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Sacred Economies of Kalimpong: The Eastern Himalayas in the Global Production and Circulation of Buddhist Material Culture

Abstract The eastern Himalayan region has long been associated with its commodities, including tea, timber, flowers, and tourism. However, as these commodities have ebbed and flowed with broader socio-political changes, one form of economy has remained constant: Kalimpong's sacred economies, based around its institutions and production and trade of sacred objects. This article will sketch out the contours of the materiality of Kalimpong's Buddhist material culture by outlining the processes of production and distribution attached to religious objects produced and procured in Kalimpong. The communities who participate in these networks of circulation and consumption are far from homogeneous, as manufacturers, merchants, and consumers are not always Buddhist; and Buddhists have eclectic tastes that are not always based on concepts of authenticity. Instead, ritual transformation is the key element that determines the function and value of an object, and new technologies that facilitate mass production and dissemination do not inevitably lead to the disappearance of the sacred. These key themes are highlighted through the study of the interaction between Buddhism, trade, and material consumption in this local setting, which is made possible by Kalimpong's key historical position as a center for cultural and economic exchange between empires and nations.

Introduction

A central element of the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism has been the commodification of Tibetan Buddhist material culture. In many ways, this “stuff” has transcended popular knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, as scholars have noted the way prayer flags, rosaries, and incense have been circulated in settings and spaces far beyond their originally intended audiences.¹ The connection between the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist material culture has historically been close, as even from the time of the Silk Road objects such as art works and ritual implements facilitated the spread of Buddhist ideas and the interaction with neighboring cultures (Foltz 1999). The potentials of material culture as a conduit for attaining Buddhist soteriological goals is actually not incongruous, given the historical role of efficacious relics and images in the Buddhist tradition.² However, what is more unusual is the removal of this material culture from its original context. As knowledge of Tibet developed around the world through British imperial incursion into the Himalayas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the Younghusband Expedition of 1904 and then beyond, objects were a central part of that knowledge. Clare Harris and Emma Martin have demonstrated how imperial and popular interest in Tibet led to the development of a collector community around Tibetan and Himalayan material culture, and how decontextualization has been a central trend in the development of these collections for colonial authorities, museums, and private collectors (C. Harris 2012, Martin 2014). The relationship between decontextualization and commodification is often assumed to be a natural, historical development that somehow undermines the authenticity of Tibetan Buddhist objects, rendering them mundane. David Morgan has recently argued that “the relations between sacred and ‘profane’ or non-religious economies can be volatile when the latter threatens to absorb the former,” and that when sacred and mundane economies “are made to overlap and complete” the result is “the evisceration of the sacred when the profit of commerce rivals the reward system of the indigenous community” (Morgan 2015, 390).

This essay will suggest an alternative pathway for understanding these processes, and that the inevitable result of the presence of two economies is not always evisceration, but instead can lead to technological innovation and new forms of religious expression and promulgation. I will explore this by looking back at sites of production and dissemination of Buddhist objects in order to explore the construction of efficacy around these forms of Tibetan Buddhist material culture, and look specifically at the site of Kalimpong as a center for the production and distribution of this material

1 For more on the popularization and commodification of Tibetan Buddhism, see Lopez 1998, Brauen 2004, Bishop 1993, Condon 2007, Joffe 2015 and Bentor 1993.

2 Studies of material culture in Buddhism include Schopen 1998, Strong 2004, and Tarocco 2011.

culture. Rather than suggest that these objects start off as efficacious and somehow are rendered mundane through their circulation through different consumer channels, or that mass production somehow makes them less efficacious, here I will follow assertions made by Arjun Appadurai and other scholars of material culture that spiritual authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, and that ultimately, objects become powerful based on the attitude of the people they interact with and their social life, rather than inherent attributes (Appadurai 1986). Tina Harris has recently demonstrated how Tibetan ritual scarves (*kha btags*) can only be understood through their social relationships, as “the meaning a scarf as at its consumption stage [when it is taken up by Buddhists] can be very different from its meaning during production,” which is often by non-Buddhists (T. Harris 2007, 189). I intend to follow up her work by tracing the production of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist objects such as prayer flags (*rlung rta*), statues (*sku*), and incense (*spos*), and considering along the way how these objects are created both socially as well as materially. However, rather than focus as she did on how these objects function as mediators of socio-cultural and religious meaning in a globalized setting, here I switch scales and consider the local by focusing on a center of production for Tibetan Buddhist objects, the eastern Himalayan town of Kalimpong, as an example of the influence of space and place on creating material culture. Kalimpong has historically functioned as an important contact zone between empires and thus as a key hub for trans-Himalayan trade. I will demonstrate how the different stages of Buddhist material production and dissemination in Kalimpong can contribute to our understanding of the processes around the creation of material efficacy, especially given Kalimpong’s particular geographical, historical and cultural position in the broader Himalayas.

Kalimpong as a center of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist material culture

Kalimpong is an especially salient site for the exploration of these topics due to its transcultural environment. In her classic work of postcolonial literary criticism, *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt discusses how certain spaces facilitate cross-cultural encounter and engagement through their position as contact zones where “peoples [who have been] geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict,” and thereby develop new tools such as language to negotiate the practicalities of encounter (Pratt 1992, 6–7). Positioned at a key point in the foothills between the Indian plains and the Himalayan states of Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, Kalimpong was a vivid example of such a contact zone, where Himalayan peoples met representatives of the British and Chinese empires and trade acted as an instigator for contact. Kalimpong’s insertion into global networks of commerce

did not come suddenly or as a rupture in the longer history of the area. The town had long functioned as a trade market for Himalayan communities to exchange commodities. In the nineteenth century, Kalimpong's importance increased as its proximity to the British leisure capital of Darjeeling and to the accessible cross-Himalayan passes of Nathu-la and Jelep-la led to its unprecedented exposure. It grew considerably in size and influence after 1904, when the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty signed between British imperial representative Younghusband and the Tibetan Government in Lhasa led to the opening of several trade markets to facilitate the circulation of British goods and Tibetan and Himalayan commodities into broader imperial trade networks. Kalimpong was especially known for its wool trade, but also as a center for the exchange of other Tibet-sourced items, such as furs, salt, musk, and borax, with global commodities brought through the routes of empire.³

Apart from circulating objects, these routes also circulated forms of cultural and ideological expression that was spread by scholars and intellectuals scholars and intellectuals who traveled along with or as traders. Religious propagation and trade have often operated in close conjunction in world history (Trivellato, Halevi and Antunes 2014),⁴ and the Himalayas were no exception. Markets were often situated close to, or even inside, Buddhist monasteries and temples, and traders often acted as important patrons and also as teachers and practitioners of different Buddhist institutions (van Spengen 2000, Hilker 2005, Wangmo 2005). Kalimpong and its close neighbor, Darjeeling, were both home to multiple Buddhist institutions, and despite the growth over time of a Christian missionary presence in the eastern Himalayas, these Buddhist institutions remained as important centers for the multiple ethnic groups in the region that practiced Buddhism, including the Lepcha, Bhutia, Bhutanese, Tibetans, Newari, Tamang, Gurung, and Rai, as well as many others (Bell 1905). The towns became part of broader pilgrimage circuits, especially as Bodh Gaya and other sites associated with the historical Buddha re-emerged as pilgrimage centers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Huber 2008).

A common practice among pilgrims in the broader Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist world was the collection of objects on their travels to either take home to add to their household shrines, or to donate as a source of merit to institutions along the way. These objects constituted examples of "supports" (*rten*) in Tibetan Buddhism that act as material signifiers of Buddhist ideology and are therefore "tangible supports that facilitate the practice of Tibetan Buddhism" (C. Harris 2012, 18). Europeans in Kalimpong, including British representatives, were attracted to Buddhist objects as representations of their developing interests in Tibetan and Himalayan

3 For more on Kalimpong's centrality as a trade center connecting Asia with the world, see Arora 2008 and T. Harris 2013.

4 See Turner and Turner 1978, 20 for more on connections between commerce and pilgrimage.

culture, rather than for their soteriological purpose (C. Harris 2012). To respond to this new European demand, several merchants in Kalimpong started to deal in religious art and objects, which fostered the type of intersections Pratt has argued are at the center of what she has termed a contact zone by bringing together “subjects previously separated by geography and history [...that through interaction become] co-present,” with material culture acting as the point she refers to where these groups “now intersect” (Pratt 1992, 8).

Initially, traders sourced their religious items from centers elsewhere, such as the Kathmandu Valley, where Newar artisans were specialists in metalwork statues and ritual implements. Over time, it became more financially feasible for Newar merchants to relocate their workshops to Kalimpong, either for a season or permanently, and this led to the opening of other production centers for sought-after items (Hilker 2005). Tibetan traders began to move down to Kalimpong following the deteriorating political situation with China in the 1940s, and also established production centers for incense and other items such as noodles.⁵

Trade for some of the commodities that had been sought after in Kalimpong, such as wool, was heavily impacted by changes in international politics in the 1950s, the Cold War, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962. However, these production centers remained in business, along with many other producers and merchants of popular forms of material culture, including ritual offering scarves, prayer flags, silk brocade *thangkha* frames, ritual implement covers and shrine decorations, monastic clothing, and books. Many of these latter items are not produced or imported by Buddhists at all, but instead by members of other communities, especially Indian Marwaris and Biharis who moved to Kalimpong in the late nineteenth century in search of new economic opportunities (Bell 1905, Majumder 2005). These communities have been highly astute in their development of new business ventures related to religion, especially in response to gaps in the market following the closing of the Tibetan border and following the development of new technologies.

The participation of non-Buddhist communities in the production and dissemination of Buddhist material culture and in Kalimpong trade has been noted already by Harris (T. Harris 2007 and 2013, 14). Here, Kalimpong’s unique transcultural environment has contributed to an especially lively, varied trade over the past century marked by an inter-religious cooperation and collaboration that challenges assumptions about the unidirectional flow of commodification. In this way, the makers and distributors of these objects contributed to the transcultural environment of Kalimpong by interacting with the demands of their market and context through invention and selection “from materials submitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” Pratt argues that this was a far from passive process and granted

5 Thondup and Thurston 2015 recounts the establishment of a popular noodle production business.

local actors flexibility and the power to “talk back” to empire (Pratt 1992, 7). In Kalimpong, local producers of religious items responded directly to local and global consumers by using new technologies to manufacture older products, and they continue to do so, not least by creating new products or changing existing ones. Another clear instance of this occurs when ritual transformation is incorporated into the production process by merchants, thus adding uniquely local elements to the global manufacture and trade in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist objects and illustrating the complex construction of transculturality in a local setting. In order to demonstrate these processes, I will now outline case studies highlighting the circumstances around the production and distribution of Buddhist material goods in present day Kalimpong, with a consideration of the historical development and dynamism of these production processes.

PRODUCTION

A conspicuous element of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist culture in the hills of the eastern Himalayas are prayer flags. These take the form of long strips of cotton that are covered in images of horses (their Tibetan name *rlung rta* literally means “wind horse”), deities, Tibetan-language prayers, and *mantra*, and are mounted on long pieces of bamboo; or they may be smaller pieces of cloth that are attached to strings and tied to trees, or the fronts of buildings, or are even strung up inside car windows. Prayer flags represent an important element of Buddhist material culture in that they are automated prayer accumulators and distributors; the original purchaser of the flags accumulates merit for themselves by mounting them, but also assists others because the prayer flags carry blessings through the wind, and they therefore are believed to represent the interconnectedness of all beings. The colors they come in—most commonly red, blue, green, yellow, and white—represent the elements (Karmay 1998). Historically, the images printed on prayer flags were printed with woodblocks⁶ on cheap cloth that would naturally degrade over time. This was convenient because they were intended to be hoisted on high in hard to reach places and thus if they naturally degraded over time they did not need to be taken down again. They were put in high places in order to carry prayers on the wind more effectively at the time of New Year (*lo gsar*), or for individual ceremonies for health or prosperity.

In the eastern Himalayas, prayer flags were produced at home or in monasteries. Cotton and wood blocks were brought at the market in Kalimpong. The wood blocks were first carved by artisans and subsequently sold on to other village markets. They were then circulated around villages and within families. Ink was produced from black soil (*sa nag*), which was ground together with burned rice into a powder. The powder was made

6 Woodblock printing in the Tibetan language dates from at least the twelfth century, see Schaeffer 2009, 9.

into a paste with water, and painted onto the wood block, which was then pressed onto the cotton. Printing needed at least two people to manipulate the wood block. The flags were then mounted on long pieces of local bamboo. Printing one hundred and eight flags for ceremonies could take up to a week of work, and if people did not have the labor or resources, they could give offerings to their local monastery and the ritual practitioners could make flags for them (Bhutia 2015).

In the 1960s, new technologies emerged that would make prayer flag production faster and less labor intensive. Block printing needed time and specialized skills, and final prints were not always clear, especially as blocks deteriorated with age. A financially viable and easy alternative emerged with the increased popularity of screen-printing, which developed around this time from being an artistic practice into a commercial enterprise. Screen-printing employs stencils and ink for quickly reproducing images with fine borders and detail on a mass level, and from the 1960s onwards mechanized screen-printing made production even easier (Lengwiler 2013). In India, these technologies were introduced for producing women's *saris* in Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai). In Kalimpong, Mr. Anjani Kumar, an enterprising Bihari merchant based in Kalimpong saw the speed and detail that screen-printing could achieve. Noticing a market for conveniently available prayer flags among local Buddhists, in 1975 he ordered stencils to be made from woodblock prints and employed local women to produce prayer flags and ritual scarves on a grand scale and had them marketed by his business Zambhala Traders. His production workshop is still operating, and is located in a multi-storied, concrete building along Ninth Mile. Today, the shop front of Zambhala Traders is filled with prayer flags of multiple sizes, as well as other local products such as ritual scarves. The printing workshop takes up two levels upstairs and employs between fifteen to twenty workers. The prayer flags the workshop produces include assorted images, such as longer flags of Tara (*Sgrol ma*) images and prayers and shorter pieces of cloth for wind horses. The ritual scarves are more varied in appearance, as in recent years Mr. Kumar has started to produce custom-made ritual scarves for tourism companies in Bhutan (figure 1).

The terrace at the top of the building is where the women work printing the fabric. On the level below there are two rooms: one with large spindle for rolling the long strips of fabric into bales after they are printed; and a second where Mr. Kumar and several men sort and tie up bundles of flags and scarves for sale and transport to other stores in Kalimpong and the nearby areas of North Bengal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. The women on the terrace work in teams of two or three spreading out long rolls of fabric, holding the stencil in place on the fabric, and applying the ink to the stencil before lifting it away, leaving a clear black image. The location on the terrace was chosen so as to use natural sunlight and dry the fabric more quickly; it can take several hours, and the rolls need to be stretched out so that the acrylic ink does not stick the fabric together. The women come from nearby areas of Kalimpong and represent a number of different ethnic and



Figure 1: Screen-printing prayer flags.

caste communities. Mr. Kumar notes that they are experts in producing prints quickly and can do up to forty long prayer flags for bamboo poles a day, even while keeping an eye on their young children who play on the terrace around their mothers. The workshop closes on rainy days and during the monsoon, as there is nowhere else with enough space for drying the long rolls. Defective prints lie scattered about on the terrace and downstairs in the bundling room. An automated screen printer lies broken in the corner. Mr. Kumar says finding the parts to fix it proved difficult in the hills, and so he went back to the manual system. His venture is highly successful, to the extent that he plans to retire and has left the company to his son, Suroj. Suroj is uncertain about the future of the venture, stating that new mass-printed flags from China are edging out the market, and that the time-consuming and messy nature of production leads him to wonder about its future practicality. Despite these issues, the Kumar family has a strong reputation in the Buddhist community in Kalimpong and beyond. Although he is not Buddhist, several Taiwanese patrons started to refer to Mr. Kumar as “Lama” due to the merit they felt he had acquired through his work. After over forty years in business, Mr. Kumar’s own interests have also turned to religion, as he intends to move to a site associated with Tantric geomancy in Assam after he retires (Kumar 2015). This workshop serves as a demonstration of a practical form of transculturality on the ground in Kalimpong, because members of different communities interact in the production and consumption of items produced there. Additionally,

the technologies used in the workshop, which have been adapted to the varying demands of the market over time, also illustrate the dynamism of this religious market, with new technologies such as screen-printing being eagerly accepted, and in fact preferred to traditional modes of woodblock printing as a result of its practicality.

A notable feature of the Zambhala workshop is the presence of tattered and torn prayer flags lying on the ground and underfoot. Buddhists have strong beliefs in the power of printed words and images (Schaeffer 2009), and avoid stepping on or casting away objects featuring pictures of deities and prayers, and prefer to ritually burn them. The attitude of the producers of the prayer flags demonstrates that at the point of production, these are pieces of printed cloth that are to be marketed. How do they become conveyers of prayer, then? What leads to this change in value? The change in the prayer flags from printed cloth lying in bales to powerful prayers entails a transformation of status that is more complex than simply their purchase by a Buddhist who believes in their efficacy.

TRANSFORMATION

This transformation is brought about through a ritual process known as consecration (*rab gnas*), where ritual practitioners visualize and then invite Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to infuse themselves and objects with their blessings (*byin rlabs*) in a vivid invocation of the central Buddhist tenant of non-duality (Bentor 1996, xix). The presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is then sealed into objects, which may be statues, stupas, or temples, making them indivisible and capable of producing and transmitting the original blessings of the same deities (Tulku and Perrott 1985, 37). The idea of a space or object acting as a home to a ritually invoked deity is part of broader South Asian ritual traditions. Closely related is the idea of visiting a shrine as an act of *darśana*, whereby a worshipper visits an image of a deity with the belief that the image contains the actual deity, and by visitation devotees are seeing the deity and the deity in turn sees them (Eck 1998, 3). Buddhist supports (*rten*) have similar ideas attached to them, such that through consecration the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas come to be present in the object or image. Consecration is what transforms prayer flags from strips of cloth on the floor of a print shop to sacred objects capable of communicating prayers.

In the case of other types of sacred objects on sale in Kalimpong, another step is necessary to prepare an object for ritual transformation. This step is the insertion of sacred substances, such as relics, *mantras*, and medicinal herbs, into the objects. These substances are known as *zung* (*gzung*, Bentor 1996, xxi), and their preparation involves a specialized skill set that includes not only practical knowledge of how to make and prepare *zung*, but also ritual knowledge. Objects are often manufactured with this requirement in mind; for example, statues are made with hollow gaps in them to allow for the insertion of *zung*, and the back of *thangkha* and other

artworks are printed with sacred syllables to give life to their represented deity. When Buddhists purchase or donate an object for a shrine, it is crucial to have *zung* prepared and the object consecrated before it can be installed for purposes of propitiation. At times, stores and manufacturers will have *zung* prepared and added directly to objects before their sale; alternatively, purchasers will take the responsibility themselves, though in both instances, the consecration takes place after the sale and is the responsibility of the new owner.⁷

Obtaining *zung* is not straightforward. While some lamas and ritual specialists who perform consecration ceremonies may keep *zung* on hand, the preparation of *zung* is considered a specialized skill. As mentioned earlier, Kalimpong is a meeting place for many Himalayan Buddhist communities. Its position as a manufacturing hub (discussed above) and trade center (discussed below) means lower prices for sought-after religious goods. While historically people could have procured *zung* after purchasing their goods from their home religious institution, as a result of current demand, in contemporary Kalimpong several *zung* specialists are resident in the town who are approached by manufacturers, merchants, and new owners to make *zung* for their ritual objects. The best-known local *zung* master at present is Lama Jamyang (Bla ma 'jam dbyangs), who lives in the neighborhood of Thongsa Gompa, the Bhutanese monastery that is believed to be the oldest in the area, dating to the seventeenth century. Lama Jamyang, who is now in his eighties, speaks flawless Central Tibetan, as well as several other languages, and is a *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*, Tantric practitioner) who originally moved from Bumthang (Bum thang) in Bhutan to Kalimpong in around 1965. He came especially to study under the famed Tibetan lama Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdral Yeshe Dorje (Bdud 'joms 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje, 1904–1987), who settled in Kalimpong after he fled Tibet following the Chinese takeover. Many students of the Nyingma tradition flocked to Kalimpong during this period so as to study under this widely regarded teacher. Lama Jamyang originally lived at Madupala, where Dudjom Rinpoche had been given land, and it was there that he began to study the art of preparing *zung*. As Yael Bentor has noted, there is a close relationship in Tibetan Buddhist educational systems between ritual expertise and meditation (Bentor 1996, xviii–xix). While staying at Madupala, he not only studied meditation but also learnt about Buddhist art and painting, and how to prepare the different elements of *zung*.

There are several different parts in the process of creating Lama Jamyang's *zung*. The inclusion of mantras, *dhāraṇī*, and prayers are important, and Lama Jamyang originally used to write these out in black ink on long strips of white paper which he would then paint with saffron and water

7 The tradition of *zung* preparation and consecration is an ancient one; see Bentor 1996 for a discussion of potential histories of *zung* and its development. According to my interviews, Kalimpong merchants have arranged for local ritual specialists to prepare *zung* for as long as there have been specialty stores selling these items.

and either roll into small, tightly-spun wheels, or fold into squares. These prayers are directed to different deities, depending on the statue and, at times, the motivation of the patron. Along with these prayers, he would also draw out different diagrams featuring deities and astrological figures, which were then folded and bound together with red, yellow, and green string. These pieces of paper could be quite large (up to 60 cm x 60 cm), but could be folded into very small bundles. Medicinal pills of varying sizes, known as *rilbu* (*ril bu*) or *mani rilbu* (*mani ril bu*) that are believed to be able to transmit *chinlap* (usually translated as “blessings”) are also included in *zung*. Making these pills is a very time-consuming process, involving grinding up herbs and precious substances, mixing them, and using cloth or machines to work them into balls.⁸ These pills have often already been consecrated and undergone different empowerment ceremonies (*dbang*) performed by respected ritual masters, and are associated with good health and longevity (hence Barbara Gerke’s reference to them as “long-life pills” or Jürgen C. Aschoff and Tashi Yanphel Tashigang’s term “jewel pills” in Gerke 2011, 233 and Aschoff and Tashigang 2004.) Other items may also be added to *zung*, including relics from powerful masters, precious substances (especially turquoise and coral, and at times gold and silver), as well as uncooked rice, jewelry, and coins. After the preparation of internal parts of the *zung*, the item to be consecrated sometimes needs further external preparation. This is particularly true of statues. Lama Jamyang is also responsible for painting faces on to the statue along with other elements including hair, jewelry, and clothing. This is understood as part of the consecration process, so it is not done at the time of production. The eyes are especially important, as it is believed that once they are painted in, the deity may take residence in the statue. For this reason, after Lama Jamyang has completed the *zung* preparation, he ties cotton wool on to the face of the statue to act as a blindfold, only to be undone by the consecrating master.

Lama Jamyang’s *zung* preparation has been developed from a long lineage of specialists. However, the introduction of new technologies over time has made the entire process faster and easier. This is especially so for prayers, which Lama Jamyang used to have to written out in painstaking detail. This was very challenging when it came to smaller statues and objects, for which he would have to make small (under 5 cm) tall rolls of prayers on which he would write as many prayers as he could fit. Now, with photocopying, he can easily replicate prayers and mantras, altering their size and gluing them together. Tibetan word processing programs have also meant that he no longer has to write out the prayers himself. He now also uses enamel paints (developed for model enthusiasts) instead of older, homemade paint, which was time-consuming and expensive to make on account of the precious stones that had to be ground up to produce the desired color (figure 2).

8 For more on the process of making these pills, see Saxer 2013, 59–94.



Figure 2: Photocopied *mantra* for preparation of *zung* with statues that have already had *zung* inserted into the base.

Lama Jamyang's workshop is situated on the first floor of his home, directly beneath a large shrine room, so patrons can easily bring in larger statues for *zung* preparation. There is a constant demand for his work, so he and his son now work together to prepare rolls of prayers in advance, which are stored in old Centerfruit Chewing Gum containers. The shelves of the workshop are stacked with enamel paint in a dazzling variety of colors, and jars of small jewels that are glued onto the crowns and headbands of statues. Tools are scattered around the room. On one wall of the workshop is a shelf groaning under the weight of finished orders, ranging from small, simple household statues of Guru Rinpoche, the Buddha and Avalokiteśvara, to large, elaborate versions of Jambhala ('Dzam bha la), the popular God of Wealth. People will often drop off the statues and return several days later to collect them; but sometimes Lama Jamyang will take care of statues for months before patrons collect them from further afield. Lama Jamyang sees his work as a natural extension of his meditation practice, and rarely takes a break apart from occasional pilgrimages. He is happy to know that his son will continue these traditions, as machine-made *zung*, he says, are simply not the same as those made by hand (Jamyang 2015). Texts on consecration often outline the ideal characteristics of the presiding practitioner, emphasizing that apart from ritual and meditative expertise, the preparer should be "stable, calm and wise" (Tulku and Prescott 1985, 35). Lama Jamyang does indeed have these characteristics. However,

his experience is also important for what it illustrates about the dynamism of the ritual elements of Buddhist material culture production. His move to Kalimpong and initial study of sacred arts were precipitated by new cycles of Buddhist migration into the area, and specifically, political events that led Tibetan teachers like Dudjom Rinpoche to settle in Kalimpong. This led to new opportunities for skill acquisition, but also heightened demand for these skills. Additionally, new technologies have led his work to expand beyond Kalimpong's local setting as his ritually prepared objects are sold through global chains of Buddhist commerce by stores in Kalimpong with trans-Himalayan and international customers.

DISTRIBUTION

Once religious objects have been prepared for consecration, they are taken to ritual specialists for the ceremony. As mentioned above, patrons will either take the responsibility of having the objects filled with *zung* themselves, or buy them ready to be consecrated. Many storeowners in Kalimpong have close connections with specialists such as Lama Jamyang as a result of the well-established traditions around buying sacred articles. The oldest store that stocks religious objects in Kalimpong is Norlha, located at Tenth Mile on Rishi Road. Housed in the front of one of the old stores that remain scattered throughout Kalimpong's market, Norlha's history dates back to the early twentieth century, when an enterprising Agrawal trader from Haryana arrived to take part in the opening of Kalimpong for trade. The store moved to its current location in the 1950s (Agrawal 2015). Initially, Norlha stocked specialties brought from surrounding areas to trade with muleteers from Tibet. However, over time the managers started to pick up religious items from manufacturers based throughout the Himalayas, noting the demand from trading families for specialized goods. Eastern Tibetan traders, for example, wanted the finest Newar-produced statues from the Kathmandu Valley, while local Bhutanese and Sikkimese residents of Kalimpong needed a place to purchase wood block prints for prayer flag manufacturing in their villages. Norlha stocked it all, and today continues to have a huge variety of different religious goods, including statues, *thangkhas*, and ritual items (including bells, drums, cymbals, and monastic horns). The current managing family includes, Mr. Sandip Agrawal, who is the descendant of the original managers and procures goods for his store directly from the manufacturers, who are based throughout Kalimpong and further afield in South Asia, China, and Hong Kong. He keeps different versions of the same items from different parts of the Himalayas as they often vary in quality, so customers may choose between different items based according to their budget. Customers come from as far away as Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh to procure items from Norlha because of the wide range of choices (Agrawal 2015). Many nearby areas, such as Sikkim and Bhutan, rely on Norlha to provide bulk goods for local stores and monasteries (figure 3).



Figure 3: The front of Norlha Store, Tenth Mile, Kalimpong.

The store has always stocked a variety of mundane objects, too, including tea and in the past wool, and today steaming pots for making *momo* (*mog mog*). The rationale for such eclectic products comes from the desire to position Norlha as a one-stop shop for traders with limited time. Norlha continues to be popular for this reason with Tibetan traders who transport goods over Nathu-la Pass, which has been opened intermittently since 2006.⁹ *Momo* steamers are a popular mundane item, along with other religious objects. These are among the few items that are allowed to be exported from India through the Pass. The list of allowable items is currently very short, containing only twenty-nine objects that are mostly food products and utensils. However, clothes, herbal products, and copper articles are included, which may be interpreted liberally to encompass religious objects. From China, the list is even more restrictive, only containing fifteen different items that are mostly animal products, including historical favorites such as wool, yak hair and tails, and also borax (Sikkim Industries, 2). However, the Chinese list also includes raw silk, which is widely sought after for high quality ritual scarves, throne covers, and ritual garments. The manager also recently established a website for Norlha which will enable his objects to travel even further afield (Norlha website, 2015).

While these objects may be obtained more easily through the Internet, this new development will continue older trends in Kalimpong of religious objects passing into the hands of non-Buddhists. While the owners of Norlha are Hindu, they have longstanding ties and networks of trust with Buddhists that lead them to be respected locally. They offer services such as arranging for *zung* and consecration, and are careful in their presentation of religious materials so as not to contravene Buddhist beliefs; for instance, no goods are stored on the floor. However, historically the store has attracted tourists and collectors, and while tourism in Kalimpong

9 T. Harris 2013 provides an overview of the circumstances around this re-opening.

is still low key after the disruption that resulted from the end of trade in the 1960s and the Gorkha agitation in the 1980s (Subba 1992 and Lama 1996), its gradual resurgence has meant that once again, collectors dare to travel to Kalimpong. Norlha is some distance away from the main bazaar, and Mr. Agrawal says that tourists form a minority in his customer base. For those who do venture down Rishi Road, Norlha also stocks items for tourists, as well as for “intermediate audiences.” In her important article on tourist *thangkhas* and the commodification of Tibetan Buddhist material culture in Kathmandu, Yael Bentor identified this audience as being made up of two groups, who are neither “internal” to the tradition nor “external,” that is, complete outsiders. The first group in the intermediate audience consists of Buddhists from other parts of Asia. The second is made up of “non-Tibetans who have in varying degrees adopted the Tibetan style of Buddhism, along with some attendant aspects of Tibetan culture” (Bentor 1993, 113). Kalimpong is a popular site to visit for these groups as it is on the way to other major Buddhist centers and is the residence of famous international teachers in Sikkim and Bhutan. It is also home to several of these centers, most notably the monastery at Durpin Dara, Zangdrok Palri (Zangs mdog dpal ri), established by Dudjom Rinpoche in the 1960s.

For the external audience described by Bentor, there are a number of shops in the bazaar that sell mass produced items, as well as more touristy items, such as postcards and velvet paintings of tea plantations and the mountains. These stores are often more affordable than Norlha as they stock mass-produced items sourced from Kathmandu and China. Among the more popular items are plastic prayer wheels (*ma ni*), both manual and solar-powered. The latter are used in vehicles, and have become popular in the hills among Buddhist and non-Buddhist vehicle owners alike. This popularity has led Norlha to stock some of these items. Their spread and their acceptance by multiple consumer communities for their novelty value and convenience demonstrates the blurring between “authentic” items for internal audiences and cheap souvenirs for external audiences. The distribution of these goods through traditional networks, such as those participated in by Norlha, as well as through souvenir and gift shops, also disrupts straightforward categorization of sacred or profane networks of commerce. Additionally, while the situation outlined here is contemporary, Kalimpong has a long history of these forms of transaction, as demonstrated by its influential position in trans-Himalayan trade networks and as a hub for global collectors of the Himalayas from at least the late nineteenth century (Harris 2012; Martin 2014). Ultimately, consumers of sacred items in Kalimpong continue to determine the sanctity of an object as users of these objects, rather than some inherent value derived from locations of production or distribution.

Conclusions

The eastern Himalayas have long been a region associated with commodities and trade. Darjeeling is synonymous with tea, even for consumers around the world who cannot locate it on a map; Sikkim has for at least a century been the world's leading producer of large cardamom, a key cooking spice; and the flowers that colored the valleys and gorges of the area are now found all around the world in the market for exotic plant species. With the decline in trade after the 1960s, Kalimpong and the region appeared likewise to have declined. However, other economies have continued to flourish. While Tina Harris noted that local entrepreneurs stressed the potential for items such as noodles, ginger, and oranges (T. Harris 2013, 98), Kalimpong has another economic base that has long been strong but is often overlooked. The sacred economies of Kalimpong may apparently be best represented by the diversity of religious institutions in its winding streets and the abundance of local festivals. But Kalimpong's trade networks have also been historically enriched by smaller, more transportable forms of sacred economy in the form of the Buddhist material culture that has been produced and distributed through networks in Kalimpong from the late nineteenth century to the present. Prayer flags, incense, and astrological charts are all produced in Kalimpong; other items, such as statues and ritual implements, are procured there in bulk for distribution further afield. The communities that participate in these networks of circulation and consumption have historically been examples of transculturality as they have been far from homogeneous, since manufacturers, merchants, and consumers have not always been Buddhist; and Buddhists have eclectic tastes that have not always been based around concepts of authenticity. Instead, ritual transformation is the key element that has influenced the function and value of an object. This paper has been a snapshot of how this sacred economy appears at this particular point in time; but through patterns of migration, trade, and interaction that have shaped Kalimpong's demography, this economy has also changed, and with the emergence of new technologies of production and dissemination, this economy is far from static. The circulation of sacred economies in the location of Kalimpong demonstrates the eminently negotiable and adaptable nature of religious efficacy in material form, and the way that contact zones contribute to these adaptations and negotiations.

Figures

Fig. 1, 2: Photo by author, Kalimpong, India, July 2015.

Fig. 3: Photo by author, Kalimpong, India, July 2016.

Archival sources

- The Tharchin Collection: diverse material acquired from the Tharchin family, held at C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University. This includes an online archive of many issues of the Mélong newspaper; accessed August 13, 2016: (http://library.columbia.edu/locations/eastasian/special_collections/tibetan-rare-books---special-collections/tharchin.html).

Interview partners

Informal interviews were conducted in July and August, 2015.

- Mr. Sandip Agrawal, owner and manager of Norlha Store, Kalimpong.
- Dr. Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia, scholar of Sikkimese Buddhism.
- Mr. Anjani Kumar and Mr. Saroj Kumar, owners and managers of Zambhala Traders, Kalimpong.
- Lama Jamyang, ritual specialist and artist, Kalimpong.

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