

# Grammatically speaking

## Religious authority and development discourse in Buddhist Ladakh<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Tibetan Buddhist teachings are transmitted through a sacred grammar ascribed to the seventh century treatise, *sum rtags* (the root grammar in thirty versus), composed by Thonmi Sambhota, historically believed to be a manifestation of the celestial deity Manjusri. Exiled Tibetans now encourage literacy in this grammar amongst the laity, albeit in a modified style. Across the Tibetan speaking Himalaya, however, regional dialects diverge considerably from these rules. The Indian region of Ladakh has linguistic connections with Tibet. Education reformists Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) began publishing a local language magazine, *Ladags Melong*, to stimulate interest in the indigenous script. The magazine's colloquial style angered Buddhist scholars, who fear that altering written styles will result in the eradication of the sacred grammar. SECMOL argues that grammar is separate from religion, and literature in the vernacular is more accessible for the majority of Ladakhis. Drawing upon fifteen months of fieldwork, the paper examines the political, cultural, and religious ramifications inherent in the distinctive definitions of grammar through the controversial experience in Ladakh.

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### Keywords

Buddhism, grammar, myth, statehood, transformation

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## Rhetorical battles<sup>2</sup>

In the Summer 2005 issue of *Ladags Melong* (a bilingual English and Ladakhi popular magazine) Sonam Wangchuk, founder of the local education reform organisation Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) and advisor to SECMOL's publishing wing Melong Publications, composed and published an open letter to the principal of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS). In the letter, Wangchuk accuses the institution's scholars of activities that are undemocratic, unconstitutional, and antithetical to the Buddha's teaching of tolerance and compassion (*Ladags Melong* 2005:21). He labels the scholars he considers to hold 'extreme views' as 'fundamentalists' and describes a resolution the scholars passed demanding that the public conform to the classical grammar when writing, and banning literature in the vernacular as a '*fatwa*' (*Ladags Melong* 2005). The open letter marked the climax to a bitter and controversial dispute regarding the form of writing centred on distinct interpretations of what constitutes 'grammar' that was to reach the office of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. In this particular issue of *Ladags Melong*, the editors sought publicly to defend their decision to write in the vernacular after what they describe as a consistent campaign by certain scholars of the CIBS to condemn Melong Publications. The scholars responded by arguing the matter to be one not of politics and fanaticism as suggested by Wangchuk, but one concerning the preservation of the Buddha's teachings that, the scholars assert, form the basis of Ladakhi Buddhist culture, and which can only be accessed through the classical writing system. Dr Ngawang Tsering, the now-retired principal of the CIBS to whom the letter was addressed, praised Wangchuk's achievements in reforming education in Ladakh, but did not recognise Wangchuk's legitimacy in discussing 'religious matters' such as this. Dr Tsering believed Wangchuk's view to be too influenced by western secularism (despite the fact that India constitutes itself as a secular liberal democratic state), that Wangchuk had neglected the study of his own culture and religion in favour of the study of science and the English language, and therefore Dr Tsering felt Wangchuk to be unqualified to speak about religious matters as 'he has never studied his religion properly' (Ngawang Tsering, interview transcript, December 15, 2010). However, the CIBS scholars impose writing using a grammatical system that the majority of Ladakhis find

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the text, I have transcribed the indigenous terms according to Ladakhi pronunciation. I italicize where the word is expressed as a noun, but not for personal names. Indigenous pronunciations are transcribed in the main body of text, with written transcription according to the Wylie system (Wylie 1959) included as footnotes.

inaccessible; they impart indigenous language instruction through religious philosophical texts using pedagogies that are rigorous in their discipline. Despite improvements to education being a major platform of the regional autonomous administration, the debate surrounding language instruction impacts negatively upon local literacy and the development of local literature. Nevertheless, many Ladakhis interviewed, both formally and in informal conversation, expressed support for the scholars, revering the sacredness of the written form and expertise of those with knowledge of the sacred grammar above that of the secular reformists.<sup>3</sup>

The controversy regarding which grammar to use for literacy in Ladakh has emerged over the past fifty years, and is an example of the contested ways in which the Himalayan Buddhist regions engage with the modern secular world and the institutions and discourses of modernity therein. Fearing cultural destruction following the occupation of Tibet by Chinese forces in 1950 and subsequent flight into exile of the Dalai Lama and his followers in 1959, the Tibetan elite began to encourage literacy amongst the laity in a modified written style that the elite claims conforms to the orthographic patterns of the grammatical treatise; and the Tibetan Library Works and Archives in Dharamsala (Himachel Pradesh, India)<sup>4</sup> was established for the purpose of standardising a modern written form. In Ladakh it is a polemic between those who wish to express themselves in written Ladakhi *p'alskat*<sup>5</sup> (common language), and those trained in classical Tibetan who insist that the written form should never deviate from the classical grammar of *choskat*<sup>6</sup> (religious language). It is centred around customarily distinct definitions of grammar: one that describes the grammar in fixed cultural terms, as a sacred complex structure of orthography and symbols created by one of profound intellect; and a definition of grammar as defined in the academic study of linguistics, as that which makes language comprehensible in both spoken and written form, the nature of which is malleable, and subject to change over time (Ong 1982:108; Sebba 2007:153). It demonstrates the continued significance of mythico-history, imparted through religious texts, for Ladakhi and Tibetan religious governance that legitimises social life and activity.

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<sup>3</sup> This article is not a discussion of philology, and I do not have any philological or linguistic training. I do not attempt any analysis of the historical accuracy of mythico-historical texts endorsed by Buddhist religious and political elites.

<sup>4</sup> I use 'Dharamsala' throughout to refer to the Tibetan political and religious authority.

<sup>5</sup> *phal skad*

<sup>6</sup> *chos skad*

## Description of the field

Ladakh is a high altitude desert in the east of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the northern-most state of the Indian Union. Ladakh was an independent Buddhist kingdom from the fall of the Tibetan Empire in the ninth century AD until 1834 when it was annexed by the King of Jammu, eventually acceding to the Indian nation as region of J&K in 1947. Ladakh is divided into the two districts of Leh and Kargil. Leh has a majority Buddhist population with strong religious, ethnic, and linguistic links to Tibet. I conducted my fieldwork in the Buddhist dominated Leh District and this is the area upon which the discussion is focused. The doctoral research investigates the emergence of a Buddhist development in Ladakh that takes as its foundation the Mahayana Buddhist philosophical and intellectual tradition. As the CIBS scholars assert, the essence of this tradition is the compassionate intention to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, which is considered to be an essential component for the correct direction of development and education in the region.<sup>7</sup> During the course of fieldwork the language controversy emerged as a component. The Buddhist scholars believe the way to access the knowledge and wisdom of the teachings, and thus influence the direction of the modern development, is through the authorised grammar composed by the semi-mythical divine figure of Thonmi Sambhota, the author of the classical grammar. It therefore highlights the Tibetan Buddhist approach to state legitimacy, where religious and temporal authority were — and to an extent still are — legitimised through mythical historiographies that foreground the subjective and performative activities of divine figures and celestial Buddhas across the ages (in this case the continued use of a sacred grammar) rather than evidential method and objective analysis that aims to represent the history of a territorially-bounded secular state (Van Beek 1996:87–149). In the same way, the debate highlights the significance in examining grammar and language with respect to their symbolic elements, and the limits of linguistic or philological enquiry in examining ideology in language. For example, Ong describes one linguistic approach to language, structure and grammar below:

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<sup>7</sup> The controversy also has significance in examining the emergence of an ethno-national identity through “folk” language. However, for reasons of space, the current article focuses on the attempts to build a regional Himalayan Buddhist development.

Where grapholects<sup>8</sup> exist, “correct” grammar and usage are popularly interpreted as the grammar and usage of the grapholect itself to the exclusion of the grammar and usage of other dialects [...] But when other dialects of a given language besides the grapholect vary from the grammar of the grapholect, they are not ungrammatical: they are simply using a different grammar, for language is structure, and it is impossible to use language without grammar. In light of this fact, linguists today commonly make the point that all dialects are equal in the sense that none has a grammar intrinsically more “correct” than that of others. (Ong 1982:108, emphasis added)

In such a definition ‘grammar’ not only describes the structure of language, it also renders language an object available for study allowing for philological or comparative analysis of the origins and development of a language through its structure. However, where an ideology is transmitted through a language that uses a religiously or politically authorised grammar, that grammar is considered by certain authorities to be intrinsically more ‘correct’. In this situation, one needs to accommodate the locally-contextualised conceptions of ‘grammar,’ and to recognise that one’s own definitions are themselves embedded in cultural conceptions of what is intrinsic or authentic. The need for such a consideration is evidenced by the Ladakhi Buddhist scholars’ assertion that *p’alskat* contains no grammar: a statement somewhat confusing to those who appropriate the objective definition of grammar as structure of language, but considered legitimate by those for whom the grammar is authorised through a cultural system, in this case Tibetan Buddhism. The approaches assumed by the contributors to the edited volume *Regimes of Language*, which examines language ideologies from the position that authority in language represents the hegemonic narratives of dominant or elite groups, are useful (Kroskrity 2000:8). The contributions combine linguistic expertise with social and cultural analysis in examining the dynamics of language ideologies embedded in cultural systems (Kroskrity 2000:8), particularly where linguistic ideologies of an external region are competing with the ideologies of the pre-existing elite. This can lead to instances of what Irvine and Gal describe as iconisation (whereby the grammar of one system is given intrinsic value), and erasure (rendering the complexities of any other system invisible or illegitimate) (Irvine and Gal 2000:37). In a related enterprise, Sebba interrogates the socio-cultural

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<sup>8</sup> Ong uses the term “grapholect” to describe a dialect that has transcended orality and been converted into a language of writing and literacy.

and ideological meanings of orthography, approaching orthography as a symbolic system ‘situated in social practice’ whether that be hegemonic or subversive (2007:13). Sebba notes as part of this process that where writing and orthography are symbolic or iconic of an essence of culture or society, its loss or alteration is believed to result in social, cultural, or religious decline (Sebba 2007:154). Such situations are mirrored in the religious and moral discussions inherent in the Buddhist scholastic discourses of Ladakhi development against the development rationales of language reform, where the iconisation of a sacred grammar discussed by Irvine and Gal works to erase the local grammar. Therefore this study examines the controversy from a perspective that accommodates the diachronic emergence of religious hegemony and ideology embedded in a religious grammar, and that explores the reasons why a society makes certain choices with regards to literacy, even if those choices are detrimental to functional literacy in the indigenous language. The data used for the discussion are based upon interviews with members of SECMOL and Melong Publications,<sup>9</sup> and the religious scholars that advise them; CIBS religious scholars<sup>10</sup> and lay scholar Tashi Rabgyas; the heads of the Tibetan Library Works and Archives of the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala anecdotal evidence; and written sources regarding the language controversy and its wider historical background.

### **Thonmi Sambhota and the creation of the *sum rtags***

As stated earlier, state legitimacy and activity in the Buddhist Himalaya were legitimised through religious Apocrypha of mythical origin, for example the eleventh century Mani Kabum,<sup>11</sup> the biography and teachings of the first Tibetan Buddhist King Srongtsen Gampo. The Mahayana (the Great Vehicle) Sanskrit teachings of the Buddhist monastic college Nalanda in ancient Bihar, from where Tibetan Buddhism emerged, consider the existence of a celestial plane inhabited by a scheme of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas whose metaphysical essences and earthly manifestations protect the inhabitants of the Buddhist Himalaya and assist Buddhist disciples on the path to awakening. The righteous kings and religious figures throughout history are regarded as emanations of either the celestial Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the manifestation of enlightened compassion and

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9 Although not with Sonam Wangchuk, as at the time he was engaged in reforming education in Bhutan and Nepal.

10 I interviewed several CIBS and religious scholars regarding this theme, but most requested anonymity.

11 ma ni bka’ ‘bum

protector deity of Tibet (of whom the Dalai Lamas are the most recognisable); or the Bodhisattva Manjusri, the manifestation of transcendent wisdom, who appears during times of scholastic innovation (Samuel 1993:538). Political legitimacy and religious sovereignty were perpetuated by the ceremonial activities and textual compositions of various *rinpoches*<sup>12</sup> (incarnate religious teachers), Buddhist teachers, and ritual specialists since the ancient time of Tibet's righteous kings (Kapstein 2000; Samuel 1993). According to Tibetan Buddhist historical discourse, the seventh century King Srongtsen Gampo, a manifestation of Avalokitesvara, delegated a group of scholars headed by Thonmi Sambhota to travel to the monastic college of Nalanda to learn Buddhist philosophy, and to develop a formal script and grammar with which the teachings could be translated into the Tibetan language. Believed to be a manifestation of Manjusri,<sup>13</sup> Thonmi developed a script and grammar based upon an analysis of the grammatical patterns of Sanskrit in which the Mahayana Buddhist texts were originally written. According to legend, Thonmi laid down the rules of this grammar in two treatises: the *sum cu pa* and the *rtags 'jug pa* popularly abbreviated to *sum rtags* or the Root Grammar in Thirty Verses.<sup>14</sup> The grammar was later transmitted to the *lotsawas*,<sup>15</sup> the great translators, for the purposes of translating the *kangyur* and *tangyur*<sup>16</sup> (the Buddha's teachings and subsequent Indian commentaries) into Tibetan. These were to become the foundations of pre-modern Tibetan statecraft (Samuel 1993). During these times, literacy was limited to the monasteries and the aristocracy, and script and grammar were inseparable from the metaphysical essence of the religious knowledge the literature sought to clarify and expand.

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<sup>12</sup> *rin po che*

<sup>13</sup> Formal interviews and informal discussions with Ladakhi religious scholars, personal friends, and the Tibetan scholars in Dharamsala confirm the belief of Thonmi as Manjusri, and his mission is discussed in the *Mani Kabum*.

<sup>14</sup> According to several of my interlocutors there were in fact eight treatises, but six were lost during the fall of the Tibetan Empire in the ninth century AD.

<sup>15</sup> *lo rtsha ba*

<sup>16</sup> *Bka 'gyur* and *bstan 'gyur*

## The context of the Ladakhi language controversy

The monastic *geshes*<sup>17</sup> (religious academics) and scholars of the CIBS who have received their religious training in the great monastic colleges of Benares or South India, or in Tibet when it was still possible to do so, look closely to the exiled monastic institutions in matters of religious practice. As monks could no longer travel to Tibet for religious instruction, the CIBS was inaugurated in 1959 for the purpose of imparting a religious education based upon the Mahayana teachings of Nalanda, albeit combined with a modern education, to ensure the preservation of the Himalayan Buddhist culture and language. In response to Dharamsala's concern of cultural preservation discussed above, Ladakhi lay and monastic scholars began producing literature for the laity in the modified style of the exiled Tibetans, despite most Ladakhis being unfamiliar with modern Tibetan. Because Dharamsala requires conformity to a uniform grammar and does not recognise any regional deviation, the Ladakhi Buddhist scholars maintain that there is one language, and spoken Ladakhi is a colloquial dialect. They use the term '*bhoti*'<sup>18</sup> to describe modern written Tibetan, which they say is the common written language from the Kargil District in Western Ladakh through to Arunachal Pradesh in the far Indian North East; and through which the culture of all Himalayan Buddhists is transmitted.<sup>19</sup>

However, few Ladakhis can understand the writing system of either *choskat* or *bhoti*. Ladakhi *p'alskat* follows the sentence structure but differs in vocabulary and grammatical forms, leading those who write in *p'alskat* to assert that spoken Ladakhi is so completely different from Tibetan it can be considered another language. They promote a distinct Ladakhi culture and identity, separate from Tibet and the other regions or nations of the Buddhist Himalaya, and their approaches to development and education in Ladakh are more 'secular' in style. Writing in the vernacular is championed primarily by Sonam Wangchuk of SECMOL and the editors at Melong Publications. Government education in Ladakh is poor quality, with a high failure rate. SECMOL identified language as a major obstacle to successful learning, with children being instructed in Urdu (the state

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17 *Dge bshes*

18 *Bhoti* is a Sanskrit word referring to Tibet, and is used by the CIBS scholars to refer to the 'language' of the Buddhist Himalaya.

19 This is rhetoric rather than fact, the dominant writing systems in Muslim-dominated Kargil are Urdu and Arabic.



language of J&K), Hindi, or English, rather than the indigenous language. Citing studies which demonstrate children who learn in their mother tongue have a greater foundation in learning, SECMOL began printing popular media and books in *p'alskat* for primary age, with the aim of standardising a written form that could be taught in schools and is more accessible to the wider population (Norman 2009:78–79).<sup>20</sup> SECMOL is supported by two monastic scholars: Bakula Rangdol Nyima Rinpoche, head lama of Lamayuru Monastery, and his language mentor Khenpo<sup>21</sup> (religious academic) Konchok Panday of the same monastery, former government teacher, and language adviser to Melong Publications. Both scholars are experts in classical Tibetan grammar, but promote the vernacular for secular purposes. Rather than accepting the existence of a single language, they use the term *bodiyik*,<sup>22</sup> literally ‘Tibetan letters,’ to describe the script that carries all the separate languages of the Buddhist Himalaya, and they resist the traditional aversion to empirical critical analysis that they argue to be a feature of Tibetan Buddhist orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> Both assert the linguistic principle that human language cannot exist without grammar, that grammar is a vessel for knowledge, and to treat grammar as a holy object is a mistake (Panday 2011:198).

### Epistemological variation in linguistic and Buddhist philosophy

The various debates in the dispute highlight the distinct positions from which the language controversy is argued (objective linguistics, cultural identity, Buddhist doctrinal principles, and historical accuracy), all of which emphasise how the arguments have emerged from within two different worldviews, rather than leading to any resolution. When in the early 1990s Melong Publications began producing *Ladags Melong*, it proved extremely popular. However, the magazine’s colloquial style angered Buddhist scholars. Emphasising Ladakh’s ethnic and religious links to Tibet, scholars feared that altering the written form would result in the eradication of the sacred grammar, and with it the wealth of teachings contained in the Buddhist compendia. Melong

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20 SECMOL partnered with the regional administration in reforming government education from 1994 to 2007 with great success, although the partnership has since ended. See SECMOL’s webpage for details: <http://www.secmol.org/edureforms/index.php>

21 *mkhan po*

22 *Bod yig*

23 Whilst Buddhist dialectics is considered an important component of higher academic studies, the government of pre-exile Tibet had a history of suppressing material that threatened its stability and the stability of relations with its patrons; see Smith 2003.

Publications disputed this, arguing that learning a more familiar form would encourage greater interest in studying the classical grammar later, should the individual wish to do so (Norman 2009:79). The CIBS scholars say that this is a short-term solution, which will have long-term negative consequences for Buddhist culture and inner development if the grammar of the teachings is diluted. They assert that the *sum rtags* contains all the grammatical rules with which one builds a sentence; any deviation results in writing that makes no sense.

The classical grammar has a complicated orthography that diverges considerably from the spoken language and those promoting literacy in the vernacular cite this as an impediment to effective literacy. SECMOL and those that advocate literacy in the vernacular dismiss the ‘divine science’ behind the sacred grammar, declaring that the CIBS scholars and monastic *geshes* do not understand what grammar is, confusing it instead with arcane spelling, or confusing language and script (Norman 2009:139; Panday 2011:51). Yet, the CIBS scholars cite the intimacy between spelling and grammar in classical Tibetan composition, which allows certain orthographic patterns to be preceded or followed only by other stated orthographic patterns, thus ‘telling’ the writer how to spell (Rabgyas, interview transcript, November 19, 2010). Therefore in spite (or as a result) of its complexity, the CIBS scholars consider the sacred grammar to be more scientific than, and superior to, the grammatical and orthographic systems of what they consider to be the worldly, secular languages of Europe or Hindi; perfect due to its divine origins.

In response to such claims of linguistic intransience, Wangchuk cited the fundamental Buddhist principle of impermanence, arguing that language is subject to change and decay just like all worldly phenomena (Ladags Melong 2005:18). He describes the scholars’ concern with preserving the ancient language to be worldly attachment caused by their ignorance of the true nature of phenomenal existence, which ultimate awakening will dispel (Ladags Melong 2005:18–19):

Our scholars would go to every country on the whole of planet earth but they would fail to find a single place where the language has not changed. Perhaps then they would realize that language is no exception when Dharma teaches us that all phenomena in nature are changing, nothing is permanent. (*Ladags Melong* 2005:19)

As discussed earlier, however, Mahayana Buddhism has significant additional doctrinal positions that challenge this. Whilst revering the existence of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, Tibetan Buddhists attribute the transmission of the grammar to Thonmi, the earthly manifestation of celestial Bodhisattva Manjusri; thus the scholars describe the Tibetan language as ‘the language of the Bodhisattvas,’ the protectors of the religion in the land (Chok Tenzin Monlam, interview transcript, April 9, 2012). Miller (1963), an East Asian linguist, traces the origins of the *sum rtags*, arguing the two treatises to be written at separate stages over time, and casting into question the possibility of Thonmi as the author of both, or even either; prompting Ladakhi linguist Bettina Zeisler to assert that from a western academic perspective, Thonmi as the architect of Tibetan grammar is nothing more than pious legend (Zeisler 2006:178). Miller expresses surprise at the Tibetan scholastic tradition’s complete acceptance of the literal tradition pertaining to the mission to India and the attribution of the sacred script and grammar to Thonmi (Miller 1963:502). However for those who revere the *sum rtags*, such historical reasoning is irrelevant; what is important is the preservation of the Tibetan culture, the foundations of which are explained through the grammar of the Mahayana teachings. What is important, the scholars argue, is the idea contained in the texts. As explained by Chok Tenzin Monlam, head translator for the Tibetan Library Works and Archives, the grammar is more than a vessel for language, it is a cultural system, a way of life; therefore ‘the whole process of the Tibetan language is directed towards Buddhism’ (Chok Tenzin Monlam, interview transcript, April 9, 2012).

### **A Tibetan Buddhist development**

For the Ladakhi and Tibetan religious and political elites, the foundations of Himalayan culture are the Mahayana teachings; and language, culture, and religion are collapsed into one. As a result of Ladakh’s historical disciple-teacher relationship with the Buddhist monastic colleges of pre-occupation Tibet (that continues in exile) the monastic elites do not separate Ladakhi culture from Tibetan; both Tibetan and Ladakhi religious scholars, and the political elites that support them, argue their culture and moral imperative to be rooted in the Buddhist doctrine, itself rooted in the sacred grammar. The Dalai Lama, *rinpoches*, and *geshes* all encourage lay Buddhists to study the religious texts in order to understand the compassionate essence of the teachings, also referred to as ‘inner development’ by Ladakhi Buddhist elites (Rabgyas 2004). External development must occur

simultaneously with inner development to ensure it does not become corrupt and mistaken. In order to achieve this, the scholars teach, one must study the Mahayana Buddhist compendia, transmitted through the classical Tibetan writing system (Shironmany 1996; Rabgyas 2004). Thus, the moral imperative of correct development and the grammar of the teachings are considered to be identical.

In 2005, the Dalai Lama visited Ladakh to impart teachings and give blessings. During his visit, he instructed those present that the classical grammar and vocabulary should be adhered to at all times when writing. Wangchuk responded to this in a personal letter to the Dalai Lama, respectfully but explicitly asking him to retract his comments and to allow the matter to be decided locally. Wangchuk's act proved to be unpopular amongst the wider Ladakhi Buddhist population. Buddhist Ladakhis consider the Dalai Lama to be their teacher and protector, and they became concerned that their spiritual leader would remove his protection if they disobeyed him.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this event, the choice was made in favour of religious protection over the promotion of local literature and *Ladags Melong* stopped going to press.<sup>25</sup> Since then the little written media in the regional language is in *bhoti*, which continues to be inaccessible to the majority of local readership. *Bhoti* is offered as an option for Class Ten examination in some Buddhist faith schools offering private education. However, in my many informal conversations with Ladakhis in their twenties and thirties who attended the Buddhist faith schools, not one opted for *bhoti*. All opted for Hindi in their general secondary examination because they said it had a less complicated grammar. In May 2012, some of the CIBS scholars organised an interschool essay writing competition in *bhoti* to motivate Ladakhis to learn the 'ancestral language and script' (World Heritage Day 2012:9). I received subsequent reports that many young Ladakhis are now opting to take *bhoti* for their Class Ten examination demonstrating that learning the classical form may be gaining popularity amongst the youth.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Anecdotal accounts tell how the monk scholars exaggerated the Dalai Lama's displeasure to frighten the Ladakhi Buddhist public. Nevertheless, informal discussions amongst the local Buddhist laity highlighted how Wangchuk's challenge to his authority was considered irreverent.

25 The Buddhist scholars claim a victory over Melong Publications in this regard, but Rebecca Norman stated that it was the resignation of Melong's principal editor to join the local administration that forced the closure of Ladags Melong (interview transcript, June 05, 2012).

26 A fellow anthropologist currently engaged in fieldwork with Ladakhi youth is finding evidence of a rise in the study of *bhoti* amongst the youth, although neither of us has been able to obtain reliable official figures for this.

However, despite being advertised as an inter-school competition, only private faith schools entered. Government schools did not participate. This highlights the concern of the education reformists that preventing the development of a vibrant local literature and media in *p'alskat* will have a detrimental effect on the written form. Nevertheless, the religious authorities are immovable, insisting that allowing modifications in the grammar will destroy Ladakhi culture's 'Buddhist' foundations.

The purpose of the article has been to show how the narratives of the Buddhist religious elite delineate a subjective history of the Buddhist Himalaya that is less about what history is, and more about what history does. Tibetan Buddhist elites engage mythico-histories to legitimise forms of governance that authorise the compassionate essence and wisdom of the teachings for the benefit of all. Such histories are distinct from the objective histories of secular historians and philologists. Thus, when such culturally-embedded systems and ideologies of religion (of which the mythical stories of grammar origin form a part) were challenged by approaches to education and linguistics considered external to the region, the result was a backlash against a perceived intellectual, religious and cultural decline. The controversy highlights the still dominant position not only of religious authority in Buddhist Ladakhi society, but also religious protection. According to some interlocutors, to dismiss the myth of Thonmi and the science expounded in his treatise would be to dismiss the divine word of the Buddha. Mills highlights the insights inherent in such a position when he remarks thus: 'the purpose of historical accounts from a Buddhist perspective lay not in their simple factual accuracy, but in their ability to generate faith in Buddhism, something which was [...] of greater benefit than the dry technicalities of 'objective history' (Mills 2003:7). The CIBS scholars claim that if the writing system is altered the ability to generate faith in the teachings will be lost, and the very survival of Ladakh's Buddhist culture will be threatened, thus producing negative consequences for the cultivation of inner development, and resulting in mistaken material development for Ladakh. Through their process of iconisation of the sacred grammar and erasure of local linguistic and grammatical forms, the religious elites are attempting to negotiate their terms with modern secular world, believing that what they are protecting are the benefits of a great tradition, the knowledge of which is contained in the teachings that are only accessible in this ancient grammar, and that are essential in countering the negative effects of increasing material development.

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