

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION:  
ALONG THE CROSSROADS OF BHUTAN AND SIKKIM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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