

# Opening the Hidden Land

STATE FORMATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF SIKKIMESE HISTORY



BY

SAUL MULLARD

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of Sikkimese History

By  
Saul Mullard



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In memory of  
Yab Tashi Thobten,  
And Yab Wongchuk Barfungpa

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## NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Throughout this book I have attempted to maintain consistency in the transliteration of Tibetan words. Unfortunately there exists no consensus within the field of Tibetan and Himalayan studies for transliteration conventions, besides the obvious usage of the Wylie system. I have thus decided to use the following conventions, which I must reiterate are far from universally accepted amongst the academic community. All proper names (places, people and titles) have been presented with the capitalisation of the initial and not the radical (*ming gzhi*); with the exception of commonly known terms and place names such as Lhasa, Gangtok, Zhigatse, Chumbi etc., where I have used a phonetic spelling. I have also reproduced names of colleagues or informants according to their preferred spellings. Another exception are those words that begin with an *a chung* prefix, in which case the next letter is capitalised e.g. 'Jigs med. In the case where the individual's name is prefaced with a title e.g. Lha btsun, the initial of the title but not of the other names will be capitalised with one exception: Chos rgyal, which will be capitalised except where it forms part of quoted text. Tibetan literary works have been italicised and the initial is capitalised, and all other terms (including clan names) have been italicised without capitalisation, except when they form the start of a sentence.

There are a number of cases, where alternative spellings are found in literary sources. For these terms (e.g. Mi dpon rab/rabs) I have chosen a single spelling throughout; however, I have presented the alternative spellings for such names or terms with the first appearance of the term in this book. This is a particular problem with proper names of Lepcha origin, which often appear in many variants and so follow the same guidelines for alternative Tibetan spellings. When quoting from a text with a variant spelling I place the spelling used in this book in square brackets e.g. *de nas yog sam* [Yog bsam] *nor bu sgang du byon*.

For the presentation of Tibetan material I have used two conventions. First, passages which appear in the main text are unedited and are thus consistent with the original source. Where there are orthographical *errata* I have placed corrections in footnotes. Second, passages which appear in footnotes are unedited. This is to avoid cumbersome footnotes while the nature and composition of errors are in any case often apparent through the translations or from the context.

Sanskrit terms are represented using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration. Proper names (e.g. Nāgārjuna, Mahāyāna, Vajrapāṇi etc.) and important nouns (such as Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Tathāgata etc.) appear with capitalisation and no italics; all other terms, unless they form part of a title, are in italics and without capitalisation (e.g. *maṇḍala*, *dharmarāja*, *ḍākini*).

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BGR	<i>'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs</i>
BMS	<i>Bla ma che mtshan gsum 'bras ljongs sbas gnas phebs</i>
Glr	<i>Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long</i>
GoS	<i>Gazetteer of Sikkim</i>
GTKC	<i>Sems dpa' chen po phun tshogs rig 'dzin gyi dgung brten [sic] gyi dkar chag</i>
JPKB	<i>Rig 'dzin 'jigs med dpa' bo'i bka' 'bum/</i>
KZNG	<i>Kun bzang rnam par rgyal ba</i>
LSG	<i>La sogs rgyal rabs</i>
LTLY	<i>'Bras mo gshongs kyi lam yig</i>
LTNT	<i>Lha btsun chen po'i rnam thar gsol 'debs</i>
MTB	<i>Mon pa'i mtho byang</i>
NGR	<i>Mnga' bdag pa'i rgyal rabs</i>
NIT	<i>Namgyal Institute of Tibetology edition of <i>The History of Sikkim</i></i>
PSLG	<i>Steng phyogs lha nas babs te nang mtshan rgya kar shar phyogs brgyud nas 'ong te khams mi nyag a'o ldong drug spun gsum gyi byung khungs lo rgyus bzhugs so</i>

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

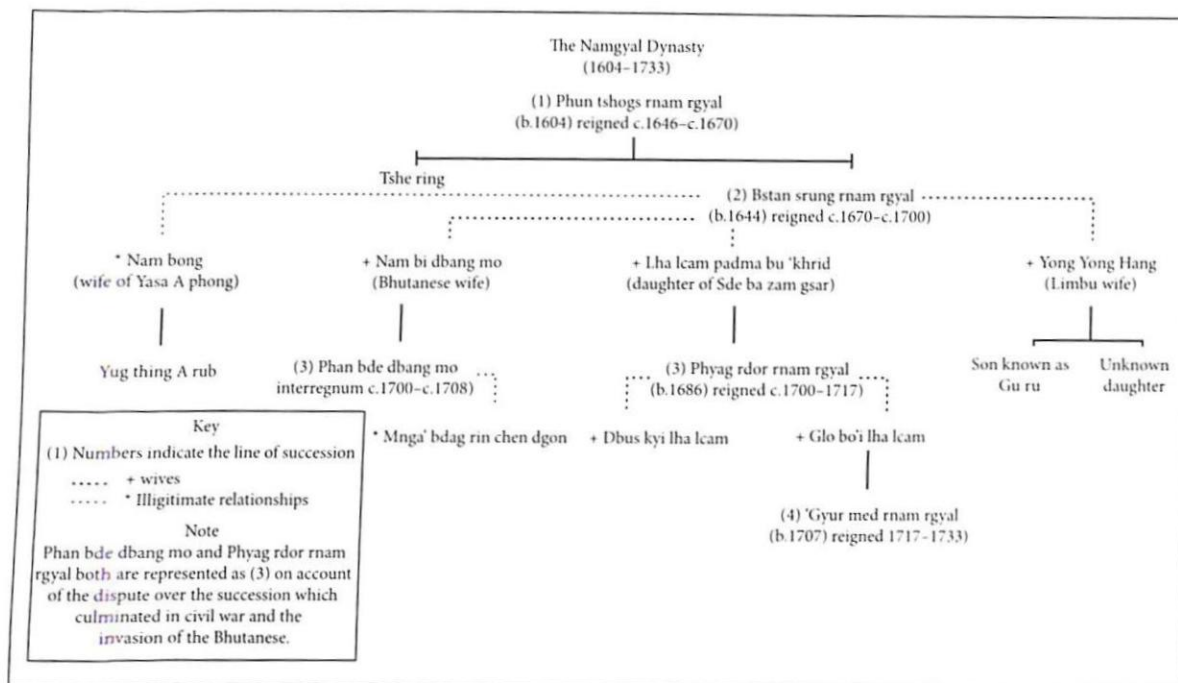
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The Rnam rgyal dynasty.



Map of Sikkim and Her Neighbours.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Sikkim, although small compared to its neighbours, commands an important geographical position. Not only does Sikkim straddle a significant and ancient trade route between Tibet in the North and India to the South it also lies between the two historic forces of the sub-Himalaya: Nepal and Bhutan. This location along a Himalayan crossroads has been, historically, both a blessing and a curse for Sikkim and its people. Whilst Sikkim profited from trade with all of its neighbours its favourable location has also been a desirable prize for its stronger neighbours to both the east and the west. As a result of this the history of Sikkim is not a peaceful one. Instead it is characterised by, almost, continual warfare with either Nepal (following the establishment of the Gorkha kingdom) or Bhutan. As such the history of Sikkim, like most states, is intertwined with the histories of its neighbours. Events that play a prominent role in the histories of other states of the Tibetan and Himalayan region also are significant in the history of Sikkim. Many specialists of Tibet and the Himalaya know that Sikkim is considered as a *sbas yul*, a hidden land, theoretically and spiritually separated from the world at large. Yet contrary to the theoretical model of the *sbas yul* (as discussed below), interaction between Sikkim and the wider region was prevalent. Many specialists, for example, may be unaware of the extent of Sikkimese involvement in the Sino-Nepalese War 1788–1792 or the impact of the Dzungar invasion of Tibet on the religious and political history of Sikkim. Both these events were significant in the history of Tibet and it is Tibet that provides the backdrop for much of Sikkimese history and culture.

Sikkim is part of the 'Tibetan' region that falls outside the political and geographical boundaries of Tibet. Whilst the precise nature of the qualities that unites these, often very different, regions has been debated and contested by academics, Sikkim has to be understood within the wider Tibetan context. As illustrated above and discussed in more detail in the pages that follow, Sikkimese history cannot be divided from Tibetan history. Much that made Sikkim a state was conceived in Tibet, least of all the concept of the *sbas yul*. Yet more than the obvious religious and linguistic similarities, the political theories and

practices are distinctly 'Tibetan'. Whether it be the concept of divine kingship, the unified system of religion and politics, or the writing of legal and administrative documents, all have Tibetan antecedents, even if, like the religion of Sikkim, they have developed a 'Sikkimese' quality. Despite all these similarities Sikkim is not Tibet, and—as many Sikkimese people state—the Sikkimese are not Tibetans.

Today, Sikkim is an extremely diverse state in the Indian Union, home to numerous different Himalayan peoples with different cultures and religions. In part this situation is a testament to Sikkim's geopolitical location as a meeting place for the different peoples of the Tibetan and Himalayan regions, yet it is also indicative of the colonial history of Sikkim and the socio-political engineering policies of the British Raj. In more recent years migration from Nepal has continued with people fleeing their homeland in search of more profitable lives or an escape from the recent civil war in Nepal. Whilst the current ethnic demographics of Sikkim remain complex, it is safe to say that Sikkim has always been a multi-ethnic region. From some of the earliest written documents of Sikkim references are made to three different and clearly identifiable ethnic groups: the Lho po or Tibeto-Sikkimese (of Tibetan origin), the Lepcha or Rong (who have resided in Sikkim since pre-historic times—for details see the section on early inhabitation of Sikkim later in this chapter), and the Limbu (a group which straddles the border regions of modern Sikkim and Nepal). This in part makes Sikkim distinct from Tibet. That is not to say that Tibet is some monolithic entity with a single 'Tibetan' ethnic group. It is just that the orientation and cultural legacies of the different ethnic groups of Sikkim is different from Tibet.

Sikkim is also different from Tibet in a number of other ways. In the first instance unlike the arid conditions of the Tibetan plateau, Sikkim is at a lower elevation than Tibet and receives more than its fair share of the annual South-Asian monsoons. This has made Sikkim extremely fertile, with an abundance of wild fruits and grains, profitable and large agricultural yields and dense jungle forests providing (in the past) large amounts of timber for construction and other purposes. The fertility of Sikkim has had an impact on the food culture of the region to such an extent that the old phrase for Tibetans as "Tsampa eaters", has little meaning for the Sikkimese who, even prior to the introduction of terraced rice cultivation by Nepali immigrants in the nineteenth century, were, according to the records available, prolific consumers of rice and wheat. Complementing the abundance

of agricultural produce, Sikkim also benefits from wild herbs, medicinal plants, and bamboo groves from which a variety of utensils are made. In part the geography and food culture of Sikkim is closer to that of Bhutan and Nepal than that of Tibet.

Bhutan and Nepal (following the establishment of the Gorkha kingdom) have had a huge impact on Sikkim, its people and history. Contacts between the people of, what are now, Bhutan and Nepal and Sikkim stretch back centuries. During the formative years of the state, Bhutanese Lamas and officials were present in the Sikkimese court and endowments were made to Lamas living in Sikkim by the local rulers of Nepal. In addition, with the westward expansion of Sikkim many Kiranti communities and political entities of eastern Nepal became tied to Sikkim through annual tribute. Yet the hold of the Sikkimese throne over its territory was tenuous at best, largely due to an aggressive and dominant aristocratic class. This weakness in the organisational structures of Sikkim has left Sikkim open to attack from Nepal and Bhutan, with both countries being successful on a number of occasions.

Unfortunately these events and wider aspects of Sikkimese history have not been adequately studied by historians of Tibet and the Himalaya, when compared with other areas of the Tibetan region. This has been due to a number of problems, including lack of access to historical sources, logistical problems such as obtaining visas and permits to conduct research in Sikkim and technical problems such as inadequate language training. As such, with the notable exclusion of Schuh and Dargyab (1978), the study of Sikkim and its history has always come second place to the study of wider Tibetan or Himalayan historical themes, such as British involvement in Tibet (Lamb 1986 and McKay 1997) or studies of Bhutanese or Nepalese history. A few articles have been published on elements of Sikkimese history (Rose 1990, Rock 1953) but even these have been based, not on original Sikkimese sources written in Tibetan, but on English translations of '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (BGR). Fortunately things are beginning to change. Besides this book, a number of articles have been written on Sikkimese history based on indigenous Tibetan sources, a revised edition of Kazi Dawa Samdup's translation of BGR is currently being completed by John Ardussi and Per Sørensen, and with Alex McKay's recent contributions on the British period in Sikkim (McKay 2004 and in press) these works all add to our knowledge of Sikkimese history. In addition to the recent works mentioned above it is hoped that this book will also offer a significant contribution to our understanding of Sikkimese history.

This book, however, is not intended to re-write Sikkimese history. Such an ambitious project can only be undertaken once we have an understanding of Sikkimese historiography. For this reason, amongst others that will become apparent in the following chapters, this book is centred on the theme of identifying significant historical sources and comparing them with later Sikkimese historiography. Therefore, the prime focus for this work is to address the apparent contradictions found within Sikkimese historiography, regarding the formation of the Sikkimese state; through the careful study and analysis of contemporary primary sources. Indeed in numerous histories of Sikkim written more recently there is a marked contrast in the interpretation of early Sikkimese statehood with sources actually written during the period in which the Sikkimese state appeared. The debate surrounds the precise date and events of the coronation of the first Sikkimese king or Chos rgyal: Phun tshogs rnam rgyal. In later works, such as *BGR*, the enthronement of the first Sikkimese king is portrayed as the defining moment of Sikkim's construction and being the result of the fruition of the prophetic tradition surrounding the *sbas yul* and the blessings and wisdom of Guru Rinpoche.<sup>1</sup> The principal element is the prophecy of the *rnal 'byor mched bzhi* (the four yogis who are brothers) as contained in the *gter ma* works revealed by Ratna gling pa.

This follows the pattern of identifying each prophesied yogi with one of the four gates or doors to the hidden land located in the northern, southern, eastern and western directions and the belief that these four individuals would meet in the centre of the hidden land and organise the administration of the sacred geography in accordance with the religio-political order: *chos srid lugs gnyis*. By so doing they would be acting to confirm the wishes and intentions of Guru Rinpoche by maintaining the region as an idyllic site for the preservation of Buddhism during the degenerate times. Whilst the traditions of the *sbas yul* and its associated literature are full of quotes to that effect, the actual events, as recorded in seventeenth century Sikkimese works seem to propose a more complicated chronology.

Throughout this book a number of events, actors and themes will be introduced, which relate to the establishment of state structures, in the form of Buddhist and 'secular' institutions. These include the development of State infrastructure; the introduction of social and politi-

<sup>1</sup> For details of this story see *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (hereafter *BGR*): 37-42.

cal stratification, tax collection and an agricultural economy based of Tibetan principles of land tenure. These systems were subsumed under an established and recognised royal lineage, which did not appear as the result of the arrival of Tibetan lamas as proposed in historical narratives such a *BGR*, but through conflict and alliance. Indeed during the early years of the Sikkimese royal dynasty, there were a number of competing assertions of power by both Limbu (Sikkimese: *Gtsong*) and Lepcha (Sikkimese: *Mon*) groups.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the production of such a 'history' of Sikkim, will be one of the main foci of this book, yet at this time, given the infancy of studies of Sikkimese history and problems with the identification of source material, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive revision of seventeenth century events. However, I shall present a number of key possibilities which may lead, in the future, to a closer examination of this important period in Sikkimese history. Through the assessment of contemporary sources I will present two major issues, which may have contributed to the development of an orthodox historiography of Sikkim, and shall also highlight a number of events, not found in later Sikkimese works, which lead to the possible assumption that later Sikkimese historiography was manufactured on the basis of serious political and religious concerns.

## 1. EARLY INHABITATION OF SIKKIM AND THE LEPCHA MIGRATIONS

Before moving on to other issues relevant to the argument in this book, it may prove useful to give an overview of early human inhabitation in Sikkim and the migrations of the Lepcha in particular. Over the past forty years a number of interesting archaeological discoveries have been made in Sikkim. The first publication of archaeological finds was in 1969, when Sikkim was still an independent country, by two Indian archaeologists N.R. Banerjee and J.L. Sharma. In that article published in the journal *Ancient Nepal* only one specimen was from Sikkim, a slate chisel, with the remainder of the finds from Nepal.

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the signing of the document, known locally as the *Lho Mon tshong gsum agreement*. This document is a legal charter, dated 1663, in which all members of the three communities of Sikkim swear to uphold the law and accept the single government of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal (see chapter six pages 140–146).

The Sikkimese chisel was found in Odhare, near modern Rumtek, which is more famously known as the exiled seat of the Karmapa. The chisel was dated by Banerjee and Sharma to the period 1000–200BC. The date range given by those two scholars appears to be ridiculously recent, particularly when they identified similarities between these tools and those found in Assam and the Brahmaputra basin, which are considered to typically represent the Indian Eastern Neolithic cultural assemblage, which in more recent years has been dated more realistically as being around 10,000–5,000BC.

Since the late 1960s, more numerous finds have been made in Sikkim. Neolithic tools have been found from the following places in Sikkim: Barpak, Gnon, Gor-terang Gytong, Lingden, Linkyong, Lingdon, Manshitong, Sangdong, Sankalong, Terang in North Sikkim and Shamshing, Pakhyong<sup>3</sup> in East Sikkim. In 2004 a team of Indian archaeologists led by P.K. Mishra, visited Sikkim where he and his team excavated 29 Neolithic sites and found over 100 stone tools. His findings were later published in 2008 under the title *Archaeological explorations in Sikkim*. In that book he noted two important points. The first was that his findings noted a distinct technological development in the production of tools, from chipped tools to polished and ground tools such as the polished stone axe; a characteristic tool of the Neolithic period. The second key point was one of comparison.

He argued that the finds in Sikkim point to two possible points of origin for the North Sikkim Neolithic cultural assemblage. He noted that the earlier chipped tools shared characteristics with similar finds in South-East Asia, in particular the Hòabìnhiàn culture, and dates these tools to around 10,000–8,000BC. According to Mishra the later polished and ground tools which are dated between 8,000–4,000BC, shared similarities to the Sìchuān and South China cultural assemblage. These findings seem to verify, in part, the earlier speculations on the migration of ancient Tibeto-Burmans, presented initially in an interesting article by George van Driem in 1998 and later in 2006.

In those articles, van Driem combined his extensive knowledge of the linguistic history of the Tibeto-Burman language family, with archaeological finds in Sìchuān, Gānsù, Eastern Tibet, Sikkim, Assam

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<sup>3</sup> Place names here are rendered according to the standardised spellings found on maps of Sikkim.



and South-East Asia in order to propose a theoretical model of the migration patterns of ancient Tibeto-Burmans.<sup>4</sup>

Van Driem locates the Tibeto-Burman heart-land in the region of modern Yunnan and Sìchuān provinces, which he terms the centre of gravity for Tibeto-Burman languages. He goes on to state that this heartland roughly corresponds to the Sìchuān Mesolithic and Neolithic cultural assemblages, which dates to c.11,500–2,000BC. He states that according to linguistic evidence the first division of the Tibeto-Burman language family was into what he terms as Eastern and Western Tibeto-Burman. However, based on van Driem's various subsequent writings on Tibeto-Burman linguistic phylogeny, it is obvious that he intends what he once called "Western Tibeto-Burman" to be a collection of subgroups encompassing Brahmaputran and probably a number of other Tibeto-Burman groups in the Northeast of the Subcontinent. Through comparison of Mesolithic finds in both Sìchuān and the Brahmaputra valley, and some northern sites in Burma and South-East Asia, he argues, based on the work of a number of archaeologists (Dani 1960: 76, Chêng 1959, Chang 1965 and Wheeler 1959), that the similarity of the technology and materials used to craft tools have been found in sites from those regions, suggesting a cultural affinity between early Mesolithic to early Neolithic Sìchuān material culture and the South-East Asian and Indian Eastern Neolithic cultural assemblage. In particular he focuses on the appearance of the shouldered celt and faceted ground axe in Indian Eastern Neolithic culture and the use of Jadeite in the production of tools: a material not found in South-East Asia or the Brahmaputra valley. Van Driem argues that this suggests a strong connection to the Sìchuān Neolithic culture from which this technology originates. He concludes that the Western Tibeto-Burmans migrated to the Brahmaputra basin and from there expanded to parts of South-East Asia and the Assamese hills. This seems to suggest that whilst the first inhabitants of Sikkim may have migrated from the Brahmaputra basin, their own ancestors migrated to the Brahmaputra basin from Sìchuān.

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<sup>4</sup> Driem has argued, as far back as 1997, that the Sino-Tibetan language family model needed to be discarded on the basis of evidence which shows that Sinetic languages emerged from the Tibeto-Burman family and not vice versa. This argument is contested by some linguists in the field of Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

Meanwhile the Eastern Tibeto-Burmans migrated northwards to Gānsù region. Van Driem argues that the north China civilisations of Péilǐgǎng and Gānsù originated from Sìchuān. He argues this by stating that the other predominant cultures of China in the Mesolithic period seem unlikely candidates as the forerunner of these northern cultures as these cultures in northern China were characterised by polished stone and cord-marked pottery, which have not been found nor associated with Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities in the other cultural regions associated with China such as Manchuria, Mongolia, and Chinese Turkestan. Van Driem argues that it is from the Péilǐgǎng and Gānsù regions that the Sino-Bodic languages emerge.

The Yǎngsháo Neolithic culture (5500–2700BC) succeeded the Péilǐgǎng culture on the North China plain and the Mǎjiāyáo Neolithic (3900–1700BC) succeeded in Eastern Gānsù and parts of Qīnghǎi. The Yǎngsháo and Mǎjiāyáo cultures were more advanced than their predecessors but were still an extension of the previous cultures rather than a new migration from a different cultural zone or a new distinct culture. In turn from these two cultures, van Driem argues, there were further migrations, caused in all likelihood by the climatic change that occurred during the middle Neolithic period. This climatic change may have led to the scarcity of food and resources which in turn served as a push factor in the migration of the Yǎngsháo and Mǎjiāyáo cultures.

The Mǎjiāyáo culture migrated both west from Gānsù along the inner-Asian trade routes and across the Himalaya to establish the later but genetically related Northern Neolithic culture in Kashmir and Swat around 2700–1700BC, and South through Eastern and South Eastern Tibet, and then on to Bhutan and Sikkim (c. 5000–3000BC). With the western thrust of the Mǎjiāyáo culture moving from Kashmir along the Himalayan alpine tract accounting for the proliferation of Tibeto-Burman languages in the Nepali hill regions. But, van Driem goes on, these languages are distinct from the languages of the Southern thrust of the Mǎjiāyáo culture, pointing to Lepcha in particular, which on account of its indeterminate position in Tibeto-Burman family with both affinities with both Bodic and Old Chinese seems to suggest a much earlier migration pattern than that of the subsequent thrust from Kashmir across the Himalayan belt.

Van Driem provides the estimate that the ancestors of the Lepchas may have crossed the Himalaya in the third or fourth Millennium BC, corresponding roughly to the end of the later Neolithic finds dated 8,000–4,000BC by Mishra in his recent book. Whether this suggests

that the proto-Lepchas dominated the people of the North Sikkim Cultural Assemblage, or whether they incorporated them into their culture is almost impossible to determine. Similarly it is not altogether clear whether the proto-Lepcha themselves originated from the Sichuān or Mǎjiāyáo Cultural Assemblages though the indication is, as far as van Driem has stated, that the proto-Lepcha form part of the early Southerly movement from the Mǎjiāyáo cultural assemblage. If that is indeed the case it seems to suggest that the Tibeto-Sikkimese and the Lepcha share an ancient and distant ancestry as the origins of the people speaking central Bodish languages such as Lho skad (Sikkimese) are also to be found in the southerly migrations from Mǎjiāyáo.

From this evidence it seems clear that Sikkim has been inhabited since pre-historic times, and that the Lepchas too have resided in the Sikkimese hills from at least c. 5000BC. However, the dominant formative narrative of Sikkim is grounded in developments that took place in historical times. This narrative of Sikkim is not only grounded in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition but specifically within the theoretical framework of the *gter ma* and hidden land traditions, and it is these traditions that I will now turn to.

## 2. GTER MA AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF SIKKIM

The importance of the *gter ma* tradition in Sikkim and its history cannot be understated. It was ultimately the *gter ma* tradition, in particular the 'discoveries' of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can (1337–1408)<sup>5</sup> that gave Sikkim its name: 'Bras mo ljongs. Prior to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can Sikkim was indistinguishable from the rest of the southern Himalaya, being defined by the toponyms *lho yul*, *lho mon*, *mon yul* etc. Yet more important than the identification of Sikkim, was the creation of Sikkim as a *sbas yul*, a hidden land blessed, according to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can, by Guru Rinpoche who came to Sikkim and set it apart from the mundane world as a worldly paradise for the practice of Buddhism when the religion came under threat elsewhere. The idea of the *sbas yul* has been the subject of numerous writings (Diemberger 1996, Sadar-Afkhami 2001, Lhundup 2001, Rigzin Ngodup 1998 and 2000 etc.) and it is worth discussing some of these points briefly.

<sup>5</sup> See Nyi ma Bzang po's biography of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can for details of the life and discoveries of this lama.

The idea of the *sbas yul*, which appears as a uniquely Tibetan phenomenon actually, according to Sadar-Afkhami (2001: 6), has its origins in Indian tantric literature and the identification of holy or sacred sites which act as gateways between the ordinary realm and the pure realm. He goes on to state that the idea of the *sbas yul* combines the popular wish for earthly paradises with the tradition of tantric pilgrimage. And from the Tibetan perspective the *sbas yul* is “neither entirely psychological nor geographical, but a dimension that can only manifest between the two, when mind and landscape become transparent to each other in non-dual space” (Sadar-Afkhami 2001: 7).

Whilst this is true, the *sbas yul* from the outset also had a religio-political function as a place to escape to in times of persecution (Diemberger 1997 and Childs 1999). Indeed Rig ’dzin rgod ldem can’s own travels in the Himalaya were not entirely motivated by religious concerns. He was born into a time of extreme political uncertainty with the Yuan-Sa skya rule of central Tibet drawing to a close and his search for patronage amongst the Gung thang royalty was initially hindered by followers of the New Translation schools (*gsar ma*), namely the Sa skya. Rig ’dzin rgod ldem can thus lost his only patrons and was forced to go in search for the Hidden lands.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Sadar-Afkhami notes (2001: 75), he was pursued by some hostile official.<sup>7</sup> In actuality then, whilst the theory of the *sbas yul* may be grounded in tantric literature it is also grounded in the real need for places of refuge (Childs 1999: 136–137). In this book both these elements will be identified. However, in order to understand the importance of both these issues it is important to discuss the importance of textual authority and authenticity in the *gter ma* tradition generally and the impact of this on the idea of Sikkim as a *sbas yul*.

Indeed in Sikkim a great deal of importance is placed on the authority of *gter ma* literature as an accurate representation of reality, in particular: the authority and authenticity of prophetic literature.<sup>8</sup> This

<sup>6</sup> For further details of the role of the royal family of Mang yul Gung thang in supporting Rnying ma lamas see Everding 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Nye gmas chen po chos dpal bas dmag bskul/ zhag po dmag ’chad dang cad pa cig gis bzlogs tshad pa bar chad kyi rnam par byung/* (Sadar-Afkhami 2001: 75 fn 82). Here he quotes from *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang ma ’ongs lung bstan* Gangtok 1983: 93.3.

<sup>8</sup> Whilst in Sikkim the importance and authenticity of the *gter ma* is undoubted, it is important to remember that this has not always been the case in Tibet. Kapstein (2000: 121–137) noted that amongst Tibetan religious-scholars the authenticity of *gter*

form of literature often accompanies the actual *gter ma* ritual cycles or practices that are revealed. For example Lha btsun chen po's *gter ma* cycle *Rig 'dzin srog grub* contains within it a number of prophecies regarding Sikkim. The authority and authenticity of these writings (both prophecies and *gter ma* cycles) result from two things. First, the idea common to most *gter ma* is that they were hidden during the time of Guru Rinpoche,<sup>9</sup> either as physical objects (*sa gter*), as mental seeds placed in the mental continuum of a disciple to bear fruit at the appropriate time (*dgongs gter*), or through direct interaction with the divine through visions (*dag snang gter*). The second idea regarding the authenticity of individual *gter ma* results from the content of the *gter ma* and the character of the *gter ston*; namely, whether it corresponds to Buddhist philosophy and if so, whether the *gter ston* has the necessary spiritual attainments (Gyatso 1993 and 1986). The authenticity or legitimacy of the *gter ma* tradition results from the power of the original person who concealed the treasure (Gyatso 1993: 109); whereas individual *gter ma* gain their authority from, not only the power of the initial concealers but also in the acknowledgement that the *gter ma* identifies relevant teachings which correspond with Buddhist philosophy. The ramifications of this process on Sikkim and its history are very important, as anything that has been articulated through the *gter ma* tradition receives wider acceptance as being an authentic *gter ma* and it is through this process that Sikkim is identified as a *sbas yul*.<sup>10</sup> This wider process, however, also becomes increasingly problematic when the text in question is a prophecy regarding an element in history, as the resulting implication is that the prophecy becomes accepted as historical fact over and above sources from

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*ma* has been contested and debated. Another important contribution to the debate on the authenticity of *gter ma* is Aris 1988.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that *gter ma* was not the exclusive domain of Guru Rinpoche, as other texts are considered to have been concealed by the emperors of Tibet or other significant figures.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted at this point that when Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can actually returned from Sikkim, proclaiming it as a *sbas yul* it was not universally accepted. Indeed in the Fifth Dalai Lama's work on the history of the Byang gter (see *The collected works* Nya volume and the bibliography of this book) he notes that conflict arose between the disciples of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can and the disciples of Sangs rgyas gling pa (also an important *gter ston* and contemporary of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can). This is likely to be a euphemism attempted to pass the blame of this controversy onto the disciples of both of those masters rather than admit that the masters themselves were engaged in the controversy.

the actual period the prophecy is said to be about. This problem is encountered often in Sikkimese historical narratives, as I shall show in chapter one.

Whilst there are problems prevalent in the transformation of prophetic and religious literature into the Sikkimese historical tradition, the nature of history as a form of enquiry has also been debated in wider academic circles. In a book such as this one, which attempts to understand the contradiction between historical sources on the one hand and indigenous religio-historical belief on the other, it becomes necessary to contextualise the argument in this book within the wider academic discourse on the nature and value of history as an academic discipline.

### 3. HISTORY, NARRATIVE AND MYTH

This book makes use of the term 'historical narrative' to define and describe the way in which the past is portrayed in Sikkim. In essence it is a description of the historiography of Sikkim. I distinguish this from history, by which I mean the academic discipline and not just 'the past', which in popular parlance has become synonymous. This leaves one obvious but incredibly difficult question about what history actually is. There are a number of significant works that have led the way in academic understandings of history; these include the seminal works of R.G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History*, Carr and his work *What is History?* And more recently the work of writers such as Tosh (2002).

History is, according to Collingwood, an inquiry into the past. It is generically a science in as far as one can define science as "the forms of thought whereby we ask questions and try to answer them" and in this way history is a science (1993[1946]: 9). So if history is a science in the generic form, there must also be an object for that inquiry. The object of history is thus human beings and their actions in the past (1993: 10). Collingwood goes on to state that history relies on the interpretation of evidence which he defines as a thing that exists in the present which a historian can think about and which helps him to answer the questions he asks about the past. Normally this evidence originates from the period of study but it can also originate from other periods and form secondary source material, which Tosh defines as "anything that [an historian's] predecessors have written about the past" (2002: 57).

The purpose of history is slightly vague,<sup>11</sup> but ultimately it is human self-knowledge; history tells us in the present what humankind has done and so helps us understand what and who we are. It helps us answer the fundamental philosophical question that has perennially preoccupied human thought since the dawn of man, and, for that matter, woman: Who are we?

But history has not always been thought of according to Collingwood, Tosh or Carr's criteria. History has not always been the scientific examination of evidence, based on questions regarding the past and humanity, but has been understood in a multitude of ways. For example, quasi-historical narrative traditions can be found throughout the world. The Norse sagas mixed semi-historical figures with fantasy and legend, other literary traditions produced 'histories' not of humanity but of divine figures where events are attributed to the actions of the divine. The same is true of Greco-Roman epics of hagiography, which concern themselves with the study of divine action and the relationship between man and gods and not humanity itself; and similar things could be said about Tibetan religious biography and historiography, where supernatural inspiration/action is commonplace.

In recent years history has come under attack by post-structural thinkers. In this book some of the ideas formed by these post-structuralists have been interpreted in part as they can contribute useful criticism of the historical method, particularly regarding the method employed in Sikkimese historiography and historical narratives. However, their ultimate aim, through deconstruction, is to reduce knowledge to subjective ideological pursuits imbued with power; or, put simply, to demonstrate the uselessness of history.

Hayden White has been one of the most prominent critics of history and historical methodology. In his work *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) he sets out his key themes in the construction of history. History, he argues, is constructed by historians on the basis of their own preferences. These preferences take the form of ideology (the theoretical or political perspective of the individual historian i.e. radical, anarchist, conservative, liberal etc.), argument or explanation (the model for understanding

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<sup>11</sup> The purpose of history may be to gain understanding of our past for its own sake, to bring knowledge to the present through an understanding of the past, to simply explain or recreate the past (Tosh 2002: 54).

how 'historical units' relate to each other) and emplotment (literary genre). White argues that history can only be written using a variety of different forms of ideology, emplotment and argument/explanation and that there is no other scientific way of writing history outside of these forms and so historians have to make a choice about the mode, style and genre in which they write history and the theory or model they use to analyse historical material. On that basis, as all history is defined by an ideology or theory (including the theory of non-theory) all history is metahistory. By this he means that all historians, despite their differing preferences, "state or imply a general view on the nature of history" (Hilliard 1997) and so create a body of theory on what history is, which in turn becomes the received wisdom but is ultimately not grounded in truth but in ideology and belief. Ultimately Collingwood's ideas on history (which are generally accepted by historians as a reasonable definition of history and its method) are, according to postmodernists, a subjective belief.

White's approach is a major challenge to the discipline of history, as the ultimate extension of his argument is that if history is subjective and belief-based, how is it possible to objectively *know* the past (Jenkins 1991). A significant problem with the postmodern approach to history is its implicit assumption that "traditional" historians have not been engaged in similar questions. Ultimately, historians do rely on facts and evidence which they interpret, and by definition interpretation is not a definitive truth; yet historians debate the relevance of certain forms of interpretation, because we accept that ultimately the past in its entirety is unknowable (in the sense of some high definitive truth). History is not about knowing the past, but attempting to understand it and this difference, often lost on post-modernists, is an important one. As historians we attempt to understand history through the interpretation of events and facts, trying to give meaning to these events and facts as a way of attempting to understand humanity in an historical period. For this reason written history is debated and contested, as if we could truly know the past, historical writings would be universally accepted, which of course they are not.<sup>12</sup> Ulti-

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<sup>12</sup> A look at the history section of your local library or bookshop will illustrate this fact by the sheer number of books written about the same time period. For example a bookshop in the west of England, which deals specifically with books on the Second World War, has a listing of over 20,000 titles on its website: [www.worldwartwobooks.com](http://www.worldwartwobooks.com).



mately, then, the post-modern criticism of history is often based on a misunderstanding of what history is and what, as historians, we are attempting to do. This has been pointed out by Mary Fulbrook (2000) in her critique of post-structural comparisons between literature and history. Arthur Marwick (2001) has also been vocal in his opposition to post-modern critiques on the irrelevance of history by arguing that the past, or knowledge of the past, ultimately effects the present and future. Related to this, I highlight in the conclusion of this book that history is often (mis)used for political ends by political groups, and that the academic pursuit of history can serve as a check on politically motivated historical constructions for the justification of certain (often oppressive) political practices.<sup>13</sup> Whilst such criticisms are fundamental to historical theory, it is also important for historians to recognise the importance of some post-modern ideas relating to history; in particular discussions of narrative in historical writing.

It is in this area that Hayden White has made an important contribution to the understanding of historiography. In his article "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality", he makes an important distinction between narration, i.e. the reporting of events and reality, and narrativity, which is the imposition of the form of a story on those events and on reality itself (1980: 6). White notes that in historical narratives the events are represented as 'speaking for themselves'; this, he says, is problematic because real events "should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be". The problem with narrativisation of real events, according to White, is that real events do not offer themselves as stories, they just are (1980: 8–9). He ultimately argues that the value attached to narrativity in historiography is problematic because it attempts to give closure to reality, to tell a story of reality, when in actuality, reality and the world does not present itself in the form of a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. This idea is important for Sikkimese historiography, where there is a presentation of a story revolving around three principal points: prophecy (beginning), event or the interpretation of events based on prophecy (middle), and the fulfilment of prophecy (end). In this book

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<sup>13</sup> An obvious example is the attempt by extreme right wing political parties in Europe to unwrite the Holocaust from the history of the Nazis and the Second World War. Many post-modernists who attempt to 'liberate' history from the 'subjective' representations of historians might, unwittingly, give much needed philosophical ammunition to the Holocaust deniers of the far-right.

I shall attempt to avoid constructing my own historical narratives and to merely present facts as they appear in the sources I have used.<sup>14</sup> However, for a historian it is difficult to reject narrative as a mode of articulating and explaining the past, because ultimately our goal is to attempt to give meaning to the past, something which ultimately contradicts with the postmodern approach to history. For this reason it is important to make a distinction between the local historical narratives of Sikkim and wider historical methodology and to accept in part Hayden White's discussion of the representation of reality as narrative but also admit that narrative plays a fundamental role in articulating the past. Whether this role devalues the 'objectivity' of history, as post-modernist may argue, or not, the reader must ultimately decide.

Throughout this book I use the terms 'Sikkimese historical narratives' or 'local historical narratives' to make a distinction between narrative style and historical method. In part it is an admission that narrative can obstruct historical fact, but it is also often inescapable. I use the term 'narrative' in this book not as a means of describing the style of Sikkimese historical writing, though most examples do use narrative in that way, but to describe the method of Sikkimese historical writing as distinct from academic modes of writing history. By this I mean the reliance of Sikkimese writers on a pre-established story surrounding state formation in Sikkim, which they then use to articulate the events they wish to portray. This story is based on the three principal events mentioned above: prophecy, event, and fulfilment of prophecy. Because the majority of Sikkimese histories follow this pattern I have designated them as narratives; this is particularly relevant given that the importance of the three principal points of the narrative often take precedence over the facts, something that will become apparent throughout the pages of this book. In order to understand why this is the case it is important to contextualise the mode in which *Sikkimese history is formed*.

A critical point in the contextualisation of Sikkimese historical narratives is the distinction made between the methods of the history of the academy and the history of Sikkimese writers. Whereas academic history is constructed through analysis of primary and secondary evi-

<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason amongst others that I shall attempt to reproduce most of the sources I have used with direct translations, to avoid the curse of narrativising events in a way divorced from the events and reality itself.

dence and the interpretation of that evidence according to theory and an attempt at trying to understand the human condition at a given time (i.e. what motivates people, what are people's needs or aspirations, their fears or hopes etc.), local Sikkimese history is grounded in a different methodology, which places oral accounts on par with documentary evidence. Tibetan historiography is not necessarily based on the scientific examination of material, but revolves around a different form of inquiry. One form of evidence is attributed to the accounts of living people who, Tibetan historical writers believe, have received their accounts from previous generations, creating a perfect uninterrupted oral lineage of history, in the same way as oral religious lineages are formed and maintained. A second form of evidence is physical evidence: places which can be identified with historical events and which are seen as unchanging in nature, caught in a time capsule and preserving historical events in the foundations of buildings etc. A third and final form of evidence is religious inspiration enforced by scriptural authority (see chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion).

Historical method in the academy is based on a completely different world-view, where evidence from the period in question ranks higher than oral, religious and sometimes physical evidence. The reason for this is that the further away one gets from the period in question the greater the chance that the material will become intentionally or unintentionally adulterated. This is due to the fact that historians recognise that knowledge of the past is a living entity, subject to change and reinterpretation by people and society according to the needs of a society at any given point in time. As such there is always the possibility that material written, narrated or constructed after the period in question, may cast the events of the past in light of present (in terms of when the history was written) circumstances. Oral history can be a good example of this process, as people forget, change things, add new stories or expand existing stories depending on social needs or wider changes in society (see Tonkin 1995: 4).<sup>15</sup> Physical evidence (in the form of buildings etc.) is also problematic, especially in the Tibetan world

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Ramble has discussed this at some length in an article where he compares and contrasts the oral tradition of the founding of Lubra Village with written sources (1983). I have also personally witnessed this in the interviews I have conducted about clan and origins histories, whereby the person recounting the narrative might pause and say that s/he has forgotten that part of the story, or someone might interrupt and say that what the teller has said is wrong and that something happened in a different way.

where acts such as the refurbishment of monasteries have a religious function by providing a way in which merit can be accumulated. Furthermore, over time buildings fall down, are destroyed by fire or war, or are extended and rebuilt.<sup>16</sup> Because of these possibilities in method it becomes difficult to read Sikkimese historical narratives as history in the academic sense. This becomes increasingly problematic when mythical elements appear as historical facts, such as the (unaided) flight of lamas and other miraculous deeds. Such things make historians uncomfortable, as being grounded in scientific methodology they would instantly disregard such statements on the basis that it is generally believed that it is scientifically impossible for a human to fly unaided. What this example underlines is the fundamental difference in the method of academic historical writing and the method of Sikkimese or Tibetan historiography. However, mythical storytelling also has a social function, and it is imperative for historians to understand the importance of this as a means of understanding the mind-set of the people and society they study.

Lincoln (1989) has added an interesting dimension to the definition of myth. He argues that myth, as the term is commonly used, is more subtle than a story which is untrue, but actually designates a relationship of superiority between the speaker (who identifies a story as myth and so untrue) and the people (or era), from whom the story originate, who believe the story to be true (1989: 24). This implies a system of power in operation between those who believe in the truth assertion of the myth and those who regard the story as untrue. Lincoln, as a way of negating the relationship of power and superiority/inferiority, argues that a suitable definition of myth, history, legend and fable (which all share similar narratives) should be formulated on the basis of whether the narrators attempt to assert some form of truth and whether that truth-assertion is accepted by their audience. In such a way he identifies a fable as a narrative that has no truth-assertion and so is accepted by the audience as fiction; a legend as a narrative that is presented as truth but is discredited by its audience;

<sup>16</sup> In Britain during the Victorian era, there was the widespread practice of trying to locate historical sites. One such example was the attempt to locate the room in the Tower of London where the two nephews of Richard III were kept after the 1483 Act of Parliament declared them illegitimate and thus excluded from the royal succession, and the exact location of the execution platform of Mary Queen of Scots etc. It was later discovered in the 1990s (during the refurbishment of the site) that the locations had been incorrectly identified.

history, which asserts truth and is accepted; and myth which has credibility and authority. What he means by authority is that myth has an element of social authority in that it acts as a charter or blueprint for society itself.<sup>17</sup> This is quite an interesting idea insofar as this relates to the construction of Sikkimese historical narratives and the role of these narratives in the construction of Sikkimese nationhood (see chapter seven for details). As the Sikkimese historical narrative, which can be proven by historical method to be inaccurate, is considered true by many Sikkimese people and that this truth assertion is directly related to issues of identity as a people. That is, the narrative tradition acts as a blueprint for Sikkimese society and its historical identity, by shaping the past into a model for national identity.

#### 4. STATE, NATION AND NATIONALISM

Whilst this book is undoubtedly about the nature of Sikkimese historical narratives and the problems faced when attempting to understand history from an academic perspective, it is also about the nature of state formation in Sikkim. As the above section helps ground this book in contemporary debates on historical thought as a backdrop to discussions on the nature of Sikkimese historical narratives, it is also important to have a similar grounding in academic thought on state formation and the construction of nations and nationalism, which should be considered as separate things. This is particularly important given that Sikkimese historical narratives attempt to define Sikkimese history as a national history; a topic that will be discussed at length in chapter seven.

Throughout this book I have used the term 'state' in a rather simple way; an organised political community, which is subsumed under a government. I include within this definition both states which are sovereign and states subject to external sovereignty, whereby supreme authority may reside (sometimes only theoretically) in another political entity, state or polity. Ultimately the state is a political entity which controls the population of an area, which may or may not be defined territorially, through a system of legitimate power or force, both of which can be exercised locally and through devolved elites within a

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<sup>17</sup> Lincoln 1989: 25.

state. As such Weber's definition of a state, as an institution which claims the exclusive right to the legitimate use of force in a given territory, is in part valid. However, I also accept Gellner's addition that there are states which do not monopolise force, such as feudal states where private wars were waged between rival lords and that these wars were tolerated by the state, provided they did not threaten the stability of the state as a whole or feudal obligations to an overlord (Gellner 1983: 3). I also reject the distinction made by Weber between the *state of his definition* (that is the modern state) and what he terms the 'political institutions', which historically preceded the development of his modern state. As the historical reality is that the term 'the state' meant different things in different periods of history.

The key point of Weber's definition, which proves useful for the purposes of this book, is that the state must be seen as being legitimate. Legitimacy of a state to exercise power, control and authority is fundamental to the survival and existence of a state; yet it should be noted that, the legitimacy of the state was not understood in the same way modern, particularly democratic, states are legitimised. That is, the state is not necessarily considered legitimate by the entire population, but by dominant political elites or, as Hay and Lister have noted, by the power and stature of the ruler (2006: 7).

Hay and Lister discuss the development of the concept of the state starting with its Latin root *status*, i.e. social status, stature or standing. They go on to discuss how the standing or "stateliness" of rulers in medieval Europe was used to distinguish a ruler from his subjects. From that came the idea that the state resides in the body of the ruler and one is reminded of the famous illustration on the title page of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. But before Hobbes, it was Machiavelli who unified the idea of the monarch as the state with the extension of the monarch (and the state) to the 'character of the political regime, the geographic area over which sovereign authority was claimed and maintained and the very institutions of government required to preserve such authority' (Hay and Lister 2006: 7). The separation of the monarch and his embodiment of the state was developed by republican political theory and writers such as Dante and his concept of the state of civic liberty, whereby the state's legitimacy is seen not as being synonymous with a ruler's stature but as being determined by the people (cited in Hay and Lister 2006: 7). Thus a ruler's authority comes from the legitimacy of the state by the people and not the innate legitimacy of the ruler by means of his stature above the subjects of his embodied

state or his royal bloodline. It is the idea of the separation of the ruler from the state that frames modern understanding of what the state is and it is this that creates the greatest confusion when trying to understand political entities in the pre-modern period and in Tibet and the Himalaya. In essence then the legitimacy of a state is defined, in the pre-modern period, by elites and not by the population at large. In addition the term 'state' is often used interchangeably with nation, implying that a state must be of a modern form defined by territorial distinctions, something—if not lacking—was, at least confused and indeterminate in the Sikkimese context. As such, whilst Weber's definition mentioned above is a good starting point, it might also be useful to understand the Sikkimese state as a community living under an organisational structure where power and authority is defined in the form of a structured hierarchy even though that hierarchy, in different periods of Sikkimese history, oscillated between a 'real' structure or a theoretical one, depending upon the relative strength of the Chos rgyal, the aristocracy and the political significance of wider inter-regional events.

Another key term I use is 'state formation', by which I mean the way in which a state comes to be in existence. However, unlike nations, which are often constructed intentionally, states are not formed by the intention of a ruler to create a state but, as Charles Tilly has argued, are formed through "a process...driven largely by extraction, control and coalition formation as parts or by-products of rulers' efforts not to build states but to make war and survive" (2006: 419).

Another key theme in this book is the extent to which we can identify the Sikkimese state as a 'Tibetan' state. By this I mean what characteristics, if any, did the Sikkimese state share with other states in the Tibetan world, or was Sikkim a 'Tibetan' state simply because the dominant body were made up of Tibetan migrants.<sup>18</sup> In this book

<sup>18</sup> Throughout this book I have termed these Tibetan migrants in Sikkim as Tibeto-Sikkimese. This is mainly due to the problems of identifying suitable ethnonyms for this population of people said to be descended from Tibetans. Unfortunately in today's climate of ethnic politics many of the terms traditionally used to describe Sikkimese people of Tibetan origin (Lho po, 'Bras ljongs pa, Bhutia etc.) have been imbued with political meanings from which it is hard to escape. For example the term 'bras ljongs pa can only be applied due to the activities of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can and his designation of Sikkim as 'Bras mo ljongs and begs the question of what these people were called before this designation was applied. Bhutia is a derogatory term used by the Nepalese to designate all northern beef-eating and alcohol-drinking Buddhists. The term 'Tibetan' is exclusively used to describe post 1959-refugees and is not suitable for

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I discuss these ideas in relation to Sikkimese state formation and argue that Tibetan concepts of state and social organisation were fundamental to the organisation of the Sikkimese state. Indeed Goldstein's work (1971a) on the model of socio-political stratification in Tibet and his study of centralisation and decentralisation (1971b) and taxation in Tibetan villages (1971c) prove useful studies for understanding Sikkimese socio-political and economic organisation (see chapters three and six for details). In addition to the 'Tibetan' nature of the Sikkimese state another key theme in this book is the idea of Sikkim as a nation as distinct from the idea of the Sikkimese state.

Any discussion of the nation has to start with the formidable work of Ernest Gellner in his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). He argued that there was nothing primordial, natural or historical about the rise of nations and the associated concept of nationalism, and that nations were the product of modernisation. He argued that with modernisation and industrialisation, society was radically transformed. In agrarian societies there was no need to promote the homogenisation of culture, given that the primary focus of the state and elites was the collection of taxes and maintenance of the peace (1983: 10), something we find reflected in the history of Sikkim. Indeed literacy was only available to select elites, which he terms the clerisy. He notes that literacy, through the standardisation of script and language, has the possibility of creating "cultural and cognitive storage and centralisation" (1983: 8). He argues that with industrialisation the need to create homogeneous communication systems which could be understood irrespective of locality became apparent as the need to train people in the use of new technology appeared. It was through this process of homogenisation that the nation and nationalism were born.

Gellner's approach regarding the creation of nations and nationalism is similar to Hobsbawm and Ranger's discussion of the invention of tradition (see conclusion). These modernisation theorists have come under criticism from a number of authors, the most notable of who is Anthony Smith. Smith (1996 [1989]) differs from both the 'modernists' like Gellner and Benedict Anderson (who saw nationalism as the product of modernisation and industrialisation) and the 'primordialists'

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Tibeto-Sikkimese on account of their long history in Sikkim. For these reasons I have chosen to coin a new term which indicates both the Tibetan origins of the people and the Sikkimeseness of the people.



(who contended that there is an ever-present essence of nation within an ethnicity ready to emerge under the right conditions). Smith argues that the notion of a nation does not lie within the ethnicity but within myths, memories, values and symbols. As “There can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth and identity, and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the concept of a nation.” (Smith 1996: 105).

For Smith, before nations there were *ethnies*—that is, communities with a collective name, common myth of descent, shared history, culture and perhaps language and territory; these ethnies form the basis of modern nations. He, therefore, maintains that there is a continuation between pre-modern society and modern society. As far as Sikkim is concerned these discussions are somewhat problematic considering that Sikkim never fully emerged as a nation. However, these discussions are important for understanding the construction of historical narratives and the purposes for which they were written, which was undoubtedly to create the backdrop for the recognition of Sikkim as a Nation. As I shall show throughout this book, such preoccupations often led to the construction of a history divorced from the facts available in seventeenth century sources.

## 5. LEGITIMACY AND TIBETAN RELIGIO-POLITICAL THEORIES OF STATE AND GOVERNANCE

During the period of the formation of the Sikkimese state, legitimacy was an essential aspect in that process and as such a body of Tibetan political theory, as well as legitimising historical narratives of origin (see chapter two and three) developed. These narratives drew upon Tibetan ideas of the invitation of kings to rule, as discussed by Ramble (2006) in his article on the principles of Tibetan monarchy, Indic models of the *cakravātin* (the universal monarch) and the *dharmarāja* (Tib. *Chos rgyal*), and the extension of that idea into the religio-political theory of state and governance: *chos srid lugs gnyis*. It is these concepts that need to be understood when discussing the legitimacy of Tibetan (broadly defined) states and Sikkim in particular.

Returning to the definition of ‘the state’ in general and its applicability to the Tibetan context one needs to be aware of the political theories developed by the Tibetans on the one hand, with the reality of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of Tibetan states on the other. The

defragmented nature of Tibetan states, and the ability of the Tibetan state (and by this I am referring to the post 1642 Dge lugs pa state) to exercise control over its constituent parts has been the subject of much debate over the past forty years beginning with Cassinelli and Ekvall's work on Sa skya in 1969 and Goldstein's critique of that study in 1971b. A decade later Geoffrey Samuel entered the fray, in 1982, with his discussion of Tibet as a stateless society, before developing his argument along the lines of Stanley Tambiah's (1976: 119–123) galactic polity model (Samuel 1993: 61–62). At the time of writing, the argument on statelessness in Tibet has been furthered by another South-east Asian import: that of James Scott's zomia concept of 'non-state space', the applicability of which to the Himalaya has been discussed by Sara Shneiderman (2010). The ideas put forward by James Scott have some usefulness for understanding geographical impediments to state formation (Scott 2009: 40–50) and communities in Tibet that fell outside the 'territory' of Tibetan states and for communities with little state interaction such as nomadic communities where different forms of social and political organisation can be found. However, his thesis which is defined by the dichotomy of valleys or flat geographic terrain as sites for states versus mountainous or hilly geography as areas of non-state spaces does not work for Sikkim or, for that matter, where the geography is dominated by such mountainous terrain which, Scott would associate with non-state spaces. In a book (like this one) which is primarily about the formation of a state, James Scott's work does not really contribute to our understanding of what a Tibetan state is, and the systems of political organisation found within Central Tibet or Sikkim; though it may help in understanding the regions of fluidity that formed the 'borders' of Sikkim in the seventeenth century as discussed in chapter six. Samuel's application of the galactic polity model is perhaps more relevant to understanding, not only, the interaction between Tibetan polities in a given historical period, but also the power shift from one political centre to another over time. Yet perhaps now is the time to shift our understanding and definition of 'the state' in the Tibetan context from traditional definitions towards a model that incorporates Tibetan principles of state, governance and society.

One key religio-political theory is that of *chos srid lugs gnyis*. This theory is centred on the idea that governance should include not just the secular world but also the spiritual. Unlike modern western societies where the separation of the spiritual orders and the political realm

is the ideal, in Tibetan societies the unification of these two systems is considered the perfect mode of government, whereby the religious influences and shapes the political and the political (through sponsorship, for example) influences the religious. In this way a political figure or government is obliged to actively preserve and promote Buddhism; this is noted through the use of the term *mchod yon*, the traditional association between a “religious preceptor-officiant” (*mchod gnas*) and a secular ruler; *yon bdag* (Ruegg 2004: 9) or *dharmarāja*. Ruegg and other scholars have written at some length on this issue (Ruegg 1995 and 1991, Cüppers, 2004, Ehrhard 2004 etc.) and I refer readers to those writings. What is interesting for this book is the application of this terminology to the Sikkimese situation. The use of these terms (*mchod yon*, *lugs gnyis* etc.) indicates an interesting event in Sikkimese politics and one that warrants some explanation. As implied by the work of Ruegg, *mchod yon* is the role of, and relation between, the *yon bdag* (royal patron / lay donor) and the *mchod gnas* (Lama or religious donee); which he notes as being primarily religious and personal, rather than an official or institutionalized concept (Ruegg 1997: 857).

While, *mchod yon* does indeed convey this form of personal religious relationship, it would be a mistake to think that it cannot also be understood, in certain contexts, as also a religio-political concept, which can develop into an institutionalized form; as *mchod yon* also implicates the two realms of the religious order (as represented by the recipients of donation—*mchod gnas*) and the temporal order which is the domain of political power and the lay community, who act as sponsors.<sup>19</sup> It is from this relationship between the temporal and spiritual spheres of social life, represented as a relationship of patronage, that we can understand the formation and extraction of a unified religio-political concept such as *lugs gnyis*. Thus, in a somewhat simplified way, *lugs gnyis* represents the political institutionalization of the *mchod yon* concept of religious patronage.

*Lugs gnyis* is probably best understood as a religio-political theory of state and society, in which the united territories of the political and religious worlds play a complementary, although not always equal, role in the formation and direction of policy. Thus certain guarantees

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that “sponsorship” of religious establishments was often compulsory. Those *mi ser* attached to the monastic estates in Sikkim are referred to as *sbyin bdag*, despite the fact that their ‘contributions’ to those monasteries was guaranteed through their physical bond to the land they ‘leased’ from the monastery.

and concessions are set in place, theoretically, to maintain the balance and stability of both social orders; and this includes the promotion of Buddhist traditions, donation of money for the construction of religious sites and rituals. The actual practical application of this system in Tibet, however, has been characterized by the alternation of political power between more secular groups and religious groups of Tibetan political society; leading to vulnerable and highly unstable governments, susceptible to political intrigue and rebellion rather than the desired result of political and religious stability. This is particularly the case when different religious groups vie for influence and sponsorship from prominent and powerful secular leaders. During the seventeenth century, central Tibet was characterised by this practice of obtaining political support in order to maintain political influence, and this certainly had an impact on the formation of the Sikkimese state. However, whilst this system was susceptible to political manipulation by some religious figures, it has to be understood that this was not a universal practice. Often religious figures did not agree with the political ambitions of their sponsors and there certainly were sponsors without political ambitions, who generally believed in the system of *lugs gnyis* and genuinely wished to promote Buddhism. Often it is easy to see only the political implications of this theory (especially when viewed from contemporary times where religious belief is on the decline), and forget that in the past people were also motivated by religious belief as well as political ambition.

With that caveat in mind, I want to turn towards the concept of the ideal ruler, to rule over this dual religio-political system. Crucial to this is an understanding of Buddhist tantric philosophy, in particular the idea, as expressed by Snellgrove (1959), as divine kingship or the *cakravātin*, who on account of his enlightened status is the ideal ruler, as he will govern according to higher principles than that of a worldly political figure. As such, the *cakravātin* embodies the dual aspects of governance and the state (the religious and the secular), in a similar way to which medieval monarchs were understood to embody the state. Yet, unlike medieval monarchs, kingship in Tibet, as Charles Ramble recently highlighted (2006), was contractual (between the king and ministers) and was not a prize sought but a burden shouldered at the request of others in order to benefit “benighted, rudderless subjects”. The similarity to that idea and Hobbes’ belief that without a monarch humanity would descend into its natural state of anarchy is remarkable and one that academics working on the definition of

Tibetan states, governance and kingship should not dismiss so easily. Whilst, Ramble, notes that the failure of a Tibetan king to uphold his side of the contract, could result in regicide or rebellion and thus precludes absolute monarchy, this does not negate the theoretical model of the *cakravātin* as the embodiment of *lugs gnyis* and by extension the state. As such the state and kingship in Tibetan society needs to be understood as a system of political organisation, which emerges from the legitimacy of a ruler, not only as a *cakravātin* or *dharmarāja*, but also through a social contract between the ruler and the ruled.

That is the theory, and theories are only useful when they contribute to our understanding of reality; in this case the political reality of state formation, governance and kingship in Sikkim. That is to say that the themes of the theoretical models of kingship, governance and state in Tibetan societies can be found in Sikkimese historical sources from the seventeenth century and it is certain that those themes take centre stage in the later historical narratives (see chapter one), but these themes occur for two separate reasons. The appearance of these themes in seventeenth century sources have to be understood as legitimising agents of the newly formed state and monarchy (chapter two) and not as a reflection of political reality; as the political reality of state formation in seventeenth century Sikkim (see chapters 3–5), however, was far more complex and was brought about, not by religious invitations to the first Sikkimese Chos rgyal (chapter one), but by conquest, alliance formation, and the subjugation of the population under the figure of the Chos rgyal. The reason they appear in later historical narratives is to characterise the formation of the Sikkimese state as the fruition of divine prophecy.

## 6. A GUIDE TO THE SOURCES

This book uses a variety of sources (many of which are reproduced in the appendices) from different genres of Tibetan literature including *gnas yig* or *lam yig* (guide books), *lung bstan* (prophecies), *gter ma* (treasure texts), *rgyal rabs* (royal genealogies), *rnam thar* (biography), *chos 'byung* (histories of religion), *lo rgyus* (chronicles) and *khriims yig* (legal documents). These genres can be classified into three groups. The first three genres noted above can be considered as religious literature, in that they relate directly or indirectly to religious themes. The second group (*rgyal rabs*, *chos 'byung*, *rnam thar*, and *lo rgyus*)

can be considered as histories or quasi-histories in that they concern themselves with the past and events/actors in the past. The final group is *khirms yig* or legal documents. This category includes a variety of literary styles from official decrees, laws, official registers and records, letters and treaties.

It would be possible to write an entire book on any one of the genres noted above, and so this short discussion here shall only ever be a brief glimpse into the variety of Tibetan literature. Given that there are a number of important works already in circulation regarding specific genres in Tibetan literature, I will not go into too much detail here and refer readers to those other works (Gyatso 1998, Cabezón and Jackson [eds] 1996, Vostrikov 1970, French 1995 etc.).

The *gnas yig* or *lam yig* genres of Tibetan literature are essentially guidebooks for pilgrims or lamas visiting the holy sites described in the book (or accounts of a lama's journey to a sacred place in the case of *lam yig*). Sikkimese *gnas yig* tend to describe the various places in Sikkim according to their outer, inner and secret meaning, using poetical language to describe the various religious qualities of Sikkim and the spiritual attainments one can achieve by either entering Sikkim, visiting the sites or meditating at the sites. They tend to be deeply religious accounts and are generally written for the spiritual practitioner. The one exception to this rule is *LTY* which also includes a number of autobiographical passages detailing the way in which Lha btsun chen po entered Sikkim and his activities whilst there.

*Lung bstan* are highly cryptic texts, in as far as they are often very difficult to understand without reference to the context of the writer. Many also fall into the category of *gter ma* in that they are received as treasures and so are regarded as direct and truthful renditions of prophecy. Generally they detail events that will take place in the future (in terms of the time in which they were concealed and not the time they were discovered). One of the most important examples of this genre for Sikkimese history is the *rnal 'byor mched bzhi'i lung bstan*, which predicts the arrival in Sikkim of the three Tibetan lamas in the seventeenth century and their discovery of the first Sikkimese king (making up the quartet). Full details of this prophecy are given in chapter one.

As I have already discussed *gter ma* in this introduction I will move on to a discussion of historical literature. In this book I use a number of sources which can be considered as historical writings. By this I mean manuscripts, which have been written for the purpose of detail-

ing events that occurred in the past. There are a number of different historical genres in Tibetan literature (*rgyal rabs*, *chos 'byung*, *rnam thar*, and *lo rgyus*). Some of the key sources in this book fall within these broad categories. The *rgyal rabs* genre is different from other genres of historical literature as such works generally (though not always) recount the histories of royal lineages; one example in this book is *Mnga' bdag rgyal rabs*, in that it recounts the royal ancestry of one of the key Tibetan lamas active in Sikkim during the seventeenth century. It also contains stylistic elements of the *rnam thar* genre, in that it also is a biography of the above mentioned lama. *Rnam thar* as a genre can be described as biographical writing in that it recounts the life and times of important people (usually religious figures), and tends to be more distinct from *rgyal rabs* and *lo rgyus* being often hagiographical and fantastic. However, as can be seen with the *Mnga' bdag rgyal rabs*, this genre in Tibetan literature has the potential to be quite fluid, encompassing different styles and objectives. The term *lo rgyus* tends to be translated as annals or chronicles in that these works generally recount events in the past, but lack historical closure; they are not necessarily written for the purpose of presenting a historical narrative in the sense of a text with a beginning, middle and end, but tend to be records of historical events. Of course as with other genres of Tibetan literature there is also a high degree of fluidity regarding the content, composition and narrative styles of *lo rgyus*. In this book I have used an important source which has been classified as a *lo rgyus*: *La sogs lo rgyus*. In a later edition of this text it is also termed as a *rgyal rabs*, which is applicable given that the early sections of this manuscript recount the origin narratives of the Sikkimese kings.

The final group, which I have termed as *khirms yig*, incorporates a number of different genres of official, administrative or legal documentation. In this book I shall use a number of these texts, including official taxation records, treaties, land grants and petitions. These sources are crucial to improving our understanding of Sikkimese history, in particular social and political history. They tend to be less biased as the objective behind their composition is often administrative, and so they are not intended to present official histories or accounts of the past. In this way these documents are important for understanding the political and social formations of Sikkim.

This short note of genre in Tibetan literature is intended to provide some contextual information for the sources used in this book. It should not be considered the final word about the genres in question

but more as a discussion of the styles and categories of literature used in this book as primary sources.

## 7. THE CHAPTERS

In chapter two I present a summary of the historical narratives of Sikkim; in particular the narratives on the origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese and state formation. These narratives have contributed to the knowledge of history locally, and in this chapter I address some of those issues and raise a number of points regarding the problems inherent in these writings. One issue of some pertinence is the origin of these writings, many of which were written during the British period of Sikkimese history. I highlight a number of themes inherent in these writings in particular the theme of divine provenance, in relation to *gter ma* and the formation of the Sikkimese state.

In the third chapter I present the first seventeenth century source in this book, a source which is valuable to the student of early Sikkimese history. I note that whilst it shares some similarities with the historical narratives of chapter two, it also presents a number of hitherto, unknown events and actors in the seventeenth century. In addition I note the use of religious terminology and the importance of religious legitimacy for the young state. I note that even prior to the date of the establishment of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal as the Chos rgyal of Sikkim, there were rudimentary systems of stratification and tax collection in place. This indicates that the start of the formation of the Sikkimese state predates the enthronement of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal as Chos rgyal, thus changing the influence of the enthronement in early Sikkimese politics.

Chapter four and chapter five are devoted to the examination of the relative influence of two Tibetan lamas in the religious and political spheres of early Sikkim. Chapter four is devoted to *Mnga' bdag phun tshogs rig 'dzin*, a lama associated with the lineage of *Zhig po gling pa* and *Byang gter*. In this chapter, which is based on the *Mnga' bdag rgyal rabs*, I argue that Phun tshogs rig 'dzin seems to have been a lama of immense influence in Sikkim, an assertion that runs contrary to the historical narratives of chapter two. In chapter five I compare the information found in *Mnga' bdag rgyal rabs* with the writings of another Tibetan lama; *Lha btsun chen po*. According to the traditional histories it is *Lha btsun chen po* who is primarily responsible for the



formation of the Sikkimese state, the enthronement of the first Chos rgyal and the introduction and construction of Buddhist institutions. Using evidence from his own writings, the writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama and a local Sikkimese historian, I argue that it appears as if the position of Lha btsun chen po in traditional narratives is not borne out by the evidence from the period. Indeed I state that his position, relative to Mnga' bdag phun tshogs rig 'dzin, was minor in early Sikkim. I also discuss one key problem found within the chronology of Sikkimese history: the enthronement of the first Sikkimese king.

In chapter six I return to the political organisation of Sikkim during the seventeenth century. In particular I present two texts which radically change our perception of early Sikkimese history. The first text is an oath of agreement signed by representatives of the Sikkimese state and other leading figures from the different ethnic communities of the area. This text mentions a previous internal rebellion or war launched by Lepcha and Limbu groups against the rule of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, and states that from the day of the signing of this treaty the different groups of Sikkim accepted the rule of the Rnam rgyal dynasty. The second manuscript is a detailed census of the Lepcha and Limbu populations in Sikkim. This manuscript provides the historian with a glimpse of the organisational capabilities of the early Sikkimese state.

In chapter seven, I return to the question of the construction of Sikkimese historical narratives. In the earlier chapters I illustrate considerable differences between evidence contained in source material from the seventeenth century and the later narratives. Such differences between the historical record and the historical narratives of Sikkim raise a number of important questions regarding the construction of history. In this chapter I attempt to offer an explanation for the construction of Sikkimese history, grounded in the tumultuous events of the War of Succession, the corresponding influence of 'Jigs med dpa' bo and the tradition of Lha btsun chen po and the ultimate arrival of the British in Sikkimese affairs. I argue that these events contributed to the construction of Sikkimese history on the basis of religious and political concerns.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LOCAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES: TIBETO-SIKKIMESE ORIGINS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SIKKIMESE STATE

In this chapter, I shall attempt to present a general introduction to the popular historical narratives of Sikkim, which concerns themselves with the two periods of Sikkimese history that are the foci for this book: the origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese people and the 'formation' of the Sikkimese state in the seventeenth century. Rather than present a dry rendition of these various narratives, I shall attempt to amalgamate a number of popular renditions into a single narrative of the historical traditions in Sikkim. Indeed many of the individual renditions share similar themes and motifs as well as a general ideological viewpoint. It is not my intention to discuss this viewpoint here as throughout the course of this book I hope to develop an understanding of the relative positions of these narratives and the reasons for their construction. Therefore, this chapter shall be limited to a presentation of some of the general themes, events, and actors found in popular Sikkimese historical narratives. This, it is hoped, will help to situate the reader and serve as the point of comparison for the arguments developed later in this book.

This chapter is divided into four principal sections. The first section is a general introduction to the sources used in the compilation of the historical narratives below. The second deals with the prominent narrative of origin, which focuses on the life and migration of a prince from Khams mi nyag and his final settlement in the regions around Sikkim and the Chumbi valley. The third outlines the narrative of 'state' formation in the seventeenth century and the results and organisational practices established to rule Sikkim in accordance with the religio-political order. The final section concludes this discussion of Sikkimese historical narratives by identifying a number of key themes, motifs and some general remarks on structure.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE SOURCES

The amalgamated narratives that appear below are drawn from three principal sources, all of which were written during the period 1860–1908.

The key source, and latest, amongst these is *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (*BGR*), which was written in 1908; preceding *BGR* in date is *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (*GoS*), an official publication of the Bengal Secretariat in 1894; the earliest source is *Bla ma che mtshan gsum 'bras ljongs sbas gnas phebs tshul* (*BMS*), written *circa* 1860. Thus all these sources can be dated to after the advent of British interest in the eastern Himalaya following the Gorkha war and the Anglo-Sikkimese treaty of 1817<sup>1</sup> which saw the return of Sikkimese land, including Darjeeling, captured by Nepal in the Sino-Nepalese war of 1788–1792.

The history of British intervention in the Himalaya began smoothly enough with the restoration of Sikkimese lands in 1817; however, with the Ilam affair and the feuds and murders which resulted,<sup>2</sup> by 1828 the British began to take further interest in the security of the shared borders of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Following this a grant to settle in Darjeeling was issued to the British by the Sikkimese king in 1835 and with the Hooker-Campbell controversy of 1849<sup>3</sup> saw the annexation of all Sikkimese territory south of the Rangeet River. If the controversy of 1849 led Sikkim to surrender its land in the plains and Darjeeling, the treaty of 1861<sup>4</sup> guaranteed British supremacy in the hills and in effect

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Treaty of Titalia (see Moktan 1997: 8–9 for a reproduction of this treaty).

<sup>2</sup> This was the Ko Ta rebellion of 1828. The Palace Collection, now under the custodianship of Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, contain a number of interesting letters and royal promulgations regarding this event; the subject of this event is also contained in the oldest Lepcha documents (see Sprigg, R.K. 1997).

<sup>3</sup> In the period after the land grant for British settlement was issued many Sikkimese subjects fled to Darjeeling to seek refuge from bonded labour on Sikkimese estates. Many of which were considered criminals under Sikkimese law. Furthermore, the Sikkimese government considered British settlement and the land grant in accordance with Sikkimese land law. This gives the right to settlement and cultivation of previously unsettled or uncultivated land; however, those settlers were considered to be bound by Sikkimese law and thus fall under the jurisdiction of the Sikkimese government. This is understandable given that the British were liable to pay an annual *ing as British territory* and thus subject to British law. Therefore, Sikkimese subjects in bonded labour were considered slaves and thus were given asylum based on anti-slavery legislation introduced in the *British Empire* on 1 August 1838. The Sikkimese return runaway subjects, to which the British refused. This led the Sikkimese government to retaliate with the arrest of Hooker and Campbell in 1849, when they entered Sikkimese territory.

<sup>4</sup> Alex McKay presented an interesting paper on the subject of this treaty at the 12th IATS conference in August 2010 held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. This paper is due to be published in Mullard (ed) *in press*.

placed serious restrictions on the Government of Sikkim. However, it was not until the 1880s that Sikkim was reduced to a protectorate<sup>5</sup> with the real power being wielded by the British ‘representative’: the first Political Officer; John Claude White.

It was within the historical context of British involvement in the Himalaya<sup>6</sup> that the three sources, to be discussed in this chapter, were written. The earliest source (*BMS*) was written by a Sikkimese monk, and survives now only as a copy in the compilation *Sbas yul ’bras mo ljongs gnas yig dang rgyal rabs bzhugs so*, edited by Gung rdo rje in 1972. In the compilation this text, which is 14 folios in length, follows directly after *PSLG*, and like the latter is written in a cursive script. The copied text also contains numerous *errata*, much like *PSLG* (Mullard 2005a). The original manuscript was written by one Skal bzang chos dbyings, the ‘Vajra Master’ (*rdo rje slob dpon*) of Rig ’dzin mchog grub gling monastery (Do/Stod lung monastery), at sometime during the 1860s.

The second source which is used below in the amalgamated narrative is *GoS*. I have refrained from relying on this source and have only referred to it when it provides an interesting insight or different information from the more common account of *BGR*. The sections of interest are the opening 16 pages of the historical section and parts of the introduction to *GoS*. It is generally believed that the majority of the information found in this historical summary was taken from an earlier text, accredited to either the G.yang thang or the La sogs dpon po,<sup>7</sup> and a number of oral histories and earlier fragmentary sources

<sup>5</sup> The history of the British protectorate over Sikkim is long and detailed for further information see: NIT: 68–83.

<sup>6</sup> For further details: McKay 1997, gives an interesting overview of British-Tibetan relations in the post Younghusband expedition era. The history of British involvement in Tibet begins ultimately with their interactions with the Sikkimese. Prior to the Younghusband expedition, the Sikkimese government had attempted to negotiate with the Tibetans, on behalf of the British. This placed the Sikkimese in a difficult position both in regards to the Tibetans and the British. In the early 1880s Sikkimese politics oscillated between a pro-Tibetan and a pro-British stance, depending on the relative ascendancy of various political factions within the Sikkimese aristocracy. The Kang gsar pa minister in alliance with his brother the Pho gdong Lama [also spelt Pho brang] undermined royal authority by negotiating directly with the British, who viewed them as potential allies. This arrangement ultimately led to the declining fortunes of the Sikkimese monarchy and the establishment of the British protectorate.

<sup>7</sup> This family (the Brag dkar pa) has been the subject of an earlier article: Mullard 2003b.

such as SMPd79 (1819)<sup>8</sup> and the Padma g.yang rtse history (which is reputed to have been destroyed during the Nepal-Sikkim war).

The final source is *BGR*, which as noted above was written in 1908. There is an English translation by 'Kazi Dousandup' [sic],<sup>9</sup> a Tibeto-Sikkimese man in the service of the British administration. There exist at least three renditions of the Tibetan version: in the Sikkimese palace, in the private library of the Queen mother of Bhutan, and in the library of T.D. Densapa.<sup>10</sup> The original manuscript is accredited to Mthu stobs rnam rgyal and his wife Ye shes sgrol ma, the king and queen of Sikkim from 1874. Whilst most scholars believe that Ye shes sgrol ma was primarily responsible for writing this historical work, there is a view in Sikkim that *BGR* was actually a later edition of the historical work written by the G.yang thang dpon po or the La sogs dpon po (noted above). Whoever was actually responsible for authoring *BGR* is, perhaps, irrelevant as the work clearly received royal clearance by being attributed to the king and queen of Sikkim.

## 2. THE TIBETAN MIGRATION NARRATIVE

At present there is little evidence to indicate the precise origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese population who 'ruled' Sikkim. However, what we can say with some degree of certainty is that there were probably different migrations to Sikkim which occurred at different times, and that these waves of immigration into Greater-Sikkim<sup>11</sup> came from

<sup>8</sup> The Sikkimese Manuscript Project Documents (SMPd) are documents that were collected and digitised by the Sikkimese Manuscript Project in 2004–2005. The current incarnation of the earlier Sikkimese Manuscript Project is the Sikkimese Royal Archive Project, in which documents from the Sikkimese Palace were digitised and catalogued. In the Bibliography of this book the reader will find documents referred to with two different numbering systems: PD (which refers to document specifically from the Sikkimese palace) and SMPd (referring to documents collected during the life of the Sikkimese Manuscript Project).

<sup>9</sup> This is the same Kazi Dawa Samdup who worked under Charles Bell at the Gangtok residency and with Evans-Wentz.

<sup>10</sup> This is the famous Barmiok Collection, (now housed in Gangtok) from where numerous rare manuscripts were microfilmed and subsequently published. After the exile of the Dalai Lama T.D. Densapa presented a number of important Tibetan works to the LTWA, where there still is a Densapa collection. T.D. Densapa is also known under these titles: Rai Bahadur, Barmiok [Bar myag] A mthing. Barmiok refers to the ancestral estate of this family; they are of Lepcha ancestry.

<sup>11</sup> 'Greater-Sikkim' denotes the wider region of Sikkim (which may fall outside the contemporary boundaries of the state), a region of the eastern Himalaya stretching

many different locations both within Tibet and along the Himalayan ranges, and continued well into the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> For example there are a number of clans in Sikkim that claim or can trace their ancestry to regions of Bhutan, such as Ha and Spa gro. Similarly there are clans who are associated with noble families or petty rulers of the Sa skya-Yuan period of Tibetan history (c.1256–1366). Whilst some cases are little more than spurious claims to enhance the historical depth, and thus respectability, of the lineage, other claims are more believable, if not wholly accurate. These different movements of people from both Tibet and across the Himalaya make it almost impossible to locate a particular region from where the Tibeto-Sikkimese as the 'collective ethnicity', portrayed in contemporary political movements, originated.

As noted in the introductory chapter of this book, there is a distinct problem with establishing suitable ethnonyms for the populations in Sikkim. This dilemma has been caused, in part, by contemporary political designations which have led to the overarching terms of Bhutia, Lho po and 'Bras ljongs pa being applied to most people speaking Tibetan dialects with the notable exception of Tibetan refugees and Nepali immigrants (Sherpa etc.).<sup>13</sup> Such political designations paste a veneer of homogeneity over what is, in reality, a rather more complex situation, based on clan structures and origin histories. As is noted in the discussion of Sikkimese clan (Appendix II) there are well over thirty clans and twenty sub-clans in Sikkim (Lepcha and Limbu are excluded).<sup>14</sup> Some of these clan names provide hints to the origins, occupations or religious persuasions of the original proto-clan, while others are merely the names of the earliest known ancestors. However, out of these clans and their associated origin stories only twelve clans and two sub-clans are referred to as being of 'pure' descent, i.e. descended from the protagonist, or his followers, in the dominant

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from the watershed of the Arun river in the west to the Wang chu river in the east; the Mchod rten nyi ma range in the north to the plains of Siliguri in the south.

<sup>12</sup> Excluding the migration of Tibetan refugees after the Chinese occupation of Tibet there seems to have been a substantial movement of Tibetans from eastern Tibet during the 1920s. These migrants settled in regions close to the Sikkim-Bhutan border.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted here that in today's political climate many of the groups mentioned above have taken the surname Bhutia or Denjongpa in order to reap the benefits associated with being a member of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. According to the Indian Constitution such groups receive benefits from state-led affirmative action programs.

<sup>14</sup> For the names and details of these clans and sub-clans see appendix II.

origin myth: Gyad 'bum bsags. These clans are collectively known as *stong dus ru[s] bzhi* [Sic.] *babs mtshan brgyad*<sup>15</sup> (The eight clans descended from the four *rus*<sup>16</sup> of a thousand each). It is the narrative of Gyad 'bum bsags to which we will turn our attention now.

The story of the origins of the Sikkimese people begins, according to *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*, with the history of the eighth-century Tibetan king Khri srong lde btsan. This king is said to have had three sons, two of which rule the Tibetan empire at different times: Mu ne btsan po and Sad na legs; the middle son Mu rub btsan po travels to eastern Tibet.<sup>17</sup> It is from this second son that the Sikkimese kings are said to descend. The descendants of this figure rule in the region of Khams mi nyag for twenty-five generations.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> There are numerous spellings for this phrase, examples include: *stong 'du ru bzhi 'bab tshan brgyad*, *stong sde ru bzhi 'babs mtshan/tshan brgyad*. The translation of this phrase may be another example of attempting to contrive meaning from a problematic expression.

<sup>16</sup> Many Sikkimese works have translated *rus/ru* as regiment, which is highly misleading. *Ru gzhis* [Sic. *bzhi*] actually refers to the four divisions of territory in the period of the Tibetan empire. In later Sikkimese land grants; such as YA1, YA2 and YA8 from the private collection of the Brag dkar pa family; from the early eighteenth century there is often an introductory paragraph which associates early Sikkim with being a part of the four *ru(s)* of *Dbus* and *Gtsang* YA8 line 3 reads: *bar dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i char gtogs pa'i sbas dpal gyi 'bras mo ljongs zhes bya ba*. '[This very place] which is known as the hidden land 'Bras mo ljongs and which forms a part of the four *ru* of [the middle province] *Dbus gtsang* [...]. Whereas *rus* has a variety of meanings such as bone, family, lineage and clan. *Rus* is also encountered in the maternal and paternal lineages of Tibet and Sikkim, whereby *rus* relate to the male line (and clan) and *sha* relates to the maternal lineage (and clan) as descent in Sikkim is now patrilineal a child is considered to be from the clan of his father.

<sup>17</sup> BGR 2003: 22–23. *De'i rgyal rgyud* [of Khri srong lde'u btsan] *sras gsum sku 'khrungs pa / mu ne btsan po mu rub btsan po dang / chos rgyal 'jing yon sad na legs dang gsum / mu rub btsan po mdo khams byang du gshegs / ces gsung pa bzhiin /*. The only problems with this account are the deep historical uncertainties that surround the figure of Mu rub (rum) btsan po and his exile from central Tibet. Michael Aris discusses the life of this prince of the Yar klungs dynasty at length and ultimately concludes that there is little certainty regarding the location of his exile from the Tibetan court as some traditions claim he was exiled to Lho brag, whilst others maintain he fled to Mdo khams. However, despite the flight of Mu rub btsan po his body was ultimately buried in Central Tibet amongst the tombs of the Tibetan kings. For further details see Aris, 1979: 73–79.

<sup>18</sup> In other versions the lineage of the *btsan po* of Tibet is absent and the origins of the Khams mi nyag kings is accredited to the migrations of the divine king *Indrabodhi* from India to Tibet BGR 23: *Rgya gar chos rgyal Indra bhu ti'i gdung re zhih gnas 'thor ba'i tshul gyi mi nyag tu phebs te mi nyag gi rgyal po mdzad*.... This is the view shared by the author of LSG (see chapter 3 page 61 and appendix IV). This is similar to the origin myths surrounding the Tibetan emperors (for details see Karmay 2003 and page 49 below) There are other stories which link the Sikkimese kings to the Dar

After that time the crown Prince of Khams mi nyag<sup>19</sup> receives a vision from the local deity of the area, who tells him that his lineage was prophesied, by Guru Rinpoche, to leave their current location and open up the sacred land of Sikkim. Upon receiving this vision the crown Prince together with his family and four sons leave Khams mi nyag on a pilgrimage to central Tibet.<sup>20</sup> At this point there is confusion as to where they first arrive. Many oral accounts claim that this group first reach Lho brag and then head to Lhasa; whereas both *LSG* and *BGR* state that the princes of Khams mi nyag arrive in Lhasa first.

Once they arrive in Lhasa the crowned prince visits the Jo khang in order to offer prayers for a safe journey and a beneficial pilgrimage, and whilst he is praying the statue of the Jo bo speaks to him. He is told to proceed to 'Bras mo ljongs as his descendants are destined to rule the sacred land. This second supernatural visit does not deter him from completing his pilgrimage and he departs from Lhasa for Sa skya, the town of his guru. Upon reaching there the prince finds that the Sa skya hierarch is constructing a new Lha khang but is having problems erecting the main columns of the temple. So the eldest son<sup>21</sup> of the prince manages to raise the four main columns by his own efforts and is hence given the nickname Gyad 'bum bsags<sup>22</sup> and also receives a wife from the 'Khon family.<sup>23</sup> Around this time another supernatural event occurs: from the sky there falls a prophetic letter, within

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se branch of the Mi nyag kings who migrated to Byang in Gtsang and married into the family of Sa skya. We shall return to the ethnonyms *dar* and *se* and this branch of the Mi nyag royal family in chapter 3 pages 70–71.

<sup>19</sup> In many of the oral stories we are not told his name. In a number of the accounts from west Sikkim this figure is given the name Gu ru bkra shis, but this name is also the one given to the father (in the oral histories) of the first king of Sikkim.

<sup>20</sup> It may be important to note that *LSG* does not describe this spiritual vision and the crowned prince of Khams mi nyag is completely absent in this account and is replaced by the Sikkimese cultural hero Gyad 'bum bsags (for details see Mullard 2005a).

<sup>21</sup> Some oral sources tell us that he was not the eldest son but rather the middle son of three. In the above account it will be recalled that the prince had four sons and not three. In some sources, like the above one, the number of sons has been increased to provide a simple reason for the *stong sdus rus bzhi*. i.e. the four clans of Sikkim descended from these four brothers.

<sup>22</sup> This is understood locally as: 'The accumulation of 100,000 champions'. This may be another example of contriving meaning from a peculiar name.

<sup>23</sup> Some of the oral versions do not specifically mention the 'Khon family but may refer instead to 'a lady from Sa skya'. In one case it was recalled that the wife of Gyad was a lady from Gtsang of noble birth.





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In this first monograph on the history of Sikkim, the author challenges traditional Sikkimese historiography to rigorous historical enquiry by comparing it to original seventeenth and eighteenth century sources and exposes the contradictions found within traditional narrative traditions. This book highlights, not only, how and why traditional historiography was developed but also redefines contemporary knowledge of the history of Sikkimese state formation. The book touches on key themes such as Tibetan understandings of state, kingship and the role of Buddhism in justifying political administration as well as social stratification and the economy of pre-modern Sikkim. This book will undoubtedly prove useful to those working on the development of historical traditions and state entities in Tibet and the Himalaya.

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