The amiable co-existence of village lamas and bon ritual specialists in Tingchim has had a number of causes. Historically, we have seen that Sikkim was established as a Buddhist kingdom in the seventeenth century by three Nyingma lamas from Tibet. As they proceeded to tame the country and its inhabitants, the Lepchas’ sacred landscape was integrated into their Buddhist rendition of Sikkim’s sacred geography as a beyul. From its inception, Sikkim was based on a shamanic view of the universe, where ancestors and protectors resided in its high mountains and deities of all kinds populated its countryside. Lhopos lived side by side with the Lepchas who, despite their gradual conversion to Buddhism, never abandoned their shamanic rituals. Although the kingdom eventually entertained close ties with Lhasa, it remained politically independent as one of the less centralised regions of the greater Tibetan cultural area where its own particular form of Buddhism flourished at the periphery, away from the influence of the great monastic institutions of central Tibet. Despite its independence from Lhasa, the Sikkimese monarchy remained weak, often unable to keep threats to its authority under control. Celibate monasteries, which could have helped strengthen the position of the Chogyals and simultaneously had an influence on Sikkim’s shamanic practices, never took root for a number of reasons. As a result, the most respected ritual specialists have been lamas who best understood the Lhopos’ needs for both Buddhism and the bon rituals of the pawo and the bongthing; the former to take care of their aspirations after death, and the latter to deal with the obstacles, illnesses and misfortunes of life in this world.

With such a background, Tingchim villagers’ worldview remained deeply shamanic, where the body, the household, the lineage, the village, the landscape and the supernatural are intimately linked and thought to affect each other. Household rituals are a celebration of these relations, where the bon ritual specialists and the village lamas perform joint or separate rituals within this shamanic worldview. Their calendrical rituals constantly maintain and reaffirm these relations, while curing
rituals re-establish order when these relations have been threatened or violated. As a result of this ritual co-operation, the *gomchen* has emerged as the most powerful and thus the most respected ritual specialist in the village. Well versed in Buddhist practice, from his retreat above the village, the *gomchen* is equally linked to the sacred landscape and the needs of its inhabitants, applying his tantric powers for the benefit of villagers’ worldly concerns. The encounter between *bon* and Buddhism in Tingchim has resulted in the *gomchen* being their celebrated ritual specialist, the mountain god Kangchendzönga their common deity, and the *khelen* their common ritual practice.

Household rituals were strengthened by a number of recent economic and political developments. When the villagers’ ties based on the exchange of labour gradually eroded from the 1960s on, following the settlement of Nepalese tenant farmers, domestic rituals provided villagers with an important avenue for social relations which drew them closer in the face of an increasing influx of outsiders. These rituals played a similar role when their political ties were transformed after 1975: the *mandal* was replaced by a Panchayat village council that was shared with the Mangshila Limbus and that increasingly applied itself to obtaining Tingchim’s share of development facilities instead of managing the community. Again, the household rites of passage, in which attendance is mandatory and which define community membership and thus the right to participate in the village’s traditional *dzomkha* meetings, helped maintain the *dzomkha*’s position as the local avenue for community management despite the introduction of the Panchayat system.

The removal of the Buddhist monarchy in 1975 also saw the end of state level Buddhism, which resulted in a marked decline in attendance at Buddhist community rituals as much at the Phodong monastery as in Tingchim. The death of the 16th Karmapa in 1981 had a similar impact on Tingchim villagers, whose relations with Rumtek gradually waned. As a result, the village’s relations with the outside world, which had up till then been based on conventional Buddhism and its relation with the high lamas and Rinpoches of Phodong, the Palace chapel and Rumtek, had to be redefined. As the youth busied themselves with secular education and the establishment of new ties with an administration and political parties increasingly dominated by Nepalese speakers, the older generation folded back onto itself and its household rituals, which in this state of disorientation and isolation greatly helped maintain the ties of Tingchim’s Lhopho community.