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Living with the Mountain: Mountain Propitiation Rituals in the Making of Human-Environmental Ethics in Sikkim

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Living with the Mountain: Mountain Propitiation Rituals in the Making of Human-Environmental Ethics in Sikkim

Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia¹

Abstract

In 2019, a debate erupted in the eastern Himalayan Indian state of Sikkim over whether the Indian Government should allow climbers to attempt to summit Mount Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain, located on the western border of Sikkim and Nepal. For local communities in Sikkim, Kanchendzonga, as the mountain is known, is seen as the protector deity of the land and its hu-

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man and nonhuman inhabitants. Summiting him is considered deeply disrespectful. Ritual and textual traditions in contemporary west Sikkim provide insight into how local Buddhists create and reaffirm their relationship with Kanchendzonga and provide context for understanding the 2019 debates. These traditions outline appropriate ethical behavior and function pedagogically to demonstrate how the mountain and humans have historically engaged in forms of reciprocal care, healing, and protection, and how they can continue to do so, thereby ensuring a generative future for all of Sikkim's transdimensional residents.

Introduction

On August 21, 2019, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs issued a circular declaring that 137 mountains in India would be opened for international climbing expeditions. Twenty-four of these mountains are in the eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, bordering Nepal, China and Bhutan. There was immediate outcry in Sikkim, as local political and cultural groups, and even mountaineers, protested the decision, stating unanimously that these mountains in Sikkim—and in particular, Kanchenjunga, or Kanchendzonga (*Gangs chen mdzod lnga*²) as it is known to locals,³ at 8,586m the

² Sikkim is a multilingual state. This article discusses Buddhist communities and traditions that use classical Tibetan as their language for ritual texts. In this paper, when a non-English word that is not widely known first appears, I will provide its spelling in Wylie for the case of Tibetan, and in phonetics for other languages.

³ I will refer to the mountain as Kanchendzonga to contextualize local Sikkimese perspectives on the mountain. It is also spelled variously as Kanchenjunga, Kanchenjinga, and so on. I will also retain the use of the term “Sikkim” to refer to the state; there are different terms used by different ethnicities, but for convenience I will use the name most widely known.

world's third highest mountain—should not be climbed, as to do so would “hurt religious sentiments” of communities in the state. Bhaichung Bhutia, the president of the Sikkimese political party Hamro Sikkim and a former footballer, explained that the mountain should not be climbed “since it has religious sentiment of people of Sikkim and it's protected and worship [sic] as a deity” (Scroll Staff). Kunzang Gyatso, the president of the Sikkim Mountaineering Association and a mountaineer who climbed Jomo Lungma (*Jo mo glang ma*; English: Everest) in 2008, expanded on this:

Religion is [a] priority in many places. And being a mountaineer, I feel that the way we challenge nature, we must also respect it. Sikkim has been built with the blessings of the mountain gods. If you want to climb Kanchenjunga, you can do so from the Nepal side. In Sikkim, according to religious beliefs, we leave a gap of 10m from the top for any peak, and that becomes our summit. (Hasnat)

Dr. Sangmu Thendup of Sikkim University affirmed the significance of Kanchendzonga in Sikkimese history and its position as a protector, lamenting that the order not only disrespects local belief but also “interfere[s] with nature. There's going to be so much pollution” (Chakrabarti).

These three quotations represent connected justifications for why Kanchendzonga should not be climbed. Kunzang Gyatso's statement that Sikkim “has been built with the blessings of the mountain gods,” engages the perfect tense to suggest generally the “blessings” bestowed on the state by the mountains. By contrast, Bhutia's comment that the mountain *is* a deity directly attributes agency to the mountain by acknowledging the blessings of the mountains. Thendup, on the other hand, mentions the deleterious environmental impact that mountaineering could have on mountain ecosystems. All three quotations acknowledge the important role that the mountain has played in Sikkimese communities on different cultural and ecological levels.

This acknowledgment of agency is crucial for understanding the debate over whether Kanchendzonga should be summited in recreational expeditions. Kanchendzonga is understood as the mighty mountain protector of the state in local traditions who was converted to Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava, the great promulgator of Tibetan Buddhism) and has been propitiated for at least seven hundred years in Indigenous and Buddhist ritual traditions (Balikci-Denjongpa). Kanchendzonga is not a profane part of nature to be summited or dominated; instead, it is an active agent with an ongoing relationship with human residents of Sikkim. Regarded as masculine, the deity is often addressed as “Dzonga,” but here I render this name as Kanchendzonga so as to not contradict the sense in which the mountain-deity is understood in Sikkim. Similarly, I will refer to the mountain as “him” to acknowledge his agency and understood personhood.

In the following, I explore what this means and provide context for the debate over climbing Kanchendzonga by drawing on textual and ethnographic research to examine Buddhist ritual traditions and practices that demonstrate the relationality between the mountain and human residents of western Sikkim.⁴ This relationality and reciprocity underscores interdimensional relations in the mountain landscapes of western Sikkim. This pattern is found across the Tibetan cultural region. In her recent work on Ladakh, anthropologist Karin Gagné discusses the “ethics of care” enacted and articulated by Ladakhis towards their landscapes, that is, how concepts of morality, ethics, and identity were deeply entangled between

⁴ Despite its small size, Sikkim is a culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse state. Here I will focus on Buddhist conceptions of the mountain drawing on data from west Sikkim. My research focused on Buddhist communities that were comprised predominately of Indigenous Lepchas and Bhutia (also known as Lhopo, “Southerners,” inasmuch as they are understood to be descendants of Tibetan migrants). Other studies that explore aspects of Kanchendzonga propitiation in other parts of Sikkim include Balikci-Denjongpa “Kangchendzönga: Secular and Buddhist Perceptions,” Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors*, Vandenhelsken, Steinmann, Arora, and Scheid.

Ladakhi humans and non-humans, and how environmental degradation can be seen as a consequence of human action. Gagné's study focuses on how "mundane actions such as farming and herding are equally important ethical practices in forming the basis for living a morally correct life" and draws on folklore, stories and songs in outlining human-nature relationality in Ladakh (xv). I draw on Gagné's discussion to explicate the ethics of care present in human-nonhuman relations in Sikkim through the themes of care, healing and protection in Buddhist⁵ mountain-related rituals and daily life practices. These themes engage Sikkimese notions of local environmental ethics, and especially pedagogies for these ethics. My research is based on textual and ethnographic research undertaken for over two decades in the eastern Himalayas, where I was raised in a Buddhist family.

I consider how daily practices and rituals are bastions of these ethics but resist the notion that the Buddhist environmental ethics present in west Sikkim can be easily equated with those of contemporary environmental movements (Cantwell, Huber, Yeh). In recent years, Buddhist conceptions of human-environment relations have been effective mobilizers for Sikkimese communities resisting environmentally destructive policies, including the construction of megadams, deforestation, and exploitative tourism practices (Balikci-Denjongpa, Arora, Little, Gergan). Although some of this activism has been successful in actualizing the demands of local communities, as political geographer Mona Chettri has

⁵ This focus on Buddhism is intended to contribute to Buddhist studies literature on human-environment relations. Sikkim is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state, and in many places, Buddhism is deeply interconnected with Indigenous religions. I do not separate these, since west Sikkimese communities do not always do so. Balikci also acknowledges the close relations between Buddhism and local religions in her study of religion in north Sikkim in *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors*. In west Sikkim, there have also historically been very close relations between *bongthing* (Lepcha ritual specialists) and lamas (from Lepcha, Bhutia, and other ethnic communities) that have led to continued cooperation and collaboration.

noted, much of the activism and politics concerning the environment in Sikkim have been “co-opted by ethnic politics in the region. [Therefore], [t]hose who cannot make environmental claims on the basis of ethnicity remain marginalized and continue to be exploited” (Chettri “Ethnic”). Sikkim is a multiethnic state, but contemporary local politics tends to oversimplify and categorize ethnicity for political aims (Chettri, *Ethnicity*). Additionally, as an element of these contemporary politics, the treatment of Scheduled Tribes by the state, and other projects of ethnic taxonomy in Sikkim, have often over-emphasized the extent to which an ethnic group is “at one with nature” in order to categorize religious traditions and practices and make claims about the extent to which some groups have connections to land over others (Vandenhelsken). This practice perpetuates colonial stereotypes of religion by demarcating characteristics of so-called “primitive” peoples and their Indigenous traditions, and thereby oversimplifies human-environment relations.

Based on fieldwork in west Sikkim, this article contributes to studies of contemporary environmental ethics and activism in Sikkim by focusing on Buddhist perspectives, and acknowledging their complexity and multi-vocal nature. In this region, Kanchendzonga is widely propitiated in daily ritual life as a powerful agent. This propitiation is distinct from the way state authorities instrumentalize “nature worship” as a metaphor (Povinelli 506). By focusing on specific communities in the state of Sikkim, this article contributes to discussions of the history of local environmental ethics, while also providing historical details that point towards how Sikkimese communities can reimagine these values in contemporary movements (Elverskog).

Mountain Deity Rituals as Pedagogies of How to Live with the Mountain

Sikkim was originally seen as a Hidden Land (*sbas yul*), identified by the eighth century Buddhist promulgator Guru Rinpoche as a safe haven for Buddhists in times of need. The “opening” of this Hidden Land took place in successive waves, as Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) with karmic connections to the Guru later traveled to Sikkim and revealed Treasures he had left behind in the landscape. These Treasures included objects and texts, including meditative instructions and guidebooks (*gnas yig*) to the Hidden Land for future pilgrims. The representations of Sikkim found within these guidebooks can be seen as in effect advertising material to motivate Tibetans to move there (Balikci).

Previous scholarship has focused on Kanchendzonga propitiation as a central element of community identity and nationalism (Balikci-Denjongpa, Mullard, Vandenhelsken, Arora). Initially, Kanchendzonga was the witness to the agreement made in the thirteenth century between the Lepcha people, represented by Thekong Tek, and the Bhutia community who arrived from Tibet, led by Khye Bumsa. Between 1642 and 1975, Sikkim was a kingdom presided over the Bhutia Namgyal dynasty. The first monarch was enthroned with the cooperation of a visiting Tibetan yogi and visionary, Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme (*Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med*, 1597-1650/4). From a very early period, religion, particularly Buddhism, and the state were closely connected, and Kanchendzonga was central to the creation of Sikkimese identity (Balikci-Denjongpa, Mullard, Vandenhelsken).

Here, I offer an additional way to think about Kanchendzonga propitiation. The acknowledgement of the mountain due to his agency and position as a protector represents a vivid example of mountain deity cults found elsewhere in Tibet, the Himalayas, and Inner Asia (Balikci-Denjongpa, Karmay). The position of Kanchendzonga as the centerpiece

of a cult is representative of the way that there are a number of different “idioms” for thinking about the mountain (Cruikshank 3). These include engaging Kanchendzonga as a mountain, as a deity, or as a site for human flourishing and adventure, which have all been produced by cultural encounters rather than some timeless “discovery” (Cruikshank 4). Sikkimese writers Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca’s invaluable book *Sacred Summit* guides the reader through the ways the mountain has been imagined and reinterpreted over time in popular sources.

Rather than focusing on the politics of identity promulgated by the Kanchendzonga cult, I consider forms of relationality embedded within the specific Sikkimese case that also includes “religious, socio-political and economic concerns [that] are all embedded in the ecology of revelation and in the politics of sacred landscape inscribed therein” (Terrone 465). I am inspired in this project by anthropologist Julie Cruikshank’s book, *Do Glaciers Listen? Drawing on myriad histories from the Saint Elias Mountains in northwestern North America*, for her:

Glaciers appear as actors in this book. In accounts we will hear from Athapaskan and Tlingit oral tradition, glaciers take action and respond to their surroundings. They are sensitive to smells and they listen. They make moral judgments and they punish infractions. Some elders who know them well describe them as both animate (endowed with life) and as animating (giving life to) landscapes they inhabit. (3)

This connection between human behavior and landscape is also present in Gagné’s study of Ladakh, *Caring for Glaciers*, and both books merge natural histories with social histories and engage with local conceptions of human ecology. In the case of Cruikshank’s glaciers, she argues that they are “profoundly relational” since “humans and nature co-produce the world they share” (366). Mabel Gergan has more recently discussed how

landscape disasters such as earthquakes and landslides have been interpreted through a moral lens in Lepcha communities of north Sikkim. Here, I consider these connections from Buddhist perspectives.

In the area of my fieldwork in west Sikkim, the most influential *terton* (Treasure revealer) was Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme, who is held to have revealed *The Gathering of the Knowledge Holders* (*Rig 'dzin srog sgrub*) that became the ritual and meditative corpus of the distinctive local Buddhist lineage of Denjong Dzokchen (*'Bras ljongs rdzogs chen*, or in English, the Great Perfection lineage of Sikkim). Ritual texts and practices from this corpus have served as pedagogical resources that inform specific ways of interacting with Kanchendzonga and the environment he presides over.

Lhatsun's status as a Treasure revealer and his activities in Sikkim that revealed and promoted *The Gathering of the Knowledge Holders* corpus is another example of the way that Treasure revealers have mediated "between the land of Tibet and its inhabitants" and in doing so "maintain[ed] spiritual balance between the environment and its inhabitants" (Terrone 462) throughout the Himalayas. Antonio Terrone's discussion of the human-environment relations promoted by Treasure revelation argues that the "principle of relationality and exchange specific to the Tibetan Buddhist context that is resonant with environmental sustainability" can be considered an "ecology of revelation" (463). Terrone focuses on the way that Treasure revealers give back to the landscape by always leaving a replacement object when they remove Treasures from the earth (*gter tshab*). Here, I consider how rituals and practices pertaining to Treasures promote certain behaviors towards the environment, and especially the mountain that presides over that environment.

Caring (*gces*) for the Mountain, Caring for the People

The most significant ritual tradition connected with the propitiation of Kanchendzonga is the *Earth Propitiation* ritual, or *Nesol* (*gnas gsol*), that has been promulgated in *The Gathering of the Knowledge Holders* revealed by Namkhai Jikme. This ritual, which involves recitation of a text, offering a shrine of burning plants (*bsang*) and oblation (*gsker skyems*), is undertaken as part of daily household rituals, in protection rituals in the protector deity temple of monasteries (*bskang gso lha khang*), and also on an annual basis in Sikkimese communities. It is a deeply important tradition due to the enspirited landscape that it acknowledges, but also for the ethics of care (*gces*) that it expresses.

In the *Nesol* text, the landscape of Sikkim is propitiated through naming and offerings featuring mandala (*dkyil khor*), images that function as microcosms of the universe, that include butter and flower sculptures called *torma* (*gtor ma*) representing the deities and spirits of the land, which are offered food and alcohol. In this propitiation, the landscape is recognized as alive: the mountains, hills, lakes and rivers are all deities (*lha*), protective deities (*gzhi bdag*) and spirits (*bstan*), which are ever present and need to be communicated with. There is a hierarchy in this landscape: at the top are Buddhas and bodhisattvas, beings who take rebirth to help all sentient beings. These are followed by the mountain deities. The most powerful is Kanchendzonga and the protector who guards the southern region, Yabdud (*Yab 'dud*). Then come the protective deities who have been bound to protect the state and Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche. These include the spirits, or *tсен* (*btsan*) of the smaller mountains that surround Kanchendzonga, such as Khabor Gangtsan (*Kha bur sgang btsan*) and Dzungri Gangchen (*Rdzong ri'i sgang bstan*). Then there are the middle protectors of the one hundred and nine lakes (*mtsho sman rgyal mo*). Many other lesser spirits of smaller hills, lakes, and streams are also present.

This hierarchy is localized right down to the household, where there are gods of the hearth and the individual body (Lha btsun).

After acknowledging this mandala, represented by the gangkhor, or shrine, built for *Nesol*, in the ritual there are several specific places where the people offering the ritual prayer explicitly state how they should or should not behave. In the first instance, the supplicant apologizes to Kanchendzonga for inappropriate behavior that has disrupted him and other beings of the landscape, stating:

People should not burn impure substances, such as meat, or commit acts of violence and pollute the environment by cutting down trees. They should not stir up or pollute the lakes or the oceans, or dig into or break the mountains and rocks. If we disturb you in these ways, we apologize and admit to doing this, and ask for protection for all sentient beings. *If humans do not keep this promise, you may take their lives to punish them.*⁶

This section of the ritual outlines very clear expectations of how not to treat the environment. Here, the author Lhatsun indirectly warns human agents that they should be more aware of who they may be disturbing when they engage in activities that pollute or modify the landscape. This apology also acts as an oath, with quite an extreme form of punishment for those who violate it. In historical and contemporary Sikkim, earthquakes, floods, landslides, illnesses and social disharmony were all regularly attributed to the displeasure of Kanchendzonga and his retinue of protector deities in response to environmental harm.

This oath is shown to be an update of an older oath, that is believed by Sikkimese communities to have been sworn between Guru Rinpoche,

⁶ Lha btsun (31), translation and emphasis my own. An alternative translation to this text is found in Balikci-Denjongpa 93.

Kanchendzonga, and other beings when Guru Rinpoche converted the mountain and his nonhuman entourage, resident in Sikkim's landscape, to Buddhism (Balikci-Denjongpa). Later in the text, the *Nesol* invokes this oath, discussing how at that time, the Guru promised that in return for humans giving appropriate oblation and caring for the land, Kanchendzonga would in return care for them by (1) maintaining peace and stability and preventing war; (2) ensuring it rained on time; (3) ensuring that the harvest would be abundant; and (4) eradicating any diseases. In the *Nesol*, Kanchendzonga is reminded of this agreement, and then all the surrounding deities are also offered oblation with the same arrangement (Lha bstun).

After apologizing for past mistakes and reinforcing the oath, the ritual supplicants directly thank Kanchendzonga in another oblation, in which he is recognized as the Master of the Place (*gnas gi bdag po*). He is asked to maintain "the Valley of Rice" (i.e., the traditional name for Sikkim) and the rest of the world in balance. Without these thanks, according to Lhatsun's commentary in the text, any type of Buddhist practice in Sikkim cannot be successful. Therefore, this indestructible oath promises appropriate human behavior toward Kanchendzonga and his retinue in return for human benefit (Lha bstun).

In the colophon of the text positioned at the conclusion, it is mentioned that the *Nesol* was, very appropriately, recorded and edited at Nyamgatshal at the base of Kanchendzonga in 1641. Lhatsun left one final warning for readers, stating:

If this offering is not performed correctly, there will be poverty, sickness, war, fighting, disease, and all bad things. If people are unfaithful and disrespectful by killing birds

and animals, the spirits and protectors will feel agitated and there will be no peace in the place.⁷

This final admonition very clearly illustrates the behavior expected of the local inhabitants of Sikkim, and instructs readers that offerings alone are not enough. Instead, humans must behave appropriately, and be aware that their actions may disturb their non-human co-inhabitants of the place. They must demonstrate appropriate care and attention.

Different daily ritual practices reaffirm this care. In west Sikkim, *Nesol* is performed many times during the annual ritual calendar. When the major annual *Nesol* takes place at Pemayangtse, villagers send offerings of rice and millet beer to be offered at the monastery and at base camp, where lamas will go to give a special offering (*Balikci-Denjongpa*). Every tenth and twenty-fifth day of the lunar calendar, all of the monasteries and *mani lhakhang* (temples) in Sikkim also host a performance. *Nesol* is performed in domestic houses annually. In monasteries, the *kangsol lhakhang* holds daily *Nesol* rituals. Local Buddhist patrons (*sbyin bdag*) of Pemayangtse Monastery will give offerings to the *kangsol* lama (normally in the form of a bottle of alcohol, some rice and some money) whenever they have important events taking place in their lives, including for relatives undergoing health treatment, students undertaking exams, and when undertaking journeys. In these instances, patrons and practitioners hope for the care and support of Kanchendzonga.

They reciprocate this care in many ways. Aside from performance of the *Nesol*, in daily village life in Sindrang, a Lepcha and Bhutia village of 54 households and 282 residents (as of 2011), villagers adhere to very specific forms of etiquette around waste disposal to avoid ritual and material pollution (*sgrib*) of the landscape. Ritual pollution is created through daily activities that further perpetuate the cycle of rebirth, and include birth,

⁷ Lha btsun (184), translation my own.

illness, sexual activities, and death. This ritual pollution can create karmic obscurations for Buddhists that impact their spiritual, and at times physical, wellbeing. Only certain sites are appropriate to use as a toilet or to throw out trash, since inappropriate disposal of waste (which is regarded as a form of pollution) can agitate Kanchendzonga's local entourage, the *tsen* and *lu* (Skt. *naga*) of the village. Beyond the village, community members also see it as an important obligation to acknowledge the mountain before undertaking any major building activity. Mostly, this means performing *Nesol* as part of the consecration (*rab gnas*) beginning any project.

Since the 1980s, the landscape of the villages around Pemayangtse has been transformed by the infrastructure built to facilitate tourism in the region. Some of this infrastructure has brought benefits to the community. For example, in the late 1980s, water pipes were installed to pump water from the glaciers of Dzungri, above Ketchopelri Lake, to parts of west Sikkim that lacked readily available water sources. This provided residents of the villages in west Sikkim (particularly around Ketchopelri, Melli and Thingling) with access to water in their own homes.

But it also meant bringing unprecedented disruption to Ketchopelri, which is a sacred lake associated with the goddess Dolma. The contractor of the project, Yap Sonam Wangchuck Bhutia, was also a lama at Pemayangtse. His father, Sindrang Yap Gomchen Chewang Rinzin, who went on to become the Dorjee Lopen of Pemayangtse in 1995, periodically lived with him at Ketchopelri during construction. On a daily basis when he was present, Yap Gomchen Chewang Rinzin would perform *Nesol* at a makeshift shrine in order to acknowledge and show care for Kanchendzonga and other non-human residents who were affected by the construction. Yap Sonam Wangchuck remembers that Yap Gomchen saw this as essential for ensuring that the project was completed successfully, especially since work with water is associated with *lu*, and if *lu* are angered,

human illness (especially skin diseases and infections and forms of dysentery) can result. Since the water access project would bring great benefit to the human communities of west Sikkim, it was especially important to ensure consent from Kanchendzonga and his retinue by demonstrating care, respect, and being sure to maintain cleanliness and peace during the construction period. The daily *Nesol* evidently was effective, since the project was completed and the tanks that were installed are still used (as of 2021).

Healing (*Drak*) the Mountain, Healing the Community

The *Nesol* and a number of pilgrimage guidebooks represent Sikkim as a land with abundant medicinal plants (Lha btsun, Tsering). These plants continue to be gathered and used by physicians and healers from a number of different Sikkimese ethnic communities. Medicine made from herbs of Sikkim is administered using pills, ointments, and salves. As part of medical treatment, Balikci found in north Sikkim that ritual specialists including lamas and Lepcha ritual specialists such as *bongthing* often use materia medica from the hills, and invoke the hills and spirits of the land, in healing rituals (Balikci-Denjongpa, Balikci). In west Sikkim, a healing practice in the *Nesol* is *sang* (*bsang*), smoke offerings, incense, or fumigation.⁸ The *sang* ritual when added to the *Nesol* is termed *Riwo Sangchö* (*Ri bo sang mchod*, or *Mountain Smoke Offering*) (Bhutia 2021). In the *Riwo Sangchö*, all the deities and beings of the land are invoked and propitiated. The practitioner apologizes for wrongdoings and uses the smoke to purify the landscape and its inhabitants. These inhabitants are listed in the text:

This I offer to the gurus, *yidams*, *ḍākinīs*, *dharmapālas* and

⁸For more on *sang*, see Tan.

All the mandalas of the buddhas of the ten directions,
 To the local deities of this world, beings of the six realms
 and the guests to whom I owe karmic debts.
 And especially to those who would steal my life and de-
 plete my life force,
 To the malicious *jungpo* demons who inflict sick-
 ness and obstacles,
 Bad signs in dreams and all types of evil omens,
 The eight classes of negative spirits, the masters of magical
 illusions,
 And those to whom I owe karmic debts of food, place and
 wealth,
 To forces that bring obscuration and madness, to the
 shades of men and women dead.
 To all the spirits, *térangs*, ghouls and female ghosts!
 Now all my karmic debts are paid, burnt in the scarlet
 flames.
 Whatever each one desires, may the objects of their desires
 rain down. . . (Lhatsun, translated by Lotsawa House 2016)

What does the prayer mean by “karmic debts”? Here, we can see all the different beings of the realms of existence and how a practitioner is entangled with them through past lives as well as current life actions. The idea in the prayer is to acknowledge these entanglements, and particularly to make amends for any wrongdoing.

After making these amends, the practitioner declares aspirations for purification to promote healing:

May illness, harmful influence, obscurations and impurities be purified!

May this age of plague, famine and warfare be pacified!

May the attacks of invaders be repelled!

May the forces that create obstacles by inviting the spiritual teacher to leave this world be averted!

May inauspicious bad omens for the land of Tibet be averted!

May the planetary forces, nāgas and arrogant king-like spirits, who cut short the breath of life, be repelled!

May the eight great fears and sixteen lesser fears be overcome!

For me and all those around me, may all that is inauspicious be averted!

May the powers and strength of samaya-breakers and *gongpo* demons be averted!⁹

More recent commentaries on the *Riwo Sangchö* have emphasized the spiritual significance of the practice for clearing obstacles to one's own enlightenment (Taye). But in the section of the text included above, the connection between a practitioner's spiritual and physical wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around the practitioner is evident. While a number of concerns are evident within the text, here I will focus on the theme of

⁹ Lhatsun translated by Lotsawa House; emphasis my own.

healing, especially since it is also raised in the colophon to the *sang* offering included in the *Nesol*:

This is the sang from the Hidden Land of Sikkim (*Sbas
yul 'bras mo ljongs ki sang*)

*Which has the capacity to purify disease and obstacles.*¹⁰

Purification heals by cleansing the practitioner and their environment. In the *sang* text, the position of the sacred mountain as part of the environment is clear, since this offering appears at the end of a long overview of the mandala of the Hidden Land.

A vivid example of this connection was made clear in a disruptive landslide that took place in 2000 beneath Pelling, a prominent tourist destination in west Sikkim. Until the early 1990s, Pelling was a forested village, perched on the ridge below Pemayangtse Monastery, and linked to other places by a basic road. With the development of tourism in the West District, locals began to build large concrete hotels. In 2000 a landslide took place right beneath Hungri ridge, the landform that holds up the main road through the town. As local residents scrambled to repair the damage to the road and prevent further slippage, they also consulted one of Pelling's most revered lamas, Yangthang Rinpoche (1930-2016). Yangthang Rinpoche lived at one of the hotels in Pelling owned by his relatives, and was considered an incarnation of Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme, which afforded him a unique perspective on the Sikkimese landscape. Yangthang Rinpoche informed local residents that they had angered the *lu* with their building initiatives, and especially their placement of septic tanks to retain the human waste from the hotels. Additional waste produced by tourists had often been disposed of without consideration of location, he noted. For example, some hotels at the time were dumping plastic waste

¹⁰ Lha btsun (30), my translation and emphasis.

of drink bottles and chip packets into local streams. This waste was introducing pollution into the landscape, he said, and this pollution had agitated the nonhuman residents of the land.

Fortunately, Yangthang Rinpoche knew of a way to repair the relationships between human and nonhuman residents of Pelling. He prescribed the offering of vases (*bum pa*) filled with precious healing substances, along with performances of the *Riwo Sangchö*. The vases which were carefully filled with consecrated substances and consecrated before being buried at key points along Hungri ridge. These burials were accompanied by sang rituals to satiate the spirits, including Kanchendzonga. This healing is believed to be crucial for maintaining the physical and spiritual health of the environment, and by extension the people within it. Since the vases were installed in a project undertaken by lamas and laypeople, the ridgeline has remained stable. It is noteworthy that in 2020 and 2021, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, *Riwo Sangchö* prayers became very common due to the belief that the practice could assist in warding off the virus and promote wellbeing during periods of lockdown.

The use of *sang* to promote purification is central to the healing rituals, and also typical of how it is used in contemporary Sikkim. When beginning new projects that will involve disturbing the landscape, lamas use *sang* offerings in consecration activities to appease the local inhabitants of the land, especially *sadag* (*sa bdag*, lord of the land), *tsen* and *lu*. *Sang* is also used to repair the landscape following transgressions or wrongdoings. Examples of *sang* being used in this way are frequent, but here I will provide examples from responses to landslides, a common event during the heavy rain of Sikkim's monsoon months. In the course of massive infrastructure projects over the past two decades that have built new roads and widened existing ones, an unprecedented amount of concrete construction has been laid across Sikkim's middle hills (McDuie-Ra

and Chettri) to support tourism initiatives in the state. As a result, landslides have become increasingly frequent and disruptive to everyday life.

Protecting (*Srung*) the Residents, Protecting the Mountain

The pleasant and powerful aroma of *sang* is just one part of *Nesol* rituals performed in Sikkim. As mentioned above, although these *Nesol* can be offered at any time throughout the year, one of the most important *Nesol* performances take place on an annual basis during Pang Lhabsol (*Dpang lha gsol*). Pang Lhabsol has been written about extensively for its significance as an enactment of Sikkimese nationalism. This distinctive dance carried out by laymen in warrior garb and by lamas dressed in masks representing Kanchendzonga and Yabdud, is considered to have originally been choreographed by the third king of Sikkim, Chador Namgyal, in 1700 CE. It commemorates the oath of “blood brotherhood” sworn between Lepcha chief Thekon Tek and Bhutia leader Khye Bumsa in the thirteenth century, when Bhutias first arrived in Sikkim.

Its annual reenactment between the twelfth and fifteenth days of the seventh month in the Tibetan lunar calendar has been seen in recent years as a reenactment of a central moment in Sikkimese nationalism, interpreted both as representative of Sikkimese identity (Balikci-Denjongpa), and as vulnerable to co-option by the Indian state to promote national interests and state tourism (Vandenhelsken). *Pang Lhabsol* was historically performed throughout Sikkim in all of its major monasteries, with the pinnacle of the ritual, a dance of warriors (Pangtoed Cham), taking place at the royal monastery at the Palace, Tsuklhakhang.¹¹

¹¹ In the early 1990s, the current king of Sikkim, Wangchuck Namgyal, forbade the dance for several years. This decision led the lamas of Pemayangtse to host the dance at the

Aside from invoking Kanchendzonga as a witness (Balikci-Denjongpa), the performance of *Pang Lhabsol* portrays him as a protector of humans and nonhumans present in his domain, the Sikkimese landscape. This theme of human-environmental relationships was seen by lamas I spoke to as more important than human politics. The meaning of the term *Pang Lhabsol* has been debated by Sikkimese scholars for the past thirty years. Pang can be spelt in two ways: as *dpang*, translated as “witness”; or as *spang*, which some local scholars have interpreted as “grass.” The latter spelling is understood to refer to all of the vegetation of Sikkim, and the ritual has been thereby seen as an offering to the mountain and the landscape it is connected with.

The most important part of the entire performance takes place in the main shrine of the monastery on the first of a four-day ritual, in the morning, when a senior lama recites the *Zhelen (zhal lan)*.¹² In this ritual text, all the supernatural forces of the landscape are invoked and given offerings, including the guardians of the four directions. Dzonga Taktse (an alternative name of Kanchendzonga) is the guardian of the north. The purpose of the *Zhelen* recitation is directly addressed during its performance, where the lama states,

We, all the inhabitants of this holy land

Apologize in your presence for all

monastery instead, and as discussed by Vandenhelsken, Rabong Gompa also started its own festival in the 1980s. In the 2010s the dance began to be performed at the Palace again, but the dances elsewhere in Sikkim also continue as well.

¹² Dokhampa and Balikci-Denjongpa both use the term *Kelen*. This is a non-honorific rendering of *Zhelen*. In my experience, lamas in west Sikkim always use the term *Zhelen*, to show respect to the deities invoked in the ritual. This is also representative of the west Sikkimese Bhutia language preference to use the honorific register in speech, especially relating to religious matters.

Deeds done against your restricted line

By destroying plants and disturbing streams

And polluting rivers and blasting rocks etc. (Dokhampa 3)

Following this apology for interfering with the landscape, the lama requests the deities that the wishes of the people to be fulfilled, free from “obstacles, diseases, fear of famine and age of war,” for wealth and “good harvest and timely rainfall,” and importantly, for protection from “war, [and] illness to man and animals” (Dokhampa 3).

This request for protection indicates another of the cardinal roles that Kanchendzonga plays for the human inhabitants of Sikkim: Kanchendzonga as a wrathful, military and secular deity in both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist cosmology (Balikci-Denjongpa).¹³ The recognition of this wrathful aspect of Kanchendzonga’s activity relates back to the conflicts and wars that were fought to form modern Sikkim’s communities and territory. The concerns about fertility and health also exemplify the interconnectedness of Kanchendzonga’s responsibilities: part of the way he can protect the people of Sikkim is by providing the material conditions for human flourishing, such as good harvests and steady rainfall, as well as relief from war and illness.

This protector aspect continues as a theme in the ritual following the Zhelen on the final day of the ritual enactment. The lamas dressed as Kanchendzonga and Yabdud complete a circle around the shrines in the monastery, and then outside around a dance ring. They take a seat, and at this point, the lay dancers begin their distinctive war dance, brandishing shields and swords, while performing the prayer (Bhutia: *Bedh*) to Kanchendzonga’s manifestation as the Dabla (*dgra lha*), or War-God. In the

¹³ The roles that mountain deities play as protectors of their communities are further discussed in Huber and Blondeau.

prayer, Kanchendzonga is recognized as a powerful guardian and addressed as the “fearless hero of blood drinkers.” The Champay, or leader of the dancers, calls out to Kanchendzonga, stating,

You are the guardian of the holy land Denzong [ie. Sikkim]

Head of the entire haughty [entourage of] Gods and Demons,

You are the guardian of the five treasures

Oh Dzonga Taktsi! You are our war deity

May the king be victorious over all! (Dokhampa 4)

As the prayer continues, the dancers cheer and raise their swords. Since the nineteenth century, a gun has been fired to further exemplify military force. Then the dancer performing as Kanchendzonga circles around the ritual space outside of the monastery. This circular dance is undertaken to “defeat all the evil forces” before he moves back inside the monastery, and the final rituals take place (Dokhampa 1989).

In Pang Lhabsol, the human inhabitants of Sikkim are represented by the dancers performing the Pangtoed cham to honor Kanchendzonga and his attendant deities. But beyond the ritual, humans have reciprocated Kanchendzonga’s protection against war and poverty. In recent years, this protection has been extended to a concern for protecting the environment in different ways. A vivid example of such concern is the possibility of opening Kanchendzonga for climbing expeditions in 2019, the debate noted at the beginning of this paper.

The Himalayas have long been a popular site for climbing enthusiasts, but in recent years there has been more critical consideration of how to acknowledge local perspectives of the mountains as deities. In many parts of the Himalayas, climbing and especially standing on top of the

peak is regarded as a fundamentally disrespectful action by Hindu and Buddhist communities: in effect, placing a person's feet on another's head demeans the latter. However, banning climbing would lead to loss of revenue for local residents who are crucial participants as guides and porters in mountaineering businesses.

Recent accidents and images of queues, and the disappearance of glaciers on Jomo Lungma, have led to lively public discussions related to the ethics of mountaineering in the region.¹⁴ Interestingly, these discussions have longer histories in Sikkim, where the kings have long thwarted the ambitions of mountaineers. A Swiss team first attempted to climb Kanchendzonga in 1905, but the expedition ended when a large avalanche killed members of the party (Side 89). The inauspicious beginning contributed to Kanchendzonga's reputation as especially difficult. In 1899, British mountaineer Douglas Freshfield remarked that "the whole face of the mountain might be imagined to have been constructed by the Demon of Kanchenjanga for the express purpose of defence against human assault, so skilfully [sic] is each comparatively weak spot raked by ice and snow batteries" (Band 207).¹⁵ Kanchendzonga was eventually scaled in 1955 by a British expedition, led by Joe Brown and George Band. Band recalled that the Dewan (Prime Minister) gave them permission on behalf of the king, Tashi Namgyal (1893-1963), under the agreement that they were "not to go beyond the point on the mountain at which we were assured of a route to the top, and not, however high our reconnaissance might take us, to desecrate the immediate neighbourhood of the summit" (Band 212). This

¹⁴A provocative resource for considering these issues is the documentary *Sherpa*, made by filmmaker Jennifer Peedom. Anthropologist Pasang Sherpa provides a thoughtful review of the film (see *Sherpa*).

¹⁵ Kanchendzonga continued to be considered an especially challenging mountain for climbers. Kumari discusses the death of two climbers in 2019 as an example.

“neighborhood” has continued to be interpreted as ten meters from the top, as noted by Kunzang Gyatso in 2019.

The debates over summiting Kanchendzonga continued even after Sikkim became part of India in 1975. In 2000, India also opened a number of peaks to expeditions as part of a broader tourism promotion initiative. An Austrian team paid US\$20,000 to climb the mountain, but after local protests over the state “selling out” to tourists, they had to promise to turn back ten meters from the summit. Ultimately, they did not make it that far, as a snowstorm forced them to turn back at 6,000 meters (Harding). Local Buddhist groups saw this as natural justice and an intervention on the part of Kanchendzonga, and Sikkim banned expeditions from then on. Media coverage represented local protectors as “incensed by what they regard as the desecration of the mountain by godless foreigners” (Harding).

Popular misrepresentation of the relationship between Kanchendzonga and the human communities of Sikkim has continued to abound. While Kanchendzonga is seen generally as sacred, how this sacredness is constituted has changed over time. In 2000 and again in 2019, local protectors invoked the authority of secular state institutions, and in particular, the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, as the reason why climbers should not be allowed to carry out expeditions on Kanchendzonga.¹⁶ Along with concern about “local religious sentiments,” this reference to state power was enough to lead to a quick change in decision on the part of the Central Government. After the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, the authority responsible for regulating mountain climbing in India, declared on August 28, 2019 that they would not issue any permits for scaling Kanchenjunga, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a new

¹⁶ See news articles by Chakrabarti and Hasnat.

circular, withdrawing fourteen additional mountains, including Kanchendzonga and Kanchendzonga South, from the list approved for climbing expeditions.

This turnaround was seen as a victory for Sikkim's human and nonhuman inhabitants. While the reasons why the mountain was sacred to them varied, all were in agreement that Kanchendzonga needed to be protected from the detrimental impact of mountain tourism. In this way, the people of Sikkim—from across ethnic and religious communities—have reciprocated the favors they have historically received from the mountain.

Conclusion

In recent years, the impact of higher temperatures and other manifestations of climate and ecological change have become more pronounced in Sikkim. In 2019, my 95-year-old father said to me with concern that “the mountains are becoming black” as he had noticed that the glaciers have been receding. He believed that the change was not only related to climate change, but also due to human actions, and especially, a decline in morality evidenced by rapacious development initiatives leading to environmental harm.

As in many public discussions around environmental politics in Sikkim, recent Indian government-led initiatives, such as the installation of mega-dams along Sikkim's rivers, have been connected with disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, and animal attacks; these, in turn, are interpreted as manifestations of the anger of the nonhuman, transdimensional residents of Sikkim (Gergan). As Gagné noted in Ladakh, these interpretations demonstrate the way that Sikkimese Buddhist communities

naturally connect environmental events with human behavior. Environmental history and human history are closely intertwined in Sikkim, and rituals and traditions connected to the propitiation of Mount Kanchendzonga are especially salient for examining changes taking place in Sikkimese society and religion. In the Sikkimese case, Kanchendzonga is both a witness to, and agent of, these changes.¹⁷ Although the Himalayas are acknowledged as the “Third Pole,” studying the mountains without consideration of diverse local histories and interpretations of agency can lead to a fragmentation of “natural, social and cultural worlds” (Cruikshank 4), as the dimension of relatedness is erased.

In his study of Andean religion, Michael Sallnow traced how pilgrimages to Mount Sinakara to collect ice have been modified in response to the retreat of glaciers in the twentieth century (Sallnow). Rituals and practices related to Kanchendzonga are also undergoing rapid change as demonstrated by anthropological studies such as those by Balikci-Denjongpa, Vandenhelsken, and Ahmed. In this article, I have added another layer to understanding how the mountain is conceptualized, by considering how rituals have created a pedagogy that instructs inhabitants of Sikkim in how to live with the mountain by exhibiting forms of care, healing and protection. This advice on relationality has had an impact on daily life and is mediated through regular rituals according to the festival calendar. But these expressions of human-environment ethics do not neatly map onto sustainability initiatives, as they focus on connecting the mountain and human inhabitants through oaths backed by the former’s threats of punitive violence and illness.

¹⁷ My thanks to Mabel Gergan for raising the generative nature of Kanchendzonga’s role as a witness, and to Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, Trine Brox, and Charisma Lepcha for discussing these points with me.

Despite this, the ethics outlined in the *Nesol* and in other mountain propitiation practices have been adapted for use as resources for contemporary environmental initiatives across religious and ethnic communities. Activists have taken inspiration from *Nesol* texts, Pang Lhabsol, and other mountain propitiation rituals, to resist the implementation of mega-dams and other activities that have led to environmental damage in Sikkim. Additionally, these traditions have been cited by environmental scientists and cultural heritage specialists as productive resources for promoting sustainability (Wagh; Ramakrishnan).

These acknowledgements of the continued relevance of rituals related to Kanchendzonga highlight how the history of Treasure revelation as legendary history also attends to the present, and can be a cultural force, most importantly, for the future. Guru Rinpoche is said to have believed that Treasure texts needed to be reinterpreted for the times in which people found them. In the case of Kanchendzonga rituals, this has become especially salient, as new generations of Sikkimese communities, Buddhist and otherwise, in west Sikkim and other parts of the state, rediscover and reinterpret them, and find new ways to live and “become-with” the environment and its interconnected inhabitants (Harraway). Venturing beyond static colonial stereotypes of “backward nature-loving religions,” the propitiation of the mountain is not a closed process. It remains open and dynamic, and constantly generative of new ways for ensuring that human and nonhuman residents can live and flourish together in Sikkim.

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