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BETTER THAN ANY DOCTOR

Buddhist Perspectives on Hot Springs in Sikkim, Himalayas

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Himalayan peoples bathe in hot springs for medical and spiritual therapy. Included in local myths, hot springs are natural features that form a part of cultural memory and are social, cultural, religious, and medical venues. They also represent the tension between economic growth and environmental protection and, consequently, the competition between different parts of people's identities. By analyzing religious, historical, and medical texts in combination with biographical accounts, a comprehensive picture of the cultural and religious significance of hot springs in the Himalayas is presented. The focus lies on Buddhist influenced societies within the Tibetan Cultural Area which are those parts in the Himalayas that have been influenced by Tibetan culture.

Keywords: Buddhist Himalayas, hot springs, cultural memory, Tibetan Cultural Area, Sikkim

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Himalayan glaciers store an estimated 2,100 to 5,800 gigatons of freshwater, earning them a reputation as the "Third Pole" (Jiménez Cisneros 2014: 242). Beyond the global ecological significance of this Himalayan Third Pole, its water sources are also pilgrimage sites for peoples living in these mountainous regions. Since the beginning of humankind, water in all its forms has symbolized life and survival on this planet. It is therefore not surprising that water sources were most likely one of the first sacred sites in human history (Ray 2020b: 20). Similarly, in early Tibetan writings from the ninth century, the importance of all types of water sources in the Himalayas, including hot springs, is emphasized from both medical and religious perspectives (Yönten Gönpo 2005). Throughout the Himalayas, hot springs have gained cultural and religious connotations and have become a part of the cultural memory connected to Himalayan landscapes. This concept of cultural memory was defined by Jan Assmann as "a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity" (2008: 110) and that "preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (1995: 130). Numerous hot springs are associated with venerated religious figures in cultural origin myths, religious rituals, and customs and thus these natural features are also social, cultural, religious, and medical venues. The significance of hot springs (*tshachu* or *tatopani*) in Buddhist influenced societies in the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau exemplifies the interconnectedness of culture, religion, and natural features.

The Tibetan Plateau, which lies north of the Himalayas, is the origin of various Buddhist forms and traditions that are grouped together as Tibetan Buddhism,

which is largely a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism (the so-called "Great Vehicle" that, due to its diversity, seeks to redeem many people) as well as a form of Vajrayāna Buddhism that includes tantric practices. The most important Buddhist traditions practiced in Tibet and the neighboring Himalayan countries, an area that is collectively known as the Tibetan Cultural Area (see Figure 1), are divided into four major schools or teaching traditions. The foundation of Tibetan Buddhism was laid around the eighth century when Indian scholars, including the legendary Guru Rinpoche, were invited to Tibet. In the course of this first wave of dissemination, the tradition of the Nyingmapa, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, developed. But political considerations led to the persecution of Buddhist proponents in Tibet during the mid-ninth century. Then, during the eleventh century, a revival of Buddhism led to a second wave of dissemination in Tibet and the emergence of two further major schools: the Kagyupa and Sakyapa traditions. Finally, at the end of the fourteenth century, the last of the four major schools, the Gelugpa, to which the Dalai Lamas belong, emerged. Apart from these major traditions or schools, further teaching traditions have been established. Some of them are still preserved and practiced, though others have already disappeared. The diverse traditions differ mainly in their interpretation of Buddhist philosophical theories and meditative practices.

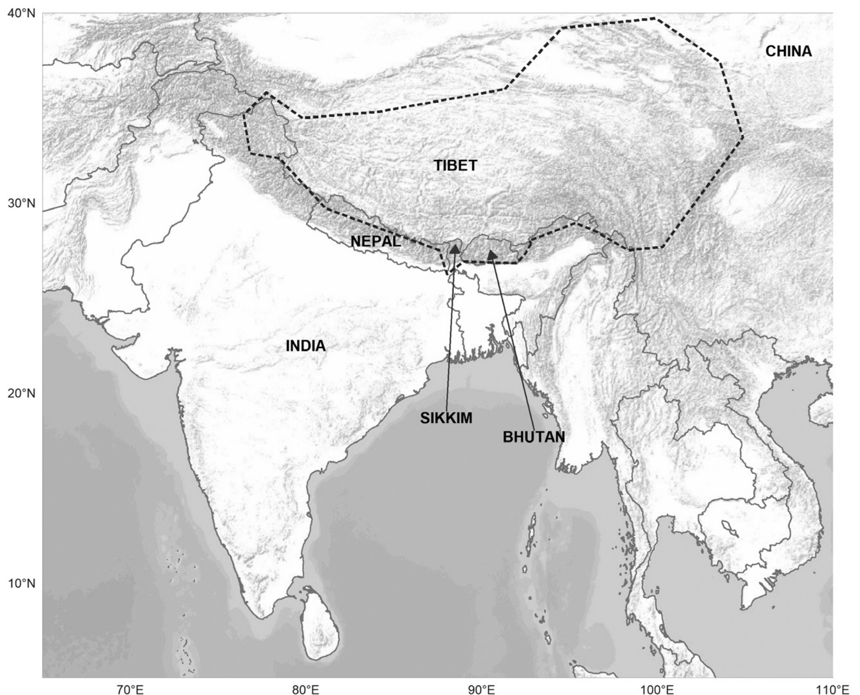

Figure 1. Tibetan Cultural Area. Tiles © Esri – Source: USGS, Esri, TANA, DeLorme, and NPS. Map by Marlene Erschbamer.

Ever since Buddhism was established in Tibet around the eighth century, the different forms and traditions spread to the surrounding lands in the Himalayas now known as the Tibetan Cultural Area (Erschbamer 2015: 5). This area includes Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim (a Himalayan state in Northeast India). Tibet shares a metaphorical kinship with the Kingdom of Bhutan and the former Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim: Tibet was regarded as the father, Bhutan as the mother, and Sikkim as the son. They are culturally expected to behave as parents to a child and vice versa: kindly, understandingly, and respectfully (Mullard 2012: 145). Correspondingly, their socio-political relationships should remain in balance to secure peaceful and tranquil lives for their inhabitants. However, just as in real family relationships, occasional conflicts and disagreements have characterized interactions between these kingdoms. Although Tibetan Buddhism shaped Sikkim for centuries, this Himalayan land never became part of Tibet. Accordingly, though Buddhist practices and pre-existing local traditions have influenced one another and became closely intertwined there has never been a complete shift in belief.

For the present study, Tibet and Bhutan will be referred to in more general terms, while more detailed information will be provided on Sikkim which exemplifies the cultural and religious significance of water in Buddhist influenced societies for the following four reasons: Firstly, Sikkim is a water-tower of India (Rindzin Ngödrup Dokhampa 1998: 1), supplying millions of people directly or down-stream with water. All in all, the state comprises 84 glaciers, 227 wetlands, 104 rivers, and nine hot springs on 7096 sq.km (Government of Sikkim 2010a; 2010b). Secondly, in Tibetan pilgrimage guides, a genre extensively consulted by Buddhist adepts and pilgrims from cultural and religious perspectives, Sikkim has been described as an outstanding sacred place, where water appears as a curing medicine (Yéshé Drölma: 12–13). These pilgrimage guides were composed to help pilgrims reach a higher spiritual level and were mainly transmitted orally from a religious person to pilgrims who were usually illiterate. Thirdly, the interconnections of culture, religion, and nature shape identities and rituals. The most outstanding ritual in Sikkim is the so-called *Bumchu* that has been performed every year since 1646. During the ritual, water is poured into special cups, and it is earnestly believed that the level of the water foretells the fortune of both the people and the land for the coming year. Devotees also believe that one drop of this water offers an elixir for long life and the seed of Enlightenment (Rindzin Ngödrup Dokhampa 2003). Pilgrims attending this ritual often combine it with a visit to the nearby hot springs. And finally, politics have taken the close relationship between people and nature into consideration: in 2001, the Government of Sikkim published special protections for sacred peaks, caves, rocks, lakes, Buddhist reliquary shrines, and nine hot springs (Government of Sikkim 2001). Sikkim's Khangchendzonga National Park became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016; the park includes multiple sacred hot springs.

This study examines the following research questions: How were hot springs depicted in literature of the Tibetan Cultural Area? Do these written accounts provide insight into how hot springs became part of regional cultural memory? In which way

do hot springs represent natural features where culture, religion, and nature interact? Using Assmann's definition of cultural memory, this essay discusses the significance of hot springs in a Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist context as revealed in religious, historical, medical, and biographical texts.

Local myths and hidden treasures

While many renowned Buddhists have referred to the benefits of visiting hot springs in their writings, the most important figure in this context was the eighth century Guru Rinpoche – also known as Padmasambhava (see Figure 2). According to legendary accounts, he transformed indigenous supernatural entities – in the case of Sikkim those that belonged to the pre-Buddhist Lepcha belief system – into protectors of the Buddhist doctrine and converted numerous hot springs across the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau into sacred sites (Loseries 1994; Rinzin Wangchuk 2004; Venturi 2019). Guru Rinpoche and his legendary actions helped shape cultural memory and identity in a Tibetan and Himalayan context. Each valley and village within the Tibetan Cultural Area has its own myths connected to the guru and "related mythology has become an inexhaustible source from which variants to articulate a huge variety of ritual concerns and aspirations can be generated" (Mayer 2015: 350). Especially along the Himalayan borderlands, many myths have been associated with Guru Rinpoche. People in Sikkim joke about how often Guru Rinpoche is connected to natural features and place lore to the point that, in one frequently foggy village, weather conditions are explained as the legacy of the guru's flatulence while traveling through the area. The legendary travels of Guru Rinpoche are still overtly recognized as shaping a shared tradition and identity in the region. Similarly, the legendary accounts of Guru Rinpoche served as a template for developing sacred places in religious sites in Tibetan Buddhist context and thus in creating sacred geography. The prevalent stereotype that narratives of sacred features ideally begin with the presence or visit of a revered religious figure – frequently with a visit of legendary Guru Rinpoche – is a widespread practice in Tibet and along the Himalayas (Huber 2008: 239). As in other religions, Buddhist sacred geographies in Sikkim derive from the travels of venerated religious figures who bless topographical features. Guru Rinpoche is thought to have endowed water sources with medical qualities and to have likewise transformed hot springs, which may have been sacred in indigenous traditions, into Buddhist sacred sites.

As recorded in legendary accounts and religious texts, Guru Rinpoche transformed the waters of hot springs into Buddhist sacred places and into effective medical treatments or, as described in primary sources, into medicine itself (Khenpo Dechen Dorje 1995: 16; Oral History Series 2012: 115; Phurpa Wangchuk 2007). He left the hot springs perpetually protected by entrusting them to highly local supernatural entities that he had previously tamed by converting them to Buddhism.

For example, the sacred hot springs of Khambu Valley, lying close to Sikkim in the nearby Chumbi Valley in Tibet, were once blessed by Guru Rinpoche. According to legendary accounts, Guru Rinpoche converted and bound twelve female spirits or supernatural entities under oath and made them guardians of the whole of Tibet. Then, he entrusted each of these guardians with one of the twelve hot springs in Khambu. Each of these hot springs was both blessed by Guru Rinpoche and placed under the guardianship of one of the twelve female protectors of Tibetan Buddhism, thus ensuring that the respective waters would remain effective for devotees (Gyurme Dorje 1998: 361; Oral History Series 2008: 87–96; Oral History Series 2012: 107–17, 202–3; Zangpo 2014). Three points illustrate why reliance on the efficacy of hot springs for the healing of body and spirit became part of Sikkimese cultural identity. Firstly, oral traditions recounting how Guru Rinpoche tamed and transformed supernatural entities into protectors of sacred sites, in this case hot springs, have been passed along for centuries. Secondly, the tradition of visiting hot springs as effective medical treatment has been passed down from generation to generation. Finally, narratives told about hot springs (with their religious, cultural, and social elements) have become part of the collective memory about local villages and broader sacred topographies. The collective memory of Guru Rinpoche's legendary deeds helped integrate pre-Buddhist concepts, including pre-existing supernatural beings, within a Buddhist topography.

Figure 2. Statue of Guru Rinpoche, Namchi, South Sikkim. Photographed by Marlene Erschbamer (2010).

Notably, nearly every natural feature in Sikkim is connected to some supernatural entity that, according to local belief, might affect political, economic, environmental, social, and personal matters if it were disturbed or not venerated in the right

way. The re-organization of landscape with local indigenous or pre-Buddhist supernatural entities installed at sacred places as protectors of Buddhism became known as mandalization, a wide-spread practice within the Tibetan Cultural Area (Huber 1999: 26; Vandenhelsken 2006: 67). This is exactly what happened in Sikkim. According to local narratives, Guru Rinpoche re-organized the whole of Sikkim into a Buddhist mandala by arranging natural features into a Buddhist order. Among others, he tamed supernatural entities that tried to prevent the spread of Buddhism and identified the Sikkimese place Tashiding as a Buddhist center or navel of the land. Furthermore, he blessed four meditation-caves in the four cardinal directions around Tashiding.[1] The association of important Buddhist figures (in the case of Sikkim, mainly Guru Rinpoche; see Figure 3) with natural features created a new Buddhist sacred geography and legitimated the spread of Buddhist teachings. Centuries later, Tibetan Buddhist masters still recognized Sikkim as a Buddhist mandala and perpetuated the conversion of natural landscapes into Buddhist landscapes (Jigme Pawo 1984: 407). The taming of supernatural entities and the re-organization of the land into a Buddhist order was an important act of incorporating existing belief systems and thus of converting people. In this regard, this process is also "a metaphor for the taming of the mind, of society, of the environment or even of the country" (Balikci 2002: 21).

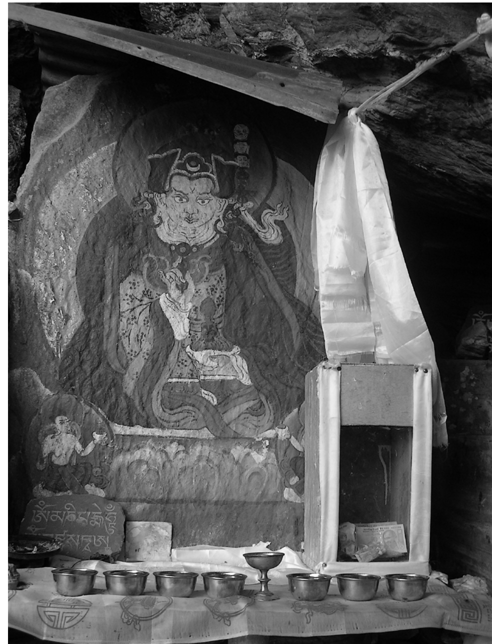

Figure 3. Depiction of Guru Rinpoche on a rock near Tashiding, the place Guru Rinpoche regarded as being the center or the navel of Sikkim. Photographed by Marlene Erschbamer (2010).

[1] A mandala consists of a center (here: the Sikkimese place Tashiding) surrounded by four gates, one at each cardinal direction (here: the four mediation caves around Tashiding). It either represents the cosmos as a whole, a landscape (as in this example), a building, a ceremony, or the human body itself. Buddhists regard a mandala, which is characterized by its symmetry, as symbolic representation of cosmic energies. By ordering different elements into a mandala, unity is formed within a dominant chaos.

Natural features within these so-called sacred landscapes play an essential role in origin stories and the remembrance and preservation of cultural roots. Hot springs are also believed to be inhabited by supernatural entities and rituals continue to be performed to please them. Buddhist ritual specialists are usually men, though Tibetan texts describe how one male and one female should ideally enter hot springs while further specifying which prayers or syllables they should recite there (Phurpa Wangchuk 2007: 122–25). The Lepcha, whose pre-Buddhist ancestors were the first to settle in Sikkim, believe that every water source, along with other natural features, harbors supernatural beings who protect the land, the water, and the people who live there. Their relationship with these pre-Buddhist numina underscore their connection to the region before the arrival of Buddhism and has also influenced their beliefs and practices within the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim (Bentley 2020). While identifying as Buddhists, many Sikkimese also rely on shamanic traditions with highly localized rites. Buddhist and shamanic experts often practice side by side (Erschbamer 2019). Both perform rituals in which supernatural entities may be included to prevent misfortune (Samuel 1993: 161). They use different methods but have the same target: to calm, tame, pacify, please, or worship supernatural entities that can include different kinds and forms of deities, demons, and spirits, both male and female. Benevolent, malevolent, or ambiguous, these beings can either act as protectors of villages and people or cause accidents and illnesses. Alexandra David-Néel (2019: 133) and Anna Balikci (2008: 85) suggested that Tibetan Buddhism includes more supernatural entities than there are human beings living in the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. Besides Buddhist deities, spirits, and demons, there are also countless entities that once were part of the respective pre-Buddhist belief systems that were tamed and became protectors of Buddhism, living either underground, in the sky, or in between (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996; Samuel 1993: 161–67). In this context, the *Nesöl*-Text has been the most important ritual text in Sikkim since the seventeenth century. The text represents an offering to the many supernatural entities of the land and an apology for any damage done to the environment or to the supernatural (Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé 2000). Rivers, springs, lakes – all connected to water – are usually inhabited by powerful half-serpent/half-human beings, called Lu, that can offer either benefits if pleased or harm if disrespected or disturbed. As mythological and religious concepts, serpents have been regarded throughout history and human geography as supernatural entities, often described as protectors that reside in or near sacred waters (Ray 2020b: 13–14). Balikci describes how such supernatural inhabitants of natural features contributed to creating a Sikkimese identity and that the assembly of entities and features that constitute sacred landscapes symbolize divergent facets of individual persons and their world (2008: 114). My suggestion is that this localized worldview depicts the strong interconnection of culture, religion, and nature in Buddhist influenced societies across the Himalayas and exemplifies the concept of cultural memory and identity as suggested by Assmann (1995; 2008).

Guru Rinpoche not only re-organized the landscape, but also hid Buddhist treasures (*terma*) in the form of objects and texts. The discovery of these treasures was

predicted by Guru Rinpoche himself and was meant to uphold Buddhist teachings and practices while inspiring Buddhist followers during turbulent and unsteady times. Though some have already been found, others remain hidden. Locators are called treasure revealers or treasure discoverers (*tertön*). They are mostly male, rarely ordained, and are often accompanied by a female tantric consort. If she is the right companion, she may help create the required conditions to locate such treasures (Samuel 1993: 296). Locators have either spotted physical objects that were once hidden or, more mystically, find texts that have been hidden in their minds from previous incarnations. Treasure revealers have discovered, among other things, guidebooks to sacred places (*néyik*) that were once blessed and prepared in support of Buddhist doctrine by Guru Rinpoche himself. These guidebooks, a genre within Tibetan literature, have been written for pilgrims by religious personages to give directions and useful descriptions of natural and cultural sites which, consequently, can lead to places where Tibetan Buddhism can be safely practiced and maintained whenever suppressed by political circumstances (Nakza Drolma 2019). Hot springs in particular were identified as sacred sites where devotees may receive purification from their sins and diseases. To illustrate this point, Buddhist pilgrimage guidebooks describe Sikkim as a sacred place where the beneficial curing waters were able to heal myriad diseases (Sanggyé Lingpa 2008: 198–99). The guidebooks' emphases on sacred waters and their comprehensive healing effects fostered their reputation and endurance as sacred places and pilgrimage sites.

While most hot springs are believed to be cure-alls, certain springs have the reputation for healing very specific diseases and thus are regarded as specialized. To illustrate this point, each of the above-mentioned hot springs in Khambu is believed to be specialized for certain diseases, such as spiritual defilements from present and past lives, headache, backache, broken bones, gout, rheumatism, diabetes, lymph-related illnesses, or skin diseases. Which spring is used for one's relief is chosen according to the respective disease (Oral History Series 2008: 90–93; Zangpo 2014: 9–20). Similarly, each Sikkimese hot spring is recommended for very specific disorders, although each of them is believed to cure skin and bone diseases (Balikci 2002: 25).

Depending on the composition of minerals in the water (such as sulfur, calcite, or lime), the water has a different smell, color, taste, and, most importantly, curative effect. Tibetans distinguish between five types of hot springs according to the respective mineral composition, for example sulfur or calcite, and five qualities of curing waters according to the medical benefit or purpose of curative treatment, including rheumatism and arthritis, nerve and lymph disorders, and so forth (Gélong Chöpel 2009: 297; Rindzin Gödem 2008: 289; Rindzin Ngödrup Dokhampa 1998: 3; Yönten Gönpo 2005: 294–322; Yonten Pasang Arya 2014: 66). Additionally, they distinguish between male and female qualities of the minerals (Oral History Series 2008: 90–93). One major treasure discoverer and important religious Buddhist master who wrote about the curative benefits of hot springs in Sikkim was Rindzin Gödem (1337–1408/9). In his writings, he emphasized that one would find all different kinds of waters, as described above, and hot springs in Sikkim that were pan-

acean in their powers (Khenpo Lha Tsering 2002: 13; Tashi Tsering Josayma 2008: 35; Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya 2005: 51; Valentine 2016). Only when the advantages of visiting hot springs were pointed out in these revealed guidebooks did these spots become Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

In addition to the pilgrims' guidebooks of sites connected to legendary Guru Rinpoche, other religious personages also addressed their personal and spiritual experiences with hot springs in their respective writings and thus promoted the benefits and significance of these natural features. By recounting both the religious and medical benefits of visiting hot springs, these writings consolidated the role of these sites in localized cultural identity. In the following, two examples are contextualized: one from the Fifth Dalai Lama and one from a Buddhist master from Sikkim.

Narratives in religious and historical writings

Testimonies and narratives about sacred springs have survived throughout human history and around the globe, often depicting these sites as places of healing and encounter with the supernatural (Ray 2020a). However, depending on their beliefs and cultural backgrounds, religious figures have encouraged or warned against visiting these sites. For example, while trips to so-called "wild baths" (thermal springs) were at the center of church criticism in Europe in the late Middle Ages and in the early modern times (Hähner-Rombach 2005: 11; Studt 205: 101), Tibetan spiritual leaders contemporaneously emphasized the medical and spiritual value of hot springs in their writings.

In the seventeenth century, the Fifth Dalai Lama became Tibet's first spiritual leader to have gained political power and unified the whole of Tibet. During his lifetime, Tibet came under the theocratic government that lasted until the 1950s. Besides his religious and political significance in seventeenth-century Tibet, he also was a passionate writer (Samten Karmay 2003). In his collected works, he repeatedly mentioned personal visits to hot springs across Tibet and described their beneficial curative effects (Dalai Lama 2009, book 5: 387, 522; book 6: 20, 32). Hot springs were perceived as powerful sites that would help in recovering from illness and could be used for preventive health care.

In Buddhist cosmology, natural features were – and still are – regarded as abodes of transcendent beings such as gods, demons, or spirits. Because these beings are believed to have the power to influence people, events, politics, and the environment itself, Buddhists perform rituals to please and pacify them as noted above (Salick 2012: 450–54). Tibetan prayer flags and multicolored Tibetan sacred syllables (mantras) drawn on stones may be seen at these spots and butter lamps and incense may be burned nearby. Past Buddhist masters performed rituals both to maintain the spiritual purity of hot springs and to worship the supernatural entities that dwell there. Several reports of Buddhists visiting and practicing at hot springs in

Sikkim are preserved, including the writings of Trinlé Gyatso (17th/18th century), a Sikkimese ritual specialist and religious figure who repeatedly visited sacred natural spots. He recorded, among other things, the efficacy of these medical waters and described them as having the power to cure all kinds of common diseases (Khenpo Lha Tsering 2002: 242; Trinlé Gyatso 1983: 191).

In Tibetan and Himalayan literature, vivid descriptions illustrate the significance of hot springs and the faith they elicited. To give an example, hot springs have been described as better than any doctor, because even one thousand doctors might not be certain about the signs of sickness or even worse might be desirous of fame or status and therefore be dishonest. Medical practitioners could unintentionally or even willfully make wrong diagnoses and prescribe medications improperly. It would therefore be far better to trust a source of natural medicine blessed by religious personages. In a Buddhist context, water has eight good qualities: coolness, sweetness, lightness, softness, clearness, freedom from impurities, the ability to sooth the stomach when ingested, and the ability to clear the throat when drunk (Tsepak Rigzin 2008: 78). Relying on these qualities of water, as well as cures specific to particular springs, Tibetan and Himalayan people have visited sacred hot springs to take care of their health for centuries (Oral History Series 2008: 94).

In contrast to the generally positive portrayal of sacred waters, Sikkimese also associate one hot spring site with a particularly tragic historical event. In this case, Sikkimese hot springs became a crime scene of a royal murder. When the third Buddhist king of Sikkim, Chakdor Namgyel (1686–1717; r.1700–1717), fell ill, he turned to the curing effects of sacred waters and visited the hot springs of Ralang. His older half-sister, who saw herself as the legitimate heiress to the throne, took advantage of her brother's health condition and sent a doctor to the hot springs. This doctor forced severe medical bloodletting, which ultimately led to the king's death. However, as a result, the king's half-sister's life also came to an end. As punishment for her deed, a scarf was put in her mouth and she suffocated (Ardussi 2021: 145–47; Khenpo Chöwang 2003: 135–37; Khenpo Lha Tsering 2002: 171, 225; Mullard 2011: 167–68).

Nevertheless, positive connotations are predominant in Sikkimese and Tibetan texts. The tradition of visiting hot springs has likewise been described in travel reports by Europeans, who have pointed out that locals fully rely on the effectiveness of such visits. Locals and foreign visitors continue to seek relief from health issues at these same springs. Westerners traveling or residing in Sikkim became acquainted with locals' beliefs in the hot springs' benefits and efficacy. English botanist and explorer Joseph D. Hooker (1817–1911) was the first Westerner to travel extensively through the North of Sikkim in 1849. He referred to Sikkimese hot springs in his *Himalayan Journals* and noted that one of his workers managed to survive a cold October night "without fire or shelter, at 16,000 feet above the sea" by staying immersed in a hot spring of the Kinchinjhow Glacier in the far north of Sikkim (Hooker 1854: 184). Some years later, in 1884, the British administrator Colman Macaulay (1849–1890) visited Sikkim looking for a new trade route that would connect Brit-

ish India with Tibet. During his travels, locals explained to Colman Macaulay that the hot springs were the best medicine one could imagine.

> [Locals] began to drink freely. We tasted the fluid, which was like a mixture of bad eggs and hot water. I resisted the Kazi's entreaties to wash in it and drink freely of it and thus be young for ever. He said it was better than any doctor's medicine. (1885: 26)[2]

Similarly, the British explorer Laurence A. Waddell (1854–1938), who travelled through the Himalayas in the 1890s, described the behavior of his men as they reached some hot spring in North Sikkim as follows:

> And my men became loud in their praises of the marvellous healing virtues of its waters as a panacea for every ailment under the sun. [...] For all my men, notwithstanding the cold, quickly stripped and bathed in it, and drank deeply of its malodorous waters. (1900: 202–203)

A slightly more detailed description, including the bathing circumstances, the appearance of the hot springs, and the recommended bathing duration, was provided by the Political Officer of Sikkim, John C. White (1853–1918):

> I found the springs. The water is moderately hot and is used [...] in cases of rheumatism and skin disease. The bathing arrangements are delightfully primitive; a hole is dug in the ground or a wall built of stones [...]. The patients sit in these baths for from four to eight hours a day for a period of ten to fourteen days. (1909: 66)

Tibetan and Himalayan literature is more specific in detailing the medicinal and spiritual effects of hot springs.

Medical and spiritual aspects of hot springs

Visiting hot springs for curative and religious reasons has a long tradition in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau. For more than a thousand years, Tibetans have been taking baths in natural hot springs as a medical treatment that was considered effective, convenient, and cheap. Even earlier, the benefits of consulting hot springs were described in a ninth-century Tibetan source that developed into the most important book in Tibetan medicine (Yönten Gönpo 2005: 294–322). In the twenty-first century, Tibetans still affirm the revitalizing effects of hot springs (Oral History Series 2008; Tashi Tsering 1992; Zangpo 2014). The positive effects of bathing in hot springs have been depicted not only in medical texts, but also throughout the

[2] Kazi (or Kaji) is the land-owning nobility of Lepcha, Lhopo, and Tibetan descent in Sikkim (Balikci 2008: 48). First, the Lepcha settled. Then, from the 13th century onwards, Tibetan and Bhutanese people arrived and became known as Bhutia albeit they prefer to be called Lhopo, meaning the ones from the South. Together, the Lepcha and the Lhopo, belong to the original inhabitants of Sikkim.

different genres of Tibetan literature, including historical writings (*logyü*), pilgrims' guidebooks (*néyik*), religious life stories (*namtar*), and collected writings from Tibetan Buddhist masters (*sungbum*).

Tibetan and Himalayan writings note the optimal season or time of the year to visit springs for the best possible results. On the Tibetan Plateau, for example, visits are generally recommended during spring or autumn, either for two weeks in the springtime or three in the autumn to get the best possible results (Gélong Chöpel 2009: 297; Oral History Series 2008: 129). However, recommendations differ among the regions in the Himalayas. For example, for the hot springs in Kyirong, lying close to the Himalayas in southwest Tibet, winter was considered the best time to visit (Tendzin Norbu 2012: 483). Likewise, the Sikkimese hot springs are also mainly visited by pilgrims during winter (Balikci 2008: 81) and the same can be observed in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan (Phurpa Wangchuk 2007: 122; Pommaret 2015: 533). One reason why the benefits might be seasonal relates to the climatic differences between the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas. Kyirong in southwest Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan have similar climatic conditions, perhaps explaining why spring visitation there might vary from the auspicious bathing and ritual times for the hot springs of the Tibetan Plateau.

Apart from providing indications on the most suitable period of the year for bathing, Tibetan texts catalogue particular ailments that could be cured as well as the circumstances under which a bath should be avoided. For example, it was recommended to bathe in hot springs when having old wounds, skin diseases, or swollen feet; having diseases after being frozen or chilled; having gout, rheumatism, a tumor, or problems with the stomach (Gélong Chöpel 2009: 297; Oral History Series 2008: 130; Yonten Pasang Arya 2014: 66). Particularly positive results were obtained for chronic illnesses such as skin diseases, nerve diseases, or gout, as highlighted by Tibetan author Tashi Tsering in his book on this subject (1992: 1). At the same time, Tibetan sources clearly listed diseases that were not cured by entering hot springs. The list included infectious diseases or mounting fever, heart disease or high blood pressure, worms with bleeding, headache, and red eyes. The sources further advised against baths for women when menstruating or pregnant (Gélong Chöpel 2009: 297; Oral History Series 2008: 130).

To achieve the best possible effect, devotees bathe in hot springs intensively for five to seven days, depending on the severity of the illness. Before they enter the spring for the first time, people are religiously and culturally expected to make offerings to supernatural entities, including the entity residing in the hot spring, the spiritual owner of the land, and the sickness-causing demon. As described in Tibetan texts, the duration of the first bath should be kept short, after which the bathing time may slowly be extended up to two hours. It is recommended to bathe in the sacred hot springs three times a day for about two hours and once under the stars at midnight (Oral History Series 2008: 132–33; Phurpa Wangchuk 2007: 122–25).

The waters are of greater spiritual significance as they are believed to cleanse sins and spiritual defilement. As Françoise Pommaret observes in the case of Bhutan:

"[t]he spiritual power of the springs blessed by the presence of a religious figure only enhances their therapeutic values" (2015: 534). While people consulted, and continue to consult, hot springs in addition to other medical treatments, these sites became popular pilgrimage destinations. As Alex McKay points out in reference to Sikkim, "[p]ilgrimages were, and continue to be, undertaken to medicinal hot springs that are understood to be located within a Buddhist sacred landscape" (2007: 91). An example of this is the important Bumchu ritual mentioned at the beginning of this essay. This Buddhist festival takes place in Sikkim once a year and is believed to foretell the fate of both the land and the people for the coming year. On that occasion, numerous pilgrims arrive from near and far and the attendance of the ritual is frequently combined with a visit to nearby hot springs.

Preservation and promotion of hot springs

The recent promotion of hot springs as tourist destinations has created jobs during the hot spring season – a development most welcomed by locals – but has also caused serious environmental and hygienic problems. The springs are generally in their natural setting, impounded or enclosed by stones. Most of them are without roofing, protective canopies, or other superstructures. Tourists can stay overnight in tents, temporary huts, or simple rooms and either use their own kitchen or buy their food in tiny restaurants or shops nearby. In Sikkim, special local committees are responsible for the maintenance and management of these sacred sites (Kushhang Leewang 2020). Locals and Sikkimese pilgrims that have traditionally visited for spiritual, cultural, and medical reasons now share these sacred places with national and international tourists, foremost those from Nepal and Bhutan. In the time of nineteenth-century Briton John C. White, pilgrimage was an arduous endeavor and, as White noted, hot springs were "used only by occasional visitors who, to reach them, have to undertake difficult and hazardous journeys, for nearly all the springs are found in more or less inaccessible spots lying far off the ordinary roads" (1909: 66). In the twentieth century, infrastructure was constructed to facilitate access to the hot springs, leading to increased tourism. For Indian travelers, for example, Sikkim has become a popular destination. Since people with different diseases have been entering the hot springs and drinking the water directly while bathing, it became likely that people would cross-contaminate. To determine the potability of the water, physicochemical analysis and other studies of some Sikkimese hot springs have confirmed the negative impact of extra-local and pilgrim visitation. Researchers have argued that "[h]ot springs are getting polluted due to influx of tourists and maintenances of poor [...] facilities in and around [the sites]" (Mingma Thundu Sherpa 2013: 63). Recognizing the value and importance of these natural features, the government of Sikkim has started programs to preserve natural and religious places across the whole of Sikkim. As a result, the most important sacred natural features have been placed under official protection by the government since 2001

and part of Sikkim was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016. These measures are meant to simultaneously preserve these natural features and their associated cultural memory and identity.

Conclusion

Tibetan and Himalayan literature across the centuries evidences the pride in hot springs across the Tibetan Cultural Area and the high regard ("better than any doctor") in which they are held. Visiting hot springs can be understood as an ancient lived tradition within Himalayan communities that not only indicates a localized custom but also gives insight into how nature is perceived within the Tibetan Cultural Area. Accordingly, these examples illustrate the significance of hot springs in a Buddhist environment, how sacred sites were created by connecting them to religious figures, and how the related narratives became a part of cultural memory. Firstly, hot springs have been described as abodes of powerful supernatural entities. Ritual performances at the edges of hot springs kept these beings pleased while maintaining the spiritual purity of their waters. Through ancient myths, this belief became a part of local cultural identities. Secondly, myths and legends containing hot springs illustrate how these natural features have been blessed by important religious figures, for example, legendary Guru Rinpoche. Through this linking of landscapes with Buddhist masters, natural features have been tied inseparably to religion and culture and thus formed part of people's identity. Finally, the beneficial medical and spiritual effects of spring devotion have been described in numerous Tibetan and Himalayan primary sources and in revealed pilgrim guidebooks. In this way, pilgrimage sites, their associated rituals, and faith in their efficacy have been mutually constructed.

The development of these spring sites as tourist destinations is having ecological consequences that challenge the primary value of these natural features as sacred places. The custom of bathing in hot springs as a lived tradition along with its cultural, medical, and spiritual facets as well as the development of Sikkim as a tourist destination symbolize the contest between economic growth and the preservation of both the environment and cultural identity. However, the value of these sites in pilgrimage practices and those recorded in various Tibetan and Himalayan literary genres suggest that the supernatural, ritual, cultural, and therapeutic dimensions of hot springs will endure as a significant testament to the generationally layered interconnections between culture, religion, and nature in the Tibetan Culture Area.

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Bolje od bilo kojeg doktora. Budistički pogledi na termalne izvore u Sikkumu na Himalaji

Za narode Himalaja kupanje u termalnim izvorima oblik je medicinske i duhovne terapije. Osim što su sastavnica lokalnih mitova, termalni su izvori i prirodna obilježja koja čine dio kulturnog sjećanja te su društvena, kulturna, religijska i medicinska mjesta susreta. Također, reprezentiraju napetost između ekonomskog rasta i zaštite okoliša te, posljedično, natjecanja između različitih sastavnica identiteta ljudi. Analizom vjerskih, povijesnih i medicinskih tekstova u kombinaciji s biografskim prikazima, dana je opsežna slika kulturnog i vjerskog značaja termalnih izvora na Himalaji. Težište je na društvima pod utjecajem budizma unutar tibetanskog kulturnog područja, odnosno onih područja Himalaja koja su pod utjecajem tibetanske kulture.

Ključne riječi: budističke Himalaje, termalni izvori, kulturno sjećanje, tibetansko kulturno područje, Sikkim