

# Flying Conches in the High-Altitude Oceans of the Himalayas: Displaced Objects and Multiscalar Relations in the Mountains of Sikkim

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## Introduction

- 1 In 1986, a road construction crew in rural west Sikkim detonated a small charge of dynamite in the side of a hill near Sindrang (Classical Tibetan/ Bhutia: *Zin da rang*) village.<sup>1</sup> They were clearing the way for a road to connect the villages of west Sikkim with the district headquarters at Gyalshing (Classical Tibetan. Bhutia: *Rgyal shing*), and beyond with the national highway that connected the small state with the plains of mainland India.<sup>2</sup> The crew were shocked to discover an unexpected and incongruous object lodged in the rocks and mud: a large, white conch. Even more strange was the behavior of the white conch. As they moved to dislodge it, it suddenly rose from the earth of its own volition and flew away, in the direction of Mount Kanchendzonga (Classical Tibetan/ Bhutia: *Gangs chen mdzod lnga*), the mighty protector deity mountain who presides over the valleys of west Sikkim. The workers gaped at each other, and several began to pray. The road construction workers, who all lived in the village where they were building the road, interpreted the appearance of the conch and its abrupt departure as a significant event and a portent for things to come.
- 2 Their interpretation of the conch was based on historical experience, for in the Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas, conches fly with surprising frequency. Several historical records of monasteries mention flying conches appearing at crucial moments in their histories.<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Anna Balikci was told about a conch that flew out from



Fig. 1 Image of Sindrang road in 2021. Photo by Chopel Dorjee Bhutia.

the lake at Tingchim (Classical Tibetan/Bhutia: *Ting chim*) village and took off in the direction of Kanchendzonga in 1958, when the road between Gangtok (Classical Tibetan/ Bhutia: *Sgang stog*) and Mangan (Classical Tibetan/ Bhutia: *Man sgang*) was under construction.<sup>4</sup> What unites these tales of out-of-place marine animals that behave strangely is their appearance at times of environmental change. Flying conches are interpreted in local Buddhist cosmologies as signs of human intervention into the habitats of other nonhuman species, and their appearance and airborne behavior foreshadow a disturbance in the balance of the five elements—earth, air, space, fire, and water—as they are conceptualized on the Tibetan plateau and in surrounding areas of the Himalayas. The balance of the elements is what allows Sikkim, and its multispecies inhabitants, to maintain health and prosperity across dimensions.

- 3 Conch shells, most commonly from the sea snail *Turbinella pyrum*, frequently appear as objects on shrines and in religiously inspired artwork in the region.<sup>5</sup> In the case of physical shells, these conches come from the Indian Ocean through trade networks or are believed to have been discovered in fossilized forms in the mountains. More recently, other types of shells have been brought from other regions around the world as a reflection of the globalization of Himalayan religions.<sup>6</sup> Their frequent appearance in material culture and invocation in Classical Tibetan-language literary culture is indicative of a rich repository of connections and associations. However, these conches are not often depicted in their airborne aspect, which points to the significance of this unusual behavior for the out-of-place object found during road construction near Sindrang village. This essay will explore some of the many resonances of conches—including as symbols of the ocean, instruments, and as objects that stimulate different forms of sensory engagement—as gateways for appreciating the significance of the flying conch and its distinctive call as indicators of ecological change and of interdimensional relationships in the Sikkimese and Darjeeling Himalayas. It will draw on ethnographic and textual research in the region by the two authors as part of larger projects related to religion and ecology. The area of Sindrang village is made up of predominantly Lepcha (in their own language, Rong) and Bhutia (in their own language, Lhopo) ethnic communities who are mostly Buddhist. Ethnographic research was based within these communities, but we emphasize that conches are considered significant across multiple communities and cosmologies. The cross-cultural significance of conches makes them an especially salient site for thinking through connections between different species and dimensions during times of global ecological transformation brought by climate change and infrastructural development.

### **Fossils in the Third Pole: Flying Conches as Arbiters of Ecological Change**

- 4 The flying conch seen in Sindrang in 1986 was interpreted by local communities as indicative of broader, multiscale changes taking place in the environment in Sikkim. On the one hand, the flight of the conch from the side of the hill in Sindrang was localized, and understood by locals as having taken place in response to the installation of infrastructure with the building of the vehicular road to the village for the first time. Shifting even further back, the appearance of the conch in the mountains was seen by Buddhist authorities as connecting to 65 million years ago, when Tibet and the

Himalayas were under the Tethys Ocean.<sup>7</sup> Fossils from the time, including shells, are found throughout the Tibetan plateau and Himalayan region, and are considered to be sacred objects (Classical Tibetan: *rten*). Oral and written Tibetan-language sources connected to Buddhist traditions throughout the Himalayas also acknowledge and celebrate this past. Traditional religious histories (Classical Tibetan: *chos'byung*) and guidebooks to the sacred geographies (Classical Tibetan: *gnas yig*) often mention Tibet's ancient history as an ocean.<sup>8</sup> Oceans, and the marine mammal of the conch, are therefore not just metaphorically loaded, but also connect to long-term historical processes.

5 Why do conches, marine animals, appear so often in the Himalayan mountains? Part of this is because of their association with oceans, which have remained deep metaphorical repositories for knowledge in Buddhist cosmologies. In Tibetan-language literature and culture, oceans commonly appear in literary and philosophical texts. The significance of oceanic imagery can be understood from the use of the term “Dalai” in the Dalai Lama’s title. This label was originally bestowed by the Mongols to a previous Dalai Lama. Dalai means ocean, and represented the respect and breadth of wisdom he was held to have by his patrons, and which subsequent Dalai Lamas are still held to have by Buddhists in the region. Part of the reason why oceans appear so frequently in Buddhist cosmologies can be explained by the Buddhist cultural connections between Tibet and South Asia, where oceans were part of daily life and important conduits for the spread of Buddhism and other South Asian-derived religious traditions into other parts of Asia.<sup>9</sup> Another reason for the common use of oceans as a metaphor or image is their connection with vastness. The unboundedness of the ocean made it a salient way to invoke ideas, aspirations, or sentiments that were beyond conception; Buddhists hoped to gain an ocean of merit, or an ocean of wisdom, or an ocean of blessings. The connection of oceans with vastness also explains the fecundity of oceanic imagery in intellectual discussions and knowledge traditions, especially in historical and philosophical genres.<sup>10</sup>

6 In addition to their vastness, oceans are interpreted as mothers, or originators, as reflected in their significance in several creation stories in South Asian traditions. In Robert Beer’s exhaustive compendium of Tibetan symbols, he discusses the significance of the *Vishnu Purana* that was absorbed by Tibetan tradition, and outlines its contents:

The gods, having grown weary of their interminable enmity with the demons or anti-gods (*asuras*), approached Vishnu for the boon of immortality. Vishnu counseled the gods to seek cooperation with the asuras to churn the great ocean together, which would reveal the gems, herbs, and nectar of immortality (*amrita*) hidden within its depths. With the help of the creator god Brahma, and the great serpent Vasuki, they were able to uproot the vast mountain Mandara to use as a churning stick.<sup>11</sup>

7 The chaos following the churning of the ocean brought forth many elements of the universe, including medicine. This story is foundational to Tibetan medicine, as it describes the origins of Tibetan-language medical traditions and materia medica that are held by practitioners of this tradition to have been derived from the deep ocean.<sup>12</sup>

This narrative also connects to other shared South Asian traditions around connections between the deities and the ocean. The oceans are inhabited by powerful beings, often categorized as *naga* (Tibetan: *klu*), aquatic spirits also found in inland waterbodies, who are considered guardians of riches under the sea.<sup>13</sup>

- 8 Another part of the sacredness of conches is derived from their status as objects out of place and out of time. These objects connect high altitude ecological cultures with oceans from the ancient past, thereby creating interspecies, trans-ecological bonds across scales from the contemporary depths of the oceans to the memories of high-altitude oceans in the mountains. Anthropologist Holly Walters has noted in her study of sacred fossil ammonites called Shaligrams among Hindu communities around the world that part of the power of the Shaligram comes from their position as “symbolic manifestations of divine movement, either through a geologically and mythologically formative journey down the sacred river (which runs from the Southern Tibetan plateau down through central Nepal and into Northern India) or transnationally in the hands of devout pilgrims.”<sup>14</sup> Shaligrams are considered to be “natural manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu” since they are “not human-made and ultimately demonstrate their own agency” as their appearance has geological and spiritual significance.<sup>15</sup> Movement and connection, then, link the religious efficacy of shells and fossils in the Himalayas across religious traditions.
- 9 The power of out of place objects has recently been discussed in museum studies. In her study of Burmese court objects in museums in England and Myanmar, museum studies scholar Sandra Dudley defines “displacement” by considering its Middle French linguistic “ancestor” *desplacer*, which has “connotations of traveling between one place and another and even of connecting the two. This articulates the fluidity of displacement as it is experienced not only by forced migrants but also by their possessions. . . . By anything, in other words, that has moved from its original location.”<sup>16</sup> Conches are displaced from their original home, the ocean, through trade networks; however, at times they are also found in the mountains, as lasting vestiges of deep histories. The movement of an object may “still be in process” and be temporal and spatial, resulting in “breaches between places, moments, objects and people,” but its “mutability also means that ruptures can be transferred and connections reforged.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of flying conches, the reforging of connections comes from the deep and complex metaphorical and actual significance ascribed to conches in the Himalayas, and in other parts of the world where Buddhist communities that practice forms of Buddhism that draw on Classical Tibetan-language texts and lineages dwell. Despite the high altitude of these regions, oceanic imagery is pervasive in Classical Tibetan-language literature, and conches are a frequently used literary image and actual object in Buddhist institutions.

### **Flying Conches as Indicators of Interdimensional Balance: Ecologies of Buddhism in Sikkim**

- 10 High in the Himalayas, conches are out of place as connections to the ocean. However, they have a significant role in local Buddhist cosmologies and as indicators of interdimensional balance. These cosmologies are based on prophetic texts and

guidebooks that are dated to the eighth century CE. In historical Classical Tibetan-language Buddhist texts that date back to Sikkim's early history preceding its absorption into India in 1975, Sikkim was represented as a Hidden Land (Classical Tibetan: *sbas yul*). A Hidden Land was a region especially set aside for Buddhist practice by Guru Rinpoche, the popular saintly figure who promulgated Tantric Buddhism throughout the Tibetan plateau and in surrounding areas of the Himalayas in the eighth century CE. During the Guru's travels, he left behind Treasures (Classical Tibetan: *gter ma*) and prophesied that in coming centuries, there would be warfare, disasters, and despair. The Treasures he left demarcated places that would act as safe havens open to Buddhists in these times of need. In one of the Treasure texts, revealed by Tibetan yogi Rigdzin Godemchen (Classical Tibetan: Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can, 1450-1521), Sikkim is shown to be a land of abundance, or as it was called in all the Treasure texts that followed, the Hidden Valley of Rice (Classical Tibetan: *Sbas yul 'bras mo ljongs*).

In the lower part of the Hidden Valley in three areas, crops grow without being sown; in the middle part of the Valley in three areas, barley grows without being sown; in upper part of the Valley, there are four places where buckwheat grows without being sown. There are numerous varieties of nutritious fruits present in the Valley, with one hundred and twenty-five tastes.<sup>18</sup>

- <sup>11</sup> This representation of abundance was actualized when different waves of migrants from Tibet and elsewhere in the Himalayas arrived in Sikkim and found fertile soil, abundant forests, and clean water sources, that flowed from the glaciers of Kanchendzonga, who in Buddhist cosmology is the guardian deity of the region. The Indigenous Lepcha (or Rong) community had already long considered Kanchendzonga, or in Rong, Kinchumzongbu, to be sacred, and held an ancient kinship with him as they considered themselves to be descendants of the first people created from the snow. He is often referred to as *Anum timbu*, or older brother, in recognition of this kinship connection.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 2 Kanchendzonga, 2022. Photo by Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia.

- 12 As well as promoting the geographical attributes of Sikkim in his Treasure texts, the Guru also prepared the Hidden Land for human residence by coming to terms with, or as texts state, “taming” (Classical Tibetan: *'dul ba*) the unseen beings of Sikkim’s landscape. This process of taming has been variously interpreted as colonial domination, Tibetanization, and as the synthesis of Indigenous Lepcha and Tibetan worldviews.<sup>20</sup> However it is interpreted, this process led to the Buddhist acknowledgement of the land of Sikkim and all its geographical features as animated. The deities and spirits resident there became interpreted as dharma protectors (Classical Tibetan: *chos skyong sung ma yul lha gzhi bdag*) and keepers of the Treasures left by Guru Rinpoche (Classical Tibetan: *gter bdag*) that needed to be cared for through ritual supplication and communication. These dharma protectors, along with human and nonhuman animals of Sikkim, were all understood to be residents of a shared sacred habitat (Classical Tibetan: *gnas*), made sacred through Guru Rinpoche’s activities and the animated nature of the landscape. The structure of the sacred habitat did not necessarily mean that Sikkimese Buddhists were all environmentally friendly, but instead that they had an awareness of other beings than themselves as present in their environment and needing to be considered when making decisions.<sup>21</sup>
- 13 The systems that facilitated ritual communication were closely connected in form and structure to Tibetan Buddhist lineages, but also took on local elements that reflect the ecological and cultural context of Sikkim. The material culture of Sikkimese Buddhism is a vivid site for understanding these points of connections and differences. In Sikkimese Buddhist institutions and household shrines across different ethnic communities, ritual implements and symbols are deployed for apotropaic as well as aesthetic purposes. These objects are categorized as sacred supports (Classical Tibetan: *rten*) that are capable of inspiring spiritual development. Some of these sacred supports reflect the ecology of Sikkim; for example, paintings frequently include mountains and hills, and offering cakes (Classical Tibetan: *gtor ma*) are made from butter produced from local dairy cow milk and flour. These supports connect the shrines closely with the landscape, which in west Sikkim is also considered to be a natural shrine, presided over by Kanchendzonga.

### **Flying Conches, Blind Snakes, and Metal Monsters: Things Out of Place, Ecologies Out of Balance**

- 14 Flying conches have appeared in Sikkim in the lap of Kanchendzonga during periods of change. Historical discussions of flying conches appeared during periods of human settlement and religious expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, flying conches have become more common, coinciding with a period of accelerated ecological change in the state. Historically, Sikkim was predominantly rural and agricultural. In the 1970s, infrastructural projects including roads, electricity, and the construction of multi-layered concrete buildings were undertaken at unprecedented speed. These projects were intended to provide resources for a growing population, facilitate tourist access to the mountain vistas of western Sikkim, and ease the post-1975 absorption of Sikkim into the nation of India. In the years before the union with India, the Buddhist monarchy had attempted to

introduce a form of infrastructural modernity into the state. After 1975, the Indian government pumped funding into Sikkim to ensure that this strategically important border territory would become integrated into the Indian nation. This process has continued into the present.<sup>22</sup> These processes of infrastructure installation had a significant impact on the human and nonhuman residents of Sikkim, including conches.

- 15 I (Kalzang, one of the co-authors) can remember an incident from my childhood that demonstrates how infrastructural projects impacted multiple dimensions. When I was growing up in rural Sikkim in the 1970s and 80s, there was a blind snake (Bhutia: *brokship*; Nepali: *gurbay*; Binomial name: *Indotyphlops meszoelyi*) who lived in the fields closest to our house where we grew vegetables. My parents told us to leave the snake alone, because it was easily confused since it couldn't see, and was harmless anyway as it was non-venomous. We could always recognize the blind snake: its tail looked the same as its head, and it would come out of the field to sunbathe during the summer months on the concrete ledge beside the outhouse. One evening in around 1984, we heard some loud thuds outside the window of the kitchen where we had just finished eating dinner. My father stuck his head out the window and found another villager who was passing by, had been startled by the snake, and was beating it. He urged the passerby to stop, and I can still remember clearly what he said:

Hey! Don't do that to the blind snake! He is harmless! And besides, he is only resting there because we have settled in his territory. These days, we humans are blasting dynamite to make roads and houses in all the places where the snakes and other animals like to live. Our loud monstrous vehicles with their great noisy, smelly metal bodies ply through the peaceful forests and disturb all the residents there, making more noise than those beings could have ever imagined. No wonder the snakes are coming out! No wonder the bears are now sleeping in our fields! No wonder we never see leopards anymore!

These beings are protectors of our sacred habitat, and they are being displaced and frightened away. Within all of us, we have snakes, bears, and leopards—we have the potential to be like these beings, to be frightened and agitated when we are disturbed. The sacred habitat (Classical Tibetan/Bhutia: *gnas*) that we live in has become out of balance because of human actions. The behavior of these beings and their appearance in our human residences is because of our own behavior.

So leave that blind snake! We have displaced him already, so he is welcome here!<sup>23</sup>

- 16 My father's education and position as a lama certainly impacted how he outlined the interspecies relationships of our village and the surrounding forest. However, other villagers, drawing on Buddhist and local cosmologies, understood his reasoning and made similar comments about the blind snake. The passerby who had beat the snake admitted his fault and apologized, saying that the snake had given him a fright because,

as it was getting dark, he had not recognized that it was a blind snake.

- 17 This vision of interspecies and interdimensional relations in Sikkim was not confined to this specific village. Instead, my father's discourse about the blind snake reflected the broader cosmological and ethical view that had developed out of Buddhist and Indigenous perspectives that prevailed in rural west Sikkimese Buddhist communities at the time, even in non-Buddhist contexts. This view held that all beings—human and nonhuman, seen and unseen—were co-residents of the Hidden Land, and that part of living in the Hidden Land entailed the recognition of a reciprocal sense of care.
- 18 Part of this recognition, however, was based on a shared sense of order derived from a concern that the elements remain in balance. The blind snake had startled the passerby because he was out of place in the territory of humans. Similarly, other strange events—such as the appearance of bears in people's fields, and the disappearance of leopards and tigers from the forest—were noteworthy, because these beings were not in their usual place of residence, the forest. My father acknowledged that the unusual behavior and displacement of these co-residents was the result of changes in the sacred habitat. In the 1970s and 1980s, these changes were most vividly seen in the appearance of vehicular roads throughout rural parts of hilly west Sikkim. These roads brought the benefit of easier access to transport, since previously people had to walk or ride horses to major roads to access schools, hospitals, and administrative centers. However, they also altered the landscape and led to the shifting of species in the name of progress and development. These changes have continued and become even more large scale. Climate change has also contributed to the displacement of different interdimensional species in Sikkim during this period of infrastructural absorption into the Indian nation state. There have been more frequent conflicts between human and nonhuman animals; more landslides, cloudbursts, and unseasonal rain, which has impacted crops; and new impacts on human health.<sup>24</sup> These events all point to the movement of beings and things out of place, and the emergence of disbalance in the environment.

### **Conches as Reminders of Connectedness across the Realms and Across Cultures**

- 19 Like these species, in the landscape of Sikkim, conches are species out of place, and their appearance has significant spiritual import that can be positive or negative, depending on the context. Conches are marine animals, and thereby closely associated with oceans. Their function also connects to oceans; if oceans are metaphors for unbounded vastness, conches are the objects through which the sound of this vastness can be emitted.<sup>25</sup> People have a number of sensory engagements with conches, including through seeing, hearing, and touching, and these engagements are all held to be significant and transformative as reminders to be cautious about imbalance between the senses, the elements, and human and nonhuman residents in the environment.



Fig. 3 Conches from the shrine at Pemayangtse Monastery, west Sikkim, 2021. Dates unknown. Photograph by Kunzang Choden Bhutia.



Fig. 4 A conch painting from a table, Pelling, Sikkim, 2022. Painting from 2019. Photograph by Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa.

20 Seeing a conch can remind human beings of their interconnectedness with other residents of the landscape. As is typical with many sacred objects in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhisms, conches function on multiple levels. Buddhist artwork, including murals and thangkhas, which function as ritual technologies to achieve “liberation upon sight” (Classical Tibetan: *mthong grol*) often feature conches.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly because conches are considered one of the eight auspicious signs that are frequently featured in Buddhist material to attract and inspire good forces. Artist and art historian Robert Beer wrote that both Vedic Brahmanism and Buddhism use the conch as “a symbol of religious sovereignty and an emblem which fearlessly promotes the truth of the dharma.”<sup>27</sup> In iconographic traditions across Buddhist cultures, the Buddha is often recognized by thirty-two major signs. These include conch shells on the soles, palms, breasts, limbs, and forehead of the Buddha’s body. Additionally, in some traditions the Buddha is shown to have curving lines on his throat that appear like the curves on conch shells and represent the Buddha’s distinctive voice.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 5 A fiberglass statue of the Buddha featuring the curving lines on his throat and the curl between his eyebrows, Sindrang, west Sikkim, 2022. Statue ca. 2010s. Photograph by Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia.

21 As revered objects, conch shells are often seen on shrines in Buddhist monasteries and temples. Right-spiraling conches (Classical Tibetan: *dung dkar g.yas 'khyil*; Sanskrit: *dakshinamukha*), where the “lower opening [is] positioned to the right of the spiral tip” are especially sought after. Beer argued that this is because a right-handed shell “acoustically symbolizes the true or ‘right-hand’ proclamation of the *buddhadharma*” and because the “right-spiraling movement of the conch is echoed in the celestial motion of the sun, moon, planets and stars across the heavens. The hair whorls on Buddha’s head spiral to the right, as do his fine bodily hairs, the long white curl between his eyebrows (*urna*) and the conch-like swirl of his navel.”<sup>29</sup> The connection between conch directionality and the physical body of the Buddha again reinforces the capaciousness of the power of the conch to span throughout time and space.

22 Conches—reproduced in precious metals, or with metal elements, or left polished—are objects and symbols that operate to engage multiple senses and layers of reality. However, despite this richness, in regular Sikkimese households across different ethnic communities, people avoid having them on their domestic shrines due to their association with death.<sup>30</sup> When a Sikkimese Buddhist passes away, the local ritual officiants will often blow conches to inform the local community of what has happened.<sup>31</sup> They are therefore complex and ambivalent objects, but they can be rendered accessible and auspicious through their incorporation into personalized ritual systems.

23 Common examples include the use of parts of shells to function as washers in the round part of handheld mani wheels. These handheld devices are spun clockwise by Buddhists to generate compassion. They are made of a wooden handle attached to a metal spindle, that functions as the center point on which a round chamber is spun. The round chamber is made of wood or metal, and encases printed prayers to Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. A washer is put onto the metal spindle that can be periodically greased with



Fig. 6 A Mani wheel, Pelling, west Sikkim, 2022. Wheel ca. 1980s. Photograph by Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa.



Fig. 7 A Mani washer, made from shell, Pelling, west Sikkim, 2022. This washer began to be used from 2021 onwards. Photograph by Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa.

butter to keep the wheel spinning. This washer is made from a cut piece of shell, and the use of this material is not accidental but, instead, an intentional connection to the deeper significance of shells. In this instance, the use of shell washers on mani wheels functions literally as the grist for the development of altruistic intention.

24 Conches, and especially shell washers that have been worn down over time, are also used in jewelry, especially as earrings or finger rings by practitioners. This is attributed to connections in astrology between conches and the “moon’s planetary influence,” since the tidal movement of the ocean is impacted by the moon.<sup>32</sup>

25 While seeing, touching, and wearing conches are all significant ways to interact with them, the sound of conches is perhaps the most significant way that conches remind humans of their interdimensional obligations to other nonhuman residents of the land. Sound can function to connect dimensions and contribute to the rebalancing of the cosmos. The association between conches and sound comes from the use of conches as ritual instruments in Buddhist institutions. In the authoritative *Bod rgya tshig chod chen mo* dictionary, the primary definition for conch (Classical Tibetan: *dung*) is its position as a type of musical instrument (which may also be made from metal). The secondary definition is that it is an animal from the ocean. Indeed, while several beings are included in this definition, shells from the *Stromidea* family of gastropod mollusks are most commonly identified as conches (Classical Tibetan: *dung*).<sup>33</sup> The term can also be extended to other oceanic creatures.

26 Conches form part of ritual instrument collections at monasteries and ritual institutions throughout the Tibetan plateau and Himalayas. Conches are seen as especially resonant and efficacious for ritual performances due to their distinctive sound and loud volume. They are blown to represent the beginning of a ritual, to mark rest periods, and at the ritual’s end. Monasteries will ideally have two conches: a larger male (Classical Tibetan: *pho*) conch,



Fig. 8 Chakthag Rinpoche, a famous Tibetan yogi who resided in west Sikkim in the twentieth century, pictured with his conch earrings. Date ca. 1940s. From collection of Sonam Wangchuck Bhutia, used with permission.

and a smaller female (Classical Tibetan: *mo*) conch, which played together produce an intertwined sound on different registers. This is important so they can be heard by beings with different hearing abilities. When I (Kalzang, one of the co-authors) was a child and was learning to play monastic instruments as part of my Buddhist education, I was told that the conch was especially powerful because its sound and vibration could be heard and felt throughout the six realms. For people involved in everyday activities, hearing the conch would draw their attention, even momentarily, back to the dharma. Not only humans benefited from this sound. The original mollusks who had lived in the conch shells would be liberated by their association with the sacred activities that their homes were used for. Even worms, deep under the ground, could feel the vibration of the conch and thereby also achieve liberation, or sow the seeds of a good rebirth. They ward off bad forces and disasters and invite instead positive, generative forces. The blowing of conches thus facilitates multispecies awareness of Buddhist teachings.

- 27 The sound of the conch in Sikkim resonates with the power of conches in other cultural settings, where conches are also found out of place at high-altitude. In the ancient Andes, conches were used as instruments and known as *pututus*. In her study of pututu playing at Chavín de Huantar, ethnomusicologist Miriam Kolar argues that the use of pututus there represented an “anthropic transposition from marine animal to (super) human vocal transformer and proxy: a technology of air transformation and wind interaction and well as sound production.” In the context of the sacred geography of Chavín, pututu performances manifested “strategic realizations of human dominance while communicating negotiation within [Chavín’s] flow-directing ritualscape.”<sup>34</sup> At Chavín, pututus were played as part of human efforts to order their cosmos, as a way to “propel human agency throughout nonhuman domains.”<sup>35</sup>
- 28 The resonances between conch-blowing and constructing order can also be found in other communities. Many Pacific cultures value conch shells. In Hawai’i, conches are blown as welcome, especially to mark the beginning of ceremonies.<sup>36</sup> In Japan, *hora* are used by practitioners of Shugendō for a variety of reasons: they are blown when “an ascetic is reciting scripture, giving orders to acolytes, giving directions during pilgrimage, performing sermons, and relaying information across mountain valleys.” *Hora* are also more generally understood as talismanic objects to clear ritual impurity and “ward off harmful mountain animals, baleful spirits, and toxins.” Among Japanese Buddhists the conch is considered as a symbol of “the power of the Buddha’s law over malevolent forces.”<sup>37</sup>
- 29 Conches are also used in many regional Hindu traditions. Using the rich imagery of conch spirals, sociologist Sukanya Sarbadhikary has discussed how Bengali women blow conches in daily rituals to call in and experience “domestic *mongol* (auspiciousness: peace, health and fortune).”<sup>38</sup> Scholars of Hinduism Anway Mukhopadhyay and Anudradha Choudry have argued that the power of the conch comes from its association with the ocean. Drawing on the work of religious studies scholar Bron Taylor, they have posited that the sensory engagement between conches and the people that play them derives from the ability for conches to allow the listener to hear “the roiling sea or the laughter of the river in the conch shell,” which moves them closer to the sea

to wait “on the shore for the water to reveal, with maternal affection, her enormous riches.”<sup>39</sup> Sikkimese Buddhist instrumentalists also blow the conch to clear obstacles and spirits and bring order to the universe, but not necessarily one where humans are dominant. Instead, conches function as reminders for all beings to remain aware of their connectedness across realms.

## Conclusion

- 30 At times of change—when humans are building new religious institutions, or roads, or otherwise engaging in environmental destruction—flying conches are reminders of the connections between different beings and of long-term processes of change. Their appearance and then sudden disappearance through flight function as reminders for human communities of these processes and the need to recognize and maintain relations between the dimensions. The Himalayas have been called the “Third Pole” by environmental scientists due to their significance as water sources for a large percentage of the world’s population. Recently, climate change in the region has had devastating consequences. The glaciers that feed the waters of East and South Asia have receded, contributing to widescale bioecological change. This change has contributed to the acceleration of a wide range of issues, and is understood as being indicative of the universe out of balance. In Sikkim, climate change is another uncertain element of ecological change, along with forms of state intervention and environmental exploitation that include large scale hydroelectric dams.<sup>40</sup> In the current era of the Anthropocene, when humans are engaging in unprecedented projects of environmental adaptation and destruction, the remarkable appearance of a flying conch reminds us of the consequences of our actions.
- 31 Flying conches remind human communities of their position as minor actors in the long-term scale of planetary processes. Their multiscale significance across myriad elements of Buddhist material and literary culture in the Himalayas points to out-of-place objects as sites for humans to think about their own impact on the planet. Ritual traditions that incorporate conches provide humans with opportunities to reflect on and consider their obligations to others. These traditions have inspired religious practitioners and activists in their pursuit of futures where there is balance between humans and their environment.<sup>41</sup> In the Himalayan context, conches function as part of a ritual order and a reminder of connectedness, and in doing so are protectors. Although they are objects that have been displaced through travel and time, the different levels of meaning and efficacy associated with conches has made them part of daily life in the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. Still, they remain ambivalent—often associated with death and transformations—and are invoked and represented with care due to their capacity to bridge dimensions. Their ability to fly is an indicator of change and disbalance. At a time when local human and nonhumans are experiencing the impact of climate change in their daily lives, it seems all the more important to watch out for flying conches who appear as harbingers of ecological change. Perhaps they can yet be visions of hope for new futures as they encourage pause and open new pathways that protect the mountains, the oceans, and their many seen and unseen inhabitants.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. Sikkim is a multilingual state. As this essay focuses on Buddhist communities, most non-English terms are from Classical Tibetan and occasionally Bhutia (also known as Lhokyed, the language used by the Bhutia, or Lhopo, community in Sikkim) languages, as much of the ethnographic research for this paper was carried out in and around a Lepcha-Bhutia region. These will be given in phonetic form based on pronunciation of terms in west Sikkim, where most of the fieldwork was conducted. Upon their first appearance, they will be followed by full transliteration into their classical Tibetan form using the popular Wylie transliteration system.

2. Sikkim is a small multiethnic, multireligious state in Northeast India. For more on the modern history and culture of Sikkim, see Mona Chettri, *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2017).

3. Flying conches appear frequently in oral traditions connected to the foundations of monasteries in Sikkim. Details from these traditions are increasingly included in state literature, such as on the Government of Sikkim Ecclesiastical Department website about the history of Kathog Dorjeden Monastery near Pakyong in east Sikkim, where a conch shell that is understood to have flown from west Sikkim is kept in the treasure house of the monastery. “Kathog Dorjeden Monastery (1840 A.D.),” Government of Sikkim Ecclesiastical Affairs Department, accessed June 7, 2021, available [here](#).
  
4. Anna Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 92.
  
5. This type of species is found in the Indian Ocean, and their shells are also widely used in Hindu traditions and are known as *Shankha*.
  
6. For example, a number of Sikkimese households visited for this research had conch shells brought from the Caribbean and Pacific by family members or Buddhist patrons of lamas who had visited there.
  
7. Rob Van der Voo, Wim Spakman, and Harman Bijwaard, “Tethyan Subducted Slabs under India,” *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 171, no. 1 (August 1999): 7-20.
  
8. A recent example can be found in a local history of Nyanpo Yutse, published by Lobzang Lhundrup Dorje as *Mtsho bod mtho sgang gi ri chu'i rig gnas (Gnyan po g.yu rtse'i gnas yig)* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2018). Thanks to Dr. Gillian Tan for this example.
  
9. Barbara Andaya, “Seas, Oceans and Cosmologies in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2017): 349-371. On the development of the cult of Mazu as a maritime Buddhist tradition, see Hugh Clark, “The Religious Culture of Southern Fujian, 750-1450,” *Asia Major Third Series* 19, no. 1/2 (2006): 211-240. In Japan, the local ecology inspired many marine-connected religious traditions that have been explored in Fabio Rambelli, ed., *The Sea and the Sacred in Japan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
  
10. Fabio Rambelli’s recent edited volume on connections between the ocean and religion in Japan, *The Sea and the Sacred in Japan*, also contains interesting examples for thinking about the significance of ocean metaphors.
  
11. Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1999), 109.
  
12. Ven. Rechung Rinpoche Jampal Kalzang, pres. and trans. *Tibetan Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976 ed.), 9-10.
  
13. Nagas are widespread throughout Asia. For a comparative consideration of their role across South Asian traditions, see Jayita Sengupta, “Sea: Mythological/ Mythical Di-

mensions in Indian Imagination,” *SARI Working Papers Series 1: Proceedings of SARI 2017 Conference on Reinventing the Sea*, 2020, accessed June 5, 2021, available [here](#).

14. Holly Walters, *Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2020), 15.

15. Ibid.

16. Sandra Dudley, “Liminality and the Object’s Point of View: Burmese Court Artefacts in Oxford, London and Yangon,” in *The Inbetweenness of Things*, ed. Paul Basu (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 40.

17. Sandra Dudley, “Liminality and the Object’s Point of View,” 40.

18. Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia’s translation of Pema Lingpa, in Tashi Tshering, *Mkha’ spyod ’bras ljongs kyi gnas yig phyogs bsdebs bzhugs* (Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute), 250.

19. Rongnyoo Lepcha and Mongfing Lepcha, “Painting the Genesis of the Lepcha: A World Emerging from the Water Spirits” in Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker, *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106-107.

20. Brigitte Steinmann, “The Opening of the sBas yul ’Bras mo gshongs as according to the Chronicle of the Rulers of Sikkim: Pilgrimage as a Metaphorical Model for the Submission of Foreign Populations,” in *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, ed. Alex McKay (Richmond: Curzon, 1998), 129-54. For representations of how scholars have characterized Sikkimese religions, see Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors* and Marlene Erschbamer, “Taming of Supernatural Entities and Animal Sacrifice: The Synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and Local Shamanistic Traditions in Northern Sikkim (India),” *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* 50 (2019), available [here](#). For a critical discussion of these characterizations, see Charisma Lepcha, “Religion, Culture, and Identity: A Comparative Study on the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong, and Ilam,” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, North-Eastern Hill University, 2013.

21. For critiques of Buddhism as an environmentally friendly religion, see Cathy Cantwell, “Reflections on Ecological Ethics and the Tibetan Earth Ritual,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 33, no. 1 (2001): 113-19; Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha’s Footprint* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Toni Huber, “Green Tibetans: A Brief Social History,” in *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora*, ed. Frank Korom (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 103-19 and Emily Yeh, “The Rise and Fall of the Green Tibetan: Contingent Collaborations and the Vicissitudes of Harmony,” in *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, eds. Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 255-78.

22. Duncan McDuie-Ra and Mona Chettri, “Concreting the Frontier: Modernity and its

Entanglements in Sikkim, India,” *Political Geography* 76 (2020).

23. Pemayangtse Dorje Lopen Sindrang Yab Gomchen Chewang Rinzin, personal communication. Kalzang remembers this incident as having taken place in roughly 1984, and confirmed this memory with his brother, Palchen Dorjee Bhutia, in personal communication in July 2022.

24. For more on climate change and its cultural impact in Sikkim, see Charisma Lepcha, “Lepcha Water View and Climate Change in Sikkim Himalaya,” in *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas*, ed. Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker (London: Routledge, 2021), 43-65; Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia, “Ignoring the Protectors: Slipping Soil and Relations in Village Resettlement Projects in the West Sikkim Himalayas,” in *Shifting Climates, Shifting People*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2022), 175-186; and Mabel Denzin Gergan, “Loss and Recovery in the Himalayas: Climate-Change Anxieties and the Case of Large Cardamom in North Sikkim,” in *Understanding Climate Change through Religious Lifeworlds*, ed. David Haberman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 208-234. Other scholarship on the impact of climate change in Sikkim includes Anamika Barua, Suparana Katyaini, Bhupen Mili, and Pernille Gooch, “Climate Change and Poverty: Building Resilience of Rural Mountain Communities in South Sikkim, Eastern Himalaya, India,” *Regional Environmental Change* 14 (2014): 267-280. The Government of Sikkim sponsored research on climate change, which was published as M.L. Arrawatia and Sandeep Tambe, *Climate Change in Sikkim: Patterns, Impacts and Initiatives* (Gangtok: Information and Public Relations Department, 2012).

25. Brian Pertl, “Some Observations on the *Dung Chen* of the Nechung Monastery,” *Asian Music* 23, no. 2 (1992): 95.

26. For more on Liberation Upon Sight in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhisms, see Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Naive Sensualism, *Docta Ignorantia*: Tibetan Liberation through the Senses,” *Numen* 47, no. 1 (2000): 69-112.

27. Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 181.

28. *Ibid.*, 185.

29. *Ibid.*

30. This is based on our observations carrying out research on material culture and religion in the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills region. We confirmed this with Dr. Rongnyoo Lepcha, who confirmed that she had only seen conches in monasteries in her research on Lepcha material culture in the Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas. Personal email communication, Rongnyoo Lepcha, 2022.

31. Anna Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors*, 273.

32. Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 185.
33. Ibid.
34. Miriam Kolar, “Conch Calls into the Anthropocene: *Pututus* as Instruments of Human-Environmental Relations at Monumental Chavin,” *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 5, no. 2 (2019): 22.
35. Ibid., 53.
36. Malcom Nāea Chun, *No Nā Mamo: Traditional and Contemporary Hawaiian Beliefs and Practices* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011), 52, 61.
37. Jonathan Thumas, “The Lion’s Road: Imagining Conch Shell Trumpets in Early Modern Japan,” *The Jugaad Project*, 27 July 2019 [13 Jan, 2016], accessed June 6, 2020, available [here](#).
38. Sunkanya Sarbadhikary, “*Shankh-er Shongshar*, Afterlife Everyday: Religious Experience of the Evening Conch and Goddesses in Bengali Hindu Homes,” *Religions* 10, no. 1 (2019): 2.
39. Anway Mukhopadhyay and Anuradha Choudry, “Revealed by Water, Hidden in Water: Indic Hydro-epistemologies of Sacred Things,” *Ecology, Economy and Society - the Insee Journal* 3, no. 2 (2020): 163.
40. For more on the impact of hydroelectricity projects in contemporary Sikkim, see Mabel Gergan, “Disastrous Hydropower, Uneven Regional Development, and Decolonization in India’s Eastern Himalayan Borderlands,” *Political Geography* 80 (2020): 102175; Kachyo Lepcha, “The Teesta Hydro Projects: Historical Analysis of Protest Movements in North Sikkim [1964-2007],” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Sikkim University, 2020; and Charisma Lepcha, “Lepcha Water View and Climate Change in Sikkim Himalaya.”
41. See the work of Mabel Gergan, Kachyo Lepcha, Charisma Lepcha, and Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia above for discussions of how ritual traditions from both Indigenous Rong and Buddhist cosmologies have inspired anti-dam activism.



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