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When a People Do Not Need to Remember: Witnessing the Death of *Pangtoed 'Cham* in Sikkim

If performance rituals are memories in action, what happens to them when a people no longer need to remember – or it is deemed politically undesirable for them to do so? In the following article, Syed Jamil Ahmed explores the annual performance in the Sikkimese monastery of Pemayangtse, in the shadow of Kanchenjunga, of the ritual of Pang Lhabsol ('Worship of the Witness Deity'), and specifically of the *Pangtoed 'Cham*, performed on the final, eighth day in homage and gratitude to the mountain. He examines the complex web of political changes over many centuries which have affected the purpose and enactment of the ritual, and finally offers a detailed account of a single day's performance, in 1999, when the ritual was losing some of its dignity and many of its former trappings. Syed Jamil Ahmed is a director and designer based in Bangladesh, where he is Professor at the Department of Theatre and Music in the University of Dhaka. In 2001–2 he was a visiting faculty member at King Alfred's College, Winchester. He wrote on 'Decoding Myths in the Nepalese Festival of Indra Jatra' in NTQ74, and on 'The Ritual of Devo Medua: Problematizing Dharma in the Ethnic Conflicts of Sri Lanka' in NTQ76. His full-length publications – *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre in Bangladesh* (Dhaka University Press, 2000) and *In Praise of Niranjana: Islam, Theatre, and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh, 2001) – catalogue the wide variety of indigenous theatre forms in Bangladesh.

IF 'RITUALS are a way people remember', if they are 'memories in action, encoded in action', and if they are designed to 'help people . . . deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life' (Schechner, 2002, p. 45), it follows that they die when people have no further need to remember, when the 'memories in action, encoded in action' cease to be efficacious in dealing with difficult 'transitions, ambivalent relationships'. This essay seeks to examine the historical-political conditions that necessitated the creation and is now leading to the death of a Buddhist ritual dance called the *Pangtoed 'Cham* (or the 'Dance of *Pangtoeds*' – i.e., the retinue of Kanchenjunga) in Sikkim, a tiny kingdom in the eastern Himalayas that was annexed by India in 1975.

The examination progresses in four stages: the first sets forth the theoretical framework

and specific utility of terms such as 'spatial strategy', hegemony, and ethnicity; the second examines ethnic identities and spatial strategies deployed in Sikkim, focusing on the three major ethnic communities: the Lepchas, the Bhutias, and the Nepalese; the third is an account of the performance witnessed at the Pemayangtse Monastery on 26 August 1999 as a 'first-person felt experience'; and the final section is an examination of the social functions of the *Pangtoed 'Cham*.

I

Spatial Strategy, Hegemony, and Ethnicity

In an article titled 'Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: the Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India', Satish Deshpande (2000) borrows from Foucault's conceptualization of 'utopias' and 'heterotopias' to show how spatial strategies are implicated in hegemonic aspirations. Asserting that

the spaces that we live in are not 'homogeneous and empty' but sites that are delineated by a set of relations and are irreducible to one another, Foucault goes on to identify two incisive kinds of spaces: 'utopias' and 'heterotopias'. Utopias represent 'society itself in a perfected form'; but they are 'sites with no place' and 'fundamentally unreal spaces'. In sharp contrast, heterotopias are 'real places – places that do exist'; they are specific locations where people live, or visit, or can experience through any of the five senses (Foucault, 1986, p. 23–4). Foucault uses the metaphor of the mirror in order to clarify the distinction between the two kinds of spaces:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface. . . . But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. . . . It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look up at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

Deshpande takes off from Foucault to posit that 'heterotopias are very special kinds of places because . . . they mediate, in a mirror-like fashion, between utopias and ideological subjects' so that these spaces 'enable – incite, compel, invite – people to see themselves reflected in some utopias'. Further, unique physical properties inherent to a space, pertaining to its history, geographical location, or physical attributes are never sufficient for it to be considered a heterotopia; considerable ideological labour is necessary to transform a space 'into a culturally meaningful, politically charged space' (Deshpande, 2000, p. 171). Ayodhya, where the Babri Mosque was demolished, serves very well as an example of a heterotopian site for thousands of young Hindu males in India today.

Questions of Hegemony and Ethnicity

Ideological practices that go into the construction of heterotopias, as Deshpande for-

mulates further, are spatial strategies. These link utopias with heterotopias in ways which 'also bind people to particular identities, and to the political/practical consequences that they entail' (p. 172). Hence, transmutations effected by spatial strategy not only strengthen 'the link between the concrete place with the abstract' but also forge 'a bond between the utopia and the people for whom it provides a renewed sense of belonging, a bond in which the place-as-heterotopia acts as the glue' (p. 172). These strategies are often devised by a dominant community with hegemonic intent to achieve social and political control.

Hegemony, which Gramsci equates with 'consent', 'civilization', and 'universal moment', may be seen as 'actually a process of struggle, a permanent striving, a ceaseless endeavour to maintain control over the "hearts and minds" of subordinate classes' (Miliband, 1982, p. 76). Instead of moral and prescriptive connotations, Gramsci's use of 'consent' 'refers to a psychological state, involving some kind of acceptance – not necessarily explicit – of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order' (Femia, 1987, p. 37). Miliband (1969, p. 181) adds:

[Hegemony] is not simply something which happens, as a mere superstructural derivative of economic and social predominance. It is, in very large part, the result of a permanent and pervasive *effort*, conducted through a multitude of agencies, deliberately intended to create . . . a 'national supra-party consensus', based on 'higher-order solidarity'.

In pre-modern societies, hegemonic intent often aims at constructing supra-ethnic consensus based on higher order solidarity.

Following Werner Sollors (1995, p. 288), it is possible to identify ethnicity as a sense of identity 'typically based on contrast', antithesis, negativity, and similar disassociated characteristics. An 'ethnic community' may be seen as 'a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among the elites' (Smith, 1999, p. 13).

As McCrone (1998, p. 28) argues, 'cultural differences like language, religion, even skin colour, are not primary and definitional characteristics, but are social identifiers which are the result, the product, of struggles in the first place.' It is necessary to see ethnic identity more as a 'process of becoming rather than being' (Hall, 1996, p. 4), as a verb rather than as a noun, 'as a concern with "routes" rather than "roots"' (McCrone, 1998, p. 34). Rejecting the views that explain ethnicity as a world of separate peoples developing its cultural and social forms in relative isolation, McCrone (p. 28) argues:

There is no one-to-one relationship between ethnicity and cultural identifiers. What matters is which ones key actors regard as significant, for which purposes and under which conditions. [What matters is] what they choose to remember, construct, or activate as a result of changing political context.

'Choosing to remember' implies memory, and this is the element that Smith (1999, p. 208) points out to be 'the most essential element in any kind of human identity'. In the case of ethnic communities, 'later generations carry shared memories of what they consider to be "their" past, of the experiences of earlier generations of the same collectivity, and so of a distinctive ethno-history'. He justifies his argument by pointing out that ethnicity is first of all 'a collective belief in common origins and descent, however fictive, and thereafter by shared historical memories associated with a specific territory which they regard their "homeland"'. Cultural commonality in a given ethnic community is 'the product of the common historical experiences that give rise to shared memories'.

While I do not deny the validity of Smith's notion of 'collective memory', it is nevertheless necessary to add that all memory is necessarily constructed. It is not only what a given ethnic community remembers, but also what it *chooses* to remember and is *led* to remember. Spatial strategies are devised to facilitate the process of choosing and leading. Another device is the ritual. As I hope to show in the following examination of the *Pangtoed 'Cham*, as one of the primary car-

riers of collective memories, rituals provide authenticity to the constructed memory.

II

Ethnic Identities and Spatial Strategies in Sikkim

The Route from Homogeneity to Destability

Situated in the eastern part of the Himalayan range, Sikkim (or Bayul Dremajong) is a tiny state incorporated within the Union of India, sharing borders with Nepal in the west, Tibet (China) in the north and the east, Bhutan in the east, and the Indian state of West Bengal in the south. The total population of the state is over 540,000, of which over 70 per cent is Nepalese in origin. They speak the Nepali language (which is quite similar to Hindi) and use the Devangri script. Except for the Sherpas and Tamangs, who are Buddhists, the Nepalis are orthodox Hindus. Two important minority communities of Sikkim today are the Bhutias (who constitute about 14 per cent of the population) and the Lepchas (approximately 13 per cent).

The total area of the region is slightly over 7,000 square km, measuring approximately 115 km from north to south and 65 km from east to west. Because the elevation ranges from about 250 m to over 8,500 m above sea level, and about two-thirds of the land consists of perpetually snow-covered mountains, the physical features of Sikkim add to its exotic impression of a land wrapped in mists and clouds. As any tourist website will tell you, Sikkim is the land of the mighty Kanchenjunga (Khang Chen Dzo-gna), the third highest peak in the world, soaring to the height of 8,534 m.

If you visit the land, a sight of the impressive five-peaked mountain standing majestically near the north-west corner of Sikkim will make it evident why it has become an indisputable part of the consciousness of the local inhabitants. However, I may also add, Kanchenjunga, often wrapped up in mist and cloud, is illusive and may not reveal himself easily to a non-believer.

Sikkimese history is traced back to three prehistoric tribes – the Naong, the Chang, and

the Mon – of whom very little is known. Some-time later entered the Lepchas from the south of the Brahmaputra valley, the region bordering Tibet and Burma, and assimilated the three tribes completely. They named their new homeland 'Nye-mae-el' (Paradise). The earliest Lepcha settlers subsisted upon hunting and shifting cultivation in the dense forests and were animist-shamanists, worshipping spirits of mountains, rivers, and forests.

Obviously, Kanchenjunga figured (as it still does) prominently in the horizon of their faith. It is also intimately associated in their myth of origin, since they believe that the earliest pair of man and woman was created on the slopes of the mountain. Another important deity was (and still is) Yab bdud, a mount in Darjiling (south Sikkim). Lepcha language, called Róng-ríng, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is written in a distinct indigenous script.

The Bhutias, who were herdsmen and cattle breeders, began migrating from Tibet to Sikkim (or, as they call it Beymul Denzong, 'the hidden valley of rice') around the fourteenth century. They are followers of Tibetan Buddhism and their Bhutia language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. They trace back the lineage of their ruling house to Khye Bhumsa ('one with the strength of a hundred thousand'), descendants of the Kham Minyak dynasty of Eastern Tibet who settled in Chumbi Valley (previously eastern Sikkim, now a part of China). After years of married life, when his wife remained barren, Khye Bhumsa prayed for help to Guru Padmasambhava (who established Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century and is believed to have been an incarnation of Buddha Śākyamuṇī). The guru is said to have commanded him to earn the blessing of the Lepcha chief and religious leader Thekong Tek.

Khye Bhumsa and his wife complied, and were blessed by Thekong Tek and his consort Gnyokong Gnal. Soon after, three children were born to the couple, and in gratitude they revisited the Lepcha chief and his consort. Thekong Tek and Gnyokong Gnal were delighted and decided to seal their goodwill with an oath of blood brotherhood between

the Lepchas and the Bhutias. In a ritual facing Mount Kanchenjunga, the two chiefs swore to treat each other as equals and consolidate harmony among the two ethnic communities (Dokhampa, 1998, p. 15).

Strategies of Ethnic Homogeneity

The narrative of ethnic homogeneity between the Bhutias and the Lepchas as constructed above was the outcome of political and social processes, and involved – here borrowing Bhabha's (1990, p. 311) phrase – 'forgetting to remember'. It forgot to remember the conflict and strife-ridden process by which the Bhutias colonized Sikkim and achieved social and political control as the dominant community by means of coercion.

For example, when Thekong Tek died and the Lepchas faced a leadership crisis, the Bhutias gradually extended their control over the former. In order to efface signs of outright assimilation, the Bhutia chief Guru Tashi, Khye Bumsa's grandson, appointed a Lepcha as his chief adviser and lieutenant. The process was further accelerated in 1642 with the arrival of monks of the Nyingma-pa ('red hats') sect, who sought refuge in Sikkim after they were removed from power in Tibet by the Gelugpa ('yellow hats') sect. Instead of seizing political control of the land, they decided to consecrate Phuntsong Namgyal, a Bhutia chief who was a descendant of Khye Bhumsa, as the Chogyal (temporal and spiritual ruler). Thus in 1642 was established the kingdom of Sikkim that extended from Thang La in Tibet in the north to Titalia on the borders of West Bengal and Bihar in the south, and Tagong La (near Paro) in Bhutan in the east to Timar Chorten on the Timar river in Nepal on the west. For the next 332 years, the Namgyal dynasty ruled over Sikkim as hereditary kings.

Phunstok Namgyal instituted Mahāyāna Buddhism as the state religion of Sikkim (an institution that continued throughout the Namgyal reign) and sought recognition from the Dalai Lama of Tibet. The recognition was granted, but tied Sikkim to Tibetan theocracy as a subordinate ally. With the help of the Nyingma-pa order, Phunstok Namgyal imme-

diately set himself the task of bringing the Lepchas into the Buddhist fold. An effective hegemonic strategy was the appointment of governors from the Lepchas, who were in the majority. Another strategy was the invention of the tradition that when Padmasambhava introduced Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim during his travels in Tibet he converted Kanchenjunga, Yab bdud, and other spirits and demons of Sikkim into Buddhism, binding them under solemn oath to act as guardian deities of the people and the land and to protect the Dharma. Yab bdud was even transmuted into an emanation of a fierce Buddhist deity named Mahākāla.

In return, the Sikkimese spirits and demons were promised worship by the followers of the Dharma (i.e., the Buddhists). Thus, the animist-shamanist spirits of the Lepchas were accommodated in the Buddhist fold, but in a distinctly lower hierarchical order. These hegemonic strategies set in motion the creation of a supra-ethnic consensus and ethnic homogeneity between the Bhutias and the Lepchas, with the former in dominant position. However, they did not succeed in erasing the Lepcha identity, as is clearly implied in the narrative of ethnic homogeneity as constructed in the legendary oath of blood brotherhood between Thekong Tek and Khye Bhumsa. The narrative 'remembers' equality of the two communities but 'forgets to remember' the Naong, the Chang, and the Mon ethnic communities.

In the process of building ethnic homogeneity, in 'becoming' homogeneous, in choosing to 'remember' and 'forgetting to remember', Kanchenjunga was deployed as a heterotopia. The myth of origin of the Lepchas and their religion had already invested the mount into a 'culturally meaningful, politically charged space'. The Bhutias reconstructed Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud as spirits who were converted to the Buddhist faith and bound by oath to act as guardian deities (*dharmapāla*) of Sikkim, subservient to Padmasambhava.

The 'deified' image of these guardians, by extension, functioned – or was intended to function – as a heterotopia for both Bhutias and Lepchas. However, instead of being

'places', Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud underwent 'heterotopian apotheosis' and were turned into 'deified heterotopias', if you will. Obviously, this act of reconstruction of the Bhutias was devised with hegemonic intent. Nevertheless, the reconstruction served as glue to bind both the Lepchas and the Bhutias with a renewed sense of belonging. The spatial strategy enabled – incited, compelled, invited – both ethnic communities to see themselves reflected in Kanchenjunga as the 'deified heterotopia'.

Destabilizing the Balancing Act

The carefully balanced act of sharing power between the Bhutias and the Lepchas was destabilized with the arrival of the Nepalese. Their earliest migration dates back to the 1760s, when Prithvi Narayan Shah swept into power in Nepal, taking advantage of the chaos and instability that was prevailing in South Asia following the collapse of the Mughal Empire. After a series of incursions across the border, Nepal occupied a large portion of western Sikkim towards the end of the eighteenth century. Consequently, the sixth Chogyal of Sikkim, Tenzing Namgyal (1780–93), was forced to flee his capital and seek refuge in Tibet, which, since the early eighteenth century, had been under the strict political tutelage of the Chinese Empire.

Encouraged by success in Sikkim, Nepal penetrated into Tibet, which led the Chinese to retaliate. This phase of border dispute was resolved in a Sino-Nepal treaty, as a result of which the Sikkimese monarchy was restored but at the cost of ceding some of its territory to Nepal. However, Nepal did not abandon its expansionist designs. Leaving Tibet and China undisturbed, it concentrated on Sikkim and British India. Spurred by the desire of gaining trade access to Tibet (for which the route through Sikkim was the most important) and curtailing the growing power of the Nepalese, Britain jumped into the fray by befriending Sikkim and waging the war of Nepal-British India (1814–16), in which Nepal was defeated.

Consequently, Sikkim regained some of the territories it had lost to Nepal, but this time

in exchange it had to cede (in diplomatic language, 'lease') the Darjiling-Kalimpong region in 1861. By the end of the nineteenth century the kingdom was gradually drawn under British overlordship, to the extent that its sovereignty had become nominal.

The most important consequence of the territorial disputes between Sikkim and its neighbours was a radical change in its demographic make-up. The Nepalese (belonging to Gorkha and other ethnic groups) migrated in large numbers to Sikkim from the mid-nineteenth century and quickly emerged as the dominant community, outnumbering the Lepchas and the Bhutias. The British colonial government of India actively encouraged the Nepalese to settle in Sikkim and in the Darjiling-Kalimpong region – a 'generosity' which proved extremely profitable in the recruitment of the Nepalese (especially the Gurkhas), well known from their aggressive, diligent and faithful characteristics, in their army and tea plantations. The extent of influence of the Nepalese immigrants can be measured from the fact that Sikkim today is known from the name the Gurkhas gave to the land – that is, 'Su-khim' or 'the new country'.

The Nepalese held economic advantage over the Bhutias and the Lepchas because, with their knowledge of terraced systems of cultivation, they brought large tracts of hilly terrain to yield crops. They also cultivated cardamom that soon became an important cash crop and brought in substantial revenue. Thus they could sustain economic independence for themselves and not depend on the scarce land in the valleys held mostly by the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Consequently, the Nepalese must have felt no urgent necessity to recognize the supra-ethnic consensus and ethnic homogeneity that was forged between the Bhutias and the Lepchas and so to conform to the existing social-hierarchical order that recognized the Bhutias as the dominant group.

It was inevitable that the carefully balanced act of sharing political power between the Bhutias and the Lepchas would be jeopardized; and by the close of the nineteenth century, serious differences had erupted between the Nepalese settlers and the Bhutias-

Lepchas. The British Indian government did not fail to intervene and settle the issue in favour of the Nepalese, because it served the British to weaken the Bhutias (as that, in turn, would give them further political leverage over Sikkim) and strengthen the Nepalese (which in turn placed them as patrons of the Nepalese and thus further ensured their loyalty).

The Shifting Hegemony

Political and social circumstances led the Sikkimese (Bhutia) and the Tibetan authorities to 'remember' cultural signifiers derived from proximate religious and language systems, which in turn forged between them a patron-client relationship based on intimate mutual trust. Changes in regional political dynamics, which saw Tibet succumbing to the political tutelage of the Chinese and the emergence of the British as a key player in political leverage, contributed further to erode Bhutia political authority. It was a very different political context – with no meaningful and common cultural signifiers – that would allow them to construct a patron-client relationship with British India based on intimate mutual trust.

On the other hand, the Nepalese immigrants had little cause to feel threatened by the Bhutias because the powerful Nepalese state across the border was their patron, and it fulfilled to a large extent the role that Tibet played for the Bhutias. These political, social, and economic conditions and struggles led the Nepalese on the one hand and the Bhutia-Lepchas on the other to choose to remember, construct, and activate cultural differences in language and religion, that in turn constructed a strife-ridden antagonistic relationship.

In 1947, when India gained independence from Britain, it claimed, following the pattern common to nationalist forces in former colonies, 'the imperial map as its legitimate legacy' (Deshpande, 2000, p. 175). Consequently, the overlords of Sikkim changed and it became a protectorate of India. Under Indian 'protection', the demographic make-up of Sikkim was altered even further, inescapably transforming it into a Nepali-

majority state. Soon, local political parties like the Sikkim State Congress, enjoying support mostly among the Nepalese ethnic community, demanded the end of the monarchical system and the institution of 'democracy' – a euphemism for state control by the Nepalese, since they were clearly in the majority.

Although the dissenting section initially failed to realize its goal, its voice gradually rose to a crescendo by the early 1970s – not without, one suspects, tacit support from Delhi. In 1973, the Nepalese community organized themselves into a 'Joint Action Committee' to lead a 'People's Movement'. Political discontent culminated in widespread agitation against the monarchy, leading to a virtual breakdown in administration.

The Indian government moved cautiously with 'democracy' as its primary hegemonic tool (which, one may be reminded, it refuses to use in Muslim-majority Kashmir). In the first move, it restored 'order' (actually a *coup d'état*) by deactivating a minuscule army (composed of about 300 men with officers drawn mostly from the Indian Army), confining the Chogyal to his palace, and appointing an Indian civil servant as the Chief Administrator. In the second move, a 'referendum' was held (the result of which was a foregone conclusion, since the Nepalese were in a clear majority) leading to a transformation of the political status of Sikkim from a protectorate to an associate state of the Union of India, with the Chogyal as the constitutional figurehead. In the final move, under the pretext of growing discontent against the Chogyal, the elected government joined the Indian Union as a fully-fledged state on 16 May 1975, and subsequently abolished the institution of Chogyal.

Transformation of the demographic make-up continued even after Indian annexation. As revealed in the census of India, growth in population in 1981 was 50.77 per cent, and in 1991, it was 28.47 per cent (Government of Sikkim, 2005). There can be little doubt that settlers from India made a major contribution to the dramatic rise in population.

As Deshpande (2000, p. 174) argues, imperialism 'is the attempt to turn the colony

into a particular kind of heterotopia, one designed to reflect the imperialist self in its own power and glory'. This applies very well in the case of Indian annexation of Sikkim. In this case, Sikkim is projected as a part of 'Bhārat' of Brahmanical ideology (which, at the popular level, draws most of its beliefs, values, and basic principles from *Ṛg Veda*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*); an invented 'Bhārat' that was 'made congruent with the India of the West's imagination . . . with the actual boundaries that were created in the second half of the nineteenth century', after the British conquest of southern Asia (Embree, p. 1989, p. 16).

Ideological labour that went into the construction of the heterotopia of 'Bhārat' as a culturally meaningful and politically charged space found no problem in binding the Nepalese community in Sikkim, since the ideological ground of 'Hindu-ness' was already prepared in them. For those to whom these constructions are of little value India has sanctified its annexation by 'democracy'.

Hence, for the time being at least, the heterotopia of Kanchenjunga has been subsumed. Even so, there is no denying the fact that the heterotopia has been a powerful tool that served well to bind the Bhutias and the Lepchas in supra-ethnic consensus based on a higher order of solidarity. But how was it deployed in the first place? Most effectively through a ritual that culminates in a masked dance known as the *Pangtoed 'Cham*.

III

The *Pangtoed 'Cham*

In west Sikkim, nestled close to Mount Kanchenjunga, is the famous monastery of Pemayangtse. Considered one of the most important monasteries in Sikkim, it was originally established in the seventeenth century by Lha-tsün Ch'em-bo (Lha btsun chen po), the legendary saint who is credited with being the foremost among all the propagators of Buddhism in Sikkim. Here each year, as in many other religious establishments in Sikkim, the monks of Pemayangtse perform the eight-day-long ritual of *Pang Lhabsol* ('Worship of the Witness Deity'),

from the eighth day to the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

The ritual is performed to commemorate the legendary oath of blood brotherhood between Thekong Tek and Khye Bhumsa, which was made with Mount Kanchenjunga as the witness. The *Pangtoed 'Cham* is performed on the last day of the ritual, as homage and gratitude to the five-peaked Mount Kanchenjunga. It also offers homage to Yab bdud (to whom I will henceforth refer as Mahākāla since that is the name the deity used in the *Pangtoed 'Cham* today). The dance seeks to appease the deities, who, if pleased, will bestow peace and protect the people of Sikkim and the whole world from natural calamities and destructive agents.

The ritual of Pang Lhabsol is believed to have been established by Lha-tsün Ch'embo. However, it was the third Chogyal, Chador Namgyal (1686–1717), who is credited with creating the *Pangtoed 'Cham* around 1700, after he is said to have witnessed it in a state of trance during meditation. Initially, when the capital of Sikkim was situated at Rabdan-tse, near Pemayangtse, *Pangtoed 'Cham* was performed annually on the culminating day of the Pang Lhabsol at the monastery. After the Gurkha invasion towards the end of the eighteenth century, the capital was shifted first to Tumlong and then in 1894 to Gangtok; *Pangtoed 'Cham* moved with the seat of the Chogyal.

At Gangtok, the *'Cham* was given at the Tsuklakhang (the chapel of the Royal Palace), where the monks of Pemayangtse Monastery and the members of noble families would perform. However, in 1995 the state government made it clear that it does not deem it fit that the monastic body should be performing religious dances. Rather, it should be left to the lay population. Consequently, the Buddhist ecclesiastic body decided to transfer the *Cham* to Pemayangtse Monastery and fund the dance out of its own resources.

The *Pangtoed 'Cham* is performed in the inner square-shaped courtyard of the Pemayangtse Monastery. On the courtyard's west side lies an imposing three-storeyed building, which is the main temple of the monastery. On the northern side is a single-storey hall

inside which sit the musicians on one side and special guests on the other. On the southern side lies the administrative office of the monastery. Open space on the east leads to the living quarters of the senior monks.

At the centre of the eastern side of the courtyard, opposite the steps of the temple, stands a steel frame in the shape of a pavilion, where the gods are supposed to sit and witness part of the performance. In the centre of the courtyard is a circular path, a little less than five feet wide, which goes around a circular grass patch about 36 feet in diameter. At the centre of the grass patch stand three flagpoles. All the dance movements take place on the circular path and on the grass patch.

Awaiting the Performance

The *Pangtoed 'Cham* for the year 1999 was supposed to be held on 26 August. I reached the monastery at seven in the morning. It was raining, well enough for any open-air performance to be cancelled. No spectator had come as yet. Except for young novice monks running about performing odd jobs, there was hardly any sign that an event of great importance was about to take place. No *thanka* adorned the front of the monastery; even the flagpoles were not displaying any special colour for the deities who were to be invoked. The only sign of the special event to come were two stacks of pine branches with leaves, which were burning near two corners of the temple facing Mount Kanchenjunga in the west, hidden in cloud and mist. Thick smoke from the stacks carried that special Tibetan incense, a fragrance that will surely make you halt and inhale deep.

As I stood in the empty and wet courtyard, wondering if the rain would ever stop, I heard a deep drone and sound of *radungs* (telescopic trumpets). Progressing towards the source of the sound, I arrived at the first floor of the temple, in a large room facing the courtyard. There, monks seated in a row were chanting prayers – broken intermittently by music played on *radung*, *gayling* (flageolet), *kang-ling* (thighbone trumpet), *damaru* ('hour-glass' drum), and *tilbu* (bell). In front

of them stood two life-size figures – one of Kanchenjunga (photo below), and the other



of Mahākāla (top right). These were made of masks and garments of the two deities, to be used during the performance. Between the two images was a table full of *tormas* (conical cakes of dough, butter and sugar, one of which represented Dabla, the war-god), and other ritual offerings. Here in the first-floor hall-room of the temple, on each morning since the 23 August, ritualized worship of the three deities had been performed, and 26 August was the culminating day. Prayers were also offered to stop the rain.

At about eight, all the monks came down and stood in a row facing Mount Kanchenjunga, under the eaves of the western wall of the temple (photo alongside). They stood in full regalia,



including the splendid red hats for which they are famous. After performing some more rituals, they moved in procession and went inside the main sanctum of the temple (on the ground floor there are images of Guru Padmasambhava, Śiva Sañkara, Buddha Śākyamuñi, Mahākāla, and Mahākālī, with subsidiary sanctums at its side for images of Tārā and Lakṣmī), and then around the temple building. When they had completed circumambulating the building, up they went to the upper two floors, into all the rooms, in front of all the images, reciting mantras and also sprinkling sacred water. When this was over, the head lama blessed all the monks.

After an interval of about half an hour, the incantations began again in front of the figures of Kanchenjunga and Mahākāla. Outside the temple, at the north-western corner, a novice monk began to utter a mantra and cast ladles full of offerings with small *tormas* in the direction of Mount Kanchenjunga. By that time, ten lay performers had arrived by jeeps, and in one of the subsidiary sanctums on the ground floor they began dressing themselves as the *pangtoeds*, the retinue of Kanchenjunga and supernatural guardians (photo below). Their dress was that of traditional Tibetan nobility: the *kheñja* (sleeveless

outer jacket) and *kho* (inner garment with sleeves) made of silk and brocade, high boots, and five sashes (blue, white, red, green, and yellow) across their chest. On their heads was a helmet with four triangular flags at the two sides and a peacock feather in the centre.

The *kho* of the *cham dpon* (leader of the dancers) and his assistant, *cham mjug*, was of a golden floral motif on black, while that of the others were navy blue, yellow, and magenta-red. Their *kheñja* were of golden floral motifs on blue, yellow, maroon, and green. Each of them also carried two props: a sword in the right hand and a small circular shield in the left. None wore masks. I was informed later that the dancers observed austerities during the period of rehearsal of their dance, which included sexual abstention.

As they finished dressing, one after another, the *pangtoeds* began to assemble inside the main sanctum on the ground floor, and rehearse their dances and songs. As I was informed later, usually there are fifteen dancers; five of them could not join this year for various unavoidable circumstances. A thin band of spectators had gathered by that time. The rain appeared to have become a little less persistent. However, the mist would not give up so easily, and had cast a





gloomy spell of chill all around. An elderly woman, who was relentlessly at work on her silver prayer wheel, confided (without stopping her wheel) that it was unusual for the rains to stay so long. Usually, she said, it is dry and the performance commences by nine in the morning.

Around ten thirty, two *atsaras* (corruption of Sanskrit term *ācārya* or 'spiritual teacher', here denoting jokers) ran in, screaming merrily from the temple into the performance space (photo above). Both were novice monks. One wore the mask of a man, another of a woman. They began to play pranks between themselves and with the spectators, using physical signs to communicate, but no words. By that time the warriors and a few local dignitaries had assembled upstairs, in front of the figures of Kanchenjunga and Mahākāla.

Led by the head lama, a ritual of consecration of the warriors and the dignitaries was performed, which involved chanting of mantras, sprinkling of rice, and holy water. The ritual ended with a brief dance of the warriors, following which all came down. The head lama then entered the main hall on the ground floor and, with all the monks of the monastery, conducted the *Khelan*, a prayer for general well-being addressed to

all the gods and the guardian deities. The following excerpt may help to illustrate:

We, all inhabitants of this holy land,
Apologize in your presence for all
Deeds done against your restricted line
By destroying plants and disturbing streams
And polluting rivers and blasting rocks.
In accordance with the command of Guru
Padmasambhava,
And other great Yogis,
May we the priests, commoners and other
devotees,
Ask our wishes to be fulfilled . . .

(Dokhampa, 1991, p. 3)

At the end of the *Khelan*, a little before 11.30, the monk-musicians began to play their instruments (seven cymbals and two *nga* hand-drums). Dressed in red robes and red pointed hats, they came slowly down the steps of the temple as a gun was fired from the temple. They performed the *Rol 'Cham* ('music-dance' of the orchestra) as they went round the circular path in a clockwise direction. After one circle, they stopped, played for a while and then ended their music. Some scrambled back to the temple, to play music for the entry of the performers, others joined the orchestra of monk-musicians seated inside the hall on the northern side.



The orchestra (photo above) was now at its full strength, composed of three large cymbals, one *nga* drum, two *radungs*, two *kang-lings* and two *gaylings*. By then the rain had almost stopped and a sizeable crowd had gathered in front of the temple, some even on the front veranda.

Soon after the members of the orchestra had taken their seats, *kang-lings* sounded from the temple, which were picked up by the orchestra. Immediately afterwards came another gun shot, and the *cham dpon* entered from the temple and shouted thrice a Tibetan war cry ('*kyi hu hu*'). He and his group were beginning to perform a dance that would purify the performance space by purging all evil forces, thus preparing for the arrival of the gods.

With a sword in his right hand and a shield in his left, he moved backwards, facing the temple as he danced around his axis, swinging both arms and swaying. After dancing in front of the temple, slowly he descended the steps, still moving backwards and dancing. The *cham dpon* stopped when he reached the performance space, immediately to be replaced by another warrior at the top of the temple steps. Eight more *pangtoeds* with brief movements followed, each shout-

ing the war cry thrice. At the end entered the *cham mjug*.

By this time all the *pangtoeds* had formed a circle on the circular path. A little later, a lay person in black Tibetan dress, holding a sword in his hands, moved to the centre of the circle. He was the representative of the Buddhist community, making the offering of the dance to the gods. The dancers began to move round and round the circle, swaying, bowing, and turning on their axes. I noticed, to my surprise, that the rain had stopped completely. However, thick fog relentlessly enveloped the courtyard. Some of the spectators, now growing in number, seated themselves on benches around the southern side of the performance space. A few even sat boldly on the benches inside the pavilion, reserved for Kanchenjunga and Mahākāla.

The warriors danced, cleansing the performing space, requesting the gods to appear before them so that all present might be blessed (photo on opposite page, left). They were also offering their arms to defend peace in Sikkim and work for the cause of the liberation of all beings.

The fog often blurred the colours of their dress, while the orchestra played its unearthly droning music. It was as though, behind the

veil of mist and fog which merged with the clouds above, the mountain had suddenly cracked open and one could hear its sonorous breathing. Its unearthly spirits in maroon, yellow, blue, and green fluttered in and out of the clouds and mists. After a while, the breathing ceased, the apparitions disappeared in the temple, and the *atsaras* jolted me back to my everyday senses. The masked woman had lifted her skirt and was gyrating her pelvis in wanton lust.

After a brief interval of pranks and jokes by the *atsaras*, a shrill call issued from the temple. It was immediately answered by the orchestra and a gunshot. The warriors trooped out in two files and stood on both sides of the steps. Two *gayling* players accompanied by two incense-bearers played, as the god Kanchenjunga himself appeared. He wore a robe of red brocade, and a black apron (with a fierce-looking face painted in the centre) was tied to his waist. Across his chest were four sashes (yellow, red, green, and white) and in the middle hung a copper disc with the auspicious sign '*khri*' inscribed on it. He held in his right hand a short lance with a flag attached to it. His red mask had three eyes, a helmet with five skulls, and was terrifying in appearance. Four 'banners of victory', red

with yellow borders, fluttered at the top of the helmet.

The god danced in front of the temple, swaying and turning as the warriors had



done before him, and then descended slowly down the steps to the dance circle (above). The warriors, the *gayling* players, and the incense-bearers went back to the temple as the god himself displayed his ominous power turning around the circular path. He had appeared as the *pangtoeds* had requested and was pleased that they had committed themselves to defend Sikkim. With his fierce power, he was assuring them that he would surely be with them in their holy cause.

The mist was gone and the orchestral music breathed on, sonorous and ethereal, crashing on the metallic cymbals. After one and a half turns, he approached the pavilion structure – to occupy his seat – but the mortals had already taken his place. After a moment's hesitation – no, he did not utter his curse – he walked off, with as much of a benign gesture as his fierce mask could



afford, towards the hall of the musicians. Perhaps the *atsaras* could not help laughing at the joke the mortals had played on the god. They rushed in delightedly, prancing all over the dance circle, mimicking the god without the slightest respect. They could afford to, since they had the licence for the day. But not for long, because the warriors entered again, this time silently, formed a circle, and began their dance of homage to Kanchenjunga (photo above).

It was a vigorous dance, as they hopped, swung to the sides, sat on their haunches, and jumped, all the while swaying their swords and shields, while the orchestra accompanied them with martial rigour. When they had paid as much homage as the god could take, the musicians stopped and the warriors walked silently back to the temple.

After a brief pause, the leader of the orchestra chanted a hymn in honour of Kanchenjunga, accompanied by music. Then it was Mahākāla's turn to enter, heralded again by *kang-lings* and a gunshot, escorted by the warriors, incense-bearers and musicians. He was dressed again as Kanchenjunga, but his robe was deep blue and his mask, with its crown of five white skulls, was also deep blue, almost black (photo right). He was holding a

banner attached to a short lance in his right hand and an imitation of a human heart in the left. He performed a dance on the circular path, turning one and half circles as well, assuring his support in vanquishing all evil





forces, help in the cause of liberation of all sentient beings, and protection for the treasures of Sikkim. When his dance ended, he joined Kanchenjunga in the hall of the musicians (photo above) There they sat, on two plastic chairs covered with imitation tigerskin. The leader of the orchestra chanted another hymn in honour of Mahākāla.

When both of the gods were seated in the pavilion, the warriors trooped out of the temple in single file and stood on the southern side of the performance space. There they performed a brief ritual known as the Bedh, which is a hymn in honour of Kanchenjunga, Mahākāla, Dāblā, the Sword, Rāhula (protective deity, attendant war-god of Mahākāla), and the Gun. The following excerpts may serve as examples:

Hymn to Kanchenjunga

You are the guardian of the five treasures,
 You are the war god of the young like us,
 You emit flames like that of fire
 Which engulfs the three worlds.
 Your super soul is not diverted,
 Out of the sphere of Dharma,
 Mounted on a lion's back and surrounded
 By forces of deities and demons

Hymn to Mahākāla

To Mahākāla I offer these hymns
 Whose piercing whistling sounds are death-
 dealing. . . .
 Accept the five organs as substitute for flowers
 And use its five seeds for food.
 You say 'Take care if you love your life,
 Come to me when you want to die.
 Your life will be sacrificed and
 Your soul will be liberated.'
 (Dokhampa, 1991, p. 4)

Two of the warriors danced across the performance space, moving back and forth from south to north as the rest sang a section of the hymn. At the end of each section, they joined the singers as two others came forward to dance. Perhaps not all the warriors could sing, or knew the song, for a person dressed in everyday clothes stood with them with a notebook and sang off its pages.

The gods were silent again at this failure, but a dog took up their cause. It barked relentlessly at the dancers from the northern end of the courtyard. The performers continued, taking no notice, but the spectators could not help laughing merrily. A bald-headed monk tried to help by attempting to shoo the dog away, but it continued defiantly. Fearing to be drawn into the ridicule, the monk called for the *atsaras*. Immediately one came prancing. Dancing a dance mimicking invitation and curse, he managed to shoo the animal away. The crowd quietened, the Bedh continued and, when it ended, the warriors stood in a circle.

The orchestra picked up its sonorous music again, as it was time for the gods to exhibit their glory. First it was the turn of Kanchenjunga, who rose majestically and walked slowly towards the warriors and stood inside their circle, facing the temple. The warriors danced with Kanchenjunga, slowly going around in a circle and around their own axes, while touching the earth with their swords. The god's dance was composed of two main parts: 'ja' klong ye shes (the 'rainbow-wisdom') and *ngang 'gros* (the 'goose-step'). The significance of the 'goose-step' lies in the popular belief that when Lha-tsün Ch'em-bo was on his way to Sikkim, he met Kanchenjunga in the form of a white



king of geese. Kanchenjunga's dance of the goose-step is a reminder of this legendary meeting.

When they had completed one circumambulation, the warriors exited to the temple, and Kanchenjunga continued to dance alone, showering his blessings amidst wafts of incense still burning in the stacks of pine leaves and branches (photo above). Towards the end of his dance, as he approached the steps, the warriors entered with the *gayling* players and incense-bearers to escort him back to the temple.

After a brief pause, the orchestra picked up its music again and Mahākāla entered the dancing arena. While he was dancing, four *atsaras* (two as males and two as females) entered the hall where the guests were seated, playing a drum and carrying a tray. They held the tray and played pranks until the guests made a contribution. Without ado, I made mine, but they wanted more – a photograph with me. I stood with them as another guest clicked the camera. While

Mahākāla danced with wrathful energy, going around in circle, blessing all present, the *atsaras* moved off to other spectators. When he had finished his act of blessing, the warriors, musicians, and incense-bearers escorted him back to the temple.

It was two in the afternoon. The gods had retired and the mortals also needed a respite. As people began to disperse, pots full of delicious-smelling curry were carried inside the hall of the musicians, novice monks rushed about with empty plates, and everybody who wanted to stay busied themselves with food. A monk graciously invited everyone sitting in the gallery of the guests to a vegetarian lunch – he emphasized 'vegetarian' with a twinkle in his eyes. However, no one seemed to move. A young girl brought me a cup of Tibetan tea with plenty of milk and a pinch of salt, which I thankfully drank with a few biscuits I had brought.

After barely fifteen minutes, the warriors came out of the temple, and with four lay musicians (three drummers, and another who beat the gong) began to sing war songs and move in procession around the temple. In their songs, they expressed their gratitude for the blessing they had received from mighty Kanchenjunga and Mahākāla, and offered their veneration for them. A few monks and lay devotees followed them (photo on opposite page, top). Three horses dedicated to Kanchenjunga, Mahākāla, and Dāblā, which were also to participate in the circumambulation, were not present. I was informed later that obtaining horses for a single day is a difficult and costly affair. Hence their omission.

The hall of the musicians was still empty, save for two monks, who sat watching. After circling the temple thrice, the warriors finished their song and came down to the dancing arena, where they formed a circle. One person stood in the centre, with a wooden casket full of rice powder. The warriors then began to dance to the accompaniment of orchestral music, moving towards the man in the centre and out again. Finally, they encircled him, dipped their swords into the rice powder, and flung the powder that gathered on the blade into the air as an offering to



Kanchenjunga. They repeated the action, and then, dipping their sword-tips for the third time, moved out to the circular path and again flung the powder in the air.

The *atsaras* were now having a merry time (photo right), mimicking the action of the warriors, who began to dance in a circle. They then gathered at the centre while the *cham dpon* performed a solo piece. As soon as he had finished, he walked off to the temple, and the dancers (mostly in pairs) followed. The *cham mjug* was the last to exit. He danced around the circular path and then, after dancing in front of the steps, he walked off as the music ended.

It was three in the afternoon, and by then most of the spectators had dispersed. A few invited male guests, sitting inside the hall, were enjoying themselves as the *atsaras* were playing slapstick jokes with



rice powder. The musicians had gathered on the circular path, but there were only six of them – five cymbal and one *nga* players. They moved around in a clockwise direction on the circular path. When it ended, they stopped and walked off. The *atsaras* followed them prancing. The *Pangtoed 'Cham* for the year 1999 was over.

IV

Of Remembering and Forgetting to Remember

It would be useful to see the ritual of *Pang Lhabsol* not so much as an expression of ideas but as 'thought in/as action' (Schechner, 2002, p. 50). The liturgical rituals of the first seven days are designed as an offering of homage to Mount Kanchenjunga made by the community of monks on behalf of the lay community. The ritual also commemorates the legendary oath of blood brotherhood between Thekong Tek and Khye Bhumsa. Because the monks make the offering, it serves as an acknowledgement of Lepcha identity by the Buddhist religious order; and because the rituals were, till 1995, performed in the royal chapel, they signified the state's acknowledgement of the pledge of blood brotherhood – i.e., the state's commitment not to discriminate between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. As the climax of the ritual *Pang Lhabsol*, the *Pangtoed 'Cham* makes public these thoughts in/as action of the ritual and more.

As the account of the performance shows, the thought in/as action in the *Pangtoed 'Cham* is an offering of homage by the *pangtoeds*, i.e., the retinue of Kanchenjunga (also considered supernatural guardians), to the two mountain gods Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud. They also make a pledge to defend Sikkim. Since members of the Sikkimese nobility played the *pangtoed*, the homage served as a public act of acknowledging Lepcha deities, and by extension the Lepcha identity. The pledge aimed to create a supra-ethnic consensus, since the members of the nobility comprised, at least in small part, the Lepchas as well. In return for the homage

and the pledge, the gods Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud promise to bestow peace and protect the Sikkimese people, in this case implying the Bhutias and the Lepchas.

One cannot ignore the strong militant undercurrent in the dance. The ritual of Bedh, in which tribute is paid to Kanchenjunga, Mahākāla, Dāblā, Rāhula, the Sword, and the Gun, is almost a call to arms. Because both of the gods signify Lepcha identity and consciousness, and because they are recognized by the Buddhist ecclesiastic order as deities, their promise, in effect, is an attempt to bind the Lepchas and the Bhutias in supra-ethnic consensus based on higher-order solidarity.

For *Pangtoed 'Cham*, the thought in/as action was designed c. 1700 not only 'to regulate disruptive, turbulent, dangerous, and ambivalent interactions', as Schechner (2002, p. 57) would point out, but also to reaffirm, reinstate, and remind. This is so because some interactions are so disruptive, turbulent, dangerous, and ambivalent that the process of fusing and healing which rituals seek can at best be temporary. Hence, in *Pangtoed 'Cham*, the Bhutias and the Lepchas are reminded of their oath of blood brotherhood with Kanchenjunga as the witness. However, not all oaths are easily converted into political and social actuality. Hence the need for reaffirmation, reinstatement, and reminding.

The Impermanence of Transformation

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, who saw the *Pangtoed 'Cham* some time before 1956, has written about a ritual reported by a Lepcha that is no longer performed. On the evening before the *Pangtoed 'Cham* was to take place, a Lepcha spirit-medium would arrive secretly at the royal palace, of whom the Buddhist monks would supposedly be unaware. The medium would enter in a trance state after being possessed by the spirit of Thekong Tek. Invariably, the spirit of Thekong Tek would reproach the Chogyal for breaking his pact of blood brotherhood with Khye Bhumsa by making the Bhutias the masters of Sikkim. The Chogyal dutifully appeased the spirit by promising to take redressive measures. In return, he requested the spirit not to hinder

the dance (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1997, p. 21–2). However, the very fact that the spirit made the same complaint each year shows that the promised redressive measures were never taken. Indeed, the oath of blood brotherhood had been broken long ago. More accurately, it was never executed in earnest since the Bhutias were always the dominant community before Indian annexation.

Reaffirmation, reinstatement, and reminders are necessary perhaps because not all transformations of identities that rituals seek to effect are permanent – although Schechner (2002, p. 63–4) insists otherwise – even if they are what Turner (1982, p. 53–4) would identify as ‘liminal phenomena’. This is so because, as argued above, identities are always in the process of becoming rather than being. The transformations of the identities of the Lepchas and the Bhutias into a supra-ethnic consensus based on the higher order of solidarity that Pang Lhabsol in general and *Pangtoed Cham* in particular sought to build was a process of becoming that was constantly hindered by political exigencies.

In order to achieve that goal, the Bhutias would have to acknowledge the Lepchas on an equal footing, which in turn would imply relinquishing power – a process that the Bhutias would never contemplate. Hence, the overt intent of Pang Lhabsol in general and *Pangtoed Cham* in particular was subverted in order to accommodate the covert objective of acculturation, or ‘appropriation and assimilation of the “other” . . . into a subsumptive position within a dominant discourse’ (Panikkar, 1997, p. 156). In this case, reaffirmation, reinstatement, and reminder had the intention of affirming hegemony.

Spatial strategies deployed in the *Pangtoed Cham* deserve careful consideration to show how hegemonic acculturation is achieved. Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud are real places – places that do exist. Spatial strategies – i.e., ideological practices that went into reconstructing these ‘real places’ into heterotopias – were initiated by the Lepchas who saw them as very special kinds of places, enabling, inciting, compelling, and inviting them to see themselves reflected in the idealized Sikkim they called ‘Nye-mae-el’ (Paradise). Kanchen-

junga was also associated with the myth of their origin. These ‘special places’ mediated in a mirror-like fashion between the utopia of Paradise and the Lepchas as ideological subjects. However, instead of being ‘places’, these were deified heterotopias.

Through an ingenious investment of ideological labour, the Bhutias appropriated these heterotopias by inventing the tradition that Guru Padmasambhava (Rinpoche) had converted them into the Buddhist fold. Thus, the appropriated ‘other’ was accommodated in a subsumptive position. On the other hand, in the oath of blood brotherhood, Kanchenjunga was accorded the very special position of the ‘witness deity’. Consequently, he acquired a status of veneration for both communities. Further, the Bhutias made the conciliatory gesture of offering both the deities their homage. Even the state made a special gesture of offering them homage in the *Pangtoed Cham*.

Identifying the ‘Real Space’

These strategies served to reconstruct Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud as deified heterotopias acknowledged by both the Bhutias and the Lepchas. They mediated in a mirror-like fashion between the utopia of Paradise/‘the Hidden Valley of Rice’, and the Lepchas and the Bhutias as ideological subjects, and thus attempted to forge a bond between them. Clearly, deified heterotopias in rituals have the added advantage of giving concrete shape to an abstraction – thus making them, easily referable in daily use.

Pangtoed Cham, in which deified heterotopias are presented, acquires the nature of a Foucauldian mirror. The circular performance space in the Pemayangtse monastery is the ‘real space’, the space on ‘this side’ of the mirror. However, after consecration, when the deities are invoked and appear, the ‘real space’ is transformed into a ‘virtual space’, similar to the ‘other side’ of the mirror.

During the entire period of the performance, the ‘virtual space’ is the utopia where the gods and their retinue can appear – Paradise/the Hidden Valley of Rice. But the ‘real space’ is Sikkim today. This is made

obvious especially when the *atsaras* bring the utopia crashing down to earth. Seen thus, the ritual serves as a 'limen' (or 'threshold'), facilitating oscillations between the utopia and the reality.

So we arrive at the notion of the ritual as a 'mirror' placed on the 'limen', that is, a 'liminal mirror' – a complex and volatile field that is located 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions, and ceremonial' (Turner, 1969, p. 95), a field charged with immense possibilities for dealing with disruptive, turbulent, dangerous, and ambivalent relationships.

These mirrors usually succeed – but not always. *Pangtoed 'Cham* is a good example of a liminal mirror that has cracked. The earliest signs of cracks began to appear with the arrival of the Nepalese settlers. Clear fissure appeared when Darjiling-Kalimpong was ceded to British India in 1850 and Yab bdud was lost. How can a liminal mirror function if the utopia it shows is no utopia because the state can no longer lay physical claim over the 'real space'? Inevitably, the mirror fell into pieces with Indian annexation.

The Nepalese invasion of Sikkim, followed by British overlordship and Indian annexation, has ended Bhutia dominance of Sikkim. I asked the driver on my trip to Pelling if the Bhutias would support any particular party in the upcoming election for their common interest. He shrugged and replied, 'Not as a group.' *Pangtoed 'Cham* has been re-transferred to Pemayangtse Monastery. Judging by the size of the attending crowd, their religious devotion (even an 'unclean' animal such as a dog can enter the 'sacred space'), the lack of seriousness of the performers (only ten *pangtoeds* instead of fifteen), and the economic stress on the organizers (not a single horse could be hired), it appears that Thekong Tek has long given up trusting the descendants of his blood brother.

After Indian 'occupation' (or 'liberation' if you will), the dance has been pushed out to the periphery. Clearly the administration has other plans. They do not need to offer homage and gratitude to Kanchenjunga and Yab bdud – especially since the militant undercurrent must be obvious to everyone.

And judging by the attendance of the spectators and participation of the warriors, the message is clear to all the Bhutias and the Lepchas. The oath of blood brotherhood is redundant in a dramatically changed political context; hence the people do not need to remember the oath. As Mandeep Lama bemoans, in Sikkim today 'there is hardly anyone who can count the names of all the twelve Chogyals'. In the state's educational textbooks, there is an 'unceremonious self-imposed ban on Sikkimese history, a complete blackout enforced on the pages of the past' (Mandeep Lama, 1998, p. 9–10).

If Pang Lhabsol in general and *Pangtoed 'Cham* in particular was meant to be a way of helping the Bhutias and the Lepchas remember, if it was supposed to be 'memories in action, encoded in action', and if it was designed to help the Bhutias and the Lepchas deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life, then clearly the ritual has ceased to be efficacious in dealing with difficult transitions and ambivalent relationships, to adjust and adapt to the changed social and political context.

Hence, the people of Sikkim, at least the Lepchas and the Nepalese, have no need to remember the 'memories in action, encoded in action'. It won't be long before Buddhism in Sikkim becomes obsolete, followed by a few devoted monks and 'backdated' lay devotees. The Nepalese community will surely make Sikkim another Hindu territory. Will *Pangtoed 'Cham* last another ten years?

Postscript

I arrived at Pelling, from where Pemayangtse is two kilometres' walk uphill, on 22 August 1999. The condition of the road was quite hazardous – I think I narrowly missed a landslide, a quite frequent danger in this area during the monsoon rains. Pelling was quite desolate, for the tourist season had not yet begun. However, it was pleasant, away from desperately busy and tired Kolkata. From the room of my hotel, I could enjoy glorious views of the mountains and fleeting

clouds. They say one can see Kanchenjunga from here.

The BBC weather forecast I'd seen on the TV in Kolkata warned of heavy showers all over eastern India. I smiled – well, the BBC could be wrong too! I woke up every morning at four, hoping to catch a glimpse of the five-peaked Sikkimese god, bathed in the first rays of sun. But the god evaded me – a 'Muslim' non-believer! – and each morning it was only my laptop that kept me company.

As every new day passed, my hopes diminished as clouds gathered to prove the infallibility of the BBC forecast. I had kept my fingers crossed for the twenty-sixth. Well, the monks had once again won over Nature – and the BBC. But the night of the twenty-sixth was back to nature – there seemed to be no end to the fog, mist, and rain. I had missed the five-peaked Kanchenjunga from my hotel window. But I consoled myself that I had seen him dance at the Pemayangtse Monastery.

This is what I was thinking early in the morning as I boarded the jeep hired to take me back to Jalpaiguri. I looked back from the jeep window, to where Kanchenjunga stood, expecting to find him still covered by mist and clouds. But my heart leapt, for suddenly there he was, resplendent in sunshine, majestic and radiant! I could not believe my eyes. I had wanted to see him all through my week-long stay but he had evaded me. And suddenly, there he stood, literally bathed in gold against a sky that could not have been more blue.

I remember you, resplendent Kanchenjunga! I remember your dance and the veil of mist and fog which merged with the clouds above. The mountains had suddenly cracked open and I heard your sonorous breathing. Your unearthly spirits in maroon, yellow, blue, and green, fluttered in and out of the clouds and mists. I cannot forget you – forget to remember you – ever.

Suddenly the jeep turned and Kanchenjunga was gone as suddenly as he had come. But I felt gladdened – somehow reassured. Perhaps the heterotopia of Kanchenjunga has not been subsumed. Or, who knows, the Nepalese community may reconstruct the

heterotopia through the same process as the Bhutias, and build ethnic homogeneity at another level. At least, that would be the wiser move.

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