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Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia

Occidental College

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Foxes, Yetis, and Bulls as Lamas: Human-Animal Interactions as a Resource for Exploring Buddhist Ethics in Sikkim

Kalzung Dorjee Bhutia¹

Abstract

Sikkimese Bhutia language oral traditions feature an abundance of stories related to human-animal interactions. In order to begin to critically consider the significance of these interactions, this article will engage with these oral traditions and what they can tell us about local traditions of Buddhist ethics. Although some of these tales seem anthropocentric because humans overpower and outwit animals, others are more ambiguous. In this ethical universe, foxes, yetis, and magical bulls all act as agents and, at times, religious teachers, reminding humans of the Buddhist theme of interconnectedness in their interactions with the environment. This article is a starting point for considering how such tales can act as a rich resource for negotiating

¹ Dept. of History, Occidental College. Email: kalzungdbhutia@yahoo.com. I am grateful to all of the people who shared their stories with me in Sikkim, as well as to my family, Daniel Cozort and the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this article.

ambiguous forms of ecocentrism in local Buddhist practice and narrative in the Eastern Himalayas.

Introduction

There was once a great lama who lived in Rinchenpong in West Sikkim. Students came from throughout the Himalayas to study with him. After they arrived, the lama would send his students away to practice in the wilderness for twenty-one days. He specified that during these twenty-one days, students had to follow two rules: first, they had to be far away from each other but close enough that they could still hear each other blow their *kanglings* (trumpets made from human thighbones); second, they could not stay anywhere longer than three nights. The lama said that if they could survive the depths of the forest and the cremation grounds, they might have a chance of surviving his demanding course of study!

Before they left, the lama instructed his students that they needed to be aware of different types of disturbances during their practice. The first would be internal, mental disturbances, which they had to vanquish through meditation. The second would be external disturbances. If students were distracted by sounds or unexpected visitors, there was only one thing to be done; they had to go out and confront the sources of these disturbances.

One dark and silent night, three of his students found themselves staying in the vicinity of Sangha Choe-ling Monastery and cremation ground. Suddenly, one of

the students was alarmed by a terrible noise that sounded like a crying child. After summoning his courage, he looked out of the tent ready to confront a ghost—only to find himself face-to-face with a fox! Startled, he took his thighbone trumpet and whacked the fox on the head!

The fox sprinted off, screeching. He stumbled down through the forest and directly into the side of tent of the next meditator, who screamed out in fear. Absolutely petrified—he thought a ghost was attacking the side of his tent! He stayed inside shivering the rest of the night, unable to confront his attacker.

Little did he know that the fox was acting as his lama, but it was only when the second meditator returned to Rinchenpong at the end of his retreat and met the first meditator - that he discovered the true identity of the *lama* who taught him about fear.

Can a fox be a lama, capable of guiding a human student to enlightenment? In this oral story from the small Himalayan state of Sikkim in India, the fox plays an important role in leading humans to confront their anxieties. However, his agency as a teacher to humans is not central to the story, and in the end, the cowardly mediator comes across as only just a bit sillier than the startled fox.

This representation of human-animal² relations suggests that Sikkimese Buddhist practitioners are anthropocentric; they see themselves superior to animals in both mental prowess and spiritual potential. This

² Animal studies scholars have a variety of ways to refer to humans that recognize that humans are also animals. Here for the sake of clarity, I retain human-animal terminology, especially since in Buddhist cultures they are understood as different and distinct parts of the cycle of rebirth. For more on this in a Buddhist context, see Ohnuma xix.

reading of Buddhism is in accord with arguments by scholars such as Paul Waldau who maintains that Buddhism is a speciesist tradition, including only human animals within a moral community that excludes other types of animals (38). However, as Reiko Ohnuma has recently shown in her book on representations of animal-human interactions in early Indian Buddhist literature, these relationships are considerably more complex. Many human-animal interactions in early literature such as the Jātaka Tales were more about humans than animals and these function as a “potent symbolic resource for reflecting on the nature of the human” (xv). Ohnuma persuasively argues for how the potency of these symbols comes from the fact that “human beings *are* animals themselves,” but like to define themselves in opposition to other animals. Despite this definition, humans and animals share “a simultaneous *kinship* and *otherness*, *identity* and *difference*, and *attraction* and *repulsion* in humanity’s relationship to the animal” (xv).

Taking Ohnuma’s argument into account, we may re-read the opening oral tale as one about the silliness of humans. In this reading, the fox’s role is humorous, but also unfortunate, as he is subjected to two startling encounters with humans who are out of their comfort zone in the forest. The moral of the story is not necessarily a comic one about being cowardly, but also an ethical one, about how humans should behave, and specifically, the need for humans to be aware of their surroundings and be considerate of other beings within them. The challenge here is for humans to overcome their limitations and acclimate to the world of the animals, thereby suggesting that there is a role for animality in Buddhism after all.³ In this article, I will explore the nuances of oral tales in order to examine several common themes related to human-animal relations in

³ Ohnuma demonstrates how animality is often suppressed or erased in early Buddhist literature (138-147).

the Sikkimese context. This article is a preliminary discussion of oral literature in Bhutia-language speaking communities. Such folk stories are often overlooked in studies of Buddhism in the state, which tend to focus on ritual, historical or institutional details.⁴ This article will engage with examples of human-animal interaction in Bhutia oral literature to outline how these tales can function as a resource for understanding local Buddhist ethics alongside other ritual and literary traditions. Some of these stories may appear to be related more to folk traditions than Buddhism, but in Sikkim, the separation between the two is artificial; and the stories in this article have been chosen as they are shared within Buddhist communities, even if they do not overtly feature Buddhist protagonists. Some of the ethical messages outlined in these tales are common to other Buddhist cultures, especially those relating to how animals can be seen as symbolic stand-ins for humans; others are more specific to the Sikkimese context.

Why is the context important here? Today, Sikkim is famous as a biodiversity hotspot in the Eastern Himalayas. It is home to a wide range of distinctive animal species including red pandas, snow leopards, Himalayan black bears, and hundreds of types of birds. Almost half of the state is still covered in forest, and much of the historical economy was based around agriculture, which from an early period led to important connections between human and animal communities. Even the traditional name of Sikkim in classical Tibetan language is Denjong (Tibetan: *'Bras ljongs*⁵), The Valley of Rice. These specific details have led the people of Sikkim to

⁴ There is little scholarship available on Sikkimese Buddhism. What does exist include anthropological studies, such as Balikci and classic historical studies, such as Waddell.

⁵ Instead of including Tibetan language words, in this article I will provide phoneticized versions of Bhutia, or Lhokyed, words, as these at times differ from the classical Tibetan vocabularies used in the Buddhist literature of the state and reflect more closely the vocabulary used by people in oral traditions.

have close relationships with the environment. Buddhist narratives of local history tend to emphasize anthropocentric narratives of saints such as Guru Rinpoche coming to subjugate the spirits of the local anthropomorphic environment.⁶ However, oral traditions complicate these representations. While there is an abundance of rich examples of human-animal and human-environment interactions in Lepcha language traditions,⁷ Bhutia traditions remain understudied.⁸ As with many other Himalayan landscapes, Sikkim is understood to be home to a rich variety of beings, including mountain deities, dharma protectors (*zhidak*, local spirits who have taken vows to protect Buddhism) and worldly spirits that influence day to day life (*tsen*). The different communities of Sikkim that practice Buddhism, which include Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Gurungs, Tamangs and a number of others, all participate in ritual life designed to propitiate this landscape.⁹ However, there is another repository of knowledge regarding appropriate human-animal and environmental interactions—that of oral traditions, passed down through an oral public sphere that has been influenced by local beliefs as well as Buddhism.

This article will explore some of the ways Bhutias have understood relationships between humans and animals, as these relationships are represented in oral folk stories. I have collected these stories over the past

⁶ For more on Guru Rinpoche and tales of “subjugation” of local deities, see Steinmann.

⁷ Plaisier provides a detailed overview of studies of Lepcha folklore to date.

⁸ Bhutias are an ethno-cultural community who are believed to have migrated to Sikkim from eastern Tibet sometime in the thirteenth century (Thuthop Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma). They practice Vajrayana Buddhism and speak a distinct Tibeto-Burman dialect known as Bhutia or Lhokyed (*Lho skad*). They refer to themselves as Bhutias and Lhopos (Southerners). For the sake of consistency and accessibility in this paper, I will refer to the people and language as Bhutia.

⁹ For specific details on mountain deity propitiation in Sikkim, see Balikci-Denjongpa, “Kanchendzonga.” Nebesky-Wojkowitz provides a comprehensive overview of different categories of protector deities in the Tibetan and Himalayan world.

forty years, and selected especially vivid examples featuring animals here.¹⁰ Some of them are well known, and some are village-specific or family-specific, and relate most closely to Western Sikkimese traditions, from where they have been collected. Historically, these types of stories are shared within communities in informal settings, between parents and children at the dinner table, or in other family and community gatherings. They are part of broader storytelling traditions that focus on human events in the past - intended to convey ethical ideals for others to emulate or avoid, depending on their outcome. Some of these stories feature clan and family lineage members; some are based more on mythical heroic figures. Sikkim does not have large performative folklore traditions, festivals, or storytelling specialists that are found elsewhere in the Himalayas. However, it is home to many festivals that relate local Buddhist histories and relationships with the land (Balikci-Denjongpa).

For the purpose of this paper, I wanted to explore stories that were focused on human-animal interactions and transmitted through oral traditions of local villages. What connects them is that the stories have been passed down in the Bhutia language. Storytelling was once a popular pastime, especially in rural settings. More recently, these traditions have been marginalized by new technologies and the use of Nepali and English languages in public life. There have been some efforts to conserve Bhutia oral traditions using new technologies, including WhatsApp and Facebook. This article is a preliminary engagement with some of the details

¹⁰ In preparation for this paper, I reviewed these stories with a group of five West Sikkimese Bhutias over the age of sixty between 2015 and 2017. I have based the stories below on comparisons of multiple versions they conveyed to me, but there can be differences between storytellers and there is no one authentic version. Here I have included the versions with details that were included most frequently, or with the most information. All translations are by me, unless noted. In future projects, I intend to include more comparative information, but for the purpose of exploring local Buddhist ethics here, I have chosen to discuss specific versions with minimal comparative detail.

about Sikkimese concepts of the environment found in these local storytelling traditions.

Animals as Ethical Resources in Buddhist Literary Traditions

There is an abundance of scholarly literature written by Capper; Waldau and Patton; Kemmerer; and Perlo, that engages with questions of human-animal interaction and the role of animals in human religions. As Daniel Capper has recently written, representations of animals and human-animal interaction is a rich area in which to explore “who we are as individuals and as a species . . .” since “[t]o be human is to coexist with natural beings, so that they shape how we understand ourselves, others, the world in which we live, and how we approach religious questions regarding meaning and proper living” (Capper 5-6). These questions are especially connected to the fields of ethics (8). In the field of Buddhist human-animal interactions, we find an array of literature related to concepts of appropriate ethical treatment of animals (Waldau, Stewart, “Violence and Non-violence,” Harvey, Pu, Finnigan) with a particular emphasis on vegetarianism (Stewart, *Vegetarianism*). Ohnuma argues that animal ethics should be seen as distinct from discussions of “the ways in which animals are represented and the ways in which animality itself is used as a comment upon the human” (xvii). Ohnuma focuses on the latter in her book, outlining how animals in early Indian Buddhist literature are represented as having “unfortunate destinies” and being below humans in the cycle of reincarnation (5-23). On the other hand, they can also be seen as critics of inappropriate human conduct (49-50). Animality in Buddhism is also the focus of an edited volume by David Jones, where the intention of the authors is to return to “the animal soul back to our spirituality,” thereby creating “a space for an ecology of compassion” (11).

Such ecology looks very different in different parts of the Buddhist world. In the Himalayas, Ivette Vargas has discussed how animals function in a number of ways in Buddhist settings: as symbols of ideas and values, as agents in teaching the dharma, as scapegoats, as guardian figures, and ultimately, as creators of culture (Vargas). As with other parts of the Buddhist world, there has been, in recent scholarship, much attention given to ideas about vegetarianism (Gayley, Barstow). Some traditional literature supports these positive presentations of human-animal interaction and ethical reflection. The autobiography of the eighteenth-century saint, Shabkar, is such a text, as we see Shabkar wandering the Tibetan landscape, giving teachings to and receiving them from animals (Shabkar). However, as Ivette Vargas argues, animals are often more liminal and ambiguous in a Himalayan context. Toni Huber's important work on animals and hunting in historically Tibetan areas, also demonstrates this transitional point. He shows that Buddhists could and did protect animal rights through ritual traditions and land sanctuary practices, but that they also continued to kill and eat animals; and collected and used animal skins (Huber, "The Chase and the Dharma").

Based on these different approaches, it is not possible to posit that Buddhism as a tradition inherently embraces or reviles animals. To understand the significance of animals in Buddhist traditions, it is necessary to explore questions of diversity of practice within specific communities and even amongst individual beliefs. Daniel Capper's research across different religions supports this idea. In surveys of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Mayan, and Buddhist beliefs about animals, he found a vast amount of diversity across and within different traditions. Different viewpoints included anthropocentric approaches (where humans are most valued); biocentric approaches (where all beings—humans, animals, and plants—are considered animate); zoocentric approaches (where plants are valued along with humans and animals); and ecocentric approaches (where all things are valued for themselves, "without concern for human use," 15)

(13-16). He even found that with the most ecocentric traditions (including Mahayana Buddhism), “natural beings must be sacrificed on the altar of human benefit” (240). Is this the case across all Buddhist traditions? This article will now turn to this question and look at discussions of animals in Sikkimese oral traditions. Two predominant themes become apparent: anthropocentrism and a complex ecocentrism.

Animals as a Way to Talk about the Project of Being Human in Sikkimese Buddhist Oral Traditions

Anthropocentrism—that is, a focus on the human—is especially vivid in Sikkimese Buddhist oral traditions. This is in accord with early Indian Buddhist literature, where Reiko Ohnuma notes that animals are most often “used to comment upon human beings, the nature of humanity, and the project of being human—as Buddhism sees it” (xvi). In the Sikkimese Buddhist cosmos, stories suggest that animals play specific roles, though these roles can have some depth. For example, as the introductory tale of the fox illustrated, animals can teach humans, or support humans in their efforts to become better Buddhists.

While the fox had little agency in his teaching moment, another animal is often represented as a guardian figure for Buddhist practitioners: the yeti (Bhutia: *migur*). Daniel Capper considers yetis to be “sacred human-animal hybrids” that offer important moral instructions. As in his work, here I will not dwell on whether yetis physically exist (179)—although many of the storytellers I spoke with say they have met (or heard) yetis in the flesh. Instead, I am interested in considering what their appearance and actions represent.

In the Sikkimese context, yetis are considered to be *zhidak*, protectors of the dharma. Therefore, they are known to support practitioners in retreat, as shown in the story below:

A long, long time ago, a great meditator travelled to the holy cave of Dechenphug in West Sikkim to undertake a three year, three month, three day retreat. Life there was difficult: the water supply was far away, and the surrounding slopes steep for retrieving fire wood. During the winter, the snow made these daily tasks especially difficult and the meditator would be reduced to collecting dripping ice from a waterfall for drinking water. Towards the end of his retreat, the weather was so bad that he dared not venture out into the cold. Instead, he decided he would try and go outside the next day.

The next morning, the meditator awoke to find fresh firewood and a full canister of water by his door. He was baffled. Who could have possibly left it there in such a remote place? The next morning, he found the same offering. He was grateful, but curious about his anonymous benefactor, so he resolved to sleep lightly - in case whoever it was returned.

That night, he spied his supporter: a hairy giant ape-like yeti that stood on two feet. The yeti quickly dropped off the supplies, before disappearing into the forest. After being spotted, the yeti never returned, and the meditator completed his retreat without any further bad weather.

Here, the yeti is seen as a friend to the meditator, supporting him at a time of personal difficulty. Another popular tale relays how another yogi removed a shard of wood from a yeti's foot, and in return, the yeti served him for years. When the yogi's friends wanted to visit him in retreat, he urged them not to come, explaining that he had no space since "at night, I already have a friend that visits!" Capper also found a number of tales from Nepal and Bhutan where yetis act as devout Buddhists who serve Buddhist masters (189-194). As with Capper's findings, Sikkimese oral traditions also affirm that yetis can act as divine punishers (199) and it is emphasized that they will only protect those with pure intention (Bhutia: *sem zangmo*).

Capper argues that yetis can practice religion because they are hybrid *and* ambivalent, between being human and animal (204-205). Other animals cannot practice religion, as they do not have the mental capacity to do so. This anthropocentric attitude is captured in the comical popular tales of *pawo*, heroes, who are seen to perform amazing actions of strength, wit and cunning. Their connection to Buddhist heroes through their titles is not accidental: these oral traditions often see pawos mete out a specific form of divinely sanctioned justice against challenges to human settlements. Penpo Rabgey is another especially well-known figure featured in stories told throughout western Sikkim.

Penpo Rabgey was a great warrior from one of the ancient clans of Sikkim. He was originally from Kewzing near Ravangla, and was famous for his amazing deeds of courage that led people to believe that he must have been a magician.

In the region between Kewzing, Damthang, and Namchi, there is a cliff known as Tingbila. Beyond Tingbila was a village called Rayong. There used to be many tigers living in this area. They would harass the local population

- eating sheep, cows, chickens, and on occasions - even the villagers themselves!

Penpo Rabgey decided that he could take on these tigers using his only his cleverness. He decided to set up a trap: he smeared his body with rotten cheese, and then lay down on the path that connected the tiger's den up on a high cliff with the village. After some time, a hungry tiger emerged, and discovered a strange smelly thing there. The tiger sniffed Penpo Rangey from head- to-toe, and then back again. She wondered if she could eat this thing or not, but the smell made her gag. She sniffed, and sniffed, and sniffed . . . and her long tiger whisker went up inside Penpo Rabgey's nose. He had a mighty sneeze, which gave the tiger a terrible shock and sent her tumbling off the cliff. That is how Penpo Rabgey killed the tiger without lifting his blade.

This tale is considered to be comical within a Sikkimese context, as Penpo Rabgey outsmarts the tiger that threatens human communities (though it obviously was not funny for the tiger). Here, being human and having the capacity to trick animals is clearly a privileged position. A similar theme is found in another story about tigers from another part of West Sikkim.

There was once a great Pawo known as Yamphung Penpo who worked as a trader. He traveled throughout West Sikkim, trading salt and other valuable local commodities from across the border with Nepal. At one point, his village was besieged by tigers, which kept attacking locals. Yamphung Penpo decided to deal with the problem. He covered his body with white silk offering scarves, and stuffed sharpened sticks of solid bamboo into his sleeves. He then waited for the tiger that soon enough came to attack him. The tiger

sniffed at the pile of khatak white scarves, and opened his jaws wide to take a bite. At that moment Yamphung Penpo reached out, lodging a bamboo stick into the tiger's mouth, wedging it open!

The tiger was helpless to attack him, and Yamphung Penpo quickly cut out the tiger's tongue.

A group of border traders came to help him, and began jabbing the tiger with sticks. "Stop!" cried out Yamphung Penpo—but he was not worried about the tiger's wellbeing. Instead, he warned, "You people will spoil the tiger's coat!"

This is another tale that is told for comic relief. However, it is ultimately tragic, as once again humans outwit animals. These animals are seen as scourges of local populations, which justifies their removal. However, such examples are far removed from claims of Buddhism as a non-violent tradition in the Sikkimese context.

Questioning Anthropocentrism: Animals as a Way to Express Interconnectedness in the Sikkimese Buddhist Context

Anthropocentric behaviors and interactions are present in a number of Sikkimese Buddhist tales. However, there are alternative messages regarding human-animal relationships in many stories that challenge the idea that Sikkimese Buddhist ethics is all about the human realm.

One well-known story illustrates this concept and takes place at the sacred lake of Kecheopalri, in West Sikkim.

Once upon a time, our grandfathers said that there was a beautiful white bull (*tsolang*) that would emerge from the

lake at Kecheopalri on holy days. Nobody minded to begin with, but then the *tsolang* began to impregnate local cows! One man grew fed up and caught the bull, intending to kill him and eat him. However, after he killed the creature he sliced him open, only to discover milk instead of blood inside the bull! After this, the man's family lineage died out. The lake dried up and shifted to another area.

This story has a clear ethical message that warns humans to take care in their interactions with animals - least the animal is not what it seems. In this tale, the human is the stupid one, rather than the animal. What confuses the human protagonist is his inability to identify the *tseñ* spirit manifesting as a bull. This is a cautionary tale, warning that human vision is limited and unable to grasp potentially important spiritual messages; and that ultimately, humans and their activities are connected to the environment, a theme common to other forms of Buddhist environmentalism (219-221).

The disappearance of the lake and the man's family lineage clearly demonstrates the interconnectedness between human behavior and the environment. Here, the man is punished through loss of family lineage, just as the lake disappears from the region. There are a number of alternate versions of this tale, which contain similar messages but tell the story differently. A previously published version states that,

[M]any years ago some Bhutia communities had settled around Khecheopalri Lake. They had herds of cattle that grazed in dense forests around the lake . . . One day a holy white ox emerged from the lake and started to graze around the lake. It finally mingled with the herd of cattle that belonged to the Bhutias. When the Bhutia owner noticed the foreign animal in his herd, he tried unsuccessfully to locate its owner. He then slaughtered the animal for its

meat and was surprised to notice that a milky discharge oozed out instead of blood. He washed the discharge, cooked the meat, and had a great feast with his friends. After that he began to notice that one-by-one, all his cattle and those belonging to the Bhutia community in the locality started to vanish due to strange ailments. It is believed that in this way the entire Bhutia community vanished from Khecheopalri Village. These days, mostly Lepcha settlements are found around Khecheopalri Lake and only a few Bhutia who married Lepchas are believed to have survived the dreadful curse,]. (Jain et. al., 297-298)

In this alternate rendition, the story becomes about how a particular ethno-cultural community disappeared from the area, due to the loss of their cattle. The playful tone of the tale's representation of the bull's virility - as the threat that annoys the farmer - is de-emphasized. Other versions recall the same events with emphasis on different ethno-cultural communities. In one, it is the Lepchas who kill the cow and die out; in another, both Lepchas and Bhutias die out, and that is seen as the reason why today, only Subbas live in the village of Tingling near Khecheopalri.

While the commentary about ethnicity here is significant, I am more interested in the central theme of appropriate interaction with the environment. Toni Huber and Emily Yeh have both argued that Tibetan societies are often represented uncritically as *green* and environmentally conscious, but without giving appropriate consideration to historical realities and contemporary political events that have led various Tibetan and Himalayan groups to strategically emphasize their environmental consciousness to gain international support for different causes (Huber, "Green Tibetans"; Yeh). I agree with the importance of critically situating presentations of Sikkimese Buddhist society as inherently environmental-

ist. However, the tale of the white bull does present an interesting example of anthropocentric attitudes being challenged. Humans use the bull as they see fit, and then receive divine punishment, presumably from the lake which is presented in the tale as an agent capable of passing down punishment on human family lineages and by physically moving to another location. This suggests the potential presence of an ecocentric approach to the environment that urges appropriate awareness of interaction with different agents—in this case, the white bull representing the lake deity. This awareness is key to maintaining the human community, as is regulation of human desire and greed.¹¹ Humans are not necessarily dominant here. Instead, they need to practice appropriate respect towards their surroundings. This concern is also shown in Sikkimese Buddhist rituals, especially the Earth Propitiation Ceremony (*nesol*) that takes place annually (Lhatsun 9-184).

Anxieties related to the power of the environment and the need to maintain balance and awareness in interactions with it are found in many oral tales related to a different category of animals: those that could be called supernatural. These include yeti, *nāga* (Bhutia: *lu*) and *biatim*.

As seen above, yetis are often seen as supporters and protectors of the dharma, and therefore, Buddhist practitioners in retreat. However, appropriate behavior while in wilderness spaces is expected, or they might be less friendly, as demonstrated in this story.

Once upon a time, a shepherd was roaming deep in the jungle at Dechenphug, looking after his cows, yaks, and sheep. He would roam with his animals, sleeping in caves and a makeshift tent. One night he was rubbing mustard oil and

¹¹ The use of cattle as a symbol to invoke warnings about collective karma also appears in the writings of Burmese meditation teacher Ledi Sayadaw in a different context. For more on this, see Braun 35-38.

sheep butter into his hands when he heard a distant cry:
Kee hee, kee hee, kee hee . . .

Thinking that his friends were teasing him, the shepherd confidently answered back in response: *kee hee, kee hee . . .*

Within a split second, a great hairy yeti appeared before him. The shepherd got such a fright that he fainted. When he woke up, the yeti was nowhere to be seen but he was so frightened that the shepherd returned to his village, warning everyone he met to never imitate a cry in the nighttime jungle, as you never knew who—or what—may come to meet you in response!

In this case, the yeti's classification as a dharma protector is significant. Certain behaviors—such as living in retreat—are supported by yetis. Others, including disturbing the peace of the night, are not.

Another type of dharma protector with magical qualities are *nāga* spirits, known in Sikkim as *lu*. Ivette Vargas has outlined how these beings are ambivalent as they are associated with a variety of positive and negative qualities. They can bring disease and tragedy if disrespected, but can also bring luck and wealth (222-227). Sikkim is also home to many *nāga*, who dwell in wet places (which, given Sikkim's heavy rainfall, are abundant and basically includes all forested areas). *Nāgas* in Sikkim are propitiated through rituals and the construction of *lubum*, small *stūpas*, in order to cure illnesses associated with them, especially skin disorders.

Another liminal creature that is local to Sikkim is the *biatim*. The following story appears to be a tale of human dominance over this creature, but its ethical message is more complex.

Over one hundred years ago, the great Lasso Kazi¹² of Ta-shiding had a very unique wife who was the daughter of the Terton Dorje Lingpa.¹³ She was known for being a hard worker and for her unique capabilities - that even she did not entirely understand. Every day she would go to the forest to collect firewood in a small basket and collect food for her cows. In the forest, she would often have visions and make discoveries nobody else could. For example, over several days she found fresh chillies when it was not the season for growing chillies. She took her friends with her to see where she had found them, but there were no chillies to be seen.

Soon after, while walking on her own, the kazi's wife suddenly felt something drop into her basket. She removed the basket from her back, and found a small stone inside it. Suddenly, from behind her she heard a child's voice: "Please, give me back my *digong*. I need it!" She turned, to see a small girl with fair hair and yellow eyes. The yellow eyes gave the child away: she was not a child, but a *biatim*, a magical shapeshifting being who lived deep in the forest. *Biatim* would often appear as children with fair hair, and invite humans to play with them. If they were female *biatim*, they would take the children to their homes under the waterfalls, and keep them there to play with - forever. However, male *biatim* posed an even greater threat than abduction, as they loved to feast on the flesh of children.

¹² Kazi is a term for a landlord in historical Sikkim bestowed by the British during their administration in Sikkim from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.

¹³ This *terton* is associated with Doling Monastery in Ravang, South Sikkim.

The kazi's wife kept her composure, and took the stone out of her basket to return to the *biatim*, recognizing that the *digong* was a talisman that held the *biatim*'s power. However, the stone flew back into her basket. She tried again to remove it, only for it to fly back in. She tried again, and turned and ran from the forest, hoping that the *digong* would be returned to its owner. But when she got back to her home, she found that the stone had returned to her basket.

That night, she was awoken by a horrible noise that sounded like a crying child. She looked out the window, and found the small girl standing on the ground, looking up at her. The *biatim* demanded, "Give me back my *digong*!" Then she started to grow until she was taller than the window! The kazi's wife was not intimidated. She responded, "I have tried to give you back your *digong*, but it keeps coming back to me. I can't help it if I am meant to have it!" She then turned from the window, and tried to go back to sleep.

The following night, the kazi's wife was woken again by the crying giant *biatim*, who was even more furious than before and grew even taller. The kazi's wife tried to ignore the *biatim*, but could not sleep. Over the following week, the *biatim* came back again and again, keeping her awake all night.

The kazi's wife became exhausted from lack of sleep. She thought to herself, "Whatever benefit I may gain from this talisman is surely not worth this torture of being kept awake all night!" In a fit of exasperation, she hurled the *digong* out the window into the maize fields. The sound

promptly ceased and she never met—or heard—the *biatim* again, and the *digong* did not return.

On the surface, this story appears to be a tale of a spiritually powerful woman overpowering an innocent creature. However, its ending is more ambivalent. *Biatim* are understood to be *tсен*, a class of spirits in Sikkim that can influence human activity both positively, through bringing fertility and luck, and negatively, through bringing illness and misfortune. In this tale, the kazi's wife tried to retain the *biatim*'s power when she is magically given her talisman. However, it is not possible in the natural order of things for humans to hold this power, and eventually she has to return it to maintain her sanity. The *biatim*, which can be understood as a symbol of the natural world, therefore wins.

As with the yeti, interactions with snakes, *biatim* and sacred white bulls demonstrate a clear ethical message: the importance of appropriate respect in dealing with the environment. Killing the wrong animals, imitating creatures at the wrong time, and attempting to wrest power from natural forces are all behaviors that invite censure and punishment. Daniel Capper has argued that ultimately, the line between humans and animals are blurry in the negotiation of appropriate human-animal ethics (Capper, 187). In the Sikkimese Buddhist context, we also see this blurriness of boundaries. While there seems to be an anthropocentric natural order, this is not absolutely defined, and ecocentrism is also present. It can only be maintained through appropriate interactions with the broader environment in which humans and animals interact.

Conclusion

Sikkimese Bhutia oral traditions feature a rich array of human-animal interactions. While many of the trends that emerge from these traditions

suggest a strong anthropocentrism present in the Bhutias' treatment of their environment, many tales contain ethical commentaries that are far more nuanced. The themes that emerge from these traditions emphasize the importance of propitiating the environment appropriately and recognizing that both humans and animals have their places and roles within it. While the overview of several of these tales contained in this article has been preliminary, it demonstrates the presence of a number of common themes among these oral traditions.

A notable theme is that animal activity is understood as connected to human ethics. This apparently is still the case. Salient recent examples include leopard and bear attacks in human settlements. Locals have interpreted this activity as a sign that human behavior unsettles the guardian deities and spirits. Of particular concern is the greed and ambition that is seen to be driving human settlement and harvesting of resources in historically forested areas. Broader developments that are contributing to these changes are the installation of huge hydroelectric projects along the rivers of Sikkim, the unplanned expansion of urban areas, and pollution that accompanies it. Earthquakes and other disasters have been seen as signifiers of supernatural concern regarding these and other cultural changes (Gergan, 494-496), but animals have also been unsettled by them, both physically in terms of losing their habitats, as well as spiritually. Many older Bhutias say that the yetis and *biatims* must have fled from the deep forests, rendering the Sikkimese landscape empty of protectors. The full impact of these changes is yet to be seen. In this context, Bhutia oral traditions remain relevant as resources for developing a nuanced concept of human-animal and environmental ethics, and perhaps for considering alternative futures for Sikkim's environment.

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