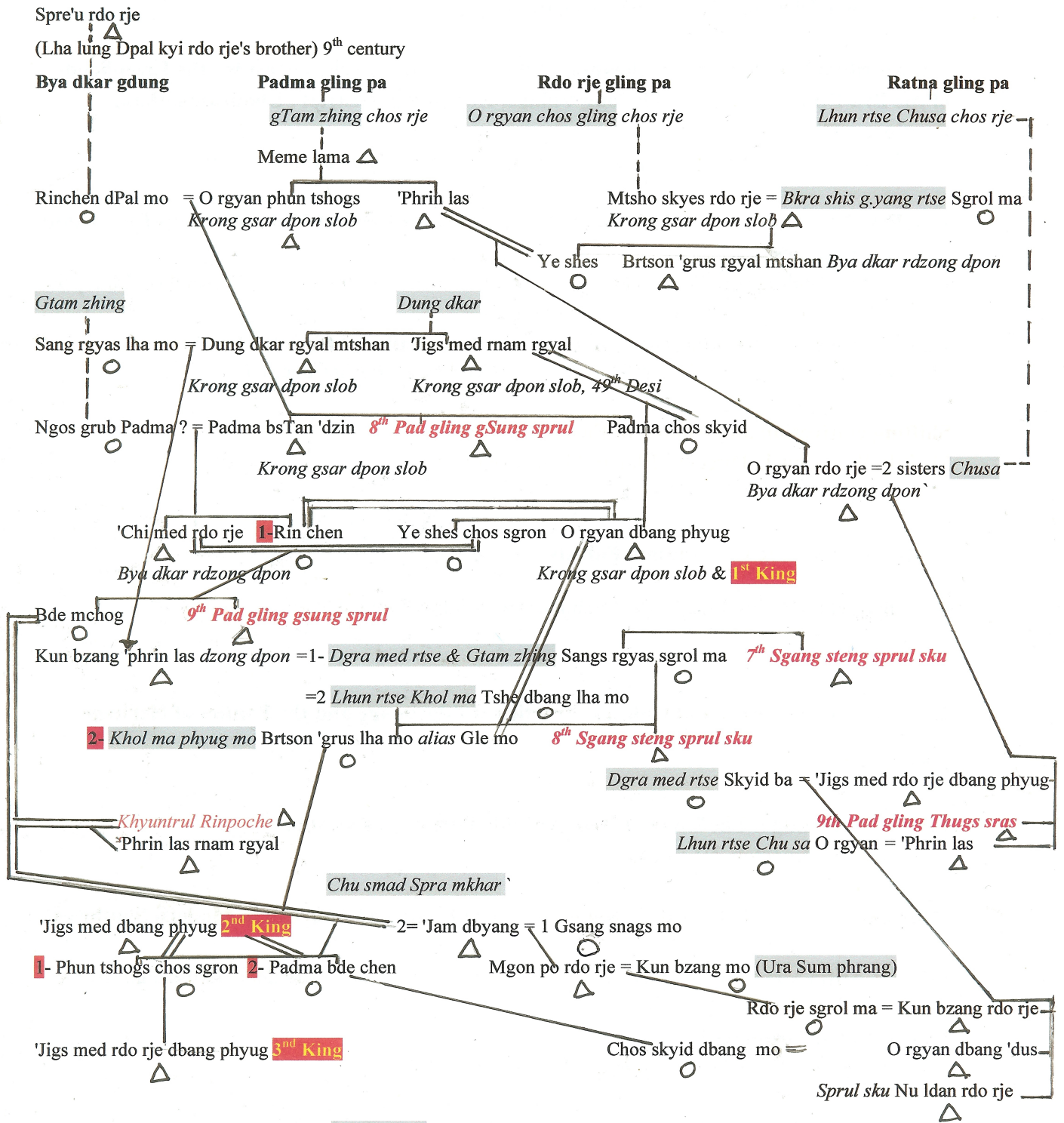
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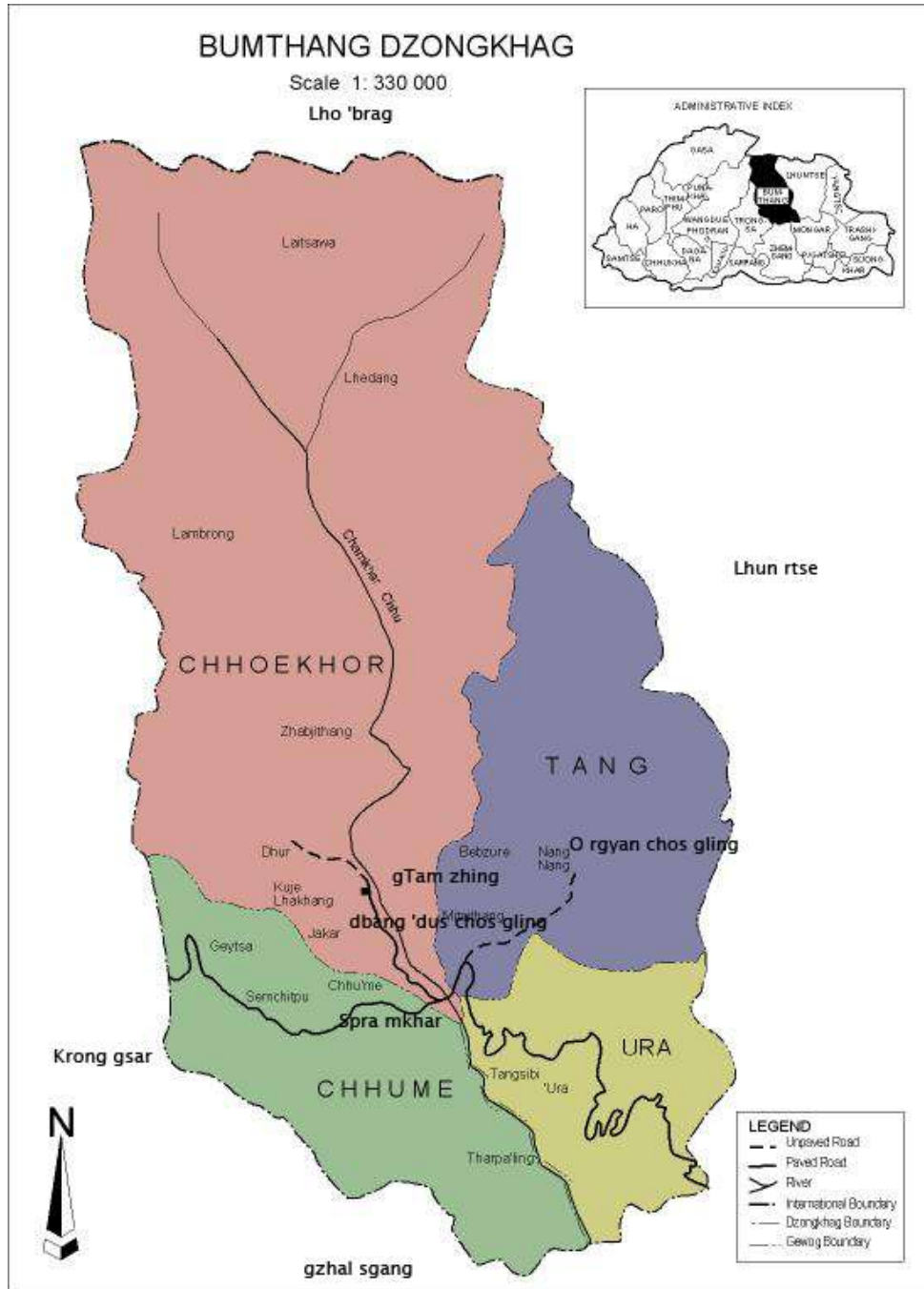
Simplified and NON-EXHAUSTIVE genealogy & alliances in the noble families of Bumthang

according to Bhutanese historiography and oral traditions (mid 19th - mid 20th centuries)



= alliances — blood lines place names & Religious lineages reincarnations
 △ Male ○ Female

MAP from SURVEY of BHUTAN with added names



‘OFFICIAL GRAFFITI’
AND THE REGULATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE
IN URBAN BHUTAN: A VIEW FROM BELOW

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This chapter examines the role of the state and various official organisations that regulate everyday life as experienced in Thimphu, Bhutan.¹ Attention is given to how law through various state practices enters the mundane everyday life of ordinary people. It begins by illustrating how the presence of law and regulations form the background of everyday life. It illustrates the subtle but significant move towards a legal system based on a new discursive framework in which governance is reconfigured and regulation appears from a distance. This is developed further through an examination of how ordinary Bhutanese use and manage the growing web of regulation and levels of forums available to them.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter considers the various ways that people talked about everyday issues and the legal dimensions that arose from the issues in question. It demonstrates the permeation of law and legality in everyday life, and the various overlapping and competing discursive frameworks in which law is located. A selection of attitudes and stances emerged during conversations with a wide range of people, and changes of opinion or attitude did arise. Therefore, it is essential to recognise that for the most part the statements and attitudes described were often dependent on the surrounding circumstances, rather than perhaps reflecting fixed views. There is a fluidity of opinion and understanding which informs an underlying flexibility in not only notions of legality, but also the manner, in which people, as individuals, approach and perceive law, and its formal institutions and sources.

¹ The chapter is based on fieldwork carried out in Bhutan between 2000 and 2004. Research was made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, Frederic Williamson Trust (Cambridge), The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and the British Academy (Travel Grant, 2003). All names have been changed to provide a degree of anonymity to my informants. .

The chapter sets out a brief discussion of law and everyday life to provide an overview of the theoretical underpinning of the argument. The main section considers law under various guises, ‘official graffiti’ and regulations. The themes are then presented in the context of a case study illustrating the role of regulation in everyday life in Thimphu as well as highlighting a range of issues, including touching briefly on corruption. The sense of powerlessness expressed by informants from humble backgrounds is noted for this was a striking difference during fieldwork – between those educated and prospering Bhutanese who were able to negotiate their way through the increasing amount of regulation and those without the same social, economic and cultural capital. The final section concludes by noting that the presence of law is often overlooked by a tendency to focus on the institutions rather than on the filaments of regulation that permeate everyday life as the state increases its reach as part of its wider programme of development. This final section links the ethnography to wider theoretical literature on governance and state-making.

Law, regulation and everyday life: an outline of the theoretical framework

There are few areas of everyday life, even in Bhutan, where the norms of state law, its texts and the formal legal system have not had some effect. In everyday situations, people do not refer exclusively to the state law as a source of social norms. Drawing on observations and interviews, this chapter examines the presence of law in the lives of ordinary Bhutanese men and women. There is an invisibility, a taken-for-grantedness, about law whereby its moral, political and cultural values become conventional. In effect, law in the broadest sense is intimately involved in the construction and reproduction of social relations and practices, and is embedded in them rather than separate. This chapter focuses on one aspect, the subtle, often overlooked role of regulations that in theory, if not in practice, extend the reach of the state and its mechanisms for social control.

In seeking to examine law in everyday life, it is crucial to understand that the formal practices of courts, legal officials and official agencies do not provide a full account of the operation of law in everyday life. Legal institutions do not necessarily have the monopoly on concepts and procedures that may be viewed as ‘legal’. Rather, it is important to consider other aspects of society that are not directly linked to the formal, institutionalised view of law. Instead, we need to

consider those meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices referred to by ordinary people regardless of whom and how they are invoked (Ewick and Silbey 1998; Griffiths 1997; Passavant 2002). As the formal law develops and insinuates its presence in ever-wider areas of daily life in Bhutan, it arguably tries to define and grasp hold of the everyday.² Yet everyday life is dynamic, and law is unable, as a result of this dynamism to fully regulate everyday life. This inability to control, to capture the wide range of occurrences in the course of everyday life, is masked by the primacy and power officially given to the formal state law. So where or how does law operate in the everyday? Law is produced out of the routine concerns and difficulties encountered in daily life, and the desire to address these concerns.

Bhutanese legal regulation is structured and co-ordinated by centralised legislative and executive bodies. Law is (re)produced by and through “the technicality of the legal process” from the law-making bodies to its application in the courts and the informal settings in which it is also invoked (Hansen and Stepputat 2001:17). Legal ideas are formed, interpreted, implemented and enforced in a wide variety of social sites and settings. So law cannot be treated as a unified whole, rather as complex, intertwined and overlapping patterns of regulation. Therefore, law’s meaning and significance is not definitively given by the policymakers or by the officially sanctioned legal interpretations of the judges or other decision-makers. Instead, as we shall see, the meanings and significance of law in everyday life are shaped, transformed, transmitted and embodied in accordance with the different social contexts and basis of interpretation. In effect, we should view law as a “social phenomenon pluralistically, as regulation of many kinds existing in a variety of relationships, some of them quite tenuous, with the primary legal institutions of the centralised state” (Cotterell 1995: 306). This chapter foregrounds the everyday and illustrates how law through official signs and regulation seeks to control social behaviour whilst at the same time becoming a taken-for granted feature of everyday life in urban Thimphu.

² Formal law refers to those created by the National Assembly as well as the regulations and codes issues by authorised state bodies and organisations (e.g., the City Corporation of Thimphu, and the various Ministries) that seek to control and govern the conduct of daily life.

“Do Not Urinate”: everyday ‘official’ graffiti

Driving into Thimphu through Lungtenphug there was a large painted billboard promoting family planning. Not an especially noteworthy piece of ‘official’ advice and yet when one looks more closely one begins to notice the widespread use of ‘official graffiti’.³ Hermer and Hunt note that “regulation is an inescapable part of everyday life” (1996: 455). Road traffic signs are perhaps the most commonplace – the ubiquitous red circle with a diagonal line through it declaring “Stop!” A noticeable feature walking around Thimphu were the admonitions against public urination and defecation oddly incongruous for being written in English and Dzongkha. Waiting with a friend leaving for eastern Bhutan at the bus depot below the Lungtenzampa bridge in Thimphu, a middle aged rural woman raised the skirt of her kira, crouched low on the grassy riverbank beside the bus park and presumably urinated. Immediately to her right was a large burgundy sign. In yellow letters it carried an admonishment in English and Dzongkha prohibiting the very act she was engaged in. To add to the scene, slightly further along the riverbank, and part of the bus depot, was a public toilet block. Few people seemed willing to use this modern facility. Sonam, returned from the side of the riverbank – he too had ignored the sign. As I indicated the public toilet he replied “*Atsi, khamlosisi due! It’s dirty!*” Sitting on the concrete platform waiting for the bus, I suggest to Sonam that he had ‘broken the law’. He looked puzzled. I explained the sign. A slow smile spread over his face – “I cannot read Dzongkha!”

The juxtaposition of the woman and Sonam both performing a natural bodily function and the ‘official’ sign highlighted a range of factors from the choice of languages (Dzongkha and English), the role of literacy and for the purpose of this chapter the role of official signs to assert legal authority and regulate everyday behaviours. As any traveller in South Asia will be aware there is a proliferation in signage notably shop names and billboards. The mix of advertisements and shop fascia can dominate but on closer scrutiny we can begin to note official signs. The incident at the bus depot brought to the fore the wide range and use of official signs. Yet, these official signs were part of the taken for granted landscape against which, and in which, everyday routines are engaged in. As Hermer and Hunt observe, “Official graffiti is an endemic feature of the present” (1996: 456). So endemic and so

³ This term is drawn from Hermer and Hunt, “Official Graffiti of the Everyday”, (1996) *Law and Society Review*.

much part of everyday life that it took the immediacy of the incident in the bus park to draw attention to this important dimension of law in everyday life.

Graffiti in the sense of transgressive adornment or defacement of public sites can be found in Thimphu. One of most striking examples was at the Dochula pass where one side of the large chorten bore the declaration “I love Kesang Deki March 2001” scratched into the whitewashed wall. Childlike doodles and numerous declarations of love and sexual prowess are the typical ‘graffiti’ found crudely etched on walls away from the centre of Thimphu, (though it should be noted for the most part the public areas of the town are free from graffiti).⁴

In comparison to this form of graffiti, official graffiti, which proliferates in seeking to regulate everyday life, carries a sense of authority. The signs often carry at the top the details of the particular government ministry responsible for the message being conveyed. This can be illustrated by one example that all travellers to Thimphu would have seen as they approached Thimphu along the only road into the city at the time.⁵ The sign explained the importance of contraception, or more specifically, the use of condoms. The family planning sign with its image of healthy parents and two children (a son and daughter) was erected by the Ministry of Health. Images of condoms and their application, together with drawings illustrating the threat of sexually transmitted diseases, notably HIV, were contained in the surrounding vignettes. Although no sexual act is shown, there is an underlying discourse concerning health, sexual activity and notions of the appropriate size and composition of the family unit. The use of the images, rather than words and text is significant. Located on the main road to Thimphu, and adjacent to a large army camp the sign was targeting the wider Bhutanese community who may lack the necessary literacy to understand written advice. A similar poster concerned with HIV/AIDS depicted a young couple, the man falling ill, and then the corpse of the man being carried away. Above all these scenes a dove carried a condom in its beak. Both signs were loaded with meaning and

⁴ In a letter to *Kuensel*, “Bad habits spoil chorten walls” (31 October 1999, p. 6) the writer complained about the graffiti on chorten (stupas) in and around Thimphu. The writer stated, “I saw writings either written with charcoal or scratched with stones. The painted walls of the chorten housing sacred relics are spoiled by scratching with stones”.

⁵ With the completion of a new main road travellers now have different options to reach Thimphu. At the time of fieldwork, 2001, there was only one road for all vehicular traffic.

various subtexts, which were brought out in later conversations with both married and unmarried men in Thimphu.

The instructional and rather admonitory nature of the billboard highlights the way in which official graffiti is an ambiguous form, as it elides advice, orders, warnings and instructions, each category merging with the other. The visual instructions on the use of condoms and the potential risk of sexual disease targets primarily the male audience and yet does not imply a passivity on the part of the female. A joint sense of responsibility is implied, not only for the prevention of disease, but also for unwanted pregnancy, allowing parents to focus on being responsible parents.

Yet, as mentioned above, official signs seeking to regulate behaviour can appear trivial. The unsuccessful sign at the bus depot prohibiting the very act performed by the woman, underscores how unsuccessful such forms of regulation are in everyday life. The City Corporation of Thimphu was authorised under the Municipality Act 1999 to create urban regulations for the management of the capital city and its resources. Identical signs prohibiting urination and defecation can be found in the centre of Thimphu – notably on Norzin Lam, the main street, and near the Sunday Market place. Other signs prohibit entry, or regulate the disposal of rubbish. Even outside the city, the use of official notices cannot be avoided – whether at the entrance to the Jigme Dorje National Park at the upper end of Thimphu Valley or immediately outside a monastery entrance, signs advise on the appropriate conduct and rights of access.

Visiting Tango monastery one usually encounters groups of Bhutanese adjusting their *kabne* and *rachu* as they prepare to enter the precinct of the monastery. The Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of Bhutan, meditated at Tango monastery and it is a popular destination for Thimphu residents, especially at the weekends. Beside the visitors preparing to enter is a large burgundy board with gold lettering advised that admission to the monastery required the correct form of dress and that photography was forbidden. Few people pay any attention to the notice – after all who would consider entering a monastery improperly dressed? And why would you want to take a photograph inside the temples? It was unclear to whom these notices were addressed. Generally written in English, occasionally with a Dzongkha section, their presence sought to reinforce the government restrictions over the access by foreigners to the temples, rather than addressing the Bhutanese. Or at least that was how Bhutanese described it when asked. Yet, such a dismissal of the notice is unconvincing. The

same signs or at least very similar in message and tone appear outside all official buildings, where few if any foreigners would normally enter. Rather, it illustrates the main argument of this chapter that even if the message is ignored, its presence reinforces if only symbolically the reach of the authority and power of the Bhutanese state, even in the remoter spaces away from the immediate purview of the state and its various institutions.

The presence and role of official graffiti reminds us that the presence and reach of law and regulation has greatly extended into ever increasing areas of everyday life in Bhutan, as it has done elsewhere. Wikan cites an elderly Bhutanese nun as declaring that “China occupied Tibet, India occupied Sikkim, and we are occupied by our own government” (1996: 282). Entering offices belonging to various organisations, for example the Royal Insurance Company of Bhutan, there was a fading notice from the Home Ministry advising that all who enter the offices must be appropriately attired. Similar small notices and announcements could be found throughout the city and also in the administrative buildings in the dzongkhags (districts), a reminder of the official policy on *driglam namzha*, but also demonstrating that law and regulation effectively are “cultural code[s] of conduct” (Passavant 2002: 727).

The presence of regulation and of the Bhutanese state is particularly visible when travelling. Check points at various locations of the main road, for instance at the bridge below Wangduephodrang or at Chudzom, near Paro, note the registration of all the vehicles passing to and fro and frequently the driver is asked the starting point of the journey and eventual destination. Other checkpoints were more erratically manned, with the barrier raised allowing traffic to move freely as for example at Hongtsho. The presence of official signs of regulation does not, however, mean that the regulations are obeyed. One person commented on bringing a workman back to Thimphu, who had no chapters but had been employed to do labouring work in Punakha valley on the basis that the only check point, the one at Hongtsho, was rarely manned. Unfortunately for my informant, it was manned on this occasion, and he was aware of being in a difficult position. However, matters were ‘negotiated’ and no further action was taken against the driver. The majority of informants admitted breaking minor regulations each day because they “are just a nuisance”. On several occasions in the evening having parked on the main street in Thimphu, Bhutanese friends would run back to the car, and turn on the hazard lights. “Have to put them on in the evening if we park here”,

explained Dorji. “But I always forget!” As if to reinforce the regulation, groups of policemen walk up and down reprimanding drivers returning to their vehicles for failing to leave their hazard lights on as required. These behaviours demonstrate that even if ordinary people may chose to bend or ignore aspect of regulations that they are aware of the regulations. Although the regulations may appear removed from everyday life, it was noticeable how through conversations with family and friends, as well as more formal encounters with a range of officials, ordinary Bhutanese knew about those regulations that most impacted on their lives. Their legal consciousness was therefore developed less through a formal process of being told the law or regulations than from the various discourses, formal and informal, encountered in the course of daily interactions.

The sense of regulation and the use of notices and signs has itself been taken up by non-official organisations. On the glass entrance door to a popular disco, Dzomza, in central Thimphu was a sign which stated in capital letters “NO KNIVES, NO GUNS ALLOWED”. I remarked on the sign to a friend, Tshering, who admitted she had not noticed it and was surprised when she saw it herself a few days later. This sign had caught me by surprise for I had not considered the potential for people, mainly young men, to carry weapons. However, it is not unusual for people to carry knives of various sizes for practical uses in the rural areas, but one wonders why they would do so in Thimphu. The sign served as a reminder of the potential for violence and also for the expansion of regulation through signs from the public to the quasi-public space of the disco. The expansion of official signs and the increasing bureaucratic regulation of everyday life in Bhutan are related. It is striking how common place the official signs are and the depth of their penetration into everyday life. Beyond the signs of the main government ministries regulating a wide range of activities from procreation to livestock are a wide range of non-government agencies with the authority to regulate additional aspects of everyday life – the City Corporation of Thimphu is an obvious example. So too are the banks, insurance company and other bodies with regulatory powers.

Yet Tshering’s comment of “not seeing” the notice at Dzomza was equally significant. It would be misleading to think that official signs, by their implicit links to state authority and legitimacy, are either recognised and adhered to, or control and shape everyday life and behaviour. Signs can be and often are in the course of simply ‘doing everyday life’ ignored. There is an indifference to these markers of

official authority and regulation – in part, because many people do not read English or Dzongkha well enough, and for the simple reason that these signs become part of the background – taken for granted. Unofficial graffiti makes more of an impact – it can amuse, surprise or shock. Official graffiti associated with state pronouncements and governmental discourses and agendas, such as health education or encouraging ‘good behaviour’, lack the same immediacy by which to engage people. Unlike graffiti hastily written or drawn, a minor act of self-expression contrary to approved and acceptable norms of behaviour, the official signs are not spontaneous and lack a sense of irreverence and wit expressed daily in ordinary conversation. This is not to say that the norms of behaviour are rejected, but rather to balance this with a reminder that the Bhutanese enjoy mocking officials and officialdom, a subtle resistance to the otherwise potentially hegemonic presence of the state (see Aris 1987). These themes can be found in a variety of popular folk stories, some emphasise the foolishness of the official, others lament the suffering caused by “duty and obligations” (Kinga 2001; Ura 1996).

What is striking is the way in which, through its rather humdrum presence, official graffiti and its ancillary forms of notices, circulars and visual icons conveys regulatory commands. It draws on its official status to not only establish legal authority, but also to create a sense of standardisation and permanency. Implicit behind each official sign is the sense of the presence of legal authority and the threat of punishment for contravening the command expressed. Many informants complained of the level of regulations and the number of regulatory bodies now exercising control. The contravention of, and indifference to, many of the official signs and regulations was balanced with an understanding of the purpose of the regulation. There is no consistency in the approach adopted by people – the breach of a minor regulation is overlooked but at the same time, if they are inconvenienced or the breach of a regulation impinges on them there is often a call for the regulation to be imposed and even for tightening up of the enforcement procedures. An example of this mixed attitude was exemplified by the regulations over refuse collection issued by the City Corporation of Thimphu.

The media, notably the newspaper *Kuensel*, carry official notices and advice. In the centre pages in both the Dzongkha and English language versions of *Kuensel*, notices from various agencies and administrative bodies including the district courts were and are printed. Among the requests for tenders to supply building material, stationary

and other miscellaneous services are important notices advising the general public at large, or specific named individuals. The City Corporation of Thimphu, the administrative body responsible for the regulating the infrastructure of the capital is one of the main contributors of notices. Below is an example of a notice issued by the City Corporation.

City Corporation
Post Box: 215, Thimphu
01/TCC/SWC/99-2000/4190

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

This is for general information to all shopkeepers, residents and public that hawkers (sale of vegetables, fruits, butter, cheese etc.) are not permitted within the urban area. Sunday market area is open seven days a week for such business. This is in line with the policy of keeping the city clean and to discourage hawkers so that the city looks well organised and beautiful. The shopkeepers should not allow hawkers to use the area in front of their shops. Henceforth, penalty will be imposed on shopkeepers if the area in front of their shops/restaurants is used by the hawkers.

All residents of Thimphu are earnestly requested to co-operate so that hawkers problem in the city could be eliminated before it becomes a big social problem.

Offtg. Thrompon

(Kuensel 23/10/99: 8)

The circulation of official notices in the newspaper and, on occasion, on the Bhutan Broadcasting Company, develops the possible range of sites from which the regulatory bodies can disseminate rules and create an image of the social requirements of the modern Bhutanese citizen. The pervasion of administrative regulation was a feature that many Bhutanese mentioned, often in passing remarks about where they had been or would be going. Tshering had to leave her home in Thimphu and make the journey to Lhuntse because of a land survey being carried out. For many, the regulations were treated as part of the process of getting on with one's daily life. Yet, the level of bureaucratic regulation

was on several occasions described as intrusive and inefficient. Although, inefficiency was one aspect of the complaints voiced, the main criticism was the sense of powerlessness when confronted with the bureaucracy.

This sense of powerlessness arose during a conversation with some school leavers. Several of the young men commented on their frustration and dissatisfaction with the character certificate issued by their teachers. Shacha Wangchuk admitted that he had struggled at school and had been slightly wild during his final year at Punakha Junior High School. However, he had worked hard at his studies and kept to the school discipline. At the end, his teacher had given him a “C” on his Character Certificate. The others had received the same grade – an indifferent grade which did not enhance their prospects of finding employment. Concern over employment and the difficulties facing even senior well-qualified students was a major theme in the conversations with young, educated Bhutanese. Competition for limited places in senior schools and at the only college in Bhutan was reflected, in my experience, by an increasing concern among parents eager to secure a good education for their children. However, examination results are not the only cause for concern. A litany of the chapters required to apply for a job, even to rent a house, include the Character Certificate, Police Clearance from the Royal Bhutan Police, medical certificate and the National Identity Card. The apparent randomness of grading students by teachers was perceived or at least described in terms of favouritism and disinterest on the part of the teachers. Ngawang, prior to leaving Bhutan to take up a position as a doctor of Tibetan medicine in Croatia, spent two months in Bhutan organising his chapters and applying for his passport. He had left Boudanath in late October and instead of arriving in Croatia two weeks later, found the bureaucracy slowed down his departure.

The ‘official’ signage and authoritative notices issues by the Road Transport and Safety Committee, the Bank of Bhutan, the City Corporation of Thimphu, amongst others, as well as the dzongkhag administration, in effect represent processes by which contemporary Bhutanese are governed. Foucault (1991) draws our attention to the processes by which governments seek to control the conduct of their subject populations. Gupta refers to this process of “governmentality” as the “conduct of conduct” (2001: 67) and notes that in addition to institutions and agencies, discourses and norms this includes “self-regulation, techniques for the disciplining and care of the self” (*ibid.*). In the Bhutanese context, the myriad of rules and regulations now

circulating and the wider discourse of ‘good governance’ and ‘gross national happiness’ emphasise the focus of the state on “fostering prosperity and happiness” (Gupta 2001: 67). Implicit in this aim is the collection, recording and inscription of the details of the everyday life of the population. Law has been central to the collection of this information for the regulation and documentation of everyday life and the ability to discipline and regulate the conduct of Bhutanese. The invocation of the ‘rule of law’ and the interplay between societal norms and state policy seek to legitimate and validate these processes.

Doing business: regulation, taxes and corruption

In the late afternoon each day, Deki walks from her apartment to an apartment block below Changangkha Lhakhang in Motithang, a suburb of Thimphu. On the ground floor of the building are two shop units and she has the lease on one of the units. Shelves line three walls, items hang from the ceiling and typically she serves customers who stand at the open window. Friends and neighbours call in and between customers she sits chatting or playing cards. Outside the shop, on a bare patch of earth each evening, local men set up a carom board providing a ready market for soft drinks and beer. She had chosen to open the shop a few years earlier to help earn money to support her growing family. Although her husband, Karma has a good post she wanted to ensure her own financial independence.

Deki and her husband were unusual for they each had a car. Karma bought his Toyota second-hand from a senior government official and his wife’s car was a third-hand Maruti. They admitted that it stretched them financially but since Karma often took his car away on work, Deki needed transport to take the children to their respective schools. Deki and Karma were paying for their two youngest daughters to attend a private nursery school in Motithang, attended by the youngest children of the Fourth King. Karma stressed his belief in providing his children with the best education that he and his wife could afford. Karma’s determination to ensure the best education for his children and his wife’s younger brothers was striking for what it revealed about himself. His own education was disrupted when he was a teenager by the sudden death of his father and his problems with his stepmother. The eldest son in the family, Tintin, is not Karma’s son – Deki’s first husband abandoned her soon after Tintin’s birth. Although she knew where her former husband lived and could have claimed child support from him, Karma expressed strong views against any such a claim, less

out of jealousy or pride, than out of his own deep distrust of the court system. Underlying Deki's decision to open the shop there was a desire to be independent as well as a desire to ensure that her husband would not feel burdened financially by caring for Tintin, especially since Karma had taken on responsibility for her two youngest brothers following her parents' sudden decline into ill health.

Opening the shop had not been as easy as they had originally thought. Permission had to be obtained and a licence granted to Deki to operate as a shopkeeper. Previously, like other friends, Deki had made journeys to Bangladesh, India and even on occasion to Thailand, to buy goods. These she had sold for a small profit to friends and colleagues when she still worked as an office assistant. Eventually, after doing business in this informal and unlicensed way for several years, she had decided to obtain formal permission. She had heard that a shop unit not far from her house would be available. Beginning with asking her 'cousin-brother', a senior monk, to suggest a suitably auspicious name for her enterprise, she set about organising her business. Realising quite early on that she needed help, she persuaded a friend who already ran a shop on Norzin Lam to assist her.

Accompanied by her friend, Chodron, Deki approached the Ministry of Trade and the City Corporation. Confused by the conflicting advice, she recalls walking from office to office and becoming more and more frustrated as she "passed chapter from one monkey to another". "I sat on so many floors waiting my turn. At times, you could see them [the officials] chatting or drinking tea ignore the people waiting." After several months, Deki received the necessary permit and licence to open her shop. The complexities of obtaining the correct signatures and permissions, as well as concerns over the financial implications of customs duties and sales tax had surprised Deki. "I realised that I would have to declare any goods I bought when I return to Bhutan from Thailand. But not from India".

Karma had been supportive of Deki's business plans but commented ruefully that she was too willing to allow people credit and too shy to ask for payment. After trading for nearly three years, Deki wants to move the location of her shop to nearer the centre of the city. The current location is quiet during the day, which is why she only opens late in the afternoon. To move from her current location she will have to pay a much higher rent and renew her license. Despite the bureaucratic process, Deki has decided to develop her business. Her concerns were not with becoming rich, but earning enough to contribute to her family's needs, and this includes providing for her

parents, brothers and sisters. Her business therefore represents her own personal way of ensuring that she is able to “repay the kindness” of her parents, and as commented on by her younger brother who has entered the army as a junior officer, “She respects Karma. He has raised us, and cares for us. So, she works to share the burden”. To share the responsibility of earning money to support a large extended family has meant that Deki learned how to negotiate her way through the bureaucracy. To do this, she called on the support of friends and relatives, especially Chodron. When Karma chides her, as he does each evening she leaves for the shop, about the outstanding credit to neighbours, she shrugs and says, “They’ll pay. It’s not a good time to ask them”. Once, after Deki had left Karma smiled and said how he appreciated Deki for her “good heart”, a phrase used to express how a person behaved towards others.

Deki’s experiences in obtaining her trading licence were reminders of the notices in Kuensel appointing new agents and revoking licenses. One day travelling along Nordzin Lam with Kesang Chodon, a senior police officer, I commented on taking a taxi from the taxi rank beside the stadium to the High Court. The fare demanded seemed high – 90 Nu. She had laughed when I added that I understood the taxi drivers were supposed to use a meter, but the driver did not switch it on. “They should. One day, I decided to try it out and took a taxi to the market, then around and about, I only paid about 50 Nu. He [the driver] saw you and thought ‘a rich chilik [foreigner]’. Next time, ask for the meter.” The level of regulation for commercial affairs is significant. Yet, one cannot help but wonder how much of it is either neither known nor understood or merely ignored. The taxi drivers are aware of the penalties for not using their meters, but few people in Thimphu would expect them to put the meter on. Many people mocked the regulations and commented on the level of corruption among officials.

The subject of corruption was one that I was hesitant to pursue, and yet one that time and time again arose in conversation. A young businessman involved in the construction industry in one of the dzongkhags remarked over supper that, although tenders were normally officially sought, it was the practice to reach an agreement with the official appointing the contractor to pay about 6% of the value to him. Waving a hand towards the houses being built opposite, he added, “Think about how much construction is going on... and how many people have cars. They don’t pay for them from their government salaries.” The penalties for those found to be taking bribes or, as in a number of recent incidents, money from official budgets are severe.

Whether or not corruption is as rampant as informants suggested I cannot comment on. What is clear, though, is that it does affect how people regard those in positions of authority. Accusations against members of the judiciary are also made, and we are faced with on the one hand, a generally respectful attitude towards the State, its authority and the status quo, and on the other, a widespread cynicism about the morality of State officials and its various institutions.

Concluding remarks: governmentality and the modern nation-state

This chapter illustrates the presence of law and regulations in everyday life in Bhutan. The ‘official graffiti’ that can be seen, and the implied regulation of ever widening areas of daily life, underscores the increasing reach of the modern Bhutanese state. As its responsibilities and objectives develop, so too do the areas of daily life, which fall under its purview. The regulations, which impact directly on individuals, are encountered in a variety of situations, not exclusively in the law courts or in government offices. Rather, they now permeate the course of daily life, especially in the urban areas. Deki’s experiences of opening her own small business and her frustration with the bureaucracy exemplify this dimension of the presence of law (in the guise of state regulations) in everyday life.

Rather, I focus on the structural changes and their impact on ordinary Bhutanese’ perceptions of the State, the legal system and their own status. This perspective draws on Abrams’ important article (1988), which deconstructs the state in theoretical terms. Abrams suggests that we should “abandon the state as a material object of study...while continuing to take the idea of the state extremely seriously” (1988: 75). Underlying his arguments about the study of the state is the suggestion that we study the state in two ways. The first “the state idea” (*ibid.*: 79), based on ideological power which is derived from the “state system”. This second element draws on various processes of legitimation and he notes that “the agencies in question, especially administrative, judicial and educational agencies, are made into state agencies as part of some quite historically specific process” (*ibid.*: 76). His stress on the historical contextualisation is reflected by many contemporary writers (see Benda-Beckmann, 1989; Fitzpatrick 1984, 1992a, 1992b; Merry 1988).

Mitchell (1991) notes how the setting up of a wide variety of “modern social practices – passports, immigration laws, inspections...” (*ibid.*: 94) which had not existed until recently “helped manufacture an

almost transcendental entity, the nation state". He then uses law as an analogy, "one could analyse how the mundane details of the legal process, all of which are particular social practices, are so arranged as to produce the effect that 'law' exists as a sort of abstract, formal framework, superimposed above social practice" (*ibid.*: 94). Although, I have reservations about the ontological distancing of law from everyday life, his comments are important. The "myth of the state" and arguably, "the myth of law" (see Fitzpatrick 1992a) together with the legitimacy and coherence they supply to established authority all depend on this apparent separation from society (Abrams 1988, Mitchell 1990, 1991).

Yet, for all the apparent separation of state and law from society, the state as demonstrated above does appear to have infiltrated everyday life in Bhutan, as elsewhere, with the proliferation of documentation and the recording and regulation of a multitude of mundane events, births, marriages sanctioned by state authority and death. Without the correct chapters, one is at a disadvantage. The various registers of data collection and regulation developed by the new cadres of bureaucrats draw on non-indigenous categories (see Gluck 1985 and 1998; Mitchell 1988; Vlastos (ed.) 1998). As with Egypt, Thailand and Japan, the desire to modernise Bhutan came from within as a response to external events and internal threats. The recent changes in political structure and move to a written constitution and constitutional monarchy are part of the process of constructing a modern nation-state. The introduction of the vocabulary of social equality in the 1950s has only now reached a wider audience prepared, if hesitantly, to assert their rights against those perceived to be socially higher. The older hierarchical features based on personal ties and social networks are gradually being replaced, yet there is an underlying tension between the desire to 'modernise' and the concerns of losing or distorting the social values which are viewed as central to Bhutanese society. This move marks the transition of local understandings and perceptions based on a renewed vision of the state as a guarantor of rights.

Any discussion of the state cannot ignore the influence in theoretical terms of the work of Foucault and Gramsci. Gramsci's idea of hegemony comprises "not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs but the whole lived social processes as practically organised by specific dominant meanings and values" (Williams 1977: 109). In essence, it upholds and legitimates a given social order. However, hegemony is not static. For Gramsci, hegemony is directly linked to

civil society and accordingly hegemony has to be “to be won, secured, constantly defended” as part of the state’s claim to moral leadership. On the other hand, Foucault’s concerns with the development of new forms of knowledge practices and surveillance encapsulated in the term ‘governmentality’ have influenced a number of anthropological works on the state – notably, Mitchell’s work on nineteenth century Egypt (1988). Although Foucault was not interested in the moral basis of the state his interest in the various styles of governmentality and discourses is highly relevant to the examination of state transformation and law in Bhutan. As Hansen and Spettutat note the state is not a universal construct and possesses “widely different histories, internal logics, and practices which need to be understood and studied” (2001: 37). Therefore, this thesis draws on local understandings and discourses concerning the state, law and social values in everyday life in Bhutan.

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THE USE OF FESTIVAL JESTERS TO SPREAD AWARENESS OF
HIV/AIDS IN BHUTAN:
*ATSARAS AS SOCIAL MESSENGERS*¹

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In 1988, five years before the first case of HIV/AIDS was diagnosed in Bhutan, yet when the threat of the rapid spread of the disease to even the remotest corners of the world was acknowledged as a very real threat, the Bhutanese health authorities decided that it needed an effective way to inform the Bhutanese people about how the disease is transmitted as well as teach the Bhutanese about safe sex. As a consequence, The National HIV/AIDS and STD Control Program (NACP) was established under the management of the Ministry of Health.²

It was not an easy task to deliver the message that a devastating disease was likely to spread in the country, if precautions were not taken. With comparatively little communication between the different valleys of Bhutan, a large proportion of the population illiterate and many places not having electricity, it became necessary to find an innovative way to efficiently spread this important message. The response to the HIV/AIDS threat was spearheaded by information distributed by health workers in health centres and teachers in schools. This was supplemented by a proactive approach displayed by the immensely well respected and popular royal family. In particular Her Majesty, the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, acted as a

¹ I am indebted to the support of the Institute of Language and Culture Studies (ILCS), Royal University of Bhutan, during the research trips to Bhutan. Without the support of the Principal, Ven. Lungtaen Gyatso, my co-researcher Lopen Tashi Tobgay and the whole of the ILCS community, the research would not have been possible. I am acknowledging the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, for the travel allowance that played a large part in financing the first field trip. The second field trip was made possible by a University of Queensland Graduate School Travel Grant. I also wish to thank Dr Adam Bowles for reading an early draft of this chapter and providing many useful comments and suggestions.

² See: The World Bank's report on Bhutan published in August 2008.
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOUTHASIAEXT/Resources/223546-1192413140459/4281804-1231540815570/5730961-1235157256443/HIVAIDSbriefBT.pdf> (Accessed 15/4 2010)

tireless campaigner for public health education focusing on HIV prevention.³ On a local level, multi-sectoral task forces to involve all sections of society were set up and formed a foundation for the districts' responses.⁴ As a part of that response, the *atsaras*⁵ in the Tsechu festivals (*tshe bcu*) became involved.

The *atsaras* are festival jesters that have been a part of the Tsechus for a long time and form an integral part of the activities on many levels. Their roles vary from festival to festival and can range from security to diviners and from first aid personnel to stand-up-comedians. Exactly when they first became a part of the Tsechu and their origin is not certain. However, most believe that their descent is Indian and that the first *atsaras* were Mahasiddhas⁶ that wandered into Bhutan some time after Vajrayana Buddhism was introduced by Guru Padmasambhava around 747 CE.⁷ It is believed that the word *atsara* originates from the Sanskrit word *ācārya*, meaning teacher. This is seen as a remnant of the teaching role that the wandering Mahasiddhas are known to have had. The Tsechu, meaning 10th day, is the major yearly ritual held in many places in Bhutan starting or culminating on the 10th day of any lunar month, being the day of the month when Guru Padmasambhava is particularly remembered. The Tsechus consist of a large number of events in honour of Guru Padmasambhava, some performed behind closed doors in the temples within the monasteries and others in public in the courtyards outside the monasteries. The *chams*,⁸ being both masked and non-masked religious dances, make up

³ *HIV/AIDS in the South-East Asian Region: progress report 2010*, World Health Organisation, Regional Office of South-East Asia, 44.
http://203.90.70.117/PDS_DOCS/B4602.pdf (Accessed 14/3 2011)

⁴ *Ibid.* 45.

⁵ *Atsaras* are part of most Tibetan Buddhist masked dance festivals, Tsechus as well as other festivals, in all regions of the Himalayas, Tibet and Mongolia.

⁶ A good introduction to Mahasiddhas can be found in Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: a Social History of Tantric Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004, p.169-171.

⁷ C.T. Dorji, *History of Bhutan Based on Buddhism*, Thimphu: Sangay Xam, 1994, p.33.

⁸ A useful text on *chams* is René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz' *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the 'chams yig*. As with all accounts of *chams* that I have come across so far, this account is based on particular observations and cannot possibly take into account the plethora of local variations that exist. However, the translation of a '*chams yig*, a dance manual, included in the volume makes it a good starting point for understanding *chams*. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the 'chams yig*, Christoper von Fürer-Harmendorf (ed.), New Delhi: Paljor Publications, 1997.

the vast majority of the public events of the Tsechus and it is in this setting that the *atsaras* appear in public. An *atsara* needs to be a master *cham* dancer to be considered for the role of jester as one of the *atsaras*' roles is to assist the *cham* dancers when necessary.

In this paper, I will outline the challenges the authorities faced when starting the information campaign about HIV/AIDS, their use of the *atsaras* as an important part of the campaign and some responses to the work of the *atsaras*. To utilise festivals of various kinds to relay the message about how to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS is common around the world.⁹ In the case of Bhutan, I will particularly use the Tsechus in Paro and Mongar as examples in my discussion, as these Tsechus showed two very different ways of responding to the directive to use *atsaras* to inform people about HIV/AIDS. I will also discuss future implications for the roles of the *atsaras* and, furthermore, the perception of *atsaras* resulting from the perceived success of the campaign. The data that forms the foundation for this paper was collected through observations and interviews conducted in Bhutan during two field trips in 2009.

The challenges that face information campaigns in Bhutan

This part of the paper will not only outline the challenges the health authorities faced in 1988 when the decision was made to inform the Bhutanese about the risk of HIV/AIDS but will also outline the changes that have taken place since. With many of the challenges still present, what was an almost impossible task then would still be a very difficult task today.

More specifically addressing *chams* in Bhutan is: Dasho Sithel Dorji, *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*, Thimphu, Bhutan: Dasho Sithel Dorji, 2001.

⁹ Using Denmark and Fiji as examples, the city of Copenhagen had a plan to use music and other festivals as venues to spread information about HIV already in 1990 and in Fiji the message has been relayed during fine arts and sports festivals, among others. See: M. Lindholm and B. Hanson, "Information to young people on HIV, AIDS and safer sex during festivals in the city of Copenhagen", *International Conference on AIDS*, San Francisco, June 20-24, 1990; Nichole Gooch, "HIV Campaign Melanesian Arts Festival Press Release 3 - Put Aside Prejudices and Act Now for Future Generations", *Fiji Ministry of Health/SPC Press Release*, 3rd of Oct. 2006, http://lists.spc.int/pipermail/press-releases_lists.spc.int/2006-October/000024.html; NA, "International Volleyball Day," *Oceania National Sporting Committee*, 17th of Nov. 2008, http://www.sportingpulse.com/assoc_page.cgi?c=2-4052-0-0-0&sID=45889&articleID=4105558&news_task=DETAIL (Accessed 22/5 2011)

Recently the number of news publications that publish either daily or weekly has catapulted to seven¹⁰ and in the larger towns like Thimphu, Paro, Trongsa, Chamkhar, Mongar, Trashigang, Gelephu, Samtse and Phuensholing newspapers are readily available. However, large parts of the population live in small towns and villages not reached by the newspaper distribution network. In 1988, there was only one weekly newspaper, Kuensel, with a far more limited distribution network than is now available. Kuensel was made a twice weekly publication in 2005, but it was not until 2006 that it lost its status as Bhutan's only newspaper. By the time Kuensel became a daily newspaper in 2009, another daily newspaper, Bhutan Today, had begun publishing in 2008.¹¹

Even in the places where newspapers are available, there is still a significant proportion of Bhutanese who are illiterate.¹² No doubt, the information will be transmitted verbally to many illiterate Bhutanese by those who have learnt to read and the message of the risk of the disease would, thereby, spread a little further. However, until literacy reaches a far greater proportion of the population, information in printed form will not have the desired spread and effect. It is obvious that a print media campaign would have been thoroughly ineffective in 1988. Even today, 23 years after the original campaign was instigated, campaigns in print media would not reach a sufficient number of people to be effective.

Television was not officially introduced in the country until 1999¹³ and therefore was not an option in 1988. Even now, a television campaign would have a limited effect in Bhutan as a television set remains a luxury item. Geographically, television sets are relatively

¹⁰ See: Saraswati, "From a Government Bulletin to Seven Newspapers", *Business Bhutan*, 23rd of October 2010. <http://www.businessbhutan.bt/?p=3042> (Accessed 14/3 2011)

¹¹ See: "About Us: Bhutan Today", *Bhutan Today*. http://www.bhutantoday.bt/?page_id=4411 (Accessed 18/4 2010)

¹² There are several estimations as to the literacy in Bhutan. An estimate by the United Nation Development Programme claims that 30% of males and 10% of females were literate in the early 1990s but other estimates from that time put the literacy rate much lower at between 12 and 18%. The United Nation Development Programme also estimated that 47% of the population were literate in 2006 and recent estimates by the World Bank and other organisations range between 50 and 54%. However, in the age group between 15 and 24 years old the figure is 74% with 80% of men and 68% of women literate according to the United Nation Statistic Division. See: <http://www.undp.org.bt/> (Accessed 17/4 2010)

¹³ See: Subir Bhaumik, "Bhutan to Enter TV Age", *BBC News Online*, 26th of April 1999. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/328850.stm (Accessed 14/4 2010)

common in the larger towns in Bhutan but are still scarce in most other places with the consequence that the same people who would be reached by a campaign in print media would also be reached by the television campaign, still leaving a large portion of the population without knowledge of the campaign.

More significantly, many parts of Bhutan have not got electricity. Even though electricity is being connected to more and more villages, not all people in Bhutan enjoy the convenience of electricity in their homes and, as a consequence, it is not possible for many Bhutanese to receive messages through electronic means.

Bhutan has largely been spared from epidemics in the past as it is sparsely populated and travels within as well as to and from Bhutan has been limited. However, there have been localised outbreaks of diseases of various kinds. According to World Health Organisation figures, malaria has occurred regularly in the southern parts of the country where the climate is tropical, as well as in some of the lower valleys where rice cultivation is undertaken. Though new cases still occur, measures taken have radically lowered the number of cases in recent times. Further, according to the same report, there are a growing number of cases of tuberculosis in the country, while leprosy has all but been eradicated.¹⁴ The difference between malaria, tuberculosis and leprosy and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is that it is the first epidemic to reach the region at a time when information has been disseminated in Bhutan through foreign workers, volunteers and tourists as well as those Bhutanese being able to travel, work or study abroad. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has also got global attention with a sense that every government and individual has an obligation to find ways to control the disease. Therefore, with the unavailability of the many ways of communication that the developed world takes for granted, the Bhutanese authorities needed to find the best medium for spreading the message.

In summary, it was a Herculean task that faced the health authorities. Even if they had had the number of health workers required to visit every village in the country to deliver information face to face, which they had not and still do not have,¹⁵ it would have taken too long to transmit the message to every part of the country. Therefore, an innovative solution needed to be found.

¹⁴ See: *The World Health Organisation's health system profile for Bhutan.*
http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Country_Health_System_Profile_2-bhutan.pdf
 (Accessed 12/3 2011)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Why the need for a campaign?

It can be argued that people from remote communities have little contact with the world outside their own village and, therefore, would not be exposed to anyone infected with HIV/AIDS. However, it has become very common among subsistence farmers in all parts of Bhutan to produce a surplus to be sold for cash, which was a development well underway in 1988. This, in turn, means that the produce needs to be brought to a market place, thereby exposing villagers from remote farming communities to many people, some that may be infected by HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Bhutan is a developing country with an increasingly elaborate system of rules and restrictions requiring official procedures and permissions, which means that anyone who wants to, for example, acquire land, erect or modify a building or start a business must travel to a regional centre to apply for the necessary permissions in order to proceed. As the process is sometimes slow, villagers may stay for a considerable time in the towns where the permits are being processed, thereby possibly becoming exposed to those infected by HIV/AIDS. In addition, with an expanding network of health care in the country, it is now more common that people are referred to hospitals located in larger towns around Bhutan, which bring the patients to these centres and, consequently, potentially brings them in contact with infected people.

HIV/AIDS is almost exclusively discussed as a sexually transmitted disease during sexual intercourse between males and females in Bhutan. The known risk factors of transmission of the disease by men having sex with men, injecting drug use and blood transfusion are rarely discussed, though they undoubtedly do exist.

A recent study estimates the number of sex workers in the capital Thimphu¹⁶ to be 266.¹⁷ While these sex workers are identified as at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, there is no indication how many of them have already contracted the virus, if any. Neither is there data about who and how many utilise the services of the sex workers. Should the virus start to spread among the sex workers, it would be another way the epidemic may reach a number of Bhutanese. Another area of concern identified in the new study is the so called Drayangs that have

¹⁶ To my knowledge, there is no available estimate of the number of sex workers in other parts of Bhutan.

¹⁷ Nirmala Pokhrel, "Thimphu Survey Show High Risk Sexual Conduct", *Kuensel*, 26th of February 2011.

been opened in the country recently. The Drayangs are bars where young women are employed to sing and dance to entertain. In some instances, the women have been assumed to be sex workers by men visiting the bars and in isolated instances the women have been sexually abused as a consequence.

Another way HIV/AIDS may spread to villages all around Bhutan is through those travelling to other places in Bhutan and abroad. As the Bhutanese economy grows, business related trips, both within and outside the country, are more and more common. An increasing number of young Bhutanese are also pursuing an education in India or in other countries. Eventually, after the possible exposure to HIV/AIDS infected persons during their time gaining these qualifications, they often return to the area where they grew up, get work in the larger centres or gain employment in public service and, as a consequence, are placed in positions all over Bhutan.

The Tsechus in Bhutan, as with festivals everywhere in the Tibetan region, are of immense importance as they are not only great religious events but also major social occasions with people coming together to share news, trade and interact socially. Many older people attending the Tsechus complain about the young people attending only to show off their finest cloths and impress persons of the opposite sex. In larger centres, the Tsechus see thousands of people attending and in smaller centres literally everyone attends. After the *chams* have finished for the day, there is often a market place with a mobile cinema, tents with gambling, bars and other meeting places open till well into the night, bringing people together like at no other time of the year. The festival time thus becomes a time when HIV/AIDS can spread, particularly when casual relationships are entered into.

On the other hand, the number of people present also makes the festivals an ideal place to make sure that as many people as possible will hear any message the authorities would like to reach as large a proportion of the population as possible. Only among young, educated Bhutanese in major centres, as well as among those running their own businesses, does there seem to be a slowly growing trend to view attendance at Tsechus as optional.

The solution: engaging the Atsaras

The solution that was reached is to use the *atsaras* during the Tsechus to spread information about HIV/AIDS and how the transmission of the disease can be prevented. *Atsaras* are naturally engaging with the

Tsechu audience and their liminal place in the festival context makes them ideally suited to reach all the festival goers. In calling them liminal¹⁸ in this context, I refer to them as being ‘betwixt and between’ in the same way as the European court jesters were.¹⁹ They are men of low class that are transformed into religious jesters that have the freedom to operate above their status or, rather, outside any social boundaries during the Tsechus. The *atsaras* frequently make fun of and interact with everyone, including monks, lamas and important visitors, using crude and sexually explicit jokes. The behaviour would be inappropriate and unacceptable at any other time and if enacted by others than the jesters. As those in the roles of *atsaras* are ordinary householders at all other times than during the festival, this behaviour has no equivalence at any other time in Bhutan. Their liminal status allows them to operate in all facets of the festival and their permission to act in any way they please makes them both unpredictable and exciting to those attending the Tsechus. Similar to the European court jesters and jesters elsewhere, the *atsaras* have certain boundaries that they do not overstep.²⁰ Some boundaries appear to be observed throughout the country, particularly those set because of the great respect that exists for certain institutions such as the monarchy and monasticism. However, there are also boundaries that are set locally that vary from place to place. For example, during one Tsechu, the *atsaras* told me that they did not interact with pregnant women²¹ whereas in other Tsechus it is common to involve pregnant women in the jokes and pranks.

When an *atsara* approaches or is carrying out a prank elsewhere around the Tsechu ground, the exclamation ‘Atsara!’ is often heard in the audience. For at least a few moments and often longer, the attention is diverted away from the *chams* to the jesters. Some people, particularly young women, profess not to like the *atsaras* but, nevertheless, everyone gives the *atsaras* their attention. As the *atsaras*

¹⁸ Victor Turner used the term liminal particularly while describing times when people were involved in rituals ‘betwixt and between’ various life stages but he points out that liminality can be seen in many areas when there is a “release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the ‘uninteresting’ construction of common sense, the ‘meaningfulness of ordinary life’”. Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1985, 160.

¹⁹ Max Gluckman, *Political Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971, p.102-103.

²⁰ Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jesters Around the World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p.131-139.

²¹ Interview with *atsaras* the day after Jakar Dzong Tsechu on the 30th of October 2009.

have everyone's eyes and ears during the Tsechus, it must, in hindsight, be considered an inspired move to engage the *atsaras* in the information campaign.

The *atsaras* are eminently suited to deliver messages about HIV/AIDS as they, as well as having a liminal position, are traditionally seen as operating in the realm of sexuality within which the HIV/AIDS prevention message in Bhutan is generally placed. In addition, as the *atsaras* main tool in their traditional roles as entertainers and teachers is a wooden phallus, they have the perfect tool with which to demonstrate the use of condoms, leaving those in the audience with a very vivid image of how to protect themselves against the deadly disease.

As the method of teaching the audience about HIV/AIDS and how to use condoms differ markedly from place to place, there does not seem to be a manual that the *atsaras* are following nor does there appear to be any formal training that they have undertaken. However, it appears that they have received some instructions and all of them seem adequately confident in how to use condoms to effectively show how they are used. During some Tsechus the *atsaras* generally move around in the audience offering free condoms that are unceremoniously thrown to the audience members whereas, during other Tsechus, the *atsaras* explain to the audience members about HIV/AIDS before demonstrating how condoms are properly used and, finally, distributing the free condoms.

The main response to the *atsaras* during these sessions is initially laughter and giggles until the seriousness of the matter at hand is established, when interest takes over and every move by the *atsaras* is keenly followed. Most men accept the condoms they are offered with embarrassed laughter. Some require considerable coaxing and some have to endure teasing as to their promiscuity from their friends. Most women accept the condoms without fuss, usually with a very serious look on their faces. The average time used to deliver this information around the Tsechu ground was approximately two and a half hours.



Handing out free condoms at Punaka. “... and you roll it on like this.” *Atsaras* at work at Mongar. (Photos by author)

In one place, Mongar, the *atsaras* made a thorough round of the audience on two different days of the Tsechu. Though the men wore masks, it was clear that it was the same men that did the work both days. They seemed utterly confident and well drilled in how to conduct themselves as well as how to deliver their message. To me, it looked like they might be health workers in *atsara* costumes, a hypothesis that I could not verify. If proven correct, this would also explain why they did not seem to have any concern with the *chams* that were performed while they were working. However, it could also be the case that they are able to concentrate solely on their role as health informants due to that the number of *atsaras* in Mongar is larger than in most other places and that they work very well together as a team. In all other places, the *atsaras* keep a constant eye on the dancers in order to assist them, if needed, while giving instructions and handing out condoms.

The *atsaras* are part of the national information campaign only in Tsechus organised and sponsored by the Dzongkhags (districts) and, therefore, by the state. At village and privately sponsored festivals there are usually not the funds to supply free condoms and/or enough *atsaras* to do the work. However, even people from communities where the *atsaras* are not involved in the scheme are often aware that the program exists elsewhere and know why it is being run. In most places there would be those that not only attend the local festival but travel to the

central town of the Dzongkhag to attend the Tsechu there, thereby seeing the *atsaras* doing their work and gaining an understanding of the message that they later share in their own villages.

The Tsechu in Paro differs from the other Dzongkhag sponsored Tsechus in that there is an information tent where health authority personnel provide the information and the free condoms. The reason why the *atsaras* are not delivering the message is not clear. However, it is believed that one or a combination of the following reasons explain why the *atsaras* do not deliver the message of the HIV/AIDS threat at Paro. The Tsechu is one of the largest in the country with a staggering number of visitors tightly packed together. Therefore it may be that the crowd is deemed to be too large for *atsaras* to effectively move around to deliver the message. The crowd in Paro is also the one that has the greatest proportion of foreign visitors each year, with the possible exception of the one in Thimphu, and nowhere else in the country are the visitors taken into consideration as much as they are in Paro. Perhaps it is deemed that it is inappropriate to have the *atsaras* delivering condoms with all the visitors present. Another reason may be that the *atsaras*, who are very busy during the Paro Tsechu, do not have time to do this work. Yet another reason may be that the *atsara gom*, the head *atsara*, very much emphasises the *atsaras* religious role and importance. Whatever the reason, the lack of *atsaras*, so to speak, 'in your face' with their bag of condoms and their wooden phalli has the consequence that the problem is seemingly given less serious attention. As Paro is one of those centres that have a comprehensive distribution of print media, as well as a relatively high density of television sets and where the population is becoming literate very fast, it has perhaps been decided that an information tent is sufficient. However, at all other Tsechus in regional centres, organised by the Dzongkhags, it is clearly the role of the *atsaras* to provide the information. At this point there is no statistic available to judge whether or not there is an observable difference in the effectiveness or otherwise of the approach in Paro compared to other places in the country.

Some responses to the work done by the atsaras

Among those that I interviewed that commented on the initiative to use the *atsaras* in the campaign to spread information about HIV/AIDS, it was unanimously deemed a success. The way the *atsaras* reached a very large part of the population and the apparent ease with which they performed the task were mentioned as factors that had impressed the

interviewees. Everyone interviewed acknowledged that the message was of great importance and that it was delivered well. However, it was officials, such as public servants organising the Tsechus and office bearers, rather than the ordinary festival attendees that levelled most praise on the scheme. For some reason, district judges in several districts were particularly vocal in their support and praise.²² The fact that the number of confirmed cases of HIV/AIDS in Bhutan is very low is partly seen as a result of the success of the *atsaras* in their work by those interviewed. In 2008 there were only 144 confirmed cases in Bhutan,²³ constituting about 0.02 percent of the population or about one person in every 5,000. As comparison, China has a prevalence of an estimated 0.1 percent (1 in every 1,000) of the population infected with HIV/AIDS,²⁴ India an estimated 0.3 percent (3 in every 1,000)²⁵ and Thailand an estimated 1.4 percent (14 in every 1000).²⁶ Looked at differently, it can be argued that there have been, on average, nearly 15 new cases of infected people a year in Bhutan, which could be seen as a high number given the resources used to inform the people. It is also worth noting that HIV/AIDS statistics are often under-reported as a high stigma is associated with the disease in many places and it is likely that the real figure of the number of infected people is higher than what the statistics show.

However you interpret the data, the perceived success of the information campaign has prompted people to think of other ways that the *atsaras* could be used to transmit information. The most common suggestions, again particularly voiced among the district judges, is to use the *atsaras* to inform about the issue of domestic violence and its consequences, which is a problem in the country.²⁷ Another common suggestion is that the *atsaras* could inform about the early symptoms of

²² This was particularly strongly expressed in interviews by the district judge at Jakar Dzong on the 26th of October 2009 and the district judge at Mongar on 28th of November 2009.

²³ See: *HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia-Pacific*. <http://aidsdatahub.org/en/country-profiles/bhutan> (Accessed 14/3 2011)

²⁴ See: *HIV InSite*, "China", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/global?page=cr04-ch-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

²⁵ See: *HIV InSite*, "India", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/global?page=cr08-in-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

²⁶ See: *HIV InSite*, "Thailand", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=cr08-th-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

²⁷ See: Yangchen C. Rinzin, "Theft, burglary and battery top crime cases", *Kuenselonline*, 24th January 2011. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/2010/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=18197> (Accessed 14/4 2011)

Tuberculosis as the number of cases of the disease is on the rise in Bhutan.²⁸ Other suggestions include information about the effects of global warming, how to counteract the growing number of incidents of violence among youths in the major towns and the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse, which are seen as underlying factors for domestic and public violence.

Possible consequences to the atsaras' role as teachers if new campaigns are launched

All of the suggestions mentioned above would bring the *atsaras* outside their customary sphere of involvement. Whether the audience members would object to, or at least react to, the *atsaras* operating in these unfamiliar spheres of engagement or respond favourably to the *atsaras'* new roles is impossible to assess before they are trialled. Should the Tsechu audience respond unfavourably or not understand the *atsaras* in their new roles, it would impact negatively on the success of new information campaigns.

Many of the people interviewed do not associate the *atsaras* with religious teaching and many do not associate them with teaching at all. To those people, the purpose of the *atsaras* is to entertain the audience during long *chams* and fill in the spaces when dancers need to change costumes or need to have a little bit longer to prepare for the next *cham*. Among those in this group of people, there is a possibility that any message relayed by the *atsaras* will not be taken seriously or misunderstood. However, they, like all Bhutanese, now appear to accept that the *atsaras* have the task of informing the population about HIV/AIDS. If it is the *atsaras* well known practice of using sexually oriented jokes and their wooden phalli while entertaining that has made the audience members accept this new role as a natural extension of their work is difficult to assess. To what extent these festival goers

²⁸ The connection between HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis is well established and researched. Tuberculosis is responsible for over 25% of deaths among those infected by HIV making this particular suggestion interesting to the health authorities on more than one level. See: <http://www.aidsdatahub.org/en/reference-materials/tbhiv> (Accessed 14/3 2011).

It is also well established that there is an increased risk of bacterial pneumonia for those infected, which makes it, it is suggested, another issue that may be beneficial to include in a campaign to inform about symptoms and risk factors in detecting those infected. See for example: M. Tumbarello, E. Tacconelli, K. de Gaetano, et al., "Bacterial Pneumonia in HIV-Infected Patients: Analysis of Risks Factors and Prognostic Indicators", *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome & Human Retrovirology*, 18:1, 1998, 39-45.

would take the *atsaras* seriously, if new campaigns were to be launched, is something to consider for those assessing how effective the campaigns would be. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that these audience members would get used to seeing the jesters in other new serious roles, given time.

Other interviewees, including the majority of those I interviewed, know that there is a deeper meaning to what the *atsaras* do and appreciate that teaching is a part of their work. However, it is not always the case that the teaching is seen in its entirety. The added knowledge of the roles of the *atsaras* may only extend to their practical role as master dancers and, as such, working to assist the *cham* dancers both in respect of their attire, their actual dance techniques and the sets of steps that each *cham* contains. The even deeper meaning, when *atsaras* are seen as teachers of 'life' and how to overcome what are seen as hindrances to enlightenment in Buddhist philosophy, is seemingly only known by monks and the well-educated people among those I interviewed.

On the one hand, the *atsaras'* role as teachers would be consolidated and enhanced by involvement in new information campaigns. On the other hand, it brings them further away from the religious teaching as well as teachings of *chams* as expert dancers. The perception of the *atsaras'* customary way of teaching, including a variety of mainly sexually oriented expressions, would be challenged and necessarily extended for any new information campaign to have optimal effect. Though this is a hurdle, I cannot see it as a major one as Bhutanese people are, in my experience, readily accepting of change. The widely held belief that *atsaras* need to be experts in everything, including life in general, gives any future use of *atsaras* a good chance of succeeding. However, it may take some time for everyone to get used to these new roles of the *atsaras* and thereby delay the results from the campaigns. Nevertheless, contemplating the alternatives, it is likely that this way is at least as efficient as other options that would bring the desired messages to the people. The fact that the *atsaras* have everyone's attention would automatically give the campaigns the opportunity to become successful among all groups of people.

Possible consequences as a result of added workload

The *atsaras* are kept busy in many ways during the Tsechus and in most festivals it appears that they have been given additional tasks as they have proven that they are efficient and keen. These additions have

been dealt with in various ways in different festivals. I will again be using the examples of the Tsechus in Paro and Mongar as these two festivals represent different ways of making use of the *atsaras* for various tasks.

On one end of the scale is the Tsechu in Paro where it is unlikely that the *atsaras* would be involved in future campaigns. At present there are three *atsaras* during the Tsechu. Holding a position as *atsara* at Paro Tsechu seems to be revered and closely guarded by those who have been chosen to hold one. The reason being, at least partly, that the *atsara gom* is valuing the work of the *atsaras* highly and is protective of the well established roles and special *chams* and events involving *atsaras* that are integral parts of the Tsechu. There is also an emphasis on the religious roles of the *atsaras*. Though there would easily be scope for another *atsara* as the Tsechu runs for five full days and the crowds are large, there is no indication that there will be any change to the structure with added help for any new tasks, including information campaigns, which may occur in the future. As mentioned above, the *atsaras* in Paro are not involved in the information campaign about HIV/AIDS at this point. It is likely that any future campaigns would be dealt with in a similar manner to this one with other people given the responsibility to conduct them.

In Mongar, on the other hand, the response to *atsaras* being given more and more responsibilities has, until now, been to generously appoint *atsaras* to cope with the added workload. As previously mentioned, the two *atsaras* that spent more time than anywhere else to inform, answer questions and demonstrate the use of condoms had no other duties to perform at the time they worked their way through the audience. It is likely that if any future campaigns occur, the *atsaras* will cope with the added workload by adding *atsaras* that can solely concentrate on this new task, thereby making sure that all the work allocated to the *atsaras* run smoothly.

In the case of Paro, the boundaries of what *atsaras* do and do not do are very clear and, in the case of Mongar, the solution to an expanding workload has been worked out. In both cases, added campaigns can be dealt with within these ways of working. In other places like Punakha, Wangdi Phodrang and Jakar Dzong the understanding of how added workload can be addressed seems much less clear. In these Tsechus, the *atsaras* constantly keep an eye on the *cham* dancers while sharing information and distributing condoms. They were frequently dashing away to deal with new situations as they arose, which would most likely also be the case during new campaigns if not presented with

guidelines for coping with the added workload. With the further added responsibilities brought on by possible future campaigns, it is likely that the *atsaras* will encounter challenges in balancing the new responsibilities with their traditional duties. It is my opinion that any decision to add further workload to the *atsaras* needs to be accompanied with clear guidelines as to priorities and suggestions of how the new workload can be managed. This would be done in order to avoid the *atsaras* becoming misunderstood and removed from their traditional roles or used in a manner that might not make sense to those attending the Tsechus.

Conclusion

The *atsaras* are a valued and important part of the Tsechu festival in all the communities that I visited and that is not likely to change. With the *atsaras* being one of the most anticipated parts of the Tsechus, the idea of using them in various ways has considerable merit. It has been argued that, due to the lack of available communication within Bhutan when the HIV/AIDS information campaign was launched in 1988, the health authorities had to conceive of an innovative way to get the message to as many Bhutanese as possible. It has further been argued that involving the *atsaras* in the campaign has been a successful initiative. However, it has also been suggested that future campaigns may be less effective. Up to this point, the *atsaras* have only been engaged in this particular campaign, which, as it happens, falls within the sphere of sexuality, being one of their usual spheres of engagement. However, as suggestions of involvement in other projects that do fall distinctly outside their present and long established spheres of involvement are put forward, considerations as to the consequences for the perceptions of *atsaras* and their position need to be taken seriously. If there are added responsibilities for the *atsaras*, there is also a risk that they will both become further removed from their traditional roles as teachers of aspects of Buddhist philosophy and get less time to be attentive to the *cham* dancers and their possible need for attention. Nevertheless, the *atsaras'* involvement in information campaigns could see them as a vehicle for important messages while also fulfilling their tasks in their traditional roles if well directed and managed.

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CHILLI TRANSACTIONS IN BHUTAN:
AN ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Chillies¹ occupy a very important part of the Bhutanese diet. The Bhutanese people eat chillies in every meal and almost all Bhutanese dishes contain chillies in various forms. Many Bhutanese people confess that they “do not know how to cook without chillies”.² Moreover, their appetite decreases dramatically when a meal does not have a sufficiently spicy kick. For the Bhutanese people, therefore, it is vital to secure enough chillies. While almost all people in Bhutan eat chillies, chillies do not grow everywhere in the country, mainly due to climatic reasons. Those who live in the area where chillies cannot grow have to obtain them somehow from somewhere. Even those who grow chillies sometimes need to get chillies from other places, the reasons for which will be elaborated later. This paper is about how people in Bhutan, especially in rural areas, obtain chillies, and also how people

¹ Most chillies consumed in Bhutan seem to be *Capsicum annuum*.

² Choden also presents a similar account of the Bhutanese inclination for chillies (Choden 2008: 112). There are numerous examples of writings on chillies, the symptom of ‘chilli addiction’ and love for this plant. For example, *Kuensel* (one of the oldest newspapers in Bhutan) dated 14 July 2008 gives the following account:

It is their incomparable sharp flavour, which some describe as succulent and earthy, with a clarity that seems to reflect the taste and smell of the skies and landscapes of Bhutan. ... Naturally, chillies are ubiquitous in Bhutan. ... ‘Addictions to *ema* (chilli) are formed early in life and the victims, I for one, never recovered,’ said Abi Sonam Kitsho, 85, from Zhemgang. ‘On cold winter days, I get such a passionate yearning for a bowl of *ema datsi* (chilli and cheese) that I nearly lose my mind’.

who have surplus chillies sell or exchange them with other commodities they need.

There are several channels through which chillies are transferred. These are, for example, selling/buying in the market, exchanging with other commodities, working for other people and getting paid in chillies, offering them as a gift, compensating for damage caused by domestic animals by giving chillies, and there is, in some parts of the country, even a custom of making an annual trip to ask for chillies. Of these channels, the paper will focus on two main ones, that via the medium of cash (usually in market places and shops) and that via exchange with other commodities, so-called 'barter'. The paper will give comparisons of these two main modes of transaction from the perspective of farmers, and will argue that people in Bhutan, especially in rural areas, alternate between the two modes of transactions very skilfully to reach a satisfying level of food security with reference to chillies, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Discussion on food security in general so far tends to focus on economic aspects of obtaining food. Those are mainly concerning the production, market access and distribution of food. Socio-cultural aspects of food security have not been very explicit, though they have been indicative, for example, in the studies on gender-related dimensions of production and food distribution within a household.³ While this paper examines trading of one of the important food items in the Bhutanese diet, it will also compare socio-cultural dimensions of trading between barter and cash medium transactions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, it presents the methodology of data collection on which this paper relies. Secondly, it discusses a few conceptual issues by reviewing preceding studies and thereby contextualises the following ethnographic narrative. The section gives an overview of the current trends in food security research and points out that while economic and material aspects are emphasised, less attention has been paid to socio-cultural aspects of food security. Thirdly, it briefly introduces the position of chillies in the Bhutanese diet. Fourthly, it provides a description of how cash trading and barter transactions typically take place among farmers. Finally, it narrates, from the farmers' point of view, positive and negative aspects

³ As an example of gender-related dimensions, see Levin *et al.* (1999). De Boeck (1994) is an example of studies on social dimensions of hunger. Fortier (2001) is one of the few examples of analysis of social and political dimensions of barter. The article however views barter as an expression of resistance of a minority group of hunter-gatherers against the hegemonic group of agriculturalists, rather than as a means of securing food.

of each mode of transaction, and also how farmers use these different modes of transaction to meet their needs.

Through these analyses the paper argues that neither economic (materialistic) nor socio-cultural factors on their own can explain elements which facilitate people's access to food. We need an integrated perspective which includes both economic and socio-cultural aspects of how people ensure their food security.

Methodology

The data on which this paper relies is mainly ethnographic, being collected through interviewing people in rural areas of Bhutan. The fieldwork was conducted in several phases spreading from 2004 to 2009.⁴ During this period, the fieldwork received support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan. Interviews with farmers were conducted in the following ten *dzongkhags* (districts), covering a wide range of agro-ecological settings both in chilli producing and non-chilli producing areas: Paro (sPa ro), Thimphu (Thim phu), Punakha (sPun na kha), Wangdue Phodrang (dBang 'dus pho brang), Trongsa (Krong gsar), Bumthang (Bum thang), Mongar (Mong sgar), Lhuentse (lHun rtse), Trashigang (bKra shis sgang) and Trashi Yangtse (bKra shis g.yang rtse). The number of people interviewed was about two hundred. The interviews were carried out using semi-structured questionnaires, which included how they trade chillies, through which modes of transaction, and the details of each transaction they engage in. Since Bhutan has nineteen different languages (van Driem 1994: 87), interpreters were employed wherever necessary. In most cases, the interpretations were from a local language to English.

Some of the aspects which needed careful attention during the interviews were units of weight and volume, particularly those with so-called Bhutanese units, such as *drey*⁵(*bre*) and *sang* (*srang*). *Drey*⁶ is a

⁴ The authors would like to acknowledge the generous funding for the fieldwork. The fieldwork in 2004 was funded by the Ajinomoto Foundation for Dietary Culture, and those between 2008 and 2009 were supported by KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) 20710191). The authors would also like to thank the Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan, for the full support and cooperation during the fieldwork.

⁵ Spelling of Dzongkha (the national language of Bhutan) terms in this paper follows those which appear in the publications of the Royal Government of Bhutan and *Kuensel*.

unit of volume and, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, it represents 1.21 kilograms of paddy (un-husked rice) or 1.66 kilograms of rice. A measure of *drey*, which is used in rural areas is not precisely uniform, therefore it can vary from one house to another. The actual transactions take place with a mutual understanding of ‘correct’ *drey*. *Sang* is a unit of weight, which is often used for measuring butter and fermented cheese called *zeydey*, and translates to 390 grams (Ministry of Agriculture 2009).⁷ Information on volume, weight, price and terms of exchange was obtained from farmers interviewed. This information was cross-checked by asking the same questions of their trading/exchange partners, or other farmers who trade in the same market places. However, the reader should be aware of the limitations of the data in terms of its accuracy in quantities. This is mainly because the precise measurement of a unit used for measuring varies from place to place (in some cases, depending on each transaction), and also because the data largely depends on what farmers told us from their memories.

Socio-cultural aspects of food security: literature review

This paper discusses an aspect of food security through focusing on chilli trading in Bhutan. In recent discussions on food security, ‘access’ to food has received increasing attention in recognition that “if food is in fields or in the markets, but families cannot afford to acquire it, then they are food insecure” (Benson 2004: 8).

The focus of this paper conforms to the general trend of food security analysis. So far however, very few analyses on access to food with ethnographic details from Bhutan have been presented.⁸ Furthermore, the ethnographic data in this paper will reveal socio-cultural aspects of access to food, and will argue that access is not only a matter of economic factors such as income and transportation, but

⁶ In Bhutan, according to Choden (2008: 64), standardised *drey* (*bre*) has been introduced by the government since the 1960s.

⁷ The conversion table was provided by one of the officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan, during the fieldwork conducted in November and December 2009.

⁸ Ueda (2009) examines, with some ethnographic data from Bhutan, the concept of food security in relation to Gross National Happiness (GNH); Bhutan’s development policy. It argues that food security under the GNH policy is not only a matter of securing enough food, but also a matter of how the food items are produced, circulated and obtained.

also a matter of socio-cultural factors including social networks and conforming to cultural norms.

Social and cultural dimensions of food security, especially concerning access to food, can be related to a group of literature which highlights social capital. In the *World Development Report 2000*, social capital is largely attributed to links among people, ranging from strong bonds connecting family members and neighbours to relatively weak vertical ties between people. These links are, according to the World Bank report, expected to serve as a risk mitigating mechanism. There are also academic works which support the view that social capital and informal networks generally reduce vulnerability and enhance the resilience of people who are marginalised in society (for instance, Boshier *et al.* 2007). The present paper will analyse, using case studies from Bhutan, how these social links work in the case of two modes of transaction, i.e. barter and cash, and also assess how important the social ties among people are in securing food.

Another feature of this paper is its focus on chillies. In the standard definition of food security, chillies may not be considered an important food item. Therefore households and individuals who lack access to chillies would not normally be considered as food insecure. Food security is still largely recognised as a matter of intake of calories, and to a less extent, of protein and micro-nutrients. As Huish (2008: 1392) rightly points out, the focus on hunger and accessibility has led the current discussion to view individuals as “mere containers for calories”. The meaning of particular food items in a specific cultural setting has been given less attention. Chillies represent a very important food item for the Bhutanese people, but in the current discussion on food security they can only be considered in terms of vitamins at best. Chillies are classified as a spice (not as a vegetable as perceived by most Bhutanese people) and even their nutritional value can be neglected. Cultural preferences for food are mentioned in some works, such as Coates *et al.* (2003), but they have not been developed to a re-conceptualisation of ‘food security’. “Cultural preferences” are also mentioned in the definition of food security given in the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action;⁹ however, they are not reflected as major indicators of food security. For instance, the

⁹“ Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” *World Food Summit Plan of Action, 1996* (FAO 1996) The same definition is used in the *Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security in 2009* (FAO 2009).

World Hunger Map 2010 by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) relies solely on calorie intake as the indicator of food security.

This paper is an attempt to draw more attention to social and cultural aspects of food security. Food items which some people can survive without can represent a basic food item for survival for others, and access to food cannot be discussed without an insight on social and cultural dimensions.

Why chillies?

As stated at the beginning of this paper, chillies occupy a very important part of the Bhutanese diet. The total production of chillies in Bhutan in 2008, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, was about 7,312 metric tons (Ministry of Agriculture 2010). As the production was 4,500 metric tons in 2004, it seems the trend is increasing (Ministry of Agriculture 2008: 16). According to *Agriculture Statistics 2009* (Ministry of Agriculture 2010), total household income from chilli selling in Bhutan was about Nu.170 million in 2008, (about Nu.280/person).¹⁰ The average ratio of households which sell chillies for cash in Bhutan is about six percent. In areas which have good market access, such as Paro and Punakha, more households sell chillies for cash (twenty-six percent in Paro, and nineteen percent in Punakha). In order to show the important role that chillies occupy in Bhutanese diet, the following aspects are informative.

The chilli is generally recognised as a vegetable rather than a spice. Hence, chillies are something to be ‘eaten’. “Does he (or she) eat chillies?” is a question often asked to find out the extent to which a foreigner accommodates the Bhutanese way of eating. The most common dish among the Bhutanese is perhaps ‘*ema datsi*’, a dish prepared with chillies and cheese. Most Bhutanese people eat chillies from childhood. The author saw a three year old child eating rice with a dip sauce made of chilli powder, salt, Sichuan pepper, tomato and coriander leaves. One person interviewed in Thimphu answered that he buys 1.5 to 2 kilograms of fresh green chillies every week for a family of four adults during the summer, and also consumes dried chillies along with the fresh chillies.

Chillies are said to be cultivated up to an altitude of 2,700 meters (Choden 2008). However there are areas even below 2,700 meters

¹⁰ Ngultrum (Nu.) is the currency in Bhutan and is pegged to the Indian rupee. As of December 2010, one US dollar is about Nu.45.

where chillies do not grow for various reasons. For those people who live in areas where they do not grow well, obtaining chillies is a very important issue. One feature of the chilli is that it does not have a substitute. Other food items generally have a substitute, for example, rice can be substituted with other grains such as wheat, buckwheat, maize, and millet. In fact in many parts of Bhutan, where people cannot obtain enough rice, they eat these grains. For chillies, however there is hardly a substitution and this fact makes obtaining chillies a more urgent task. An episode from the Tang Valley in Central Bhutan, where chillies do not grow, shows this sense of urgency. The people in Tang used to go to the neighbouring valley, Kurtoe (Lhuentse Dzongkhag), to ask for chillies every autumn until a road connection brought chillies to nearby shops and markets twenty years ago. Eighty-two year old Aum Dawa narrated that she used to go to Kurtoe to work in the paddy fields and received three *drey* of paddy for one day's work. She also went around from house to house in Kurtoe asking for chillies since the area produces chillies in abundance, but she could only get about ten kilograms of dried chillies, which was hardly enough for her family for the following year. When chillies ran out, she beat the remaining seeds of chillies and used them in cooking. This was a story of when she was young enough to be able to travel to Kurtoe, which is three to four day's walk.

Chillies are traded not only for eating but also for seeds. In the areas where the harvesting of chillies falls during the monsoon season, chillies cannot be dried well because of humidity. This means chillies are harvested before seeds become mature. The farmers therefore have to rely on chilli seeds from higher altitude areas where the harvest season is after the monsoon. As a result, obtaining chillies can also be an important matter even for those who grow chillies.

Chilli trading: cash transactions and barter

Chillies can be traded in various forms. They can be fresh green, dried red, and dried powdered red. Dried white chillies are harvested as fresh green, immersed in hot water and then dried under the sun. People sometimes cut fresh green chillies into small pieces and dry them. This kind of dried chilli retains a green colour. These various forms of chillies are used in different dishes, and there is a suitable method of cooking for each kind of chilli.¹¹ Chillies can also be traded as

¹¹ Choden (2008) gives an excellent description of different methods of Bhutanese cooking involving chillies.

seedlings. An official from the Ministry of Agriculture pointed out that, unlike many other plants, chilli seedlings can keep in good condition after being uprooted from the soil and transported. This can enhance income generation for farmers, since they can be sold as seeds, seedlings, fresh fruit and in dried form. The following narrative focuses mainly on trading fruit, both fresh and dried, not touching much on trading seedlings.

Trading of chillies for cash is expanding as road networks are extended. At the same time, these days, people are more in need of cash in order to finance children's education and to meet various material needs. One farmer in Ramjar Gewog¹² in Trashigang Dzongkhag said, "people's first preference is cash these days." Typically markets are held during the weekends in most of the towns where district headquarters are situated. The number of shops is increasing along roads, selling basic household items. Most chilli trading for cash takes place in markets, and to a lesser extent, in local shops. (Transactions from visiting individual houses can also sometimes be done with cash.)

Transactions with cash mostly take place in shops and market places with unknown people. Barter, on the other hand, usually happens with a known person who mediates the transaction. Usually people know which commodity can be exchanged with what and at which time of the year in a particular village. Attention should be drawn to the fact that barter also occurs between chillies and chillies. This is an exchange with a time lag. For example, in the lower part of Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang, the harvesting of chillies falls during the monsoon season. People in the area therefore cannot dry chillies, and thus cannot get mature seeds from their harvest. They take their fresh green chillies to higher altitude areas, where the harvest season is after the monsoon. The early fresh green chillies from the lower altitude are welcomed by those at the higher altitude, where people have to wait for their own harvest. After a few months, when the chillies at the higher altitudes are properly dried, they are brought down to the producers in the lower altitude areas.

When a person wants to barter his chillies with oranges from Village A, for example, he takes them to his host family in the partner community with a small gift. The host announces to the people in the village that chillies from Village B have arrived to be exchanged with oranges. The person who brought chillies may or may not stay while

¹² *Gewog* is an administrative level which is below *dzongkhags*. Sometimes it is translated as block.

the transaction takes place. The host primarily looks after the transaction, and the person who brought chillies will receive oranges.

The terms of barter transactions, according to the data the author has collected, are usually stable, and are the same throughout the area where barter of various other commodities also take place. Within the period of the fieldwork the author conducted, each of the following areas are considered to be 'one area': Paro, Thimphu, Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang; Bumthang, Trongsa, Lhuentse and the part of Mongar where there is frequent contact with Bumthang; the part of Mongar which is near to Trashigang, north of Trashigang and Trashigang Yangtse. On the other hand, in cash transactions, the price of fresh green chillies fluctuates more than ten times during the season. The first harvest usually fetches the highest price, and the price goes down as more chillies come onto the market. Prices of dried chillies are, however, usually stable.

Cash transactions and barter: from the farmers' perspective

In some media reports barter is represented as a vanishing practice, as the implementation of development programmes accelerates socio-economic changes affecting the practices of trading and exchanges amongst people. As stated above, the number of shops and markets has increased and people have started to feel that it is easier to buy in shops and markets rather than engaging in barter. The author's fieldwork data also confirms that some barter have certainly ceased. For example, farmers in one village in Ramjar Gewog in Trashigang Yangtse Dzongkhag stated that they bartered their maize for yak butter and cheese from Merak and Sakten areas until two years ago. Also a person in Galing in Trashigang Dzongkhag said that barter with Thrimshing and Kangpara areas had ceased twenty-five years ago. In many cases, new shops and road networks were cited by people as a reason why barter had stopped. They said that it is easier to buy in shops.

Cultivation of a new crop also changes the pattern of trading in rural areas. People in the Tang and Ura valleys in Bumthang Dzongkhag used to go to Tangmachhu area in Lhuentse Dzongkhag and Thrithangbi and Limithang areas in Mongar Dzongkhag respectively, to exchange their product with rice and chillies. The barter, however, gradually ceased to take place around twenty years ago, according to several farmers, as potato cultivation started in Bumthang. Potatoes are cultivated as an important cash crop, and are mostly taken by farmers to the border town of Phuentsholing to be sold

at the auction yard for exporting to India. There, they tend to buy their necessary items, including rice and chillies, with the cash obtained by selling potatoes.

In some other cases, however, barter transactions are still active and form an important part of people's food security. In Trashigang Dzongkhag, where interviews were conducted with farmers in May 2007, one farmer informed that in the previous year he obtained about thirty-five kilograms of fresh green chillies and seven kilograms of dried red chillies through barter. For the family of four adults, he said, it was enough as he grows chillies in his own field as well. Another farmer in the same village said that he gets more chillies through barter than buying from shops with cash. In the previous year, he obtained seventy kilograms of fresh green chillies and twelve kilograms of dried chillies through barter. Though he cultivated chillies in his garden, the harvest was not very good due to chilli blight.¹³ Two farmers in Ramjar Gewog in Trashy Yangtse Dzongkhag said that they get more than seventy percent of rice they eat through barter. Although the extent to which people engage in barter varies widely, barter remains an important means by which many farmers obtain food.

In the area called Dawakha in Paro Dzongkhag, the authors met several households which have recently started to barter. The village is known to produce good quality chillies, and the degree of monetisation of each household economy is very high with chillies and other vegetables being sold in Thimphu market every weekend. One farmer who recently started to barter with people in Lobesa in Punakha Valley,¹⁴ exchanging her chillies with rice said, "if you sell your chillies in the market and buy rice with that money, you will get less rice compared to when you exchange with rice in Lobesa. So it is better. I take a taxi to go to Lobesa for barter."

From the point of view of farmers who produce rice, transactions at market places and shops have a hidden cost, which is husking. In order to sell in markets and to shops a farmer has to husk rice himself, and for that he or she has to pay for using the husking machine, or invest in more labour to do it manually. In barter, transactions usually take place in the form of paddy or un-husked rice, saving farmers the cost of husking. Moreover, products are delivered to the door-step. These 'hidden' costs are also some of the reasons that farmers opt for barter.

¹³ "Chilli blight", according to Wangdi (2005), is "a general wilting disease" caused by organism named *Phytophthora capsici*. The disease seems to be affecting chilli production in Bhutan since mid-1990s.

¹⁴ Lobesa is in the Thimphu Dzongkhag but is situated in Punakha Valley.

Furthermore, some essential items are obtained only (or mostly) through barter. One of these items is red rice, which is indispensable for important occasions such as religious ceremonies and festivals. It is easily obtainable in bigger markets such as the one in Thimphu, while in rural areas the kind of rice one can buy in shops is predominantly the white rice imported from India. Therefore people in rural areas usually rely on barter to obtain red rice. Farmers in Dawakha said that they make sure to get red rice in exchange for their dried chillies. Bhutanese chilli is also one of the items which cannot be found very easily in shops in rural areas as dried chillies sold in rural shops are usually imported from India. Many Bhutanese people prefer the local variety of chilli to Indian imported ones. People generally say, "Indian chillies are too hot, and the local variety of chilli is tastier." Milk churning utensils, fermented yak cheese and yak butter are also among those items which are more easily obtainable through barter than in markets and shops. The fact that some food items can be accessed almost exclusively through barter in some parts of the country is a very important point in considering 'access to food'. However, the implications of different modes of transaction for household survival strategies have not been central to the analysis regarding access to food.

The 'human touch' of barter also helps to secure the amount of items farmers need. Some farmers in Trashigang said that when someone comes for barter, they need to offer at least a small amount of the item wanted, because they "feel pity" sending the person home without anything. At the same time, the farmers generally seem to perceive that when they take their products to markets, they are never sure how much will be sold by the end of the day. One farmer said: "In weekend markets I have to sit down and wait for customers all day, then attend each transaction by weighing products and counting money. Even after all these tedious tasks, I won't know how much I can sell by the end of the day." But if they take them for barter, they are almost sure that all of their products will find takers. One farmer told the author that because he knows the person in the partner community there is very little chance that his products will be rejected. This means that the farmer knows that he will receive the desired quantity of whatever it is he needs. Farmers, however, also said that in barter transactions, they cannot complain about the quality of the products offered by the people of their partner community. This is also because of the 'human touch'. Once the human relations already exist, and the transaction takes place around these human ties, it becomes difficult to complain about the quality.

It seems that farmers are consciously playing with the two modes of transaction. One farmer in Ramjar Gewog in Trashigang Dzongkhag said that he takes his fresh green chillies to the market while the price is more than Nu.10 per kilogram. The price decreases slowly during the season, and when it comes down to Nu.10 or below, he takes his chillies for barter to Bidung (a neighbouring *gewog* in the same *dzongkhag*) to exchange with paddy. Having two different modes of transaction enables farmers to secure necessary food both in terms of quality and quantity. At the same time, having two modes of transaction seems to work as a kind of safety net for farmers. This becomes more obvious when we compare the case in which farmers have only one mode of transaction. For instance, potato growing farmers in Phobjikha usually take almost their entire product to the auction yard in Phuentsholing. The price of potato fluctuates more than fifteen times depending on the year's production and on the harvest in the neighbouring states of India. Therefore, the farmers do not have an alternative to avoid low prices.

Discussion

This section discusses two aspects of chilli trading in Bhutan with reference to the theoretical concerns presented earlier in this paper. Firstly it examines to what extent human networks are working especially in barter transactions, and secondly how these two modes of transaction relate to informal safety nets for people in rural areas.

Concerning the first question, we have shown that barter practices involve social networks more than cash transactions at market places and shops. Barter usually happens with partner communities, using a host to mediate actual transactions. As a result of the socio-economic changes the country has been going through, partner communities have changed over the course of time. But to establish a new partner community, it is necessary to have 'a contact' within a community to start, and the 'contact' usually becomes the host in subsequent transactions. Once one starts transacting with a community, the relationship usually continues for years. The ethnographic data analysed indicate that there are elements of 'human touches'. The "human touch" in this context is synonymous to "feeling obliged". Since people know each other personally they feel obliged to help to get what the other party wants. The flip side of this story is that the person who wants to exchange understands that the other side has done as much as they can, therefore feeling "not right" to complain about

what is offered. This human touch is a kind of social capital. We in this context learn that social capital is not all positive to every party who is engaged in it. It certainly involves a down-side (in this case study, one should not complain about the quality of the product.). Furthermore, attention must also be drawn to other aspects of barter. Some farmers pointed out that they are better off with barter rather than cash transactions in terms of quantity, as well as avoiding some hidden costs such as husking rice and transportation. Clearly there are economic considerations to barter. Barter practices cannot happen purely because of human networks.

The second question concerns how these two modes of transaction can be positioned in terms of safety nets. As shown in the ethnographic narratives, farmers take advantage of both modes of transaction. At market places, the price of green chillies can fluctuate considerably and farmers know the general price trends during the season. They each have individual price levels at which they start to take chillies to barter, where terms of exchange are relatively stable. In other cases, farmers judge that barter is generally more profitable considering all the factors including cost and labour for transportation, processing and packaging. Therefore it is not that either mode works as a safety net for the other, but rather it seems to be the case that having two modes of transaction is of itself a safety net for farmers. It is a diversification of trading channels that helps farmers secure the necessary amount of food.

Conclusion

The paper has presented various aspects of chilli trading in Bhutan. It argues that several factors, economic, social and cultural, interplay to facilitate transactions. Farmers consciously weigh these various aspects. Transactions at market places and shops generally bring cash, the necessity for which is steadily increasing in Bhutan due to changes in the socio-economic situation of the country. Barter transactions are facilitated by human networks, as well as economic considerations. In some circumstances, there are clearly economic advantages to be engaged in barter, for example, where weekend markets and shops are far away, or where a farmer thinks that it is more profitable to take products to barter considering all costs including hidden ones. Barter transactions are also facilitated by farmers' personal and social ties with their hosts, and conforming to certain social norms, such as taking gifts to the host, is part of the transaction.

As we have reviewed, studies on food security to date emphasise more the economic aspects of access to food, while some of the social capital literature (for instance, Boshier, Penning-Rowsell and Tapsell (2007), Grootaert, Oh and Swamy (2002), Houtzager and Pattenden (1999), and Moser (1998)) tend to give an impression that human ties can solve many problems that poor people face. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that social capital (human ties) alone cannot either provide resilience or reduce vulnerability. We would rather understand that having two modes of transactions and the ability to utilise these with an understanding on the positives and the negatives of each mode provides farmers with food security. Social ties are not a panacea. What matters is people's ability to take advantage of them.

The current case study on Bhutan's food security shows that we need an integrated perspective. People's access to food in rural Bhutan has been largely fulfilled through two channels, cash transactions in markets and shops, and barter. Elements which work to facilitate people's access to food are social and cultural as well as economic. Furthermore, barter transactions happen not only with human ties. Overall economic advantage is also one of the major considerations in engaging in barter, and human networks are the primary facilitator of the transaction. While in preceding studies on food security, access to markets has been a major focus, the case of Bhutan indicates that relying only on markets does not secure people's access to food. Having two (or more) channels secures people's access to food far more firmly.

Throughout the paper, it has been demonstrated that the Bhutanese people try their best to secure enough chillies for their own households. It is not an exaggeration to say that households in Bhutan which lack chillies are not food secure. This situation of food insecurity cannot be captured in the conventional measurement of food security. Given the diversity of eating practices around the world, there must be many other food items which are considered vital in some areas of the world, but not included in the measurement of food security. Chilli in Bhutan is one such example. The concept and measurement of food security should incorporate such cultural preferences at its core. This should make the concept more sensitive to different eating practices in the world.

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THE LEPCHA PADIM OF LINGKO,
DZONGU, NORTH SIKKIM

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s, for a couple years, I lived in the Bhutia village of Tingchim in North Sikkim for the purpose of ethnographic fieldwork. From the village, just across the deep river valley of the Teesta, we could see the villages of Hee and Gyathang in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu. To my surprise, no one from Tingchim had ever set foot in the area except for one or two who did so on government duty. These Lepcha villages, so close yet so mysterious, inspired fear among Tingchim Bhutias. My binoculars only contributed in intensifying the mixed feelings of proximity and mystery.

Some months later, I understood that this fear originated from ancient curses which had allegedly been cast by the Lepchas across the valley. These curses had been sent by some Lepcha shamans—referred to as *bongthing* outside of Dzongu but as *padim* within the reservation—because some of the Bhutia ancestors had failed to pay for cattle they had taken from their Lepcha neighbours. These curses seemed to have spread and affected a large number of households in Tingchim. In fact, many were still performing annual rituals so as to counter their effectiveness at the time of fieldwork. This was my first introduction to the *padims* of Dzongu.

Some seven years later, I had the opportunity to cross the Teesta over to Dzongu when we initiated a visual anthropology project there among the Lepchas of Tingvong village. This finally gave me the opportunity to meet these ritual specialists who had so thoroughly terrified my previous informants. Among them, one proved particularly charming although not so much so initially. Merayk, the Padim of Lingko village, was first opposed to our project, having developed a dislike for enquiring foreigners, particularly would-be anthropologists

¹ I am very grateful to Dawa Lepcha for his comments on an earlier draft, for filming and translating the interviews with the Lingko Padim on which much of this article is based, and for working with me on the last section listing the Padim's ritual repertoire.

wondering around the reserve. Thus, for the first year, I never personally visited his house but only sent the project's cinematographer Dawa Lepcha to film rituals and enquire about their significance. Once used to our style of filming, I joined in to attend a special ritual occasion in February 2004. It then dawned on the Padim that I had been behind Dawa and the project all along, something which amused him and served as a start to our friendship. In the following months, Dawa intensified his filming and captured on video a good portion of his ritual repertoire. On the one hand, the Padim continued to 'protest' our enquiries but on the other, it was clear that he was enjoying the attention and appreciating the purpose of the exercise. He was indeed aware that the only way his own great-grandchildren would probably ever see anything of his disappearing art would be through the films we were putting together. Gradually, his rituals turned into performances where he was no longer only controlling the stage and the audience but actively contributing to the success of the filming project. Dawa being Lepcha undoubtedly made the development of this working relation possible. They laughed at each other jokes and made more at my expense.

Dawa made video recordings of the Padim's ritual repertoire, interviews, family life and agricultural activities, on and off, between 2003 and 2010. By the time we completed our recordings, the Padim was 80 years old and probably the most qualified Lepcha shaman of Dzongu. Dawa followed him in his wonderings across fields, jungles, rivers, mountains and valleys to perform wherever he was called in the villages of Upper Dzongu. Having worked with a number of Bhutia and Lepcha shamans in Sikkim, I have come to view them as very dedicated social workers. The Lingko Padim, like all of them, didn't mind welcoming people in his house or walking over the hills to distant houses at odd hours of the day or night to ritually attend to seriously sick patients.

While healing remains his main ritual practice, the Lingko Padim's calendar is punctuated by a number of rituals which he performs on an annual basis. These may be held for the benefit of the village as a whole, for that of a particular household, clan or individual. Two rituals however, one held in the winter (*sugileot*) and another in the spring (*tokpo bur*), are held in honour of his own personal deities. Before giving a brief description of his ritual repertoire, I shall present the project, the films, and how our Padim became the remarkable person that he is today.

THE PROJECT AND THE FILMS²

Dawa Lepcha's video recordings of the Padim's ritual repertoire is part of the first phase of a larger visual anthropology project initiated in 2003 at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, which aims to produce a documented video record of the ritual culture of Sikkim's indigenous Buddhist communities. The video record is produced with and for the indigenous communities and is preserved at the Institute for future generations and research use. From this archival material, a series of films is being edited for viewing both in Sikkim and at ethnographic film festivals worldwide.

The project was conceived and established in consultation with Professor Asen Balikci along with two Sikkimese cinematographers: Dawa Lepcha and later Phurba Tshering Bhutia. Together we have been making systematic video recordings among Sikkim's indigenous Buddhist communities. With Dawa Lepcha and Prof. Balikci, we first worked among the Lepchas of Dzongu, and from 2007 onwards, Phurba Bhutia and myself have made recordings among the Bhutias and more recently among the Bhutias of Lachen, a mixed agricultural and pastoral community located in Sikkim's extreme north along the Tibetan border.

Dawa Lepcha joined the project as a young film-school graduate. He himself originates from Dzongu and has a deep understanding and curiosity for his own traditions and culture. For the purpose of our project, he chose the village of Tingvong in Upper Dzongu as it was still relatively traditional and for practical reasons, was accessible by jeep. We started off in January 2003 with a three week training workshop where Professor Balikci instructed Dawa and myself on the basics of ethnographic filmmaking. Dawa was made to carry out camera exercises in the village which were then viewed and discussed in the evening. This was followed by a second workshop in January 2004 where we screened and discussed classic ethnographic films and where Dawa continued with his filming exercises. For two years, filming continued on a regular basis and meanwhile Dawa took a short computer editing course.

In January 2005, the project's first film was edited under the supervision of Professor Balikci. *Tingvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim* (2005) was intended as a village portrait illustrating the economic and

² For a more exhaustive description of this visual anthropology project including its Lepcha and Bhutia phases with a total of eight films, see Balikci (forthcoming) and <http://www.tibetology.net/researchprojects/sikkimvideo/index.html>

religious changes the Lepchas of Dzongu have undergone in recent decades.³ The film was screened at several ethnographic film festivals around the world and won an award at a documentary film festival in Shillong, in India's north-eastern region. Filming continued and editing on the project's second film *Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem* (2007) was started in February 2006. The film was shot in Dawa's neighbouring village monastery of Lingthem where the lamas performed their annual *cham* or ritual masked dances over a period of six days.⁴ *Cham* was also screened at a number of ethnographic film festivals.

Dawa continued to film in Dzongu on a regular basis until the spring of 2007 when he decided to take an indefinite leave from the project. At the time, we had some 170 hours of recorded material on the ritual and social life of the Lepchas. Although incomplete, much of the material focused on the rituals of the Padim of Lingko village. Dawa rejoined the project in the spring of 2010 in order to complete the shaman's portrait as a healer and the recordings of his ritual repertoire together with his shamanic chants. With this material, a third film, *Ritual Journeys*, was completed in the spring of 2011. The film is an intimate portrait of the Padim, presenting his daily life as a healer, father, and farmer together with a selection of interviews and rituals performances. The film was first presented to a village assembly in the Padim's own house and then screened to a packed audience in Gangtok. The film made the rounds of ethnographic film festivals and was awarded a special commendation by the panel of judges

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- ³ *Tingvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim* (2005), synopsis: From the 1940s, the Lepcha of Tingvong village gradually abandoned hunting, gathering and the slash and burn cultivation of dry rice, and became settled agriculturalists. Entire mountains sides were converted to cardamom and terraced for the cultivation of irrigated paddy. The irrigated rice and the cardamom cash crop not only brought the Lepcha within Sikkim's market economy but helped create a surplus which could among other things be invested in religion. From the 1940s, the Lepcha of Tingvong gradually embraced Buddhism and all its complex rituals without however abandoning their strong shamanic traditions. Today, both forms of rituals amiably co-exist in the village.
- ⁴ *Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem* (2007), synopsis: These dramatic ritual masked dances impart elementary Buddhist teachings while providing entertainment to villagers. Their main purpose is to remove obstacles and ward off misfortune for the village, its inhabitants and the monastery. However, for lamas and more serious Buddhist practitioners, these *cham* and their rituals hold deep philosophical meanings. In the course of this village event, the deities who emerge in the period between death and rebirth make their rhythmic appearances followed by the Lord of Death who judges one's good and bad deeds in the after life.

(Intangible Culture Film Prize) at the 12th RAI International festival of Ethnographic Film, London, June 2011.

THE PADIM

Merayk, the Padim of Lingko, was born around 1931 in the village of Lingko in Upper Dzongu. In those days, the Lepchas were still hunter-gatherers and cultivated different varieties of dry rice, millet, maize, buckwheat and soya beans in patches of jungle that were first cleared, burnt, sowed and harvested for two or three consecutive years before being left to rest for seven or eight years. At the time, Buddhism was making its first serious inroads into the community. Although the nearby Lepcha monastery of Lingthem was built in 1855, it took time for the influence of its lamas to reach Tingvong across the valley. The process gained momentum when, in 1943, Lingthem monastery started performing yearly ritual masked dances, which were well attended by villagers from across Dzongu. By the 1940s, there were five lamas in Tingvong and its surrounding hamlets: they were known as Norden (Tingvong's first lama), Sumbuk Lama (Tingvong), Manang Lama (Tingvong), Lampen Lama (Kusung village), and Naji Lama (Nung village). Although the lamas gradually took over the ritual needs of the community from the 1940s, in those days, the *padim*, the *mun* and even the *pawo* (Tib. *dpa' bo*) and the *nejum* (Tib. *rnal 'byor ma*)⁵ were still the ritual specialists of choice of the community.

Both *padim* and *mun* get possessed by various Lepcha spirits and deities and are called to perform healing and other rituals. However, only the *mun* can perform the death ritual and is generally considered far more powerful than the *padim* because of the nature of his helping-spirits. Both men and women can become *mun*, while only men become *padim*. Some begin their shamanic career as *padim* and eventually graduate to *mun* as they inherit new helping-spirits from their ancestors and receive the required training and initiations or *lung*.

Merayk descends from lineages of both *mun* and *padim* from his maternal and paternal sides respectively and says he inherited his ritual powers from the same spirits who possessed his ancestors. Two of his paternal grandfathers of Lingko were *padim* while he received the *mun*-spirit from his mother's lineage from the village of Likngi. From his maternal uncles in Lingthem, he also received *mun*-powers which he

⁵ The *pawo* (male) and the *nejum* (female) belong to a Tibetan shamanic tradition prevalent among the neighbouring Sikkimese Bhutia known as Lhopo but they are also found among the Lepcha.

describes as not so positive. His maternal grandfather was known as Thyak Thimbu and is mentioned by Gorer as Gongyop's elder brother (Gorer 1938: 215 fn.1), the latter being Gorer's principle *mun* informant in Lingthem.

When Merayk first received his ancestral-spirits, he was only eighteen years old. He went through the usual stages of initial madness and disassociation, running into people's houses, into the jungle and along cliffs at odd hours irregardless of the weather only to return exhausted without any memory of what had happened. He sought a teacher in the village of Nambongtam (Nampathang) where he stayed for only a week. There he received the first *lung* giving him the necessary qualification to perform, which was done by drinking from a ritual bowl. He was taught some rituals and learnt their corresponding chants by heart. When he was learning the mantras to be performed for the curing of poisoning, he received the news that his son had died. No longer able to concentrate, he returned home, leaving his studies and initiations incomplete, and soon started performing as a *padim*.

Merayk was then married to his first wife who was herself a *mun*. She was much older to him and became *mun* at the age of 40 which is considered very late in life. She inherited her *mun*-spirit from her mother's lineage soon after her mother's death. Her mother was from the village of Ship in Upper Dzongu and Merayk is of the opinion that his wife's *mun*-spirit returned to Ship after his wife died of rabies as he heard there was a new *mun* performing in that village. Her own father had been a *pawo* but she did not inherit helping-spirits from her paternal lineage, otherwise she would not have become a *mun* but a *nejum*. Interestingly, her teacher had also been a *pawo*, and is today remembered as the father of late Apak, the Tingvong hunter. This *pawo* was also known to be a 'lama' and even performed *mun* rituals. As already noted elsewhere,⁶ this give and take and fluidity between Lepcha, Sikkimese Bhutia (Lhopo), Limbu and other ritual traditions is not an isolated phenomenon and is widespread in Sikkim.

His wife was a very popular healer and was called almost daily to perform curing and other rituals. She could not however perform the

⁶ "...a certain ritual flexibility is common everywhere in Sikkim. I have come across a Lhopo acting as a Limbu *yebā*, a Limbu acting as a Lepcha *bongthing*, a Lepcha acting as a Lhopo *nejum*, a Lhopo performing as a Nepalese *jhākri* and even a Lepcha lama renouncing his robe for that of the *bongthing*. It all depends on the identity of their friends, neighbours and teachers and is a clear reflection of the ritual fluidity found among Sikkimese tribals" (Balikci 2008: 153). Gorer also adds that these foreign spirits were introduced in Dzongu through intermarriage with foreign women (Gorer 1938: 216).

important *mun* ritual in honour of the dead (*Passong tyut*), when their souls are guided to *Rum lyang* where all the dead are thought to reside. Being already 40 when she started to perform, she never had the opportunity to learn or receive its *lung*. Gorer mentions that already in the 1930s, very few *mun* could perform this ritual (1938: 356) perhaps because the *mun*'s death ritual requires the sacrifice of an animal, usually an ox, which runs contrary to Buddhist ethics and by then, the village lamas had already taken over funerary procedures.

For many years, they performed together, Merayk acting as his wife's ritual assistant whenever he was free. Together they performed the *sugileot* in their house, her grand annual ritual in honour of her helping-spirits. She did most of the ritual offerings herself leaving him only a small portion to perform. Eventually, Merayk learnt the *mun*'s chants and now performs the *sugileot* on his own, chanting over a period of three consecutive nights. Owing to his mix-lineage, descending from both *padim* and *mun* ancestors from whom he inherited helping-spirits, his experience and perhaps the close association with his wife, Merayk is considered more than a *padim* but not quite a full *mun* as he never underwent the complete training and received all the required initiations. He can, however, hold a form of death ritual called the *Mari sem*, whereby the soul of the dead is separated from that of the living.

Merayk is now himself a very popular and successful *padim* in his own right. Nearly every day, he receives visits from close and distant villagers seeking his services first and foremost as a healer but also in order to perform rituals held at birth, marriage or death, and also in honour of house, ancestral and hunting deities, and various community rituals. When called to help a sick patient, before holding any ritual, he first establishes which malevolent *mung*-spirit is responsible for the patient's suffering. For this, he uses a rosary while reciting the mantras of the *padim*. In difficult situations, he performs a second divination, reading from rice grains scattered on a plate, hoping that both divinations concur. Once identified, he performs a propitiatory ritual, presenting the ritual offerings corresponding to the offended *mung*-spirit's particular taste with the hope that the latter will now loosen his grip on the patient. If the patient doesn't improve, the process is repeated two or three times in case the wrong *mung* was identified or in order to offer a more elaborate and expensive ritual (sometimes including the sacrifice of an animal such as a chicken, a goat, a pig or even an ox) before the patient is taken to hospital. According to Merayk, the *mun* doesn't require a rosary or rice when divining the

cause of illness; being more prophetic, the *mun* simply chants and reveals the cause of the patient's suffering.

Merayk commented that in order to take control and defeat a particularly virulent class of *mung* known as *mozom*, some *mun* and *padim* will take the help of a powerful spirit by the name of Chiang who requires the sacrificial offerings of blood, usually in the form of a pig or a goat. In lieu of blood, Merayk has been successfully offering old silver coins along with *chang* and a silk scarf to his Chiang helping-spirit at the beginning of every possession ritual so as to request him to stay away when his help is not required. Before a *mun* or *padim* passes away, he must return this most powerful helping-spirit to his abode and instruct him under oath not to return until his successor calls him back. Merayk adds that until his reincarnation or *alet* returns, his Chiang will not come down to create trouble for the living.

THE PADIM'S RITUALS

For the sake of reference, I list below the rituals performed by Merayk, the Padim of Lingko, which were, for the most part, filmed by Dawa Lepcha as part of our visual anthropology project. The rituals were recorded on MiniDV video tapes from beginning to end; including preparations, uninterrupted ritual chants and, in many cases, followed by an interview. Where indicated, excerpts from these rituals were edited and included in the film *Ritual Journeys* (2011). The video recordings are archived at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology for posterity and further research use.

Various descriptions of Lepcha rituals are available in the works of Gorer (1938), Siiger (1967) and Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1951, 1952) where further information about some of these rituals, as they were performed in the 1930s-50s, may be found. Exhaustive recent information about Lepcha rituals in Dzongu will soon be available in Jenny Bentley's forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation (2016). This list is merely intended as a very brief record of the Lingko Padim's particular ritual repertoire.

I. *Community rituals held for the benefit of the village as a whole*

Depending on the village and the ritual specialist, the first three rituals below, held for the benefit of the village as a whole, are performed either in a single day or on three separate occasions. In Lingko, the

performances of the first three were held and filmed on the same day but in two different locations on February 18, 2004.

1. *Chirim*: Once a year before the monsoon, the 14 households of Lingko village collectively perform the *Chirim* ritual in honour of their protective mountain deity Kongchen Chyu and his retinue of lesser peaks and sacred lakes. An altar is set up in the forest on a large stone where they are propitiated to prevent illness such as fever and dysentery that are common during the rainy season. Each household is represented by a little basket containing offerings from its fields which is hung on a horizontal bamboo pole set above the altar. Each household contributes a chicken which is sacrificed in the course of the ritual and offered on the altar. Excerpts of the *Chirim* are included in *Ritual Journeys*.⁷

2. *Tsom tsu fat*: offering ritual for the eight Lepcha kings. Performed and recorded at the same time and in the same location as the *Chirim*. A separate smaller altar is set up for the Lepcha kings on a rock with the appropriate offerings.

3. *Satap rum fat*: offerings for protection against hail stones. Every spring, the ripening winter crops are threatened by hail stones. These often destroy entire harvests and are much apprehended by villagers all over Sikkim. This offering ritual was held on the same day in February 2004 but near the school where a separate altar on a bamboo platform was erected for the purpose.

⁷ According to Dawa Lepcha, the *Chirim* ritual was followed by the performance of *Kongchen Chyu rum fat*, or *Kongchen fat*, an offering to the mountain deity Kongchen when his guards go to pay their respect to what he calls the Southern Deity. It is now obsolete but used to be performed for the entire region by the *bongthings* of the Taso family of Nung village. Jenny Bentley who had the chance to interview the last Taso Bongthing before he passed away in October 2011 adds that “the Kóngchen ceremony was part of a larger ritual complex of which the other rituals are still performed in Dzongu today... The Kóngchen ritual was performed to appease the mountain deity Kóngchen and seek protection against disease, natural disaster and other calamities for the entire Sikkimese community... In the Lepcha cosmology prevalent in Dzongu, it is believed that the soldiers of the mighty Kóngchen would accompany the Nung Taso southwards to the palace on their way down to the plains, where the deity Chádóng rázú resides. These soldiers are embodied diseases and, if not appeased, would bring harm and destruction to the villages along the way. So simultaneously with the royal Kóngchen ritual, all other villages in Dzongu conducted rituals to protect their village areas. These rituals are still performed today and presently known as *Cirim* (ritual against disease) and *Sátáp rum fát* (ritual against hailstorms).” (Bentley 2011: 3).

4. *Lung zee rum fat*. Offering ritual to appease the deities inhabiting the village's territory. These may reside in large rocks, trees, mountains, etc. This ritual was filmed in Kusung village in November 2005.

5. *Lyang dik rum fat*. Offering ritual for the deities of the low lands in order to appease them, prevent illness during the monsoon and return them back home. This ritual was filmed below Tingvong, at 6th Mile, in July 2003. It is included as the opening ritual in *Ritual Journeys*.

II. Preventive rituals held for the benefit of the household and clan⁸

1. *Putso fat* or *pho lha fat*. Ritual offering for the ancestral gods of the exogamous patrilineal clan known as *putso*. All family members of the same *putso* within the village and surrounding area must gather on this occasion where an ox is sacrificed. Known *putso* members from distant villages may also participate if invited or come to hear about its performance. It is held every three years on a rotation basis for the prosperity, well-being and longevity of the *putso*. Filmed in Panang village in November 2006 and included in *Ritual Journeys*.

2. *Lee rum fat*. Ritual offering for the protecting deities of the household. Held every three years. This ritual is now obsolete and was not filmed. It is often confused with the *Putso fat* which has now largely replaced it.

III. Optional regular rituals of the household's animals and crops

1. *Sakyu rum fat*. This ritual, now largely obsolete, was performed twice a year for the dry rice and other traditional crops, first when planted, and later when harvested. It is still performed in the remote village of Pentong where the cultivation of dry rice has survived till this day. The ritual was not recorded although the planting and harvesting of the dry rice in Pentong was filmed.

2. *Langee rum fat*. A form of *Sakyu rum fat*, this ritual is an offering performed for the guardian-spirit or 'owner' of the cardamom crop at

⁸ An additional household ritual, the *Pun tsu tsok*, is now an obsolete ritual but mentioned here for the sake of reference. It was held in order to prevent obstacles from affecting the family. If performed once, it had to be held for three consecutive years. The Lingko Padim never performed this ritual as he hadn't received its *lung*. Dawa Lepcha mentions that it was performed until recently by the *padim* of Lingdong village.

the time of harvest. The owner of the field performs it in order to ask for an abundant harvest and avoid the guardian-spirit's displeasure when the fruit of the cardamom is taken away. It was filmed in Kusung in November 2005.

3. *Mut/Fog rum fat*. Hunting offering ritual held in honour of a hunter's personal helping-spirits. It is performed to ensure the continuous success and safety of the hunter. Even if a hunter has abandoned the practice, the ritual must still be annually performed or else the helping-spirit may express his displeasure, withdraw his protection, resulting in illness in the family. In many cases, it is still performed by the descendents of great hunters. Filmed in Kusung village in November 2005 and included in *Ritual Journeys*.

4. *Zung*. Ritual held when an animal is dedicated to a particular protective deity. Later, when the animal is required for butchering, the *zung* must first be transferred to a young animal by the Padim. A goat *zung* ritual was filmed in Kusung in Jan 2005 and a *zung* ritual for a ram was filmed in December 2004.

IV. *Curing rituals held for the benefit of the individual*

1. *Tyak dum*. Ritual offering for the *tyak dum* or protector of the house. This ritual is performed whenever the *tyak dum* is divined by the Padim as being responsible for a household member's illness. This may happen when the *tyak dum* was somehow offended. This ritual was filmed in Lingko in June 2004.

2. *Lyang it nikung* (grandmother's birthplace). This protective female deity originates from the birthplace and *putso* of the women of the house. It usually acts as a protector and follows the bride to her new home after marriage. However, it can become troublesome and cause illness to members of the new household and must then be appeased with the appropriate offering ritual when divined by the Padim as the responsible agent. We did not get the chance to film this ritual.

3. *Sum doue* (to collect lost soul). Ritual performed to guide 'lost souls' that are causing trouble after death. The Padim will either destroy the troublesome soul with the help of his powerful Chiang helping-spirit or adopt it as a useful helping-spirit. We did not get the chance to film this ritual.

The Padim performs a variety of curing rituals, each designed for a particular local spirit which may have been identified as responsible for

someone's illness through the Padim's divination. A number of such rituals were filmed over the years, one of which is included in *Ritual Journeys*.

V. *The individual's rites of passage*

1. *Ing rum fat* or *Kynet rum fat*. Ritual performed shortly after birth to protect the newborn, introduce him to the clan deities so that they take responsibility for its development into a good human being, and thank them for this new addition to the *putso*. Filmed in Tingvong in the spring of 2004.

2. *Bree*. Rituals performed on the occasion of marriage whereby the recitation of the 'origin story of marriage' is chanted. In order to ensure their long life, the couple is made to drink three times from a ritual bowl. This is the only ritual performed jointly by lamas and *padim*, each sitting on either side of the family altar. The Padim mentioned that before lamas got involved, marriage ceremonies were held outside where the ox brought by the groom's family was sacrificed and offered to the clan's deities. A number of marriage rituals were filmed.

3. The Lingko Padim cannot perform the *mun*'s death ritual (*Passong tyut*) when their souls are guided to *Rum lyang* where all the dead are thought to reside as he did not receive its *lung*. Today, this ritual has been replaced by the funeral procedures of the lamas. However, the Lingko Padim still performs a form of death ritual on the third night after death called *Mari sem*, whereby the soul of the dead is separated from that of the living, the bad aspect of the soul being guided to *suniol bang* at the base of Mount Siniolchu while the positive aspect is guided to its peak. It is thought that the bad aspect may later return to create problem and for this purpose, it is given its share of the deceased possessions and guided to the base of Siniolchu from where it should leave the living in peace.

VI. *The Lingko Padim's personal annual rituals*

1. *Sugileot*. This is the Padim's grand annual ritual held in the month of December. It is a village event where food for all is prepared in the courtyard while rituals are held in the altar room of his house over a period of three days. It is attended by Lingko villagers, relatives and sponsors from neighbouring hamlets. Its main purpose is to invite the Padim's personal deities, thank them for their continuous assistance over the year by presenting them with specific offerings, dispense

blessings to the assembly and return the deities to their abode at the beginning of winter. He will call them back in the spring with the *Tokpo bur* ritual.

For the purpose of the ritual, offerings of grain, ginger, dry fish, dry bird, butter lamps together with all the *khadas* and monetary contributions made by the assembly are laid on a banana leaf (*lafit*) before the Padim. A bamboo frame is erected over his head where rows of flowers (mostly marigolds) are strung on 13 to 20 bamboo poles (depending on the availability of flowers) and hung together with specific offerings of rice and puffed rice packed in little parcels. Little bamboo pots filled, some with fermented rice others with millet, are hung at each corner. These flowers are meant, both as a seat for the deities to take when invited, and as offerings to be individually presented to them in the course of the ritual chants. If not given a seat when invited, the deities would instead take possession of the Padim which would become quite unmanageable for him. Other offerings consist of sugar cane, yams, fruit, bananas and medicinal plants which are distributed to all. A chicken is also presented.

The invited deities consist of three groups: the deities of the lowlands, the deities of the highlands, and the Padim's personal deities or *pum rum* inherited from his ancestors. Each are given specific rows of flowers and particular offerings with every single flower being individually offered to his numerous deities, which is the reason why the distribution has to be done over three consecutive nights of ritual chanting. The lowland deities' offerings are taken to them by boat.

The Padim gets possessed by his personal deities during the ritual, particularly on its third night when plates of ginger, medicinal plants and fermented rice are empowered by the deities and distributed to the audience as both a blessing and a healing substance. His personal deities take a seat on the flowers of the Padim's headdress and stick before taking possession of him. In the end, he blows healing mantras on each individual present at the ritual, paying particularly attention to infants who are prone to be taken away by a particular malevolent *mung*. He then goes around the house to drive away malevolent beings. Over the course of the ritual, he often blows on substances to drive the latter away or throws pieces of offerings out the window to chase them out the house. There are specific offerings for the spirits helping him guard the entrance door of the ritual room. A knife lies next to the offerings in order to guard them when the Padim momentarily leaves the room. Once the blessing and healing rituals are over, the Padim continues all night with the *mun's* ritual chants, individually

distributing the offerings to the low and highland deities and his personal *pum rum*.

The *Sugileot* ritual was filmed in its entirety between 10 and 14 December, 2004, including preparations, uninterrupted ritual chants followed by interviews describing the rituals and its offerings. It is the concluding ritual of *Ritual Journeys*.

2. *Tokpo bur*. This is a one day ritual held in the Padim's house to invite his deities back in the spring. Villagers are again invited and given the deities' blessings through the blowing of healing mantras and the distribution of healing substances. The ritual was filmed in the spring of 2011.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our overview of the Padim's ritual repertoire. A number of these rituals were filmed several times, in different locations, for various individuals, households, clans or villages. Over the years, Dawa Lepcha made similar recordings of rituals performed by other *padims*, *muns*, and *nejums* in and around Dzongu, all of which are archived at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.

The Padim of Lingko, now 80 years old, does not have any serious students. Some have come and gone but none have shown the necessary sustained interest, diligence and capacity needed to take over his complex ritual tradition though one student now seems to be making progress. The reasons for this are multiple and can be assigned as much to the levelling of culture as a consequence of education and development, as to the lack of candidates due to the availability of new economic opportunities. The Buddhist lamas' role has been equally influential although both traditions have co-existed without conflict for decades except for the practice of animal sacrifice which is gradually being eliminated without, however, introducing fundamental changes to the Padim's ritual tradition. It is for this reason that we have endeavoured to make a record of his dying art with the hope that it may at least survive in digital format and be made available to future Lepcha students, would they be future anthropologists or perhaps *padims* in need of ancestral inspiration.

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The Chirim ritual altar of Lingku village when, once a year, the mountain deity Kongchen Chyu is propitiated to prevent fever and dysentery.



The Lingko Padim at the time of a wedding ritual in Tingvong village

NARRATIONS OF CONTEST:
COMPETITION AMONG REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL
LEPCHA BELIEF AND GURU RINPOCHE IN SIKKIM

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Myths of a magical contest between a practitioner of local religious tradition and a Buddhist counterpart are common in large parts of the Himalayas and have been well documented. The most famous account of these mythological competitions is between the Bonpo religious practitioner Narubon (or Naro Bonchung) and Milarepa at Mount Kailash.¹ There is a less known narrative of a competition between a *bóngthing*, a protagonist of Lepcha religious tradition,² and Guru Rinpoche, a Buddhist protagonist,³ told among the Lepcha of North Sikkim that has recently been compiled in written form in Lepcha language. The magical contest is said to have taken place in Chungthang where footprints can still be traced in a rock and rice grows despite the high altitude. This sacred place is known as Guru Ney do (Lepcha *nye dho*, Tib. *gnas rdo*, holy rock). The Lepcha are a Tibeto-Burman group living in the southern Himalayas in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. In their religious tradition the landscape around them is inhabited with

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- ¹ For the Buddhist versions of the competition see Hoffmann 1950a: 197–210, 277–90; Hoffmann 1950b: 65–77; Das 1984 18–24; for version from other perspective see Karmay 1972: 86–93, Reynolds 2005: Chapter 5, Blondeau 1973: 63–94, Helffer 1995: 121–40; Tucci 1937: III, Tucci/Heissig 1970: 260ff.
- ² In the following I will use the term Lepcha protagonist or Lepcha religious practitioner. Hereby, I am not primarily referring to the ethnicity of the protagonist, but to his function within the local religious tradition of the Lepcha community.
- ³ In the collected accounts the narrators use different names when referring to the Buddhist saint. The most detailed oral narrative uses the name Guru Padmasambhava. This is Sanskrit and means ‘he who is born from a lotus’ (see Grünwedel 1898: 447). Most other oral versions speak of Guru Rinpoche. In the written version the saint is called Guru Udyen. This comes from the Tibetan *U rgyan pa*, meaning ‘the person from Udyana (Kafiristan) (Grünwedel 1898: 447; Grünwedel 1896: 529). For the sake of consistency I will use the term Guru Rinpoche in this article unless in direct quotations. Guru Rinpoche is a historical and mystified figure whose real name is not known. He was born in Kafiristan and called to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen (reign: 740–786 AD) to subdue the demons preventing the construction of the monastery in Samye. On his way he is supposed to have subdued many local supernatural beings all over the Himalayan region (Grünwedel 1869: 529). On Guru Rinpoche in Sikkim see also Stein (1972 [1962]: 66) and Waddel in Risley (1972 [1894]: 244).

supernatural beings and spirits. Any disturbance of the supernatural causes disease, natural disaster or social conflicts and disputes. Two different kinds of religious practitioners mediate between spirits and humans. The *bóngthing* is always male, has knowledge of medical plants and controls evil spirits solely through ritual performance, but cannot function as a medium. The *mun* on the other hand can be male or female and fits into the classical definition of a shaman.⁴ His or her soul can travel; a *mun* works as spirit medium and appeases evil spirits. Tibetan Buddhism⁵ was propagated in the Lepcha inhabited territory since the 17th century and was the state religion until the Sikkimese kingdom became an integral part of India in 1975. Today, most Lepcha in North Sikkim are Buddhists and practise elements of their earlier religious tradition side-by-side or integrated into Buddhist rituals. The spread of Buddhism provided a new religious context for the Lepcha people, and also went hand in hand with the establishment of an entirely new political system—a kingdom with a feudal ruling class.

The narrations of competition from different cultural groups all over the Himalayas, including the ones I collected among the Lepcha, portray the fragile nature of the relationship between local religious traditions and Buddhism, some more openly indicating the greater power of the latter⁶ whereas others give validity to both. They open a discourse on themes such as cultural and religious assimilation and subjection, often however, they do not describe a conflict between two incompatible belief systems ending with one suppressing the other, but result in delineating fields of religious competency and ritual activities.⁷ Further, the origin of respective characteristics of the shamanic and Buddhist drum is explained,⁸ or the loss of script in tribal communities arises from the competition.⁹ The variations of the competition narrative among the

⁴ For definition of 'shaman' see Shirokogoroff 1935; Eliade 1964 [1951]; Reinhard 1976.

⁵ Most Lepcha in North Sikkim follow the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism in Sikkim as well as other parts of the Tibetan world has fused with local religious belief such as the worship of Mount Khangchendzönga. In the following I will be using the term Buddhism to refer to the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim and its localised specialities.

⁶ Oppitz 1968: 134–5 (Sherpa).

⁷ Höfer 1975: 1–7 (Tamang), Mumford 1989: 54 (Gurung), Macdonald 1976: 319 (Muglan).

⁸ Mumford 1989: 52 (Gurung), Vinding 1998: 414–5 (Thakali), Riboli 2000: 105 (Chepang), Oppitz 1998: 334ff. (Naxi and Moso).

⁹ Vinding 1998: 414–5 (Thakali), Hoffmann 1956 (Ghale), Mumford 1989: 53 (Gurung), Oppitz 2008.

Lepcha in Sikkim stand out due to two other distinctive features. First, their main focus lies on the integration of the Lepcha community into Buddhism understood as the religion of a new state structure dominated by a foreign ruler from Tibet. Therefore, the narrative additionally addresses questions of political subjugation and domination by people perceived as ‘others’. Second, an extensive part of the numerous versions are told in the genre of prophecies, the content of which can vary greatly depending on the narrator. Some of them are read as fulfilled, others debated about. These prophecies are told as integral part of the competition narration, but also in combination with other myths. Analytically, I will use the term ‘magical contest’ to refer to the verbal and physical disputes between the Lepcha *bóngthing* and the Buddhist saint; and ‘prophecies’ to refer to the words spoken and acts performed by Guru Rinpoche after the actual contest is over. The magical contest and the prophecies are understood as components of the collected versions of the competition narration, thus this term encompasses both of them.

Searching for the mythical traces in the landscape, it was surprising to find that the imprints and other markers at the location where the competition is said to have taken place, are predominantly connected to a different account in which Guru Rinpoche fights and kills a female demon. The majority of the people from the region tell this alternative narration in connection with the sacred space and do not mention a competition or even an encounter between the Buddhist saint and a Lepcha religious practitioner. This led me to a more detailed investigation on different levels than previously expected: If not known or narrated locally, in which section of the Lepcha community is the competition narration told? Why did this competition narrative emerge? What makes it an interesting and productive account to narrate?

THE MAGICAL CONTEST AND GURU RINPOCHE’S PROPHECIES

The sources I rely on in this article stem from fieldwork conducted in Dzongu (Zónggú in Lepcha), the Lepcha reserve area in North Sikkim, and in the village Chungthang that lies just outside this protected area. I collected a number of oral variations of the competition narrative as well as contextual data on which this article is based. These are one long and detailed oral account, a number of shorter versions as well as follow-up discussions and interviews on the magical contest and the prophecies.¹⁰

¹⁰ I have been conducting fieldwork among the Lepcha since 2005. The data used in this article was collected in 2009 and 2010. In respect for the anonymity of the narrators

Further, I rely on a recent written source in Lepcha language, in which the author compiled this oral tradition from a version he had heard from two senior members of his village community (Lepcha 2009). In the following, I first discuss the protagonists mentioned in the various versions I have collected. Then I give one coherent account of the competition myth based on the version compiled in written form. This written source is considered an oral text (see Finnegan 2007: 10ff), e.g. oral tradition compiled and written down. It has large amount of detail, but for the sake of this article, I focus on the main narrative strand of the competition. Then I discuss additional prophecies attached to the competition story. In contrast to written texts, oral accounts are transmitted interpersonally with no fixed reference point and memory in oral transmission is not verbatim. Consequently, many variations of one narrative are the norm. Some highlight certain episodes, whereas others omit them completely (Goody 2000: 37–8). Therefore, the variations to the competition story found in other collected oral versions as well as the alternative flavours and connotations they add are discussed in later parts of the article.

The protagonists

The Lepcha counterpart is not always clearly defined as a religious practitioner, but described as a venerable old man or great-grandfather (*thikúng*) and only his actions reveal supernatural powers. In the written and in the most detailed oral version the old Lepcha man is called Thikúng Ádik, who is defined as a famous Lepcha priest with strong magical abilities (Tamsang 1980: 462), sometimes he is also referred to as the first Lepcha king. Three versions of the collected competition narrative speak of Thikúng Munsalóng participating in the magical contest with Guru Rinpoche. Thikúng Munsalóng is a well-known legendary figure simultaneously described as a powerful *bóngthing*, Lepcha leader, hunter, and scholar. He has the air of a supernatural being and is also perceived as an ancestor and historical figure. In some regions Thikúng Munsalóng is associated with the economic shift from hunting to cultivation (Simick 2001), but according to the accounts most commonly known he is believed to have invented Lepcha script as well

and my interview partners I am not going to name the source of the versions of the competition narrative or discussions referred to in this article, but indicate when a different version is given.

as assisted Lhatsun Chenpo (1597–1654?)¹¹ and/or Guru Rinpoche¹² in pacifying local demons and spreading Buddhism in Sikkim (Namgyal/Dolma 1908: 31). When this incident is narrated in the Lepcha community, Thikúng Munsalóng is said to have taught Lhatsun Chenpo about the rites, beliefs, and the sacred landscape of the Lepcha people which the latter then incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism to create a unique Sikkimese form (see also Foning 2003 [1987]: 188). Therefore, naming Thikúng Munsalóng as the protagonist, adds a different connotation level. Indirectly, the ‘new’ religion (e.g. Buddhism) is portrayed as having been shaped by adopting elements from the Lepcha indigenous belief and not vice versa. Lepcha religious tradition is consequently placed in a more powerful position, it is not described as dominated by Buddhism but as actually nourishing it. Syncretic influences are reversed.

Main narrative compiled from the written source

Guru Rinpoche comes up from the plains on his way to Tibet and subdues demons in Lepcha territory. Then he meets Thikúng Ádik at a hill called Damchu.¹³ He addresses him as the master of evil spirits and accuses him of provoking demons so that they torture human beings. Thereupon Thikúng Ádik responds:

‘I, Ádik, am the ruler of light and fire here. If illness and disaster befalls my people, I will extinguish it myself.’ The devout Uden [Guru Rinpoche] said: ‘Inflicting evil spirits onto mankind, bringing trouble onto brothers and relatives is a great sin. Now you also should follow the lessons of the Lord Buddha.’ Thikúng Ádik said: ‘I am the ruler of light and fire in the ancestral land of the Lepcha people. What is the

¹¹ Lhatsun Chenpo or Lhatsun Namka Jigme (*lha btsun chen po Nam mka' 'jigs med*) was a Dzogchen master, his birth and death dates vary in different sources (Vandenhelsken 2003: 56). He is considered the main propagator of Buddhism in Sikkim (Balikci 2008: 22–3, 88–90, see also Waddel in Risley (1972 [1894]: 248–50). However, Mullard argues that the position ascribed to Lhatsun Chenpo has little grounding in historical facts being more the result of the construction of historical narratives during a later phase in the political history of Sikkim (Mullard 2011).

¹² There is confusion about whether Thikúng Munsalóng lived during Guru Rinpoche’s or Lhatsun Chenpo’s time, some even say he lived long enough to meet both of them. The encounter between Lhatsun Chenpo and Thikúng Munsalóng is also mentioned in the *History of Sikkim* (Namgyal/Dolma 1908: 31, 32). More research is required on this legendary figure.

¹³ The written version is the only collected version where this first encounter does not take place at Chungthang but further down near the plains.

reason for you to teach me things now you and I have to meet?’ (Lepcha 2009: 3)¹⁴

They arrange to meet at a place called Numjiit plains.¹⁵ The Lepcha protagonist goes there through a hole in the cliff and comes out at the rock up north, whereas Guru Rinpoche walks.¹⁶ Both protagonists reach at the same time. This shows Thikúng Ádik that his adversary is a man of magical mastery, and he remarks that Guru Rinpoche possesses the powers of the god Tukshe. On hearing this, the Buddhist saint gets angry and says:¹⁷

I am not Tukshe who mates with your pig, or who settles down with your fish. I am not Tukshe who wants to marry your daughters. I was born from a pure flower as a child of the living god. I am able to sit on water by making myself as light as the wind and I can sit calmly in the midst of a fire. (Lepcha 2009: 3, 4)¹⁸

Thereafter, Thikúng Ádik suggests competing with their supernatural powers and initiates the magical contest. He transforms into a small fly and sits on a leaf of a plant without bending it under his weight. Guru Rinpoche also turns into a fly, but he is still too heavy and the leaf gives way. The young Lepcha men and women watching rejoice. The saint

¹⁴ go lyáng áresá satsuk samik pawú ?ádik yumbá kasusá migyâ zónnyin gunká ?ádók ?ánót pláanglá godâ sumsho, gyelúng ?úngdennu libá mungmáthápnu zónnyinká numnu tsángkoká kidukbishangre luyo ?átim gum. ?álang hólá sònggyerumsá kónyengát ma ?o. thikúng ?ádiknunlibá gore máyel málúk lyángsá satsuk samik panú mám pó. hó kasum ?áring hlápgáttung shúgó hósá gá tsumdogátpá.

¹⁵ This name is also found in the most detailed oral version and the narrator uses this name synonymously with the place name Chungthang. All other versions collected name the Ney do (or sacred rock) at Chungthang as the place of the competition.

¹⁶ In Lyangsay village in the Kalimpong Subdivision there is a system of caves, villagers narrate that Thikúng Munsalóng entered these caves and came out at a point further north. An oral version states that Guru Rinpoche comes to Chungthang riding a sunbeam and then meets Thikúng Ádik there. That the Buddhist protagonist rides on a sunbeam is common in other contest narrations found in the Himalayas, usually they are racing to the top of a mountain as a main part of the magical contest.

¹⁷ The following short verbal dispute on the god Tukshe thing is only found in the written version of the competition story.

¹⁸ gyálúng ?údenre sáklyáklung ?ámik prengpreng ?átim ngáklung gore ?ádosá món-gúdyepká ?áyu mátlung tukshe magúnne gore ?ádosá ngútsál ta?yumótkupká brimát bâm tukse magunne gore ?ádosá ta?yumókup ?ágyápdepká brimátlung ?áyumát-tungbámshibú tukshe magúnpá liyámma?o. gore ?átsóngripsá ?ábúrlómgyekthobú júmrumusá ?ákupgum. gore ?úngplangká sukmutzang ?ákyâng mátnu ngánkhâtbú minóngká ?ákyet mátnu ngánkhât liyám ma ?o.

acknowledges his defeat, he bows his head and says, “You are my teacher” (Lepcha 2009: 4).¹⁹ Thereafter the Lepcha people enjoy themselves, eat meat and drink alcohol. Guru Rinpoche refuses to accept the rice and yams they offer him and accuses the Lepcha people of not being open to his words warning them that he came to this place to spread his knowledge, but now the people of Tibet will receive his wisdom. Then Guru Rinpoche takes boiled or beaten rice and predicts that after receiving his teachings favourably, the descendants of Tibetan people will set up their rule in Lepcha territory, if the cooked rice turns into a rice grain and a rice plant grows. He throws the rice and paddy sprouts. Seeing the miraculous powers of Guru Rinpoche and also recognising the threat of a foreign ruler in their lands, Thikúng Ádik and the attending people beg for forgiveness and protection:

Holy teacher, you who cannot be hurt by fire, you were right. You who cannot be lifted up in the wind, who cannot be flooded away by water, who is born from a flower bud, who does not know death or sickness, who is like a god, our reverent saint, we were not capable of recognising you. We did not know to pay attention to your words. Though our eyes have reddened, our tongues are now faulty and we have come to a dead end, we ask you to correct our fate. (Lepcha 2009: 7)²⁰

On hearing this, Guru Rinpoche throws cooked yams, which again turns raw and then shoots. The yam plant wraps itself around the paddy, so the saint picks it up and throws it to the other side of the valley. Thereby Guru Rinpoche prophesises that the Tibetans will only continue to rule over Lepcha territory, if they respect the local people of the place and let their religion thrive. If they suppress the Lepcha, their reign will be over.²¹ The Buddhist saint mentions other prophecies and thereafter

¹⁹ *kasusá lopân hódokátyumbá libán phyókphokát yámmaʔo.*

²⁰ *minu dúpmalyelbú gyelúng lopân hó thâng yám ma ʔo sukmut nunlá lyâmmakhâtbú ʔúngnunlá bunmakhâtbú ribúmribúr lóm gyekthópbú ʔámák ʔádók manyinnubú rumzangbú chinyiwámbú gyelúng hóre káyúnun ʔádommum thyák malekne yámmaʔo. ʔádoringká thyom mamát nón yám maʔo. káyú ʔámikre zálnónganglá ʔálire kyólnónganglá lómtónlópálnónganglá ʔáringtómsung nákbongátmyáyám maʔo.*

²¹ The same prophecy is also attached to legendary account of the brotherhood treaty between the Lepcha chieftain and religious practitioner Thikúng Tek and the Tibetan noble man Gye Bumsa. In the official version the two meet and combine their lineages eternally in a blood brotherhood. This treaty is the mythological grounding for the political and cultural alliance of the Lepcha and Bhutia in Sikkim, commonly clubbed together as BL. There is however a second version prevalent in the Lepcha community. In this adaptation Thikúng Tek and Gye Bumsa do not make a treaty of eternal brotherhood, but the Lepcha chief binds the Tibetan noble man to a vow that his descendants

Guru Rinpoche leaves for Tibet carrying a skull gifted to him by Thikúng Ádik to help him subdue evil spirits if required (Lepcha 2009: 11).²²

Additional prophecies

The main prophecies spoken by Guru Rinpoche as part of the competition narrative are what I will in the following refer to as the ‘rice’ and the ‘yam’ prophecies and are found in the vast majority of all versions collected. In some oral versions they only emphasise religious aspects. It is said that after Guru Rinpoche loses the competition, he claims this area is not ready to be tamed, but later a lama will return, subdue the demons and convert the Lepcha people to Buddhism. Lhatsun Chenpo is usually named as this lama whose arrival Guru Rinpoche foretold. Depending on the version there are also additional prophecies on future religious and political incidents and power struggles included in the narrative. Their fulfilment is either considered to have not occurred yet or is debated about. They range from the image of Lepcha religious tradition and Buddhism coexisting peacefully in Lepcha land, to the Lepcha religious tradition being dirtied and Lepcha women safeguarding it, to Buddhism being suppressed in Tibet and Lepcha land becoming the last haven of Buddhism, from the Indians having a grip on Lepcha land to the fear of China taking over Sikkim if the Indian government does not take care of the welfare of the Lepcha people. Depending on the context the account is told in, the narrator and the listeners will speculate about these prophecies. Their phrasing is cryptic, referring to people born in certain years of the Tibetan calendar and leaving space for individual interpretation and debate especially on particular present and past political circumstances. The prophecies are considered powerful, as the ‘rice’ and the ‘yam’ prophecies are perceived as already fulfilled, but they are not told as if engraved in stone. Their fulfilment depends on actions taken and deeds done at respective times to prevent the foretold from happening, or enabling it. This gives additional importance to the debates happening in the narrative setting. The following quote from the written source is given as an example for such a prophecy. Here the

will never suppress the Lepcha people. The very prophecy is mentioned, in case the pact is violated. This version, but not including the prophecy, was first recorded by Halfdan Siiger from his informant in Kalimpong in the late 1940s (Siiger 1967: 28).

²² gyelúng lopân gúrú ryúmbúchire thikúng ?ádiknu bi thómbú mân thyák?yúng bunu lómká múngmápang tyulung pát panú hrísúng dicensámpáthárúsá driká khyâká ?ábryángká sámye linbú lyángká rumsá likát zúmyám ma?o.

Lepcha are told to be careful in times of certain future rulers, or else there will be loss of fortune:

In the future, at a time similar to now, in a Monkey year, the posterior of a Lepcha mother of a Tiger year may accept bribery which shall be sweet. If the Lepcha do not pay heed to knowledge, they will never retrieve their fortune. The Lepcha should pay heed to knowledge. If they know how to search, the lost jewels of Tibet shall be found. If they do not know how to search, their fortune will fall into the hands of monkeys. (Lepcha 2009: 10)²³

CONTESTED NARRATIONS: ON A DEMON AND INTEREST GROUPS

When narrating the competition between Guru Rinpoche and a Lepcha practitioner traces are pointed out in the present-day landscape. Still today in Chungthang, there is a flat land where red rice grows²⁴—a plant that usually cannot be cultivated in this altitude and climate—and a village beyond Chungthang, in the direction Guru Rinpoche threw the yams, is called Búk, which is Lepcha for ‘yam’. Interestingly however, these landscape markers mentioned in all versions of the competition narration are locally related to alternative accounts: Guru Rinpoche is on his way to Tibet subduing the demons of the land. He preaches Buddhism to a Samo mung, a female demon. In some versions she attacks him actively. Guru Rinpoche then chases and fights her. Some sources say the imprints in the rock occurred then. Thereafter, the saint shoots arrows at her, the first arrow misses, and leaves a hole in a cliff above Chungthang. The second arrow hits the demon. She is killed at a place called Maltem, approximately 5 km from Chungthang in the direction of Lachung. There Guru Rinpoche chops the demon into pieces and hangs her body-parts on a rocky cliff. The stone formations can still be seen. After, or in some variations, during the fight Guru Rinpoche rests for lunch, some boiled rice falls to the ground and the rice field comes into existence. His lunch packet is tied with strings of the yam plant, this he

²³ tsāngnámká tyú?áalom gyúrbá sathangnám bú róngkupnunre máyel ?ámúsá tacekre pátkupsá gizobán suhunámká ?umshang mátsho. Róngkupsangre ?othánámká rikbú mamátgang róngkupsangnu ?yóng ?ore sathálá lódup makhâtnayám ma?o. róngkupsang rikbú mátnubám gát yám ma ?o. dóngyálágang ?orenámká fátnónbú pátlyángsá nórpú ló dupkhat ma ?o. dóng mayāngang nám ?othá a?yóng ?ore sahusá ?ákáká shornónshang gun má?o.

²⁴ Since a few years now, rice does not grow anymore on this specific piece of land. At present (early 2010) the area is strewn with garbage and partially polluted with sewage from the adjoining houses (see also NOW! Newspaper. 4th of May 2011, page 2).

throws away towards the opposite side of the valley. Some sources say the traces in the stone are also made during this time.²⁵ This alternative narrative is also mentioned in a publication from the mid-1960s (Olschak 1965: 165). No prophecies are attached to this account.

These unexpected findings raised questions and triggered the need to investigate the relevance and the meaning of the competition narrative in the wider cultural setting of the Lepcha community. Oral narratives are understood as social action performed by tellers to specific audiences (real or imagined) in a particular time, place and setting, while being constituted by repetition and patterning (Tonkin 1992: 97f.). Narratives always have narrators, oral texts (recounted, enacted, or written down) are therefore not just there (Finnegan 2007: 159), but are cultural products moulded by different interest groups and players in society. So was the competition narrative locally not known at all? Who tells which story? And what do the various members of the Lepcha community think about the different mythological explanations of the landscape markers? In Chungthang and the surrounding villages of Dzongu the majority of the villagers regardless of their age had no recollection of a magical competition or even a meeting of Guru Rinpoche and a Lepcha religious practitioner. The informants telling me about the competition narrative mainly came from a section of the Lepcha community involved in the strengthening of Lepcha culture and active in the civil society of Sikkim. One of their main activities is to compile and publish works on Lepcha oral tradition, and organise rituals and other cultural functions. In this process they are canonizing Lepcha culture (see Goody 2000). The Lepcha have a script of their own, but the narrative corpus on Lepcha religious and cultural tradition called *lúngten sung* in Lepcha was transmitted orally. The majority of old documents in the Lepcha language are translations of Buddhist scriptures with only a few texts with indigenous traits, later on Bible translations and textbooks were produced (Plaisier 2007: 17; Klafkowski 1980a, 1983). Only recently did the spread of literacy spur a production of publications in Lepcha language and script, but still hardly any literature in Lepcha language originates from Dzongu. The competition narrative is one of the oral

²⁵ Two sources combine elements of the competition narrative and the account on the female demon. Guru Rinpoche comes on a sunbeam and Thikúng Munsalóng through a cave underground. They meet at the stone, have lunch, when Guru Rinpoche drops the rice and throws the yam-string, Thikúng Munsalóng puts his walking stick in the ground and a specific tree (*Sámbráng kúng* in Lepcha, species in the genus *Schima* (Family *Theaceae*) grows of it. These are the only variations collected in which the two religious practitioners meet, but do not have a contest. Guru Rinpoche then goes on to chase and kill the demon after the mutual lunch.

narratives considered important enough to be published in written form. The written version of the competition narrative, *Gúru rídyensá námthó*, is one of the few books from that area in the recent years. So who is the audience of these tellers or writers? In the preface the hope is stated that the publication will stir interest among the Lepcha youth in their literature and encourage them to promote their culture by writing down Lepcha traditional narratives. With dominant written traditions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity) surrounding the Lepcha community, the written and printed word is considered to have the power of historical accuracy and to grant visibility. And both these qualities are also required in the political system of India today, perceived as necessary for cultural preservation. Political and economic rights are given to tribal groups (as well as castes) on the basis of quotas. In order to be acknowledged as a 'tribe' in this system, it is important to become and stay visible as a tribal group. One way of achieving this is to emphasise the written documentation of history and culture of the respective ethnic groups, the 'older' the sources the better. The competition story is presently also promoted in Dzongu in connection with a proposed statue project of Thikúng Munsalóng, who is sometimes mentioned as the protagonist. In this context short versions of this narrative were recently narrated or mentioned during large public gatherings organised by the local Lepcha association. Interest groups among the Lepcha community are therefore consciously or unconsciously emphasising the competition narrative over the alternative and possibly older account of Guru Rinpoche fighting a demon which is connected with the same landscape. They are doing it in the context of promoting Lepcha culture and addressing various different audiences (youth, gatherings of villagers) in written and oral form.

When asked about the two different narratives explaining the identical landscape markers, the reactions among the Lepcha community differed. The competition narrative studied in this article is itself a variation of a genre common in Lepcha oral tradition found and known around the locality, even though not many villagers in Chungthang have heard this specific one. There are other accounts on contests between Buddhist Bhutia (Lhopo) or Tibetans and the Lepcha prevalent in the same region. For example, the local legend in which a Lepcha supernatural hero and a Bhutia noble compete in carrying water up a hill above Ship Gyer, a village in Dzongu, is known and widely told in the village community and beyond. Those Lepchas in Chungthang and surrounding who had never heard of a competition mostly shrugged and said, I must have gotten wrong information, as in their knowledge Guru

Rinpoche was fighting a female demon. Sometimes it was also mentioned that people with political or vested interests had invented the competition narrative. Efforts are also made by local members of the civil society to merge the two alternative stories connected with the landscape markers. It cannot be pinpointed when the competition narrative started to be prominent in Lepcha civil society and there was no conscious replacement of the previous account of the fight with a demoness. There are indications and locally made assumptions that the story in which Guru Rinpoche is chasing a demon is older, but it is also possible that versions of the competition narrative have been subliminally present for quite some time, maybe more so in the Lepcha areas outside of Sikkim, but were not the dominantly locally known narratives. Informants telling me about the competition narrative believed the myth to be ancient and quoted older people they remembered hearing the story from. Namgyal Lepcha who compiled the account in written form, got the details of the narrative from two senior residents in his village. Interestingly, both of them had ties to the Kalimpong area just outside of Sikkim. The age and authenticity of the competition story relating to the landscape markers are therefore locally contested.

The competition narrative has become prominent in a certain section of the Lepcha community, the question remains why? Why do oral traditions change? Why does one emerge among certain tellers and become more prominent than others connected to the same markers in the landscape? Narrators in different locations draw on their recollection of a transmitted collective memory which constitutes culture while formulating their accounts, but in the process of reproduction the oral accounts change. Reasons therefore vary; certain transformation is inherent in oral transmission because of forgetting or personal creativity for example. Adaptations can also occur due to pressure from the outside, the teller's own interests of various kinds or changed needs and requirements in the community. In the case of oral accounts on Sikkimese history for instance, Saul Mullard has clearly analysed that commonly known narratives on events and people in the early Sikkimese history do not document history as it happened, but were modified or even emerged later on in train of the construction of a national identity (Mullard 2011). The speed of change in oral traditions varies, it can occur slowly and unconsciously to the people telling them (see for example Goody 2000: 31 and Ong 1982: 48 on how genealogies adapt). In this case the transformations are hardly contested within the community. But sometimes events and innovations in the surrounding world change them

harshly and consciously, maybe even radically breaking with older traditions and weakening or destroying previous social, religious, or political structures and institutions. These kinds of new adaptations are more obvious, perhaps distinguishable as ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1–5), and their authenticity can also become debated within the communities. Oral traditions are therefore not an unchanged relic of the past nor ‘naturally’ in existence, as no elements of culture are, but are part of a construction and re-construction process which forms all culture(s) during which cultural identity is formed, negotiated, strengthened, and transformed. On this analytical background I am interested in two central questions. Does the competition narrative deliver more efficient or contemporary ways of dealing with the present-day religious and political context of Sikkim, and become more popular in Lepcha civil society due to recently occurred changes as far-reaching as the transition from a Buddhist kingdom to an integral state of the Republic of India? In which way is this narrative, defined as social action and constitutive moment in cultural identity formation, more productive in the present day context than the alternative account on Guru Rinpoche fighting the demoness?

COMPETITION NARRATIVE AND THE PRODUCTIVITY OF ORAL TRADITIONS

Religious Conversion and Collateral Influences in Sikkim

The initial theme taken up both in the account in which Guru Rinpoche is fighting a female demon and in the competition narrative is religious conversion or even subjugation. In the Lepcha villages in North Sikkim Lepcha religious tradition and Buddhism co-existed (Gorer 2005 [1938]: 181) and still co-exist in a fairly well balanced, but also fragile relationship. Lamas and shamans practice side by side. There is no specific division of work, but also no direct competition. In the Lepcha villages the religious practices are characterised by syncretism, Lepcha mythology and rituals have incorporated Buddhist elements and vice versa. Following Siiger’s description Lepcha belief “seems ready to adopt significant traits from other religions without losing its own character and it responds in a sensitive way to important changes in the people’s way of life.” (Siiger 1975: 302) In the past fifty years, however, there have been various changes in Sikkimese Buddhism unsettling this fine balanced syncretic relationship, especially triggered by the immigration of knowledgeable lamas from Tibet, who were trained outside of Sikkim. The rapport between Buddhism and elements of

Lepcha traditional belief is being questioned more than in previous years, it is being redesigned and sometimes also heavily criticised. Slowly, but steadily an awareness is growing among the Lepcha that they are actually following two distinct religious practices. In the Lepcha reserve area, Dzongu, and its relatively remote village areas the fragility of the intertwined religious systems is less noticeable, but becoming increasingly evident. Animal sacrifice in Lepcha traditional healing or annual rituals, a crucial element of Lepcha belief, is one of the main issues of contention (see also Balikci 2008). Strategies are adopted to minimize the contradictions; as an example the number of animals killed during sacrifice is reduced, cooked meat is offered, but blood is not sacrificed anymore, or rituals formerly performed combined are now done individually by either the lama or the *bóngthing*. In some cases more radical steps are also taken. Animal sacrifice has been stopped in many places in Sikkim. On the other hand, sections of the Lepcha community, mainly in Kalimpong, are renouncing Buddhism (or Christianity) and reconverting solely to Lepcha religious tradition (or a revived version thereof) – another strategy to deal with the inherent contradictions of religious coexistence.

The altered and disputed perception towards syncretism and Lepcha religious tradition as a whole offers a possible explanation for why versions of the competition narration gained importance in the Lepcha civil society, as the need has increased to discuss the relationship between both religious systems and maybe even defend elements of the traditional Lepcha belief. Guru Rinpoche is portrayed as the conqueror of the demons in Lepcha territory and the propagator of Buddhism in both accounts. In contrast to the account where Guru Rinpoche is subduing a demon, the competition narration shows an interaction between two representatives of different religious tradition in Sikkim thereby allowing debates between the protagonists. It gives both protagonists a voice, whereas in the alternative narrative the demoness (as such connoted negatively) remains mute and merely Guru Rinpoche's activities are portrayed. This verbal and physical exchange provides space to discuss conditions of syncretism, entangle power relations and negotiate their terms.

In the collected versions of the competition narration Guru Rinpoche respects the abilities of the Lepcha protagonist after initial misunderstandings and accusations, and the Lepcha religious practitioner acknowledges Guru Rinpoche's strength, when the latter proves his magical powers during the prophecies. The narrative describes both contenders as equally strong, however not in direct

competition: The Lepcha protagonist wins in the magical contest, but Guru Rinpoche demonstrates his powers during the prophecies, which scares the people and causes them to seek his protection. This establishes Buddhism as a superior and powerful state religion without degrading the Lepcha religious tradition. Both religious practitioners go through a change from believing their own religious system is superior or stronger to accepting the knowledge and power of the other. Further syncretistic elements are introduced, such as Takshe thing. The short dispute on Takshe thing (also called Tashe thing) quoted above adds an interesting dimension to the discussion on certain syncretic elements of Lepcha belief and Buddhism. The characteristics and actions mentioned by the Buddhist saints with a very derogative tone, refer to legendary stories on Takshe thing known and told in Lepcha community. He is a figure in Lepcha mythology connected to Guru Rinpoche as well as the Lepcha progenitor Tukbo thing.²⁶ The latter mythological figure is merged with Takshe thing to such an extent that double names exist (Takshe tukbo thing or Tukbo Takshe thing).²⁷ At the same time Takshe thing is a Lepcha name used for Guru Rinpoche (Siiger 1975: 298, 302). This blending of mythological figures becomes apparent in the oral narrations on Takshe thing, as for example compiled in Stocks de Beauvoir (1975 [1925]: VII, VIII). Some of the characteristics and events described in them such as marriage with animals and the origin of various sacrificial elements of the Lepcha religious practitioners seem more applicable to Tukbo thing, but similarly mythology and iconography of Guru Rinpoche are also intertwined in the accounts. Takshe thing is for example depicted with a pointed hat and a moustache. Stocks de Beauvoir refers to these narrative elements as “more modern beliefs” (1975 [1925]: 12) and thereby implies that the narrative elements clearly attributable to Guru Rinpoche were included in the mythologies at a later time as the ones referring to the Lepcha progenitor. Takshe thing as Guru Rinpoche can be understood as an adoption from another religion and stands as a syncretic element in Lepcha mythology. Some Lepchas are sceptical about this (see also Klafkowski 1980a) and according to K.P.

²⁶ Tukbo or Takbo thing means ‘the lord who protects, protector, guardian, defender’ in Lepcha (Tamsang 1980: 434). This is a name used for the Lepcha progenitor more often called Fadróng thing. See also Siiger 1975: 306, Beauvoir Stocks de 1975 [1925]: 11.

²⁷ See also Siiger 1972: 239 for use of the name. Dualistic notion of deities is common in Lepcha belief, such as for example Ítbú debú rum, the creator and destroyer god, or Sakyu sánom rum, the fertility and fortune god. Sometimes one deity is connoted female and the other male, sometimes their properties are oppositional, but the dominant gender of each is not known. In ritual language and poetry this dualistic rhyming is used.

Tamsang, Takshe thing is “the omniscient lord, *n.* the prophet, having infinite knowledge; [...] the founder of Lepchaism” (Tamsang 1980: 412).²⁸ In the written version of the competition narrative Guru Rinpoche describes himself as pure and declares he has nothing to do with transformations into animal bodies, animal consorts, and animal sacrifice; activities clearly disliked. Thereby, he distances himself from any syncretic elements regarding Takshe thing. This describes a purified conception of Buddhism which does not accept syncretistic beliefs and activities, nor respects the powers of the local religious specialist. Guru Rinpoche’s attitude towards the local religious tradition and its practitioner however begins to change in course of the narrative compared to during the initial verbal disputes. This assumption is further solidified at the end of the written source when Guru Rinpoche leaves for Tibet where he uses a sacrificial device given by the Lepcha religious practitioner to aid him tame evil spirits in the landscape. Here elements of Lepcha belief are imported into Tibetan Buddhism. There are also prophecies implying the same. In versions of the narration naming Thikung Munsalóng as the protagonist the notion of Buddhism nourishing from Lepcha religious belief is emphasised, turning any form of syncretism into an adoption of Lepcha belief by Buddhism.

Most versions of the competition narration underline the strength of Lepcha religion and the mutual respect between the two religious traditions, which are historically rooted in Sikkim, but increasingly contested in the recent decades. In form of a legendary religious account the competition narration delivers a historical and religious justification for the mutual understanding and respect between the religions. Tension becomes obvious, but is resolved. Namgyal Lepcha, when asked, gives a similar reason for bringing the oral tradition into a written form—he wants to draw attention to the close relationship of the Lepcha, who also follow their own belief, to Guru Rinpoche and Buddhism. The prophecies which have not yet been fulfilled, leave room for voicing fear and debating the validity and entanglement of both religious traditions.

²⁸ This definition implies that Takshe thing is the most important figure in ancient Lepcha belief. It could be possible that a pre-existing Lepcha supernatural being with the name Takshe thing (Takshe tukbo thing or Tukbo Takshe thing) did exist, but then was over time merged with the Buddhist saint—a view I think quite credible as a hypothesis, but requires more research and a thorough translation of the Lepcha book (*námthár*) *Tashi sung* (see also Plaisier 2003: 39, 42). Based on his preliminary research done on versions of this book collected in Kalimpong in the 1970s Piotr Klafkowski classifies *Tashi sung* as a text of Lepcha religious tradition which has been revised under the influence of Buddhism (Klafkowski 1980b: 112-13, 1980a, 1983). See also Mainwaring (1876: XI).

The characteristic of the prophecies turns more obvious when analysing the ethno-political context.

Prophecies and Multiple Voices on Political Suppression

The second and in some cases a lot more dominant theme addressed in the competition narrative is the political subordination of the Lepcha. In all versions collected Guru Rinpoche is clearly described as stranger and outsider coming into the region inhabited by the Lepcha with missionary intentions. In the written source the interaction between Thikúng Ádik and Guru Rinpoche starts out as a conflict over religious views and supremacy. Political supremacy and suppression is explained by possession of religious knowledge and becomes a topic in the end, as Guru Rinpoche prophecies that the Tibetan people, enriched with his religious knowledge, will set up their rule in Lepcha land. However, many versions of the competition narrative do not predominantly highlight the religious aspects, but describe the threat of suppression of the indigenous people by the Buddhist divine ruler as well as potential other rulers. In the most detailed oral version for example the first spoken dispute and the contest are already introduced with a more political overtone when Thikúng Ádik describes the Lepcha as the powerful kings of the respective region. By solely referring to the earthly powers of the Lepcha people, the contest is given an ethno-political, rather than religious component from the beginning, and political control over the area is at stake in the contest and the prophecies. It describes a contest between the insiders versus the outsider, who is threatening the existing political order.

The discussion on political supremacy becomes especially apparent in the prophecies and delivers further explanations for the growing interest in the competition narrative. Summarised all prophecies have the same core elements: If the people and especially the rulers do not respect Buddhism, Lepcha religious tradition, and especially the dignity and welfare of the Lepcha people, then their reign will perish or various other negative effects will occur.

In the first prediction the Buddhist saint Guru Rinpoche lets rice grow and foretells the political subordination of the Lepcha to a Tibetan and Buddhist ruler and then, while letting yams grow, he utters another prophecy protecting the Lepcha and their local religious tradition. One can read an analogy into these prophecies also mentioned by Scott (2009: 200); rice stands for the 'state' or 'civilisation', whilst tuber or roots symbolise 'swidden' or 'non-settled cultivation'. Guru Rinpoche lays the

sediment of the Buddhist state, but also protects the religious and economic lifestyle of the indigenous people of the area. In some versions the prophecy specifies that the reign will be ended after twelve generations if the Lepcha are not respected, a time frame which corresponds with the length of the rule of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim.

Both the ‘rice’ and the ‘yam’ prophecy are considered fulfilled by all the narrators, as people from the Tibetan region came, established a kingdom in Sikkim, and the reign of their descendants, the Namgyal dynasty, ended in 1975. The prophecies can therefore be told as a critique of the previous kingdom and additionally express pride in the present democracy with its existing alliances. The fulfilled prophecies also stand as warning for the present ruling class, as a warning of what can happen if the people indigenous to the place and protected by Guru Rinpoche are not treated with respect. They further bear hope that whatever political system might come, the Lepcha and their cultural and religious tradition will be eternally protected by the saint and will outlive it eventually.

However, among the Lepcha community (again only a certain section) there is not only a notion that the Sikkimese kingdom, but also that the present-day Sikkimese government is eroding their rights. This feeling of deprivation often goes hand in hand with the perception of being ruled by ‘foreigners’ and not by their own people—irrelevant of the fact that many landlords in the kingdom were of Lepcha ancestry and that there are also Lepcha representatives in the present government. The fear of losing privileges and reservations so far protected by Sikkimese law is ever-present in Lepcha society and is growing due to ongoing political debates. Additionally, the implementation of hydro-power projects and the protest against them have further split the Lepcha civil society into fractions, created insecurity, and intensified the controversies in the preservation of sacred landscape, the importance of Lepcha cultural heritage, and the political domination of the indigenous people in their own motherland. The not yet fulfilled prophecies give a platform for debating such topics. The prophecies warn the listeners to caution and provide hints about potential rulers in Lepcha land and the dangers they might bring. Their cryptic form allows speculation about misdeeds of the ruling class, allows a safe space to voice critique about the present political situation, and express fears.

Prophecies and Debates on Ethnic Domination

In a number of versions the rulers and potential suppressors are associated with the entire ethnic group of the Bhutia regardless of any historical accuracy. Therewith the historical suppression in a feudal structure is turned into the timeless domination of one ethnic group, the Bhutia, over another, the Lepcha. Thus a new level of connotation and material for debate is added.

In Sikkim, there is a historical political and cultural alliance of the Lepcha and the Bhutia, described as brotherhood and honoured by many in Sikkim. Both are considered the original Sikkimese and for example share a quota in the Legislative Assembly as well as in government jobs and education. Now, in present-day Sikkim the notion exists that some political forces, often associated with 'the Nepalese,' are trying to weaken and divide this historical Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) alliance. Heated debates on this topic have for example repeatedly been induced by the demand of Lepcha associations for separate Lepcha quotas or exactly 50% of the existing BL quotas. On this background, the competition narrative can be, and is by some informants, interpreted as a 'recent invention' of vested political interest groups attempting to split the historical alliance of the Bhutia and the Lepcha by giving a mythological justification for the felt suppression of Lepchas through the entire ethnic group of the Bhutia. It can also be narrated by interest groups to underline exactly these demands for separate representations.

Debates and Prophetic Powers

The competition narrative in its different versions gives means to analyse, in which way and to what extent actors of a socio-cultural group accept the ruling power and their policies, and debate shifts in power and dominance. Is the ruling class and the decisions made by it welcomed, ignored, resisted? As shown, the prophecies are debated about and the reading of the narrative is contested in the Lepcha community. Depending on the version, compliance with certain political setups and ideas are expressed whereas others also bear a subtext of criticism of past as well as possible present or future suppression. Any critique, fear or implied suppression of past or present-day actors of the ruling class is voiced through cryptically phrased prophecies uttered from the mouth of a most respected Buddhist saint and the discussion of these, but not expressed directly. The competition narrative draws on cultural elements native to and present in Lepcha as well as Sikkimese Buddhist culture (such as prophecies) and remains in the norms of a 'traditional' narrative. Certain versions of the competition narration can be read as 'weapons of

everyday resistance' (Scott 1985), but caution is called for when talking about individual intent, as the narrators are not necessarily consciously reacting to religious changes or shifts in ethno-political situations in Sikkim (see Scott 1985: 290, 300–1). The competition narrative is usually not told as part of a political strategy or anything close to resistance, but as a normal part of the mythological fundus, in with the prophecies create a situation where opinions and fears can be debated and expressed, each version adding a different flavour to it.

CONCLUSION

Documenting the account of a competition between a Lepcha religious practitioner and Guru Rinpoche led down an unexpected path, as there is another, locally more common narrative of the Buddhist saint fighting a demoness connected with the marks in the landscape. In the Lepcha community it is discussed, even disputed, when the competition narrative arose, some claiming it to be very recent and politically vested, others claiming it to be ancient. This directed me to thoughts on 'invented tradition' and on a quest for understanding why the competition narrative emerged as an important narrative. A rigid distinction between 'old' and 'invented' tradition cannot be drawn, as creativity and innovation are internal to the process of oral transmission, and the relation between changes in cultural narrations and changes in a surrounding is not a straight forward one. There might be cases, where it clearly can be shown that a narrative or a ritual has emerged from a new political setting, a drastic natural catastrophe or some other specific occasion and certain actors that can be pinpointed. But then, people, their stories and culture adapt to changes in various contested ways. Some adaptations are consciously motivated by actors and openly disputed, while others happen in slower and subtler ways. Some voices and stories are mere whispers in certain times, but being muffled does not make them new when they turn louder. Other narratives are only noticeable as echoes of obscure origin. Fixation on the distinction of old and new can be beneficial in some occasions, but often the question of authenticity and of 'the real' or 'the older' tradition blocks the view to more interesting questions—the questions like, why this narrative has become popular in Lepcha civil society, regardless of whether it was there beforehand? What makes the narrative productive and interesting in a cultural setting?

In comparison to the narration in which Guru Rinpoche chases and kills a female, there have been various shifts in content and genre. First, the focus of narration has changed. The protagonists are not a saint and

a demoness anymore, but two representatives of different religious traditions. Depending on the variations they are also described as representatives of two political interest groups as well as different ethnic groups. Instead of addressing the subordination of an evil spirit, which indirectly implies the subordination of previous religious traditions, the competition narrative shows a contest during which religious, political and ethnic supremacy is more explicitly negotiated. Second, the competition narration emphasises interaction. By holding a physical and oral competition both contestants get a say, can bring over their point, but also change their point of view in the course of the narration. The narration becomes more dynamic and personified in contrast to the alternative story during which Guru Rinpoche speaks through action and the demoness remain mute. Debates are not only opened up between the protagonists of the story, but also among the public listening to or reading the story. Third, a large part of the competition narration comprises of prophecies, not mentioned in the version where Guru Rinpoche kills a demoness, but also known as parts of other narratives. The two main prophecies are the same in all versions, while the additional ones sometimes mentioned differ. They leave space to speculate and discuss present and future events. Fourth, these dynamics are enhanced when the versions collected are compared, as each one of them includes different emphasises and views on topics such as religious, political or ethnic domination and relations. Summarised the range of topics discussed has been enlarged in the competition narrative and the focus is more on relationships, interaction, debate, and power negotiation.

The competition narrative can be used as a medium for dealing with, understanding, debating, maybe even influencing the current situation, and therefore becomes or remains an interesting narrative to tell, write, and share. The narrative with its different variations, interactive elements and the prophecies allows the expression of attitudes and feelings, and the discussion of questions concerning religious and political interaction, mutual respect, domination and suppression. The context of the telling of the narration and more specifically of the prophecies offers a space for people to debate what is on their mind; the sadness about their traditional belief being side-lined in comparison to Buddhism, the harmonious relationship of Buddhism and Lepcha belief and the threat to it, the fear or the necessity of a split between the traditional Lepcha Bhutia alliance, the frustration with past or present governments for stripping the Lepcha of their rights and suppressing the indigenous people, the chances of modern democracy compared to the feudal

system, and not least the power of religion over politics. All these opinions and problems can be and are voiced through this narrative and its variations, by changing emphasis, and discussing the prophecies.

In this line of thought oral traditions can be conceptualised as a discursive matrix through which different fears and opinions prevalent among the society are channelled. Oral tradition or myth does not give us insight into ‘a’ culture as a whole, but in close analysis of dynamics such as emerging oral narratives, the increasing emphasis on certain oral accounts, and existing variations and versions enables the deeper understanding of debates and dynamics on the current cultural field and the process of cultural identity formation and negotiation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Kachyo Lepcha for his continued assistance and friendship, the *bóngthings* of Dzongu, elders and other interview partners for sharing and discussing their stories with me. Further, I express my gratitude to Mickma Lepcha for the commitment and accuracy in the translation work on the written Lepcha source, and Heleen Plaisier for help in editing the translation. Thanks to Marietta Kind, Mark Turin, and Kerry Little for constructive inputs on earlier versions of the presentation at the IATS-conference 2010 and the present article. The research for this article was carried out during fieldwork for my doctoral thesis funded by the *Janggen Poehn Stiftung* and the *Forschungskredit der Universität Zürich*.

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REIFICATION OF ETHNICITY IN SIKKIM:
'TRIBALISM' IN PROGRESS¹

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Several scholars have highlighted the role of ethnic belonging and solidarity on political action in Sikkim.² In this paper, I intend to question and deconstruct this argument by highlighting the historicity of ethnic categories in Sikkim. This firstly reverses the above-mentioned argument by highlighting the determining role of politics in defining and reifying ethnic boundaries, and politicizing ethnic groups. By doing so, I also propose to apply to the case of Sikkim the distinction discussed by Brubaker (2004: 11-18) between ethnic categories as commonly represented and institutionalised by states, and ethnic groups. This finally supports the idea that, in Sikkim also, ethnicity³ is not pre-defined and 'natural,' but emerged at the intersection of various political interactions.⁴

This paper thus focuses primarily on ethnic categorization, and not on ethnic identification; it thus also proposed to differentiate categorization and identification.⁵ This approach in terms of categorization entails critically analyzing their emergence and use in Sikkim, in the intention to deconstruct the idea of a natural bond between socio-political entities constructed by political leaders, and ethnic identities and be-

¹ I am grateful to Roland Lardinois for his guidance on this article, to B. G. Karlsson and Townsend Middleton for their comments, to A.C. Sinha for his information and to Prem Poddar, Stephan Kloos and Saul Mullard for their revisions. Any mistakes and the opinions presented here, however, remain my own.

² See, for instance, Chaube 1987, Datta 1994, Gurung 2011, Roy-Burman (J.J.) 2001, Sinha 1975.

³ Following Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1995: 21-33), 'ethnicity' is not comprehended here as ethnic groups and ethnic belonging but in the sense of the social actors' understanding of social divisions and inequalities in terms of ethnic belonging and differentiation.

⁴ Barth 1969, Brubaker 2004, J.L. and J. Comaroff 2009, Wimmer 2008 to mention only a few.

⁵ I am grateful to B.G. Karlsson for guiding me toward this clarification. In my opinion, a study of those categorisations from the top presents a first step in the study of cultural changes induced by them, or, in other words, of the influence of policies and politics on ethnicity and cultural identities; this is the focus of other publications, while this article is essentially on the history of the construction of ethnic categories.

longing. In other words, it proposes to look at how labels that often determine people's socio-political life in a more or less positive way emerged and were used, and to make a difference between these labels and what people actually are and want to be. This approach in terms of categories then allows for analytical distance. The argument of an influence of 'ethnic' affiliation on politics in Sikkim is not refuted, but by historicising ethnic categories, this influence is moved to the level of political action (suggesting that at other levels, people's actions are actually dynamic and fluid). Besides, this paper demonstrates that social scientists as well as policy-makers often have an ethnic reading of situations that are, in reality, involving various agents and factors.

In short, taking inspiration from Dirks,⁶ how have the classificatory categories of the population, or 'ethnic categories,' which today are a core feature of the politics of Sikkim, been conditioned by history? This discussion will be engaged into by a history of ethnic categories in Sikkim, starting with the first colonial Sikkim censuses⁷ and ending with the 2006 Sikkim State Socio-Economic Census. How did the colonial, and then the Indian and Sikkimese administrations represent Sikkimese ethnic communities in official and legal documents, and how did this reflect early ethnological concerns?⁸ Additionally, to what extent did the first modern policies in Sikkim, shaped in the aftermath of the decolonisation of India, reflect the then existing categorisations of the Sikkim population?

1 - ETHNIC CATEGORISATIONS THROUGH HISTORY

The populations of Sikkim

The first colonial census in 1891 mentioned thirteen "races or castes" in the Kingdom of Sikkim, namely Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Jimdar, Khambu (etc.),⁹ Kami, Brahman, Magar, Chetri (the Indo-Nepali caste of Kshatriya), Newar, Slaves, and Dirzi.¹⁰ The Sikkim State socio-economic census of 2006 added the following groups to this list: Sunuwar/Mukhia, Thami, Jogi, Dewan, Bhujel, Damai, Sar-ki, Maji, and Sanyasi/Giri.¹¹

The early history of settlement in Sikkim is still partly in the shadows, but the attribution of rights and benefits on the basis of ancestral

⁶ 2001: 5 and 8.

⁷ There are earlier Sikkim censuses in Tibetan translated and analysed by Mullard (2009); see here below.

⁸ See, among others, Cohn 1987 and Dirks 2001.

⁹ Rai, Jimdar and Khambu are three names for the same group.

¹⁰ *Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1894: 27.

¹¹ Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006.

presence in Sikkim, as in some other parts of India, makes this question an important political issue. The Lepchas depict themselves as being autochthonous to Sikkim,¹² the Bhutias are seen as having come from Tibet and Bhutan to Sikkim¹³ beginning in the 13th century,¹⁴ and the Limbus' ancestral lands lie in the western part of Sikkim bordering Nepal. The presence of Magars in early Sikkim history has been mentioned in *The History of Sikkim*, written (or compiled) in 1908 by the then royal couple,¹⁵ and by Hooker (1854).¹⁶ However, Mullard's study of primary sources (including censuses and an agreement between ethnic groups), contemporary with the foundation of the Sikkim kingdom, leads to conclude that there is no evidence of Magars having been in Sikkim at that time.¹⁷ Hooker also mentions Tamangs ("Moormis"), and Mechis in the Terai in the 1850s. Newars from Nepal settled in Sikkim in the 19th century.¹⁸ Numerous people from what is now north-eastern Nepal also fled to Sikkim starting at the end of the 18th century during the Gorkha conquests of Eastern Nepal.¹⁹

In the second half of the 19th century, the colonial government (which seized administrative power in Sikkim from 1888 to 1918)²⁰ encouraged the settlement of Nepalese in order to increase the number of workforce and taxpayers, and as a bulwark against Tibetan influ-

¹² Mainwaring 1971: ix.

¹³ Mullard 2009: 32

¹⁴ By their own historians, as for instance the King and Queen Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908.

¹⁵ Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma. This text is believed to be a later edition of an earlier historical work (Mullard 2009: 31).

¹⁶ Hooker writes that the Magars (spelt "Magras") are aborigines of Sikkim (1854 [1980], vol I: 130). This question is however debated in Sikkim; see, for instance, Sonam Wangdi 2010.

¹⁷ Saul Mullard's personal communication.

¹⁸ Shrestha 2005: 27; see also Subba 1989: 1.

¹⁹ As well as to India; Pradhan 1991: chapter 6 (especially p.117).

²⁰ Rose 1978: 207. See also Administrative Report of the State of Sikkim 1918-19:1, and Rao 1972: 123 and 145.

ence;²¹ this led to a growth of the population, though available Census figures raise problems.²²

Anthropological studies of Nepal organise these groups according to the criteria of language, localisation or social organisation. A superimposition of these criteria would be an oversimplification, but in broad brush strokes, this classification more or less matches the one commonly used in the Himalayas, between Kirāt or Kirant—a term that “generally means the ‘autochthonous’ Tibeto-Burman groups of East Nepal”²³ and the “the wild non-Aryan tribes living in the mountains”²⁴—Newars and caste-organised groups.

The Kirant category includes various ethnic groups depending on an author’s predilections, including sometimes just the Rais, and at other times the Mechs, Lepchas, Yakhas, Limbus, Magars, Gurungs, Sunuvars, etc.²⁵ They speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family²⁶ that are differentiated from the Tibetan dialect spoken by the Bhutias. As for the latter, they have retained a number of Tibetan cultural practices, while having also adopted local features. Regarding the Lepchas, in contrast to their oral tradition, hypotheses of their early migration from the east and from southern Tibet have been drawn, based on the inadequate evidence of “linguistic and cultural relations to communities living in north-eastern regions of India and Burma.”²⁷ The castes in Sikkim are mainly Nepalese, represented by the Bahun (Brahman), Chetri (Kshatriya), as well as the so-called low castes of

²¹ See Risley’s famous quotation on “the praying-wheel of the Lama [that] will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman [...] settl[ing] the Sikkim difficulty for us” (*Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1894: xxi), and Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908: 77. H. H. Risley (1851-1911) was a colonial administrator and ethnographer. His ‘obsession’ for caste as the main organizer of Indian society, and for the castes’ racial origin, left a deep mark on the first Indian censuses. He was the supervisor of the 1891 census for Bengal and the commissioner of the 1901 census (Dirks 2001, mainly: 212-224, see also Cohn 1984).

²² The official figures give an increase of 264% of the Sikkim total population from 1891 to 1931 (see the census 1891, published in the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, and Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006: 12). But the 1891 figure of 30,500 has been proven inaccurate; it very likely underestimates the real number of Sikkim inhabitants at that time (Mullard 2011: 210-213).

²³ Gaenszle 2000: 4.

²⁴ Chatterjee (1951:16), quoted by Subba 1989: 35. See also Schlemmer 2003/2004: 121.

²⁵ Subba 1989: 35-36.

²⁶ Schlemmer *ibid.*

²⁷ Bentley 2007: 41-42, analysing Mackean 1920: 511, Siiger 1967: 27, Sprigg 1982: 16-31, White 1971: 7, *Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1973: I, Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 7, and Pradhan 2006: 3.

Kami (black-smith), Damai (tailors and musicians), Sarki (tanners and cobblers) and Majhi (boatmen).

Most of the Kirant follow one of the major religions of the area—Hinduism or Buddhism—although they usually also have their own religious specialists. Today around 60% of the Sikkim population is Hindu.²⁸ Most of the Bhutias and Lepchas are Buddhist, though many Lepchas have converted to Christianity. The main language of Sikkim is Nepali, which in many cases has replaced the individual languages of the various communities.

This broad picture makes the dichotomy between ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ in the Indian colonial classification as well as in anthropological literature on this area visible. While “the 1854 Nepali legal code, or *Muluki Ain*, codified the position of many of the country’s groups, incorporating them within the Hindu caste framework,”²⁹ in contrast “[t]his [colonial and anthropological] model posits two Himalayan ideal types: the Indic, characterised as linguistically Indo-Aryan, racially Caucasian and religiously Hindu; and the Tibetan, characterised as linguistically Tibeto-Burman, racially Mongoloid and religiously Buddhist.”³⁰ And it does not allow the “classif[ication of] all of the people who fit into neither category.”³¹

It is commonly found in tourist literature that the population in Sikkim is made up of three ethnic groups, namely Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese. I first argue here that this classification is constructed on an opposition between ‘caste’ and ‘tribe.’ Secondly, despite the fact that this dichotomised representation structured the censuses of Sikkim as well as its first modern political institutions, it long remained unclear to administrators which group to put in which category, migrations from Nepal having apparently blurred the distinctions. Thirdly, in the 1990s, the previous ‘Nepalese’ category, upon which policies and politics had been based, was overthrown and replaced by a divide between ‘Indo-Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid’ based on the then revived notion of race. A new tripartite organisation of the population thus came out, including these two groups and the Bhutia-Lepcha. Both the recommendations of the second Commission for Backward Classes in 1980 and the “movement of indigenous nationalities” (*janajati* in Nepali) in the 1990s³² were instrumental in this shift. It led to an uncommon distribution of power in the area, in which ‘Mongoloid’ formed the government in place of the high castes in 1994. I suggest that this was possible partly by using the legal resources obtained by Bhutias and Lepchas since

²⁸ Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006: 358.

²⁹ Shneiderman 2009: 172.

³⁰ Shneiderman 2009: 173.

³¹ Shneiderman 2009: 173.

³² See Subba 2012.

1975, like the status of Scheduled Tribes and the legal protection provided by the article 371f of the Indian Constitution (see here below). Furthermore, since the category of ‘Backward Classes’ is viewed as a springboard for inclusion into the category of Scheduled Tribes by the Sikkim government, these recommendations triggered a struggle for reclassification. Groups listed as ‘Backward Classes’ indeed endeavour to be identified as ‘tribal’ and other groups attempt to be recognised as Other Backward Classes.³³ This quest for ‘backwardness/tribalism’ as well as the complexity and overlapping of classifications in Sikkim are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Classifications of ethnic groups in Sikkim

SIKKIM “THREE ETHNIC GROUPS” REFLECTED IN RESERVATIONS UNTIL 1979	CURRENT DIVIDE OF ETHNIC GROUPS	IN THE “RESERVATION SYSTEM” (STATE WELFARE)		PERCENTAGE IN POPULATION (2006)
Lepcha	Lepcha	Scheduled Tribes (1978)		37%
Bhutia	Bhutia			
‘Nepalese’	Limbu, Tamang	(2003)		
	Bhujel, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar (including Mukhia), Sanyasi, Thami, and Jogi	CENTRAL LEVEL (DELHI): Other Backward Classes (1995 -> 2000) ³⁴	STATE LEVEL (SIKKIM): Most Backward Classes (2003) Adding Dewan, and excepting Sanyasi	23%
	Newar	“General”	Other Backward Classes (2001)	23%
	‘High’ castes: In Sikkim:			

³³ As Subba (2012) explains, their reclassification as ST in Sikkim would offer many opportunities: protection of the land, reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly, etc.

³⁴ Groups declared as OBC by Sikkim state in 1994; Bhujel, Gurung, Limboo, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamangs were included in the Central list of OBC on 25th May 1995, Sanyasi and Thami on 6th December, 1999 and Jogi on 4th April 2000. See <http://sikkimsocialwelfare.org/General/Welfare/StateCommBckWrdCl.aspx>

	Bahun and Chetri		(+ Sanyasi)	
	'Low' castes: in Sikkim: Ka- mi, Damai, Mahji, Sarki		Scheduled Castes (1978)	6,6 %

Censuses of Sikkim, and the confusion of criteria

The first instances of an ethnic depiction of the population of Sikkim appear in two Tibetan texts analysed by Mullard (2009 and 2011) dating to the second half of the 17th century. This is the era of the first Bhutia king's enthronement, and, in the first document, representatives of three ethnic groups—Lho [Bhutia], Mon [Lepcha], and gTsong [Limbu]—acknowledge the new ruler's supremacy as the head of a single political order.³⁵ The alliance of these ethnic groups is one of the elements providing a foundation for the kingdom, and that also delimited it. The second text is, in all likelihood, a census produced by the ruling elite for administrative purpose.³⁶ It lists clans, families and individuals, assembled under the label 'Mon pa.' In contrast to another text from the same time period, 'Mon pa' does not refer to the Lepchas exclusively, but also to Limbus.³⁷ Mullard comments that this other text "recognized the ethnic plurality of Sikkim, whereas this register fails to distinguish between Lepcha and Limbu groups."³⁸ He adds that 'Mon' conveys a meaning closer to that of 'non-Tibeto-Sikkimese' [i.e. Bhutia].³⁹ In other words, the category Monpa was not intended to be descriptive in this case, but it marked otherness from a Bhutia ruling elite's point of view.⁴⁰ In this regard, the colonial censuses represent a shift in the perception of social groups, and the isolation of the 'ethnic' category, identified as the main social organiser. Scholars have precisely described the role and use of anthropological representations and knowledge in this process, mainly starting from the 19th century.⁴¹ The first Sikkim colonial census dates to 1891, when Sikkim had been under British colonial rule for just over two years, and was "done by the

³⁵ Mullard 2009: 198.

³⁶ Mullard 2009: 225-240.

³⁷ *Ibid*: 229.

³⁸ *Ibid*: 239.

³⁹ *Ibid*: 238-239.

⁴⁰ Pommaret (1999: 52) already stated that the term Mon pa could designate groups that have in fact little in common. On the meanings and uses of the term, see also Aris 1979.

⁴¹ Amselle and M'Bokolo 1985, Cohn 1987, Dirks 2001, Middleton 2010 among others.

then political officer in Sikkim [J.C. White].”⁴² Simultaneously, in the Sikkim elite’s writing, the old representation of the population, i.e. Lho Mon gTsong, was turned into “the three races living in Sikkim.”⁴³ The indigenous population was thus defined, and opposed to all the other groups.

Categorisations displayed in later censuses are going to be presented now; there are categorisations from ‘the top,’ reflecting the colonial understanding of social organisation in India and then its adaptation after independence. From 1901 Sikkim censuses were conducted under the auspices of the West Bengal Census Authorities; there was no separate report for Sikkim until 1971.⁴⁴

Bhutia-Lepcha versus Nepalese

The sparse census data of 1891 regarding the “races or castes”⁴⁵ of Sikkim are organised along two criteria. The first expresses the Bhutia rulers’ point of view: the thirteen groups mentioned above were first divided into three categories, namely “more or less allied,” (Limbus, Gurungs, Murmis, Khambus, Mangars), “later immigrants from beyond the Arun [river] in Nepal,” and Bhutia and Lepcha.⁴⁶ The text then identified three main “stocks” in Sikkim based on their ancestry of settlement in Sikkim: the Sikkim aboriginal Lepchas, the “next in importance, if not in antiquity commonly called Bhoteas,” and the Limbus, either of “Lhasa Gotra,” i.e. Limbu exogamous groups presumably originally from Tibet, or of “Kasi gotra,” who would ostensibly have come from Benares. The latter specification differentiated the Limbus of ancient settlements in Sikkim from the Limbus who had arrived from Nepal at the end of the 19th century. This description of the “main stocks in Sikkim” thus emphasized the foreign origin of “later immigrants from beyond the Arun.” This provided a base for the organisation of the Sikkim population in terms of three categories, which Waddell displayed in summarising the census: Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalese, etc.,⁴⁷ divided between ancient inhabitants (Bhutias and Lepchas) and migrants.

⁴² *Census of India 2001, Series 12–Sikkim*, Analytical note: 1.

⁴³ Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908.

⁴⁴ *Census of India 2001, Series 12–Sikkim*, Analytical note: 3.

⁴⁵ *Gazetteer of Sikkim 1894* and *Census of India 1891*.

⁴⁶ *Gazetteer of Sikkim 1894*: 27.

⁴⁷ *Gazetteer of Sikkim*: 1894: 259. In the language report of 1893, the same distinction is based on language (Baines 1893: 148).

The dichotomy between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese has today become the most common.⁴⁸ As Shneiderman explains, “It is intriguing that Tibeto-Burman language-speaking, beef-eating groups of Nepali heritage such as the Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and Thangmi were included under the rubric ‘Nepali’, rather than classed with the Bhutias and Lepchas, which suggests that a sense of Nepali national identity already trumped particular cultural identities as criteria for self-identification in colonial Darjeeling.”⁴⁹ As far as Sikkim is concerned, the wish to differentiate indigenous people from outsiders—whether to protect the former or “dilute” them, as Risley’s ringing phrase suggests (see fn. 25)—has most probably played a role as well. Moreover, I argue that the conceptualisation of castes and tribes being opposed structured the opposition between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese in Sikkim, as we shall see now.

Hill ‘tribes’ as Nepalese castes

In the Indian censuses from the 1870s, castes were selected as the “fundamental unit of India’s social structure,” and thus they became the basic category used to organise the population counts.⁵⁰ At the same time, the British had difficulties in classifying ‘aboriginals’/‘tribes’ of India.⁵¹ In the census of 1901, Risley (the census superintendent) shared out ethnic groups between categories organised in a caste hierarchy⁵²:

Class I—High Castes:

Brahman
Khas

Class II—Intermediate castes

Gurang [Gurung]
Limbu
Manger
Rajbansi (Koch)

⁴⁸ The problems raised by those terms, especially ‘Nepalese,’ have been discussed by several authors, mainly Chalmers 2003, Hutt 1997, Subba 1992, Shneiderman 2009, Sinha 2006. See also Vandenhelsken 2011.

⁴⁹ 2009: 268 n19.

⁵⁰ Dirks 2001: 49

⁵¹ Middleton 2010: 199.

⁵² *Census of India* 1901, Vol. 1—Ethnographic Appendices: 58. This table is entitled “Social Grouping of the Mongoloid Tract of Assam, Sikkim, Koch-Bihar, and Hill Tippera,” and is presented in the section Hindu.

And Class III–Low castes:

Chakma
 Kami
 Khambu
 Kuki
 Lepcha
 Nama Sudra⁵³

Here Risley regarded ethnic groups as various castes of Nepalese society.⁵⁴ This concept is later expressed by O'Malley: "The majority of the people in the hills are of Mongolian origin, belonging chiefly to various Nepalese castes, but also including a large number of Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans."⁵⁵ The ethnic groups of 'Nepalese origin' are then classified in a separate category than Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans *because* they are considered to be castes. However, although Risley classifies Nepalese ethnic groups as castes, he places "Mongoloid tribes," as, for instance, the Limbus, "outside the Hindu caste system."⁵⁶ As Galanter points out,⁵⁷ the location of the dividing line between "tribals" and "non-tribals" has not always been free from doubt, a doubt linked to a controversy over the extent to which tribal's were "Hindus."⁵⁸ The hierarchical ordering of Nepalese tribes simultaneous to their location outside of Hinduism echoes Ghurye's later view of tribes as "backward Hindus."⁵⁹ Since 1891, tribes were indeed associated with the religious category 'Animism.'⁶⁰ Hinduism "functioned dually as the default classification *and* dominant reference point against which 'aboriginals'

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 59.

⁵⁴ Planning Commission, Government of India, 2008: 191 and Subba 1999: 121.

⁵⁵ 1907: 40.

⁵⁶ *Census of India* 1901, Vol. 1–Ethnographic Appendices: 203. A similar comment is made by S.C. Das: "The Kirata are well known as a tribe of non-Brahmanical people" (1902: 26, third footnote)

⁵⁷ 1984: 150.

⁵⁸ 1984: 150fn135. Kumar 1999 and Xaxa 1999 also discussed the analogous use of the terms in the early censuses.

⁵⁹ 1963: 19, quoted by Galanter 1984: 150fn135. According to Xaxa, Ghurye made his observation "based on highly inadequate data and on the very selective use of the comments and observations of the Census Commissioners" (2008: 76). On the distinction between castes and tribes, see also Bailey 1961.

⁶⁰ Middleton 2010: 200. Xaxa explains how, when criteria to identify tribes started to be defined after 1901, religion was the main of them (tribes were "animist" and then, following "tribal religion"). Other dimensions were gradually added with the terms "hill" and "forest tribes." In 1931, though Hutton (the then census commissioner) referred to tribes as primitive tribes, he also thought that, since tribes were identified according to religion, the tribe-caste distinction could be maintained only on the basis of religion (Xaxa 2008: 3 and 14; see the whole chapter 2).

were negatively determined.”⁶¹ Additionally, since Nepal was a Hindu Kingdom, there was even more reasons—if the situation was not observed too closely—to consider its tribes as Hindus.

A blurred distinction between tribes and Nepalese castes

Simultaneously, it remained unstable for a long time whether a group was placed in the category of caste or tribe.⁶² The ambivalence goes in both directions: in the same text, while Nepalese Brahman are enumerated for Sikkim, Chetris (the Nepalese Kshatriyas) are not; still in the 1931 census, both are enumerated in separate categories, with Chetris often being “Khas returning themselves as Kshatriya.” Finally, under the category “All Tribes” and the sub-category “Tribes of the Himalayas” are listed: Bhutia (of Sikkim, Bhutan, etc.), Brahman (Nepali), Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Jimdar, Kami, Khambu, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Magar, etc.⁶³ This difficulty in differentiating castes from tribes in this region of the Himalayas is not only due to the view of tribes as the negative counterpart of Hinduism, but also to the difference made between Indian and Nepalese castes: the 1911 census understood Nepalese castes to be “tribal and not functional castes,” because their members adopted any kind of occupation.⁶⁴

The pre-eminence of the ‘social’ criterion over the racial category of Mongoloid

Racial criteria, including the racial category of ‘Mongoloid,’ were introduced in the first census of Sikkim; Risley considered Bhutias and

⁶¹ Middleton 2010: 199.

⁶² The list of “official” tribes was set up only later: “The first serious attempt to identify the “primitive tribes” was in the 1931 Census [...] In the 1935 Act for the first time provision was made from some representation for “Backward Tribes” in the reformed Provincial Legislatures, and a list of Backward Tribes was promulgated in 1936 for all of the provinces except Punjab and Bengal [...] In 1950, the President promulgated the list of Scheduled Areas, and the list of Scheduled Tribes” (Galanter 1984: 147-149).

⁶³ *Census of India* 1931, table XII-5 (p. 446). The text defines Nepalese or Nepali groups as “groups of Nepali origin” and includes in this category: Brahmin-Nepali, Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Jimdar, Kami, Khambu, Khas, Khawas, Kisan, Limbu, Mangar, Manjhi, Murmi, Newar, Sarki, Sunwar, Tharu and Yakka (p450). Among them, Rai, Limbu and Gurung have been entered as following tribal religions (1931: 384). As for the “castes and tribes” present in Sikkim, they are Bhutia, Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Khambu, Kami, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Murmi, Newar, Sarki and Sunuwar (1931: 492).

⁶⁴ *Census of India* 1911, Vol. 5: 451. This view was supported by O’Malley by his having a Nepalese Brahman groom in his house.

Lepchas to have a “Mongolian origin.”⁶⁵ In the 1901 census, further refining this category, he added the category of Kiranti to the ‘Mongoloids,’ defined in 1891 as a “Nipali family of languages,”⁶⁶ and in 1915 as “a tribal or national group.”⁶⁷ This exemplifies the “confusion of racial-linguistic and cultural criteria in the establishment of the classification.”⁶⁸ However, the ‘social’ criterion—the idea that ethnic groups such as Limbu, Gurung, etc. are castes—preceded the Mongoloid-Aryan racial divide, while ‘Nepalese’ was alternatively a race and a geographical origin.⁶⁹ Although in the 1911 census, castes were no longer classified according to status,⁷⁰ this pattern remained and fixed the representation of the hill’s population for many years.⁷¹

The reification of arbitrary classifications despite changes

In the 1941 census, in which Yeatts regrets the “excessive association of the census with anthropology,” most of the 1931 ‘Hill Tribes’ were not maintained in this category; only Bhutia and Lepcha were. This ‘delisting’ as Hill tribes has become an important issue in claims for the separate state of Gorkhaland in Darjeeling.⁷² It was explained as the result of peoples having declared themselves to be Nepali language speakers, while Nepali is classified as an “Indo Aryan language.” Indeed, the tribes of the Hills were no longer identified according to ethnic belonging, but according to language. The association between race and culture had left its mark. However, with regard to Sikkim, in the 1941 census, the table “Variations in population of selected tribes” (which does not include Brahmans) enumerates Bhutia, Damai, Gurung, Kami, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Newar, Sarki, and Sunuwar.

From 1951, only the newly created categories of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes were enumerated in India. Bhutias and Lepchas were declared to be Scheduled Tribes⁷³ (the Sikkim Bhutias and Lep-

⁶⁵ Risley 1891: 252.

⁶⁶ *Census of India* 1891 - Report: 149. Also in the Census 1901, that identifies three categories of Kiranti: Kiranti (Khambu and Jimdar), Kiranti (Yakha), Kiranti (others), Vol. 1: 343.

⁶⁷ Risley 1915: 463.

⁶⁸ Cohn 1987: 115.

⁶⁹ O’Malley 1907: 43.

⁷⁰ Dirks 2001: 223.

⁷¹ See for instance White 1909: 7-9.

⁷² See, for instance: <http://www.darjeelingtimes.com/news/news/The-locus-stands-of-Darjeeling-District.html>

⁷³ When the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 was published, “four communities (Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa, Yolmo) out of the approximately 20 ethnicities that make up the Gorkha community [in Darjeeling area] were afforded this designation” (Middleton

chas joined the list only in 1978, after the integration of the Kingdom into the Indian Union),⁷⁴ and the Brahman and “Kshatria or Ketri” were declared “non-Backward.” To add to the confusion, in 1951, none of the Sikkimese low castes were included in the list of Scheduled Castes,⁷⁵ but some Scheduled Castes were counted in Sikkim (112 people).⁷⁶ Scheduled Tribes were also enumerated in Sikkim in 1951 (Bhutias and Lepchas, 29,429 people).⁷⁷

Sikkimese languages and religions were also enumerated, and, still today, those data are used to support the conception of the population of Sikkim as being divided between Buddhist, supposedly represented by Bhutias and Lepchas, and Hindus-Nepalese, which in 1961 included Limbus.⁷⁸

Despite their confusion of criteria to divide caste from tribes, the successive censuses finally gave ground to a divide between ‘indigenous’ and ‘immigrants’ in Sikkim as in Darjeeling. As we have seen, in Sikkim, it was both based on the ruling elite view of Nepalese groups as outsiders, on the confusion between castes and tribes, and on the view of every Nepalese groups as Hindus. The first modern institutions, established in the aftermath of Indian independence, reflect this divide. Indian thought and policies (both colonial and post-colonial) were undeniably used as models and borrowed to modernise the state, but Sikkim, as a distinct sovereign country, also integrated its own history, categories of thought and political factions.

2 - ETHNIC LAWS AND POLICIES

Reservations versus democracy

The first law in Sikkim that dealt directly with ethnic groups is probably the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, stating that “no Bhutias and Lepchas are to be allowed to sell, mortgage or sublet any of their lands to any person other than a Bhutia or Lepcha without the express sanction of the Durbar [the Crown].”⁷⁹ This law was based on the Order No.1 of

2010: 57fn1). See the entire part “‘Tribes’ by Law,” Middleton 2010: 223-227 and the Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950:

<http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/subord/rule9a.htm>

⁷⁴ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders, 1978. According to Subba (2012) “[In Sikkim] The same castes were recognized as SCs and the same tribes as STs in Sikkim as those recognized so in 1950s in the hills of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal.”

⁷⁵ See the list in *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 449.

⁷⁶ *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 451.

⁷⁷ *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 451.

⁷⁸ See, for instance Sinha 1975: 10 and Gurung 2011: 76.

⁷⁹ Government of Sikkim, Sikkim Code Vol. 2, Part 1: 4.

1897, which had been announced by the Political Officer John Claude White during the period in which the King of Sikkim was dispossessed of his power as a ruler⁸⁰ and during a period when conflicts of opinion arose between different factions of the ruling elite over the question of Nepalese settlement in Sikkim. Nevertheless, immigrants were eventually allowed to clear forestland and settle in Sikkim provided they paid taxes.⁸¹

The reasoning that gave birth to the law somehow heralded the protection by the state of social groups—tribes and castes—considered endangered, mainly through contact with Hinduism. It also heralded definition of Sikkim citizenship by the length of time one settled in the kingdom rather than by residence. The discussion of Revenue Order No.1 in the Administration Report for Sikkim 1933–34 indeed uses ‘heredity’ as a criterion for differentiating Bhutias and Lepchas from outsiders, and positions them as ‘naturally’ subject to being endangered: “A law prohibiting land alienation by the hereditary State subjects (i.e. Bhutia, Lapcha), in favour of non-hereditary subjects such as Nepalese or domicile plainsmen is in force and acts as a very useful check on the former class, which is poor and improvident, being speedily replaced by the latter, who are more subtle and shrewd.”⁸²

A series of laws, which have been discussed elsewhere,⁸³ reified and institutionalised this ethnic divide in the first half of the 20th century. They stipulated differences in lease terms for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese landlords’ estates (fifteen years for the former, ten for the latter), until landlordism started to be abolished in 1949,⁸⁴ banned Nepalese settlement north of Penlong La and north of Dickchu,⁸⁵ restricted the settlement of Marwaris to three towns in Sikkim (Gangtok, Rangpo and Rhenock),⁸⁶ set differences of taxation for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese farmers (which from 1958 was gradually equalised),⁸⁷ and banned

⁸⁰ Sonam Wangdi 2010.

⁸¹ Sikkim Administration Report 1933–34: 29.

⁸² 1933–34: 28. These words reflect an exact reversal of Risley’s policy to use Nepalese immigration as a tool to weaken Tibetan culture in Sikkim.

⁸³ See for instance Arora 2007, Bentley 2007, Gurung 2011, Hutt 1997, Sinha 1975.

⁸⁴ Rose 1978.

⁸⁵ Sikkim Administrative Report 1909 and Sikkim Administration Report 1930–31. The banning of settlements north of Dickchu was renewed by a proclamation on 30 August 1956, but after local inhabitants expressed worries concerning the ban with regard to Nepalese being employed on farms, Nepalese were granted permits to settle under the control of the Sikkim Durbar (see notification No. 988/LR of 21 July 1958).

⁸⁶ Sikkim Council meeting of 27 October 1908, reinforced in 1913.

⁸⁷ Sikkim Administrative Report 1914–15: 3. Regarding this equalisation, see Proclamation of His Highness Sir Tashi Namgyal of 30 August 1956 (in Moktan 2004: 178) and notification No. 1074/LR of 7 November 1960.

the purchase and bequeathing of property to descendants by women married to non-Sikkim subjects.⁸⁸

Over the course of time, the attitude toward castes changed, towards more ostracism in some cases. For example, while caste matters were judged by a Panchayat appointed by the court until 1935, a notification in 1936 put an end to this practice, enjoining “a strict *laissez-faire* policy in all caste matters not appertaining to the State religion.”⁸⁹ Later, in the 1960s, proposed resolutions to “abolish caste prejudice”⁹⁰ and for reservation of seats in public schools for Scheduled Castes were refused by the Palace representative for the reason that “there is no reasonable ground [...] to assume that any particular section among the Nepalis population is especially backward. Under the circumstances the question of any reservation of seat for any particular caste among the Nepalis population in Sikkim therefore does not arise.”⁹¹

The benefits for the indigenous population granted by the state were depicted as welfare for backward categories: a proposition for the equalisation of free education among the Bhutias, Lepchas and the Nepalese communities (Bhutias and Lepchas having free education up to class VI, whereas the latter only up to class II) was refused, and the longer free education for the former justified by the need to “inculcate the urge for education [to] the Bhutia-Lepcha who are educationally backward.”⁹²

The transformation of ‘hereditary Sikkim subjects’ into a minority to be protected by the state, which paralleled such measures in India, was developed further in a ‘parity system,’ which was implemented by the Constitutional Proclamation of 23 March 1953 (standing for the first Constitution of Sikkim). This arose out of the context of the injustices of landlordism, the decolonisation of India, and the political struggles between the newly formed Sikkim State Congress and Sikkim National Party. This first directly elected state council was composed of twelve elected members, six seats being reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha and six for Nepalese.⁹³

⁸⁸ Notification No. 1155/H of 1962.

⁸⁹ Notification No. 2352 of 1923, No. 3025-175-J of 1935, and No. 2717/J of 1936.

⁹⁰ “[...] For, not only is this evil and hampering the development of the nation as a whole, it is also curse to the Scheduled Caste people.” Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 26 April 1960: 17.

⁹¹ Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 25 April 1960: 13.

⁹² Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 23 April 1960: 11.

⁹³ This system was strongly contested, as discussed by several authors; see among others Grover 1974: 46, Hutt 1997. According to Basnet, this “Proclamation [the Constitutional Proclamation of 23 March 1953] had been drafted by Indians, approved by the Government of India, and the Chogyal had merely been asked to sign it” (1974: 168). Gurung has recently ventured the interesting hypothesis that the parity system was drawn on the model of a scheme framed by the Muslim judge Syed

Related to this, according to B.S. Das,⁹⁴ quotas were provided in public employment, while the fear that this would also bring an increase in the number of jobs for Bhutias and Lepchas was expressed. ‘Parity’ was also applied to scholarships for education—Lepchas, for instance, were provided scholarships to study in schools outside Sikkim⁹⁵—though the difference of treatment for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese in education was still in force in the late 1950s.

The role, on both sides, played by the feeling of ethnic belonging in framing the system should not be underestimated. However, in the political arena, the situation was far more complex than the dichotomised representation that had come into being with the parity system. The intricate relationships of influence and ethnic affiliation cannot be reduced by a superimposition of political and ethnic affiliations, and to a binary division, as has been pointed out by Rose:

Prior to accession to India in 1975, Lepcha and Bhutia kaji and mandal [landowning nobility and their local representatives] families that opposed Nepalese migration and supported the Namgyals against both the British and their Sikkimese ‘favorites’ formed the leadership core of the pro-monarchist, strongly nationalist Sikkim National Party. The descendants of the Khangsapa family [another landowning noble family who supported both the British and the Nepalese immigration], and associated Sikkimese and Nepalese families, maintained an ‘oppositional’ posture to the Court, first in coalition with their old Newari Thikadari [landlords] colleagues in the Sikkim State Congress, and later with a menagerie of other peripheral ‘non-establishment’ groups in the Sikkim National Congress. The Newari Thikadari families and their affiliated Nepalese (not necessarily Newari) families joined the Sikkim State Congress and eventually transformed it into an instrument of their communal interests. A number of other non-Newari

Mahmood of Allahabad in 1896 to provide reservations to Muslims in political institutions (2011: 167). However, no book references are given, and the connection with Sikkim is attributed to the Dewan (Prime Minister and head of the administration) Nari Rustomji. But, though Rustomji was a personal friend to the Sikkim king for a long time, he became Dewan of Sikkim only in April 1954 (see Rustomji, 1987: 37). The parity system was framed during the tenure of the first Dewan of Sikkim, 1949 to 1954, J.S. Lall. It is however right that the contested voting system linked to the parity system was implemented only in 1958 (Royal Proclamation of 16th March 1958).

⁹⁴ 1983: 8. However, I could not find any confirmation on this claim in legal documents.

⁹⁵ Proceedings of the Sikkim Council, 23rd October 1962. It has to be recalled that, in India, quotas in education were made possible by an amendment of the Constitution in 1951 (Dhavan 2008: 8).

Nepalese families, who were not traditionally affiliated with the Thikadaris, have become politically active since 1947.⁹⁶

Interestingly, the Sikkim State Congress, which initiated the democratic move, did not demand an ethnic organisation of the Council. According to C.D. Rai,⁹⁷ who was part of the event, and was one of the persons who wrote the Sikkim State Congress statement of 1947,⁹⁸ the issue was not ethnic representation: “The only communal question the authorities could have in view is probably that existing between the oppressors and the oppressed, the Landlords and the ryots.”⁹⁹ But the following three demands of the party—abolition of landlordism, establishment of a democratic government, and the merger of Sikkim with India¹⁰⁰—were answered by the then ruler by nominating a representative from each of the ‘three communities of Sikkim’ as his secretaries. Thus, political representation of these communities was implemented as an answer to the demand for equity and democracy.¹⁰¹

Rustomji describes the Sikkim ruling elite’s interest “to avert Nepalese predominance in the Council and to enact measures to protect and advance the interests of the minorities.”¹⁰² Tensions arose due to the more qualified Nepalis competing in public employment, and the recognition of Buddhism as the only state religion.¹⁰³ Moreover, using both colonial terminology and functionalist anthropological theories, Rustomji also explains the fear that the “Bhutia-Lepcha communities [...] were in danger of being engulfed by the extraneous influx.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Rose 1990: 66. During the period of colonisation, however, the relationship between the Sikkim ruling elite and the colonial powers seems to have been rather ambiguous and more than merely an opposition.

⁹⁷ Personal communication on 6 Jan. 2011.

⁹⁸ Sikkim State Congress Petition to the Maharaja of Sikkim, 9 Dec. 1947, and “A few facts about Sikkim (1947),” in: Moktan 2004: 106–112.

⁹⁹ “A few facts about Sikkim” in Moktan 2004: 109. The Petition however also mentions, “the object of writing this pamphlet [...] is to air the grievances of the downtrodden ryots (subject people) of Sikkim state consisting of Sikkim Gorkhas, Bhutias and Lepchas.” It later states that the “Maharaja Sir Tashi Namgyal, K.C.S.I., is of Tibetan descent, and so are his personal adherents called Kazis, who formed the majority of the Landlords of Sikkim.”

¹⁰⁰ Grover 1974: 35

¹⁰¹ Later, in 1956, a Council member expressed the idea that the opposition to the parity system was “sacrif[icing] the interest of the original inhabitants of the country in the name of democracy” (Proceedings of the Sikkim Council, 19 May 1956: 3).

¹⁰² Rustomji 1987: 32.

¹⁰³ Rustomji 1987: 32–33.

¹⁰⁴ 1987: 29. See also p. 8–9, where he explains the cultural incompatibility between Tibetans and Nepalese, reminding the similar conception of H.H. Risley.

Shift in the ethnic divide

The question of ethnic belonging has long been related to the question of citizenship in Sikkim, and both of them were linked to indigeneity to various degrees over time. The Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 defined for the first time the conditions that governed the ‘subject hood’ of Sikkimese people.¹⁰⁵ It granted Sikkim subject hood to “persons ordinarily resident in the territory of Sikkim for a period of not less than fifteen years immediately preceding the promulgation”¹⁰⁶ (the ‘cut-off’ year was then July 1946), and referred to Lepchas, Bhutias and Tsong, but not to Nepalese. The 1961 Regulation has been interpreted at that time and by a number of scholars (including by a king’s supporter like Rustomji)¹⁰⁷ as expressing the Sikkimese king’s lack of desire to “forge a common identity in Sikkim” and excluding the Nepalese.¹⁰⁸ In response to complaint for discrimination, all reference to the communities was deleted from the promulgation in 1962.¹⁰⁹ However, the Regulation brought a change in the existing categorisation of Sikkim population by granting subject hood to people domiciled in Sikkim before 1946. The then king’s concern was to stop ongoing immigration.¹¹⁰ Additionally, Hiltz has shown how the ‘invention’ of Sikkim national identity in the 1960s involved bringing out a ‘Mongoloid stock’—that is to say ‘culturally Buddhist and not Indo-Aryan’—from ‘ethnically Nepali.’¹¹¹ The ruling elite popularized the term of “Tibeto-Burman” understood as a “vague sub-tribal category” bringing together the ‘Mongoloid Tribes’ and the Bhutia-Lepchas in order to withstand Indian hegemony.¹¹² We find here another form of the relation between the Sikkimese kingdom and ethnic belonging: in the 17th century, ethnic belonging was defining the boundary of the kingdom; in the 1960s, it provided a base for the construction of nationalism. However, the latter was not constructed on the dividing line between Nepalese and Bhutia-Lepcha, but the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 started to shift this line to another one between ‘tribes-indigenous-ancestral settlers-insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’¹¹³ Though the ‘ethno-racial’ category of

¹⁰⁵ Basnet 1974: 120.

¹⁰⁶ Sikkim Subject Regulation 1961 (amended) in, for instance, Moktan 2004: 181.

¹⁰⁷ Hiltz 2003: 175, fn30.

¹⁰⁸ Thapa 2002: 59. See also Datta Ray 1980: 105 and Sinha 1975: 87 on this question.

¹⁰⁹ Rao 1972: 153.

¹¹⁰ Rustomji 1987: 42.

¹¹¹ Hiltz 2003: 73-74.

¹¹² Hiltz 2003: 74-75.

¹¹³ According to Gurung, the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 was also questionable because it based the registration of names on the Land Survey Report of 1950-51; “Thus only those who has landed property were considered eligible to be registered as

‘Mongoloid’ was clearly borrowed from the colonial thought,¹¹⁴ the understanding of tribes as original inhabitants or indigenous people has been expressed since a long time in India through vernacular categories,¹¹⁵ and, in Sikkim, both provided a base for the attribution of ‘citizenship’ (more precisely: subject hood).¹¹⁶

In 1975, Sikkim was annexed by India and became a state of the Indian Union. While it was not included in either the Fifth or Sixth Schedule, article 371F was added to the Constitution guaranteeing, among other special provisions for Sikkim, that “all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or repealed by a competent legislature or other competent authority.”¹¹⁷ As far as citizenship is concerned, the problem of people having been ‘left out’ from citizenship in 1961 was maintained after the integration of Sikkim within India as, according to the Sikkim Citizenship Order 1975, the Indian citizenship was granted to persons recognized as a Sikkim Subject by the 1961 regulation.¹¹⁸

The ‘Indian reservation system’ was also implemented in Sikkim since 1978. This system of ‘compensatory discrimination’¹¹⁹ provides quotas in public employment, education, and states legislative assemblies to several categories: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other

Sikkim Subjects while the ordinary peasants without any substantial landed property in 1936 [1946?] were left out” (2011: 171). It is not mentioned if this was still the case for the revised Regulation of 1962. In the case it was, the Regulation then produced another dividing line according to land ownership between insiders-land owners and outsiders-land tenants.

¹¹⁴ See Hiltz’s informants’ statements in this regards, who differentiate on one side ‘Mongoloid’ from Tibetans on one hand, and from other Nepalese on the other, just as the colonial census commissioners did (2003: 74, fn24).

¹¹⁵ See for instance Xaxa 1999.

¹¹⁶ This question has been analysed elsewhere in anthropology, notably the process of selecting one item supposedly representative of a new group to create social unity and a new political space (see among others Porqueres I Gené 2001). The relations between indigeneity and citizenship and/or nationalism are complex ones, varying from their opposition to their assimilation according to places and historical contexts. The equation of indigeneity and citizenship that the kings of Sikkim attempted to construct in the 1960s represents a particularity in the Indian context where ‘indigenous/tribes’ were for long at the margin of the society.

¹¹⁷ Article 371f of the Constitution of India.

¹¹⁸ This problem has been recently revived by the Sikkim government’s proposal to issue a new residential card (see Sonam Wangdi 2011; for a historical outline of this question, see Gurung 2011: 174-176). According to Gurung, part of the problem is due to the fact that, though the people ‘left out’ from the citizenship registration in 1975 were granted Indian citizenship in 1989, the mandatory clauses of the 1961 Regulation were not obliterated (*op. cit.* 175).

¹¹⁹ Galanter 1984.

and Most Backward Classes, and women. In 1978, Kami, Damai Majhi and Sarkhi were recognized as Scheduled Castes by the Indian central government and the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim were included in the national list of Scheduled Tribes.¹²⁰ However, various groups were included in the category of Bhutia that were not considered as such by Sikkimese Bhutias, but by the colonial administrators and ethnologists, like the Tibetans and Sherpas.¹²¹ Despite this fact, the reservation system isolated the former rulers' groups—defining them as 'backward,' 'primitive' and as a minority¹²²—in a distinct category, to which special benefits were granted. Though the Sikkimese aristocracy, for instance, fell down from the status of ruling elite to the one of primitive and backward tribe, their special protection by the new state reified the group's boundaries, and provided it with concrete benefits. Additionally, the 'Nepalese' still had seats reserved in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. The dividing line between Bhutia-Lepchas and Nepalese was then institutionalised again.

The category of 'Mongoloid' did not disappear, and was given a new form and strength from 1979 onwards. Until 1994, those two interconnected set of categorisation—i.e. Bhutia-Lepchas contra Nepalese, and Bhutia-Lepcha / 'Mongoloid' / 'General'—co-existed at different levels. In the frame of the reservation system, in 1979, while Sikkim was under Presidential Rule after a split in the ruling party, the parity system was annulled and replaced by a new formula of reserved seats.¹²³ The reservation of seats for Nepalese was ended and, in the thirty-two-seat assembly, twelve seats were reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha, one for the Sangha, and two for Scheduled Castes; seventeen were classified as 'general.'¹²⁴ This triggered great tension in the state, and a member of an opposition party declared that reserving seats for the "B-L" (Bhutia-Lepcha) and for the 'Sangha' (representative of the Sikkimese Buddhist monasteries) "without making a corresponding reservation for Sikkimese of Nepali origin is violative of the right to equality" and was therefore anti-constitutional; the case was raised to the Supreme Court.¹²⁵ The non-reserved seats in the assembly were

¹²⁰ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders, 1978.

¹²¹ See http://www.sikkimgovtwelfare.org/links/sc_st_obc_mbc.htm

¹²² These criteria were selected by the Lokur Committee for revising the list of the Scheduled Tribes in 1964, and included in the Tribal policy, although the bill of this Committee was withdrawn (Department of Information and Public Relations 2008).

¹²³ Thapa 2002: 4.

¹²⁴ Thapa 2002: 74.

¹²⁵ R.C. Poudyal And Anr. Etc. Etc vs Union Of India And Ors. Etc. on 10 February 1993: <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/745161/>. The Supreme Court decided in

now labelled “General” and opened to all, that is to say including to ‘plainsmen.’ The latter referred both to the traders who had settled in Sikkim in the nineteenth century and newcomers who had arrived since the merger of Sikkim with India. Political debates began to describe these ‘plains people’ as new outsiders, with their ‘influx’ endangering the ancient inhabitants. A ‘son of the soil’ policy influenced a quest for a dividing line between outsiders and ‘indigenous;’ the latter now including ‘Sikkimese Nepalese.’ This category of Sikkimese Nepalese reflects the form taken in Sikkim by the claim raised by Indian Nepalese in general for recognition of both their Indian citizenship and their distinct identity.¹²⁶

From the 1980s, the category of Nepalese was gradually divided into two parts at the administrative and political levels: the ‘Mongoloid’ on one side, the high castes and the Newars on the other. The strength taken in Nepal during the same period by the *janajati* movement, which emphasized and politicized a division between high castes and tribes, had an important influence in Sikkim.¹²⁷ The Second Backward Commission, the ‘Mandal Commission,’¹²⁸ was also instrumental in this split. It visited Sikkim in 1980, and recommended nine groups to be included in the category of ‘Backward Classes’: the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Tamang, Sunuwar, Tsong, and Yakthumba (Limbu, Tsong and Yakthumba have been since then declared as being the same group).¹²⁹ Those are the groups commonly regarded as ‘Mongoloid,’ and the recommendations of the Mandal Commission finally equated this ethno-racial category to the administrative category of OBC. This is shown by the then opposition in Sikkim of the OBC to the “NBC,” i.e. the Newar-Bahun-Chetri. The latter was only officially enacted in 2003 (see below), but it was widely used in political discourses until then. The opposition between OBC and NBC highlights the equation of administrative categories to ethnic groups in political representations.¹³⁰ The category of NBC was even distinguished from the OBC with regard to race, as the NBC were labelled “Aryans.”¹³¹

1993 that Bhutia-Lepcha and Sangha reservations were valid. On this subject, see also, among others, Arora 2006: 4065 and n. 16, Bentley 2007, Kazi 1993.

¹²⁶ See in this regard Chalmers 2003, Golay 2006, Hutt 1997.

¹²⁷ See Hangen 2010, Subba 2012 and 1999.

¹²⁸ Regarding the task of this commission in India and the controversy it triggered, see Srinivas 1996: xxvii-xxxiv.

¹²⁹ With regard to this paragraph, see Thapa 2002 chapter 4, Phadnis 1980, Chakravarti 1994, B.S. Das 1983, and Datta-Ray 1980.

¹³⁰ It is interesting to note that, in Nepal, the Newar were included within the *janajati*, and not associated with the Bahun and Chetri, though it remains a controversial issue (Gellner 2012). The history of the Newar in Sikkim, notably as landlords during the

When V.P. Singh's government decided to implement the recommendations all over India in 1990,¹³² the Sikkim state government adopted a resolution rejecting their implementation in Sikkim because they did not cover all the Nepalese, and excluded Yogis and Sanyasi, the high castes Bahun and Chetris, as well as the Newars.¹³³ The political opponent to the then Chief Minister campaigned for the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and won the election in 1994 with the support of the recommended OBC. The victory of the new government, still ruling today, was viewed as a victory of the 'Mongoloid' over the high castes as well as over the former ruling party. Through their reclassification by the state and their insertion within a pre-existing pattern of representations linked to political struggles, the OBC had become a political force that defeated the government that had ruled almost continuously since 1979. From 1994, the recommendations of the Mandal Commission were gradually implemented as follows:

- 2nd June, 1994, recognition as OBC by the Sikkim government of the Bhujel, Gurung, Limboo, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamangs; added to the central list of OBC on 25th May 1995;
- 6th December, 1999, addition to the central list of OBC of the Sanyasi and Thami; Jogi added on 4th April 2000;¹³⁴
- 2000: addition of the Thami, Yogi and Dewan to the list of OBC by the Sikkim government (Gazette No.94 dated 11th April, 2001).

monarchy, and their place in society, especially their large representation in the state administration (Gurung 2011: 240), led to their association to high castes.

¹³¹ See Thapa 2002, and Gurung 2011. This racial division was also found in the frame of the *janajati* movement in Nepal and the Nepali writer Gopal Gurung's book *Hidden Facts in Nepalese Politics* (1985, published by the author) played a key role in those events in Sikkim. The book, born of the particularly political situation in Nepal in those years (the "Panchayat Rule"), also describes and strongly contests the domination of high castes over the "tribes" or "nations," and explains it in terms of racial difference between "Aryans" and "Mongoloids." The book was widely spread in Sikkim during the 1994 political campaign (see also Gurung 2011: 243), and Gurungs and Bhutias I interviewed have stated, "It made us understand that we were outside the caste system" (about Gopal Gurung's life, political activities and writings, see Hangen 2010).

¹³² See Sharma 2005, Dhavan 2008: 10, Hasan 2010.

¹³³ Information and Public Relations Department 2003: 6, and *Sikkim Express* 12–19 September 1990.

¹³⁴ See the Central list of OBC for the state of Sikkim ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/sikkim.pdf, <http://sikkimsocialwelfare.org/General/Welfare/StateCommBckWrdCl.aspx> and the Sikkim Government Gazettes, http://sikkim.gov.in/asp/Miscc/sikkim_govtgazettes/GAZ/GAZ2011/index.htm

Among those groups, Limbu and Tamang have been recognized as ST in 2003 (see below). As regards OBC, the Sikkim government has later declared part of them as “Most Backward Classes” (MBC), and declared other groups as OBC. This has not been yet enacted by the central government. Sikkim ethnic groups have thus different statuses according to the state and the central governments, as shows table 1.

The divide between “Mongoloids” and “Aryans,” then institutionalised by new categories for reservations (or soon to be), interacted with another one in the frame of employment: the divide between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals.’ The latter was still at the core of tensed debates in Sikkim in 2011. Since 1974, a rule states that priority in public employment is to be given to ‘local,’ and “non-Sikkimese nationals may be appointed only when suitably qualified and experienced Sikkimese nationals are not available.”¹³⁵ The ‘locals’ were the Sikkim Subjects Card holder; their number was increased in 1991 by the issue of Certificate of Identification. These were granted to Sikkim Subject Card holders, direct descendants and spouses of Sikkim Subjects, people who are landowners and resident in Sikkim, people who have an Indian Citizenship Certificate issued under the Sikkim Citizenship Order of 1975, and descendants and spouses of people employed by the Sikkim government before 1969.¹³⁶

In brief, the Mandal Commission triggered a change in the political alliances, and from here, a movement for reclassifications, as we will see now. It did so by bringing the racial divide between ‘Mongoloids’ and ‘Aryans’ to the forefront, a criterion that had been framed by colonial administrators, but had never become a primary organizing tool of population in Sikkim. Paradoxically, while the arbitrarily constructed category of ‘Nepalese’ was dismantled, another criterion for population organisation in colonial times became dominant: that of race. Simultaneously, while the search for falling on the right side of the divide between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals’ continued, it was mitigated by a new project of the government of granting reservations to all the former ‘Nepalese’ groups.

From backwardness to tribalism

A no-confidence motion caused the government to fall on 17 May 1994, whereupon the recommendations of the Mandal Commission were implemented by the next government on 2 June 1994. In his open-

¹³⁵ Rule 4(4) of the Sikkim Government Establishment Rule 1974, confirmed by a Supreme Court decision in 1994. The Rule 4(4) is protected by the article 371f of the Constitution.

¹³⁶ Sikkim Government Gazette, 8th December 1995, No. 198.

ing address to the Assembly, the Chief Minister elected in November 1994 (and still governing today), Mr Chamling, revealed his concept of the OBC category as being a bridge towards the ST category.¹³⁷ He also expressed the idea that the inclusion of Sikkim as member of the North-Eastern Council¹³⁸ will facilitate the process of providing “all possible facilities hitherto peculiar to Tribals of the state” to current OBCs. According to Sinha,¹³⁹ Chamling here referred to the “tribal states,” where more than half of their population is recognized by the Union Government as Scheduled Tribes. The Indian Constitution provides two possibilities for areas where there is a preponderance of tribal population: the Tribal Areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (which guarantees special political, judicial and financial schemes for tribal majority areas), and the Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution (that mainly allows protective and economic measures for tribal people). The “Tribal Areas” are from the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.¹⁴⁰ In 2010, Chamling, on his side, expressed the wish that all Sikkim subject certificate holders are given tribal status in order to be exempted from income tax.¹⁴¹ In November 1994, he had additionally linked the recognition of distinct cultures to the reclassification of the OBC as ST.¹⁴²

The demands from certain former Nepalese groups for inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribes was not new. As early as November 1990, Tamangs, Rais and Limbus had brought forward such a demand. These groups based their demands on the fact that historically and culturally they had more in common with Bhutias and Lepchas, and that their identity was separate and distinct from the rest of the other Nepalese communities.¹⁴³ This was welcomed by a number of Bhutia-Lepcha political organisations that stressed “distinct identity and unity among all hill tribes” and supported the Limbus’s demand for ST.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Proceedings of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, first session, fifth assembly, 29 December 1994: 14.

¹³⁸ The nodal agency for the economic and social development of the North Eastern Region which consists of the eight States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

¹³⁹ 2006: 10.

¹⁴⁰ For more details on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, see Galanter 1984: 148 fn121, and Roy Burman 2006.

¹⁴¹ <http://www.in.com/news/current-affairs/fullstory-chamling-seeks-tribal-status-for-sikkimese-people-12398655-in-1.html>

¹⁴² *Op. cit.* The declaration of the Tamangs, Rais, Gurungs, Mangars, Sherpas and Newar languages as official languages of the Sikkim state was enacted in 1995.

¹⁴³ *Sikkim Express* 5 November 1990.

¹⁴⁴ *Sikkim Express* 5 November 1990.

Simultaneously, in the 1990s, an important movement of ethnic revival developed among the Bhutias and Lepchas.¹⁴⁵

Chamling government's programme expressed in 1994 was gradually implemented. In 1995, reserved seats for OBC were instated in public employment, educational institutions for professional courses, Panchayat and municipality boards. Sikkim joined the North Eastern Council in 1998. As we have already seen, in 2000, the Sikkim state added Thami, Yogi and Dewan to the list of OBC. The Government of India also added these communities to the central list of OBC, with the exception of Dewan.¹⁴⁶ In 2003, Limbu and Tamang, previously OBC, were granted ST status, and other OBC were declared 'Most Backward Classes' by the Sikkim state government (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar and Thami). In brief, all of these groups have been included in the central list of OBC, except Dewan, and in addition to Sanyasi.

Still in 2003, pursuing the project of having all the Nepalese groups included in reserved categories, the high castes Bahun and Chetri, as well as the Newars and Sanyasi, were declared OBC by the Sikkim government.¹⁴⁷ A year later, a commission was set up to examine the feasibility of including the then "MBC" into the Scheduled Tribes category, and the state OBC into the central list of OBC.

Tables 2: lists of Sikkim OBC and MBC

List of Sikkim OBC according to the Central Government	List of MBC according to Sikkim state	List of OBC according to Sikkim state
Bhujel, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar, Sanyasi, Thami, Jogi	Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar, Thami, Jogi	Newar, Bahun, Chetri, Sanyasi

Another census was published by the government of Sikkim in 2006, based on "social groups" (Scheduled Castes, Tribes, etc.) and "commu-

¹⁴⁵ Balikci 2002, see also in this regard, Thapa 2002.

¹⁴⁶ See the central list of OBC: <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/backward-classes/index.html>

¹⁴⁷ Notification No. 54/SWD/WD dated 17 Sept. 2003.

nities” (Limbu, Tamang, etc.).¹⁴⁸ Since “The Indian census enumerates for mother tongue but not for ethnicity,”¹⁴⁹ the 2006 Sikkim census broke with Indian current practices in enumerating for ethnic groups. This accompanied the support for affirmation of distinct ethnic identities, that itself accompanied the process of reclassification.

Interestingly, the Sikkim state pattern of reservations was applied to educational institutions at post-matriculation level outside the state of Sikkim, with 21% reserved on merit, 33% for Scheduled Tribes, 21% for Most Backward Classes, 14% for Other Backward Classes, 6% for Scheduled Castes, and 5% for “Others” (only for locals with Sikkim Subject Certificate/ Certificate of Identification).¹⁵⁰

With regard to reserved places in state public employment, as approved by the Governor of Sikkim, until today (2009) these have been divided as follows: Bhutia-Lepcha 22%; SC 7%; MBC as declared by the Sikkim state 21%; OBC 21%; and ST (Limbu-Tamang) 14%.¹⁵¹ However, the Sikkim state categories of OBC (Bahun, Chetri, Newars and Sanyasi) and MBC (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar and Thami) are not yet recognised as such by the central government, and reserved places in public employment according to the central scheme are only provided in other states of India based on the pre-2003 pattern (according to which the Sikkim state MBC are on the central state list of OBC, and the Sikkim state OBC are ‘General’ according to the central state, and do not benefit from any quotas in the rest of India).

In other parts of India, violent debates started in 2005 over the introduction of reserved seats in private educational institutions and central government educational institutions for OBC.¹⁵² The question of reserved seats for the Limbu and Tamang in the Sikkim legislative assembly was raised and strongly opposed by the Bhutia-Lepcha, who were reluctant to share their seats with the new ST. Constitutional experts advised that, in accordance with the old Sikkim laws, seats in the assembly be reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha as a special category, and not for the ST and thus not for the Limbu and Tamang.¹⁵³ It is since then discussed whether additional reserved seats should be created for the new ST in the Legislative assembly without changing the number of seats, or the size of the assembly be increased.

¹⁴⁸ Department of Economics, Statistics Monitoring and Evaluation 2006.

¹⁴⁹ Turin 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Gazette No. 251, 26 June 2004.

¹⁵¹ Gazette No. 322, 27 August 2009

¹⁵² See Sharma 2005, Hasan 2010.

¹⁵³ See Gurung 2011: 296-300. The same experts decided that the percentage of reserved seats in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim could exceed 50% without “affecting the provision of the article 14 of the Constitution” (*Ibid.*).

Conclusion

The categories of the colonial censuses developed over the years were instrumental in designing the categories ‘Nepalese,’ ‘Aryans,’ ‘Mongoloid,’ etc. and, more particularly, in dividing the ‘Nepalese’ from the Bhutia-Lepcha, and arbitrarily selecting caste as the central organising criterion. The importance given to caste in the early censuses appears to have led to the notion of groups identified as ‘Mongoloid’ or Kirant as being sub-castes of the Nepalese. In Sikkim, this representation of the population combined with that of the ruling elite opposed to more Nepalese immigration. One of the results has been to shift the Limbus from the indigenous category to that of immigrants. These categories determined the first ‘modern’ policies and institutions of Sikkim, providing a frame to answer claims for more democracy in terms of reservations for local people.

The invention of Sikkim national identity in the 1960s, and then the Mandal Commission recommendations in the 1980s led to a shift in the dividing line of the ethnic categories, which came to lie between the racial categories of ‘Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid.’ The Mandal Commission recommendations also indirectly led to equating the proposed ‘Backward Classes’ to the ‘Mongoloid’ as viewed since colonial time; this greatly contributed to their development into a powerful political force, and enabled them to form the government in 1994. A new social hierarchy was thus created within which the position of the ancient Bhutia-Lepcha nobility was weakened, the high status groups of Newar-Bahun-Chetri were politically isolated, and the ‘Mongoloid’ (or ‘Kirant’) were given a place proportional to their numbers in Sikkim. It also triggered demands for reclassifications of various groups as ‘backward’ or ‘tribal,’ claims that were also part of the political program of the state government since 1994. The ‘Mongoloid’ based their claims on their cultural closeness to Bhutia-Lepchas, who already had the Scheduled Tribes status that they were coveting.

This history of classifications in Sikkim shows that the dichotomy Bhutia-Lepcha versus ‘Nepalese’ has never been the only form of categorisation of the Sikkim population. However, this pattern is often the main one monopolized to analyse Sikkim political and social relations in scholarly literature. It has been shown here that this pattern was historically constructed, and that, paraphrasing Brubaker,¹⁵⁴ it is a matter of ethno-political practice, but not an analytical tool. This dichotomy always cohabited with others categorisations—like the so-called ‘Mongoloids’ versus ‘Aryans,’ which was given a political colouring by the king of Sikkim in the 1960s in the frame of construction of Sikkim na-

¹⁵⁴ 2004.

tional identity—and was brought to the front scene to various degrees over time. The cancellation of the ‘Nepalese’ seats in the Sikkim legislative assembly, the political struggle between the previous and the current Chief Ministers, the Mandal Commission, and the political debates in Nepal (especially the *janajati* movement) from the 1980s combined to give precedence to the ‘Mongoloids’ versus ‘Aryans’ pattern of representation of Sikkim population. This shift enabled the election of the current government, and was instrumental in the starting of the process of reclassification of Sikkim ethnic groups.

More recently, the history of ethnic categories in Sikkim took another turn with the CRESP report, which introduced a number of new concepts, like decentralisation and the criteria of harmony with nature, which have been borrowed from the policy and agendas of the United Nations. In doing so, it attempted to replace the former divides of Sikkimese society, and inserted Sikkimese ethnic categories in a “new global political space”¹⁵⁵ by linking them to indigenous issues. Further studies will show if and how these new concepts have been included, rejected or transformed by the various ethnic groups in Sikkim, and thus, whether or how they have become part of discourses claiming distinct ethnic identities and equal rights.

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¹⁵⁵ Karlsson 2003: 404.

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