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Propitiating the *Tsen*, Sealing the Mountain: Community Mountain-closure Ritual and Practice in Eastern Bhutan

Riamsara Kuyakanon
University of Cambridge, rk391@cam.ac.uk

Dorji Gyeltshen
Institute of Language and Culture Studies, Bhutan

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Riamsara Kuyakanon

Dorji Gyeltshen

This interdisciplinary study examines a community ritual in Mongar, eastern Bhutan, in connection to its socio-ecological context. We provide an in-depth documentation of the *tsensöl* (*btsan gsol*) deity-propitiation ritual to 'seal' territory and prohibit entry to higher mountain reaches. The ritual and the community mountain-closure period (*ladam*) that it precedes are first situated in context of other documented (but now defunct) territorial sealing practices in Tibet and the Buddhist Himalaya. We then analyse and discuss the syncretic, flexible, and place-based nature of *tsensöl*, and show how the ritual, the mountain god Khobla Tsen and *ladam* are interrelated in expressing community concerns for safe-harvests and wellbeing. We conclude by examining what a ritual such as *tsensöl* might tell us about village political ecology, community concerns, and knowledge of the environment.

Keywords: political ecology, environmental knowledge, ritual, community resource management, Bhutan, mountain god.

Introduction

Territorial prohibitions to do with deity worship exist in many places and among many communities around the world. In the Himalaya and Tibet, such prohibitions can restrict entry into a certain area, and are usually associated with topographic features such as mountains, lakes, rivers, and forest areas where deities are embodied or dwell. Prohibitions may be temporal or spatial or a combination of both, and are observed in diverse ways in different communities, though similarities can exist in practice. To our knowledge, there has been no detailed study of a *currently* practiced community ritual centred on deity worship to close or seal¹ territory and prohibit entry to higher mountain reaches as it is practiced in Bhutan, or indeed elsewhere in the Buddhist Himalaya and Tibet.

Our study is concerned with *tsensöl* (*btsan gsol*), a deity propitiation ritual that is closely associated with *ladam* (*la bsdams*), the customary 'sealing' or 'closure' of mountains, as performed by communities in eastern Bhutan. In the case of *ladam* as practised by the villagers of Soenakhar, *tsensöl* is performed to mark the beginning of the closure period. During *tsensöl*, the trail up into the higher mountain reaches is symbolically sealed. Once the ritual is completed, *ladam* is considered to have begun. People are thereafter prohibited from passing through or otherwise engaging in extractive or disturbing activities in the 'sealed' area. *Ladam* may mean a total prohibition against entry into and passage through a specified area, or it may restrict certain activities or actions within that area. This

customary practice predates the centralised Bhutanese state (see Wangchuck 2000) and is still practiced in parts of the country. It is also referred to as *pudam* (*phu bsdams*), and as *ridam* (*ri bsdams*), or compounded as *ladam-ridam* (and vice-versa). These terms all have the general meaning of closing off a mountain or a high pass, though actual practices may vary widely between communities and in different parts of the country, and appear to exist within a wider array of customary territorial prohibitions.

While the *tsensöl* ritual preceding some form of *ladam-ridam* in Bhutan is mentioned in several ethnographic vignettes (see Penjore and Raptan 2004: 25; Kinga 2008: 40; Choden 2004: 16), due to the lack of in-depth studies, we also draw from literature on similar practices in ‘ethnographic Tibet.’² Within this literature, with the exception of Kathryn March’s study on the Solu Khumbu Sherpa almost 40 years ago (1977), community mountain-closure rituals and practices appear to have been defunct at the time of documentation, due to political and territorial upheaval (Huber 2004: 146) or to more gradual processes such as the loss of knowledge or introduction of tourism (Diemberger 1995)—although in the latter case, an attempt at revitalisation was documented (*ibid*).

This paper describes the *tsensöl* ritual that marks the commencement of the *ladam* period, as it is observed in Soenakhar, eastern Bhutan. While *ladam* in Bhutan has received some mention in works and studies (e.g., Wangchuk 2000; Ura 2002; Choden 2004; and Wangdi et al. 2014), as far as we know there has been no detailed ethnographic description of the *tsensöl* which precedes *ladam*, nor an attempt at interdisciplinary analysis that examines the ritual in connection to its socio-ecological

context. Thus, through an analysis of *tsensöl*, we also hope to establish a better understanding of the socio-ecological context of community mountain-closure practice. In sum, this paper is a documentation and analysis of the ritual to close the mountain (*tsensöl*) and the insights it offers into the practice of mountain-closure (*ladam*) in eastern Bhutan. It is not an analysis of the practice of *ladam* itself, which will be the subject of another study.

Since observing *ladam* means a *de facto* restriction against causing disturbance (physical and spiritual) in the sealed area, whether by passing through, herding cattle or collecting resources, and because it is particularly discriminating towards ‘outsiders,’ this ritual has been identified as a form of community natural resources management through environmental sanctions (cf. Messerschmidt 1999; Wangchuk 2000; Giri 2004; Wangdi et al. 2014). To date, mentions of *ladam-ridam* in Bhutan appear most frequently in studies on natural resources management. Of the ten or so primary sources that refer to this practice, all do so in connection to its perceived ecological aspect, and none mention it primarily in terms of deity propitiation.³ While this may be due to communities not performing a libation ritual (*gsol kha*) in relation to *ridam-ladam*, we believe it is also a result of the preponderantly instrumentalist interpretations on the part of researchers, to ‘the dominance of environmental and ecological models over all others, such as spiritual and cultural’ (Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2015: 519), as well as to disciplinary divides that hamper holistic analyses.

In what follows, we first distinguish *tsensöl* and *ladam* in Soenakhar from similar mountain-closure practices documented in Nepal and Tibet. We then describe the

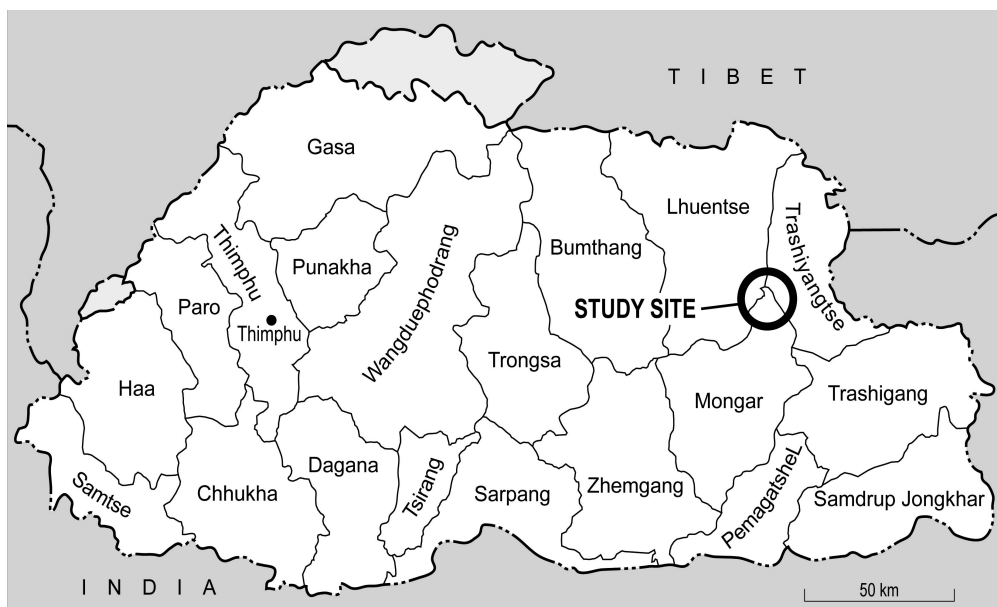


Figure 1. Map of study site.

Cartography by Philip Stickler

community of Soenakhar and Khobla Tsen, discussing him in relation to a general Tibetological understanding of the *tsen* (*btsan*) class of deity. We then describe the *tsensöl* ritual as we observed it performed, and comment on its nature. Finally, we suggest what observing the *tsensöl* ritual as a marker for the *ladam* period might tell us about community political ecology and *ladam* practice. In short, we demonstrate how examining and understanding a ritual closely, in addition to being a contribution to knowledge in itself, can give valuable insight into the beliefs and practices of mountain community livelihood. In so doing, we hope to redress the tendency in contemporary environmental literature to allude to such community practices somewhat one-dimensionally as a mode of ‘community natural resource management’ and instead to situate such environmental knowledges and practices within what Toni Huber and Poul Pedersen (1997) term a ‘moral climate’ or moral space. This is a significant intervention because it clarifies what the community considers to be important rather than imposing an exogenous, instrumentalist rationale for *ladam* practice, and demonstrates the value of interdisciplinarity in understanding human-environment interactions.

Other ‘Sealing’ Practices: *Gnas go sdoms pa* and *Ri rgya lung rgya sdoms pa*

‘Sealing’ or closing off a mountain is a practice that has been mentioned in studies on sacred mountains and mountain-deity worship in the Buddhist Himalaya and Tibetan cultural sphere (e.g., Karmay 1996; Diemberger 1994; Blondeau 1998; Huber 2002). Hildegard Diemberger (1994; 1995) and Toni Huber (1999) have written about seasonal rituals conducted to open (*gnas go phye ba*), and to close (*gnas go bsdams*) routes to sacred mountains (*gnas ri*) and hidden lands (*beyul*, *sbas yul*). Soenakhar and the surrounding communities that observe *ladam* are located on the route to Beyul Aja Ney (*a brgya gnas*), a sacred pilgrimage site and hidden land. While *ladam* in the villages effectively closes the route into Aja Ney, there is no *gnas go sdom* for Aja Ney as such. Further, *ladam* does not begin in the same month among the different villages (as demarcated by their mountains) around Aja Ney. For the villagers that graze their herds in Aja Ney, there does not appear to be a *gnas go sdom* that regulates seasonal passage times for taking animals to high-altitude pasturage as noted by Diemberger (1994), nor is there a ritual that might act as a space-divider between popular pilgrimage and esoteric practices as described by Huber (1999). However, though there is no ritual to mark the beginning or end of pilgrimage season into Aja Ney *per se*, the observation of *ladam* plays a role in marking the spaces and times of the agricultural and pastoral year, which influences pilgrimage patterns.

In textual sources, the codified practice of sealing a mountain is ‘*ri rgya klung rgya bsdams*.’⁴ Huber’s critical study of monastic and state-level territorial sealing (2002) discusses how, from the 15th century onwards, Buddhist ideology behind the practice in Tibet incorporated concepts of *abhayadāna* (*mi ‘jigs pa’i sbyin pa*), performing the ten virtuous actions, cleansing of effects of negative actions as well as other motivations including compassion for sentient beings and sparing oneself of lower rebirths. In Bhutan, this phrase (or a variation, *ri rgya klung rgya btsugs*) appears in several works. The earliest mentions that we have found are in Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) treasure texts such as the *lung bstan kun gsal me long* (Prophecy of the All Illuminating Mirror), and the guidebook to Beyul Khenpalung (*sbas yul mkhan pa lung gi lam yig*), where the phrase appears in context of practising Buddhist virtues in order to establish peace (especially with Tibet), social harmony, and happiness. In the *rin spungs mgron gnyer gyis zhus ngor gnang ba bslab ston gyi rim pa dge legs ‘dod ‘jo* (Wish-Fulfilling Righteous Advice) written during the reign of 13th Desi (1744–1763), the Je Khenpo Yenten Thaye instructs the people of the country to observe ‘*ri rgya klung rgya bsdams*’ during the first and seventh months, and warns of punishment in accordance with the Zhabdrung’s Code of Law or Katrim Chenmo (*zhabs drung gi bka’ khrims chen mo*). The phrase also appears in Pema Tshewang’s ‘*Brugs gsal ba ‘i sgron me*’ (1994) cited in Karma Phuntsho’s *History of Bhutan*. Jigme Namgyel, father of the First King of Bhutan Ugyen Wangchuck, proclaims sealing the mountains and valleys (c1855–1856) as an act of purification so that his lama Janchub Tsonдру would come from Tibet to visit him. In addition to printing Buddhist scriptures and proclaiming that all citizens in his domain should observe the five precepts, he ‘sealed the mountains and rivers from hunting, fishing and the like’ (Phuntsho 2013: 437). The reasoning given for Jigme Namgyel’s act of sealing here is ‘in order to protect life,’ (ibid) which fits in with the soteriological reasoning that forms the contexts for the codified practice of *ri rgya klung rgya bsdams*. While Jigme Namgyel couched his declaration in terms of spiritual aims, it also had the more pragmatic motive of getting his powerful lama to come to Bhutan and support him, which in turn had a beneficial political outcome. However, these were not the reasons given by the villagers of Soenakhar and surrounding communities for their customary practice of mountain-closure, or *ladam*.

The villagers of Soenakhar explicitly stated that they perform *tsensöl* and observe *ladam* in order to not disturb Khobla Tsen and to protect their crops. Their concern was to prevent retribution from Khobla Tsen for a type of offense that, as has been pointed out, is usually retrospectively identified (Huber 2004). Additionally, unlike notions sur-

rounding karmic causality where intention is a significant factor, retribution or punishment might also result from unintentionally committed offenses.⁵ Unlike karmic causality (*las rgyu 'bras*) which may play out over lifetimes, the effects of offending Khobla Tsen have identifiable immediacy. Villagers related how weather calamities such as hail, rain and wind storms occurred immediately after *ladam* came into effect when someone went into the sealed area. This causality between action and result and its perceived inescapability can be a source of humor. Interlocutor Aum Choten Zangmo recounted with much animation and hilarity how, when she was young many decades ago, Meme Lhundup was in Aja Ney and tried to come out after *ladam* had begun, but that evening there was a terrible storm, so he was afraid other villagers would scold him, so he hid in the forest and stayed in the 'sealed' area. He waited until the next morning to come out, but when he did so, another storm happened! (Interview, May 2011).

Community and Deity: Soenakhar and Khobla Tsen

Soenakar is located in the Sherimung 'administrative block' or *gewog* (*rged 'og*) of Mongar district (*rdzong khag*) in eastern Bhutan.⁶ The people here are referred to as Sharchop, or 'Easterners' (*shar phyogs pa*) in the national language Dzongkha (*rdzong kha*). They speak Tshangla (*tshangs la*), the dominant language of eastern Bhutan. Soenakhar lies a gruelling climb up from the rushing Sheri Chu ('crystal river') that courses along the valley floor. The village is made up of some 87 registered households,⁷ which extend across the upper reaches of a mountain surrounded by maize fields and broadleaf forest. They usually sit in distinct locales with their own place names.

The mountain on which Soenakhar is located is called Khob La (etymology unknown), and the inhabitants refer to their mountain god as Khobla Tsen, though his seldom used and less known name is Norbu Drakpa, 'Illustrious Jewel.' All the people who come from Soenakhar must propitiate Khobla Tsen, as he is the territorial deity (*yul lha*) of those who live there and the birth deity (*skyes lha*) for those born there.⁸ For this reason, he is also commonly referred to by Soenakharpas as their *skyes btsan*, or birth *tsen*. As the main deity of the area, Khobla Tsen has power over his territory, including over the wellbeing of those who inhabit it as well as those who were born there. It may be just as accurate to say that the Soenakharpas are Khobla's people as he is their mountain god or local deity.⁹

Tsen have been generally characterised as somewhat fearsome male deities, red in color, warrior-like and associated with cliffs, high rocky outcrops and mountain

passes (see for example, Nebesky-Wojtkowitz 1956; Pommaret 1995; Diemberger 1998; Ura 2004).¹⁰ It is commonly believed that *tsen* should be red, as most *tsen* appear to be so, and they are also associated with the color (Diemberger 1998). For example, it was said that when Dodrup Rinpoche's reincarnate (*sprul sku*) could not be found, advice was taken from a lama who dreamed that the path to the Rinpoche's reincarnate was indicated by a man riding on a buckwheat colored horse and bearing a red lance banner in hand. This meant Siew Mar (*Tsi'u dmar*) *tsen* first had to be propitiated. According to Cornu, they are "red spirits who live in the rocks. They are all male, and are the spirits of past monks who have rejected their vows. *Tsen* who have been tamed by great practitioners often become protectors of temples, sanctuaries, and monasteries. One makes red offerings to them" (in Samuel 1993: 162). As we shall see, it is not always the case that *tsen* are red, male, and that red offerings are made to them.

Many *tsen* exist in Bhutan, and despite most scholarly accounts of *tsen* being male, female *tsen* are not unusual (Ura 2004).¹¹ *Tsen* are generally considered to be worldly, unenlightened deities (*'jig rten pa'i srung ma*) who have been oath-bound (*dam can*) by Padmasambhava to observe and uphold the Buddhist doctrine. To complicate this however, some *tsen* have not been bound, and so remain more dangerous, while others appear to be enlightened. For example, Siew Mar, the main protector deity of Mysore Namdrooling Monastery is a *tsen*, who is believed to be enlightened, as he was protector deity (*chos skyong*, Sanskrit *dharmapala*) of Samye. However, unenlightened beings can also be protector deities, while others progress through different forms. Tandin Dorji's fascinating study of Wangdue Phodrang district's protector god Radrap Nep documents how he was a *tsen* in Tibet who was made into a *terdag* (treasure-guardian) by Guru Rinpoche, and then in the 13th century he became *dam can* (oath-bound) at Ralung by Phajo Drugum Shigpo. Later he was invited by a Bhutanese trader to move to Bhutan to be their god and general, and he came, tempted by descriptions of the mountain peak which would be his abode (Dorji 2008).

In addition to being found in various states of enlightenment, as well as both male and female, *tsen* can be temperamental and passionate, as illustrated by the following story from Soenakhar:

Khobla Tsen is one male *tsen*. Opposite to the Khobla—which is the name of the pass—there is a pass called Tshaphu which is located above Muhung village, opposite to Soenakhar. We believe there is also a male *tsen* called Tshaphu Tsen. And beside the Tshaphu pass, there is

another pass called Tshewang Lhamo. We believe there is a female *tsen* called Tshewang Lhamo. So, village people have a story to tell about how Khobla Tsen and Tshaphu Tsen had a fight over the Tshewang Lhamo Tsen...

Generalisations regarding *tsen* evidently can be problematic. From one perspective this may be seen as reflective of the ‘extreme typological complexity’ of protector divinities (Blondeau 1998: 8). From another perspective, ‘This could lead to questioning our need for classification—classification that might not have any relevance in the Tibetan popular context where deities exist without anybody having the urge to understand, in an intellectual way, how they relate to each other’ (Pommaret 1995: 40). And yet again, we have seen that how protector deities are classed or identified can be matters of profound political importance, historically and in the present day (e.g., Dreyfus 1998; Kay 2004).

Once a year, in the early spring, a *tsensöl* (‘libation to the *tsen*’) ritual is held outdoors on the mountain to propitiate Khobla Tsen on behalf of the community. This ritual is pronounced ‘*sansoi*’ by the Soenakharpa and marks the commencement of the *ladam* mountain-closure period, more commonly referred to as ‘*tadam*’ in Soenakhar.¹² As an action, going to close the mountain is ‘*tadampey dele*’ or sometimes ‘*phudampey*’ in colloquial speech.

The main text used during the *tsensöl* ritual is the *Pho lha chen po nor bu grags btsan mchod p'i cho ga* (Ritual Text to Propitiate the Great Male Deity Norbu Draktsen). The text is in accordance with the traditional formula for *gsol kha* texts, but notable in its description of Khobla Tsen. His appearance is described as clear as the autumn moon, and he is handsome, splendid and magnificent. This description of Khobla Tsen as a white and non-wrathful deity (though he is of course wrathful to enemies) is notable in that it is in contradiction to the general imagery of *tsen* as red, wrathful deities.¹³

Oh! Manifestation of initial wisdom,
 Free from the deception of dualistic perception of
 this world,
 Lord of the entire *lha srin dregs pa* (gods and spirits),
 We praise you, obedient to Padmasambhava

As white and bright as the purified autumn moon,
 Your supreme body majestic and charming,
 Adorned by varieties of precious garlands,
 And flowing brocade, we praise you.

Holding a sword in the right hand to conquer the
 enemy forces,

In the left hand, holding a lasso to subdue the three
 realms,

And a wish fulfilling jewel,

We praise you.

In the text, Khobla Tsen is referred to as chief of the eight classes of deities and demons *lha srin sde brgyad*,¹⁴ and his retinue also includes other kinds of *tsen*—river, tree, etc. He is a ‘*jig rten pa'i srung ma* or ‘protector of the world’ (meaning that he is a worldly deity). As he is subjugated by Padmasambhava and ‘oath-bound’ he is reminded of this in the ritual. While the origin of Khob La Tsen is unknown, he may be an autochthonous deity whose worship existed prior to the advent of Buddhism, or he may have once been a clan god who over time became identified with a geographical area, as suggested by Aris of other territorial gods (1979: 109). However, until more evidence comes to light, such speculations in the Bhutanese context are difficult due to reasons discussed by Françoise Pommaret, who has noted that the ‘question of ancestorship is too complex and too linked to each local history to be answered easily’ (2004: 64).

Tsensöl: Propitiating the Tsen and ‘Sealing’ the Mountain

Tsensöl is conducted on the 15th day of the third month in Soenakhar. *Ladam* begins immediately after this ritual sealing of the mountain. The exact dates are determined according to the traditional Bhutanese calendar. When we attended *tsensöl* in the female iron rabbit year (2011) the ritual date fell on the 17th of May.

The ritual is held in a forest clearing along the trail leading further up the mountain, out of sight above the last settlement. While there seems to be no particular name for this location, it is referred to as the place where *tadam*

ཀྱི་ མོག་མའི་ཡེ་ཤེས་དག་པའི་རྣམས། །གཉིས་རྣམ་འཁྲུལ་ [འཕྲུལ་] ལས་འཇིག་རྟེན་འདིར། །རྣམ་ཐོན་ཤེས་པ་ཀུན་གྱི་ [གྱིས་] རྗེ། །པར་ལྡན་པ་ཀུན་ལྟོད་ལ་བསྟོད། །སྟོན་ཀའི་
 ལྷ་ལྷན་ལྷན་གསལ་བ། །མཛེས་ཤིང་བརྗོད་ [བརྗོད་] པའི་སྐྱེ་མཚན་གསལ། །རྣམ་ཚོགས་རིན་ཆེན་འཕྲིང་བ་དང་། །རྣམ་ལྷན་དར་གྱིས་བརྒྱན་ལ་བསྟོད། །པ་རོལ་དཔུང་འཛོམས་རལ་གྱི་
 གལ་ལས། །ཁམས་གསུམ་དབང་དུ་སྤྱད་བྱེད་ལགས། །འདོད་དུ་ཀུན་འབྱུང་ཚོར་བྱ་གཡོན། །ལྷག་གི་པར་ལྡན་མཛེས་ལ་བསྟོད། །

Figure 2. Eulogy of Khobla Tsen excerpted from the Ritual Text to Propitiate the Great Male Deity Norbu Draktsen. (Shejun archive)



Figure 3. *Tsensöl* offerings, Soenakhar, Mongar.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)

(or *ladam*) is held, *tadamsa* (*rta bsdam sa*). On the uphill side of the clearing an assemblage of stones is used as an altar. It is weathered and moss-covered. The main offering sculpture or *torma* (*gtor ma*), the *btsan gtor*, is placed on top of this altar. At the base of the main boulder an offering shelf is made by resting a plank on logs. It is lined with banana leaf and holds food offerings in tiffin tins and traditional *bangchung*, a woven-bamboo circular container, as well as water and rice offerings (*mchod pa*), money offering (*snyan dar*), a butter lamp (*dkar me*) and three offering *torma* (*zhal zas*). The drinks offerings and a bag of mixed grains (*'bru sna*) that will be used later for the harvest prediction are placed on the ground.

Because Soenakhar does not currently have a village lama, the ritual is performed by the caretaker of the temple, who takes on the role of *gomchen* (*sgom chen*) or 'lay monk.' He sits facing the altar, reading the ritual texts and chanting to the accompaniment of the bell (*dril bu*) and drum (*Dama ru*) held in his hands. The text can be divided into six parts, and is in the same form as other *tsen* libation texts, with the invocation (*spyen 'dren*), reminder of vows (*dam zhag*), offering rite (*mchod pa*), *torma* offering (*gtor bsngo*), eulogy (*bstod pa*) and offering fulfilment (*bskang ba*). In the invocation, Norbu Draktsen (i.e., Khobla Tsen) and his retinue are called upon, and he is described as 'protector of the glorious auspicious village' (presumably Soenakhar), and '*genyen*,' (*dge bsnyen*), as most mountain deities who have taken vows to Buddhism are called. His abode (*pho brang*) is a specific place, but it is not clear whether it is a cliff or a peak. In the *dam bzhang* he is reminded of his

obligation to solve problems and bring harmony to the village. His offerings are then presented and the *torma* is blessed so that the spirits who are non-physical entities can consume it and the offerings. This time Khobla Tsen and other beings invoked are reminded more forcibly of their vow to Padmasambhava and their obligation to uphold the dharma and ensure the well-being and harmony of sentient beings, especially in the village, and in the country more generally.

Specifically, Khobla Tsen and his retinue are reminded that they should keep away illness and discord, bring rain on time, make the harvests and cattle thrive, and make all affairs and activities flourish. The eulogy then places him in the hierarchy of non-human entities. He is obedient to Padmasambhava's command, and chief of the eight classes of spirits. It praises his physical attributes, his very beautiful consort who is a *menmo* (female water deity) and his protective actions. He is petitioned to promulgate religious and worldly activities, to ensure bountiful harvests, and to annihilate those who destroy the happiness of the people or harm the dharma. Finally, the *bskang ba* makes symbolic offerings to the five senses in addition to the offerings made earlier. The text ends with a formulaic soteriological petition to Khobla Tsen that he help the petitioners in their practice of the dharma.

As the *gomchen* recites in front of the altar, the villagers sit behind him in the clearing on piles of lopped branches. Every household is supposed to send one representative with offerings of *tshogs* (a rice dish with meat). The dish should



Figure 4. Ap Tshewang Rinzin, the gomchen or caretaker of Reling lhakhang, recites the text in front of the altar to the accompaniment of hand bell and drum.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)

be cooked, should include dairy products, and should be the first portion (*phud*). Beef and fish can be offered if they are available, and beans and red chilli are an acceptable substitute if there is no meat or fish available. Pork should not be offered as it is considered unclean (*btsog pa*). Smoke offering (*bsangs*) is also made, and a small fire is kept burning throughout the ritual, with leaves occasionally added to it to produce smoke. While the gomchen chants, another villager who knows the procedures acts as ritual assistant and tends to the altar, making sure that offerings are correctly placed. At a certain point, the women perform prostrations in the clearing. One of the ladies brings a ceremonial scarf (Dz: *rachu* Ts: *sari*) and dons it before prostrating. The *rachu* is then passed on and used by another female villager as she prostrates in turn. Upon finishing, each takes a small step in the direction of the altar and bows from the waist, with bent head and covered mouth, as if receiving a blessing.

Just as the women finish prostrating, the sound of bamboo collectors (*she jang pa kan*) rushing down the mountain trail with their last loads of the season becomes audible. The rhythmic slap of bamboo rafts jouncing on the trail can be heard long before the collectors come into sight. They do not halt until they have passed the clearing. They have been up in the mountain since the early hours, leaving their houses after the first cockcrow around 4:00 am. The 'rafts' are bundles of bamboo stems secured at

the top and split at the bottom, about 3-4 meters long and dragged behind the collector. Each man uses a bamboo pole to keep balance and navigate, pushing off the sides of the trail as he rushes down. The collectors know that they have to reach beyond this point before the *tsensöl* is completed. After unyoking their loads, they sit down at the edge of the clearing and partake in the food offerings that the ritual assistant removes from the altar and shares with all present.

Once the food has been eaten, the bamboo collectors continue with their loads down the mountain. The gomchen and several of the men go some 10-15 meters up the trail, within easy sight of the clearing, just beyond a stone identified as Tsheringma (one of the Long-Life sister goddesses, popularly considered to be a goddess of wealth). They bring with them two tall saplings (*shing*) stripped of lower branches and topped by a crown of foliage. Each bears a roughly carved replica of a weapon—one a sword (*patang*) and the other a club (*kharamshing ga teytha*)—in addition to two free-standing carved wood phalluses (*kharamshing*). The saplings are planted on either side of the trail, and the phalluses are staked at their base. According to one of the men present, the 'sword' is to warn trespassers off and intimate their punishment should they trespass.¹⁵ A length of vine is cut, stripped, and strung across the trail between the two saplings to cordon off the path up the mountain. There is laughter and ribaldry as the ensemble is put in



Figure 5. A picnic lunch at Tadamsa is shared out from the *tshogs* once the offering has been made.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)



Figure 6. Sealing the trail leading up the mountain.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)



Figures 7a & b. Left, a harvest prediction (*Bruna yaphay*), or literally ‘throwing grains’; and right, a *btsan gtor* offering with grains adhered to it, forecasting that the rice harvest will be best this year, followed by maize. (Kuyakanon, 2011)

place. Once this part of the ritual has been completed, bawdy things (*tsokha*) are usually yelled out.

The group then moves back to the Tsheringma stone whose moss-and-lichen-covered slabs protrude from the ground. The stone looks like a vulva, with clefts and folds facing up to the sky, and what one informant points out as the clitoris. It is robed in moss, lichen, and ivy, and dappled with sunlight. Last year’s wood phallus stands lopsidedly in one of the folds. The *gomchen* uses his *patang* to clear off the foliage around the stone, making it more outstanding. *Ara* (fermented grain alcohol) is then poured on the stone as libation (*gser skyems*) accompanied by high-pitched calls and repetitions of acclamations to the deities ‘*chi su chay ho lha ge lo*’ (*ki swa phywa’o lha rgyal lo*, ‘the gods are victorious’).

After the ‘seal’ has been put up and the libation made, the group moves back to the clearing and the *gomchen* continues to chant from the text. Once he completes the prayers and puts away the ritual text and instruments, the *gomchen* takes a handful of grain and tosses it at the main *btsan gtor* on the altar. Those present each take three turns to toss a handful of grain at the same *torma*. Some make an invocation beforehand. The grain that sticks on the *torma*

signifies how the harvest will be for the year, and it will be best for the grains that stick topmost. Of all the grains thrown (wheat, rice, barley, buckwheat, maize, and millet), the forecast is that for the year of the female iron rabbit the harvest would be best for rice, followed by maize. This marks the end of the ceremony, and after a group photo the participants disperse to their houses and chores while our group slowly heads down the mountain with many tea stops at the houses of relatives en route.¹⁶

Observations of a Folk Ritual¹⁷

Having described the ritual as we observed it performed, we now reflect on its characteristics as a flexible, place-based, folk ritual. It is clear that the *tsensöl* is syncretic, with obviously Buddhist elements such as the text and its performance by a lama or lay monk rather than ‘shamanic’ persons such as *pawo* (*dpa’ bo*), *pamo* (*dpa’ mo*) or *nejom* (*rnal’ byor*). It has been noted that Tantric taming (*dul ba*) is closely associated with agriculture and associated with seasonal and agricultural equilibrium. Prior to Guru Rinpoche’s first visit to Bhutan, the grieving Sindhu Raja had neglected to propitiate Shelging Karpo and ‘there was climactic disorder which in turn induced crop failures and famine’ (Ura 2004: 6). Guru Rinpoche then came and sub-

duded Shelging Karpo and this was associated with bringing order back to the land for human welfare. The Soenakharpa propitiation of Khobla Tsen echoes this legendary event with its archetypal themes of Tantric taming, propitiation and putting the land in order.

Tsensöl also contains non-Buddhist elements (in the doctrinal sense) that derive from folk practices: the deities invoked, meat offering, phalluses, and harvest prediction. It is a renewal of bonds between the community by praising, reminding and petitioning Khobla Tsen of his obligations from his vow to Padmasambhava. Diemberger has noted that the *gsol* ceremony ‘establishes thereby an alliance (linked to ritual commensality) between people and gods which has to be purified again and again. This aspect includes the territory itself (and the natural environment in general), which is characterized by the identification of its features with deities’ (1994: 147), and indeed the *tsensöl* is addressed not only to Khobla Tsen, but to his consort as well as all deities in his retinue who inhabit various parts and features of the landscape.

The ritual is part of community and livelihood maintenance, and shows the widely remarked upon flexibility, negotiation, and pragmatism of folk ritual. Though *tsensöl* should be completed by lunchtime, should it happen that the bamboo collectors are late in descending, the ritual would be extended to wait for them—i.e., they would not be ‘sealed’ up in the mountain and unable to return without trespassing prohibited area. While it should ideally be

performed by a lama or the village astrologer (*tsipa*), we have seen that in default of one, it is performed by someone acting in the capacity of *gomchen*. Within living memory, its timing, location, attendance, and conduct have been subject to modification. When Reling Lopen was the village lama in Soenakhar some 30 years ago, he sometimes performed *tsensöl* with many helpers, and with the full complement of ritual instruments, while at other times it appears that he was less well supported, and on occasions held the ritual lower down the mountain at Dowatsemo, nearer to the settlements.

The relative malleability of the ritual is one way that *tsensöl* can be considered ‘place based,’ meaning that abstracted procedure is not given precedence over pragmatic contingencies. Another way we can consider the ritual as ‘place-based’ is that Buddhist concepts with strong soteriological connections such as ‘ritual pollution’ (*grib*) or giving freedom from fear (*mi ‘jigs pa’i sbyin pa*) become changed in emphasis or meaning when they are embedded in specific community concerns. For example, while Buddhist ideology is embedded in the codified sealing practice of *ri rgya klung rgya sdams* discussed earlier, examining *tsensöl* provides us with different insight. It is conducted to petition Khobla Tsen for his protection and to remind him of his obligations to the community, and subsequently *ladam* is observed to not offend or disturb him rather than to uphold the precept of not taking life (though if one inadvertently killed wildlife that belonged to the deity, retribution could be expected).¹⁸



Figure 8. Dowatsemo, or the ‘stone summit chorten,’ is located further down the mountain, where *tsensöl* was sometimes conducted in the past. From Bumpoktor, the trail passes the *chorten* on the way to Reling Lhakhang, and to Suma hamlet beyond that.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)

Similarly, while the idea of ritual pollution is embedded in the practice of sealing, and *sgrip* as a concept embodies both mundane and spiritual forms of pollution or defilement, *ladam* is not performed as an act of purification or merit, and is concerned with the material well-being of the community. During *ladam* in Soenakhar, the purpose of sealing is to prevent both actions and pollution that might anger Khobla Tsen, rather than for a more soteriological end, such as sparing lives of wild animals that might otherwise be hunted. It is believed that outsiders, or anyone not from the community—including former inhabitants who have moved elsewhere—can bring *sgrip* with them that is offensive to the deity. (This has in some cases been described as outsiders having bodily scents from perfumes or deodorants.)

Ritual, Agro-pastoralism and Village Political Ecology

Tsensöl gives special insight into village political economy and socio-ecology, in light of its role as a marker for the beginning of the *ladam* period, when access to the ‘sealed’ area of the mountain is forbidden. Without assuming that *tsensöl* originated at the same time as *ladam*, we suggest that an understanding of *tsensöl* also provides a window into past livelihood concerns which revolved around an agro-pastoral system where cattle, forest and field were integrated (Ura 2001; Moktan et al. 2008; Siebert and Belsky 2014; Wangchuk et al. 2014). It also allows for speculation on some key actors and aspects of village political ecology, meaning the politics surrounding the management of natural resources, as well as environmental change and its representations (Goldman and Turner 2011: 6).

The location of the ritual points towards its function in regulating seasonal human-livestock movement and activities. It is held in the forest clearing, along the trail where bamboo collectors (and in former times, the cattle herds) must pass. In the past, it was sometimes held even lower down the mountain in more trafficked areas. In addition to the adjustment of locations in accordance with the officiant’s or the villagers’ practical concerns, there is the flexible timing, both in delaying the completion of *tsensöl* until the bamboo collectors return down the mountain, as well as in marking the beginning of the *ladam* period, which usually lasts until the harvest is finished.¹⁹

Supporting the case that *tsensöl* and *ladam* are key aspects of village political ecology is that *ladam* is a somewhat more flexible sanction for local inhabitants in terms of movement. It is not unusual that when resource collectors have come down the mountain and *ladam* has been declared, cattle and cow herders still remain in the higher reaches of the mountain, only to descend weeks later when

the fodder is exhausted. What is important is that when they do come down, they do so discreetly, and not commit behaviors offensive to Khobla Tsen. Meanwhile, messengers may go up to deliver food and rations if needed with no calamitous weather repercussion so long as they do so in the right manner. What remains inflexible is the sanction against taking out forest products, and entry by ‘outsiders’ or people who are not recognised inhabitants of the area.



Figure 9. The late Abi Tshering Wangmo (Tsampa Kota’s daughter) with Lopen Dorji Gyeltshen and the *kasho* from the Second King.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)

The Bumpoktor family (so-called after the place-name of their house, Bumpoktor) were *koche* (*kho che*), or local nobility, and pre-eminent settlers and major landholders on Khob La mountain. Aum Choten Zangmo remembers that as a child the Bumpoktor house was the only well-built, permanent dwelling. They were also the area’s leading religious practitioners. According to local oral history, Sengge Rinchen founded the Bumpoktor settlement in the time of the First King Ugyen Wangchuck (r. 1907-1926) and had a *kasho* (*bka’ shog*) or royal decree from the king granting the Bumpoktorpa family the territory of Soenakhar, from the

top of Khobla Mountain to the Sheri river in the valley below. Another family member, Meme Garpa, was sent with the old *kasho* during the reign of the Second King Jigme Wangchuck (r. 1926-1952) to get a new *kasho* (for reasons unknown), but unfortunately came back with no *kasho* at all. This was later rectified.

Five generations ago Bumpoktor Tsampa (*mtshams pa*) Jigme Choeing Rangdrol,²⁰ also known as Tsampa Kota, compiled an abridged version of the *tsensöl* text to be used for daily offerings (see Appendix). We believe this was done some 60 years ago. While we know that Bumpoktor Tsampa compiled this abridged version, the history and provenance of the actual *Pho lha chen po nor bu grags btsan* text is unknown, and it has no colophon. Significantly, it is kept in the private family *lhakhang* at Bumpoktor and not in the village *lhakhang* at Reling, which was also built with the support of the Bumpoktorpa family.²¹ Tsampa Kota also received a *kasho* from the Second King, which is still in possession of the family. Especially significant to understanding the relationship between the local lama and resource use and control, around the same time or slightly earlier, Tsampa Kota shifted the *tsensöl* date from the second Bhutanese month to the third in order to allow the villagers more time for bamboo collection. Since *tsensöl* also marks the commencement of *ladam*, as long as *tsensöl* has not been held, villagers may still go into the higher reaches of the mountain to collect forest products and graze cattle.

Three decades ago, when Lopen Thinley Norbu, also known as Reling Lopen²² performed *tsensöl*, in addition to the main text he also used two other texts: *Tshong tshong btsan rgod dgyes pa'i mchod sprin* (Clouds of Offerings to the Delighted Tshong Tshong Tsen) and *Skyes bu chen po gdangs nga ling gi gsol kha* (Libation to the Superior Dangaling). Both texts are commonly used in territorial deity propitiations in Bhutan, and both Tshongtshongma and Dangaling are deities particularly associated with cattle and wealth (often synonymous), and are widely invoked in Bhutan. In particular, the latter text to Dangaling is for the wealth and well-being of livestock. The Bumpoktorpa family had a much larger herd in the past by report and from the large size of the existing cowshed (*wa phae*). While Mongar continues to have one of the highest cattle numbers in the country, it is likely that there were more cattle in the area prior to the nationalisation of forests (1969), subsequent restrictions placed on migratory herding and other land-use changes. Customary regulation of cattle movement through forests (where they also forage), fields and pasture was very important, and in some areas *ridam-ladam* appears to be solely related to such regulations (cf. Ura 2001).

We see in these deeds of both Bumpoktor Tsampa and Reling Lopen the role of the local lama as community leader in religious, political and livelihood matters. As Diemberger observed, they are the 'great men' of the community who 'often act as political intermediaries within the community, among communities and between the community and the state' (1994: 149). In Tsampa Kota's day, local concerns and disputes were brought to him. In addition to lineage and ability to reach out to regional and national authorities illustrated in the story above concerning the requesting and receipt of the royal *kasho*, their authority in the community derives from their knowledge of the Buddhist textual tradition. This is also evident in Tsampa Kota's activity in creating an abbreviated text for the community for daily use to invoke Khobla Tsen as their village deity or birth deity.

What does this depiction of a village ritual in eastern Bhutan reveal about processes of historical change? It has been observed that *gsol* implicitly defines essential relations—between community and local resources, and local political leadership, community and Buddhist textual tradition (Diemberger 1994: 147).²³ These are to an extent true in Soenakhar, and we note these in a context of Buddhicisation. The local story has Khobla Tsen behaving in a passionate worldly manner, fighting with Tsaphu Tsen over Tshewang Lhamo Tsen. Going back to a doctrinal understanding of *tsen* as mundane deities we would not expect Khobla Tsen to have a *torma*, yet he does. The *tsensöl* text and ritual *torma* would have him be enlightened. He is treated as such and held in high honour by the community as they petition him and remind him of his vows. Situated among similar rituals that have been described in Bhutan, *tsensöl* appears to be more Buddhicised (for its text, supplication formula, and practitioner) than other similar local community rituals (cf. Centre for Bhutan Studies 2004; Pommaret 2009). It seems that we are seeing both clerical and folk aspects of Buddhism manifested in one powerful *tsen*.

If we are to speculate on a process of Buddhicisation in a folk ritual using the lens of political ecology, we also note the importance of individual actors such as Khobla Tsen and Tsampa Kota to historical change and influencing environmental management. It is worth observing that while *ridam-ladam* type practices are or were also observed in the northern, central and western areas of Bhutan, it is most clearly connected with mountain deity worship in the east. Could this be reflective of the fact that eastern Bhutan was the last region to be incorporated into the Drukpa polity? Could it be that in Soenakhar's *tsensöl* ritual preceding the *ladam* mountain-closure as we observed it in 2011, we have a snapshot, a moment in time, in a process of Buddhicisa-



Figure 10. Bumpoktor Lhakang is the large building with the red stripe around the upper story. It is flanked by houses of the Bumpoktorpa family.

(Kuyakanon, 2011)

tion, state centralisation (and decentralisation) and more recently, a shifting away from forest-dependent agro-pastoralism to a market-based economy? We don't know for sure, but this may be so. To support this last supposition, comparing *tsensöl* as we observed it to its conduct in past times (with more assistants, more instruments and more 'ceremony'), it would seem that for various possible reasons,²⁴ less resources are being directed towards the proper performance²⁵ of *tsensöl*.

Conclusion

Like most of Bhutan, Soenakhar is undergoing an unprecedented rate of social and material change due to on-going modernization and developmental processes and recent political transformation. In addition to the introduction of constitutional democracy and party politics in 2008, village activities must be considered as intertwined with road-building, electrification, the introduction of a cash economy, market integration, modern education and healthcare, rural-urban migration, and a host of other changes which affect the social fabric and people's environmental perceptions and behaviours and the ecological composition of the land itself.

In our greater study area (which comprised Soenakhar and several other villages on surrounding mountains), the *tsensöl* ritual was not conducted by every community that observed *ladam*. We were told that some of the communities used to conduct the ritual, but no longer. However,

while *tsensöl* may not be conducted by every community, they still observe *ladam* on their respective mountains. It is tempting at this point to remark on the process of obsolescence and point to signs of it, but we cannot be entirely sure this is the case. While *tsensöl* is not always conducted, there were also times in the past when it was omitted in Soenakhar, for example if no-one was available to lead the ritual due to temporary absence. Most of the villagers interviewed believe that *ladam* is as effective as ever. Throughout the country, deity-belief remains strong. 'Respect for mountains is very much alive in Bhutan,' Pommaret remarked two decades ago (1995: 43). This generally remains true.

In this paper, we have described the *tsensöl* ritual as we observed it in Soenakhar village of Mongar Dzongkhag in 2011, and commented on it relative to studies on 'closing' or 'sealing' mountains in the Buddhist Himalaya and Tibet. We have drawn from studies on territorial and community aspects of local and mountain deities in Bhutan, and examined the ritual's relationship to the socio-ecological practice of *ladam*, mountain-closure. While *tsensöl* points to *ladam* as culturally embedded 'natural resource management' practice that is considered a kind of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) by other knowledge communities including scholars, activists and consultants (Berkes and Folke 1998; Berkes 2012), it is important to note that this is not how those who practice it conceive of it, and that community-based understandings may be glossed over when *ladam-ridam* is referred to as Buddhist environ-

mentalism or TEK (Kuyakanon Knapp 2014; 2016).²⁶ As it is currently practiced in Soenakhar and surrounding communities, *ladam* does not hold without the logic of belief in the mountain god. For the villagers, Khobla Tsen is the prime protagonist, the ‘actor’—literally defined as ‘first in importance’ (prōtos ‘first in importance’ + agōnistēs ‘actor’). By looking closely at *tsensöl*, we have demonstrated the prime importance of Khobla Tsen to *ladam*.

Should *ladam* practice cease to be observed—as is possible with changing livelihoods and the recent construction of a motor road (meaning people cannot be stopped from passing through), it would be an erroneous functionalist assumption that there would be no more deity worship. Firstly, for the people of Soenakhar, propitiating Khobla Tsen has most immediately to do with plentiful harvests and personal and community wellbeing. Secondly, in conducting this research we have seen and been a part of a revitalisation²⁷ or at the very least a new virtual life where through the internet and the creation of the Soenakhar Society Facebook page,²⁸ Soenakharparas are able to renew their community ties through an entirely different setting far from the forest clearing, which is nonetheless relevant to a sense of community and belonging. In the different valleys and mountains of Bhutan, such village and territory-based communities are virtually springing up like mushrooms.

Appendix

The following is an abbreviated *tsensöl* text compiled by Tsampa Kota, to be used for performing daily offerings.

ཁོ་ལ་བཅའ་བྱི་གསེར་སྐྱེ་མས་བཞུགས་སོ། གྲི། མཚོ་ལ་ཡངས་པའི་ཁོ་ལ་ནམ་མཁའ་དབྱིངས། རྫོན་ཤིང་ནགས་མའི་མེ་རྟོག་བཟ་བའི་དབུས། །ལྷ་
ཡི་བདུད་རླིང་ལེངས་འཕྲོས་ལོ་བྱང་ནང་། །ལོ་ལྷ་བྲག་བཅའ་ཡབ་ཡུམ་འཁོར་བཅས་ལ། །གསེར་སྐྱེ་མས་གཅོང་མས་མཚོན་དོ་འདི་བཞེས་ལ། །བདག་
ཅག་བསམ་དོན་བསྐྱབ་པའི་ཕྱིན་ལས་མཚོན། །རི་བོ་འདི་ཉིད་བསྐྱར་བའི་རི་ཕྱན་ལ། །རི་གཉན་བྲག་གཉན་མཚོ་གཉན་ལྗང་གཉན་སོགས། །གནས་
པའི་ལྷ་བདུད་རླིན་མོ་གཙོ་འཁོར་དང་། །བཀའ་ཉན་བྲན་གཞུག་མངག་བཞུགས་འཁོར་བཅས་ལ། །གསེར་སྐྱེ་མས་གཅོང་མས་མཚོན་དོ་འདི་བཞེས་ལ།
།བདག་ཅག་བསམ་དོན་བསྐྱབ་པའི་ཕྱིན་ལས་མཚོན། །བྱང་པར་ས་ཕྱོགས་ཡུལ་ཕྱོགས་འདི་ཉིད་ལ། །གནས་པའི་གཞི་བདག་ཡུལ་ལྷ་སྐྱང་མའི་ཚོགས།
།དྲིགས་པའི་ལྷ་སྐྱིན་ལྷེ་བརྒྱན་ཚོགས་བཅས་དང་། །འཁོར་དང་བཅས་པ་མ་ལུས་ཐམས་ཅད་ལ། །གསེར་སྐྱེ་མས་གཅོང་མས་མཚོན་དོ་འདི་བཞེས་ལ།
།བདག་ཅག་བསམ་དོན་བསྐྱབ་པའི་ཕྱིན་ལས་མཚོན། །ཅེས་པ་འདི་ཡང་འཛིགས་མེད་ཚོས་དབྱིངས་རང་གོ་ལ་གྱིས་བྲིས་པའོ།

Libation Offering to Khobla Tsen

O! ~ We offer pure libation ~ to the male father cliff Tsen deity, to the mother and to the retinue ~ in the palace filled with radiant divine nectar ~ in the midst of forests with blazing flowers ~ in the celestial sphere of high and vast Khobla mountain ~ Please accept this offering ~ Help us fulfil our wishes!

We offer this pure libation ~ to the nagas, demons and menmo spirits, chief and retinue, ~ to the attendants, deputies and retainers who obey their orders and dwell ~ in the fearsome places of the mountains, lakes, meadows and other such sites ~ in the lesser mountains which surround this mountain ~ Please accept this offering!

Help us fulfil our wishes! ~ Specifically, to the gathering of lords of the ground, village deities and protectors of Buddhism, ~ to the gatherings of the eight classes of haughty gods and demons ~ and to all the retinue without exception, ~ we offer this pure libation. Please accept it! ~ Help us fulfil our wishes!

Riamsara Kuyakanon (PhD, Geography, University of Cambridge, 2015) is a geographer who works at the nexus of conservation, culture and development. Her doctoral dissertation focused on the relationship between environmental conservation, Buddhist culture and sustainable development in Bhutan. She teaches on sustainable development, cultural geographies and geographical theories, and is affiliated with the University of Cambridge's Department of Geography, Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies Unit, and Institute for Continuing Education. She has published several chapters in edited volumes on aspects of environmental conservation and culture in Bhutan.

Dorji Gyeltshen (Masters in Buddhist Philosophy, Gangteng Shedra, 2006) is a Buddhist scholar, researcher, and lecturer at the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS), Takse, Bhutan. After training to the highest level (Khenpo) he became Dzongkha language editor for *Bhutan Observer*, Bhutan's first bilingual private newspaper. He has project-managed the study and digital documentation of the *Pad gling* tradition in Bhutan, and Bhutan's monastic archives for the Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research. He has translated various treatises and books, co-authored biographies on the Second and Third Kings of Bhutan, and written on early book production and printing.

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Endnotes

1. In this paper we use both the terms 'close' and 'seal' in reference to *ladam* because we feel the former better reflects the vernacular aspect of the practice and is how Bhutanese themselves most commonly translate the term into English, while the latter is reflective of its more formalised, clerical and symbolic elements.

2. For use of this term see, e.g., Samuel (1993) and Huber (1999).

3. The following sources contained what appeared to be primary references to mountain-closure practice, variously referred to as *ladam/ridam/phudam/serdam*, with some also using different orthographies: (Messerschmidt 1999; Wangchuk 2000; Ura 2002; Choden 2004; Giri 2004; Allison 2004; Penjore & Raptan 2004; Kinga 2008; Wangdi et al. 2014; MoA, RGOB n.d.).

4. The phrase can be translated as 'closed the seal of mountains and valleys/rivers', or 'seal the width of mountains and rivers.'

5. For a discussion on karma as intentionality refer to Phuntsho (2004). Butcher (2013) discusses the relationship between *las rgyu 'bras* and *sgrip* in context of Ladakh, where the floods of 2010 are understood as retribution from the deities.

6. Administratively, Soenakhar is a *chiwog* (*spyi 'og*), or sub-unit, of Sherimung *gewog*.

7. The number of households registered in the census may not accurately reflect the actual number of inhabitants as several generations may comprise a household, and many members of a household may actually live and work elsewhere.

8. Pommaret's studies on local and mountain deities (1995) and deities and territory (2004) in Bhutan discuss concepts of place and settlement and the strong connections between territory and deity in the Bhutanese context.

9. As has been pointed out by Pommaret (1995), there is no Tibetan equivalent for the English generic 'mountain deity' or 'local deity,' and this is also the case for our study area. We use the English terms 'deity' and 'god' broadly synonymously, but feel that in certain contexts 'deity' conveys a more scholasticized and impersonal quality of existence, and 'god' conveys a more immediate presence.

10. The intricacies involved in the Western scholarly attempt to identify and categorise *tsen* are dealt with in Pommaret (1995).

11. While Tucci (cited in Pommaret 1995) said it was very difficult to distinguish between *nyan* and *tsen*, Karma Ura distinguishes them from *tsen* in colour and customary dwellings and furthermore observes that *nyan* in Bhutan 'seem to be relatively rare' (Ura 2004: 8).

12. It should be noted that this distinction between *tsensöl* and *ladam* is often not evident in speech, where '*ladam*' is also used to refer to *tsensöl*.

13. In the *gönkhang* (*mgon khang*) of Wangduetse lhakhang in Thimphu, Chukha Dzong's Thadra Tsen is depicted as white (see Kuensel, 'A House of Deities', 1/8/2012). The

forementioned Radrap Nep of Wangdue Phrodang who began as a *tsen* in Tibet, manifested in white colour when he became a *terdak* (*gter bdag*) or ‘treasure guardian’ (Dorji 2008).

14. See Pommaret (2003) for a study of Padmasambhava and the eight classes of deities and demons in Bhutan.

15. The phallus is a ubiquitous and multivalent symbol in Bhutan. See Pommaret & Tobgay (2011) for an insightful overview and exploration of the place of the phallus symbol in Bhutanese social history.

16. The group photo was made at the request of the participants, and copies were duly printed out and delivered. Our group comprised of Lopen Dorji and myself, his mother who lives in nearby Yadi and who returns to Soenakhar several times a year, and a cousin from neighbouring Muhung, who was temporarily working in Soenakhar as a muralist commissioned by Bumpoktor family member Dasho Dzongda (see acknowledgements) to decorate Reling *lhakhang*.

17. This blanket term covers a wide range of possibilities, and our starting point here is Samuel (1993). We realise that what is considered Bon or Buddhist or pre-Buddhist in Bhutan is the subject of many differing opinions (Choden 2004 describes *btsan gsol* prior to *ridam* in Kurtoe as part of the Lha Bon, while Aris (1987) and Chhoki (1994) suggest that some folk traditions do not pre-date the introduction of Buddhism but are rather contemporaneous ‘alternative’ expressions or reactions to the dominant discourse). Most recently, Pommaret (2009; 2014) and Samuel (2013) have engaged with what is ‘Bon’ in Bhutan.

18. We also state this for several reasons: illicit hunting does occur in the area, respondents seldom gave the precept of taking no life as a reason, and when further probed referred to another village ritual period (lasting three days) observed later in the year, which is centred on the precept of taking no life.

19. The issue of when *ladam* ends is further complicated by the fact that some communities have written understandings with the local government, which makes it difficult for them to adjust the dates in accordance with agricultural needs.

20. Bumpoktor Tsampa was Lopen Dorji Gyeltshen’s maternal great-grandfather.

21. The family’s patronage in this subsistence community continues through renovations, development support and sponsorship of various projects, rituals and events.

22. Reling Lopen Thinley Norbu was Lopen Dorji’s

father. He served as Soenakhar’s Lopen for over 20 years. Both Lopen Dorji and his older brother Jigme Tenzin apprenticed as *gomchen* under their father for a period of time.

23. It should be noted that these generalised observations arose from Diemberger’s observation of the *gnas gsol* ceremony in the Gunsu community (1994). She also notes a fourth, between men and women, which we do not address here.

24. These will be further discussed in a forthcoming paper on the ecological management aspects of *ladam*.

25. According to Tantric texts, rituals are more effective when properly performed.

26. As March noted of the Solu Sherpa *kangsol*, ‘far more than a public posting of a rule about crop-destroying animals’ (1977: 91), it was about deity propitiation for protection.

27. Diemberger (1995) and others (e.g., Sneath 2014) have also written on the phenomenon of revitalisation under different contexts.

28. <<https://www.facebook.com/Soenakharsociety>>.

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