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Hidden Land and Changing Landscape: Narratives about Mount Khangchendzonga Among the Lepcha and the Lhopo

ABSTRACT: This article explores contemporary ‘hidden land’ narrative constructs of Máyel Lyáng and Beyul Dremojong in Sikkim, India, as conceived by the Lepcha and the Lhopo, two ‘scheduled tribes’. Lepcha and Lhopo narratives about these hidden lands in Mount Khangchendzonga inform us about their contemporary and historical, indigenous and Buddhist contexts and the interactions between these contexts. Lhopo perspectives on the hidden Beyul Dremojong echo classical Tibetan Buddhist ‘revealed treasure’ guidebooks and exist within the complex and reciprocal relationship between the Lhopo and the land they inhabit; development initiatives are understood to have caused illness and death in the Lhopo community of Tashiding, often referred to as the geographical ‘center’ of Beyul Dremojong. Contemporary Lepcha comprehensions of Máyel Lyáng, described in oral narratives within an ethnic community whose cosmology is intimately connected with Mount Khangchendzonga, today show some influence of Lhopo interpretations of Beyul Dremojong and the treasure texts; they also reflect Lepcha fears about cultural dispersion. Present-day narratives about both hidden lands reference notable political events in modern Sikkimese history (encounters with the British; the Chinese occupation of Tibet).

KEYWORDS: Lepcha, Lhopo, Treasure Texts (*gTer ma*), Máyel Lyáng, Beyul Dremojong (*sBas yul ’bras mo ljongs*)

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Mount Khangchendzonga (*Gangs chen mdzod lnga*)¹ straddles the Himalayan border of Nepal and India, dominating the terrain of the small Northeastern Indian state of Sikkim. The world's third highest mountain at 8,586 meters (28,169 feet), Khangchendzonga today holds a significant place in the religious traditions of the Lepcha² and the Lhopo,³ both 'scheduled tribes' in Sikkim,⁴ and worship of the mountain is culturally pervasive to the point of secularization.⁵ Mount Khangchendzonga functions as the shared location for two distinct 'hidden land' narrative constructs: 'Máyel Lyáng' among the Lepcha and 'Beyul Dremojong' (*sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs*) among the Lhopo. In recent decades, development initiatives and globalization have affected Sikkim's topography and community structures, changes that have impacted Lepcha and Lhopo conceptions of Khangchendzonga's hidden land.

Lepcha tales about Máyel Lyáng, described in indigenous narratives arising from a cosmology intricately and inextricably interwoven with Sikkim's landscape, reveal an awareness of cultural dispersion that is believed to be responsible for a reduced level of communication with the spiritual inhabitants of the hidden land. In certain narratives, the movement away from the 'traditional Lepcha way of life' has caused the 'path' to Máyel Lyáng to close completely. Máyel Lyáng is also, for some, understood to be solely a psychological ('internal') state rather than a physical reality, reflecting the influence of Buddhist conceptions of sacred geography and Lhopo understandings of Beyul Dremojong.

Modern Lhopo interpretations of Beyul Dremojong, a hidden land first described in 14th century Tibetan Buddhist 'revealed treasure' Terma (*gTer ma*) texts of the Nyingma (*rNying ma*) school, primarily represent the beyul as 'internal', drawing on a framework rooted within these texts; yet nevertheless Lhopo narratives recount failed expeditions led by lamas in search of the physical land. Among the Lhopo of Tashiding (*Brag dkar bkra shis sdings*), a settlement built around

¹ In this paper, I have used Anglicized phonetic spellings for Tibetan terms and place names, followed in parentheses by Tibetan orthography in italics using the Wylie system. This Wylie transliteration is given only the first time a Tibetan word is used and I have capitalized just the first root letter appearing in a word, phrase, or sentence. When Wylie transliteration appears in the title of an article or text it has not been italicized. I have presented Lepcha terms as best as I am able in keeping with the orthography used in Plaisier's 'A Grammar of Lepcha' (Plaisier 2006; see also Plaisier 2005, 7-24). Lepcha terms are not italicized to more clearly distinguish them from Tibetan, though when a Lepcha word is first presented I have placed it within inverted commas; however, when quoting other sources I have kept the Lepcha spellings and italicization employed by the original authors intact. On the few occasions that I use Sanskrit terms, they are transliterated using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration system, placed in italics, and identified as Sanskrit [Skt].

² This research focuses on the Renjóngmú Lepcha, those who live in the historically 'Sikkimese' area that includes present-day Sikkim as well as Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Siliguri in West Bengal. In particular, it prioritizes residents of the Dzongu valley, Sikkim. The term 'Lepcha', while widely used in official and governmental capacities, is an external name used to describe the group; the Lepcha refer to themselves as Mútuncí Róngkup (children of the snowy peak) or Rúmkup (of God).

³ From the Tibetan *lHo pa*, literally 'people from the South'. The Lhopo are sometimes referred to as the Bhutia; certain scholars use the terms interchangeably (Arora, who designates the term 'Bhutia' as acceptably self-referential [2006b, 31]) while others have problematized 'Bhutia' as being larger in its scope of ethnic inclusion and thus consider 'Lhopo' more appropriate (Balikci-Denjongpa [2006, 128] and Vandenheilsken [2003, 57]). I will here use Lhopo.

⁴ 'Scheduled tribe' is a classification in the Constitution of the Indian Republic referring to indigenous groups.

⁵ For a discussion on the use of the term 'secular' in this context (Sikkimese and Indian) see Arora's 'Roots and the Route of Secularism' (Arora 2006a, 4063-71).

the Nyingmapa monastery often described as the ‘center’ of Sikkim’s beyul (*sBas yul*; hidden land), the construction of new buildings, roads, and houses, while sometimes viewed as communally beneficial, is held responsible for deaths and illnesses as the ‘sacred ground’ is damaged.

Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in autumn 2005 and spring 2007 in various locations in Sikkim: Gangtok (*sGang tog*), Tashiding, and Mangan; and the villages of Lingthem, TingVong, and Lingko in the Lepcha reserve area of Dzongu. Twenty-seven community members of both genders and varying ages (approximately 20 to 75 years) were interviewed between one and five times each; when necessary, these exchanges were completed with assistance from translators of the Lepcha and Sikkimese languages. I actively solicited information about the locations, descriptions, and mythologies of Máyel Lyáng and Beyul Dremojong and asked interviewees to share narratives pertaining to the discovery of these lands. The primary classical Tibetan text referenced in this piece, ‘The Guidebook to the Holy Place ‘Bras mo ‘dzongs’ (*Gnas ‘bras mo ‘dzongs gi lam yig bzhugs s+ho*; extracted from the rock *bZang in lHa brag* by Rigdzin Godem [*Rig ‘dzin rgod kyi ldem ‘phru can*] between 1362 and 1373) was discovered in Sikkim in the late twentieth century and provided to me in blockprint copy at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, where its translation to English comprised part of my MSt dissertation.

This article in no way attempts to represent the entirety of the vast and varied Lepcha and Lhopo interpretations of Khangchendzonga’s hidden land. Perspectives on this topic within these populations are no doubt significantly more multifaceted and nuanced than can be represented here and are likely constantly developing and changing themselves. Instead, through analyzing select Lepcha and Lhopo descriptions of Khangchendzonga and its beyul, I hope to offer contemporary snapshots of how particular community members view and speak about the land, with an aim to highlight the shifting relationships between Sikkim’s hidden land and changing landscape.

Sikkim as an ‘Opened’ Hidden Land

The political history of Sikkim and the self-conceptualization of the Sikkimese state have inherently been influenced by ideas of a hidden land within Sikkim and by understandings that Sikkim, itself, is one such hidden land, now opened. Mullard⁶ has illustrated how Buddhist textual depictions of Sikkim as a hidden land have significantly contributed to the state’s comprehension of its own modern history; Sikkim has relied, in part, on an assumed acceptance of the religious authority of ‘revealed’ Buddhist teachings to facilitate narratives that promote a specific type of religious nationalism. Balikci-Denjongpa and Arora have investigated issues of Lhopo identity as they relate to the sanctity of the land and ethnic revitalization (Arora 2004; Arora 2006b; Balikci-Denjongpa 2002; Balikci 2008; Balikci 2011).

⁶ See Mullard’s *Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History* for a complete analysis of the history of the formation of the Sikkimese kingdom (Mullard 2011). Mullard traces the development of historical narratives of the Sikkimese state to illuminate the political and nationalist agendas that influenced the writing and re-writing of Sikkimese history.

Bentley has commented on contemporary dynamics within Lepcha communities with attention to the impact of Buddhism on Lepcha cultural heritage (Bentley 2007, 61-64). Analyses of all contemporary Sikkimese narratives must consider this Buddhist context, including those concerned with indigenous Lepcha chronicles: while the Lepcha Máyel Lyáng is the product of a pre-Buddhist worldview, today most Lepcha in Dzongu identify as following both Tibetan Buddhism⁷ and Lepchaism⁸ simultaneously, using the expression 'fifty-fifty' [TingVong 2007]⁹ to explain this double practice.

In one hand, we carry our own culture, oldest religion. In the other hand, we carry Buddhism. ... So, somebody, some lamas are performing puja inside the other room, and 'bóngthing' [shaman] is performing another ritual in the other room. Everything goes parallel because we don't want to forget everything, we don't want to ... make our culture vanish.¹⁰

We went too far to get back to our own religion, to believe ourselves as the 'mun' [shaman], bóngthing, to have a separate Lepcha religion. We went too much far. Because we have already adopted Buddhism as a religion; some Lepcha, they adopted Christian [Christianity] as a religion, we couldn't come back. But now, the alternative only then is that you should not forget.¹¹

The importance of Khangchendzonga in Lepcha cosmology, eschatology, and vernacular religion cannot be overestimated. The Lepcha 'represent the high peaks as a supreme paradise, from where immortal beings provide all the necessary cereals and good health. But these peaks are inhabited by gods (*rum*) and demons (*mung*) which must be constantly tamed and pacified' (Steinmann 1996, 179). Understood to be both the Lepcha land of origin and destination upon death, Lepcha oral narratives describe how the first humans came from Khangchendzonga's snows:

[H]ow Lepcha [were] created: there was a story that the two Lepcha elders, Nazongnyú and Fodongthing, [the] first Lepcha ... [were] created by Itbu-Mu, the Mother Goddess. From one hand, from [her] left hand, she just pick[ed] up snow; from that snow, the Goddess created Nazongnyú. From [her] right hand, she pick[ed] up some snow, from that, she created Fodongthing. ... Then these Lepchas live ... at the base of the Mount Khangchendzonga with the belief that Khangchendzonga is everything to

⁷ Many Lepcha have adopted Christianity, though most in the Dzongu Valley (the Renjóngmú) follow Nyingmapa Tibetan Buddhism and Lepchaism. The Dasangmú Lepcha monasteries in Kalimpong, West Bengal, are Kagyupa (*bKa' brgyud pa*), a different school of Tibetan Buddhism (Steinmann 1996, 194).

⁸ I use the term 'Lepchaism' to describe the varieties of indigenous worldviews and nature-based rituals that constituted Lepcha practice prior to (and since) the arrival of Buddhism in Sikkim. These are characterized by a cosmology intimately connected with the topography of Sikkim and manifested as interaction with land deities and ancestors through the following of 'bóngthings' and 'muns' (sometimes, 'padems') – different terms for shamans or ritual specialists. I chose the term Lepchaism in an attempt to avoid depicting indigenous Lepcha religious expressions in a homogenous or unvaried manner.

⁹ Quotes from interviews are referenced by place name and year and are given in [brackets] to distinguish them from bibliographical citations.

¹⁰ [Lingthem 2005]

¹¹ [Lingthem 2005]

them, a guardian deity, providing them with the protection, care, good fortune, peace ... All the Lepcha people start living at the lap¹² of Khangchendzonga. And then ... Lepchas originated in the lap of the mountain, so some of the Lepchas originated from the river, some from the lake, some from the caves, some from the small mountains ... so since we all are originated from this nature, we believe ... ourselves [as] the offspring of this nature, and since Khangchendzonga is the head of the nature, we believe this Khangchendzonga not only as a deity but as the king of the nature.¹³

Though Lepcha ‘lúngten sung’ (mythology) retains its indigenous identity, the influence of Buddhist thought is identifiable in some narratives presented as decidedly ‘Lepcha’ as opposed to Buddhist or ‘syncretic’. Attempts to trace this Buddhist influence on Lepcha folk tales must take into account the complicated historical relationship between the Lepcha and the Lhopo. Contemporary belief holds that the Lhopo – descended from the Minyak (*Mi nyag*) dynasty prince Khye Bumsa¹⁴ (*Gyad ’bum sags*), a Khampa (*Khams pa*; from East Tibet) – and the Lepcha formed a union in the 13th century, in which the Lepcha accepted Lhopo governance so long as the Lhopo agreed to ‘worship and respect [the Lepcha] guardian deity Kongchen-Konghlo [Khangchendzonga]’ (Foning 1987, 310).¹⁵ The full version of this narrative, which describes the manner in which the indigenous deity Khangchendzonga was invoked by the Lepcha bǒngthǐng (shaman) Thekong Tek to cure the barrenness of Khye Bumsa and his wife, establishes how Khangchendzonga came to be accepted as a Buddhist deity¹⁶ (in this case, a male ancestral deity). Balikci-Denjongpa has examined the development of Lhopo understandings of Khangchendzonga as both a ‘secular’ and a Buddhist mountain deity in the context of the relationship between Lhopo ‘bǒn shamanism’¹⁷ and Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁸

¹² The use of the term ‘lap’ may be an error in my transcription in one or more instances in this quote; it could, instead, be the term ‘lep’, here explained by the same woman quoted above: ‘Lep is a place where one’s soul has to rest. Every clan has got their own lep. If somebody’s clan is originated from a particular lake, then when he dies, his ... soul [goes] to that place as a lep. After visiting his own lep ... he goes back to the lap [lep] of Mt. Khangchendzonga, for the peace ... forever’ [Lingthem 2005].

¹³ [Lingthem 2005]

¹⁴ This is the folk narrative and its scholarship is disputed. For a chronicle of this dispute and the earliest account of this union, as well as details on the history of the Tibeto-Sikkimese and a translation of ‘the Chronicle of the three brothers of the A’o sub-division of the IDong drug clan of Khams Mi nyga (whose ancestors) descended from the Heavenly Realm and came via the Eastern area of India’, see Mullard’s article ‘A history from the Hidden Land: Some Preliminary Remarks on a Seventeenth Century Sikkimese chronicle’ (Mullard 2005a).

¹⁵ A Lhopo woman in Gangtok told me that her grandmother believed the Lepcha chieftain who made this agreement (Thekong Tek) was an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, since she could imagine no other reason that he would have so willingly yielded over his land. She believed, therefore, that the merger must have been ‘sanctioned’ in a Buddhist way. This narrative is a folk example of the manner in which Sikkim’s history can be reconstructed as ‘sanctified’ and Buddhist [Gangtok 2007].

¹⁶ Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava is said to have ‘tamed’ the indigenous deity of Khangchendzonga in the 8th century, several centuries prior to the union. Such a ‘taming’ exists within the tradition of the creation of Tibetan ‘place gods’ through the politicization of the land and the creation of the local deity (*yul lha*) (see Ramble 1996, 142).

¹⁷ Balikci-Denjongpa refers to ‘bǒn’ in the context of ‘specific oral ritual texts’ or the ‘folk religion’ [here, of Tingchim] as it is practiced alongside ‘high Buddhism’ (Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, 8); she suggests that the term ‘bǒn’ as used by the Lhopo is perhaps related to the etymology proposed by Diemberger’s reference to ‘lha bon’: translated as ‘to pray, to chant’ (Diemberger 1989, 424; as cited in Balikci 2002, 19).

¹⁸ For an analysis and explanation of ‘mountain deity cults’ in Tibet see Karmay 1996.

The significance of Khangchendzonga among the Lhopo is clearly illustrated in the nesol (*gNas gsol*) text by Lhatsun Chenpo (*lHa btsun chen po, lHa btsun nam mkha'* 'jigs med, *Kun bzang rnam rgyal*; 1597-1650). Lhatsun Chenpo, generally considered the 'founder' of the Sikkimese kingdom,¹⁹ encountered Khangchendzonga upon his arrival to Sikkim. This meeting – in which the mountain deity took the form of a white vulture (Sardar-Afkhami 2001, 136) or a wild goose (Kotturan 1976, 86) – so moved Lhatsun Chenpo that he composed the nesol, a text honoring Sikkim's sacred topography and role as (an 'opened') beyul. The nesol is still widely used throughout Sikkim today and is a central part of statewide festivals such as Pang Lhabsol (*dPang lha gsol*).²⁰

However, the primary Buddhist institution influencing contemporary understandings of Khangchendzonga's hidden land among both the Lepcha and the Lhopo is the textual corpus of the Nyingmapa 'revealed teachings'. The Terma ('treasure') tradition²¹ is based in the belief that during Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava's²² 8th century journey through Tibet and the Northeastern Himalayas, he 'hid secret knowledge' originally proclaimed by the 'Primordial Buddha' (*Dang po'i sangs rgyas*) to be discovered by Tertons (*gTer ston*[s], 'treasure-revealers') in the future. Beginning in the 10th century,²³ these Ters began to be revealed directly in the mind of the pre-designated Terton or 'recalled' to the Terton when he discovered their placement (perhaps in rocks, trees, statues, the sky, etc.²⁴).

The Chang Ter (Northern Treasure; *Byang gter*) cycle of Terma refers to Terma revealed to Rigdzin Godem (1337-circa 1409) in the 14th century. Rigdzin Godem is credited as the Terton-author of a number of neyigs (*gNas yig*[s], or *Lam yig*[s]²⁵), 'guidebooks' providing instructions for pilgrims who wish to journey to 'sacred' Himalayan hidden lands, including Beyul Dremojong. Godem traveled to Sikkim in 1373 and successfully 'opened the door' to Dremojong in 1375. He spent the following five years exploring the area (Wengchuk and Zulca 2007, 83) and at the time of his death²⁶ in Sikkim, Godem had uncovered 'entry certificates' (*Kha byang*)

¹⁹ As Mullard has pointed out, it is overly simplistic to date the formation of the Sikkimese state to a single event; I reduce Sikkim's founding here for the purposes of conveying the importance of the narrative of Lhatsun Chenpo and the composition of the nesol (Mullard 2002b, 31-48; Mullard 2011, 115-137).

²⁰ Pang Lhabsol is an annual celebration of Khangchendzonga and of the union between the Lepcha and Lhopo at Kabi Longstok featuring the invocation of the Buddhist deity Dzonga (Khangchendzonga). It is today celebrated by Sikkimese of all faiths; the nesol composed by Lhatsun Chenpo comprises a significant part of this ritual.

²¹ For an explanation of the Terma tradition, see Gyatso's 'Signs, Memory, and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission' (Gyatso 1986, 7-36).

²² While the Chang Ter Terma cycle is directly associated with Padmasambhava, as are most (but not all, and not those of Bön) Terma traditions, Songtsan Gampo (*Srong btsan sgam po*, 7th century) and Vimalamitra (*Dri med bshes gnyen*, 8th century) are also credited with Ter (Gyatso 1986, 30).

²³ Usually Ter revelation is described as beginning in the 11th century (Thondup 1986, 189; Doctor 2005, 20; Smith 2001, 238) with Sangye Lama (*Sangs rgyas bla ma*), though sometimes is suggested to have begun in the 10th (Gyatso 1986, 2) or 12th (Sardar-Afkhami 2001, 91) centuries.

²⁴ For an brief explanation of such 'Earth Treasures' (*Sa gter*) and also a contextualization of the Ter movement in its political context, see Goldstein and Kapstein 1998, 73-76.

²⁵ Ramble (1999) has addressed the varieties of 'sacred landscape' as they are represented in Tibetan literature, perhaps problematizing Wylie's 'four categories' of landscape literature, of which 'passport' (*Lam yig*) is one.

²⁶ Godem died having achieved the 'rainbow body' (Boord 2003, 32). Orofina states that lamas in Gangtok relayed to her that Godem's bones are preserved in the 'great stupa near Gangtok' (Orofina 1991, 8).

and ‘keys’ (*lDe mig*) to seven beyuls,²⁷ of which Dremojong is often described as the holiest.²⁸

*Máyel Lyáng*²⁹ Among the Lepcha

Máyel Lyáng is depicted in the writings of Gorer, Kotturan, Foning, and Tamsang – in works published in 1938, 1976, 1987, and 1993 respectively – as a concealed utopia located somewhere near Khangchendzonga. Gorer suggests that Máyel Lyáng is ‘far up the Talung Valley, somewhere behind Kinchenjunga’ (Gorer 1938, 236); Kotturan states that it is ‘a valley high up on the mountains hidden by the great peak Kangchenjunga’ (Kotturan 1976, 32). Foning places it near Punyang Chyu (Foning 1987, 51); Tamsang describes it as ‘the land of hidden paradise, or the delightful region or abode’ (Tamsang 1993, 1).

More recently, Little describes Máyel Lyáng as ‘believed to be located just near the base of Kanchenjunga’ (Little 2007, 83). Bentley refers to the ‘Lepcha concept of Mayellyang, the holy hidden land where the supernatural people of Mayel live and all prosperity of Lepcha land comes from ..., often translated into English as paradise or heaven’³⁰ (Bentley 2008, 132). Jain, Singh, Rai, and Sharma state that folk tales of the Kecheopalri Lake area describe the Lepcha as originating from ‘Máyel Lyáng, a mythical land at the foothills of Mount Khangchendzonga in Sikkim itself’ (Jain et al. 2004, 296).

In both historical and contemporary narratives, Máyel Lyáng is often associated with animals (particularly pigs and birds), agriculture, salt, the number

²⁷ According to the Fifth Dalai Lama, Godem possessed guides to the following seven hidden lands: Dremojong [Sikkim] (*‘Bras mo gshongs*); Deden Kyimolung (*bDe ldan skyid mo lung*); Bepa Pemetsel (*sBas pa padma’i tshal*); Rolpa Khandro Ling (*Rol pa mkha’ ‘gro gling*); Gyelkyi Khenpolung (*rGyal kyi mkhan po lung*); Lhai Podrangding (*Lha’i pho brang sdings*); and Dromokhu (*Gro mo khud*). As Boord points out, Johan Reinhard lists the seven lands differently (Khumbu, Helambu, Rongshar, Lapchi, Dolpo, Nubri, and Sikkim) and these lists are not directly transferable (Boord, not dated; edit from Boord 1993, 21-35).

²⁸ Sardar-Afkhami references a text entitled *Ma ‘ong lung bstan gsal ba’i sgron me* which explains that a ‘serpent-jewel’ (*nāgamāni* [Skt]) was placed under Beyul Dremojong, making the spot especially holy (Sardar-Afkhami 2001, 79). The *History of Sikkim* states that ‘of all beyul, Sikkim is said to be the most sacred and sanctified, the king of all sacred places equaling paradise itself’ (Balicki-Denjongpa 2002, 25).

²⁹ ‘Máyel Lyáng’ is a term used by Lepcha to describe both the area they currently inhabit and the hidden land in Khangchendzonga. Arthur Foning (a Dasangmú [Kalimpong] Lepcha) used the term ‘Mayel Kyong’ to describe the hidden land in Khangchendzonga rather than ‘Máyel Lyáng’, as does Little (who also references Foning) (Little 2007, 83). Steinmann states that Máyel Lyáng (or ‘Renjyong Lyang’) is ‘the name of a mytho-real country on the south-eastern slopes of Kanchenjunga’ (Steinmann 1996, 179). Christoph Von Fürer-Haimendorf (in Foning 1987: xii) used the term ‘Máyel Lyáng’ to encompass all of Sikkim, Darjeeling (West Bengal), Eastern Nepal, and Lepcha areas of Bhutan. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association uses the term ‘Nye Mayel Renjyong Lyáng’ to indicate ‘the ancient Lepcha kingdom’, extending from the Himalayas to areas of Bangladesh and Nepal. Plaisir translates ‘Ne Máyel Lyáng’ (referring to the ‘tribal homeland of the Lepcha people’) as ‘hidden paradise’ and ‘Ne Máyel Málúk Lyáng’ as ‘land of eternal purity’ (Plaisir 2006, 1). Plaisir also reproduces a conversation with the President of the Lepcha Association of West Bengal, D. T. Tamsang, in which she asks for clarification of the meaning of ‘Máyel Málúk Lyáng’ ... the so-called ‘holy’ land’. The response is: ‘What we call the land of Máyel Málúk is what we get when we combine all of the territories of Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Ilám. That is what we call the hidden paradise, Máyel Málúk Lyáng.’ (Plaisir 2006, 175-176). In this paper, I use Máyel Lyáng to refer to the mythical hidden land only, never the contemporary geographical ‘Lepcha’ homeland of this world.

³⁰ Bentley notes that the Lepcha concept more closely correlating to that of a ‘heaven’ is Rum Lyáng or Púm Lyáng, ‘the realm of the gods and the place of ancestors where the deceased go’ (Bentley 2008, 132).

‘seven’, and ‘time cycles’. Described as a land that is constantly in harvest, Máyel Lyáng is inhabited by the Máyel dwellers, or Máyel^{mú}. Narratives generally represent the Máyel^{mú} in ‘sevens’: usually seven brothers, seven couples, or seven families (as in Gorer 1938, 237; Kotturan 1976, 31-32; and Little 2007, 83, respectively). In all of these narratives as well as those that I recorded, the Máyel^{mú} are depicted as aging cyclically, each day beginning as children in the morning, becoming men in the afternoon, and maturing into elders in the evening, only to start as babies again the next day. One Lhopo³¹ man suggested that this daily cycle occurs because the Máyel^{mú} will one day be required to repopulate the world.

Gorer describes the Máyel^{mú} as part-god and part-man, sporting huge goiters as a sign of affluence. In his account, the wives of the two eldest Máyel^{mú} brothers are spirit sisters, constantly lying on their backs underground, their stomachs serving as soil to be harvested (Gorer 1938, 237).³² Plaisier, compiling the unpublished third section of the late Halfdan Siiger’s opus on the Lepcha gathered from fieldwork he conducted in 1949 and 1950, states that Siiger depicted the Máyel^{mú} as tiny, hirsute beings that were not benevolent nor malevolent (‘neither *rum* nor *múng*’³³) and who inhabited a ‘fertile land’ that some Lepcha equated with a place of afterlife (Plaisier 2007, 26). Today, these immortal Máyel^{mú}, often identified as Lepcha ancestors, are indeed understood to be smaller than regular humans: they are ‘no more than five feet high’ [Gangtok 2005] and ‘look the same as human beings, but only they have a short height’ [Lingko 2007]. Sometimes they are described as being ‘so small’ that they have become part of nature: ‘We cannot see them with our naked eyes; they are spirits, in the air, in the bird, in the plants’ [TingVong 2007].

Many tales of the discovery of Máyel Lyáng follow a formula wherein a fortunate Lepcha man in the wilderness happens upon (or, less commonly, deliberately seeks out) ‘nature signs’ that lead him to Máyel Lyáng (feather trails, pig footprints, tree branches). In these narratives, the traveler stays some time with the Máyel^{mú}, but then returns to his home, often with gifts to aid a successful

³¹ This Lhopo man was the only Lhopo to relate Máyel Lyáng narratives that matched the indigenous Lepcha descriptions of the land. The same man told a tale of a Lepcha from Sakyong who had found his way to the Máyel^{mú}; after staying one night with each brother, he was then asked to leave [Gangtok 2005]; Gorer also recounted a tale of a hunter who traveled past Sakyong to reach Máyel Lyáng (Gorer 1938, 237). This Lhopo man’s depiction of indigenous Lepcha narrative stands in contrast to that of a different Lhopo man, who, when asked about Máyel Lyáng, replied ‘Máyel Lyáng is the same as Beyul Dremojong’ [Tashiding 2007].

³² Gorer states that the Máyel^{mú} themselves travel to Tibet annually to sell their large eggplants, chilis, pumpkins, and cucumbers (Gorer 1938, 236); contemporary accounts of Máyel Lyáng do not seem to include similar descriptions. On the contrary, as the Lepcha themselves are geographically dispersed, the Máyel^{mú} seem to be associated more and more closely with the immediate land of Khangchendzonga and Dzongu.

³³ ‘Rum’ is a term referring to a helpful deity; ‘múng’ is a term referring to an evil spirit (or ‘devil’ in Plaisier 2006). However, Gorer states that the Máyel^{mú} were referred to as ‘Sakya rum’ (the god of food) in worship (among other names) and also describes the land’s three guardian spirits as ‘Tom-tik’, ‘Mi-tik’, and ‘Mayel Yook rum’, also called ‘Pong rum’ (Gorer 1938, 236). Steinmann states that the Lepcha sometimes refer to the Mayel dwellers as ‘rum’ as well and cites Siiger’s published works as referring to the god of rice as ‘Sa kyu rum’ (Siiger 1967, 37, as cited in Steinmann 1996, 183). Thus, sometimes the Máyel dwellers have also been considered to be rum (benevolent gods).

agricultural yield (for example, special grains or vegetables). Once left, Máyel Lyáng cannot usually be found again.³⁴

This structure remains intact in many present-day Lepcha descriptions; contemporary discovery narratives also deviate from this model. One Lepcha man explained that ‘if you want to go to Máyel Lyáng, you have to avoid salt for three months’ [Gangtok 2005]. Another atypical tale of interaction with the Máyelmú is reproduced below:

My grandfather also used to say there was a girl who got married to a Máyel Lyáng man. She belongs to the lake just opposite Passingdang [in Dzongu]. I don’t know whether it was real or was a story; I was of a young age, I did not ask my grandfather, ‘is it real?’ They used to tell us all sorts of stories but we didn’t have any interest when we were young. The daughter who got married with the Máyel Lyáng man comes yearly back to visit her mother.³⁵

However, modern narratives about the Máyelmú emphasize the growing distance between the Lepcha and the dwellers of the hidden land.

Due to the development, due to the changes, due to the education: after many years, it will be more difficult to have contact with Máyel Lyáng. ... The main reason is that we will have forgotten our mother tongue language; we will be unable to have a conversation with [the Máyelmú].³⁶

Lepcha today make direct connections between the changes in Lepcha culture and the ability to communicate with Máyel Lyáng. ‘If we don’t do our prayers, the traditional ceremonies, the pujas ... today we don’t wear our traditional dress ... this is why there will be a divide [between us and Máyel Lyáng]’ [Lingko 2007].

The land was created, the water was created; to preserve all these things, in a storage, a mystical place: it is known as Máyel Lyáng. After the humans, ordinary people, are living here, we don’t have our spiritual beliefs nowadays. There is a conflict in our traditional belief. If, suddenly, there is destruction everywhere – to get the spiritual power back, [one] can get it back from Máyel Lyáng.³⁷

This narrative, which acknowledges the ‘conflict in [Lepcha] traditional belief’ while also suggesting that Máyel Lyáng will one day reopen and share its full spiritual and material wealth with the Lepcha people, is notable because this depiction of the land as a ‘store of future wealth’ is reminiscent of Tibetan Buddhist neyigs to Dremojong. Máyel Lyáng’s recent narrative association with the ‘return of

³⁴ Little describes a narrative in which a hunter from Puntong finds Máyel Lyáng by following ‘the black river’. Upon witnessing the happiness of the Máyelmú, the hunter decides to leave to fetch his family and bring them to Máyel Lyáng as well, leaving a trail of clothes so that he could find his way back. When returning with his family, however, he could not find his clothes: ‘he just saw hills’ (Little 2007, 83).

³⁵ [TingVong 2007]

³⁶ [TingVong 2007]

³⁷ [Lingko 2007]

Mun Salong' (a famed Lepcha priest and the guardian of Khangchendzonga before the coming of Padmasambhava) [Gangtok 2005] further parallels Lhopo perceptions of Beyul Dremojong as it depicts Máyel Lyáng not only as a 'repository' analogous to the Buddhist beyul but introduces to the narrative the potential coming of Padmasambhava's comparative 'equal' in indigenous Lepcha mythology. However, Máyel Lyáng is simultaneously understood to be a historical source of sustenance for the Lepcha, a departure from Beyul Dremojong narratives that tend to depict the hidden land as 'untouched'. Máyel Lyáng's potential opening would not be the first and is instead represented as a 're-opening'.

In the early days, Lepcha used to get everything, foods, from Máyel Lyáng. If it is exposed totally, it will be lost and [there will be] no remains of foods, plants. ... For ordinary Lepcha, when there is need, it will open.³⁸

Little's description of the land suggests that the 'opening' of Máyel Lyáng is dependent on one's level of 'Lepcha purity'. She states that only a 'pure Lepcha, one who has only Lepcha ancestry, speaks the Lepcha language and follows the Lepcha traditions can move the stone [that blocks the entrance] by placing his left hand on it' (Little 2007, 83).³⁹ However, Máyel Lyáng is described by some Lepcha as still remaining 'open' to animals, who can pass back and forth between the two worlds: it is 'only for human beings [that] it has been closed' [TingVong 2007]. Some animals are considered to have gone into Máyel Lyáng and disappeared forever. A Lepcha in TingVong explained that the growing distance between the Lepcha and the Máyelmú is due to the Lepchas' neglect of ceremonies that involve the killing of animals; since Lepcha do not always participate in these rituals, the Máyelmú might no longer be aware that the Lepcha still exist.

The birds and the animals can go back to the physical Máyel Lyáng. The grandfathers tell us if [we] don't kill the animals [and don't] do the ceremonies, they [the animals] move away from us. If we keep doing ceremonies, we keep the connection. From Máyel Lyáng, they might still be believing 'then still there is a Lepcha community'. ... The animals have gone back to Máyel Lyáng. ... We used to find different types of birds, animals also; we [used to] see in the forest. If you go to the forest, we can see musk deer, different animals. But nowadays we don't see. Most of the people don't go hunting, don't kill animals, keep distance from the animals. We haven't done any ceremonies; that's why. [*Question: Who is in the physical Máyel Lyáng today?*] Only animals and birds.⁴⁰

³⁸ [TingVong 2007] However, this same man later stated that he thought that Máyel Lyáng was actually closed forever.

³⁹ Gorer also recounts a narrative in which the door to Máyel Lyáng is now blocked by a stone, due to the actions of a hunter, who, having discovered the hidden land, felt threatened, pulled out a knife, and fled (1938, 238). The door to Beyul Dremojong is similarly 'closed' by a large stone in some Lhopo narratives (i.e., Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, 25). Foning describes the door to Máyel Lyáng as being blocked by large dogs, an idea he suggests might have originated from the Lepcha seeing similar large dogs guarding Tibetan houses (Foning 1987: 54-55); perhaps an indirect implication that it is in some manner the presence of the Tibetan Buddhists that has 'closed' the door to Máyel Lyáng.

⁴⁰ [TingVong 2007]

Birds, in particular – perhaps due to this ability to cross between the two worlds – figure prominently in the relationship between the Lepcha and the Máyel mú. Foning wrote that the Máyel mú communicate with the Lepcha of this world through birds or insects (Foning 1987, 52). According to Gorer, these birds are called the ‘Máyel fo’; the parent birds perish while returning to Máyel Lyáng after informing the Lepchas of harvest time, but their children, just born, complete the journey (Gorer 1938, 236). This is a belief that remains among the Lepcha. One such bright blue bird was named to me as an ‘elelu [elu?] fo’ [TingVong 2007].

Further suggesting a Tibetan Buddhist influence, some Lepcha today describe Máyel Lyáng as an ‘internal’ place rather than a physical, locatable *land*, employing the ‘outer, inner, secret’ schema of beyul comprehension among the Lhopo. This triadic conception, which will be discussed in the next section of this paper, is central to Lhopo comprehensions of Beyul Dremojong, which usually require the achievement of an ‘internal’ beyul state before discovery of the ‘external’ hidden land can be considered.

From my view, it [Máyel Lyáng] is internal. There is no physical. [Question: Was it physical in the past?] In past, yes, maybe. Maybe. In the past, there was not contact with different peoples. It was a hidden place. [Now] people migrate and forget the main place. ... To find Máyel Lyáng, we have to stay in peace. ... When we have studied outside, when we come back to our village, we find a vast difference. We keep rushing towards outside, forgetting ancestor things. ... I wouldn’t believe in the Buddhist land. I believe in the Lepcha land. The Buddhists came; they had also studied about our religion. ‘How we can make them Buddhist.’ So the Buddhists had to pick points from the different religions. [Question: So they appropriated it?] So they appropriated it, our hidden land, and made it Buddhist ... What they have written in these Buddhist scripts, I cannot say about them.⁴¹

This suggestion that Beyul Dremojong is a re-imagining of Máyel Lyáng does not seem representative of Lepcha conceptions of the beyul. In addition, the varieties of hidden land scriptures and locales within the Buddhist canon and the prevalence of ideas of the ‘Lost Paradise’ in multiple cultures⁴² suggest that this idea is not historically sound. However, the statement is illuminating, as it calls attention to a separation between Máyel Lyáng and Beyul Dremojong in Lepcha thought (‘the Buddhist land’; ‘the Lepcha land’) despite the land’s apparent internalization – and,

⁴¹ [TingVong 2007]

⁴² In her article about Beyul Khenpalung (*sBas yul mkhan pa lung*), Giacomella Orofino argues that neyigs fit the ‘Lost Paradise’/‘Land-without-Evil’ characteristics that Mircea Eliade outlined while discussing Guarani messianism: 1) prophets facilitate the rediscovery of the hidden land; 2) the land’s imminent rediscovery is linked to apocalyptic currents reflecting current threats and fears in society; and 3) the hidden land can be reached only through a challenging journey. She postulates that the ability to view beyuls in this light supports Eliade’s argument that the Land-without-Evil is, in Guarani messianism, not shaped or informed by the influx of Christianity with the Portuguese, and thus is, in some sense, an indigenous (or, at least, non-Christian) archetype (Orofina 1991, 240-241). Lepcha narratives about Máyel Lyáng can loosely fit these categories as well, but discovery narratives about Máyel Lyáng do not necessarily follow the blueprint of requiring a devoted traveler’s ‘difficult initiation’ or ‘arduous journey’ in order to reach the land.

in this case, suggests a championing of the Lepcha comprehension over the Buddhist ('I wouldn't believe in the Buddhist land. I believe in the Lepcha land.').

Both Gorer and Foning reference the bi-annual worship of the people of Máyel Lyáng (Gorer 1938, 238-243; Foning 1987, 54-55), as does Steinmann (1996, 185). Gorer, describing these complex ritual procedures – which involve animal sacrifices by virgins and a night of ritual copulation, the so-called 'pressing of the rice' (Gorer 1938, 242) – postulates that they may be of 'a different origin to the other Mun ceremonies' (Gorer 1938, 235). Bentley in 2008 mentions rituals dedicated to Máyel Lyáng while offering an explanation for the legend of the construction of the pot-tower of Dharamdin, the 'stairway or tower to heaven'; in the narratives she recorded, she was told that this tower was built to allow Lepcha in a flat part of Sikkim to see Khangchendzonga and thus 'see their heaven, their Máyel Lyáng, and be nearer to the gods they were worshipping' (Bentley 2008, 131). Yet many Lepcha whom I spoke with did not share detailed information about these rituals with me. One exception was a Lingko Village 'padem' (ritual specialist) who explained that the offerings associated with these worship practices encourage the Máyelmú to return the coming year and also help prevent disease [Lingko 2007]. 'We can have connection with the people of Máyel Lyáng in a spiritual way only, while doing the ceremonies,' another Lepcha man said [TingVong 2007].

Gorer and Foning also suggest that the Máyelmú aided in the construction of Fyung Di, the 'great palace' near Pemionchi Monastery in West Sikkim (Foning 1987, 54; Gorer 1938, 237), a reference to Rabdentse (*Rab ldan rtse*), the abode of the Sikkimese kings until 1814. After helping, the Máyelmú 'then disappeared in a clap of thunder' (Gorer 1938, 237). This anecdote, while not encountered on my fieldwork, is unusual as it connects the Máyelmú, usually associated with ideas of 'pure Lepcha identity', with the physical maintenance of the Sikkimese (Buddhist) kingdom.

A Lepcha lama in Dzongu professed to believe in both of the two lands, while stressing that only Máyel Lyáng exists in the physical world. The crossover between Lepcha and Buddhist thought is evident in his referral to Beyul Dremojong as 'Beyul Lyáng' (Land of Beyul), stressing its separateness in identity from Máyel Lyáng while simultaneously conflating Buddhist and Lepcha terminology [TingVong 2007]. Another Lepcha, who has lived his whole life in Tashiding and describes himself as entirely Buddhist, claimed no knowledge of Máyel Lyáng by such a name; he understood Beyul Dremojong to be achievable only in the mind of a powerful lama [Tashiding 2007].

A common Lepcha saying is 'Alyu arong linba, Long nun paruk dongba; Mayel Kyong⁴³ ka thisyong re'. Translated as 'When cats grow horns and the rocks sprout shoots, we will reach Mayel country', the phrase is understood by Foning to suggest that Máyel Lyáng is virtually unreachable, as 'some natural obstacle, or barrier ... will prevent us, and drive us away' (Foning 1987, 51-52). Yet this phrase is not completely unlike certain neyigs describing the route to Dremojong, which instruct the pilgrim traveling to Sikkim from Tibet to cross through valleys populated by 'thirty-two different kinds of wild animals', each with 'two heads' and

⁴³ Foning uses 'Mayel Kyong' to refer to the Lepcha hidden land.

some with ‘two bodies’ (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 12r) – or even monkeys with horns and creatures with ‘a bird’s head and four limbs’ (Levine 1993, 117-118). It is, perhaps, less of a declaration of discouragement than an assertion of prerequisite: ‘nature will misbehave’ immediately before the beyul is revealed. Within the Buddhist *neyigs* to Dremojong, ‘horned cats’ and ‘sprouted rocks’ really might, in fact, signal that one is approaching Beyul Country.

Beyul Dremojong⁴⁴ Among the Lhopo

‘I believe the Buddhist religion about Beyul Dremojong ... Padmasambhava came to Sikkim and he graced the holy land. He blessed Sikkim and [found] the treasury in Khangchendzonga,’ said a lay Lhopo [Tashiding 2007]. As evidenced by this quote, contemporary Lhopo understandings of Beyul Dremojong strongly parallel the Chang Ter tradition.

Classical Tibetan guidebooks (*neyigs*) to Beyul Dremojong from the 14th century depict a land replete with material and spiritual riches that will be opened to Buddhist practitioners in a time of need. Often whimsical in their contents, these guidebooks describe vast stores of wealth, natural riches, and numerous animals, sometimes hybrid or unusual creatures. Dremojong is described in continual harvest, yielding varieties of fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants. Certain *neyigs* describe caves filled with magical utensils – for example, a vase filled with the ‘elixir of life’, potions for a mystical swift-footed run, Guru Rinpoche’s karmic dagger (which embodies the universe), and a mirror which shows the three realms of existence (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1).⁴⁵

Lhopo conceptions of the land echo these *neyigs*: Khangchendzonga,⁴⁶ which in Tibetan translates as the five-treasure mountain, is believed to hold stores that will be revealed to the devout when the world is threatened. These repositories were described to me as 1) salt, 2) gold and precious stones, 3) sacred scriptures, 4) ammunition, and 5) medicines⁴⁷ [Gangtok 2007]. Further parallels can be identified between the classical Beyul Dremojong *neyigs* and specifics of contemporary Lhopo

⁴⁴ Different *neyigs* use different spellings. Balicki-Denjongpa, commenting on the compilation text *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig* which contains several classical texts about Sikkim, elaborates on the final syllable of the Tibetan word for Sikkim, *'Bras mo ljongs* [‘Dremojong’] – *ljongs* literally translating as ‘Land’ or ‘Country’ as separate from the word for the hidden land, *'Bras mo gshongs*, with *gshongs* [‘Demoshongs’] meaning ‘valley of rolling hills’. She also states that ‘While Dremojong is in the heart of historical Sikkim, located around and below Mount Khangchendzonga, Demoshong remains a true hidden land. Some people are said to have caught glimpses of it through an opening in the rock while travelling through the mountains although the entry could never be found again’ (Balicki-Denjongpa 2002, 25).

⁴⁵ The *neyig* in Scheid (2007) is in some ways similar to the *neyigs* translated by Levine (1996) and Rechung Rinpoche (2007). It is in parts quite unlike the *neyigs* in Boord (2003) and Ngodup Dokhampa (2003b).

⁴⁶ *Gangs chen mdzod lnga* (Khangchendzonga) translates as snow-great-treasure-five in Tibetan.

⁴⁷ Another account of these contents described to me in fieldwork substitutes rice for sacred scriptures [Tashiding 2007]. Gyatso Bhutia lists turquoise instead of precious stones, invincible armor instead of ammunition, and grain as well as medicine in the fifth repository (Gyatso Bhutia 2005). In *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig*, a collection of Terma texts compiled by Terton Jigme Pawo (*'jigs med dpa' bo*), the stores are presented as 1) salt; 2) gold and turquoise; 3) Dharma scriptures and ‘other precious objects capable of increasing one’s wealth’; 4) arms; 5) medicine and different types of seeds (Balicki-Denjongpa 2002, 20). Levine describes the fifth as ‘fruit and medicine’ (Levine 1993, 116).

descriptions of the land through similarities found in accounts of ‘sacred’ topography. For instance, one Lhopo expressed belief in a hidden land in Khangchendzonga, which, as seen from Tashiding, resembles a sleeping pig, explaining that in the pig’s ear one can discover something magical that will allow people to return to a youthful age [Gangtok 2005]; in the Rigdzin Godem neyig ‘The Guidebook to the Holy Place ‘Bras mo ‘dzongs’, a pig-shaped mountain does indeed yield a cave that houses a vase filled with the ‘elixir of life’ (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 9v-10r).⁴⁸

Lhopo understandings of the hidden land in its outer, inner, and secret manifestations echo the triple conceptualization of Dremojong outlined in these texts. In the same Godem text referenced above, Sikkim’s aspects are related in the following manner:

Merely hearing the name of Dremojong, you will accumulate merit for many lifetimes, and as a result Guru Rinpoche will protect you and all your defilements will be purified. The shape of Beyul Dremojong is like a square celestial mansion. The inner contents are like the mandala of the deities (with form). As for the secret aspect, it is as the four seats of the chakras of the three *nāḍi*[s] [Skt]^{49,50}

In the Rigdzin Sokdrup Terma cycle of teachings (*Dag snang rig ‘dzin srog sgrub*) revealed to Tertön Lhatsun Chenpo near Tashiding, Khangchendzonga’s outer manifestation is that of a semi-deified ruler; his inner manifestation is that of a powerful monk appearing as a Buddhist disciple; and his secret manifestation is that of a ruling mountain spirit known as the God of Wealth. (The text referred to below can likely be dated between 1642 and 1650.)

As his outer manifestation, he is half-*lha* half-*tsen* and has the capacity of [sic] conquer them all (*phyi ltar lha btsan*). As his inner manifestation, he is great monk who has taken layman’s vows and resembles a disciple of Sakyamuni Buddha with a bowl and a walking stick (*nang ltar sprul la’i dge bsnyen*). As his secret manifestation, Dzö-nga is the king of *nöjin* (*gsang bag nod shyin rgyal po rnam thos sras*) by the name of *rnam thos sras* or god of wealth.⁵¹

A lama in Gangtok described ‘outer’ Khangchendzonga as the mountain as seen from Tibet, with five peaks; ‘inner’ Khangchendzonga’ as the mountain as ‘associated with’ Samye Monastery (*bSam yas*);⁵² and the ‘secret’ Khangchendzonga

⁴⁸ Levine also mentions a neyig with ‘a mountain shaped like a sleeping pig’ which contains ‘a wish-fulfilling vase’; ‘on reaching this spot ... you will naturally receive the supreme fortune of the great Mahamudra’ (Levine 1993, 119). A detailed study comparing particular topographical descriptions in the Dremojong neyigs and contemporary Lhopo narratives might shed more light on the historical roles of certain texts and give insight into their circulation history.

⁴⁹ *rTsa gsum*; *nāḍi*[s] [Skt]: the three channels, the three roots.

⁵⁰ Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 6v.

⁵¹ Balikci-Denjongpa 2002, 19.

⁵² Samye (*bSam yas*) was the first monastery built in Tibet and features in neyigs to Beyul Dremojong; for example, *Gnas ‘bras mo ‘dzongs gi lam yig bzhus s+ho* starts with a conversation between King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong lde btsan*) and Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava in Samye (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 1v-2r). See also Diemberger

as the mountain as seen from Sikkim [Gangtok 2005]. The same lama, two years later, explained that the 'outer' element refers to the physical hidden land, the 'inner' to the psychological state corresponding to that hidden land, and the 'secret' to the innermost, or Buddha aspect, of one's self [Gangtok 2007]. A Lhopo woman in Gangtok understood the 'outer' as the material and geographical aspect of the mountain, the 'inner' as the invisible form of the mountain ('inner quality', 'human essence'), and the 'secret' as the 'sensation of fearlessness' and the 'presence of one who will lead' [Gangtok 2005].

Beyul in Tibetan means hidden land. But then it has different meanings – outer meaning, inner meaning, inner-most meaning. Outer meaning is that [the] door is open, Sikkim is open; innermost meaning means if you are purified in your own mind, if you are able to tame your own mind, then everything is open to you, fully opened. But it is difficult to say that; people are not fully awakened. Sikkim is holy, sacred, hidden, only to those who have a deep faith and devotion, if he or she is fully purified and awakened. The land of Buddha is always opened to all.⁵³

From these descriptions I propose that it is perhaps possible to loosely equate the 'outer, inner, and secret' understandings of Beyul Dremojong with the concepts of 'elsewhere, here, and everywhere': the 'outer' beyul is often described in terms suggesting materiality and distance ('elsewhere'); the 'inner' beyul is associated with one's humanity and mind (the temporal present, the physical 'here'); and the 'secret' beyul is transcendent and can not be correlated to a physical plane ('everywhere'). Once one has 'found' the 'secret' beyul, 'then, wherever you go, all the lands are hidden lands, all the lands are the Pure Land of Buddha' [Gangtok 2007]. This model allows the 'outer' manifestation of the hidden land ('elsewhere') to remain unfound (and the physical land 'unopened') while simultaneously privileging practitioners with the experience of Padmasambhava's 'sanctified earth' in an immediate sense, via the 'inner' aspect ('here'), only manifested in the self. The 'secret' aspect, in this model equated with 'everywhere', corresponds with the articulated Lhopo comprehension that for those who are awakened, the beyul is already opened, and omnipresent.

Attempts to discover the *physical* beyul are usually understood to require 'first [the] purification of the mind'⁵⁴ [Tashiding 2007]. A lama explained that due to 'pollution' in Gangtok, Sikkim's capital city, the beyul is today difficult to find; while he seemed to imply that emotional ('internal') pollution is responsible for this obstacle, Gangtok is progressively being urbanized and it stands in stark contrast to the pristine landscapes of North Sikkim. Perhaps accordingly, the beyul's physical existence is often described as 'elsewhere' by Lhopo in Gangtok, but is rarely described at all among Lhopo in Tashiding. When directly queried about where one

1997, 292, for a similar reference.

⁵³ [Gangtok 2007]

⁵⁴ On her article about pilgrimage to hidden valleys in the Terma tradition, Diemberger states that the 'way to the holy mountains is first of all a spiritual journey. In the most interiorized dimension the concrete itinerary can be even superseded by the spiritual journey through visualization – the soteriological path to liberation' (Diemberger 1993, 61).

could locate the hidden land, one Tashiding resident replied 'here'⁵⁵ [Tashiding 2007].

While the monastery itself was founded in 1641 by Ngadak Sempa Chempo Phunshok Rigzin (*mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po phun tshogs rig 'dzin*), a key character in the Sikkimese 'coronation narrative',⁵⁶ Tashiding is already described as the center of the beyul in much earlier neyigs⁵⁷ and the area is the supposed repository of many Ters,⁵⁸ including the Bum Chu (*Bum chu*).⁵⁹ Legends about Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava's activities in Tashiding are still strongly in circulation and local lore holds that the Dalai Lama saw Padmasambhava himself there in a 1994 visit. A local lama drew a parallel between the holiness of Tashiding and that of Bodhgaya⁶⁰ – 'there is really no difference' [Tashiding 2007]. This comparison is also included in classical texts.⁶¹

However, recent development initiatives in Tashiding have brought increased tourism, construction projects, and destruction of natural resources to the area. These changes have been incorporated into Lhopo understandings of Tashiding's 'sacred land', a perspective based on a reciprocal relationship with the land that was originally outlined in the nesol. Lamas have prophesied that when a black snake curls its way up towards Tashiding, the place will be 'finished'; today, a newly built black asphalt road winds to the top of the hill, which some residents experience as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Yet residents are of two minds about the road: on one hand they view it as a beneficial modern advance, something that aids convenience, connects them to the hospital, and encourages tourism. The construction of the road is simultaneously blamed for a variety of local illnesses and deaths. The road, therefore, serves a practical purpose and also offers protection, but

⁵⁵ Arora describes an experience in Tashiding wherein scholar Ngodup Dokhampa explained to the crowd the relevance of the sacred place during the Bum Chu ceremony, as locals held limited knowledge of the religious importance of the ritual and area (Arora 2004, 31).

⁵⁶ For a more accurate and thorough historical account of Sikkim's coronation story that calls into question the general beliefs, see Mullard's 'The 'Tibetan' Formation of Sikkim: Religion, Politics and the Construction of a Coronation Myth' (Mullard 2005b). Also see Mullard 2011, 115-137, for an elaboration on what he refers to as Sikkim's 'coronation conundrum'.

⁵⁷ For a description of Tashiding as the center of Sikkim's sacred landscape and the four holy caves of Sikkim, see Ngodup Dokhampa's *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs: the Hidden Valley of Sikkim* (Dokhampa 2003b). See also the *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig* compilation (Balicki-Denjongpa 2002, 24) and the *rDo rje nyi ma'i gnas yig gsang ba'i dkar chak bzhus* (Boord 2003, 50). For a reference to Tashiding as the successful seat of an 'opened beyul', see *Gnas 'bras mo 'dzongs gi lam yig bzhus s+ho* (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 2v). Rigdzin Godem also supposedly blessed the White Rock Cave at Tashiding (Boord 2003, 32).

⁵⁸ According to a young Lhopo monk, there used to be a stone key in the rock (*Brag dkar*) but 'a stupid local man' used it regularly, without any purpose. Finally, the key broke, and the man was dead within a few days [Tashiding 2007].

⁵⁹ A Ter, Bum Chu (*Bum chu*) is holy water distributed every spring, the receipt of which brings multiple blessings. For an explanation and history of this practice, see Ngodub Dokhampa's 'Origins of the Bumchu (*Bum Chu*) of Drakar Tashiding (*Brag dkar bkra shis sdings*)' (Ngodub Dokhampa 2003a).

⁶⁰ Bodhgaya is where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

⁶¹ The comparison of Tashiding to Bodhgaya is echoed in Ngodup Dokhampa's *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs: the Hidden Valley of Sikkim*: 'Tashiding, the spiritual centre of the land is as sacred as Bodh Gaya, the centre of the whole world' (Ngodub Dokhampa 2003, 76). In Godem's *Gnas 'bras mo 'dzongs gi lam yig bzhus s+ho* folio 12v reads '[Dremojong], the wish-fulfilling jewel, is as rich as a palace of a great king. In terms of spiritual powers to protect you from the four kinds of demons, it is comparable to the stupa Bodhgaya' (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 12v). See also Levine (1993, 118) and Mullard's 'Brag dkar bkra shis sdings kyi sku bum: the text, the author, the stupa and its importance in the formation of religious politics in Sikkim' (Mullard 2003, 17).

does so at the expense of disturbing the land, damaging its Ters, and freeing destructive entities that the land had subdued.

A young monk described the changes in this manner:

[O]n my side, I am sad. Ten years before it was very peaceful. Now many people live in houses here and it's a little dirty. It's a little bit disturbing; noisy, with the road, and dust. It should be peace. We should have prohibited this road. If the government [must] make a road – [do it] a little farther from the monastery.⁶²

Another Lhopo monk explained the concerns of an older Tashiding female resident.

She [a Tashiding resident] is worried about the road. One side she is disappointed; one of the workers, they broke a big rock and they cut a big tree. Many obstacles come to people who stay here. They got problems. Because of the breaking of the holy rock. Last time it's also happened like that – in 2006. All older people died because of development here; it's obstacles. Because they are breaking the holy stone; sometimes holy stones are keeping *nāga*[s]. So the development is killing people. People she knows very well have died, lamas and laymen.⁶³

In the course of constructing the road, many rocks have been broken and trees cut down; these actions have brought about what residents refer to as 'obstacles', which manifest, for example, in the form of *nāga*[s] [Skt]⁶⁴ and cause sickness and death. This is apparent in a Tashiding lama's statement that 'four monks and ten locals' in the village have died as a result of this construction. The same lama told a story about the discovery of a holy treasure rock early in the construction process: the workers took it immediately to the police station, where Tashiding lamas and government officials convened. The rock was then taken to Chorten Gonpa (*mChod rten dgon pa*) in Deorali, Gangtok, against the wishes of the locals, who believed the rock should remain in Tashiding. 'Tashiding is actually a holy place, and [the] holy place give[s] obstacles to the workers. They are destroying many things; big stones have *nāga*[s], and *nāga*[s] will anger, and they will give obstacle[s],' one lama explained [Tashiding 2007].

Residents also fault development for 'drying up' medicinal and holy water reserves in the area and believe that the construction workers wanted to destroy one of the 'stone thrones of Padmasambhava'. However, through socially mobilizing against the construction, they were able to prevent the stone from being broken.

Balikci recounts a similar situation in the Lhopo village of Tingchim. The village's lake was 'thought to have lost some of its sanctity when the road between Gangtok and Mangan was built in 1958, and rocks were blasted with dynamite in

⁶² [Tashiding 2007]

⁶³ [Tashiding 2007]

⁶⁴ *Nāga* [Skt] is a term for a type of entity that assumes the form of a snake or a hybrid human-snake, comparably *lu* (*kLu*). This is interesting in light of Sardar-Afkhami's explanation of Beyul Dremojong's particular 'sacredness' emanating from a 'serpent-jewel' (*nāgamāni* [Skt]) placed under this beyul (Sardar-Afkhami 2001, 79), especially as Tashiding is often depicted as being as the center of the beyul.

order to make way for it'. Balikci describes how the Tingchim Lhopo reacted strongly when butterfly collectors from Darjeeling came to the lake with their equipment, ultimately preventing the Bengalis from catching any butterflies. Tingchim residents understood the butterflies to be supernatural and thought that disturbing them would bring about disastrous results for the community (Balikci 2002, 84-85).

A section of the *nesol* ritual text (f.60-61), the offering ritual to the deities of the land, includes an apology for any wrongdoing done to the environment that reads as follows:

All our actions which are contradictory to the body, speech and mind
of gods
Such as burning meat in the hearth, cutting down trees which are the
abode
of deities, polluting lakes and destroying hills, rocks and cliffs
Please forgive us for doing those by ignorance

Thus, 'cutting down trees which are the abode of deities, polluting lakes and destroying hills, rocks and cliffs' are considered particularly sinful among Sikkimese Buddhists and the need to refrain from these actions is still relevant, not only to the villagers but to many urban Lhopos as well. If people respect the numerous sacred sites of Sikkim and refrain from these polluting and destructive actions, it is believed that the higher deities and protectors of the land won't withdraw their blessings and protection that will ensure the peace and prosperity of the land. On the other hand, if people do not refrain from these actions, it is believed that the wrath of the deities could in turn result in epidemics, famines, internal fighting and natural calamities.⁶⁵

This description, documenting the dual response of protectiveness *for* the land and fear *of* the land, and the reciprocal nature between the two, highlights the complex relationship between the Lhopo and the land, particularly within the context of the *nesol*. The resilience of this *nesol* text emphasizes the enduring narratives of Sikkim's 'opening' and the mountain's dominion. Viewed in this framework, Tashiding narratives that suggest direct correlations between damage to the land and damage to the Lhopo present as continuations not only of the Buddhist Terma tradition but also as manifestations of the dynamic particular to Sikkim and its inhabitants, one based in the state's distinct religio-political history.

Political Dimensions of Khangchendzonga's Hidden Land

Since thirty years, thirty years [ago], one lama – his name is, I forgot his name! Actually he is a Holiness – he came here and he wanted to go to Beyul Dremojong. My father was there. Many people were willing to go in Beyul

⁶⁵ Balikci 2002, 85.

Dremojong. Lama said, 'I am going to Beyul Dremojong; those who want to, come with us'. And many people were going, you know? We thought this was real. And they went in Beyul Dremojong's direction – North direction – and then the obstacles came. The plan was all a mistake. My father was saying that time when Rinpoche met the obstacle, he died, or disappeared. [My father] and all the people were just following this lama. But my father came back. Somebody said, maybe the lama died near the mountain, near the snow.⁶⁶

As I have attempted to illustrate in the preceding sections of this paper, contemporary Lepcha and Lhopo understandings of Khangchendzonga's hidden land suggest a movement away from the physical: in the case of the Lepcha, this is due to cultural dispersion and the influence of Buddhism; among the Lhopo, this is attributable to a pre-existing comprehension of Sikkim's land – particularly Tashiding – as 'sacred' and Chang Ter triadic approaches to the idea of the beyul. However, expeditions in search of Sikkim's physical hidden land cannot be neglected. In the words of a Lingthem Village Lepcha: 'I mean, people are trying! To get to that place. But we are living here [in Dzongu]; we've never tried' [Lingthem 2005].

Six narratives described expeditions that had set out in hopes of physically locating Khangchendzonga's hidden land. These accounts, provided by two Lepcha and three Lhopo, can be mapped to three separate incidents: 1) an account of a failed expedition about 'thirty years ago', sometimes dated as 1966; 2) an account of a failed expedition in 1959;⁶⁷ and 3) an account of a possibly successful expedition 'when the British army came', told to me by one Lepcha, about his grandfather.

While I was studying, my grandfather told me one story. When the British army came in search of Máyel Lyáng, my grandfather used to carry the salt [?] for that person. He [the British man] went on searching and searching. Almost a year. He came back suddenly and he gave stories about Máyel Lyáng. But still my grandfather hasn't seen [the] physical; but he has heard this.⁶⁸

One Lepcha lama used the term 'Shambhala'⁶⁹ to describe the hidden land. This man went on to say that many lamas come in search of 'Shambhala' within Sikkim, though they may not straightforwardly admit this is their goal. Another Lepcha man provided the following account, employing a similar narrative structure to Lhopo descriptions of the 1966 expedition yet referencing an avalanche, which is often mentioned in the context of the 1959 expedition.

Just below Khangchendzonga, we believe there is a place, Máyel Lyáng. And twenty or thirty years before, Ladhakis took an old lama ... they reach[ed] up

⁶⁶ [Tashiding 2007]

⁶⁷ Levine (1993, 111) makes reference to this 1959 expedition; also see Bernbaum 1980.

⁶⁸ [TingVong 2007]

⁶⁹ Shambhala (in Tibetan, *bDe 'byung*) is a fantastic and pure 'spiritual kingdom' referenced in the *Kālacakra* [Skt] Tantra (*Dus kyi 'khor lo*), Zhang Zhung scriptures, and the Hindu *Kalki Purāṇa* [Skt]. A relatively comparable depiction is found in Bön texts on Olmo Lung Ring ('*Ol mo lung ring*).

to the base of Khangchendzonga. And when the lama was performing puja ... [he] told the Ladhakis that it was not the time: 'let the proper time come and we can try', but the Ladhakis, they forced the lama, 'you have to do it, you have to discover the door, you have to open it, we must go to Máyel Lyáng, Shangri-la'. The lama was performing the puja, then, [an avalanche fell on them]. So one of the people in ... that group, I think he must be there [in West Sikkim].⁷⁰

The years 1959 and 1966 correspond with major events in Sikkim's recent history: 1959 was the year of the historic Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet; 1966 saw the launch of the Cultural Revolution across China. The term 'when the British army came' used in the Lepcha narrative is imprecise but clearly suggests a time of political turmoil. These historical contexts, still invoked in modern tales of the hidden land, are presented as temporal incentives, references to turbulent eras; travels to the physical beyul are associated with threats to cultural stability.

Orofina views Terton Rigdzin Godem as 'one of the first in the religious history of Tibet to have brought to the cult of the hidden valleys that messianic character which has since then made the lands seem a more than ideal refuge to be sought in times of political troubles' (Orofina 1991, 8). Balikci, referencing Samuel in suggesting that Sikkim has always held the particular connotation of being a beyul that might serve as a refuge from political trouble, points out that the kingdom did serve as one such haven for many Tibetans after the 17th century religious wars in Tibet (Balikci 2002, 81, with reference to Samuel 1983, 517). Following the Dalai Lama's exile, Sikkim again welcomed the refugees, including prominent Nyingmapa and Kagyupa (*bKa' brgyud pa*) lamas (Bentley 2007, 62). Diemberger writes that beyuls functioned as 'protagonists of a millenaristic mythology in Tibetan religion connected to the critical periods in history' (Diemberger 1997, 297).

Contemporary oral narratives – alluding to political events of the past century – underscore this association between the beyul and political sanctuary.⁷¹ References to 1959, 1966, and the British army, who 'came in search of Máyel Lyáng', draw direct connections between recent expeditions in search of Sikkim's hidden land and key military moments of the previous decades. This is further evidenced in one Lhopo's statement that the 1959 expedition was inspired by the Chinese occupation of Tibet [Gangtok 2005].

Often classical Tibetan neyigs open by offering the beyul as a reprieve from the 'degenerate' times of the 'modern-day world'⁷² – a world that, today, centuries later, is radically different yet similarly perceived. The narrative of the beyul has endured, in part, due to this perpetual promise of refuge; it has been further propagated by the practical and migratory fulfillment of this promise throughout Sikkimese history.

⁷⁰ [Lingthem 2005]

⁷¹ Also see Ehrhard (1999b) for a political analysis of these 'treasure discoverers' and Ehrhard (1999a) for a historical contextualization of the search for Himalayan 'sacred lands'.

⁷² 'In the great gathering of the act of consecration of Great Samye (*bSam yas*), King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong sde btsan*) asked: Oh Great Master! As for you, you know all the past, the future, and the present; in these degenerative modern times, how is it that there is great suffering among the Tibetan subjects? Where should the dharma

Conclusion

Máyel Lyáng and Beyul Dremojong are two separate mythological conceptions of a hidden land located in the same mountain, Khangchendzonga. Globalization, cultural dispersion, and development projects have altered how these hidden lands are perceived. Diemberger has described mountains in Tibetan civilizations as ‘bridges’ between *the world of the people* and *the world of the gods* (Diemberger 1997, 320); thus it only follows that when the mountain, itself, changes, the bridges are altered, and the connections between the human and the divine must be rebuilt in a new way. This paper has attempted to examine these ‘religious bridges’ by offering a window into current conceptions of Máyel Lyáng, Beyul Dremojong, and the myriad of hybrid ‘Beyul Lyángs’ that interpolate these two distinct mythological constructs in the present day.

The influence of Buddhist perspectives can be identified in some contemporary Lepcha understandings of Máyel Lyáng, though other Lepcha still regard the two lands as separate. The careful consideration with which the Lepcha describe the growing distance between Lepcha communities and the Máyelmú is a microcosm of the self-aware approach employed by Lepcha activists addressing larger, more tangible threats facing their culture. The Lhopo understand select local misfortunes to be the result of development affecting the sacred land around them, a phenomenon that is simultaneously new and historical: new, because the development initiatives are recent and unprecedented; historical, because the view that damage to the land elicits threats from the land is grounded in Padmasambhava’s original ‘subduing’ of Khangchendzonga in the 8th century and Lhatsun Chenpo’s composition of the nesol. The hidden land has sustained its suggestion of spiritual and political refuge for centuries, a role that continues to be illuminated in contemporary Lepcha and Lhopo descriptions of expeditions in search of the land.

Trends towards internalization of the hidden land in both groups can perhaps be seen as the ‘othering’ of the physical land and as a dissociation of the physical land from the imminent, sustaining intimation with which it has historically been endowed. However, this claim must take into account the inherent multivalence of indigenous and Buddhist approaches to the land: in this context, examinations of the ‘physical’ versus the ‘hidden’ (in Lepchaism) and the ‘external’ versus the ‘internal’ (in Buddhism) may simply be semantics.

In Sikkim, a state whose cultural, religious, and physical topography is rapidly changing as its ‘secret summits’ are increasingly mapped, the shifting narratives of the Lepcha and the Lhopo reflect two societies’ ongoing attempts to locate themselves in relationship to the land – and the deities – as the ‘Hidden Valley of Rice’ continues to be opened to the world.

practitioners go? The Great Master spoke thus: Listen! King, ruler, subjects, all: When in degenerate times, the human life span is nearing sixty years, it will be necessary to go to the hidden lands ...’ In *Gnas ’bras mo ’dzongs gi lam yig bzhugs s+ho* (Scheid 2007, Appendix 1: 1v-2r).

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