CHAPTER THREE
THE HIDDEN LAND AND ITS SUPERNATURAL POPULATION

One day, Lopen Dugyal mentioned that there are many more spirits and deities inhabiting the environment in Sikkim than there are human beings. Indeed, nearly every mountain, hilltop, prominent rock, mountain pass, crevasse, valley, old tree, lake, river and stream seems to be the abode of some supernatural being. The mountain god inhabiting the peak of Mount Kangchendzönga is considered to be their chief and his worship is an important aspect of ritual everywhere among Sikkimese Buddhists. The world of Tingchim villagers is configured by these supernatural beings who inhabit the house, the local territory, the high mountains and the ne (gnas) or powerful sacred sites of Sikkim. Villagers entertain intimate relations with these beings who play a role in all aspects of daily life, from agriculture to hunting and gathering, from illness to good health and prosperity, and from marriage to house building, childbirth and death. Samuel has mentioned that the importance given to local deities seems to vary between communities and between individuals, though some of this may reflect the differing degrees of interest in these matters among Western observers (1993: 190).

Dedicating an entire chapter to them, hopefully, isn’t simply a reflection of my interest in village religion but a reflection of the central importance attributed to these entities as they greatly contribute to shaping Tingchim villagers’ worldview as well as the physical and social environments in which they live. In order to consider the villagers’ relationship with these supernatural entities in later chapters and the ways in which ritual specialists will thrive to take control of them, one must first look into the concept of Sikkim as a beyul or sacred hidden land and identify the different classes of supernatural beings who reside within its territory.

1 Ramble has pointed out that sacred countries are usually densely populated with supernatural beings (1996: 142).
Although the tantric deities of Tibetan Buddhism are by far the most respected deities in Tingchim, they are confined to villagers’ individual Buddhist practice, the Phodong monastery and the village’s prayer hall where the lamas and the nyungne am (smyung gnas a ma—the village’s group of praying women), hold their calendrical Buddhist rituals. These tantric deities and their rituals are shared by the Tibetan Buddhist world at large and their relevance in everyday village life remains somewhat theoretical. In the same way, the sacred pilgrimage places of Tibet, India and Nepal are all highly desirable places to visit but are nevertheless located on the outer limits of their conceptual world.

1. Taming of the country and its inhabitants: Sikkim as a BEYUL

Sikkim was, and in many ways is still regarded by its Buddhist inhabitants as a sacred hidden land or beyul. The following words of Terton² Dorje Lingpa (1346–1405) and Terton Ratna Lingpa (1403–1478), quoted from the History of Sikkim, summarise how most Lhapos still think of their country’s potential. Terton Dorje Lingpa described Sikkim as

> a veritable paradise on earth, created by a miraculous supernatural power into a vast and magnificent palace where everything calculated to produce beauty and grandeur have [sic] been provided on the grandest imaginable scale (Namgyal 1908: 9).

The History of Sikkim also tells us that the land was initially blessed by Chenresig and Indra, followed in the eighth century by Guru Rinpoche who “exorcised the land of all evil spirits, and rid it of all obstacles that would tend to obstruct or disturb the course of devotional practices” (Namgyal 1908: 10). Prophetical books were compiled and hidden by him in rocks so as to be rediscovered in later times. Treasures were hidden in one hundred and eight secret mines and stores to render this land productive, healthy and harmonious as well as to facilitate the spread of the Dharma. Terton Ratna Lingpa qualifies Sikkim as:

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² For the Nyingmapa, ter (gter or gter ma) are spiritual treasures, sometimes objects such as images but usually texts attributed to Guru Rinpoche who hid them so as to be later physically discovered or revealed in other ways by Buddhist practitioners called terton (gter ston).