

THE *DZUMSA* OF LACHEN: AN EXAMPLE OF A  
SIKKIMESE POLITICAL INSTITUTION

SOPHIE BOURDET-SABATIER<sup>1</sup>

*translation* ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA

Every society requires some kind of political framework to ensure its continued existence. In most regions of the world, today this structure is provided by a strong central government that determines the behaviour of the various populations inhabiting its territory. Indigenous political systems were once numerous and varied allowing social groups isolated from the centre of power to organise themselves according to their own particular needs and circumstances. In recent decades, these local structures have increasingly been threatened by national governments and their decentralisation policies. Many have already disappeared, and it would thus seem interesting to consider the prospect of the surviving ones. Within the Himalayan context, the *Dzumsa* (*'dzoms sa*) of Lachen provides an interesting example of a political institution inherited from the past that has managed to survive and adapt itself to changing circumstances.

Located some fifty kilometres from the Chinese border, the village of Lachen falls within a restricted area of Sikkim's North District.

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<sup>1</sup> This study of the *dzumsa* of Lachen is part of a larger research project undertaken for the degree of Ph.D. in Geography (Paris X Nanterre) focusing on the political, social and economic activities of the people of the Lachen region. Fieldwork research was carried out from January 2002 until November 2003, a two year period during which my husband and myself shared the life of Lachenpa society. Setting up household in the village, we shared their life-style, interacting and participating in all social events such as monastic dances, funerals, marriages and village council meetings. In order to better understand the migration process, we stayed in Lachen at 3000 m as well as in Thangu at 4000 m. In order to gain some understanding of this complex society, I collected data directly from the different areas of production and through a large number of interviews. I was initially confronted with a number of difficulties such as the harshness of the climate, the lack of local understanding and cooperation, the army's restriction of our movements and the language barrier. Eventually, thanks to the moral support of my family, my thesis supervisor and my partner, and thanks to the intervention and support of the Chief Secretary of Sikkim S.W. Tenzing as well as the *Pipon* of Lachen Anu Lachenpa and my loyal friend and translator Rinzing Chewang Lechenpa, the situation rapidly improved and I was able to continue working on the research I had come to Lachen for.

Under military surveillance, access to the valley is strictly monitored and few scientific researches were ever carried out in the region. Only some short terms studies were undertaken usually by government servants for the purpose of the Sikkim administration. From a socio-economic viewpoint, the valley of Lachen, even more so than that of Lachung, remains relatively unknown. This study is an attempt to throw light on the institution of the *dzumsa*, the political system of the people of Sikkim's extreme north which today can still be witnessed in Lachen, one of Sikkim's remotest valleys. The case of Lachen appeared interesting for two reasons: 1. This local political system not only seemed robust but seemed to have preserved its status and powers (or part of these) despite the establishment of a strong Indian governing system following Sikkim's integration within the Indian Union in 1975; and 2. The agro-pastoral practices of Lachen are of a particular kind. Like most societies settled at high altitudes, herding is a central economic activity of the valley. Pastoral-nomadism has always been practiced by local populations, but contrary to usual practices, the entire Lachenpa community moves with the seasons, leaving the rest of the valley, and notably the main village of Lachen, practically empty of inhabitants for most of the year. Even though practices have changed with new economic conditions, all households still gather their members and together migrate with the seasons in search of better pastures for their yaks and sheep.

*What is the dzumsa?*

The *dzumsa* is the traditional administrative system of the villages of Lachen and Lachung, high altitude communities speaking a Tibetan dialect and settled in Sikkim's North District. This system of self-governance was initially established during the first half of the 19th century in order provide structure and cohesion for these societies and their activities. These communities were too far removed from the central authority to follow rules applicable to other regions of Sikkim. Many similar cases can be found throughout the world, particularly in Nepal and Tibet: the studies of Te in Nepal presented by C. Ramble (1990, 1993) and of Nyi-shang by Ph. Sagant (1990) provide interesting comparative examples. During the time of the Sikkimese kingdom, the *dzumsa* and the *pipons* (*spyi dpon*) or village chiefs were recognised and used by the king (*chos rgyal*) as a means of delegating his authority. In the 1970s, when the Indian Government initiated the reorganization of Sikkim's administration and introduced the

'panchayat' system of local government, the new system was not imposed in the valleys of Lachen and Lachung. Eventually, the *dzumsa* was officially recognised in 1985 and continues to function today. The *dzumsa* is an interesting example considering that few of these surviving political systems throughout the Himalayas were officially recognised by the governments in place (see for example the case of Nyi-shang in Nepal where the system ceased to exist in 1977 after the establishment of the panchayats).

The word *dzumsa* has three meanings. Literally, it refers to the 'gathering place' but also to the institution in-charge of administering and organising activities within a given territory, as well as to the general council of villagers composed of household heads.

The *dzumsa* - or general council of Lachenpa villagers - is directed by a group of people, elected or designated by villagers depending on the period, to represent them and manage village affairs. This council of representatives, referred to as the *lhey-na* (*lus sna*) and now better known as the panchayat, is composed of two *pipons*, six *gembos* (*rgan bo*), two *tsipos* (*rtsis po*) and two *gyapons* (*rgya dpon*). This council or *lhey-na* is changed every year unless the public wishes to renew its mandate. It is responsible for the application and respect of the community's laws and regulations, and for the organisation of the main village events. It schedules the meetings of the village's general council where decisions are taken and meets before each one in order to discuss the agenda and measures to be proposed. Within the *lhey-na*, the *pipons* and the *gembos* are the issuers of orders while the *tsipos* and the *gyapons* are there to assist them. The two *pipons*, originally called *chipons* (*spyi dpon*) or 'king of the public', are the village chiefs, possessors of authority, spokesmen of the *lhey-na* and Lachen's representatives to the outside world. Since 1978-79, they are no longer nominated as was customary but are elected by the general village council. The *gembos*, literally the 'responsible people' of the village, are to assist the *pipons* in their functions, in taking decisions, in making the system work and in dispensing justice. They were previously designated by the *pipons* but are now also elected by the public. The *tsipos* or 'accountants' were previously the collectors of the various taxes that were to be handed over to the Chogyal. They have now lost this function and instead are responsible for calculating fines and maintaining the books. The *gyapons* finally are designated by each of the *pipons* as their assistants during the village meetings notably by calling members to assemble by announcing the traditional 'zum niao!' ('dzoms nya'o').

The elections of the *lheyna* take place every year at the time of the lunar New Year just after the monastic mask dances. Until about thirty years ago, the *pipons* were not elected as is the case today, but were nominated by a group of people called *theumi* (*thos mi*) who were considered to be the most respected, honest and experienced members of the community. In the mid-1970s, Sikkim entered a new era following its merger with India. The entire Sikkimese administration was upset and restructured, and the repercussions of this upheaval were felt in the remotest corners of the old kingdom. The *dzumsa* did not remain unaffected by these changes and gradually took on a structure that would be considered as 'more democratic' by Western societies. This new system gave an equal voice to all villagers when it came to choosing the group of *pipons*, which was not the case in other Himalayan Buddhist societies whereby village chiefs were often chosen by means of ritual (Sagant 1990). In Lachen, this new measure even served to better legitimise the *pipon's* status. The first elections were in 1978-79 and continues to be held to this day. After closing the accounts and wrapping up any unfinished business, the *lheyna* officially resigns by ordering the *theuton* (*grol ston*) or last common meal and returning the *dzumsa* house keys to the public. Elections are organised in the next couple of days by a transitional group designated by the general council of villagers. In order to give more legitimacy to the new *lheyna* and channel the votes, a list is compiled which consists of those considered to be eligible for the status of *pipon*. Elections begin once the general council of villagers and the lamas (who have been participating in elections since the early 1990s) agree on who should be included on the list. Everyone receives two voting ballots (with the seal of the *pipon* of Lachen on the reverse in order to avoid fraud) and writes on these the name(s) of his candidate(s). Once the voting is completed, the ballots are sorted by name and counted. The candidate with the most votes becomes the first *pipon* and the runner-up becomes the second *pipon*. Those from the third to the eighth place are elected *gembos* and those in the ninth and tenth position are elected *tsipos*. Once the elections are over and the new *lheyna* is in place, the public shares the meal offered by the departing *lheyna*.

The general village council is composed of Lachenpa household heads residing for the most part in Lachen. All Lachenpa household heads are not necessarily council members or *khepo* (*khas po*) either because they are lamas or because they recently separated from the main household. Further, only men can become members of the *dzumsa*, and no women are officially authorised to attend the various

meetings. However, a widow will take her husband's place until their son is old enough to take charge or if they had no son, until she adopts one. When, according to villagers, the *dzumsa* of Lachen was first established during the first half of the 19th century with Dorje Samdup as the first *pipon*, it had a very small membership and anyone who wished to join could do so if he met the previously mentioned conditions. The *pipons* of those days even promised land to those willing to join. The number of members then rose from about 60 in 1936 to 80 in the early 1970s and to 175 in 2003. In the early 1990s, new measures were put in place in order to limit the membership's rapid growth, and today the rules are much stricter. Only Lachenpas by birth can now join the *dzumsa*, and the general village council only accepts two new members a year.

Meetings are held in the *dzumsa*'s new house or *mang khim* (*mang khyim*) built in 1984-85, and which today represents the 'gathering place'. After the 'zum niao!' call to meetings, people have thirty minutes to assemble and make their presence known to one of the *gembos* taking attendance. Members then sit in a circle without following any specific order or reserved seating except perhaps for the *lhey-na* in order to favour discussions and debate. If the lamas join the meeting, as it is the case when the matter of the day is of interest to them, they will sit on the central benches facing the *lhey-na*. *Dzumsa* meetings are held as often as situations call for them. Previously, they only happened a few times a year in order to organise the main religious festivals, set sowing dates and when to move the herds. They are now much more frequent and varied. The functions of the *dzumsa* have evolved and multiplied since Sikkim joined the Indian Union, and the body itself has become the intermediary between the government and the people and acquiring, in this sense, more and more responsibilities towards both. Today the *dzumsa* has new functions that call for regular meetings, such as calls for tender and the redistribution of property and money, topics to which we will return later on.

### *The dzumsa's historical functions*

As previously mentioned, the *dzumsa* was established to favour cohesion within the community by organising activities shared by the entire social group. In order to accomplish its objectives, the *dzumsa* has since the beginning enforced a number of rules of conduct. The old rules however were not compiled in a register, and it is only in 1991

that they were put down in writing in a 'book of rules' written in Tibetan and called *tepchen* (*deb chen*).

The *dzumsa* of Lachen has a number of social responsibilities. First of all, it has a strong judicial role: the *dzumsa* determines the conduct rules to be followed by all individuals and sees to their implementation and respect. These paramount policing and judicial functions exemplify the system's rigidity and socialising role. Before a police station was established in the village, the *dzumsa* had the power to arrest all those who broke the law, but now only intervenes in the event of minor offences committed within its sphere of influence. The 'old' rules are numerous and the *dzumsa* also sanctions absences and lateness to meetings, disrespect of dates set for sowing or for moving herds, absence from community work, failure to make the required wood contribution to funerals and of butter for the lamps at the monastery. The *dzumsa* can formulate new rules such as not being allowed to attend village meetings or monastic dances (*'cham*) in a state of drunkenness, to fight, to gamble to the extent of putting the household's finances at risk, to throw *tsampa* (*rtsam pa*) on the *phami* (*bag mi*) or middleman in-charge of negotiating marriages, etc. Whenever a rule is broken, the *dzumsa* imposes a fine which varies according to the gravity of the infraction and is recorded in the accounts' register. At the end of the year, before the new elections, a *tsipo* (accountant) and a *gembo* work out the total fine to be paid by each individual and collect the dues that are kept in a common fund. In its judicial capacity, the *dzumsa* arbitrates disputes and conflicts within its own community without having resort to the courts of Chungthang or Mangan. In such a case, a complaint is first registered by the *lheynd* who then becomes the only referee and judges the case. Cases handled by the *dzumsa* are numerous and varied: these may concern illegal land occupation, defamation, adultery or physical and moral injury. Judgement is pronounced by calling and informing the 'guilty' party who must then apologize and offer a *khada* and a *chang* to each member of the *lheynd* and to the other party. The 'winner' is then offered a *khada* and a *chang* by the *lheynd*.

Since its inception, the *dzumsa* also plays the role of intermediary between the different social strata and the government. It facilitates exchanges by acting as collector and distributor, notably in regard to taxes. Under the monarchy, the *pipon* collected the grazing, forest and land taxes once a year that were then handed over to the king by the new *pipon* when he presented himself after taking up office. Today, the *pipon* still collects some land tax for the government. The *dzumsa*

also serves as intermediary between the lay society and the monastery, a relation that involves a number of obligations towards both. During the important rituals, the *dzumsa* takes care of collecting the supplies necessary to prepare the *tormas* (*gtorma*) and feed the lamas. It also takes care of the annual collection of butter or *makay* (*mar skal*) to feed the monastery's butter lamps. Once a year, it collects kitchen wood from each household for the council's meeting house. Each member is to supply the prescribe quantities or pay a fine.

The *dzumsa* plays a very important role at the time of traumatic events such as death or repeated natural calamities when its solidarity function comes into full play. Death is a particularly important moment both for the concerned family and society, and the *dzumsa* offers its support to be former by monopolising the entire community. Strict rules are to be followed and each household has to contribute to the funeral by bringing, as soon as the *gyapon* has made the call, a bundle of wood for the house of the diseased (*khas shing*) and one or two logs for the funeral pyre (*ro shing*). Log and bundle sizes are checked by the *gyapon* with a bamboo ring and names are entered in the register. Since 1991, new rules regarding cremation have been put in place testifying to the evolution of the *dzumsa*. For example, in order to reduce funeral expenses, it was decided that only 15 people would help with the cremation and accompany the diseased. Workers are chosen by lot among volunteers while the rest contribute Rs25 that the *dzumsa* hands over to the family to help with expenses. In 2002, the *dzumsa* also decided that no meat or alcohol would be consumed at funerals.

The *dzumsa* is also in-charge of organising collective works undertaken for the benefit of the community. During the time of the monarchy, these were mainly concerned with the visits of high ranking civil servants or the building of communal structures such as the monastery or the *dzumsa* house. Since the establishment of the new decentralising government, more and more responsibilities are delegated to the *Dzumsa* such as the organisation of plantation works, construction of draining channels, etc. These represent an important source of income for the *dzumsa* and hence the local population. Important works intended for the benefit of the entire community are carried out jointly by all members of the village's general council and the monastery and are referred to as mandatory and non-excusable. Every household has to participate and absences are severely penalised. In the case of smaller tasks, such as the construction of welcome gates

or the sweeping of streets prior to the visit of high ranking officials, a small number of workers are selected by lot.

The *dzumsa* of Lachen has always carried out a certain number of economic functions and played an important role in the organisation of traditional activities. In order to coordinate the community's efforts and give everyone the time to repair the fences that will protect their crops from the animals that roam freely throughout the entire territory, the *dzumsa* sets the sowing and harvesting dates for the different levels of the valley, especially for the village of Lachen and the hamlets located to the north of Samdong. In order to favour the re-growth of the grass, the *dzumsa* also sets the dates for moving the herds and determines the altitude below which the animals are not allowed to graze during the summer months. It sets the dates for bringing in the hay from public lands in order to give everyone the opportunity to put up adequate winter reserves.

*Adapting to emerging challenges: the new roles of the dzumsa*

Even since Sikkim joined the Indian Union, the *dzumsa's* responsibilities have not ceased to evolve and the original system has shown a high level of flexibility and adaptability when faced with new economic and political situations. The challenges have indeed changed, and the *dzumsa's* position as a viable institution is constantly being re-evaluated.

On the economic front, the *dzumsa* now has additional duties. Sikkim merger with India and the closure of the Chinese border have caused a number of changes in traditional activities that were then primarily centred around agro-pastoral activities and trade. The Lachenpas used to barter wood and oranges originating from Sikkim's lower regions for Tibetan barley since the locally produced quantities were insufficient. With the establishment of an Indian bureaucracy, the local population found itself stripped of certain rights, notably that of managing its own territory and its resources. For example, pressure from the army has gradually and continuously reduced the extent of the territory exploited by the people of Lachen, and the government restricted access to protected forests and the gathering of minor forest products and medicinal plants. As a result, the people of Lachen have had to look for alternative sources of income and re-orient their activities. Today, most households still practice agro-pastoralism and agriculture as their basic economic activity but all are also investing in

new economic ventures such as tourism, contract work, employment with the government or the army, etc.

In response to this changing economic landscape, the *dzumsa* adapted itself by implementing a number of measures allowing it to take advantage of the situation. For example, it has put into place a very strict system for the allotment of government jobs that do not require a qualification beyond Class X - such as electrician or watchman -, or for the allotment of government contracts that are auctioned during the meetings of the village's general council. Contract go to the highest bidder, whether a layman or a lama, although they cannot be given to non-*dzumsa* members. Once a contract has been allotted, the successful contractor must quickly deposit the due sum in exchange of which the *lheynga* issues a certificate or agreement (*gan rgya*) in order to protect him from any extortion attempts. The entire sum is paid into the communal *dzumsa* account which, as we will see, will be equally redistributed among members of the general village council, including the lamas.

The *dzumsa* has also implemented a business tax. Every year, at the time of *Drug ko tshes bzhi* - one of the annual Buddhist festivals held during the summer -, it collects a tax on shops, gaming parlours and cinemas that varies depending on the size and revenue of the business and which is paid into the communal *dzumsa* account. Since 1985, it has also been setting the price of certain local products, particularly butter, cheese and livestock in order to protect the poorer members of the community. Before this measure was put into place, prices were sometimes very high for the profit of the rich who produced a surplus and to the detriment of the poor who were forced to buy from them<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the already mentioned redistribution role of the *dzumsa* is one of its most important. It represents a significant means of financial help for the entire community without which many households would find themselves in difficulty. This redistribution role is relatively recent and came with the changes previously discussed. The money collected from auction sales, taxes and fines is accumulated in the *dzumsa* account and redistributed among members as need be. The

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<sup>2</sup> In most cases, the *lheynga* sets very reasonable rates: Rs150-180 for one kg of butter, Rs 120-150 for cheese compared to Rs200-250 in Gangtok. The price of a medium sized bull is set at Rs 9,000, Rs15,000 for a yak and Rs 1,800 for a sheep. These prices have not changed since 1996 and whoever tries to sell at a higher price risks a very stiff fine.

*dzumsa* of Lachen, unlike that of Lachung, does not redistribute once a year but whenever it is most required by the population, generally four or five times a year. This usually coincides with important religious or social events when people have to incur important expenses like in December before the monastic dances or in June before moving the herds or harvesting the first potatoes.

The greatest challenge for the *dzumsa* of the 21st century is met on the political front where important pressures constantly put into question the viability of the system. The greatest 'danger' comes from the intrusion of state level politics, and the *dzumsa* indeed nearly failed during Sikkim's 1999 general election. The *dzumsa* was then divided in two distinct factions, one supporting the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party and the other the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). At the time of the *lhey*na's annual elections, instead of putting aside their differences and prioritising the welfare of the whole community, each party elected its own representatives and further divided the community. Relations between households became tense with some taking radical measures against opposing families. The population remained divided for nearly a year until the next general elections with two separate *dzumsas* organising the usual activities such as sowing and moving herds, independently. Later on, the *lhey*na supporting the SDF party gained full legitimacy, and gradually, a few influential persons, saddened to see the system disintegrate, preached for a reunification which did eventually happen a few months after the elections. In order to prevent a reoccurrence of such events and protect their institution, the leaders of the *dzumsa* decided to take some measures before Sikkim's general elections of April 2004. Several motions were voted and adopted by the entire population. For example, displaying party flags in the village or talking politics during the village's general council meetings became finable offences.

### *Conclusion*

The role of indigenous political systems is increasingly being questioned by government institutions that favour uniformity within their territory. National policies have taken over and few local systems can resist the economic and political pressures. For the time being, the *dzumsa* of Lachen seems to be adapting itself and finding ways to survive the pressures of state politics; it has indeed proven itself capable of adapting to changing circumstances. Structural changes within the *dzumsa* have been numerous since Sikkim became a part of

India, and the Lachenpas seem more than ever determined to defend their interests and an institution that is so beneficial to village life. But for how long will the *dzumsa* be able to face these internal and external threats? Is this structure really indispensable and will it keep on renewing itself successfully?

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