

## **Zombie Slayers in a “Hidden Valley” (*sbas yul*): Sacred Geography and Political Organisation in the Nepal-Tibet Borderland<sup>1</sup>**

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The Himalaya, with its high peaks and deep valleys, served for centuries as natural geographical frontier and boundary between the kingdoms and states of South Asia it straddles. Given the strategic advantage of controlling that high ground, it is little wonder that the Himalaya has throughout history witnessed countless skirmishes between neighbouring states that sought such strategic advantage. The interest in this mountain range, of course, was not restricted to matters of defence. North-south trade routes criss-crossed the Himalayan range, connecting the Tibetan plateau to the rest of the Indian subcontinent, ensuring lucrative tax revenues for those who controlled these economic lifelines. In the era of European colonialism in the “long” 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Himalaya became embroiled in what has been called the “Great Game” between the British and Russian empires, who sought to expand their respective commercial and imperial interests in the region. Due to its pristine environment, awe-inspiring mountains, and the remoteness of its valleys, the Himalaya was also the well-spring of countless legends, myths and romantic imaginings, engendering the sacralisation of the landscape that had served as a source of religious inspiration for peoples living both in its vicinity and beyond. Hence, despite its remoteness – or because of it – warfare, pilgrimages, trade and the search for viable areas of settlement have been some of the key factors contributing to the migratory process and interest in the area.

Largely because they lay in the frontier zone, enclaves of Tibetan settlements located deep in the numerous Himalayan valleys were often on the outer fringes of state influence, enjoying a significant degree of local autonomy until processes of state consolidation intensified in the last century or so, as exemplified by the case of Nepal. A particular body of Tibetan religious literature suggests that located in the vast mountain range

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a larger PhD project on the pursuit of the “good life” in the Langtang Valley, northern Nepal, where fieldwork was conducted from July 2001 to August 2002. I acknowledge with gratitude financial support from the following: Royal Anthropological Institute’s Emslie Horniman Scholarship; University of London Central Research Grant; and SOAS Additional Fieldwork Award. I wish to thank Prof. JDY Peel, as well as the editors and reviewers of EBHR, especially Prof. András Höfer, for their helpful comments and suggestions in the course of writing this article.

were a number of sacred beyul (*sbas yul*<sup>2</sup>), ‘hidden valleys’, where the Tibetan royal courts and their subjects might seek refuge when their societies faced the prospect of dissolution as a result of external threats. Contemporary scholars have identified some of these beyul, and have conducted a number of important ethnographic and historical studies (e.g. Aris 1975; Ehrhard 1997; Childs 1998, 1999; Diemberger 1991, 1996, 1997; Orofino 1991). Apart from enriching our ethnographic knowledge of these locales and their inhabitants, some of this research (e.g. Childs 2000, 2001; Diemberger 1997) further provides us with insights into patterns of trans-Himalayan migration as well as the processes through which these locales had been incorporated into nascent nation-states. In these remote communities, unique systems of social and political organisation evolved, often as the result of the articulation of specific local historical realities within the broader socio-cultural context of elements of Tibetan and Indic origin (cf. Clarke 1983: 25). A major volume of essays (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996) on the history and social meaning of mountain cults in Tibet and the Himalaya has provided a crucial impetus to the study of political organisation in these mountain communities, effectively combining textual analysis and ethnographic method.

Despite such effort, there is a need for much more detailed social-historical research into the political systems of these enclaves, many of which are located in the Nepal-Tibet borderlands (Ramble 1997: 339-340), not least because it will serve to illuminate present-day patterns of domination, status valuation and local political processes. More specifically, studies into the various beyul thus far do not sufficiently explore the relation between the beyul concept and the historical formation of specific social and political structures. This article sets in part out to address these concerns in Himalayan research by presenting an analysis of the indigenous form of political authority and structure in the Langtang Valley, one of the significant beyuls identified in the Tibetan sources. None of the few previous cursory studies on the Langtang valley have included the concept of beyul in their accounts, nor do they provide any historical account of the formation of Langtang’s indigenous social and political organisation. This article argues that the notion of sacred geography not only forms an important part of social memory and discourse in Langtang, but also that the beyul concept had in Langtang’s history served an ideological function in relation to the development of its socio-political structure. Any attempt to understand the social practices of the inhabitants of Himalayan enclaves such as the Langtang valley must take into account wider geohistorical and geopolitical realities, as van Spengen (2000) has so admirably shown in his analysis of the trading practices of the Nyishangpa in the Manang district of Nepal. This

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<sup>2</sup> Italicized terms and names are given in correct transliteration or transcription. The transliteration of Tibetan follows Wylie. Chinese is transcribed according to the Pinyin system.

is one of the key methodological considerations that guide my analysis throughout the article.

### **The setting**

The fieldwork for this research was mainly conducted in the Langtang Village Development Committee (N. *gāũ bikās samiti*), which covers four hamlets totalling 540 inhabitants<sup>3</sup> divided into at least sixteen named patrilineal exogamous clans, living in 109 households. The village is located in the Langtang valley just inside Nepal's present-day border with Tibet. The valley stretches in an east-west orientation for about 22 miles (approx. 35 km), carved out by the westward flow of the Langtang Khola that originates from the glaciers of Langshisa.

Following Hall (1982), I take the "Langtang region" to encompass an area of around 200 square miles that is drained by the Langtang Khola. Geologically, this region falls within the Inner Himalaya, while climatically it is in the transitional zone between the southern monsoon region and the arid deserts of the Tibetan plateau. The Langtang valley itself encompasses several ecological zones, from the relatively fertile subtropical forests at the western entrance of the valley, to the rocky, wind-swept stretches of Himalayan pasture that support herds of bovines and sheep belonging mainly to the valley's inhabitants. With its close proximity to Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, and its enchanting natural scenery, it was incorporated in 1976 into the national park that bears its name. At the town of Syabru Bensi, about a day's walk to the Tibetan border, the valley intersects with an important trade route that has for centuries linked southern Tibet with central Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. Even to this day, just before the Nepalese national festival of Dasain in October, flocks of Tibetan sheep travel along this mountain route to Syabru Bensi to be transported further on to the rest of Nepal.

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth known as "Langtanga".

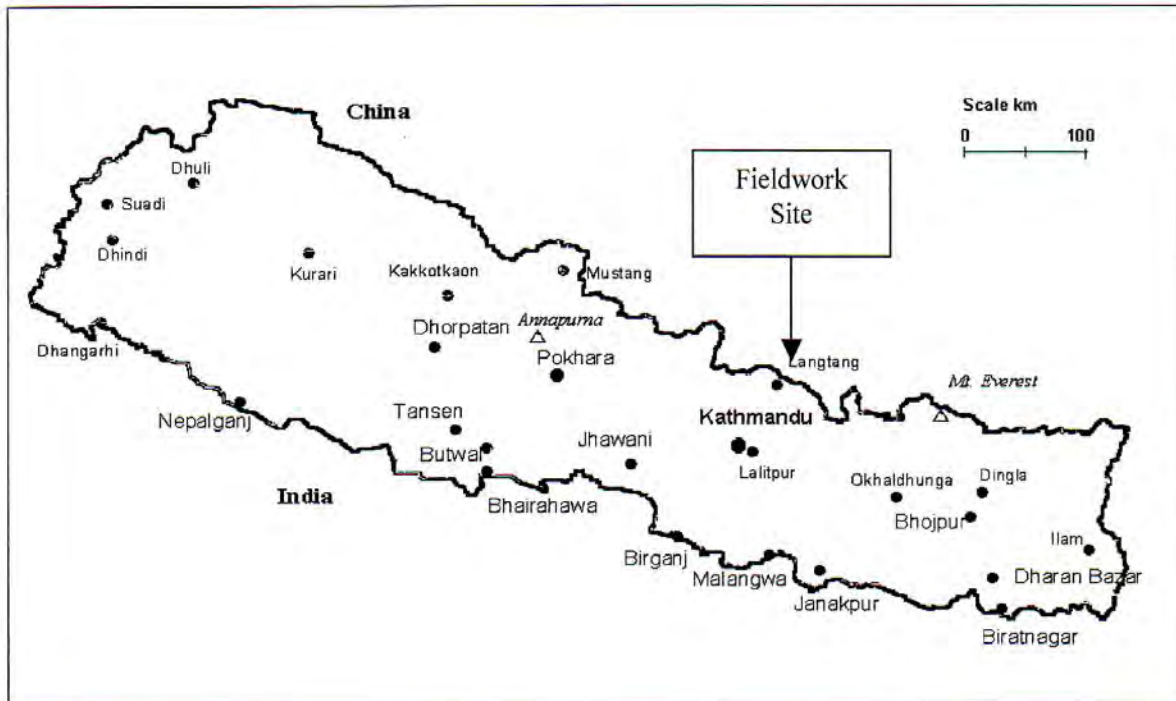


Fig. 1.1: Fieldwork site in Nepal

Before the 1960s, the daily affairs of Langtang village were subjected to minimal intervention by the central government in Kathmandu, except for taxation and in times of war. That state of affairs began to change after the isolationist Rana regime was deposed and Nepal embarked on an overall policy of socio-economic development. Langtang's relative isolation came to an end towards the end of 1962, when the new "panchayat" system heralded a period of intensive development that was underwritten almost wholly by foreign aid, witnessing a burgeoning of government administrative capacity. The construction of new schools and roads went hand in hand with the expansion of the civil service and a growing number of health workers and teachers. In 1970, the Rasuwa District headquarters, which had been located at Trisuli, some five days' walk from Langtang village, was moved to the present location at Dhunche, a mere two days' walk away. With this relocation of the district headquarters, Langtang village began to receive more visits from government officials, and with the panchayat system, villagers could express their demands — for example, for development funds — directly to the district through their village headman, the *pradhan pancha*, who sat on the district council (cf. Cox 1989: 15; see also Campbell 1997). By 1973, the incorporation of Langtang into the Nepalese state was more or less complete, when the government established a primary school and a police station in the village, as well as an army camp on the village outskirts in the light of the gazetting of Langtang National Park.

### **Sacred Geography: Langtang as Beyul ('Hidden Land')**

Given that Langtang Valley is today one of the most popular trekking destinations in Nepal, it might stretch one's imagination to describe the valley as a "hidden land". Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, the concept of beyul had aroused much interest and speculation amongst Tibetans, especially the adherents of the Nyingmapa (*rnying ma pa*), and inspired many an adventure and legend. The founder of the Chyangter (*byang gter*) branch of the Nyingmapa, Renzin Gokyi Demthruchen (*rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem phru can*, 1337-1408), a famous tertön (*gter ston*, 'treasure finder') of teachings hidden throughout the Himalaya by the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava, is reputed to be the most influential figure contributing to the popularity of the beyul idea, after allegedly having discovered texts detailing various hidden lands (Childs 1999: 127-128). What does the concept of beyul (*sbas yul*) entail?

*Sbas yul* are valleys situated in the southern slopes of the Himalaya. According to legend, they were concealed by Padmasambhava so that they could be used as sanctuaries during times of need. The hidden land is both a refuge for meritorious individuals from all strata of Tibetan society during a time of moral and political disintegration, as well as a place for the spiritually inclined ... As a refuge from social and political strife, it is a settlement destination, a fertile landscape where society can function *with a king as a legitimate ruler*, and where an *idealised version of Tibetan society* can be sustained remote from the deteriorating conditions of Tibet (Childs 1999: 128, italics mine).

The conceptualisation of beyul therefore implied an ideal model of Tibetan political organisation, to be replicated in the hidden valley where the descendants of Tibetan kings and other Tibetans fled when facing the threat of social disintegration due to either civil strife or warfare. It is perhaps within this context that we can begin to understand the interest that was aroused in beyul writing, the efforts undertaken to find them, as well as certain historical waves of Tibetan migration throughout the southern Himalaya. As pointed out above, interest in, and the search for, the various beyuls took on impetus in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. As various writers have highlighted, this was largely in response to the perceived and actual threats to the integrity of various Tibetan kingdoms, whether from invading Mongols, Uigurs, or rival Tibetan kingdoms (Ehrhard 1997; Childs 1999). In the literature, there is a consensus that the legitimate ruler of a hidden valley must be member of the royal lineage associated with King Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde brtsan*), "a tantric who is blessed and who is from the

unbroken lineage of the *mnga' bdag* kings themselves..." (*gnam zla gnas yig*: 17b, quoted in Childs 1999: 144)<sup>4</sup>.

Listed among the locations in the beyul literature was a place called Dagam Namgo (*zla gam gnam sgo*), or 'Heavenly Gate of Half-Moon Form'. In the biography of another tertön, Renzin Nyida Longse (*rig 'dzin nyi zla klong gsal*, died 1695), is an account of the protagonist's discovery of beyul Dagam Namgo in the year 1680:

Finally he set off on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the year of the monkey, offering prayers of supplication to the Master Guru U-rgyan [i.e., Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche]. Even though numerous illusions cropped up along the way he strode on further without giving way to doubt, and [so] he came to the centre of the 'sacred place'. How he saw the upper and lower caves where Padmasambhava practiced, [as well as] the small [cave] of his practice, the foot impressions, the impressions of bodily parts etc., together with many miraculous signs—[this all] becomes clear in a separate history (quoted in Ehrhard 1997: 337).

In relation to this article's main subject matter, a momentous event took place: as Renzin Nyida Longse was starting on his journey to search for the beyul, he met a Domari [i.e. a person of the Domar (*rdo dmar*) clan] and his son. According to Ehrhard, this son was Domar Minyu Dorje (*mi 'gyur rdo rje*, born 1675), who later became a prolific writer, his works including several important texts concerning Dagam Namgo. But where exactly was it located? Based on comparison with the geographical evidence presented in various texts, Minyu Dorje concluded that it must be located in the valley of Langtang (*glang 'phrang*). To further bolster his argument, he recounted a legend relating to the discovery of Langtang, which was interpreted as the 'opening of the gate to the sacred place' (*gnas sgo 'byed pa*):

Now for the origin of what is called *gLang-'phrang* a bull is said to have been killed once in 'Bri-bstim during the consecration feast for the erection of a stūpa of gold and silver by one patron. In the evening the bull fled to that secret land by reason of his supernatural knowledge. The valley was discovered by virtue of the fact that the owner followed its trail; for this reason [the valley] is known under the name Bull Passage—so it is said in the tales of the people of old (quoted in Ehrhard 1997: 345).

To Minyu Dorje, Langtang was unlike any other beyul:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michael Aris (1990: 93-94): "[a]ll the Buddhist kingdoms founded at different periods in the Himalayas traced their descent from, and founded their legitimacy upon, the early royal dynasty of Tibet."

It is even more excellent than all the other secure hidden lands that have been described previously. It is easily reached and lies near Tibet. In other treasure mines, [however], it is not dealt with in detail. [If it is asked] why, [the answer is] because it is a secret and protected area... In short, a hidden land is a land where a person flees to in the face of terrifying enemy troops. Its characteristic is that of a fully secure place. If, therefore, Yol-mo [present-day Helambu, an area just south of the Langtang valley] and La-phyi for example, are termed 'hidden lands', what is more to be said [of a land] that surpasses them in matters of security? (quoted in Ehrhard 1997: 342, 346).

From the above we can see that Langtang/Zla-gam gnam-sgo was more highly estimated by Minyu Dorje than any other beyul. Further, as Ehrhard has convincingly argued, Minyu Dorje thought that Langtang beyul is the centre of a sacred space arranged in the sacred *maṅḍala* form.

There is a dearth of material on the history of Langtang in its early days of settlement. In order to reconstruct the early political organisation of the place, I will rely on comparative historical and ethnographic material, as well as oral accounts provided by the Langtangas themselves. Given that the Langtang valley was located in the frontier region that branched just east of the important north-south trade route between the southern Tibetan town of Kyirong and central Nepal, and that this particular region of the Himalaya had witnessed numerous wars between various Nepalese kingdoms and the Tibetan and Chinese armies (Regmi, D.R. 1961: 167-230; Shaha 1990; Stiller 1995; Petech 1973; Uprety 1998: 32-65), Langtangas' formal political allegiance would have shifted as much as the fluid state borders. To the north, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Langtang probably came under the influence of the Gungthang Kingdom, centred at Dzongga, which dominated southern Tibet and its vicinity. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Gungthang kingdom was subdued first by the rival Tibetan polity of Tsang. Later, the Fifth Dalai Lama subsumed the area in 1641 under his rule with the help of his Mongol patrons and made Dzongga the administrative centre of the southern region (Childs 1999: 218-219).

In the south, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nepal witnessed the rise of two strong and ambitious rulers in the persons of Ram Shah of Gorkha, and Pratap Malla of Kathmandu. Sensing that Ram Shah had his sights on the important trade routes to southern Tibet, Pratap Malla, exploiting the internal turmoil that was engulfing Tibet at that time, reacted by launching two military incursions around 1630, capturing the trading towns of Kyirong and Kutu. After the Fifth Dalai Lama had consolidated his rule, he managed to wrest back the two towns, while Kathmandu continued to hold on to the areas right up to the northern border, an area that included the Ghale principalities and the Langtang Valley (Holmberg 1996: 42; Shaha 1990: 29-

30; Regmi 1960: 381-383). The Gorkhalis, under the leadership of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, annexed in 1744 the fertile lands around Nuwakot, just north of Kathmandu, thus securing the trade route that ran from Kathmandu through Rasuwa Garhi to Kyirong in Tibet, forcing Jayaprakash Malla, the ruler of Kathmandu at that time, to sign a pact with the Gorkhalis in January 1757 to share its revenue from its trade with Tibet. By this time, the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty in China had already gained a firm foothold in Tibetan politics, and kept a Resident (or Amban) in Lhasa exerting great influence over the Dalai Lama. In 1791, after a series of disputes over Tibet's refusal to use debased Nepalese coins, the Gorkhalis, having already conquered the Kathmandu Valley, launched an attack across the northern borders. This military incursion provoked the reaction of the Chinese imperial army which swept across the border at Rasuwa Garhi in pursuit of the retreating Gorkha army through Nuwakot to as far south as Betrawati, within a stone's throw of Kathmandu. After the two warring parties had signed a peace agreement, the combined Chinese-Tibetan army retreated, and this was followed by a period of relative peace between Nepal and Tibet that lasted for almost 60 years. The Langtang region witnessed war again when Jang Bahadur Rana, the Prime Minister and de facto ruler of Nepal, decided in 1854 to invade southern Tibet once more with the hope of controlling Kyirong and Kuti. In this particular instance, villages along the invasion route through Rasuwa to the border not only had to supply food, but also conscripts, porters, as well as animals for the Nepalese army (Uprety 1998: 70). Given that Langtang lies just on the border, it is highly likely that Langtangas were also drafted to help in the war effort. In the end, though Jang Bahadur failed to annex the two strategic towns, he managed to force the Tibetan government to pay a significant annual tribute.

According to local oral history, Langtang was caught up in between the imperial designs of the two neighbouring states of Tibet and Nepal, with Langtangas having to pay taxes to whoever was dominant at any particular time. However, an indication of where Langtangas' true loyalty lay in those tumultuous times of border skirmishes and shifting frontiers can be gained from a well-known story. It tells of Langtangas' attempt to resist the invasion of the Nepalese army, resonating with the notion that Langtang as a beyul must be a well-guarded refuge in which an ideal Tibetan society could be sustained. The story speaks of an elderly couple, affectionately referred to as *yibi meme chenpo* ('the illustrious grandmother and grandfather'), staying at Thangshyap, near Langtang village. Their main duty was to guard against any intrusion by outsiders. When the Nepalese army moved up the Langtang valley and tried to subdue the people of the area, the elderly pair turned the slope into a thick sheet of slippery ice. This act prevented the soldiers from reaching the top of the slope, and inflicted considerable casualties on the invaders. When the Nepalese army tried to breach the defence again the next day, the old woman, referring to her aching body due her physical exertions the day before, complained loudly:



“Khasa gyap, dering dün”. She actually meant, “yesterday, [pain in the] back, today [pain in the] front.” But the soldiers misunderstood the old woman as saying, “yesterday, [killed] a hundred, today seven [hundred]<sup>5</sup>.” Afraid of suffering even more casualties, the Nepalese soldiers eventually gave up their military incursion and retreated in panic. In memory of the old couple’s heroic effort, a memorial (*mchod rten*) was constructed just in front of Thangshyap, where villagers would pray once a year, in the fourth Tibetan month, for their continual protection.<sup>6</sup>

### The mukhiya clans

The earliest known political organisation in Langtang was that of the so-called mukhiya (N. *mukhiyā*, ‘headman’) clans. Members of these four clans are believed to have arrived from Kyirong after hearing the news of the discovery of a beyul in Langtang valley. The news allegedly inspired the migration of the first wave of settlers from Kyirong to Langtang. And given that Langtangas usually place the founding of the village “about four hundred years ago”, the time coincides with the period of turmoil in southern Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries during the disintegration of the Gunthang kingdom. Given that the intensification of interest in, and the search for, beyul usually coincided with periods of external threats to existing social and political orders (Sadar-Afkhami 1996: 2), we could surmise that it was during the turmoil of southern Tibet in that period that the first mass migration of Langtangas’ ancestors from Tibet occurred. These earliest settlers subsequently devised a system of rotating once every four years the village headmanship amongst the four founding clans, namely the Jhapa, Shangpa, Zangpa, and Thokra.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In Tibetan, the pronunciation of *rgyab* (‘back’) and *mdun* (‘front’) sounds similar to *brgya* (‘hundred’) and *bdun* (‘seven’) respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Langtang valley, as a beyul, is revealed by the myth and its associated ritual practice as an “inner” sanctified space that has to be protected. The protective pair of “grandmother and grandfather” can be found in other settlements in the Himalaya, for example in the village of Dzar in Mustang (cf. Gutschow and Ramble 2003: 144, 156).

<sup>7</sup> The rotation of headmanship amongst chief houses or villagers seems to be a common Tibetan practice. Barbara Aziz (1978: 199, italics mine) noted that in the district of Dingri just across the border from Nepal, “[t]heoretically the headmanship of a hamlet rotates among village members, or is assigned to a popular vote of members. It is not hereditary and there must be a consensus of agreement for an incumbent to retain office. In most villagers, however, the same person remains in office for several years consecutively. Or, the headmanship may be shared by general agreement between *two or three chief houses in the villages and thereby moves from one to another almost automatically.*” Saul (1999: 68) also notes that

It is significant that the Langtangas tend to use the Nepali term *mukhiyā* rather than *gowa* (*'go pa*), its Tibetan equivalent. The explanation for this has to be considered in relation to the incorporation of Langtang into the nascent Nepalese state. From the time of the “unification” of Nepal by Gorkhali kings in the middle of the eighteenth century, to the Rana regime of hereditary prime ministers, the country’s rulers relied primarily on a system of land grants to control the population<sup>8</sup>. To increase its hold over communities such as those on the frontier with Tibet, the Nepalese rulers in Kathmandu maintained, and sometimes enhanced, the status of the local headmen with special land grants (such as *kipat*) and conferring of additional powers so that these communities could continue to exist and be governed in accordance with their traditions (Steinmann 1991: 477-483; see also Forbes 1999: 115-116; Caplan 1970: 3-9). As long as these two groups of state functionaries – the nobles and state officials, and village headmen – fulfilled their stipulated roles, state interference in local affairs was kept to the minimum, allowing a significant degree of autonomy to these communities.

The term *mukhiyā* in Langtang encompassed two different types of local officials: the *jimivāl* was allocated the task of collecting taxes on wet fields, and the *tālukdār* on dry fields (Holmberg, 1996 [1989]: 45). As there were no wet fields in Langtang, the two subdivided roles collapse into the sole title of the *mukhiyā*, while *tālukdār* came to designate the *mukhiyā*’s runner, locally known as *chog*, tasked with enforcing rules and helping in the initial preparations for various village festivals and rituals, such as the collection of grain and butter from all households. State administration from early Gorkha times exhibited what has been termed “dual foundation”, characterised by a combination of “centralization of political authority and decentralization of administrative functions” (Regmi 1979:18). Such arrangements engendered a politically symbiotic relationship between rulers and state functionaries.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the patron-client relationships had established deep roots in the country. At the national level, the rulers, nobles and senior government officials supported each other ... At the

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in the Mustang region of Baragaon, a rotation system of headmanship was instituted around 1930.

<sup>8</sup> Large swathes of land were granted to officials and nobles close to the ruling families – the so-called *jāgīr* and *birtā* land – on which no tax was levied. The main aims of these land grants were to reward the services rendered to the regime by these individuals, as well as to secure their continued allegiance and service. The recipients in turn exercised control over the tenant farmers who worked on these lands. The rulers also relied on the village headmen, whose role was to collect tax and control local land use. For a more in-depth discussion of the history of landownership in Nepal see, e.g., Regmi 1976, Caplan 1970.

village level, the local functionaries depended on rulers and nobles for their positions, providing in return the valuable services of collecting taxes and controlling land and forest use (Malla 2001: 291).

In the case of the Kingdom of Mustang, for example, Ramble (1997: 396) points out that the central government in Kathmandu allowed the Mustang king to retain his rule over the principality while demanding the periodic payment of taxes. Later, the nobles of the Baragaon area were also tasked with the collection of taxes in Dolpo. It was within this larger state system that Langtang's mukhiya political organisation was embedded. In other words, during this period of Nepalese state consolidation, especially after the fixing of the Nepal-Tibet borders in 1856 when Langtang formally came under Nepalese jurisdiction, the legitimacy of the headman's authority was a function of both local historical and cultural factors, and the policy of the Nepalese state at large (cf. Diemberger 1997).

### **Zombie Slayers in Langtang: Ascendancy of the Domar clan**

To understand Domari rule in Langtang, we first turn to clan history and the various myths associated with it. Here, I follow Godelier's (1971) historical approach to the study of myth as embedded within, and at the same time commenting upon, material social relationships. What counts as "memory" or "history" is inextricably related to competing politico-cultural interpretations of contexts, which include the notion of place (see also Rappaport 1990: 11-17, 188-189). Bearing this in mind, I now present a version of the clan history as recounted by Minyu Lama, the most revered Domari in Langtang today.

According to Minyu Lama, the Domar<sup>9</sup> clan originated from a sacred mountain in China called Riwo Tse Nga (Chin. *Wu Tai Shan*, or 'Five-Terrace Mountain', also known as *Qing Liang Shan*<sup>10</sup>). A Chinese Emperor had included the clan as part of the dowry accompanying the Chinese princess who had been betrothed to the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen<sup>11</sup>, who

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<sup>9</sup> The Domaris belong to a special category of religious practitioners known as the ngagpa (*sngags pa*), or hereditary priests, who are believed to possess a special religious quality called the dung gyü, transmitted through the male line (Aziz 1978: 53).

<sup>10</sup> I wish to thank Charles Ramble for pointing out to me the identity of Riwo Tse Nga and Wu Tai Shan. Known also to the Chinese as Qing Liang Shan, it is situated in the present-day Chinese province of Shanxi. The mountain is regarded as one of the "Four Great Buddhist Mountains" in China, and is famed throughout the Buddhist world as the abode of the Bodhisattva Manjushri.

<sup>11</sup> From both Tibetan and Chinese historiography, we know that Trisong Detsen did not have a Chinese wife. According to a published history of the Domar clan

is credited in Tibetan hagiographic accounts as the ruler who introduced Buddhism into Tibet. Upon arriving at the Tibetan court the Domaris were installed in high positions in the court hierarchy. The clan was further differentiated into six different lineages arranged in a hierarchy structured by their respective abilities and skills. For example, the Holung Bagyi Dong was able to dispel locusts, to prevent them from causing damage to the crops. The highest lineage, to which Minyu Lama belongs, was the Namdro Zangyi Dong, whose members were believed to be able to slay zombies (*ro langs*; for an interesting discussion of Tibetan zombie stories see Wylie 1964). Attention to such purported skills is relevant to our present goal of understanding the position of the Domar clan in Langtang. The belief that the Domaris, at least in times past, were zombie slayers is widely held by Langtang villagers. While no zombies could be seen stalking villagers at the time of fieldwork, the reputation of Minyu Lama was built on the fact that he was believed, on several occasions, to have prevented the dead from terrorising the villagers during funeral rites, and to be able to exorcise evil spirits from afflicted individuals. Some older Langtangas recall Minyu Lama's deceased father as being an even more formidable figure, a tall man who knew everything and was able to predict imminent deaths.

These stories of the Domaris' connection with the Tibetan rulers, and their ability to slay zombies, are just some of the sources of their authority in Langtang, another of which is related to Langtang's founding myth. The present head lama of the Langtang temple, who is not a Domari, mentioned that prior to the arrival of Minyu Dorje, lamas of the Drukpa Kagyu (*'brug pa bka' brgyud*)<sup>12</sup> order lived there. In fact, they were responsible for the construction of the first temples in the Langtang valley. For example, present-day Langtang village has two temples situated next to each other, the older of which was built by a Drukpa Kagyu lama by the name of Milun Ganpo. In any case, in the accounts narrated by Minyu Lama, when his illustrious ancestor Minyu Dorje first reached the Langtang valley, having entered from the east, he was met by a Drukpa by the name of Chorangri.

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(Chophel 1998), some members of the clan had formed part of the retinue that accompanied Princess Wen Cheng to Tibet when she was betrothed to Songtsen Gampo. Minyu Lama's linking of the Domar clan to Trisong Detsen, who did not have a Chinese wife, is perhaps due to his desire to trace his lineage to this prominent king who has been credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet.

<sup>12</sup> The Drukpa Kagyu is a branch of the Kagyupa, named after the country where it had taken root, Bhutan (Drukyul, *'brug yul*) (see Tucci 1988: 36). See the account below regarding the duel between Minyu Dorje and Chorangri. The fact that the Kagyupa were the first to arrive in Langtang is not surprising given that one of the most prominent members of that school, Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*), had been to the neighbouring Helambu, and could very likely have passed through the Langtang valley en route there (cf. Clarke 1983).

At that time, there were already people at Langtang. There was also a lama called Chorangri, who was from Bhutan [Drukyul] but was not a Domari. Chorangri knew that Minyu Dorje was coming, transformed himself into an eagle, and flew to Langshisa Kharka to meet him. When the eagle arrived at the place, it dropped headless to the ground in front of Minyu Dorje, who was at that time seated by a *bod lcog* [a low Tibetan table] with his servant and having his lunch of tsampa and water. Seeing the lifeless and headless eagle, Minyu Dorje took the tsampa, moulded it into the shape of an eagle's head, and attached it to the bird. Immediately the eagle came back to life and was transformed into Chorangri. He said to Minyu Dorje, "This is my place and you are my guest. Let me go ahead and make the necessary arrangements to welcome you." Minyu Dorje replied, "Please don't say that; we'll go together." When they reached Numthang, they made some tsog [*tshogs*, 'offerings'], which became the hills, and the water from the hills was tsogjang [from *chang*, 'barley beer']. From Numthang, Chorangri, again transformed into an eagle, flew ahead, while Minyu Dorje was being carried by his servant. The servant thought, "The other lama could fly all the time, and I have to carry my lama." Minyu Dorje could read his thoughts, and was angry with his servant for doubting his ability. To prove his power, he made handprints in a cave at Chyadang, which can be seen even now. Convinced but also ashamed, the servant continued to carry his master.

Eventually, Minyu Dorje reached Chorangri's dwelling, and spent the night there. Next day, the two lamas got engaged in an intense debate, with Minyu Dorje standing at a small hill called Borkhang at Langtang, and Chorangri at another hill some distance away. Their arguments were facilitated by a crow carrying letters between them. For many days the debate raged without a clear winner, since the two were almost on a par with regard to learning. The matter came to a head one day in the monsoon season when the grass was tall and abundant. Minyu Dorje issued an ultimate challenge: the person who can climb to the top of a blade of grass without causing the dewdrop at the top to fall to the ground will be the winner, and the loser will have to leave Langtang. Rising to the challenge, Chorangri turned himself into a snail, and started climbing up a blade of grass with a drop of water at the top. The dewdrop fell. Meanwhile, Minyu Dorje transformed himself into an ant, and because of its small size, managed to emerge triumphant in the task, leaving the drop of water intact. Acknowledging defeat, Chorangri left Langtang.

After getting rid of his rival, Minyu Dorje embarked on a number of tasks to stamp his authority on Langtang. First he had to build a temple. For guidance, he consulted Padmasambhava by making a divination. There are a couple of accounts regarding Padmasambhava's instruction. Minyu Lama says that Minyu Dorje was instructed to build a temple near the present-day

Prangjang (see below), lying next to the village. However, the temple was destroyed in a fire, and a new one was built on top of a hill that looks like an elephant trunk. In another account, Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) initially asked Minyu Dorje to construct not one but four temples, a project which the latter said was beyond his ability. As a compromise, Guru Rinpoche told him to build just one, but to represent the remaining three on three of the four walls of the temple being built.

Langtangas also credited Minyu Dorje with the great act of banishing from Langtang a man-eating demon, or *dü* (*bdud*), that had demanded annual human sacrifice. According to Langtang villagers, each year different families would take turns to supply a male to be sacrificed to appease the *dü*, failing which disasters would befall the village. Chorangri was not able to get rid of the demon, and now Minyu Dorje conducted the most extreme rite of tantric exorcism, *jinseg* (*sbyin sreg*)<sup>13</sup>, a ritual fire with the capacity to burn out and destroy the demon. When that effort failed, Minyu Dorje teamed up with another religious specialist by the name of Meme Pengyab, the ancestor of today's *lha bempa* (*lha bon pa*), who had the capability to see the *dü*. Together, the two religious virtuosos caught the demon, and with Meme Pengyab dragging it from the front with a rope and Minyu Dorje pushing it from behind, the *dü* was led away from Langtang towards India from whence it had originally come. The final twist to the story is that as they were about to leave the Langtang valley, at the place called Wangyal, near the present-day Syabru Bensi, the *dü* escaped into a cave when Meme Pengyab was momentarily distracted. To prevent the *dü* from escaping, Minyu Dorje blocked the cave with a huge boulder and assigned a *devi* (*devī*, 'goddess') to guard over it. I have been led by Langtang villagers to the shrine near Wangyal dedicated to the *devi*, and from the shrine, looking towards a cliff in the distance, one could see black markings on the wall which the locals believe depict the shape of the *dü* being led away, with a rope tied around its neck.

The above semi-historical and mythical accounts of the arrival of Minyu Dorje in Langtang, narrated by one of his redoubtable descendants, can perhaps be conceived as what Malinowski (1936) has called a "social charter" which is manipulated by the power holders to justify or explain

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<sup>13</sup> Mumford (1990: 142) has offered a vivid description of the *jinseg*: "... the performing lama drew a four-directional mandala on the floor colored red, green, black, and white, to represent all types of area gods. A fire was lit over the mandala on which the performing lama boiled a pot of oil to a great heat. While chanting mantras, he suddenly poured in alcohol. A blazing pillar of fire shot up and spread out to every corner of the ceiling; the audience was surrounded by flames as if trapped in a burning house... The demons had been burned out, to be released into a higher rebirth."

their dominance. Similarly, in the specific context of Tibetan and Himalayan studies, Alexander Macdonald has stressed that hagiographies of heroic figures, such as Songtsen Gampo, and prominent saints are often portrayed as “history”, contributing to the various “power models” that are “formulated and exploited by certain elites and are used as instruments of social control” (1984: 133ff; see also 1980). Here, I take “history” as a representation that refers to “ideologically embedded knowledge represented as ‘the past’” (Yelvington 2002: 231). Ask any adult in Langtang about the founding history of the village, and you will likely be told stories of the exploits of Domar Minyu Dorje, in addition to the more popular story about a man searching for his lost bull. The fact that the Drukpa Kagyu preceded Minyu Dorje was not widely known amongst ordinary Langtanga. Almost all whom I asked about the founding of Langtang mentioned the story of Minyu Dorje’s arrival, but said nothing of his predecessors. This is perhaps indicative of how deeply entrenched in the Langtanga’s social memory is this particular founding myth. Of course, the knowledge of Langtang as a beyul further lent justification to the Domaris’ high status and provided legitimacy to their rule in Langtang. We therefore see that the dominant discourse regarding the sacred space of Langtang effects an act of forgetting that in turn contributes to the coherence and persuasiveness of a particular ideology of social order and political power<sup>14</sup>.

If we agree with the historian Moses I. Finley (1965) that the narrator of oral history often reflects his own interests, we could attempt an interpretation of the story concerning Minyu Dorje as a rationalising justification of the Domaris’ dominance in Langtang. Clearly, the part about Minyu Dorje of the Nyingmapa defeating Chorangri, who belonged to the rival Kagyupa, could be seen as suggesting both the superiority of the clan and the Nyingmapa over its rivals. This affirmation of the Domaris’ power reinforces what is suggested by the widely known legend amongst the Langtanga of the Domaris’ reputation as zombie slayers. Furthermore, in Langtangas’ social memory, their welfare has been closely associated with two very significant acts of Domar Minyu Dorje: the building of the temple

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<sup>14</sup> That is not to say that all members of that clan are presently equally respected, and while most of them would have at least some religious training, currently it is the learned ones who are most revered. While villagers do indicate that in recent years the previous high status of the Domar clan has waned somewhat, ritually, however, the Domaris’ dominant position is still unassailable. In both the temples at Langtang and Kyangjin, there are designated seats near the main altars, which could be occupied only by lamas who are from the Domar clan. In the temple status symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism, the further one sits from the door, and nearer the main altar, the higher is one’s status. Even the head lama, who is supposed to be the most spiritually accomplished in Langtang, if he is not a Domari, would not be allocated that special position. All village-wide rituals would never start before a participating Domari lama has arrived.

under the direct instruction of Padmasambhava, and the expulsion of the cannibalistic demon from the Langtang valley. We note also that Minyu Lama mentioned the Domaris' close relationship with King Trisong Detsen, and we link this to the textual exegesis mentioned at the beginning of this article regarding the notion that the rightful rulers of beyul must belong to Trisong Detsen's imperial lineage. In this narrative, therefore, the legitimacy of the Domaris' political and religious dominance is embedded within the concept of beyul and the identification of Langtang as one of these sacred "hidden valleys". Here, we can relate the above narrative to the potential ideological function of myths in legitimising political structure (cf. Balandier 1972: 118-119).

### **Ideology emplaced: Land, ritual, power**

Not much is known further about the Domaris in Langtang after Minyu Dorje and his sons constructed the new temples in Langtang, allegedly under the instructions of none other than Padmasambhava himself. We know that Minyu Dorje had one daughter and five sons, one of whom was Kunzang Gyume Lhundrub (died 1767), mentioned in a Tibetan source as having commissioned an entire key collection of Nyingmapa teachings, the "Collected Tantras" (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*) (Ehrhard 1997: 258). According to the current head lama, he was the founder of the temple at Kyangjin. Another son, Pema Dorje, constructed the temple at Langtang. The ancestors of the Domaris currently residing in Langtang are said to have arrived only around the closing quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Informants belonging to the former mukhiya clans claim that as there was no Domari lama in the village at that time, some members of the mukhiya clans went across the border to the vicinity of Kyirong to search for a suitable lama to take over the Langtang temple, and to give instructions to those who desired to live a religious life. The Langtang searchers eventually found a Domari at a place called Rama (*rag ma*), about three to four hours walk from Kyirong in Tibet, who agreed to move to Langtang. What happened next had tremendous consequences for Langtang, with the subsequent period witnessing the rise to power of the Domar clan.

An important part of the deal to persuade the Domari lama to come to Langtang was that the mukhiya would relinquish the leadership of the village to him. Upon their arrival, the Domaris established themselves on an estate next to the village temple as the centre of authority from where they would exercise both religious and temporal power. Villagers still call this estate the Labrang (*bla brang*). This term itself gives an indication of the high status of the new Domari lama, for the word "labrang" refers to the estate of a very high lama — in fact a reincarnate lama, or trulku (*sprul sku*) (see Goldstein 1973: 448; Tucci 1988: 10; Mills 2000: 27) — or at least a revered tantric priest (Aziz 1978: 53). Under the new arrangement, the Labrang took over the office of the headman from the mukhiya clans and subsequently came to dominate both religious and political life. At the



beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Rana government established a horse farm at what is today known as Ghoratabela, not far from Langtang village, and the Domaris, as the new mukhiyas of the village, were given the task of looking after the state horses.<sup>15</sup>

Following the passing away of the first Domari lama, the clan split into two factions as the result of a dispute between his two sons, Kusho Nima and Kusho Renzin. The latter moved out of the Labrang to establish his own estate, known as the Prangjang:

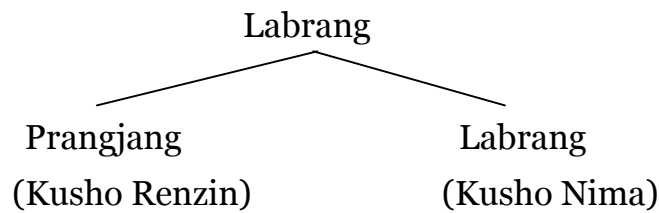


Fig. 1.2.: Segmentation of the Domar clan

As will be recalled, one of the important agreements between the mukhiya clans and the Domaris for the latter to settle in Langtang was the transfer of the leadership of the village. With this transfer, the erstwhile system of rotational headmanship was abolished. Henceforth, until the local election within the panchayat system in the 1960s, the role of headman was transmitted through male agnates, primarily through brothers. If no male sibling were suitable, then the office would be taken over by the son of the former headman. Kusho Nima inherited the headmanship from his father, the first occupier of the Labrang. Later, with the arrival of elections, Kusho Nima was elected as the first *pradhan pancha* (renamed from *mukhiya*). Kusho Nima had two sons: unfortunately one died before being able to take over the office, and the other was found to be unsuitable, as he was mute and considered intellectually undeveloped. In this circumstance, Kusho Renzin, as the younger brother of Kusho Nima, took over the office of the headman, hence precipitating a gradual shift in the centre of power from the Labrang to the Prangjang.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One wonders if the reason behind this assignment was in any way related to the fact that the Domaris' clan god, Tamdin (see below), is also believed to be the patron deity of horse traders.

<sup>16</sup> In her study of Sherpa Buddhism in the Solu-Khumbu region, Ortner (1992) argues that the process of temple founding was intimately tied to contestations for political power amongst influential male siblings, the result of which was the founding of a temple by the triumphant party. The motivation behind the building of temple by the winner of the power struggle was to cement his authority as a

Referring to the Tamang village of “Tamdungsa”, in the same administrative district as Langtang, Holmberg (1996 [1989]: 47) points out that the standing of the headman was a function of both his reputation within the community and his role as intermediary between the locality and the state. There was, however, a crucial difference between Langtang and the Tamang village of Tamdungsa, where the headman and the lamas, though both manifested a royal disposition, were nevertheless personifications of two distinct institutional roles. In Langtang, however, religious and temporal authority was vested in a single person. The power wielded by the headman was very considerable, reminiscent of the “royal style” noted by Hocart (1950) as typical of the Indian villages. Some older people in Langtang can still recall the almost absolute rule the Domari headman exercised over village affairs. He was responsible for the arbitration of disputes and enforcing village regulations, such as the prohibitions against smoking, drunkenness, and the killing of animals. Only extremely serious cases, such as murder, were referred to the district authority. Since there were neither police nor army in the locality at the time, the responsibility of enforcing state laws and village rules fell upon the shoulders of the headman’s runners, called *chog*<sup>17</sup>.

Myths by themselves are, however, insufficient to sustain the dominant position of the Domaris. In addition to territorial cults and meanings attributed to Langtang valley as a *beyul*, here we shall see that the pre-eminence of the Domaris was also partly a function of two other conditions: the Nepalese political system in general, and the economic base of the society. As I have already indicated, from the founding of the modern Nepalese state in the late 1800s to the 1950s, the political system was based upon the centralisation of authority coupled with the decentralisation of administration. In such a political arrangement, many remote communities were able to maintain a high degree of local autonomy. It was within this larger state system that unique indigenous forms of social, economic and political organisations evolved. Before the onset of trekking tourism in Langtang in the late 1970s, for subsistence the inhabitants relied mainly

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“protector” in a visible form, but also, paradoxically, to indicate to fellow Sherpa that he (the winner) was humble or “small” in the eyes of the gods. Ortner suggests that the rationale behind the act of temple founding was an internal cultural tension, or “contradiction”, between “bigness” and “smallness” that is an essential feature of Sherpa culture (Ortner 1992: 53-81). In Langtang, the fraternal rivalry between the Domari brothers had not resulted in the founding of a new temple, but the establishment of an estate alternative to the Labrang. The founding of the Prangjang estate was not the consequence of Kusho Renzin being banished from the Labrang by Kusho Nima, but an aggressive act on the part of the younger brother to challenge the Labrang’s authority.

<sup>17</sup> In the Lama village of Tarkhyeghyang in Helambu, the positions of village headman and head temple official were inherited by patrilineal descent. Temple assistants are known as *Uje* (*dbu-rje*, see Clarke 1980: 134)

upon agriculture, such as the cultivation of buckwheat, barley and potatoes, as well as animal husbandry comprising the breeding of sheep and various bovine stocks.

In addition, before the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Langtangas were actively engaged in the trans-Himalayan trading of salt and rice between Kyirong in Tibet and central Nepal, plying the main trade route that passed through Rasuwa Garhi at the border. Langtangas also collected medicinal herbs from the surrounding forests both to supplement their diet and to be sold for cash in the markets of Trisuli Bazaar and Kathmandu. Prior to the nationalisation of forests and institutionalisation of the new national panchayat regime in 1962, Langtangas' economic activities were another crucial factor that contributed to the emergence of an indigenous pattern of landownership that entailed not only a system of resource extraction and distribution, but also provided the material basis that sustained social and political structures in Langtang.

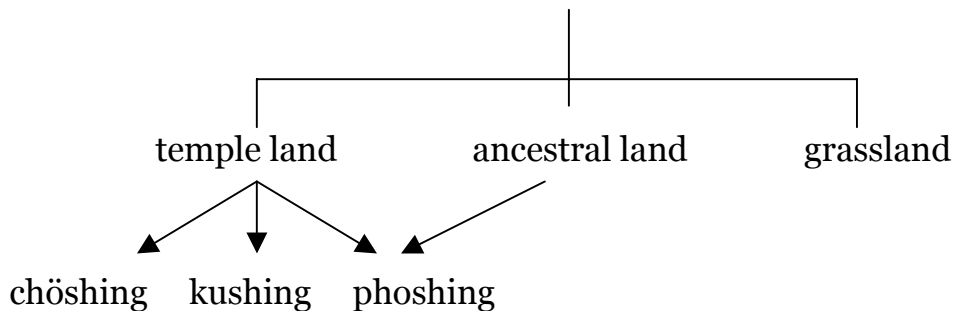


Fig. 1.3.: Langtang landholding

The first and most common category of land is phashing, meaning 'ancestral land', encompassing both the land first cultivated by the ancestors of a particular lineage, and also those other lands acquired from other villagers. Phashing could be bought and sold between any willing owners. The second category of land included swathes of grassland for herds of animals to graze. Any lineage that had the privilege of using a particular patch of grassland, was once obligated to contribute butter to the two temples at Langtang and Kyangjin, the amount of which was proportional to the size of the grassland allocated. The third category of land pertains to the temple. In Langtang, temple land is distributed amongst certain sections of the population, with the primary purpose of ensuring the supply of grains, beer and butter required in communal rituals and the upkeep of the temple. One subcategory of temple land is chöshing (*chos zhing*, 'religious land'), whose ownership rotates between the two Domari estates of Prangjang and Labrang. Furthermore, for the purpose of gaining merit, some Langtang households might donate a proportion of their phashing to the temple as phoshing, which oblige the donor to give to the temple 4 *pāthī* of barley to support the annual festival Nara (see below). The third subcategory of

temple land that concerns us here is kushing, which were allocated by the temple to the twenty-eight lineages from nine different clans who had first settled in Langtang<sup>18</sup>.

<b>Name of clan</b>	<b>Number of lineages with kushing</b>
Shangpa	6
Nagpa	5
Zhu Sanga	5
Garza	4
Zangpa	2
Jhapa	2
Zang Yümpa	2
Thokra	1
Wypa	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

Table 1: The kuriya lineages

One of the main purposes of granting the kushing was to ensure the annual organisation of temple festivals, such as Nara and Yulbi Chechu, to which all kuriya (owners of kushing) were obligated to contribute certain amounts of grain, derived from the cultivation of their kushing.<sup>19</sup>

Kushing land, with a total size of around 6-7 *ropani*<sup>20</sup> are inherited agnatically within the each kuriya lineage. If a particular lineage was unable to fulfil its obligations, then its kushing has to be transferred to another lineage within the same clan. The difference between phoshing and kushing

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<sup>18</sup> The mukhiya families had promised the Domari from Rama that the 28 lineages in Langtang at that time would each contribute a male member to the temple to be trained under the Domari as village priests. These families were given kushing, hence becoming kuriya.

<sup>19</sup> The kushing is very similar to the notion of *bog ma*, a term referring to the communal land owned by Tibetan monasteries. For Tibetan monasteries with considerable landed property, the usufruct of the *bog ma* is usually transferred to certain aristocratic families (*bog bdag*) who have “to deliver part of the harvest to the [monastery]... and to pay taxes to the government.” (Tucci 1988: 158) The kuriya in Langtang thus replicates the obligations of the *bog bdag* in other Tibetan monasteries. In Mustang there is a comparable system, known as drongpa, in which the drongpa households commanded high socio-political status and were obligated to sponsor important temple festivals. In the villages of Kag and Dzong, village headmen were selected only from the drongpa households (see Saul 1998: 51-54).

<sup>20</sup> Here one *ropani* is defined locally as the area of land ploughed by the dzo (a cross-breed between the yak and the zebu cow) in a day.

is that the former refers to phashing land donated to the temple by individuals, while the latter refers to the lands granted by the temple to the founding lineages of Langtang. Apart from their religious duties, the kuriya were also required to take turns each year to provide two of their members as assistants/runners (chog) to the village headman. These chog were responsible for enforcing village rules and regulations, and for maintaining law and order prior to the establishment of a police post in Langtang.

The consequence of this pattern of landownership with its concomitant ritual obligations was the engendering of a three-tiered structure of “ritual hierarchy”: with the Domaris holding chöshing at the top, the kuriya holders occupying the middle position, while those without kushing (the so-called yangpa) who were disqualified from organising the most important village festival of Nara, were then relegated to the bottom rung of the ritual hierarchy. From the perspective of Langtang’s political and social inclusion, this indigenous system of landownership bound the various founding lineages into a social unit that was continually re-created and reaffirmed through the annual celebration of Nara. It has been shown here that the Langtang system of landholding was once underpinned by a set of religious and temporal obligations that defined the boundaries of Langtang sociality. My contention is that ultimately, the ideology that gave legitimacy to this system consisted of the Domaris’ right to rule in the sacred beyul of Langtang. Systems of landholding are often more than just solely economic arrangements; they are implicated in notions of identity and personhood, as well as communities’ participation in specific social orders.

Writing about the “Lama” villages in the neighbouring Helambu region, Clarke (1980: 81) notes that membership in these villages is predicated upon “taking a loan from the temple, part of which is paid back immediately, and on which annual interest is payable as a contribution to the costs of a temple-festival.” In Langtang village, the kushing granted to the twenty-eight households of the nine founding clans could be seen as the functional equivalent of a temple “loan”, the “payment” of which consists of the organisational and financial contributions to the Nara and Yulbi Chechu festivals. Therefore, as in the Lama villages of Helambu, village membership in Langtang was once conceived in terms of the villagers’ participation in the corporate life of the temple. Michael Vinding (1998: 272) points out that the term kuriya is used amongst the Thakali to refer to households represented in the village assembly, whose social obligations included the duty of the village worker to participate in public works programme. One crucial difference between the Thakali and Langtang cases seems to be the ritual component that formed an integral part of the latter’s political organisation. In fact, Vinding highlights that in Thak Khola “ecclesiastical and temporal powers are clearly separated, and in some villages *religious specialists cannot become headman*” (ibid.: 282, italics mine). In Langtang, however, political and religious supremacy were invested in the single person of the

Domari headman. The dominance of the Domar clan in Langtang was symbolically most eloquently expressed and affirmed in the annual festival of Nara.

### Nara

Nara was considered the most important annual festival for Langtangas, and indeed for all other Tibetan Buddhists in the region such as those in Helambu in the adjacent valley (Clarke 1991: 43). The full name of the festival is Nara Donjuk (*na rag dong spyugs*), which means approximately ‘finishing with hell’, as the primary aim of the central offering is to accumulate merit so that the donor will not descend to hell upon his death but gain a better rebirth. At a more mundane level, Nara is concerned with the securing of blessings or tendil (*rten ’brel*, ‘material prosperity’) not just for the donors of the festival but also for the village as a whole. The duration of the Nara differs from region to region; in the Helambu area Nara could last one to twenty days in the village of Tarkhyeghyang, while in Langtang the festival usually lasts five days.

Each year, four kuriya households from a total of twenty-eight would be the principal donors for the festival, defraying most of its expenses. In the first stage of preparation, longchang, two “temple administrators”, or jipa<sup>21</sup> (*spyi pa*) from the four organising kuriya would gather the villagers and ply them with beer. Amidst the drunken stupor and amicable atmosphere, villagers recall their status as either kuriya or yangpa. All the kuriya would have to offer certain amounts of grain for the making of chang. The total amount of grain a particular kuriya would have to contribute depends on the number of households within that particular lineage<sup>22</sup>. Some of those without kushing (the yangpa) may contribute to the cost of Nara as a means of gaining merit (*phan yon*). All additional costs, along with the supply and preparation of food for the duration of the festival, are borne by the main

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<sup>21</sup> Clarke (1991: 43) is of the opinion that the term “jipa” used by the Helambu people is a corruption of the Tibetan *sbyin bdag*, which means ‘sponsor’. However, by adhering to both phonetic and ethnographic evidence, I would suggest that it refers to *spyi pa*, the term for a junior administrator of the temple. Apart from its ritual functions, the temple in Tibetan cultural areas is also an economic institution with its own properties (*spyi*), one of which is land. In general, *spyi pa* refers an official responsible for the administration of land belonging to the temple (see Tucci 1988: 130, 158). In the case of Langtang, and probably also in Helambu, the term *spyi pa* also connotes a donor (hence, *sbyin bdag*) with reference to festivals such as Nara. This view takes on further credibility in relation to the pattern of landownership of the Langtang Labrang, as discussed above.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., in a lineage consisting of three brothers, the eldest, if he holds kushing, has to give 21 *pāthī*; the second brother, known as yang chewa, 6 *pāthī*; and the youngest, the yang chungwa, 4 *pāthī*.

organising *kuriya*, the *jipa chenpo*, and the Domari clan (from either the Labrang or the Prangjang).

During Nara the principal ritual actors are divided into three categories. The first is called *chökya* and made up of Domari clan members, who are the principal donors for the first day of the festival. The four *kuriya*, the *jipa chenpo*, are divided into two groups of *jipa*, the *trapa jipa* and the *chomo jipa*<sup>23</sup>. The former is responsible for the second and fourth days, and the latter for the third and the final fifth days. The most important people in the Nara festival are, unsurprisingly, the Domaris. Not only do they comprise one of the three main categories of principal sponsors, the Domari lamas are also the chief officiating lamas of the festival. In addition, one of the main deities propitiated during Nara is none other than Tamdin (*rta mgrin*), the Domaris' clan-god (*skyes lha*). On each of the five days of Nara, the main officiating priest would invoke Tamdin while conducting a sequence of religious dances (*'cham*). It is necessary here to give an overview of this principal deity to further explicate the Domaris' ritual and political dominance in Langtang.

Numerous works in Brahmanic and Tibetan literature have affirmed Tamdin's tremendous ritual power. The 'Horse-head One' has his origin in the Brahmanic religion: known in Sanskrit as *Hayagrīva*, he is believed to be an *avatāra* of the Lord Vishnu. As one of the 'defenders of faith' (*chos skyong*; Skt. *dharmapāla*) of the Brahmanic religion, his wrathful nature is harnessed to his dominant role as the 'destroyer of obstacles' (Skt. *krodha vighnāntaka*), eradicating all impediments that might hinder one's quest for enlightenment (Linrothe 1998: 86). *Hayagrīva* has been appropriated by Tibetan Buddhism into its vast pantheon and become known as Tamdin, belonging to a special group of guardian deities called the Trag She Ghe (*drag gshed brgyad*, see e.g. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1977: 23; van Gulik 1935: 10-28). As an archetype of fierce compassion in Tibetan Buddhism, Tamdin is considered a terrific form of the Bodhisattva Chenrezi<sup>24</sup> (*spyān ras gzigs*, *Avalokiteśvara*), as well as the manifestation of Padmasambhava<sup>25</sup>, who is credited for introducing Buddhism into Tibet. Tibetan sources refer to the deity's critical role in the introduction of Buddhism from India to Tibet: when Padmasambhava was invited by King Trisong Detsen to Tibet to promulgate the *dharmā*, the saint allegedly encountered great opposition from the local demons and deities. To subjugate these malicious spirits,

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<sup>23</sup> Tib. *grwa pa* and *jo mo*, i.e. 'monk' and 'nun', respectively.

<sup>24</sup> Chenrezi is depicted in Tibetan Buddhist history as the father of the Tibetan nation. Taking the form of a monkey, the bodhisattva mated with a mountain demoness, an emanation of *Tārā*, to give birth to the first Tibetans (Samuel 1993: 168).

<sup>25</sup> One of Tamdin's origin mantra is "Om Hrih Padma Sambhava Hum" (Rhie and Thurman 1996: 189).

Padmasambhava invoked Tamdin, and in transforming the erstwhile enemies of Buddhism into its guardians, bound them by an oath to defend the new faith in Tibet (Nebesky-Wojtkowitz 1977: 101-102, 171, 193). Under his new guise, Tamdin is the lord of all *dharmapāla*, the chief defender of the Buddhist faith.

For Langtangas, Tamdin is widely acknowledged as a *srung ma* (see also Mumford 1990: 117-139), a ‘guardian’ of not only their religious faith, but also against harmful forces. It is the only clan god in Langtang whose cult is not restricted to the clan to which it is the tutelary deity, given its wider function encapsulated within the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism. On the 29<sup>th</sup> day of each month in the Tibetan calendar, the Ngi Shu Ghu (*gnyis bcu dgu*), the Domaris pray to their guardian deity in the Langtang temple. On this day, Langtangas with physical or mental afflictions believed to be caused by evil forces, would bring offerings of grain to the temple, hoping the Domari would pray to Tamdin to help eradicate their sufferings. When asked why they sought help from Tamdin, respondents always mentioned Tamdin’s “great power”. The importance of Tamdin to the Langtangas in various village rituals such as the Nara and Ngi Shu Ghu thus directly confirms the Domar clan as a crucial point of reference, symbolically expressing and affirming it as the principal protector and benefactor of the community as a whole.

## Conclusion

In a recent article on divine kingdoms in the Garhwal Himalaya, William Sax notes that most 20<sup>th</sup> century studies of kingship have not adequately addressed the relationship between territorial control and conception of sacred places, and that many specialists of religion still persist in “using transcendental and non-empirical categories... to describe and analyse their object” (Sax 2003: 177). I share with Sax a non-reductionist approach to the study of power and authority in sacred places: in the present article, the beyul concept is not seen as a transcendental religious category that contrasts with the “worldly” or the “profane”. By paying close attention to the interaction — or what Max Weber would characterise as “elective affinity” — between ideas on the one hand, and social institutions and practices, on the other, the methodology I have adopted eschews the separation of the “religious” from the “social” and “political” in the exercise of power by a dominant social group. As Macdonald (1987: 7) has argued in his discussion of power and authority in the Himalaya, “political, economic and religious charisma are not separated, ... [a]uthority and power are not qualities... which are either religious or political: they are both, and their manipulation is moral, in local eyes.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> However, Macdonald seems to contradict himself when he, in the very same article, gives primacy to violence and conflict in the initial formation of social



According to Tibetan textual exegesis, beyul was conceptualised as a sanctuary where an idealised Tibetan society could be established and sustained, ensuring in part the preservation of the royal lineage which was ideologically deemed essential to the peace and prosperity of Tibetan society. In this article I have explored the relationship between the beyul concept and the form of political organisation it has historically engendered in Langtang. I have shown that the ideology that portrays Langtang as a sacred place both sustained, and was sustained by, a local political economy that in turn was part of a larger regional system. In what form did this “ideal” Tibetan society take root in the Langtang valley? Langtang’s indigenously evolved system of land distribution and ownership was once underpinned by what I would call a “ritual hierarchy” of its social organisation. Until fairly recently, the local political hierarchy was mapped on to this ritual hierarchy. The popular history of the settlement of Langtang village intimately relates to the conception of the valley as a sacred geography, as revealed by the myth of its discovery, manifest in the indigenous system of land distribution, and the ritual and political dominance of the Domari. In this article, I argue that the historical formation of Langtang’s indigenous social and political organisations can fruitfully be understood in terms of the beyul concept, especially in relation to the notion that only those associated with Trisong Detsen’s royal lineage could be the legitimate and ideal rulers of the various beyul. The evidence presented here invites future comparative studies into the autochthonous socio-political structures in other Tibetan enclaves along the Nepal-Tibet border, especially in areas where lamas of specific lineages have historically dominated the local ritual and political arenas, such as in Nubri, Yolmo and Khenbalung.<sup>27</sup> Such comparative studies would provide us with a clearer picture of the infra-structural histories of these enclaves, and improve our understanding of the status contestations and seismic shifts in social and political alignments in the present times.

## Epilogue

In Langtang, the Domaris’ hold on temporal power has been challenged in recent years, most significantly after King Mahendra of Nepal promulgated the “Partyless Panchayat Democracy” in 1962. Under this political arrangement, all citizens were empowered by law to elect their local leaders in periodic elections. In the first two decades of the panchayat regime, the Domari candidates managed to get elected to the post of village headman, renamed the *pradhan pancha*. By the late 1970s however, after the creation

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orders. In this formulation, religious notions of authority are essentially epiphenomena — ideologies that provide justifications for the exercise of power.

<sup>27</sup> For an extensive list of Tibetan enclaves situated along the Nepal-Tibet border see Jest 1975: 33-35.

of Langtang National Park and the introduction of tourism to the area which caused a radical shift in Langtang's economic orientation from agriculture and animal husbandry to the cash economy of tourism, there emerged a new group of rich and powerful tourism entrepreneurs who relied on their new-found wealth and status to challenge the Domaris' dominance in local elections (Lim 2004a and b). In 1982, one of these beneficiaries of tourism, Temba, managed to get elected as the *pradhan pancha*, defeating a relatively young and inexperienced Domari candidate, Tshewang, who was unable to match his opponent's ability to mobilise personal wealth to secure the support of voters. Elections in the next ten years saw the Domari continually challenging Temba in local elections, but to no avail. Throughout this period, Temba had become the richest man in the village, with his family members owning at least four hotels throughout the Langtang Valley. Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990, subsequent elections in Langtang were marred by widespread violence as disputes flared up between the Nepali Congress, which Temba represented, and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), represented by another wealthy hotel owner. Temba won the election again by a slight margin in 1992. In the 1997 election, after violence perpetuated by supporters of the two parties had once more threatened to engulf the whole village, the political leaders and other village "big men" consulted amongst themselves and decided not to carry out the election, but to select one "neutral" person who would be deemed satisfactory to all sides. They selected Tshewang, the Domari.

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