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Loyalty, resistance, subalterneity: a history of Limbu ‘participation’ in Sikkim

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process of construction of the interconnection between ethnicity, indigeneity, and political participation in Sikkim concerning the Limbu ethnic community. It firstly discusses Limbu associations’ claims for the reservation of seats for the Limbu community in the state legislative assembly, following the recognition of the group as a Scheduled Tribe in 2003. From this point on, the paper goes further back in time, and, based on archival documents, shows that the view of the lack of political representation of the Limbu as a result of ethnic discrimination is grounded in a ‘uncertain’ membership, which has historical roots dating back to the foundation of the kingdom. It shows that the troubled relations between the Limbu and the leading power in Sikkim in the early days of the kingdom long continued to inform their subaltern form of political membership.

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1. Introduction

Limbu organisations and political representatives are today claiming the reservation of seats for their community in the Sikkim state assembly, following their recognition as Scheduled Tribe (ST) in 2003 (granted also to the Tamang in the same year).¹ Although more than fifteen years have passed since their recognition as ST, they have not yet been granted these reserved seats, and Limbu political leaders see this as the result of ethnic discrimination. This situation and the corresponding claims of the Limbu are an example, alongside others presented in this special issue, of the differentiated access to political participation as well as to citizenship status and entitlements on the basis of ethno-cultural divides and of territoriality, similar to other parts of north-east India.² The present-day situation of the Limbu invites us to explore the process of construction of this interconnection between ethnicity, indigeneity and political participation in Sikkim.

After clarifying the current claims of the Limbu concerning their political ‘participation’ – here understood as the part taken in decision making as well as a means to gain political agency³ – this paper presents a social history of this ethnic community with a particular focus on the process of construction of the interconnection between ethnicity and political participation. We thus shift the concept of political participation (and the interlinked concept of ‘representation’) from its usual

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context – it is mainly used in political science to study people’s choices in democracies – to the time preceding the making of the nation states in the region. We shall see that ‘participation’, in the early history of the Sikkimese kingdom, is best understood as the place given to social groups within the social stratification that emerged from the effort of the new ruling elite to strengthen its political power through alliances and political centralisation. We shed light on relations and processes that determined the place of the Limbu in the early form of social stratification by examining their relations with dominant powers.⁴

Our intention is to contribute to the elaboration of a ‘history from below’.⁵ Rather than producing a ‘truth’, we here intend to look at the archival sources (which although not numerous, do nevertheless exist) with the aid of some theoretical anthropological tools – notably, the deconstruction of ethnicity,⁶ and the focus on the common people rather than on the rulers – so as to present one possible understanding of these sources. Some sources, in addition, allow us to frame alternative views of history, or at least to call our knowledge of Sikkimese history into question, which is also an important step in understanding the past.⁷

In this regard, this paper benefits from the different perspectives of its collaborating authors: a Limbu political scientist and writer, and a European anthropologist. This collaboration allowed us to ally deep knowledge of the community with a view from the outside⁸; in particular, it enabled us to connect history to the oral tradition.⁹ Social scientists mostly treat the oral tradition as offering an insight into societies’ present-day cultural norms and values,¹⁰ seeing them both as documents of the present and expressions of the past.¹¹ In the present paper, we will see how oral tradition, in particular Limbu folk stories and narratives of clans’ origins, can shed light on the memories that nourish political subjectivities today.

2. Reservation of seats and participation in the legislative process

The Limbu in Sikkim today claim reserved seats for their community in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, a right resulting from their recognition as Scheduled Tribe (ST) in 2003. At this date, they were included in the Indian Union’s list of Scheduled Tribes with the Tamang.¹² Several Limbu organisations were founded in the years following 2003 to pressure the government to reserve seats for both groups.¹³ These organisations proposed two legal frameworks to this end: article 332 of the Constitution of India, which directs that Scheduled Tribes should have reserved seats in their state assembly; or reservation within the framework of article 371 F, which maintained the validity of the old laws of Sikkim after its integration into the Indian Union. In the latter case, the Limbu and Tamang would get reservations as a specific category and not as ST; a similar arrangement had been done for the Bhutia-Lepcha in the past.¹⁴ On 4 January 2016 the Supreme Court of India ‘directed the Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA] to find a permanent solution to the long pending issue of Limbu-Tamang tribal seat reservation in the Sikkim legislative assembly within four months’.¹⁵ This led to the foundation, in March 2016, of the Sikkim Limboo Tamang Tribal Joint Action Committee (hereafter LTT-JAC), which gathered several Limbu and Tamang organisations together.¹⁶

The disagreement between these organisations and the then-government¹⁷ concerned the ‘formula’ for implementing the reservations, and in particular the government’s plan to increase the number of seats in the legislative assembly from 32 to 40, in order to provide, in the near future, reserved seats for groups which are currently claiming ST recognition. The current Sikkim Legislative Assembly includes 32 seats, among which 12

are reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha, 2 for the Scheduled Castes, and 1 for the 'Sangha' (the representative of the Bhutia-Lepcha Buddhist monasteries), with the remaining 17 being 'general seats', open to all other communities.¹⁸ The government supported the recognition as Scheduled Tribe of the 'Eleven Indigenous Ethnic Communities of Sikkim' (EIECOS) – namely the Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Khas (Bahun and Chettri), Mangar, Newar, Rai, Sanyasi/Giri, Sunwar/Mukhia, and Thami – in order to 'give justice to all'.¹⁹ It planned to reserve 20 seats for the Scheduled Tribes while preserving 12 specifically for the Bhutia-Lepcha (BL), and to reduce the number of general seats to 4, once these groups were recognised as ST.²⁰

The EIECOS are commonly referred to as the 'left out' indigenous communities, a name explained by the chairperson of the Sikkim State Commission for Backward Classes, T.N. Sharma, in the *Summit Times*:

The demand of the 11 left out communities of Sikkim is genuine and not a new demand but it is a request for the restoration of the rights and status provided to the communities before the merger with the Indian union. But due to a mistake made by the previous government, these communities were deprived of their rights which they were enjoying when Sikkim was an independent kingdom.²¹

Mr Sharma makes clear reference to the reservation of seats for the category called 'Nepalese' in equal number to that of the Bhutia-Lepcha, a policy which was abandoned in 1979.²² EIECOS is thus a new name for an old category, which allows the redefinition of the 'Nepalese' as indigenous.

Limbu-Tamang organisations consider that these two projects of the government (the increase in reserved seats and the recognition of the EIECOS as ST) hinder the project of the reservation of seats for the Limbu-Tamang. They argue that the increase of seats to 40 requires constitutional amendments as well as a modification of the delimitation of the assembly constituencies, which is already scheduled all across India for 2026; however, in their opinion, the reservation of seats for a Scheduled Tribe merely requires a vote of the State Assembly. The organisations advocate the setting up of reservations of seats for the Limbu and Tamang without increasing the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly.²³ More particularly, the LTT-JAC committee members argue that the reservations of seats for the EIECOS will lead to a re-arrangement of all seat reservations in the assembly, and reduce or even endanger the representation of the Limbu-Tamang. One of our interlocutors explained:

In fact, they [the state government] do not want reservation [of seats in the Legislative Assembly] for the Limbu and Tamang. They want to keep us in the group of Nepali. We are not Nepali. Nepali, what does it mean? Citizens of Nepal. Isn't it? [...] For instance, Obama, if he had kept on telling that he belonged to South Africa, he would not have been the president of America, would have he? Furthermore, people of Nepal came here and can do as they want. A treaty allows them to. Gradually, their number increased, and now, they want to remain here in the name of Limbu. So, they want to keep Limbu with them. But there are historical evidences showing that Limbu are not Nepali, and also linguistic evidences since the Limbu language is recognised as a distinct language by experts. Legally, even other people called 'Nepalese' in Sikkim are actually not Nepali. They are Sikkimese because Sikkim is not a caste, it is the name of a state. (Interview with M. Vandenhelsken in Gangtok, 8 March 2018)

These words highlight the imbrication of citizenship, belonging, and temporality of settlement in Sikkim. Whereas, for the Sikkimese Nepalis, their recognition as ST concerns the

recognition of their old membership to the kingdom,²⁴ the Limbu perceive their assimilation to Nepalis as an obstacle to their recognition as Sikkimese, and to their access to political representation in Sikkim in particular. The division of the Limbu between Nepalese Limbu and Sikkimese Limbu dates back from the establishment of the border between Nepal and Sikkim in Limbu territory in the early nineteenth century.²⁵ As for the assimilation of the Limbu to Sikkimese Nepalis, it is rooted in the nineteenth-century Sikkim history, and in particular, in the categorizations constructed by the British colonists,²⁶ as well as, very likely, in the definition of Sikkim as a Buddhist nation.²⁷ A subaltern form of social identity for all Limbu in the kingdom emerged from this context; here, 'subaltern' is understood the sense of both discrimination – Limbu had to pay the same taxes as Nepali 'settlers', and not as the 'natives', which were lower, and later, were divided into 'Sikkimese' and 'Nepali Limbu' – and specific agency: this context gave ground to a specific form of Sikkimese Limbu claims for recognition of their distinct identity.

In this paper, we want, however, to go further back in time and shed light on the historical journey of Limbu social identity and political participation since the foundation of the Sikkim kingdom in the seventeenth century. By doing so, we show that Sikkimese Limbu associations' view that differentiating themselves from Nepali Limbu is necessary to guaranty their political rights is grounded in a 'uncertain' membership, which has historical roots older than the nineteenth century, and dates back to the foundation of the kingdom. In other words, we now look for 'sediments of former imaginative acts',²⁸ which informs the relations between the Limbu and the Sikkim state until today.

3. Resistance, and distance from political power in the early years of the Kingdom

How were the Limbu involved in the Sikkimese kingdom in its early days? Was their place in the socio-political system determined merely by ethnicity?²⁹ A seventeenth-century Tibetan text provides information about the link then made between the hierarchisation of the subjects and the submission or allegiance to the soon-to-be king in a context where the Bhutia were gradually expanding their territory³⁰; this text, translated and discussed by Mullard, is the first known document to provide information about the socio-religious organisation set up by the Bhutia and Lepcha in the years before the foundation of the Namgyal kingdom:

First of all those who were trustworthy servants amongst the Lepcha were considered as one's own sons. However, when conflict or opposition gradually arose only the dependable and trustworthy servants and others would be given important work and they were placed under a head man and work leader. Thereafter the *mon* of the caste of Bkra shis steng kha and the Lepchas of Seng lding were gradually subdued. Thereafter they all were given the title of the 'Lepchas officials' (*las byed mon pa*). Likewise, ministers who were unsuitable and untrustworthy, whoever they may have been, were known as the *mon pa* who conducted trade.³¹

This pattern of hierarchisation eventually became a differentiation between ministers (tib. *blon*) and servants (tib. *gyog*).³² People and groups who submitted to the Bhutia leader(s) were rewarded and given positions in the administration of the territory, whereas 'unsuitable and untrustworthy' ministers were employed in 'outdoor services'.³³

This does not allow us to conclude with certainty that the difference made between lords and commoners was merely based on ethnicity: all servants were part of the group of people given the derogatory label 'Mön', but not all Mön were servants, some being 'official' or 'ministerial' Mön.³⁴ Moreover, in the early days of the Sikkim kingdom, 'Mön', used more recently to specifically designate the Lepcha, could also include the Limbu.³⁵

Assimilation of Lepcha and Limbu appears in Namgyal and Dolma's *History of Sikkim*, for example, when the clan Sanyit-bho is firstly described as Lepcha, and then as Tsong.³⁶ In the same text, the name 'Tsong', though most of the time referring to Limbu, also sometimes refers to the Magar and Jimdar.³⁷ Thus, Mön and Tsong seem to have been categories used to identify and rank people on the basis of their difference from the Bhutia, rather than clear and stable ethnic categories.

Moreover, the principle of allegiance highlighted in the quotation above recalls the one based on kinship or personal loyalty to the ruler, which operated in Nepal before the Gorkha conquests. This principle contrasts with the one later implemented by the Gorkha, of allegiance to the state as an entity that transcended the person of the ruler, and which allowed more durable political alliances.³⁸

Therefore, these ethnic categories seem to have been defined as part of processes of social differentiation with (and by) the new ruling elite rather than by 'culture' as it is today³⁹; we can assume that personal loyalties to the Bhutia leaders defined ethnic/statutory groups, whose boundaries were consequently malleable.

It is unclear whether or not Limbu were included in the early socio-political entity mentioned above. Around a decade after Phuntshog Namgyal (1604–1670) became ruler of the area, a war broke out, referred to as the 'Mön pa war' in Tibetan documents; it could have been either a rebellion against the Bhutia ruler, or a war in reaction to the expansion of the Bhutia kingdom.⁴⁰ Limbu oral tradition also reports the resistance of the Lepcha and Limbu to the expansion of the Bhutia's power: a tale from Gerethang (West Sikkim, near Tashiding) narrates that after the three Tibetan lamas consecrated the first king of the Namgyal dynasty, Phuntsok Namgyal, as king in Yoksam, whereas some Limbu and Lepcha accepted the new ruler, the Lepcha leader Na-ang gathered other members of these two communities to fight against the Bhutia. A battle took place in Gyazing; the Limbu and Lepcha were defeated and large numbers of their dead were buried under the stupas still visible today in the main market place of Gyazing town. The Lepcha and Limbu who could escape fled to Daramdin.⁴¹ Consequently, in contrast to the interpretation of this place name in Tibetan – rGyal shing, i.e., land of the king or king's victory – the Limbu understand 'Gyazing' to be a derivation of *che*, i.e., dead body, and *zing*, to bury, in Limbu.

According to Tibetan texts, the Mön pa war ended with the defeat of the Mön pa, and, very likely, with the integration of their territories into the Bhutia kingdom.⁴² The Lho Mön Tsong Sum Agreement (1663) 'was in all likelihood written after the end of hostilities' and was very likely to have been a peace treaty or reconciliation document.⁴³ The Limbu were then included in the Bhutia kingdom.⁴⁴

However, no archival document tells with precision the extension of the Limbu territory included in the kingdom. Oral tradition sheds its own light on the signatories to the treaty.⁴⁵ For example, one of them, Shu Phang of Rimbi, recalls the name Supahang, which is mentioned in the mythological narrative (*mundhum*) reciting the names of the ancestors of the Limbu Khamdhak clan (this *mundhum* is chanted during

the ritual called ‘Nehangma’). The signatory Sde She Hang could be Tesehang, also a Khamdhak, who resided in the place called Tesenthang close to Rimbi; he is remembered in Limbu oral tradition as a hunter, who started the practice of eating pork. Yug shugs could be Yugsho, also a Khamdhak from Rimbi, grand-father of Yupalsingh (see below). Tapa Agod, the Limbu leader of Rathang, could refer to the old Limbu term ‘Tapa’, which designates an administrative centre, or headquarters of a territorial entity; the Limbu call the area and river Rathang, in West Sikkim, Lathung; the Limbu clans Parangden and Phurumbo are old settlers in this area.

This information, though very brief, shows that oral tradition conveys the idea of an allegiance of several clan leaders living in the areas of Rimbik and Rathong – where the Khamdhak, Parangden and Phurumbo clans trace their origins – to the early Bhutia kingdom. Namgyal and Dolma’s *History of Sikkim* reports that, under Phuntsok Namgyal, the territory under the control of the new kingdom extended further to the west, comprising ‘Shingsa Dag-pay [likely in present-day Sankhusaba district,⁴⁶ near Chainpur], Walung [today’s Walungchung Gola, in the north-west of Taplejung District], Yangmag Khangchen [either Yangma Kambachen, in the surroundings of Walungchung Gola, or Kangpa-chan,⁴⁷ Yarlung [the mountains Yalung Khang on the west side of the Khanchendzonga], and Timar Chorten in the West [“Timar” refers to the Tamor river, which originates in a lake close to Pabuktar, a locality in the neighbourhood of Yangma Khangla, then goes down towards Taplejung], down along the Arun [...].’; these places are shown in [Figure 1](#) below.⁴⁸ It is however unlikely that these points drew a border; they could have been localities where leaders, mostly Limbu, pledged allegiance to the Sikkimese king. [Figure 1](#) shows these localities on a map.

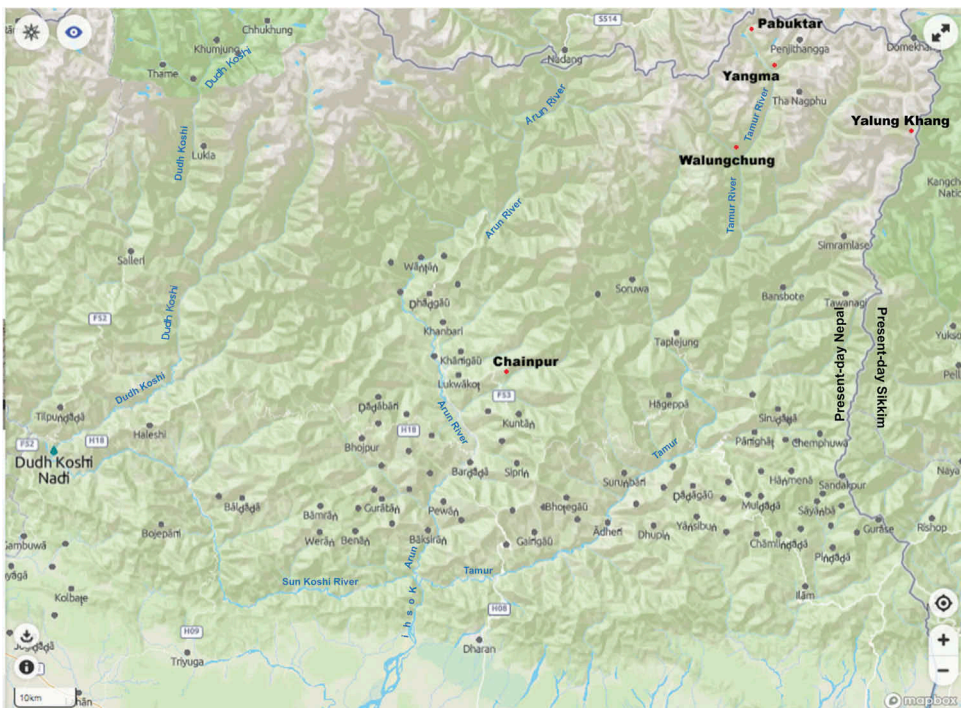


Figure 1. Western borders of the early Sikkim Kingdom (present-day eastern Nepal) © OpenStreetMap Contributors (place names added by M. Vandenhelsken).

4. The Limbu in the early administration of the Kingdom

Then, as shown by the archival sources as well as in Namgyal and Dolma's *History of Sikkim*, Limbu were given places and ranks in the new administration; the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Limbu participated in the administration of the kingdom in ways that were both varying and overlapping, as shown in Figure 2:

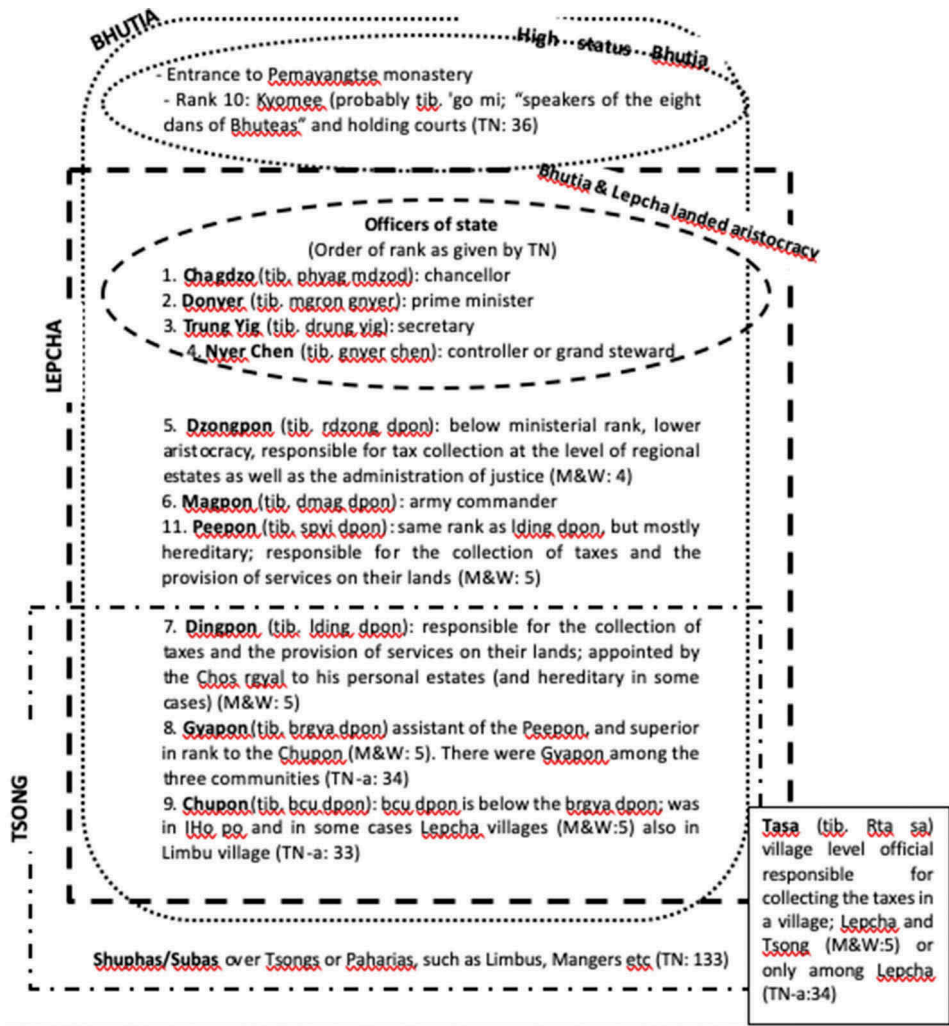


Figure 2. Position in the state administration and 'ethnicity' in the early history of the kingdom ⁴⁹.

This figure highlights a system of access to functions in the administration and to land ownership based on a combination of clan status and the form of ethnicity then extant. In other words, functions were attributed not merely on the basis of ethnicity. This was the case for example in the 1990s in the region of Pemayangtse monastery: whereas Limbu and Lepcha did not have any internal hierarchy of clans, Bhutia were organised in several (two or four, depending on the region) ranked socio-professional strata in Sikkim like in Tibet. ⁵⁰

Through marriages with Bhutia, some Lepcha families had reached the upper levels of the social hierarchy in the kingdom, differentiated from common Lepcha people, who, like common Limbu people were considered as having a social status inferior to that of high status Bhutia clans. Thus, the Bhutia clan hierarchy formed the basis of the social hierarchy within the society that included Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Clan-ethnic hierarchy in Sikkim.

Top rank	King
Higher ranks	Bhutia and Lepcha kazi and ministers (we will see below that there have been one Limbu minister)
Middle rank	Bhutia high status clan (Limbu and Lepcha headmen were in between the previous level and this one)
Common people, low status	Bhutia (low status clans), Lepcha, Limbu

In Figure 2, for the Limbu, only one category of officials is shown; the difference between *tasa* and *subba* is unclear in Namgyal and Dolma; likely, *subba* is a more recent term which replaced that of *tasa* to designate a similar function.

The main point concerning the Limbu highlighted by this figure is that, in these early days of the kingdom, they had little access to ownership of large land holdings such as those of the Bhutia and Lepcha landlords; this entailed that they were at a distance from the exercise of power and to land ownership. One possible explanation to this is that the Limbu maintained ownership of their own lands, 'with rights to administer justice and collect taxes'⁵¹ under the leadership of the Bhutia king.

This distance from the centre of power can also be linked to their opposition to the Bhutia rule, that continued in the early eighteenth century. Several sources report that during the reign of Gyurme Namgyal (1707–33), the fourth king of Sikkim, Limbuan separated from Sikkim.⁵² What could this separation have then meant? Did Limbu people or clan leaders leave the then-territory of the kingdom? Did villages or families or clans stop paying taxes to the king?

Limbu were likely also involved in the war of succession that took place after the death, heirless, of the Chogyal Gyurme Namgyal in 1733, when the son of a Sangachöling nun was declared the successor. Challenging the boy's legitimacy to the throne, the Bhutia minister Gyalpo Tamding seized power in Sikkim from 1738 to 1741. The Lepcha minister Changzod Karwang protected the boy and allowed the appointment of a Tibetan regent until the young Namgyal was able to take over the government.⁵³ Tibetan sources refer to a man called Deshe Gönshe (tib. *de shes mngon shes*), who was one of the persons 'who spoiled and damaged the protection and maintenance of political and religious authority'.⁵⁴ Mullard argues that Deshe Gönshe was Srijanga Singthebe, who is today considered the 'discoverer' of the Limbu script.⁵⁵ Originally from present-day Nepal, Srijanga endeavoured to spread among Limbu the awareness of the specificity of their language and religious practices, and, due to these activities, was assassinated by Lamas of the Buddhist monastery of Pemayangtse.⁵⁶ According to 'other sources',⁵⁷ Srijanga took part in the war of succession against the Namgyal king. This suggests that the murder of Srijanga by the Pemayangtse Lamas was not only related to the former's activities in the development of Limbu language and literature, as it is

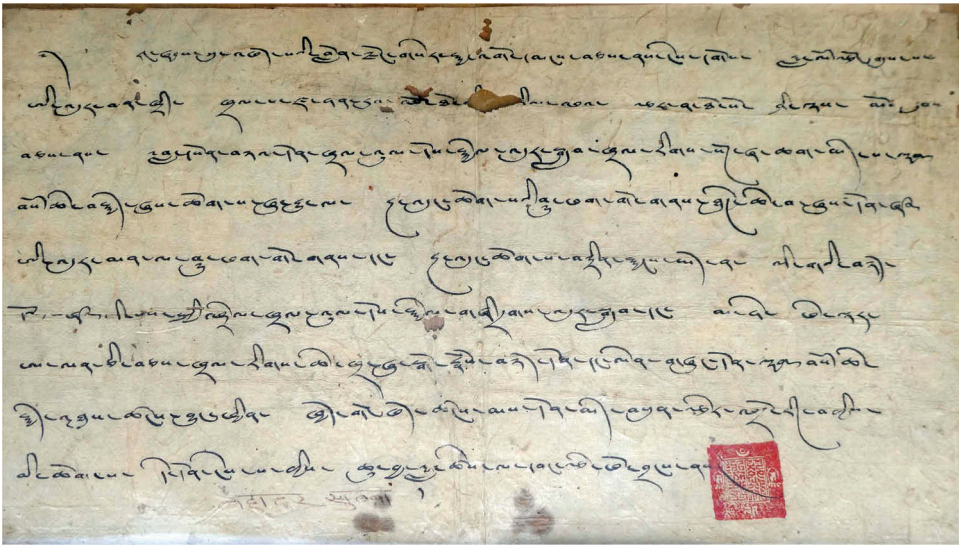


Figure 3. Order of appointment of Limbu Nembang tax collectors in Sombaria.

commonly perceived today, but was also rooted in a political struggle that concerned the access to political power in Sikkim. This could explain why Srijanga died in the same year as Gyalpo Tamding's rule ended, namely 1741. The *History of Sikkim* also mentions another 'rebellion against the Sikkim Raja' of the 'Paharia or Tsong', 'under Shing-rag-gyal', which was 'put down by force' by the Changzod Karwang. We can venture the hypothesis that Shing-rag-gyal also refers to Srijanga.

In any event, a significant number of Limbu remained in the kingdom as subjects of the king: Tibetan documents mention Limbu taxpayers in various parts of Sikkim, such as in 'Ri shi' (probably Reshi near Rhenock),⁵⁸ and Rimbik in 1785.⁵⁹ The function of taxpayer was called in Tibetan 'nangzen' (tib. nang gzan), which referred to tenants who had to render various labour services to the king and landed gentry, and were similar to the agricultural tenants or 'dependent peasants' in Tibet.⁶⁰ According to the *History of Sikkim*,⁶¹ it was found 'among Bhutia, Lepcha and Tsong', and likely represented the majority of the population. It was one of the three categories of people in the early days of the kingdom, in addition to the 'Kazi or ministers', and 'Bhutia and Lepcha favored with small free hold properties (*patta*)'. Taxpayers were under the Chupon, Gyapon, Peepon, Kyome, Tassa, and Subah. In the village of Nako-Chumbung in the 1990 s, Bhutia villagers drew a distinction between 'nangzen', 'owners of the land and the water' (tib. *sa bdag chu bdag*), and bound labourers (called *khyep* in Bhutia dialect, tib. *khol*); whereas bound labourers were all low-status Bhutia, dependent peasants and small land owners were people of higher social status.⁶² A Tibetan document of 1853 shows that that some Limbu had the position of 'dependant peasants' in other villages in Sikkim; it was issued in the Tumlong palace, and ordered a Limbu man called Thoba Shingdab to fulfil his duty as *nangzen*.⁶³

There were, however, exceptions to the overall picture of the estrangement of the Limbu from political power: certain Limbu had held high ranks since the early days of the kingdom. For example, the signatories of the latter part of the Lho Mön Tsong Sum Agreement compiled in 1676 were Limbu of high position.⁶⁴ The second king, Tensung

Namgyal (1670–1700), married as his third wife the daughter of a Limbu chief from the Arun valley, Yong-Yong Hang. The *history of Sikkim* mentions from this union one son, named Guru, whose line is extinct, and one daughter. The daughter's daughter, Pande Chering Gyalmo, married a man from a high-status Bhutia clan in Yangang.⁶⁵ Female descendants of the Limbu queen have thus been absorbed in the Bhutia nobility. Additionally, from the eighteenth century, a class of Limbu middle men for tax collections emerged in Sikkim.

5. Strengthening loyalty and the administration: the emergence of a Limbu middle class

The mid-eighteenth-century events led to transformations in the socio-political organisation of the kingdom, as defined in an assembly known as 'Mangsher Duma' convened by the then-regent of Sikkim⁶⁶; henceforth, 'Lepchas obtained a greater share in the administration as Tumiyang or superintendents of cultivation, and some fixed system of revenue was devised'.⁶⁷

This not completely new phenomenon: from the early days of the kingdom, a number of Limbu had been appointed tax collectors (*tasa*) in various parts of Sikkim, such as in Rimbi, where Shu Phang, one of the Limbu signatories of the 1663 Lho Mön Tsong Sum treaty, was a *tasa*.⁶⁸ A document dated 1779 mentions that the function and rank of tax collector over the agricultural tenants had been conferred on a Limbu man called Domikpa by the second Chogyal of Sikkim, Tenzung Namgyal (1670–1700) in Daley (identified as Bhara Khelay, near Soreng by Limbu today); the document confirms that Domikpa's descendants are still in charge of tax collection.⁶⁹

In more recent years, there were Limbu *tasa* in Zamdong and Namchi in 1845,⁷⁰ as well as in the estate of Rangpor, in the plains area.⁷¹ In Sombaria (near Soreng), tax collectors from the Nembang Limbu clan were appointed, as shows the official order dating likely from 1873 (Figure 3):

According to the descendant of the last Mandal, this position was hereditary until the mid-twentieth century.⁷² More recently, there were Limbu *mandal*⁷³ for example, in Darap (the last one was called Dambarsing Subba), Nambu (the last one was Birman Subba), Timrong (Birhang), several in Gerethang, in Baluthang (Tharsing Mandal), Sordong, Uttarey, Lingchom, Langang, Soreng, Tharpu, Sombaria, Siribadang, and Hee Gaon. There were Limbu *karbari* (assistants of *mandal*) in Sidingbung and Singpheng, near Darap.

In the mid-eighteenth-century, Limbu were allowed public demonstrations of prestige similar to that of Lho po (i.e. Bhutia) lords to strengthen their loyalty.⁷⁴ Namgyal and Dolma report that the Tsong 'so as to gain their friendship and loyalty back,' 'were given grand presents and the privileges of freedom of having kettle [drum] beaten and bearing banners and flags, according to their rank and position'.⁷⁵ Similar rights were also given for services 'during both peace and war', such as the permission to play the drum (*chyabrun* or tib. *dza rnga*) during religious practices (tib. *lha sol*) given to Yupalsingh Subba (grand-son of one of the signatories of the 1663 treaty mentioned above), possibly in 1742.⁷⁶ Namgyal and Dolma's *History of Sikkim* suggests that the men who were granted these special rights were Limbu headmen; they eventually acquired the title of 'Subba', which was not likely to have been used for Limbu before the introduction of the *kipat* system in Limbuan after 1774. We also see here that the

granting of privileges and the appointment of Limbu as tax collectors contributed to the process of strengthening the administration by binding the loyalty of the Limbu to the Bhutia rulers.

The information that has just been given provides details about the process of formation of a landowning class in the eighteenth century discussed by Mullard.⁷⁷ According to Mullard, this class eventually turned into an aristocratic class, and, 'The Limbu aristocracy [...] were also granted titles, ranks and special privileges comparable to their Lho po and Lepcha counterparts'.⁷⁸

However, whereas a landowning class clearly emerged in the Limbu community from the eighteenth century, with power to levy taxes over small regions,⁷⁹ were Limbu as closely involved in the exercise of political power as the Lepcha and Bhutia aristocracy? Was the social stratification in the early period of the kingdom that we described above transformed as regards the access of the Limbu to political participation and power when a landowning class developed among them?

One Limbu man reached a high position of power in the past: in the early nineteenth century, Ilam Singh Tsong became a minister of the Sikkimese king. There is little information about him, but what there is raises several questions.⁸⁰ Ilam Singh was a councillor and/or Dewan (prime minister) of the Sikkimese king Tshudpud Namgyal, and acted as intermediary in negotiations between the Sikkimese government and the British regarding several issues in the 1840 s.⁸¹ He had good relations with A. Campbell, then superintendent of Darjeeling, with whom he shared information about the Limbu script.⁸² Ilam Singh collaborated with Cheboo Lama (political representative of the Sikkimese Chogyal in Darjeeling, also known as Tsepa Aden or Tchebu Lama⁸³), probably in the 1840 s.⁸⁴ According to Campbell, Ilam Singh was fifty years old in 1842, which means he was born around 1790.⁸⁵ He died in 1847.⁸⁶

The presence of a Limbu prime minister in those years, and in particular his name Ilam, is of interest in the present context: Ilam Singh's term as prime minister followed that of the Lepcha prime minister Bholö, who was assassinated in 1826 on order of the king of Sikkim.⁸⁷ This assassination led to the migration of hundreds of Lepcha to Ilam, where one of Bholö's sons had a landed estate. After the death of Ilam Singh, the son of the Bhutia minister who had ordered Bholö's murder became prime minister. Ilam Singh was thus prime minister in the intermediary period between the (temporary) fall of the pro-Lepcha faction and the return to power of the Bhutia group.⁸⁸ Did he come from Ilam, and, in this case, might he have had any connection with Bholö's descendants, given that Bholö's family remained influential in Sikkim even after the events following 1826?⁸⁹ Or was his name misspelled, or a mere coincidence?

6. Conclusion

In summary, as far as we can tell today, in the early history of the Sikkim kingdom, Limbu's status and participation in the Sikkim society has been determined by their resistance and, later, their loyalty, to the Sikkimese kings, by their local and clan affiliation, and, possibly, by their economic activities. The part taken by ethnicity has to be assessed in regard to the meaning then given to ethnicity: the categories in which Limbu were included seem to have been primarily categories of differentiation framed by

the Sikkimese Bhutia ruling elite, rather than defined by cultural specificity. Srijanga's activities suggest that a sense of pan-local community existed among Limbu, but he was also involved in a political struggle that did not merely concern the Limbu. Moreover, the Limbu involved in the kingdom were likely localised groups, either clans or localities, rather than a pan-local ethnic community.

However, whereas hereditary charges of tax collection were granted to the Limbu from the mid-eighteenth century, enabling the emergence of a Limbu landowning middle class, this Limbu aristocracy had responsibilities and land holdings of a different rank than those given to the Bhutia and Lepcha aristocracy: except for Ilam Singh Tsong, the highest rank Limbu reached in the state administration before the twentieth century was that of tax collection; for example, there have never been any Limbu landlord in Sikkim.

Limbu tax collectors – known as Mandal in recent times – had a central role in the struggle for access to specific political representation for the Limbu since the 1940s and for the protection of their cultural specificity. But before this time, Limbu were controlling land estates of lower size, had functions of intermediaries between small farmers and landlords rather than full control over the estates, and did not have leading political functions in the administration of the state. We argue that the troubled relation between the Limbu and the leading power in Sikkim in the early days of the kingdom continued to determine for long this subaltern form of political participation.

Notes

1. There are altogether about 700,000 Limbu, mostly residing in north-east Nepal, between the Arun and Mechi rivers (387,300 in Nepal, which represents 1.46% of the country's total population: *National Population and Housing Census 2011*). There are 56,650 Limbu in the Indian state of Sikkim (DESME, 32), including 34,292 Limbu speakers (*Linguistic Survey of India*).
2. Baruah, "Politics of Territoriality."
3. Cohen and Uphoff, "Participation's Place in Rural Development"; and Cornwall and Brock, "Beyond Buzzwords."
4. For a similar approach on the Rai community in Nepal, see Schlemmer, "Rai, Khambu, Subba, Kirant, etc. . . .". This work thus takes a parallel line to previous scholarship that has discussed the influence of ethnicity in political conflicts in Sikkimese history (Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*; and McKay, *The View from the Palace*; in a recent article, Mullard, 'Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History', shows that in early-19th-century, political conflicts in the kingdom were economic- and class-based, and therefore refutes their analysis in terms of ethnic determinism).
5. Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India*.
6. This paper approaches ethnic boundaries as historically constructed rather than 'primordial' (for a synthesis of this debate, see Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries").
7. Whereas until recently, the *History of Sikkim* – composed by the Sikkimese royal couple Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma in 1908, in a context that conditioned the content of the text (Steinman, "The opening of the sbas yul 'bras mo'i gshong according to the chronicle of the rulers of Sikkim"; Dorjee, 'Some issues in the early British construction of Sikkimese history', and Tsering, "A short communication about the 1908 'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs") – was the main primary source used by scholars, other Tibetan sources now available as well as their analyses provide a new insight into the history of Sikkim since the foundation of the kingdom (see in particular Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*; Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*; and "Recapturing Runaways, or Administration through Contract").

- Dhungel's work ("The Long-ago Fight for Kirant Identity") marked a similar shift in the knowledge of Limbu history.
8. For an argument in favour of breaking down the divides between 'native' or 'local'/'western' or 'foreign', observer/observed, and scholarly research/ethnic activism, produced in the colonial era, see Narayan, "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?"
 9. Oral tradition differs from oral history: the latter are narratives of direct witnesses to a past event (Schneider, *So They Understand*, 53–68), whereas oral tradition concerns the distant past.
 10. Schneider, *So They Understand*; and Tonkin, "Investigating Oral Tradition."
 11. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*.
 12. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act 2002 (No. 10 of 2003), published on 8 January 2003. The first demand from a Limbu organisation for recognition as tribal dates back to June 1976. For an history of Sikkimese Limbu's claim for tribal recognition, see Subba, *Politics of culture*; Khamdhak, "Struggle of Sikkimese Limboos"; and Vandenhelsken, "Politics of Ethnicity".
 13. The Sikkim Limboo Tamang Tribal Forum, founded in 2004 by the ex-minister Birbal Subba from Hee Gaon (founder of the Sikkim Limboo Action Committee for Tribal Forum in 1993); the Young Youth Society of Singpheng, founded in 1994; and the Limboo Tamang Voluntary Committee (LTVC), headed by Yehang Tsong.
 14. Gurung, *Sikkim*, 296–300.
 15. Dutta, "Tribal Seat Reservation Issue Rakes up Storm in Sikkim."
 16. The claim for LT seats reservation is also supported by the organisations which are part of the LTT JAC, such as the Limboo-Tamang Voluntary Committee (LTVC) (see Summit Times, "LTVC Reiterates Demand") and the Sikkim People's Alliance [SPA], <https://www.facebook.com/SLTTJAC>.
 17. This was supported by the previous Sikkim government, held by the Sikkim Democratic Front, which ruled Sikkim from 1994 to 2019.
 18. See the official website of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly: <http://www.sikkimassembly.org.in/Sikkim-Legislative-Assembly.html>.
 19. Ongmu, "Will Come to Power".
 20. Notification No. 945/Home, dated 27 March 2005.
 21. Pradhan, "Sikkim Summit about Restoring Lost Rights".
 22. According to Subba, this spelling of the term to refer to Indians citizens of Nepali origins is incorrect, and should be written 'Nepali' (Subba, "The Nepalīs in Northeast India," 56); it is however commonly used in Sikkim, generally as part of the label 'Sikkimese Nepalese'.
 23. See Ravidas, "Query on Chamling Quota Offer" for Details of their Argument, and Dutta, "Tribal Seat Reservation Issue Rakes up Storm in Sikkim", on the legal implications.
 24. About the struggle of the Indian Nepalīs for recognition of their distinct identity in India, see among others Dhakal "The Urge to Belong"; About the struggle of the Sikkimese Nepalīs, see Vandenhelsken, "Reification of Ethnicity in Sikkim"; Gurung, *Sikkim*; and Chettri, *Ethnicity and Democracy*.
 25. See Pradhan, *The Gorkha conquests*.
 26. Arora, "Assertive Identities, Indigeneity"; and Vandenhelsken, "Politics of Ethnicity".
 27. See McKay, "Indian Structures, Sikkimese Processes."
 28. Kratochwil, „The Politics of Place and Origins."
 29. For former discussions on this point for Sikkim in general, see Carrasco, *Land and Polity in Tibet*, 185–93; and Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 4.
 30. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 60–3, 82–3.
 31. La sogs rgyal rabs 1657, in Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 60–1.
 32. For an overview of the early administrative system in the years immediately preceding the foundation of the Namgyal kingdom, see Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 81, 153.
 33. Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*, 15, and, for a discussion about this, Mullard *Opening the Hidden Land*, 61 fn16, 81, 146.
 34. About the name Mön (tib. *mon*), see Pommaret, "The Mon pa Revisited."

35. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 62n24, 86n49, and 154.
36. *History of Sikkim*, annex 21.
37. *History of Sikkim*, 73, and annex 32. We should however consider the liberty taken by the translator Dawasamdub with the original Tibetan version of the text written by Namgyal and Dolma: these assimilations have to be attributed to the translator, rather than to the authors. As mentioned by McKay (this issue) a new edition of this text based on the original Tibetan version prepared by John Ardussi, Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, and Per K. Sørensen, is forthcoming (Serindia, Bangkok: 2020).
38. Regmi, *Kings and Political Leaders of the Gorkhali Empire*, 15.
39. This idea is consistent with Balikci's assumption that prior to the arrival of the British in the region, ethnicity was not the main marker of identity (*Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, 81–82).
40. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 145.
41. Tale told by Nanda Kumar Lepcha's father (then 70 years old) and K.B. Subba of Chindebhung to Buddhi L. Khamdhak in September 2003. A similar account is reported by Chemjong (*History and Culture of the Kirat People*) and Dahal (*Sikkimko Rājnitik Itihās*). However, these books do not mention the sources of their information. Parts of Dahal's translation and the interpretation of primary sources are fantasies, as shown by later re-translation of the same texts; regarding Chemjong's historical account, see Dhungel, "The Long-ago Fight for Kirant Identity"; and Pradhan, *The Gorkha conquests*, 52 and 98.
42. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 156.
43. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 145; and Mullard, "Regulating Sikkimese Society," 26.
44. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 84, 142.
45. See the list of signatories in Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 143.
46. Shingsa is the local name of Sankhusaba (see Jest, *Monuments of northern Nepal*, 16).
47. Das, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, 23.
48. History of Sikkim, 20.
49. 'TN' refers here to the *History of Sikkim*, authored by Namgyal and Dolma, and TN-a to the annex in the same book; 'M&W' refers to Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*.
50. West Sikkim, *Vandenhelsken Le monastère Bouddhique de Pemayangtse au Sikkim*; and "Les spécialistes de rituels bouddhiques *nyingmapa* de Pemayangtse."
51. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 152.
52. Risley, "History and Sikkim and its Rulers," 15; Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*; and Pradhan, *The Gorkha conquests*, 80.
53. Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*.
54. Mullard, "Regulating Sikkimese Society," 14.
55. "Regulating Sikkimese Society" 14, fn7.
56. Dhungel, "The Long-ago Fight for Kirant Identity"; and van Driem *Languages of the Himalayas*, vol. 2, 674–75. Srijanga Singthebe was from the Limbu clan Thebe and originally from Taplejung area (Dhungel, *Ibid*) or from Sinam-phangpe in Yangrok, according to an oral tradition reported by Subba (*The Limboos of the Eastern Himalayas*), and was, according to Vansittart (*Notes on Nepal*), a Limbu chief. About Srijanga, see also among others Risley, "History and Sikkim and its Rulers," 37; Sprigg, "Limbu Books in the Kiranti Script," 591; Subba, *Politics of culture*, 243; van Driem *Languages of the Himalayas*, vol. 2, 674–75; Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*; and Gaenszle, "Scripturalisation of Ritual in Eastern Nepal."
57. Mullard, "Regulating Sikkimese Society," 14.
58. PD/1.1/046 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 27; the date is unknown.
59. PD/1.1/003 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 16.
60. Carrasco, *Land and Polity in Tibet*, 44–45 and 90–91.
61. Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*, annex 23.
62. Vandenhelsken, *Le monastère Bouddhique de Pemayangtse au Sikkim*.

63. See original document and Nepali translation in Dahal, *Sikkimko Rājnitik Itihās*, 34; translation from Tibetan to English by Hissay Wongchuk.
64. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 156.
65. Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*, 24; about descendants of the Limbu wife of the second king, see also Mullard, “Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History, 375.
66. Namgyal and Dolma, *History of Sikkim*, 41.
67. Riskey, “History and Sikkim and its Rulers,” 16.
68. Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 143.
69. See PD/I.I/002 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 15. See also Mullard 2015.
70. PD/1.1/013 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 19.
71. PD/1.2/008 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 33.
72. The descendants of the Mandal shown this document and provided information to the authors of this article in Sombaria, 18 November 2018. The document was translated by Tsering Drongshar and Tsewang Gyatso, IKGa-Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna for this article. The document was issued in the Tumlong palace in the water bird year, very likely corresponding to 1873. There were at least two Limbu *mandal* in Sombaria, both from the Nembang Limbu clan.
73. In charge of revenue collection in the smallest territorial division, known as the ‘block’.
74. See Mullard, “Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History, 369 (including footnote 2). Pradhan argues that these privileges were given to the Limbu because the rebellion that triggered the organisation of the ‘Duma’ ‘was the result of the Limbu chiefs being deprived of their traditional privileges’ (*The Gorkha conquests*, 157).
75. *History of Sikkim*, 43.
76. The date mentioned in the document is the 24th day of the 11th month of the water dog year, which could either be 1742, 1802, or 1862; the original document is published in several local publications in Sikkim, including in Subba, *The Limboos of the Eastern Himalayas*, 95 and (translated in Nepali) in Dahal, *Sikkimko Rājnitik Itihās*, 34; it is however inaccurate to date this document from Phuntsok Namgyal’s coronation, as stated in the translation of this document in previous publications, since the water dog years preceding 1742 were 1622 and 1682, and Phuntsok Namgyal was officially enthroned in 1642 and died in 1670. We are grateful to Hissey Wongchuk Bhutia for his new translation of the document.
77. “Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History,” 369.
78. Ibid. Limbu were also involved in trade: see document PD/1.1/032 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 23, translated by Hissey Wongchuk Bhutia (Gangtok), Tsering Drongshar, and Tsewang Gyatso (Vienna); we are grateful to Tashi Densapa, director, and Anna Balicki, research coordinator, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, for giving us access to this text.
79. Mullard, “Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History,” 369.
80. Regarding Ilam Singh, see Campbell “On the Literature and Origin”; “Journal of a trip to Sikkim”; and “Note on the Limboo Alphabet of the Sikkim Himalaya”; Campbell’s correspondence with the Gov. of India in 1841 (SPA/CO/OF/021/072) and a note by T.H. Maddock in 1846 (and SPA/CO/OF/021/123), both in McKay, *The View from the Palace*; Jha, *History of Sikkim*, 8; Singh, *Himalayan Triangle*, 183–84; and PD/9.2/009 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 210. Pradhan (*The Gorkha conquests*, 159) refers to a mention of Ilam Singh in a report of a mission from Nepal to the east in the early years of the British settlement in Darjeeling (Bhaktawarsingh Bhandari to the Nepal Darbar, Nepal National Archives, Letter No. 149).
81. Campbell, “Journal of a Trip to Sikkim,” 483; Jha, *History of Sikkim*, 8; and Singh, *Himalayan Triangle*, 183–84.
82. Campbell, “On the Literature”; and “Note on the Limboo Alphabet.”
83. About Cheboo Lama, see Hooker, *Himalayan Journals*, vol. 2, 5.
84. PD/9.2/009 in Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 210. The ox year mentioned in the document could be the iron ox year, i.e., 1841, which is the ‘ox year’ closest to the events involving Ilam Singh, mentioned in the other sources, and before his death.

85. "On the Literature," 4.
86. Campbell, "Journal of a Trip to Sikkim," 483.
87. Regarding these events, see Basnet, *Sikkim*, 30–31; Singh, *Himalayan Triangle*: 176; Sprigg, "1826: An End of an era in the Social and Political History"; Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 9–10; Mishra, "Nepal-Sikkim Relations"; Mullard, "Recapturing Runaways"; and "Reading Ethnic Conflict".
88. Mullard, "Reading Ethnic Conflict in Sikkimese History".
89. Mullard and Wongchuk, *Royal Records*, 9–10.

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