The Enactment of Tribal Unity at the Periphery of India: The political role of a new form of the Panglhabsol Buddhist ritual in Sikkim

Mélanie Vandenhelsken

Since the 1990s, the rituals of the various Sikkimese ethnic groups have received growing media coverage.[1] This formerly independent Buddhist kingdom, annexed by or 'merged' with India[2] in 1975, is at the northeastern edge of the Indian republic, between Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. It is home to about twenty ethnic groups[3], who are generally depicted as belonging to one of three categories: Bhotia, a linguistically and culturally Tibetan group, to which the Sikkimese kings belonged; Lepcha, the original inhabitants of the area; and 'Nepalese,' a label which emphasises their foreign origin. The terms 'Nepalese' and 'Bhotia' will be discussed in more detail below. These categories are constructed within several thematic fields, including the interpretation of history. This article is an attempt to highlight the instrumental role of the state of Sikkim in this process of constructing ethnic categories by using and reshaping an ancient ritual[4]

2   The question of whether the Sikkim merger was an annexation is debated. See for instance Das 1983 and Datta-Ray 1980 who each support a different point of view, i.e. repectively that the integration of Sikkim within the Indian Union was the result of a democratic referendum, or of an Indian military intervention. However, the statement in Parliament in 1978 by the Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai that 'the manner in which Sikkim's merger with India was carried out was a wrong step' is taken as an admission to the annexation of Sikkim. My thanks to Pema Wangchuk for having brought this to my notice.
3   See Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation: 59.
4   It is not implied here that ethnicity and identity are only and always determined by nation states; transnational influences are also instrumental in this regard (for this area of study see Shneiderman 2009) as well as global ones, but these will not be discussed here.

in order to reposition Sikkim as an integral part of the State of India[5] despite its peripheral position at the geographical border of the Indian nation-state.

The focus on certain rituals is largely legitimated by referring to 'ancient' traditions. For example, a newspaper article of 14 August 2008 began with the statement 'Tendong Lho Rum Faat is one of the oldest festivals of indigenous Lepchas,' and continued, 'Realizing its importance and need to preserve this age-old coveted tradition and culture of the indigenous Lepchas, the Sikkim Democratic Front government declared the 8th August of Almanac calendar a state holiday since 1997.'[6] The current Sikkim government invests particular attention in the ritual that will be examined here: the Panglhabsol (Tib. *dpang lha gsol*)[7] as celebrated in Ravangla, a small town in the centre of Sikkim, and a two-hour drive from Gangtok, the state capital. Here, Buddhist masked ritual dances similar to those staged in many Tibetan monasteries are combined with sports tournaments, the sale of products chosen to represent various ethnic groups of Sikkim, and speeches by government representatives. Panglhabsol has been celebrated close to the town centre of Ravangla since 1984, but under the Sikkimese monarchy it was the most important state ritual, celebrated every year in the royal chapel (Balikci 2008). It was banned shortly after the annexation of Sikkim because the Indian government saw it as a display of royalist and nationalist sentiments (Pommaret 1996), but it was resumed later in the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, its celebration was finally stopped for religious reasons by the prince-heir of Sikkim (Balikci 2008: 336). In 1993, the ritual was 'revitalised' by the royal priests of Pemayangtse 'monastery' (*gompa*)[8] who in the past had been in charge of its celebration in the palace. This

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5   For clarity's sake, 'state' with a lower-case 's' will be used hereafter to denote the Sikkimese state, and 'State' with an upper case 'S' to denote the Indian State.

6   *Now!* 2008.

7   Terms preceded by 'Tib.' are Tibetan language terms transliterated in the Wylie system. The transliteration is given at the first occurrence of the term; the following instances are transcribed in a simplified way (the letter ö is pronounced as 'eu' in French).

8   The Tibetan term '*gompa*' (Tib. *dgon pa*), which literally means 'isolated place', is generally translated as 'monastery.' But in Sikkim, most of the users of these places are not monks but householder ritual specialists, who go to a *gompa* for temporary periods as children to study at the *gompa*'s Buddhist school, and as adults to practise rituals as well as to meditate. The term *gompa* will thus be used here instead of 'monastery,' and understood as a place of worship for non-celibate ritual specialists and lay practitioners.

time, it took the form of an open protest against India's annexation of Sikkim (Vandenhelsken 2006).

I argue here that the 'neo-Panglhabsol'[9] of Ravangla has been appropriated by the modern Sikkimese state. On one hand, the state uses it to monopolise the political legitimacy of the ancient regime, re-establishing the link between the mountain cult and political power that is widespread in the Tibetan cultural area (see Blondeau 1996 and Blondeau and Steinkellner 1998) but was severed in Sikkim with the fall of the monarchy (Steinmann 1998). On the other hand, the myth linked to the ritual has been reinterpreted, transforming it into a new foundational narrative that unifies all the people of Sikkim, concealing interethnic competition. The 'politics of tribalisation',[10] within which all the ethnic groups living in the state aim to acquire the status of Scheduled Tribe (ST) from the Indian government, is the real object of the 'neo-ritual', and lies at the core of its ambivalence. The 'neo-Panglhabsol' thus proves to be a space for an enactment of politics that remodels ethnic boundaries, and aims at repositioning Sikkim within the Indian Union.

The Panglhabsol of Ravangla does not challenge the Indian central government, but rather aims at a political centralisation of the state of Sikkim that was never really achieved before the state was incorporated into India. This centralisation is effected by transforming the myth of the foundation of the Bhotia kingdom into a myth of the Sikkimese nation within the Indian nation.[11] This implies the need to rewrite the history of Sikkim, to redefine the claimed status of the state's historical leaders, and to create a cultural boundary between Sikkim and other Indian states. All of these endeavours have become sources of new tensions between Sikkim's various ethnic groups.

The takeover of Panglhabsol by the modern state

Ravangla[12] is located in an enclave of Sikkim's South district, at the intersection of the East district, where the capital Gangtok is located, and the West district. The population of the town, about 45,000 inhabitants, is predominantly Hindu, with roughly the same proportion of Hindus to

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9   In reference to Galinier and Molinié (2006).
10   In reference to Sinha (2006).
11   See in this respect, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Babadzan (2001).
12   Also called 'Ravang', 'Rabang', 'Ravong' or 'Rabong.'
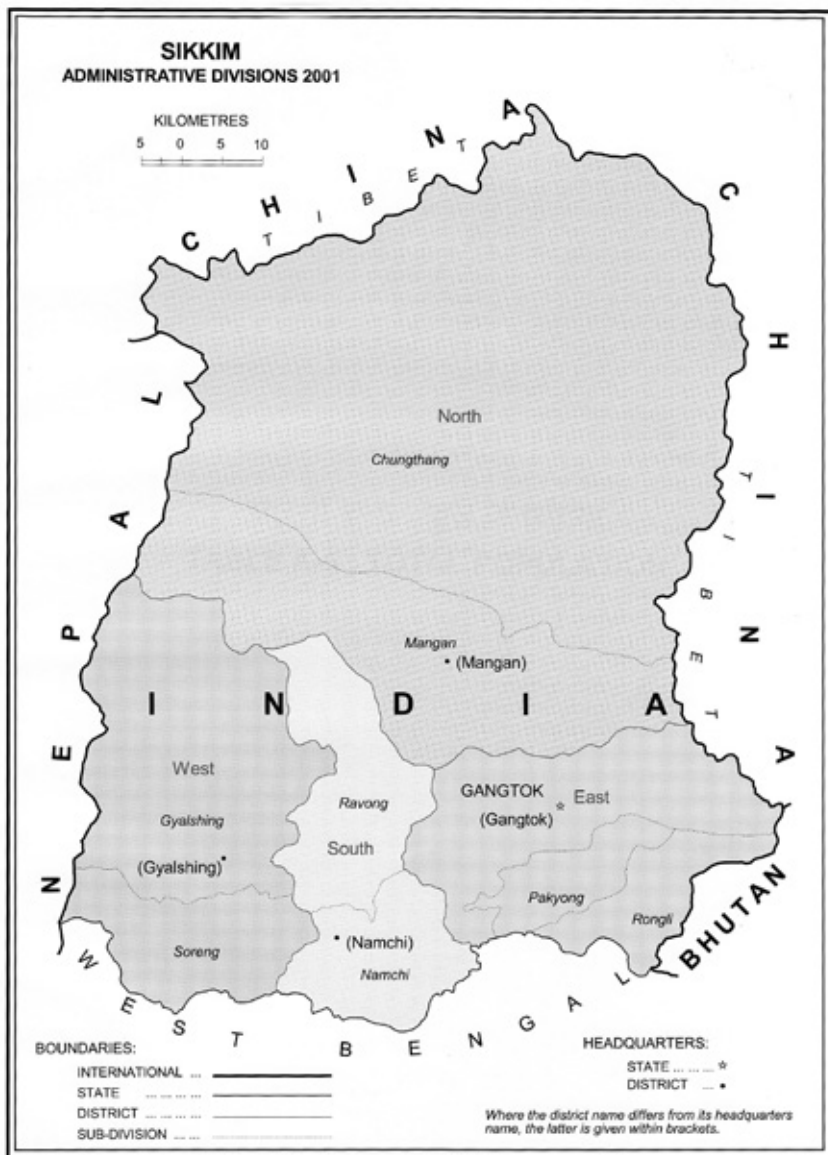
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Buddhists as seen at the state level. The Buddhist *gompa* of Ralang, located a few kilometres north of the town, is one of the most important *gompa*s in the state. It is one of the few Sikkimese *gompa*s that holds the right to collect taxes from the lay households in its vicinity as well as on products sold at certain shops in Ravangla. Founded in 1730 by the king of Sikkim, it is one of about twenty Sikkimese *gompa* belonging to the *kagyupa* (Tib. *bka' brgyud pa*) Tibetan school of Buddhism, whereas in the state as a whole there are mainly *nyingmapa* (Tib. *rnying ma pa*) *gompa*s.

In the last few years, the celebration of Panglhabsol in Ravangla has become one of the most important annual events in Sikkim, as is evident both from the number of visitors and its coverage in the media. During the celebration, Buddhist ritual dances are performed in front of a Buddhist 'temple' (*mani lhakhang*) located at a separate site, like a *gompa* but nearer the city centre. Volleyball matches are organised behind this temple in the same compound. On either side of the temple and the sports field, culinary specialities of different ethnic groups are sold at stands, and various achievements of the government are presented. Speeches by members of the government, usually including the Chief Minister (head of the state government) of Sikkim, are interspersed between the dances and matches. In the evening, dances are organised in the city in the same place that the Buddhist ritual dances were performed earlier in the day. These dances are described as traditional to the various local ethnic groups, but are generally performed to popular Hindi music, and as on other occasions, this transformation into 'Bollywood-style number[s] [...] carr[ies] the weight of 'culture' in the generic South Asian sense' (Shneiderman 2011: 203). Thus, the ingredients of the Ravangla Panglhabsol include an assemblage of the sacred and the secular, as well as an omnipresent display of the local state and of ethnic tradition depicted as adapted to the modern world. It is an event that attracts not only pilgrims, but also tourists and the curious.

On 15 September 2008, the Panglhabsol of Ravangla celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its creation with unparalleled splendour. This 'Silver Jubilee of Pang Lhabsol' at Ravangla was accorded the status of a Sikkim state function. The Sikkim government was represented by its Chief Minister, the Ministers of Sport and of the Urban Development and Housing Department (UD&HD) and a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Ravangla. This date also saw the official unveiling of a new *gompa*, built between the temple and the sports field.

The foundation of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' and political careers

A group of men native to Ravangla, who were all members of the then ruling party (the Sikkim Pradesh Congress[I]), organised the 'neo-Panglhabsol' for the first time in the autumn of 1984.[13] The initiators of the ritual whom I interviewed[14] claimed that Panglhabsol was no longer celebrated in the royal chapel at that time and thus they wanted to fill the gap. However, its celebration had only been interrupted by the prince at the end of the 1980s (Balikci 2008: 336). The ritual was thus simultaneously performed in both places for a few years. These men had therefore other motives.

In 1984, a simple fair (*mela* in Nepali[15]) was organised, with street peddlers and farmers from the vicinity selling their products. It was linked to Panglhabsol by its date: the fifteenth day of the seventh Tibetan month (August-September). One of the people who initiated this celebration and was interviewed for this study is Mr. Dorje, a Bhotia originally from the vicinity of Ravangla.[16] He was around 60 years old at the time of the interview, and was a member of the Sikkim government. Mr. Dorje defines himself as a villager. His family owns a small area of land, of which part is leased to tenants. He can thus be considered to belong to the rural middle-class. Mr. Dorje was a civil servant until 1975, when he resigned. He explains his decision as being due to the excessively heavy control that the royal government exercised over the population at that time, thus giving credence to the accusation of authoritarianism levelled at the Sikkimese kings by their opponents.[17] This ideological position—midway between the more common pro-Indian antimonarchism and the royalism opposed to Sikkim's merger with India—represents a group of ideas that gave birth to the 'neo-Panglhabsol' of Ravangla, and that most likely helped Dorje to become a member of the government.

Another founder of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' of Ravangla is Mr. Sharma, a few years younger than Mr. Dorje, and a member of the high-status Indo-

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13   This party later joined the Indian Congress party (Kazi 1993: 73).

14   I interviewed four of the twelve founders of the 'new Panglhabsol' for this study in 2007 and 2008.

15   Nepali is the lingua franca of Sikkim. My Bhotia interlocutors, for instance, use Nepali more spontaneously than the Bhotia dialect (called Lhoke, Tib. lho skad or Denjongke, Tib. 'bras ljong skad).

16   All the names used in this article are pseudonyms, except for those of public figures such as Ganju Lama and the heads of the Sikkim state.

17   However, Mr. Dorje did not participate in the anti-monarchy movements of 1973-74.

Nepalese caste Chetri. In 1984, when he was a civil servant, he resigned in order to join the then ruling party and stand for the elections. In 1985 he was elected as MLA of one of the constituencies of Ravangla. He remained a close associate of the government then formed by the Sikkim Sangram Parishad. In 1993, one year before the elections, Mr. Sharma as well as all the founders of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' of Ravangla joined the rising Sikkim Democratic Front; the latter won the 1994 elections and is still ruling today.

Other founding members were not interviewed, such as Ganju Lama, who passed away in 2000. He is famous in Sikkim because he was decorated with the Victoria Cross as a soldier in the British Gurkha battalions. Two local elected representatives (members of *panchayat*, i.e. bodies representing the smallest administrative divisions in India) were also part of the group: a Chetri and a Rai. Finally, four other Bhotias were involved. One was also a building contractor, and another a Ravangla hotelkeeper.

On the Panglhabsol day in September 1984, a Hindu ritual was organised to worship the mountain Kailash, located in southwest Tibet, which is a Buddhist sacred mountain and considered by Hindus to be the residence of Shiva. In 1985 Panglhabsol Buddhist ritual dances were introduced into the celebration under instructions from the sub-division magistrate, who had just been appointed in Ravangla, and the deputy. Both officials were Bhotias. Panglhabsol was staged in the Ravangla town centre. A ritual specialist from Ralang was requested to teach the dances to a dozen young men from the town. As Panglhabsol continued to be performed in Ralang *gompa*, it indeed became necessary to train new dancers for the 'neo-Panglhabsol' staged in Ravangla at the same time. In the first years, the dancers' accessories were made of common things such as saucepan lids for shields, pieces of bamboo for swords, and so forth.

The same year, the building of the Buddhist temple in Ravangla began on a piece of land located not too far from the town's shopping area. The government had given this plot to Ganju Lama, the most famous of the founding members. The temple was financed entirely by Mr. Dorje from his personal funds. Gradually, various lay elements were added to the celebration, such as volleyball matches, the 'traditional' dances of various ethnic groups, which together were called the 'cultural programme,' and the market stands. The 'neo-ritual' was soon institutionalised through the creation of an official organising committee, the Panglhabsol Celebration

Committee (PLCC). It is composed of seven members, with the sub-division magistrate serving as its chairman. In 1994, Mr. Dorje was elected MLA of one of the constituencies of Ravangla, and acquired a public subsidy for the PLCC. During this mandate, in 1996, the ground floor of the temple was completed, and subsequently all of the elements of the 'neo-ritual' were moved to its site. Hereafter, the celebration became a three-day event instead of merely one day. In 1999, as one of the founding members joined the government, an annual grant of 100,000 rupees was granted by the Ministry of Culture to the PLCC. Since 2000, all of the members of the Panglhabsol organising committee have also become members of the Ravangla Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC). Thus the 'neo-ritual' gained in importance, attracting leading government officials to participate and the public to attend.

Common to all of the founders of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' is their involvement or desire for involvement in politics in a society in which participation in collective activities—generally called 'social work'—determines the recognition of political leaders as much as the vote of the local population.

The reframing of the ritual or the takeover of religion by politics
The Panglhabsol ritual originally celebrated the Buddhist mountain god Dzönga (Tib. *mdzod lnga*). In the guise of one of its identities, Dzönga is a protective deity of the kingdom, 'thus linking and uniting the person, the lineage, the village and the State together under the Chogyal [i.e. the king]' (Balikci 2008: 27; see also Balikci 2002). Thus, the ritual is closely linked to political power, as the mountain cults in Tibet often are,[18] and to the kingdom. As mentioned above, it is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Tibetan calendar (August-September), which marks the end of the monsoon season and the beginning of harvest time. It is one of the yearly occasions on which masked ritual dances are staged in the wealthier Buddhist monasteries. As on other occasions, it is composed of several rituals aiming in turn at protection and exorcism. The most important of these is the ritual of 'propitiation of the holy place' (Nesol, Tib. *gnas gsol*), which is the 'ritual of the soil *par excellence*,' a celebration of Sikkim

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18   See Blondeau (1996) and Blondeau and Steinkellner (1998), and in the latter, in particular Karmay (1998).

as a Buddhist holy site (Balikci 2008: 108). In the royal chapel in the past, only Pemayangtse ritual specialists performed Panglhabsol masked dances; these specialists were formerly royal priests and are members of the clans that share a common ancestor with the royal family (Vandenhelsken 2006, 2009). The masked dances alternate with non-masked dances, called *pangtö* (Tib. *dpang bstod*, i.e. 'worship of the witness-deities;' a term which will be explained further below), performed by noble laymen. They perform as warriors of the mountain god and celebrate the subjugation of his enemies. As Balikci explains,

> In this case, the meaning of enemy was particularly intended as the enemy of the Dharma and the monasteries, and consequently, the enemies of the Buddhist kingdom and its monarchy. Indeed, it is mentioned in the Nesol (f.55-58), that Jigme Pawo [a religious man close to the third king of Sikkim, who choreographed the *pangtö* dances in the 18th century] reminded Dzönga of his oath taken before Guru Rinpoche that he would prevent enemies from entering Sikkim, particularly anyone who came here with the intention of changing the structure of the administration as it had been established by the three lamas who consecrated the first Chogyal [i.e. king] at Yuksam in 1642 and set the borders of the new kingdom (Balikci 2008: 108).

Moreover, when it was celebrated in the royal chapel Panglhabsol was the occasion for the royal family, as well as the lay and religious members of the government, to renew their vows to serve the kingdom in front of the protective deities of Sikkim (*ibid*: 316).

When the first 'neo-Panglhabsol' was organised in Ravangla in 1984, it was not held at the *gompa* of Ralang, located several kilometres outside the city, but in the town centre. Mr. Dorje explains that this was because Ralang *gompa* was too far away. Moreover, when discussing the addition of the Buddhist ritual dances the following year, he added, 'people were not used to seeing this type of dance.' This statement refers to the geographical isolation of the *gompa* of Ralang and to the fact that in the past it was mainly the Bhotias who attended Buddhist ritual dances. In the 'neo-ritual,' these dances were extracted from the monastic environment of Ralang and brought to a larger, multi-ethnic audience. But there were critics among the general population, as well as within the Ralang religious community,

of ritual dances being performed at a market place. There were two aspects to their critique: they highlighted the paradox of accumulating merit while also accumulating profit, and the tension between the pure and the impure. The geographical isolation of the *gompa*s is perceived by Buddhist practitioners to represent and enable a distancing from the accumulation of wealth, as well as from all of the 'poisons' of secular life that stand in the way of spiritual progress.

This criticism was not misplaced: the fundamental motive for bringing Panglhabsol to the town centre was to put the dances on the market, in the literal as well as the figurative sense. This is very clear from the Chief Minister's inauguration speech in 2008: 'Sikkim has a very high potential in the tourism industry; thus, we have to combine our customs, traditions, culture and food habits with tourism and take this festival and our culture and traditions to the world market.'[19]

However, the relationship between the 'neo-Panglhabsol' and the Ralang religious authority was not completely severed. First, both the 'neo-Panglhabsol' founding members and Ralang ritual specialists claim that Ralang celebrated Panglhabsol in the past, and this reference to antiquity thus justifies the present celebration of the ritual in Ravangla. Moreover, the ritual specialist from Ralang who trained new dancers in 1985 is today the spiritual leader of the Ralang religious community.[20] However, in Ralang, servants of the monastery performed the *pangtö* dances, not men from the nobility as had been done in the royal chapel; these dances were even called 'servant dances,' (Lk. *kecham*).[21] However, the founders of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' did not call on Ralang's servants, but rather on a ritual specialist. The latter's social status and his influential position within the religious community most probably made him the choice of the founders of the 'neo-ritual.'

Soon after 1984, Mr. Dorje began building the temple where the dances take place today. It was located closer to the town than Ralang, but not

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19   Daily newspaper Sikkim Reporter, 17 September 2008.

20   He carries the title *dorje lopon* (Tib. *rdo rje slob dpon*), literally 'Dorje master,' which is the highest function in the hierarchical organisation of the Buddhist religious communities in Sikkim.

21   'Lk.' indicates words in Lhoke, the Tibetan dialect spoken by Bhotias in Sikkim. Kecham is most probably derived from Tib. khyep 'cham, the Lhoke word khyep being equivalent to the Tibetan word khol po, meaning 'servant' or 'slave' (Stein 1981: 71 and 101, and Das 1989: 193).

directly in the shopping area. Mr. Dorje explains that he decided to build this temple to respond to the criticism of organising the ritual in a market place. The new temple was linked to Ralang *gompa* because a Buddhist school was attached to it, with a teacher and students who came from Ralang. Although Mr. Dorje placed the ritual dances into a religious framework by having them performed in front of the new temple, he nevertheless insisted that there was a difference between a temple (*mani lhakhang*) and a *gompa*: 'I built a temple, and you should not mix up *gompa* and *mani lhakhang*,' he explained to me, 'a *mani lhakhang* is used by old women who come to recite mantras.' This understanding of the 'old women's' religious practices is a simplification, since it does not take into account the fasting (Tib. *bsnyen gnas*) performed by these practitioners, who abstain from meat, fresh vegetables, alcohol and speaking for periods that can last up to sixteen days. Here, Mr. Dorje stresses the difference in status between the temple and the *gompa*, and in this way implicitly tells us that by installing the 'neo-ritual' in a *mani lhakhang*, he was not competing with the Ralang *gompa*.

However, in 2008 Mr. Dorje built a *gompa* next to the temple, thanks to funding from the Indian central government. Since the principle of secularism is inscribed in the Indian Constitution, in order to receive financing the *gompa* had to be classified as a museum (musical instruments and other traditional objects are indeed displayed in an alcove on the ground floor). In 2008 Mr. Dorje had become a member of the government. Did he wait until acquiring this powerful social position before taking it upon himself to compete with the *gompa* of Ralang? The fact remains that the ritual dances were taken from the Ralang *gompa*, provided with legitimacy by keeping a minimal link to Ralang, and, after a detour through the market place, were again installed in a religious site, albeit one that is controlled by the state.

Extracting Panglhabsol from the *gompa* also allowed the addition of new elements. It would have been difficult to add elements such as sports matches and ethnic dances to the Panglhabsol if it had remained in Ralang. Indeed, the Bhotia nobility criticised the addition of elements that had not been part of Panglhabsol in the past. As one of my interviewees explained: 'When a single ethnic group has a ritual, it is tradition, but when everything is blended, it is tourism.' However, during the masked ritual dances in Pemayangtse, which the critics of the Ravangla Panglhabsol generally take as an example of authenticity, small shops are installed within the *gompa*

compound, but only in a restricted and limited space. This practice, as well as the critics of the blended 'neo-ritual,' appears to be in tune with Buddhist philosophy—of which Pemayangtse is considered the main guardian in Sikkim—which maintains the interdependence and separation between the religious and temporal domains (Ruegg 1995).

Therefore, the problem caused by the 'neo-Panglhabsol' is less the adding of elements to the Panglhabsol 'that do not refer to the beyond and the sacred' (Caillet and Jamous 2001: 68), than the fact that these elements are not confined to the secular plane, and are therefore not adequately differentiated from the Buddhist ritual dances. The change of location thus did not lead to the sacred character of the ritual dances being removed, but permitted the elements chosen to represent culture to be sacralised: the move of the ritual made the 'sacralisation of culture' possible (Babadzan 1999: 7-8).

Thus, the 'neo-Panglhabsol' is not the fruit of a process of secularisation which involves the privatisation of the religious domain, nor is it the removal of areas of society and culture from the authority of religious institutions and symbols (Madan 1987, Berger 1973: 113, quoted by Madan *ibid*: 748, Hervieu-Léger 1986: 208). It rather allows the relationship between the religious and temporal domains to be transformed: the religious domain is brought under the control of the state, and under the control of the market in the service of the state. Assayag's analysis of Hindu nationalist processions can be borrowed to describe this relationship within the framework of the 'neo-Panglhabsol': 'It was about reconfiguring the religious on the political field, or politics on the religious, by inscribing them in a double register simultaneously nostalgic and utopian, monastic and monarchical' (2003: 388).

Moreover, placing religious practices on the same level as sport and commercial activities permits the social and historical positions of the various ethnic groups of the state to be equalised, thus neutralising the predominant position of the Bhotias within Sikkimese society and history. The 'neo-ritual' thus has the same aim as the reinterpretation of the myths to which it is linked. In order to further examine this relationship, let us consider the political mechanisms through which ethnicity is constructed in Sikkim.

The construction of ethnicity by the state in Sikkimese history

Ethnicity, homeland and secularism in Sikkim

How can this 'staging' of culture, identified with ritual, be interpreted? Are we seeing a situation in which 'enchanted religious forms undoubtedly do not want to die, preventing the nation-state from being created by disenchantment of the world' (Assayag 2002: 182)?[22] In other words, does this 'staging' of culture express the secessionist desires of ethnic groups, desires that are supported by the Sikkim state? And does it question the incorporation of Sikkim into the Indian nation-State by rejecting the principle of secularism as inscribed in the Indian Constitution? Analysing the situation in this way might draw inspiration from the Gellnerian 'modernist' view of nationalism, which links nationalism to the secularisation of society and cultural homogeneity. According to this concept, the growth of secularism is necessarily accompanied by nationalism and, simultaneously, cultural homogenisation is one of the prerequisites for the emergence of the nation-state (Gellner 1981, 1999; Assayag 2002). Other concepts of nationalism can be included in this paradigm of modernisation, which, linked to the emergence of industrial societies, marks the passage from the organisation of traditional communities to the state society (Assayag 2001: 25 and chapter 1).

Anthropologists have questioned this model for several reasons, in particular for its 'Euro-centrism.' The role it allocates to secularism is also open to discussion because, as in Europe, 'the religious reification of culture played a determining role in the definition of nature and of the territorial borders of nations' (Assayag 2001: 26 and 1997). Reviewer, the history and anthropology of India provide noteworthy examples of religious symbols and practices being used by Hindu nationalist movements (Assayag 1997, 2001, Jaffrelot 1991 and 2005).

Critics of the modernist paradigm argue that the relationship between communities and nations is a reciprocal one. Nationalism produces distinct identities; exalting 'reinvented ethnicities' has often accompanied the formation of nation-states, either by supporting them or not.[23] In addition,

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22 My translation of Assayag: '[chez les sociétés traditionnelles] les formes religieuses enchantées ne veulent décidément pas mourir, empêchant l'État-nation de naître par désenchantement du monde!'

23 This is my translation of 'ethnicité fictives' in the sentence: 'Le passé n'est pas moins un

groups often resort to old forms of patriotism in response to homogenisation and standardisation. Hindu nationalism, to use the same example again, reveals links between nationalism, 'communalism' (as ethnic tensions are called in India) and religion. Jaffrelot (1988) has shown that the birth of Hindu nationalism was concomitant with that of communalism.

In line with these theses, I argue that the ritual presented here is part of a process that is producing a nationalist or, at least now, a patriotic form of identity.[24] The reshaping of this ritual aims at re-drawing the ethnic map and the ethnic boundaries of Sikkim, underlining ethnic belonging and differences[25] that are not opposed to the nation and providing an example of ethnicity being politically constructed. I will show that the religious sphere—which was paramount in what was, until recently, a Buddhist kingdom—is instrumental in this process, with the Sikkim state placing the ritual under its control and 'the enchantment of the world'[26] entering the service of the homeland. The 'neo-Panglhabsol' thus reveals particular referents and forms of nationalism in Sikkim, and becomes a scheme of action for constructing a state nationalism for Sikkim through a reshaping of ethnicity.

The framework for the emergence of the 'neo-Panglhabsol'
In Sikkim today, what is popularly referred to as the 'reservation system' largely fixes ethnic boundaries. This system of 'compensatory

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pays étranger que familier, notamment parce qu'il renvoie fréquemment à une « ethnicité fictive » s'auto-représentant comme « peuple élu », c'est-à-dire une communauté instituée par ou contre un État national' (Assayag 2002: 184).

24   According to Assayag (2001: 31), patriotism is based on the principle of residence, while nationalism is based on the principles of descent and ancestry. Sikkimese collective identity as constructed by the state is based on the principle of residence, and therefore falls within patriotism rather than nationalism. Nevertheless, the construction of the first seems to lead to the second.

25   Rejecting a primordialist understanding, I here comprehend 'ethnicity' as a representation by the social actors of divisions and social inequality, as well as differentiation in terms of belonging to an 'ethnic group' (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995: 21-33). 'Ethnic group' is also a problematic expression, and is also not understood in the primordialist sense of groups made up of unchanging and superimposed natural and cultural features. It is rather broadly speaking considered a dynamic entity, continuously shaped according to relations to others, and definition by others, to ideological and material needs and assertions, local and global politics, history, etc. (On the problems raised by the notions of ethnic groups and tribes, and particularly in the South Asian context, see for instance Gaenszle (2000: 19-24) and Gellner (1997: 15-16)).

26   I refer here to Max Weber's concept of the 'disenchantment of the world.'

discrimination' (Galanter 1991) is implemented everywhere in India: it guarantees minimum representation in public employment, higher education, and political institutions for those social groups described as 'backward.' Quotas are reserved for four categories: Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and women (Tawa-Lama 2005: 9-10).

Of the speakers of the approximately 90 languages registered as residing in Sikkim (Census of India 1991), who are also divided for official enumeration purposes into twenty-one ethnic communities[27] and six religions,[28] only the Bhotia, Lepcha, Limbu and Tamang have been granted the status of ST. The Kami, Rai, Majhi and Sarkhi, which are Nepalese castes of lower social status, belong to the category of SC. The identification of OBC is more complicated, since the Indian central government and the state of Sikkim do not use the same definition. In 1994, the Delhi government acknowledged the Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar, Tamang, Thami, and Jogi as OBC,[29] but in 2001, the government of Sikkim included most of these groups in the category of Most Backward Classes (hereafter MBC), and included groups that had previously been considered as having a high social status in the OBC category.[30]

In addition to quotas in education, employment and political representation, allocated in a variable manner according to the membership category, twelve of the thirty-two seats in the legislative assembly of Sikkim are reserved for the category 'Bhotia-Lepcha' and one seat is reserved for a representative of the Buddhist religious community of the state (the Sangha). The nineteen remaining seats, called 'general', are not reserved. That is to say, they are open to all candidates, regardless of ethnic belonging. This organisation of the legislative assembly has triggered numerous debates. It is also an issue in current Sikkimese politics, of which the Panglhabsol ritual is a component.

The boundaries of this 'ethnic map' draw on 'metanarrations' (Gingrich 1998), or various 'thematic skylines,' as found in colonial, missionary and

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27   Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation (2006).
28   Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikh, Jain, Christian and Muslim.
29   There was already a disagreement with Gangtok, since the Sikkimese government included the Dewan in this category.
30   All of the laws mentioned here are part of the Sikkim Code, published in 6 volumes by the Law Department, Government of Sikkim.

anthropological literature (Steinmann 1996). Tourist guidebooks, for instance, present the population of Sikkim as being composed of three 'ethnic groups': Bhotia, Lepcha and Nepalese.[31] All of these categories combine subgroups of various origins, dialects, and social status under singular labels. There are also variations in understanding amongst ethnic group members, and between them and the state and national administrations, leading us to question the notion of 'ethnic group' (see Amselle 1985). In this regard, the labels 'Bhotia' and 'Nepalese' are problematic.

The following table summarises this situation and its evolution:

Table 1: Ethnic categories in Sikkim

Key:
(1) As declared by the Indian central government
(2) As declared by the Sikkim government

	1978	1994	2001	2003
SC	Kami, Damai Majhi and Sarkhi (1)			
OBC		Limbu, Tamang, Bhujel, Gurung, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar, Thami, Jogi and Dewan (1, except Dewan)	Bahun, Chetri, Newar, Sanyasi (2)	
MBC			Bhujel, Gurung, Mangar, Kirat Rai, Sunuwar, Thami, Jogi, Dewan (2)	
ST	Bhotia and Lepcha (1)			Limbu and Tamang (1)

The former Sikkimese kings' ethnic group used several names for

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31 Of numerous examples, see the text entitled 'Sikkim. Ultimate Eco-destination' published by the Sikkim Tourism Department, Government of Sikkim.

themselves, including *Lho po* (as *lho* means 'south' in Tibetan, this name was most probably given by Tibetans to refer to southern populations) and *Denzongpa* (Tib.*'bras ljongs pa*) which refers to the kingdom and to Sikkim as a Buddhist holy place. But the Scheduled Tribes order of 1978 included in the category of 'Bhotia' groups that were not considered as part of their group by the Sikkimese 'Bhotias,' only by the colonial administrators and ethnologists.

As for the term 'Nepalese,' its usage for people living in India has been discussed in several scholarly contexts (see Hutt 1997: 106, Subba 1992, especially: 67-74, Shneiderman 2009: 15-20). It is problematic if it is used to mean 'speakers of languages spoken primarily in Nepal', to indicate people of Nepalese origin (Hutt 1997: 106), or to suggest a cohesive community with a unitary identity and common language (Chalmers 2003). In India, the groups classified as 'Nepalis' have long searched for a term that indicates their Indian nationality, while also highlighting their distinct identity (see Subba 1992: 67-68, Hutt 1997, Sinha 2006). In Darjeeling, several political groups have debated the use of the term over time (Hutt, 1997: 108, 117; Subba 1992: 68 and 71). In Sikkim, the term 'Nepalese' is preferred to 'Nepali,'[32] and it is used as an ethnonym rather than referring to people who speak the Nepali language.[33] But it is nevertheless contrasted to Bhotia and Lepcha, and the recent attempt by the Sikkimese administration to replace it with 'Sikkimese Nepalese,' to stress the conception of the category as a 'quasi ethnic group'[34] highlights even more its quality of foreignness. However, many of the groups classified as 'Nepalese' are not of recent origin in Sikkim. For instance, the term imputes a foreign origin to groups like the Limbu, who have lived in Sikkim as long as the Bhotia and Lepcha.[35]

Finally, in Sikkim more than in Darjeeling, although common cultural practices can be found among all the ethnic groups classified as 'Nepalese,' and a common sense of belonging to the 'Nepalese group' has been claimed by

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32   In the scholarly debate, A. C. Sinha has recently proposed to use the term 'Nepamul' as an abbreviation of the Nepali translation of 'Indians of Nepalese Origin' (2003: 11-12).

33   My thanks to Mark Turin for having brought to my notice the terms of this debate on 'Nepalese-Nepali.' In this regard, see also T.B. Subba (1992: 71-72, and 2003: 56).

34   This expression is used by Hutt (1997: 102).

35   Regarding the ancient settlement of Limbus and other 'non Bhotia-Lepcha' ethnic groups in Sikkim, see Arora (2007: 200), Hutt (1997: 103 and 131), Sinha (1981: 191), Steinmann (1996: 118), and Subba (1989: Introduction).

its members on several occasions in the past,[36] the groups labelled as such do not have as many common 'cultural traits' as they have different languages, religious practices, and forms of social organisation.[37] Additionally, the particular historical and political situation of Sikkim has led each group to recently claim a distinct identity, with a particular language, religion, costume and so forth, a phenomenon that can be linked to the political programme of the present government, which I will discuss below. However, in Sikkim the division of the population into autochthonous inhabitants and immigrants is generally super-imposed on that between Buddhists (27% of the total population) and Hindus (68 %).[38] This dual division of the population is a historical construction; but the superimposition of classification criteria upon the inhabitants of Sikkim is too simplistic. It can be traced back to a combination of the Sikkimese elite's relations with others and early ethnological and colonial thought that created a representation of the population of Sikkim as being divided into a Hindu majority and an autochthonous minority. Since then, the term 'Nepalese' has been used to describe anyone who is neither Bhotia nor Lepcha, regardless of his or her language, religion, social organisation, or even origin.[39]

The twofold division of the Sikkimese population determined policies related to the various ethnic groups. First, it became part of the administrative management of the population. Moreover, in the first half of the 20th century, several laws made official the different treatment of the Bhotias and Lepchas on the one hand and the 'Nepalese' on the other, in favour of the former. Thus the differences between the 'indigenous' Bhotia-Lepcha and the 'Nepalese' immigrants were constructed and institutionalised (see Arora 2007: 202 and 204-205, Sinha 2006: 6-7). Finally, the royal government of Sikkim established the controversial 'parity system' in 1950–51 that reflected the binary division of the Sikkim population. Here, six seats of the royal Council were reserved for Bhotias and Lepchas, and six for the 'Nepalese' (six were nominated by the ruler).[40] The 'parity' between Bhotia-Lepcha (B-L) and 'Nepalese' was maintained

36 Regarding the inclusion of sub-groups such as Rai, Limbu, and Gurung into the larger 'Nepali' group, see Hutt (1997: 117, 119).

37 In this regard, see also Arora (2007: 197).

38 These figures are presented by the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Government of Sikkim, 2006.

39 In this regard, see also Arora (2007: 202).

40 Sinha (2006: 7), see also Hutt (1997: 131-132) and Sinha (1981) on this subject.

for almost thirty years with a few modifications, the most important of which was the conversion of this Council into a thirty-two-seat legislative assembly after the integration of Sikkim into the Indian Union.

The twofold division of the population was also reinforced by events leading up to the incorporation of Sikkim into India. This historical event was seen by the ruling elite, the media, as well as common people as a confrontation between the 'Nepalese', who opposed the monarchy (and were manipulated by India), and the Bhotia-Lepcha.[41] A referendum in 1974 resulted in 96% of the votes being cast in favour of abrogating the monarchy and Sikkim being incorporated into India.

A series of policy measures connected to these events is still at the core of current politics, and constitutes the framework in which the 'neo-Panglhabsol' ritual in Ravangla was founded in 1984. Among them is what is often called the 'special provision' for the Bhotia-Lepcha, that is to say, a group of policy measures specific to these groups. Notably, article 371F of the Indian constitution, added just after the annexation of Sikkim, guarantees the validity of the old laws of Sikkim. Among them is the Land Revenue Order n°1 of 1917 that 'forbids Bhotia and Lepcha to sell their land to any other ethnic groups without the sanction of the Palace.'[42] The attribution of the ST status to the Bhotias and Lepchas (*Scheduled Tribes Order*, 1978) created a unique situation in India, in which groups including traditional ruling elites (although both the Bhotia and Lepcha groups are internally differentiated along class lines) were classified as 'tribes,' despite being of a higher social status than the Indian and Indo-Nepali castes.[43]

The 'Representation of People Act' enacted by the Indian central government in 1979 confirmed the reservation of 12 seats for the Bhotias in the legislative assembly. But the act also annulled the parity system in Sikkim, which resulted in the reserved 'Nepalese' seats falling into the 'General' category. Those who opposed this measure declared that reserving seats for the 'B-L' was anti-constitutional, because it was not proportional to the population (Kazi 1993, Bentley 2007).[44] The Bhotias and Lepchas, who represent about 20% of the state's total population, indeed held 37.5% of

41   In this regard, see Hutt (1997: 131-133).

42   Sikkim Code, volume 2, part 1: 4. On this subject, see also Arora (2007: 204).

43   This situation can also be found in northeast India, but it is different from that found in the 'tribal belt' in the centre of the country. See Carrin (1996).

44   On this subject, see also Arora (2006: 4065 and n. 16).

the seats of the legislative assembly.[45] However, the winner of the 1979 elections, N. B. Bhandari, did not debate the reservation of seats for Bhotia and Lepcha, although he contested the cancellation of the 'Nepalese seats.'

Another important event in the run-up to the establishment of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' was the release of the report that presented the recommendations of the second 'Backward Classes Commission' (also known as the 'Mandal Commission'), which reopened the debate on reservations across India at the end of 1980.[46] The Mandal Commission Report recommended attributing the status of 'backward classes' to several ethnic groups that had previously been classified as 'Nepalese' by the state of Sikkim: Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar, Tamang, Thami, Jogi and Dewan. Bhandari opposed this proposition firmly because it would divide the 'Nepalese' group.[47] He did not implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission during his mandate, and thus created enemies in most of these groups. But he initiated a 'son of the soil' policy, a policy designed to enhance the regional identity of Sikkim. A well known Sikkimese journalist explained Bhandari's policy in the following terms:

> The issue which concerned us most [...] was the preservation of the distinct regional identity of the State. Sikkim had been taken over by India and it was now pointless making it an issue. However, we could still preserve what was left and what was permissible under the Constitution. This we felt could only be achieved through unity of the three ethnic communities of Sikkim – the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the 'Sikkimese Nepalese.' Only if the people were united and conscious of their rights could they come together and organise themselves to keep a constant check on the government, irrespective of whichever party may be in power (Kazi 1993: 72).

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45   According to the census 2001. At the beginning of 2003, Limbu and Tamang were included in the category of 'Scheduled Tribes,' but they do not share the Bhotia-Lepcha seats in the legislative assembly, in spite of having requested this.

46   This commission was appointed by the Indian government to determine suitable criteria for identifying 'economically and socially backward classes,' and to consider, among other things, the question of reservations for this category of citizens (Ramaiah 1992). The expression 'backward classes' dates back to the colonial era and first designated groups suffering from lack of education who were underrepresented in the administration, trade and industry (Jaffrelot 2005: 239, 248).

47   Bhandari himself belongs to the high-status Indo-Nepali Chetri caste.

These words reveal the metamorphosis of the protest against the annexation of Sikkim into an appeal for the defence of a Sikkimese cultural identity. It is this attitude that is enacted by the celebration of Panglhabsol in Ravangla.

In May 1984, Bhandari's Finance Minister accused him of corruption and the governor dismissed the government. This occurred after Bhandari had become allied with the Congress Party in 1981, which earned him the loss of Bhotia support, because most of the Bhotias blamed Congress for the merger with India. The Minister of Finance became head of government but remained in power for only thirteen days before a state of emergency was declared. New elections were organised in November of the same year, and Bhandari won 31 of the 32 seats of the legislative assembly. It was between May and November 1984 that Bhandari's party members organised the first celebration of Panglhabsol in Ravangla. The choice of a Bhotia ritual with strong symbolic contents was not accidental in a context in which lost Bhotia votes had to be recovered.

The reinterpretation of Panglhabsol in the service of the 'politics of tribalisation'

The recycling of Sikkimese nationalism
From the first year of the 'neo-Panglhabsol,' its founders attempted to make the ritual a celebration of the unity of the three ethnic groups of Sikkim: the Lepchas, the Bhotias and the 'Nepalese.' This echoes another Panglhabsol ritual organised by a minister at the 'Statue of Unity' in Gangtok. This is located next to the main shopping street of the city, and represents the Sikkimese king's Tibetan ancestor kneeling before the autochthonous Lepcha chief. The association of Panglhabsol with the unity of Sikkim's ethnic communities is indeed drawn from one of the myths of the ritual's origin. There are at least two such myths. The first is known primarily to Buddhist ritual specialists. It links the origin of the ritual to the advent of the Tibetan religious practitioner who introduced Buddhism to Sikkim and thus made the reign of the Bhotia kings possible.[48] The second version is also part of the Sikkimese kingdom's foundational

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48   See Balikci (2008, among others: 70, n. 44), Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993: 217), Rock (1953), Steinmann (1998), Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma (1908).

myth. It tells, among other things, how an ancestor of the aristocratic Bhotia clans named Khye Bumsa came from Tibet to Sikkim and took an oath of friendship with a Lepcha chief and wizard, Thekong Tek. Khye Bumsa had settled in the Chumbi valley but could not have any children, and thus had come to meet Thekong Tek to benefit from his magical powers. Not only did Thekong Tek's blessing enable Khye Bumsa to have three sons, but the Lepcha chief also predicted that one of them would become the first king of Sikkim. The two men then enacted a ritual sealing of their friendship, for which animals were sacrificed (the ritual is thus called 'blood-brotherhood pact'), and the mountain god Dzönga and other local deities were called as witnesses. One of the interpretations of the name 'Panglhabsol' (if spelled in Tib., *dpang lha gsol*) is 'celebration of the witnessing deities.'[49] The 'statue of unity' in Gangtok represents the latter myth. The founders of the Panglhabsol of Ravangla express the same idea as the minister who founded the Panglhabsol in Gangtok: 'It is not only Khye Bumsa and Thekong Tek who undertook the blood brotherhood pact here, what Pang Lhabsol signifies is the unification of all Sikkimese people' (*Now!* 2006).

This notion of ethnic unity is reminiscent of the famous Indian slogan 'unity in diversity' which generally supports the concept of federalism. In addition to this reference to the Indian nation, one of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' founders refers to an element of Hindu nationalism: 'I wanted our Panglhabsol to be as popular as Ramlila.' Ramlila is the popular dramatic performance surrounding Rama, the divine monarch and hero of the *Ramayana* (Assayag 2003: 376). These rituals, and more generally the God Rama, are some of the symbols that were used by Hindu nationalists during demonstrations at the end of the 1980s that claimed the site of the Ayodhya mosque to be Rama's birthplace (Assayag 2003).

The founding of the Sikkimese nation was already part of the myth of Panglhabsol, which at the end relates how the autochthonous population allowed Tibetans to reign in Sikkim.[50] Yap Sonam Yongda, the former captain of the king's guard, also affirms this interpretation of the myth. His

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49 For historical background, interpretation and analyses of this myth see Balikci (2002, especially: 19-20), Mullard (2003), Steinmann (2003-2004: 152-153), and Wangchuk and Zulca (2007).

50 This also affirms the indigeneity of the Bhotias and Lepchas, according to Arora (2007: 211).

opposition to the annexation of Sikkim caused his imprisonment, during which, according to some, he was tortured. He writes in a newspaper article:

> I am of the view that it would be more appropriate that events like 'Pang-Lhab-sol' be evaluated as Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo's [the Tibetan religious man who introduced Buddhism in Sikkim, and here considered as the founder of Panglhabsol] endeavours—theoretical as well as practical— to expedite the formation of Sikkim as a Nation-State. [...] This meeting [between Khye Bumsa and Thekong Tek] established the political legitimacy of Sikkim as a Nation-State based on religious nationalism [...] In this context Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo made another important formulation: the most essential factor of people for the nation to develop was to make people more patriotic. This he sought to do by observing Pang Lhabsol as the 'national day.' [...] The pangtye [*pangtö*] *cham* [masked ritual dances] was a reminder to the people at large of their role to defend their country from foreign aggression. And, in the view of the present-day misuse of such unique Sikkimese Buddhist tradition by those who claim to be the champions of culture and tradition but have turned our rich tradition into cheap *nautanki*, it is the duty of those who respect our ancient heritage to attempt an objective assessment (Sonam Yongda 2006).

The old form of Panglhabsol is here linked to nationalism, recalling for instance Tibetan mountain cults described at the end of the 1990s by Karmay, which 'ha[d] the effect of re-animating the national consciousness' (1996: 70). However, today in Sikkim the actual ruling power takes possession of the cult. It retains the nationalist aspects presented by Yap Sonam Yongda but introduces the 'Nepalese' into this paradigm by means of the mountain cult. Connecting the Hindu cult of Kailash to the Panglhabsol when it was first performed in Ravangla, Mr. Sharma explained to me:

> Panglhabsol is a prayer to the Buddhist mountain god Dzönga, and the Nepalese worship Kailash, which is also a mountain. We [the founders] saw Panglhabsol as an instrument around which the Bhotia and Nepalese could be unified. At that time [when the 'neo-ritual' was founded], we had a problem to make this idea understood; only people in Ravangla understood.

Here one sees a desire to create a cultural entity that does not only include the Bhotia and Lepcha, but also the 'Nepalese,' and this cultural unit is conceived as establishing a political unit: a Sikkimese nation.

The syncretic character of mountains cults in other parts of the Himalaya (see for instance Toffin 1988 for Mount Kailash, and Tautscher 1998 for Tamang mountain cults in Nepal) is exploited in order to represent and reach Hindus as well as Buddhists, and finally to establish the 'people' of Sikkim as a unitary entity. This remodelling of ethnic boundaries implied the rewriting of history. Both the founders of the 'neo-Panglhabsol' and the Sikkim state reduced the multiplicity of narrations upon which the ritual was based, and chose just one for reinterpretation, leading to the levelling of the historical and social status claimed by the Bhotias.

Let us remember that at the time that the 'neo-ritual' was established the reservation of 'Nepalese' seats in the legislative assembly had just been annulled, and the reservation of seats for the Bhotias was being questioned. The official political discourse, which the 'neo-Panglhabsol' founders were supporting, argued that only a political alliance between the Bhotias and the 'Nepalese' would lead to the interests of each group being preserved. But the tensions between the two communities surrounding the merger of Sikkim with India were still quite recent, and thus this alliance had to be constructed.

The 'neo-Panglhabsol' finally appears as a present time form of asserting a new religious authority and political power by absorbing the cult of a local deity. This process has been described for conquests of new territories in the Himalayas through the settlement of a new god, or the conversion of local gods to Buddhism.[51] The creation of a new social space is aimed at in Sikkim through the 'neo-Panglhabsol,' and in particular the construction of what can be called 'tribalisation.' This concept is at the core of the current government's political programme.

The enactment of unity as 'tribalism'
In his speech at the Panglhabsol in Ravangla in 2008, the Sikkimese Chief Minister declared:

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51 See Buffetrille (1998) and the two volumes on mountain cults in the Tibetan cultural area and the Himalayas edited by A.M. Blondeau (and by E. Steinkellner for the second one), and in particular the articles of Karmay, Hazod, and Ramble in the 1996 volume, and of Schicklgruber and Steinmann in the 1998 one. I am grateful to Sara Shneiderman for her suggestions on this point.

Pang Lhabsol is the identity of Sikkim and the Sikkimese people. It reflects the rich culture and traditions of the people of this state. It is the festival of our state, bringing all the various ethnic peoples to a single platform in order to conserve the traditions and culture of Sikkim; this festival is related to the worship of Nature and conveys the message that the Sikkimese people have always been worshippers of Mother Nature. The people of Sikkim have, on this day, worshipped our Guardian deity Mt. Kantchendzonga since the time of the Namgyal [the Sikkimese kings] Dynasty.[52]

The reference to the monarchy seems to be meant not only for the Bhotias, but also to be intent on demonstrating the antiquity of the mountain cult, as based on nature worship. The latter is one of the characteristics of the 'tribe' in Indian representations. On the one hand, this recalls Hindi language concepts related to the idea of tribe: *adivasi*, that is to say 'aboriginal,' *vanyapati*, 'masters of forests,' *pahari*, 'inhabitants of the hills' and, in Sanskrit, *dasa* (as opposed to *arya*), which implies the idea of descendants of the original inhabitants.[53] On the other hand, it refers to the cultural criteria that a group needs to meet in order to be categorised as a Scheduled Tribe, a point to which I will return.

Since its first elections in 1993, and especially since the 2000s, the Sikkimese government has developed what the sociologist and anthropologist A.C. Sinha (2006) calls a 'process of tribalisation', which I would term a 'politics of tribalisation.' The author describes this as follows:

Sikkim has joined the North Eastern Council (NEC) for the purpose of developing the administration. There are a number of states within the NEC that are known as 'tribal states' because more than half of their population is recognized by the Union Government as Scheduled Tribes. Taking a cue from the above practice, the government of Sikkim decided to approach the Union Government to accord the status of Scheduled Tribe to the communities listed in the State as the MBCs or Most Backward Communities. Already 38 percent of the Sikkim population is recognized as Scheduled Tribes and another 5.93 percent as Scheduled

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52   Sikkim Reporter (2008).
53   Herrenschmidt (1978: 123).

Castes. The present ruling party – the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF)
– is committed to bringing all of the *Nepamul* Sikkimese under special
constitutional categories like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs
and MBCs. They do not hide their efforts and their desire to see that
the communities listed among the MBCs in the State are accorded the
status of Scheduled Tribe. Once this is achieved, apart from the social
engineering of uplifting the 'educationally and economically backward
communities', another 22.4 percent of population will be added to the
total, creating a genuine claim of being a tribal state, which will have its
own advantages in terms of the liberal allotment of funds. (2006: 10)[54]

These politics are evident in the regular shifts of ethnic groups from one
category to another (see Table 1). For instance, the Limbu and Tamang were
part of the 'Nepalese' category until 1979, then became Other Backward
Classes from 1994, and finally acquired the status of Scheduled Tribe
at both state and national level in 2003. In 2001, other groups who had
acquired the status of OBC in 1994 were declared Most Backward Classes by
the government of Sikkim (this decision has not been ratified by the central
government). The same year, the Indo-Nepalese high caste groups of Chetri
and Bahun, as well as Newar and Sanyasi, were declared OBC. As far as can
be ascertained, this situation is an exception in India, and it has not been
validated by the central government. In 2005, the government of Sikkim
approved a resolution accepting the request of the Lepcha to be recognised
as an Indigenous Primitive Tribe, but the central government has not yet
examined the application.

    The ethnic groups applying for inclusion in one or another of these
categories have to prove to the government that they meet the criteria.
The Indian reservation system contains a number of paradoxes, since it
defines groups according to cultural criteria while aiming to compensate
for economic disadvantage (Shneiderman and Middleton 2008). The
first 'Backward Classes Commission' of independent India (the Kalelkar
Commission, 1955-56) adopted, as a criterion for inclusion in the category of
Scheduled Tribes, 'a separate excluded existence, not fully assimilated in the
main body of the people' (Roy Burman, 2008: ii). It thus ruled out the concept

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54   See also the online article 'Chamling seeks tribal status for Sikkimese people': http://www.
      thefreelibrary.com/Chamling+seeks+tribal+status+for+Sikkimese+people.-a0216452086

of primitive traits and backwardness used by the colonial administration to establish the list of Scheduled Tribes in 1931 and of 'Backward Tribes' in 1935. However, these criteria were reintroduced in 1964 by the Lokur Committee as part of a review of the list of Scheduled Tribes (*ibid*). The commission retained primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the rest of the population, and backwardness as criteria for inclusion on the list (*ibid*).[55] Faced with strong protests, this legal act was withdrawn, but the criteria were not replaced. However, in July of 2006 'the Ministry of Tribal Affairs came out with a Policy statement which discarded an earlier Policy announcement indicating primitive traits and backwardness along with cultural distinctiveness as criteria for recognition of ST. In the new Policy statement community consciousness, harmonisation with nature, and distinctive culture have been associated with tribal social formation. Distinctive culture as a relevant trait has never been disputed by anyone though there may be difference of opinion about the components of distinctive culture' (Roy Burman, *ibid*: viii).

The worship of nature that the Sikkimese Chief Minister mentioned in the above quotation thus has become a resource for inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribe within the framework of the 'politics of tribalisation.' Finally, as a mountain ritual, 'neo-Panglhabsol' is a staging of the Sikkim government's politics. The ritual also conceals the discord that existed prior to this political moment, as well as tensions triggered in the race for reservations.

Indeed, the reservation system creates several problems. Although primitive traits and 'backwardness' are officially no longer taken into account, the worship of nature has remained a 'positive' criterion for tribal status, the institutionalisation of which produces an 'objectification' of cultural traits (see Cohn 1987, Amselle and M'Bokolo 1985) as well as their transformation into commodities and a resource to be captured (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The speech of the Chief Minister suggests his desire to meet this criterion. 'Tribalism' is at the same time a resource for the current government's political agenda (both in terms of its internal affairs, and in its relationship with the Indian central government), and for the collective identity strategies of the ethnic groups. The Mandal Commission

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55   See also Shneiderman and Middleton (2008), and http://tribal.gov.in/searchdetail. asp?lid=738&skey=policy).

Report triggered what Lardinois (1985) called a 'struggle for classification.' After 1990, implementing the recommendations of the Mandal Commission first led to the old ethnic categories being divided up. Next, it opened the way to create concrete benefits for ST, SC and OBC, launching a competition between the ethnic groups for access to these categories (Shneiderman and Turin 2006: 55). Then the various groups began to compete for the same resources, as has occurred in other systems of positive discrimination (Hobsbawn 1999). The result was a process analogous to that observed in the neighbouring region of Darjeeling:

> For the first time, being a member of a Scheduled Tribe or Caste could actually alter one's educational or professional chances for the better. The race had begun. For many Darjeeling residents of Nepali ancestry [...] the search for classification as a Scheduled Tribe presented an alternative option for demanding benefits from New Delhi (Shneiderman and Turin 2006: 55).[56]

In Sikkim, the 'politics of tribalisation' is opposed not only by some of the Bhotia nobility, of which for instance Yap Sonam Yongda is a member, but also by a relatively new political organisation, the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC), founded in 1999. This organisation questions the incorporation of new groups into the ST category, and opposes the request of the Limbu and Tamang to share the seats reserved for the B-L in the legislative assembly.[57] In response to the increasing influence of SIBLAC, the Sikkim Gorkha Apex Committee (GAC), strongly opposed to SIBLAC, was created in 2003.

Conclusion

The new form of the Panglhabsol ritual presented in Ravangla displays a remodelling of ethnicity by the Sikkim state through the agency of the neo-ritual's founding members who, in this situation, and in the frame of their own political strategies, conveyed the rulers' representations of the

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56   The 'tribes' of Sikkim are more influential that those in Darjeeling, since they hold nearly half of the seats in the legislative assembly. In addition, Sikkim exercises a stronger power of influence on the Indian central government than Darjeeling because it is a separate state and not merely a district.

57   See this organisation's internet site: www.siblac.com.

population. Here, the process of dividing the population into ethnic groups and creating a worldview based on ethnic difference is supported by the state. This goes hand in hand with the reservation system, which reifies ethnic boundaries and conceals their porosity. Instead of opposing the state, this worldview is given the task of providing the state with a more stable foundation than it held in the past. In addition, the politics of the state largely determine collective identity: it must be 'tribal,' as this term is understood today in India.

This understanding of 'tribalism' is the result of interactions between Sikkim and the Indian government, both ideological and political, and not the result of a hypothetical isolation of Sikkim from the rest of India.[58] The understanding of 'tribe' has been borrowed from the Indian administration; the 'identity' allocated by the central State is then claimed as Sikkim's own. Furthermore, the new Sikkimese identity is today promoted by the state; and the new 'people of Sikkim' that has been created by the 'politics of tribalisation,' attempting to include the former 'Nepalese' into the category of indigenous Sikkimese, is presented as a way for Sikkim to 'preserve what was left' despite the merger (see again Kazi's quotation above), and thus as a condition for Sikkim to be part of India. This politics is, finally, a project for constructing a Sikkimese nation that can be integrated into the Indian nation through the strategic deployment of ethnic difference.

The exclusion of 'plainsmen' from the Sikkimese nation is not inconsistent here: any creation of identity implies exclusion, and the incorporation of Sikkim into India is achieved by distinguishing the 'Nepalese' from the Hindus in the rest of India in order to prove the former's indigeneity. The promotion of tribalism upholds the exclusion of these Indian Hindus, allowing the 'Sikkimese Nepalese' to undertake more tribal practices than more orthodox Hinduism would allow. The practices of the Bhotias, which are Buddhist and thus more perceptibly close to nature, according to a common understanding of the Indian tribal policy, are then monopolised as representative of the Sikkimese national identity, an identity that now encompasses the 'Nepalese.'

The Ravangla Panglhabsol ritual is a 'neo-Panglhabsol' because it retains the ancient elements of the ritual but allocates them a new role. The ritual is no longer concerned with enhancing the well being of the country as

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58   As for example stated in Arora (2006).

a politico-religious unit by worshipping the mountain gods through the intermediaries of the king and his priests, but is instead intended to stage the tribalism of its practitioners and the ethnic unity of Sikkim, ultimately enacting the politics of the Sikkim government. Indeed, it does not merely aim at expressing tribalism and unity, but also at enacting these concepts, at bringing them to life. This analysis thus supports Shneiderman's argument that 'ethnicity emerges in a process of ritualization' (2009: 3). The ritual is a space constructing representations rather than expressing them (in this respect, see also Moore and Myerhoff 1977), a space that gives life to the main aim of the actual government: it creates a new 'people of Sikkim', joined in tribalism and integrated into India.

The 'neo-Panglhabsol' converts the discourse of interethnic divisions and the contested integration of Sikkim into India into one of the unity of the people of Sikkim within the Indian nation. It thus enacts the government's politics by disguising the imperfections of the reservation system and representing them as advantages, thereby accomplishing the Indian dream of incorporating its periphery into the nation. This process relies upon references to the divine, and is therefore more efficient than lay celebrations as an enactment of government politics; but sports tournaments and the sale of so-called cultural objects are additional endeavours intended to convince Sikkim's inhabitants of the government's success in providing wealth and protecting Sikkim's cultural identity, by placing the state in the market economy and developing tourism.

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