

Economic Resources to Stabilise Power in Ladakh During the rNam rgyal Dynasty (16th–19th Centuries)

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Introduction

The kings of Ladakh were primarily assigned their social status as members of the rNam rgyal lineage, however their exclusive right of power acquired by birth had to be backed up not only through diplomatic and military means but also on an economic level. The noble families and their social status did depend upon middlemen and, to a large extent, on the rural population: it was the services and goods provided by the lower class of society that made the elaborate lifestyle of the aristocracy possible in the first place. Economic resources were not only important for the preservation and representation of the king's own status—they also influenced the ruler's political decisions regarding his territory and shaped his communication and interaction with other kingdoms. Maintaining control over these resources was therefore one of the most important requirements to hold the position of supreme ruler. This paper focuses on the strategies the kings of Ladakh applied to secure their social status by economic means, including questions such as: What were the economic resources of the Ladakhi kingdom? How were they used to maintain power? And which social groups played a part?

The rNam rgyal Dynasty

The last four centuries of the kingdom of Ladakh were characterised by political changes and territorial conflicts. However, a good dozen throne holders and their staff were able to maintain the rule of the rNam rgyal dynasty astonishingly stable between the 16th and 19th centuries. On the one hand the kings of Ladakh tried to establish themselves as a centre of power towards the neighbouring smaller Muslim and Buddhist kingdoms. On the other hand they found themselves located in the midst of a network of different empires and polities (above all the Mughal Empire and the Tibet), which often perceived Ladakh as geographical and political periphery over which they strove for direct or indirect rule.

The rNam rgyal dynasty has its beginnings already in the 15th century, when *lha chen* Bha gan¹ united the kingdom under his leadership. Little is known about this formative period of the dynasty: the political fate of the first throne holders is only vaguely outlined in the kingdom's chronicles (*La dwags rgyal rabs*). The first half of the 16th century was marked by invasions of surrounding rulers. Especially the military attacks under the leadership of the Central Asian general Mirza Haidar Dughlat—who was in the service of the Mughal Empire—temporarily endangered the rule of the Ladakhi kings.² Other Muslim rulers also began to extend their influence towards Ladakh: after successful campaigns of the chief of Skardo, king 'Jam dbyang rnam rgyal (r. 1595?–1616) and members of the aristocracy were captured. According to the *La dwags rgyal rabs*, the Ladakhi king fell in love with the Muslim princess during his imprisonment, married her, and later on was handed back his dominion by the bride's father.³

Under Seng ge rnam rgyal (r. 1616–1623; 1624–1642), the dynasty reached its height at the beginning of the 17th century. Several successful military campaigns made it possible to annex large parts of the neighbouring areas.⁴ The king's close relationship with the scholar sTag tsang ras pa (1574–1651), together with royal patronage of the monasteries founded by him made the 'Brug pa the leading school in Ladakh. This caused tensions with the dGe lugs pa, who at the same time pulled the strings in Tibet. Seng ge rnam rgyal's defeat against the Mughals at the end of 1639 brought political trouble and caused him to cut off the trade routes to the west—a decision which is said to have had far-reaching and dramatic consequences for the kingdom's economy.⁵

After his death, the dominion was divided among his sons: Guge, Zanskar, and Spiti were given to the younger princes. Ladakh was henceforth ruled by bDe ldan rnam rgyal (r. 1642–1694). His policy was influenced by the relations with Tibet and Kashmir, which was at that time under Mughal rule. The diplomatic contacts between these powers, initially peaceful, progressively deteriorated, as Ladakh's partisanship to Bhutan led to increasing tensions with Tibet. Several

¹ The exact dates of *lha chen* Bha gan are very unclear. Based on the calculation of the average length of reign in Ladakh, Petech suggests the years 1460–1485 (1977: 25). Although the accuracy of Petech's dating has been questioned, among others by Schuh, and since more recent studies on the earlier stages of the rNam rgyal dynasty have yet to be advanced, the dates of each king's reign will be hereafter presented in accordance with the provisional chronology proposed in Petech (1977).

² Petech (1977: 25–26).

³ Francke (1926: 106).

⁴ Francke (1926: 108).

⁵ Petech (1977: 46–53).

military confrontations culminated in the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War of 1679–1684. The conditions negotiated afterwards shaped Ladakh's relations with Tibet as well as Kashmir for the rest of the kingdoms' independence: in addition to the establishment of regular tribute missions and restrictions on trade, Ladakh lost a large part of its western dominion to the Tibetan government.⁶

At the end of the 17th century Nyi ma rnam rgyal (r. 1694–1729) ascended the throne. His period of government was characterised by a restructuring of the judiciary system as well as active contact with important religious figures of various Buddhist schools. Besides sending tribute missions to the main monasteries of the dGe lugs pa in Tibet, Nyi ma rnam rgyal also strengthened the relations with the followers of the Bhutanese 'Brug pa bka' rgyud. In foreign policy he tried to establish diplomatic relations with all neighbouring rulers: envoys were sent among others to the Mughal Empire and the Chinese court, in order to ensure the security of important trade routes and minimise conflicts in the border areas. Due to the influence of his second wife Zi-zi Khatun, however, the Ladakhi army became increasingly involved in smaller military combats on the border with Baltistan.⁷

bDe skyong rnam rgyal (r. 1729–1739) continued his father's policy towards India and China. The events of the following decades were affected by a major internal political crisis that led to the division of the kingdom into two spheres of influence (one under the rule of Purig and the other under the rule of Leh). This partition took place after a series of latent conflicts fuelled by the personal interests of various actors: especially queen Zi-zi Khatun and the family around the *bka' blon* ("prime minister")⁸ Tshul khirms rdo rje seemed to pursue their own agenda.⁹ In the middle of the 18th century, the Tibetan lama Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755) was entrusted with negotiations between the opposing parties and the results were recorded in

⁶ Petech (1977: 74–80). For a wider discussion on context and consequences of the war, see for example Ahmad (1968), Schuh (1983), Emmer (2007), Schwieger (2015) and Bray (2018).

⁷ Petech (1977: 83–93).

⁸ In contrast to the old Tibetan administration, where *bka' blon* usually refers to the four cabinet ministers of the *bka' shag*, the title is used in a slightly different way in the context of the Ladakh kingdom: according to Cunningham (1854: 285), there were four or five "governors of district" who were given the title *bka' blon* amongst which a prime minister was chosen. This prime minister resided at the royal capital and was entrusted with governmental affairs. He is often only referred to as *bka' blon* although he had a higher rank in the administration than the other district governors who carried the same title. Depending on the source, there are other names and titles for the position of prime minister: besides *bka' blon* one also finds for example *gung blon*, *chos blon chen po*, *dbang gyi bka' blon* or *bka' blon che ba*. See Cunningham (1854: 285–286), Gergan (1976: 607), and Petech (1977: 155).

⁹ Francke (1926: 120–121).

the Treaty of Hanle of 1753.¹⁰ The most important points included the procedure for the territorial reintegration of the two dominions under one rule, the regulation of succession within the royal family to avoid similar situations in the future, the pardon of the family of the minister Tshul khrims rdo rje, who had fallen out of favour with the king of Leh, and the regulations on customs duties and traffic on the trade routes to Kashmir.¹¹

After the political reunification of the kingdom, the affairs of government fell in the hands of Tshe dbang rnam rgyal (r. 1753–1782). During this period, Ladakh's domestic political situation was marked by great tensions between the king, his government staff, and the common people. The chronicles describe the king as easily influenced and accuse him of costing the state disproportionate sums due to his love for horses.¹² In 1782 his rule was ended by a people's revolt: the rebels occupied Leh, and the king and his minister had to seek refuge in the monastery of Hemis. To protect his life and that of his minister, Tshe dbang rnam rgyal finally announced his abdication; he was given some land and from then on devoted himself entirely to his horses.¹³

At the end of the 18th century, renewed military conflicts with the neighbouring Baltic minor kingdoms challenged the political fortunes of the kings of Ladakh. While the relations with Tibet and China were maintained over the following decades by diplomatic missions, the economic and political relations with the neighbouring north-western regions underwent a decisive change: with the conquest of Kashmir in 1819 by Ranjit Singh (1780–1839)—who belonged to the Sikh and was the first ruler of the united Punjab—a new player appeared within the regional structure of power. Ranjit Singh demanded tribute and gifts from the Ladakhi royal court, which it seems were then paid regularly.¹⁴ By this time the kings of Ladakh had already lost most of their political significance and more and more sovereignty over the kingdom's territory, especially in the south, had been relinquished during the last decades of the dynasty. With the invasion of the Dogra in 1834, the period of the independent kingdom finally came to an end and a few years later Ladakh was incorporated into the state of Jammu and Kashmir under ruler Gulab Sing.¹⁵

Context and aspects of royal economic policy

¹⁰ The original text of this treaty has been edited, translated, and analysed by Schwieger (1999).

¹¹ Schwieger (1999: 80–82).

¹² Francke (1926: 122–123).

¹³ Petech (1977: 118).

¹⁴ Petech (1977: 130–135).

¹⁵ Petech (1977: 151).

The goal of successful and persistent rule was primarily to secure peace and order within one's own domain and to establish politically stable relations with surrounding authorities. Wherever the kings or their deputies succeeded in this, persistent and foreseeable conditions were created, which ultimately benefited economic activities as a whole. Power in general manifests itself in the combination of sovereignty—in terms of discourse on legitimation and representation, territorial control, and communication—and interaction policies towards others. Consequently, the strategies to maintain and stabilise power must take all these aspects into account, including economic resources, which are of crucial importance at all levels, as they form amongst others the material basis of power for the ruling individuals and institutions.

The economic system of Ladakh at the time of the rNam rgyal dynasty was mainly based on the agricultural sector. Most of the population were farmers or peasants and rendered services in the cultivation of land or animal herding. Agricultural production had to ensure the basic needs of everyday life and mainly consisted in food and building materials. As in other Tibetan societies at that time, money played almost no role in the administration of the kingdom: services were paid for by the transfer of land and privileges, while taxes were paid in natural products or by labour. However, Ladakh's strategic location—at the crossroads of regional and supra-regional trade routes—provided the kingdom with a second economic pillar, allowing its rulers to profit from the import and export business of various goods:

While local trade in subsistence commodities like salt, butter and barley was basic to the economy [...], Ladakh was unique in that a trade in high-value luxury commodity was integrated with that in subsistence commodities.¹⁶

Contrary to what happened in European medieval societies, the economic importance of trade and crafts in the Tibetan milieu did not really contribute to the formation of a powerful middle class.¹⁷ Although individual artists, traders, and their families held important positions within the Ladakhi kingdom during the rNam rgyal dynasty, their activities were largely controlled by the state, with the ruling class enjoying the highest profits. While aristocracy, court officials, and monastic establishments used their social status to their own financial advantage, the common people were cut off from economic possibilities

¹⁶ Rizvi ([2005] 2011: 309).

¹⁷ Carrasco (1959: 214).

and subjected to repression and exploitation.¹⁸ To borrow from Pedro Carrasco, “social differences based on trade and industry reinforce the stratification based on land and the control of political power”.¹⁹

What were the possibilities and means that kings possessed to interfere with the economic system? First and foremost, rulers created instruments for structuring economic activities and set the framework for trade and agricultural production (e.g. by fixing customs duties, taxes, and levies; distributing land and fields or founding and controlling centres for the exchange of goods). In the light of that, it is hardly surprising that the political action (or non-action) of the kings usually bore consequences for economic processes, regardless of any conscious economic-based motives behind it. Especially in the context of pre-modern societies, it is virtually impossible to clearly differentiate political/legal, religious/cultural, and economic spheres within the ruling system, as those rather influenced, overlapped, and conditioned each other. For example, military or diplomatic interventions could determine not only the political but also the economic fortunes of a kingdom, while economic circumstances in turn sometimes guided the actions of the ruler, for example in the area of legislation.²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu argues that economic capital can only be used in conjunction with social and cultural capital for real exercise of power: whereas economic capital is first and foremost seen as the material goods that one possesses and that can be converted into money, cultural and social capital (e.g. titles of nobility) can also be transformed into economic capital under certain conditions.²¹ In accordance with these categorizations, I define the concept of economic resources for my purposes as follows:

- in the classical sense, as material goods which are produced, exchanged, traded, and/or acquired (e.g. food, clothing, jewellery, technical equipment, weapons, furniture);
- as social goods which are not primarily of material or even economic nature, but with which economic opportunities or advantages go hand in hand (e.g. offices, rights of land use, tax reduction);
- as services (labour), representing an economic factor by which goods are made available or usable in the first place (e.g. transport services, cultivating fields or certain handicrafts).

The production and circulation of these goods was the main purpose

¹⁸ Sheik (2010a: 55).

¹⁹ Carrasco (1959: 214).

²⁰ McCormick (2005: 69–71).

²¹ Bourdieu ([1992] 2015:52).

of the kingdom's economic system and various social groups engaged in the process. The kings of Ladakh needed to gain and retain control over these material and social resources in order to maintain their position of power. The strategies they adopted to do so can be observed on three levels: first in the surroundings of the royal seat as the centre of power and representation; secondly within the policies regarding their own territory; and ultimately in the interaction with other authorities.

Promotion and display of socio-economic status

Every form of domination requires a certain degree of public display in order to determine discourses about one's rule and to ensure a positive perception of it. Through a system of signs, symbols, and behavioural patterns, one could usually express position and rank, friendship and hostility in a non-verbal way.²² Demonstrations of power and status aim to consolidate the desired social order and maintain a kind of aristocratic identity. It could either be oriented outwards to clarify structures that go beyond the court or it could serve to create a certain "exclusive" sense of belonging only among court members.²³ The royal court served as a stage for representation, where the king permanently presented himself to his immediate environment and clarified his social and economic status through his lifestyle. The spectrum of self-representation in this regard ranges from language, gestures, facial expressions, posture, clothing, equipment, and luxury items to ceremonial forms of collective action such as dance, banquet, procession and so forth. By choosing certain goods, accessories, attributes, and rituals, the rulers could strengthen and illustrate their own position and claim of power. All this was directly perceived and reflected by the closest environment. Therefore the ruler's appearance had to correspond with certain expectations which came hand in hand with his position of power. As Michael McCormick points out, promoting the king's individual lifestyle also had a significant influence on the economic system in general, since a big part of the movable and immovable wealth of society was concentrated in the king's treasure, court, and estates.²⁴ Royal luxury and consumption boosted the economy and involved a whole range of different groups: for instance craftsmen and traders who produced, designed or imported certain goods and riches which were then used to embellish the appearance of the king and his living space.

Ideals of royal function and appearance manifest themselves in a

²² Althoff ([1997] 2014: 232).

²³ Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 11).

²⁴ McCormick (2005: 61).

wide variety of media, such as architecture, visual arts, music, and literature.²⁵ A series of wall paintings depicting members of the rNam rgyal dynasty can give an idea of how the representation of their socio-economic status might have looked like—or at least, how it was perceived by others. Since commissioners and artists of these paintings are usually unknown, one can only speculate on the degree of realism, but the sceneries reflect certain ideals and conceptions concerning the aristocratic upper class. These depictions of donors, which are typical of Tibetan cultural areas, can be found in temples spread all over Ladakh. The types of representation vary considerably: while, for example, Seng ge rnam rgyal's depiction in Hemis is oriented towards Tibetan-Chinese style, other paintings integrate elements of Central Asian art.²⁶ Some show the ruler paying homage to spiritual figures, in others the royal family is at the centre of festive celebrations. In both cases the richly ornamented and patterned fabrics of the king's clothing are just as indicative of his exclusive status as the material and style of other attributes and furnishings—for instance headgear, throne, vestments, parasol, teapots and so forth (see Figs. 1 and 2). The king's appearance is also addressed in written media. Portuguese Jesuit Francisco de Azevedo, who came to Leh in 1631, writes about his impression of king Seng ge rnam rgyal:

He wore a rather dirty upper garment of some red material, a mantle of the same, and a thread-bare cap. [...] [E]ither ear was adorned with turquoise and a large coral, whilst he wore a string of skull-bones round his neck [...]. He was sitting [...] on an ornamental carpet of crimson velvet of the time of Mathusala.²⁷

The *La dwags rgyal rabs* contains all kinds of references to the king's wealth: for example, his personal religious utensils are said to be made of gold and silver.²⁸ Furthermore, acts of presenting exclusive goods to religious dignitaries are highlighted. Especially the list of gifts and treasures that Seng ge rnam rgyal is said to have presented to sTag tshang ras pa aims to impress the reader:

He presented 100 ponies, 100 yaks, 100 cattle, 1000 sheep, 1000 goats, 1000 silvers (Ladakhi rupees), 100 zho of gold, 3000 loads of grain, one string of pearls, one string of coral beads, one string of turquoises, 25 matchlocks, 25 spears, 25 swords, 15 coats-of-mail, 25 pieces of silk, 10 pieces of brocade, 25 pieces of gauze with and without pattern, 25

²⁵ Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 7).

²⁶ For a detailed analysis regarding the painting of king Seng ge rnam rgyal in Hemis, see Bellini (2012).

²⁷ Wessels (1992: 109).

²⁸ Francke (1926: 109).

pieces of broad gauze for scarfs of blessing, and other presents inconceivable.²⁹



Fig. 1 — *Seng ge rnam rgyal*, Hemis (*Lha khang rnying ma*).

²⁹ Francke (1926: 109).



Fig. 2 — bKra shis rnam rgyal, Leh (rNam rgyal rtse mo).

Even if the gifts described here may be attributed for the most part to the imagination of the historiographers, they do imply a special position of both recipient and giver—in this case the king.

Such use of economic means for religious edification was quite common among the kings of Ladakh. Just as Christian *caritas*³⁰ was of great importance as an economic principle of action in European Middle Ages, things and services settled in the context of Buddhism could also become economic goods. The propagation and promotion of Buddhism and its institutions was considered one of the main royal tasks; therefore the kings of Ladakh spent numerous riches to increment their religious merits by sponsoring the realisation of *maṇi* walls, *stūpa*, precious manuscripts, and statues, just to name a few. Some legal documents show that services to erect *maṇi* walls and inscribe prayers were in return rewarded by the kings with the allocation of land. In an edict issued 1824 by king Tshe dpal don 'grub rnam rgyal (r. 1802–1837; 1839–1840), it says:

Earlier, when the new *maṇi* wall at Leh was erected, the '*o ma cig pa*³¹ [Don 'grub tshe ring] from Tog accomplished with pure intentions the good services of inscribing the *maṇi* and so forth. As reward for this, he is provided with land of the size of 15 *khal* of seed [...], land of the size of 3 *khal* of seed [...]. In addition, the property of a house [...]; and an area of uncultivated land [...]. All this was transferred.³²

Such transfer of land, tax revenue or reduction, and other privileges were not only directed to individuals but also to certain monasteries, which in return performed prayers. Specific rituals for the royal family were listed in a number of royal charters, the latter one of the means through which various monastic communities ensured themselves a steady financial support from the ruler. In a document that was probably issued around 1765, the widow of bKra shis rnam rgyal (king of Purig) ordered the transfer of right to levy taxes for a total of 22 *khal* of seed to the monastery sTeng rgyud in Spiti. This transfer was conditional on the provision of various religious services, including death rituals for the late king of Purig and his son, ceremonies for long life and successful reign of the king of Ladakh, ceremonies for long life of the king's mother and the queen, and ceremonies for the welfare of the

³⁰ Based on *caritas* ("charity"), Christianity in its early days offered a new concept of social responsibility. Mutual giving and taking gave meaning to both donor and recipient in a material and spiritual exchange system. This charity was used mainly by the nobility and clergy to increase their prestige, but also understood as a guideline of action by guilds of trade and crafts.

³¹ According to Schuh (2008: 444), '*o ma cig pa* refers to a family from which a woman is recruited as a wet nurse for the young children of the royal family.

³² 'Jam dbyang rgyal mtshan (2008: 249–250).

author of the document and her daughter.³³ In several documents, king bDe skyong rnam rgyal rewarded the establishment and performance of an annual ritual for a long life of the king and his family with the transfer of land, taxes, and manpower to the monastery in Matho:

Thinking that for the lifetime of the king [...] and (for the lifetime) of his family (it would be good) if one could establish as a life-prolonging ritual (*tshe grub*) (the regular performance) of a rNam rgyal stong mchod, he said that (it would be good) if a financial basis (*gzhi rten*) would arise for it.³⁴

The remission of tax obligations or the transfer of the same to other persons could also be ordered in return for these rituals; apparently, this order was not always followed. An addition on a document by king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal (r. 1739–1753) threatens consequences for the refusal of transport services—probably by the population—and emphasises the importance of these services for the execution of the mentioned rituals.³⁵

As Arthur Mark Trewin states, such royal patronage was more than just an economic relationship and the kings clearly expected to take popular credit for their support of monastic institutions.³⁶ Furthermore the kings had, at least in theory, an exclusive right to demand such special religious services, not only out of an economic power, but also because of their divine authority. Therefore all the “purchased” religious goods (whether material or symbolic in nature) ultimately served to strengthen the social status and prestige of both sides—the ruler and the Buddhist establishment which received the grants of the ruling dynasty.

Representation strategies aimed to promote the king not only as an individual, but also in association with the elites present at court. Ultimately, it was not only a matter of clarifying the position of the ruler, rather of establishing a certain group identity through which the inner circle of power could define itself.³⁷ Members of the royal household depicted in the paintings are usually no less splendidly designed than the royal family: certain aspects of clothing and jewellery indicate an elevated social as well as economic rank and distinguish them from the normal population (see Fig.3).

³³ Schuh and Heimbel (2019: 82–84).

³⁴ Schuh and (Heimbel 2019: 115).

³⁵ Schuh and Heimbel (2019: 146).

³⁶ Trewin (1995: 246–248).

³⁷ Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 7).



Fig. 3 — Female members of Ladakhi aristocracy, Basgo (*Cham ba lha khang*).

According to Abdul Ghani Sheik, oral tradition states “that the aristocracy [...] wore dyed clothes, while ordinary people were restricted to plain cloth. The nobility also monopolised the use of foreign materials such as satin, brocade and velvet.”³⁸ William Moorcroft, who reached Ladakh in the early 19th century, confirms this in his records: the head-gear of the *bka’ blon* and other high officials, for instance, are said here to have been made from Russian silk velvet and Chinese brocade.³⁹ In addition, Moorcroft lists a whole range of equipment that can be found among the aristocratic class of Ladakh, such as boots of Russian or Chinese leather; necklaces of silver, gold, pearls, coral and turquoise; ornamented tea-pots and cups of Chinese porcelain.⁴⁰ The sense of exclusivity and economic superiority through the consumption of certain goods ultimately strengthened the power position of nobles. Alexander Cunningham even claims that these displays of royal luxuries were the only things that really interested the king:

[...] the king was well satisfied both with his minister and with his subjects, if the former gave him sufficient means for the enjoyment of his royal pleasure, and if the latter never disturbed his quiet ease with their

³⁸ Sheik (2010a: 56).

³⁹ Moorcroft and Trebeck (1841: 323).

⁴⁰ Moorcroft and Trebeck (1841: 326–329).

complaints.⁴¹

For some rNam rgyal dynasty throne holders this may well be true. Especially king Tshe dbang rnam rgyal, according to the chronicles, only cared about his horses, wasting vast amounts of state funds for his obsession and thus disrupting the political peace and order.⁴²

These means to represent one's own position were supplemented by communal rituals that influenced both life at court and the king's public appearances. A number of social groups were involved in these ceremonies and rewarded with money, land or privileges for their services. In his studies on the musical symbolics of power and authority in Ladakh, Trewin emphasises the importance of the Mon community of musicians, known as *mkhar mon*, under the rNam rgyal dynasty:

These group of royal musicians resembled a "mercantile guild", which had an economic emphasis and shared probably similar rights and obligations as the palace traders (*mkhar tshong pa*).⁴³

The lineage of these court musicians is said to have originated at the beginning of the 17th century when a group of Muslim maids and musicians was sent to Ladakh to attend the wedding of king 'Jam dbyang rnam rgyal with the daughter of the ruler of Kapulu.⁴⁴ The musicians were constantly present at court, whether they were needed or not, and probably received a fixed annual salary and land for their services. Their main activities were bound to the public duties and ceremonies of the king.⁴⁵ Moorcroft writes:

[...] musical accompaniments [...] form part of the state of the higher secular dignitaries, and the Raja is always preceded by minstrels and musicians when he leaves his palace.⁴⁶

Indication of daytimes and music performances to announce and escort the king's participation in sportive contests, such as archery and horse-racing, were also part of the court musicians' tasks. Furthermore they accompanied dances at royal feasts held in the palace and performed songs in the king's honour.⁴⁷ The materials of their instruments aimed to reinforce the symbolism of their performances and reflected

⁴¹ Cunningham (1854: 257).

⁴² Francke (1926: 122).

⁴³ Trewin (1995: 185).

⁴⁴ Sheik (2010b: 70).

⁴⁵ Trewin (1995: 186).

⁴⁶ Moorcroft (1841: 344).

⁴⁷ Trewin (1995: 186).

the king's status. The royal *sur na*⁴⁸ for example "was covered with silver inlaid with gold and encrusted ruby, lapis lazuli, coral and turquoise in lotus-flower and peacock motifs".⁴⁹ The function of such festivities was to convey, manifest, and promote an ideal identity of the noble class, which constituted the self-image of the ruler and his court.⁵⁰ Court musicians' crucial role in the king's display becomes also evident by the fact that they figure in most of the earlier mentioned wall-paintings beside the royal family and their staff.

Another group to be represented in visual media are the court dancers: just like the musicians, they too contributed to the image of the king and his entertainment (see Fig. 4). Selected families were obliged to provide one dancer each whenever the king requested their services and were rewarded with food. Furthermore, it was considered a privilege to be ordered to dance at the royal court and thus contributed to the prestige of these families.⁵¹



Fig. 4 – Court musicians and dancers, Leh (*rNam rgyal rtse mo*).

Such ritualised display of socio-economic status aimed to influence narratives and promote certain ideals and concepts of rulership. Authority, in general, relies on the approval of the population: this could be secured through violence and coercion, but where rulers fulfil certain expectations by granting their subjects' protection and support, the latter are more willing to comply.⁵² The king's public participation in Buddhist festivities can certainly be seen in such a light: Martin

⁴⁸ *Sur na* is a wooden flute which is played in traditional folk-music from Central Eurasia, Western Asia, and North Africa.

⁴⁹ Trewin (1995: 233).

⁵⁰ Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 13).

⁵¹ Heber and Heber ([1903] 1976: 210).

⁵² Trewin (1995: 203).

Brauen for instance mentions the personal role of the king in a certain ritual, where he would adopt the deity from Nyarma as “crown deity” by offering her a horse and a lion.⁵³ Although it is hard to reconstruct how much of this description corresponds to the truth, it seems safe to imply that the kings served certain narratives and provided role models through their patronage of Buddhist celebrations in both material and symbolic forms. All these rites of representation—whether at the royal court or in the religious sphere—ultimately embodied norms and values that were important for the self-image of royal figures and thus served to legitimise their power.

Last but not least, social and economic functions of the court as place of everyday life and centre of consumption shaped the architectural environment by creating quarters for aristocracy, crafts, and trade in the immediate vicinity of the royal palace. The royal residence itself dominated the surrounding landscape and conveyed the superior position of its inhabitants. In votive inscriptions, the royal buildings are depicted as heavenly palaces on earth and are therefore symbolically elevated—an attribution of a supernatural aura that reflects the special status of the rulers.⁵⁴ The royal palace in Leh—a nine-storeys high building—was constructed during the first half of 17th century by king Seng ge rnam rgyal (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 – Palace and old town in Leh.

⁵³ Brauen (1980: 143–144).

⁵⁴ Francke and Jina (2003: 123–124).

It was designed by a Muslim carpenter from Baltistan and is said to have been completed within three years.⁵⁵ After its construction, Leh Palace remained the main royal seat until the defeat of the kingdom by the Dogra in mid-19th century. Cunningham writes:

The royal palace at Lé is a large fine-looking building, that towers in lofty pre-eminence over the whole city. [...] Its size and height give it a very imposing appearance.⁵⁶

Moorcroft describes the palace as “a conspicuous object on the approach to the city.”⁵⁷ The palace building stands elevated, above the normal people. The surrounding wall separates the people inside from the world outside—spatially as well as symbolically: those who are outside the palace’s walls do not belong to the inner centre of power, nor can they profit from the advantages and amenities of the royal court. Impressive royal seats also testify to the economy of the kingdom: size, furnishings, and architecture give an idea of the financial and human resources required as well as the numerous professions and craftsmanship expertise which were used to build them.

Economic and political functionality

The dwelling of the royal court encloses not only a social habitat but also an economic area, namely that of the housekeeping. The palace community is responsible for covering the regular goods and labour needs of everyday life at court. According to Yoseb Gergan, there were a number of offices assigned to this task: the *gnyer pa* (“steward”) was in charge of the food storage and the account of incoming and outgoing goods; the *'degs dpon* (“master of scales”) weighed incoming commodities; the *shing dpon* (“master of timber”) organised the provision and storage of wood and coal; and the *sha gnyer* (“meat steward”) was responsible for ensuring the meat supply.⁵⁸ One does also find a *lcags gnyer* (“iron steward”) mentioned in legal documents.⁵⁹ Moorcroft states that the subjects supplied the king with fuel, milk, butter, tea and grass for his cattle; they also contributed to the basic economic maintenance of the elite through their services as servants in the king’s household or as labourers in his fields.⁶⁰ Further donations for the court’s daily needs were corn, wood, apricot, apples, and grapes.⁶¹ In

⁵⁵ Sheik (2010c: 95).

⁵⁶ Cunningham (1854: 314–315).

⁵⁷ Moorcroft (1841: 318).

⁵⁸ Gergan (1976: 606).

⁵⁹ See Togdan Rinpoche (2015: 347).

⁶⁰ Moorcroft (1841: 320).

⁶¹ Petech (1977: 159–160).

addition to these natural resources for daily care, the king also received a regular income of about 50,000 rupees. According to Cunningham, this income consisted mainly of various taxes, presents, fees, and customs.⁶² This budget was further supplemented by revenue derived from houses alienated for the maintenance of the royal family.⁶³ However, ensuring the basic provision of food and other goods for the daily operation of the palace could become quite problematic, especially in times of crisis. Two royal edicts, issued in the second half of 18th century, state that due to political incidents—in one case internal unrest, in the other the change of office in the administration—there was a shortage of food at the court. In both instances, a person named 'Gang ba must personally cover for this lack of supply:

When in the Fire Pig Year riots and accusations arose as a result of inner unrest [...] the meat and butter for the kitchen did not arrive. But the 'Gang ba searched for a tricky method and borrowed it. There was no possibility to travel to Sa spo rtse, but he went there without consideration for his life and spent the expenses for the kitchen.⁶⁴

Accordingly, at the time of change in the office of the meat steward (*sha gnyer*) [...], it turned out that food for the fortress did not arrive. For this purpose [...] the 'Gang ba separated the meat and the butter etc. for the kitchen and [...] according to the instructions of the treasurer [...] the butter, meat etc. were sent on loan.⁶⁵

These examples illustrate that the royal court depended on local agricultural production for its everyday needs in order to secure its own livelihood and thus its functionality as centre of power. The fact that the king's subsistence had to be secured even beyond his reign is addressed in the Treaty of Hanle, where the retired king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal is granted land as a property to secure his welfare.⁶⁶

The royal court was not only a place of everyday life and representation, it was also the administrative centre of power from which the destiny of the kingdom was directed. It was here that the king met with his advisers to take political decisions, grant edicts or discuss military strategies. The royal court was thus a knot of social networks and communication, in which a number of different individuals and groups interacted with each other. This social function of the royal court served to bind those persons to the ruler, who in turn was necessarily dependent on their support for his own survival. This was particularly

⁶² Cunningham (1854: 270–271).

⁶³ Petech (1977: 159).

⁶⁴ Schuh (2008: 111–112).

⁶⁵ Schuh (2008: 117).

⁶⁶ Schwieger (1999: 197).

true of members of the aristocracy and clergy, whose influence the ruler sought to regulate and control his kingdom. Such equal integration and neutralisation of power elites, at least in theory, is to be regarded as one of the main tasks of the royal court alongside the actual governing of the territory.⁶⁷ The functioning of administrative bodies had therefore to be ensured on a personal as well as economic level. Those who supposedly put this operativity at risk—for example by raising the costs of keeping the court or by enriching themselves—were accused of harming the social reputation of the entire government, thus endangering their own position of power. Examples of such situations can be found in several sources. The *La dwags rgyal rabs* mentions that the kings Tshe dbang rnam rgyal and Tshe dpal don 'grub rnam rgyal strained both country and people with their irrational behaviour and disproportionate use of economic resources against the explicit advice of their officials. The text goes on saying:

As the king again paid no special attention, the treasures he had passed into the hands of other nations. At that time the treasure was lost beyond recovery.⁶⁸

The Treaty of Hanle further claims that there were even some irregularities in the income and expenses of the castle and identifies the *bka' blon* bSod nams lhun grub and his son Tshul khrim rdo rje—who also held the position of prime minister for some time—as responsible of such anomalies:

[...] And again as for the reason that all income and expenses of the castle of Ladakh are free (from receipts), since the time of the minister bSo nams lhun grub [...] one has only been doing business for one's own interests. Thus one has taken most of the income and land itself.⁶⁹

[...] Because the minister Tshul khrim rdo rje had no affection for the castle, he kept all external and internal income for himself. By sending each other confidential conversations and letters, the greats were eager for rewards. [...] Because the benefits to the king of Ladakh were not great, both inwardly and outwardly, [...] great damage was done to the castle [...].⁷⁰

It was therefore up to all members of the royal court to ensure that the centre of power functioned properly—on both an economic and administrative level. Besides the satisfaction of daily needs and desires,

⁶⁷ Butz and Dannenberg (2004: 33–34), Paravicini (2007: 242–243).

⁶⁸ Francke (1926: 122–126).

⁶⁹ Schwieger (1999: 200).

⁷⁰ Schwieger (1999: 208).

a smooth running of state affairs required the carefully balancing of existing competitions and a tight control over the power aspirations of single individuals. However, as the kingdom's history shows, such issues could by no means always be settled internally and sometimes external mediators were needed to settle conflict situations.

Controlling the social and economic space

The way in which power and domination are exercised becomes evident not only in the relationship of the ruler with his advisers and subjects, but also in the way in which the controlled space is dealt with. It is precisely in feudal and patrimonial conditions that dominion over subjects derives from monopolised power over their land. In the sociology of space, the principle of distribution is mentioned as an immanent factor: spaces are used to establish relations between goods, between people, and between goods and people. The constitution of space is based on the use of primary resources to secure one's own placement and to influence the placements of others. Space itself becomes a commodity, a wealth, an object of exchange. Through the control and division of this strategic resource, legal, economic, and political structures are created in the territory of domination. The basis for this is an asymmetrical distribution of access to material and social goods; yet, space and the order constituted within it are never to be seen as static, but as a relational and changeable resource of a political and economic practice.⁷¹ The possibility of influencing these spatial structures can be attributed to four different means:

- (1) Wealth, which is to be considered as the primary chance for an increased availability of goods. Since prosperity and riches are mainly in hands of higher classes in society, they therefore earn bigger possibilities in determining spatial and social structures.
- (2) Rank, which means that the chance to get access to goods is determined by one's position in the social hierarchy. Those who have higher positions are usually given more space and resources (symbolically and materially).
- (3) Affiliation, referring to the possibility of access based on the association to certain groups. For instance, belonging to a community of craftsmen provides opportunities and networks to acquire and exchange certain resources and expertise.
- (4) Knowledge, which can be related to symbolic or material processes and grants more possibilities of action. Specific knowledge, for example in the religious sphere, allows people

⁷¹ Löw ([2001] 2017: 214–217).

to use certain resources and thereby enables them to influence spaces and power structures.

These means to create and influence relations of space—be it on a material, symbolical, economic or social level—always appear in combination and can strengthen or weaken each other: although a person may theoretically have a better chance of obtaining resources through their membership of a specific group, their access to them can still be limited, for example due to insufficient financial means. As social positions can be tied to certain expertise or possessions, the access to knowledge and money is in turn often organised by affiliation or rank.⁷² Members of the ruling class in pre-modern societies usually owned these means (e.g. wealth, rank) themselves or could make use of networks of special knowledge and expertise in consideration of their socio-economic status. They therefore represented a decisive factor in the constitution and organisation of all sorts of spaces.

The importance of space and land for maintaining one's own status is particularly evident in royal policies. Relations between centre and periphery, structures of administration, ownership and dependencies, and the control of resources play a central role in this context. Land must certainly be considered as one of the most important instruments to create political, social, and economic structures.⁷³ In contemporary Tibetan societies, the mobility of land was limited: all land was property of the ruler, who bestowed estates to the nobles and monasteries as government grants and had the right to resume them at will. The sale of land was restricted or even forbidden, and the main form of transfer was inheritance. The common people, bound to these estates, had to provide certain inalienable obligations of service and tax payments.⁷⁴ Since the power of disposal and distribution over space was primarily reserved to the king, his possibilities to influence social and economic structures were immense. As previously mentioned, certain social groups which engaged in the representation mechanism of the royal family were rewarded for their services mainly by land allocation. In this way, local centres of specialised communities emerged: these were sustained from generation to generation and their family and business networks often extended across borders.⁷⁵ Court

⁷² Löw ([2001] 2017: 212–214).

⁷³ The significance of land is reflected in the oral lore. As Sheik states, old proverbs show that prosperity and social position were defined by the extent of cultivable land they possessed. One of such proverbs is: "To take a bride by pretending that *tetres* is his main field", where *tetres* describes the largest field belonging to the king of Ladakh (2010a: 53).

⁷⁴ Carrasco (1959: 209), Kapstein ([2006] 2012: 176).

⁷⁵ Bray ([2011] 2016: 314).

musicians, for example, were provided with estates in Phyang and sometimes even with houses within the capital's citadel, and palace traders were given land in Leh and Ruthog for their subsistence.⁷⁶ Land also served as means of payment for certain positions within the administration:

The uncle [...] has taken over the office of the smaller caretaker, but the number of fields was too small. For this reason, the fields belonging to the fortress' own core possession [...] were now handed over as permanent possessions.⁷⁷

The transfer of land however did not only occur purely in material form as land ownership or residential space, rather it was usually accompanied by granting access to various economic resources such as the labour of the people living there, certain tax income, and other privileges. The granting of such rights enabled the receiving person with some form of control over defined geographical, social, and economic spaces within the kingdom and created thereby hierarchies across several levels of society. The size and location of the assigned space often reflected social status, degree of economic dependence, and possibilities of political influence. Princes who did not succeed to the throne, for example, were often granted territory at the edge of the kingdom in order to keep them at the greatest possible distance from the centre of power. Or they were—at least theoretically—completely banished from the political sphere by their entering into monasteries.

If officials did not fulfil their duties or were disgraced in front of the king, they were usually deprived of their land. In a document from 1731 it is stated that after the minister Lhun grub was removed from his office, the fields and residence which had been granted to him were confiscated by the fortress, and his family resettled in another area. Such a demotion always carried with it the loss of associated social goods, economic advantages, and thereby rank and power potential. On the other hand, if it were the king who lost control over the selective distribution of land and space to aristocrats with their own agendas, this could in turn threaten his position of power. A prominent case was that of prime minister Tshul khrims rdo rje, a member of an influential noble family that had been in the service of the king for generations. The Treaty of Hanle remarks how, after his appointment as *bka' blon*, he was driven only "[...] by his desire to eat from the power of the king of Ladakh [...]"⁷⁸ The text further states:

⁷⁶ Trewin (1995: 186), Sheik (2010b: 70).

⁷⁷ Schuh (2008: 143).

⁷⁸ Schwieger (1999: 233).

Because at the time of my grandfather Nyi ma, the minister was allowed to use the lands of the castle at will, not a single son of the minister [...] was sent to the monastery, and he generously allocated lands of the castle to them. Instead of the daughters from the castle, he sent his own daughters to the princes as brides. (He) pretended that (his) family were even the rulers. (He) hoped that in the end he would actually attain royal rule.⁷⁹

Through these examples it becomes clear that the power to dispose and distribute material and social resources was a key tool in the maintenance of status and power within one's own dominion.

But how was control over these resources assured in border areas? A collection of documents belonging to sTeng rgyud monastery in Spiti,⁸⁰ illustrates what power of disposal over spaces, goods, and people may look like in areas where different spheres of influence overlapped: a document dated 1708, for instance, confirms that the monasteries of Spiti, including their monastic villages, were under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan monastery of bKra shis gang, yet economic, military, and political control over the rest of Spiti had been transferred to the government of Ladakh. Spiti was thus divided into two parts, one administrated by a religious establishment, the other by the court. Although the monasteries did not fall within the jurisdiction of Ladakh according to this decree, the Ladakhi king issued several documents in the following years to institutions of the Sa skya school. In these documents it can be seen that economic resources for the execution of an annual ritual in these monasteries had to be assured by the king of Ladakh, since the localities providing them were subordinated to his administration. Furthermore, it was the *bla brang* of the monasteries that had to provide certain goods to the *mkhar dpon* ("governor of a castle") of the Ladakhi administration in the area—even if they were not officially under his authority.⁸¹

Other documents illustrate the different spheres of influence in a village called Rama: some households were required to pay taxes to a Sa skya monastery, others to a local dGe lugs pa monastery, and others still were directly subordinated to the administration of the king of Ladakh. The fact that this situation could lead to conflicts became apparent when the handling of a broken water channel was discussed in the village: basing themselves on the existing tax duties, the inhabitants considered different authorities to be in charge. Some turned to the monastery with the request to completely rebuild the channel, others complained about these plans to the king of Ladakh. According to

⁷⁹ Schwieger (1999: 233).

⁸⁰ Published by Dieter Schuh and Jörg Heimbel (2019).

⁸¹ Schuh and Heimbel (2019: xxii, 46, 56).

the documents dealing with this topic, the problem of different responsibilities regarding the rights of water use had been present in this village for over a century. In the end it seems that the issue was somehow solved, and the channel was repaired and used by all parties equally.⁸² Although these conflicting situations did not seriously question the separation of power in Spiti as a whole, they show how precarious the circumstances could become at the margins of one's own domain. Regarding the supply and control of economic resources, special strategies were necessary in order to maintain one's own political influence and economic survival in these contested areas.

Warfare, commerce, and the economy of gifts

Finally, the kings' tasks also included securing and demonstrating their social status against other rulers, and they did so through war, trade or diplomacy. All of them depended in different ways on economic resources: in the foreground of all their efforts was the preservation and expansion of their own power. Despite being sometimes unavoidable, military conflicts came at a hefty price due to the inevitable loss of people and material that ensued them. There was no permanent army in Ladakh, and the armed forces were more of an *ad hoc* appointed national militia. In case of war, every family had to provide one soldier, as well as weapons, rations, and an extra-man for transportation, who also acted as a replacement soldier in case of need.⁸³ It is hardly surprising that the general food supply of the kingdom was at risk in such times of crisis. War always meant a higher consumption of goods and a simultaneous loss of manpower to cover the increase in supplies, since many were otherwise involved and only a few remained to care for the basic needs of the kingdom. According to Sheik, these circumstances even led to quick retreats of invading forces "as local production could not sustain such arm[ies]" for long.⁸⁴ Like soldiers, most of the other military positions were also appointed in case of necessity: the prime minister, or any other of the chief ministers, was entrusted the role of commander-in-chief to lead the campaign and was therefore unable to uphold his original duties during the period of military intervention.⁸⁵ They were often generously rewarded for their services with material and social goods, as a number of legal documents show:

When war was waged [...], Nga dbang lhun grub settled on the

⁸² Schuh and Heimbel (2019: xxvii, 184).

⁸³ Petech (1977: 160).

⁸⁴ Sheik (2010a: 52).

⁸⁵ Petech (1977: 160).

mountain spur and rendered efficient services. Based on this, I gave him the house where Nur ma gzhi lived and which belonged to the fortress.⁸⁶

In addition to this higher consumption of man and material in cases of war, defeats had also to be taken into account, as they always entailed the danger of losing control and power over strategic resources and spaces. On the other hand, conquering areas endowed with economic advantages could benefit the political and financial state of the kingdom. As mentioned in the chronicles, the conquering of Gu ge by Seng ge rnam rgyal brought access to local gold mines and therefore a significant surplus of economic means for the royal court in Ladakh.⁸⁷ The proceeds of war were not limited to access to local resources, as they also brought a surplus of humans and animals: "He brought the chiefs of all these (districts) [...] (with him) as hostages" and "[...] carried away ponies, yaks, goats, and sheep, and filled the land with them".⁸⁸ It should be kept in mind though that the plundering of those very same resources by foreign powers may in turn lead to a serious weakening of one's own economic state.

Commerce was another important instrument of trans-regional interactions. The kings of Ladakh were the largest traders of the kingdom and thus generated profits beyond the local economic production. The royal palace maintained its very own group of merchants (*mkhar tshong pa*) who were mainly involved in the trade of wool. Traders from outside brought in return all different kind of fabrics, precious stones, porcelain, medicine, luxury items, and other commodities.⁸⁹ Custom duties imposed on these products represented a large source of revenue for the ruling aristocrats. Moorcroft writes:

The Raja, the Khalun, and the Lompa⁹⁰ also divide between them the produce of the imposts on merchandise in transit, and they all carry on a trade in shawl wool and tea, from which their principal income derived."⁹¹

Trade meant mobility not only of goods, but also of people and information, and therefore social contacts and forms of exchange across borders. By levying road taxes, issuing so-called *lam yig* ("grants of

⁸⁶ Schuh (2008: 123).

⁸⁷ Francke (1926: 110).

⁸⁸ Francke (1926: 105, 108).

⁸⁹ Ahmed (2014: 336).

⁹⁰ Moorcroft means here the officials residing in the royal capital: so Khalun standing for the prime minister (*bka' blon*) and Lompa for the governor (*blon po*) of Leh.

⁹¹ Moorcroft (1841: 335).

passage”), and securing transport labour,⁹² the kings could influence and regulate the circulation of goods, people, and animals. In addition, almost all social groups in the country, from the aristocracy to members of the clergy and peasants, were somehow involved in the structures of local or transregional commerce business. The control over routes and networks could therefore guarantee and increase power potentials, as demonstrated by the fact that a blockade of the trade routes was used several times during the rNam rgyal dynasty as means of political pressure. One prominent case occurred in the 18th century: during the separation of the Ladakhi kingdom, Phun tshogs rnam rgyal—who was then king of Purig—caused political troubles by blocking the flow of goods and people between Ladakh and Kashmir. In the Treaty of Hanle it is said:

The uncle has stopped the travelers, (namely) the merchants and messengers, until today. There was a conflict between Ladakh and Mulbekh. Not only in the end the Kashmiris did not bear it anymore. This certainly makes it a cause of a great deal of conflict between the kingdoms.⁹³

The fact that such points were part of peace negotiations in all major conflicts testifies to the general importance of commerce for the political situation of the kingdom. The trade blockade, initiated by Seng ge rnam rgyal and maintained for many years, is said to have been an economic disaster for the Ladakhi kingdom.⁹⁴ Dieter Schuh doubts that the impact on the economy was that drastic: on the one hand, this blockade would have relieved the common people of their obligations to “forced and more or less unpaid labour in the transportation sector”.⁹⁵ On the other, the income from trade had never been spent on military infrastructure or on raising the living standard of ordinary people; instead, it was mainly used to finance luxury goods for the court, the aristocracy, and the monastic establishments. It is also unlikely that the kingdom would have outlived Seng ge rnam rgyal for two centuries if the blockade were having such a great impact on its economic state.⁹⁶ The question arises to what extent trade actually contributed to Ladakh’s economic strength. Of course, such a blockade caused financial losses especially for the upper class by eliminating

⁹² The common Tibetan term for such obligatory or corvée transport labour is *’u lag*. In the Indian Himalayas it is also known with the Persian/Urdu term *begar*. For details on nature and development of transport labour in Ladakh, see Grist (1994) and Bray (2008 and forthcoming).

⁹³ Schwieger (1999: 224).

⁹⁴ Petech (1977: 51, 163).

⁹⁵ Schuh (2014: 153).

⁹⁶ Schuh and Munshi (2014: 153).

additional sources of income (e.g. road tolls and import taxes) and limiting the availability of luxury items. The common people were more likely to benefit from the blockade though, as certain mandatory services became obsolete. It should not be forgotten, however, that such an obstruction could have effects beyond the economic level. The reduced mobility of people and information due to the blockade of infrastructures was likely to be more of a problem than the loss of access to a few material goods. For example, in the excerpt from the Treaty of Hanle quoted above, not only merchants but also messengers are explicitly mentioned as being affected by the blockade. It is also conceivable that an absolute blockade of strategically important crossroads had an impact on local exchange of information and goods and would then no longer affect only long-distance trade and the country's ruling elite. With that in mind, such a blockade may not have been the ultimate economic ruin of the kingdom—but it could have significantly limited the scope of political action.⁹⁷

Last but not least, commerce did not only dictate terms and conditions for royal policy, since traders themselves played a central role in political communication. In their function as intermediaries between rulers, they did not only represent economic interests but were also instrumental in shaping foreign political relations. A very prominent case in this regard were the Lopchak (*lo phyag*) missions sent from the court of Leh to Lhasa. Established after the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War in 1684, these diplomatic missions continued to take place until the mid-20th century and were always tied to the exchange of material goods. Every three years, representatives commissioned by the Ladakhi royal court carried a number of gifts for the local Tibetan government and important monasteries. The list of gifts mentioned in treaties and chronicles included gold, saffron, and cotton cloth. In return, the Tibetan side regularly sent its own diplomatic mission to Ladakh, mainly with tea.⁹⁸ In both cases the exporting traders were also granted privileges: they benefited from corvée transport labour on either sides of the frontier and used the journey to their own advantage by trading lucrative goods along the way—these missions thus have always been both political and economic in nature.⁹⁹ Although the symbolic action of presenting gifts played a main role on the surface, the items also had an economic value that could not be overlooked and gave them

⁹⁷ The critical role of such transportation networks is also emphasised by Goldstein in his study on taxation and structure of the Tibetan village of Samada. He describes the corvée transport system as an important tool “through which the central government maintained communications with all points in the polity with a minimum of personnel and expense” (1971: 25).

⁹⁸ Francke (1926: 116), Bray (2018: 44).

⁹⁹ Bray (2018: 51).

additional weight: the grant of high-end and luxury goods revealed the prestige and status of its donor as well as of that of the one receiving them; such missions also consumed a whole range of other resources. According to the *La dwags rgyal rabs*, each embassy had to be provided with daily rations for the members, several animals to carry humans and loads, a specific number of men “to act as groom, cook, and servant”, and unrestricted fodder for the horses.¹⁰⁰

Ritualised exchange of gifts formed one of the bases for political communication and interaction with foreign powers during the kingdom’s period. However, such tributary relationships and the dependencies expressed by them could be interpreted in very different ways by the involved parties. Even non-payment of tributes in some cases had no major observable consequences for the political status quo. When Seng ge rnam rgyal did not pay his promised tribute to the Mughal Empire, Ladakh remained for all intents and purposes an independent kingdom. It was not until his successor bDe ldan rnam rgyal raised to power that envoys were sent to the Mughal court to make concessions of loyalty. In return, the new emperor Aurangzeb demanded, among other things, the construction of a mosque and the production of coins bearing his name.¹⁰¹ These political relations and dependencies were thus not a fixed and unchangeable construct, rather presented themselves differently depending on the perspective through which they were seen and had to be negotiated repeatedly during the period of the dynasty. The kings of Ladakh therefore constantly stood within a spectrum between open confrontation and efforts to reach consensus. In this regard, economic resources and networks could play a significant role in the communication with other rulers.

Concluding remarks

In summary, the stabilisation of power in the kingdom of Ladakh was based on various strategies adopted in the fields of representation, administration, and interaction, which were all carried out to some extent with the help of economic means. The king demonstrated his economic and social status by consuming, displaying, donating, and purchasing material and symbolic goods. He influenced the economic and social system by determining, regulating, and controlling framework conditions such as the distribution of land, grants of privileges, and access to resources. He actively participated in the production and circulation of economic goods through his role as a trader and warlord. The

¹⁰⁰ Francke (1926: 116).

¹⁰¹ Petech (1977: 63).

kingdom's material economic system was based on two key elements: agriculture and trans-regional trade. While the first was primarily intended to cover the daily needs of food, trans-regional trade and its exquisite goods were aimed first and foremost at the aristocratic class: as consumers, they pushed the production and circulation of commodities through their lifestyle. In addition, a whole range of different protagonists were involved in the kingdom's political and economic fortunes. Their services for the ruling class—whether in a representative, administrative, political or religious form—were usually accompanied by economic advantages and often granted them a special social position. The complex network of relations between rulers, elites, and subjects was ultimately based on a system of asymmetrical distribution of material, social, and symbolic goods. When kings lost control over these resources, for example through internal quarrels, trade blockades or military defeats, the social and political order could be destabilised and the ruler's position of power endangered. The control and regulation of access to resources of any kind was therefore essential for building and maintaining the ruler's socio-economic status and political power.

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