

## The Killing Month Ritual

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I (GC) recall meeting Toni for the first time at the IATS conference in Graz, Austria. He was exceptionally supportive of a paper that I presented, which had invoked bristling criticism from a senior colleague – a rebuke that had little to do with the substance of the paper and more to do with the nuances of certain terms. Over a few beers in the pub that evening Toni resuscitated my battered confidence by explaining that academicians often get too bogged down in minutia to see the forest for the trees. I still recall Toni’s encouraging words and try to put them into practice when interacting with younger colleagues, especially those from the communities where I conduct research. My co-author, Jhangchuk Sangmo, was born in Nubri at a time when secular education was difficult to attain, especially for females. She never had the opportunity to pursue prestige-bestowing credentials or the luxury of dedicating her career to academic inquiry. Despite such obstacles, she has proven to be a first-rate researcher who has worked with not only me but also biological anthropologists Cynthia Beall and E. A. Quinn, geographer Rune Bolding Bennike, and ethnomusicologist Mason Brown to name a few. So, when asked to contribute to a Festschrift honouring Toni Huber, I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to collaborate with Jhangchuk on a study of The Killing Month, a ritual performed annually in her natal village. This paper highlights Jhangchuk’s capabilities and makes a firm statement that it is preferable to treat indigenous collaborators as colleagues and co-producers of knowledge rather than relegating them to mere “research assistant” status through a footnote acknowledgement. Thank you, Toni, for demonstrating the importance of encouraging younger scholars. Your legacy of thoughtfulness toward others has now passed down two generations. What this means, my friend, is that you are becoming old and venerated!

While traveling up the Buri Gandhaki to Nubri in 1995, a Buddhist enclave in Nepal’s highlands, we came across a man in a lowland village dressed in the distinctive red tunic worn by many Nubri residents. He sat on a grassy pasture above the trail amid a flock of sheep and goats, unglutes he was herding down valley for sale so they could be ritually sacrificed during the upcoming Hindu festival of Dasain. Unable to conceal his disgust, our companion Karma, a devout Buddhist from Nubri, spat on the ground and scolded the man for committing a great sin (*sdig pa chen po*). Selling sentient beings for slaughter contravenes the basic Buddhist tenet to refrain from killing and contradicts the Tibetan practice of *tshe thar* [saving the life (of an animal meant to be killed by others)] by facilitating rather than hindering their deaths by violent means.

This vignette alongside a mountainous trail underscores a tension that is bound to arise in a religiously pluralistic society like Nepal, a nation founded by Hindus who imposed a caste-based social hierarchy on a diverse population and came to use Dasain as one means to assert their dominance. The objectives of this paper are to document a ritual deployed by Buddhist highlanders to affirm their moral values by counteracting negative consequences associated with animal sacrifice, and to discuss an example of how people were using rituals well before the rise of Nepal's indigenous nationalities movement to symbolically resist Hindu cultural dominance.

### DASAIN AND STATE POWER

Dasain, a ten-day Hindu religious festival, is a prominent national holiday in Nepal offering a respite from work and an opportunity for families to gather. The eighth day of Dasain, Maha Astami, involves appeasing the goddess Durga through blood sacrifices that symbolize her vanquishing of demons in a mythical battle. On the final day of Dasain individuals receive a *tika* (a blessing of red powder applied to the forehead symbolizing health, prosperity, and longevity) from their head of household or an elder member of their lineage. This is also a day when political leaders, including the king in the past, give *tika* to their subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1700s Nepal's rulers have used Dasain to support their political agenda of subjugating a dispersed and diverse population. For example, when Limbus in eastern Nepal fell under the rule of the Gorkha kings they were compelled to celebrate Dasain and worship Durga; some local leaders who did not comply were reportedly hanged.<sup>2</sup> Jang Bahadur Rana (1817–1877) used Dasain as part of an attempt to civilize subjects of the kingdom by pressuring them to align with Hindu religious practices and the Hindu legal system.<sup>3</sup> Under his reign the Muluki Ain legal code, enacted in 1854, specified that all subjects of Nepal should participate in Dasain.<sup>4</sup> This became a time for subordinates to affirm allegiance to their overlord, whether the King of Nepal or a local leader vested with the power of the state.<sup>5</sup> As Gellner notes, “The close connection between the worship of Durga and the successful maintenance of power may be illustrated by the fact that every police station in Nepal has a small Durga shrine outside it”.<sup>6</sup> In effect, Nepal's leaders used Dasain to display and exert their authority over the populace, many of whom observed religions other than Hinduism.

<sup>1</sup> Bennett 1983: 140–41, 263–74; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993; Gellner 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Tumbahang 2011: 22.

<sup>3</sup> van Ede 2001: 59.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner 2005: 767.

<sup>5</sup> Macdonald 1987; Holmberg 1989; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993; Ramirez 1993; Sagant 1996; Hangen 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Gellner 1999: 147.

With the rise of ethnic politics and the indigenous nationalities (*adivasi janajati*) movement, many people began to resent Dasain as a manifestation of high-caste oppression they had been forced to adopt and to discard the festival in favour of what they viewed as more authentic, primordial traditions.<sup>7</sup> Rejecting Dasain became an overtly political act. The Mongol National Organization, which sought to unite various ethnic groups based on a common racial identity and history of oppression, took a leading role.<sup>8</sup> For some Gurungs the boycott was a strategy to distinguish themselves as non-Hindus by returning to their “own religion” (*aphno dharma*), Buddhism, and thereby revert to a previous identity that had been subordinated under pressure from an authoritarian regime. Magar activists seeking an alternative to Hinduism began to adopt Buddhist life-cycle rituals. Ex-Gorkha soldiers in Oxford who are mainly Gurung and Magar modified their Dasain celebrations as a “way of symbolizing their rejection of the hegemonic Hindu order that placed them in a debased position”. Tamangs began resisting the caste hierarchy after they gained some political clout in the 1980s. In Melamchi, Tamangs quit celebrating Dasain altogether in the early 2000s, while the All India Tamang Buddhist Association instructed members living in Sikkim to refrain from celebrating Dasain.<sup>9</sup> Even some Maoists during the height of the insurgency developed a counter-narrative to the story of Durga’s triumph over demons by interpreting the tale as representing the state’s suppression of the masses.<sup>10</sup>

Rejecting Dasain is a relatively recent trend spurred by the indigenous nationalities movement. Meanwhile, in the Buddhist border regions of Nepal, where many communities are of Tibetan origin or share cultural similarities with their neighbours to the north, a more subtle form of resistance has been playing out for over a century. Residents of highland areas, far from the direct scrutiny of their overlords, have been devising rituals to counter what they view as Dasain’s morally problematic dimension – the ritual slaughtering of animals. Granted, Tibetan societies have an ambivalent history regarding ritual violence and bloodshed, and animal sacrifice has

<sup>7</sup> Yakharai 1996; Bhatta 2003; cited in Hangen 2013; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Hangen 2013: 122. Influenced by the Mongol National Organization, the Sherpa cleric Thubten Lama claims a Mongol racial identity for his people, and because Nepal’s rulers are originally from India states that, “Nepal is in fact an undeclared Buddhist country whose people have been suppressed by ‘imperialist Hindus’” (Lama 1999: 24). He laments that some Sherpas have assimilated to broader Nepali society, and advises such people “to repent for not following Sherpa tradition and to pick up the old customs without hesitation” (Lama 1999: 33). The first person thanked in the preface to his book is Gopal Gurung, founder of the Mongol National Organization.

<sup>9</sup> Hangen 2013; Gellner and Karki 2007; Pariyar et al. 2014: 140; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2003; Pokharel 2010: 81; Tamang and Sithou 2018: 38.

<sup>10</sup> Fujikara 2003: 27. Dasain is not the only ritual context used by marginalized peoples of Nepal to resist state power. See Holmberg on the Tamang Chhechu ritual’s effect of forging a collectivity “in opposition to the official administration and in negation of the extractive regime it represented” (2000: 941).

been part of syncretistic religious practices in Buddhist societies for centuries.<sup>11</sup> But in Nubri's Buddhist society, which had been governed by Tibet prior to the 1850s, the Killing Month Ritual described below became a means to express opposition to ceremonial bloodletting and, perhaps, to subjugation by Hindu rulers.

### THE KILLING MONTH RITUAL

In 1856 Nubri was incorporated into the Kingdom of Nepal following a war with Tibet. Kathmandu's rulers posted a *subba* to Nubri, a man of Thakuri background tasked with collecting taxes and dispensing justice on behalf of the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> According to the sons of Tsewang Norbu (1927–1971), the last *subba*, who lost power during the 1960s transition to the panchayat system of governance, their ancestors were Hindus who annually sacrificed a lamb during Dasain upon a large rock overlooking their former administrative headquarters in the village of Namdru. Nubri's residents were compelled to receive *tika* from the *subba* to signify their subordination to the kingdom. But eventually the situation turned as the *subbas* assimilated to Nubri's Buddhist society. A shift in religious orientation occurred during the lifetimes of the Subba Tsangpa (1870s to late 1940s) and his son Tsering Yungdrung (1901–1949). Tsangpa befriended a visiting lama from Derge, Eastern Tibet, who convinced him to replace Hindu practices with Buddhist rituals. Although a precise dating is uncertain, this probably occurred during the first or sec-

<sup>11</sup> Dalton 2011. Tibetan manuscripts found in Dunhuang refer to ritual specialists (*bon* and *gshen*) during the time of the Tibetan Empire who sacrificed sheep and horses to guide the deceased into the afterlife as well as Buddhist attempts to do away with such practices (Stein 1970; 1971; cited in Kapstein and Dotson 2007). Archaeological evidence confirms that Tibetans did indeed sacrifice animals as part of funerals (Aldenderfer 2013). Treaties between Tibet and China during the 8th and 9th centuries included animal sacrifices alongside Buddhist rituals (Snellgrove and Richardson 1980: 93; van Schaik 2011: 45–46). With the ascension of Buddhism, animal sacrifice was generally replaced by rituals that evoked but did not involve actual killing (Dalton 2011), yet replacements and bans did not reach all corners of the Tibetan Buddhist world. In Khumbo society a *lha bon* sacrifices black goats which are first offered to a mountain deity before being shared among ritual participants (Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 264–65). Just to the north in Kharta and Dingri animal sacrifice was “a deeply rooted albeit controversial practice”; attempts by Buddhist lamas to ban the practice were not always successful (Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 266–67; see also Childs 1997). Some communities situated at the geographical periphery of Tibetan societies melded Buddhist practices and animal sacrifice into syncretistic religious systems (Holmberg 1989; Balikci 2008; Erschbamer 2019), some of which are being transformed by the rising influence of Buddhist ethical perspectives on killing (Torri 2016).

<sup>12</sup> According to Snellgrove, the term Thakuri derives from the Sanskrit term *thakkura*, which means “lord”, and “was originally a title claimed by warriors of lordly rank” (1989: 19). As Hindu “wearers of the holy cord” (*tāgādhāri*) they rank just below Brahmins and ahead of all other Chhetri groups in Nepal's complex caste system. Nepal's pre-1990 constitution stipulated that the King of Nepal must be a Thakuri member of the ruling Shah dynasty (Sharma 1978: 2; Höfer 1979: 7–9; Whelpton 2005: 10–11). See Childs and Choedup 2019 for more details on Nubri's *subba*.

ond decade of the 20th century. Thereafter the Hindu ritual of Dasain that included an animal sacrifice was replaced by a Buddhist ritual which was also called Dasain, but the Tibetan spelling (*zla gsad mchod pa*; the Killing Month Ritual) indicates that it took on an entirely different meaning.

The Killing Month Ritual in Trok Village, Nubri is one of sixteen annual rites designed to safeguard the health and welfare of the community's residents. Whereas the other annual rites are conducted on specific dates according to the Tibetan calendar, the Killing Month Ritual shifts each year to coincide with the Hindu Dasain festival. To fund the ritual, the Subba Tsering Yungdrung took the budget previously devoted to the Dasain sacrifice and divided it up as a loan to all households in Trok. Subsequently, each household has the obligation to repay an interest fee of 33% per annum in grain which is collected and used to prepare arak (a locally distilled beverage) and food for the ritual's participants.<sup>13</sup>

An "interest document" (*bed yig*)<sup>14</sup> was drafted during the time of Tsering Yungdrung. It is still used today and is periodically updated (most recently in 2019). The interest document identifies each household's original grain loan (*dnegos*), and the amount that must be repaid annually as interest (*skyed*) to support the Killing Month Ritual (see tab. 1). A *drong chen* ("large household") is typically headed by a younger or middle-aged man and comprised of two or more generations of family members. A *pho rang mo rang* ("solitary male, solitary female") household consists of elderly people who have transferred most of their fields and cattle to a successor so they can live in semi-retirement. In both cases the annual interest repayment is one-third the amount of the original loan; all units of measurement are in 'bre.<sup>15</sup>

household type	loan (dnegos)	repayment (skyed)	households	Total
drong chen	2 'bre	2/3 'bre	39	26 'bre
pho rang mo rang	1 'bre	1/3 'bre	18	6 'bre
<b>total</b>			57	32 'bre

Tab. 1. Household Assessments. 2020 © Geoff Childs

The interest document also specifies the amount of grain to be collected on a few parcels of land owned by the village *gomba* and sharecropped by various households (see tab. 2).

<sup>13</sup> This is the customary way rituals are funded in Trok. For more details see Childs and Choedrup 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Usually spelled *sbad yig* or *rbad yig* in the unconventional orthography of village Nubri.

<sup>15</sup> The basic unit of measurement is 'bre, a standardized wooden cup which equals in volume one 'bre of grain. The unit of measurement for a field size is also called 'bre, or the size of a parcel of land on which one 'bre of grain is sown.

gomba field name	field size	grain owed
Kyus	3 'bre	3 'bre
tang lang mtha' ma	4 'bre	4 'bre
ta dkar 4 'bre 44 'bre		
dong ra	3 'bre	(7) 'bre
ga sa ra dong	2 'bre	22 'bre
<b>totals</b>	16 'bre	73 'bre

Tab. 2. Gomba Field Assessments. 2020 © Geoff Childs

From table 2 we learn that produce from five sharecropped *gomba* fields is used to support the ritual. Fields often come into *gomba* possession when they are bequeathed by elderly people who have no heirs or who want to generate merit by supporting religious institutions. These fields are then sharecropped by households who own insufficient land to meet their subsistence needs. A specified portion of the crop – regardless of yield – is requisitioned by the *gomba*, but that amount varies according to field quality and other factors. For two of the fields listed in table 1 (*kyus* and *tang lang mtha' ma*) one measure of grain is handed over for each measure of grain that is planted, whereas for two others (*ta dkar* and *ga sa ra dong*) the ratio is ten measures of grain given for each measure planted. The requisition from one field, *dong ra*'s seven 'bre, is circled, meaning that the grain is no longer collected to support the Killing Month Ritual.<sup>16</sup>

The loan and repayment system is a reliable means to secure funding for the ritual because it generates far more interest than the original advance. For example, after twelve years a large household will have repaid eight 'bre of grain, or four times the original loan amount. Furthermore, the number of households in the village tends to remain constant whereas *gomba* fields are often left fallow when not needed. Nevertheless, *gomba* fields account for 73 out of 105 'bre (roughly 70%) of the annual grain procurement for the Killing Month Ritual.

The interest document includes details on the timing of the ritual, including the stipulation, "The tenth day of the Killing Month Ritual must be coordinated with Dasain [as practiced by] lowlanders. Everyone must assemble at the ritual place for two days starting on the tenth [of the month]."<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Killing Month Ritual

<sup>16</sup> The interest document for another ritual specifies that twelve measures of grain will be collected from the yield on this field, so it is not fallow.

<sup>17</sup> *zla gsad kri ka 'go dus gyu la 'grong chen dang pho rang mo rang mtshang ma la bre re re bdus gos yod/ zla gsad tshes bcu mchod pa rong pa zla gzad dang snyams 'byor brtsugs gos yod/ chos gnas bcu gcig zhag gnyis bar 'du tshog gos yod/ zla gsad mar tsa bre 55 gnyer pa rim bzhin rtsis sprod byed gos yod/*



takes two full days and one morning to complete and requires eleven practitioners (*mchod pa*) and nine assistants (*gnyer pa*). It begins with one person reciting 108 times a prayer to Drolma, the beginning of which is found in the interest document and reads:

The jewelled crowns of the gods and demigods,  
Bow down to your lotus feet.  
You who free all beings from trouble and misfortune,  
To you I prostrate, Mother Drolma.<sup>18</sup>

The focus on Drolma, the saviouress, makes sense from a Tibetan cultural perspective. She is commonly invoked by people of all social strata who seek protection from calamities and misfortunes.<sup>19</sup> According to Sherab and Dongyal,

From the moment you start praying to and practicing Tara [Drolma], your life will be always under the protection of the Great Mother. From then on rebirth in the lower realms will be prevented. If you do this prayer for others, it will bring them the same benefits; it will protect them in their lifetimes as well as uproot future births in the lower realms.<sup>20</sup>

The crux of the ritual centres on the making of four mandalas that are offered to Drolma.<sup>21</sup> The same mandalas offered to Drolma are made when a person is on the verge of dying in the belief that doing so prolongs the person's life, which indicates that the Killing Month Ritual is associated with lifesaving (*tshe srung*) endeavours. According to ritual officiants, the main purpose of the Killing Month Ritual is to pray for the animals sacrificed to the Hindu goddess Durga so they can experience a favourable reincarnation by avoiding rebirth in the hell realms. According to Sherab and Dongyal (see quote above), this is precisely one of the forms of protection Dolma can provide. The ontological emphasis therefore is on mitigating the negative effects of a sentient being's violent death rather than attempting to prolong its life.

At the end of the second day all villagers assemble at the village temple and are given *tika* and *arak*. The solemn rite then turns into festive merriment that lasts into the morning. The *tika* is a throwback to previous days when the *subba* would give

<sup>18</sup> People refer to the prayer as Drolma kyandro (sgrol ma skyabs 'gro), "taking refuge in Drolma". This section of the interest document reads: *lha dang lha min cog pan gyis/zhabs kyi padma'i las 'khrungs zhing/ 'phongs pa kun las sgrol mdzad ma/ sgrol ma yum la phyag 'tshal bstod/*. This seems to be an excerpt from "the short Green Tara prayer of two stanzas found in The Blessing Treasure: A Liturgy of the Buddha (thub chog byin rlabs gter mdzod)", which reads, *om po ta la yi gnas mchog nas/ tham yig 'jang khu las 'khrungs shing/ tham yig 'od kyis 'gro ba sgrol/ sgrol ma 'khor bcas gshegs su gsol/ lha dang lha min cod phan gyis/ zhabs kyi padmo la btud cing/ phongs pa kun las sgrol mdzad ma/ sgrol ma yum la phyag 'tshal bstod/* (Sherab and Dongyal 2007: 188–90).

<sup>19</sup> Beyer 1973.

<sup>20</sup> Sherab and Dongyal 2007: 182.

<sup>21</sup> See Beyer 1973: 143–226.





the blessing to his underlings thereby symbolizing his superior status as an official of the kingdom. However, nowadays a *nyerpa* rather than a political leader places butter rather than red powder on a recipient's forehead. People see the bestowing of *tika* as an acknowledgement of their status as citizens of Nepal and a nod of respect to Nepali culture. Today's Killing Month Ritual therefore resembles Russell's point that Dasain can be used by indigenous groups to signal both Nepali identity and ethnic distinctiveness.<sup>22</sup>

### THE MORALITY OF LIBERATING VERSUS KILLING

To refrain from harming other beings is a core tenet of Buddhism. It therefore comes as no surprise that Nepal's Buddhist highlanders are troubled by the sheer volume of animal sacrifice that occurs during Dasain. Tibetans recognize that animals, as sentient beings, have emotions and are capable of suffering just like humans. This has led to a long-standing debate on the moral status of animals,<sup>23</sup> as illustrated by the recent endeavours of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö, an influential cleric in eastern Tibet. To dissuade fellow Tibetans from selling their livestock for slaughter because doing so generates immense suffering, he disseminated posters of animals appealing to humans through the caption, "Friends, please stop eating our meat. Because of slaughter for our meat, we live in tremendous fear of being killed".<sup>24</sup> Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's appeal is reminiscent of Jigme Lingpa's (1730–1785) reflections on the torment animals experience at the hands of a butcher.

Having now become animals, your fathers, mothers, siblings and friends from previous lives tremble with fear in the butcher's sinful hands, tears streaming from their eyes, and panting for breath. In that state they wonder what to do. Alas, there is no refuge! There is nowhere to go! Thinking that, right now in this place, they may be killed, their urgent suffering is great. In such a state, like one approaching a terrifying pit of hell-fire, their body is turned upside down, their muzzle is tied up, and their eyes move wildly with lights shining forth. What they see is their stomach being opened up. With their feet perpendicular, they are set on the path to the next life without even a quiver.<sup>25</sup>

Proclamations against violence do not mean Tibetans inevitably avoid causing injury to all sentient beings. Understanding the realities of subsistence, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö advocates for humane slaughtering techniques when nomads need to kill livestock for meat.<sup>26</sup> On a more day-to-day basis, Tibetans acknowledge that essential

<sup>22</sup> Russell 2004: 257–58.

<sup>23</sup> See Barstow 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Gayley 2017: 30.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Barstow 2019: 8.

<sup>26</sup> Gayley 2017.



economic activities, like ploughing the earth, wreak havoc on soil-dwelling critters. This is a reason why laypeople often try to counterbalance a sinful action (*sdig pa*) with a meritorious one (*dge ba*), for example by chanting a mantra at the completion of each furrow while ploughing. Even hunters who deliberately kill wild animals feel they can atone for their negative actions through ritual actions.<sup>27</sup>

In order to better understand the intent of the Killing Month Ritual we asked participants whether it is connected to the concept of *tshé thar* [saving the life (of an animal meant to be killed by others)].<sup>28</sup> One man responded, “In the past our ancestors sacrificed animals like other Hindus, so when they replaced Dasain with this ritual many animals’ lives were saved which is a form of *tshé thar*”. However, others pointed out that the Killing Month Ritual is fundamentally different from *tshé thar* because the purpose is not to save the lives of animals destined for slaughter – an impossible task for a small, politically weak group of Buddhists dwelling far removed from the levers of power. The animals’ lives are destined to end in ritualized butchery despite any moral objections they may hold. Rather, the point of the ritual is to generate merit for the animals so they can have a more favourable rebirth, a future-oriented salvation objective.

The Killing Month Ritual fits loosely within the same moral realm as “sealing decrees” (*ri rgya klung rgya sdom pa; sha rgya*), which include prohibitions on hunting and the killing of domesticated animals.<sup>29</sup> In Tsum, such decrees were issued in part to exert control over transgressions committed by outsiders, including representatives of Nepal’s government. Amendments to the original 1921 proclamation specify that nobody is permitted to barter animals to other regions where they would “face certain death”, a prohibition apparently meant to thwart the selling of livestock down valley prior to Dasain.<sup>30</sup> Whereas sealing decrees are pre-emptive measures designed to discourage people from committing acts of aggression against animals in areas controlled by Buddhists, the Killing Month Ritual acknowledges the inevitability of the slaughter in territories beyond Buddhist control while attempting to alleviate post-mortem consequences. Nubri residents’ transformation of a Hindu sacrifice to a Buddhist ritual thereby suggests that it is a non-confrontational

<sup>27</sup> Huber 2004a: 37–38.

<sup>28</sup> *Tshé thar* is the practice of liberating an animal that would otherwise suffer, a custom that may pre-date Buddhism in China but became subsumed under the umbrella of Buddhist morality and practice (Shiu and Stokes 2008). *Tshé thar* has been described among Tibetan nomadic societies (Holler 2002; Thargyal 2007; Tan 2016), from the perspective of a cleric in eastern Tibet (Gayley 2017), and in Nubri (Childs 2004). *Tshé thar* involves offering a “life yak” (*tshé g.yag*) to local protector deities, which is permitted to roam free until dying of natural causes. The most auspicious time to do so is Sagadawa, the birth month of the Buddha (Holler 2002: 208). It is a means to demonstrate compassion and generate merit (Tan 2016: 4) and is one of several rituals designed to substitute for animal sacrifice (Holler 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Huber 2004a: 39–40; 2004b: 132–33; Plachta 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Plachta 2018: 152.

form of resistance against political domination by people with a different cultural orientation.

### ETHNIC POLITICS, REVISITED

In the current atmosphere of ethnic politics, it is tempting to analyse today's Killing Month Ritual as aligned with challenges to the nexus of state power and Hindu religious hegemony arising from the indigenous nationalities movement. But such an interpretation is problematic for three reasons. First, the ritual predates the 1990s ascent of the movement. Second, Nubri's *subba* – a Thakuri who embodied state power – was instrumental in ridding the ritual of animal sacrifice and transforming it into a Buddhist rite. He even helped ensure its longevity by creating the long-term funding mechanism. Third, nowadays the residents of Trok do not see their ritual as a challenge to state power. No doubt, as Shneiderman remarks with respect to Thangmi communities, they are able to express their identity through “ritualized actions carried out within a broader discursive context created by political, economic, or other kinds of external agendas”.<sup>31</sup> The broader context in which the Killing Month Ritual arose includes the Buddhist region's incorporation into a Hindu polity and subordination to a representative of the state who carried out rituals considered to be morally repugnant. However, unlike Shneiderman's points about certain Thangmi performances, the Killing Month Ritual is not “mounted for express consumption” by external agents including government and NGO representatives.<sup>32</sup> Participants and audience members are almost exclusively Trok residents. When we asked if any government officials had ever expressed concerns over the ritual, our respondents scoffed at the question because few outsiders ever witness it.

Whether the Killing Month Ritual represents an earlier manifestation of resistance to a caste hierarchy and legal system that in many ways was inconsonant with local cultural norms is difficult to determine with the evidence on hand. At the very least, it is possible to assert that it is a means for Trok's residents to affirm commitment to basic Buddhist tenets that stand in opposition to Dasain's animal sacrifices, and by extension to affirm their identity as highlanders who are culturally affiliated with the Tibetan Buddhist world. Perhaps the origin of the ritual is even associated with a broader movement to contest Dasain as an extension of state power by opposing, on moral grounds, Hindu animal sacrifices. For example, the Killing Month Ritual has also been undertaken in Tsum and Dolpo for decades,<sup>33</sup> so Trok's version is not an anomaly. Furthermore, in Gyasumdo in the early 1980s Tibetans were conducting a fasting ceremony during Dasain to transfer merit to

<sup>31</sup> Shneiderman 2015: 37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Personal communications with Dhawa Gyanjen and Tashi Tewa.

the dispatched animals. We do not learn when the ceremony came into being or if it originated in opposition to the state – only that one intent was to “protest the animal sacrifices being performed in the [surrounding] Gurung villages”.<sup>34</sup> Tamangs in Rasuwa District attribute their buffalo sacrifice during Dasain to a command of the state yet recognize it as inherently sinful, so the day after killing the bovine they perform a funeral for the animal on the grounds that doing so “makes the sin go away”. The enactment of Dasain, Campbell argues, “provided a stage for playing out political tensions”,<sup>35</sup> which brings to mind Shneiderman’s observation, “What appear as rituals of subordination on a superficial level are in fact a fundamental aspect of the production of an agentive Thangmi ethnic consciousness”.<sup>36</sup> In the 1970s Sherpas were conducting a ritual during Dasain to “offset with meritorious work some of the tremendous sins” generated by the widespread slaughter.<sup>37</sup> Although Paul does not delve into the origins of the ritual, van Ede claims that a Sherpa *na rag* ritual in Bigu, which is held at the same time as Dasain, was initiated to challenge political and economic domination by recent settlers who were high-caste Hindu representatives of the state.<sup>38</sup>

The prevalence of the Killing Month Ritual and similar rites in Nepal’s Buddhist highlands suggests that they are somehow connected, and that their core ideas could have disseminated through the well-documented Buddhist networks in the region.<sup>39</sup> It also suggests that they represent an assertion of Buddhist identity by marginalized groups who were not content to be relegated to an inferior ontological status yet had few means to express their dissatisfaction. While direct challenges to state power can lead to violent retribution, the intentions of a ritual can be framed in benign moral terms, akin to a “hidden transcript” by the relatively powerless against the powerful.<sup>40</sup> The origins and deeper meanings of rituals like the Killing Month are therefore fertile ground for investigating historical relationships between Nepal’s power brokers and peripheral communities, or in other words, the manifestation of ethnic politics before the rise of today’s indigenous nationalities movement.

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<sup>34</sup> Mumford 1989: 113.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell 1995: 135–38.

<sup>36</sup> Shneiderman 2005: 7.

<sup>37</sup> Paul 1982: 98.

<sup>38</sup> van Ede 2001.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Huber and Blackburn 2012; Ehrhard 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Scott 1990.

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