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DECOLONISING SIKKIMESE BHUTIA LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION: THE JOURNEY FROM COLONIAL REPRESENTATION TO REVIVAL AND RECLAMATION

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Abstract

Sikkimese Bhutia language is spoken by around 30,000 people in the contemporary northeast Indian state of Sikkim. Historically, the cultural and linguistic ties between Tibet and Sikkim led Western scholars to frame Sikkimese Bhutia as a gateway language for studying Tibetan. In the twentieth century, linguists represented it as an endangered language. However, the rise of the Internet in Sikkim has fostered alternative forms of cultural production, where Sikkimese Bhutia has been revived and reclaimed in Sikkimese communities, as Sikkimese Bhutia writers and scholars have rejected colonial and Tibetan models and embraced local approaches to the making of decolonised identities.

Keywords: Sikkimese Bhutia language, language reclamation, language education, cultural production, Internet culture, Sikkim, Himalayas, India

Introduction

In 2017, the film *Bya-kay* (English: *Bringing a Hen*) marked an exciting moment for movie lovers in the eastern Himalayan Indian state of Sikkim. It was the latest in a spate of locally produced films,¹ and was seen as especially significant by members of the Sikkimese Bhutia, or Lhopo, ethnic group.² This was because *Bya-kay* was

1 *Bya-kay* was released following the success of the film *Dhokbu* (dir. Dawa Lepcha) in 2017, which featured Lepcha and English dialogue, and following the success of a number of Nepali- and Hindi-language films made in the state.

2 This article focuses on the Sikkimese Bhutia language, which is also known as Lhoked, Lho skad, Denjongke, Denjongkay, and Sikkimese. In this article, we use the term ‘Sikkimese Bhutia’ to refer to this language since all of these terms have their own problems: Denjongke and Sikkimese, for example, suggest that this language is the predominant language of Sikkim, and does not acknowledge the other languages of Sikkim as equally legitimate and worthy of the title. Lhoked (or as it is rendered in the popular Tibetan Wylie transliteration system, Lho skad) means ‘Southern language,’ and while many contemporary Bhutias prefer this term, Bhutia is more widely used in official government discourse. We add ‘Sikkimese’ to differentiate the form of Bhutia spoken in Sikkim from one of the other ethnic

the first film ever produced entirely in Sikkimese Bhutia, or Lhokey, language. The cast were composed of students and faculty from the Department of Bhutia at Sikkim University in Gangtok, and the director, writer and producer, Bhaichung Tsichudarpo, had long been an active writer, teacher and promulgator of Sikkimese Bhutia language and cultural materials including calendars, music and books. The plot of the film represented a nostalgic look at life in rural Sikkim in the 1960s, and was centered around a Sikkimese Bhutia family's preparation for the birth of a new child. The tone of *Bya-kay* was eclectic; it featured painstaking attention to detail in the presentation of rituals related to hospitality and birth, and details around food preparation, family hierarchy, and local healing traditions. The film also featured entertaining religious and romantic songs that appeared abruptly between otherwise serious scenes that earnestly presented historical rural Sikkimese Bhutia life as it was imagined by the director. In the prologue that appeared in Sikkimese Bhutia and English, Tsichudarpo presented his motivation, stating that the film was intended to counteract “the erosion of identity” currently experienced by Sikkimese Bhutia youth in Sikkim, and that the film was intended to “take out younger generation back to the past where our root [sic] lies.”³

This anxiety around the cultural loss wrought by modernity was shared in online discussions on social media and YouTube that accompanied the release of the film. These discussions were overwhelmingly positive and supportive, as many commentators noted their desire to learn to speak Sikkimese Bhutia better.⁴ In this way, the director’s motivation to inspire the use of Sikkimese Bhutia language was realised. But also present in the film were messages about behaviour, etiquette, and morality as Tsichudarpo imagined it in a historical context. *Bya-kay* then was not just about presenting Sikkimese Bhutia language and culture, but also about how to perform it correctly.

The close connection between presenting and performing Sikkimese Bhutia language and culture has developed as part of broader cultural revitalisation movements in Sikkim since the 1990s,⁵ and especially in response to studies by linguists that have written of Sikkimese Bhutia as a “moribund”⁶ or “endangered” language.⁷ Sikkimese Bhutia, also known as Lhokey (*Lho skad*, the Southern language) or Sikkimese, is a language spoken in Sikkim and in the northern border regions of West Bengal by an

2. – *ctd.* groups known as Bhutia, or Bhotiya, elsewhere in the Himalayas. Therefore for clarity and accessibility, this article refers to this language as Sikkimese Bhutia. For Sikkimese Bhutia words, we use a phoneticised version of the word, rather than the Tibetan transliteration system of Wylie that does always not represent pronunciation in Sikkim, and additionally does not represent how Sikkimese Bhutia terms are spelt in the Tibetan alphabet. See Yliniemi 2019, 1–5 for a summary on discussions of terminology.

3 *Bya-kay* 2017.

4 *Bya-kay* 2017.

5 Balikci 2008.

6 van Driem 2007, 312.

7 Turin 2014, 384; Yliniemi 2019, 12–14.

estimated 25–30,000 people.⁸ The language has strong historical and linguistic ties to different Tibetan languages. As with many other parts of the Himalayas, Sikkim was historically influenced by Buddhism derived from the Tibetan plateau, and much of the historical literature was in classical Tibetan, along with other languages including Lepcha, the distinctive language of the Indigenous Lepcha ethnic community, and Devanagari, which was used by some of the historical communities that are today often grouped together as Nepalis. Buddhism had been an important in the foundations of the Sikkimese state under the Bhutia-led Namgyal dynasty in the seventeenth century.⁹

In the nineteenth century, the kingdom of Sikkim became part of the British Empire's realm of influence in the Himalayas, which led to the introduction of new systems of governance and education in new languages.¹⁰ In 1975, Sikkim was absorbed into the Republic of India, which led to further changes. Contemporary Sikkim is a multiethnic and multilingual state,¹¹ and since 1977, when the Sikkim Official Language Act was passed,¹² government schools have offered a number of Sikkim's eleven official languages as part of their regular curriculum.¹³ As part of the implementation of local languages into the school curriculum, a written orthography was developed for Sikkimese Bhutia language, and a group of Bhutia language teachers developed a curriculum for teaching Sikkimese Bhutia language in schools. As well as promoting a standard orthography, the authors of these materials were also concerned with promoting a local identity that included cultural as well as linguistic fluency. As linguistic anthropologist Mark Turin has observed, students learning local languages in Sikkim are not necessarily "being taught the language in order to use it Rather, through the prism of language, they are learning mostly heritage, culture, history, and ancestry. In fact, these students are 'learning belonging', because the utility of such languages to young Sikkimese is now as markers of belonging rather than as vernaculars for daily use."¹⁴

However, in the last decade, the rise of the Internet has led to the emergence of more non-official revitalisation efforts that are definitely focused on encouraging vernacular language use and have led to expanded notions of who speaks Sikkimese Bhutia. In this article, we will explore the process through which these new revitalisation efforts have emerged, and thereby challenge legacies of colonialism present in historical materials and linguistic discussions of Sikkimese Bhutia. In more recent materials produced in Sikkimese Bhutia, Sikkimese Bhutia writers, musicians, filmmakers, and activists have put forward their visions of cultural fluency and morality by students, and other

8 Yliniemi 2019, 6.

9 Mullard 2011.

10 McKay 2007; Rai 2015; Jha 1985.

11 Turin 2014, 388.

12 Sikkim Official Language Act 1977.

13 The official language of Sikkim is English, and Nepali and Hindi are also widely used. Other government recognised languages include Lepcha, Bhutia, Gurung, Limboo, Manger, Mukhia, Newari, Rai, Sherpa and Tamang.

14 Turin 2014, 389.

audiences, not only in how to speak like a Sikkimese Bhutia, but also how to behave like a Sikkimese Bhutia. This is a move towards encouraging the use of Sikkimese Bhutia as a daily vernacular, *as well as* a “marker of belonging” noted by Turin, is an example of the decolonisation of languages in this multilingual region, and demonstrates the vitality of Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production.

The Sikkimese Bhutia language has only recently been the subject of detailed study, with the release of linguist Juha Yliemi’s detailed study of Sikkimese Bhutia grammar.¹⁵ In this article we will demonstrate three distinct phases in the development of modern Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production. Initially, colonial attempts to study Sikkimese Bhutia framed it as only worthy of study as a gateway language for studying Tibetan. In the second phase, connections between Sikkimese Bhutia and Tibetan were used in the creation of Sikkimese Bhutia learning materials in the 1970s. As the language became the focus of studies by non-Sikkimese linguists who branded it as “endangered,” local communities also began to brand it as dying, declining, or economically irrelevant. However, these discourses have also helped to inspire its revival, or more pointedly, reclamation. The study of Sikkimese Bhutia language by linguistic scholars¹⁶ has accompanied a resurgence in publicly produced language materials and language learning initiatives that complicate representations of Sikkimese Bhutia as endangered, as local scholars worked to present Sikkimese Bhutia as a modern language. In the third phrase, over the last decade the widespread use of the Internet has complicated these notions of modernity and led to a decolonisation of language materials as Sikkimese Bhutia writers and scholars have moved away from colonial, Tibetan, and linguistic models, and embraced local approaches to the making of identity. There is therefore a spectrum of movement between reclamation, revitalisation, and decolonisation.

Miami scholar of Indigenous linguistics Wesley Leonard has differentiated between language reclamation and revitalisation. He has stated that revitalisation “is a process focused on language itself wherein the goals and measures of a given effort revolve around variables such as the number of speakers,”¹⁷ while reclamation is a “larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives.”¹⁸ The development of Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production between the 1970s and 2010s reflects a movement between revitalisation to reclamation in the production of different types of materials produced over time. In the 2010s, with the arrival of multiple Internet platforms there has been a decolonial approach that center community agents and concerns, rather than a “top-down” state-driven initiatives.¹⁹ In Māori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s groundbreaking book *Decolonising Methodologies*, she has discussed how decolonisation takes place when “indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched...”

15 Yliemi 2019.

16 Yliemi 2019; Turin 2014; Lee *et. al.* 2018; Lee *et. al.* 2019.

17 Leonard 2017, 19,

18 Leonard 2012, 359.

19 Leonard 2017, 19.

and questions are framed according to local concerns.²⁰ Language and education are important elements of life that are dominated by colonial policy in the Himalayan region, and even with the departure of the British, new national regimes have perpetuated hegemonic ideologies in the support of the nation, leading to layers of coloniality.²¹ The representation of Sikkimese Bhutia as endangered or dying is a representation of how these hegemonies represent local cultures. More recent developments indicate the arrival of decolonised approaches to the production of Sikkimese Bhutia language materials, and this article has been inspired by research into other Himalayan languages that have traced similar trajectories.²² In particular, in Prem Bahadur Phyak's study of language regimes in Nepal, he discussed how decolonisation "is not a reversal of colonial language ideologies, but rather is, first about engaging in critical analysis of the construction, reductions, and impacts of those ideologies, and then the creation of new ideologies which address linguistic oppression and discrimination at the local level. Decolonisation liberates language policy actors from their own ideological domestication and supports their agency, advocacy, and activism towards creating space for grassroots multilingualism in education and other public spheres."²³

Our study has taken place over almost two decades and is a collaboration from different perspectives: co-author Kalzang Dorjee is a native speaker of Sikkimese Bhutia and studies the cultural history of Sikkim; and co-author Amy has studied Sikkimese Bhutia as a second language since 2004. We have both together and separately collected materials and undertaken interviews with Sikkimese Bhutia teachers, scholars, language activists, and speakers on the topic of Sikkimese Bhutia since 2004. We have also engaged critically with Sikkimese Bhutia language materials including colonial manuals, textbooks, dictionaries, newspapers, radio shows, plays, the novel *Richhi* (Tsichudarpo 1996 [2003]), social media discussions, YouTube videos, and the film *Byakay*. An analysis of material produced over time demonstrates important transitions in the Sikkimese Bhutia public sphere. This examination will contribute to studies of the historical legacies of colonialism and local language use in the Himalayas, and will also engage with discussions around language revitalisation and reclamation work in India²⁴ and elsewhere.²⁵

20 Smith 1999, 193.

21 Anthropologist Carole McGranahan has discussed how Tibet has had different waves of colonisation by the British and Chinese successive governments in McGranahan 2007. This is also the case in the eastern Himalayas, as Sikkim has moved from being a British protectorate to being absorbed into India in 1975.

22 See for example Sherpa 2019 and Tso 2019. The development of Sikkimese Bhutia language movements cannot be understood as separate from similar types of revival and decolonial movements in Sikkim and the Eastern Himalayan region. The development and promotion of Lepcha language learning materials has been very influential on Sikkimese Bhutia and other communities. For reasons of length, this article does not contain a detailed discussion of this influence, but please see Lepcha forthcoming and Lepcha 2013 for excellent discussions of Lepcha language.

23 Phyak 2016, 31.

24 Gohain 2012; Mitchell 2009.

25 Leonard 2012, 2017; Hinton, Huss and Roche 2018.

Phase 1: Colonial Representations of Sikkimese Bhutia Language

The development of Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production in Sikkim has been accompanied by the development of other local language publics. These have been studied by anthropologists and geographers as exemplars of the ethnic politics present in Sikkim and India more generally, and used to examine local perspectives on themes that include democracy, ethnicity, identity, and secularism.²⁶ Sikkimese Bhutia language and literature has been relatively understudied in this explosion of interest. It is currently featured in a handful of ethnographies²⁷ and has been documented by several linguistics scholars.²⁸ While these studies have all provided rich considerations of how Sikkimese Bhutia language materials present the past in the creation of identity, less focus has been placed on the colonial histories of Sikkimese Bhutia language, and what these tell us about the multiplicity and complexity of Sikkimese Bhutia identities as they are presented in these materials.

Bya-kay presented an important moment in Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production for its visual as well as linguistic representation of Sikkimese Bhutia culture and language. It was the latest in a long series of experiments that connected local languages with new technologies. At the time when Sikkim had only recently been absorbed into India, local languages were being reconceptualised according to Indian state taxonomies. Among these State taxonomies were the allocation of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which guaranteed certain rights to specific ethnic communities.²⁹ The negotiation of who is recognised as a Tribe, as opposed to some other category, remains a heavily politicised process in Sikkim.³⁰ The promotion of language use is part of the way different ethnic groups receive ST status. However, in the case of Lepcha and Sikkimese Bhutia communities, both have been recognised as Indigenous since the colonial period, when colonial scholars began studying these languages.

The recognition of the Sikkimese Bhutia and Lepcha as “tribals”, in opposition to the blanket identity of Nepali, dated back to the British administration in the nineteenth century. The Sikkimese Bhutia were originally represented as Bhotia in early materials, which connected groups throughout the Himalayas to Tibet, as the term Bhotia was derived from ‘Bod’, the Tibetan name for Tibet, and like other communities, Sikkimese Bhutias were held to have migrated from Tibet. This categorisation by British authorities reflected their interest at the time in Tibet as a central political and cultural force in the Himalayas. Art historian Clare Harris has examined how, as a result of this interest, hill peoples from Sikkim and the adjoining areas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling were often represented as debauched or inferior versions of “authentic” Tibetans.³¹ Kalimpong

26 Arora 2006, 2007; Balikci 2008; Bentley 2007; Chettri 2017; Gergan 2014; Shneiderman 2015; Vandenhelsken 2011, 2020.

27 Arora 2007; Balikci 2008; Steinmann 2003/2004; Vandenhelsken 2011.

28 Yliniemi 2019; Turin 2014.

29 For more on this process, see Middleton 2015.

30 Chettri 2017; Arora 2007; Vandenhelsken 2011.

31 Harris 2012, 90–102.

and Darjeeling, important tourist and market centers,³² became centres for the study of Tibet, where colonial officers and European explorers made use of local scholarly labour with rare acknowledgement.³³ For this reason, the study of Sikkimese Bhutia language was also dismissed. The first detailed publication related to Sikkimese Bhutia language was *Manual of the Sikkim Bhutia Language or Denjong Ke* was written by Graham Sandberg (1851/2–1905), a British clergyman who spent decades in India and who developed a strong interest in Tibet and linguistics.³⁴ In a note to the reader at the beginning of the book, Sandberg's attitude towards Sikkimese Bhutia – as a step to learning Tibetan – was made clear. He wrote,

The writer of these pages has often wondered why those who spend so many months yearly at Darjiling [sic] never seem to take the slightest interest in the language spoken by the bulk of the population there. They may not be aware that the uncouth-sounding chatter of the Bhutias about the place is in reality a dialect of one of the great literary languages of Asia. It differs in many particulars from Tibet but on examination will be found full of interest, and by no means so barbarous a speech as is supposed. To acquire the Sikkim dialect might form a preliminary step to the study of Tibetan tongue, which has been so long and strangely neglected.³⁵

Sandberg's manual remains informative for its representation of Sikkimese Bhutia as it was spoken at the time, as well due to its representation of colonial Anglo-Bhutia relations, especially in Darjeeling. Colloquial exercises include chapters such as “Engaging Coolies,”³⁶ and the “Lord’s Prayer in De’n-Jong Ke.”³⁷ But more than these particularities, the book represents the beginning of the circulation of colonial myths about Sikkimese Bhutia language, and specifically, the notion that it was merely a “dialect” of Tibetan, and not a language worthy of learning for the sake of its own merits.

The idea that Sikkimese Bhutias were nothing more than a type of Tibetan continued to circulate in materials produced by, and for, colonial knowledge networks. In the widely cited *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, in an overview of Sikkimese history the author H.H. Risley emphasised how “the Rajas of Sikhim were brought within the attraction of a civilisation far higher than their own.... Small wonder then, that their continual effort was to show themselves to be thorough Tibetans; that the Tibetan language came into use at their court, and that their chief advisers were drawn from Tibetan monasteries.”³⁸

³² Sharma 2016.

³³ Martin 2016.

³⁴ Sandberg 1888 [1895].

³⁵ Sandberg 1888 [1895], 7.

³⁶ Sandberg 1888 [1895], 78.

³⁷ Sandberg 1888 [1895], 9.

³⁸ Risley 1894, ii–iii.

Recent scholarship on colonial representations of Lepcha communities has noted the detrimental impact that stereotypes about Lepchas being “shy, timid and slow” have had on State policy toward and treatment of Lepcha communities, and also on self-representation.³⁹ Sikkimese Bhutias were represented in colonial scholarship as Tibetans, with little consideration of their distinctive culture or language. Some of this representation was understandable, given the presence of classical Tibetan as the language of administration and statecraft; and the significance of the monasteries for the education for lay and monastic students before the advent of British schooling.⁴⁰ There was no distinctive category of Sikkimese Bhutia literature, and as with pre-modern Tibetan literary cultures, much of the literature that was produced was religious in nature.⁴¹ However, the categorisation of Sikkimese Bhutia language as no more than a dialect of Tibetan was also misleading, due to the strength of oral traditions in Sikkimese Bhutia communities that used distinctive vocabulary and grammar from Tibetan language.

Phase 2: The Emergence of Local Narratives of Sikkimese Bhutia Language Cultural Production

Apart from Sandberg’s volume, there were no other Sikkimese Bhutia language materials produced until the 1960s, when homegrown materials began to emerge in concert with government initiatives in both the Kingdom of Sikkim and in independent India. In 1962, All India Radio began to broadcast a Sikkimese Bhutia language program from its station in Kurseong, north Bengal. Its host, Yabchung Kazi, a Sikkimese Bhutia man from the Tharkapa family of Tashiding, West Sikkim, was given the charge of creating Sikkimese Bhutia language material that fitted with other AIR vernacular language programming: to be entertaining, but also informative in a way that would inculcate positive perceptions of India and Indian nationalism.⁴² The timing was important, as following border disagreements between India and China in the 1960s, India was increasingly concerned about consolidating Sikkim’s status as independent of China. These concerns contributed directly to the absorption of Sikkim in India in 1975. Within Sikkim, the King and his government were similarly concerned with promoting local culture as a way to proclaim Sikkim’s independence.⁴³ As radio technology spread throughout the hills, vernacular programs in languages of the hills were seen by the Indian state as important way to reach local communities with government-approved materials, but were also seen by the Sikkimese government as advantageous for promoting local language use. AIR also had another motive for Kazi’s show: they hoped it would function to counter Tibetan-language propaganda being broadcast from stations in Chinese-occupied Tibet over the border from Gangtok.⁴⁴

39 Gergan 2014.

40 Dewan 2012.

41 Jabb 2015.

42 Baruah 1983.

43 Hiltz 2003.

44 Kazi 2010.

Kazi imbued his daily one-hour show with creativity that far surpassed the brief given to him by AIR. In assembling his show, he traveled through rural Sikkim, interviewing and recording local people talking about a wide range of topics, including agriculture, traditional knowledge, and the weather. He gathered songs and music, and also wrote new songs, skits, and stories as well. In an interview, Kazi recalled that at the time there was not always Bhutia vocabulary available for news events and new technologies, so he also had to create new words.⁴⁵ The popularity of this show during the 1960s was represented in *Bya-kay*, where the father of the house was seen listening to Kazi's radio show.⁴⁶

While Yabchung Kazi's show undoubtedly had an impact on spoken Sikkimese Bhutia language, written Sikkimese Bhutia language did not develop until 1977, with the passing of the Official Sikkim Language Act that was part of a set of legislation intended to fold Sikkim into the Indian nation. The responsibility to develop Bhutia language materials fell to Norden Tshering, the Inspector of Schools and former school teacher.⁴⁷ He began the process of developing an orthographic system for Sikkimese Bhutia language. He retained the Tibetan alphabet, as was the case in many other Himalayan states such as Bhutan and Ladakh where classical Tibetan had been the language of statecraft. As noted by linguist Bradford Lynn Chamberlain, the decision by state authorities to use classical Tibetan script to write "modern" languages in "multiscriptal environments" such as in Sikkim "is driven by forces that are ideological or practical in nature... Ideological focuses include acceptability and identity. Practical forces include accessibility and economics."⁴⁸ The ideological reasons in the case of Sikkim was that all of the Sikkimese Bhutia teachers involved in the creation of language materials came from Buddhist backgrounds where they had used classical Tibetan language, but this also represented the continuation of legacies from the British colonial period. The practical reason for retaining the Tibetan alphabet was that its use was already widespread among Sikkimese Bhutias, as monasteries had historically been the centres of education for lay and monastic students of all genders.⁴⁹ Teachers for this new curriculum were recruited from Sikkimese Bhutia communities, and especially from among young people who had passed Class 10 who had knowledge of Tibetan script. They were trained in Gangtok by Department of Education officials, and many members of this first generation of Bhutia language teachers are still active teachers.

These officials included Norden Tshering, who designed the first Sikkimese Bhutia language curriculum for government schools for Classes One through Eight with the orthography he had developed. In the 1980s, Palden Lachungpa adapted

45 Kazi 2010.

46 *Bya-kay* 2017.

47 Takchungdarpa 2010.

48 Chamberlain 2008, 121. Bhutan provides an interesting case study to compare with Sikkim, as Bhutan also adopted a modified Tibetan alphabet in the creation of a national script for the national language of Dzongkha. See Nado 1982, van Driem 1994 and Phuntsho 2013: 53 for discussions of these developments.

49 Dewan 2012.

Tibetan textbook materials into Sikkimese Bhutia.⁵⁰ In 1984, Norden Tshering worked with Pema Rinjin Takchungdarpa, another schoolteacher who had been educated at Pemayangtse Monastery, to produce materials for Classes Nine through Twelve. With the implementation of the new government school system and universal education, very few students completed high school during this time period, and so for many years, these materials circulated without the need for higher levels or non-curricular materials.

Aside from school textbook materials, the only popular materials published in Sikkimese Bhutia language were newspapers. The first was the *Sikkim Herald* that continues to be produced by the Department of Information and Public Relations by the Government of Sikkim. The second, *Current Sikkim (Dato'i Denjong)* was published from 1993 until 2008.⁵¹

Phase 2 continued: Continuing and Contesting Legacies of Colonialism – The Theme of Decline in Linguistic Representations of Sikkimese Bhutia

The 1990s saw a lively cultural revitalisation effort among Sikkimese Bhutias in Sikkim, which has been discussed by anthropologist Anna Balikci in her in-depth ethnography of a northern Sikkimese village.⁵² These efforts also feature in other anthropological studies that appeared based on this period by Vibha Arora, Brigitte Steinman, and Mélanie Vandenhelsken.⁵³ Language education was part of these efforts, and in 2000, the curriculum for undergraduate degrees in Bhutia was released. This revitalisation took place following decades of colonial impact on educational structures in Sikkim. At the end of the nineteenth century, many elite Sikkimese Bhutia families began to send their children to missionary schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling to gain an English language education.⁵⁴ Non-monastic schools began to open in Sikkim that also taught in English. After Sikkim became part of India in 1975, many private schools run by missionaries also opened in Sikkim. Educating young people in English medium institutions was seen as necessary for them to gain skills to participate in the new economy. Since the 1980s, education, urbanisation, and the multilingual nature of Sikkimese society has led Sikkimese Bhutia to become a diglossic language.⁵⁵ In contemporary Sikkim it is very common for even fluent Sikkimese Bhutia speakers to code switch with the other dominant languages of English and Nepali.

Linguistic anthropologist Mark Turin led a Linguistic Survey of Sikkim from 2004 that provided important insight into contemporary language use in Sikkim by surveying

50 Ylineimi 2019, 10.

51 Yleinemi 2019, 11.

52 Balikci 2008.

53 Arora 2007; Steinman 2003/2004; Vandenhelsken 2011.

54 Dewan 2012; McKay 2007.

55 Maconi 2008.

over 17,000 students and teachers.⁵⁶ This Survey was built on the legacy of colonial categories related to language and ethnicity, but it had important conclusions that have been influential in the formation of state patronage of language education initiatives. Among the respondents on Turin's survey, seven percent of those surveyed responded that they could speak Sikkimese Bhutia, and ten percent responded that Sikkimese Bhutia was their mother tongue.⁵⁷ Turin highlighted this discrepancy, connecting it to the socio-economic status of Sikkimese Bhutia since the 1960s and urbanisation, and also to the politicisation of "linguistic belonging" for "tribal" communities.⁵⁸

Contemporary discussions in Sikkim regarding the position of Sikkimese Bhutia language are inflected by class status,⁵⁹ since middle and upper class Sikkimese Bhutias express more anxiety about endangerment and cultural loss, while rural Sikkimese Bhutias often retain high levels of fluency and language knowledge. In interviews we carried out with Sikkimese Bhutia speakers, we noted an apparent internalisation of ideas circulated initially by Sandberg, including that Bhutia is a "dialect" of Tibetan and that Tibetan is a more "authentic" language in which to learn the study of Buddhism. The issue of vernacular, non-elite access to Buddhism and use of Sikkimese Bhutia in non-religious contexts has not been discussed as widely within Sikkim, though several prominent linguists have classified Sikkimese as "vulnerable" and "endangered."⁶⁰ These classifications have impacted Sikkimese Bhutia conceptions of their language health and continued colonial legacies. However, they have also been important for mobilising state and private resources for language revification, and added impetus for contemporary young people to participate in learning initiatives and communities.

Phase 2 continued: Representations of Sikkimese Bhutia as a Modern Language

In response to these changes, non-official Sikkimese Bhutia language materials started to circulate in late 1990s. This saw the development of an actual public sphere outside of school curriculum, where Sikkimese Bhutias who could not read or write Sikkimese Bhutia language, or who had not undertaken the curriculum, also participated in cultural production by reclaiming language learning and use. Linguistic anthropologist Wesley Leonard has discussed how Native American moves towards reclaiming and eventually decolonising language use has been "a process which entailed identifying and resisting the imposition of Western values and knowledge systems that contribute to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples."⁶¹ In the Sikkimese context, Western values and knowledge systems were promulgated during the colonial period, and had continued after Sikkim became part of India as Sikkimese Bhutias were categorised as

56 Turin 2014, 382.

57 Turin 2014, 384.

58 Turin 2014, 385–386.

59 Turin 2014, 393.

60 Turin 2014, 384; Yliniemi 2019, 12–14.

61 Leonard 2017: 16.

“tribals,” and Sikkimese Bhutia language represented as endangered. In this instance, Sikkimese Bhutia language educators and activists resisted these representations by promoting language use. Organisations such as Khyerab Yargay Tshogpo produced materials such as music cassettes that contributed to a rise in cultural identity. In the early 2000s, several dictionaries,⁶² and music video VCDs appeared. One of the most prolific songwriters and performers from this period was school teacher Bhaichung Tsichudarpo from East Sikkim. Tsichudarpo recorded songs, produced music videos, and also wrote the first ever novel in Bhutia, *Richhi (Hope)* in 1996.⁶³ He is also an astute cultural entrepreneur, as he has become more widely known for his astrological calculation publications that he sells as printed one-page annual calendars. The release of *Bya-kay* in 2017 was the latest in Tsichudarpa’s continued efforts to use new technologies to promote language use.

The rise of interest among young Bhutias in learning Bhutia language has been accompanied by the growth of research on Bhutia language and culture. In 2019, linguist Juha Ylineimi completed a doctorate outlining Bhutia grammar, following the publication of several articles.⁶⁴ His dissertation includes a survey of Bhutia language production and estimates that at present there are around thirty active Sikkimese Bhutia language authors.⁶⁵

Phase 2 continued: Representations of Sikkimese Bhutia as Both Uniquely Sikkimese and Trans-Himalayan

Most of these authors are Sikkimese Bhutia language teachers, and write to produce materials for the government education curriculum. These materials are therefore pedagogical in nature, and this pedagogy goes beyond presenting linguistic standardisation to promote specific forms of everyday identity and behavior.

Textbooks written for Sikkimese Bhutia language students include vocabulary that is specific to Sikkimese Bhutia communities, and over time, this has included variations on spelling from classical Tibetan terms. One of the most controversial and distinctive elements of Sikkimese Bhutia orthography was the *tsha-lag*, which functions “to mark that the members of consonant cluster do not merge into one pronunciation, as they would do in Classical Tibetan spelling, but are pronounced separately.”⁶⁶ This letter was developed by Pema Rinzin Takchungdarpa in the 1980s, and generated great debate among scholars in Sikkim. Scholars trained in Buddhist monasteries found the creation of a new letter disturbing, since it represented a movement away from classical Tibetan orthography and challenged conceptions of classical Tibetan letters

62 Ylineimi 2019, 10–11.

63 Tsichudarpo 1996 [2003].

64 Ylineimi 2018; 2017; 2019.

65 Ylineimi 2019, 10–11.

66 Ylineimi 2019, 28.

as inherently sacred, and thereby historical discourses that subsumed Sikkimese Bhutia within Tibetan. Pema Rinzin Takchungdarpa argued that the tsha-lag was necessary to represent a sound specific to Sikkimese Bhutia language, and was therefore part of the assertion of a local linguistic and literary identity.⁶⁷ Since public debates in the 1980s and 90s, the tsha-lag has continued to be used by Sikkimese Bhutia authors.

As has been noted in other studies of Sikkimese language and culture, Sikkimese Bhutia language textbook materials are concerned with presenting specific local narratives related to Sikkimese Bhutia identity and history that complicated historical ties to Tibet. A vivid example of this is the *Denjong Chharab* (*History of Sikkim*), a textbook assigned to Class Ten-level students released in 1986.⁶⁸ As noted by anthropologist Brigitte Steinmann, the *Denjong Chakrab* promotes a specific history of Sikkim.⁶⁹ This history of Sikkim provides an overview of “how the Valley of Rice came into existence” by outlining the genealogy of the kings of Sikkim. This history begins with the visit of Guru Rinpoche to the “Hidden Land” (*beyul*) in the eighth century. During this visit, he left a prophecy that Sikkim would become a shelter for Buddhists fleeing from political disturbances in coming centuries.⁷⁰ These Buddhists were led to Sikkim by Treasure Discoverers (*terton*), who had karmic connections with Guru Rinpoche and came to “open” the valley of rice for Buddhists to reside in. In the conventional Sikkimese history represented in the *Denjong Chharab*, this process of settlement begins with Khye Bumsa, a chieftain with a lineage connecting back to eastern Tibet who arrived in Sikkim in the thirteenth century. When he arrived in Sikkim, he met with Thekongthek, a local Lepcha leader, and made a vow to the mountain deity, Kanchendzonga to live peacefully as equals with the Lepcha community and the beings of the landscape.⁷¹ While these details appear to emphasise Sikkimese ties to Tibet, the rest of the narrative is more complicated. It continues with an overview of the very distinctive local Sikkimese Bhutia clan system.⁷² In following centuries, Tertons continued to arrive in Sikkim, culminating in the arrival of Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme in the seventeenth century. Lhatsun met with two other Tibetan yogis in Sikkim, Ngadak Sempo Phuntsok Rigzin and Kathok Kuntu Zangpo, and they enthroned the first king of the Sikkimese Bhutia Namgyal dynasty, Phuntsok Namgyal, in 1642.⁷³ But even as the Tertons appear to tie Sikkim to Tibet, the emphasis on details related to the Namgyal dynasty are distinct and local. The appearance of this version of Sikkimese history in a school textbook is consistent with forms of Sikkimese nationalism circulated by

67 Takchungdarpa 2010.

68 Takchungdarpa 1986.

69 Steinmann 2003/2004, 151–152.

70 Takchungdarpa 1986, 1–5.

71 Takchungdarpa 1986, 5–12.

72 Takchungdarpa 1986, 14–16.

73 Mullard’s study of Sikkimese historiography provides more detailed analysis about the representations of this period of state formation. Mullard 2011.

the Chogyal Palden Thondup and his supporters in the 1960s and 70s.⁷⁴ The *Denjong Chharab* continues the presentation of Sikkimese history that corresponds with the lineage of the Sikkimese Bhutia kings, providing a chapter for the reign of each king until the reign of Thondup Namgyal, the twelfth.⁷⁵ However, since the *Denjong Chharab* was produced after 1975, the ending presents a naturalised absorption of Sikkim into India. This chapter focuses on the appearance of the institution of the Chief Minister as head of state,⁷⁶ which was necessary since the publication of this work was sponsored by state initiatives. The book has not been updated since 1986 and continues to be reprinted, with evidence of its state patronage intact.

While Sikkimese Bhutia literary materials have historically had strong local influences, they have also always had translocal ties. When Sikkimese Bhutia scholars developed the orthography for Sikkimese Bhutia language, they used the Classical Tibetan alphabet. This decision has entangled Sikkimese Bhutia literary and cultural production with Tibetan literary history, an issue common in other contemporary Himalayan states such as Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh in India and Kingdom of Bhutan that have historical connections to Tibetan-derived forms of Buddhism. These ties challenge British colonialism and contemporary geopolitical claims by India and China in these regions, but also complicate local identity production. Anthropologist Swargajyoti Gohain wrote of the movement in western Arunachal Pradesh for Bhoti, or Tibetan, language to be adopted in schools as a mother tongue language. She argued that this call for language recognition for Bhoti, instead of for Monpa or another regional language, gestured towards a “Himalayan imaginative geography” that connected Arunachali Buddhists with other parts of the Himalayas.⁷⁷ The use of Classical Tibetan script for Sikkimese Bhutia is another example of this shared imaginary with other Himalayan Buddhist communities. It is also evidenced in textbook materials. In Class 10, students are required to learn Tibetan astrology as part of their Sikkimese Bhutia curriculum. In the foreword to the textbook, the unnamed Joint Director of Language Education justified this addition to the curriculum by writing that astrology is a “distinctive form of knowledge that is rarely taught outside of monasteries and needs to be studied by more lay people.”⁷⁸

Phase 2 continued: Bhaichung Tsichudarpo’s Sikkimese Bhutia as a Language of Buddhist Modernity

However, the representation of Buddhism in Sikkimese Bhutia language materials and media is by no means uniform and complicates the movement in the development of Sikkimese Bhutia language materials towards decolonisation. Author Bhaichung Tsichudarpo’s longer length works, the novel *Richhi* and drama *Namtog*, both contain

74 Hiltz 2003.

75 Takchungdarpa 1986, 26–79.

76 Takchungdarpa 1986, 79–89.

77 Gohain 2012, 338–340.

78 Dakpa and Takchungdarpa 1995 [2013], 1.

very specific representations of both Sikkimese Bhutia identity and Buddhist identity. As with Tsichudarpo's film *Bya-kay*, they also both present specific pedagogical intentions that can be interpreted as responsive to the challenges of modernity in Sikkim. Tsichudarpo's presentation of modern identity is representative of an internalisation of modernist discourse and another element of the continued legacy of colonialism in the region.

Tsichudarpo's novel, *Richhi* (or in English, *Hope*) is the only long form Sikkimese Bhutia language novel that has been published to date. Published originally in 1996, and reprinted in 2003, the narrative outlined a love story between a village teacher named Chokyi and her student's older brother, Karma. The novel plotted their meeting and courtship before they were separated when the boy went to study medicine. A family-arranged marriage became a further barrier to their love when Chokyi entered into a marriage arranged by her parents. Fate cruelly brought the lovers together once again when Chokyi became ill and was assigned to Karma's care in the hospital. Out of a sense of shame, Chokyi behaved as though she did not remember Karma. At the end of the book, she was taken for treatment for Delhi, and she and Karma were once again separated.

Richhi featured a conservative central social message, as Chokyi obediently followed her parents' wishes by marrying their ideal groom. The novel did not question her decision, and in fact uses the Buddhist concept of karma to explain why they did not end up together. Following their reunion in the hospital, Karma observed that,

[Chokyi] must have recognized me yesterday, but because of the situation, even if she did recognize me she would have pretended not to. The Precious Jewel knows! What a situation! What bad luck! In the end, even if we met each other, we couldn't even say a single word. What sort of unwholesome merit must we have collected in the past! The Three Jewels know! My heart has become like a feather that has been blown away by the wind; it is so light that it travels from place to place, finding no resting place.⁷⁹

Karma understood that events were predetermined by "unwholesome merit" and invoked the Jewels of Buddhism to cope with his heartache. This theme of predetermination continued through to the conclusion of the novel, where Chokyi hoped fervently that she could be reunited with Karma in their next lives, and took solace in his professional success.⁸⁰ The invocation of karma and karmic connection at the end of the novel emphasised the lack of agency Chokyi and Karma had in deciding the outcome of their relationship. The novel did not present any critique or alternative. Instead, both characters were shown to be at peace with their lives.

The final representation of the authority of karma in *Richhi* does not correspond to most modernist readings of Buddhism. Religious studies scholar David McMahan has written of the construction of "Buddhist modernism" around the world following

79 Tsichudarpo 1996 [2003], 171–172; our translation.

80 Tsichudarpo 1996 [2003], 173; our translation.

the nineteenth century that promoted Buddhism as rational, scientific and democratic.⁸¹ Tsichudarpo's idea of karma here was not democratic, instead functioning as encouragement for readers to comply with family decisions. But Buddhist modernist trends are found elsewhere in Tsichudarpo's literature. In particular, his play *Namtog (Superstition)*⁸² outlined a clear demarcation between what the characters considered to be effective, rational Buddhism and superstitious traditions that should be eradicated. Tsichudarpo's pedagogical intent was clear from the prologue of the play, where he discussed that he was inspired to write *Namtog* due to his concern about the continued tradition of animal sacrifice, which he saw as a superstitious. Tsichudarpo critiqued his community, stating that "at a time when researchers, scientists and astronomers have reached the moon, and people can fly in space [i.e., in aeroplanes] and move across the earth, we still believe in superstition, are amazed by superstition, and place our hopes in superstition. This is a big mistake! Since we are Buddhist, we should not believe in worldly deities, Bon and other things such as *bongthing*, and the ideas of non-believers."⁸³

Namtog related the story of a family seeking medical care for their patriarch. In it, Palmo, the patient's wife, had relied on the local village shaman, or *bongthing*, Norgayay, to treat her husband during a long illness. Her husband's sister, Yudron and her husband Rabzang arrived to visit and discovered that the patient had become extremely ill. Rabzang demanded that he be taken to the hospital immediately. Norgayay, the *bongthing*, discouraged this, instead preferring to engage in a lengthy and convoluted ritual. The patient's wife remained torn, and eventually Yudron and Rabzang convinced her to try taking her husband to the hospital. The *bongthing* left after absolving himself of any responsibility if the patient's health declined. Once the patient arrived at the hospital, Dr. Dolma and a nurse engaged in a lengthy check up, and diagnosed him with a swollen liver. After several days of glucose drips and injections (that are all relayed in painstaking detail) the patient improved. After thirty-two days he was allowed to return home, and everyone was happy with the outcome.

The style of the play illustrated its pedagogical intent. The pacing was slow and scenes were detailed. Especially noteworthy is the scene where the patient arrived at the hospital for treatment and was examined by Dr. Dolma in great detail. These details suggest to us that the intended audience may be villagers like the patient and his wife, who were depicted as fearful and unsure about medicine. Ignorance was also thoroughly condemned. At one point early in the drama, the patient cried out when receiving an IV line, "Aiyo! You people are trying to kill me!"⁸⁴ This comical response was intended as a criticism of the irrational fear of medicine.

This attitude towards shamanic religious practice was also demonstrated in the characterisation of major protagonists in the play. The *bongthing*, Norgayay, was shown

⁸¹ McMahan 2008.

⁸² Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003].

⁸³ Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 2.

⁸⁴ Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 28; our translation.

as comical. He bumbled about, coughing and spitting, and warned that the patient would deteriorate if taken to the hospital due to the influence of spirits.⁸⁵ Rural communities were implicated as perpetuating these practices due to ignorance. The patient's wife, for example, was shown as indecisive and even attributed her husband's initial improvement to the *bongthing*'s care.⁸⁶ Her change of mind was not actually depicted in the drama. Instead, the narrative skipped ahead to the day the patient was released from hospital, and by this point, she was emphatic about the benefits of modern medicine.⁸⁷

However, *Namtog* did become knottier at the end. Here, a visiting family member Aku Tshering embarked on a long discourse about the uselessness of *bongthing* and pig sacrifices, before suddenly concluding that Buddhism also offered opportunities for clearing obstacles through ritual, and that through faith in the lama, followed by a hospital visit, all illnesses could be cleared.⁸⁸ According to this uncle then, Buddhism, or "the Buddha's teachings" (*nang po sanggyay ki chos*), were clearly not superstition, but instead were compatible with scientific rationalism and medicine. Buddhist practices such as doing smoke offerings (*sang*) or oblations (*serkyem*), which were forms of ritual practice, were seen by the uncle as rational.⁸⁹ His reasoning behind what separates these rituals from the *bongthing*'s ritual were not entirely clear. The patient agreed with Aku Tshering, saying that because of the widespread use of animal sacrifice, many villagers were dying before their time and needed to have their "eyes opened."⁹⁰ Here then, Buddhism was constructed as compatible with modernity in contrast with animal sacrifice. The problematic element of how this plays out however is that in reality in Sikkim many Buddhist lamas and practitioners are also very much tied to these superstitious activities.⁹¹ Who then are intended to be the Buddhists that the play refers to? What type of Buddhism is rational Buddhism? The play ended with a critique of villagers, as the patient laments that he and his community would never progress as long as they kept sacrificing pigs and going to *bongthing* when they got sick. Along with this, a dialogue between the patient, his wife and a visiting uncle toward the end of the play also repeatedly affirmed how wonderful medicine is, and how useless shamans were. Together, these details conveyed a strong message that denigrated shamanic practices, gathered together here under the rubric of "superstition" or *namtog*, in favor of medicine, and more generally, science and modernity. These pedagogical concerns that were intended to celebrate a specific form of modernity demonstrated the continued valorisation of colonial epistemologies in Sikkimese communities.

85 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 17.

86 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 31.

87 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 36, 38.

88 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 41.

89 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 39.

90 Tsichudarpo 1997 [2003], 40.

91 Balikci 2008.

Phase 3: #learnlhokay! And Decolonise Sikkimese Bhutia: The Emergence of Multiple Sikkimese Bhutia Public Spheres

Tsichudarpo's critiques of what he perceived to be backwards behaviour were not veiled or subtle, and represented a particular vision for how to speak and behave as a modern Sikkimese Bhutia. Tsichudarpo's concerns with cultural fluency have continued to feature in his work across mediums. When the trailer for *Bya-kay* was uploaded to YouTube in 2017, it was enthusiastically celebrated by participants in the Sikkimese Bhutia language online community for its representation of tradition, with several viewers commenting that it seemed "more like a documentary."⁹²

However, the idea of a singular Sikkimese Bhutia culture or language as imagined by Tsichudarpo with his documentary-style exposition and presentation has been challenged since the early 2000s, with the emergence of an online cultural production among Sikkimese Bhutia speakers, students, and activists. There have been criticisms by scholars of communication and sociologists of presenting the Internet as the site of a utopian public sphere in which all sections of a society can present their perspectives, due to the different structural inequalities of technological access, literacy and other factors that prevent equal access to the Internet.⁹³ However, in Sikkim internet access using smartphones is widespread, and the innovative adoption of different platforms have led to a reclamation of Sikkimese Bhutia language initiatives by community members who are not perceived experts, such as scholars and teachers writing for government school students. Groups dedicated to Sikkimese Bhutia language use have sprung up on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, and at present these forums are the mostly lively representatives of a Sikkimese Bhutia public sphere. This growth in the diversity of language materials, and public interest in and demand for them, connects to broader global trends among minoritised languages. As Kristen Tcherneshoff and Daniel Bögree Udell have written, due to increased awareness of linguistic diversity and concern about loss, "minoritised peoples are proactively reclaiming ancestral languages and rebuilding their cultures, especially when access to media creation is available."⁹⁴ Online Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production at present demonstrates elements of a decolonial approach. Although it is hosted on Internet platforms created by corporations, the different mediums that are being accessed, used and responded to by Sikkimese Bhutia users allow for the emergence of multiple epistemologies and forms of expression that challenge state institutions and colonial legacies.⁹⁵

A significant figure in the creation of online forums for sharing Sikkimese Bhutia knowledge is scholar-activist Thupten Palzang, a faculty member at Gyalshing Government College in Gyalshing, West Sikkim. Like many other young Sikkimese Bhutia language teachers in Sikkim, Thupten Palzang is a scholar with a monastic Buddhist background from West Sikkim and possesses a strong command of classical Tibetan as well as Sikkimese Bhutia. His innovative approaches to creating Sikkimese

92 *Bya-kay* 2017.

93 Loader and Mercea 2011, 12.

94 Tcherneshoff and Udell 2019, 106.

95 Wesley 2017, 20.

Bhutia materials online allow him to reach audiences far outside of his classrooms, and demonstrate how Bhutia language innovators have continued to incorporate new technologies into the promotion of language use. Thupten Palzang's initiatives, linked together under the title of "Denjong ki Lhokay" (meaning Sikkim's Southern Language) and the hashtag #learnlhokay! include recording Youtube videos where he teaches Sikkimese Bhutia vocabulary and sentence construction,⁹⁶ sharing wedding videos and travel logs, and running Facebook and Instagram accounts where he circulates materials related to Sikkimese Bhutia language and culture.⁹⁷ These forums feature links to each other. The most popular online forum is a WhatsApp group, where people upload speeches, words, and questions about vocabulary and pronunciation and share them. This forum also features visual materials, particularly related to Buddhism and Sikkim's landscape, and shared news items of interest. While Thupten Palzang's original Youtube videos inspired the beginnings of these sharing communities, over time they have far expanded beyond language sharing. As with Sikkimese Bhutia language curriculum materials, these social media platforms reinforce certain ways of being Bhutia, especially with the strong emphasis on Buddhism-related materials, including the circulation of advertising for Buddhist monastic festivals and Youtube videos of prayers. The WhatsApp platform still also continues to have most of its material generated by older Sikkimese Bhutia speakers and teachers. Users have mentioned to us their anxiety over posting publicly on this forum, least they be shamed for making a mistake, and it therefore can be interpreted as a further medium for language policing.

Additionally, the ubiquity of Buddhist-related materials exhibits the continued complicated connections between Tibetan Buddhist monastic literary approaches to language and literature and Bhutia language and literature from earlier periods of Sikkimese Bhutia language production. The first generation of Sikkimese Bhutia language teachers were made up of men and women who were able to read and write in Tibetan because they had mostly grown up in families with monastic ties. However, the second generation, trained from the 1990s, included an increasing number of male teachers recruited from Buddhist institutions such as Nyingma Shedra in Gangtok, where they had received their education in Tibetan language. According to teachers who we interviewed, this has influenced the creation of official Sikkimese Bhutia curricular materials, as terms and orthography are often adopted from classical and contemporary Tibetan language materials.

However, the liveliness of the online public sphere disrupts the colonial legacy and Tibetan-isation of Sikkimese Bhutia language production. Social media platforms in particular allow participants to challenge dominant narratives and move away from the "positional superiority" of Tibetan.⁹⁸ For example, since 2019, many of the photographs shared on the DenjongLhokay Instagram page include people uploading photographs of themselves and friends wearing Denjong ki Lhokay t-shirts. The merchandising of Denjong ki Lhokay as a distinctive brand is a vivid yet complex example of "performing

96 Youtube.

97 Denjongki Lhokay Channel Youtube; Denjongke Lhokay Instagram; Denjongke Lho kay Facebook.

98 Leonard 2017, 20.

ethnicity” in Sikkim.⁹⁹ But these photographs also demonstrate the multiplicity of Sikkimese Bhutia language enthusiasts, as mixed-race and non-Sikkimese Bhutias are also featured in images.

Additionally, the WhatsApp group allows people from throughout Sikkim to share vocabulary and pronunciation practices from their communities. This challenges attempts at language standardisation. In interviews with older urban Sikkimese Bhutia language speakers outside of educational institutions, language standardisation was a common point of anxiety, with debates over whether some areas in Sikkim speak more “pure” Sikkimese Bhutia than others. However, young people who use WhatsApp do not have such concerns, and report that one of the elements of the group they find most valuable is the access to different forms of pronunciation. Younger Sikkimese Bhutia people who have studied outside of Sikkim in Delhi, Kolkata and South India report that they befriended students from around Sikkim and found great diversity in Bhutia languages spoken between different regions of Sikkim. WhatsApp allows people to share different vocabulary and forms of pronunciation, and participants can select what they find to be the most “authentic” information shared. Other online forums continue to appear that are further complicating and inspiring multivocality, and allow for code-switching and less policing of “orthodox” language use.

Conclusion

The online use of Sikkimese Bhutia language outside of government school and monastic contexts demonstrates the way that part of the contemporary engagement with Sikkimese Bhutia goes beyond ethnic politics and colonial legacies. The “ethnicisation” of Sikkimese Bhutia has also been challenged by the demographics of Sikkimese Bhutia language learners. In interviews with west Sikkimese Bhutia language teachers between 2013 and 2020, many noted the rising number of ethnically Sherpa students opting to study Sikkimese Bhutia language in government schools due to the comparatively lower number of Sherpa language teachers and courses available in the state. This was in perceived contrast to the preference of ethnic Sikkimese Bhutia students for learning Nepali as their second language. Additionally, Sikkimese Bhutia people in mixed race relationships and families have found online resources valuable for learning more about their partners and parents. Rural communities that have been marginalised by State-level discourses of modernity are now emerging as ideal sites for Sikkimese Bhutia language learning and reclamation. These different examples all demonstrate that there is no longer one authority capable of participating in Sikkimese Bhutia cultural production, and no one way to be Sikkimese Bhutia. This also exhibits a movement away from colonial constructions of Sikkimese Bhutia as a “dialect” or “gateway” for learning Tibetan language, and from even modernist perceptions and state programs that promote the revitalisation of a standardised Sikkimese Bhutia. The decolonial move that has taken place since the emergence of the online Sikkimese Bhutia public sphere allows for multiple forms of Sikkimese Bhutia language to circulate.

99 Chettri 2017; Shneiderman 2015.

The liveliness of these initiatives challenge narratives of Sikkimese Bhutia as “endangered”; however, these narratives, circulated by often well-intentioned state officials and linguists are also important, as they support the distribution of state infrastructure and funding for language revitalisation which in the future may interact more with unofficial initiatives of reclamation. As time goes on, it will be interesting to see if non-Buddhist Sikkimese Bhutia also become involved in Sikkimese Bhutia language activities, as has been the case with the Lepcha communities of Sikkim, North Bengal and eastern Nepal. It will also be interesting to see if these public initiatives inspire more learning of Sikkimese Bhutia language by non-ethnically Sikkimese Bhutia people. At present, the Sikkimese Bhutia online public sphere and other forms of cultural production all demonstrate ways that Sikkimese Bhutia speakers are evading attempts at homogenisation, engaging in forms of decolonisation, and enriching ways to speak, and be, Sikkimese Bhutia.

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