CHAPTER SEVEN
THE LAND, ITS PROBLEMS AND RITUAL SOLUTIONS

This chapter addresses cases of illness and misfortune that find their root in problems related to the economic and sacred aspects of the land and its resources. The first section is concerned with the ritual treatment of disputes arising between non-relatives, and between members of different ethnic communities, over questions of land ownership, the most common source of dispute among people all over Sikkim—land boundary disputes between relatives are addressed in chapter 9. It suggests the way in which land disputes are related to accusations of poisoning, witchcraft and the sending of curses. The second section looks at the consequences of polluting or destroying objects of nature within the village and how these are perceived locally and cured ritually. In the last section, we leave the village in order to discuss the case of what was perceived to be a wrongdoing perpetrated against the sacred land that acquired state-level proportions. The successful protest movement against the construction of a hydro-electric power station on the sacred Rathong Chu river at Yuksom in West Sikkim was instigated by a group of urban Lhopo activists. The basic arguments and methods used against the project were continuous with village beliefs, and ritual, along with ‘modern’ methods of political and legal struggle, played a central role in the unfolding of the campaign.

We have seen in chapter 4 that illness may be brought about by a variety of causes. Although the cases of illness and misfortune discussed in this chapter are thought to be provoked by offended nöpa or through witchcraft, poisoning and cursing, one shouldn't forget that these are only some of the causes that may be cited. Nor should we conclude from these examples that villagers’ relations with the nöpa are limited to illness and misfortune. It was stressed in chapter 4 that villagers may relate to the supernatural beings of the land in a number of ways and that the latter may be perceived not only as agents of misfortune but also as protectors and providers. In the same chapter, the concept of drib (pollution) generated by wrongdoing was introduced as an articulating agent between the social, physical and supernatural worlds. When mo divination reveals that an illness was caused by a nöpa, the ritual specialist
must uncover the motivation for the act. If it isn’t a case of witchcraft, poisoning or cursing where the nöpa would have been instructed by an enemy to cause the ailment, the nöpa would have been incited to inflict the disease because of the presence of drib generated by the patient’s or someone else’s wrongdoing.

The cycle of illness prompted by wrongdoing can also be read as an expression of Tingchim villagers’ apprehension about threatening agents, although this reading is my interpretation of what the villagers accept as the relation between illness and wrong action. A threat would appear to be any destabilising or menacing factor at the root of a conflict, tension or disorder that undermines the survival of the person, the kin group, the village or the ethnic community. The threatening agent, whether another kin member, a villager, an outsider or the patient himself, will be uncovered by a ritual specialist in the course of divining the cause of illness. In this way, the agent can be blamed, not only directly for his unacceptable behaviour, but also indirectly for the disorder, competition or insecurity it engenders. In this chapter, we look at such cases, and the threatening agents to which they point, where the wrong action has been performed against the sacred land and its products.

The concept of beyul or sacred hidden land was introduced in chapter 3 along with the Nesol, the most important ritual of the land, which condemns the cutting down of trees, the polluting of lakes, and the destruction of hills, rocks and cliffs. Because of its sacred quality, the natural environment becomes a platform upon which threatening agents may reveal themselves through their performance of wrong actions against it, or what appear to be wrong actions according to Lhopo values. This may occur, for example, in the context of competition for natural resources with Nepalese settlers or in the context of environmental degradation caused by construction work undertaken by the Government.

1. LAND AND OTHER DISPUTES WITH NON-RELATIVES AND OUTSIDERS

Issues of land ownership and field boundaries are the most common source of disputes among Lhopo relatives and non-relatives alike. When relatives have a dispute over a question of land, as we will see in chapter 9, their common pho lha mo lha are the supernatural beings invoked to help resolve the conflict. These either stand as witnesses to