CHAPTER TWO

ZOMBIE SLAYERS IN A ‘HIDDEN VALLEY’

The Himalayas, with its high peaks and deep valleys, has for centuries served as a natural geographical frontier and boundary between the kingdoms and states of South Asia which it straddles. Given the strategic advantage of high grounds to the defence of a realm, it is little wonder that the Himalayas has throughout history witnessed countless skirmishes between neighbouring states that sought such strategic advantage. The interest in this mountain range, of course, has not been restricted to matters of defence. North-south trade routes criss-crossed the Himalayan range, connecting the Tibetan plateau to the rest of the Indian subcontinent, ensuring lucrative tax revenues for those who controlled these economic lifelines. In the era of European colonialism in the ‘long’ 19th century, the Himalayas became embroiled in what has been called the ‘Great Game’ between the British and Russian empires, which sought to expand their respective commercial and imperial interests in the region. Due to its pristine environment, awe-inspiring mountains, and the remoteness of its valleys, the Himalayas was also the well-spring of countless legends, myths and romantic imaginings, engendering the sacralisation of the landscape that had served as a source of religious inspiration for peoples both living in its vicinity and beyond. Hence, despite its remoteness—or, because of it—warfare, pilgrimages, trade and the search for viable settlement areas have been some of the key factors contributing to the migratory process and interest in the area.

Largely due to its location in the frontier zone, enclaves of settlements located deep in the numerous Himalayan valleys were often on the outer fringes of state influence, enjoying a significant degree of local autonomy until processes of state consolidation intensified in the last century or so, as exemplified by the case of Nepal.¹ A particular body of Tibetan religious literature suggests that located in the vast mountain range were a number of sacred ‘hidden valleys’, or *beyul* (*shas yul*), where

¹ For an extensive list of Tibetan enclaves situated along the Nepal-Tibet border see Jest (1975:33–35).
the Tibetan royal courts and their subjects might seek refuge when their societies faced the prospect of dissolution as a result of external threats. Contemporary scholars have identified some of these *beyul*, and have conducted a number of important ethnographic and historical studies (e.g. Aris 1975; Reinhard 1978; Ehrhard 1997; Childs 1998, 1999; Diemberger 1991, 1996, 1997; Orofino 1991). Apart from enriching our ethnographic knowledge of these locales and their inhabitants, some of this research (e.g. Childs 2000, 2001; Diemberger 1997) provides us with further insights into patterns of trans-Himalayan migration as well as the processes through which these locales have been incorporated into nascent nation-states. Historically there evolved in these remote communities unique systems of social and political organisation, often the result of the articulation of specific local historical realities with the broader structures of Tibetan and Indic origins (cf. Clarke 1983:25). A major volume of essays (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996), on the history and social meaning of mountain cults in Tibet and the Himalayas, has provided a crucial impetus to the study of political organisation in these mountain communities, effectively combining textual analysis and ethnographic method.

Despite such effort, there is a need for much more detailed social-historical research into the political systems of these enclaves, many of which are located in the Nepal-Tibet borderlands (Ramble 1997:339–340; Jest 1975:33–35), not least because it will serve to illuminate present-day patterns of domination, status valuation and local political processes. On a more specific note, studies into the various *beyul* thus far do not evince sufficient exploration of the relation between the *beyul* concept and the historical formation of specific social and political structures. This chapter in part sets out to address these concerns in Tibetan and Himalayan research by presenting an analysis of the indigenous form of political authority and structure in the Langtang Valley, one of the most significant *beyul* identified in the Tibetan sources. None of the few previous cursory studies on the Langtang Valley has included the concept of *beyul* in their accounts, nor have they provided any historical account of the formation of Langtang’s indigenous social and political organisation. This chapter will show that the concept of sacred geography not only forms an important part of the Langtangpa’s social memory and discourse, but also that the *beyul* concept had in Langtang’s history served an ideological function in relation to the development of its socio-political structure. What I present here is not solely a straightforward, chronological account of significant historical