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Traditional Rituals as Conduits for Political Ascendancy: The Pang Lhabsol Festival of Sikkim, India

This article explores the role of the traditional Pang Lhabsol festival of Sikkim in India as a medium for political ascendancy and influence in the region – a phenomenon that has continued, albeit with different political inflections, from its founding days until the present. Since its emergence as an indigenous practice in the thirteenth century, it has consistently transformed according to each juncture of political realignment in the region. After 1642, the festival was redesigned to resonate with the religion and ideology of the ruling Namgyal dynasty, playing out negotiations between mainstream Buddhism and the animistic Bon religion. While the inclusion of the Pangtoed Chham dance performance in the ritualistic itinerary of Pang Lhabsol had very significantly reinforced the role of the king as the protector of the people and their faith, the festival has been considerably overshadowed by the inclusion of new elements that resonate with the secular narrative of India after 1975. The article identifies the significance of each of these new elements, drawing as well on audience research undertaken through in-depth interviews. Arkaprava Chattopadhyay is an Assistant Professor at the Shri Ramasamy Memorial University in Sikkim, as well as a doctoral candidate at the Central University of Sikkim.

Key terms: culture, political rhetoric, Buddhism, Tibet, Nepal, Lepchas, Bhutias.

ALTHOUGH traditional expressions are ancient, they remain popular and meaningful in contemporary times. Given the plethora of diverse traditional rituals and folk media forms in India, these expressions exist as indigenous knowledge systems that have established the spiritual foundation upon which society has evolved. Inquiries into how mythological imaginaries are used for political substantiation through the imagery of traditional rituals and folk media forms are few and far between. Since the relationship between cultural expressions, politics, and religion is complex, the role of traditional rituals and folk forms as conduits for negotiations between them all provides scope for important scholarly exploration.¹

This research on the Pang Lhabsol festival as a medium for reinforcing and disseminating the religious and ideological narratives of the earlier monarchs of the Sikkim region was motivated by the following questions. How was the Pang Lhabsol festival used to legitimize monarchy in the context of religion? Was

the Pangtoed Chham (a theatrical dance) brought in to Pang Lhabsol to reinforce this legitimization? What is the underlying narrative portrayed through the performance? How did the narrative support the Buddhist monarchy and local sentiments concerning the king? How were the signifiers of influence embedded in the performance? What was negotiated between the elements of Buddhist philosophy and indigenous religion through Pang Lhabsol? What are the present negotiations? Which elements co-exist? Which have been sidelined, and why?

The Lepchas, the predominant indigenous group of the upper north-eastern region of India, occupied the eastern part of the region extending over the subsequently established Kingdom of Greater Sikkim, which extends into the Chumbi valley in present-day Tibet, the Lapchan area of Nepal, as well as the Har Chu and Ammo Chu valley, presently in south-west Bhutan. The Limbus occupied the western part, referred to as Limbuwan (presently also spread over Nepal and West

Bhutan). However, not being consistent in any organized cultural and religious structure, there were frequent wars and conflicts among local tribal chiefs.

Although the tripartite Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum treaty between the Lepchas, Limbus, and Bhutias marked the beginning of the reign of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642 and the birth of Greater Sikkim as a kingdom, the origins of this relationship can be traced back to 1274, when the Tibetan (Bhutia) prince Khe Bhumsa ceremoniously convened with Thekong Thek, the leader of the Lepchas, and his wife Kne-kong Nyalnin Kne-kong Nyal in a forest grove in Kabi Longstok – today twenty-five kilometres north of Gangtok, Sikkim.² Masters of occult shamanistic practices, legend has it that they ensured Khe bear a son – a long-standing wish of the Tibetan leader who had travelled across regions in desperate search of such an outcome. To mark their union, a blood brotherhood accord was established, witnessed by the mountains, which are personified and revered by both communities as sacred deities. Consistently since then, Pang Lhabsol, which literally means ‘homage to the witnesses’, was celebrated to mark this occasion.

In the year 1642, the Buddhist sacred saints of the Greater Sikkim region – Lhatsun Chenpo, Ngadag Lama, and Kathog Lamam – identified Phuntsog Namgyal from among the peasants to be the first Chogyal (king); he was to be crowned at Yuksom (the first capital).³ He was believed to be the great-great-grandson of Khe Bhumsa, the historical Tibetan prince. The Namgyal dynasty ruled the region until 1975, after which it became part of India.

Celebrated since 1274, the evolution of Pang Lhabsol significantly reflects not just the political, but also the religious and socio-cultural practices of Sikkim over the centuries. Realizing its influence over the regional communities – it was used as a conduit by the successive ruling powers (especially the Namgyal kings, between 1642 to 1975) to reinforce their claims – Pang Lhabsol elements were consciously restructured to resonate with religious beliefs and to disseminate them. Although they have become partially

detached from the monarchical elements of the festival after India’s takeover of the Kingdom of Sikkim in 1975, the traditional monks of the Pemayangtse and the Tsuklakhang royal monasteries have ensured that the specific ritualistic sequence of earlier times still be adhered to in order to preserve the ritual’s religious character. Since the religious and royalist elements were closely intertwined, the ‘orthodox religious rendition’ was illustrative of the earlier rhetoric of ‘divine sanction’ enshrined by the Namgyals.

The celebrations at Rabongla, but also celebrated across various towns in Sikkim in a modified carnival form, have considerably developed into an extravagant affair since their beginnings in 1983. Attended in large numbers, this event has had the effect of sidelining considerably intertwined religious-royalist elements. Thus, there are two distinct forms of celebrations that take place during Pang Lhabsol in present times: the orthodox religious rendition upheld by the monasteries, and the festive cultural celebrations across the towns of Sikkim that project the secular approach of current rule.

My 2019 research studied the most prominent ‘orthodox rendition’ supported by the Tsuklakhang royal monastery in Gangtok to contrast it with the grand cultural celebrations at Buddha Park in Rabongla that took place during the following week. A follow-up study occurred in 2020, when the festive celebrations had to be restricted due to the Covid pandemic, and the usually sidelined orthodox rendition took centre-stage once again. The comparison between the latter and the more commercial secular form showed that the orthodox form of the ritual still has symbolic ties with pre-statehood monarchy, while the modern form is a genuine conduit for the secular rhetoric of a multi-religious, multicultural, and multilingual India.

The Ritual and its Elements

Since Pang Lhabsol is suffused with metaphysical symbolism, its overall presentation is projected in terms of poetic acts immersed in religious philosophy, reinforcing legends and myths. However, since the Pang Lhabsol

festival evolved over a period of 746 years, four distinct phases of transformation occurred during the political realignments of the region. Furthermore, the sociocultural and religious aspects emanating from migrant-native intermingling accentuated these changes. Where the elements representative of the dominant class were accommodated, those of the subaltern communities were discontinued (Figure 1).

The first phase began with the festival's inception in 1274 AD. However, as Thukchuk Lachungpa, former Forest Minister of the

Government of Sikkim and President of the Pang Lhabsoi Statue Committee, asserted, much has changed over time, but the core objective of Pang Lhabsoi has remained the same. He observed in my interview with him (16 July 2020) as follows:

As the festival emerged to celebrate the treaty of friendship between the Lepchas and the migrant Bhutias, it consistently served as a significant reminder of the bond between the communities. This context is relevant even today. A festival unique only to Sikkim, it is celebrated adhering to the traditional procedures accommodating the

Elements Political Phases	Lepcha Practice of Animal Sacrifice	Shaman Dance by Lepcha Boonthings	Buddhist Tradition of Oral Invocation of Deities	Feast and Music	Buddhist practice of Neysol	Pangtoed Chham (Masked Dance)	Nepali Cultural Events and Sports
1274–1642 Phase 1 Region ruled by Lepcha Chieftains	✓	✓	✓	✓			
1642–1711 Phase 2 Region ruled by the Namgyal Dynasty (Buddhists)		✓	✓	✓	✓		
1711–1975 Phase 3 Region ruled by the Namgyal Dynasty. Reinitiation by Chakdor Namgyal (Buddhists)		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1975 onwards Phase 4 Region is a part of India (Secular)			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1. The evolution of Pang Lhabsoi, corresponding to the historical sequence of political realignments.

customs of both the communities. In fact, over the recent decades, the customs of the Nepali community who are most prevalent at present, have also been accommodated.

The Lepchas were the dominant class until 1642, during the festival's first-phase evolution between 1274 and 1642, and their tradition of animal sacrifice and the dances of the Boonthings (the shamans of the Lepcha community) dominated the spiritual chants offered by the Buddhist Bhutias. To foster camaraderie, and not offend the Lepchas, the Bhutias had to acknowledge the sacrificial traditions, despite them being against their own core beliefs. When the reign of the Namgyal dynasty began in 1642, the Lepcha tradition of animal sacrifice was removed from the festival.

With this first major political transformation in 1642, a large number of Tibetan Buddhists (Bhutias) settled in Sikkim, vastly outnumbering the native Lepchas and Limbus. However, as a new religious system patronized by the Bhutia king was in the offing, challenging the previous religious system became a necessity. Although Buddhist rituals and beliefs were consciously enshrined so as to dominate the most prominent cultural expression in existence at that time – Pang Lhabsol – the customs and beliefs of other communities were nevertheless partially included in it. Where the Lepchas were animistic and worshipped objects – places, creatures, plants, rocks, rivers, and so on – the Limbus engaged in Yumaism, which was influenced by the shamans of the Kirata ethnic groups who had been living in the region since 1500 BC. Thus, as inter-community negotiations manoeuvred through political realignment, the Pang Lhabsol festival was significantly used as a tool to disseminate the new monarchical rhetoric.

As the political dominance of the Buddhists increased after the coronation of the first Namgyal king (a Buddhist of the Nyngmapa sect), the invocation of their deities became the central feature of the festival. This second phase of the festival's evolution continued until 1711, when Chakdor Namgyal, the third king of the dynasty, returned from Tibet. Prior

to this, he had been deceived by his sisters and had lost his kingdom to the Bhutanese king Dev Zidar for a period of eight years. Legend has it that he was delivered to a safe haven in Tibet as a child, through the valiant efforts of the Limbus and the Lepchas.⁴

On his return, understanding the importance of consolidating his rule through the support of the people, he initiated and choreographed the theatrical masked dance expression Pangtoed Chham, folding it into the Pang Lhabsol festival. He recognized the occasion as the kingdom's National Day. This marked the beginning of the third phase in the evolution of the festival, which lasted until 1975, after which it transformed into a secular celebration in accordance with the sociopolitical rhetoric of contemporary India.

It may seem, on casual observation, that, after 1975, the only major change to the Pang Lhabsol ritual was the inclusion of Nepali cultural traditions. Yet the issue of change is much more complex than appears. New elements were included, while various previous elements that glorified monarchy were consciously diminished. The fourth phase of Pang Lhabsol as it exists today has two distinctly separate characters, as indicated above: the traditionally prescribed monastic one, and the secular cultural one celebrated across the major towns of Sikkim, especially Rabongla. Strikingly, the secular cultural celebrations sponsored by the present government have become the more popular variant of this ritual. Over the years, various popular Sikkim artists, such as Remanti Rai, Prashant Tamang, and Raju Lama, have been engaged to perform at the festival. Dorjee Dazom Bhutia, former Power Minister of the Sikkim Government, former member of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly representing the Rabongla constituency, and Chairman of the Cross-Cultural Committee, has observed in interview (3 August 2020) that the large-scale celebrations have, in fact, turned Rabongla, a small Himalayan town, into a major tourist destination renowned across the world:

The celebrations were primarily initiated as an effort to revive the diminishing significance of the ritualistic tradition among the youth of Sikkim.

Incorporating cultural and sporting events within the celebrations at Rabongla has considerably rekindled their interest, not just with regards to entertainment, but also in heritage.

After 1975, and shortly after the absorption of Sikkim into India, the Pang Lhabsol ritual was banned because the Indian government saw it as a display of royalist and monarchical sentiments.⁵ It resumed in the late 1970s, only to be stopped again because of logistical insufficiencies in the early 1980s. In 1983, it was revitalized by the royal priests of the Pemayangtse monastery as a protest against India's annexation of Sikkim.⁶ Pang Lhabsol in its present form is a manifestation of political centralization effectuated by the re-interpretation of the myth linked to the ritual, and transforming it into a foundational narrative that unifies all the people of Sikkim. The myth of the foundation of the Bhutia kingdom has now been transformed into the myth of the foundation of the state of Sikkim, ensuring that the fall of monarchy saw the end of the political legitimacy of the ancient regime.⁷

In the light of this, it was therefore necessary to study the earlier monarchical form of the festival in contrast to its present form. It was also critical to identify the contextual transformations of its elements. Thus, as noted earlier, my research, facilitated by the monks of Tsuklakhang and Pemayangtse, focused on their orthodox ritualistic rendition, which had adhered to the norms of the third phase of its evolution.

Adopting a methodology drawn from the work of Vladimir Propp (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928), Paul Bouissac (*Semiotics of the Circus*, 2010), Richard Schechner (*Performance Studies*, 2002), and Janet Louise Langlois ('Folklore and Semiotics: An Introduction', 1985), the researcher has not only analyzed the ritualistic procedures but has also deconstructed the religious magniloquence of the Pangtoed Chham into its key messages. This was an effort to decipher the role of Pang Lhabsol as rhetoric for the purposes of sustaining monarchical political ascendancy.⁸ In fact, it was striking to note that various ceremonial sacraments derived from mythological metaphors to glorify the king were

embedded in these messages. Encoded religious messages, sociocultural negotiations, political rhetoric, and 'floating signifiers'⁹ were preserved within Pang Lhabsol. It was possible, through close semiotic analysis, to understand what seemed to be obscured from view today in the ritual but was intended to be conveyed intentionally by it.

Interpretation and Analysis

While the political accommodation and discontinuation of some of the ritualistic elements over the festival's evolution have been discussed 'paradigmatically' in the previous section, it is also vital to give a 'syntagmatic' interpretation of the dominant rhetoric of each of the elements (segments and practices) involved. The following reflections are based on my ethnographic observations as a participant, and, as well as a researcher who had in-depth interaction with the monks who perform the Pang Lhabsol ritual. Interviews with various government officials and other relevant respondents have also been of critical importance. Although the researcher has invigorated the validity and reliability of this study by consistently evaluating the reproducibility of its findings with its key respondents, it is nevertheless open to fallibility, given the subjectivity inherent in such studies.¹⁰

The State Manager of the Tsuklakhang Trust, Adup Tshering Bhutia, affirmed that Pang Lhabsol actually starts a month in advance, when offerings and prayer flags are sent out to the Pemayangtse monastery from Tsuklakhang. Upon receiving these, the Pemayangtse monastery sends out their monks to place these offerings at caves and sacred sites around Sikkim. More offerings are directly sent out to the Lepcha shamans across the region, one such being a cave above Kalijhora in the neighbouring state of West Bengal, where a shaman of importance to the monastery resided until he died. This part of the ritual not only portrays the king as the 'religious power centre' that calls upon the gods, but also respects and addresses all the sacred sites. A 'neso' (feast) is observed in the vilages, organized by their wealthier inhabitants. Royal offerings to the monasteries are

shared among the common people, who attend the ritual of the final day. Fruit, alcohol, and, sometimes, gifts of silver and gold are offered. Offerings are also sent to the previous capitals of Sikkim – Yuksom (1642–70), Rabdentse (1670–1814), and Tumlong (1814–94), where the royals had resided.¹¹

Over the centuries, Pang Lhabzol was held only in the royal chapel of these previous capitals, and only observed at the Tsuklakhang monastery in Gangtok since 1894. After the 1975 merger of Sikkim with India, other monasteries, such as Ralong, Lachen, and Ringim, were authorized to conduct this ritual, thereby easing the monopoly on authority. Given that the monks of the Pemayangtse monastery were the primary coordinators of this ritual at the royal chapel during the time of monarchy, the most authentic form of the ritual can still be witnessed there. (The ritual was reinstated at this monastery in 1983.) The monks also own a mask used in the Pangtoed Chham since the eighteenth century, representing Mahakaal, one of the deities of the narrative. By contrast, the Ringim monastery, which is administered by the Lepchas but is owned by trusts set up by the government, uses for its rituals shamanistic elements such as magical demonstrations and performances by shamans in a trance.

Traditionally, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Tibetan calendar (festival day), the ritual pays homage to the deities Kangchendzonga (referred to as Dzonga for short), Hissay Genpo (referred to as Mahakaal), and the Dragpo Deshi ('guardians of the four directions'). Their invocation at this stage is critical since the masked manifestations appearing during the Pangtoed Chham are considered to be the invoked deities. The latter validate the king's oath to be a 'shaylen' (protector). Although the shaylen no longer exists, the invocation of the deities is integral to the spiritual catharsis of the Buddhist audiences. 'Rinpoches' (deeply learned preachers), 'Lamas' (monks), and 'boonthings' (Lepcha shamans) conduct the prayer-based activities of the ritual within the monastery. The Chham dancers perform the religious narrative in the outside courtyard.¹²

Pang Lhabzol follows the spiritual text from a holy book referred to as Neysol, containing the prayers of all the deities of Sikkim. Chanted over the preceding three days that lead into the main festival day, the recitation of the Neysol is said not only to invoke the gods, but also to pacify their wrath – especially because their former king, Palden Thondup Namgyal, was forced to abdicate after the people's 1975 referendum in favour of the region's merger with India.¹³ His heir apparent, Wangchuk Namgyal, whom a handful of royalists and well-wishers consider to be an icon of the people's unity, is said to be living in self-induced exile as a monk in the caves and forests of bordering Nepal.

During the course of the Neysol recitations, several huge 'gtor ma' (unbaked sacrificial cakes made of barley), dedicated to the mountain deities, are placed in front of the main altar of the monastery. Precious garments are put up on the life-size figures representing Dzonga and Mahakaal. The masks on these figures have a peaceful expression by contrast with the angry masks ('khro bro') worn during the Chham. Burning pine leaves and incense powder is also believed to invoke the deities. Perceived as holy smoke, such burning is a regular practice at most Buddhist homes in the region, and they elicit positive sensations.

Senior monks from monasteries across the region are invited to bear witness to the ritual. Earlier, their presence was a mark of respect and allegiance, not only to the gods, but also to the king. As the senior monks arrive, white ceremonial cloth is exchanged as a symbol of the purity of intention and blessings. As the monks recite the sacred texts in various tones of voice according to their organizational structure, each paragraph has a dramatic conclusion, indicated by diction, tonality, and release, followed by the sound of low-frequency horns and large bass drums. When the monks' prayer rites come to an end, the ceremony is intensified by the Pangtoed Chham performance in the adjoining courtyard. The audiences, who form the outer circle in the enclosure, maintain a disciplined silence except when soft utterances intrude upon it, notably by the chant 'Om Mane Padme Hum',

which literally means ‘the universe resides in the lotus’.¹⁴

Although no longer an element of the ritual, on the day before the Pangtoed Chham during monarchy, a Lepcha female shaman (‘Mun’) invariably arrived in the capital to be escorted to the royal palace.¹⁵ The Mun would eventually go into a trance, supposedly possessed by the spirit of Thekong Thek, the former Lepcha leader. The Mun would admonish the ruling Namgyal king for the sins of his ancestors (becoming masters of the land and thus breaching the treaty of blood brotherhood). At that point, the king’s spokesperson had to assure the Mun that everything was being done for the benefit of the Lepcha community, thereby requesting the spirit to allow the ritual to continue undisturbed. The Mun left early the next morning in a semi-delirious state. The general population and the Lamas were never informed of this so as to avoid their interpreting it as a bad omen. After the death of Mun Norkit Lepchani, who played this role for decades, it was taken over by her husband, who was a shaman. This element of the ritual symbolized the repressed anger of the Lepchas against the Bhutias for having taken over their land. Unlike other parts of the ritual, this one was suggestive of the conflict between the groups – a manifestation of underlying social discord. Furthermore, not informing the common people and monks may be interpreted as a political move on the part of the king. This moment can be seen as detrimental to the sacred aura of the ritual, but it accentuates the intermesh of political and religious affairs of earlier history.

The Pangtoed Chham

It should be noted that, although the presentation of all the Chhams in the Himalayan region may seem to be similar to a casual observer, there are vast differences in terms of the characters represented and the scripts being showcased. In fact, these various Chhams are institutionalized and restricted.¹⁶

Monks can only perform them on certain dates and for certain occasions according to the Tibetan calendar. However, as Adup Tshering Bhutia explained, ‘commoners’

perform a major part of the Pangtoed Chham (the Lok Chham segment), guided by Lamas. This is a unique allowance. However, the common people who are to perform must undergo around three months of rigorous practice, and refrain from sexual activities during this time.

The narrative of the Pangtoed Chham comes directly from the chronicle of the Pang Lhabsoi ritual in which the guardian deities, who were witnesses to the blood brotherhood treaty between the Lepchas and the Bhutias in 1274, are invoked. In the course of the Chham narrative, the wrath of the deities is appeased by the king and his subjects, which is seen to sanctify and validate the political role of the king as the guardian of the land through their blessings. Other Chhams such as the Kagyed Chham, are performed on other occasions and have separate objectives.¹⁷

During his exile, Chakdor Namgyal befriended a monk, Jigmed Pa, from the Mindrol Ling monastery of the Nyingmapa sect in Tibet. He was considered a reincarnation of their sacred saint Gyalwan Lhatsun Chenpo. The exiled king returned to Sikkim in 1708 after the death of the sixth Dalai Lama. Pa assisted him in administering Sikkim.¹⁸ Together they founded the magnificent Pemayangtse monastery. Later, Jigmed Pa was recognized as the ‘root guru’ (spiritual guide) of the Namgyal dynasty. Legend has it that Pa saw the masked characters of the Pangtoed Chham in his dreams. These characters were thus represented and choreographed according to Buddhist scriptures and narratives, intertwined with Chakdor Namgyal, on Pa’s recommendations.¹⁹ Pangtoed Chham has three major segments as outlined:

- **Lok Chham:** performed by common people dressed as the king’s warriors.
- **Dzonga Chham:** the masked manifestation of the Kangchendzonga range.
- **Mahakaal Chham:** the masked manifestation of the sacred deity Hissay Genpo.

The Pangtoed Chham starts with the temple orchestra, made up of the Lamas in red robes and pointed red hats, who circle the area in the courtyard where the dance is to take place.

Adorned by colourful prayer flags, the group of dancers and the forthcoming characters circle the 'droso chemar' (offering to the deities), which is a structure adjacent to the 'gyaltsen' (a tall pole in the centre of the courtyard with a flag signifying a banner of victory). The droso chemar is decorated with flowers made of butter-craft and is decked by rectangular wooden containers filled with roasted barley, wheat, and rice beer. As shown earlier in [Figure 1](#), during the first phase of the evolution of Pang Lhabsol, offerings to the deities were animal sacrifice, a practice abolished during the rule of the Namgyals after 1642. From a political perspective, 'the prohibition of animal sacrifice can be regarded as a dominance of Tibetan Buddhism over the local pre-Buddhist deity cults'.²⁰

The rhythmic orchestra, composed of war drums, trumpets, and low bass chanting, announces the Chham, after which the Lok Chham segment begins. Lok Chham is the warrior dance led by monks enacting the dance master ('chhams dpon') and the second in command ('chhams mjug'), who moves at the tail of the procession. It signifies loyalty and devotion towards the king, as well as towards the protective deities.²¹ The grouped warrior dance and its shamanistic expressions are scripted to lead to the performance of Dzonga, the most sacred of the mountain deities. There is an eerie silence in the audience at this point. Dzonga is in a dramatic, wrathful demonic form. He circles the droso chemar and is finally seated on a platform in the courtyard ([Figure 2](#)).

The performance of the other protagonist, Mahakaal, follows. A manifestation of Hissay Genpo, the wrathful Buddha, emerges, wearing a dark blue mask and a ceremonial costume. The Lok Chham warriors escort him out into the courtyard in a ceremonious manner. As the music builds up fear, the vigorous movements signifying death and destruction are performed. Amidst the audience's prayers, Mahakaal completes his performance and is seated on the platform ([Figure 3](#)).

The warrior dancers then come out once again to pay homage to the seated Dzonga and Mahakaal. The Lok Chham dancers are essential for the portrayal of the king's and

his people's loyalty to the guardian deities. The dance validates the legitimacy of the monarchy in the presence of the gods. Dzonga then starts his dance again, which is now divided into two phases: 'ja klong ye shes' (which means 'rainbow wisdom') and 'ngang gros' (which means 'goose step').²² Mahakaal follows with a second dance, after which both deities peacefully return to their place. Next, the warrior dancers start the 'bya ba' and 'phyi biskor', the inner and outer circling, to depict the various regions of Sikkim.²³

The swift movements and joyous gait in this section give a sense of celebration. A significant procession of senior monks representing the different sects and sub-sects of Buddhism circumambulate the monastery. This represents the unity of all the Buddhist sects. After the completion of this stage, the Lok Chham warriors perform the 'dgu bskor', a nine-fold circling sword dance in front of the temple. This is reassurance that the warriors, monks, and people have united allegiance to the king (formerly) and the deities. It is followed by 'nor bu dga khyil' (literally meaning 'jewel-happiness-twirl'), which affirms the key to happiness. This marks the end of the Chham.²⁴

Musical instruments such as 'radongs' (loud horns), 'gyalings' (trumpets), drums, and cymbals enhance the auspicious ambience throughout the performance. While the horns and trumpets always accompany scenes of conflict and wrath, the rhythms of the big bass drums and thunderous claps of cymbals accentuate the changing narratives of the script. As emotions are manoeuvred through the loud sounds created during the phases of the deities' rage, a softer use of cymbals is heard during the general segments of the narrative, and these build up the suspense. The wrathful clatters of brass are warlike, suggesting legions of soldiers, and the cymbals are struck harder at such junctures. The music and accompanying chants significantly heightened the wrathful kinesics of the deities, indicating that the gods would be irritated if their chosen king was challenged by war or revolt. As the monks explained, the rhythm was designed to be in the tempo of



Figure 2. The Dzong Chham at Tsuklakhang in 2018. Photo courtesy of travelshoebum.com.

the spectators' heartbeats, and was emotionally resonant.

The Significance of the Lok Chham

The commoners performing the Lok Chham are dressed in white shoes – traditional warrior outfits consisting of kilts and full-sleeved silk shirts of various colours. They also wear two different sashes across their breast. (During monarchical times, when there were real warriors, the sashes distinguished their military units.) Four yellow flags, some with a

navy blue border around a red triangle, are affixed to golden helmets. A peacock feather is mounted at the centre, referring to the blood brotherhood treaty. A peacock feather was gifted to Thekong Thek on the occasion of the brotherhood and is considered to be an auspicious symbol. Harking back to its original symbolic association, it still adorns the crown of the present Lepcha chief. It is also used in one of the sequences of the Kagyed Chham performed by monks on other occasions. Sporting bracelets, boots, swords, shields, and daggers, the dancers give a magnificent



Figure 3. The Mahakaal Chham at Tsuklakhang in 2019. Photo by Arkaprava Chattopadhyay.

display of martial arts as choreographed by the third Chogyal (king), Chakdor Namgyal, an elite warrior himself.

The kinesics of the Lok Chham adhere to the underlying narrative. There are specific head, leg, and body movements that follow the script. Emerging out into the courtyard one at a time, each warrior dancer is graceful, despite his stoical face. Eventually seventeen of them emerge, swaying to the sound of the cymbals, each with a sword in his right hand and a golden shield in the left. A clockwise circular revolution around the central pyramid (victory banner) speeds up as all the characters kick in a coordinated fashion, followed by three short leg extensions. Then they swing their swords in a rotation until they face the pyramid. This movement is followed by a

small skip and a forward extension of the shield towards the pyramid. This position is held for a second before the dancers rotate in the opposite direction and hop three times on each leg facing the audience, while holding the sword in a defensive stance to the chest and then to their back. This action is repeated as they circle the central pyramid several times. The first part of the action depicts the skilfulness of the royal warriors, whereas the second symbolizes their loyalty and devotion towards the king.

The various moves of the warrior dances are referred to as follows:

- ‘gri khor’: representing the unsheathing of the sword.
- ‘gri rdar’: sharpening the sword.

- 'gri phyar': brandishing the sword.
- 'khrag mtsho rba rlabs': billowing waves of the blood sea.
- 'khro mo i inga bskor': five-fold revolving of the female fierce ones.
- 'inga bskor': five-fold revolving.
- 'bdun bskor': seven-fold revolving.
- 'gri thod kha sbyor': putting the sword close to the skullcap.
- 'rdo rje gro': thunderbolt step.
- 'khro mo i gdong bsig': fanning the face of the female fierce ones.²⁵

The Significance of the Dzonga Chham

Various scholars have comprehensively explored the association of Kangchendzonga (the Kanchenjunga mountain range) with the Lepchas, Limbus, and the Bhutias from historical, political, cultural, and religious perspectives.²⁶ In fact, the mythical origins of the mountains can be associated with the autochthonous people as well as the migrants to the region.²⁷ Although separate in context, there are various narratives that overlap. The Lepchas refer to the Kanchenjunga mountain range, locally known as Kongchen Konglo, which means 'big stone' or 'eldest brother'. It is considered to be the first creation of Dzongu, an area in Sikkim considered to be the mother creator reserved for the Lepchas. According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the great warrior god Dzonga ('mDzod Inga stag rtse') personifies the mountain, and it, together with the dark acolyte Yabdud, must be appeased and obeyed to prevent tragedy – illness, earthquakes, and so on.

As part of the relevant narrative, the Dzonga personification of the mountain range has been represented as the creator/warrior god. The red, fiery, three-eyed mask manifesting Dzonga is full of wrath. The upper part of the mask resembles a helmet, with a human skull adorning the front. The flag at the top of the helmet is referred to as the 'rgyal mtshan' (banner of victory), and three triangular flags adorn the sides, tipped with a tuft of cotton.²⁸ The mask is red to signify anger. The costume is an apron to which are attached precious stones representing the natural resources of the region. Furthermore, the apron is decorated

with a demonic face at the centre and pictures of thunderbolts and human skulls at its hem, signifying death due to his wrathfulness.

To gauge indigenous sentiments towards Dzonga, it can be noted that the first successful ascent of the Kanchenjunga summit during the 1955 British expedition led by Charles Evans turned back just before reaching the top as a mark of respect towards local sentiment: the action thus honoured Chogyal (king) Tashi Namgyal's request that Kanchenjunga remain an 'untrodden peak'.²⁹ In the Pangtoed Chham, the guardian deity Dzonga's wrath is shown to be capable of being eventually pacified by the efforts of the monks and the monarch. Dzonga is revered in modern times across all age groups among the Tibetan Buddhists and indigenous Lepchas, as well as the Nepali Hindus. As former Minister of Tourism of the Sikkim government Bhim Dungal observes, even Hindu priests in the villages of Sikkim pray to the Kangchendzonga as the guardian deity.

As Dzonga arrives, he is honourably escorted on either side of the gateway by the Lok Chham dancers, and senior monks in their traditional hats who blow large conches announcing his arrival. Silently showering flowers, the gestures of the monks add to the unnerving ambience generated here. The wrathful deity is portrayed as hostile and aggressive during this first sequence. Dzonga sways to the release of the trumpets, holding a red flag attached to a lance that is held in his right hand; a blue shield with three golden stones symbolizing a jewel is held in his left. An ornament containing bone pearls and a wheel depict the cycle of life and death. Amidst some bursting firecrackers to signify destruction, Dzonga claims the courtyard in a solo trance-like dance. Swaying in circular motions and rotation in both directions depict his fearsomeness. A light bay-coloured horse with an ornamental saddle and rich drapery escorts him at his side. After the sequence is completed, he sits on a chair covered in tiger skin to represent a throne.

In the second rendition of Dzonga's dance – a combination of the 'ja klong ye shes' (rainbow wisdom) and 'ngang gros' (goose step) – the former represents his blessings for

the wisdom of life while the latter is a representation of the white king goose, which, according to legend, was the form he adopted when he communicated with the saint Gyalwan Lhatsun Chenpo, when on his way to Sikkim. During this second sequence, he performs the steps of a goose, his arms spread like the wings of the royal white goose of mythology.

The Significance of the Mahakaal Chham

Mahakaal is depicted holding a spear in his right hand and an object that resembles a human heart in his left. Also referred to as Hissay Genpo, he wears a dark blue mask with red eyes and menacing teeth. Five miniature skulls adorn the mask. These signify death as an outcome of his wrathfulness. He is escorted by a black horse with white hooves.

As Tashi Tenzing, Research Coordinator at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology explains (21 July 2020), Hissay Genpo is considered to be a wrathful form of Buddha, revered by all:

Although held at a higher level in the hierarchy of deities in Buddhism, during this festival he is considered on the same platform as Dzonga, the leader of the mountain deities. Although most people consider Mahakaal to be a manifestation of Yabdud, the deity of the lower regions, it is a misconception [because of the similarity between the two masks]. Yabdud is represented by a black mask, which only has one human skull. Although invoked during the Neysol recitations over the earlier few days in the monastery, along with other mountain deities such as Paw Hungri and Nyalchen Thangla, they are not represented in the Chham.³⁰

As Mahakaal (Hissay Genpo) comes out of the monastery, he appears to be in a drunken state, swaying from side to side. He walks backwards down the stairs into the courtyard. A ceremonial group of senior monks in their traditional hats proceed in front, blowing large conches, as they had done before. This announces Mahakaal's arrival. He is surrounded by other welcoming monks who shower flowers while the Lok Chham dancers escort him, and he makes a swift movement with the blue flag that is in his right hand. Mahakaal gestures towards them to go. He turns dramatically to the crowd to show his

magnificent mask. After circling the central altar one and a half times, he is finally seated beside Dzonga to mark the end of his first sequence.

The Significance of the Concluding Segment of Pang Lhabsol

Although the movement, choreography, and underlying context of most parts of the Pangtoed Chham are metaphorical of earlier monarchy, they are not capable of much influence because the king is no longer there. It is thus possible that only learned monks and some community elders are aware of their meaning.

The ritual's conclusion begins with the representation of Kham (a district in Tibet), which is the place of origin of the Namgyal dynasty. For this purpose, three horses with attendants are prepared for Dzonga, Mahakaal, and Nyalchen Thangla (a personified Tibetan mountain deity) to mount. Although all the mountain deities worshipped in Sikkim are invoked during the Neysol recitations, during the Pangtoed Chham it is only Dzonga and Mahakaal who are represented. The other deity, Nyalchen Thangla, who was invoked during the prayers but not personified in the Chham, is nevertheless allotted one of the three horses during this final origin-based reference.³¹ An oath of protection used to be recited by the king in the presence of the deities at the end, but this practice has now been discontinued.

In the time of monarchy, after an oath of protection ('shaylen'), a band of the king's bodyguards, along with other royal representatives carrying banners that depicted the communities of the region, used to lead the three horses dedicated to the mountain gods around the monastery three times. While doing this, they used to sing a significant victory hymn referred to as 'dzongkhor'. Considered a celebration of the king's victory over his enemies, it reaffirmed the religious belief in the victory of good over evil, as also the political belief in the victory of the king as the victory of the people. This particular sequence was also performed when the procession set out for the town later in the evening. Although performed at present, only the religious idea of the victory of good over evil is indicated

today. The king's oath used to be instrumental in providing the monarchical context of the 'dzongkhor'. Its discontinuation today has effectively restructured the rhetoric. Furthermore, the role of the king's bodyguards who participated in the ritual disappeared after Sikkim's merger with India, as if a symbolic end of the monarchy.

Conclusion

Clifford Geertz defines religion as:

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.³²

But then, given the localized cultural settings and lack of universals, there are various missing links as regards culture, media, and religion.³³ James Carey's ritual view of communication, commonness, communion, and community established the construction of a symbolic reality by which the beliefs of a society are maintained, adapted, and shared.³⁴ Thus, studying a ritual that is specific to Sikkim and in its 746th year provides various insights into social transformation.

Given that both indigenous animists as well as migrant Buddhists considered the region favourably, it perhaps offered them religious resonance in their political negotiations. Sikkim was originally named Bay-Yul Demajong, or Sbas Yul, by Guru Padmasambhava, meaning 'a hidden country full of treasures, fruits, flowers, and medicinal herbs'.³⁵ The land was thus considered sacred, a place where the seeds of teaching were sown.³⁶ Although Buddhist teachings were spread across the land over the past three centuries, the Buddhist masters did not completely eliminate indigenous practices. As long as they did not harm animals – sentient beings – the latter's particularities were allowed to co-exist within the ritual.

The forests were sacred spaces for the Lepchas, but had been taken over by outsiders.³⁷ Just as the Buddhist monasteries were sacred

repositories of knowledge and religious artefacts, the sacred groves of Tholung and Kabi Longstok were revered deities for the Lepchas. Thus the Lepchas' sharing of their land with the Tibetans was tantamount to sacrificing a part of their religious as well as cultural identity. Changes in power structures and the status quo were played out throughout the changing customs of the first three phases of the evolution of Pang Lhabsol. Whereas previous ritual practices highlighted religion, secularization ensued after 1975, in some respects facilitated by the majority Nepalese community, which supported India rather than monarchy.

However, as the people across religious faiths in the region genuinely fear their wrathful personae, the entire sequence involving Dzonga and Mahakaal, minus the king's oath, is meticulously upheld. Instead of the king's oath, the wrath of Dzonga and Mahakaal is now satiated through prayer – perhaps, ironically, more than ever before. Zigmee Wangchuk Bhutia, a senior monk at the Pemayangtse explained that, although the deities are shown to have frightening faces, they are not to be taken as evil. The angry masks are meant to communicate that evil is not something external. They reside within the mind. Just as teachers and parents present angry faces to children to instil discipline, so too do the angry masks. Moreover, other characters of the ritual provide comic relief to lighten the mood. Their tomfoolery is symbolic insofar as it cleans away all sorts of negative emotions through laughter. It is only after these characters have cleansed the place of performance that the deities come out from behind the curtains. Such characters appear in all other Chhams as well.

It is evident that the festival grew in popularity over the centuries, becoming a significant part of the daily life of the people. As people started to associate the celebrations with religion, both the Buddhists and the Lepchas absorbed it into their ritualistic sacred space, developing separate versions that represented opposing rhetorics. Given the absence of any anti-India, pro-monarchy 'forces', the orthodox form of the ritual is more of an expression of nostalgic sentiments,

perhaps a repressed lament for what has passed. Although it has been transformed in the present time into a predominantly entertainment event in a carnival mode, its value as a medium for communicating the religion, culture, politics – and so the history – of Sikkim remains unaltered. Political heads of previous eras had used it as a potent tool of influence, and it continues to serve the present political structures and their appropriation of it as a secular cultural narrative.

Today the festival plays out over a month and, although the whole Chham revisits the former grandeur of the monarchical kingdom, the subtle changes that it has undergone are inadequate for re-invoking any royalist sentiments. Although the Pangtoed Chham is attended by hundreds of people, the rhetoric of 'gods entrusting the king and his warriors with governing the land' has been re-contextualized and turned into a narrative in which the wrathful deities who have been invoked are satiated and appeased simply through prayer and subservience. Furthermore, its grandeur has been re-positioned within celebrations attended by thousands.

What is striking, however, is that the Pang Lhabsol of 2020 was obliged by restrictive Covid measures to dispense with its lay cultural celebrations, leaving only its religious segments held in the monasteries. Renewal of the orthodox religious ritual was to be expected in the circumstances imposed by Covid. The monks meticulously observed the sequences leading to the festival day and, just as meticulously, the prayers within the monasteries, but the ceremony was kept out of bounds for visitors. Moreover, the Pangtoed Chham was not performed.

Various intra-religious connections between different schools of Buddhist philosophy had contributed to the region's ritualistic practices. The co-existence of religious and political narratives in Pang Lhabsol was relevant to the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa Buddhists of the region, many of whom took refuge in India during the 1961 Tibetan exodus accompanying the Dalai Lama. Orthodox Buddhists have a greater sense of attachment to festivals involving the Buddha himself, rather than such deities as Dzonga and Mahakaal who have

localized animistic origins. Buddhist festivals such as the Saga Dawa, Drukpa Tsechi, Lhabhab Dhuechen, and Throngkar Tsechu are celebrated all over the world.³⁸ Now, since Pang Lhabsol has been secularized into a grand cultural celebration embracing all the present communities, the festival makes sure that authentic expressions of Buddhist faith are safeguarded and can flourish.

In fact, the State Government of Sikkim even has an ecclesiastical ministry to protect and preserve these expressions, and this is unique in respect of all the other states of India. Just as the monarchs of previous eras recognized the potency of the ritual, so the present ruling organization has recognized its efficacy in the region, thus using it for its sociopolitical purposes while having no deep connections with the ritual's origins. The enduring popularity of the contemporary Pang Lhabsol festival in some respects ensures that its religious dimension survives with its secular entertainment, even if the former has the capacity to stay distinct.

Notes and References

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1. Francisco Osorio, 'Proposal for Mass *Media Anthropology*', in Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman, eds., *Media Anthropology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005), p. 36–45.

2. The treaty demarcated the Tibetan Bhutias as the father, the Lepchas as the mother, and the Limbus as the child. The uprising of the Mangars, a minority who were also indigenous inhabitants of the region, were defeated in battle by the Bhutias, supported by the local Kirata chieftains, and banished.

3. The three sacred saints of Buddhism who arrived from three separate directions to converge at Yuksom in Sikkim.

4. Jash Raj Subba, *History, Culture, and Customs of Sikkim* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008), p. 207–12.

5. Françoise Pommaret, cited in Mélanie Vandenhelsken, 'The Enactment of Tribal Unity at the Periphery of India: The Political Role of a New Form of the Panglhabsol Buddhist Ritual in Sikkim', *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, XXXVIII (Spring–Summer 2011), p. 83–118 (p. 84).

6. Vandenhelsken, 'The Enactment of Tribal Unity'.

7. Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ernst Steinkellner, cited in *ibid.*, p. 83.

8. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), trans. Laurence Scott, rev. ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Paul Bouissac, 'Semiotics at the Circus', in Paul Cobley and Kalevi Kull, eds., *Semiotics, Communication, and Cognition 3* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), p. 1–197; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Janet Louise Langlois, 'Folklore and Semiotics: An Introduction', *Journal of Folklore Research*, XXII, Nos. 2–3 (May–December 1985), p. 77–83.
9. Elements devoid of meaning that do not adhere to the underlying context. In regard to rituals and folk media forms, these usually occur due to modern innovations fuelled by commercialization.
10. Clive Seale and Martyn Hamersley, cited in Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 226.
11. 'Yuksom' literally means the 'meeting place of the three learned monks', referring to the Gyalwan Lhatsun Chenpo, Ngadak Senpa Chenpo, and Kathok Rikzing Chenpo.
12. Subba, *History, Culture, and Customs of Sikkim*, p. 207–12.
13. The referendum on abolishing the monarchy was held in the Kingdom of Sikkim on 14 April 1975. Although 97.5 per cent of the overall voters were in favour of its merger with India, only 61,133 people out of the approximately half a million people in the region actually voted.
14. Some keep count of the chant cycles by using the beads of the lace held in their hand, while others rotate miniature prayer wheels to spread out the energies emitted from their chant. Apart from presenting their offerings at the altar, they also circle the monastery while rotating their prayer wheels along the designated path – a tradition for Buddhists visiting a monastery on any occasion. Usually, some large prayer wheels are also affixed along the paths for them to use.
15. Rene De Nebesky Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2007).
16. Some of the popular Chhams of the region are Rolchham (Cymbal Dance), Tsamche (Animal-Headed Mask Dance), Shyak (Dance of Horned Animals), Namding (Dances of Winged Birds/Animals), Thakshobalop (Dances of the Beasts), Dhur Chhams (Skeleton Dances), and Shanag (Black Hat Dances). See Subba, *History, Culture, and Customs of Sikkim*, p. 187.
17. 'Kagyed' refers to the eight teachings of Guru Padmasambhava, which are depicted through these dances.
18. Subba, *History, Culture, and Customs of Sikkim*, p. 207–12.
19. Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances*, p. 21.
20. Geoffrey Samuel, cited in Marlene Erschbamer, 'Taming of Supernatural Entities and Animal Sacrifice: The Synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and Local Shamanistic Traditions in North Sikkim (India)', *Études mongoles et sibériennes*, L, No. 1 (2019), p. 5.
21. Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances*, p. 22.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
26. At 8,586 metres, the third highest peak in the world, referred to as 'Kanchenjunga', is a part of this mountain range, spread out over Nepal and India.
27. Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulka, *Kangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*. (Sikkim: Little Kingdom, 2007), p. 4.
28. Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances*, p. 24.
29. Wangchuk, and Zulka, *Kangchendzonga*, p. 257.
30. Nyalchen Thangla, Paw Hungri, Yabnud, and Dzonga are actually the names given to different mountains that surround the region. Given that these are considered to be sacred deities and are manifested through masked theatrical enactments choreographed into ritualistic dances (Chhams), this provides a vast pool of characters who are selectively represented according to the specific context of each ritual. For the Pangtoed Chham, only Dzonga amongst the mountain deities is represented.
31. Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances*, p. 24.
32. Clifford Geertz, cited in Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.
33. Clifford Geertz, cited in Osorio, 'Proposal for Mass Media Anthropology', p. 36. See also Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1997).
34. James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 11–28.
35. Padmasambhava is the primary Guru of the Buddhists in the region. Also referred to as Guru Rinpoche, he founded Vajrayana (tantric) Buddhism in the Himalayan region (spread out from Tibet) and is considered to be the second Buddha.
36. Sarah Evershed and Adam Fish, 'In the Middle of the Lotus: Khecheopalri Lake, a Contested Sacred Land in the Eastern Himalayas of Sikkim', *Bulletin of the National Institute of Ecology*, XVII, No. 1 (2006), p. 51–65.
37. Vibha Arora, 'The Forest of Symbols Embodied in the Tholung Sacred Landscape of North Sikkim, India', *Conservation and Society*, IV, No. 1 (March 2006), p. 55–83.
38. Sagya Dawa is the anniversary of the birth, enlightenment, and *parinirvana* (liberation) of Lord Buddha. Drukpa Tsechi is the day Buddha delivered his first teachings at Sarnath. Lhabhab Dhuechen is celebrated to mark the descent of Lord Buddha from heaven back to earth after imparting his teachings to the gods and liberating his mother from her state of *samskara* (cycle of life, death, and rebirth). Thrungrkar Tsechu is the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava.