

DEATH BY POISONING: CAUTIONARY NARRATIVES AND INTER-ETHNIC ACCUSATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SIKKIM*

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ABSTRACT

The Sikkimese are a multi-ethnic community in a Himalayan sub-region in India. Even though the majority of the population is Hindu and Nepalese, the minority Buddhist and Bhutia/Lepcha communities are very strong. Death by poisoning is a common occurrence among the Sikkimese, and it is often ambiguous and subject to suspicion. Narrated initially as traditional cautionary tales, these belief narratives have been used against the multi-ethnic communities that reside in Sikkim, leading to real-world accusations. The article explores how belief in, and narratives related to, poison, poisoning, poison keepers and the poison deity are used to justify the demonisation and othering of a community.

KEYWORDS: death by poisoning • ethnicity • belief narratives • demonization • Buddhism • accusations • Sikkim

INTRODUCTION: INITIAL ENCOUNTER

Every time I bid farewell to my parents in Sikkim, mentioning my journeys to other places, my mother’s reaction is to caution me: “Be careful where you put your mouth”. She is afraid that I will be poisoned, for death by poisoning is understood to be common in the region. Indeed, I have met many people who claim to have been affected, indirectly or directly, by this phenomenon, known to Bhutias as *dhuk*, to Nepalis as *kapat*,

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and to Lepchas as *gni'ing*. In a region of weak state presence, a difficult landscape, and many sources of social conflict, sudden deaths are not uncommon. Poisoning accusations provide a frequent explanation that assigns meaning to an otherwise unexplained event such as the loss of a loved one.

Research that has been done on the wider context of poisoning has situated the belief within a broader network that, for example, emphasises “witchcraft where minorities women in China were accused of poisoning men with special poisons called *ku*” (Feng and Shryock 1935: 2); and how “dislocations and ambivalences engendered by rural capitalism, particularly the transformation of relations of production and proprietorship and attendant shortages of critical resources such as land” in Malaysia (Peletz 1988: 162); “the interface between cosmology, the economies of fortune, and hospitality” in Tibet (da Col 2012: 175); and “the ambivalent supernatural creature nurtured by persons who sacrifice human beings to him in exchange for wealth and good fortune” in the north-eastern Indian state of Meghalaya (Lyngdoh 2015: 169); as well as accusations due to change in social status and economic drift in Bhutan (Dema 2017).

The phenomenon has been sparsely documented in the Himalayas and less so in South Asia. In the context of Sikkim, Ajo Dugyal Bhutia (65 years old), who is a non-celibate monk and teacher at the local Higher Buddhist Studies Centre (SHEDA), has said that poison is a living thing. It has a will of its own. (FM: M, 65) It is believed that poisons are brought from shops in the same way that one can buy a book or jewellery. Usually the sellers are Indian, Muslim, or Tibetan merchants while the buyers are Sikkimese locals lured by the hope of prosperity. Once bought, the life of the poison is intertwined with the buyer, making him/her a poisoner. This then becomes a family legacy of a sort and is passed down from one generation to the next. Ajo Dugyal says he heard that poisoners/poison keepers who inherit poison are trapped because it is hard to get rid of the poison. One needs to nurture the poison as if it is one's own child or an older person in need of care. Offerings should be made every six months, with failure to do so resulting in the sacrifice of a member of the poison holder's family.

Exploring further, the article firstly aims to document the dramatised narratives and beliefs that are indicative of different verbal accusations, shared ideas, fears, and communicative relations between the plural communities in Sikkim. The practices of negotiation illustrate social change or tension, rumour, gossip, social stigmatisation, scapegoating and witchcraft beliefs. Secondly, the article shows how the traditional cautionary tales related to *dhuk* (poison, poisoning), *dhuk zam* (poisoners, poison keepers) and *dhuk lha* (poison deity, poison owner) is ‘weaponised’ and used as a tool in real-world accusations. It depicts how such accusations are invoked due to fear of being poisoned and as a way of making sense of the loss of loved ones. I argue that the linking of poison to the ‘Other’, and the use of forms of othering and demonising, stems from increasing insecurity due to drastic growth in the number of immigrants, changes in political inclination, plural communities, economic competition, social conflict, and unequal opportunities in an environment with limited resources. Finally, I conclude that such demonisation and othering are examples of inclusion and of the bridging of the gap to the fastest growing section of the population, i.e., the immigrant population.

To understand and conceptualise the features and dynamics of communities, especially the ethnic communities, there are the fundamental works of Max Weber (1968 [1922]), Emile Durkheim (1992 [1893]) and Ferdinand Tönnies (1957 [1887]), who defined community as “human togetherness” formed based on biology, geography, sociology and psychology, place, everyday interaction, and sensibility. Human beings as a species relate to one another through a variety of social dynamics both amicable and hostile, such as conflict, enmity, bodily love, friendship, market transaction, and others (Weber 1968 [1922]: 13). The notion that communities can also be non-place-based further paved the way for debate on ethnic communities in the age of increasing mobility, as per Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]) when he coined the term ‘imagined communities’. Problematising further, Roger Brubaker (2002: 164) introduces ‘groupism’ as “the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as the basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis”. Despite much research and interest in the topic, much data is still needed regarding how people live together constructively and how practices of acknowledging and bridging difference works in everyday life (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). In this light, the article outlines, through the narratives of poisoning in Sikkim, how belonging is understood as a dynamic social location, multiple in its nature and shifting over the course of time (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013). The forms of ‘othering’ and fear of the other that this article deals with show assimilation even in forms of demonisation.

Before Sikkim’s merger with India in 1975, it was a Himalayan Buddhist kingdom ruled by the Chogyal Dynasty¹ formed in 1642 (disputed, see Mullard 2011) under the influence of Tibetan theocracy. Historically, Sikkim was *de facto* a protectorate of British India after the treaty of 1861; the 1950 treaty with India continued Sikkim’s protectorate status until 1975 (Singh 1988: 191–197; Bajpai 1999: 121). Later, with the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, the Sino-Indian war on Sikkim’s border in 1962–1963, the democratic aspirations of the population agitating against the oppressive rule of Sikkim’s feudal oligarchy, and the breakdown of internal law and order all led to the 1975 referendum that culminated in the annexation of Sikkim to India in 1975 (Arora 2007: 196). After the merger, even though the Himalayan Buddhist kingdom was dismantled, Buddhism as a religious practice and authority remained strong.² These imprints in today’s political institutions are visible in the form of the Sangha seat in the state Legislative Assembly and Ecclesiastical Affairs Department, which looks after the affairs of all the religious institutions within the state, standing distinct from the notion of secularism (Vandenhelsken 2003; Arora 2007). *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Risley 1894: 257) states that there are 36 monasteries in Sikkim, whereas today there are 248 monasteries under the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department.

Demographically, the ethnic groups are classified into three broad categories: the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis. The population of Sikkim is predominantly Hindu (68%), with Buddhists comprising a large minority (27%) and Christians comprising a small component (3%); Muslims are present in insignificant numbers (Lama 2001: 7). Nepalis started migrating to Sikkim at the beginning of the 19th century, with various sub-groups represented (Newari, Limboo (Subba), Rai, Tamang, Sherpa, Gurung,

Murmi, Kami, Damai, Sarki, etc.; see Singh 1993). Additionally, there are Indian Businessmen from Bihar, Bengal, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of India, generally referred to as *madhise* or *dhoti* (plainsmen), as well as Tibetan refugees who escaped there after Tibet's occupation by China. Therefore, Sikkim's demography is the result of migration, as well as socially engineered settlement and its politics. In short, in a place like Sikkim where communities are multi-cultural and beliefs interconnected, the act of othering could be synonymous with acceptance.

Linguistically, Sikkim comprises 22 Indo-Tibetan and Indo-Aryan linguistic groups. Nepali became the lingua-franca and national language of Sikkim when it was included as one of the 22 Scheduled languages specified in the Constitution of India by the Seventy-first Amendment Act, 1992. Prior to this on October 17, 1977, the Sikkim Official Language Act was passed by the Governor of the State, adopting Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha as "the languages to be used for the official purposes of the State of Sikkim" (*The Sikkim Code*).³ Tracing the history of these ethnic categories, one finds that in the 1891 census of Sikkim the population was differentiated ethnically into 13 groups (Risley 1894: 24). However, after 1891 the imperial administration delineated four dominant groups: Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus and Nepalese. Due to intense ethnic competition over resource entitlement one can argue that there is aggravated ethnic tension in Sikkim. The boundaries between indigenous Lepcha-Bhutia and perceived Nepali migrants are reinforced by religious differences and affirmed by differing attitudes towards the landscape (Arora 2004). The state government is faced with the challenging task of balancing the aspirations of these diverse ethnic groups while implementing development projects and modernising Sikkim's economy (Arora 2006: 65). Previously sustained by shifting cultivation and agricultural occupations, Sikkim was industrially backward and landlocked; land ownership played a vital role in defining the strength of one's ethnicity. Ethnic difference, as Veena Bhasin (2002: 6) argues in the context of Sikkim, is usually associated with inequality in resource sharing, power, and prestige and results in the stratification of the society. During the British protectorate, the Bhutia-Lepcha elites managed to wrest substantial privileges, such as access to prime lands and lower taxation, from the British under autochthony, causing many other communities to be sour and dissatisfied.

Against this backdrop, while communal harmony has long been the ideal norm, such forms of ethnic diversity always carry with them the possibility of creating disorder. With the recent boom in tourism, competition has heightened and the number of people who live illegally has increased. For the last decade the Sikkimese fight against 'fake' Sikkimese residents has intensified, ending in mass protest in the capital city Gangtok. The local media cover news stories like these, for example, in "Sikkim Surakshasamiti to Continue Fight against Fake COI, RC" in the *Sikkim Express* (Monday, October 19, 2020). In addition, on December 23, 2019, the United News of India, a multi-lingual news agency, covered a story under the headline "Former MLA Tseten Tashi Bhutia Exposes Fake COI Resident on Sino-Indian Border":

He appeals to the government to establish a separate department dealing with the issue of the Sikkim Subject Certificate, the Certificate of Identification, and the Residential Certificate. Citing an example of XY Kami, living on Army Land on 4th mile road to Nathula, who possessed fake COI but has managed to rise to the prestigious position of Panchayat. He said, it was shocking.

Job opportunities are scarce and at the same time there is a readily available workforce. Therefore, many immigrants from Nepal and nearby Indian states such as West Bengal continue to flood into Sikkim, adding fuel to existing communal tensions.

TYPES OF POISONING IN CONTEMPORARY BELIEF

We cannot trace when it first came to Sikkim. There is no date and time to tell you as recorded, but it was a long, long time ago. Since the time of our ancestors, dhuk as a tradition/phenomenon has existed. (FM: M, 65)

One day in winter 2018 I was supposed to attend a wedding in a neighbouring village called Swayem. I was on the back of a scooter with my uncle, a village monk. While zooming past the hills we were in conversation through the wind and our helmets about my interest in researching guardian deities. At that moment, we passed by a small ration shop, dilapidated with a rusted roof and walls made of uneven planks painted green. I wanted to stop and buy a bottle of water, but my uncle instinctively sped up and said: "Don't you want to reach home alive?" When I inquired about his reaction, he responded,

They raise a poison deity, you know. They are very dangerous. Two weeks ago, a 29-year-old teacher [male] from Manipur [one of India's north-eastern states], who teaches at the local English-medium school died. He went in to buy some food and drank a Coca-Cola – and by the time he arrived at his residence he was blue – dead within half an hour. (FM: M, 42)

The narratives of perplexing and mysterious incidents of misfortune (deaths) befalling a healthy young person without any ailments usually generates suspicion that malevolent powers are operating, usually ending with the verdict that "he or she was poisoned". My mother justified her belief in the reality of the poison keeper by recalling a death of her childhood friend and neighbour. She recalled how

Bhu-Tsering (44 years old) came home from nearby, supposedly from a rumoured poisoner's *batthi* (local alcohol bar), totally drunk at night. Next day, he had a severe stomachache and vomited blood; within a couple of hours, he was declared dead. (FM: F, 53)

When I asked her how she knew that he died of poisoning, she said "he was definitely poisoned. His feet, fingers, face, and hands turned blue, he vomited blood and his teeth burst open. More so, he drank alcohol in the rumoured place, I heard. It's clear." (FM: F, 53)

The use of 'I heard', 'they say so', 'someone said' are key aspects of rumour in these cases. The informants I have interviewed generally have not seen the poison themselves but all of them knew the houses and shops, and the people who have been accused. These rumours are encountered frequently, such as when I was travelling from Gangtok to north Sikkim with family and my mother said enthusiastically that Sonam (45 years old, small roadside restaurant and bar owner), who is now married to a Lepcha man, is our distant relative. Upon hearing this, father replied, "Now, let us keep our distance from those relatives who nurture medicine" (medicine here is a euphemism

for poison). Upon further enquiry, he said, "I heard that Sonam is known as a poisoner and that she has killed many". In this case, another important aspect to note is the fact that Sonam belongs to the Bhutia community and is married to a Lepcha. This aspect of inter-ethnic difference is more frequent these days, illustrating embedded social tension and change.

Recently the narratives of poisoning have included rumours about roadside restaurants and food stall owners. One can be warned every time one travels across Sikkim to avoid certain restaurants and eating places on the way. For example, one time when I was travelling to Gangtok we passed a place called Bakcha, where we came across the Bakcha Bar and Restaurant; we made a pit stop so that the passengers could use the restroom. When I asked a man named Tenzing (a fellow-passenger, ex-monk) who was sitting next to me to help buy me crisps and a bottle of coke from the restaurant, he looked at me anxiously and whispered "it is dangerous to eat or buy anything from this restaurant. They are rumoured to be poison keepers. I will buy something at the next stop for you, it is better to avoid it here." (FM: M, 44)

The above narratives show that the belief is now widespread and attaches itself to impersonal commercial transactions. But I wanted to seek an eyewitness to such a death by poisoning or someone who had seen the poisoning happen. Here I will elaborate on the interview with Ajo Dugyal again, who mentioned that there were two kinds of poison (*dhuk*), first one that kills instantly, while the second takes years to show any effect. When elaborating on the first kind of death by poisoning, which he had witnessed, he said:

There was a man in Phodong whom everyone called *Yabla*.⁴ I do not know who he was. I am doubtful he was anything but *Yabla*. He was a lean and dark guy of no identifiable ethnicity. Either he was Sherpa or Tamang – or maybe a mix of both. Who knows? I was in Phodong Monastery during that time and the 16th Karmapa⁵ visited for the first time. *Yabla*, on that occasion opened a restaurant. It was a big event. There was a Rai lady, her name eludes me, quite old but very charming. She went inside the restaurant to eat dumplings. She came out, and within 10 minutes she fell to the ground, all her teeth smashed, and she died right there. When I was growing up, I remember my mother suffered from difficulty in delivering a baby. An invitation was sent to a ritual healer and the sacrifice of a chicken was made. In that ritual, the head is chopped off a living chicken. Sometimes, the ritual healer would even rip it with his teeth. The headless chicken would then dance in pain, flapping its wings, and would die. It was like that. It was a pitiful sight. I could not see it anymore. She died right in front of our eyes. So dangerous is the instant poison type. (FM: M, 65)

There are multiple components to untangle in this story within a story – the visit of the Karmapa to Sikkim, the event at the monastery where the poisoning took place, his childhood memories of a ritual performance and an interesting comparison between the death of the Rai lady with the chicken sacrifice that he witnessed as a young boy. But I would like to delve into the aspects of suspicion and doubt that he had for the owner of the restaurant who, according to Ajo Dugyal, is supposedly of an unknown ethnic background. These kinds of narrative, in which the victim and the accused are from different ethnic backgrounds, have become more popular in recent years. Dur-

ing one of my conversation with a friend, he mentioned that his father died of poison and that he was poisoned by a Nepali man named Ram Bahadur who owned a small roadside stall where his father ate lunch. In these cases, the symptoms, and the way one dies are important, and it can be supported by a verbal statement and other proof as incriminating evidence for understanding, although not for legal action.

Regarding the second type of poisoning, Ajo Dugyal continued:

Imagine drinking tea here, and a *bahun*⁶ man is sitting next to me. He wants to drink my tea. He sees me sipping from my cup, and he swallows his spit. Such intense wants and desires can cause slow poison. It does not have a direct or instant effect, but it kills you slowly. When you get poisoned so slowly, you lose weight first and then become pale, there is constant coughing, and the eyes turn yellow. In such a situation, some people might say it is Tuberculosis or Jaundice, but it is not. It is slow poisoning. (FM: M, 65)

In this belief particularly, attention can be drawn to the medical diagnosis and the discrepancies between this and poisoning belief. I will discuss further in the next section arguments in which traditional beliefs are stronger and more potent than modern beliefs. In the cases presented here the core connecting belief comes from an emphasis on ethnic background. Which is to say that poisoners are always someone from a different tribe or community, someone who does not belong.

TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES OF POISON AS CAUTIONARY NARRATIVES

Today the narratives are situated within ethnic conflict and are made more intense by the intermingling of the community through inter-marriage, residing in proximity, etc. The lines between who belongs with who are blurring. These narratives are not new and have been long established in the Bhutia community as taking place among families, neighbours, and villages for a long time. Earlier these stories had entirely different connotations and uses, but today are shared as cautionary narratives.

Previously during my fieldtrips, I visited Ajo Namgay, a ritual expert who is one of my main informants in Lachung (FM: M, 88). On my way, I saw him coming out of a home where he had just finished offering a divination. I joined him and we started to walk towards his home. On the way he started pointing and warned me about eating and drinking from certain houses that we passed because that person was rumoured to be a poisoner and poison keeper. I smiled at him but did not ask any further questions as we had arrived at his house. Once I started to interview him sitting in his kitchen, I asked about his earlier comment. Upon hearing this, Chum (grandmother, Ajo Namgay's wife, 86 years old) got excited and further cautioned me, saying I should be careful of where I eat when travelling. When I enquired further how poison keepers get their poison, she recalled a story she had heard a long time ago:

Once upon a time in Lachung there lived two sisters. One day a young man died right after leaving the house of the older sister, where he drank a pint of *arak* [local rice beer]. Soon, the younger sister discovered that her elder sister could use poison and tried to help her get rid of it. First, they tied the poison to a huge rock and

threw it into the lake, but when they arrived back home the poison was already there. Then they tried to burn it in the fire, but it wouldn't burn. Lastly, with no other option left to get rid of the poison the younger sister locked her older sister in her room and burned her alive. Only by killing her sister could she dispose of the poison. (FM: F, 86)



Photo 1. Ajo Namgay, photographed in Lachung, Sikkim. Photo by Nawang Lachungpa.

We can see that this story of the sisters, who lived in Lachung, has no focus on ethnicity. They were from the same community as the person who died. The fact that the younger sister ended up killing both the sister and the poison is narrated as if it was a victory of good over evil.

After sharing this story, Chum moved directly on to another story, during the telling of which she and Ajo interrupted to fact-check each other.

Chum: I heard about Am Kanchi from my mother, did you also hear her story?

Ajo: Oh yes, Mangan's infamous Am Kanchi.

Me: Who is Am Kanchi?

Chum to me: In the olden days, in Mangan, a lady named Am Kaanchi was known for keeping or raising a poison. She had a tea shop. It was a long time ago. Everyone, including her family, feared her. She carried it tied in her arm, in a black pouch, like Indian people have in their arms.

Ajo (gleaming at me): This is a funny one.

Chum: So, one day. She went to Pharing hot spring. She went to dip in the hot spring. I think it was her time to go [giggling]. She got inside the hot spring, and

after a minute, she was floating in it [burst out in laughter]. [The poison tied in her hand was exposed to the hot water drowned its owner and the entity both.]

Me: So, does that mean that the life of the poisoner and the poison are connected?

Chum: Yes. They make a pact. They make the pact and become connected for life. One depends on the other. The poison cannot withstand heat or fire. I heard that once you burn it then it dissolves, but so does the owner. (FM: F, 86)

Many stories like these are shared among families in Sikkim. These narratives, based entirely upon a belief in the poison and its interconnectedness with the owner, are then exploited orally and turned into warnings about travelling and the increasing mobility within Sikkim.

The narratives presented above have the aura of humour about them, presenting the lesson that if you indulge yourself in the wrong choices you will end up dead. This interconnection between the poison and its owner also has a sense of removal from the everyday and lapses into the realm of the supernatural, where the owner's human self is questionable. Therefore, these narratives are used as cautionary. To me as well, when Chum and Ajo mentioned these narratives, it felt that they were telling me I should be careful when travelling and avoid eating in random places. But the focus on how these tales have become attached to real places and houses stems from the function of the oral narrative, which, in contrast to other forms of media, can transmit both harmoniously as well as a destructively.

WHO ARE THE POISONERS? THEIR AIM AND INTENTION

According to my informant, poison keepers or poisoners are people who nurture and look after a poisonous entity to become wealthy and successful. Ajo Dugyal said this about them:

In Namok village, there lived a man called Amdo Dongphu. I clearly remember, one day in Gangtok town, I heard his name announced when an Indian businessman was beating a drum, saying, "a man from Namok brought poison, be careful, be careful". I can understand why he resorted to this action. His wife's father had debts, which he had to pay. Some people say he was paid well for buying the poison. But it didn't last long. How could it? He died soon after. Now who knows where the poison went? I am sure it must be looking for a new owner still, lurking around. (FM: M, 65)

Such narratives of poison as an object to buy and sell, especially in Gangtok, are as common as belief in poison itself. The inclusion of Gangtok as the only big city with people from different backgrounds is crucial as it sets the capital city up as a mix of multiple communities. But such vague transactions lead to questions such as who sells it? Where can one find it? Who buys it? How much does it cost? Many other people from remote Sikkimese villages go to Gangtok for trade and end up becoming pawns to Indian cunning. This idea, of the cunning Indian merchant, is derived from stories found in Sikkimese villages in which the villagers are duped into paying high prices for the fake jewellery that started to appear in the city. Continuing, Ajo Dugyal shared other stories

he had heard of Indian Muslim merchants selling poison in a wooden box to Sikkimese people. He said:

Sikkimese people are blinded by the promise of wealth that can come from buying the wooden boxes. The merchants says that the box has magical powers, they buy it and along with it they buy pain for generations to come [...] *Dhuk*, they say, are bought by Indian merchants. Some say they bribe the local people to buy it by giving them money, but other times the locals actively buy it. I do not know for sure. However, Indian merchants are the first to disperse among the Sikkimese locals. I heard that when you buy the *dhuk*, the seller will take your name and address. I do not know how much it costs, maybe 5,000 rupees or 20,000 rupees. Nevertheless, once you buy it, the merchants take a picture of you from behind and paste the picture in a drum and beat that drum early in the morning in Gangtok, announcing that some person with such and such a description has brought *dhuk* and took it to such and such a place. (FM: M, 65)

One other similar narrative told by Ajo Namgay also says:

Dhuk is distributed among the Sikkimese by Indian merchants. Some Sikkimese want to become rich, and so they buy it and raise it. Merchants, they are the main devotees, it is their deity. They do not even eat meat. They should make only *kar chey* [a white offering that includes milk, flour, rice]. I heard that if you want to become rich, beautiful, and successful, then you need to make a pact with this deity of theirs when you buy it. It is like, you are not only buying it but owning it, as it becomes connected with you. I even heard that people get paid for it. If you want a *dhuk*, then you need to go and see an Indian merchant. He will also give you 100,000 rupees, just for buying it. After that, he will take a picture of you and announce your name around the town by beating a drum. That's how other people are alerted. (FM: M, 88)

The identities of the poisoners remain unclear in both the cases shared by Ajo Dugyal and Ajo Namgay. Apart from the fact that Indian merchants somehow duped local Sikkimese into believing in the magical powers of wooden boxes, it remains unclear where the shops and who the buyers are. Instead, the references give us a wider perspective on Sikkimese economic change and the increasing relationship between locals and Indian merchants. This relationship is based on transactions from cash crops such as cardamom and ginger. Although the cultivation of cardamom as a cash crop was introduced to Sikkim at the end of the 19th century, it was then only cultivated in small quantities (Balicki 2008: 46); later, with the increasing need for cash for household expenses, production increased. John Ware Edgar (1969 [1874]: 55) mentions that in 1873, cardamom was mainly cultivated in the low valleys in the extreme west of Sikkim. Sikkim's local inhabitants, primarily agriculturalists, depended on their rice harvests, mustard seed oil and home-grown vegetables. In this period offerings were made to local deities annually for good harvests and rain. Slowly, the focus shifted towards cash crops because of the increasing need for cash, with Indian merchants as the main buyers. Soon, harvesting the fields became less and less important because of the easily available rice, oil and other sufficiently available products from nearby Indian shops, and a new kind of

affinity was in the making. The Indian merchants would provide locals with household expenses for the entire year, and at the end of the year take the field produce in return, at times resulting in the locals paying more than they received. With this increasing dependency on the Indian merchants, a form of exploitation started to emerge:

Exploitation of the Lhopos⁷ and Lepchas in these isolated regions must have been tremendous. The Administration report for the State of Sikkim for the Year 1907–[1908] mentions that the rate for cardamom at Gangtok was Rs 50 to Rs 52 per maund⁸ and that it sold for Rs 60 to Rs 68 in Calcutta. By comparison, the Marwaris (Indian merchants) were buying the cardamom from villagers in Mangan for Rs 5 per maund at around the same time. (Gorer 1987 [1938]: 116)

Within this relationship, there was a transformation in the role of proprietorship. The deities to whom the villagers annually made offerings for good harvests were now replaced by the Indian merchants. The villagers became dependent upon the bookkeeping, which became all-important in telling the villagers if they would get any money back or if they would have to pay more. The Indian merchants are often referred to as *maliks* meaning masters, showing how the role of the deities transformed into the role of the merchants, and how the relationship between the locals and the Indian merchants became one of fear and suspicion.

Another important aspect to discuss further in this context is 'beating the drum'. In the narratives the beating of drums is a tool used by Indian merchants to warn the other people who has brought poison. However, figuratively the phrase could also mean rumour. For example, 'I want to tell you this secret but don't beat the drum about it', means I am telling you something but do not tell anyone else. I will discuss the close connection between poison narratives and rumour in more detail in the next section.

Poison keepers in Sikkim can be divided into those who buy it, and those who inherit it. Inheritors are not only confined to the immediate family but can be spread among the wider kin group with a second or third generation inheriting poisons. For example, Ajo Dugyal said that sometimes these poisons are passed down from one family member to another at weddings:

Once there was a woman whose mother was a poisoner and who didn't know she has inherited it from her. Some people died after eating something she had cooked and then she realised that she was just like her mother. Pity she was because she owned a restaurant. She closed it down upon realising her abilities. But one day when her son came back from school, she made him dinner. I think it was bread, but next day when she went to his room to wake him up, he was lying cold and blue. (FM: M, 65)

Ajo Namgay mentioned that some children who know that there is a poisoner in the family have requested that they inherit the poison intentionally in the hope that they can obtain wealth and beauty. Inherited poisons are more potent than bought ones because it has lived a few years and has had a couple of sacrifices. Because they are powerful presences, these poisons are very hard to dispose of. Pema (31 years old, dentist) told me the following story while driving me from Gangtok to Phensang, along a rugged road where landslides often occur in wet weather:

You know, this road can never be fixed. The road has been constructed and reconstructed so many times, but in vain. I heard that an old lady who used to live on the other side of the valley had inherited poison from her great-grandmother. One day, she ended up killing her husband unintentionally. She was very hurt and therefore wanted to get rid of the poison. First, she dug a hole in the ground and buried it deep inside. But when she arrived home, it was back in its usual place. She then wanted to burn it in the fire. She burned it for the entire night, but the pouch it was in only got heated not burned. Angry and frustrated, she ran from her home, she came here and threw it into that valley [pointing towards the valley]. When she threw it, a huge landslide occurred, and she slipped and died as well. Only after that could she get rid of it – by losing her life. But her family still suffers and all of us as well. Due to that event, this road is forever cursed and will never become smooth. (FM: M, 31)

The narratives presented above are somewhat interconnected and therefore make more sense. One of my informants, Tenzing presented a narrative which focuses on *dhuk* as a deity, as an entity to be interacted with and taken care of correctly.

Dhuk is a *lha*.⁹ It is a treasure to raise at home. It can make you wealthy and help you prosper. But it makes some conditions. Chief among them is refraining from meat and alcohol. Our people (Bhutia) buy *dhuk* and want to raise them to become wealthy too, but the main problem with our people is that they cannot abstain from alcohol and meat. Once you have such things at home the *dhuk* becomes addicted to them. Soon, they seek animal meat, and later, human flesh. Once meat is offered to the *dhuk lha* then it is over. It becomes so strong that you don't have to poison someone's food, just the thought of wanting someone's wealth could poison them. This is even shown in movies. Such poison is not easy to get rid of. It can pass down from father to son, mother to daughter. It is not visible. It's like thoughts, even with thought you can pass it to someone else. Such poison is driven by its owners. We believe in *gzhi bdag* [guardian deities], so the poison comes with its own owner who needs propitiation and offerings from time to time. It is like going to Tholung and bringing an object from the monastery.¹⁰ With the object comes a deity. If you keep it clean and treat it well, it will make you prosper, but if you don't know how to treat it well then it can cause havoc. (FM: M, 44)

Tenzing's interpretation of the poison as *lha* is partly motivated by his beliefs as a monk, and also influenced by the Bhutanese movie *Golden Cup: The Legacy* (2007, directed by Tshering Wangyel) to which he referred multiple times. Here, the audience is introduced to the poisoner as someone who can transfer poison through bad thoughts. There is a comparison here to Buddhist philosophy in which it is believed that even a bad thought about someone is poisonous. In this section, the article has focused on poisoners and their intentions. In the next section, continuing from the narratives about the poison deity, the article offers insights into forms of ownership. It will elaborate on the non-human agent in the form of a deity and how the invocation of such a deity reveals an understanding of the social structure within the forms of proprietorship.

“Poisons are living things” Ajo Dugyal said (FM: M, 65). Every three or four years it should change house or owner. If kept for more than four years, then it becomes potent, attaches itself to the family and is transferred from one generation to the next. Just as all medicines have *lha*, so in a similar way do poisons. Poison is called *dhuk lha* and requires many rituals to appease and nurture it. Existing solely in the oral belief narratives and practices of Sikkimese (especially *lhopo*) tradition, *dhuk lha* translates literally as ‘poison deity’. It is mainly evoked when travelling in Sikkim and relates to certain places and people one might encounter on the way. The belief includes *dhuk lha* as an object (either a piece of coral or gold), attached to a certain supernatural entity, sealed inside a vase or bamboo container, seeking an owner or caretaker. Bruno Latour’s (1987: 84) conception of actant as “whoever and whatever” acts, including entities their representations that extend to the realm of the supernatural and its institutions and processes, resonates with the Sikkimese understanding of what *dhuk lha* represents. This is a notion of ‘relational ontologies’ in which the mingling of object and material components are brought together by human and non-human agents through skilled techniques (a form of ritual creating a pact) that have the ability to enhance social efficacy. This relationship between the *dhuk lha* and *dhuk zam* (poisoner or poison keeper) shows that not only do non-humans behave as agents but also that they have the potential to be valid and productive social partners; therefore, they must be approached with appropriate social modes of mediation and behaviour (Descola 2009: 149).

Continually during my interactions with the locals, I discovered a sense of ambiguity surrounding belief in *dhuk lha*, until on December 2018 I visited Rumtek Monastery to interview the monastery’s head monk. He gave me a monastery tour, and we entered a dark room where the statues of three deities were covered in maroon, brown, and yellow curtains. Upon my asking why the figures were covered, the monk told me that these are the worldly deities (*rjig ten ghi lha*) and that they are dangerous. People who visit the monastery generally give offerings because they are seeking worldly and materialistic pleasures. The statues were Dzönga, the mountain deity of Sikkim in the middle, Palden Lhamo, a transferred deity of wealth from Tibet to the left, and the *sungmo*,¹¹ protector of Rumtek monastery to the right. Upon further inquiry I was made aware that Palden Lhamo is a malevolent deity known also as a poison deity because she possesses the power to destroy and has been cast out from the higher realm of Buddhist deities. The monk added that Palden Lhamo is rumoured to have been brought to Sikkim by Tibetan merchants who came to trade, and later by Tibetan refugees escaping Tibet in 1959. The reference to Palden Lhamo in the context of Sikkim is due firstly to iconography that depicts Palden Lhamo as a deity carrying a mysterious pouch or bag filled with poison, and secondly because there are more Tibetan refugees who make offerings to Palden Lhamo in Sikkim than Sikkimese. In his book *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Protective Deities*, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: 25) describes Palden Lhamo’s general image as follows:

[...] the goddess is of a dark blue hue, has one face, two hands, and rides on a mule. She brandishes a massive sandalwood club adorned with a thunderbolt with her right hand, and with her left hand she holds in front of her breast the blood-filled skull of a child, born out of an incestuous union (*nol thod*). She wears a flowing garment of black silk and a loincloth made of rough material. Her ornaments are a diadem of skulls, a garland of freshly cut heads, a girdle of snakes, and bone ornaments, and her whole body is covered with the ashes of cremated corpses. She has three eyes, bares her fangs, and the hair on her head stands on end... and she carries a sack full of disease (*nod rkyal*) and a pair of dice (*sho rde' u*).



Photo 2. Palden Lhamo (poison deity), photographed on May 13, 2021, in Lachung, Sikkim. Photo by Nawang Lachungpa.

Such a daunting image of Palden Lhamo is not only the reason for the demonisation of the deity; the fact that the deity has travelled from another region (Tibet) with her people (Tibetan refugees), who are finding it hard to be accepted in the new community also plays a part. The head monk adds nonchalantly that Palden Lhamo is comparable to the goddess Kālī¹² from the Hindu point of view: “Both of them look exactly the same”.¹³ This adds to the idea that demonisation is not confined within the Tibetan refugee community, Indian merchants are probably also involved with the deity. Moreover, since Palden Lhamo entered Sikkim with Tibetan refugees she is in the lowest category of non-local or worldly deities. Here, the effects of demonisation are transferrable not only within a certain community from a certain background but also among those deities that were brought to Sikkim and introduced to certain locations.

RUMOUR AND THE BLAME GAME

Lhamo: I swear by the deities and dead children of mine, I would swear by the chog [religious scriptures] in the altar hall that if we did such things, then may our head burst into flames right in front of you. (FM: F, 35)

When a person belonging to a different community gains sudden economic success and climbs the social ladder, he or she is often the subject of suspicion or doubt. Increasingly, accusations of poison are associated with ‘someone out there’, ‘never someone from our own village’. In the majority of cases, and in the case of Ajo Dugyal, we can find insecurity and fear of the Other:

Most of the poisoners are usually from the neighbouring village or from different communities all together. I have never heard of a poison keeper in our village. I am 60 years and to date I have not heard of someone from the village accused of such things. There are some people I hear in Ramthang village but not in mine. We do not know who exactly and where, but I hear in Rongong and Phodong there are plenty. People from these villages do not inherit it from their ancestors. They buy it directly from Indian merchants to become rich. I have heard recently from someone that one of my friend’s sisters got one. Her name is Gazam; she keeps it, looks after it. It is unfortunate. What are people willing to do these days to attain wealth in life? Her ancestor did not keep them. I do not know why she got it and where she got it from. (FM: M, 65)

Gordon Allport and Leo Postman (1947: ix) write that rumour is “a specific (or topical) proposition for belief passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without a secure standard of evidence being present”. In the case above as well, the fact that he heard that it happens ‘not in my village but among the neighbouring villages’ is a manifestation of othering.

Rumour undermines social institutions and provides us with an insight into the structure of a community. The usual narratives are transferred within a community, within one’s inter-personal contact group. This article therefore elicits questions such as why do people spread rumours relating to a specific community? Why do people deem rumours about getting rich by killing someone with poison trustworthy? Scholars such as Nicholas Difonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007: 13) refer to rumour as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk”. The fact that narratives of poisoning are not backed by evidence (Allport and Postman 1947; Shibutani 1966; Kapferer 1990) and are generally considered ambiguous (Rosnow and Fine 1976; Rosnow 1980) is of great relevance in the Sikkimese context.

Rumours create a scapegoating mentality and express hostility towards a certain group. These forms of imputation and blame occur because people feel their security is threatened in a situation in which uncertainty is caused by a rapidly changing social environment. I asked my friend, who lost his father to poisoning when he was 10 years old and claimed that his father became a victim to the poison nurtured by a Nepali food stall owner, about seeking justice and taking legal action against the perpetrators. He replied,

we all know he did it, but we haven't seen it. We do not have evidence to prove it. Therefore, we can just hate it and tell everyone else about it so that just like my father, no other person becomes the victim of it. My father wasn't the first, I heard, but the aim is to make sure he is last. (FM: M, 32)

Luise White (2005: 241) proposes that

rumour is spread because they sound true or sounded like they might be true. Rumour conforms to the standard of evidence; they do not seem false, fanciful, unlikely, or even unreasonable to those who tell them and those who hear them.

In Sikkim, apart from this, rumour takes the form of imputation and blame of people who are not only newly arrived but also differ in belief and practice. Rumour, when reinforced within the cherished beliefs of communities, changes forms and helps people make sense of the others surrounding them whose cultural practices and world-views are foreign within their own cultural context.

Rumour proliferation helps us trace the effects of a conformity cascade in which people will go along with a group to maintain approval regardless of their private doubts. Amid judgement and opinion that contradicts my friend, he surely has doubts about what he believes, although to a great extent this is ingrained by the loss of his father and later his mother when he was young. The collective belief of the community, whose support he will always cherish, gives him a sense of belonging. Robert Knapp (1944: 24) identified a type of rumour that circulates because of fear of identity and uncertainty as "wedge-driving rumour" because of its "effect in dividing groups and destroying loyalties; it's essential motivation is aggression or hatred. In practice almost all aggression rumours turn out to be directed against elements of our own population or our allies." The role of rumour here is not to seek justice for the loss of loved ones but to belong among the living by shifting one's belief. My friend making sure that everyone else is aware of the poisoning place ties in with the idea mentioned above that people should not 'beat the drum'. The Indian merchants who go to the town in the morning and announce the name of poison buyers remains questionable, as does the assertion from a couple of people that they have heard something from someone else. The narrative further suggests that perhaps *dhol pitey mayah*¹⁴ has a metaphorical meaning in which it is suggested that the poison buying be kept secret, later to be announced publicly. Although among my informants the beating of the drum occurs, this remains open to speculation.

Rumour can be a way in which othering the outgroup through belief-related stereotype helps make peace with tragedy, such as death. This 'risky shift' has repeatedly demonstrated through empirical research that humans abhor cognitive dissonance, and when confronted with complex data in evaluating an idea, a program, or a person will shift opinion in the direction of the larger group to mitigate the difficulties of dissonance, thus helping make rumour real, lived and often dangerous.

CONCLUSION

Within a pluralistic ethnic set-up such as that in Sikkim, poison narratives (in both literal and metaphorical senses) become 'lived' among those deemed affected directly

or indirectly. Francisco Mariani (1952 [1950]: 52) writing about his journey to Tibet via Sikkim, mentioning how a Sikkimese princess warned him of impending danger in Tibet and cautioned him not to eat in random places, saying that he could be poisoned, and that poison is almost a living thing that has a will of its own. Through traditional cautionary tales told by elders to the younger generation, this article shows how oral narrative always carried within it the possibility to be give rise to real-world accusation. In this article, by delving into the discourse on poison, which can kill and sometimes even transforms itself into an entity and is both victim and perpetrator, I focused on understanding how the new community are involved. The article talks about forms of forced assimilation and demonisation, othering and casting out. In the Sikkimese context, when every natural disaster such as landslide, hailstorm or earthquake is attributed to the wrath of a deity and failure of propitiate such deities at the correct time, it is not surprising when unexplained deaths are attributed to the anger of the deities and to the violation of social norms. These phenomena appear to be waning in all rapidly 'modernising' societies because of the capacity to ameliorate the dislocations and ambivalences engendered by rural capitalism, transform the relations of production, proprietorship, and shortage of resource, and increase scarce opportunities, etc.

NOTES

1 The Tibetan title of Sikkim's king, *Chos-rgyal*, implies that the king is the temporal ruler and upholder of the Buddha-dharma. Historically Sikkim's monasteries were closely involved with the formation of the state and the socio-temporal affairs of the Kingdom of Sikkim, as was also the case in Tibet (Dolma and Namgyal 1908; Samuel 1993). From Tibetan *chos*, Dharma and *rgyal po*, king, or the one who rules according to religion (Balicki 2008: 378). Therefore, Chogyal means the King of Sikkim who rules according to religion.

2 Buddhism is the second largest religion in Sikkim after Hinduism. Buddhists comprise 29.6% of the total population. The Bhutia community is the second largest community comprising 13.08% of the population (96.17% of Bhutia are Buddhist). Lepcha account for 7.78% of the total population and are the sixth largest group (85.14% of the Lepcha are Buddhist). (Linguistic Survey I)

3 The first census of Sikkim dates to 1891 when Sikkim was under British colonial rule. The total population of Sikkim was then 30,458, of which a little over one third were the indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia populations. This early census, and some later surveys, recorded ethnic affiliation only and contained no explicit data on which languages were spoken or by how many people. According to the 1931 Census, out of a total population of 109,808, 12% were Lepcha and 11% Bhutia, the rest being mainly Nepali. (Linguistic Survey II)

4 *Yabla* is a local term for father, someone who is of higher status and respected in the community.

5 The 16th Karmapa's visit to Sikkim in the 1960s influenced the Sikkimese to discard animal sacrifice and shift to more cordial sacrifices, including *kar chey* (white offerings, i.e., rice, flour, milk, and incense).

6 The *Bahun* are sub-tribes of the Pradhan community. Broadly speaking they belong to the Hindu-Nepali community.

7 Lhopos ('people from the south') are generally Tibetan immigrants who migrated to Sikkim from Kham Minyak from the 13th century onwards, establishing a Buddhist kingdom in 1642. It is a point of contention that not all the Lhopo community are aristocratic or elite Buddhist prac-

tioners. There are many Lhopo villages across Sikkim, secluded from the direct rule of the state that took little part in the 'state formation'. They are also known as Bhutia and Denjongpo and speak Lhokay.

8 1 maund = 40 kilograms.

9 *Lha* are deities that are well-disposed towards human beings.

10 Tholung monastery in Dzongu prefecture north Sikkim is known as one of the sacred monasteries of Sikkim. Beliefs about these monasteries are numerous, among which is the belief about carrying things from the monastery. Many pilgrims have shared stories about being seriously ill after unintentionally carrying objects, even rocks, from Tholung. Only returning and placing the object back in that area cures the person. For more information, see Arora 2006b: 56.

11 *Sungmo* ('protector' or 'caretaker') is a particular deity that is attached to a person, or which resides in a certain monastery to protect and guard.

12 *Kāli* (Maha Kali or Kali Ma) is a powerful, fierce, independent goddess who is venerated and deeply respected by Hindus all over the world. *Kāli* images are often shocking and profane. The goddess is generally depicted as wild and ravenous, dancing on the body of her submissive consort Siva. She holds the severed head of a slain demon in one of her four hands while her tongue, thirsting for blood, lolls from her mouth. Her long black hair is disheveled and strewn about and her skin is usually a dark shade of blue. She is all but naked save for a girdle of severed human arms around her waist. What is more, she is adorned with a necklace of 50 human heads and has infants for earrings. Her fierce iconography must be the basis for the monks' comparison with Palden Lhamo. For more on *Kāli*, see for instance Kinsley 1975.

13 Iconographic image of the Palden Lhamo and *Kāli* acquire strong and fierce female deity.

14 *Dhol pitey mayah* literally translates as 'do not beat the drum'. Usually, this phrase is used when one confides a secret to another person, saying 'do not make rumors' or 'do not share this information with anyone else'.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials. The materials are in the possession of the author.

List of Informants:

FM: F, 35 = Lhamo (Pseudonym), female; 35 years old – February 2020.

FM: F, 53 = Mother, female; 53 years old; Tingchim Village, North Sikkim – December 2018.

FM: F, 86 = Chum (Grandmother), female; 86 years old; Lachung, North Sikkim – February 2018.

FM: M, 31 = Pema Geley Bhutia, male; 31 years old; Phensang, North Sikkim – January 2018.

FM: M, 32 = Friend (Anonymous), male, 32 years old; Gangtok – July 2019.

FM: M, 42 = Lama Samten Bhutia, male; 42 years old; Swayem Village, North Sikkim – July 2018.

FM: M, 44 = Tenzing Bhutia, male; 44 years old; Phodong, North Sikkim – March 2019.

FM: M, 65 = Ajo Dugyal Bhutia, male, 65 years old, Sichey, Gangtok – January 2018.

FM: M, 88 = Ajo Namgay Bhutia, male; 88 years old; Lachung, North Sikkim – February 2018.

For clarity and upon the informant's permission, I have mentioned the names of the main informants, such as Ajo Namgay, Ajo Dugyal, Lachung Chum, Tenzing, Pema Geley and Lama Samten as well as my parents here. On the other hand, I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the people whose stories my main informants shared and other people I interviewed who had reservations and did not want their names to be mentioned.

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