

National Hegemonies, Local Allegiances: Historiography and ethnography of a Buddhist kingdom

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The attempt by the 9th Sovereigns of Sikkim Chogyal Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshe Dolma (1860-1914) to document the formation, expansion and decline of their kingdom (the 'Hidden Country of Sikkim' or *sBas Yul 'Bras mo ljongs*)¹, from its foundation (1642) to the end of their own reign (1914), presents a primary source of historical documentation for the ethnographer, which can be read in the particular historical context of the kingdom at that time and the political debate that aimed at the annexation of the kingdom by India in 1974.

The work of the historian, according to Marc Bloch (1997: 7-30), starts not only with the collection of facts but also requires an act of construction on the historian's part, to transform the source material into documents and then to reconstitute these documents, these historical facts, into a real debate. The reconfiguration proposed by Marc Bloch attempted to rethink the real function of history: the documents, as evidence of the reality, could only be relevant on the condition that one knew how to make them relevant. From another perspective, linked also to the French "School of the Annals", Henri-Irénée Marrou (1954: 30) proposed a philosophical conception of History, which he defined first as "valid knowledge: history as opposed to false, unreal and imaginary representations of the past, for instance imaginary stories, fictions, utopias, folk traditions, or stereotyped legends promulgated with pedagogic aims in primary schools by the great modern

¹ Chos rgyal mThu stobs rNam rgyal dang rGyal mo Ye Shes sGrol ma gnyis nas sgrig mdzad, *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*. 2003: 55. This original Sikkimese version, written in Tibetan, has recently been published in Gangtok (August 2003). Previously, I had access only to the English translation of a text entitled "History of Sikkim", written by the palace translator, Sir Kazi Dawa Samdup, whose few copies were circulating in Sikkim and abroad. The authors of the Gazetteer of Sikkim (1894) had published an English version of this "History", quoted by, among others, Siiger (1967: 26) in his masterpiece about the Lepchas. The English typescript of the *History of Sikkim* upon which I based this article comprises 175 pages, typewritten in the English on 35cm. long pages. Copies of this English typescript could also be recently found in the Oriental and India Office Collection, London, under reference MSS Eur E 78, and in the manuscripts department library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, ref: MS 380072. Before getting the Sikkimese Tibetan version, I worked with the English typescript, personally obtained in 1996 from the family of the last Chogyal's private guard, Captain Yongda (see Steinmann 1998: 117-142 and note 3: 141). Here I draw mainly on the English translation (Namgyal and Dolma: 1908), but I refer to the Tibetan text for different events where the English translation did not follow the Tibetan version.

states (...) as a creative effort, a dramatic mental struggle”, showing the limits and the humbleness of the writer faced with the huge and complex task of reconstructing the past, while seriously taking into account relative and contemporaneous aspects of the intellectual and moral needs of the current day.

The task of the ethnographer gathering his field data starts also with a collection of source material, which will be later transformed into real documents. But interviews and direct contacts with eyewitnesses provide basic and invaluable information only on the condition that data is evaluated carefully, owing to the selective nature of people’s and anthropologist’s memory. Considering both these approaches to history and ethnography, I propose to introduce a general discussion of the interest of reading this local historiographic Sikkimese chronicle in an ethnographic context, hoping to throw some light on the historical relevance of a political and religious description of a Buddhist kingdom made by the Rulers themselves. I shall draw on comparative ethnographic data, collected in Sikkim at various places and times over the last thirteen years.²

History of Sikkim: The political context

Namgyal Thutob and Yeshe Dolma’s *History of Sikkim* (1908) was composed when the 9th Chogyal of Sikkim was placed under arrest by the first British Political Officer, Claude White. From 1641, the date of the coronation of the first Chogyal, Phuntshog Namgyal in Yoksum (West Sikkim), which is stated in the History of the Namgyal, until the 19th century and the intervention of the British colonial forces, succession in the Namgyal dynasty passed from father to son.³ Sikkim had been overrun by the Bhutanese in 1706, under the third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal. Tibet came to the rescue of Sikkim but the kingdom lost the province of Limbuana to Nepal, and under the reign of Tenzing Namgyal (1780-1790), Nepal invaded Sikkim as far as the Tista River. At the end of the 18th century, war broke out between Nepal and Tibet and the Nepalese firmly established themselves in Sikkim, south and west of the Tista. In turn, the Chinese intervened after expelling the Nepalese from Tibet and they started to reformulate the kingdom’s frontiers. They gave the region west of the Tista to Nepal, while the northern and eastern boundaries of Sikkim were fixed at the Chola and Jelep range. The Chumbi Valley, which had been a part of Sikkim, was given to Tibet.

British relations with Sikkim began in 1814-15 with the intervention of the East India Company which tried to expand trade with China via Tibet.

² I have been collecting ethnographic data all over Sikkim starting in 1991, during different periods of stay. Until recently, the access to field research in Sikkim was conditioned by difficult territorial reserves and restrictions.

³ Raghunadha 1978: 3-9.

The Company wanted both to protect its interests from the Nepalese and Bhutanese interventions, and to gain easy access to Tibet against the Gurkhas' will. The Company signed the Treaty of Sagauli with Nepal in 1815, and agreed to hand over the territory between the rivers Mechi and Tista to Sikkim. The Chogyal accepted and signed the Treaty of Titalia on 10th February 1817, which marked the beginning of the end of Sikkim's independence. In 1835, Sikkim was forced to give Darjeeling as a "gift" to the Company. The relations between Sikkim and the Company worsened, although the Company granted the Chogyal annual funding after he had given possession of Darjeeling. But the Tibetan resistance in Sikkim was growing, and led to another British military expedition into Sikkim towards the end of 1860. The Chogyal submitted completely to the Indian Government through the Company, which could have annexed Sikkim at that time. This was not done for fear of a coalition between Nepal and Bhutan and an open war with Tibet or China. But the Treaty of 1861 brought Sikkim under the control of British India and made Sikkim a protectorate, despite a number of weak points in the Treaty (like the retreat in Chumbi), which further helped the Chogyal to resist the British India Government.

Although the authors of the *History of Sikkim* pretend to trace the constitution of Sikkim back to the time of the 5th Dalai Lama and his personal recognition of the first Chogyal of Sikkim⁴, to whom he would have offered valuables and precious texts for his coronation, the political relations between Sikkim and Tibet itself never ceased to waver between promises of support and threats of retaliation, while the British were involved. In 1892, the British removed Thutob Namgyal from the throne and recognized his second son, Sidkeong Namgyal, as successor to Sikkim's throne. In 1903, the Younghusband Expedition invaded Tibet and forced it to sign the Lhasa Convention on 7th September 1904. Tibet had recognized *de facto* the status of Sikkim as a protectorate, which was also confirmed by the Peking Convention with Tibet in 1906. Chogyal Thutob Namgyal died on 11th February 1914. His son also died on 5th December of the same year, and was

⁴ Concerning this recognition by the Fifth Dalai Lama, see Chos rgyal mThu stobs rNam rgyal (2003: 55). In Namgyal and Dolma (1908: 30), the translator Kazi Dawa Samdup gives the following explanations : "And as the Maharaja Chogyal Phuntso Namgyal of Sikkim was also one of the canonised saints of the doctrine, the Dalai Lama condescended to regard the brotherhood thus established and sent the Raja a most friendly and complimentary letter recognising him as the ruler of the sacred land of the southern slopes, and accompanying the letter with the silk scarf of congratulation, bearing the Dalai Lama's seal, the mitre of Guru Rinpoche extracted from a hidden store (gTer) as well as the Phurpa (devil dagger) and the most precious sand image of Guru as present". The Tibetan version (Chos rgyal 2003: 54-55) emphasizes the initiation of the *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub* conferred to the Great Fifth Dalai lama by Lhatsun Chenpo. The Dalai Lama asks Lhatsun to be the chief of the doctrine and recognizes him as his Guru. He offers Lhatsun a silk scarf and sends the gifts mentioned above to the Raja of Sikkim, Phuntshog Namgyal. This passage emphasizes the reconstruction of a direct lineage tracing Lhatsun Chenpo's legitimation back to Guru Rinpoche.

succeeded by his younger brother, Tashi Namgyal, who ruled the kingdom till his death on 2nd December 1963. The *History of Sikkim*, written by the Chogyal in 1906, was retained and considered a private property for a long time. A translation into English was done by Kazi Dawa Samdup,⁵ but the original Tibetan version was kept by the different reigning families of Sikkim and Bhutan. Joseph F. Rock, who was interested in the genealogy of the Sikkimese family, and Nebesky-Wojkowitz who worked on the religious mountain cults, had access to the Tibetan sources.⁶

The composition of the *rgyal rabs*

The *History of Sikkim*, although being titled “History”, is composed partly with hagiographic and historiographic documents,⁷ illustrating how a dynasty of twelve rulers created and propagated the sanctity of their reign and country. They start with the description of their territory as the “sBas Yul ’Bras mo ljongs” or ‘Hidden Land Full of Crops’, as it is called in Tibetan *gter ma* literature. Cosmologies, stories, legends, anecdotes, excerpts from holy guides (*gnas yig*)⁸, Tibetan revelations and historical texts (*gter ma* and *rnam thar*) constitute the bulk of this history, composed as a royal genealogy (*rgyal rabs*). It defines how the country, its people, mountains, lakes and valleys became the most sacred centre of a Buddhist kingdom. The supposed foundation of the monarchy in 1642, with the consecration of the first Chogyal (Phuntshog Namgyal) by Lhatsun Namkha Jigme (otherwise known as Lhatsun Chenpo), the founder of the Dzogchen sect in Sikkim and the personal delegate of the 5th Dalai Lama, along with two other lamas, became the core of a vast model aiming to link the rulers’ ancestors to the Minyak dynasty in Kham and the Tibetan Sakya Hierarch’s lineages. In the manuscript, many dated events, such as the long series of conflicts with the Tibetans, Bhutanese, Gurkhas, Limbus (Tsongts), Magars and Lepchas (Rongs), of Nepal and Sikkim, make this text resemble a modern history. Socio-political data recreate the ambience of diplomatic relationships between the reigning family and the British traders and colonists. The traditional presentation of their country through mythological and religious

⁵ The Earl of Ronaldshay (1923: 130) during his travels in Sikkim, met the translator of the *History of Sikkim*: “We spent a pleasant day or two at Gangtok preparing for one journey up the head waters of the Tista river, and no one could have been more charming or more helpful than H. H. Tashi Namgyal, C. I. E. Maharaja of Sikkim (...). He placed at our disposal the knowledge and practical assistance of his officers, amongst whom was one, Kazi Dawa Samdup, a man of learning with a great knowledge of English and a scholarly knowledge of Tibetan. His study of Tibetan manuscripts has already been responsible for results of no little interest”.

⁶ Rock (1953: 925-948) and Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: 218). Other authors have mentioned the *History of Sikkim* (see Steinmann 1998: note 3: 141).

⁷ See Namgyal Thutob (1908: 30).

⁸ Tibetan words in italics and between quotation marks are given in correct transliteration (Wylie).

descriptions owes as much to the necessity of reaffirming the antiquity of the kingship and Buddhism as to the urgency of offering resistance to new waves of colonial powers from Nepal, installed by the British. After Indian independence was won, Sikkim became the arena for violent and revolutionary processes aiming at the constitution of a democratic movement. In 1948, the Sikkimese leaders requested a representation for Sikkim in the Indian Parliament from Nehru. But the demands of the people of Sikkim, mainly concerning the implementation of land reform, were constantly rejected. The first elections in Sikkim were held in 1953, on the basis of six seats for the Bhotias-Lepchas and six seats for the Nepalis. At that time, there was not any real political frame for a democratic representation of the different ethnic groups in Sikkim, although strong traditions of local chieftainships and governments still existed among the Lhopos and the Lepchas of Sikkim, and among the bordering Tibetan and Bhutanese populations. The existence of some estates, private palaces and monasteries complicated the administration of the land. Finally, due to internal political fractions and to numerous appeals to India for help by the king himself and the different political parties, the country was completely incorporated into the State of India in 1975.

Since then, the *History of Sikkim* has appeared as a major document, in the form of a speech for the defence of a destroyed kingship, sacrificed at the altars of the East India Company's trade and politics. After the incorporation, sBas Yul 'Bras mo ljongs officially became "Sikkim" in the new Indian Constitution. The various and heterogeneous populations who lived there, diversely self-designated as "Lhopos, Mons, Tsongs, Rongs, Lachenpas, Lachungpas, Hapopas, Bhotias *a. s. o.*", became *de facto* "Sikkimese citizens" or Denjongpas in Lhopo language, which meant also "tribal peoples of the Himalayas" in the rhetoric of the Hindu colonialists.

The rise of a national consciousness

The controversial question of the country's annexation to India, or its merging into a wider democratic nation, was discussed, analyzed and publicly debated in Sikkim.⁹ To understand the various aspects of the

⁹ Several writers took a strong stance on this question, among them Jigme N. Kazi, originally a Lachenpa, chief editor of the *Sikkim Observer* and author of *Inside Sikkim, Against the Tide*. He wrote for instance (1993: 212): "Ten years after his controversial move to declare Prince Wangchuk the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim, Bhim Bahadur Gurung admitted that he had always felt uncomfortable and somewhat guilty at having been a party to the 'selling of Sikkim'. Gurung saw the Chogyal's death and his funeral on February 19th 1982, as a god-sent opportunity to expiate himself of the sins he had committed, and made attempts to vent his true feelings. In 1975, Gurung moved a resolution in the Assembly, abolishing 'the institution of the Chogyal' and declaring Sikkim to be a 'constituent unit of India', thereby paving the way for Sikkim to become the 22nd State of the Indian Union".

development of a national consciousness from an ethno-historical point of view, let us first consider the singular and unique position of this small Himalayan kingdom among the bordering countries. We have seen how the modern frontiers were the result of different waves of colonization (Tibetans, Gurkhas, Bhutanese, British, Indians), and intense conflict concerning the kingdom's efforts to establish its capital in a central location. In the past, Sikkim had occupied a much larger territory, including part of the Limbu territory, called Limbuwan by Limbu writers. It occupied this region which spread westward into Nepal; the Chumbi Valley into Tibet, and into the part of western Bhutan up to Tagong La. To the south, the country included the district of Darjeeling and a part of the country of Morang in the Tarai. The Gurkha raids of Nepal and the policy of the East India Company deprived Sikkim of the western Limbu and Lepcha territories, until, in 1817 and 1834-35, Darjeeling and the southern territories were lost. Finally, the Chumbi Valley was taken in 1890.¹⁰ It is interesting work for the ethnographer to understand how these political and geographical frontiers are perceived by the population and how the social ties are woven in a country where solidarity is still based on ethnic self-definitions, kinship and personal allegiances. One should consider the transformation of local groups, ethnically labelled, into national citizens, members of a unique entity and the Sikkimese State of India, through the following dynamics:

- The long history of the inclusion of heterogeneous populations, stereotyped as Lho (Lhopos/Bhotias), Mon (Rongs/Lepchas) and Tsong (Limbus/Subbas), into national "Sikkim" or Denjong¹¹. This movement relied on models of centralisation based on selective genealogies, the creation of national myths rooted in a *maṇḍala*-state system, and indigenous conceptions of democracy.
- The constitution of a politically legal Indian community through the transformation of Sikkimese customs caused by India's violent annexation, which paved the way for a series of reforms primarily concerned with land tenure system and land tenancy rights.
- The delimitation of the national territory, which now depends on an image through which different communities try to redefine themselves by reconstructing ethnonyms and socio-political frontiers such as ethnic, religious and political revivals, a fast growing tourist industry and the conversion of people to foreign religions and sectarian movements.

The first aim of the *History of Sikkim* seems to have been a clear desire to determine the roots of the myths of origin of the royal lineage and

¹⁰ See the presentation of Sikkim by Chantal Massonaud (1982: 117-118).

¹¹ There was, and still is, a kind of political game and debate about the stereotyped designations of the different populations, issued from this nationalised and centralised vision: see Steinmann (1998a: 145-158).

Sikkimese Lhopos in a greater Tibetan tradition. Although these myths are believed to be known throughout the country, they essentially refer to the Lhopos and then to the Lepchas. The *History of Sikkim* clearly shows the Chogyal Thutob Namgyal's will to describe these populations as the legitimate ones. The holiest monastic figure is the *arhat* Lhatsun Namkha Jigme (lHa bTsun nam mkha' jigs med), whose image is present in many Nyingmapa monasteries of the Mindroling tradition in Tibet. Oral narratives shape the various encounters between Lhatsun and a Lepcha priest and reveal divergent Lhopo and Lepcha conceptions of Buddhism. The links they create between the Tibetan model of Buddhism, particularly with regard to mountain cults and their own conception of the territory, are heterogeneous, although Lepchas, as well as Lhopos, are fervent practising Buddhists.¹² Today, the Lepchas are strongly engaged in a movement of political revival, appealing to a tradition of "animism". They claim to be the real "autochthonous ones" and argue against conversions to foreign religions believed to have been imposed on them by Christian missionaries, or Buddhist and Hindu priests. The Lhopos, on their side, also wish to promote some new and revived concepts of Buddhism, prevailing around certain tantric monasteries and schools, and linked to the foundation of seventeenth century kingship in Western Sikkim.

In addition to *History of Sikkim*, a great number of contemporary booklets and publications aim to show a modern and democratic country. They provide descriptions of different encounters between Nepalese, Lepcha, Tibetan and Bhutanese populations, and provide secondary sources of ethnographic documentation. Lay associations and festivals centered around traditions and heritage aim at redefining local traditions, while asking governmental delegates to promote the minorities' integration into a larger community. We now find in Sikkim the same context of ethnic revivalism that we find in Nepal, beset as it is with conflicting relationships between castes and tribes, and described within a wider racist distinction between Mongol populations and Indo-Aryan ones.¹³ One of these recent compilations, endeavouring to create a national consciousness (although based on particularism), is a new *rgyal rabs*, recomposed from excerpts of *History of Sikkim* and taught in schools and colleges. It is entitled "Denjong Charap" (*Bras ljongs chags rabs*, Bhutia Rapid Reader for classes IX and X)¹⁴ and is written in Lhoke (*lho skad*), the national language of Sikkim. This text retraces the history of the main lineages of the Pemayangtse monastery, one of the three temples founded by Lhatsun Chenpo, the

¹² Elsewhere, I have discussed different aspects of this comparative mythology (Steinmann 2003).

¹³ See for instance the case of the Magar populations in Nepal, analyzed by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2002), or Schlemmer (this volume).

¹⁴ Melanie Vandenhelsken drew my attention to these publications that she collected in Gangtok, Sikkim, during her fieldwork.

spiritual master of the kingdom. It also describes the main rituals surrounding the emblematic figure of the main mountain deity, Kanchenjunga.

Local traditions of democracy and state centralisation

In addition to these reconstructions around the royal genealogy, oral and written narratives about the Lhopos' and Lepchas' ancestral origins describe an encounter between the Lhopos' and the Lepchas' chiefs as a form of ritualised alliance. This story has taken on the dimensions of a national myth. The authors of the *History*¹⁵ explain how a friendship was forged between a Tibetan prince, Kye Bumsa (*Gyad 'Bum gsags*), the founder of the great Lhopo clans of Pemayangtse, and a Lepcha ancestor, The Kong Tek. Kye Bumsa was linked to the Sakya priests by marriage. He married Jomo Guruma of the Sakya family; then he went to Sikkim through Pakshi, to the north of Khampa Jong. He built several temples, among them Pakshi Gompa, and continued his route to Chumbi Valley, where he fought against a Bhutanese spirit medium (*dpa' bo*), Ngawang Gyepe Palbar (*Nga dbang Gyad pa'i dPal 'bar*), a renowned athlete. After extended conflict, he sought the help of a famous Lepcha priest. During his retreat in the Chumbi Valley, Kye Bumsa had heard about the existence of a famous holy man living in the country of Mon. He went to Sikkim, in search of this man, passing through the Chola mountains. On arriving in the place, which was actually called Kabi Lonchok, he met The Kong Tek, whose name in the Tibetan version of the *History* is "*Guru'i sprul pa*"¹⁶, literally, 'the emanation of the Guru (Rinpoche)'. This Guru is described as living in a bamboo hut and sitting on a throne, covered with all kind of shamanistic garments. Kye Bumsa, who had no heir, was able to have three sons, thanks to the believed intervention of The Kong Tek. The Chogyal's insistence on the importance of this direct alliance, sworn with blood of sacrificial animals between the Tibetan ancestor and the Lepcha chief, can be read as a symbolic parallel to the pleading for indigenous democracy in Sikkim by modern writers and

¹⁵ Namgyal and Dolma's *History of Sikkim* 1908: 15 sq.

¹⁶ In the English translation of the rGyal rabs (Namgyal 1908: 17), The Kong Tek is also called a "patriarch and wizard". The Tibetan text (Chos rgyal, 2003: 31) reads : *De nas Chu 'bir lo gsum tsam bzhugs kyang sras med par mon yul du Guru'i sprul pa The Kong Teg Nyo Kong dang bya ba gnyis yod pa des srid kyi rten 'brel 'grig thabs shes zer thos pa dang*: "Although Kye Bum lived for three years in Chumbi, he did not have any sons; having heard that there was a certain emanation of the Guru called The Kong Teg with Nyo Kong in the country of Mon, who was able to confer a progeny, he wished to meet with him." Kye Bumsa is called *dpon g-yog*, or 'master with servant'. For historical details about this Tibetan version, see Mullard 2003: 13-24 and note 10. Anna Balikci-Denjongpa (2002: 19-20) has shown how the alliance which was sworn between the Lhopos' ancestor and the Lepcha chief was the beginning of the transformation of the mountain deity Dzönga into a Tibetan *pho lha* or male ancestral deity who may bless the patrilineages with male descendants".

journalists. During the difficult period of the annexation, some fought to maintain the uniqueness of the local traditional systems of chieftainship¹⁷, while being aware of the contradictions between the claims of being at once both an “autochthon” and a supporter of the values of a modern democracy. In the following present-day example, we can see how these contradictions directly express power divisions at a local level.

In 1994, elections took place in the village of Lachung, North Sikkim, to choose a new village leader. The assembly assisted by the main landowning households (*'dzoms kha*) and headed by the village leader (*spyi dpon*), gathered in the traditional open court, tightly controlled by the Indian army which surrounded the area. Governmental delegates and secretaries of the rural development committee were sent from the capital to attend the meeting. According to custom, the ancient village leader gave a long introductory speech before addressing the items of the day, namely the new elections and the organization of the New Year's festival performance (*lo srung*). Soon the people were harbouring resentment against the old village leader, who had proven himself unable to express the villagers' political views. The assembled villagers of Lachung shared an acute awareness of having been treated as second-class citizens for too long, borderland people derogatorily called “Bhotias” by the central government of Gangtok; when in fact they saw themselves as “pure” Lachungpas, people born in Lachung and able to control and administer themselves and their own land. In reality, divisions based on a conception of the greater or lesser antiquity of people's settlements in the village were the real source of conflict and social classification on a local level. Pure Lachungpas could trace back several generations of ancestors, while “Bhotias” were considered as mixed-bred settlers, the “other”, *i. e.* mere “barbarian strangers”. In 1978, the status of Scheduled Tribe was given to the Bhotias and the Lepchas and immediately generated strong divisions in the country, particularly between the Bhotias and the various Buddhist Nepalese communities, already considered as minorities or “OBC's” (Other Backward Classes) in Sikkim. Strong competition for gaining access to development funds arose in the bordering villages of North Sikkim, which were isolated by restrictive border controls and heavy army occupation.

In Lachung in 1993, the modern political parties were divided between the party of N. B. Bhandari (Sikkim Sangram Parishad) and the party of P. K. Chamling (Sikkim Democratic Front). They had recently gained the support of local divisions of recently installed and newly wealthy tenant-

¹⁷ Kazi (1993: 197) writes: “the lifestyle of the people of Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim and their administrative set-up under the ‘Pipon system’ is far more effective and democratic than the present panchayat system. This type of open democratic society in North Sikkim has endured the tests of time. The Lachenpas and Lachungpas have, down the centuries, maintained their unique democratic system, which has also enabled them to preserve their ancient cultural heritage”.

farmers or “Bhotias”, as well as of impoverished Lachungpas, who had been colonised by the new traders and by the Army. Oppositions and fractures resulted from the election of two *spyi dpon* per party, which gave a total of four *spyi dpon*, recreating the “democratic way” supposedly imparted to the people from above. The political discourse continued to be beyond the reach of ordinary people, whose real interests remained neglected. The village election now became largely organized and controlled from outside the village. Another Sikkimese writer has shown how the same phenomenon was reproduced on the national level when on May 11th 1974, one year before the annexation of Sikkim by India, the *kazi* leader Lendhup Dorje who was a village *spyi dpon*, allowed himself to become the political spokesman in Delhi, which eventually put an end to the autonomy of the kingdom.¹⁸

Political revival

On the religious and ritual side of village life, the staging of sacred dances (*cham*) performed in the courtyard of the temples during the main festivals, became an important element in local elections. Traditionally, under the monarchy, the celebration of the masked dances in honour of the mountain deities Dzönga-Yabdü (*mDzod lnga* and *Yab bDud*) played a central role. They reinforced national sentiments when the country came under India’s control. The *History of Sikkim* states that the first dance of Panglhasol (*dpang lha gsol*), the most important ritual masked dance performed before the Sikkimese New Year (*lo srung*) in honour of the gods, was established in the 13th century when the ritual brotherhood was cemented between the Lepcha chief and the ancestor of the Lhopos. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, who studied an original manuscript preserved in the Tolung monastery in the northern restricted area of Sikkim, and who also had access to the *History of Sikkim*, explains the origin of the cult of the gods of the Kanchenjunga starting from the thanksgiving ceremony performed by Lhatsun Chenpo in the 17th century in honour of all the deities of the country (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 217-218). The saint is said to have thanked the gods for his safe journey from Tibet across the Himalayas. The cult of Dzönga in the Panglhasol (basically an “offering to the witness deity”) and its codification, are explained in a guide entitled Denjong Nesol (*’Bras ljongs gnas gsol*). The choreography of the dance is believed to have been established by the third king of Sikkim, Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal (*Phyag rdor rNam rgyal*,

¹⁸ Datta-Ray (1980: 212), shows the transformation of local village leaders into national democratic leaders by ironically pointing to the enormous gap between the local way of governing and talking to the people about their own affairs, and the complete brainwashing which must be learnt by those who want to appear on the national scene: “Where did Lendhup Dorje learn such words? Did he even know their meaning, he who hardly knew how to read newspapers?”. I have already described this political event in the village of Lachung in Steinmann (1998a: 155-156).

1686-1716) (Steinmann 1998b: 197-198). This national ritual was originally performed by tantric monks in the Palace's chapel (*gtsug lag khang*), in front of the king, and later in different Nyingmapa monasteries of Sikkim. Dancers embodied the two deities, Dzönga and his acolyte, Yab bdud, an emanation of Mahākāla, powerful representations of the sacred and hierarchical order established in the kingdom, around the person of the king himself. The physical apparition of the masked deities and other effigies displayed in the gompas, guaranteed social order and the sacredness of the king's reign. The historical importance of this Buddhist vision of the mountain¹⁹, the solemn oath taken by the king's ministers, dignitaries, monks and lay people present, in front of the threatening mountain deities staged through masked dances and effigies, symbolized these strong links between religion and sovereignty. Offerings and exorcisms which were made during the performance came from widespread Tibetan representations of the mountains being inhabited by ambivalent and potentially malevolent beings, sources of welfare or warfare, protecting frontiers against potential invaders and more specifically, protecting places of origin of ancient kings.²⁰ These masked dancers and the god's effigies were explained by the lamas to the people as a direct symbol of the king's presence. Consequently, they generate an atmosphere of high reverence and fear. The religious aspects of the cult of Dzönga were connected to the political and religious role of the Sovereign, ruling according to *dharma* (the chogyal is a *dharmarāja* in the Indo-Buddhist tradition). The last celebration in the Palace was held in 1991, before being forbidden by the Chogyal himself. Then it moved to Pemayangtse, the residence of the tantric guardians of the ritual.

As a sign of revival of the Buddhist traditions in the country, the Sikkim Tribal Youth Association has published a booklet about the origin and meaning of the Panglhasol performance, which starts by declaring that the Panglhasol or worship of the guardian deities came into existence after the visit of Guru Padmasambhava to Sikkim, in about the eighth century A. D.²¹ The close connection between doctrine and reign are thus being traced back to the Buddhisation of Tibet. Yet, Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion only during the period of monarchy. We understand that it became a sign of nationalistic rallying for young Sikkimese who wanted to resist the Hinduisation of their country, as it also became a pinpoint in the villages' traditional political assemblies, after the end of the monarchy, to refer to a revered past order, symbol of a certain autonomy and self-dignity for societies living on the borderlands.

¹⁹ See the analysis of the different representations of the cult of Dzönga among the Lhopos by Balikci (2002).

²⁰ According to Stein (1981: 22 and 27), ancient Tibetan kings are directly connected to mountains.

²¹ *Pang Lhasol Souvenir* (1989: 1).

Reinventing ethnonyms and toponyms

In Sikkim, representations of mountain deities and of frontiers were thus closely associated. Conflicts along these frontiers played a significant role in the rise, expansion, decline and the fall of the Sikkimese monarchy. The *History of Sikkim* shows how the mythic origins of the Beyul Demojong are based on an etymological interpretation of the country's name and a schematic and religious resettlement of a sacred centre within the territory of some indigenous tribes (Tsongs or Limbus, Rongs or Lepchas, and probably other groups among the Nepalese), which were incorporated in the new Buddhist kingdom. Concerning the name of Sikkim as Demojong, Dr Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa (Ngodup 1998: 1-12) has posed the question:

The revealers of hidden treasures have given various accounts of the origins of the 'Bras-Mo-ljong's name: 1) Valley of fruits, 2) Hidden Valley, 3) Bar-Yul or the country sandwiched between two countries, (i. e. Nepal and Bhutan). The last is the new interpretation never previously found in modern books on Sikkim.

The naturalized and religious visions of an Edenic country, through Tibetan mythology, would not completely exclude other political conceptions of the frontiers. Religious lhopo representations of the sacred site of Pemayangtse are sketched as a *maṇḍala*-like territory, drawn in the landscape with four caves, representing important places of pilgrimages and retreats and conceived as surrounding the heart of the country or the king Phuntsog Namgyal's first place of coronation (Yoksum):

- The East Bayphug or the secret cave lies between the Tendong and Maynom mountains.
- The South Khandu Sangphug, as the cave resort of occult fairies. Here is a hot spring and on the rocks are the Guru's footprints.
- The West Dechen phug or cave of the Great Happiness. It is in the snow near Dzongri.
- The North, Lhari Nyingphug or the central cave of the Gods on the hill, situated along the most difficult path and holiest of the four.²²

These frontiers, which also eventually became colonial agricultural and military settlements, are idealistically described in the *History of Sikkim* (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 29):

According to the oracles, Sikkim would have been a part of the political Tibet. In fact, it is composed of one continent (sic), three valleys and twenty mountains. At the time of the three kings of Tibet, the frontiers spread up to China in the East. In the country of Shabru Kangkar, there is

²² Ngodup, *ibid.* See also a new and revised version in Ngodup (2003: 75-86). See the map of the Tibetan religious representation of this landscape in Steinmann (1998: 118).

a pillar of white conch shells. To the South, the frontiers extend to India: a green pillar in obelisk in the country of bamboos. To the West, it extends as far as Naga country: pillar of white silver or obelisk. To the North, mountain of Manas, pillar of copper. These lands are therefore owned by Tibet.

In defining their country's borders according to Tibetan oracles, the Sovereigns were showing allegiance to their Tibetan protector, when the alliance between them was at a breaking point and they were in constant conflict on their Eastern and Southern borders. But it was also a means of re-establishing the integrity of their territory against the East India Company, which relentlessly resorted to using some powerful *kazi* leaders and feudal lordmen to achieve their trade goals with Tibet. Later, in the *History of Sikkim* (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 121), and in a less idealistic way, the Chogyal refers to a reported message from Tibet:

We are in receipt of a communication from Sikkim minister, the Karmapa (Raja Thondup), that all the land beyond Jelep la belongs to Sikkim, and that unless we withdraw our troops stationed in the Lingter before the third day of the second month of the Saji year 1889 and vacate the fort, Her imperial majesty the Great Empress will be appraised of the matter and suitable retaliatory steps will be taken. We are of the opinion, as you may be aware, that the British Government after gradually absorbing the Sikkim and Bhutan States, is gradually advancing upon Tibet and making roads, laying bridges, and building barracks at Kupuk within Tibetan territory.

If mythology and political history were so densely interwoven, this was at a time when the representatives of the central authority, the kings, made themselves the patrons of the land. The "private property" or usage of the land by any group or tribe, had to be adjusted and redefined through these centralized religious conceptions. Ideally, the sovereigns' conceptions bore a vision of freedom and peace. When Herder (Sternhell 1972: 28) was raising the question of national, historical and cultural particularities as catalysts of political action, he was describing the beginning of the process of dismantling collectivities perfectly. These entities were not yet assimilated as marginalized societies by the nation-states, but were still free to follow their own customs, ignorant as they were of the state of "political" frontiers. Two examples from the *History of Sikkim* can illustrate this point.

When Thutob Namgyal had to escape from the control of governor Claude White, he tried to seek refuge with his family in Walungchung Gola, beyond the Sikkimese borders of Kanchenjunga, an area that was considered a barbarian borderland, but still a potential refuge (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 140).²³ After an exhausting trip, and at the point of dying, the

²³ About the political situation of the Tibetan chieftains in Walungchung Gola in the 20s', see Steinmann (1988).

Namgyal's family arrived in the country of Tsongs and Newars (or Paharis). The Tsongs immediately interpreted his arrival in their territory as an open declaration of war, and detained him as a prisoner for three days. In the other example, a Mangar chief had died in 1750. His son wanted to have his inauguration ceremony performed or graced by the presence of a representative of the Sikkim Maharaja. The regent neglected to respond or to send a royal delegation. Taking revenge, the Mangar chief sought the patronage of the Dev Raja of Bhutan (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 52).

We see through these diplomatic mistakes how the placing of societies into a peripheral position, which is historically the experience of numerous Asiatic societies now considered by modern nation-states as marginal and minority, is often the result of a largely imagined vision of a centre. The real frontiers are themselves the result of political actions. These frontiers produce, as much as they issue from, a progressive cultural differentiation. The Mangar chief needed only legitimation from the king of Sikkim. The result is a new alliance with the enemy and a cumulative process of division. The primary vision of a territory is first understood by any society in its local language, which conveys a particular use of land and a particular vision of origin of the ancestors' land. The natural limits are situated beyond geographical barriers, like mountains or rivers. Ethnic groups do not have a ready-made theory about what their identity or nationality should be as long as a State does not impose an official existence upon their dialect or upon their right to use certain spaces, as specifically defined through the limits of a region. The "region" could be defined here in the terms provided by E. Benveniste (1969: 14-15). The *regio*, etymologically, is first a "frontier", the result of a policy. The construction of a *regio* is thus the consecration of a new "designated limit". In this way, when the Lachungpas or Lachenpas, among others, claim to be considered "pure Lachungpas," they paradoxically contribute to the restriction of their own space and unknowingly aid the intervention of the State, which will eventually create "reserved and restricted" areas to maintain their illusion of a pristine purity of untouched ethnic groups. This is, for instance, the case of the Lepcha people of Dzongu, which was declared a "reserved and restricted area" in North Sikkim.

Reconstruction of patronyms is also a way for people to recreate a pseudo-"identity" with the idea that they would share a single and common destiny, or a particular region of origin. A writer of Rai origin, commenting in 1966 about the patronyms of the Tamang of Sikkim and Darjeeling (Rai 1966 : 25-26), gave different etymologies for "Tamang": Ta-mangpo, i. e. 'many horses', or Ta-marpo, 'a herdsman looking after herd of red horses' in the Himalayan pasture".

In Nepal in the sixties, people were rediscovering and reinventing new ethnonyms, in order to be recognized by the State and to gain status and prestige. Rai concludes for the Tamangs that, whatever the exact meaning of their ethnonym, they had chosen to add the name "Lama" at the end of their

patronym, to show that they would not renounce their Buddhist faith, while performing the work of soldiers. But he adds that if the leading personalities in Sikkim wrote Lama after their names, it was because Lama was a title carrying prestige and status. Paradoxically, Tamang-Lamas became a purebred stock of army men. These facts mirror the actual state of social relationships between the different Tibetan Bhotias of Sikkim, fighting each other for the right to be recognized as secondary citizens in India.

Lhopos from the Western district of Pemayangtse claim to be descendants of Kye Bumsa's three brothers, having established a lineage of eight clans, the "Bab mtshan brgyad". Presently, they are ordered in a strict social hierarchy between the Ourip and the Yarip, "lowest and highest" clans. The lowest clans are also called *khyep* or servants, while *jowo* are noblemen as opposed to *khyep*, who are from lower extraction (Vandenhelsken 2002: 226-39). If this particular hierarchy is proper to the Lhopos of Pemayangtse, it has direct repercussions on the Bhotia communities of the north, in Lachen and Lachung areas. The people here also claim to be the descendants of Kye Bumsa's three brothers, and to share the same myth of origin. Some of them claim to come from the Valley of Ha in Western Bhutan, and today, they share an awareness of having been marginalized by the State. But they distinguish themselves from the Lhopos of Pemayangtse who apply the title of "Yab" to their names:

In Pemayangtse, they call "Yab" the people of a higher class. In fact, *yab* means only 'father'. We, Bhotias, we reject this term; this is an incorrect notion. They have married Lepchas! The king gave them the preference because of the site of the kingdom, in Rabdentse.²⁴

Reconsidering origins through land tenure: Feudals and tribals

The borders of the North Sikkim district are situated, for the most part, in a mountainous region, at the limit of the forested area and the beginning of high-altitude pasture lands. The altitude of the inhabited area lies between 3600m and 5500m. There, one finds communities of seasonally migratory shepherds in mountain pastures. People are mainly agriculturalists and stock-breeders of yaks.²⁵ Inside the community, people divide themselves between ancient settlers and "colonists". Among the colonists, there are mainly the Indo-Nepalese groups, who compete for the land. The history of land tenure and the widely shared desire to be recognized as a more ancient and original settler, is a lynchpin in the history of the country. Through different episodes of the *History of Sikkim*, and the description of

²⁴ Commentaries collected in Lachen in April 2002.

²⁵ The centralisation of the State and political reforms have transformed certain ancient herdsmen into salaried civil servants, earning between 5000 and 6000 Indian rupees a month, to look after yaks that they don't own.

contemporaneous social tensions, we can define several front-lines of conflict among the groups.

The main line of demarcation is a linguistic division between Bhotias or Lhopos, speaking *lho skad*, the Sikkimese Tibetan dialect, Lepchas and Limbus, speaking respectively their own language, and the Indo-Nepalese populations, speaking mainly Nepali and Hindi. Nepalese, Limbus and Lepchas fight Bhotias over property and land-development, while Indo-Nepalese communities, stereotyped as “NBC” (Newar-Bahun-Chetri), are considered “colonists” introduced by the British, protected and exploited at the same time by the landlords (*kazi*), and together in conflict with all other groups. Another division is within the Lepcha groups, between the Christians and the Buddhists. Among Buddhist Lepchas, some claim to be ancient “animists” or “nature worshippers”. Here, let us consider the crucial question of land tenure and taxation, which articulates these links between self-given ethnic definitions²⁶ and the organization of life and work in a nationalized Hindu state.

The question of land is central to the political economy of Sikkim, both because it is scarce and because of permanent conflicts regarding moving and unsettled frontiers. As “feudalism” has been described in modern statistics and reports as “a stranglehold over land and society”²⁷, let us assign feudalism a definition that differs from the standard European and Chinese formulations²⁸. In the case of Tibet, Warren Smith (1996: 23) defined feudalism as “a system of government in which a ruler personally delegates limited sovereignty over a portion of his territory to vassals”. This political aspect of Chinese feudalism, which allowed the Hans to rule an

²⁶ Elsewhere I have described the political discourse around stereotyped ethnonyms (Lho, Mon, Tsong) and national political jokes describing these three potential “autochthonous” populations as a unique tripod (Steinmann 1998a).

About the Mon or Monpas, Smith (1996: 9) has given interesting explanations: “Tibetan scholars associate the Mon with the earliest Tibetan states of Kongpo, Pobo and Dakpo. The Mon can be reliably identified as a population who were encountered, displaced, and to some extent absorbed by those migrants from the north who were to become the Tibetans. The Mon can be included with some certainty in the list of ethnic groups that contributed to the ethnic identity of the Tibetans”. In the *History*, it is well understood that the Monpas were the Lepchas who went directly under the authority of the new Tibetan king (Namgyal and Dolma 1908: 19).

²⁷ See for instance Lama (2001). For the statistics and the historical perspectives on the land tenure and the inequality between the different landholders, I rely on the data given in this report.

²⁸ See for instance Bloch (1939), who emphasized the fact that feudal societies in Europe, despite great variation of forms, intensity and geographical and temporal expansions, bore important characteristics in common: the splitting of the central State into fiefdoms, the personal links of dependency, protection and heredity based on possession and exploitation of the land; the military vocation reserved to the superior orders or to the vassals, and the extreme social and political inequality favorable to a small oligarchy of landowners, warriors and clergymen. Slavery was often part of it.

immense empire and to integrate progressively all the countries situated on the borders, developed in a different way in the case of a tiny country like Sikkim, already a vassal of Tibet. We must begin with the strict definition of land-holding in Sikkim. The queen Hope Namgyal, when the crown tried to argue against the annexation of Darjeeling by the British (Namgyal 1966: 47-48), explained:

Traditionally, the land in Sikkim belongs to the king. All the farmers' land in Sikkim was property of the king. The cultivators had no title to the soil and a man may settle and cultivate any land he may find unoccupied without going through any formality whatever, and when once he had occupied the land, none but the Rajah can turn him out. But the Rajah can eject him at any time and if he should cease to occupy the land he would not retain any lien upon it (...) But a man who has terraced a piece of hillside could not sell the land but is allowed to sell the right of using the terraces (...) Also there were Kazis and headmen and various other officials who exercised jurisdiction over specific tracts of lands. The Kazis and officials enjoyed some authority but the final authority was the king in all matters of import. Aside from exercising some authority, judiciating minor disputes, and referring pertinent cases to the Ruler, the official also assessed the revenue payable by all the peoples settled on the lands within his jurisdiction; paid over to the Ruler a certain fixed contribution and kept the greater portion for himself. The Kazis had no proprietary right in the lands although they did have a kind of hereditary title to their office. The land was not assessed and paid no revenue. The assessment was on the payer of revenue personally, and in theory he was permitted the use of the King's land so that he could prosper and be able to provide services to the king which he was bound to do as the king's "live chattel" (sic). If the system had been extended to theoretical perfection he would have been obliged to give a small share of his labour, or the result of his labour to the State (...) The value of the wives, children, cattle, furniture, etc, were all accounted for but not the extent of his fields.

Historically, according to the definition of a Buddhist Tibetan kingdom and to the concept of royal powers rooted in sacred mountain deities, bound by an oath to follow the Buddhist doctrine, this definition sounds canonical. From another perspective, this concept of land as a "sacred property" has in fact developed through a system of forced labour and semi-slavery, although since the 17th century, it has helped to maintain the integrity of the kingdom against the invaders. Land rights were vested primarily in nine *kazi* families. At the time of the first king of Sikkim, Phuntshog Namgyal, the term "*kazi*" probably did not exist. It was introduced in the wave of colonisation and propagated with the importation of some models of Nepalese administration by the British civil engineer Claude White, who had been trained in colonial administration in Nepal. He introduced this model of land reform from Nepal into Sikkim thanks to the help of some Newar notaries he brought

with him. Shortly after his appointment in June 1889, he introduced a land settlement program known as the lessee system, which has been described by Rose. This system was transforming “the traditional land-grants owned by the kazis and the monasteries into fifteen year leases given out to kazis and ten year leases to Nepalese landlords (*thikadars*), for which they paid a fixed rent to the Government” (Rose 1978: 214 *sq.*). Each region of Sikkim was strictly separated from the others. Cultivation of the land was carried out in the name of village headmen, who were diversely called *maṅdal*, and were appointed by the *kazis*. Since Sikkim is predominantly rural, nearly all the population lived and still lives, in villages. This British reform fragmented the king’s authority and facilitated the acquisition of land by foreigners, mainly Nepalese. The traditional land-holding allowed the landlords and their heirs to maintain tenants on their private estates as compulsory labourers. In fact, the tenancy rights were applied as forced labour because the tenants had to provide more than half the crops to different *maṅdals* or primary landlords. Greater political and civil rights have been based on a demand made in 1949 for the abolition of this system. However, the private estates of the Palace and the monasteries were left untouched by the new land regime.²⁹

The Northern district of Dzongu constitutes a separate case. This north-western area of Sikkim, bordering Mount Kanchenjunga, is mainly covered with forest and mountains. It was the fiefdom of Lepchas and high-pasture yak breeders. These lands were given by the king to the Lasso Kazi, and later on, it was taken back and became the Queen’s Private Estate. It was successively administered by the Malling Kazi in the nineteenth century, and later by the Rhenock Kazi. Today, this private property is still kept as a reserved area for the “aboriginal” Lepcha population. At the time of annexation, this land became the most sacred core of the kingdom, in reference to the time when the priests of Pemayangtse monastery and the king chose the Northern Nyingmapa monastery of Tolung as the safest place for protecting the treasures and precious heritage of the Buddhist kingdom from Gurkha invaders. The Northern pass had always been considered as the place through which Lhatsun Chenpo came from Tibet.

Currently, Lhopos, Nepalese and Lepchas all work in the Dzongu district producing cardamom, yet the profits are established in a very uneven way. The greater part of the cultivated area is still owned by a few Bhotia families. Since Lepchas were designated the natural owners of the place by the State, they were not allowed to sell their land, but it has been progressively dispossessed through different administrative manipulations. This land is composed mainly of forested areas with difficult access. Since the sixties, many Nepali tenants have come to cultivate cardamom for the Lepchas.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Nevertheless, ancient landowners have been progressively deprived of their lands, according to the fact that in 1983, Nepalis owned 59% of the total cultivated area, Bhotias and Lepchas owned only 20% each.

They used to give them a bag or two that were immediately sold on the market to redeem debts.³⁰ The Nepali workers act as subsistence tenants on Bhotias' fields, while Bhotias rule them with an iron hand. The Lepchas, in turn, remain despised "tribals" in the Bhotia lexicon. The Lepchas are kept in a state of insulation and dependance. In the past, the question of installing Nepali settlers on the land of the Sikkimese Chogyal was a source of tremendous conflict between Tibetans, Kazis and Lamas.³¹

Thus far, the installation of new Nepali cultivators on the Kazis' and Lamas' private lands did not free the indigenous labourers, Limbus and Lepchas. One of the main interests of reading the royal historiography of this ex-Tibetan Buddhist kingdom in an ethnographic perspective, is to gain a deeper understanding of contemporaneous Tibetan and Nepalese conceptions of ethnicity and feudalism retrospectively, which gave rise to this unique Sikkimese country.

Concluding remarks

In this essay, we are not pretending to develop new definitions of ethnicity and feudalism but trying to throw some light on the origins and development of various modern political revivalisms, as deeply rooted in a genealogical reconstruction of their past by the ancient Rulers. For Lepchas and Lhopos, these recreated traditions of "autochtony" must be understood as a direct illustration of certain national myths. The *History of Sikkim*, seen in the light of the new democratic political debate about the value of status and ethnonyms, was an attempt to shape a national history in the form of a resistance against the Hindu assimilation, on the one side, and a desperate struggle against the British hold, on the other. While the kings tried to write a defence and illustration of their kingdom against British occupation, a modern and popular use of this *History*, re-interpreted and written through different lay publications, is at the core of the "revivalism", the nostalgia for a traditional order.

Comparative ethnographic and historiographic documents also reveal that we confront a social organisation which is primarily non-liberal, not yet mercantile, rooted as it is in a particular model of Tibetan Buddhism that

³⁰ For a study of the relations between the Bhotias and the Lepchas regarding the cultivation of the cardamom in the western area of Sikkim, see Steinmann 2000: 437-444.

³¹ Namgyal and Dolma's *History of Sikkim* (1908: 102) relates these events, at the time of the governor Ashley Eden: "Pemionchi lamas sent a batch of priests to turn out the Paharia settlers from Rhenock. Immediately, the Phodong Lama Karma Tangkyong at once took out the fire arms from Tanlang Palace, and gathering the men from Gar, Jongu, Sammong, Kabi behind the Phodang Spur, Shotag, Be-Tsa-ng and Yogtsa, armed them with guns. He also gathered the men from Rumtek, Katok, Phodang and Phensung. They all came to Rhenock and the lama ordered the Pemionchi lamas to desist from turning out the Paharis settlers. He offered the Tatsang lamas Rs 700/- per annum, so that they could keep the new Paharias settlers, but the Tatsang lamas would not entertain the idea at all".

further developed into an original form of Tibetan nationalism. Recreations of myths regarding ancestry and a highly spiritual vision of the land have forged a unique society which still has to fight to protect and keep its diversity and uniqueness. Now citizens of the Indian democracy, most of the Sikkimese have to work in a land tenure system which is still based on inheritance of debts and personal ties to the landlord. In the past, with the intervention of foreign merchants and religious missionaries, this system favoured the marketing of indigenous Sikkimese labour abroad. One of the greatest systems of debt fell on those situated at the base of the grass-root level work, i. e. the cardamom and ginger cultivators. These crops became international food products and spices, bringing money to the traders, but producing alienation and a hostile environment for the gatherers.

We saw how social tensions should also be understood in the light of the colonization (internal and external) and the debilitating effect of wars. Through the *History of Sikkim*, we understand the progressive loss of land by people, due to abusive landowners' policies oriented towards the service of the British hierarchy, and to internal disputes consequently aroused among the dispossessed. Let us consider, for example, the conflicts extending today in the South-Western district. The Limbus describe themselves as rivals of the Bhotias for stock management and access to land. They constitute an intermediate class between the Bhotias and the Lepchas, being conscious that in order to secure their place, they have to make Lepchas the scapegoats.³² In former times, Limbus and Lepchas intermarried and shared a number of complicated cultural features. Their shamans bore the same titles and they worked side by side in the same fields. But Limbus, caught between the desire to take hold of lands lost in the past, and to engage in a new kind of business and trade, like the Bhotias, have now become the rivals of their ancient allies and neighbours. This example is symptomatic of the different social and ethnic confrontations throughout the country. The East India Company and its allies, who made great efforts to introduce a free-market for their own profit, while trying to maintain the ancestral rules and hierarchy, failed to transform social organization and land tenure. A deeply rooted religious vision of the soil shapes the structure of land tenure and prevents the people from behaving as pure merchants or liberal landowners. A fondness for the ancient order develops through messianic beliefs, widely spread among Lepchas, Limbus and other Nepalese groups who are engaged in intense competition for the land.

³² Around Kechöpalri lake, a sacred place of worship both for Lepchas, Bhotias and more generally Hindus and Buddhists, some Limbu landowners complain about the Lepchas: "They go and borrow money from the Bhotias, making a bid for the next crop of cardamom and immediately spending the loan on drinking. Therefore, they only get half of their revenue when they could have earned more than the double, had they sold the crops on the market!"

Finally, as a hagiographic text and a well-documented historiography, the *History* helps us to understand the crucial role of ancient Tibetan mythology as a frame for expanding and ruling a country. As a first-hand historical document about the constitution of the Namgyals' dynasty and high rank Lhopos' lineages, we understand the process of legitimating a reign. By allowing themselves to be the chroniclers of their own reign, the Namgyals have also given a fascinating ethnographic description of the various populations of Sikkim and events that ended in the annexation to India. We can decipher how the category of "State" was popularized through centralisation of kingship and how national stereotypes were constituted and propagated in the midst of great ethnic diversity. After the British colonization, the Indian invasion was the last trial for this kingdom. Important figures such as the *kazis* entered the arena to help establish historical roles and status. They owed their legitimacy as much to foreign interventions as to local traditions.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this *History* of a Buddhist kingdom is the projection of a clear light on strategies which surround the construction of a political nationalism.

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