A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LEPCHA ORTHOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE

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Introduction

The Lepcha people are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim. The Lepcha language is spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling district in West Bengal in India, in Ilām district in Nepal, and in a few villages of Samtsi district in south-western Bhutan. The tribal homeland of the Lepcha people is referred to as ꠀ ꠁ ꠂ *ne máyel lyáng* 'hidden paradise' or ꠀ ꠁ ꠂ ꠃ *ne máyel málúk lyáng* 'land of eternal purity'. Most of the areas in which Lepcha is spoken today were once Sikkimese territory, as the kingdom of Sikkim used to comprise all of present-day Sikkim and most of Darjeeling district.

Today the Lepcha people constitute a minority of the population of modern Sikkim, which has been flooded by immigrants from Nepal. Although many Lepcha people estimate their number of speakers to be over 50,000, the total number of Lepcha speakers is likely to be much smaller. According to the 1991 Census of India, the most recent statistical profile for which the data have been disaggregated, the total number of mother tongue Lepcha speakers across the nation is 29,854. While their distribution is largely in Sikkim and the northern districts of West Bengal, there are no reliable speaker numbers for the Darjeeling district, where there are many Lepcha villages particularly in the area surrounding the small town of Kalimpong. There are reportedly roughly a hundred Lepcha households in Ilām, mainly in the villages Nāmsāliṅ, Phikkal, Kolbuṅ, Pañckanyā, Kanyām, Śrī Antu and Cisopānī, and approximately a thousand Lepcha speakers in Samtsi District, in Denchukha north of the 'Amochu in Bhutan (van Driem 2001: 819). Although Lepcha is unmistakably a Tibeto-Burman language, its exact position within the Tibeto-Burman language family is still unclear.

The English name 'Lepcha' derives from Nepali *lāpce* or *lāpcā*, which originally had the derogatory connotation of 'inarticulate speech'. Nowadays, the term 'Lepcha' is widely used without this connotation. The Lepcha call themselves ꠄꠅ꠆ ꠇꠈ ꠉꠊ *mútuncí róngkup rumkup* 'children of the Róng and of God', or simply ꠇꠈ

róngkup 'children of the Róng'. Alternatively, the Lepcha people may call themselves ᰣ ᰍᰶᰃᰵ *róng ʔágít* 'the Róng tribe'. The Lepcha word for 'language' is ᰕᰰᰃ *ʔáríng*, and the Lepcha call their own language ᰣᰍᰵ *róngríng*.

The Lepcha divide themselves into four main groups according to the region they inhabit. The Lepcha from Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik and Darjeeling are known as ᰔᰶᰊᰵᰃᰵ *támsángmú*, the Lepcha from Sikkim are called ᰉᰬᰍᰵᰃᰵ *renjóngmú*. The smaller group of Lepcha living in the Ilām district of eastern Nepal are known as ᰛᰕᰶᰕᰵᰃᰵ *ʔilámmú* and the Lepcha who live in ᰊᰩᰶᰜᰣᰍ *prolyáng* 'Bhutan' are referred to as ᰊᰩᰍᰵᰃᰵ *promú*. The Lepcha of Kalimpong, though formerly part of Bhutanese territory, are Támsángmú and not Promú. There is some debate over whether the Lepcha from Kurseong, Darjeeling and Mirik should belong to the Renjóngmú or the Támsángmú Lepcha, as some people use the name Támsángmú strictly for Lepcha living in and around Kalimpong.

The four groups do not represent four different dialects; although there are regional differences between the Lepcha spoken in different areas, these differences are largely lexical. The Lepcha spoken by the Renjóngmú is generally more influenced by Denjongkay, the language spoken by the Bhutia people of Sikkim, than the Lepcha spoken by the Támsángmú, which in itself is more influenced by Nepali than the Lepcha spoken by the Renjóngmú. Since there is a lot of mobility between Sikkim and Darjeeling district, with children going to school or college or finding jobs in areas different from where their parents live, the regional influences are not always straightforward. However, the sense of regional identity is strong enough, buttressed by a number of real cultural differences, between the Renjóngmú and the Támsángmú to make the distinction between these major groups within the Lepcha speaking community a vital one.

In Sikkim, Lepcha is one of eleven official languages. Lepcha is taught in schools, there is a textbook department that develops official learning materials, there is a Lepcha edition of a government newspaper, the Sikkim Herald, and the government radio station broadcasts news bulletins and cultural programmes in the Lepcha language. A special area in North Sikkim holds the ᰌᰩᰵ Dzongú [*zónggú*] Lepcha reserve, a Lepcha conservation area where but few outsiders have been allowed to settle. In the Darjeeling district, the Lepcha have had to struggle to get official status in order to receive special benefits and to be able to have air time on the official radio stations. The Lepcha Association, which is a social and cultural

organisation with several different branches and chapters in which many Lepcha people have organised themselves, coordinates evening classes in the Lepcha language and other social and cultural initiatives, such as festivals and archery competitions.

The Lepcha are divided into various clans or families known as ꡣꡭꡱ *putsho* and each clan has its own ꡰ *dâ* 'lake' and ꡅꡱ *cú* 'mountain peak'. The *cú* are regularly honoured in ꡅꡱ ꡱꡰꡮꡱ *cú rumfát* 'mountain worship' ceremonies. In the Kalimpong area, the origin of the clan names is traditionally explained as follows: when the evil king ꡜꡙꡱꡮꡱ *hlaso múng* 'Lhasa Devil' was killed by ꡱꡮꡱꡮꡱ *támsáng thíng* 'Lord Támsáng', then Lord Támsáng expressed his gratitude to 108 men by bestowing upon each of them an honorary title, as well as placing each of them under the protection of a specific lake and mountain peak. The honorary titles developed into clan names, such as ꡙꡭꡱꡮꡱ *lúksómmú*, ꡱꡮꡱꡮꡱ *simíkmú*, ꡱꡮꡱ *sadámú.* Although most Lepcha know to which *putsho* they belong, they do not always know the corresponding *dâ* and *cú*. Today the full clan name may be shortened, e.g. *Simik* from ꡱꡮꡱꡮꡱ *simíkmú,* anglicised and shortened, e.g. *Foning* from (ꡱꡮꡱ) ꡱꡮꡱꡮꡱ *fonyung rumsóngmú*, or the clan name may be substituted by the generic epithet 'Lepcha', e.g. *Dorji Tshering Lepcha.*

The central religious roles in the Lepcha community are traditionally occupied by the ꡱꡱ *mun* and ꡱꡮꡱꡮꡱ *bóngthíng*, who both function as shamans. The *bóngthíng* is traditionally a male shaman who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals and may heal acute illness. The *mun*, often but not necessarily a female shaman, is a healer who exorcises demons, helps to heal illness and guides souls to the afterlife. It is possible for a *bóngthíng* to develop into a *mun*, in Sikkim such healers are known as ꡱꡮꡱ *padem*. In the eighteenth century, the Lepcha people were converted to Buddhism, although indigenous Lepcha shamanism managed to coexist with Buddhist customs and beliefs. Both Buddhist lamas and Lepcha *bóngthíng*s preside at many important ceremonies in Lepcha life, each to perform their own rituals. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, in the Darjeeling district a significant number of Lepcha people have converted to Christianity. Many Christian Lepcha people have lost their language and have distanced themselves from the old shamanistic rituals and beliefs. This stance occasionally gives rise to tension between Buddhist and Christian Lepcha.

History of Studies on the Lepcha Language

Archibald Campbell published a short list of Lepcha words in 1840 and a short introduction on Lepcha in 1869. In 1842, the independent clergyman William Start brought more than twenty German missionaries to Darjeeling in order to start a Christian mission post there. Although the initiative was not a lasting success, William Start and his colleague Karl Gottlieb Niebel did run a school for Lepcha children in Tukvár, near Darjeeling, for some time and translated parts of the Bible into Lepcha (Start and Niebel 1849, 1872). When Start returned to England in 1852, Niebel continued his missionary work in the area. A commemorative plaque in St. Columba's Church in Darjeeling reads: '1865. Karl G. Niebel, 23 years translator with the Lepcha, died' (Perry 1997: 31). Some of the other missionaries that Start had brought over settled in the region and started up various businesses.

At around the same time that William Start became interested in the Darjeeling area, Colonel George Byres Mainwaring of the Bengal Staff Corps made his first visit to Darjeeling. The Lepcha customs and way of life had a great impact on Mainwaring, who saw all the traits of Lepcha culture he so admired reflected in their language. He was the first to write a grammar of Lepcha, which was published in 1876. Mainwaring worked on a Lepcha dictionary as well, the manuscript of which was edited and published in 1898 by Albert Grünwedel after Mainwaring's death. Mainwaring's work has been of pivotal importance for the survival of the Lepcha language, although it has also been criticised because of its strong latinate bias.

Apart from editing Mainwaring's dictionary, Albert Grünwedel published translations of Lepcha texts based on Tibetan sources. Lawrence Waddell published an article with remarks on a number of Lepcha place names in 1892, and in an article in 1899 he translated and explained nine Lepcha songs. In his account of Tibetan Buddhism, Waddell (1895) also described Lepcha religious practices. These works were followed by different short accounts of the Lepcha language by Schott (1881), Drouin (1901) and Feer (1898).

Several studies on Lepcha culture or aspects thereof have been published, such as those by Stocks (1925), Morris (1938), Gorer (1938), Hermanns (1954) and later Klafkowski (1980, 1983), Thakur (1988) and Chattopadhyay (1990). The Austrian tibetologist René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz published extensively on the religion of the Lepcha until his early death in 1959. The most important

anthropological study of the Lepcha people and their culture remains the monumental work by Halfdan Siiger and Jørgen Rischel, published in 1967.

Notable 20th century publications on the Lepcha language consist of studies on the field of classification (Benedict 1972, Bodman 1988, Shafer 1955, Forrest 1962), orthography and inconsistencies in spelling (Chakraborty 1978, Haarh 1959, Sprigg 1983, 1989, 1997b, 1998a) and phonology (Bodman 1989, Sprigg 1966a, 1966b). In 1966, Prabhakar Sinha wrote an unpublished grammar of Lepcha as a Ph.D. dissertation at Deccan College in Pune. The present author is also working on a descriptive study of the Lepcha language. The data for this study were collected during several sojourns among Lepcha speakers in Kalimpong and Sikkim between 1994 and 1998.

The Lepcha Textbook Officers in the Department of Human Resource Development (formerly the Department of Education) of the Government of Sikkim and the various Lepcha Associations of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim have been publishing periodicals, books, plays and collections of poetry in Lepcha for decades. The Lepcha author Arthur Foning published his influential book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* in 1987, and the book was reprinted in 2003. Two other outstanding Lepcha scholars, ᰀ᰷ᰊ Khárpú Támsáng and ᰀ᰷ᰊ Dóngtshen Luksóm, have both published grammars of Lepcha written in Lepcha, i.e. Támsáng (1978), Luksóm (1981), as well as other studies.

Several dictionaries of the Lepcha language have been compiled (Cemjong 1970, Grünwedel 1898a, Kumar 1978). Khárpú Támsáng's magnificent *Lepcha English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, published in 1980, is indispensible to anyone working on Lepcha. In 1983, a *Lepcha Hindi English Dictionary* was compiled by Dóngtshen Luksóm. In 1996, an *English to Lepcha Dictionary* was published by the eminent Lepcha authors ᰀ᰷ᰊ Ugen Shipmú, ᰀ᰷ᰊ Karma Lode Rigimú, ᰀ᰷ᰊ Nakú Tshering Likmú and ᰀ᰷ᰊ Dorji Wángdi Kunchúdyangmú.

Ever since its first issue in 1997, the quarterly Lepcha bilingual news magazine ᰀ᰷ᰊ *Aachuley* [*ácúle*] published by the Lepcha Literary Organisation in Kalimpong and edited by ᰀ᰷ᰊ Lyángsóng Támsáng, has proven to be an important forum for contributions on Lepcha language and culture written by authors from all over the world.

The Lepcha Script

The Lepcha have their own indigenous script which dates back to the 18th century. The Lepcha script is written from left to right, with spaces between words. In Lepcha, no distinction is made between capital and lower-case letters. Punctuation marks are similar to the ones used in the Tibetan orthography, although nowadays full stops, commas and question marks from the Roman alphabet are also used. The 'alphabet' or 'syllabary' is referred to in the Lepcha language as ᰔᰭ *kakha* 'ABC', ᰩᰨᰉ *chomíng* 'written letters' and ᰕᰉᰬ *míngzât* 'treasure of letters'. The native Lepcha orthography is systematically treated in the text ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng*, the book on the Lepcha alphabet, which is traditionally used to teach Lepcha orthography (Plaisier 2003: 31-32).

The order of the Lepcha alphabet as given in the ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng* is different to the order in which the Lepcha alphabet is taught and read out today. The original Lepcha syllabary was built out of five units, as given below in Diagram 1 below, the first units running from ᰣ *ʔa* to ᰕ *ma*, and the second unit running from ᰝ *ha* to ᰗ *tha*, etc. Although most ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng* books use the same order, occasionally there is some variation in the order of the units. A similar conclusion was pointed to by R. K. Sprigg in his article 'Original and sophisticated features of the Lepcha and Limbu scripts' (1998). The order of the consonant symbols within the five units may vary slightly between different versions of the ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng*, between the introductory summary of the alphabet in the opening part of ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng* and the actual listing of all possible syllables in ᰜᰨᰕ *lazóng* books. However, the differences are minor and most of them are apparently oversights of the copyists.

ᰣ *ʔa*	ᰴ *ka*	ᰃ *ga*	ᰔ *pa*	ᰥ *fa*	ᰥ *ba*	ᰕ *ma*	
ᰝ *ha*	ᰛ *ra*	ᰰ *kha*	ᰔ *ta*	ᰗ *tha*			
ᰌ *da*	ᰜ *la*	ᰍ *kla*	ᰃ *gla*	ᰬ *pla*	ᰕ *fla*	ᰅ *bla*	
ᰕ *mla*	ᰟ *hla*	ᰤ *va*	ᰅ *nga*	ᰗ *ca*	ᰕ *pha*	ᰧ *nya*	ᰊ *na*	ᰎ *tsa*
ᰟ *wa*	ᰘ *ja*	ᰏ *za*	ᰬ *ya*	ᰕ *sha*	ᰛ *cha*	ᰖ *tsha*	ᰥ *sa*

Diagram 1: Original order of the syllabary

In the ᰛᰩᰰ *lazóng,* all the orthographic symbols and combinations of symbols are treated in a specific order, building from simple consonant or vowel signs to more complex syllables. Apart from a few paragraphs which introduce the different sections making up the book, the ᰛᰩᰰ *lazóng* does not contain running text as such. The traditional method of instruction is for the teacher to recite sections of the ᰛᰩᰰ *lazóng* in a set melody and for the students to read and chant along with the teacher, until the students have memorised the values of the letters and the syllables and are able to read and to recite by themselves. Although most people nowadays learn to read and write Lepcha through primers and textbooks based on different methods, the traditional method based on recitation of the ᰛᰩᰰ *lazóng* is still practised. The list of possible syllables in Lepcha given by Mainwaring in his grammar (1876: 12-18), is clearly based on the ᰛᰩᰰ *lazóng*. The order of the syllabary that is mostly used in primers and textbooks today, clearly influenced by the order of the *devanāgarī* alphabet, is given in Diagram 2 below, starting with ᰀ *ʔa,* ᰄ *ka,* ᰅ *kha,* ᰆ *ga,* ᰉ *nga,* and ending with ᰢ *bla,* ᰥ *mla,* ᰦ *hla*.

The 36 consonant symbols (ᰔᰨᰵ ᰀᰮ *chomíng ʔámo* or ᰀᰮ ᰀᰩᰵ *ʔámú ʔámíng* 'consonants, mother letters' are given below with a Roman transliteration of each symbol. When the consonant is not marked by any vowel sign, the inherent vowel of the consonant is the vowel transliterated as *a*.

ᰀ	ᰄ	ᰅ	ᰆ	ᰉ	ᰧ	ᰗ	ᰈ	ᰜ
ʔa	*ka*	*kha*	*ga*	*nga*	*ca*	*cha*	*ja*	*nya*
ᰊ	ᰋ	ᰌ	ᰍ	ᰎ	ᰏ	ᰐ	ᰓ	ᰕ
ta	*tha*	*da*	*na*	*pa*	*pha*	*fa*	*ba*	*ma*
ᰌ	ᰣ	ᰝ	ᰤ	ᰛ	ᰜ	ᰟ	ᰓ	
tsa	*tsha*	*za*	*ya*	*ra*	*la*	*ha*	*va*	
ᰠ	ᰡ	ᰫ						
sha	*sa*	*wa*						
ᰅ	ᰆ	ᰐ	ᰏ	ᰢ	ᰥ	ᰦ		
kla	*gla*	*pla*	*fla*	*bla*	*mla*	*hla*		

Diagram 2: Consonant letters

Vowel diacritics may be added to the consonant symbols. The vowel diacritics are traditionally known as ᰀᰧᰵ ᰀᰧᰬ *chomíng ʔákup* or ᰀᰧᰬ ᰀᰧᰵ *ʔákup ʔámíng* 'vowel signs, child letters, small letters' and ᰀᰧᰬ ᰕᰧᰶ *ʔákúp thámbyín* or ᰕᰵᰬ ᰕᰧᰶ *míngkup thámbyín* 'diacritical vowel signs'.

ⓒ	ⓒ(	̃ⓒ	ʃⓒ	ʃ̃ⓒ	(ⓒ	(̃ⓒ	ⓒ)	ⓒʓ	ⓒ̣
-a	*-á*	*-â*	*-i*	*-í*	*-o*	*-ó*	*-u*	*-ú*	*-e*

Diagram 3: Vowel signs

Any Lepcha consonant may occur at the beginning of a syllable. Although all Lepcha vowels may be found at the end of a syllable, only a limited number of consonants can occur syllable-finally. The consonants found at the end of syllables are: *-k, -t, -n, -p, -m, -r, -l* and *-ng*. The ᰖᰬ ᰕᰧᰶ *tyelbú thámbyín* or ᰕᰵᰖ ᰕᰧᰶ *míngtyel thámbyín* 'final consonant signs' are given in Diagram 4 below.

The ᰕᰵᰬ *nyíndo* sign, i.e. 'ᰶ⊕', transliterated here as *-ang*, is used to indicate a final velar nasal when no specific vowel sign is indicated, as in ᰠᰩ *sang*. The ᰍᰬᰣ *lakang* sign, i.e. '⊕', is used to indicate a final velar nasal in combination with diacritical vowel signs, as in the syllables ᰀᰠᰧ(*sáng*, ʃᰠ̃ *síng*, and (ᰀᰠ *song*. The distinction between the ᰕᰵᰬ *nyíndo* and the ᰍᰬᰣ *lakang* is not always made when people discuss orthography, often the ᰕᰵᰬ *nyíndo* is used as a general term for a written final velar nasal.

For those consonant clusters in which the initial consonant is followed by one of the post-consonantal glides *-y, -r* or *-l*, the term ᰕᰵᰖᰩ *míngthyú* 'conjunct consonants, affixed consonants' is used. The ᰕᰵ ᰖᰩ *míngthyú* series includes the consonant symbols ᰀ *kla*, ᰜ *gla*, ᰄ *pla*, ᰛ *fla*, ᰍ *bla*, ᰌ *mla* and ᰟ *hla*, which are also sometimes referred to as the ᰍᰖᰩ *lathyú* 'l-cluster', literally 'l-affix'. The orthography also has special symbols for post-consonantal *-y* and *-r*, i.e. the ᰦᰖᰩ *yathyú* 'y-affix' and the ᰦᰖᰩ *rathyú* 'r-affix'. The ᰦᰖᰩ *yathyú* and ᰦᰖᰩ *rathyú* symbols can be used in combination with each other, as for example in ᰛᰩ *fryóm* 'suspect'. The ᰦᰖᰩ *yathyú* and ᰦᰖᰩ *rathyú* symbols may also be used in combination with the ᰍᰖᰩ *lathyú* series, as in ᰕᰩ *mlyúk* 'lukewarm, tepid', in which case the ᰦᰖᰩ *yathyú* always follows either the ᰍᰖᰩ *lathyú* or the ᰦᰖᰩ *rathyú*. The ᰍᰖᰩ *lathyú* and ᰦᰖᰩ *rathyú* may not be combined with each other.

symbol	$\overset{\acute{}}{\circledS}$	$\overset{\ddot{}}{\circledS}$	$\overset{\hat{}}{\circledS}$
transliteration	*-k*	*-m*	*-l*
name of symbol	ᰜᰫᰥ *lakát*	ᰜᰊᰤ *lanyet*	ᰜᰤᰥ *lasám*
examples	ᰛᰥ *rok*	ᰍᰫ *kím*	ᰊᰥ *pál*

symbol	$\overset{\circ}{\circledS}$	$\overset{\bullet}{\circledS}$	$\overset{\sim}{\circledS}$
transliteration	*-n*	*-p*	*-r*
name of symbol	ᰜᰊᰤ *lanun*	ᰜᰫᰤ *lakup*	ᰜᰗᰥ *ladar*
examples	ᰊᰥ *bán*	ᰫᰥ *ʔóp*	ᰛᰫ *kor*

symbol	$\overset{=}{\circledS}$	$\overset{\prime}{\circledS}$	$\overset{)}{\circledS}$
transliteration	*-t*	*-ng*	*-ang*
name of symbol	ᰜᰫᰊ *lakat*	ᰜᰪᰂ *lakang*	ᰍᰫᰗ *nyíndo*
examples	ᰎᰥ *fát*	ᰛᰫ *róng*	ᰘᰍ *pang*

Diagram 4: Final consonant signs

symbol	©ᰤ	©ᰥ
transliteration	*-y*	*-r*
name of sign	ᰤᰭᰥ *yathyú*	ᰜᰭᰥ *rathyú*
examples	ᰀᰤ *kya*, ᰀᰥ *kra*, ᰀᰥᰤ *krya*	

Diagram 5: Affixed consonant signs

For retroflex sounds, which occur mainly in loanwords from Denjongkay, the clusters ᰀᰥ *kra*, ᰝᰥ *hra* and ᰃᰥ *gra* are used, e.g. ᰉᰥ *throm* 'town, market', and ᰀᰥ ᰍᰭ *trók chí* 'thank you'. The retroflex sounds are usually marked by a dot written below the graph, so as to distinguish these sounds from the unmarked non-retroflex sounds *kra, hra* and *gra*, which occur widely in Lepcha, e.g. ᰍᰥ *krít* 'hunger', and ᰝᰥ *hróng* 'come up, arrive'. This useful diacritic was introduced by Mainwaring (1876: 10-11), and is known as *Mainwaring's dot*. Mainwaring suggests that the dot was also used with the letters ᰕ *za* and ᰛ *ra*, but this particular usage is no longer found (Mainwaring 1876:

11). Although not all Lepcha writers favour the orthographic innovation, Mainwaring's dot is still widely used to indicate retroflex sounds.

ᰥ	ᰤ	ᰣ	ᰥ	ᰤ	ᰣ
kra	*gra*	*hra*	*tra*	*dra*	*thra*

Diagram 6: Retroflex consonants

The ᰶ *rân* 'circumflex' sign is a diacritic flourish written over a consonant sign or over a vowel sign 'ᰶ', as in ᰶ *rân*, ᰦ *ʔâ* or ᰧ *ʔí*. Although the original function of the ᰶ *rân* sign is still unclear, it is often present in closed syllables, in which case the circumflex sign should be written above the final consonant sign. It has been suggested that the function of the ᰶ *rân* is to indicate stress or pitch, in order to distinguish stressable syllables from syllables that never appear in a stressed position, and this hypothesis may well be correct (Plaisier 2003: 28-29, Sprigg 1983: 316). However, because the function of the ᰶ *rân* sign is unclear to most writers, nowadays the sign is used by the Lepcha in a variety of ways, and opinions vary strongly as to which is the correct usage.

Although many Lepcha believe that a literary tradition existed among the Lepcha before the arrival of Buddhism in the area, thus far no evidence has been found to corroborate this claim. It seems more likely that the invention of the Lepcha alphabet was motivated by the religious activities of Buddhist missionaries. The Buddhist monks were keen to communicate with the Lepcha people in their own language, and as so often happens when the influence of a new religion spreads, religious texts were translated into the local language of the area, in this case Lepcha, for which an alphabet had yet to be created (Plaisier 2003: 20-23, Risley 1894: 13, Sprigg 1983, 1996).

The Lepcha script is understood to have been devised during the reign of the third chogyal of Sikkim, ཆོས་རྒྱལ་ཕྱག་རྡོར་རྣམ་རྒྱལ *Chogyal Chador Namgyal* (*imperabat* 1700 - 1716). According to Lepcha tradition, the native Lepcha orthography was created by the Lepcha scholar ᰌᰧᰬᰵ ᰀᰍᰜᰩᰵ *Thikúng Mensalóng*, who is believed to have been a contemporary of བླ་མ་ལྷ་བཙུན་ཆེན་པོ *Lama Lhatsun Chenpo*, i.e. བླ་མ་ལྷ་བཙུན་ནམ་མཁའ་ འཇིགས་མེད་ *Lama Lhatsun Namkha Jigme* (1597 - 1654), the patron saint of Sikkim, who played a definitive part in the Sikkimese conversion to Buddhism. Since sources mention that ᰀᰍᰜᰩᰵ *Mensalóng* and *Lhatsun*

Chenpo met each other (Foning 1987: 152), it might well have been the case that they worked together on the Lepcha orthography, which would account for a Tibetan tradition which ascribes the introduction of the Lepcha script to *Lhatsun Chenpo*. The Lepcha tradition that credits ᰛᰩ᰷ᰮᰜ *Mensalóng* with the invention of the Lepcha script seems even more plausible when we realise that during the reign of *Chador Namgyal* not just the Lepcha script, but also the Limbu or Kiranti script was developed, not by *Chador Namgyal* himself, but by the Limbu monk *Śirijaṅgā* (van Driem 2001: 674-675).

Lepcha literature has hardly been studied at all, yet it is generally believed that an indigenous Lepcha literature does not exist. This view is based on the fact that many written Lepcha texts are translations, or rather adaptations, of Tibetan Buddhist works. Since the Lepcha script was probably introduced to write down Lepcha translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts, and keeping in mind that the original Lepcha stories were passed on orally, from generation to generation, and were traditionally not written down, it is not surprising that most Lepcha texts are indeed of a Buddhist nature. However, despite the large amount of books that show a strong Tibetan influence, there are also many books with a native Lepcha character. Many tales clearly reflect values and beliefs of the indigenous shamanistic Lepcha religion. In this respect, Piotr Klafkowski makes the important point that the Tibetan influence on Lepcha literature has been much overemphasised (1980: 112, 1983: 172). Apart from the indigenous Lepcha shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism, other religions and folkloristic traditions from Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal may also have influenced Lepcha literature and Lepcha oral traditions. The precise nature of the influence of all of these traditions on Lepcha literature is yet to be studied in detail.

The entire complex of Lepcha myths, legends, fables and fairy-tales that has been orally transmitted throughout the centuries is known as ᰜᰪᰴᰳᰳᰬᰰ ᰛᰪᰴ *lúngten sung* 'mythology, legends'. Traditional Lepcha narratives contain views and statements on fundamental matters of life and are aimed at the survival of the traditional values of the Lepcha community that they reflect. Some of these accounts deal with universal issues like the origin and destiny of the human world or with matters of life, death and the afterlife. Many myths contain religious truths or explain different aspects of religious teachings, such as the functions and tasks of gods and goddesses. These narratives are sometimes closely related to religious rituals, but not all myths are of a religious nature. Some myths may attempt to explain the history of the

Lepcha community, their ethics and moral philosophy, their places of pilgrimage and traditional Lepcha customs, such as family laws, marriage customs, hunting techniques and dietary proscriptions.

In the titles of Lepcha texts we often find an indication of genre, such as ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *sung* 'story, narrative', ᤙᤥ *cho* 'book, learning, doctrine, dharma, religion', ᤕᤢᤱᤞᤥᤱ *munlóm* 'prayer, blessing', or ᤏᤠᤔᤛᤢ *námthár* 'legend, biography'. A book referred to as ᤙᤥ *cho* typically conveys a canonical message, whereas a ᤕᤢᤱᤞᤥᤱ *munlóm* is usually a prayerbook of some kind. A ᤏᤠᤔᤛᤢ *námthár* is generally a text containing a sacred legend, some chapter of native lore or a hagiography about the life of a saint or miracle-worker. The term ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *sung* 'story, narrative' is used specifically for traditional stories that were originally not written down, but transmitted orally. In a broader sense, ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *sung* refers to narratives or stories in general. We find the term '*sung*' in the titles of many well-known Lepcha texts, such as the text entitled ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *tashe sung* 'The story of Lord Tashe'. The latter text can be considered to be the pivotal masterpiece of Lepcha literature, and it has been transmitted in many different versions, oral as well as written. The title ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *tashe sung* is also used for fragments of the complete story of Lord Tashe. In fact, the genre names are not always used in a consistent fashion by the Lepcha. For example, the text ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ *tashe sung* is also referred to as ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ ᤛᤠ ᤏᤠᤔᤛᤢ *tashe sung sá námthár* ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ ᤛᤠ ᤙᤥ, *tashe sung sá cho*, and ᤀᤠᤙᤣ ᤁᤛᤢᤱ ᤛᤠ ᤕᤢᤱᤞᤥᤱ *tashe thíng sá munlóm*.

An excellent account of traditional Lepcha stories was published by de Beauvoir Stocks (1925, 1926). René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1953) wrote an article on the Lepcha 'legend of the tower', providing both the original Lepcha text of the legend as well as a translation into German. Several Lepcha legends are described in the publications of Geoffrey Gorer (1938: 485-491), Matthias Hermanns (1954: 30-96), Amal Kumar Das (1978: 216-233), and George Kotturan (1983: 122-124, 1989). The monograph of Halfdan Siiger and Jørgen Rischel (1967) includes descriptions of various Lepcha myths, as well as transliterations, analyses and translations of over 40 short Lepcha texts. In Arthur Foning's *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, we find a translation and discussion of various important Lepcha legends (1987: 85-109, 265-280). Of particular value are publications such as Khárpú Támsáng's books on Lepcha mythology (1996, 1997), which capture traditional Lepcha stories in the Lepcha language. This brief discussion of Lepcha writings would not be complete without mentioning the series of illuminating articles by Richard Keith Sprigg on early written documents in Lepcha (1983, 1995, 1997a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d). The

present author has published a catalogue describing the unique collection of Lepcha manuscripts kept in Leiden, the world's largest collection of Lepcha texts (Plaisier 2003). This catalogue also contains an introduction to Lepcha literary history and a survey of the smaller collections of Lepcha manuscripts in London, Gangtok and Vienna.

Whereas the literary language used in books such as ᰋᰰ ᰜᰩ *tashe sung* is laced with Buddhist terminology and loans from Tibetan, the language used in Lepcha folk songs — of which there are many — is usually less influenced by Buddhist vocabulary. Lepcha songs are discussed in some detail in the publications of Waddell (1899), Das (1978: 233-234) and Chattophadhyay (1990: 68-102). Several Lepcha song books have been published, e.g. by ᰜᰩᰵ ᰀᰥᰧ ᰋᰛ Sonám Tshering Támsáng (1986). René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz collected some wedding songs during his stay with the Lepcha people, which he later published and discussed (1952). Lyángsóng Támsáng (1998) devoted an informative article to the highly specific genre of the ᰣᰪ ᰬ *ʔápryá vâm* 'hymn, classical song'.

From this brief introductory article, it will be clear that further research into Lepcha literature would benefit from careful translations and analyses of important traditional Lepcha texts as well as from written versions of indigenous songs, myths and stories that are as yet to be committed to paper.

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