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## **IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LOTUS: KHECHEOPALRI LAKE, A CONTESTED SACRED LAND IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYA OF SIKKIM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Khecheopalri Lake (also called Khachoedpalri Pemachen Tsho or Tsho-Shu Tsho) is a declared Buddhist holy site in West Sikkim. There are two small villages near the lake that are home to about fifty families of predominantly Bhutia-Lepcha descent. This area is a sacred place for Guru Rinpoche, the patron saint of Sikkim, who came to Khecheopalri in the 8th century to bless the waters. However, starting about ten years ago the lake became both a popular tourist attraction as well as a pilgrimage site for Hindus from neighboring Indian states and increasingly for western tourists. The lake is being threatened by the construction of a temple as well as trash from the ever-growing number of tourists. Buddhist sacred sites are protected under the 1991 special provision of article 371(f) meaning that the government has the obligation to protect these sites from damage or encroachment by other religions. This paper explores the mythical, ecological and religious significance of the Khecheopalri Lake.

*Key Words:* Sacred Lake, Tourism Impact, Guru Rinpoche, West Sikkim

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sikkim is a small Indian state that lies, landlocked, within the Himalayan mountain range. It borders Nepal to the west, Tibet to the north and the east, Bhutan to the south and the east and the Indian state of West Bengal to the south. Sikkim was originally named Bay-Yul Demojong or Sbas-Yul by Guru Rinpoche, otherwise known as Padmasambhava. He described the Bay-Yul Demojong as a, “hidden country full of treasures, fruits, flowers, and herbal medicinal plants.”<sup>1</sup> Guru Rinpoche was a Tantric prophet, rejoyiced in Tibet, the patron saint of Sikkim, one of the founders of Vajrayana Buddhism and created the Bay-Yul Demojong by planting secret teachings, or *termas*<sup>2</sup>, in caves and mountains throughout Sikkim<sup>3</sup>. In the 13th century, a Tibetan

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<sup>1</sup> See: Namgyal, Sir Thutob and Jeshay Dolma. 1908. History of Sikkim. (Translated from Tibetan by Lama Dawa Kazi Samdup). Unpublished typescript. P. 42-47

<sup>2</sup> Secret treasures, hidden by Padmasambhava that were to be discovered at auspicious times by “Tertons” (or treasure-seekers). They are both guidebooks to hidden lands as well as states of mind discovered while in a meditative trance. The most famous is Guru Rinpoche’s “Tibetan book of the dead.” <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Termas>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.answers.com/topic/padmasambhava>

prince named Guru Tashi had a divine vision telling him to go to Denzong (meaning “valley of rice” in Tibetan) or Sikkim.<sup>4</sup> His descendants later formed the royal family of Sikkim<sup>5</sup>. The several etymologies of the different names reflect Sikkim’s status as an amalgamation of varied cultures and traditions. Just like its people, the landscape is also characterized by diversity.

Sikkim’s geography is mostly hills and mountains with elevations that range from 920 feet to 28,000 feet. The Teesta River, which originates from the Cholamu Lake on the Tibet border, is the largest and most important river in Sikkim. Its major tributary is the Rangeet. Both rivers get their water from snowmelt as well as monsoon rains. Running from the north (bordering Tibet) to the south (bordering West Bengal) it provides drinking water, irrigation opportunities and, more recently, hydroelectricity<sup>6</sup>.

The state is gifted with 28 mountains, 21 glaciers, 277 lakes, 5 hot springs, and over 100 rivers and streams. Sikkim, for how small it is, has an incredible amount of diverse flora and fauna. Because of its wide range of elevations, the flora varies from tropical to temperate to alpine and tundra. However, the flora and fauna are frequently disturbed by road building, dam construction, tourist activity and urban development. Sikkim is the least populated state in India with only 76 people per square kilometer (total population of 540,493). The state’s residents are primarily Lepcha, Bhutia, and Sikkimese of Nepali descent.

The Lepcha are the most ancient inhabitants of Sikkim. The word “Lepcha” is actually a derogatory term in Nepali meaning “vial speakers.” They, however, call themselves Rongpa which means “ravine-dwellers.” As the original inhabitants of Sikkim they came much earlier than the Bhutias or the Nepalese. They have their own dialect which is of Tibeto-Burman origin. The Lepchas formerly practiced the Bon or Mune tradition which is based on the worship of nature. Their origin is a mystery but according to their own tradition they migrated from an unknown place with another tribe (the Jindaxs) who went on to Nepal while the Lepchas stayed in Sikkim<sup>7</sup>. They are primarily farmers and continue to worship and celebrate the land despite their relatively recent conversion to Buddhism and Christianity.

The Bhutia people come from the Kham region in lower eastern Tibet sometime after the 15th century. They have their own language, a dialect of Tibetan. They almost exclusively practice Vajrayana Buddhism which they introduced to the Lepcha people upon their arrival. A social change from a gathering and hunting shamanic culture to a horticultural theocracy occurred when Bhutia Buddhists came to influence

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.indiatravelogue.com/dest/sik/sikkim2.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikkim#Government\\_and\\_politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikkim#Government_and_politics)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.sikkiminfo.net/physical\\_features.htm](http://www.sikkiminfo.net/physical_features.htm) As of June 2004, the Department of Forest, Environment and Wildlife government of Sikkim has taken the controversial “Teesta Stage V hydroelectric project” to court. The dam is proposed to go through geographically delicate landscapes and sacred ecological sites which will have grave environmental as well as social consequences. So far, only one dam has gained clearance (a 510 MW, 96.5 m high dam). The controversy is still going on today and remains a serious concern, especially for the indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha inhabitants whose homes and sacred sites are being threatened.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.indiatravelogue.com/dest/sik/sikkim2.html>

Sikkim. Buddhism was incorporated with relative ease and peace because of its ability to fuse with nature worship. Consequently, the Vajrayana Buddhism found in Sikkim is a hybrid of tribal shamanism and monastic Buddhism (Denjongpa 2002). The king of Sikkim was of Bhutia descent, many of the Bhutia people continue to identify with their royal ancestry despite the monarchy being disenfranchised in 1975. In the 13th century, a Lepcha priest named Thekongtek and a Bhutia ruler Khyebumsa joined hands and swore eternal blood-brotherhood at a sacred site called Kabi-Longtsok in Northern Sikkim. Since that time, they have fought together to maintain their constantly threatened identities. Sikkim recognizes several other tribes (including Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa and Yolmo) as “Sikkimese Bhutia” but this lack of distinction is causing great concern to the Bhutia-Lepcha communities who feel that their voice and distinct identity is being drowned by these false additions (Kazi 2003).

The Nepalese are the most recent migrants to Sikkim. They came as early as two centuries ago, but their migration did not begin to have a serious impact until the 19th century. Now, they make up 70-80% of the state’s population. The Nepalese are made up of several tribes including the Limbu (who came in the 14th century, and thus are grouped with the Bhutia and given tribal status), Gurungs, Tamangs and Rais. With their migration came the introduction of terraced farming, cash crops (namely cardamom), Hinduism and the Nepalese language. The majority of the Nepalese people are Hindu and consequently about 68% of Sikkim’s population claims Hinduism as its religion despite Sikkim being the only declared Buddhist state in India.<sup>8</sup> The type of Buddhism practiced in Sikkim is called Vajrayana and has its origins in Tibet.

## **Overview of Vajrayana Buddhism**

The term “Vajra” comes from Sanskrit and literally means the “diamond thunderbolt.” “Yana” also comes from Sanskrit and means “path”. Symbolically, it signifies the transformation of an ordinary human mind into an enlightened one. Tantric Buddhism began in the fifth and sixth centuries in India and merged in Tibet to form Vajrayana Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism is considered the diamond thunderbolt path that purports that enlightenment is achievable in one life time, not through a denial of ignorant ways but a transformation of illusion (“samsara”) into enlightenment (“moksha” or “nirvana”) resulting in experiencing no difference between samsara and nirvana. According to Vajrayana principles humans live in samsara because they are contaminated by the five poisons and will only be liberated from them after the five poisons are transformed into the five wisdoms.<sup>9</sup> This transformation is a main goal of the Vajrayana Buddhism which Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) helped to develop in Tibet in the 8th century.

Before the introduction of Buddhism, Tibetans were practicing an ancient religion

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<sup>8</sup> All information gained from: <http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/S/Si/Sikkim.htm> and <http://www.sikkiminfo.net/>

<sup>9</sup> Greed transforms to the wisdom of sameness, hatred to mirror like wisdom, delusion to reality wisdom, and pride to wisdom of individuality and envy to all accomplishing wisdom.

Source: <http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Vajra>

known as Bon. It is difficult to know the early history because it has become so fused with Buddhism. However, it is clear that it was a mixture of animism (they saw nature as a manifestation of a spirit world) and shamanism. The Bon religion thrived with vibrancy until the middle of the 7th century when the ruling king, Songtsen Gampo, married two Buddhist women from Nepal and China. The two wives brought with them several monks who began to convert the people of Tibet away from their local Bon religion and shamanic practices, which included both animal and human sacrifices. Until 754, when King Trisong Detsen became the king of Tibet, Bon and Buddhism seemed to maintain a level of civil yet uneasy coexistence. However, Trisong Detsen and his successor Ralpacan forcefully made Buddhism Tibet's national religion by giving the Bon priests the choice between conversion or exile. Trisong Detsen invited the Bengali sage Shantarakshita to Tibet to form the first monastery at Samye and slay the local demons. However, he had difficulty with this task and instead of enlightening them; he irritated them into sending storms, crop failures and leprosy. Scared and frustrated he fled to Nepal. Then, Trisong Detsen invited Guru Rinpoche to Tibet to slay the local demons and establish monasteries. Although he was confronted with many malevolent demons, he succeeded in taming or killing them and establishing monasteries.<sup>10</sup> After studying and teaching extensively in Tibet, he left on a blue horse with 25 disciples and traveled through Sikkim. In Sikkim he deposited *termas*, slayed local, malevolent spirits and collaborated with native shamans in creating Sikkim as the ideal place for Buddhism with an emphasis on sacred landscapes. The type of Vajrayana Buddhism that is practiced in Sikkim today is *rNying ma*. It places a huge amount of importance on pure ecologies, sacred places and *dakinis*.<sup>11</sup> The importance of women allows esoteric male practitioners to have female consorts for their meditation practices (while this is strictly forbidden in other forms of Buddhism). Guru Rinpoche is said to have had up to 75 female consorts with him at Tashiding where he consecrated the various sacred places within the *geomandala*<sup>12</sup> of West Sikkim. Later he went to Khecheopalri where he met his highest consort, the Blue Tara.

## INTRODUCTION TO KHECHEOPALRI LAKE

In the Bhutia language, “Khecheo” means “in the middle” and “palri” means “lotus”, thus Khecheopalri means “in the middle of the lotus”. The lotus is one of the eight

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<sup>10</sup> Kerrigan, Michael. *The Diamond Path: Tibetan and Mongolian myth*. Time-Life Books, Amsterdam. 1998. 14-19.

<sup>11</sup> A female consort whose religious role includes the combining of the male and female powers in esoteric

Tantric rituals designed to create sacred spaces within which the dakini dwells. The term comes from Sanskrit and literally means “Sky Dancer.” Dakinis embody divine feminine form and can be wrathful or compassionate spiritual helpers that often awaken dormant enlightened states within their male counterparts. They are also considered deities of the earth and dwell within lakes, rivers, caves etc.

<sup>12</sup> The village of Tashiding is the center of a sacred landscape which is organized under the principles of a mandala. The most important points in the *geomandala*, with Tashiding as the center, are four caves in the four cardinal directions. To the east is Shar chok be phuk, to the south is Lho khandro sang phuk, to the west is Nub dechen phuk, to the north is Byang Lhari rinchen nying phuk. In the fourteenth century a tertön (revealer of hidden treasure) named Rigzin Godemchen, revealed this fact (Dokhampa 2003).

Auspicious Symbols in Buddhism and symbolizes the enlightened mind, which rises immaculate out of the muck of egotism and ignorance<sup>13</sup>. “Khechari” is also the heavenly realm or “pure land of dakinis” and may relate to the lake’s name<sup>14</sup>. Khecheopalri is located in West Sikkim at an elevation of 6,100-6,500 feet. The lake is surrounded by dense jungle which is home to a wide variety of birds, mammals, insects and flora.

Before the relatively recent Vajrayana Buddhist influence, the animistic Lepchas worshipped the lake as a location of spiritual power emanating from the plants, animals and geography. About 300 years ago, the establishment of the Khecheopalri Gompa<sup>15</sup> transformed Khecheopalri into a sacred Buddhist site. However, the mixture of animism and Buddhism, in both cognition and practice, became clear as we spoke with Bhutia-Lepcha villagers and Buddhist monks.

There are several myths about the lake which are all based in the belief that the lake’s waters contain both healing and wish-giving powers. Barren couples venture there to ask for fertility, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims come for their health and their families’ health; people even come to solve marital strife. On a daily basis, people offer flowers and food to the lake’s dakini. Most of the Buddhist pilgrims and Bhutia-Lepcha villagers believe that the lake and its surrounding sacred sites form an anthrogeography of a dakini. The lake is her foot, a cave (called Duji Dolmas) is her head, and a small part of the jungle (Hring) is her body. The dakini has many Tibetan names including Gyal-po-Kunga, Choo-Long Lu Chen, Nay Dungkar Bhuti, Nay-Dungkar Lhamu and Tsho-Shu Tsho<sup>16</sup>. Topden Lepcha Lama, who is a high Lama at Khecheopalri Gompa, told me that she has two other names as well - Nygyom A Shya lamo and Chamen Thumka Puti<sup>17</sup>. The dakini is described by Pala Bhutia, a lama at Khecheopalri Gompa and the son of a late Rinpoche,<sup>18</sup> as, “having a body covered in diamonds with a pulsating light surrounding her”.<sup>19</sup> However, some people in the village, such as Topden Lepcha Lama, believe that you can not see her, and her power is known only through her actions. There are several ceremonies dedicated to the Lake that are performed each year by the monks of Khecheopalri Gompa and the surrounding areas. Nay-Sol prayers are performed in the first month of the year as well as the 10th month (according to the Tibetan calendar). Once a year the monks do another prayer called Thu-Tsol at the lake side to Tsho-Shu Tsho. Buddhists from all over Sikkim perform their own forms of these ceremonies for the lake in their individual gompas. The animistic traditions are performed with the help of the religious leaders (namely the Bongthing, or priest, and the Mun-priestess). They offer their prayers to the deities Gyal-Po-Kugna, Nay-Dunkar Lhamu and Nay-Dunkar

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<sup>13</sup> The other seven include; Conch, Banner, Parasol, Two Fish, Eternal knot, Wheel, and the Pitcher.

<sup>14</sup> Khecheopalri is an important site for dakinis who reside within the lake. [http://www.khandro.net/dakini\\_khandro.htm](http://www.khandro.net/dakini_khandro.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Gompa means monastery.

<sup>16</sup> Lama, Acharya Tshering. Letter to the Chief Secretary, Government of Sikkim. “Defilement of Khachoeopalri Lake in West Sikkim.” July 15th, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Khecheopalri Busty, May 19th, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Rinpoche is a very high lama, usually a reincarnation, who chooses to stay in the human world to help others gain enlightenment instead of going to Buddha’s pure land.

<sup>19</sup> Khecheopalri Busty, May 20th, 2005

Bhuti<sup>20</sup>. In either March or April, the “Khachodpalri Mela” is held. During this festival, also known as Butter Lamp Floating Festival,” the lake is lit up with beautiful butter lamps<sup>21</sup>.

The lake is one of many “moving landscapes” within Sikkim<sup>22</sup>. Khecheopalri’s several mythologies explain how and why it moved to its current locale. All of the myths stress the importance of personal and ecological purity and cleanliness. Once the lake becomes dirty, it moves to a new location. Consequently, the Bhutia-Lepcha villagers around Khecheopalri spend much time cleaning the lake’s surroundings. However, starting about ten years ago, the lake became both a popular tourist attraction as well as a pilgrimage site for people from neighboring southern Indian states happy to escape the sweltering southern Indian summer in the temperate Sikkimese mountain valleys. Of the dozens of tourists that come each day show few outward expressions of religious piety. They drop their trash, take their photos and leave. This is a growing concern for the indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha villagers and Buddhist pilgrims whose fear is that the lake may again move. This issue is also political. Because Sikkim is state governed by the Buddhist principles of social interdependency and non-violence, religious tolerance is practiced. Religious sacred sites within Sikkim are protected under the 1991 special provision of the article 371(f) of the Indian Constitution. According to this article, the government has the obligation to protect previously established religious places from damage or encroachment by any other religions. The Khecheopalri case is currently in the Indian Supreme Court and gathering substantial media attention in the major newspapers of India. The issue surrounds the incident on July 6th 2004 when a man by the name of “Nepal Baba” swimming in the lake and placing an Indian flag in the middle. This was both shocking and disturbing for the Buddhist people who are allowed to neither wash their faces near the lake nor dip their feet in the water. Again, the issue of purity is raised in the context of the lake being defiled. As the reader will discover, the villagers’ efforts as well as mythological accounts explain the necessity for cleanliness.

### **Levels of Purity and Cleanliness**

Our informants repeatedly expressed a concern with purity and cleanliness on the personal, ecological and transcendental levels. There is a strong correlation between the pilgrims’ purity in mind, heart and actions and their ability to be healed by the lake. There are three main levels of purity that must be maintained - purity in body, speech and mind. Evolving sets of three is a recurring motif in Buddhist thought. Examples of Buddhist paths that evolve in three include; the three jewels of Buddhism, the three realms of samsara, the three sects of Tibetan Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana) and the three bodies of Buddha (known as the Trikaya). On the most basic level, a physical purity both of the lake and of the person

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<sup>20</sup> Lama, Acharya Tshering. Letter to the Chief Secretary, Government of Sikkim. “Defilement of Khachodpalri Lake in West Sikkim.” July 15th, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.india9.com/i9show/43845.htm>

<sup>22</sup> For more information see: Mullard, Saul. “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.” *Bulletin of Tibetology* 39 (2003): 16-17

is important when performing pujas<sup>23</sup> or offering prayers. Hinayana Buddhism (the lesser vehicle), with a focus on gaining enlightenment for one's self versus helping others, is related to the first level of purity. On this level, bodily, ecological and material purity is essential in order to progress to and comprehend the second level. On the second level, clarity in thought and heart must be kept. This means that one can not have selfish or malevolent intentions while asking for a wish or doing a puja or the effectiveness will be lost. Just as the body-oriented first level of purity relates to Hinayana Buddhism, the speech-related second level is associated with Mahayana Buddhism, or "the greater path." Mahayana stresses the importance of Bodhisattvas - those who remain in samsara (on Earth) to help others by offering them teachings. Thus importance is placed on speaking and listening, teaching and learning just as the second level of purity recognizes the importance of maintaining pure speech while offering prayers to the lake. As the reader will discover, the importance of pure speech is repeated in the mythology. The final level is a transcendental purity.

Once one has dutifully performed religious actions with the above mention levels of purity, the lake and its accompanying spiritual powers can reward you with a higher divine purity. By being able to maintain compassion and wisdom in an equanimous state within one's self by practicing the first two levels of purity, one can then begin to act "Buddha-like" until his qualities are actually achieved within the individual. One must realize that "divine purity" is not something that happens to you, but rather is an awakening of dormant states of consciousness that are within all sentient beings. The third and final level of Buddhism is Vajrayana which is important on the third level of purity. Vajrayana is a merging of wisdom and compassion which can be seen in the reality of the Lake as the dakini's home. Her anthropogeographical body is a physical manifestation of this non-dualistic union. Her home is also the merging of wisdom and compassion represented by the union of Guru Rinpoche and Blue Tara. All three levels of purity, their corresponding stages of Buddhism and other motifs of three, retain importance in the mythology of the lake.

One informant, Sonam Kampa Bhutia, a teacher at Khecheopalri Secondary School, spoke of the people's responsibility to keep the lake clean. He said, "We as villagers must walk around the lake picking up the trash that the tourists leave there because if the lake's dakini becomes dirty or unhappy, she will leave."<sup>24</sup> The dakini can not clean herself and so by rewarding the pilgrims and villagers for their pujas, prayers and actions with health she ensures that they maintain her physical purity. The concern with ecological cleanliness is important on the first level of purity, the Hinayana way and the first body of Buddha (nirmankaya)<sup>25</sup>. On this level there is a

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<sup>23</sup> "Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god, spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs and rituals." Source: <http://www.asia.si.edu/education/pujaonline/puja/background.html>

N.B.: Puja is both a Hindu and Buddhist term.

<sup>24</sup> Khecheopalri Secondary School, May 19th 2005. Translation from Nepali.

<sup>25</sup> Many believe that Buddha was not a human being but rather three manifestations of a universal, spiritual being. His physical body (as Siddhartha Gautama), or Body of Magical Transformation, is called the nirmankaya (kaya is from the Sanskrit word meaning "dimension of existence" or more simply "body"). His second manifestation is the Body of Bliss or the sambhogakaya. His third is the Body of Essence, or dharmakaya.

demand for respect of the physical feature of the lake. If this is not fulfilled, the lake will again move. Pala Bhutia explains that, “1,000 years ago the lake was in Pema-thang but became dirty and moved here to Khecheopalri.” Topden Lepcha Lama, who teaches Tibetan at Khecheopalri Gompa, also spoke of the lake’s movement. He said its original site was near Yaksum and then it moved to Thattong and finally rested at Khecheopalri. There are many myths surrounding the lake’s transitory nature. One myth is relayed by The Statesman News Service in the article, “Sikkim Congress clean chit to Nepal Baba.”<sup>26</sup> It tells how the lake (formerly called Lobding Tso) many years ago was at Yaksum and revered as the mother of all sacred lakes in Sikkim. The lake’s dakini, Pemachen Tso-men, asked to be moved to Khecheopalri because the Nepali army had defiled it by disposing of dead animals and humans in the lake. This was during the invasion of the Nepali king Prithvi Narain Shah. A monk helped the lake move to Khecheopalri and said the prayer “Tso-shug” which is a request for the lake to stay at Khecheopalri. Thus, its name should have been Tso-shug, but because of its location is now called Khecheopalri. This myth directly states the importance of maintaining the physical purity of the lake. The following myths explicate more subtle issues of purity.

One version of the myth was told by Chandra Bhadure Thumo Gurung, a Sikkimese Buddhist of Nepali descent who lives in Lapdang, West Sikkim. This story is about a young girl who was collecting sisnu when a white cow appeared to her and tells her a secret. The secret was that a sacred lake was coming to that site, but she was not allowed to tell anyone. Frightened by the speaking cow, she immediately runs home and tells her mother and father. That night she dies. The white cow had trusted her with a secret and she betrayed it. The impurity in her heart and actions inevitably killed her. The myth is both edifying for the future villagers as well as an explanation for the necessity for purity of heart. A similar myth was told by Topden Lepcha Lama. He narrated the story of a young, naked woman walking from her village in search of sisnu (stinging nettle) to make clothes for herself. There was no water anywhere and therefore no sisnu, so she sat down and prayed. All of a sudden water started appearing rapidly from the ground. Frightened, the girl ran back to her village and told her father who went up to the lake and prayed all day long. He returned home, told his daughter not to be frightened and to also go pray by the lake. They eventually moved there and established the village. He mentioned that one maintains a pure heart (“lamagial pa Gchiam Simla Sam” in Tibetan<sup>27</sup>) through mantra recitation, meditation and prayer offerings. These two myths deal with purity of speech and consequently correspond to the second level of purity, Mahayana Buddhism and the second body of Buddha (sambhogakaya). Sambhogakaya is the blissful realm of Buddhas, the land of bodhisattvas and where the Buddha exists as a transcendent, eternal, body, celestial being. In this body the Buddha enjoyed himself while teaching the truth and leading others to realizing the truth. Although the term “enjoyment” is used, it is not to be understood as selfish or physical pleasure, but rather pure, spiritual enjoyment. The first myth tells of the consequences for not maintaining pure speech and the second one, with a focus on prayer, shows how those who speak the truth and practice prayer

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<sup>26</sup> “Sikkim Congress clean chit to Nepal Baba.” Statesman News Service. 22 December. 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Not exact Tibetan spelling





Figure 1. Two views of the Lake Khecheopalri

will be rewarded. The final story is one stemming from the tradition of Guru Rinpoche and explains the anthrogeography of Khecheopalri Lake.

Looking down at Lake Khecheopalri from the cave (Dugi Dolmas), one can see that the lake is a perfect shape of a left footprint. Some informants said that Guru Rinpoche left it there as he stepped down during his travels in Sikkim; others say it belongs to the Blue Tara. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether), amongst other things, relate to the five female consorts who attained perfection. The highest consort is Kundu Yeshe Chhoogyn, who was also a master of the tantric practice. She met him there, and through their tantric union they empowered the lake. The combination of Blue Tara and Guru Rinpoche is representative of the Vajrayana notion of eliminating duality. Male and female unification illustrates the interdependence of compassion (male) and wisdom (female)<sup>28</sup>. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the woman is as essential to and capable of enlightenment as the man. At Khecheopalri Lake, one can see both creative feminine power and destructive masculine potency - the waters can be utilized to either inspire fertility or cause death depending on your purity. The belief is that, taken in small amounts, the waters are healing, but immersion in the water may be fatal. Just as the above mentioned two levels relate to the Buddha's first two manifestations, the last level is associated with his dharmakaya or "truth body". This is the essence of Buddha and can not be explained in words, but rather must be realized by the individual. On this level, one is no longer being directly taught through words and texts, rather the individual is attempting to understand truth through the emanation of Buddha's essence. Thus, after going through the first two levels of purity and Buddhist practice one may realize truth, also known as enlightenment, as the reward for purity. At Khecheopalri Lake, one finds all three levels working as a means for both gaining something (perhaps a wish or a prayer or enlightenment) as well as giving back in the form of offerings or cleaning around the lake. Examining the oft quoted story that birds use their beaks to pick up leafs that float on the waters of the lake, one may gain some insight into the tripartite teachings on purity and Buddhist practices that are available to pilgrims who are involved with one of three types of Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana). On the Hinayana level, the myth is about the physical cleanliness. On the Mahayana level, the myth describes a world of dakinis and anthropomorphic birds that themselves are bodhisattvas. The Vajrayana level is slightly more complicated because of the esoteric nature of the teachings. The basic idea is that the myth is a map for the khechari mudra.<sup>29</sup> The birds, symbolizing air, meet the lake, a symbol of water, and thus air and water meet when the beak of the bird slices the waters of the lake. Similarly, during the khechari mudra, air

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<sup>28</sup> Wisdom explains that the self is basically empty and therefore self-directed acts are meaningless, thus leading to compassion for all living beings as a way to direct energy away from the self. Therefore wisdom and compassion, male and female are non-dualistic equals. Enlightened human beings may also experience the lifting of duality as the realization that the internal and external worlds, and samsara and nirvana are one and empty. <http://timphu.bhutan.at:81/~bhutan/altdye00/c-viex/k-02-01-02/start.php3>

<sup>29</sup> A mudra is hand gesture using the fingers of both hands. It is found in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Each hand gesture represents a different spiritual truth and is used by meditation, accompanied by a specific mantra and visualization. Each gesture contains esoteric teachings that may be lost on the inexperienced practitioner. However the symbolic, relaxation aspect is a useful ritual for beginners.

(represented by prana)<sup>30</sup> meets water (represented by the drinking of elixirs) to enact a radical yogic connectivity and trance. The long process of understanding the Lake, coming to realization about truth and practicing one or more levels of Buddhism begins with the pilgrimage.

### **Medicinal Properties and Pilgrimage Practices**

Certain places in nature such as lakes, waterfalls and caves are endowed by indigenous cultures (and their gods) with the capacity to heal. Getting to these places is often difficult. Physical, mental and spiritual endurance is tested during pilgrimages making the journey part of the practice and the destination if achieved, more spiritually rewarding. In this respect, Lake Khecheopalri is an important pilgrimage spot. It is said that wish-giving is most effective if the pilgrimage is done three times by foot. The Indian government's investments in road building to expand tourism in Sikkim have increased jeep traffic and "spiritual tourism" as well as decreased the number of pilgrims who come by foot. Several of our indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha informants explained that the waters have healing powers and wish giving capabilities and thus people come from all over to pray to the lake and have their wishes granted. Every informant we spoke with mentioned the lake's ability to help in producing offspring. For example, Sonam Bhutia, a Buddhist villager, relayed a story about how his mother gave birth to five stillborn children and finally went to the lake to ask for just one live born boy. Her wish was granted and he grew up a healthy child. The lake also is said to solve marital strife. Pala Bhutia told us that "if a couple is fighting, the wife should make tea with the water from the lake and serve it to her husband; then peace will come back to the home."<sup>31</sup> Pilgrims also come to the lake in times of illness. One may collect the lake's water for later use or drink it from the lakeside for instantaneous healing. I spoke with four Hindu pilgrims from Geyzing in West Sikkim who had come there to collect water for their sick parents. Sonam Kampa Bhutia mentioned that "if your throat hurts you should drink the water, and if your eyes hurt you should splash water in them and they will be healed."<sup>32</sup> According to the Bhutia-Lepcha Buddhists, the lake's dakini, Tsho-Shu Tsho, endows the water with the power to purify households during and after death ceremonies. Lamas will take the water and sprinkle it throughout the house thereby purifying it.

All of the efforts that go into up-keeping the ecological and material integrity of the sacred sites create a connection between the sacred geography and the sacredness in the psychology of the believer. Thus, these sacred sites are physical manifestations of the higher powers that inhabit them. The importance of preserving these sites is realized throughout the Buddhist community of Sikkim. Consequently, since the Tertön dNgos grub rgyal mtshan (1337-1408) revealed that Guru Rinpoche had blessed Sikkim as the hidden realm, the Sikkimese Buddhist community has done its

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<sup>30</sup> Prana is the Sanskrit word for "breath". It is a term used to describe air and breathe as the vital forces that sustain life.

<sup>31</sup> Khecheopalri Gumpa May 22nd, 2005. Translation from Nepali.

<sup>32</sup> Khecheopalri Secondary School. May 19th, 2005. Translation from Nepali.

best to preserve the sacred sites<sup>33</sup>. In 1642, Buddhism was declared the national religion of Sikkim. In Sikkim, recent events regarding Khecheopalri Lake have led the Buddhist community to feel threatened, vulnerable and isolated by the Indian Government, which is supposed to guard their interests and sacred sites according to article 371(f) of the Indian Constitution.

### **The Khecheopalri Lake Controversy**

The Bhutia-Lepcha community was once the majority and now has become a minority in Sikkim to a Nepalese population. In the late 1800s the British encouraged the agriculturally-savvy Nepalese to terrace the hills and cultivate rice, tea and cardamom. On April 26th 1975, Sikkim became the 22nd Indian state. This meant that the open border law between India and Nepal now applied to Sikkim, resulting in a surge of Nepali immigration. From being the sole inhabitants of their hidden Buddhist kingdom, the Bhutia-Lepcha are now only 17% of the total population with their minority percentage evermore threatened by continuing migration.

Several problems have resulted from the Bhutia-Lepchas recent marginalization. Their ability of self-representation in the Sikkimese government is threatened; their capacity to protect the Buddhist architecture and sacred places is under assault and their traditions, languages and cultures are vanishing. Besides feeling as though their voice is not being heard, the Buddhist community is especially angered by the recent plans for the construction of a Hindu temple on the lake's shores and the swimming within Khecheopalri Lake by Nepal Baba.

The incident involved a man by the name of "Nepal Baba" (also known as "Kirat Baba," "Sat Guru" and "Guru Hazoor") who, on July 6th 2004, after swimming to the middle of the lake, planted an Indian flag and a white flag as a sign of defiance against Buddhist control of the lake and the ascent of Nepali nationalism and Hindu radicalism in West Sikkim. His followers also planted white, non-Buddhist, flags all around the lake. The white flags symbolize the Kirats revivalism movement. This act was horrifying to the Buddhist community who fear that the lake may move again. However, representatives of the World Religious Reformation and Human Unity Organization say that the white flags were intended to mean world peace and "avert the third world war."<sup>34</sup> While that may have been his intentions, the consequence is that Sikkim's long standing history of peaceful religious co-existence is, according to Acharya Tshering Lama, "being systematically destroyed by the forces inimical to the interest of Sikkimese people."<sup>35</sup> By turning the Buddhist community against the Hindu community, Nepal Baba has successfully begun polarizing the various religions in Sikkim that formerly maintained peaceful levels of respect. Not only did Nepal Baba and his followers (members of the Kirat revivalist movement) swim in the lake, but they also proposed the building of a temple within the Lake's sacred grounds.

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<sup>33</sup> Boord, Martin J. "A Pilgrim's guide to the hidden land of Sikkim. Proclaimed as a Treasure by Rig'Dzin Rgod Kyi Ldem'Phru Can." *Bulletin of Tibetology*. 39 (2003): 31.

<sup>34</sup> "Sacred lake controversy deepens." *The Telegraph* 23 July 2004, 12.

<sup>35</sup> "Sacred lake controversy deepens." *The Telegraph* 23 July 2004, 12.

The Buddhists are attempting to cease the building of the Kirateswar mundir, or temple, at Lake Khecheopalri in compliance with Article 371(f) while the Hindus are loudly voicing their resistance to the Indian government's preferential treatment of Buddhism in Sikkim. The Article 371(f) in the Indian Constitution states that,

*No person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination or any section thereof into a place of worship of a different section of the same religious denomination or of a different denomination or any section thereof*

The Buddhist community has formed two groups, ASMON (Assembly of Sikkim Monasteries) and SIBLAC (Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee) to help outline plans that will allow for the least confrontation and the most action to protect the threatened culture, ancestry and religion of the Bhutia-Lepcha community. SIBLAC has formally accused the Sikkimese congress of remaining silent during this issue. The government on the other hand, feels as though SIBLAC and the Buddhist community are making something out of nothing since the proposed construction never gained clearance from the Ministry of Environment. Senior government spokesperson, B. B. Gurung, told the "Statesman News Service" on November 21st 2004 that, "The state government will not show any disrespect to the religious sentiments of any community here. This lake, situated in western Sikkim, is visited by both Buddhists and Hindus." A similar remark about needing to be "religiously tolerant" and therefore justifying a lack of action against Nepal Baba was made by Congress president Mr. N. B. Bhandari. After letting Nepal Baba go without any repercussions, he told "The Statesman" on December 22nd, 2004, that, "We have nothing against any religion and its representatives. Anybody is welcome to preach in Sikkim and Nepal Baba is not an exception." This statement is a direct denial of the events that took place at Khecheopalri on July 6th. The state government is also claiming that Nepal Baba is a foreign national and no action, under international laws, may be taken against him. Although this also is clearly not true as he has gone into Indian Territory, both ASMON and SIBLAC are troubled by the government's lack of action. They are mainly concerned with preserving the status of the Buddhist community and taking steps towards punitive action against those who defile sacred areas such as Khecheopalri Lake. If nothing is done now for this disrespectful and profane display, others may get away with worse actions in the future. The weakness of the law enforcement has allowed these law breakers and disrespectful religious fanatics to go free and unpunished. According to ASMON, in a letter to the Governor of Sikkim,

"The State Administration has remained a passive spectator to this dangerous development. It causes us shame and anguish that the Ministry of the Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim has remained inactive in these circumstances. By adopting such a stand the Government is guilty of condoning a heinous crime perpetrated by a foreign national."<sup>36</sup>

This letter, along with dozens of others, has fallen on deaf ears and no action continues to take place. The Buddhist community is anxious about its newly

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<sup>36</sup> Day-Gyon-Jingkyong Tsogpa. All Sikkim Monasteries Association. Letter to the Governor of Sikkim, Raj Bhavan. "Onslaught against the Buddhist Culture of the Himalayas and the Sovereignty of the Indian Union." 6, August, 2004.

threatened positions within Sikkim.

In a letter to the Chief Secretary, Acharya Tshering Lama, MLA, Sangha Constituency<sup>37</sup> states his concerns for the future of Sikkim by writing, “Today what is at stake is the concept of a united Sikkim, and the very cultural structure known as the Sikkimese culture. The future of Sikkimese people lies in constitutional secularism; it should not be allowed anymore to be a plaything of forces, which are inimical to our interest.” Hopefully, with the support of newly formed groups and the strength of the monks and the Bhutia-Lepcha community, the case’s outcome will be one that works towards protecting these immeasurably important and sacred sites and traditional cultures.

As the reader has discovered, purity as a physical and spiritual practice at Khecheopalri Lake is representative of its importance throughout all of Tibetan Buddhism. The Buddhist community recognizes the value of maintaining Khecheopalri’s holiness as a Buddhist site. The current court battle is not just about religious rights, but the spiritual well-being of a whole population. The Bhutia-Lepcha Buddhists understand that if they begin to loose rights on their own sacred sites, the damage could be irreparable. The first level of purity demands a respect for the natural balance and preexisting ecology. The Sikkimese government’s encouragement of tourism throughout the state has caused irrevocable damage to Khecheopalri Lake and other such holy sites. The defilement of the lake and the government’s usage of motorboats to remove the flag also increase the fear that the lake may move again because of its physical pollution. The tourists not only leave trash, increase jeep traffic and disturb the sanctity of the lake, but also fail to comprehend the second level of purity. The many tourists we spoke with never alluded to the necessity for right speech while asking for a wish, nor mentioned any desire to offer a prayer while visiting. Therefore, the outspoken Buddhist community is not just fighting to have Nepal Baba detained and the building of the mundir ceased, but also asking for some understanding of the potential long-term effects of increasing tourism to Khecheopalri and other holy sites. The Buddhist community, through groups such as SIBLAC and ASMON, would also like to increase awareness about the threat to their culture and heritage. ASMON, in a pamphlet entitled “Appeal from Rinpoches, Tulkus, Monks/Nuns and Buddhist practitioners of Sikkim” explains, “We believe that just as deforestation threatens our climate, so by destroying a culture or a distinctive way of life or belief of a certain section of people, we destroy part of ourselves.” Sikkim was blessed as a hidden land. It was meant to be a place of refuge when violence, famine or drought plagued other Buddhist’s homelands. Its sanctity must be preserved. By increasing the awareness of tourists, making appeals to the government for action and protection and by continuing to preserve the holy sites, Sikkim’s importance as a secret hidden land sanctified with beauty, abundant natural wealth, invaluable hidden teachings and a population of peaceful, spiritually advanced individuals, may be maintained and treasured as it was blessed to be.

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<sup>37</sup> The Representation of People Act, 1980, states that the makeup of the congress shall be as follows: 12 seats for Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepchas, 2 seats for Scheduled Castes of Sikkim, 1 seat for the Sangha and 17 seats as general. The Sangha seat (presently occupied by Acharya Tshering Lama) is designed to give the monastic population its own voice. The Sangha representative is elected through an Electoral College of the Sanghas (Buddhist monk community).

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