

Taming of supernatural entities and animal sacrifice. The synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and local shamanistic traditions in Northern Sikkim (India)

*Dompter des entités surnaturelles et sacrifier des animaux. La synthèse entre
bouddhisme tibétain et chamanisme local dans le nord du Sikkim (Inde)*

Marlene Erschbamer



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/3915>

DOI: 10.4000/emscat.3915

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Centre d'Etudes Mongoles & Sibériennes / École Pratique des Hautes Études

Electronic reference

Marlene Erschbamer, « Taming of supernatural entities and animal sacrifice. The synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and local shamanistic traditions in Northern Sikkim (India) », *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 50 | 2019, Online since 04 March 2019, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/3915> ; DOI : 10.4000/emscat.3915

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Dompter des entités surnaturelles et sacrifier des animaux. La synthèse entre bouddhisme tibétain et chamanisme local dans le nord du Sikkim (Inde)

Marlene Erschbamer

This study is part of a postdoctoral research project entitled “Glorious Riceland, gateway to Tibet. Northern Sikkim in Tibetan and Western travel reports”. Sponsored by the Bavarian Gender Equality Grant (BGF) and the women’s representative (Frauenbeauftragte), LMU Munich, Germany. Some parts of this paper were presented at the workshop “Evolving through Context” held at LMU Munich in March 2017. I am grateful to the organisers and the participants of the workshop as I benefitted from a fruitful exchange with them while writing this article.

The subject of animal sacrifice (*srog dbugs btang shed*) is somewhat taboo and villagers are ashamed of having to resort to this practice when someone is seriously ill. For this reason, I was first told that animal sacrifice was a thing of the past until I stumbled unknowingly on a ritual where a goat had just been killed (Balikci 2008, p. 132).

Introduction

- 1 The issue of animal sacrifice – the “red offering” (*dmar mchod*) performed in some Buddhist communities across the Tibetan cultural area in the Himalaya – has received considerable critical attention. Surveys such as that conducted by Torri (2016) have shown that, according to common belief, local deities prefer red offerings such as blood and meat¹. In Sikkim – a former Buddhist kingdom and now an Indian state in the southern foothills of the Himalaya – nearly every mountain, hilltop, lake and river is said to be populated with supernatural beings. They play an important role in daily life, and need to be worshipped. Some of these entities were tamed and converted to Buddhism by Tibetan masters (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002 and Balikci 2008, p. 85). However, of course the taming of supernatural entities has not only been a feature undertaken by Buddhist masters who came to this region, but is also an important task of village religion itself. Village people often consult a Buddhist master and a shamanic expert simultaneously. As Balikci notes: “The Sikkimese shamans are the ritual specialists in charge of keeping good relations with the households’ and the lineages’ ancestral gods” (Balikci 2008, p. 145). Among the Lhopa of Sikkim, the pawo (*dpa’ bo*) is a male and the nejum (*rnal ’byor ma*) a female shaman. Both maintain good relations with the ancestors and the lineage protectors and get possessed, while the *bongthing*, who is responsible for good relations with supernatural entities of the locality, never gets possessed (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, p. 7-8, 2014, p. 52, and Balikci 2008, pp. 9-17, 145-169). The Lepcha have two different kinds of ritual specialists, the *bongthing*, who is always male, uses medical plants and performs rituals but is no medium, and the *mun*, a spirit medium that can be male or female (Bentley 2009-2010, p. 136²). All of them, Buddhist village lamas and shamanic experts, conduct their rituals, although these vary in practice: whereas the Buddhist master may burn incense and read Buddhist texts, a shaman may sacrifice animals to get rid of a supernatural entity (Arora 2006a, p. 64, Gorer 1967, pp. 182-187, 206-209, 230-234, and Kotturan 1983, pp. 137-138). It has been suggested that village religion can be understood as “creative interaction”, whereby none of the rituals performed are exclusively Buddhist or shamanistic (Balikci 2008, p. 140). Shamans and Buddhist masters perform their rituals for similar purposes, although certain facets of the shamanic practice – such as animal sacrifice – are considered improper by Buddhist leaders. Nonetheless, villagers have found their own way to respect and deal with both local shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist practices.
- 2 The sacrificing of animals was – and partially still is – practised as part of rituals: in order to show loyalty and to worship, calm or tame supernatural beings. Ever since Buddhism was introduced to Sikkim during the 17th century, these practices caused a kind of dilemma, with people being aware that taking a sentient being’s life contradicts Buddhist principles. As Letizia argues on the diffusion of Buddhism among some ethnic groups of Nepal: “The shift to Buddhism was not as a result of a shift in beliefs; at the beginning, it was a nominal and collective one [...]” (Letizia 2014, p. 297). Similarly, the diffusion of Buddhism in Sikkim is not a complete shift from one to another belief. The process of “incorporation of ‘tribal’ populations [...] into major cultural patterns of Tibetan” has been described as Tibetanisation by Samuel (2017). Although Buddhist kings ruled over Sikkim and different Buddhist monasteries were established, the transformation of Sikkim into a completely Buddhist place remains an ongoing process. This might be a

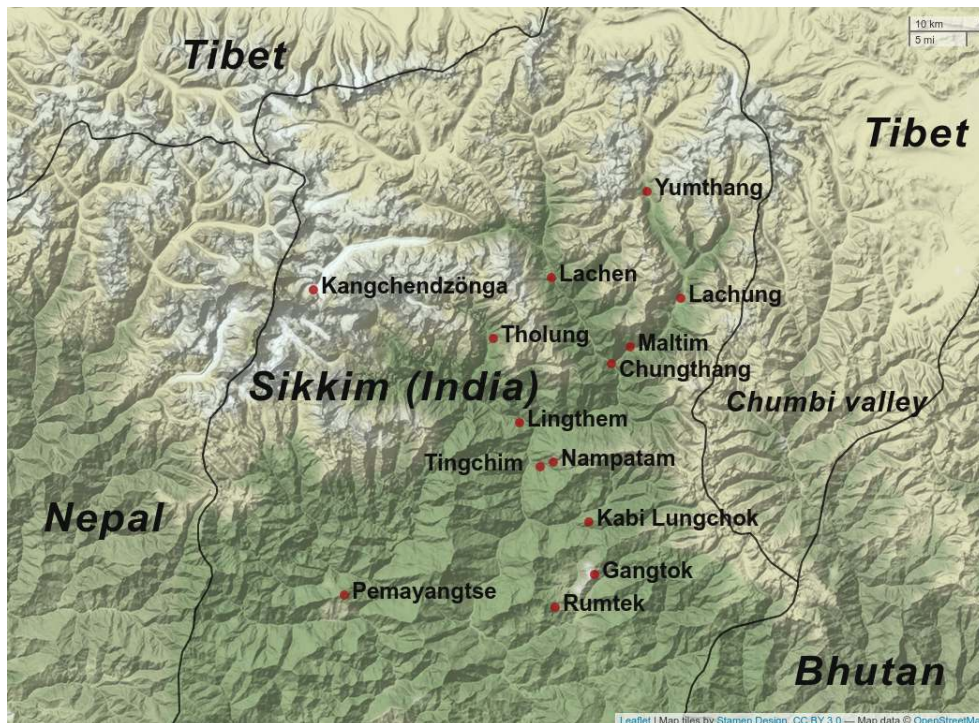
reason why ancient rituals have survived in North Sikkim, despite being gradually influenced by Buddhism³.

- 3 Northern Sikkim is mainly inhabited by people of Tibetan origin and Lepcha, who are the original inhabitants of Sikkim. Most Lepcha live in a reserve called Dzongu, although settlements of the Lepcha can also be found outside: for instance, at Chungthang in North Sikkim, at Kalimpong in West Bengal, in the Ilam district of Nepal and in Western Bhutan. They once followed a shamanistic tradition in which animal sacrifice was part of religious rituals, but became gradually influenced by Buddhist thought from the Tibetan settlers and Tibetan masters visiting this area. Most of the Lepcha are Buddhists, while some are Christians, and they practise the ancient Lepcha rituals whenever required. The remote valleys of Lachen and Lachung in the very North of Sikkim are mainly populated by descendants from Tibetan settlers, who also practise a local shamanic tradition along with Tibetan Buddhism⁴. Lamas and shamanic experts are living side by side, they co-exist and partake in village activities. Most village lamas lead non-celibate lives and stay in their village homes rather than in monasteries. As Balikci reminds: “Celibate monasteries never found fertile grounds in Sikkim” (Balikci 2008, p. 60).
- 4 As will be seen below, animal sacrifices – which are part of ancient rites – sometimes create problems. On the one hand, these practices are taken seriously as they are a heritage from the forefathers and thus part of one’s own tradition and identity. As Letizia points out: “Religions are a major factor of belonging and globalization, crucial for tying people together and shaping a sense of communality among believers, thereby contributing to the emergence of a global imagination [...]” (Letizia 2014, p. 287). Practising the old traditions signifies remembering one’s own roots and thus it is a sign of belonging to a certain group or community. On the other hand, many people in Northern Sikkim define themselves as Buddhists, whereby the principle of not killing is an important part of Buddhist thought. However, ignoring ancient practices does not seem to be an option for them. I argue that this is not to be interpreted as a contradiction *per se*, but rather as a sign of an ambivalent relationship between religious systems that are strongly interconnected, a kind of confrontation between local practice and Buddhist theory, where Buddhist theory is represented by Tibetan masters who visited Sikkim and local practice in local Sikkimese communities that practice their ancient rites along with Buddhist elements and strongly believe in their efficacy.
- 5 Different field studies have been carried out among the Lepcha of North Sikkim during the course of which the taming of supernatural entities and the practice of animal sacrifice were described. Furthermore, Balikci carried out some detailed fieldwork among the Lhopo in the North Sikkimese village of Tingchim and thus presented the first Lhopo village ethnography since the union of Sikkim with India in 1975. She was mainly interested in village religion and came to the conclusion that both Buddhist masters and shamans share a shamanic worldview and that rituals are carried out jointly. The same has been observed within Lepcha communities. Both shamans and Buddhist masters interact and co-exist in daily village life (Balikci 2008, Bentley 2007, 2014, Gorer 1967, Morris 1938, and Siiger 1967⁵).
- 6 Whereas all such studies focus on the original inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepcha and the Lhopo, and present their contact and experience with Buddhism, the focus of the present study lies on Tibetan masters who travelled to North Sikkim and highly criticised practices such as animal sacrifice. Thus the aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between Tibetan masters and local Sikkimese communities through

examples of encounters that took place in Northern Sikkim during the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries.

- 7 This paper is divided into two major sections, the first of which introduces Tibetan Buddhist masters who travelled to North Sikkim and tried to prohibit the practice of animal sacrifice to save the lives of sentient beings. While local Buddhists, laypeople and village lamas, had found their own way to deal with these ancient rites, which theoretically contradict Buddhist principles, Tibetan masters from outside these communities were irritated by the practices and made it their personal task to restrict or ban them. The second section of this paper will examine different occasions during which animal sacrifices come into play within a Buddhist community in the Himalaya: to show loyalty or tame supernatural entities. Each of these occasions are important within a Himalayan community, wherein the offering of a life underlines the significance of the respective performance. This part of the study aims to gain insights into the importance assigned to these rituals regarding the relationship of Tibetan masters and local Sikkimese communities, and consequently regarding the confrontation of Buddhist theory and local practices.

Figure 1. Map of places mentioned in paper, 2017



Map created by author using country borders from CIA World DataBank II, tiles from Stamen (terrain background), and coordinates of locations from own research.

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Tibetan masters and restrictions on animal sacrifice in North Sikkim

- 8 According to mythological accounts, during the 8th century, the Indian Buddhist master Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet by the Tibetan emperor Khri Srong lde btsan as

demonical forces hindered the establishment of Buddhism as a state religion. He pacified and converted some of these entities, which were part of the pre-reformed Bon belief⁶, whereby consequently Buddhism was introduced. In this context, the relationship between a lama-shaman rivalry and animal sacrifice has been investigated (Dowman 1996, pp. 104-105, Mumford 1989, pp. 31-32). Principles of the pre-reformed Bon regime – for example, the practice of animal sacrifices – clashed with those of the newly-established Buddhism. As Torri observes: “The original domestication of territorial gods and spirits operated by Padmasambhava corresponds to their cooptation into the Buddhist sphere, while their preference for blood is considered a step back towards the supposed darkness of pre-Buddhist times” (Torri 2016, p. 16). As Padmasambhava triumphed over the ancient traditions and thus helped to introduce Buddhism in Tibet, some of the pre-reformed Bon po were said to have exiled to marginal regions; for example, to Nepal and Mongolia.

Figure 2. Padmasambhava, 2010, Namchi (South Sikkim)



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- 9 According to sources, during the course of his subsequent travels, Padmasambhava visited present-day Sikkim, where he blessed numerous places and prepared the land for the Buddhist doctrine, which was finally disseminated during the 17th century. As Padmasambhava reached present-day Sikkim, locals were practising animal sacrifice: “Non-Buddhists, followers of ancient local traditions (*bon*), carried out animal sacrifice. [They] did not listen”. Again, Padmasambhava criticised certain prevalent practices that contravene Buddhist principles. Following this narrative, it is believed that Padmasambhava was probably the first Buddhist master who tried to prevent people from performing local practices such as animal sacrifice in Sikkim.

- 10 Previous research has indicated that the prohibition of animal sacrifices not only clashes with the Buddhist principle of not killing, but can also be regarded – in the words of Samuel (2017) – as a “sign of Tibetan Buddhist dominance over local pre-Buddhist deity cults”. Indeed, one way to legitimate a new religious system was to contest the already-present one. The theme of a contest between a highly-accomplished Buddhist master and a shaman or high-ranking person belonging to another religious group is a common topic in Tibetan Buddhism⁸. According to a local myth, a magical contest took place in North Sikkim during the 8th century. The two main protagonists were Padmasambhava, who prepared present-day Sikkim for the dissemination of Buddhism, and a Lepcha, a member of the original inhabitants of Sikkim. Even though the Lepcha won the competition, Padmasambhava showed his powers with several prophecies. Scared by his powers, the locals began following him. Ever since, Buddhism and the Lepcha belief have co-existed and Buddhist masters and shamans have been practising side by side. Moreover, a synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism has developed in Northern Sikkim. Such a confrontation of magical powers can be read metaphorically, with two religious systems fighting to be the superior one (Torri 2013, pp. 125-129). This is certainly true in the case of Buddhist masters fighting shamans, where – for example – the Buddhist principle of not killing clashes with ancient traditions demanding animal sacrifices.
- 11 Of course, the suggestion that animal sacrifice is a point of tension between local shamanic and Buddhistic aspects and that this balance is upset from time to time by the arrival of charismatic Tibetan masters who preach a prohibition on animal sacrifice is not new. Surveys such as that conducted by Samuel (2017) have shown that especially in marginal areas village shamans and Buddhist masters can be understood as being part of competing religious systems. In this context, Samuel refers to Northern Nepal and Mongolia as regions where members of the pre-reformed Bon regime had gone into exile after the introduction of Buddhism as state religion in Tibet during the 8th century. Nonetheless, there are still additional marginal areas that are not part of Tibet itself but rather the Tibetan Cultural Area, areas surrounding Tibet that were once influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. In these marginal areas, one can observe similar structures, with Sikkim being one of these marginal areas. What follows is an account of different Tibetan masters who tried to restrict or prohibit the killing and sacrificing of animals in Sikkim at different points in time.

Account of a great Perfect One in Sikkim

- 12 Soon after the enthronement of the first Buddhist ruler (*chos rgyal*) of Sikkim, the great Perfect One (*grub thob chen po*) dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (1601-1687) travelled to Sikkim⁹. dKon mchog rgyal mtshan was born in sKyid grong in southwest Tibet and became an important master of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud tradition¹⁰. Before arriving in Sikkim, dKon mchog rgyal mtshan had concentrated his activities in Bhutan. However, due to some disagreements, he had to leave Bhutan¹¹. Subsequently he travelled to Sikkim, a place that he described as being a land of darkness, where people showed harsh behaviour and where animals were killed¹².

Figure 3



Left: dKon mchog rgyal mtshan depicted on his hagiography, 2011, Dharmasala. Right: statue of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan in a 'Ba' ra ba monastery, 2014, Tsangek monastery (Sikkim).

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- 13 dKon mchog rgyal mtshan helped locals by providing infrastructure: he was responsible for the construction of bridges and the reparation of roads. In this way, he also benefitted traders and pilgrims. Furthermore, he banned killing animals and thus rescued many fish and wild animals (Erschbamer 2011, p. 45). Several decades later, another Tibetan master travelled to Sikkim and provided infrastructure for locals and rescued animals.

Account of a care-free yogin in North Sikkim

- 14 bSod noms chos 'dzin was a so-called "care-free yogin" (*bya btang*). In 1724, he travelled to Lachung, Chungthang and Lachen in North Sikkim to follow in the footsteps of his teacher bSod noms bstan 'dzin dbang po (1639-1694¹³). Among other things, he was responsible for providing infrastructure to the locals: "In Sikkim, [bSod noms chos 'dzin] built village prayer halls, roads, and bridges at [the places] rTse mo [rin chen thang, i.e. Chungthang], Lachen, and Lachung¹⁴".
- 15 A message was sent to Lachung that bSod noms chos 'dzin was on his way there. He was invited by followers of the ancient tradition – referred to here as Bon – and the rNying ma tradition¹⁵. He arrived at Lachung on the fifth day of the eighth Tibetan month. During the day of new moon, a member of the local authorities visited bSod noms chos 'dzin and asked for a purification and a libation ritual as they had difficulties with the water mill. After four days, three stone workers (*rdo bzo*; in the text *rdo gzo*), two carpenters (*shing bzo*; in the text *shing gzo*), along with male and female workers of all kinds could complete their work without hindrance. As a life empowerment was strongly required for the people of Lachung, bSod noms chos 'dzin provided the villagers with this. The workers were all Lhopo and – as was customary – they wanted to kill many animals for their feast.

All the workers were Lhopo who, for a long time, relied on [practices] according to the following example: "We need some meat. Let's slaughter [some] animals!", they

said. As virtuous and evil deeds were mingled, I [i.e., bSod nams chos 'dzin, replied]: "Don't do [that]. By all means, if [you] should [do that], I am going to kill myself!" After that the feast gathering settled decisively, I rejoiced. The lives of many animals, such as female and male yaks, cows, oxen, goats, sheep, and birds, could be saved¹⁶.

- 16 As shown in the above described travel accounts, Tibetan masters who visited Sikkim, where animal sacrifices were part of the lived culture, intended to rescue as many animals as possible. Whereas dKon mchog rgyal mtshan issued a ban on killing wild animals, bSod nams chos 'dzin prevented the slaughter of many animals for a feast. Additionally, both masters helped locals by providing infrastructure. According to the anthropologist Samuel, it was rather typical for Buddhist masters to build bridges and save the lives of animals:

Bridge-building is not as unusual an activity for a Tibetan lama as it might seem at first sight. The biographies of many Tibetan lamas recount their role in promoting public works of various kinds, mediating disputes, setting aside game-reserves to protect animals, and the like, and these were evidently part of the role of the lama, especially in a small village *gompa* rather than a large monastic center. (Samuel 1993, p. 518)

- 17 The two Tibetan masters discussed above offer a good example for conducting activities for the welfare of sentient beings, both humans and animals. Nevertheless, Balikci (2008, pp. 132-133) states that "[t]he act of taking life is an important transgression of Buddhist principles and the need for the offering in *bon* rituals against its consequence according to Buddhism presents a difficult dilemma for some villagers". This might be one reason why these charismatic Buddhist masters were not successful in a long run. As will emerge below, their attempts to prohibit animal sacrifice only lasted for a short time.

More recent attempts to restrict animal sacrifice

- 18 Even centuries later, Buddhist masters continued to preach a prohibition on animal sacrifice. Discussions are still conducted on whether to practise or to abandon traditional rites, in this case the "red offerings" or, in other words, animal sacrifices. This can be understood as an indication of topicality concerning animal sacrifice in local Sikkimese communities and their religious life.
- 19 The third Lachen Gomchen (La chen sgom chen, 1867-1947), for example, a native from North Sikkim, was a local Buddhist leader who criticised practices like animal sacrifice. He studied under renowned masters in Tibet and, subsequently, spread his teachings in Northern Sikkim at the beginning of the 20th century (Balikci 2008, pp. 56-59¹⁷).
- 20 However, such confrontations of Buddhist principles and local shamanistic rites often coincide with the arrival of charismatic Buddhist leaders from Tibet, whose arrival caused a wave of Tibetanisation. From the 1950s onwards, many renowned Tibetan masters left their monasteries in Tibet and sought asylum, amongst other places, in Sikkim. Their arrival and their activities in Sikkim can be seen as one big wave of Tibetanisation. A well-known example is the 16th Karma pa (1924-1981) and his attempts to stop animal sacrifice in Sikkim. In the 1960s, villagers from the North Sikkimese place Tingchim asked the 16th Karma pa for help, since many people were dying from an epidemic. He found out that people still sacrificed animals and he replaced this practice with a more peaceful one. Up to 60 oxen were sacrificed each year before the 16th Karma pa tried to restrict this practice. Due to the influence of the Karma pa, people from Tingchim abandoned animal

sacrifice for about a decade, although eventually they secretly started the practice again. Since then, “only” goats and chickens are sacrificed during rituals; for example, to heal severely ill people (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, p. 11, n. 18¹⁸). Also among the Lepcha, animal sacrifice was – and partially still is – part of their rituals, especially to avert diseases (Siiger 1967, pp. 143-147). As shown by Bentley (2007, p. 62), spiritual leaders such as the sixteenth Karma pa “have targeted aspects of traditional Lepcha beliefs, such as animal sacrifices, and have tried to eradicate them”. Bentley elaborates that animal sacrifices are still practised in the Lepcha villages of Nampatan and Lingthem, “even though there is an awareness that this contradicts Buddhist beliefs¹⁹”. The return to traditional practices as a sign of belonging to a certain group or community seems to be more important than the knowledge that these practices are contrary to Buddhism, which is also followed.

- 21 Interestingly, these examples support the theory that animal sacrifice is an example of the confrontation of theory and practice, of Tibetan masters and local communities, and thus they give insight into the relevance of Buddhist ethics in Sikkimese communities. Ancient traditions require animal sacrifices and as these traditions and practices are a factor of belonging, they are not given up entirely, regardless what attempts may be made. Buddhist masters who visited Sikkim criticised these practices and tried to convince people to abstain from those performances, although in the long run they were unsuccessful. Many Sikkimese call themselves Buddhist but hold on to the shamanistic rituals that are of great value for them as they believe in their effectiveness. Therefore, elements of Tibetan Buddhism and ancient local rites are strongly interconnected and are not interpreted as a contradiction by local communities. These findings further support the idea that the shift to Buddhism is not to be understood as a complete shift in belief and the Tibetanisation of certain Himalayan regions is still an ongoing process. Hence, village practice can be understood as an inventive intersection and interaction between Tibetan Buddhism and local rites.
- 22 In this section, it has been shown how different Buddhist masters have tried to prohibit the practice of animal sacrifice over the course of many centuries. They preached Buddhist principles although in the long run they were unsuccessful in convincing locals to abandon the ancient practices as a whole. The section that follows moves on to consider different circumstances in which the sacrifice of animals was and partially still is performed in local Sikkimese communities.

Rituals requiring animal sacrifice

- 23 The practice of sacrificing animals was and partially still is an important cultic element. For instance, during the Vedic period in India, animals were offered to the gods through fire for the purpose of welfare and protection (Michaels 2016, pp. 231-310). However, in Buddhism animal sacrifice and thus the Buddhist principle of not killing clashes with ancient local traditions, with animal sacrifice being part of the living culture.
- 24 The Tibetan rNying ma master Rig 'dzin gar gyi dbang phyug (1858-1930) composed a text on animal sacrifice in which he explained that such practices – which he called bad customs (*srol ngan*) – are wrong, harm oneself and others, and contradict the teachings of Buddha (*Thar med dmyal ba'i gting rdo srog gcod mchod sbyin gyi nyes dmigs*, 1b.2-2a.1²⁰). Ngag dbang dpal bzang (1879-1940) – who composed a text on preventing violence (*'tshé 'gog*) – mentioned animal sacrifice (*dmar chog*) and the offering of flesh and blood (*sha khrag mchod*) as something that can never be performed in accordance with the authoritative

scriptures (*Tshe ba chos su 'dzin pa'i lam srol 'gogs byed thub pa'i dgongs rgyan*, pp. 379-386²¹). At this point, it is important to note that in Tibetan Buddhist belief, highly-realised individuals may use flesh and are even capable of transforming it into something pure. However, the meat had to be from animals that died of natural causes and were not killed, as illustrated in the following example, from the text *Dus 'khor 'grel pa dri ma med pa'i 'od*:

“Concerning flesh which serves as experience for yogis, [this is] flesh from [beings], like cow and dog, which were without sin and which died due to their own karma”, it is said and “The five meats and the five nectars: at so-called outer feast gatherings, where food and drinks are consumed, there are five types of flesh, for example human flesh, horse flesh, and dog flesh, which are contaminated as [their consumption] is considered wrong. These should be viewed as impure. [Flesh] being fat and aromatic, such as mutton, can be accepted as clean if it is prepared as food and offered, seeing that clean and dirty [are the same] and [it can] be eaten without scruples²²”.

- 25 Turning now to different kinds of rituals that include animal sacrifice, these can be divided into two categories: 1) rituals to show loyalty and 2) rituals to tame and please supernatural entities. This section will be rounded up by examples of rituals to swear and strengthen an oath that include the killing of animals.

Showing loyalty through animal sacrifices

- 26 One study by Pirie (2015, p. 177) examined the trend in performing sacrifices as an instrument of showing loyalty in old Tibet, where this practice was performed to uphold Buddhism. This can also be observed in Sikkim: at Tholung in North Sikkim, a shamanic ritual was performed during the Namgyal dynasty to legitimise kingship, show the loyalty of the Lepcha towards the Sikkimese monarchy and thus keep peace. During the ceremony, a pig was offered at the reliquary shrine of Tsugphud Namgyal (Arora 2006a, p. 70), the seventh Buddhist ruler of Sikkim²³. The case reported here illustrates the significance of sacrifice within the village community to legitimise a ruling relationship and show loyalty towards it, even though Sikkim was a Buddhist kingdom and the practice theoretically contradicts Buddhist principles. However, local communities do not interpret the practice of ancient rites as contradictory to their Buddhist beliefs, as the two traditions are interconnected. Such interconnectivity can also be observed in the following section, where the sacrificing of animals to please supernatural entities will be set in context.

Animal sacrifices to please supernatural entities

- 27 Animal or blood sacrifice is one method to calm or tame supernatural beings that live in the environmental surroundings and are said to have a strong influence on the welfare, failure and misfortune of sentient beings. Although animal sacrifice is theoretically not compatible with Buddhist thought, it was ritually performed even in Tibet up to 1959. Monks used to attend these controversial performances, which they theoretically negotiated but practically tolerated. In Southern Tibet, animal sacrifice is mainly widespread as a form of worshipping mountain deities. This practice is also widespread in Sikkim, with the mountain Kanchenjunga (Gangs chen mdzod lnga) being the abode of Sikkim's Protecting Deity and thus being worshipped most importantly besides Padmasambhava, who once blessed the whole land and thus prepared it for the Buddhist doctrine (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002 and Diemberger & Hazod 1997²⁴). As noted, animal

sacrifice, which has been part of – for example – healing rituals, was described as a repulsive activity by Tibetan masters. Moreover, it seems that some rituals have been conducted even if villagers knew that the ancient rituals are not compatible and justifiable with Buddhist principles in the first instance and therefore these rituals provide a vivid example of Buddhist ethics in Sikkim. This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Gergan, who reported the following from her fieldwork among Lepcha:

During fieldwork I was asked to film a shamanic ritual performance that required, among other things, the offering of chickens [...]. Later as we watched the video with chickens being bludgeoned in preparation for the offering, someone remarked in jest, “Gosh, look at all that blood! We must be accumulating a lot of sin. We are such bad Buddhists!” (Gergan 2016, p. 5)

- 28 Even though they define themselves as Buddhists, villagers perform local shamanic rituals as they fear significant consequences for them and their community if they stop the practice of their ancestors, by doing so they would stop worshipping supernatural entities that are part of their culture. However, as a consequence of the Buddhist influence, the number of sacrificed animals was often reduced or cooked meat is used. Alternatively, even more radically, animal sacrifice has come to an end in some Sikkimese communities. Furthermore, the replacement with dough effigies is also reported (Bentley 2009-2010, p. 148, Olschak 1965, pp. 98, 166).
- 29 From the previous discussion, it can be seen that within the context of pleasing supernatural entities, the practice of animal sacrifice is theoretically negated but practically tolerated and thus this is a further example of the interconnectivity of ancient local traditions and Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. The following is a brief report on one particular kind of ritual, namely on oath-taking rituals that include killing animals.

Strengthening an oath through killing animals

- 30 The killing of animals in course of taking an oath is technically not a sacrifice to please or calm supernatural entities. Nonetheless, a legend and a historical event shall be presented that included the killing of animals to strengthen an oath. In imperial Tibet, killing animals was important for many rituals that were performed to take an oath. Moreover, Buddhist monk-ministers had to swear by smearing the blood of animals on their lips (Diemberger & Hazod 1997, pp. 273-274, Stein 1972, pp. 200-201, and Vitali 2004, p. 108). Dotson demonstrated that this was a key element in oath-taking rituals in Tibet (Dotson 2007, p. 11). However, this practice of taking or of strengthening an oath was also widespread in the surrounding areas. Several episodes are recorded in which killing animals was part of swearing an oath in Sikkim. The story of Gyad 'bum gsags and the Lepcha Thekong Tek is an important legend in this context: In the 13th century, Gyad 'bum gsags travelled from Tibet to Sikkim to ask the Lepcha Thekong Tek for help because his wife could not get pregnant²⁵. Thekong Tek performed a ritual and the couple was blessed with sons. As a sign of gratitude, Gyad 'bum gsags returned to Sikkim and a blood brotherhood was sworn between him and the Lepcha Thekong Tek. This was accompanied by killing numerous animals to strengthen the oath (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, p. 19, Balikci 2008, p. 69, Mishra 2008, pp. 4-6, Mullard 2005, pp. 62-66, 2011, pp. 40-41, 76, and Risley 2010, pp. 7-9²⁶).
- 31 A similar case was described by Colman Macaulay (1885, pp. 50-51): the Chungthang Lama – named Larip Dechan – had jurisdiction over the Lachen and Lachung valleys in North

Sikkim. He was not very popular and was even said to tyrannise the people living there. Growing tired of the lama's behaviour, people from these two valleys met at a rice field below Chungthang monastery in 1877. From each valley, one bull was brought along. The two bulls were slaughtered, men dipped their hands in the warm blood and swore to no longer obey the Chungthang Lama (i.e., not to pay taxes, not to send sons to the monastery, not to cultivate the monastery's land, etc.). As they went towards the monastery, the Chungthang Lama had already escaped. The monastery was left deserted for the six following years until a new lama was installed by the Sikkimese king and the lamas of the Pemayangtse monastery.

Concluding remarks

- 32 Both the Lepcha and the Lhopo belong to the original inhabitants of Sikkim and they show similarities in their shamanic traditions. They share their belief in the supernatural and the impact of supernatural beings on the individual and society. They fear severe consequences if they stop worshipping them and thus abandon their shamanistic traditions. The taming of supernatural entities and their conversion to Buddhism became a method to incorporate predominant rites and beliefs, in which the interpretation of the role and function of animal sacrifices plays an important role. In Buddhist Sikkim, it is a common method to legitimise practices by tracing them back to Padmasambhava and his legendary deeds. Therefore, it is not surprising that the taming of numerous supernatural entities is accredited to him.
- 33 The results of this research support Samuel's (2017) idea that Tibetanisation is an ongoing process that marks some shifts in ethnic identity, even though it is not a complete shift from one belief to another. It is noteworthy that several Buddhist masters have spread their teachings in North Sikkim but have never intended to eliminate the original practices as a whole, as long as they did not intend to harm sentient beings. However, animal sacrifice was – and partially still is – performed as a practice for showing loyalty and to keep supernatural entities at bay. The studies presented thus far provide evidence that performing these rituals with all of their cruel parts is synonymous with preventing harm for the local communities, although practices and particularly the intensity and dimensions of these rituals have changed. In this regard, both shamanistic rituals and Buddhist practices are tolerated, co-exist, and form a synthesis in Northern Sikkim. In summary, “red offerings” (*dmar mchod*) are still important within local communities across the Tibetan Cultural Area in the Himalaya, although a process of Tibetanisation has started centuries ago and still is an ongoing process. Together, these results provide important insights into the relationships between Tibetan masters and Sikkimese communities, into the interconnectivity of different religious systems, and how they can be interpreted as an inventive interaction that, at first sight, may seem contradictory for an outsider.

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NOTES

1. On the introduction of offering substances (*dkar mchod*) in favour of animal sacrifice (*dmarmchod*) in Mustang, Nepal, see Ehrhard 2003, p. 107.
2. The Lepcha, along with the descendants of early Tibetan settlers, belong to the original inhabitants of Sikkim, who today form a minority of less than 20% of the population. The Lepcha, who were the first to settle in Sikkim, call themselves Rongpa. From the 13th century onwards, Tibetan as well as Bhutanese settlers arrived from the neighbouring valleys. They are commonly known as Bhutia, but prefer the term Lhopo (Balicki 2008, p. 5), meaning “the ones from the South”.
3. According to Balicki and Samuel, the shamanic worldview could stand the test of time as mainly members of the rNying ma and bKa’ brgyud traditions of Tibetan Buddhism were active in Sikkim and both traditions have a kind of shamanic nature (Balicki 2008, Samuel 1993). On animal sacrifice in Himalayan Buddhist communities see also Childs 1997. For a collection of essays on shamanism and violence, see Riboli & Torri [2013] 2016. For studies on animals in context of Buddhist ethics, see Keown 2005, pp. 39-52, and Waldau 2000.
4. The Sikkimese of Tibetan ancestry who live in the Lachen and Lachung valleys in North Sikkim are commonly known as Lachenpa and Lachungpa, “the ones from Lachen and Lachung”. North Sikkim is the largest of the four districts of Sikkim and, at the same time, the least populated one. According to the Indian Census of 2011, the majority of the population define them as Buddhists in North Sikkim; see <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/461-north-sikkim.html> (accessed 17 January 2018).
5. For further reading on the Lepcha see – among others – Arora 2009, Stocks [1925] 1927, Foning 1987, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1951, and Olschak 1965. For details on the Lhopo in Tingchim, see Balicki 2008, Balicki-Denjongpa 2002, 2006, 2014. For a study on the Lhopo of Western Sikkim, see Vandenhelsken 2006. For studies that deal with the Lhopo along with the Lepcha, see Arora 2006b, Bhasin 1989, Nakane 1966, Shukla 1976, pp. 6-9, as well as Steinmann 1996, 1998.
6. Pre-reformed Bon indicates the ancient belief that was practised in pre-Buddhist Tibet. It differs from the Bon tradition that has developed after Buddhism had been introduced in Tibet and that is practised in Bon monasteries. See also footnote 15.
7. *sBas yul ’bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig phan yon bcas pa ngo mtshar gter mdzod* (129.5-130.1); *mu stegs bon lugs* [130] *dmarmchod byed mi nyan /*.
8. The most famous one is the magical contest between the Buddhist yogin Mi la ras pa and Na ro bon chung, follower of the ancient Bon tradition at mount Kailash, a sacred mountain known as Gangs rin po che and mount Ti se in Tibetan.
9. Originally, living a life as a Perfect One (*grub thob*) – an idea that reached Tibet from India in the 10th and 11th centuries – meant leading an ascetic life and not feeling bound to monastic discipline. However, this tradition soon became integrated into monastic communities. The exact date of the arrival of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan in Sikkim is unclear. Ardussi has suggested that dKon mchog rgyal mtshan built the first ’Ba’ ra ba monastery in Sikkim during the second half of the 1640s (Ardussi 2011, p. 39, n. 24), whereas Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya states that dKon mchog rgyal mtshan arrived in Sikkim in 1658 (*Padom ’dzum pa’i nyi zer*, p. 12, n. 7), although this master’s hagiography (*Grub thob chen po dkon mchog rgyal mtshan gyis (= gyi) rnam thar mdor bsdus ngo mtshar bdud rtsi’i chu brgyun*) does not provide exact dates of these events. dKon mchog rgyal

mtshan is also known as the first bKa' brgyud sprul sku, a lineage that is also called Grub thob sprul sku.

10. sKyid grong is situated in Mang yul Gung thang. This area is one of the lowest parts of Tibet near the Nepalese border. The hagiography of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan – entitled *Grub thob chen po dkon mchog rgyal mtshan gyis (= gyi) rnam thar mdor bsdus ngo mtshar bdud rtsi'i chu brgyun* – was composed by his heart disciple Rin chen bstan pa'i gsal byed (1658-1696), 'Ba' ra ba sPrul sku, at 'Ba' ra brag in 1693. A reproduction was published as part of the *bKa' brgyud gser phreng chen mo* in 1970 and as part of *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs* in 2010 (*bKa' brgyud gser phreng chen mo*, vol. 3, pp. 86-141 and *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs*, vol. 28, pp. 87-142). Additionally, some parts were edited in *'Bras ljongs nang dgon sde khag gcig gi chags rabs yig cha*, pp. 26-39, and a summary can be found in *Don brgyud dpal ldan 'brug pa'i mkhas grub bla ma rgya mtsho'i rnam thar legs bshad nor bu'i gter mdzod*, pp. 198-200. For further reading on dKon mchog rgyal mtshan in Western languages, see Ardussi 2011, p. 36 and Ehrhard 2009, p. 196. On the tradition of the 'Ba' ra ba, an offshoot of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa, see Erschbamer 2017.

11. Zhabs drung rin po che (1594-1651) – the candidate who was not recognised as being the rebirth of the 'Brug pa hierarch of Rwa lung, namely Pad ma dkar po (1527-1592) – went to Bhutan and unified the land. Five groups of Buddhist masters – to which dKon mchog rgyal mtshan belonged – did not support him. Consequently, they were forced to leave Bhutan (Aris 1979, pp. 208-211, Ardussi 1999, pp. 64-65, 2011, p. 35, Baruah 2000, pp. 253-256, Imaeda 2011, pp. 39-76, Karma Phuntsho 2013, pp. 207-254).

12. It was quite common to describe the lands south of Tibet as places of darkness, people who are non-Buddhists were commonly referred to as Mon pa, barbarians (Pommaret 1999, Shneiderman 2006). However, Tibet itself was also once described as a land of demons, with its inhabitants being uncivilised and barbarous (Gyatso 1987, p. 38). For a more detailed study on dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, see Erschbamer 2013. dKon mchog rgyal mtshan established two monasteries in Sikkim: one in a place called 'Dam bzang and one in bTsun mo rin chen thang, present-day Chungthang in North Sikkim. On a discussion about where the place 'Dam bzang might be situated, see Erschbamer 2017.

13. For a biographical account on rTse gdong Khri chen bSod nams bstan 'dzin dbang po, see *Sa skya'i gdung rabs* (pp. 116-188). The main source for present study is the text *mThong thos yid kyi dga' ston*. For further reading on bSod nams chos 'dzin, see Ehrhard 2015.

14. *mThong thos yid kyi dga' ston* (69.3-4); *'bras ljongs rtse mo la chen la chung sogs ma ni lam zam la sogs bgyis pa la /*.

15. In this context, one has to bear in mind that the Bon tradition is not to be confused with ritual specialists who were referred to as being members of the Bon tradition by their local communities. This is also the case when bSod nams chos 'dzin writes in his travel account that he was welcomed by members of the Bon tradition. This clearly refers to the original inhabitants of North Sikkim and not followers of the Bon tradition. For a discussion of Bon in comparison to ancient local traditions labelled Bon, see Huber 2015 and van Schaik 2013.

16. *mThong thos yid kyi dga' ston* (81.4-82.2); *las mi thams cad lho pa yin pa dang / sngon nas mig ltos de ltar yod par brten / sha zhiq dgos pas dud 'gro gsod zer bar / dge ba sdiq dang 'dres pa nga [82] mi byed / cis kyang dgos na nga rang gsod byas pas / tshogs ma kho thag chod nas rjes yi rang g.yag 'bri ba glang ra lug bya sogs pa'i tshe thar .*

17. Lachen Gomchen became known for teaching the French explorer and writer Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969) and also met the German Buddhist and Tibetologist Ernst Lothar Hoffmann (1898-1985), better known as Lama Anagarika Govinda in 1937 (Govinda 2006, pp. 99-103). For further reading on the third and the fourth Lachen Gomchen see Lachen Gomchen Rinpoche (2013, pp.73-81).

18. See Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya 2005, p. 58 for a note that the 16th Karma pa stopped the animal sacrifice in Sikkim. In 1959, the 16th Karma pa left Tibet due to the difficult political situation. He was given some land in Sikkim, where he established his Dharma Chakra Centre at Rumtek.
19. Lingthem is situated within the Lepcha reserve called Dzongu in North Sikkim, Nampatan lies outside the reserve.
20. This text is also part of *Rig 'dzin gar gyi dbang phug gi gsung 'bum*, vol. 1.
21. Ngag dbang dpal bzang was a rDzogs chen master and abbot of the monastery Kaḥ thog in Khams, Eastern Tibet.
22. *Thar med dmyal ba'i gting rdo srog gcod mchod sbyin gyi nyes dmigs* (13b.1-4); *dus 'khor 'grel pa dri ma med pa'i 'od las / rnal 'byor rnams kyis / spyod du rung ba'i sha ni / kha na ma tho ba med pa'i ba lang* (= *glang*) *dang khyi la sogs pa rang gi las kyis shi ba'i sha rnams so // zhes dang / gzhan yang / sha lnga bdud rtsi rnam pa lnga // bza' bca' btung ba phyi yi tshogs / zhes mi sha rta sha khyi sha sogs sha chen lnga yin yang / phyin ci log rtog gis bsad pas / de dag la dme bar lta / lug sha sogs tsho ba zhim pa rnams la gtsang mar 'dzin cing mchod pa dang bza' bar byed na / gtsang dmer bltas dang bag med spyad // ces pa*. The text *Dus 'khor 'grel pa dri ma med pa'i 'od* is part of the collected writings of Thugs rje brtson 'grus (1243-1313), founder of the Jo mo nang monastery in Tibet; see *'Dus 'khor 'grel pa dri ma med pa'i 'od*. The five meats or five types of flesh (*sha chen lnga*) are elephant flesh, human flesh, horse flesh, dog flesh and cow flesh. The five nectars (*bdud rtsi lnga*) are excrement, urine, blood, flesh, and white and red regenerative substances.
23. The Buddhist rulers or Dharma kings (*chos rgyal*) of Sikkim belonged to the Namgyal dynasty. For further reading on Tsugphud Namgyal (*gTsug phud rnam rgyal*, 1785-1863) see *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi chos srid dang 'brel ba'i rgyal rabs lo rgyus bden don kun gsal me long*, pp. 180-213, Risley 2010, p. 18-21, and Yeshe Dolma 1908, pp. 54-68.
24. Dalton (2011) shows that violent rituals were commonly used throughout Tibet. They could be seen as marginal and ambivalent but existed in different forms. For example, Tibetan war magic was used to tame the demons from the borders that attacked the Tibetans. By using such powers, Buddhism was sought to be protected. Such rituals were performed mostly – but definitively not exclusively – by members of the rNying ma tradition.
25. Gyad 'bum gsags ruled over the neighbouring Chumbi valley and is said to be the Tibetan ancestor of the Sikkimese Buddhist kings (*chos rgyal*), who ruled over Sikkim from the mid of the 17th century to 1975.
26. The blood brotherhood was sworn at Kabi village, which lies about 17 km North from Gangtok. A monument of stone and some statues are reminders of this legendary event.

ABSTRACTS

Animal sacrifice is part of the old shamanic traditions in Sikkim. For the Sikkimese people, it is not contradictory to follow Tibetan Buddhism and practise local shamanic elements like animal sacrifice, but it is rather a sign that these traditions are strongly interconnected. But Buddhist masters who arrived from Tibet criticised certain practices such as animal sacrifice. These encounters marked a confrontation of theories of Tibetan Buddhism, for example not killing, with the practices of a lived culture within local communities in the Himalaya.

Les sacrifices d'animaux font partie de l'ancienne tradition chamanique du Sikkim. Pour les Sikkimais, il n'est pas contradictoire d'être, à la fois, adepte du bouddhisme tibétain et de

poursuivre des pratiques chamaniques locales telles que le sacrifice d'animaux ; c'est même le signe que ces traditions sont fortement interconnectées. Ces pratiques ont été cependant vigoureusement critiquées par les maîtres bouddhistes venant du Tibet. On assiste ainsi à une confrontation entre les théories du bouddhisme tibétain, notamment ne pas tuer, et les pratiques d'une culture vivante au sein de communautés locales dans l'Himalaya.

INDEX

Keywords: animals, sacrifice, ritual, Tibet, Buddhism, shamanism, Sikkim, Himalaya

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AUTHOR

MARLENE ERSCHBAMER

Marlene Erschbamer studied Tibetology, Sociology, and Philosophy at the LMU Munich, Germany, where she received her PhD in 2016. Since then, she has been affiliated with the LMU Munich. Her fields of research include the Barawa Kagyu ('Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Sikkim Studies, and religious geography and Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the Himalaya. In 2017, she published the monograph *The 'Ba'-ra-ba bKa'-brgyud-pa. Historical and Contemporary Studies* (Vienna, WSTB).

marlene@erschbamer.net