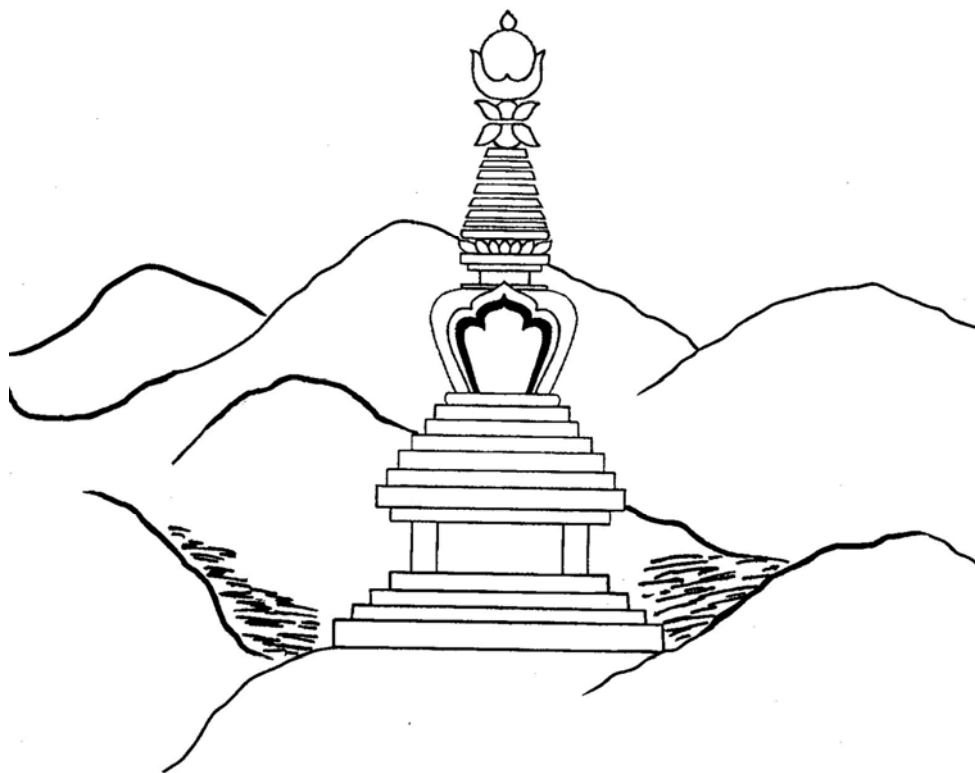


Bulletin of Tibetology



VOLUME 56

No. 1

2025

NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY
GANGTOK, SIKKIM

ISSN 0525-1516

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The Bulletin of Tibetology is published bi-annually by the Director, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim.

Annual subscription rates: South Asia, Rs.150. Overseas, \$20.

Correspondence concerning bulletin subscriptions, changes of address, missing issues, etc., to: Administrative Officer, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok 737102, Sikkim, India.

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Submission guidelines. We welcome submission of articles on any subject of the religion, history, language, art, and culture of the people of the Tibetan cultural area and the Buddhist Himalaya. Articles should be in English or Tibetan, submitted by email and should not exceed 5000 words in length.

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PRINTED IN INDIA AT VEE ENN PRINT-O-PAC, NEW DELHI

BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

Volume 56 Number 1 2025

CONTENTS

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA Editorial	5
ALICE MILLINGTON Recovering the ‘Missing Decade’: The forgotten Eastern Nepalese chapter of lHa btsun nam mkha’ ’jigs med’s geographic biography	9
TENZING LONGSEL BARPHUNGPA Phö Rinpoche (1863/5-1936): Poet, grammarian, teacher and mentor	27
KUNZANG NAMGYAL Buddhism and Social Reform: A layman’s monastery at Lachung	33
RACHEL GUIDONI Alexandra David-Neel’s Journey to Lhasa in 1924: 100 years later, what remains to be discovered?	41
RAMAN MOHORA “According to Our Own Genius”: The assertion of a Sikkimese national identity at the coronation of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1965	65
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	89

EDITORIAL

This issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* offers a selection of five articles of relevance to the region, three of them written by young Sikkimese scholars. It opens with Alice Millington's "Recovering the 'Missing Decade': The forgotten Eastern Nepalese chapter of lHa btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med's biography," where she presents a new interpretation of the enigma surrounding Gyalwa Lhatsün Chenpo's 'missing decade,' the Tibetan master thought to have opened the Hidden Land of Beyul Dremojong in the 17th century.

Alice carried out long term ethnographic field research in the region of Walung in Eastern Nepal, where she witnessed the performance of the Neysol (Tib. *gNas gsol* 'offering to powerful sacred places'), a ritual attributed to Lhatsün Chenpo and his third incarnation Jigme Pawo (b. 1682–1739/40), which is widely performed in Sikkim today. For Sikkimese, the performance of Neysol on *the other side* of Mount Khangchendzonga may come across as a surprise. The ritual is thought to have been composed and first performed by Lhatsün Chenpo *after* he opened the Hidden Land and was welcomed by the mountain deity Dzönga, who then revealed to him the various places of sacred nature within Beyul Dremojong. This resulted in what is thought to have been the first performance of the Neysol in the region, even though the Walung area may not have been acknowledged as distinct from 'Sikkim' in those days. Early in the 18th century, the Neysol became the ritual basis of Pang Lhabsol, Sikkim's national ritual of the land introduced at Pemayangtse monastery by the Third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal (1686–1717) together with Jigme Pawo. But the anomalies don't stop here.

Alice Millington puts forward the idea that Lhatsün Chenpo may have spent a number of years in the Walung area before crossing over to the region that is now known as Sikkim and that the 'missing decade' in Lhatsün Chenpo's biography may well have been spent west of Khangchendzonga, instead of being attributed to scribal errors introduced into the textual records. This alternative explanation based on oral histories sourced from Taplejung District in modern-day Eastern Nepal, attest to a significant period of residence by Lhatsün Chenpo in this region before he entered the Beyul in the 1640s through the Kang

La, the northern gate to Beyul Dremojong. Our attention is thus drawn to a ‘missing chapter,’ rather than a ‘missing decade,’ in Lhatsün Chenpo’s geographic biography.

The second article in this issue by Tenzing Longsel Barphungpa offers a short biography of a little known yet remarkable Rinpoche from Sikkim, who made his mark in Tibet as a grammarian and poet at the end of the 19th century. Ugen Tenzin Dorje Rinpoche, commonly known as Phö Rinpoche, was a Lepcha born at Tumlong, North Sikkim, in 1863/5 into the family of the Khangsar Dewan, a prominent Lepcha minister at the time. Upon his return from Tibet, he established a hermitage at Rey Mindu in Sikkim, which eventually became a full-fledged monastery. He had many students over the years, the most famous being one of the truly great modern masters of Buddhism, Khunnu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen.

The third article by Kunzang Namgyal “Buddhism and Social Reform: A layman’s monastery at Lachung” describes the establishment and functioning of an innovative system of Buddhist Dharma practice by laypeople introduced in the early 1950s by Trulshik Rinpoche at Lachung’s Thangmochi monastery. The author argues that this monastery’s laypeople’s practice may be viewed as a model for other Himalayan monasteries that increasingly face a shortage in the enrolment of novice monks.

The fourth article, by Rachel Guidoni, “Alexandra David-Neel’s Journey to Lhasa in 1924: 100 years later, what remains to be discovered?”, unearths new information about the famous French explorer and Buddhist practitioner’s two-month sojourn in Lhasa during the time of Losar. Travelling with Yongden—her Sikkimese assistant and later adopted son—the pair explored Lhasa and attended the Losar festivities incognito, at a time when no Western woman had ever set foot in the holy city. Drawing on Alexandra David-Neel’s archives, preserved in her former home-turned-museum in the southern town of Digne-les-Bains, Rachel Guidoni sheds light on key details such as the dates of their arrival and departure, where they stayed, what they witnessed, and the hardships they faced due to exhaustion and illness.

The fifth contribution by Raman Mohora with the title “‘According to our own genius’: The Assertion of a Sikkimese National Identity at the Coronation of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1965” examines and offers an analysis of a souvenir book published shortly after the 1965 coronation as an event marking the apogee of the Himalayan kingdom’s assertion of a distinct national identity. The author outlines the circumstances that made it necessary for the ruling family to do so, in

which manner it invoked various forms of ‘tradition’ to reinforce the notion of a shared national identity among Sikkim’s various communities, and how the 1965 event was received by Sikkim’s neighbours and other invited nations.

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa
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RECOVERING THE ‘MISSING DECADE’:

THE FORGOTTEN EASTERN NEPALESE CHAPTER OF
LHA BTSUN NAM MKHA’ ’JIGS MED’S BIOGRAPHY

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The modern history of Sikkim is intertwined with the figure of lHa btsun Nam mkha’ ’jigs med (1597–1650/53), also known (hereafter) as lHa btsun chen po and Kun bzang rnam rgyal. Playing a central role in the topographical imagination of Sikkim as a *sbas yul*, and as the *gter ston* of the *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub* cycle, he is regarded as the chief propagator of Buddhism to this region (Balikci 2008). In Sikkim, his most tangible and enduring legacy is the *gNas gsol* (Earth Propitiation Ritual). This text, which is traditionally imagined as a thanksgiving ritual to the mountain deity mDzo lnga, is the principal ritual basis for the annual *dPang lha gsol* festival at Padma g.Yang rtse monastery.

Limited secondary literature has been published on the life of lHa btsun chen po, despite his significant role within the Nyingma tradition. One notable exception in the English language is the work of historian Saul Mullard, particularly his monograph *Opening the Hidden Land* (2011). In his varied works on Sikkimese historiography, Mullard examines a series of dates in textual chronologies of lHa btsun chen po’s life, which he describes as “problematic” (Mullard 2005a: 75), to the extent that they may challenge the established narrative of Sikkimese state formation. This chronological issue—essentially amounting to a ‘missing decade’ in lHa btsun chen po’s documented history—has led scholars to assume that scribal errors were introduced into the textual record when recounting the opening of the sBas yul ’Bras mo ljongs and other key events in lHa btsun chen po’s life.

Whilst scribal inaccuracies and other copying errors do abound in Tibetan texts from this period (see Beyer 1992), no alternative explanations for this ‘missing decade’ in lHa btsun chen po’s life have been discussed academically, beyond simply human error (Mullard 2011: 127–8). This paper introduces an alternative explanation by turning to oral histories sourced from Taplejung District in modern-day Eastern Nepal. These accounts attest to a significant period of residence by lHa btsun chen po in this region, as narrated by local residents. The area in question, locally

known as the Walung *panchgaon*, falls directly on the path that lHa btsun chen po would have taken on his route from Kong po to Sikkim to access the northern gate of the sBas yul 'Bras mo ljongs. Based on primary field research conducted with residents of the Walung *panchgaon*, and a subsequent visit to Gangtok, this article presents a new interpretation of the enigma surrounding lHa btsun chen po's 'missing decade.'

Not only did Walung fall under the claims of the Sikkimese kingdom until the territory was formally ceded to the Gorkhas, these two communities—now separated by national borders—retain a crucial cultural and religious connection in their performance of the *gNas gsol* ritual ascribed to lHa btsun chen po and his third incarnation 'Jigs med dpa' bo (b. 1682–1739/40). The ritual defines these territories as the possessions of the mountain deity Gangs chen mdzod lnga, which features in the line of sight of some settlements in the *panchgaon*. Nonetheless, Walung's earliest history remains patchy, and it is not precisely known when the valley was first settled, although estimates range from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century (Bista 1967; Saxer 2023).

Similarly, despite lHa btsun chen po's prominence as one of the most celebrated figures in the Eastern Himalayas, historical details of his life remain sparse, except for foundational elements such as his date and place of birth (Mullard 2011). However, when read alongside the parallel absences in Walung's history, their entangled stories can offer clues to 'missing chapters' in both chronologies. Since the earliest Nepalese record of Walung dates from Pratap Singh Shah's reign in 1775 (Wangyal 2009), the various accounts of lHa btsun chen po discussed in this article might, further, crucially date the settlement of the Walung valley to the early seventeenth century.

The stories of lHa btsun chen po that have thus far been subject to academic study are forms of Tibetan life-writing known as *rnam thar*. Such texts trace the attainment of enlightenment by the biographical subject, and are usually written to give authority to a lineage's history, or to inspire a reader on their own spiritual path (Erschbamer 2018). However, less attention has been given to the physical paths taken by these figures in their journeys across Tibet and the Himalaya, particularly when these are not explicitly detailed in the final hagiographical texts. In recognition of the deep and generative connection between Tibetan life-writing and sacred geography, Andrew Quintman (2008) frames Tibetan life-writing as a 'geographic biography,' a term I utilise throughout this paper. By drawing attention to a region of the Himalayas which is rarely detailed in academic scholarship, nor studies of Buddhist hagiographies—but which undoubtedly fell on the path taken by many religious practitioners and even

the rNam rgyal dynasty themselves whilst travelling between Tibet and Sikkim (*RHoS*¹ 2021: 394–6)—this article addresses significant lacunae in both Sikkim Studies and in reconstructions of the lives of major Buddhist masters: in this case, that of lHa btsun chen po.

THE HISTORICAL POSITIONALITY OF TAPLEJUNG DISTRICT

This article introduces—potentially for the first *time*, to many students of Sikkim Studies—a region known locally as Walung *panchgaon*, situated in Taplejung District of northeastern Nepal. The term *panchgaon* refers to five highland villages with religious, linguistic, and political ties: Walung, Yangma, Ghunsa [Khambachen], Lungthung, and Lelep. These villages do not just share close geographical proximity to Sikkim, but significant religious and cultural connections. Although these are not the only settlements in upper Taplejung, they are the only Nepalese villages that annually perform the *gNas gsol*. Between November 2021 and May 2022, I conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Walung, the central node of the historical *panchgaon*, with additional time spent in Yangma.

Walung is located in the upper Tamor Valley, approximately 20 km south of Tipta-La, a key border pass along the historic trade route connecting Shigatse and Kolkata. The district also shares an international border with Sikkim, which is easily accessible on foot. Due to this strategic historical and geographical location, Walung served as a crossroads for four major powers for centuries: Tibet to the north, the expanding Gorkha kingdom to the west, Sikkim to the east, and Limbuwan to the south. While in the early seventeenth century, Walung may have nominally fallen under the Limbuwan domain of ‘*Pallo Kirat*’ under the Kingdom of Yangwarok—which spanned northern Taplejung and included the Khangchendzönga massif—Wangyal (2009: 579) posits that the valley likely “never drew [their] fancy” as it was agriculturally barren and thus “monetarily unproductive” within the Limbu economic framework. Conversely, according to orthodox historical accounts of Sikkim, after the sBas yul was opened and the Chos rgyal’s authority assured:

¹ *The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of the House of Namgyal* (abbr. *RHoS*), John A. Ardussi, Anna Balikci-Denjongpa and Per K. Sørensen. The original Tibetan text, completed in 1908 and known as the *Denjong Gyalrab*, was written by Chogyal Thutub Namgyal and Gyalmo Yeshe Dolma, with a preliminary English translation known as *The History of Sikkim*, completed in 1911 by Kazi Dawasamdup.

Hence, from that time forward the borders of Sikkim over which he held sway were as follows: Dibda La [Tipta-La] in the upper direction, and from there west to Timar Chorten, and the Arun River, including Zhingsa, Grogpe, Walung, Yangmag, Khangchen and Yalung; thence in the south as far as Naxalbari, and Titalia; and in the east at Tegong La. (*RHoS* 2021: 104)

Even after the Gorkha conquest over this region was complete, this region remained in Sikkim's economic orbit, although the Kingdom's *de facto* hold over this entire territory—as with many of its other claimed regions—was likely “tenuous at best” (Mullard 2011: 3). As late as 1848, Joseph Dalton Hooker reported that the Walung 'go ba (headman) claimed to pay taxes to both Nepal and Sikkim (Hooker 1855). In 1892, when the ninth Chos rgyal fled Sikkim² with his family for his estate in rDo phra, it was in Walung that he sought refuge. The group was “cordially received” by the local residents, although permission for the Chos rgyal to stay in Walung longer term was denied by the Government of Nepal (*RHoS* 2021: 394–95). Despite these links, scholarship of Sikkim generally neglects ceded territories like Walung,³ which might fall under the rubric of ‘Greater Sikkim.’

However, a far more significant testament to lHa btsun chen po's presence in the Walung *panchgaon* than any historical territorial claims is the continued annual performance of *gNas gsol* in this region. Unlike the *dPang lha gsol*, which is typically celebrated in the seventh Tibetan month in Sikkim, *gNas gsol* is performed in the third Tibetan month in the Walung *panchgaon*. The substantive differences between Walung's *gNas gsol* and that practised in Sikkim will be the subject of a separate article. The uptake of *gNas gsol* was, further, likely influenced by the later presence of 'Jigs med dpa' bo in Walung, for which textual records exist (*RHoS* 2021: 157, 160). But taken together, these circumstances suggest some validity in the idea that lHa btsun chen po spent time in this region prior to opening the sBas yul—which may not have been acknowledged as distinct from ‘Sikkim’ in contemporaneous texts.

² This was not the first time that Walung featured on the direct path of flight for a Chos ryal escaping Sikkim. During the Bhutanese invasion of Sikkim (c. 1700) the third Chos ryal, Phyag rdor nam rgyal, fled Sikkim by crossing through Ilam and Walung (*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*: 65, cited in Mullard, 2011: 163).

³ There is far more to be said about the longstanding historical relationship between Walung and Sikkim, both in terms of political and economic ties, and religious connections including the *gNas gsol* ritual. However, reflecting the focus of this article on lHa btsun chen po, these elements will be discussed more comprehensively in future works.

THE LIFE OF LHATSÜN NAMKHA JIGME

According to his autobiographical works, lHa btsun chen po was born in an estate called gZhis rab in Byar yul, a region of southern Tibet bordering modern Arunachal Pradesh. At the age of eleven, he committed his life to pursuing the Buddha Dharma, and after six unsatisfying years spent in a hermitage, he embarked on a lengthy journey to Kong po (Mullard 2005b). In the years that followed, he received teachings from an impressive array of lineage holders in the Nyingma [and Bonpo] traditions, to the point that, upon his meeting with the ‘Great Fifth’ in 1651, lHa btsun chen po was “revered by the Dalai Lama as a lineage holder of the *Byang gter* and [had become] an important *gter ston* in his own right” (Mullard 2011: 121).

However, at an uncertain point in the 1630s or 1640s, lHa btsun chen po fled Tibet. His own account in *Mkha’ spyod sprul pa’i pho brang ’bras mo gshongs su har sangs sgyu ma’i rol rtse kyis lam yig* (hereafter LTLY), explains his reasons as:

Furthermore, during the time of travelling from the eastern region of Kong yul, and being saddened, generally, by what is equal to the degeneration period resulting from the general impermanent and changing nature of all time [...] to whomsoever I spoke, hearing only words of suffering and pain and so I have realised and understood the prophecies, by other eminent masters, that it is necessary for sentient beings of the *dus mtha’* to flee to the hidden lands. (LTLY 426–427, quoted in Mullard 2011: 123).

lHa btsun chen po’s flight is recounted as a response to the appearance of signs predicted in Buddhist literature regarding the end times, or *dus mtha’*. In accordance with prophetic tradition, at the onset of *dus mtha’*, one should flee to the border regions and hidden lands. Mullard (2011: 123) describes the political climate in Tibet during the late 1630s and early 1640s as one of “extreme upheaval, both in terms of political organisation and religious participation”. Indeed, Martin Saxer (2023: 32) speculates that Walung’s first inhabitants were sourced from the mid-seventeenth century “wave of Tibetan populations settling along the southern flanks of the central and eastern Himalayas” that fled in response to political changes, including the expansion of the Qing empire and growing ascendancy of the dGe lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism. These developments saw the Fifth Dalai Lama installed as the ruler of a unified Tibet thanks to the armed intervention of Guushi Khan and the Hoshuud Mongols (Diemberger 2007). As the dGe lugs pas sought to consolidate

their authority, members of other religious traditions were widely persecuted (Erschbamer 2018), including the Nyingma school to which lHa btsun chen po belonged.

It is under these tumultuous political and religious conditions that lHa btsun chen po departed Kong po in pursuit of “border regions and hidden lands,” known in Tibetan as *sbas yul*. In Sikkimese origin stories, this search provided the impetus for the greatest achievements for which lHa btsun chen po is credited: the revelation and opening of the sBas yul ’Bras mo ljong; the creation of a sacred environment according to Buddhist ideals of the universe, the establishment of Buddhism as a political entity under the leadership of the Namgyal dynasty, and the conversion of the indigenous population (Balicki 2008). These accomplishments are highlighted in *The History of Sikkim*, completed in 1908 by Sikkim’s ninth Chos rgyal, Thutob Namgyal, alongside his queen Yeshe Dolma. This work, a blend of “cosmologies, stories, legends, anecdotes and excerpts of *gnas yig*, *gter ma* and Tibetan historical corpus” (Steinmann 1998: 117) is considered the canonical account of Sikkim’s foundation. It details the transformation of a physical centre—the country with its mountains and people—into a spiritual centre to promote the flourishing of Buddhism (*ibid.*).

This basic narrative of lHa btsun chen po opening the sBas yul ’Bras mo ljong is reasonably consistent across sources. However, Mullard (2011: 124) devotes an entire chapter of *Opening the Hidden Land* to resolving a “chronological discrepancy” that recurs in canonical Sikkimese accounts. Predominately, this inconsistency is an issue of dating. In his autobiographical works, lHa btsun chen po first lists a *specific* date in LTLY (437.6–438.1), noting his attendance at a tantric feast in Tibet on the tenth day of the fifth month of the Fire Rat (*me byi*) year (1636 AD). In the following pages, he departs for Sikkim on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, presumably in the same year. No further dates are given before his appearance in Nor bu sgang, within the Yog bsam valley, which are referenced as being in the tenth month—again, without a cited year. The next appearance of a *full* date is the first day of the eleventh month of the Fire Dog (*me khyi*) year—early 1647 AD. This, Mullard points out, would imply that the journey to Sikkim from Kong po took ten years, “which, even in the seventeenth century, is a very long time, and thus highly unlikely” (2011: 127). Accordingly, he suggests a scribal error, where “*me*

khyi” was mistakenly written instead of “*me byi*,” due to their similar pronunciation in certain dialects.⁴

For Mullard, such is the unlikelihood of this lengthy interval between IHa btsun chen po’s departure from Kong po and the events in Sikkim that “on this basis alone we may have sufficient doubt to question the accuracy of the Fire Rat date” (*ibid.*). The conviction behind this assertion is perplexing, given that in an earlier article about IHa btsun chen po’s life, he notes that “as with many histories of Tibetan religious figures, he [did] not go directly to Kong po, but instead [found] himself wandering through central Tibet” for over five years (Mullard 2005b: 34). In the remainder of the chapter, Mullard uses this chronological inconsistency to debunk the canonical Sikkimese narrative which registers IHa btsun chen po’s presence at the enthronement of the first Chos rgyal,⁵ which according to official state histories happened in 1642, eventually demoting him from ‘Patron Saint’ status to “a relatively minor, although still important, religious figure in Sikkim” (2011: 130).

Taking several discrepancies of chronology into account, a revised year for the coronation has been proposed as 1646⁶—suggestion which significantly (but not exclusively) draws on likelihood of these scribal errors in LTLY (see Mullard 2011: 128–33). However, if our objective moves away from establishing the historical accuracy of narratives of Sikkimese state formation, and towards recovering missing elements in the life of IHa btsun chen po, the date of importance to verify is not necessarily that of the coronation, but his departure from Kong po.⁷ Significantly, this part of his life remains missing in other hagiographies beyond LTLY. For

⁴ A further possibility suggested by John Ardussi (*pers. comm*) is that, in the *khyugs* script in which IHa btsun chen po’s original works may have been written, *khyi* and *byi* can look very similar, which later scribes may have miscopied.

⁵ There are other possibilities that have been raised in the debate surrounding IHa btsun chen po’s presence at the coronation: firstly, that the date of 1642 was fixed retrospectively to more closely associate the formation of the Sikkimese kingdom with the 1642 establishment of the dGa’ ldan pho brang in Lhasa; and secondly, that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal had indeed obtained political power over an area of West Sikkim by 1642, but that only in 1646 or 1647 did an event that could be equated to a ‘coronation’ take place, which IHa btsun chen po attended (Mullard 2005a). Neither of these possibilities conflict with the point that this article puts forward. It is important to note that my concern relates to dating his *departure* from Kong po, rather than the timings of events on the western side of Khangchendzönga.

⁶ This date is also adopted in Dudjom Rinpoche’s account of IHa btsun chen po’s life (Rinpoche 1991: 820)

⁷ In *’Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (2003) published by The Tsuklakhang Trust; printed in Nepal at Amdo Gomang Computer Parkhang, the date of IHa btsun chen po’s departure is given as 1627, but the text is known to contain many errors and deletions.

instance, in folio 130 of his autobiographical work *Kun bzang rnam par thar pa*, lHa btsun chen po refers to himself aged 21, then in the following pages recounts his activities in Sikkim—which by all accounts, he did not reach until his forties (Mullard 2005b: 35). The concern of this article, accordingly, departs from the ‘Coronation Conundrum’ that is debated in Mullard’s (2003, 2005b, 2011) writings on early Sikkimese state formation. Importantly, I emphasise that the contention surrounding the dating of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal’s enthronement—whether this be 1642 or 1646—does not preclude lHa btsun chen po’s stated date of *departure* from Kong po (1636) being correct.

Indeed, supported by oral and social memories preserved by the Walung community in Eastern Nepal, I suggest that this perceived *chronological* inconsistency could be accounted for by a *geographical* inconsistency. The *History of Sikkim* recalls how in 1642,⁸ lHa btsun chen po attempted to enter the sBas yul through its northern gate (Khang La). In the process, he was challenged by an emanation of mDzo lnga, who had been commissioned as a guard by Guru Rinpoche. In a dossier compiled to nominate the Khangchendzönga National Park (KNP) to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Balikei-Denjongpa and Lachungpa (2016: 101) narrate this critical moment:

When Lhatsün Chenpo first arrived from Tibet, it is said that Khangchendzönga tested him before appearing to him in the form of a white goose and giving him permission to open the gate to the beyul. In his welcoming discourse, the mountain deity revealed the various places of sacred nature, and old people believe this to be where the Neysol ritual was first composed.

However, when lHa btsun chen po “first” arrived from Tibet, he did not immediately manifest at the gate of the sBas yul, but undoubtedly passed on foot through what is today northern Taplejung. Indeed, the Khang La pass is situated within the modern-day Sirijungha Rural Municipality, which does not share boundaries with Tibet. This draws our attention to a ‘missing chapter’ in lHa btsun chen po’s geographic biography. A question that remains unasked, and unanswered, in his other *rnam thar*—which are typically focused either on the opening of the sBas yul or the ‘treasure texts’ he revealed as a *gter ston*—is: what happened in the interim?

⁸ Interestingly, Steinmann’s article (1998: 131) about *The History of Sikkim* also quotes “*me kyī*” as the year of lHa btsun chen po’s departure from Kong po, whilst also asserting his presence at the 1642 coronation.

During my field study of Walung's *gNas gsol*, a possible answer came to light. When asked about the origins of the festival, one resident explained:

There was a monk from Tibet called Gyalwa Lhatsün Chenpo, who came to Walung, and he settled in Simbuk near Yangma. He lived there for many years but was planning to go to Sikkim. As he prepared to leave for Sikkim, all the villagers from Simbuk requested him not to leave. He suggested that, in his absence, they should perform a ritual [he had authored] called Nesöl. This suggestion satisfied them, and he left for Sikkim.

If lHa btsun chen po remained in Simbuk for “many years,” as several Walung residents asserted, this allows for the possibility that the Fire Rat date given in LTLY is accurate, and that the interval between his departure from Kong po and activities in (modern-day) Sikkim was indeed close to a decade. Indeed, despite the absence of this stay in Sikkimese accounts and his official hagiographies, Walung collective memory recalls a decisive imprint left by lHa btsun chen po on the ritual and architectural landscape of upper Taplejung, attributed to an extended stay in the region. Most notably in the *panchgaon*, a powerful *mchod rten* located at the approach to Yangma village is ascribed to lHa btsun chen po:

Lhatsün Namkha Jigme stayed in Yangma and built the chörten. It is thought to be as old as Boudha's, and the level of blessings it contains is the same. The only difference is that Boudha Chörten is in a metropolitan centre, whereas Yangma is at the corner of the world—nobody knows about it. But the blessings are the same. It was built and blessed by Gyalwa Lhatsün Namkha Jigme.

One morning in June 1980, the ‘blessings’ of the *mchod rten* were tested when Nangama Pokhari, a glacial lake located 600m above Yangma, catastrophically burst after an avalanche. As floodwater and debris cascaded down the valley, eyewitnesses recalled how it seemed certain that Yangma would be engulfed—until the deluge suddenly diverted as it neared the *mchod rten*. Several barley fields were inundated with debris, but the residential area of the village was entirely spared. Although it was closest to the source of the outburst, Yangma suffered significantly less damage than several downstream villages, which residents attributed to the powerful protective influence of the *mchod rten*'s blessings. When a religious figure consecrates a sacred site, a generative exchange takes place between the body of the saint and the terrain, instilling it with ‘residual potency’ (Huber 1997). The 1980 flood consolidated this belief, and it is

thought that the village stands today as testament to lHa btsun chen po's former presence.

More generally, it was common for Tibetan yogins, religious practitioners and ascetics in this period to establish temporary residences in monasteries, for the purposes of teachings or meditation, whilst undertaking long distance journeys (Larsson and Edholm 2021). In his own writings,⁹ lHa btsun chen po attests to this: “Whenever I lived, I gave uninterruptedly empowerments and teachings. [...] I turned the wheel of Dharma without interruption constantly for the benefit of many beings” (quoted in de Micheli 2022: 19). Moreover, from a regional perspective, Ehrhard (2008: 19) notes that Walung's monastery—named bDe skyid chos gling—was considered “special not only in virtue of its physical location [at the boundaries of Nepal, Sikkim and Tibet] but also in a religious sense”, as a “branch sacred site” (*gnas lag*) of the sBas yul 'Bras mo ljongs.¹⁰ Historical records document that it attracted visiting lamas from areas as distant as dPal ri in Central Tibet (*ibid.*). Parts of its structure have been archeologically dated at over 450 years old, and a former monastic centre (now in ruins) existed in sKyid sbug¹¹—some five hours' walk to the north—significantly before the current monastery was built. It is not only plausible, but likely, that lHa btsun chen po would have paused here along the way. Why, then, might possible time spent in this area be absent in lHa btsun chen po's existing *rnam thar*?

RECONCILING RNAM THAR WITH CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY

In Tibetan and Himalayan historical narratives, it is common for textual and oral sources to significantly diverge. In his study of the founding of Lubra Village, southern Mustang, Charles Ramble encounters a similar problem. Quoting Redfield, he draws attention to an imputed opposition between “the great tradition” that is preserved in historical texts and religious biographies, and “the little tradition” that “keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in village communities” (Ramble 1983: 268). Which of these contains the ‘truth’ of historical circumstance? Of course, as both Ramble and Redfield acknowledge, “the two traditions are interdependent” (*ibid.*), yet in practice, written accounts are given

⁹ Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med. “srid pa la nges par skyobs,” (f. 141.2)

¹⁰ The contents of documents found in bDe skyid chos gling translated by Ehrhard (2008) further indicate that the monastery was historically administered by religious masters with close ties to both the Sikkimese court and the central government in Lhasa.

¹¹ Possibly sKyid phug

predominance by scholars. Pearce (2020: 270) highlights tendencies within the academic discipline of Tibetan Studies to consider oral accounts relevant only “insofar as they relate to the primary, textual reality,” yet many ‘textual realities’ are impossible to reconcile chronologically.

The shortcomings of using Tibetan literary sources as a basis for historical reconstructions are well established. Similar discrepancies exist in *rnam thar* of even the most venerated Tibetan figures, from Mar pa the Translator to Mi la ras pa (Ducher 2017). In fact, Diemberger comments, Tibetan biographers routinely struggled to reconcile “textual sources that were often clearly at odds with each other” concerning the lives of their most famous masters (2007: 276). Mullard (2005b: 32) himself acknowledges that textual sources can be “deeply misleading” as foundations of historical enquiry; that events are regularly recounted with “a disregard for chronological sequence” or are elided altogether in *rnam thar*. He even goes as far as to claim that “Tibetans are adverse [sic] to dates” (*ibid.*). In his later 2011 analysis, then, it is unclear why he holds the dates and sequences established in LTLY as sacrosanct, even when there is cause to doubt their plausibility. For instance, Mullard (2005b: 36–7) reflects that it is “curious” that lHa btsun chen po would choose to remain in Kong po “during the most turbulent time of the Tibetan civil war” yet leave several years *after* the central Tibetan state was established in 1642.

More instructive, as Ramble (1983: 269) suggests, is to learn from “the stress they place on different aspects of the same story in accordance with their own interests.” For instance, Balikci and Lachungpa’s passage above—which glosses over lHa btsun chen po’s journey through northern Taplejung straight to his arrival at the gate of the sBas yul—squares with the intention to elevate the KNP, which falls entirely within India’s political borders, to the prestigious status of a UNESCO ‘Mixed’ World Heritage Site. Events which occurred outside of its boundaries are simply not relevant to the objective. Moreover, the dossier relies heavily on *The History of Sikkim* as a primary source for this passage. Although Walung did fall within Sikkim’s political territory at various points until 1816, by the time *The History of Sikkim* was compiled in 1908, the territory west of the Mechi River had been ceded to Nepal almost a century before and had thus long been outside the Chos rgyal’s sphere of influence.

This would not be the first time that a Tibetan saint’s *rnam thar* was reconfigured in response to fluctuating [geo]political and religious imperatives, as Quintman (2008) demonstrates persuasively for Mi la ras pa’s biographical tradition. Authoring a biography is an act of “landscaping” the subject’s life, of “laying alternative ground lines and marking new territories” (Quintman 2008: 404). For instance, the first

concerted attempt to map the sites of Mi la ras pa's life occurred in the thirteenth century, with a clear intent to demonstrate how his activities "systematically claimed large areas of Tibet's southwest as part of the bKa' brgyud sectarian landscape" (*ibid.*). Early compositions of Mi la ras pa's biography are thus inscribed largely in geopolitical terms, delimiting the boundaries of a Buddhist terrain aligned with the religious tradition of his followers.

In the case of lHa btsun chen po's life stories, the same might be said concerning the legacy of his third incarnation, 'Jigs med dpa' bo. Prior to his arrival in Sikkim in 1709, the dominant religious traditions in the Kingdom were attributed to mNga' bdag phun tshogs rig 'dzin—whose presence and role in the first Chos rgyal's enthronement features more decisively in early textual sources (Mullard 2011). However, with the mNga' bdag tradition in decline following the War of Succession with Bhutan (1699–1708),¹² the arrival of 'Jigs med dpa' bo catalysed a resurgence in the ritual traditions associated with lHa btsun chen po, including the *gNas gsol*. Indeed, during his own lifetime, lHa btsun chen po "never fully received recognition" (*ibid.*: 133) for his religious accomplishments. It was the physical travels and spiritual deeds of his later incarnation that ultimately "reshap[ed] the religious map of Sikkim with Padma g.Yang rtse at the centre" (*ibid.*: 177). Indeed, the promotion of the lHa btsun tradition in Sikkim by 'Jigs med dpa' bo was in itself a biographical act, reinscribing the life of his former incarnation into the sacred geography of the sBas yul.

Departing from the static form of material texts, the biographical tradition itself is dynamically responsive to the concerns of the author(s). In her research on Chos kyi sGron ma's biography, Diemberger (2007) references the 'multivocality' of biographical texts: that the composition of *rnam thar* does not end with a completed manuscript, but incrementally continues after the subject's death. Like tree rings, the 'core' biographical details can become encased by successive 'growth layers' that each bear characteristics of the era's politicoreligious climate. The historical 'truth' can be concealed by these biographical additions, but the core continues to shape the development and growth of further layers. The light and shaded areas of the tree rings reflect the required omissions and additions demanded of the prevailing 'climate' of the time. The objective, as in

¹² Several accounts suggest that the mNga' bdag family held the role of Royal Preceptor, but that after a purported affair between mNga' bdag rin chen mgon and Phan bde dbang mo, the half-sister of the third Chos rgyal who was considered responsible for the Bhutanese invasion of Sikkim, this position and the mNga' bdag lineage was tainted by disrepute (see Mullard, 2011: 164).

dendrochronology, is not to extract an intact, original ‘core,’ but a cross-section of history and place as influenced by changing conditions.

Indeed, whereas the most influential biographies of Mi la ras pa, Heruka’s *Life* and *Collected Songs* (completed 1488), comprise comprehensive “geographic atlases” (Quintman 2008: 380), the earliest texts name almost no specific locations; subsequent writings record incrementally more detailed resolutions of space. In several cases, places mentioned in earlier versions are “literally wiped off the map” in later biographies (*ibid.*). I suggest that this is what happened to upper Taplejung in canonical Sikkimese *rnam thar*—but where might we find alternative sources?

In April 2023, during a visit to Gangtok, I was introduced to Lopen Jigme Wangchuk, an expert on lHa btsun chen po and the *gNas gsol* text. During our meeting, he expressed surprise that *gNas gsol* was practised in the Walung *panchgaon*. Although *gNas gsol* had been “his life’s work” for seven years of study, he had never visited the Nepalese side of Khangchendzönga, nor did he know any Walung-ngas personally. Despite this, his familiarity with lHa btsun chen po’s collected works registered instant recognition of the place names:

Walung and Yangma were the first places that lHa btsun chen po visited. There are nine or ten volumes of lHa btsun chen po’s collected works. I have read everything four times, and these places are mentioned. Yangma is in the text under two names: ‘yang mag nyams dag tshal,’ and ‘yang mag lha’i lding khang.’ Walung appears as ‘zhing sa wa lung.’

According to the texts, he said, in the seventeenth century, Yangma was home to “thousands” who received lHa btsun chen po’s teachings and was the site where he composed hundreds of sacred songs (*mgur*). A later search of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) for “*yang mag*” revealed a colophon¹³ that confirms lHa btsun chen po visited Yangma before opening the sBas yul. Even more significantly, Lopen Jigme Wangchuk suggested that *gNas gsol* might have originated in the Walung *panchgaon*:

The first Nesöl composed by lHa btsun chen po was composed in Walung or Yangma, that’s for sure. There are two main volumes of the Nesöl text that we call ‘mother and son’ [...]. The longer text that is practised today came after the arrival of Jigme Pawo, and other elements incorporated, and it is now called the Denjong Nesöl. [But] the first Nesöl text, which is 5-6 pages long and is not [the] elaborate ritual [that is practised today], could have been composed in Walung or Yangma.

¹³ (*Rang shar gnyug ma’i thol glu zin bris* ff. 46).

This converges significantly with a narrative given by a 65-year-old from Yangma, who attested the same sequence of composition:

A monk came from Tibet and stayed in Nup and Simbuk. It was during his stay there that he thought of establishing a religious festival called Nesöl. Everybody in Yangma asked the reasons for performing Nesöl, and he replied that it ensures good weather, good cropping, and no diseases for humans or animals. After this, he went to Sikkim. He also went to some other places in the area and made lots of mendang on the way. At that time, there was no Nesöl in Sikkim, but after this journey, the festival spread there.

Notably, even though one Walung monk recounted a visit by 'Jigs med dpa' bo to the erstwhile monastic centre of sKyid sbug, it was an enduring residence by lHa btsun chen po in the region that persisted more vividly in local memory. Because I met Lopen Jigme Wangchuk when my time in Sikkim was nearing its end, our collaboration was cut prematurely short, and I was not able to view his collection of texts myself. Nevertheless, the moniker¹⁴ he ascribed to Walung, "*zhing sa wa lung*," also appears in an 1882 text translated by Ehrhard concerning this region (2008: 14). Moreover, in nearby Ghunsa—which also annually performs the *gNas gsol* in the third Tibetan month—an enduring historical memory of lHa btsun chen po's presence here is also shared by residents (Diemberger 1994). Meanwhile, Bhutia (2021: 272) notes that the colophon of the *gNas gsol* text reports that it was recorded and edited at Nyams dga' tshal at the base of Khangchendzönga in 1641—again, disputing Mullard's chronological revisions.

Nonetheless, my principal concern here is not necessarily to 'correct' details of lHa btsun chen po's biography, but also to bring aspects of Walung's religious heritage to light that have not been addressed in other ethnographies. Indeed, Quintman (2013a: 472) speaks of the need to shift from "positivist concerns of separating historical truth from pious fiction," and instead turn our attention to the "local epistemologies" fostered by *rnam thar*: how life stories are infused with meaning over time, and across various places. Although Walung is no longer part of Sikkim, life stories of lHa btsun chen po—and the continued practice of *gNas gsol*—have preserved cultural and religious connections between the sites even as their political lives diverged. Just as *gNas gsol* ritually defines both Walung and

¹⁴ The term *zhing sa* likely does not—as Ehrhard (2008: 16) suggests—refer to a region of "arable land," but to the Shingsa region of the Arun valley, reflecting the considerable regional importance of the 'go ba (headmen) of these two areas at this time.

Sikkim as within the possession and influence of mDzo lnga, the life of lHa btsun chen po has also become “a narrative that [holds] them together,” as Diemberger (2007: 5) observes of the followers of Chos kyi sGron ma’s biographical tradition. Indeed, lHa btsun chen po has shaped “a foundational character for the community of [his] disciples” (*ibid.*) in both Walung and Sikkim.

Above all, following Quintman (2013b: 3), this article seeks to broaden received notions of what constitutes Tibetan sacred biography, by both bringing oral accounts and landscape readings to the fore—elements which are particularly lacking in histories of Sikkim (Mullard 2011: 193) as well as in those of its understudied neighbours. It also intends to resist tendencies in Tibetan studies for textual interpretations to take precedence over primary field realities. Although the *gNas gsol* festival in the Walung *panchgaon* is not discussed in depth here, owing to limitations of scope, its association with lHa btsun chen po has helped sustain his presence in Walung’s social and historical memory, which has in turn kept unwritten recollections of activities within his own lifetime alive. Indeed, collective memories of lHa btsun chen po may have provided the first mention of Walung on the historical record—in addition to their major ritual tool for managing the environment.

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PHÖ RINPOCHE (1863/5–1936):
POET, GRAMMARIAN, TEACHER AND MENTOR¹

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Phö Rinpoche Ugyen Lama (1863/5–1936)²

¹ This article is a brief account of the life and works of Phö Rinpoche, written with the help of whatever little exists in writing about him and interviews with people, including members of his family. However, it is by no means exhaustive and suffers from lacunas aplenty. It is hoped that these gaps can be filled by researchers in the future.

² Photograph courtesy Tashi Tsering, Amnye Machen Institute.

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous peoples of Sikkim, the Lepchas or Rongs, came into contact with Tibetan Buddhism properly around the 13th century. Prior to this, they belonged to an ancient culture, as part of the intricate web of nature. An animist faith that conversed with the spirits residing in caves and mountains through mediums or shamans, not very unlike their contemporary cultures up and down the Americas, across Africa, Australia and that wide expanse of Eurasian flatland, the Steppes. With the advent of Tibetan Buddhism and modernism, this belief system is challenged at best and struggling to survive at worst.

In this context, it is remarkable to find in history, a Lepcha ecclesiast belonging to the cultural hinterlands of Tibet rising to recognition, respect and renown within the cultural heartland. There have been precious few Sikkimese who have left a mark on Tibetan Buddhist culture, let alone a Lepcha. One such was the remarkable Phö (Tib. Bod) Rinpoche.

Ugen Tenzin Dorje Rinpoche (Tib. O rgyan bstan 'dzin rdo rje Rin po che), commonly known as Phö Rinpoche, was born in 1863/5 at Tumlong, North Sikkim, into the Samdrub Khangsar (Tib. bSam 'grub Khang gсар) family. He was one of the six sons of the Lepcha Khangsar Athing Lhundup (Tib. Khang gсар A mthing Lhun grub), popularly known as Khangsar Dewan, a prominent minister in nineteenth century Sikkim. The Dewan and his brother, Phodong Lama, were instrumental in the rapid changes that took place in the social, political and economic spheres with the advent of British supremacy in Sikkim, circa 1880s, and the huge demographic changes as a result of immigration.

Phö Rinpoche joined Phodong Gonpa, one of the first Kagyu monasteries in Sikkim, and eventually rose to become its chief abbot (Tib. rDo rje slob spon). In his search for teachers and learning, he had to venture far beyond Sikkim. By some accounts, he was accompanied on some of these journeys by two of the Great Meditators (Tib. sGom chen) of Sikkimese Buddhism, the Labrang Gomchen and Lingdok Gomchen.

TIME IN TIBET

Phö Rinpoche's desire for knowledge led him all over Tibet and he ultimately joined the Sera monastic university in Lhasa. He excelled in his studies and became a well-known literary scholar of Tibetan Buddhism.

During his stay at Sera, he wrote several treatises on Buddhist philosophy, which are included in the syllabus of this university till today. He was a

poet as well and his poetry has been recorded in three volumes. The first volume was published by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in 1968 as *rGyan gyi bstan bcos me long gi 'grel chen dbyangs can ngag gi rol mtsho'i snying po bsdu pa blo gsal bung ba rol pa'i dga' tshal zhes bya ba las le'u dang po bzhugs so*. Barmiak Athing Rai Bahadur Tashi Dadul Densapa O.B.E. (1902–1988)³ wrote the introduction to the first volume, in which he mentions that Phö Rinpoche wrote this first volume while at Samye monastery. This introduction was written on the 27th day of the 5th month of the Earth Monkey year of the Lunar Calendar, corresponding to July 22nd, 1968.

A commentator from Kham, Khamtrul Chokyi Nyima (1730–1779), also known as Khams 'grel, had written a commentary on the 6th–7th century Sanskrit poet Acharya Dandi's *Kāvyādarśa*. Phö Rinpoche removed all the comments and translated directly from Dandi.

Another poetry he wrote is titled *Kun phan nyi m'i snang ba* or “The Sunlight which Benefits All.” This work was first published in Tibet by the Yapshi Pheunkhang aristocratic house and was later republished from Varanasi.

He travelled extensively in Central Tibet and Kham. He went to Tsurphu monastery, the traditional seat of the Karmapa, and became a close counselor of the Fifteenth Karmapa Khakyab Dorje (Tib. *Mkha' khyab rdo rje*, 1870/71–1921/22). He accompanied the Karmapa to Far Eastern Tibet where they both studied under the great masters of the Rime movement, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye (Tib. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–1899), renowned scholar and seminal figure in the Rime movement, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (Tib. 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po, 1820–1892), the eminent scholar Ju Mipham Rinpoche (Tib. 'ju mi pham, 1846–1912) and Togden Karma Monlam Ozer Lasam Gyaltsen (Tib. *rTogs ldan Kar ma smon lam od zer lhag bsam rgyal tshan*). He received transmissions and empowerments from them. He learnt grammar from Togden Karma Monlam Ozer Lasam Gyaltsen. It is believed that all the litterateurs and grammarians of U-Tsang became Phö Rinpoche's students.

He worked mostly on language and literature, with grammar, phonetics and poetry being his specialties. He was renowned for his proficiency in grammar and poetry and he taught these subjects to the children of Tibetan aristocrats.

³ Barmiak Athing Tashi Dadul was a member of the State Council and an accomplished scholar.

RETURN TO SIKKIM

After his return from Tibet, he spent some years meditating at Ghonam Hill in Khamdong. In 1897, he built a small hermitage at Rey Mindu to spread Buddhism to the people of this area. The people of this area, who were mostly Lepcha, used to hunt wild animals in the thick forests. Rinpoche asked the villagers to give up hunting and introduced dharma to the people. While ‘Rey’ means woven bamboo, ‘Mindu’ denotes the Lepcha practice of hunting and meeting in one place to distribute the kill afterwards.

The small hermitage was named ‘Ma-Sang Gonpa’ meaning butter lamp lit monastery. In 1935, the old structure was replaced by a concrete one. This structure suffered huge damages in a storm in 1979 and again in the earthquake of 1981. Construction of a new monastery was started in 2000. The structure faced further damages in the 2011 earthquake. This monastery follows the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism and is known as Rey Mindu Katen Namgyaling Gonpa.

STUDENTS

Due to his vast knowledge, he earned the title of Rinpoche from his devotees. He had many students some of whom became famous, most notably the great Kinnauri (Tib. *Khun nu*) scholar-yogi Tenzin Gyaltsen (Tib. sTan ’dzin rgyal mtshan, 1894/95–1977). Also known as Khunnu Lama, he left his home in Kinnaur, in modern day Himachal Pradesh and his destinations were the great centers of learning in Tibet.

In the course of his journey, he arrived in Gangtok in 1913. He met Phö Rinpoche and was influenced by his quest for knowledge and teachers in inner Tibet and Kham. Phö Rinpoche taught Khunnu Lama grammar and literature.

Another of his students was the peerless Tibetan physician and astrologer Khyenrab Norbu (Tib. mKhyen rab nor bu, 1883–1962). Phö Rinpoche is named as one of the teachers from whom he learnt the “Ten Fields of Study” in Tibetan Buddhism (Tib. *rig gnas bchu*).⁴ Khyenrab Norbu went on to become the personal physician to the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and is also credited with making the natal horoscope (Tib. *skyes skar*) of the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Khyenrab

⁴ The “Ten fields of Study” include the five major sciences, i.e., Arts and Craft, Medicine, Grammar, Logic and Philosophy, and the five minor sciences, i.e., Poetry, Synonyms, Lexicography, Astro-Science and Dance and Drama.

Norbu became Director of the Chagpori Medical College and the Institute of Tibetan Medicine and Astrology (Tib. Bod kyi sman rtsis khang) in Lhasa.

Thubten Lhundrub (Tib. Thub bstan lhun grub, 1906–1955), another noted astrologer received the Yuthok Nyingthig (Tib. g.yu thog snying thig)⁵ initiations from Phö Rinpoche. Thus, it can be surmised that Phö Rinpoche was an authority in the science of Tibetan medicine, besides his expertise in literature and grammar.

CONCLUSION

Unless one is acquainted with the cultural backwaters that was tiny Sikkim in the 19th century, juxtaposed against the rich scholarly and literary traditions in the grand old monasteries of Tibet, Phö Rinpoche's achievements are difficult to fully appreciate. Perhaps more unbelievable is the fact that he taught and inspired one of the truly great modern masters of Buddhism, Khunnu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen.

Phö Rinpoche read the works of, and most likely was greatly influenced by, the brilliant eighteenth-century polymath the Eighth Situ Rinpoche, Situ Panchen Chokyi Jungne, who is well known for his contributions to medicine, painting, literature and religion. Volumes of Situ Rinpoche's works belonging to Phö Rinpoche are still in the possession of his family at Chuksing House, Gangtok.

In his later years, Phö Rinpoche resided at Chuksing House where he passed away in 1936. A few years after his death, a handwritten manuscript was given by Rai Sahib Gyaltsen Kazi (b. 1887)⁶ to Barmiak Athing, which indicates that the third volume of the anthology could be at Samye monastery.

For his achievements, Phö Rinpoche stands as a true giant of Sikkimese Buddhist history, casting a long shadow with his extant poems and through his monastery at Rey Mindu.

⁵ Yuthok Nyingthig is the main spiritual tradition connected with Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine).

⁶ Gyaltsen Kazi was the grandson of Khangsar Dewan who served the court in various capacities and was conferred the title of Rai Sahib in 1928.

BUDDHISM AND SOCIAL REFORM:
A LAYMAN'S MONASTERY AT LACHUNG

KUNZANG NAMGYAL
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The Thangmochi monastery at Lachung, North Sikkim

In the northernmost tip of Sikkim, close to the snowy mountains, lies a beautiful valley blessed in the eighth century by Guru Rinpoche called Lachung. An innovative system of Buddhist Dharma practice by laypeople was introduced in Lachung in the early 1950s by Trulshik Rinpoche. This was long before such practice became popular in Dharma centres around the world. This laypeople's practice continues till this day in Lachung's Thangmochi monastery, popularly known as Mangpai gonpo (dMangs pa'i dgon pa) or layman's monastery. Here it has proved beneficial to villagers in many ways. Thangmochi's laypeople's practice may be viewed as a model for other Himalayan monasteries that increasingly face a shortage in the enrolment of novice monks.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MONASTERY

According to oral tradition, the site of the Thangmochi monastery was blessed by Ngadag Sempa Chenpo Phuntshog Rigdzin (mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin, 1591/2–1656), one of the four yogi brothers who spread the third phase of Buddhism in Sikkim in the 1640s. At that time, it is said that the sacred vase presently housed at Tashiding monastery¹ was brought to Lachung for a few days. Ever since, Lachung was reserved for Ngadag Sempa Chenpo and his descendants as their religious land. Although this oral tradition has not been corroborated by any historical source or solid evidence, the claim may not be entirely baseless. According to Khenpo Lha Tshering,

Since 1735 onwards descendants of Ngadag Rinchen Goen [a grandson of Ngadag Sempa Chenpo] have established monasteries in different parts of Sikkim such as Namgyal Lha Tse in South, Pandam Gon in East, Senchi Ngadag Gon in North near Mangan, and the monastery in Lachung at Thangmochi, which is believed to have been blessed by his forefather [Ngadag Sempa Chenpo] in the 17th century.²

Tradition maintains that the latter's grandson Ngadag Rinchen Goen stayed at Lachung for a long time along with his cattle, during which time he established a full monastic system at Thangmochi. However, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*³ states that Thangmochi was initially established with five monks, the following century in 1788. This suggests that Thangmochi may have actually been established by a descendant of Ngadag Rinchen Goen, as suggested by Lha Tshering.

Traditionally, the Lachungpas were agro-pastoralists and traders, who practiced transhumance, migrating with the seasons to find greener pastures for their cattle herds. According to local history, Rinchen Goen couldn't follow the village rules of cattle migration as he had to look after the monastery. A conflict arose between the villagers and the Lama resulting in the Lama abandoning all his belongings and migrating towards Tibet where he established Shari Ngadag Gon (Shar ri mNga' bdag dgon) in Tsang, Central Tibet. Only later on, when Lachungpa traders came

¹ About the sacred vase of Tashiding and the associated Bumchu ritual, see R.N. Dokhampa. *Bulletin of Tibetology* 2003 Vol 39 (1) May: 25–30.

² Lha Tshering 2002. *mKhan po lHa Tshe ring* (2002). *mKha' spyod 'Bras mo ljongs kyi gtsug nor sprul pa'i rnal 'byor mched bzhi brgyud 'dzin dang bcas pa'i 'byung ba brjod pa Blo gsar gzhon nu'i dga' ston*. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology: 63.

³ Risley 1894. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press: 257.

across his monastery in Tibet, did they realize the importance of Lama Ngadag Rinchen Goen. However, they didn't know his name and referred to him as Shari Ngadag po. Since then, the descendants of Ngadag Sempa Chenpo have been traced there in Tsang, and were traceable until 1957.

A few monks looked after Lachung's Thangmochi monastery between 1800 and 1930. But due to lack of financial support and deteriorating living conditions, the monastery remained without monks. A few villagers who had settled nearby started taking care of it by cleaning and holding a minimum form of worship. It remained to serve as a transit camp for migrating Lamas from Tibet.

BEGINNING OF SOCIAL REFORMS

Then, around 1946–1947 as a destined 'Divine Man' of Lachung and its people, H.E. Laere Trulshik Pawo Dorje (1897–1962) or Trulshik Rinpoche Kunzang Pawo Dorje, along with his consort Khandro Pema Dechen (1923–2006)⁴ of Kham Minyak, Eastern Tibet, arrived in the Lachung valley accompanied by infinite signs of auspiciousness. Trulshik Rinpoche chose the said monastery for his abode. With his miraculous divine power of mind reading and skilful means, he organized the villagers' restoration of the monastery. Rinpoche invited one member from each household in the village and built four different stupas around the monastery namely Dudul Chorten (bDud 'dul mchod rten) in the eastern side similar to the one at Deorali, Gangtok, which was built around the same time; to the south Lhabab Chorten (Lha babs mchod rten) the Stupa of Descent from Tushita Heaven; on the west side Myangdey (Myang 'das mchod rten), the Parinirvana Stupa and Namgyal Chorten (rNam rgyal mchod rten) the all-Victorious Stupa in the northern side of the monastery.

During the construction of the stupas Rinpoche took the villagers on pilgrimage to Tibet and within Sikkim. Rinpoche then spent a considerable amount of time with those people involved. The fortunate set of pilgrims felt blessed beyond measure to witness the divine powers of Rinpoche. The bonding between the Lama and his adherents was thus sealed with an unshakeable faith. Some old villagers can still tell you with astonishment about Rinpoche's occult powers: of how you couldn't hide or say anything about Rinpoche as you would be immediately witnessing your thought transform into action for even a small thing like your desire to have a sugar tea when reaching the monastery.

⁴ About Khandro Rinpoche Pema Dechen (1923–2006) see, *Bulletin of Tibetology* 2006 Vol. 42 (1&2): 135–153.

After the completion of the stupas,⁵ a grand celebration feast was held at the time of the consecration ceremony, when many advices relating to religious and layman's moral code of conduct were imparted, thus introducing a unique way of monastic life which has been successfully followed by the villagers until today.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNIQUE WAY OF CELEBRATING TSE CHU

During Rinpoche's stay in the valley, he realized the impracticality of establishing another fully functional monastery with ordained monks among Lachung's limited population, when one fully functional monastery already existed. However, Rinpoche still felt the need for some socio-religious reforms based on the following concerns. First, although villagers were fluent in their own language, which is similar to Tibetan, and most could read the religious texts, they didn't engage in any Buddha Dharma activities. Secondly, the community hardly met for any religious upliftment work or joined activities for the accumulation of merit. Rinpoche saw that this would be detrimental to the community in the long run and hence, established a unique system of celebrating Tse Chu for community development and for the spread Buddha Dharma in the long run.

On the day of the stupas' consecration, after completing the religious rituals, Rinpoche divided the community into four sections with each group comprising a team of 28 to 30 households. From each group, five to eight people, adding up to around 35, were trained on the rituals to perform Tse Chu as per the Jang Ter or "Northern Treasures" tradition, including the making of *tormas* (dough figures) of different deities with butter decorations. Furthermore, to avoid future anomaly in the shapes and sizes of the *tormas* and to ease the process of making them, wooden dummy *tormas* were made, few of which are still in existence and used by the followers today.

Upon the successful completion of the training and explanations, Rinpoche organized an initiation and authorization ceremony. The ceremony enabled the general laymen to conduct the Tse Chu rituals as they were granted the required qualifications by Rinpoche. The yearly calendar of the monastery was set following the Tibetan lunar calendar:

⁵ The stupas were completed circa 1952–1953. People recall that at the time of the 1954 flash flood, which washed away sections of Lachung, the wooden roofs of the stupas still looked fresh. This freshness, which typically lasts only a year, helped them pinpoint the exact year of completion.

- During the 1st month of the lunar calendar, from the 13th to 15th day, special rituals are to be conducted together by the entire group with an empowerment of different objects held on the 15th. This ritual is to be earmarked as the monastery's most important activity. Until the late 1990s, people were said to be blessed during this event with a variety of self-appearing edible rosary balls from beneath the four stupas.
- During the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th of the lunar months, Tse Chu will be performed by each group taking turns.
- During the 6th and 12th lunar months, Tse Chus will be performed by all the groups together at which time teams could learn and see the differences, if any, arising among them and correct errors accordingly.

The group members were blessed with a *khada* and given 50 rupees from Rinpoche's personal account to cover expenses for attending monastic activities and the newly introduced Tse Chu. This money was kept as a corpus capital fund, loaned within the group based on need or compulsion to generate interest. In the case of compulsory loans, it was ensured that the borrower could repay the full amount with interest over time without difficulty. Currently, all four groups have created enough capital to organize significant events. Following this, a general moral code of conduct for the attendees of the monastery was established.

- Every household must enrol into the monastery with pure devotion and willingness to accumulate some virtue in order to attain liberation from Saṃsāra.
- When attending any function at the monastery, everyone must wear traditional dress and carry a rosary. If someone comes without traditional attire, they must serve as a cook in the kitchen and are not allowed to enter the monastery, even for prostration or offering tea.
- Household heads must attend the Tse Chu as per their turn. If the household head cannot attend for any reason, they must depute a male family member who is at least 18 years old. If there are no male members of 18 years or older, a minor can attend the Tse Chu against monetary compensation. However, if someone in the family is sick or there is an unavoidable circumstance, no fine will be levied.

- To attend Tse Chu each household has to contribute roasted barley flour (*tsampa*) to prepare the *tormas* and as an important ingredient for purification and smoke offering. The attendees are to bring half or one kilogram of butter or palm oil for butter lamp and *tsog* offering items based on availability of village produce; two pieces of home-baked flat bread is a must. Some will bring a small amount of locally made beverage, which is needed to prepare a special offering to the deities. Lastly, tea leaves, butter, and salt are to be brought for the preparation of tea.
- While in the monastery, those who know the prayers or can read fluently have to stay inside the monastery main altar room and recite the prayers. Those who do not know the prayers can either stay inside the congregation hall or outside the monastery and recite the Vajra Guru mantra or circumambulate the monastery while chanting mantras. No one should waste time chatting or lazing around, and if found, will be fined in cash, which will be invested in the capital fund.
- Whenever someone wishes to join a Tse Chu group, he/she must join the same group where his forefathers were members. This is done in order to avoid possible chaos and negative peer influence assuming that controlling or guiding one's own relatives will be relatively easier.
- When a person takes the vow to join a group, the latter has to approach the group with a *khada* and a nominal fee, presently set around 1,500 rupees, following which all the norms related to the monastery will be explained to him/her. As per tradition set by H.H. Trulshik Rinpoche, he/she will then be welcomed into the group with a *khada* and Rs. 500 by the committee.
- One should enter the compound with the humility of being just one ordinary layman committed to perform some Dharma in order to cleanse obstacles and accumulate virtue to attain Buddhahood. As you enter, your social status holds no value; you are not to carry any ego; you are to devote all your time to Dharma activities.

RITUAL PRACTICE OF THE MONASTERY

All the religious activities are based on the tenet to pray to Guru Rinpoche, as this land itself is the Hidden Land of the Guru himself. Hence, all prayers are based on Guru's Seven Lines Prayer (*Le'u bdun smon lam*).

During the 1st month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, a special prayer ceremony conducted from the 13th to 15th day in both the monasteries is sponsored by the general community of Lachung with contributions from all households. This contribution is called *Kangyur khey* or “taxation for reading the translated words of the Buddha.” The prayers consist of the reading of 108 Kangyur volumes as a general rite for peace and prosperity of all sentient beings. In the olden days, taxes were collected from each household in the form of salt, sugar, oil or animal fat, rice, *tsampa*, vegetables and the like, which were needed to feed the monks in the monastery and provide offerings to Guru Rinpoche. As there were numerous households, one person’s contribution could fit in a single carry-bag, which made it easy for all to participate. Today, only 550 rupees are collected from each household and essential items are procured accordingly. These are collected on the 11th morning until 12th afternoon and then brought to the monks’ monastery by volunteers the same day.

Back in the layman’s community monastery at Thangmochi, early in the morning of the 13th, people assemble with a limited portion of the above contributions supplemented with individual contributions such as butter or palm oil for butter lamp, and start their Dharma activities.

Usual prayers are started inside the main assembly hall for half an hour with the Seven Lines Prayer of Guru Rinpoche followed by Duesum Sangay (*Dus gsum sangs rgyas*), Sampa Nyurdrub (*bSam pa myur sgrub*) and 108 or one round of Vajra Guru mantras, Sampa Lhundrub (*bSam pa lhun sgrub*) ten times, Duesum Sangay three times, Sampa Nyurdrub one time, which will be repeated three times during the first and second day. On the 3rd or 15th day, the same prayers are repeated four times by which time each person will have recited Sampa Lhundrub hundred times followed by other prayers. From the evening of the 13th day most people visit the monastery to circumambulate and chant Vajra Guru until midnight and again from early morning until the 15th day of the first month.

On the 15th day, the monastery becomes a centre of sacredness equally important as Tashiding as vouched by H.H. Trulshik Rinpoche. In the afternoon, empowerment of the main relics of the monastery is conducted. These consist of stupas and a white conch-shell, which have been in the monastery since 1950–1954, together with an image of Trulshik Rinpoche and Khandrola. The procession is mostly executed by the general laymen with pure dedication and devotion toward the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and Trulshik Rinpoche.

On the 16th day of the first month around 18 monks from Lachung’s Samten Choeling monastery are invited to the Thangmochi monastery to read 16 volumes of Dharma scriptures. With that, the major activity of the

monastery is completed. However, individual households' invocations for their respective guardian deities will be done for which each household will need around 10 to 15 minutes.

CONCLUSION

The base of Buddha Dharma is seeking Nirvāṇa from Saṃsāra. If exposition, debate, composition, learning, reflection and meditation are there in any institute or monastery it is a healthy sign of flourishing Dharma. Based on all this, is a well-organized monastery where one can learn and follow the Dharma.

The Tibetan term for Dharma is *Choe*, which means to correct one's own mind from delusion, attachment, and bearing its own entity, for which participation in monastic activities with pure heart is the first step towards it. Hence, people enrol their children in the monastery to achieve it.

However, very few people today will join monasteries as fully ordained or ordinary monks, who will devote their whole life to the Dharma and the monastery. Numbers are decreasing daily with a number of major monasteries around the world now left with one or two monks and in some cases, monks have to be invited from other places on required days.

In such situations, the above-mentioned example from Lachung is a viable alternative to promote and propagate Dharma activities among lay people. The functioning model of the lay monastery provides a great opportunity for people to unite for the betterment of the community and for the propagation of the Dharma.

This way of functioning can flourish if willing followers are motivated to carry out Dharma activities and operate within a well-organized and disciplined setting following an agreed upon code of conduct with limited financial contributions. Lachung can be taken as a living example of ever-expanding success following this system of Dharma practice and having survived without any external financial support, while transforming the inner core of the participants and also the outer infrastructure of the monastery.

For the spread and sustenance of Buddha Dharma in the long run, it is important for people to physically participate in Dharma activities rather than just being supporters and sponsors of Dharma.

ALEXANDRA DAVID-NEEL'S JOURNEY TO LHASA IN 1924:

100 YEARS LATER,
WHAT REMAINS TO BE DISCOVERED?¹

RACHEL GUIDONI

French National Library (BnF)

INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGIN OF THIS RESEARCH

Among the events commemorated in 2024, France Mémoire—the mission of the Institut de France responsible for setting France's national commemorations—lists Alexandra David-Neel's "stay" in Lhasa, assigning the date of January 28, 1924.² I reached out to them in early January to express my surprise at this choice, particularly given that the Maison Alexandra David-Neel places the event at the end of February.³ After several exchanges in which I shared my concerns, they ultimately agreed to revise their calendar to reflect a stay in "January–February 1924."⁴

I then conducted some quick research and realized that, in the many biographies devoted to her, no author had attempted to precisely date Alexandra David-Neel's secret stay in Lhasa. That prompted me to investigate further in order to determine the correct dates. One thing led to another, and I soon found myself completely absorbed—searching for

¹ I am grateful to Anna Balikci-Denjongpa for publishing this article. Sincere thanks also go to the Maison Alexandra David-Neel (MADN), whose team has always been incredibly supportive in granting access to their remarkable archives. This paper was first presented in Digne (southern France) on the occasion of the centenary of Alexandra David-Neel's entry into Lhasa. It was later expanded for a seminar co-organized by Pascale Dollfus and myself in Paris, in November 2024, focusing on little-known Western women who explored Himalayan regions.

² See www.france-memoire.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Calendrier-2024.pdf (last check: 12/11/2024). This date has then been used by other French medias.

³ See the timeline on their website: www.alexandra-david-neel.fr/a-propos/ (last check: 12/11/2024). The Maison Alexandra David-Neel is a public institution that includes the house where Alexandra David-Neel and Yongden lived, as well as a museum dedicated to their lives and accomplishments (www.alexandra-david-neel.fr/).

⁴ See www.france-memoire.fr/dossiers/sejour-dalexandra-david-neel-a-lhassa/ (last check: 12/11/2024).

other pieces of the story missing from all these accounts. Why Lhasa? Where did she stay? What did she do there? These are the discoveries I now propose to share.



Alexandra David-Neel and Yongden before the Potala, Lhasa, 1924⁵

This photograph is the only material evidence of their stay in Lhasa. To mark the centenary of the achievement, the Maison Alexandra David-Neel displayed the original glass plate. Interestingly, the first known mention of this photograph comes relatively late—in a letter Alexandra David-Neel sent to her husband on November 27, 1924, while she was in Calcutta preparing to return to France:

“As a humble New Year’s gift, you will find enclosed a photograph of me sitting in Lhasa in front of the Dalai Lama’s palace. My face is smeared with lacquer, as is the custom for Tibetan women on journeys, which gives me a black face.”

Surprisingly, she makes no comment on the photograph’s significance in documenting her feat, nor does she mention the photographer. To this day, it has not been possible to identify who took the picture—though at the time, there were very few photographers operating in the region.

⁵ Photo: Maison Alexandra David-Neel, département d’art asiatique du musée Gassendi © Ville de Digne-les-Bains.

1. WRITTEN SOURCES ABOUT HER STAY IN LHASA

The French-speaking public is most familiar with Alexandra David-Neel's book *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhassa*, first published in 1927 (full title: *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhassa. À pied et en mendiant de la Chine à l'Inde à travers le Thibet – A Parisian Woman's Journey to Lhasa: On Foot and Begging from China to India through Thibet*). However, there are other accounts of this remarkable journey.

The first was published just one year after her arrival in Lhasa, in 1925, under the title *Souvenirs d'une Parisienne au Thibet (Memories of a Parisian Woman in Thibet)*, and was republished only in 2024 in the *Terre Humaine* collection (Plon publisher) to mark the centenary of her achievement. This work appears to have been originally published in France, despite the mention of "Pékin" as the place of publication. It was evidently the subject of two limited print runs, confidentially distributed: one of ten copies (numbered in Chinese) and another of fifty copies (numbered in Arabic numerals). The twenty-six-chapter text was reprinted the same year in the French newspaper *Le Matin*, which published thirty-one daily instalments of her adventure from June 21 to July 22, 1925.

Alexandra David-Neel then signed a contract with an American publisher for the English version of her journey, which she completed in September 1926. It was published in June 1927 (simultaneously in New York and London) under the title *My Journey to Lhasa: The Personal Story of the Only White Woman Who Succeeded in Entering the Forbidden City*. The second French version, completed in December 1926 but not released until a year later, in December 1927, is the version best known to the French-speaking public. It is largely based on the English edition, although it differs significantly in several places, and it also differs from the original 1925 French version in being three times longer!⁶

In addition to the material found in these publications, further information is preserved in the archives of the French explorer in Digne, although it is very scattered. Foremost among these are the letters to her husband (Philippe Néel, 1861–1941), which are a treasure trove—written deliberately to be preserved and to help her later reconstruct the chronology of events and the development of her thoughts. Also worth mentioning are her notebooks and booklets, which are numerous and require significant time to study and extract information from.

⁶ I won't list all the later versions of this story, but let's just mention the German edition that came out in October 1928, based on the 1926 English text.

It should be noted, however, that to the best of our knowledge, there is no specific file dedicated to this particular journey to Lhasa. One of the reasons given by Alexandra David-Neel is that she had to travel incognito, without carrying the slightest item that might reveal her identity. As a result, references to her stay in Lhasa are scarce. Nonetheless, by cross-referencing the available material, a fairly accurate picture of her itinerary can be assembled.

Finally, it is highly likely that most of the memoirs of this journey were written after her arrival in India in June 1924, during a three-month stay in Pedong, near Kalimpong (from mid-June to mid-September), with the French missionary Father Douénel. She then continued her travels in India before returning to France in May 1925.

As for her reasons for taking on the challenge of reaching Lhasa, she is quite explicit in her earliest account (1925), where she states her motivation three times in similar terms.

I vowed to triumph, partly because it's not in my nature to accept defeat of any kind, and partly to set an example of what women and French women are capable of. Stung by the game, I persisted: a woman would pass and that woman would be a Parisian.⁷

But there were people standing in front of the travelers, telling them, "We're not passing here!", as if the land didn't belong to all men. Twice they'd said that to me... I was laughing now, all alone in the night, in the middle of the bush. "We're not passing!" – Really? – A woman would pass, a Parisian woman.⁸

"What will I do, I thought, if my attempt fails again? – What would I do? – I'd start all over again." In which direction? I didn't know yet, but I'd start again. It was a gamble, I'd win it: a woman would pass by, a Parisian woman.⁹

It becomes clear that she sought to take revenge on the British for having forced her to turn back three times, viewing this as an opportunity to prove what she was capable of. Her motivation was driven by a sense of pride and vengeance, combined with a strong feminist and chauvinist sentiment.

It is worth recalling that, at the beginning of the 20th century, Central Tibet and its capital, Lhasa, were closed to foreigners. British authorities were particularly vigilant in ensuring that no outsider entered without

⁷ David-Neel 2024 [1925], p. 84.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 86.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 95.

authorization. Only two British officers normally stationed in Sikkim visited Lhasa during this period: Charles Bell, who went there in 1920 as a special ambassador, and Frederick M. Bailey, who spent the summer of 1924 there, accompanied by the medical officer, Major J. Hislop.

2. INITIAL CLUES REGARDING THE DATES OF HER STAY

In the preface to the collection of letters addressed to her husband, Alexandra David-Neel's lady-in-waiting, Marie-Madeleine Peyronnet, recalls that David-Neel had an extraordinary memory—except when it came to dates. David-Neel herself admitted that dates held little interest for her, as “only the facts count.”¹⁰ This may explain her negligence in recording the dates of her stay in Lhasa.

We also know that she travelled without any compromising equipment—that is, no watch, diary, or measuring instruments—and carried only a few sheets of paper and a pencil for occasional notes. Yet, if we rely on the clues found in her writings, it becomes clear that she actually had a fairly accurate sense of the dates of her stay.

In the book *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhassa* (second account, published in 1927), several clues point to the dates of her stay. Notably, we learn that the journey took place during the winter of 1923–1924. Most significantly, the explorer notes that she arrived in Lhasa in time for the Tibetan New Year celebrations.

We know that the Tibetan New Year always falls between January and March, which means Alexandra David-Neel arrived in Lhasa at the beginning of 1924. By consulting Gregorian–Tibetan calendar converters, we can see that the first months of 1924 correspond to the final months of the Tibetan Water Pig year 2050 of the 15th cycle, followed by the year of the Wooden Mouse.¹¹

More precisely, the Year of the Water Pig ended on February 4, 1924, and the Year of the Wooden Mouse began on February 5, 1924, continuing until February 22, 1925.¹² Since Alexandra David-Neel stated that she arrived in Lhasa in time for the New Year celebrations, it is likely that her arrival occurred around February 5, 1924.

¹⁰ David-Neel 2019 [1975], p. 14.

¹¹ See for example www.thlib.org/reference/tibcal/index.php.

¹² See [www.lotsawahouse.org/Cgi/phugpa.pl?year=1924](http://www.lotsawahouse.org/Cgi/phugpa.pl?year=1924;);
www.tibastro.be/Calendar/WestToTibDate;
www.thlib.org/reference/tibcal/index.php?animal=9&element=4&cycle=0

Another temporal indication appears later, when the explorer recounts a “very curious feast” she attended on the night of the full moon of the 1st Tibetan month (second account, p. 340). Again, using calendar converters, we can determine that this feast took place on February 20, 1924.¹³

The most indisputable date is that of her departure from Lhasa.¹⁴ In her travel account, she states that she intended to leave the capital “the day after the great procession called ‘ser pang’, which ended the series of festivities” (second account, p. 360).

This festival of the Golden Procession (*ser 'phreng*) is well known: it was instituted in the 17th century by the Regent Sangye Gyatso (Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), and gained renown not least because of the precious treasures that were displayed, the large *thangkas* unrolled along the façade of the Potala Palace, and the grand procession that wound around the capital—hence its name. Alexandra David-Neel confirms this timing in a letter to her husband, where she writes that she left the capital the day after this ceremony.

We know from H. Richardson that this procession took place on the 30th day of the 2nd Tibetan month,¹⁵ which in this case corresponds to April 4, 1924. Alexandra David-Neel describes it as the most beautiful spectacle she had ever witnessed: “Never in my long travels have I contemplated a more beautiful spectacle” (second account, p. 372). So, since she planned to leave Lhasa the day after the grand procession, this means that she left on the 1st day of the 3rd Tibetan month, i.e., April 5, 1924. This aligns with her statement that she stayed in Lhasa for two months.

In conclusion, based solely on the accounts of her trip and the letters to her husband, we can establish that Alexandra David-Neel stayed in Lhasa between early February and April 5, 1924.

During my stays in Digne, I looked for other references to this trip in the archives, but found only scant mentions. I confess that this seems surprising, especially when you consider that it was this exploit that made her famous in the first place.

There are two brief, marginal references. The first appears in her 1932 diary, on a page where she summarizes her travels and notes for 1924: “in the land of Po.”¹⁶ She also includes a cross-reference to February 3, where

¹³ See www.lotsawahouse.org/Cgi/phugpa.pl.

¹⁴ Désiré-Marchand mentions “around April 9 or 10” (p. 117) but this is inaccurate.

¹⁵ Richardson, pp. 74–81. As the Officer in charge of the British Mission in Lhasa, he stayed in the capital from 1936 to 1940, and again from 1946 to 1950.

¹⁶ The diary has inventory n. ADN-G2-AG33, and the mention is p. 12.

she writes, “1924 Lhasa en fév.” [english: “1924 Lhasa in Feb.”] (*ibid.* p. 15), which directly confirms our hypothesis of a February arrival.

The second reference appeared twenty years later, in 1952, when she once again compiled her travels in a diary for the Larousse publisher. This time, she noted: “arr. à Lhasa en fév. 1924”¹⁷ [English: “Arr. in Lhasa in Feb. 1924”].

These two brief references, though marginal, confirm with certainty the dates of her stay in Lhasa: from early February to April 5, 1924.

3. PLACE OF HER STAY

As a reminder, in her account of her travel across Tibet, Alexandra David-Neel recounts how a woman had approached her and her companion Yongden¹⁸ at the market to offer them accommodation “on the edge of town”, with a beautiful view of Lhasa.¹⁹ The accommodation consisted of a “tiny cell” in “a half-collapsed hovel.” These are the only details to be found in the French version.

The English account provides more detail, including descriptions of both the house and its inhabitants. It highlights the stunning view of the city and the Potala, which particularly delights her after weeks of travelling.²⁰ The house is divided into three sections: the front room, occupied by a couple who frequently quarrel; the room at the back, where another couple argues constantly throughout the day; and a small room situated between the two, where Alexandra David-Neel and Yongden are assigned to stay.²¹

She explains that the building functions as a caravanserai, housing “the strangest specimens of humanity.” The place offers no privacy and resembles a run-down shack, yet it suits her perfectly because she feels safe there and believes she has no chance of being discovered.²² In fact, the English account includes several incidents that occur at the inn, which are absent from the French version. This is all we know from the literature.

¹⁷ Diary inventory n. ADN-G2-AG43, p. 89.

¹⁸ Yongden (Yongs ldan, 1899–1955) was a young Sikkimese boy when Alexandra David-Neel first met him in 1913. She later adopted him, considering him her son. He accompanied her throughout her life and many travels, though he passed away fifteen years before her.

¹⁹ David-Neel 1987, p. 326.

²⁰ David-Neel 2005, p. 264.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 293.

²² *Ibid.* p. 291.

As far as the archives are concerned, I came across a photocopy of a page from a personal notebook dating back to the 1920s. It read: “Name of my home in Lhasa Tséyangtze near Nabonshapé in Banajong.” What a discovery! I knew I absolutely had to track down the original notebook containing this information and investigate the reference further.

The notebook in question (notebook CADN26) is small and blue, measuring just $13 \times 6.5 \times 0.5$ cm. The information appears on the last page, written in pencil, amid a mix of various notes (as is often the case with David-Neel—one of the many factors that makes studying her archives so challenging). None of the other pages mention Lhasa. As I continued my research, I came across another similar reference. In her 1936 diary, she writes on March 3: “The poor house where I lived in Lhasa was called situated in the quarter called Tsé yang tsé.”²³

I now had two perfectly concordant references. The next step was to identify and locate the place. To do that, I needed to decipher the meanings of three terms: Tseyangtze, Nabonshapé, and Banajong.

Tseyangtse (likely tshe dbyangs rtse, “summit of melodious life”) is the most problematic of the three terms. I haven’t found any residence or district in Lhasa bearing this name. The only reference I’ve come across appears on a map of Shigatse published by Sarat Chandra Das in 1902, where he notes a site called *Tse-yang-tse*, described as a “garden for the Chinese.”²⁴ Tibetans from Lhasa also have no recollection of any place with this name. And yet, this is the term David-Neel uses twice when referring to her residence.

Nabonshapé is less problematic. In my view, it likely refers to Ngapö Shapé (Nga phod zhabs pad, Minister Ngapö), whose full name was Ngapö Tenzin Puntso (Nga phod bstan 'dzin phun tshogs, 18xx–1932).²⁵ The Ngapö were one of the principal families of the Tibetan aristocracy (*sku drag*), originally from Kongpo in southern Tibet. They are documented in ministerial roles (*bka' shag*) as far back as the 18th century.²⁶

According to Petech, Tenzin Puntso was originally from the Nyelung family and became a member of the Ngapö family by marrying into it as a son-in-law (“*magpa*”). He was appointed minister (*bka' blon*) in 1921 and

²³ Inventory n. ADN-G2-AG38, p. 50.

²⁴ Sarat Chandra Das, 1902, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (map p. 45, n. 24 on legend), and also online: www.gutenberg.org/files/68898/68898-h/68898-h.htm.

²⁵ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ngapo_Tenzin_Phuntsok (last check: 12/05/2024).

²⁶ Petech, p. 99, and Tsybikov, p. 164, 179, 321. Gombojab Tsybikov (1873–1930) was a Buriat scholar who travelled to Tibet from 1901 to 1902 and spent thirteen months in Lhasa, from August 1900 to September 1901. He is considered to be the first person to have taken photographs of Lhasa.

was killed by the Chinese in 1932 during a mission to eastern Tibet, at Chamdo.²⁷ He is also known as the adoptive father of Ngapö Ngawang Jigme (Nga phod ngag dbang 'jigs med, 1910–2009).

Interestingly, in the English version of Alexandra David-Neel's account, the couple occupying the back room of the inn are described as aristocrats. The man is referred to as a “captain,” or *dapön* (*mda' dpon*) in Tibetan—the same title attributed to Ngapö by Waddell in his 1904 book.²⁸ This raises the possibility that the man she encountered was Ngapö Tenzin Puntso himself. At the time of her stay in Lhasa, David-Neel recounts that the captain was unemployed and reduced to begging. Nonetheless, he remained well-regarded in the neighbourhood and consistently returned home with enough food to support his wife and two children.²⁹

It's the third term that proves to be decisive. Banajong in fact refers to Banak Shöl (sbra nag zhol), a district in the northeast of Lhasa. This area was traditionally home to families from Kham, in eastern Tibet—often traders—and was also known for its cluster of temples housing oracles. Banak Shöl is a well-known and clearly identifiable district that appears on many historical maps of Lhasa.

By combining these three terms, it becomes possible to identify the location where Alexandra David-Neel likely lived in Lhasa: it was “the district or estate called Tseyangtse, near the Ngapö minister's residence in Banak Shöl.”

After extensive research, I finally found what I was looking for in August 2024. On a 1904 map of Lhasa published by Waddell, a house (marked as number 35) is labelled Nga-pö-sa—the “residence of the General (Dah-pon) who visited Darjeeling in 1892.”³⁰ On the map, this house is indeed situated in the market district, referred to there as “Ba-na Bazaar.”³¹ It lies directly beside the Meru Nyingpa Temple (number 34 on the plan), known as the residence of the Nechung Oracle.³²

Waddell explains that he based his map on an earlier one created in 1878 by the Indian *pandit* A.K., to which he added details gathered from

²⁷ Petech, p. 102.

²⁸ Waddell, 1904, p. 293. See below. David-Neel uses the word “Captain” even if *mda' dpon* is usually translated by “General”, a captain corresponding rather to *brgya dpon*.

²⁹ David-Neel 2005, p. 293.

³⁰ The map appears in his article published in *The Geographical Journal*, p. 420. It is also available online: www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/lhasa-waddell-1904.

³¹ It doesn't list any residence called Tseyangtse, and the only house that bears the qualifier “tse” (summit, peak, height) is the Kun-sang-tse house (n. 65), but it's not in the district we're interested in.

³² See www.thlib.org/places/monasteries/meru-nyingpa/history/#_edn29.

4. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STAY IN LHASA

It now remains to reconstruct her program during the two months she spent in Lhasa. In her account, Alexandra David-Neel states that she wished to “climb to the top of the Potala, visit the shrines and great monasteries in the vicinity, attend various ceremonies, and take [her] fair share in all the New Year festivities.”³⁵

Nevertheless, she likely accomplished far less there than she and Yongden might have, simply because they both became seriously ill. We know this from letters she sent to her husband, as public accounts make no mention of this. One such letter spans ten pages, written in pencil and dated February 28, March 12, and April 2. She wrote it in three stages while staying in Lhasa and likely mailed it later, once she was safe—probably in Gyantse, where she revealed her identity upon arrival.

She explains that she and Yongden arrived in Lhasa extremely thin and weak, which made them more vulnerable to the diseases circulating in the city:

I arrived in Lhasa reduced to a skeleton. When I pass my hand over my body, I find just a thin skin covering the bones. Apart from that, I was not ill when I arrived here, but there is a sort of influenza [= flu] here, and after about a week's stay, my boy and I were struck—he more seriously than I. (Letter to her husband, 28/2)

They suffered from persistent coughing, fever, and various aches, and she was especially troubled by her severe weight loss:

What is more annoying is my general state of emaciation and the weakness that [...] must result from it. (Letter to her husband, 28/2)

Her greatest concern, however, was for her young companion, who was both physically weakened and emotionally drained:

My boy, although less slimmed down than I am, is in worse health—he has a bad fever, is very depressed, and, more than I am, is in urgent need of rest and a nourishing diet. (Letter to her husband, 28/2)

Their poor health continued to be a serious concern throughout their stay. In her March letter, she again describes bouts of severe influenza—so

³⁵ David-Neel 1987, p. 327.

intense that she feared they might have contracted pneumonic plague. Yongden was so weakened that he could hardly walk:

The influenza that seemed likely to pass took a very bad turn. The boy was very seriously ill, and I even more so than he; the pain during the coughing fits was awful. We started coughing up blood. For a moment, I thought we had pneumonic plague. (Letter to her husband, 12/3)

Although the feared diagnosis was ultimately ruled out, their condition remained alarming. Yongden, in particular, continued to eat very little and spent most of his time sleeping. In this context, she wrote that she was planning to leave Lhasa soon, expressing disappointment with the city:

The city is of no interest. [...] The famous Djo-o temple [Jowo, the main statue in the Jokhang temple] is nothing marvellous. Nor is there anything very special about the Dalai Lama's palace. (Letter to her husband, 12/3)

In April, she revealed that it was their poor health that had ultimately kept them in Lhasa so long—they simply weren't well enough to leave:

Why this long stay? you may ask... We're definitely exhausted. I've had another relapse of influenza, and the little one is worse off than I am. The fever suddenly takes hold of him [...], he can't sleep, he can't eat, the attack lasts a day or two, then he gets better—and then it starts up again as soon as he tires a little. (Letter to her husband, 2/4)

These difficult circumstances undeniably shaped the course of their stay in Lhasa. Nevertheless, it is still possible to trace some of the places they visited and the events they attended. Since it is now known that she arrived around February 5—New Year's Day—she reached the city just as pilgrims and travellers were pouring in for the festivities. She notes that the inns were full and the streets crowded.³⁶

One final point about her account of her time in Lhasa: while the two French versions are brief and at times feel disjointed, the English version is more elaborate, well-structured, and rich with anecdotes and descriptions. I am currently in the process of highlighting all the differences between the three versions, though I have not yet completed this task. The following is based exclusively on the French accounts, as I only recently gained access to the English version.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 336.



Yongden, also known as Aphur or Lama Yongden, was born in 1899 in Mindu (now part of East Sikkim district), to a Tibetan father and a Lepcha mother. He entered Alexandra David-Neel's service in May 1913, at a time when she was seeking a servant who spoke both English and Tibetan.

He would go on to accompany her throughout her travels in Asia. After their successful entry into Lhasa in 1924, they returned to France, where David-Neel officially adopted him in 1929.

Translator, assistant, daily companion, and author of several books—he was above all her son. Yongden passed away in 1955. Following Alexandra David-Neel's death in 1969, their ashes were scattered together in the Ganges in 1973, in accordance with her wishes.³⁷

A. New Year festivities

Alexandra David-Neel recounts several events related to the New Year festivities. However, it's important to note that the order of events is not chronological. She appears to have chosen a personal sequence, particularly towards the end, where she focuses extensively on the “scapegoat ceremony,” even though it is not the final ceremony of the

³⁷ Photo: Maison Alexandra David-Neel, département d'art asiatique du musée Gassendi © Ville de Digne-les-Bains.

festivities. In doing so, she clearly prioritizes the sensational, showcasing her skills as a writer, which take precedence over a strictly ethnographic approach.

The first event Alexandra David-Neel describes is the exhibition of gigantic offerings (*bco lnga mchod pa*, or “offerings of the 15th [day]”), which she attends on the evening of the 15th day of the 1st month—February 20, 1924.³⁸ This marks a significant moment in the festivities, commemorating the “Great Miracle of the Buddha,” during which he demonstrated his power before an assembly of heretical masters.³⁹

The offerings consist of colourful butter sculptures arranged on stretched animal skins, which are then affixed to wooden frames mounted on poles several meters high. The designs include deities, religious figures, animals, and floral patterns. David-Neel compares these to *tormas*, although they are not quite the same.

At nightfall, lamps placed on tables in front of the figures are lit, illuminating the vibrant display. David-Neel adds that the Dalai Lama⁴⁰ visited the exhibition, drawing an impressive crowd (first account, *Souvenirs...*, published in 1925, pp. 147–148). She then describes a formal procession of high-ranking officials and army officers accompanying the Dalai Lama in his sedan chair, followed by a parade of secular and religious dignitaries (first account, p. 149). To end the evening, she recounts observing a total lunar eclipse on their way home (first account, p. 150).

She then attends “cavalcades of gentlemen sumptuously costumed in the fashion of past centuries, infantrymen and cavalrymen of the army of the ancient kings, in chain mail, carrying spears and shields, reminiscent of the Thibet of old [...] horse races, disorderly, mad, joyous, amusing” (*ibid.* p. 169). These events correspond to the festivities following the 22nd day, which, over the course of three days, take on a distinctly military character.

This tradition dates back to the 17th century, when the 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682), introduced them as a tribute to the Mongols who had granted him both temporal and spiritual authority over Tibet. On February 27 and 28, 1924, families of the capital’s notables paraded in their finest attire,

³⁸ Richardson, pp. 27–30, and Tsybikov, pp. 137–38. I chose to mention the descriptions of these two authors because they were the ones who were in Lhasa at the dates closest to David-Neel’s stay.

³⁹ The Buddha performs two miracles simultaneously: he rises into the air and his body emits water and fire. This episode is known as the Sravasti miracle.

⁴⁰ This is the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso (Thub bstan rgya mtsho, 1876–1933).

evoking Tibet's glorious past and the historic moment when the Mongol leader Gushri Khan elevated the Dalai Lama to power.⁴¹

She also notes attending several teachings by the man “who occupies the throne of Tsong Khapa”—that is, the Ganden Tripa (dGa' ldan khri pa or Khri rin po che), the head of the Gelug school (second account, p. 349). These teachings are typically held during the first month of the year in front of the Jokhang and are theoretically reserved for monks (first account, p. 169).

At the time, she describes the Ganden Tripa as “a thin, angular-faced old man of aristocratic, disdainful asceticism” (first account, p. 170).⁴² H. Richardson identifies these teachings as taking place on the 24th day of the 1st month (February 28, 1924), the same day on which large votive effigies are dismantled and destroyed outside the city—a ritual marking the expulsion of all negative influences.⁴³

She then recounts attending the *ser 'phreng*, or Golden Procession, which she describes as “the most beautiful I've ever seen in the many years I've travelled to various countries” (first account, p. 170). She witnessed the event from “a mountain spur close to the Potala walls,” offering her a unique vantage point from above (first account, p. 171): “an unforgettable spectacle which, on its own, would have repaid me for the fatigue I had endured to contemplate it” (first account, p. 172).

This procession marks the final highlight of the New Year celebrations, held on the 30th day of the 2nd month. By this time, all negative influences have been ritually expelled from the city and the deities honoured, allowing the capital to be symbolically purified. The procession follows the *lingkhor*, the road encircling the city.

The participants—primarily monks and religious figures—are dressed in sumptuous brocade garments in shades of yellow and orange (hence the association with “gold”). They process around the city with banners, ritual objects, and ceremonial music. A huge *thangka* is unfurled across the façade of the Potala, and dances are performed throughout Lhasa. This grand procession brings the New Year festivities to a close.⁴⁴

She concludes her written account with a detailed description of the scapegoat ceremony, whose expulsion precedes the Golden Procession

⁴¹ See Richardson, pp. 31-37.

⁴² In 1924, the head of the *dge lugs* order was Jampa Chödrak (Byams pa chos grags, 1876–1937/1947) (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganden_Tripa, last check: 19/04/2025).

⁴³ Richardson, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁴ Richardson, pp. 74-81 and Tsybikov, pp. 148-49.

(first account, pp. 173–174; second account, pp. 364–370). This elaborate ritual typically spans several days and culminates in the expulsion of a designated man from the capital on the 29th day of the 2nd month—corresponding, according to our converters, to April 3, 1924. Indeed, she notes that she witnessed his departure from the city.

The ceremony is conducted for the long life and good fortune of the Dalai Lama, as well as the prosperity of the entire country. It involves selecting an individual to symbolically absorb all the misfortunes of the community.⁴⁵ Over several days, this person walks through the streets of the city, collecting offerings from the inhabitants. Those who refuse are threatened with dire consequences. Laden with these goods—believed to be imbued with negative influences—the man is then sent out of the city, thereby carrying away misfortune and ensuring the spiritual purification of the land, its ruler, and its people.

B. Remarkable monuments in Lhasa

In the first account of her journey (*Souvenirs...*, published in 1925), the earliest mention of Lhasa appears in her description of the golden roofs of the Potala (p. 131). Two pages later, in the following chapter (p. 133), she recounts her arrival in the Tibetan capital. From that point onward, all subsequent chapters up to the final one (p. 177) focus on her stay in Lhasa. However, her descriptions remain vague: it is often unclear whether she personally visited the places she mentions, or what impressions they left on her. This stands in stark contrast to the English version, in which she vividly details her experiences of city life and her visits to various sites—explaining, for example, that she rushed to see the most famous landmarks in case her true identity was discovered. She also shares what she particularly enjoyed or found amusing, offering a more personal and engaging account.

In the French version, she refers several times to the Potala and the Jokhang, recounting how she and Yongden joined a group of peasants who had come for the New Year celebrations in order to enter the Potala without attracting attention.⁴⁶ She notes that it is the Potala that gives the city its distinctive charm, while the rest holds little interest for her.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Richardson, pp. 61-71 and Tsybikov, pp. 146-47. See also my Master's thesis on this specific ritual.

⁴⁶ David-Neel 1987, pp. 330-32.

⁴⁷ David-Neel 2024, p. 135.

She devotes a chapter to the “dwellings of the Dalai Lama and the sights of Lhasa,” which include the Jokhang and the Norbulingka—his summer residence—but she does not clearly state whether she visited the Norbulingka, although it seems highly likely.⁴⁸ She quickly mentions many temples and monasteries, but gives little detail on the three major ones: Ganden, Sera, and Drepung.⁴⁹ The temple she appears to know best is the Jokhang, as she admits to having explored it “right down to the smallest corner.”⁵⁰

She recounts her visits to the market, noting that the most sought-after items are aluminium kitchen utensils and “junk imported from India and Europe”,⁵¹ which she seems to view with a sense of disappointment, lamenting the lack of exoticism. More broadly, she describes the city as “lively,” its inhabitants as “jovial,” and the streets as relatively clean.⁵²

Her letters to her husband reveal a bit more. In the second letter (dated March), she mentions visiting a monastery “a little way away,” at a round-trip distance of “9 English miles (13.5 km),” which was likely Drepung—consistent with her 1925 account, where she notes that Drepung is 6 km from the city. She adds that she “intends to leave Lhasa at short notice,” explaining that she doesn’t like the city and has already visited the shops, the Jokhang, and the Potala.

In her last letter, dated April 2—just before leaving Lhasa—she recounts a journey to Ganden, which they had passed on their way to the city but had not visited at the time. This time, the trip took three days, during which Yongden collapsed from exhaustion, forcing them to hire horses to reach the monastery. Since she was not permitted to sleep there, they camped on a nearby mountain. The next day, with Yongden still feeling very unwell, she visited the monastery alone. They then made the return journey on foot. Altogether, the trip took six to seven days.

She also mentions having bought two horses in preparation for their return to India, as they no longer had the strength to make the journey on foot. She adds that she plans to stay “another week” to attend the scapegoat festival, and that she will depart “the very next day after these festivals” (Letter to her husband, 2/4).

We can therefore be certain that she visited at least two of the three major monasteries surrounding Lhasa, as well as the Jokhang and the

⁴⁸ David-Neel 1987, p. 336; David-Neel 2024, pp. 138–41.

⁴⁹ David-Neel 2024, pp. 143–44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 145.

⁵¹ David-Neel 1987, pp. 337–38; David-Neel 2024, p. 141.

⁵² David-Neel 2024, p. 143.

Potala. As for the rest, the French versions allow only for speculation. I will be able to provide a more complete picture once I have examined the English version, which should help fill in the gaps and include her personal observations.

That said, I believe there are at least three reasons that could explain the lack of details about the stay in Lhasa. First, it's possible that the French publisher (or even Alexandra herself) wanted to highlight the theme of defying the English, challenging the forbidden, and proving them wrong. Once she had succeeded, the primary goal had been achieved, and the details of the city might have seemed secondary to the overarching purpose. In fact, she writes to her husband: "I will tell you at once that I have completely (as completely as anyone could possibly imagine) succeeded in the rather adventurous journey for which I set out when I wrote you my last letter. [...] My success is complete, but if I were offered a million to repeat the adventure under the same conditions, I think I would refuse" (letter of February 28).

On the other hand, the British had a strong connection to Asia, particularly India, which may explain their keen interest in obtaining details about life in Lhasa. They likely wanted to read the anecdotes that were missing from the French version. Last but not least, we now know that both she and Yongden were very ill, which could explain why they didn't venture out much and didn't find the city particularly appealing.

5. DEPARTURE FROM LHASA

After two months in Lhasa, Alexandra David-Neel and Yongden set off again, leaving Tibet from the south and heading toward India. In the first account of her adventures, she summarizes her stay with the following words: "For two months, I wandered around the Thibetan Rome, visiting its temples and strolling on the high terraces of the Potala, without anyone suspecting that, for the first time since the world began, a foreign woman had gazed upon the forbidden city."⁵³ She also recalls her departure with these words: "I left Lhasa as peacefully as I had entered it, without anyone suspecting that a foreigner had wandered about for two months."⁵⁴

In the first account of her trip, published in 1925, it's possible that Alexandra David-Neel truly believed she had remained incognito in Lhasa. However, as early as the following year, letters preserved in her archives reveal that she was aware this was not the case and that she had likely been

⁵³ David-Neel 2024, p. 133.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 174.

recognized. Still, as a woman of letters and an explorer eager to be acknowledged for her exploits, she probably chose to remain silent on the matter. The first piece of evidence comes from F. Ludlow, a British resident of Gyantse, who wrote to her about what he had heard:

A Tibetan gentleman of high rank was informed by one of his servants that a strange woman living in the bazaar had had “a bath” and had used a “European towel.” He thought about it for a moment, and then dismissed the matter from his mind, saying that the person must be a Sikkimese or Nepali. I wonder if there is any truth in it. I should like to hear your version of the story.⁵⁵

A letter from David Macdonald, the British Trade Agent in Gyantse at the time Alexandra reached the city, identifies the Tibetan in question as Minister Tsarong (1888–1959), a diplomat and close adviser to the 13th Dalai Lama:

I met the Tsarong Shapé and inquired how it was that he did not know that an European Lady had visited Lhasa. He told me that a woman came and mentioned to him that there was a Lady, who washes herself every morning and this fact aroused some suspicion in his mind. He said that he was going to make some enquiries as to who the Lady was, but he was kept busy, and then he learnt of your arrival at Gyantse. The Tibetans think that you must be a remarkable Lady to be able to visit Lhasa in disguise and to undertake the long and perilous journey.⁵⁶

Macdonald later recalled this anecdote in a 1946 letter, explaining that he had asked Tsarong about it when he was on his way to India. Tsarong told him that he had sent someone to look after her, but it was only then that he learned of Alexandra’s arrival in Gyantse.⁵⁷

To return to our account, we now know that Alexandra David-Neel and Yongden left Lhasa on April 5, 1924, visiting the main religious and sacred sites along the way: Samye, Tsetang, Neudong, Yumbulhakhang, Chongye, Mindoling, Yamdrok Lake, Samding Monastery, and others.

⁵⁵ Letter from F. Ludlow, 9/8/1926, p. 2 (MADN archives, Digne).

⁵⁶ Letter from D. Macdonald, 20/9/1927, p. 3 (MADN archives, Digne).

⁵⁷ Letter from D. Macdonald, 11/1/1946, p. 2 (MADN archives, Digne). According to other sources, Laden La (1876–1936), who was then sent to Tibet by the 13th Dalai Lama to set up a civil police force, was also aware of her possible presence, but he said nothing because he had seen her in India in 1912, when she had been received by the Dalai Lama, and he esteemed her because of “her sincere interest in and real commitment to Tibetan Buddhism” (Désiré-Marchand, p. 117). See also Mascolo de Filippis, p. 183. One of her daughters, who wrote his biography, explains that he kept silent “as she kept a low profile” (Rhodes and Deki, 2006, p. 40).

They arrived in Gyantse on May 5, 1924, exactly one month after departing from Lhasa.⁵⁸

En route, she wrote another letter to her husband, which she mailed upon arriving in Gyantse. In it, she summarizes her stay in Lhasa, noting once again that she had contracted the flu several times and was still feeling weak and feverish (pencil-written letter to her husband, early May).

In Gyantse, she met several British officials: David Macdonald⁵⁹ (1870/73–1962), the Trade Agent stationed there since 1905; Frank Ludlow, head of the boys' school he had founded in 1920; and Captain Frank Perry, head of the local garrison and the man who would later notify David-Neel of her arrest.⁶⁰ She arrived penniless, ragged, and in poor health, but the Macdonald family received her warmly and took great care of her. Macdonald even agreed to lend her money so she could continue her journey to India.⁶¹



From left to right, front row: Colonel Frank Perry (who arrested A. David-Neel in Gyantse), Annie and Vera (daughters of D. Macdonald) and David Macdonald, British Trade agent in Gyantse in 1924⁶²

⁵⁸ Désiré-Marchand, p. 117.

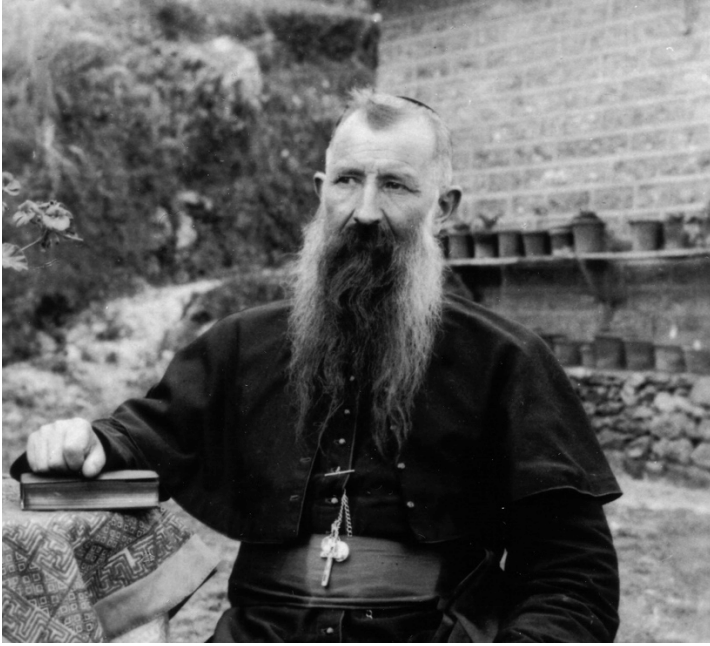
⁵⁹ He lived there with his wife Alice Curtis, and their nine children (Annie, their eldest daughter, would later marry Captain F. Perry). (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Macdonald, last check: 20/5/2024).

⁶⁰ Désiré-Marchand, p. 117.

⁶¹ This is all the more remarkable given that the French Consul, to whom she had written as soon as she arrived in Gyantse, refused to help her, and she so asked her husband for help (as the British agent wanted to be reimbursed quickly before this put him in an embarrassing position with his superiors) (Letter to her husband, 15/6).

⁶² Photo: <https://double-dolphin.blogspot.com/2018/07/weekend-at-himalayan-hotel-mayfair-kalimpong.html>

She remained in Gyantse for twelve days, still suffering from fatigue and fever. On May 17, she set out for India, accepting an invitation from the French missionary Father Douénel (1866–1940) to stay at Pedong, near Kalimpong.⁶³ She arrived there three weeks later, on June 11, 1924.



After her return from Lhasa, Father Douénel invited Alexandra David-Neel to stay with him in Pedong. It is likely that she wrote the first drafts of her travel account there ⁶⁴

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though her feat took place a hundred years ago, a close reading of Alexandra David-Neel's writings still offers fresh insight into the sojourn that made her world-famous and marked a turning point in her

⁶³ According to Désiré-Marchand (p. 118), she received an invitation from him along the way. Yet in the history of the South Tibet Mission (p. 86), it is said that Father Douénel regularly visited Gangtok and it was during his first visit that he met David-Neel and invited her to stay at Pedong. This seems more realistic. For Father Douénel's short biography, see <https://irfa.paris/en/missionnaire/2014-douenel-jules/>.

⁶⁴ Photo: <https://irfa.paris/missionnaire/2014-douenel-jules/>

career. At the same time, it is striking how few details she provided—even in retrospect—about this extraordinary moment.

From early on, two distinct reactions emerge in her reflections:

On the one hand, she readily admitted that Lhasa held little personal appeal. For her, it paled in comparison to the landscapes, experiences, and people encountered along the way. While still in Lhasa, she wrote to her husband:

I had no curiosity about Lhasa. I went there because the city was on my route, and also because it was a Parisian joke to play on those who forbid access to it. (Letter to her husband, March 12)

On the other hand, she quickly recognized that her stay in Lhasa could bring her unexpected fame. From an early stage, she worked to attract media attention and establish her name. For instance, while still in Gyantse, she confided to her husband that she was already considering which publishers to contact for her travelogue and asked him to subscribe to the “*Argus de la presse*” to keep track of all articles mentioning her (Letter to her husband, May 16).

This duality—detachment from the experience itself, yet strategic exploitation of its symbolic value—has led subsequent biographers to similarly gloss over the two months she spent in the holy city, focusing instead on the eight-month journey.

With the information presented here, I hope to have reversed this trend and shed light on those overlooked two months in Lhasa—a stay that signalled the beginning of her fame, yet was marked by illness and the lingering effects of a clearly arduous journey, which she deliberately chose not to emphasize.

I’ll close with a final quote that captures both her view of the exploit and her enduring affection for the one who became her adopted son after her return from Tibet. In a draft will written in 1958 (sent to the friend she wished to appoint as her executor), she wrote:

What I want is to perpetuate the memory of Lama Yongden, my adopted son, and, from a patriotic point of view, to perpetuate the memory that the first white woman to enter Lhasa was a French woman.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Letter from David-Neel to C. Fouchet, 18/2/1958, p. 4 (MADN archives, Digne).

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“ACCORDING TO OUR OWN GENIUS”:¹

THE ASSERTION OF A SIKKIMESE NATIONAL IDENTITY
AT THE CORONATION OF
CHOGYAL PALDEN THONDUP NAMGYAL IN 1965

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the political history of Sikkim analysing the coronation of its last monarch in 1965 as an event marking the apogee of the Himalayan kingdom’s assertion of a distinct national identity. It situates the coronation in its proper historical context, showing why the ruling family needed to create and assert a national identity. It examines how the coronation invoked ‘tradition’ through its use of cultural symbols and rituals and narrativized Sikkim’s history to reinforce the idea of a shared national identity. This paper uses sources from the recently released Sikkim Palace Archives and a special commemorative book released shortly after to mark the occasion, to attempt this study.

INTRODUCTION

On the 22nd of May, 2023, Gangtok witnessed the conclusion of a yearlong celebration commemorating the centennial birth anniversary of the last Chogyal (King) Palden Thondup Namgyal of Sikkim. The event, attended by members of the erstwhile royal family, Bhutanese delegates, Sikkimese government ministers and a diverse section of Sikkimese society, saw

¹ The title of this paper is taken from a line in the proclamation of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal (r. 1965–1982), which announced his succession to the throne of Sikkim after the death of his father, Chogyal Tashi Namgyal. The full sentence reads, “We shall always pride our national identity and our deep sincere resolution to progress according to our own genius.” It summarizes the crux of this paper whose focus is on the creation and assertion of a Sikkimese national identity, emphasizing its independent international status: Proclamation of Palden Thondup Namgyal (Chogyal r. 1965–1982), 05 Dec 1963. (Endangered Archives Programme 880: SPA\PA\SN\002).

displays of reverence and remembrance for the last king.² There were traditional monastic rituals, speeches and ceremonial dances aplenty. This occasion came quite close on the heels of protests in Sikkim caused by the Indian Supreme Court's verdict in January, which referred to the ethnic Nepali population in Sikkim as "people of foreign origin."³ While the Supreme Court removed the reference from the verdict after protests, it raised fears of the general Sikkimese population about the issue of Sikkimese identity within the larger Indian nation-state. Thus, the celebration of the Chogyal's birth centenary became a rallying point for the assertion and celebration of a 'Sikkimese identity,' almost fifty years after the merger of Sikkim with India on 16th May 1975. This event showed the need for the reimagination of a Sikkimese identity within the Indian Union and how that process often involves a hark back to its former monarchy.

Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, in their works on the creation of nationalism, have shown that national identities are "invented" or "constructed." This process, through which an imagined sense of community is fostered serves different purposes across time and historical contexts. In Sikkim, the need to create a distinct national identity was felt post-1947, when the British left the subcontinent in a mess, with its many princely states floundering unsuccessfully to assert their independent status against the emerging Indian state. Sikkimese nationalism, then, arose in anticipation of post-colonial India's assertion of hegemony and owed its creation chiefly to its last Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal and members of the Sikkimese intelligentsia who strove to create a distinct Sikkimese identity which represented its ethnic diversity and international independent status.

² Pankaj, Dhungel (2023).

³ The Supreme Court's verdict had come on an appeal filed by the Association of Old Settlers of Sikkim and others seeking the striking down of a part of the Income Tax Act, 1961, more particularly, the definition of "Sikkimese" to the extent it excludes Indians who have settled in Sikkim before the merger of Sikkim with India on April 26, 1975. The Supreme Court in the verdict had said, "Therefore, there was no difference made out between the original inhabitants of Sikkim, namely the Bhutia-Lepchas and the person of foreign origin settled in Sikkim like the Nepalese or persons of Indian origin who had settled down in Sikkim generations back." The judgement and the protests that ensued show how people continue to imagine and assert their identity in the present political circumstances. See, "SC Removes Reference to Sikkimese-Nepalese as "Foreigners" after Govt Sought Order's Review." Hindustan Times, 9 February, 2023. www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/sc-removes-reference-to-sikkimese-nepalese-as-foreigners-after-govt-sought-order-s-review-101675881227606.html.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sikkim today lies as a minor protrusion from the Indian landmass into the Himalayas, wedged between the Tibet Autonomous Region to its north and northeast, the Indian state of West Bengal to its south, and Nepal and Bhutan on its west and east respectively. But despite its diminutive size, Sikkim possesses significant geopolitical importance due to its possession of the Nathu La and Jelep La mountain passes, which serve as the most accessible passageway into the Chumbi Valley, onto the Tibetan plateau. Further, these mountain passes are a mere 170 kilometres away from the ‘Siliguri Corridor’ also dubbed as the ‘Chicken's Neck Corridor,’ which is a narrow strip of land at the trijunction of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh that connects India’s North Eastern Region to the rest of India.⁴ Hence, Sikkim’s status as an invaluable piece of geostrategic real estate. Today, the state is inhabited by around twenty-two ethnic groups who are broadly grouped as Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali communities.⁵

The ancestors of Sikkim’s ruling Namgyal dynasty had migrated to Sikkim from Tibet in the 13th century. They were established as rulers in the 1640s, and consecrated by three Tibetan monks. The ruling family with a Bhutia monarch, owed loose allegiance to the Tibetan theocracy and the Dalai Lama.⁶ The Lepchas were the earliest known inhabitants in Sikkim along with the Tsongs (Limbus) and when the Bhutias arrived from Tibet, tensions were only natural in such an ethnically diverse state. Hence, the Lho-Mon-Tsong-sum agreement of 1663 was signed between the ethnically Tibetan Bhutia (Lho), Lepcha (Mon) and Limbu (Tsong) communities swearing allegiance to the Sikkimese king, thus cementing his authority and legitimacy to rule.⁷

Sikkim’s brush with the East India Company (EIC) came during the Anglo-Gorkha War of (1815–1816) where the Company were looking for allies to encircle Nepal. Sikkim, which until then had faced a series of onslaughts from Nepal and Bhutan were only too happy to support the

⁴ Chokepoints: Circulation and Regulation in India’s Siliguri Corridor, *Center for Urban and Regional Studies*, November 22, 2017, <https://curs.unc.edu/2017/02/20/chokepoints-circulation-regulation-indias-siliguri-corridor/>.

⁵ Anna Balikci-Denjongpa (2011): 1–10.

⁶ Alex McKay (2021) discusses the Tibetan influence over Sikkim in his theoretical conception of the Mandala Kingdom.

⁷ McKay (2021): 18. Gradually, the Lepchas were also assimilated into the hierarchy of the kingdom. Also see Andrew Duff (2015): 85–86.

EIC.⁸ Through the Treaty of Titalia (1817), the British restored some lost Sikkimese territory and used the three Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan as a ‘buffer’ to protect British colonial possessions against the Chinese, and in the larger ‘Great Game,’ against Russia.⁹

British-Sikkimese relations spiralled downwards over misunderstandings surrounding the status of Darjeeling, with both claiming sovereign status over it.¹⁰ Saul Mullard and McKay have argued that the rapid development of Darjeeling under the British led to a rising demand for labour, which was filled by migrant Sikkimese who left in search of better economic opportunities. To counter this erosion of the Sikkimese tax base, the British, along with the first Pradhan Thekadars and some Bhutia-Lepcha landlords, settled many Nepalis in the southern and western regions of Sikkim.¹¹ By the 1890s, census records show that the “Nepali Sikkimese” outnumbered the earliest Lepchas and later settled Bhutias. This was an important period in Sikkim’s history as it entirely transformed the ethnic make-up of the kingdom.¹²

Over time, Sikkim was made into a British Protectorate and the Anglo-Chinese treaty of 1890 cemented that status, with the British retaining control of the internal administration and foreign relations of the state. They established the official British Residency in Gangtok in 1890 with the Political Officer at its helm, primarily to fulfil the twin objectives of establishing trading relations with Tibet and increasing their political influence there.¹³ The Younghusband expedition (1904–1905) into Tibet followed and in 1911, when the 13th Dalai Lama took refuge in the Political Officer’s residence to escape the Chinese, Sikkim’s geostrategic importance increased manifold. After British paramountcy in the region was achieved, they restored powers of internal administration to the Sikkimese monarch in 1918.¹⁴

During the reign of the reclusive second-last monarch, Chogyal Tashi Namgyal, a perfect balance had been struck wherein the British got an acquiescent ruler while Sikkim enjoyed the protective cover of the British.

⁸ McKay (2021): 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 77.

¹⁰ Darjeeling was presented to the British by the Sikkimese ruler in 1835 to build a sanatorium. However, the British, upon realizing its strategic value began rapidly developing the region and claimed sovereign status over it. Darjeeling’s takeover by the British is seen as an instance of the Empires “Frontier Policy.” *Ibid.*: 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147–149. See also, K.C. Pradhan (2008) and Ardussi, Balicki-Denjongpa and Sørensen (2021): 313–315.

¹² Hiltz (2003): 71.

¹³ McKay (2021): 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Their interests had converged.¹⁵ Towards the end of his rule, his son, Gyalsey Palden Thondup Namgyal who served as an advisor, became the de facto ruler, overseeing internal affairs and even heading negotiations with India during the period of transition from a colonial British state to an independent Indian one. This paper discusses his coronation in detail.

Things took a turn once the British left the subcontinent in 1947. The network of princely states, all of whom had personalized treaties signed with the British, had to renegotiate their arrangements with the Government of India. Although Sikkim was part of the ‘Chamber of Princes’ since 1935, she was regarded as a ‘special case’ as she was encircled on three sides by foreign territory and only on one side by British Indian territory. Furthermore, Sikkim had religious and cultural differences vis-à-vis the other princely states and had historical ties to the Tibetan theocracy like its neighbour Bhutan.¹⁶

Within the Indian cabinet, there were differing views on the status of Sikkim. Sardar Patel was in favour of Indian intervention in Sikkim to counter the Chinese threat. However, Nehru, with his ‘Himalayan bias,’ wanted to create a pan-Asia federation, a “new Asia rising from the ashes of colonialism,” and let the Himalayan kingdoms be.¹⁷

Thus, the three Himalayan monarchies, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim all signed treaties with the Government of India. Of the three treaties, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950¹⁸ was the “most restrictive,” in part due to India’s anxiety over the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1949.¹⁹ This treaty formalized Sikkim as a Protectorate of India and gave India sweeping powers over

¹⁵ The end of the colonial period was marked by the Political Officer’s report on the state of affairs in Sikkim, which invariably included the same paragraph, “The system of governance in Sikkim was based on the good old patriarchal monarchy of ancient days of oriental civilisation where subjects stand as children of the Ruler; and with the simple hill people unaffected by the virus of democracy and elections, the system works excellently.” Duff (2015): 33.

¹⁶ When the Cabinet Mission arrived in India in 1946, crown prince Thondup was anxious that Sikkim’s membership of the Chamber of Princes might be used as a reason to club Sikkim with the other princely states. While Sikkim had a connection with the British, he felt that his family and by extension, Sikkim’s historical and cultural ties lay with Tibet rather than with India. Duff (2015): 29–33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 52.

¹⁸ On 14 December 1950, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty was signed, formally making Sikkim a protectorate of India. The treaty laid down that Sikkim would “enjoy autonomy in regards to its internal affairs” but the Government of India be responsible for the defence and territorial integrity of Sikkim by stationing armed forces. Sikkim was to have “no dealings with any foreign power.” *Ibid.*: 44.

¹⁹ Hiltz (2003): 69.

matters of Sikkim's communication, foreign affairs and defence. It also gave the Indian government the right to intervene in Sikkim's internal administration in cases where law and order were threatened.²⁰

The postcolonial period, from the 1950s to the 1970s was interesting in Sikkim's history. Jackie Hiltz, in her work on the construction of Sikkimese national identity, portrays this period as one where the Chogyal was atop the "last wave of nationalism," striving to create a national identity for Sikkim.²¹ This period also saw Gyalsey Palden Thondup Namgyal's marriage to an American socialite, Hope Cooke in 1963. Their wedding brought the glare of the international media on Sikkim and it was thrust onto the world stage.²² Hope Cooke had diplomatic connections in her family and the spotlight of international media served the Gyalsey with an opportunity to assert Sikkim's separate identity. The role of his wife, Hope Cooke in contributing to the "cultural-symbolic" attempts to give Sikkim an international voice is discussed later. Most importantly, this period saw the coronation of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, an event which marked the apogee of Sikkim's assertion of a distinct national identity.

SIKKIMESE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal's biggest challenge in the creation of a national identity lay in finding ideas of a shared past rooted in cultural traditions, which balanced the protection of the ruling minority Bhutia-Lepchas as well as represented and reflected the demographic majority Nepali Hindus.²³

Benedict Anderson writes that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being"²⁴ Sikkim's national identity too, was rooted in the largely Buddhist cultural and religious systems of its past and involved the invocation of a shared culture and history by the Sikkimese.²⁵

²⁰ Suchismita Das (2014): 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 44.

²² The Chogyal's marriage to Hope Cooke contributed greatly to Sikkim's visibility in the international media as Hope Cooke was one of very few Americans to get married into royalty.

²³ Hiltz (2003): 72.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson (1991): 12.

²⁵ The invocation of Mt Khangchendzonga which is revered as a guardian deity by the Sikkimese was a symbol of a shared landscape with all communities in Sikkim venerating the sacred peak.

Hiltz writes that Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal was working on political and cultural assertions of national identity that manifested themselves in various ways. Political assertions of a national identity included calls of renegotiating the 1950 Indo-Sikkim Treaty, inclusion in international bodies such as the United Nations and a gradual “Sikkimisation” of the kingdom’s bureaucratic structure, which still had a lot of Indians. Cultural and symbolic assertions of Sikkim’s national identity involved the exhibition of political insignia such as the national flag, national anthem, and the Sikkim Guards, as well as bringing changes in the school curriculum to create a “national consciousness.”²⁶ Other efforts included the revitalization of handicrafts and cottage industries whose finished goods were sold in India and New York.

Further, Hiltz writes that the assertion of Sikkimese national identity was rooted in a “Tibeto-Burman” identity which sought to transcend the cultural differences between the ruling Bhutia-Lepcha minority and the majority Nepali population. Thus, an attempt was made at defining the ethnically diverse Sikkimese as emerging from a non-Aryan (and therefore non-Indian) Tibeto-Burman stock.²⁷ At around the time of the coronation, the term “Tibeto-Burman” gained currency and was used to describe the basis of Sikkimese nationality and language. It was an attempt to “reinforce the idea of separateness from India” and allowed the Sikkimese Nepali a claim to Sikkim’s ‘culturally Buddhist’ heritage.

RUN UP TO THE CORONATION

This section looks at some of the major developments in the run-up to the coronation to provide a setting for the event.

In September 1959, the Sikkim National Congress was formed, leading to a new period in the history of political movements in Sikkim. It saw the emergence of Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa, a landowner from an old Lepcha family. He was closely associated with the Nepali population and sought to represent them and fight for a fairer voting system and rights.

²⁶ Among other things to assert Sikkim’s independent status, Chogyal Palden Thondup represented Sikkim in many International conferences. He was President of the International Mahabodhi Society. He even proposed the idea of an indigenous ‘Sikkim Militia’ but the idea was shelved owing to opposition within Sikkim from the political parties. Duff (2015): 93.

²⁷ However, as Suchismita Das argues, even the Tibeto-Burman label was exclusionary as it only included Nepalīs of non-Aryan stock while leaving out so many others. Suchismita Das (2014): 42–56.

Kazi and his Scottish wife Elisa Maria Langford Rae,²⁸ got together and advocated for the abolition of the monarchy and closer ties with India. They were based in the Indian town of Kalimpong in West Bengal and produced articles critical of the Sikkimese monarch.²⁹ They had acquired significant support among the Nepali majority population and the issue of fair treatment and representation was to haunt the monarch in the coming years.

Another significant event was the flight of the Dalai Lama to India. This altered the relationship between India and China and thus, the three Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan now assumed an enhanced role in India's foreign policy.³⁰



Figure 1. Coronation 1965, the King & Queen³¹

²⁸ She adopted the title of Kazini of Chakung.

²⁹ Duff (2015): 87–88.

³⁰ For instance, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) was formed and tasked with building connectivity in Bhutan and Sikkim. Duff (2015): 95.

³¹ Alice S. Kandell, *Sikkim Photos (Kandell Collection)*, 1965, photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.30226>.

The Indo-China conflict of 1962 also led to some interesting developments. For instance, Beijing began to refer to Sikkim, Bhutan, Darjeeling and Kalimpong as “fingers on the hand of China” and there was a massive troop build-up in Sikkim, enabled by the 1950 Indo-Sikkim Treaty to defend India’s interests in the region from Chinese military threat.³² At Sikkim’s border, the Chinese and Indians engaged in allegations and refutations of incursions often leading to heated standoffs. This period also marked a significant change in Indian attitudes surrounding Tibetan refugees.³³ The Himalayan region assumed military and intelligence priority. The size of the regular Indian army was doubled to 750,000 and there was the creation of an external intelligence service within the Intelligence Directorate headed by R. N. Kao.³⁴

Then came the controversy surrounding the issue of nomenclature. While Chogyal Thondup Namgyal’s father Chogyal Tashi Namgyal did not have an issue with the terms Maharaja, Maharani and Maharaj Kumar (words used in the 1950 Treaty) to refer to the royals, the term had “Indo-Aryan origins” which “rooted Sikkim in the Indian orbit.” Chogyal Thondup wanted to change the status quo and wrote to Delhi that he and his consort wished to be referred to as the Chogyal and Gyalmo respectively, reviving the ancient Sikkimese titles. This issue was not settled until immediately before the coronation.³⁵

Therefore, the coronation took place at a time when Indo-China relations were tense, a burgeoning political movement sought to abolish the monarchy and a king sought to assert a distinct independent national identity.

THE CORONATION

This section proceeds to view the coronation as remembered in a commemorative book released to mark the occasion. This piece of coronation memorabilia was intended to provide a picture of Sikkim to the

³² In 1961–1962, The Sikkim Subjects Regulation was introduced to determine who was or was not a Sikkim subject. It was an attempt at defining Sikkim’s separate identity as well as to prevent future immigration into the kingdom. The regulation also noted that intermarriage between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalis could “undermine the solidarity of minorities” and therefore, it was necessary to “adhere to customary practices to ensure the survival of Sikkim” *Ibid.*: 92, 101.

³³ It led to the creation of the ‘Special Frontier Force’ which operated undercover as the 12th Gurkha Rifles, later known as Establishment 22.

³⁴ Duff (2015): 112.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 109–110.

reader as well as document the coronation as a moment of national pride in public memory. The book, in its dedication, aims to

attest to the beauty of our country, the strength and grace of our people, and the valour of our history, for all of these were an inextricable part of the Coronation. The Coronation was for us in Sikkim a moment in time, a moment which fused our people and our King, our history and our future.³⁶

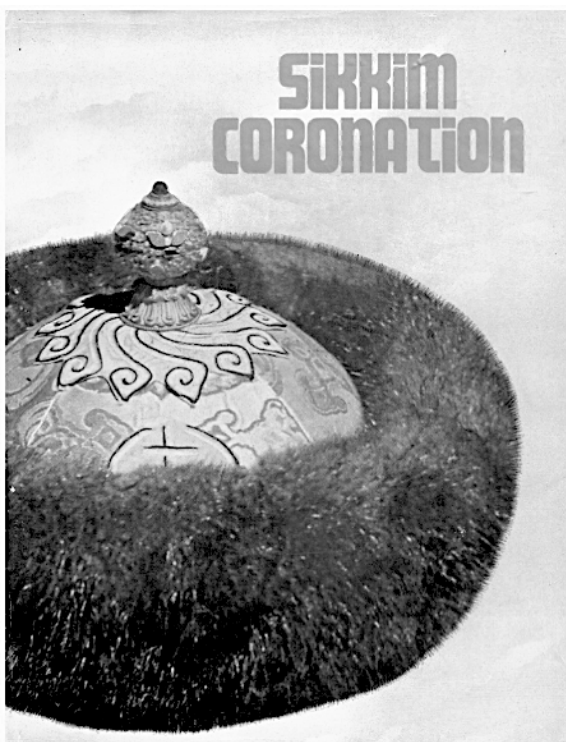


Figure 2. The front cover of the Coronation book published by the Coronation Souvenir Book Committee, 1965

The book opens with a portrayal of symbols of sovereignty including the Namgyal Coat of Arms³⁷ and the “national flag of Sikkim.” The book has

³⁶ The Coronation book was published by the Coronation Souvenir Book Committee in 1965. Since its pages are not numbered, relevant section titles or headings from which extracts and photographs have been taken are mentioned in the paragraphs.

³⁷ ‘Invented traditions’ of the Victorian era, the post-1857 saw the establishment of an Honours system, the Order of the Star of India and protocols, whereby maharajas were

sections on the “Modern History of Sikkim,” “Religions of Sikkim” and “Coronations of Sikkim” which are aimed at projecting the distinct nature of a Bhutia-Lepcha Buddhist Sikkimese identity. For instance, the section on the “Modern History of Sikkim” takes the reader on a journey through the history of the Namgyal Dynasty beginning in the 1640s, through the colonial period (including pictures of Chogyal Sidkeong Namgyal at Oxford in 1906, perhaps to show a connection with the British) ending with a eulogistic remembrance of the last Chogyal Tashi Namgyal. The former king’s administrative and other achievements are recorded and his efforts at integrating Sikkim’s diverse communities are acknowledged. Here, the notion of a common Sikkimese identity transcending ethnic divisions is hinted at, all the while acknowledging the paternalistic role of the ruler in maintaining harmony. The passage reads: “Basically, our communities are very akin. By race Mongol, and by social organization Tribal. Still, there is a need for conscious guidance to encourage us to remember our essential oneness.”

Thereafter, a section is dedicated to the succeeding monarch, which almost reads like his curriculum vitae. It includes details of his birth and formative years. The dual role of the monarch as a temporal as well as spiritual head is mentioned and Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal is recognized as the reincarnation of two venerable Buddhist figures. Then there is a collage of pictures of the Chogyal with Jawaharlal Nehru, Bhutanese and Nepalese royalty, Indira Gandhi and the President Inoyu of Turkey. In this section as well, there is mention of a Sikkimese national identity which encompasses the diverse ethnic communities of the state under the leadership of the monarch as the following extract suggests:

He [Palden Thondup] is the symbol of unity of his people which comprises three main communities—Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese—all blended into Sikkimese. This was amply demonstrated when thousands of his subjects, came from all parts of his country to congratulate him for being the Twelfth Consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim. And he found time to give audience to every single person who came to have his ‘Darshan.’

The book also captures an interesting period in Sikkim’s history which the then Dewan of Sikkim and Chogyal Thondup’s colleague from the Indian Civil Service Nari Rustomji described as ‘Sikkim’s cultural renaissance,’

accorded between nine and twenty-one gun salutes. The Bengal civil servant Robert Taylor designed medieval-styled coats-of-arms for the Indian ‘princely’ states, binding different kingdoms in a shared tradition. The Namgyal coat of arms was also developed then. See also Ardussi, Balikci-Denjongpa and Sørensen (2021): 291.

which was rooted in the ‘Dress, language, architecture, religion, social customs, music, painting— [...] centred [in] the heart of Sikkim’s culture.’ This “heady era,” according to the journalist Sunanda Datta-Ray is documented in the architectural styles pictured and captioned in the book as “Sikkimese Buddhist Architecture.” Similarly, a picture of the gateway to the Tashiling Secretariat intends to showcase the new “Sikkimese architecture” and is captioned “Sikkim is striving to preserve her aesthetic integrity and heritage even in new buildings. The appearance of our towns must not betray the natural beauty of the countryside.” Other stills portray the monarch and his queen pictured in a youth library, visiting cottage industries, inspecting farm yields and tea plantations.

A section titled “The Religions of Sikkim,” announces Buddhism as the “The State Religion of Sikkim” adding that “there is full freedom of worship in the country.” It describes the different religious communities that inhabit Sikkim and describes the spread of Buddhism in the state beginning from the eighth century onwards. The section also claims that “There is no religious discrimination in the public services and institutions” and notes that “one of the happy features of Sikkim is the free intermingling of the children of different communities and creeds under one roof in all schools and institutions.” It also mentions that the government services employ at all levels, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians alike and that “the faith of the individual in Sikkim is what he professes.”

The section titled “Coronations of Sikkim” posits the Namgyals at the centre of Sikkim’s history and mirrors the tendency of early writers to describe historical processes within a Buddhist framework, attributing historical events to the fulfilment of “divinely ordained processes.”³⁸ It traces the genealogy of the Namgyals and displays a mythic continuity with the past. The Namgyals are described as belonging to the Minyak Kingdom in the Kham region of Tibet. A certain Khye-Bumsa settled in the Chumbi Valley region and upon moving into Sikkim, signed a pact of “blood brotherhood” with Thekongtek, the legendary Lepcha chief at Kabi Longtsok. The passage goes on to describe how a descendent of Khye-Bumsa, Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated by three monks as the first ruler of Sikkim in fulfilment of an oracle. The legend described in the book mentions how an ancient oracle predicted that a certain person named Phuntsog would be found in Gangtok and was to be made king. The three monks send a search party to seek Phuntsog and discover him milking his cows. Relieved, the search party leave for the coronation and along the way, they meet the Lepchas and Magars (representing Sikkim’s ethnic diversity)

³⁸ McKay (2021): 9.

while gathering gifts offered by the people. The first-ever coronation involves the conferment of the title of Chogyal which means, “King who rules with righteousness.” Thereafter, the rites of “eight auspicious objects” and “seven auspicious Royal emblems” were performed. The passage also records the recognition of the coronation by the Dalai Lama who sent gifts and a letter referring to the Chogyal as “Ruler of the Sacred Land of the Southern Slopes.” This emphasizes the ties of the Sikkimese monarchy with Tibet as well as the derivation of legitimacy from a figure like the Dalai Lama.

The coronation of succeeding rulers is described briefly until the coronation of Sidkeong (Tulku) Namgyal under British watch, which is recorded with extraordinary detail. It displays how Sikkim’s interaction with the British led to the Anglicization of Sikkimese coronations along with existing Buddhist rituals. Sidkeong Namgyal’s coronation in 1914 describes how:

Sir Basil Gould, the Political Officer [...] represented the Viceroy in India. [...] The Sikkim National Flag flew outside the palace and a detachment of one hundred and thirteen infantry, Sikkim police and Sikkim Lepcha Orderlies presented arms and fired “feux de joie” followed by the beating of drums and the blowing of trumpets and clarions. Afterwards, the Head Lama and other Buddhist priests offered blessings.

The book proceeds to explain in detail Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal’s coronation, underlining the fact that it would be performed “strictly on the basis of the scriptural injunctions and according to ancient traditions.”

It mentions the formation of a central committee designated as the “Ser-Thri-Nga-Sol (Coronation) Committee” under orders of the Chogyal. The dowager queen Gyalyum was its chairman and the composition of the committee and sub-committees exhibit a predominance of Bhutias and Lepchas along with a few Sikkimese Nepali representatives.

The book describes how on the morning of the 4th of April, 1965, the Royal procession left the palace for the Royal Chapel where the coronation was to take place. On the palace lawns, a “shamiana in Sikkimese style with auspicious Sikkimese signs” was set up to house some of the day’s events. In a nod to emphasize Sikkim’s independent status, the Chogyal is described as having inspected the Guard of Honour presented by the Sikkim Guards (Sikkim’s indigenous armed force), Sikkim Police and Sikkimese Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.

The guestlist consisted an array of international guests including Lakshmi Menon, Indira Gandhi, a special representative of the Dalai Lama, a special representative of the King of Bhutan and ambassadors from twelve countries. A discussion on the Indian government's undermining of the event as well as the conspicuous absences of certain attendees is discussed later.

The book describes the coronation as beginning with a purification ceremony followed by a host of other rituals whose detailed descriptions and significance are meticulously provided. The invocation of tradition and the symbolic offering of royal robes and royal insignia to the ruler make for an interesting read. The offerings were meant to symbolize "power over the entire universe" and involved offerings such as the "Shab Lham" or boots (which stood for stability and power), "Nazah" or royal robe (symbolizing the wearer as an embodiment of the benevolent and altruistic symbol of the Buddha), "Ser Gyi Ku Rak" or golden sash (signifying moral virtues and compassion for sentient beings) and the "Zab Chen Gyi Ber" or the royal mantle (symbolizing grace and glory) (See figure 6). Once the presentation and robing of the monarch was conducted, he was seated on the golden throne and to the accompaniment of music and prayers from Buddhist scriptures, the "Nor Bui Tok Gyis Gyenpai Wu-Sha" or the jewelled crown was offered to the Chogyal.³⁹

Other symbols offered to the monarch included the popular "eight auspicious signs,"⁴⁰ "eight auspicious objects"⁴¹ and the "seven sacred emblems of kingship,"⁴² as mentioned in the coronation of the first Namgyal king Phuntsog Namgyal in 1641.

At the end of the rituals, the book mentions speeches by the subjects, the monarch and by Lakshmi Menon, who as Minister of State in the Indian

³⁹ Other objects offered to the King and his consort included the "Khorlo-Tsib Tong" or a thousand-spoked wheel of gold signifying the "ultimate symbol of royalty," the "Norbu Rinchen" or priceless gem representing peace and prosperity, the "Tashi Dzes Shi" or four auspicious objects which included a conch shell, drum and cymbals, standard of victory and the "precious tassel." Thereafter, the monarch was presented with "emblems of health and longevity" referred to as the "Tse-Lha Rik-Ngai Drub Dzes." These objects are pictured in the book and later in this paper. See Figure 5.

⁴⁰ "Tashi Tak Gyed" which comprised of "the jewelled parasol, the golden fish, the vase of treasures, the excellent lotus, the right whorled conch shell, the curled noose i.e., the knot of eternity, the standard of victory and the gold wheel."

⁴¹ "Tashi Dzes-Gyed" is described as including "a wight whorled conch shell, a mirror, curd, vermillion, a gemstone from an elephant's head, a sacred fruit, fine grass and white mustard."

⁴² "Gyal Sid Rinchen-Nadun" consisted of a wheel, a gem, a Queen, a Minister, an elephant, a horse and a Commander-in-Chief (see figure 5).

External Affairs Ministry addressed the gathering as the head of the official Indian delegation at the coronation.

The book contains the full text of the King's accession speech. It was an important speech considering how, at that moment, he had the ears of the world's press listening to every word he said. In it, he spoke of a 'national identity' and of reviving Sikkimese heritage. He warned:

We have to ensure also that, with the material progress towards which we are striving, we do not lose sight of the spiritual values that are our precious heritage, that the rich legacy of our past and the lovely things of Sikkim are not engulfed in the ocean of change.

While fondly remembering Jawaharlal Nehru, whom the speech described as "a true and steadfast friend of Sikkim," Chogyal Palden Thondup expressed his confident hope "that the government of India will continue to hold out to us this hand of friendship." He referred to India as "a good friend to Sikkim" and described the bond between the two countries as "strong and indissoluble."

However, there were certain extracts from the accession speech that raised eyebrows among the audience, especially that of the Indian delegation.⁴³ Those lines made direct references to calls for Sikkim's independent international status, the restoration of complete sovereignty and a revaluation of the treaty with India. The following extracts substantiate the point further:

While the streams of many diverse cultures have, for generations, flowed into and enriched Sikkim, her geographical situation also raises problems that lay upon her people a special burden of responsibility. India is a great and peace-loving country and we feel secure in her protection. But we are also conscious and alive to the need of preparing our people for any eventuality, so that they may be ready to lay down their lives in defence of their country, should the occasion arise.

Ours is a small country, but we have pride in our institutions, our way of life and cultural heritage. It is for this that we are resolved to maintain our national identity and so direct our affairs that our land may develop according to its own natural genius.

Further, the public address delivered on behalf of the Sikkimese Subjects to the newly crowned monarch reinforces those very ideas of Sikkimese

⁴³ Duff (2015): 118.

sovereignty and the importance of the monarchy. The relevant extract is worth quoting in full:

For us, the Chogyal symbolizes the unity, continuity and the cultural heritage of this Himalayan Kingdom. Sanctified by the presence of Mahaguru Padma-Sambhava, the Second Buddha, Sikkim has a tradition of righteous and peaceful life. It was [...] 1642 of Christian era that Miwang Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated by three Lamas at Yoksam Norbu Gang. This was an event, prophesied by the Lepcha sage Thek-Kong Tek, that was to prove to be of the greatest historical importance to our country. Since then, Sikkim has enjoyed the benevolent rule of eleven Consecrated Rulers who brought about material as well as moral development of this country and at the same time preserved the national identity of our Kingdom.



Figure 3. Coronation ceremony of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal and Gyalmo Hope Namgyal, Gangtok, Sikkim⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Alice S. Kandell, *Sikkim Photos (Kandell Collection)*, 1965, photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.30226>.

The book also features the speech delivered by Lakshmi Menon, India's representative to the coronation. As if in response to Chogyal's assertion of national identity, her speech contains a pointed observation. It reads:

India has had long and historic bonds with Sikkim, which go far beyond the terms of the Treaty which Your Highness' late distinguished father concluded with Independent India.

In a section titled "Some messages received on the auspicious occasion of Ser-Thri-Nga-Sol of the Chogyal," congratulatory messages from foreign dignitaries including royalty such as Queen Elizabeth II, King Mahendra of Nepal, King Jigme of Bhutan; the President of India S. Radhakrishnan, Vice President Zakir Hussain, the then recently deceased Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Foreign Minister of India Swaran Singh, the United States Secretary of State Dean Rusk and from A. G. Bottomely, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations in England. What is interesting to note is that while all the messages display generous congratulations, most of them also express regret at their inability to attend the coronation. None of the people mentioned above attended the coronation. For instance, the President of India expresses "regret" at not being able to attend without citing any explanation whereas the Prime Minister of India cites the "current session of Parliament and other pressing preoccupations" as an excuse. The fact that a junior Minister of State was sent as India's official representative also shows the Indian government's deliberate undermining of the significance of the Sikkimese coronation. The obvious snubbing of Sikkimese royalty can be understood in terms of the prevailing lows in Indo-Sikkim relations wherein India was concerned about events at the Chinese border, Sikkim's protectorate status and Chogyal Palden Thondup's assertion of Sikkim's sovereign identity. The absences of the Nepalese and Bhutanese monarchs are also conspicuous and their vague excuses of "pressing duties at home" and "various important unavoidable problems" respectively, might have been influenced by Indian pressure.⁴⁵ Another notable omission in these congratulatory messages is the word '*coronation*,' which is entirely absent from the letters sent by Indian dignitaries and the Bhutanese monarch. While the message from the British, Americans and the ruler of Nepal explicitly use the term to congratulate the Chogyal, others—including the President and Prime Minister of India as well as the Foreign Minister—avoid using it altogether,

⁴⁵ Sunanda Datta-Ray refers to instances when Bhutan and Nepal were warned by India at showing respect accorded to sovereign heads of state to the Chogyal of Sikkim. Sunanda K Datta-Ray (2013): 343.

instead referring to the event as *Ser-Thri-Nga-Sol* or variously as an ‘occasion’ or ‘ceremony’. This selective phrasing suggests a reluctance to acknowledge the event as a formal coronation. The intent of using the term *Ser-Thri-Nga-Sol*, although formal and valid, could be taken to characterise the event as a religious enthronement rather than a politically sovereign coronation. This could have been done with a view to undermine the coronation as well as reflect a diplomatic stance on the nature of Sikkim’s sovereignty.

The commemorative book proudly exhibits reviews of the coronation published by the foreign press including newspapers like the Daily Telegraph, Evening Standard, Washington Post, The Daily Express, Chicago Daily News, Hindustan Times, Amrita Bazar Patrika and The Economist. A common thread that ties these reviews is their over-the-top ways of romanticizing Sikkim.⁴⁶

Quite many pages of the book are dedicated to the royals and include their childhood pictures along with ones at royal ceremonies. Such images were meant to evoke feelings of pride as well as to project the royal family in the familiar roles of doting fathers and mothers, engaged with their families and lives.

Other images in the book seek to capture and include vignettes of everyday life along with three images of youth from the three communities of Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia all together on one page to emphasize communal harmony. Some images include assertions of national identity and shared landscapes such as one titled, “Our Sikkim” showing a view of a valley with terraced fields. Further, there is a picture of an old gentleman with a drawn bow titled “Archery, our National Sport.” A page showcasing the hydroelectric potential of Sikkim’s rivers reads, “Our many waterways can be some of our most difficult obstacles, but the same waterways when controlled and channelled can be turned into one of the most useful assets.”

Another page showcasing the floral bounty of Sikkim is captioned, “Our development extends not only to projects of concrete and steel but also to the realm of flowers; a definite natural resource,” and includes a picture of the crown prince and princess of Japan viewing a Sikkimese rhododendron exhibit in Tokyo. In showcasing the queen’s attempts at getting Sikkim recognized internationally, a picture of a “Lord and Taylor”

⁴⁶ Datta-Ray (2013) describes how the American and European newspapers romanticized the coronation and Sikkim with its “‘improbable magic’, ‘giant butterflies and pandas and four hundred different species of wild orchid’, ‘ancient mystique’ amidst ‘amazing comfort.’”

outlet in New York shows products from Sikkim's cottage industries including textiles complete with a small but noticeable Sikkimese flag.

A picture captioned "Instrumental in developing our Sikkim" show a group of elected Council members seated with the Principal Administrative Officer of Sikkim. Formerly known as the Dewan, the administrative officer was an Indian citizen and during the time of coronation, owed his loyalty to the Chogyal of Sikkim rather than to the Indian Political Officer—an appointee of New Delhi and a colonial vestige who symbolized India's control in Sikkim. The total absence of any mention of the Indian Political Officer in the coronation book displays the "acute social rivalry between the two establishments."

All in all, the three-day coronation was a success. According to Andrew Duff, the coronation "acted as a national unifier for those living in Sikkim" with Nari Rustomji dubbing it as 'the Prince's (Gyalsey Palden Thondup's) Finest Hour.' However, Duff writes that despite all of it, the coronation, as well as the book, fell short of recognizing the Nepali majority in the pictures and text. He casts this as "a further sign of the inability of the Chogyal to fully accept that the ethnic make-up of his country had changed." The issue of fair representation of Nepalis would later create problems for the monarchy and influence future political events in the state.

CONCLUSION

Sikkim's post-colonial history, which saw its transition from an independent monarchy to a federal state within the Indian republic, is a domain of contested narratives with varied views and voices. Literature from this period mainly exists in the form of memoirs written by political actors, Indian diplomats, members of India's intelligence service and accounts by journalists who saw events as they played out in Sikkim, albeit replete with their own biases.

While some accounts characterize Chogyal Palden Thondup's creation and assertion of national identity as "the over-ambitious, ill-advised, ill-timed venture of a less-astute statesman," others view it as "the legitimate counterhegemonic nationalistic ambitions of a cultural minority."⁴⁷ Further, Sikkim's postcolonial history which saw its 'merger' with India has also been looked at as the "culmination of a legitimate struggle for democratic rights in Sikkim" versus "a cynical process of Indian

⁴⁷ Suchismita Das, *Sikkim the Place and Sikkim the Documentary: Reading Political History through the Life and After-Life of a Visual Representation*, 44–45.

Imperialism.”⁴⁸ While it may have been both, there is no doubt that the Sikkimese today, as part of the Indian Union enjoys significant rights and freedoms guaranteed under Article 371F of the Indian constitution unlike their counterparts in Tibet. However, with challenges such as population growth, dwindling resources and other political developments, the issue of Sikkimese identity is always at the fore, and as the paper showed, is still constantly being reimagined and asserted.



Figure 4. King of Sikkim reviews troops, Sikkim⁴⁹

⁴⁸ McKay, *The Mandala Kingdom*, 283.

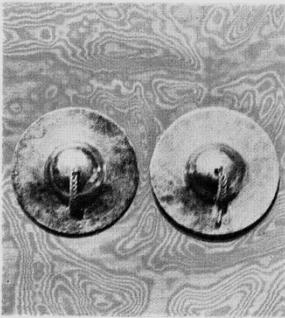
⁴⁹ Alice S. Kandell, *Sikkim Photos (Kandell Collection)*, 1965, photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.30226>.



Doong-Kar-Ye-Khil :
The Right Whorled Conch Shell

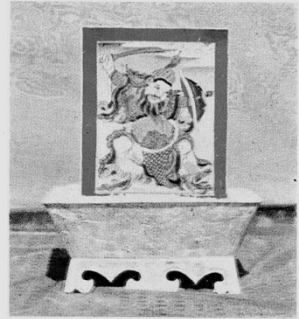


The Norbu Rinchen :
Priceless Gem



Rolmo Cymbals

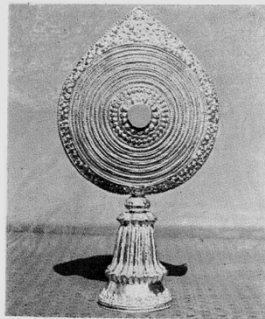
Makpon Rimpoché :
The Precious Warrior



Phen : The Precious Tassel ;
Nga : The Drum :

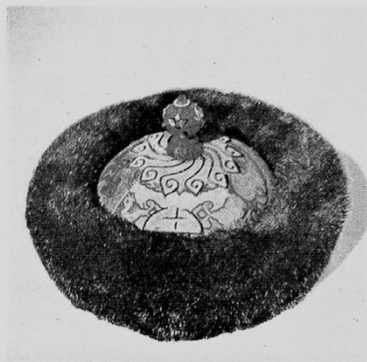
Gyal-Tsen :
The Standard of Victory

The Khorlo-Tsib-Tong :
The Thousand Spoked Wheel



Tachok Rimpoché :
The Excellent Horse

Figure 5. A collage from the 1965 coronation book showing symbolic objects used for the coronation



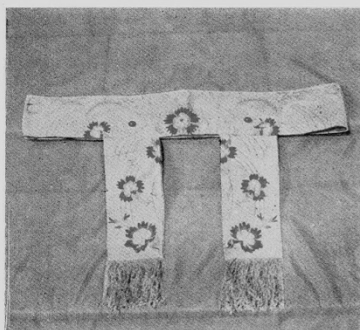
The Jewelled Crown : Wu-Sha Norbui Tok-Chen



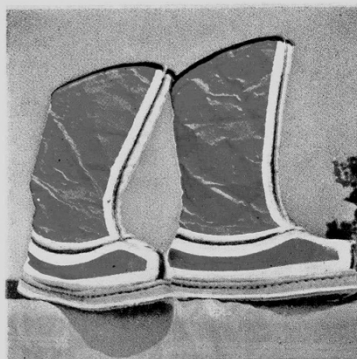
Nazah : Royal Robe



Nazah : Royal vestment



Ser Gui Ku Rak : Golden Sash



Shab Lham : boots emblazoned with Dorjies

Figure 6. A collage from the 1965 coronation book showing the crown and royal vestments used for the coronation

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