

THE 'TIBETAN' FORMATION OF SIKKIM:
RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF A CORONATION MYTH

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INTRODUCTION

If one were to look through the tourist information pamphlets given to visitors on their arrival in Sikkim, one would notice (after references to Sikkimese orchids and claims of Sikkim being the Switzerland of the East) a historical section, in which the tourist is told about the formation of the Sikkimese kingdom and State. The commonly accepted popular history, which I will go into detail below, is basically set around the figure of lHa btsun chen po and two other Tibetan lamas who met at Yoksam and decided to crown a man, king of the hidden land. This man was found in the figure of Phun tshogs rnam gyäl, a farmer from Gangtok in east Sikkim, who was crowned king in 1642.

In this article, I examine the details of the above story in light of information gathered from mid-seventeenth century documents, written in Sikkim during the formative period of Sikkimese statehood. Based on these sources, I assess the extent to which the tale of coronation is an accurate representation of an historical event and explain how this particular story became popular in both the orthodox and local histories of the Sikkimese State and population.

For the purposes of this paper, I have used three principal mid-seventeenth century documents, which are further supplemented by a number of eighteenth century manuscripts. Two of the main documents come from the collected works of lHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med: *Kun bzang rnam pa thar par* (hereafter *KZNT*), and '*Bras ljongs lam yig*; and the third document is the Nam rtse (pronounced Namchi in the Sikkimese dialect) edition of the *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* (hereafter *GlrN*). The final chapter of this text is an account of the mNga' bdag pa tradition of Byang gter in Sikkim.¹ Supplementing

¹ This text, which follows the *rgyal rabs* from folio 548-594, details the genealogy of the mNga' bdag family, who through the figure of Phun tshogs rig 'dzin and his son Byams pa bstan 'dzin became influential during the formative years of the

these documents are: *'Jigs med dpa' bo'i bka' 'bum*, *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*, *Bla ma ched mtshan gsum 'bras ljongs sbas gnas phebs tshul*, and *PSLG*.² As the basis of historical enquiry, Tibetan literary works are often deeply misleading, in that chronological references are often sacrificed for religious accounts and life stories, so much so in fact, that it appears that Tibetans are adverse to dates. This impedes the student of Tibetan history, since one may discover *what* happened only to be frustrated by the conspicuous lack of sequential references. Moreover, in some cases one finds that particular authors have the habit of recounting events with a disregard for chronological sequence. While the primary sources used for this article do fall prey to some of these characteristics, by and large they follow a reasonable chronological order with important events marked pinpointed to the day, month, and year in which they occurred.

In addition to discussing the story of the coronation of the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal, I look into the role of two Tibetan lamas and their activities in Sikkim during the early years of the Namgyal dynasty. For this reason, a large part of this paper is dedicated to biographical account of these lamas, namely: lHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med and mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin. Through this discussion of their activities it is hoped that a clearer picture of the religious and political climate of early Sikkim will become apparent including an understanding of state-led religious patronage. The article concludes with a brief study of the competing position of the two major rNying ma pa lineages in Sikkim and the final ascendance of the rDzogs chen / sMin grol gling branch.

THE SIKKIMESE CORONATION STORY

The most popular account of the coronation of the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal centres around the main figure of popular Sikkimese folk history: lHa btsun chen po Nam mkha' 'jigs med. Firstly lHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med leaves Tibet with his followers and heads south where he first encounters the mountains of the Sikkimese Himalaya. Unable to cross a deep gorge he contemplates the path before miraculously disappearing into the mountains. After

Sikkimese kingdom. The text was written by Byams pa bstan 'dzin in 1656, the year of his father's death.

² See Karma tshang bsam skal bzang blo ldan in the bibliography for the full title of *PSLG* and information on the other Tibetan sources.

two weeks of waiting, his disciples fear the worst and begin to make preparations for the construction of a stupa to honour their master. Just as they are about to give up all hope, they hear the sound of Nam mkha' 'jigs med's thigh bone trumpet in the distance, after which the master himself appears flying over the gorge, having found the secret northern path into the hidden land. The master and his disciples negotiate the last obstacle and begin tracing a southwardly path into the centre of the hidden land, where finally they reach Yog bsam.

It is in Yog bsam that lHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med meets with two other lamas; mNga' bdag sems pa chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin, who had arrived via the southern entrance of the hidden land; and Kah: thog Rig 'dzin Kun tu bzang po, who had reached Sikkim through the western door of the *sbas yul*. Then mNga' bdag sems pa chen po proclaims that he should be the ruler of the hidden land because he is descended from the lineage of khri srong lde btsan. However, lHa btsun chen po counters this by quoting from the prophetic traditions of the rNying ma pa, in which it is stated that a fourth person should be present having come from an easterly direction. So it is agreed to send out a search party to the east to find the man that should make up the quartet of prophesised people.

In the eastern town of sGang tog, a man named Phun tshogs rnam rgyal was found milking his cows and seeing that he was endowed with the characteristics of a superior being, he was brought back to west Sikkim. In 1642 this farmer from sGang tog was enthroned in Yog bsam, the meeting place of the three Tibetan lamas, and the whole country was filled with celebrations. After this, lHa btsun chen po consolidated Buddhism in Sikkim with the help of his devout disciple and new king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, building monasteries and *lha khang(s)* such as Grub sde, known as the oldest monastery in Sikkim, gSang sngags chos gling and Padma g.Yang rtse. He spent the rest of his life in Sikkim opening holy places, discovering *gter ma* and meditating in caves and secluded places.

THE 'TIBETAN' LAMAS

Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med

Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med was born in 1597, in sByar yul, and it is suggested in traditional historical accounts of his life that his family was from the nobility of that area. I have found no record of his father's

name but his mother is clearly mentioned as being Yid ‘ong bu dga’.³ It appears that his father died when he was quite young. Like many Tibetan youngsters, Nam mkha’ ’jigs med spent his early childhood raising the family’s yak, sheep, horses and other animals, spending most of his time on the high pastures near his home town. At the young age of eleven he fled from his parental home with the desire to dedicate his life to the study of religion. He spent six years in the hermitage of gSung snyan grwa tshang under the tutelage of one O gyan dpal sbyor, where he learnt how to read and write, but this apparently did not quench his thirst for the Dharma and so, aged seventeen, he left the hermitage for Kong po.⁴

As with many histories of Tibetan religious figures, he does not go directly to Kong po but instead finds himself wandering through central Tibet. His first stop is Dwags po rtse, when he meets with a Tibetan lama named Rig ‘dzin mchog grub rnam rgyal. He stays two months with this lama before he continues his journey.⁵ He reaches the place of sMin grol bskyed rdzogs gling⁶ (not to be confused with the monastery of sMin grol gling, which was established in 1670), where he stays for around five years, pursuing various forms of renunciation and spiritual practices.⁷ Finally, he makes his way to Kong po where he spends twelve months with one of his principal teachers, Grub thob sod rnam dbang po (1547-1625).

After residing with Sod rnam dbang po, he meets with many other lamas and receives teachings and instructions from them. After which he stays with, perhaps his most important teacher, ‘Ja tshon snying po (1615-1672) and receives instruction on many teachings of the treasure tradition, such as the *gter ma* of Sangs rgyas gling pa (*Bla ma dgongs ‘dus*), Ratna gling pa (*Thugs sgrub* and *sNying ‘dus*), O rgyan gling pa, rDo rje gling pa, Chos rgyal Rin chen gling pa’s teachings on rDzogs chen, Padma gling pa, Karma gling pa, bDe chen gling pa, Rig ‘dzin rgod ldem can, etc.⁸ If we can assume that *KZNT* follows a

³ *KZNT* 49 line 1-2: *ma yid ‘ong bu dga’ zhes bya ba’i mngal du zhugs dus*. “At the time of residing in the womb of (his) mother, who is known as yid ‘ong bu dga’”

⁴ Ibid: 55-56

⁵ Ibid: 60

⁶ Presumably this is either a monastery or a hermitage.

⁷ Op. cit: 61-62

⁸ Ibid: 79-86. Full details of the empowerments, oral instructions and textual teachings received by lHa btsun chen po can be found in *Kun bzang rnam par rgyal ba* 79-103.

chronological order⁹ then these events happened prior to the death of Nam mkha' 'jig med's other main teacher Sod rnam dbang po, in 1625.¹⁰

It appears that he spent the remainder of his time in the Kong po region where he practised and 'revealed' treasure texts until the mid-1640s,¹¹ after which he travelled to Sikkim at the request of one of his principal teachers, 'Ja tshon snying po. In '*Bras ljongs lam yig* (hereafter *LTY*) lHa btsun chen po gives some further reasons for his journey to the hidden land of Sikkim:

While travelling from the eastern direction of Kong po [I] was saddened by the meeting of the degeneration period caused by the general impermanent and changing nature of all existing time.

Especially [at this time] there was misunderstanding between dByings pa chen mo and those such as Gong ma chen po¹² [who resides] in the fort of bKra shis rtse¹³ and the brother of the king from the northern direction who is from the clan of rBa.¹⁴ To whomsoever I spoke to I heard only words of suffering and insults. So I have seen many times in many prophesies, by other eminent masters, that it is necessary for sentient beings of the *dus mtha*¹⁵ to proceed towards the hidden land. Here follows a quotation from 'The sutra of the highest prophesy' which is from the very mouth of our teacher the son of king Suddhodana: "Listen Shariputra! After my parinirvana there will be seven times lineage of the king, which is like the light of a saviour. After that there will be a period of 510 years and towards the end of that time my four disciples must go to four places which are the forests, the island of the external ocean, the source of the essence of meaning rivers and the place of the mountain called Dan tig. They must go to the

⁹ Of such things we cannot be certain as in folio 130, Nam mkha' 'jigs med refers to himself aged only twenty-one, then the following eight pages refer to his activities in Sikkim (he reached Sikkim aged 49).

¹⁰ Op. cit: 123.

¹¹ For example, in 1642, the date that traditionally corresponds with the enthronement of the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal, lHa btsun chen po had composed a poetical text in Kong po.

¹² The Dalai Lama.

¹³ A village in the sTod lung district, which is near Lhasa.

¹⁴ It appears that this may refer to the gTsang princes.

¹⁵ Dus mtha refers to the period of time when the Dharma will degenerate.

island of the south-western places and also all the places of the doctrine of the Buddha such as Khotan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Uddiyana and India. Since at the end of the time the Buddha Dharma will flourish in the northern snowy land [i.e. Tibet]. That is according to the prophesy by Rig gsum mgon po. At the end of 500 years all the people of Tibet must go to the border regions. They should flee to the forest.” Thus it is prophesied! Thus it is explained!

Furthermore prophesies have been uttered from the very mouth of ‘Ja tshon snying po, who is the second Dorje Chang and who is the body of all Buddhas, “Now proceed towards the hidden land and the border of lHo mon [i.e. Bhutan].¹⁶ Although the Buddha taught heaps of teachings of all the Buddhas to each sentient being’s afflicted with bad karma, it is not possible to stop karma, which is without deception. Now the great powerful troops from Mongolia are coming quickly, and since the sentient beings of the *Dus mtha* will sink in the quagmire of suffering, those sons, disciples, benefactors and persons affectionately connected must abandon attachment and must go in the direction of the peaceful hidden land.” Thus, all that has been persistently commanded [by ‘Ja-tshon snying po] has been understood clearly in my own mind.¹⁷

This opening passage of *LTLY* is enlightening in that it clearly documents the religio-political situation of Tibet in the seventeenth century through references to Mongolian armies, the rise of the Dalai Lama (Gong ma) and the degeneration period of Buddhism. Certainly this passage is a nice example of seventeenth century rNying ma pa religio-political rhetoric, perhaps with the intention to inspire other practitioners to flee to the borderlands. However, it is also important to remember that the seventeenth century was a dangerous time in Tibet, with forcible conversions and the eruption of open civil war, which may have appeared to many (on the losing side) as the ‘degeneration time’.

What is curious about lHa btsun chen po’s life is that during the most turbulent time of the Tibetan civil war he remained in Kong po,

¹⁶ Sikkim is classed within the greater territory of lHo mon which has generally been identified as the later state of Bhutan. It therefore seems that before the establishment of the two Himalayan states of Sikkim and Bhutan, the region to the south of Tibet was generally referred to as lHo mon.

¹⁷ *lHa btsun lam yig* 426-429.

leaving Tibet at least three years after the establishment of the central Tibetan state under the Dalai Lama in 1642. Indeed it was not until the 13th day of the fifth month of the Fire Dog, or *Me khyi*, year (1646) that lHa btsun chen po, with fifteen followers, left Kong po for the hidden land.¹⁸ On his way to Sikkim he passes through Kong po to bSam yas and by the seventh month of the same year he reaches a point where he can view the Sikkimese mountains and there he makes the necessary offerings to the deities of Sikkim.¹⁹ After the ninth month of the same year we are told that he meets with mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin before he finally arrives in Sikkim via Phu chu dkar lha (sic).²⁰

mNga' bDag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin

The second important Tibetan figure in Sikkimese religious and political history was mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin, who was born in the palace of Sag khri mkhar in western Tibet in 1592, after which he and his father left western Tibet for dBus gtsang. It appears that Phun tshogs rig 'dzin was born into quite a privileged family that ruled a portion of western Tibet, bordering on Mang yul Gung thang. Further it appears that this family had an important connection with the kings of Mustang as A mgon bsam grub rab brtan (the king of Mustang) was married to the second daughter of Phun tshogs rig 'dzin and that this connection would prove important in Phun tshogs rig 'dzin's later life.²¹

He spent most of his early years training with his father, before he embarked upon a period of meditation and seclusion, which lasted for twelve years.²² His entry into Sikkimese history is marked, as it is with

¹⁸ *LTLY*: 438-439. This is probably due to the fact that he was less connected to the enemies of the dGe lugs pa, unlike one of the other Tibetan lama, Phun tshogs rig 'dzin, who remained for some time in the capital of the gTsang rulers. The text actually gives the date of the *me byi* or Fire Rat year (1636), though this is obviously an error for *me khyi* as the rest of the text follows a reasonably chronological order until page 562 where the date of the eleventh month of the *me khyi* year is given. It is clear that the first date of the *me khyi* is a copying error as every time a new year is mentioned the year is stated and then the months in chronological order until the start of a new year.

¹⁹ *Ibid*: 521.

²⁰ *Ibid*: 548-552.

²¹ *GlrN*: 581 and 587.

²² *GlrN*: 565-566.

IHa btsun chen po, by the prophetic tradition of the rNying ma pa school. In the mNga' bdag appendage to the Nam rtse edition of the *rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* the prophesy of rDo rje gling pa is quoted: "there will arise (a situation) which resembles the hawk hunting for prey, and an individual who is a descendent of the lineage of Khri srong lde btsan²³ (will act as) a symbol of the former attachment to the innate ground of the interior of the sacred land of Sikkim".²⁴ So on the 25th day of the third month of the Water Horse year (1642) Phun tshogs rig 'dzin leaves from Zhigatse, the capital of the gTsang princes, with his son in search of sBas yul 'Bras mo ljongs.²⁵

When he reaches the outer door of the hidden land he issues a number of proclamations and promises to the oath bound protectors of the hidden land and entreats them to remember their oaths to protect the Dharma and the hidden land. He then offers *bsang* to the local divinities and proceeds toward Yog bsam, where he arrives on the third day of the eighth Tibetan month (four months and eight days after he left Zhigatse). The mNga' bdag history marks this event as being the final completion of the prophesies from the *Lung bstan bka' rgya* and *The seven profound and secret teachings of Khri srong lde btsan* which relate that an individual who is both a *ras pa*²⁶ and a descendant of the Tibetan kings will open the hidden land and re-establish the dynasty of Khri srong lde btsan.

²³ The mNga' bdag pa family are considered to be a sub-branch of the royal family of Ladakh, who claim descent from the kings of Gu ge, who were considered to be a branch of the Tibetan royal family. It appears, however, that the mNga' bdag pa family only received this title during the period of Yuan Sa skya rule over central Tibet.

²⁴ Ibid: 575-576. *rdo rje gling pa'i lung byang gsal ba'i sgron me las/ 'bras mo gshongs su nang gi gnas gzhi chags pa'i snga rtags su/ khri srong lde btsan gdung brgyud chig byi'u khra'i ded pa bzhin 'byung bar zhes gsung ba.* This passage may be using the metaphor of the hunt of the hawk as an example of the political climate of mid-seventeenth century Tibet; a period of extreme civil and political disorder, caused by the power struggles of the gTsang prince and Mongolian factions of the dGe lugs pa school.

²⁵ Ibid: 576. *Chu pho rta'i hor zla gsum pa'i nyer lnga la rgyal khab chen po gzhi rtse nas 'jig rtan gyi snyan grags kun la phyi phyag mdzad nas yab sras chas cig 'bras gshongs su phebs.*

²⁶ A *ras pa* is a person who has perfected the practice of inner-fire, a meditation practice which, as a by-product, generates internal heat in the practitioner; so much so it is claimed that those who practise this meditation have the ability to melt snow, etc. The most famous adept of this tradition was Milarepa. *Ras pa* refers to the cotton clothes these practitioners wear.

Then, in accordance with the prophesy of Ratna gling pa that “If in this place, monasteries, stupas and temples are built the land of Tibet will experience a hundred years of happiness and bliss,”²⁷ Phun tshogs rig ‘dzin and his son began the construction of the dMar po lha khang²⁸ in Yog bsam during the 11th month of the Water Sheep year (1643). mNga’ bdag Phun tshogs rig ‘dzin and his son also constructed the monastery of Zil gnon, which they began in 1649 and completed in 1651. It was also around this time that the Byams pa lha khang was constructed in bKra shis lding. However, Phun tshogs rig ‘dzin was also involved in the coronation of Sikkim’s first king Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal at some point between 1643 and the construction of Zil gnon in 1649.

THE THRONE IN THE FOREST: THE CORONATION OF PHUN TSHOGS RNAM RGYAL

In a previous article (Mullard 2005: 75) I argued that one often finds inaccurate references to the date of the establishment of the Sikkimese dynasty. The orthodox approach to Sikkimese history contends that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal was brought from sGang tog (the current state capital) and enthroned in Yog bsam nor bu sgang in the year 1642. In my previous article I noted that this was highly unlikely due to a number of issues, one of which was based in the translation of *PSLG*, which stated that the ancestors of the first Sikkimese king, Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, had been resident in western Sikkim at least since the mid-thirteenth to early fourteenth century.²⁹ In the mNga’ bdag chronicle we find that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal originally hailed from a place known as sGang tog.³⁰ This however, does not negate the fact that the

²⁷ Ibid: 577. *lHag par radna’i (sic.) gter byang las/ gnas der lha khang mchod rten sgrub sde tshug/ bod yul lo rgya’i bar du bde bar ‘gyur/.*

²⁸ This monastery no longer exists; however, it is believed that this monastery stood on a site near to the coronation throne in Yog bsam.

²⁹ *PSLG* does state that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal was made ruler of Sikkim in 1642, though this appears to be an addition inserted by the editor of the text Gung Dorje in 1979.

³⁰ *GlN: 578. de skabs sgang tog gi zhal do (sic. zhal ngo) a pa (sic a pha) rdo rjer bkra shis rtags brgyad (dang) rgyal srid sna bdun sogs kyi dbang bskur gnas kyi rgyal por bskod (sic. bkod) mtshan yang rgyal po phun tshogs rnam rgyal zhes gnang nas mchod yon du gyur/.* “At that time the eight auspicious symbols and the seven signs of royalty were conferred upon the Lord of sGang tog A pha rDo rje and (he) was enthroned as king of this sacred place. Furthermore he was given the name of

ancestors of the Sikkimese royal family resided in western Sikkim. Indeed we should remember that the current capital of Gangtok was only settled in the late nineteenth century (1888), and that thereafter the palace at Pho brang was abandoned after the earthquake of 1897, an earthquake that also saw the destruction of the palace at Gangtok.³¹ Thus it may be more likely that the sGang tog we find in the mNga' bdag chronicle actually refers to the settlement of Zil gnon, which was also known by the name sGang tog Zil gnon rtse³² and which according to *PSLG* had been settled during the life time of Brag btsan dar, the son of the Khams Mi nyag prince.³³ Furthermore, the old route to Zil gnon begins in an easterly direction from Yog bsam towards the eastern tributary of the Rathang river for around two hours before following the hill of dPa' bo Hung ri, down in a south-easterly direction to reach modern Zil gnon monastery.³⁴

In my previous article in this journal, I put forward the date of 1646 as the date of the enthronement of the first Sikkimese king, and as of

King Phun tshogs rnam rgyal and the 'priest-patron' relationship was established." In the above passage it appears that *zhal ngo a pa* is in fact a title as *a pha* in western Tibetan dialects conveys a similar meaning to that of *sku ngo*, and given that this text was written by a western Tibetan we can deduce that this phrase indicates an honorific title.

³¹ The palace at Gangtok was rebuilt and served as the royal residence until it was gutted by a fire in the 1920s. A few years prior to the earthquake, Gangtok had become the formal capital after the Political Officer J.C. White had the British residency constructed as his official residence and office. It was with the more proactive policy of the British in the Himalaya that led to the construction of Gangtok as the capital of Sikkim. With the exception of the Sikkimese coronation myth, the student of Sikkimese political history will not encounter Gangtok as a key site in the history of Sikkim until the arrival of J.C. White and the subsequent relocation of the Sikkimese capital in 1888.

³² For example in the following text *Bla ma che mtshan gsum 'bras ljongs sbas gnas phebs tshul* (folio 8) it is noted: *de nas sgang tog zil non rtse bzhugs nas sras chos rgyal A phag* (sic. a pha) *'khrungs/*. Then having resided on the top of the peak of Zil gnon (or more: accurately having resided at Gangs tog zil gnon) the son Dharma raja A phag was born. It may also be important to note that after the capital of Sikkim was moved from west Sikkim to the dBang sdus rtse pho brang in Tumlong, many key ministers relocated and with that move came the re-identification of west Sikkimese place names to new sites in eastern Sikkim. For example today there are two places named 'Bar nyag, one in west Sikkim the other, now in the district of South Sikkim, near the modern town of Shingtam. Other examples include, Tadong, Martam, Samdong, etc.

³³ Mullard 2005: 65-66.

³⁴ I walked this route in January 2006 and it took around five hours, though I was told by a local of bKra shis 'dzom that it would take a local between two and three hours to walk.

yet I have not come across any source contradicting that date. Further, even in the mNga' bdag chronicle we do not have a specific date for the coronation, with that key political event happening between the construction of the dMar po lha khang (1643) and the construction of Zil gnon monastery in 1649.³⁵ Thus it appears likely that the information given in '*Bras ljongs lam yig* is correct and since that particular text follows a chronological pattern, as of yet, there is no reason to doubt its accuracy.³⁶

RELIGIOUS PATRONAGE AND THE RNAM RGYAL DYNASTY

Certainly the evidence presented in the mNga' bdag history seems to suggest that mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin and his son held the position of being the main religious instructor of the first Sikkimese king. However we are also told in the works of lHa btsun chen po that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal also received an initiation into the *gter ma* text of the *Rig 'dzin srog grub*. So where does this leave the state of religious patronage in mid-seventeenth century Sikkim, when texts from both the mNga' bdag pa and lHa btsun pa indicate a level of patronage? Perhaps in order to answer this question we should address the physical evidence i.e. the early Sikkimese monasteries.

According to the mNga' bdag history we are told that during the life time of Phun tshogs rig 'dzin three principal monasteries were built in the name of the mNga' bdag lineage: bKra shis lding (in the centre of the *sbas yul* and thus the most sacred site in Sikkim), Zil gnon (the former ancestral home of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal) and the dMar po lha khang (built close to the site of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal's coronation). lHa btsun chen po, on the other hand, was responsible for the construction of sGrub sde and bKra shis 'dzom, to the west of Zil gnon and in the region of his principal *sbyin bdag*³⁷ lHa dbang bKra shis. Certainly the locations of the mNga' bdag monasteries seem to indicate that this tradition may have had a more prominent position in the early

³⁵ *GlrN*: 578-580.

³⁶ The particular text has the following chronological pattern: every event that has a different year is introduced with the year, the month and the day; an event which shares the same year as the previous event notes only the month and day. Thus we have the pattern year, month-day, 2nd month-day, 3rd month-day, 4th month-day, etc. until the next new year, after which the system is restarted.

³⁷ The role of the *sbyin bdag* in Tibetan Buddhism is quite a complex relationship which can, amongst other things, be identified with the role of a benefactor of religion.

religious politics of Sikkim. Though it should be noted as well that IHa btsun chen po also had a number of royal disciples such as Princess Ye shes dbang mo and her daughter mKha' spyod tshe ring IHa mdzes, whom he instructs on the nature of impermanence.³⁸ Furthermore, it is also mentioned in the *lam yig* that IHa btsun chen po is the Bodhisattva vow holder of the first Sikkimese king: *some fortunate being such as the powerful king Phun tsoq rnam rgyal were given the eight religious vows and the Bodhisattva vows and hence from that time onwards, they came to be known as Bodhisattvas.*³⁹

It appears that the issue of early state-led religious patronage is characterised by competing assertions from the two contenders: IHa btsun Nam 'kha 'jigs med and mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin. However this may be possible to clear up if we take into consideration the role of early Sikkimese politics and its impact upon the development of religious institutions in Sikkim. As I noted in a previous article (Mullard 2005: 75-77), early Sikkim was most likely characterised by a small patchwork of autonomous regions headed by a local chief or lord, one such lord being IHa dbang bKra shis. His territory included the area around bKra shis 'dzom, which later merged with the realm of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal after a private audience, which led to an alliance being forged between the two men. Later this figure was involved in the subjugation of the Lepcha king of Yug mthing, in the upper Yog bsam valley, and this territory was subsumed under the early Sikkimese kingdom. IHa dbang bkra shis is often mentioned in *LTY* under the title of Jo bo, or lord, and it is also clear that the first monastery constructed by IHa btsun chen po was in the territory of bKra shis 'dzom and it appears that IHa dbang bKra shis was in fact one of the principal *sbyin bdag* of IHa btsun chen po.⁴⁰ Thus it appears that, whilst, mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin was perhaps the more influential of the two, IHa btsun chen po also had a number of important patrons amongst the leading families of seventeenth century Sikkim.

It also appears that there was no conflict between the two Lamas as it is noted that the most sacred stupa in bKra shis lding was in fact

³⁸ *LTY*: 578.

³⁹ *LTY*: 583.

⁴⁰ The monastery can still be seen today, and according to the local Lepcha inhabitants, they claim to be the direct descendents of those Lepchas that were settled there during the life of IHa dbang bKra shis. They also mentioned that the site of the current monastery was in fact part of a complex, which included a *rdzong* or residence of IHa dbang bKra shis. They remain followers of IHa btsun chen po.

constructed by IHa btsun chen po as is attested to by the *dkar chag* of the stupa, composed by IHa btsun chen po (for details of this text see Mullard: 2003a). Throughout the collected works of IHa btsun chen po, there are repeated references to many meetings between the lama and the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal, which may indicate at least a lack of hostility between the two, despite the fact that mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin, running contrary to popular opinion and local sentiment, was probably the most prominent lama in Sikkim at that time.

As of yet there is nothing in the contemporary sources to indicate any degree of hostility between the two major religious personalities of early Sikkim which, given the propensity of Tibetans to sectarian differences, is quite remarkable.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CORONATION MYTH

If the mNga' bdag lineage dominated early Sikkimese religious life, why is it that in most orthodox historical accounts we find IHa btsun chen po in the central role of royal preceptor? In short, the development of this historical account was based on the later political and religious developments that surrounded the Bhutanese invasion of Sikkim c.1700. As is well known, the Bhutanese invasion led to two significant events in Sikkimese history. The first one was the intervention of the central Tibetan government through the Brag dkar pa minister (Mullard 2003b). The second event was the arrival of IHa btsun 'Jigs med dpa' bo, who was retrospectively recognised as the third incarnation of IHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med and who studied in sMin grol gling, the monastery founded by the fifth Dalai Lama's rNying ma pa student gTer bdag gling pa.⁴¹ This figure was to have an important role in the development of Sikkimese political history and filled the religious vacuum left by the declining fortunes of the mNga' bdag lineage in Sikkim. In short, prior to and during the struggle for the throne and the subsequent Bhutanese invasion, the mNga' bdag school sided with the third Chos rgyal's half-sister, Phan bde dbang mo, and her claim to the Sikkimese throne,⁴² and after the defeat of the Bhutanese by the

⁴¹ *'Jigs med dpa' bo'i bka' 'bum*: 125-136. In these pages is a list of all the initiations 'Jigs med dpa' bo received from gTer bdag gling pa and his son, Padma 'gyur med rgya mtsho, whilst he was residing in sMin gling.

⁴² *BGR* notes that the principal mNga' bdag lama of Sikkim at that time was involved in a secret love affair with the Sikkimese princess and half-sister of Phyag rdor rnam rgyal.

Tibetan general Karma dar rgyas and the execution of Phan bde dbang mo after the assassination of the third Sikkimese king in 1717, the mNga' bdag school was left without an important patron.

Furthermore, after the return of the third Chos rgyal Phyag rdor rnam rgyal from Tibet, around 1708, he and 'Jigs med dpa' bo jointly administered Sikkim and set about the reorganisation of the Sikkimese land-holding system. They also built Padma g.yang rtse monastery. With these events the position of the sMin grol gling lineage was firmly established in Sikkim and became the dominant religious tradition in terms of royal patronage, with the lamas of Padma g.yang rtse becoming the most important in Sikkim on account of their role in the coronation of Sikkim's kings. Such later events may account for the inflated role of lHa btsun chen po in subsequent Sikkimese historical writings. Indeed this is suggested by the first documented account of lHa btsun chen po's role in the coronation of the first Sikkimese king being found in 'Jigs med dpa' bo's *bKa' 'bum*.⁴³

CONCLUSION AND HISTORICAL EPILOGUE

In the study of Tibetan history one is often metaphorically torn between sources of historical information and the strong local beliefs in semi-historical legends, which incorporate a number of key religious themes. The coronation story of the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal certainly falls within this category of localised historical belief, which is articulated through the development of the central figure of lHa btsun chen po and the importance of his *gter ma* tradition in later Sikkimese religious history. Or put another way, this local account serves to illustrate the importance of lHa btsun chen po's religious tradition, not only in relation to the mNga' bdag tradition but also in relation to the establishment of political power through the process of searching for a figure who corresponds with the prophetic tradition of the rNying ma pa. This local historical tradition implies that the rNying ma pa, or to be more specific, the tradition of Sikkimese rDzogs chen through the figure of lHa btsun chen po, holds a far more important position than that of Sikkimese royalty, whose dynasty would not have been established without the injunction of lHa btsun chen po.

⁴³ 'Jigs med dpa' bo'i bka' 'bum: 243 line 2. *Kun bzang rnam rgyal gyis* (lHa btsun chen po) *sbas gnas chen po'i sgo phye/ rgyal po phun tshogs rnam rgyal sar mnga' gsol*.

In the literary sources, however, we find an altogether different story. What we are told is that the religio-political position of IHa btsun's tradition was less influential, indeed often playing a secondary role to the mNga' bdag tradition. Yet while the mNga' bdag tradition was important in the mid-seventeenth century, it ultimately became embroiled in the politics of the Sikkimese succession and the resulting Sikkim-Bhutan war. Meanwhile in Tibet, the position of selected rNying ma pa traditions improved in both political and religious ways after the Fifth Dalai Lama gained greater control of the Tibetan government's organisation. The rNying ma pa were enjoying a renaissance of sorts, supported by a rNying ma friendly Dalai Lama who, much to the disapproval of the dGe lugs pa authorities, began practicing and revealing texts associated with the rNying ma teachings.⁴⁴

It was by gTer bdag gling pa, a gifted rNying ma student of the Dalai Lama, that sMin sgrol gling was established. gTer bdag gling pa was also a holder of IHa btsun's *gter ma* tradition, which he passed on to his disciple and the third incarnation of IHa btsun chen po, 'Jigs med dpa' bo. With the eruption of the Sikkim-Bhutan war, the flight of the third Sikkimese king to Tibet and the subsequent arrival of Tibetan military aid in Sikkim, Sikkim was being transformed from an independent Buddhist kingdom on the fringe of the Tibetan world to an integrated part of it. Furthermore, with the third Sikkimese king's exile to Tibet he became heavily influenced by figures such as gTer bdag gling pa. After his return to Sikkim, the third Chos rgyal repeatedly invited gTer bdag gling pa's student and third incarnation of IHa btsun Chen po, IHa btsun 'Jigs med dpa' bo, to Sikkim.⁴⁵ By the time 'Jigs med dpa' bo had arrived in Sikkim, the religious and political situation had dramatically changed. New laws and land grants were introduced which changed the way religious and political institutions were to be managed. Perhaps with these changes came the adoption of a new history of the formation of the Sikkimese kingdom, a history which not only highlighted the position of the lineage of IHa btsun chen po, but also the prophesised nature of the first Sikkimese king.

Furthermore after the death of the third Sikkimese king Phyag rdor rnam rgyal in 1717,⁴⁶ the involvement of the Tibetan state (through sMin gling) in Sikkimese politics, an involvement that had been

⁴⁴ For further details of these teachings see Karmay, 1988.

⁴⁵ 'Jigs med dpa' bo bka' 'bum: folio 8.

⁴⁶ mKhan po chos dbang 2003: 136. *Chos rgyal mchog gi phyi lo 1717 lor zhi bar gshegs so.*

growing steadily after Phyag rdor's sojourn in Tibet, further increased with 'Jigs med dpa' bo arranging a marriage between the fourth Chos rgyal, 'Gyur med rnam rgyal, aged only thirteen at the time, and the youngest daughter of gTer bdag gling pa, 'Gyur med sgrol ma.⁴⁷ Ultimately this marriage of convenience failed and the fourth Chos rgyal, seeking a religious life, embarked on a pilgrimage to Tibet, a pilgrimage which ultimately saw the introduction of the bKa' brgyud in Sikkim. However, by the time of the construction of the first Karma bka' brgyud monastery in Sikkim (c.1730s), the ascendancy of sMin sgrol gling had been firmly established and perhaps with that as well the coronation story of Sikkim.

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⁴⁸ The following Tibetan references have been ordered in chronological order of the years of birth of the authors, where known, or the year in which the document was compiled.

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