Cleansing the Sacred Habitat in the Time of Coronavirus: Buddhist *Sang* Rituals in Sikkim in Response to the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic

Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia

Summary

The *Riwo Sangchö* (the Mountain Incense Smoke Offering) is a Buddhist smoke offering ritual associated with purification that has become popular in response to the coronavirus in west Sikkim, India in 2020. Inspired by the mountainous landscape, the incense at the center of this ritual appeases local spirits and in turn ensures their protection. The incense itself is made from widely available medicinal plants that are sourced from local forests. The popularity of the ritual represents the continued efficacy of historical traditions that have adapted to the new challenges brought by the pandemic.

Since the beginning of the global spread of Covid-19, religious organizations have rapidly adapted to the challenges of a socially distanced world. Religious institutions have incorporated new technologies including Zoom, WeChat, and WhatsApp into their daily activities to allow their communities to continue to access rituals, teachings, and support networks. In the northeast Indian Himalayan state of Sikkim, scarcity and irregularity of Internet access made online substitutions for religious practice challenging for Buddhist communities in the mountains and valleys of the West District. The monasteries that were normally the center of religious life there were emptied, and their teachers sent out messages through Facebook encouraging people to pray at home.

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A *sang* offering underway in a domestic *Sangbum* in Gyalshing, west Sikkim.

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Local communities responded by drawing on historical traditions. Since May 2020, when the first coronavirus cases appeared in the state in quarantine facilities, a very popular prayer in the villages of west Sikkim has been the *Riwo Sangchö* (or in English, the *Mountain Incense Smoke Offering*). This prayer is representative of a type of ritual known as *sang* in areas through the Himalayas, Inner, and East Asia where forms of Buddhism connected to Tibet are practiced. *Sang*, rendered as incense or fumigation, is an ancient form of ritual on the Tibetan plateau and in surrounding areas, and is especially associated with purification of ritual pollution (or *grib* as it is known in Bhutia and Tibetan languages). This association is because of the pervasiveness of smoke in and beyond form, and its ability to pervade space, far beyond the initial location where the incense offering is burnt.

Sang is practiced around the world in Tibetan, Himalayan, and Inner Asian Buddhist communities, but west Sikkimese Buddhist communities consider themselves to have a special relationship with the *Riwo Sangchö*. This special relationship comes from its history as the ritual that was "recovered" from the landscape of Sikkim by the seventeenth-century Tibetan yogi Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme (1597–1650/1654). Local history recalls that

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Lhatsun was inspired to visit Sikkim due to visions that invoked his past life connections to Guru Rinpoche, a famous saint who is held to have promulgated Buddhism in Tibet and the Himalayas in the eighth century CE. Guru Rinpoche left a prophecy that Sikkim was a Hidden Land (in Tibetan, *beyul*) that was especially set aside to act as a safe haven for Buddhist practitioners in times of need. Lhatsun was one of a number of Tibetan visionaries connected to the lineage of Guru Rinpoche who traveled to Sikkim and revealed teachings the Guru had left behind from the landscape. This landscape was conceived of as a sacred habitat for human, animal, and supernatural residents. The teachings revealed by Guru Rinpoche's followers, which include *Riwo Sangchö*, became the basis for Sikkimese Buddhism.

Local healers and lamas have historically used the *Riwo Sangchö* as a form of cleansing fumigation in times of airborne illness and in locations where illness is treated and there has been death. This is due to the belief that illness, death, and ritual pollution are generated by elemental disbalance between human bodies and their surrounding space, which is populated by nonhumans including deities resident throughout the landscape in the mountains, rivers, rocks, and trees. Medical and ritual intervention, including *sang*, assists in healing this disbalance. When it is burned in *sang* burners known as *sangbum* above people's homes on roofs and hills, *sang* is seen to cleanse the sacred habitat and pervade throughout the universe.

In the case of *Riwo Sangchö*, the association between the offering and cleansing is derived from the ingredients of *sang*. The incense that is offered is made by local villagers from food and medicinal plants that are widely available in the forests around the villages of west Sikkim. Traditionally, 108 materials were used, including ground juniper and pine. While the use of these resources points to extractive economies that have shaped Buddhism historically, more importantly, rituals such as *Riwo Sangchö* provide outlets that aspire to multispecies and multidimensional flourishing, even if those aspirations are not always realized.

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Kanchendzonga, the mountain deity protector of Sikkim

Photograph by Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia

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Indeed, the sacred habitat of Sikkim has changed drastically since the time of Lhatsun's visit. While in recent decades, Sikkim has been marketed by the State government as "green" and organic due to its rich biodiversity, the same government has embarked on environmentally exploitative hydroelectric and infrastructural projects. Recent disasters, such as landslides and earthquakes, have been interpreted by Buddhist and other Sikkimese communities as reflections of the concern, anger, and subsequent disappearance of the local spirits of the land in response to human hubris and the generation of unfavorable karmic circumstances.

Coronavirus is understood to be an imported virus, and due to its global spread is not easily, or fairly, interpreted as a signal of local morality or ritual pollution. Instead, it has been devastating to the local economy that is reliant on tourism. According to texts left by Lhatsun, humans born in the Hidden Land will be heroes and heroines, capable of extraordinary, enlightened feats. Coronavirus should not be able to take root in such an enchanted sacred habitat. However, it has, and in late 2020, case numbers are still rising. The *Riwo Sangchö* has continued to provide a means for Sikkimese Buddhist communities to cleanse and protect the land and its seen and unseen inhabitants, and reinvigorate positive forces in the state and around the world. This is not to say that *Riwo Sangchö* is understood as a cure for or as capable of warding off the coronavirus. In west Sikkim, the ritual is being used to complement social distancing, mask-wearing, and medical treatment to respond to the pandemic as a form of spiritual support. The practice of *Riwo Sangchö* points to the continued efficacy and meaning local communities draw from historical ritual traditions to respond to new challenges brought by the pandemic.

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Related links:

- Sikkim Covid-19 Centralized Information System
  https://www.covid19sikkim.org/
- Text and translation of Mountain Incense-Smoke Offering
  https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/lhatsun-namkha-jigme/riwo-sangcho
- "Histories of Central Himalayan Herbs: *Vanaspati Karyalaya* in Tehri Princely State c. 1879–1950." *Arcadia*, 2020.
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