



Jenny Bentley

Guardians of Land and Water

Rituals, Vulnerability, and
Indigenous Belonging
among Himalayan Mútunci Róng

Seismo
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among Himalayan Mútunci Róng by Jenny Bentley

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“Verklempf” or completely overcome with emotion, October 2023

To the Lyángdók Úngdók of Ne Máyel Lyáng

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List of Abbreviations

ACT	Affected Citizens of Teesta
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BL	Bhutia Lepcha
CCS	Concerned Citizens of Sikkim
CFD	Citizens for Democracy
CLOS	Concerned Lepcha of Sikkim
COI	Certificate of Identification
HEP	Hydro Electric Project
GJM	Gorkha Janmukti Morcha
GNLF	Gorkha National Liberation Front
GTA	Gorkhaland Territorial Administration
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILTA	Mutanchi Rong Shezum, Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association
JAC	Joint Action Committee
LDC	Lepcha Development Council
LRM	Lepcha Rights Movement
MBC	Most Backward Classes
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MLAS	Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, People New Way Association
MLLDB	Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board
MOTA	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
NEFEN	Nepal Federation of Nationalities (before 2004)
NEFIN	Nepal Janajāti Adivāsi Mahasang, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act
NGO	Non governmental organisation
NHPC	National Hydroelectric Project Company (Limited)
NOC	Non objection certificate
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PRG	Progressive marker
PTG	Primitive Tribal Group
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
RMROS	Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shezum, Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association

RMRT	Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, Sikkim Lepcha Association
ROP	Rong Ong Prongzum
RST	Rong Shezum Thi, the Lepcha Association of Ilam
SAFE	Sikkim Associations for Environment
SC	Scheduled Castes
SDF	Sikkim Democratic Front
SIBLAC	Sikkim Lepcha Bhutia Apex Committee
SKM	Sikkim Krantikari Morcha
SOD	Sangha of Dzongu
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TMC	Trinamool Congress
UN	United Nations





FIGURE 1: Rays of hope, November 2013 © Kunga Tashi Lepcha.

Acknowledgements

This ethnographic study builds on nearly a decade of research conducted in Sikkim and West Bengal in India and Ilam in Nepal. It would not have been possible without the support and generous help of numerous people – scholars, mentors, friends, and interview partners – and institutions. I note here that it has been ten years since the experiences in the field. The temporal distance from the material does not diminish my argument; rather, it serves to protect the privacy of my interview partners, some of whom discussed politically sensitive topics. This approach also enables me to generalise certain insights beyond the immediate political context, making my reflections more applicable to broader issues.

In 2008, when I was working as an assistant to Prof. Michael Oppitz, then director of the Ethnographic Museum in Zurich, on the manuscript of his later publication *Die Morphologie der Schamanentrommel*, I decided I wanted to pursue ethnographic research in the eastern Himalaya. Kindly, Prof. Oppitz agreed to be my supervisor. I would like to thank him for his ongoing patience beyond his retirement, as well as the trust he put in my abilities. He has deeply influenced my perception of ethnography and aesthetics. I would also like to thank Prof. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka for accepting my request to be my second supervisor. Her writings on belonging have enriched my work.

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Tshering Lepcha, P. T. Simik, Prem Bahadur Lepcha, Sherap Lepcha, Sonam D. Lepcha, Sonam Rinchen Lepcha, Sonam Tshering Lepcha, Suman Lepcha, T. T. Lepcha, Tar Tshering Lepcha, Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha, Tseten Lepcha, Ugen Palzor Lepcha. These people all have one thing in common: they are dedicated to ‘the Lepcha cause’ – even if they do not all define the term in the same way – and I respect their endurance and passion.

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Many experiences and voices have contributed to this ethnographic study. I am and remain grateful to everyone who has shared their knowledge and commented on my work; however, the voice you read, and the responsibility for any errors you may find, is mine alone.

Jenny Bentley,
Darjeeling, May 15, 2025

Notes on Transliteration and Interviews

To transliterate words in Róngríng – the language of the Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup, more often called by their exonym Lepcha – into the English language, I use the system suggested by the linguist Heleen Plaisier in her book *Lepcha Grammar* (2007a). I have made one modification to make the text more readable for the layperson, namely omitting the phonetic symbol for the glottal stop at the beginning of Róngríng words that start with a vowel. The Róngríng names of people, deities, or places are capitalised. Other Róngríng words are in italics. To date Róngríng has not been standardised, and different pronunciations of the same word exist depending on the region. Consequently, there can be several ways of spelling the same word. I have mainly relied on two sources. First, I used K. P. Tamsang's dictionary because it is the most complete (Tamsang [1980] 2009). Second, in the context of Dzongu, I based the spelling on the local pronunciation, following Kachyo Lepcha's suggestions. If the words did not exist in any known dictionary, which was frequently the case with words used by religious specialists in their ritual recitations, Kachyo and I discussed the possible spellings and I relied on his assessment.

The region is linguistically complex, and names of people or places are derived from various languages, thus sometimes the word origin is not clear. Therefore, I do not use the Róngríng transliteration for all the names, but just for those in passages translated from Róngríng or clearly associated with a Róng ancestral figure and more-than-human sentient being. For other names, a version is chosen and then consistently used, except in quotations. As an example, I use the spelling 'Tista' for the main river running through Sikkim, even though it is just as common to spell it 'Teesta'. This decision is due to my use of transliteration from Róngríng. The double 'ee' is based on English phonetics, while in my transliteration of Róngríng, I use 'i'. With regard to the historical context, names derived from Tibetan sources are frequent. I give the common present-day spelling. I add the Wylie spelling in brackets, as given by Saul Mullard, in case it is important for historical or conceptual understanding (Mullard 2011). With regard to all foreign words used, if no language is indicated then it is Róngríng. The other languages prevalent are Nepali, Tibetan, and Lhoke (the language of the people classified as Bhutia). Drawing on Balikci (2008), I do not distinguish between Tibetan and Lhoke terms, as even for Lhoke speakers it is often difficult to make such a distinction. If a word from any of those languages is used, then it is indicated using the abbreviation Nep. or Tib., in brackets, unless the language it derives from is directly mentioned in the text.

Róngring doesn't define gender in the pronouns. The gender of more-than-human beings, in particular, is often ambiguous as they exist in pairs (see Chapter Four). Therefore, I only use the English gender pronouns (he, she) if the speaker defines the gender by a specific ending such as *-mú* (mother), *-nyú* (from *ányú*, aunt), or *-pano* (king). If the gender is not specified or they are named in pairs (see Chapter Four), I do not use the pronoun, but the name.

I reference the speaker in a quotation or as the source of the information depending upon the context of the interview and the permission granted by the interviewee. Executive association members are referred to by the post they held at the time of the interview. I took this decision because the interviewee was speaking to me as the bearer of a public office, not as a private person. Some people changed their post and thus the same person can be referred to using two different posts, depending on the time of the interview. Similarly, I also name other sources, such as the members of the Panchayat, by the post they were holding if their post was relevant in the context of the interview. Other interview partners are quoted by name, when I was given permission to use the name. If not, I use the term 'interlocutor' or 'activist', depending on whether they are active within the ethno-political movement or the anti-dam protest or not. Further, I anonymise people by referring to their role in the situation, such as village elder, student, or attendee. Some information used is from conversations that took place during participant observation and was not recorded, but noted down after the event; these are indicated with the term 'conversation' or 'notes' depending on if it was a direct communication or statements made in a meeting. Further, I directly quote from speeches. Due to their public nature of the utterances, I use the names of the speakers. With regard to certain incidents, I also use the names of prominent public figures.

I quote the religious specialists that perform the community rituals with reference to their profession and location. This denomination captures the importance of their relation to the place of residence. Additionally, the villages and hamlets each only have one religious specialist officiating in the annual community rituals. One exception is the religious specialist officiating during Tendong Hlo Rumfát; he is referred to by name, because this was the common local usage, and his residence was not of prime importance in this context. Religious specialists quoted from outside of Dzongu, such as from Ilam and the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, are introduced by name to ensure that the information is credited to the right person. Whenever I use a name, I received the consent to do so. All conversation partners were introduced to the book project and agreed to be a part of it. If I have misrepresented any of the information they shared with me, the mistake is mine.

Most interviews were held in Róngring, seldom in Nepali or English. My research assistant Kachyo Lepcha and I translated them. Here, the translations are used. I have retained the original recordings. All references are listed in detail in the List of Conversation Partners, in the text I only refer to the title or name, month, and year.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



A Vanishing Existence?

*The stars do not drop on this world from the sky,
The Lepcha culture will never fade away,
It has never gone off course,
From the blessed land of Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo.
Covering their heads with snowy shawls,
Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo are still peeping at us.
Who says the Lepcha are vanishing?
(Sonam Tshering Lepcha; translation Tamsang 2008a, 89)*

And whereas, to protect and safeguard this vanishing Tribe and uplift their socio-economic, educational, political status and to give them a distinct identity and special status, the Sikkim Legislative Assembly in the Session held from 21st to 28th February 2006 passed a resolution for declaring the Lepcha Tribal Community of Sikkim, as the Primitive Tribe Group. (Sikkim Gazette, Notification 375, 2006)

‘Who says the Lepcha are vanishing?’ is the title of a famous song, quoted above. It was written by Sonam Tshering Lepcha, who was probably the most renowned personality in the cultural revival and whose death in 2020 sent tremors through the Mútunci Róng community (Aachuley Report 2007b). The Mútunci¹ Róngkup Rumkup are an Indigenous people from the southern foothills of the eastern Himalaya in present-day India, Nepal, and Bhutan (see Bentley 2021, 334, Figure 2 for a map of the area). They are more commonly known under the exonym ‘Lepcha’, a term used as a last name and predominant in academia and governmental documentation. However, the term bears the history of colonialisation and can have derogatory connotations. Commonly, Lepcha is said to be an English corruption of ‘Lapche’, a term derived from the Nepali for ‘vile speaker’. While scholars such as Subba (1988) argue against this interpretation and discuss the word’s origins in Limbu or other Kirati languages, the latter derivation has stuck in common usage. While there are good reasons to adopt the term ‘Lepcha’ – such as its official use – I prefer the endonym out of respect for Indigenous peoples, their histories of marginalisation, and their understandings of the world. The endonym Mútunci Róngkup

1 There are different spellings and transliterations for the term Mútunci. I am using the spelling used by Tamsang ([1980] 2009) and the transliteration system introduced earlier. ‘Mutanchi’ is the most widely used Romanised spelling of the term.

Rumkup is translated as “Children of Mother Nature and God” (Tamsang [1980] 2009: 582). Locally, various forms of this term are used for self-denomination, as for example the component *róng* (Tamsang [1980] 2009: 652). It carries multiple meanings – it may function as an adjective meaning ‘kingly’, a verb meaning ‘to wait’, or a noun referring to ‘peak’, ‘horn’, or a species of rattan. However, in Tibetan, the term *rongpa* is more widely applied to mean ‘valley people’. Another common abbreviation is Róngkup. The suffix *-kup* implies the smallness of the specific word. Used as a noun *kup* means ‘child’ or ‘descendant’ and is not gendered in meaning (Tamsang [1980] 2009: 203). However, in contemporary usage, Róngkup is typically associated with male individuals, whereas women are referred to as Róngmít. The term *mútunci*, according to K. P. Tamsang, translates as ‘Mother Nature’ and is also used as a self-referential term by members of the community. This term is gaining popularity due to its uniqueness – is not applied to any other Himalayan community – and its emphasis on the people’s connection to nature. Currently, there is no consensus among community leaders or scholars regarding which abbreviated form of Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup to use. I will use Mútunci Róng throughout this publication when referring to the people. This choice reflects the omission of the suffix *-kup*, due to its gender connotations, and the exclusion of Rumkup, which is infrequently used community members themselves. Further, I use the term Róng to signify expressions and elements as belonging to the community, following the usage of native speakers. For example, Róng sukdam refers to the worldview shaped by ancestral teachings (*sukdam* translating as ‘world’) or Róng sung denotes stories from the community (Tamsang [1980] 2009: 871, 655).

The above-mentioned song title questions the widespread (self-)description of the Mútunci Róng as a vanishing people or culture, a self-image captured by the prominent Róng writer Arthur Foning in his book *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe* (Foning [1987] 2003). Ever since the British colonialists started writing about and governing ‘the Lepcha’, they have been classified as a ‘dying race’.² This classification was part of the colonial construction of the *noble savages*, in opposition to the ‘warlike’ and ‘industrious’ people categorised as Nepali or from the Indian plains (Kennedy 1991; Kent 1991). The framing of the Mútunci Róng as ‘dying’ was just as much about governmentality as about it being an actual concern and common conviction at the time (Francis 2011).

2 See for example Mainwaring [1876] 1971, xx, xii, xiii; Temple [1887] 1977, 12; Risley [1894] 1973, i–ii, xxi; Waddel [1899] 1978, 293; Goror [1938] 1996, 36–37; Morris 1938, 285; Schermann 1926, 12.

The colonial description stuck, supported by experiences of marginality, and the classification has real-life consequences still today. Current administrations of the postcolonial Indian state use the same categories, as the above quotation shows. Many Mútunci Róngkup and Róngmit I met in the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal, as well as in the Nepalese district Ilam, introduced themselves and their ethnic group to me, a research scholar, as a ‘vanishing tribe’. Additionally, much scholarship on the Róng community uncritically reproduces the colonial imageries of the ‘shy, conquered, and dwindling Lepcha’.³ Moreover, the self-assertion as ‘vanishing’ is a part of Róng popular culture. It shapes cultural revival activities and political action. Importantly, it describes existential loss – loss of culture, of sovereignty, of community, and lastly of self – as I tried to capture in my first published article (Bentley 2007a).⁴

Despite or maybe because of its omnipresence, the phrase ‘vanishing Lepcha’ is also contested, as the song title implies. “We are not dying, we are here,” said a Róng speaker at a large public gathering in Kalimpong, West Bengal, in December 2011, in an emotional appeal to the crowd to stand up for the community, its rights, and its unique history and heritage. Arora conceptualises this counter-narrative as the emergence of the subaltern Mútunci Róng that “highlights their ability to negotiate, rebel, and resist the hegemonic power of the post-colonial state and engage with democratic institutions” (Arora 2017, 79). But while Arora suggests that this counter-narrative replaces the trope of the vanishing tribe, I argue that tropes of vanishing and subaltern resistance are intrinsically interlinked and produce different – but assembled – approaches to dealing with and overcoming vulnerable marginalised positioning in the eastern Himalaya.

The Róng community – at least in interaction with a research scholar – is described and more often than not describes itself according to a ‘damage narrative’, a concept I take from Tuck (2009). Via the damage narrative, Indigenous people become defined by present-day brokenness, by a depleted existence, in the light of a history of colonisation and exploitation. Such a narrative is part and parcel of attaining leverage in claims for reparations for former injustices or for government support. India has an elaborate colonially grown legal preferential rights framework, the reservation system, within which castes and tribes are ‘scheduled’. With this official recognition, their members get access to economic,

3 Examples are Das and Banerjee 1962, 4; Chakraborty 2001, 21–31; Nirash 1982; Thakur 1988, xi; Gurung 2011, 101–2; Tamlong 2008, 18–26. For Sikkimese reception of colonial sources, see Wangchuk 2011. See also R.P. Lepcha 2021 for a critical reflection from a Róng scholar’s perspective.

4 See Arora 2017 for debate; Bentley 2011a; see Lepcha and Lepcha 2021 for an ethnographic engagement with the environment and the effects of colonialism on the self.

social, cultural, and political resources.⁵ The ‘Lepcha’ are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in both Sikkim and West Bengal. Introduced as a means to support marginalised sections of the Indian community and counteract inequality, the preferential rights system is just as much a form of governance (Corbridge et al. 2005) and creates differentiated citizenship (Vandenhelsken 2021; Young 1989). It thereby perpetuates colonial bio-cultural policies to assimilate communities defined as tribal into a mainstream Hindu civilisation – an approach also supported by Indian anthropologists such as Ghurye (1963). Nepal likewise, though in a different form, has a history of classifying groups along ethnicity lines in relation to caste and has in the past two decades adopted the international Indigenous peoples’ framework, scheduled under the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act and the Indigenous Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989, of the International Labour Organisation, known as ILO 169.⁶

Driven by worries about the repercussions of conceptualising oneself as broken, Tuck calls on researchers and Indigenous communities to find ways to reformulate research and imagine alternative ways to present findings in order to support the respective communities in countering inequities. The overwhelming sense of loss among the Mútunci Róng I interacted with piqued my curiosity about how members of the Indigenous community dealt with this omnipresent discourse on incompleteness and on damaged existence. What efforts did they make to revitalise whatever they felt they were losing, or to secure their very existence? Were there spaces in which self and the ethnic group were reimaged differently? How was equity demanded or formulated?

These considerations spurred my interest in the Róng ethnic associations that had been formalised to improve the socio-economic situation (achieve equality) and revive or preserve Róng culture (counter the ‘vanishing’). The main Róng association in Sikkim, the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum (RMRT), defines its first objective as to “safeguard the rights and privileges provided to the Lepchas as a minority and backward inhabitants in the constitution of India” (RMRT 1998, 1, 2). It takes on the obligation to “unite all the Lepchas of

5 See Bétéille 1986, 1991, 1998, 2006; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Galanter 1984; Jenkins 2003; Karlsson 2000, 2013; Karlsson and Subba 2006; Panandiker 1997; Roy Burman 1996, 2003; Shah and Shneiderman 2013; on the criteria and problems of definition associated with the category and concept of ‘tribe’, see Xaxa 1999 and Bétéille 1998; for a critique, see Shah 2010. Various suggestions have been made for different definitions of tribe and criteria applicable to the process of enlisting Scheduled Tribes: see Department of Information and Public Relations 2008, 23. For insight into reservation systems and ethnic politics in the Sikkim and Darjeeling region, see Chettri 2013, 2017a; Middleton 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2016; Shneiderman 2014; Vandenhelsken 2009/10, 2021. For a Róng scholar’s perspective, see Lepcha 2015.

6 Hangen 2010; Malagodi 2013; Lawoti 2005; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Onta 2006; Shneiderman and Middleton 2008; Shneiderman 2013a.

Sikkim to make them conscious of their rights and duties as citizens of this great democratic nation” and “take steps to distinguish the Lepchas as the distinct aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim” (RMRT 1998, 2). The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), from Kalimpong in West Bengal, similarly aims to “abolish, eradicate social backwardness, ills and differences existing among the Lepchas” and “fight against the continuing exploitation of the poor, illiterate, and innocent Lepchas by vested interests” (ILTA 2003/04, 2). The Rong Shezum Thi (RST), the Róng association in Fikkal in the Ilam district of Nepal, places its focus on the ‘emancipation’ of the community (RST [2052] 1995, Art. 5).⁷ The respective constitutions reaffirm my initial experiences. In their formal outlines, the associations operate from a place of brokenness that they intend to fix.

The Róng association members are involved in several activities specifically to prevent their culture from vanishing and to ‘uplift’ their people, ranging from winter coaching classes, to book publications, to placing political demands. A great amount of energy is directed towards organising annual ritual events based on Róng religious tradition – described as ‘functions’ or ‘programmes’ in the local jargon. Building on Geertz (1973, 113), I argue that ritual as an event is attractive for activists⁸ and researchers alike as a performative convergence point of religious, political, social, and cultural production for insiders as well as a vantage point during which the same can be observed by others, be this the ethnographer, members of other ethnic communities, or government authorities. The regained interest in ritual activity is not unique to Róng associations, but a phenomenon that occurs in the entire Himalaya as well as other parts of the world and that consequently has come into the focus of international policy makers and researchers (Brosius and Polit 2011; Shneiderman 2015a; Corr 2003).⁹

This observation sparked my interest in community rituals as spaces and processes of negotiating what it means to be Mútunci Róng and – importantly – as ways of counteracting an existential loss. I started to review the available eth-

7 I thank Dr. Rajen Upadhyay for translating the RST constitution from Nepali into English for me.

8 With regard to the local context, I define activists as people engaged in ethno-political or environmental actions with the aim to protect the Mútunci Róng (including their environmental surroundings), preserve and promote Róng culture, and gain specific rights and resources for the community. In Sikkim and the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills people involved in associations or other work for the welfare of their communities call themselves ‘social workers’ (see Chapter Seven). I have retained the term ‘activist’ to enable a conversation larger than the local context.

9 There has been a growing interest in what the UNESCO describes as ‘intangible cultural heritage’. In 2006, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage came into force. This convention focuses on practices such as storytelling, rituals, and festivals. It adds a new dimension to the discourse on protecting local or Indigenous traditions and brings in the notion of ownership, trademark, and market economy; see Hemme et al. 2007; Ruggles and Silverman 2009; Smith and Akagawa 2009; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009.

nographic literature on Róng community ritual practice, such as classic works by Gorer ([1938] 1996) and Siiger (1967) and publications by the Róng writers Foning ([1987] 2003), K. P. Tamsang ([1983] 1998), and L. Tamsang (2008a). Following up on my literature review, I talked to people with key positions in the community, among others an executive member of the Sikkim Lepcha Association and officer at the Sikkim Information and Public Relations Department based in Gangtok, a Padma Shri awardee¹⁰ in Kalimpong, a religious specialist in Dzongu (the famous Róng Indigenous reserve area in the north of Sikkim), and a Róng videographer. I also made a short field trip to a known village area. I deemed this trip necessary as findings from my master's thesis indicated that the activities of the urban Mútunci Róng associations do not necessarily resonate with the perceptions, grievances, and interests of the rural Róng population.¹¹ Comparing the preliminary information, it became apparent already that my first few interview partners lived and understood the concepts I was working with – such as 'ritual', 'culture', 'ethnicity', or 'identity' – differently from myself as a trained socio-cultural anthropologist, as well as from each other.

This diversity in itself and the challenge of rethinking and redefining my own perceptions inspired me to delve further into this group of concepts: ritual, (Indigenous) belonging, and existence. I realised that by applying concepts of 'culture' in a ritual context, I was already making assumptions about what the act itself was and which aim it meant to achieve. By doing so, I was working within a colonial multiculturalist legacy that builds on assumptions and concepts, and – as Povinelli (2002) points out – perpetuates unequal power structures. Crucially, not all my interview partners described the importance of ritual within this logic. As an anthropologist, I was producing knowledge about the Mútunci Róng that will be received and reproduced by members of the community themselves as well as potentially by the authorities, a fact clearly laid out for the local context by Middleton (2016) and discussed in depth by additional scholars (Briggs 1996; Hale 2006). I did not want my work to overwrite these other ways of describing

10 The Padma Shri award is the fourth highest civilian award given by the government of India. It recognises distinguished achievements in the field of arts, education, literature, science, and so forth. Late Sonam Tshering Tamsang received the award in 2007 for his contributions in folk music.

11 In 2005 and 2006 I conducted research in the course of my master's thesis, 'The Lepcha Cause', at the University of Zurich (Bentley 2007a). I carried out participant observation and interviews in two different village communities in North Sikkim (Lingthem in Dzongu and Nampatan just outside of Dzongu close to Mangan, the headquarters of the Mangan District of Sikkim) and interviewed core members of the various Mútunci Róng associations. I was interested in the formation and importance of the ethnic associations in the contemporary Róng community. I studied the interactions of the various associations with each other and the relations of the mainly urban-based Mútunci Róng associations to the rural Róng community. During my master's research I was affiliated to the Delhi School of Economics, Department of Sociology, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim.

ritual and their role in constituting what it meant to be Mútunci Róng, and thereby to perpetuate a dominant colonially framed knowledge paradigm (Smith 2012; A. Simpson 2014; Yeh 2016). Therefore, I embarked on the task of scrutinising my own theoretical approach in order to grasp the assemblage of meanings and the depth of interpretations I found in the responses of my interview partners. The attempt I make here is to be reflexive on my use of theory and concepts, aware that they reproduce specific ontological values and power structures. Beyond that, I make other ways of knowing and producing knowledge a part of my elaborations.

The first few interviews showed that not all identifications, relations, or attachments forged by ritual practice and the interlinked narratives were emically defined as ethnic, but that they were also formulated by a logic with regard to locality, kinship, sacred space, and politics that draws on ontologies Indigenous to the Mútunci Róng. Consequently, building additionally on Handler's concept of compromised terms (2011, based on Clifford 1988), I gave up the use of 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic identity' as an analytical framework.¹² Drawing upon Simpson's approach, I was keen to "move away from 'difference' and attendant containment as units of analysis" (Simpson 2007, 68). I am not implying that ethnic identifications or boundary-works were irrelevant. However, I required an approach that could distinguish when ethnicity came into play, as well as when other emotional attachments, practices, and relations were more relevant than or even contested specific categorisations. I needed an approach that highlighted the interconnect-edness and exchange instead of demarcating difference. Furthermore, I tried to avoid generalisations about ethnic groups, such as the phrasing 'the' Mútunci Róng, to prevent a groupist approach that implicitly reproduces a non-reflected dichotomy between a generalised ethnic 'us' and a just-as-generalised 'other'.¹³

12 For a critique of the theoretical concept of identity, see Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker 2004; Paff-Czarnecka 2011.

13 Groupism can be defined as the "tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis" and "the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed" (Brubaker 2004, 8). Thereby, these groups are reified, and the world is understood as being composed by these groups defined as ethnic, cultural, or national. Handler describes how in a nationalist ideology – the same can be said for an ethnic ideology – culture, identity, tradition, and history are possessed "as well-bounded cultural objects that could be packaged or 'encapsulated' for political and ritual use" (Handler 2011, 49). In the present-day ethno-political context in India, a 'packaged and distinct culture' has become important to gain access to social, economic, or political resources. Groupist approaches still exist in the social sciences, especially in works on interethnic relations or environmental and Indigenous rights movements. Depending on the research question, these approaches – keeping in mind the criticism of generalising 'an ethnic group' – generate valuable insight into relations between ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and states. A risk of these approaches is that they tend to follow the unifying discourse of ethnic activists and oversimplify internal dynamics.

Being interested in exploring the complexity inherent in my preliminary interviews, I needed to find another conceptual terminology that would allow me to conceptualise acts of commonality, mutuality, and attachments without a predefined label such as ‘cultural’, ‘religious’, ‘ethnic’, or ‘national’. For this purpose, I build on Pfaff-Czarnecka’s conceptual framework of belonging (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011). To clarify, as a theoretical approach belonging is not merely about the politics of belonging, but it offers tools to examine the relational and situational positionings, to use Hall’s concept (1990, 226), that constitute what it means to belong to the Róng community. Belonging is formulated at the “intersection of structure (social position / social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice)” (Anthias 2001, 635).¹⁴ It includes a focus on collective allegiances that Brubaker and Cooper suggest calling ‘connectedness’ (2000, 19–21) and sharpens the focus on the quality of the relations. Lastly, belonging is about interaction and not distinction, difference, or bordering practices.

Belonging is an effect of performance; it is made in the act (Bell 1999, 3). My focus here is on the act itself. Thus, beyond the individual’s formulation of his or her belonging in ritual, I unravel community-level scales of belonging imminent in the act. Which mental images and parameters for belonging do rituals formulate? Which relations and practices do rituals assemble and what qualities do they have? And, importantly, what attachments to tangible items, such as plants, animals, rocks, or water bodies, do rituals enact? Land and the belonging to place (see hooks 2009), as I suggest here, are crucial in the Róng community rituals as well as in ethnic politics. Importantly, I argue that rituals conceptualise polysemic representations of land itself to which they then shape the relations – enabling different variations of what Indigenous belonging could be. In doing so, this present work aims to contribute to scholarship on fluid identity formations and multiple attachments in the eastern Himalaya.¹⁵

Both ritual and belonging produce and institutionalise power. At the same time, they are products of power negotiations that intersect and are assembled in the performances. Building on Foucault (1978), power is a relational “activity that creates super- and subordination as an effect of interaction” (Rao 2006, 152).¹⁶ The approach incorporates processes ‘from below’ such as sentiments, ties, and assumptions of the people, while taking into account the constructions ‘from above’ and the institutionalised power structures.¹⁷ The dynamics and modalities of belonging change in the course of time. Especially in times of felt

14 See additionally Anthias 2006, 2008; Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989.

15 In particular, Karlsson 2000; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011; Subba and Wouters 2013; Vandenhelsken and Karlsson 2016.

16 See also Bell 1992; Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 17–19.

17 See Hobsbawm 1990, 10 on nationalism.

instability and uncertainty, the fixation of a social location as well as the search for roots and security therein can become obsessive, oppressive, and potentially dangerous (Appadurai 2006, 7). This is a topic I will return to, as it relates to the existential insecurity that I described as a starting point for the present work.

Importantly, such a performative approach allows us not only to analyse the intersectionality – a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989) – between different categories such as religiosity, ethnicity, race, culture, and nationality, but also to unravel the multiple definitions of these categories themselves depending on positionality and the thought-frameworks activated. In the coming section, I elaborate my understanding of these theoretical approaches.

Research, Culture, Legitimacy: My Position

In socio-cultural anthropological research there is a continued debate about who has the authority to write about and define (a) culture or (a) people. This debate criticises the hegemonic colonial history of the discipline and has culminated in the crisis of representation of the entire discipline and an engagement with how to decolonise the discipline and its methodologies.¹⁸ The same question is raised in multi-ethnic and highly politicised settings such as present-day Sikkim and the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal. Works by Róng scholars, such as K. P. Tamsang or more recently Reep Pandi Lepcha, strongly criticise publications by colonial officers and anthropologists for corrupting and falsifying Róng culture and causing problems for the community today (Tamsang [1983] 1998; R. P. Lepcha 2021). Most anthropologists, especially the ones foreign to the community, have at least once been asked: ‘What gives you the right to come here, research, and write about us?’

When I started my research in Sikkim as a graduate student, I was not at first confronted with questions of legitimacy. Having come as a student with an affiliation to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, a renowned research institute in Gangtok, I received certain credentials. Thanks to that institutional support, my research was considered backed by the local government. Further, ‘resource people’ such as the film director and later activist and politician Dawa Lepcha introduced me to the village community of Dzongu, lending me credibility. The access to ethnic activists involved in the Mútunci Róng associations was more testing, their scepticism higher. In Kalimpong, where initially I did not have any contacts or an institute to assist me, the ILTA president and the general secretary questioned my legitimacy to conduct research among their community immediately, in our

18 Said 1978; Fabian 1983; Fanon [1952] 2017; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988, Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Smith 2012; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021.

first meeting. The meeting ended on a cordial note, but with the request to submit a letter asking for permission to conduct fieldwork in Róng villages of Kalimpong, with which I complied. After receiving my letter, the ILTA executive members discussed the issue and then granted me permission, under certain conditions: the literary secretary was appointed as my advisor and I was requested to go to the field with him or a person appointed by him. Further, the ILTA members added: “we trust that you will write the ‘truth’ about the indigenous Lepcha tribes. Your thesis on the Lepchas should not be open to misinterpretations and harmful to the interests of the Rong people” (personal correspondence, 29 September 2005).

The letter is an outcome of a sceptical relationship between researchers and Indigenous people, who often experienced and still experience the former as the long arm of the (post-) colonial state and governmentality (A. Simpson 2014; Middleton 2016; Wouters and Subba 2013; Po’dar and Subba 1991). With it, the ILTA executive members held me, as an anthropologist, responsible for my actions, and more importantly reminded me of my responsibility towards the people with whom I was conducting my research. This reminded me of crucial ethical norms such as recurring consent, care, reciprocity, and respect (Piquemal 2005; Tadu 2017). At the same time, the word ‘truth’ specifically implies the above-mentioned groupist and primordialist approach to culture, in which an encapsulated ancient, pure, and authentic culture is expected and defined. The legitimacy to define this ‘truth’ was claimed by ILTA and I, as an anthropologist, was requested to abide by their version of the ‘truth’. The request was understandable, and many anthropologists rightly seize the potential of scientific research to contribute to ethnic movements and particularly Indigenous rights movements (Hale 2006; Fischer 1999; Myers 2002; Povinelli 2002; Warren and Jackson 2002).

As Hale points out, however, a problem that activist research has to deal with is that the strategies of the activists essentialise ethnic groups – specifically in order to ‘work the system’ – and force uncomfortable categories on the socio-cultural anthropologist (Hale 2006, 102). This was exactly how I found myself interpreting the letter. ILTA’s self-understanding of culture and ethnic group – colonially influenced, defined by purity, and ‘outdated’ from an academic point of view – made me feel very uncomfortable, especially because it additionally activated a strong and simplified anti-immigrant narrative that went together with an idea of ‘firstness’. Such approaches to ethnicity hold the potential to ignite “politics of geographical hate” (Castree 2004) and increase the victimisation of outsiders (Bowen 2000; Gschiere 2005; Gschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; van Schendel 2011). Especially against the backdrop of recurring violence in India (Baruah 2003, 2020)¹⁹ as well as a strengthening of

19 See McDuie-Ra 2008 for the Northeast, Shah 2010 for Jharkhand.

the Hindutva movement in India (Longkumer 2022) and the ultra-right in Europe and the US, these tendencies disconcerted me strongly.

In interaction with Róng activists I encountered various local interpretations of the concept of Indigeneity that – beyond the academic sphere – had adapted its use.²⁰ As Hirtz points out, in order to seek recognition as Indigenous, activists and politicians transform their ways of formulating and defining what an Indigenous people is, in order to adapt to existing global or (sub-)national frameworks, institutions, and modes of communication (Hirtz 2003). Similarly, according to de la Cadena (2010), the only way for Indigenous people, especially Indigenous activists or ‘ethnic politicians’ as she calls them, to defend their ways of conceptualising and understanding the world and turn them into a political resource, is to reframe their practices as ‘culture’. This is exactly the case for the activists involved in the Mútunci Róng associations, who claim recognition and protection by the Indian reservation system.

The Indian reservation system categorises supposedly homogenous groups of people according to the British colonial model of culture, caste, and tribe, and allocates them entitlements to rights and resources. With regard to people classified as tribes, the Indian state perpetuates a racial and ethnic classification that is “bio-cultural” (Gilroy 1987, 39) making cultural or ethnic traits ‘natural’, fixed, almost inheritable, and tying people to place, to their “supposed natural habitat” (Baruah 2013, 70). As such, recognition and demands for recognition exist in non-territorial and territorial forms (Shneiderman and Tillin 2015; Vandenhelsken 2021). While the legal preferential framework in Sikkim is additionally complex due to the state’s history as an independent kingdom (Pradhan 2021), the processes of classification still remain within the same postcolonial way of categorising and understanding the world. Therefore, to gain official recognition within this system, activists need to convincingly portray ‘their’ ethnic groups as ‘possessing’ an essentialised and oversimplified ‘traditional’ or ‘ancient’ culture (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Corr 2003; Middleton 2016 for the Darjeeling hills; Povinelli 2002; Starn 1991). Consequently, to claim existence in the Indian administrative and political sphere, activists have limited space for articulations (Hall 1996; Li 2020).

Categories of ethno-political practice – drawing on anthropological thoughts and ethno-logics – have affected the world, a condition Middleton (2016, 8) aptly defines as the “ethno-contemporary” and Karlsson (2011, 60) conceptualises as the “‘ethnification’ of social life,” the latter concept including the underlying dangers of this process that increasingly shapes the common perceptions of self, other, and the world. I remember provocatively proposing to a Róng friend, while discussing

20 See Baruah 2013; Baviskar 2006; Béteille 1998; Mander and Tauli-Corpuz 2006; Karlsson 2013; and see van Schendel 2011 for the discussion on local interpretations of Indigeneity.

issues of the reservation system called ‘the creamy layer’ (Moodie 2013), meaning the tribal elite profiting from the quota system, “Maybe it would be a good idea if the government just got rid of the reservation system altogether and introduced a system based on socio-economic parameters that would actually benefit poor people.” My friend looked at me aghast: “But that would be taking away our identity” (friend, September 2011). This conversation highlights just how deeply ethnic self-understanding interlinks with government recognition in the reservation system. At the same time, my friend’s reaction underlines how members of minority communities formulate the survival of their culture, language, and maybe even way of life as dependent on government recognition.

Consequently, merely deconstructing the activists’ primordialist and exclusionist understanding of culture and self as ‘corrupted’ by colonial categorisations or other ‘outside’ influences, according to constructivist concepts such as ‘invented’ traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and ‘imagined’ communities (Anderson 1991), did not seem fruitful, as such investigations only create new dualisms between an ‘objectified’ and an ‘ancient’ understanding of self, group, and culture, and result in ascribing more authenticity to the latter.²¹ This creates a different but just as stagnant picture of Indigenous communities and negates their abilities to transform (Smith 2012).

Especially in the context of ethno-political action, within which the ILTA members move, deconstruction of cultural narratives along such lines can have devastating real-life consequences, because this process by default initiates doubts about the authenticity of activist claims and can be used to portray such claims as false or even to declare certain identities untrue (Karlsson 2000, 248–49). For this reason, constructivist approaches have increasingly been criticised by ethnic activists (Hale 2006). Additionally, constructivist approaches do not offer precise tools with which to analyse the lived realities of the inequalities that foster such primordial demands to place and other rights. Nor can they help us to understand the emotional appeal of primordialist approaches “despite blatant historical inaccuracies and unsettling elusiveness in daily life” (Gschiere 2005, 31). While focusing on deconstructing primordial identifications and historical inaccuracies, the shifting perceptions and interpretations of culture, self, and other over the course of time inherent in all forms of cultural and social production are neglected.

And this is not to forget that the letter I received was about definatory power: about who has the right and the authority to define ‘culture’ or ‘an ethnic

21 For examples of anthropological research on ‘invented traditions’, see Handler 1984a, 1984b; Linnekin 1983; Hanson 1989. For debate on invented tradition, construction, and reception by people who perceive the discussed traditions as their own, see Briggs 1996 and Karlsson 2000. For debate on authenticity, activism, and anthropology, see Handler 1986; Linnekin 1991; Hanson 1991; Briggs 1996.

group? Is it the central, state, or local government, the foreign or local anthropologist, the ethnic activist, ethnic associations, the shaman, the community, or every individual? The question of legitimacy has become increasingly important when culture is directly linked to access to economic and political power and has started to define the very essence of identity formations, as is the case in the life of the ILTA executive members. Different agents and structures try to define what culture is according to their own parameters and thereby potentially deny other agents this specific right. Important to add here is that Róngring does not even have a word equivalent to the English term *culture* (Chapter Two). As an anthropologist, I am just one voice among several contesting voices.

In many cases, activist research validly supports a subaltern voice within a larger entity such as the nation-state. However, one cannot forget that the activist project itself can take on hegemonic dominance over other voices in the same community. Among Mútunci Róng there was and still is no consensus about what 'the truth' is and who has the legitimacy to claim this truth. For this reason, requesting me to write the truth was not enough. In the letter, the ILTA executive members set out other requirements for me in order for them to agree to my research project: most importantly, they assigned a chaperone to guide my research. They thereby wanted to ensure that they knew what I was asking, and which people were answering me.

I conceptualise the debates on legitimacy as a struggle for voice among several agents from within and outside the community. It involves not only the dualistic relationship between a researcher and the research population but multiple actors, including members of the respective community – in my case the Róng community – and members of other communities, government agents, and researchers. The defensiveness of activists is on the one hand due to a strongly felt need to protect their own community from external misrepresentation, but at the same time it reflects the very political struggle of maintaining the privilege to possess ownership over Róng culture and speak for the community – a right which is also contested within the Mútunci Róng themselves.

So where do I stand? How do I begin to approach even defining belonging to the Róng community, when members themselves contest what the truth about their 'culture' is? I am not neutral: my personality and my theoretical approaches influence what ethnographic material I collect, how I arrange it, and lastly how I write about it. I strongly follow Handler in that dealing with compromised terms and concepts – while at the same time respecting the claims made by ethnic activists and the local world view – cannot just be left to "literary-critical commentary" (Handler 1985, 181) but should take place within the ethnographic writing itself, especially on topics such as ethnic identity or nationalism. Consequently, as mentioned, this means letting go of 'compromised'

terms, utilising more differentiated and precise analytical tools and concepts, scrutinising the ways in which data is collected and presented, and opening up to embracing alternative ways of knowing. This work is an attempt to do that.

Drawing on scholarship at the intersection of Western and Indigenous sciences—such as the work of Stein et al.—the process of interacting and writing became, for me, a journey of critically interrogating and stepping beyond the hegemony of Western colonial epistemological categories of knowledge production, while learning to engage with conceptual frameworks grounded in Indigenous worldviews, ontologies, and values. With the intention of getting beyond simplified dichotomies, I analyse narratives and practices in order to understand the assembled, negotiated, and reassembled ‘content’ that people engage with in the processes of formulating their belonging to the Mútunci community. With a strong “commitment to what people say” (Simpson 2007, 68), I attempt to do justice to the different voices and approaches to self and other prevalent in the research field. The aim is to repeatedly engage in conversations about being Mútunci Róng and belonging to the Róng community and about what it means to actually be empowered to decide on this very being and belonging. In the process of writing, I take into consideration what this knowledge means for other actors, whom it benefits, and whom it may harm. In this process, the narrator’s voice is and remains mine.

Why Ritual? And Which Ritual?

Drawing upon Brubaker’s proposal to analyse ‘groupness as event’ via moments of high solidarity and mutuality (2004, 12), I suggest that ritual activities are moments of shared experience, of a common lot, a performance of being together – of belonging, or, negatively defined, of not belonging. Ritual, as I approach it here, is conceptualised as a more-or-less-formalised public act or event that is somehow related to the sacred. It takes place for a specific reason or on a specific occasion, and in its widest sense is one particular way of dealing with transitions or changes. The immediate event is framed by a formal decision that demarcates the ritual from everyday practice (Michaels 1999). In Rónggríng ‘ritual’ is *rumfát*, sometimes shortened to *fát*. The term *rum* means ‘god’ or ‘deity’ and *fát* is ‘worship’ or “reverent honour and homage paid to God or a sacred personage, or to any object regarded as sacred” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 658). The term includes all activities performed by the Róng religious specialists that address more-than-human beings in any form or manner. It is used for individual and collective rituals related to the human life cycle (birth, marriage, death), healing rituals, clan rituals, house rituals, personal rituals, and annually



FIGURE 2: Participants at Sotáp Rumfát in Pentong, April 2010.

performed rituals for the benefit of the community. I limit my focus to the annually recurring community rituals to facilitate comparison among different types of rituals that bring the Róng community together.²² When translated into English, I use the term more-than-human beings for deities (*rum dár*), malevolent spirits (*múng*), and all other classifications of sentient sacred beings that are not human, animals or plants in Róng religious tradition.

Community ritual provides a platform for the interplay between and the negotiations of various meanings. Its strength for generating belonging lies precisely in its polysemy, because the diverse participants can relate to the ritual and its potential for socio-cultural production differently depending on their own notions and interpretations (Kertzner 1989; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996). As a delimited activity, ritual takes place in a certain context, time, and place (Bell 1992, 92). It is situational, but at the same time bound to a history of past ritual. Ritual draws on and reproduces collective representations, memory, knowledge systems, and symbols, as well as tangible forms of heritage.²³ Respective assembly plans specify the compositional components that comprise a particular ritual performance (Oppitz 1999a). It produces a collective felt experience.

Ritual activates mechanisms and modalities that relate people to each other, to symbols and items, as well as to the place and environment (Figure 2). The latter is defined as the actual surrounding in which the ritual staging takes

22 See Annex One for a list of Róng community rituals.

23 For discussion on ritual and myth, see Segal 1998, 2006.

place as well as the wider imaginary space, including natural habitats and sacred and political elements. A ritual has negotiated meaning. It is performed for a specific goal and strives towards ritual efficacy. It addresses specific agents that are perceived as having the power to recognise the ritual action and fulfil the ritual aims. Furthermore, they can exert control over the ritual script and meaning (Alexander 2006, 36). Ritual is a process that is not hermetically closed but is interlaced with the social world and underpinned by various external influences and power dimensions. Ritual offers ways of understanding the world beyond the ritual itself and of interpreting the relations between actors and collective representations.

Rituals are internally orientated by generating certain collective memories, ties to spatial configurations, and allegiances (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 4) – these being forms of mental maps evoking groupness (Migdal 2005, 7). At the same time, acts of boundary definition take place, relying on distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Mental checkpoints – “sites and practices that groups use to differentiate members from others and to enforce separation” (Migdal 2005, 6) – are vitalised and categorisations implemented. Ritual is a process that is constantly integrating as well as differentiating. In this way, ritual renegotiates the boundary-making processes that can establish, stabilise, or subvert both symmetrical and hierarchical social relations and distinguish ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’. Thereby, it orders social, political, cultural, and religious differences (Bell 1992, 130; Hüsken and Neubert 2012, 4, 5).

Based on Shneiderman, I introduce two modes of ritual: ‘ritual practice’ and ‘ritual programmes’ (Shneiderman 2015a, 36–39). Practice, as Shneiderman defines it, is “embodied, ritualized action” (37) carried out by individuals of specific ethnic groups “within an indigenous epistemological framework to achieve soteriological goals” (37). Practice, which can be understood as ‘primary frameworks’ in Goffman’s sense, additionally incorporates those ritualised acts which are performed because ‘they have always been done like this’ (Goffman 1974). Ritual practice is often performed in what could be defined as traditional settings such as village households or communities. The ‘village’ is a crucial social location in the traditional societies in the Himalaya and remains an important reference frame in today’s more globalised world (De Sales 2011; Hangen 2010; Shneiderman 2015b).

Primary frames, such as ritual practices, should not be conceived in terms of unchanging traditions. Here I rely on Handelman’s modification to the frame theory. He conceptualises frames through the idea of a Moebius surface (Handelman 2006, 571–82; Handelman 1998, xxiv). In this manner, frames as schemata of interpretation, of understanding, and of seeing the world, define what belongs, demarcate difference, and label occurrences, actions, and obser-

vations, although the boundary surface keeps interlacing (Goffman 1974, 21). While turning the inside out and the outside in, the relationship between the content of the frame and the 'world outside' is constantly negotiated. Transformation of the primary frame occurs, sometimes unnoticed, sometimes reflected upon, but without redefining the framework. The self-transforming modality of a Moebius frame adds an interesting level to the issue of conscious construction of 'identities' or 'culture' and the question of creating or being created, which has been extensively debated in social anthropology (Karlsson 2000, 239ff.).

Ritual programmes, in contrast to ritual practice, are redefined in the context of cultural revival. They are consciously transformed community rituals, analogous to what Goffman defines as a 'keying' (Goffman 1974, 43–44). Thus, these 'new' rituals are perceived as changed by the people involved in the performance. They build on a respective primary framework, but have undergone change in regard to the audience, the setting, material culture, the organising agent, the activated relations, the intended aims, recognising agents, efficacy, and power structures. The transformed rituals include elements of propitiating the sacred and are subsequently still called *rumfát* in Róngring but include additional performance elements and adaptations to new requirements. Shneiderman refers to these rituals as performances; because I use 'performance' and 'performativity' for both types of rituals, I have decided to go with one of the terms that people in Sikkim and the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills use to refer to such transformed rituals, namely the 'programme'. Incidentally, the ritual script of these transformed rituals is literally printed as a programme and handed out to the participants.

Based on Goffman, the terms 'keying' or 'transformation' would be theoretically apt to describe the type of ritual I termed 'programme'. However, the former term seemed too theoretical. For a long time, I played with the idea of using the term 'transformations'; however, readers of previous drafts made me aware that this phrasing could be misleading. Using the term 'transformation' for one ritual type could imply that the other 'ritual practice' does not transform and is unchanged. Another term frequently used in Sikkim and the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills is 'function'. I decided not to use this term because it would become difficult to discuss the 'function' of rituals. The term 'programme' clearly is not perfect, because it can possibly be interpreted as a fixed and pre-formulated script, such as in computer programmes. Consequently, it is underlain by the same criticism as has been expressed for ritual itself, as discussed in this publication.

Such transformations in ritual practice – usually in combination with efforts at cultural revival and heritage production – have been observed in the

Himalaya²⁴ and around the world (Brosius and Polit 2011; Corr 2003). Cultural objectification can be defined as one of the significant keys (to use Goffman's terminology) that initiates the transformation of ritual into what I have termed 'programmes'. Drawing on Handler, I define cultural objectification as "the use of a concept of culture to imagine certain aspects of the world as objects, as things, which are at once possessed by a social group and representative of it" (Handler 2011, 41, drawing on Cohn 1987). Cultural objectification is strongly linked to multi-culturalism and its governance. It is a process that deeply defines postcoloniality and its power structures.

Ritual programmes are predominantly performed in urban and especially multi-ethnic contexts. The recognising agents and the audience alike are comprised of members of the Róng community and others – the latter group encompassing a vast and heterogeneous range of subjects extending from members of other ethnic communities, representatives of different states or (I)NGOs, and the international community (usually only present in the form of tourists) to possibly endless others, as media coverage is broad during these events. The insiders for whom these performances take place are just as diverse, at least in an imagined form (not necessarily present at the event), as the Mútunci Róng are a transnational community with different social statuses, genders, political affiliations, and so forth (Shneiderman 2015a, 37–38). I argue that ritual programmes are performed to specifically transmit an objectified cultural knowledge, activate ties to powerful government agents, proclaim space for the Mútunci Róng, generate belonging to the community, and motivate individual actors to support the ethno-political strategies of the ritual organisers – the Mútunci Róng associations.

In line with Shneiderman (2015a), I argue that ritual programmes are adapted to the requirements of a multi-ethnic and transnational environment and more often than not transport practices traditionally considered sacred (despite having clear social and political implications) into the public realm of negotiations and politics of belonging. Thereby, parameters for transformation are set within fields of political, economic, and social action that previously were not part of the assemblage of rules and actions of ritual performance (see also Torri 2019, 27). They are modern adaptations to needs derived from the political and economic environment, in which culture is a resource and modalities of self-awareness in the Mútunci community are assembled and contested.

I analyse Mútunci ritual practice and its transformations along three dimensions distinguished by Gellner, namely the soteriological, social, and

24 For more details, see Berg 2003/04; Holmberg 2016; Shneiderman 2015a; Torri 2017, 2019; Vandenhelsken 2011; Wettstein 2016.

instrumental dimensions (Gellner 1999).²⁵ These systematise important aspects of ritual meaning as well as mechanisms of belonging. Each dimension is more or less predominant in different types of ritual or in different interpretations of the same ritual (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012, 2). Based on my approach to keying, I add a fourth dimension: the cultural dimension. This dimension seeks to engage with the larger process of cultural objectification, which is the outcome of the dynamics of the modern world and dates to processes of othering and representation under the colonial administration (Handler 2011, 41).²⁶ The layering of another dimension into ritual interpretation is a conflict-laden process along which different ways of understanding self, group, and the world erupt (Chapter Three).

Ritual – both practice and programme – opens up to negotiations, defined as “any process of interaction during which different positions are explicitly or implicitly debated and/or acted out” (Hüsken and Neubert 2012, 3). Such negotiations take place in relation either to the ritual itself or to fields beyond the ritual, defined as “proxy negotiations” (Hüsken and Neubert 2012, 3). To understand the dynamics of such negotiations, I rely on the interrelation as well as the distinction between act, action, and actor. Actors participate in many acts, and as a consequence their actions are not confined to the act. At the same time, acts make narratives that have effects beyond the intentions of the actors. There is a certain degree of “misrecognition of what it is in fact doing” (Bell 1992, 92). Drawing upon Althusser and Foucault, social action – such as ritual – has specific aims and potentials to transform a situation of which the agents are aware. However, they will not see the entire processes and transformations of their ritual activities (Bell 1992, 108). This approach is crucial to unravel the assemblages of ritual acts and actors’ participation in overlapping and supposedly contradictory acts.

25 The instrumentalist dimension is not to be confused with an instrumentalist approach to ritual or social action. An instrumentalist approach often overemphasises that people (and activists involved in processes of identity politics) consciously choose, shape, and recreate their belonging to reach specific gains and get access to resources. Such an approach bears the risk of reducing the mechanisms of belonging to completely conscious choice-based strategies of certain key actors, thereby ignoring the emotional power of claims to belonging (Gschiere 2005, 31) such as feelings of insecurity, which increase the search for roots or security (Anthias 2006, 21). Additionally, purely instrumentalist approaches negate the dynamics of subjectivation, which recognise – drawing upon Foucault – the self as a creative and powerful agent and acknowledge that the self is subjected to forces beyond it (Gschiere 2005, 32). Political manipulation and deep emotional involvement are both at the heart of negotiations over belonging to an ethnically defined community (Gschiere 2005, 18). Strategies chosen by leaders do not need to resonate among the rest of the people and mobilise them (see Karlsson 2001, 29), nor are the leaders themselves always conscious of the effects of their chosen strategies.

26 See Warner 2014a, 30–31 for an example.

Ritual provides a space “for the renegotiation of world-views and power relations” with an open outcome (Rao 2006, 148). Mastery over ritual – as Bell states, building on Bourdieu (1977) – is “to possess the tools for ordering and reordering the world, for perceiving and not perceiving, for evaluating, for unifying, and for differentiating – not as rules, but as a flexible social instinct of what is possible and effective” (Bell 1990, 306). The various actors may be complicit with or resist the dominant value, misunderstand, adapt, or formulate different alternatives (see also Bell 1992, 182). Ritual practice and ritual programmes offer different spaces and have different outcomes. It is particularly the assemblages and contestations between these two types of ritual performances I focus on in this work.

Making Reality, Understanding the World, the Group, and the Self

Afore, I have introduced the process of keying, to use Goffman’s term, as initiated by a redefinition of ritual practice to fulfil the needs of ethno-politics. Now, I outline how the distinction between ritual practice and programme marks an ontological difference. I argue that ritual practices are embedded in what I will call Indigenous ontologies, which, as I have defined elsewhere (Bentley 2021), understand the world according to Indigenous thought-frameworks and cosmologies, similar to what Watts calls Place-Thought (Watts 2013). In my research approach I consciously include what has been called “enchantment” – ergo ways of understanding the world in interaction with more-than-human sacred entities and spiritual experience, as suggested by scholars such as Gergan (2015) and Schulz (2017) – while grounding it in ethnography and heeding Bennett’s interjection that such ontologies also bear political implications and thus remain productive – potentially ambiguously so – in the present day (Bennett 2001). In contrast, ritual programmes are transformed within culturalist ontologies. Such thought-frameworks constitute the ethno-contemporary, defined as a world classified according to (post)colonial racialised anthropological categories and thought (Middleton 2016).

I understand ontologies as analogues to what Campbell called “regimes of value and ordering the world” (Campbell 2010, 200). My theoretical approach is inspired by what Escobar (2007) calls the ontological turn (Blaser 2013, 2014; Cameron et al. 2014; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2009, 2012; Hunt 2014; Pedersen 2012; Viveiros de Castro 1998) as well as by scholarship on decolonising anthropology and its methods (Smith 2012; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021). In this work I analyse the assemblages and negotiations between differ-

ent ways of understanding or framing reality. Therein, I take a distinctly different approach to prominent proponents of the ontological turn who theorise that ontologies constitute different ‘worldings’, meaning they make up different worlds or realities (Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010). Similarly to Vigh and Sausal, I am uneasy with the pure indexicality that underlies this assumption, as it seems to eradicate the complex relationship between signifier and signified, to draw on Saussure’s linguistics (1959), as expressed in the statement ‘things are what they are’. It ignores the complex issue of language’s non-exhaustive representation of reality (Wittgenstein 1999) and undermines people’s doubt, uncertainty, and ambivalence (Vigh and Sausal 2014, 61). Consequently, I understand ontologies as ways of constituting present-day reality and placing oneself in relation with it and its historical embeddedness that exist mutually, at times overlapping. And it is specifically these entanglements that I am interested in.

Ontology as a theoretical concept is distinct from but closely interrelated with the concept of epistemology, which refers to the practices and knowledge systems that are employed to grasp experienced reality and are coupled into often-institutionalised power structures. How and when an individual engages with a specific ontology and knowledge system requires activation, depends on the context, moment in time, and respective positionality (Bentley 2024; Riboli et al. 2021, 4), and will be examined here alongside community ritual performances. This being said, I acknowledge and analyse that individuals exist within epistemic violence through which – as theorised by Spivak (1994) – dominant knowledge production marginalises and silences specific ontologies and their knowledge systems due to power relations rooted in coloniality and reproduced in neoliberal societies.

I do not rely on the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ ontologies, as prominently discussed by Blaser (2013), because it suggests a temporal difference between ontologies, which according to my ethnographic material does not exist. As Theriault points out, the pitfall of such an approach is that it styles the ‘pre-modern’ into a foil for what the West has lost (Theriault 2017, 117). As I argue here, by combining Handelmann’s modification of the frame theory with a practice-orientated analysis, the different ontologies are coeval, sometimes being spatially separated, sometimes not. Importantly, as social anthropologist Soumhya Venkatesan stated during a roundtable, ontologies, understood as theories of being and reality, “have histories and genealogies” and as a consequence they are not “transcontextually stable” (Carrithers et al. 2010, 154). This observation captures my point precisely, since I intend to present how ontologies among the Mútunci Róng are historically anchored, contemporaneous, and alternatively meaningful depending on context and positionality. I use

an ontological approach in so far as it helps me to comprehend such different but entangled ways of understanding the world and take them seriously as perspectives of defining reality and baselines for consequent actions within the framework of my research.

As introduced above, one of the main distinctions I make is between Indigenous ontologies and culturalist ontologies. What strikes me in the literature on Indigenous practices and resistance to a history of subjugation is that in the dichotomy created between the 'Indigenous' and the 'Western', the colonised and the coloniser, the prototypical Indigenous activist turns into a model representative of a generalised non-Western and generic Indigenous ontology. In contrast to this perception, in my ethnographic context, paradoxically, some Indigenous activists, namely the executive members of ethnic associations, re-frame and enact Indigenous knowledge according to the modalities of colonially influenced culturalist ontologies. Such a framing is required to employ Indigeneity (or in the Indian context 'tribalness') as a political resource in the present-day political context. Consequently, while Indigenous activists very much live and practice according to knowledge formulated within Indigenous ontologies (Bentley 2021), the knowledge they publicly disseminate, portray, and promote is often not. This discrepancy throws up the question of whether those who follow the strategies of the coloniser – or the hegemonic government strategies – in fact remain colonised subjects, empower themselves by appropriating the 'strategies of the powerful', or possibly turn into colonisers themselves. Consequently, I think we need to engage in a very careful and radically empirical analysis of what the 'Indigenous' is that we are encountering and writing about – how is the concept employed, when is it political self-denomination, when is it an ontological positioning?

Similarly, as Shneiderman (2015a, 32ff.) theorises for ritual practice and programmes, I argue here that the culturalist ontologies do not substitute or subsume the Indigenous ontologies, nor vice versa. Leaning on Theriault (2017), I theorise that ritual assemblages and contestations "bring competing ontological assumptions and world-making practices into mutually transformative encounters with one another" (116). In this work, I specifically analyse the modalities of how ritual practice and programmes assemble and negotiate Indigenous and culturalist ontologies, and in that process formulate parameters and spaces for constituting belonging. In this I distance myself from the analytical approach of radical difference that some proponents of the ontological turn build their analysis around (for example, Blaser 2014). Radical difference as a unit of analysis, as I have argued above based on Simpson's work (2007, 2014), brings the dangers of containment. It pushes forward a fundamentally Euro-

centric conceptualisation of the world as understood in binaries, instead of re-thinking theory-making along alternative ontologies, as Watts poignantly shows in her theorising of Place-Thought (Watts 2013). Further, I agree with Vigh and Sausal's (2014) critique that taking "incommensurable difference, as an analytical point of departure, may be problematic in relation to the impact that anthropology has outside academia" (49). They warn that rather than do justice to the radical other, such an approach could reinforce radical essentialism.

I started this reflexion on fieldwork and accountability with the letter I received from the ILTA executive members, granting me permission to do research but asking me to write the 'truth'. Holbraad's outline of an anthropological method he devised and calls "ontography" – combining the terms ethnography and ontology –, defines its final goal as the articulation of "true representations of the phenomena" (Holbraad in Alberti et al. 2011, 908). Written in a completely different context, it shows how easily words and concepts merge and how alterity is combined with a search for a singular truth, raising questions such as who defines this truth. Can there only be one true representation of 'the' phenomena? Vigh and Sausal (2014) point out the lack of reflexivity here and warn that "radical essentialism and radical alterity are treated as neutral analytical perspectives and techniques despite their history as socio-political phenomena, and their devastating effect within a shared political world" (59, 63).

Based on this critique, I suggested an analysis of the disjuncture between ritual practices and programmes, and between Indigenous and culturalist ontologies, by investigating how various ontologies are assembled in practices and narratives and negotiated in power struggles and territorial relations. Through such an analysis, we can understand how members of an Indigenous community cognise the world and its sentient beings and interact with them, as well as how they constitute assembled and negotiated versions of self. I argue that in Indigenous communities actors engage in (ritual) acts embedded in either one of these ontologies (Indigenous or culturalist), depending on the time, context, and intention. I believe that a powerful analysis of the challenges and productivity of this process gives credit to Indigenous agency. At the same time, it unravels structures of Indigenous subjugation. Importantly, such an analysis does not aim at resolving contradictions but focusses on how the negotiations constitute a multi-layered world.

Ontologies are embedded in struggles over legitimacy and bound into power structures. Often, states ascribe the status of reality to one specific ontological interpretation of the world over another (Nadasdy 2003, 138–39). They follow such world-making strategies and push forward therein-embedded

epistemologies to strengthen specific agendas, such as in the implementation of large-scale dam projects in the Róng reserve Dzongu (Bentley 2024; Gergan 2020; Huber 2019).

From Blaser's approach, which he terms political ontology, I harness the aspect that ontologies are negotiated not between ethnic groups but over "practices, performances and enactments" (Blaser 2013, 553). Thus, difference is not between one identity or group and another, but is levelled, stacked, produced, and performed in complex relations that are within and beyond individuals as well as groups (Butler 1997; Bell 1999). I do not imply that inter-ethnic distinctions and negotiations are not an aspect of formulating membership in an ethnic group, as formulated in classical definitions of ethnicity (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997), but – as mentioned with regard to belonging – I am interested in the question of which modalities of belonging are deployed within an ethnic group.²⁷ Additionally, focusing on ontologies gives me the potential to analyse how individuals and discourses – that are built around specific ethnic epistemologies and claims – can transcend the respective ethnic group and enable actors to be part of global or regional networks beyond their respective ethnic group.

Similarly to what I mentioned with regard to Pfaff-Czarnecka's approach to belonging, Blaser combines cognitive- and action-orientated approaches: stories, defined as "narratives that embody certain ideas about the world and its dynamics," create spaces to act and enact (Blaser 2013, 548). Embedding the acts and modalities in an ontological approach thus gives me a mode that is "higher in scope and abstraction" (Steven Reyna in Carrithers et al. 2010, 187). Therefore, this approach not only allows me to investigate multiple alternatively formulated relations to specific entities, such as for example to territory, but also enables me to examine how these entities are defined differently depending on the respective ontological context that these relations are being enacted in. As I have argued elsewhere (Bentley 2021), such an approach details concepts of multiple identities and fluid attachments because it introduces an ontological polysemy.

27 The centrality of boundary-works between 'us' and 'them' in the formation of culture-based identities was first taken up by Barth 1969 and then further developed by Jenkins 1997 as well as others: see Banks 1996; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Eriksen 1993; Fenton 1999. Categorisation, the fixation of categories by external forces such as the state, and their impact in transforming patterns of social identification and cultural-based forms of social mobilisation, have been widely discussed in postcolonial writings (for examples see Young 1976; Geertz 1963; Horowitz 1985) as well as more recent studies on systems of classifications – many of them focussing on the Indian reservation system and state censuses (see Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996; Dirks 1992; Hirschman 1986; Jackson 1999; Jackson and Maddox 1993). For the debate on how census categories reshape identifications, see Patriarca 1996; Kertzer and Arel 2002, 5, 6; Nobles 2000; Starr 1987; Nagel 1995; Petersen 1987, 1997; Hacking 1986; Goldberg 1997.

Based on experiences in the field, I do not approach the simultaneity of different understandings and enactments of reality as *per se* conflicting, even if the contradictions are obvious to all involved, but instead conceptualise their analyses as a means of offering us precise insight into what it means to belong – a process that is not unilinear or straightforward, but messy: polysemic, assembled, negotiated, and, yes, sometimes conflicting.

Vulnerability as a Driving Force

Having developed the distinction between ritual practice and programme, I started to ask myself: What, then, do they have in common? Studying my interview transcriptions, notes, observation descriptions, and translations of ritual recitations, I realised that all rituals I have observed have a common logic: they all deal with vulnerability and are strategies of strengthening the position of the Mútunci Róng in a fragile environment. This insight seemed particularly powerful because it reconnected with the dominant (self-)definition as vanishing that I described in the beginning of this chapter. In that context, I had suggested that being vulnerable constitutes an aspect of what it means to belong to the Róng community. Regarding ritual, I theorise that the acts of countervailing this said vulnerability similarly contribute to the modalities of belonging.

Vulnerability as a concept is predominantly applied in studies on health and on environment, climate change, and disaster management (Baldwin and Stanley 2013; Blaikie 1994; Clark 2011; Hilhorst and Bankoff 2004; Whatmore 2013; see Gergan 2014, 2016b for Róng ecological precarity). Even if I do not delve into the pathology of the vulnerable, the link to these topics is crucial. I argue that vulnerability is a particularly powerful framework because it includes the core of Róng Indigenous ontology, which – as I theorise in this present work – evolves around the vulnerable existence. I aim to unravel how community rituals are products of and produce local epistemologies on health, illness, reciprocity, and the aversion of any form of disaster. These are strongly linked to an understanding of human interactions with a fragile environment and a sacred landscape, as well as to a sense of community (Chapters Three and Four), as highlighted by Riboli et al. (2021) in their publication on disaster mitigation from an eco-cosmological perspective.

Vulnerability, in the sense of a greater risk of precarity, is also theorised in the context of poverty and the lack of access to jobs and a job market (Das and Randeria 2015; Forment 2015; Han 2018). This conceptualisation of vulnerability is associated with the provisions of compensatory discrimination in India (Galanter 1984) that link the vulnerability of an ethnic existence with access to

economic provisions and rights. The Indian government introduced the concept of vulnerability into governance in the National Tribal Policy, drafted in 2006 (MoTA 2006). The anthropologist and policy maker B. K. Roy Burman pushed for the inclusion of this concept in order to replace existing pejorative government criteria to define a tribe, such as ‘primitiveness’ or ‘backwardness’, and include a more relational approach to marginality. It was similarly B. K. Roy Burman who influenced the reformulation of tribal policy in Sikkim, as he was appointed the chairperson of the Commission for Review of Environmental and Social Sector Policies, Plans and Programs, referred to as the Burman Commission in Sikkim, in 2005 (Sikkim Government Gazette Notification No. 73/Home/2005; see also Subba 2013; Vandenhelsken 2009/10). The National Tribal Policy has not yet been implemented (MoTA Press Release 15.07.2019). Along similar lines, the Union Government renamed the category Primitive Tribal Group (PTG), created by the Dhebar Commission in 1973, as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) in 2006. This revised approach again impacts the Róng activists and their formulations of Róng ethnic belonging, as the Mútunci Róng were declared an ‘Indigenous Primitive Tribe Group’ on a state level in 2006 (Sikkim Government Gazette Notification No. 375).

I suggest that in Mútunci community vulnerability – understood as arising from human interactions with each other and the environment, leaving its contextual definition up to ethnographic explorations – is a driving force behind the (ritual) acts derived from both Indigenous and culturalist ontologies. A sense of vulnerability, diverse definitions of this vulnerability, and accordingly chosen means to overcome this vulnerability are what bind ritual practice and ritual programmes together and weave the assemblage of what it means to belong to the Mútunci Róng. The ritual acts negotiate and assemble different interpretations of which vulnerability is crucially more endangering to the group as well as the self, and thus requires more counteracting. Consequently, the contestations are not merely about who belongs, but about sustaining life – existentially living.

Vulnerability has a history of being defined as a condition that renders the person who is vulnerable or experiences vulnerability as a victim, a mere paralysed recipient. Such a condition is conceptualised as making people passive and leading to non-action. However, drawing upon my ethnographic data, I follow Butler’s argumentation that a vulnerable positioning can be the precondition to putting up a struggle and attempting to resist whatever causes the threat to safety and survival. Beyond mere survival, people in vulnerable positions can aspire to overcome what makes them vulnerable and establish a position of power instead (Butler 2016). Crucial to my argumentation is that, building on Butler, vulnerability can initiate acts and actions. Butler’s focus is on acts of protest, resistance, and performativity (Butler 2015; Bell 2010), and it is

the latter aspect I take up. I am especially interested in the performative acts of overcoming vulnerability that arise from vulnerability understood as an existential threat itself. I argue that it is these performative acts that crucially formulate belonging to the Mútunci community and to place.

Butler links the vulnerable to a force that can potentially create equality and a democratic system that overcomes subjection and other forms of social injustice. Her approach has been criticised for not elaborating how exactly the one would transmute into the other (Mills 2015, 48; Tsantsoulas 2018). I depart from her elaboration here and use my ethnographic material to analyse how vulnerability motivates actions and inactions, how the self and the community are generated, and how their place in society is reasserted or reformulated. Therefore, I am primarily interested not in processes of resistance, albeit they do figure in my work, but in the act of creating a safe space for well-being or prosperity and consolidating belonging to a defined group within this safe space. I see vulnerability not as a means of breaking down colonial or postcolonial oppression, hierarchies, or categorisations but as a force that motivates actions to achieve more than just survival (Chettri 2018).

To aspire to overcome vulnerability, even if temporarily, means to aspire to the “good life” (Butler 2012, 2015; rethinking Adorno 1951, 39). A ‘good life’, minimally defined, means a life worth living, a life that the person living it is content with or that fulfils his or her aspirations. But the definition of a ‘good life’ also needs to be ethnographically explored.²⁸ We find several strategies here; for some, survival can mean to break with experienced state repression, victimhood, and dominance, termed ‘survivance’ in the context of Indigenous studies (Vizenor 1994; Tuck 2009). Others base their actions on local epistemologies, while some draw on political compliance and windows of opportunity to get subsistence from the state. Hereby, I argue that the ritual act is more than a mere coping strategy, contrary to how it has been defined in the past (Bell 1992, 92). It is an attempt to achieve something, be it religious, political, social, or health-related (Gellner 1999, 58). I do not imply that the acts are successful, nor deny that the result may be showcasing mere resilience, but the primary aim of the acts is an aspiration for more. It is about prosperity and rights, while multiple understandings of both are enacted.

Vulnerability has the potential to use victimhood as a critical resource for action (Schott 2013, 218) and can be conceptualised as a “condition of power and agency” (Velicu and García-López 2018, 57). Rituals are articulations of

28 As an example, in Indigenous politics in South America, the concept of ‘good living’ (*buen vivir*, *sumac kawsay* in Quichua) has inspired alternative models to the development paradigm (Caria and Dominguez 2016; González and Macías Vázquez 2015; Lyall et al. 2018; Merino 2016, Valhust and Beling 2014; Walsh 2010).

this process. They are acts specifically defined to resist vulnerability in order to try to change the circumstances, even if temporarily and in a way that requires repetition. Consequently, rituals are about aspirations and hope. Within the Indigenous context, both aspiration (Povinelli 2002; Shneiderman and Tillin 2015) and hope (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2016; Miyazaki 2004) are powerful concepts. The inclusion of aspirations or hope distinguishes a theoretical framework based on vulnerability from one based on resilience, a concept increasingly used in scholarship on the Himalaya since the Nepal earthquake in 2015 (Shneiderman et al. 2016, 2019). The concept has been criticised because it frames resilient Indigenous people as neoliberal subjects with the capacity to survive, but not to resist othering or subjection. It focuses on adapting to circumstances, but not on capabilities to change them. Consequently, in such a conceptualisation, acts of resilience are limited to reactions, without potential for change.²⁹

What strikes me as potent about conceptualising ritual within a theoretical framework of vulnerability is that it captures the ‘double valence’ of power – subjection and agency (Butler 1997, 2015, 2016). This valence figures prominently in academic literature on Indigenous people. There is an ongoing debate in the social sciences over whether framing Indigenous demands within the colonial multicultural legacy empowers Indigenous people. Prominently, Povinelli discusses how the colonial multicultural legacy demands standards of ‘authentic traditional’ culture that are impossible for people to fulfil, and in this way perpetuates unequal power structures (Povinelli 2002), thus keeping Indigenous people in a vulnerable positioning. Similarly, Simpson (2014, 2016, 2017) and Coulthard (2014) define the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994) as reproducing colonialism’s negative effects and structural inequalities.³⁰ These elaborations are placed in a wider critical discussion in postcolonial studies (Fanon [1952] 2017; Mbembe 2001; Spivak 1999). On the other hand, authors such as Greene argue that by including practices considered customary in their articulation of Indigeneity, the activists in Peru customise Indigeneity and regain agency (Greene 2009).

It is important to note that achieving or aspiring to agency does not necessarily entail the rejection of subjection or of the hierarchical structures that make subjection possible. Scholarship on South Asia, specifically on India and Nepal, tends to include both positionings, focussing more “on the dialectical relationship between the *formation* and the *effects* of policies” (Shah and Shneiderman

29 Chandler and Reid 2016, 2018; Evans and Reid 2014; Hage 2009; Joseph 2013; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2016, 2018, 2019; Miyazaki 2004; Welsh 2014; for Nepal, see Nightingale 2015.

30 See also Alfred 2005; Corntassel and Witmer 2008; Veracini 2015; Wolfe 2016.

2013, 4; see also Shneiderman 2020). As Chhetri (2018) points out in the case of Darjeeling, subjection “is not imposed by external powers as much as it is generated through the people’s perennial quest to reconstitute their identities and thereby attain the rights and belonging they desire” (172). This process of the subjects’ assumption of subjection (Butler 1997) is linked to the fact that the subaltern and the elite are intimately enmeshed in the procedures and practices of the reservation system (Chatterjee 2004).

Scholars in the (north)eastern Himalayan region critically highlight identity-based politics, objectification and governmentality, extractivism, and persistent inequality and the resultant violence.³¹ Others point out that because the Indian state pushes forward with hegemonic nationalist projects and ideologies, ethnic minorities experience it as a continuation of British colonialism, leaving little space for Indigenous knowledge systems (Akhup 2013; Bodhi and Ekka 2013; Karak 2016; Longkumer 2022; Xaxa 2016). Simultaneously, scholarship focuses on responses from ‘below’ that non-exhaustively include resistance (Shah 2010), ritual agency (Shneiderman 2015a), aspirations (Shneiderman 2013a), performativity of the “tribal slot” (to use Li’s term, Li 2000), the appropriation of categorisation (Middleton 2013a, 2013b, 2016), and lastly the formulation of ethnicity as a political resource (Chettri 2017a). In the foreground is often the complex relationship with the state as well as among the people and categories in a given locality.³² In South Asia’s complex history, politics, and power dynamics make the definitions of who is Indigenous and who is a migrant or settler contentious. Here, the field poses different questions with regard to state subjugation and the Indigenous than in more obvious settler contexts such as the Americas or Australia.

Similarly, scholars of ritual theory differ in their assessment of the ability of ritual to reinforce structures or ignite change. Some highlight how rituals reinforce the socio-political order (Durkheim [1915] 1965; Rappaport 1999) and, thus, buttress the positioning of the hegemonic elite (Gramsci 1992); others underline the rituals’ potential to initiate social, political, psychological, and soteriological change (Grimes 1990; Tambiah 1995; Turner 1967; Schechner 2015). The latter approaches discuss in particular the subversive character of rituals performed by marginalised groups (Brosius and Hüsken 2010, 3). In other words, the question raised is whether rituals buttress existing power structures and thus reinforce the vulnerability of Indigenous people, or instead give them agency to improve their positioning and potentially even the means to overthrow the

31 See amongst others Baruah 2020; Chettri 2017a; Karlsson 2011, 2013; Kikon 2019; Middleton 2013c, 2016; Shah 2010; Shneiderman 2013a, 2015; Vandenhelsken 2009/10, 2021; Wouters 2023.

32 For an understanding of locality, see Appadurai 1995.

system. Here, I argue that rituals are performed to counteract vulnerability in order to achieve the ‘good life’; how this act interrelates with hegemonic power structures and processes remains open and requires empirical analysis.

I am aware that my deliberations include vulnerability within different felt and experienced states of precariousness as well as, subsequently, different means and strategies to overcome it. Importantly, to return to my thoughts on the enactment of belonging to a specific ethnic community, in my case the Mútunci Róng in the eastern Himalaya in India and Nepal, I argue that vulnerability and empowerment processes weave a thread that binds together the ritual participants and underpins the various modalities of belonging. In other words, while enacting strategies to overcome vulnerability and create a ‘good life’, the ritual creates the in-group itself. The ritual process defines the specific vulnerability, a procedure, an addressee or recognising agent, and an outcome seen as some form of empowerment. During this process, I argue, relations amongst participants and groups are (re)formulated, attachments to place (re)activated, and self is (re)constituted. Ritual thereby specifically defines an in-group – those who find themselves in a position of vulnerability but are included in some way or other in the process of counteracting this vulnerability. Thus, via ritual processes of vulnerability and empowerment, I analyse different meanings and layers of belonging.

Multiple Sites, Mixed Methods, and Research Partnership

Building on the theoretical framework described above, I incorporated multiple research sites with regards to locality, voiced opinions, and mediums. A respect for a plurality of voices inspired my choice of interview partners and research localities as well as the presentation of the findings. The work draws on ethnographic multi-sited fieldwork spanning 2006 to 2014. After six months’ research for my master’s thesis in 2006, I returned to India in 2008 and stayed for several extensive trips until June 2014. In total, I spent around three and a half years in the eastern Himalayan region.

For most of these years I worked with Kachyo Lepcha, a graduate in English language who had just returned to the village when I met him in 2008. He supported me in learning Rónggríng and in conducting interviews, transcriptions, and translations. Our cooperation was important for grasping the complex nuances in conversation and for understanding ritual language that differs from everyday Rónggríng. Beyond being a research assistant, and probably more importantly, Kachyo was my partner in conversation and formulation of thought.



FIGURE 3: Kachyo Lepcha documenting the last part of the protective ritual Cirim, Pentong Búngthing in the background, Pentong, April 2010.

We discussed our interviews and findings, contradictions, and revelations. He was the only other person who had heard the interviews; attended all of the rituals, meetings, or other events; and worked on the translations. We could discuss the content and deliberate about confusing or conflicting information. He was just as enthusiastic about the discoveries and as frustrated about setbacks as was I. For both of us, the experience of working together, aware of the fact that our relationship started out as that of an employer and an employee, was transformative. Our discussions changed my approaches, and I dare say also his. As such, he contributed to my fieldwork and my thoughts both as a critically thinking, analytical-minded, knowledgeable Indigenous person and, increasingly, as a friend (Figure 3). His work influenced the ethnographic field, which I understand as being made and negotiated in ethnographic practice (Reddy 2009, 90; Schumaker 2001), just as much as mine did. Kachyo then pursued his own interests, becoming a lecturer of Róngring at the college level (Middleton and Cons 2014), and eventually wrote a PhD on the history of the anti-dam movement in Dzongu, which he successfully defended in 2020 (Lepcha 2020).

Given that the Mútunci Róng live in present-day India, Nepal, and Bhutan, my ethnography was multi-sited. In line with my understanding of this approach,

we moved between different geographic locations and their specific features (rural, urban, cyberspace), between different social strata (village elders, local politicians, cyber activists), and between different mediums (classical village fieldwork, media coverage, government papers and proceedings). All of these 'sites' are interconnected and influence each other in multiple ways.

I used a mixed-methods approach. I did participant observation in everyday life, ritual activities, and other community gatherings, during which I kept structured notes about observations and conversations. Kachyo and I recorded and translated thirty-four community rituals in total. The ones we recorded in Dzongu were accompanied by several follow-up interviews with the respective ritual specialists to understand the details of the recitations with regard to the sacred landscape. I attended Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the ritual programme analysed in this work, more commonly spelt Tendong Lho Rumfaat, three times in Sikkim (2006 in Geyzing, 2009 and 2012 in Gangtok) and twice in Kalimpong, at the Boys Hostel in Bom Kyong (2009, 2012). In 2011, Kachyo documented the ritual programme in Rinchenpong.

Kachyo and I conducted 102 recorded semi-structured and narrative interviews with selected partners in Dzongu (Hee Gyathang, Lingdem, Lingdong, Lingthem, Lingzya, Pentong, Saffo, Shipgyer, Sangdong, Tholung, Tingvong) and other parts of North Sikkim (Baksha, Chungtang, Kabi, Mangan, Nampatan), South and West Sikkim (Begham, Gangyop, Githang, Namchi, Rabong, Radhu, Rinchenpong, Solophok), Kalimpong and Darjeeling (including Biyong, Khalijora, Lyangsa, Mane Gompa, Ngasey, Pedong, Pochok), and Ilam (Fikkal, Ilam, Kazini, Phensang, Zilbong), ranging from religious specialists and schoolteachers to elders, monks, local elected representatives, and other residents. Furthermore, I conducted forty-five interviews with Róng activists, some with the same person several times over the years, and attended ten Mútunci Róng association meetings on different occasions (internal, public, as well as for ritual preparation). Additionally, I base my findings on the analysis of other data, such as press releases and publications of the Mútunci Róng associations, newspapers, and social media sites. Moreover, I relied on gazetteers, laws, notifications, official correspondences, and so forth to capture the legal and historic context of my research field.

Geographically, I focused on one in-depth research site for a detailed ethnographic study of the annual community ritual cycle and the modalities of belonging that were generated. I chose Dzongu, the Róng reserve, mainly for two reasons. Various factions of the Róng community, just like foreign scholars, had in the past ascribed cultural authenticity to the Dzongu Mútunci Róng. Numerous Mútunci Róngkup and Róngmít directed and even urged me to do my research in Dzongu 'if I wanted to find real Lepcha culture'. I did not centre my

fieldwork in Dzongu thinking I would find more ‘pure’ or ‘ancient’ traditions there, but the representation by the members of the Mútunci Róng people of the culture of this place as being more ‘authentic’ than in other areas, and the ongoing local debates over this presumed ‘authenticity’, stirred my interest. Additionally, previous ethnographic research work had been conducted in the region (Gorer [1938] 1996; Morris 1938),³³ one of which in particular clearly placed the focus on ritual activities and Róng religion (Siiger 1967; Siiger and Rischel 1967).³⁴ Gorer and Morris lived in Dzongu during colonial times in 1937, and Siiger in 1949, just after independence when the status of Sikkim was not yet clarified. This preceding scholarship gave me material for historical comparison. In accord with A. Simpson (2014) and Smith (2012), I am aware of the need to be cautious about the reproduction of colonially shaped narratives and images. Being able to draw on previous ethnographies from colonial times specifically gave me the means to incorporate how previous ethnographies had created specific imageries of what ‘a’ Mútunci Róng and ‘their’ culture are, and had influenced the perception of the self and the ethnic group among people in Dzongu and Mútunci Róng beyond. The three mentioned authors are interesting each in their distinct ways: Morris is barely known in Dzongu; Siiger is highly respected for his documentation of a now lost ritual practice revolving around the main mountain deity Kóngchen; and Gorer’s work is mainly rejected for his emphasis on Róng sexuality and intimate relationships.

- 33 Geoffrey Gorer and John Morris spent three months residing at the monastery in Lingthem village in 1937. The works by Gorer and Morris have been criticised by academics and by members of the Róng community. While one review praises Morris’s detailed description, another finds fault in his lack of theoretical framework and understanding of what is described (H. 1939; P. 1938). Copies of his book cannot be bought locally and are hardly accessible to the people in Sikkim. Compared to Morris’s work, Gorer’s book has received a lot more attention internationally and locally. Early reviewers mainly complimented his work, while later ones criticised his theoretical approach (P. 1939; Enthoven 1939; Linton 1939; Nash 1941; Miller 1968–69; Caplan 1968). Gorer’s book has been reprinted (2005), is available locally, and is well-known. Many Róng scholars and intellectuals criticise it, mainly for his emphasis on sexuality. Considering the authors’ short stays, lack of training and language skills, and, at least in Gorer’s case, use of an outdated theoretical approach, both books may be informative but lack crucial information and contain many mistakes, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations.
- 34 Halfdan Siiger was in Tingvong in Dzongu and Singhik, just outside the reserve, for around four months in 1949. From today’s perspective, his ethnographic material is valuable despite being fragmentary and frequently relying on secondary descriptions instead of his own participation, due to the short time frame of the research. What is especially remarkable is the transparency with which the ethnographic material is set forth, often mentioning the informant by name or the problems in acquiring the data and the specific means and methods of dealing with the problems. Siiger had planned a third volume on the analysis of Róng religion, which he did not complete (Plaisier 2007b). For reviews of his work, see Gorer 1968; Sprigg 1967; Turnbull 1969; Angel 1968. Additionally, Siiger published several articles (Siiger 1955, 1956, 1967, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 1978, 1981; Siiger and Jørgensen 1966).



FIGURE 4: Map of Dzongu, 2013, designed by Sonam Tashi Gyaltzen based on the Dzongu Ecotourism Map, designed by Peter S. Lepcha, ECOSS.

In Dzongu (Figure 4), I focused on the villages Lingthem, Tingvong, and Pentong. Lingthem is the village where Gorer resided, but more importantly it is home to Kachyo. It became my base in Dzongu. Tingvong is the cluster of hamlets where Siiger conducted most of his fieldwork. As the importance of the ritual for Kóngchen mentioned above became obvious, we spent more time there. Pentong, the third village in which we observed ritual practices, seemed an interesting addition because there is an experienced senior Róng religious specialist there and all the households belong to one male clan. Lingthem and Tingvong can be described as ‘immigration’ villages. People from more remote places in Dzongu, such as Pentong, had settled there due to the better road

connectivity and access to the markets.³⁵ Therefore, the villages have a larger number of male residential clans. Considering that previously the clan seems to have been the important social unit within Róng society, this possibility for comparison seemed sensible. Incidentally, this was also the village of Kachyo's father, who likewise had a history of moving to Lingthem, albeit one that was quite unique: because he was a twin, a maternal uncle who lived in Lingthem had adopted him, so he came to the village as an infant. Additionally, we visited other Dzongu villages where we met religious specialists, activists, and other knowledge keepers alike.

Some Róng interview partners and friends from Kalimpong supported the nostalgia and authenticity connected to Dzongu, while others were critical and even expressed their slight discontent with me doing my work in Dzongu. Some, such as the ILTA president, explicitly rejected the notion of a particularly authentic Róng culture in Dzongu and claimed, rather, that the region had experienced a strong Buddhist influence, while in comparison Róng culture and lifestyle in Kalimpong remained more original (ILTA president, July 2006). Another important interjection was that the interest of anthropologists and researchers in Sikkim and Dzongu in the past had given Mútunci Róng of that region a more distinct voice. In comparison, the Róng activists in Kalimpong felt that the Mútunci Róng in West Bengal had not been heard. They highlighted the complicity of the anthropologists and their power to shape the representation of a specific culture with respect to the outside world. Public and historical visibility in records, be they academic or administrative, is crucial in the politics of recognition, as Shneiderman elaborates for the Thangmi (2015a).

Kachyo and I visited several other rural sites in South and West Sikkim (Gyalshing, Soreng, and Namchi districts) and what was then the Kalimpong subdivision, but for shorter stays. Kalimpong became a district in 2017, after the time of my fieldwork, but while I was revising my research for publication. As it was still a subdivision in the timeframe this work focuses on (2006 to 2014), I will continue to refer to Darjeeling district including Kalimpong when naming incidents that occurred within this timeframe. I use the term 'Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills' to frame the region, unless I am drawing on the work of other scholars. Then I use their regional terminology. I place Kalimpong before Darjeeling as my interview partners in West Bengal mainly live in and around Kalimpong.

35 Since 2016 Tingvong and the villages further north on the eastern valley side of the river Rónggyóng, including Pentong, have been less accessible than during the time of my field work. Due to a massive landslide a lake was formed and the bridge over it collapses every rainy season (Bhutia et al. 2016; Lepcha et al. 2018). For a long stretches in the year, these villages are regularly cut off and residents are forced to walk and use a raft.

In Kalimpong, we observed rituals and everyday life, and interviewed selected key people such as religious specialists, village leaders, and teachers. Besides the rural village setting, I lived in Gangtok for several months each year and had lengthy stays in Kalimpong town. In these urban regions, I interviewed Róng activists, participated in meetings and ritual programmes, visited protest sites of the hunger strike that was taking place at the time, and interacted with local scholars and other resource people, such as journalists. Most of these interviews I conducted alone. I spent many days working with Kachyo on transcription and interview notes, furthering our exchange. In April 2011, Kachyo and I spent one month in Fikkal, in the Ilam district of Nepal. We visited some village areas and interviewed members of the local Mútunci Róng associations, religious specialists, Buddhist monks, and a descendent of the former aristocracy (*Kota kazi*), and interacted with scholars and writers of the region. Unfortunately, I could not enter Bhutan for research.

During my stay in Kalimpong, I built up a productive relationship with Azuk Tamsang (Figure 5). When I met him, he was a young and aspiring Róng activist who held the position of ILTA welfare secretary. Initially, he had been chosen to guide me instead of the literary secretary mentioned in the letter to me from ILTA, because the latter was getting too old to venture around remote villages and was too busy to spend his time with a young researcher. Azuk and I came from very different positionings, an activist and a researcher, and our perspectives and theories could not have been more distinctively different. But our mutual interest in collecting narratives and in hearing what the people beyond the urban centres actually had to say tied us together. We visited several villages in and around Kalimpong and attended ritual performances, rallies, meetings, weddings, and other social gatherings. Azuk never worked as a research assistant for me. Many of the interviews I recorded with Azuk, I would later transcribe and translate together with Kachyo. While initially our interactions were an obligation for him because he had been directed to see who that foreign researcher was and what she was doing, it then turned into a research partnership, during which we both assisted each other in our respective projects. During my stays in Kalimpong, we discussed the pressing issues in the cultural and ethno-political landscape of the Kalimpong Mútunci Róng. Many a time the discussions were heated, but we learnt to understand and respect our different approaches and mutually opened our eyes to different perspectives on the world. What began as a cautious interaction, based on distrust, turned over the years into a friendship based on trust and mutual understanding that transformed both our attitudes to our respective work.

Of course, Róng people have moved beyond the regions around Sikkim, the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, and Ilam. The Mútunci as a community do



FIGURE 5: Azuk Tamsang giving a speech at Tendong Hlo Rumfát, Kalimpong, August 2009 © S. T. Wangdi.

not have a strong history of emigration – unlike, for example, the Nepalese groups involved in the military services – but today many Mútunci Róngkup and Róngmít leave their homes and go to cities in India or abroad, such as Dubai, London, Sydney, and New York, for studies and better job opportunities. I have not done any participant observation in those cities, as Kikon and Karlsson (2019, 2020), McDuie-Ra (2012, 2013), and Smith and Gergan (2015) have done on migrants from other northeastern Indian states, but today the wider transnational community adds to the local discourses mainly via social media and infrequent visits home. Social media sites have become an important site of research. In 2008 the internet had just reached Sikkim’s villages and was becoming more widely used. Very quickly, the social media sites (during my fieldwork chiefly Facebook) developed into an important medium to disseminate information and discuss issues and strategies, some of which actually materialised and impacted the world beyond the global net. A young, vibrant, and digitally connected generation of Mútunci Róng residing in and far beyond the Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Ilam hills emerged as part of a global discourse on Róng culture and notions of belonging and on the Róng homeland. Since it was then a new medium and people were not yet habituated to its scope, many users were a lot less cautious about what they said online than they would be in a public domain in which they were physically present. Especially in the initial years of my research, the government, and here I mainly mean the Sikkim

state government, did not yet check or exert control over social media sites, so people did not expect repercussions. This was something that would change with the online presence of anti-dam activists³⁶ and the increased government use of social media. Still, on social media, youth expressed fears, emotions, aspirations, and refreshingly uncensored speech in posts and comments, and I started to document the public online interaction on sites and in groups dedicated to various Róng topics and causes.³⁷

Over the near decade I have spent in the Róng community, my positioning has changed. The ethnographer's non-static positioning in the field is a point that Middleton and Cons (2014) make and which applies to my work. My interactions changed as I engaged in local projects of heritage conservation, especially rebuilding after the earthquake of 18 September 2011. I made it a point to share whatever information and knowledge I had collected with interested members of the local communities, activists, scholars, designers, artists, and government agents alike. I shared recordings and photographs, published articles locally, edited press releases and articles written by members of the Róng community, participated in organising events, contributed to discussions on various government and non-government projects related to Róng culture and history, and compiled information on certain narratives and ethnographic methodology for presentations and workshops held by myself or others. With the passing of years, I became accepted – albeit warily so by some members of the Róng community – as an 'expert' in my own right. This position is to a certain extent just as uncomfortable as being denied any right to do research. My relationship to members of the community changed, as some turned into close friends, associates, and confidants. My writings were and still are discussed locally, and I have become a contributor to the local debate on Róng culture.

My long-term involvement gives me unique insight and sensitivity regarding issues relevant to the Róng community, it has especially strengthened my awareness of the responsibility I carry towards the community and the many individuals who have opened up to me, placed their trust in me, and are dear to me. This self-conception and awareness of my own changing position has strongly influenced the approach I have adopted in this ethnographic study.

36 Within the movement, the activists fighting against the dams along the Tista River started calling themselves pro-river activists, a term focussing on the river ecosystems and their connection with them instead of on what they oppose. While acknowledging the importance of this self-understanding, I use the term 'anti-dam' as it was dominantly used during my fieldwork.

37 See Ginsberg 2016 on Indigenous digital media use.

Outline

In the following I give a short outline of this work. In Chapter Two, I introduce the most prominent Róng ritual programme, Tendong Hlo Rumfát. In investigating the history of its revival, I outline the processes of making Róng culture legible and regaining power over entextualised transmission, and highlight the activists' attempts to make a unified canon of Róng culture. While the unification of culture is strongly promoted by Róng activists, I argue that the assemblage of the ritual programme allows creativity, polysemy, and potentially finding pride beyond a damage narrative.

In Chapter Three, two important community rituals in Dzongu (Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim) are introduced, with a focus on their function of averting dangers, defined as natural catastrophes and diseases but also social unrest. I discuss the concept of ritual exchange between humans and more-than-human beings as well as the expected efficacy and the dangers of the 'vanishing' ritual specialist. In the second part, I highlight how transfers of revived ritual into the Dzongu setting ignite local discussion on cultural dominance and soteriological outcomes of ritual. I argue that it is not the ritual programmes that promote objectified Róng culture that are contested, but the transfer of unknown rituals into Dzongu that are not distinctly framed as different from village community practice. In their similarity, they emerge as competition, specifically, as I suggest, because they disrupt the ritual efficacy in counteracting vulnerability.

In Chapter Four, I then focus on the relations to land formulated in village practice that crucially enable the formulation of a safe space. Ritual practice enacts an understanding of the world in which humans and more-than-humans interact in different realms – which I have defined as Róng Indigenous ontology. Based on ritual recitation, I detail how village ritual practice activates the more-than-human beings embedded in the immediate visible topographic landscape as guardians. As such, I maintain that ritual practices as strategies of overcoming vulnerability depend on intimate relations and knowledge of the immediate landscape. By activating local more-than-human entities, rituals protect an inner space – the village – and all its residents from the said imminent dangers. In this context, the safe space for belonging is formulated through localised Indigenous knowledge and expands to all residents of said demarcated area.

Then, in Chapter Five, I unravel the various ways in which the relations between humans, more-than-human beings, and land/water are reformulated in cultural revival and the anti-dam protests. Importantly, I contextualise this refashioning in the processes of regionalism and territorial fragmentation that derived from the formation of the states of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. I argue

that the delocalisation of more-than-human beings, an increasingly unspecific animist understanding of ritual practice as worship of Mother Nature, and the sacralisation of culture enable new ways of tapping the powers of the guardians of land and water. The reformulated attachments to land enable different articulations of Indigeneity within and beyond regional and national borders that in turn enable strategies of countering diverse vulnerabilities through mechanisms available in cultural ontologies and state governance.

As I have argued, both vulnerability and ritual include processes of agency and subjection. In this regard, rituals are acts that negotiate power and access to powerful positions in a society. Chapter Six introduces the question of power in ritual practice, a power, as I argue, that is historically rooted but detached from present-day political processes. Based on oral traditions and historical records, I discuss the power relations between Dzongu residents and the royal dynasty of Sikkim that were enacted and re-enacted in the performance of the historical Kóngchen ritual, as it used to be conducted in Tingvong, Upper Dzongu. While in the local understanding of (non)interactions with more-than-human beings and their consequence for human lives and the environment, the discontinued ritual is still crucially interlinked with ritual practice today, through the demise of the kingdom and the change in political organisation and parameters to access power, the ritual practice lost its worldly recognising agent and thus its political impact. Additionally, as I argue, the increased understanding of the world beyond Indigenous ontologies initiated the weakening of the ritual's efficacy. More-than-human beings in the contemporary world have lost their influence on political affairs.

In Chapter Seven, I then introduce ritual programmes as spaces in which to establish and cultivate patron–client relations with decision-makers and powerful brokers in present-day Sikkim and beyond. Regional political networks, the differentiated citizenship structure, and the anti-dam protest – which was at its peak during my fieldwork – crucially shaped the interactions between Mútunci Róng association members and their strategies for overcoming vulnerability and achieving a ‘good’ life. In an epilogue, I recall the processes of empowerment and of counteracting vulnerability, and strategies of shaping a narrative of the Indigenous Mútunci Róng within and beyond the damage narrative. Then, in line with the contestations in ritual assemblage and transfers, I recall the “dark side of Indigeneity” (Shah 2010) and discuss the ways in which a closer look at Róng Indigenous ontologies could be fruitful for reconceptualising ideas of relations to land, ownership, and access to resources.

CHAPTER TWO

**Ritual Revival: Assembling Culture,
Negotiating Unity, Making Memories**





FIGURE 6: Tendong hill, August 2012.

What are ritual programmes? In this chapter, I discuss the processes – or the ‘keys’, in Goffman’s sense – that transform ritual practice into a programme. The most famous Róng ritual programme is called Tendong Hlo Rumfát. Especially in Sikkim, it has emerged as the most important event in the annual Róng cultural calendar. Tendong Hlo Rumfát is held once a year at the heights of monsoon, from 6 to 8 August in Sikkim and on 22 August in Kalimpong. It revolves around a mythological flood, during which members of the Róng community were saved upon Tendong hill, located in present-day Namchi district, Sikkim, on the mountain range between the Rangit River in the west and the Tista River in the east (Figure 6). Tendong is the present-day pronunciation of Róngring term *tungrong*, translated as ‘ladder, staircase or means of rising’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 389). *Hlo* means ‘hill, hillock’.

Tendong Hlo Rumfát emerged as the symbolic bearer of Róng culture, future, and prosperity. How did this occur? I discuss the making of ritual programmes as a strategy to counteract the persistent fear that the Róng culture and people are vanishing. This chapter unpicks the mutual existence of processes of subjugation and agency in ritual assemblage, as well as the processes of cultural objectification and state recognition.

Ritual programmes are performative expressions of a historically rooted “intensive affective politics of self-objectification” (Shneiderman 2020, 213).

Tendong Hlo Rumfát, as promoted by the Mútunci Róng associations, is performed to “educate the young Lepcha children to appreciate the value of their own ancient roots” (Aachuley Report 1999b, 22) and for the “development of Lepcha education and culture” (RMRT president, speech, Tendong Hlo Rumfát, Gangtok, August 2009; Aachuley Report 2001a). In the activists’ discourse on cultural revival, a quantifiable ancient culture is on the verge of becoming lost or destroyed by various forces and needs to be catalogued authentically in order to be passed on, especially to the younger generation (see also Corr 2003, 40, 51). In other words, ritual programmes produce and pass down objectified cultural content that has alternatively been defined as property (Brosius and Polit 2011, 2), commodity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), or resource (Handler 2011, 49). They engage in creating visibility and thus external recognisability as an ethnic group in the ethno-contemporary. Visibility/non-visibility is a crucial concept in studies of minority groups, as for example Michel (2013) elaborates for the Swiss context.

In Rónggring, as in many Indigenous languages, there is no specific word for ‘culture’. When people now talk about their culture in Rónggring, the word *lúngten* or *lúngten sung* is commonly used as the closest match. It is translated as ‘tradition’. The stem of the word, *lúng*, means ‘blessing’ (Tamsang 2005, 159) and ‘degree’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 772), and it is used to describe the initiation of the Róng religious specialists. The verb carries yet another meaning: it translates as ‘to teach’ as well as ‘to administer’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 772). The second part of the expression *lúngten*, the word *ten*, means ‘to preach’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 394). The addition *sung*, ‘story’, emphasises the narrative style and indicates the importance of knowledge transmission and storytelling.

The most approximate Rónggring word for ‘culture’ thus highlights the active imparting of religious tradition, which is transmitted orally by initiated specialists. Additionally, it refers to administering or ruling in a legal and political sense. Simultaneously, it is used for the mythological corpus revolving around the origin of the world, all sentient beings, and customs (Bentley 2008; Foning [1987] 2003, 87). Thus, in the concept of *lúngten sung*, religious, cultural, political, and legal components are assembled in the process of handing down knowledge. It is comparable to the concept of *mundhum* or *muddum* among the Kirati groups of the central-eastern Himalaya or *kheti* among the Magar in western Nepal. The term *sung* is most likely related to **dum*, the common root found in the different words for *mudhum* in the various Rai languages and in Limbu. It is related to the Tibetan term *sgrung* that means ‘fable’ or ‘legend’ (Gaenszle 2011, 281). As Gaenszle (2011) describes for *mudhum*, *lúngten sung* incorporates



FIGURE 7: Netuk Lepcha, Lingthem Búngthíng, offering millet beer, November 2013 © Kunga Tashi Lepcha.

a “common ancestral way of life” (281; see also Gaenzle 1991, 1993; Oppitz 1991; Schlemmer 2003/04, 25–26, 132). In the assemblage of ritual programmes, I suggest, Róng activists and organisers adapt core elements of *lúngten sung*, namely *narrating*, *teaching*, and *administering*, to the requirements of the political scenario of late liberalism and to the demands of a culturalist branding of the world.

Religious specialists, called *búngthíng* or in Dzongu *padim*,³⁸ are the keepers of this oral knowledge and the main actors in community ritual practice (Figure 7). During my fieldwork, Dzongu residents used the words *búngthíng* and *padim* interchangeably, the latter being more frequent. Plaisier defines a *padim* as a *búngthíng* who has turned *mun* (Plaisier 2005, 9). While this is the case in Dzongu, the term is also used for *búngthíng* who do not possess a *mun* spirit. According to K. P. Tamsang, the term *búngthíng* is a composite of *búng*, ‘mouth’, and *áthíng*, ‘lord’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 405) or ‘highly respected person’. A *búngthíng* is “the one with the power over speech” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 534), literally the ‘lord of the mouth’. This denomination emphasises the importance of oral transmission. There is an alternative spelling of the word that emphasises an additional meaning associated with the profession: *bóngthíng* (Plaisier 2005, 9). This spelling is used by the Róng scholar Arthur Foning as well

38 Plaisier (2005, 9) and Nebesky-Wojkowitz (unpublished a, 1) spell the word *padem*.

as linguist Heleen Plaisir. The word *bóng* means ‘trunk’, ‘foundation’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 529), ‘power’ (Tamsang 2005, 119) or ‘main’ and ‘original’ (Foning [1987] 2003, 529). According to Foning, the religious specialist is described as “the original honourable and the highly respected one” (Foning [1987] 2003, 62). After several discussion, I decided to use the former spelling of the word that foregrounds the importance of orality and the power over communications and interactions.³⁹

A man comes to be a *búngthing* when the personal spirit within a patri-lineage chooses him, a moment which is usually experienced through illness or spells of madness, and which then requires initiation. The *búngthing* is one of the two types of ritual specialists specific to the Róng Indigenous religious tradition. He communicates with more-than-human entities by means of ritual exchange and has medical knowledge. The other type, called *mun*, can be classified as a spirit medium. He or she is chosen by a female *mun* spirit and can directly communicate with the more-than-human beings, become possessed, and perform specific healing or death rituals.⁴⁰

So how do ritual transformations reformulate this oral transmission of religious knowledge, turn it into objectified culture, and pass it on? In this chapter, I analyse the assemblage of Tendong Hlo Rumfát. Beginning with the history of ritual revival, I investigate the flood myth and the pre-existing ritual practices. Then, the actors and their role in the campaign for state recognition of the ritual are introduced. Next, following the various compositional components of the ritual programmes, to use Oppitz’s concept (1999a), I describe Tendong Hlo Rumfát, mainly concentrating on the performance in 2009. Distinctively, the assemblage approach applied in this work does not use sameness as an analytical concept, something that A. Simpson (2014) raised as a critique concerning the anthropological conceptualisation of culture, but instead analyses how ritual organisers assemble and define their heritage.⁴¹

Then I examine the subaltern power in ritual assemblage embedded in the historical context of hegemony and script. I am interested in how ritual assemblages are integrated in processes of regaining power over cultural transmission and intensify processes of creating a canon of unified and authenticated culture,

39 When Kachyo was lecturer at Geyzing College, West Sikkim, the staff of the Lepcha Department, Sikkim University, and colleges had similar discussions and made the decision to use the spelling *búngthing*. Thus, I align myself with this decision.

40 For descriptions of the profession see Foning [1987] 2003, 80–83; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1952, 27–39; P. T. Simik, July 2006; Siiger 1967, 165; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 389; Tamsang [1983] 1998, 47–49.

41 On the ambiguity of difference, see Cooper and Stoler 1997, 1–56.



FIGURE 8: Sonam Tshering Lepcha, August 2009 © S. T. Wangdi.

as a requirement of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition. This raises the question of what position religious specialists – the traditional mediums of oral Indigenous knowledge – have in cultural revival and in the ritual programmes. Lastly, in these processes, debates on legitimacy and authority over cultural production take centre stage.

An Ancient and Lost Tradition: Assembling Tendong Hlo Rumfát

When I started out on my quest to collect information on Tendong Hlo Rumfát, most of my interview partners, members of the various Mútunci Róng associations, or others involved in the revival, referred me to Sonam Tshering Lepcha (Figure 8). They respectfully called him *lapân*, teacher, narrated the version of the mythology he had told them, and suggested I meet him personally. Sonam Tshering Lepcha (1928–2020), from Bom Kyong in Kalimpong, had received the

Padma Shri award, the fourth highest civilian award in India, for his contributions in folk music and was highly respected for his knowledge of Róng culture and his dedication to the preservation and promotion of the same. He has been described as the “backbone of the indigenous Lepcha culture” (ILTA, 1 June 2010). He initiated the revival of Tendong Hlo Rumfát and was one of the most influential figures in the Róng cultural revival in India and Nepal.

The revival of Tendong Hlo Rumfát activated a discourse about a lost tradition. Sonam Tshering Lepcha formulated how he had tried to capture and preserve what would otherwise have been lost. He himself was not a religious specialist, but according to his own information he gained his experience in the profession during his childhood years by assisting his paternal aunt, who was a great *mun*. His aunt used to perform Tendong Hlo Rumfát, and he learnt the recitations and performance of this ritual from assisting her (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010). Asked about the Tendong Hlo Rumfát recitations that he had published in a booklet, he described himself as a medium and an arranger of the ancient words:

All the words are not mine, they are brought to me by mun and búngthing who used to do Tendong Hlo Rumfát before, and hence I know how to do the offering to Tendong Hlo. I learned from the mun and búngthing, so I just brought back again what had already vanished [...] because my aunt used to do Tendong Hlo Rumfát, all the words of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát book are the original words. It is not my creation. I just arranged the sentences and clarified the words. That much I did. Otherwise it is the words of the mun. (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010)

Similarly, the ritual organisers in Sikkim portrayed Tendong Hlo Rumfát as a very ancient ritual, of which the performance had ceased and the knowledge had nearly been lost. Members of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee, official press releases, media coverage, and the public discourse continually underlined the ancientness of the festival based on the assumed ancientness of one of its most crucial compositional components, the flood mythology. In doing so, the Róng activists attempted to underpin it with legitimacy. The ritual programme as it is celebrated today is clearly not, as publicised, “one of the oldest festivals” of the Mútunci (Now! Feature 2002, August 7–13, 9; SE Report 2005, July 26, 1). However, I argue here that the ritual programme is not a case of the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Instead, various ritual interpretations, myths, prior practices, as well as cultural, educational,

and political features provide the compositional components that have been reassembled into the celebration of Tendong Hlo Rumfát.

Ritual practice with regard to Tendong hill did exist in the past. An interview partner from South Sikkim remembered that previously, when the monsoon was particularly heavy, elders used to perform a ritual against floods at Tendong hill (Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, July 2009). A similar reference can be found published by Foning ([1987] 2003). In the vicinity of Tendong hill, some families conducted house rituals (Li Rumfát) dedicated to Tendong Hlo as a guardian deity to protect them from floods. One family, for example, started performing the ritual seven generations ago, according to their own oral tradition (Tempa Lepcha, July 2009). Likewise, in Kalimpong Tendong Hlo is appropriated during the house ritual (Lyangsong Tamsang, July 2006). Ritual practice revolving around the deity residing in Tendong hill was more specifically associated with lineages and seasonal incidents rather than the community.

One concise composite element is the flood myth. It exists in several variations that all include similar motifs: flood, flight up a hill, changing geographical features, a bird as mediator, and benevolent deities as saviours. All myth variations start with a flood in the land of the Mútunci Róng, called Ne Máyel Lyáng, the sacred hidden land (*ne* sacred, *má* hide, *yel* eternal, *lyáng* land). The reasons for the flood vary; some narrations give no cause (Mainwaring [1876] 1971, xx, note; Waddell [1899] 1978, 110; Tamsang [1983] 1998, 56.). As these references only curtly mention the myth, it is possible that an incomplete story was collected. The version promoted during Tendong Hlo Rumfát mentions a love story between the two main rivers of the region, Rangit and Tista, called Róngít and Róngnyú in the Róng language. Róngít is composed of the two words *róng* and *ít* and translates as ‘the origin of the Mútunci Róng’, as *róng* is the short version of the endonym Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup and *ít* means ‘to create’ and refers to an origin or source. The word *róngnyú* is connoted female through the ending *-nyú*. While the word *nyú* means ‘aunt’ but is added to words to emphasise the female character. Róngnyú is translated as ‘motherly’ or female Mútunci Róngmít. The river Rangit flows through the west of Sikkim, is a major tributary to the Tista, and originates in the Rathong glacier, while the Tista springs from the Tso Lamu Lake in the north of Sikkim. Some sources mention that Rangit comes from Naho Dâ [lake], while Tista originates in Natar Dâ (RMROS 2004; Doma 2005, August 6, 2). This lake or these lakes feature importantly in origin mythologies (Bentley 2008). The location of Naho Natar Dâ given by senior religious specialists is often very vague, being somewhere in the lap of the mighty mountains. The correlation between the mythological Naho Natar Dâ and for example the Tso Lamu Lake seemed apparent in this context but was not generally made.



FIGURE 9: Confluence of Tista and Rangit, January 2012.

As the stories go, the two rivers wanted to be together and decided to meet further south from their separate mountain homes in a thick jungle, *punzók* in Róngrín (Tamsang 2008a, 20; S. T. Tamsang 2004).⁴² The female river Tista reached the meeting point swiftly, because she took a snake or mythical water dragon (*parílbu*) that glided down the hills smoothly as a guide. The male river Rangit followed a hungry partridge (*tútfo*) that kept making detours to find food. Therefore, he was delayed and reached the meeting point after his lover had already flowed by. While the river name Rangit clearly traces back to the original name Róngít, Tista is said to derive from an utterance of the Rangit River, when he reached the meeting point later than the female river. He said, ‘*thi sathá?*’ which means ‘when did you reach?’ (Tamsang 2008a, 21; S. T. Tamsang 2004). Angry or surprised, he decided to return to the mountains and thereby flooded Ne Máyel Lyáng. Today, the confluence of the two rivers is colloquially referred to as the ‘lovers’ meet’ – as written on a signboard at a viewpoint on the road to Darjeeling (Figure 9). This narrative version predominantly relies on sources from Kalimpong.

Initially, the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee promoted a version in which an earthquake damaged the Naho Natar lakes, causing the rivers to come down from the mountains and flood Ne Máyel Lyáng (RMROS 2004, Now! Feature 2002, August 7–13, 9; Now! Report 2003, August 6–12,

42 See Lepcha and Lepcha 2021 and Foning 2022 for an art-ethnography of the narrative.

8; Doma 2005, August 6, 2). In several other variations, a serpent blocked the river, the reasons why this happened again varying (de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 32, 35; Das and Banerjee 1962, 128; Foning [1987] 2003, 91–93; Hermanns 1954, 40–44). Similarly, some accounts of the love story between the rivers do not mention a deluge (de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 122–23; Risley [1894] 1973, 41). In South Sikkim we found a version that connected the flood with the narrative of the sun(s) and the moon that is quite common in Northeast India (Blackburn 2008, 153–57, Appendix 3; Doma 2010, 54–58). Here, the strength of all the suns dried out the world and, after the people prayed for rain, it came and caused a flood (Interlocutors, July 2009) or, alternatively, seven suns were called upon to stop the flood (Dorji Karthak Lepcha, July 2009). Another, more general, account placed the flood early in the time of creation, when there was not enough water in the world, so the creator deity Itbú Mú called all the deities of water to convene, because water was necessary for survival. But when all the water came together, the world was submerged (MLAS culture secretary, January 2010).

When the flood came, the humans fled up Mount Tendong. Many versions include a sister mountain, Maenam hill (Mánóm Hlo), which was then submerged (Das and Banerjee 1962, 131–32; Kotturan 1989, 42–44; Tamsang 1997a, 23, 2008a, 21; Waddell [1899], 1978, 110). In Róngring, the hill is named Mánóm, a composite of *má* ‘hide’ and *anóm* ‘elder sister’, translating as the hiding elder sister (Tamsang 1997a, 23). On the Mount Tendong, the people prayed to the deities (*rum dár*) to save them. In the most popularly told version today, they called upon Itbú Mú.⁴³ A partridge, *kohomfo*, took on the role of mediator between the deity and the people in several versions of the narration and offered millet beer (*ci*). In some narrative variations, the deity herself descended in the form of a bird (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 56; Choden Lepcha, August 2009; Sonam Tshering Lepcha, Kalimpong, August 2009). In two accounts known to me, Tendong hill grew or changed shape to prevent submersion (Mainwaring [1876] 1971, xx, note; Waddell [1899] 1978, 111).

The deity – varying depending on the version – then intervened and made the flood recede. In some renderings the river was merely convinced to flow again but no physical or magical powers were used (Phur Tshering Lepcha, July 2009; Tempa Lepcha, July 2009; Tamsang 2008a, 21; Gurung and Lama 2004, 122; Foning [1987] 2003, 93). In others, physical intervention was required. For instance, the deity threw a stick to the ground and made a hole to drain the water (Dorji Karthak Lepcha, July 2009; Choden Lepcha, August 2009; Lingthem

43 For examples, see Phur Tshering Lepcha, July 2009; Tempa Lepcha, July 2009; Tamsang 2008a, 21; Gurung and Lama 2004, 122; RMROS 2004; Foning [1987] 2003, 93; Sangdong Bünghing, August 2009; N. Lepcha, former MLA, August 2009.

Búngthing, January 2010; de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975).⁴⁴ In the variation in which an earthquake had initiated the flood, the creator deity caused another earthquake that made other peaks rise up and force the flood to drain southwards (Now Feature 7.–13. 8. 2002, 9; Now! Report 2003, August 6–12, 8; Doma 2005, August 6, 2).⁴⁵

The importance of the flood myth and Tendong Hlo Rumfát in cultural revival was visualised in the emblem or flag of both RMRT and ILTA. The RMRT emblem shows Tendong hill in the middle front part with a partridge towering above it and Mount Kangchendzonga in the background. All were described as depicting the “history, creation and tradition” of the Mútunci Róng (RMRT 1998, 9). The ILTA flag takes up the same symbolic components. It shows Mount Tendong, a partridge perched on the hillock with both wings spread out, and Mount Kangchendzonga as a backdrop (ILTA 2003/04; Tamsang 2001b). Located at the top and the bottom of both emblems are two words in Róng script: *mútunci* and *ácúle*. Both these words are symbolic carriers of Róng ethno-political actions. They denote concepts indigenous to the Róng community but transformed and enriched with multiple shifting meanings – some of them newly inspired by a local reception of the global Indigenous rights movement.

As mentioned, the word *mútunci* is a part of the endonym and combines the notion of humans and Mother Nature, grasping the interdependence of humans and their environment in a way hard to translate within the English language. Similarly, *ácúle* is another word that is complicated to translate. Azuk Tamsang, for example, explained the word as a composite of core concepts of Róng religious tradition: *á* stands for *át*, the origin, *cú* for the mountains connected with Róng clans, and the *le* is short for *lep*, the entrance to the ancestral lands (A. Tamsang 2014, 29; see Tamsang 2008b). It encompasses a self-understanding that the Mútunci Róng as a community and each Róngkup and Róngmít originate from the mountains, Mount Kangchendzonga in particular,⁴⁶ and will return there again. The term is often translated as ‘hail to the mountains’ and is an expression of joy. This translation, however, does not do justice to the depth of existential emotive interlinkage with the mountainscape captured in this word. In recent years, it has turned into the battle cry of any rally, festival, or ritual.

44 For similar myths on the drainage of floods in other geographical regions, see Kind 2002 for Phoksumdo, Nepal.

45 For a comparison of some versions of the flood myth, see Kapp 1986.

46 For versions of the Róng myth of origin, see Karma Loday Lepcha 1999, 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003, 3; 2004, 3; Gurung and Lama 2004, 15–19; Foning [1987] 2003, 88–90; Simik 2001; Tamsang [1983] 1998, 38; Tamsang 2008a, 3–4; de Beauvoir Stocks 1975, 19–24, 29–30; Gorer [1938] 1996, 223–24; Morris 1938, 63; Siiger 1967, 112, 172–75; Jest 1960, 126–27; Chakrabarty 1985, 215–16; Das and Banerjee 1962, 128–29; Kotturan 1989, 17–19; Hermanns 1954, 30–40.

So, when did the revival of Tendong Hlo Rumfát start? In the early 1990s, some members of the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association (RMROS, Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shezum) visited Sonam Tshering Lepcha, who invited them to his Tendong Hlo Rumfát ceremony. At that time, it was a simple household ritual, not performed for the public (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010; Loden Lepcha, January 2009). Even Sonam Tshering Lepcha, as one of the main promoters of this ritual, did not ascend Tendong hill to perform it until 1995 (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, August 2009, July 2012). After the experiences in his house, the RMROS members decided to organise the first public Tendong Hlo Rumfát in Gangtok at a community centre in 1993, an event insignificant in size compared to nowadays.

At that time, RMROS members raised the funds themselves. The programme started out with a religious ritual performed by four people: Sonam Tshering Lepcha; Lavi Sangay, who is a famous religious specialist from Baksha in North Sikkim and who performed at all the ritual programmes we documented in Sikkim; a renowned *mun* from Mirik in Darjeeling, who still performed in 2006 but died a few years later; and a *búngthíng* from East Sikkim, who was already no longer alive when I started out with my research. The religious ritual was succeeded by a dance show.

After the first celebration in 1993, RMROS joined hands with RMRT to request a state holiday for the occasion of Tendong Hlo Rumfát, on the recommendation of the then Chief Secretary of Sikkim. Thereby, the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations initiated the process of ritual formalisation. Their main incentive was to place ‘Lepcha’ on the cultural calendar of Sikkim and provide the event with official recognition, thereby enhancing its credibility and publicity, aiming to have a formally acknowledged event reserved only for the Róng people. Before 1993, the state had not granted an official holiday for any celebration specific to the Mútunci Róng. The rituals noted were mainly Buddhist ceremonies or festivals associated with the state or other communities, such as Pang Lhabsol, the state worship of Mount Kangchendzonga (Vandenhelsken 2011; Balikci 2002), and Losung, the agricultural New Year ceremony celebrated by Sikkimese Bhutia (Balikci 2008). Námsung (or Námbun), the Róng New Year, was celebrated during the same time, but not mentioned in the government calendar (Lepcha 1999; Lepcha 2003, 2004).

The file with the request was forwarded to the government administration, but it lay idle for a while. The joint action committee of the Mútunci Róng associations did not follow up on its progress, mainly because RMROS was on a hunger strike, demanding that 50 per cent of the quotas reserved for the Bhutia and ‘Lepcha’ (commonly abbreviated to BL) in Sikkim be solely reserved for the Mútunci Róng. The preferential rights for BL pre-dated the Indian res-

ervations for Scheduled Tribes and were built on the old laws of the Sikkimese kingdom. Under Article 371F of the Indian Constitution, they remained valid after the integration of Sikkim into India in 1975 unless repealed by the authorities. The Sikkimese government first established reservations in its state council in 1952 (Sikkim Darbar Gazette Vol. II, No. 7, 28 December 1952; Government of Sikkim n. d. V, 53–54). When the Representation of the People Act was amended in 1979, 12 seats out of 32 remained reserved for BL in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly (Sikkim Government Gazette (Extraordinary) No. 75, Notification No. 7(14) Home/79, 7 September 1979, 176). The ordinance to the Representation of the People Act annulled the parity system, a system that gave a proportionate representation to people classified as ‘Lepcha’ and ‘Bhutia’ and people classified as ‘Nepali’, each 15 seats. The annulment was a highly contentious political move and shaped the public discussions on representation for years (see Basnet 1974; Chettri 2017a; Gurung 2011; Grover 1974; Sengupta 1985; Sinha 1975; Vandenhelsken 2009/10, 2021). Since the provisions for the Mútunci Róng were not affected, the restructuring of the reservations did not significantly shape the ethnic politics of the Mútunci Róng associations.

In response to this agitation, the chief minister of Sikkim held talks with RMROS representatives. While none of their demands were met, the government picked up the Tendong Hlo Rumfát file and approved the ritual programme as a state holiday to pacify the protestors (Former RMROS North president, August 2009; former RMROS president, August 2009). The decision to grant Tendong Hlo Rumfát as a state holiday was taken in November 1996 during the height of the agitation, which then afterwards subsided. The implementation was not finalised until 1997 (SE Report 1996, November 9–11).

The process of formalising a ritual was new to all the association members. After the granting of a state holiday, more details had to be worked out, and the assemblage was more tedious than expected. The date of the event posed the first problem. While building on whatever they knew about the myth and prior marginal ritual practice, it was clear to all decision-makers that the time frame for the ritual was during the monsoon season. Setting a date according to the lunar Róng calendar would make the date change annually according to the Gregorian government calendar, just like the Buddhist ceremonies did. But influential executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations wanted the date to be fixed to increase the recognition and visibility of the ritual.

Uncertainty about the ritual content itself added to the confusion. The ritual programme was a reframing of components of ritual practice and oral traditions, but the organisers and initiators themselves were not certain about how to interpret certain elements as well as the ritual as whole. The name chosen

for the ritual suggested the importance of the mountain deity (Tendong in this case), as opposed to other potential elements such as flood, water management, or the divine beings of the rivers. Based on this framing as a ritual to propitiate the mountain deities, some people believed it should therefore be celebrated together with Pang Lhabsol.⁴⁷ According to other members, this defied the purpose, as the Róng community would then not have a celebration specifically defined as their own unique tradition.

The government was pressing for a date to finalise the process and as a result the RMROS president decided on 8 August – a date in the middle of the rainy season that did not collide with any other official festivities in Sikkim (Former RMROS North president, January 2009; former RMORS president, August 2009; Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, July 2009). Adding to the arbitrariness, in Kalimpong the celebration was held on 22 August. As the RMROS president at the time mentioned in an interview, he had hoped that proper research would be conducted on the history, content, and date of the ritual. However, as he put it, more than a decade had since passed; by now, the date is ingrained in the minds of the people and could not be changed even if some other data should “come out” (Former RMROS president, August 2009). His words show how the assemblage of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát ritual relied on a deep emotional attachment to the flood myth and the sacred hill and the hope that knowledge on a former, but forgotten ritual would emerge. Additionally, these elaborations give an insight into the tedious process of adapting practices to the existing government framework as well as the RMROS members’ assessments of ethno-political requirements.

Since then, Tendong Hlo Rumfát has emerged as the most important ritual in the state calendar of Sikkim for the Róng community. RMROS and RMRT appointed members to the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee and various government departments contributed financially. As a result, in Sikkim it was expanded to a three-day celebration, even though only the last day was an official state holiday. On 6 August a prayer was conducted on Tendong hill itself. The next day a literacy and cultural programme was held, while the third day, 8 August, was the main publicly promoted event.

47 In Chungtang, for example, Tendong Hlo Rumfát is celebrated in the monastery, because it is perceived as a festival for the holy landscape, like Pang Lhabsol (Lendup Lepcha, Panchayat president, January 2010).

Celebrating Tendong Hlo Rumfát: A Brief Description

Kachyo and I had already reached Tendong hill on the evening of 5 August 2009, together with some friends. Through the forest, damp with monsoon mist, we climbed the partly mossy and slippery trail. We spent the night in a small hut up on the hill. We had expected that other organising members would have already arrived on the night before, as they had in 2006, the last time I had scaled the hill for the ritual. But this was not the case. The next morning, when we were already heading down, thinking the ritual would not happen, the delegation finally arrived. They immediately began to clear the ground at the ritual site.

Banana leaves were laid out on the wall that served as an altar, with an erected stone (*langtsók*) at its centre. The *búngthing* Lavi Sangay placed a row of five bamboo sticks in front of the erected stone, then five bamboo containers with the opening cut in a slanting manner and another five cut horizontally. Those in the back row he filled with milk and those in the front row with water. He placed flowers in all the vessels. Then five larger vessels were put in the foreground and filled with fermented millet beer. Lavi Sangay put a straw in each of them. In between the vessels, bamboo butter lamps were lit. Sugarcane and a container with fermented rice (*cibop*) were added. Then the delegation decorated the entire altar with flowers and placed fruit offerings on the wall. A bench was placed in front of the altar for the *búngthing* to sit and recite his prayers.

The ritual started with the burning of incense, a practice that every Róng ritual began with. The smoke is said to notify the deities that a ritual offering is about to begin. According to Lavi Sangay, the fermented millet offering was dedicated to the mountain deities Kóngchen, Tendóng, and Mánóm, because *cí* had been offered during the time of the deluge. He offered the milk to the local guardian deities (Lungjí Lungnóng), the deities of the big stones and of the big trees (Yohló Yotsen). Water was given in remembrance of the flood. The sugar cane was specifically given to Thikúng Tek and Nyikúng Ngál, an ancestral couple of the Róng people. The flowers were the representative seats of all the deities (Lavi Sangay, August 2009). The bamboo sticks were merely put there as decoration. According to Lavi Sangay, whom I interviewed afterwards, the ritual was performed to request the deities to extend protection against a surplus of water as well as the absence of water. Its main aim was to regulate both floods and droughts, especially during the monsoon. In the understanding of the religious specialist, this ritual did not just commemorate a mythological event, but it was an active water management strategy.

In 2009 Lavi Sangay oversaw the ritual and the altar preparation. He could clearly tell me which ritual paraphernalia was for whom and why. I mention this

because, when I attended the ritual again in 2012, the paraphernalia used were the same but now in abundance, with baskets of fruits and offerings heaped around the altar space. Besides Lavi Sangay, six other religious specialists had contributed to the altar. All of them conducted the ritual together. Tendong hill was full that year – a stark contrast to 2009. The offerings were not clearly bound to named sacred embodied deities. None of the religious specialists could clearly outline the altar the way Lavi Sangay had done three years beforehand; even he himself could not. The year 2012 saw the largest gathering I documented on Tendong hill. Many members of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee and of the executive body of RMRT and RMROS had climbed Tendong hill, along with youth, villagers, and other interested people. Most of them had connections to one or the other branch of the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations. VIP guests, such as politicians and bureaucrats, and media were also present.

After the recitation, the participants took the fruit offerings on the altar as *tsho* (Nep. *prasād*), a material offering from the deities to be consumed. Often it would be distributed to family members and others who could not attend the ritual. Additionally, the organisers took some material offerings from Tendong hill back to Gangtok to be placed on the altar at the venue of the last two days of celebration. The bamboo vessels, banana leaves, and ceremonial scarves were left to decay.

While the delegates were on Tendong hill, the preparations at the main location of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát programme would be in full swing. For the ritual organisers, the ritual process had begun months before the event with organisational meetings. They had decided on the venue, the chief guests, and the performances – based on the experiences of the previous years. Then they had advertised and announced the programme in the Sikkimese press, newspapers, radio, television, and social media. Press releases informed the public about the festival event, reminded them of the ancient Róng tradition, and portrayed an upcoming pompous celebration of it. The ritual organisers catered to the media and invited them. After the event, most news channels published an account. Likewise, the ritual programme was promoted and documented in Indigenous media, such as the magazine *Aachuley*, published by ILTA, or in the form of souvenirs available at the event.

On 7 and 8 August 2009 the organising committee had invited a larger number of religious specialists from Sikkim to the state capital. They started their prayers early in the morning. At all the locations I documented, the religious specialists were situated outside the main venue, slightly aloof from the other activities, which took place in a community centre, an assembly hall, or other spaces that could fit a large audience. Both in 2009 and in 2012 the com-



FIGURE 10: Saffo Búngthíng and Lavi Sangay on Tendong hill, August 2012.

mittee members prepared the altar under the guidance of Lavi Sangay and Dechen Lepcha, a *búngthíng* from Saffo in Dzongu, North Sikkim (Figure 10). The latter actively participated in many rituals organised by RMRT North Branch and the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS), the Róng NGO in Dzongu. The offerings and paraphernalia were arranged similarly to the one on Tendong hill; paintings of mountains decorated the backdrop of the altar.

In 2009, fourteen religious specialists were present, of whom twelve were *búngthíng*. Three of them were from Dzongu and two from around Kabi in North Sikkim, while the other seven were from East Sikkim, mainly from villages close to Gangtok such as Rumtek, Sang, and Rakdong. They used both the words *padim* and *búngthíng* to describe themselves. No *mun* was present at the gathering. One of the attending religious specialists was a Róng *pawo* from Nandok, East Sikkim, while another one was a Róng *yama* from Rakdong, East Sikkim. The latter two types of religious specialists originally stem from Lhopo and Tsong (Limbu) lineages respectively, but have transferred their ethnic group belonging, often by means of past intermarriage or mutual living patterns, and now exist among the Róng community (Balikci 2008; Bentley 2024). All the religious specialists had their own small altar set up in front of them, on which the items and paraphernalia they needed for their offerings were placed. Many of the items were not used for the specific offering of the day, but were on

display or used for blessing rituals, given to individual people on request. The blessing entails a calling upon the deities of fortune and long life in the name of a specific person.

Hardly any visitors were present at the early morning initial prayers besides the organising team. During the day, participants made offerings at the altar and received blessings from the respective religious specialists. Lavi Sangay and Saffo Búngthíng led the prayers using microphones. The recitations of the other *búngthíng* were hardly audible. In 2009, Saffo Búngthíng introduced the day's offerings as being for the mountain deities Tendong and Mánóm, the guardians of long life and birth. The *búngthíng* gave a short summary of the flood incident. Thereafter, he introduced the various religious specialists present as the ones performing the offering and addressed their respective protective deities using generalised terms: *rumkup dárkup*, *padimrum panárum*, *búngthíngkup munkup*, *pawo*. As we interviewed them, the majority of the *búngthíng* stated that they had started the performance with an offering to their own guardian deities, which is common practice. It seems many made offerings to deities of fortune and long life, as Tendong hill had saved the Róng people and guaranteed them life (Palden Lepcha, *búngthíng* from Kamboul, August 2009). The same ritual recitations were repeated throughout the day. The organisers had tried to summon a significant number of religious specialists. This was less to make the ritual performance more effective than it was to display the strength of a living heritage.

In Kalimpong, the programme was held on 22 August at the Boys Hostel in Bom Kyong; this is the location of the ILTA office and the Lepcha Museum, established by the late Sonam Tshering Lepcha. By 2012, ILTA had constructed a community hall there. In 2009, the altar was similarly elaborate to the one in Gangtok, though this time a painted Tendong hill with a partridge above it formed the backdrop. Sonam Tshering Lepcha himself arranged it. In front of this, there were five large-sized bamboo vessels, each with a bamboo stick decorated with seeds from the *pago kung*, commonly known as Indian trumpet tree. The seeds are used in most ritual ceremonies and have medicinal purposes (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 462). The bamboo vessels represented five mountain deities, from left to right when facing the altar: Sándók, Sanyól, Kóngchen, Pandim, and Sákyár. Ample fruit offerings and incense filled the altar. Significantly different to Gangtok, with its array of religious specialists, no *búngthíng* or *mun* recited at Tendong Hlo Rumfát in Kalimpong. The main focus of the ceremony before the cultural show was the recitation read from a book written by Sonam Tshering Lepcha. In 2009, as an exception, a religious specialist from Lingsay village recited prayers, the ILTA welfare secretary having organised for him to come. The music of the cultural show, which started simultaneously,



FIGURE 11: Walking the streets of Gangtok in Róng dress, August 2013 © Kunga Tashi Lepcha.

made it hard to understand and impossible to record his recitations. According to the religious specialist's summary, the ritual he conducted was similar to the ones conducted by Lavi Sangay and Saffo Búngthín in Sikkim.

Back in Gangtok, in 2009, the programme on 7 and 8 August itself started at 10 a. m. – as indicated in the ritual programme distributed to the attendees. The main difference between the second and the third day of Tendong Hlo Rumfát was that most chief guests, politicians, and other VIPs attended on the last day, which was the official state holiday. Consequently, on that day there were more speeches and fewer other activities. The second day of the event started with the narration of the Tendong myth to the crowd. Cultural dances punctuated the speeches. Detached from the traditional surroundings in which they used to be performed, they visually portrayed and emphasised certain aspects of culture. In the dances, customs, from sowing to ritual practice, and material heritage, from dress to weapons and instruments, were put into action and displayed. Songs underlined the dances. Moreover, they were performances in their own right. Content-wise, the songs reminded people of ancient times and described a romantic nostalgia, while at the same time they addressed present-day problems.

The Róng dress had emerged as an important visual marker of ethnicity and thus of the ritual event. With the years, pressure had increased to wear the Róng dress when attending the ceremony (Figure 11). This request to the members of

the community was articulated more explicitly in Kalimpong; but in Sikkim too most people participating were wearing Róng attire and even chief guests from other communities came with at least a Róng hat or some ‘Lepcha-related’ clothing item, in acknowledgement of the Róng origins of the event. In 2012, a group of young Mútunci Róng organised a fashion show, in collaboration with RMROS and the Rong Ong Prongzum (ROP), the youth association in Kalimpong – the Himalayan Ethnic Lepcha Fashion Event. Local designers and enthusiasts from the Róng community were requested to come up with creative adaptations of the Róng dress and present them to a larger public. The event was a great success, was attended by many, and reverberated in the following years. After that, fashion shows materialised as a new element of the ritual programmes at Tendong Hlo Rumfát.

The speeches included a wide range of topics. They informed the people about the importance of Tendong Hlo Rumfát, as well as about cultural components considered significant to the organisers, such as the use of Róngríng or the wearing of Róng dress. Further, the speakers promoted the government’s and associations’ activities to preserve Róng culture, such as the building of the tower of Daramdin,⁴⁸ Róng cultural centres, and museums. Thereby, the speakers framed an image of what a contemporary tangible Róng heritage should look like. Furthermore, the speeches addressed more political issues, such as recognition as a Primitive Tribal Group, or highlighted problems in the community such as poverty, illiteracy, the bad results of Róng students on the final exams, and alcoholism.

Quiz competitions and debates on the Róng language, education, and culture further enriched the programme. They were usually done on the second day, as part of a literacy and culture programme. The main participants were teams from schools, colleges, and various branches of the Mútunci Róng associations. Quiz competitions and debates were a form of transmission borrowed from the British and current Indian school system. The quiz briefed the participants and indirectly the audience on their cultural knowledge and passed on the knowledge at the same time. While the competitions were going on, whispers arose from the crowd as people discussed possible answers. The audience cheered when the participants got the answers right, scolded them when they were wrong and the answer seemed obvious, or listened silently for the correct answer given by the judge. Not only myths and cultural forms were transmitted

48 This was a RMRT project. The plan was to build a replica of the earthen pot tower, based on a prominent mythology; for the latter see Mainwaring [1876] 1971, xx, in footnote (*); Das 1896, 5; Risley [1894] 1973, 42; de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 35–36; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1953; Das and Banerjee 1962, 131; Tamsang [1983] 1998, 81–84; Foning [1987] 2003, 90–91; Kotturan 1989, 69–71; Tamsang 2008a, 14–15. At the time of publication this project is still not completed.

at the event, but also, importantly, ways of dealing with changes in the modern set-up. As an example, in 2009 the debate was about a federal law passed by the Sikkim government that gave women equal land inheritance rights as men. The debate laid out the pros and cons of this law for the Mútunci Róng in front of the public and, lastly, formulated a collective opinion. In this case, the law was deemed problematic due to potential loss of land to other communities.

The ritual programme included – and this seemed critically important – felicitations, the presentation of citations, and various awards for achievement in the Róng language, culture, and social work. The chief guest handed out certificates to the various Róng individuals and publicly acknowledged their contribution to the Róng community and culture. Recipients highly appreciated this public recognition of success and dedication.

And finally, outside the hall or seated venue, there were stalls selling food items considered ethnic and other forms of tangible heritage. The visitor could buy Róng dresses or T-shirts or recent publications of books, music, and videos, or indulge in replicas of traditional artefacts.

Religious Specialists and Religion in Cultural Revival

In the process of ritual assemblage, Sonam Tshering Lepcha wrote down and published the recitations of Tendong Hlo Rumfát (S. T. Tamsang 2004) as well as five other rituals: Cú Rumfát, Lyáng Rumfát, Sakyu Rumfát, and Múkzekdínj Rumfát, all rituals annually performed in Kalimpong, and Tungbóng Fát, the ritual performed after the birth of a child. Sakyu Rumfát is the harvest ritual.⁴⁹ The other three rituals are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Sonam Tshering Lepcha's incentive was to pass on or at least to store his knowledge (Bom Kyong, September 2010). Traditionally, Róng religious specialists would have students and orally pass their knowledge on to them. Eventually they would become initiated religious specialists. Sonam Tshering Lepcha was not a *búnghíng* or a *mun* but had acquired a large amount of knowledge due to his interest. He could not fall back on the traditional way of passing on knowledge, but had found other means to do so. Thus, he reached out to a large number of people (Azuk Tamsang, December 2009). Sonam Tshering Lepcha wrote down his memory of the recitations in an attempt to prevent the loss of Indigenous knowledge. This loss is intrinsically linked to the 'vanishing' of the

49 For more information on Sakyu Rumfát, see Siiger 1967, 89–95; Gorer [1938] 1996, 235–44; Morris 1938; Jest 1960, 128; Foning [1987] 2003, 51–54. ILTA has revived the ritual and supported its celebration as a community ritual every year: Lepcha 2008, 19–21.

religious specialist as a profession and of their religious powers, as passionately narrated by a religious specialist we interviewed in Nepal:

Once upon a time there used to be so many mun and búngthíng. There used to be a mun and two búngthíng in Matling, two búngthíng and two yama in Zoubari, one mun in Douray and so forth. Now just as the kings and queens have gone, the búngthíng and mun have also vanished. Now in the surrounding area I am the only búngthíng. I am not perfect, but what can I do? People come and invite me for rituals, so I have no choice but to perform (Rushed Bahadur Lepcha, Fikkal Búngthíng, April 2011).

In oral traditions the *búngthíng* and *mun* of the past are described as having close to superhuman powers (Bentley 2009/10). The *búngthíng* and *mun* were feared in the community and had a high status. Villagers tried to keep them happy with gifts and contributions during ceremonies such as marriages. It is plausible that the profession also came with significant political influence, as many oral traditions conflate the figure of the chief and of the religious specialist (see Chapter Six). It was therefore a prestigious profession, despite the physical strain it produced on those who performed these roles (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1951, 45). The profession seems to take its toll; religious specialists often have weak health and prone to bouts of illness. This weakness is associated with the dangers that the close interactions with more-than-human beings entail.

In the collective memory of a lifetime, the people described the power of the religious specialists as progressively decreasing. It is not uncommon to hear about the previous generation of religious specialists and their strength compared to the religious specialists today. The hills remained filled with oral narratives, rituals, and incidents related to evil spells cast by one religious specialist upon another during fights, or upon people by a religious specialist in the name of their avenging opponent, fostering narratives of the dangerous religious powers of the Róng religious specialists (Balikci 2008, 46; Bentley 2009/10; Gorer [1938] 1996, 479; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1951, 69; Siiger 1967, 162, 166–67). As an example, the Sikkimese king forbade the use of religious powers for evil magic, which seemed to have been a concern or even a fear of the ruling class (Mullard 2015; Morris 1938, 147). The narrators of such stories that I heard or was told during interviews more often than not concluded that no religious specialist had such powers anymore today (Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2010; Pentong Búngthíng, April 2010).

Foning had mentioned the decrease in religious specialists in the Róng community in the late 1980s (Foning [1987] 2003, 73). A short excursion into the

history of the religious specialists of Dzongu illustrates the same theme. In the 1930s, eight *mun* and at least one *padim*, or potentially several more, lived in Lingthem village in Dzongu (Gorer [1938] 1996, 215–16; Morris 1938, 116). When I started fieldwork in 2006, there were eight senior religious specialists in the entire Dzongu area. Most villages of Upper Dzongu (Pentong, Lingko, Nung [Tingvong], Lingdem, Lingthem, Saffo) and some in Lower Dzongu (Sangdong, Tariang) had a senior religious specialist in charge of the annual rituals. The senior *búngthíng* who had performed the annual rituals in Lingdong had died before I started my research, and since then four more have joined him in the ancestral realms: the *mun* from Tariang, Kóngchen Búngthíng from Nung, the *búngthíng* from Saffo, and the *búngthíng* of Lingthem.

The Lingthem Búngthíng was in his sixties, but the *búngthíngs* in both Pentong and Lingko⁵⁰ were in their 80s at the time of my fieldwork. There were younger ones to take over, but they were few in number and most of them had had no or incomplete training. Even the senior religious specialists, such as the Lingthem Búngthíng, often mentioned how they did not know as much as the generation of religious specialists before them (Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2010). A young female *mun* from Sakyong was considered to have the most promising future among the religious specialists in Dzongu (see also Little 2013). Her powers were feared and respected, especially due to her accurate predictions, but, as a *mun*, she did not have much knowledge about the *lúngten sung* and did not perform the community rituals in the Dzongu villages.

Similarly, in Ilam, Nepal, in 2011, the most senior *búngthíng* was 81 years old and lived in Fikkal. His father had been a *mun*, considered one of the most powerful religious specialists of the region. The senior *búngthíng* stated that he had had no teacher but had started to perform the rituals after his father died. He used to assist his father during his youth. His self-assessment of his knowledge resonated with the narratives of Sikkim and the adjoining hills: he did not know as much as his father did (Rushed Bahadur Lepcha, Fikkal Búngthíng, April 2011).

What to do? There are no good búngthíng, no mun, and no yama anymore. You will see. Today everything is vanishing. In our grandchildren's time all our róng rúm fá t dár fá t will be gone. When my father was still alive, I saw him chant the entire night. At early dawn, he would then tell the prediction. With the morning sunrise he finished the entire ceremony. Nowadays nobody is here, all the búngthíng

50 For an account of the Lingko Búngthíng, locally called *padim*, see Balikci 2009/10.

and mun, yaba, yama have left this place, so who will continue? No idea. Whatever I know I am doing, like Sakyu Rumfát, Búngthíng Rumfát. If I die, then nobody will do the rumfát dárkrát. Who will do it?
(Rushed Bahadur Lepcha, Fikkal Búngthíng, April 2011)

With the decline of religious specialists in the Róng community⁵¹ and a growing sense of cultural loss, a new concept of the ‘learned *búngthíng*’ has cropped up. A learned *búngthíng* is a person who did not receive the calling, ergo was not chosen by the *búngthíng* deity, but had out of his own interest learnt how to perform the rituals (Little 2013, 187–88). These learned *búngthíng*, such as Azuk Tamsang, the ILTA welfare secretary, or Sonam Tshering Tamsang, are usually conscious of the core role of the religious specialists in the Róng community, often take on important positions in cultural revival, and are in their own way trying to preserve Róng ritual practice and collective cultural memory. The learned *búngthíng* will usually perform rituals for the house, the clan, or the community, but rarely healing rituals.

The concept of a learned *mun* does not exist. In Kalimpong, it is more and more common to hear that a *mun* needs to get the ‘calling’ and be possessed by his or her specific private deity, while the obligations and tasks of a *búngthíng* can be learned. In Dzongu, however, most people agreed that being a religious specialist was not a choice but required predestination by a spirit. Within this logic, a person could not learn to be a *búngthíng*. In Dzongu villages, household heads or senior knowledgeable villagers did perform certain rituals. In some cases, the head of the household was perceived as being empowered by the ancestral lineage, his position of seniority, or knowledge. Therefore, the deities would listen to him (Lendup Lepcha, Panchayat president, January 2010; interlocutors, January 2010). In contrast to the abovementioned learned *búngthíng*, these people did not call themselves *búngthíng* or take on any other functions of the *búngthíng*, such as community or healing rituals.

In Kalimpong, learned *búngthíng* often chose the profession out of interest and through their engagement in cultural revival activities. It was, finally, also a product of cultural objectification, of ‘culture’ becoming a way of understanding the world and making reality. The learned profession fulfilled the need for transmitting knowledge and performing rituals to preserve culture (Chapters Two and Five).

51 At the time of publication there is a resurgence of *mun* in the Kalimpong region. It is beyond the scope here to relook at this phenomena, but the increase in the numbers of *mun* who are actively in training would be an interesting research topic to look into.



FIGURE 12: Group interview with villagers in Zilbong, Ilam, April 2011.

The concept of a learned *búngthíng* also exists in Ilam, but in a slightly different way, as villagers of Zilbong explained to us (Figure 12). In Ilam, the learned *búngthíng* usually inherited their profession; they were either former assistants to or close relatives of religious specialists. This was a profession created out of necessity. More often than not, the main requirements came in time of illness, as thirty years ago there were barely any medical facilities in Ilam and it was difficult and expensive to reach the nearest hospital in Darjeeling (Bhuan Singh Lepcha, learned *búngthíng*, April 2011).

My father is a búngthíng, but not a real búngthíng. Sometimes my father used to say that he never thought he would be a búngthíng. When he was young, there were lots of búngthíng and mun, so my father helped them make the altar. He used to accompany the búngthíng. After that, when the time came when all the búngthíng and mun had died and nobody was there to do all the things like small household rituals, he just started to do the rituals, because he knew how to do them, whom to offer to and what to offer, and because he spoke Róngríng well. [...] Previously, my father only used to perform our own household ritual, and only after that the villagers came to know that my father could perform the rituals, so they started to invite him for rumfát. (Prem Tshering Lepcha, April 2011)



FIGURE 13: Sonam Tshering Lepcha and others reading the recitations, August 2009 © S. T. Wangdi.

Considering the necessity for religious specialists, one would expect Sonam Tshering Lepcha's written ritual texts to come into use frequently. However, beyond the rituals organised by ILTA, I have not observed or heard about the entextualised recitations being used. One reason is that many senior religious specialists were illiterate, at least in the Róng language, and so the texts were not accessible to them. Even in contexts where religious specialists were not or rarely available, people seemed to prefer to rely on a person as mediator between them and the more-than-human beings, rather than a text. So far, Sonam Tshering Lepcha's efforts have not borne fruit in the sense of the formation of a sacred written tradition or the widespread usage of the text for religious purposes, a process defined as scripturalisation (Gaenszle 2011, 282).

At the rituals organised by ILTA, on the other hand, the reading of the respective ritual book has replaced the recitations by an initiated religious specialist (Figure 13). At rituals I observed, Sonam Tshering Lepcha was usually the main reciter, but other ILTA members joined in. Often children accompanied him. They learned how to read the traditional style of reciting in night schools for the Róng language, run by ILTA to teach the children their mother tongue. Unlike in Sikkim, the Róng language was not taught in schools in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills. The recitation of Sonam Tshering Lepcha's books has brought a significant change to ritual performance and to religious practice. With the ritual enactment of the oral texts, people who have not been initiated, and have

not received the powers to negotiate between the human and the more-than-human world, perform the sacred religious knowledge by reading. The ritual texts have made religious knowledge and the recitations detachable from the profession of the religious specialist and thereby undermined the powers of the *búngthing*.

In an interview, Sonam Tshering Lepcha clearly stated that he himself believed in the power of the recitation and the deities addressed in them. He had written them down in good faith. Rituals, he clarified, relied on the sacredness of the words, regardless of whether they were oral or written, and on accurate procedure (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010). In this interpretation, the written word was a powerful tool of negotiation with the more-than-human entities, even if it had been detached from the mouth (*búng*) and thus the profession of the *búngthing*. The powers to negotiate are thus transferred into the word itself – regardless of the medium.

The publication itself, however, contradicts his words. The acknowledgements in the Tendong Hlo Rumfát book mention that the Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal, carried the costs for the “protection, conservation, maintenance and development of the ancient and very rich Lepcha language and literature” (S. T. Tamsang 2004, 1). In this interpretation, the recitations become void of sacredness. Writing down ritual recitations is merely an act of preserving by making oral Róng culture tangible in Róng script. The process of writing down an oral narrative has been defined as entextualisation (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In the context here, two interpretations of the entextualisation of ritual recitations co-exist with regard to the sacredness of the text. Their concurrence precisely highlights the complexity of the process of both separating and reassembling the sacred and the cultural. The acknowledgements reformulate Róng ritual as culture, language, or even literature within a culturalist ontology. However, the compositional components available for this assemblage do not separate out the religious, the cultural, or the political. Leading actors navigate between the strategies and the rhetoric of cultural revival on the one hand in order to receive funding, and their personal beliefs on the other – beliefs that, in the case of Sonam Tshering Lepcha, are likewise transformed by revival practices.

Where is the space for religion, formulated according to Róng Indigenous ontologies, in cultural revival? The members of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee of Sikkim discussed this very question in the leadup to the 2013 ritual programme. In a preparation meeting, some members proposed to confine the religious ceremony to the first day of the occasion and have the next two days dedicated to the show and performance within the auditorium. Others agreed, complaining that the current set-up was too widely spread out, gave



FIGURE 14: ILTA president Lyangsong Tamsang interacting with a senior *mun*, August 2009 © S. T. Wangdi.

the participants reason to move about, and took the focus away from what was happening on the stage – that is to say, the cultural performances and speeches. They suggested splitting the event, with the religious ceremony being completed on 6 August on Tendong hill and then, after the deities were appeased, the secular ceremony could take place in Gangtok or other urban locations. Others vehemently objected, hinting that without the ceremony it would not be a *rumfát* anymore. The latter faction insisted that at least a symbolic religious performance needed to be kept. In 2013, the set-up ended up remaining as it had been in the previous years, but the debate made evident the underlying tension between ritual as a religious practice and as a cultural festival (Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee meeting, June 2013).

While the space for religion in cultural revival is unclear, the religious specialists are key players in cultural revival, above all the *búngthing* as the keepers of traditional knowledge. Other elders in the village, traditional leaders, and people who have collected knowledge about Róng culture out of their own interest, may have their opinions on Róng ritual, culture, and history, but they cannot rely on an initiated line of knowledge in the way that religious specialists – at least in theory – can. The religious specialists' status gives their knowledge authority. Consequently, they are 'assets' and 'sources' of knowledge for the activists involved in cultural revival and ethno-political action (Figure 14). Their importance, combined with the rarity of knowledgeable religious special-

ists, has increased their status. A growing consciousness among a mainly young generation about the cultural loss has enhanced interest in the profession of the religious specialist.

Mun and búngthíng are a main source of identity, for example, the tune and the words [of their recitations]. Mun and búngthíng are the owners of our culture and tradition. They give us our rich culture. (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010)

Ritual Programmes: Regaining Power Over Cultural Transmission

In the ritual description of Tendong Hlo Rumpfát, it becomes apparent that, while the showcasing of religious specialists and their performances was one aspect of the programme, the committee's focus was on staging and disseminating 'cultural content'. This process included tangible cultural heritage as well as the knowledge embedded in oral traditions. It expresses what I have conceptualised as the cultural dimension of ritual programmes. I have already introduced the pressure to perform objectified culture in order to remain visible as a 'tribe' and uphold the justifications for the rights and privileges granted by the Scheduled Tribe status. With this in mind, in this chapter I take a different perspective. I theorise that the Indigenous activists reformulated what they defined themselves and their ethnic group to be, to regain control over its representation. I argue that ritual programmes are about fixation, about holding onto knowledge in the only manner that seems acceptable in today's world, i. e., in the manner of the powerful. It is thus a strategy to preserve the knowledge of the forefathers, to make the 'cultural stuff' tangible and tactile. This strategy includes reformulating Indigenous knowledge within the dominant culturalist ontology.

We need to write, we need to publish. If we don't write everything down about ourselves, then others will and it might not be what we want to say. (Azuk Tamsang, December 2012)

Ritual performances are, I argue, performances of counter-writing. Writing here is understood in its widest sense of fixing something intangible to a tangible symbol. Róngkup and Róngmit interested in their culture, ethnic entrepreneurs, and local scholars alike have recognised the power of written sources and more recently visual documentations. Viewed from this perspective, commodifying Róng culture is a process of reappropriating the tools of the powerful to mani-

fest their own power. Defined in these terms, it is an attempt to counteract the perceived weakness of oral tradition, which is due to its volatile and fleeting nature in a world dominated by the written word.

In the Himalaya – as in most places where Indigenous people have encountered so-called ‘great’ traditions (Redfield 1955; Singer 1972) – script was associated with hegemonic power and was seen as an attribute of those people who dominated the political area and subjugated others. Putting it in straightforward terms, the possession of a script meant power (Gaenzle 2002, 2011 for the Himalayan region; Goody 2000; A. Simpson 2014; Smith 2012). Subsequently, it is not surprising that many Himalayan and Northeast Indian communities have variations of a myth about how they lost their script and, in some cases, recovered it again (Oppitz 2006; Blackburn 2008). The myth highlights the still ongoing contestations in the Himalayan interface between oral and written traditions and the power hierarchies they have produced and still produce (Bentley 2009/10; Holmberg 1989; Mumford 1989; Ortner 1995a, 1995b; Oppitz 1968; Samuel 1993; Vinding 1998).

Historically, in the Róng community, writing was clearly associated with Buddhism. The Róng word for Buddhist monk is *yuk mun*, translating as the religious specialist with the power over letters, *yuk* meaning ‘letter’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 630). Most Mútunci Róng who still practice their traditional shamanic religion also simultaneously self-define as Buddhists and follow practices of Tibetan Buddhism as well. Many syncretic elements exist, hinting at a history of co-existence (Balıkcı 2008; Bentley 2009/10; Lepcha 2013); yet despite this concurrence, frictions do occur. As I have argued elsewhere, contestations between the Indigenous and the written Buddhist tradition among the Róng people cannot be thought about separately from the history of state formation in Sikkim. In Róng myths, we find Buddhism understood as the religion of the emergent state structure, founded and finally dominated by rulers who came from Tibet. The history of writing is a history of political subjugation just as much as of religious conversion (Bentley 2009/10).

The Mútunci Róng, together with the Limbu (or Tsong) (Gaenzle 2011; Vandenhelsken and Khamdak 2021), are in a unique position in the Sikkim and West Bengal Himalaya, because they have their own script. Historically, for that matter, until the general increase in literacy that occurred towards the end of the past century, writing in any language remained elite knowledge among feudal groups. There is a corpus of religious books written in the Róng language and script, called *námthár*. The Tibetan term *nam thar* means ‘biography’. The Róng word, however, is more general and translates as “scripture” or “sacred writing of the Lepcha people” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 444). The existence of this

corpus gives Róng activists the opportunity to reproject the power of writing back upon an ancient past. The origin of the script is debated; while many Róng scholars and activists describe it as ancient, it most likely was invented in the early eighteenth century (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 26–32; Foning [1987] 2003, 153–56; Plaisier 2005; Sprigg 2005, 86–90; Tamlong 2008, 29–30). There are hardly any old manuscripts containing Róng teachings or religious elements, and the majority of *námthár* are translations of Buddhist works incorporating local Róng characteristics; this being said, in-depth research on the content of *námthár* is still outstanding and this evaluation is subject to change. Yet despite the existence of a script, oral traditions – the Róng *lúngten sung* – were not written down until the twentieth century. This late entextualisation underlines the power ascribed to orality in Róng religious tradition, as incorporated in the figure of the *búngthing*.

The writing down of oral tradition is closely linked to the foundation of Mútunci Róng associations. Literacy, education, and lastly a middle-class existence with its privileged access to resources, are crucial to enable activism and social action (Edwards and McCarthy 2004, 117). Activists have to interact with political and government agents as well as media, and so need to entextualise, analyse, and debate. In order to do this successfully, activists need to master languages and symbols, and implement them effectively in a complex and competing political environment. All these tasks are mainly intellectual (Morris and Staggborg 2004, 174–75).

In the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, Christian missionaries made education available to a broader public much earlier than in Sikkim, which is why organised activities to support Róng culture and rights started here. The first meetings of what was to become the first ethnic association, Mutanchi Rong Shezum (the General Lepcha Association), the precursor of ILTA, were held in 1922 in Kanchanjunga Kothi, the home of Rebecca Namchu, who shaped this endeavour together with Rev. Gyan Tshering Sitling (Chhaya Namchu, July 2023). Then, in 1925, Sangdo Tshering Tamsang, the *mandal* of Bom Kyong in Kalimpong, took over the presidency (ILTA president, July 2006). The association was not registered until 1950, under Certificate of Registration of Societies Act XXI of 1860 (No. 18713/909 dated 27 March 1950). In 1995, the registration was altered under section 9 (2) of the West Bengal Societies Registration Act 1961 and received a modified number, S/18713/909, on 25 May 1995 (Tamsang 1997b, 12).

During the 1920s and 1930s, many members came from an educated Christian background. The general secretary of the ILTA P. T. Lepcha lists the following presidents: “Ren G. T. Sitling Lepcha, Renyoo Azem Rebecca Namchyoo Lepcha (David Babuni), Ren Sungkyaol Taso Lepcha, Ren Arthur Foning Lepcha,

Ren Apang Chhyoden Lepcha, Aathing K. P. Tamsang Lepcha, Ren Bagsing Lepcha, Ren C. D. Lepcha, Ren Tunsing Simik Lepcha, Ren D. T. Tamsang Lepcha and others” (2010, 2). It was these educated people who were the first among those who came from the Indigenous community itself to start collecting and writing down Róng oral traditions. A leading personality who influenced the history of the Mútunci Róng association in West Bengal as well as the entextualisation of Róng oral traditions was K. P. Tamsang. He was elected secretary in the 1940s and kept this position until 1951, when he left India to work with the linguist R. K. Sprigg at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (ILTA president, July 2006). After his return two years later, he resumed his post. In the early 1970s, he was elected president of the General Lepcha Association, in which post he stayed until his death in 1985 (Tamsang 2001a, 12–14). K. P. Tamsang was the son of Sangdo Tshering Tamsang, one of the founding presidents of the association, and the father of Lyangsong Tamsang, who was the long-term president or general secretary until 2013. Thus, this family has influenced the Mútunci Róng association in Kalimpong for three generations.

It was this educated ethnic leadership that discussed, contested, accepted, and rewrote what had already been written about their community, in the mainly English accounts left by colonial administrators; and to a certain degree, they internalised and reproduced these accounts (see for example Tamsang [1983] 1998; Arora 2017). The reason why I mention this is that the people currently involved in Mútunci Róng associations are at least the second, if not the third or fourth, generation who have been working with, reflecting on, reproducing, and managing their ‘cultural content’ within a political system that since the mid to late nineteenth century has required them to do so. I think this historical perspective is crucially important for questions of self-understanding and categorisation, and in defining processes of othering. The processes of “turning ethnology on themselves,” as Middleton describes the strategies of activists in Darjeeling (2016, 175), are historically rooted, and engage in the negotiation of futures while demanding recognition from the state today.

The production of oral text – meaning a written version of an oral tradition – is complex and contentious, due to the characteristics of oral traditions. Oral traditions exist in a close rapport with people, locality, tangible heritage, and the social, historical, and political context of the specific moment of narration. Róng *lúngten sung* is not standardised or told in its entirety in a linear way. Such narrative form is common among Indigenous communities. Morgan (2020), as an example, defines it as Indigenous Relational Aesthetics, which exist “in multiple physical and spatial realms, from our dream visions to our waking lives” (202). It can be described as a variety of sequencing. The sequences are told in

a specific chronology, but certain events take place at the same time, making it impossible to narrate the whole corpus in one go.⁵² Depending on interest or intention, the narrator can start and end the narration at different points within the *lúngten sung*. As incidents in the creation of the world run in parallel, the context and the person telling the myth channel the narrative flow. Therefore, the narrative situation, such as an interviewer asking for a specific myth, the local background of the person, and personal attachments to specific storylines, influences the choice of the narrative plot, chronology, and the emphasis given to specific narrative elements within a chosen storyline. The Róng *lúngten sung* can be described as an ensemble of narratives through which a narrator navigates; there are ample biforcations and turning points where the narrator can choose to enter one or the other storyline or narrative strand. The choice of narrative plot is not random, but the decisions are driven by context, custom, locality, and power.⁵³

Entextualisation cannot reproduce the logic according to which oral traditions or performances are comprised of various compositional components and variations of the same myth, and requires instead a narrative linearity (Goody 2000; Oppitz 1999a). Accordingly, it forces the author to choose a storyline, to focus on one narrative strand and neglect others. Consequently, unification is to a certain extent inherent in the process and required to produce entextualised output. Oral texts are void of the contextualisation and spontaneity inherent to oral narrations and are fixed in a more directed composition; consequently, they become comparable over time, beyond the moment of narration, and so shed the transient and changeable nature inherent to the medium of oral tradition or performances. Yet, precisely by being detached from their interactional setting, they gain the power of potentially endless dissemination as well as the promise of a more enduring existence (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Finnegan 2007; Goody 2000). Of course, today, entextualisation includes more than just writing; oral traditions are encapsulated in audio recordings, photographs, films, and so forth.

Paradoxically, Tendong Hlo Rumfát is an example of the power of past entextualisations. The flood myth relating to Tendong hill found its way into the publications of early travellers and administrators in the region. The account published by the famous botanist J. D. Hooker (1814–79), who is known to have worked closely with Róng guides, is the oldest reference in the English language, having been recorded in 1849 and published in 1854. Several other colonial writings mention the myth, though mostly without giving a detailed account.

52 For a discussion on the cohesiveness of the mythological corpus, see Gaenszle 1991, 249 and Oppitz and Kohl 1992, 20.

53 For an example of the analysis of various narrative strands and versions of one mythology found in different localities and contexts, see Bentley 2008, 2009.

The reason for these multiple mentions is probably arbitrary: the old route to Gangtok led past Tendong hill and the hill is distinctly visible from Darjeeling. Therefore, it seems, the travellers picked up the legend on the way. Additionally, the flood theme suited it for comparison with the Christian narrative of Mount Ararat, which must have sparked the interest of missionaries.⁵⁴ Because of the written references, the myth was established as something the educated Mútunci Róng had to deal with, and so was turned into common knowledge in certain sections of the Róng community; moreover, it enabled a proof of ‘ancient’ existence. As such, the existence of the myth in written sources increased its popularity and made the narrative of how the Mútunci Róng saved themselves on Tendong hill the core building block of a huge revival movement.

Making a Róng Canon: Struggles Over the Unification of Culture

It is pretty much evident that “Tendong Lho Rum Faat” celebration has become a very important platform for the entire Lepcha community, in the recent times. [...] “Tendong Lho Rum Faat” celebration has proved to be the thread of unity that binds us together under one idea, one cause and one passion – the love of Lepcha Community.
(RMROS president in RMROS 2004)

The entextualisation of oral traditions transforms perceptions or expectations regarding truth, the linearity of history, and failed rituals (Goody 2000, 102). It thereby activates a process during which human actions get institutionalised, authorised, recognised, and included within a canon, referred to as *canonisation*, another concept derived from the literary field (Goody 2000, 199; Pollock 1998, 41). While the creation of a unilinear and fixed narrative is inherent to entextualisation, canonisation requires an authority to choose which oral texts belong to the canon and which do not. Executive members of various Mútunci Róng associations claim precisely this authority.

The homogenisation of diverse oral traditions into a canon in order to formulate an ‘ancient and coherent culture’ clearly caters to the systems of governance and recognition (Torri 2019). Activists deemed a powerful canon of Róng culture to be necessary in order to carve out their own existence in a context

54 The flood story related to Tendong is mentioned, for example, by Hooker [1854] 2004a, 3; Mainwaring [1896] 1971, xx, fn; Macaulay [1884] 2005, 2; Bodsohn 1901, 255. Hooker’s account was collected while travelling into Sikkim. Hooker and Mainwaring mention that the Mútunci Róng were saved on a ship; however, this seems to be a Christian import, as the comparison with the biblical story of Noah’s ark is not far to seek.

structured by ethnic politics, and so gain access to funds and boost their future prospects. While the parameters according to which culture was defined had been developed within colonial and postcolonial governance and anthropology, the executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations claimed decisional power over the ‘content’. Cultural objectification and canonisation have been occurring for at least a century: thus, the process was not new and was charged with emotional attachments. It demanded engagement with previous entextualisations and unification attempts. Being able to canonise and thus standardise ‘culture’ is about regaining and sustaining power over heritage production, and about ownership over ‘culture’ as a commodity or resource (Brosius and Polit 2011, 12). Brosius labels this process as “heritagisation,” which she defines as “the creation of and conscious reference of a particular social group to a cultural heritage in order to position itself firmly, or to improve a position, within a particular field of discourse” (Brosius 2011, 120).

The perceived needs, requirements, and processes of canonisation are, as I suggest, tied to intra-ethnic power negotiations. The Róng activists are no unified front, among other reasons due to their various positionings in different regional political contexts and localised knowledge systems. They do not always agree on what belongs in the canon or how the particular content should be narrated or framed. The increased entextualisation as well as greater literacy and the wider reception of fixed texts has enhanced their comparability to older variations and to narrative alternatives from other localities. Temporal and regional differences in oral narrations have become a lot more obvious to the Róng activists engaged in cultural revival. And the more oral texts were produced and compared, the more Róng activists perceived unification to be necessary, because contradictions became more obvious and so turned the diversity or the inherent polysemy of oral tradition and ritual practice into a ‘problem’ (Bentley 2021).

Beyond the political need for an ethnic group to possess a unified culture, the contradictions or differences are challenging because they undermine the intrinsic understanding of *lúngten sung*. Similarly to what Gaenszle (1991, 250, 355) describes for *muddum*, *lúngten sung* is considered as unified and unchanged knowledge transmitted from the ancestors and passed down from one generation to the next. Polysemy and variation were not problematic as long as tradition remained both oral and rooted in context. The comparability of the fixed text, as mentioned above, has disrupted the characteristics of orality that enable variation, change, and a notion of continuity to exist simultaneously, and has caused confusion and uncertainty. It is in this highly emotional and politicised process of assembling oral texts that the desire to compile ‘the real culture’ and the demands for ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ gain prominence.

After reading my article on the evil spirit Lásó Múng (Bentley 2008), the ILTA president sat me down and asked why I was creating confusion by adding all those other versions instead of sticking to the one narrative. Indeed, in the article I had painstakingly collected and compared written and oral sources on the variety of myths narrated about and around the evil spirit (Bentley 2008). It was an attempt to *not* choose, to *not* canonise, and while writing I was aware that it did not comply with the activists' project of unification. On that day, I explained my positioning – to one of the most influential Róng activists in West Bengal – via a question. How was I to decide which narrative is more important or authentic than another? For you, the shape-changing Lásó Múng relates to the year in the Róng calendar, and his killing explains the origin of ten Róng clans, but who am I to tell the *búngthíng* in Dzongu that the bird-like evil spirit was not killed in a lake of poison and blood, or that his village name was not derived from the way that Lásó Múng slaughtered his ancestors? In my opinion, I added, no one had the authority to tell him that. The ILTA president nodded. Even if he himself might have preferred publications that unify Róng culture, he acknowledged that I did not have any authority to do so.

Many executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations in Sikkim perceived ILTA's proactive stance, the long history of entextualisation in Kalimpong, and especially the cultural transfer into Sikkim that Arora aptly conceptualises as the Kalimpong stimulus (Arora 2017), as cultural hegemony. Crucially, activists from Kalimpong, and especially Sonam Tshering Lepcha, were key figures in promoting the cultural revival itself and institutionalising various aspects of Róng culture in the governmental structures of Sikkim. In 1954 the Sikkimese king had appointed Sonam Tshering Lepcha to teach Róng songs and dances to be performed the following year at the Indian Independence Day celebration in Delhi. Sonam Tshering Lepcha was actively involved in the founding moments of the Sikkim Lepcha Association in the early 1980s and remained similarly active in the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department of Sikkim (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010; Arora 2017); he continued these activities until his death in 2020.

Sonam Tshering Lepcha's activities shaped the institutionalisation of specific 'Lepcha cultural content' in Sikkim. With regard to ritual, besides Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the Sikkimese government recognises three other rituals as official Róng rituals: the Róng New Year festival, called Námsung, which is celebrated all over Sikkim; Cú Rumfát; and Múzbekdíng Rumfát (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011).⁵⁵ The latter two rituals are not traditionally celebrated by the majority

55 For more information on Cú Rumfát and Múzbekdíng Rumfát, see the list of rituals in Annex One and Chapter Three.

of Mútunci Róng in Sikkim, but are celebrated in Kalimpong. Sonam Tshering Lepcha promoted these festivals, based on his regional knowledge, and played a critical role in having them registered with the government. Consequently, it is the performance of these supposedly 'traditional' Róng rituals that the government financially supports.

The Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations have had to deal with this past institutionalisation, even if it did not represent their experience of ritual practice. RMRT lists Múzbekding Rumpfát in their official calendar and has conducted the ceremony (RMRT publicity secretary, Gangtok, November 2008). This, however, did not occur on a regular basis. In the years of my fieldwork, I only noted one community performance of the ritual, in 2006 (Diyali, April 2006, 12). According to the RMRT organisers, the ritual had not been held in Sikkim for a long time because it had been forgotten, but it had been preserved in Kalimpong and other Róng pockets in the Darjeeling hills (Diyali, April 2006, 12).

Despite these differences and the struggles over cultural hegemony, the executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations in Sikkim and Kalimpong agreed that cultural difference within the Róng community was a problem and that it weakened 'the Lepcha'. True to the late liberal understanding of culture as a clear-cut catalogue, they described unification of Róng oral traditions as the only way to stop the fractioning and conflicts among the Mútunci Róng and unify them as 'a' people. Unification is consequently an attempt to get support from as many members of the community as possible, enhance the strength of 'the Lepcha' as stakeholders, and gain leverage for the 'Lepcha cause'.

Consequently, Róng activists have increasingly started targeting these cultural differences. The various Mútunci Róng associations have in the past tried to find compromises in order to stop the constant contestations. A proactive step was taken in 2005 by the Primitive Lepcha Welfare Committee, which was formed in Darjeeling in 2004 (Aachuley Report 2004b, 32). A "Lepcha Convention" was held and representatives of the various associations from Sikkim (RMRT, RMROS, MLAS) and Kalimpong (ILTA, ROP) were invited to discuss controversial topics such as the date on which Námsung is celebrated;⁵⁶ the

56 In the Róng calendar, an additional month (Tafá / Num Tsán) is added every three years; which year it is added in varies between Sikkim and Kalimpong. The former start adding the month during the Rat year (Kolok Nám), the latter in the Tiger year (Sathang Nám). Therefore, in some years the New Year celebration is not at the same time in the different regions. This confusion was discussed in the all-association meeting in 2005. It was decided to keep the extra month every three years starting from the Rat year, followed by the Eagle year, Horse year, and Hen year (Primitive Lepcha Welfare Committee 2005). However, it does not seem to have been implemented, since the problem remained: in 2013 the Róng New Year was celebrated earlier in Kalimpong than in Sikkim.

use of ‘ta’, ‘tha’, and ‘da’ in Róng script; the alternative use of weekdays; and other mythological differences (ILTA 2005). Though these controversies were not resolved, the meeting was a constructive effort to negotiate, find solutions, and maybe even accept certain differences.

Sonam Tshering Lepcha had a similar impact on the perception and practice of Róng culture in Ilam. Here, however, his influence was not contested but rather sought after. He went to Ilam for the first time in the 1980s. In the following years, other RMROS and ILTA executive members visited Ilam, many in search of historical documents. Similarly, RST executive members visited Sikkim and Kalimpong, and they looked up to ILTA and RMRT executive members as experienced activists and knowledgeable advisors from the Róng heartland. The interaction with the Mútunci Róng associations from beyond the national borders equipped RST executive members with the capacities to promote their culture and supplied the visible ‘content’ to fill this new demand for culture; the songs, dances, ritual programmes, dresses, flags, teaching materials, all of which did not exist in the region beforehand in such objectified form. The former RST president described how they learned to objectify their Róng culture:

Before the Nepali year 2043 [1986], we did not know our culture and dress. We spoke Róngríng, followed the rumfát, but we did not know the dress, we only wore the Nepali dress. Nowadays each household has their individual traditional female and male dress, our flag and so forth. Now people understand we are Lepcha (Former RST president, April 2011).

To promote the proficiency of Róngríng in the Ilam Róng community, the RST president actively sought assistance from ILTA. RST introduced night schools after the model in place in Kalimpong, and invited teachers from West Bengal to run them. A seminar on Róng manuscripts was organised in 2009, clearly inspired by a similar annual event in Kalimpong, and the ILTA executive members were the chief guests and narrators. RST had started celebrating Námsung, Róng New Year, and assembled a first Róng community ritual programme in Fikkal. The framing had been adopted from the Kalimpong and Sikkim Mútunci associations.

Despite their efforts at canon building, contestations, and the recognition of mutual influences, however, the Mútunci Róng associations were not the sole custodians of Róng culture. With the easier access to new mediums and alternative ways of publication such as the internet, the number of actors engaged in the public discourse on Róng culture had multiplied. Social media

sites surfaced as new public platforms for negotiating Róng culture, religion, and politics. Online, the debates were faster, more fluid, and multi-vocal. A slow democratisation of reflexive cultural production had set in.

Similarly, the ritual organisers are not the sole producers of the ‘culture’ disseminated during Tendong Hlo Rumfát. The compositional components of the ritual programmes – dances, songs, and stalls for selling cultural products – were open with regard to content, leaving room for creativity in cultural production. New songs, poems, and stories were written, new choreographies designed, and new tangible ethnic products crafted. For members of the Róng community artistically involved in cultural production, as the musician Mickma Lepcha pointed out, Tendong Hlo Rumfát was the most significant event of the year, as it brought together their target audience (Mickma Lepcha, folk musician, July 2012). Tendong Hlo Rumfát was the place for Róng authors to sell their books, for fashion designers to promote their newest creations,⁵⁷ for musicians to release their albums, and so forth. The production of cultural heritage was encouraged by the distribution of prizes and felicitations.

Cultural production beyond the scope of the Mútunci Róng associations was not always encouraged. Sonam Tshering Lepcha criticised the fusion of traditional music, styles of singing, and Róng lyrics with modern musical genres such as rock music and hip-hop. He himself was a gifted musician, had composed many famous Róng songs, and spent a lot of time and energy teaching a younger generation how to play various traditional instruments; however, he wanted to retain the traditional rhythms, techniques of playing, and styles of singing and felt they were not being preserved by fusion music. Traditionally, different types of religious specialists sang different tunes during specific ritual activities; this was knowledge Sonam Tshering Lepcha wanted to keep alive.

My aim is to preserve the tunes of the mun in the tunes in [my] songs. Nowadays, we can hardly find any mun or búngthing, even in Sikkim, and all the knowledge is dead because nobody is interested in singing a song, a Róng song. Sikkimese like to sing English songs. If we only sing the songs of others then what will be preserved? However, even though almost all our mun and búngthing are dying, at least we have the tune of the chanting which is hidden behind those songs [i. e. those he has written, J. B.]. (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010)

57 For fashion shows and ethnicity in Nagaland, see Wettstein 2013.

According to this logic, fusion music does not preserve the essence of Róng culture and is futile as a means of intergenerational cultural transmission. Sonam Tshering Lepcha's critique of fusion music is one example of how the culture performed during Tendong Hlo Rumfát is not completely streamlined to the preferences of leading activists. In their assemblage, ritual programmes leave open a space for variation and multiplicity in meaning, in a way that the oral texts cannot.

Memory, Experience, and the Power of Pride

On this occasion we get so many ideas on what Lepcha is and on the development and progress in the Lepcha community. (Alak Lepcha, Speaker Tendong Hlo Rumfát, August 2009)

In the enactment of the assemblage, the participant can bypass the contestations about unity, or the “tensions concerning accuracy and truth in representation of the past” (Cattell and Climo 2002, 25), since it is precisely the polysemy, which is considered problematic by many activists, that constitutes the strength of ritual programmes, enabling participants to relate to them differently depending on their own notions and interpretations (Kertzer 1989). During Tendong Hlo Rumfát, participants are not simply reduced to being spectators of their own culture, as was argued by Holmberg (2016, 317) with regard to Tamang Lhochhar (New Year); by contrast, the polysemy inherent in the ritual assemblage, I suggest, turns ritual programmes into spaces for creative interactions with culture and content that specifically allow Indigenous people to find new articulations.

In many ways, Tendong Hlo Rumfát is about nostalgia or emotions, about memories.⁵⁸ Ritual programmes are a counter-strategy to forgetting, as rituals reconnect past and future (Finnegan 2007, 195–96). Initially, Tendong Hlo Rumfát was not a ‘common’ cultural memory or a known ritual practice in most Róng regions, and it still fails to reconnect every individual with a felt common past: but after three decades of intense promotion and government recognition, the ritual programme is creating its own history, and its legitimacy is repeatedly acknowledged by the state during each annual celebration.

Since 1993, an entire generation has grown up with Tendong Hlo Rumfát. The younger generation is increasingly mobile and more often moves between

58 On memory and social memory, see Assmann 1991, 1995, 1999; Welzer 2002.

different geographical and social spaces. Many live or have lived in the more urban areas for a certain amount of time, because of their education and jobs, and have attended Tendong Hlo Rumfát. Furthermore, the experience reverberates beyond the event itself. The publicity accompanying the transformed ritual reaches out and allows people not physically present at the event to feel part of it. Via media, a large imagined community – the Sikkimese public – can experience the ritual programme, the cultural performances, and the speeches. Even the young people who had not attended the event heard about it through school, television, social media, and friends: in their life's memory, Tendong Hlo Rumfát had 'always been celebrated like this'. Consequently, the discourse produced around the celebration is bearing fruit among a new generation of Mútunci Róng: to them it is 'the' Róng ritual *par excellence*.

Every Tendong Hlo Rumfát is an embodied practice of social memory (see Connerton 1989; Csordas 1994; Stoller 1995). New ritual performances become part of the experienced and remembered social memory and constitute the accumulated past (Brundage 2000; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In this way, ritual performances impact what is or is not perceived as Róng culture – regardless of the contestations and larger discourses revolving around cultural production in Róng civil society. Tendong Hlo Rumfát can be understood as an institutionalised event that consciously formulates social reality, rooted in the past but constituting the future (Yerushalmi 1982, xv), building on a sense of continuity and incorporating change (Brundage 2000, 5–13).

In discussions at the ritual itself as well as in interviews and conversations beyond the ritual context, young attendees of Tendong Hlo Rumfát mentioned an aspect of the event that surprised me. Processes of othering bring with them racialised and derogatory framings of ethnic groups and people belonging to those groups. In the case of the Róng, and especially Dzongu and other remote regions in North Sikkim, 'the Lepcha' were stereotypically considered backward, a little stupid, or maybe naïve (Gergan 2014; Kennedy 1991). Many of my interlocutors had experienced these racial stereotypes in schools and other public and private places; but now they shared that ritual programmes such as Tendong Hlo Rumfát made them experience 'being Lepcha' differently. They gave them something to be proud to belong to.

In its reporting on Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the media painted a positive image of the festival and of Róng culture. The participation of politicians and other public figures from the Róng community as well as other communities underlined the presentability, social acceptability, and prestige of the event. The felicitations and awards for cultural and social achievements handed out to members of the Róng community by leading figures of Sikkimese society direct-

ly instilled a sense of personal recognition (Interlocutor, June 2006; attendees Tendong Hlo Rumfát, August 2009). This positive imagery and experience were direct consequences of the state recognition and the state agenda of supporting the various ‘cultures’ in Sikkim.

These statements surprised me because, in the years I attended Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the public framing and speeches had repeatedly promoted the notion of ‘the primitive Lepcha’, something I would have expected to *increase* the sense of othering and backwardness. Speakers expressed their appreciation of the government for the new status and kept the public informed about the demands and promises of the new quotas attached to this status that were to benefit the community. The context was one of achievement and of an acknowledged rightfulness. I argue that the RMRT executive members, just like the young participants, reappropriated derogatory terms and used them for empowerment, in order to no longer be damaged (Galinsky et al. 2013; Gaucher et al. 2015; Croom 2018 on reappropriation).

In this context, I suggest that the use of the derogatory self-description ‘primitive’ can be perceived as empowering despite its formulation within a damage narrative. The RMRT general secretary powerfully formulated his rebuttal of the government’s strategy of taking up the connotation of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘harmonious with nature’ instead of ‘primitive’ that I mentioned in the introduction. In the quotation below, the RMRT general secretary reacts to a conversation the activists had had with the anthropologist and commission chairperson B. K. Roy Burman. The latter had highlighted the negative connotation of ‘primitive’ as an ethnic trait and pointed out that they should feel insulted when the term is used to describe their ethnic group and reject the self-identification. His words caused irritation, confusion, and anger.

Primitive can be a very good and authentic kind of identity, because primitive is linked with aboriginal. Only the aboriginals can be primitive, because if you have a history of migration, you cannot be treated as a primitive of that particular area. In that way I think it is a very good document for the Lepcha. We have nothing to do with self-insulting words. [...] We also submitted a bulky representation to Dr. B. K. Roy Burman and his reaction was why are you insulting yourself and always complaining. (RMRT general secretary II, June 2013)

The prestigious celebration of Tendong Hlo Rumfát helped the executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations to recreate a positive image of the

Indigenous. According to my findings, the Róng individuals who attend Tendong Hlo Rumfát were not ashamed to associate themselves with the Róng community, and the participants I talked to found pride in the public display of ancient language and culture. In other words, Tendong Hlo Rumfát did more than merely showcase a distinct ancient culture of a backward, isolated tribal group, so as to fit the guidelines of Indian reservation politics. The performance was clearly not an act of resistance to this ‘othering’ by the structures of governance; yet new cultural productions such as arts, music, drama, and poetry, as well as a new sense of pride were evolving in the ritual programmes. These new components again enabled more polysemy and attachments, especially among those contributing.

An organiser of the first Tendong Hlo Rumfát told me that the main initial incentive for RMROS in organising a public celebration was to give the people an event where they could meet – in order to bring Mútunci Róng together (Loden Lepcha, August 2009). From its humble beginnings to a large community gathering, the organisers succeeded in doing that. To draw on Durkheim ([1915] 1965), we may say that the event facilitates the necessary interaction between collective thought and the individual experience of it. People reconnect with this collective thought or memory in various ways and with varying intensities, which explains the power of ritual in generating feelings of commonality.

Conclusion

As Shneiderman (2020) puts it, ritual transformations are “folkloristic objectifications of tangible culture that are acceptable as legitimate displays of ethnic content” from the viewpoint of the state (216). They are externally uncontested articulations of ethnicity, as an accepted part of the ‘unity in diversity’ strategy of the state and the Indian government. Keeping the governance aspect of ritual programmes in mind, in this chapter I have illustrated the production and performance of cultural content, as activities designed by the Mútunci Róng associations’ executive members to regain power over the processes of transmission and to self-determine a format for Indigenous existence. The experience of domination by written traditions (Buddhism and Hinduism) is encapsulated in the myths of many ethnic communities in the Himalaya. Therefore, entextualisation – the visual fixation of oral tradition – has a long history of being associated with power. Aligned with this, producing objectified cultural content such as texts, tangible objects, or staged dances is itself empowerment. Crucially, the

production of oral texts cuts out variation and initiates debates over what should be integrated into the Róng canon and what should not. Canonisation requires authority, but among the Róng activists there exist multiple authorities in different regional and political contexts. To the activists, the diversity of cultural content posed a dilemma of inauthenticity, thus igniting their efforts to unify and authenticate the cultural content. And while none agreed on the content, they all equated a unified culture with the unity of the people and therefore stressed the necessity of purifying that content.

Furthermore, in this chapter I have argued that in contrast to the activists' interpretations, the property of polysemy makes the ritual programmes particularly valuable in cultural revival. The act itself represents more than the intentions of the ritual organisers, or their actions and framings; rather, a multitude of activities and meanings co-exist within the complex assemblages of ritual programmes. Building on Turner's approach to media, Boyer remarks that "human production always contains a historical excess within itself, which is the potential to transcend and to transform fundamentally the dominant social relations of production and reproduction in a given time and place" (Boyer 2006, 47; Turner 1991). I have shown that Tendong Hlo Rumfát, with its excess of media, performances, and stages, is exactly that.

The polysemy of ritual assemblage allows people to express 'culture' beyond the 'one' claimed by the Mútunci Róng associations, and to experience belonging as a vibrant resource. I have mentioned that Tendong Hlo Rumfát was one of the main events to promote, sell, or showcase Indigenous Róng media, art, music, fashion, etc. This Indigenous cultural production is not guided or streamlined by ethnic activists, nor is it 'pure' or 'primitive', as my example of fusion music shows. It is self-representation conducted by a diverse array of individuals, often in search of their own roots and combining Indigenous roots with a modern lifestyle and interests. I argue that Indigenous media production, without actively claiming to be 'writing' back at colonial categorisation and stereotypes, reformulates culture and self on its own terms – even if the concepts more often than not remain objectified and positioned within paradigms of searching for the ancient, unspoilt roots of the self. Moreover, the opportunity to perform and the associated felicitations provide incentives to produce more culture, art, fashion, and literature in the years to come. Underneath the public striving for objectification and unification, Tendong Hlo Rumfát creates a space for a young and vibrant 'lived' cultural production based on Róng heritage.

Additionally, I have argued that Tendong Hlo Rumfát has shaped the experience and memory of the participants and continues to do so, since a whole generation of Mútunci Róng has grown up experiencing Tendong Hlo Rumfát.

Similarly, the objectification of culture is normal for many of the participants. In conversations during Tendong Hlo Rumfát, not one of the participants described the cultural expression they were experiencing on that day as the product of colonial othering. On the contrary, young people expressed a regained pride in ‘being Lepcha’ due to the positive formulation of a rich cultural heritage and knowledge, even though the speeches often referred to ‘the Lepcha’ as ‘primitive’. The ritual organisers as well as participants thus engage in interpretation of government definitions and strategies, and they do not uncritically frame their ‘culture’ according to what they think the government requires but engage in a creative process of acceptance, modulation, and rejection. In this context, as Middleton (2016) puts it, “people categorize back” (25; see also Malkki 1995, 8; Karlsson 2000, 31–32). I conclude that processes of creativity, pride, and cultural strength have arisen out of the damage narrative that is deployed within the political discourse and governmentality. The cultural dimension of ritual – as I have unravelled it in this chapter – is thus productive in countering the ‘vanishing Lepcha’ narrative in multiple ways.



CHAPTER THREE

Ritual Practice, Exchange,
and Transfers in Dzongu



FIGURE 15: Mount Kangchendzonga as seen from Lingthem, Dzongu, October 2008.

Ritual practices that appease protective mountain deities, such as the Róng religious tradition centred on Kóngchen (Figure 15), have been defined in the scholarship on Himalayan religions as ‘mountain cults’ (Buffetrille 1998; Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Blondeau 1998). Karmay introduced a distinction between what he calls secular mountain cults and those defined as “holy in a pure Buddhist sense” (Karmay 1996, 60), associated with the scriptural tradition of Buddhism or the Bon religion (Gingrich 1996, 236). The latter includes mountains as spaces of pilgrimage and objects of veneration (Karmay 1996; for worship of the Buddhist mountain deity residing in Mount Kangchendzonga, Dzönga, see Balikci 2002; see also Huber 1999, 77), while the classification as secular derives from the assumption that this type of mountain cult is performed for “mundane pursuits” (Karmay 1996, 59). For the Tibetan context, such rituals are conceptualised as “clearly related to local and tribal patterns of peasant and pastoral economy, society, and their respective oral traditions” (Gingrich 1996, 235–36). Similarly, such unwritten traditions have been understood as reminiscences of older religious traditions that have not been effaced by the spread of Buddhism. In particular, the close link between sacred landscape and fertility (in its widest sense) is considered a pre-Buddhist concept (Karmay 1993).

I argue that in the case of the Róng religious tradition – often practiced alongside Tibetan Buddhism, with many localised syncretic elements – the conceptualisation as ‘secular’ and as a ‘reminiscence’ are both problematic. The use of the word ‘secular’ implies that these forms of practice pertain to worldly matters and are clearly distinct from religious affairs and a ‘purified’ religious tradition (ergo Buddhism). Further, ‘secular practice’ is associated with the practice of laypersons and not of highly specialised and initiated religious specialists such as *mun* and *búngthín*. Although laypeople can perform certain practices, the annual rituals require the knowledge, skills, and professionalism of initiated religious specialists. Additionally, the worship of Kóngchen cannot be described as reminiscence but is an actively lived religious practice.

By denominating one type of mountain cult as secular, the terminology of classification implements and complicates the distinction between profane and sacred that Durkheim introduced and that has been criticised in the scholarship on ritual and religion (Durkheim [1915] 1965; Eliade 1959). In the Róng religious tradition, sacred and profane activities and spaces interlace, such as has been argued for other parts of the world (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Goody 1961), and suggest a different understanding of sacredness. Consequently, I do not apply this distinction as an analytical tool.

Another problem derives from the conceptualisation of Róng religious practice as ‘mountain cult’. This terminology ignores the fact that Róng religious practice does not merely focus on the main mountain deity but connects to a wider environment and cosmology that is shaped by human and more-than-human interactions with diverse landscape markers, such as lesser hills, lakes, rivers, water sources, marshlands, bamboo groves, and trees. The scholarship’s focus on mountains – and its neglect of, for example, bodies of water⁵⁹ – has had real-life consequences, including the omission of rivers in the process of defining sacred sites for the UNESCO mixed world heritage site application for the Khangchendzonga National Park that was granted in 2016 (Lepcha et al. 2018). In this chapter, therefore, based on ethnographic material from three villages in Dzongu, I start to introduce Róng ritual practices as derived from and constituting an Indigenous ontology, in which the more-than-human spaces and entities, the human body, and the physical environment were and to a certain extent still are inseparable, just as the religious, social, and political fields are thought as interdependent.

Against this backdrop, I am interested in how Róng activists position the sacred in their assemblage of objectified cultural content. This chapter is structured in two parts, the structure in itself representing the exchange and transfers. In the first part, I outline annual community ritual practice in the villages

59 See C. Lepcha 2021, Lepcha and Lepcha 2021 as notable exceptions.

of Dzongu, the Indigenous Róng reserve in the Mangan district in the north of Sikkim. What I am interested in here is the soteriological dimension of ritual practice, as suggested by Gellner (1999, 58). As presented in the introduction, I argue that ritual is mutual action to secure personal, communal, and environmental well-being and fertility, as widely theorised in the scholarship on the Himalaya (Blackburn 2010; Holmberg 1984, 1989; Torri 2015). The welfare and safety of humans, animals, and the environment is interwoven in ritual practice, all being interdependent on each other. The soteriological reasoning grounded in Indigenous ontologies motivates – even necessitates – ritual practice. By reference to two community rituals, I unravel the social relationships between humans, more-than-humans, and space that are formulated in practice, and show how the villagers overcome their common lot by means of ritual exchange, ensuring divine protection from disasters and illnesses. Based on this, I argue, ritual practice constitutes the belonging to the community and environment and activates mechanisms of (divine) “recognition beyond politics” (Shneiderman 2014, 279).

Then, in the second part of this chapter I examine the dynamics of transferring the rituals organised by the Mútunci Róng associations according to the parameters of culturalist ontologies into the primary location of ritual practice. I argue that ritual transfers are relatively unproblematic so long as the ritual transferred is distinctly different from the existing ritual practice, namely an objectified cultural performance, and as such does not compete in its efficacy or disrupt the system of counteracting vulnerability.

A Brief Introduction to Community Ritual Practice in Dzongu

Living in Dzongu for a total of several months over a number of years, Kachyo and I documented two of the main community rituals in the Indigenous reserve: Sotáp Rumpfát and Cirim. Sotáp Rumpfát is held to protect the village and crops from natural disasters such as hail, snow, and heavy rains: the word *sotáp* means hail (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 864). Cirim is performed to prevent diseases from spreading among the villagers, their livestock, or crops; additionally, the ritual averts any form of disturbance, be it quarrels or social unrest, from harming the village community (Tariang Mun, January 2010). The name ‘Cirim’ probably derives from the Tibetan and Lhoke word *spyi rim*, which translates as ‘common ritual’ (Balicki 2008, 60).⁶⁰ In Róngring, *rim ro* means a “formal religious or sacred

60 Cirim is performed in the Lhopo (Bhutia) communities of Sikkim, too. For example, in Tingchim village, the ritual is held jointly by Buddhist *lamas* and the *búngthing* “in order to prevent and cure illness for the whole village when need arises during the monsoon” (Balicki 2008, 321). In Lhopo villages such as Tingchim, Cirim used to be performed regularly during Pang Lhabsol, but now it is only performed if perceived necessary (Balicki 2008, 321).

ceremony” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 640). Thus, a second word meaning could also be ‘the sacred ceremony of offering millet beer’ (*cí*). Both rituals are preventive rituals for the sake of personal and environmental health, prosperity, and social harmony. They are performed to protect the locality, crops, and animals that are the livelihood of the villagers, as well as the village community as a whole.

In Dzongu, the village communities performed Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim every year at a specific time. Sotáp Rumfát was held at the end of winter, when thunderstorms with heavy rain and hail are frequent. The ritual fell either in the month of Kursóng (January–February)⁶¹ or Thón (February–March).⁶² Pentong Búngthíng explained that this was the time for the ritual because the wheat was nearly ready for harvest, and any hailstorms or large thunderstorms that might destroy the harvest had to be warded off (Pentong Búngthíng, March 2010). Cirim followed shortly afterwards, just before the advent of the summer season, in the month of Sám (March–April)⁶³ or in Num Tsán (April–May/May–June),⁶⁴ as during monsoon diseases often spread and threaten the village communities. Teng Búngthíng recounted that Cirim should be performed in the time separating the winter from the summer, because it is in this transition period that protection from disease and other harm is required (Teng Búngthíng, January 2010).⁶⁵

In every village in Dzongu there is a specific place where the annual community rituals were or still are performed. Every villager knows the location, but usually no lasting structure demarcated it, and ritual altars are rebuilt anew every year. In Lingthem, the site for Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát is the same: it is called Mándóng and located close to the *mani* wall and shrines below the monastery amid pine trees. In all other villages there are two separate places. The

61 Siiger dates this month in February to March (1967, 79).

62 Siiger dates this month in March to April (1967, 79).

63 Siiger dates this month in April to May (1967, 79).

64 Calculating the Róng months according to the Gregorian calendar is not straightforward.

According to Siiger (1967, 79), this month is called Tafá in Kalimpong. However, in some years the region of Kalimpong has both the months Tafá and Num Tsán in the calendar, such as in 2011 and 2013. In other years, 2012 (Thunderbolt year) for example, Num Tsán is not mentioned as a separate month. The additional month Tafá / Num Tsán is added every three years.

At present, in Sikkim they start adding the additional month during the Rat year (Kolok Nám), while in Kalimpong they start adding it in the Tiger year (Sathang Nám).

65 Some villages, like Nampatan, located southeast of Mangan just on the opposite hill to Dzongu, celebrate it later in the year, in June, which can be the month Blúng, just before the peak of the rainy season. A few villages in Dzongu, such as the hamlets of Tingvong, celebrate Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim on the same day. Pentong does both rituals very close together, as one part of Sotáp Rumfát (*parnap*) is held on the day Cirim is performed. This specific case will be discussed in Chapter Six.



FIGURE 16: The elevated altar at Lingthem, March 2010.

locality for Cirim is more likely to be in the forest area. In Tingvong, the ritual place is called Kundyâm; it is close to the Malyóng stream and waterfall running through Tingvong, called Malyóng Sót (*tuksót*, waterfall, in Dzongu shortened to *sót*). It lies beyond the centre of the village, just below the paved road. The most impressive Cirim ritual place is in Pentong, located just off the old path to the village in a small clearing in the forest. For the ritual the altars are erected on a rock that overlooks the Rónggyóng river valley, Pentong village with its two prominent hillocks, and the village Sakyong on the other hillside. On a clear day, one could catch a glimpse of the snow-capped mountains. Sotáp Rumfát is done in a place where more people could assemble. In Tingvong as well as Pentong this is, for example, close to the school grounds, where the lunch was served during the ritual occasion. At Sotáp Rumfát more people gather, and some villages elect the traditional administrative posts (see Chapter Six).

All the community rituals I observed in Dzongu were assembled from similar compositional components. The ritual started early in the morning, when the delegation reached the ritual place with offerings collected from the village community and started preparing. All rituals had an altar made from four erected wooden or bamboo sticks and a platform, called *tshómtsú* in Róngring (Figure 16). The platform was then covered with banana leaves that had been slit

into two along the middle vein and cut at the bottom to fit the depth. Their tips faced the back of the altar,⁶⁶ while the latter was always positioned in such a way that the religious specialist was facing towards the snow-capped mountains when he was in front of the altar. On both sides of the altar the helpers erected horizontal wooden sticks and hung little woven baskets with a mix of various cereals from each village household (*dú*), wrapped in banana leaves, inside them, called *míng* (Gorer [1938] 1996, 228).⁶⁷

The erected altar held the *lópfiyet*, “the plate of large plantain leaf cut into two parts” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 760). The word *lóp* means both ‘leaf’ and ‘shield’ (760). One aspect of the word describes the tangible form of the ritual space, while the other hints at the ritual function of warding off evil. The word *fiyet* is translated as ‘to cut’ but also ‘to assemble or mix various things together’ (514). Both meanings of the latter word seem apt for the offering, as banana leaves are indeed cut, while at the same time it symbolises a tangible meeting place of the human and more-than-human worlds. In rituals we observed in Dzongu, the plate itself was not made from banana leaves but was metal, usually copper. The plate was put on the banana leaves placed on the altar platform and filled with rice, moulded into six heaps. Three short pointed bamboo slivers with butter (*mórgyen*) on the top were stuck into the three bigger heaps in the back row, while three butter lamps were placed in the front row. Additionally, eggs, one rupee coin (*kóm*, silver), and a ceremonial scarf (*khádo*, fig. *bádo*)⁶⁸ were offered on the plate.

Before the ritual started, the religious specialist prepared the *ci sungkyo*. This is a small wooden bowl from which millet beer was offered. It was one of the few permanent ritual items used solely for religious purposes by the Róng religious specialist (perhaps along with the metal butter lamps used today); all other paraphernalia were bestowed with meaning in the specific ritual context, which then dissolved again after the performance was over (see Oppitz 1999a, 77ff for discussion). The *ci sungkyo* was decorated with lobs of butter, in the observed rituals of Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim the religious specialists placed five lobs. The number of lobs varies depending on the intention of the ritual. In rituals considered good, such as community rituals or marriages, five *mórgyen* are set

66 See Bickel (1999, 83) for the similar use of banana leaves among the Belhare.

67 Gorer calls them *ta míng*. The word *ta* could either be an expression used to indicate to the listeners that it is just here (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 338), or it could be a corrupted form of *thám*, which means material or innate object (400). Interestingly, the word *míng* additionally means letter or signs customarily aligned (570).

68 The word *tór*, which means silk, is also used for the ceremonial scarves (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 373). For *khádo* see Tamsang 2005, 45 and Tamsang [1980] 2009, 227; for *bádo* see Tamsang [1980] 2009, 519: figurative word for scarf.

in place; only three are used when the religious specialist performs bad spells or sent evil magic to someone; while eight are used in rituals that sealed a treaty, such as between two families, or a promise (Kachyo Lepcha, May 2014).

The burning of incense below the altar indicated the ritual beginning. As the smoke of the incense moved upwards, it was supposed to clear the sky, make the mountains visible, and bring the ritual action and the offerings to the attention of the deities (see also Morris 1938, 5). The religious specialists of Dzongu recited in a sitting position. They did not clothe themselves with any special paraphernalia during their rituals. The power seemed to lie solely in their words, the offerings handed over, and the ritual items on the altar. In contrast, in Kalimpong *mun* wear white and have headgear with feathers.⁶⁹ Sotáp Rumfát was comprised of three parts: first, the offering of millet beer and rice (*cizophut*) on the *lópfyet*, the plantain leaf offering on the elevated wooden altar; this was the vegetarian part of the offering. After that, helpers – usually young men – killed and plucked the chicken brought from the households and prepared the meat offering, called *sháphut*.⁷⁰ The liver, lungs, and heart were taken out and roasted.⁷¹ Together with the legs and wings, these chicken parts composed the *sháphut* offering, and this offering was performed at the same altar. The meat offering was then distributed to the people present. Finally, all ritual practice ended with a short ritual for the deities of the place, including the spirits of the deceased that have not been able to return to the ancestral lands and roam the vicinity. Before and after the main ritual, the religious specialist also called upon his own personal deities and shared a part of the offering with them.

Cirim had two additional sequences, the blood offering (though during my fieldwork that was only performed in Tingvong) and an egg divination, both done before the *sháphut* offering. Lingthem Búngthing also performed the egg divination during Sotáp Rumfát. To exemplify these additional ritual elements, the description relies on the Cirim that Payel Búngthing conducted in the main Tingvong hamlet in 2010. At that time, women were not allowed to attend Cirim in Tingvong – a restriction I had not experienced anywhere else. The religious specialist told me that previously only the *búngthing* and the village administrator would participate, because the ritual was so dangerous. During our fieldwork, men could attend, but the restriction remained in place for women. The

69 See Oppitz 1999a, 94 for a discussion of paraphernalia in the Himalayan context.

70 The word *shá* for meat is not Róngring but comes from Tibetan or Lhoke; the Róngring word for meat is *mân* (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 553). The word *phu* means to offer, while *phut* is described as the first fruit, the first part of the harvest, which is given to the deities (499).

71 Oppitz describes a similar style of cooked meat offering during a hunting ritual of the Magar (see Oppitz 1997, 527).

búngthính reasoned that the woman was the protector and nurturer of the children and the family, and therefore a target for evil spirits who would want to harm their family (Payel Búngthính, April 2010). Consequently, I did not attend the ritual. Kachyo went alone and recorded audio and video footage. Since the danger was only at the moment of the ritual event and the content itself was not forbidden for women, I could still view the footage, and we analysed the material together. The restrictions are in place for other hamlets in Tingvong, Tingvong proper (the ritual I describe here), Kussung (performed by the same *búngthính*), and Lingko, performed by a senior *padim*. I could not find out when and why this restriction was implemented. Siiger mentions nothing, which does not mean the restriction did not exist then. In 1949, when he was in Tingvong, a female *mun* presided over the Cirim he observed (Siiger 1967, 187–90). But the fact that a woman presided over the ceremony does not necessarily mean that other women could attend.

The blood offering was performed on an additional ground altar with erected stones (*langtsók*) (Figure 17). Erected stones are important in Róng religious practice to demarcate their only permanent sites, such as in the ritual site in the sacred grove at Kabi Longchok or the altar for the Kóngchen ritual described by Siiger (1967, 194, Plate VIII; see R. Lepcha 2021). In addition, they are used to distinguish boundaries and protect the fields (Foning [1987] 2003, 36–43). So during Cirim, after the millet beer and rice offering at the plantain leaf altar, the *búngthính* offered the same at the stone altar, where a black cock was tied up. Then a helper cut the head off the cock, sprinkled the blood over the altar, and placed the head in the middle. The stone altar I describe here is the one that was constructed in Tingvong proper. The main concept is the same in every village, despite slight differences. The altar in Tingvong comprised sixteen stones aligned in two rows.⁷² Despite not performing a blood sacrifice in Pentong, the religious specialist integrated three erected stones into the plantain altar in the Cirim ritual we observe. The Lingthem Búngthính did not use stones at all in his performance. He had not learnt how to conduct the blood offering, as in his younger years he was engaged as a lay monk at the Lingthem monastery and while taking on these duties it was not deemed fit for him to perform animal sacrifice. However, he remembered his father used to perform this ritual sequence. His memory aligned with the documentation of the ritual by Morris (1938, 153) and Gorer (Gorer [1938] 1996, 228–30). According to them, eight stones were erected.

The Payel *búngthính* smeared butter on the top of the stones and stuck small pieces of thread onto them. The altar faced down the river valley towards

72 Siiger mentions that twelve stones were used in Tingvong in 1949 (Siiger 1967, 188).



FIGURE 17: Payel Búngthng performing Cirim at the stone altar, April 2010.

the southern hills and the plains, a spatiality I explain in Chapter Four. The spatial alignment of the altar is the same in Pentong and in the Cirim observed by Gorer and Morris in Lingthem. The stones represented the soldiers of Kóngchen. These dangerous more-than-human beings have their abodes in the mountain ranges and were said to move down through Dzongu around the time of the ritual. They were the main evil spirits that required appeasement during the community rituals so that they would not harm the villagers. According to Róng oral traditions, the movement of the Kóngchen soldiers down the mountain was initiated by a past interaction between a specific clan in Dzongu and the Sikkimese king. In Chapter Six, I describe how this interaction is connected to the ritual for Kóngchen that used to be performed in a hamlet of Tingvong as well as its historical and political implications; here it suffices to say that while the ritual and the Sikkimese kingdom have been discontinued, the more-than-human soldiers still descended from the mountains and could potentially cause destruction. During Cirim, the blood was offered to satisfy these soldiers.

Equipment for the soldiers was arranged around the stones: weapons, food, and other miscellaneous items to guarantee them safe passage. Twelve replicas of poisonous arrows were provided which were carved in a triangular pattern that closed towards the pointed tip of the bamboo stick (*súktsót kret*).



FIGURE 18: Pentong Búngthíng performing the egg divination, April 2010.

Súktsót, the Róngríng term used for arrow, literally means to receive pain, while *kret* translates as 'to join'. Another ten poisonous arrows had a fern-like pattern, in which the triangular carvings closed towards the bottom of the pointed bamboo. In Róngríng the term used to describe these arrows is *krunkrók kret*, join the fern. Then there are two additional ones decorated in a zigzag design, they are called *potsóng kret*; *potsóng* is the name used for a snake.⁷³ The pattern on these latter arrows was compared to a snake. They were placed in pairs, tips intersecting, and decorated with butter. On the ground between the stones there were eight normal arrows (*tsóng zóng*: *tsóng* 'arrow', *zóng* 'exceeding the normal or extra', Tamsang [1980] 2009, 593, 617) as well as six guns, six bows, and six shields. The soldiers were also given food: twelve woven baskets with mixed grain, twelve bamboo water vessels with a slanted opening (*tek*) (see also Morris 1938, 154), twelve horizontally cut vessels with milk and tea leaves (*tur*) (154),⁷⁴ butter, and eggs. Additionally, there were long sturdy bamboo walking

73 Translations of the arrow names are given by Kachyo Lepcha.

74 The same was done in the altar in Pentong, although here no tea was used and the bamboo vessels with the horizontal opening were only filled with milk. In Pentong, six of each were placed on the altar, aligned in rows of three. According to Morris (1938), the Lingthem ritual previously used eight of each and only added milk (155). The use of bamboo vessels is common in Róng rituals, and they are used by the Lhopo in Tingchim when propitiating ancestral deities (amongst others Dzönga) and by the Limbu (Balikci 2008; Sagant 1996, 378).

sticks (*patúng*) (154) placed at the back of the altar,⁷⁵ mixed coloured thread (*kadi kanek*) for binding or building bridges, a plant for colouring (*vyum*),⁷⁶ cotton for clothes, and flags (*târ*) on the altar, all for the Kóngchen soldiers to use during their journey. The entire arrangement was called *tuk tsóm*, where *tuk* means the personal or precious offerings and *tsóm* stands for the decorative offerings.

After the blood offering, an egg divination followed (Figure 18). The eggs were either dedicated to specific deities, as I describe in Chapter Four (Lingthem), or represented the village household that had brought them (Tingvong, Pentong). If the egg yolk was speckless, it was a good sign. Dark or bloody spots were considered a bad omen and a hole in the egg yolk was interpreted as a sign of death in the coming year.⁷⁷ After that, the cooked meat was prepared and offered at the erected lópfyet altar, just as at Sotáp Rurfát, and at the stone altar. Cirim ended with an offering to the deities of the place and the *búngthíng*'s tutelary deities.

In summary, during the ritual, the religious specialist first specified the area for which the offering was effective. Then he asked the main mountain deity (Kóngchen Pano), who is addressed a king in the ritual recitations (*pano*),⁷⁸ and subsequently various local guardian deities (Lungjí Lungnóng, or Lyáng-dók Úngdók, translated as the protectors or owners of land and water) to each receive their respective share of the various offerings presented to them: the decorations hanging from the sticks, the golden and silver altar, the golden and silver butter lamps, millet beer and rice, the butter, and the life of a chicken. In return, the *búngthíng* requested them to prevent heavy storms, hail, winds, or diseases from coming to the lands, and to send them through the mountain valleys straight to the plains area instead.

We recorded the entire recitations of the community rituals I analyse here. However, considering that the power of the ritual is in the specific recitation just as much as in the act and setting – and within Róng Indigenous thought-framework the interaction with more-than-human beings is dangerous – I have kept the direct rendition of ritual text to the bare minimum. Consequently, the text is mostly kept in English, with some explanatory Róng words, and mainly paraphrased.

75 In comparison to the altar in Tingvong, in Pentong three walking sticks were placed towards the back of the altar, and one stone was put in front of each of them. They were all much smaller in size than in the Tingvong ritual. In Lingthem a total of eight walking sticks was used, just as in Tingvong today (Morris 1938, 155).

76 This plant is an herbaceous climber, *Rubia cordifolia* Linn, whose roots and leaves are used for the dyeing (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 830).

77 Limbu religious specialists perform similar egg divinations (see Sagant 1996).

78 For more details and the political implications, see also my discussion in Chapter Six.

Ritual Reciprocity or Paying Taxes to Deities (*khe tóp*)

I have asserted that Dzongu villagers engage in community ritual practice primarily for soteriological reasons, and thus with soteriological goals. When asked why they perform Cirim or Sotáp Rumfát, villagers specified that it was a necessary offering to the deities (*rum dár*).

We have to give tax to the deities of the area. If we don't, then there will be problems. (Sangdong Búngthing, August 2009)

The main addressees and the primary recognising agents of all ritual activity are more-than-human beings. The recitations of Cirim give an insight:

Today we burn incense. We burn incense (2x, sóngkuptá, pâkuptá) towards an elevated place. It is through the golden (3x) and silver incense we from our side down here [offer]. (3–4)⁷⁹

As mentioned, incense was burnt at the beginning of every Róng community ritual. In the recitation, the ending *-tá* indicates that the burning is directed – like the smoke – towards an elevated place. Then the *búngthing* demarcated the area – the hamlets Tingvong and Payel belonging to Tingvong village – for which the ritual performance applied. The request to the more-than-human beings not to send any diseases to the specific village followed, and was repeated in a rhyming method called ákep, characteristic for Róng ritual recitations, that I describe in more detail in Chapter Four. The sentence remained the same, only the word for disease varied slightly. This same composition was used – with some exceptions – throughout the entire recitation:

pulyum sóm thápmabon pugóm sóm thápmabon
úngdâr sóm thápmabon úngmi tukmi sóm thápmabon
Don't place diseases.⁸⁰ (6)

At this stage, the main mountain deity was addressed.

Ne Kóngchen Pano ká to the sacred Kóngchen king up there
káyú álóng látnunká me⁸¹ we right now again – in an upright position

79 The numbers after the translation indicate the line number of the translation. The document is in the possession of the author.

80 The recitations have been shortened. There are several other words used for various diseases within the recitation.

81 The Róngríng word *me* means 'that', additionally, it implies 'down there'.

khekuptá⁸² tóρ⁸³bu dyung⁸⁴bu from down here pay the small tax towards
an elevated place
phutkuptá tóρbudyung pay the first fruit of the harvest towards an
elevated place. (7)

Then the specific offering was made more precise: millet beer.

*See now again, it is this millet beer offering (2x, numfing ciphut,
numdyol ciphut). You all receive it properly and nicely. (8–10)*

When the religious specialist requested the more-than-human beings to accept his offering, he put the rice grains he had in his left hand into the liquid fermented millet. Then he emptied the *sungkyo* bowl towards the altar. This gesture was repeated throughout the ritual performance.

The word the villagers and the *búngthing* in his recitations use for offering is *khe tóρ*. The word *khe* is ‘tax’, while *tóρ* has multiple meanings. It can either be translated as ‘to pay’ or ‘to pray’. In the everyday context it is additionally used in the sense of giving support. Paying, praying, and giving support are consequently perceived as related activities. This word encapsulates an understanding of reciprocity between humans and more-than-human beings embedded within the environment as defined within a Lepcha Indigenous thought-framework. It introduces a practice of mutual obligation and support and establishes a recurring relationship. The various aspects of this relationship will be uncovered in this publication.

The main obligation in ritual practice is the symbolic material exchange. The community participates in this exchange through material contributions: it is compulsory for every house to give *ci* (local millet beer), rice or *táfá* (beaten rice), *dú* (a mix of rice, barley wheat, soya bean, and sometimes maize⁸⁵), and egg or chicken. Increasingly, it was becoming normal for organisers to ask for monetary contributions, either in addition to the mentioned items or instead of it, such as in Pentong or Chungtang. The local elected leader in Chungtang, the Panchayat president, confirmed that monetary collection was still a tax system, but modernised, done in a “short-cut way”, to use his expression (Lendup Lepcha, Panchayat president, January 2010). The villagers could bring any additional items and contribute whatever they had in the house such as fruits, ginger, salt, tea leaves, vegetables, and flowers. Not everything the villagers provided

82 *tá*: towards an elevated place.

83 *tóρ* means both ‘paying’ and ‘praying’; this shows the interrelatedness of religious and political obligation and will be discussed in Chapter Six.

84 *dyung*: vertical or upright.

85 In some villages, maize is not used during Sotáp Rumfát (Sangdong Búngthing, August 2009).

was used for the actual ritual ceremony; some items were used to prepare lunch for the participants after the ceremony.

This material offering by each household was crucial in the ritual exchange. It made the villagers a part of the ritual process and activated a relationship with the more-than-humans that was initiated, supervised, and guided by the ordained religious specialist. By means of this contribution to the ritual exchange, each household and its members in return became eligible for the divine protection from disease, disastrous weather, and other calamities. Recently, some villages in Dzongu had introduced the rule that one person from each household must attend. This new phenomenon is potentially linked to experiences of community at ritual programmes, yet even without this obligation, people did come and attend the rituals: some were there to help, others to socialise. I saw rituals which were attended just by a handful of people, while others – for example *Sotáp Rumfát* in Pentong – were gatherings of thirty or more.

The ritual reminded the villagers and the more-than-human beings of a mythological contract between humans and the malevolent spirits. The contract between the malevolent forces and the religious specialist enabled him or her to take on the intermediary position between the human and the more-than-human worlds. It elaborated an understanding of the world in which more-than-human beings threaten but also protect the Róng people. The concomitance of vulnerability and benevolent strength was enshrined in the advent of the world or of the sentient beings, and of relations between them. The narrative of the creation of the *mun* and the *búngthing* was part of the entire creation myth corpus. It started after evil had come to the world, when the Róng progenitors, *Nazóngnyú* and *Fadróngthing*, deprived their children of parental attention and threw them into the forest. Once neglected, these children turned into various kinds of malevolent spirits and caused harm to the humans who descended from the last-born children of the Róng progenitors and were loved and taken care of. Initially, the humans were powerless against these more-than-human beings and sought help from the deities.

At this point, several variations of the myth exist. In Dzongu, most commonly the deities gathered under the guidance of *Kumyâ Kumshi Rum*, the god of knowledge, and summoned the malevolent beings to *Ázúm Purtám*, the meeting plains. *Kumyâ Kumshi* can be translated as ‘trickery’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 227), but in this context, ‘wisdom’ (Tamsang 2005, 40) seems a more apt translation. While Tamsang emphasises *Kumyâ Kumshi Rum* role in the institutionalisation of marriage (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 227), this deity holds a prominent position in the entire creation story as told in Dzongu (Bentley 2008).

At Ázúm Purtám the deities negotiated with the evil spirits to make them stop killing people, and it was decided that the spirits were to be offered food in the form of millet beer, blood, and other edible items instead of human souls. However, there was no one with the ability to enter into exchange with the evil spirits and feed them. Therefore, Ítbú Debú Rum, the creator and destroyer deity, created the first *búngthíng* and *mun* to negotiate between the more-than-human beings and the humans and prepare the food, i.e. offerings, for the evil spirits (Pem Chedar, Nampatan Búngthíng, April 2006). According to Pentong Búngthíng, the first religious specialist, whom he called Ádi Ázuk Munkup, received ginger (*salek*), a kind of plant (*parmu*), colourful thread (*kadi kanek*), and a bundle of elephant grass (*pashór*) to be used for interacting with the more-than-human beings (Pentong Búngthíng, April 2010). The *pashór* was an important item among the paraphernalia of the religious specialists in Dzongu and was used in cleansing rituals. In some variations of the myth, plants and animals were first sent for the task of negotiating, but they all failed to perform their duty (de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 23–25).

In other versions no contract was made, but the deities met, took an oath, and bestowed upon the religious specialists powers to subdue evil. In the *Nyúlik Nyúsóng Sung*, a creation story of the first *mun* written by Mung Shyel Simikmu in Ngasey in 1886,⁸⁶ the supreme creator deity summoned various deities to figure out how to protect the humans and all living creatures from being devoured by evil spirits (Simik 1992, 8–9). In another account prominent in Kalimpong, a more-than-human figure called Támsánghíng empowered the religious specialists. He arrived from Pandim Cú to free the Mútunci Róng from the most malevolent spirit, Lásó Múng. According to K. P. Tamsang, Támsánghíng bestowed ‘supernatural’ powers on a man and a woman so that they could help the humans, which is how the first *mun* and *búngthíng* came into being (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 44). In Sonam Tshering Lepcha’s version, first only Nyúlik Nyúsóng Mun was created. Then Támsánghíng decided that Nyúlik Nyúsóng Mun alone was not sufficient to fight the malevolent beings in the world:

Therefore, he found a young, pure Lepcha lad living in a cave named ‘Dub-Di’, above ‘Puntaong’, Zaongu. Tamsang Thing, again, consecrated this young man with three shoots from ‘Pashyor’, elephant

86 According to Mung Shyel Simikmu he wrote *Nyúlik Nyúsóng Sung* in 1886 (Sheep year) in Ngasey village, Kalimpong. Then Pasang Jhyllum Simik copied the text in 1961 and P. T. Simik reproduced it again in 1992. He then translated it (Simik 1992).

grass, and gave him supernatural powers at a lake named ‘Azaor’ or ‘Da Yaong Chaok’, Sa Kyung, upper Zaongu; hence, his name ‘Azaor Boongthing’: (S. T. Tamsang [Lepcha] 1999, 35, transl. by L. Tamsang)

In Foning’s version, the gender roles are reversed. The creator deity made the first *búngthing* to control the evil spirits and work for the benefit of the humans. When the male religious specialist grew too busy, he selected a woman from the humans and with a ceremony delegated some of his functions to her, namely human welfare and the “incorporeal and spiritual side” of his tasks (Foning [1987] 2003, 61).

Against this mythological background, the ritual can be defined as a circumscribed situation of reciprocity during which the humans interacted with the more-than-human entities in a controlled setting by giving a form of payment and support, so as to ensure the absence of the malevolent more-than-human beings and the protection of the benevolent ones.⁸⁷ The benevolence of the deity required a regular offering or tax payment, defining this practice of reciprocity as recurring and binding to both equal partners. The mythology on the origin of Cirim demonstrates how any help from the deities came with an equivalent return demand, thereby solidifying as well as reshaping the relations. On request, the mountain deity Kóngchen sent soldiers to aid the Mútunci Róng of Dzongu in fulfilling the demand from the Sikkimese king to support his army in the time of war. These soldiers had their abodes in the snow-capped peaks surrounding Mount Kangchendzonga. After the mountain deity unleashed their powers in the form of diseases, a regular annual ritual offering became required in order to control them (see Chapter Four for details of the myth). Up through the present day, the Kóngchen soldiers have continued to demand regular worship to maintain order, prevent diseases, and ensure prosperity.

Now again today [we] arrange the customary decorative bamboo hangings (2x; potsúmíng, pálá míng), to [the ones] up there again we show through the golden and silver altar (2x; jer tsungróng, kóm tsungróng) to the sacred Kóngchen king, to Zengó⁸⁸ king. And now again to us, to this land, to this water, to our twenty-one households of Pentong, you do not bring rainstorms and wind and thereby destroy barley, wheat, buckwheat, and sweet buckwheat fields. Now we definitely pay tax to the sacred Kóngchen king, to Zengó

87 For a similar theorising of ritual, see Oppitz 1993.

88 Zengó is a word used as *ákep* (the rhyming narrative style; see Chapter Four) for Kóngchen. According to Chakraborty (2021) Zengó is a more-than-human believed to have their residence in Tholung monastery.

king. Up there, today we again [offer] to the sacred Kóngchen king, to Zengó king through the share of a chicken tied up here (2x; lumbu lumsóng). Now you do not disturb, you do not give pain. Receive the sungkyo offering; receive the butter smear offering (mórgyen). Receive it; accept it. It is a millet beer offering, it is a rice offering. Receive it through the sungkyo offering; receive it through the butter smear offering (2x). (Pentong Búngthíng, March 2010, 11–45)

Kóngchen, the central mountain deity itself, is the main addressee of the rituals. He stands as guard and guarantor of fertility and well-being.⁸⁹ As the superior of the Kóngchen soldiers, only Kóngchen can control these mountain ‘demons’, ergo the diseases or any form of misfortune. Kóngchen himself is never considered an inherently malevolent being or connoted with illness, but other more-than-human beings with abodes in mountains are more ambivalent, as are the lesser more-than-humans dwelling in rocks and watercourses. Róng religious tradition makes a distinction between *rum* (benevolent more-than-human being) and *múng* (malevolent more-than-human being), but the division is ambiguous. The terms *múng* and *rum* can both be used for the same more-than-human being depending on the context.

In the ritual recitations the religious specialists addressed the more-than-human beings in the plural, as indicated with the suffix *-sang* or *-pang*. In the Cirim ritual Payel Búngthíng used the suffix *-sang*, while Pentong Búngthíng used the suffix *-pang*. The former plural suffix is used for humans and benevolent spirits, the latter for non-human plurals such as animals, things, or evil spirits. Consequently, Payel Búngthíng emphasises the benevolence of the more-than-humans, while Pentong Búngthíng focuses on their malevolent aspects. This different approach implies that, depending on positioning, intention, and relation, either the positive or the negative features of the same more-than-human beings or types of more-than-human beings were placed in the foreground. In everyday language the two plural endings are not consistently distinguished, which could equally account for this variation.

As Payel Búngthíng explained with regard to the restriction on women’s attendance, the ritual act – of interacting with more-than-human beings – is perilous. The performance itself is a serious task that has consequences. Ritual speech is a constant reminder of the difficulty involved in interaction with deities. The language of ritual speech is called Tungbór Ríng. It is often described as the language of the gods, since its usage is confined to ritual invocations (Tamsang 2008a, viii–ix; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 388). Ritual speech is flatter-

89 For a similar understanding of Kóngchen in the Bhutia community and in Sikkimese Buddhist philosophy, see Balikci 2008, 109.

ing. Adjectives like silver (*kóm*) and golden (*jer*) beautify the offerings to make them desirable to the deities. The speech is figurative or metaphorical, employing words not used in everyday life, such as *lumbu lumsóng* for chicken, more commonly called *hík*. Its grammatical structure is multifarious and indirect. The *búngthíng* more often than not ends on a phrase or expression which can be translated as ‘it is’, ‘it is me’, or ‘it is known’, such as *gomo yá*, *gummo yá*, *yámá* or *yumbá*.⁹⁰ These phrasings are used to create a distance between the speaker and the content, similar to the phrase “it has become known to me that”. Another characteristic of ritual speech – again a local form of circumlocution – is the diminutive. The ending *-kup* is added to evil spirits, diseases, and tangible items that are offered. The word itself means ‘child’, but when added as a suffix it emphasises smallness (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 203). The use of this suffix again seems to be a strategy to honour the more-than-human beings while at the same time downplaying the danger involved in addressing them.

Narratives of people dying or becoming very sick after attending ritual performances are relatively common, especially with regard to death rituals (Gebu Lepcha, May 2011; Lungko Búngthíng, May 2011). In 1949, the residing Kóngchen Búngthíng, a religious specialist whose lineage is tied to the proactive mountain deity Kóngchen and who then was in charge of performing an annual ritual to call upon the latter to protect the kingdom of Sikkim (see Chapter 6), was scared to tell the foreign anthropologist Siiger the wording of a sacred song that was sung during the royally funded ritual to Kóngchen, because he feared the negative reaction of the more-than-human beings. After persuasion, he whispered them into the ear of Siiger’s assistant, while a villager stood guard to watch for any signs of divine wrath (Siiger 1967, 192). Approximately 70 years later, Samdrup Taso, the officiating Kóngchen Búngthíng, was unwilling to name the soldiers and their abodes in an interview with us, since he perceived it as too dangerous to name them outside the ritual context. Unlike Siiger, we did not push for the information, but respected the religious specialists assessment of the situation. According to Siiger, during the Kóngchen ritual performance the people participating were not allowed to talk loudly, while the Kóngchen

90 The spelling of the word here is according to the pronunciation in Dzongu. The words *gomo yá*, *gummo yá* are more often spelt as *goma* or *gumma* and indicate the first person. Plaisier spells the latter word *yâmbá* (Plaisier 2007a). This expression *yâm* means to know; *yâm o* can be translated as ‘be it known’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 623). Rónggring does not yet have a standardised spelling, and the local pronunciations of words vary. In the transcription of the recitation, Kachyo Lepcha has kept the spelling close to the local pronunciation. There might be other variations between the spellings found here and the spellings in the available dictionaries. According to Plaisier, in modern-day spoken Rónggring *yâmbá* functions as a discovery participle (DSC), which is composed of the word *yum/yâm* ‘to know’ and the postposition *bá* ‘when’ (Plaisier 2007a, 153). It emphasises that the speaker has come to know about the information, either directly or indirectly.

Búngthính conversed with other people through actions, because loud voices could offend the more-than-human beings (Kóngchen Búngthính, June 2011; village elder, June 2011).

All this indicates that the exchange of offerings or sacrifice was a dangerous interaction in which the villagers regularly partook to secure a future year of non-interaction. During the ritual, the boundaries between the humans and the deities – who inhabited or influenced the same realm and co-existed there – were reinforced. Importantly, it gives insight into a governance system among the Mútunci Róng that includes reciprocity with divine more-than-human beings and the land they are embedded in.

Ritual Efficacy: Vanishing Knowledge, Discontinued Rituals, and Disaster

Well-being and prosperity are the aim or the expected outcome of community ritual practice. Ritual efficacy refers to the success or failure of the ritual, or achievement of the expected ritual outcome (Sax 2006, 477). How, then, do we know whether rituals work? When I asked the villagers and religious specialists in Dzongu this very question, it became clear that experiences in the aftermath of the ritual are what indicate its efficacy. A ritual is considered successful if nothing extraordinary happens in the community within the following year. The absence of harm or disaster indicates that the deities have received the offerings favourably and accordingly fulfilled their duty to protect the village, its inhabitants, and crops. Thus, ritual success is measured by non-events.

If instead heavy rains or winds destroy the harvest after the ritual, or if diseases and death unsettle the village, that means that the deities were not pleased with the offering and therefore did not prevent the evil spirits from reaching the village area and causing harm. The egg divination – as performed in Lingthem – added another level to the question of ritual efficacy. Here, the religious specialist would foresee the benevolence of the various more-than-human beings in the coming year. It provided the people with a measure of how favourably the various more-than-human beings had reacted to their offering. If the religious specialist noted one of the egg divinations to be unfavourable during the ritual performance, bad incidents could occur in the following year without indicating a lack of ritual efficacy, since the reaction of the more-than-human beings had already been foretold within the ritual performance itself. In this case, the people expected something to happen within the year, and might perform additional rituals in an attempt to prevent it.

Furthermore, for an efficacious mediation the *proper* execution of the ritual is required, which includes the performance of accurate recitations and the

offering of the correct items to the corresponding benevolent or malevolent sentient beings. Additionally, ritual efficacy is clearly linked to the authority the religious specialist enjoys in the village and the wider community. His power is derived from his ability to mediate between the mundane and the more-than-human world, and thus from prior successful ritual performances.

If the búngthing does not offer properly to the rumdár, they might harm us. Some disease will afflict us. The búngthing and the padim should have perfect knowledge of the ritual. The padim needs to know which deity requires the offering of which items during the ritual, such as milk, blood, or tea leaves. The padim should offer to them correctly and not get the deities mixed up. If he does not offer them properly, the consequences could be that natural disasters such as floods, or disease, will affect the whole village and the whole nation. (Saffo Búngthing, January 2010)

My interlocutors in Dzongu, and in other rural areas, viewed wrongly performed rituals as a huge problem for the community. Such errors occurred because in some cases the transmission of knowledge had been interrupted and religious specialists, elders, and other villagers no longer knew how to properly prepare the altar or had only been taught shortened versions of the recitations. Further, as mentioned, the powers of the present generation of religious specialists were perceived as being weaker than those of the preceding generations: therefore, their strength in mediating between the human and the more-than-human worlds was considered to have declined. Consequently, the chances of them performing erroneous rituals and thereby angering the deities had increased.

The societal positioning of Samdrup Taso, the Kóngchen Búngthing, during my fieldwork was an example of how the community had lost faith in the abilities of a religious specialist. His lineage used to be highly respected and had produced the most feared *búngthing* of all of Dzongu. Successive generations had held the important responsibility of appeasing Kóngchen in the name of the Sikkimese king and protecting the entire country. There were certain constraints on the respective officiating Kóngchen Búngthing, but he also had a degree of wealth and a high status. When we interviewed Samdrup Taso, the last Kóngchen Búngthing, however, we found him at the margins of the community, where he lived until his death in 2011. The respect for the Kóngchen Búngthing had diminished because the villagers did not think he was still able to conduct the ceremony properly. They described his recitations as blurred and not correct; he was labelled a drunkard, and some people even said that he was senile.

The ‘vanishing *búngthính*’ – meaning both the person and the knowledge – is an existential problem in a physical sense, not merely in the sense of cultural survival. As an example, Lingthem villagers explained the death of a young resident as having been the consequence of an ancestral curse sent by an enraged religious specialist a century ago and which still tormented the family, causing most of its members to die because it was too strong for the present-day religious specialists to control. As the religious specialists gradually ceased to acquire the required knowledge and initiation, this increased the vulnerability of the entire village community, because their ability to control precarity and ensure prosperity was reduced. Additionally, the decrease in the number of initiated religious specialists endangered everyone who required the services of a ritual specialist. This existential anxiety could not be eased simply by the presence of a learned *búngthính*, as he had not been initiated and did not stand in contract with the more-than-human beings – a necessary condition to enable successful interaction with them.

Despite this, many still considered it better to perform the community rituals with the little knowledge and power that was left, rather than to stop performing them altogether, because the discontinuation of important community rituals was perceived as an even larger threat to the Róng community. For this reason, the discontinuation of the Kóngchen ritual was and still is a matter of concern for the people in Dzongu, and particularly in Tingvong, for it meant that they were breaking the contract and so the more-than-human beings did not have to keep their end of the bargain either (Gyanden Kangchen Lepcha, June 2011). An oral tradition recorded by Siiger had long reminded listeners of what happened if the Kóngchen ritual was not performed (Siiger 1967, 192–93): the protagonist whose brothers had turned into the soldiers did not offer regular sacrifices as she had promised, and so the soldiers turned wrathful. A snake blocked the river, causing a flood, until her son gave them a ritual offering. In Indigenous ontologies, villagers mentioned the lack of ritual continuity as the reason when death, illness, or other harmful incidents occurred:

*During the sheep year when I was young, a very dangerous disease spread in Gangyop and in the whole Tashiding area. So many young children died, nearly half the population died, but the people of the area could not give any reason for why the people were dying. A few days later the villagers met with a *búngthính*. He explained that the disease was afflicting them because in Gangyop and Tashiding they had stopped performing Cirim. From that year onwards they again started to conduct the ritual and then everything was alright. (Ringchin Lepcha, February 2010)*



FIGURE 19: Landslide partially covering the village Bey, November 2011.

On 18 September 2011, during my fieldwork, an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.9 on the Richter scale struck Sikkim and particularly the Mangan district. It left over a hundred residents dead and many more displaced. Local opinion associated the disaster with a failed ritual. Pentong Búngthing, for example, declared that nothing had happened in Pentong during the earthquake, because they had offered their annual rituals properly. The earthquake may have occurred because the main protector, Kóngchen, was not satisfied, but even though the earth shook – a bad sign in general – their local guardian deities had protected the village from any harm. According to this logic, their guardian deities were satisfied with the annual offerings and had extended their help to the villagers. In contrast, the neighbouring village, Bey, had been hit badly by a landslide during the earthquake (Figure 19). Most of the residents survived, but the village was partially buried and no longer safely inhabitable, as half the hillside had come crashing down.

Pentong Búngthing's explanation was simple. It had been years since the people of Bey had offered Sotáp Rumpfát or Cirim. Their deities might indeed be angered, but at the very least they felt neglected and therefore had not extended any protection from the forces of creation. The villagers had not acted upon their sacred and ancient obligation; in return, the guardian deities had not kept

their side of the contract. This lack of protection had caused the devastating effect that the earthquake had on the village (Pentong Búngthíng, January 2012).

According to Róng creation myths, the mountain deity Kóngchen was crucial in preventing earthquakes. All land rested on the more-than-human being Matli Pano, translated as the earthquake king (Namgyal Lepcha, May 2006). Ítbú Rum, the creator deity, had made him in relation to Kóngchen, who is said to be his elder brother and eldest son of Ítbú Rum. Pentong Búngthíng narrated the myth as followed:

Ítbú Rum created the sacred Kóngchen king and the Matli (earthquake) king. She created these two but there was no place for the humans, because an ocean covered the whole area. So Ítbú Rum thought about the human beings and where they could stay. She decided that Matli Pano would lie above the ocean. On his body she created soil, and this became the earth, where humans could live. But Matli Pano did not want to lie below the soil, so he moved below the earth and caused the whole world to shake. There was no control over the movements of his body. There were flood and earthquakes so no human could have stayed there comfortably. Next Ítbú Rum thought of a solution. She decided that Kóngchen Pano would pin down Matli Pano's chest, so he could control the movements of his younger brother. (Pentong Búngthíng, December 2008)

In the Róng Indigenous ontologies I learnt from the *búngthíng* in Dzongu the earthquake king is beyond the world, underneath, and out of reach of the Mútunci Róng.⁹¹ They cannot directly influence his actions, and consequently religious specialists do not offer their prayers to him. Kóngchen, however, was the one with the responsibility to stop the earthquakes, by holding Matli Pano firmly. Religious specialists could address him and engage in exchange with him. As Pentong Búngthíng indicated, the local guardian deities in the vicinity of the village could not prevent an earthquake itself, but they could prevent any harm it might cause within their place of protection. Here, the notion of 'seeing', the visibility in an effective landscape, is crucial and emphasises the agency of the embedded more-than-human entities, a point I elaborate in more detail in Chapter Four. In the current chapter, I focus on the aspects of danger and ritual efficacy. The earthquake indicated that Kóngchen must be dissatisfied with

91 See Chapter Four for a detailed analysis of spatial dimensions and agency in Róng Indigenous ontologies.

their actions (or ritual inactions). When, subsequently, Kóngchen Búngthíng, the last initiated religious specialist in an ancient lineage that held the supreme responsibility of appeasing the main mountain deity, died in an aftershock, it was clearly interpreted as an extremely bad omen. He was 84 years old (Bentley 2011b).

The natural catastrophe strengthened the understanding of the world along Róng Indigenous ontologies in Dzongu and revived or at least temporarily reinforced the claimed ritual efficacy of the community rituals. After the earthquake there was an increase in ritual activity in the northern part of Upper Dzongu, which was one of the main affected areas. The main ritual performed after the earthquake was the Lungjí Fát, which is the ritual to appease the local protective deities, including Kóngchen. Lingzya Búngthíng, whose area of influence was where the majority of the destruction in Dzongu had occurred, had little time to rest in the months after the earthquake. The relief camp was located in Lingzya and people from the completely destroyed village Bey as well as Sakyong and Pentong were staying there.

Further, that year the Dzongu Mútunci Róng association, MLAS, cancelled the fair (Nep. *me/a*) at Namprikdang for Námsung, the Róng New Year, but instead organised a one-day ritual function after deciding that the divine more-than-humans needed to be appeased after the earthquake. It was the regular New Year cleansing ritual and a Lungjí Fát. Additionally, Saffo Búngthíng, the officiating religious specialist, performed an Árót Fát, the ritual conducted in order to keep any form of negative energy or violent death away from the community. It was performed in the aftermath of the earthquake to appease the spirits of those who had died in the disaster as well as to mollify other harmful more-than-human beings that could cause violent deaths in the future.

In other villages in Dzongu that were less affected by the earthquake, ritual activity did not increase but the earthquake caused a rise in religiosity and strengthened the belief in local guardian deities, especially among the younger generation. The incident, a devastating earthquake, was added to the collective memory of the Dzongu residents. Their vulnerability and the importance of respecting their contract with the protecting guardian deities had been refreshed by a real-time life experience. The earthquake reminded the people of the exposure of the human body and its space to the power of nature and, according to their religious tradition, to the wrath or at least inaction of local deities. It reminded them that ritual practice based on Indigenous ontologies could be a successful strategy for overcoming the said vulnerability.

The more-than-human beings were the main recognising agent of community ritual practice. According to this conception, the questions of Róng 'culture' did not come into play as the main incentive for organising village community

rituals. The ritual *per se* was necessarily performed for the deities, and thus responded to both soteriological and instrumental considerations. The reflexivity and debates within the community thus evolved within the Indigenous ontology on which this soteriological framework is built. Despite the notion of an unchanging tradition, the quality of the performance, the changes that had been introduced – such as a monetary offering system – and the success linked to them were subject to regular scrutiny and debate, especially in the aftermath of a natural catastrophe such as the 2011 earthquake. Ritual practice implied the sharing of a common lot and the shared means to avert the mutual threat. It opened up mechanisms of being together and protecting each other.

Overwriting Local Oral Traditions: The Dominance From the South

Tendong Hlo Rumfát has in the past been celebrated, in the district capital Mangan, on the opposite side of the valley from certain villages in Dzongu. People from this region were actively involved in ‘bringing’ Tendong Hlo Rumfát to Sikkim. What effect did this new ritual transformation have in the ‘traditional’ setting of community ritual practice?

In 1997 Tendong Hlo Rumfát was conducted in Mangan for the first time, jointly organised by the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations (RMRT, RMROS). One of the organisers told me that the majority of the local Róng people they interacted with at the time were not familiar with the mythology or the significance of the ritual programme. They had to fall back on the local myths of flood and flight up Lingi Cú, a mountain visible from Mangan, in order to explain its meaning and importance and create common ground and understanding. At least ten years after this first performance, many elders I talked to still said they did not know anything about Tendong Hlo Rumfát. This statement did not necessarily mean that they had never heard of the present-day celebration, since ‘knowing’ in this context had a different, deeper meaning: Tendong Hlo Rumfát was not a part of their ancestrally transmitted knowledge system; it did not belong to *lúngten sung* of their region and lineage. Sangdong in Lower Dzongu described how Tendong Hlo Rumfát disrupted his understanding of the world:

I heard, when I was young, the older people offered to Lingi Tangdâ Cú, but nowadays they have shifted to Tungrong (Tendong) Mánóm Cú, but there is no background for that. The story I heard from the elders was similar to that they tell today, but they said the people were saved up Lingi Tangdâ Cú during the flood. Now, it has been shifted to Tungrong (Tendong) Mánóm Cú; the story is related to Róngnyú and

Róngít, being guided by Tútfo and Paríbu. Many old men, búngthíng, used to conduct offerings against the flood, but now the ritual is being performed in South Sikkim. (Sangdong Búngthíng, August 2009)

Tendong Hlo Rumfát was thus not revived within an open or empty space of lost tradition; instead, with their ritual assemblage and promotion, Mútunci Róng association members had given birth to a new dominant narrative that competed with other narratives or localised variations. This new form – as I will show for the case of Dzongu – overshadowed existing local practices and knowledge with regard to the mitigation of hazardous events such as flash floods and landslides.

After our interview, Kachyo seconded what Sangdong Búngthíng had said. He remembered that in the past, his grandfather, a *mun* from Lingthem, used to descend to the confluence of Rónggyóng and Tista annually to perform a ritual locally called Rut Fát (*rut*, landslide), addressing Lingi Cú to prevent floods or landslides from happening. The performance of this ritual had been initiated after a bad landslide had hit the Panang region in recent remembered history. In this case, it is possible that J. D. Hooker had recorded the very same horrific landslide that then became a part of social memory and ritual practice. In his publication he mentioned that a devastating landslide had occurred in the year prior to his visit to the region, in 1848. It had destroyed a whole village and killed twelve residents and all their cattle (Hooker [1954] 2004b, 16). Since then, the ritual had been repeated annually to prevent such an event from recurring, but the regular performance of the ritual was discontinued after the death of Kachyo's grandfather. This specific incident illustrates how within Róng Indigenous ontologies, ritual practice evolved and changed when hazardous incidents happened. Rituals were actions to overcome the dangers of living in a precarious landscape and adapted according to experiences made and remembered.

What then was the myth connected with Lingi Cú, a mountain northwest of Panang and Lingthem? An MLAS member, an initiator of the first Tendong Hlo Rumfát celebration, and several religious specialists told me similar versions of the myth connected to Lingi Cú and the Dzongu landscape. Two hillocks went to war over a woman. Both hills were called kings and the regions they resided over were their kingdoms. Sumphyók Pano is a hill on the southwestern banks of the Rónggyóng River that flowed through Upper Dzongu and then into the Tista. It lies in the vicinity of Panang, south of Lingthem. This hill fell in love with the wife of Rungdók Pano, a hillock on the other side of the river towards the village Saffo. In a slightly different version, she was not his wife but a woman belonging to his kingdom. Sumphyók Pano unified the other hillocks of the Panang–Lingthem area under his command, such as Lingi Cú and Tangdâ Cú,

who were also the guardian deities of the area, while Rungdók Hlo assembled his army of hills. As the opponents and their allies started moving towards each other in battle, they closed the valley and blocked the river course. The region was submerged (Loden Lepcha, August 2009; MLAS culture secretary, January 2010; Saffo Búngthíng, January 2010; Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010). Lingthem Búngthíng told the same narrative, but without mentioning a flood (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; Lepcha 2012, 14–15.).

In the several versions collected, the names of the kings and the wife varied, as did their relationships and the outcome of the conflict. Lingthem Búngthíng named the king from the Lingthem side of the valley Lungzóng, a local guardian located upstream from Lingthem village and not on the downstream boundary to Panang. The hillock on the Saffo side was called Khúhyúp Pano. Again, Saffo Búngthíng from his side called the king Sangdem, while naming Lingí Cú as the main opposing king from the Lingthem Panang hillside. Lingthem Búngthíng in turn refers to Sangdem Pundí as the daughter of Khúhyúp Pano (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010). Another source associated the name Lungzóng Thyaktit Pundí or Lungzóng Hlo with the princess (Lepcha 2012, 14–15). The guardian deity then was described as the female consort of Sumphyók Hlo, who is the main guardian of the Panang region (14–15). This ambivalence of gender and roles among the guardian deities is a common feature of Róng narratives.

After the flood occurred, the Dzongu residents saved themselves by going up Lingí Cú.⁹² Local residents say that the fireplace made by the survivors of the flood out of three stones (*puhum*) can be seen on the peak of Lingí Cú to the present day (Chindemu Lepcha, April 2006; Choden Lepcha, August 2009; Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; Sangdong Búngthíng, August 2008). Lingí Cú, the saviour mountain, was usually mentioned in relation to one or the other of two associated mountains. I address this pairing of embedded deities in more detail in Chapter Four. In some narrative versions, the partnering mountain was Lunggám Cú, a hillock above Tingvong on the opposite side of the valley to Lingí Cú and the main guardian deity of that vicinity (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; MLAS culture secretary, January 2010). The two hillocks were described as brother and sister, similarly to Tendong and Mánóm Hlo. According to various

92 A version collected in Lingthem, Dzongu, by de Beauvoir Stocks mentions Kóngchen Cú as the mountain the Mútunci Róng are saved upon ([1925] 1975, 32, 35), as does a version collected in Tingvong, Dzongu, by Siiger (1972, 241). The flight onto Kóngchen Cú is not mentioned in the narrations I collected in my fieldwork. Furthermore, Siiger's version mentions the Róng progenitors, Fadróngthíng and Nazóngnyú. It is they who flee up Kóngchen Cú while all other humans drown. When the flood subsides, they descend again as Nyikúng Ngál and Thikúng Tek (Siiger 1972, 241). The latter are the protagonists in the legendary blood treaty that occurred in Kabi Longchok.

narrations, Lingi and Lunggám Cú had a competition with each other over who would be submerged first. Finally, Lunggám Cú was submerged, while Lingi Cú's head (ergo peak) grew in order to keep out of the water. This expansion is said to explain the present appearance of the hillocks (Sangdong Búngthíng, August 2009; Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; Lingthem Monastery Dorji Lapân, January 2010). In other versions, however, Lingi Cú is related to Tangdâ Cú, another guardian deity of Lingthem. Here, Tangdâ is the older brother while Lingi is the younger one (Sangdong Búngthíng, August 2009).

Moreover, the deities that supported the Dzongu residents and helped make the flood recede differed from those in the myth narrated in association with Tendong hill. Instead of the creator deity Ítbú Rum, it was either Kumyâ Kumshi Rum, the deities of knowledge, or Tukshethíng Tukbothíng (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 32, 35). Tukshethíng is the name of a mythological figure, either describing a Róng progenitor deity or Guru Rinpoche (Bentley 2009/10). The term is often used paired with Tukbothíng or Takbothíng, the term used for the Róng progenitor Fadróngthíng (see Siiger 1975, 306; de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975).

In other variations, Kóngchen got involved to bring peace back to the region and to lower the water. He sent one of his soldiers, Manik Cú, to mediate between the two opponents and the conflict was settled. In the Panang version the woman decided to stay with Sumphyók Pano, thereby leaving her former husband, Rungdók Hlo. She physically shifted over the valley to take up a new residence (Lepcha 2012, 14–15), while in the version collected from Saffo and Lingthem the narrative ending was reversed, and the wife stayed with her former husband on the Saffo side of the valley (Saffo Búngthíng, January 2010). Manik Cú was supposed to return to his seat at the side of Kóngchen after his peace mission was accomplished. But the discussions and decision-making took so long that the dawn had already set in and Manik Cú could not leave the place anymore, because he was only to move during the night. Therefore, he remained as the constant mediator between the two rivalling hill ranges, whose war, according to oral tradition, shaped the steepness of the valley (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010; Saffo Búngthíng, January 2010).

This short excerpt shows how rich and multi-faceted are the oral traditions relating to the embedded more-than-human beings, floods, and the existing and past ritual practice designed to counteract future disaster. It is these traditions and practices that Sangdong Búngthíng described as declining due to the celebration of Tendong Hlo Rumfát. He noted that today the ritual had 'gone' to South Sikkim, referring less to the location of the actual ritual programme, since it had also been celebrated in Mangan, than to the location of

the mythological incident and the associated interaction between humans and more-than-humans. He added that Tendong Hlo Rumfát had become the main ritual against floods, while in Dzongu the previous practice of countering flash floods had ceased to be performed. The transformed and centralised ritual and the promoted narrative had grown more influential, while local practice had declined.

Sangdong Búngthíng hinted that the ritual programme in this case had overridden the practices previously performed against floods, even though there were other reasons why the rituals were not conducted anymore, namely the passing away, without passing on their knowledge to the next generation of religious specialists, of the elder religious specialists who used to perform one or the other ritual against floods. However, the *búngthíng's* nostalgic statement revealed that the local practice of Dzongu was clearly not included within the framing of the ritual programme. Given that the name of the ritual already homed in on Tendong hill in South Sikkim, localised narratives connected to other landscape markers were automatically placed outside the frame. It seemed in this specific case that the transformed ritual accelerated the decline in importance given to certain localised forms of practice, and even stood in competition with them. Instead of being revived, the discontinued Dzongu practice was being replaced, the narratives overwritten.

In reaction to this, Saffo Búngthíng from Dzongu, who until his death was one of the main religious specialists to annually participate in Tendong Hlo Rumfát, tried to weave the local narrative strands together. He mentioned that Tendong, Mánóm, and Lingi, as well as other abodes and their respective mountain deities, were all part of the flood story, since the flood had covered all of Ne Máyel Lyáng. In his logic, the people just knew the version that mentioned the mountain nearest to their home, as it was that respective peak that their ancestors had fled onto (Saffo Búngthíng, January 2010). Similarly, MLAS had taken the initiative to get the Dzongu narrative of the battle between the hillocks recorded in a school textbook for the Róngríng syllabus of the Sikkimese state (MLAS culture secretary, January 2010).

The Perils of Transferring ‘Cultural’ Rituals: A Dzongu Experience

Heeding Sangdong Búngthíng's words, I now take a closer look at how ritual revival influences ritual practice. The performance of Tendong Hlo Rumfát – with the inherent aim of organising a mass gathering – has predominantly been situated in Gangtok or the capitals of the other districts of Sikkim. What I am



FIGURE 20: Dance enacting ritual, Námsung *mela*, December 2008.

interested in is the phenomenon of ritual transfer. Such ritual transfers occur when actors permanently transfer a ritual or ritual components from one social environment into another (Neubert 2006; Langer et al. 2006). Members of Mútunci Róng associations actively promote transfers of ritual programmes or elements into rural Róng areas with the primary incentive of reviving and promoting Róng culture (Figure 20). But what then happens to the local practice? And where is the place for the soteriological reasoning mentioned in the first section of this chapter, when revived rituals are assembled around objectified culture?

In Dzongu, MLAS regularly organised one ritual programme: the Námsung *mela*, the New Year's fair. Most of the households in Dzongu celebrated Námsung. During New Year, the villagers feasted for a week and troupes of boys and girls went from house to house singing and dancing. At the end of the 1990s, RMROS members introduced a new ritual component in the region, the Lásó Múng Sonáp. This was a clear ritual transfer from over the state border. Much as was the case with Tendong Hlo Rumpfát, the Róng activists had been inspired by a visit to Kalimpong (Bentley 2008).

Lásó Múng Sonáp was celebrated on the last night of the old year. Lásó Múng was the first-born son of the Róng progenitors and the leaders of the evil spirits. First, a religious specialist performed a cleansing ritual, which had previously already been done in Dzongu for the New Year ceremony, then the village

youth went from house to house drinking millet beer and collecting offerings. Around midnight they burnt the effigy of Láso Múng, while a Mútunci religious specialist performed a last ritual. Until recently, in Dzongu, the oral tradition on Láso Múng was not associated with the New Year celebration; hence the religious specialists had previously not performed this ritual component. Usually, in the week after New Year, MLAS organised the Námsung *mela* in Nampridang. It was a fair with food stalls, rides, and other activities, as well as cultural performances and speeches from a stage. A religious specialist – during my fieldwork it was Saffo Búngthing – performed a ritual in a replica of a traditional Róng house close to the main stage and gave blessings to whoever came to seek them. As such, the set-up and organisation were similar to the ones of Tendong Hlo Rumfát.

At approximately the same time, in 1994, and in collaboration with the other Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations, MLAS introduced another ritual programme in Dzongu, Thikúng Munsalóng Commemoration Day (Pano Munsalóng Sáknón Súkyním). Thikúng Munsalóng was the founder of the Salóng *putso* (clan), one of the oldest clans in Dzongu (Pentong Búngthing, March 2010), associated with inventing the Róng script and introducing Lhatsun Chenpo, the Buddhist patron saint of Sikkim, to the sacred places of the holy hidden land, *beyul* (Tib. *sbas yul*) (Dorji Karthak Lepcha, July 2009; see R. P. Lepcha 2022, 149–154).⁹³ Some called him the last Róng king in the Sikkimese region (Bentley 2008, 2009). The organisers first celebrated Thikúng Munsalóng Commemoration Day in Passingdang, then Hee Gyathang, and Nampridang (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011). The ritual was not regularly performed, but regained importance during my fieldwork because the government had initiated the building of a large statue of Thikúng Munsalóng on Sungzâm hill above Lingthem, one of the main protective boundary deities.

Significantly, in their organisational structure and output, both the Námsung *mela* and Thikúng Munsalóng Commemoration Day were distinct from the annual Dzongu community ritual practice. Neither was referred to as a ritual in the local language, a stark difference to Tendong Hlo Rumfát, even though rituals are conducted on both occasions. Most Dzongu villagers viewed these ritual programmes differently than the community ritual practice that the religious specialists in their vicinity had performed as far back as they could remember. They recognised the political and modern nature of the ritual programmes and did not consider them particularly sacred, nor as a competition to the other community rituals performed for soteriological reasons, such as Sotáp Rumfát

93 See Chapter Five. For scholarship on the Buddhist concept of *sbas yul*, see Aris 1980; Childs 1999; Diemberger 1994, 1996, 1997; Ehrhard 1997, 1999a, 1999b; for an insightful discussion of Sikkim as *sbas yul*, see Mullard 2011, 9–12.

and Cirim. The majority of the Dzongu public – especially regarding the *Nám-sung mela* – enjoyed the excitement of the event. Only a few – usually related to the political opposition – complained that these ‘rituals’ were not ‘religious’ but only festive occasions that did not take the sanctity of Róng religion seriously.

Other ritual transfers existed in Dzongu and were far more problematized, both by the local population and particularly by the religious specialists. Motivated by the availability of government funding and supported by the other Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations, MLAS sponsored several additional ritual celebrations in Dzongu, namely Múzbekdíng Rurfát, Lyáng Rurfát, and Cú Rurfát. The Sikkimese government allotted funds specifically to these rituals, because – as mentioned earlier – due to Sonam Tshering Lepcha’s influence in the Culture Department, these were the rituals officially acknowledged as Róng practice. The religious specialists in Dzongu did not traditionally perform or even know these rituals, especially Múzbekdíng Rurfát. The ritual meanings and aims were consequently somewhat obscure to them. When I asked Lingko Búngthíng about Múzbekdíng Rurfát in 2006, he laughed at the name and said that maybe the Mútunci Róng association members were confused (Lingko Búngthíng, April 2006).

The word *múk* means ‘weed’ or ‘greenery’; *zek díng* means ‘sprouting or coming up’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 583). Activists from Kalimpong described the ritual as a prayer to Mother Nature,⁹⁴ a Róng festival in honour of the sprouting greenery (L. Tamsang 1999, 18; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 583; Sonam Tshering Lepcha, Bom Kyong, September 2010), as well as an “education in socio-ecological and environmental conditions in the Darjeeling Hills and its importance; exchanging of ways and means to protect it from further destruction in the interest of the Lepchas” (Aachuley Report 1998, 32, 40).⁹⁵

Then, in Dzongu in 2007, MLAS organised Múzbekdíng Rurfát for the first and last time during the time of my fieldwork in Namprík, Tingvong. The performing religious specialist was Lingko Búngthíng, who a year beforehand had laughed about this ritual. As Lingko Búngthíng had already told me in an interview the previous year, the MLAS culture secretary had described Múzbekdíng Rurfát as Sotáp Rurfát, because both were performed in spring; attempted to regulate the powers of Mother Nature, such as rain; and sought to bring prosperity to the Róng community (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011).

94 I address the concept of Mother Nature in ritual programmes in Chapter Five.

95 For descriptions of Múzbekdíng Rurfát see Das and Roy 1999, 9–11; L. Tamsang 1999, 18–19; Aachuley Report 1999a, 21–23; 2000, 8–11; 2002a, 27–29; 2003, 26–27; 2004a, 22; 2006a, 15; 2007a, 10; 2009b, 13; Gurung and Lama 2004, 123; Gurung and Lama 2004 revised by RMRT 2005, 21–22.

In the same year, the Panchayat members of Sakyong and Pentong, together with pro-dam activists, organised a Cú Rumfát, literally translated as ‘mountain deity offering’, in Lingzya, to ensure “harmonious development” (Now! Report 2007, August 23, 1). Lavi Sangay conducted the ritual. It was performed in the same week as Pang Lhabsol and one day after the anti-dam activists Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha, both from Dzongu, withdrew their hunger strike. Anti-dam activists interpreted this ritual performance as a political move and not a religious practice. In 2008, MLAS made another attempt to revive Cú Rumfát in Namprík. The Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department of the Government of Sikkim and the North East Zone Cultural Centre were the primary sponsors of the ritual. MLAS took over the entire preparations for the ritual, including the building of the altar, and brought the offerings (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011). Although the public from Namprík and Nung contributed some offerings, the rest of Tingvong did not attend, nor did everyone from the two hamlets, because many villagers did not understand the meaning of the ritual or the reason for the ritual occasion, as it had not usually been in their ritual calendar (Panchayat member, June 2011; Payel Búngthíng, June 2011).

That year, Payel Búngthíng performed Cú Rumfát, mainly because the more senior Lingko Búngthíng refused to do it. After conducting the prayers at Múzbekdíng Rumfát a few months beforehand, he had fallen seriously ill, and in his logic, the guardian deities of the location were angered due to his activities, and he had experienced their wrath. From his point of view, the organisers had instructed them to perform false rituals, and he refused henceforth to do this (Panchayat member, June 2011). The organisers had then turned to another religious specialist from Namprík, but he refused because he did not know how to perform the ritual. So Payel Búngthíng had agreed to do it, even though he himself was unaware of which ritual it was. When asked, he described the ritual as *cholsá rumfát*, the ritual from down below – meaning that the ritual had come north from the urban centres of Gangtok or Kalimpong – but as unknown to him. He suggested it might be a combination of Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim. Since he did not know what to perform, he conducted a ritual to all the guardian deities of the region, a Lungjí Fát. According to this logic, he considered the Mútunci Róng to be close to their local guardian deities, so a ritual performed to them could not do any harm (Payel Búngthíng, June 2011).

Furthermore, the Lingthem Búngthíng had performed a Cú Rumfát organised in his vicinity by MLAS. When asked about it in an interview, he said likewise that he did not really know what the ritual was about. To his understanding, Cú Rumfát was an appeasement of the mountain deities and all the more-than-human beings inhabiting the landscape. He described how during rituals such as

Cirim he had to pick out all the mountains in his recitation. Similarly to Payel Búngthíng, he compared Cú Rumfát with Lungjí Fát and thus interpreted it as a general part of every Róng ritual practice (Lingthem Búngthíng, May 2006). A *búngthíng* in Denchung, South Sikkim, made a similar statement with regard to Cú Rumfát, when he described it as a part of Lyáng Rumfát, a ritual I discuss below (Laku Tshering Lepcha, April 2011). When I asked MLAS executive members about the ritual meaning, they described it as a worship of Kóngchen Cú and consequently compared it with Cirim. In Kalimpong, Cú Rumfát used to be the name for the ritual performed annually by male Róng clan members for their respective protective mountain deities (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 307), a ritual known in Dzongu as Pholha Fát. Pholha refers to the ancestral tutelary deities of the male lineage, the term being an import from Lhoke or Tibetan (Balikci 2008). However, in the course of the cultural revival, ILTA started to perform the ritual for the whole community and subsequently transformed it into a more generalised worship of all the mountains as well as the principal mountain deity Kóngchen (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 307; Foning [1987] 2003, 46).

Another ritual that MLAS introduced in Dzongu was Lyáng Rumfát, the denomination literally translating as ‘land deity worship’. This is the ritual to the deities of the land and was compared by its main organiser to Cirim (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011). Just as it had done with the other rituals, ILTA promoted Lyáng Rumfát and celebrated it in spring in the Karmi Estate. In Dzongu, MLAS organised it in Passingdang in July. When we documented the ritual in 2011, Tashi Mun, then a junior religious specialist based in Passingdang, conducted the transferred ritual. His performance was comparable with the Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát carried out by Lingthem Búngthíng: he addressed the same guardian and followed a similar sequencing. Again, MLAS received funding from the North East Zone Cultural Centre for the ritual, routed through the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department of the Government of Sikkim. The MLAS culture secretary was trying to get the money directly to MLAS, to make it easier to organise the ritual (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011).

Lyáng Rumfát was not known in Mangan district in the north of the state, but was performed annually in Róng villages in all other districts of Sikkim, the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, and Ilam. It was a community ritual addressed to the more-than-human beings of the respective land, the Lungjí, in which they were appealed to for protection against diseases and natural disasters; or it was a prayer for timely rains, health, and prosperity (Phur Tshering Lepcha, July 2009; Chodok Lepcha, *lama* and Panchayat, July 2009).⁹⁶

96 For details on Lyáng Rumfát, see Aachuley Report 2001a, 4; 2002c, 10; 2004c, 13; 2006b, 4; 2007c, 19–20.

Contestations over ‘Real’ Ritual Practice

An elder villager and former Panchayat member in Tingvong expressed what many villagers thought when he described the Cú Rumfát performed in Namprík as ‘not a serious ritual’, but merely a demonstration of how to do a ritual. On the contrary, he asserted, the Kóngchen ritual, Sotáp Rumfát, and Cirim were the ‘real’ rituals performed to Kóngchen Cú (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). The importation of alternative cultural or religious components was disconcerting for certain religious specialists, but the more serious contestations were those which erupted over their professional self-conception, the rightful agency in ritual practice, and the soteriological powers of ritual.

Religious specialists saw themselves as experts in ritual, and few appreciated being instructed about ‘new’, ‘correct’, or ‘more authentic but lost’ ritual practices by people who were not initiated into their profession. At the same time, however, the religious specialists and ethno-political activists depended on each other. As mentioned, the *búngthíng* and *mun* were the sources of information and knowledge for the activists. The activists needed the religious specialists to participate in their cultural revival activities such as the ritual programmes. Even though they emphasised the cultural aspect of the display, the performance would not have been possible at all without the religious specialists.

On the other hand, the interest of the activists in the profession of the religious specialist reascribed value to it. The religious specialists were to a certain extent dependent on the government, and the activists often were the ones with privileged access to these services. Members of the Mútunci Róng association had a good rapport with the state government (Chapter Seven). Under the Samajik Sewa Bhatta Scheme that was introduced in Sikkim in September 2008, faith healers and practitioners of animistic traditions were eligible for a monthly allowance. In 2011, the number of beneficiaries of the scheme was increased to 50 per constituency and the amount was fixed at 600 rupees per month (Sikkim Government Gazette (Extraordinary), Notification No. 10/CA&HD, 5 May 2011). The local Panchayat could nominate the eligible beneficiaries. The Mútunci Róng associations were influential in these decisions: they had close connections to the elected government representatives and their suggestions had an impact on who was recommended for the allowance. Hence, it was increasingly important to attend rituals organised by the Mútunci Róng associations and become known to the executive members in order to receive a recommendation. In brief, then, the relationship was a contested one, but at the same time one of mutual dependency (see also Shneiderman 2015a, 62ff.).

In contrast to the transferred ritual programmes, the framing of Lyáng Rumfát, Cú Rumfát, and Múzkedkíng Rumfát hardly differed from the commu-

nity ritual practice. They lacked all the additional compositional components: there was no public stage for speeches and dance performances, and government officials, politicians, and the press were seldom present. The new organising agent, MLAS, plus the existence of external funding, linked the ritual to the modern power apparatus, but the visual ritual assemblage was indistinguishable from that of Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát. Even in ritual meaning and outcome, the organisers compared and indeed equated them to existing ritual practices – thereby implying a threat of intended replacement. I argue here that the fact that Róng activists conflated the transferred rituals with the existing ritual practice made these new performances contested and – according to Róng Indigenous ontologies – potentially dangerous. The core discrepancy between the interpretation of the ritual by religious specialists and by the activists lay in the differences in definition of ritual meaning, efficacy, and goal. Hence what was problematic was the fact that these differences were conflated in the respective transfers.

The transferred rituals were performed for the purpose of cultural revival with ethno-political intent. The MLAS culture secretary described the necessity to promote and teach Róng culture. He saw the need to give workshops and train the local up-and-coming religious specialists on their distinct local cultural heritage and religious practice, to strengthen and protect them from ‘vanishing’. In this context, he was clearly aware that, because MLAS was receiving funds, cultural and religious components foreign to the local practice were being transferred into Dzongu.

The aim of these transfers was to reappropriate the ‘Lepcha content’ that had become established through being promoted by the Mútunci Róng associations and recognised by the government but was not commonly known nor part of oral transmission in Dzongu: the transfers thus sought to turn this content into something distinctly belonging to Dzongu, and so to re-establish ownership over it by transferring it into the local environment. The MLAS culture secretary not only highlighted the similarities with existing practice as a means to explain these new rituals to the public and the religious specialists but saw this process of ‘same-ing’ as an integral part of the negotiations between different local Róng traditions engaged in cultural revival. In particular, it was a means of dealing with the hegemony of the ‘Kalimpong variations’ promoted by ILTA. As the culture secretary saw it, ILTA had the network, money, and experience to publicise their versions, something that was in the final analysis a good thing for the community as a whole, despite its overwriting local traditions. The approach of the MLAS culture secretary was not to opt for open opposition by promoting alternative socio-cultural production, but to attempt to include the different facets and merge variations wherever possible. He deemed it necessary to inte-

grate this local heritage of Dzongu within the larger picture of the Róng cultural revival, if the local variations were to be sustained, and the conflating of the ritual transfers with existing practice was a strategy to achieve just that. Thus, it was an effort to regain self-determination and a sense of authority in the larger discourse on Róng socio-cultural production (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011).

The addressees and recognising agents of the ritual transfers were primarily the Dzongu people, the other Mútunci Róng associations, and the state. Despite this, in their overall framing the ritual transfers appeared to be directed specifically at those agents concerned with soteriological aspects – the deities themselves – and in this respect they disrupted crucial components of the ritual practice. The annual community ritual performances fell under the authority of the religious specialists and the village community.⁹⁷ Importantly, their material contributions made the villagers a part of the ritually protected community. In ritual transfers, new organisers took over and bought the offerings with their external funding: thus, what the activists perceived as a successful use of government support severed the contractual relationship between the villagers and the more-than-human beings that made the ritual effective. Without participating via their material offerings, the villagers were detached from the direct benefits of the ritual.

The religious specialists did not perceive their ritual practices as being caught up in the conceptualisation of culture that was evolving within the wider debate on rights and privileges in the competitive Indian reservation system and other political arenas. On the contrary, they performed the ritual practices for soteriological goals as defined in Róng Indigenous ontologies. For them as professionals, the primary recognising agents were and remained the more-than-human beings embedded in the landscape around them, and ritual interaction with them remained a dangerous activity. In the ritual transfers, however, the more-than-human recognising agents remained completely undefined, mainly due to the unclear soteriological aim of the rituals and their detachment from the *lúngten sung* as transmitted in Dzongu. Consequently, the ritual transfers brought uncertainty and increased risk, contrary to the function of fighting vulnerability that was the soteriological aim of village community ritual practice. In the end, then, instead of supporting or reviving existing Indigenous practices, the rituals had the potential to turn into an externally funded competition, but without actually achieving the desired more-than-human protection and countering vulnerability. On the contrary, they bore the risk of making the people more vulnerable.

97 See Chapter Six for the traditional political authorities in village practice.

A failed ritual – one which results in angering or neglecting the more-than-human recipients – is dangerous, as Lingko Búngthing’s illness indicated. The MLAS culture secretary was aware of the problems of ritual transfers. He himself was closely linked to his home in Dzongu and was convinced of the soteriological powers of ritual (MLAS culture secretary, June 2011). The clash between the goal of revival for cultural or ethno-political reasons and the locally expected soteriological powers of ritual and the danger of a failed revival became most apparent when, in 2006, youth and activists from Tingvong village attempted to revive the former Kóngchen ritual (Wangchuk and Zulca 2006). Their motives were to preserve the history and culture of their village as well as to enhance its uniqueness in a tourist market (Pema Lepcha, April 2011). The main funding stemmed from sponsors in Gangtok under the initiative of the editor of the *NOW!* newspaper, who at that time was doing research for his book on Kangchendzonga (Lhakit Lepcha, June 2011; Wangchuk and Zulca 2006, 52). Enthusiastic youth took up the idea and convinced the villagers. Many, however, did not want to revive the ritual, because they considered it dangerous, and they issued warnings and said they wished to leave the ritual untouched. It had not been performed in a long time and could unsettle the more-than-human beings, namely the Kóngchen soldiers. Additionally, they did not trust Kóngchen Búngthing to be able to hold the ceremony properly (Pema Lepcha, April 2011).

From the beginning the revival of this ritual seems to have been ill-fated. There was not enough money for a yak, so an ox was brought. When a Panchayat member from Nung went to get the ox from over the valley in Laven, the first ox fell off a bridge on the way to Nung and a second one had to be purchased. The reason given for this was that the Panchayat member collecting the ox did not belong to one of the families who had traditionally been on the organising committee for the royally funded ritual (Panchayat member, June 2011).⁹⁸ The ritual was then performed. A few weeks later the organiser from Tingvong, who had sacrificed the ox, died an unnatural death. In the local understanding, this was a direct consequence of a failed ritual. The more-than-human beings became enraged, withdrew their protection, or expressed wrath.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a deeper insight into some community ritual practices in Dzongu and the Indigenous ontologies in which they are embedded – in which the human and the more-than-human, the natural and the tran-

98 See also my discussion in Chapter Six.

scendental worlds are not separated from each other. Religious, cultural, and historical knowledge that has been transmitted from one generation to the next interweaves people, land and water, and past and future (Berkes 2009; Berkes and Berkes 2009; Berkes et al. 2000). According to Róng Indigenous ontologies, *lúngten sung* doesn't just contain stories of the ancestors; it constitutes knowledge of the world and how to understand and practice it (Blaser 2013, 552). As is common with Indigenous communities, the endonym Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup, translates as 'descendants or children of Mother Nature and god', underlining the interrelatedness of environment, more-than-human, and human in the Róng Indigenous ontologies of Dzongu.⁹⁹

Ritual programmes and practice lay open different ways of conceptualising the self and the Róng community as a whole, and thus of formulating the sense of belonging. While ritual programmes support a politicised and objectified articulation of self and ethnic group, ritual practices are non-objectified and of a soteriological nature. However, as I have analysed closely in this chapter, the transformations of practice into ritual programmes are not the subject of particular contestation in Dzongu – which we may take as one exemplary rural community – precisely because the people there are aware of the different frames of reference they cater to and ontologies from which they derive.

The overwriting of local oral traditions is one aspect that appeared as problematic in my interviews in Dzongu. That process hints at the present-day structures of power that operate between rural and urban Mútunci Róngkup and Róngmit, between the educated and non-educated, and between the Dzongu ritual practices and those promoted by ILTA. Sangdong Búngthíng did not criticise the act of transforming rituals as such, but rather the modalities of the process, especially the process of selecting which traditions to include in this reframing and which to omit. He reminded us of the existing feedback loops between ritual practice and programmes (Shneiderman 2015a) and how, despite everything, the programmes could in time come to eradicate certain practices and supplant local narratives, instead of promoting them. This, at least, was the fear of the senior *búngthíng*.

I therefore conclude that ritual programmes as products of culturalist ontologies cause little problem in themselves, even when they are transferred into the setting in which village practice traditionally takes place. Villagers are well aware of strategies of objectification and the formulation of their world according to the heritage and 'identity' that is conceptualised as the 'possession' of an ethnic group. The reframing of rituals as cultural events is not new, and the

99 On the development of the abstract concept 'nature' see Ducarme and Couvet 2020; see also Glick Schiller in Carrithers et al. 2010.

proximity of the event is associated with enjoyment – especially when it comes to the Námsung *mela*. For most of the villagers these ritual programmes did not necessarily need to be ‘religious’; it was not their aim, and consequently the lack of defined soteriological agents did not cause any concern. Living and navigating within a culturalist and Indigenous ontological outlook on the world was a normality, and while the parameters were discussed – as was the case with the non-inclusion of local content in Tendong Hlo Rumfát – the processes in themselves were not debated.

However, additionally to the obvious ritual transformations, Róng activists encouraged the performance of several rituals unknown to Dzongu in an effort to revive ‘lost’ practice, negotiate interregional differences, and access government funds. Multiple contestations arose over these ritual transfers, as I have argued, specifically because they were *not* transformed according to the same parameters as ritual programmes and lacked the significant assemblage of distinctively different compositional components. The Róng activists, who were considered to be the specialists for the objectified cultural production, described these ‘rituals from the south’ as being the same as the annual village rituals. This conception blurred the clear distinction between ritual practice and programme, between actions in Róng Indigenous ontologies and actions in culturalist ontologies. As I have argued, due to this blurring there was a conflation of ritual goals, recognising agents, and efficacy. This, combined with the different expectations that the initiators, i. e. the ethnic activists, and the executors, i. e. the religious specialists, had for the outcome of ritual, made these transfers highly problematic.

The *búngthing* and *mun*, the specialists in the knowledge that is produced according to Róng Indigenous ontologies, experienced the activists telling them which ritual *practice* to perform as an encroachment on their field of expertise. But more importantly, the transferred rituals, despite being coalesced with existing ritual practice, dismantled the ritual structure that enabled an exchange between the villagers and the embedded more-than-human beings. Moreover, they did not address the clearly defined soteriological recognising agents that required propitiation, nor were they embedded in the *lúngten sung* or local landscape. Religious specialists and villagers considered this lack of clarity and soteriological seriousness as dangerous because it enhanced the risk of ritual failure. Ritual procedure, including the collection of offerings from all households, and the inherent relationship between people, more-than-human, and place, maintained the balance that kept harm and disaster away from the villagers, and which was sealed in a mythological contract. Transferred rituals disrupted this balance. Thus, they were an unnecessary and dangerous interaction with

more-than-human beings which did not enhance the protection of the villagers, and on the contrary could potentially cause more harm than benefit. These ritual transfers therefore witness a collision between different vulnerabilities defined along the lines of the culturalist ontologies and Róng Indigenous ontologies, and which are addressed in ritual practices and programmes respectively, because the activists' attempts to explain and overwrite regional differences to unify and purify the Róng 'cultural stuff' have dismantled their usually very clear-cut spheres of ritual agency.



CHAPTER FOUR

Dangerous Lands and Waters:
Spatial Orientations,
Movements, and Guardians



FIGURE 21: Living with the land, Lingthem, Dzongu, November 2008.

In the previous chapter I introduced the interrelationship between humans, more-than-human beings, and the environment – the land (*lyáng*) and water (*úng*). I then discussed ritual practice in terms of the contract between humans and more-than-human beings, adding references to debates and contestations over ritual transformations and transfers. I have, however, not yet discussed the qualities of the relationship between humans and the environment, with its embedded more-than-human beings (Campbell 2013; Torri 2013; Holmberg 1989). Their connections to each other are essential for grasping ritual practice and how belonging to the Róng community in Dzongu is formulated (Figure 21). Furthermore, such relationships are crucial, because ‘hereditary’ or Indigenous attachments to land are an important political resource in Sikkim, as well as in other parts of India and Nepal (Arora 2007a; Hangen 2010; Karlsson 2003, 2013; Karlsson and Subba 2006; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Shneiderman 2014; Vandenhelsken 2021; van Schendel 2011).

I start my elaborations by taking a closer look at the altar and the corresponding recitations. While I include all recitations and rituals we observed, this chapter draws primarily on the various community rituals that we observed Netuk Lepcha perform for Lingthem village. We documented Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát twice, in 2009 and 2010. Thanks to Netuk’s phenomenal knowledge of the more-than-human beings and sacred spaces in the vicinity of the village, we were able to do a most detailed analysis of the deities’ abodes. Additionally,



FIGURE 22: Eggs on the altar at Lingthem, March 2009.

Lingthem was Kachyo's home village. Kachyo himself had knowledge of the village landscape and we spent more time there, giving us the opportunity to explore, visit the sacred places, and return repeatedly with more questions, which the Lingthem Búngthíng would patiently answer.

Additionally, I rely strongly on an interview with Kóngchen Búngthíng in 2011. He helped me understand how the community rituals in Dzongu all interlinked with the discontinued Kóngchen ritual. In this chapter, moreover, I explore how the ritual interaction with the Sikkim royal lineage shaped – and still shapes – the local ritual practice, the dangers of the world, and the mechanisms to overcome vulnerability in Róng Indigenous ontologies of Dzongu. I deal with the historical and political implications in Chapter Six.

Lingthem Búngthíng was very exact in how he moulded the rice on the *lóp-fyet* plate (Figure 22). He split the rice into three vertical ridges, with two heaps in each ridge. Then, in each ridge he put a butter lamp and a small cut bamboo stick with a small piece of butter (*mórgyen*) on it. Afterwards, Lingthem Búngthíng placed four eggs on the altar. He marked each of them with a special sign. When asked, he explained that each sign belonged to a specific deity or group of deities. On the rice row to his left, when facing the altar, the religious specialist placed the egg dedicated to Ne Kóngchen Pano. In the middle were two eggs; the one at the back was for the Kóngchen soldiers (*vík*) and the one at the front of the altar was

for the Lungjí Lungnóng¹⁰⁰ or Lyángdók Úngdók, the guardian deities of land and water. In the understanding in Dzongu, Lungjí Lungnóng are the local guardian deities, and not merely serpent gods dwelling under the world, as described by K. P. Tamsang ([1980] 2009, 768). They dwell in prominent landscape markers such as hills, lakes, water sources, rocks, or trees, but are distinguished from the mountain deities of higher realms (Foning [1987] 2003, 56). On the right ridge of rice, he placed the egg for Cádúng Rázó, a malevolent more-than-human being of the plains (*dángsá*). The deities addressed in the community rituals thus come under four main groups. The offerings on the plate I documented were practically identical in 1937 (Morris 1938, 156; Gorer [1938] 1996, 228). During that time there was confusion about the number of eggs used, and the old *mun* Pomri eventually declared that four was the right number (Morris 1938, 156).

The four groups represent different realms and trajectories, as I will explore in depth in this chapter. In ritual recitations, the Róng religious specialists evoked these more-than-human beings embedded in the landscape within a specific sequencing. There is a vast scholarship on the spatial dimensions in the Himalaya that distinguishes between two dominant patterns, the horizontal and the vertical sequencing of space (Allen 1972; Bickel 1999, 1997; Gaenszle 1999; Gingrich 1996; Oppitz 1999b; Ramble 1996; Diemberger 1996; Steinman 1996). Based on Ramble (1996, 1998, 147), I examine relations to landscape and to the more-than-human beings in terms of certain patterns. Thereby, I attempt to understand how by means of ritual performance, the place is mapped and positioned within a larger cosmological order (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999, 13). In this manner, ritual practice recurrently formulates a Róng way of constituting the world they live in and belong to.

In this chapter I elaborate both the vertical and horizontal trajectories, as they are enacted in Róng ritual practice in Dzongu. All rituals we observed followed a similar spatial enactment when addressing the more-than-human beings. As Payel Búngthíng clarified, Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát are for the more-than-humans of the lowlands and the upper realms (Payel Búngthíng, Tingvong, April 2010). The recitations start at the high mountains (Ne Kóngchen Pano) and trace down to the village area, where the religious specialists call upon the local guardians for protection for a clearly demarcated area, and then specifically activate the guardians of the lower realms.

The ritual actions are stipulated by and correlate with the movement of the more-than-human beings. Drawing on scholarship on the Himalayan ritual journey (Blackburn 2010; Allen 1974; De Sales 1994; Gaenszle 1999, 2002;

100 The spelling here is chosen according to Kachyo Lepcha's recommendation. In K. P. Tamsang's dictionary the word is spelt Lungjí Langnóng ([1980] 2009, 768).

Oppitz and Kohl 1992; Pettigrew 1999; Maskarinec 1995), I analyse the movements in the ritual recitations and surrounding mythologies. The most influential movement is that of the Kóngchen soldiers. They move down the vertical axis from their abodes in the high Himalayan mountains towards the south, bringing disruption. The movement cannot be ritually stopped or diverted. It is in order to confer protection from destruction that in his ritual speech the religious specialist circumscribes the village, calling upon the boundary guardians to close the space to achieve its protection.

By elaborating the respective positionings of the more-than-human beings and their related agencies in these trajectories, I aim to outline how, due to their residence in specific abodes, the more-than-humans remain rooted in this world and thus are approachable by religious specialists. Their presence – embedded and at times mobile – gives them the power to harm or protect.

The Vertical Axis: Realms, Deities, and Agency

The directionality of the offering, or in other words the vertical dimension of ‘up/*thol*’ and ‘down/*chol*’, structures the ritual performance and delivers a framework for understanding the Indigenous perspective on the world, the cosmos, and how the humans, the more-than-human beings, and the environment are positioned within it. The arrangement of the four eggs and groups of deities on the altar in Lingthem indicates a sacred and geographical landscape divided into three “mythical storeys or levels” (Siiger 1975, 300). In the Róng spatial orientation – as has already been discussed for other Himalayan communities such as the Thulung Rai (Allen 1972, 83)¹⁰¹ – ‘up’, ‘upwards’, ‘uphill’, and ‘upstream’ are associated with an orientation towards the snow-capped mountains and the north, while ‘down’, ‘downwards’, ‘downhill’, and ‘downstream’ are associated with the plains and the south. In between these extremities lies a middle realm of the southern Himalayan hills. This introduces “ideas of a layered cosmos” (Bickel and Gaenzle 1999, 9) as commonly described for Himalayan communities (Gaenzle 1999, 149; Oppitz and Kohl 1992, 25).

Cholnunbú Cádúng Rázó Lyángká nóngátmo
Tholnunbú Ne Kóngchen Lyángká nóngátmo

101 Additionally, such spatial references to a vertical axis are integral to the culture and language of the Kiranti speakers in the Himalaya. See Allen 1972; Bickel 1997, 1999; Bickel and Gaenzle 1999; Ebert 1999; Levinson 1997; Rai 1988; Ramble 1996. As is the case for the Kiranti groups in the Himalaya (Ebert 1999; Gaenzle 1999, 149; McDougal 1979; Sagant 1973), the west/east dimension does not figure prominently in Róng rituals.

*The ones from the lowlands have to go to the land of Cádúng Rázó
The ones from the upper lands have to go to the land of Kóngchen
(Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2009)*

The religious specialists in Dzongu made a clear distinction between the deities from the upper realm (*thol*) and the deities from the lower realm (*chol*) on the altar and in the recitations, and they reinforced this differentiation during interviews.

In general, the orientation of ‘up’ and ‘down’ aligns with the north–south axis that reaches from the Himalayan range to the plains. When located in Dzongu, the effective directions of the topography (mountain–plains) vary slightly from the cardinal directions. The mountains lie in the northwest of Dzongu. In Upper Dzongu the main river valley, the Rónggyóng Kyong, runs more or less towards the southeast. Mount Kangchendzonga seems to lie beyond the head of this valley. In Róng Indigenous perception of space, when the altar and the reciting *búngthíng* face the snow-capped mountains, they face ‘upwards’ (*thol*). There are exceptions in Dzongu, in Pentong and Nampatan the altars do not face towards the mountain range in all villages. When asked, Pentong Búngthíng clarifies that the direction of the altar is not necessarily important if the deities are addressed properly. The local perception of ‘north’ and ‘south’ is more defined by “experienceable trajectories” (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999, 16; Bickel 1999, 83), generally leading in these cardinal directions rather than by the effective scientifically defined north or south. These trajectories point towards geographically prominent spaces of topographically and religiously defined extremes, the mountains and the plains. In this manner, the three-layered cosmos represents geographical reality and overlaps with religious, cultural, and social meaning. As has been debated for other ethnic groups in the Himalaya, the north–south axis thus gives not merely physical, but also religious and social orientation to the people (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999, 12).

The recitations of both Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim begin by addressing the deities of the upper realms, at the elevated altar, facing the main mountain guardian deity of the Mútunci Róng. Directionality is not only given in myths, descriptions, and the content of the ritual but is additionally woven grammatically into the ritual language. In his recitations of the first offering to Kóngchen, Pentong Búngthíng repeatedly uses the word *thol*¹⁰² or *tábá*, meaning ‘up there’,

102 The word is used in the rituals in Dzongu and translated by Kachyo Lepcha. I could not find the word *thol* in the dictionaries available. K. P. Tamsang uses the words *tál* or *thál*. The word *tál* is translated as “above. Adv. up; high above the ground; high up; at or to a high point, place, or level; considerable height; extension upward, at position of a considerable height, high amount or price” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 362). While *tál* indicates the position, the word *thál* emphasises the direction: upwards (Tamsang 2005, 82; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 403).

to indicate the location of the more-than-human beings. The suffix *-plang* is added to offered items and *-dyung* is attached to verbs in order to reveal that the offering is directed upwards. The word *plang* means ‘upon’ or “upwards as to get or be on” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 493, here spelt *plóng*) and *dyung* is “vertical, in a vertical position” (436). The offering (the *upwards* offering), the act of giving (offering *vertically*), and the receiver (Kóngchen *up there*) all linguistically indicate the vertical spatial dimension.

Who resides in the upper realm? Prominently, Kóngchen finds his abode in Mount Kangchendzonga. He is the eldest son of the creator deity, the almighty ancestor and the chief of the other, lesser more-than-human beings embodied in the landscape, and the main protector in the north. On the *lópfyet* altar in Lingthem, the egg dedicated to Kóngchen is located on the side closest to the mountains. The several other snow-capped mountains are home to mountain deities that figure prominently in Róng mythology, such as Sanyól Cú, presently better known as Mount Siniol, or Pungrím Cú (Mount Pandim). According to some sources, Kónghló is the wife or female consort of Kóngchen (Jest 1960, 128) and is embedded in the neighbouring mountain peak. Róng deities exist in pairs, frequently one is male and the other is female. They are often denominated as husband and wife (Nebesky-Wojkowitz unpublished b). This being said, the gender is often not clearly associated or can shift, fluidity being an inherent element of Indigenous ontologies that refuse to be classified along binaries, as discussed in literature on concepts such as Two-Spirit (Pyle 2018).

Moreover, other worlds are located in the upper realm. In the ritual recitation to Sotáp Rumfát, Pentong Búngthíng mentioned the boundary between the earth and the sky and the final resting place of animal souls (Tóngmútóng Gyúmúgyú / Dóngmúdóng Yúngmúyúng).¹⁰³ This place is not visibly marked in the landscape as the mountain deities are, but is perceived as beyond where humans can see. Additionally, the final resting place of human souls is in the upper realms – not visible to the human eye: Púm Lyáng, the land of origin, or Rum Lyáng, the land of god (De Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 10). In Dzongu people use both these words interchangeably for the place to which the religious specialist guides the souls of the deceased. Again, in contrast to the mountain deities, these conflated spaces are not traceable in geographical reality.

The distinction between visible embedded mountain deities and invisible vertical worlds can be traced – to a certain extent – in Túngbór Ríng, the ritual

103 De Beauvoir Stocks mentions another world between earth and sky sometimes called “Tiamtan, Sari-rung-dong-chen or Siri-nong-dong-chen” (de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975, 11). It is possible that the latter two refer to similar places on the verge between the realms.

language. Two words are used for the direction or location ‘up’: *thol* and *tábá* (or merely *tá*). Typically, *thol* is used for altitudinal directions and locations embedded within the physical landscape – many of those places being visible from the ritual site. The other word, *tábá*, more clearly indicates verticality and is associated with realms beyond human sight and also more likely associated with the sky. This is a similar distinction to Ramble’s verticality and absolute height (Ramble 1998, 151).

Cádúng Rázó, a malevolent spirit, is the spatial opposite of Kóngchen and is manifested in the landscape of the south or the plains. In the altar in Lingthem, the egg dedicated to this deity was located on the right side of the altar, more downstream, and associated with the deities of the lower realms. The *búngthíng* placed the offerings for Cádúng Rázó on the elevated altar (and in Tingvong at the stone altar) on the side considered to be facing the lower valley regions. On the special altar for the Kóngchen ritual in Tingvong, called *latsu*, Cádúng Rázó dwells in the group of stones separated from Kóngchen’s immediate entourage and located downstream. Here, Cádúng Rázó presides over the retinue of the lower realm.

It was difficult to gather any further information about Cádúng Rázó. Many of the *búngthíng* I questioned found it hard to provide any additional characteristics for this malevolent spirit, even though they named Cádúng Rázó as one of the important more-than-human beings of the annual rituals. As Sonam Tshering Tamsang puts it:

Our búngthíng and mun used to invoke Kíngtsúm Cú,¹⁰⁴ Siktí Múnyú, and Cádúng Rázó, but now I don’t know the exact meaning of Siktí Múnyú and Cádúng Rázó. (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010)

Lingdem and Payel Búngthíng both described Cádúng Rázó Ányú (aunt) as the guardian of illnesses and attributed to her the ability to cure diseases (Lingdem Búngthíng, January 2009; Payel Búngthíng, April 2010). When we asked Kóngchen Búngthíng, he said he thought it was a place, but then he brushed the question off, adding that he did not have much knowledge about the lower

104 This is another name for Kóngchen. The word *kíng* means forehead, while *kíngtsúm* can be translated as destiny or fate. The term is an abbreviate of the name Kíngtsúmzóngbú Cú; *kíngtsúmzóngbú* means having an auspicious forehead (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 185–86); thus, Kíngtsúmzóngbú Cú is often translated as the mountain with the auspicious forehead. This name is chiefly used in Kalimpong, while in Dzongu only Kíngtsúm Rum is known, the god of fortune or destiny and not associated with Kóngchen.

realms. It was not his responsibility to know, but that of the *búngthing* who performs the ritual of the lower realm (*dángsá rumfát*). This was a historical counterpart to the Kóngchen ritual, performed by Chegra Búngthing in the Golma forest in the Darjeeling hills (Chapter Six). According to Kóngchen Búngthing the ones responsible for the lower realm in turn did not know the guardians of hills (Kóngchen Búngthing, June 2011). No other religious specialist in Dzongu mentioned this distinction so clearly, but it was striking that in all the recitations we recorded, the deities of the upper realms and the local guardian deities figured prominently, while the religious specialists concomitantly neglected the more-than-human beings of the lower realms. Only Lingthem Búngthing even mentioned this deity of the lower realm in his performances.

I was not able to observe Chegra Búngthing performing the ritual, but according to his own information he made an offering to Cádúng Rázó but gave more importance to the more-than-human being of the place, called Gyápdut, a generic term for an evil spirit (Foning [1987] 2003, 294; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 249). It was the malevolent spirit of a former Róng king, called Golmá Pano (Chegra Búngthing, May 2011). Interestingly, according to a narrative collected by Rongnyoo Lepcha for her master's thesis, "Chadongrazoo" is a hillock above Geet River, close to Lungsyol, a village near Dalim Fort and the present-day Bhutan border. On this hill, Aashekmit prays for a son, and later she conceives; her son is named Gyebú Áchok, known in Kalimpong as the last king, killed at Dalim Fort (Lepcha 2017, 61). As quoted by Reep Pandi Lepcha (2021), C.A. Bell, the Political Officer to Sikkim from 1908 to 1919, refers to "Chadong Raja" as a "former king of Damsong" who was treacherously killed. Both these narratives link the more-than-human being of the southern realm, Cádúng Rázó, to Gyebú Áchok, a legendary king who is important in the current-day cultural revival (see Chapter Seven).

The plains or the southern realm of the sacred landscape in Róng mythology is tentatively classed as female. According to Siiger's interlocutors in the late 1940s, Cádúng Rázó was female and considered to be Kóngchen's wife (Siiger 1967, 145, 175, 193). Other sources similarly indicated that the deity of the great ocean or of the plains was the complementing consort of Kóngchen (Hermanns 1954, 30–31). Lingdem Búngthing and Payel Búngthing from Dzongu likewise associated Cádúng Rázó with the female gender (Lingdem Búngthing, January 2009; Payel Búngthing, Tingvong, April 2010). Despite this attribution, however, the evil spirit's gender remained fluid. The ritual recitation that Siiger recorded mentioned Cádúng Rázó thrice with varied gender. The first Cirim ritual addressed Cádúng Rázó as *múnyú*. This is a suffix indicating the female gender and, if used as a word, means maternal aunt (Siiger and Rischel 1967, 93, Text 31, 7). In the recitation for the Kóngchen ceremony at the *latsu*, the deity was

male and addressed as *pano*, king (114, Text 36, 9), while in another version only the name was mentioned, without any obvious gender markers attached to it (118, Text 37, 49).

While Siiger placed a question mark next to his translation of the word ‘king’, the description of Cádúng Rázó as a king and hence of a male gender was still common during our fieldwork. The gender fluidity regarding Cádúng Rázó seemed to be due to an inherent ambivalence within Róng religious thought. There seemed to be a tentative shift from female to male that could hint at a loss of importance of the female and matrilineal aspects of Róng religion, through interaction with more patriarchal social and political systems during the Sikkimese kingdom and later after the merger with India.

Cádúng Rázó was not the only more-than-human being associated with the lower realms. The creator deity Ítbú Debú Rum was also prominently assigned to these realms. *Ítbú* means ‘creator’, *debú* ‘destroyer’, and *rum* ‘god or deity’. As with many other Róng deities, the creator exists in a dual form. Ítbú Rum connotes femininity as the creator mother, such that Debú Rum would take over the male part of the divine pair. When telling the creation myth, many narrators used the name Ítbúmú or Ítmú, while leaving out the male and destructive counterpart. The use of the word *mú*, mother, instead of *rum*, god, additionally underlined the female act of creation. Considering this emphasis, I will use the English pronoun ‘she’ for the creator deity while keeping the dualism in mind. This decision needs to be taken because personal pronouns in Róngring are gender neutral. Some decisions are more straightforward, such as the use of the pronoun ‘he’ for Kóngchen. I have avoided using a personalised pronoun for Cádúng Rázó due to the inconclusive gender affiliations.

Similarly to what I mentioned above for the upper realms, Tungbór Ríng and Róng Indigenous ontologies make a slight distinction between the concepts *chol* and *mebá*, both used for the word ‘down’ in ritual recitations. *Chol*, again a word not found in the dictionaries available, was used for a lower location on an incline. The word could additionally indicate horizontal distance. It referred to an altitudinal lower space. In contrast, *mebá* is always a space that is vertically lower and can be translated as ‘below’ or ‘underneath’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 585). Cádúng Rázó’s abode in the plains is described as *chol*, while the creator deity is traditionally considered as dwelling under the world or under Kóngchen, in a place consequently described as *mebá*.

The creator deity belongs to the realm associated with the underworld, the ultimately lowest space and the counterpoint to the sky, called Tóngdek Márdek (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 428, 636; Foning [1987] 2003, 98). *Tóng* means ‘end’ or ‘the furthestmost part of anything’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 428); *dek* can be translated as ‘bottom’ or ‘lowest part of anything’. If used as a verb, the same

word is translated as ‘to come to an end, to die’ (495). *Márdek* is described as ‘bottomless’ or “pertaining to the lowest depth of the ocean, immeasurably deep without bottom” (636). The underworld or netherworld is therefore associated with the lowest realm possible, beyond the ocean on which the world lies. Another concept used for the underworld is *Nyó Lyáng*, often translated as hell, place of the evil spirits or of the dead (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 54–55).

Other – mainly female – deities are associated with the underworld. This is, for example, where the female spirit or grandmother *Sómgli Sómbum* resides (Simik 2001, 2), also spelt *Sâmlí Sâmla Ányú* (aunt) (Plaisier 2011). She is the guardian of the yeast that is required in order to ferment millet beer. The same more-than-human being is more commonly referred to as *Matlínýú* (Plaisier 2011). Similarly, a male more-than-human being residing in the lower realms is *Matli Pano*, the earthquake king, mentioned earlier. Some people relate these two more-than-human beings to each other (Foning [1987] 2003, 115), while others deny any connections (Namgyal Lepcha, January 2012).

The difference between *thol/tábá* and *chol/mebá* explains my prior statement that from an Indigenous perspective as I encountered in interaction with ritual specialists in Dzongu, *Matli Pano* has no agency in the word (Figure 23). In Dzongu, rituals address more-than-human beings embedded in the landscape that are associated with the altitudinal vertical axis (*thol/chol*; *Kóngchen/Cádúng Rázó*). These more-than-human beings can be benevolent or cause hardship. Either way, they affect well-being or fertility, as they stand in interaction with the humans due to their presence in the environment. Consequently, they have agency in the everyday world of the *Róng* community. The more-than-human beings associated with a vertical position on top or below the physical world (*tábá/mebá*; *Ítbú Debú Rum*, *Matli Pano*, for example) played a part in the creation of the world but are not actively involved in the everyday life of the people anymore. It seems as if their activities are in a mythical past. It is not as if their characteristics or past actions do not affect today’s world, but they have no contemporary agency in the sense that they are actively understood as intervening into what is happening in the present. This is best explained by the example of *Matli Pano*. During creation he was designed to shake and this he will do regardless of what the people in today’s world do or do not do. An earthquake, however, happens when *Kóngchen* does not control him – as ordered by the creator deity. And *Kóngchen* only controls his elder brother if he is satisfied and appeased, or in other words, if the humans have not harmed, angered, or neglected him. Therefore, the religious specialists in Dzongu address *Kóngchen* amongst others, while offerings are not made directly to the more-than-humans residing vertically below or above in the community rituals.

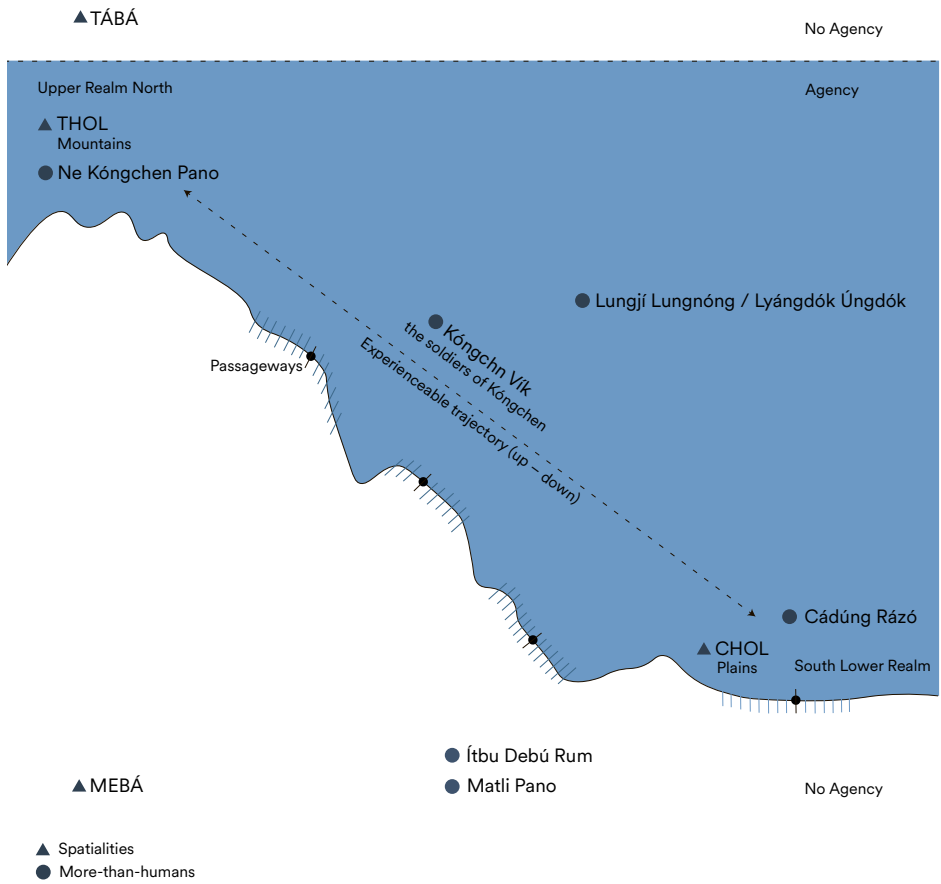


FIGURE 23: Different concepts of up and down (*chol/thol, mebá/tábá*) and agency of more-than-humans in community ritual practice in Dzongu. Note: The movement of the Kóngchen soldiers and the passageways are introduced in the following sections.

Ambivalent Spaces of Fertility/Illness and Dangerous Movements

Scholarship on Rai, Tamang, or Magar in the Nepalese Himalaya conceptualises the spatial extremities ‘up’ and ‘down’ as symbolising a religious, psychological, social, and economic dichotomy (Allen 1972; Gaenzle 1999; Höfer 1999; Oppitz 1999b, 1992). Gaenzle (1999, 136) cautions that dynamics within the dichotomy need to be taken into consideration – a cautionary note that holds bearing when analysing approaches to space within the Róng Indigenous ontologies.

In Róng Indigenous ontology – again, based on community ritual practice in Dzongu – we do find the common association of the lower realm with negative, malevolent, female forces and bodies of water, while the upper realm is characterised as positive, benevolent, and linked to male forces and mountains

(Höfer 1999; Oppitz and Kohl 1992, 44–45). However, a little more probing immediately uncovers the ambiguity of the axial extremities. Similarly to what Ramble (1998, 141) and Tautscher (1998) outline in their research, the male/mountain and female/lake dichotomy is recurrently reversed, as in Róng religious tradition mountains are likewise female consorts or deities in their own right. Cádúng Rázó is both a king and an aunt, the inherent fluidity questioning the use of dichotomies as analytical tool. Bodies of water such as lakes and rivers are also associated with both genders, as becomes clear in the narrative of the flood and the lovers in which the River Róngít is male and Róngnyú is female.¹⁰⁵

Regarding fertility and prosperity, there is another connotation overlapping the dichotomy in the scholarship on Himalayan ethnic groups. The upper realm is associated with purity, which corresponds with health, prosperity, well-being, life, and a certain form of fertility such as clean springs, but at the same time with barrenness and poverty. In contrast, the lowlands, related to rivers and oceans, are linked to illness or negative forces, in certain cases even with death (Gaenzle 1999, 116, 148; Höfer 1999, 206; Oppitz 1999b, 198; Oppitz and Kohl 1992, 44; Ebert 1999), but simultaneously with fertility, wealth, and uncleanliness (Ebert 1999, 116).¹⁰⁶

Róng religious tradition relates concepts of fertility and destruction with the deities in both the upper and the lower realm. In the upper realms snow, hail, destructive rains, and winds are created and reside there. They underline the imagery of the barrenness of the upper realms. Rains, however, as a natural and religious concept already bear the ambivalence of destruction and fertility. Further, another realm associated with fertility, in the sense of lush abundance, is located in the higher mountains: Máyel Kyong.¹⁰⁷ It is a mythological space, described either as a valley or as a village, hidden somewhere in the mountains below Kangchendzonga, beyond the geographical territory. It seems tempting to understand the place as a *beyul*. However, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *beyul* is a hidden paradise with perfect conditions for religious life, which will be revealed to humans when the time is right and the need for protection of the people and the *dharma* occurs (Aris 1980, 62–63). It is a space of purity and

105 See also C. Lepcha 2021 on water and gender.

106 Here it needs to be added that among the Magar, life and death are associated with the east–west axis (Oppitz and Kohl 1992, 45). Further, as discussed for the Newar, the spatial categories are correlated with status: ‘up’ with high status and ‘down’ with lower status (Toffin 1999, 35–37). Such correlations do not seem to be dominant in the Róng community. For example, as mentioned, more-than-human beings in both the upper and lower realms are described as kings and of high social status.

107 For versions of the Máyel Kyong mythology see Siiger 1967, 90; 1981; Goré [1938] 1996, 235–44; Morris 1938, 186–88; Hermanns 1954, 33–35; Tamsang 2008a, 18–19; Kotturan 1989, 31–33; Doma 2010, 440–46.

high-altitude mountains. In Róng mythology, on the contrary, Máyel Kyong is an eternal place of fertility which is not meant for humans to take refuge in but is instead inhabited by other more-than-human beings, the people of Máyel.¹⁰⁸ The realm Máyel Kyong is a symbol of lavish greenery and agriculture, a place with golden-coloured vegetation and bountiful daily harvests. Prosperity and lushness are believed to enter into the human world from there, like a repository of “spiritual and material wealth” that can be accessed (Scheid 2014, 74).

Taking this into consideration, I suggest that rather than centring analyses and theory-building on the extremities and constructing dichotomies, a focus on exchange and movements between the two extreme realms is fruitful in understanding conceptualisation of creation and destruction in Róng Indigenous thought-framework. It is, for example, the exchange between the beings of Máyel and the humans that ignited the agricultural fertility of the region. Legend has it that all the crops now cultivated originate from Máyel Kyong, from where they spread to the world. The inhabitants of Máyel Kyong still send migratory birds to the middle realms of the humans, in order to tell them about the right season for planting and harvesting various crops and plants. Here again, fertility derives from the upper realm. The movement of the birds ensures prosperity. This journey, interestingly, is not commonly associated with danger though oral traditions remind of the dangers when humans themselves enter Máyel Kyong.

In the communities in Nepal this vertical movement has been described as an ancestral axis, because the religious specialist has to travel up and down this axis to get in touch with the ancestors (Gaenszle 1999, 149). The upward journeys to the ancestral world are common in the Himalayan space and central in death and healing rituals.¹⁰⁹ The death ritual, for example, contains the ritual journey *par excellence*. Similarly, in Róng death rituals the religious specialist (*mun*) guides the soul of the deceased (*apil*) to the Púm Lyáng or Rum Lyáng,

108 For a detailed discussion of the distinctions and similarities between the Buddhist concept of *beyul* and Máyel Lyáng/Kyong, see Scheid 2014.

109 Shamanic journeys are usually part of death or healing rituals or the initiation rites of shamans and have been discussed at length in literature on the Nepalese Himalaya. For literature on shamanic journeys, see Allen 1974 (for Thulung Rai); Sagant 1979 (Limbu), 1990 (Manang); Oppitz and Kohl 1992; De Sales 1994 (for Kham Magar); Ramble 1996; Gaenszle 1993 (Mewahang Rai); Mumford 1989 (Gurung); Forbes 1998 (Yamphu Rai); see also Oppitz, Gaenszle, Höfer (Tamang), and Pettigrew (Gurung) in Bickel and Gaenszle 1999. Another type of journey discussed in the Himalayan context is the pilgrimage (see Macdonald 1997). These pilgrimage journeys, in contrast to shamanic journeys, are not mythic, but actual journeys through a geographical and sacred space (see Oppitz and Kohl 1992). Pilgrimages are not a part of practice in Róng religious tradition and only become crucial in the Róng community during Buddhist ritual practice. For discussion of spatial directions and journeys, see Parkin 1992; Werbner 1989. Verbal journeys regarding the soul are predominantly used in death or healing rituals and therefore are not covered by the scope of this ethnographic exploration.

the land of ancestors or gods. This journey is necessary to uphold the difference between the realms and prevent the growth of evil. If a soul does not return properly to the land of the ancestors, it will start roaming around the earth and turn into a *Máknyám Múng*, the evil spirit of the dead or shade of the dead (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 576), which can harm the people. Then again, in case of illness, the *mun* goes in search of lost souls during healing rituals.

In Róng Indigenous ontology, fertility, in the sense of creation, arises from the lower realms; it is here that everything originated. Movements from the lower realms to the middle realm where the humans dwell initiate both creation and the opposite of creation (destruction). *Nazóngnyú*, the female progenitor of the *Mútunci Róng* and the goddess of procreation, ascended from the underworld (Siiger 1972, 238). All the origin mythologies collected from the *búngthing* in Dzongu specifically mentioned this upward movement from the underworld to the middle realm, while for the sake of completeness it needs to be mentioned that also other narratives strands that highlight the creation of *Nazóngnyú* and *Fadróngthing* of the snow of Mount Kangchendzonga (for example Tamsang 2008, 3). After ascending from the underworld to the mountain realms, *Nazóngnyú* and *Fadróngthing*, the Róng progenitors, committed incest and descended to the middle realm, the place of the humans. When by neglecting their first children evil spirits came into being, they crucially disrupted the social order and initiated human precarity.

Additionally, there are mythological movements in the other direction. As an example, animals descended into the underworld to retrieve the yeast to ferment millet beer and – in certain versions – enable the first marriage. Here again, the potion necessary for marriage and procreation comes from the lower realm and needs to be brought up. During their journey, the animals additionally received new characteristics. Millet beer, created by the potion carried from below, was cursed and is still seen as a cause of evil in the Róng community (see Tamsang 2008, 5–7).

In Róng Indigenous ontologies, I argue, health/illness and fertility/barrenness are not associated with a specific realm, but with the movement from one realm into the other. Consequently, health/illness or fertility/barrenness are not categories that stand in opposition to each other, separated by a physical and geographical order, but entangled existential processes associated with the change of various scales and tied to human–environment interactions. The communication along this axis, from one realm to the other, is both creative and destructive, establishes survivance while endangering it at the same time. The liminality and ambivalence are beautifully reflected in the full name of the creator deity itself – *Ítbú Debú Rum*, the creator destroyer deity. In multiple layers, therefore, well-being, fertility, and destruction are closely linked to various up and down movements along this axis. To summarise, while movements from one realm

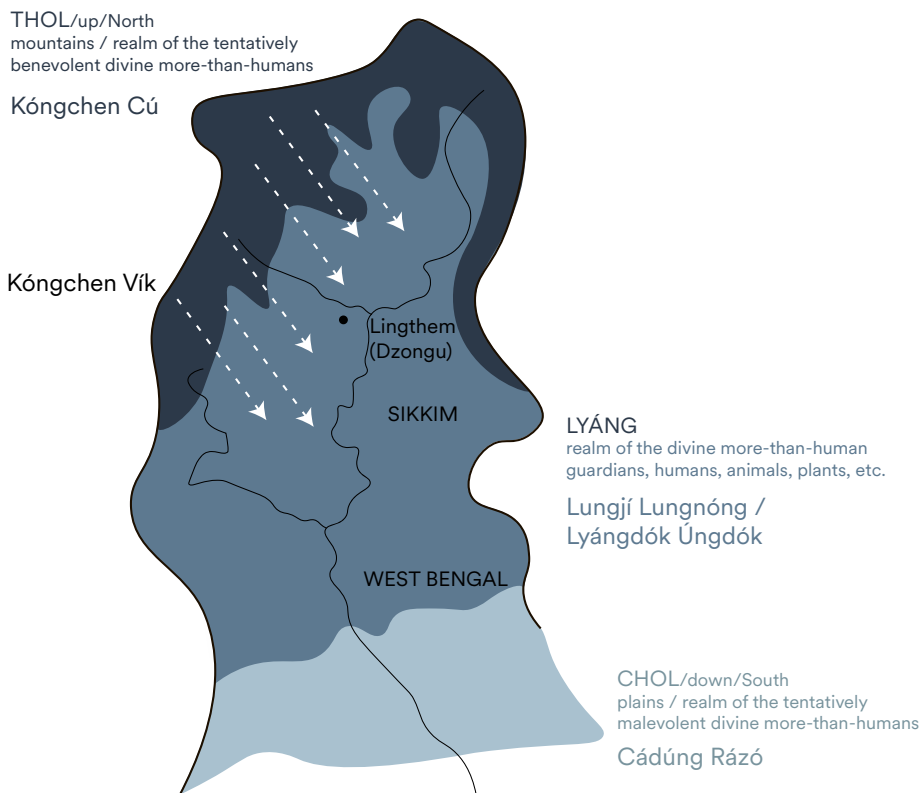


FIGURE 24: Movement of Kóngchen Vík.

into the other need to be undertaken to maintain prosperity, physical well-being, and lastly the cosmic order (Gaenzle 1999, 159) or to unleash powers of creation and renewal, they are dangerous as the disruption has consequences. Therefore, they require embeddedness in the ritual process. In the following, I elaborate on the dangerous movement that initiates the need for ritual protection in Dzongu.

The Movement of the Soldiers

The Kóngchen soldiers travel down the mountain valleys and bring diseases and harm along with them (Figure 24). It is this journey that mythologically initiated the Dzongu community rituals as practiced today. The position of the soldiers' egg on the altar indicates that they transcend the realms. The stone altar at Cirim underlines this assumption. Initially, I was confused because the whole altar is dedicated to the Kóngchen soldiers and at the same time split along the middle into the lower and the upper realms, with soldiers on both sides. But their transcendent nature would explain this distinction.

The Kóngchen soldiers are ambivalent more-than-human beings. They are warriors in the entourage of the mighty deity Kóngchen, with abodes in the snow mountains, a position associated with protection, while at the same time they are diseases embodied in different types of animals or spirits roaming through Dzongu with the power to destroy the well-being of the Mútunci Róng and their environment. Consequently, the dangerous diseases descend from the upper realms, or the north, to the lower realms in the south (Son-in-law of Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011).

The mythology encapsulated in the origin story of Cirim and the Kóngchen ritual provides an insight into the reasons for the soldiers' movement and their ambiguous characteristics (see Chapter Six on how the rituals are historically connected). Netuk Lepcha, the Lingthem Búngthíng, narrates the origin mythology of Cirim as follows:

Why do we have this ritual? During the king's time there was a war. The king said to the people of Dzongu or Kóngchen Lyáng – to those living in the land of Kóngchen – you should send some soldiers (vík). But they had no soldiers in Dzongu. There was no one with the ability to fight, so they had no one to send. So, the búngthíng performed a plantain leaves offering to Ne Kóngchen Pano. They made offerings to Ne Kóngchen Pano for maybe two to three days continuously. First, there was an ant (tukfil) on the plantain leaves tray. They realised this was a gift from Kóngchen, a soldier, so they got a bamboo vessel, put the ant inside and covered it. Once more they performed a plantain leaves offering for two to three days to Ne Kóngchen Pano, and this time an earthworm (tarekbu) appeared. They recognised it as a soldier, put it in a bamboo vessel and covered it. Again, they did a plantain leaves offering to Ne Kóngchen Pano, and after two to three days they found a snake (padebu) on the offering plate, put it in a bamboo vessel and covered it. Again, they prayed to Ne Kóngchen Pano and performed a plantain leaves offering for two to three days, but this time they didn't receive anything, so they agreed that Ne Kóngchen Pano must not be giving more soldiers. So, they carefully packed these soldiers and sent them to the king along with one man. When the king received the vessels with the animals, he said, I am talking about soldiers, about men, human beings, what is this? The king refused to take them and scolded the man who had delivered the vessels. But the man said, you just take it and take it to where the fighting is. The king did, so then the three animals were

taken out. The bamboo vessels were opened, and the animals went to the battlefield. They did not use any weapons, they automatically won the war, because when these three came, they brought dysentery (tabók dók), fever (dulót), and smallpox (rumdu). The different diseases spread in the area and the enemies died. However, not only the enemies died, but all the others too. The king was worried about this and again sent a message to Dzongu: How can we stop it? People will die out. Please make someone stop this. On hearing this, the Taso family (Gârkumtsum putso) rushed down to the king's palace and stopped the evil spirits' fever by giving them an offering. That is why Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát are offered to Ne Kóngchen Pano with the request not to send his soldiers again. Please stop your soldiers. (Lingthem Búngthíng, January 2010)

Important for my argumentation here, the myth explains the interrelation between the soldiers as both protectors and diseases (destroyers) and clarifies how the annual obligation to Kóngchen came into being. Crucially, the myth describes two interrelated movements. First, the diseases, received from Kóngchen in the upper realm by means of ritual in Dzongu, descended to the royal palace and the lower realms. Then the religious specialist of a specific clan, the clan of the Kóngchen Búngthíng, descended to counteract the damage caused by these diseases by conducting a ritual. This first Cirim explains how the ritual interaction with the king became a part of the annual Kóngchen ritual in Nung, a hamlet of Tingvong, in Dzongu, thereby significantly changing the ritual process. As shown here, ritual practice itself is caught in a process of change and continuity, as it adapts to circumstances, while keeping specific core philosophical and religious logics.

When the Kóngchen ritual was still performed, the religious specialist would travel to the royal palace, in the later years located in Gangtok, to perform a ritual and return with a yak (or an ox) to sacrifice it at the *lhatsu*, the dedicated ritual place in Nung. The Kóngchen soldiers were attached to him and made this journey together with him. For this reason, Kóngchen Búngthíng was the only religious specialist in Dzongu – or in the Róng community as far as I know – who had restrictions on his free movement in everyday life. He was not allowed to leave the Tingvong area except for the visits to the palace, infrequent and urgent trips to the closest market town Mangan, and to Laven, a village on the opposite side of the valley, to perform his lineage ritual (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011; Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011; Payel Búngthíng, June 2011; village elder, June 2011; Siiger 1967, 193–94). The Gârkumtsum clan originated in Laven. Some generations later, the lineage *búngthíng* was old and had

no sons, so he adopted a relative's son from Nung. Subsequently, the worship and lineage crossed over to Nung village (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007, 45–46, 48).

When Kóngchen Búngthíng still journeyed down to the palace for the ritual performance, my interview partners described, the day would turn dark and misty (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011; interlocutors, June 2011). As a consequence, on this day the villagers stayed at home, no one worked in the fields, and the children were not allowed to shout or sing (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). Pentong Búngthíng underlined that whenever Kóngchen Búngthíng went to the palace, someone would die there (Pentong Búngthíng, May 2011). It was considered dangerous to meet the procession. If it did happen, then the passers-by had to give Kóngchen Búngthíng some money or another valuable item, such as the knife most Róng men carry. The religious specialist introduced the people to Kóngchen and his soldiers and explained that they were from the area. He then requested the more-than-human beings not to harm these insiders (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011).

After receiving the ceremonial gifts and conducting a ritual in the royal palace, the procession would return, singing the procession song noted down by Siiger, accompanied by drums and bells, and performing rituals on the way. If anyone happened to meet the procession on the way back from the royal palace, they had to continue to walk in front of it (Kóngchen Búngthíng, 2011; Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). They had to stay on the 'inside', defined as closer to Dzongu and the snow-capped seats of the soldiers, and not behind Kóngchen Búngthíng or on the 'outside', where the soldiers were following. The entire process took four days.¹¹⁰

The ritual specialists of the Dzongu villages used to perform the annual community rituals, Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát, on the day Kóngchen Búngthíng

110 For a full description of the ritual and the recitations, see Siiger (1967, 190–201) and Siiger and Rischel (1967, 106–25). I think this number of days given by Siiger counts all the days Kóngchen Búngthíng and his entourage were gone from the Tingvong area in total and not just the return journey, as indicated by other sources (such as Wangchuk and Zulca 2007). The path led from Gangtok over Dikchu to Mangan. From there, the yak was taken along the road below Leek village, the old road that is barely visible anymore and hardly used since a motorable road was constructed on the other side of the valley. The walk along that route to Gangtok took around one and a half days, a short ceremony at the palace to receive the yak, and then a slower walk back with the yak. In this way, the entire journey could easily have been accomplished in four days. Wangchuk and Zulca hypothesise that the procession stopped at several places on the way to offer prayers at special locations at the time when the ritual was still considered important, which prolonged the return journey itself to four days (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007, 49). But it seems unlikely to me that the procession was prolonged into a four-day return journey from Gangtok, because the movement of the Kóngchen soldiers along with Kóngchen Búngthíng was considered extremely dangerous as they bring disease and other calamities. Additionally, the social and economic constraints put on the villagers during the time of the journey make a prolongation of the return trip unlikely.

left for the palace, in order to protect their respective villages from the dangers that the moving Kóngchen soldiers brought along. This connection was not apparent in present-day ritual conduct and memory. It was, however, remembered by selected religious specialists (Lingthem and Pentong Búngthíng, Kóngchen Búngthíng, and his southern counterpart Chegra Búngthíng) and commonly narrated by elders in Tingvong. I provide more details on the historical and political aspect of the Kóngchen ritual in Chapter Six.

There is a basically forgotten ritual element that used to ‘close’ the community ritual on the day Kóngchen Búngthíng returned from the palace to complete the cycle of protection, called *parnap*. The only religious specialist that still practiced this ritual element in combination with Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát in the villages I did my fieldwork in, was Pentong Búngthíng. He performed it three days after the initial ceremony. The word *parnap* is used in Róngríng for the activity of abrading rough edges of the bamboo. It was the final touch to the ritual, and it indicated the ending of a ritual period. The *parnap* summed up the ceremony in case any evil spirit had remained behind or had not received their share of the offering properly. It was performed in order to assure that everyone was satisfied.

In the case of Cirim, when we observed the ritual in Pentong, similar rules restricted the mobility of the villagers in the time between the rituals and its *parnap*. When we attended the ritual, the *búngthíng* explained to us that no person who had not been in the village for the first part of the ritual was allowed to enter the village until the *parnap* was over. People who had been in the village during the first part could come and go in those three days (Pentong Búngthíng, April 2010). Netuk Lepcha, the *búngthíng* of Lingthem, remembered a ceremony called *parnap* being performed, but he did not know how to do it, nor did he know the meaning of it (Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2010).

To summarise, the journey of the Kóngchen soldiers brings the separation of realms into disarray; the ritualised journey is, however, required to honour the reciprocal exchange with the Kóngchen soldiers. The disruption is required to uphold the order in the long run, but at the time of the journey, the disorder brings diseases, rains, and other forms of danger. Such a situation makes the people along the path vulnerable and demands ritual protection. The community rituals in Dzongu are specifically such practices of protection. During these rituals, the *búngthíng* ask the soldiers to spare them, activate the local deities as guardians – an aspect I discuss in the next section – and send everyone back to the realm to which they belong. But ultimately, they only deal with the disruption with the aim to keep the people safe. It was the ritual of Kóngchen Búngthíng that, I theorise, dealt with the reason for the disruption itself and bore the elements required to re-establish order (see Chapter Six).

Within these protective practices, one thing the religious specialists stress is that after the liminal moment of ritual disarray, the more-than-human inhabitants need to be sent back to their respective realms, and thus separated again to set the cosmos and the world in order, to keep the balance. At the end of all his community ritual we observed, Lingthem Búngthính meticulously named each of the more-than-human beings he had called to reside in the altar, and he sent each back to their respective realm: *cholsá chol*, *tholsá thol* – the ones from down [go] down, the ones from up [go] up. Kóngchen Búngthính described this separation most clearly to me. We had asked him about his southern counterpart in the Kóngchen ritual – thinking he must be the expert on this. However, he shook his head: Why would I know anything about the plains *búngthính*? He referred to him alternately as the *dángsá* or *cholsá búngthính*, which translates as the religious specialist of the plains (*dáng*) or the lower realms (*chol*). He clarified that he was not allowed to meet him. At the palace, he had done his part first and then left before the southern *búngthính* arrived. When we probed and asked why they were not allowed to meet, he answered that the Kóngchen soldiers were dangerous (Kóngchen Búngthính, June 2011). Within Róng Indigenous ontologies, our question was nonsensical. Kóngchen Búngthính is the specialist of the north, ancestrally tied to the upper realm and its mountain deity Kóngchen. His responsibilities were to bring the soldiers to receive their offerings and then bring them back to the northern realms they belong to. To uphold this order and the cosmic stability, his activities had to be strictly separated from the ones of the religious specialist in charge of the lower realms.

The Middle Realm: Passageways and Interaction Zones

Recalling again the *lópfiyet* offering at Lingthem, the egg for the Kóngchen soldiers and the local guardian deities (Lungjí Lungnóng) were both located in the vertical line of rice in the centre. It symbolises the middle realm, the space in between the extremities of the vertical axis. Before I discuss the ritual protective mechanisms that draw on the local deities as guardians, I want to flesh out this realm and its positioning in the cosmos.

The middle realm is the most multifarious level, in which humans and non-humans co-exist and interact. Non-humans would be animals, the environment itself, and variously defined more-than-human beings. Many different worlds co-exist and overlap: Numshímnyo Lyáng (the human world), Múng Lyáng (the world of malevolent spirits), Thámcsng Lyáng (the animal world), and Máknyám Lyáng (the land of spirits) (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 54–55). The word used for what I have called world is *lyáng*. It is laden with multiple mean-

ings: land, place, earth, region, country, and surface (782). The word describes a space that is grounded within the visible environment and is not beyond the physical landscape.

The movements along the vertical axis show their effect in this realm and in its several worlds. As such, the middle realm is a space of exchange and transaction. It is where the reciprocal relations occur between humans and more-than-human beings, humans and their ancestors, more-than-human beings and environment, humans and environment, humans amongst each other, and many more. The interactions have different qualities and outcomes, many of them being negotiated in ritual.

The middle realm holds the passageways between the earth (with its many worlds) and the worlds that are not embodied within the physical landscape: the underworld, the sky, the ancestral lands, and the otherworldly spaces where hidden more-than-human beings dwell. An apt example for such passages is the gateway to the ancestral lands (*lep*). Each Róng clan has its own *lep* with a different location, usually in a cave or gorge. It is through these gateways that the religious specialist guides the souls during the death ceremony. Several other passageways used to exist but have been severed over time. The myths collected on Lásó Múng in Dzongu mention a passageway from the middle realm to the land of the dead souls called Múk Nyám Lóm. In Róngring *mák nyám* means “the shade of the dead or departed; the spirits of the dead collectively” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 576) and *lóm* is ‘road’ or more significantly in this context an “open way for passage or travel” (755). The name can, thus, be translated as the way of the spirits of the dead (Bentley 2008). In that myth, when the deities cut down Sanyól Kung, they decided to let the tree fall towards that passage and blocked it. The interaction that used to occur through the passageway was connoted more positively or negatively depending on the narrator. In some versions, the way was blocked on purpose in order to prevent malevolent spirits of the dead from escaping and harming the humans (Lingthem Búngthíng, October 2008). The same incident, however, stopped communication between the Mútunci Róng and the dead souls of their relatives (Simik 2001, 17). Furthermore, oral traditions narrate the previous travels of Róng persons into the realm of the Máyel beings. There was a passageway to Máyel Kyong allowing an exchange between Róng ancestors and the people of Máyel. Hunters used to go there and bring back seeds. The Máyel beings ventured into the world and traded. But today the way is impassable, as it has been sealed by a rock and the location of the village remains unknown. As mentioned by Scheid’s interview partners, due to cultural and religious changes, the distance to the Máyel beings has increased, thus closing the sacred space to human and more-than-human interaction (Scheid 2014).

The passageways indicate a movement to the inside to transfer from one realm to the other. Oppitz describes a similar gateway between the world of the humans and the immortal amongst the Magar in western Nepal, as well as the Lohorun Rai in the Arun valley in eastern Nepal. In his interpretation, this entrance demarcates a horizontal position between inside and outside. It is therefore detrimental to the three-layered vertical dimension (Oppitz 1991, 118–20). After discussions with various interlocutor and Róng religious specialists, I am not sure if the inside–outside pairing stands in contrast to the vertical dimension. Considering the distinction between *tábá/thol* and *mebá/chol*, I would hypothesise that the inside–outside pairing is additional to the vertical dimension, adding another level of agency depending on spatiality within the respective trajectory.

The middle realm does not only exist, but moreover is shaped and transformed by past, current, and future interactions between all the sentient beings, human and non-human, and the exchanges between the various worlds within the middle realm and beyond. Not all interactions or memories of them are the same. Some passageways are blocked today. In this case *lúngten sung* carries memories of transfers from one sphere to the other and the perils of the interactions. Whatever dangers or benefits the movements through these passageways used to bring along with them are now merely reminiscence. However, some worlds and interactions are still very present, as in the case of the movement of the Kóngchen soldiers.

Calling the Guards: The Local Deities (Lungjí Lungnóng) as Boundary Protectors

If some rumfát is going on in Lingthem, in the búngthing's recitations, we make offerings to all the borders and protectors of Lingthem, like Lingí Tangdâ Cú, Saphok, and so forth. Like in Tingvong, for example, it is the same, they make offerings to local boundary protectors like Lunggám Cú, Takdí Cú. Or, in Hee Gyathang, they pray to Lingí Cú, because it is a boundary of the village, then in Tariang, there are some of their own cú there, too. So, many villages have their own rituals and their own boundaries in rituals, which they offer something to. (MLAS culture secretary, January 2010)

The “borders and protectors” that the MLAS culture secretary mentions in the above quotation are the seats of the local guardian deities of a respective village, the Lungjí Lungnóng, to whom the fourth and last egg in the Lingthem altar is dedicated. In the everyday Róng language, the more-than-human beings and their

abode coalesce. The deity was described as *cú*, meaning mountain. This conflation was not a recent epistemological change, but already observed by Siiger in the late 1940s (Siiger 1972, 238). Ritual language, in contrast, is consistent in making a distinction between the abode, and the more-than-human being whose home the respective abode is. When the religious specialist specified which deity the offering was meant for, he used the expression *ngánbúsangká*. The word *ngán* means ‘to sit’. In Róngring, the suffix *-bú* is the most important nominaliser, but can also be a factive marker and thereby indicate that an event is taking place. The suffix *-sang* signifies the plural, and *-ká* is a locative suffix indicating direction (Plaisier 2007a, 87–89). The phrase can be translated as ‘to those who sit’ or ‘to those who are sitting down’. According to Heleen Plaisier (personal communication, 24 November 2014), the word could likewise mean ‘to those who remain’. It emphasises that these deities are dwelling in their natural abodes as well as on the altar.

The ambiguity of the sacredness of the topographic marker itself and of the topographic marker as an abode of a sacred being has been widely discussed in Himalayan scholarship (Berglie 1980; Höfer 1999; Macdonald in Pommaret 1996, 42; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976; Pommaret 1996, 42; Ramble 1996). It has been theorised that the inherent power of the space is possibly derived from the presence of the more-than-human being, but that the characteristics of the deity and the place have merged and thus render the place itself sacred (Höfer 1999, 227–28; Ramble 1996, 156).

The local guardian deities, classified together as *Lungjí Lungnóng*, are called *Lyángdók Úngdók*, guardians of land and water. They are the main protectors of the local village, including humans, more-than-humans, animals, and plant life. In certain parts of the recitation, and on the altar, the individual guardians were clubbed together under that classification, but in its sequencing the recitation specified them one by one, each with their specific individual personalities and abodes.

It is a prayer to all the four directions asking for protection of our land, animals, and plants from the hail. Do not let this hail fall on our motherland. Please do take this and let it go directly towards the different directions and not wander in our land. (Lingthem Búngthing, May 2006, on *Sotáp Rurfát*)

The sequencing in which the *búngthing* calls upon them activates the horizontal dimension. Such activation is common among the ethnic groups of the Himalaya and has been associated with “conceptions of circle making out of sacred space” (Bickel and Gaenzle 1999, 9). I argue here that, more than making a ‘sacred’ space, the community rituals make a divinely secured ‘safe’ space. If the vertical

movement is associated with danger and change, the spiral movement that I will explain in detail in the following brings protection, safety, and continuity.

The religious specialists conducting the village community rituals Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát did not leave the place – even symbolically or metaphorically – and travel through the landscape; instead, unlike the Kóngchen Búngthíng, they stayed within the vicinity of the village and called guardian deities to take their seat in the altar, by naming their respective abodes. The local deities differed from one place to another and dwelled in prominent local landscape markers around the physical boundaries of the village. Each *búngthíng* was acquainted with the respective guardian deities of his respective area and summoned them during the performance of the community rituals. In some villages (Pentong, Tingvong), the religious specialists included local guardians from beyond the vicinity of the respective village. Payel Búngthíng, for example, calls upon local deities of the villages Pentong and Sakyong, north of Tingvong. In the following, I describe the sequencing in which Lingthem Búngthíng called upon the local guardian deities, mainly based on the Cirim ritual documented in March 2010 (Figure 25). I chose Lingthem Búngthíng’s recitation because it was the most methodical. Lingthem is comprised of four hamlets: Lower Lingthem, Upper Lingthem, Sangklong, and Passingdang. The latter is a relatively recent settlement that came into existence when villagers moved down the hill from Lingthem to the newly constructed road.

Sungzâm Hlo Sumphyók Hlo sá bek
in between Sungzâm hill and Sumphyók hill

Lingthem Búngthíng called upon the four main boundary deities protecting Lingthem. The village was technically not circumscribed in the ritual recitations, but the opposing extremities of the vicinity were invoked in pairs. Pairing is a constant element in Róng religious thought as well as in the Róng ritual language, Tungbór Ríng. It structures entire recitations. In recitations the same sentence is usually repeated, with only a small variation:

káyú khekup tópbú phutkup tópbú
We tax small p(r)ay PRG¹¹¹ tax small p(r)ay PRG
We are paying tax (2x)

111 According to Kachyo Lepcha, the suffix *-bú* is used as a progressive marker (PRG). Commonly the suffix *-bám* is used, while in North Sikkim the verbs *nyí* (to be) and *ngán* (to sit, remain) can be suffixed as progressive markers (Plaisier 2007a,119).



*including residing or associated more-than-humans

FIGURE 25: Local guardian deities of Lingthem community rituals (illustrated map not to scale).

This narrative style is called *ákep* (Tamsang 2008a, ix; A. Tamsang 2014, 28). The word *ákep* itself means ‘companion’ or the “one who accompanies or associates with another” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 7). I use the English word *pairing* as opposed to *dualism*, as this Mútunci concept does not indicate an opposing distinction, quite the opposite, it emphasises companionship and interrelatedness of two elements. The *ákep* concept aligns with the Róng mythology that – in the case of deities – often refers to them being interlinked in marriage or in sibling relations. In ritual language, the *ákep* style is used to join two sentences together (*ring shok*); it can be described as a specific type of rhyming. The apposition forms the rhythm of ritual speech as a mnemonic device, but moreover holds a deeper cosmological knowledge and classification of the world. Oppitz (1999b) classifies this type of parallel rhyming of sentences in the ritual

language of the Magar as *parallelismus membrorum* (175). As in Róng rituals, in Magar the parallel constructions exist in verbalisations concerning space, indicating that this mnemonic device corresponds to the essence of classification in Himalayan cosmologies and perceptions of the world.

Returning to the topographic abodes called upon first in the recitation, Sungzâm Hlo is a hillock between the Sangklong hamlet of Lingthem village and Kayem hamlet of Lingdem, the neighbouring village located upstream. It is situated towards the northwest of Lingthem and seals the village in the direction of the upper realms. Sumphyók Hlo is a hill located between Panang,¹¹² a hamlet technically beyond Lingthem, and the Barfok Lingdong region to the southwest of Lingthem, located downstream. In Róng Indigenous epistemology this hillock closes the boundary of Lingthem in the direction of the lower realms. These two boundary deities, located at the opposite binaries of the village, are the most important and most often called upon local boundary deities in the ritual recitations of Lingthem Búngthíng (1 in Figure 25).

Then the religious specialist introduced a second pair of boundary deities and their abodes: Lingi Cú/Pano and Tangdâ Cú/Pano. Lingi hillock is located on the upper end of Lingthem, behind the village slope. Geographically, it is on the southwestern side of Lingthem, and on the Barfok Lingdong boundary. Since it is above the village, it is considered an upper guardian deity in the village despite the actual geographical southern location. Tangdâ hill, however, is located above Sungzâm hill, beyond the Sangklong side of Lingthem. This deity's dwelling place seals the upper boundary (2 in Figure 25). Then, the river Rónggyóng that runs through the valley of Upper Dzongu and below Lingthem village was addressed. Even though it is technically located to the northeast of Lingthem, it is considered a boundary deity guarding the lower or southern border to the village (3 in Figure 25). The *búngthíng* named the latter guardian only once, while he mentioned the other four more often. Here again, as in the recitations documented from Pentong and Tingvong, the invocations towards the upper realms seemed to be of greater importance than those towards the lower.

After these five boundary deities had received their offerings, the *búngthíng* called upon the local guardians located within the vicinity of Lingthem. He started by summoning the local deities towards the upper but southern side of Lingthem. Kim Dâ is a lake located in Lingthem below Lingi Mountain, just next to Gongtyok, a hillock. The embodied more-than-human therein was the next

112 Today, Panang does not celebrate the community rituals together with the other hamlets of Lingthem (Passingdang, Lower Lingthem, Upper Lingthem, and Sangklong), but it used to be related to the larger administration of the village (de Beauvoir Stocks [1925] 1975). In the monastic rituals it is clearly considered a part of Lingthem.

one that the *búngthính* invoked. Then Pador Kung, a hillock beyond Panang just above Sumphyók hill, was addressed. Thereafter, the recitation reached over to the other side of Lingthem and called upon Pamong Kung and Lungzóng Pano,¹¹³ two hillocks below Sungzâm, beyond Sangklong on the upper and northern boundary of the village area. Next, Kahryok Kung was called upon; this is a hill between Lower Lingthem and Sangklong, situated on the Lower Lingthem side of the river that divides the two hamlets. These protective deities form an inner ring within the first five main border deities mentioned, as if building reinforcements for the first guardians called upon (4 in Figure 25).

In the next section of the recitation, the *búngthính* addressed more-than-human figures and spirits bound to the territory of Lingthem. They were not considered deities, but ancestors, more often than not associated with specific clans. In various forms they had become a part of the landscape and shape the relation between land, the people and their clans. They either had specific abodes or had otherwise left their traces. First the *búngthính* addressed Sumdogyen and subsequently called on his abode Sadi Bóng, a tree in the vicinity of Lower Lingthem. Sumdogyen is actually a precious stone that was hidden in the tree. It is linked to the clan story of the Tsetelim *putso*, the clan of the present Lingthem Búngthính and possibly the oldest and previously most powerful clan of the village. Legend has it that the ancestor of the clan, Áthính Márgin, brought the precious stone from Ánden Cú, a mountain behind present-day Mangan. Both the stone and the tree were now more-than-human guardians of Lingthem. Lingthem Búngthính described the story as follows:

Áthính Márgin was a mun. He used to stay at Ringzi Bóng, now situated at Upper Lingthem. One evening he came out from his house and saw something glittering over Ánden Cú. He saw the glittering in the evening time. From then on, he observed it for two to three nights. Whenever he came out during the evening, it was always there. One night he made a plan. "I will go and catch this glittering thing." The next day he went out from his house and went to the glittering place, towards Ánden Cú. He reached where Mangan now lies, where there were so many birds (fadróngfo); and he searched for that glittering thing. At last, he found a small round stone. It looked like it was glowing, so shiny and glittering. So, he took it from that place

113 In some recitations, such as during Sotáp Rumfát in 2009, Lingthem Búngthính additionally addresses Lunggám Pano, one of the main hillocks behind Tingvong and the main guardian deity of the village. It is considered the brother of Lungzóng Pano.

and again returned from *Ánden Cú* and reached *Lingthem*. He considered the stone as a good sign for his family or clan. He thought that maybe in future the precious stone would give him a good life. He considered it as his protector and always kept the stone on this body. Wherever he went, he would always carry the stone.

One day at Lower *Lingthem*, at *Takbriang*, someone had died. Because he was a *mun*, he rushed down for the funeral ceremony. He rushed down and reached *Nayâ Kyong*, where at present the rest house is situated, and suddenly remembered the precious stone in his bag. He thought: "I can't carry this precious stone to the funeral ceremony, or a bad accident may occur, because it is so precious to me." For this reason, he did not want to take it any place that could destroy the stone that he considered a god. So, he took the stone out from his bag and kept it at the *Nayâ Kyong*, and he said, "I will be coming back tomorrow from *Takbriang*, you will stay here. I can't carry you because you are a god, a precious thing, so you will stay here, and I will come back tomorrow." The next day he came back up and reached *Nayâ Kyong*, but he could not find the stone anymore. He had lost his precious stone, and he searched for it. At last, he reached *Sadi Bông*. There he received a sign that the precious stone had entered into it. He could not retrieve his precious stone. He was angry and in a bad mood. And he asked of *Sadi Bông*, "you hid my precious stone, you hid my god, you hid my wealth, but it is ok. In future you will look after my clan, don't harm my clan. From today onwards you are the guardians of this village and the guardian of *Tsetelim putso*." (*Lingthem Búngthíng*, February 2010)

Following this, the *búngthíng* mentioned *Sumbráng Bông*; this abode is a tree that marks the boundary between Upper and Lower *Lingthem*. Then he called upon *Nyú Nayâdut/-gyen*. This spirit dwells in *Nayâ Dâ*, a lake located below the rest house in the middle of *Lingthem*, below the rocks, and beside the concrete steps. The lake does not exist anymore, but the location is still known to the people.¹¹⁴ Moreover, this place is mentioned in the narrative on *Sumdogyen* and *Sadi Bông*. Next, *Lingthem Búngthíng* called *Nyú Namfinggyen*, a more-than-human entity embedded in *Namfing Dâ*, a lake located on the opposite

114 In the *Cirim* recitations in April 2009, the *búngthíng* at this point calls upon the two rivers running through *Lingthem*. He describes them as *dut*, devils. *Nahár Dut* or *Kyong* is the river running through Lower *Lingthem* and *Sambro Dut* or *Kyong* is the river between Lower/Upper *Lingthem* and *Sangklong*.

hills from Lingthem above the village Leek. Namfinggyen is the only local deity not in the immediate vicinity of Lingthem village. Leek and Lingthem have close relations. Villagers from Lingthem own land in Leek and people from there have settled in Passingdang, on the banks of the river Rónggyóng below Lingthem. The close interrelations could explain the invocation of this local guardian deity.

The more-than-human beings situated in lakes are often female. In this combination the word *nyú* implies female gender, from the word *ányú* ‘aunt’, while *gyen* implies male gender, from *ágyen*. The more-than-human being dwelling in this lake is sometimes called *Nayâ Dâmít*, for example in the *Sotáp Rumfát* in 2010. The ending *-mít* clearly indicates female gender and means ‘goddess’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 570). Despite this confusion in the ritual recitation, the oral traditions ascribe a female gender to *Nyú Namfing* and name her an important local guardian. *Lingthem Búngthíng* associated all the places in Lingthem mentioned in the ritual recitations with *Nyú Namfing*. According to his narrative, she was on her way back from *Horka*, a place the *Lingthem Búngthíng* described as close to present-day Darjeeling. The people from there were at war with Lingthem village. There are many oral traditions of *Dzongu* residents fighting the *Horka* (Bentley 2014; Lepcha 2012). The term ‘*Horka*’ most likely refers to the *Kotapa*, a branch of the *Barfungpa* landlord family with landholdings in present-day *Ilam*, *Darjeeling*, *Kalimpong*, and *West Sikkim*. The narratives of war probably recall the *Kotapa* rebellion (1828–1841), when after the assassination in 1826 of the *Sikkimese* Chancellor *Bolhö* (*Phyag mdzod Bo lhod*¹¹⁵), a *Barfungpa* from *Kabi*, the *Kotapa* faction allied with the *Gorkha* army and raided *Sikkim*, reaching as far as *Dzongu* (Bentley 2014).¹¹⁶ According to the *búngthíng’s* narration, *Nyú Namfing* had been taken to *Horka* during the war, where she then worked as a porter. There are other versions of the narrative, in which *Nyú Namfing* is depicted as a strong protector with more-than-human powers who fought the people of *Horka* and pushed them back all the way to their home.¹¹⁷

On her way back to Lingthem she carried butter and cheese. She reached *Suglí Hlo*, a hillock between *Horka* and *Darjeeling*. There she cut off a branch of the *Sumbráng* tree to use as a walking stick. Finally, she arrived at the confluence of the rivers *Róngnyú* and *Rónggyóng* at present-day *Namprikdang*. Here she picked up a stone. Then she walked up to Lingthem. At *Nayâ Kyong*, she got

115 He was also known as *rNam rgyal phun tshogs* (Mullard 2013, 181) and *Buljeet* (Warner 2014a, 27).

116 For more information on the *Kotapa* rebellion, see Mullard 2011, 2013; Mullard and Wongchuk 2010; Ardussi et al. 2021; Risley 1894 [1973]; Schwerzel et al. 2000.

117 See the narrative collected by *Rummit Lepcha* and *Pema Tarbu Lepcha* (Lepcha and Lepcha 2023).

thirsty and wanted to drink. However, she could not find any water. So, she left the packets of butter and cheese at Nayâ Kyong, went a little further down, and dug a hole in the soil. Water sprouted out and she drank until she was satisfied. She then gave the responsibility of the place to Nyú Nayâgyen. She said: 'From today onwards, you are the guardian of this pond'. Then she returned to get her packets, but they had turned into stone, so she left them there.

She continued towards Upper Lingthem. When she reached the boundary of Lower and Upper Lingthem, she placed her walking stick in the soil and it grew into a large tree, the Sumbráng Bóng. She then placed the stone she had brought from the confluence beside it. It grew into a large stone. She said, 'from here upward, the place will be referred to as Upper Lingthem, from here downwards, it is Lower Lingthem' and thereby specified the boundaries between the main hamlets of the village. Then she reached Mangráam, her home in Upper Lingthem. Therefore, she is not only embodied in Leek, but also has a place where she is considered embedded in Lingthem. Here, she was met by the souls of all the villagers who had been killed by the Horka. They were hungry and asked for food and drink. Nyú Namfing placated them, turned them into the guardians of Lingthem, and said, 'Do not worry, in future, the people of Lingthem will always give you the last part of any offering, but do not harm them' (Lingthem Búngthíng, February 2010).

Directly after naming Nyú Namfing in the ritual recitation, Lingthem Búngthíng calls upon another main protective female figure of Lingthem: Lingthem Ányú Pundí. Other sources tell the narrative about Nyú Namfing, previously mentioned, in association with Lingthem Ányú Pundí (Ngacho Lepcha, *lama*, December 2008). In the recitations, both are addressed separately, but consecutively, potentially implying that they are a pair, or aspects of the same more-than-human being. The pairing would explain why the same narratives and topographic markers were associated with each of them.

Oral tradition says that Lingthem Ányú Pundí was an only daughter. She had seven brothers who were all hunters. The brothers spent most of their time out in the forest, while Lingthem Ányú Pundí stayed in the village. She accumulated an abundance of wealth. As soon as her brothers noticed her fortune, they turned very jealous. When she refused to share her riches with them, they were infuriated and killed her. They chopped her body into numerous pieces and scattered them. The different parts of her flesh started to move towards each other, joined together again, and Lingthem Ányú Pundí came back to life. She knew she had to leave because her brothers would try to kill her again. Thus, she asked her daughters to take care of everything and guard the seeds and the crops. She reassured them that from this day onwards she would be

everywhere in Lingthem, in every stream, in the big trees, in the fields, in every house, and protect them and the generations to come. After this, she entered a lake and vanished (Lingthem Búngthíng, October 2008; see Bentley 2011).¹¹⁸ In another narrative, one brother of Lingthem Ányú Pundí is the guardian located in Sadi Bóng, consequently relating him to the Tsetelim *putso*. While she was absent from the village, all her brothers had turned into stones; one of them was in the Sadi Bóng tree. In this narrative, all her brothers turned into the guardians of Lingthem (Ngacho Lepcha, *lama*, December 2008).

In the last section of the Cirim recitation, Lingthem Búngthíng called upon the guardian deity of the Lingthem monastery, Gâmbú Gomchen, whom he described as Lingthem Ányú Pundí's husband. The inclusion of Buddhist more-than-human beings indicates the syncretic relation between Róng traditional religious practice and Buddhism (Arora 2006; Bentley 2007, 2008; Lepcha 2013). At the end of his recitation, the *búngthíng* introduced more local deities at the core of Lingthem village: Nampol Dâ, a lake on the bottom part of Lower Lingthem, Narim Kung, a hill in Lower Lingthem, and Sukmut Lóm Veng, a hill further up from Narim hill (5 in Figure 25).

The Lingthem Búngthíng mapped the area of the village for which protection was sought and only appeased the local deities embodied in the Lingthem landscape. In his ritual recitation, Lingthem Búngthíng called upon various more-than-human beings that are in some form or other related to the landscape of Lingthem village. The activation of these guardians followed a spiral web movement along binary pairs (Höfer 1999, 240; Schicklgruber 1996, 117; Ramble 1996, 145f; Bickel 1999, 90). First the outermost points – the borders – of the space were addressed, moving from the lower northern side of the village to the lower southern, then from the upper southern to the upper northern boundary down to the southernmost. Next, the *búngthíng* called on a second row of deities in a similar manner, drawing a second inner spiral movement between binary pairs. This clockwise spiral movement then led towards the inner areas of Lingthem until it reached the core where various more-than-human beings dwell. It is a circular closing of the boundaries to prevent evil from entering the inhabited territory.¹¹⁹ The guardian deities form the boundary protecting the 'inside' from the diseases, located on the outside, moving down and up the vertical axis from north to south. At the same time, the movement between the

118 In the Cirim recitations of 2009, Lingthem Búngthíng additionally calls upon Ányú Dâmít. This is an additional name for Lingthem Ányú Pundí. The name is a reference to her entering the lake (Lingthem Búngthíng, February 2010). It translates as the 'aunt lake goddess' (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 570).

119 See Oppitz (1999b, 168) for similar mechanisms among the Magar.

two pairs spans across the spiral closure, indicating connection and interdependence – it is along these established companionships (*dkep*) between the guardians that the *búngthing* tightly weaves the web of protection.

Carving Out a Safe Place: Security, the Good Life, and Belonging

In the process of ritual closure, the ritual specifically defines an area that requires safeguarding. It either corresponds with a village including several hamlets (such as in Lingthem) or a hamlet of a larger village (such as in Tingvong). The ritual responsibility of each *búngthing* is restricted to his respective village. There, he has intimate knowledge about the local more-than-human beings, their characteristics, abodes, and mythologies. He is familiar with the topography of the village, the fields, the animals, and lastly the residents, their relations to each other, to the land, and to animals. Moreover, he cultivates varied relationships with these more-than-humans, humans, animals, plants, and so forth. I argue that it is this localised and intimate Indigenous knowledge, bound into relations, that enables the intermediary positioning of the religious specialist between the different worlds and realms. The only exception is Kóngchen Búngthing. In the words of the Lingthem Búngthing:

Actually, Gârkumtsum putso does the offering. That clan offers for the overall villages. Here we just do [the ritual] for the protection of our village from the natural calamity. (Lingthem Búngthing, April 2006)

Relying on the recitation transcribed by Siiger, Kóngchen Búngthing called more-than-human beings with abodes beyond Tingvong and beyond Dzongu as guards, such as Pawo Hungri. He asked for protection for the Sikkimese king and the nation of Sikkim (Siiger 1967). Not only did Kóngchen Búngthing carry the responsibility to shield his own vicinity, as the other religious specialists of Dzongu do, but it was also his duty to safeguard the entire kingdom of Sikkim. The ritual had a nationalist character and was intended to keep the state boundaries and royal lineage of Sikkim safe. The method of enclosing an inner space of safety is extended from the village to the entire state (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007, 50).

The understanding of reality in Indigenous ontologies in Dzongu that I have elaborated through an analysis of the practice of two community rituals places the Dzongu residents in between two powerful realms above and below them, on the trajectory of dangerous more-than-human beings, and thus in a state of constant vulnerability. In their immediate locality, the Róng villagers are equipped

with the means of mutual protection: community rituals as acts of recurring relationship building. The appeasement of guardian deities creates a protective web with boundaries towards the outside and encloses a safe space: the village. In ritual practice, the village – defined as the inside – is guarded during a moment of disorder.¹²⁰ In this process, “it is, above all, the very act of defining a space that is of primary importance” (Ramble 1996, 152). Ritual maps out the positioning of the Róng villagers within the larger cosmos and the immediate landscape in front of the people. The relations of the people to more-than-human beings and the land/environment (as their abodes), (re-)activated in ritual, provides the people with the means to orientate and locate themselves and others (including human and non-human beings) within the geographic region they inhabit in a religious and cognitive sense. The horizontal and vertical spatial dimensions are the cognitive schemas and systems of classification within Indigenous ontologies (see Allen 1972 for the Himalayan space; see also Needham 1973).

By verbally circumscribing the village in a spiral movement of pairs, the *búngthíng* distinguishes between the benevolent protector deities standing as guards and the harmful evil spirits potentially attacking from the outside. In his ritual recitation, he separates the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’, ‘what belongs to the village’ from ‘what does not’, and lastly ‘us’ from ‘them’ in its widest sense (Bickel and Gaenzle 1999, 12; Toffin 1999). While this process creates a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, it cannot be reduced to ethnic boundary-making but places the villagers in interaction with more-than-human beings and humans, with territory and people, with ancestors and outsiders, with present and past, with worlds and realms. As such belonging is defined over relations of reciprocal exchange between differently defined entities. Additionally, while at the moment of ritual the boundary is clearly defined, it is timebound and interactive, done anew every year and thereby leaving space for redefinition of the inside and outside. Thus, affinities, subjectivities, and identifications are constituted on several levels. None of them are conceptualised as a clearly enclosed group; instead, they provide possibilities for activating mechanisms of belonging, as defined within Róng Indigenous thought-framework.¹²¹ Thus, ritual reactivates the affective relations to the village territory embodied in the geographical features of the space (Shneiderman 2015b).

The concluding point I raise is that while the mythological contract with more-than-humans ensures protection from harm and, lastly, a temporal over-

120 See Oppitz and Kohl (1992, 38) for a similar demarcation process in healing rituals. See Bickel and Gaenzle (1999, 10, 78), Höfer (1999, 228), and Pettigrew 1999 for ritual in the Nepal Himalaya and social order.

121 See Gaenzle 1991, 343ff. for discussion on the Mewahang Rai.

coming of vulnerability, it is their embeddedness in the landscape that demarcates the space of safety and belonging. The horizontal invocation of deities and representation of geographical area is a “technique of assuring safety” (Ramble 1998, 147). If ritual practice is successful, the protection by these deities enables a good life in a safe space. Ritual practice shapes the village as a place of security and prosperity, to which belonging is asserted.

Conclusion

Following the annual community ritual practices, I mapped out the relations between humans and more-than-humans, the environment, the land and water, and worlds and realms – embedded in a present-day practice and oral knowledge system passed down over generations – that constitute a variation of reality. It is a reality in which the dichotomy between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ is not formulated, a reality that animates the precarious geographical environment of the Himalaya with human and more-than-human relations, various worlds and realms, dangers, and responsibilities.¹²² The knowledge of this cosmos and of past and present interactions is preserved in the *lúngten sung*. From this perspective, the reduction of *lúngten sung* to ‘culture’ in its commodified and objectified understanding does not take Róng world-making practices or their philosophies and knowledge seriously.

Ritual practice regularly activates these worlds: the physical world that humans live in, the sacred landscape and realms of the more-than-humans, and the mythological past of the ancestors (Bickel and Gaenzle 1999, 19).¹²³ Thereby, it binds them together and outlines an interdependence of more-than-human, territory, environment, community, and self. In this way, it reformulates and passes on the understanding of the world, of who we are, and of where we belong, grounded in the past but redefined through present interactions, that I have defined as Róng Indigenous ontologies.

I do not mean to imply hereby that the villagers are always aware of the presence of more-than-human beings in the vicinity when they engage in everyday actions. Many are not always conscious or cautious of moving in a world inhabited by more-than-human beings, specifically also because those beings have been pacified in the ritual practice and do not require any additional attention. Some might not even believe in it anymore. Moreover, and

122 See Torri 2020 for a discussion on nature and culture in the Himalayan context.

123 See also Gaenzle, Oppitz, Pettigrew in the same volume.

importantly, not every tree, rock, or topographic marker is sacred – as the Dzongu residents pointed out regarding the land they sold for the hydropower development (Subba 2011, 337) – but only specific topographic markers are the abodes of more-than-human beings.

Furthermore, I bear in mind that not everyone living in Dzongu has such a detailed knowledge of the words and realms, the local deities, and the cosmological implications of the evil spirits' journey in Róng Indigenous ontologies. After all, it was initiated professionals with many years of experience in their field who shared most of the information that I have included in this chapter. Most Dzongu residents know parts of it, and piece together enough to understand their reality and their world. In my conversations with villagers, working side by side in the fields, or sharing meals around kitchen fires, I have heard people refer to more-than-human beings residing in specific places in the village vicinity, or talk about how a neighbour got sick after unintentionally disturbing an evil spirit's abode. While an individual resident will not have the detailed knowledge of an initiated religious specialist, the majority of villagers live with the knowledge that they share their village space with more-than-human beings who have their own respective homes and deserve to be interacted with respectfully.

The invocation of protective border deities makes the villagers, who have contributed offerings in exchange for protection, aware of the boundaries to their home and safe space. The boundaries clarify and reify an inside and an outside in regard to the village locality and the people who belong. They define a space where the inhabitants – here encompassing humans, more-than-humans, animals, plants, and so forth – know and interact with each other, along set rules of reciprocity and care. As mentioned in the introduction, the 'village' is a reference framework for belonging in the Himalaya. This certainly is the case in the Róng community. As Gorer ([1938] 1996) remarked in the late 1930s after his experience in Dzongu: "When a Lepcha speaks of 'we' he generally means all the people of his village" (142). During my fieldwork, not much had changed. Of course, who 'we' was would depend on the context of the conversation and could refer to other reference groups, but when a Róng person meets another Róng person, the locality where the person came from is the first information requested and given. The 'village' allows the identification of the 'other' and 'self'.

My elaborations, however, do not stop there; my focus on the ritual act allows me to flesh out what exactly the 'inside' means with regard to the village territory. The community ritual activates the relations of the villagers to the multifarious sacred landscape of their village and defines a geographical space

filled with memory and more-than-human beings (Tilley 1994, 15–20). Accordingly, this chapter has developed one aspect of what ‘the village’ can mean, not defined by difference from people that do not reside there but defined by qualities of interactions within a human/non-human space and by affective territorial and environmental relations. These relations enable the individual to negotiate his or her self-understanding and constitute personally defined attachments to place.

People growing up or living in Dzongu have experienced the precarity of the Himalayan landscape – from blocked roads to flash floods to earthquakes. The accumulation of these minor and major calamitous events constitutes an experience of common lot (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 3). Community rituals are a mutual mechanism to overcome this vulnerability. An individual cannot ensure his or her well-being alone in the Róng community, but every household needs to contribute to make the ritual a success and avert the danger. A sense of belonging together is created by this act of ensuring well-being and in the widest sense protecting each other through the mutual achievement of sacred protection.

The background features a complex, layered line-art design. The upper portion is filled with dense, swirling blue lines on a black background, creating a sense of organic movement and depth. Below this, a large, irregular shape is defined by thick white outlines, filled with fine, parallel white lines that create a textured, almost fabric-like appearance. The bottom right corner shows more intricate white line patterns, including some that resemble a grid or a series of overlapping paths. The overall aesthetic is that of a traditional indigenous art style, possibly a woodcut or a textile design, rendered in a modern, graphic style.

CHAPTER FIVE

Territory, Nature Worship,
and the Politics of Indigeneity



FIGURE 26: One of the most visible embedded local guardian deities in Dzongu, Múngyúng Cú (also known as Pungyung or Lumyung), described as Kóngchen's guard, November 2013 © Kunga Tashi Lepcha.

Ritual practice enacts ties to a very localised sacred landscape, as I showed in the previous chapter. What happens to the conceptualisation of the more-than-human beings and their embeddedness in the territory in ritual programmes? How are the relationships with these more-than-human beings maintained? How are land and water as well as the attachments to them transformed and transported?

The relation to the sacred land and the rivers that run through it remains central to the public promotion of the ritual programme of Tendong Hlo Rumfát, as it is intrinsically linked to the political project of claiming or reasserting Indigeneity. Indigeneity in these terms is defined as political positioning “which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning and emerges through particular patterns of engagement” (Li 2000, 150). In a speech during Tendong Hlo Rumfát in Kalimpong in 2009, the activist Paul Simik called the Mútunci Róng “Lyángdók”. As mentioned, this term, Lyángdók Úngdók, designates the embedded guardian deities that in the Dzongu rituals are more commonly called Lungjí Lungnóng (Figure 26). The word *dók* carries two meanings: guardian and owner (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 422–23). This pairing of meaning strongly formulates how activists perceive themselves, their community, and their relations to territory: namely as guardians and owners of the land, who carry the responsibility to protect the land, amongst other duties by performing rituals; are inheritors of the territory; and as

ancestral citizens have rights within what they define as their ancestral territory, Ne Máyel Lyáng. Importantly, the concept of Lyángdók Úngdók intimately ties the process of counteracting danger or enabling prosperity to the ownership of place (including land, water, and the entire ecosystem) in a religious, symbolic, and political sense, thereby redefining an ancestral ontological concept and sketching a local reading of Indigeneity.

In this chapter, I outline the multiple definitions of Indigeneity as they are negotiated among the Róng activists. While the overarching claim of ancestral relations to the territory and the demand for associated entitlements resonate with all Róng associations' agendas, the characteristics of the 'ancestral relations', the 'territory', and the 'entitlements' vary. Here I will unravel these concepts and their assemblages within the ritual programmes and ethno-political action of the Róng activists. I argue that the conceptualisation of territory crucially shapes the array of possible relations to the said territory, just as much as the relations shape and reshape the conceptualisation of the territory itself. In this chapter, I examine these relations based on their enactment in ritual, as promoted and debated by different groups of Róng activists. I argue that this sets the scene for a public discourse on Indigeneity and belonging among the wider Róng public.

The expressions of Indigeneity assembled and negotiated by ritual are historically grounded and shaped by the legal and political frameworks in which they occur. In the first section I introduce Róng territory as a borderland, in which borders both separate what is similar and enact difference (Chettri 2017a; Cons and Sanyal 2013; Middleton 2016; Shneiderman 2015a; van Schendel 2005; van Schendel and Maaker 2014). Róng activists have to negotiate this while basing their claims to Indigeneity on an ancestral land, Máyel Lyáng, whose ascribed territory now belongs to three – earlier four – different nations, with different citizenship laws, national discourses, and politics. I argue that simultaneously to the fragmentation of an imagined larger ancestral land, the state formation process has initiated the institutionalisation of regions that strongly define the characteristics of Indigeneity among Róng activists. For which entity is Indigeneity claimed? Do present-day borders regulate Indigeneity as a modern political project? How do the chosen strategies address vulnerabilities and activate safeguarding mechanisms?

Keeping these questions in mind, in the first section, I examine the relations to land as activated in ritual programmes. I argue that here a trend towards the delocalisation of embedded more-than-human beings becomes apparent. Ritual programmes activate relations to territory according to topographic markers or ancestral figures more commonly known in the wider Róng community, rather than associated with a specific locality and clan. Holmberg

acknowledges a similar shift away from lineage or clan towards an ethnically defined entity and its relations in his discussion of the revival of the Tamang New Year (Holmberg 2016). This trend aligns with a trend to formulate Róng religious tradition around the worship of the creator deity, Ítbú Rum, more often than not defined as Mother Nature herself. These transformations adapt the colonial imagery of the ecologically noble savage (Retford 1991; Nadasday 2003) to an international discourse on Indigeneity. However, as I put the argument here, they are primarily very localised strategies in order to incorporate a state-driven agenda of inter-ethnic harmony in Sikkim and to engage a multi-religious community in cultural revival and ethno-political action in Kalimpong.

In the next section, I take up the activation of sacred space in the anti-dam movement. When in 2006 Dzongu became a metaphorical battlefield over the implementation of large-scale development projects, its legal protection as an Indigenous reserve and the sanctity of the region and its rivers turned into a key argument against the implementation of the dams. Importantly, as a political resource, activists framed Dzongu as a ‘holy land’ for all Mútunci Róng by connecting more-than-human beings that are common to the Róng community as a whole, but usually only vaguely embedded in the visual landscape, to specific topographic markers located in Dzongu. Thereby, they formulated the emotional attachments of Róng activists from beyond Dzongu’s borders to the territory of the reserve, a “kind of rooted translocalism” (Katz 2001, 724).

The final section of this chapter comes back directly to the revival of Tendong Hlo Rumfát. Here, I focus on the activities undertaken in order to regain ownership over a piece of land on Tendong hill, and the creation of a visible ritual site. In the process, I unravel questions of dispossession and legibility.

Lastly, I argue that in ritual programmes, not only are the ritual, the heritage, and its aims reframed, but the relations to the more-than-humans and to territory are also renegotiated. Ritual programmes draw on the embodied relations in ritual practice and activate them within a new framework of Indigeneity. In order for them to be productive, they or their relations to territory are transformed. When I say ‘be productive’, I mean this in the same sense in which the deities are productive within ritual practice, protecting from harm and enabling a good and prosperous life, but in this case according to the parameters of the state-sponsored compensatory discrimination.

Crafting Indigeneity: National Narratives, Classifications, and Regionalism

So, Tungróng Hlo Rumfát is not brought from Bhutan or Nepal. It is not brought from Israel or Benares; rather, Tungróng Hlo Rumfát

is from Máyel Lyáng. It is only our festival. It is our history that we are celebrating today. Through Tungróng Hlo Rumfát, we are recognised as Lepcha, as original inhabitants of Máyel Lyáng. (ILTA president, August 2009)

When the ILTA president says “original inhabitants of Máyel Lyáng” he is referring to an ancestral land. According to Róng oral tradition, that ancestral land covered territories which currently are part of three nation-states: India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Some activists even frame it as stretching as far as Titaliya in current Bangladesh or Chumbi Valley in the Autonomous Region of Tibet, China (Tamsang [1983] 1998, 1; Thakur 1988, 37; Foning [1987] 2003). These boundaries are practically equivalent to the frontiers claimed by the Sikkimese kingdom in the past (see Mullard 2011, 37; Ardussi et al. 2021, 104; Buchanan Hamilton 1814, 268; [1819] 1971, 119). A possible spatial convergence of ‘Greater Sikkim’ with Máyel Lyáng may have occurred in Róng oral tradition.¹²⁴ This eastern Himalayan region and beyond has been conceptualised as a topographic space of historical spatial lineage networks and movements (Huber and Blackburn 2012; Moran and Warner 2016). Scholars such as Chettri (2017a), Harris (2013), and Shneiderman (2013b) have unravelled both the present-day and the historical trade network, familial ties, and other exchanges that bind the people in this region together – across and within the borders.

At the same time, the present-day states set parameters, such as citizenship laws and border controls, that regulate formulations of territory, belonging to territory, and the legal parameters for claiming Indigeneity. Furthermore, the states instrumentalise the latter as a mode of bio-political control (Elden 2013; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2016, 2018; Moore 2005; Scott 1998). The national narratives and laws, as well as India’s concept of tribe and Nepal’s *adivāsi janajāti*,¹²⁵ influence the local definitions of who belongs to territory. The history of state formation has also, as I argue here, initiated processes of regionalisation that have strong emotional importance regarding belonging in Róng community.

Additionally, in all local contexts, the vernacularisation of an international definition of the Indigenous – in short, the negotiated Indigenisation in eth-

124 See Mullard and Wongchuk (2010, xii) for a very insightful and illustrative mapping of the shifting borders which has been drawn up based on tax documents and other sources from Sikkimese Palace Archives, now under custodianship of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok.

125 On the history of the terms *jāt* and *jāti* and the classification, see Lecomte-Tilouine 2009. For more details on the democratisation process, the increasing importance of ethnicity and exclusion from 1990 onwards, and the demands for representation and promotion of minority culture and languages, see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Whelpton et al. 2008.

nic politics (Karlsson 2001, 2011; Karlsson and Subba 2006; Subba 2006; Xaxa 1999) – influences the Róng activists’ definitions and strategies. As Karlsson points out with reference to the northeastern Indian state Meghalaya, this paradoxical simultaneity of state-driven projects of affirmative action and Indigenous rights movements based on self-identification is heightened in the Indian context and becomes encapsulated in the hybrid term “indigenous tribe” (Karlsson 2013, 37).

Thus, in their articulations and interpretations of territory and belonging to territory, activists negotiate between local, state, and international parameters and narratives of Indigeneity and citizenship¹²⁶ as well as an emotionally charged and affective attachment to a trans-border ancestral territory that does not exist as a political entity. To understand these complex negotiations, I give a brief overview of historical state formation, protective laws, and the current ethno-political scenario in the eastern Himalayan region where Róng ancestral lands are located.

Since the mid seventeenth century, several dynasties, namely the Namgyal, the Sen, the Shah, and the Zhabdrung, have struggled to establish sovereignty over the people in the eastern Himalaya and established a complex network of patron–client relations with Róng chieftains, amongst others. Within these networks, landlords – or patrons of labour (Warner 2014a, 2014b) – recurrently shifted their allegiance to competing kings. The subjects stood in relation to their patrons through bonded or free forms of labour and tax, or negotiated these relations by purposefully staying aloof, a political positioning associated with shifting cultivation (Mullard 2011, 2013; Scott 2009; Warner 2014a). The establishment of the East India Company in the Darjeeling region and the colonial brokerage of treaties and labour markets changed the relation between political power, people, and territory, and enforced a gradual shift from the governance of people to the governance of territory (and the people who resided within it) (Warner 2014a; Jalal 1995).

Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, the Sikkimese kingdom officially recognised the Róng and the Bhutia community, the BL, as “hereditary Sikkimese” (Government of India 1933) in distinction to other ethnic groups classified as Nepalese. Subsequently, the royal and colonial administration extended protective measures for the BL, such as the Land Revenue Order No 1, 1917, that protects BL lands from sale to non-BL, or the reserved seats in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. Oral tradition has it that in the early twentieth century the Gyalmo Yeshey Dolma, queen from 1882 to 1910, decided to reserve her estates in North Sikkim for the Róng people. The Dzongu region was then legally protected as a Róng Indigenous reserve under a royal proclamation in 1956 (Government of Sikkim n. d. II, 91, dated 30 August 1956).

126 See Mulmi and Shneiderman 2017 for Nepal.

In the Sikkimese kingdom, citizenship was tied primarily to land ownership, and secondly to ethnicity, if one takes the above-mentioned laws into consideration. Acknowledged Sikkim subject status then gained importance as the precondition for Indian citizenship in 1975, when Sikkim was made an Indian state. Up to the present it continues to regulate privileged access to resources and political positions under the guise of the Certificate of Identification (Bentley 2021; Pradhan 2021; Vandenhelsken 2021). In other words, belonging to Sikkim defined – and continues to define – Indigeneity, just as much as belonging to the Róng community. Both sub-national and ethnic features are prerequisite for claiming Indigeneity in the Indian state of Sikkim.

The nationalist discourse of Sikkim – formulated and reformulated since the end of the nineteenth century – builds on the Buddhist conceptualisation of Sikkim as a *beyul* and the performance of the *nesol* ritual, the worship of the sacred Buddhist sites of Sikkim (Tib. *gnas gsol*) and most importantly of Mount Kangchendzonga and its embedded divine entity, called Dzönga (Balicki 2002, 2008; Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993).¹²⁷ Another pillar of the nationalist discourse is the blood brotherhood between the Tibetan nobleman Gye Bumsa who settled in Chumbi, the ancestor of the Sikkimese Namgyal rulers (1642–1975), and the Róng religious specialist and chief Thikúng Tek, a brotherhood that – according to the myth – was consecrated at Kabi Longchok¹²⁸ in the late thirteenth century (Arora 2007a; R. P. Lepcha 2022, 154–156; Siiger 1967, 28). The name Kabi Longchok is derived from the Róngring term *kávi langtsók*. The first word is a composite of *káyúsá* ‘our’ and *vi* ‘blood’, *langtsók* is an erected stone; it translates as ‘the erected stone of our blood’.

127 The *History of Sikkim* (Tib. *Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*) (Ardussi et al. 2021) and *Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Risley [1894] 1973) were influential in framing the nationalist discourse on Sikkim. The ninth Chogyal Thutop Namgyal and the Gyalmo Yeshey Dolma compiled the *History of Sikkim* in the beginning of the twentieth century (Namgyal and Dolma 1908). I use the thoroughly revised annotated translation (Ardussi et al. 2021), unless I refer to the appendix “Predigree of the Kazis of Sikkim and the history of their ancestors”, see Ardussi et al. 2021, 30–31 on why the authors did not include the appendix. The appendix is quoted as “Namgyal and Dolma 1908, Annex”. The *Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Risley [1894] 1973) was published by the Bengal secretariat, a few years before the *History of Sikkim*. There is an earlier Tibetan source, *Bla ma che mtshan gsum ’bras ljong sbas gnas phebs tshul*, dated around 1860, that Saul Mullard includes in his publication. For a historical critical perspective on Sikkimese state formation and its narratives, see Mullard 2011. For modifications of the nationalist discourse during the Sikkimese kingdom, see Hiltz 2003, 2011. For the debates in the quest of the Sikkimese government for a ‘tribal state’, see Vandenhelsken 2009/10; Sinha 2006; SE Report 2003, July 24, 1.

128 The blood brotherhood narrative was especially promoted in the 1970s, when the seat reservation of the Bhutia was being questioned on the basis of their “foreign origin” from Tibet. At this time, conscious efforts were made to promote a culture of distinct Sikkimese characteristics (Balicki 2006, 132–33).

Both mythologies come together in the ritual of Pang Lhabsol, performed to worship the Buddhist mountain deity Dzönga (Balikci 2002; 2008, 69, 70 Footnote 44; Ardussi et al. 2021; Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993, 217; Rock 1953; Steinmann 1998; Vandenhelsken 2011).¹²⁹ The importance of including Sikkimese nationalist features in strategies of asserting Indigeneity becomes visible in the public framing of Tendong Hlo Rumfát as a ritual “to pay obeisance to the Guardian Deity of Sikkim, Kangchendzonga and all the spirits and manifestations of Mother Nature” (Now! Report 2007, August 2, 4). As at the time of research most Mútunci Róng in Sikkim – and most activists – consider themselves Buddhist while simultaneously practicing Róng religious tradition,¹³⁰ the mountain worship and its syncretic characteristics and integrative powers resonate with them (see also Tautscher 1998; Toffin 1988). Being part of the Sikkimese narrative enables self-identification and a sense of home. Thus, belonging according to the parameters set by the narrative provides a safe space to claim economic resources and political access.

At the same time, the nationalist discourse captures historical processes of political and religious subjugation of the autochthon by the spread of Buddhism and the Tibetan lineage rulers in the Himalaya, as has been extensively discussed in scholarship on mountain cults and the ‘taming’ of deities, landscapes, and people (Ortner 1978, 99; Samuel 1993, 220; Karmay 1996, 70). The blood brotherhood can be and is read as a story of subjugation, as I have argued elsewhere (Bentley 2009/10, 2021). The prophecies, according to which Kóngchen’s wrath will destroy the Namgyal lineage if the rulers ever suppress the Mútunci Róng, especially highlight the precarious relationship between the Róng subjects and the Sikkimese royalty.

In Sikkimese politics, the blood brotherhood is enrolled in power struggles between different ethnic fractions (Arora 2007a; Balikci 2006, 132–33). The Mútunci Róng associations demanded PTG status – derived from their earlier

129 Pang Lhabsol was performed in the royal palace until it was banned after the merger by the Indian government, which “saw them as a nationalist and royalist manifestation” (Pommaret 1996, 54). The ritual was resumed in the late 1970s, but then discontinued for religious reasons in the 1980s by the crown prince (Balikci 2008, 336). Since 1984 it has been celebrated in Ravangla and in 1993 it was revived again in Pemayangtse monastery, which had been in charge of the celebration at the royal palace during the monarchy. During Pang Lhabsol, a popular celebration takes place on MG Marg, the main street of Gangtok.

130 The majority of Mútunci Róng in Sikkim consider themselves Buddhist. The *State Socio Economic Census* 2006 classifies 85.14 per cent of the Mútunci Róng in Sikkim as Buddhist. Followers of Róng traditional religion are not mentioned in the census. The rest of the Róng population is classified as Christian (12.76 per cent) and Hindu (2.10 per cent) (Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006, 363). There is no more recent information on the religious composition by ethnic group.

demand for 50 per cent of the BL reservations – and in 2005 the Sikkimese government’s subsequent granting of the status as “Indigenous Primitive Tribe Group of Sikkim” on state level (Sikkim Government Gazette Notification No. 73/Home/2005) was interpreted as a move to split the historical bond between the Bhutia and ‘Lepcha’ (BL). In particular, the political opposition and many anti-dam activists interpreted it as a divide-and-rule strategy by the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) government (Now! Report 2005, February 22, 3; Now! Report 2005, February 24, 4). The chief minister Pawan Chamling clarified that ‘the Lepcha’ are the only tribe in Sikkim fulfilling the criteria for this status (Now! Report 2005, February 23, 1). With the demand for PTG status still pending at the Union Government, RMRT’s framing of Indigeneity has been shaped by the image of the primitive tribe, defined by a decreasing population, economic and educational backwardness, and primitive traits (RMROS 2004; RMRT 2005, 5; Now! Report 2005, February 2, 1, 8), as I mentioned earlier with regard to the speeches during Tendong Hlo Rumfát.

In contrast to this official interpretation, many leading activists of the anti-dam movement and later members of the political opposition rejected the use of the term ‘primitive’ to categorise their ethnic group and questioned the benefits of this status (Dawa Lepcha, September 2008). The activists criticised the duplicity of the state government’s strategy: on the one hand they implemented a special status to protect the ‘indigenous people and culture’, while at the same time they were pressing forward with massive hydro projects which would specifically disarray the very same people and sever their lands and culture. The new status was declared as eyewash and the government denounced as hypocritical (Interlocutors, July 2009). Despite the disagreements over the PTG status, however, all Róng activists in Sikkim refer to the Indian Supreme Court ruling that classifies the Mútunci Róng as “original indigenous inhabitants” (Supp (1) SCC 1994, 367) of Sikkim.

Within these multiple possible subjectivities, the Róng activists in Sikkim navigated between a subaltern narrative of the Indigenous Mútunci Róng, in which the Sikkimese kingdom materialises as the repressive, colonial agent, and a sub-nationalist discourse of Sikkimese Indigeneity, in which the British and later Indian governments figure as the colonialising force.

Aligned with Tunyi and Wouters’s conceptualisation of India’s Northeast as an internal borderland (Tunyi and Wouters 2016), I argue that the Sikkim and West Bengal border remains significant, even after the annexation of Sikkim. The Róng activists based in Kalimpong do not carry a history of emotional, political, or legal integration in the Sikkimese kingdom. Present-day Darjeeling came under British colonial rule after 1835. Modern Kalimpong seems to have been disputed between local Róng chieftains, Tibet, Bhutan, and later Sikkim, until

it became affiliated to Bhutan after the Sikkimese War of Succession (1699–1708).¹³¹ The British seized the region in 1865 (Moktan 2004, 21). Consequently, the ILTA activists’ conceptualisation of Indigeneity is more straightforward and does not need to negotiate multiple levels of historically formulated emotional attachments to and multiple definitions of territory.

ILTA activists – strongly influenced by K. P. Tamsang and his son – curate a history of their last Róng king, Gyebú Áchok, and claim belonging to a historical sovereign Indigenous nation that was usurped by Bhutan, then by the British, and lastly by India. It is important to note here that any claims to a past Indigenous nation are void of claims to secession or complete national self-determination. There is an opposing narrative that negates the existence of the Róng kings and conceptualises historic Róng society as void of hierarchies and the Mútunci Róng as egalitarian forest dwellers practising shifting cultivation, prominently promoted by A. Foning ([1987] 2003, 8–9). According to Tibetan language sources closer to the historical time, Gyebú Áchok was most likely a chieftain over three Róng communities between Rangit and Tagong La, but the exact localities and the extent of his power remain unclear (Ardussi 2011, 39n27, based on *Bod kyi srid don rgyal rabs*, vol. 1, 448; Roy et al. 1998, 27; Tamlong 2008, 57–58; K. P. Tamsang 2000, 2–3). Sources seem to agree that Bhutanese forces killed him at Dalim Fort in present-day Bhutan in 1676 (Ardussi 2011, 36–37).¹³² Thereafter, Bhutanese sources give evidence of another local Róng chief, called Monpa Adzin (Mon pa A’dzin), in the region.¹³³ Hence, the Róng activists from Kalimpong refer to a history of tribal self-determination beyond any nation state until the end of the seventeenth century.

ILTA has internalised the pairing of ‘tribal’ and ‘indigenous’, mentioned by Karlsson, in its self-identification as an organisation. In 2004, while retaining the name Mutanchi Rong Shezum in Rónggring, the English name was changed to Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. By including both significant terms in their designation, the president hoped to combat the “experienced immense difficulties in satisfying and convincing them of our status as indigenous tribes of the Darjeeling district, West Bengal” (L. Tamsang 2004, 27). ‘Them’ refers to the local, the state, and the Union governments, as well as other non-governmental institutions. In their usage of the word ‘Indigenous’, ILTA executive members rely on the international UN framework (Tamsang 2007, 20).

131 For details on the first War of Succession, see Mullard 2011, 162–65. For prior disputes in the Kalimpong region, see Ardussi 2014.

132 According to Ardussi (2011, 40n35) the biography of the fourth Druk Desi Tenzing Rabye (1639–1696), *Sde srid* 4, 93.b–94.b, is the most reliable source on Gyebú Áchok’s death. This version is noted similarly in Aris and Suu Kyi (1979, 248). See R. Lepcha 2017 for insight on the role of Gyebú Áchok in Lepcha identity formation.

133 According to Ardussi, the main source on his life is *Sde srid* 4, 187.b–188.b.

Beyond having Scheduled Tribe status, the Róng community in West Bengal had significantly less access to protective laws or measures than in Sikkim. Ultimately, in 2010, leading Róng activists in Kalimpong came together under the banner of the Lepcha Rights Movement (LRM) and demanded a Lepcha Development Council, their own autonomous homeland in the West Bengal. This demand was difficult to navigate in the multi-ethnic context of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills. Politics is fuelled by the anxiety of belonging of ethnic groups classified as Nepali of Indian origin, clubbed together under the designation Gorkha, to the nation-state of India. They experience regular othering and uncertainty of national inclusion (Middleton 2016). The demand for a separate state, Gorkhaland, as a home for the Nepalese of Indian origin, has shaped politics, administration, inter-ethnic interactions, and territorial imagination in the past century, but especially since the 1980s. In 2007, the Gorkhaland movement flared up again with the formation of a new party, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), and resulted in the signing of a tripartite agreement for an autonomous council, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), in 2011 (Golay 2006; Shneiderman and Middleton 2018; Subba 2002; Wenner 2013). In this tense environment, claiming outspoken Indigeneity for one ethnic group was contentious. In 2013, the West Bengal government granted a development board specifically for the Mútunci community, as I discuss later in Chapter 7.

In Nepal, RST executive association members formulate similar anxieties over being othered as Indians. The Indigeneity of the Ilam Mútunci Róng to the territory was disputed; they were classified as ‘from Sikkim’. One specific historical incident buttressed the notion: After the assassination of the Sikkimese Chancellor Bolhö in 1826, his nephews fled to a part of their patrimonial estate in Kota (present-day Ilam) along with 800 Róng subjects (Campbell 1869, 153; Mullard 2011; Ardussi et al. 2021, 243; Risley [1894] 1973, 19; Schwerzel et al. 2000; Warner 2014a, 27). This narrative of seeking refuge sufficed to turn ‘the’ Mútunci Róng as an ethnic group into immigrants to present-day Nepal in colloquial understanding. RST engaged in a long struggle of counter-history-writing, networking, and lobbying in Ilam as well as in Kathmandu and ultimately succeeded in getting the Róng community recognised officially as *adivāsi jana-jāti* under the NFDIN Act, 2002. The RST became a member of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nations (NEFIN), the umbrella organisation for the 59 scheduled Indigenous nationalities.¹³⁴ This organisation can operate in international

134 The Nepali name is Adivasi Janajati Mahasang. For the use of nationalities instead of people in Nepal, see Shneiderman 2020. Initially NEFIN was called Nepal Federation of Nations (NEFEN). In 2003, ‘indigenous’ or *ādivāsi* was inserted to connect to the international discourse and donor agencies. For the historical development of NEFIN, see Hangen 2010, 39–41; Fischer 1993, 2001; Shneiderman and Middleton 2008; Gellner 2007; and Whelpton et al. 2008.

forums. Unlike India, Nepal has ratified ILO 169 and acknowledged the international legal framework of the UN with regard to Indigenous rights.

We feel our Lepcha recognise themselves today and they are very proud to say, 'I am Lepcha'. We got our own identity in our own land.
(Former RST president, April 2011)

For the RST president, the official listing in itself was a huge achievement. It acknowledged the Mútunci Róng's intimate relations to the territory and counteracted their othering as immigrants. The NEFIN classified the 'Lepcha' as 'endangered'. Arguing within a damage narrative, the RST president considered this categorisation beneficial, because it gave more leverage for access to provision, resources, or political rights. As a representative of a significantly small minority, he had proposed to NEFIN that marginalised ethnic groups should receive autonomous areas within larger districts and therefore had submitted the draft for *Federal Rong Autonomous State* (Nep. Sanghia Rong Swayatta Rajya ko Bidhan) in 2011 (RST president, April 2011).

Its borderland existence places the Róng community as a whole in a marginal position, on the fringes of the respective nations (Gergan 2020). Consequently, Róng activists cite the fragmentation of the Róng community into four (or with the integration of Sikkim into India, three) nation-states as alienating the regional Mútunci Róng from each other, thereby "destroying their united force" and "weakening their cause" (Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, 26 November 2012). Based on what I have outlined in this section, I argue that the activists' heightened experience of fragmentation derives from factors external as well as internal to the Róng community. On the one hand, Róng activists direct their ethno-political action towards the state as recognising agent. As I have elaborated here, each state and local government has different legal requirements, political environments, and nationalist narratives that challenge mutual cross-border Indigenous activism and buttress a sense of fragmentation. I argue that the 'external' recognitions of territorial relations through citizenship, protective regulations – with all their anxieties and inequalities –, and the dominantly promoted sub-national dialogue on how these attachments should look, strongly interact with modes of relationship that a community builds to territory and influence the activists' respective understanding of Indigeneity.

On the other hand, historical state-formation initiated processes of regionalism within the Róng community, defined as the formation of regional entities – larger than a village area – with specific histories, cultural narratives, and practices, as well as distinct economic networks, politics, governance, and power structures (Paasi 2011, 15; Jones and MacLeod 2004). The Mútunci Róng

describe themselves as Renjóngmú (Sikkim), Jongumú (Dzongu), Dámsángmú (Kalimpong), Dáryulyángmú (Darjeeling), Ilámmú (Ilam), and Prómú (Bhutan). The suffix *-mú* ('mother' in Róngring) refers to birth, parentage, or origin; it generally indicates belonging (Bentley 2021). As pointed out by A. Foning and K. P. Tamsang, both of whom were influential Róng activists, regions of residence have become reference points for belonging (Foning [1987] 2003, 126, 288–92; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 41–42). Intra-ethnic regionalisms lead to the formulation of distinct subjectivities and attachments to territory within and beyond the state parameters and (sub)-nationalist narratives.

Recitations at Tendong Hlo Rumfát: From Enumerating Deities to the Use of Hypernyms

How are relations to territory and, in the end, formulations of Indigeneity assembled in ritual programmes in the different regional contexts? In the past chapters I have asserted that in community ritual practice in Dzongu, the religious specialists' relations to the place, environment, and to the local human and more-than-human residents were crucial for the ritual performance and its success. In contrast, in ritual programmes, aside from their initial recognition as a professional, it was their relations to the ritual organisers and to the various Mútunci Róng associations that gave the religious specialists the authority to conduct the ritual; local rootedness and intimate knowledge was not a selection criterion.

For the first performance of Tendong Hlo Rumfát in Mangan, close to Dzongu, the organisers invited four or five religious specialists from North Sikkim to conduct the ritual. According to one of the organisers, the *búngthing* did not, however, perform a ritual specific to Tendong hill or based on the mythology of the rivers Rangit and Tista, simply because they did not know any such ritual. Similarly to what was described for the transferred rituals in Dzongu, they performed a Lungjí Fát, the ritual seeking protection from the local embodied deities and mountain deities (Loden Lepcha, August 2009). Coming from the surrounding villages, the religious specialists who conducted the rituals in Mangan were not far from their places of residence, so many of the local deities they called upon would still have been in sight. But in the ritual programmes we documented, the organisers called religious specialists from different parts of Sikkim to Tendong hill, to Gangtok, or to another district capital. Consequently, I was curious to find out if they would still perform a Lungjí Fát and, if they did, upon which more-than-human beings they would call: the ones embedded in the *búngthing's* places of residence, or those surrounding the ritual space? Did they guard a demarcated territory, and if so, which?



FIGURE 27: Lavi Sangay performing on Tendong hill, August 2009.

For this investigation I draw mainly on Lavi Sangay's ritual recitations on Tendong hill in 2009. It was the only recitation we could record in its entirety, because in that year Lavi Sangay was the only religious specialist present; on the other occasions, there were always several *búngthing* and *mun* performing at the same time, making it impossible to understand the individual wordings. In Róng practice, as I mentioned, the religious specialist does not travel physically or verbally to the abodes of the more-than-human beings. On the contrary, the deities are called upon to take their seats on the altar at the place where the religious specialist resides. Here, a first significant difference between the ritual programme and the practice I documented in the villages manifests itself, at least for the ritual on Tendong hill. Here, the religious specialist scaled the abode of the more-than-human being itself and held the prayers on its peak.

For Lavi Sangay, the ritual preparations started in his house. Before he set out on the journey to Tendong hill, he performed a ceremony for his own protective deities. After the main ritual, he would again do the same, this time giving them a part of the offering. The religious specialist arrived on Tendong hill dressed in Róng dress. The dress had no religious properties, but was the ethnic dress that – as already noted – has become the common attire for a ritual programme. This dress style created a visually distinct event, distinct especially from ritual practice in Dzongu, during which Róng dress was not commonly worn. I should add that on two occasions, once in Lingthem and once in Tingvong, the

búngthíng changed into Róng dress before the event; this act was, however, caused by my presence, and showed an acknowledgement of the heritage function of ritual. When I asked Payel Búngthíng why this time he was wearing Róng dress, since during the last ritual I had recorded he had not, he laughed and said this time he was prepared: he wanted to look good for the photographs and the films (Payel Búngthíng, April 2010). Similarly, Lingthem Búngthíng knew we were recording the ritual for the archives of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. It was the only time I saw him perform a community ritual wearing Róng dress.

Subsequently, on Tendong hill, after preparing the altar, incense was burned just outside the demarcated ceremonial area and the religious specialist began the ritual by offering a ceremonial scarf to the *langtsók*, the erected stone at the altar place (Figure 27).

Today we are offering to Tungrong (Tendong), Mánóm, Kóngchen, and all the gods and goddesses residing in this area and Máyel Lyáng. It is the tradition [lúngten sung] of the Róngkup. (Lavi Sangay, August 2009)

Lavi Sangay offered the deities butter lamps, rice, and grains. He mentioned the more-than-humans residing on Tendong hill, Mánóm hill, and Mount Kangchen-dzonga specifically by name. Like in village practice, the offerings were beautified with the words 'golden' and 'silver'. The ritual speech was indirect and structured with parallelisms. Then the *búngthíng* offered the same deities fermented millet (*ci phut*). He flattered the gods, compared them with orchids, and summoned them to take their seats. Then, he summarised the myth, mentioning that Tendong Mánóm Cú had saved Mútunci Róng during the flood and that the ritual was a thanksgiving and an offering in search of reconfirmation of the protection. Afterwards, he offered rice and beaten rice to Kóngchen and the deities of Róngnyú and Róngít (Tista and Rangit). Again, Tendong and Mánóm were called upon. This time, he described them as the guardians of pilgrims and ancestors of the Mútunci Róng. Further, he gave offerings to Kábi Thák Kánu, Thikúng Tek, and his wife Nyikúng Ngál. He mentioned that in the following days a grand offering would be given to them in Gangtok. Then, the deities of Dzongu were given their share and asked to send no harm, nor to destroy cultivation or food.

Following this, the recitation turned more general. Lavi Sangay requested of the deities that they bestow long life on the people, and fertility to those without children. Next, the *búngthíng* called upon the pilgrims of India, Thikúng Munsalóng, whom he described as the guardian of pilgrims and fortune, and Lhatsun Chenpo, the Buddhist patron saint of the kingdom of Sikkim. Fermented

millet beer and butter lamp offerings were given to the deities residing in the sources of Róngnyú and Róngít. Then, Lavi Sangay addressed Tendong personally and mentioned different days and months. The recitations gave the mountain deity credit for protecting the Róng scriptures and mentioned the mythological building of the earthen pot tower in Daramdin.

Afterwards, the many deities embodied in mountains and hillocks, the protectors of pilgrims and sacred places, received offerings of beaten rice, fermented millet, butter lamps, and a ceremonial scarf. The names of deities were not specifically listed, merely their functions. Lavi Sangay continued by giving offerings to the deities of Dzongu, Tholung Gompa, and Lhatsun Chenpo, as the “blasting” may have been disturbing them (Lavi Sangay, August 2009). The “blasting” referred to the destruction caused by the construction of dams and roads in the region. Thereafter, offerings of butter lamps and a ceremonial scarf were again given to Tendong, Kóngchen, Róngnyú and Róngít, the snake (*paríbu*), and the partridge (*tútfo*), respectively. The *búngthíng* requested a long and blessed life from them, as long as the rivers Tista and Rangit.

He interrupted his recitation while the organisers distributed rice to all the people attending. Subsequently, the last sequence of the ritual began:

Today I am offering to all the deities. I offered to Tungrong (Tendong), Kóngchen, Thikúng Tek, Nyikúng Ngál: you all are walking through the sunray, you all are the gods and guardians of Máyel Lyáng. I am offering golden and silver butter lamps, golden and silver ceremonial scarves to you. You all receive it. During the flood the quail prayed to the deities, so we are blessed by the creator deity, Ítbú Rum, we all survived. Tungrong (Tendong), you are the guardian of the Róngkup, so bless us with a long life. God of Máyel Málúk Tám¹³⁵ and Creator deity, you all are gods, bless us with long life. (Lavi Sangay, August 2009)

During the performances we observed in Gangtok, Lavi Sangay and Saffo Búngthíng both had dominant positions. Their recitations were transmitted more loudly than the other ones over microphones. They clearly took the lead. As such, their performances became a standard, especially for religious specialists who – as stated above – didn’t know what to perform, because Tendong Hlo Rumfát had not been a part of their initiation and the narrative was not even included in the *lúngten sung* as they had learnt it. Keeping in mind that Lavi San-

135 Málúk is the rhyme to Máyel; see discussion in Chapter Four on the rhyming style *ákep* in recitations. The word *tám* means ‘flat land’.

gay had been performing this ritual since the early nineties, he had clearly influenced the way the ritual was practised. Consequently, the more-than-human beings called upon have become more or less standardised, as the following two examples highlight.

During Tendong Hlo Rumfát, I start from Kábi Kánu Lyáng, Thikúng Tek, Nyikúng Ngál, and then offer towards Tungrong (Tendong) Cú, Mánóm Cú. They are all gods, like the kings of history. (Tariang Mun, January 2010)

*To the deities who created land and water
Prayers to Tungrong (Tendong) and Mánóm today
We offer fermented liquor, rice, and receive it all
I am offering to the deity of the búngthíng (Padim Paná Rum)
I am offering to Fadróngthíng, Thikúng Tek, Nyikúng Ngál, Kíngtsúm
The offering of fermented liquor, the offering of rice, receive it all.
(Lingsay Búngthíng, August 2009)*

Lavi Sangay's recitations did not circumscribe a clearly demarcated area. Consequently, the 'us' that required protection in the ritual recitations introduced in the beginning was not spatially defined, as it was in the Dzongu community ritual practice. It could potentially include all the Mútunci Róng, intended vaguely as everyone belonging to the ethnic group. Lavi Sangay began the ritual by calling upon more-than-human beings embedded in the immediate landscape. Besides the main mountain deity Kóngchen, who is appeased in every ritual recitation we recorded, the other embodied more-than-human beings were those who were related to the most commonly narrated flood mythology: Tendong and Mánóm Hlo, Róngít and Róngnyú.

These four more-than-human beings could be interpreted as the outer guards of the place. As such, this interpretation would resemble the first circle of the spiral circumscription along pairs, as described for the Lingthem ritual practice. However, in Lavi Sangay's recitations there was no spatial directionality in the sequencing. He called Tendong Hlo first and then Kóngchen, while in the village rituals the deity of the northern extremity would be called upon first, before ritually closing the space. Any other guardians were subsumed under the hypernym "all gods and goddesses residing in this area" (Lavi Sangay, August 2009). This hypernym was repeated regularly.

In rituals documented in Dzongu, after calling the guards of the outer ring, the religious specialists named locally embedded more-than-human beings in

an inward-spiralling sequence of pairs. The guardians were more clearly specified towards the centre of the locality, the further ‘inside’ the *búngthíng* reached. In the recitations recorded on Tendong hill, there was no further circumscription after the offering to the outer guardians, and Lavi Sangay then named ancestors. Meanwhile, in the Lingthem Búngthíng’s recitations, the ancestors were at the inner core of the sacred space. Consequently, they received their offerings there towards the end of the ritual, and not directly after the outer guardians.

In contrast with the village practice of calling upon very specific local ancestors, Lavi Sangay called upon Thikúng Tek and Nyikúng Ngál, the Róng leaders who took an oath of blood brotherhood with Gye Bumsa at Kabi Longchok. These ancestral figures were not associated with the immediate locality or residing clan, unlike what was the case in all the recitations we recorded in Dzongu. They were, on the contrary, widely known and celebrated in Sikkim, and as such were ancestral figures to whom all Mútunci Róng and Sikkimese could relate. Additionally, these ancestral figures were prominently connected with the Pang Lhabsol ritual and the narrative of Sikkimese state formation.

Next, Lavi Sangay called on the deities of Dzongu, another very vague hypernym, and summoned the deities of long life and fortune. These deities are not embedded in the physical landscape and are commonly evoked in blessing rituals. They embody the immanent reasoning behind ritual practice – ensuring prosperity. In the further recitations, he switched back and forth between embedded guardian deities (Róngnyú and Róngít and their sources, Tendong and Kóngchen) and ancestral figures (Thikúng Munsalóng, Lhatsun Chenpo, Thikúng Tek, Nyikúng Ngál). Additionally, he mentioned the Tholung monastery in Upper Dzongu, which was founded by Lhatsun Chenpo and holds the relics of his sixth reincarnation (Arora 2006, 66). These ancestral elements are significant indications of the syncretism between Róng religious tradition and Buddhism as practiced in Sikkim. Again, they link the ritual meaning to the mountain worship revolving around Mount Kangchendzonga and the state ritual of Pang Lhabsol.

Certain religious specialists raised concerns about the lack of propitiation of the local guardians of the place in the performance of Tendong Hlo Rumfát. Lingzya Búngthíng from Dzongu, for example, told us about an exchange he had had with a *búngthíng* from West Sikkim during the Tendong Hlo Rumfát in 2010, in Mangan. They were discussing which deities they addressed during the ritual. Lingzya Búngthíng had explained that he offered to Kóngchen Pano, Tholung, and the local deities (Lungjí Lungnóng) of Dzongu such as Lingi Cú and Lunggám Cú, but the other *búngthíng* had not responded. He went on to confirm what I have outlined in the previous chapters. He told us that natural di-

sasters, such as floods or earthquakes, were caused by disturbing or neglecting local deities. These were guardians, but could be malevolent, and if they were not appeased properly in ritual, they would stop averting disasters. For that reason, he added, a ritual against floods must address the local deities, as they were the immediate protectors. Lingzya Búngthíng accused the *búngthíng* from West Sikkim of not knowing what he was doing, since he could not recount the precise local deities he offered to and had different ways of performing. Lingzya Búngthíng continued to caution that the rituals and the practitioners brought from 'outside' were problematic, because they did not offer to the local deities, yet these were the dangerous ones who needed to be appeased so that the people of Dzongu would not suffer (Lingzya Búngthíng, January 2012).

Similarly, Sonam Tshering Lepcha told us about an occasion when he had met Lavi Sangay on Tendong hill and they had performed the ritual after each other. He accused Lavi Sangay of not knowing what to offer to whom or even why the ritual was performed, and instead reciting completely different things. He mentioned, in particular, Lavi Sangay's calling upon the Dzongu and Tholung more-than-human beings, and remarked critically upon the elements of syncretism with Buddhism. In Sonam Tshering Lepcha's understanding, there was no benefit in performing the ritual in such a way. He recalled that Lavi Sangay had once gone mad during the recitations and said that this had occurred because – as Sonam Tshering Lepcha argued – Lavi Sangay had failed to do the proper offering. Thus, he cautioned: "This happened because it is not a joke, it is real. Some guardians are there to receive the offering" (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, September 2010).

Both Lingzya Búngthíng and Sonam Tshering Lepcha raised concerns about the neglect of the immediate locale – the manifold specific local protective deities in the landscape seen from the ritual site. The recitations of ritual programmes tended to propitiate deities residing in focal landscape markers of the Sikkimese landscape (Kangchendzonga, Rangit, Tista), ones directly linked to the Tendong mythology (Tendong, Mánóm, or the animals Kohomfo, Tútfo, Paríbu), and ancestral figures that all Mútunci Róng and Sikkimese could relate to, regardless of locality, region, or clan. The local more-than-human beings – each individually called upon and rendered taxes in ritual practice – were instead subsumed under a hypernym. One reason for this lack of detailed consideration was the transfer of the religious specialists away from the locality to which their Indigenous knowledge applied, the locality wherein they had been initiated and of whose human and more-than-human residents they had intimate knowledge.

The lack of local knowledge and non-propitiation of local deities were considered particularly problematic and dangerous as regards the definition

of the ritual at Tendong Hlo Rumfát as a community ritual to seek protection from floods. This latter interpretation of the ritual programme was most clearly expressed by Lingzya Búngthing, as well as by Lavi Sangay when he described the ritual as being about water management. Such a reading of the event required the propitiation of local deities, and thus the performance of Lungjí Fát. In this logic, the loss of detailed knowledge about the immediate landscape meant that the religious specialist could not precisely demarcate the territory that required protection, and therefore could not create a safe space and ensure divine protection.

This being said, not all the religious specialists considered the ritual performances at Tendong Hlo Rumfát problematic, because they had a different understanding of the ritual that was being conducted. Most of the religious specialists we interviewed at the Tendong Hlo Rumfát location in 2012 described the rituals they were conducting during the day as blessings intended to bestow long life and prosperity upon the participants. This interpretation commemorated the new life after the flood. It required ritual activities that are more individualised and reminiscent of the cleansing ceremonies on Róng New Year, during which the religious specialist used the *pashór*, the elephant grass bundle, to swipe away all evil and bad fortune of the old year, and prayed for prosperity in the new one. Such blessings and cleansings were detached from territory.

The relations to land, to the deities with local abodes, and to the ancestors of respective clans and village communities – crucial in countering vulnerability in ritual practice – were vague in the performances of the ritual programme for Tendong Hlo Rumfát. These severed connections were caused by a disruption of the bond between religious specialist and territory, as well as an uncertain interpretation of the ritual's purpose and meaning. As a counterpoint, I suggest, ritual programme organisers promoted a differently defined relation to territory – based on the trope 'nature and environment'. Such an alternative interpretation of relations to land indicates that the ritual programmes catered to different recognising agents and providers of security and prosperity than the embedded more-than-human beings that were the main addressees of village community ritual practice.

Worship of 'Mother Nature' as Cultural Practice

Already in the first few years of its performance, the public promotion of Tendong Hlo Rumfát focused on the close relation of the Mútunci Róng with nature. Nature worship became the focal key, to use Goffman's conceptual

terminology, according to which activists reframed ritual practice into a cultural ritual programme.

The occasion revives the love of nature, [...] the Lepchas are still very connected to the mountains, hills, villages, rivers and for this reason many of the rivers, mountains, hills, lakes and villages bear Lepcha names. (SE Report 1996, August 17–20, 4.)

In the discourse surrounding it, the festival was depicted as a flagship for the value that the Mútunci Róng gave to nature. Since colonial times, ‘the Lepcha’ have been ascribed a deep knowledge of the nature around them. They were denominated natural botanists and ‘nature worshippers’ with all the positive traits associated with the *noble savage*.¹³⁶ Building on a long history of nostalgic reimagining of Róng lifestyle and religion, the self-imaging of ‘close to nature’ is one pillar of the cultural revival; it is reinforced in the framing of ritual transformations as cultural acts of nature worship *per se*. While the display of an ecologically savvy Indigeneity clearly resonated with definitions of the Indigenous in the arena of international Indigenous politics, I argue that this doesn’t encompass the entire reasoning that is at work here. The drafting of Róng ritual programmes along the lines of nature worship made them more inclusive: however, who was to be included was different between Sikkim and Kalimpong where Tedong Hlo Rumfát is celebrated respectively.

The Sikkimese government supported the promotion of Tendong Hlo Rumfát as a celebration of nature as part of its politics of ‘tribalisation’, the term Vandenhelsken uses to refer to the policy of requesting Scheduled Tribe status for all ethnic groups in Sikkim (Vandenhelsken 2011, 107; Sinha 2006). This was a strategy to enable Sikkim to keep its regional distinctness within the Indian nation while at the same time to include the three ethnic categories ‘Bhutia’, ‘Lepcha’, and ‘Nepali’ on an equal footing, in order to create a multi-ethnic political environment. As Vandenhelsken describes for the revival of Pang Lhabsol, nature worship was defined as the common denominator of all Sikkimese people and an identifier of their tribalness (Vandenhelsken 2011). The report of the Burman Commission underscored closeness to nature as a tribal trait and, significantly, as a unifying feature in Sikkimese society that enabled harmony among the inhabitants. It stood at the core of the Commission’s recommendations:

136 See Campbell 1840, 386; Dalton [1872] 1987, 101; Das 1896; Dozey 1916; Goror [1938] 1996, 273–77; Herbert 2000, 7; Hooker [1854] 2004a, 128–29; Mainwaring [1876] 1971, ix; Morris 1938, 42; Dr. Graham in Morris 1938, 38–41; O’Malley [1917] 1989, 44; Pinn [1986] 1990, 170; Sannial [1880] 2009, 61; Schermann 1926, 9; Temple [1887] 1977, 12; Waddell [1899] 1978, 77–78, 91–92, 105; White 1909, 7.

Thus, while the society here is a constellation of multiple identities, culture of harmony with nature unites them and through unity with nature the humans enter into a compact of unity among themselves (Department of Information and Public Relations 2008, 1).

Simultaneously, nature worship blended well with the government's promotion of Sikkim as a green and 'organic' state (Government of Sikkim 2018). In the context of state-promoted inter-ethnic harmony and environmentalism, Tendong Hlo Rumfát turned into a universal prayer for everyone in the world, including all communities in Sikkim, as a specific feature of tribalness that all Sikkimese share. The public announcement by the Celebration committee in 2009, for example, described Tendong Hlo Rumfát as including "prayers for continued peace, prosperity and unity in Sikkim" that were to be offered jointly by "Bongthings and faith-healers of other communities" (Now! Report 2009, August 3, 1). The transformation of Róng religious tradition into a stereotypical form of nature worship underlined Indigenous claims to space, but expanded them in such a way that it placed not only the Mútunci Róng in the Indigenous fold, but all Sikkimese ethnic groups.

The Tendong Hlo Rumfát celebration offers to nature. It is specifically the Lepcha community that offers to all of nature's beings such as insects and worships them. But this Tendong Hlo Rumfát is more than a Lepcha festival or rumfát. It is for the entire world. During the time of the Róngnyú and Róngít flood, which is the reason why the Lepcha people worship Tendong Hlo, not only we survived, but so did all the human beings, insects, plants, animals, and trees. Everyone and everything survived in this world, because the Lepcha people worship nature. (N. Lepcha, former MLA, August 2009)

In this reciprocity, as the above quotation indicates, the 'Lepcha-ness' of the ritual programme becomes redefined. With regard to Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the Mútunci Róng were those who saved the world in mythological times due to their intimate connection with nature. Such a rendering buttressed the Mútunci Róng's ancient belonging to Sikkim and their importance as the designated performers of this ritual protecting all people in Sikkim and the world. In this context, the powers of the Róng ritual tradition are reformulated (see Chapter Seven).

In Kalimpong, the reorientation of the ritual around nature worship needs to be understood within the multi-religious context that the executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations in Kalimpong must navigate.

This rumfát is not a religious festival, it is our culture. Here, we are celebrating Tendong Hlo Rumfát; here nobody is Buddhist, nobody is Christian, but we are all Róngkup. (ROP president, August 2009)

The ritual organisers made attempts to reformulate the religious content of the ritual programmes, because they considered religion to be a divisive and weakening factor for the ‘Lepcha cause’ – i.e., political engagement for the welfare of the community and the protection of their language and culture. Most Mútunci Róng do not solely follow Róng religious tradition but are either members of a Tibetan Buddhist or a Christian denomination. The simultaneous practising of Tibetan Buddhism and Róng religious tradition might be contested with regard to specific acts, such as blood sacrifice, but syncretism and a long history of parallel and joint practice exist in Sikkim and West Bengal, as has equally been documented for other ethnic groups in the Himalaya (Balikci 2008; Bentley 2009/10; Lepcha 2013; Mumford 1989; Torri 2019).

In Kalimpong, around half the Róng population is Christian, and many of them have economically sound and influential positions due to a legacy of British colonial education (Foning [1987] 2003; Graham 1897, 125–27; Thakur 1988, 101ff.). The majority of the Christian Mútunci Róng do not attend or participate in any Róng rituals or religious practices (Lepcha 2013; Arora 2017, 85). Additionally, incidents had occurred in the past to alienate a section of the Christian community from ILTA, the ritual organiser. The ILTA executive body was required to give a non-objection certificate to the local Panchayat in order for a Róng individual to obtain the all-important Scheduled Tribe Certificate. In the past, ILTA executive members had refused to give such certificates to Christian Mútunci Róng – according to the logic that they were not ‘real’ Mútunci Róng. Such acts of exclusion reverberated as a social memory in the Christian community, as became very clear in a meeting between Christian clergy and executive ILTA members that I attended in 2012 (Public meeting, July 2012).

Subsequently, the mobilisation of a significant section of the community – the Christians – within the fold of Róng self-identification and activism became paramount for ILTA and influenced the framing of ritual programmes. There was a genuine concern that the religious divisions were weakening the community’s potential for collective action and preventing the transmission of Róng culture and practice.

Tendong Hlo Rumfát is not a religious festival; it is our cultural festival. We all are gathered here today; it means we have our unity. This assembly shows our identity and culture, unity makes our identity strong. (P. T. Simik, August 2009)

The unity that P. T. Simik, the ILTA literary secretary, spoke about in his speech here was not the same as the unity I discussed in the previous chapters concerning the revival activities of the Mútunci Róng associations. In that context, unity concerned the specific ‘cultural content’ of *lúngten sung*, the stories and memories that bear the potential for Mútunci Róng to form an emotional bond to their community. Rather, in this case the unity was a call for participation beyond religious boundaries, a call to put ethnicity – or, ancient culture, – before religious belief, by separating concepts that were inseparable in the Indigenous ontologies of the rituals performed in Dzongu. The strategy was to counter the ‘vanishing’ of the Mútunci Róng and their culture by not merely reviving the lost Róng heritage amongst the Christian Mútunci Róng, but more importantly by gaining their support for ethno-political action. Thereby, the activists would have a larger stronghold and thus a louder voice in ethnic politics in Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills.

Focusing the ritual on Mother Nature was a strategy to counter the alienation of certain Mútunci Róng on religious grounds and to unite them under the umbrella of ‘nature worship’. In an interview, Lyangsong Tamsang, the long-term ILTA president, formulated how the worship of nature bridged this religious gap and could – potentially – enable Christian Mútunci Róng to participate in community ritual programmes.

Traditional Lepcha nature worshipping is the true culture of the Lepchas. We are the Children of Mother Nature. It is important to know that Rum Faats are carried out, conducted in your own mother tongue, Lepcha. Prayers, ovations and thanks giving to Mother Nature for the survival of Lepchas was very clearly understood by our ancestors. These Rum Faats originated in Mayel Lyang and were holistically carried out by the loyal Lepchas generations after generations. A Rum Faat is purely a cultural thing and one of the main identities of the original Lepchas. Lepcha individuals should respect their ancestors and their philosophy on the Lepcha way of life. Respect your ancestors and their culture and you will be respected. It's of vital importance that all Lepchas attend and participate in their ancient culture, Rum Faats. At least all the Lepchas should try to understand what these Rum Faats are and stand for. (L. Tamsang 2014, 20–21, emphasis added)¹³⁷

I argue that the openly postulated separation of religion from ritual, and specifically from community ritual programmes, leads to a secularisation of rit-

137 For another example, see Tamsang 1997a, 23.

ual as well as a sacralisation of culture by the reconceptualisation of nature worship.¹³⁸ The highly specialised act of protecting a village space – invoking embodied more-than-human beings – was reformulated as a “thanks giving to Mother Nature for the survival of the Lepchas”. Survival in this context had a double connotation. It looked into the past and recalled incidents such as the mythological flood; but, simultaneously, survival was clearly orientated towards future actions and opportunities. Lyangsong Tamsang aligned participation in ritual programmes with respect for “their ancestors and their philosophy on the Lepcha way of life”. In this respect, the future survival of the Mútunci Róng, here understood in a more political and cultural sense, became possible.

Crucially, Lyangsong Tamsang introduced the idea of a “philosophy” and a “way of life”. Here, he appealed to a sense of being Mútunci Róng that extended beyond culture and tied rituals to a redefined Indigenous ontology void of religious practices. The definition of the Mútunci Róng as “Children of Mother Nature” drew on the endonym Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup, which closely aligns the people with a concept of nature and universe. In stating that the “offering of the Lepchas to Mt. Tendong has a universal appeal and truth in it” (Tamsang 1997a, 23), Tamsang reframed Róng Indigenous ontologies as a universal spiritual idea of living in a way that was close to nature, and indeed bound to it, while he described the unique and customary way in which this holistic act was performed as Róng ancestral knowledge and culture.

It was within the context of this assemblage of Róng religious tradition and Indigenous ontologies that Lyangsong Tamsang (2008a) described Sonam Tshering Lepcha’s published ritual recitations of Tendong Hlo Rumfát as “books on Mother Nature, ecology, environment and surroundings” (82). Nature itself, and the relatedness to nature, was thus sacralised. An ‘ancient and Indigenous nature worship’ formulated along these lines equated the creator deity Ítbú Rum with Mother Nature herself. Praying to Ítbú Rum was comparable to praying to Mother Nature, a sacred source beyond a single specific religious tradition that was open to believers of all religions, as a Róng youth stated in a discussion on Facebook on this topic:

Well I guess we tend to confuse rong culture with religion ... these are two different things ... Lepchas are nature worshippers and I don't think there's any harm if lamas and pastors start worshipping but in their own way. (Urgen Lepcha, 21 May 2014)

138 See Vandenhelsken (2011, 94) for a discussion of secularism and the sacralisation of culture in the ‘neo’ Pang Lhabsol.



FIGURE 28: Visible devotion during rituals is more prominent among Mútunci Róng involved in cultural revival movements, at Dámsáng Fort, December 2011.

Simplified, the message that the ILTA executive members passed on to their fellow Róngkup and Róngmít, and mainly to the Christian ones, was that praying to Mother Nature was not a religious act based on a specific Róng Indigenous ontologies, nor built on the relationship to “so many *múng*” (Plaisier 2007b, 5). This was crucial, since within the Christian context the latter was considered an act of devil worship (Torri 2010, 160–61). On the contrary, praying to Mother Nature was defined as a holistic act of religiosity, at the most based on Mútunci philosophy, while the ritual performance was equated with cultural practices, as passed down by the ancestors.

Ítbú Rum: Religious Revival and Agency

As Torri (2019) states, “in every public event where ethnicity and culture are displayed, the religious element vehemently appears” (35); and the same is true in the ‘secular’ culturalist worship of sacred nature. The focus on a universally grounded worship of Mother Nature, equated with Ítbú Rum, has given rise to a revitalisation of Róng religious tradition, especially because it enabled members of the Róng community to retain Christian and Buddhist links.

Some members of the Róng community, young, educated, and actively involved in cultural revival movements (Figure 28), were consciously retracing their roots and reconnecting to their ancestors’ religious tradition, along the lines of the more holistic and animist understanding of a sacred relationship

to nature, described above. Yet as I analyse it, the link between Ítbú Rum and nature is less straightforward than activists might want to suggest, and the process of assemblage transforms religious tradition itself.

Jokingly, a friend of mine in Kalimpong referred to these young Mútunci Róng who were reviving ‘ancestral nature worship’ as ‘born-again’ Mútunci Róng, leaning on the term ‘born-again Christian’ that is used for the followers of Evangelical Christian movements. The comparison was striking in many ways. The *rite de passage* (Van Gennep [1909] 1960) of born-again Christians is baptism at an adult age. Similarly, a group of Mútunci Róng from Kalimpong, associated with ILTA and active in protesting against the dams in Dzongu, went to Dzongu in 2008 to be re-baptised as ‘Mútunci Róng’. They bent to touch the water and the rocks below in the basin of the Lingzya waterfall and received new Róng names. The ROP president performed the name-giving ceremony (Little 2013, 154). One of the participants was Valentine Tamsang, raised Roman Catholic, who then became known as Azuk. The baptism in Dzongu was a public affirmation of believing in Róng religion, defined as nature worship as I elaborated in the previous section, by the change in the first name: in local understanding, one’s last name indicates one’s ethnic group or caste, while the first name shows which religious tradition one follows.

‘Born-again’ Mútunci Róng negotiated a collective idea of religion as defined by family and the individual’s rational choice between two mutually exclusive belief systems, defined as “spiritual individualism” by Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 249–51). Here, I agree with Little (2013, 154) in pointing out that with this baptism the young Mútunci Róng did not renounce the religion (Christianity or Buddhism) that they grew up with. In the local environment, it was hard to reject the religion your family followed; so, born-again, Mútunci Róng often built their own individual assemblage based on reflective thoughts on the divine. The process of reconnecting with ancestral nature worship was not religious conversion *per se*, meaning a complete renunciation of the former belief. Instead, this concept of religious conversion was grounded in the processes of turning nature worship into something holistically Indigenous, as well as in the negotiation between the context of their membership of a Christian community and the individual urge to reconnect with their roots.

The ritual act they chose – baptism – was a reframing of Christian ritual practice. The choice of place, the Lingzya waterfalls in Dzongu, was about reconnecting with an ancestral and sacred Mother Nature, linked to a reconceptualisation of Dzongu as sacred ancestral land of all Mútunci Róng, as I elaborate in the following section of this chapter. Róng religious tradition contains a name-giving ceremony called Tungbóng Fát: the young Mútunci Róng from Kalimpong knew about this ritual, and Sonam Tshering Lepcha had even pub-

lished the recitations in a book. The Róng could have found a Mútunci religious specialist to conduct such a ritual, or used Sonam Tshering Lepcha's book to do the same, but they chose a reframing of a ritual including symbolic elements of the religion most of them had grown up in and of the Indigenous nature worship they wanted to become a part of. They thus assembled and reframed ritual elements that they already knew, as a means to reconnect with their ancient roots.

The, born-again, Mútunci Róng practised a more conscious amalgamation of the various religious traditions within their life, in which ancestral religious practices were incorporated in cultural awareness and preservation. One of my interlocutors, born into a Christian family, stated that for him there was no difference between the Christian God, Ítbú Debú Rum, and any other more-than-human being. Similarly, Azuk Tamsang, for example, had been married in a Roman Catholic Church with a ceremony completely held in Róngríng – songs and prayers being dedicated to Ítbú Rum as the translation of the term 'God'. This denomination turned the Christian invocation into a simultaneous invocation of Mother Nature. Azuk himself was a learned *búngthing* and regularly conducted prayers to his personal guardian at Dámsáng Fort and performed a ritual at the confluence of Tista and Rangit. The conceptualisation of holistic nature worship gave him the necessary tools to negotiate his religious practice with the social context of his family and his wider network. As a personal decision, though, his acts of worship were more than the practising of culture: they were devoted religious acts of worshiping Ítbú Rum and his ancestors – both of which he believed would protect him and give him strength and courage for the path that he had chosen in life or that life had chosen for him.

In this reformulation of Róng religion as Indigenous nature worship – if we look at it as a religious practice – the creator deity Ítbú Debú Rum was reframed into a differently defined divine entity than she was in the Róng religious tradition outlined in the previous chapters. Interestingly, her male pair deity, Debú, traditionally associated with destruction, was regularly omitted when the creator deity was associated with Mother Nature. In Dzongu, I found a similar emphasis on the female when religious specialists narrated parts of the creation myth. Thus, in the creator deity's reassemblage as Mother Nature, the focus lies on the female nurturer, and what is thereby lost is the ambivalence of all sentient beings and the geographical world essential to Róng Indigenous ontologies, and notably the destructive side that requires appeasement – or the *múng*, so to speak.

In 2012, the ROP president, Buddhist in his upbringing, explained his approach. He described Ítbúmú, or the 'creator mother' as he called her, as the supreme deity. Everything else, nature and the local guardian deities along with it, was her creation (ROP president, June 2012). She was elevated to the top of a hierarchical pantheon of more-than-human beings, or in the most extreme

form turned into the sole divine being. As Siiger (1975) had already noted, the idea of a supreme creator deity, drawn from Christian epistemology, was already influencing the Róng religious tradition in the late 1950s (303). In this context, I theorise that the incorporation of Christian patterns of thought is to a certain extent linked to the assumption (based indeed on experience) that institutionalised religions have strong powers of self-assertion. In addition to their written canon, mentioned above, they had clear monotheistic structures which stood in contrast to the syncretic, ambivalent, and very localised Róng religious traditions. The association members, with their drive to unify and purify, found this lucidity compelling. Further, the conflation of an idea of a supreme creator deity with Mother Nature as core to Indigenous religions closely relates to Hindutva strategies in Northeast India, as discussed in depth by Longkumer (2022, 89–124).

Ítbú Rum herself was reframed in this process of appropriation. Crucially, she shifted realms. As already mentioned, in the Róng Indigenous ontologies of Dzongu the creator deity was associated with the lower realm, the underworld in its widest sense. She was located *mebá*, below the world. In the reconceptualisation of Ítbú Rum as the supreme creator of Mother Nature, she had migrated to the upper realm. She was referred to as the supreme creator deity in heaven, who then created the Róng progenitors from the snow of the highest mountain ranges.

Significantly, Ítbú Rum has *agency*, something which she did not have according to the Róng Indigenous ontologies that I have described based on Dzongu ritual practice and narrations. When located below (*mebá*), in the Dzongu Róng Indigenous ontologies, she is beyond visible embodiment on the earth and positioned in a different temporality, in a time before the present, in an ancient time. According to this logic, the active role of Ítbú Debú Rum remained confined to the time of creation. This deity created the world and all the forces therein and gave the religious specialists the power to negotiate between humans and the more-than-human. However, the deity was not a member of the pact made between the spirits and the religious specialists. According to this logic, agency in the present-day world lies with the malevolent and benevolent more-than-human beings she had created – agency was thus given by the agreement to engage in an exchange with the humans. The creator was conceptualised as beyond the operation of today's reality and thus beyond the scope of human influence. The creator deity did not interact with the religious specialists and was not called upon in community ritual. She could not intervene directly, but only by means of her various children, in her creation (see also Morris 1938, 120; Gorer [1938] 1996, 225).

In the religious revival associated with Mother Nature, the supreme creator deity had agency in the present-day world. She was the main addressee of

religious thought and practice. As a supreme deity in the pantheon, her agency did not lie only in a past act of creation; she retained control over her creation. During the ceremonies I attended, I regularly heard people mutter prayers to the creator deity. The phrase “May Ítbú Debú Rum bless you” was common usage among a younger generation – regularly posted on Facebook walls along with messages congratulating people on their birthdays or other festive occasions. Ritual recitations, such as Sonam Tshering Lepcha’s, addressed the creator deity directly.

Similarly, as described for cultural heritage, I observed tendencies towards the purification of a religious tradition in accordance with this hierarchical model of an institutionalised religion with a set pantheon. The ROP president discussed the various opinions on the syncretic Buddhist elements in Róng ritual practice with me. He took the position that these elements were “imports” from Tibetan Buddhism and had the effect of weakening Róng religious tradition. Aware that many members of the Róng community understood syncretic ritual features – such as mountain worship – as being ultimately Mútunci Róng, he played with the idea that for a strong Róng unity, a Róng religion crafted around one supreme creator mother figure, Ítbú Rum as Mother Nature, would be ideal, describing the Róng religion as monotheistic (ROP president, June 2012). A similar discomfort with syncretism and an expressed need for a unique defined corpus of beliefs and practices has been observed amongst Rai and Limbu activists (Schlemmer 2003/04, 132).

Dzongu as a ‘Holy Land’: Reformulating Sacred Landscape

During my fieldwork, from 2006 until 2009, Róng activists were on a relay hunger strike against the construction of dams in Sikkim. The protest predominantly focused on those projects which were taking place or planned in the Róng reserve of Dzongu. It was through the anti-dam protest that another reformulation of the attachment to the more-than-human beings embedded in the lands occurred: Dzongu became framed as a land that was holy for all the Mútunci Róng. Issues of land, sacredness, precarity, environmental destruction, and Indigenous survival – especially with reference to Dzongu – stood at the core of contention and were thus debated and reformulated.¹³⁹

139 For scholarship on the anti-dam movement, see Arora 2007b, 2008b, 2009, 2014; Bentley 2021, 2024; Chettri 2017b; Dukpa et al. 2018, 2019; ; Dukpa 2024; Dutta 2007; Gergan 2016a, 2016b, 2020; Huber and Joshi 2015; Joshi et al. 2018; Lepcha 2007; Lepcha 2013; Little 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; McDuie-Ra 2011; Subba 2011, 2014; Wangchuk 2007. On the history of protest against dams in the Teesta River in Sikkim, see Lepcha 2020.

I argue that the experience of vulnerability, inherent in the precarious relationship between human, more-than-human, and environment – and counteracted in ritual practice – was the main incentive for the young activists from Dzongu to protest the large-scale development projects. As I have shown, within Indigenous ontologies, protection of the environment and survival of the residents were interlinked: not in a deterministic way, since through ritual the residents could negotiate various outcomes of these interactions (Bentley 2024), but nevertheless crucially interconnected and interdependent. I am interested in how exactly the Dzongu landscape was framed as an ancestral and sacred space for all the Mútunci Róng, and – importantly – what made this productive for the anti-dam activists in their fight for the preservation of the fragile environment and, as they verbalised it, the survival of the Indigenous people.

Crucially, I argue, this framing was not invented, nor was it inauthentic. In a similar way to what I have suggested in the previous sections, the anti-dam activists transformed the relations to more-than-human beings, environment, and territory in accordance with a culturalist ontology, formulating them in a language understood in today's local, national, and international political field and thus turning them into productive resources in acts of protest. Retelling these relations in the context of a 'holy land' empowered the activists to speak up against a development project they experienced as destructive to their environment, their people, as well as the Indigenous ontologies they had grown up with.

The debate around questions of Indigenous belonging, land, and rights that I discuss in this section dominated public discourse in Sikkim and much of the scholarship on the protest. Therefore, and as I have noted elsewhere, it is important before I proceed to highlight that the anti-dam protest encompassed a much wider range of activities and exchanges of knowledge than I am able to include here. The anti-dam activists transmitted and contested knowledge on dams, technologies, environmental impact, and the legal context both in the Dzongu villages as well as – behind the scenes, so to speak – in court hearings, official negotiations, and conferences (Bentley 2024; Huber 2019).

When the Dzongu activists started their protest against the dams, the government planned to construct 31 dams in Sikkim, six of them in Dzongu. Five were already ongoing or completed, amongst them the Teesta V hydroelectric project (HEP), located on the southern border of Dzongu (Huber and Joshi 2015, 17). The activists, who had initiated the protest under the banners of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and Concerned Lepcha of Sikkim (CLOS), were mostly from Dzongu or the bordering regions in North Sikkim. The public weaving of a narrative around Dzongu as a holy land for the Mútunci Róng began when the Róng activists from Kalimpong joined the hunger strike in July 2007 (Figure 29). Prior to this, they had publicly drawn upon the syncretic sacred landscape – also



FIGURE 29: Anti-dam protest, Kalimpong 2008 © Azuk Tamsang.

incorporated in the Buddhist and Sikkimese understanding of blessed places – in order to support their protest (ACT and Lepcha 2006; Now! Report 2007, July 31, 3). Towards the end of 2007, the anti-dam protestors of ACT, ILTA, and ROP formed a new Joint Action Committee for the Protection of the Holy Land Dzongu (Sharma 2007, November 16, 1, 2; Now! Report 2007, December 6, 1).

The indigenous Lepcha cannot afford to lose their holy land, Dzongu (Foakraam Takraam), their ancestral land, cultural heritage in the name of development and profit. The Lepchas' religious beliefs, the source of origin, cultural heritage embodied in Dzongu, Foakraam Takraam, must be saved at all cost if the indigenous Lepcha are to live with dignity, respect and honour in this world. Save Dzongu, to save the Lepchas' existence as one of the ancient races of the world. (Aachuley Report 2008, 14; ILTA framing of holy land, see also Tamsang 2009a, 39)

Feeding on nostalgic representations of authentic and ancient Dzongu Róng culture, the activists described Dzongu as a hub of Róng history and culture, and – importantly – as a sacred place, the sanctity of which ensured future Róng prosperity. ILTA members equated Dzongu with Fókrám Tâkrám, the mytholog-

ical place of origin. Fók means ‘through’ or ‘channel’, *tāk* ‘to pick’ or ‘to nestle’, and *rám* is ‘source’ (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 510, 637, 361). Thus, the place name can be translated as the source through which all is channelled and where all is nestled. Fókrám Tâkrám is described as the source of Róng religion, cultural heritage, and ultimately existence (Tamsang and Simik 2008, 25; Tamsang 2009a, 39). Activists identified Dzongu as the place in the shadow of Kóngchen Cú whence all the crucial institutions of Róng Indigenous heritage originated: where the Róng progenitors descended to earth, the Róng religious specialists originated, and the first marriage took place (Lepcha 2007, 23). Additionally, the location of Máyel Kyong, the ancestral village of the seven immortal couples, was attributed to Dzongu (Tamsang 2009a, 39; Lepcha 2007, 23–24). While previously the location of these ancestral activities was just associated with *thol*, ‘up north’, the fact that Dzongu was one of the most northern Róng areas, just adjoining the Kangchendzonga range, facilitated the localisation of wherever *thol* meant in the Dzongu landscape, especially from a Kalimpong perspective which would locate Dzongu a lot further up north.

The sacred landscape in Dzongu was importantly interlinked with the death ceremony and the successful passage of the deceased person’s soul to the ancestral realms – a dangerous and important activity.

There are two graveyards of life and death, Railboo Chuk and Seng-boo Chuk which is in Dzongu. The ten ‘LEP’ which is the door to the ancestral soul are also in Dzongu. No matter wherever the Lepchas live today in the world when they die their souls have to come back to Dzongu in search of the ‘LEP’ to end their journey of life (Lepcha 2007, 23–24).

The death ceremony accentuated the importance of rivers. As mentioned with regard to ritual journeys, the Tista and its tributary Rónggyóng River that runs through Upper Dzongu were pathways along which the *mun* guided the soul of the deceased on its way to its entry point to the eternal abode (Lepcha 2007, 23; Tamsang and Simik 2008, 26). The significance was retained in the Rónggring name Rónggyóng, the river that had officially been renamed Kanaka: *róng* is an alternative short form of the endonym, while *gyóng* is translated among other meanings as reciting a prayer. Accordingly, it was the river of Róng prayers (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 254, 652). Passingdang, a village hamlet of Lingthem, was the place where, on the way to the ancestral lands, the *mun* asked the soul of the deceased to stand on a twig of bamboo. As the soul had no weight, the twig did not break (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 478). In Rónggring the place name is

spelt Poshíngdáng; *po* means ‘bamboo’, *shíng* ‘twig’, *dáng* ‘flat land’. There was another place, below Pentong in Upper Dzongu, where the soul was asked to walk over a sandy bank. As there was no body, no footprints were to be seen (Tamsang and Simik 2008, 26). These requests showed the soul that it was dead.

There are other Lepcha holy lakes, caves, places in Dzongu which it is impossible to list here [...]. ‘Foakraam Takraam’ i. e. Dzongu is absolutely and naturally holy to the indigenous Lepcha tribe living all over the world. The life-cycle of the indigenous Lepcha tribes, their origin, birth, life, death, their souls returning to ‘Poomju,’ the final resting place, culture, custom, tradition begins in Dzongu and ends in Dzongu. (Tamsang and Simik 2008, 28)

Many of the Róng protestors from the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills had never been to Dzongu; but they had heard nostalgic stories of the place (Little 2013, 135; Foning [1987] 2003, 260–70). Due to its protected legal status, for them Dzongu represented a sanctuary or a safe haven for Róng culture, which they felt had been lost in West Bengal. This affective attachment gave them the necessary sentiment to join the protest and legitimised their interest in the issue. Furthermore, the fight for Dzongu gave them a sense of ‘motherland’ in the present-day and contested place in which they lived. Darjeeling district was indeed contested at the time, being claimed by a revived Gorkhaland movement. The threat (even if merely symbolic) to their immediate homes enhanced the urgency to protect this last haven for the Mútunci Róng. The fight against the dams and for the Róng holy land gave the Róng activists the opportunity to claim ancient belonging to the region. The protest allowed them to indirectly assert Róng Indigeneity to the lands in the Gorkha territory, even while involving themselves in an issue that was not contested in the local politics of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills.

A former RST president similarly formulated Dzongu as intrinsically linked to Kóngchen when he explained to me why RST had extended its support to the anti-dam protest over the national borders.

We need development but we have to understand first, Dzongu is the historical land of the Lepcha and all Lepcha worship Kóngchen Cú. They have never been there in Dzongu, but it is Lepcha land. Everybody knows Kóngchen Cú and Dzongu are the identity of the Indigenous Lepcha of the world. During the birth ceremony, death ceremony, and marriage ceremony Lepcha always offer to Kóngchen Cú.

So Dzongu is a holy land of the Lepcha. (Former RST president, April 2011)

The RST president immediately linked the anti-dam protest with the international framework on Indigenous rights. He told us that according to ILO 169, companies or development projects should consult the Indigenous people of a place before they implement anything (RST president, April 2011). But this international framework did not apply to Sikkim, as India had not ratified the convention.

While the anti-dam protestors clearly worked within an Indian and Sikkimese legal framework about community rights and infrastructure projects, they also built up ties with national and transnational environmentalists and Indigenous rights activists and organisations. Consequently, they gained an additional frame of reference with which to define themselves, beyond the categories set up within the Indian reservation system. It was according to the latter categories that the public discourse had linked Dzongu with connotations of backwardness and associated it with a fear of black magic and primitive traits. As Taylor (1992, 5) remarks, the politics of recognition has the potential to include misrecognition, which can have as a consequence that people suffer real damage. The young activists had been confronted with negative stereotypes of intellectual inferiority and bad social behaviour such as rampant alcoholism (Bhasin 1989, 82; Gergan 2014). Following Gergan (2014, 2016a), I argue that, similar to what participants describe for Tendong Hlo Rumpfát, the protest narrative of Dzongu as a holy land reformulated the negative colonial image. In this respect, however, I want to add that although this went some way towards correcting the colonial racialised imageries, the discourse of othering nevertheless remained.

While the discourse empowered some sections of the Róng community, others were sidelined. As activists added an additional semantic layer to the local landscape, there was a concomitant transformation in the relations between humans, more-than-humans, environment, and territory as formulated in the Dzongu ritual practice. The activists' narrative encompassed the existing and embodied narratives, ancestors, and practices common to most Mútunci Róng, and represented a process of making those relations more generic that was similar to the process I have described for the relations to land activated during Tendong Hlo Rumpfát. However, instead of delocalising those narratives, it consolidated them within Dzongu, heightening the sanctity of the place. This process was contested within Dzongu itself, where it was perceived as an overwriting of local Indigenous practice by outsiders or people influenced by outsid-

ers, amongst others (Bentley 2021; McDuie-Ra 2011). The pro-dam supporters did not deny that Dzongu always had been and still was an important place for the Mútunci Róng – both in its reality as a protected area and in the imagery associated with it. However, they declared that “recent attempts to project it as a holy land of the Lepcha has ‘no precedence’” (Bhutia 2009, November 16, 1).

Similarly, the emphasis on Dzongu as a holy land neglected the specificities and characteristics of the more-than-human beings embedded in the Dzongu villages’ landscape. Moreover, Dzongu as a holy land also overwrote the Buddhist syncretic features of the Dzongu and North Sikkim landscape, such as the Tholung monastery and the sacred place of Guru Rinpoche in Chungtang. These places are mentioned in the *nesol* ritual texts, as was highlighted by monks from Dzongu who had joined the protest under the banner of Sangha of Dzongu (SOD) (Now! Report 2007, July 31, 3), and are crucially interlinked with the sub-nationalist discourse of Sikkim. The early press releases drew on this heritage to remind people of the deities’ potential wrath (ACT and Lepcha 2006). Conceptualising Dzongu within the Sikkimese syncretic landscape would have been crucial for the support of the wider Sikkimese public, which is why locals, journalists, and scholars alike considered the presence of the Kalimpong Mútunci Róng to be the reason for the lack of local support (McDuie-Ra 2011, 93, 95; Little 2010a, 115–17; Wangchuk 2007).

What, then, was so powerful about this discourse? I assert that the concept of Lyángdók Úngdók – again in its adapted form – empowered the Róng activists in two ways and made Dzongu as a holy land an influential framing. First, it is the activists themselves who were reframed as Lyángdók Úngdók, as guardians of land and water. As Indigenous landowners, the anti-dam activists strongly felt the need to protect their homes and, like the mountains and water bodies surrounding their villages, stand as guardians against harm and destruction. Within this reframing of Dzongu as a holy land, Indigenous knowledge of the environment and a lived relation with embodied more-than-human beings were not formulated as primitive traits that needed to be governed and brought into the ‘Indian mainstream’ – as the jargon of reservation politics puts it – but instead became unique assets of the Indigenous subaltern. Consequently, the educated young protestors from Dzongu, who had previously been confronted with negative stereotypes connected with their place and people, now found new pride in their heritage and origins.

However, the power of ‘Dzongu as a holy land’ runs deeper than this. Therefore, second, it reactivated the pairing of ‘protector’ and ‘owner’ incorporated in the word *dók*. As such, it entailed a symbolic counteracting of dispossession. The state of being dispossessed is at the core of the definition of

Indigenous and marginalised people (Butler 2016; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Reid 2018). In the context of Dzongu, however, the overall state of dispossession is harder to perceive: Dzongu residents owned the land they lived on, at least to a large extent, and even if some happened to not possess land titles, customary law retained the knowledge about which land belonged to whom, as was acknowledged by the Land Revenue Department (Subba 2014). Scholars and Indigenous activists thought of ownership not merely in terms of the legal possession of land, but also as a question of citizenship and even self-determination, defined as the right to live in one's ancestral lands on one's own terms (A. Simpson 2014; Povinelli 2011).

Within such a definition of ownership and agency, the dams raised the spectre of dispossession. The activists pointed out that Dzongu residents were not given a say in *whether* the dams should be implemented: the public hearings were only about *how* the dam construction could affect the people and environment, and how this effect could be mitigated or compensated. The land was owned individually; thus, no collective decisions were required to sell it, ignoring notions of intergenerational ownership of ancestral land. The government facilitated the process of obtaining the protected Indigenous land. As BL land or reservation land could not be sold to a non-BL person or entity, the government functioned as an intermediary, buying the land and then leasing it out to the company. This undermined the legal protections in place for Indigenous land. In the activists' discourse, therefore, they were pairing up with the local guardians – the actual owners of the place, those who were there before the people, and those who had the control – in order to protect their residence. An alliance with the more-than-human beings – despite being generic in its overall narrative – symbolically repossessed the land given to the developers, in the sense that it reclaimed the agency of the land itself. According to this logic, the guardians and owners would be angered by the destruction and the residents would feel their wrath. This, therefore, was a narrative of Indigenous belonging, environmental respect, and empowerment.

The repossession by the activists of the deities embedded in the land was a reminder of the soteriological power of these more-than-human beings, but turned that power into a political force. More-than-human beings became a part of the protest, like the earth beings in a protest against mines in the Andes (de la Cadena 2010), and in the process were transformed. Crucially, the activists added a clear directionality to the process: the deity was disturbed, the deity would do harm. The clarity ascribed to divine agency consolidated the emotional “easy resolution”, as Gergan (2016a, 6) terms it, required to push the protest forward. However, this logic negated the ritual practice of managing and counteracting the wrath of the deities, as well as warding off harm to the community, a core

practice of ensuring prosperity according to Róng Indigenous ontologies. It was along this fault line that tension arose when pro-dam activists performed rituals before drilling and blasting began, or when anti-dam activists reminded residents that natural disaster – be it an earthquake or flash flood – was initiated by the destruction the dams were causing to sacred abodes, and hence incurring the deities’ wrath (Bentley 2021, 2024; Subba 2014, 337; Wangchuk 2007, 48).¹⁴⁰

Being Visible: Reclaiming Land and Ritual Space

In this final section, we return to Tendong Hlo Rumfát, introducing yet another quality of the relations to the land and bodies of water. As I have remarked, relations to embedded more-than-human beings always entail the component of ownership. I have noted that one of the reasons for celebrating Tendong Hlo Rumfát was to ‘put Lepcha’ back on the state calendar. Similarly, in order to achieve legibility in ethno-political and cultural action, fixed ritual spaces gain in importance (Torri 2019, 50). I suggest that the history of Tendong Hlo Rumfát is – among other things – a history of reclaiming ritual space, not only in the sense of a public event but by regaining ownership over and visually demarcating the ritual site on Tendong hill. As mentioned, Róng ritual practice had previously had no permanent human-made structures for worship, with a few exceptions where permanent *langtsók*, erected stones, demarcated the site, such as *latsu* in Tingvong and the sacred groves at Kabi Longchok. Interestingly, these sites were places for rituals during which the local Róng community had interacted with the Sikkimese rulers in some form or another and are connected to the state ritual of Pang Lhabsol. Thus, these historic sites also hint at the state’s importance in making “society legible” (Scott 1998, 2). I agree with Torri, who posits, drawing on case studies conducted among the Hyolmo, that “ethnic associations behave in a similar way [as the state] to produce legible images of their group” (Torri 2019, 48).

At the time when the Mútunci Róng associations revived Tendong Hlo Rumfát, there was no visible site for this ritual on Tendong hill. Moreover, the Pema Gomchen Tendong monastery complex overlooked the valley, and this was a recognisable Buddhist site. In 2003, the South Sikkim Lepcha Association took the initiative to demarcate a ritual place on Tendong hill for the Róng ritual.

Tendong Hlo is the identity of the Lepcha community, but we don’t have the actual document [for the land, J. B.], because the hilltop of

140 For a critical assessment of the framing of Indigenous closeness to nature in the context of natural resource management, see Shah 2010 on eco-incarceration.

Tendong Hlo was registered in the name of the Tamang head lama. For this reason, we did not have a proper place during the Tendong Hlo Rumfát. (Phur Tshering Lepcha, July 2009)

Oral tradition has it that Tendong Gomchen Rinpoche went to Tibet for teachings, along with other monks, as well as Gyalmo Kunzang Dechen, wife to the eleventh Sikkimese king, Tashi Namgyal (1914–1963). When they returned to Sikkim, Tendong Gomchen Rinpoche attended a three-day ceremony at the royal palace. Here, the king asked him about his future plans. He stated his interest in returning to Tibet, but the king advised him not to go, because there could be problems with the Chinese government. He recommended that Tendong Gomchen Rinpoche teach in Sikkim and asked him where he would like to stay. Gomchen Rinpoche stated that there was a small hut on Tendong hill. Previously, herders had come up there with their cattle, but otherwise it was uninhabited. At that time the lands fell within the estate of Barmiok, and the king then asked the landlord, Barmiok Áthing, to sanction the construction of a monastery at the site. The latter agreed and the land was demarcated. The king donated building material, while the queen contributed the statue and other religious paraphernalia for the monastery. In 1955, the Pema Gomchen Tendong monastery was established as a Nyingmapa monastery.

Later, the monastery was associated with Bomtar monastery in Namchi, a Kagyü institution, which is commonly referred to as Tamang Gompa, because the caretaker of the Pema Gomchen Tendong monastery, Tenzing Tamang, has connections with that monastery. Tenzing's grandfather had taken care of the Tendong monastery, while he himself had been sent to Enchey monastery in Gangtok for training. When his grandfather died in 1964, he took on the responsibility (Tenzing Tamang, Pema Gomchen Tendong monastery caretaker, April 2011). This was the reason why monks from the Bomtar monastery performed rituals on Tendong hill, even though officially the Pema Gomchen Tendong monastery did not fall under the patronage of the Dorji Lapân, the head lama of the Bomtar monastery.

To the activists, the land on Tendong hill had thus been dispossessed three-fold. First, no Mútunci individual or community owned the land – in a capitalist sense. Second, on a religious level, the monastery – a Buddhist institution – was the visible marker on the sacred hill and owned the land. Third, on an ethnic level, the lamas who performed rituals there and took care of the monastery belonged to another ethnic community. Additionally, the birthday of Lord Ram was celebrated on this summit (Arora 2008a, 142). For these reasons, RMRT executive members felt the need to possess at least a plot of land on the hill to use as a place of worship, in order to make the Róng relations to the land visible –



FIGURE 30: New ritual site on Tendong hill, April 2006.

or, in Torri's words (2019, 48), legible to the inside and the outside. This being said, there was an additional, more pragmatic reason for wanting to demarcate a ritual site and then lay the ground with tiles. Since the ritual was held during the monsoon, it usually rained incessantly during the ritual performance, and the place became muddy and infested with leeches. Consequently, a tiled place, with walls and posts between which a tarpaulin could easily be put up, was a requirement for the comfort of the religious specialists and the people attending the ritual (Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, July 2009).

According to Arora's account of the ritual held on Tendong hill in 2002, the organisers had previously erected a *langtsók* on land that belonged to the forest department (Arora 2008a, 142). The RMRT South branch took up negotiations with the caretaker of the monastery, and eventually they came to an agreement whereby a plot of land was allotted to the South Sikkim Lepcha Association, which was the main initiator for the construction of a Róng place of worship. Official permission to build was required, and this was received from the Forest Department, whose minister at that time, D.T. Lepcha, belonged to the Róng community. He supported the effort. Together with the West Sikkim branch, the South Sikkim Lepcha Association took on the responsibility of developing the area. They organised youth from Róng villages in South and West Sikkim to volunteer and provided food and shelter for them. D.T. Lepcha facilitated the

process by assisting in getting the permission to use building material, such as stone and wood, from the surrounding forest. It took around two months to complete the construction (Figure 30) (Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, July 2009; Phur Tshering Lepcha, July 2009).

On my first visit to Tendong hill in 2006, the site had already been completed. The demarcated space is just a few steps outside the monastery compound. A square plot had been levelled, elevated, and tiled. On the northwestern side – facing the snow-capped mountains – there was a wide stone wall of around a metre in height, with a *langtsók* at its centre. The ritual site was enclosed with a stone ledge and a metal railing on the remaining three sides. An entrance gate was located on the side opposite from the wide wall. During the ritual performance, an altar was prepared on the surface of the stone wall. Written below was the inscription “Máyelmú róngkuprumkup ítbúdebúsá cínlóplóm gyâtholyáng ‘tungróng hlo hrí” (the Mútunci Róngkup Rumkup of Máyel preserved the land ‘Tendong hill throne’¹⁴¹ through the blessing of the creator and destroyer deity). Further, a signboard declared the area to be a Róng ritual site. It read, “Puja site of the Lepchas for Tendong lho rum fat. Courtesy – R. M. R. T & S. L. Y. A Sikkim”. In addition, the word *ácúle* had been added in Róng script. During a meeting in 2011, the RMRT general secretary O. T. Lepcha had called the ritual site “Tendong Pilgrimage Centre” (May 2011). The site envisaged Tendong hill as a sacred Róng site through the altar, the erected *langtsók*, and the inscription in Róngríng. At the same time, the sacred site was also visually inscribed as Mútunci Róng for the outside world, through the signboard in the English language.

In 2012, a new stone was inaugurated explaining the significance of the ritual site to anyone passing by (Figure 31); this was the latest step of the Mútunci associations in claiming Tendong hill inscribing the oral tradition at the mythological location, so to speak. Its visible presence solidified the state patronage of the event. In gold English writing on black stone it expressed the government’s acknowledgement of the ritual and associated tradition. The power of the state was further emphasized in that the stone explicitly mentioned the state as the agent which had given permission to perform the annual ritual within the forest premises. I cite the text here in full:

Tendong hill, the Lepcha sacred worship place. This is the historic spot, where according to the belief of the Rongkup Rumkup

141 The word *throne* is basically used for an important ceremonial place or “the chair or seat occupied by a sovereign, or other exalted personage on ceremonial occasion, usually raised on a dais and covered with a canopy” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 813).



FIGURE 31: Inauguration of the stone by the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee, August 2012.

(Lepcha) their ancestors in the ancient time climbed up and took refuge to escape the great deluge that took place in Sikkim, the description of this historical natural phenomenon, that resulted, into this area assuming a place of worship, is a long one. Suffice it to say that the prayer offered to the Itbu rum (creator) by the Lepchas who had taken refuge on this spot was answered when the Kohom fo (a hill partridge) appeared at this spot and took in a few grains of Mong chee-bep (the fermented millet offered in the rum faat) as a sign of acceptance of their prayer, after which the deluge subsided. Since this ancient time the Lepchas have been offering Tendong (in olden times Tungrong) Iho rum faat.

The Sikkim Government have acknowledged this as a prayer offering place of the aboriginal Lepchas and have assisted in developing the spot as a prayer offering spot.

In view of the importance of this place, according to the Lepcha age old tradition, the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India have also consented to allow the Lepchas, to organize rum faat at the area spreading over 0.4213 hectare, at this spot, in the year 2003. This historic spot is located under South Territorial Division of Namchi Subdivision South Sikkim, at an altitude of 2635 mtrs.

In the year 1997, the Government of Sikkim, declared the 8th day of August, the day when the Tendong lho rum fat is offered annually to commemorate the historic day, as a state holiday.

‘The Lepcha’ had now claimed a presence on Tendong hill. A site had been specifically demarcated for their ritual, and ownership had been transferred to the South Sikkim Lepcha Association. This ritual site bore little resemblance to the traditional ritual sites; the *langtsók* remained the sole similarity. The conception and requirements of the ritual sites had changed during the ritual programme. Space needed to be acclaimed, owned, and made legible. In addition to placing ‘the Lepcha’ on the cultural calendar, the state recognition put the ritual on the map of the state. The state recognition of the ritual, the state approval to use the ritual site for ritual, and the actual structure on Tendong hill all added up to legitimising the ritual, the Mútunci Róng associations, and the Róng community at large. At the same time, this legibility enforced the state’s control over ritual programmes, contextualising the activities of the Mútunci Róng associations in processes of governmentality. As such, I suggest, the repossession of land was the opposite of the symbolic repossession in Dzongu, as it revolved around legal citizenship and tangible heritage, sponsored and inscribed by the state. Crucially, the embedded deities of the place find little space in this performance. The creator deity was inscribed twice in the site, not in a seat or a symbolic abode but in inscriptions in Rónggring for the insiders to see, and in English for the outsiders to be informed.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a short overview of the political regions, the legal frameworks, and the nationalist discourses that formulate trajectories of territorial integration. It is within these trajectories that community rituals became a productive means to shape, redefine, and display relations between ethnic group and territory – a ritual power specifically appropriated by the ethnic activists. Through analysis of the ritual programme, Tendong Hlo Rumfát, I unravelled what Shneiderman (2020) calls “the objectification of a particular set of relationships between ethnic bodies and territory” (207). In Róng ritual practice, the humans – the ethnic Mútunci Róng – did not interact with territory either directly or exclusively: these relations were always in association with the more-than-human beings whose abodes are in the given territory, and who protect and own the land. Róng activists thus faced the problem that their

very relation to land and water – one crucial asset in the political positioning of Indigeneity – was deeply interwoven with more-than-human beings, who found no visible place in an objectified world conceptualised within culturalist ontologies. In this chapter I have shown that in order to be productive in a world that only allows Indigenous people to express themselves through ‘culture’, Róng activists have reconceptualised ritual practice – and ultimately their Indigenous ontologies. Within these processes, however, the more-than-human does not vanish or manifest itself as mere culture. It evolves, takes on different embodiments, and thereby also formulates new relations to territory and people.

In order to objectify the relations between ‘the’ Mútunci Róng and ‘their’ territory and integrate them within a framework of recognition and cultural rights, Róng activists or, more often, the ritual act itself (here in the sense of ritual programme) redefined what the characteristics of more-than-human beings and their relations to the territory were. This reformulation was at times a mere consequence of the ritual setup – such as the increasing use of hypernyms – but in other contexts the redefinitions were more conscious – such as in the foregrounding of nature worship as a more ‘secular’ concept to encourage the participation of Christian Mútunci Róng in ethno-political action and cultural revival, or to manage inter-ethnic politics.¹⁴²

I have thus described the observed tendency towards a delocalisation of knowledge and of the more-than-human beings themselves. Stockhausen (2018) notes a similar transformation regarding ritual sites of the Dumi Rai community in Nepal in the processes of ethnic revival (see also Holmberg 2016). The effects of this delocalisation were a more generic perception of embodiment in the landscape and a focus on the more-than-human beings and ancestral figures that were common to the majority of Mútunci Róng. These transformations increasingly blurred the distinctions between nature as an abode of the divine and nature as itself divine, particularly in the reformulation of the creator deity Ítbú Rum as Mother Nature and in the secularisation of ritual. To exemplify this, I have traced a universalisation of Róng practice as nature worship that mainly highlights the benevolence of Mother Nature. Coinciding with this, and spatially distinct but overlapping, the activation of core Róng more-than-human beings within the holy landscape of Dzongu gives a new potency and directionality to the wrathful aspects of the embodied more-than-human beings.

As defined by the activists, one primary aim of the ritual programmes – and thus of the reframing of the more-than-human beings and its relations to territory – was to enable all Mútunci Róng to find common ground in the per-

142 See Torri 2019 for a discussion of secularism and religion in ethnic revival in Nepal.

formed heritage, and potentially increase mobilisation for political action. The act attempts to buttress what I call a pan-Róng belonging – a sense of togetherness beyond political, religious, regional, social, and cultural divisions. However, as I showed in Chapter Two, while the executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations aimed to create a unified, legible imaginary of their ethnic group in order to buttress that sense of togetherness and belonging, the diverse strategies and actors within the field of ethnic politics and environmental activism assembled several potential imageries of what ‘Mútunci Róng’ could be. What I have assembled in this chapter is not exhaustive. It is channelled by my own approach of looking at cultural revival and ethno-political actions through the lens of ritual programmes. My main point here was not to systematically outline what these imaginaries were, but to emphasise that they were constituted of and themselves constituted polysemic relations to polysemic more-than-human beings and to a polysemic territory reformulated within culturalist ontologies.

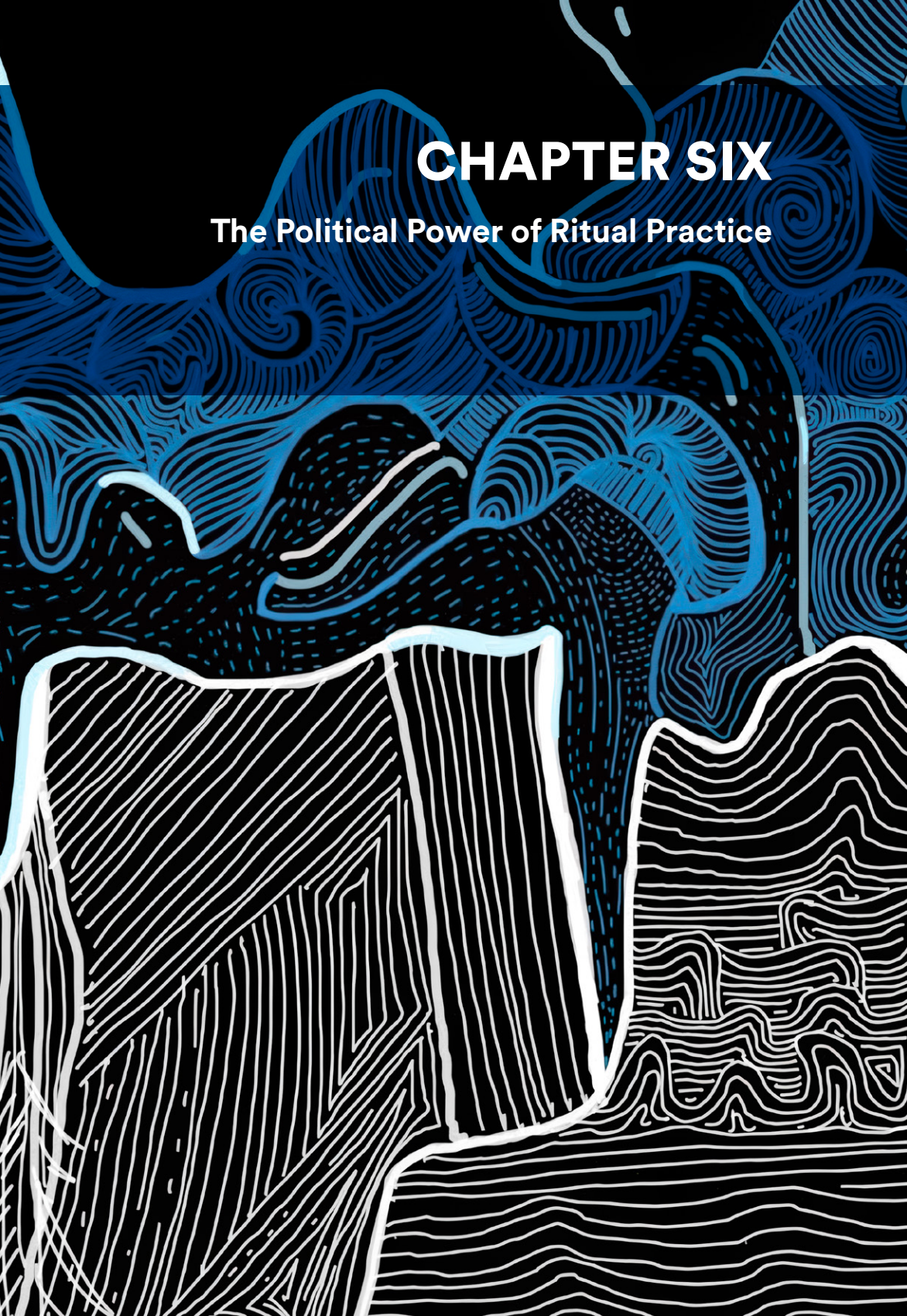
I use the concept of polysemy here because I find it more fruitful than the search for purity within culture, religions, or ontologies. The linguist Taylor (2003) has pointed out that whereas polysemy (in his usage, related to language) raises issues in scholarship, “the speakers of a language rarely experience polysemy to be a problem at all” (647). This is because – to remain in the context of linguistic theory – polysemy is “a natural consequence of how communication works” (Falkum 2009, 27). I argue that polysemy is inherent to Róngríng and Róng cognition: the many different meanings for the same word are, indeed, enough to drive a learner crazy, but the Róngríng speaker understands their meaning from contexts and through an appreciation of polysemy. Similarly, Róng religious tradition is polysemic – with pairings and multiple associated meanings. This inherent polysemy only becomes problematic when the differences are activated – such as by the requirements of showcasing an objectified and unified culture in the Indian reservation system, or in the process of political contestations.

I argue that in ethno-political action, it was the polysemy of more-than-human beings – their potential to be many things at once – that turned politically potent, such as in the concept of Lyángdók Úngdók. I suggest that while the characteristics of the more-than-humans and their relations to territory were framed according to culturalist modes of othering, Róng activists did not merely reject or confirm state categorisation but in fact reformulated and assembled their own approaches to Róng tradition, imaginaries of self and group, as well as positioning in the world. The ritual act assembled what it meant to be Indigenous, with all its polysemy, and how that powerful but also dangerous concept could be productive in formulating self through actions to counter harm and

improve welfare. What I have only so far addressed in passing is the politics involved in this process. The unravelling of the political power of the more-than-humans, the negotiations with the state, and the performative searches for the 'good life' are the main foci of my last two chapters.

CHAPTER SIX

The Political Power of Ritual Practice



I have introduced the state as a powerful recognising agent of ritual as well as of ethnicity, the latter in the form of the regulations for Scheduled Tribes or *adivāsi janajāti*, contextualised within the politics of governmentality and the agency of the governed. In this context, the state means the Republic of India and the Republic of Nepal and their respective local manifestations and agents. Ritual programmes in their enactments are rooted in the idea of a state that recognises cultures and acknowledges belonging to the territory through forms of differentiated citizenship and complex administrative measures. The sub-nationalist discourse and legal framework of the Sikkimese kingdom has a strong impact on the concepts and experiences of Indigeneity of the transnational Róng community in Sikkim as well as beyond the immediate boundaries of the former kingdom. Therefore, before I elaborate on the patronage relations between state agents (often Mútunci Róng) and the Róng clientele, as well as the networks of exchange and resistance in and around ritual programmes, I examine the politics on which Róng ritual practice in Dzongu was grounded – the politics and power relations of the Sikkimese kingdom.

The ritual practice and its oral traditions, the *lúngten sung*, draw on a notion of the state in which power is asserted through taxes, alliances, and lineage, as well as through relations to mountain deities. I should clarify that I do not conceptualise present-day ritual practice in Dzongu as a historical act: in contemporary Dzongu society, the performances are very much acts of the present endowed with ritual agency. I have introduced them as important soteriological acts to ward off danger and ensure community welfare – even prosperity – through exchange with more-than-human beings. What I suggest is that the ritual practice, grounded in the interface between Róng Indigenous and Himalayan Buddhist ontologies – tied to mountain cults and kings – is no longer linked to political powers in contemporary Sikkim or India. However, my main argument here is that once we see that, in the Róng Indigenous and the wider Himalayan ontologies, the embedded more-than-human beings co-exist with humans, and have agency and a real impact on human well-being (Mullard 2011, 144), then – according to this formulation of reality – ritual has the potential to change the world and its power relations, and hence is a powerful political device, one that was crucial in negotiating political powers and allegiances in the past.

The meaning I intend to convey when I locate the political powers of ritual in the interface of Róng Indigenous and Himalayan Buddhist ontologies is well captured in Michaels's (2003) statement that "holy mountains are not simply there, but made, they are products of discovery and taming" (17). 'Taming' is the terminology used for the hegemonic Buddhist subjugation of Indigenous deities, often narrated by means of a contest between a Tibetan Buddhist master and



FIGURE 32: Samdrup Taso, the late Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011.

a demon (Bentley 2009/10; R. P. Lepcha 2022).¹⁴³ In the Himalaya, many accounts describe how Buddhist saints tamed local deities and incorporated them into the Buddhist pantheon. Thereby they were transformed into protectors of the *dharma* and the place. The sacred environment was converted in accord with the Buddhist universe (Karmay 1996). This hegemonic position required cyclical re-enacting – thus taming was an ongoing process and not an accomplished fact (Torri 2015, 263; Samuel 1993, 169; Schrempf 1999, 213). As the scholarship on colonialism has made clear, for example in the colonial construction of Australia as *terra nullius* (Moreton-Robinson 2005; Turner 2006), the discovery and the history of the discoverers omits or demonises the characteristics of the mountain before it was discovered and tamed. The ‘taming’ of malevolent spirits relates not only to religious conversion, but moreover to the transformation of the people’s mind, environment, and society: it refers to the subjugation of people and their country (Balikci 2002, 19; Ortner 1978, 99; Samuel 1993, 220). Deities get subjugated, more often than not along with the people who believe in them.

143 See Blondeau 1973, 63–94; Das and Chattopadhyaya 1984, 18–24; Hoffmann 1950a, 197–210, 277–90; 1950b, 65–77; Karmay 1972, 86–93; Reynolds 2005, Chapter 5; Tucci 1937, III; Tucci and Heissig 1970, 260ff., for the larger Himalayan context; or similarly for the Bon tradition, cf. Kind 2012, 24–34.

It is not my aim here to search for and disentangle the pre-Buddhist shamanic strata in Róng ritual from the syncretic religious and affective practice in present-day Dzongu, Sikkim, and the wider Himalaya (Balikci 2008; Mumford 1989; Samuel 1993). I make this point just in order to contextualise Róng ritual practice within a history of the political expansion of Tibetan rulers. Dzongu community ritual practice and the *lúngten sung* of the Dzongu and Sikkim landscape tell of the formation of alliances, the subjugation, and the resistance of the Dzongu Róng community vis-à-vis the Namgyal dynasty. In this chapter, I focus on the politics of the Kóngchen ritual and how, when it was still practised, it was recurrently used to negotiate relations with the Namgyal rulers of Sikkim. I highlight the political organisation, the power negotiations, and lastly the Indigenous religious power of the Kóngchen ritual that included the residents of Tingvong, potentially of entire Dzongu, and the king.

I, therefore, draw on the oral traditions I collected during my fieldwork in Dzongu, especially also on my interview with the late Kóngchen Búngthíng (Figure 32). Additionally, for the Kóngchen ritual I rely on Siiger's (1967) material from 1949. His work is relatively transparent concerning how he received the information and who gave it to him. For the political organisation of Dzongu, I draw on current memory, the observations and descriptions of Siiger, Morris (1938), and Gorer ([1939] 1996), as well as publications by colonial administrators. Where possible, I contextualise the narratives within the broader critical scholarship on the history of Sikkimese state formation, mainly drawing on Saul Mullard's work (2011).

The relation between oral tradition and history is complex. Oral traditions are embedded in the narrative present, thus formulating a view on history and not an account of historical events. Furthermore, as I have already described for Róng *lúngten sung*, narratives depend on the context and are tied to the narrator. Over time, stories are added, elements consciously omitted, and others forgotten (Mullard 2011, 17; Tonkin 1995; Ramble 1983). In the main, oral traditions are a reflection of the narrator's, as well as the collective past narrators', interpretations of the world, the self, and the group, as well as their positioning towards the political rulers (Chapman et al. 1989, 1).¹⁴⁴ While I contextualise the narratives within the available historical critical scholarship, it is the interweaving of these oral traditions with the present that interests me most. They show us a present-day understanding of history and consequently a present-day positioning of ritual practice within power relations of the past.

144 See Gaenszle 2003; Oppitz 1974 for the Himalayan context. See Bentley 2009/2010 and R. P. Lepcha 2022 on how Róng mythologies can be read as products of positionings and interactions with the politically dominant (in most cases the Namgyal dynasty).

Kóngchen Ritual: Ritual Interdependence, a Powerful Lineage, and Territorial Control

When I started my fieldwork on the community rituals in Dzongu, I did not expect to find that two of the most common rituals, Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát, were actually the same ritual as the famous but discontinued practice of the Kóngchen ritual, documented by the anthropologist Siiger and conducted by the lineage of the Kóngchen Búngthíng. The first inconsistencies I stumbled over were when we tried to find out the date when Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát were performed. Initially, this seemed to be a simple organisational task involving drafting a ritual calendar in order to get an overview of which rituals were performed when. The village communities organised each ritual once a year, both in the first half, Sotáp Rumfát before Cirim. The latest Cirim we had recorded was in June. However, older sources all consistently claimed that Cirim was performed twice a year, while none mentioned Sotáp Rumfát (Gorer [1938] 1996; Morris 1938, 4; Siiger 1967, 187). When we probed further, we found memory of a second Cirim. Payel Búngthíng remembered that Cirim had been shifted from the end of summer to the beginning of the monsoon (Payel Búngthíng, June 2011).

During a visit to Tingvong we asked about the Kóngchen ritual. The royally funded ritual in honour of Kóngchen is aptly called Pano Rumfát, the king's ritual (Pentong Búngthíng, May 2011; son-in-law of Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). As the ritual was not performed anymore, I was initially more interested in the revival attempt in 2006. But then, in an interview, a village elder, a former Panchayat of Lingko, suddenly corrected us:

Actually, we do not have Kóngchen Rumfát, Sotáp Rumfát, and Cirim Rumfát, for that itself is Kóngchen Rumfát. The difference is that the public did Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát. The same Rumfát was done by Nung Tásó [Kóngchen Búngthíng, J.B.] at Gangtok, and when he returned from Gangtok, he performed the same Rumfát here. There was no difference between Kóngchen Rumfát, Cirim, and Sotáp Rumfát. In the wintertime the king gifted a yak for the ritual called Sotáp Rumfát and in the summertime the king gave an ox for the Cirim Rumfát. [...] All this combined is called Kóngchen Rumfát. (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011)

Initially, we were surprised. Then, when we interviewed Kóngchen Búngthíng, he also distinguished between the winter and the summer ritual (June 2011). Suddenly, it made sense that the Teng Búngthíng called Cirim Pano

Rumfát (January 2010) and that Tseten Lepcha from Chungtang described the ritual as an invitation to the king (January 2010). Several other senior villagers in the various hamlets of Tingvong confirmed the statement made by the former Panchayat. Payel Búngthíng, explaining why Cirim had been shifted, reasoned that when the Kóngchen ritual was discontinued and Kóngchen Búngthíng no longer descended to the royal palace, this had had an influence on the performance of Cirim. There seems to have been no reason to delay the ritual performance and thus it was shifted to the present time in spring, directly after Sotáp Rumfát (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011).

When Kóngchen Búngthíng told us that his clan was Gârkumtsum, another relation between the village community rituals and the Kóngchen ritual struck me. During the recitations for Cirim and Sotáp Rumfát, Lingthem Búngthíng said that actually the Gârkumtsum clan should be performing the ritual, but this offering was not done anymore. He requested the deities to be satisfied with what he had to offer from the Lingthem area (Lingthem Búngthíng, May 2009). Initially, when working on the translations, we had thought that he was perhaps referring to the clan of a previous religious specialist from Lingthem, who had performed the annual rituals before him. However, after the interview with Kóngchen Búngthíng it became evident that Lingthem Búngthíng was referring to the part of the ritual cycle that had no longer been performed since the demise of the Sikkimese kingdom: the Kóngchen ritual.

After we came to understand the historical interrelatedness between rituals that are today named and described differently, more and more ritual connections surfaced. The myth explaining the origin of the Kóngchen ritual tells of six (or seven) brothers who turned into the soldiers of Kóngchen. In his Cirim recitations, Payel Búngthíng clarifies that he is performing the ritual because the brothers instructed the villagers to do so. In another example, Lingthem Búngthíng performed the same recitations for both Sotáp Rumfát and Cirim. I initially interpreted this as a loss of detail and knowledge, as the initial mythological background implies two completely different rituals: one of them connected to the creation of snow and hail in the creation story (Bentley 2008), the other derived from a more recent history of war. But against the backdrop of ritual interdependence, the similarities between these rituals made sense.

In Dzongu, it seemed the memory of how these three rituals were interlinked was slowly becoming obscured. Several younger villagers in Tingvong corrected me and told me that I must have gotten something wrong, as they did not know about the connection between the three rituals. Additionally, leading activists in the Róng community from Dzongu thought that I must have been mistaken when I discussed the ritual interdependence with them.

The anthropologist Siiger (1967) notes that there were two ceremonies to Kóngchen, but he could only get proper information about the performance that occurred around February and March. The other one, which Siiger describes as minor, was later in the year (May, June) (191). He does not seem to connect these ceremonies with the Cirim rituals he also describes, but notes a vague omnipresence of Kóngchen and his ceremony. According to the recitations collected by Siiger, the historic Kóngchen ritual called upon various more-than-human beings to prevent harm from afflicting the Sikkimese king and to ensure his prosperity and long life. The wording of the recitations was strongly reminiscent of the Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát ceremonies we recorded and translated during our fieldwork, although the recitations circumscribing the place included more-than-human beings, mainly *múng*, embedded outside of Dzongu and with more significance in the royal context. Places named were, for example, Tashid-ing, Pemayangtse, and a rock in Chumbi (Siiger and Rischel 1967, Text No. 38), as well as the various states that the Namgyal dynasty had been to war with (Bhutan, Nepal, Limbu) (Text No. 35).

The Kóngchen ritual could only be performed by one lineage of religious specialists. I have already introduced Samdrup Tásó and his positioning in the society after the ritual was discontinued. Here, I am interested in the history of his lineage and its political positioning with regards to the territory. I suggest that the narrative on the origin of the Kóngchen ritual does not explain the origin of the royally funded ritual but contextualises an older ritual obligation of the Gârkumtsum *putso* to the main mountain deity Kóngchen, due to their ancestral kinship relations. Siiger (1955) had already documented that Tingvong villagers believed the lineage of Kóngchen Búngthing to have originated in time immemorial. In their logic, this was the reason why the king took an interest in his worship (188, 195).

In the origin narrative as recorded by Siiger (1967, 192–93), the six brothers who became Kóngchen soldiers had a sister whom they used to visit but did so less and less often. She was unhappy, so she decided to go further south. Before she left, she promised her brothers that if she had children, the children would perform rituals to the brothers, but if she did not, then they would have to be satisfied without offerings. She went to Laven, a village on the hillside opposite Tingvong. There she met a man and gave birth to a boy who stammered. Then a snake (*payelbu*), considered poisonous (Tamsang [1980] 2009: 467), blocked the river and flooded Upper Dzongu. Knowledgeable people requested that the boy perform a ritual to Kóngchen and Payelbu. Consequently, he did so, and within the ritual offered fowl meat to his uncles. Thereafter, the serpent let the water flow again, down to Cádung Rázó, Kóngchen's wife. The son then mar-

ried, and when he died his son took over the ritual to Kóngchen. They were the ancestors of Kóngchen Búngthíng.

As mentioned, kinship relations of various sorts between different mountains, lakes, and other landscape markers are prominent in the Róng origin mythologies, as in other Himalayan communities (Karmay 1996, 59; Hazod 1996). The myth of the origin of the worship of Kóngchen evokes several levels of kinship ties. First, the Kóngchen soldiers themselves were brothers. In other contexts, the mountains surrounding Kóngchen are described as the brothers of Kóngchen himself (Steinmann 1996, 186). Second, the Kóngchen soldiers were the maternal uncles of the first Kóngchen Búngthíng. After this first generation, the descent runs along the male lineage. Some variations of the myth talk of seven brothers, six of whom turned into more-than-human beings and one of whom remained human (Payel Búngthíng, April 2010; Namgyal and Dolma 1908, Annex 23–24). In this case, the ancestral relation was entirely patrilineal, a shift that also occurred in the wider Róng society. In Dzongu, Gorer ([1938] 1996) already notes that all children inherit the father's clan (150). The existence of female guardian deities that are passed along the female lineage indicated that potentially clans used to be inherited as such. Particularly in Kalimpong, the practice that the mother passes on her clan to the daughter and the father to the son is still common (Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011) and is moreover inscribed in the Róng customary law compiled by ILTA (2003, 3).

In the available oral tradition, the embodiment of the Kóngchen soldiers correlated with a distinction made in the scholarship on Himalayan mountain cults: male ancestors of clans were embodied in mountains and married to specific female more-than-human beings or serpent spirits associated with specific bodies of water (Balıkcı 2002; Steinman 1996 for the Sikkim context; Kind 2012). Linked with this, every Róng clan has an associated mountain (*cú*), lake (*dâ*) or waterbody, and specifically defined entry point into the ancestral lands (*lep*). While we could not find out which lake or *lep* was linked with the Gârkumtsum *putso*, Kóngchen Búngthíng was very clear about the associated mountain: Kóngchen. Chegra Búngthíng, the religious specialist who performs the southern counterpart to the royal Kóngchen ritual, belonging to the Taring *putso*, named Kóngchen as his clan's mountain and Língmú Lóngmú Dâ as the associated lake (Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). This is Khecheopalri Lake in West Sikkim (Kachyo Lepcha, May 2014).

Another particularly interesting aspect of this narrative is the decision-making processes and power distributions with regard to counteracting vulnerability. The kinship relations did not automatically determine the boy's role in ritual practice. A disaster occurred (a flood) and knowledgeable people with deci-

sion-making power in the community convened and decided that this specific boy must have the powers to mitigate the disaster (clearly due to his close maternal blood relations with the defined culprits: neglected Kóngchen soldiers). Subsequently, according to this oral narrative, the practice and the powers of ritual practitioners were shaped by the political agency of other members of the community and thus strongly embedded in community organisational structures.

So how did these kinship relations translate into political power? In what have been denominated Tibetan mountain cults, mountains are, besides being ancestral lineage deities, also territorial deities. They are masters over specific territories and have an entourage of other mountains and more-than-human beings under their command. The territorial deities presiding over a larger region receive the title 'chief' or 'king' and rule over the other embodied more-than-human beings (Karmay 1996, 59). The lesser deities or the entourage of the chief are called ministers or soldiers. This description applies also for the worship of Kóngchen, who in ritual recitations was summoned as Ne Kóngchen Pano, the sacred Kóngchen king. In this logic of divine leadership, the kinship relations endowed specific people with socio-political power over the territory that belongs to their ancestral deity. Ancestral connections to more-than-human owners of the lands justified political rule (Blondeau 1996, ix; Ramble 1996; Karmay 1996). Under this interpretation, the Gårkumtsum clan and their religious specialists were more than religious leaders; they were political leaders over a specific territory in what is today North Sikkim. Here again, I remind, it is the relations to diverse Lyángdók Úngdók that translate into political power.

With regard to the Mútunci Róng, Bhutia, and the Tamang, Steinman (1996) hypothesised that the conceptualisation of mountains as chiefs, ministers, soldiers, or kings entered the local religious epistemologies of the Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman groups of the Himalaya in interaction with Buddhist concepts (199). This may be the case. Karmay (1996), however, argues that such Buddhist concepts were clearly added onto prior ideas that related mountains to the origin of people, and vested power in kinship relations to the said mountains (60). Not much is known about Róng political organisation or the territorial function of clans prior to the Sikkimese kingdom. Most social memory of previous political organisation tells of political offices that date back to the Sikkimese kingdom; any existing written sources do the same. In Róng origin myths, as highlighted above, people and deities regularly convene, often summoned by the gods of wisdom, in order to take decisions.¹⁴⁵ While I am aware that these myths do not give any historical description of political decision-making before the advent of the Namgyal dynasty, they do formulate a social memory of decision-making

145 See Bentley 2008 on the pact between humans and evil spirits. See also my discussion in Chapter Three.



FIGURE 33: Ritual organisation: The *gyápân* in action, March 2010.

processes within councils based on (religious) knowledge and possibly seniority, in addition to clan-based power structures, as well as – importantly – relations to more-than-humans. A remnant of previous decision-making institutions could potentially be the office of the *yúmí*, which still existed in Lingthem and Nampatan during my fieldwork.

Ritual Organisation and Traditional Offices: *yúmí* and *gyápân*

The political leadership of Róng clans and its divine origin seems to have been completely incorporated into the governance structures of the Sikkimese kingdom. In the late 1930s, when Dzongu was a royal estate, Morris (1938) noted for Lingthem village that clans had minor political importance (64). A closer look at ritual organisation underlines his observation. In the rituals we participated in, the ritual organisation was still closely linked to the administrative offices of the former Sikkimese kingdom, first and foremost to the former local tax collector. This indicates that the function of ritual in the former Sikkimese kingdom was not merely soteriological, but instrumental, to use Gellner's distinction, and bound into a system of alliance, tax collection, and royal governance.

Besides the religious specialist, the main person in charge of the ritual organisation was the *gyápân* (Figure 33). This term does not come from Róngring

but derives from the Tibetan *brgya dpon*. In the administrative organisation of the former Sikkimese kingdom, the *brgya dpon* was one of the lowest ranks (Mullard and Wongchuk 2010, 5). In the wider Tibetan context, it was a military rank. According to Tamsang's dictionary ([1980] 2009), a *gyápân* is a "centurion. n. in the ancient Lepcha Army, the commander of a century; an army officer of 100 soldiers" (245). It is likely that during the kings' time, the *gyápân* had military functions, such as organising soldiers on the village level and leading them to war. Colonial sources suggest (Warner 2014a, 27), as does the origin myth of Cirim, that Róng chiefs were integrated primarily into the military service of the kingdom. I argue here that these obligations of military service as a form of taxation by the king were annually reinforced in the ritual cycle of Dzongu.

According to the previous ethnographies, the *gyápân* worked as an assistant (usually in collecting taxes) to the *mandal*, the village head. In Siiger's (1967) phrase, the *gyápân* was the "actual village-leader" (118). He was in charge of everyday village administration, the collection of taxes, gathering the villagers for ritual occasions and communal work, as well as negotiations in conflicts. The *gyápân* was elected for a term of three years (Gorer [1938] 1996, 131). Ideally, every male villager took on the post of the *gyápân* once. The election of the *gyápân* was tied into the ritual cycle and held at the time of Sotáp Rumpfát, a practice still observed during my fieldwork. We attended an election in the village of Nampatan, just outside of Dzongu. After the ritual performance was over, the villagers gathered and appointed the next *gyápân* of the respective village hamlet. In this case, the decision had been made beforehand and the election was a formality.

In the ritual practice we observed in Dzongu, the *gyápân* fixed the date of the ritual after consultation with the Róng religious specialist; with the Panchayat, the present-day elected authority; and with the head lama, the other religious authority in the village. Then he informed the villagers about the ritual date. One or two days before the event, he collected the appropriate offerings from each household. He entered the household offerings into a register, to keep track of who had given what. This used to be equivalent to a village tax register.

As mentioned above, in some villages, such as Lingthem and Nampatan, yet another traditional office bearer was still involved in organising the community rituals: the *yúmí*. During my fieldwork, each hamlet of Lingthem had a *yúmí*. They were usually elderly men and took on the role of advisors. Even at the time of the kingdom they seem to have had no official duties, but were close to the *mandal*. The *yúmí* can be described as a council of elders. Based on seniority and knowledge, the *yúmí* seem to have been held in high esteem and had influence on decision-making in the village. There is no equivalent for the

post of the *yúmi* in the Sikkimese administration. It is possible that the *yúmi* is a relic of a prior system based on seniority or knowledge that was then adapted to the administration in the Sikkimese kingdom, as Gorer suggests ([1938] 1996, 131), but this remains a hypothesis. No new *yúmi* were being appointed anymore, which leaves the future of the office uncertain.

In the Sikkimese kingdom, Dzongu was a royal estate, the dowry of the queen. Thus, the Dzongu residents paid taxes and other services directly to the royal palace. Various landlords (*kazi*) used to oversee levying the income from the region in the name of the queen, but the residents did not need to render services to them. According to Siiger (1967), a part of the taxes was paid directly to the *kazi*, in 1949 an estimated one rupee per household (119). However, it is possible that his interlocutor Adir was talking about taxes paid to the *muktiar*, an intermediary between the *mandal* and the king introduced in Dzongu in the beginning of the twentieth century, as the use of titles in that section of Siiger's ethnography is not very clear. According to Siiger's interlocutors, until the beginning of the twentieth century the taxes were paid in dry rice. Money entered Dzongu with cardamom plantations, a commodity that was taxed individually (119).

It seems that depending on the respective queen and her family relations and trust, the landlord put in charge of Dzongu changed over the course of time. Colonial sources provide sporadic insights: in 1849, the region was supervised by the *subba* of Singtam, whom Hooker ([1854] 2004b, 15) described as a tall Bhutia,¹⁴⁶ while ninety years later, in 1937, Rhenock Kazi had taken over the obligation from Mali Kazi (Gorer [1938] 1996, 123). Gorer gives no indication as to when this occurred. According to Siiger (1967, 119), in 1949 the king received five rupees a year per household.

The name Dzongu, *Zónggú* in *Róngríng*, is probably derived from the Lhoke or Tibetan language; *rDzong* means a fortified area or administrative region, and *gu* is nine – hence, 'nine fortified areas'. The reference to fortification again strengthens the assumption that initially military alliances and service were the primary connection between the *Róng* chiefs of Dzongu and the Namgyal rulers. In spite of the connotations of the name, there were twelve administrative units during the later years of the kingdom, as also mentioned in ritual practice.

As stated, in the beginning of the twentieth century the royal administration introduced the position of the *muktiar* in Dzongu. He assisted the landlord in collecting taxes and had a position superior to the *mandal*. In practice, he

146 The region described as being governed by the *subba* of Singtam in the name of the Gyalmo during that time is described as larger than today: "from Gorh to the Tibet frontier" (Hooker [1854] 2004b, 15). For example, the Chungtang region, which today is beyond the borders of Dzongu, was governed by the same Singtam *subba* (23).

supervised the collection of taxes, ergo the work of the *mandals*, and visited the villages twice a year to then report back to the royal palace (Siiger 1967, 118; Morris 1938, 65; Gorer [1938] 1996, 124). He dealt directly with the king's or queen's agent at the royal palace (Morris 1938, 65). At a certain time, there were two *muktiar* in Dzongu: one for Upper Dzongu, based in Lingthem, and one for Lower Dzongu, based in Gyathang. Then a local dispute arose over the succession of the Lingthem *muktiar*, and the *mandals* of the five villages of Upper Dzongu made a request to the court to get rid of the post altogether, which was granted. Therefore, since the mid 1930s the Gyathang *muktiar* has taken on the responsibility for the whole region. Interestingly, the *mandals* had forbidden the successor to the office, with whom they did not agree, to attend any festive gatherings at the monastery or in private houses until the matter was resolved (Gorer [1938] 1996, 124–26). Such sanctions highlight the importance ritual occasions used to have in the political organisation and the assertion of power within the village. Since this incident, the office has been handed on in a hereditary manner.

There used to be twelve *mandals* in Dzongu, each presiding over an administrative village. The term *mandal* was commonly used for village heads in northern India. The *mandal* was in charge of tax collection as well as law and order in his respective village.¹⁴⁷ In early the early ethnographies of the first half of the nineteenth century, the *mandal* was considered the landlord, while the other villagers were referred to as tenants (Siiger 1967, 118; Gorer 1938 [1996], 127). There were privileges to the post, such as the remission of certain taxes and the right to free labour. The *mandals* were heavily involved in social affairs. They were responsible for arranging marriage alliances, but – and this seems significant – were not involved in the organisation of community rituals. According to Siiger (1967, 119), in 1949, the *mandal* received eight annas, a currency unit used in British India, and the *gyápân* four, for their services. Sixteen annas were worth one rupee.

According to Gorer ([1938] 1996, 123), the office of the *mandal* had replaced the *jem mi*, an office that no one whom we asked could remember. Since Gorer himself mentions the *yúmi*, he does not seem to have been confusing *jem mi* with *yúmi*. According to Siiger (1967, 118), the state introduced the office of the *mandal* in Dzongu around the 1870s. During Gorer's stay in Lingthem in 1938, some *mandals* in Dzongu claimed to be the eleventh or twelfth within their family (Gorer [1938] 1996, 127, 130). It is likely that the term *mandal* replaced an older term referring to a similar office within the royal administration, due to the growing influence of British India in Sikkimese affairs.

147 See Siiger 1967, 119 on the system of levying tax in Tingvong, Dzongu.

The office of the *mandal* was to a certain extent hereditary in the extended family. Often the eldest son inherited the office, but not always. Even if the *mandal* had a close heir, the villagers in the end needed to elect the successor. The choice of the right keeper for the office was pragmatic. Often the villagers chose the most capable son in the extended family. The office therefore ideally and preferably stayed within one lineage and clan, though it could transfer into other clans depending on how succession was negotiated (if, for example, it fell to the husband of a daughter). If a *mandal* died without a suitable heir, the *yúmí* would substitute for him until the households made a choice. This decision was then forwarded to the landlord, the royal court, or the king for approval. In a next step, the new *mandal* would be on probation for two years and, if his work was satisfactory, he was officially confirmed in the office (Siiger 1967, 118). During my fieldwork, the *mandal* families were still known, but the office was completely obsolete, as it lacked any ongoing involvement in community rituals.

The village of Tingvong historically had one more level of administrative office bearers. Each of the six hamlets in Tingvong had a *tásó* (one each for Tingvong proper and Payel together, Namprik, Kussung, Lingko, Sangvo, and Nung), while the entire Tingvong area had one *mandal* (Agya Maila, May 2011). According to Mullard and Wongchuk (2010, 5), *rġa sa* was a title prevalent in Limbu villages, some Róng villages, and in the Sikkimese territories in Morang, presently in Nepal, for an office ranking under the *gyápân*. This hierarchy did not apply for the usage of the term and office in Tingvong. Here, the *tásó* ranked at the same level and received the same amount of respect as the *mandal*. In an interview, the Tingvong resident who would have been the *mandal* office bearer – and was still referred to as *mandal* by the other villagers – clarified that before the term *mandal* was used, they used to call the village leader *tásó* (Tashi *mandal*, June 2011). Locally, the word is described as a Róng word. Interestingly, there is a Róng clan called *Tásómú* (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 363). However, today it is impossible to say if the clan denomination turned into an official administrative title or vice versa.

The office of the *tásó* was closely linked to the Kóngchen ritual, which is why in Dzongu it only exists in Tingvong. The king appointed five families and Kóngchen Búngthíng to the committee that organised the Kóngchen ritual, giving them the rank of a *tásó*. This was the reason why villagers referred to Kóngchen Búngthíng as Samdrup Taso, indicating the – by then diminished – importance of his political rank rather than his religious lineage. Furthermore, they called him Nung *Tásó*: Nung was his village hamlet, thus this denomination referred to his territorial leadership. The commitment to organise the ritual was inherited within the extended family, according to the same logic as described for the *mandal*. It ideally succeeded from father to son but could also be passed

on to any other suitable relative (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). This was why, during my fieldwork, the villagers associated the members of the committee and the office of the *tásó* with families and not individual people. The *tásó* did not levy taxes in the village other than the offerings on the ritual occasion.

During my fieldwork, the villagers did not address any of the family members of the Kóngchen ritual committee as *tásó* – with the aforementioned exception of Kóngchen Búngthíng. None of the other members who had actually participated in the ritual performance and had actively taken on administrative duties during the kingdom was alive anymore. Technically, their sons or nephews would inherit the post, but the ritual and the political system had ceased to exist (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). In contrast to the disappeared political duties of the office of the *tásó*, due to his religious responsibilities, the obligation of Kóngchen Búngthíng to pay his taxes did not end with the decline of the ritual and the ending of the kingdom.

Ritual and Obligation: Paying Taxes in Historic Dzongu

The Cirim origin myth suggests that the alliance that was initiated by war, and which resulted in the annual necessity of the Kóngchen ritual, was an alliance between the Gârkumtsum *putso* and the royal lineage. In living memory, it was between the village community – each hamlet represented by their *tásó* and not all of the same clan – and the king, indicating a shift from clan to village residence as administrative unit. In the following section, I elaborate how community rituals were productive not only in the exchange between humans and embedded more-than-human beings, but also in the exchange between king and subject. They were part of a religio-political organisation revolving around the king as a Dharma raja or Chogyal, the divine ruler. As mentioned, the summer performance of the Kóngchen ritual coincided with the state celebration of Pang Lhabzol. I outline here how the religious process of paying taxes (*khe tóp*) described in Chapter Four is inherently instrumental and political.

The committee members assisted Kóngchen Búngthíng in organising the ritual, collecting the necessary offerings. Some of the offerings were kept in Tingvong for the performance; these resembled the offerings collected in other community rituals (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011). The offerings taken down to the palace, however, were more extraordinary. The committee members were responsible for collecting fruits such as bananas and oranges, millet beer, a medicinal plant from Pentong (*púkzing*), and the kidneys

of high-altitude deer (*saburthíng*). Additionally, during the ritual performance at the end of winter they transported five live birds caught in the Sakyong area (*tuklyángfo*) and five live fish caught in the Rukshót waterfall, commonly known as Lingzya falls, to the royal palace (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011). All these items were rare, hard to get, and said to have medicinal properties.

The delegation, comprising Kóngchen Búngthíng, the committee, and other helpers, brought the offerings to Gangtok. In living memory of the event, they did not meet with the king personally, but Rhenock Áthíng received them (Pentong Búngthíng, May 2011). At that time, he was the private secretary to the king and his lineage had been in charge of Dzongu in the name of the Gyalmo since some time before the 1930s. In contrast, Chegra Búngthíng, who performed the southern ritual during Pang Lhabsol, met the last Sikkimese king, Palden Thutop Namgyal, and his father, Tashi Namgyal (Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). It is possible that these kings received the southern *búngthíng* because he resided beyond the Sikkimese territory and was technically not subject to the king, while courtesy had it that those in charge of Dzongu received Kóngchen Búngthíng. It could, however, likewise signify a loss of importance given to the ritual that I will address in a later section. The delegation presented the items they had brought and used them in the performance at the royal palace.

Kóngchen Búngthíng and the delegation used to get specific items in return: red, yellow, and white coloured cloth pieces, millet beer, and rice, among other things (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011; Pentong Búngthíng, May 2011). Kóngchen Búngthíng received occasional additional gift items, most famously two elephant tusks, which are now lost, and guns (Siiger 1967; Wangchuk and Zulca 2007). The most prominent offering was a yak. According to the village elders and Kóngchen Búngthíng, the king offered the yak during the winter ritual. In the summer ritual, they received an ox (Waddell in Risley [1894] 1973, 355). Both these animals were then sacrificed at the ritual place in Tingvong. One of the committee members was specifically in charge of slaughtering the yak. The official title given to Kóngchen Búngthíng and the committee implies that this ritual exchange of goods was perceived as an official form of tax not only to the mountain deity but also to the Sikkimese king.

Kóngchen Búngthíng explained that while he, the one who performs the upper ritual, *tholsá rumfát*, received a black yak from the king, the one who performs the ritual of the plains, *dángsá rumfát*, got a white yak (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011).¹⁴⁸ However, Chegra Búngthíng said that he never received a white yak from the king (Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011); furthermore,

148 See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976, 20 for other forms of white yak offerings in Sikkim.

people from the region around Golma forest do not remember a white yak, but talk about chickens, goats, a pig, an ox, and other items (Gebu Lepcha, May 2011; Lungko Búngthíng, May 2011; son-in-law of Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011).

The yak is not used in any other known Róng rituals or mythology.¹⁴⁹ It represents an expensive and precious symbolic gift from the ruling class, or the king himself, to the pre-Buddhist god Kóngchen. The feast on the day of the ritual must have been exceptional for the Tingvong residents (Siiger 1967, 200). The offering of an ox, as done in the winter ceremony, used to be more common in the Róng community, but was expensive and only done when really required. Lingthem Búngthíng recounts that, in some years, the villagers sacrificed an ox at Cirim, especially when severe diseases had befallen the village or other unnatural incidents had happened in the years before and a larger sacrifice was deemed necessary (Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2010). Both Kóngchen and Chegra Búngthíng recalled that during the reign of the last king (1963–1975), the palace stopped contributing animals for sacrifice (Kóngchen Búngthíng, June 2011; Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). This is clearly associated with a strengthening of non-syncretic Buddhist practice in Sikkim and the problematising of animal sacrifice in Buddhist philosophy (Balikci 2008).¹⁵⁰

There is an interesting difference between the Kóngchen ritual and the complementary ritual in the southern hills. Chegra Búngthíng, in the south, received all the offerings from the royal palace, and after the demise of the kingdom he continued to get the offerings from the Tsuklakhang Trust, the organisation behind the former royal chapel. He did not offer anything to the royal family in return (Son-in-law of Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). In contrast, the offerings used during the Kóngchen ritual came from two different sources: the organising committee and village community sent items down to the palace, and the delegation brought offerings and return gifts from the palace.

These alternate exchanges underline the different relations the religious specialists, the communities, and lastly the territories had to the Namgyal

149 According to the Socio Economic Census 2006 there were 76 yaks in the Gram Panchayat Unit Sakyong Pentong (Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006, 433). However, these yaks were all located around Tholung monastery and actually belonged to the Tholung family, who in Sikkim are classified as Bhutia. Róng villages are usually at too low an altitude to raise yaks, and traditionally Mútunci Róng do not do high-altitude herding. The animal is associated with the higher-living people, such as the Bhutia and the Drukpa, in whose cultures it has great importance. This being said, there is a Róng clan in Dzongu whose clan origin narrative associates them with the yak (personal conversation, Mayelmit Lepcha, Gangtok, 2023). On the importance of the yak among the Sherpa and Tamang, see Oppitz 1997 and Macdonald 1980.

150 See Torri 2019 for similar research with the Hyolmo in Nepal.

rulers. Chegra village was located in Darjeeling, beyond the Sikkim borders. The adjoining land had not been steadily under control of the Sikkimese king since the Sino–Nepal war in 1788. At the latest from around the mid nineteenth century, the political and administrative dependencies of the region on the kingdom had become obsolete, and the local power holders with whom political interaction was required were the British colonial officers and those intermediaries they sponsored (Warner 2014a, 2014b). In my fieldwork I found no living memory of tax obligations to the king. However, the ritual obligations of the Sikkimese royal family remained. Therefore, the royal palace completely sponsored the ritual and contributed the offerings. It was merely the execution that was in the hands of Chegra Búngthing.

Dzongu, on the other hand, was part of the Sikkimese kingdom. As residents of the queen’s private estate, the villagers stood in direct alliances with the royal family and had tax obligations towards the king, or more precisely the Gyalmo. The ancient alliances between the Mútunci Róng of Dzongu and the Sikkimese king that were activated in the mythology of the Cirim ritual still had real political consequences until the demise of the kingdom in 1975. The Kóngchen ritual was the occasion when Dzongu (or at least the Tingvong area) reaffirmed its loyalty to the royal family through tax obligations and ritual exchange. The royal family was obliged to return gifts. Kóngchen Búngthing was not required to pay any additional taxes, as the ritual was seen as an appropriate exchange of duty (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011).

According to a member of the Tholung family, all of Dzongu used to pay taxes to the royal palace during Pang Lhabsol, at the time of the Kóngchen ritual. This was the case until the seventh king, Tsugphud Namgyal (1793–1863), was buried at the Tholung monastery, after he died in Chumbi. Oral tradition has it that a group led by Chumbu from Namprík, Tingvong, initiated the burial of the king in Dzongu, and prevailed over the monks from Pemayangste (Agya Maila, May 2011). While no other sources seconded this oral tradition from Dzongu, there is a reliquary of the seventh king at Tholung monastery (Arora 2006, 8). Additionally, it is highly probable that Tsugphud Namgyal died in Chumbi at the summer residence of the Sikkimese kings. He was residing there in 1861, when he sent his son to sign the treaty of Tumlong (Ardussi et al. 2021; Risley [1894] 1973, 21).

According to social memory, the king’s burial at Tholung was not merely of symbolic or ritual nature, but instead had real political significance.

“We carried [the body of the king] from Tibet so we will carry him to Tholung monastery.” All the mandals agreed and they carried the

dead body from Dikchu [...]. They stopped at Namprík; the Lingko Mandal offered a bundle of beans, a pumpkin, a plate of rice, millet beer, and a pig to the body and soul of the deceased and stated, “you are our king”. The Tingvong Tásó then gave a speech: “You are our king. Today you are dead, but this does not matter, you will remain at Tholung monastery along with Lhatsun Chenpo. Don’t harm the public of Dzongu.” At that time, there was a lama present. He said, “it is not good to offer all this, but anyway, he was the Róng king. You will now have to offer to him during Pang Lhabsol, the same as you offered today. (Tholung Monastery Dorji Lapân, August 2010)

From then onwards, the village of Tingvong – all six hamlets under one *mandal* – had the ritual obligation to contribute (taxes) to the Tholung monastery during Pang Lhabsol. In exchange, they were exempted from the duty to pay tax to the royal palace in Gangtok (Agya Maila, May 2011). According to this oral tradition, the monastery and the palace negotiated alliances and services, and agreed that the regular annual tax was to be paid to the monastery. The Kóngchen ritual exchange went on undisturbed.

The Tingvong *mandal* had the responsibility to arrange the Pang Lhabsol ritual at Tholung. He used to accompany a *búngthing* and the offering there. Any Róng religious specialist could perform the ritual at Tholung monastery: it was not tied to a lineage such as with the Kóngchen ritual. The regular ritual performance was required to satisfy the spirit of the dead king, which was said to cause harm if not offered to regularly. Lingthem Búngthing described how the ritual obligation to the dead king came into being:

The Sikkimese king died at Chumbi valley, the Mútunci Róngkup from Dzongu brought back his dead body from there and kept it at Tholung monastery. After a month all the villages of Dzongu were disturbed by natural calamities. There were rats in the fields, dangerous animals were seen everywhere and were causing disturbance in every village of Dzongu.

Yuksam Rinpoche told Ship Gyebú, “Tonight you have to sit at the door of the monastery, while I will be inside the monastery. Tomorrow we might get some solution.” At midnight, so many tigers, bears, monkeys, rats, and other dangerous animals came out from the monastery or the coffin where the body of the deceased Sikkim king lay. So, in the morning, Ship Gyebú told the Rinpoche every-

thing that he had seen. They decided, “Early the next morning we have to burn the dead body of the king.” Since then, during the Pang Lhabsol, villagers offer pig and other items to the soul of the king so that he does not disturb the villages.

Actually, when the king was alive, each village used to pay tax to the king. Now it is the same thing. If we do not offer to him, he will be hungry, because he has nothing to eat, so he will get angry, turn into animals, roam around the village, eat everything, and disturb the villagers. That’s why we are offering during Pang Lhabsol. (Lingthem Búngthíng, April 2006)¹⁵¹

In the oral narrative of Dzongu, there was a memory of a dispute between the village areas about paying taxes. The other villages in Dzongu still continued to pay their taxes to the royal palace and used to get salt, *khapse* (deep fried biscuit), and *táfá* (beaten rice) from the king in return (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, June 2011; Tashi *mandal*, June 2011). The villagers of Tingvong did not get anything, besides the ritual items returned during the Kóngchen ritual, because of their ritual tax obligation to Tholung. This caused a dispute. The twelve *mandals* of Dzongu came together and decided that every village would offer to Tholung and they would rotate annually (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Panchayat, May 2011). There were other versions as to why all the villages started taking turns in offering to Tholung during Pang Lhabsol, however: according to the Dorji Lapân of Tholung monastery, the *mandal* from Gor made fun of the Tingvong *mandal* for offering to a dead king instead of the king that was still alive: “You are all slaves to the evil king’s body” (Tholung Monastery Dorji Lapân, August 2010). According to the Tholung family, the other villages made offerings to the palace, but they had some problems due to the presence of the dead king. A divination was made that there would be unrest between the twelve *mandals*, so the father of the present caretaker of Tholung monastery decided that all the villages should take turns in offering to the monastery. The *mandals* agreed (Agya Maila, May 2011). According to this oral tradition, the dispute, or averted dispute, would have taken place roughly at some point during the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite the end of the kingdom, the obligations to the dead king remained and the rotation system prevailed. Several narratives illustrated how diseases

151 Interestingly, in the previous Buddhist ceremony performed at Lingthem during Cirim, an *mdos* ritual was performed for the spirit of the same deceased king (Lingthem Monastery Dorji Lapân, January 2010).

spread in villages that did not hold the ritual properly, or how a wild animal or the king's ghost started ravaging the area when the ritual was temporarily not performed. The ceremony called *kamse* was then reinstated in the mid 1980s and has since been conducted every year by the villages of Dzongu in turn (Arora 2006, 70). In contrast to the 'living king', in the case of the celebration of Pang Lhabsol at Tholung, the evil spirit of the deceased king still demanded offerings and loyalty from the Dzongu villagers. This, however, probably had less to do with the political subjugation of the people of Dzongu, or their effective loyalty to the Namgyal dynasty, than with Róng religious thought-framework. When a spirit or a deity was incorporated into the local pantheon and worship, the offerings had to be continued or else the cosmic and social order became deranged.

Networks of Subjugation and Local Agency

The ritual exchange around Kóngchen illustrated in the previous section hints, as I argue here, at a complex system of political subjugation and local agency built around networks of traditional power holders (redefined as office bearers), services (soldiers, labour), and knowledge (religious proficiency, medicinal plants, etc.), similar to what Rupakheti (2016) maintains with regard to the Gorkha kingdom.¹⁵² The relationship between the king and local chiefs, as well as office bearers with varying degrees of power, was ambivalent, shaped by dependence, subjugation, and forced service, as well as a degree of reciprocity and voluntary action (Warner 2014a, 28).

The dispute about paying taxes to the Tholung monastery or to the king illustrates that – at least in living memory – the Dzongu residents did not consider the taxes to the king a particularly large burden. Siiger (1967), who calculated the income and tax expenditures in Tingvong in 1949, concluded that “taxes should not weigh heavily on the people” (119). Moreover, according to oral accounts narrated to us in Dzongu, the villagers enjoyed the return gifts, as well as the power they bestowed on them. With regard to early state formation, Mullard (2011, 156) makes an important point: the local chiefs who found their place in the history (in tax registers, for example) were those who had managed to secure alliances and remained in the goodwill of the Namgyal ruler. I suggest

152 See Sinha 1975 and Steinman 1998 for readings on the positioning of the Róng leaders within the Sikkimese kingdom. Importantly, Mullard (2015) rejects an ethnic reading of historical political conflict and alliances in Sikkim according to current understandings of an objectified ethnic group.

that the Gor *mandal* making fun of the Tingvong *mandal* for offering to a dead king in a monastery captured the significance of the ritual exchanges in terms of building and sustaining networks of power distribution that to a certain extent profited the local leaders. The discontinuation of paying taxes to the palace severed the Tingvong *mandal*'s relations with the court and hence placed him in a disadvantageous position with regard to access to power, representation, and funds.

According to the Cirim myth, the alliance of the Dzongu Mútunci Róng with the Namgyal dynasty occurred during a time of war with the Bhutanese that Sikkim was on the verge of losing (Sangdong Búngthíng, August 2009; MLAS culture secretary, June 2011; Dawa Lepcha, April 2011).¹⁵³ As elaborated below, I argue that the alliance can tentatively be dated to the War of Succession (1699–1708) (Bentley 2014). According to Mullard (2011, 64), his sources barely gave insight into the Sikkim of that period, as they documented the activities of the king, Chagdor Namgyal, in exile in Tibet. Hence, I build my argument on the information available from the *History of Sikkim*, the royal chronicle compiled by the ninth king and his wife in the beginning of the twentieth century. Its annex mentions that a leader of the 'Gar Jongu Lepcha', the Dzongu Mútunci Róng, had an alliance with the king when the palace was located in Rabdentse and received the title of *gyápân* (Namgyal and Dolma 1908, Annex 23–24). The title, as mentioned, implies a military relation.¹⁵⁴ The clan myth of the Gor Jongu Mútunci Róng entextualised in the annex is strikingly similar to the one recorded by Siiger for Kóngchen Búngthíng's clan and mentioned in the Cirim recitation of the Payel Búngthíng (Namgyal and Dolma 1908, Annex 23–24).

The palace was in Rabdentse from 1649 to 1788. There were several conflicts between Sikkim and Bhutan in this long period, but oral accounts in North Sikkim tell of how the residents' ancestors fought the Bhutanese at Namgay Thangu Fort (Namgal Thonpoi Dzong). The fort was located on a ridge between Nampatan and Tingchim, on the opposite hillside to Dzongu, where its ruins can still be seen. The Bhutanese built and used this fort during the War of Succession (Ardussi et al. 2021, 123, 125). Placing the alliance mentioned in the Cirim myth in this war would make the relation between at least one clan in Dzongu and the Namgyal dynasty around 250 years old by the time Siiger recorded the Kóngchen ritual.

According to Mullard (2011), who amongst others draws on seventeenth-century legal agreements and tax documents, early state formation in Sikkim was a by-product of "a ruler's efforts to enhance his power, wealth and

153 Lingthem Búngthíng calls the adversary Horka: see Bentley 2014.

154 For a discussion of the various administrative titles and the administration, see Mullard and Wongchuk 2010, 4–6; Vandenhelsken and Khamdak 2021.

to ultimately survive” (Tilly 2006, 419). By this logic, the king was dependent on the Dzongu Mútunci Róng at the time when they joined the war, and they – according to the local oral tradition – significantly helped the Namgyal dynasty to win it. Alliances worked both ways. The Namgyal rulers established power through alliances with local leaders who, probably for reasons of pooling military resources, desired or were required to accept the supremacy of the Namgyal dynasty but maintained ownership over their lands and people. Thus, the local leaders remained in charge of tax collection, justice, and lastly local governance (Mullard 2011, 152–53). This concurs with Rupakheti’s argument for the Gorkha kingdom that the local leaders were “more than just office-holders” (Rupakheti 2016, 75); they were intermediaries between the state and the respective local lineage groups: “partners and co-sharers of the realm” (Wink 1986, 187).

By means of ritual, the local leaders affirmed their loyalty to the king and received the capacities to reaffirm their own power positions in the village and beyond. The rituals reinforced administrative positions that empowered local leaders with specific capital, to use Bourdieu’s term (1973, 1977, 1983, 1986). Certain positionalities within society, such as that of the *mandal* and the lineage of religious specialists, were not open to everyone but only to members of lineage groups, and gave the office bearers access to social, religious, cultural, economic, and political capital not accessible to others. The distribution of resources was therefore unequal. It needs to be added that the local leaders were quite low in the hierarchy of the kingdom. Initially, *mandals* did interact with the court, but later the post of the *muktiar* was installed as the intermediary, cutting the *mandals*’ direct access to the power centre. But the local leaders did enjoy local autonomy and decision-making power, as the incident regarding the Upper Dzongu *muktiar* suggests. Decisions over leadership were made locally, even though they needed the final sanction of the court.

The offices of the *gyápân* and the *yúmí*, on the other hand, were not linked to ancestral lineages, at least in the early- to mid-twentieth-century administration. This office gave every man in the village the hope or opportunity to sustainably change his specific socio-political position. In days gone by, the *gyápân* had responsibility and a certain amount of power at the village level. He used to collect or at least assist in collecting taxes. While the office was considered arduous, time-consuming, and exhausting (Gorer [1938] 1996, 131), and consequently limited to three years (Siiger 1967, 119), it was still popular, because it came with authority (Morris 1938, 67). At that time, it gave the respective office holder power and status as well as the possibility of rising within the hierarchy. Eventually, if a man was elected as *yúmí*, it could even mean advancing to the position of advisor to the *mandal*. And in their years serving as a *gyápân*, though

it was hard work, young men could massively increase their social network within the village and maybe even at the king's court.

Religious Power of the Indigenous

In this section, I return to the concept of taming, introduced at the beginning of this chapter. I argue that the Kóngchen ritual indicated that the main mountain deity residing in Kangchendzonga was not tamed, but that the Sikkimese sacred landscape remained strongly polysemic. The ritual was not a product of religious syncretism, but of two religious traditions existing side by side and – at least for the Dzongu Mútunci Róng – Róng religious tradition retained significant political power within the kingdom.

In the official narrative, the kingdom was founded when three lamas – Lhatsun Chenpo, Kahtog Rigzin Chenpo, and Ngadag Sempa Chenpo Phunthog Rigzin – opened the doors to the sacred hidden land of Sikkim, Beyul Demojong, and enthroned Phuntsog Namgyal as the first king of Sikkim in Yuksam.¹⁵⁵ The national discourse mainly revolves around the Buddhist saint Lhatsun Chenpo (1597–1654?), who is considered the founding father of Sikkim and ultimate subduer of Mount Kangchendzonga.¹⁵⁶ Kóngchen, or in its Buddhist manifestation Dzönga, is said to have been subdued by Guru Rinpoche in the eighth century and appointed by him as protector and keeper of the land. It was his duty not to let anyone enter the sacred hidden land unless the person was the right one chosen to pursue Guru Rinpoche's intentions. Therefore, the deity tested Lhatsun Chenpo on arrival and then introduced him to various sacred sites and places of Beyul Demojong (Balikci 2002, 22). After crossing the Himalaya safely, Lhatsun Chenpo is said to have performed a thanksgiving ritual (Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993, 402), which was later interpreted as having been the first *nesol* performed (Ardussi et al 2021, 80; Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993, 217; Balikci 2002).¹⁵⁷

155 For a historical critique see Mullard 2011.

156 The dates of his birth and death vary depending on the source (Vandenhelsken 2003). He is considered the main propagator of Buddhism in Sikkim (Balikci 2008, 22–23, 88–90; see Waddel in Risley [1894] 1973, 248–50). However, Mullard (2011) argues that the position ascribed to Lhatsun Chenpo has little grounding in historical fact, being more the result of the construction of historical narratives during a later phase in the political history of Sikkim.

157 There are various Tibetan sources for this narrative. Nebesky-Wojkowitz ([1956] 1993) gets his information from notes that Barmiok Kazi Tashi Dadul Densapa (bKra shis dgra 'dul gdan sa pa) had made from a handwritten manuscript of a biography of Lhatsun Chenpo preserved at Tholung monastery in Dzongu.

Oral traditions ascribe the sacred knowledge of the place in the *nesol* ritual to the Róng community. The *History of Sikkim*, the source of the national integration narrative par excellence, mentions that a Róng religious specialist, Thikúng Munsalóng, received and guided Lhatsun Chenpo to all the sacred places in Beyul Demojong, which the latter then recorded into the *Lam yig*, a guide book (Ardussi et al. 2021, 97). This act indicates that during the time of writing, in the early twentieth century, the rulers did not erase the pre-existence of Róng knowledge over the land, but formulated it as a rightful appropriation by the Buddhist saint.

In another version we heard during fieldwork, Thikúng Munsalóng first met and guided Guru Rinpoche when he came to Sikkim in the eighth century, and introduced him to the sacred local knowledge of the place while receiving Buddhist knowledge from him. Then Thikúng Munsalóng stayed as the keeper of this amalgamated sacred knowledge and lived until Lhatsun Chenpo arrived so he could pass it on to him (Dorji Karthak Lepcha, July 2009). These narratives are additionally interesting in the context of Dzongu because they revolve around Thikúng Munsalóng. According to Pentong Búngthíng, Thikúng Munsalóng was the founder of the Salóng *putso*, one of the oldest clans in Upper Dzongu. He reached Sakyong, a village in Upper Dzongu on the opposite hillside to Pentong, together with the founder of the Gârkumtsum *putso* (Pentong Búngthíng, May 2011). If we rely on oral tradition, this indicates an alliance between these two clans.

In these oral traditions, then, the knowledge of the lands is ascribed to the Róng religious specialists. Buddhist practitioners, on the other hand, depend on this knowledge to ‘tame’ the deity and install themselves as political leaders. Narrated from a subaltern perspective, every *nesol* or institutionalised Pang Lhabsol was an enactment of the knowledge of the Indigenous, “a national shamanic ritual in the sense that it celebrated people’s relation with the sacred land and its deities” (Balicki 2008, 23). At the same time, it remained a reminder of the subjugation process.

Dzönga – the Buddhist manifestation of the mountain deity – became the chief protective deity of Sikkim. While ancient Tibetan kings seem to have been linked with territorial deities as *sku bla*, personal protective deities (Gerke 2007; Huber 1999; Karmay 1996), in the case of the Namgyal dynasty the territorial Buddhist deity, Dzönga, was the king’s *pholha*, his clan deity. Dzönga achieved status as an ancestral deity of the male patrilineage through the oath taken between Thikúng Tek and Gye Bumsa at Kabi Longchok. From this perspective, the ancestral alliance with the territorial deity Dzönga empowers the Sikkimese king as a Chogyal, Dharma raja, with the divine right to rule. But here too the relation to the land was only achieved via the relation with a Róng religious specialist.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Bentley 2009/10), there were versions of the blood brotherhood narratives told in Róng households that included prophecies. These prophecies protected the Indigenous Mútunci Róng with regard to the Namgyal rule. They spoke of the oath as a vow given by the ancestor of the king, in front of Kóngchen as a witness, never to dominate over the Indigenous people of the place, and added the punishment of the deities' wrath in case any king ever broke this promise. Some of my interlocutors pointed out that the prophecy came true, since the twelfth king stopped performing the Kóngchen ritual properly and lost his kingdom (amongst others, Dupden Lepcha, October 2008). Others placed it in the modern political context of the anti-dam protest in order to remind the people in power that the deities of the place never stopped owning the land and required courtesy. Taking the prophecy into consideration, Pang Lhabsol as the annual remembrance of this oath at Kabi Longchok can be seen in a different light: it was the time when the king annually reconfirmed his awareness that his rule was based on its acceptance by the Indigenous people and deities of the place. It enacted the dependency of the king on the Indigenous people and reminded him of the fragility of his rule.

These oral traditions underscored the struggles over the knowledge of the sacred land as well as over territory itself, to legitimise the entitlement to rule over Sikkim. Within the process of Buddhist conversion and subjugation, the pre-Buddhist deities keep asserting themselves as the actual owners and protectors of land and water, the Lyángdók Úngdók. They remind the rulers that the hidden land was not empty when it was discovered, and that the ones that were there before still hold the ultimate power.

Mullard points out that the earliest written document of allegiance – the Lho Mon Gtsong gsum agreement – pledged to the first Sikkimese king, Phuntsog Namgyal, by local Bhutia (Lhopo), Mútunci Róng (Mon), and Limbu (Tsong) chiefs, calls upon a host of Buddhist deities as well as “the protector deities and the patrons of the religions of the Gtsong and Mon,” of the Limbu and the Mútunci Róng respectively (Mullard 2011, 144). In the Tibetan texts on Sikkim the Mútunci Róng are usually referred to as Monpa and not Rongpa.¹⁵⁸ The Lho Mon Gtsong gsum agreement promised all the local leaders who pledged the oath to the Sikkimese king that serving the Chogyal, the Dharma raja, would bestow upon them wealth and prosperity (146). The oath was importantly located in an ontology in which more-than-human beings were real and had agency. Thus, the fear of more-than-human wrath bound the signatories to the oath. The dominance of Buddhist deities mentioned in the oath hinted at Buddhist supremacy, but as Mullard specifies, the inclusion of the deities of the other religions indicated recognition of religious difference (144).

158 See Pommaret 1999, 52–74 on the concept of Monpa.

I argue here that the Kóngchen ritual indicates that it was more than merely the recognition of religious difference, however. While I recognise that the royal patronage of the ritual was part of the “complex process of managing different groups’ claim to past rights and services” (Rupakheti 2016, 77), it was not part of the ‘taming’ processes described for the expansion of Tibetan Buddhist hegemony. On the contrary, in the ritual patronage the Chogyal acknowledged the powers of the pre-Buddhist deity Kóngchen and the appropriation of this deity as crucial to sustaining his rule over the land. The third to the twelfth kings, if the date given for the war is correct, fulfilled an ancestral ritual obligation that Chagdor Namgyal or his local acting representative during the war had taken upon himself when he asked the Dzongu Mútunci Róng to help them win the war and, according to the myth, took the Kóngchen soldiers, as embodiments of diseases, to the battlefield. According to Róng Indigenous ontologies, the request for Kóngchen’s soldiers transformed the ritual and the associated ritual obligation, making it necessary to pay a regular tax expressed through ritual. The Namgyal dynasty did not change this or transform the ritual into Buddhist practice, but continued to abide by the requirements of the pre-Buddhist deity and the Róng religious tradition.

Consequently, the Buddhist practice that endowed the king with the entitlement to rule was more or less obsolete in this ritual arrangement. If we consider that the powers of the more-than-human beings were perceived as real and not separated from political agency, the ritual act – and the king’s participation in it – expressed a royal acknowledgement that the Róng religious specialist and thus Róng religious tradition were strong enough to keep the Chogyal on his throne and protect his country, or to get rid of him if needed. As such, the dependency was reversed: the Mútunci Róng were not suppressed by the king, but the ritual annually enacted an eternal indebtedness of the king towards the Mútunci Róng of Dzongu, because their religious powers had saved his kingdom and rule. The ritual power remained in the hands of the subaltern, as their religious specialists and clans kept the supreme privilege of appeasing the primary territorial deities. In this way, the upper strata, be it the ruling class or the king himself, relied on the subaltern to protect them from the wrath of these deities (see Scott 1985, 244 for a similar example).

According to Róng Indigenous ontologies, the changes in the ritual practice in Dzongu were not due to new political or religious dependencies. I argue that the changes in ritual obligation in the interaction with the Sikkimese royal family occurred due to reasons inherent in the Róng Indigenous ontologies and not due to religious subjugation. The events that occurred during the war changed the order of the world to a certain degree, induced the need for ritual appeasement, and altered existing ritual requirements. With the involvement of

the Mútunci Róng of Dzongu in warfare, malevolent spirits – embodied in the entourage of Kóngchen – began a movement towards the plains (or the royal palace) that changed the religious cycle in Dzongu. New more-than-human beings were added due to the interaction with the Namgyal dynasty, as any deceased person, for instance the seventh king, could turn into an evil spirit haunting a place. The various events transformed and created new more-than-human threats that harmed not only the Róng community but everyone residing in the locality of Sikkim. Therefore, ritual offerings were and to a certain extent still are required. Thus, beyond resistance to Buddhist conversion and the struggle for agency within a new political set-up according to the parameters of the same, as described above, the Kóngchen ritual asserted its own religious values and ontology within the new political set-up.

And, I argue, the Kóngchen ritual was not the only ritual obligation to a pre-Buddhist deity or practice of the Sikkimese royal family. When I was trying to discern the similarities between the Kóngchen ritual and the ritual performed by Chegra Búngthíng for the southern realms in Golma forest, I could not find any besides the fact that they both took place at Pang Lhabsol. It was merely in the Buddhist promotion of these rituals that they aligned: the Kóngchen ritual was the ceremony addressing the mountain deity protecting the northern gate. This description imprecisely conflated Kóngchen and Dzönga. Similarly, the ritual at Golma is described as protecting the southern gate, associated with Yabdü (Tib. *yab bdud*). Yabdü is an acolyte of Dzönga, the Buddhist mountain deity residing on Mount Kangchendzonga, and an emanation of Mahākāla, whose abode is in a forest close to the present town of Siliguri (Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993, 219)

According to the local Róng interpretation, Chegra Búngthíng performed the southern ritual as protection from the evil spirit of a Róng king, assassinated by either the Bhutanese or the Namgyal dynasty. In this logic, the royal family had and continued to have the annual ritual obligation, because it was – depending on the version – their wrongdoings or their war that caused the death of the king and the consequent emergence of a wrathful spirit (Village elders, May 2011; son-in-law of Chegra Búngthíng, May 2011). No one mentioned Yabdü. A local conflation of the Buddhist version of the event could potentially be assumed in the name of the evil spirit, Gyápduť. Against this assumption, Gyápduť is also just a generic term for an evil spirit in Rónggríng (Foning [1987] 2003, 294; Tamsang [1980] 2009, 249). I suggest that it is possible that these Róng rituals were merely bound together by the figure of the Chogyal and his ritual obligations to appease the pre-Buddhist deities to ensure his prosperity and his rule, but they actually originated from very different historical events. Nebesky-Wojkowitz mentioned several other religious specialists participating in offerings

in and around Pang Lhabsol (1951, 23; 1959, 8–15; 1976, 19–24). Pang Lhabsol was the state ritual to the deity of the land, and it seems plausible that it was during this performance that the king would fulfil all the ritual and thus also political obligations towards the Róng chiefs, clans, and deities.

To conclude, with respect to the practice of the Kóngchen ritual, it seems safe to say that the pre-Buddhist deity Kóngchen, like other Róng more-than-human beings embedded in the Sikkimese landscape, was not subjugated or tamed. Moreover, the longevity of the king, as well as his prosperity and rule, required protection by and acceptance of the Róng territorial deity, which, in the case of the Kóngchen ritual, could only be achieved by prayers conducted by the specific lineage of religious specialists. Kóngchen remained the ultimate owner of the land, the chief of all the Lyángdók Úngdók. While the Mútunci Róng lost their political independence with the affiliation to the Sikkimese kingdom, I argue, they kept religious powers over the place, annually enacted in ritual practice. If their religion and deities were not respected, either in the past or present, the rulers would eventually cease to reign over the lands, or in other words, they would only rule as long as Kóngchen tolerated their presence.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the historico-mythological context of present-day community ritual practices. This is bound up with previous administrative offices and a system of creating alliances with and reaffirming loyalty to the Sikkimese king. Ritual practices, as I have unravelled them in this chapter, were not an unchanged ancient heritage; they built on a specific way of understanding the world and were tools to deal with changes within the human and more-than-human environment. In doing so, ritual practices changed according to incidents and recurring negotiations with the powerful. Acknowledging the problems of oral traditions with regard to history writing, I suggest that ritual practices as well as the oral traditions that revolve around them give alternative present-day (meaning the time of narration) perspectives on historical power negotiations, albeit embedded in the narrative temporality, and thereby produce counter-knowledge.¹⁵⁹

In this chapter, I argued with respect to the Kóngchen ritual that the Róng religious tradition remained powerful in a political way in the Sikkimese kingdom. I revealed that up to the last king, the kings honoured the propitiation of

159 For a discussion on Indigenous histories, see Maddock 1988; Rose 1994; McBryde 1985.

the pre-Buddhist mountain deity by bi-annually participating in the ritual alongside the Buddhist Pang Lhabsol celebrations. Such procedures acknowledged the Róng deities' ownership over land and water and proved the importance of the maintenance of good ties to Róng religious specialists, who were potential political leaders. The inherent power of the Róng more-than-human beings thus bestowed the Indigenous people with power, as they were the ones with the privileged means of communicating with the embedded deities. I argue that these fragile negotiations between Indigenous power holders, both human and more-than-human, and the Buddhist royalty were possible due to the polysemy of the sacred lands. The Buddhist and pre-Buddhist deities existed simultaneously. The deity in Mount Kangchendzonga was tamed and not tamed at the same time. However, according to Róng oral tradition, while the Buddhist lineage established itself as rulers, it was in the end the untamed Róng deities, embedded in the territory, that remained the owners of the land. They had to be propitiated beforehand and were ultimately needed to sanction the rule of the king. Thus, the name Pano Rurfát had a double valence: it was the ritual in the name of the Sikkimese king for the mountain deity who is actually the ultimate king over the territory.

The governance of the Indigenous inhabitants (again, both human and more-than-human) of the sacred Buddhist land was a fragile, negotiated process between power holders, as is exemplified in the important positioning of the blood brotherhood in the national discourse of Sikkim. It is hard to say how much these ritual powers of the Indigenous Róng religious tradition, in other words the Róng hegemony over communication with the divine owners of the land, translated into actual political power; but Róng chiefs did rise to high ranks.

Members of the Barfung landlord family originating in Kabi were especially powerful players in the kingdom, basically ruling instead of the king from the Second War of Succession in 1736 up to the previously mentioned assassination of Barfung Chancellor Bolhö in 1826, thus during the reigns of the fifth and sixth kings (Mullard 2015). However, there was a strong cultural and religious appropriation of the Tibetan Buddhist aristocratic lifestyle among the Róng landlords and hence a disconnection from the Róng commoners and the lower strata of office bearers. This detachment is still evident in the present discussion of the question of whether descendants of *kazi* with Róng ancestry self-define or are classified as 'Lepcha' or Bhutia. Furthermore, the negotiations between leaders do not provide much insight into the positioning of the commoners who stood in relations of bonded labour with the landlords. Suppression ran within and over ethnic lines, as important historical works on the region highlight (Mullard 2011, 2013; Warner 2014a, 2014b).

The powers of ritual practice, at least regarding the Kóngchen ritual, had begun to cease before the demise of the kingdom, which had to do with an epistemological shift in Tibetan Buddhism. After the Chinese invasion of Tibet, many learned lamas and Buddhist masters fled to Sikkim and influenced the way Buddhism was practised. The increased interaction with a Tibetan Buddhist philosophy that was not built around the fragile inner-Sikkimese negotiations of sacred landscape and power led to an epistemological change. The invocation of pre-Buddhist deities and the presence of Róng religious specialists during Buddhist state rituals became perceived as uncomfortable. The propitiation of pre-Buddhist deities and the polysemic co-existence of the tamed and the untamed turned into an increasingly hushed affair. In the words of Hope Cooke, the last Sikkimese queen, it was “one area better left unexplored; there is a defensiveness, a denial of the connection between the two” (Cooke 1980, 162). Animal sacrifice, crucial to the Kóngchen ritual, was especially criticised, as killing is considered a sin in Buddhist philosophy (Palden Tshering Lepcha, former Pan-chayat, June 2011). The existence of the ‘untamed’ turned uncomfortable and required “discreet” handling (Balikci 2008, 25). This is why the twelfth Chogyal stopped giving the yak as an offering but gave money to purchase one instead. It was a compromise, and symptomatic of a gradual change in the way Buddhism was practised, especially in more urban and aristocratic circles (Balikci 2002).

With the end of the monarchy, the patron of the Kóngchen ritual ceased to exist and the political recognising agent was gone. In the initial years, the Indian government did not allow the celebration of Pang Lhabsol because its political importance in negotiating networks was seen as a threat – anti-Indian and pro-Chogyal factions could conspire during the event. This very fact shows that the government was well aware of how political powers were negotiated in and around ritual practice. The demise of the kingdom had consequences on the local level. While the post of the *gyápân* was still elected, the young men carried the burden of work and obligation but without the previous status, power, and honour. There was little visible merit in these administrative responsibilities. Therefore, the office was increasingly unpopular. Cirim and Sotáp Rurfát stopped having a political purpose; they were no longer part of asserting local leadership or negotiating relations with the agents of the king higher up in the political strata.

Besides, during the kingdom, the process of cultural revival had already been initiated, influenced by an understanding of the world shaped by culturalist ontologies and capitalist bio-cultural governance. With the beginning of colonialism, the management of powers and the ‘native’ – that is, the management of pre-existing rights and entitlements as was previously done through

ritual – began to work according to a different system, again building on previous power structures but making new elites and changing the quality of power (Baruah 2020).

Finally, at the latest with the merger with India, the Mútunci community ritual practices in Dzongu were no longer productive in asserting a position in the new political world. They did not speak the right language of cultural heritage and objectified Róng identity. Practices couched within the logic of Róng Indigenous ontologies, or even the broader Buddhist Himalayan ontologies, ceased to be productive political tools for achieving prosperity in a political and administrative system in which welfare is distributed through a system of articulated objectified culture. It is in this context of loss that the transformed ritual programmes become meaningful.

The background features a complex, abstract design of white and light blue lines on a black field. The lines form various patterns, including concentric circles, wavy bands, and dense, textured areas that resemble wood grain or topographical contours. The overall effect is a rich, layered visual texture.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ritual Programmes, Patronage,
and Aspiring to the ‘Good Life’



FIGURE 34: Felicitations and politicians at Tendong Hlo Rumfát, August 2012.

What, then, does this new political world look like, and how are ritual programmes productive in negotiating power relations? I have introduced the state as the manager of welfare in so far as it is connected to schemes and projects, especially regarding the protective measures that are extended to the ethnic communities classified as Scheduled Tribes or *adivāsi janajāti*, such as the Mútunci Róng. These mechanisms were put in place to support and govern minorities. The nexus between the state, as provider, and the ethnic group, as the vessel by means of which welfare is received, has led to an increasingly ethnic approach to solving socio-economic problems (Chettri 2017a, 140). It is within this nexus that we find the growth of ethnic associations which operate as representatives and claimants for the welfare of their specific ethnic group, and I have introduced ritual programmes as the spaces in which ethnic groups represent themselves and stage their objectified culture in order to sustain themselves within the welfare systems.

The state, however, does not interact with the voters or the residents as a unified entity, even in a place like Sikkim, where at the time of research one political party had been in power for over twenty years (Figure 34). What we find, rather, is a ‘patronage democracy’, defined by Chandra (2003) as an electoral system in which the state “monopolizes access to jobs and services, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws

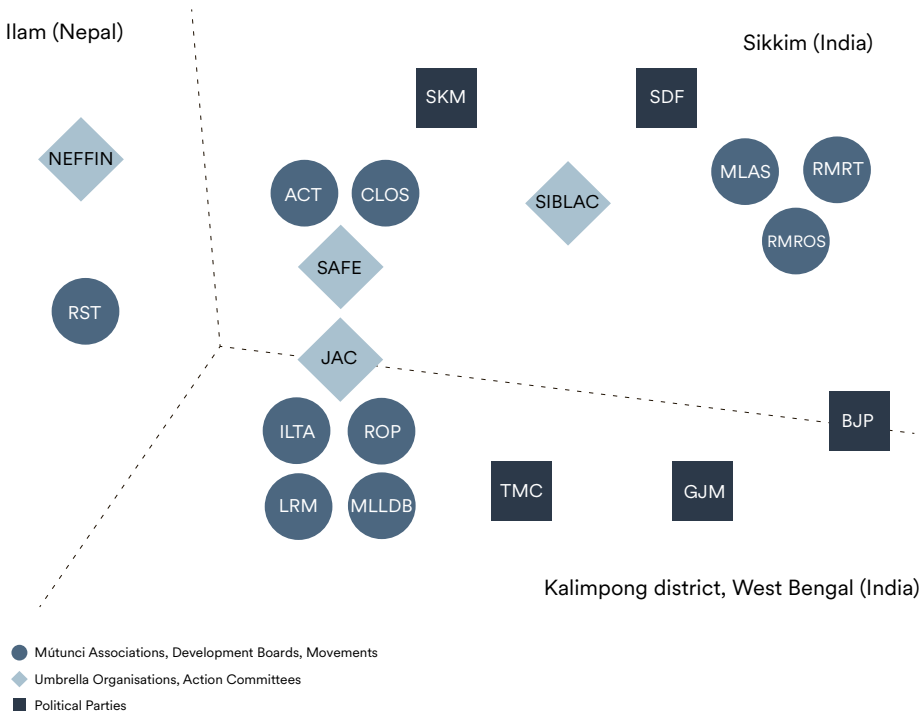


FIGURE 35: Overview of relevant actors in Chapter Seven.

allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state” (7). As the scholarship on South Asia suggests, such a system thrives on and reproduces the patron–client relations that regulate access to state resources, public goods, and services – and thus to those schemes accorded to Scheduled Tribes. The systems of governance described through the scheduling and categorising of minorities are tied up in networks of brokers, including politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and, amongst others, ethnic activists. They facilitate an unequal distribution of goods within the coalitions that enable co-optation and resource capture (Chandra 2003; Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2005; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2008; Piliavsky 2014; Wenner 2015). These networks work within and beyond the intersecting fields – to use Bourdieu’s notion (1984, 1993) – of politics, economics, religion, education, etc.

Ethnic associations – as part of civil society – position themselves as standing in between politics and economics (Gellner 2010; Hangen 2010). The executive members are intermediaries or communicators between ‘their people’ and the welfare providers, usually politicians or bureaucrats, and thus are tied up in the coalitions and redistribution networks. They self-define and carefully curate the image of the selfless social worker who negotiates services for the welfare of their ethnic community. This is an approach to patronage that Wenner (2015,

235) defines as ‘moral’. Woven into these networks are likewise symmetrical relations of reciprocity and collective advantage, such as friendships, marriages, and neighbourhood. All these social formations demand commitment, loyalty, reciprocity, and obligations (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 5). At the same time, they empower actors with capital – again drawing on Bourdieu’s concept – defined as capacities and resources. In the local context, the notion of *aphno manche*, ‘our people’, plays a strong role in the formation of relations of support, but also of brokering services and petty corruption (Jamil and Dangal 2009; Subedi 2005). Traditionally, the expression *aphno manche* refers to the family, lineage, clan, or ethnic group, but today it includes the members of the same locality, political party, or, increasingly, modern professional groups or friend circles (Figure 35).

Compared to the historical context sketched in Chapter Six, the structures and actors of patronage in Sikkim and West Bengal have changed (Scott 1969; Weiner 1965). This is not due to a break but to a gradual transition. While new brokers entered the scene at the same time members of the former landlord class (*kazi*) – with their inherited socio-economic wealth and access to the modern education system – now became bureaucrats, politicians, or entrepreneurs. Certain social and political groups retained an “inherited structural ability” (Shah and Lerche 2018, 16, 19) that enabled them to continue to access power and social positions. This hereditary capital, understood in its widest sense, along with pre-existing inequalities, still shape political and social relations. Members of former landlord families are still significant patrons within the Róng community. Among the Mútunci Róng association members, the majority are urban and from the educated middle class and male; some have roots in the previous minor landlord elite of the former Sikkimese or Nepalese kingdom, and many hold white-collar jobs.

As sites of exchange, I argue, ritual programmes are productive events during which patronage networks are activated, reshaped, renewed, but equally also broken. As I lay out in this chapter, they are “dense social situations” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012, 2) where religious, cultural, social, political, and economic fields and their respective power relations intersect. This is particularly so because ritual programmes have kept – or were specifically adapted and assembled to retain – the inherent agency of the ritual, namely the ability to transform the world (Sax 2006, 477) and to initiate a change of role, status, or social positioning in society (Michaels 1999; van Gennep [1909] 1960). Actors invest capital, be it social, cultural, political, or economic, in ritual programmes. The intersectionality of fields that characterises these events allows for the transfer of capital from one field to another, as well as capital gain. In the political and economic transitions, it was those people with various resources and positionalities who were able to move between different intersecting fields and

accumulate power (Chettri 2017a, 145). In connection with ritual programmes I also discuss processes of distribution, empowerment, and dispossession, as well as the negotiation of inequalities.

Patronage, as an exchange of goods and services based on reciprocity, is crucial for political mobilisation within political parties as well as ethnic associations (Wenner 2016; Piliavsky 2014, 5). In the first section of this chapter, I explore how the ethnic Róng elite delicately engaged in exchange with both the government and the people during the ritual act. Ritual programmes are learning grounds for the youth and for those who are newcomers to ethnic politics. They are acts in which, by recurring participation, people can claim presence, and where the public – facilitated by association members – can meet influential players such as ministers and bureaucrats. They are moments of hope for welfare and social mobility.

In the second section, I revisit the anti-dam protests. I lay out how patron-client relations, relations to more-than-humans, and the practice of counter-acting vulnerability described in Chapter Four shaped the contestations in Dzongu – played out amongst others during ritual programmes or via the absence of certain factions of Mútunci Róng at the respective rituals.

The next section widens the scope beyond the state borders of Sikkim. Ritual programmes are places for networking and activating patron-client relations not only between the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations and the state, but just as much between the regional Mútunci Róng associations and, at a certain time, ILTA and the Sikkimese state. The anti-dam protest significantly reshuffled the interactions within these spaces, which was most radically experienced when Róng activists from Kalimpong were evicted from Sikkim while on a pilgrimage (Bentley 2021).

The last section takes the focus away from Gangtok and Dzongu as the centres of interaction and turns towards West Bengal, where the Róng activists searched for new routes to achieve recognition through the demand for a separate council, and thereby negotiated new relations of patronage beyond the local autonomous administration.

Staying Close: Sikkimese Róng Activists and the Ruling Government

Since the recognition of Tendong Hlo Rumpfát as a state holiday, the ritual performance has been tied to state structures and been under the patronage of the ruling party. What such patronage entailed was most evident in the new composition of the organising committee.

So, in 1997, Dr. Pawan Kumar Chamling and his party decided on our holiday of Tendong Hlo Rumfát. In 2003 they made a committee system for the ritual programme, because it is a state holiday, and not only for the Lepcha but a festival for all the people of Sikkim (RMRT president, August 2009).

The president of the committee was a representative of the Mútunci Róng associations, while the state (and ultimately the ruling party) appointed the chairperson. With state recognition, therefore, came state control and dependency.

The state involvement in the ritual organisation was apparent in the funding streams. While the Mútunci Róng associations pooled funds for the first ritual programmes, after the state recognition the funds came in from different government departments and legislative bodies. The main contributions were from the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department (Government of Sikkim) as well as the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Kolkata. The Tourism and Civil Aviation Department and the Sikkim Legislative Assembly were among the contributors, for example in 2012. If we take into consideration the patronage democracy within which the event was set, the funding thus came with reciprocity, obligations not merely towards the state but towards the ruling party. Significantly, in the above quotation from the RMRT president, the chief minister and his party were conflated with the state and its administrative structures. Ritual programmes were mandatory events for the political elite, especially for those members of the Róng community who numbered among them, and simultaneously the Mútunci Róng association had the duty to invite them. The guest list of VIPs during Tendong Hlo Rumfát, similarly to the example from a RMRT meeting given below, reads as a who's who of Sikkimese politics and administration.

I would like to welcome our honourable chief guest Ren O. T Lepcha MP Rajya Sabha [Member of Parliament, Council of States], advisor Ren D. T Lepcha, honourable Minister of the Power and Energy Department and the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department Ren Sonam Gyatso Lepcha [also Dzongu MLA], Minister of the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services and Irrigation and Flood Control Department Ren Dawcho Lepcha, Chairman SBS [State Bank of Sikkim] Ren Laxman Lepcha, Panchayat Adhayasha North Kamsun Lepcha, Chairperson Chukey Saring, D. G. S. T. Lepcha, Assistant Commissioner Lhendup Lepcha, General Manager of Reserved Bank of India Tshering Kalzang Lepcha, Director T. N. Densapa, [...]. (RMROS member, May 2011)

The chief minister was invited to Tendong Hlo Rumfát as chief guest for the first time in 1995, an invitation which had been recurrent since then. When he could not attend, a Sikkimese minister would take his place. At the event, the front rows of seats were sofas or other comfortable sitting arrangements reserved for these VIP guests, and they received privileged treatment throughout the ritual including beverages and a lunch served in a special VIP section. The years 2013 and 2014 saw a heightened party-political involvement in Tendong Hlo Rumfát due to the state elections, and this changed the visual aspect of the event, with party flags adorning the site. In 2013 Tendong hill was visited by SDF youth – young people involved in the party, but not necessarily members of the Róng community. Their participation made manifest the close relations between the Mútunci Róng associations and the ruling party.

With the state recognition, Tendong Hlo Rumfát turned into an occasion where politicians could address the public. The speakers at the main event were RMRT or RMROS members, politicians from the ruling party such as ministers, members of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly (MLA), and members of Parliament (MP), as well as Róng bureaucrats. Many of the invited politicians were Mútunci Róng, but they spoke in their capacity as political leaders, affiliates to the ruling party and the ruling government. Government interests framed the content of the speeches when politicians spoke.

Reciprocally, besides mentioning the objectified cultural content of the ritual, the Mútunci Róng association speakers praised the government's achievements as regards Róng welfare. During my fieldwork these speakers addressed the attainment of PTG status and the subsequent demand for separate quotas.

We Lepcha are backward in every field, everybody knows that, but the present government protects and preserves us [...] before I leave the stage I want to make one more point, the only government that understands the sentiments of Lepcha communities is the SDF government. The SDF government has brought development to Lepcha communities in every field. (S. D. Lepcha, RMRT president, August 2011)

But the one and only government is Dr. Pawan Kumar Chamling. His party gives us a lot of opportunity. We should grab the opportunity. (N. T. Lepcha, Ex-Chairman, Singhik, August 2009)

Another recurring topic was the Tower of Daramdin: this replica of an earthen pot tower featuring prominently in Róng mythology was thought of as a tourist

spot which would enhance the local economy. RMRT had initiated the project, and it had received government sanction, but the work was not progressing.

It was common for speakers to ascribe the state recognition of Tendong Hlo Rumfát, the success of the ritual revival, and the very existence of a Róng 'identity' to the benevolence of the present government, the ruling party, and lastly the chief minister. They equated state recognition of the ritual with the recognition of the Mútunci Róng as an ethnic group. According to this logic, the ruling party had given 'the Lepcha' the gift of 'identity' or existence.

From 1997 the government recognised Tendong Hlo Rumfát on the 8th of August as a national holiday. So from 1997 we got the identity of the Lepcha community who are original inhabitants of Sikkim. But were the Lepcha not there in Sikkim before 1997? So before 1997 we did not know about our identity and rights, but [we received them] from the government of Sikkim under the party president Dr. Pawan Kumar Chamling ... only he understands the sanctity of the particular community. (R. B. Subba, minister, chairperson of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee, August 2009)

The speeches by the different politicians and the RMRT president in 2009 and the following years had a similar tone: the chief minister and his government were the only ones concerned about the Mútunci Róng. The chief minister did not want them to vanish, had recognised the festival as a state holiday for the protection of their culture and history, and was giving the Mútunci Róng further opportunities such as in the development of their language. He had acknowledged them as the Indigenous people of the region and ultimately publicly bestowed on them a specific 'identity'. Within this rhetoric, Indigenous survival was accredited not only to the government in general, but specifically to one person.

I argue that the mentioning of the government's accomplishments for the benefit of the Róng community as well as its future schemes had several functions in the context of patronage relations. It was intended to publicly flatter the politicians and government officials who were present and reaffirm their good relations; it informed the attending public (including those present via the media) about the party's activities and potential future plans, thereby showcasing the party agenda; and lastly it endorsed the party with respect to a potential ethnic voter pool. I suggest, moreover, that in this repetition, ritual programmes delivered the script for future activism: they were learning grounds, places for members of the ethnic associations to grow and make connections, to learn

about the regulations and available benefits, and to gain social confidence and master what Chettri (2017a) calls the “bureaucratic language and the rules governing rights” (148). The described blueprint for interaction remained after the conclusion of my fieldwork and a change in government, as confirmed by my visit to Tendong Hlo Rumfát in 2024.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, during my fieldwork the Sikkimese government was promoting a unified tribalism in Sikkim. The state used the politics of tribalisation to shape inter-ethnic reconciliation and ultimately satisfy conflicting demands by pushing a local version of ‘unity in diversity’, a discursive strategy of multi-culturalism that was used all over India. The state-appointed chairperson of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát celebration committee was officially always chosen from another community than the Mútunci Róng. RMRT publicly promoted these changes as a sign of inclusion of other ethnic groups (RMRT president, Tendong Hlo Rumfát, Gangtok, August 2009). In the words of the 2009 Celebration Committee chairperson, Tendong Hlo Rumfát took on a new role of promoting ethnic inclusion and a Sikkimese identity:

If we separate the Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali, it may be harmful for the state. Unity is important to make Sikkim beautiful, so from 2003 the Tarjum has introduced a new committee system for organising and celebrating the Tendong Hlo Rumfát. That is a very good idea, because it is not communal. We all are one and Tendong Hlo Rumfát is our festival. There is no Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali, but we are all Sikkimese. (R.B. Subba, minister, chairperson of the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee, August 2009)

The representation of the other communities on the committee was to a certain extent symbolic and ceremonial, but it reproduced the state discourse on unity among the various ethnic groups in Sikkim and ensured the annual reproduction of the government’s tribalisation policy. Speeches given during Tendong Hlo Rumfát constantly reaffirmed the unity between the different communities, while at the same time emphasising that every community had the right to protect and conserve its own culture, community, and tradition, and that the different communities should assist each other.¹⁶⁰

The obligation of patronage went beyond the ritual event as a platform for the promotion of the government’s agenda: RMRT actively campaigned for the SDF party to ‘get the Lepcha vote’. In 2009, RMRT went on tour for three weeks

160 For example K. T. Gyaltsen, speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Celebration Committee president, speech, Tendong Hlo Rumfát, Gangtok, August 2009.

to the different districts, under the leadership of their president C. T. Lepcha, “to call on its people to vote for the Sikkim Democratic Front” (Now! Report 2009, April 29, 3). The RMROS then congratulated the chief minister for sweeping the elections and thanked him “for showing faith to the Lepcha community and giving them their rights in the Sikkim Assembly poll again. The Association is looking forward to work for the backward and downtrodden people of the community with the help of the government” (Now! Report 2009, May 25, 3).

This close affiliation with the ruling government was ingrained within the structure of RMRT. The executive members often worked in government service and former executive members of the Mútunci Róng association had joined politics. Political lobbying is not mentioned in the RMRT constitution, but it is stated that the association sought “encouragement and help from the Government and well-wishers” (RMRT 1998, 1). Additionally, another task RMRT assigned to itself was to “project the image of the Lepchas as being a dedicated community who have the most sincere loyalty to the State and to promote fraternal sentiments for other communities” (2). The executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations can be defined as “*indio[s] permitido[s]*”, state-authorised Indigenous persons (Hale 2004, 17). The Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera spontaneously used this term to start a discussion on how to conceptualise governments’ use of “cultural rights to divide and domesticate indigenous movements” (Hale 2004, 17).

This strong compliance with the government was symptomatic of the political situation in Sikkim at the time. Until May 2014 the ruling party had had no serious opposition in the state and held thirty-two seats in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. A strong sense of government control was noticeable in many aspects of life, such as in the dependency on government jobs. And while government dominance and compliance were generally already strong in Sikkim, sustaining and achieving additional protective measures was one of RMRT’s focal activities. In this context, a favourable government was necessary for getting requests sanctioned and demands heard, as ultimately the government had the power to recognise and approve demands made within these institutionalised structures. Fostering these relations was part of a strategy to secure the position of the community and achieve access to new possibilities for further socio-economic mobility and status. As Arora (2006), McKay (2021), and Vandenhelsken (2011, 111) point out, much of the strategising and self-understanding within the Sikkimese sub-nationalist discourse occurred in interaction with India, especially administratively, but under the assumption of hypothetical isolation from the rest of India.

The close affiliations to the government and the ruling party were, to a certain extent, rational decisions intended to achieve the highest possible benefit

for the community, or the individual in question – as was often interjected by the opposition. At the same time, many executive members of the Mútunci Róng associations firmly believed that the actions of the government offered respect and protective mechanisms for the Róng community and would enable the promised upward mobility.¹⁶¹ In 2011 the executive body of RMRT changed, after being under the presidency of C. T. Lepcha for fifteen years.¹⁶² The new RMRT president nicely captured the interrelation between party politics and working for the benefit of the respective community, and its sensitive and problematic nature:

Previously somewhere and somehow our tárjúm [abbreviation for RMRT used in Róngring, J. B.] only worked for the party. This is good, but it is a platform for the Lepcha community and not made for politics. We will work for politics but if any development harms our community, the tárjúm will not tolerate this. We will compromise in some points with the government, but if our community suffers, then obviously this tárjúm is there for the welfare of the Lepcha society. We will work for our community and always for the Lepcha welfare. If the government does something against the Lepcha, this tárjúm will stand on the opposing side and hope that all the Lepcha will support the tárjúm. (RMRT president, May 2011).

Catering to the ruling party was also, however, the subject of criticism. Members of the Róng community, among them well-known social workers and former members of the Mútunci Róng associations, considered that the close affiliation to the ruling party and the socio-economic interests involved in this discredited RMRT in general. They disapproved because, in their opinion, RMRT was merely interested in making money from contracts with the government, and no longer in working for the benefits of the Mútunci Róng. It was the anti-dam protestors that most strongly opposed this strategy of keeping close to the government and the ruling party. CLOS in its founding manifesto in 2006, for example, explicitly blamed “wrong policies of the authorities and the so-called Lepcha associations / organisations in Sikkim” (Wangchuk 2007, 40) for the deplorable situation of the Róng community. They questioned the legitimacy of the association.

The embrace of patron–client relations, tightly intermeshed with Sikkimese government strata, did not entail that the Mútunci Róng associations

161 See Vandenhelsken (2011, 90) for another example of the close relation between ritual performance, ‘social work’, and party politics in Sikkim.

162 For example, Now! Report 2007, May 19, 1 for re-election.

remained completely compliant or that they uttered no criticism of government decisions and policies, but the criticism was measured and carefully timed. It seemed that the youth wing, RMROS, took on the task of being the more outspoken and challenging agent. As an example, executive RMROS members kept reminding the government publicly that even though PTG status had been granted, no benefits had arisen from it for the Mútunci Róng (Bhutia 2011, July 26, 1). Then, in 2013, in the run-up to the elections, the government promised 5 per cent placement reservations for Róng students in institutions for higher studies (SE Report 2013, September 22, 6) and formed a Primitive Tribe Welfare Board. The latter was administered under the Welfare Division of the Social Justice, Empowerment, and Welfare Department. The government appointed the executive members, of whom two stemmed from RMRT. The board was to identify socio-economic and educational schemes specifically for the Róng community (RMRT general secretary II, June 2013). Significantly, it was only after winning the elections that the government then released a notification readjusting the reservations in government service and the public sector that guaranteed the separate 5 per cent quota for communities with PTG status – namely the Mútunci Róng – in government jobs, public sector undertakings, and higher education (Sikkim Government Gazette, Saturday 5 July 2014, No. 279; No. 19/GEN/DOP, dated 27 June 2014).

Furthermore, while discursively the government ‘gave the Lepcha their identity’, the Mútunci Róng associations clearly wanted a say in who belonged to the community, also demanding to be involved in defining belonging and citizenship to Sikkim (Bentley 2021). When the government started issuing the Primitive Tribe Certificates (Now! Report 2010, August 12, 2), the RMROS demanded to be involved in the process of defining who should be issued a certificate, and thus who should be officially recognised as Mútunci Róng. In a letter dated 16 July 2010, it stated that “other communities are also applying for Primitive Tribe Certificate in guise of Lepcha. In recent years we have come across many cases whereby Scheduled Tribe (ST) Certificate for Lepcha Tribe were issued without proper identification” (RMROS 2010, 48). The letter further pointed out that in the neighbouring state of West Bengal, it was a prevalent practice for people to be issued ST Certificates only on recommendation of the various ethnic organisations, such as ILTA. Consequently, the following request was formulated:

Under the fact and circumstances it is humble prayed that this Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association which was formed for the cause and welfare of the Lepchas of Sikkim may be given authority by the State Government to issue Certificate of Identification based on which

Certificate of Primitive Tribe Group in respect of Lepcha community be issued by the Office of the District Collectorate of Sikkim. This will help the government in checking the fraudulent issuance of Primitive Tribe certificate. (RMROS 2010, 49)

This appeal can be read in two ways. It is disconcerting because it shows that in Sikkim, identities or belongings to specific categories had become predatory (Gschiere 2005; Appadurai 2006). On the other hand, it displays that RMROS was seeking more agency in the process of brokering classification, belonging, and lastly access to resources, by an attempt to insert themselves into an administrative process as an ethnic organisation. The District Collector East rejected the request of the RMROS on the basis that

You will understand and appreciate that so far in Sikkim no Association of any Caste/Community has been authorized to issue COI/ NOC/clearance for issuing OBC/MBC/SC/ST certificates to the applicants. (RMROS 2010, 43)

The Sikkim government was not willing to give away to an association the power to define who was 'tribal'. The ascription of who was officially scheduled as a 'Lepcha' remained in the hands of the state. The associations had the right to complain, but the ultimate decision lay with the government, based on pre-existing issued certificates, ST, or Certificate of Identification (formerly Sikkim Subject Certificate).

Tendong Hlo Rumfát performances were not only events where the elite circles met and reaffirmed their loyalty to each other. Especially for common members of the various Mútunci Róng associations and village-level branches, but also for members of the general public, the ritual programmes were events where existing relations could be fostered and new relations begun. Many people attending would usually never get close to the chief minister or any other high-ranking officials; but active participation in the event, such as helping the organisers build the stage or bringing students from a village to dance, enabled interaction with people in power, usually brokered via a higher-level executive of a Mútunci Róng association. As an example, one of the students participating in a contest told me that an executive Mútunci Róng association member had helped her meet with an influential 'resource person', a high-ranking Róng bureaucrat, to help her with her further studies (Student, August 2012).

The RMRT executive members acted as facilitators and brokers, offering introductions to individuals they deemed worthy. In my successive years of attending Tendong Hlo Rumfát I observed people climb the ranks in the Mútunci Róng

associations and find government jobs. The event opened multiple avenues for participation, and with it the hope for an extension of one's personal network and an increase in socio-mobility and status. As such, it provided an opportunity space within a patronage democracy (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2005, 2008) in which an *Indio permitido* could seek to translate resources to overcome personal or collective grievances. Here, I am reminded of the importance of hope in strategies of the vulnerable (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2016; Miyazaki 2004).¹⁶³

MLAS, the Mútunci Róng association in Dzongu, took a slightly different approach to the other Mútunci Róng associations. The organisation was involved in cultural preservation and revival, as were the others, but executive members had restructured the MLAS to be able to implement welfare programmes funded by national and international NGOs as well (MLAS 2006). This process was initiated in 2001, when the Voluntary Health Association of Sikkim appointed the MLAS as a field NGO for the national Reproductive and Child Health Program (MLAS executive director, May 2006; MLAS 2003–4). MLAS worked together with other organisations, such as the Eco-Tourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim, and implemented projects financed by the Japanese International Corporation Agency, for example. These projects forced them to restructure and update their accountability measures, such as auditing, to be eligible as an implementing agency. The new organisational structure opened up new channels for funding and patronage relations beyond the state government.

Dams and Patronage: From Insecurity to Bargaining the Future

During my fieldwork, the obvious political and government patronage of the ritual programme was a matter of debate whose lines reflected the schism that shaped the Róng community in those years: pro- and anti-dam. Hydro companies started funding ritual programmes such as the Námsung *mela* in Dzongu, in a clear expression of their contribution to the community (Figure 36). The reciprocity in this sponsorship would be for the Dzongu residents to extend support to or at least not oppose the dam construction. The anti-dam protestors interpreted this as a direct interference in Róng culture and a misuse of cultural activities as political platforms to assert power. They heavily criticised the way the ritual was celebrated, as being politicised and only about money, status, and access to positions within a given hierarchy (Dawa Lepcha, July 2009).

In 2009, ACT organised its own Tendong Hlo Rumfát at the BL House in Gangtok as an alternative celebration. The anti-dam protest strongly shaped

163 See Snellinger 2016 for the politics of hope in Nepal.



FIGURE 36: Banner at the Nampridang festival showing the sponsors, amongst others the dam developers, December 2008.

the patterns of participation, attendance, and absence at ritual programmes. What was superficially a disagreement on how development should look, and which kind of development would be beneficial for the people, was in fact tied into party politics, and at root reflected the struggle to retain dominance through patronage as well as by exerting control over discourse and knowledge exchange (Huber 2019).

In this section, I focus on the dynamics in Dzongu itself focussing on the time period between 2006 and 2014, and then in the next section I discuss the effects it had on the relations between the various Mútunci Róng associations.

In Dzongu, the actors supporting the dams were, as McDuie-Ra describes them, “less of a movement and more a network of NGOs, political leaders and public servants with some ties to the larger Lepcha organisations in Gangtok” (McDuie-Ra 2011, 89). They were what would locally be described as *thulo manche* (Nep. big people), leaders with political and economic resources and leverage. All the elected representatives of Dzongu, such as the Panchayat members and the Dzongu MLA, were in favour of the hydro projects when the anti-dam protest began to emerge. The pro-dam network had clearly invested in relations with the ruling party and the state government, also for private gains. State-dominated brokers actively participated in facilitation, defined as the process of enabling powerful actors to reap private gains from environmental

projects in vulnerable locations (Huber et al. 2017; Collins 2008, 22). At the same time, the support of these representatives was motivated by their genuine perception that their Róng community was dependent “on the goodwill of the dominant ethnic groups and the government to survive” (McDuie-Ra 2011, 93). Due to their relations with the government, the Dzongu public viewed the pro-dam actors with a large amount of trust as well as fear.

Pro-dam actors combined two arguments in endorsing the dams. One was constructed around the discourse on modernity and development that is common in the promotion of infrastructure projects in the Himalayan borderlands, and formulates any negative effects as an act of national sacrifice (Drew 2018; see Harriss 1998). The other described run-with-the-river dams as ecologically sustainable and focused around reaping the wealth of the rivers (Huber and Joshi 2015; Drew 2018; Escobar 1995). Pro-dam supporters presented the dams as the best alternative for economic growth in Dzongu after the demise of cardamom. The projects would ‘open up’ Dzongu through infrastructural development and tourism and help sustain Róng culture (McDuie-Ra 2011, 90ff.). The official statements by RMRT and RMROS highlighted the prospects of jobs for the Mútunci Róng of Dzongu and the benefit for the larger public. In line with the government’s argument, the Mútunci Róng associations presented the dams as a means of socio-economic mobility (McDuie-Ra 2011, 90–97). They blamed the dam’s opponents for rejecting development and hanging on to an idealised image of Róng culture and community that no longer existed.

The transmission of information on the dams, as several scholars on infrastructural projects pointed out, built on knowledge gaps and strategic ignorance (Huber 2019; Chettri 2017b; Frickel 2008; Boelens et al. 2019; McGoey 2012 on strategic ignorance). Government actors both experienced and manufactured uncertainty about the ecological consequences and tended to emphasise the temporary inconveniences of dam construction (Huber 2019; Huber and Joshi 2015; Gergan 2019). The focus of the pro-dam narrative was on the economic gains that would be consequent on employment and investment in other infrastructure, such as roads and schools. In that respect, dams were conceptualised as a bankable risk.¹⁶⁴ In the case of Chungtang, where Teesta HEP III was constructed, Dukpa et al. (2018) show how the connections between state-sanctioned power and knowledge distribution had a strong influence in preventing local protest against the dams. The situation was similar in Dzongu; however, it did not prevent the protest.

Importantly, there was an additional power broker on the scene: the dam developers themselves. The state actors acted on the local level as both facilita-

164 See Butler and Rest 2017 on Nepal.

tor and agent, so that the state actors and dam developers became perceived as one and the same.¹⁶⁵ In reality, the state government had little influence over the developers' internal dealings and clearly could not control all their actions. Further, the decision-makers within these companies were again tied into different interest networks. As such, the companies as agents – though not necessarily every employee – functioned according to the parameters of capitalist profit making. The welfare of the local people was not the first priority, if it was any priority at all, beyond mere image maintenance.

Most of the Sikkimese anti-dam activists, who for two years sat on relay hunger strike in BL House on Tibet Road in Gangtok, came from Dzongu. Leading activists belonged to what would be classified as the 'educated resource people', some coming from previous *mandal* and *muktiar* families. Among them were known personalities, such as a former forest minister, a former national-level football player, and a documentary cinematographer. Most of the protestors, however, were educated Dzongu youth; many had come to the capital for studies or had returned from colleges outside the state. They had spent some years outside the reserve for their education, but remained connected through family ties, visits, and affective sentiments.¹⁶⁶ A month into the hunger strike, CLOS president Gyatso Lepcha aptly captured the sense of action and relations to the reserve (as well as the gender bias of the movement):

We are the new generation, the sons of Dzongu, and we know what is best for our future. (Gyatso Lepcha in NOW! Report 2007, July 19, 2)

The anti-dam protestors aligned themselves with a global environmental movement that questioned the economic and ecological viability of dams within the fragile Himalayan space, combining this with asserting their conceptualisation of sacred space, as described in Chapter Five. In their reasoning, the only way to prevent harm and to have a good life in the reserve or in the rest of the state was to stop the dam construction. Through their protest, the anti-dam activists refused to be the *Indio permitido* and pushed for alternative decolonial Indigenous

165 Lord similarly describes how, in Nepal, people in affected areas consider hydroelectric developers to be the government: the reason, however, is the reverse. While in Sikkim the omnipresent control of the government and the government-led promotion of dams is the main reason the local population does not distinguish between the government and the developers, in Nepal the people have experienced the opposite, a lack of government due to decades of instability, war, and no elections (Lord 2016, 150).

166 For an intimate description of the anti-dam activists and their life at the protest site, see Little 2013. For a study of youth and precarity in Sikkim, see Gergan 2016b.

futures (Gergan and Curley 2021). They were not content with the operating spaces made available to them in the multi-cultural system of protective rights. The anti-dam activists had their own concepts of what being Indigenous meant and how the state was exploiting their land and resources, and thus they did not comply with the rules of the multi-cultural patron–client relations.

As Lidskog (2010) has pointed out, “citizens seem to have no choice but to trust experts in order to achieve a healthy and safe life” (70). However, with the educated people in their community divided in their opinions on the dangers and long-term effects of the dams, many villagers were at a loss about what to do. For them, it was basically impossible to get an unbiased assessment of the realistic risk to environment and livelihoods, to hear the pros and cons of mitigation measures, and achieve some form of accountability from developers and government.

Adding to the lack of transparency on the impact of the dams, the Sikkimese government took a hard stance against the anti-dam protestors. Therefore, involvement in protest – in the widest sense of being associated with a protestor – disrupted the channels of patronage.¹⁶⁷ Most households depended heavily on government subsidies, contributions from members with (usually low-level) government jobs, and recurring employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Additionally, financial pressure was significant in the years leading up to the anti-dam protests because Dzongu residents had lost their cash crop due to a fungus, and there was practically no more yield from the large cardamom plantations (Bentley 2007). Most Dzongu villagers had relied on the cash crop income to pay for expenditures beyond subsistence, and this circumstance only increased the sense of being reliant on government rations and patronage relations to get access to income. The extent of possible party patronage became obvious in the 2014 elections, when the former ACT general secretary joined the opposition party Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) and contested the Dzongu seat in the Sikkim Legislative assembly. Huge amounts of funds were then channelled into the villages through the SDF campaign, along with services and promised income opportunities such as contracts. The place-dependency of the Dzongu residents, defined as functional reliance on the place’s services and resources (Dukpa et al. 2018), was significantly interlaced with a dependency on the government.

In this context, the young age of the anti-dam protestors was significant, as was their distance from the immediate pressures of village life. They became

167 See Gergan and Curley 2021 on the disciplinary pressures of the Sikkimese state on the anti-dam protestors.

engaged in protest over affective connections to their homes and – something which tends to get forgotten – their conviction that development needed to be done differently in order for them and the coming generations to survive. Their approach to development was bound into their experience and understanding of the Dzongu more-than-human landscape, in combination with an intense interaction with environmentalist approaches to modernity (Little 2013).¹⁶⁸ The young anti-dam protestors were aware of the dependencies of their families on services and goods channelled via government agents. One of the youths I met in Lingthem told me about how his brother had dragged him out of BL house: his brother was a government employee and had acted after experiencing pressures in his workplace over his inability ‘to keep his family in check’. Others saw family members transferred or facing victimisation due to their siblings’ or children’s actions. Gyatso Lepcha from CLOS put into words something I heard recurrently at BL house and in Dzongu:

But owing to the pressure of the authorities, the poor people are made to keep mum, as we all know that in our state 9 out of 10 houses have a government servant, so there is no alternative except to obey the authority. In spite of all this, we have come out, my father who is a government employee and was victimized and transferred only because his son has protested against the project. (Lepcha 2007, 25)

During fieldwork in the Dzongu villages, I was asked repeatedly what my opinion was and if I – as an educated person – could recommend what the best decision for them would be in order for them to keep themselves and their families safe. Interestingly, their concerns aligned with those of both the anti-dam protestors and the pro-dam supporters alike (Wangchuk 2007, 36). The Dzongu residents interacted with and heard information from both sides. They knew about the houses that had been cracked at other dam sites, about the potential that their fields would dry up, the danger of blasting, and the arrival of immigrant labourers in their immediate vicinity; they had heard this from anti-dam protestors or just through informal discussions and conversations. They were worried about how it would impact their lives and livelihoods. At the same time, they heard about the job opportunities and the ‘progress’ that the dam projects would bring with them, as well as about the benefits the dam companies promised, from roads to schools to support of Róng culture (Interlocutors, 2006–12; ACT 2006a, 2006b; Now! Report 2007, June 21, 3).

168 For a study of the young activists’ lives after the protest, see Gergan 2014, 2016a.

The fears that the dams could increase vulnerability and be detrimental to livelihoods – defined in economic, social, cultural, and religious terms – were shared by probably most Dzongu residents, even outspoken pro-dam supporters. Their strategies of dealing with this potential hazard to their community differed. I would argue that many people in Dzongu made their decision with a certain amount of pragmatism, trust in the government, and resignation. However, another factor that weighed strongly in their decision-making was fear of government repression (see also Scott 1985, 274–77) in case one opted for a solution not aligned with official state strategies. In Dzongu there was a general sense of unease, alongside a pragmatic approach that it was better to get something from it than lose out completely. Most Dzongu residents tried to make the best of the situation and at least get access to immediate means to improve their life, be it financial compensation for land, or new roads or schools. One common statement was that the government would know best, but that they at least wanted to be compensated for the inconvenience and increase in vulnerability that had been framed as temporary (Interlocutors, 2009).

The implementation of the dams turned into a process of bargaining between the negative impacts and promised benefits of the development projects. The villagers engaged in public hearings as spaces for bargaining – to mitigate or at least compensate for the potential experienced hardship or loss. During public hearings in Dzongu, the pro-dam network made demands intended to increase the benefits for the Dzongu community, such as access to education facilities, land compensation, improvement of infrastructure, free electricity, job opportunities in the project, and cultural facilities such as model houses. Additional requests were protection of the environment, cultural documentation, and respect for local place names (Now! Report 2007, July 17, 2). Based on their fragmented knowledge and an assessment of their patron–client relations, affected people weighed the risk to their livelihoods and the environment against the opportunities that the developers could offer them, to reduce their marginality with regard to facilities.¹⁶⁹

MLAS executive members located in Dzongu were involved in negotiating the concessions for the residents with the government and the hydro-project companies. It was a delicate positioning, especially in the tense years between 2007 and 2009, when the relay hunger strike shaped the Gangtok townscape. They eventually agreed that no labourers would be allowed to settle in Dzongu, as well as that locals and affected households should be given preference in employment. Another demand was that a certain percentage of the profit should

169 For a detailed analysis of the financialisation of benefits with regard to the border regions of Nepal, see Lord 2016.

return to the community in the form of social welfare and various other facilities (McDuaie-Ra 2011, 91).

One of the people involved in these negotiations was the executive director of MLAS. He was one of the few people who managed to balance the rift between pro- and anti-dam sections in the early years of the protest. He had wanted to resign from MLAS but his resignation was not accepted by the other members. The dependency on his knowledge and the mutual agreement that their other welfare schemes needed to be continued, secured his position and enabled him to facilitate communication between the factions (Executive director MLAS, August 2009; Now! Report 2007, September 27, 3).

The RMROS North Branch president very clearly expressed how for many an acceptance of the dam projects had been a calculated bargain, as well as a sacrifice made by the Róng community in the north, for the government and the developers to ensure their survival as an Indigenous group:

We have supported hydel projects for the sake of national development and the government and developers should in turn take care of our tradition, culture, old nomenclature, nature and environment which are getting adversely affected by such development projects.
(RMROS North Branch president in Now! Report 2011, July 26, 1)

To be affected by large-scale infrastructure development was thus a means to achieve recognition and increase one's bargaining power (Lord 2016, 146–47). The villagers described themselves, or were described by the Mútunci Róng associations, as damaged or liable to experience damage, and this was to acquire security or even status according to the parameters of a modern capitalist ontology.

The anti-dam protestors pointed to the co-optations and pressures that permeate the power regimes of patron–client relations. They questioned whether the affected people, landowners, and the general public of Sikkim were truly involved in the decision-making process (ACT 2006a; Wangchuk 2007, 39–41), and concluded that the government had not only decided without consulting the affected people but had pressurised the local people into selling lands and supporting the projects (Now! Report 2007, June 25, 1). Around twenty young landowners from Sakyong and Pentong in Upper Dzongu, among them some who would have inherited the lands their fathers sold, accused the Panchayat members and other government agents of exploiting the illiteracy of the older generation of landowners, making them sign empty papers and in the process not clarifying the exact boundaries or degree of compensation (Now! Report 2007, July 19, 1). As mentioned, there was not only significant trust in the elect-

ed representatives in Dzongu but also fear, and both of these would have enabled such transactions. The landowners' claims derived from the customary understanding that the land belonged to a specific family and was passed along a patrilineage and did not necessarily belong merely to the person whose name was on the land deed.

The ruling party and the elected representatives, such as the Dzongu MLA, strongly opposed the accusations made by ACT and some affected households. They affirmed that appropriate regulations were in place to protect place, people, and environment (Now! Report 2007, June 30, 1, 4). The elected representatives highlighted the democratic decision-making process in which the public gave the party representatives and the ruling government the right to speak for them. The pro-dam actors inverted the argument and demanded that the protestors sitting outside of Dzongu should let the people in Dzongu, who in their perception supported the dams, speak for themselves and make their own decisions on the issue of whether they wanted development and how this development should look (McDuié-Ra 2011, 95). The pro-dam supporters asserted that the majority of the residents of Dzongu supported the projects (Sharma 2007, July 9, 1, 2).

The state agents, in this case the elected representatives as well as by proxy the Mútunci Róng associations, countered ACT's implication of government-sponsored pressure by highlighting the protestors' own (potential) violence. The situation in Dzongu was tense. In summer 2007 there was one incident during which anti-dam protestors destroyed material at a dam construction site (Now! Report 2007, July 19, 2; Wangchuk 2007, 44). RMRT "pleaded" with the hunger strikers to remain "patient and keep peace and tranquillity" (Now! Report 2007, June 28, 1), implying that the protestors endorsed violence. This wording framed the anti-dam protestors as a threat that in the end would undermine the welfare of the Sikkimese people: "a handful of opportunists [were] posing a sharp threat to the possibility of Sikkim evolving as a developed, peaceful and prosperous State" (Oberoi 2007, August 14, 4). As such, they framed the protest as detrimental to the state's aim of fostering harmony and creating a safe space in which to live.

The MLAS executive members and the many other pro-dam supporters in Dzongu did not deny the negative environmental impacts highlighted by the protestors but framed the possible economic benefits of the dams as superseding the potential damaging consequences. As such, this was not a strategy to advert harm but rather to mitigate the effects of harm, similar to the interpretation of interactions with the embedded more-than-human being, but according to different modalities that function within a modernist and capitalist ontology.

As described in Chapter Three, ritual practice is a form of interaction that can appease an angered deity and thus avert harm or secure the deities' protection, which is why, as mentioned in Chapter Five, the developers made use of ritual before starting blasting or other invasive work, for example at the Panang HEP. They performed this ritual exchange to prepare the deities, ask their forgiveness, and give offerings for their continued support. I argue that the fact that developers had conducted rituals, and as such to a certain extent respected the local relationship to nature, was in part what caused the rise in scepticism about dams among people in North Sikkim after the earthquake on 18 September 2011. The main destruction centred on the dam site (Figure 37).

The rumour emerged that the dams had caused the earthquake, even though scientists disagreed (Gergan 2020). I argue that this rumour did not merely come from the observation that dam sites had experienced more impact, which could have been due to the sensitivity of an already damaged landscape; rather, it correlated with the Róng Indigenous ontologies. Executive members of ACT refrained from publicly associating the disaster with the dams out of respect for the sentiments of the Dzongu people (Dawa Lepcha, December 2011), and instead engaged in rebuilding. However, the thought was out there, and other protestors did voice the interrelation, especially because anti-dam activists had previously associated natural disasters and dams with the anger of local deities, such as when a flash flood killed four labourers at the Panang HEP (Wangchuk 2007, 48).

What I intend to underline here is that the earthquake particularly rattled those people who supported the dams. I argue that this was not because they now believed in the anti-dam protestors' logic that any disturbance equals disaster, but rather because rituals had been performed to appease the more-than-human entities before starting the construction precisely to prevent such disasters. The earthquake meant the ritual practice had failed. The gravity of the incident and its specific effects on Dzongu and the dam sites could be seen as signs that the deities of the place were actually angered. Kóngchen had withdrawn his protection, had stopped pinning down the earthquake king. I do not want to imply that all pro-dam actors followed this thought process, nor that all Dzongu residents changed their mind on development projects, nor that all Dzongu residents believed in this Róng Indigenous ontologies (see also Gergan 2016a, 5, 6); still, it was enough to ignite doubts among many Dzongu residents about their chosen strategy of countering harm by minimal ritual practice and financial compensation.

Beyond ontological reasoning, the developers' and the government's failure to deliver the promised socio-economic improvement triggered more scepti-



FIGURE 37: Destroyed road near Panang HEP site, November 2011.

cism within the population and increased dissent about the government's development strategy. This in turn amplified the pressure on the local representative who, to remain in power, had to deliver the promised amenities. In Chungtang, the site of Teesta HEP III, located just outside of the Dzongu borders, for example, residents requested that the founding member and working president of ACT support them in holding the implementing company, National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd. (NHPC), accountable, especially with regard to promises it had made as well as concerning particularly destructive impacts on the environment. Chungtang was his home village, in which his ancestors had been local leaders, and he had ties with the residents going back to his childhood. These local relations gave him a sense of obligation towards his community, inspiring him to participate and to become the president of the steering committee for the implementation of Teesta HEP III. He decided – albeit in the face of public criticism – that as an activist his work did not stop once protest had failed to prevent the dam.

His involvement in the committee was a chance to prevent more damage and at least contribute to protecting the environment and the local people throughout the process of implementation. The committee dealt with issues

such as that the government was taking more land than required, the lack of transparency in job allotment, that locals did not get access to work, and that rehabilitation measures were not efficiently implemented (Tseten Lepcha in NOW 29.04.2012). Such collaboration would have been unheard-of in the initial years of the protest.

In 2012, government representatives such as the Dzongu MLA (and Power Minister) and elected Panchayat members in North Sikkim boycotted two public hearings about Teesta HEP IV, mainly due to the insensitive implementation by the developer, NHPC. In May 2015, after my fieldwork – and in fact beyond the scope of the data analysed in this work – the Dzongu MLA (who at that time was additionally deputy speaker of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly), together with other government officials, elected Panchayat members, government employees, and the public of Dzongu, agreed to jointly oppose the implementation of all forms of hydroelectric power projects in the Róng reserve, Dzongu (ACT 2015). However, as detailed in Rinchu Doma Dukpa's PhD thesis, which examines the later phases of the protest movement, contestations and power dynamics persisted – albeit shaped by shifting allegiances and party politics (2024, 99–132).

Trans-border Relations: More Than Cultural Differences

Relations between the various regional Mútunci Róng associations had not always been easy in the past, strained as they were by different understandings of heritage, accusations of cultural hegemony, and rival approaches to framing culture for projects to achieve state recognition, as discussed in Chapter Two. I argue that the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations' support for the dams was beneficial to their relations with the Sikkimese state, but it hampered their overall quest for 'unity' in the Róng community. The internal differences didn't prevent shared 'cultural' action by the regional Mútunci Róng associations, such as participation in ritual programmes, until ILTA, ROP, and RST joined the anti-dam protest. From 2007 onwards, the Tendong Hlo Rumfát Celebration Committee did not extend invitations to any anti-dam activists; this included members of ACT and other Sikkimese organisations, as well as ILTA, ROP in Kalimpong and RST in Ilam. Thus, it was not cultural differences or fears of the cultural hegemony of one regional group over the other, but rather political positionings and diverging interpretations of the vulnerability to environmental disaster and large-scale development projects, that caused a pervasive rift between the Mútunci Róng associations.

With this move to stop inviting anti-dam activists, RMRT cut off all its intra-ethnic trans-border ties on an association level. Along with ILTA, even the

actual founder of Tendong Hlo Rumfát, late Sonam Tshering Tamsang, ceased to attend the ritual. Similarly, the RMRT executive members were no longer invited to join the festivities across the border in Kalimpong or Ilam. Thus, the courtesy arrangement of mutual invitations that had existed since the beginning of the celebration of the state ritual of Tendong Hlo Rumfát was now discontinued. At the same time, new relations were intensified, such as those between the anti-dam protestors and a larger global activist community as well as those between ILTA and the Ilam Róng association.

According to leading activists from Kalimpong, at the time that they expressed their support for the anti-dam protest in Gangtok, they were not really aware of the staunch division within the Róng community of Sikkim and the consequences that their actions would have for their already difficult relations with the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations (ILTA welfare secretary, May 2011). They did not anticipate that they would strain their relations with the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations to such an extent that communication was not possible anymore.

The executive members of ILTA had carefully cultivated their relations with RMRT in the previous years, because the members of the Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations had socio-political capital that the activists in Kalimpong did not hold: through their tightly knit patron–client relations, the Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations had close ties to the state government (L. Tamsang 2000a, 2000b). RMRT executive members could approach MLAs and MPs to negotiate favours and could facilitate meetings between ILTA members and leading politicians or high-ranking bureaucrats in order to discuss issues they were pursuing and for which they wanted political support from the Union Government in Delhi, as they had done in the past with regard to the Róng language, Rónggring. Therefore, RMRT executive members had more leverage with respect to the agendas and topics that their state government would pursue, especially also introduce for discussion at the central government level. Sikkim was a smaller state, and the Mútunci Róng, as an ethnic community, were part of the state’s self-understanding and tribalist agenda. In West Bengal, although ILTA had connections with the power centre in Kolkata, its needs were not considered very important compared to other issues within the large state. In this context, ritual programmes such as Tendong Hlo Rumfát were important annual events for the ILTA executive members, at which they could cultivate interactions with the Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations and thereby activate relations with Sikkimese government representatives.

The ties between RMRT and the Róng association in Ilam, as well, turned sour over the dam issue, much to the RST executive members’ surprise. They

had heard about the implementation of dam projects in Dzongu in 2007, when they met with ILTA and its Kolkata branch. Considering the cultural importance of the Róng heartland around Mount Kangchendzonga for them and the entire Róng community, RST decided to support the protest. The RST executive members wrote a letter to the chief minister of Sikkim stating their disagreement with the implementation of the dams. They went to Kathmandu to meet the NEFIN executive members and received a letter issued by them condemning the construction of the dams. As the main umbrella organisation for Nepal's Indigenous nationalities, NEFIN is recognised as a spokesperson for the latter by the Nepal government and has strong international ties to NGOs and UN agents. The RST members did not meet ACT directly as they could not find time to travel to Gangtok, but they handed the letter over to the ILTA president.

The RST members were not aware of the party-political situation in Sikkim and the RMRT's affiliations with the Sikkim government. RST executive members dealt with party politics very differently than did the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations. RST executive members were involved in most major political parties in Nepal except the Royalist party. There were supporters of the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal, and the Maoist parties within their ranks. The acceptance of such diverse party membership or support within the marked a substantial difference from Sikkim and West Bengal, where the members of the Mútunci Róng associations usually aligned with the same political party and as such were crucial players in negotiating a vote for a specific party in return for services in ethnic politics. The RST president explained to me that during RST meetings, they were not allowed to talk about individual politics, but they did discuss which party's agenda was best for the promotion of the Mútunci Róng and their culture (RST president, April 2011).

RST had always had closer relations to ILTA than to the Sikkim associations, because of the uniting figure of Sonam Tshering Lepcha. Festivals and celebrations in Nepal were publicised in the ILTA magazine *Aachuley*, and RST sent out regular invitations (Aachuley Report 2002b, 8–9). ILTA delegations, spearheaded by Sonam Tshering Lepcha, attended events in Nepal. In the years following the anti-dam movement, this interaction only increased. Three RST delegations came to Kalimpong for the annual festivities between 2009 and 2013 (Former RST president, April 2011; Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, July 2009), more than in all the years beforehand. The improved exchange, however, was due more to the situation in Nepal than to the anti-dam protest. After the peace treaty in 2006, the consequent declaration of Nepal as a democratic federal state, and the lengthy constitution-building process, Indigenous politics gained importance in Nepal. The interaction with experienced Indigenous activists from their own

community was considered enriching for their own strategies even if they were based in a different country (Former RST president, April 2011).¹⁷⁰

In the meantime, ACT built up a local, national, and international network of supporters and environmental activists. Their cause was framed – especially internationally – as the cause of the marginalised Indigenous Róng community. Within this network, ACT activists became spokespeople for the Mútunci Róng as Indigenous people in Dzongu and in Sikkim. In the initial days of the indefinite hunger strike, the Sikkim Lepcha Bhutia Apex Committee (SIBLAC), Concerned Lepcha of Sikkim (CLOS), Citizens for Democracy (CFD), and Concerned Citizens of Sikkim (CCS) formed an umbrella association in support of ACT, called Sikkim Associations for Environment (SAFE) (Now! Report 2007, July 7, 1, 2). Other organisations, such as Sangha of Dzongu (SOD), Sikkim Lharipa Association, and Citizens Forum, further expressed their support (Now! Report 2007, June 25, 1, 2). But ACT was careful about whom they kept up relations with within the state. The statement with which RMRT publicly joined the pro-dam discourse shows why: it requested ACT to remain “‘cautious’ against the designs of ‘vested interests and try not to politicize the issue’”. The release additionally stated: “We do not want our people’s sentiments to be misrepresented by others for their benefit” (Now! Report 2007, June 28).

This explains why, while engaging with other civil society groups, ACT refused to enter into relations with opposition parties in Sikkim. This may sound like an easy decision to make, but it meant a refusal of patronage, finances, and networks – especially after being cut off from any access to patronage other than from the group’s supporters, some of whom were influential former landlord families. On the request of ACT, for example, the convenor of the BL rights organisation SIBLAC, who at the same time was the vice president of the opposition party Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee, withdrew the announcement that SIBLAC would join the hunger strike (Now! Report 2007, August 17, 3). But after the opposition parties formed a joint action committee and then publicly extended their support for the protest (Now! Report 2007, July 28, 1; Now! Report 2007, August 2, 4), in the public perception ACT was increasingly merged with the political opposition. The anti-dam movement, which had started out from cultural and environmental concerns, was quickly understood along political lines. Acts executed by political parties, such as the burning of the governor’s and chief minister’s effigies, were attributed to the protest and thus to ACT. The executive members stuck firmly by their stance of being non-political, particularly because of all the rumours of them being co-opted by

170 See Shneiderman 2015a for trans-border exchanges among the Thangmi.



FIGURE 38: Anti-dam activist Tenzing Lepcha speaking in Kalimpong, with ILTA literary secretary, December 2008.

opposition parties. Consequently, leading activist Dawa Lepcha, who for many was the face of ACT during the hunger strike, left his office as general secretary in 2013 when he decided to join the political opposition party SKM (Now! Report 2013, February 3).

ACT built up strong relations with the executive members of ILTA and ROP during the years of the hunger strike. While ACT had been cautious about forming alliances with any other organisations within Sikkim, they did not reject the support of the Kalimpong Mútunci Róng (Now! Report 2007, August 1, 3; Bentley 2021). On the contrary, they formed a joint action committee. ACT general secretary Dawa Lepcha and ILTA president Lyangsong Tamsang went to Delhi to meet representatives of the Union Government and leading environmentalists (Now! Report 2007, December 6, 1). From 2007 onwards, executive members of ACT and supporters of the anti-dam protest were invited to the events in Kalimpong and addressed the audience. While they stopped attending any Róng ritual programmes in Sikkim, the celebrations in Kalimpong were new platforms where they could speak openly about the protest, their opinion, and actions (Figure 38).

ILTA had been campaigning on various issues for years, and had built up relations with bureaucrats, ministers, and other resource people both in the Union Government in Delhi and the West Bengal government as well as with national and international Indigenous rights activists (Little 2013, 107; Wangchuk 2007,

52). Many of the Dzongu anti-dam activists were relatively new to activism on such a scale, especially because in Sikkim a lot revolved around Sikkim itself and did not extend beyond the state borders. This network gained by relations with ILTA opened up new possibilities that also strengthened the protest.

The anti-dam activists now networked with environmentalists in India, such as with the organisation Kalpavris, the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, and the Delhi Solidarity Group. They interacted with politicians and leading social activists, such as Surendra and Manju Mohan and most prominently Medha Patkar, famous for her role in the protests against the Narmada dam (JAC Press release, 5.12.2007). ACT members attended international forums. Working president Tseten Lepcha became a member of the Plenary Board of the World Mountain People's Association, which addressed the issue of hydropower and climate with the UN. I do not intend here to give an extensive network analysis, but only to highlight that the scope of their actions now took them beyond the borders of the Sikkimese state and linked them to advocacy groups in the global network of environmental and Indigenous rights. While clearly relying on the Sikkimese and Indian political and legal context for their immediate actions, such as protest and court cases, they additionally moved in a completely different framework of recognition, thereby "leapfrogging the state" (van Schendel 2011, 26).

Furthermore, their breaking away from the patronage of the Sikkimese government, their politics of refusal (A. Simpson 2014) – not necessarily a choice, but a consequence of protest – made it essential to find other funding sources to keep the protest alive, and at a minimum to provide for food and the bare necessities for the protestors at BL house. The anti-dam activists had local supporters, but increasingly relied on a network of global support, comprised of a Sikkimese diaspora and other environmentalists. This international flow of funds – which ran along lines of personal connections and symmetrical relations of support – was problematic for the Sikkimese government, because it freed the activists from the reciprocity by which patron–client relations function. With access to resources that came to them as personal gifts, not officially as funding for the protest, which could more easily have been stopped by the government, the activists were to a certain extent more independent and freer to make their decisions. These international resources, however, brought with them other unspoken obligations. These funds were tied to the continuance of the protest and dried up after 2009, when the relay hunger strike was withdrawn and the public protest subsided.

After the 2011 earthquake, communication between the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations and ILTA turned more cordial, and they entered into contact

once again. I argue that there were three interrelated reasons for this; first, the earthquake made educated Mútunci Róng rethink their strategies of survivance; second, in that year RMRT elected a new executive body, with a new president and general secretary; and third, the tension surrounding the dams had cooled down with the ending of the relay hunger strike. Additionally, in West Bengal the Róng activists' strategies had changed with the demands for a separate council, and the dams were no longer a priority. In 2011, ILTA extended invitations across the regional borders to the executive members of RMRT and RMROS for Pano Gyebú Áchok's Birth Anniversary celebration in December, just a few months after the earthquake. Both Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations accepted the invitation. The encounter was not without contention, since past insults were not forgotten and mutual accusations of not having extended invitations lingered. However, an atmosphere of cordial negotiations was cautiously re-established.

Then, in 2012, as mentioned in the description of Tendong Hlo Rumfát (Chapter One), RMROS and ROP came together to create a successful fashion event held in Kalimpong and Gangtok. It was pushed forward by a young generation of active, educated, and urban Mútunci Róng who wanted to get away from political division and create new forms of unity and collaboration through a modern expression of Róng culture. The event in Gangtok brought executive members of ILTA and RMRT, as well as Sikkimese bureaucrats and politicians, together under one roof for the first time in five years. This did not sit well with certain anti-dam activists, who accused ILTA of having sold out and taken up negotiations with the government (Activists, December 2011).

This reuptake of communication between the regional Mútunci Róng associations, despite all the differences and the bad experiences of the past years, had a lot to do with their overall interest in working for their community, preserving their culture, and enhancing their welfare. The one thing all the association members agreed on was that collaboration would strengthen their community. The political differences – as I elaborate in the following section – were not merely party-political but arose from the different trajectories of national and regional integration of the Róng activists.

The Róng Outsider: Sub-nationalist Discourse Relived

From the perspective of the ILTA executive members, there was a specific episode in the anti-dam protest that was central to the complete break in their relations with the Sikkim Mútunci Róng associations. It represented their non-be-

longing to the Sikkimese territory – despite their affective relations to Dzongu as a holy land.

ROP's first visible act of protest, on 11 July 2007, was the blockage of the highway leading to Sikkim. Dressed in Róng attire, they stopped traffic to and from Sikkim for a few hours. A Róng religious specialist performed a ritual in front of a banner reading, "It is unconstitutional to construct dams on constitutionally protected areas. Do not destroy our motherland. Save Dzongu" (Now! Report 2007, July 13, 1). The action caused resentment among a broader Sikkimese public – sensitive to the disruption of their only lifeline as a landlocked state – and caused the Sikkimese chief minister to strongly condemn the action as "criminal" (Oberoi 2007, August 14, 4), branding the Kalimpong Róng activists as outsiders with no right to interfere: "the neighbors from beyond the State borders did not own any land in Dzongu nor had they ever been there to feel strongly and genuinely enough for the welfare and understand what was in the best interest of the Lepchas of Dzongu" (Oberoi 2007, August 14, 4). The chief minister highlighted the role of legal land ownership and, importantly, regional or sub-nationalist belonging to Sikkim, while clearly negating the emotional attachments of the Mútunci activists to their Indigenous lands, Ne Máyel Lyáng, and to Dzongu as a holy land in particular. Moreover, he denied that they had the ability to know what would enable the Dzongu Mútunci Róng to lead a good life.

Contestations openly erupted when the Kalimpong Róng activists decided to make a pilgrimage to their holy land of Dzongu. Mútunci Róng associations from Kalimpong made three attempts at such a pilgrimage, but the physical crossing of regional borders and the appropriation of Dzongu ended in a fiasco. In the first attempt, in January 2008, forty ROP members visited Dzongu on a pilgrimage to their holy land, many of them for the first time. The group first visited BL house in Gangtok to attend the two-hundred-day celebration of the hunger strike against the dams. The next day they headed to Dzongu via Kabi Longchok, where the ROP president conducted a ritual and explained the historical background of the sacred space (Rongkup 2008, 20). In Dzongu they met with religious specialists and activists and performed rituals at several places such as at the confluence of Rónggyóng River and Tista, as well as at the Lingzya falls. The latter ritual was the 'baptism' described in Chapter Five.

Even on the first night in Dzongu, tensions were obvious. On entry the police vigorously checked the group, and the district administration complained about the use of political slogans. The word declared a slogan was *ácúle*: as already mentioned, this was a Róng expression of joy, usually translated as 'hail to the mountain' (Tamsang 2008b, 22–23), but in the past activists had frequently used the term during rallies and at speeches. Nevertheless, *ácúle* was

actually not a political expression, but had been loaded with that content by the protestors and especially by government administration (Little 2013). On the fourth day of the group's trip the district administration accused them of shouting political slogans again and asked them to leave. The permits were cancelled. The situation in Dzongu then became tense and eventually resulted in violence. On the way out, ROP met an opposing group, mainly supporters of the Dzongu MLA. The situation grew worse, foul language was used, and eventually stones were thrown (Rongkup 2008, 20; Little 2013, 156).

After this first rejection, the desire to return to Dzongu increased among the executive members of ROP and ILTA, and in February 2008, just after the second indefinite hunger strike had begun, ILTA and ROP organised a second march to Dzongu; the Sikkim government issued permits (Tamsang and Simik 2008, 24–32). A group of five to seven hundred Mútunci Róng started to walk from West Bengal into Sikkim. They reached Rangpo to a strong police presence and a welcoming group of anti-dam protestors. In Singtam, however, they experienced passive hostility when all the shops, restaurants, and hotels were closed, and the lights switched off. The community hall where they had planned to spend the night was locked, leaving them stranded.

The pilgrims had planned to meet Medha Patkar on route and join her on her way to Gangtok – a strong symbolic act. But the state government implemented Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code in the capital that forbids four or more people to gather, thus preventing the long march to Gangtok. The organisers then rescheduled and marched along the lower road to Dzongu instead. As they crossed Dikchu, the location of Teesta HEP V, the situation was already tense, and the pilot cars were pelted with stones, but when they reached Sangklong, the point from where they planned to enter Dzongu, a counter-rally had formed. The pro-dam network had mobilised around five hundred local Mútunci Róng, who now blocked the entrance. The inspector general (for law and order), the district collector north, and the police tried to calm the situation down and negotiate. The pilgrims had planned to halt in Namprikdang and hold prayers at the confluence of the rivers Rónggyóng and Tista. With the situation getting out of control, the police stopped the long march. The pilgrims conducted a ritual at the banks of Tista in Dikchu, but were then escorted out of Sikkim by the police – officially to guarantee their safety (Tamsang 2008c, 48–49; Little 2013, 158–63; McDuie-Ra 2011, 88).

In November 2009, ILTA planned another long march to assert their sacred connections with the holy land. In response, in North Sikkim, a Joint Action Committee comprising a youth group from Dzongu and a local Panchayat, supported by the area MLA, formed to oppose it (Bhutia 2009, November 16, 1, 4;

Now! Report 2009, November 18, 1, 3). The press release by the JAC president warned that “the youth of Dzongu would go to any extent to stop the march from entering Dzongu” (Bhutia 2009, November 16, 4). The North Sikkim administration initially said it would not issue permits, but then consented for the pilgrims to enter in small groups, under the pretence of lacking infrastructure (Now! Report 2009, November 19, 1; Letter District Collector North to ILTA president, dated 28 October 2009). ILTA had to cancel the march entirely at the last minute, however, because on the day it was planned a strike in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills prevented all movement.

Contestations about the pilgrimages had erupted concerning agency, ownership, and legitimate voice (McDuie-Ra 2011, 97). The pilgrims were physically evicted from Dzongu or denied any entry at all. As such, they experienced the ultimate denial of belonging. On the surface, the debate was about Róng culture and practice: the Kalimpong Róng organisers asserted vehemently that the pilgrimage to their holy land had purely religious purposes, with the ILTA president calling it a religio-cultural act, a description to be understood in the context of the secular nature worship outlined in Chapter Five (Tamsang 2008c, 46). Sikkim government actors, the pro-dam supporters, and a section of the Dzongu residents perceived them as anti-dam activists, not as pilgrims or religious practitioners, and the ‘pilgrimage’ as a political rally. They rejected the religious rationale on the grounds that Dzongu had “no past record as a place of pilgrimage for Lepchas from elsewhere” (Bhutia 2009, November 16, 1).

Pilgrimages are not a common practice in Róng religious tradition; they are, however, performed in Buddhism and Christianity, and thus comprise a practice known to and performed by Róng individuals in different contexts. The pilgrimages to Dzongu physically reproduced the journey taken by the soul of the deceased along the Tista River to the ancestral abode. In ritual practice it was a spiritual journey undertaken by the *mun*, a dangerous and difficult act, since if not performed properly the spirit would return and roam the lands, causing harm. In this context, the journey was an affective and political act of reclaiming agency over a region considered holy.

The nostalgia for a ‘pure Róng place’ was interesting and complex; what irked a section of the people in Dzongu was the implication that the Dzongu Mútunci Róng were to carry the burden of conserving a ‘pure’ Róng culture – which when considering local ethnic politics and the criteria of the Indian reservation system implied remaining backward, primitive, and poor – while the Kalimpong activists enjoyed their comfortable and modern life in the towns outside (McDuie-Ra 2011, 95–96). This conflict aligned with the modernist discourse and the genuine local need for better infrastructure such as roads, power supply,

and schools; but the irony cannot be overlooked that RMRT had at the same time been the chief proponent of an objectified primitive Róng culture in their pursuit of the PTG status and had previously been criticised specifically for that.

Beyond debates about culture and modernity, I argue that the core contentions were due to a conflation of party-political sentiments and patronage obligations with the affective expressions of regional belonging. Each side accused the other of being misled by outsiders or of being outsiders. Here, the pro-dam network could build on a strong aversion, much more deep-seated than the current incidents, to perceived paternalism from people from outside Dzongu, and this struck a chord in Dzongu. It was rooted in the same history of being 'othered' as 'backward' and unable to speak for themselves that the Dzongu anti-dam activists likewise experienced and struggled against.

The anti-dam protestors depicted members of the counter-rally in Dzongu as either Dzongu residents who were being influenced and forced to protest by the muscle of the SDF party or simply non-locals hired in by the party. The outspoken group of Dzongu residents rejecting the pilgrimage, in turn, framed the pilgrims as outsiders due to their residency outside of the state. The contestation was a question of political affiliation, as well as different interpretations of who was a member of the in and out group with respect to Dzongu. We find two types of outsiders here: the political outsider and the regional outsider.

The political outsider denotes people with other political views than SDF and thus, as the pro-dam network argues, different to the majority of the residents of Dzongu, since they had 'all' voted for SDF. From the beginning the anti-dam protestors had been described as influenced by people with vested interests, meaning the opposition parties, as I described in the section above. Some of the pro-dam supporters, such as a former president of RMRT and a member of the Dzongu Gram Panchayat, described the claims to Dzongu as a holy land as a "corruption of Lepcha sacral tradition to support their [anti-dam protestors'] own politics" (McDuié-Ra 2011, 95).

The president of the Joint Action Committee formed to oppose the pilgrimage described Dzongu's strong emotions against the Kalimpong Róng activists because of their burning an effigy of the Dzongu MLA during a rally. The JAC interpreted this as disrespectful to the people of Dzongu in general, because they had voted for this MLA and entrusted him with their future well-being (Bhutia 2009, 4). However, he implied that they had coordinated support from outside of Dzongu in case the pilgrimage did take place. Such a threat indicated that the mobilisation ran along SDF party lines, and that perhaps not so many people in Dzongu had such strong emotions attached to the political dimension that they would actually mobilise against the pilgrimage. Dzongu experienced

‘rowdy politics’, as Chettri (2018) puts it for the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, in a context where service and money had usually been sufficient.

While the image of the political ‘other’ was mobilised according to the patron–client relations of the SDF party, I suggest that a second outsider also captured the emotions of the Dzongu Mútunci Róng: the figure of the outsider to Dzongu or Sikkim. I argue that regional belonging to Dzongu and Sikkim formulate separate subjectivities, but that the former is strongly dependent on the latter. The pro-dam network quickly framed the anti-dam protestors as people or Mútunci Róng from outside Dzongu – even though most of the protestors in BL House were actually from Dzongu itself. According to this argument, their residency outside of the reserve prior to the protest discredited them from being able to speak for a region they did not live in anymore. Additionally, they were again described as having been co-opted, this time by the Mútunci Róng from beyond the state borders.

The anti-dam activists from Dzongu – as the earlier quotation by Gyatso Lepcha shows – clearly affirmed their belonging to Dzongu. On a different level, they justified the involvement of non-Róng and non-Sikkimese associations, environmentalists, and others by reference to the effect that the dams would have on people living downstream, as far as Bangladesh, coincidentally all subsumed under the ancestrally claimed Róng territory Ne Máyel Lyáng (Speeches by MLAS executive director and ACT president in Sharma 2007, November 16, 2). In countering this argument, RMRT pointed out that there are dams on the Tista River in West Bengal, but when the work on these dams had started ILTA had not spoken up against them; so why were they concerned about the dams in Sikkim (RMRT publicity secretary, November 2008).

These debates about regional outsider status erupted in the context of the pilgrimages, because in this act the Kalimpong Róng activists highlighted the holiness of Dzongu for all Mútunci Róng and thereby buttressed their legitimacy to have a say in what the future of Dzongu should look like – justifying this by their belonging to the Róng community and their ancestral ties to the land. They thus constructed an affective belonging to a larger ancestral Róng territory that pre-dated the present-day regional borders – as such, negating the relevance of those borders.

On a discursive and emotional level this pan-Róng belonging conflicted with the regional belonging of the Dzongu residents that was built on relations to territory (as captured in Chapter Four), further solidified by a strong Sikkimese sub-national discourse, the vital protective measures, and the efficient network of patron–client relations. As I have already mentioned, Dzongu is still protected by a royal proclamation of the king dating back to 1956: anyone who

is not a Mútunci Róng from Dzongu requires permits to enter, live, or work there. These permits are issued by the district administration, in those days the district collector north, but again only on the invitation of a local person. Therefore, the residents have a strong sense of self-determination in choosing who could enter, regardless of the legal administrative process behind it. This protection, as with any Sikkimese old law, was upheld by Article 371F when Sikkim became a part of India. As such, the special status of Dzongu and with it the security granted to the Dzongu residents were closely linked to the specific national integration of the kingdom of Sikkim into India.

Belonging to Dzongu was thus historically as well as currently closely tied to the sub-nationalist discourse of belonging to Sikkim, and this sense of belonging depended on keeping the boundaries intact between 'us' Sikkimese, and 'them', defined as anyone from beyond the regional border. The idea that ties to a holy ancestral Róng land would give political agency in present-day decision-making undermined this territorial belonging and ignored the historical specifics of the region. According to this line of thought, the emotional rejection of the pilgrimage derived from its negation of what being from Dzongu actually was about today, as well as in the past. I argue that the genuine differences in understanding of what it meant to belong to the place, derived from its inherent polysemy, were what ignited the protests, and at the same time negated any claims for legitimate agency the Kalimpong Róng activists might have asserted over the future of the place. It was these different understandings of belonging to place, but moreover of the place itself, that made the issue so emotional and so mobilised the public (Bentley 2021).

Moreover, the claim for pan-regional Róng Indigeneity subverted the carefully curated sub-nationalist discourse of BL unity and Sikkimese belonging, which were all crucial to the justification of the legal positioning of Dzongu in the system of differentiated citizenship in Sikkim as an Indian state. The fact that according to Article 371F(k) the old laws could be amended or appealed created a constant sense of insecurity – an underlying fear that these privileges could be taken away if anyone shook their foundations too hard. Access to resources through group-based rights – such as the Dzongu Mútunci Róng's rights over resources in Dzongu – was one of the most common strategies of overcoming vulnerability and striving for socio-economic mobility. Thus, in Sikkim, anything that could rewrite history or introduce new claimants to the resources of the state was met with caution, and potentially fear or rejection (Bentley 2017).

This being said, from the perspective of the Kalimpong anti-dam activists, their actions buttressed the importance of Dzongu as an Indigenous reserve. The assertion of ancestral belonging to Dzongu was emotional and symbolic, but never resulted in any actual claims to the territory or even exemptions from



FIGURE 39: Rally in Kalimpong town, December 2011.

the regular permit process. It remained on the level of an “activist citizenship” (Isin 2008, 38, 39), meaning they were not a priori recognised by law but performed acts that claimed rights and obligation that – as Isin points out – could potentially change the law but did not have to. The legal protection of Dzongu as a reserve was central to the anti-dam protestors’ argument, and its importance was buttressed internationally precisely by their actions. Thus, they had no intention to put the legal protective mechanisms in jeopardy. During the pilgrimage, they respected the permit process, declaring their right to enter – based on the Indian constitution and not on an ancestral ethnic right – but respecting the authority of the Sikkimese government in upholding the protections (Simik and Tamsang 2008).

The assemblage of relations to territory, people, and history as well as party politics ultimately led to the eviction of the Kalimpong Róng activists and a denial of their agency to speak on behalf of Dzongu – at least through the act of the pilgrimage. The activists perceived this denial as an injustice and a negation of their sentiments. However, I argue, in another respect the pilgrimage was a success. As I explore in the next section, it was an act of visibility directed towards the political players and local and state government agents in the Kalimpong Róng activists’ own place of residence (Figure 39).

A Different Patron: Boards, Politics, and Indigeneity

The hunger strike against the dams in Dzongu coincided with the renewal of sentiments and demands for Gorkhaland in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills

of West Bengal. The establishment of Gorkhaland is a longstanding demand from Indians of Nepalese origin, a demand to be recognised as belonging to the Indian nation through having their own state – ignited by the anxiety resulting from recurring experiences of being othered as Nepalese citizens when moving beyond the hills, as well as traumatic incidents of ethnic cleansing of Nepali speakers in Northeast Indian states and allegedly in Bhutan, with refugees spilling over the border. It arose from a sense of marginalisation and deprivation within the current state of West Bengal (Bagchi 2012; Hutt 2003; Lacina 2017; Middleton 2013c, 2016; Shneiderman and Middleton 2018; Sarkar 2013; Subba 1992; Wenner 2013). In this section, I embed the activism of the Kalimpong Mútunci Róng associations within the political context of West Bengal and the evolving demand for a Lepcha Development Council.

The long march that ended in fiasco in Dzongu took place in February 2008, coinciding with the time when the “beloved and feared henchman” (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018, 16) Bimal Gurung and his newly founded GJM party consolidated power over the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills and ousted the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) government that had formed the local government since the first Gorkhaland agitation ended in 1988. The agitation had flared up in 2007, after Prashant Tamang from Darjeeling had won Indian Idol, a popular national singing competition. This ecstatic moment for the Nepali-speaking community in India – one of whose members had achieved recognition on a national level – was destroyed by a derogatory public remark about his ethnicity and national belonging. This was when Bimal Gurung demanded Gorkhaland or death (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018).

Most Mútunci Róng in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills I interacted with – including activists – supported the demands for their own state. However, for the ILTA activists the premises on which the state was to be built made them feel uncomfortable. Since the mid 1990s the politics of tribalisation had taken hold in the hills, with different ethnic groups demanding tribal status. Within this context, the GNLF government had then started to demand that Darjeeling be included in the Sixth Schedule – as opposed to an own state (Middleton 2016). Some people experienced this approach as dividing and weakening the ‘people of the hills’ or ‘the Gorkha’ (Shneiderman and Middleton 2008), whereas for the Róng activists it meant that the ‘Gorkha-umbrella-identity’, as I paraphrase it, under which Mútunci Róng had been subsumed, had crumbled. I argue that the near-decade of tribalisation in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills, during which the diverse ethnic groups denominated as ‘Gorkha’ had showcased their distinct culture and language in support of their applications for recognition as Scheduled Tribes, had undermined the unity of the ‘Nepali’, ‘Bhutia’, and ‘Lepcha’ that had so strongly shaped the first Gorkhaland agitation in the 1980s.

The rebranding of ILTA to include Indigenous in its name was just one result of this. The sudden return to a Gorkha identity was antithetical to the present-day ILTA's positioning and self-understanding, and the long march symbolically underscored this sense of non-inclusion: thus five to seven hundred people marched through the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills dressed in ethnic Róng dress, manifesting difference in a political context that demanded Gorkha solidarity, with posters publicly expressing sentiments of Indigeneity.

During Dhasain, the most important festival for Hindu Nepali in West Bengal, in autumn 2008, the GJM requested that all residents of the hills, including Róng individuals, wear traditional Nepali dress¹⁷¹ as a sign of solidarity with the Gorkhaland movement (Bagchi 2008, September 11; Chettri 2017, 120–24; Tamsang 2008d). The ILTA executive members decided to oppose what they perceived as an imposition, refused to wear the attire, and advised the Róng community members to wear their own dress, expressing this in a letter to all the sub-divisional associations (*thom shezúm*) (Tamsang 2008d, 15). The situation grew tense, as different visions for the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills and different patron–client relations clashed. The GJM enforced their 'request' through their party workers and muscle power, locally called 'rowdies' or *gundas* in Nepali (Chettri 2018; Wenner 2015).

ILTA had strong patronage networks in Róng rural areas, channelling welfare funds and services such as access to the Scheduled Tribe Certificate. In July 2009, shortly before ILTA planned the third pilgrimage, a group of men in masks with *khukuris* (traditional Nepalese swords) and iron rods destroyed and looted three houses belonging to Róng families. Everyone knew that they were GJM rowdies, but no one dared do anything, since everyone knew that the families had been targeted for not participating in GJM activities and not casting their vote in favour of GJM (Lepcha 2009, August 8, 1, 2; Tamsang 2011). These acts of violence induced fear among the Róng community and imposed the difficult question of whom to remain loyal to in these times.

It was an incident unrelated to the local politics in the hills, however, that triggered the Lepcha Rights Movement (LRM). In 2009, six Róng men were denied recruitment into the Eastern Frontier Rifles, a state armed police force, because they could not show a Gorkha Certificate, which would have made them eligible for recruitment (Tamsang 2009b, 11–13; Tamsang 2010; Achuley Report 2009a, 10; Achuley Report 2010, 5; Sub-divisional officer 2008, 12). Ironically, at the height of an agitation that expected Róng hill residents to identify as Gorkha, the government of India had denied them access to important employ-

171 The *daura suruwa*, a knee-length tunic tied with four ribbons, and *dhaka topi*, a hat, for men and *chaubandi colo*, a blouse, for women.

ment opportunities specifically because the Anthropological Survey of India had listed them as non-Gorkha. To the increased dismay of the executive members of ILTA, they were classified as ‘tribals of Sikkimese origin’ instead (Ministry of Culture Department, Government of India, G. O. 13-229/2000/ESTT, dated 10.09.2004). To protest the systematic deprivation of access to jobs and the bureaucratic othering as belonging to the neighbouring state, Róng activists sat on hunger strike in Siliguri and organised protest rallies in Kolkata in August and September 2010 (Aachuley Report 2010, October 22; Dutta 2010, September 9). Their demands remained unheard, but through this protest younger, politically ambitious leaders emerged on the scene, closely linked to ROP. This sparked the LRM, which initiated the public demand for a separate council, an idea that had been lingering among Kalimpong Róng activists for a while.

As a young and energetic activist told me, the LRM was not formed as an alternative to ILTA or its youth wing. The Mútunci Róng associations were apolitical bodies – as per legal registration – and the LRM initially did not want such restrictions. Further, this more ad hoc form of a network allowed them to act quickly and freely without having to discuss the consequences for the established ILTA (LRM activist, November 2011). While the established executive members were a part of the movement, visible at the rallies and publicly supportive, the LRM brought new dynamics and undermined the longstanding dominance of ILTA in the Kalimpong region. Moreover, it included the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Forum, a political Mútunci Róng organisation based in Kalimpong (Ravidas 2010, December 3).

Initially, the main LRM demands were to abolish the ‘Sikkimese Community Certificates’, give Róng individuals access to recruitment in the armed forces of the hills, and introduce Róngring as a medium in schools. In August 2011, the month after the GJM, the newly elected West Bengal government under the Trinamool Congress (TMC), and the Union Government had signed a tripartite agreement for an autonomous council, namely the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), the LRM extended its agenda. In that month LRM activists held rallies and hunger strikes in Kalimpong, Siliguri, Kolkata, Delhi, and other places in the hills. They now publicly demanded the formation of a council for the socio-economic uplifting of West Bengal Mútunci Róng. In the first phase of the movement there had been a demand for representation for Mútunci Róng in the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal and the Parliament. Similarly, the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Forum had previously demanded reservations for the community in the GTA “to ensure that they [the Lepcha] remained an integral part of the political system in their homeland” (Ravidas 2011, August 11). The movement was fuelled by a strong sense of vulnerability, of a vanishing existence, and the need to do something in order to survive as a distinct community:

The Lepcha community today is the most vulnerable community in West Bengal. The existence of the community itself is highly threatened. It is estimated that in the next 20 years with the same continued Government Policies, the Lepcha community will perish forever from West Bengal. The community will be referred to in the past tense. The population may be there but it will be a dead community as a community's identity is always based on its language, literature, custom, culture, tradition, economic stability and region. (Aachuley Report 2011, 2)

The LRM activists had initially envisaged a council for Mútunci Róng in India – independent of their region of residency – and tried to include the Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations in the movement. However, lack of coordination, cooperation, and especially interest from the side of the organised Sikkimese Mútunci Róng bodies put an end to this. A delegation of the LRM met with some Sikkimese politicians who held posts in the ruling government, but could not get any public support due to the remaining contentions over the Kalimpong activists' involvement in the anti-dam protest (LRM activist, June 2012).

The appeal was for a Mayel Lyang Lepcha Autonomous Council, described as a non-territorial “autonomous self-governing body” with administrative, financial, and judicial power based on Róng customary law (LRM 2011, 1). It was supposed to “administer social, economic, educational, ethnic, linguistic and cultural advancement of the Lepcha” and “provide representation and assist in smooth Governance of the state” (LRM 2011, 1). The council was to be elected within the Róng community of West Bengal. The proposition was to hold elections on three levels according to a system already implemented in ILTA that the activists considered an Indigenous governance system. Over one hundred village-level associations (*kyong shezúm*) existed, and their members voted for their executive committee, which then elected representatives to the sub-divisional association (*thom shezúm*) from their midst. The sub-divisional association executive members then voted for the central executive committee (*púm shezúm*).

The public promotion of the demand for the council was an interesting mixture of non-territoriality, welfare, and Indigeneity. The first two points were clearly intended to avoid a discursive clash with the Gorkhaland demand, as the ILTA Joint Secretary clarifies:

The proposed LDC is an exclusive body meant for the Hill-based Lepcha community whereas GTA will be an all-encompassing body involving the entire Hills and all the ethnic communities based here. (ILTA joint secretary, The Statesman, NBSplus, 24 May 2012)

The driving force was a sense of deprivation and marginalisation by the Róng community in the hills. The Róng leaders were aware of their exclusion from the current political scenario and the future vision for the hills. A delegation of activists had met Bimal Gurung prior to the signing of the GTA in order to discuss the possibility of an alternative name for their own state or regional autonomous body, one that was more inclusive of their existence. The GJM supremo had rejected this, clearly based on the requirements and sentiments of his own support base. The Róng delegation members were well aware of the futility of their request due to the affective history of the Gorkhaland movement. The announcement of the GTA, from the perspective of the activists, was thus equivalent to eliminating the Róng ancestral belonging to the region from the map (Activist, October 2013):

The name of our native land is going to be changed. It will be named after one ethnic group. It is not clear what will be the place of the others in that territory. (Dutta 2011, August 14)

Emotionally, the renaming of the region as Gorkhaland (even if not as a state) increased a sense of non-belonging among the LRM activists; it manifested a threat to the Mútunci Róng's very existence as an Indigenous community. For this reason, the activists firmly demanded the term Máyel Lyáng, locally recurrently translated as 'Lepchaland', to be in the name of the board. It carried symbolic implications of reclaiming territory and ownership of the place. In the end, the demand for a board was about hope – the hope of recognition, unity, improvement of life conditions, and political influence in the hills.

After less than a month of protest, on 2 September 2011, the chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, announced that a 'Lepcha Development Council' or board would be formed and met with a delegation of the LRM (Banerjee 2011, September 6). The speed and ease with which this provision was granted indicated that it aligned with the political interests of TMC. After the promise, the form and scope remained unclear. In the next year, Róng activists as well as the West Bengal chief minister used the word 'council' and 'board' interchangeably.

Between the announcement and the implementation (2011–2013) the volume of public assertions of Róng Indigeneity in speeches and media increased. The activists reactivated the narrative of a golden era under Pano Gyebú Áchok, the last Róng king, and the last age when 'the Mútunci Róng' ruled as suzerains over their own homeland, their Róng kingdom. It evoked the collective memory justifying claims to a Róng homeland. The ILTA public programmes, and especially the celebration of the last king's birthday, held every year on December 20,

recreated national symbolisms such as the hoisting of a flag and the use of an anthem – a song composed by Sonam Tshering Lepcha called “*ácúle róng dúnggít*”, ‘hail to the Róng ancestry’ (Tamsang 1998). Significantly, the genitive form *dúnggítsá* is presently translated as “national” or more precisely “a citizen or subject of a particular nation” (Tamsang [1980] 2009, 430). Underlined by the use of the word *dúnggít* as opposed to *lúngten*, in this variation of culturalist ontologies, culture was quintessentially equated with ethnic group or race. In speeches on Pano Gyebú Áchok’s Birthday Celebration, ILTA activists made claims to Róng ‘firstness’ to territory and their ‘blood rights’ to the soil.¹⁷²

Blood is thicker than water. The sense of ‘we are Lepcha first’ was always there in the hearts and minds of the Lepchas. (Aachuley Report 2012, 25)

In this context, the use of Lyángdók Úngdók in order to describe the Mútunci Róng is closely associated to primordial ancient ownership of land. Activists characterise Pano Gyebú Áchok as martyred in his fight against exploitation, against cultural loss, and lastly for Róng sovereignty (ROP president, December 2011). This narrative depicts Gyebú Áchok as a strong warrior and counters the imagery of the timid, nature-worshipping, vanishing ‘Lepcha’. As such, the celebration of this historical figure as a martial cultural hero was a redefinition of the damage narrative, as theorised by Tuck (2009). It still stems from a position of loss and brokenness, but at the same time it celebrated strength.

The primordial blood and soil narrative – especially in association with a homeland claim – is problematic in itself, but more so in the political environment of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills. The Róng activists drafted an alternative regional narrative – crucially important in processes of regionalism (Paasi 2002) – that held the potential to undermine the narrative of Gorkhaland, as it applied similar strategies (Wenner 2013), or at least enabled the questioning of the Indigeneity of ‘the Gorkha’. The narrative closely corresponds with processes of territorialisation (Baruah 2013) and formulations for ethnic homelands in Northeast India (Baruah 2003, 2020; McDuie-Ra 2008; van Schendel 2011; Weiner 1978).

In December 2012, more than a year after the announcement, the GTA Sabha finally took the decision that if the Lepcha Development Board were to be formed within the GTA, they had no objection; on the contrary, they would

172 For the more general debate on the problematic of firstness, dominance, and self-definition, see Barnard 2006; Colchester 2002; Grey 1995; Kuper 2003; McIntosh 2002; Stavenhagen 1994.

support the formation of boards for all ethnic communities (Gazmer 2012, December 15). In January 2013, when relations between the GJM and the state government were again tense, and amid threats of a renewed flare-up of the agitation for a separate state, the West Bengal chief minister clarified that the Lepcha Development Council came under the jurisdiction of the state and not the GTA, a decision the Róng activists were in favour of. Additionally, she mentioned plans to set up a Buddhist Development Council in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills along the same lines. The GTA chief executive, Bimal Gurung, then accused the state government of ‘divide and rule’ strategies (Statesman News Service 2013, February 1, 1), while the GJM general secretary, Roshan Giri, described it as “an encroachment of the powers and functioning of the Gorkha Territorial Administration Sabha” (The Telegraph Bureau 2013, February 5).

In February 2013, the resolution for the formation of the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (MLLDB) was passed (No. 462-BCW/6S-73/2011). The board was registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961. It was basically an official association, with no elections and no jurisdictional or governance provisions. It could collect donations, but not generate revenue. It was placed under the administrative control of the Backward Classes and Welfare Department, and not as demanded by the GJM under the GTA.

The LRM planned a celebration on 9 February 2013, while the GJM called for a strike on the very same day to protest the state government’s decision to set up the board under its administration. In reaction to this, the LRM activists went on hunger strike against the “politicizing” of the board (LRM 7.2.2013). ILTA president Lyangsong Tamsang summarised the sentiments of hopes and aspirations associated with the MLLDB as following:

When the dreams, aspirations and hopes for a better life and to join the main stream in India by the Lepcha tribal community living in West Bengal was about to be realized, the Lepchas’ issue, Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board, was unjustifiably and negatively politicized to restrain, suppress and silence the Lepcha tribal community’s long standing, genuine, legitimate demand and right to recover, promote and develop their ancient language, literature, culture, traditions and economic conditions by the main political party in the Hills. (Tamsang 2013, 2)

Many activists and supporters of the LRM felt the need to get access to funds beyond the GTA to improve the socio-economic positioning of their community (Activists, June 2013; Aachuley Report 2013, 13–14). Beyond the affective level, the question was an economic and political one, deeply entrenched in

the dependencies of a patronage democracy. The GTA wanted to administer the fund because then their political tutelage would be necessary to access it, a necessity to maintain their power monopoly. They – as recognised patrons – were under pressure to deliver services to their clients, or else fall out of favour. Thus, they required reliable access to resources that they could redistribute (Wenner 2016, 172, 175; Burnell 2006). Now that the funds came directly from the state government, the GTA not only lost out on cuts from the funds, but additionally lost leverage over services as well as people, which is at root the reason why they strongly opposed the way the funding was channelled past them.

The MLLDB funds established new patron–client relations: to the ruling TMC party and via the party to the state government. The state government similarly – in the true sense of a patron – asked for the creation of a vote bank in return. Further, the state government held control over the MLLDB membership. The state government appointed some of the members, while others were members due to their posts in the larger state administration, such as the district welfare officer or the district magistrate; the ILTA, for its part, could put forward suggestions. All aligned with a political strategy to weaken the GJM.

The GJM leaders captured the public sentiment at the time. The demand for a Lepcha Development Council and its implementation beyond the GTA was widely framed as a betrayal of the Gorkhaland cause and ultimately of the people of the hills. Mútunci Róng were described as either stupid victims of the shrewd politics of the chief minister or money-hungry traitors without ideals (Times of Darjeeling, 3.8.2013; discussion on Facebook about MLLDB).¹⁷³ Pictures of the ILTA president as Mamata Banerjee’s tame monkey circulated on social media. The general public was well aware of the unspoken party-political implications of the funding being channelled through the board. The Darjeeling-based Mútunci Róng association, All India Lepcha Association, held a rally and a public meeting against the board’s bypassing of the GTA (The Telegraph Bureau 2013, February 12).

ILTA publicly rejected any claim that it had political affiliations or dependencies, specifically underscoring that the board was “by the Lepcha of the Lepcha, and for the Lepcha” (Tamsang 2013, 3), and thus again implying that the GTA leadership was not Mútunci Róng nor in favour of the Róng community.

We are a deprived and backward community. The Lepcha Board will help eradicate our problems. So it is wrong to say that the Bengal government, which is trying to help us, is using our community as

173 Screenshots with the author, accessed 4 August 2013.

a pawn for political gains. We have managed to achieve our right through years of struggle and not by political affiliation (ILTA president, TNN 2013, September 1).

ILTA had expended significant energy in building up an image that stressed socio-economic marginality but resisted the notion of numerical marginality. I remember asking if there were really one lakh (100 000) Mútunci Róng in the Kalimpong region after I proofread a press release for the Pano Gyebú Áchok Birthday celebration. “Potentially, if we say so then there will be”, was the answer I received (Activist, December 2012). The words became prophetic. In public speeches, the chief minister and others mentioned that the Róng people comprise 20 per cent of the hill population and had a population of 1.5 lakh. Numerical strength was an important pawn in the game of political patronage, as a West Bengal minister explained to the *Telegraph* newspaper:

You cannot ignore the Lepchas in the Darjeeling hills as they form 20 per cent of the population there. If the state government gets the Lepchas on its side, the demand of a separate state could be countered within the hills. (The Telegraph Bureau 2013, August 3)

The implementation of the board was the ritualisation of a patron–client relation par excellence. The set-up of the board dragged on until the announcement of the new Indian state of Telangana, carved out of the northwestern part of Andhra Pradesh in August 2013, set the hills aflame again. A high-level committee was formed to establish the board, and the chief minister herself came to Kalimpong on 3 September for the celebration. On that day GJM called for a *ghar bhitra janta*, a strike, during which the public was requested to stay inside their houses. While most residents of the hills remained inside, people dressed in Róng attire and waving TMC flags lined the roads on the way to Kalimpong, a visual convergence of a cultural and political event. During the event, ILTA welcomed the West Bengal chief minister and gave her the title Kíngtsúm Dármít, bestower or goddess of good fortune. She would in the years to come be addressed as such. Ritually, the chief minister became a symbol of the new access to socio-economic prosperity as well as cultural protection.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) elections, ILTA and MLLDB executive members openly supported TMC, holding up their end of the bargain. But the political strategy did not pan out, as the TMC candidate, the famous former national footballer Bhaichung Bhutia, lost against the BJP candidate, backed by GJM. The fact that Narendra Modi, the BJP candidate for

prime minister, held a public meeting in the plains region of the Darjeeling constituency and announced that, if BJP came into power, then the longstanding demand of the Gorkha would be taken into account, probably had a significant impact in shifting the vote in favour of BJP and, therefore, GJM (Miriam Wenner, personal communication, January 2015).

Beyond party politics, and in the words of the new MLLDB chairman, the board “will certainly change the socio-economic conditions of the marginalised Lepchas of West Bengal for the better; above all it has given us dignity and honour” (L. Tamsang 2014, 17). As one LRM activist clarified, the board “gives the Lepcha their identity” (LRM activist, June 2013). The name of the board symbolically recognised that the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills was (also) their land. Additionally, they had successfully positioned themselves within the public awareness of the state. In several public speeches, the West Bengal chief minister defined Mútunci Róng as the oldest or original inhabitants of the hills; for the first time the state government clearly recognised Mútunci Róng as Indigenous people of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling hills. For the Róng activists, who had in the past repeatedly tried to assert their belonging to a place that in wider West Bengal was known as the home of the Gorkha, this was a huge victory.

Soon after the MLLBD was formed, several other communities requested the same set-up. In total, the West Bengal Government created fifteen other community-based development and cultural boards and one based on the region. The requests of these boards preponderantly emphasised socio-economic marginality and cultural or language needs but did not draw openly upon alternative narratives of regional historical hegemony and Indigeneity as the Róng activists had. Just like for the Róng community, the strategies were designed to get access to facilities from the state government, and potentially reap funds and political opportunities (Tamang and Sitlhou 2018). These subsequent demands for other ethnic boards came in the context of disillusionment with the aspirations for Gorkhaland. In contrast to the ethnic homelands and council formations (including still pending demands) in Northeast India (Baruah 2013, 2020), the West Bengal boards were not ethno-territorialisation projects, since the activists in West Bengal did not claim territory or control over resources of the said territory. Instead, these were new ways to claim recognition and resources for welfare within community-based NGO structures to access privileges and power through state patronage. Locals and scholars alike have argued that the development boards undermined a significant regional demand for territorial autonomy, namely the Gorkhaland movement (Chhetri 2017, 480; Sarkar 2014). As local critics have observed, they were part of a larger state-sponsored

strategy to divide the self-understanding of ‘Gorkha’ along communal lines (The DC News Desk 2018, August 23), bound up with a history of tribalisation (Middleton 2016; Shneiderman 2015a).

The formation of the MLLBD changed the landscape for the Róng activists in Kalimpong. The former ILTA president was appointed MLLBD chairperson, while the mastermind behind the Lepcha Rights Movement was the vice chairperson. The ILTA executive members were re-elected, and the posts filled with the former ROP executive members. The formation of the MLLDB made way for a new leadership within the Róng community, while respecting the experience and knowledge of the elder generation of activists. The MLLDB gave the state more say in the internal affairs of the Róng activists, while it gave the activists access to an unprecedented amount of funds. The new ILTA executive board became the implementing agent of schemes financed by the board, asserting a close relation between the two entities. The board had several development schemes it was implementing, but in the years to come – after my immediate fieldwork was over – it would be crippled by corruption. As the ILTA welfare secretary pointed out, even before the implementation of the board the villagers feared victimisation and had experienced being sidelined from local development schemes and other services funded by the GTA (ILTA welfare secretary, July 2013). It remains a matter of further investigation how much socio-economic improvement the board will bring to the life of the common Mútunci Róng.

Conclusion

This chapter has contextualised governance, or, from a different perspective, empowerment strategies, through the lens of differential citizenship as it plays out within the local power politics of the different patronage democracies in which the Mútunci Róng associations were active. The various activists and associations navigated their way within complex networks of patron–client relations that at times negated each other. Róng activists could be described as brokers of a polysemic good – the ‘Lepcha cause’. The latter, indeed, was often how activists would describe their work and dedication.

Róng activists engaged across regional and international boundaries and constantly needed to define and redefine who their *aphno manche*, ‘our people’, were. As I have shown here, ‘Mútunci Róng’ are not always equal to ‘Mútunci Róng’. In the context of the Sikkimese Mútunci Róng associations, Róng individuals who are supportive of the ruling party and its agenda are the in-group

to its actions, while Róng individuals who are opposed to the ruling party or to specific agenda items are excluded from its actions directed at the welfare of ‘the’ Róng community. This is something that upset the RST president, because, at least during my fieldwork, in Ilam the Róng association had managed to keep personal party politics aside and focus on community welfare in a broader sense.

Similarly, the Róng activists and associations involved in the anti-dam protest cut ties with the network that supported the dams, but given their lack of patronage could not cut anyone from their services. Within the anti-dam protest, other questions of *aphno manche* – ties to state, region, and locality – overlapped with the party-political ties. Different definitions of ‘our people’ raised contentions concerning agency in the anti-dam movement and the question of who had the right to speak about the welfare of the Dzongu Mútunci Róng and contribute to a future vision of what a good life would be in Dzongu. For the Kalimpong Róng activists, ‘our people’ were all Mútunci Róng in the world, since the origin and the final resting place of their ethnic group was grounded in Dzongu. For the Sikkimese government actors (and members of the Sikkimese public), ‘our people’ were the people of Sikkim who should have a say, since it was their government, their policy, and importantly their protective measures and laws. Dzongu residents, often regardless of their position on the dams, would lastly say ‘our people’ to refer to people from Dzongu itself. These polysemic understandings of ‘us’ were assembled and contested, and broke open and came together, such as in the figure of the Dzongu activists who often carried all three conceptualisations of ‘us’ within them.

Then, again in a different setting, ‘the’ Mútunci Róng is related closely to party-political affirmations: GJM or TMC, and with it the wider question of whether Mútunci Róng as a community can be subsumed under the classification of Gorkha; or does this negate the very essence of what being a Mútunci Róng would actually mean? Does one, indeed, have to be Gorkha to agree with and demand Gorkhaland? As Marmit Lepcha put it, “we have helped our neighbour for their rights. Now it is our turn to fight for our rights” (Aachuley Report 2013, 14).

In Chettri’s formulation, in the context of the rowdy politics of the Darjeeling hills, it was hope for future prospects that gave an incentive to engage in patron–client relations. This hope surely had an individualistic component, an aspiration for a better life or a better socio-economic positioning, within which ethnicity materialised as a crucial resource to be deployed. The debates arising around the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects especially indicated how the hope for a better life was intrinsically linked to a desire for incorporation into a capitalist market, with all the modern amenities or even

luxuries bound into processes of growing capitalist connectivity and ethnic closure, as Wouters (2023) discusses for Northeast India. As in Northeast India, via preferential access to resources and territory, an increasingly rich tribal elite that is intrinsically interlinked with capitalist ventures had initiated processes of socio-ecological destruction (Hausing 2014).¹⁷⁴

Turning to the bigger picture, my research shows that it was genuine concern for the welfare of the community that motivated many activists. There were differences in opinion and at times controversies over what was the best way to achieve the aspirations for the community, with which patronage partners, and ultimately through which visions this better life was to be imagined. The paths the activists chose were not always the ones that would be safest for their personal good, nor defined according to immediate financial benefits – notably concerning the engagement in the anti-dam protest or wagering against a political party known for its violent suppression of opposition such as the GJM. As I argued regarding the Dzongu residents, I here observe that Róng activists, in their visions and actions that were intended to achieve a better life for members of their community (including themselves), simultaneously adopted a pragmatic and an idealistic, an affective and an instrumental approach to their work.

The embeddedness of welfare services in patron–client relations, as I have argued, explains why the quest for recognition never stopped. Initially, I wondered why this insecurity of belonging still prevailed among Róng activists, especially in Sikkim after the recognition of the PTG status. However, that patron–client relations require regular activation and constant reassertion of need, or else the services might fall to someone else. The repetitive assertion of marginality, socio-economic deprivation, and ‘lagging behind the mainstream’ were the normal imagery on which the interactions with patrons were built. The enduring support by patrons required a continuous activation of what Tuck called the damage narrative. Therefore, recognition by the state was not a one-time event. There might be heightened activities until the state had recognised a status such as PTG, but even after that recognition the distribution of goods accorded to individuals of this status was not secure. Regular reminders of vulnerability and of dependency on the patronage was required in order to overcome this vulnerability. In this sense, ritual programmes catered to the requirement for a public space to recurrently renew relations and enact need.

174 For Meghalaya, see Karlsson 2011.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Epilogue



How did and do members of the Róng community counteract ‘their vanishing’ in and beyond ritual? Were all their actions tied up in a damage narrative of prior brokenness, or did any spaces exist in which self and ethnic group were reimagined differently? If so, how was equity demanded or formulated? These were the questions I asked myself at the beginning of my research, and which remain as undercurrents throughout the chapters.

My starting point was the observation that ritualised ethno-political action is concerned with counteracting ‘the vanishing Lepcha’ – a local trope for the historically rooted religious, cultural, social, political, economic, and lastly demographic marginalisation of the Róng community. By framing my research according to the theoretical field of ritual, Indigenous belonging, and vulnerability, and particularly according to ritualised ways of counteracting vulnerability, this work contributes to an understanding of the multi-dimensionality of the uncertainties that Indigenous people in the Himalaya are struggling with, and of how they seek to address them and thereby shape belonging to community and land. Such vulnerabilities include personal and community health, ownership over land, environmental fragility, political agency, and lack of access to resources. Using the lens of vulnerability also allows us to engage seriously with the Róng Indigenous ways of understanding the world and reality. Additionally, focussing on ritual acts as one of the multi-faceted resources and strategies for overcoming vulnerability that exist simultaneously within the Róng community makes it possible to develop a theoretical approach that does not use ethnic formulations of vulnerability or damage as the framework, but ethnographically unravels the situational frameworks and definitions applied by the actors themselves.

In this publication, I outline several positionalities out of which vulnerability is defined and strategies to overcome vulnerability and ensure well-being are accordingly developed. I have discussed approaches to and practices of ensuring Indigenous survival, or, in the terms I have adopted, countering vulnerability through ritual practice and programmes. These include practices which fall within the logic of Róng Indigenous ontologies, as well as performances of objectified culture and network-building to seek recognition and patronage through the diverse channels of differentiated citizenship. Furthermore, they include protests against capitalist exploitation. All these actions and reactions are nourished by the aspiration to live a ‘good life’ as defined on one’s own terms. Within these processes, specific actors (activists, ritual specialists) formulate mental maps and relations (to humans and more-than-humans) that in turn define Indigenous belonging.

The focus of this publication has been on the intra-ethnic assemblages and contestations that arise in the process of countering vulnerability, con-

stituting Róng belonging, and formulating political demands. I have analysed the processes of purification and objectification of Róng culture in the light of their present-day importance. At the same time, I have elaborated on the diverging agency in interactions between humans and more-than-humans within a polysemic territory, seen as an Indigenous approach to achieving security and prosperity. The polysemic idea of Lyángdók Úngdók, the guardians of land and water, weaves a common thread throughout this work. It is a powerful self-understanding of both the people being themselves protectors of the land/water as well as their being safeguarded by the more-than-human protectors of the land/water. Róng Indigenous belonging is thus not merely multiple, but polysemic, and assembled over several ontological frameworks. Empowered through the self-description as a protector, the strategies and the logics applied do not necessarily build on the colonially induced perception of being damaged, in spite of the omnipresence of the ‘vanishing Lepcha’, but align with variously defined interactions with the environment and activate mechanisms to ensure well-being and safety.

“Earth-beings,” to use de la Cadena’s term (2010, 336), are adapted to modern politics in order to remain influential and stay ‘powerful’ within a culturalist ontology. In my ethnographic field, this adaptation included strategies directed towards a more animist perception of land and the worship of Mother Nature. For all their political differences and regional positionings, the worship of Mother Nature is an imaginary that all activists drew upon, which underlined the power inherent in it. The process of transforming Róng religious tradition clearly showed that the self-definition along culturalist lines was not merely prescribed from the outside or imposed by government policies, but was something that Róng activists had incorporated, redefined, and were using within specific strategic approaches, thereby building on previous interactions with state classifications and formulations of an objectified culture that dated back at least to the end of the nineteenth century. The assemblage functioned within the colonially rooted parameter of ‘tribal closeness to nature’, but it also indicated a struggle to get beyond the damage narrative of the ‘backward’ Mútunci Róng who needed protection. Like the reappropriation of the term ‘primitive’, the unique ritually and ancestrally justified access to Mother Nature was redefined according to features of Indigenous strength and uniquely powerful Indigenous knowledge. The transformation was about regaining power over the narrative, and as such bears the potential to formulate strategies of resisting vulnerability and belonging that extend beyond a self-understanding as being damaged. The powerful Indigenous relation to Mother Nature was used to formulate a self-image that was linked to the global Indigenous rights discourse, inspiring strategies of alternative ways of living and income generation.

Processes of countering vulnerability within a paradigm of Indigeneity clearly had a “dark side” too, as Shah aptly points out (2010). As my focus was on the ritual countervailing of vulnerability, I make no claims to completeness when it comes to discussing the problematic elements inherent in the assertion of Indigenous belonging. I have, however, highlighted some of the dark sides that emerged during my research, and which broke open in particular cases of contestation. Ritual practice, programmes, and lastly the assemblage of belonging take place within the double valence of power as theorised by Butler (1997, 2015, 2016): subjugation and agency. Within this double valence of power, my research has pointed out new avenues of insecurity and inequity that opened up, and which I have scrutinised in more detail here.

I have argued that in ritual programmes ‘being Lepcha’ was adapted to the governance strategies to secure recognition and overcome vulnerability. These recurring events were important spaces in which to activate and reactivate the patron–client relations that gave hope of upward mobility to the Mútunci Róng association members, who were strongly bound into party politics. The programmes and the action of the Róng activists thrived on aspirations for a good life – more often than not defined in terms of a capitalist welfare society. As the assets ran along lines of personal relations and networks, they could only trickle down through membership in the Mútunci Róng associations, or to people who fostered relations to members of a Mútunci Róng association. Resources were extended to those who demonstrated attendance and loyalty. In this process, the actors participated in a constant performativity of need and insecurity in order to acquire patronage.

However, apart from MLAS, within the Róng associations’ organisational structures there were no institutionalised means for how funds would be distributed, how the ‘welfare’ would reach the community, or how the community is involved in defining what ‘welfare’ is. Moreover, there were no mechanisms to ensure transparency or accountability to the ‘general public’ they were intended to represent but who remained beyond their membership structures. The RMRT executive board elected in 2011 was aware of this weakness, and the general secretary initiated a membership drive in order to have more representation among the ‘general’ Róng public (RMRT president, May 2011). Similarly, LRM activists tried to rethink what an autonomous non-territorial body should look like and suggested a three-tier system to elect the executive council members from within the Róng community, as it officially exists in ILTA. The proposal lacked a mechanism for grass-roots agency and participatory accountability, but it was an attempt to make the provision more inclusive to the Róng public, and especially to the rural and marginalised section. The suggestion was never publicly discussed, and in the final provision was brushed aside in favour of

a board appointed by the state government. Further, there is little public discussion on what governance and welfare would mean along a Róng Indigenous intellectual framework, such as for example the First nation forms of governance, ethics, and philosophies that arise thorough physical, social, and spiritual relations with land as discussed in the special issue of *Decoloniality: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (Wildcat et al. 2014).

The failure to rethink those provisions that were granted or demanded based on ethnicity or Indigeneity, in such a way as to meet the expectations of transparency and accountability that have become the norm in the development NGO sector, or to crucially rethink the potential of alternative governance structures and ethics based on a Róng intellectual framework, strongly underlined that in India such provisions were tools of state governance and political patronage. They were not actually intended for welfare and equality, as for example the development boards in West Bengal purport to be. The government and its ruling parties had little incentive to change this, as their power rested on dominance within a patronage democracy and on party-political interests within the sphere of ethno-political action. Additionally, the capitalist interests among the Indigenous elites used ethnicity or privileged access to lands and resources as a means to fulfil their desires, as has been discussed for Northeast India and cautiously for the anti-dam movement in Sikkim (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Karlsson 2011; McDuie-Ra 2011; Wouters 2023). The question remains, then, of where this left those Indigenous activists who were genuinely interested in achieving equity and equal rights to specific lifestyles and languages, as well as in improving the marginalised circumstances of their community members. My research shows the necessity to seriously rethink how resource distribution and class were addressed in the strategies of overcoming Indigenous vulnerability. Such examinations need to go beyond discussions of the ‘creamy layer’, and incorporate critical analysis of capital, labour, and resource use, as strongly advocated by Shah (2010, 12) and Shah and Lerche (2018).

The second contention erupted around the soteriological reasons for ritual action and ritual agency, which were particularly visible in the debates on ritual transfers and the local reactions to the reformulations of Dzongu as a holy land in the anti-dam protests. The above-mentioned understanding of ritual as nature worship undermined the specific agency of overcoming vulnerability inherent in ritual practice. The direct interaction with the embedded more-than-human divine beings – mediated by the ritual specialist – gave the ritual its power and at its heart helped the community negotiate a safe space. The creator deity, on the contrary, had no agency in Róng Indigenous ontologies as practiced in Dzongu. The delocalisation of more-than-human beings, the focus on the creator deity, and a promotion of an animist connection to Mother Nature changed interac-

tion that were built on ancestral kinship relations between people, divine, sentient beings and land (and water) and made such direct interaction impossible. Thus, these shifts undermined the important ritual act of exchange itself and eliminated the meaning of ritual as a form of governance that includes more-than-human beings. These transformations, I have suggested, occurred to gain agency according to the parameters of the present-day political field within the parameters of the Indian state.

After the 18 September 2011 earthquake, it was the failure of ritual efficacy within Róng Indigenous ontologies that in the end had a political impact on the pro-dam section. It wasn't the 'earth-beings' of the anti-dam protestors that convinced them, but the fact that the negotiation with the embedded more-than-human beings – by means of ritual practice – had failed to counteract the danger of constructing the dams and so secure their protection. Consequently, it was ritual failure – experienced as a seismic event – that brought pro-dam actors to rethink the dams as too dangerous. Following the logic implied by the Róng Indigenous ontologies, the amenities being offered by the dam developers were not worth bearing the consequences of ritual failure, as experienced in the devastating earthquake. Lastly, this showed that Róng Indigenous ontologies still bore importance within people's decision-making processes, even if the effect was not a permanent one and the contestations over dams continued. I am not implying that it was the only factor – the reasoning behind personal choices is always manifold – but only that ritual practice still had political agency. This observation has implications for approaches to overcoming vulnerability within the political field.

In the eastern Himalayan region, it could be fruitful for activists, politicians, and scholars alike, in seeking to understand political action and social justice, to look more closely at the Indigenous interpretations of land, environment, and cosmos derived from Indigenous ontologies that have not been adapted to the existing frameworks of representation and recognition within culturalist ontologies. Within Róng Indigenous ontologies in the widest sense, being a Lyángdók Úngdók means responsibility more than ownership or rights in the present legal sense of the word based around capitalist ideas of possession. It specifically includes the responsibility to care and engage in reciprocal interactions with all the beings within the land. Territory is a co-managed space between humans and non-humans in which the more-than-human beings are the guardians of the land and multiple worlds and realms exist. The interactions between the different 'users' and 'owners' of the realms are mediated by ritual exchange – based on alternative notions of governance that include more-than-human beings in reciprocal acts of keeping order and well-being. These reciprocal relationships create the ethical, moral, and spiritual underpinnings to nurture a good life.

Building on this insight, I suggest it could be fruitful to rethink and extend the idea of co-managed spaces, as put forward by van Schendel as an alternative approach to homelands and exclusive Indigenous space, to include ‘users’ and ‘owners’ as well as practices of negotiation from an Indigenous ontological perspective (van Schendel 2011, 37).

In insisting on the importance of the distinction between Indigenous epistemology and ontology, I am not proposing to look into Róng religion or to reproduce the manner in which relations between people, the environment, and the divine are established in specific ancestrally transmitted practices but rather to rethink the political and economic co-management of resources according to a notion of polysemic territory, environment, and agency built on relations that include both humans and more-than-humans. Importantly, these interactions include the agency and power to negotiate protection and prosperity that focus on ancestrally transmitted intellectual thought-framework – beyond culturalist or capitalist world-making – of reciprocal negotiations – a perspective that needs to be linked to any debates on Indigenous rights. How such intellectual frameworks built on Róng thought, reciprocity, and spirituality might look is beyond the scope of this book but requires future engagement.

Such a thought experiment would of course have to include the ethnic other that in this work has only been featured on the outskirts, such as in the tribalisation politics of the government, the anxious belonging of the Gorkha, or the threat of the migrant workers in the dam projects in the Dzongu Indigenous reserve. In this context, the similarities in interactions between different realms, and between humans and more-than-humans, that exist within Himalayan ontologies could be a fruitful ground for exploring potential co-management spaces (Bentley 2024; Oppitz 2017). Additionally, there are attachments to land that I have not addressed in this work. For example, labour and acts of livelihood sustenance form relations to the respective land that have unique qualities and emotionality; these, however, are not built around ancestral ties to territory, but arise from interaction and intimate knowledge of environment and place, as Besky (2013) shows with regard to tea garden workers in Darjeeling. Such a focus could prevent the ascription of ownership of environmental Indigenous knowledge, resources, and rights to territory to one specific ethnic group, as is discussed by Baviskar (2005).

With respect to the cultivation of meaningful relationships across differences – whether ethnic, political, or otherwise – another central aspect of Mútunci world-making, as revealed through community rituals, warrants closer scholarly attention, namely the concept of *akep* – companion. This notion, in my view, holds significant potential for informing theoretical approaches to interrelatedness and the quality of relationality over distinctions based on

Róng intellectual thought-frameworks. While dominant academic theoretical frameworks frequently operate through binary logics and the prioritization of categorical distinctions (cf. Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2004), Róng Indigenous ontologies, as practiced in Dzongu, centre relationality and reciprocity by weaving interconnected webs of protection. This ontological orientation does not aim to erase or homogenize distinctions; rather, it affirms coexistence through differentiated relations. *Akep*, in this sense, exemplifies a mode of togetherness that resists oppositional structures and instead cultivates mutual presence across difference through regular interactions based on reciprocity. Such intellectual work could not only inform academia, but also governance policies.

Co-management approaches have received critical attention in the scholarship on Indigenous knowledge and the co-management of environmental conservation. As Campbell (2013) shows for the Himalayan region, such approaches have not translated into practices of conservation on the ground. Furthermore, they struggle to include the ‘cosmological’ elements of Indigenous knowledge (Houde 2007). Within the tense political atmosphere in the wider region, marked by tribalisation and ethnic conflict, such an alternative picture of the “return of the native” (Kuper 2003), as suggested here, could offer productive inputs in the search for more inclusive and less objectified approaches to Indigeneity and equality.

In setting the limits of this work, I chose to concentrate on dynamics within the Róng community. I chose this focus specifically because it enabled me to analyse the complex polysemic image that I had experienced of the Indigenous Mútunci Róng as being beyond and yet within the political. I felt strongly that such an approach was necessary as a counterpoint within a political environment that reduced what it meant to be Mútunci Róng to a purified catalogue of objectified ‘cultural’ traits, and thereby created a need to clearly establish ‘cultural’ difference from the ethnic other living within the same space. This work caters to the need, to use Shah’s (2010) words, “to pay attention to the voices that are not usually heard in transnational, or even national forums, as well as the processes which lead to their marginalization” (35). As Smith (2012) points out, in most conceptualisations of the Indigenous, Indigenous people and culture cannot “be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory,” this perspective being derived from the colonial-era idea that Indigenous culture cannot and potentially should not change (77). As writing ethnography is in the final analysis a political act (Shah 2010, 190, based on Asad 1973), this was my attempt to write against that assumption. My research shows that ‘being Mútunci Róng’ is all that: complicated, internally diverse, even contradictory, and there is nothing non-authentic about it. I have thus attempted to counter, in my writing, those

purified and unilinear versions of what Mútunci is, and of how their vulnerability as an Indigenous people is to be overcome.

While finalising this manuscript for publication, a devastating flash flood surged down the Lachen River and subsequently the Tista River, destroying the Teesta Stage III hydroelectric dam in Chungtang, along with bridges, homes, and lives. The event left a deep scar on both the landscape and its people – one that will endure for years. This catastrophe once again exposed the vulnerability of Róng bodies and livelihoods, a vulnerability that is compounded by capitalist extractive practices imposed upon land and water. Through a ritual lens, this work has explored how such vulnerabilities are managed and how safe spaces are created. Yet, a critical question remains: which strategies – within the polysemic assemblage I have attempted to analyse – serve to perpetuate historical injustices affecting both people and landscape? From this perspective, the development of an Róng Indigenous intellectual framework for understanding and embodying land–water relations holds significant promise. This is particularly true if we foreground a pedagogy of land – understood as both process and context – at the centre of our relational engagements with land, people, and environment (see, among others, Bruno et al. 2024; L.B. Simpson 2014).

Rather than adapting Róng *lúngten sung* to align with culturalist or capitalist ontologies and thus reducing this ancestral knowledge to essentialised notions of ‘tradition’ or static ‘cultural’ archives – as is often the case with survivance strategies tied to ethnic politics – I pose the question of how relationships with Lyángdók Úngdók, land and water, in all their inherent polysemy and diversity, might themselves become creative forces for reimagining Róng Indigenous futurities. Within this context, *lúngten sung* encompasses teachings that are dynamic, place-bound, and ancestrally transmitted – a living knowledge framework that shapes and is shaped by remembered experiences, events, and decisions. What can we learn from land and water interactions that have been ancestrally passed down, and how might these teachings inform projects of environmental and social justice reparations? As this publication has sought to explore, Róng community ritual practice teaches that acknowledging vulnerability does not necessitate the avoidance of risk or the denial of difference. Instead, it suggests that safe spaces are cultivated through respectful and reciprocal relationships with diverse sentient beings – relationships that are grounded in said ancestral knowledge, resilient even in the face of rupture, and oriented toward healing. While my work does not offer definitive answers to the questions raised above – nor are they mine to answer – I hope it invites curiosity and encourages readers to seek further teachings from Lyángdók Úngdók.

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Annex One: List of Róng Community Rituals

TIME	PLACE (REGION)	RITUAL	REASON	ORGANISER
Late winter / spring	Dzongu, North Sikkim	Sotáp Rumfát	Annual protective community ritual against hail	Religious specialist, <i>yúmí, gyápân</i> , sometimes <i>pan-chayat</i>
Spring	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts, transferred to Dzongu	Múkzekdng Rumfát	Róng annual community ritual in honour of the sprouting greenery [Suggested regional equivalent: Sotáp Rumfát]	ILTA, MLAS
Spring	Dzongu, North Sikkim	Cirim (sometimes called Pano Rumfát)	Annual protective community ritual against diseases	Religious specialist, <i>yúmí, gyápân</i> , sometimes <i>pan-chayat</i>
Spring/summer	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts, transferred to Dzongu	Lyáng Rumfát	Annual community ritual to the deities of the lands [Suggested regional equivalent in Dzongu: Cirim]	ILTA, MLAS
Spring (April, May)	Dzongu	Thikúng Munsalóng Commemoration Day (Pano Munsalóng Sáknón Súkyním)	Annual community ritual in honour of the Róng legendary religious specialist and leader Thikúng Munsalóng	MLAS
6 August / 22 August	Sikkim (Tendong hill, Gangtok, or other district headquarters), Kalimpong	Tendong Hlo Rumfát	Annual community ritual commemorating a mythological deluge	Celebration committee, RMRT, RMROS, ILTA
Late summer	Sikkim Dzongu / royal palace	Kóngchen ritual (also called Pano Rumfát)	Royally funded historical ritual to the protective mountain deity Kóngchen.	It has been discontinued. Previously committee appointed by the king, comprising of six <i>táso</i> , including the Kóngchen Búngthing
Late summer, autumn	Sikkim (Gangtok, Ravang, Pemayantse)	Pang Lhabsol	Annual Buddhist (state) ritual in honour of Mount Kangchendzonga	State government, celebration committee, Tsuklakang, monastic committee

Continuation of Table *List of Róng Community Rituals*.

TIME	PLACE (REGION)	RITUAL	REASON	ORGANISER
Autumn	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts	Cú Rumfát	Annual community ritual in honour of the mountains (Also a clan ritual for male clans, called Pholha Fát in Dzongu) [Suggested regional equivalent in Dzongu: Cirim]	ILTA, MLAS (Unless clan ritual, then it is the respective household)
Autumn	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts	Sakyu Rumfát	Harvest ritual. Only in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling district is it still a community ritual; in Dzongu it is merely performed in some households	ILTA, households
20 December	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts	Gyebú Áchok's Birth Anniversary	Annual community ritual in honour of Gyebú Áchok, the last Róng king	ILTA, ROP, LRM
Winter	All Róng regions	Námsung (also spelt Námbun)	Róng New Year celebration	All Róng associations, households
Winter, last night of the old year	Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts, transferred to Dzongu	Láso Múng Sonáp	Ceremonial destruction of Láso Múng, ending of the old year	Individual households, RMRT, MLAS
Winter	Dzongu	Námsung <i>mela</i>	Ritual programme, festival, New Year Celebration	MLAS

Note: There are three other rituals mentioned in the publication that are not performed at a specific time in the year, but are done in the context of specific circumstances. *Árót Fát* is performed to keep negative energies or violent death and its consequences away from the community. *Lungjí Fát* is done to appease and communicate with the embedded local divine more-than-human beings. It is a part of all community rituals. *Tungbóng Fát*

is the naming ceremony performed after the birth of a child.

The list of rituals includes the community ritual practices and programmes discussed in this publication. It should not be read as an exhaustive list of all (community) rituals in Dzongu or within the Róng community. There is, for example, another important ritual in Dzongu, *Kabi Rumfát*, that I have not discussed here.

Annex Two: Protective Rights for the Mútunci Róng in India and Nepal

YEAR	SIKKIM/INDIA	WEST BENGAL / INDIA	ILAM/NEPAL
1917	Land protection for Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) (Land Revenue Order No.1)		
1951		'Lepchas' recognised as Scheduled Tribe, or 'ST' (Quotas in government sector jobs, education, etc.)	
1956 (According to oral tradition since the early 20th century)	Establishment of the Dzongu Reserve (Royal Proclamation)		
1961	'Lepchas' recognised as 'Sikkim Subjects'	Provisions: Citizenship in Sikkim and later in India	
1977	Róngring becomes an official state language	Provisions: language taught in government schools, various government-sponsored publications	
1978	Bhutias and 'Lepchas' recognised as ST	Provisions: quotas in government sector jobs, education, etc.	

Continuation of Table *Protective Rights for the Mütunci in India and Nepal.*

YEAR	SIKKIM/INDIA	WEST BENGAL / INDIA	ILAM/NEPAL
1952/1979	<p>Twelve seats reserved in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly for BL (Representation of People Act)</p> <p>Provisions: political representation</p> <p>RMRT/RMROS: Demand for 50 per cent of the BL seats and reservations (until 2005)</p>		
2002			<p>'Lepchas' recognised as Indigenous Nationality (<i>ādivāsi janajāti</i>) under the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act, 2058 [Bikram Sambat; 2001/2002]</p> <p>Provisions: So far no rights granted, but access to specific development schemes</p>
2006/2013	<p>Primitive Tribal Status (PTG)</p> <p>Provisions: since 2013, 5 per cent reservation in higher education</p>	<p>ILTA: Demand for PTG until 2007</p>	
2012/2013	<p>Primitive Tribe Welfare Board</p> <p>Provisions: Board develops and implements schemes in favour of the 'Lepchas'</p>	<p>Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board</p> <p>Provisions: Board develops and implements schemes (NGO with government-appointed chairperson), no protective rights</p>	



Title Art by Anugrah Pandi Lepcha

“Verklemt” or completely overcome with emotion (October 2023)

“When the river Teesta – so abused and misused – lost its patience, the world stopped and the chaos unfolded. Stripping the river of her rights to flow – and flow freely –, humans forgot the course of nature in their wants and needs. Humans’ desire for more and more progress broke the unspoken rule between human and nature thus disrupting the equilibrium. Our once free-flowing, loving, and calm river Teesta was in full rage. Like an agitated and hopeless prisoner waiting to break free, she finally let go. When the river swallowed the lands and claimed her space, we finally stepped back as a community, we paused to look around and see the monster we were creating. This artwork came to life during those moments of silence and introspection. My emotions ran high, I hurt for the lost lives of my brothers, while I empathise for the life of our community river deity, too. The push and pull to feel for them both, was a painful experience.

My work reflects my interpretation of our hills’ ecological concerns. Our mountains are melting and our rivers are stifled. Our hills are turning into plains and trees are being lost. Our natural ecosystem full of rich flora and fauna is slowly becoming a mere memory and the butterflies have long been lost. Will we pass on nature’s glory as something to be touched, felt, seen, and smelt, or as a mere story of the past?”

By Anugrah Pandi Lepcha

Dr. Anugrah Pandi Lepcha is a scholar and researcher with a deep commitment to the study and preservation of indigenous cultures and stories. With a background in ecological social work and cultural studies, her work focuses on the rich heritage of the Lepcha community, including their traditions, languages, and social practices. Her research contributes to a broader understanding of indigenous knowledge systems and their relevance in contemporary contexts. Anugrah is actively involved in initiatives aimed at cultural preservation and the promotion of indigenous voices in academic and public spheres – carrying on the quest to find the equilibrium between human and nature one indigenous story at a time.

A carefully woven exploration of ritual protection, changing power politics, and Indigenous survivance.

The book offers a detailed analysis of the pluriverse of an Indigenous community in the south-eastern Himalaya. It is a rare deep-dive ethnography of the Mútunci Róng community – more commonly called by their exonym Lepcha – and of the ontologies and strategies activated in ritualised struggles to reduce marginality and ensure a good life. Based on over a decade of interactions, the author assembles community ritual practices and performances, their actors and power relations, as well as the histories and thought-frameworks they are embedded in. She shows how Mútunci Róng actors live and activate various understandings of self and the world depending on their respective spatio-temporal positioning. Through the ritual lens, the author analyses vulnerability and survivance and unravels multi-modal processes of constituting belonging to the place, community, and the Himalayan environment, putting the polysemic concept of Lyángdók Úngdók, protectors of land and water, at the core of her analysis.

Jenny Bentley is an independent researcher based in the Indian Himalaya, with a PhD in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of Zurich. In an ongoing project on storytelling and empowerment among Mútunci Róng youth, she collaborates with several Indigenous scholars, knowledge keepers, and artists. Additionally, she is an active member of the Swiss Anthropological Societies Interface Commission for Engaged Anthropology and consults at Echostream, a multi-disciplinary design agency based in Gangtok, Sikkim (India).

