

Ritual in Sikkim: expressions of cultural identity and change among the Lhopos

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The article discusses the political, economic and religious changes that have swept through Sikkim in recent decades and their consequences on the ritual field, both within the monastery and the household. Since the 1970s, the Lhopos (Sikkimese Bhutias) have felt the need to properly define their language, culture and rituals as distinct from Tibetan or other Himalayan highlanders for a number of historical, political and economic reasons. This need to assert a distinct Sikkimese identity has found perfect expression through the worship of the deities of the land and its sacred sites (*gnas*) as these indirectly promote their ancient relation with the sacred land (*sbas yul*) and their “sons of the soil” identity.

Community membership entails mandatory participation in a number of domestic rituals which are, in many cases, a celebration of these territorial and ancestral deities. Their performance help ensure the health, fertility and prosperity of the individual, the land and the household. The obligation to participate, particularly to weddings and funerals, provides a neutral ground for all members of the Lhopo community to meet beyond political and other differences. Although these ritual obligations were originally held to ensure community membership and thus access to labour and help in case of emergency, they were well maintained and adapted to the urban setting as they ensured financial contributions so that wedding and especially funerals could be properly performed.

The end of the Buddhist monarchy in 1975 was followed by the gradual abandonment of Buddhist state rituals and a diminishing attendance at important monastic rituals throughout the state. As a result, the household rituals, which survived the political upheavals of the 1970s, seem to have effectively replaced the monastery as the centre of Lhopo community and social life in post-1975 Sikkim.

Considering the importance of ethnic politics in Sikkim, the advantages of their ‘tribal’ status and the basic need to survive as a community under threat, the capacity to define and promote a Sikkimese identity has found expression in a number of ways over the years, not only through the household rituals and the celebrations of the ancestral and land deities, but also through the protection of the sacred sites (anti-hydro project protests), the revival and even creation of ‘national’ rituals on a modest scale in various corners of the state, the adaptation of the script of the Lhopo dialect, and the efforts to preserve particular Buddhist teachings and lineages specific to Sikkim such as the *rig ’dzin srog sgrub* revealed by Lhatsun Namka Jigme as a *ter* in the 17th Century.

The performance of domestic rituals and the need to assert a cultural identity independent of Tibet has also indirectly helped promote what may be called Sikkimese 'village Buddhism' and in certain cases, the co-existence of shamanism and Buddhism at the village level. Sikkimese village Buddhism has indeed surprisingly well integrated aspects of what villagers call *bon*. Although *bon* rituals are the domain of the *dpa' bo* and the *rnal 'byor ma*, these shamans have become practically non-existent in Sikkim and aspects of their practices, which do not require possession, have been integrated and survived in the rituals of the village lamas, particularly those concerned with the celebration of the sacred land.

These land rituals are perhaps the best expression of the Sikkimese identity today. Indeed, this relation with the land, its harvests, deities and sacred locations, is probably the most important aspect of culture left to the Lhopo community, along with their language and rites de passage, to define themselves as a distinct community. Such form of Buddhism seems to have evolved in interaction with the rituals of neighbouring communities, particularly those of the Lepchas, the Limbus and the Bhutanese; and perhaps in reaction and in an effort to define and assert autonomy from a more disciplined, scholarly, celibate and politically powerful Tibetan monk-body which today represent the culture of a foreign land which Sikkimese had to disassociate themselves from if they were to survive as one of India's indigenous 'tribal' community.