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**IMAGINED PLACES: POLITICS AND NARRATIVES IN A DISPUTED INDO-TIBETAN BORDERLAND**

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**IMAGINED PLACES: POLITICS AND NARRATIVES IN A DISPUTED INDO-  
TIBETAN BORDERLAND**

By

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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of  
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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology  
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## ABSTRACT

### IMAGINED PLACES: POLITICS AND NARRATIVES IN A DISPUTED INDO-TIBETAN BORDERLAND

By Swargajyoti Gohain

My dissertation concerns cultural politics and place-making in the “Monyul corridor”, a Tibetan Buddhist cultural region comprising of Tawang and West Kameng districts in west Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. For nearly three centuries, Monyul was a “vassal state” of Tibet, and the Monpas, as the communities inhabiting this region are collectively known, were part of a trans-Himalayan trade and pilgrimage circuit. But following a colonial boundary in 1914, the fall of the Tibetan state in 1951, and especially after the boundary war between India and China in 1962, Monyul was integrated into India. Border passages between Monyul and Tibet were closed, and Monpas became “scheduled tribes” of India, entitled to affirmative action benefits. Since 2003, the Monpas, under the leadership of Tsona Gontse Rimpoche, influential religious leader and former member of the Arunachal Pradesh state cabinet, have been demanding autonomy for Monyul within Arunachal Pradesh, invoking the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. In my dissertation, using “anti-essentialist” theories of space, I show how new ideas of community among the Monpas emerging through their politics of local autonomy, discourses of transnational origin and migration, and struggles over language and renaming, construct Monyul as a Himalayan Buddhist place, even as such spatial imaginations are consistently undercut by internal oppositions as well as external pressures of region and Monyul’s status as a disputed border. Theoretically, I have been influenced by spatial theorists (e.g. Massey 1994) drawing on the ideas of philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, as well as by anthropologists and historians (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Scott 2009, Van Schendel 2002, 2005) who have considered how displaced and marginal peoples articulate relations to place. By merging spatial theories and the scholarship on border, my work increases ethnographic understanding of the negotiations forced on people living in disputed border regions; and how these find expression in their politics and everyday practices.

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I owe an intellectual debt to Willem Van Schendel, professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, whose work on borders and place and space guided many of my own reflections on place-making, and who, to my great delight, agreed to be an external member of my dissertation committee and provided invaluable feedback. I am indebted to Toni Huber, professor of Tibetan Studies at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University, who mentored me during my DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) fellowship period in Berlin during January-April 2013, for his generosity, scholarly inputs, and for sharing many interesting ideas and information about Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh.

Many people have asked me why I chose to work in Monyul. However, one's choice of fieldwork site is overdetermined by so many factors that to construct a coherent narrative justifying this choice is a difficult task. The narrative I use is that I "was sent there". Between 2004 and 2006, when I was working as research assistant to sociologist Patricia Uberoi at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, the euphoria of the Look East Policy and border trade was at its peak in India. Professor Uberoi was interested in sociological data for the BCIM (Bangladesh-

China-India-Myanmar) initiative for cross-border cooperation between the four countries carried out on Track II diplomatic stage, and she sent me to conduct a pilot survey on local opinion regarding the reopening of cross-border trade routes in Monyul. During this first trip to Monyul, I was impressed by the vivid images of movement and circulation that narratives of border trade invoked; and when I had to decide on a project for my Ph.D., I kept returning to Monyul as a fieldwork location. I am thankful to Patricia Uberoi for sending me on the mission that eventually determined my anthropological location, as well as for her constant encouragement of my work. I would also like to express my gratitude to former teachers in Delhi University, especially Rabindra Ray and Alka Mavlankar, whose kindness and mentorship helped me grow as a student. Thanks also goes to the Wenner-Gren Foundation, U.S.A., and the Institute of Critical International Studies, the Anthropology Department and the Laney Graduate School at Emory University for funding various phases of my dissertation research; to Emory Women's Club for supporting a phase of dissertation write-up, and the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) for funding a research visit to the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin in spring 2013.

I thank my family for standing by me in all decisions that I have taken in my life – my father, a public intellectual whose brilliance and scholarship have been a constant motivation; my courageous mother, who has been the “rock” in my life; Atreyee, my sister, also writing her Ph.D. dissertation, who patiently listened to my many complaints and talked me out of my darkest moods as I struggled through creative blocks; Siddhartha, my brother-in-law, for brotherly advice on matters personal and professional; and Jiya, my little niece, for providing moments of comic relief during periods of dissertation-distress. I thank my husband, Mridupawan, for being there for me. A committed physicist himself, he not only understood and withstood the challenges, mostly of physical distance, that anthropological fieldwork and writing bring to marriage, but also freely dispensed with moral boosts and technological expertise whenever I needed them most in his unflappable way.

I am deeply obliged to my friends in Arunachal Pradesh for their help without which this dissertation would not have materialized. H.E. Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, Yeshe Pema, Dr Sakya, and college professors, Leki Norbu, Tashi Phuntsok and Dr B.N. Jha in Bomdila, Phunchu Namje and Namang Tsering in Dirang, and Guru Rinpoche, Gelong Sangey Leta, Phurpa Lhamu, David Sangtam, Sonam Tsering, Ngawang, Padmashri Thubten Phunsok, Tashi Khandu (Kitpi village), Lama Nyima Don, Rinchin Norbu, Pema, and K.N. Damo in Tawang were instrumental in providing leads and facilitating contacts for fieldwork and fuelling important ideas for my dissertation. A special note of thanks for Phurpa Lhamu (and her wonderful family and friends) and Yeshe Pema for often creating for me an atmosphere of such conviviality that fieldwork seemed to be an extended visit to a friend's place. I have also not forgotten my several other informants who contributed to this dissertation in sundry little ways, and whose names will come up as the chapters progress.

I cannot end the acknowledgements page without putting in a note about Emory University's library resources. If anthropological fieldwork is a social and socializing project, dissertation writing is very often a solitary exercise – painful and laborious and yet rewarding and rejuvenating; and the space *where* the writing is done bears on *how* the writing is done. I will always remember with appreciation the friendly library staff at Emory University's Woodruff Library for speedily processing my innumerable library and inter-library loan requests, and especially, Marty Ike, for his prompt responses to my requests for the library office in which I spent days writing up pages of what eventually took form as my dissertation.

And to all those whom I may have inadvertently omitted from this special page, I say, my thanks will never be far away.



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## Chapter 1

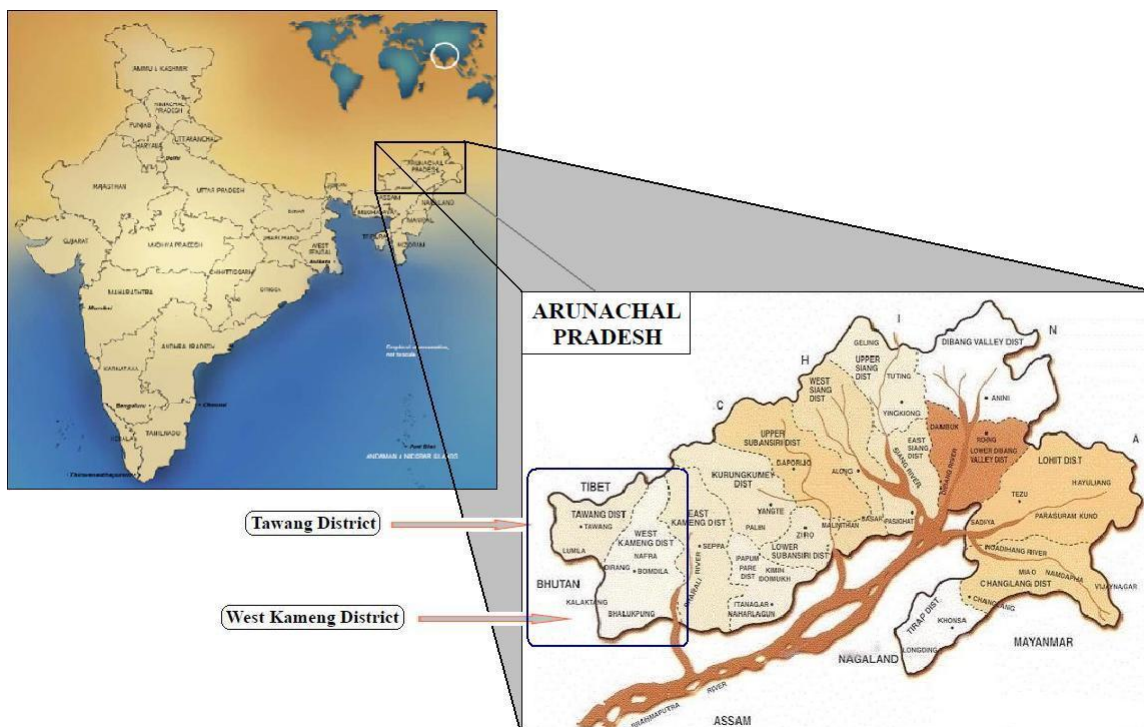
### ***INTRODUCTION*** **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

.....as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become ever more salient [and] it is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities....In such a world, it becomes even more important to train an anthropological eye on processes of construction of place and homeland by mobile and displaced people (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 39).

Zemithang is the last settlement in Tawang district, Northeast India, before one reaches the India-Tibet border. In the not too distant past, Zemithang, where the borders of Tibet, Bhutan and India intersect, acted as the conduit for a triangular trans-Himalayan trade. Today, Zemithang constitutes a rural backwater – one of the least developed areas of Tawang in infrastructural and educational terms. Ngawang Chottan, a village headman in Zemithang (local pron. Zemathang), laments, “After 1959 when the [Indo-Tibetan] border was closed, this became a peripheral area (*kona kona ho gaya*). Earlier it used to be a central place (*main jaga*) for carrying out trade”. In gloomy weather, Zemithang takes on attributes of a “Sleepy Hollow”, a visual impression that is repeated in several places throughout the district of which Zemithang is part. This is Tawang, a border district in west Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, described by an Indian news reporter as “a land that the rest of the world has all but forgotten” (Ramesh: 2006).

The vignette above summons images of a forlorn, forsaken place, where nothing happens. But this is not a place as “forgotten” as we are led to believe, and indeed, cannot be, for Tawang and its adjacent district, West Kameng, together constitute a disputed tract in a prolonged boundary conflict between India and China. With a mountainous topography that inhibits easy access notwithstanding, Tawang and West Kameng are high on the security agenda of the Indian nation-state, proven by the numbers and density of the military population there. The

representation of Zemithang as a forgotten periphery is at odds with its representation as a “central” conduit for trade and a militarized zone.



### 1.1 Inset map of Arunachal Pradesh in relation to India

Image created by Mridupawan Deka

In summer 2004, I had visited Bomdila, a small town serving as the district headquarters of West Kameng, which is 165 km from Guwahati, my home town in Assam in Northeast India. Guwahati is a bustling, if haphazardly organized city in the plains, and after my 9 hour long drive up narrow, uneven mountain roads to an altitude of 8000 feet, I was tired but captivated by what appeared to be the serene, spiritual and unspoiled beauty of a *remote* border town. It took me another 8 hours of travel after a night’s halt, to reach Tawang, which is a further 185 km northward from Bomdila, at an altitude of approximately 10,000 feet. Today, with several trips and fieldwork months behind me, I am able to reflect on, and be reflexive about these first impressions. Indeed, I ask myself, what makes something or someplace remote? Is remote that

which is physically distant from urban centers or the centers of state administration, or is it but one quality of space?

It is my intention here to write about spaces and place-making; about remoteness, marginality, and peripherality, but also about conduits, connections, and transnationality. I began with the trope of remoteness to highlight a particular kind of marginality imposed on the people who inhabit the borders of the nation. But remoteness is not a fixed character of a landscape. How can a once frequented thoroughfare, as Ngawang recounts, be seen as an isolated corner on the national map, and how do current cultural politics further construct place?

According to Kim Dovey (2009: 3), a large part of what distinguishes space from place is that place has an intensity that connects sociality to spatiality in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> If *space* is given meaning and transformed into *place* through discourses, practices and valuations attached to the former by different actors (Cresswell 2004), then my purpose in this work is to trace such place-making endeavours. I examine how different constructions and imaginations attach to a particular space through discourses and practices of social actors, depending on how the actors position or locate themselves within wider social relations, and from where they call upon the images and associations. The same region could even be two different places in the minds of the same actors so that Drolma of Dirang could conceive of herself as inhabiting two places that are quite contrary in features, simultaneously remote and vibrant, disempowered and potent, depending on which place-frame she is identifying with or positioning herself at that moment. Engaging both historical and contemporary narratives, I focus on place-making projects of the colonial state as well as contemporary projects of place-making in Mon-yul, the area of my ethnographic work.

The Mon-yul (henceforth, Monyul) border, a contact zone between Bhutan, Tibet and Northeast India, presently consists of Tawang and West Kameng districts of western Arunachal Pradesh, a state on India's Northeastern border with China. *Mon* is a Tibetan word meaning

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed exposition on the difference between space and place from a geographical perspective, see Cresswell (2004).

lowland and *yul* roughly means settlement; and Mon-pa (henceforth, Monpa) are the lowlanders or people of Mon. This nomenclature was initially used by Tibetans to refer to Tibetan Buddhist populations distributed in the lower Himalayan altitudes in the outlying areas of Tibet, but is now restricted to the ethnic minorities settled in Monyul. For three centuries, the Monpas were under Tibetan political and spiritual control, sharing ties of trade and religion with adjacent Bhutan and Tibet. In 1914, a colonial boundary divided Monyul from Tibet; but as the British did not extend regular administration here, Tibet continued to exercise *de facto* control over Monpas even after India gained independence from British rule. The first Indian political post was established in Tawang in 1951. However, in the wake of a border war between India and China in 1962, cross-border passages with Tibet were militarily closed off and Monpas were reoriented towards the Indian state.

Other Tibetan Buddhist populations of the Himalayan region were similarly dislocated, not through physical relocation but rather through re-articulation within the nation-state of India. Although always peripheral communities even with respect to the Tibetan center during Tibetan rule, these populations now became doubly peripheral as they were juxtaposed against largely non-Buddhist Indian milieus and became enclave territories in mostly border outposts while also losing access to trade routes and other avenues of exchange with Tibet. Ladakhis in India's northern frontier, for example, found themselves part of the union territory of Jammu & Kashmir, while Monpas were absorbed into the regional networks of Arunachal Pradesh, a frontier state in Northeast India, which till 1987 was designated as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

Monyul, the traditional homeland of the Monpas, became two districts or administrative sub-divisions within Arunachal Pradesh. Since 2003, however, led by Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, the charismatic Tibetan Buddhist monk and abbot of Gaden Rabge Ling monastery in West Kameng, a section of Monpas have begun demands for a local administration that would be autonomous of the Arunachal Pradesh state administration. They do not want to territorially secede from Arunachal Pradesh but draw on the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution to

propose a political unit within Arunachal Pradesh, consisting of the Monyul region, which would be called Mon Autonomous Region, and would be administered by a council of locally elected representatives functioning independently of the state administration. Proponents of this demand argue that local political management would enable Monyul's representatives to implement much-needed steps for development and cultural preservation in a way that a centrally- or state-run administration cannot.

The demand for a local council for the Mon region advances a view of locality as including only those who live within Monyul and obscures other imaginations of Mon. Its officially expressed political contours include *non-Monpas* who live in the region, but exclude *non-locals* – those living outside Monyuls' local spaces. Yet, in other contexts, Mon is much more than its image as projected in political statements for local autonomy. It is not simply a political unit subsumable in administrative procedures, but charts new kinds of trans-local community based on the idea of Mon as a Tibetan Buddhist place.

In my dissertation, I focus on place-making in Monyul, which includes the spatial constructions and representations that accompanied subsequent regime transitions from Tibetan to British colonial to the postcolonial Indian state; as well as emerging politics and ideas of place in the present period, promoted by an influential Tibetan Buddhist clergy.

Mon is the term around which the emergent spatial imaginations are mostly framed (although, the term Himalaya too is selectively used, as I will show) but they form not one, but several, often contradictory places, thereby preventing a singular cartographical representation of Mon. *Mon is a concept, an idea put forward to resist current marginality and to construct community.* But stemming as it does from a border location that is the subject of a dispute, this construction has to confront the “cartographic anxieties” (the excessive concern to keep the nation's borders intact) of the Indian nation (Krishna 1994). Further, one of its imagined configuration – as trans-Himalayan space – is in tension with the Monpas' regional membership in Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, the different spatial imaginations in and of Monyul are not given

but shift and shrink to accommodate the pressures of region and border. Thus, Mon is a negotiated identity. In my dissertation, I will attempt to show the claims and conflicts surrounding Mon, as I trace its variegated folds, using the theoretical framework given by thinkers on space, place, borders and identity.

In my dissertation, I privilege the rubric of “place” above “identity” – territorial, regional, national, or transnational – because of the problems associated with the concept of identity. Scholars who have critiqued “identity” for its implications of homogeneity and for silencing internal differences (Hall 1996), have also proposed alternative terms, such as “interpellation” (Hall 1985) or “identification” (Cooper 2005, Hall 1996). But these are heavily loaded terms. In contrast, the notion of place as multi-vocal, which I follow, avoids the problems of identity without accumulating too much semantic baggage. The second reason why place serves a better function than identity is because articulations of the latter in Mon also have a spatial correspondent. But even though I theorize place, I also recognize that place and identity (“place-identities”) go hand in hand.

Place and identity are not separate from each other in my analysis, for places, in the sense that I use the term, are *embodied identifications*. I owe this insight to Jonathan Boyarin’s formulation of “embodied memory” (1994), which he explains is the understanding of memory as not being superorganic but as intricately bound up with identity for both “collective memory” and “collective identity” result from inter-subjective practices of signification and are not fixed but constantly re-created (Boyarin 1994: 23). Dovey (2009) references Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* – embodied dispositions – to arrive at a similar notion of place, although place as habitus is less useful in understanding how place-identities constantly change.<sup>2</sup> Places embody identifications, which in turn, accrue from the *social relations and networks* in which individuals find

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<sup>2</sup> Habitus, in Bourdieu’s conception, is not cognitively understood but is internalized. It is the social order which inscribes itself on bodies. The concept of habitus is, therefore, a theory of power, for it explains how social divisions and hierarchies are reproduced. It is less useful in understanding structural change (Dovey 2009: 33).



themselves. This, of course, does not mean to say that one should be blind to attempts to *fix* memories and identities, but to be cognizant of their mutability.

Each chapter of this dissertation foregrounds one kind of spatial trope such as locality, peripherality, separation, region, or transnational connections, each arising from the historical and wider social relations of and current politics in Monyul: however, these tropes are fluid. In other words, locality is not always a pristine space, connections are compromised, separation is incomplete, peripheries are contested and regional obligations conflict with other affiliations. Thus, in depicting the different spatial representations of Monyul, I attempt to resist closure and avoid being reductive, and instead, highlight those tendencies, oppositional or internally fracturing, that limit or undermine the dominance of a singular spatial construction.

### **Imagined places**

My dissertation draws on theories of space and place that are influenced by the thought of philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991), and takes off from the work of his interlocutors, mostly cultural geographers (e.g. Keith and Pile 1993, Massey 1992, 1993, 1994), who have written about place, space, identity, and locality. I have been inspired as well by historical ethnographies of marginal and border peoples in South and South East Asia (Scott 2009, Van Schendel 2002, 2005). I have also selectively utilized perspectives from cultural theorists (e.g. Hall 1996, Said 1979, 1993, Williams 1977), especially when I have sought the embodiment and articulation of place in narrative media, in narrations of origins, in memory and legend, and in the politics of identity and homeland. But my initial theoretical ideas of space and place were guided by the anthropological insights brought together in the volume *Culture, Power, Place* edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997).

While the contributors to this volume, published more than a decade ago, did not centrally engage with the works of Henri Lefebvre, the methodological suggestions they offer build on, and continue to resonate with the concerns of an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars,

cultural geographers included, who work on theories of space/place. Gupta and Ferguson begin by challenging the traditional anthropological conception of local culture as a bounded unit<sup>3</sup> (the conventional isomorphism between culture, power and place is adequately captured by Eric Wolf's [1982] analogy of "billiard balls" to describe the anthropological tendency to treat each culture as discrete entities having no relation with each other). They argue that the local is not a pristine, inviolate space, but produced through interconnections, and that this conception is a product of a particular mode of representation that disregards the presence of external (colonial or neo-colonial) influences in ethnographic portraits of the "local". Today, research into how refugees, exiles, and mobile populations unmoored from their national base (e.g. Appadurai 1996, Glick Schiller 2005, Malkki 1995, Rouse 1991) think or draw associations with place have cast into relief the unboundedness of "local" culture, people and place. In the current world, increasingly interconnected through physical and "virtual migration" (Aneesh 2006), locality becomes even more elusive as it is not just international migrants and refugees for whom the link between culture and place becomes tenuous, but also populations who do not move and yet experience the growing cosmopolitan transformations of familiar locales.

However, Gupta and Ferguson's aim in this volume was not simply to criticize anthropology's pre-occupation with the culture-place bounded entity, but also to call for *an interrogation of space* itself, which for long has simply constituted the blank site for ethnographic work. Going beyond Durkheimian theories of social space as being collectively constituted, Gupta and Ferguson ask (1997: 4) how spaces are constructed as a locality by relations and structures of power. (In seeking to interrogate established categories of knowledge through a critical epistemology, Gupta and Ferguson were in tune with other critical perspectives around the 1990s such as the Princeton based Culture/Power/History series [Dirks *et al* 1994], influenced by

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<sup>3</sup> While critical reflections about the one-on-one, exclusive relation between a place and a people (and their culture) were not revolutionary within anthropology in the 1990s, having been in the horizon for quite some time in various forms (e.g. Rosaldo 1988, Wolf 1982), they were systematically outlined by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson in the volume, *Culture, Power, Place* (1997).

Foucauldian excavation methodology). The corresponding methodological step is to direct attention to the historical and contemporary contexts that produce a particular place and give it its peculiar character, and to study cultural change as situated within interconnected spaces. In my dissertation chapters on separation and periphery, I use this optic in understanding how Monyul was historically produced as a margin through colonial practices of segregating frontier areas from mainstream spaces – a policy that is continued by the postcolonial Indian state, albeit for different purposes.

That the local is not really “local” but a constructed place which both shapes and is given shape by global forces is now standard wisdom even in undergraduate textbooks<sup>4</sup>. But *Culture, Power, Place* goes one step further to ask how are spaces contested and reconstructed. So, while drawing on Foucault, Gupta and Ferguson go beyond Foucauldian thought in their argument. In Foucauldian terms, one might say that if subject position is the self-governing tendencies or self-knowledge within individuals that make them conform to an identity without being coerced through any external agency (Foucault 1994: 130), then national subjects, for instance, should be those who have successfully assumed a political identity linking them with a particular national territory. However, like other authors who have argued contra Foucault,<sup>5</sup> Gupta and Ferguson stress that it is not enough to show how specific rationalities of power create and maintain the subject effect, but one must also show how subjectivities are open to manipulation and subversion. They borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) terms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization<sup>6</sup> –without explicitly engaging the former’s post-structuralist conceptual

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<sup>4</sup> See Jack David Eller, *Cultural Anthropology: Global forces, Local lives*, Routledge (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars (e.g. De Certeau 1984, Scott 2009, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003) have since offered a corrective to Foucault by showing how there might be scope for creativity even amidst constriction. For example, Michel de Certeau (1984) shows how various street cultures might provide the liberatory face to an oppressive structure through clandestine, tactical, dispersed and makeshift popular practices (Harvey 1989).

<sup>6</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, dimensions of territorialization/deterritorialization/reterritorialization are those processes by which social and spatial boundaries are inscribed/erased/reinscribed. Territory is the stabilization of an “assemblage”, a whole whose properties emerge from the interconnections between its parts (e.g. family is territorialized in a house, a corporation in an office, a community in a neighborhood

framework – to direct attention to alternative constructions of space and the processes whereby space is invested with meaning, values, sentiment and affect. They explain deterritorialization as narratives or actions resulting from migration, exile or global financial and cultural flows, which challenge the link between people and their cultural and political homelands; and reterritorialization to refer to new modes of place-based identities that follow, or emerge despite of, processes of deterritorialization, but which do not necessarily conform to modernist spatial imaginations.

The various chapters in Gupta and Ferguson's volume address the different ways in which people imagine, invoke, or contest taken-for-granted spaces, by engaging a variety of conceptual tools. These include analysis of memories (e.g. Malkki 1997, Rofel 1997), media (Peters 1997), exilic national sentiment (Malkki 1997), transnational practices (Gupta 1997), as well as the notion of "bi-focality" (Gupta 1997, Peters 1997) or a simultaneous attention to both local and global forces shaping locality. For example, Lisa Rofel (1997) shows how spaces of modernity in the Chinese silk factory separate individual workers through positions of hierarchy, shift work and stress on individual productivity; yet, these are transgressed by workers who draw on their memories of previous spatial arrangements during the Cultural Revolution to resist managerial authority and create spaces of interaction within the factory. The various chapters of the volume indicate how ethnographic analysis might tap into affective processes that both inspire and aspire to ideas of spatial community. As Akhil Gupta argues, "we need to pay attention to the structures of feeling that bind space, time, and memory in the production of location", and the latter may mean geographical units larger or smaller than nations or that cross-cut national boundaries (1997: 197).

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etc.) but it is always subject to deterritorialization; deterritorialized elements are recombined once again into new assemblages through a process of reterritorialization (Dovey 2009: 17, 18)

This theoretical suggestion is especially helpful for me in understanding contemporary social processes among Monpas that indicate distinct spatial imaginings. Using *Culture, Power, Place* as a methodological signpost, I attempt to theorize place-making in contemporary Monyul.

### **Reorientation and marginalization**

Following the fall of the Tibetan state in 1951 (Goldstein 1989),<sup>7</sup> and subsequent India-China border tensions in 1962, communities inhabiting the Monyul region experienced a significant reorientation. They were not physically displaced, that is, forced to leave their homeland behind and resettle in a foreign land as a result of the border conflict, unlike internally displaced peoples (IDPs) within India – populations who are affected, and displaced from their homeland by ethnic or communal riots.<sup>8</sup> Yet, without being physically transplanted, they bear some effects of an “uprooted” population. Firstly, with the military closure of traditional cross-border passages between Tibet and Monyul, Monpas no longer had access to previous trade or pilgrimage routes. Once itinerant travelers traversing routes of commerce and religion, they are now “grounded”, and hence paradoxically “uprooted” from their old routes. A parallel situation is that of Tibetan Buddhist Brokpas of west Sikkim who used to practice seasonal transhumance but lost access to previous routes when the border war between India and China put a stop to their mobility (Arora 2010). I argue that for cross-border yak-herders, traders and pilgrims, familiar, well-traversed routes constituted roots, and denial of access to these routes following the 1962 border war led to the uprooting of former mobile populations.

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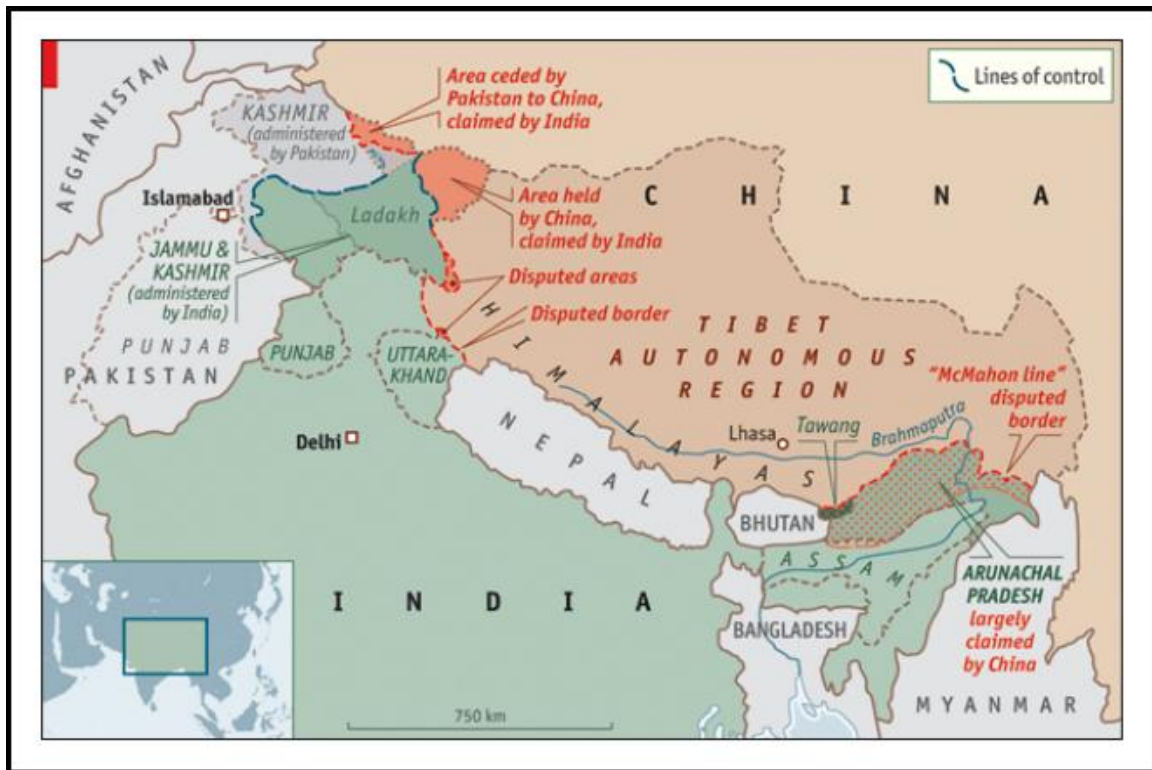
<sup>7</sup> Melvyn Goldstein regards October 1951, and the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement between China and Tibet as marking the end of the “*de facto* independent lamaist state” (Goldstein 1989: 823). However, the old monastic system continued for some more years until the Dalai Lama and his key officials fled to exile in India in March 1959, followed by thousands of Tibetans.

<sup>8</sup> In India, internal displacement has often been the consequence of inter-group conflict caused by colonial methods of labor transplantation, where groups were forcefully moved from one part of the country and resettled in other parts during the colonial period, but in the postcolonial period found themselves at the receiving end of the hostility of indigenous populations in the region where they had made their new homes. Such groups are thus reduced to a fate of eternal nomadism, illustrated in Siddhartha Deb’s *Point of Return* (2004), a powerful fictional account of the nomadic lives of East Bengali Hindus in Shillong, North East India.

Secondly, the Monpa communities were forced away from former circuits of commerce, kinship and religion, and re-oriented towards new economic and administrative networks that were very different from those associated with the Tibetan monastic or “lamaist state” (Goldstein 1989). Although, Monpas became subjects of the British colonial state after the McMahon Line boundary was drawn in 1914, unofficially they remained within Tibetan networks. But after 1951, they were absorbed into hitherto unfamiliar regional and national circuits. The new centers became Tezpur, the nearest plains city, Guwahati, the capital of Assam, and Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, while New Delhi is the distant, often unseen, seat of power, more inaccessible perhaps than Lhasa was in older times. Previously divided into various territorial settlements (*tsho*), different Monpa communities were given a common administrative identity as a “scheduled tribe” – beneficiaries of positive discrimination, and a regional membership in a common administrative unit called the North East Frontier Agency, which became the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. As one of 26 officially recognized scheduled tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas’ regional identity is defined largely by their common documented “tribal” identity, although within Arunachal Pradesh, Monpas are marked by other groups as being different given their Tibetan Buddhist traditions and former relations with Tibet.

Other Tibetan Buddhist communities in India’s northern and northeastern borderlands are similarly located *vis a vis* their regional circuits. Incorporated into diverse state and regional frameworks as Tibetan Buddhist minorities in post-independence India, many of these border communities harbor a perception of marginalization in relation to the cultural milieu in which they find themselves (Arora 2010, McHugh 2006, Van Beek 2000). Their cultural and very often, physiognomic similarities with Tibetans frequently result in other communities mistaking them for, or sometimes unjustly labeling them as Tibetans, and thereby, as refugees situated outside the national order (Malkki 1995, 1997). A few years ago, when I was working in Delhi, Drolma (a pseudonym), a young co-worker belonging to a minority Tibetan Buddhist community in Uttaranchal, a state in north India, complained to me about her marginality in Delhi where people

often took her to be Tibetan (and hence, not Indian). She added defensively that her community did not take part in the demonstrations by Tibetans for a Free Tibet, although in many other respects they followed Tibetan Buddhist customs and rituals.



**1.2. The disputed border territories in the India-China border conflict**

Courtesy: *The Economist*, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

For most of the Tibetan Buddhist communities in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands living an “enclave existence” amidst non-Tibetan Buddhist populations, cultural belonging and citizenship are not givens but contested issues. As in the case of Drolma cited above, these border subjects may seek to deflect further marginalization by striking a position of disassociation from Tibet, given that within India, Tibetans are marked as refugees or non-citizens. Geographical distance from Indian administrative centers as well as cultural distance from their Hindu, Muslim, or Christian neighbors have created a sense of dislocation for India’s Tibetan Buddhist minorities.

I argue that the reorientation of Tibetan Buddhists of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands has resulted in new spatial imaginations, or reterritorialization (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). If we consider the removal of Monpas from their former Tibetan circuits as deterritorialization, then the new, or more precisely, emergent spatial imaginations among Monpas manifest through discourses of autonomy and narrative constructions, may be termed reterritorialization. But the reterritorialized forms are quite distinct from the previous forms.

As studies of diaspora and exiles suggest, displacement serves to arouse new, creative ways of imagining place. For instance, in Glick Schiller's (2005) description of Haitian long-distance nationalism, it is blood which defines the tie between the Haitian diaspora and their homeland, while in Liisa Malkki's (1995, 1997) account of Hutu camp refugees in Tanzania, the condition of exile allows the former to construct a Burundi nation of Hutus uncontaminated by Tutsi interlopers. In both these cases, although homeland is the memory of the place remembered that serves as the most powerful symbol of unification for a displaced people, the relation with home is constructed differently by people in different settings. Although both Malkki and Glick Schiller were addressing the plight of physically displaced peoples, their argument helps in understanding empirical processes in Monyul. Monpa communities suffered a sense of dislocation as a result of their successive shifts through different political regimes (Tibetan, British and Indian), the border war as well as their eventual integration (as periphery) into new politico-economic centers; consequently, a local monk leadership in selective collaboration with the political leadership are now able to harness and channel these feelings of disempowerment among mostly the educated, professional classes into support for Mon autonomy.

Yet, contemporary spatial imaginings in Monyul do not have a fixed or physically mappable referent all the time, but constantly mutate into other shapes or fold back onto each other with each process of imagination or articulation. The Mon that emerges in certain discourses and practices has a quite peculiar shape, stretching outward, archipelago-like, at times to include Buddhist communities scattered across the Himalayas, including Tibet, but at times,



contained to the Monyul districts. In my dissertation, hence, *I attempt to theorize a spatial identity which, firstly, is not formed by politically continuous units, and secondly, is a fluid identity with flexible spatial contours.*

While the insights provided in *Culture, Power, Place* (1997) are valuable for understanding these spatial imaginations, they have to be developed further in relation to contemporary processes in Monyul. Therefore, I expand these insights by culling from the observations of spatial theorists, whom Gupta and Ferguson address, but do not sufficiently engage with. But before discussing the spatial theorists, I engage with some other important scholars who contribute in their own ways to ideas about non-conventional relations between people and place.

### **Non-contiguous spaces and imagined geographies**

In his now famous, and rather controversial work on Zomia, James Scott (2009) conceptualizes the highlands of Asia, from the western Himalayan Range through the Tibetan Plateau and all the way to the lower end of the peninsular Southeast Asian highlands, as a transnational entity significantly distinct from the usual area divisions of Asia, that is, Central (Inner), South, East, and Southeast (Michaud 2010: 187). He calls it Zomia, a term coined by historian, Willem Van Schendel (2002). Scott's notion of Zomia is slightly different from the way in which it was originally used by Van Schendel as the collective term for dispersed, mostly hill dwelling minorities living in the highlands of different Southeast Asian states. Van Schendel's term was deliberately imprecise for although it rested loosely on geographical features, it was defined more by political criteria of marginality and exclusion (Michaud 2010: 203). Van Schendel's objective was mainly a statement against the area studies framework that blocks off world regions and arbitrarily constructs cores and peripheries. His notion of Zomia is therefore more of a critical tale

of area studies, for he demonstrates how non-contiguous, peripheral regions can be shown to rest on certain common features, and thereby, colloquially speaking, stands area studies on its head.<sup>9</sup>

Scott's notion of Zomia includes certain areas that Van Schendel left out, although it overlaps with another geographical category termed by academics as the "South East Asian Massif" (Michaud 2010: 203). Attempting a political history of these non-state spaces, Scott argues that these hill populations are not to be understood as backward tribes left behind by an advancing civilization, but as people articulating a political stance – that is, rejection of state rule – by taking refuge in areas that are more or less inaccessible to state agents. Arguing for the recognition of Zomia as a historical entity, Scott shows that while conventional divisions between hills and valleys have always invested the former with backwardness and lag and inflated the latter as repositories of civilization, such conceptualizations are a-historical; they do not take into account the fact that hill-dwellers may have willingly chosen to remain outside "civilization" or rather, outside state spheres, in order to be more free of tax, surveillance or corvee labour. He reinterprets the hill-valley distinction as being the latter's choice in favour of freedom over state governance, manifest in periodic flights away from state, and thus civilizational centers. Hill peoples, who are frequently constructed as the barbarian other to a valley-based civilization, are thus actually a "state-effect" formed by populations evading state imposed taxes or administration.

Scott has been criticized, despite the just cause and academic allure of a concept such as Zomia, primarily for the fact that ethnographic observations do not bear out his thesis. Most populations that he included in Zomia had at various times collaborated with, rather than rebelled against, the state (Michaud 2010). Further, Scott's analysis tends towards mono-causality, reducing virtually everything in Zomia to a state-effect, and not leaving room for other factors that may have led to population settlements in high altitude areas.

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<sup>9</sup> Van Schendel 2002; also personal communication, July 2012

However, the projects of both Scott and Van Schendel interrogate the taken-for-grantedness of spaces and in this regard they coincide with the argument made by Gupta and Ferguson. Although Scott might have extrapolated too much from various ethnographic literature, his thesis that remote hinterlands were not always so, but are spaces created through the flight of state subjects to peripheries challenges conventional modes of understanding the spaces of nation-states. Similarly, Van Schendel questions the validity of spatial ordering in the academic disciplines through his critique of area studies divisions. In my reading, both these scholars make significant interventions in seeing the relations between people and places in a different light.

The second important point to note for purposes of this dissertation is that both Van Schendel and Scott's concepts can be seen as attempts to understand place and identity in a non-contiguous territorial frame for they describe a political *positioning* that gives rise to a distinct spatial identity. Thus, in explaining what makes Zomia a region, Scott elaborates the common basis that unites these territorially disconnected units. He writes, "Zomia is knitted together as a region not by a political unity which it utterly lacks, but by comparable patterns of diverse hill agriculture, dispersal and mobility, and rough egalitarianism... The signal most distinguishing trait of Zomia *vis a vis* the lowland region it borders is that it is relatively stateless" (2009: 19). The Zomia hypothesis thus, presents an example of scholarly attempts to understand spatial identity that is not dependent on territorial proximity. I identify my work as having a similar enterprise, which is to theorize place-making that is not strictly territorial in the conventional sense. I show how the space of Mon is transformed through practices that have an inter-regional and sometimes transnational reach. Although the space thus formed is not politically continuous, being divided into various provincial units within India, or into different nation-states (e.g. India and Tibet), it highlights a non-territorial basis of place-making.

Thirdly, Scott argues that Zomia is an identity in flux, for in order to remain outside the state's reach, the hill populations have to practice "dissimilation" (2009: 173) or the deliberate positioning of themselves as different or dissimilar to the valley population, as well as

“disaggregation” (Ibid. 209) or constant disbanding so as to avoid state control. He uses the terms, “jelly-fish” (Ibid.) and “shape-shifting” to capture the constantly shifting territorial structure that is Zomia. Here, “one is dealing with molecules which sometimes unify in the form of a vague confederation sometimes, just as easily disaggregate” (Scott 2009: 38). This creative conceptualization is useful in understanding the shifting spaces of Mon in its different and contextual articulations.

Scott’s terms can be used to underscore the similar spatial transformations that occur in various imaginings of Mon, although not in the same way defined for Zomia by Scott. In my conceptualization of the spaces of Mon, I attempt to denaturalize the marginality of border spaces in a way that is similar to the projects of Van Schendel and Scott – and similar in methodological orientation to the goal of Gupta and Ferguson – by showing that the detachment of Monyul from historical networks through the delineation of boundaries naturalized “remoteness” as the defining feature of this border region.

But I go beyond these concepts in two respects; firstly, my analysis concerns the geographical imaginations that are *subjectively* informed, and promoted by the monastic communities, in Monyul. This is not the case with Zomia. As Michaud remarks. “We can also suppose that notions such as Zomia, the Southeast Asian Massif, the Himalayan Massif, or Haute-Asie, have never been needed by the subjects themselves”, and hence, “such an overarching notion as Zomia has never been proposed locally by any of the societies dwelling there customarily” (Michaud 2010: 212). The terrain covered by Zomia consists of populations and areas that are vastly diverse, and the societies that are part of it did not conceive of any unity amongst themselves.

In contrast, *my dissertation attempts to show that the emergent spatial imagination that I foreground is a subjective category, held together by a collaborative, although primarily monastic, vision and program.* Hence, I have also termed it an imaginative/imagined geography (Said 1978) – a representation of space that does not map perfectly onto an empirical space,

although it claims in certain contexts to share identity with the territory of current Monyul. In the various chapters, I show that the imagined place has flexible, *amoebic* contours depending on positioning and strategy – depending on who, for what purpose and in which context, articulates the identity. It has a locus, definitely, which is the current Monyul region of Arunachal Pradesh, but its outer boundaries change shape with the different articulations of it. In discoursing on autonomy, actors articulate a geography that conforms to constitutional definitions of what the autonomous region of Monyul should be, and hence it is inclusive of non-Monpas. In other narrative formats, actors envisage a wider geography where a trans-local Tibetan Buddhist identity takes primacy over a territory-based local identity. These shifting contours, in turn, largely derive from the controversial position of Monyul in the India-China border war, as well as from conflicting regional obligations which influence how actors selectively express or mute their trans-local identifications.

I should note here that I use the word “imagined” as Benedict Anderson does in his study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1991) – not as fabrication or invention, but as projection, and re-invention – of taking something that exists and transfiguring it through the prism of narrative, memory, and practice. A highly influential term in this context has been Edward Said’s imaginative geography (1979). Said uses the term imagined geography to mean imperialist representations about the Orient through archives that allowed Europeans to *see* the Orient through a variety of metaphors (feminine, emasculated, dark, savage). Orientalism as an imagined geography thus was about a specific place but rather than being the place, it was an idea of the place that constructed it alternately as child-like or vicious or sly. This imagined/imaginative geography of the *Orient* was then put to use in colonial methods to subjugate the *Oriental native*. Followers of Said have typically used the concept of imaginative geographies as spatial devices that aid colonial or neo-colonial projects of domination. For example, Derek Gregory (2004) transports this colonial construct to the present by arguing that in occupied Palestine areas of Israel, an imagined geography too is in place.

For Said, however, an imagined geography, once having been imagined, becomes a monolithic entity that enables the power of control through the power of representation. *But my point is that imaginative geographies can be a tool to understand both projects of rule as well as projects of resistance.* In India, the continuing use of the term *terra incognita* for Arunachal Pradesh, including Monyul, is an imaginative geography in that rather than pertaining to an empirical place, it rests on the idea of a place as empty, unknown. But attention to past networks within which Monyul lay gives lie to such constructions of the unknown land. The counter geography that is produced through alternative constructions of place is *also* an imaginative geography. Like dominant geographies, counter-geographies also do not sum up the empirical reality. Further, relations of power are implicated in counter-geographies too. If resistance to essentialist representations arouses a counter-production of space, the latter may also be equally essentialist.

Further, in Saidian conception, while the idea of the Orient may be different from the empirical Orient, the boundaries of the Orient do not change. In contrast, my interest is in the shifting potential and multiple character of imaginative geographies. I do not wish to present the imagined geography of Mon as a homogenous space, but rather as a multivocal and dynamic space. I avoid reifying spatial representations that claim an essentialist identity, and show that Mon can simultaneously answer to several spatial representations: it is at times “indigenous/Indian place”, at others, “Tibetan Buddhist place” and yet others, “Arunachali region”, even though none of these representations are stable or uniform. In each imagination, its boundaries and contours change, depending on who is included and who is excluded, and how the relations between self and other are put forth.

I therefore follow a view of place and locality advanced by some cultural geographers (e.g. Massey 1992, 1994) influenced by Henri Lefebvre (1991), which is the view that place should not be seen as bounded, rooted, static or unified. Just as historians have been the first to enthusiastically adopt methods of critical historiography, and cultural anthropologists have been

the ones to generate internal critiques of culture, geographers have been at the forefront of critical attitudes to fixed forms of space (Massey 1991, Massey 1994: 249).

I should mark as an aside that some theorists of space occasionally cite Foucault's reflections on space (Massey 1994: 249), and especially his statement that while it has been common to see time as life, dialectical, space is seen as dead, fixed (Foucault: 1980: 149). Foucault admits that space, too, could be seen as inflected with power and the discursive study of spatial descriptions and of how objects are implanted, delimited and demarcated would throw into relief processes of power (Ibid). But Foucault notably attaches less importance to theorizing space, in comparison to time, and does not undertake any archaeology or genealogy of spatial discourse. For him, space is a site where power unfolds, and different ways of managing space over time testifies to the evolution of more effective ways to govern. For example, he talks about sovereignty, discipline and security as different modes or economies of power that are exercised over different types of spaces (Foucault 2007). Thus, sovereignty is exercised over a territory from a center, disciplinary power over a deliberately designed space to enable total control and security over spaces that have to take into account the unknown and uncertain (the term he uses is milieu). But his theory of spatial transformations does not have any agent (Harvey 1989). Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" (1967), which are real places that at the same time are socially produced spaces, for they are transformed through ideological projection into something other than themselves (Deshpande 1995), approximates to an extent a notion of transmutable space.<sup>10</sup> However, while Foucault's notion of heterotopias is useful for understanding the social or rather, discursive production of space, it does not explain how space comes to be multiply characterized.

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault's heterotopias are spaces where the inversion and contestation of reality takes place, He writes about heterotopias, "Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (Foucault 1967).

### **Dynamic spaces and spaces of character**

The writings on space by Henri Lefebvre (1991) offer a clearer exposition of the different dimensions of space. Lefebvre has been the inspiration for many cultural geographers, and his work has seen resurgence in contemporary works on place and cities. I provide a brief summary of Lefebvre's main argument before elaborating its interconnections with my own thesis. For Lefebvre (1991), space exists at three levels; the first, he terms, *spatial practice*, which is connected to production and reproduction of spatial forms. A room in an apartment, marketplace, or street corner evokes a particular description, or use, which corresponds to the spatial practice. These are the *experienced* or *perceived* material spatial practices that constitute the daily regularities (Harvey 1989). The second level corresponds to *representations of space*, the signs, codes and knowledge that allow material practices to be talked about, and include academic disciplines of geography, architecture, urban planning (Harvey 1989). These are the *conceived* spaces, and also the official or dominant spaces.

The last corresponds to *representational spaces*, which are the *lived* spaces, and “hence the space of the ‘inhabitants’ and the ‘users’, but also of some artists, and ...writers and philosophers, who describe” (Lefebvre 1991: 39). Long after representations of space, which are abstracted out from the actual use of space, dominate the spatial ethos, representational spaces live on as historical space (note the similarities with Marx's use-value and abstract value of labor). Representational spaces survive despite the visible, dominant official representations; they exist in myths, memories, mental inventions (codes, utopian plans, imaginary landscapes), or art that imagine new meanings and possibilities for spatial practices (Ibid.). While spatial practices are governed by the spatial design of official representations, representational spaces are linked to dominated, clandestine, underground spaces or the lived spaces which are not cohesive or always verbalized but exist and communicate symbolically. These are also the potentially subversive spaces. They form the “affective kernel” in spatial conceptions (Lefebvre 1991: 42).

Lefebvre is careful not to posit a divide between the three, for all coexist, and any given



individual of a social group may move from one to another easily. Representations of space impose a homogeneous code, while representational spaces keep alive the contradictions and contestations that enable change. Lefebvre illustrates this concept through the example of the human body; in the space of the body, practice is the function of organs and members; representations, the various codes that allows us to talk about the body, such as anatomy, physiology, ecology; and representational or lived body is when culture intervenes so that the body cannot be reduced to function alone. Hence, Lefebvre writes, “We are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer generically as ‘social space’” (1991: 86).

It must be noted that in the above example *all of the different codes refer back to the same referent* - the human body. We may also assume that the space of the body is transformed not only by *representations* of it but also through *practice* as well as aspiration, affect or even something like embodied dispositions. Power impinges on space, but so does projections of affect or sentiment that may run contrary to directions indicated by power. Thus, although Lefebvre’s concept of transmutable spaces seems similar to Foucault’s heterotopias (Foucault 1967), it diverges in one important respect. His manner of conceptualizing space allows entry to multiple modes of talking, enacting, and imagining space and not only to the power of representation of dominant sections alone. For this reason, as already mentioned, my concept of imagined geography departs from Edward Said’s notion of imagined geography which is influenced by Foucault. While Said conceives of imagined geography as only a project of rule, my idea of imagined geography allows power as well as its contestation to enter the frame.

Lefebvre’s most incisive observation was that *space implies social relations*. In stating so, Lefebvre tries to do for space what Karl Marx did for commodities. “The successful unmasking of things in order to reveal (social) relationships – such was Marx’s great achievement” (Lefebvre 1991: 81). If Marx (McLellan 2000: 473) successfully showed how the social relation between men assumes the form of a relation between things or commodities in an

economy based on circulation, Lefebvre argues similarly that social relations are encoded in space. It is this particular concept of space as social relations that imaginative geographers such as David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Michael Keith, Steve Pile, and Neil Smith, to name only a few, have drawn on – and then further developed. Building on this particular insight, it is possible to show, for instance, that Monpa spaces – constituted/constitutive of social relations – may change as the configuration of social relations change.

Adopting a Lefebvrian framework in relation to Mon, I argue that in the conception of Mon as remote border or national periphery, we find the dominant spatial representations of Monyul, while the other connotations of Mon that thrive in oral narratives, memory, or popular discourse are the representational spaces. While this brief illustration is intended to demonstrate the usefulness of Lefebvre's analysis, I register certain caveats in using his theoretical framework.

While Lefebvre's materialist conception of space troubles static notions of space, and directs us to differing, yet co-present levels of space, his conception cannot avoid a teleological slant stemming from the relation he draws between space and capitalist development. Lefebvre's space traverses a lineal trajectory wherein the succession of different spaces from natural to absolute to abstract space reaches its apogee in capitalist homogenous space, and within the last, a new space – a differential space is germinated. This particular aspect of Lefebvre's analysis is plumbed (masterfully) by David Harvey in his classic, *Conditions of Postmodernity* (1989) where he draws on Lefebvre's framework to show how conceptions of time and space are created through material practices which also impact social relations and cultural forms. But Harvey also draws on Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) to explain the dialectical relation between spatial practice and representational space. The concept of *habitus* – regulated practices that produce practices which in turn reproduce the objective conditions which produced the *habitus* in the first place – help in understanding the inter-relation between different levels of spaces, i.e. how perception can materially alter spaces and how imagination can affect the represented. Harvey shows how beginning from the age of Enlightenment to the period of modernism to the age of

postmodernism, evolution of spatial constructs and imageries can actually be traced to developments in capitalism. For example, in postmodernism, the emphasis upon ephemerality, collage, fragmentation, and dispersal in philosophical and social thought mimics the conditions of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989: 302).

Harvey's use of Lefebvre suggests that every epoch is dominated by one set of *immanent* meanings of space (Keith and Pile 1993), although this epochal thinking is sometimes undermined by few of Lefebvre's own statements that indicate the multiplicity of space. In other words, in this reading of Lefebvre, a dominant spatial vision may coexist with other unofficial spaces, but the latter's counter-force is not so much emphasized as the former's dominance. When unofficial spaces rise up to meet the dominant spaces in contest, it leads to epochal transition.

However, the implicit historicism of Lefebvre's work (made explicit in Harvey's analysis), should not blind us to the richness of his theorization (Keith and Pile 1993). Lefebvre's notion of representational space has proved especially useful to conceptualize imagined spaces that have transcendental possibilities, which I have explored in various chapters and dwelt at length in the concluding chapter. Therefore, I engage the writings of Lefebvre's interlocutors, geographers Doreen Massey (1992, 1993, 1994) and Michael Keith and Steve Pile (1993) in particular, who have synthesized his important arguments without retaining the teleology of his analysis.

For these geographers, space is plural because it is socially constituted as much as socialities (communities) are constituted by spatial imaginations. In other words, *socialities* and *spatialities* are inter-twined (Dovey 2011). (This view resonates with the view held by Gupta and Ferguson that in the contemporary world, not only do people imagine place, but also that imagined places exert a force on how people imagine community; and communities grow up around imagined places). Keith and Pile (1993: 6) use the term "spatiality" to capture the ways in which the social and the spatial are inextricably interwoven, and to conjure up the circumstances

in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals. Keith and Pile argue that landscape is made up of competing spatialities that do not exhaust each other or one is not more real than another; and that social groups and movements give a particular *character* to space by projecting outward a particular ethos, sentiment, or political vision. The same place can be different spatialities depending on whose representation or whose sensibility it is, or *who is staking claims to it, and how*.

While Doreen Massey does not use the term spatiality to show that places can be several (spatialities) at once, she argues in similar vein for an “alternative view of space” (1994: 264, 265), in which space is not a flat surface that can only be the site for action or a “a kind of 3-D... slice which moves through time” (1993: 154); rather, space is configured through social relations and networks which are dynamic and which imbue space with this dynamic potential.<sup>11</sup>

Further, Keith and Pile (1993) point out that such spaces may articulate a stand (“speaking position): “...meaning is never immanent; it is instead not just marked but also in part constituted by the spaces of representation in which it is articulated.<sup>12</sup> These spaces of representation [resistance] subvert the representation of spaces [dominant spaces] so that the ground we stand on becomes a mongrel hybrid of spatialities; at once a metaphor and a speaking position” (1993: 23). Keith and Pile’s concept of spatiality not only advances a multi-vocal view of space but also captures the gains of identity politics without succumbing to essentialism or glorifying reactionary movements.

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<sup>11</sup> Massey rejects the distinction between space – as abstract, and place – as lived, localized; for they make out place to be the site of only local politics where the local is bounded, static and opposed to the global (Massey 1993, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Keith and Pile give the example of a few Labour authorities in London who declared the local units under their jurisdiction “nuclear free zones” in the 1980s to vocalize a political statement about the possible, undesirable infiltration of nuclear proliferation into intimate residential zones. They argue that whether or not this designation could be taken seriously is beside the point, for the point is that it “created, however, briefly, a *space of resistance* that tried to weld place, politics and identity” (1993: 10). In 2011-2012, similar spaces of resistance in urban spheres of America and Europe were formed through the Occupy Movement, when thousands of people gathered in high profile urban zones to protest against economic structures of inequality.

Resistance cannot wipe out dominant spatialities, but can provide limits or check to the latter. But resistance can also morph into reactionary movements if its essentialist claims are reified, and one man's imagined community may be another man's prison (Appadurai 1990: 6). The way out is thus an *anti-essentialist* conception of space (Massey 1994) that will conceive of spatial consciousness or imaginations without essentialising any of them, and see each as a shifting ground in which momentary lines can be drawn between inside/outside to achieve "arbitrary closure" (Keith and Pile 1993: 17).

This stance is analogous to the concept of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1996) which enables a transitional solidarity based on group interests while keeping the critique of essentialism alive. None of the writers cited above deny that essentialist place-making occurs constantly. That is, the attempt to bound off places from their outward connections, to present them as the site of nostalgia and home/homeland', and to represent them as having one essential character embodying "us" versus "them" are processes that happen all the time. While these writers admit the advantages of recognizing spatial articulations against dominant narratives of state, patriarchy or any form of chauvinistic identity, they caution against accepting such place-making endeavors as unproblematical.

*My analyses in this dissertation share this "anti-essentialist" (Massey 1994) concept of mutable and multi-vocal spaces. An anti-essentialist view of place destabilizes the marginality of Momyul without putting forth a theory of autonomous agency or constituting a stable image of Momyul. I avoid the essentialist tendency of giving primacy to one spatial representation, and show that each representation of space is internally fissured or limited by outside forces (Laclau 1990). For example, Monpa oral narratives of transnationality hark back to the past in nostalgic reminiscences but cannot be thought of as reconstitutive of an authentic space. At the same time, that does not mean that they can be dismissed as being of little consequence. They articulate a transnational imagination that thrives in – and provides a check to – the space of the nation-state.*

The segregation of Monyul from Tibet is clearly in accordance with a spatial code that reifies the border – which I term a *border-normative* vision. Border-normativity is the official code of modern nation-states, sanctioned through international boundaries, treaties and maps and defended through military structures and security technologies. The trans-local and cross-border imaginations underlying the current discourse for local autonomy in Monyul are opposed to the border-normative vision. But it would be inaccurate, not to say essentialist, to argue that these current spatial imaginations present a more authentic representation of Mon than its border-normative mapping.

That is, if colonial and postcolonial representations of Monyul were undercut by oppositional forces, so, too, are the new spatial imaginations that seek to promote Mon as an essential Tibetan Buddhist place. Unitary representations of Mon as unadulterated Tibetan Buddhist space, promoted mainly by the monastic sections, are ruptured by the double consciousness (Gilroy 1992)<sup>13</sup> of Monpas who remember their past as trans-Himalayan traders, but now participate in a regional identity as people of Arunachal Pradesh. Border normativity too has seeped into Monpa consciousness especially among the younger generation, in the more than five decades of Indian nation-hood, which intermittently but consistently undercuts cross-border identifications. For the same reason, although I speak of the monastic community as spearheading the contemporary Monpa cultural politics and endorsing the Tibetan Buddhist geography, I recognize that within this population group too, there are voices of dissent. Homogenous spatial representations constantly unravel as contradictory visions and internal conflicts surface.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy (1992) uses W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness" to speak of the trans-Atlantic hybrid culture among black diaspora populations, which is neither African nor American or European. I use this term mainly to refer to the competing allegiances of region, nation, and transnational identities that create conflicting subjectivities in the Monpa mindset.

### **Welding spatial theories and border literature for the study of *disputed borders***

The disputed border location, in which my study was carried out, runs as a common thread across my different chapters. Hence, even as I locate my work in the wider field of border studies, I also show how the study of a disputed border is both informed by and challenges the existing scholarship on the border. In this section, I provide a cross-disciplinary review of the existing literature on border in order to identify common themes, and show how they construct a distinctive discourse of the border. I then insert my own work in the field of border studies, showing connections and relevance, as well as demonstrating how studies at a disputed border, where regular cross-border flows are interrupted by various surveillance practices, necessarily involves meshing insights from border literature with the theories of space and place that I have discussed so far.

Since the 1990s, borders have increasingly captivated the imaginations of scholars and policy makers alike. Reflecting on ground situations around the world where borders have been de-bordered, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the time-space compression of post-modernity (Harvey 1989: 296) leading to increased circulation of peoples globally, many scholars have sought to recast borders in terms of how they bridge rather than separate populations across national spaces. As Van Houtum and Strüver (2002) argue, given the current empirical situation, borders should be seen less as lines of division or walls, and more as gateways or “doors” opening up from one spatial unit to another. The focus on borders as sites for inter-cultural, transnational articulation has a parallel objective – the scaling down of the nation-state as the main unit of study.

In a comprehensive review article, Baud and Van Schendel (1997) argue that border populations need to be rescued from a top-down statist analyses which treat borders as peripheries of the territorial nation, and suggest a cross-border perspective that takes as the unit of analysis both sides of a border rather than a region in one nation. With similar aims, many writers (e.g.

Adelman and Aron 1995, Van Schendel 2005) attempt to expose the particular border associated with a nation-state as contingent by historically tracing and unveiling the particular processes, ideas and practices that went into the construction of the border. Van Schendel (2005) writing about the India-Bangladesh border shows how this boundary was an arbitrary colonial construct, in the face of which contemporary border people both accept the conditions of bordered, restricted existence, and creatively seek to defy/cross the border for economic and commercial gain, often through the covert support of corrupt border guards. According to Van Schendel, the clandestine border-crossing activities (smuggling, illegal immigration) constitute a “border effect” that counters the state effect (of surveillance, patrol, territorial control). Other works (Roitman 1998, Chalfin 2001) show how the state’s reach in border regions that are the hub of trans-border and transnational networks is mediated through state agents, whose interpretations, ideas and practices redefine rather than diminish the sovereignty of the state.

In many works the border is treated not simply in spatial terms as a physical boundary or even a zone of cross-cultural interaction between two nations. Hannerz writes, “the ethnography of state borders is not limited to the particular localities where states are directly adjacent to one another. It also involves all the individuals, groups, and organizations which in one way or other operate, or want to operate, transnationally, or which hope to transfer their operations across borders: refugees, migrant labourers, tourists, transnational businesses and occupations, diaspora families and many others” (1997: 544).

Hence, a second important feature of border studies is that it has enabled a fertile space for exploring new kinds of belonging and subjectivities. In literary postcolonial theory, in particular, the border is more than an empirical border: it provides a space in which to observe hybridity, liminality, and the duality of belonging. For example, the US-Mexico border figures both literally and metaphorically in the works of Gloria Anzaldua (who talks of a Mestiza rhetoric), José Limón, Oscar Martínez and José David Saldívar among others (Goodman 2002). The works of these writers have shown the postmodern transformation of the borderland from



being civilization's marginal or frontier spaces to being spaces of a decentered cosmopolitanism (Goodman 2002). Literary postcolonial theory also studies the effects of imperialism and colonialism and interrogates the power hierarchies between the West and its other (Third World) by inserting narratives from the margins to counter dominant narratives stemming from a powerful Western subjectivity. Border crossings in literature have included work by diaspora writers, such as Gayatri Spivak, Hanif Kureishi, and Trinh T Minh-ha who have inserted their subjectivities into, and thereby ruptured conventional Eurocentric narratives of life, world and the Other. These authors write about and from the subject position of border crossers.

For many social scientists similarly, the border is embodied by "liminal" populations that include refugees, immigrants as well as racial, religious and ethnically hybrid peoples. In this sense, border offers a means to understand new kinds of transnational longings, belonging and modes of identity politics. Mobile communities such as refugees or migrant workers are seen to destabilize the link between nation and territory by operating in spaces that transcend a national cartography, thereby constituting "post-national cartographies" (Appadurai 1996; also Rouse 1991, Shapiro 1994).

However, if on the one hand, the broad scholarship on border has provided many important insights and ideas, on the other hand, it has also encouraged a discursive trend that foregrounds border crossing. In most border-related works, the focus is on populations on the move (or who have moved), whether it is border people subverting state lines or the voluntary or forced movement of transnational migrants, although in each different case, movement may be clandestine, oppositional, directly confrontational, or imposed. However, such instances of physical border crossing do not apply to people living in disputed borders, where every move is monitored by the military. In disputed borders, therefore, themes of cross-border migration and movement make little sense. My aim is to highlight the experiences, subjectivities and politics of the inhabitants of disputed borders.

By disputed border, I mean not only a linear boundary line whose exact position is contested, but an entire border region which is claimed by both the nation-states between which it lies. Thus, while *border disputes* figure along many international boundaries, where the alignment of the boundary line is contested, the *disputed border region* offers a different case. So, while India has many boundary disputes with Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is in relation to the boundary with China that questions about entire tracts arise.

India and China have 2500 miles of common frontier from northwest Kashmir to the trijunction of China, Myanmar and India, and the two countries are in dispute regarding three main border tracts along this frontier, amounting to 50,000 square miles of territory. In the Ladakh province of Jammu & Kashmir, approximately 15,000 square miles of territory along a 1100 miles stretch of boundary line are contested (Sharma 1965). This is known as the “Western Sector” (Aksai Chin area). Two-thirds of the boundary here divides Kashmir and Sinkiang, China, and one-third divides Ladakh and Tibet. The second area of dispute, the “Central Sector”, concerns certain border passes and specific places along the Indo-Tibetan border in the Indian states of Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal and Punjab. The most important area in the India-China boundary dispute is Arunachal Pradesh, called the “Eastern Sector”. Here, the Indian government claims the border to be the colonially determined McMahon Line, which runs some seven hundred miles from the trijunction of Tibet, Bhutan and Tawang to the trijunction of India, Myanmar and China. China claims almost 33,000 square miles south of the McMahon Line.

Following India’s independence from colonial rule in 1947, the Indian and Chinese governments signed a trade agreement in 1954 but did not engage in direct talks about the alignment of the India-China boundary, over which the two governments did not agree – while India accepted the colonial boundary, the Chinese government considered it an unfair imperialist deal by the British. Between 1954 and 1959, military incursions were reported on several points of the India-China frontier by both sides, leading to major debates in the Indian parliament; but the Indian government did not officially acknowledge the possibility of a border war (Bhargava

1964, Sharma 1965). In 1960, the Chinese premier, Chou En-lai proposed a trade-off whereby China would recognize the McMahon Line as the Indo-Tibetan boundary if India relinquished claim over Aksai Chin (Gupta 1974: 33), but this did not happen. On 20 October 1962, the Chinese troops attacked several posts on the Tibet-Monyul border, and soon overran the entire Monyul region. The troops remained here for three months before they were called back.

Till today, India and China have failed to come to a consensus regarding these disputed tracts. Both the countries have stationed massive army personnel in the border areas, which are subject to intense surveillance.<sup>14</sup> Permanent military settlements guard the border passages between Tibet and Monyul in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh. Once itinerant peoples traversing cross-country trade routes, or “frontier trade agents” (Pemberton [1835] 1991) and “bridge communities” (Roy-Burman 1966) in the past, the Monpas are now prohibited from crossing the border into the Tibet region. While they are not a “trapped minority” like the Palestinian populations in Israel who are marginalized both in their country and in their mother nation across the borders (Rabinowitz 2001), they have lost access to many formerly frequented routes.

I do not suggest that border crossing is altogether absent in the Mon region, but that the close military control of this border inhibits cross-border movement toward Tibet. This kind of close monitoring of movement is not always effective in other border regions, where some modicum of cross-border movement is possible and even sanctioned by the state. In the border with Bangladesh, for example, Van Schendel (2005) observes that the Indian state has not enforced complete discontinuity of border crossings and allowed cross-border marketing; and although the governments of each side has sought to monitor borderland markets by means of

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<sup>14</sup> China has reportedly deployed 13 Border Defense Regiments totaling around 300,000 troops. Six divisions of China's Rapid Reaction Forces are stationed at Chengdu city in southwest China, with 24-hour operational readiness and supported by an airlift capability to transport the troops to the China-India border within 48 hours. India too has 120,000 Indian troops stationed in the eastern sector, supported by two Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons from Tezpur in Assam; and a five-year expansion plan to induct 90,000 more troops and deploy four more divisions, and two more Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons in the eastern sector (Goswami 2013).

surveillance, permits, visas and intelligence, they could do so only haphazardly. In the Monyul border, however, cross-border exchanges of this kind with Tibet cannot be envisioned both because of the military checkpoints and the region's mountainous topography.<sup>15</sup>

The passages leading from Monyul to Tibetan areas have restricted access strictly monitored by the Indian army. In the last decade, in keeping with the Indian government's Look East policy of encouraging ties with East and Southeast Asia, a lot of proposals to open up hitherto closed or ignored international border routes for trade purposes circulated in New Delhi's administrative, academic and trade circles. Subsequently, a couple of international trade marts on the India (Sikkim)-China and India (Manipur)-Myanmar border were opened and the blueprints for opening a number of others were sketched out.<sup>16</sup> But the trade routes of Arunachal Pradesh leading to Tibet did not come into consideration because this was a disputed border region. A scheme to build a road that will connect Monyul to valley towns in neighboring Assam through Bhutan also lies buried underneath bureaucratic roadblocks.

Thus, even as borders are increasingly bridged through cross-border migration as well as diplomatic cooperation between governments, in disputed border regions, such as the Monyul-Tibet border, the overt military structures in place impart a physicality to the border as a line of division. I have characterized the particular spatial code that imparts this quality to the border as the border-normative vision, which is present in all nation-state imaginations, but becomes particularly forceful in situations of border conflict. Empirical studies of disputed border zones therefore highlight the compulsions and compromises incumbent on inhabitants of such borders. The India China boundary war is now half a century old, and yet, political leaders of both

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<sup>15</sup> Routes to Bhutan are still porous, and apparently migration from Monyul to Bhutan takes place intermittently, and with the knowledge of the border security personnel. According to Toni Huber, who conducted fieldwork in east Bhutan and Monyul, Monpas migrate out to Bhutan in search of better life standards (Personal communication, January 2013)

<sup>16</sup> In 2005, while conducting a survey on popular opinion regarding the opening of trade routes revealed an almost unanimous favor for reopening ancient trade routes between Arunachal Pradesh and China. But the sociological and human interests in reopening trade routes were surmounted by the security perspective in policy decisions concerning this border trade.

countries remain stuck in the same impasse as they were fifty years ago, especially since the border issue has now become entangled with matters of national prestige (Gupta 1974). From the perspective of the Indian government, it is considered inadvisable to even broach the topic of the McMahon Line in diplomatic meetings with China, for that would be read as an indirect admission of the boundary's disputed status and may signal India's willingness to negotiate over it (Ibid.).

The border anxieties surrounding Monyul become palpable during particular moments, when the nation responds to media generated scares about an impending border war. The year 2009 saw some such moments when China protested against the Indian government's decision to allow the Dalai Lama to visit Monyul, and the Indian media reacted by whipping up a frenzy about a possible Chinese aggression at the borders. In the months leading up to November 2009, when the Dalai Lama's visit was scheduled, the media was a cacophony of rumor and reporting, as news about military developments at the border – relating to advances by Chinese troops and anticipatory reinforcements by the Indian government – regularly made the headlines. The anxieties about an impending war also took on astrological dimensions in internet and rumor mills, as sinister predictions about Chinese intentions spread. An especially fanciful prediction was that 2010 being the year of the tiger in China, and the tiger being the symbol of bravery, China would chose to go to war with India in this year.<sup>17</sup> I cite this anecdote by way of showing how Monyul's disputed status – its dominant representation – continues to be highlighted in media reports and circulated as political rumors.

I do not argue with the basic assumption of border scholarship that borders are a site of articulation, movement and contact and hence, must be studied as such. But with respect to

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<sup>17</sup> When I came to Guwahati during fieldwork intermissions, people invariably were curious to know about the situation near the border, but when I spoke to people in Dirang or Tawang about their fears, they would reply, dryly, that the media was inflating the situation. Army trucks make their way regularly up the main roads carrying supplies for the soldiers and it had nothing to do with an impending war. Around the same time, however, the news media carried reports that the Indian government would soon be sending reinforcements of 50,000 – 60,000 troops to the border (Wong 2009; also, “A Himalayan Rivalry”, *The Economist*, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010)

Monyul and other areas on the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, the border dispute has not only resulted in the cutting off of previous routes to Tibet, but also a reorientation for these border peoples. Hence, in order to understand the ideas of place and identity in such a disputed border, I weld together insights from border literature with theories of space and place.

Such merging of theories is not new for scholars studying similar controversial border situations. For example, Smadar Lavie's (1990) study of the Mzeinis of South Sinai presents a classic case of a border region under occupation that had to shed previous elements of social life in order to adapt to life under two hostile nations. In the Arab-Israeli conflict in the twentieth century, the South Sinai was a "political football tossed at least five times between Egypt and Israel" (Lavie 1990: 6). Like disputed border peoples, border populations sandwiched between two hostile political identities pursue adaptive strategies that are also border effects (Van Schendel 2005) but are constituted differently from those in border regions generally. Strategies of adaptation, defiance or accommodation in such controversial borders have a more veiled character, and have to be conceptualized accordingly. In trying to theorize how the Mzeini Bedouins of South Sinai adapted to a situation where cross-border ties of any kind had to be suppressed, Lavie takes recourse to the literary trope of allegory. According to Lavie, the Mzeina could not perform their nomadic Bedouin identity romanticized in travelers' accounts except allegorically, because they were disenfranchised on their own land by continual military occupations (1990: 39). Their tribal identity appeared as moralistic, multi-layered narratives transcending the spatial and temporal boundaries of military occupation through symbolic defiance only, because for Mzeinis to openly confront any armed or unarmed occupier could mean beatings, jail, even death (Lavie 1990: 7).

Similarly, among the Monpas, memories and oral narratives sustain the cross-border ties with Tibet, albeit in a discursive, fragmentary form rather than as physical movement – accompanied by multiple acts of negotiation and compromise. Contemporary politics draw upon these memories and narratives of cross-border relations to articulate new spatial imaginations,

which neither exist in allegorical fashion nor have coagulated into a solid or readily visible form. They are akin more to “structures of feeling” which are affective elements of consciousness and relationships (Williams 1977). Structures of feeling, according to Raymond Williams, are “social relations in solution”, not yet precipitated, for they are “a social experience still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be *private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies*” (1977: 132) [emphasis added]. I attempt to understand the emergent spatial imaginations as “structures of feeling” that are “in solution” in contemporary narratives and politics in Monyul. They may also be seen as indicating “formations” (Williams 1977) with trans-national, or rather, inter-regional scope and character. Formations, following Raymond Williams’ definition, are not institutionalized structures (church, school, workplace, family, or neighborhood) but processes in the making. For Williams, while these formations (in which he includes “structures of feeling”) are mostly affective, alternative tendencies and movements in the artistic, scientific, literary or philosophical domains, they may later become oppositional formal structures (Williams 1977: 113-119). Bringing spatial theories to bear on my understanding of the Monyul region, I attempt to trace place-making in this border.

The border is a hybrid zone not only because it demonstrates the mingling of several intersecting worlds, but because it hides within it multiple layers of places which surface contextually and *conjuncturally*<sup>18</sup> (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). In daily practice, the border is an expression of the “triangle of power relations between state, regional elite, and local people at the time” (Baud and Van Schendel 1997: 219), but these relations wax and wane, leading to different configurations of place at different times and periods. The theories of space/place outlined here, which allow one to talk simultaneously of several, coexisting spaces, is particularly useful for understanding the experiences of border populations in Monyul.

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<sup>18</sup> Several scholars have favored the term “conjuncture” (e.g. Anderson 1991, Mankekar 1999, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003) to speak about the historically contingent domination of cultural and political forces that come together to give rise to a particular social form or practice.

Conversely, the Monyul border provides a vantage point for interrogating notions of spatial fixity, for it has an inherent duality and contradiction, for which structural as well as political factors are responsible.

Apart from military barricades to cross-border movement toward Tibet, poor and frequently hazardous road conditions impair transportation and communication of this region with regional and state networks. As in other parts of the Himalayan ranges, snow, rain and erosion restrict all-weather connectivity to Monyul. In the last decade, the government of India has attempted in select areas to surmount climatic hazards through engineering innovations. For example, a project to build a tunnel in the 13,044 feet high Rohtang Pass in order to facilitate all-weather connectivity to Leh, Ladakh and Lahaul-Spiti in Himachal Pradesh has been in the pipeline since 1983, and in June 2010, drilling on the Rohtang Pass was officially begun. In Monyul, while people may wistfully talk of a similar tunneling project for the nearly 14000 feet high Dzela Pass between Dirang and Tawang, the size and cost of such a project means that state agents will not be in a hurry to initiate such a plan any time soon. I interpret this factor of selective developmentalism as arising from a theory of “neither more nor less”, which is a balance of centripetal (oriented toward the state-center) and centrifugal energies to keep a disputed border within the nation’s gravity levels, and motivated by the security rather than welfare interests of the state. It allows the poor transportation conditions of Monyul to continue without completely cutting it off from the centers.

Thus, Monyul’s status as disputed territory combines with its tough topographic terrain to encourage a perspective of Monyul as a periphery at the limits of the nation. However, this image is destabilised by personal stories of cross-border kinship, narratives of trade, and memories and legends of migration and settlement which constitute Monyul as part of a wider network. Contemporary Monpa politics of autonomy that promote Monyul’s transnational Tibetan Buddhist connections articulates yet new identities. Thus, the multiple layers of place that lie folded in the Monpa spatial fabric need to be unraveled not only for understanding the specific



situation of Monyul, but also for expanding our perspectives in general about place-making in disputed border regions.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

In this dissertation, I focus on the different spatial representations of Mon as they emerge contextually, and point to oppositional tendencies within each of them. Each chapter of the dissertation presents a particular spatial trope or lens through which Mon is configured: Locality, Connections, Separation, Periphery, and Region.<sup>19</sup> However, I complicate each trope as the chapter progresses by showing alternative spaces and imaginations that contradict or challenge the defining trope, so as not to reduce the view of spatial shifts to either a linear or an essentialist one. Through these chapters, I also trace an emergent spatial imagination evident in contemporary politics and narratives that connect Monyul with other Tibetan Buddhist populations in the Himalayan region; which I treat in detail in the Conclusion.

In chapter two, I present a brief ethnographic profile of Monyul, Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast region of India. In chapter three, Locality, I discuss the demand for local autonomy for Monyul, which has been active since 2003, and show how the discourse of local autonomy is underlain by alternative spaces that are trans-local in scope, reaching out to other Tibetan Buddhist minorities of India through common programs of action. In chapter four, Connections, I trace oral narratives of transnational origin and migration currently in circulation. However, connections are compromised as some Monpas strive to accommodate the border in articulating origins by imputing descent from a local king in Monpa legend, and thereby claiming indigenous belonging.

Chapter five, Separation, identifies the buffer policy as the spatial design that guided colonial practices in Arunachal Pradesh, and traces Monyul's current marginality not to the 1962 border war, but to the colonial buffer policy, which involved keeping some frontier areas outside

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<sup>19</sup> I thank Professor Bruce Knauft for suggesting these spatial terms to me.

regular administration. However, the buffer never became a *fait accompli* as alternative practices, which survived as representational spaces (Lefebvre 1991), prevented the buffer design from being realized in Mon. Chapter six, Periphery shows how spatial practices of the postcolonial period continue to treat Monyul as the nation's periphery by imposing new Hindi names on villages, towns, and natural landmarks of Monyul. However, if places are represented as state spaces through Hindi renaming, then the rejection of such names by Monpas puts forward an alternative spatial vision, although neither of these spaces are self-sustaining. Chapter seven, Region explores how contemporary Arunachali regional identity, built on an anti-immigrant, including anti-Tibetan, sentiment, puts pressures on trans-local imaginations of Mon. However, Monpa regional ties are fraught with many opposing tendencies that include Monpas' old identities as subjects to Tibetan rulers and their new identities as Indian citizens to Tibetan refugees.

By juxtaposing parallel and oppositional narratives and practices, I show that no spatial representation of Mon can be taken for granted; rather, it is performed as multiple spaces. The various negotiations and contradictions create shifting spaces that momentarily enhance or diminish the category of Mon. Shneiderman (2006: 14), in her discussion of Tibetan ethnicity, terms this kind of shifting presence as the “now you see them, now you don't” phenomenon. *It is also a characteristic of representational spaces that exist as “structures of feeling” or affective states not yet precipitated but in process* (Williams 1977).

At the same time, going with the concept of “strategic essentialism”, it is possible to distill a collective, emergent spatial consciousness that is gradually gaining ground in the Himalayan region, and current social processes in Monyul only present a localized effect of this trans-border imagination. In the Conclusion, I pull together the arguments and observations from the different chapters to make certain suggestions about this imagined place that I term the Himalayan imagined geography.

I identify my thesis as the study of place-making in a disputed border region, rather than as the ethnography of a border region or of a political movement. The preliminary fieldwork that I conducted in this region suggested that the political movement for a Mon Autonomous Region had potential not just for shedding light on Monpa identity politics *vis a vis* other Arunachalis. There were multiple narratives that clamored for expression in the context of the autonomy movement, and the official demand for autonomy only touched the surface of these subterranean narratives. I have used the discourse of autonomy to open up different narratives about the spaces of Mon. (While “narrative” is reminiscent of linearity, cohesion and structure, it is rescued to some extent by “multiple narratives”, implying the co-existence of several competing and coherent accounts) [Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003: 49].<sup>20</sup>

I recognize that differences of definition might exist between different categories of oral traditions. For example, with respect to Native American oral traditions, Peter Nabokov offers three distinct categories – myths, legends, and folktales. Myths are sacred stories that take place in an earlier world and are held as absolute truths, and are based on cyclical time, for they are invoked to give explanatory meaning to the present; legends maintain their link to Western “historical” time, containing human characters and factual content; and folktales are “just-so stories”, entertaining but often implicit with moral or educational lessons (Nabokov 1996, cited in Deloria 2002: 16). However, Nabokov also recognizes that the lines dividing these categories are blurred. In my work, I have used oral narratives as a common term for narrative genres that include Nabokov’s “myths” as well as “legends”, for my attempt is to understand the politics and positioning inherent in the narration rather than the semiological decoding of terminology in narrative content or classification of classification of genres of oral narratives. In chapters where I

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<sup>20</sup> Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal (2003) prefer “stories” over “narrative” or “discourse”, for stories, as the contingent production of narrative process, containing all the messiness and incoherence of the moments of production. I have relied on the notion of multiple narratives and narratives within narratives in my analysis.

treat oral narratives, I emphasize the “reading” and “retelling” of oral narratives in individual narrations for what they might reveal about the conflicting identifications of the narrators.

My research methodology consisted of ethnographic methods (participant observation, interviews, conversations and oral history) as well as archival work in regional, national and local libraries. I used mostly Hindi to conduct interviews because Hindi is the main language in public spaces and the second language in homes in Monyul. I used the help of friends acting as translators during interviews with senior Tibetan Buddhist monks and old people in rural areas whose Hindi was too pidginized for our mutual understanding.

In terms of archival research, I conducted work in the Indian national archives as well as the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh state and West Kameng and Tawang district archives. With regard to India’s eastern frontiers, many scholars (Chatterji 1999, Choudhury 1978, Van Schendel 2005, Zou and Kumar 2011) have written about the colonial construction of boundaries, while other writers have written historical accounts of the McMahon Line boundary between India and China (Choudhury 1978, Gupta 1971, Hoffman 2006, Lamb 1966, Maxwell 1970, Mehra 1979, 1980, Murty 1971, Sperling 2008). In my dissertation, I have mainly used colonial writings about buffer in order to see how this specific colonial practice influenced Monyul’s current image as remote margin.

My position in the field was perhaps that of an outsider-insider – although not Monpa, I was relatively more of an insider as somebody from neighboring Assam. In fact, many a times I was complimented on my “Monpa” looks. During interviews and conversations, people were quite willing to share information with me, since they saw me as a student of Monpa culture and history, but there were times when I sensed a certain curiosity as to my “real” intent – what did I really want to know, given that Monyul was such a politically sensitive area? I particularly recall a conversation that took place between my host in Tawang, his friend, an English teacher from Nagaland, and me. The Naga teacher asked me why, if I was interested in cultural identity (the rubric under which I categorized my work), did I not choose to write about my own community.

Why, he asked, couldn't the Monpas write their own history. Least expecting the critique, I blurted that as somebody from neighboring Assam I am still in a relatively better position to understand questions of Monpa identity; and added that there were many Monpa researchers who *are* writing their own histories. My Monpa host rallied to my defense good humouredly. Even if I put aside the inadequacy of my hasty answer, I have found the question of "who can represent whom" quite intriguing. That does not mean that even Monpas telling their own stories can (or are able to) necessarily present a more "complete" or "true" picture – as even my Monpa friends recognized. They would anxiously tell me, after I had come back from a particular hearing of origin or migration narratives that I should not believe or write down everything I listen to. Suffice it to add here that my attempt is to foreground, interpret, and make sense of the representations that coincided with the course of my fieldwork in order to support my thesis. My interpretation is also only a partial interpretation, a partial truth (Clifford 1986) that omits but also, hopefully, reveals.

## Chapter 2

### ***ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE*** **MONYUL, ARUNACHAL PRADESH, AND NORTHEAST INDIA**

Arunachal Pradesh, on India's extreme north east frontier, has often been described variously as *terra incognita* or no-man's land. A signboard at the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh state border check post reads "Arunachal Pradesh: The Unexplored Paradise".<sup>21</sup> With a relatively low population density of 17 per sq. km. (2011 census)<sup>22</sup>, Arunachal Pradesh has however, always been home to populations described in various literatures as "hill tribes" (Barpujari 1970) or "highlanders" (Furer-Haimendorf 1982). Rather than being a description of actual places, therefore, the term "unexplored paradise" is a projection, or like the fabled "Orient", a discursive construction that has a magical quality of expunging past histories and networks through a romantic, uniform and static vision of space. Just as the word "frontier" conjures up the image of yet to be discovered founts of wealth and the lone prospector making his way through swarms of jungle, or expanses of uninhabited landscape (Tsing 2005), similarly, the phrase "unexplored paradise" entices the world-weary tourist with the invitation to explore the wonders of hitherto unknown land. It has the effect of transforming lived place into an abstract landscape which is no-man's land, but can be every man's paradise.

What is often forgotten in the use of such terms is that they are rarely indigenously deployed, but are designations bestowed by external forces. The epitaph of "unexplored paradise" given to Arunachal Pradesh – while invoked for its tourist appeal – encodes the asymmetrical power relations in which Arunachalis find themselves in the contemporary Indian nation. Its use highlights both the marginal status of this state in the national imagination, and its contrast to developed, metropolitan, industrial centers such as Mumbai, often described in popular parlance as the "teeming metropolis". In this section, I will give a brief overview of Arunachal Pradesh,

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<sup>21</sup> The term, "unexplored paradise", indicating pristine territory waiting to be discovered, is often used in relation to entire Northeast India in tourist brochures, and particularly for Arunachal Pradesh.

<sup>22</sup> [www.censusindia.gov.in](http://www.censusindia.gov.in)

one of India's Northeastern states, before moving on to a profile of Monyul, the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, with which this study is concerned.

The Northeast region of India, a land of hills, valleys, forests and rivers, comprises eight states that collectively border four different countries: China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Colonial rule came to this region in the mid-nineteenth century, decades after the rest of India had already been colonized, and even after that, many areas of this region remained on the margins of rule. The colonial term "North East Frontier Tracts" designated only the northern fringes of this vast region. It should be noted that while "Northeast frontier" is a geographical term to denote the frontier areas in the northeastern direction of India, the term "North East Frontier Tracts" is used to refer to the erstwhile official designation of the tracts comprising the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Although adjoining the plains of Assam, the North East Frontier Tracts – excluding the Monpa areas, which were under Tibetan rule – were never formally part of any pre-colonial political state, for the Tai-Ahom rulers, a Shan community that ruled Assam from 1228 to 1828, followed a conciliatory policy toward the hill communities.

Relations between the Ahom state and the hill communities were marked by mutual dependency, embodied through customary law that was disrupted during British rule which artificially separated the hill and plains communities (Devi 1968 [1992]). After Assam and other areas of present-day Northeast India were annexed to the British colonial empire in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the British established a policy of loose administration in the hill tracts. The main activity of the British government in the hills, or more precisely, the foothills, during the nineteenth century, was to gain control of the trade and the trade fairs along the foothills passes.

In 1873, the British instituted the Inner Line Regulation. The Inner Line was a boundary that separated the hilly tribal tracts, including present-day Arunachal Pradesh, from the plains below. This regulation made entry of non-indigenous persons into the hills contingent on government permission, although the actual aim behind this act was to protect the expanding

British commercial interests of tea and oil in the foothills in the nineteenth century. Preventing British subjects with mercenary objectives from plundering the hills was an insurance measure to ensure peace on the commercially viable foothills. By the early twentieth century, however, the British had taken sufficient control over the newly defined North East Frontier Tracts to want to demarcate the border between British and Tibetan territories, and in the 1914 Simla Conference, the British and Tibetan representatives agreed on the McMahon Line as the new boundary. Despite the mapping of the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914, there was never any attempt to consolidate this area within regular administrative circuits, and a substantive Tibetan presence continued to be exercised, especially in Monyul's vicinity (Verghese 2004). The first Indian political post in Tawang was established by an expedition led by Major Bob Khating in 1951, four years after India gained independence from British rule. Since 1962, after the India-China border war, cross-border passages between Monyul and Tibet have been militarily closed.

In the 1930s, the North East Frontier Tracts were divided into the Balipara, Lakhimpur, Sadiya and Tirap Frontier Tracts, and the Balipara Frontier Tract administrative division included Monyul. In 1954, following decolonization, the North East Frontier Tracts were renamed as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and placed under the governorship of Assam. The previous tracts were reconstituted as the Kameng Frontier Division, Subansiri Frontier Division, Siang Frontier Division, Lohit Frontier Division, and the Tirap Frontier Division, and these divisions later became districts of the Assam province (Bose 1979a: vi). The Indian Frontier Service was created in 1956 for the better administration of the border areas. Until 1972, NEFA was constitutionally part of Assam, but "because of its backwardness, it was kept under formal control of the President of India" (Verghese 2004). In 1972, following the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971, NEFA was delinked from the Assam administration, and made into a Union Territory, and in 1987, it was made into the frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh is currently divided into 16 districts, of which Tawang and West Kameng form the



western flank.<sup>23</sup> It continues to be covered by the Inner Line regulation, which presently requires all non-Arunachali Indian citizens to acquire an Inner Line Permit, and non-Indian citizens to acquire a Protected Area Permit for entry. Further, this rule prohibits foreign nationals from extended stays, limiting their visits to a period of thirty days. I shall discuss the Inner Line policy in more detail in chapter five.

West Kameng and Tawang, where I conducted my study, are collectively known as Monyul.<sup>24</sup> The combined population of the two districts is 13,6963 (Census 2011). West Kameng district, covering a total area of 7422 sq. km., is surrounded by Bhutan in the west, and Tawang district and East Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh in the northwest and east respectively. It has 3 administrative subdivisions (Bomdila, Rupa, Thrizino) with 12 administrative circles (Dirang, Bomdila, Kalaktang, Balem, Bhalukpong, Jameri, Sinchung, Nafra, Thrizino, Rupa, Thembang, and Shergaon) and 4 development blocks (Dirang, Kalaktang, Nafra-Buragaon, Thrizino). Tawang district, approximately 2172 sq. km. in area, is located about 180 km. from Bomdila, and is bordered by Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the southwest and separated by the Sela range from West Kameng district in the east. It is divided into 3 subdivisions (Lumla, Jang, Tawang) with 7 circles (Lumla, Zemithang, Dudhanghar, Mukto, Thingbu, Jang, Tawang) and 3 development blocks under them (*District Report 2007*).<sup>25</sup> The main economic activities in this

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<sup>23</sup> From west to east, these districts are Tawang, West Kameng, East Kameng, Papumpare, Kurungkumey, Upper Subansiri, Lower Subansiri, West Siang, East Siang, Upper Siang, Dibang Valley, Lower Dibang Valley, Anjaw, Lohit, Changlang, and Tirap. Initially, Tawang and West Kameng were both included in the Kameng division, which was later split into the two districts of Tawang and West Kameng.

<sup>24</sup> Colonial writers (Bailey 1913, Kingdon-Ward 1940) as well as Bhutan scholar, Michael Aris (1980) locate both Tawang and West Kameng in the territory of Monyul. Neeru Nanda (1982: 2) however notes that Monyul only refers to Tawang and does not include the areas south of it. According to my information, Monyul includes both Tawang and West Kameng. The name, Monyul figures more in anthropological, ethnohistorical and local documents rather than in administrative documents.

<sup>25</sup> These administrative circles roughly correspond to seven traditional divisions into which Monyul was divided: Shar Nyima Tsosum, Lepo Tsoshe, Pangchen Dingduk, Dhagpa Tso Gyeth, Shauk Rho Jangda Tso, Dangnang Tsoduk, and Rangnang Tsoshe (Norbu 2008: 18, 19). (Note that these terms are not properly transliterated in English but follow the spelling used by the author). During postcolonial reconstitution of Monyul, these traditional divisions were taken into account while forming administrative circles. Shar Nyima Tsosum, Pangchen Dingduk, and Dhagpa Tso Gyeth approximates the Tawang, Zemithang and Lumla circles respectively of Tawang district, while Dangnang Tsoduk and Rangnang Tshoshe corresponds to Dirang and Kalaktang circles respectively of West Kameng district. However,

region consist of agriculture (paddy, maize, millet, wheat, apple, potato) and animal husbandry (goat, cattle, sheep, and yak), although the lack of good roads makes transportation of crops to the plains markets a disproportionately costly enterprise.

Unlike many other parts of Arunachal Pradesh, where Christianity is the dominant faith and where Christian missions of various denominations are active, there are very few Christian converts among Monpas owing to the strong influence of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic system. Many sites in Monyul (often termed the “hallowed land of Mon”) are said to have been “hallowed” by the touch or footprints of a Buddhist saint or previous incarnations of the Dalai Lama (Bhattacharjee 1988). Many village *gompas* (monasteries) and *chortens* (Buddhist monument housing sacred relic) in Monyul encapsulate a story, and many caves and forests are identified through hand or footprints cast in stone, as having been blessed by the passage of a holy person. It is possible to draw a map of Monyul’s sacred geography plotting *chortens*, *gompas*, and other sacred sites. Correspondingly, Monpa oral history abounds with stories of spiritual personages or magically endowed men who had travelled from Tibet or Bhutan to Monyul and vanquished demons, or of gifted individuals who had conquered natural forces through the power of meditation.

According to local Monpa traditions as well as Tibetan history, the famous Indian Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava or Lopon Rinpoche spread Tibetan Buddhism in Monyul (and Tibet) in the latter half of the 8th century (Nath 2005: 53).<sup>26</sup> But Buddhism took root in Monyul in the 12th century when a Buddhist monk of the Nyingmapa (Red-Hat) sect came from Bhutan to the Tawang valley and built three monasteries – Ugyeling, Sangyeling and Tsorgyeling (Ibid.

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these are rough approximations, for a few traditional areas such as Lepo Tsoshe and Shauk Rho Jangda are now on the Tibetan side while Mago-Thingbu circle now under Tawang district was originally part of Jora in Tibet; and some of the circles in West Kameng were traditionally non-Monpa territory.

<sup>26</sup> Buddhism in Tibet was founded by King Srongtsan Gampo of the Yarlung dynasty (Mills 2003) but its consolidation and propagation in the entire land of Tibet and some neighboring tracts such as Monyul is credited to Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava, who was invited to Tibet by the king Thrisong Detsen in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. With the development of Tibetan Buddhism, four major sects arose – Nyingmapa, Sakyapa, Kargyupa, and Gelugpa, which are further divided into many sub-sects. The Buddhism of Padmasambhava persists today in the Nyingmapa sect, which literally means the “old school” (Sarkar 1996)

54). Tsangyang Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama was born at the Urgyeling monastery (built by Ugyen Zangpo of the house of Terton Pema Lingpa, the Great Treasure Revealer) which lies at a little distance from Tawang town a direct descendent of Ugyen Tsangpo.<sup>27</sup> A stone inscription beside a small copse of trees at the monastery entrance narrates the following “tale of the plantation of the walking stick”,

Legend has it that at the time of leaving for Tibet, Tsangyang Gyatso planted his walking stick and prophesized that he would visit Tawang once again, when all three tree trunks that would grow of it would attain equal heights. Truly it happened, but unfortunately, one of the trunks broke in 1959 due to a strong wind, an ominous sign. Soon afterwards, the people of Tawang saw the Dalai Lama coming to Tawang once again, this time as the great Fourteenth, on his way to India in exile.

While the Nyingmapa sect persists among many Monpa lineages today, especially in the Zemithang region, it is the Gelugpa (Yellow-Hat) sect to which the Dalai Lama belongs, which is the dominant sect in both Tibet and Monyul. There are also some Monpa areas where the pre-Buddhist shamanic animistic Bonpo faith is practised, but their numbers are few (Nath 2005: 53). The Gelugpa sect was formed in the 14th century by the scholar monk Tsongkhapa, but it was under the leadership of the Fifth Dalai Lama, that the Gelugpa sect allied with Mongol military power that led to its political ascendancy and widespread influence (Mills 2003). Although Thangston Gyalpo, a lama of the Gelugpa sect and disciple of the First Dalai Lama visited Monyul during the first half of the fifteenth century and built an iron suspension bridge over the Tawangchu river, he did not introduce the Gelugpa sect in this region. It was Tanpei Dronme, a Monpa man from Berkhar village and disciple of the Second Dalai Lama (1475-1542), who built a Gelug monastery called the Talung monastery at Sanglem, Kalaktang in southern Monyul, and brought many areas, including some of the plains tribes of Assam under his rule (Sarkar 1996: 5). The Geugpa sect was consolidated and extended in Monpa areas after Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso, a disciple of the Fifth Dalai Lama, built the Gaden Namgyal Lhatse or Tawang monastery in 1680

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<sup>27</sup> A *terton* (gTer-sTon) is one who discovers or reveals a hidden scripture (*terma*) of Lopon Rinpoche or Guru Padmasambhava, the founder of Nyingma, the earliest school of Tibetan Buddhism (Bhattacharjee 1983: 3)

(Sarkar 1996: 6). In the same year, all areas of Monyul came under the systematic control of the Tibetan state.

Local traditions mention the rule of one king, Gyalpo Kala Wangpo, in Monyul before Tibetan rule. Oral traditions also hint that Tibetan rule existed in Tawang prior to the establishment of Tawang monastery when Srongtsan Gampo, the 33<sup>rd</sup> king of the Yarlung dynasty of Tibet who ruled in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, extended his kingdom in all directions and covered the Mon areas too<sup>28</sup>. But the first official record of state presence in Tawang is presented in an edict by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1680 (Aris 1980: 15, Dasgupta 2005: 96), in which he testifies that in this year, Tshog-sum/Tsosum (collective name for the three oldest village settlements in Tawang) and its neighboring areas were brought under Tibetan rule.<sup>29</sup>

When the McMahon Line was delineated as the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914, Monyul passed into the hands of the British government in India. However, public unawareness, and lack of an aggressive policy to consolidate the border by successive British and Indian governments led to *de facto* Tibetan rule over these areas until the 1950.<sup>30</sup> Due to the low profile of Indian administration in Monyul, especially Tawang, in the immediate post-independence phase, Tibetan tax-collectors continued to exercise their powers freely in this region, and neither the Tibetan officer nor the Monpa peasant subject realized that the administration had changed hands. The tax-officials were eventually sent back by an Indian expedition led by Major Bob Khating in 1951, but even after that, ancient ties of trade, kinship and religion between Tibet and Mon areas continued to propel cross-border movement.

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<sup>28</sup> Tshering (2002) mentions that according to the Tang Annals, Srongtsan Gampo [Srongstan Gampo, whose minister was Thonmi Sambhota] (ca 617-650), the 33<sup>rd</sup> king of the Yarlungpa Dynasty, while expanding the Tibetan Empire, annexed the present day Baltiyul and Gilgit [of present day Kashmir] that once belonged to the Palolas during the fifth century AD.

<sup>29</sup> Aris, in his history of Bhutan (1979) supplies some evidence to the effect that Tawang had once been ruled by kings who shared common lineage with some East Bhutanese dynasties.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion about the boundary issues concerning the McMahon Line or the role of the British colonial government, please see Choudhury (1978), Gupta (1971), Hoffman (2006), Lamb (1966), Maxwell (1970), Mehra (1982), Murty (1971), Sperling (2008).

Apart from relations of rule, there existed strong ties of trade between Tibet, Bhutan, Assam and Monyul. Tawang in particular, constituted one of the important routes through which trade exchange between Assam and Tibet took place (Gupta 1974: 30), as this was the shortest route from Lhasa to British India (Holditch [1904] 2005). Holditch called Tawang a frontier market town not far from the Assam border (Ibid. 183), and the greatest amount of trade between Assam and Tibet passed through this channel (Devi [1968]1992: 250). Alexander Mackenzie (1884 [2007]) reports on the border trade with Tibet;

Tibetan caravans conducted by 20 persons used to come down annually to a mart of Chouna on the Assam border after two month's journey from Lassa and conveyed silver bullion to the amount of about one lakh of rupees... The large quantities of rice brought by the [Assam] merchants at the latter place were purchased and imported into Tibet from Assam by the Tibetan merchants. Tussa [tussar] silk cloth, iron and lac found in Assam, skins, buffalo horns, pearls and corals, first imported from Bengal were traded by the Assamese merchants. The Tibetan merchants brought woolens, gold dust, salt, musk, horses, Chinese silk etc. The annual fair was temporarily stopped due to Burmese occupation... The fair was started at Udalguri later on (Mackenzie 1884: 15)

Reminiscences of cross-border trade with Tibet formed a staple part of the narratives given by old people in rural areas. Trade routes linked the various areas of Tibet, Monyul, Assam, and Bhutan in such a way that travel was part of the Monpas's annual itinerary; there was no particular trader class, and everybody, including women, had opportunities for traversing these trade routes. Along with regular trade, Monpas also attended seasonal trade fairs in Tibet and Assam. Old men recounted stories of how people from Bhutan and Mon areas used to go to Tsona in Tibet to attend trade fairs held thrice a year. While traders from Tawang and southern Monyul went to Tsona via Tawang and nearby Lhou, a great number of people from Bhutan carried their wares to the trade marts in Tibet through Kenzemani in Zemithang, on the northernmost tip of Monyul at the Bhutan-Tibet junction. During these times of cross-border traffic, some amount of trade was also carried out in Zemithang, a place now associated with images of a sleepy backwater. Using Zemithang as conduit, traders carried rice, jaggery, and oranges from Bhutan for the trade fairs in Tibet, and from Tibet, they would bring back ghee (butter), *churpi*

(fermented cheese), *nambo* (sheep wool cloth), dried fish and meats. People from Zemithang also sold local wares such as bamboo baskets, rolling pins and other wooden crafts, broom made of bamboo leaves to Tsona, and locally produced rice, millet, ghee and *churpi* in Bhutan.

The Monpas undertook northward trade journeys to Tsonadzong in Tibet and to markets in Merak-Sakten and Trashigang in Bhutan, and southward, to the Udalguri, Rangapara, Lokra and Charduar markets on the Assam foothills (Dhar 2000: 242, 243). The colonial officer, F.G. Bailey, in his travel diaries of 1913, writes of the trading town of Tsona,

There were three trading seasons in Tsona: the Yartsong or Summer Market in the fifth month, the Tongtsong or Autumn Market in the seventh month and the Winter Market of Guntsong in the tenth and eleventh month. Very few of the traders lived there all the year round. Most came up for the seasonal markets. The main winter trade was in salt. Monbas brought it in from the people of the Changtang, north of Lhasa, and with the money they got for it went on to buy grain in the Nye valley (1957: 246).

The Monpas of Tawang and Zemithang visited Tsona thrice annually, during the lunar months of *Dawa Ngapa* (June-July), *Dawa Dunpa* (August-September) and *Dawa Chukchipa* (December-January) while the Monpas of Mago and Thingbu villages visited Jhorakharda monastery in Tibet for trade exchange (Dhar 2000: 244). F.G Bailey also mentions Tsetang (Chetang) in Tibet as an important trade center visited by many Monbas (Monpas) from Tawang, carrying with them *madder* (vegetable dye), chili, planks from Monyul as well as Indian goods brought from Assam (Bailey 1914: 61). According to elderly inhabitants in Zemithang, while Monpa groups in the immediate Tibetan borderlands such as Zemithang and Thingbu conducted trade with Tibet and their neighboring Monpa and Bhutanese villages, such as Lumla or Dirang instead of coming down to lower altitudes, the items they brought from Tibet continued downward to the foothills via the Monpa groups at lower altitudes who attended the marts on the Assam foothills.

Clearly, the Monpas, were what Pemberton (1835 [1991]) termed “frontier trade agents”, carrying goods from Assam to Tibet and vice versa. But they not only acted as trade middlemen but also directly exchanged their indigenously grown rice, maize, millet, chili, *madder* (vegetable

dye), bamboo mats and baskets, and *chang* (millet beer) for Tibetan items such as rock salt, dried meat, *churpi* (yak cheese), wool and *betang* (Tibetan silver currency), and for items from Assam and Bengal such as Assamese silk, pearl, corals, iron utensils (Devi [1968]1992: 251, Dhar 2000: 242). They were certainly not the only tradespeople moving across the Himalayas, for in other trade routes and marts that fell on the eastern side of Arunachal Pradesh, other groups of Arunachal Pradesh acted as intermediaries in the Assam-Tibet trade. But on the western side, trade agents were chiefly the Monpas, and in less numbers, the Aka (Hrusso), Daphla (Nishi) and Miji (Sajalong) tribes. Further, unlike in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh, where the terrain was not favorable for caravan trade, in the western part, a vast caravan trade existed and the Monpas, who used to rear pack animals (such as yaks, ponies, and horses) earned handsome amounts of money by engaging these animals in caravans on the trade routes between Assam, Bhutan and Tibet (Dhar 2000: 242). Along with the circulation of trade items, other ties, of marriage and hosting relations (*naitsang*) were forged between Monpas and their trade partners. For reasons of thrift as well as security, it was apparently common practice for traders to seek and be given accommodation by Tibetan, Bhutanese and Assamese families with whom they had hosting relations.

Monastic studies constituted another important motive for movement. Common peasants were highly integrated in this temporal-spiritual system through a monastic custom which stipulated that every Buddhist household with three sons must give up one male child to the monastery. People in Tawang and lower regions, such as Dirang, sent their sons to Tawang monastery, while in Zemithang and nearby areas of Hro and Jangda, the middle sons would be sent to Gompa Tse in Tsona, Tibet; and if there were four sons, the fourth would be sent to Tawang Gompa. Although this custom has lost much of its compulsory character today, many rural families continue to send their third or middle son to either Tawang monastery or to Bomdila Gaden Rab Ge Ling monastery, as the former Gompa Tse of Tibet, displaced during the 1950s, is known.

Religious pilgrimage also encouraged the circulation of Buddhists among the various sacred spots of Bhutan, Tibet and Monyul. Monyul's Buddhists regularly visited Gompa Tse monastery in Tsona, Tibet during the occasion of Drubchod Chenmo, the monastic festival in October-November, (which is now held in Gaden Rab Ge Ling monastery at Bomdila) while people from all over gathered in Tawang during the Torgya festival in January. Gorsam Chorten in Zemithang, which is 800-900 years old and was built by Lama Sangey Thridar, was another popular pilgrimage spot. Moreover, many Monpas from Dakpanang area (present Lumla circle) made annual trips to visit a particularly famous *chorten*, Chorten Kora, in Trashiyangtse district of east Bhutan, which is the subject of a popular legend.

Ngawang, the headman of Lunpo village, Zemithang narrated to me the folk story of an *ani* (nun) from Tsoksum (Tawang) who had gone to Bhutan for pilgrimage (*kora*) and then dreamt that she would have sit in meditation in the *chorten* for enlightenment. So she sat down in meditation inside the *chorten* until death befell her. This story also forms the plot of a recent film *Chorten Kora* produced in Bhutan, although the headman of Lunpo alleges that the film is a more romanticized (commercialized) version of the story that exists in oral lore. In the film, a Bhutanese merchant falls in love with a princess from Lha vog yul sum (Tawang). But the Nyingma master of Lho Mon (Bhutan) had already identified the same princess as the maiden of royal blood of his prophesies who would have to be walled inside a *chorten* to be constructed in a land under the sway of evil forces. Only by this supreme act of self-sacrifice could the evil forces be subjugated and the spirit of dharma/ Buddhism made to prevail in that land. The young princess agrees to give up her love, and travels to the dark land in Bhutan and meditates inside the *chorten* as the last brick is laid, enclosing her within. She loses her life but religious enlightenment comes to the land and the people of that land and all Bhutan deify her. The link between Drukyl (Bhutan) and Monyul is sealed forever, thus, in the anthropomorphised figure of the *chorten*, which preserves the spirit of the young Monpa princess.



Toni Huber (1999) discusses a popular pilgrimage circuit (*rong-skor*) around the Dag-pa Shel-ri or “pure crystal mountain” in the south-eastern Tibetan borderland region of Tsari that took place once every twelve months. Pilgrims from all parts of Tibet, Bhutan and Monyul came to this spot to circumambulate the difficult circuit of the mountain “ravines” (*rong*), for this pilgrimage was supposed to be particularly efficacious in cleansing one’s negative *karma*. However, the last such pilgrimage procession to take place was in 1956, after which it stopped in the face of the continuing India-China border dispute (Huber 1997b: 224).

Apart from the regular pilgrimage spots, such as Gorsam, Gompa Tse, and Tawang Gompa where Buddhists from Bhutan, Tibet and Monyul used to congregate, there were other holy places that provided incentive for movement. For example, the prophesy of Pemako (*padma-bkor*), the Tibetan “promised land” or the mythical sanctuary for persecuted Buddhists, encouraged movement across Buddhist areas. F.G. Bailey in 1913 hazards that Pemako lies “on the frontiers of India” but that the “exact geographical position of Pemako was imprecise. All that was known was that somewhere on the Dihang-Lohit watershed there was a holy mountain of glass and around this holy mountain lay fertile valleys” (1957: 35). According to some sources, Pemako covers a large area on the frontiers of southeastern Tibet and Upper Siang district in Arunachal Pradesh, and includes the holy mountain Kundu Phodrang (*kun-dus-pho-brang*) (Sardar-Afkhami 1996). One also finds in Bailey’s diaries the record of people who had recently migrated from Bhutan, Tawang and Tibet in search of Pemako after fleeing from taxes by the state (1957: 35-36). Persecution and the search for refuge led many Tibetans and Bhutanese to migrate to Pemako. On the Tibetan side, similarly, there were Monpas and Bhutanese who had settled in the Tsangpo valley after migrating out in search of Pemako (Bailey 1957: 73).

My intention in highlighting the politico-economic and religious networks of Monyul here is to show the extent to which the culture and polity of Tibet held sway over Monyul till almost the middle of the twentieth century. As the above descriptions show, the political economy of Monyul was strongly integrated with Tibetan Buddhist networks. Historian Alastair Lamb

confirms, “Tawang was as Tibetan as Phari at the head of Chumbi valley [at the intersection of Sikkim and Tibet]” (Lamb 1966: 303). Trade, religion and monastic relations constituted Monyul as part of a transnational circuit with Tibet and Bhutan, while marriage and kinship further cemented relations forged through trade. These circuits invest the Monyul area with a peculiar distinctiveness within Northeast India, for unlike other social groups of this region who were oriented towards South East Asia, and Myanmar in particular, Monpas were part of Tibetan social and political-economic networks.

Even after the colonial boundary was demarcated, people in these areas continued to carry about their cross-border affairs until the 1950s. However, since 1959 and especially after the 1962 border war between India and China, cross-border movement has almost ceased. Although stray traders and yak-herders from Tibet continue to make their way to Monyul sporadically, they function as “illegal” border-crossers rather than the cross-border travelers of old times. After the postcolonial cooption of Arunachal Pradesh, initially the Assamese language, and subsequently, Hindi and English were introduced into the public spaces of the state, including Monyul. This was accompanied by the movement of military personnel, teachers, servicemen, and traders from the eastern side of Arunachal Pradesh as well as from other parts of India, who not only settled in these areas but also began to dominate the offices, educational institutions and market places. Old routes and contacts retreated from the visible spaces, but continued to exist in memories and narratives and are now being foregrounded in contemporary politics.

### **Fieldwork: From the Margins**

When I had declared my intention to do ethnographic work among the Monpas, a senior scholar advised me that good research is not necessarily about going to those places where nobody has yet done research. Once upon a time, research consisted of identifying empirical lacunae, so that if one researcher wrote a history “from 1857 to 1947”, the next researcher would pick up from where the previous had left, and go on to write a history “from 1947 to 1972”. While such kind of

reasoning might have governed the choice of fieldwork locations in an earlier anthropology, where the least explored site might mean the most productive, this anthropological convention has since become of questionable merit. Hence, by choosing Monyul as my fieldwork site, it appeared that I was taking an old-fashioned route to fieldwork.

Although several Indian historians and anthropologists (e.g. Bhattacharjee 1983, 1988; Dhar 2005; Dondrup 1994, 1997, 1999; Dutta 1999; Dutta 2002; Elwin 1959a, 1959b, 1965; Jha 1997, 2006; Nanda 1982; Nath 2005; Norbu 2008; Sarkar 1980, 1996; Tashi 1999) have conducted studies of Monyul, Western scholars have invested less time in this region, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>31</sup> The relative lack of attention on this region by the Western academy is partly due to the difficulty of foreigners conducting long-term fieldwork in Arunachal Pradesh, a state covered by the Inner Line policy.<sup>32</sup>

However, by opting to do research in a region that is marginal at least in the Western academy, was I actually choosing an outdated route to research? The assumption that Monyul is less known in scholarly literature, supports the dominant representation of this region as remote (Lefebvre 1991). In other words, the view that the relative absence of scholarly research in Monyul makes the latter an outdated site for research corroborates the official representation of Monyul as a remote margin. It is remote not only in a geographical sense as being the outskirts of the nation; it is also remote in terms of scholarly access. So while a research project to study, say, Tamil culture and history, may draw upon, build on, critique and reformulate, the previous existing literature on the subject, a similar project on Monyul cannot follow this academic

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<sup>31</sup> Colonial administrators and ethnologists to have visited this area included Nain Singh (1875), G.A. Nevill (1912), F.M. Bailey and H.T. Morsehead (1913), F. Ludlow and G. Sherriff (1934), G.S. Lightfoot (1938), F. Kingdon Ward (1935, 1939), K. Lumsden (1936), and J.P. Mills (1944). After India's independence, Verrier Elwin (1959, 1965), Leo Rose (1967), Aris (1980), Furer-Haimendorf (1982) have given us many interesting accounts of this region. Since 2002, Toni Huber has been conducting fieldwork on clan-based rituals and Bon religion in east Bhutan and Monyul (Personal communication, January 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Foreign citizens require a Protected Area Permit (PAP) for entry into certain areas of Northeast India, including Arunachal Pradesh for a stay up to 30 days. For the Indian citizen, who is not from Arunachal Pradesh, an Inner Line Permit (ILP) is necessary to gain entry into Arunachal Pradesh. For professional or research purposes, it may be extended through the offices of the Deputy Commissioners in Arunachal Pradesh.

tradition. To speak of the minority state, so to speak, of Monyul in anthropology is not very different from codes of representation that depict it as remote – both feed the same image of marginality.

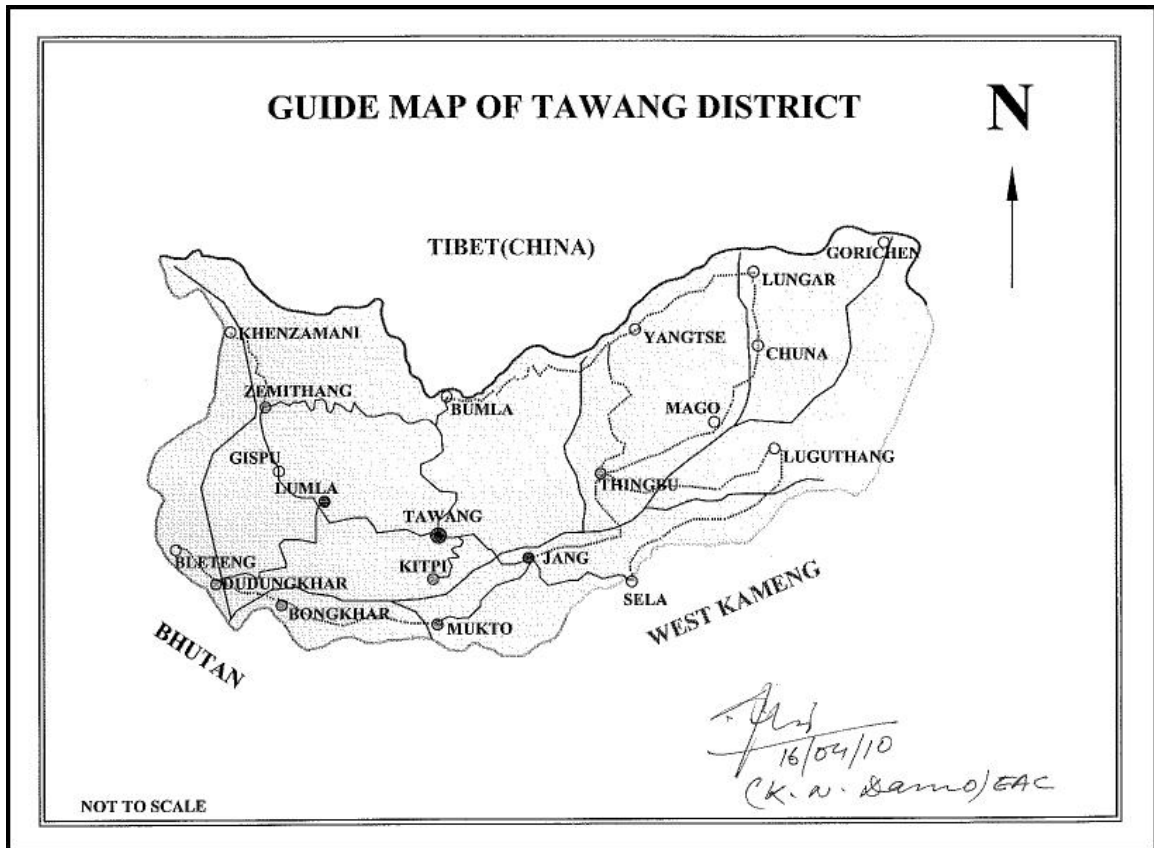
However, in perceiving Monyul as academically virgin territory, are we not succumbing to conventional representations of the margin? As anthropologist Anna Tsing asks, “...might it be possible to disentangle analysis of the rural and the remote from assumptions of the pristine?” (1994: 282). Eventually, these reflections contributed to my thesis, where I have used spatial theories to interrogate the supposed remoteness of the Monyul border, by highlighting past and present connections. If “margins” are “a conceptual site from which to explore the imaginative quality and specificity of local/global cultural formation” (Tsing 1994:279), then I show that various spatial representations of Monyul reformulate state-centric conceptions, which locate it at the limits of the nation – both geographically and culturally.

My interest was further spurred by the anomaly I perceived in the Monpas’ peripheral position in the present and narratives of cross-border connections. I wanted to understand whether local residents contemplated the anomaly of past and present situations, and if so, how did they articulate it? In comparing past and present times, many among the older generation are quick to praise the benefits of modernization that have accompanied the regime transition from Tibetan rule to Indian state. But they also reminisce about the old times when they had direct access to Tibet through trade, a past in which they might have been subordinate to the Tibetans but where their traditions did not cast them as inferior to the ruling group. The later generations in their 30s – 50s have indirect memories, filtered through the eyes and perceptions of the older people, but they are the ones who are more vocal in resisting their marginality within regional and national circuits. Frequently forced to negotiate regional structures of inequality in the context of job and work, many among the professional and educated sections have been quick to respond to the demand, proposed by monk leaders, for Monyul’s autonomy from regional administration. A section of them participate with the monks in the idea of a Tibetan Buddhist community,

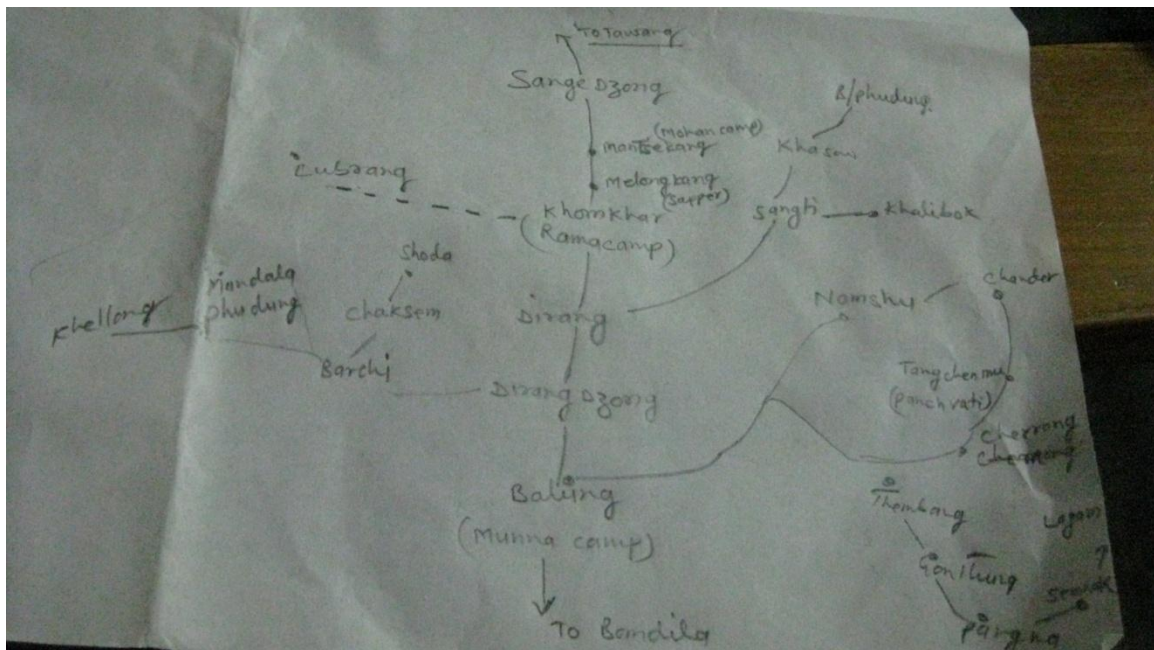
encouraged also by an international milieu, in which Tibetan Buddhism is resurgent and in which Monpas are offered the possibility of participation. The margin thus hides multiple processes that enable its reformulation. By looking at different spatial conceptualizations of Monyul, I seek to show margins are lived, represented, and reimagined.

I conducted dissertation fieldwork between 2008 and 2010 in Tawang and West Kameng districts of west Arunachal Pradesh. While my primary bases were Dirang and Bomdila in West Kameng, and Tawang in Tawang district, I made trips to nearby Lumla and Jang in Tawang as well to villages in Kalaktang (local pron. Kalengteng), which shares a direct boundary with Bhutan, and in Zemithang (local pron. Zemathang), which shares a direct boundary with Tibet.

Bomdila, Dirang and Tawang, while presenting similar cultural landscapes, differ from one another in terms of dialect, local customs, altitude and demography. Tawang, being nearer the Tibet border and farthest in distance from the Inner Line boundary adjoining Assam and also from the traffic of the plains, is more distant from the center, in terms of communication. Bomdila, despite being the district headquarters, was formed through the radial expansion of military quarters, and is populated by migrants from nearby Monpa areas as well as outside. But Bomdila is within a day's journey from the nearest city in the plains, and hence many government employees seek job transfers either to Bomdila or to other areas of Arunachal Pradesh so that their children can have access to better education and other resources. Further, during inclement weather, Tawang is more likely to be cut off from road networks than Bomdila, which is now in the process of being connected to the plains through two major roads, whereas Tawang is still dependent on one artery of transportation.



2.1. Guide map of Tawang. Courtesy: K.N. Damo



2.2. Map of Dirang. Courtesy: Namang Tsering



**2.3. Tawang monastery from a distance**

A third town, Dirang is situated mid-way between Bomdila and Tawang. When I started my fieldwork, many people advised me to choose Dirang as my primary base because there were several old Monpa settlements within easy distance from the town, which could open up the “real” Monpa society to me. At approximately 4000 feet, Dirang is lower in altitude compared to Bomdila and Tawang (where elevations range from 6000 to 14000 feet), has a warmer climate and certainly offers greater access to rural Monyul, so to speak. Yet, in its lack of infrastructure, Dirang is more “remote” than even Tawang, which at least has local travel agencies and regular vehicles operating to and fro. The road connecting Tawang to Bomdila passes through the main Dirang market, and a story goes that earlier “Dirang-pas” (natives of Dirang) used to stop passing

vehicles and forcefully (over)load them with passengers and luggage, a step often necessary because vehicles starting from Dirang were so few and far-between. Tawang, situated at the confluence of both Bhutan and Tibet, and historically having acted as an outpost of Tibetan rule in Monyul, is culturally and historically more focal than either Bomdila or Dirang. In terms of tourist allure, both Dirang and Bomdila serve mostly as transit camps for people driving *enroute* to Tawang, although since the 2000s, Bomdila has been growing in cultural importance owing to the enterprise of Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, the influential abbot of the Gaden Rabgye Ling monastery in Bomdila, displaced here from Tibet during the 1959 Tibetan exodus.

Within the district of Tawang, Zemithang, one of the administrative circles that I visited, is considered the rural backwaters. The backwater image is heightened by superstitions that float around concerning the inhabitants of Zemithang, who, it is said, are compulsory poisoners – they habitually mix poison in the food of their unwary guests. The people in Zemithang not only refute this allegation but also share narratives of how Zemithang was a hub of commerce, once upon a time, when traders from Bhutan and Tibet used this route for their seasonal trade activities. The notion of centrality, exaggerated somewhat perhaps in their narratives, is still in sorry contrast with the present situation of Zemithang, which is also educationally the most backward area within Tawang. I have addressed the ambivalence of these locales to show that Monyul is spatially quite heterogeneous.

Similarly, although I make reference to the Monpas, it should not be considered the default for a homogenous community of Monpas with converging subjectivities with regard to place. The idea of Mon as separate from the rest of Arunachal Pradesh in terms of a distinct (Tibetan Buddhist) cultural tradition is inspired and circulated by the (mostly male) monastic sections; yet even within the monastic community there are differences. While many educated urban professionals as well as rural residents profess sympathies for this idea, there are many who either refuse or are apathetic to its aim. My goal is to trace the contours of an emergent imagined geography, but in unpacking the current socio-spatial discourses among the Monpas today, I



avoid reifying, romanticizing, or homogenizing any particular spatial construction of domination or resistance. Hence, in my subsequent chapters, I place different narratives of place in tension with one another.

### Chapter 3

#### *LOCALITY*

#### **TEXT AND CONTEXT OF THE MON AUTONOMOUS REGION**

Since 2003, the Mon Autonomous Region Demand Committee (MARDC), an organization formed by the influential monk Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, has been leading a demand for an autonomous council for Tawang and West Kameng districts.<sup>33</sup> At my first meeting with the Rinpoche in June 2008 at the Kalachakra Monastery in Dirang, where he was presiding over a religious ceremony, he justified the demand for autonomy in the following manner:

Within the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, any community can preserve their culture and rights. ...; utilizing that clause, why not have some kind of an autonomous council within our own territory so that we can formulate our policies according to the needs of our local people.

Autonomous councils, defined in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, are a political arrangement for the devolution of administrative powers to local bodies at districts or state sub-divisional tiers. Included in the Indian Constitution initially as an institutional device to accommodate cultural pluralism among culturally and geographically peripheral, frontier tribal communities in Northeast India, this provision was later extended to Ladakh in Kashmir and Darjeeling in West Bengal<sup>34</sup> (Sixth Schedule Amendment Bill 2007) as well as to non-frontier, “heartland” tribal areas such as Jharkhand in Bihar and Uttarakhand in Uttar Pradesh (Sonntag 1999) – both of which became independent states in 2000. While the Sixth Schedule does not apply to Arunachal Pradesh because of the boundary disputes involving this state, the MARDC demand calls for the inclusion of Monyul in this constitutional clause.

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<sup>33</sup> The Monpas are not the only ones in Arunachal Pradesh, however, to demand autonomous councils. Three other groups in the state are demanding the same provision, but while the bill was passed in the state assembly, it has been pending in the national assembly.

<sup>34</sup> The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council Act 1995 and the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Agreement 1988 were the two legislations introduced for setting up autonomous councils in Ladakh and Darjeeling respectively. The Gorkha Hill Council was renamed as the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration in 2011. There is now talk of changing its name to Gorkha and Adivasi Territorial Administration (GATA) in an attempt to make the state-hood demand more inclusive of the considerable tribal Adivasi (aboriginal) population in the region (Pradhan 2011).

At first look, the Monpa demand for an autonomous council appears to be another instance of a marginalized community speaking the “cultural grammar” (Baruah 1999) of the nation-state in order to ameliorate present conditions. In adopting a territorial formula prescribed in the Indian Constitution, champions of autonomy appear to be conforming to rather than confronting the constitutional provision, for they frame their demand in terms of local administrative changes in Monyul, and include all Monpa and non-Monpa minorities living within Tawang and West Kameng (*Constitution of Mon Autonomous Council* 2005). However, the appeal to locality is at odds with other narratives within the discourse of autonomy that invoke a community of Tibetan Buddhist populations *beyond* the territorial boundaries of current Monyul. The reference to locality in the autonomy demand is revealed to be a negotiated deal, and the local is shown up as a site where regional and transnational interests intersect. In this chapter, through a focus on the public transcript or *text* and the wider social and political *contexts* of local autonomy, I show that despite its public text as represented in the *Constitution of Mon Autonomous Council* (2005) and other official documents and statements of the MARDC, the demand for local autonomy is underlain by certain trans-local impulses, condensed in programs for Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation, which constitute Monyul as part of a pan-regional Himalayan community within India.

Most office-bearers, public leaders and supporters of the MARDC are quick to stress that their demand for a local autonomous council is strictly within constitutional limits, and that they are merely demanding their due. Changlu, a young grassroots-level leader in Yewang village, Dirang and supporter of the autonomy demand asserts,

The central government has given a lot of care and attention to Arunachal and to Arunachal tribals since independence and we are grateful for that. But now if they grant us autonomy it will be very good. We have a lot of hope that the central government will grant it...it is not a national issue...not against the nation... we are asking only for what is in the constitution.

I show that despite the genuflection to locality through invocation of constitutional rules, the wider discourse around the movement and outside it in public spaces outlines trans-local imaginations. Monpa proponents of autonomy frequently draw comparisons between their proposed autonomous region and two other regions which were granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule: the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), an autonomous region in Assam, nearest to them in geographical terms, and the Ladakh Autonomous Council, to which they feel closer in spirit, since Ladakh is a Buddhist region. The proposal for a Mon Autonomous Region or the similar demand in Ladakh during the 1990s, when viewed independently of each other, suggests ethnic or regional politics. When viewed together, however, the objectives of the two coincide, and the dots, when connected, sketch an alternative cartographical contour. In this, a Ladakhi or a Monpa ethnicity is subsumed to a Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity. *I submit that the autonomy movement covers a physical region comprising the current districts of Monyul, but the imagined place articulated in popular discourses stretches beyond the boundaries of Monyul to encompass Tibetan Buddhist minority communities of Indian Himalayas.*

In 2007 and 2008, when I visited the region for preliminary research, the autonomy movement was at its peak, with leaders organizing *Dilli Chalo* (March to Delhi) campaigns and public rallies in Monyul to put pressure on the national government. By 2009, when I began my extended fieldwork, however, the momentum had considerably slowed down.<sup>35</sup> Some say that this was the result of objections raised by other groups within Arunachal Pradesh who believe that autonomy to Monyul would open a Pandora's Box of similar demands. Others view it as a temporary recession brought about by the local assembly elections in October 2009, during which

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<sup>35</sup> When I met Tsona Gontse Rinpoche in Bomdila in May 2013, he told me that the demand for autonomy is still on-going, and that he would renew his efforts to mobilize public support for the demand. *Tawang Vigilances*, an internet forum in a social networking site that reports current events in Tawang posted an update that on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, T.G. Rinpoche, Pema Khandu, Arunachal Pradesh minister of tourism (son of the deceased chief minister, Dorjee Khandu), and several members of the Arunachal Pradesh legislative assembly and Monpa public leaders met in New Delhi to discuss the demand for a Mon Autonomous Region. During my trip to Monyul in May 2013, I learnt that the Rinpoche, accompanied by a contingent of politicians and youth leaders, had undertaken a visit to Karbi Anglong, an autonomous district in Assam, to gauge the achievements of autonomy here.

popular energies were diverted toward campaigning. A few others hazard the opinion that it was a political trade-off between local and national leaders for maintaining status quo in a disputed border territory. Yet others remark in ire that only bloodshed will spur the national government into taking concrete steps, for the Monpas have, till now, eschewed violence or any form of aggression, in putting forward their demand. The relative waning of the MARDC movement, thus, seems to have been overdetermined by factors that cannot be reduced to a single reason.

I suggest that the Monpas' demand was additionally affected by instability within the autonomy discourse stemming from conflicting visions about Mon. The MARDC demand for local autonomy rests on the dual narratives of development and Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation, but there is an incongruity between the two. While the development proposal constructs a locally bounded collectivity of Monpas and non-Monpas through a common imagination of Monyul as a zone needing special development measures, the parallel objective of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation undercuts the development agenda through the inter-regional and trans-local tendencies it contains.

Monpa leaders appeared to be conscious of this tension, and tended to suppress reference to "Monpa" in favour of "Mon" during interviews, the latter term supposedly more inclusive since it indicates a physical region, *viz.* Monyul, rather than a particular ethnic group or culture. I had initially assumed that the preference for the term Mon over Monpa had to do with choosing a term that would be inclusive of the other non-Monpa minority groups (Aka or Hrusso, Miji or Sajalong, Khowa or Bugun, Sherdukpen) residing in Monyul. But as I later realized, while a geographical (Mon) rather than ethnic (Monpa) nomenclature appears to give equal participation in the autonomy scheme to non-Monpa groups, Mon does not consistently refer to the current territories of West Kameng and Tawang. Rather, the term Mon arises quite frequently in reference to communities living outside Monyul's political boundaries, and is associated with a claim of Tibetan Buddhist heritage.

The latter claim may be cause of some skepticism, for Mon, in its early connotation, was not considered a core Tibetan space. In fact, it connoted “barbarian” spaces in earlier Tibetan Buddhist schemes, where initiation into the Buddhist faith was the yardstick for measuring the civilized against barbarian (Shneiderman 2006: 10). Thubten Phunsok, eminent Monpa intellectual, social worker and founder of Manjushree Orphanage in Tawang, admitted that in Tibetan cosmological models, Mon was considered “dark” or “jungle” (wild/untamed) territories.<sup>36</sup> Although the dichotomy between civilized and barbarian could have meaningfully lasted only up until the conversion of the latter to Buddhism, it still meant that there did exist a distinction between Tibet and its peripheries.

However, proponents of Mon autonomy gloss over such distinctions to construct an imagined geography of Mon that unites peripheral Tibetan Buddhist areas in India, from Monyul in the east to Darjeeling, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh to Kargil in the west. Significantly, in doing so, Mon creates a boundary between Buddhist peoples and their non-Buddhist others. Thus, while the constitutional model of a Mon Autonomous Region creates boundaries between Monyul and the rest of Arunachal Pradesh, the Mon in the narrative of cultural preservation creates boundaries between Tibetan Buddhists and their others, and establishes a horizontal solidarity among pan-Himalayan Tibetan Buddhists.

Moving from the discursive to the practical sphere, we find that the pan-Himalayan community acquires shape through certain collaborative struggles by Tibetan Buddhist communities of India, namely, the struggle to make Tibetan or Bhoti the official language in schools and offices of Tibetan-speaking regions, and the struggle to gain government accreditation for Sowa Rigpa, the system of Tibetan medicine. Both these struggles offer a

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<sup>36</sup> Bhutanese historian, Lopon Nado, traces the etymology of the word Mon to mean people who were in darkness (*mun*) and considers the main criteria for being a Monpa to be non-Buddhist (cited in Pommaret 1999: 64). Gyalsey Rinpoche’s book ([1999] 2009) published in Tawang contains a similar etymological explanation. But people I spoke to during my field research were reluctant to accept this as the only explanation. Geshe Nawang Tashi Bapu, Principal of Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies, Dahung suggested that this etymological explanation is one among other possible interpretations.

window to the translocal tendencies that nestle in the Monpa demand for local autonomy. They invoke an imagined geography based on common heritage and converging in practical programs to secure recognition for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa.

This imagined geography is not a stable category. While in the programs for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa, it expresses a horizontal camaraderie linking Tibetan Buddhist minority communities from the northeastern to the northwestern marches of India, in the following chapters, I will show how in other articulations of identity, the geography of Mon may vertically expand northward in narratives of origins and marriage to include Tibet and Bhutan, or may contract in other assertions of identity and become confined to the present districts of West Kameng and Tawang.

### **Text and context of local autonomy**

Many people in Monyul refer to the autonomy demand as the “Rinpoche’s movement”. Since its inception, it has mainly been a one-man crusade. Tsona Gontse Rinpoche or T.G. Rinpoche<sup>37</sup>, as he is widely known is the founder of Gaden Rabge Ling (GRL) monastery (also known as Upper Gonpa) in Bomdila, West Kameng. Born on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1967 in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, T.G. Rinpoche was recognized as a reincarnation by His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. After graduating with the degree of Geshe Lharampa (the highest monastic degree equivalent to a Doctorate in Buddhist philosophy) from Drepung Loseling Monastery, South India, T.G. Rinpoche returned to his home in Monyul and became active in various social activities. He served as a state minister of industry, textile and handicrafts, and hydropower and cabinet minister of tourism in the Arunachal Pradesh state government in his different tenures as electoral

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<sup>37</sup> My information regarding T.G. Rinpoche’s biographical details comes from interviews as well as a booklet, *The concise biography of the great Tsonawa*, published by the Buddhist Culture Preservation Society of West Kameng, and handed to me during one of my visits to the GRL Monastery at Bomdila. The present Tsona Gontse Rinpoche (born as Jetsun Tenzin Jampal Wangchuk) is the 13<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of the Tsonawa (Master of Vinaya) line. Vinaya is the Buddhist code of discipline laid down in the canonical text, *Vinaya Pitaka*.

representative, and at present, holds the position of chairman in the Department of Karmik & Adhyatmik Affairs (*Tso-rig*) with the government of Arunachal Pradesh. People who knew T.G. Rinpoche during his younger days tell me that he decided to join electoral politics once he realized that only political power would help him bring about much-needed social and cultural reforms in Monyul.

T.G. Rinpoche apparently conceived the idea for Mon autonomy after being inspired by the success of the Ladakh Autonomous Council, and invited a Ladakhi lama (“Lama Lobsang”) – who also served as a member of the National Commission on Scheduled Tribes – to Mon for practical advice. He formed the Mon Autonomous Region Demand Committee (MARDC) with the support of several political and religious leaders of Tawang and West Kameng. Norbu Lama of Gonghar village, Tawang describes how the leaders of autonomy mobilized public opinion in the initial stages of the demand;

It all started around 2003...Till 2008, there had been two public rallies in Tawang..A lot of people had attended. The first was on 9 October 2006. At that time, Lama Lobsang from Ladakh was present. A few delegations from our state were present, and so were some MLAs [member of legislative assembly], ministers, some village elders...after that, on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2007, there was a general platform. There too, the leaders of the two districts were present..The Hon. TG Rinpoche had spread the message of the meeting. The message was first conveyed to each constituency in Tawang (Tawang, Lumla, Jang), and then the Panchayat leaders in each constituency mobilized the villagers.

Both Tibetan Buddhist religious elites and lay political elites of Monyul have comprised the leadership of the autonomy movement since its beginning stages; and out of the 13 members of the advisory committee of the MARDC, four are high-ranking religious leaders (*Constitution* 2005: 55). At my first meeting with him in 2008, the Rinpoche had said that he joined politics because he thought that in this way he could become a friend of the MLAs (members of legislative assembly) and share his views with them. While Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders do not outnumber the lay political elites in the organization of the MARDC, the dominant narrative of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation within the autonomy demand is clearly shaped by the Rinpoche’s ideas.



On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the *Constitution of Mon Autonomous Council* was formally approved at an MARDC meeting held in Dirang, West Kameng. It puts forward a proposal for a Mon Autonomous Council – to be comprised of 33 seats out of which 30 would be filled by members elected from within Tawang and West Kameng districts and the remaining three nominated by the Arunachal Pradesh state government (*Constitution 2005:6*). According to the *Constitution*, the objective of the autonomy demand is “to fulfill the economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of socio-cultural, religious and ethnic identity of the indigenous tribes of the two districts of Tawang and West Kameng and to speed up the infrastructure development in the districts” (Ibid: 6). The autonomous council would have administrative powers over 50 subjects, such as land revenue, cultural affairs, rural and urban development, customary laws, forest, tourism and education, and decision-making powers over job appointments and trade permits (Ibid: 11, 12).

The MARDC *Constitution* and other official documents of the movement stress that the autonomy demand is in the interests of the region<sup>38</sup> and that it would benefit all those communities who live in the Mon region. Region, which comes from the word *regere* meaning “to command” (Foucault 1980) implies a claim of possession and identifies a particular place as belonging to a particular group of people. The MARDC demand stakes a claim to region by making the argument of self-governance for the ethnically diverse residents of West Kameng and Tawang, who include the Monpas as well as non-Monpa groups, such as the Buddhist Sherdukpens and the non-Buddhist Hrusso (known as Aka in pre-colonial and colonial times), Sajalong (Miji) and Bugun (Khowa) groups.

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<sup>38</sup> Note that here region is used to refer to the Mon Autonomous Region, the official label for the proposed autonomous unit. Region, used in this sense, overlaps with the meaning of local autonomy. In chapter seven, where I discuss the regional obligations of the Monpas towards the Arunachali state, I use region to mean the Arunachal Pradesh state. Although, the meaning of region in these two contexts refers to two different territorial units, that is, West Kameng and Tawang districts in the first instance; and Arunachal Pradesh in the second instance, the two usages do not make for contradiction. For region in both instances refer to a territorial identity that is being forged, even if the territory in question might be different. To look at it in another way, if local autonomy is implemented the Mon region may well be a sub-regional unit within a regional unit.

At our first meeting, T.G. Rinpoche stressed that the boundary of the proposed council is not based on ethnic boundaries. He justified the use of the word Mon in place of Monpa in the nomenclature of the autonomy demand by stating; “Mon means area... Monpa becomes too narrow. Once you are inside Mon, you become part of it. It is territory that gives the people an identity”. The demand for a Mon Autonomous Region is based on the shared regional identity of all ethnic groups living within Tawang and West Kameng districts, and quite a few ministers and influential leaders belonging to non-Monpa groups in West Kameng are members of the MARDC core committee (*Development and Progress 2008: 53*).

The regional focus is however, not a consistent one, and slippage occurs as soon as definitions of the self and other are elaborated. Viewed historically, definitions of “us” and “them” in Monyul have never been constant. If during the period of Tibetan ascendancy, Monpa meant the Tibetan Buddhist communities inhabiting the lowlands, it was followed by a period of ethnic and national identity formation, when communities previously known as Monpa became nationally identified or ethnically marked as either Bhutanese or Ladakhi; and correspondingly, Monpa shrunk in scope to become associated with the Tibetan Buddhist ethnic minorities in West Kameng and Tawang.

In the MARDC official statements, the geography of Mon identity shifts once again to include the non-Monpa ethnic groups. But the last is not a stable category; indeed it has shifting territorial contours that move to accommodate the context in which it unfolds. In popular discourses on Mon autonomy, the territory that “Monpa” covers shifts to indicate, at times, the current two districts of West Kameng and Tawang, and at times, to extend to a wider connotation where all low-lying areas on the Indo-Tibetan borderlands (previously known as Mon) are included. The dissonance between the former and the latter can be identified as stemming from conflicting imaginings of Mon. Although the demand for Mon regional autonomy makes a distinction between those living within the bounds of current Monyul and those living outside those boundaries, parallel narratives within the movement introduce a distinction between the

Buddhist Monpas and the non-Buddhist other. While the different ethnic groups living in Monyul are patched together by the fact of contemporary political coexistence (as residents of the two districts), this political unity implodes in the face of conflicting criteria within the autonomy discourse for demarcating boundaries between self and other. In the following paragraphs, I examine the historical relations of conflict between Monpas and non-Monpas that challenge the regional unity proposed by the Mon Autonomous Region demand.

Buddhist Monpas have historically and consciously recognized a division between Monpas and “Gidu” (Pommaret 1999: 62). My Monpa informants explained the term “Gidu” as meaning “one who has no religion” (*jiska koi dharam nahi hain*). Traditions of opposition and antagonism between Monpas and “Gidus” are well recorded both in official records and oral lore. Colonial administrator F.M. Bailey notes the use of the word “Gido” by the Monpa to refer to the non-Buddhist groups during his exploration of the Indo-Tibetan frontier areas in 1913, “...there were two more Monba villages down stream, first But, about six miles down, and after that Konia. Below Konia was the country of the Lopas, who were called Torku by the people of Mago and Gido by the Monbas” (1957: 233).

“Gidu/Gido” and “Lopa” were interchangeable terms, with the latter favored by Tibetans and the former, locally, by Monpas. Among Monpas, “Gidu” was the indigenous classification for the more generic term, “Lopa” (Klo-Pa), by which Buddhists were distinguished from non-Buddhists.<sup>39</sup> According to Bailey, “[t]he term Lopa meant to the Tibetans what barbarian meant to the Greeks, pagan to the Christians and to Kipling ‘lesser breeds without the law’” (1957: 74). British naturalist, Kingdon Ward, who had travelled extensively in the Tibetan and Indian Himalayan region, similarly notes, “These Lopas dwell in the jungle, far down the valley, south of the Great Himalayan range. They are the people whom on the Assam side we call Daphlas or

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<sup>39</sup> The “Klopa” who remain in Chinese territories today as a result of “spillover” are labeled “Lhopa” by the Chinese government, meaning “southerners” to avoid the pejorative meaning of “barbarian” associated with the traditional spelling. Like Monpas who are likewise on the Chinese side, these Lhopas are accorded the status of a minority nationality equal to that of the Tibetans (Aris 1980: 9).

Akas, or possibly Abors – imprecise labels. But to the Tibetans, they are all alike, Lopas or Chachu, that is to say, savages” (1941: 69).<sup>40</sup>

From the perspective of the Tibetans, both Lopas and Monpas were outside the proper civilizational scheme, but the Monpas who had embraced the faith were considered to be higher in this scheme than the “Lopa barbarians”. The difference between Monpa and “Lopa” was a question of being “more or less civilized compared to mainstream Tibetans” (Pommaret 1999: 64). In the context of Monyul, however, use of the term “Gidu/Lopa” separated, on the one hand, Monpas from non-Buddhist tribes, and united, on the other, Monpas with other Tibetan Buddhist communities on the borders of Tibet (Bailey 1957). Bailey brings out the relationality of these terms through his observation that in the Tsangpo valley, inhabited by Monpas, Bodhpas (Tibetans) and Drukpas (Bhutanese) who had all migrated there in search of the promised land of Pemako, the distinctions that existed between these different groups were overcome by their common concern to be different from the non-Buddhist “Lopas”. He writes of the inhabitants of Tsangpo valley, and especially the village of Kapu,

The Bhutanese, called Drukpas by the Tibetans still considered themselves the subjects of the Trongsa Penlo (who in the time since their ancestors emigrated had become the Maharaja of Bhutan). Similarly, the people from Monyul, called Monbas by the Tibetans, called themselves by the name of the country from which their ancestors had come rather than by the place in which they are. They appeared however to be in the process of destroying the thin barrier which divided Drukpas from Monbas.....*Their racial origins were becoming obliterated by their need to distinguish themselves from the Lopas, who lived in isolated villages throughout the same country* (1957: 74) [emphasis added].

It should be clear that in the classificatory schemes of Buddhist populations in Tibet and its borderlands, a distinction existed between those who belonged to the faith and those who did not. The “Lopas” could mean any non-Buddhist tribe, from the Adis (formerly, Abors) in Subansiri to the Nishis in Kameng, living in the vicinity of Buddhist settlements. In west Arunachal Pradesh, the “Gidu” word was applied to all the non-Monpa tribes such as the Akas,

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<sup>40</sup> Note that Assam at this period included the frontier tracts which only later became a separate state called Arunachal Pradesh.

Mijis and Bangnis, and the cultural distinctions between them were heightened by their relations of hostility.

In spite of living in adjacent settlements, Monpas and non-Monpas in Monyul traditionally had hostile relations. British colonial administrators visiting the region between 1914 and 1941 had noted how the mild-mannered Monpas were frequently subject to raids and taxation by the more martial Mijis and Akas. Captain Nevill of the British government, during his survey of Monpa areas in 1914, reports with regard to Loba (here, referring to the Mijis of West Kameng) harassment of Monpas,

Their blackmailing raids have been going on for many years. They look on the Monbas as their lawful prey and talk of their visits as collecting taxes. These things must be stopped at once, and there should be no difficulty about it (Nevill, cited in Reid [1942]1983: 286).

Nevill further describes the Monbas of But and Konia villages, considered lowly even by other Monpa groups since they practiced animist rituals, as being a “miserable lot...entirely under the thumb of the Mijis who make them cultivate for them” (Ibid: 283). Clearly, territorial contiguity did not make for a greater sense of neighborliness. Thembang, a Monpa village in West Kameng even today has fortified boundaries that were erected by inhabitants to ward off “Gidu” raids.

In present times, Monpas consider the other Arunachalis as being “less civilized” compared to them, since they had a religion and script long before the others did. During everyday conversations, Monpas refer to non-Monpa Arunachali groups somewhat derisively as barbarians (using the English word) and offer historical as well as contemporary anecdotes of harassment by various “Gidu” groups who live in closest proximity with Monpas. One person recounted to me an interesting perspective of the *dao* – a sharp and large chopper used for many everyday purposes. He said that while the Monpas might carry the *dao* around, they would only use it to clear their way forward in dense jungle, and never to inflict injury on any living creature (While the Monpas can eat fish, yak and other meat obtained from others, they claim that their religion prohibits them from killing, that is, hunting or fishing for food. Huber [1997a, 2001] has

a different perspective on this, arguing that the representation of Tibetan Buddhism as a non-violent religion that prohibits the killing of animals is one largely disseminated by the Tibetan community in exile; as historically, Tibetan societies practiced hunting for subsistence as well as commerce). But the “Gidus” use the *dao* as a weapon to inflict violence on men and animals. It is common perception among many Monpas that despite, or possibly because of the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, which taught them to be “peace-loving”, they have been dominated by their more aggressive neighbours.

Yet, these “Gidu” groups once considered outsiders have now allied with the Monpas in the demand for a local autonomous region. In the contemporary context, the Monpas share a common regional identity with Akas and Mijis as residents of Monyul, and in order to demand a separate regional unit carved out of the present territory of Arunachal Pradesh, they have to express solidarity with the “Gidus” with whom they traditionally shared little sympathy or connection (Mitchell 1883: 27).

While articulating the regional identity of the autonomy demand, Monpas supporters rationalize this compromise on the grounds that both Monpas and their neighboring “Gidu” groups are collectively marginalized in relation to more powerful “Gidu” groups living in the eastern and central parts of Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Adis (formerly Abor), Nishis (formerly Dafla) or Apatanis, who have superior educational qualifications and constitute the “creamy layer” of Arunachal’s tribal populations. Many of these groups had converted to Christianity during the British colonial period and moved up in material and educational terms.<sup>41</sup> The presence and influence of various denominations of the Christian mission and their welfare efforts in the eastern and central parts of Arunachal Pradesh have helped many in these parts to acquire university degrees and high administrative posts. Government-funded schools and colleges too are more numerous in these areas than in Monpa areas, resulting in the near absence

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<sup>41</sup> The first school and the first college in Arunachal Pradesh were established in Adi territory at Pasighat in 1920 and 1964 respectively (Blackburn 2004: 22)

of Monpas in high bureaucratic posts, and consequently, their lack of voice in the state's decision-making process.

Educated Monpas resent this disparity as members of dominant Arunachali groups frequently occupy higher administrative positions even in Monyul. During 2009-2010, a non-Monpa held the Deputy Commissioner's post at Tawang, the highest position at the district level, although in neighboring West Kameng district, quite a few Monpas occupied key administrative slots in the Deputy Commissioner's office. The Monpas' loyalty to state is severely tested especially during their visits to Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, where they have to deal with a bureaucratic set-up dominated by Adis and Nishis, and are forcefully made aware of their marginality during such dealings. They argue that once autonomy is granted, they would not have to visit Itanagar for every little thing since official processes would be routed through the local administrative offices.

The regional imbalance in power applies to the non-Monpa groups living in Monyul as well, who are similarly marginalized compared to the dominant groups of central and eastern Arunachal Pradesh. The official MARDC discourse highlights this regional disparity when splitting the category of "Gidu" into those who live within Mon region and those who live without and drawing the former into the local identity of Mon. Sonam Thunggon, former secretary, Bomdila unit of MARDC argues that the autonomy proposal includes Monpas and non-Monpa tribal inhabitants of Tawang and West Kameng such as the Khoas, Mijis and Akas, and adds; "Khoas, Akas, Mijis are more supportive [of the demand] than Monpas". In this way, MARDC leaders attempt to bridge the divide between a regional identity and an ethnic identity by identifying an other where non-Monpa "Gidus" are only selectively excluded.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In other examples of autonomy demands, proponents of autonomy have frequently isolated an identifiable other residing within, and as the ethnic movement became increasingly aggressive, the other progressively became victims of attacks and evictions. In case of the Monpas, the other is selectively identified.

### **Development and local autonomy**

The Mon regional identity rests to a large extent on the case it makes for regional development in which all residents may be equal share-holders. In a press interview, T.G. Rinpoche clarifies the background for the autonomy demand, saying that “there was no feeling of alienation among the people of these districts”, and that “certain factors like different geography of the region, varied culture and tradition besides backwardness ....compelled the people to demand autonomy”<sup>43</sup>. The stress on the “different geography” and “backwardness” of Monyul is meant to underscore the uniqueness of the region, for which special development measures are needed. MARDC leaders allege that despite the geo-strategic importance of Monyul in India-China border relations this region has received less attention from the government of India in matters of development compared to other areas of Arunachal Pradesh, and it continues to remain backward on all fronts (*Constitution 2005: 2*).

Climatic and topographic factors, including snow in the winter and rain and landslides in the monsoon, which cause road blocks, make this mountainous region unfit for any kind of development activities for much of the year. Hence, this region requires special considerations that are not possible under the present administrative set-up. Centrally allocated funds are not adequately utilized for the development of this region due to under-representation of people from this region in the state assembly. Whenever there is delay in apportioning funds, resulting in a change of season in Mon region in the meantime, a non-Monpa bureaucrat or minister would (allegedly) be likely to say, “Oh, its winter now, snowing, and so funds will be diverted to Itanagar”. Proponents of autonomy argue that an autonomous council would have control over local development programs, enabling the proper and timely execution of development projects in the Mon region.

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<sup>43</sup> “Mon Autonomous Region demand gains momentum,” *United News of India* (Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh), 18 June 2008



However, I highlight a different aspect to the thesis of regional underdevelopment put forward by leaders of the Mon autonomy demand. I argue that the development narrative provides the leaders with the means to weld specific concerns about preserving Tibetan Buddhist traditions with popular aspirations for development within the autonomy demand. In doing so, I follow Gramsci's contention (2000) that the leaders of any popular movement must take into account the concerns of the people and utilize popular idioms in order to gain support of the common people – and differ from the argument of the early Subaltern Studies collective that the subaltern constitutes an autonomous domain separate from elite politics (Guha 1997). In Monyul many people have at least one relative in the monasteries, and monks and village priests play important roles in forming social opinion in both rural and urban communities. The strong leadership of monks in the autonomy demand has not resulted in a rift between the laity and the monks, but to the contrary, has helped the discourse of autonomy to percolate down to the lay people. T.G. Rinpoche's personal charisma and grassroots campaigning have also been instrumental in mobilizing public reception to the idea of autonomy.

Use of the development agenda serves to make the aims of the movement convergent with popular interests, for the issue of development has more appeal among lay Monpas as well as non-Monpas relative to the agenda of cultural preservation in which the monk proponents of the demand have greater stakes. When I asked one rural grassroots leader about the stress placed on cultural preservation in the MARDC movement, such as introducing Tibetan language in the schools and offices of Monyul, he replied, "*they* have different ideas" (emphasis added). When prodded, he said that being a monk, the Rinpoche might have other ideas. Rural leaders like him begin by admitting that the main reason for starting the MARDC movement was cultural (religious) preservation, yet, very soon they move on to talk about the need to develop roads, education and medical facilities.

Development is a particularly pervasive narrative in the Monyul border region, where the inclement climate creates a year-round dependence on the army for basic infrastructural facilities,

and often even for food supplies. Bhan (2008) describes a similar situation for Kargil, another border region on India's northern frontier with permanent military settlements, where people regard development as a necessary good to be welcomed, instead of a state imposition that has to be thwarted or strategically resisted (Ferguson 1994, Li 1999). In Monyul, state and civil society appear to find points of shared interest in the development narrative. The desire for development becomes palpably evident in conversations about roads and connectivity. Road construction in this part of the country is the task of the General Reserve Engineering Force (GREF), a wing of the Border Roads Organization. The Indian government allocates a good amount of development funds for infrastructural development in this region. Yet, even today this region remains cut off from the rest of the country during both the winter and summer monsoon seasons, because of road blocks created either by heavy rains, snowfall or landslides in altitudes that reach 14000 ft. on stretches.

State agents stress good connectivity as being of paramount importance in a border region such as Tawang, especially in light of news reports about increased road construction activities on the Chinese side of the border. In an interview, a retired army general, Lt Gen. D.B. Shekhatkar pointed out that China has constructed railway lines right up to Lhasa and is also planning to construct another railway line right up to the border with Bhutan, which will be very close to the narrow corridor, often termed the chicken's neck, connecting the Northeast region with the rest of the country (*Assam Tribune*, 12 April 2010). In contrast, the road that connects Tawang to Tezpur, the state border between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and the only gateway of the Mon region to the rest of India, is in a perennially disabled state.

However, unlike the state perspective (reflected in the army general's remarks), where improved road communication means greater national security, in the public discourse on roads, the everyday benefits are more important. I once experienced first-hand the repercussions of poor connectivity in this border region, when a power transformer in Tawang exploded and plunged the whole town into darkness. It took the local electricity board more than one week to repair the

transformer because road blocks apparently prevented both the expert technicians from Kolkata as well as the replacement transformer from reaching Tawang. During this week, the electricity board doled out power in measly portions – 2-3 intermittent hours – on a daily basis. There is a private helicopter service operated by the Pawan Hans Helicopter Ltd. Company on the Guwahati-Tawang-Itanagar circuit, but that too is suspended during inclement weather.

Moreover, for the common people, helicopters are not the most viable travel option. The main option for people who do not own private vehicles is to travel on chartered Tata Sumo cars that have the capacity for a maximum of 9 people but usually carry 11 passengers. A bus service operates between Tawang and Bomdila, but fatal road accidents of bus and Tata Sumo passengers are common on the road to Tawang, made doubly dangerous by the high prevalence of fog in higher altitudes. Usually, such accidents take place at blind-curve points where the road swerves sharply. Such sharp curves can easily be avoided if roads are built in a planned fashion, or if the roads are made wider and flatter at turnings. Many areas in the Tawang district lack motorable roads till today where travel by foot, mules and less commonly now, yaks constitute the means of transport.

Commodities in the region are overpriced because of the high transportation costs from the neighboring states. Export too is limited for the same reason – transportation expenses far outweigh the income earned. Bad roads affect both public health care and education in Monyul. Due to the lack of proper health care infrastructure,<sup>44</sup> patients have to be transported either to cities in neighboring Assam or to Itanagar, the state capital for both diagnosis and treatment. There are several cases where patients traveling to a distant hospital, especially those with heart conditions, either died on the long ride to Itanagar or while waiting for a roadblock to be cleared.

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<sup>44</sup> For example, in Tawang district, there are 23 government healthcare facilities, but only one of them is a district hospital, and the rest are treatment clinics. The district hospital does not have amenities for surgeries or complicated medical procedures that require superior technology (*District Report: Tawang* 2009: 14).

Similarly, in the absence of good roads connecting rural areas to urban institutes for higher education, many Monpas drop out before completing secondary school.

Education and economic conditions are particularly dismal in the Zemithang/ Pangchen circle of Tawang district near the India-China border post. Zemithang has one small, sleepy town and a number of surrounding villages, but only a few with motorable roads and these latter, fortified by army garrisons, are the ones leading to the border post. Other villages less strategically located are yet to get road connectivity and can be reached only by trekking on dirt tracks. Children discontinue their studies after the eighth standard as the nearest secondary school is in Lumla, a town at a distance of 48 km from Zemithang. These school drop-outs frequently resort to working as wage-laborers in road construction projects. Urgyen Drema, a young girl in her early twenties from Khobleiteng village in Zemithang, was the only girl in her village considered “*parha-likha*” (educated) in 2010 when I visited. She tells me that she studied up to the eighth standard and then left studies because, being an only child, she could not leave her parents to go study in the secondary school at Lumla, or Tawang, which is 93 km away. She tends to her livestock and works part-time as an Anganwadi worker<sup>45</sup> where her duties include escorting little children to schools, cooking mid-day meals for them and generally taking care of the toddlers. Drema informs me that her chores leave her with ample time to engage in part-time work as a day labourer with GREF, which involves breaking stones, carrying loads etc. I visited her house where she lives with her husband, infant child and old parents, and while they do not lack basic material necessities, it is evident that a bright, intelligent mind was denied its rightful due through lack of educational opportunities. In 2010, only two other boys from this village had finished middle school, besides Drema. In fact, most people in the entire Pangchen area were

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<sup>45</sup> The Anganwadi program, as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program is popularly known, was launched by the Indian state in 1985. Its stated objective was to improve the health of the national population by targeting the nation’s children, especially those living in rural areas, by providing them with adequate government health care services (pre and post-natal health check-up, supplementary nutrition, inoculations and day-care) before and after birth and during the growing-up period. As part of this program, Anganwadi or primary health care centers were set up in rural areas and an Anganwadi workforce recruited primarily from within the rural populace (Gupta 2001: 65-69)

primary school drop-outs; they knew how to sign their name, but that was as far as their literacy skills went. There were very few primary schools here, and fewer middle schools, and little children, as Drema said, could not be coaxed to walk the long distances to school.

The GREF continues to build roads, but as recurring landslides wash away or dig holes in previously constructed roads, they lead to an endless process of road-cutting and construction that compounds the worries of commuters but also, ironically, provides a never-ending source of income in terms of contract work for some people. In fact, people in this region had realized quite early on the money-minting possibilities of development work and the earliest job opportunities in the developing urban spaces of Tawang were grabbed by those associated with development works, such as employees of Central Public Works Department, border roads labor and the *ghorawallah* (horse owners) who dominated the supply routes (Nanda 1982: 35). Various conversations in the field suggested that this trend continues even today as these groups are the ones who keep siphoning public monies meant for welfare programs to their personal funds.

Poor road connectivity has further meant that every small bureaucratic procedure presents the people of this region with a disproportionate amount of physical exertion. Residents of Monyul are required to travel to Itanagar, the capital in the eastern part of the state for minor official work such as getting a signature on a document. But as there is no direct road between Itanagar and Monyul, travelers from Tawang spend more than 24 hours on the road, crossing state boundaries to Assam and then to Itanagar. A state government willing to allocate money for building intra-state road connection between east and west Arunachal Pradesh would incur stupendous expenditures and would be forced to suspend all other development works. But if Monyul is given autonomy, administrative offices would be relocated here and there would no longer be any need to travel to Itanagar for the slightest bureaucratic task.



3.1. Tsona Gontse Rinpoche in his chamber at GRL monastery, Bomdila



3.2. Map of the proposed Mon Autonomous Region on the front door of a Monpa house



**3.3. Bhoti language and literature school: Tawang Public School, established by the Dalai Lama in 1997**



**3.4. Road block at Thonglen, on the Tawang-Zemithang road**



3.5. MARDC badge with yak logo

Autonomy proponents quote all the above factors while justifying the need for a local autonomous council. If Monyul gets autonomy, development funds will flow directly from the central government to the autonomous council instead of being routed through the Arunachal Pradesh state government – so the argument runs. The MARDC *Constitution* (2005: 4) contains a proposal to request the central government for additional development package if autonomy is implemented for Monyul.



However, non-Monpas from outside the region argue that the autonomy demand inflates the development need of the region. They say that although infrastructural development is certainly an issue of importance here, there are other areas of Arunachal Pradesh (with the exception of the capital and some areas) which are even less developed compared to the Mon region. A non-Monpa government employee belonging to one of the dominant tribes, who was stationed temporarily at Bomdila reasoned, “If you think of it, people are much better off here. On the other [eastern] side, in Kurungkumey, Subansiri, it is all forest. Here you don’t find any beggars, and everybody gets regular meals. But on the other side, even today people have to forage in the jungles for food”. It is true that the infrastructural situation in some other parts of Arunachal Pradesh is much worse than Monyul.

The use of development discourse in the MARDC demand for autonomy can be understood as accruing from multiple standpoints. It is through the idiom of development that religious leaders of the MARDC meld together esoteric with public interests. It is also by invoking development that the leaders are able to make a case for regional autonomy without appearing to harbour exclusivist ideologies. Monpas in government service can defend the autonomy proposal without appearing to be disloyal to either the state or national government, for they can navigate the bumpy areas by professing the development goal through the argument of better connectivity and security for a border region.

A Monpa government officer in Tawang argues that the development needs of the region would be best served by autonomy;

To Itanagar, it is 600 km.... The nearest airport is Guwahati [capital of Assam]. The working season in Tawang is very different from other parts of Arunachal Pradesh. By the time [development] funds are released, it is too late for construction. .... We cannot grow much except for potato and other seasonal vegetables. Transportation costs to Tezpur is very high, taking costs of the products up – who will buy? Supplies from Tezpur [nearest town in Assam] cost much. In winter, there is massive deforestation, because of heavy demand for firewood. During winter and summer, roads are blocked.

Development gives credibility to the demand for local autonomy by putting forward the argument that the demand for autonomy stems neither from alienation nor from religious difference but out of a collective desire for development. Religious and cultural grounds alone cannot justify the need for separate administration. Mention of culturally alienating conditions too must be suppressed given Monyul's sensitive location. Hence, the public text of the autonomy demand highlights the development narrative. Further, the development agenda holds together the patchwork identity of the Mon Autonomous Region by muting the cultural and historical differences between Monpas and the non-Monpas living in Mon, and making the rhetoric of a non-Monpa other subservient to the rhetoric of regional (under)development and backwardness.

In contrast, the narrative of culture preservation belies the bounded locality of Mon. "One who has no religion" is not only the definition of the "Gidu" but also defines the boundaries of belonging within the representational space, *viz.* Mon. In this narrative, the other is negatively marked by the absence of Buddhism. The balance between the dual agendas of development and culture preservation is, therefore, hard to maintain, and as each individual narrative surfaces, the boundaries of the represented space also shifts. The local identity projected by the MARDC is internally fractured by horizontal extensions that on the one hand, cleave apart the Monpa and non-Monpa identities, and on the other, draw connections between the Monpas and other Tibetan Buddhists of the Indian Himalayas. I discuss the latter tendency in the following section.

### **Politics of culture: Language, medicine, religion**

Bhalukpong is a small town where the inter-state border check post between Assam and Monyul is located. A former office-bearer of the MARDC (name withheld) describes what he expects autonomy to achieve; "The moment one enters Bhalukpong everything should look different. People should experience a different new world". This man's view, which may be contingent on several other factors, points to particular spatial imaginations at work in the MARDC discourse. The Mon Autonomous Region begins at Bhalukpong and ends at Tawang-Tibet border. The

alterity of this “different new world” is based (obviously) on cultural features derived from Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

One supporter from rural Tawang concedes that (Tibetan Buddhist) religion is the main factor behind the autonomy demand, for “in the last ten years, people have started to drift to other religions”. In informal conversations, leaders frequently allude to the potential threat to Buddhism from the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries who are very influential in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>46</sup> A Monpa person in a senior government post (who incidentally had begun but never completed monastic studies) told me that the proselytizing goal of Christian missions is “scary”, for it is quite different from the goal of Buddhism, which is to attain liberation from *samsara* (cycle of life). He expressed reservations about the methods of the Christian missions for converting people, such as offering financial aid and other services, and said that he had once stumbled upon a loose sheet left behind at a public telephone facility, which turned out to be a progress report of a Christian mission documenting how much progress had been made, how many people had been converted and outlining target areas and groups.

The actual number of Monpas who have converted to Christianity is very less;<sup>47</sup> yet, many in Monyul regard the Christian missions as posing a challenge to Buddhist cultural traditions. A few years back, some unknown persons damaged the Christian Revival Church building at Tawang in the night, after which the district commissioner had to lock up the church under public pressure. T.G. Rinpoche once said to me, “In Arunachal Pradesh, where we are 10 % and 90 % are not Buddhists (*sic*), we are losing our culture”, implying that the “culture” will be preserved if autonomy is granted. The narrative of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation is thus

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<sup>46</sup> A trend towards cultural revivalism is also growing among the dominant tribes like the Nishis and Adis. A section of intellectuals, advocating a return to their pre-Christian roots, are trying to revive the indigenous Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon worship) faith.

<sup>47</sup> A young Monpa Christian told me he had converted to Christianity after experiencing a “miracle”. When a terrible accident once left him with fractured ribs and other injuries, he had little hope of surviving. Yet, he survived. He attributes his recovery to being introduced to and developing faith in Christianity through a friend. This man told me that although there are around five or six active Christian missions in Tawang itself and at least two churches, the Christian Baptist Church and the Christian Revival Church, they do not have any Monpa numbers. The Christian Revival Church was built in 2003 and there are around 300 members of the Church now, barring Monpas.

linked to the concern to preserve Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions in Monyul. Favored particularly by the monastic communities, the narrative of cultural preservation proposes an alliance between different Tibetan Buddhist populations of India.

But unlike the idea of local autonomy, which rests on the dual anchors of territory and development, the idea of a cultural community between Tibetan Buddhists of the Indian Himalayas does not have similar material support, given that it forges alliance between territorially and politically dispersed communities. So what gives it strength? I argue that the narrative of cultural preservation acquires concrete expression through struggles collectively waged for the rights of Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*), the traditional language and medicine system respectively of Tibetan Buddhism. A wider, subterranean spatial imagination not manifest in the constitutional model of autonomy becomes both visible and is given practical and contemporary relevance through the promotion of Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa.

*Bhoti*: The first involves the campaign for including Bhoti/Tibetan in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Bhoti, as it is known in India, is the language of the Tibetan Buddhist religious canon. The *Constitution* (2005) of the Mon Autonomous Region contains a proposal to promote Bhoti as the official language in local schools and offices in Monyul by including it in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution: “Government of Arunachal Pradesh would be requested to consider inclusion of Bhoti language as third language up to Secondary level in all schools in the MAC area in consultation with the leaders of Council area” (*Constitution* 2005: 4). In July 2010, a 3-day seminar was held in Tawang to raise popular awareness about the importance of including Bhoti in the Eighth Schedule.

The Eighth Schedule contains a list of the 22 scheduled languages of India, and the government of India is responsible for the development and enrichment of these languages. Indian education policy follows a three-language formula, which stipulates that education is to be provided in three languages, the first language, which could be the mother tongue or regional language, the second language, which could be Hindi, English or any other Modern Indian

Language (MIL), and the third language, which again could be either Hindi or English or a MIL (Bhatt and Mahmood 2008). Inclusion of Bhoti in the Eighth Schedule will not only give it a legal status as an official Modern Indian Language (MIL), but will also facilitate instruction in the Bhoti medium from the primary level onwards in schools in Tibetan speaking regions.

According to Tibetan myth and early Buddhist-era historiography, the Bhoti or Tibetan script was invented by Thonmi Sambhota, a Tibetan scholar who was sent to India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century by the Tibetan king Srongstan Gampo to learn the language of and translate the Buddhist scriptures. Sambhota invented the Tibetan alphabet by adapting the prevailing script of the Gupta period (Shakabpa, cited in Thakur 2009: 39)<sup>48</sup> to the needs of the Tibetan tongue, and developed 4 vowels and 30 consonants for Bhoti. The script is strongly associated with the literary Tibetan language, in which the Tibetan Buddhist religious canon (*Kangyur*, *Tangyur*) as well as various medical, historical and grammatical treatises are written.

Literary or classical Tibetan, which has undergone many reforms and developments since the time of Sambhota, continues to be the canonical language of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment.<sup>49</sup> While literary Tibetan is required for scholarship in the classical literature, linguistic developments among speakers of Tibetan-related languages of the Himalayan region have resulted in the use of Bhoti script to write these hitherto oral languages (Chamberlain 2008). Several of these spoken varieties have developed into written languages in the last century using the Bhoti script. For example, Dzongkha, the Bhutanese national language uses the Bhoti script.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The exact origin source of Bhoti is disputed. While some Tibetan scholars use the term Devanagari, others use Brahmi while yet others simply quote Sanskrit as the origin of the Bhoti script. The place where it originated also has been variously mentioned as Kashmir, Nepal or Magadha. Since the script in use during the Gupta period was Siddhamatrika, a derivative of Brahmi, it may have been that Brahmi was the scriptural source. The translations were carried out from Sanskrit texts, and hence, probably, Sanskrit is often mentioned as the source of the Tibetan script.

<sup>49</sup> Literary Tibetan is called *Yig-skad* (pron.yig-kay), while vernacular Tibetan is called *Phal-skad* (pron. pha-kay) (Tournadre 2003:26, 27). Another term, *Chos-skad* (pron. choe-kay) or the language of Dharma, is used to refer to the language of religion and philosophy, although it is pure Literary Tibetan. Tournadre (2003) identifies three categories of Literary Tibetan: Old Tibetan (7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century), Classical Literary Tibetan (12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century), and Modern Literary Tibetan (20<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>50</sup> So while there is a historical parallelism between the Bhoti script and the classical Tibetan language, a distinction between language and script has emerged in the light of recent developments. Chamberlain

A modernized Tibetan language corresponding to the spoken language of Lhasa and Central Tibet (*U-kay*) was developed and is now taught globally to students who wish to learn the Tibetan language. It is also the standard Tibetan used in international Tibetology conferences as well as by the Tibetan government-in-exile (Tournadre 2003: 26).

The Monpa communities and other Tibetan Buddhists of the Himalayas speak different “Tibetan-related languages” or oral variants of modern Tibetan (Tournadre 2003)<sup>51</sup>. Within Monyul, different Monpa communities speak different oral variants; in northern Monyul, Dakpa dialect is spoken, while in southern and central parts, Tshangla is spoken. Brokpas (yak-herders) in the villages of Nyukmadung, Senge and Lubrang speak Brokeh, which is also spoken by the yak-herders of Merak-Sakten in Bhutan. The dialects spoken by Monpa groups in Lish and Chugh villages are different from the other dialects.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of a common dialect, the Tibetan dialect as spoken in Central Tibet acted as the lingua franca at least for the Brokeh, Tshangla and Dakpa speakers; and people from these regions could mutually understand each other, if not communicate freely, through the link language of Tibetan. Since the entire region was under Tibetan administration effectively till 1950, religious, administrative and judicial documents and circulars were written in literary Tibetan, and the latter functioned as a state language to consolidate the bureaucratic networks between Lhasa and Tawang during Tibetan rule (Thakur 2006). As an elderly villager in Tawang said, people living in areas under Tibetan rule knew Tibetan because it was “the language of the *raja* [ruler]”. Monastic recruits from these areas were trained in literary Tibetan while many among the laity were familiar with spoken

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(2008) uses the term ‘Sambhota’ (after the inventor) to refer to the script and Tibetan to refer to the orthographic system of classical Tibetan.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Tournadre (2003) uses the term “Tibetan-related languages” to include mostly oral languages spoken in the India-Tibet border areas, as well as by groups in Nepal and Bhutan.

<sup>52</sup> According to Toni Huber, there are languages belonging to 5 different branches of the Tibeto-Burman family tree in Tawang and West Kameng: Dakpa spoken north of Dzela pass; Brokeh, the Bodic language of high altitude dwellers practicing pastoralism throughout the region; Dirang Tshangla spoken south of the Dzela pass; a fourth Tibeto-Burman language, yet to be classified; Kho-Bwa languages spoken by the 4 Sartang villages, Sherdukpens, Buguns/Khowas (and perhaps Lishpas); and Hrusish languages spoken by Miji/Dimmai and Hrusso/Aka. Brokeh has the closest affinity with Tibetan to the north, while Tshangla has less so (Personal communication, February 2013).

Tibetan. Monpa traditional folk-songs contain many Tibetan words, and some are sung in Tibetan, proving the continuing hold of Tibetan over Monpa socio-cultural life.

Gelong Ngawang Dhondhup, senior lama and Bhoti teacher at Dirang Higher Secondary School told me that village lamas used to teach Bhoti unofficially in Monyul, but these classes came to a halt around the 1960s, in the aftermath of the India-China boundary war. In its place, the Indian government started instruction in Assamese, for the North East Frontier Agency, as Arunachal Pradesh was known then, was initially part of Assam. Assamese was replaced by Hindi after Arunachal Pradesh became a union territory in 1972 and a state in 1987. Currently, despite English being the first language of education, Hindi has become the *de facto* lingua franca for most Arunachalis, including Monpas. Different Monpa groups commonly communicate with each other in Hindi, although Bhoti continues to be used in ritual contexts which require reading of the scriptures. Older people from Mon remark, “*aajkal toh Hindi chalta hain*” (Nowadays, people speak Hindi), implying that with the change of governments, Hindi has replaced Tibetan as the language of rule and medium of communication.

But the MARDC demand for the constitutional recognition of Bhoti is not an independent project of some Monpa leaders; it is a collaborative initiative by groups in different Himalayan regions such as Zaskar, Ladakh, Spiti, Kinnaur, Uttar Kashi, Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Arunachal Pradesh and the entire Himalayan range of India (Gombu 2009: 5). Ladakhis, in particular, have been at the forefront of this struggle, and Ladakh was the first among the Himalayan states to adopt the Tibetan system as its system of education (Chamberlain 2008: 125, also, Parvez cited in Thakur 2009: 40), although the initiative to promote Bhoti as a constitutional language was taken by charismatic monk personalities with international statures, such as T.G. Rinpoche in Monyul and Lama Chospel Zotpa in Ladakh.

In June 2008, when I had my first interview with T.G. Rinpoche, I asked him why they [the Monpas] wished to learn Tibetan in schools. The Rinpoche replied with some force that “Bhoti is not Tibetan”, and said that one should not link language with nation, for Bhoti does not

belong to the Tibetans. Monpa monks and Bhoti teachers avoid directly referring to Tibetan as Bhoti. They say they are fighting for the preservation of the classical script. *But in Mon, as well as other Tibetan-related areas of India, what is taught in schools is not the classical Tibetan script alone but the modern Tibetan language.*<sup>53</sup>

In the entire Himalayan regions of India, Bhoti, as it is used in publications and school curricula, refers in practice to modern Tibetan. As Gelong Nyima Don<sup>54</sup> stated, “*dbus-skad* [pron. *U-kay*/ Central Tibetan] has become the *yig-skad* [pron. *yig-kay*/ literary Tibetan] today”. Bhoti textbooks are published by the Sherig Parkhang, the publication division of the department of education of the Tibetan government-in-exile at Dharamsala, although new textbooks for the schools of Monyul will be printed at Arunachal Pradesh, as I was told during a visit to the Deputy Directorate of School Education (DDSE) at Tawang in April 2010. During this visit, I also met Yeshe Khawa, Drugyal Lama, and Lhamo Tsering, monks and Bhoti teachers who were at that time engaged in designing syllabi and illustrating textbooks for school primers.

Yeshe Khawa told me that it is the *lipi* (script) which is paramount: “All the knowledge of tradition that we possess are encoded here [Tibetan scriptures]”. His stress on script is significant, for, despite the variations between the Tibetan-related languages spoken in different regions of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and India, literary Tibetan is common to all of them. Linguistic identification with *Bhoti* in place of the oral Monpa dialects thus unites the Monpas with the other Tibetan Buddhist peoples of the Indian Himalayas. *Bhoti*, here, is not simply a language but

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<sup>53</sup> A comment in the online newsletter *Ladakh Reach* is intriguing: “Moreover, the school texts in Lahaul-Spiti and Tawang are entitled as ‘Bhoti reader’ and if you see inside the textbooks, colloquial Tibetan language is used, instead of *chos-kad* [the scriptural language], ..... it is just like ‘promoting colloquial Tibetan language in the name of Bhoti’”. <http://news.reachladakh.com/news-details.php?&9037108689101832591411589417&page=&pID=352&rID=0&cPath=5> (Accessed 11 September 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Gelong Nyima Don (popularly known as Lama Don), from Lebrang village, Tawang, is 53 years old. He is an ex-monk, and had studied in Drepung monastery at Karnataka. I met him for the first time in 2008, and again, in 2010. He is originally from Mukto, but settled in Tawang since 1997, since the Dalai Lama’s visit to Tawang that year. Inspired by the Dalai Lama’s call to promote Bhoti, Lama Don taught Bhoti to adults as well as school children between 2001 and 2004 but retired from this activity in 2008. Since then, he has been involved in various kinds of social work, especially for the cause of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation.



intricately tied up with Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Chamberlain 2008: 120-121). Monpas consider Bhoti to be no less a part of their identity than the local Monpa dialects, since it is the language of their sacred texts, and constitutes the strongest connection to their Buddhist identity. A Ladakhi proponent of Bhoti echoes the sentiments of many of my informants when he writes, “If serious effort is not made towards the use and preservation of the indigenous Ladakhi/Tibetan scriptures, the coming generation may write their cherished language in Persian or Devanagari script” (Shakspo 2005: 64). As the Tibetan Buddhists of India’s border regions increasingly face pressures from neighboring Hindu, Muslim or Christian communities, Bhoti provides an anchor around which these minority communities may mobilize.

The politics of Bhoti involves a dialogue with the government of India by calling for certain amendments in the Indian constitutional and legal code, and utilizing the framework of minority rights in this context. A paper published as part of the proceedings of a seminar on Bhoti held in Tawang in August 2009 quotes Article 29 (1) and 350 (A) of the Indian Constitution, both of which I reproduce below.

Article 29: Protection of interests of minorities. (1) Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.

350-A: It should be the endeavor of every State and of every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups; and the president may issue directions to any state as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision for such facilities (Sridhar 1996: 333).

While the Tibetan language has been acknowledged as a minority language in the Indian context, it has been particularly applicable for Tibetan refugees in India. Article 30 (1) of the Indian Constitution proclaims that “...all minorities whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer institutions of their choice” (Maslak 2008: 85) and on the basis of this provision, both the Central Tibetan Schools (CST) Administration run by the Tibetan Government-in-exile at Dharamsala and the Indian Department of Education officially

provide education for Tibetan refugee students in India in the Tibetan medium (Ibid. 85). Tibetan is taught at the primary level in Tibetan schools in accordance with the UNESCO-recognized fact that education is best when imparted in the mother tongue (Sridhar 1996: 335).

What we are discussing here, however, is not the rights of Tibetan children but the rights of speakers of Tibetan-related languages to be taught in Tibetan. Strictly speaking, Tibetan is not the mother tongue of any of these communities, who speak Tibetan-related oral languages. Yet, Monpa and other Tibetan Buddhist communities in India rally under the common agenda of Tibetan *qua* Bhoti for pragmatic reasons. As a religious textual language, Bhoti has purchase only in monasteries and in conducting religious ceremonies. But in the event of its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule, it will generate demands for Bhoti teachers. If granted mother tongue status, it can be offered from primary levels onwards in schools in Tibetan Buddhist regions. Since it will also have the status of a Modern Indian Language (MIL), it can be offered as a course in higher educational institutions, creating university level jobs for Bhoti scholars.

The politics of the Bhoti language is thus associated with issues of livelihood of monks, who have traditionally acted as Bhoti teachers even though there are many lay individuals acquiring formal degrees in Tibetan language today. However, there are quite a few problems relating to remuneration and recruitment in Bhoti teaching, foremost being the legal problems in recruiting Bhoti teachers in regular posts; government institutions can only give regular appointment to candidates who have cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET), and Bhoti teachers, despite all their qualifications do not possess this certificate since Bhoti is not officially recognized. They can only be hired through special ad-hoc government schemes that usually come with low salaries, which, in turn acts as a further disincentive to recruitment.<sup>55</sup> When monks

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<sup>55</sup> Gelong Ngawang Dhondhup, Bhoti teacher at Dirang Higher Secondary School, whom I had interviewed in October 2009, let me know that the salaries of Bhoti teachers had improved only marginally since the 1990s. It was 500 rupees monthly in the 1990s, 1000 rupees from 1994 to 2000 and 1500 rupees from 2001 onwards. From 2008, Bhoti teachers hired under the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (National Literacy Mission) contractual scheme are paid a salary of upto 8000 rupees monthly.

can earn more by officiating in household or monastery ceremonies than by teaching Bhoti in schools, they prefer the former option.

The politics of Bhoti is therefore not simply rooted in cultural aspirations but has a pragmatic aspect since it stems from concrete factors in which considerations of monastic livelihood and survival emerge as central concerns. If monks have to be integrated in modern secular institutions, then the fields of their expertise should have income-generating values within publicly available frameworks.

*Sowa Rigpa*: A second campaign in which Monpas are invested involves the demand to make the traditional Tibetan medicine system, Sowa Rigpa (science of healing), a government accredited practice within India. Sowa Rigpa refers basically to what is popularly known in the Western world as Tibetan medicine (Clifford 1990). Traditionally, this system of medicine is known by different local names in the different areas where it was practiced. While among many Tibetan communities in Tibet, it is called Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*), in Ladakh and Mongolia, it is commonly known as *amchi* medicine, derived from the Mongolian word *am-r-jay* (“superior to all”), in Kargil and Skardu, as *abba*, and in the institutes for Tibetan studies for Tibetan exile communities in India, it is simply called Tibetan medicine (“*bhot chikitsa*”).

In many of the areas where it was traditionally practiced, Sowa Rigpa has a declining clientele today, with Western medicine fast making inroads in rural areas. Besch (2006) shows in his detailed ethnographic study of *amchi* practitioners in Spiti, a small border region in Himachal Pradesh, how the break-down of village social structure through increased communication with distant urban centers, integration into a monetary economy, and introduction and state sponsorship of Western medicine clinics in these areas have resulted in the dissolution of traditional reciprocal ties between *amchi* and their patients as well as a shrinking of the power and authority of the former. Contrary to a past when learning medicine ensured economic and social standing, the *amchi* of today can no longer make a living solely through their medical practice. Despite the widespread use of Sowa Rigpa among Tibetan Buddhist communities, practitioners

do not have the license to practice medicine outside of the monastic circuits or to legally market Sowa Rigpa medicine in pharmacies. Sowa Rigpa practitioners therefore seek government recognition in order to be at par with the more popular biomedicine system.

Like the Bhoti campaign, this is a collaborative venture by groups across the Himalayan region. The advisory council of the Sowa Rigpa Medicine Preservation Development Society has one member each from Spiti (Himachal Pradesh), Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Leh (Ladakh), Gangtok (Sikkim) and Dharamsala, while the executive members include Tibetan Buddhists from Dharamsala, Leh, Manali (Himachal Pradesh), Delhi, Zaskar (Ladakh) and Gangtok respectively (Gombu *et al* 2005). In 2005, the Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association – an organization dedicated to Tibetan Buddhist culture preservation with headquarters in Delhi – published a volume to which different experts and practitioners of Sowa Rigpa contributed articles, and who unanimously called for the official “recognition” and “patronage” of this ancient medicine system (Gombu *et al* 2005: 227). Till 2010, only four institutes in India, including the Men-Tsee-Khang at Dharamsala, were awarding Sowa Rigpa degrees, and all of them were regulated by the Central Council of Tibetan Medicine under the Tibetan government-in-exile (T.G. Rinpoche, Government Correspondence, 29 July 2010)<sup>56</sup>.

The first national seminar on Sowa Rigpa was organized in Delhi on 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2004, and was attended by representatives from the entire Himalayan belt (Gombu *et al* 2005: 19). The representatives at this meet resolved, among other things, to press for the recognition of Sowa Rigpa as an independent medical system. Legal recognition would allow government institutions to set up education and research on the Sowa Rigpa medicine system (Ibid: 8). After years of lobbying on the part of Sowa Rigpa supporters, the Indian parliament approved the Indian Medicine Central Council (Amendment) Bill, 2009 for amending the Indian Medicine Central Council Act, 1970. Once these amendments come into effect, they would confer a legal

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<sup>56</sup> I was given a copy of the government correspondence between T.G. Rinpoche and the Rajya Sabha Secretariat in Delhi.

status on Sowa Rigpa and also lead to a government mechanism for regulating the teaching, research and pharmaceutical development of Sowa Rigpa (*Press Information Bureau*, 10 September 2009).<sup>57</sup>

Compared to the Bhoti language issue, Sowa Rigpa is less publicized in the Monpas' autonomy discourse, and exists primarily as a corollary to the issue of cultural preservation. Since it directly concerns only the community of Sowa Rigpa practitioners and their patients, it makes for a more esoteric circle unlike that formed by the language community. But I discuss it here for its relevance in pointing to a trans-local community of Himalayan Buddhists that emerges in the campaigns for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa.

Leaders of the Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa struggles frequently attempt to gloss over the Tibetan connections by stressing their Indian origins or contributions. Monks temper the direct Tibetan link in Bhoti by highlighting the contribution of the classical Indian script, Sanskrit, in the development of this language. Although the Tibetan script has undergone many adaptations, evolutions and reforms in Tibet since it was invented by Sambhota, Bhoti teachers in conversations with me seemed at pains to prove that Tibetan was an Indian export. The impression they sought to give is that “it all started in India”.

The same is true of Sowa Rigpa. The various articles on Sowa Rigpa in the collaborative volume by Gombu *et al* (2005) stress the Indian heritage of this medicine system, since it was developed from Indian Buddhist medical texts taken to Tibet. Most of these articles emphasize the continuities with and possible scope for collaboration with Ayurveda, the ancient Indian medical system (Ibid. 253). Tibetan medical practitioners rely on one fundamental text known as the “Four Tantras” (*rGyud bzhi* / pron. *Gyu Shi*), roughly dating to the eighth century, which corresponds to an ancient Indian medical text, *Astāngahrdayasamhitā* written by Vāgbhatta, one

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<sup>57</sup> <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=52535> (Accessed 11 March 2012).

of the three classic writers of Ayurveda (Besch 2006: 47, Finckh 1980, Janes 1995).<sup>58</sup> It is also interwoven with concepts of Tibetan Buddhism, without the knowledge of which one's understanding of Tibetan medicine remains incomplete.

However, Tibetan medicine has followed its own trajectory of development, not always deriving from its Indian corollary. The practice of Tibetan medicine is influenced by multiple sources, including Indian and Chinese ideas, as well as pre-Buddhist shamanic rituals and healing rites of Bon religion.<sup>59</sup> It should also be noted that the doctrine of diagnosis in Tibetan medicine diverges from the Indian system of Ayurveda (Finckh 1980: 105).<sup>60</sup> Further, the practice of Tibetan medicine in its institutionalized form (e.g. Men-tsee-khang or Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute at Dharamsala) is a modern form that evolved in the middle of the twentieth century through exposure to concepts of Western bio-medicine, particularly after 1980s: it does not sum up the heterogeneity that exists in traditional Tibetan society in both the *practice* of Tibetan medicine, in which pre-Buddhist religious elements (deities, demons, spirits) underscored the social basis of illness, rather than the mind-body holism that institutionalized Tibetan medicine emphasizes; as well as category of *practioners*, which ranged from part-time village practitioners to lineage physicians, monk physicians and private, “secular” physicians) (Janes 1995: 11).

Although both Tibetan script and language and Sowa Rigpa have developed considerably within Tibet through royal patronage as well as infusion of indigenous knowledge and effort, the

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<sup>58</sup> The strongest correspondence between Tibetan and Indian medicine is seen in the humoral theory. Tibetan medicine is based on the principle of five fundamental elements (earth, water, fire, air, space) – found in Indian physiological theories – which are conceived to exist in various combinations as different phenomena. In the humoral theory of Tibetan medicine, body is constituted by the three humors of bile (*mkhris pa*), phlegm (*bad kan*) and wind (*rlung*); good health is when the three humors exist in a state of equilibrium, and loss of equilibrium results in health disorders. Other elements such as urine analysis are developments unique to Tibetan medicine (Besch 2006).

<sup>59</sup> The English translation of the full Tibetan title (which I do not reproduce here) is “The essence of Ambrosia: Tantra of the secret oral instructions on the eight branches”, but the book is commonly known by its short name “Four Tantras” derived from the book’s four parts (Besch 2006: 47)

<sup>60</sup> The system of Tibetan medicine can be compared to a tree with 3 roots, 9 trunks, 47 branches and 224 leaves; the 3 roots relating to (i) the arrangement of the body parts (healthy organism, diseased organism), (ii) system of diagnosis (observation, palpitation, questioning) and (iii) system of therapy (nutrition, behavior, medicines, external methods of treatment) respectively (Finckh 1980: 105)

current Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa campaigns promote the Indian contribution. This is even more evident in the nomenclature of the two, that is, the designation of Tibetan language as “Bhoti” and Tibetan medicine, as “Sowa Rigpa”. These terms should not be taken-for-granted, for they are contested terms. We have already seen how confusion is created by addressing Tibetan as Bhoti. Similarly, the designation Sowa Rigpa for the system of Tibetan medicine became the officially used term only in 2004 (Gombu *et al* 2005: 19). An articulate and intelligent physician of Tibetan medicine confided that gaining unanimous acceptance for the term Sowa Rigpa in India was not easy as it faced opposition from several quarters. The widely used term, Tibetan medicine, as it is popularly also known in the West, was partly responsible for stalling the official recognition of this system of medicine in India. While a section of government representatives had objections to the word “Tibetan” and wanted a substitute, a section of Tibetan representatives from the Tibetan government in exile objected to substitutes that they thought would dilute Tibetan contribution to what is now a globally recognized healing system. The negotiated outcome was the term Sowa Rigpa, which translates simply as science of healing.

It is noteworthy that the transition from Tibetan to Sowa Rigpa effectively deterritorialises the term. From being a medicine system that contains the name of a particular country, it is converted by a sleight of nomenclature to one that is spatially appropriable by practitioners, irrespective of national or cultural membership in Tibet. It is useful to note an observation by Nicolas Tournadre at this point, “*chōkā* [the language of the scriptures] is sometimes used for political reasons in order to avoid mentioning the word ‘Tibetan’, which refers to a nation and may therefore be less ideal in a religious context” (2003: 28). The same applies to Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa. That the language movement operates under the banner of Bhoti and not Tibetan and that the Tibetan medicine practitioners regroup under the title of Sowa Rigpa suggests the negotiations that India’s Tibetan Buddhist minorities make. Since the campaigns aim to secure recognition from the Indian state, they have to blunt their transnational tendencies and focus on the community of Tibetan Buddhists living within the boundaries of the

Indian nation: the community articulated through programs for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa accommodates the border. At the same time, the term Sowa Rigpa successfully gives the scattered healing practices a systematic character, and unifies its different, scattered practitioners into a “single” tradition from where further programmatic action is possible. The negotiated outcome is to offer a perspective of community that is Tibetan Buddhist but slightly removed from Tibet.

### **Forging community: Religion and organization**

As I indicate in this chapter, there is an ongoing attempt by the Tibetan Buddhist religious leadership in India to forge community ties among Tibetan Buddhist populations of the Himalayan region; and the MARDC autonomy demand in Monyul presents one aspect of this inter-connected discourse. Consider the following statement by T.G. Rinpoche;

Monpa [are a] very ancient community - before start of mainland India. In Nepal also some sections of the community call themselves Monpa. Ladakh also Mangyul. In a place called Mechuka, [in central Arunachal Pradesh], some peoples known as Mema. ....In Sikkim, some tribes (Lepcha) – they are also saying [called] Monpa. Before becoming independent, Bhutan also had Monpa. Drukpas also called themselves Monpa.

In such statements, the geography of Mon acquires trans-local contours. While I have not collected ethnographic data from non-Monpa areas (aside of secondary sources bearing on these areas), I use the narrative of cultural preservation within the MARDC discourse, which includes the struggles for the rights of Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa, to highlight the contemporary construction of a Himalayan Buddhist community. The invocation of a Tibetan Buddhist cultural tradition is at odds with the constitutional discourse of local autonomy, for it not only institutes a division between Monpa and Gidu, but also reaches outward, outside of the spaces of current Monyul, to forge community ties with people in other Tibetan Buddhist enclaves of India.

As I show, this trans-local community is based on certain pragmatic aspects. The struggles around Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa, championed by members of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy, suggest that the community is not envisaged as a spiritual community alone, but is conceived



within a rights-based framework. The rhetoric of minority rights involved in the campaigns for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa shows that the community of Buddhists is not one only devoted to spiritual goals of salvation but has clearly spelled out practical ends, to be achieved through constitutional methods. If the reorientation of Monpa areas from their former Tibet-centric networks may be identified as a process of deterritorialization, then the trans-local imaginations found in contemporary Monpa cultural struggles for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa constitute reterritorialization. But reterritorialization is not only a different geography (form) but is also of new content, characterized by the movement of Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities from the spheres of the monastery to the plane of practical action and towards engagement with constitutional parameters.<sup>61</sup>

In order to push forth such practical objectives, moreover, a unity more than what cultural identity can give is required. That is, simply stating common heritage cannot be the basis of collective action. Political unity is not an option since these Tibetan Buddhist communities are dispersed in different states of India. If common territoriality or homeland cannot be the form of the organization, something else must stand in for it. T.G. Rinpoche's words offer some insights as to where the impulse for reterritorialization stems from;

Our Buddhists are very unfortunate in terms of organization and set-up. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs [are organized]. Buddhists are worst in organizational set-up. We don't have umbrella organization..... *That is why trans-Himalayan religious brotherhood is needed.*

Brotherhood is a very loaded term, used to refer to a range of widely varying contexts. It might mean metaphorical blood ties, common caste membership as in the term *biradari* in north India, or descriptions of clan bonds between male members of a patrilineal society, as among the Pashtuns of Afghanistan. More significantly, the term, brotherhood, has acquired a particular cast

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<sup>61</sup> In a forthcoming research article, "Monks, Elections, Cars: Democracy and the Monastic System in West Arunachal Pradesh" (Gohain 2013), I argue that (Tibetan Buddhist) monastic adaptation to democratic institutions in Monyul, manifested through monks' participation in electoral politics, is a survival strategy for monks in a world where they are gradually being disinvested of (spiritual) authority.

in the context of rising Islamic identity politics where some movements and organizations style themselves as a brotherhood. I do not wish to suggest that the use of the term, brotherhood, by T.G. Rinpoche carries the meanings associated with any of the categories above.

Certainly, it would be possible to excavate this particular usage for deeper implications about gender exclusions practised in Tibetan religious and civil spheres. Women are, in general, considered to be the second sex in Tibetan society by virtue of *karma* or past deeds and hence there exists prescribed rituals that promise liberation and rebirth as men in the next life. Huber (1994) shows how women pilgrims, including nuns, are excluded from certain routes in the circumambulations of the Dag-pa Shel-ri or “pure crystal mountain”, a ritually important peak in Tibet’s Tsari region; while lay discourses justify this prohibition by citing certain negative feminine traits (impetuous, irreverent, arrogant etc.), clerical discourses justify it on the basis of feminine bodily traits (women’s bodies as ritually polluting and sexually dangerous/distracting) that would defile the purity of the sacred peak. Women are also excluded from male monastic as well as civic spaces in Tibetan society (Huber 1994: 363). Even today, membership in the Tibetan Buddhist clergy has a male bias, for nuns have a secondary position compared to monks, and are rarely associated with higher positions within the monastic echelon. Nuns cannot appear in examinations that would qualify them for the Geshe rank, which is the highest degree that can be conferred in the monastic educational system.

Use of the term, brotherhood, thus, carries the gender exclusions practiced in the wider Tibetan context. A Buddhist brotherhood, as used by the Rinpoche, may imply the authority, power of decisions and capacity for action, traditionally vested in monks versus nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist system. I do not put forward the term brotherhood as an indigenous category for explaining current Monpa political processes. Yet, it must be understood as a fraternal organization – composed chiefly of male, religious personnel, that is, Tibetan Buddhist monks. When T.G. Rinpoche remarks that “spiritual leadership [is] not capable of this kind of organization”, it is clear that he differentiates spiritual community from organization. Unlike

spiritual community, which refers to followers of a set of religious and spiritual principles, an organization has a more action-oriented tone to it.

Further, T.G. Rinpoche invokes organization in the context of articulating the lack of organization on the part of Buddhists and compares the latter's situation with that of other religious communities who possess an organization. Thus, he seems to be attributing the disorientation of Tibetan Buddhists in India to this very lack. His statement indicates not only a mood of urgency but an action-oriented mood that hints of the need to act in order to salvage heritage. But action also requires organization, which for Indian Buddhists means overcoming their enclave existences and presenting an organized front. Representing community does not rest on a moral charge alone, but must be an active force in bringing about the desired legal and constitutional amendments.

Thus, the campaign for Bhoti is not simply about preserving cultural tradition or ancient script, but is about successfully representing a community of Bhoti speakers, which will then enable its official recognition. That is, Bhoti can be constitutionally recognized only if it can be proven that it is spoken by a significant number of speakers. Lama Nyima Don of Tawang regretfully told me that during the initial census surveys, some people gave Hindi as native language, others gave Monpa; in Ladakh, people gave Ladakhi and in Sikkim, Denzong, and in this manner, Bhoti got left out in the Himalayan region. That is, the government failed to register Bhoti as an important [vernacular] language. He added that in the 2011 census, Monpas as well as other speakers of Tibetan-related languages would be asked to return Bhoti as mother tongue so that it would get included as a major language in the constitution. Although this is not a confirmed report, it shows how organization may play a vital role in securing the rights of the represented community. In short, in order to mobilize, people have to organize.

This kind of conceptualization allows us to see the formation of a Tibetan Buddhist community composed out of discontinuous spaces, that is, without making community dependent

on territorial contiguity. Where territorial continuity is absent, organization steps in to represent contemporary practical concerns of livelihood especially concerning the monastic community.

Moreover, invoking fraternal organization redistributes power or authority from a center to more diffuse, non-hierarchical locations. In the earlier pre-nation-state geographies, central Tibet, which was the seat of both temporal (Tibetan Kashag and parliament) and spiritual authority (Drepung, Sera, Ganden monasteries), was the core to the peripheral borderland Buddhists. Today, the previous vertical (north-south) and hierarchical ties with Tibet are being replaced by a lateral solidarity among the community of Buddhist followers. The pan-regional identity that emerges as a consequence shies away from a Tibet-centric discourse, to a decentralized space where there is not one, but may be several loci along a lateral axis. Thus, if the border dispute plays a part in determining the lateral outline of the imagined geography, cultural ties sketch its internal contours. In this horizontal solidarity, Monyul may hope (or offered a promise) to become one of the loci of Tibetan Buddhist culture in India, as the trend of constructing Tibetan Buddhist universities, libraries, monasteries, and monuments in this region seems to be indicating. This lateral geography is also a named one, in particular instances; it is named as the “Himalayan” geography.

As Bourdieu (1991) argues, words have the magical effect of naming the unthinkable, of making the represented the real through discursive performance (1991: 223). For example, the fact of naming many different languages spoken in parts of southern France, Italy and Spain “Occitan” and of calling the region where this language is spoken “Occitanie” conjures into existence the people and the region (*Ibid.*). Today, Himalaya has transitioned into an umbrella category for Tibetan Buddhist culture and people, in certain discursive usages. Monks, in particular, use the term Himalaya to refer to the Tibetan Buddhist cultural area. I will discuss the character of the Himalayan imagined geography in more detail in the Conclusion.

It is significant that along with changes in the status of Tibet, the word “Himalayan” has emerged as a substitute for “Tibetan” with its less overt political tone. Many people in the field

concluded that several institutes of Tibetan studies are called institutes of Himalayan studies or culture because of the political implications carried by the term Tibetan. This point also cannot be delinked from the contested boundary issues between India and China, for in the wake of the India-China border conflict, anything related to Tibet or expressing a Tibet connection became a matter of concern for the state. If China could stake a claim on Mon areas by showing the latter's cultural affinities with old Tibet, then the Indian counter has comprised an outright denial of such claims as fabricated. Such contestations not only explain the awkward alliance between Indian Buddhists and Tibet but also the popularity of Himalayan as an alternative category for mobilization. In this sense, the different labels of Himalaya, Bhoti, and Sowa Rigpa mediate the tensions between national and transnational affiliations of India's Tibetan Buddhists. They are border effects (Van Schendel 2005) where border denizens devise ways to accommodate their transnational identifications while engaging with agents and processes of the nation-state.

However, cultural imaginations of Mon as Himalayan Buddhist space are not uniformly spread out across the region. Several non-Monpas who have newly converted to Buddhism reject the discourse of autonomy, their Buddhist affiliations notwithstanding, because they are wary of Monpa dominance in the proposed autonomous region. In West Kameng, for example, there are many individuals from former "Gidu" tribes such as the Mijis and Akas who are newly converted Buddhists, with some of the richer ones even donating land for monastery sites. These non-Monpa participants are aware of the anomalies associated with the name "Mon" for the proposed territorial unit. While favorable to the idea of autonomy for development, they are critical of the term Mon because of its dual associations with both Monpa ethnicity and Tibetan Buddhist religion. In one notable incident, an MARDC committee meeting was apparently stalled because a member of the Aka, one of the local Gidu groups, raised objections to the term "Mon" considering it to be exclusive of non-Monpa members.

Non-Monpa members also object to the insignia of a yak on the MARDC emblem, for the yak, a traditional mainstay for Tibetan Buddhist economies, is held to be a symbol of Monpa-

ness. Both Monpas and non-Monpas recognize that the yak on the MARDC badge is not simply the symbol of an economic way of life, but a cultural symbol. The use of yak in the trans-Himalayas not only maps altitude but also the spread of civilization and the linking of trade routes. Among all the tribes in the higher altitude districts of Arunachal Pradesh, only the Monpas have traditionally practiced yak-husbandry for the obvious reason that they are part of the Tibetan Buddhist trade network and profited from the use of yak as pack animal (Dhar 2000:242). Yak-dances are part of the performative repertoire of yak-based Tibetan Buddhist economies, and yak-husbandry is a crucial marker of the Monpas' Tibetan Buddhist identity. In refusing the insignia of the yak on the MARDC badges, non-Monpa supporters of the autonomy demand actually reject the Tibetan Buddhist affiliations of the Monpa autonomy proponents.

A break-away group among the Monpas who identify themselves as "Sartang" challenges the notion of a homogenous Buddhist community by claiming a separate indigenous identity. These groups who follow animistic traditions have historically been assigned a lower rank in social hierarchy. Other Monpas hold the Sartangpas in low esteem and maintain that they were never truly Buddhist, having long been animists, and do not seem to regard their splintering away with any surprise. Sangja Gombu, former vice-president of the Dirang Zilla Parishad, a local village council in Dirang, said of the Sartang: "they have turned their clan identity into religion", implying that the low-status of the Sartangpas in the Monpa clan hierarchy led the former to assert a different identity. Although Sartangpas claim that their assertion of a separate identity is not based on religious differences, it is widely known that Buddhist Monpas have traditionally treated the Sartangpas as inferior because of the latter's non-Buddhist practices. Sartangpas are now demanding to be registered as a separate group from Monpas in the list of Scheduled Tribes, which will also allow them to collectively compete with the other Monpa groups for constitutional benefits.

The image of a Tibetan Buddhist place is further offset by individuals within the Monpa communities, including those who have non-Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, spouses, for whom

personal ties undercut their allegiance to a Buddhist community, and who reject the premises of the autonomy demand. A few termed the MARDC movement “premature”, saying that common people had to be educated before they could claim equal participation in the demand; others opposed it out of political reasons, calling it “Rinpoche’s movement” guided by the monk’s electoral agenda. (Supporters of the autonomy demand rush to deny this last allegation by recounting how the Rinpoche had always been active in social service long before he joined politics).

In other words, the Buddhist place that emerges in certain Monpa discourses is not self-sustaining. It is checked not only by forces that place limits on it from outside, that is, by non-Monpa quarters, but also by those from within the Monpa community who are uneasy with the notion of a Buddhist place. The imagined place of Mon is therefore a fractured place, and yet, just because we recognize something to be unstable does not mean that we should ignore the spatial imaginations it contains (Keith and Pile 1993). The narrative of cultural preservation within the discourse of autonomy conflates Monpa ethnic boundaries (Monpa/Gidu) with Tibetan Buddhist religious boundaries (Buddhist/non-Buddhist) to convey a distinct spatiality of Mon that selectively builds on Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and is expressed as a Himalayan geography.

The imagination of Mon as part of a Himalayan community does not splinter Monpa territories from Arunachal Pradesh. One may conjecture that this is why Monpa leaders are not demanding separate state-hood, but use a constitutional clause that does not require territorial secession to articulate their autonomy demand. The autonomy demand is a pact with the constitutional mandate, where autonomous councils may cover areas that have multi-ethnic/multi-religious demographics but may not overstep already delimited territorial boundaries between two or more states. This pact involves compromise, where earlier antagonisms are covered up and an inclusive ideology put forth in an attempt to conform to the territorial solution constitutionally provided. It accommodates the limitations imposed on what a marginalized people may legitimately demand of the Indian government. In its current constitutional definition, the model

of autonomous councils does not pose a territorial challenge to the nation-state; it is a constitutionally valid manner of redistributing administrative privileges without redrawing existing state boundaries.

Further, within the Indian nation, although the autonomous council model is a widespread narrative for the political resolution of marginality, it can also be substantively remolded to fit situational conditions. Within Northeast India, many groups are currently making demands for setting up autonomous councils. A few groups, such as the Bodos have already utilized this constitutional clause to demand and acquire a Bodo Territorial Council. Karlsson (2003) writes with regard to indigeneity that delegates of various groups at international platforms on indigeneity speak a common language, molded into its unified form through discursive interchanges. Hence, “‘indigeneity’ is a travelling discourse that has emerged and developed in dialogue with various social movements and non-indigenous actors, and not something that reached us straight from the mud-hut, bush or wherever one is to locate the ‘authentic’ tribal spokesperson” (Karlsson 2003: 406). The MARDC discourse, too, contains such negotiations and maneuvering within the constitutional model. The demand for an autonomous region is an outcome of a dialogue between the available option and the empirical ground conditions. What is proposed is a Mon autonomous region whereas what actually emerges through various articulations is an imagined place with a trans-local cartography.

At the same time, while the agenda for Buddhist heritage preservation gives rise to new spatial imaginations, it does not sever the ties between Monpa and Arunachali spaces. The Monpa demand for autonomy is not a total rejection of current territorial configuration, and their alliance with the other marginalized Buddhist peoples of the Indian Himalayas is also not a territorial expression, in the sense of outlining an “ethnic homeland” (Baruah 2003). Rather, it articulates a fraternal community based on claims to heritage and a shared plan of action. The point of origin, Tibet, is implied but not prominent in this conceptualization of community.



The cultural programs articulated in the context of autonomy envisage a horizontal camaraderie between peoples dispersed east-west along the Indian Himalayan region. In other contexts, the imagined place has a more transverse and transnational shape with both east-west and north-south lines reaching outwards to Tibet and Bhutan. That is, the discourse of autonomy identifies a Tibetan Buddhist space within India and only hints at a trans-Himalayan solidarity with Buddhists outside India. The latter tendency is given clearer expression in the Monpa discourse of Tibetan origin and marriage; and this is the subject of the following chapter. But I should immediately note that origins is a highly contested issue among the borderland Monpas consisting of opposed strands of indigenous and transnational articulations. The first constructs Monpas as “primordial” subjects of the Indian nation, and the second, as members of a transnational trans-Himalayan community.

## Chapter 4

### *CONNECTIONS* NARRATIVES OF TRANSNATIONAL ORIGIN AND MIGRATION

In this chapter, I analyze the transnational community that emerges through narration of cross-border origin and marriage. Although cross-border relations between Tibet and Monyul were disrupted in the aftermath of the border tensions between India and China, there is a growing discourse of Tibetan origin and kinship in contemporary Monpa societies. The imagined place of Mon created through oral narratives of original migration from and kinship with Tibet or Bhutan has a different shape from the Mon articulated in the programs for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa in the autonomy demand (although the distinctions are more analytical than empirical as the two overlap in significant ways). Although in both cases, Mon creates spaces of belonging for Tibetan Buddhists of the Himalayan region, the latter constructs community through programs for action while the former does so through the criteria of descent and kinship. More importantly, while a cultural agenda constructs a community of Indian Buddhists by accommodating both the border and Tibet's controversial position in India-China foreign relations, the community articulated through origin and kinship, invoking mythical time or times passed, carries more transgressive (of national borders) potential. In other words, while the Mon of cultural programs is inter-regional, the Mon in the discourse of origins may be bolder in articulating transnational identity.

However, origin and marriage are politically charged issues in Monyul today, entangled with the boundary dispute, and within the discursive space of narrative, there is much negotiation. If origin or "blood" are the basis for articulating "long-distance nationalism" (Glick Schiller 2005) or nationalism across national borders in some cases, they also become negatively marked for the same reasons. That is, if purity of origin and marriage could be markers of national identity, then correspondingly, hybrid origins and miscegenation across borders could be seen as potential threats to the idea of the homogenous nation.

In the Northeast region of India, migration stories are still fresh in popular memory among many groups due to their relatively late migrations, and many groups maintain transnational ties till today. India's Northeast, connected to the rest of the nation through a narrow corridor (aptly titled "chicken's neck"), is as much the Northeastern border of India as it is the northwestern border of Southeast Asia (Baruah 1999). Hence relatively recent stories of trans-border migration are the norm rather than the exception here.

However, in the case of the Monpas, stories of trans-border and particularly, Tibetan, origin have become a contentious issue in the context of the disputed border: initially the Chinese and then the Indian states instrumentalized ethnic relatedness of border populations in their contest to gain control of the McMahon Line (Huber 2010: 301). On the Indian side, the constant surveillance of the Monyul-Tibet border by military troops has led to a hyper-presence of the border in the daily lives of people and the dominance of what I term the border-normative vision. This has created a situation where assertions of trans-border connections, in the form of blood ties and marriage alliances, become threats to the idea of a uniform cultural nationalism, for transnational kinship "messes up" neat political boundaries. Given that the Monyul region is a disputed border tract, the origins of the Monpas have become tied to questions of national belonging: if the origin stories admit Tibetan origins for the Monpas, they could help to make a stronger case for China's claims over the region as an extension of Tibet. Indeed, other groups who live in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Adis and Sherdukpens, also have legends of origin that trace Tibetan descent (Bose 1979a: 16, Fürer-Haimendorf 1982: 172, Nyori 1993, *quoted in* Blackburn 2004: 23).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Huber observes that the Mra, non-Tibetan populations of Upper Subansiri district of central Arunachal Pradesh on the Indo-Tibetan border also claim ethnic relatedness with Tibetans (Huber 2010, 2012). But this is a post-1950s phenomenon and it clearly shows cultural identity construction. The Mra (postcolonial name, Tagin) not only conducted cross-border trade with Tibet but also enjoyed certain customary rights during the Tibetan era especially since cross-country traders to Tibet had to pass through their territory. Because of their economic privileges, the Mra considered themselves superior to other neighboring groups. Following the 1950s border dispute, they were co-opted as a "tribal" group by the Indian state, lost their former privileges and became at par with the other Arunachali "tribal" groups. Huber argues that in the

But the Monpas claiming Tibetan origin is quite different from the origins claims of the Adis, for example, who only had trade ties with the Tibetans in recorded history, or even the Sherdukpens, who despite being Buddhists, were independent of Tibetan rule. In contrast, Monpas owed allegiance to the Tibetan state up to the early twentieth century. Hence, their stories of cross-border origin acquire a more challenging character than those of the Adis. In other words, origin and marriage have been dragged into debates about the political boundary.

From one perspective, Monpa oral narratives of origin have counter-narrative potential. National narratives tend to conflate territory with common blood or origins, and to demonize those they construct as non-indigenous and interlopers (Tambiah 1992). This is despite the fact that the idea of indigenous origin is frequently incongruous with the reality of the transnational affiliations of the nation's inhabitants. By stressing transnational origin and kinship, Monpa oral narratives provide a counter to a national geography that mark off Monyul as a peripheral border between India/Indian and Tibet/Tibetan. Further, narratives of origins, marriage, and migration subvert the trope of remoteness often attributed to Monpa spaces by introducing the component of mobility through a narrative medium. In this light, the Monpa discourse of Tibetan origins becomes a way of rejecting strands of chauvinism within nationalist discourse. However, neither official discourses nor their counter discourses are totalising, but always leave room for maneuver.

Most scholars working on oral traditions agree that origin stories are metaphorical “pseudo-histories” containing renditions of cultural circumstances rather than history (Deloria 2002: 16); some scholars of Native American oral traditions have also investigated the historical setting of origin stories to uncover the culturally specific historical details (Ibid.).<sup>63</sup> My focus in

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context of their present marginalization, Mra representation of their Tibetan relations must be understood as an effort to highlight both their past economic standing and connections with a ruling class.

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Blackburn (2004: 17) distinguishes migration legends from other forms of oral narratives in two important ways: first, unlike most oral narratives, migration legends are (claim to be) more specific in chronological, geographical and historical terms, especially through their emphasis on named events, places and people or groups; and second, migration legends are not recited or performed in ritual contexts

analyzing oral narratives is to see how people “read” oral narratives. Reading is the discursive act as well as reproduction – where reproduction is not same as duplication (De Certeau 1984).

Michel de Certeau (1984) argues that the reader is the receiver of official text who in reading it, inserts his own world into it and transforms it. Just as the reader of a linguistic or cultural text, inhabits, transports himself into and transforms the text he reads, the listener, and later narrator, of a tale also invents or reinvents the latter (De Certeau 1984). That is, the reader “re-tells” the narrative, and in this respect, “enunciation” or the speech act (or the act of narrating, in this case) becomes central. I examine how Monpas re-invent narratives of origin, migration and marriage through re-telling in a disputed border setting.

My interest in Monpa oral narratives is not to find a conclusive answer regarding origins, or to attempt to capture the (elusive) pure essence (Foucault [1994]2003: 360) of a clan or lineage by tracking down blood ancestry. Rather, my intention is to see where the act or process of narration itself leads us. Therefore, I concentrate on the ambiguities and tensions that appear at the moments of articulation as “rhetorical tactics” (De Certeau 1984). At the border, oral narratives, like border practices, can reveal different strategies of defiance and accommodation towards the boundary (Van Schendel 2005). By paying attention to the peculiar inflexions given to Monpa narratives of origin and marriage in the context of their enunciation by individual storytellers, I attempt to show that while representational spaces defy the border in their transnational articulation, they also sometimes accommodate the latter, especially in making claims to indigenous origin. The notion of “representational space” is helpful in understanding the transnational spaces of Mon, for the latter emerge in fragmentary fashion and are shaped through negotiation and accommodation than through direct resistance. As inhabitants of a disputed border, Monpas have to tread carefully on questions of origin and national belonging. A

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and lack certain conventions, such as an opening formula (“once upon a time”) but are usually told in fragments, as anecdotes. While I have used legend and narrative interchangeably in my work, I should note that Monpa narratives of origin and migration have these two signal characteristics highlighted by Blackburn, that is, named specificity and non-ritual performance.

straightforward admission of cross-border lineage might be seen as shouting out loud one's transnational affiliations, thereby jeopardizing their position as national subjects. Therefore, qualifications and caveats make their appearance in their narrations of transnational connection.

Colonial ethnologies and administrative reports contain debates as to whether Monpas were ethnically more affiliated to Tibet or Bhutan (Bailey and Morsehead 1916, Mills 1946). The question of Monpa origin has also been taken up in some contemporary writings within Bhutan studies (Ardussi 2004, Aris 1980, Pommaret 1994, 1999). It was a subject of concentrated debate especially during the period of escalating border tensions between India and China in the 1960s, when each nation-state tried to determine that the disputed tracts, which include Monyul, were part of their national territory. For both sides, this meant citing sources that would prove that these tracts and their inhabitants had traditionally been part of their national territories. In this situation, Monpa monks and intellectuals are now inserting their own stories, and through this process, positioning themselves as part of a "Tibetan", or "Bhutanese" or of a trans-border Tibetan Buddhist space, and at times, of an "indigenous" Indian space. While themes of kinship with Tibet and Bhutan in oral narratives encourage a conception of Mon as a transnational zone, different enunciation tactics on the part of different individuals undermine the transnational concept of Mon.

The same people who claim trans-border ancestry, especially from Tibet, are well aware that such claims are fraught with wider political implications involving the disputed border. This was brought home to me forcefully when during a chance encounter with a Monpa intellectual, I casually asked him, "Where did Monpas migrate from?" Twinkling his merry eyes at me, Lama Tashi<sup>64</sup> had answered, "Will you be able to face it, if I tell you?", and then, after a pause, he stated, "The Monpas are originally from Tibet". His question whether I could "face" this fact

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<sup>64</sup> Geshe Nawang Tashi Bapu, Principal, Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies, Dahung, is popularly known as "Lama Tashi". He is a person of eminent stature in Monyul and has won world-wide acclaim for his performances of Tibetan chants.

suggests both his awareness of the debates around the question of origins, and his assumption that I, as a non-Monpa Indian, would rather hear stories of Indian origin for the Monpas.

The claim to Tibetan origins is therefore frequently accompanied by disclaimers and qualifying statements. Those who wish to state Tibetan origins, while simultaneously disclaiming the currency of such connections, employ various strategies such as a narrative ploy that separates time, so that the past is constructed as disjointed from the present. This is in contrast to traditional narratives or myths where past and present temporalities are linked cyclically, and the past and present mutually realize each other. In other words, when origins become contested, the opposite of rhetorical cyclical time, *viz.* carving of time, becomes a rhetorical strategy. Through this, narrators are able to simultaneously claim origin from Tibetans but also distance themselves from present Tibetans, through the use of the refrain *pahle zamaane mein* (in the old days), as I will show. So, on the one hand, spaces are conjoined narratively but on the other, time is carved up. But once again, temporal carving is a rhetorical device that succeeds in highlighting the paths of present boundaries that divided spaces previously joined.

A second enunciation tactic for Monpas has been to mobilize oral narratives and stories for the “invention” of an indigenous lineage from a “local” king called Kala Wangpo. In this particular mode of enunciation, Monpas claim indigenous origin for themselves by introducing boundaries, both physical and ethnic, between Tibet/Tibetan and Mon/Monpa, and creating an indigenous space of and for Monpas. For the last several decades, the various groups of Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas included, have subscribed to a common identity as Arunachali given by the Indian state, which is clearly separated from Tibet. Along with the other groups of Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas are constitutionally classified as a scheduled tribe, which does not translate directly as indigene, but is an enumerated category of groups that are supposedly “backward” in relation to other Indian communities, and entitled to affirmative action benefits. Some scheduled tribe groups claim the indigenous slot in international conventions on indigeneity in order to gain global recognition for their demands for political sovereignty (Karlsson 2003).

But the need for international recognition is not the only motivating factor in assertions of indigeneity. In this chapter, I aim to underscore the fact that given the suspect status of Monyul, many Monpas find it necessary to assume the indigenous slot through claims of descent from a king positioned as local, and employ enunciation tactics to do so.

In the following sections, I detail particular contexts in which Monpas articulate Tibetan connections through stories of origin and marriage, but instead of seeing this as a uniform discursive space, I point to the distinct identifications – Tibetan or Bhutanese or indigenous – that emerge through various acts of negotiation and maneuvering. I place these identifications in clearer perspective by highlighting the political context in which they emerge, and the various tactics that make them possible.

### **The thesis of Tibetan origins**

Monpa communities follow the Tibetan kinship system, in which the primary organizing principle of descent is “*riü*” or bone. In Tibetan Buddhist belief, bone is the bodily substance found in human beings and animals, passed down from father to offspring through the male sperm (which, in its whiteness, is identified as bone) during the act of sexual intercourse, leading to conception (Levine 1981: 55, 60). According to Nancy Levine, *riü* describes categories of people sharing common agnatic descent from common ancestors, and in this sense, *riü* refers to patrilineal descent categories, or simply patrilineal clans (Ibid.).

In the last few years, a couple of books on Monpa society that include genealogical accounts of different Monpa patrilineal clans have been published in Monyul – *Sba yul skyid-mo ljong kyi chos 'byung* (*The Religious History of the Hidden Place of Happy Valley*) (2002), a publication of the Buddhist Culture Preservation Society, was translated to me by Lama Lhobsang Phuntsok of Jang and Gelong Sangey Leta of Tawang; and Gyalsey Tulku’s (Rinpoche) *rTawang dgonpa 'ilorgyus Monyulgsa ba 'imelong* (*The Clear Mirror of Monyul: The History of Tawang Monastery*) ([1991]2009), was translated to me by Gelong Sangey Leta.



Written in the Tibetan language, these books trace the origin of Monpa clans to, and subsequent migration from, Tibet, even to specific villages within Tibet. Both books trace the roots of many current Monpa lineages to a common progenitor – Lhasey Tsangma – a prince who was exiled from Tibet to the land of Mon sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

According to the *The Clear Mirror of Monyul*, Monpas migrated from Tibet in seven waves, and Lhasey Tsangma came with the seventh wave. Lhasey Tsangma was the brother of Langdarma, the Tibetan king who is infamous in Tibetan history for his attacks on Buddhism through destruction of monasteries and scriptures and persecution of Buddhist monks. Although Lhasey Tsangma, as the eldest son, was the rightful heir to the throne, he chose to become a monk. Since the middle son, Langdarma abhorred religion, the youngest, Thiralpa was made king. Langdarma, however, desperately wanted to be king, and conspired with his evil minister to kill Thiralpa and end his reign. But first they had to get rid of Lhasey Tsangma, for if Thiralpa died, Lhasey Tsangma would be made king. Langdarma bribed all the prophets and fortune-tellers of Tibet and instructed them to say that if Lhasey Tsangma were to remain in Tibet, the whole country would plunge into misfortune and Thiralpa too would fall gravely ill. The evil minister duly reported the false prophecies to Thiralpa, who believed them and decided to expel Lhasey Tsangma to eastern Bhutan, sending with him rations and a retinue. After his expulsion from Tibet, Lhasey Tsangma roamed over many areas of present day Bhutan, and his progeny eventually migrated and populated various areas of Monyul.

Although Gyalsey Rinpoche claims to also have consulted with many knowledgeable village elders about the genealogies of particular lineages before writing his book, all versions of the Lhasey Tsangma story come from the *rGyal rigs*, a Tibetan text of which one version exists in English translated form (Aris 2009). When questioned about his textual source, Gyalsey Rinpoche told me that his thesis of Tibetan origin draws on the genealogies written by Lama Wanginder, a monk scholar who wrote a book in the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the royal dynasties of east Bhutan based in Trashigang (Aris 2009), that is, the *rGyal srig* text. Gyalsey Rinpoche believed

this to be the best possible account of Monpa origins and drew on it for his own work. Monpa intellectuals and monks who have read either Lama Wanginder's original work or Gyalsey Rinpoche's book repeated the Tibetan origin thesis to me.

Many Monpas belonging to high-ranking clans trace direct descent from Lhasey Tsangma. For example, Geshe Nawang Tashi Bapu (Lama Tashi) who hails from Thembang village in Dirang, West Kameng, and belongs to the lineage of the Thembang Bapus uses the prefix "Bapu" before his name. He narrated,

Bapu *jat*<sup>65</sup> came in 9<sup>th</sup> century to Mon areas. . . . . The various Bapus in Dirang circle came from Kalaktang [in southern Monyul]. The original Bapu in Kalaktang was descended from a local king in the Tawang area – Prangpodar. Prangpodar is the ancestor of the Thembang Bapus. Wangma Peladar and Prangpodar were cousins and all Bapus are descended from these two cousin brothers. These cousins were great great grandson of the king of Tibet. . . . . Langdarma planned to kill his younger brother who was king. But there was another brother who could become king if he killed the good brother. . . . . *This brother, Lhasey Tsangma, came to Tawang and his great great grandsons came to Thembang. When Lhasey Tsangma was on his way to Tawang from Lhasa, he came via Bhutan and had a son with a local girl and that is how his descendents fill that part of east Bhutan, i.e. Trashigang.* [emphasis added]

In the common parlance of central and southern Monyul, Bapu is used as a generic term for all ruling or higher clans, which went by different names.<sup>66</sup> These clans claiming a royal lineage have origin stories with one common element. The particular settlement or village in quest of a ruler/chief would send out a search party which would, in the course of its wanderings, chance upon a group of children playing. The party would then lay out its array of meat and the child who refused all meat (e.g. chicken, pig, cow or goat) except the leg of the yak or sheep (the two animals most important in Monpa animal husbandry and said to form the diet of the higher

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<sup>65</sup> *Jati* is a Sanskritic Hindu term primarily used to refer to caste categories but Monpas use it to refer to patrilineage. Levine (1981) shows how the Nyinba, a Tibetan Buddhist group of Nepal, similarly, use *jat* as a loanword to express the concept of *rü*, the patrilineal descent category of the Tibetan kinship system (Levine 1981: 60). This also indicates how group identities are shaped by the national framework where they live, for the Nyinba live in a predominantly Nepali caste Hindu society (Shneiderman 2006: 21). The same applies for Monpas.

<sup>66</sup> In Dirang, Namshu, Thembang and other areas of central Monyul, as well as in Kalaktang, southern Monyul, the Melongkharpa, Faichilpa and Sherthipa are said to be Bapu clans. High ranking clans in these areas go by other names such as Khuchilu (Dugtotopa), Sharchokpa, Dirghyipa and Ata Jyepu. But according to some Monpas, the Khuchi/Khuchilu clan came much later from Bhutan. Whatever may be the case, in common discourse, Bapu stood for ruling clans.

ranking clans) would be immediately recognized as the future prince. One village priest told me that Bapus are the ruling clan, brought long time back from Tibet because “all ruling clans came from Tibet”. Lama Tashi, narrator of the above tale on Bapus, claims to have read about the origins of his lineage in a Tibetan text.

Lhasey Tsangma’s story is currently very popular; yet it carries its own exclusions. It identifies certain low-ranking groups among Monpas as descendants of the servants, horse grooms, water-carriers or porters who formed part of Lhasey Tsangma’s retinue. One person in Dirang told me that he belonged to a *chhota jaat* (low caste) called Gila that came from Tibet along with the Bapus a long ago. Some sections of the Gilas are now rejecting their lowly origins and identifying themselves as an indigenous group.<sup>67</sup>

One elderly lama at Tawang monastery contests the Tibetan origin thesis by arguing that it might have been disseminated by an over reliance on Tibetan texts. He told me that when Gyalsey Rinpoche joined as abbot of Tawang monastery, he was asked by visitors to this region about the origins of Monpas. Since all documents relating to Monpa origins are written in Tibetan, Gyalsey Rinpoche consulted these books and wrote that Monpas are from Tibet. This lama implies that a theory issuing from Tibetan sources will locate Monpa origins in Tibet. It is a different matter that Gyalsey Rinpoche, the author of the book, *The Clear Mirror of Monyul*, is “ethnically” Tibetan having been born in Tibet before moving to Tawang.

But many old men and women in rural areas recount stories of Tibetan origin derived from oral traditions. J.P. Mills, a British ethnologist-administrator who visited Dirang in the 1940s wrote; “Dirang Dzong is the most important of a small group of 9 or 10 villages inhabited by

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<sup>67</sup> Some Monpa groups living in certain villages of West Kameng district (e.g. Selari, Rahung, Khoina, Jirigaon, Nine Mile) on the borders of Monpa and non-Monpa territories are asserting a separate identity as Sartang. These groups practiced a form of animism where they worshipped trees, hills and inanimate objects. A few among them have become Buddhists now, while some others have converted to Christianity. Traditionally not considered real Monpas by other Monpas because they did not follow Buddhism, Sartang Monpas are now claiming indigenous origin.

people who call themselves Grangmarangpa, but are usually included under the general term of Monba. They claim a Tibet origin and their culture is largely Tibetan” (1946: 8).

While the origins of some clans are traced to the various branches of the bloodline of Lhasey Tsangma, other clans are said to have been spawned by people migrating from Tibet in earlier waves. Some of these earlier migrants were either expelled as a consequence of war or according to the belief that an ill person can get rid of his disease by dispatching a human substitute to a far off land, i.e. Mon. *The Religious History* (2002) also mentions a story about a festival called Lhasa Monlam, during which, each year, one man would be exiled to Monyul in a symbolic gesture of evacuating evil. The man probably functioned as a kind of human *torma* – an offering cake whose ritual consignment to flames during Tibetan festivals symbolizes the banishment of evil. Each year, a man from a different village would be exiled, and the clans that he gave rise to in Monyul took on the names of the villages in Tibet from which the progenitor of the lineage had migrated. For example, if Kong-po was the village, the lineage came to be called Kong-mo. Ser-mo, Nyar-mo, Ngur-mo, Khu-mo, Kyi-mo, Khar-mo, Drag-mo, Nye-mo, Zhu-mo, Rong-mo, Tsang-mo, Dag-mo, Kar-mo, Nam-sa, Wang-mo and so on are Monpa clans said to have been originally named after the corresponding villages in Tibet. A Monpa officer with the clan title Damo said he was from the Da-mo clan, which originated in a place in Tibet called Da[g]mo.

The idea of Tibetan origins of Monpas is particularly prevalent in the Tawang circle, which is nearer to Tibet. People of Tawang readily narrate clan histories that retrace original migration from Tibet. For example, those belonging to the Khyi lineage trace descent from the illegitimate son of Srongtsan Gampo, the 33<sup>rd</sup> king of Tibet. In oral lore, Khyi is widely recognized as being descended from the king, although the bastard origins of this lineage take away from the claims of royal blood. This particular origin tale straddles the real and the fantastic worlds, for it begins with the illicit activities of one unfaithful queen of Srongtsan Gampo who had sexual intercourse simultaneously with a dog and a goat. The resulting offspring was a boy

who had the face of a dog and horns of a goat, and who was named Khyigharathoe (Khyi=dog, gha=face, rathoe= forehead like a goat [ra=goat, thoe=forehead]). Although the king did not know the truth and considered the boy to be his own, he was ashamed to show his son to the public, and so sent him to the Monpa country along with some servants. Monpa people thought he was royal blood and made him king. The present Khyi lineage is formed of the descendants of king Khyigharathoe. Aris (1979: 60) also writes of a mythological hero, “Khyi-kha-ra-thod” in Bumthang, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nepal, who as the illegitimate son of the king’s consort was banished to the land of “Mon-mkhan,pa-luong”, though he mentions that this tale is not widely popular in Bhutan. But individuals of the Khyi lineage in Mon were proud to recount their blue-blooded origins, despite their illicit beginnings and despite the rather unflattering categorization of Mon in this legend, provoking one to wonder whether the royal connections were more important than their Tibetan roots for narrators from a marginalized people like the Monpas.

Yet, we also find oral narratives that trace descent of some Monpa clans from Tibetan commoners.<sup>68</sup> A popular story recounts how Merak Sakten on the Bhutan-Monyul border and Senge, Nyukmadung, Lubrang of Monyul were populated by working people from Tsona in Tibet who then formed the Merakpa lineage. I heard it for the first time from Yeshe Tsering, the village headman of Senge village, Dirang, who happened to mention that the people of Merak Sakten in Bhutan, and Senge, Nyukmadung and Lubrang in Monyul speak a common *Brokeh* dialect. He narrated the following story to illustrate his statement. (I also heard this story from various other sources, including from a man belonging to the Merakpa lineage).

There was an autocratic king [a *dzongpon* or officer in some versions] in Tsona [Tibet]. One day he said that a mountain was blocking the sun and casting a shadow over his house, and so he set all people to work to cut down the mountain. A mother nursing her child was crooning a lullaby, and she sang that it is easier to cut off the neck of the tyrant

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<sup>68</sup> Like many “oral” narratives of Tibetan origins that actually stem from textual sources, this legend is also a written narrative circulating in manuscripts in the area; one version dates to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All oral versions come from retelling of this text, as with the Lhasey Tsangma story (Toni Huber, Personal communication, January 2013)

than to cut down the mountain. The workers took the hint and beheaded the king. Following this, they fled to Merak-Sakten [on the Bhutan-Monyul border], via the Dzela pass (some must have settled in Senge, Lubrang and Nyukmadung on the way). When they reached Merak they thought that it was a good place to rear yaks, and cleared up the forest by setting it on fire. Merak means “set on fire”. The nursing mother was deified as Aum Jomo, and even today worshipped by the people of Merak. *Merakpa* is one branch of the original immigrants from Tsona. When the group was fleeing from Tsona to Merak, some of them came to Thembang [in Dirang] and became Merakpas. Even today, Aum Jomo is worshipped in Thembang every six years.<sup>69</sup>

This story describes migration routes that originated in Tibet, moved through Bhutan, and ended in Monyul. In the story of Lhasey Tsangma too, as given in the book, *Clear Mirror*, we find a back and forth movement of marriage alliance and descent between clans that had settled in areas that are now dispersed among Tibet, Bhutan and Monyul. For example, the following narrative segment from the *Clear Mirror* narrating how particular areas of Bhutan and Lha Vog Yul Sum (the older, collective name for the three largest villages of Tawang) came to be settled, constructs an image of a Tibet-Bhutan-Mon kinship circuit.

In the meantime, in a place called Lumpa rati in Bhutan, the last of the royal line had passed away, and no good ruler had been found. So the people of Lumpa rati decided to invite a Jepon from Lha Vog Yul Sum. They invited Gyeshe Ta U or Kya U, one of the four sons of Jobo Sang chun, son of Lhundrup. Kya U went to Lumpa rati and had one son, Lama who spread his line in Bhutan, which came to be known as the Jobo Kham pa clan (*Thus it is that the people of Lha Vog Yul Sum [Tawang] and Bhutan are related*). His direct line went dead but was continued by that of his brothers and sisters [emphasis added].

The above narrative segment suggests that kinship provided a basis for alliance between ruling clans of Bhutan and Monyul. The frequently used term “Jobo” apparently refers to a group (or lineage) of chiefs of Lha Vog Yul Sum (Tawang). Aris (1979) writes that Tawang (Lha Vog Yul Sum) had been ruled by a Tibetan dynasty called “Jo-bo”. Jobo might have been the lineage of Lhasey Tsangma, used as the title for royal clans. It thus appears that Jobo was a post but also

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<sup>69</sup> Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the current Bhutanese queen mother also gives a version of this tale in her description of the Brokpas (yak-herder communities) of Merak-Sakten in her book on Bhutan (Wangchuk 2006: 165,166).

an ascriptive title that was acquired through birth in a royal lineage<sup>70</sup> (Aris 1980). In the above narrative, cross-migration of members of Jobo lineage between Bhutan and Mon is shown to have given rise to yet new clans. These genealogical accounts do not simply sketch a migration route but through exchange of chiefly personnel, connect different lineages of Mon and Bhutan together.

Despite the presence of Bhutan in narratives as a mediating link between Tibet and Monyul, however, a thesis of independent Bhutanese origin or “ethnicity” is sometimes put forward, presumably, to offset the Tibetan origin thesis. To say that the Monpas are of Bhutanese ethnicity lessens Tibet’s (and hence, China’s) claims on the Monpa areas; and hence, in some accounts, Bhutan is positioned in opposition to Tibet as the land of origins for various Monpa clans. An Indian scholar D.P. Choudhury (1978) denies any connection between Tibetans and the tribes of the North East Frontier, which includes the Monpas, in his historical account of India’s North East Frontier. Although his work is primarily an analysis of British colonial policy in the North East Frontier of India, especially Tawang and West Kameng from the early colonial period beginning in 1865 till the demarcation of the McMahon Line boundary in 1914, Choudhury states that in the context of the India-China border dispute it becomes necessary to find out how far “this area ethnically relates to Tibet” (1978: 17). In the first chapter where he discusses “the people and economy of the frontier”, Choudhury concludes on the basis of observations made by other scholars on the language, dress, architecture and crafts of Monpas, Tibetans, and Bhutanese that it is “highly likely that Monpas were originally non-Tibetan in stock but were exposed to Tibetan influence from the north” (Ibid: 19); he surmises that the Monpas have Bhutanese blood, and possibly even “tribal” blood through their connections with the tribesmen living south, i.e. on

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<sup>70</sup> Lama Sangey Leta, my monk friend and guide in Tawang who helped me translate the book explained, “*Jobo* was the lineage of Lhasey Tsangma. Anybody who belonged to his lineage would be invited to become a leader by the people”. According to him, *Jepo*, a Tibetan word used for chiefs, means the same thing.

the Assam foothills. Attributing a Bhutanese affinity to Monpas thus acts to counteract suggestions that Monpas have a Tibetan origin.

### **Mediating the Tibet connection: Bhutan in Monpa origin stories**

In British administrative and ethnological reports of the early twentieth century, the inhabitants of Monyul were termed extra-Bhutan Bhutias (Mackenzie 1884 [2007]). But “Bhutia” was a catch-all term reserved for all communities with Tibetan ethnicity; and the demographic lists of frontier communities in *Assam Administration Reports* till 1915 (*Assam Administration Reports 1915-1916*) included Monpas and Tibetans in the same category as Bhutias. The Monpas were subsumed under the category “Bhutias subject to Tibet”, and it was only in 1916, that they were listed as a separate category as “Monbas”.

Some historians and Tibetologists trace the origin of Monpas to east Bhutan and note that Sharchokpa (easterners) – a term differentiated from Nyubchokpa (west Bhutanese) – applied to both east Bhutanese and the southern and central Monpas, although not to the Monpas of Tawang. The British historian, Michael Aris (1979 & 1980), who produced the first systematic history of Bhutan using classical Tibetan sources, argues that Monpas may have been Bhutanese aboriginals, who settled in Monyul after fleeing from excessive taxation in eastern Bhutan. Aris (1980) also refers to the “Bapus” of Domkho and Murshing in West Kameng as the original kings of Mon, who settled there as a result of being sandwiched between the advancing Tibetan army from the north and the Ahom rulers from the south. Aris (2009) claims to have based his work on the major work of Lama Wanginder, although he discounts the latter’s thesis that Bapus are merely descendants of one Prangpodar of Lhasey Tsangma’s lineage. Aris was deeply interested in the origin of not the Monpas but in a lost dynasty of East Bhutan, which, he believed, were aboriginal to Bhutan. Aris could also have been referring to the group of families in the southern Monyul area of Kalaktang, which is closer to Bhutan, who claim to be related to a Bhutanese royal dynasty. Bibhash Dhar, an Indian anthropologist, similarly presents oral evidence of



Kalaktang (Khalengteng) Monpas in southern Monyul on the Bhutan border claiming Bhutanese origin (Dhar 1984: 297). Dhar writes that “the elderly people [in Kalaktang] are of the opinion that although no migration occurred in their lifetime still they had heard of their forefathers to have migrated from eastern Bhutan” (Ibid).

Francoise Pommaret (1994, 1999), scholar of Bhutan, would also like to trace origin of Monpas to Bhutan as Michael Aris does, and suggests that the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh might have been the aboriginals of Bhutan, who later migrated eastward. However, she makes several interesting interventions regarding Monpa-Bhutanese ties; firstly, she implies that the Monpas do not constitute a self-contained, monolithic ethnicity but may have trans-border ethnic affiliations with certain groups of Bhutan, citing the example of the Merak-Sakten people in Bhutan who are called *brok-pa* (yak-herders) as well as “Brah-mi” – a term applied to the Tawang Monpas too, and secondly, she maintains that a group also known as Monpas in south central Bhutan do not have any obvious links with the Arunachali Monpas, for the former are recent Buddhists, and mainly serve as the entrance keepers of a sacred site of Nabji, said to have been hallowed by the Buddhist saint Guru Padmasambhava’s presence.

However, a third Bhutan scholar John Ardussi (2004) refutes the theory of Bhutanese origins for Monpas and instead, traces the original homeland of both east Bhutanese and Monpas to Tibet, calling them descendants of the gDung lineage. Based on the similarity of the languages between the populations of East Bhutan and Monyul (collectively, termed the gDung lineage), Ardussi argues that the gDung lineage might not have been aboriginal to these areas but might have been driven there from their original seat in Yarlung in Tibet by the powerful Sakya rulers in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, following which they settled in eastern Bhutan and Mon. That is, the gDung in current Monyul and Bumthang in East Bhutan might have had origins in Yarlung of Tibet.

But as Ardussi also argues,

There is sometimes a temptation to view the core population of Bhutan as more or less fixed since antiquity, or at least since the time of the Tibetan monarchy, when royal princes and their followers are said to have entered the country from the north and met up

with Bhutan's primordial inhabitants. In reality, however, there is much evidence of ongoing immigration and population movement during all periods... (Ardussi 2004: 68)

I have neither the wish nor the expertise to try and pin down the convoluted story of Monpa origins to a particular point in time and space. Indeed, the routes to roots frequently lose continuity in the mists of hoary time and in the jumble of multiple retellings. Fresh migrations and inter-marriage of populations lead to "impurities" making impossible pure-blood narratives. But I attempt to foreground and interpret the representations given to me by the people with whom I spoke of their origins. As Huber (2010: 323) notes, oral narratives reveal ways in which a basic story can be embellished to serve the interests of each teller or a certain social context.

In the popular mind, the original homeland of the Monpas is usually Tibet. Many Monpas in settlements near the Bhutan border, who claim common ancestry with east Bhutanese royal clans, eventually trace back steps to Tibet. Gombu Thrinley, a young *Panchayat* leader and last in the direct line of the Melongkharpa clan in Kalaktang on the Monyul-Bhutan border, claims same clan membership with the current queen mother of Bhutan, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck. He offers the following narrative as to how Domkho village in Kalaktang circle (near Indo-Bhutan border), and the seat of power of the Melongkharpas, came to be settled:

Domkho (Domkhar village) was founded by Srongtsan Gampo's son Trangshidhar, who saw many places and finally settled in Domkho. When the Tibetan king heard of Trangshidar's growing power, he wanted to challenge him, and an army was called from Tibet. It took one year, carrying loads, clearing roads, and so on and it camped in Buringbam for one month from whence it sent a message to Trangshidhar. Ultimately negotiations took place and the Tibetan army went back after constructing a *mane* near Domkho.

When Domkhar was first settled, the king had lots of power. He wanted to build a house and called an architect from Lhasa to construct a seven storey house in Domkho, Melongkhar in Domkho, Buntengkhar in Shergaon, Lomekhar in Rupa, Sigmikhar in Thembang.

Note that the spread of this family in these different areas once again traces links between Tibet, Bhutan and Mon. Gombu claims to be the last in a line of twelve generations, the heads of each which he named. The tenth in this line was Gombu Hridar. The current Bhutanese queen-mother is the offspring of a descendent of Gombu Hridar and a reincarnation of Zhabdrung

Rinpoche, the founder of the Bhutanese state. The queen had visited Domkho after hearing stories from her grandmother, Dorjee Wangmo about her kinsmen and of the fabulous jewelry and property supposedly in the possession of the Melongkhars of Domkho. Gombu's narrative traces recent descent from a Bhutanese lineage but original descent from Trangshidhar, who also figures in the narrative of Lhasey Tsangma.

Lama (Padmashri) Thupten Phuntsok, founder-principal of Manjushree Institute at Tawang remarks,

I think Monpas originated in Tibet. Later, of course, migration could have been from Druk [Bhutan], but the majority of Monpas have Tibetan origins. Earlier, Mon covered a vast region. Today, if you see the Mon areas, you could say that some of its people came from Bhutan. But earlier, there was no Bhutan.

By saying that “there was no Bhutan”, the lama meant to say that Bhutan was not yet an independent political entity since it was actually known as Lho Mon (southern Mon) in earlier times. Lama Phuntsok claims that before 1951, Mon unofficially stretched from Tsona in Tibet (Mon-Tsona) to Bhutan (Mon-Bumthang), till Kalaktang. Tsona was the headquarters of Mon areas, and hence, it was called Mon-Tsona. Lama Phuntsok then raises an interesting point. How can we say that Monpas have a Bhutanese origin, when both Monpas and east Bhutanese originated in Tibet? He points out that a distinction between a Bhutanese and Tibetan ethnicity is a technical one, if we consider the crisscrossing migration routes in oral lore.

Today, while it is easy to suggest that people migrated either from east Bhutan to Mon or vice versa, perhaps, in fact, both east Bhutanese and Monpas came from Tibet. Since there was no clear border, and east Bhutan and Monyul were part of the same region – Shar Lho-Mon – it might have been that the population groups in this region followed common paths of migration. In the period of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when national and ethnic identities were ascendant in the Himalayan world, indigenous names rather than the Tibetan umbrella term, Mon, became popularized to the outside world; and the undifferentiated terrain of Mon split into Drugyul, Ladakh and so on. Yet, national borders did not solidify as quickly as identities. The current

abbot of Tawang monastery Guru Rinpoche says, “Earlier, we lived in harmony. It was not like there were lines showing where Mon ended and Bhutan begun. ....the border was not clearly demarcated”. Guru Rinpoche recalls that the demarcation of the border took place during his grandfather’s time. He could even recall the name of the Bhutanese officer in Trashigang, (“who was like the Deputy Commissioner”), during whose time the border between Kalaktang in southern Monyul and Bhutan came up, for this officer had been one of the sponsors of his grandfather who was a monk. The line dividing a Bhutanese ethnicity and a Tibetan or Monpa ethnicity is blurred, given that there was continuous migration of people from Tibet to Bhutan and Mon and vice versa, and inter-marriage amongst them was fairly common.

However, I am not arguing that the Tibetan or Bhutanese connections can sum up the ancestry tale of the Monpas who are a hybrid group with different sections having migrated from different areas that include, but are not exhausted by, Bhutan and Tibet. Further, migration seldom took place in a series of major waves, but rather, through several smaller processes of movement and resettlement, which Huber (2012) terms “micro-migration”. Trade also played a large role in motivating movement. It is quite likely that Monpas share common kinship with certain plains people of Assam, with whom they had trade and hosting relations. For example, according to oral traditions, many Kacharis, a group living in the foothills below the high altitude Monyul region, migrated from Udalguri in the adjoining plains to villages in central Monyul for purposes of trade. Their descendants are said to presently live in Lish village. Tsering, a taxi-driver locally operating in Dirang, professed to be of the Then-ba clan, which, according to an elderly person of Dirang village, is of Kachari descent. The dialect of Lish is also very different from the Brahmi or Sharchokpa dialects of north and central Monpas.

Sangja Gombu, a former rural grassroots leader belonging to a high-ranking clan from Namshu village in Dirang told me that the indigenous people of Namshu were the Ngalang Ayu, who were decimated after a particular “historical” incident. In the following tale, he makes clear reference to the mixed heredity of Monpas of Namshu;

A girl from Namshu had married someone from Bhutan and gone off to settle there. Later, she sent an emissary to find out how her brothers at Namshu were faring. When the emissary reached Namshu, he found that festivities were going on because two bisons (*mithun*) had killed a tiger. He stayed on to participate in the festivities. When the first emissary did not report back, the girl got worried and sent a second emissary. He reached Namshu and saw that festivities were on and people were dancing and making merry. When he went near he heard people singing and rejoicing that “*Tak*” (tiger) had been killed. Now it so happened that the name of the first emissary was Taki. The second emissary thus was misled into thinking that the Ngalang Ayu of Namshu had murdered Taki. He reported this back to his villagers in Bhutan, and so they came and took revenge by eliminating the entire population of Namshu ...

Namshu was later resettled by Komo and Tsarmo clans. Komo and Tsarmo are considered to be of lowly descent. *Tsarmo are of Kachari stock; they came from Majbat in Assam.* But they were not ruler material and hence invited Bapus. The Bapus of Namshu are descended from Thembang Namshus. The latter came from Tibet, from a place called Dewa Lha Gyari. [emphasis added]

In this tale, there is clear intermingling of Bhutanese and Kachari stock in the blood of Namshu Monpas. According to Sangja Gombu, while intermarriage between low and high clans was possible in Namshu, people from Namshu and Thembang did not intermarry with plainsmen. But this is a contradiction. If the hills men and plainsmen came from the same Kachari stock, as he admits to be the case, how can they refuse to inter-marry? As many Monpas had hosting relations not only with trading partners in Bhutan and Tibet but also with Kachari families in the plains below, such trade relations could have resulted in marriage in the course of time and thus inter-mixture between Monpas and Kacharis. I have reproduced the above tale and its inferences about Kachari descent in order to show the multiple available routes to the Monpas’ roots.

Yet, in contemporary Monyul, many individual narratives about origin identify Tibet as the original homeland of the Monpas. Drawing on both oral lore as well as old and contemporary texts, young and old individuals trace the origins of their clans to Tibet. Further, I came across a popular idea that Tawang Monpas are “*asli Monpa*” (authentic Monpas) as opposed to Dirang Monpas, who live nearer to the plains. While learned individuals are quick to brush off such distinctions as people’s ignorance, the term “*asli Monpa*” definitely circulates, especially among the younger generation. It is possible that Tawang is considered authentic because it has a Monpa

population relatively un-hybridized by inter-marriage with other Arunachali groups or Indian migrant communities. Population-wise too, Tawang has less number of people from other tribes, such as Miji and Aka, compared to Dirang and Bomdila, and especially the latter, which is a relatively new town that grew out of an army camp, and is composed of migrants. But here a question arises. Although in Kalaktang and Dirang villages, too, there is a low population of non-Monpas, these two places are not termed authentic. So, apparently, un-hybridized populations alone do not make for authenticity. Another possible reason why Tawang may be considered more authentic is because it was the seat of the Tawang monastery from which administration was conducted. During the Tibetan period, the tax travelled from Amartulla and Udalguri in the adjoining plains of Assam to Tawang, from which it made its way to Tsona and Lhasa. The centripetal force stemmed from Lhasa and is still recognized as such by people. In Lhou village in Tawang, the 89 year old *ex-tsorgan* or headman, Pema Gombu defined Mon as that [region] which stood south when seen from Lhasa as center.

From the migration stories of Monpas, one can infer still a different idea about the authenticity of Tawang Monpas, which is that the Tawang Monpas are considered to be of truer ethnic stock since Tibet is closer to Tawang. Even Dirangpas, or people of Dirang, say that Tawangpas are the real thing. When asked why, they reply; “everything started from there”, since Tawang was inhabited first, followed by other Monpa areas. In the above narrative of Gombu of Domkho, for example, the origin is Tibet, although Bhutan appears as the intermediary location between the place of origin and eventual settlement. In the popular mind, at least, Tawang is the land of the authentic Monpa because the original migrants from Tibet settled here first.

### **Narrating indigenous origins: “Born in India”**

A third perspective on Monpa origins is that they are indigenous to India. In an article published by India’s Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, the author, a former political officer to Tawang, argues that the Monpas are descended from an Indian prince, Rupati, who had also

spread Hinduism in Monyul before the advent of Buddhism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Murty 1971: 528). A fairly recent article (Dutta 2008: 564) published from this same institute repeats the argument about Monpas being influenced by Tibet but being of completely different ethnicity. Other experts (Aris 1980), however, completely reject the thesis of Indian origin for the Monpas. This thesis came into prominence especially in the wake of the India China boundary war. During the period of intense boundary disputes of the immediate pre-war period, an official document called the *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question* (1961) was published. Divided into two sections, each presenting the official viewpoints of the Indian and Chinese governments on the border dispute, the section which treats the Indian perspective includes a claim that the Monpa areas traditionally belonged to the Indian subcontinent, citing several textual sources (*Report* 1961: 104-107). On the Chinese side, the writings of some Chinese Tibetan authors, such as Chab-dga-rta-mgrin' in his book, *Bod-ljongs-zhib' jug* reveal similar attempts at cooption (Pommaret 1999). Pommaret argues that such attempts to identify or trace similar origins for Monpas and Tibetans might be politically motivated (1999: 63). Here I will treat only the debates taking place on the Indian side.

Taking recourse to mythological treatises to prove that Mon areas have been part of the national geography since the hoary past is quite common in nationalist narratives, especially those that seek to project the nation (and its nationals) as existing in space as a unit since time immemorial. Alonso points to the importance of "spatial memory" (1994: 387) in nation-building, that is, how temporalizing and memory-making stabilize the identity or place and people, by showing how what is within (the people-nation) *was* before. Alonso terms such nationalisms that draw on the sacralized past for its legitimation, epic nationalism. Co-option of a people as "one of us" is often accompanied by narratives that differentiate between "us" and "them" in such a way that geographical and ethnic boundaries coincide. On the part of the Indian state, this includes asserting difference between Monpa and Tibetan and covering up the social ties between them.

In this situation, quite a few Monpa individuals are presently taking the position that Monpas are indigenous to India in order to combat questions of supposedly non-national affiliations. But it is a peculiar kind of positioning where an indigenous Monpa space is invented to counter positions of foreign origin. So, if there are many who trace descent from Tibetan royalty, there are also those who, being aware of the Chinese claim, are reluctant to name Tibet as the origin place of Monpas. I focus on a popular legend among the Monpas which recounts how Buddhism is brought to a “heathen” land (current Monyul) ruled by a king, Kala Wangpo. This story, derived from a Tibetan *namthar* (sacred biography) is also part of Monpa oral lore. Many in the 60s - 80s age groups had heard it narrated by lamas at public gatherings, while others had heard it from their parents or relatives as a bed time story. Kala Wangpo is thus an epic figure in legend. I show how in certain Monpa versions of this legend, a narrative shift through enunciation or the act of narrating (De Certeau 1984) leads to Kala Wangpo becoming a king “indigenous” to India. That is, some Monpas employ the legend to strategically “narrate” indigeneity. Kala Wangpo is projected as Monyul’s own, as a local historical figure indigenous to Monyul region, and his story is included in school textbooks on local history. Further, some individuals even claim that the people of Monyul are descended from the offspring of Kala Wangpo, who had ruled Monyul in the past. In contemporary Monyul, there is a resurgence of the popularity of this legend through public performances of it. For example, in July 2010, a performance was staged in Tawang in the newly constructed Kala Wangpo Hall, and on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2010, this legend was performed in Tezpur in the Monyul-Assam border town.

I present below an abridged version of the folktale as given in Cynthia Josayma’s (2001) English text. It is a translation of a Tibetan *namthar* or lifestory titled “Khandroma Bumo Drowa Sangmo Namthar” (Josayma 2001: ix) on which the opera script used by the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts at Dharamsala is also based:



*It was one thousand five hundred years after the Buddha had passed into Nirvana. Buddha's teachings were flourishing all over but there was a place called Mandralgang,<sup>71</sup> which had no religion and which was rocked by fighting among the people who lived there. The goddess of wisdom, Yeshe Khandroma, decides to show them the way of Dharma (religion) by taking human form. She is born on earth as the daughter of a pious old couple and is called Drowa Sangmo. She grows up to be a beautiful young woman. Once when the king of Mandralgang Gyalpo Kala Wangpo is out hunting, his dog goes missing, and while searching for his dog, he comes across Drowa Sangmo, is smitten by her beauty and marries her. Drowa Sangmo introduces the people of the land to the Dharma, but soon after giving birth to a daughter Lhachik Kuntu Sangmo and a son Lhase Gyalpo Kuntu Legpa, she flies away to the heavens. The king had another wife, Hashang, a demoness in human form, who wishing to usurp the kingdom, conspires to get the king's two children from his other marriage killed. She pretends to have a rare disease that can only be cured by eating the hearts of the children, and hires two executioners. The executioners take the children to the top of a high hill with the intent of throwing them down. They decide to spare the girl child but not the boy, who is however, rescued by his mother, who is watching from the skies, and carried away to Padmachen. The boy becomes king of Padmachen and is eventually reunited with his sister. The evil demoness has, in the meantime, imprisoned the king, Kala Wangpo, and become queen of Mandralgang. The boy challenges her to battle, where he defeats and kills her. He releases his father from captivity, and thereafter, father and son return to Padmachen [and live happily ever after].*

This is a folktale replete with religious symbolism that celebrates the triumph of good over evil. However, the shift in enunciation in some Monpa narrations leads to an additional

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<sup>71</sup> In Monpa narrations, Mandralgang/ Mandal Gang is identified as Tawang, although in some versions of this tale, the king is said to have ruled from Mukto, the Monpa area south of Tawang (Nath 2005: 57).

element attaching to the religious character of the tale. These narrations project Kala Wangpo as a king whose descent line affirms the Monpas' indigenous status. The shift becomes noticeable when we compare everyday Monpa renditions of the legend and the text of the Tibetan opera *Drowa Sangmo* as followed and performed by Tibetan opera troupes. I explain how the shift is made with the intent of a tactical gain. The text of the play performed in Monyul theaters and which I read in the Hindi script follows the official format of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts at Dharamsala. I focus on the disjunction between the public performance text and the individual retellings of the tale by Monpa narrators by reproducing a conversation I had with some Bhoti teachers.

Yeshe Khawa, a Bhoti teacher who narrated the tale to me at the Deputy Directorate of School Education in Tawang, chose to begin by highlighting the glory and spread of the kingdom of Kala Wangpo, while *Drowa Sangmo* enters at a later stage in his narrative. He recounted:

Gyalpo Kala Wangpo was a king who ruled over Tawang. His wife was Khandro *Drowa Zangmo*. He had two wives, the other was *Dunmo Hashang*. Two children were born to him; a girl and a boy. The boy was called *Kuntu Lagpa*, the other was called *Lyachi Kuntu Zangmo*. The king thought of the welfare of his people and his reign was peaceful. One of his wives, *Dunmo Hashang*, was a demon, who was against religion. She wanted to destroy the king and his family.

Here, it is not clear whether Gyalpo Kala Wangpo's kingdom stretched over Tawang alone or over all Mon, including the southern lowlands. The narrator tells me that Mon today has become the personal name of Tawang and West Kameng, whereas earlier Bhutan, Sikkim (Tamang), Ladakh and Monyul were collectively called Mon in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In this narrator's version, the title of the legend makes the king Kala Wangpo the central protagonist, while in the Tibetan version, *Drowa Zangmo/Sangmo* is given central place. In this Monpa version, *Drowa Sangmo* enters at a later stage in the narrative. In contrast, note the prelude to the story of *Drowa Sangmo*, from the TIPA website is;

There once was a place called Mandal Gang, which had no religion and which was rocked by fighting among the proud people who lived there. The wisdom Dakini, Yeshe Khadro, observed this region and saw the suffering of its inhabitants. She decided to show them the path of Dharma. She was born on earth to the daughter of a pious old woman and was called Drowa Sangmo.

The religious significance of the story is flagged in the prelude itself which purports to be a tale about how religion came to a pagan place, Mandalgrang, or Tana Mandrel Gang where Kala Wangpo of Monyul ruled. Kala Wangpo himself makes an unostentatious entry in the prelude thus; “her husband, King Kala Wangpo is totally under her [the evil queen’s] control”.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in Josayma’s English translation of the Tibetan text (2001), the first two chapters are devoted to describing how the wisdom fairy Yeshe Khandroma chose to take birth in human form in order to save the world from degeneration. The king is introduced only in the third chapter which describes his first encounter with Drowa Sangmo.

The relative advantage of the shift in enunciation in the Monpa version becomes evident when we note that in the latter Kala Wangpo is portrayed as a typical patriarchal figure, or the probable father of a Monpa lineage. The Monpa teacher who narrated the tale chose to begin by highlighting the glory and spread of the kingdom of Kala Wangpo, and the goodness of the king himself, although, in the Tibetan text, Kala Wangpo is depicted as a somewhat arrogant king who indulges in “sinful” activities such as hunting animals. The Tibetan version attaches more significance to the theme of religious symbolism— the defeat of evil forces albeit after severe trials and tribulations —than to the patriarchal and patrilineal king figure; and hence, it is the celestial being Drowa Sangmo, the harbinger of Dharma, who is the stronger presence in the tale.

In the Monpa narratives, moreover, local place names are highlighted in order to add to the truth claim of the story. The mythic scope of the stories notwithstanding, they collapse temporal distance by marking present spots with the imprint of a past that appears to be within grasp. The evil queen is assigned a birthplace in Zemithang (in north Tawang) while the celestial

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<sup>72</sup> [http://www.tibetanarts.org/lhamo\\_drowa.html](http://www.tibetanarts.org/lhamo_drowa.html) (Accessed 11 March 2011)

queen is said to have hailed from Morshing (in Kalaktang circle of West Kameng district). The battle between the king of Padmachen (Kala Wangpo's son) and the demoness is said to have taken place in Merak, on the Monyul-Bhutan border. In some versions, Padmachen is identified as Thembang village in Dirang, and the fortifications around the village are said to have constituted the king's fortress (according to more recent history, these fortifications were erected to repel raids by outsiders on Thembang). The hill from which the children are hurled down by the assassins is identified as Mukto hill, which falls in the Mukto circle in Tawang district; although some local people would have Kitpi as the hill in question. All areas are unquestionably within Monyul, and this kind of appropriation becomes necessary for the spatial appropriation of the legend. Current interest in Monyul's Kala Wangpo connection has peaked to such an extent that a Bhoti teachers in Tawang is currently attempting to write the local version of Kala Wangpo in Bhoti by visiting all the places mentioned above in order to fill in the narrative with the local content. In contrast, in the Tibetan version by TIPA and Josayma (2001), Monpa place-names are almost wiped out of the narratives: one section of the latter's book simply notes that the children after escaping the clutches of the assassins for the first time spent some time wandering about in the jungles of East India, a place absent from the Monpa narratives.

By referring to places that are within Monyul, Monpa narrations of the legend construct Kala Wangpo as native to Monyul, and in doing so, reinstates the king figure from his dependent position as Drowa Zangmo's spouse to the central role as the father of the Monpa race. Thus, the narration of this particular legend is intended, first, to show that Kala Wangpo was indigenous to Monyul, and second, that Monpas are indigenous to Monyul. The story shifts from being a religious tale to being a tale of a local king.

But Kala Wangpo is not a figure who can be territorially contained as Monpa local lore. If geography is taken as a measure or justification for such containment, then Kala Wangpo belongs as much to Bhutan as to Monyul, for his story unfolds across a geographical stretch that transcends the current Mon areas. Locality is undermined by the fact that performance of this

legend is not confined to Monyul, but has been appropriated by the popular culture industry in Bhutan. A movie has been made in Bhutan on Gyalpo Kala Wangpo, and the story included in school textbooks written in Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language. In Tibet too, traditional performances of Kala Wangpo's legend are common, and in Dharamsala, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts set up by the Tibetan community in exile regularly stages performances of the story of Drowa Sangmo. The legend of Kala Wangpo thus has merit and popularity for its emotive quotient in all Tibetan-influenced areas. The deference to locality that Monpas make in using this legend in local textbooks is a negotiation with the territorial logic of the nation-state.

When Kala Wangpo is appropriated as Monpa local history, it points to two things. First, it exposes the problems inherent in the current territorial logic that defines national existence. Thus, even though Kala Wangpo ruled over contiguous territory, in contemporary history texts, his primary identity has to be "Monpa", an identification that becomes necessary as soon as he is made the central protagonist of a "local" tale. Secondly, and in related fashion, it highlights the predicament of a border people, who have to come up with local histories that suppress, rather than glorify, the multiple routes and tendencies which shaped their past and continue to do so in the present. Ambiguity is thus built into the act of appropriation. Ambiguity here is not simply the ambiguity of form that accrues from the multiple telling and interpretations of oral texts (Trawick 1988) or through semiotic excess – the plurality of meanings generated by any sign that resists interpretive closure (Mankekar 1999). It is also an ambiguity deriving from the liminal position of the narrators as suspect citizens of a disputed border. Popular constructions of Kala Wangpo as an indigenous king bring to the fore the political negotiations that Monpas make in combating questions of transnational (non-national) origin.

The canonization of Kala Wangpo in Monyul could be read as the natural consequence in a people's quest for a hero, who is absorbed neither in the "great tradition" of either Sanskrit Hinduism or of Tibetan Buddhism but is independent of both. While Kala Wangpo is a figure of Tibetan oral traditions, he is far from being a central figure there. But in contemporary Monpa

discourse, Kala Wangpo has been chosen to mark off a Monpa indigeneity. How this is done and why it is done becomes quite clear from the following remarks of the elderly lama serving in Tawang monastery. He argued,

Kala Wangpo and Khandro Drowa Zangmo must have been progenitors of a *jati*. There is no proof of this because in this king's time, there was no language, no Hindi, English or even Monpa. People simply used to chant Om Mane Padme Hung, and fly prayer flags. There were no schools then....

Significantly, when questioned about the origins of Monpa clans, this particular lama was reluctant to name Tibet since he was aware of the Chinese claim. He suggested that I should write that Monpas are neither from Tibet nor India, but are of indigenous origin (“born here”) – and that they have been living here since the time of king Kala Wangpo, who ruled from his capital in Tawang sometime around the sixth century. In the lama's view, the people of Monyul were descended from the offspring of Kala Wangpo and Khando Drowa Zangmo.

This kind of genealogical assertion to indigeneity can be validated only if Kala Wangpo's kingdom is in Indian territory. Monyul was not part of Tibet at the time of Kala Wangpo's reign, estimated to be during the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Nath 2005: 57), having been annexed officially only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Aris 1980). Hence, in his time, Kala Wangpo was neither Tibetan nor Indian but a native of Tawang. This makes the treatment of indigenous origins a more flexible issue, for if Kala Wangpo was native to Tawang, and Tawang is now part of India, it means that Monpas who live in Tawang (and by extension downwards, in West Kameng) are native to India. By putting forward Kala Wangpo's kingdom as “indigenous” space, this lama is negotiating the contested arena of origins to offer a thesis of indigenous origins for the Monpas.

There are other ways, besides tracing descent from Kala Wangpo, by which Monpas deflect a thesis of cross-border (implying foreign) origins. A former headman of Seru village whom I had interviewed for origin narratives, after recounting how the Tsangmo and Shukmo/Shu-mo clans of Seru were descended from Tibetan lineages, added that even before the

Tibetan migration, there used to be Monpas in Mon areas. He traced the first migration to the Pandava and Kaurava war in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, in which the defeated Kauravas fled to the northern side of India, which he concluded, would have been the Mon areas. When prodded, he did not or could not cite any source for this story, saying that it was just hearsay.

The reference to the *Mahabharata* made above is not entirely hearsay, having its source in some classical Sanskrit texts, which mention that when the Pandava brothers were fighting, Arjun fought with the armies on the north and Bhima with the enemies on the east, and these enemies included the Kirata, Cina and Himalayan highlanders. But they do not mention that the Kirata, Cina or other terms used to describe the Mongoloid or Himalayan dwellers were related to the fighting dynasties. The *Comprehensive History of Assam* (1990) edited by the historian Barpujari, states,

...legends associate the beginnings of Aryanism in Assam with the establishment of Naraka's rule in that land of the Kirātas [who] were Mongoloid mountaineers of the Himalayas, an important Bhotia tribe being still known by the same name. There are Kirātas living in the Morung, west of Sikkim, while the Kirātas, regarded as one of ten tribes of the Bhotia race allied to the Tibetans, had their headquarters in Mokwanpur in Eastern Nepal. The entire Bhotia race may have been called Kirātas because the use of the name seems to have been very wide (Barpujari 1990: 82).

While this statement concedes an overlap of and contiguity between the territories under Aryan rule and that of Bhotia habitation, it does not hint at any identity of kinship between the two groups. Further, as Stuart Blackburn argues, we cannot use these vague references to identify "Kirātas" with any present day inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh (Blackburn 2004: 44).

Reference to epics in order to substantiate Indian claims over Monpas and Monyul is also made in the official document published jointly by the governments of China and India on the boundary question. The fact that a well-read Monpa man chose to bring this reference up in the context of origins is significant. Narrating indigenous origins sunders the uniform spaces of a transnational geography created through stories of cross-border origin and marriage.

In light of media reports about renewed Chinese claims over Arunachal Pradesh, Arunachalis, particularly Monpas (since China is seen to be especially keen on the Mon areas), are quick to state their Indianness. Many Monpas appear to feel that they will be more suspect since they have cultural affinities with Tibetans on the other side. In order to prove that Monpas cannot be considered part of Tibet, different tactics are employed. These include citing an ancient boundary that existed between Tibet and Monyul even before the British delineated the current one. Lama Tashi told me,

Lhasey Tsangma put a border between Mon and Tibet. He took a tree and planted in Tawang in a place called “Nye” – people there are called *Nye-pa* – “*Mon-yul Nye*”. *This is never found in books but heard a lot about [emphasis added]*.

This was not an isolated incident. As I sat sipping tea with my hosts after a lama from Thembang had just finished giving me an account of how the Thembang Bapus were descended from Lhasey Tsangma, an aunt of my host called my attention to one of the statements uttered by the lama – that there had existed a boundary between Tibet areas and Monyul in history. Her flagging this particular point in the entire narrative of the lama for my benefit was a revealing gesture. It suggests that many Monpas are not only conscious of, but also continually resist, the status of being suspect citizens. A Monpa government officer complained, “When I go down [to the plains] people ask me. You are from Tawang. Do you prefer to go with China or India. *Arre*, bullshit. In 1962, the Chinese tried their level best to convince the local Monpas, but could not. Nobody went with them. So what do you mean?” Whenever I mentioned my research to non-Monpa people, I invariably encountered the question, “So! Do they consider themselves Indian or Chinese?” My counter that after more than fifty years of being part of independent India where they had minimal interaction with the Chinese state, they could hardly be considered “less Indian”, did not always increase the confidence of my interrogator(s).

In order to highlight the kind of negotiations that Monpas make in their daily life, I reproduce a conversation snippet between Lhamo, a friend in Tawang, and an army officer in



March 2010. The army man comes to talk to my friend about a package that he was supposed to collect from her, but Lhamo replies that delivery would be delayed. He says that since he would be visiting his home town in North India for a couple of months, she should hand the package to his deputy who was also accompanying him on that day. The army man tells both Lhamo and his deputy to scrutinize well each other's faces so that there is no problem in recognition at the time of handing over the said item. I give a transcript of their exchange below.

Army Man (AM): Of course, you will recognize him [his deputy], but he will find it hard to identify you ...all of you look so similar, Monpa, Nepali, Chinese....

Lhamo (L): Is that so? Well, China keeps calling us, "come, come". In that case, we should go to their side.

AM: Do you wish to go over to their side?

L (pouting): And why not? Since you can't differentiate between us.

AM (laughing): Don't say such a thing. Is our [army] presence here all in vain?

Both the army man and my friend were clearly bantering. But it is equally clear that behind the jestful, flirtatious words lay something deeper, for the distinction that the army man from North India made between himself and the Monpas identifies the latter as physiologically closer to non-Indian nationalities. But the retort of my friend is also important in that it reveals an undercurrent of tension between the Monpas and the North Indian "saviors" – the Indian army. The same tension is present in the defensive attitude of some Monpas talking about their origins.

When a case is made for indigenous descent of the Monpas from Kala Wangpo, or when the headman from Seru suggests indigenous origins for the Monpas, they are both adopting a defensive attitude. Whether this is out of a desire to distance themselves from Tibetans or to defy the Chinese claim over Mon areas is not clear. But it is clear that for borderland people like the Monpas, origin and kinship become highly contested issues in the face of narrow definitions of Indian nationalism that construct nationals as culturally homogenous or as having a common origin traceable to a foundational myth.



**4.1. Gyalsey Rinpoche and monk Sangey Leda**



**4.2. Elderly person of Teli village, Tawang**



**4.3. Chorten built by Bhutanese queen in Domkho village, Kalaktang**

**“*Pahle zamaane mein*” (in the old days): Marriage and denial**

The use of the caveat, “*Pahle zamaane mein*” (in the old days) is yet another tactic, especially noticeable in stories of Monpa-Tibetan marriages, used to divert attention away from Tibetan ties. Several individuals distance their present identity from their past associations with Tibet by relegating their kinship with Tibetans to a past which is now over. The past is suspect for it entails a unity with Tibet through connections of trade, rule and even kinship and hence, “in the old days” is used to stress discontinuity between the past and present. The headman of Seru village, who had favored a thesis of indigenous origins for the Monpas, when asked about marriage relations between people in the border villages in Tibet and Monyul, replied that there were instances but that they took place “in the old days”. Ngawang Chottan, the *tsorgan* (headman) of Lunpo village, when asked whether there had been marriage relations between his village and the adjacent Shou village (now in Tibet) had said, There was a woman from Shou who married and settled in Kyalengteng [a neighboring village]...in the old days. “*Ye purana zamaane ki baat hain*” (This happened long ago) – he added for additional emphasis. What is interesting is not that such marriages take place, but that some sections of the public tend to shroud such marriages with the veil of secrecy and actually look uncomfortable with the idea of marriages with Tibetans – not least because the latter are marked as the Other in both the Indian nationalist and Arunachali regionalist discourses.

In nationalist discourse, Monpas and Tibetans are differentiated as having very distinct political identities. While Monpa groups living in China are also ethnically differentiated from the Tibetans, what makes the Indian situation peculiar is that the ethnic difference between these two groups is also overlain by a political distinction. While one (Tibetan) has the identity of refugee, the other (Monpa) is a minority group and constitutionally recognized as a scheduled tribe (ST) and beneficiaries of affirmative action benefits; and claims to benefits require clear demarcation between those who are citizens and beneficiaries and those who are not. Where marriages between Monpas and other Indians do not threaten boundaries, for these occur between Indians,

marriage between Monpas and Tibetans disturb the political boundaries between refugee and citizen. From the perspective of the Indian nation-state, in light of China's rival claims over Monyul, it becomes more important to highlight the social boundaries and history of antagonistic relations between Monpas and Tibetans rather than the kinship ties between the two.

In this context, the oft-quoted refrain "in the old days" serves to institute a break between the past – when Monpas may have married Tibetans – and the present – when they do not. Although marriages between Tibetans and Monpas continue even today, they appear to be events of long ago when the phrase "in the old days" is used. "In the old days" should not be thought of in the same way as one would the phrase "once upon a time" in fairytales or even "dream time" in Australian Aboriginal mythology. I argue that "in the old days" is a rhetorical device born of political contingency. It does not telescope time or bridge yesterday and today. Rather, it carves up time by erecting a temporal division between now and before in a way that makes the past distant and more inaccessible.

Since there was a complete reversal of political allegiance in 1950s, and a dramatic change of circumstances, many people in their 50s do not know what it was like pre-1962. They could have been infants and toddlers then and might not have been attentive to the stories their parents and grandparents could have told them. Some remained deprived of both education and the awareness to preserve the tales of their land and people, since they were toiling to make ends meet, either as laborers in the frantic schemes for border road construction or as farm workers.<sup>73</sup> Those who were not born till the 1970s acquired modern education and a taste for all things Indian (North Indian), popularized by the television or through their interaction with the new

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<sup>73</sup> My guide in Dirang, Phunchu Namje told me ruefully that a lot of oral narratives were lost because many in their generation (he is in his 40s) did not care to listen to their stories told by parents, grandparents, uncles or aunts, and often dismissed the story-telling of elderly relatives as the rambling words of senile people who had no other business to attend to. Their generation is also the one that learnt Assamese and Hindi in schools, although their children are now learning Bhoti. I am tempted to call their generation "the missed generation" although their experiences differ substantially from that of the "half-caste" children among Australian Aborigines who constitute the "stolen generation". While enculturation was not forced upon the Monpas following regime-change, there was symbolic mediation by state, including the use of the Hindi language, to mold them towards a national consciousness.

migrants from Bihar, Punjab, Bengal and Assam, who came as soldiers, civil servants, teachers and government employees. So, the perspective of “in the old days” both results from and also utilizes the cultural dislocation of the Monpas so as to highlight the distance between Monpas and Tibetans in the present.

Denial of the past and narrations of indigeneity are border effects (Van Schendel 2005) that are not subversive in that they do not seek to circumvent the border or to defy it, but instead to accommodate it. They enable a spatial concept of Monyul as a region that can be as neatly separated from its Tibetan neighbors in kinship aspects in the same way the physical boundary line separates the corresponding territories of Monyul and Tibet. But just as we observed the contradictions in rendering Kala Wangpo as a local king, we will now see how the caveat “in the old days” falters in the face of conflicting accounts.

Both written records (Bell 1982, Fürer-Haimendorf 1982) as well as oral history document marriages between Monpas and Tibetans which forged ties between the two communities as well as places. For a large number of Monpas, marrying Tibetans was and is actually quite a routine matter. Many among Monpas have a Tibetan grandfather or grandmother living with them, or some uncle or granduncle who had migrated to Tibet and married there. Consider, for example, the story of Yeshe from Senge Dzong, whose father was originally from Tibet. Nye Gompa (monastery) in Senge was under the jurisdiction of Tawang monastery, and the latter used to nominate a lama to officiate over it for a three year period. Yeshe’s father had come down at the age of 15 as the orderly of the lama nominated to the Tawang monastery from Tibet. The lama was very popular, and after his three-year tenure was over, the people of Senge requested him to stay on. The lama and his orderly, Yeshe’s father settled down in Senge, and the latter married a local girl, who was Yeshe’s mother.

Ngawang Chottan, headman of Lunpo village, which is very close to the China border agrees that marriage between Pangchen, on the Indian side, and Labo, on Tibet side, probably occurred, since the later were considered Monpa, not Tibetan areas before 1959. In Zemithang,

which is on the Indian side, there are families who married same clan members living in areas of present-day Tibet. Another old man from Lunpo village in Zemithang reminisces,

There is somebody from Hyou [which falls on the Tibet side, now] who married and settled in Kyalengteng [on Indian side]. There is a Rongmo caste in Shou – Shoupa Rongmo. All this happened *in the old days*.... There are two types among Rongmos; a Shoupa Rongmo could marry a Rongmo from another clan-division. Marriages happened between same clan members [emphasis added].

Thus, while love often led to such marriages, clan endogamy also played a role. Clan endogamy combined with village exogamy to create a kind of cross-border marriage circuit, especially in Tawang. There were also particular villages which exchanged partners through a system of village exogamy, and such villages could have been on two sides of the present border. People could marry their fellow-Buddhists, and it was common for people to marry between clan divisions within one's own village or neighboring village. Marriage rules thus respected clan boundaries and not modern boundaries of nations; and this trend did not end with the closing of the border.

Fürer-Haimendorf, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Arunachal Pradesh in 1980 observes that although there were social sanctions that restricted Monpas from marrying outside their community or social rank, high ranking Monpas could marry Bhutanese and Tibetans of good standing (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982). He writes, "In recent years, some Monpa girls have married Nepalis but no Monpa man has so far married any complete outsider. Bhutanese and Tibetans do not fall in this category as they are Buddhists with similar customs" (Ibid. 160). In the present period, the Monyul region offers a demographically mixed landscape, for the number of Monpas married to non-Monpas is high. Many Monpa men and women have found partners in Assamese, Bengali, Punjabi, Oriya or other Arunachalis and especially in Nepalis. This pattern of marriage has overshadowed the previous marriage pattern where Monpas only married fellow Buddhists from Monyul, Tibet or Bhutan.

Despite the shift in marriage patterns, it does not mean that the earlier form of marriages does not take place, but that they are not readily made visible to the outsider. Since Monpas,

Tibetans and Bhutanese share common Buddhist names unmarked by ethnicity or nationality, marriages among these three groups often form a pattern not readily visible. Such marriages are also not advertised to the outsider. My queries into this topic elicited different replies from different quarters depending on how I was perceived (in some cases, I was taken to be a government agent) or the individual qualities and capacities of the respondent (the independent professional and lamas were more forthcoming in their opinions than middle-ranking government employees, and often individual qualities of frankness too affected the quality of responses). Yet, I did arrive at a pattern that confirmed inter-marriage between Monpas, Tibetans and Bhutanese takes place as Fürer-Haimendorf had described (1982).

In Tawang, Tibetan kinship is hard to deny. If distance determined marriage partners, then it was easier for people from Tawang to marry within their own area or with cross-border Tibetan and Bhutanese populace than with Indian tribesmen such as Kacharis from the plains. The chances that migration and marriage between Monpas and Tibetans occurred are greater than the chances that they did not occur. Yet, even this simple fact of association becomes a matter of contention, and many people were fearful that if they spoke of such a connection, they would invite more unwanted territorial claims. As the elderly lama at Tawang had cautioned, I should not write about these things as it would add fuel to the Chinese claims that Monyul belonged to them.

People hesitate to admit to cross-border marriages because the dominant narrative would have the Indo-Tibetan political boundary to neatly coincide with kinship boundaries. The matter of Tibetan refugees acquiring false scheduled tribe documents, which I will discuss more fully in chapter seven, has added another edge to the issue. There are unconfirmed reports that some Tibetans who have become prosperous through trade marry their daughters to Monpa men so that they can use their kinship connections to acquire scheduled tribe certificates and acquire benefits reserved for the latter category. Such occurrences, as well as the official discomfort with close social ties between Monpas and Tibetans, serve to cast a shroud around the quite common



phenomenon of marriage between the two communities. Many Monpas thus do not readily volunteer the information that their family includes a Tibetan member, while some outright deny the fact that such marriages used to take place even in the past. The Chinese claim, the border dispute, and the matter of false scheduled tribe certificates haunt Monpa discussions of marriage. The introduction of caveats in order to minimize Monpa-Tibetan cross-border connections goes alongside assertions of transnational connections in this disputed border region.

### **Performing transnationality: Mon as a trans-Himalayan geography**

Tradition is about “pastness”. And not just about the past. It is not a positive discourse but a reflective and reflexive one. ....It is a metadiscourse which allows the past to cease to be a “scarce resource” and allows it to become .... a renewable resource (Appadurai *et al* 1991: 22).

Oral narratives and popular memory are the contemporary reconstruction and representation of what had transpired in the linear past or in mythic time. While individual memory is sustained by I witness – “I was there and saw it” – kind of statements, oral narratives about the past and collective memory draw on public legitimacy and tradition for force – “this was what happened for my parents/grandparents say so”; and so when individuals claim to base their stories on these kinds of oral narratives, they add the weight of tradition to their narration. However, these narratives also re-present events of the past for particular objectives in the present. The past is recycled through oral narratives but in such a way as to suit present contingent circumstances. Oral narratives thus work through a circular logic, where the past and present weave in and out of the narration through the images they evoke and the contrasts they summon in the minds of both narrator and audience.

Thus, narratives and memory are not outside the individual or the subjective, but are fashioned and reinvented through the latter’s narrations to send out specific messages. The narrative not only reflects and but also helps to create the subjectivities and political positioning

of the narrator. Further, the interpretive potential/aspiration of folkloric performances often becomes the medium to access the voices from the margins (Appadurai *et al* 1991: 21).<sup>74</sup> As I have shown in this chapter, a discourse of Tibetan origins is gaining popularity in contemporary Monyul. A prominent Monpa politician reportedly visited his ancestral village in Tibet a few years back, where his clan is supposed to have originated. Clearly, when individual narrators identify with the Tibetan origins thesis, they position themselves in a particular way. It is in this sense that narrating origins are a creative means of identity construction. In invoking their Tibetan connections, individual narrators are not merely telling the story of origins, but are also retelling it with a specific aim in mind. Most individuals who narrate these stories are aware of the tensions involved in narrating Tibetan origins, as is evident by the statement of the monk who asked me if I could “face” the fact of the Monpas’ Tibetan origins.

One way to interpret Monpa oral narratives of cross-border Tibetan origin is to see these as attempts to resist their current minority status by tracing connections to royalty. During my stay in Bomdila, I had an interesting discussion with historian, B.N Jha, who is a professor in the Bomdila Government College, West Kameng. Very knowledgeable about Monpa social history, Jha argues that Monpa attempts to trace Tibetan lineage arose as a result of Tibetan monastic rule. The spread of monastic education among the Monpas led to their familiarity with Tibetan genealogical traditions, and their need to associate with the ruling power led to genealogical legends and stories that claimed descent from royalty. According to Jha, the tendency to trace Tibetan royal lineage among Monpas could also have been an outcome of Monpa interactions

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<sup>74</sup> Gender is one of the basic parameters of alterity in South Asian oral traditions, and many scholars have sought to recover the “female voice” from within male-centred oral narratives. For example, Raheja and Gold (1994) show how rural women contest patriarchal values and assert a distinct subjectivity while remaining within structures of domination.

with princely clans, such as Kachari Rajas among neighboring plainmen, with whom they shared trade ties.<sup>75</sup>

Certainly, there are plenty of examples from Indian history alone, from ancient to modern times, where marginalized peoples seek illustrious lineage either to combat marginality or to make one's political status at par with an equivalent spiritual or social rank. Thus, an individual belonging to a tribal group, after coming to power, would claim descent from either a princely clan or a relatively higher caste status. During the middle ages, it was common for many Hinduised ruling families to claim descent from a respectable ancestry.<sup>76</sup>

However, Monpa discourse of origins cannot be reduced to a summary statement about a marginalized population's quest to acquire status and respectability. While I do not dispute the upwardly mobile aspirations of a group as being one possible explanation for the Monpa discourse of origins, this forms only part of the picture. I have shown that Monpa discourse of origins is not a monolithic narrative of Tibetan origins but a highly fractured discourse, owing to the region's disputed border status.

Not all the narratives discussed here are always clear. While the original progenitor's name (e.g. Lhasey Tsangma) is always constant, the perfect retracing to Lhasey Tsangma is not always possible because of the various trajectories in which progenitors and progenies appear to

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<sup>75</sup> According to Jha, this must be especially the case with Thebengia Bhutias or the Monpas of Thembang and Sherchokpas or the Monpas of Dirang and Kalaktang, who had closer interactions with the plainmen (Personal communication, October 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Barpujari (1990: 124) mentions how the Gurjara Pratiharas, believed to have come from Central Asia, represented themselves as descendents of Lakshmana, brother to king Ram in the epic *Ramayana*, and of the Suryavamshi (solar) dynasty. In Assam, the kings of Mlechchha dynasty, who ruled between 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> century, considered to be of aboriginal (implying tribal) origin, (Melchchha is believed to be a derivative of the tribal Mech) similarly claimed descent from Naraka, legendary son of mother Earth and the god Vishnu, and founder of an Aryan kingdom in Assam (Barpujari 1990: 96, 124). M.N. Srinivas (1960) has an entire thesis on Sanskritization (the attempts by a lower caste group to move up in the caste hierarchy by emulating an upper caste or taking the latter as reference group) where he provided examples of tribes that self-converted to Kshatriya caste, the warrior caste when they acquired economic and political power. For example, the Noniyas, a Shudra caste tried to raise their status to that of the higher ranked Cauhan Rajputs by emulating the latter's lifestyle.

move.<sup>77</sup> The fact that these narratives appear as rambling versions is not so much important as what the act(s) of narration might reveal about how narrators position themselves *vis a vis* dominant national narratives or their transnational callings.

The identification of Tibetan origins by differently located individuals adds a new dimension to the representational space of Mon that we have discussed in chapter three. The Mon articulated in oral narratives of origin and migration has a cartographical referent that is far wider than the one outlined in the cultural politics of the MARDC demand. Whereas the programs for culture preservation identify the Monpas as belonging to a community of Indian Buddhists, the oral narratives of migration bind the different lineages of Monyul with those of Tibet and Bhutan in common skeins of blood, descent, and marriage. Unlike in the cultural agenda, where Mon gives shared space to Tibetan Buddhists within India, the Mon articulated through narratives of origins and descent includes spaces outside India. When Monpas narrate Tibet as the origins of Monpa clans, they allow a spatial vision to emerge where the contours of the present Mon expands to a trans-Himalayan geographical space. These narratives also become a means by which a border people, whose trans-border connections were abruptly cut, discursively undermine the nation-state imperative to fix people to definite, bounded territories.

But the Monpa discourse of origins constitutes not one, but multiple, shifting spaces. While assertions of Tibetan origin construct a transnational geography for Mon, caveats and denials reintroduce the boundary in the discourse of origins. The latter prove that the Monpa discourse of origins cannot be understood separately from the border location, for the looming spectre of the border dispute influences many of the statements offered by the Monpas articulating origins. The India-China border tensions form the backdrop and the context for the articulation of identity, and hence, the origin stories reflect the tensions between the idea of a culturally homogenous nation and the representations of transnational, cross-border ties that are

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<sup>77</sup> B.N. Jha shared with me that he had had several Tibetan history texts translated and found that the stories of migration would begin properly but would then become more and more confusing and finally end with how a particular Monpa area was settled by a particular clan.

being animated in contemporary cultural politics. However, while the narratives within the autonomy demand discussed previously imply these connections with Tibet, the retracing of Tibetan origins seeks to make them explicit.

The transnational space of Mon does not always require the open contradiction of the inter-regional spaces of Mon as seen in the programs for cultural preservation. In most cases, the two representations of Mon – one, inter-regional, and the other, transnational – occur simultaneously, although for analytic purposes, I have distinguished them. For example, during my first interview with T.G. Rinpoche at the Kalachakra Gompa, Dirang in 2008, he attempted to justify the Monpa demand for an autonomous region by invoking the Monpa community's once transnational dispersion in the following words:

Monpa [are a] very ancient community - before start of mainland India. In Nepal also some sections of the community call themselves Monpa. Ladakh also Mangyul. In a place called Mechuka, [in central Arunachal Pradesh], some peoples known as Mema. ...In Sikkim, some tribes (Lepcha) – they are also saying [called] Monpa. Before becoming independent, Bhutan also had Monpa. Drukpas also called themselves Monpa.

So the transnational Mon is not compartmentalized from the inter-regional Mon in popular discourse, although the latter is more accommodating of the border. That is, in the programs for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa, Tibet is pushed to the background, and the community articulated is spatially contained within the boundaries of India, because these struggles require the support of the Indian state. The transnational Mon is able to suspend the border-normative vision temporarily because it is given creative license by the mythic space in which it unfolds.

T.G. Rinpoche's statement above reveals yet another kind of negotiation taking place within the discourse of origins. It is possible to find narratives where Tibet is present but in the background as distant progenitor. Such narratives advance a view of Monpas as having common kinship with people living in Tibetan Buddhist pockets in India as well as Bhutan, but in doing so, they imply but not directly state common origin in Tibet for these various Tibetan Buddhist groups. A Monpa businesswoman in Dirang informed me that she belonged to the Gonpapa clan,

also called Pema Lingpa (*sic*). According to her, Gonpapas are present in Ladakh too, for a female officer there had sent a message to one of her relatives, saying, “You belong to the Gonpapa clan, and so do we”.

The argument in such statements is that different clan groups in different Himalayan zones have common descent, and ethnicity coincided with geography in the past, as the people who lived in the low lying areas on the borders of the Tibetan polity were collectively known as Monpa. But these statements do not make the thesis of origins in Tibet obvious. What they stress instead, is the unity of Monpa groups spread east-west across regions which had been one in the past, but are severed from each other now. The link with Tibet was severed in a distant past, but the internal split among different Monpa groups happened in the recent past as a result of modern nation-state boundaries instituted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If claiming Tibetan origins, on the one hand, and identifying an indigenous space through the figure of Kala Wangpo, on the other, constitute two opposite tactics within the discourse of origins, then the identification with a pan-Himalayan community constitutes a tactic which mediates between the two extremes. The latter is a mediating category for it identifies Tibet as the original homeland but also blunts the genealogical connection with Tibet by identifying a lateral dispersion along the Tibetan borderlands rather than tracing a direct route to Tibet. In other words, the Tibetan origin is implied, but not expressed in this tactical enunciation. The pan-Himalayan identity that is articulated is more in sync with the regional Mon revealed in the cultural agenda, and which I have outlined in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I have tried to draw attention to the Monpas’ trans-border, and specifically Tibetan, imaginations that emerge – although in fractured form – through oral narratives of origin and migration.

## Chapter 5

### *SEPARATION*

#### **BUFFER POLITICS AND THE COLONIAL PRODUCTION OF MONYUL AS MARGIN**

...if one begins with the premise that spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection. ....instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we need to examine how it was formed *as a community* out of the interconnected space that always already existed (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 36)

An Indian reporter observes in reference to Monyul, “At first sight, a 400-year-old Buddhist monastery, tucked deep in the Himalayas in a *remote corner* of India's northeast, hardly seems like a highly coveted piece of real estate” (Ramesh 2006) [emphasis added]. Modernization and development narratives of the Indian state construct Monyul as a remote border region – the underdeveloped backwaters of a developing nation. Low on infrastructural facilities, transportation, education, healthcare or commercial enterprise, Monyul appears to be a peripheral place, geographically as well as culturally at the nation’s margins. However, instead of taking these characteristics of Monyul as given, I examine how colonial spatial practices produced Monyul as a margin by separating it from interconnected spaces.

For Lefebvre (1991: 42), spatial practices are what we routinely perceive of a particular space. They are the visible consequences (“perceived spaces”) of the official representations of space (“conceived spaces”) (Harvey 1989). That is, official representations are not only conceptions of space but they modify the texture of space in accordance with the spatial code. Spatial practices and official representations have a practical impact on character of the place, even though these are not necessarily the lived aspects. In this chapter, I discuss how British spatial representations of Monyul in the colonial period attempted to transform it into a buffer in the interest of empire. Previously, Monyul had been integrated into wider Tibetan state and trade circuits, but in accordance with colonial spatial designs in the twentieth century, there was an attempt to take this region out of these earlier circuits and refashion it as a buffer zone. I trace

Monyul's current marginality to the buffer spatial practices of the colonial period, which continue to direct spatial perceptions of this region in the postcolonial period. While in the previous chapters, I have looked at contemporary politics of place, in this chapter I look at the historical production of Monyul as margin.

In the early twentieth century, the British rulers attempted to construct Monyul as a buffer zone beginning with attempts to map the frontier between Tibet and British India leading to a boundary treaty between the British and Tibetan governments in 1914. My argument here differs from that of other scholars (e.g. Bose 1979a, Lamb 1966) who have discussed the buffer role in relation to Tibet, because I show, firstly how Monyul too could be considered a buffer despite being within a delimited boundary, and secondly, how its buffer status influences many of its contemporary spatial attributes. Further, while other scholars have shown how modern boundaries divide up areas formerly conjoined, my intention is show how division is naturalized by constructing a particular border area as *terra nullius* or land belonging to no one (Povinelli 2002: 39). In marking a territory as *terra nullius*, colonial appropriation of territory achieves a double agenda - it erases past networks in which these lands were embedded and constructs this land as amenable to colonialist intervention.

I further argue that the buffer concept was a "spatial fix" (Harvey 1989) – a territorial solution to historically contingent processes (Smith 1992) – which stemmed from the social relations between Britain and her imperial rivals in Asia, Russia and China in the early twentieth century. In the first years of the twentieth century, Monyul was not on the defense radar of the British colonial rulers. Its potential as buffer only came to the fore when Tibet could no longer be relied upon as a buffer against Britain's imperial rivals, China in particular, thereby displacing the buffer to Monyul region. Monyul became a buffer because of a particular conjuncture of events that convinced the British of the necessity to have a buffer or barrier between its own and China's territories. While earlier social relations between Tibet, Bhutan and Monyul – of trade, rule,



kinship and pilgrimage – had served the status of “corridor” (Aris 1980) for Monyul, the new relations of imperial rivalry required Monyul to be constructed as a buffer.

This chapter shows that Monyul’s representation as a marginal place can be traced back not simply to the moment of the 1962 border war, but further back to the preceding colonial period. The border war did not produce but instead exacerbated conditions that already existed. In the wake of the 1962 India-China boundary war, considerations of territorial preservation on the part of the postcolonial Indian state have resulted in measures to sequester Monyul from historical, trans-border networks. Analogous to the British buffer policy of deliberately keeping some frontier areas, including Monyul, outside regular administrative networks as a defense strategy, the postcolonial Indian state maintains tight military structures and security measures at the Monyul-Tibet border to monitor all cross-border interactions. The conditions of sequestration, put in place by the British administrators, have been intensified in the postcolonial period.

However, despite the buffer project in Monyul, alternative spatial forms continued to thrive during the colonial period. In spite of the 1914 boundary treaty and buffer practices intended to remove Tibetan political and religious investments in Monyul, Tibetan authorities were exercising *de facto* control over Monyul till the 1940s (Gupta 1971). Until 1951, Monyul remained a “corridor” (Aris 1980) in a trans-Himalayan circuit, as people continued to circulate for purposes of religion, commerce and kinship. The Monyul buffer was never a completed project but was subject to contestation, most notably, from the Tibetan religious aristocracy, whose temporal hold over and material interests in Monyul were challenged by the latter’s incorporation into colonial India. Thus, the buffer conditions that prevailed in Mon during the colonial period could not eradicate cross-border practices, which prevented the buffer project from attaining total closure. Despite the colonial representation of Monyul as British territory, unofficially it remained part of Tibetan spaces and of Tibetan Buddhist networks.

### **The buffer as a zone of difference/indifference**

Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994) distinguishes the modern Western conception of a boundary from the traditional Siamese conception. While the modern boundary is a line between two sides of border zones, in the Siamese conception, the border referred more to the limits of state authority, rather than to the limits of territory, so that it appeared that a wide border lay between both sides' boundaries of authority (Winichakul 1994: 77). In the latter, the border was akin to a no-man's land. Winichakul maintains that in Thailand the modern nation form ("geobody") emerged with the aid of modern geography (Ibid). Although Winichakul was discussing changing notions of the boundary in Thailand (Siam), he implies that the modern national boundaries invariably refer to inflexible lines and overlooks the fact that some modern boundaries also include the buffer zone – which means neutral, even dispensable, frontiers. I argue that even modern boundaries may leave some spaces as *provisional* spaces to be used as buffer and the latter contradicts the modern notion of boundary as outlining and strictly differentiating one national body from another (Winichakul 1994). To be precise, despite the technical definition of modern boundaries as separating one territory from the other, there may actually be reserve spaces at the border that have the function of providing a protective cast that can, upon necessity, be shed.

The main characteristic of a buffer is that it is a neutral zone and relatively dispensable compared to regular state spaces. Imperial buffer zone practices involved the deliberate maintenance of particular territories along the frontiers of empire, in which administration ranged from negligible to limited governance, with the strategic aim of keeping a neutral territorial stretch between one's own gates, so to speak, and those of the enemy's. Less investment of administrative resources in the buffer means that in the event of an enemy attack on the frontiers, the colonial power will be forewarned before it incurs serious financial losses while also gaining time to recoup forces when the enemy is crossing the threshold. While it is true that the hilly, forested topography of Arunachal did not easily favor British designs of rule, predicated on

economy and thrift, geography alone cannot be the basis for characterizing an area as *terra incognita*. The rough terrain of sub-montane Arunachal Pradesh never prevented movement, contact or participation in political or commercial networks for the people who traditionally inhabited the hills. From a different calculation, topography has also never been a barrier to serious expansionist intentions.

Rather than geography and topography inhibiting administration, I argue that the buffer design underscores a politics of access, and constructs particular geographies as secluded or “untouchable”, in an administrative sense. By its very definition, the buffer is a liminal space which does not belong fully to any state but acts as a protective barrier between two state spaces. The notion of buffer is commonly traced to the Indian Viceroy, Lord Curzon (1907), according to whom the modern buffer as a deliberately neutral territory or state stemmed from the ancient and medieval conception of a neutral strip whose object was to keep apart two powers whose contact, otherwise, might provoke collision. Indeed, in 1895, British representatives wishing to create a buffer between British India and Russian expansion in Central Asia, drew the famous Durand Line on a map, separating the North West Frontier of British India (now in Pakistan) from Afghanistan (Maggi 2001: 20).

Buffers have existed in all times and spaces, and hence cannot be chronologically typecast as a “colonial construct”.<sup>78</sup> However – and this was a remark by Lord Curzon himself – what makes modern buffers different from the ancient and medieval conception of a neutral strip or belt of severance is that whereas earlier communities treated the buffer as a malleable frontier that should be kept unoccupied but only so that it could be later occupied, modern buffers are sanctioned by diplomatic conventions and international law (Curzon 1907). In other words, *modern buffers were sanctioned, paradoxically, by boundaries*. This means that the buffer does

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<sup>78</sup> The buffer is a spatial practice that exists not only in colonial discourse but also in twenty-first century nation-state discourses when the border is considered to be under threat. Since Arunachal Pradesh is considered a disputed territory, and its boundaries with China a matter of contention, it has not surrendered its buffer aspects completely, and the latter are manifest in the continuation of the protectionist policies of the Inner Line today.

not preclude drawing of boundary lines, but can exist after the boundary has been drawn as a second wall of protection.

In the period of imperialism when treaties were always in threat of being undermined by expansionist intentions of a rival power, a boundary did not mean that the external contours of a modern nation could be once and forever fixed as a “geo-body” (Winichakul 1994). Sir Henry McMahon, the British diplomat, who gave his name to the McMahon Line boundary between India and Tibet, made a distinction between boundary and frontier in his Inaugural Address to the Royal Society of Arts in 1935. He argued that “a frontier sometimes referred to a wide tract of border country, or to hinterlands or buffer states, undefined by any external boundary line” (1935: 3). McMahon thus held that frontier or buffer meant a tract of neutral territory separating two potentially antagonistic neighbors, but a boundary was a specific line, either delimited by precise map descriptions or demarcated by ground surveys. In the heyday of imperial rivalry and world wars, McMahon could argue that *“it was the frontier buffer zone which had the greatest importance, and the boundary was comparatively less significant, particularly when it ran through inhospitable mountain or dessert terrain. Hence, the delay in establishing administration and control over the border region”* [emphasis added]<sup>79</sup> Note that Sir Henry McMahon equated the frontier with a buffer, and as we will see in later paragraphs, the policy of the British Government in India in relation to the frontier areas followed a similar conception.

Sir Henry McMahon also made a distinction between the two stages of “delimitation” and “demarcation” of the boundary. According to McMahon, delimitation is the determination of a boundary line through a treaty and defined in written and verbal terms, while demarcation is the actual definition of the line through pillars or other such physical means (McMahon 1936: 4). So even after the Indo-Tibetan boundary was fixed through the 1914 treaty, there was very little effort to politically consolidate it, leading to the continuation of its frontier aspects, and thereby, of the buffer zone. In McMahon’s conceptualization, the buffer zone exists in the nebulous time-

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<sup>79</sup> Foreign Political (Secret) Proceedings (India), May 1915, Nos. 36-50.

space between delimitation and demarcation, for once the boundary is demarcated, it means physical presence of state agents deployed in surveillance, at which point the buffer zone ceases to exist, at least in theoretical terms, for it is incorporated in the fully state spaces. We may further assume – following McMahon’s distinction between delimitation and demarcation – that a delimited boundary that had not been demarcated was conducive to buffer zones.

In other words, the creation of the buffer and the expansion of the frontier were associated imperial practices, for both rested on the assumption of a flexible or variable boundary line. The expansion of the boundary is possible only if the boundary in question could be pushed further forward as the imperialist power advances territorially, while the buffer zone too was predicated on the existence of two boundaries, an inner and an outer, where the inner protects the core, while the outer merely signifies a limit, which can be modified in the event of hostile forces overrunning it. Once the buffer zone has been incorporated into one over the other state circuits, its neutral zone quality is over.

British buffer policy in west Arunachal Pradesh derived from a wider rhetoric of the buffer relating to imperial threats stemming from China and Russia. While almost all the areas on the frontiers of Northeast India were excluded from the privileges of representative government in accordance with the “policy of non-interference”, I only focus on the spatial transformations in Monyul. The frontier areas on the North East Frontier were initially designated as “Backward Tracts” in the Government of India Act of 1919, and later as “Excluded Areas” in the Government of India Act of 1935. Between 1935 and 1943, these areas, which formed a “continuous block, on the borders of ... Assam” (Reid 1944: 18) were directly administered by the Governor of Assam.

Similar zones of exclusion existed elsewhere in colonial India, for which anthropologist Kaushik Ghosh (2006) proposes the term “exclusive governmentality”. The British government in India had declared certain areas to be outside regular constitutional law and the 1935 constitutional act provided for partially excluded and excluded areas that were exempt from laws

applicable in the rest of British India (Baruah 2003: 49). Ghosh applies his concept of exclusive governmentality to understand colonial ruling logic in tribal zones of exclusion in non-frontier areas, that is, pockets within included areas, so to speak, over which the government exercised loose control. Ghosh observes that after constructing the tribal or indigenous populations of India as irreducibly different from the mainstream Hindu/Aryan populations, the colonial state then devised two ways of dealing with their alterity: “incorporative governmentality” or the assimilation of these populations through rule and the market, and “exclusive governmentality” or the protection of tribal areas from Hindu/Aryan exploitation through the creation of autonomous areas under the governorship of a state commissioner or Christian missionaries (Ghosh 2006: 508). The latter mode of governance rested on the belief of a basic incompatibility between tribal customary laws and market principles, overlooking the fact that this incompatibility was a function of the displacement and exploitation of tribals through new modes of colonial land tenure (*Ibid.*)

In the territories that lay on the frontiers of empire, in contrast to those in central and east India, more complex calculations were at work. Although frontier buffer zones were not made part of regular British administrative networks, they served important geopolitical purposes. Their exclusion rested on strategic considerations as the Simon Commission Report (1928) of the British government makes clear: “the Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, and the Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts are frontier districts occupied to protect India as well as the province from invasion and attack, and that though for the moment the North East Frontier may not be a serious menace to the peace of the rest of India, there was a time not long ago when attention was directed to that frontier, and the time may come soon when that frontier will become no less, if not more important for the defense of India than the North West Frontier” (cited in Reid 1944: 27).<sup>80</sup> All the areas mentioned here were Excluded Areas, including the Balipara Frontier Tract,

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<sup>80</sup> The Naga Hills Tract, corresponding to the state of Nagaland today, also a frontier area, did not function as much as a buffer as the North East Frontier Tract. A colonial officer, J.H. Hutton (1946) had noted that

which was the British administrative division to which present Monyul roughly corresponds. The phrase, “a time not long ago” in the report refers to the Chinese surveys into these areas in 1910 that was the immediate cause for British buffer practices.

Secondly, unlike the Excluded Areas at frontier spaces, in the other excluded zones in non-frontier areas discussed by Ghosh, incorporative and exclusive governmentality, despite being contrasting modes, went hand in hand; even as these areas were protected they were simultaneously included in a colonial modernity, manifested through education, development and land tenure laws (Ghosh 2006). This was not so in frontier excluded areas. Colonial rule was well-entrenched in most parts of India by the mid eighteenth century, but rule in the northeastern frontier was initiated only in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, from the beginning, the colonial rulers did not show much interest in extending rule in the northeastern borders beyond acts of annexation, and were happy to leave these areas in their earlier state of governance in so far as they did not hamper the functioning of the British administration in the nearby plains areas. The main objective in this initial stage being appeasement rather than encroachment, the British implemented the Bengal Regulation Act of 1873, which drew a boundary known as the Inner Line, roughly dividing the hills from the plains areas in Northeast India, whose objective was to protect British commercial interests in the plains. Since the “hill tribes” often raided the plains for supplies, the British were led to create an imaginary boundary that would reduce contact between “the civilized valley dwellers and the primitive hill dwellers” (Bose 1979a: 104). British attitude toward these tribes was one of appeasement (to prevent tribal raids and massacres of British subjects) and mediation rather than overt control.

However, British political deliberations with regard to the western parts of the North East Frontier – that is, current Monyul – were different from those concerning neighboring tribal tracts

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in the Naga Hills, despite administration being loose, external contact through the missionaries, and especially the American Baptist Church, as well as military communication necessitated by World War II, had brought the Nagas into close contact with the outside world. Compared to the Naga tract, the North East Frontier Tracts articulated less with the networks of colonial India.

where Tibetan political influence was not as strong or where the tribal communities did not have Tibetan Buddhist affiliations. Unlike the other Excluded Areas, where the people did not owe sovereign allegiance to any external power, the Monyul region was part of the Tibetan state. So while in other areas of the North East Frontier, the British adopted policies to simultaneously appease (“pacify”) and loosely administer the native populations, in Monyul, they had to additionally push back the older authority structures and construct the region as not only different from the adjoining plains below but also different from the neighboring Tibetan areas above.

I propose the term *zones of difference/indifference* in order to draw out the double-layered nature of exclusive governmentality on which rule in Monyul region was predicated. I also wish to highlight, through the use of the term “zone” (from the Latin *zona*, meaning geographical belt), the territorialist considerations that underlay modes of rule in frontier areas. Maintaining Monyul as a buffer required the simultaneous separation of this region and its inhabitants from the people of both Tibet in the north and Assam on the south (hence, *zones of difference*), while at the same time, exercising only a loose administration over these regions for reasons of economy and political strategy (hence, *zones of indifference*). This double exclusion meant severing long-term, cross-border relations in which the Monpas had been embedded for centuries, and transforming the latter into a neutral zone.

*Monyul’s southward ties:* The Monyul region fell under the Balipara Frontier Tract, a subdivision of the North East Frontier Tracts. Before 1919, it had been known as the Western Section of the North East Frontier (Reid [1942] 1983: 269). Like other hill communities on the Northeast frontier, the Monpas had symbiotic ties with some plains-dwelling communities (Kachari/Bodo) of neighboring Assam through annual or seasonal trade marts at the foothills, and through hosting relations (Devi [1968]1992: 252). Monyul, and Tawang in particular, constituted one of the important caravan routes through which a considerable trade between Assam and Tibet took place (Dhar 2000: 240, Gupta 1974: 30), and the Monpas acted as middlemen in this trans-Himalayan trade (Dhar 2000: 240). Monpa traders not only attended trade fairs in Tibet but also



trade marts on the Assam-Monyul border in which traders from Bhutan and Tibet also participated.

There were several foothills passes or *duars* from west to east leading from the Indian plains to Bhutan; out of the eighteen *duars*, seven were on the Assam frontier and eleven on the Bengal frontier (Mackenzie 1884: 9). Till the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bhutanese state had control over these *duars*, in return for which it paid annual tributes to the Ahom state in Assam. East of the *duars* on the Assam frontier, there was another *duar* called the Kuriapara *duar*, which was under the joint control of the Ahom state in Assam and the Tawang monastery (Ibid. 15). This was a unique sharing arrangement with the pre-colonial Ahom rulers of the adjacent plains kingdom of Assam. The Ahom king Pratap Singha started this system with the foothills trade passes to grant the hill communities a share in the revenue from trade goods that passed through these passes as well as access to commodities that were not available in the hills. In return for this concession, the Monpas paid an annual tribute to the Ahom state (Bose 1979a: 48)

All the Assam trade with Tibet that came *via* Tawang passed through the Kuriapara *duar* (Bose 1979a: 48, Devi [1968]1992: 250). The local Monpa chiefs or Sat Rajas (Seven Chiefs) oversaw the collection of revenue from trade that passed through this *duar* for four months a year from 15<sup>th</sup> October, while the revenue from the remaining months went to the Ahom state. The Monpa chiefs were answerable to two “Gellengs” (*sic*) or deputies of the abbot of Tawang monastery, who in turn, were subordinate to Lhasa (Ibid.).

The Monpas of the foothills might also have been involved in a customary exchange system with the Assamese living on the foothills called *posa*, according to which hill people obtained taxes in kind from the plainspeople, but with permission from the Ahom rulers of pre-colonial Assam. Ahom king, Pratap Singha (1603-1641 A.D.) had granted the right of *posa* to the Aka (now known as Hrusso), Daphla (Nishi), Abor (Adi) and extra-Bhutan Bhutia (Monpa and Sherdukpen) in order to appease these hill tribes on the kingdom’s frontier (Bose 1979a: 101).

Through this system, the hill people were paid taxes by the Assamese border subjects, who for this reason got partial remission from taxes to be paid to the Ahom state. *Posa* included various gifts of cloth, grains, utensils, and share of fish from ponds or forest produce that hill people could claim from subjects of the Ahom state. In return, the hill people recognized the sovereignty of the Ahom king and paid annual tribute to the latter. *Posa* was a very well-defined system, whereby the hill and plains communities were involved in a mutual recognition. The Monpa Sat Rajas who managed the Kuriapara *duar* were entitled to *posa* payments on these same grounds, for four months of the year, in return for which they paid an annual tribute to the Ahom sovereign (Bose 1979a: 48).

However, the colonial practices of this period changed many existing relations between hills and plains. When the British took over, they redefined the *posa* as “blackmail money” (Bose 1979a: 51), and made it directly payable in cash from the government treasury to the hill people.<sup>81</sup> They also captured the *duars* controlled by the Bhutanese government, and in 1844, signed a treaty with the local Monpa chiefs (Sat Rajas) to purchase rights over the Tawang-controlled Kuriapara Duar. As a result of this treaty, the Monpas no longer had to interact with the Assamese for *posa* payments for they were directly paid a cash amount of 5000 rupees annually by the British. The abolition of the old system of *posa* terminated the customary relations that existed between the hill people and their bordering Assamese neighbors.

During this initial stage, the British did not deliberately try to change the spatial character of Monyul, although the redefinition of the *posa* system brought about significant changes in hills-plains interactions. The British were initially interested in opening overland trade routes to

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<sup>81</sup> Several scholars (e.g. Jha 1996) have argued that the definition of blackmail money did not fit the concept of the *posa* system. Jha (1996: 448) argues that the *posa* was not ill-defined exaction, but “a well-ascertained and fixed feudal levy emanating out of the fixed feudal privileges of some of the bordering hill chiefs of Arunachal Pradesh.” The *posa* was a customary practice that was sanctioned by the Ahom sovereigns of pre-colonial Assam, but it cannot be understood as blackmail or extortion money. However, once the British conquered Assam, they read the *posa* as a kind of extortion tax, and thus continued payment to the hill people under the terms that the latter would not raid the plains villages. *Posa* actually thus became blackmail money only in the colonial period.

Tibet and China via the North East frontier, and so they annexed the *duars* in order to gain access to the voluminous trade that passed through the foothills passes. After securing the rights to the *duars*, the British instituted annual trade fairs in the foothills where people from Assam and professional trading communities of India such as the Marwaris could exchange items with hills people as well as Tibetans and Bhutanese. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in light of Russian overtures to and Chinese claims on Tibet, the British gradually dropped their plans of developing trade routes to Tibet. With the flow of cheaper goods from the plains into the foothills trade marts, Tibetan goods lost out in demand and correspondingly the former trade routes as well as the foothills trade marts also declined in importance (Ganguly 2000: 17).

The 1873 Inner Line Regulation initiated a more drastic transformation of the relations between the hills, including Monyul, and the plains. The term “Inner Line” was coined by Arthur Hobhouse in his draft for the Regulation of 1873 (Bose 1979a:104). It authorized the local British administration to prescribe and from time to time, alter a line to be called the “Inner Line”, in each or any of the districts of Assam, and to prohibit any subject living outside from living or moving there (1979a: 104). The Inner Line, roughly corresponding to the boundary between the hilly tribal tracts and the plains, prohibited all British subjects or any person residing in or passing through such districts from passing into the hills from the plains without a pass under the hand and seal of the executive officer. The British took responsibility for law and order only up to the Inner Line, and beyond it, the hill tribes were left to themselves. Hence, the Inner Line not only marked the boundaries between hills and plains, but also marked the frontiers of administration proper.

Although this regulation was ostensibly to protect tribal interests, its actual aim was to protect empire’s interest in the plains of Assam. By the beginning of the 1870s, Assam, with its flourishing industries of tea, petroleum, coal, rubber and wood and the ivory trade, was a promising resource for British revenue, whereas the hills bordering Assam that were inhabited by tribes represented, from a colonial administrator’s point of view, an unreliable condition of law

and order (Bose 1979a).<sup>82</sup> Hill tribes often came into conflict with entrepreneurs who ventured into their areas for commerce. Further, when these tribes came down to the plains, they sometimes came into conflict with plainsmen over supplies. The “problem of the hill tribes” (Barpujari 1970) led the British to institute a law that would reduce contact, and therefore friction, between hills and plains dwellers. The Inner Line regulation not only prevented Indian traders from trading freely with Tibet and the hill people, but also put a stop to the free movement between the hills and the plains. It was the first official step in the spatial transformation of the frontier hill tracts.

*Monyul's northward ties:* But with respect to Monyul, there was a second step that had to be carried out before this region could become a buffer. This step consisted of severing the northward ties of the Monpas, that is, their links with the Tibetan state, since a buffer cannot have overlapping sovereignty ties. The trans-Himalayan trade ties with Tibet were already affected by the Inner Line regulations, for it disrupted the free circular trade between Tibet, Assam, Bhutan and the hill people of the North East Frontier. As the demand for Tibetan goods declined with the gradual flow of goods from other British territories into the foothills markets brought by commercial traders, the role of the former intermediaries (e.g. Monpas) of the trans-Himalayan trade also correspondingly diminished. The latter continued to carry on trade with Tibet but their importance as trade agents in a circular trade was reduced.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, there had existed an idea of an “Outer Line” that signified the outer limits of the British territory, but it was a notional rather than a well-defined international boundary between Tibet and British India (Bose 1979a: 109). This Outer Line was purposely kept undefined so that the government could advance the boundaries to any extent the circumstances might allow. But in 1910, following reports of Chinese incursions into the areas of the hill tribes, the British began attempts to clearly delineate the Outer Line. The

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<sup>82</sup> Hence, although the government of India tried to make the Inner Line correspond to the natural features of the country, all tea plantations at the foothills were included in the Inner Line (Bose 1979a: 105)

conversion of Monyul into a specifically British buffer required not simply annexation of the frontiers but also the removal of non-British (that is, Tibetan) influences that could constitute rival state claims. Not only were the Monpas tied politically to the Tibetan state, but they were also connected to other Tibetan Buddhist communities and spaces through routes of trade, migration and pilgrimage. Due to the entrenched nature of Tibetan influence in this region, erasing the age-old Tibetan influence from Monyul was a task quite unlike severing the latter's barter ties with the plains. It is this spatial transformation that I treat in detail in the next sections.

Many scholars (e.g. Chaudhury 1978) identify the British lack of will to consolidate the border after the 1914 boundary treaty as directly shaping the current border dispute between India and China. Had the British established solid state machinery in these areas, the post-colonial Indian state would have had a smoother route to staking her claims here. But I argue that the British never extended regular administration to Monyul because they were guided by a distinct spatial code in this region based on the dual strategies of selective co-option and voluntary non-interference. In other words, British policy in Monyul should not be read as a lack or a passive stance, but should be understood as an active strategy of imperial rule. Rule in this region was determined by serious calculations, and systematic procedures, which become obvious in the colonial discourse regarding Monyul. The buffer code constituted Monyul as a zone of difference/indifference by simultaneously separating the latter from both prior and subsequent networks in which it was or could be embedded, and making it subject to British policies of non-interference, which I read as practices of indifference.

Imperial politics at the Monyul frontier was only one instance of a general imperial strategy of divide and rule that led to bifurcations of continuous cultural zones in frontier areas. As Olaf Caroe, one of the hardliner administrators to have served in Northeast India, observes in his criticism of Alastair Lamb's book *India-China Border*, which attempts to attribute the boundary war to British policies, "...since when has ethnic or linguistic affinity been accepted as the criterion for national boundaries, for instance, in Switzerland or Afghanistan?" (Caroe 1964:

274). The colonial production of Monyul as buffer was achieved through a dual boundary division that disconnected Monyul from both its northbound and southbound connections. Difference and marginality were thus co-produced.

In doing so, the buffer spatial strategy sought to undermine other spatialities of Mon. However, colonial buffer designs were never a *fait accompli* as there was resistance expressed by Tibetan authorities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and unofficially manifested through the continuation of cross-border practices. In the next section, I look at Monyul's spatial character before it was transformed through the buffer code.

### **Before colonial changes: Mon as Tibetan space**

Compared to the other areas of Arunachal Pradesh, with which Tibetans had merely trade relations, Tibetan interests in Monyul were far more entrenched. Most of the early colonial writings acknowledge Monyul to be attached to Tibet, since Tawang and its surrounding areas, such as Dirang, Bomdi La and Rupa were governed indirectly by Lhasa. Tawang monastery is termed as an “off-shoot of the Drepung monastery” (Bailey 1913, Mitchell 1883, Nevill cited in Reid [1942]1983: 287), while Monyul itself is termed a “vassal state” of Tibet (Kingdon Ward 1938: 613), or “wedge of Tibet which abuts on the Assam Valley” (Reid [1942]1983: 283). Alexander Mackenzie, Junior Secretary to the Bengal Government wrote in 1873,

....the Tawang country is held by Bhuteas [Bhuteas/Bhutias is a generic term for Tibetan or Tibetan related peoples] who are entirely independent of Bhutan proper and directly under Tibet. On all occasions, Tibetan officials take part in whatever is done there...Here, then...we are in actual contact with Tibet (Mackenzie *quoted in* Lamb 1966: 299).

Monyul was officially produced as a Tibetan space in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Fifth Dalai Lama proclaimed in an edict of 1680, that Tawang and its neighboring areas were under Tibetan rule (Aris 1980). In the same year, work on the Tawang monastery, Gaden Namgyal Lhatse was started by Lodre Gyatso, or Mera Lama as he is widely known, a disciple of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Tawang monastery was built not only for religious propagation but also for a

military function. The monastery, located on the boundary of Bhutan (though boundaries were more to be negotiated rather than fixed at that time) and on the periphery of the Tibetan polity, served as a vanguard military outpost for Tibetan forces in the Drukpa (Bhutanese)-Tibetan sectarian rivalries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and its fortified architecture attests to this fact (Sarkar 1996). There were several armed clashes between the Monpas and Drukpas, in which Tibetan-Mongol forces assisted the Monpas (Jha 2006: 233). Once this monastery was built, monastic influence over local affairs became stronger, and temporal power coincided with the spiritual power of the monks. The abbot of Tawang monastery was both the temporal and spiritual head of the people, and the whole of the area under the Tawang monastery was divided into administrative centers (*dzongs*) which were in charge of jurisdiction and tax collection. After the threat of Bhutan subsided, Tawang continued to function as an extension of the Tibetan system.

Monyul was integrated into Tibet's networks through both rule and religion and hence was subject to monastic systems of tribute centered at Lhasa. The region of Monyul was divided into three major tax outposts, Tawang Dzong or Gyanghar Dzong, Dirang Dzong and Talung Dzong at Kalaktang, where grains collected as taxes would be stored, and carried by conscripted labour (*u-la*) from local villages in relay form until they finally reached Tsona, from where a portion travelled to the Tibetan government's coffers at Lhasa. Most of the villages in the Tawang valley, including those in Pangchen (current Zemithang) were under the jurisdiction of the *dzongpon* (officer) of Tsona dzong (*dzong* could mean both fort and district), while those south in Dirang and Kalaktang, upto the Assam foothills were under the jurisdiction of Tawang monastery.

The first Indian explorer to have visited the Tawang area was Pundit Nain Singh, a native of Kumaon trained in British trigonometrical survey methods, who reached Tawang on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1874 as he journeyed from Lhasa to Assam (Trotter 1877: 121). He made the following observations about Tibetan rule in Monyul;

With the exception of a very large and important monastery at Tawang, the whole of the villages of the Tawang valley are under the jurisdiction of the Chona Jongpon [Tsona *dzongpon*]. This Tawang monastery is entirely independent of the Jongpon and of the Lhasa government. It contains 600 lamas and...they are (with the single exception of the village of Singi Jong, which is a *jagir* of the Chona Jongpon) the proprietors and rulers of the whole country to the south of the range of hills which separates the Tawang from the Dhirang valley; their territory extends right upto the British frontier near Odalguri, which latter place is said, prior to its occupation by the British, to have formed a portion of the Tawang jagir...(Trotter 1887: 119)

Although Nain Singh was mistaken in assuming that Tawang monastery was “entirely independent of the..Lhasa government”, he was correct in recognizing that Tsona (“Chona”) Dzong was an important administrative center for Monyul, and also, that the Tawang *dzongpon* (“Jongpon”) had his summer residence at Tsona (Trotter 1887: 118). Captain G. A. Nevill of the British government who visited Tawang noted in 1914 that the inhabitants of Tawang are largely composed of Tsona people, who come here to escape the severe cold of Tsona during the winter months (Nevill, cited in Reid [1942]1983: 287).

Many of my informants told me that since the entire district of Monyul actually started from Tsona, the latter was called Mon-Tsona. Capt. F. M. Bailey, who, alongwith Capt. H. Morsehead, was deputed to map the boundary between Tibet and India in 1913, gives an account of the relation between Monyul and Tsona,

Mönyul is the comparatively low-lying district of Tibet which is governed by the lamas of Tawang. ....The district is governed by a council of six named *Trukdri*. They are the *Kenpo*, or Abbot of Tawang Gompa, another lama in a high position, two monks known as *Nyetsangs*...and two Tsöna Dzongpöns. In this way, the Tsöna Dzongpöns have a hand in the Government of Mönyul. In the summer when the Dzongpöns are at Tsöna they keep agents at Tawang to act for them but from November to April they themselves live at Tawang and send their agents to live in the cold climate of Tsöna. Under the Trukdri are the two Dzongs, Dirang and Taklung, each of which is held by two monks sent from Tawang who act together. The Dzongpöns of Taklung live at Amratala on the Assam border in grass huts during the trading season (1914: 41-42)

The Tibetan state asserted its rule not simply through the regular collection of taxes but also through military presence. The explorer Nain Singh observed that although the main interest of Tibetans in Monyul was the collection of taxes, there was also a standing army in Dirang



consisting of a “regular armed force of lamas to enable them to cope not only with the independent Daphla, Duffla or Lhoba tribes...but also with the neighboring and more powerful country of Bhotan on the west” (Trotter 1887:120). The latter was a reference to Tawang’s position as a military outpost against Bhutanese attacks in the Drukpa-Tibetan sectarian wars. Tibetan authorities further regulated entry to areas they considered to be within their jurisdiction. British officer F.M. Bailey writes after his exploration in 1913, “...as the people were accustomed to prevent travelers from India from entering Tibet by this road, the people were afraid of allowing us to proceed towards Tawang. At Dirang, they asked to see our passport” (1914: 59).

The Tibetan state did not exert its presence in Monyul alone. People in other parts of the North East Frontier Tracts also paid taxes to some Tibetan private families (Huber 2011). Quite a few non-Monpa tribes (including Adis and Mishmis in central Arunachal Pradesh) had trade relations with Tibet and visited the trade mart at Tsona with their wares. There were also quite a few Tibetan settlements in other parts of the North East Frontier. Colonial officer F.M. Bailey as well as naturalist Frank Kingdon-Ward report having encountered Tibetan villages near Abor (now obsolete designation for the Adi tribe) territory in central Arunachal Pradesh (Bailey 1957: 156). While attempting to map the Indo-Tibetan frontier, Bailey reported the presence of three such settlements at Lopo, Ki-phu-li and Matapo, which fell in the Abor (Adi) territory.<sup>83</sup> The proceedings of the Foreign Department of 1911 also report Tibetan settlements near Mishmi territory in central Arunachal Pradesh. Yet, it was only in Monyul that the Tibetan state had established systematic control mainly via the Tawang monastery.

Given the dominance of Tibetan official spaces in Monyul, the British understood that in order to bring this region within the ambit of British rule, they would have to wrest control from the Tibetan establishment. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the British government sanctioned various tours and expeditions to “Tawang country” (Reid [1942]1983: 293), that is,

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<sup>83</sup> Policy to be adopted toward the tribes, 1911, p. 15

Monyul, to find out the nature and extent of Tibetan influence here. Captain Nevill, a British police superintendent who surveyed this area in March 1914 wrote in his memorandum that in the event of British annexation of Monyul, the Tawang monks backed by the authorities of Tawang monastery and its parent monastery at Drepung “would take up a policy of obstruction” which “would be most difficult to overcome” (Nevill, cited in Reid [1942]1983: 288). But along with this realization went the conviction that Tawang constituted “a dangerous wedge of territory thrust in between the Miri country [adjoining Assam plain] and Bhutan” (Ibid.: 281), which needed to be co-opted into the British empire for reasons of defense. Hence, the subsequent delimitation of the boundary in 1914 included this wedge of territory on the British side, not to mine it for its resources but to make it an effective barrier zone against invading enemy forces. Monyul’s transformation from Tibetan space to colonial buffer zone was thus a spatial solution to the problem of imperial defense.

### **The buffer as spatial fix**

In the *Conditions of Postmodernity* (1989), David Harvey argues that spatial conceptualizations are fundamental to capitalism’s methods of profit. The arts and cultural forms, in turn, are mimetic of capitalist’s methods. Harvey argues that although it is easy to view space as delinked from material/social processes and to deploy it rhetorically and artistically, especially in postmodernism, spatial transformations must be understood in relation to capital’s trajectory. According to him, capitalism adopts certain spatial solutions or “spatial fixes” to overcome its current problems and achieve its objective.

Following Harvey’s concept, other political geographers (e.g. Brenner 1999, Harvey 1989, Sassen 2006, Smith 1992) have discussed how the current nation-state form was a temporary spatial fix in capital’s progress trajectory, at a time when nations were the center of finance and business. With changes in global capitalism (globalization), the nation state is further rescaled as its operations are shifted either to cities that become the new centers of business,

financial planning and administrative decision-making or to transnational corporations and suprastatal organizations such as the European Union.

Unlike these spatial theorists, I do not use the notion of spatial fix in relation to capitalist relations of Monyul, but to refer to “temporary territorial resolutions” (Smith 1992) to historically contingent processes. This is not to suggest that the spatial transformations in and of Monyul were independent of motives of capital; indeed one could effectively explore the relations between capitalism and colonialism in Northeast India (e.g. Guha 1977).<sup>84</sup> However, here I use the notion of spatial fix in relation to Monyul in order to bring out the particular concatenation of events that precipitated its buffer position.

Monyul’s construction as buffer can be seen as a spatial fix that served British imperial interests in India in the early twentieth century. That is, it was a territorial solution to ensure the protection of British imperial frontiers in India against the rising power of China. That Tibet was a buffer zone for British political and commercial interests against imperial Russia and China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is well-known (e.g. Lamb 1966). But as the chances of Tibet being annexed to China became imminent, the British became alert to the need of constructing a buffer zone that lay at altitudes lower than the “roof of the world”, which led to the shifting of the buffer from Tibet to India’s Northeast frontier. Several writers (Bose 1979a & 1979b, Choudhury 1978, Lamb 1966) have noted that the immediate provocation for delineating the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914 was the suspected incursions made by China’s Manchu (Qing) general, Chao Erh-feng, during the early twentieth century into the Abor (now Adi) tribal territory in what is central part of Arunachal Pradesh. Attempts to map the boundary between India and Tibet in 1911 and the proclamation of the McMahon Line in 1914 was the direct outcome of this shift in colonial

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<sup>84</sup> In his historical treatise of colonial rule in Northeast India *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977), historian Amalendu Guha argues that the interests of the colonial administration in Assam coincided with those of the tea planter class who were eager to exploit the growing potential of Assamese tea to compete with Chinese tea in the world market. Hence, he designates the colonial state as Planter Raj or rule of the planter class. Arora (2008) argues that interest in developing British trade routes (e.g. Nathula, Jelep-la) to Tibet through Sikkim was promoted by British intentions of capitalist expansion into Sikkim.

perspective. The production of Monyul as the buffer was thus the colonizers' territorial resolution or spatial fix to the problems envisaged on the North East frontier.

Till the first years of the twentieth century, the British continued to treat Tibet as the buffer. Between 1899 and 1903, the British government in India got reports that Russia was trying to secure a foothold in Tibet through her own Buddhist subjects, the Buriats of Siberia (Lamb 1966: 11). A Russian Buriat, Dorjev had achieved an important position in the Tibetan monastic hierarchy and had visited the Russian Tsar as the 13th Dalai Lama's ambassador on a couple of occasions. It is worth noting how the functional dependence between religion and empire comes to the fore here. Russian expansionism in Tibet was attempted through religious, rather than military overtures, and it points to a less researched aspect of empire-building.

While the British had been trying to make inroads into the Tibetan trade market, unlike the Russians, they had failed to even establish communication with the Dalai Lama. Convinced that Tibet had to act as the buffer between the British and Russian empires, Lord Curzon proposed sending a mission to Lhasa, and through a show of British military strength, force the Dalai Lama to acknowledge the existence of the British government in Lhasa. As a result, in 1904, Major Francis Younghusband was sent on a mission to Tibet, initially for negotiation of the boundary between Tibet and the British-held state of Sikkim on the northern frontier. When, as anticipated, the talks failed, Younghusband was authorized to move deeper into Tibet. In August 1904, Younghusband occupied Lhasa, and the Dalai Lama fled to Mongolian territories.

It must be noted that British interests in Tibet was solely the creation of a buffer state, and not territorial expansion, for it was not considered economically viable to maintain an empire extending beyond the Himalayan range. Moreover, annexing Tibet would bring upon further repercussions in the form of Chinese retaliation, who in 1904 also laid claims on Tibet (Lamb 1966). Hence, after the Younghusband mission, Tibet was not made into a British protectorate state, although there were some British administrators who advocated such a policy. Instead,

Tibet was produced as a buffer state by establishing new trade marts and the post of a British Trade Agent (who also had political and diplomatic functions) in the very heart of Tibet.

The buffer state logic with respect to Tibet is expressed in the dispatch by St. John Brodrick, the Secretary of State to the Government of India on 2 December, 1904, where he wrote that British influence in Tibet was desirable only to “exclude that of any other Power” and once that had been achieved, then “Tibet should remain in that state of isolation from which till recently, she had shown no intention to depart, and which hitherto caused her presence on our frontier to be a matter of indifference to us” (Brodrick *quoted in* Lamb 1966: 13-14). While the British preemptive action in Tibet in 1904 was brought on by the perceived threats from Russia, this action also achieved a double victory in that it opened the way for direct communication between British authorities in India and Tibet, which had until then, been mediated by Chinese authorities.

Unlike Tibet, where Chinese control was already established, the tribal territories lying west to east between Bhutan and Burma (that became present Arunachal Pradesh) did not come under British buffer calculations in the period between 1826 and 1910. In Monyul, the British had a commercial interest for they desired control over the *duars* or foothill passes over which considerable trade passed. In 1844, therefore, the British signed a treaty with the local Monpa chiefs (Satrajas) to gain control over the Tawang trade outpost (Kuriapara Duar). But politically, Tawang did not yet come into British imperialist visions of a buffer. In the first years after the British annexed Assam and its neighboring hill tracts, the dominant idea in administrative circles was that it would be impractical to extend administration to the hill tracts, including Monyul. At this time, the main concern was the protection of British economic interests in the foothills and plains. Yet, some semblance of authority had to exist in the frontier tribal areas, so that the latter would become subject to British rules without being subject to regular British governance. The Inner Line policy, an outcome of the Bengal Regulation Act, 1873, was just such a means. The Inner Line was intended to prevent any outside encroachment into these hills areas that could

potentially lead to conflict between the latter and the British government. But while this policy was implemented to keep the plains and the border areas separate, it additionally protected the commercially important plains areas by demarcating an inner wall (Inner Line) and an outer wall (the frontier beyond Inner Line) of defense against invading imperial forces.

It should be noted that a buffer policy with regard to the tribal tracts was in nascent formation, since the Inner Line effectively marked off the areas that needed to be protected from those that did not. But the buffer potential of the tribal tracts (between Tibet, now recognized by Britain as being under Chinese suzerainty, and British Indian territories) began to be fully considered at the change of the decade. In 1910-11, when the Chinese general Chao Erh-feng undertook a series of colonizing expeditions south of Tibet to these tribal territories on the British frontier, these latter areas became the center of Anglo-Chinese competition. The British became aware of the vulnerability of the North East Frontier areas and actively sought boundary delimitation, and consequently, they attempted to exert British control over these areas. In 1913, Captain F.M. Bailey and Captain H.T. Morsehead were deputed to map the boundary between these territories and Tibet. At the 1914 Simla Conference, the British government secured Tibetan agreement to a boundary alignment, thus advancing the limits of the British territory some 60 miles to the north to the crest line of the Assam Himalayas (Gupta 1971: 522). Apart from incorporating a large tract of aboriginal territory, this boundary line also annexed the Tawang tract.

While the British, Tibetan and Chinese representatives participated in this tripartite conference, only the Tibetan regent Lonchen Shatra and the British representative signed the boundary document, but not the Chinese agent who disagreed with some of the clauses included (Goldstein 1989, Lamb 1966). Under the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tibetan resistance had grown considerably stronger, while the 1911 Chinese Revolution, which brought about an end to Manchu rule, had destabilized Chinese authority in Tibet (Gupta 1971: 533). The Tibetan acquiescence to the McMahon boundary was conditional on securing British aid in demarcating

the Sino-Tibetan boundary. For the Tibetan authorities, thus, the 1914 agreement signaled a pact on whose terms Monyul was officially transferred to British India.

The 1914 boundary was the culmination of the British strategy shift to make a buffer (or double buffer) of the tribal tracts below Tibet. As with Tibet, British strategy in these territories was propelled by the threat of Chinese territorial expansion. Charles Bell, Political Officer at Kalimpong, in his report on the developments in Tibet, expresses most clearly the British buffer logic in the North East Frontier. He writes, “As it would not be possible for the British to keep China out of Tibet, it would be of vital importance to keep China out of *the narrow strip of territory between India and Tibet*” [emphasis added] (Bell 1930: 223). This narrow strip was Monyul, which afforded the shortest route from Tibet to the plains of Assam.

A number of writer-administrators of that time called attention to the *hills* as a barrier to forces invading the *plains*. That is, the hills had value only in so far as they could provide deterrent to enemy forces that could wreck British economic interests in the plains. Thus, for instance, J.H Hutton writes about the nature of administration in the hills, “The original occupation of the hills, both along the frontier and between the two valleys of the Surma and the Brahmaputra, was in the nature of an *insurance policy*, first taken out about 100 years ago, for the peaceable development of the plains” [emphasis added] (1946:107). Note the phrase “insurance policy” which translates easily as *buffer*. Following the creation of the McMahon boundary in 1914, Charles Bell wrote, “We have thus gained a frontier standing back everywhere about a hundred miles from the plains of India. *This intervening country consists of difficult hills and valleys, and so constitutes an excellent barrier*” [emphasis added] (Bell 1992: 155). Such an attitude towards the hills or highlanders on the part of the imperial state further shows that often hill communities remain out of the reach of “civilization” not because they actively opt for flight, as Scott (2009) suggests, but because the state denied them access to the lowlands, and, as the case of the Inner Line between the hill and plains communities shows, disrupted customary, and long-standing patterns of interaction between the two. To state it in extreme fashion, hills are not

simply “zones of refuge” (Scott 2009) but could also be “zones of refuse” for states who are only concerned with protecting the core spaces of empire.

An extract of the proceedings of the Foreign Department, 1911, summarizes British calculations about the buffer role to be played by the North East Frontier.

By our Tibetan policy we do not endeavour to prevent China from establishing herself strongly in Tibet. It is the natural corollary of the policy that we should maintain inviolate the narrow zone of country that still intervenes between India and China. Two things are essential as regards this zone. *The first is to keep China out of it. The second is to keep British and Indian vested interests out of it as far as possible, and to avoid responsibilities in its internal administration.* The reason of the first has already been explained. The reason for the second is that by allowing British and Indian vested interests to grow up in the zone, at any rate with anything that could be construed into a Government guarantee for the security of those interests, we destroy our buffer States and create those very difficulties, which we should endeavour to remove. Moreover, what those border States prize above all is the right to manage their own affairs. We need, therefore, something as near as possible to that which we have recently obtained in Bhutan, namely, the control of their external relations, coupled with our guarantee of non-interference in their internal administration. [emphasis added].<sup>85</sup>

Drawing the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914 did not mean that the British were interested in extending regular administration to the limits of the line, or mapping a “geo-body” but rather, in continuing with the Inner Line/Outer Line kind of logic where administration would continue to be latent beyond the Inner Line. The buffer was needed between India and a Tibet under the control of China, and the creation of the buffer required boundary delimitation. But the whole enterprise of boundary marking in the North East was not to expand state presence till the boundary, but to encourage a *zone of difference*, or enclave-making. The buffer was thus an outcome and strategy of British territorialist caution.

In a telegram to the Secretary of State for India in London, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1910, the Viceroy Lord Minto clearly expresses his concern regarding the North East Frontier, following increased Chinese activities in these areas (especially in Rima in central Arunachal Pradesh,

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<sup>85</sup> Policy to be adopted toward the tribes, 1911, p. 37



where a body of Chinese soldiers allegedly issued an order to the chief of the local Mishmi tribesmen to cut a track from Tibet to Assam, but was refused by the latter).

In consequence of proceedings of Chinese in Rima and vicinity of tribal tracts on the North-East Frontier, the question of our future relations with these tribes is causing anxiety locally. Military authorities...hold that our influence should run approximately from the east of the wedge-shaped portion of Tibetan territory, known as the Tawang district, which runs down to the British frontier north of Odalguri....., as far east and as near as possible to Rima, thence across the Zayul Chu valley to the Zayul Chu-Irrawaddy divide; and then along that divide until it joins the Irawaddy-Salween divide. In this area the tribes for the most part are believed to be independent, and some of them are already under our influence. We are inclined to think that the best policy to pursue would be to gain a buffer by extending the "outer line" so far as may be necessary and by arranging that the tribes within or beyond it have no intercourse or relations with any other foreign Power than ourselves.<sup>86</sup>

Mapping and delineating the boundary between Tibet and British India thus became imperative in the eyes of the British. Note that the above extract refers to the importance of including all areas from Tawang to the Irawaddy-Salween divide (on Myanmar-India-Tibet borders) within the "outer line" of British India, that is, the McMahon Line, because of military suggestions to do so. As F.G Bailey, one of the protagonists in mapping the frontier writes, "There seemed, in fact, two objections to the acceptance of the natural geographic frontier, the ethnic spillover (which...led to the settlement of Tibetans in Mipi [in Arunachal Pradesh]) and the *sovereign spill-over*, which led to the collection of taxes from non-Tibetans by the Tibetan government" [emphasis added] (1957: 156). Due to this "ethnic spillover", many British administrators were unable to decide whether or not to call Monyul Tibetan or not; although they were generally inclined to consider these areas as distinct from Tibet proper, they also admitted that "Monbas" (*sic*) were culturally "more Tibetan". That is, if one could grade the borderlanders, Monpas would approximate a Tibetan-ness more than they would the plains-dwelling Hindus (Mills 1950: 158).

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<sup>86</sup> Policy to be adopted toward the tribes, 1911, p. 47.

Yet, it was the “sovereign spillover” that led to British decision to include Tawang along with the rest of Monyul within the “outer line”. The following remarks by naturalist Kingdon-Ward throws light on British calculations regarding Monyul;

People as supine as the Monba become a menace by their very helplessness and inactivity. Let us suppose for a moment that the Indian government backs out, either on the grounds of expense or for some other reason, tears up the 1914 treaty and leaves Monyul alone. What is likely to happen?.....Apart from any loss of that mythical quality, prestige, one of several unpleasant things may happen – unpleasant for India and Great Britain.

.....How long will Tibet retain its independence? It is not guaranteed by anyone; and since it could not defend itself against aggression by even a moderate power, only its geographical isolation prevents it from being gobbled up. It may at any time, through its own weakness and corruption, fall a prey to China. Or to Russia. And always in the background looms that restless giant Japan.

.....one cannot but think that the days of the medieval oligarchy which rules Tibet are already numbered. Even a moderate power established in the Tsangpo valley would be a menace to India. Sooner or later India must stand face to face with a potential enemy looking over that wall [the Himalayas] into her garden....*With Monyul a Tibetan province, the enemy would already be within her gates* (1938: 618) [emphasis added]

British administrators justified the inclusion of Monpa areas in British India by citing the argument that Monpas themselves wanted the change. Colonial rulers observed that the Monpas, burdened by Tibetan taxes and harassed by overbearing officials requested British presence in Monyul. It is true that the Monpas were tax-oppressed, for they had to pay a double tax – one to Tawang or Tsona, and the other (which was more like extortion money) to the Aka or Miji chiefs. However, the significance of such a request is undercut by Kingdon Ward’s, rather condescending, observation that the people of Monyul, despite having to pay taxes to Tibetan government, as well as tribute to the Aka chiefs, did not seem to be unhappy.

The system appears to work smoothly and to cause no inconvenience to anyone. The Monba are peasant proprietors, and it would be hard to find a more cheerful and contented people. They live in substantial houses, they have enough clothing and enough to eat – no surplus of either, I suppose. The Tibetan Church looks after their spiritual welfare; and if it is inclined to be parasitic, at least it has introduced the arts, brought consolation, and raised the standard of living (Kingdon-Ward 1938: 617).

So it was not exactly on humanitarian grounds, but a consideration of Monyul’s buffer use that led the British administration to demarcate a boundary line north of Monyul. As late as

1950, J.P. Mills expresses the British fear of a Chinese imperial aggression when he writes, “India must hold the sub-Himalayan belt somehow because if she had China sitting on the edge of the plains I doubt if Assam would be tenable; and she could not afford to lose Assam with its wealth of coal, oil, tea and timber” (1950: 160).

British official thinking was not based on consensus; indeed there were many who called for aggressive incorporation of these frontier areas. Quite a few British officers concerned with administration of the North East Frontier proposed that the British become more active in this border region. In 1914, Captain Nevill recommended the establishment of British posts in form of a garrison, dispensary, and a hospital in the western frontier areas, believing that such posts would recruit the frontier tribesmen as well as ward off potential imperialist advances (see Reid [1942]1983). “Hardliners” like Sir Lancelot Hare advocated extending regular administration to the hills (Bose 1979a) with the objective of the military protection of the borderlands. In the Memorandum appended to the proceedings of the Simla Conference, Political Officer at Sikkim Charles Bell suggested a new administration for the combined areas of Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet, Tawang and the North-Eastern Frontier Tracts, arguing that the frontier tribes had close relations with the Tibetans, and that the frontier department should be placed within a foreign department rather than the local administration of Assam. Henry McMahon, while not in complete agreement with Bell, did agree that a separate officer for Tawang should be appointed.<sup>87</sup> The British government in Delhi however did not pay heed to these recommendations.

In the late 1930s, certain administrators like Olaf Caroe renewed the call to advance British forces right up to the boundary. This was partly in response to the continued Tibetan presence in the Balipara tracts, comprising the present districts of Tawang and West Kameng. Following an expedition to Tawang in 1938, Captain Lightfoot proposed that local representatives be appointed in Tawang (cited in Reid [1942] 1983: 298). But the British government of India kept on postponing serious considerations of them (Ibid. 301). It advised the

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<sup>87</sup> Foreign Political [Secret] Proceedings [India], May 1915, Nos. 36-50

local administration to continue the old policy of non-interference in Monyul. In doing so, the British government of India showed that despite having delimited a boundary line, it was more influenced by the “frontier as buffer” concept of Sir Henry McMahon with respect to the western parts of the North East Frontier Tracts. In the Adi and Mishmi tracts in the central parts of this frontier region, the British government built a number of control posts, trading posts as well as road tracks to connect these areas to the rest of the country (Bose 1979a: 192)

The boundary agreement between the British and the Tibetans was kept secret for a long time even among some British administrators (Gupta 1971: 524). Since the Chinese representative had not ratified the 1914 boundary treaty, the British were reluctant to extend administrative activities to Monyul or even to publish maps of the boundary line (Reid [1942]1983: 296). Hence, the McMahon boundary, simply represented on a map drawn by Foreign Secretary Sir Henry McMahon, was not published in the maps of that period.

The McMahon Line acquired legitimacy in British official circles only through the diplomatic endeavors of particular British officers, most notably Olaf Caroe, Deputy Secretary of the Foreign and Political Department (Gupta 1971). The official publication of a map showing the McMahon boundary in 1938 – which included destroying copies of an official document (Aitchison's “Treaties”) in which the boundary was not depicted, and replacing it with revised copies in which the McMahon Line figured – was the first step towards securing its legitimacy (Ibid.). But other events unfolding in the world stage, namely, the Second World War and growing force of decolonization diverted the attention of the British government away from any policy changes in the India-China border areas.

However, despite Monyul’s role as buffer, it maintained some of its previous spaces, as Tibetan officials continued to collect tax from Monyul till the 1940s. The Tibetan landed aristocracy and monastic sections also resisted the British move to expropriate Tibet of Monyul, thus giving form to oppositional spaces that prevented closure of the buffer project.

### **Tibetan recalcitrance and representational spaces of colonial Mon**

In the 1930s, the naturalist Frank Kingdon-Ward, noted that “the *de facto* rulers of Mon-yul are the Tibetan dzongpons” (1940: 5) and further wrote about meeting with the “Geshi Ishi Dorji, High Priest of Monyul” in Shergaon (adjacent to the Assam plains) who agreed to forward his request for entry into Tibet to the Tsona Dzongpon (1941: 19). Kingdon-Ward also observed that “there is no visible force in Mon-yul” (1940: 5). This was in contrast to the account of explorer Nain Singh, previously cited, in the late nineteenth century, who had noted a Tibetan military presence in Monyul. So in the intervening half-century between these two records, there had been a shift in political priorities on the part of Tibet either because of the 1914 boundary which made Tibetan military presence in Monyul redundant or because the Tibetan government treasury in this period could no longer afford to maintain an army in the outlying areas due to increased pressure on its resources (Goldstein 1989), or both. Tibet in the 1940s did not maintain an official presence in Monyul, but it continued to maintain an unofficial or *de facto* presence in Monyul (Kingdon Ward 1940). It exercised its authority in Monyul not through a military apparatus but as a cultural paternalistic force (through the monastic system) as well as through taxation. J.P Mills’s notes on his tour of the Balipara Frontier Tract suggest that as late as 1945, Tibetans were present not only near the Tibetan border, but as far down as Dirang. After crossing the Sela (Dzela) Pass into Tawang, Mills writes about feeling that he was “on the fringe of Tibet” (1947: 9) although he was at quite a distance from the boundary line. Mills further writes of the various welcomes, greetings, receptions given to him in different Monpa and Sherdukpen (“Tongti” and “Shergaon”) villages by splendidly attired Tibetan officials. It is clear that for Mills, the cultural spaces of Tibet extended far below Dzela Pass between Tawang and Dirang.

So if, on the one hand, there was British reluctance to consolidate the border, on the other, there was Tibetan recalcitrance toward recognizing this area as British, leading to the persistence of Monyul’s Tibetan spaces. In a significant incident, British botanist Frank Kindon-Ward was asked for his Tibetan passport when he wanted to enter the British territory of Tawang

in 1935. Thus, despite the official agreement between the British and Tibetan government concerning Monyul's political status as British territory, the various contestations and claims over Monyul in the period between delimitation and demarcation formed the oppositional (or representational) spaces. Even after the 1914 boundary was demarcated, Tibetans continued with their regular demands from the tax-paying villagers and monasteries. While the idea of a buffer may rest on the notion of an empty (unoccupied) stretch of territory between two (occupied) states, Monyul not only had a local mobile population of cross-border traders in the 1930s till the 1950s, it also continued to host Tibetans and Bhutanese from other territories visiting with the missions of trade or taxation.

Many scholars (Choudhury 1978, Gupta 1971, Lamb 1966) have argued that one reason why Tibetans continued to exercise a visible presence in Monyul till the early 1950s was due to the lack of a "forward policy" on the part of the British government. I have already argued that the seeming British passivity at the frontiers was actually an active imperial strategy. However, British secrecy about the boundary was not the only factor for Tibetans remaining ignorant about the change in Monyul's political status. It also was not simply the lack of communication between Lhasa and the individual overlords charged with collecting taxes. Rather, certain ambiguities within the boundary treaty itself allowed sections of Tibetans to continue collecting taxes, while forbidding the Tibetan state from doing so. These ambiguities combined with Tibetan resistance to Monyul's status change and led to "de facto" Tibetan rule continuing here till the 1950s.

Although the buffer logic necessitated the eradication of any presence or practice that could cast a Tibetan character on this region, the British had to contend with the Tibetan monastic establishment that did not view the British activities in Tawang favorably. Thus, political considerations led the British to adopt a cautious attitude towards continuing Tibetan interests in the region. In delineating the boundary, therefore, the British made some concessions to the Tibetans, to the extent of allowing Tibetan families, such as Shewo and Sam-drup Pho-drang,

who had private interests in Tawang, and to the Tawang monastery, which had private interests in Dirang and Talung Dzong, to retain these interests (Bose 1979a: 123). It was not just the Tibetan religious establishment which had a direct interest in Tawang, but also certain rich private families of Tibet who maintained separate estates in Tawang and adjoining areas, to whom people in some parts of Monyul, paid taxes.

The Monpas of Mago-Thingbu, for example, paid taxes of yak butter and cheese to Kishung Depa, the agent of one Samdru Photrang, one of the big families of Lhasa (Mitchell 1883, Bailey 1914: 40). The Kishung Depa was “a minor official who collected taxes from the little district of Mago on behalf of Samdru Potrang/ Sam-drup Pho-drang, the great Lhasa family that owned it” (Bailey 1957: 222), and who had also asked Captains Bailey and Morsehead for their passports when they had made their journey from Tibet to Mago in 1911 (Bailey 1957). The people of Mago had to pay double taxes, both to the Kishung Depa and the [Namshu] Monbas (Bailey 1957: 233), but the taxes to the latter, as Bailey writes, “were not so much for services rendered...as for disservices not rendered” (Ibid 229). According to Nima Damdul of Lhou village, Tawang, besides Mago-Thingbu, people of Luguthang, Chander and Namshu villages, as well as a section of people of Thembang village in Dirang also paid taxes in the form of butter and chilies to the “Kishung Dewa”.

The Pachakshiriba Monpas, as the Membas of Mechuka valley in north central Arunachal Pradesh are known (Huber 2008: 245), paid a tax to another big Lhasa family called the Lhalu. Bailey writes that there were around one thousand Pachakshiribas who paid taxes to the Lhalu family but none to the Tibetan government (1957: 162). The representative of the Lhalu family, in whose Lhasa house the Younghusband Mission had stayed in 1904, was called the Gacha Depa (Bailey 1957: 156).

Hence, in finalizing the boundary treaty, British allowed certain monasteries and Tibetan families to maintain “private” interests in Monyul (Bose 1979a). In doing so, the colonial rulers made a distinction between “private” and “public” which actually did not correspond to the

realities of the Tibetan state, where such a distinction was hardly clear-cut, for the Tibetan government allowed some rich Lhasa families to collect taxes, and the latter, in their turn, had to contribute to the royal treasury. Further, the Tibetan state was a “theocratic” state in which the interests of monastery and government coincided.<sup>88</sup> The British officer in charge of an expedition to Tawang in 1938 admitted as much, saying, “So inextricably are State and Religion intermingled in Tibet that till the Tibetan monastic officials are withdrawn, Tibetan influence and intrigue must persist in the surrounding country” (Lightfoot, cited in Reid 1942[1983]: 298). In fact, one British administrator while admitting to the unwitting role of British treaties in perpetuating boundary confusions, had written that when the British paid Rs. 5000 as payment for taking over the Kuriapara Duar, the foothills pass controlled by Tawang, they had done so under the assumption that it was to Tawang that the money would go, only realizing later that the money was actually absorbed by the Drepung monastery at Lhasa.

Yet, the boundary treaty did not take into account the unity of private monastic and state interests in Tibetan rule. Allowing certain Tibetan private interests to continue while seeking to banish the workings of the Tibetan state in Monyul was thus a process ridden with internal contradictions. Even though the British were keen to divide Monyul from Tibetan political authority, they could not achieve a clean break: not only did Tibetan peoples continue to cross over but also an inherent duality in the boundary agreement left scope for Tibet to exert unofficial “public” presence in Monyul. These ambiguities led to the existence of alternative spatialities in Mon, despite buffer practices.

Besides the internal inconsistencies of the boundary treaty, the inconsistencies of opinion among the monk aristocracy too contributed to the Tibetan presence continuing in Monyul, although both these factors were inter-related. Thus, while the Lonchen Shatra, the representative

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<sup>88</sup> The argument that a private/public divide existed in the workings of the Tibetan state continues to be put forward even today by Indian researchers writing from a defense perspective. While such researchers admit that Tawang monastery was collecting dues on behalf of Drepung and that Tibetan private estates also existed till the 1950s, they argue that “ecclesiastical jurisdiction” of the monastery should not be read as political rule by Tibet (Dutta 2008: 563)



of the Tibetan government, sanctioned the 1914 boundary proposed by the British, not all Tibetan officers were happy about ceding Tawang to British India. Upon the Shatra's return to Lhasa after the boundary treaty, many in the Tibetan government thought that the Shatra "had given away too much" (Goldstein 1989: 23). Tibetans were reluctant to give up their considerable tax and property rights in Monyul, and understanding this, the British too were cautious in staking their claims for fear of offending the Tibetans in the immediate aftermath of the treaty conclusion (*Ibid.*).

From the British point of view, Monyul had been a subject of the Tibetan government, ("*Dewa Zhung*") till 1912, but in 1913, after the boundary was fixed, Monyul, including Tawang was ceded to India (Kingdon Ward 1938: 614). Yet, the ambiguities of the boundary treaty, and contradictions within the attitude of Tibetan ruling classes to the Tawang question led to many among the Tibetan officer-ranks as well as their Monpa subjects failing to accept that political control had shifted to British hands. When the First World War began, the resulting confusion and financial crisis diverted the British government's attention away from the boundary issue until the mid-1930s, when a Political Officer visited Tawang and reported that that Monyul was still under Tibetan control. In 1938, therefore, the Government of India sent an expedition to Tawang to "inform the Monba that they were British subjects" (Kingdon Ward 1938: 615). This was not viewed favorably by the Tibetans, as Kingdon Ward notes,

I was in Monyul for six months in 1938, and no sooner had the expedition returned to the plains than I began to feel the weight of Tibetan displeasure.....being dependent on the local people for transport, when I went on tour, I had to order it through the *jongpens*, who asked to see my permit from Lhasa (*Ibid.* 615)

In 1943, when J.P. Mills was given the task of enforcing the boundary defined in the Simla Convention, he did not get any cooperation from the Tibetans. As he notes, "The Tibetans issued no maps and said, in effect, that they could not find the papers about the Convention. What they really meant was that if we had forgotten the boundary for over twenty-nine years we could go on forgetting about it altogether" (Mills 1950: 154). Kingdon Ward similarly writes, "It is

inconceivable that the present Tibetan Government is entirely ignorant of the 1914 treaty....But the Kashag [Tibetan parliament] has apparently assumed blissful unconsciousness of any such transaction...” (1938: 615)

The willful attitude of Tibetan authorities towards the 1914 boundary line created some consternation in British circles. Government correspondence of the 1930s indicates the rising concern of the British over Tibet’s continued hold on Tawang. Tibet had agreed to cede Tawang to the British on the understanding that the latter would help them settle their long-standing questions with China, and even in the 1930s, the Tibetan authorities maintained that they would come to an agreement on the Tawang question once the British took care of the Chinese question. Norbu Dhondhup, British agent in Lhasa called attention to this clause in 1937 while advising against any decision to forcibly annex Tawang to rid it of Tibetan presence, noting that “while Assam [British authorities in Assam] has the right to annex Tawang, such action would have far reaching effect on the minds of the Tibetans”.<sup>89</sup>

As late as 1945, Hugh Richardson noted that the Tibetan Kashag considered the British claim to Tawang as something new (1945: 62). Richardson therefore advocated adopting quiet, instead of aggressive action to eliminate Tibetan presence, so as not to arouse retaliations. A couple of years later, in an official report, Richardson records his conversation with the Dzungpon of Tashigang in Bhutan. The Bhutanese officer reportedly told him that while a large number of lay and monastic individuals of Tawang would welcome regime change to British rule, the main opposition stemmed from high-ranking officers of monastery and village headmen who would lose their powers of taxation. The Tawang officials were under orders from the Tibetan government to admit the British political authorities but not to give them land “even enough to pitch a tent”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Extract from a letter from R.B. Norbu Dhondhup, 1937.

<sup>90</sup> Report by the British Trade Agent, 1947.

Although Tibetans had trade and tax presence in the entire Indo-Tibetan frontier area, including in the Lohit, Siang and Subansiri valleys, areas with non-Tibetan Buddhist inhabitants lying west of Monyul, Tibetan influence was strongest in the latter area. It was here that the British “claim to this country was strenuously opposed both by Tibetan secular frontier officials and by monastic tax collectors” (Mills 1950: 157). Gaining control over Monyul, especially Tawang, was thus a contested act between the British and Tibetan authorities, especially the high-ranking classes and monastic elites within the latter. The British attempt to erase Tibetan presence from Monyul and enforce their own presence there was also not a simple, direct affair but was shaped by strategic considerations (fear of retaliation), policy suggestions from different individuals, general guidelines of colonial rule (buffer logic), and also by forces operating beyond the spaces of Monyul (world wars and Chinese actions in Tibet). The British spatial design was thus never completed, even after the boundary was sealed, due to oppositional forces that constituted the representational spaces in this period.

These spaces did not grow in linear or cumulative fashion into the new politics of place that I outline in later chapters. But they point to the cracks within the colonial buffer practice that were ripe with the possibilities of transformation at the correct “conjuncture” (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003) of forces. The Chinese annexation of Tibet and the subsequent flight of H.H. Dalai Lama to India, followed by the India-China border war, which led the government of India to close all passages along the India-China border, form only one of such conjunctural forces. The political changes in Tibet in the 1950s and the rise of India and China as two strong nation-states provided the backdrop for the new relations that define Monyul’s contemporary official representations. In postcolonial India, thus, Monyul’s official representation as margin derives from its disputed territory status, and its spatial practices follow the official code.

One element that remains fairly constant in the oppositional practices following the Indo-Tibetan boundary demarcation of 1914 and the oppositional practices in Monyul today is the involvement of the leadership of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community. In the colonial

period, primary resistance to British claims came from the monastic elites, while the new politics in the contemporary period are being authored by monk leaders and politicians. The struggles over power and place in both cases are strongly defined by a religious leadership with political stakes, although the context and nature of the struggles are different.

### **Postcolonial transformations: Making of a border zone**

In the event of Chinese territorial claims over Tawang on the grounds that this region is historically and culturally closer to Tibet, an argument such as the one outlined above might be seen to be counter-productive. That is, a discussion about the transformation of Monyul from Tibetan space to colonial buffer, and a postcolonial marginal border, may have unintended repercussions and ramifications. Indeed, some academics (Pommaret 1999) and several of my informants in Arunachal Pradesh have voiced fears that any discussion suggesting Tawang's connections to Tibet might directly play into China's claims. However, in this chapter, I have sought to historically contextualize the present marginality of Monyul by tracing its colonial production as an imperial zone of difference/indifference. I have sketched a history of Monyul by tracing its spatial shift along with a shift in social relations between Britain and China. But the latter presents only one process of spatial transformation in a series of shifts, for prior to the imperial period, Monyul had been represented as a Tibetan space; after colonialism, it was produced as a disputed national tract, and in the contemporary period, yet new politics of place are being waged.

In 1943, in the twilight of colonial rule, the British government did attempt to extend certain development works in the North East Frontier Tract, and for this purpose, conceived of the first Five Year Development Plan in 1946. Development, according to this plan, rather than a change of buffer strategy, was conceived as a tool to propagate the image of the benevolent state in the minds of the local Monpa population and also wean the latter away from Tibetan influence, given that Tibetan officials were still collecting taxes in Monyul till the early 1940s. The

following statement by A.A. Barney, Deputy Secretary of External Affairs, is nothing short of a declaration of intent:

....in this case, the plan could not be called “development” in the spatial technical sense in which that term is now used, but amounted really to little more than the introduction of essential administrative arrangements in a territory which has previously been not only “undeveloped” but almost entirely unadministered.....*from the administrative point of view, it would seem that the proposed plan is the minimum which, spread over 5 years, may be expected to achieve any effective results and at the same time retain the good-will of the inhabitants of these areas so that they regard Government as a benevolent organization and not merely as interfering and acquisitive....* [emphasis added]<sup>91</sup>

The development plan did not imply that Monyul’s buffer days were over, for the kind of development conceived was not one that required great investment on the part of the colonial government. The official as well as media reports of this period on the proposed plan leave no doubts as to the actual intention behind the plan of delivering development to the frontier tribes. Serious cost-benefit calculations went into the proposed plan as colonial officers deliberated to what extent administration should be supplemented by beneficial activity (roads, hospitals, schools). However, actual work for the Five Year Development Plan was begun only in November 1947 after India had gained independence. But the same policy considerations continued to guide the postcolonial state. As with many policies of the immediate decolonization period, this development plan, too, reflected a continuity rather than break with the colonial regime. As a report in *The Statesman* phrased it,

The Plan is neither new nor of Indian devising; British officers drew it up probably 18 months ago. Its acceptance by the Union Government and the comparatively quick start with work auger well for both India and the tribal areas. It is a “forward policy which is pushed forward; it aims at gradually drawing the tribes that inhabit the inaccessible mountains to the north and east of the Brahmaputra Valley into the Indian orbit... (*The Statesmen*, 19 November 1947)<sup>92</sup>

The dilemma of the postcolonial Indian government, concerned with nation-building and integration in the 1950s, was whether to adopt a strict policy of assimilation or to continue the earlier strategy of isolationism with regard to the frontier tribes. Verrier Elwin, missionary turned

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<sup>91</sup> External Affairs, North East Frontier, 1946, p. 21-22.

<sup>92</sup> External Affairs, North East Frontier, 1946, p. 21-22.

anthropologist and national advisor on tribal affairs, advocated a policy where the government would respect tribal rights over land and forest and allow tribals to develop on their own, without “over-administering” their areas (Elwin 1959b). Many nationalists of the period preferred a more integrationist standpoint (Baruah 1989), but eventually, the approach favoured by Elwin of non-interference and gradual assimilation was adopted and the areas beyond the Inner Line were allowed to retain their status quo. The Constitution of India of 1950 continued many of the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935 with respect to the excluded and partially excluded areas, only changing the nomenclatures. The “backward” tribal areas of the rest of India were placed in the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, while most in Northeast India were placed in the Sixth Schedule (Baruah 1989, 2003). While both the Fifth and Sixth Schedules provided for protection of minority cultures and special development schemes for the areas they covered, only the Sixth Schedule provided for self-governance in the volatile frontier areas on India’s Northeast region (Sonntag 1999: 422). At the same time, a benevolent state presence had to be exercised in these areas so that national boundaries were not confused. This is where development played a role.

Development in the late colonial period and immediately after decolonization had a two-pronged objective; first, to expand a tenuous administration to hitherto un-administered territory, and second, through certain beneficial activities, signal to the subject populations who the legitimate authority in these areas was. In this respect, road construction was seen as the priority area. The most important road network was seen to be the one linking the Assam foothills to the Sela Pass in Tawang, for this was the hill track over which all traffic from the area controlled by Tawang monastery had to pass, while two other road arteries would link southern Monpa areas (present Kalaktang circle of West Kameng) and eastern Nishi (non-Monpa tribal territory) to the plains.<sup>93</sup> It should be clear that development, in the form of roads, was selective, and primarily intended for the non-military penetration of the state into these border areas. While official policy

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<sup>93</sup> External Affairs, North East Frontier, 1946, Appendix I to Corollary, pp. 22

rested on non-interference and gradual assimilation, a forward policy with respect to frontier areas was enacted through development.

However, with growing political turmoil across the border in Tibet in 1951, military exercises at the frontier were appended to the policy of non-interference in Monyul. Following independence, India found herself in a changed position *vis a vis* China, confronting the latter as one militarized nation-state against another, and entrusted with protecting the borders she had inherited from the colonial state. In 1951, Major Bob Khating of the Indian Frontier Administrative Services led an expedition to Tawang to establish the first Assam Rifles paramilitary post there, guided by local Monpas led by Pema Gombu, later to become headman of Lhou village in Tawang. A locally published biography of Pema Gombu,<sup>94</sup> an influential man from one of the aristocratic clans of Lhou village, presents a description of how local people supported the first official expedition of the post-colonial Indian government to Tawang. Many people told me that the Monpas had requested the Indian state to occupy their areas since they wanted to be free of Tibetan rule. The discursive element of “request” introduces power symmetry to the boundary creation, whereby the Monpas’ wishes are seen as being taken into account. One is not sure, however, whether this element is a latter addition to local legend mediated by official representations.

As India-China border tensions rose in the 1950s decade, the Indian state attempted to assert greater military presence in Monyul by stationing Indian troops in this region. When Chinese troops occupied Monyul briefly during October 1962, this event marked the denouement of the buffer practices. Its immediate aftermath marked the moment of border closure – when porous boundaries were reconstituted as the limits of national territory beyond which existed the non-national (both geographically and figuratively). This is the moment, when the boundary physically drew the contours of the geo-body (Winichakul 1994). The official representation of

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<sup>94</sup> *A Brief Biography of Shri. Pema Gombu*. (n.d.) Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, a copy of which I acquired from Pema Gombu’s son, Urgen Tsering, chairman of Lhou Secondary school, Tawang.

Monyul in the contemporary period is that of a disputed territory in the border conflict between two nation-states. Neeru Nanda, who had served as the Deputy Commissioner to Tawang in the 1970s, remarks in her popular book, *The Monpas of Tawang*;

But in the border areas, one can never afford to rest on laurels, real or imaginary. The loyalty of the border people has always to be earned, for governments in border areas anywhere in the world will invariably get the loyalty they deserve – perhaps more, but never less (Nanda 1982: 9).

Despite being a well-beloved administrator with an anthropological bent of mind, Nanda nonetheless has to speak in the language of power and patronage when defending the “loyalty” of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. The particular context in which the loyalty of the Monpas is put in question is the India-China war, during which Monpa areas were overrun by Chinese troops, and subsequent to which, Monpas came to be regarded by mainstream media as a people of “uncertain patriotism” (Nanda 1982: 9). Monpas are frequently suspected of harboring anti-national feelings as they were under Chinese occupation for three months from October to December during the 1962 border war (Nanda 1982: 7). In his account of the India-China war, G.S. Bhargava who served as Principal Information Officer to the government of India, writes, “At Dirang [West Kameng] a tribal youth...asked me if, ‘since the Chinese had left the Indians would come back’. In other words, he bracketed his countrymen with the enemy. *In the circumstances, it was too much to expect the tribals to resist the Chinese militarily*” (1964: 62) [emphasis added]. Inhabiting the geographical and cultural margins of the nation, Monpas are thus subject to the suspicions cast on those considered incompletely Indian, or as “Indian, but not quite”.

The India-China war marked the moment of shift from British buffer designs to the nationalist co-option of Monyul. The military closure of the Monyul-Tibet border passages in the 1950s choked off earlier arteries that had continued to thrive despite the rhetoric and practice of a buffer. Alongwith military activities, development programmes in the postcolonial period modified the previous approach of “indifference” to the Monyul border tract, but the development



is of a selective kind that lays emphasis on roads and connectivity and less on healthcare, education or employment. Roads are constructed from a military point of view, connecting main towns and army settlements rather than rural areas, while those roads that are not strategically important are neglected. As an Indian officer remarked about the road leading to Seppa in East Kameng district (which bifurcates from the Bomdila-Tawang main road at a place called Nechipu), “the road not being a defence priority received least priority by the Border road task force” (Bhattacharjee 1992: 174). Army settlements have been built at a frequency of every 30-40 kilometer stretch on the main road – the national highway that winds its way from the Assam plains to the India-Tibet border.

Monyul’s status as disputed territory is now the official code that guides spatial practices here. The perceived spaces of Monyul today combine images of a marginal border with that of a militarized frontier. In the next chapter, I discuss how military penetration of Monyul’s spaces in the postcolonial period further attempts to build on this code through renaming local places with mostly Hindi names. However, just as the buffer project was subject to contestation, renaming practices are undercut by acts of resistance.

## Chapter 6

### *PERIPHERY* RENAMING, NATION-MAKING, AND RESISTANCE AT THE BORDER

Monyul's status as a disputed border has served to define its daily spaces. At the India-Pakistan border post at Wagah, Amritsar, the daily performance of patriotism through nationalistic songs blared on loudspeakers, nationalistic slogans, "*Bharat Mata ki jai*" (Long live Mother India) and refrains of the national song *Vande Mataram* during the ritual lowering or hoisting of flags every morning or evening, infuse the border with an intense patriotic flavor (Gohain 2006). In contrast, the ubiquitous presence of military personnel at India's Tawang border with China, lying under a grey cloud of mountain and security fog, makes such daily rituals of patriotism redundant. It is as if Monyul has been transformed into a sprawling military settlement, so frequent are the army camps lining its roads.<sup>95</sup>

Along with the settlement of military populations from other parts of India, many places in Monyul have been renamed today or had their pronunciations Hindified. I argue that renaming is a postcolonial spatial strategy to integrate peripheral and disputed state spaces into mainstream national spaces.<sup>96</sup> The renaming of Monyul's places with Hindi names by the Indian army marks this region as a postcolonial hinterland that is open for nationalist appropriation. In this respect, the same principles that guided the buffer practices of the colonial period also underlie the renaming trend. Although, the colonial buffer imperative was to separate Monyul from its trans-border Tibetan connections and the nationalist imperative lies in militarily settling it, both

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<sup>95</sup> There are an estimated 100,000 troops along the entire Arunachal Pradesh border, including Tawang (Ramesh 2006; see also "A Himalayan Rivalry", *The Economist*, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010). According to local sources, there are at least 5000 troops in Tawang itself, although this is unconfirmed.

<sup>96</sup> I use integration instead of assimilation to speak of nationalist co-option, because unlike assimilation which brinks on denial of distinct cultural identities ("melting-pot" metaphor), integration accepts difference of the "parts" but as subsumed to the national "whole" ("salad bowl" metaphor) (Watson 2000). While integration, with a multicultural spirit, views India as a "composite culture" where diversity is not annihilated, but unified through fusion, it is impaired by the clause of allegiance to a national concept, primarily defined by the majority culture. Integration, although more nuanced than assimilation, also eventually makes demands for subordinate existence on minority cultures, and assumes that the latter would place their commitment to the national goal over and above their ethnic and religious allegiances.

approach it with a similar frontier attitude (Tsing 2005). By adopting a frontier attitude in Monyul, the state is able to see this border zone as *terra nullius* (Povinelli 2002) or virgin territory that is amenable to intervention, which may be explored, discovered and settled. Colonial policies constructed Monyul as a dispensable frontier and postcolonial renaming practices treat Monyul as a suspect frontier that has to be integrated, albeit as peripheral national space. If the conditions for Monyul's marginality were laid down in the colonial period, their perpetuation in the postcolonial period underscores Monyul's peripheral status in the national imagination. *Hindi renaming seeks to erase other historical associations of place, constructing it as part of a (culturally homogenous) nation.*

While other anthropologists have focused on education, census, development and resettlement programs as different means to spatially appropriate marginal state spaces (Ferguson 1994, Li 1999, Scott 1999), I draw attention to renaming – a less discussed, but equally pertinent *spatial strategy* (Deshpande 1995) of nation-states. Deshpande, explaining Foucault's notion of heterotopias, argues that *spatial strategies* are ideological practices involved in the construction of heterotopias – real places that compel people to see themselves as reflected in some utopia, and which therefore, have to be socially produced (1995:172). In other words, spatial strategies are geographies of power that attempt to represent space in a particular mode, which may or may not reflect lived realities. I argue that the replacement of local Monpa toponyms or place-names with Hindi toponyms by state agents such as the Indian army is a spatial strategy because it seeks to facilitate a seamless transition of cultural landscape as one crosses over from the Indian mainland into the hilly hinterland of Monyul. A Hindi toponym, displacing a Tibetan-based toponym, invokes associations that identify the place as part of a Hindi/Indian topography. Unlike development, which is a more frontal strategy of rule, renaming constitutes a covert approach of integration, for it paints an *image* of the place through metaphor, that is, the place name.

Yet, who names, and thus, narrates, is not a given fact but is a contested act. Hindi renaming of places has provoked reactions from several fronts: the monastic sections, in

particular, call for the restoration of older toponyms. Protests against renaming and the call to reclaim older place-names challenge the spatial motif of peripherality inscribed on Monyul through military representations. The contest over place-names or politics of toponymy may be understood better by comparing it with the politics of repatriation. Repatriation of material culture involves justifying rights over material heritage by tracing both membership in and lineage from the original, ancestral community, although, as the Native American Graves Protection Act (NAGPRA) shows, proving ownership is fraught with tensions and raises the impossible question, how far must we trace origins in order to lay rightful claim over cultural property (Stutz 2009). The tracing, the wresting or the granting of rightful ownership in the NAGPRA discourse is intertwined with the politics and history of Native American disprivilege in North America, moving back and forth between past denial and present justice, rather than with the objective establishment of true ownership; and NAGPRA is the culmination of this process of political struggle.

What we can take away from this issue is that just as repatriation is more than being about actual ownership, but is a political contest, so too are toponymic claims. That is, *renaming and resistance constitute opposite claims of ownership*. Monpa assertions over place-names may be considered as the repatriation claims of non-material culture or intangible heritage. If renaming by the Indian army is a claim of possession made by the state on a disputed border territory, then popular responses for restoring old names may be seen as a counter-claim.

But the dispute over place-names is more than a cultural property dispute. While the official conception of Monyul is that of a subordinate periphery that may be appropriated through Hindi cultural markers,<sup>97</sup> resistance to renaming contests the image and location of Monyul as *terra nullius*. Many places in Monyul narrate either tales of religious or spiritual revelation or

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<sup>97</sup> Tourist brochures often promote those historic ruins or sites that have mythological associations with the Sanskrit-Vedantic civilization, such as the Malinithan or Bhairabkund sites in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, the Sanskrit name of the state, Arunachal Pradesh, meaning land of the rising sun was introduced only after this region became the subject of a border dispute.

histories of erstwhile Tibetan rule, presence and contact; to call for restoring these names is to claim an alternative spatial character for Monyul. The struggles to reclaim place-names are not simply protest at being symbolically expropriated of native title, but are tied to contemporary cultural politics in Monyul.

### **In the name of the nation: Renaming in postcolonial India**

Edward Said (1993) writes, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them”. It has long been acknowledged that branding places through names is a device of cultural imperialism. Place names narrate stories about a community or a region, and these narratives have ideological force. They fix the character of places by narrating how a place came to be called so, thereby naturalizing the connection between the signified (topography) and the signifier (name); hence the term, toponym. Thus, they invest a place with a distinct character and identity through discursive effect (naming, iteration) and the power of representation. For instance, English colonialism in Ireland in the nineteenth century consisted of translating Gaelic sounding names into comparable English equivalents, and thereby transforming the Irish landscape into an Anglicised one (Friel 1980 *cited in* Reinares 2007). Hindi names perform a similar function with respect to places of Mon. They bring the latter into the ambit of a Hindi/Indian cultural nation through iterative effect.

From the perspective of the Hindi-speaking soldiers stationed in Monyul, Hindi names may be particularly heart-warming for they symbolically create a “home away from home”. A (North) Indian *jawan* (foot-soldier) who is deployed to this peripheral corner of the country with no prospects of immediate transfer and who arrives possibly bowed down by feelings of bleakness, is not assaulted by a sense of the foreign but is assuaged by the ring of familiarity when he encounters Hindi place-names such as *Jyoti Nagar* (trans. “town of light”) instead of the

strange sounding (from the point of view of Hindi-speakers) Tibeto-Burman *Nagrobchap* (behind the hill).

But such a view, while not completely untrue, depoliticizes the context. Border areas, as Aggarwal argues, “are far from peripheral to the nation-state, for it is at its borders that the nation is perhaps experienced most intimately” (2004: 3). With respect to Ladakh, which figures prominently in the India-China border dispute, Aggarwal shows how cultural performances of national holidays, festivals, films or traditional sports such as archery competitions become sites for nation-making. Bhan (2008) similarly recounts how the Indian military formalized annual national ceremonies in Kargil, a border tract and site of the 1999 India-Pakistan war. I argue that the contemporary practice of renaming Monyul’s places with Hindi names by Indian army soldiers is a similar attempt at nation-making. Hindi renaming is not simply a sentimental act of recalling home through familiar markers for soldiers in a strange land (not to mention that the strangeness or otherness of Monyul itself stems from a construct of the Indian self as North Indian). Hindi names are a state strategy to inscribe places considered sub-national with the seal of the nation.<sup>98</sup>

In the last couple of decades, the names of streets, monuments, institutions, public spots, natural landmarks and entire cities have been changed in many metropolitan centers of India with the intention of eradicating colonial imprints, and coloring places with nationalist hues. Renaming replaces the colonial story of rule by the nationalist myth of a glorious past or a triumphal modernity. For example, in 1995, during the term of the Narasimha Rao Congress government (1991-96), the outer and inner circles of the circular Connaught Place, the famous central shopping plaza of Delhi, were renamed as Indira Chowk and Rajiv Chowk respectively, after Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, the mother-son prime ministers duo of the Indian Nationalist Congress party. The substitution of names carrying associations with the colonial past with names

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<sup>98</sup> Here I use the term sub-national to express both potentially secessionist tendencies within the Indian nation (Baruah 1999) as well as the spaces that are not recognized as fully national, or below-national.

that indicate an Indian heritage or, as in the case of Rajiv Chowk, an Indian modernity marks an attempt to write out or over colonial labels that mar the respectability of nationalist memory.

Just as length of genealogy confers prestige on an individual, length of history confers prestige on a nation (Tuan 1980), and gives moral weight to a nation's present existence by tracing its existence in the past. If nationalist memory is the (invented) oral lore of the national community, then renaming is part of the project of nationalist memorialization. While national memory proposes an origin myth of the nation, commemorations, monuments and memorial spaces that celebrate selected events and heroes of the past "naturalize" the memory by associating it with everyday life events (Azaryahu and Kellerman 1999), and are instrumental in how the national memory is carried forth. The fact that renaming places seldom arise from a collective desire but are the initiative of a handful of politicians who have the political and legal clout to decide on such matters (Sen 2010) does not detract from the latter's objective of nationalist memorialization.

Renaming places has also been on the agenda of nativists or regionalists in various parts of India, similarly motivated by a decolonizing mindset. Nativist naming practices abound in postcolonial India, with authorities in urban, metropolitan centers increasingly turning to provincial names, as for instance, the renaming of West Bengal with its Bengali equivalent, Paschim Bongo, or the renaming of Madras as Chennai, or the renaming of Bombay as Mumbai after the local goddess Mumba Devi (Hansen 2001). In both the nativist and the nationalist reasoning, renaming allows for the recognition of the vernacular over the colonially given character of cities or urban sites.

In contemporary Monyul, renaming is not an attempt to rewrite a colonial history, for colonialism followed a different trajectory here. The British never did name the places or roads of Monyul after colonial figures. In fact, the British were quite reluctant to make aggressive claims on Monyul during their rule for fear of offending the Tibetan authorities who had not yet relinquished their *de facto* claims entirely, as my previous discussion on the colonial buffer

showed. The only names that were present at the time of decolonization were the local toponyms. Yet, since the 1950s, local places have rapidly been renamed with the arrival of huge numbers of military populations to this region who began assigning their own names to places. Unlike in the metropolitan areas of India, where renaming is done through official legal procedures, in Monyul, renaming has mostly been unofficial. But many of the army-given names have now become the official addresses for these places, not only marking them as fresh settlements but, by disregarding old names, also making the stories and histories associated with the latter names obsolete.

Despite the difference between renaming practices in metropolis and periphery, a discussion of renaming in metropolitan centers is necessary to understand the official code that also guides renaming processes in peripheral border areas. Both are undergirded by a *common nationalist spatial code*, which prescribes that place-names should be compatible with a nationalist memory or the nationalist project. Renaming in both instances is carried out by the same actor, that is, the nation-state and its agents such as the army or the political representatives. In the metropolis, renaming overwrites colonial historiography to fix an indigenous Indian character on places. In Monyul, the Hindi or Hindified toponyms, which are more compatible with the idea of an Indian national space, similarly fix a national character on places and blot out other histories. Therefore, understanding the metropolitan context clarifies other contexts of renaming. Renaming in Monyul might not be motivated by the desire to symbolically rid a place of its colonial character, but it is an integrationist move to create national places out of border spaces.

To quote Lefebvre again, “representations of space have a practical impact... they intervene in and modify spatial textures which are informed by effective knowledge and ideology” (1991: 42). That is, representations of Monyul as periphery do not simply remain on the ideational level, but are accompanied by various discursive and material practices to implement this view of the ground. Renaming is both a spatial code and a practice to map Monyul



as a peripheral national space. Hindi renaming of Monpa places serves the project of (homogenous) nationalism by mapping Monyul as Hindi/Indian space. In the following sections, I look at how the Hindification of Monyul's landscape aids in its nationalist transformation by over-writing a nationalist narrative onto older toponymic narratives.

### **When legends die: The politics of renaming**

Named landscape, according to Bakhtin, are "chronotopes" (Bakhtin, cited in Basso 1996: 62) or points in the geography of a community which exist as symbols of the community itself. The use of place names in narratives creates a hyper-link between the present and the past so that individuals, while narrating stories, are able to make a temporal claim of continuity by attributing to present places something that transpired in these exact same places in the past. Oral narratives containing place-names function as benevolent keepers of tradition by anchoring a people's identity to a particular place as well as connections with other places (Basso 1996). Conversely, each place-name is the metonym of a tale, mnemonically recalling people to their customary ways, and narrating historical or mythical associations. Individuals may use these names as a means to assert heritage by summoning the cultural repertoire embodied in them, or as a renewable resource in constructing self.

Oral narratives in Monyul, like in other societies with predominantly oral cultural traditions, belong to more than one genre (Basso 1996); yet, places figure in both tales of religious revelations and spiritual presence, in "secular" stories of Tibetan rule, trade or genealogical connections, and in Monpa origin legends. (Almost all the origin tales that I heard were very place-specific, and were never simply about X clan but about X clan of Y village). Moreover, many places of Monyul from Zemithang near the Tibet border to Kalaktang near the Assam and Bhutan border are associated with myths about persons who came from either Tibet or Bhutan for religious purposes and left their mark on a particular place through extraordinary deeds.

One particular tale that is popular in all areas of Mon, from the settlements of Domkho-Melongkhar in southern Monyul to Senge and Jang in northern Monyul tells the story of the great mystic and tantric Ngon Chin Yula, who was referred to as Sangey (god) by the local people. It is said that he once travelled from Jang in northern Monyul to Melongkhar in eastern Monyul and was accompanied by a magical bison on his return journey. The magical creature performed different actions in each place it passed through, causing those places to be named accordingly. In the different versions of the same story that I heard, there were slight variations in details. For example, in some, the protagonist Ngon Chin is a healer while in others he is a yak-herder, but in each version, the particular events resulting in place names remained unvaried.

Ama (a term for both mother and mother's sister) narrated this legend to me one evening when I was staying at her house, as a guest of her daughter, Chomu, a doctoral student of history at Gauhati University. Once, we were discussing the origins of the different lineages of Jang village, and as she was listing the clans one by one, she mentioned that people of the Ngon Chin clan are known to be very proud. When asked why, she replied that it was because they were descended from a great man, Ngon Chin, and so began the tale:

In Domkho Melongkhar [a place in Kalaktang in southern Monyul], a rich boy dies. He was the only son of the house. The family heard that there was a man in Jang, Ngon Chin who could revive the dead, and so they go to meet him there. Ngon Chin asks them how many days it was since the boy had died and they reply two days. So the next day at sunrise, Ngon Chin comes to Domkho [since he had powers, he could cover distances in a flash] and revives the boy. The family is very happy and wishes to reward him, but he asks only for the *zhop* [rock vessel in which *mand*/wild bison are given food]. Ngon Chin goes to the riverbed and using his magical powers makes a rope out of sand. He ties the *zhop* with the sand rope and tugs it thrice, saying "get up". In the place which is now called Mandlangphudung, the *zhop* turns into a *mand*, gets up and follows him (*Mand* = bison, *lang* = get up).

Wherever Ngon Chin passed with the *mand*, names became attached to places. For example, the place where the *mand* bellowed, came to be called *bir mang* (*Bir*=heavy sound). When he reached what is today called Lish, the bison's weight suddenly became very heavy (*Lyu* means very heavy), and hence was named *Lish*. In Melongkang, the bison wept, and hence it became Melongkang (*melong*=eye). At Nyumadung, the bison was sick (*nyu lok* means unwell) and so the place name became Nyumadung. At Senge dzong, the bison felt better (*seng* means better) and thus the place acquired its name. At Mandtsithong, he drank water (*mand*=bison, *tsi*=water, *thong*=drank).

At Dzela pass, there are three lakes (*tsho*). One is called Myaktsikang/Mandthungsa. It is believed that at the spot where the lakes stands, the *mand* wept, and a lake formed (*Myak tsi*= tear drops, *kang*=the place where tear drops fell). At the Dzela pass, the guardian of one of the lakes did not allow the *mand* to pass. Ngon Chin had two foolish sisters. He sent a message to them asking them to bring peace offerings for the guardian of the lake, but the persons carrying his message were envious of him, and so they distorted the message and told the sisters that their brother wanted them to bring radish, onion and garlic, considered impure.

When their brother saw them bringing these items, he resigned himself to going inside the lake and battling with the guardian of the lake. He told them that if the water of the lake boiled white like milk, it meant that he had won, but if it boiled red like blood, it meant that he had lost. After cautioning them not to act in haste, he dived in. After prolonged fighting, the lake's water started boiling like milk, and the sisters foolishly assuming that their brother had won started clapping. But immediately afterwards, the lake water turned to boiling blood, indicating that their brother had lost the battle and died. At last, the right hand of their slain brother came out of the lake. [The story of Ngon Chin ends here but there still exists in Jang a clan called Ngon Chin which claims descent from him].

For Ama, the toponymic tale establishes the fact that there had once existed a man called Ngon Chin, and by referencing place names that correspond to actual places today, Ama supported her genealogical thesis that there are descendents of Ngon Chin living still in Jang. Gyalsey Rinpoche's book, *Clear Mirror of Monyul* (1999) also mentions a person called Ami Ngon Chun, as the founder of the Gonpawa caste. Ami Ngon Chung was a great tantric master who came to Monyul from Tibet via Tsona, performing many miracles on the way. He finally settled in Nyam-ga-teng in Dirang. Gyalsey Rinpoche seemed to think that the Ngon Chung mentioned by the Rimpoche in his book and the Ngon Chin Yula of folk lore are the same; and if that is the case, then the reference to Ngon Chin as a great tantric master in the legend not only establishes the Tibet connection of the Gonpawa caste and the people of Dirang but also traces a map of tantric Buddhist places of Monyul. Within Tibetan Buddhism, tantric powers are attributed to Nyingma (red-hat) monks, who more than their counterparts of the Gelugpa (yellow-hat) sect, incorporate tantric rites in their study curriculum, and are believed to be capable of performing miracles. Therefore, the journey of Ngon Chin from the northern to the eastern parts of Monyul traces the geographic spread of tantric Buddhist influence in Monpa areas.

At Domkho, Kalaktang, near the Monyul-Bhutan border, Gombu narrated a slightly different version of the same tale. The legend both names and describes a landscape (Domkho-Melongkhar) and a clan (Melongkhar-pa) that has lost its earlier glory. Gombu, who claims to be the last of the Melongkharpa (those from Melongkhar clan), framed his account to highlight his kinship connections with the present Bhutanese queen mother, who also belongs to this clan. Since the legend speaks of the wealth of the Melongkhar family, it corroborates, in a way, Gombu's claims of aristocratic privileges, although nothing material remains of the ancestral property except for the ruins of the Melongkhar house. By pointing to me the exact spots in which, for example, the vessel turned into the bison or the place where the bison had been tethered, Gombu attempted to authenticate the associations between the places in the story and the places before us. Gombu uses Ngon Chin's legend as an entry point for broaching his aristocratic lineage, but the place-names in the narrative give legitimacy to Gombu's claim by grounding the memory in actually existing places.

However, most of the places originally named after the various deeds performed by Ngon Chin's bison in the legend have now been given new names by the Indian army. For example, *Melongkang* is called *Sapper Camp* (literal meaning: low-lying camp), which is an Indian army outpost. *Mandhungsa* is called *Harighat* (literal meaning: abode of the lord Krishna). These two new place names narrate a postcolonial military history and summon a Hindu mythological universe, respectively. As army camps spring up over Monpa areas, they not only take over the territory but also erase cultural and historical markers associated with various places. Namge Tsering, a former headman of Jang village declares, "Places are given Hindi pronunciations, altering the very names of the places". Having acted as guide to Indian army soldiers on several occasions, he claims to have seen place-names misspelled and misrepresented in army maps. Since Indian soldiers cannot easily pronounce Monpa place names with Tibetan spelling and phonetics, they tend to Hindify the pronunciation, leading to the distortion of the Tibetan names.

Numerous other incidences of renaming abound. Most of the new Hindi names refer to Hindu mythological figures or stories that are part of popular lore, especially in North India. To cite just a few examples, a place below Dzela Pass, between Tawang and Dirang, which was called *Zhangmona* by locals, is now called *Arohan/Arahan* (ascent) by the army now. The place called *Phugten* (means cave inside a rock) is now an army camp which goes by the name of *Baisakhi* (spring or spring festival by same name). There is a hill locally known as *Donglhai Gyapo* (*dong* means conch) after the resident god. Earlier this hill used to be white as a conch, but later was razed and became black. It is now renamed as *Jinda Pahaar* (Hindi literal translation: living hill, but it could also be named after an army general called Jinda). *Wang-thok Foh Tsher* is a place where there used to be a lot of tea trees around and a cave by the side of the grazing ground. *Wangthok* in Tibetan means abundant *wang* or tea trees, and *foh/pho* means cave and *tsher* means grazing grounds. But this place is now called *Bhawani* (name of a Hindu goddess). Similarly, the army outpost Dohola or Dhola Post (*dhola/dhoola* means pristine white in Sanskrit, and could be derived from the name, *Dhaulagiri* [*giri*, mountain], one of the highest Himalayan peaks in Nepal) was earlier known as *Tshih Doong* (*tsha* means water or marshy land and *doong* means ridge: marshy land over a ridge). Incidentally, this was one of the first Indian army outposts to be set up on the border, and also one of the first to have fallen to the Chinese military attack of 1962. *Kharmakhar* [*Kharma* is the name of a clan and *khar* means house] became Rama Camp, possibly named after the Hindu god, Rama.

Answers as to how these names originated lie in the realm of urban legend. The displacement of entire hamlets (*bastis*) to newly formed urban milieus marks one beginning of the renaming process. In Monyul, entire hamlets are gradually evacuated when the people move towards the new urban settlements that develop by the wayside of the main road. As hamlets are transplanted to the roadside, they acquire new names. For example, Rahung *basti's* original location was on a hillock, but it has been resettled alongside the road from Dirang to Bomdila (which is actually a national route), mainly because many of the *bastiwallahs* (villagers) work as

construction workers or suppliers for the army. Jyoti Nagar (Hindi lit. trans. “the town of light”) is a predominantly army settlement right next to Dirang town on the road from Bomdila to Tawang. Previously, this was just an area called Nangrobchap (meaning, behind the hill), and the land was part of Yewang village located above Dirang town, but when Yewang village sold the land to the army the new name emerged.

Places also acquire new names through random name assignment. I am told, “In Muna camp, there used to be a general called Muna [allegedly] and so they started calling it Muna”. As the name stuck, the areas surrounding the army camp gradually began to be called by the same name. In several instances, the new names replaced the older place names. When older place names are replaced by new Hindi names, narratives are unmoored from their topographic anchor and places are a-historicized. Once old place names are changed or distorted or almost forgotten, the metonymic chain to place is broken. Renaming effaces toponymic narratives and disconnects time and space in chronotopes so that the latter loses their holistic quality.

### **Of army camps and material aids to renaming**

Renaming both shapes and is shaped by the physical transformation of Monyul’s landscape. If renaming is a symbolic means of statist incorporation through a resignification process, army settlements, war memorials, or temples are the overtly physical method of national integration; and both mutually supplement each other. For names are never sufficient in themselves in fixing identities but need to be supplemented through iteration or performance (Hansen 2001). Physical acts of settlements by the Indian army, in residential areas, public places, and grazing lands accompany symbolic means of spatial incorporation. They inscribe an imaginative geography on Monyul that categorizes it as a periphery, even though this categorical *representation* may run contrary to Monyul’s lived aspects. Army settlements corroborate this representation by physically altering the character of space, while simultaneously reducing in presence alternative representations of Monyul. Renaming by the Indian army is thus not an isolated act, confined to

the symbolic level of national integration, but is supplemented or given support through collaborative material practices. This does not mean that renaming invariably occurred first, followed by the others, or vice versa. These processes are simultaneously implicated in the nation-building moment.

Physical settlement of non-native populations in ambiguous state-spaces has been a common strategy of incorporating ambiguous areas within a state. In his study of China's frontier policies in the Qing dynastic period, C. Patterson Giersch (2006) shows how efforts to secure the allegiance of border populations of the Yunnan region included Qing expansion, migration, as well as intermarriage with local women. However, during the pre-nation-state period, the emphasis was on ensuring loyalty of border peoples rather than enforcing strict territoriality of borders (Giersch 2006). But in a nation-state system, the emphasis is on physically mapping the borders. Sankaran Krishna (1994) gives the example of the plan for a nation-wide march contemplated by the Indian nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1992, to begin at the southern extremity of India and to end in a flag-hoisting ceremony in Srinagar, the capital of disputed Kashmir, in the north. When bad weather prevented this march from taking place, the BJP leaders exhorted every Indian to draw a map of India on the soil nearest to them and to plant a flag at the point representing Kashmir, for long a subject of bitter disputes between India and Pakistan (1994: 510). Krishna terms this excessive concern to represent India's geographical profile with all points on the borders intact, "cartographic anxiety". States, driven by this sort of cartographic anxiety, harness both material and symbolic means to assert control over frontier spaces.

If during the period of colonialism, the Western powers sketched an "imaginative geography" (Said 1978) of the countries of Orient through the archive, while simultaneously implementing their control on the ground through physical acts of conquest, in postcolonial states, the combination of the material and symbolic arts is intensified, especially in sub-national zones. An extreme comparison would be the inscription of a Zionist imaginative geography over

Palestine's spaces, which consists of "construct[ing] Palestine as a space empty of its native Arab population. A series of campaigns – at once political and military, economic and cultural – was waged to establish this imaginary as brute 'facts on the ground'" (Gregory 2004: 78). In order to realize the dream of Eretz Israel (Holy Land of Israel), Zionists had to de-realize (or reduce in presence) Palestine, and this they did by actively resettling Jewish settlers in Arab landholdings, while legally dispossessing the Arab land-owners. Material and discursive production of space thus take place simultaneously (Ibid.).

It is possible to identify a similar process in Monyul. Monyul is an area of intense surveillance and a high priority area on the security radar of the Indian government. In the wake of border hostilities with China, the Indian state has deployed massive army troops to this region. The first troops to be stationed at Tawang were the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary unit under the governor of Assam, functioning under the External Affairs ministry of India, but during 1961-62, in the months leading to the border war, the Assam Rifles were supplemented by the armed forces, and a number of military outposts with headquarters in Tawang were set up (Bhargava 1964: 69). Since then, there has been a gradual build up of military settlements all over Arunachal Pradesh.

The General Reserve Engineering Force (GREF) and Border Roads Organisation (BRO) – the engineering and public works wing of the military, are in charge of road construction in the north and northeastern border states of the country, including Arunachal Pradesh (While the GREF is composed of a mix of army and civilian personnel, it follows the army structure of command, control and administration). The BRO and GREF were formed in 1960 mainly to increase communication in border areas as a defense strategy, and the immediate backdrop for their formation was the impending threat of a Chinese aggression; hence, the priority areas for road construction were Ladakh and NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh), and especially the Bhalukpong-



Bomdila-Tawang road.<sup>99</sup> The particular unit of the BRO in Arunachal Pradesh is known as Vartak (previously known as Tusker).

There are early reports of Monpa grievances against the spreading army settlements. Chanda (1969) writes how local Monpas were disturbed by the army occupying vast stretches of their cultivated or cultivable land. While the army needed flat surfaces for setting up camps, there was frequently a discrepancy between areas notified and actually occupied and further, the compensation given for land taken was quite meager. Of all army settlements, the ones that are located in former yak-pastures have impacted the local economy the most. Yak-pastures are important for yaks can never be fully domesticated and thrive only in the wild, and that too, in higher altitude areas (they can survive only at an altitude of 9000 feet and above). In other words, the traditional landholdings at high altitudes for grazing these semi-domesticated creatures are necessary for continuing yak-husbandry practices. Therefore, depletion of land reserves for grazing yaks because of army occupation of the traditional grazing pastures has affected the very livelihood of yak-herders (known as *brog-pas*). Yak-rearing used to be a good source of livelihood for the local people, because they are the traditional beasts of burden in the entire trans-Himalayan Buddhist economies, as well as a food source.<sup>100</sup> Not many people feel motivated to breed yak these days. Arora (2010) has written about the coexistence of yak and mines in the grazing fields of Sikkim – leftovers of the India-China war, and the crisis in yak-husbandry in a region floored by new commerce. She touches upon, but does not fully analyze how this crisis is propelled by the clash between popular and state interests.

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<sup>99</sup> “Border road is twenty-five”, *The Times of India*, October 10, 1985.

<sup>100</sup> Yak is used for bearing loads because of its special kind of hoof which helps in mountain-climbing. Yak hair is used for making carpets, blankets and special type of fans. Not a lot of yak milk is produced and hence yaks are not valued for milk. But local people both consume yak cheese as part of their diet, and also use it (fermented) as a seasoning in curries. Yak meat is also an important part of the protein-intake for Monpas. It is an important animal in the entire Himalayan region, for its usefulness in bearing loads, especially for trade. According to people I spoke to at the National Research Center on Yak at Dirang, the entire stretch in East Asia from Mongolia, China, Tibet, West Kameng and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Uttaranchal comprises the yak-belt. In fact, the yak might be a common thread in the former Buddhist civilizations linked by trade.

The shrinking of former pastures, and in turn, of the yak-population, has led to widespread concern among Monpas. Grazing lands are nearly extinct – “they are almost all gone”, as one concerned Monpa individual lamented. Former lands marked as grazing pastures for yaks and sheep are now wholly occupied by the Indian army troops who have bounded off these areas from the public. Lama Nyima Don of Lebrang village in Tawang says to me, “Yaks provide a temperature meter. When the temperature falls, they come down, and when it rises they go to upper lands. They do it on their own; there is no need to drive them. Nowadays, they can no longer go to the upper reaches, since the army *jawans* (soldiers) chase them off. Some even beat them. A few have also been lost”.

Besides physical occupation, the army has also transformed the local landscape through various war memorials. Following the India-China war of 1962, several war monuments were constructed in Monyul which now stand as ode to the Indian state on the Tezpur-Tawang main road. The most prominent one is the Tawang War Memorial, which is dedicated to the 2,420 Indian servicemen who lost their lives in the 1962 China-India War. Built in the form of a large white Buddhist *stupa*, complete with prayer wheels with inscriptions in the Buddhist script, this monument makes concession to local architecture possibly with integrationist aims. That is, it seeks to gain *local* sympathy for members of the *national* army through appropriation of cultural symbols – a “tactical” maneuver (drawing on De Certeau’s [1984] definition of tactic as covert battle).

A second war memorial spectacle is the Jaswant Garh, a shrine to the one-man army of Jaswant Singh, who gallantly battled Chinese troops before being killed in 1962. While driving on the roads, one also comes across stone pillars carrying eulogic inscriptions (“when you go home, tell them of us and say: for your tomorrow, we gave our today”). War memorials aid the nationalization of space by injecting a new element in “local” history. If landscape is a text, war memorials, through their visible, visual impact and eulogies, establish the dominant narrative and edge out the other, older narratives that then become muted, unspoken, or even invisible. War

memorials further declare Monyul as a place where Indian soldiers battled in order to keep the nation's borders sacrosanct. Edicts and epitaphs praising fallen soldiers impress on visitors as well as locals that this was a territory gained through bloodshed and martyrdom. They are therefore an endorsement of the state's ownership rights on a territory hard won.

Temples or other monuments of a Hindu religious nature also superimpose on the cultural geography of Monyul, as Indian soldiers and workers engaged in road construction have built several temples on the main road connecting Tawang to the plains below. The aura of these temples, dedicated to various gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, is embellished by new legends that recount how construction of a particular stretch of road was continually hampered by landslides until the temple was erected. At a place called Dedza, on the road to Bomdila, there is a "*Nag mandir*" or temple for the worship of the snake god. The story goes that the army engineer charged with building the road encountered various problems until finally the snake god appeared in a dream and instructed him to build the temple. Once the temple was built, the road construction went smoothly.

The erection of army settlements near or over old villages, the transplantation of entire hamlets to spots near the main road and their subsequent metamorphosis into roadside shanties, or the physical occupation of yak-pastures by the army troops, especially in areas close to the border – are all processes that materially supplement the nation-state project of renaming. Many Monpas today recognize that army occupation, linguistic reorientation, and renaming are connected practices, and many echo the view that "wherever the army people have moved, they altered the place-names".

### **Hindi renaming, popular culture, and the hegemonic transformation of Monyul**

The Hindification of Monyul's places has, however, largely been a consequence of the general Hindification of Monyul's public spaces. According to Bourdieu (1991), the power of reification, whereby places appear to *be* what they are designated, does not simply stem from the personal

authority of the person naming it (in this case, the Indian soldiers as agents of the Indian state), but also from the *recognition* granted to it by the members of the group (the local peoples). Bourdieu's observation casts light on the process of Hindification in Monyul. The Hindification of Monyul's landscape is one in which Monpas participate through the recognition they grant to Hindi.

It is a common state strategy to convert peripheral state spaces into zones of loyalty through the circulation of the national language, for the state deems it important to maintain the "loyalties" of the people in the border areas, especially in a disputed border. A parallel security strategy is to recruit the border people to man military outposts at the border as a means of ensuring their loyalty.<sup>101</sup> In Monyul, Hindi, the official language, becomes the mediating agent in the hegemonic transformation of landscape. In the absence of a common *lingua franca* in Arunachal Pradesh, Hindi has developed into a link language not only for Monpas but for all peoples in the state.<sup>102</sup> The people in small towns in Assam, the state adjacent to Arunachal Pradesh, are less conversant in Hindi compared to their Arunachali counterparts, despite Assam being geographically nearer to Delhi.

As India's official language, Hindi began to be taught in Arunachal Pradesh in the 1970s, and today, it has become the main language of communication in this state, and also the first language in practice, if not principle. For a time immediately after decolonization, Assamese used

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<sup>101</sup> Unlike imperial states, where the loyalty of the border people had to be won for securing their allegiance to the ruling authority, in modern nation-states, the loyalty of the people has to be won so as to make the physical borders inviolate, for the border people are the ones who then act as sentries or deputies of the state. It is for this reason that a favored security policy of states has been to recruit an increasing number of border people in the national army, and to let "tribals" have an active part in the nation's defense (Bhargava 1964: 62).

<sup>102</sup> Hindi is the link language because most of the Arunachali tribes, with the exclusion of the Khampti-Singphos and Monpas, do not have a written language. As early as 1958, a few educated persons of the Adi, one of the dominant tribes took an initiative to make the Adi language the Arunachali *lingua franca* by writing it in Devanagari script and using it in primers. Although their attempt did not succeed, since 1982 some Adi intellectuals and students have revived efforts to build an Adi literature. They have proposed that the Adi language, based on the Adi dialects of East Siang and Dibang Valley region of Arunachal Pradesh should be developed using the Roman script (Mibang 1998: 429-431). It should be noted that a similar hybrid language called Nagamese exists as the *de facto* *lingua franca* for the tribes of Nagaland, again similarly divided by mutually unintelligible dialects. However, lack of consensus for Adi led to Hindi remaining the *lingua franca*.

to be taught in schools of Arunachal Pradesh, for there was an idea in administrative circles that the central government should administer North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) as Arunachal Pradesh used to be called then, with the Assam government as its agent, and later Assam should take over the entire administration (Das 1998: 388). Assamese leaders too promoted the spread of Assamese language for official and educational purposes all over the NEFA, citing historical ties between the Assamese plainspeople and the hill people of NEFA; and also advised the central government to send Assamese officers for the latter's speedier integration into Assam (Rustomji 1983: 100). But the India-China war led the national government to rethink this decision, and with the North East Frontier Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971, NEFA became separate from Assam in 1972. English became the primary medium of instruction in Arunachal schools and Hindi the second language.

In Monyul, Tibetan used to be taught by monks in village schools but was gradually discontinued as first Assamese, and later English and Hindi became the official medium of instruction in schools.<sup>103</sup> Rijomba, a primary school teacher in Dirang told me that since the children of non-Monpa professionals and soldiers form a large percentage of the student population, particularly in the towns of Monyul, teachers prefer to instruct in Hindi at the primary levels of schooling despite English being the official medium. With Hindi dominant in schools, offices, and marketplaces, as well as domestic spheres, where parents converse amongst themselves or with their children and friends in Hindi, many Monpas, especially from the urban sectors, have become primarily Hindi-speakers both in the public and private domains. Hindification of the population has, in turn, facilitated the Hindification of Monpa toponyms, and correspondingly, Monyul's topography.

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<sup>103</sup> There was local resentment against Assamese when the latter was made the medium of education in Monyul (Chanda 1969). While the groups in the southern parts of Arunachal Pradesh that are contiguous to Assam had a long history of contact with the Assamese people and language, groups in the northern parts such as the Monpas of Tawang had little contact with Assam or Assamese cultural influences. Nari Rustomji, an Indian administrative officer recalls in his memoirs that during his tours to Monpa areas before 1950, he spoke with the local population in Tibetan (Rustomji 1983: 100).

In the national media, the prevalence of Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh is cited as the mark of the latter's "integration". See, for instance, the following newspaper report, published by a national newspaper in February 2008 during a period of renewed media hype about Chinese interest in Tawang,

Tawang, a bustling town of almost 10,000 people, looks more well-integrated into the Indian mainstream than most other eastern Himalayan towns like Darjeeling, Gangtok and Shillong. Hindi, which faces resistance in most of the eastern hills, has become the lingua franca of this frontier region. "We have adopted Hindi because it is our national language and because the tribal groups here do not have a common language", explains Tashi Wangchu. As the melodious tune of Ya Ali from Hindi movie *Gangster* wafts across Old Market Street, Dicky Dolma, a teenaged shopkeeper comments, "We find ourselves close to India, the birthplace of Buddhism. We get everything, from food to education, from there. . . . Here, the word Chinese is only associated with a particular cuisine".<sup>104</sup>

This report discusses Hindi as well as the Hindi popular culture industry (in the reference to the music from a popular Hindi film, *Gangster*). The people quoted here attribute the pervasiveness of Hindi to the lack of a common language in the region. Hindi has, however, become popular not simply because it fills in a lacuna, but through systematic dissemination through Hindi serials and films aired on television and by the thriving market for Hindi audio and video discs. Several writers (Mankekar 1999, Nayar 2006) have discussed how national television and a film industry centered at Bollywood are often the media for disseminating official nationalist narratives. Nayar, for example, shows how the 1960s, a period of nation-building and Nehruvian developmentalism and socialism in the political sphere, has its essence captured in films like *Hum Hindustani*, and in songs like "*chodo kal ki baatein, kal ki baat purani; naye daur mein likhenge, milkar nayi kahani, hum Hindustani*" (Forget the yesterdays, lets script a new story together today, we are Indians). A television and Bollywood-centric Hindi popular culture have been instrumental in conditioning acceptance of Hindi in Monyul's public spheres.

Hindification in Monyul is moreover aided by the unlikely complicity between army *jawans*, the Bollywood popular culture, and agents of tourism. A few years ago, in an interview to

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<sup>104</sup> "Tawang speaks in Hindi: We're Indian-India," *The Times of India*, 15 February 2008

a news reporter, T.G. Rinpoche railed against renaming practices that have obliterated former histories and identities of places. He gave the example of lake Tsho-nga Tser, which was formed after an earthquake created a crater on the grazing land located on the way to the India-China border post at a few kilometers from Tawang. This lake is now popularly known as Madhuri Lake, after a Hindi film celebrity.

The area was known as Tser, which means grazing land. The villagers used to pay five coins to the landowner for according them traditional rights to graze their cattle. Until 1996, the lake was known as Tsho-nga Tser, but soon after Rakesh Roshan shot the film on location, the soldiers started calling the lake after Madhuri... The state government, instead of developing the area, is banking on Madhuri's name for tourist inflow.<sup>105</sup>

Madhuri Dixit, at one time the most popular actress in the Hindi film industry, had shot for a film *Koyla* at the Tsho-nga-tser lake site in Tawang, after which local army men, followed soon by taxi drivers and others serving the tourist business, started referring to the lake as Madhuri Lake. This particular instance of renaming places in the border district found its way to a national newspaper because it involved a popular film celebrity. But there are other instances too of new names that have become attached to old places for their touristic appeal, which have functioned to revise the cultural geography of Monyul.

A case in point is the name of the Sela Pass – the pass separating Tawang from Dirang area. As per Tibetan phonetics, the name should be spelled as Dzela. Although the British had begun the name distortion by referring to it as Sela Pass (seemingly unable to pronounce *dz*), the name Sela has now acquired a reinvigorated popularity through a new legend, circulated by the Indian army. (Note the change in spelling in the new oral lore from Dzela to Sela). Perhaps, many younger Monpas do not know that the story of Sela replaced an old Monpa legend about *Dzela Khuchi*, a mountain god who resides on the pass. Earlier, whenever he heard noise, the god used to cause rainfall. “So one had to tread softly”, said Yeshe Tsering, the headman of Senge, a village that provides a direct view of this pass. “All that has stopped now”, he added.

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<sup>105</sup> “Buddhists frown on ‘Madhuri’ lake,” *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), 8 July 2009

The new legend which soldiers are fond of telling has origins in the 1962 India-China war. In 2007, en route to Tawang from Bomdila, I had stopped for tea at the small shed where one or two lonely, friendly sentries wait. They served us sweet watery tea and enthusiastically showed us the memorial built in the name of Jaswant Singh, the Indian soldier who had died after his singlehanded combat with Chinese soldiers. The legend of the gallant soldier however has been embellished today. In the soldiers' account, corroborated by our cab driver, Jaswant was assisted in his valiant battle by two local Monpa girls called Sela and Nura. In the army version, Sela Pass is known after Sela; and Nura has a place named after her as well, Nuranang.

This is a popular story and no one knows how it originated. Yeshi, the headman of Senge village states that such stories are pure fabrications. I am not sure whether army records would validate the new version, and yet, it circulates – among tourists, taxi-drivers and lonely soldiers stationed in misty outposts who further help to circulate the story among fresh tourists. Every new tourist who comes here takes back this legend as part of his/her travel memories and aids its further circulation. The new legend finds frequent mention in media reports as well as travelogues and travel journals published by visitors to this area. As one recent tourist writes;

Jaswant Singh's saga of valour and sacrifice continues to serve as an inspiration to all army personnel posted in this sector. It is a fact that he alone killed more than 300 Chinese soldiers in the war. He was assisted by two girls of the local village named Nura and Sella, and they were also given due credit, and the pass was named after Sella, and the highway named after Nura. It is still believed that the soul of this martyr still protects the whole of West Kameng from Chinese attacks (Dutta 2010)<sup>106</sup>

Like the renaming of Tsho-nga-tser lake as Madhuri Lake, the new legend of Sela Pass caters to a growing tourist industry. Tourism is not confined only to the official or circulated brochures alone, but is composed of a complex of actors, including those who benefit from the "ripple effects" of tourism, such as service providers of lodgings, food and beverages, handicraft,

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<sup>106</sup> Simmons, G. 2007. "Mysterious Arunachal Pradesh", <http://www.buddhisttravel.com/index.php?id=66,649,0,0,1,0> (Accessed 10 February 2013)



local transportation, guides, shopping, entertainment, photography etc (Bezbaruah 2005). It is these latter that are responsible for the spread of new legends that have a pan-Indian appeal.

Here we might identify a basic problem with the much touted potential of “ethnic tourism”. Ethnic tourism, which markets ethnic culture as the unique selling proposition (u.s.p.) of many marginal communities, frequently rests on the idea that these communities only have “ethnicity”, the other of “civilization”, to sell: and ethnicity, in turn, presumes, some kind of isolated development, pristine whole-ness, un-spoiled nature etc. While this kind of presumption does not hold up anywhere, it is especially weak in Monyul, where a syncretic mixing of Tibetan Buddhist “civilization” and local shamanistic rituals exist, speaking of a long history of outside contact rather than a secluded evolutionary history.

In any case, ethnic tourism, less commercialized and insufficiently packaged in Monyul, is not the main attraction for the domestic tourists in Monyul. Arunachal Pradesh attracts people for its scenic wonders and natural beauty (waterfalls, mountains). It is interesting that in keeping with the prevalent view of Arunachal Pradesh as *terra incognita*, eco-tourism is being promoted as the unique selling proposition of Arunachal tourism. Monyul like the rest of Arunachal Pradesh is not being seen as a place with “culture” but as “virgin” territory.<sup>107</sup> In this context, the domestic tourist is rather unimpressed by stories about a mountain god named Dzela or Tibetan grazing lands which only resonate with local sensibilities. But new legends of a pan-Indian nature strike a chord in their minds. Indian domestic tourists, especially those hailing from sections influenced by the Hindi popular culture industry, are more impressed by the implicit romance between an Indian soldier and a local girl in the Jaswant Singh story than by the legend of a (g)rumbling mountain god.

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<sup>107</sup> Tourist brochures speak of the wondrous scenery and lustrous beauty of the rivers and falls. But while the brochures mention the abundance of *gompas* in Monyul, they do not mention many other sites which are deserving of attention. For example, the Dirang Dzong – a fort from Tibetan days – still lie neglected. I was informed that it is only of late that the government has paid attention to renovating or restoring such historic sites

The story of the soldier Jaswant and the local girl Sela not surprisingly, greatly resembles the plot of a popular Bollywood film of the 1960s, *Haqeeqat* (The Reality). It is a war film set in Leh (Ladakh), on the northern frontier of India, during the India-China war of 1962, with a sub-plot of the romance between Bahadur Singh, an Indian soldier stationed there and Angmo, a local Kashmiri girl who dies with him after heroic battle. In her analysis of the film, anthropologist and China scholar Patricia Uberoi (2011) writes,

As the Chinese and Indian armies confront each other in Ladakh, what is the role of the local population of Ladakhis? *Haqeeqat* presents Ladakh as a “barren” frontier land where not a blade of grass can grow. In skeptical moments, the soldiers even doubt that it is worth fighting for. Insofar as this marginal zone is seen as peopled at all, its population is narratively *feminized*... The femininity of the border area is represented by Angmo (the daughter of a Kashmiri mother and Ladakhi father)..... Captain Bahadur Singh, representing mainstream masculinity, promises Angmo redemption from liminality: he will take her with him to the glittering city of Delhi, and give her lovely clothes and jewels. The fantasy of her incorporation into the national society is not to be, however, for she perishes with Bahadur Singh on the front (Uberoi 2011).

I reproduce Uberoi’s words not only because it presents a gist of the film’s plot in wonderfully vibrant language but also because it clearly brings out the structural similarities between Ladakh and Monyul, including the marginality of the two frontier areas (and the impossibility of full nationalist incorporation because the nation needs its marginal other for self-construction).

The film’s plot is recycled in the legend of Sela and Jaswant Singh. It narrates the Monyul frontier as a space that both desires incorporation into national space and is given protection by agents of nationalism, viz. the Indian army. Romance is very much a contributing factor in perpetuating new legends. Similarly, the value addition in romance is surely multiplied in renaming a lake Madhuri, after the reigning Bollywood actress of the 90s decade, instead of sticking to the former, obscure Tibetan name – Tsho-nga-tser. The romantic supplement does not feed a local thirst for external romance ingredients, but aids a tourism complex that brings in elements from mainstream Indian popular culture in order to lure domestic national tourists to a far-flung frontier. It is the latter to whom the imaginative representation of Monyul as a marginal

frontier with which the nation interacts as protector is sold. Tourists from areas of mainstream India buy these images, and acquire the conviction of a frontier that is not foreign but one they can *know* (identify) as being part of themselves via the story of the doomed Indian soldier who was aided by a frontier woman. The marriage of Hindi, Bollywood popular culture and tourism thus serves the purpose of nationalism by mapping these spaces as marginal, to be sure, but also appropriable as *us* and *ours*.

### **Resistance to renaming**

If army given names impose a nationalist ethos on the landscape, then Monpa resistance to renaming re-appropriate the meaning invested on the latter to articulate a counter-ethos. I argue that resistance to renaming is a self-conscious act of place-making. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1980) distinguishes between “rooted-ness” and a “sense of place”, where the former is an unself-conscious, taking-for granted attitude to place, while a “sense of place” is a self-conscious reflection on places. Tuan further explains the difference between the two as the difference between “knowing” and “knowing about”. According to him, there is a knowing that is the result of familiarity through long residence, and a knowing that results from conscious effort; the latter “knowing about” is conscious awareness of the present, where the past is mined for support in the present (Tuan 1980: 6-8). To have a sense of place is to consciously articulate a particular place-identity. When individuals step back from the flow of their everyday lives, and self-consciously attend to, or *dwell*, on place, they acquire a sense of their relationship to space.<sup>108</sup> In doing so, they also dwell on themselves and their identities.

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<sup>108</sup> Basso (1996) cites Martin Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling” to characterize the Apache sense of place. The concept of dwelling assigns importance to the forms of consciousness with which individuals perceive and apprehend space. This conceptualization of place has been criticized by Massey and other cultural geographers as fostering singular, fixed identities for places (Dovey 2009: 8). What I wish to highlight by referencing Basso here is the self-consciousness of place which makes people stand back and reflect (and in the process, also construct) on the relations between place and identity. But I also recognize this to be a construction that is open to contradiction.

This kind of sense of place is to be seen in the demand for ethnic or ancestral homelands, where homeland is seen to map onto contemporary physical spaces that have existed since immemorial times. Tuan writes, “As people diligently learn about old buildings and try to restore them, they have brought the misty past into the clarity of the present” (Tuan 1980: 8). *But a “sense of place” or “knowing about” does not consist only of restoring old buildings or sites, but also of the deliberate acts of creating and maintaining place through the medium of speech, gesture, rituals and words* (Ibid.). A self-conscious sense of place is marked by a people’s reflections of where they came from, and their networks or associations with the world (Basso 1996: 107, Tuan 1980).

Ngawang Chottan, headman of Lunpo village in Zemithang, comes from a family of lamas and has two brothers living in monasteries. As belonging to a line of village priests (who do not take the robe but perform rituals and ceremonies in villages), he is literate in Tibetan. Ngawang Chottan showed me a document containing a list of places with their old names, and the legends associated with each place, which he had painstakingly drafted with the help of assistants *in English*, and a copy of which he generously shared with me. As many places have had their names changed in the event of army settlement, Ngawang Chottan decided to compile the legends to preserve them before they were permanently lost. One narrative describes how the place Gyapa in Zemithang, considered to be the most “remote” corner of Tawang district, got its name:

The word Gyapa in Monpa means the travelers who travel from one place to another for business. In ancient time, the travelers from Bhutan used to travel through this place to Tibet on business purpose and they take rest at this place for taking meals.

This narrative offers an image of Gyapa (and Zemithang) as the corridor for trans-Himalayan commerce. The headman’s document constructs the illegitimacy of the army given names by putting forth an alternative claim with regard to how the places *really* got their names. For example, note the story of how *Wang-thok Foh Tsher* came to be called so:

This is a place having a lot of “*cheel*” trees around with a cave by the side of grazing ground. The word, *Wang-thok* means abundant *wang* trees, *Foh* means cave and *tsher*

means grazing place. *Therefore, the place is called Wang-thok Foh Tsher and not as "Bhawani" [the army given name].*

The fact that Ngawang Chottan choose to compose his document in English clearly shows that his target is a wider audience beyond Monyul. It not only indicates *deliberate positioning*, but also suggests a self-conscious act at place-making (Tuan 1980). Ngawang Chottan's compilation of toponymic narratives is clearly a self-conscious act for it involves reflection as well as *written* representation of Monyul's places with the particular objective of contesting the latter's peripheral status to a global audience.

A recent book written by a Monpa intellectual (Norbu 2008) contains a list of 64 places whose names have been changed by the Indian army. Not all the names are Hindi; quite a few of the new names have a military tone, such as Assam Rifle Colony (previously known as Pelri) – after the Assam Rifles. Although, the author of the book does not comment on the name changes besides listing the old and new names, the very fact that he thinks it necessary to include the list in the appendix of his book, once again an English publication, suggests self-conscious representation at work.

At a more organized level, the All Dirang Monpa Youth Welfare Association (ADMYWA), a cultural organization based in Dirang town had brought out a document protesting the name changes. In 1997, the now almost defunct ADMWYA produced a manifesto with a list of sixteen places from Bomdila to Tawang whose names have been changed. The organization proposed, among other things, to restore the traditional names of these places. The following list, reproduced from the ADMYWA manifesto, presents on the left hand side, the names given by the army, and on the right hand side, the older toponyms, but it classifies the latter as "new names" and the army names as "old names". (This shows the extent to which army given names have become entrenched in public consciousness).

	<b>Old name</b>	<b>New name</b>
1	Salari	Namku
2	3 mile	Chanden
3	9 mile	Warjong/Tinkhai
4	14 mile	Darbu
5	Munna camp	Balung/Chonma
6	Panchavati	Tangchenmu
7	Lonihat	Larzab
8	Dirang village	Dirang dzong
9	Jyoti nagar	Nagrobjab
10	Kalachakra camp area	Karkha
11	Rama camp	Khamkhar
12	Kala pahar	Lungrom
13	Sapper camp	Melongkang
14	Mohan camp	Saktenkang
15	Baisakhi	Mantsathongmen
16	Hot water, Dirang	Khochi

The ADMYWA members were people in their twenties in the 1990s; they are the generation currently in their 40s and born in the aftermath of the 1962 boundary war, and who faced the brunt of the re-orientation from Tibet because they were cut off from older memories and experiences and exposed to new networks through a Hindi/Indian-based education and popular culture. This generation had no knowledge of the older toponyms, which had already been replaced by the army given names by the 1990s. In order to compile the list of Monpa/Tibetan toponyms, the members of the ADMYWA had to consult with older Monpas who still retained oral memories of the Tibetan period. The ADMYWA document is clearly a self-conscious act to preserve the characteristics of a Monyul that the members only knew through legend. The ADMYWA members later increasingly got involved in their personal and professional lives. In 2009-2010, Phunchu Namje, the ex-Vice President of the organization, and Namang Tsering, the General Secretary, seemed to have become reconciled to the entrenched nature of the Hindi names, but suggested a middle way out of the dilemma between preserving older names and retaining the post-colonial names by arguing that both should be simultaneously retained, and used in postal communications.

### **Mon as a sacred geography**

The ADMYWA manifesto, like Ngawang Chottan's document must be understood in the wider context of contemporary cultural politics in Monyul. In a press statement, T.G. Rinpoche castigated the Arunachal Pradesh government, saying, "It makes no sense why the state government is allowing outsiders to name historical places, steeped in ancient religious Buddhist tradition .... does not augur well for more than four lakh Buddhists living in the state" (*The Telegraph* 8 July, 2009). From this perspective, Hindi names are to be rejected because they threaten to upstage the "traditional Buddhist" character of Monyul's spaces. It is notable that T.G. Rinpoche has been protesting against the decline of Buddhist traditions since the 1980s ever since he returned home from his monastic studies in South India, and has been most critical of renaming practices. Most of the people who are outspoken against Hindi renaming have been influenced by his ideas. The founding members of the All Dirang Monpa Youth Welfare Association (ADMYWA) were contemporaries of the Rinpoche as young men, and recall having witnessed his frustrations at not being able to achieve the changes in society that he wished to.

Namang Tsering, the general secretary of the ADMYWA, who now works as a school teacher in Dirang, initially attempted to differentiate between Buddhism and Monpa culture;

Buddhism and culture are separate here. Buddhism came from Tibet, but our culture is totally different. Before Buddhism came to these areas, people used to worship trees, rocks, hills; even now they do so, in places such as Rahung; they don't celebrate Lhosar, but follow the Bon faith.

But immediately afterwards he added, "Ours is a religion-based culture, and almost all the festivals we celebrate have a religious basis." Projecting Monyul as an essentially Buddhist place elides other traditions that continue till today. The discourse of the Mon Autonomous Region demand, which I discussed in chapter three, similarly promotes the idea of Mon as a Buddhist sacred geography. An official report of the MARDC makes the following assertion; "Tawang is one of the few pockets where Buddhist religion and culture have survived *in its own form*....Therefore there is an imperative need to preserve Buddhist religion and cultural heritage

....” [emphasis added] (*Development and Progress* 2008: 27). When a lay office-bearer of the Mon Autonomous Region Demand Committee (MARDC) states that the moment one enters Bhalukpong, the Assam-Monyul border town, people should experience a different, “new world”, he is evidently thinking of features derived from the Buddhist cultural universe. Such statements make the cultural identity of the Monpas synonymous with their Tibetan Buddhist religious identity.

These discursive trends are accompanied by material projects of place-making in Monyul today. A place near the Manjushri Orphanage just below the Tawang town, which was revered as a sacred site for it is believed to bear many physical marks of the Sixth Dalai Lama’s presence, had long stood neglected. Yet, in the past few years it has become one of several places that the Arunachali government (led by the late Monpa chief minister Dorjee Khandu) has been trying to restore. On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2010, the Tenma oracle, consulted by the 14th Dalai Lama, was flown in from Delhi for a ceremony held to consecrate the Jigkyob Thondrol *stupa* to be built at this site. A scattering of ministers (Tsewang Dhondup) public personalities (the two sons of the then chief minister), monks (Guru Rinpoche, Lama Thubten Phuntsok) and army commandants were present on this occasion. After the ceremony was over, a lama narrated to a group of us the myths and legends surrounding this place. The Sixth Dalai Lama had been a precocious child in his childhood and had often been physically reprimanded by his parents and older siblings for being disobedient and willful. We were shown a rock which bears the imprint of the young Dalai Lama’s body where he had fallen after being struck by his sister.

The event was used to stage or perform a particular kind of place-identity with regard to Monyul. It was a public presentation of the place as a Tibetan Buddhist *gnas* or sacred place. It consciously asserted a heritage claim to Monyul’s Tibetan Buddhist heritage, and mapped Monyul as Tibetan Buddhist sacred geography. The presence of the Tenma oracle, as representative of the Tibetan government in Dharamsala, served to vindicate this claim.





There are growing trends to show that funds are now being invested to reinvigorate Buddhism in this region. They are reflected in the increasing drive to build monasteries, often with the aid of foreign (Japanese, Taiwanese, American) donations, to renovate ancient Buddhist monuments (e.g. Gorsam Chorten in Zemithang) and build new ones (e.g. the statue of Tara Devi in Lumla), to establish institutes for Buddhist learning or organizations for Buddhist culture preservation, and to revive the Bhoti script in educational and administrative circles. These trends point to a process whereby a definite character for Monyul is sought to be highlighted. The material constructions aid in propagating further the image of Monyul as a Buddhist cultural place although this image conflicts with other images and practices in Monyul.

However, like all imaginative geographies, including the national one, the image of Mon as a Buddhist sacred geography too is not empirically self-sustaining. Indian social psychologist Ashis Nandy (2006) writing with regard to the name change of the south Indian city of “Bangalore” to a more decolonized “Bengalooru” argues that while the new name “corrects and compensates for the sanitised, ‘de-vernacularised’ image that Bangalore has always projected — first as a city of retired bureaucrats and army officers, then as the capital of Indian science, and now as a citadel of information technology”,<sup>109</sup> it also may fix the spatial character of the city. If the colonial Bangalore had superseded the vernacular character of Bengalooru by projecting this city only as a technocratic city, then Bengalooru threatens to supersede all the images associated with Bangalore. Neither factor is desirable for cities, as all spaces, are plural (Ibid).

While Hindi toponyms fix Monyul in an essentialized image of a periphery to be integrated, we find this essentialist view potentially being replaced by yet another essentialist view - that of Monyul as uniform Buddhist place. Identities and communities are not stable and fixed; rather they are characterized by multiple narratives and inherent instabilities (Blom Hansen 2001), and other co-existing spaces of everyday practices prevent us from fixing a singular identity of Monyul as a Buddhist place. In the chapter on locality, I have shown how non-

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<sup>109</sup>Nandy, Ashis, *Imaginary Cities*, article in the blog, *Half a page of scribbled lines*, 2006.

Monpas, non-Buddhists and even some Buddhist Monpas profess discomfort with the idea of Mon as Tibetan Buddhist place. The representational spaces of Monyul not only emerge in fragmentary fashion but are also internally fractured. I explore some further contradictory tendencies in the next chapter by focusing on Monpa-Tibetan relations within Arunachal Pradesh.

## Chapter 7

### *REGION*

#### **TIBETAN REFUGEES AND MONPA “TRIBES” IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

In July 2007, during a preliminary research visit to Arunachal Pradesh, I witnessed a demonstration in the Bomdila town market, where the banners said, “Go Back, Refugees”. The next day, all shops in the market remained closed. I probed, but drew blank responses from the shopkeepers and small traders, many of whom were Tibetans. Later, well into my fieldwork, I still had difficulty getting the local Monpa people to speak about the Tibetan refugee issue. Tibetan refugees are a contentious subject in the regional politics of Arunachal Pradesh, and the discourse around the Tibetan refugees particularly crystallizes the tension between the Monpas’ regional identity and transnational affiliations. The figure of the Tibetan refugee in the Monyul region introduces complications in the Himalayan imagined geography that my previous chapters outline.

My earlier chapters highlight attempts by the religious leadership in Monyul to forge community with populations dispersed across the Himalayan region through invocation of common cultural (Tibetan Buddhist) traditions. In outlining the geography of this community, Tibet itself is featured in the background, or invoked as erstwhile center or origin, since Monyul’s disputed border status intervenes in and modifies direct expressions of transnational allegiance to Tibet. This emerges most clearly in the discourse of Tibetan origins. While the relations between Monpa and other Tibetan Buddhists constitute one angle to be considered in the Himalayan imagined geography, relations (or expression of connections) to Tibet constitute the second angle. In this chapter, I look at a third angle: the relations between Monpas and the Tibetan refugee community.

I should make it clear that by “Tibetan refugee” I am not pointing to Dharamsala in which the Tibetan government in exile is based, or any of the other locations where sizeable chunks of the Tibetan exile community are resettled. Rather, I look at Monpa-Tibetan relations in

Monyul; the challenges introduced to the pan-Himalayan identity by the Monpas' participation in postcolonial Arunachali regional networks, their negative memories of Tibetan rule, and the political opposition between the identities of (Tibetan) refugee and (Monpa) citizen.

In the subsequent years after 1959, when the Dalai Lama entered India in exile, many Tibetans followed their leader to India, and were resettled in various regions; and although there is no actual count of Tibetan refugees settled in India, the number is estimated to be above 100,000. The major Tibetan settlements are in North and South India, where the government of India had donated lands to the refugees in the 1960s. Although India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issues resident certificates to the descendants of Tibetans who arrived in India before 1979, through the office of the district superintendent of police in the locality where the individual resides (Routray 2007: 81).<sup>110</sup>

Tibetans are free to work and own property in India, but they do not enjoy the same rights as Indian citizens, such as formal participation in Indian politics or the ability to carry a legal Indian passport.

In postcolonial India, therefore, Monpas and Tibetans have distinct political statuses; the first are citizens and the second, refugees, and these two categories are defined in mutual opposition to one another. Monpas are listed as scheduled tribes (ST) in the Indian constitution, a status that carries affirmative action benefits. Although the concept of ST in India is not associated with aboriginal inhabitation, but rather with a constitutionally enumerated category based on certain constitutionally earmarked traits (Beteille 1998), in practice, it is *most of the time* interchangeable with indigeneity in Northeast India. Many groups listed as scheduled tribes of Northeast India often assert indigenous status based on priority of settlement *vis a vis* new

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<sup>110</sup> While the Dalai Lama himself had chosen to enter India *via* Tawang, most Tibetans takes the easier route through Nepal, during the winter months when the extreme cold results in lax surveillance on the border posts. Once in Nepal, Tibetan refugees receive a card from the local UNCHR office after which they may depart to India, a procedure that takes anything between a week to several months. When they reach India after a three day bus journey, they are registered by Indian authorities at the border and then sent to the Tibetan Reception Center at McLeodganj, Dharamsala (Routray 2007).

settlers. In contrast, Tibetans in India are refugees, and refugees are identified as “a people without a nationality”.<sup>111</sup> In the national order of things, where being rooted constitutes the common sense vocabulary of identity, refugees, or those defined as being without roots, are accorded a liminal status (Malkki 1992). As philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes, “the idea of a people today is nothing other than the empty support of state identity...[and hence] the people without a state (Kurds, Armenians, Palestinians, Basques, Jews of the Diaspora) can be oppressed and exterminated with impunity, so as to make clear that the destiny of a people can only be a state identity and that the concept of people makes sense only if recodified within the concept of citizenship” (Agamben, quoted in Bauman 2004: 33).<sup>112</sup> As stateless peoples, Tibetans do not have the same rights that citizens of a state can claim.

Given this, it is easy to assume that Monpas have an opposed, even conflictual relation with Tibetans, situated as they are to the latter as national citizens to foreigners. Indeed, conventional migration theory, which constructs an opposition between immigrants and natives, commonly identifies these structural differences between citizens and refugees as the cause of friction between the two (Brettel 2000: 98, 99). In such scholarship, migrants and refugees, despite their differences, are thought to always have allegiances to the home they left behind and to have experiences and subjectivities imbued with nostalgia for home (Brettel 2000: 99).<sup>113</sup> However, many anthropologists (e.g. Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1994) are increasingly calling for rethinking the conventional polarity between migrants and indigenes.

For example, Nancy Glick Schiller (2010) argues that “migration scholarship’s binary division of foreigner and natives, which is legitimated through the adoption of the nation-state as

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<sup>111</sup> “Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html> (Accessed 30 November 2011)

<sup>112</sup> It is interesting how stateless has come to mean refugee populations. In classic anthropology, stateless societies meant those societies – also termed acephalic societies - without any recognizable form of political authority such as chiefdoms, and which included tribal groups that were considered to have egalitarian structures and lacked a centralized authority (Fortes and Evans Pritchard 1940). But in the era of nation-states, statehood is recognized of the nation alone.

<sup>113</sup> Underlying the notion of “America, the melting pot”, therefore, there is a pressure on immigrants to assimilate and forgo ties to their country of origin (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1994: 51), since as long as immigrants have ties to their native land, they cannot fully belong in their adopted country.

a unit of both study and analysis, leaves no conceptual space to address questions of the global restructuring of region and locality that serves as the nexus of migrant incorporation and transnational connection and to which migrants contribute in ways that may rescale cities” (2010: 37). Glick Schiller therefore directs attention to how the flows and processes of global capital restructure cities in which both migrant and non-migrants live. Her analysis, which she terms “locality analysis”, adopts the same approach to locality as Doreen Massey and other spatial theorists because it pays attention to locally placed residents and institutions situated within regional, national and global networks, and the production of localities through global restructurings (2010: 35).<sup>114</sup>

My understanding of Monpa-Tibetan relations in Monyul similarly pays attention to the regional, national and transnational networks which structure “local” inter-ethnic relations. What I am interested in is the idea that the local is not a nested, neatly circumscribed unit, but interacts with historical and trans-regional, transnational forces.

Owing to the specific history and politics of Monyul and its cross-border states, Monpa-Tibetan relations in this border region cannot be fitted into conventional stereotypical distinctions between indigenes and refugees. Their present relations have been shaped by continuous bonds of religion, memories of hierarchical ties of rule, as well as a *role inversion* in the present, where Tibetans, the erstwhile rulers of Monpas, have become negatively marked in the citizen/non-citizen binary, and the disprivileged other in an exclusivist regional ideology. I am interested in seeing how the “local” relations between Monpas and Tibetans can be shown to carry trans-local linkages, and conversely, how the relations between these two groups that unfold outside the local context of Monyul may influence how they perceive each other within Monyul. I explore how the Monpas’ location in regional and transnational networks intervenes in shaping their relations with

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<sup>114</sup> John Peters terms the perspective which pays simultaneous attention to local and global processes, the bi-focal vision (Peters 1997)

Tibetans within Monyul, and how this, in turn, impacts their articulation of a broader trans-Himalayan spatial consciousness.

I begin by placing the controversy around Tibetan refugees in the wider context of Arunachali regional politics, and then move on to show how Monpas display a duality in subscribing to the regional ideology. Prior to the regional integration of Arunachal Pradesh in postcolonial India, Monpas had less contact with other Arunachalis from the eastern part of the state compared to their neighboring Tibetan or even Assamese trade partners. As I showed in chapter three, the traditional “us” versus “them” division in Monyul had always been between Monpas and “Gidus” or “Lopas”, where the latter referred to non-Buddhist groups that are now part of the Arunachali regional identity. In the older dominant civilizational scheme derived from Tibetan Buddhist worldview, Tibetans could be Bodhpa and the Bhutanese, Drukpa, and divided through sectarian loyalties, but nevertheless, followers of the *Dharma* or Buddhist religion. Plainsmen from adjoining territories were called Nyera or Ki (in the Kalaktang area) but the latter fell outside the cleaved circle in which Monpas and fellow Buddhists took up one side, while the “Gidu/Lopa” took up the other. In this sense, some Arunachali groups are more foreign than the Tibetans who once ruled over Monyul.

In the postcolonial context, however, the older scheme has been thrown awry because Monpas and “Gidus” are now on the same side, given their inclusion in a common regional identity, while the Tibetans, by virtue of their lack of citizenship status, are on the other side. Yet, membership in the regional identity of Arunachal Pradesh does not mean that all Monpas are uniformly receptive of a regional ideology largely premised on the indigenous-foreigner distinction. For many Monpas, historical and cultural differences with other Arunachali tribes hinder their sense of belonging in an Arunachali regional identity. The Monpas’ marginalization within Arunachal Pradesh has led the pro-Tibetan monastic sections and a small, but active intellectual class in Monyul to lobby for an alliance with other Tibetan Buddhist groups, and the demand for a Mon Autonomous Region is part of this process, as I demonstrated in chapter three.



Although some Monpas, the younger generation, in particular, contextually participate in an Arunachali regionalism, in which Tibetans are denied space, other historical, political and global connections lead to ambiguities in Monpa attitudes towards the Tibetans. These ambiguities carry over to the Monpas' articulations of regional identity where they are not able to position themselves in strict opposition to the Tibetans.

Thus, while past and present cross-border relations articulate with contemporary identities of region and state to give a peculiar cast to Monpa spatial subjectivities, they do not lead to a clear delineation between categories of Monpa indigenous and Tibetan foreigner. Monpas' participation in regional circuits, fed by memories of a harsh Tibetan regime, does supply elements of discord within the Monpas' pan-Himalayan spatiality. But while these may reconstitute the terms for the trans-local Mon community, they do not prevent Monpas and Tibetans from forging community ties based on cultural traditions. Negative memories are also tempered by the present disempowered status of the Tibetan refugees, where Monpas have rights to affirmative action benefits, but Tibetans, their former rulers, live in a condition of disenfranchisement amidst them. Monpa tolerance of Tibetans refugees is further augmented by the fact that both groups are part of the same religious-spiritual community, of which the Dalai Lama is the supreme head. In this chapter, I explore the role and limits of region in configuring Monpa-Tibetan relations in Monyul.

### **Immigration and Arunachali regionalism**

In 1994, an elected Member of Parliament (MP) from Arunachal Pradesh, Mr. Nyodek Yonggam, who belongs to one of the dominant tribes in the state, raised the issue of refugees in national parliament and urged the central government to arrange for the repatriation of the refugees.

Below is part of the text of his speech,

As the nation is aware, a large number of refugees, particularly Chakma and Hazong refugees from erstwhile east Pakistan were permitted to settle in Arunachal Pradesh under a temporary arrangement by the NEFA administration (Now Arunachal Pradesh)

and the Central Govt. on different occasions commencing from 1964-65. Likewise, a large number of Tibetan refugees have also been permitted to settle in Arunachal Pradesh [since] 1950. All these arrangements were made when there were no elected Governments in the State and the people of Arunachal Pradesh were quite ignorant on all these developments. As per the census conducted in 1990 the strength of refugees in Arunachal Pradesh is as under.

Chakma-Hazong	– 30000
Tibetan	– 6500
Yobin	– 1500

Now the number of refugees has increased to more than one lakh. The presence of such a large number of refugees in Arunachal Pradesh is causing social, economic and political tensions. They have outnumbered the indigenous population and have occupied all the fertile lands. Such developments have been disturbing the minds of youth and leaders of A.P. (Yonggam 1994)<sup>115</sup>

Mr. Yonggam here expresses what Myron Weiner (1978) famously termed the “sons of the soil” sentiment, to refer to conflict between indigenous people and migrants over economic and natural resources, such as land, jobs, educational and employment quotas as well as other politically bestowed benefits in a context where opportunities are perceived to be scarce. According to Weiner, who based his observations on the nativist movements in Assam, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in the 1970s, anti-foreigner sentiment increases proportionately to the growing competition for access to living areas, jobs and resources in a region.

Protests against migrants and refugees in Arunachal Pradesh follow a pattern of anti-immigrant sentiment that had its precedent in many states of Northeast India. In Northeast India, more than in any other part of India, debates around the issue of immigration have become highlighted in key moments of the region’s modern history. Even before India’s independence, and at a time when avowing national, rather than regional identity, was paramount, political leaders in the undivided state of Assam (which later splintered into five of the seven Northeastern states) had expressed concerns about the indigenous populations being outnumbered by migrants from other parts of India. Migration to colonial Assam had been a colonial project, consisting of the large scale import of labour to work on undivided Assam’s newly growing tea, oil and coal

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<sup>115</sup>While doing archival research in Tawang District Library in 2010, I found a collection of official letters, government correspondences, and parliamentary statements by Mr. Nyodek Yonggam, former Member of Parliament in Delhi, dated between June and December 1994 in a publication called *The Voice of Arunachal Pradesh in Rajya Sabha*, 2008, Itanagar.

industries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Immigration also occurred in the early twentieth century as a natural movement of educated Bengalis to neighbouring Assam to fill in the latter's administrative and teaching positions (Baruah 1999, Gohain 1985, Guha 1977). The colonial government further encouraged cultivators from land-scarce east Bengal to migrate to Northeast India, a region rich in fertile land but poor in cultivators. Immigration doubled during the immediate years after independence and partition of the country when Hindu migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) settled in parts of Tripura and Assam, outnumbering and out-achieving the local population.

In Northeast India, therefore, protest against "influx" – implying the inward migration of non-local immigrants – has constituted a prime mover of the region's politics. The Assam Movement spanning the late 1970s and early 1980s (1979-85) was the first such movement in the region which was built on an anti-foreigner discourse and spearheaded by students who felt more keenly the perceived threat posed by immigrant to their employment. The target of local Assamese resentment in this case was initially the Muslim refugees from Bangladesh (pejoratively called "Miyans") but later extended to Bengali as well as North Indian migrants to the state, considered to have grabbed job opportunities in the state. Public ire against the foreigners, locally termed "*bohiragoto*" (outsider), fanned by an aggressive student leadership, exploded into several violent incidents against (often, poor) immigrants, the worst being the infamous Nellie massacre of 1983, when over two thousand Muslim settlers, originally from Bangladesh, were slaughtered in Nellie, Assam. Baruah (1999) notes how the problem of migration historically constituted a split between Assam's nationalist (pan-Indian) and subnationalist (Assamese provincialism) identities, and finally spiraled into the anti-foreigner agitation.

In present Arunachal Pradesh, there is a similar uprising against the influx of refugees, and once again it is the student community, mostly from the majority Nishi groups, that is at the helm (Prasad 2006). Foreigner-outsider divisions which have steadily been on the rise in

Arunachal Pradesh since the 1980s (Routray 2007) have grown in fervor today. However, unlike in the neighboring state of Assam, the migration and settlement of refugees in Arunachal Pradesh was not a gradual process of inward flow, but was state-sponsored. In other states, while migration was mostly master-minded by the colonial state as an answer to the growing demand for labour for the tea, coal and oil industries (Baruah 1999), migration and settlement in these states are legally permissible according to the Indian constitution.

But in Arunachal Pradesh, covered by the Inner Line policy, neither domestic nor international migration is possible without the positive sanction of the central government. Arunachal Pradesh acquired full state status only in 1987, before which it was constitutionally part of Assam, the neighboring state, and was administered by the Ministry of External Affairs, with the governor acting as the agent of the President of India. In this interim period, before Arunachal's transition to full state-hood, a number of events changed the demography of this incipient state. With the exodus of Tibetan people, following the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959, a small number of Tibetan refugees (growing to 6500 in 1994, according to Mr Nyodek Yonggam's estimate) were resettled in Arunachal Pradesh. A few years later, in 1964, construction of the Kaptai dam in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in then East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh) led to the displacement of a large number of Buddhist Chakma tribes people to the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura. Since it was not feasible to hold these refugees in Tripura in the aftermath of the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and in Mizoram, in the face of a peaking Mizo insurgency, the Indian government decided to relocate the refugees elsewhere (Verghese 2004: 225-226).

The government of India decided on Arunachal Pradesh as one of the primary refugee rehabilitation sites due to the low population density of this state as well as the proximity of other Tibetan Buddhist and Theravada Buddhist groups in this region since the Tibetans or Chakmas seeking political refuge were Buddhists. While the government of India hoped that the refugees would be assimilated with the local population, this did not prove to be the case, and on 29

September 1980, the Arunachal Pradesh government was forced by public pressure to issue a circular, directing all the deputy commissioners to terminate the employment of the Chakmas, Hajongs and Tibetans until further decisions were taken in this regard (Routray 2007: 86). Arunachali regionalists argue that these refugee relocations were done at a time when Arunachal was a Union Territory (its pre-State political status) without consulting the local tribal communities who had resented these intrusions from the start (Verghese 2004: 226). Anti-refugee protests are linked to issues related to competition for resources between indigenous and outsider in Arunachal Pradesh. According to B.G. Verghese, the Arunachali attitude with respect to the Tibetans has been one of envy, for while the Tibetans are inoffensive and do not venture out of their refugee camps, they are very industrious, possess a good business sense, and by dint of hard work, have become more prosperous than many of the Arunachali local people (Verghese 2004: 228).

In other regions of India, where Tibetan refugees have been resettled, there have been reports of inter-ethnic conflict between Tibetans and the local Indians (Routray 2007). In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, local resentment against Tibetan settlers is fanned by land alienation cases, where refugees are thought to illegally acquire indigenous land, violating the Himachal Pradesh Tenancy Act, according to which only Himachalis can buy land (Routray 2007: 85). Tibetans have become targets of local mob violence because they are perceived to have prospered by usurping rights that are legitimately meant only for the indigenous populations. My own observations in Dharamsala during a visit in June 2009 impressed upon me the extent of refugee overcrowding in this small hill-town, which has resulted in problems of water and electricity supply. In the early 1960s and 70s, there had been plenty of room for refugees to work on the agricultural and handicraft settlements allotted by the Indian government. However, as more and more refugees make their way from Tibet to India, and as the government of India has not allotted new lands for their resettlement, many of the new refugees are crowding the market places of Dharamsala, leading to increasing tensions between the local people and the refugees.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the friction between Tibetan refugees and local communities has erupted into violence on a few occasions, and some activists of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), a regional student body, were reportedly beaten up by Tibetan refugees in a Tawang village in September 1994 (Verghese 2004: 228). In 1994, when the anti-refugee agitation in Arunachal Pradesh was at its heights, the AAPSU president had issued strong demands to eject Tibetan and Chakma refugees and had threatened to disrupt the forthcoming State Assembly elections if photo identity cards were not issued to genuine voters (Ibid). The anti-immigrant sentiment among Arunachali youth has led several student organizations to demand anti-refugee state measures. Anti-refugee sentiment is also frequently expressed in public and media space, and by state representatives from Arunachal Pradesh, like Mr. Nyodek Yonggam, who speak in the same language as the student body with respect to immigrants.

Here, as in other anti-foreigner movements in Northeast India, priority of settlement constitute the terms on which people self-identifying as indigenes assert their difference from later settlers; and each time battle lines are drawn between locals and the immigrants, older residents take on the indigenous slot *vis a vis* the new migrants.

However, who is indigenous and who is not is a fraught issue, involving a selective invention and inventory of tradition, on the basis of which constructions of indigenous and foreign in the present are traced back to the past. Many writers have noted how traditions of hostility to outsiders frequently metamorphose into ethnicity/nationality discourses in the postcolonial context. For example, Susana Devalle (1992) argues that the Santhali ethnic protests in Jharkhand had roots in the hostility of the *adivasi* to non-tribal moneylenders, categorized by the latter as "*diku*". In Tambiah's (1992) analysis, Sinhalese nationalism is defined in opposition to the Tamils, who are recast as outsiders/interlopers – descendants of the invading "*Damilas*" of the epics *Kulavamsha* and *Mahavamsha*. In the context of Northeast India, son of the soil movements have also rested on tracing indigenous-foreigner distinctions to the past through means of a variety of discursive and constitutional procedures (Weiner 1978).

The statement of the parliamentary representative from Arunachal Pradesh, Mr Yonggam, seeks to articulate an indigenous-foreign dichotomy on similar terms. Yonggam's statement that a large number of Tibetan refugees have been permitted to settle in Arunachal Pradesh since 1950, implies that pre-1950 (in the case of Tibetan) and pre-1964 (in the case of Chakma Hazong), Arunachal Pradesh had been indigenous territory. On these grounds, he demands the repatriation of refugees from Arunachal Pradesh to their pre-migration homelands. Yonggam's statement, by casting Arunachal Pradesh as a homogeneous whole which was ruptured by the presence of non-indigenous elements, erects a temporal division between an indigenous past and immigrant present.

A slight shifting of scale, however, disturbs the narrative of this statement. The postcolonial identity of Arunachal Pradesh is an amorphous identity comprised of frontier areas and was recognized as such in its initial designation as the North East Frontier *Tracts*, which took into account its plural identity. However, it was subsequently renamed as North East Frontier Agency and in 1987, as Arunachal Pradesh. The regional unity of Arunachal Pradesh is a political unity, in which a singular narrative of an indigenous "us" versus an outsider "them" cannot be sustained. This is particularly the case if we shift scale from the regional unit of Arunachal Pradesh to border areas such as Monyul. In the latter, the indigenous-foreign distinction is not so easy to maintain, considering that traditionally the primary division was not between Monpa and Tibetan but between Monpa and Gidu, or non-Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, and Tibetans had access to this region till as late as 1940s. Tsering, a young Monpa cab driver, made an interesting revelation when he told me that if Mon autonomy is granted it would ban non-Monpas from buying land within the Monyul districts. In Arunachal Pradesh, tribal land is inalienable, meaning that non-tribals cannot purchase land within tribal territories, and tribals from outside too cannot purchase local land. This means that if Monpas get what they are demanding, other Arunachalis could be prohibited from buying land from Monpas. Tsering justified this course by arguing that Monpas seldom can buy land in Itanagar, which is reserved by the dominant tribes.

Given this context, how does one read the Arunachali anxiety about rights denied to indigenes by refugee influx when non-Monpas themselves are viewed as outsiders by Monpas?

This is not to suggest that there were no boundaries between Monpas and Tibetans, but that rule, religion, and kinship created certain ties between the two which cut across ethnic boundaries. In the postcolonial context, the basis of division being territory and political boundaries, with accompanying rights and obligations, those who were earlier “outside” are now “inside”. In the following sections, I show how Monpa discourses about Tibetans are informed by the historical inter-connections between the two groups as well as present contingencies, and these discourses and connections provide a check on the forces of region.

### **Remembrance and reconciliation: Coming to terms with Tibetan rule**

“Tibet” seems a bit less now. Earlier, Tibetan officers used to reside here for 3 months at a stretch. Then all the villagers had to work at grinding wheat, making *chang* [local fermented beer]. They did give us some hardships, made us work, did not pay us. There was an official at Gyengherdzong, who was like our DC [Deputy Commissioner] today.

Tibetan people would inform 2-3 days before hand, and 9 people would come for taxes. .... They had documents stating which village had to carry how much *threi* [tax in food grains]. Local people had to carry loads, cook food for these 9 people. Punishment consisted of beatings. If roads were not constructed in time, there would be fines, sticks and confiscation of cows. There was a lot of harassment. Locals had to produce fodder for the cows and horses. If the bells did not tinkle (indicating that the animals were fed and content) punishments would be given out.

These are statements by men in their 60s and 70s, recollecting the hardships of Tibetan rule. The first is a former headman in Kitpi village near the Tibet border, and the second, a former headman of Morshing near the Bhutan border. In Kitpi village, I also met Yangchin Chomu, a Monpa woman of 70, who can barely see, but still preserves her raven-black hair and tight, fair skin. She was a child when Tibetan rule ended, but she had heard many stories about Tibetan officers. When Tibetan tax collectors visited, Monpas would be summoned to fetch food and water and prepare *chang* (fermented beer) for the officers, clean and sweep the rest areas. They would be forced to supply fodder for the 20-30 horses brought by the officials. In those days,



people would be punished for trifling crimes; they would be stripped naked and beaten, or thrown into prison. Lesser crimes such as being late for work or in delivering supplies would earn beatings or starvation. Although, there were no cases of exploitation of girls (because, in her view, people “dared not lift their eyes to look at the Tibetan officials”), Monpas would run to hide when Tibetan officials came (“don’t remember if anybody apart from *dzongpons* came”). Yangchin Chomu says that earlier, Monpas had to pay a lot of money in monastery taxes and often had to give up their household rations (“feel like crying at the memories of Tibetan rule”). At times, they even had to forage for food in forests, for their last grains would be seized by Tibetans. It was her view that with Tibetan rule gone, Monpas are now more prosperous. When I asked whether Tibetans used to look down on Monpas, she replied, “Definitely must have looked down, or else they would not have tortured us so much”.

Both written documents and oral memory preserve the record of Tibetan high-handedness toward the Monpa peasantry. Popular memory resurrects a past in which the Tibetan overlords ruled Monyul with an iron hand. Although in promoting the idea of a Tibetan Buddhist community the monk leadership in Monyul attempts to downplay the hierarchies that once characterized interactions between Tibetans and Monpas, stories of a harsh Tibetan regime have percolated down generations to become etched in public memory. An oppressive taxation system harshly enforced by tax officials deputed from Tsona or Lhasa contributed to a stereotype of the Tibetan as a merciless master, although not all Tibetans were tax-collectors or rulers. Stories of the injustices meted out to poor Monpa peasants by Tibetan tax-collectors have built a negative image of Tibetan rule among the Monpas. The elderly people, and especially those living in the cusp period of the Tibetan and Indian eras, have a memory conditioned by their personal childhood experiences with Tibetans mixed with the stories handed down by the generations before them. For this generation, Tibetan rule compares poorly with that of the democratic government of India from the 1950s on.

The various areas of Monyul started contributing taxes to the Tibetan government when they became part of the Tibetan state in 1681 (Aris 1980: 51). In those days, all areas under Tibetan rule were divided into zones which were then placed under a zonal headquarter. Tsona in southern Tibet acted as the headquarters for the areas in Monyul. Most of the villages in the Tawang valley, including those in Pangchen (current Zemithang) were under the jurisdiction of the *dzongpon* (officer) of Tsona dzong (*dzong* could mean both fort and district), while those south in Dirang and Kalaktang, upto the Assam foothills were under the jurisdiction of Tawang monastery. Monpas in Tawang and Dirang remember the past role of Tsona in the administration of Monyul; Ugyen Tsering, Chairman of Lhou Secondary School, Tawang, told me that Tsona was the administrative center for the Mon areas, and was in charge of appointing *dzongpons* to Gyanghar Dzong (Tawang), Dirang Dzong and Talung Dzong. He compared Tawang to the District Court, Tsona Dzong to the High Court and Lhasa to the Supreme Court – the three tiers of the judiciary in India’s present democratic set-up.

As I described in chapter five, the particular region of Monyul was divided into three tax outposts, Talung Dzong at Kalaktang in southern Monyul, Dirang Dzong in central Monyul and Tawang Dzong or Gyanghar Dzong in northern Monyul, where grains collected as taxes would be stored, and taxes from the southernmost point of Monyul were carried by conscripted labour (*u-la*) from local villages in “relay” (Roy-Burman 1966) form until they finally reached Tsona, from where a portion was sent to Drepung monastery at Lhasa. This meant that taxes in the form of food grains as well as yak-products were carried from one village to the second by porters from the first village who would be replaced by porters recruited from the second village who would carry the supplies to a third village where they would be replaced in turn, and so on, until the supplies finally arrived at their destination in Tsona. All areas from current Kalaktang on the Assam-Monyul border till Tsona in Tibet participated in this relay traffic, although yak-herding groups in some parts of Monyul directly paid taxes in the form of yak products to the agents of certain private families based in Tibet (Bailey 1913: 40).

In many cases, the first monastic taxes were voluntary contributions made by villagers in a religious spirit. The monastery at Tawang, for example, founded by Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso, was built through the efforts of the people of the villages around Tawang. When Mera Lama was building the *gompa* (monastery), the Monpas pledged donation of land, grain, and firewood, among other things, for its upkeep and further pledged to give the middle son out of three brothers as a lama to the monastery. Since Mera Lama's time, Tawang monastery gets the agricultural levy (*khrei*) twice a year, in summer and autumn from villages around Tawang.<sup>116</sup> These commitments continue to be honored till this day, as all the villagers religiously pay the stipulated *khrei* regularly (Nanda 1982: 70). This example from Tawang monastery shows how voluntary tribute later developed into an organized system of taxes, often termed a feudal or manorial estate system (Goldstein 1989).

Colonial records from the early twentieth century show the extent to which the Tibetan tax regime was responsible for the impoverishment of many Monpa households. British officer Captain Nevill provides an account of the tax regime in Dirang after a visit in 1914.

South of the Sela is the valley of Dirangchu, a fine, open valley and well-populated....Although this valley is naturally a very rich one and although a very large area is brought under cultivation, the inhabitants did not strike me as being nearly so prosperous as their neighbours north of the Sela. This is due to the fact that the country south of the Sela as far as the Assam border is controlled entirely by the monks of Tawang, with the exception of the village of Sengedzong, which is under the jurisdiction of the Tsona Jongpens. *The people are ground down by excessive taxation they are only left barely enough to live upon*, also they are generally harassed by the Lobas who levy blackmail in the most oppressive manner." (Nevill, cited in Reid [1942]1983: 287) [emphasis added]

British ethnologist and administrator J.P. Mills also noted his impressions of the Tibetan tax collection methods when he visited Dirang Dzong in 1940s.

They [monastic tax collectors] had been in the habit not only of collecting taxes on a scale which bore no relationship at all to the capacity of the wretched villagers to pay, but had always refused any payment for transport or supplies. The two monastic officials kept a most unpleasant prison at Dirang Dzong, a really horrible place, and had not

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<sup>116</sup> The *khrei* or *threi* is a variable unit that could be twenty *bres* (units) of wheat in Dawa Ngapa (June-July) and twenty *bres* of millet or barley in Dawa Gupa (October-November). When land is divided among the heirs of a household, the *khrei* to be paid also gets divided accordingly (Bhattacharjee 1988: 7)

infrequently inflicted the most brutal punishments.....They were in fact oppressing the inhabitants to such an extent that a considerable number of them had left their villages and gone across to Bhutan (1950: 157).

The “prison” or dungeon mentioned by Mills lies in ruins in Dirang *basti* (village) today, but bears witness to the punitive practices of the Tibetan regime. There is also an unpleasant legend still in circulation about twelve leading householders of Dirang who had been killed because they protested the building of Dirang Dzong which symbolized imposition of Tibetan rule. These men lie buried under the *mane* (stone wall constructed for religious merit) that is still seen beside the road leading up to Dirang town (Sarkar 1996: 16). Many older people in Dirang testify that Tibetan rule was highly unpopular. Elderly people throughout Monyul remember that the lamas used to be quick in inflicting corporal punishment on any errant villager. What kind of lamas were they when they were so cruel, one old man from Yewang village in Dirang questioned. He was quick to praise the Indian government and said that life was much better under the Indian government.

These memories of oppressive rule may have influenced Monpa-Tibetan relations even after the Tibetan regime ended. Rose and Fisher (1967) observe that Monpa-Tibetan relations were never good, and that villages settled by Khampas from Tibet brought in to work on the Tawang monastery did not share close ties with neighboring Monpa villages. However, the experiences and perceptions of Tibetan rule were not necessarily uniform, but differed according to group, family, region and personal history. Further, not all relations between Monpas and Tibetans were based on tax-collection: trade, monastic studies and pilgrimage forged bonds of friendship and marriage between individuals of the two communities.

A different side to this tale of exploitation may also be constructed from the Tibetan perspective. On his part, the Dalai Lama has often said that the present predicament of the Tibetans in exile must be due to their misdeeds in the past, in an obvious reference to the taxation system that Tibetan officialdom had imposed on tax-paying peasants and small traders. But the

tax system itself was subject to the political fortunes of Tibet as well as the onslaught of modernization. As Goldstein (1989) notes, one of the ways in which the Tibetan government tried to fend off the advanced expansionist aims of imperial powers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was to attempt to build a modern military force, the maintenance of which depended on public revenue. Such a regime intent on expanding its tax base and input thus could only instill negative memories in the minds of its subject populations from whom the taxes to support the defense forces were raised. Hence, quite a few elderly Monpas offer the view that the change in government (from Tibetan theocratic to Indian democratic) has allowed Monpas to become “more prosperous”, as Yangchin Chomu of Kitpi village said.

If change in regime led to Monpas growing “more prosperous”, exile brought about a different kind of status inversion for the Tibetans, who slipped from their earlier position of a ruling group to being refugees, or people who are not “rooted” in a fixed national territory (Bauman 2004, Malkki 1995). Devoid of political existence in a nation – the only kind of existence deemed morally right in a world of national units – refugees also become divested of basic human rights. Tibetan refugees living in Nepal and India are supplicants of humanitarian aid from the governments, for none of these countries has ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (Routray 2007). Thus, while a negative image of Tibetan rule has been perpetuated in Monpa popular memory, this image conflicts with the present disenfranchised status of the Tibetans amidst them. Hence, the past exists but as dislocated from the present.

In Monyul, although people are critical of the old Tibetan polity, they seldom extend the same critical attitude towards the Tibetan refugees living among them. This is possibly because they understand that the Tibetan refugees cannot be held accountable for the actions of the Tibetan tax-collectors of the past. The reversal of past asymmetrical power relations through the political disempowerment of Tibetans has helped to blunt the edges of Monpa hostility towards the Tibetan communities today. Many Monpa families have at least one living Tibetan relative among them. The high level of inter-marriage between Monpas and Tibetans in the border

districts also makes acceptance and assimilation easy, besides blurring boundaries between the two groups. Tibetans today are considered separate from the Tibetans of the past. When I asked the two young girls who had helped me in my transcription work in Tawang whether Monpa-Tibetan marriages were common, they responded with some awkwardness, “*abhi toh sab same hain*” (Nowadays all are the same).

If harsh rule had erected barriers between Tibetans and Monpas, bonds of religion and kinship have partially dissolved those barriers in the present period. Tibetans are no longer regarded as autocratic rulers. Rather, they are seen as kinsmen or fellow Buddhists whose fortunes have declined. The dramatic reversal of fortunes that overturned older hierarchies also seems to have erected a distance between past and present by inverting the terms of recognition. If earlier, recognition hinged on a lord-subject relationship, in which the Tibetans, as occupying the privileged position of overlord, had to recognize the Monpas, in the present, it is the Monpas as legitimate bearers and also, as I will show later, sharers of citizenship documents, who command the terms of recognition. In Kalaktang, a headman gave a humorous take on the changed Monpa-Tibetan relations. He said, “Now, Tibetans are no longer *dzongpons* (officers). The other day I had gone to Tawang, met a couple of Tibetans there who said, ‘you [Monpas] used to give us so much love’. Now, if we hadn’t given them love we would have got their sticks”, he cackled.

While the reversal of fortunes have made the Monpas view Tibetans in a more kindly light, it is also the figure of the Dalai Lama, accessible to his lay followers in a manner unprecedented in the history of the Tibetan monastic system, that has brought about significant changes in popular attitude. While the change in Tibet’s fortunes has, on the one hand, recast the Tibetans outside Tibet as refugees, it has, on the other hand, allowed a wider public direct access to the once elusive charisma of the Dalai Lama. Tibetan histories as well as biographies of the present Dalai Lama record the fact that traditionally, the Dalai Lama’s presence was a felt, rather than a visible, form of authority for the lay Tibetans. One Monpa woman told me how her parents

had once visited Lhasa to catch a glimpse of just the *shadow* of the Dalai Lama as he strolled in the Norbulingka palace gardens. After the decline of old Tibet, the Dalai Lama has increasingly become a public figure, who is regularly seen on and heard through television and other media. The Dalai Lama's visits to the Monyul region (the most recent one was in November 2009, while I was conducting fieldwork) are said to precipitate a boom in cultural activity, interest in Tibetan language, as well as a scramble to register non-governmental organizations dedicated to the aims of (Tibetan Buddhist) culture preservation. The Dalai Lama's visit to Monyul in 2009 shows how he provides a mediating influence on Monpa perceptions towards Tibetans in Monyul. After the Dalai Lama's public appearance in the Buddha Stadium, he was chauffeured to the monastery at Upper Bomdila and given a welcome reception. The only lay people, apart from monastery staff and privileged guests, allowed to attend this event were the Tibetans of Tenzingaon refugee settlement in West Kameng. The Dalai Lama's attention to Tibetan refugees may have served to mold tolerance and sympathy towards the latter in Monyul.

In Tawang, in response to my query, "how did Tibetans regard Monpas in the past", Ngawang's grandfather who is 102 years old and has no eyesight, replied that obviously they must have regarded Monpas badly or else why did they impose all the taxes and cruel punishments? But what was striking was that he explicitly stated that he did not wish to say anything against the Tibetans now because of the high regard in which they [Monpas] regard His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. He said, "[I] can say many things about Tibetans, but won't because the Dalai Lama is Tibetan. But when Tibet was free, then Tibet wanted to capture all Himalayan regions..."

Phunchu Namje, my guide in Dirang town, expresses most succinctly the formative role of the Dalai Lama in cementing Monpa-Tibetan ties,

..... majority people [in Arunachal Pradesh] are non-Buddhists who do not like us Buddhists because we have given shelter to the Tibetans. We coexist happily with the Tibetans because of the Dalai Lama, whom we regard not just as a political leader but as our spiritual leader (*dharm guru*). *The Tibetans are his people and to hurt them is to hurt*

*him*. The non-Buddhists . . . . . in the other districts of Arunachal do not think well of us, because they feel that we shelter the Tibetans and make them tribals [emphasis added].

The last phrase “make them tribals” refers to the pattern of Tibetans acquiring scheduled tribe certificates illegally, a practice that I discuss in the following section. What I wish to highlight here is the statement that “non-Buddhist” Arunachalis do not like Monpas for favoring the Tibetans, who are the outsiders. But more revealing is Phunchu’s sentiment that to hurt Tibetans is to hurt the Dalai Lama. When criticisms of Tibetan rule are softened by statements such as “I don’t want to say anything against Tibetans for they are the Dalai Lama’s people”, it points to the force of religious-cultural bonds, accentuated through the person of the Dalai Lama, in shaping Monpas’ compassionate take on Tibetan refugees.

These bonds are not new, only renewed today. For the same British administrator-anthropologist, J.P. Mills, quoted earlier, who had noted the tensions that existed between Tibetan overlords and their Monpa subjects, also commented on the cultural hold that Tibet had over this hilly belt.

...the cultural and social pull is towards Tibet. If a hillman gets on in the world he does not buy Assamese clothes, he buys Tibetan ornaments and becomes more like a prosperous Tibetan. He can never be absorbed into any of the Hindu castes of the plains, whereas he knows he can become a nominal Buddhist and be at once absorbed into Tibet (Mills 1950: 158)

In contemporary Monyul, as Monpas seek to ward off discrimination within regional networks, they draw on these cultural bonds they have in common with their previous rulers, the Tibetans. Tibet might have declined in status as a temporal center and the spiritual core of Tibetan Buddhism, but Tibetan Buddhism is resurgent in an international milieu, building on funds and patronage from richer nations. In this resurgent trend, earlier peripheral Tibetan Buddhist spaces such as Monyul are being redefined as necessary nodes in a Tibetan Buddhist network, as Tibetan Buddhist communities of the Himalayan region led by the Buddhist clergy ally to forge a trans-border, pan-regional (Himalayan) community based on common history and



heritage. It becomes necessary to understand Monpa-Tibetan relations in Monyul in the context of this present collaborative endeavor. The growing international stature of Tibetan Buddhism influences Monpa tolerance of Tibetans within Monyul; and the process of alliance among different Tibetan Buddhist communities in the present act as a salve on bitter recollections of rule.

In chapter four, while discussing origins narratives, I pointed to the use of “in the old days” as a rhetorical device to carve the past from the present, so as to be able to make claims of Tibetan origin and yet claim distance from Tibetans in the present in order to avoid allegations of foreignness. Here, we see the opposite tendency, where people agree that Tibetans might have committed injustices in the past but absolve them of their past deeds because of their compassion for the latter’s present disenfranchised condition as well as their desire to belong to a transnational community.

However, Monpa-Tibetan relations in Monyul are also conditioned by their regional obligations, which are often opposed to their trans-local allegiances based on religious-cultural community. Region and religion thus act as tangential forces on Monpa subjectivities. While one gives Monpas membership in a political community, with an accompanying constitutional status, viz. scheduled tribe, the other allows the Monpas participation and partnership in a resurgent Tibetan Buddhist civilizational community. I discuss how the tension between region and religion is brought to the fore in the issue of ST certificates.

### **ST Certificates and the politics of documentation**

Let us briefly return to Phunchu’s statement that the non-Buddhists in the other districts of Arunachal do not think well of the Monpas because they help to make “tribals” out of the Tibetans. This statement pinpoints one of the loci of the tension between the Monpas’ regional and religious allegiances. On the one hand, Monpas are included in an Arunachali regional ideology based on the distinction between the indigenous Arunachali and the immigrant foreigner, and young Monpa students are sometimes co-opted into this ideology. Quite a few

students of Bomdila College in West Kameng had taken part in the anti-refugee demonstration of the summer of 2007, organized by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union, a regional student body. During my field work, I heard claims to ST status being articulated by mostly the younger generations in order to distinguish themselves from the Tibetan refugees. Their claims to the ST slot occur relative to the new immigrants and in applying for their share of government benefits reserved for the ST category.

On the other hand, non-Monpa Arunachalis frequently collapse the identities of the Monpas and Tibetans, citing their cultural and physiological similarities. As one Monpa informant once said, "Nishis [one of the groups presently dominant in Arunachali regional politics] do not regard the Monpas as Arunachali. Monpas are called Tibetans by Nishis". This view was corroborated from the opposite side, when a non-Monpa official stationed at Tawang gave me the following opinion about the rise of the MARDC,

*... the demand for Mon Autonomous Council is believed by the AAPSU to be a way of protecting Tibetans. AAPSU demands almost overlap with demands of All Nishi Students' Union. The AAPSU is not targeting the Tibetans for a number of reasons. Tibetans are very peaceful unlike Chakma-Hajongs who create unrest. If necessity arises, Tibetans can be deported for they have a definite origin, but not Chakma-Hajongs who have no origins. Last year (2007) AAPU demanded eviction of refugees but did not stress much on Tibetans because of their links with Monpas. In one of the constituencies of Tawang, an MLA is Tibetan. Tibetans have political power, another reason why they do not figure in AAPSU demands.*

In this officer's statement, both Monpas and Tibetans are situated outside the regional and even national context, for both are seen to maintain ties that do not conform to the territorially defined regional identity of the "Arunachali".<sup>117</sup> In other words, the transnational associations of the Monpas are politicized by an exclusivist regional ideology that demands clear-cut dichotomy between the indigenous and the foreigner. It is this duality, of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from regional networks that characterize the non-Monpa Arunachali's

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<sup>117</sup> While the officer's argument that the demand for autonomy is a ruse to provide political cover to the Tibetan refugees cannot be confirmed, a Monpa educationist once told me that the demand for Mon autonomy is not anti-refugee, and that the MARDC was not involved in the anti-refugee protests in 2007. He had said, "Tibetans and other Buddhist groups are supporting the good cause".

attitude to Monpas in general. This duality seeps into their articulations of region and also infects how Monpa youth respond to the regional ideology, as it becomes evident in the latter's discourse on illegal scheduled tribe certificates.

As already mentioned, scheduled tribe (as well as scheduled caste) refers to a category of citizens to whom certain special privileges are granted, such as reservation of seats in the legislatures, government service, and educational institutions, waiving a part or the whole of the fees for admission to schools and colleges, relaxation of upper-age limits for applying to certain jobs, and so on. In order to avail of these privileges, a citizen belonging to a scheduled tribe must have in his or her possession a valid certificate, which he/she can acquire by going through the proper application channels.<sup>118</sup> A scheduled tribe (ST) certificate is documentary proof of belonging to a scheduled tribe, as per the specifications mentioned in the Indian constitution. Within Arunachal Pradesh, Monpas are "tribal" by birth, that is, through ascribed criteria, which they prove by applying for and securing ST certificates. Proof of ST certificates is mandatory for claiming affirmative action benefits as well as other citizenship rights.

Within Arunachal Pradesh, a refugee may attain the documented status of citizen by acquiring false ST certificates through illegal means. In an anti-immigrant milieu, refugees are already subjects of hostility and suspicion, but once they metamorphose into citizens, they are seen as a greater threat for then they become competitors for opportunities in an equal playing field. Hence, the allegation that Monpas aid Tibetans in becoming "tribals" – meaning that they help Tibetan refugees acquire false ST certificates – amounts to casting a serious aspersion on the Monpas' regional loyalties. The issue of false ST certificates highlights the strains as well as ambiguities in the Monpas' regional obligations.

In Tawang and West Kameng, while there are many Tibetans who were officially settled in refugee settlements after their exodus from Tibet, there are also many who had been living in these areas before the border solidified. Quite a few Tibetans had simply crossed the border to

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<sup>118</sup> [http://india.gov.in/howdo/otherservice\\_details.php?service=8](http://india.gov.in/howdo/otherservice_details.php?service=8) (Accessed 3 October 2011)

Tawang during the turbulent period of the 1950s and moved to other areas further south, or came later from across the border, and settled down in Monpa villages and towns. In everyday affairs, it is difficult for an outsider to distinguish a Monpa from a Tibetan. Monpas themselves recognize only one difference among the Tibetans, articulated as “pure” and “*kaccha*” Tibetan. Pure Tibetan means one who had immigrated from Tibet before 1951 or had lived in local areas for a long time, while *kaccha* meaning raw, is used to refer to one “fresh off the boat” or a new refugee who has not yet assimilated. So, while a pure Tibetan might be assimilated if he or she had come between the 1950s and 70s, *kaccha* is one who does not speak Hindi or Monpa, is shy with the local people, and is still struggling to find his bearings in the new society.

This is similar to the categories of “India-born” (referring to the second generation India-born Tibetans) and “newcomer” (referring to the new arrivals from Tibet), mentioned by Chen in her work on Tibetan refugees of Dharamsala (Chen 2009: 44). Chen mentions how newcomers are not only legally outsiders but are also made unwelcome by the India-born Tibetans, who had either been born in India or sent out to boarding schools here by their parents at a very early age, and who have consequently been socialized into Indian norms and mannerisms, and even manifest a heightened sense of a Tibetan nationalism as against the newcomers who are more in sync with ground realities in Tibet (Chen 2009).<sup>119</sup> In Monyul, if the difference between pure and *kaccha* Tibetan is prominent, less so is the difference between early Tibetan settlers and Monpas. Since in most cases, the Tibetan old-timers who had migrated several decades ago are either married to local Monpas or have integrated into local Monpa culture, they can be distinguished from the Monpa members of society only by their “tune” or the peculiar nuances of their speech, even when they speak the local dialects.

Further, inter-marriage, mixed parentage and mixed habitation have blurred the differences between Tibetans and Monpas in the towns of Tawang and Bomdila. In Monpa

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<sup>119</sup> There is also a legal problem in the latter’s assimilation, as the Indian government discontinued issuing residence permits to Tibetan newcomers after 1979. However, Tibetans sometimes obtain permits through bribery or through falsifying their date of birth or parentage (Routray 2007: 82).

society, although property passes patrilineally, there is a custom of “*makpa/makbo*” or son-in-law residing in his father-in-law’s house and inheriting the latter’s property in the absence of a male heir (Furer-Haimendorf 1982: 162, Nanda 1982: 58, Tsering 2010: 3). So although land does not pass through the mother’s line, marriage makes it easier for non-Monpas, including Tibetans, to acquire ST certificates. For example, when a Monpa girl marries a Nepali, Bangladeshi or Tibetan man, she might try to manufacture an ST certificate for her husband and children. Thus, ST certificates frequently travel along the kinship circuits existing between Monpas and Tibetans.

The blurring of difference between Monpa and Tibetan in Monyul has fed the practice, quite widespread, of Tibetans - who cannot otherwise claim ST certificates through marriage – seeking and acquiring scheduled tribe certificates. In November 2000, the All Arunachal Pradesh Students’ Union (AAPSU) claimed that thousands of Tibetans refugees, settled in Tawang and West Kameng districts, were illegally obtaining ST certificates – which makes them Indian citizens – and trading licenses in connivance with politicians in this state (*Assam Tribune* 30 November 2000)<sup>120</sup>. The AAPSU claimed that a fact-finding committee instituted by them had found that out of 1,600 Tibetans in the Shyo village in Tawang district, 181 had managed to obtain illegal ST certificates, while in Bomdila, 300 Tibetan refugees had managed to obtain ST certificates. The report further claimed that the Tibetan refugees settled in Tenzinggaon in West Kameng, Tindollang in Lohit and Cheophelling in Changlang districts have moved out of their camps and started to dominate business and the economy in Tawang and West Kameng. It stated that, “since freedom of Tibet is a distant dream, the Tibetans are trying to settle in various places in the State by acquiring land through inter-community marriage, money power” (*Ibid.*). The AAPSU report argued that it was easier for the Tibetan refugees to acquire illegal certificates because of the various similarities they shared with the local Monpas (*Ibid.*).

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<sup>120</sup> “Tibetan Refugees Illegally Settling in Arunachal: AAPSU”, *The Assam Tribune*, (Guwahati), 30 November 2000.

This claim is not too far off the mark for not only has frequent inter-marriage between Monpas and Tibetans confused the boundaries between them, but many Tibetans in Tawang often self-identify as Monpas in order to blend in for political and social reasons. Some Tibetans also change their documented identity to scheduled tribes after procuring ST certificates, often through underground channels or through their affinal relations with local Monpas. A well-connected Tibetan businessman may also use his contacts to get certificates for himself and his family through the help of local Monpa politicians. According to Namang Tsering, a school teacher in Dirang, before some recent changes, people could acquire these certificates relatively smoothly for all they had to do was go to the *tsorgan* (village headmen), who are knowledgeable men of society but uneducated in the language of official documents, and get the certificates countersigned or approved by them.

The matter of ST certificates further highlights how a state provision to make boundaries clear is paradoxically used to sanction or facilitate the change of status in Tibetans from being refugees to indigenous people. James Scott (1999) argues that the modern state is constituted partly through practices of legibility. Borrowing from Foucault, Scott writes that the state constructs its territory and workforce as legible or knowable, and hence, governable, through codifying procedures such as population registries, censuses, land records, making last names mandatory, standardization of weights and measures, urban planning and so on. But contra Scott, Das and Poole (2004) write that while the modern state has rested on legibility, in extensive documentation, statistics, codification of its rules and practices, it is continually undone by the illegibility of its practices seen in the displacement, falsification and circulation of personal identity papers. Mariane Ferme (2004: 87) also shows that practices of corruption and illegibility paradoxically constitute the state. Arguing that the business of sovereignty is conducted in the border between norm and exception, legality and illegality, and in fact, it is in the exceptions that the presence of the state is seen, Ferme shows how the “failed” state of Sierra Leone re-emerges at the moment of its effacement. That is, when Sierra Leone war refugees in the United States –

who have been deterritorialized through displacement from their native country – are marked as “Sierra Leonian”, they are reinscribed (reterritorialized) with the mark of sovereignty at the moment of deterritorialization.

But I point an additional angle in the story of corruption or illegibility. I argue that Tibetan refugees who acquire ST certificates also become state subjects through a similar process of “illegibility”. While the procurement of false scheduled tribe certificates points to the loopholes in state legibility procedures, it also shows up how the state could be used to confound its own agenda. That is, scheduled tribe certificates are the physical boundary instituted by the state to identify and bound off its citizens from the non-citizens. In Monyul, the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy, already blurred in practice through marriage and cohabitation, is further blurred by the agency, albeit unintended, of the state. In other words, the identity of the Monpa tribe/citizen is to a large extent “given” by scheduled tribe certificates, which lay on them the stamp of the legitimate citizen. But when Tibetan refugees acquire certificates through a process of “illegibility”, they too become legitimate state subjects. A state provision to demarcate boundaries between indigenous and foreign is manipulated to produce the opposite result: the legibility of the state is compromised, or it becomes illegible in the process of making populations legible.

The idea popular in Arunachali regional circles that Tibetan refugees in Monyul acquire ST documents with the aid of local Monpas, brings to light the split between the Arunachali and Monpa constructions of indigenous identity. While the former rests on a clear delineation of self from the non-indigenous other, the latter is not able to banish the Tibetan from its idea of community. The matter of illegal ST certificates has resulted in a fractious public sphere in Arunachal Pradesh. It is this fractiousness that the anti-refugee demonstration and its aftermath with which I began this chapter, encoded, for it not only threatened to bring to the fore the gap between the political identities of the Monpas and Tibetans, but also the gap between Monpas and other Arunachalis. The silence in the town and the unofficial curfew that followed in the wake of

this demonstration was a charged and pregnant silence beneath which the tensions and problems of identities simmered.

Non-Monpa Arunachalis do not recognize any real difference between Monpas and Tibetans, and find the clearest evidence of the complicity between the two groups in the fact of false ST certificates. Yet, when the AAPSU organized a demonstration against refugees, including the Tibetans, in Monyul, it was an attempt to mobilize a regional consciousness among Monpa youth. The AAPSU rally against refugees may be seen as an attempt to “interpellate” Monpas to the Arunachal regional identity, which is to summon provisionally or momentarily recruit subjects to their identity structures (Hall 1985). Arunachali regionalist discourse clubs together Monpas and Tibetans in the same category, but it cannot deny the scheduled tribe status to Monpas. That is, despite the common sentiment among non-Monpas in Arunachal Pradesh that Monpas and Tibetans are the same, the Monpas’ *de jure* status as STs cannot be disputed. Since the Arunachali regional identity draws force from the common “tribal” status of its members, it cannot exclude Monpas from its community. The anti-refugee protests were aimed at performing as well as promoting an all-Arunachali “tribal” identity from which the Tibetans were excluded.

A section of Monpa youth also partially subscribe to this regional identity. The influence of the regional ideology is most evident in younger members of the Monpa population who move about in Arunachali regional circuits. In 2008, a young Monpa woman I met at the Rajiv Gandhi University in Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, told me that she thought the biggest problem to Monpa identity today were “the Tibetan refugees”. Many individuals within Monyul too, currently in the late thirties and early forties age-bracket, and who had studied in regional or national colleges in the 1990s, hold similar views. Norbu (a pseudonym), a young businessman in his late thirties, and supporter of the MARDC, was quite forthcoming. He said that the Tibetans were foreigners although, he hastened to add, they were “most loved guests”. He agreed with the AAPSU report which alleged that Tibetan refugees are illegally getting ST certificates because of their cultural similarities to Monpas and Sherdukpens, and offered his view that having the ST



certificate helps Tibetans to avail of certain facilities, and so the rich and influential ones among them covet these certificates for participating in electoral politics. He informed me that many Tibetan traders who have prospered seek to buy political fortunes by marrying off their daughters to local Monpa men, and thereby acquire ST certificates.

According to Norbu, it is unfair on the local people, when outsiders get into politics. He argued, “Do any business, but do not get into politics. They should not be in politics. It is the duty of the people here to select their leaders. I find it illogical when some people who are not indigenous to the area are getting into politics. In every house, it is the parents who should have authority, not the guests.....” According to him, those Tibetans who have false ST certificates harm the interests of both (Monpa and Tibetan) communities, for on one hand, they are running away from their Tibetan identity, and on the other, they are harming the interests of the true ST population by denying the latter opportunities in their own land. However, this same person had also stated his support for the MARDC demand, which rests on the Monpa-Gidu opposition.

Thus, sections of Monpa youth selectively incorporate elements of the dominant regional ideology without buying into its entire agenda. In 1997, the manifesto of the All Dirang Monpa Youth Welfare Association, a now defunct cultural organization, included an objective to “end ST Certificate problems”. According to Namang Tsering, a former office-bearer of the organization, sale of [tribal] land and marriage of [tribal] girls to non-tribals lead to the problem of [false] ST certificates. He told me that in the organization’s heyday, some members would find out who had false certificates by inquiring into their family history and lineage, and then they would visit these homes, demand that the certificates be produced and tear them up on the spot. The actions of the ADMYWA were targeted more against the malpractices of ST certificates and less against the Tibetan communities. The main issue for them was the fear of unemployment, for the proliferation of false ST certificates reduces employment opportunities for legitimate certificate holders. It should be noted that the same ADMYWA was involved in a campaign to preserve Tibetan toponyms, which I have discussed in chapter six. Therefore, actions and

statements directed against false ST certificates alone do not constitute grounds for identifying an Arunchali regional consciousness in Monpa youth.

Although the mostly young generations among Monpas speak out against the “ST certificate problem”, they have not polarized into camps for or against Tibetan refugees; rather the refugee issue exposes the ambiguities in Monpa positions towards Tibetans. Most Monpas appear cagey when probed about the refugee issue, and tend to dismiss the anti-refugee demonstration of 2007 as “just a student demonstration”. A former village council leader, hesitated when I asked him about Monpa-Tibetan relations. “*Theek hain*” (They are alright) was his short answer. But when probed about the AAPSU slogan “Go back, refugees”, this leader’s son, a young government employee, said that that had been a purely student demonstration and students, he implied, hardly knew enough. A young Monpa college teacher responded phlegmatically to my question about false ST certificates by saying that although there are a few who have got ST certificates through illegal means they are under the scanner of police and investigative agencies.

A small incident highlights the ambiguity in the attitude of Monpa youth towards Tibetans. In November 2009, a professor from a reputed institute in Kolkata gave a talk at Bomdila College, in which she compared the Tibetan populations with the people of Arunachal Pradesh. However, her observations on the Chinese role in Tibet in the course of the talk aroused the ire of many in the audience, especially of a young Monpa college teacher, who disapproved of her apparent disregard of human rights violations committed by China in the Tibet Autonomous Region. This young man was especially aroused by her comment that China was doing a good job in TAR, and disputed her statements that Tibetans held 95 percent of jobs in the Tibetan regional administration, or that there is regard for Tibetan culture in China. Tashi had the support of quite a few members of the audience, who seemed to feel that the professor was not sensitized enough to the plight of Tibetans in China.

In the same session, however, the professor faced a question from a young student in the audience in her late teens, whose question drew many embarrassed looks from the faculty, for she asked, “Do you think the Tibetans will dominate us, like the British? They are more developed [than the locals] and so their numbers would increase, they might even recourse to violence”.<sup>121</sup> The young girl asking the question was from the Sherdukpen tribe,<sup>122</sup> the other Buddhist tribe besides the Monpas in west Arunachal Pradesh, who had never been Tibetan subjects but had paid some form of tribute. The girl had obviously developed her idea of the Tibetans as being like “the British” in conversations with friends, peers, or perhaps relatives, and however misconstrued her take on the Tibetans was it represented a sentiment in which Tibetans are clearly the outsiders. Above all, her attitude portrayed how students in Arunachal Pradesh are recruited to a regional ideology in which all immigrants are seen as usurpers of local rights as well as resources.

There is thus a split in Monpa subjectivities between subscription to a regional ideology in which Tibetans are cast as interlopers and to the idea of a Tibetan Buddhist community, actively propagated by monks, intellectuals and educated professionals, in which Tibetans are accommodated. While some sections among Monpa youth claim that the anti-Tibetan sentiment is a thing of the past that only survives as old wives’ (or men’s) tales, there are other sections, represented by the likes of Norbu, for whom Tibetans are “guests” who should not overstep their limits. However, the majority acknowledges past injustices by Tibetans but extols tolerance in the present because Tibetans are the people of the Dalai Lama.

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<sup>121</sup> The professor’s answer, although intended to throw light on how well Tibetan refugees had assimilated into their local societies, was evasive. She had replied, “In Dharamsala Tibetans speak Tibetan, but in Darjeeling, they do not; they speak the local language. They have been in Darjeeling for 5-6 generations...In Bylakuppe, the first Tibetan settlement, they speak Kannada”.

<sup>122</sup> The Sherdukpen are an ethnic group concentrated mainly in three settlements, Rupa, Shergaon and Jigaon, of West Kameng districts are Buddhists like the Monpas, but are differentiated from the latter by their language. The Sherdukpen also have myths of Tibetan origin, but unlike the Monpas, did not come under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan state and only paid a nominal tribute to Tawang Dzong once in every three years (Chakravarty 1973: 7, Choudhury 1990: 148).

### **Complicating boundaries at the border: Labopas and Zhospas**

So far I have shown how region and religion exert competing pulls on Monpa subjectivities and shape Monpa-Tibetan relations in present Monyul. In this section, I show how the Monpas' ambiguous attitudes to the Tibetans amidst them are also a function of the border itself. In a border region where identities intersect and overlap, it is difficult to clearly differentiate indigenous from foreigner. The hybrid or spill-over of identities at the border troubles a regionalist discourse premised on rigid distinctions between indigenous and foreigner. I illustrate this argument by giving below examples of two groups in Tawang: the Labopa and the Zhospa. The first are inhabitants of a region adjacent to Tawang, which is currently outside Indian boundaries, while the latter are dwellers of a particular settlement within Tawang.

Zhospa, commonly distorted into Shyopa, refers to the inhabitants of Shyo *basti* (village) or Zhos village, which is located below the great Tawang monastery. This village was founded 300 years ago during the construction of the Tawang monastery as part of a monastic tradition whereby a group of people, deputed to serve the monastery and its inhabitants, settled down near the monastery premises. The average Monpa consider Shyopas to be Tibetans. When I was probing into the incident of false ST certificates, my friend Phunchu suggested that I inquire into the Shyopa or inhabitants of Shyo *basti*, a community of Tibetans who had migrated to the Mon areas long ago, and who had been granted ST status by the government. In fact, in the 1990s decade, the ST status given to Shyopas had drawn much media attention. Note the following reference to the residents of Shyo village below;

In 2002, the State Government of Arunachal Pradesh granted citizenship to ninety Tibetan refugee families of Shyo village living in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh bordering China. The Tibetans had fled to Arunachal Pradesh in 1950s and 1960s. But in the case of Chakmas and Hajongs the State government cites the East Bengal Regulation Act of 1873 for their forcible deportation. The 1873 Act requires taking of prior permission (Inner Line Permit) before entering into Arunachal Pradesh. However, the Chakmas and Hajongs who fled from then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) did not go to Arunachal Pradesh on their own. They were taken to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, present Arunachal Pradesh) by the Central Government with a view to permanently settle them there. The question is that if the Tibetans who fled to Arunachal

Pradesh on their own can be given India Citizenship, why can't the same be provided for the Chakmas and Hajongs, who had migrated from undivided India (Prasad 2006).

The author here speaks in the language of human rights while trying to argue for the citizenship eligibility of the Chakma-Hajong refugees.<sup>123</sup> But what I would like to highlight is the comparison he draws between Tibetan refugees *vis a vis* Chakma-Hajong refugees. The author questions the special treatment given to Tibetan refugees, and especially the government decision to grant “citizenship to ninety refugee families of Shyo village in Tawang district”. He suggests that there should not be any difference between the rights and provisions attached to the Shyopa and the Chakma-Hajong because they belong to the same category of displaced peoples.

However, the Shyopa do not completely fit the criteria for displaced peoples. The inhabitants of Shyo village have an ambiguous position in the history of Monyul. Most Monpas consider it a Tibetan settlement, while others say that it has a “mixed” population. During my first field visit to Tawang, many people tried to dissuade me from going to Shyo village because they assumed that since I was conducting research on Monpa identity and culture, I would not find anything to interest me in Shyo, where only Tibetans lived. Time and again, I encountered statements to the effect that Shyo was a Tibetan village. But when I raised the issue of Shyopa being Tibetans before Lama Thupten Phunsok, founder-principal of Manjusri orphanage, he argued that such labeling is incorrect, and offered the following explanation,

When Tawang monastery was built, some people were entrusted with getting the supplies of bamboo, wood – they are called *mi-se*. Those who work for the Tawang *gompa* [monastery], and the *gompa* helps them in return...they are called Tawang *Zhopa*. Every *gompa* has a *zho* in its premises, the people there are the *mi-se* of the *gompa*. They work for the maintenance of the *gompa*, and the *gompa* looks after their needs, tends to their problems. Whether they are called *Zhopa* everywhere, I don't know. Of course there is the Lhasa *Zhopa*. *The Tawang Zhopa are Indians*. Earlier there were only 5-6 houses; now of course, they have increased. Since they have been living here since 17<sup>th</sup> century when Tawang *gompa* was built, they must be counted as Monpas, no? They did come

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<sup>123</sup> Chakma-Hajong are an ethnic minority who were formerly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of undivided Bengal but after partition became part of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). In the years following India's partition, many Chakma-Hajong fled East Pakistan and settled in India, and although all the Chakma Hajong populations who settled in other parts of Northeast India were given citizenship, those in Arunachal Pradesh are still considered refugees (Prasad 2006)

from Tibet, but today the population of Zho *basti* [village] is mixed, with many having married Monpas. *It is very wrong to call them Tibetans. From 1914, when Tawang became part of India, they have been living here – so how can you call them Tibetan?* [emphasis added]

Zhospas/Shyopas were thus service-providers for the Tawang monastery and were involved in a patron-client relationship with the monastery. As generations of inhabitants of Zhos continued to engage in the same duties, they became a distinct community that cannot be termed Tibetan. There are two implications in this lama's statement. To call the people of Zhos village, Tibetan, would be to call them refugees, even though their forefathers had migrated to this part of India 300 years ago. The second implication is that national identities are only an effect of boundary demarcation, and hence, all those who were on the Indian side when the boundary was delineated were automatically drawn into the Indian national fold, no matter what their origins may have been.

The distinction between migrant and indigenous in a border region is a highly charged issue, but at the same time, it is highly ambiguous. The same ambiguity is also a feature of the Labopas, or the inhabitants of Labo, a region just above Zemithang/Pangchen on the Tibetan side of the border. Labo Tsho Zhi or Labo, in short, is a group of four villages on the Chinese side just across the current Monyul border. It would be more accurate to say that this used to be a group of four villages for these villages do not exist now, having been depopulated during the India-China border tensions. While Labopas are acknowledged to be Monpas, related in custom and dialect with the Monpas of the adjacent Pangchen settlements, they were put on the other side of the boundary line during the boundary demarcation of 1914. As a result, Labopas who emigrated to India during the 1950s became labeled as refugees, despite being ethnically of common stock as the Monpas. The erstwhile Labopas or inhabitants of Labo dispersed to different places, with many now living as Tibetan refugees in the Tibetan settlements in India.

The name Labo Tsho Zhi figures in Monpa written and oral narratives as one of the erstwhile Monpa settlements. Monpa educationist, Dorjee Tsering (2010) mentions in his paper

presented at a conference in Tawang, that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Fifth Dalai Lama had brought the following areas of Monyul under his control;

1. Labo-Tso-Dzi (This area had been annexed to Tibet in 1914 when the McMahon Line was negotiated)
2. Panchen- Ding-Drug (Present Zemithang circle)
3. Dagpa-Tso-Gyey (Present Dakpa-nang) [In Lumla circle of Tawang]
4. Shar Ngima Tso Sum (Present Tawang sub-division)
5. Drang Nang Chu Gyey (Present Dirang Circle)
6. Hrong-Nang Toe-Me (Present Kalaktang Circle)

Each division here refers to places that have been roughly reconstituted as circles or administrative sub-divisions within present Monyul, that is, *all except La po tsho zhi*. *Sbayul* or *The religious history* (2002) also cites the following places as having once constituted Monyul; Tsok Sum, La Po Tsho Zhi, Pangchen Ding Druk, Dagpa Tsho Gye, Drang Nang Tsho Dug, Rang Nang Tsho Zhi, Sha Hog Jangda. Note that in the English transliteration of Tibetan words in different documents, different spellings may be produced. I will use the spelling Labo Tsho Zhi, as this was what Sangey Leta, who translated the book suggested to me.<sup>124</sup> During fieldwork, I learnt that in the Tibetan taxation system, Labo was counted as part of Monyul, and Labopas were called Lhat or Lha-lang (servants). The Labo settlements were regarded as part of the same Mon region by Tibetan rulers. These were under Tawang monastery and under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan government. In Labo, the system of recruitment of monastic novices was similar to the one followed in neighboring Zemithang, currently on the Indian side. Thus, if three boys were born in a Labo household, the third son would be sent to Tsona gompa, and if four boys were born in the same house, Tawang gompa would take the fourth son. Many in Monyul told me that Labo was once considered part of Monyul, until the current boundary was delimited, and that Labopas too consider themselves Monpas. Gelong Nyima Don, a well-informed Bhoti teacher from Lebrang village told me that even today, some regional channels from China broadcast songs identified as “Labo Monpa” songs.

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<sup>124</sup> *Sbayul* or *The religious history* (2002) also mentions that Lapo tsho zhi had four settlements – i) La Po Sin Mo Tsho ii) Gom Ni Tsho iii) Ging Pa Tsho iv) Zhan Ley tsho (Conference paper, Tawang July 2010).

The name Labo Tsho Zhi has been almost erased from written record in the present, because most of the people dwelling in the Labo settlements fled to India in 1959-62 and currently live at the Tenzingaon Tibetan settlement in West Kameng. *Sbayul* (2002) additionally mentions that after the boundaries became solidified after 1959, Labo went into China's hands, while the other parts of Monyul remained with India. However, the people of former Labo who now live in Monyul are identified as refugees, as opposed to their Monpa counterparts who are identified as indigenous people in the national framework. When I went to meet an aged person originally from Labo, he told me that he had been sent at a very young age to Gompa Tse at Tsona to become a monk. He later fled with another monk friend to India via Tulung La (Mago) when the political disturbances started in China. However, he was evasive when I asked him whether he thought Labopas were Monpa or Bodhpa (Tibetan). His reply was, "It is hard to say who is Monpa and who is Tibetan, since China has decreed that all areas from Pangchen and below would be India's." (It is a common assumption of many people in the rural areas that the current boundary was decided by China)

What is striking about this man's response is the stark recognition that identities are territorially given and not ethnically ascribed. Labopas are refugees only by virtue of having been on the wrong side of the international boundary. Monpa-Tibetan relations in Monyul illuminate the messy social dimensions of an international border that physically divides Tibetan spaces from Monpa-Indian spaces. While a border-normative principle would align objective with subjective boundaries, in practice, the border is not a clean line that splits transnational subjectivities into national identities. Although the border defines the Monpas as *not* Tibetans by virtue of the former's location on one side of the border versus the other, the boundaries between the two groups are often blurred by inter-group marriages and other border-crossing exchanges. So, even as identities are defined by an international boundary that marks out those who belong from those who do not, they are reconstituted by actors negotiating complex historical and spatial fields.



If Labopas could be termed foreigners by virtue of having been on the Tibetan side when the boundary was drawn, then by the same logic, Tibetans who were on the Indian side when the boundary was fixed must be Indians. In arguing that the Zhospas are Indians because they had been living here since 1914, when the international boundary was drawn, Lama Thupten Phuntsok makes a profound statement. He states that which is seldom even implied in political discourses of national boundaries – that there is no innate difference between people of two different sides of a boundary, be it ethnic, national or other boundaries. *It is the boundary which creates, and propagates the difference.*

The cases of the Labopas and Zhospas show that while the nation-state identities of the world may hinge on essentialist definitions of the indigenous based on a territorial logic, such definitions may not be sustained in practice. Not only are Monpas considered to be like “Tibetan” by other Arunachali tribes, they also share bonds with people of Tibet that make them eschew exclusivist identities of indigeneity *vis a vis* Tibetans. In conventional discourses, indigeneity is premised on the distinction between the native versus the outsider, with the latter considered to maintain roots and ties extending outside native soil. While the indigenous peoples are considered to be rooted, refugees are uprooted. But such “arborescent” metaphors (Malkki 1997) of constructing indigeneity are disturbed when we consider social relations in a border such as the Monyul region. When Monpas are interpellated (Hall 1985) into a regional Arunachali identity, they have to identify as indigenes *vis a vis* Tibetans, with whom they share kinship, history and religious connections.

Contrary to a regional Arunachali ideology, therefore, Monpa articulations of indigeneity are ambiguous, and mostly occur in the context of applying for government benefits and in using the scheduled tribe certificate. But even in the latter, their differences with Tibetans are blurred by practices of illegibility when the same scheduled tribe certificates are also acquired by Tibetans. The boundaries between indigenous and foreign in the Monyul region thus are compromised by historical ties and contemporary practices alike. While an Arunachal Pradesh

student community strives to recruit Monpa youth into a regional ideology in which Tibetans are outsiders, their efforts are undercut by the ambiguous relations between Monpas and Tibetans.

### **Conclusion**

In previous chapters, I have shown how the idea of a trans-Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist community is evident in various aspects of Monpa cultural politics today. Disseminated primarily by the intellectual and monastic sections, the idea of a cultural community also finds resonance among lay Monpas from both urban and rural contexts. It is buttressed by contemporary cultural politics and oral traditions that perpetuate memories of contact through trade, kinship and pilgrimage. The alliance between Tibetans and Monpas is not, however, devoid of tensions, and this chapter was an attempt to indicate particular spaces and contexts in which differences between Monpa and Tibetan threaten to become polarized.

In the contemporary scene, the competition for resources in the form of affirmative action benefits doled out by the postcolonial state constitutes one arena where boundaries between Tibetans and Monpas threaten to resurface. Indeed, when a section of young Monpas express the view that Tibetans are to be tolerated only in so far as the latter remain within their limits and not behave like the indigenous people, these youth are speaking in the idiom of region, rather than religious community. But such views are contested by statements, also from young educated Monpas who argue that the anti-refugee attitude is an AAPSU regional project to which Monpas do not subscribe. Remembrances of past misdeeds on the part of Tibetan officers constitute another discursive space where difference is highlighted. But as I have already shown, such memories are mediated by present contingencies, where the Tibetans are seen as disempowered.

A third area of friction unravels in certain educational spaces outside Monyul, where individuals of both groups compete for privileges, once again as citizens and refugees. But in this case, it is the Monpas, despite being citizens, who are at the disadvantaged end. I draw on the experiences of two Monpa women, one young and the other past middle age who had studied in

Central Tibetan Schools to show how Tibetan students express their resentment toward their higher achieving Monpa cohorts by labeling them as outsiders. Central Tibetan Schools are administered by the Indian government, specifically by the Central Tibetan Schools' Administration (CTSA), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Human Resources, created by the Government of India in 1961, with the objective to educate Tibetan children living in India. There are around 71 CSTs spread across different states in India, from the primary to senior secondary levels, where the medium of education at the primary level is Tibetan and the syllabus, which conforms to the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) curriculum includes among other general subjects, the study of Tibetan history, geography and culture.<sup>125</sup>

Quite a few Monpas seek and are given admission in CSTs. Previously, it used to be difficult for Monpas to get admission for their children in these schools meant for Tibetan refugee children, and a lot of strings had to be pulled before any Monpa girl or boy could be enrolled. Usually, only influential Monpas managed to get admission for their children. In the 1990s, His Holiness Dalai Lama, answering a plea by Monpas on one of his visits to the region, agreed to have 10 seats reserved annually for Monpa children in the CSTs across India, and since then, Monpas have found it easier to get admission, and a steady number of young Monpas go every year to Varanasi and South India or the Central Schools for Tibetans to acquire a Tibetan education.

Mrs. Nima (a pseudonym), who is now in her sixties and comes from a well-to-do and politically connected Monpa family in Dirang, had been a student at a CST in the 1960s. She was admitted to the school at the insistence of her father who wanted his children to know more about their heritage. But Mrs. Nima was equivocal in her claim that "Tibetans do not like us [Monpas]". She alleged that her notes and preparations for exams used to be sabotaged by her Tibetan peers. Drema (a pseudonym), now in her 20s, who had also been a student at a CST in the 1990s, was

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<sup>125</sup> <http://ctsa.nic.in/> (Accessed 3 October 2011)

more restrained in her responses. But both women reported being the subjects of envy of their Tibetan classmates. This was more often the case when Monpa students fared better in studies in comparison to their Tibetan classmates, who would then accuse the former of being favored by the teachers because they were Indians. Both women however stress that the authorities were always helpful and came to the aid of the distressed Monpa students. Drema reports that the warden used to explain to the Tibetan children who tormented her, that they should cooperate since they eat of the same “*thali*” (dish), are the same, look the same, dress the same and so on.

The experiences of these former students of CST highlight the problems that Monpas face. While the Monpas reach out to the Tibetans to ameliorate their present regional marginality, they must confront possible rejection even by the Tibetans. Monpa parents send their children to CSTs in the hope that they acquire a Tibetan-based traditional education, but these children face discrimination because they are not “proper” Tibetans, so to speak. The Indian-ness of the Monpa students becomes the mark of their difference. That is, they might have the same culture, religion and traditions, but they have a different national identity, besides having once been subordinate to Tibetans in a civilizational hierarchy. More importantly, Monpas have a distinct political identity; they are not refugees, and so cannot aspire to the concessions given to refugees.

In other words, if the ST certificate is the peg on which hangs the identity of the citizen *vis a vis* the non-citizen in the rhetoric and politics of regional identity, then the special provisions for refugees in India enable a similar positioning for Tibetan refugees, but in reverse form. Tibetan students in CST explain the relatively better performance of their Monpa classmates with respect to grades as the result of a nationality bias; Indian teachers would naturally give higher grades to Indian students. What is striking here is that in such practices, Monpas who are otherwise cast to a corner in Indian nationalist imaginations are placed squarely within the Indian nation. That is, in Tibetan expressions of classroom rivalries, Monpas are invested with a nation-ness that is denied to them in official nationalist discourse, which sees as them as borderline

Indians. Further, both the ST certificate issue and the Tibetan-Monpa competition for grades in CSTs point to the very material practices around which issues of identity are played out.

While the articulation of a distinct Tibetan identity by Tibetan refugees through classroom competition unfolds mostly outside Monyul, on select occasions, this identity also becomes visible within Monyul. For example, during the Dalai Lama's visit to Bomdila in November 2009, various institutions, organizations and groups banners put up streamers and banners to welcome His Holiness in the Bomdila market place. Among these, was a banner put up by the Tibetan People of Arunachal Pradesh. The wordings of the banner proclaimed the Tibetans to be a distinct group among several others in Arunachal Pradesh. This was also an open declaration of identity in a context where otherwise identity is sought to be blurred for political reasons.

The friction between Monpas and Tibetans issuing from the former's regional affiliations is, however, countered by efforts of the Tibetan Buddhist religious leadership within Monyul. In 2009 when there was worldwide protest against the Chinese oppression of monks in Tibet, the Indian government prohibited Indian nationals from engaging in any show of solidarity with the Tibetans. Despite this, T.G. Rinpoche defied state injunctions to lead a procession from Tawang monastery (8 July 2009, *The Telegraph*). Similarly, during the period of Tibetan protests against Chinese atrocities on monks in 2008, monks, nuns as well as villagers in Tawang took out candle-light processions in a display of their solidarity with the Tibetans.

The reaching out to the Tibetans, on the part of the Monpas, is evident in their narratives of origins that trace genealogical connections to Tibet, discussed in chapter four, or in the support for Tibetan as the official mother tongue in Monyul, discussed in chapter three, or in the increasing number of non-governmental organizations dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist heritage in Monyul that have mushroomed in the past decade. Further, there is a revival of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural toolkit, and several educational institutions have incorporated the study of Tibetan culture in their curricula. For example, in Shanti Deva Vidyalaya, a private

school in West Kameng, students say their prayers in Tibetan during the morning assembly, although they follow it up with a pledge of allegiance to the nation in English. Till 2008, school houses were named after Tibetan rivers, Zha chu, Dhe chu, Ma chu, and Ke chu, but were changed to colors in 2009; Nong po (Blue), Kar po (White), Mar po (Red) and Sher po (Yellow). There is a weekly competitive event where current news items in Tibetan newspapers have to be translated into Hindi and presented by students. A similar effort to inculcate knowledge of the Monpas' Tibetan Buddhist heritage was also evident in Guru Padmasambhava School of Bomdila. Since 2010, the study of Tibetan languages has become a part of school syllabi from the primary level onwards in most of the schools of Monyul.

In previous chapters, I have discussed how the specific form of Monpa cultural politics that finds prominent expression in the demand for autonomy and struggles for Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa expresses *translocal community*, although the spatial scope of this community shifts contextually. Therefore, I had also discussed how the particular status of Monyul as a disputed border territory influences how translocal community is articulated, for while on the one hand, proponents of Mon autonomy invoke their trans-border Tibetan connections, on the other, the suspect status of the Monpas as occupying a nebulous national territory and the hyper-surveillance measures in this region prevent the Monpas from stressing their identifications with the Tibetan world. Indeed, in the statements of many Monpas, declarations of historical and kinship affinities with Tibetans are accompanied by disclaimers regarding such ties in the present. The controversial status of Monyul as a disputed territory introduces caveats in articulations of transnational belonging.

In this chapter, I have tried to draw attention to some further challenges to trans-border articulations, which emerge most tellingly in exclusionary definitions of the Arunachali or Monpa "tribal" citizen *vis a vis* refugees, and in the matter of the scheduled tribe certificates. The formation of an Arunachali regional identity with the passing of the years since the Monpas' regional integration has had an impact on Monpa subjectivities, and a regional consciousness

coexisting with the memory of exploitative Tibetan officials threaten to drive a wedge between Monpas and Tibetans. But while I came across many old people willing to share their experiences of hardship during Tibetan rule, there were also others who stated that they did not wish to say anything against the Tibetans because they were the “Dalai Lama’s people”. Many Monpas, not connected to the monastic circuit, expressed their difference with Tibetans as “just political”, implying that the difference in their identities is imputed by political boundaries. Thus, historical relations reinforced in the present through the figure of the Dalai Lama, and current possibilities envisaged by the Monpas, of participating and partnering in a resurgent Tibetan Buddhist civilizational community, constitute a buffer against the Arunachali regional ideology.

## Chapter 8

### *CONCLUSION* CORRIDOR, NODES AND IMAGINED GEOGRAPHIES

I opened this dissertation with a focus on the MARDC movement for local autonomy, and through it, I have identified certain endeavors of place-making visible in contemporary cultural and political discourses and practices in Monyul. While the autonomy demand claims to be in the interest of the Monyul region (and its residents), the underlying spatial imaginations, promoted by the religious leadership in collaboration with a section of intellectuals and politicians, construct trans-local community between the Monpas and other Tibetan Buddhists of the Indian Himalayas. However, the form of this community is shifting and malleable, deriving from other relations and networks in which Monpas are embedded. That is, while some religious and political leaders attempt to foreground Monyul as a Buddhist place, and part of a network of other Tibetan Buddhist sites in the Indian Himalayas, their efforts are consistently undercut by opposite tendencies and pressures.

In my chapters, therefore, I have examined how articulations of trans-border community both emerge, and are simultaneously contained, through oral narratives of origin; for individual narrators, on one hand, claim Tibetan origin for Monpas, and on the other, deny their Tibetan connections to assert indigenous belonging. I have further examined how popular resistance to Hindi renaming by the Indian army of Monyul's places is tied to the wider politics of constructing community; and yet, throughout these different chapters, I have maintained that assertions of place and identity with regard to Monyul promoting the latter's Tibetan Buddhist character are constantly challenged by the Monpas' regional obligations as well as the disputed status of this border region. While the particular constraints introduced by regional forces are dwelt on in chapter seven, Monyul's disputed border status runs as a common thread through all the chapters, interrupting and modifying assertions of translocal community.



On the one hand, the border, located at the confluence of multiple forces and flows, provides a particular vantage point to interrogate singular or homogenous ideas of space (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), and thus facilitates an “anti-essentialist” perspective of place and identity (Massey 1994). On the other hand, the disputed status of the Monyul-Tibet border allows us to observe how people constantly negotiate between their national and transnational affiliations, and how the resulting compromises create new forms of politics. This is noticeable in narrations of origins, discussed in chapter four, where the disputed border and the Monpas’ suspect status lead to articulations of indigenous identity through appropriations of a cross-border legend as the tale of a local hero. It is also manifest in the Monpas’ discourse of autonomy, discussed in chapter three, where supporters chose to couch their demand for political change in constitutionally acceptable language. Despite the primary objective of the autonomy demand being the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist traditions within Monyul, in which the local Tibetan Buddhist leadership is working in alliance with Tibetan Buddhist leaders from other Himalayan pockets of India, the demand itself is articulated through the constitutional model of autonomous council. The disputed border status of Monyul intervenes in articulations of community, and introduces compromises and ambiguities in transnational articulations.

Fluid constructions of place in Monyul are thus very much a function of this region’s disputed status, which, more than other contexts, prevents singular identifications to develop, as regional, national and transnational allegiances constantly overlap and conflict. Using “anti-essentialist” theories of space and place, I have not taken for granted any of the spatial forms accruing from ties of local, transnational or regional allegiances; instead I have tried to show how these conflicting allegiances give rise to shifting spaces that emerge contextually. Like scholars of identity politics who have sought to examine the particular constructions and strategic positionings that enable identities to solidify, even while recognizing the latter’s fluid, multiple and processual character, I have observed the historical and contemporary – and often, quite

individual – processes that allow identities to become fixed to particular places, if only momentarily, through discourse, practice and politics.<sup>126</sup>

In this concluding chapter, I attempt something different. I propose to go beyond the previous kind of analysis by dwelling for a bit on the new imaginations of community that my previous chapters have flagged. Since these notions of community have an obvious spatial character, I categorize them as the Himalayan imagined geography. It is an imagined geography since it is not (yet) a territorial identity and not tied to any one particular region. Rather than being a politically demarcated geography of territorially contiguous spaces, it constructs community among dispersed populations across the Himalayas through alliance instead of through proposals for territorial changes; and secondly, it is a flexible geography, constantly mutating into different configurations depending on context, as I have shown in my earlier chapters. Although I lack primary ethnographic data from other Himalayan areas to support my thesis, I reflect on available material to venture some preliminary suggestions about this emergent Himalayan geography.

My intention here is not to suggest that earlier networks that were suppressed after the 1950s could be returned in the present. Other social and political arteries, which includes national as well as regional postcolonial identities that have become prominent since the detachment of Monyul from Tibet, have ensured that neither Mon nor Himalayan can be coterminous with the geographies of an earlier period. Himalayan is not a new “edition” of Tibetan: it is a new entity altogether.

### **Re-imagining the Himalayas**

The Himalayan identity has traditionally been known both as a cartographic identity, that is, mappable in a sense that correlates loosely with geophysical features of the landscape, and a category in academic and political discourse, referring also to a geographical location, that

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<sup>126</sup> In discussions of indigeneity, for example, terms such as “strategic essentialism” (Lee 2006) and “indigenous slot” (Karlsson 2003) have been used to describe the provisional consolidation of indigenous identity.

includes the border areas of Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in India, as well as border states, such as Nepal, Bhutan and the Tibetan region. Some scholars go so far as to equate the Himalayas with a Buddhist zone: "...the entire Himalayas form a Buddhist zone.....Despite a large number of Hindus in the region not many temples are to be seen around. Most hilltops are studded with chortens and monasteries" (Subba 1990: 71). And again, "...the entire Himalayas contain basically what is described as the Buddhist culture" (*Ibid*: 75). It is interesting that along with geographical continuity, what is stressed in such applications of the term is religious continuity. Although there are many populations and places in the Himalayan region that are *not* Buddhist, usages such as the above create a discursive space where Himalaya does not remain only a geographical signifier, but slides to a religio-territorial referent.

We notice a similar shift in contemporary discourses in Monyul, especially in statements given by Tibetan Buddhist monks. The following statement, exemplary in a way, by Lama Tashi, principal of the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in West Kameng shows what Himalaya connotes for Tibetan Buddhist monks in Monyul as well as outside of it:

...culture is cultivated in the mind. If we look at the Himalayan people, we can see what they have cultivated in the last few centuries. The Himalayan culture has mostly been influenced by the Buddhist culture, and without knowing the Buddhist culture, you won't know the Himalayan culture.

A Ladakhi author of a research article on Bhoti expresses similar sentiments, "With the advancement of modern harsh and hostile civilization ..... the language and culture of the Himalayan region is disappearing, declining and degenerating very fast" (Dawa 2006). In usages such as this, the history of the Himalayan region is intertwined with the history of Tibetan Buddhism (excluding the other branch of Buddhism, *viz.* Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism), and hence, Himalaya accrues a certain cultural capital, transitioning from a purely territorial marker (of the geographical region called Himalaya) to signifying a symbolic and cultural geography. The Himalayan imagined geography rests on the *selective* appropriation of certain religious and

cultural markers in order to sketch an alternative landscape for the Himalayan identity. The Himalayan social space, so stated, excludes those linguistic or ethnic communities who live in the Himalayan ranges but do not practice Buddhism.

In such discursive use, Himalaya articulates an imagined geography that does not have to be tied to any national territory and can potentially be both a trans-border and inter-regional category; trans-border, because it can cross the boundaries of India, to cover Nepal, Bhutan, and at times, even Mongolia, and inter-regional, because it connects the Tibetan Buddhist areas of India's northern and north-eastern borderlands horizontally.

In the context of contemporary cultural politics in Monyul, paralleled among other Tibetan Buddhist minorities of India, Himalaya is additionally reconfigured from being a religio-territorial term to a practical category for mobilization and a form of spatial politics. As I have shown in chapter three, in particular representations, "Himalaya" steps in as a substitute for "Tibetan", especially in negotiations between Tibetan Buddhist monks and the Indian state for the preservation of cultural traditions. It arises at a juncture when Tibetan Buddhist communities outside Tibet have need of a politically-neutral banner under which they might mobilize. In such contemporary discourses, Tibet is constantly present in the background, but only as distant founder, for it physically cannot be accommodated in the new geography. What is stressed, instead, is the community of Tibetan Buddhist populations within India, where the Tibetan exile community is included (frequently with caveats, as I have shown). That is, rather than Tibet, it is the Tibetan Buddhist traditions that take centre stage here, and correspondingly, the architects of this imagined geography are the religious or spiritual leaders of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, supported by some educated sections and political elites.

The Himalayan imagined geography also constructs a moral geography, and not simply because it is, as envisioned by monks, associated with the Tibetan Buddhist religious community. DeRogatis (2003) notes the conflation of physical and moral landscape in the discourse of American Protestant missionaries in the context of the settling of the American frontier. The

inhabitants of the “wild” frontier were not only seen as encountering physical dangers but also moral degeneration, and the missionaries’ call to frontier emigrants to refrain from immoral habits (e.g. swearing profanely, cheating, drinking excessively etc.) forged a “moral geography”. We find similar allusions to such a moral landscape derived from Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary Monyul. When Buddhist leaders lament the loss of compassion and peace extolled in Buddhist scriptures in the areas they current inhabit as a result of new immigrations and new cultural imports (Christianity), they impose a moral geography onto the spiritual cultural geography that is articulated. The Monpas’ regional dominance by other Arunachali groups is attributed to certain moral characteristics of the former, such as peaceful, non-violent temperament, considered to be an outcome of Tibetan Buddhist influence. However, I limit myself now to simply calling attention to the moral dimensions of the Himalayan imagined geography, as it is beyond the pale of my expertise, and this thesis, to expound on these moral dimensions here.

When Monpa leaders from mainly monastic sections identify with a “Himalayan culture”, they stake a similar claim to the Tibetan Buddhist cultural capital. Even though, physically, the present districts of Monyul form only a small part of the entire Himalayan ranges, the transmutation of Mon into Himalayan becomes possible through the conflation of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and a Himalayan landscape. This argument may provoke questions as to how far the Mon (in the Mon Autonomous Region demand) identity is coterminous with the Himalayan Buddhist identity. Is Mon *qua* Himalayan *part* Himalayan in territorial scope but *all* Himalayan in religious character? Or is Mon a subset of Himalayan? We cannot express identities in mathematical formula; what is more important to stress here is that in certain monastic expressions, Mon *is* Himalayan in terms of terrain (montane and sub-montane) and religious tradition (Tibetan Buddhist). *Landscape, religion and cultural traditions are conflated in the Himalayan imagined geography.*

In this dissertation, I have also drawn attention to certain contemporary trends in Monyul, noted in the growing popular consciousness about the need to preserve Monyul's Buddhist cultural heritage, in the increasing number of private "culture based school[s] for the promotion of culture" in Monyul, in the restoration of previously neglected sites as Buddhist sacred places (*gnas*), and in the call to preserve ancient Buddhist and pilgrimage sites. I have also mentioned the great number of non-government organizations with the aim of Buddhist culture preservation now seen in the public spaces of Monyul.

The term Himalaya appears in the names of many of the non-government organizations in Monyul and outside formed with an objective to preserve Buddhist culture. Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association is the name of the umbrella organization, which has its headquarters in Delhi, and to which Tibetan Buddhists from the different regional corners subscribe or are office-bearers. Several other organizations that are regionally distributed work on similar lines. In West Kameng district, for example, there are three major organizations devoted to this end; Buddhist Culture Preservation Society, founded by T.G. Rinpoche, Monyul Traditional Culture Development Society, founded by the abbot of Tawang monastery, Himalayan Culture and Tradition Preservation Society, founded by Jigme Rapten Rinpoche in Dirang.

The idea of Mon as a Buddhist geography is definitely one promoted by the Tibetan Buddhist religious elite who also command the economic resources and social influence to do so. The movement for Mon Autonomous Region, as I have already shown, has a strong religious leadership motivated by a need to preserve Buddhist cultural traditions in Monyul. In chapter three, I called attention to how the politics of Bhoti language and Sowa Rigpa medicine are connected to the growing challenges to the livelihood of monks in the contemporary world. Even though it is frequently difficult to make a distinction between the interests of the Buddhist clergy and that of the lay society, including ordinary village monks, the promotion of Monyul as

an essentially Buddhist place is mostly an act of the local religious elite who has the support of the some politicians.

In order to understand how imaginations of pan-Himalayan community visible in Monyul connect to developments outside Monyul, we need an inside-outside vision, or bifocal perspective (Peters 1997) or extroverted gaze (Massey 1991, 1992). In other words, imaginations of community are reflected in contemporary Monyul but are not exhausted in the latter; rather, Mon represents one dot in an emergent connect-the-dots pattern. It is useful at this point to recapitulate theoretical conceptions about locality that have guided my analysis. *Mon qua* Himalayan is an extroverted concept which is both inside of Mon and also outside, for it relates to processes occurring inside Monyul but whose purview extends well beyond its locality.

### **State and transnational influences**

Anthropologists K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal (2003), who are guided by the same perspective as critical scholars of locality (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Glick Schiller 2009, Massey 1994), write:

Localities exist not because of something innate within a particular site in space...Rather, discrete points in an abstract spatial grid have little meaning in themselves, and spaces become localities because of how they are situated in particular networks with other people, places, and social entities. Localities are produced as *nodes in the flows of people and ideas*, and are thoroughly socially constructed (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003: 12)

Underscoring the non-local character of so-called “localities”, these scholars argue that the local, far from being a pristine space, is produced in systematic articulations of social, economic, and cultural processes. Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal’s remarks and especially their observation about “nodes in the flows of people and ideas” strongly resonate with my argument in relation to the Himalayan imagined geography. Trans-local networks and flows in the name of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation give particular content to Monyul’s locality.

In the context of what is happening in the Himalayas, it is possible to understand that the locally unfolding processes in Mon are not merely being shaped by trans-local forces but equally contribute to the latter – they are firmly embedded in an entire set of interconnected discourses and practices. Although I can only represent what I have encountered in the field, I also recognize that I cannot speak only of a Mon space, but need to understand at what point do the objectives of this so-called local struggle coincide with those of a trans-local struggle? While discussing the demand for a Mon Autonomous Region in chapter three, I have already shown how it was inspired by the similar movement in Ladakh, to the extent that T.G. Rinpoche had invited a lama from Ladakh to Monyul in the initial stages of the movement. The attempts to construct a Mon Buddhist geography are clearly nodal developments in the cross-border flow of particular ideas relating to Tibetan Buddhism. We get an idea about the points of coincidence by comparing briefly two documents.

In 2009, the government of Arunachal Pradesh announced the creation of a new department of Karmic and Adhyatmik Affairs (*Tso-rig*) of Tawang and West Kameng district to look after the subject of Buddhist culture preservation, under the department of Cultural Affairs of the state government of Arunachal Pradesh at Itanagar. Not surprisingly, the then Monpa chief minister put T.G. Rinpoche in charge of overseeing the functioning of this department.<sup>127</sup> I reproduce the “Nine Point Agenda” of the Tso-Rig department below, a document that I collected from Dorjee Norbu, the then secretary of the Buddhist Culture Preservation Society in Bomdila. I then show how the agenda here tallies with the objectives outlined in another document, produced outside Monyul. The Nine Point agenda includes the following tasks;

1. To maintain and look after and registration of monasteries, gompas, stupas....

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<sup>127</sup> Rumor has it that T.G. Rinpoche gave an application to a senior political representative in Delhi for the creation of such a department in Arunachal Pradesh, since such a department already exists in Sikkim, Bhutan and Ladakh. The political representative told him to get the signatures of at least 15 MLAs (Member of Parliament) from Arunachal Pradesh. He could get only two. He went back and told the political representative that his one person represented lakhs of people (his followers), and keeping the proposal on the desk, he came away. Story goes that three days later, he got the permission for the creation of such a department.



2. To provide aid and support to indigenous religious institutions, scholarships and fellowship
3. Renovation and reconstruction of old monasteries and other pilgrimage places
4. To preserve wild life, ecology and environment
5. Promotion of religious studies, including arts
6. To establish and support study centers for the Sowa Rigpa traditional healing systems...
7. To establish monastery and Dharamshalas for the local pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Lumbini etc.
8. Support and supervision over the traditionally maintained ceremonies and festivals
9. To conduct research and publication, workshop and seminars related to local tradition, culture and Bhoti language.

It should be noted that this document pertains to the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist cultural works and spaces, rather than the promotion of a Monpa ethnic landscape. To put it in a different way, the document projects the culture of the West Kameng and Tawang areas as overlapping with the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. I should also note that T.G. Rinpoche, who held a ministerial portfolio in the Arunachal Pradesh state government till 2010, did not compete in the state assembly elections in 2010. Gossip has it that the then chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, also a Monpa man and member of the Indian National Congress party, entered into an agreement with him that resulted in the creation of the new Tso-rig department headed by T.G. Rinpoche.

Now let us compare the Nine Point Agenda with the objectives of another document that came into being in November 2011. This document, known as the Lumbini Declaration consists of the resolutions adopted at a joint Himalayan conference at Lumbini, Nepal, attended by political representatives and civil society leaders from Nepal and India and eminent leaders of

Tibetan Buddhism from the Himalayan world as well as abroad.<sup>128</sup> I present an abridged version of these objectives below;

1. Protect the living culture and the Bhoti language of the authentic Nalanda-Tibetan forms of Buddhism...
2. Preserve important Trans-Himalayan and Indo-Tibetan cultural sites...
3. Promote monastic education, training and common standards, including recognition and training of tulkus and lamas.... promote the welfare of disadvantaged followers of Tibetan forms of Buddhism ...
4. Provide mutual support in balancing Nalanda-Tibetan Buddhist traditions and practices as they encounter 21st century needs...

The points of convergence between the aims in these two documents show the common practices or politics that are being forged among Tibetan Buddhist communities of the Tibetan borderlands, inside as well as outside India. The common objectives of different institutes and organizations dedicated to the goal of Buddhist culture preservation suggest that they are the result of a dialogue between Tibetan Buddhist leaders. In chapter three, I highlighted a statement by T.G. Rinpoche, in which he laments the lack of organization among Buddhists, and extols organization as the need of the hour. The systematic drive to promote Bhoti or Tibetan as the mother tongue of borderland Tibetan Buddhists of India during census operations suggests one effect of organization. The modalities of this organized community are not yet formalized, but are indicative of a certain process at work. It is only by apprehending the intent of alliance and organization among Tibetan Buddhist monastic populations that we realize that the discourses about the preservation of the Himalayan Buddhist culture in Tibetan Buddhist pockets of India and its trans-border areas arise separately and yet, in sync.

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<sup>128</sup> <http://sarr.emory.edu/projects-himalayas.html> (Accessed 2 December 2011)

Further, it is possible to connect the contemporary cultural revivalism in Monyul with the transnational resurgence of Tibetan Buddhism. Scholars have argued that Tibetan identity in exile is a modern identity that has been influenced by transnational culture (see Huber 2001). An essentialized modern Tibetan national identity, formed by the leadership of the exile community, is selectively based on the anchor of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition, excluding other religious traditions of Tibet such as the Bon religion; and this modern Tibetan exilic identity arose out of interactions between Tibetan Buddhist leaders from Dharamsala and South Asian Buddhist leaders in international Buddhism conferences (Ibid: 362). The participation of the Dharamsala elites in the activities of international Buddhist groups, such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists (founded in 1950) and the World Buddhist Sangha Council (founded in 1966), and in the latter's precepts and principles of world peace directly contributed to the formation of an exilic Tibetan identity that rested on the representation of an essential, non-violent Tibetan identity.

International attention on Tibetan Buddhism, and conversely, participation of Monpa monks in international Tibetan Buddhist forums, has similarly aided religious revival in Monyul. It is reported that many high-ranking monks in Monyul maintain contact with foreign donors, and their contacts in Western countries have helped hundreds of poor villagers to find foreign sponsors for education. A number of trends indicate transnational patronage in the revival of Buddhist culture in Mon. Monastery building is going on at a furious pace with the flow of dollars, yen or euros into Monyul. For example, in 2009, I visited the construction site of the new Chilipam *gompa*, a Nyingma monastery in Rupa, West Kameng. The original *gompa* is small, surrounded by the living quarters of the monks and chamber of Guru Rimpoche. But the new one, which was nearing completion at that time, is huge, golden, magnificent and full of innovative Buddhist designs. The *tsam* (meditation) area for monks going into retreat is also a constructed place atop a hillock. The global circulation of money and resources in the name of Tibetan Buddhism has not left Monyul on the periphery.

Networks forged during monastic circulation may also have helped in the (re)imagining of Monyul as a Buddhist place. Many Monpa religious leaders currently engaged in preserving and promoting Tibetan Buddhist traditions in Monyul are monk returnees from the Tibetan monasteries of South India. Jigme Rapten Rinpoche of Dirang, popularly known as Shemo Rinpoche, went to Ganden Jangtse monastery in Mundgod, South India for his monastic studies at the age of nine. He was recruited from his village, Dirang *basti*, by some monks from South India. After completing his Geshe Lharampa degree (highest monastic degree in Buddhist philosophy), he returned to his native village and is currently engaged in a project to build what he hopes will be the largest Gelug monastery in Dirang town. He is the chairman of the local non-governmental organization, Himalayan Culture and Tradition Preservation Society, whose president, however, is based in South India. Shemo Rinpoche says, “We are Himalayan peoples...I am interested in preserving our culture...I wanted to do something for the public good, and so I started non-governmental work”. The personal histories and career trajectories of other monk returnees, including that of T.G. Rinpoche, reveal similar connections with wider Tibetan monastic circuits.

Finally, while the Himalayan geography is influenced by and indicative of translocal networks, it is important to recognize that this does not mean a receding role for the nation-state. The disputed border status of Monyul influences government policies and decisions regarding this region, and its relations and interactions with transnational actors are often mediated by the state. Both the Indian state and the actors leading Monyul’s cultural politics are involved in mutual negotiations. I have already noted how proponents of Bhoti and Sowa Rigpa negotiate with constitutional policies for the official recognition of these practices. But the state too makes concessions and allowances for this region to keep it within its spheres of influence. The Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies at Dahung, West Kameng was established with funds from the Department of Culture in the Union Ministry of Culture and Tourism, although the project

proposal mentions that the institute will attempt to generate its own funds after five years of its establishment.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012, the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh Nabam Tuki announced that the government would give funds of rupees 4 crore (40 million) for the Tawang monastery in addition to more than rupees 1 crore for various development measures. He also said at the same meeting that the state cabinet has approved regularization of services of 36 Bhoti teachers and the upgrading of the middle school at Zemithang to secondary level, besides completion of the important Lumla-Tashigang road. Without opposing the demand for Mon autonomy, he said that the demand needs introspection.<sup>129</sup> The actions of the Arunachal Pradesh chief minister, quite evidently representing the national political leadership, are clearly oriented to ensuring the continuing loyalties of a disputed border region. Fears for national security enable paradoxically the transnational mapping of Monyul as Buddhist place.

### **Corridor, periphery or node in a network?**

So far, I have attempted to show how the Himalayan spatial formation is localized in the politics and practices of current Monyul. Although the specific strains and pressures on Monpa spaces will not be the same as the strains and pressures on, say, Ladakhi space, the two have identified a common space of belonging which is the “Himalayan region”. Taking these fragmented but connected happenings into account, we may make a suggestion about the shape of this imagined geography, and how it may redistribute cores and peripheries.

Previously, Monyul had been subservient to Tibet with which it was positioned as periphery to core, and Monpas were subordinate to the Tibetan overlords. Yet, common ties of religion and culture and Monyul’s importance as trade route undercut some of its peripheral status and constructed it as a corridor or gateway in a trans-Himalayan (Bhutan-Monyul-Tibet) trade

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<sup>129</sup> “4000-cr corpus fund announced for Tawang Buddhist monastery”, *Hindustan Times*, Kolkata, Monday, December 3, 2012.

circuit. Roger Rouse (1991) uses the term *transnational circuit zone* to characterize the transnational *circuits* created by rural Mexican migrants who not only remit money back to their homes and home country but also maintain continuous connections with home through return migrations or seasonal work-related migrations instead of becoming diaspora. In pre-1950s Monyul, seasonal trans-Himalayan migrations, stemming from trade needs and pilgrimage purposes, similarly constructed a transnational circuit zone; and although these routes have almost disappeared, memories and narratives of cross-border trade, pilgrimage and kinship point to one way in which Monyul was (and continues in subterranean manner to be) a corridor in a trans-Himalayan circuit.

The events after the 1950s, and especially after the 1962 India-China boundary war, when Monyul was disconnected from Tibetan spaces, led not only to the loss of Monyul's gateway status but also to reorientation for the Monpa communities, as well as for other Tibetan-related communities of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands. In the colonial and postcolonial period, Monyul was constructed as margin and periphery with renewed intensity. Yet, following the diasporic spread of Tibetans, increasing worldwide popularity of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and other events of global scale, there are emerging discourses and practices in contemporary Monyul which parallel other processes unfurling in the Indian Himalayas, and sometimes, even in regions beyond. Since the Monpas' experiences are shared by these other Tibetan Buddhist minorities of India, the ideas and politics currently taking shape in Monyul are not occurring in isolation but as part of other cross-border processes. How might one locate Monyul in the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist community?

While in the previous Tibetan Buddhist circuits, Monyul was a participating trade route, in the new envisioning of a Tibetan Buddhist alliance, where Tibet as center is absent, Monyul is offered the possibility (promise?) of a partnership that was not available to it before. As a potential node in cross-border flows, Monyul is more empowered than a trade corridor. In some statements, the Dalai Lama has indicated that he may choose to be reborn outside China, and

there are speculations as to the important role Tawang may play if the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama chooses to reincarnate in Tawang itself (*The Economist* 2010). The Dalai Lama had taken birth in Tawang once already in his sixth reincarnation. Many residents of Tawang are aware of the significance of Tawang in the absence of a strong center within Tibet and hazard the opinion that today “many look at Tawang for direction when it comes to preserving Tibetan culture and heritage” (Tashi, *quoted in Segal* 2009). Periphery may be redrawn by the repositioning of Monyul within the trans-Himalayan frame.

If we treat the (re)imagined Himalayan geography as a formation, we may infer possible trajectories for it. Formations, as Raymond Williams (1977: 113-119) writes, are not institutionalized structures but processes in the making, which may later become oppositional formal structures. In its current form, the Himalayan geography that I have outlined does not physically bound off a Himalayan region as distinct from other surrounding regions. That is, it does not translate into a Himalayan homeland or state. It is unlike modern territorial forms – exemplified by the nation-state – with a defined center (in the central or national government and its offices) and boundaries. Yet, it is not a space of diffuse imaginings without any structure or direction at all. Although the Himalayan formation does not present any crystallized formal structure it is also not simply a space of “hope” (Crapanzano 2003), a waiting characterized by non-directional, non-specific desire. The imagined geography that I have presented here is a space of activism forged by monks through concrete programs for Tibetan Buddhist culture preservation and promotion. It is additionally a space of pragmatism, for it identifies specific measures that need to be taken to ensure the survival of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan region.

Is it possible to see this Himalayan space as a pluri-centric geography, where previous enclaves are connected to become nodes in cross-border flows, routed possibly through newly established institutes of learning? Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies is an institute for Tibetan Buddhist scholarship at Dahung, West Kameng, which was conceptualized in 2000 and

formally recognized in 2010. An interview with the founder principal of the Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies at Dahung, West Kameng and certain documents provided by him that contained the institute's manifesto, reveal that the objectives of this institute overlap with the aims of the two documents – Nine Point Agenda of Tsoorig department and the Lumbini Declaration – outlined above. The project proposal of the institute contains the following observation:

It is seen that despite the best intentions, neither the national plans for educational development have proved adequate and appropriate for these communities in the trans-Himalayan belt with their rich cultural heritage, nor have any worthwhile local plans been initiated...What an irony that the culture of *karuna* [compassion], *ahinsa* [non-violence] and *maitri* [friendship] that are now being adopted in the West, are allowed to stagnate in parts of the country of their origin.<sup>130</sup>

The project proposal further mentions that this institute, which was set up after a proposal by the Buddhist Culture Preservation Society of West Kameng, would offer students of Arunachal Pradesh, otherwise deprived of education in “traditional subjects” because of their distance from Tibetan and Buddhist research institutes, opportunity for higher learning in the fields of “Buddhology, Bhot language and literature and Himalayan Studies” among other things. The proposal projects Monyul as one of the places where Buddhism “originated” and locates the institute as a participating node in a network of institutes, similarly oriented to disseminating Buddhist studies. So while the re-imagined Himalayan geography is not a physically unified entity; it is a cohesive set of discourses and practices promoted by the Tibetan Buddhist leadership and channeled possibly, through an inter-connected network of institutions.

It is equally possible that in the alternative geography, new cores and peripheries are being formed where Monyul's location is still ambiguous. Although many political projects disguise relationships spatially, where there seems to be no core, that is hardly ever the case. Certain criteria are explicitly singled out for defining who can belong and who are excluded. The

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<sup>130</sup> “A brief project proposal for the establishment of Central Institute for Himalayan Culture Studies, Dahung, Distt. West Kameng (Arunachal Pradesh)”



core then can be detected by the people it indicates as belonging. Certainly, the question arises then, whether all are nodes equal?<sup>131</sup>

Thus, the emergent form of the Himalayan geography is a negotiated one. It is mediated not only by transnational networks in which it is embedded, but also by a nation-state anxious to protect its borders. However, it is also fractured by oppositional tendencies from within as well as outside that influence its shape and scope. I have attempted to outline in very preliminary manner, the contours of this imagined geography. While my dissertation tracks the spatial shifts of Monyul till the current period, it cannot end there. It projects to a future period when the Himalayan geography that is emergent now may outline new relations between Tibetan Buddhist minorities of India and transnational spaces. That is the subject of a different work.

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<sup>131</sup> I thank Professor David Nugent for pointing out this important point to me, even though it is beyond the scope of my Ph.D. fieldwork to provide an immediate answer to this question.

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