

# Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors

VILLAGE RELIGION IN SIKKIM



BY

ANNA BALIKCI

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SIKKIM UNIVERSITY  
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## PREFACE

This book was initially written as a doctoral dissertation in Social Anthropology at the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies. It is based on over two years of field research carried out in Sikkim and in the village of Tingchim between October 1993 and December 1995, with two additional research visits to the village in May and December 1996. Since the first draft was written in the late 1990s, my understanding of the subject based on the initial fieldwork experience has evolved in a number of ways. I have again been living in Sikkim since 1999 and working at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology as Research Coordinator since 2002. My work at the Institute has allowed me to carry out further field studies in a number of new settings and circumstances, particularly among the Lepcha of Dzongu in North Sikkim. When I started rewriting my thesis as a book in 2005, I eventually decided to exclude most of these new findings and experiences so as to keep it as a representation of a particular time and place, and of a particular experience. The first long-term fieldwork experience remains the most intense, where the discovery of a new social world can be an exhilarating experience for the novice anthropologist. Indeed, looking back, my enthusiasm for understanding Tingchim's ritual culture knew no limits and I never tired of attending rituals, carrying out interviews and looking for gaps in my understanding of the village's social world. I view this as an experience which, along with its moral obligations and academic standards of enquiry, cannot be lived outside of the anthropological framework. The freshness and innocence of my viewpoint also allowed for a certain distance, which made the data gathering and the processes of analysis and writing easier. I believe such work can only be done once in a person's lifetime. This said, my subsequent fieldwork experiences and understanding of Sikkimese culture are not any less valid than this initial study—they are simply different, and will require a different style of writing. After over twelve years of residence in Sikkim, I have gained an insider's viewpoint, which allows not only for a more nuanced grasp of socio-cultural issues, but also makes it in certain ways more difficult to distance myself, a distance which can be necessary for academic writing.



My time and efforts in recent years have been spent on visual anthropology projects where local participation and appreciation is achieved in a more direct way. It has indeed been one of my greatest pleasures to work with my father, Asen Balikci, along with young Sikkimese, in the discovery and recording of their own culture and history. Using the medium of ethnographic film and historic photographs, together with Dawa Tshering Lepcha, Tenzin Chukie Tashi and Phurpo Tshering Bhutia, we are gradually documenting Sikkimese ritual culture and reconstructing Sikkim's visual history in a way which appeals not only to foreign and local audiences, but also to different generations of Sikkimese from urban and rural as well as from modern and traditional educational backgrounds.

The rewriting of the original manuscript was generously funded by the Richard Carley Hunt Fellowship awarded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, New York, for which I am extremely grateful. Financial support for the initial research is acknowledged in the original preface below.

While working on this book, many people helped, both in Europe and in Sikkim. My gratitude first of all goes to my thesis supervisor Lionel Caplan and research assistant Lopen Dugyal Acharya Bhutia for their continuous support over the years. I would also like to thank my thesis examiners Charles Ramble and Sophie Day for their comments and encouragement, as well as Tashi Densapa, Director of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, for giving me the necessary leave to work on the final manuscript. I am indebted to many who helped, each in their own way: Sabine Pusch, Mark Turin, Françoise Pommaret, Samten Karmay, Saul Mullard, Dawa Tshering Lepcha and Isabelle Onians. At Brill, I would like to thank Albert Hoffstädt and Patricia Radder. I am particularly grateful to the Series Editors Charles Ramble and Alex McKay for their most appreciated help while finalising the manuscript, as well as to Carl Yamamoto for his expert editing.

My father Asen Balikci, mother Véréna Ossent and husband Jigme Dorje Denjongpa were there every step of the way, giving me all the necessary time and space to complete this work, despite the numerous obligations and complications that come with a family life stretched over three cultures and continents.

Tathangchen, Sikkim  
January 2007



## ORIGINAL PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sikkim was first suggested to me as a place of study by Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute. With his encouragement, I visited Sikkim in January 1991 and again during three months in the summer of 1992. From the start, the religion of the common people interested me more than the Buddhism practised in the important monasteries, but I could find little literature on the subjects of village Buddhism, domestic rituals and the practices of Tibetan shamans. Sikkim, where the Lhopos' religious culture had remained fairly undisturbed, seemed like an ideal location for the study of village religion.

It is thanks to the efforts of Captain Yongda of Pemayangtse and the family of the late Executive Councillor Netuk Lama that I received my first one-year permit for Sikkim, a very difficult thing to obtain in those early days. I will forever be indebted to Captain Yongda and his wife Chumla, as well as to Pema Namgyal, his late mother Mrs Netuk Lama and his wife Aie Chumden for all the help, trust, patience and hospitality they extended to me over the years.

Armed with my first long-term permit and assisted by my good friend Tashi Wangdi, I started fieldwork at the end of 1993 in Nako-Chongpung village near Pemayangtse monastery. Working in Chongpung proved difficult for unrelated reasons and, with the help of Sonam Tinley of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, I eventually moved to Tingchim village in North Sikkim, where I met Lopen Dugyal, a lama who was to have a great influence on the unfolding of my project. Lopen Dugyal became my teacher, informant, research assistant, translator and friend. We worked together, in his village of Tingchim as well as in Gangtok, from March 1994 until December 1995, with two additional field trips to Tingchim in May and December 1996. My debt and gratitude to him is enormous as he patiently guided me nearly every step of the way and introduced me to the village's conceptual world. Tingchim proved to be a fascinating village as, unlike most villages in Sikkim, it still had a number of shamans working together with village lamas. It was an ideal site for a study of the religion of the common people.

It would be impossible for me to mention by name all the people in Sikkim who helped over the years. My gratitude goes first to the villagers of Tingchim, who welcomed me, answered my questions, tolerated my

presence in difficult circumstances and were generally patient enough with the demands of an anthropologist. I would like to thank the descendants of Dugda Mandal, the family of Ani (Tashi Lhamo) and Ajang (Kiaktsing), in whose house I stayed during the period of field-work. Their son Maila (Rabden) became my second research assistant, while his wife Atic and brother Saila (Sungrap) cooked and, along with Palzor and all the other children and cousins, generally made me feel at home while a guest in their house. The family of Lopen Dugyal, the descendants of Inchung Tsomi, have been of considerable help, especially his brother Norbu, who contributed many valuable insights. I would also like to thank Mr. Karma from Mangan, Tingchim's Panchayat vice-president, and to remember the late Mintok Tang Ajo as well as the late Lakchung, who first welcomed me in Tingchim.

The participation of Tingchim's ritual specialists was crucial in making this project a success. Ritual specialists in Sikkim are not generally inclined to share their knowledge with outsiders, particularly women coming from a foreign land. I am especially indebted to the Tingchim Bongthing, who always made me feel welcome at his rituals. His kindness will always be remembered. The same goes to the late Tsam Khang Ajo, the late Tingchim Pawo Nadu, the late Tingchim Ana Nejum, the late Sesung Gomchen and the Seyam Nejum. I remember them all as unique ritual specialists. Among the lamas, many were helpful, but I would particularly like to thank Pema Choden, Rigi, Nima Norbu, Rabjung and Chyuri.

While the names of most people and places have not been concealed, some villagers' names have not been revealed. The project made it impossible always to mention people in the best of circumstances, and when a matter was particularly sensitive, names were changed outright. Tingchim villagers, however, will know whom I am referring to and I sincerely apologise if I have offended anyone. It is my hope that I will be forgiven and that they will understand that all aspects of village life, the good and the bad, have to be included for this work to be complete. I would also like to apologise for any misrepresentation; any mistakes should be considered entirely as my own.

In Gangtok and elsewhere in the state, numerous people helped me. My deep appreciation goes to Pema Namgyal, Sonam Paljor, Chum Chukie Topden and Sonam Wangdi, who initiated me into the Sikkimese way of thinking and its politics in a most unusual way. Together they successfully fought against the construction of a hydro-electric power station which would have destroyed the abode of Sikkim's pro-



tective deities. During the four intensive months of the campaign, all openly shared their views, hopes and frustrations and worked together as a team. Truth often comes out in moments of crisis, and I now realise that what I learned during these four months is just as important as, or at least complements my understanding of, life in the village.

Others in Gangtok I would like to thank are the late Rechung Rinpoche, the late T.S. Gyaltzen, Tashi Densapa, Chumden Nangpa and her staff at the State Archives, Khenpo Lha Tsering, the late Dr Rigzing Ngodup Dokhampa and his nephew Sonam Tinley, Norden Tshering, the late Khyaliram Singhi and the late Ganju Lama VC. MM. And most importantly, the Sikkim Government officials who helped me obtain the necessary permits: ex-Chief Secretaries P.K. Pradhan, Varadhan and Sonam Wangdi, as well as Tsegyal Tashi, Namrata Thapa and T.T. Bhutia. Tsegyal Tashi is particularly remembered for his patience and understanding in dealing with what seemed like my never-ending demands for permit extensions.

Prince Jigdal Namgyal, the late Chogyal's brother, his wife Lacham Kusho Sonam Yangchen of Namseling and his son Ponpo Jigmela initially welcomed me to Sikkim in January 1991 and were extremely kind and supportive during fieldwork. I am grateful to Chimi Thonden, Lacham Kusho's niece from New York, who introduced me to her aunt. A special thank you goes to Semla, Princess Hope Leezum Namgyal, the youngest daughter of the late Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal. Semla was not only encouraging during fieldwork, she also gave me the keys to Rhenock House in Gangtok and thus provided me with a home where I could peacefully work on the final draft at a moment in my life when I needed it most.

Among my first teachers, I would like to mention the late Gorlok Tulku, who taught me some basics of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Genjong Rinpoche and Khenpo Chowang, who were equally helpful, each in his own way. Lachen Rinpoche has been a constant source of inspiration during all these years of researching, writing and living in Sikkim. By their mere presence, Dodrupchen Rinpoche and the late Khandrola of Chorten monastery, as well as Khandro Khyentse Tsering Choden at the Palace chapel, were constant sources of inspiration.

Funding for the pre-fieldwork year spent at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London was initially provided by the FCAR of Québec (Fonds pour la formation de chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche). Fieldwork and writing were generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Frederick

Williamson Memorial Fund, Cambridge University, and an Additional Fieldwork Award, School of Oriental and African Studies.

At the Université de Montréal, where this project was born, many extended their help. Deirdre Meintel gave me the necessary confidence to embark upon graduate studies; Jean-Claude Muller's lectures inspired me enough to want to become an anthropologist, and Madame Duplessis helped with administrative matters so that it could actually happen. Catherine Lussier's rock solid friendship came to my rescue more than once over the years. In London, Sabine Pusch's constant friendship and hospitality has meant so much to me. Alex Gabbay found Tingchim in the first place; Maria Phylactou read some of the chapters and was always of great support before and after fieldwork; and Charles Ramble at Oxford encouraged me to write about Sikkim's mountain deity.

At SOAS, Mark Hobart's fascinating lectures had a considerable influence on my approach to fieldwork. My deepest gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor, Lionel Caplan, who undoubtedly provided the greatest support over the years. Without his unfailing patience and help, even after he retired, the research process would never have unfolded as it did nor this thesis seen the light of day.

My father, Asen Balikci, has always been the greatest inspiration. As a child, I remember him coming back from the Arctic, where, in my mind, he spent most of his time hunting, kayaking and eating raw seal meat with a band of Eskimos. Later, when leaving for Afghanistan, where he worked among the Pashtoon nomads of the Hindu Kush, it was my greatest wish to accompany him to what seemed like the most interesting place on earth. Instead, we visited Pomak villages in the Bulgarian mountains, where I first became fascinated with other cultures. Later, my mother Véréna Ossent introduced me to the Himalayas at the perfect time in my life. Both my parents have been of immense support in so many ways over the years. My husband Jigme Dorje Denjongpa has been immensely patient. His support has been total in helping me complete this work, which also means so much to him. At home, Amla, Tshering Choden and Loday have patiently put up with a daughter-in-law who spends much of her time behind a computer instead of being a normal Sikkimese *nam*.

Tathangchen, Sikkim  
January 2002



## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The language of the Lhopo is a southern Tibetan dialect variously called Lhoke, Denjongke, Bhutia or simply Sikkimese which is written using the Tibetan alphabet. When reproducing Sikkimese words, I have simply spelled them the way I heard them. Their romanised Tibetan spelling is given in parentheses at their first appearance in the text following the Wylie system of transliteration (Wylie 1959). No distinction has been made between Lhoke and Tibetan terms. It is sometimes difficult for Lhoke-speakers themselves to make a distinction, and both languages are often used together in a single sentence, especially when referring to ritual. Until recently, Lhoke was a spoken dialect, and both Tibetan language and script were used when writing was necessary. In the 1980s, a simplified script was developed for Lhoke using the Tibetan alphabet. No adequate Lhoke dictionary is yet available and thus, the orthography of many terms reproduced here remains arbitrary. A glossary of recurrent words and their spellings is provided at the end. Foreign words have been italicised while proper names of places, people and deities appear in Roman characters.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

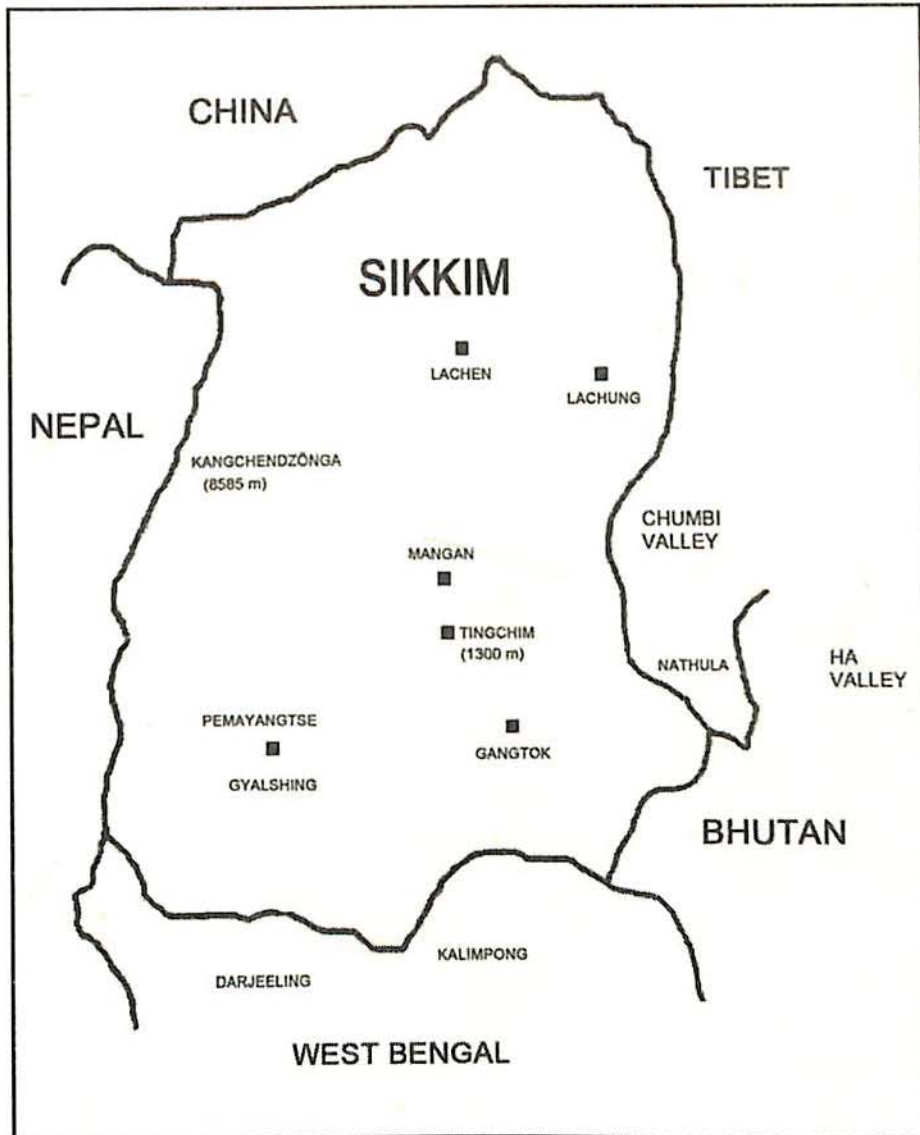
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Map 1: Sikkim



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This is a study of ritual within a community variously referred to as Bhutia, Lhopo or Denjongpa in the agricultural village of Tingchim in North Sikkim.<sup>1</sup> It is intended as a contribution to the anthropology of Himalayan Buddhist communities and to the discussion concerning the relation between Buddhism and shamanism. This study explores the rituals and working relations of Buddhist lamas and shamans<sup>2</sup> within the wider context of village life, taking into consideration the sacred history of the land as well as its more recent political and economic transformation.

Shamanic rituals held by various specialists among Tibetan Buddhist communities such as the Sherpas and the Ladakhis usually have either disappeared under the influence of forms of Buddhism that did not support such worldly practices or have been absorbed into the hierarchy of the Buddhist monasteries. The *pawo* (*dpa' bo*) and the *nejum* (*rnal 'byor ma*), the male and female shamans of the Sikkimese Lhopo, have remained independent of the Buddhist establishment and, for the most part, were neither suppressed nor greatly influenced by the lamas. In Tingchim, they perform their rituals side by side with non-celibate village lamas, usually independently but on some rare occasions, jointly. Considering that shamans, also called spirit-mediums or oracles, among Tibetan Buddhist communities have been portrayed as rivals of the lamas (Mumford 1989), in need of being tamed or domesticated (Day 1990), campaigned against by the celibate lamas (Ortner 1995) or at least tested and blessed (Berglie 1979, 1982), the independence of the Sikkimese *pawo* and *nejum*, and the tolerance the village lamas have shown them, may seem unusual.

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<sup>1</sup> Variations in ritual procedure, terminology and all aspects of culture between Lhopo villages in Sikkim can be significant from a Sikkimese viewpoint. Unless otherwise specified, all material presented here applies to Tingchim village and is not intended to be representative of the Lhopo community as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> My choice of the word shaman is explained later in this chapter.

Buddhism, which firmly established itself in Sikkim in the seventeenth century, initially absorbed the cult of ancestral gods and local deities which eventually became central to the performance of rituals currently held by both village lamas and shamans. I argue that this shared conceptual view of reality, well rooted in the sacred topography and history of the land, is at the base of their amiable coexistence. So strong is this shared worldview, which links the body, the territory, society and the supernatural, that village lamas and shamans in Tingchim have at times together ignored reformist Buddhist ideas that have permeated into the village in recent decades, the most significant being the question of propitiatory animal sacrifice. Thus, contrary to how the lama-shaman relation has generally been presented in the literature, the situation in Tingchim suggests that viewing it as a dichotomy may be misleading. In her discussion about the relationalism of shamanism versus the individualism of Buddhism among the Sherpas, Ortner (1995) has indeed demonstrated that a simple dual analysis may hide at least as much as it reveals. Although the Buddhist project and its production of a non-relational self does exist and has been analysed by Adams in the context of Tibetan society (1992), instead of focusing on this binary opposition and the details of this process, or how Buddhist thought is pushing the shamans out of business, I chose to explore how and why the relational worldview refuses to die despite an obvious decline in Lhopo shamanistic practice *per se*.

Tingchim villagers' worldview revealed itself best during the performance of curing rituals where the working relations of village lamas and shamans could be witnessed along with the influence knowledgeable outside lamas and Rinpoches have had on their practice. Not only do these moments of crisis reveal villagers' ritual preferences, the necessity to save people's lives provides the ritual specialists with the license to join hands and perform rituals that would, under normal circumstances, be considered unacceptable by orthodox Buddhist lamas. These rituals in turn best illustrate to what extent the ancestral gods and the local deities are thought to link people's actions to the land, the body, the household, the lineage, the village and the state. I argue that this relational or shamanic worldview is so fundamental to the Sikkimese way of thinking that it underpins the lama-shaman duality. A number of historical, political and economic developments have contributed to the endurance of the shamanic worldview in Tingchim, which now seems to be maintained by the central importance attributed to household rituals as opposed to those held at the Buddhist monastery. Community



membership entails mandatory participation in a number of domestic rituals, the performance of which indirectly sustains the amiable co-existence of shamanism and Buddhism at the village level.

This study thus asks why village lamas seem uninterested in eradicating, or at least controlling, the shamans' practices in the way that Tibetan Buddhist lamas generally advocate. And why villagers' relational or shamanic view of the universe seems to endure despite a decline in shamanic practices? In the process of seeking answers to these questions, I have tried to gain some understanding of people's ordering of their own world, its basic premises and the articulation of its various realms.

### 1. BASIC CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Sikkim was an independent Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, founded in 1642<sup>3</sup> by Tibetan Nyingma (rNying ma) lamas and ruled by the Namgyal dynasty, a monarchy of Tibetan origin. It became a protectorate of the British Government in 1890 and was integrated into the Union of India in May 1975, simultaneously putting an end to the rule of the Chogyals.<sup>4</sup> Sikkim is a small mountainous state squeezed between Nepal, Bhutan, West Bengal and Tibet. There is not a single stretch of flat land and altitudes vary from a few hundred metres above sea level to the world's third highest peak, Mount Kangchendzönga at 8,585 metres. Agriculture is the basis of Sikkim's economy and is the world's main producer of large cardamom.<sup>5</sup> The ethnic composition of Sikkim's half million inhabitants is extremely varied considering that Sikkim is a tiny state of about 70 by 110 kilometres and that twenty percent of its territory lies under perpetual snow. The Anthropological Survey of India has documented twenty-five different communities that can be grouped in three main categories: (1) Bhutias (Lhopos) and Lepchas, the original inhabitants of Sikkim who now represent less than 20% of Sikkim's total population; (2) people of Nepalese origin, mainly Limbus and Rais, who started migrating to Sikkim in large numbers from the 1870s and who now represent more than 75% of the population;

<sup>3</sup> This date is still disputed. See Mullard (2003 and 2005a).

<sup>4</sup> Chogyal is the title of the Sikkimese kings. From Tibetan *chos*, Dharma and *rgyal po*, king, or the one who rules according to religion.

<sup>5</sup> Sikkim produces close to 70% of the world's production of the large cardamom.

and (3) people from the plains of India, mainly Marwaris, Biharis and Bengalis who are a small although rapidly growing minority of merchants and service castes.

Tibetan settlers came to Sikkim from the neighbouring valleys of Chumbi and Ha and regions beyond these southern valleys such as Kham Minyak from the thirteenth century onwards and established the kingdom in 1642. Their descendants call themselves Lhopo (*lho pa*—‘people from the south’) but are generally known as Bhutia,<sup>6</sup> Sikkimese or even Denjongpas, the people of Denjong or Demojong (‘Bras mo ljongs’—‘the fruitful valley’, often translated as the ‘valley of rice’). Since the term ‘Bhutia’ can also refer to any Buddhist highlander living in the Himalayas, and ‘Sikkimese’ may be confusing considering that the Lhapos are now a minority in the state, I will refer to them as Lhopo, which is the term they themselves prefer.



Plate 1: Tingchim village

<sup>6</sup> According to the Indian Constitution, Sikkimese Lhapos are referred to as ‘Bhutias’, a generic term spelt in various ways such as Bhutiya, Bhotia, Bhote (from *bod*, Tibet). The term is confusing as it may refer to any Buddhist highlander residing in the Himalayas, from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, who speaks some dialect of the Tibetan language.



Tingchim is an agricultural village of 54 corporate Lhopo households. Its 265 Lhopo villagers are organised in ten exogamous patrilineages that have little purpose beyond regulating marriages. The majority are descendants of migrants from the adjacent valleys of Chumbi (Tibet) and Ha (Bhutan) who came to Sikkim between 200 and 400 years ago. The village is located in Sikkim's North District, some 53 kilometres north-west of the state capital of Gangtok along the highway that leads to the high valleys of Lachen and Lachung (see map 1). It lies on the eastern bank of the river Teesta at an altitude of 1,300 metres and is part of a group of a dozen Lhopo and Lepcha villages centred around the Kagyud (bKa' brgyud) monastery of Phodong and the Nyingma monasteries of Labrang and Phensang (see map 2). Tingchim faces the Lepcha reservation of Dzongu,<sup>7</sup> located on the opposite bank of the river Teesta where Geoffrey Gorer carried out fieldwork in Lingthem in 1937 (Gorer 1938).



Plate 2: The Nyingma monastery of Labrang located 15 km. south of Tingchim

<sup>7</sup> Dzongu was a Private Estate of the Palace (Gyalmo's or Queen's Estate), which was made into a Lepcha reserve by Sir Tashi Namgyal where, to the present day, non-Lepchas may not settle permanently or become landowners.

Since the focus is on Lhopo ritual, I have limited myself to the group of Lhopo households defined through ritual obligation and centred around the village's prayer hall even though this may not correspond to the actual population of Tingchim village as an administrative division. Thus, this study includes all of Tingchim's Lhopo households but not the large number of Nepali-speaking tenant farmers settled within the administrative division known as Tingchim Revenue Block. These tenant farmers, who started settling on Lhopo land within Tingchim Block in the early 1960s, are discussed in chapters 2 and 6 in the context of their relations with Lhopo landowners. The group of Lhopo households is also linked through the exchange of emergency help and corresponds to the members who are entitled to attend village meetings, since only landowners may be represented and participate in the village's decision process. Although a number of the tenant farmers of Nepalese origin settled within Tingchim Revenue Block are Indian citizens with a right to vote, they are not considered fully-fledged village members by the Lhopos as they do not have any rights to ownership of protected Bhutia (Lhopo) and Lepcha land.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when referring to Tingchim 'village' or 'villagers', I am only referring to the landowning Lhopos who were coterminous with the whole of Tingchim village's population until the early 1960s. While the ethnographic focus is on Tingchim's Lhopo population, I am aware that the village cannot be a bounded sociological unit, and that villagers are linked in various ways to people in other villages, towns, religious centres, and places beyond Sikkim. However, some of these links are addressed when discussing the village's changing relations with the outside world in chapter 11.

The lack of anthropological literature based on long-term field research among the Lhopos has contributed to them being perhaps misrepresented through the writings of aristocratic and Buddhist elites. Such misrepresentation also came about indirectly, through the publication of a series of monographs that focused exclusively on the Lepchas (Gorer 1938, Morris 1938, Siiger 1967, Foning 1987, Gowloog 1995), on the relation between the Bhutias (Lhopos) and the Lepchas centred around the monastery (Nakane 1966), or more recently, on the socio-

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<sup>8</sup> Article 371F of the Constitution of India protects old Sikkimese laws such as Land Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 that precludes the sale of Bhutia (Lhopo) and Lepcha land to any other ethnic community, including to Sikkimese of recent Tibetan or Bhutanese origin (Land Revenue Department Notification No. 28/L.R. dated 21st April 1969).



politics of the state and its history (Basnet 1974, Sinha 1975, Rose 1978, Sengupta 1985). These writings have contributed to maintaining an image of the Lhopos as an aristocratic Tibetan Buddhist population that arrived, built monasteries and converted the indigenous Lepchas. But they omit to acknowledge the existence of the commoner Lhopo villagers who had a very limited understanding of Buddhism and lived in villages far removed from the six premier monasteries of the state<sup>9</sup> and the Palace that were the centres of religious and, to some extent, political power.

Tingchim was such a village where until the end of the nineteenth century, every patrilineage had its own shaman responsible for the lineage and its households' ritual needs. Although villagers considered themselves Buddhists, there were no lamas in Tingchim until 1910 and people were dependent on shamans and other ritual specialists (see below) who officiated at all rituals performed for the benefit of the individual, the household, the lineage or the village. Tingchim lay on the northern edge of the Phodong 'parish', the closest monastery, which acted as centre for local administration and tax collection during the time of the kingdom, and where no men from Tingchim were lamas until the 1930s. The Phodong monastery was only visited once a year by Tingchim villagers on the occasion of its annual monastic *cham* ('*cham*) dances held just before *Losung* (*lo bsrung*), the Sikkimese farmer's New Year that falls on the first day of the eleventh month of the lunar calendar. Buddhism then gradually took over as the main ritual practice of the village in three distinctive phases, which are discussed in the following chapter.

Today rituals are performed in Tingchim by three types of ritual specialists: (1) the non-celibate village lamas, both Kagyud and Nyingma;<sup>10</sup> (2) the *pawo* and the *nejum*, the male and female shamans of the Lhopos;

<sup>9</sup> The most important monasteries of Sikkim are Pemayangtse, Tashiding and Phensang for the Nyingmapa, and Rumtek (not to be confused with the Karmapa's Dharma Chakra Centre also located at Rumtek), Ralang and Phodong for the Kagyudpa. The premier monastery is Pemayangtse as it was responsible for the performance of the Chogyals' coronations and other royal rituals such as the annual monastic dances performed at the Palace chapel in Gangtok.

<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, the use of the term 'lama' in this context is incorrect as this term is normally reserved for particularly learned Buddhist ritual specialists. Two terms are normally used in the village: an initiated lama will be called a *grwa pa bsgnis pa* or simply a *drapo* (*grwa pa*), i.e. a lama who has accepted the discipline of the Sangha and is now a full member of the lama-community of his village. Before his initiation, a student is referred to by the term *chopo* (*chos pa*), or a man of Dharma. I



and (3) the *bongthing*, a specialist who performs the offering rituals for the supernatural beings of the locality. The *pawo* and the *nejum* specialise in maintaining good relations with the *pho lha mo lha* (father god, mother god), the Lhopos' ancestors and lineage protectors through possession and offering rituals while the *bongthing*, who never gets possessed, maintains good relations with the ambiguous supernatural beings who inhabit the local territory. On very rare occasions, he may still do so through the offering of an animal sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> When Tingchim did not yet have Buddhist lamas, villagers relied on an additional religious specialist called *nagshang* (*sngags 'chang*—'the holder of tantra knowledge') who was said to have mastered Buddhism's tantric powers as well as the ritual skills of the *bongthing* and the *pawo* that did not require possession. The *nagshang* was feared by villagers as he was not bound by the ethical principles of Buddhism, which meant that his ritual powers could also be used to cause harm.

Although the village lamas, the *pawo/nejum* and the *bongthing* each have their own particular altar and annual calendrical rituals, the meeting ground for all remains the curing of illness, which is done by taking control of the supernatural beings who inhabit the landscape and who, more often than not, have been diagnosed through divination (*mo*) as being the cause of someone's suffering. Unlike the Buddhist deities and the *pho lha mo lha*, these local supernatural beings are considered wild or only partly tamed and for this reason are considered ambiguous. On the one hand, they may have beneficial supernatural powers for which they are propitiated, but on the other hand, they may also be easily provoked and bring illness and misfortune to villagers or even sent to implement curses or maledictions. In Tingchim, they are referred to by the general term *nöpa* (*gnod pa*), those inclined to cause obstructions, damage or trouble. Taking control of these forces is the main object of everyone's ritual practice and in villagers' eyes, the measuring stick of their ritual powers. To accomplish this, the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bongthing* will draw their ritual powers and protection from the *pho lha mo lha*, while the village lamas will draw theirs from the supra-worldly

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have nevertheless kept the use of the term lama or lama-student to refer to the village's *drapo* and *chofo* because of its widely accepted use in English publications.

<sup>11</sup> The *bongthing's* role in Tingchim is reminiscent of that of the *lha bon* of the Khumbo in east Nepal, a priest specialised in the worship of clan and land deities (Diemberger 1997), the *lha bon* of Baragaon in southern Mustang and that of the *a ya* in central Tibet who are equally responsible for the propitiation of local gods and the making of 'red' offerings (Ramble 1996, 1998, 2008).

deities of Tibetan Buddhism. These ambiguous *nöpa* are thought to have forgotten their oath of submission (*dam tshig*) to the Dharma sworn before Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) and to have returned to their untamed or unbound state (*dam nyams*). This regression is said to have occurred because, in the distant past, the villagers' forefathers succumbed to the practice of animal sacrifice with the hope of saving the lives of sick relatives. Now that these wild supernatural beings have been spoiled by the offerings of blood, lamas, *pawo/nejum* and *bongthing* invoke their respective pantheon and methods with the hope of pacifying the wrath of these beings during curing rituals.

Tingchim villagers collectively refer to the ritual knowledge of the *pawo*, *nejum*, *nagshang* and *bongthing* as *bon*, or more precisely as *lhabon* (*lha bon*) if it is concerned with the protective *pho lha mo lha*, and as *drebon* ('*dre bon*)<sup>12</sup> if it is concerned with honouring or appeasing the ambivalent local supernatural beings thought to be responsible for misfortunes of all kinds. In Tingchim, the term *bon* refers to specific oral ritual texts that are chanted and considered to be the core of the *bon* specialists' ritual knowledge. It may also refer to knowledge that has been imparted directly from the supernatural either during possession rituals in case of the *pawo* or *nejum*, or through visions or dreams in the case of the *bongthing*.<sup>13</sup>

Previously, the Lhopo *bongthing* used to be referred to in Tingchim as *bon ban*<sup>14</sup> or the 'the one who can recite the oral texts of *bon*'. In the course of time, as the *bon ban* included more and more supernatural beings of Lepcha name and origin in his rituals and as he gradually forgot his own *bon* texts, the *bon ban*'s ritual performance increasingly held in Lepcha style, led him to being referred to as '*bongthing*' instead of *bon ban* or *bon ban bongthing* by the Lhopos, the term *bongthing* referring to

<sup>12</sup> The rituals of *lhabon* are called *lhachö* (*lha mchod*) and their corresponding white offerings *karchö* (*dkar mchod*) since they usually consist of white items such as rice. The rituals of *drebon* ('*dre bon*) are called *drechö* ('*dre mchod*) and their red or black offerings *marchö* (*dmar mchod*) or *nachö* (*nag mchod*) since they would consist of red blood or meat and black *torma* (*gtor ma*—conical dough offerings) made of dark grain such as millet.

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

<sup>14</sup> *Bon ban* is the reversal of the more usual form *ban bon*, 'Buddhist and Bon priests' (*ban* is an abbreviation of *ban dhe*, from Sk. *vandya*). However, Jäschke's entry for *ban bon* includes the definition 'a Bon-priest', in which case, however, the word probably would be *bon ban*.



the male ritual specialist of the Lepcha. However, the Lhopo *bongthing*'s ritual practice is not to be confused or equated with that of the Lepcha *bongthing*. In Tingchim, his rituals are held in honour of a large number of supernatural beings that are not shared by the Lepchas, and he is equally qualified as a *pawo* to perform the offering rituals to the *pho lha mo lha* in the houses of those who do not require the mediumship services of the *pawo* at that particular moment. It should also be noted that the ritual practice of the Lepcha *bongthing* is not considered a Tibetan *bon* tradition by the Lhopos. And perhaps more importantly, while the Lepcha *bongthing* does induce spirits, both the Lhopo *bon ban* and *bongthing* never get possessed.

Although Atso, the present Tingchim *bongthing* no longer remembers the oral texts of *bon*, his father Ajo Bongthing had a large repertoire.<sup>15</sup> *Bon ban* are now very rare in Sikkim and I was told that a woman *bon ban* still performed in the village of Phensang. She only chants the oral texts of *bon* at night and will have to close the curtains if a divination is urgently required during the day.

The term *bon* has come to refer to at least four different religions corresponding to different periods of Tibetan history. Per Kverne has suggested the following definitions and historical model: *bon* as (1) an autochthonous, 'pre-Buddhist' Tibetan religion, (2) an organised cult, perhaps focusing on the person of the king; this would correspond to the 'court religion' both of Zhang-zhung and of Tibet, (3) a contemporary 'folk religion' or a 'religion without name' which has often been styled Bon in Western literature but is never thus referred to in Tibetan, (4) the post-eleventh century, organised and eventually monastic Bon religion (2000: 17).

In the context of Tingchim, we are concerned with *bon* as (1) an autochthonous 'pre-Buddhist' religion, which, as Kvaerne points out, has to be reconstructed entirely *a posteriori*, and (3) the contemporary 'folk religion', and the possible relations between both. Contrary to what Kvaerne noted, Tingchim's contemporary folk religion is referred to by Tingchim villagers as *bon* in their own Sikkimese dialect of Tibetan. Thus, despite the term's numerous and sometimes confusing definitions, I will use the term *bon* to refer to Tingchim's 'folk religion' (Tucci 1980),

<sup>15</sup> Ajo Bongthing passed away in 1985. We will see in chapter 11 that these oral texts of *bon* are originally Tibetan and thus have no relation with the ritual practice of the Lepcha *bongthing*.



or what has also been termed ‘nameless religion’ (Stein 1972) or ‘pagan tradition’ (Ramble 1998: 124) since this is the term used by the villagers themselves. Supporting this choice is the fact that Tingchim villagers recognise Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon, and give him a place on their altars erected in honour of the *pho lha mo lha*, the ancestral gods and lineage protectors. One could also add that *bon* as practised in Tingchim is closely related to some aspects of the first three of the Nine Ways of Bon (Snellgrove 1967: 9–10): (1) divination and medical diagnosis, (2) rituals for the ambiguous deities of this world, and (3) techniques for destroying enemies.

However, despite the presence of Shenrab<sup>16</sup> on Tingchim’s altars, *bon* as practised in Tingchim should not simply be perceived as the survival of an archaic form of pre-Buddhist ritual practice but primarily as a living tradition concerned with this-worldly matters in terms of health and fertility, which has evolved in interaction with Buddhism and the ritual specialists of neighbouring ethnic communities such as the Lepchas, the Limbus and the Bhutanese.<sup>17</sup> Specific elements that could link Tingchim’s *bon* rituals to ancient Tibetan traditions will be discussed when these arise in later chapters. Interestingly, Nebesky-Wojkowitz had also noted that the Sikkimese *pawo* and *nejum*

are regarded by the Buddhists as typical representatives of the Bon creed. Actually, they seem to be a remnant of the earlier, unorganised Bon (1956: 425).

And as Bellezza noted:

the spirit-mediums are vibrant testimony of an alternative or Bon paradigm of Tibetan culture, one that is conceived of as being anchored in the pre-Imperial history of the Plateau (2005: 2).

<sup>16</sup> The presence of Shenrab may also be witnessed in non-Buddhist rituals in Bhutan (Lham Dorji 2004).

<sup>17</sup> The term *bon* or rather *bon chos* is equally used in Bhutan as a generic term to refer to non-Buddhist rituals held for local deities. As in Sikkim, *bon chos* rituals in Bhutan are performed with the hope of bringing prosperity and fertility in this life while Buddhism is considered to help people get a better rebirth in their next life (Pommaret, 2004). The Bhutanese equivalent of the Lhobo *bongthing* (previously *bon ban*) would be the *bon po* who propitiates local deities in case of sickness and recites the verses of *bon* during calendrical offering rituals for the community (see the articles in *Yawo yawo: voices from the past* published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004, for examples of these rituals). The equivalent of the Sikkimese *pawo* and *nejum* in Bhutan are called *dpa’ bo* and *dpa’ mo*, the latter also being referred to as *rnal ’byor ma* in Western Bhutan (Pommaret 1998).

Ritual specialists similar to the *pawo* and the *nejum* present among other Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist populations have variously been referred to as 'spirit-mediums' (Berglie 1983, Bellezza 2005), 'oracles' (Prince Peter 1978, Day 1990), 'intercessors' (Jest 1976) and 'shamans' (Adams 1992, Ortner 1995, Holmberg 1989, Fürer-Haimendorf 1955). I have chosen to use the term shaman when referring to Tingchim's *pawo* and the *nejum*, despite the confusion which seems to be surrounding this term in anthropology, for two related reasons concerned with the concepts of 'soul flight' and 'master of spirits', two aspects commonly associated with classical North Asian shamanism. The term shaman probably originated from the Tungus language and as Reinhard (1976: 14) explains, it had already been clearly defined by Shirokogoroff in 1935 (p. 269):

[i]n all Tungus languages this term refers to persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from the spirits....

Later, Eliade chose to limit the definition to the notion of soul flight:

the shaman specialized in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld (1964: 5).

As Reinhard explains, the discrepancy between both definitions in the Tungus context

is due to Eliade's 'historical' interpretation which is supposed to show that the soul journey aspect in prior times was of primary importance among Tungus and spirit possession was a later development (1976: 14).

Interestingly, not only did the Sikkimese *pawo* and *nejum* I worked with introduce spirits into their body in a controlled manner in order to use the latter's powers to help others as defined by Shirokogoroff, they were not unfamiliar with the notion of soul flight or what they called the ability to 'travel on wind' to the deities' abode and the land of the dead located in the high mountains between Sikkim and Tibet. They travelled to the deities' sacred abodes in order to consult them on matters of divination and ritual healing and returned with a description of these abodes and the 'house' where villagers' ancestors reside. Although this ability was once shared by all *pawo* and *nejum* of Sikkim, it has now been forgotten by most and I only heard of one living Lepcha *nejum* residing in Singhik, north of Mangan, who claimed to be able



to travel on wind to the deities' abode. Malag Ajo Pawo, the father of Pawo Nadu, the present Tingchim *pawo*, was famous for this ability and could bring back descriptions of the deities' palaces. He would start every *séance* with the chanting of a *bon* oral text, *The Bon [Story] of the Deer with the Eight-Branched Antlers (Bon shwa ba'i rwa brgyad)*<sup>18</sup> and 'wind' would then take him to the abode of the supernatural beings and the sacred locations of Sikkim, such as Tashiding, Pemayangtse and Rabdentsi, where the deities are said to reside. Thus until recently, the *pawo* and *nejum* of Sikkim were shamans, even in Eliade's limited sense of the term.

Raymond Firth distinguishes the spirit-medium from the shaman as follows:

[s]pirit mediumship is normally a form of possession in which the person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men. The accent here is on communication; the actions and words of the medium must be translatable, which differentiates them from mere spirit possession or madness. *Shamanism* is a term I prefer to use in the limited North Asiatic sense, as a master of spirits (1959: 141).

As we have seen, Shirokogoroff himself considered this to be the shaman's ability to introduce spirits at will into himself and use their power. It could thus be understood as the shaman's ability to control spirits rather than being controlled by them. We will see that although the Tingchim *pawo* does act as a spirit-medium, or as a communicator for spirits and in a way as their servant, it would be wrong to reduce him to this limited role. It is said that the *pawo* introduces these spirits into his body in a controlled manner thanks to the help of his personal guardian deity and that of his *kabab* (*bka' bab*), the spirit of his predecessor, the previous *pawo* of his own spiritual lineage. Indeed, a *pawo* is only officially initiated once he has started mastering the art of regulating his trances thanks to the assistance of these helping spirits. Although the controlling ability is to some extent attributed to the latter, the bottom line remains that it is the shaman himself who is performing in a regulated manner. As I.M. Lewis explains "the controlled production

<sup>18</sup> According to Samten G. Karmay (personal communication) this corresponds to the ritual text known as *Bon shwa ba ru rgyas*. The text is published in a collection of ritual texts by Khedup Gyatso in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, 1973 under the title *gTo phran*, No. 20. Tingchim's oral version is discussed in chapter 11.

The title of the Sikkimese version of this oral text was translated to me as *brgyad* (eight) but this may be a mis-rendering of *rgyas* (spreading).

of trance is taken as evidence of controlled possession by spirits" (1971: 48). It is said that before a *pawo* reaches this stage, local spirits throw themselves onto him in any order and at any time of the day or night. Eventually, as he gains experience, the *pawo* uses the same helping spirits' powers along with the protection of his ancestral gods (*pho lha mo lha*) for a number of purposes, particularly that of divination and healing by summoning and taking control of troubling local supernatural beings. In this sense, the Tingchim *pawo* does more than simply act as a medium or communicator for spirits: together with his helping spirits and protected by his clan deities, he takes control and bargains with local spirits for the welfare of his people. And as we have seen, his predecessor could embark on ritual journeys to visit, consult, and bargain with deities and ancestors directly at the location of their abode.

The most important difference between the Sikkimese *pawo* as a shaman and, for example, the *lhapa* as the spirit-medium of Upper Tibet, is their respective different levels of integration within the Buddhist system and the status of their guardian deities. In Upper Tibet (Bellezza 2005), the *lhapa* acts as a spirit-medium for important Buddhist protectors and it would thus be inappropriate, if not unthinkable, for the *lhapa* to act as their master, in the shamanic sense of master of spirits and in this context, the *lhapa* is indeed better defined as a spirit-medium serving these high ranking deities. In Tingchim however, where Buddhism has only had a cosmetic influence over the *pawo*, and where the patrilineage and its numerous non-Buddhist deities still play a role in the life of the descent group, agency is still attributed to the *pawo* to some extent. His mastery is defined by his ability to work together and make use of the powers of his *pho lha mo lha* and of his tutelary deity who may or may not be of an ambiguous Buddhist nature. The choice of the term shaman highlights this lack of submission to Buddhist ideals and general affinity with North Asian shamanism, an affinity which will be further explored in chapter 5. Considering that the term *pawo* is generally translated as 'hero', the notion of master would indeed better define him than that of servant or simple vessel to be embodied by higher gods.

As for the term 'oracle', it has so far been associated in the literature with specialists making predictive utterances while in trance and entertaining a strong connection with the Buddhist establishment such as the famous Nechung oracle of Tibet (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, Prince Peter 1976, Lama Chime Radha Rinpoche 1980) or the village and monastic oracles of Ladakh (Day 1990). Since the *pawo* and *nejum* of



Tingchim village entertain no formal relations with lamas at any stage of their career, and their practice is to some extent related to Eliade's concept of soul flight and Shirokogoroff's notion of master of spirits, I concluded that using the term shaman when referring to the tradition of Tingchim's *pawo* and the *nejum* was not inappropriate. Further similarities linking Sikkim with North Asia will be explored when comparing shamanism as found in Tingchim with that of the Daur Mongols (Humphrey 1996) in chapter 5, perhaps locating Sikkimese shamanism on the very southern edge of the Siberian complex.

## 2. LAMAS AND SHAMANS: A PROBLEMATIC RELATION?

The relation between lamas and shamans among Tibetan Buddhist communities has been the subject of a number of studies. As early as 1937, Gorer was surprised to notice that the Lepchas of Lingthem, a village not far from Tingchim, "practise simultaneously, and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two...mutually contradictory religions" (1938: 181). A few years later in 1953, Fürer-Haimendorf visited the Sherpas of the Khumbu and Solu regions and wrote:

[t]here seems to be no jealousy between the practitioners of the two different religious systems. Lamas may advise on the consultation of a shaman, and shamans often prescribe the recitation of sacred scriptures by a lama as part of the remedies for an illness caused by the wrath of a god. Thus there are none of the conflicts which in Tibet characterized the relations between Buddhism and the old Bon religion...distinct systems of belief and ritual are sufficiently harmonized to allow of their frictionless coexistence (1955: 52).

Some years later, Berglie studied village *pawo* among Tibetan refugees in Nepal in the early 1970s, and although he could not study the relation between the *pawo* and the lamas in detail, he wrote that:

[t]he activities of the *pawo*, the lama, and the *sngags pa* partly overlapped as they were asked to help in the same kinds of situations: someone was ill, someone was struck by misfortune, etc. I do not think, however, that it would be correct to regard them as competitors. As they used different methods for healing the sick or bringing good luck, they are rather regarded as complementary to each other (1976: 87).

This amiable co-existence of lamas and shamans was soon to vanish from subsequent publications.

Ortner (1978b, 1995) and Paul (1976) collected material on the relation between shamanism and Buddhism among the Sherpas, material that was to greatly influence a number of future studies on the subject. By the time Ortner arrived in the field in 1966, there were no longer any practising shamans in Solu. The construction of fourteen celibate monasteries in the region over a period of fifty years had effectively managed to eradicate shamanism in the course of their campaign of religious upgrading (1995: 358–59). She nevertheless concluded that village life

presumes a world in which people are interconnected and have ongoing obligations to one another. The theory of illness and curing embodied in shamanism shares those (relational) assumptions. Buddhist monasticism, in contrast, is both socially and psychologically individualistic. It encourages a rupturing of social obligations and the renunciation of a subjectivity that finds those obligations compelling (1995: 367).

As she points out, a number of subsequent studies (Mumford 1989, Desjarlais 1992, Adams 1992) adopted a similar approach, by aligning shamanism with relationalism, and Buddhism with individualism (1995: 369). To this we could add that the Sherpas' dramatic example, which so clearly echoed what may have happened in historical Tibet, influenced the way future researchers, including myself, were to look at the relation even before their first day of fieldwork by presuming that shamanism and Buddhism had to be in conflict. What had happened to Gorer's, Fürer-Haimendorf's and Berglie's amiable co-existence of both ritual systems? Lama Chime Radha Rinpoche has even suggested that seeing an outright contradiction or dichotomy between Buddhism and surviving pre-Buddhist practices may be a consideration created by Western observers (1980: 25–26). In reality, the conflict and its intensity, or even its absence, most probably varied considerably from region to region at different times of Tibet's political history. Indeed, a different viewpoint started emerging in later years. Ramble noted that in the Mustang village of Te, there is no clear evidence of a clash between Buddhism and what he calls pagan rituals (Ramble 2008).<sup>19</sup> Ortner didn't publish her original material, which circulated in manuscript

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<sup>19</sup> I am referring to an early draft of *The Navel of the Demoness* (Ramble 2008) as I did not consult the final work which had just been published as this book was going to press. Recently, Ugyen Pelgen (2002) also noted that what Bhutanese call *bon*, or non-Buddhist ritual for local deities, and Buddhism coexist harmoniously in Bhutan.



form, but eventually warned us of the pitfalls of a simple binary opposition. By re-analysing her own Sherpa material some twenty years later, she demonstrated how it would be misleading and “wrong to align the shamanism/Buddhism opposition permanently and completely with the relationalism/individualism opposition” (1995: 370) and that the shamanism/Buddhism opposition was just too simple. Indeed, at least in Tingchim, the assumption of opposition didn’t always hold true and instead obscured much of what was actually going on.

Mumford’s study greatly contributed to reinforce the idea of an opposition between lamas and shamans. He left for the field in 1981, shortly after Ortner wrote her unpublished manuscript on the decline of Sherpa shamanism. Mumford went out of his way to locate a healthy form of ‘pre-Buddhist’ shamanism in Nepal that would be contrary to Lamaism both ethically and philosophically. He found in Gyasumdo ‘a contemporary clash’ between Buddhist lamas and Gurung shamans where the older

shamanic layer is still being challenged by Tibetan Lamaism in a manner analogous to the confrontation that must have occurred again and again in rural Tibet in the past (1989: 6–7).

Mumford associates shamanism with the ‘ancient matrix’ or the shamanic worldview where “personal identity is relational, defined in terms of connections between person and the landmarks of local space.” The ‘individual life sequence’ then steps in, by promoting

a directional identity of ‘individual becoming’ that seeks extrication from the world matrix, as in Christian or Buddhist religious destinies and economic individualism (1989: 16).

He explores how these two voices, the first represented by the shamans and the second by the lamas, are engaged in an inter-illuminating dialogic encounter which results in the creation of a third layer “emerging between rival regimes as an unpredictable process, in a manner that is dialogical rather than doctrinal” (1989: 35). However, despite the apparent success of the Buddhist project in Gyasumdo and the creation of what Mumford sees as a third layer of meaning among the shamans, he notes that in the end, the Tibetan laity is still persuaded by the primary layer that is advocated by the Gurung shamans (1989: 34).

A few years later, in her article on *The Production of Self and Body in Sherpa-Tibetan Society* (1992), Adams very clearly exposed in which way the discourse about the self shifted from relational to bodily/mental

following the rise of Buddhist lamaism and new forms of power in historical Tibet:

[t]he discourse of Buddhism aimed to produce subjectivity: individuality where there had been collective identities; *self*-control where there had been control by *peers*; a bifurcated self where there had been a unified, social whole; and a supersedence of conscious (mental) over physical being, which ultimately meant constituting a body as a non-social object upon which self-strategies could be put into effect in the effort to obtain self-perfection (1992: 161–62).

Adams argues that such subjectivity was created so that Tibet's population could be controlled through non-coercive means in a way similar to the European modern example as presented by Foucault. However, despite defining the relational self as something of the past, which existed in pre-Buddhist Tibet, she notes that the Buddhist project failed to eliminate the belief in real demons and 'social self' where sickness was caused by failing to sustain good social relations with others. She adds that "Buddhism was really only successful at posing alternatives to pre-Buddhist notions of the self and the supernatural" (1992: 165). Ortner also points out that even though shamanism seems no longer to exist among the Sherpas, it may yet still exist in other forms, for example by using shamans from other ethnic groups and the popularity of the *tulku* (*sprul sku*—reincarnate lama) who may be considered as an 'upgraded shaman' (1995: 381–82).

The survival of shamanism as opposed to its decline among Tibetan Buddhist populations was the subject of an interesting subsequent study (Day 1989, 1990). Sophie Day, who worked with a large number of *lhapa* oracles in Ladakh, describes a form of shamanism where, instead of eradicating the practice as among the Sherpas, the lamas subordinated it to the monastery although without completely absorbing it as in the case of the Dalai Lama's famous Nechung oracle. The village *lhapa* are diagnosed, cured, trained and validated by the lamas who preside over the initiation ritual meant to separate the *lhapa*'s gods and demons so that the *lhapa* may only be associated with the divine. Village *lhapa* who normally perform household rituals also have the possibility to rise within the Buddhist hierarchy and become monastery *lhapa* as they progressively get possessed by higher gods as a result of their Buddhist practice and close association with the monastery. In the end, the situation in Ladakh offers a remarkable expression of the shamanic worldview, how it managed to adapt itself and openly survive



within a Buddhist framework. While the Sherpas may have turned to the shamans of other ethnic communities once their shamans gave up their ritual practices under pressure exerted by the celibate lamas, the Ladakhis simply found a way to make their shamans acceptable to the Buddhist establishment.

How the relation between shamanism and Buddhism unfolded in historical Tibet must have varied considerably depending on the type of Buddhism, shamanism and political authority exercised in each region. The cases provided by anthropologists from different corners of the Himalayas and Tibet, including this present study, can only be isolated examples within a vast array of possibilities. Samuel, who surveyed the nature and evolution of religion in pre-modern Tibet in his important work *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (1993), gives us a good insight into the extent of this variability and the factors that came into play in Tibet's religious history. Samuel also notes that what he calls the shamanic mode of operation or Mumford's

‘ancient matrix’ in Tibetan societies was constantly under attack, either overtly or implicitly, by Buddhism, but it continually reconstituted itself. Throughout Tibetan history, it provided a background against which Buddhism took shape and in terms of which it had to justify itself (1993: 6).

Central to Samuel's analysis are what he calls ‘shamanic Buddhism’ and ‘clerical Buddhism’. By shamanic Buddhism he is referring to the application of tantric powers by lamas, incidentally gained in the process of their progress towards Buddhahood, for the benefit of their lay followers in terms of health, wealth and protection. Contrary to my use of the term, he uses the term ‘shamanic’ as an analytical category that does not carry any implication of historical association with Siberian shamans. He sees Vajrayāna rituals as employed by Tibetan lamas as a sophisticated form of shamanic ritual practice (2005: 11–12). Clerical Buddhism on the other hand is associated with scholarship, philosophical analysis and monastic discipline. Both forms of Buddhism share the goal of ultimate enlightenment. Although the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) are generally associated with clerical Buddhism and the study of the Sūtras, and the Nyingmapa with shamanic Buddhism and the practice of the Tantras, Samuel makes it clear that all Tibetan Buddhist schools have different degrees of both shamanic and clerical tendencies. He also points out that Tibetan religion has two shamanic complexes: the spirit-mediums of Tibetan folk religion and the shamanic Buddhism of

the lamas. The unusual aspect of Tibetan society is that the shamanic complex had a strong and autonomous role unlike Theravādin Buddhist societies where the shamanic form is not practised by monks but is kept at the fringe of orthodox Buddhism where it is in no position to threaten the state's authority. Samuel argues that, while clerical Buddhism is associated with centralised states, shamanic lamas were able to rise to important positions of power in Tibet because of the limited nature of its centralised political control. While central Tibet with its large Gelugpa celibate monasteries is associated with clerical Buddhism and centralised power, vast regions—Samuel mentions regions containing more than half of Tibet's population—remained entirely or somewhat independent of Lhasa's control. In these regions, lay rulers and lamas reigned over their kingdoms, monastic estates and exerted influence over nomadic tribes. Among these, the

most successful of these visionary lamas, creators of new religious orders or founders of new political structures, were able to transform the shape of Tibetan religion and society through their activities (1993: 36).

In these less or non-centralised regions of ethnic Tibet, monasticism survived through support from the general population who sought the shamanic powers of the lamas in helping solve their worldly problems and “it was perhaps inevitable that shamanism would survive by becoming Buddhist, and Buddhist monasticism would survive by becoming shamanic” (1993: 472).

Samuel's analysis linking clerical Buddhism with centralised states and shamanic Buddhism with decentralised or less structured regions has not been without its critics. Pommaret (1996) has pointed out that attempting to apply this model to the whole of the Tibetan cultural area may be somewhat reductionist. The model indeed doesn't seem to account for areas such as Bhutan that were centralised in the seventeenth century by the Drukpa Kagyudpa ('Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa) who should be defined as shamanic according to Samuel.

However, as we will see below, Sikkim was never a strongly centralised state and Samuel's model here works relatively well. Sikkim was indeed such a kingdom where Buddhism became shamanic and shamanism became Buddhist, created in 1642 by three visionary Nyingma lamas who established both a new political structure, and, to some extent, a new religious order. When Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigme (1597–1650) arrived in Yuksum from the north, he met with Kahtog Rigzin Chenpo and Ngadag Sempa Chenpo Phuntshog Rigzin (1591[2]–1656), two



great Tibetan Nyingma lamas who had entered Sikkim respectively from the western and southern gates. Together, the three lamas founded the kingdom at Yuksum in West Sikkim and enthroned Phuntsog Namgyal of Gangtok as Chogyal or king who rules according to the Dharma, thus entrusting him with both temporal and spiritual powers.<sup>20</sup> The three lamas, known as Sikkim's Patron Saints, came to Sikkim at the time of the religious wars between the Gelugpa and the King of Tsang, which led to the reunification of Tibet under the 5th Dalai Lama in 1642.

Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigme belonged to what Samuel would call shamanic Buddhism; not only was he a Nyingmapa, he was also a master of Dzogchen (rDzogs chen), the teachings of the 'Great Perfection' shared by both Nyingmapa and Bonpo. When he proceeded to convert the indigenous Lepchas to Buddhism, he did so by converting their sacred landscape and including its already sacred features within his Buddhist rendition of Sikkim's sacred geography. He composed the *Nesol* (*gNas gsol*—'offering to powerful sacred places') ritual text, which is a celebration of Sikkim as a *beyul* (*sbas yul*—'sacred hidden land') and an offering ritual to Kangchendzönga (*gangs* snow, *chen* great, *mdzod* treasure, *lnga* five), Sikkim's mountain god, and to all the deities of the land. The *Nesol* is still one of the most important and most often performed rituals in Sikkim, as much in the monasteries as in the villagers' private houses. From its inception, Sikkim remained a Buddhist kingdom where the people's shamanic worldview remained unchallenged by the missionary lamas, where the land was sacred, where ancestral gods and the country's protectors resided in its mountain peaks, and where the cause of illness and misfortune was to be found within some imbalances of this relational whole. The Tibetan immigrants, ancestors of the Sikkimese Lhopos who came to Sikkim from the thirteenth century onwards, lived side by side and even intermarried with the Lepchas who, despite their conversion, never abandoned their shamanic practices. Thus, I shouldn't have been surprised, when I started fieldwork in Tingchim, to witness lamas and shamans celebrating the sacredness of their landscape together. Sikkim indeed seemed to be a good choice for studying the persistence of the shamanic worldview among a Tibetan Buddhist community rather than the process of its demise.

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<sup>20</sup> On the respective seventeenth century roles and activities of the three founding lamas, see Mullard (2005b).

The persistence of the shamanic worldview in Sikkim is not only due to the inherent shamanic nature of Nyingma and Kagyud Buddhism as defined by Samuel or the Tibetan immigrants' close association with the Lepchas. Sikkim was never a strongly centralised state capable of keeping threats to the Chogyal's temporal and spiritual authority under control. Throughout most of its history, the monarchy was weak, often unable to defend Sikkim's borders or keep its landed nobility under control. Over the centuries, the Sikkimese Chogyals lost the Ha Valley and the area now occupied by Kalimpong in North Bengal to the Bhutanese, Limbuana in eastern Nepal to the Nepalese, the Darjeeling hills to the British, the Chumbi Valley to the Chinese, and eventually, what was left of Sikkim to the Indians.<sup>21</sup> Although Sikkim, in theory, was a small centralised agriculture-based state (Samuel 1993: 140) with an aristocracy, it actually had many features of the 'remote' agricultural community (1993: 128–31) before the British reorganised its administration and strengthened its estate and feudal system. The most important features characteristic of the remote agricultural community were its lack of large celibate monasteries and the importance of patrilineal descent groups in terms of both kinship and status among its commoners. Interestingly, Pemayangtse, the premier monastery of the state responsible for the coronation of the Sikkimese Chogyals, was originally created as a celibate monastery by the third king Chagdor Namgyal (1686–1716) in 1705. Had celibate monasteries survived and flourished in Sikkim as they did among the Nyingma monasteries of the Sherpas, we could presume that the kind of Buddhism Adams (1992) suggests, based on the creation of a non-relational self-regulated individual, would have at least to some extent succeeded in checking shamanic practices as well as the powerful landlords or any other potential threat to the Chogyal's authority. Instead, Sikkimese lamas were married farmers and the most respected and still remembered religious specialists were not reincarnated lamas at the head of powerful celibate monasteries but *gomchen* (*sgom chen*), realised tantric practitioners who lived in mountain caves and who were known for their magical powers, non-conformity and irreverence towards any form of worldly authority. And until the

<sup>21</sup> According to the *History of Sikkim*, the original borders of Sikkim were the following: "Dibdala in the north, Shingsa Dag-pay, Walung, Yangang Khangchen, Yarlung and Timar Chorten in the west, down along the Arun and Dud Kosi rivers, down the Maha Lodi Nuxalbari, Tatjala in the south. On the east Tagong La and Tang La in the north" (Namgyal 1908: 26).



end of the monarchy in 1975, the most important state ritual was *Pang Lhabsol* (*dPang lha gsol*—‘offering to the witness god’), the national celebration of Kangchendzönga, which was not only attended by lamas but, although discreetly, by Lepcha shamans. *Pang Lhabsol* was, to some extent, a national shamanic ritual in the sense that it celebrated people’s relations with the sacred land and its deities.

As mentioned, my usage of the term ‘shaman’ will be limited to the previously introduced concept as it is understood within the Siberian complex. As for the term ‘shamanic’ as in ‘shamanic worldview’, I am in no way referring to Samuel’s definition of the shamanic as in ‘shamanic Buddhism’ but rather to the concept of the ‘ancient matrix’ as introduced by Mumford where “personal identity is relational, defined in terms of connections between person and the landmarks of local space” (1989: 16), a concept I will be further exploring below.

Such a shamanic view or the idea that all things are interconnected is widespread in Asia. As Humphrey relates (1996: 215), life among the Daur Mongols

was a temporary union of parts, which could easily be disordered or unbalanced. In all this there was no clear separation of the physical from the mental, or of the mental from the emotional.

Her approach to the study of shamanism among the Daur first took into consideration the Daur’s views of the nature of human life in the world and the cosmologies that ‘call for’ the shaman rather than the study of the shaman, his role and abilities (Humphrey 1996: 50–51). It was precisely such a cosmology that ‘called for’ the shaman, which I eventually tried to uncover and understand in Tingchim, but such insight did not come immediately.

In Tingchim, the persistence or even the existence of the shamanic worldview is something I came to realise gradually for a number of reasons. First, as I mentioned earlier, I didn’t expect it to be there; second, villagers are primarily Buddhists and have been made to feel ashamed of pursuing their shamanic belief and practices; and third, I felt that researching the last shamans in Sikkim would be looking for the exotic and the romantic rather than researching what was actually there. *Pawo* and *nejum* have practically disappeared in Sikkim and although Tingchim still had a practising *pawo*, a *nejum* and a *bongthing* at the time of fieldwork, I assumed that they were already something of the past and that I should concentrate on ritual and inter-ethnic relations, my original research topic. But a few clues soon made me

realise that, despite a dying shamanism, the shamanic worldview was so pervasive that it could not be ignored: (1) when someone falls ill in Tingchim, the first and last to be consulted are not the lamas and the doctors but the *pawo* or the *bongthing*; (2) illness is usually thought to be inflicted by some ambiguous local deity who would have been offended as a result of someone's wrongdoing; (3) Tingchim villagers don't hesitate to consult non-Lhopo shamans from neighbouring ethnic groups if their own fail; (4) the most effective cure when death is threatening, whether they perform it or not, is still thought by some villagers to be animal sacrifice despite the 16th Karmapa's effort to eliminate the practice in Tingchim in the early 1960s;<sup>22</sup> (5) every household, without exception, performs biannual harvest offerings to thank their providers, the *pho lha mo lha* who inhabit the sacred landscape and its *bon* paradises located in the high mountains between Sikkim and Tibet. Eventually, it became clear that the shamanic worldview was so deeply ingrained in the way of thinking among village lamas, shamans and villagers alike that it rarely came into conflict with Buddhism or its individualist agenda. And when it did, the conflict was not about the existence of the relational-self, but how best to address it.

As I mentioned earlier, Ortner thought it was "wrong to align the shamanism/Buddhism opposition permanently and completely with the relationalism/individualism opposition" (1995: 370) as she did in her first manuscript and later demonstrated how shamanism and Buddhism could be shown to be both individualistic and relational in Sherpa society. Although I very much agree with her, I believe that her definition of relationalism in this context is too limited and thus prevents us from appreciating its fundamental importance and why it doesn't always have to be opposed to Buddhism, at least in Sikkimese society. She sees relationalism primarily in terms of relations between people and omits the notion of land and local space:

[w]ith respect to painting a relational picture of Sherpa society, then, one could emphasize the virtual total corporateness of the nuclear family, the obligatory participation in mutual exchange groups, the determination of status by lineage membership and birth order, hereditary attachment

<sup>22</sup> Before 1962 when the practice was completely abandoned following the influence of the 16th Karmapa who provided a substitute Buddhist ritual for Tingchim villagers, up to sixty oxen were sacrificed each year as part of curing and other rituals. The practice has since been rekindled by some Tingchim villagers, and chickens and goats are now very occasionally sacrificed with the hope of saving the life of dangerously ill relatives (see chapter 4).



to particular temples and to particular 'headmen' (*pembu*) and more (*ibid.*: 370–71).

And when she discusses the relational aspect of the supernatural beings dealt with by the shamans, as opposed to the non-relational demons dealt with by the lamas, she again portrays them strictly in terms of relations between people. The *pem* (witches) and *nerpa* (ghosts), who are the domain of the shamans, are respectively associated with the relational sentiments of envy and pity or compassion (1995: 364). A definition limited to social relations makes it more difficult to undo the shamanism-Buddhism opposition and may be a projection of the anthropologist's preoccupations and categories. Despite what I see as a limited definition, it was Ortner's insight to see Sherpa society as sharing a relational shamanic worldview, which didn't always need to be opposed to the individualism of Buddhism, and that this shamanic worldview didn't simply die with the death of the Sherpa shamans but survived in other forms. And it is precisely these insights that I wish to explore.

For Tingchim villagers, the idea of relationalism is much more pervasive. For example, their body and patrilineage are related to the landscape through their *pho lha mo lha* who reside in the high mountains and, in some cases, simultaneously in specific locations of their own bodies. One of the most important of these lineage protectors, the mountain god Kangchendzönga, was also worshipped during the 'old days' as protector of the kingdom by everyone who considered himself first and foremost as Sikkimese, thus linking and uniting the person, the lineage, the village and the state together under the Chogyal. A person is defined by these relations to land, lineage and ancestors, which in turn bind villagers together. Illness is often but not exclusively thought to be caused by either disregarding these relations, for example by omitting to perform a prescribed ritual for the *pho lha mo lha*, or by violating them, for example by quarrelling among relatives or damaging a supernatural being's territorial abode. Village lamas and shamans share and work together within this worldview, which is best illustrated through the ritual curing of illness and the notion of *drib* (*sgrib*—pollution, defilement). Any action that is thought of as wrong becomes a source of *drib*. In turn, the presence of *drib* offends neighbouring supernatural beings who then express their displeasure by inflicting suffering on human beings. Ideally, a ritual cure demands that this original wrongdoing be uncovered and the offended supernatural being's identity be precisely established either through the shaman's possession rituals or

the *bongthing*'s or the lama's divinations. The popularity of the shamans and the *bongthing* is of course due to the fact that they are far better equipped than the lamas to operate within this local shamanic world where the social and physical environments and the supernatural are thought to be so intimately linked. Any preventive ritual performed on a regular basis by any of Tingchim's ritual specialists is likely to aim at maintaining or reaffirming these relations while curing rituals will aim to exorcise agents, often identified through their wrongdoing, as a threat to this relational order.

Defined in those terms, rather than strictly in terms of relations between people, a relational world is far from being the sole property of the shamans. The idea that all things are interconnected is certainly present in Buddhism too. Samuel mentions that the ancient Tibetan concept of *tendrel* (*rten 'brel*—'arising in mutual connection') was present in Tibet long before the introduction of its Buddhist equivalent from India known as *pratīyasamutpāda*, the concept referring to the relational nature of all phenomena (1993: 447–48). *Tendrel* finds its application in divination and in the reading of omens, or the "mutual correspondence of apparently disparate phenomena within a single situation" (1993: 191). Thus when village lamas look for the cause of illness, like the shamans, they are looking for the cause of the imbalance within this relational whole. But what constitutes this relational whole and what creates an imbalance, is of course defined and interpreted in local terms, and this is the local understanding that is shared by both village lamas and shamans, but not necessarily by foreign educated lamas and Rinpoches.

This all-pervasive form of relationalism, present in both shamanism and Buddhism, doesn't preclude the individualist Buddhist project, which is equally present in Sikkim and can be witnessed in the discourse of the few celibate lamas or *gelong* (*dge slong*) who live in retreat from society. Once disconnected from their villages and families, such lamas are not only disconnected from a demanding social world, they are disconnected from the village's particular worldview, and consequently, the relational concept of *tendrel* like many other concepts, is soon interpreted in non-social abstract terms. For example, I will always remember a conversation with an educated celibate lama in Gangtok who thought that my interest in village religion was a waste of time since village lamas had not yet understood that the supernatural beings identified as the cause of people's problems actually didn't inhabit the landscape but were located in their minds. As long as villagers live in



a social world, they are likely to keep applying the relational concept of *tendrel* to the parameters of the world they live in, which includes land, natural resources, family, lineage, ancestors, village and state, rather than to the parameters of a non-social self.

The idea that all things are interconnected appears to be what Collingwood would call an absolute presupposition. In his *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940: 34–57), he demonstrates how an individual or group's values and the entire structure of their particular way of thinking are ultimately based on absolute presuppositions that remain unquestioned and assumed as truth. A metaphysical analysis would uncover these absolute presuppositions not to question their degree of truthfulness but rather to consider how they are created and vary historically and culturally. Thus, how *tendrel* is interpreted may depend on the interpreter's social or non-social setting, but the concept itself and its inherent relationalism is not likely to vanish. Thus it is not surprising that despite the Buddhist project, the shamanic worldview refuses to die and keeps coming back as Ortner, Mumford, Samuel and Adams have all pointed out. It also means that presuming that the shamanic worldview should not survive the Buddhist project appears to be a projection of the anthropologist's need for distinct, non-overlapping and non-contradictive categories, a form of analysis that Hobart would call 'epistemological imperialism' (Hobart 1989).

What is perhaps unusual in Tingchim in comparison to other Tibetan Buddhist communities is that, in all practical terms, the shamans are usually considered more capable than the village lamas in precisely identifying what caused an illness and how to re-establish the imbalance. Powerful Rinpoches are of course considered far superior to village lamas and *bon* specialists by all Sikkimese, but their superiority remains somewhat theoretical as villagers rarely get the chance to ask them to intervene in such worldly matters. The location, attributes, likes and dislikes of each local deity are best known by the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bongthing*, a form of local knowledge that usually makes them more powerful than the village lamas when dealing with serious cases of illness. In other Tibetan Buddhist societies, the lamas have usually gained their superior position over the shamans in dealing with worldly problems thanks to their superior ritual techniques gained through their association with the far superior tantric deities. In Tingchim, however, the tantric deities and the lamas' rituals are considered somewhat too abstract or not sufficiently intimate with and understanding of the villagers' problems and the local cosmology to be considered fully effective.

In case of serious illness, to be successful, a ritual must uncover the cause of the illness through negotiation with the responsible supernatural being rather than through taming and subduing. The ritual itself is often dramatic and performance-based rather than based on the reciting of the liturgy of the lamas. Thus village lamas who have managed to adapt their rituals tend to become popular when dealing with misfortune while those who try to be pure are eventually sidelined. However, the village lamas maintain their position at the top of the ritual hierarchy in Tingchim because of their association with higher knowledge and the supra-worldly deities of tantric Buddhism, which establishes them as masters over the domain of death and rebirth. But when dealing with worldly problems, instead of transmuting the whole scenario with the help of higher deities as outside lamas would advocate, village lamas participate on the same level and directly into the world of shamans. Problems and tensions in Tingchim arise when this shared shamanic worldview is questioned. Thus, tensions in Tingchim usually do not arise between village lamas and shamans, but between village lamas and those outside lamas advocating a purer form of Buddhism that is not understanding of local problems and villagers' particular worldview. However, some Rinpoches are very much aware of the problem and the 16th Karmapa is said to have encouraged Tingchim villagers to maintain their biannual harvest offerings in honour of their *pho lha mo lha*.

To avoid confusion, I shall refer to (1) the form of Buddhism as practised in Tingchim by married village lamas as 'village Buddhism', (2) the purer form of Buddhism advocated by educated outside lamas and Rinpoches as 'conventional Buddhism',<sup>23</sup> and (3) the local form of ritual and understanding, shared by both village lamas (village Buddhism) and shamans (*bon*), as 'village religion'.

A number of authors have made a distinction between village or popular forms of Buddhism and more orthodox forms advocated by monastic or other elites (Spiro 1971, Southwold 1982). Among the Sherpas, Sherry Ortner notes in *High Religion* (1989) the existence of

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<sup>23</sup> I chose the word 'conventional' rather than the more common term 'orthodox' as I am referring to the villagers' perception of orthodox Buddhism which is different as they usually have a very limited understanding of the latter.



a 'folk' form of Tibetan Buddhism, in which local married priests (*lama*) conducted rituals in village temples and in households for the benefit of the general populace... [and the] more 'orthodox' monastic institutions, in which celibate individuals live and practise religion on a full-time basis (1989: 3).

Samuel's categories are more elaborate as he distinguishes between three spheres of religious activities present, each in various degrees, among all forms of what he calls 'clerical' and 'shamanic' Buddhism. The first, the 'pragmatic orientation' is "the realm of this worldly concerns, conceived of in terms of interactions with local gods and spirits." The second, the 'karma orientation' is "the sphere of death and rebirth, past and future lives, again seen in terms of karma and 'ideology of merit'." The third, the 'bodhi orientation', is concerned with the pursuit of enlightenment carried out through tantric practice (1993: 31). While 'clerical Buddhism' is primarily concerned with the karma orientation and 'shamanic Buddhism' with the pragmatic and bodhi orientations, both forms of Buddhism are nevertheless involved in all three spheres of religious activities. The distinction I have made between 'village Buddhism' and 'conventional Buddhism' in the context of Tingchim corresponds, within Samuel's 'shamanic Buddhism', to a difference of emphasis upon these three spheres of activity and their applications. Village Buddhism in Tingchim is primarily concerned with the pragmatic orientation: thus, village lamas co-operate with the shamans in relieving villagers from the sufferings of life in this world by dealing directly with the troublesome supernatural beings of the territory. Village lamas' interest in the bodhi orientation tends to focus on gaining tantric powers that may render their pragmatic rituals more effective, while the karma orientation mainly finds expression during the performance of death rituals, individual daily practices and the annual Buddhist rituals held at the village's prayer hall. What I have called 'conventional Buddhism' in the Sikkimese context corresponds to the views, practices and aspirations of those lamas and lay practitioners who: (1) place a stronger emphasis on the study and rituals of the karma orientation, (2) refrain from honouring the supernatural beings of the territory or co-operating with shamans on the pragmatic level, and (3) engage in tantric practices primarily aimed at the accumulation of merit and the pursuit of enlightenment. Those holding such views have usually had the opportunity to study Buddhist philosophy beyond the village with Tibetan lamas; have been living in urban areas

for more than a couple of generations where they have lost touch with the supernatural population of their village of origin; or have otherwise been influenced by charismatic Rinpoches.

Despite its alleged inefficiency or dislike of dealing with the ambiguous local deities, conventional Buddhism and its emphasis on the karma orientation has an important role to play in the village. For Tingchim people, conventional Buddhism is something that lies outside the village, both literally and figuratively. It is something very precious to aspire to either through secluded practice, pilgrimage, study in outside schools and monasteries or during the rituals of death. Before the end of the Buddhist monarchy, conventional Buddhist aspirations were the most important avenue for the village's relation with the outside world, through the Phodong monastery, the Palace chapel, the 16th Karmapa's Dharma Chakra monastery at Rumtek and pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist sites of Tibet, India and Nepal. After the end of the monarchy in 1975, participation in Buddhism and the village's relations with the outside world both gradually re-defined themselves along other lines. Eventually, conventional Buddhism re-emerged in the 1990s as one of the village's privileged avenues in its relations with the outside world that now included countries as far away as Taiwan.

In the same way, shamanism has had to considerably redefine itself in the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth, every patrilineage in Tingchim had its own *pawo* or *nejum* while today, there are hardly half a dozen Lhopo *pawo* and *nejum* still practising in Sikkim. It does not appear possible to pinpoint a single dramatic event as among the Sherpas where the construction of celibate monasteries eradicated the practice in a few decades. However, the introduction of the cardamom cash crop in Sikkim at the end of the nineteenth century, coupled with the construction of an extensive network of roads, may be important factors. With the money gained from cardamom, villagers were able to hire cheap Nepalese labour to look after their fields and, like the wealthy nobility, they were now able to invest their surplus time and money in Buddhism, a far more prestigious—and expensive—form of worship. Tingchim started producing cardamoms at the same rate that it started producing lamas who first took over from the *nagshang* in the ritual domain of death at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the community rituals from the shamans in the 1930s. Shamans gradually lost their sponsors but maintained a certain monopoly over the ritual curing of illness, at least in Tingchim, until 1997 when both Pawo Nadu and his mother the *nejum* passed away without leaving any



suitable successors.<sup>24</sup> Potential shamans also found a better income in cardamom, and families with children displaying the symptoms of mediumship were able to afford expensive cures and rituals to help them avoid the hardships of possession. In addition to this, shamanism became associated with the religion of the migrant labourers of Nepalese origin whom the Lhopos had come to dislike ever since the Gorkha invasion of Sikkim west of the Teesta in 1789. The gradual construction of a network of roads facilitated the marketing of the cardamom and travel to important monasteries, and Tibetan Rinpoches who started taking refuge in Sikkim after the Chinese takeover of their country in 1959. And roads made it equally easy to travel to Gangtok to visit its doctors and hospital.

It must be emphasised that the decline of shamanism, however, is not synonymous with the decline of the shamanic worldview. Although the lamas may have finally taken over from the shamans in the twenty-first century, Buddhism did not completely take over from shamanism. The most popular village lamas operate very creatively within the village's shamanic worldview and when necessary, villagers regularly consult the shamans and other ritual specialists of their Nepalese tenant farmers. However, the survival of the shamanic worldview seems to find its roots in the central position of the Lhopos' household rituals where participation is mandatory and defines community membership. Whether *bon* or Buddhist, household rituals have maintained and even gained importance in recent decades for a number of economic and political reasons. As a result, the household and its rituals, and not the monastery, seem now to provide the main avenue for the maintenance of the ties of the Lhopo community and its identity.

Gaining some understanding of the relation between shamans, village lamas and the influence of conventional Buddhism was made possible by my teacher Lopen Dugyal Acharya Bhutia who also acted as my research assistant and translator during the whole period of fieldwork research. Lopen Dugyal was the first village lama to leave Tingchim and return after nine years of study with the Acharya or Master's degree in Buddhist philosophy from the Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies in Gangtok also known as the Deorali Shedra (*bshad grwa*). Like most advocates of conventional Buddhism, he disputed the practice of *bon*

<sup>24</sup> Although Pawo Nadu and his mother are no longer present in Tingchim, I refer to them as if they were still alive when describing their rituals in the following chapters.

and the village lamas' leniency towards and participation in unorthodox practices. Lopen Dugyal became a key player in this interplay between village religion and conventional Buddhism following his return to the village, which coincided with the period of my fieldwork. He was openly challenged by the *bon* ritual specialists while the village lamas remained silent but became increasingly irritated by what they saw as his intellectual arrogance and the threat his knowledge represented to their status. This confrontation was complex and painful since beneath the veneer of his conventional Buddhist education, Lopen Dugyal had himself been a village lama for years and could sympathise with relatives and neighbours and understand their need for village religion. The *bon* ritual specialists themselves were his cousin, his paternal uncle and his maternal aunt, and the village *gomchen* had been his first teacher. Our study and endless questioning pushed him into a deeper dialogue with his relatives, giving voice to the village's ritual specialists. He would not normally have entertained these dialogues with such interest, which in turn helped him understand village religion in a less dogmatic way. We will see that Lopen Dugyal's confrontation with village lamas is not a denial of this inter-illuminating dialogue but an indication that the village is not about to part with its conceptual view of itself and its shamanic worldview.



Plate 3: Lopen Dugyal Acharya Bhutia in his house in Tingchim



Working on the subject of rituals with a teacher and research assistant considered a Buddhist authority was not without its problems. As Burghart has pointed out while referring to anthropologists working in India, “[h]ow does one write the culture of a people which has already been written by its native spokesmen?” (1990: 277). I largely escaped the problem by working on a subject that was relatively unknown to Lopen Dugyal; although he was familiar with *bon*, Lopen Dugyal was not a *bon* specialist. The same applied to other cultural authorities within the state who rarely had more than a superficial interest in or understanding of the *pawo*, the *nejum* or the *bongthing*’s ritual practices or the joint rituals of village lamas and shamans. The main subjects locally considered acceptable objects of study are Buddhism, language, history, and ‘culture’, which is understood as traditions such as the proper way to hold weddings and funerals, or to perform Sikkimese songs and dances. I was thus working in a grey zone, which had not yet been fully interpreted by local experts, something that made it easy for me to proceed. Local shamans were not considered authorities since they merely performed rituals without the help of written texts that could express an incontestable truth. The shamans’ understanding of Buddhism, the only form of real knowledge by which their rituals could be properly interpreted, was not considered sufficient for local authorities to hold their views in some esteem. The fact that I was not interpreting village religion according to a conventional Buddhist paradigm was perhaps more problematic and the only factor that led Lopen Dugyal and myself to hold conflicting views. Sometimes Lopen Dugyal went to great lengths to educate me in what he considered the orthodox or proper interpretation of a *bon* ritual or describe its Buddhist equivalent. Although such views offered illuminating insights into the relation between conventional Buddhism and village religion, Lopen Dugyal quickly understood and respected the fact that, for the purpose of the research subject—which he came to consider as *our* project—it was important to allow a voice to the village’s ritual specialists and respect their views and interpretations. It also helped to point out that conventional Buddhism was a very well-documented subject that didn’t need our attention while no-one knew about Tingchim’s *bon* rituals and that these should perhaps be recorded, as they are locally understood before they disappeared. Lopen Dugyal was prepared to do this for the sake of his ancestors and so that their traditions may be remembered by the village’s future generations.

While exploring the rituals of village lamas and shamans, I was not concerned with the nature or action of ritual in itself (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) but rather with the performance of ritual as a platform where the relation between *bon* and Buddhism and Tingchim villagers' particular worldview could be observed. In the end, these performances provided a platform where not only the interests of *bon* and Buddhism were engaged but, to borrow Hobart's term, many facets of Tingchim villagers' world became 'articulated'. It is interesting to note that in Bali, "rites provide a means of articulating the different, potentially incompatible, interests of different people and groups" (1992: 12) and that the king's success, as organiser of rites, exemplifies "the ruler's capacity to articulate the manifest and non-manifest worlds" (1992: 15). While the "kings, or courts, were agents of articulation through ritual" among the Balinese (1992: 3), in Sikkim, the village ritual specialists, thrive but never individually succeed in fulfilling this role. In Tingchim, one could say that any *bon* or Buddhist ritual specialists' capacity to relieve people's suffering in terms of obstacles, health and fertility exemplifies his capacity to articulate the social, physical and supernatural worlds that are thought to be intimately related. For this reason, I thought it imperative to include the wider context of village life and not limit my observations to ritual performances.

Viewing all ritual specialists in interaction and not limiting my observations to isolated practices seemed equally important. As Holmberg has pointed out in his studies of Tamang ritual, the use of multiple ritual specialists or 'multi-faceted ritual systems' is a common feature in South and Southeast Asia (1989: 4). One of the popular models for the study of such religious complexities has been the articulating concepts of 'great tradition' and 'little tradition'. However,

calling attention to structural, historical, and communicative continuities between these opposite poles Dumont and Pocock (1959), Obeyeskere (1963), and Tambiah (1970) interpret the social and cultural systems of India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand as unified systems and have criticised approaches that consider great and little as isolates (Holmberg 1989: 5).

Holmberg follows the example of Tambiah who

conceives Thai religion as a 'single religious field' encompassing four 'cults and complexes' that exists in relations of 'opposition, complementarity, linkage, and hierarchy' (Tambiah 1970: 2).



He points out that the tendency in Nepal—with notable exceptions—has been to study these ritual specialists in isolation by neglecting their association with other forms of ritual practices. He concludes that comparative studies should not be contrasting different strands of shamanism or Buddhism but rather total religious systems whether within the Himalayas or greater Asia (1989: 5–6). As much as possible, my approach has also been to consider the ‘total religious field’ in my observations of *bon*-Buddhist relations through the rituals of daily life rather than considering the practices of the *pawo*, the *bongthing* and the lamas in isolation. In turn, their ritual co-operation and division of labour revealed that together their seemingly contradictory practices form a single ritual complex based on a shared shamanic view of the universe.

While ‘ritual’ is a contested term in anthropology and there are many views on how it should be understood or defined, this is not the main concern of my study. I have decided simply to regard ritual as any performance held by any of the village’s ritual specialists whether they are concerned with what Samuel has called the pragmatic, karma or Bodhi orientations. These rituals are generally held either: (1) on a regular basis for the purpose of augmenting fertility and prosperity, the merit of the sponsor or the powers of the practitioner, or (2) in moments of crisis with the hope of propitiating the supernatural beings of the territory, the ancestral gods or the Buddhist deities. Tingchim villagers do not have a general term similar to ‘ritual’, which may cover all such performances, as each is referred to by a particular term that I will introduce as need arises.

### 3. THE CHAPTERS

The central theme of the research being the relation between lamas and shamans and the survival of the shamanic worldview through the performance of household rituals, it was necessary to identify the different platforms on which lamas and shamans operate and ritually meet. In addition to attending rituals, considerable time was thus spent on understanding village life, its history, agricultural economy, inter-ethnic relations, kinship system, relation with the state, and so forth. The context seemed as important as the subject since lamas and shamans have themselves always been engaged with the wider context, which

created them and gave them a voice to start with. With such a broad approach however, the presentation of the material became problematic. In the end, I chose to present it according to the various platforms on which lamas and shamans meet, which correspond to aspects of village life to which villagers have an on-going relation *through* ritual. These are: (1) the sacred land and its resources, (2) the individual and the household, (3) the lineage, the village and the state. Within each of these three sections, which correspond to Parts II, III, and IV, I made a distinction between those calendrical rituals performed on a regular basis with the aim of augmentation and those held in moments of crisis with the aim of propitiation. None of these categories are meant to be rigid but only a way to facilitate the analysis as ritual categories in fact often overlap one another.

Part I introduces the setting in four chapters. Following this first introductory chapter 1, chapter 2 outlines Tingchim's recent political, economic, inter-ethnic and religious history as well as Sikkimese—including Tingchim villagers'—migration history. Chapter 3 introduces Sikkim as a *beyul* or sacred hidden land along with its supernatural population that shapes Tingchim villagers' vision of the world they live in: the ancestral gods, the supernatural beings of the local territory and Kangchendzönga as Sikkim's mountain deity. Chapter 4 introduces 'village religion' and the different levels of co-operation between *bon* and Buddhist ritual specialists. It exposes the working relation of village lamas and shamans in relation to illness, its causes, diagnosis and the sequence of ritual cures. This is followed by chapter 5, a description of the shamans' rituals and initiations, their interaction with dead ancestors, the influence of Buddhism over their practice and the relation of their practice to North Asian shamanism. In more general terms, Part I aims to outline Tingchim villagers' particular worldview and some of the causes for its persistence.

Part II is concerned with the land, its harvests, workers and rituals. Chapter 6 presents the agricultural economy and in which way Tingchim villagers' relations with their Nepalese tenant farmers and local merchants revolve around the cardamom trade. It stresses the central importance of the household rituals that ensure the continuous fertility of the land and the way in which the *khelen* (*khas len*),<sup>25</sup> an oral ritual text and offering ritual for the deities of the land, has emerged

<sup>25</sup> *Khas len* or its honourific form *zhal len* means 'expressing' or 'addressing'.



as the common ritual practice of the village lamas, the *pawo* and the *bongthing*. Chapter 7 addresses cases of illness and misfortune rooted in problems related to the economic and sacred aspects of the land and its resources. The first section looks into the relation between land disputes and accusations of poisoning, witchcraft and the sending of curses or maledictions. The second section looks into the consequences of destroying particular objects of nature and the rituals needed to be performed as a cure. The last section discusses the successful protest movement against the construction of a hydro-electric power station on the sacred Rathong Chu river at Yuksum in West Sikkim, which was considered an ultimate wrong action performed against the sacred land.

Part III addresses the rituals of the household and its members. Chapter 8 presents the domestic rituals held on the occasion of the rites of passage—birth, marriage, moving into a new house, joining the monastery, severe illness and death—and in which ways attendance at these household rituals forms the basis of a network of mutual help in which participation is mandatory and defines community membership. Chapter 9 discusses land boundary disputes, the most common sources of dispute among relatives and Tingchim villagers, and how the ancestral gods may help in ritually resolving these quarrels. The lingering consciousness of dead kin members may also plague the life of household members, a situation that will be addressed by the combined ritual participation of the village lamas, the *pawo* and the *bongthing*. The unfolding of this collective ritual action provides a rare example illustrating the way in which the *bon* and Buddhist ritual specialists may join forces for the welfare of a patient and collaborate in the performance of a single curing ritual.

Despite the important changes the village has been through in the second part of the twentieth century, the above household rituals ensuring the health, fertility and prosperity of the individual, the land and the household have been well maintained. These domestic rituals not only encourage the participation of *bon* and Buddhist ritual specialists but the survival of the shamanic worldview on which these are based. Thus chapters 6 to 9 aim to demonstrate the amiable working relations of lamas and shamans, and the complementary aspect of their respective practices rather than the opposition, which the recent literature suggests characterises the lama-shaman relationship.

These domestic rituals seem to have gained a new dimension as they became the only avenue left for Tingchim villagers to define themselves

as a community in face of an ever growing and more powerful population of outsiders. Their maintenance was further encouraged by important changes that took place in the village's relation with conventional Buddhism, the state and the outside world following the abolition of the Buddhist monarchy in 1975, changes that are addressed in Part IV. Chapter 10 is concerned with the role of conventional Buddhism in the village's relation with the state and the outside world, before and after the monarchy, and its consequences for the household rituals. Chapter 11 addresses the latest conventional Buddhist influence on the single complex of village religion and the way in which *bon* specialists and village lamas reacted to Lopen Dugyal's return to the village after graduating with a Masters degree in Buddhist philosophy. This is partly addressed through the unfolding of events during the *pawo*'s annual retreat where the spirits of ancestors attempted to mediate between Lopen Dugyal and the *bon* specialists. The chapter eventually concludes that contrary to how the lama-shaman relation has been presented in the literature in recent years, their amiable co-existence in Tingchim indicates that the real confrontation may actually lie not between *bon* and Buddhism, or lamas and shamans, but between conventional Buddhism and its more pragmatic village adaptation. Chapter 12 concludes and summarises the main arguments leading to the endurance of the shamanic worldview which finds itself at the root of the amiable co-existence of village lamas and shamans and the celebration of domestic rituals. I argue that the recent economic, political and population changes that took place in Sikkim in the twentieth century have contributed to strengthen the celebration of domestic rituals among the Lhopos and that the household may indeed have replaced the village's prayer hall and the monastery as the centre of Lhobo social and religious life following the decline of state level Buddhism in post-1975 Sikkim.

The approach I have chosen, whereby the working relation of lamas and shamans is presented within the wider context of Tingchim's social life, has been essential for a number of reasons. Firstly, because Sikkim has been very difficult of access to foreign researchers until the 1990s, this work is the first ethnography of a Sikkimese Lhobo village based on long-term field research.<sup>26</sup> A certain amount of background

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<sup>26</sup> The foreign anthropologists given permission to carry out field research in Sikkimese villages during the time of the kingdom were Gorer (1938), Morris (1938) and



knowledge, given in chapters 2 and 3, was thus necessary in order to introduce the antecedents of the ethnic community, the ancestral gods and the sacred aspect of the land they live in. Secondly, because there is no ethnographic work yet available on the Lhopos, many Sikkimese friends, government officials, scholars and Tingchim villagers who supported me throughout the research process expect me to present them with a complete ethnography, which they will be able to show to their children as an example of the way of life of their forefathers. I have thus included material, which is not indispensable in terms of this study's arguments, but which will be considered important for the next generation of Sikkimese readers. Thirdly, according to Samuel, there has been little detailed ethnography on household and family rituals as yet (1993: 196), as well as on the *pawo* and *nejum* who are becoming rarer every year, while there is a wealth of material available on conventional Buddhist and Tibetan monastic rituals.

Lastly, my approach to ritual, through the platforms of village life where lamas and shamans meet—land, household, lineage, village and state—demands that the relation between household rituals and the pragmatic aspects of village life be included in the analysis. This was decided at the time of fieldwork when my doctoral research supervisor Professor Lionel Caplan encouraged me to explore the village's political economy and its relation to ritual, taking into consideration its historical

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Siiger (1967) who all worked among the Lepchas of Dzongu, and Chie Nakane (1966) who did two months of field research in 1955 on the relation between the Bhutias, the Lepchas and the Nepalese. This work, based on field research carried between 1993 and 1996, is the first Bhutia (Lhopo) village ethnography carried out in Sikkim after its merger with India. The French anthropologist Mélanie Vandenhelsken carried out field research on the relation between the village and the monastery in Nako-Chongpung in West Sikkim later in the 1990s. Her thesis entitled: *Le monastère bouddhique de Pemayangtse au Sikkim (Himalaya oriental, Inde): un monastère dans le monde* (2002) is concerned with the relation between Pemayangtse, the premier monastery of Sikkim, and its surrounding villages, and the Western Sikkimese Lhopos' social organisation. No reference is made to her thesis in this work for two reasons: (1) only some of her thesis chapters, which she still intended to work on, were made available to me when this book was going to press, and (2) her work is an important contribution to Sikkimese ethnography and many interesting comparisons between Western and Northern Sikkimese Lhopo ritual culture and social organisation could be made using our respective studies, something I hope to do in a separate publication. The French anthropologist Brigitte Steinmann has also carried out a number of short-term field studies in Sikkim (1996, 1998). Among Indian anthropologists, notable contributions to the ethnography of indigenous villages have been Bhasin's general study of Bhutia-Lepchas of North Sikkim (1989) and Gowloog's re-study of the Lepcha village of Lingthem (1995). From 2001, the following researchers carried out fieldwork in Sikkim whose theses were not yet available: S. Sabatier-Bourdet, V. Arora, J. Bentley and J. Garcia.

and inter-ethnic dimensions. I soon realised that the core of the ritual performances did not teach me much about Sikkimese society or the relation between lamas and shamans, but that understanding usually emerged from the context in which the rituals were being held. This in turn enabled me to appreciate the relational aspect of village life and to what degree it is deeply rooted in a shamanic view of the universe. This understanding eventually allowed me to reach my final conclusion about the central importance of household rituals as opposed to those held at the monastery, how these are based on a shamanic worldview shared by both village lamas and shamans, which in turn contributes to the amiable co-existence of village Buddhism and shamanism at the village level.



## CHAPTER TWO

### PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

This chapter looks into some aspects of Tingchim's and Sikkim's historical past in order to understand where Tingchim villagers came from, how they lived in the early twentieth century, and in which way their lives were transformed through a series of events that took place in the course of the same century. Changes in the village's administrative relations with the Phodong monastery and the Palace, the settlement of the first Nepalese in the North District in the late 1930s, the arrival of Tibetan lamas and Rinpoches in Sikkim in the late 1950s, the expansion of the cardamom cash crop and the shift to a market economy in the 1960s, followed by the end of the Buddhist monarchy in the mid 1970s, are all major events which transformed the lives of Tingchim villagers. These economic, political and religious developments influenced the relation between village lamas, *bon* ritual specialists and knowledgeable outside lamas, which in turn reshaped the face of ritual in the village. These changes also help us understand in which way the gradual and rather late Buddhacisation of the village contributed to the inhabitants' dependence on the rituals of village religion and the persistence of the shamanic worldview on which these are based.

#### 1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TINGCHIM'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

Life in Tingchim in the first part of the twentieth century was described to me by my oldest informant, Tsam Khang Ajo, who was born around 1913. Sikkim was then divided into a number of estates and Tingchim village came under Phodong, one of the five monastic estates directly administered by the Palace.<sup>1</sup> The Phodong Estate or Elaka was comprised

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<sup>1</sup> The five monasteries with landed estates were Pemayangtse, Ralang, Rumtek, Phodong and Phensang (Administration Report of the Sikkim State for the Year 1925-26).

of six village blocks<sup>2</sup> of which Tingchim was the farthest, fifteen kilometres north of the Phodong monastery. It was also the only village to be entirely Lhopo, the five others being either Lepcha or of mixed Lhopo and Lepcha populations. The Lepcha reservation of Dzongu faced Tingchim on the opposite bank of the river Teesta. Being surrounded by Lepchas and living at the same altitude, the Lhopos of Tingchim had a similar way of life based on hunting, trapping, gathering of jungle products and slash and burn cultivation of dry rice, buckwheat and various types of millet. Wheat and maize were cultivated in small permanent dry fields around the houses, and rice in a few small paddy fields below the village, which were all ploughed by hand. Mud in the paddy fields was mixed by pulling a stone with a rope. The husband would make a hole in the mud with a stick where the wife would place the seed. Oxen and cows were kept in the forest above the village where tigers, panthers, and leopards were common, and where deer, wild boars, bears, porcupines and monkeys were trapped or hunted. From the forest they gathered fruit, wild tea, different varieties of roots and bamboo shoots, ferns, stinging nettles and other green leaves, half a dozen types of mushrooms and edible flowers. The staple food was flat bread made of millet or buckwheat as well as *tsampa* (*rtsam pa*) made of wheat.<sup>3</sup> Cloth was woven by women from stinging nettle fibres<sup>4</sup> into a long piece of material wrapped around the body and fastened with a wooden pin on the shoulder. Medicines and lamp oil were all obtained from the forest.

Metal was rare and food was cooked in Tibetan pots of red clay that were bartered against grain with the Lhopos of Lachen, agropastoralists living higher up the valley between Tingchim and Tibet who acted as middlemen. Cups and bowls were made of wood and bamboo and the village's only piece of iron was used together with a flint to make fire and was shared by all the households.<sup>5</sup> However, the

<sup>2</sup> The six village blocks of the Phodong Estate were Phodong, Ronggong, Ramthang, Seyam, Namok and Tingchim (Government of Sikkim Secretariat file, General 38/3/1929, Number of Houses of Phodong monastery).

<sup>3</sup> Although *tsampa* is usually made from wheat or rice in Sikkim instead of barley.

<sup>4</sup> The stalk of the stinging nettle plant was peeled and the inside white fibre was first washed for one week, dried, beaten and then woven into different lengths of materials used as men and women's dress as well as sleeping sheets. There were no other types of weaving in Tingchim.

<sup>5</sup> An old proverb says whoever possesses a flint is a rich man and whoever owns a sewing needle is even richer!





Plate 4: Tsam Khang Ajo, my oldest informant

main barter trade with Lachen was Tibetan salt against grain—rice, maize and buckwheat—between regular trading friends, which was later expanded to include pins, needles and metal tools that came from China and Tibet as well as blankets, potatoes, dried cheese and sheep fat that were produced in the valleys of Lachen and Lachung. With the Lepchas of Dzongu, grain was exchanged for piglets. Dye products and wild cardamom were gathered from the jungle around Tingchim and bartered against oil and tea with Marwaris, a merchant caste originally from Rajasthan who first came to the area in 1895.

The first piece of manufactured cloth was brought to the village in 1918 when my teacher Lopen Dugyal's father went to Darjeeling to sell eggs with his uncle and returned with a pair of white shorts, a shirt, a cap and a pair of shoes. The trade in eggs was the first to bring money to the village, which was used to buy rice—an expensive delicacy—from the Marwari shops at Rangpo located on the border with West Bengal. The eggs were bought from the Lepchas in Dzongu

and carried up to Darjeeling in baskets where they were sold to the British who had been settled there since 1835.

Although surrounded by Lepchas, the Tingchim Lhopos say they did not inter-marry with them until recently. Both communities generally seemed not to have trusted each other and the Lhopos rarely ventured to the neighbouring Lepcha reservation of Dzongu except for trade carried out with established partners. The Lepchas settled within the Phodong Estate had more interaction with the Lhopos centred around the monastery and its activities,<sup>6</sup> but Dzongu was considered a dangerous place where Lhopos risked the possibility of being poisoned. Even today, only a handful of Tingchim villagers have ever set foot in the reservation and this usually on government duty. This ancient mistrust between both communities finds its roots in the Lepchas' feeling of betrayal on the part of the Lhopos who failed to uphold the thirteenth century oath of eternal friendship sworn between their respective Tibetan and Lepcha ancestors when the former were invited to settle in Sikkim by the Lepchas. Eventually, the Lhopos' feelings of cultural superiority were used to justify their efforts to rule, exploit and convert what they perceived as happy-go-lucky forest dwellers.

Although the cultivation of cardamom as a cash crop was introduced in Sikkim at the end of nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> it was only cultivated in Tingchim in small quantities from around the 1910s in the lowest part of the village block by the river Teesta. On average, they probably harvested around one maund (40 kg) each,<sup>8</sup> which was sold to the Marwaris in the nearby bazaar of Mangan. Tsam Khang Ajo sold his first harvest of cardamom in Mangan in the 1930s for Rs 15,<sup>9</sup> all collected in silver coins engraved with Emperor George V with which

<sup>6</sup> See Chie Nakane for Bhutia (Lhopo) and Lepcha relations centred around the monastery (Nakane 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Edgar mentions that in 1873, cardamom was mainly cultivated in the low valleys in the extreme west of Sikkim (1969 [1874]: 55).

<sup>8</sup> There were twenty-one cardamom growers in Tingchim in 1924 whose combined production was estimated at around 13 maunds (520 kg), although this had probably been underestimated for tax evasion purposes (Government of Sikkim Secretariat file, Land Revenue 9/9/1924, List of Cardamom Growers in Sikkim).

<sup>9</sup> Exploitation of the Lhopos and Lepchas in these isolated regions must have been tremendous. The Administration Report for the State of Sikkim for the Year 1907-8 mentions that the rate for cardamom at Gangtok was Rs 50 to Rs 52 per maund and that it sold for Rs 60 to Rs 68 in Calcutta. By comparison, the Marwaris were buying the cardamom from villagers in Mangan for Rs 5 per maund at around the same time and Gorer even mentions that they were still paying as little as Rs 8 to the Lepchas of Lingthem in the year 1934 (Gorer 1987 [1938]: 116).



he then bought a maund of rice for Rs 8. In those years, the need for cash was so minimal that the income from a maund of cardamom was sufficient to cover a household's expenses for a whole year.

Until the mid-1930s, the village's headman, called *pipon* (*spyi dpon*),<sup>10</sup> was nominated by the elders and was mainly responsible for taking care of the village's relations with the Phodong *mukter*,<sup>11</sup> the agent of the Phodong monastery who acted as administrator and revenue collector for the Estate's six village blocks. The *mukter* was appointed by and was directly answerable to the Palace. Following the introduction of cardamom, villagers paid the house tax and the land rent in cash to the lamas of the monastery who in turn paid the house tax to the state and retained the land rent realised from the villagers, which was utilised for the maintenance of the monastery. In addition to these taxes, which were gradually introduced by John Claude White, the first British Political Officer, after his appointment in June 1889, villagers continued to make contributions in kind to the monastery at the time of annual rituals, just as they did prior to the introduction of White's new taxation system. According to Tsam Khang Ajo, the monastery was then very powerful and cases of murder, theft, and quarrels that couldn't be resolved by the *pipon* or his assistant were referred to the Phodong lamas. Some time in the 1930s, the Tingchim *pipon* was replaced by a *maṅdal*<sup>12</sup> by the name of Tsing Tsing appointed by the Chogyal. Tsing Tsing Maṅdal became responsible for the collection of tax, which he eventually handed over directly to the Palace following the abolishment of landlordism in 1951 and the commencement of the first scientific land survey the same year.

Established on a monastic estate under Palace Administration, Tingchim villagers, along with the others of the Phodong Estate, did not suffer under the hands of difficult landlords or the burden of heavy taxes, as had been the case for many throughout the state. There were very few areas in Sikkim similar to the Phodong Estate where the local

<sup>10</sup> The *pipon* had an assistant headman in charge of resolving disputes called a *tsomi* (*'tsho mi*), a tax collector or *letsen* (*las tshan*), and two assistants or messengers capable of managing respectively one hundred and ten villagers. The latter were called *gyapon* (*brgya dpon*) and *chupon* (*bcu dpon*).

<sup>11</sup> The term *mukter* seems to originate from the Ottoman Empire. *Mukhtar* means village chief or mayor in Iraq.

<sup>12</sup> As head of the village, a *pipon* was nominated by the elders or in some cases, elected by the villagers, while a *maṅdal* was appointed either by a landlord or the Chogyal as his representative.

population was protected from the intensive economic development, which was prevalent on the estates that had been established and developed with Nepalese labour at the end of the nineteenth century and which were run for maximum productivity for the benefit of the landlords and the state. In an effort to develop the state's economy, White had introduced a land settlement program shortly after his appointment, known as the lessee system.<sup>13</sup> According to the new system, the traditional land grants administered by the kajis<sup>14</sup>—the land-owning nobility of Lepcha, Tibetan and Lhopo descent—and by a large number of monasteries were replaced by fifteen-year leases given out to kaji and Sikkimese landlords and ten-year leases to Nepalese landlords called *thekādār* for which they paid a fixed rent to the government.<sup>15</sup>

The appointment of the first British Political Officer immediately followed the 1888 eviction by British forces of a Tibetan garrison occupying Lingtu within Sikkimese territory, followed by the signing of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, which fixed the Sikkim-Tibet boundary and acknowledged the British Government's protectorate over the kingdom. Sikkim had always considered itself a dependency or vassal state of Tibet and had looked upon Tibet and ultimately China for protection. After the signing of the Convention, the British were eager to rid Sikkim of any influence Tibet might still hold in that country. They employed what they considered hard-working Hindu Nepalese

<sup>13</sup> For details of the lessee system, see Rose (1978: 214–16).

<sup>14</sup> Waddell mentions that the word kaji seems “to be borrowed through the Nepalese from the Mahomedan rulers of India, and to be the Persian word *kāzi* or *kādī*, a magistrate” (1899: 433). Indeed, Qazi were found throughout the Mughal Empire as head of towns appointed by the imperial court. The Sikkimese equivalent for kaji is *lönpo* (*blon po*—minister). A ruling kaji—usually the eldest son—was referred to by the Lepcha term of address ‘athing’.

<sup>15</sup> Lall mentions that White initially created 24 lessee estates (1981: 229). According to the Annual Report for the year 1926–27, there were by then 69 lessee estates in Sikkim. These were held on 15-year lease by 46 different landlords of whom 21 were kajis, six Bhutias, eight Lepchas, ten Nepalese and one a plainsman. In addition to these 69 lessee estates, there were 24 estates under direct control of the state, 16 under the managers of the Private Estates of the Chogyal and five estates whose land revenue was allocated for the upkeep of the five big monasteries.

These figures do not include the private estates of the kajis from which they obtained their revenue and which were held in exchange for services rendered at the Palace prior to British intervention. These holdings were non-taxable up to one hundred acres. Tenancy agreements were in use on the private estates of the kajis long before the arrival of the first Nepalese tenant farmers. There were various arrangements, a recent one being that the tenant farmer turned in fifty percent of the paddy, the cardamom and the straw and retained all of the winter crops.



migrants, who served the double purpose of developing the country's economy and creating a state revenue, as well as weakening the influence of the Buddhist Sikkimese and their ties with Tibet. Indeed, the Nepalese were already in the majority by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> However, a large and sparsely populated section of North Sikkim, north of the market of Dikchu, including the Phodong Estate, the Lepcha reservation of Dzongu, and the high valleys of Lachen and Lachung were closed to Nepalese migration and did not come under the lessee system.<sup>17</sup>

The traditional land grants taken from the monasteries<sup>18</sup> and the kajis by J.C. White were redistributed and leased out to lessee landlords<sup>19</sup> who were greatly encouraged by the British to bring in large numbers of labourers from Nepal in order to increase the state's as well as their

<sup>16</sup> Risley's often quoted prediction for Sikkim reads as follows: "[t]he influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism, and the praying-wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman. The land will follow the creed; the Tibetan proprietors will gradually be dispossessed, and will betake themselves to the petty trade for which they have an undeniable aptitude" (1894: xxi).

<sup>17</sup> "His Highness deems fit that the interests of the indigenous and backward people, in the North Sikkim area require, as hitherto, to be duly safeguarded,

His Highness is pleased to order that the rules relating to the settlement and/or the carrying on of any occupation in such areas (i.e. North of the line formed by the Dick Chhu from the Chola, down the Tista to Ranghap Chhu, up the Ranghap Chhu till it meets 27.25 minutes latitude and thence along it to the Western border to Sikkim) by outsiders (non-indigenous) only on a permit issued by the Sikkim Darbar shall continue to hold force." (Proclamation of His Highness Sir Tashi Namgyal, 30 August 1956).

<sup>18</sup> The system of administration and collection of revenue prevalent in Sikkim prior to White's reorganisation of the administration and introduction of a system of revenue collection in cash, is not clear. However, it is clear from the *History of Sikkim* that the lamas' role in tax collection (in kind) as well as in local and state administration prior to British intervention in 1890 must have been substantial. Indeed, half the members of the *lhade mide* (*lha sde mi sde*), Sikkim's traditional state council, consisted of lamas until it was changed by J.C. White who retained only one seat for the head lama of Pemayangtse monastery. As part of White's land reform, Sikkim's 35 monasteries lost part or all their land holdings with the exception of five important monasteries which included Phodong. The general working of the administration and system of land revenue in force between 1890 and 1973 are given in Leo Rose's article on the modernisation of the traditional administrative system of Sikkim (1978: 205–26).

<sup>19</sup> Leo Rose mentions that "[i]n the course of the land settlement program, the political officer summoned all the kajis to Gangtok to have the land grants they had received from the Namgyals changed to leases. Several of the kajis who had supported Chogyal Thutob Namgyal against the British refused to come, and were then stripped of their landholdings" (1978: 215 fn10). My informants indicated, however, that the new landlords created by the British have generally not been accepted amongst the ranks of the original landed nobility.



own revenue by getting the immigrant labourers to clear the jungles and bring large tracks of land under irrigated terraced cultivation.<sup>20</sup> These lessee landlords were further encouraged by the fact that their land rent remained fixed and did not increase with productivity. The landlords were responsible for the collection of taxes, for extracting *jharlaingī* (forced labour) from the villagers and for the maintenance of law and order within the estates under their jurisdiction. In 1911, the rent the tenant had to pay to the landlord for rice fields on the lessee estates was twenty-five percent of the crop.<sup>21</sup> According to this assessment in kind known as *kuṭ* (contract), twenty-five percent of the gross produce—before seeds were set aside for sowing—had to be turned over to the landlord or manager of the estate, which represents at least fifty percent of the net produce.<sup>22</sup> Although landlordism was abolished in 1951, we will see that a similar form of *kuṭ* is still practised today all over Sikkim between the tenant farmers of Nepalese origin and their Lhopo/Lepcha and Nepalese landowners.

Protected from these heavy taxes and intensive economic developments prevailing on the lessee estates, Tingchim villagers were nevertheless subject to a limited amount of compulsory paid labour and portage duty that were enforced everywhere in Sikkim. Until 1924, all villagers had to furnish eighteen days a year of free labour to the state, the landlord and the *mandal*,<sup>23</sup> but in practice, this system was

<sup>20</sup> Before the British took over the administration of the country, Sikkimese opinion about Nepalese migration was highly divided. The Chogyal and his trusted councilors along with the Pemayangtse lamas opposed it vehemently while some kajis such as the Khangsapa brothers—encouraged by the British in Darjeeling—started settling Nepalese on their estates from as early as the 1870s.

J.W. Edgar, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, during his tour of Sikkim in 1873 reported that Nepalese were numerous in the south-west of Sikkim, around Namchi and Dhurmden [Daramdin], while “there are very few Nepalese in other parts of the country; and the Guntuck [Gangtok] Kazi told me he would not allow a Nepalese to settle within his jurisdiction. When I asked the reason, he said that they wasted the forests; that they allow their cattle to trespass; that they made themselves unpleasant neighbours in other ways; lastly—and I believe this to be the true reason—that the people of Sikkim had suffered so much in the past from Nepal, that they distrusted and dreaded all Paharias” (1969 [1874]: 74–75).

<sup>21</sup> Rent for dry fields and cardamom was paid in cash.

<sup>22</sup> According to Barmiok Kaji “[t]he *koot* system was in vogue in Sikkim from the very beginning when terraced rice fields were started” which should coincide with the settlement of the first Nepalese tenants in the south-western region of Sikkim in the 1870s (Sikkim State Archives, file 37, Land Revenue, Complaints of raiyots of Sikkim, 21/1/1911).

<sup>23</sup> Sikkimese peasants were expected to provide seven days of free labour in a year to the state, one day in the year for road repairing, six days in the year to the landlord



open to abuse to the extent that under certain landlords, the villagers had little time left to look after their own fields.<sup>24</sup> In 1924, the Palace tried to check the situation by abolishing free labour and replacing it by a system of compulsory paid labour.<sup>25</sup> But the landlords did not implement the new order, abuses persisted and in 1929 the Palace attempted to abolish the entire system but the British Political Officer objected.<sup>26</sup> The system led to revolt in the 1930s and porterage duty and forced labour were eventually abolished in 1945 and 1947 respectively.

Tingchim was not only spared the harassment of servitude experienced by many under the lessee landlords but was also protected against Nepalese settlement and the importation of a foreign language and culture within the boundary of their village and the Phodong Estate until 1938 when the first Nepalese settlement was created in neighbouring Mangshila on the southern border of Tingchim Block.

For this reason, Tingchim's social organisation, political economy and religious culture remained fairly undisturbed compared to other Lhopo villages that came under the influence of Nepalese culture decades earlier. In the year 1938, a group of a dozen Limbus from eastern Nepal, were granted permission by Sir Tashi Namgyal to settle

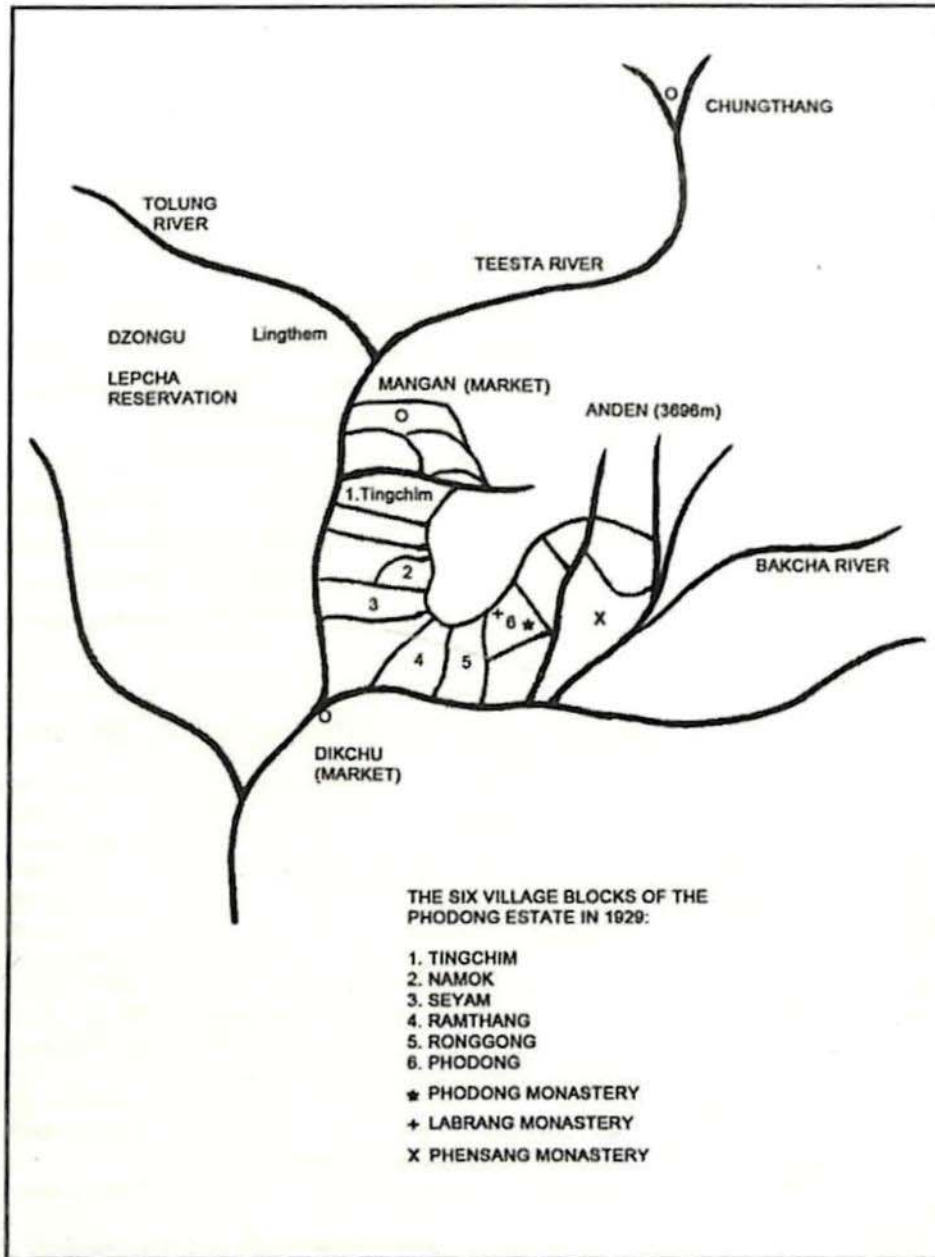
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and four to the *mandal*. Note from Barmiok Kaji dated 30 Oct 1911 (Sikkim State Archives, file 37, Land Revenue, Complaints of raiyots of Sikkim, 21/1/1911).

<sup>24</sup> In Tingchim, the villagers didn't entirely escape the abuses of forced labour and experienced difficulties under Kunga Gyaltzen, a monk of the Phodong monastery and Phodong *mukter* from 1922 until 1934, who abused his rights to free labour and falsified the number of houses under his jurisdiction in order to pocket some of the house tax which should normally have been handed over to the state. Tingchim villagers were regularly called for legitimate porterage duty for the state but the *mukter* also forced them to work on his personal fields. The villagers of Tingchim, Namok and Seyam took their revenge by submitting a written complaint to the Palace in 1929, openly denouncing the *mukter's* house tax embezzling activities (Petition dated 25th July 1929. Sikkim State Archives, General, file 546, Number of Houses of Phodong Monastery 38/3/1929). The court case lasted three years but the villagers eventually won and their revolt is cited as a good example of the northern Sikkimese confrontational attitude for which they have a reputation and which is often contrasted with the Lepchas' timidity and the western Sikkimese Lhopos' polite and less direct manners.

<sup>25</sup> General Department Circular No. 5814/G to all Landlords of the Sikkim State. 15 July 1924.

<sup>26</sup> In a letter located in the State Archives at Gangtok, the British Political Officer replied to the Palace's suggestion to abolish forced labour on the 3rd of December 1929: "[t]o upset the custom, whereby an Ilakadar [landlord] can claim Jharlangi for his private purposes as much times as his bustiwallas [primary land holder] are free from work on their fields would cause unnecessary unrest and neither Ilakadar nor bustiwallas would know where they were. A time for changing their custom will come when a new revenue system is instituted. This note to be treated 'confidential'"—the Political Officer at that particular time was Major J.L.R. Weir.



Map 2: Tingchim village block and the Phodong Estate



and open fields within the Phodong Estate at Mangshila.<sup>27</sup> They initially worked as labourers for the Tingchim Lhopos in return for food until they had cleared sufficient fields for themselves. They cleared the jungle of dangerous beasts and helped Tingchim villagers carve paddy terraces below the lake, and like Nepalese did everywhere in Sikkim, taught them how to plough and practise permanent irrigated agriculture. The most significant changes brought about in Tingchim by the arrival of Limbu settlers were first in the expansion of methods of cultivation and later in the transformation of the whole economic structure of the region.

As the area under permanent cultivation gradually expanded, the need for shifting cultivation diminished and by the early 1960s, the vast area above and behind the village normally used for slash and burn agriculture, cattle grazing and gathering of jungle products was converted to the cultivation of the cardamom cash crop. The village's total production of cardamom down by the river in 1924 was around eight hundred kilos, while the 1995 yield cultivated up in the forest behind the village was just under one hundred tons providing an average annual income per household corresponding to the salary of a school teacher. With the expansion of the cardamom fields, Tingchim villagers not only joined a global market economy, they became mini-landlords themselves and started employing cheap Nepalese labourers who eventually settled as tenant farmers on their land from the early 1960s to work their grain and cardamom fields. Unlike the land-owning Mangshila Limbus, these Nepalese labourers were landless immigrants who recently came from Nepal in search of work during the cardamom harvest and who remained in Sikkim as tenant farmers under various tenancy agreements.

These tenants first came to Tingchim in small numbers, building huts in the lower parts of the village in the early 1960s. However, their numbers have steadily increased and today they already outnumber the Lhopos in Tingchim Block. Similarly, the Limbu population of neighbouring Mangshila has also increased at a much faster rate than that of the Lhopos. Mangshila has close to two thousand Limbu inhabitants while Tingchim's Lhopo population of around two hundred and sixty has barely doubled since the 1920s. This Nepalese population explosion

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<sup>27</sup> Government of Sikkim Secretariat file, General 38/3/1929, Number of Houses of Phodong monastery.

is not only due to their high birth rate but also to the constant flow of new immigrants arriving from Nepal in search of economic opportunities in Sikkim. Contrary to the Limbus of Mangshila who are the only Nepalese who were eventually granted the right of land ownership in North Sikkim, these more recent Nepalese migrant workers may not own or purchase land from their Lhopo or Lepcha employers—Land Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917, which is still in force, prevents anyone but Bhutias (Lhopos) and Lepchas from acquiring such land. Eventually, the use of tenant farmers and the expansion of the cardamom cash-crop from the 1960s gradually brought money and independence from co-villagers by changing the traditional work exchange system whereby each Lhopo family was dependant on neighbours and relatives for the mutual exchange of labour during sowing and harvesting times.

Today, at the top of the village block is forest land used for keeping cattle, hunting and food gathering. Still within the forest but above the village houses, are large cardamom fields. The houses themselves are located around and just below the *mani lhakhang* (*ma ni lha khang*),<sup>28</sup> the village's prayer hall, at 1,300 metres. They are surrounded by vegetable gardens and dry fields of maize, millet, wheat, barley and ginger, below which are paddy and more cardamom fields that extend all the way down to the river Teesta at an altitude of 800 metres. The majority of the Nepalese tenants have built their houses a long distance away from the Lhopo houses among the lower fields in the warmer altitudes of the block.

The next major change for Tingchim came about with the end of the Buddhist monarchy, when Sikkim joined the Union of India in 1975 followed by the introduction of the Panchayat Raj system of local government in 1976 along with party politics at the village level. In 1978, the Bhutias<sup>29</sup> and Lepchas of Sikkim were declared a Scheduled Tribe by the Constitution Order of 1978, a status that ensures seat reservation in education, scholarship, and employment in the State and Central Governments to India's indigenous people and makes them the benefi-

<sup>28</sup> *Mani lhakhang* literally means house of gods and is basically the village's prayer hall. A *mani lhakhang*, as opposed to a monastery, does not have living quarters for lamas.

<sup>29</sup> According to the Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978, the Bhutias as a scheduled tribe also include Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatay, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa, Yolmo. This definition of the Bhutia tribal category was copied directly from the Scheduled Tribes Order of West Bengal, and thus, did not specifically mention the Lhopos, presumably under the understanding that they are commonly referred to as Bhutia in Sikkim.



ciaries of a number of allocations and welfare schemes. From then on, the village headman, an appointed and respected elder, was replaced by an elected villager—usually young—whose main duty was to seek and administer the various rural development projects and funds that were allocated to tribals by the State and Central Governments. The new abundance of Nepalese labour and expansion of cardamom fields into the forest where shifting cultivation had previously been practised resulted in endless boundary disputes, which were for the most part settled when the second land survey was carried out in the late 1970s. Private landed property was fixed and individual maps were issued, which also meant that villagers could no longer encroach on the forest and government land. Since fields are inherited and divided more or less equally among sons, a need was felt for making the existing fields more profitable or to look towards new economic ventures. After a few disastrous experiences, Tingchim villagers concluded that they had little talent for business, but schooling had become accessible in the 1960s and with it, the prospect of a government job. Many were successful in finding jobs when the bureaucracy was expanded after 1975 and a total of ten percent of Tingchim's population is currently on the government's payroll, as post-master, agricultural field man, teacher, police officer in Gangtok, etc. Electricity, immediately followed by television, was brought to the village in 1987, and with it, the discovery of new horizons and a world of consumerism. In November 1995, the first satellite dish was installed in Tingchim beaming in American soaps from Hong Kong.

The 1990s brought a shift in the course of these developments. The government stopped hiring and since there is virtually no industry in Sikkim, unemployment among graduates throughout the state became rampant. Young villagers turned back to the land as a safe means of income. Since fields can't be expanded and are still being divided, they have been experimenting since 1992 with ginger as a new cash crop and permanent grain fields, for the first time, are gradually being converted into cash crops. Realising the value of their land has also sparked a new trend in attempting to expel Nepalese tenants in order to personally cultivate the fields following the old work exchange system or by hiring poor Lhopo villagers on a daily wage basis.

The Lhopos' relation with the Mangshila Limbus as well as with Tingchim's Nepalese tenants has generally been very positive over the years. But this original atmosphere of mutual help and gratefulness is gradually deteriorating due to these new economic and demographic

pressures and through the external manipulations of political parties. Village unity and equality among households is highly praised and although Tingchim villagers resent the changes that brought tensions and divisions among themselves in recent decades, they do not look upon the past as a golden era. Rather, they are grateful for the educational and medical facilities and economic opportunities now available to them despite a certain nostalgia for the loss of their Buddhist kingdom. Looking at the past, their main regret and longing eyes focus on the Limbu settlement of Mangshila. Had the Nepalese Limbus never been invited to settle here in the 1930s, all these lush paddy and cardamom fields would now be theirs to harvest.

## 2. RELATION BETWEEN *BOV* AND BUDDHISM OR THE CREATION OF VILLAGE RELIGION

In Tingchim village, the time when a *pawo* in trance first asked for a Buddhist ritual to be performed and the villagers did not know what he meant, is still remembered. It is difficult to say when this could have been, but the Kagyud monastery of Phodong, the first to be built in the North District, was established as late as 1740, a whole century after the foundation of Sikkim as a Buddhist kingdom. Until the 1930s, no men from Tingchim were lamas in Phodong, and the monastery, located some fifteen kilometres south of the village, was visited only once a year by Tingchim villagers on the occasion of the exorcistic rituals and annual *cham* dances held before *Losung*, the Sikkimese farmer's New Year. In those days, Buddhism was primarily confined to the monasteries, their surrounding villages, the capital and the Palace. Although villagers considered themselves Buddhist, there were no lamas in Tingchim at the end of the nineteenth century. For all rituals performed for the benefit of the individual, the household, the lineage and the village, people were dependent on different types of shamans who were numerous and powerful.

Buddhism then gradually took over as the main ritual practice of the village in three distinctive phases. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tingchim villagers received the first major Buddhist influence that present villagers can remember from the Lachen Gomchen, later to be known throughout Sikkim for his powers and peculiar character, and famous beyond Sikkim's borders as a teacher of Alexandra David-Neel. The Lachen Gomchen was born in neighbouring Namok and



meditated for some twenty years in the forests above Tingchim, Namok and Phodong.<sup>30</sup> From his retreat above Tingchim, he is said to have prevented *pawo* and *nejum* from being born in all the surrounding villages. He told villagers that with their drums and bells, the *pawo* and *nejum* kept waking up the *nöpa*, the ambiguous supernatural beings of the locality who could otherwise sleep for many decades if left undisturbed. Not a single *pawo* or *nejum* was born in Tingchim while the Lachen Gomchen was present and the necessary rituals for the *pho lha mo lha* and supernatural beings of the land were performed by Ajo Nakshong without the medium of trance or the beating of drums. Once the Lachen Gomchen left for Tibet and eventually resettled a few days walk higher up the valley in Lachen, Tingchim got a new *pawo* and the practice was rekindled, but to a lesser degree.

Until the 1930s, the practice of Buddhism in Tingchim was limited to the undertaking of meditation retreats in the forest by a few aspiring lamas in admiration of the Lachen Gomchen. The knowledge they acquired seems to have been for their own benefit and accumulation of merit although the tantric powers they gained in the course of their practice were also used for the benefit of villagers when asked to perform household rituals for the sick during the winter. Their knowledge of Buddhism was limited to the practice of meditation, the use of mantras, the recitation of ritual texts of which they usually did not understand the meaning, and the procedure to be followed during funerals, which in those days were still a simple affair. In the 1910s, there were only two or three such lamas in Tingchim, and by 1930 there were seven of them who were, for the most part, affiliated to the Phodong monastery, with the exception of one family of hereditary lamas affiliated to the Nyingma monastery of Labrang, also located in Phodong. Although belonging to different sects and monasteries, all the lamas of Tingchim performed their duties together within the village. Until the late 1920s, lamas never performed community rituals at the village's prayer hall, which had until then been the meeting place for the older women of the village to pray ever since the construction of Tingchim's first prayer

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<sup>30</sup> After his retreat, the Lachen Gomchen travelled extensively in Tibet where he received teachings and eventually settled in Lachen upon his return to Sikkim. The present *tulku* of the Lachen Gomchen was born at Yangang in South Sikkim and now resides at Gangtok. Until recently, he was the only Sikkimese *tulku* belonging to a Sikkimese lineage, all others being reincarnations belonging to Tibetan spiritual lineages.

hall at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> There were no Buddhist community rituals nor did the lamas celebrate the important days of the Buddhist calendar. Despite the Lachen Gomchen's influence, until 1930, community, lineage, household and, to a large extent, individual religious matters, were still in the hands of the shamans.

The second phase was marked by the passage of Sakya Lama Tshoda Gyatso from the great Sakya (Sa skya) monastery in Tibet, who stopped in Tingchim at the end of the 1920s on his way to a pilgrimage in India when he was asked by the Lachen Gomchen to help take control of an epidemic in the village. As part of the remedy, the Sakya Lama instructed the village lamas to perform the annual Buddhist rituals on a regular basis within the village's prayer hall. Lamas received training from the Phodong lamas on how to perform these rituals and, from then on, Buddhism stopped being individualistic and became an occupation of the community where the villagers' participation both in presence and in contributions was required.



Plate 5: Tingchim's prayer hall or *mani lhakhang* located just above the village

<sup>31</sup> Village prayer halls or *mani lhakhang* are used throughout Sikkim as a place for the women of the village over child-bearing age to meet and pray on the 8th, 15th and 30th of each lunar month. Their main practice is that of Chenresig, the Buddha of Compassion.



During Tingchim's third Buddhist phase, which was initiated by the arrival of Tibetan Rinpoches in Sikkim following the Chinese takeover of their country in 1959, the transformation of the village's ritual practice continued following the influence of the 16th Karmapa who eliminated the practice of animal sacrifice in the village. Buddhism effectively took over as the community's main ritual practice when in the early 1960s, the annual *mangchö* (*mang mchod*) community ritual, that required the sacrificial offering of an ox for all the supernatural beings of the land, was abandoned and replaced by the Buddhist *Bumkor* (*'bum bskor*), whereby the Buddhist scriptures were taken out to bless the village houses, as the village's most important ritual of the year.

Gradually, Buddhism timidly imposed itself and emerged as the most prestigious form of ritual while still accommodating *bon* and without even openly trying or succeeding to eliminate that practice in its totality. The Lachen Gomchen's, the Sakya Lama's and the 16th Karmapa's efforts were all directed at specific aspects of *bon* such as animal sacrifice or spirit possession without trying to eliminate the ritual practice as a whole. The 16th Karmapa is even said to have encouraged the Tingchim Lhapos to maintain their ritual offerings in honour of their *pho lha mo lha*. Today, the village lamas, the *pawo*, the *nejum* and the *bongthing* are thought to generally get on and work together for the welfare of



Plate 6: Village lamas performing an annual ritual in the *mani lhakhang*

the people. We will see that this tolerated co-existence finds its best expression in the annual *chirim* (*spyi rim*—‘common ritual’), where lamas and the *bongthing* momentarily officiate together within the precinct of the village’s prayer hall (see chapter 10). In the wider context, their tolerated co-existence also found expression in the past during state rituals performed at the Palace chapel at Gangtok.

The late spread of Buddhism in remote areas of Sikkim such as Tingchim, with the consequence of the preservation of shamanism, had other historical reasons. Buddhism firmly took root in Sikkim following the establishment of the Buddhist monarchy in 1642 and the efforts of Sikkim’s Patron Saints and subsequent lamas and Chogyals—particularly that of the third king Chagdor Namgyal—to convert the indigenous Lepchas and build the first monasteries. Powerful Buddhist institutions such as the large celibate monasteries of central Tibet, which would have contributed to a rapid spread of Buddhism and suppression of *bon*, never developed in Sikkim for a number of demographic, political and economic reasons. According to the earliest census, Sikkim’s Lhopo and Lepcha population in 1891 was just over 10,000 and the lamas numbered less than one thousand. The Phodong monastery registered one hundred lamas in 1891 (*Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1894: 257) from the surrounding villages who gathered there only on special occasions. There were no towns and this small Sikkimese population was dispersed throughout jungles and forests. There were no centres for higher Buddhist studies within Sikkim and only a few could afford to travel to the Tibetan Nyingma and Kagyud head monasteries of Mindroling (*sMin ’gro gling*), Dorje Drak (*rDo rje brag*) and Tsurpu (*Tshor phu*) in central Tibet for the study of Tibetan grammar and Buddhist philosophy. Most Sikkimese practised shifting cultivation and rare were those who had any surplus food or free time allowing them to travel for the purpose of study or pilgrimage.

Celibate monasteries never found fertile grounds in Sikkim. We have seen that although Chagdor Namgyal had initially created Pemayangtse, the premier monastery of Sikkim, as a celibate monastery in 1705, it did not survive in this form. An important factor, which may have discouraged the maintenance of celibate monasteries, was the chronic shortage of agricultural labour among the Lhopos prior to the settlement of Nepalese tenant farmers. This shortage of labour encouraged brothers to stay together to work their parents’ fields for as long as their respective families got on and must have made it very difficult to spare the labour of one brother and support him as a full time celibate



lama in the monastery. The only attempt to create a celibate monastery after Pemayangtse was by Taring Rinpoche<sup>32</sup> with the support of the late Queen Mother<sup>33</sup> and ended in complete disaster with every single monk breaking his vows and eventually taking up married life. Some Sikkimese think that one of the reasons why celibate monks eventually break their vows in Sikkim is because Sikkimese society expects them to look after their parents in old age if no other brothers are capable of doing so, an obligation for which they require a wife and the income of a household. And once married, lamas are again back in the community, dependant on its solidarity and celebrating its communality. The fact that Sikkimese lamas were not celibate and had to look after their fields and families also contributed to their failure to maintain a strong position in the politics of Sikkim comparable to that of the Gelug monasteries of central Tibet.<sup>34</sup> And perhaps for the same reason, the system of *tulku*, or spiritual reincarnation, never took root in Sikkim. Most knowledgeable lamas, monastery abbots and realised *gomchen* had sons, and knowledge, spiritual power and property was passed on to them rather than onto a *tulku* chosen by the monastery.<sup>35</sup> With the exception of the Lachen Gomchen, the few Sikkimese *tulku* were reincarnations of Tibetan lamas or Rinpoches belonging to Tibetan spiritual lineages. Thus, by comparison with Tibet, Sikkim's indigenous masters were not reincarnated lamas at the head of powerful monastic estates but non-celibate monastery abbots or *dorje lopen* (*rdo rje slob dpon*)

<sup>32</sup> Taring Rinpoche (1886–1947), also known as Changzod Kusho or Lhatsun Tenzing Pawo was considered a reincarnation of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme. He was the son of Maharani Yeshe Dolma and thus the half-brother of Sir Tashi Namgyal, the 11th Chogyal of Sikkim.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Tashi Namgyal's wife, Maharani Kunzang Dechen Tshomo Namgyal (1904–1987), was the daughter of Rakashar Depon Tenzing Namgyal, a General in the Tibetan Army.

<sup>34</sup> Whether celibate or not, the chance to maintain a strong monk-body became an impossibility once the majority of the monasteries were stripped of their landholdings by White at the end of the nineteenth century and the holdings redistributed to newly appointed landlords. The creation of the lessee estates greatly strengthened the lessee-landlords who then kept a large portion of the agricultural surplus which could have been used to support celibate monasteries by the state which in turn would have strengthened the monarchy. White's re-organisation of the *lhade mide*, the traditional state council where the lamas and the laity were represented in equal numbers, further stripped the monasteries of the political authority they had enjoyed all over Sikkim prior to British intervention.

<sup>35</sup> Regarding this subject, Hooker mentions: "I never heard of any Sikkim Lama arriving at such sanctity as to be considered immortal, and to reappear after death in another individual, nor is there any election of infants" (1855 [1987]: vol. 1, 342).

who had climbed the ranks of their local monastery's hierarchy through study and seniority as well as elusive *gomchen* who spent their lives in the forests from where they were said to perform miracles and reach high levels of self-realisation.<sup>36</sup> Sikkim was renowned throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world as a *beyul* blessed by Guru Rinpoche where results in meditation were easily obtained.

Had celibate monasteries taken root in Sikkim, we could have expected that shamanism would have disappeared more rapidly as it did among the Sherpas where the establishment of Nyingma celibate monasteries in the twentieth century wiped out shamanism in a few decades (Ortner 1995). Nevertheless, Sikkimese monasteries did have an impact on shamans and village religion, although much slower, and limited to the immediate villages surrounding them. For example, animal sacrifice has effectively been eradicated from the villages surrounding Phodong monastery and there are hardly any active Lhopo *pawo* or *nejum* left in West Sikkim where the influence of Buddhism has been greatest since the seventeenth century. The last great *pawo* of the area, Chongpung Ajo Pawo, who passed away in 1994, had incorporated the invocation of high Buddhist deities<sup>37</sup> in his chanting under the influence of the Pemayangtse lamas, something I never heard chanted by the *pawo* in Tingchim.

The survival of *bon* rituals in Sikkimese villages such as Tingchim reveals that, however Buddhist the Lhopos might have been prior to the establishment of the kingdom, the Buddhacisation of Sikkim, which was initiated by Sikkim's Patron Saints in the seventeenth century, was never completed. The transformation is still an ongoing process of which the most recent phase may appear as a 'revival'. An important development, which had significant consequences for the development of Buddhism all over Sikkim, was the arrival of Tibetan Nyingma and Kagyud Rinpoches and highly knowledgeable lamas from Tibet who settled in Sikkim as refugees from the late 1950s. The most prominent Rinpoches who have made contributions to Sikkim's Buddhist development are, among the Nyingmapa, Dudjom Rinpoche and Doderupchen

<sup>36</sup> Sikkim's last famous *gomchen*, including the Lachen Gomchen, were Lingdok Gomchen and Labrang Gomchen who meditated in two neighbouring cottages on a hilltop above Gangtok called Taktse (See Silverstone 1973).

<sup>37</sup> Towards the beginning of his invocation, which I had the chance to record in 1993, Chongpung Ajo Pawo made offerings to: *bla ma, yi dam, dpa' bo, mkha' 'gro, chos skyong, srug ma, phyogs bcu na bzugs pa'i sangs rgyas, sangs rgyas* and *byang chub sems dpa'*.



Rinpoche,<sup>38</sup> the latter having established the large Chorten monastery at Deorali near Gangtok mainly for Bhutanese monks from eastern Bhutan; and among the Kagyudpa, the 16th Karmapa who established the international headquarters of the Karma Kagyud at the Dharma Chakra Centre at Rumtek. Although his monastery was mainly for Tibetan monks, the 16th Karmapa had a profound influence over the minority Kagyud villages of Sikkim such as Tingchim just as Dudjom Rinpoche did over the Sikkimese Nyingma villages around the same period. Other knowledgeable Tibetan lamas and Rinpoches found employment in the newly established Namgyal Research Institute of Tibetology (1958) and the Government of Sikkim's first Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies (founded in 1960) which was reserved for the education of Sikkimese lamas. These institutes and monasteries became the first centres for higher Buddhist teachings within Sikkim.<sup>39</sup>

As in the case of the high lama of Sakya who visited Tingchim in the late 1920s, the people of Tingchim usually only consulted high lamas collectively in the case of deadly epidemics, which their local ritual specialists could not control. From the village's point of view, conventional Buddhism and its Rinpoches was something that lay outside and beyond the reach of the village until the 1960s. Buddhism was both incredibly precious and somewhat intangible. It had little to do with village daily life. Village lamas' greatest achievement was to go on pilgrimage or to study in Tibet. They came back with tales and accomplishments which raised their position locally. This changed in the 1960s when villagers expanded their cardamom cash-crop fields and hired Limbu workers. A surplus of time and money was created, which could, as among the wealthy Sikkimese of Gangtok, be invested in the practice and study of Buddhism as well as for the biomedical and ritual treatment of individual cases of illness and the secular education of children. The consultation of newly available Tibetan Rinpoches increased and became even more essential since the practice of animal sacrifice as the ultimate cure in cases of illness was simultaneously abandoned under the influence of the 16th Karmapa.<sup>40</sup> The practice of sending village lama-students to the newly established Institute of

<sup>38</sup> Dodrupchen Rinpoche is currently the most important Buddhist figure residing in Sikkim and serves as a uniting force for its Buddhist population.

<sup>39</sup> On the contributions of Tibetan lamas to the establishment of Buddhism in Sikkim after 1959, see Gyatso (2005, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche had a similar influence on the Nyingma villages in Sikkim.

Higher Nyingma Studies did not happen in Tingchim until much later as the Institute, although opened in 1960, was still unofficially reserved for candidates from Sikkimese Nyingma villages. Nevertheless, more lamas were trained locally and, by 1985, there were nineteen active lamas in Tingchim.

Further changes occurred following the end of the Buddhist monarchy and Sikkim's integration within the Union of India in 1975. Buddhism was no longer the base of the village's relations with the outside world through the Phodong monastery and the Palace's Administration. These changes resulted in a marked reduction in attendance and contribution to the annual Buddhist community rituals in post-1975 Sikkim. While the community aspect of Buddhism was slowly dying out, the Tibetan lamas offered new educational alternatives that gained popularity for the personal achievement and career prospects they could lead to. Since 1985, fifteen young lama-students from Tingchim have been sent for Buddhist studies outside the village to the monastic school in Rumtek, the monastic school in Phodong, and the government's Institute for Higher Nyingma Studies in Gangtok. This brings the number of active and studying lamas in Tingchim to thirty, the highest ever recorded number of lamas for the village. But with the new educational opportunities offered by the Tibetan lamas, the traditional patterns of learning and practice were changed. They study in large institutes from an early age and meditate in special centres instead of following in the footsteps of their *gomchen* ancestors who retreated to the mountain above their village. As a result, the new lamas do not study Sikkim's particular Buddhist traditions brought by its founding lamas or have any knowledge of the supernatural beings of the land, their own *pho lha mo lha*, or how to serve the simple needs of their fellow villagers. Nor have they established ties of mutual help and future ritual obligations towards villagers who would have brought them food during their retreats above the village. They have been segregated and elevated above their community and are now said to look down upon the senior lamas of their own village monasteries.

In recent years, lama-students from the Institute for Higher Nyingma Studies have been criticised for joining the institution with the sole purpose of obtaining a college degree that will qualify them for government employment, with the result that these lama-graduates usually no longer return to the village to serve their community. Others from Kagyud villages have joined the monastic school at the Dharma Chakra Centre at Rumtek and other Tibetan institutions in North Bengal



although these students, upon completion of their studies, are often sent abroad to teach in the Kagyud centres scattered throughout the world and seldom return to their villages of origin. Chogyal Wangchuk Namgyal<sup>41</sup> seems well aware of these problems and, in the late 1990s, established an imposing monastic school and retreat centre at Taktse near Gangtok where lamas throughout the state are sponsored and given the opportunity to study Buddhist philosophy as well as Lhatsun Namkha Jigme's teachings and undertake meditation retreats within the Nyingma tradition. These lamas are not given college degrees and are expected to return to their village monasteries in order to help raise the level of scholarship, discipline and understanding of Buddhism at the village level.<sup>42</sup>

### 3. ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS OF THE LHOPOS

The various origins and times of migration of the Sikkimese Lhopos have not yet been completely established and are still the subject of speculation and debate. Hopefully, historical and archaeological research will one day shed light on these questions although few original manuscripts and historical records are believed to have survived the Gorkha invasion of the late eighteenth century. The various origins, which had been pieced together from surviving documents and oral histories presented in the *History of Sikkim* (Namgyal 1908), mainly relate the possible antecedents of the Namgyal dynasty and related clans and lineages, and make little mention of the origins of the commoner Sikkimese Lhopos such as the people of Tingchim.

The origins of the Chogyals of Sikkim is a complex question, which has not yet been elucidated by historians. The various histories that have been put forward usually claim that the Chogyals descend from a Minyak prince by the name of Guru Tashi who left Kham Minyak

<sup>41</sup> Prince Wangchuk was spontaneously 'appointed' Chogyal by the people immediately after his father, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal's cremation in 1982 (Bobb, *India Today*, March 15, 1982). The title is of course ceremonial and unrecognized; it is however maintained by many Sikkimese for emotional reasons.

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Chogyal Wangchuk Namgyal has made a new attempt at establishing a celibate monastery at the Palace chapel in the 1990s where, by the year 2000, out of 55 lamas, seven had taken full celibate vows. However, a few years later, I was told that most had renounced their vows.