

# ***Bulletin of Tibetology***



VOLUME 43

NO. 1 AND 2

2007

NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY  
GANGTOK, SIKKIM

The Bulletin of Tibetology seeks to serve the specialist as well as the general reader with an interest in the field of study. The motif portraying the Stupa on the mountains suggests the dimensions of the field.

# ***Bulletin of Tibetology***



VOLUME 43

NO. 1 AND 2

2007

NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY  
GANGTOK, SIKKIM

*Patron*

HIS EXCELLENCY SHRI BALMIKI PRASAD SINGH, THE GOVERNOR OF SIKKIM

*Advisor*

TASHI DENSAPA, DIRECTOR NIT

*Editorial Board*

FRANZ-KARL EHRHARD  
ACHARYA SAMTEN GYATSO  
SAUL MULLARD  
BRIGITTE STEINMANN  
TASHI TSERING  
MARK TURIN  
ROBERTO VITALI

*Editor*

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA

*Assistant Editors*

TSULTSEM GYATSO ACHARYA  
THUPTEN TENZING

The Bulletin of Tibetology is published bi-annually by the Director, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim. Annual subscription rates: South Asia, Rs150. Overseas, \$20.

Correspondence concerning bulletin subscriptions, changes of address, missing issues etc., to: Administrative Assistant, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok 737102, Sikkim, India (nitsikkim@yahoo.co.in). Editorial correspondence should be sent to the Editor at the same address.

Submission guidelines. We welcome submission of articles on any subject of the history, language, art, culture and religion of the people of the Tibetan cultural area although we would particularly welcome articles focusing on Sikkim, Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas. Articles should be in English or Tibetan, submitted by email or on CD along with a hard copy and should not exceed 5000 words in length.

The views expressed in the Bulletin of Tibetology are those of the contributors alone and not the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. An article represents the view of the author and does not reflect those of any office or institution with which the author may be associated.

PRINTED AT BABA OFFSET PRESS WORKS PVT. LTD. , GANGTOK, SIKKIM

BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

Volume 43 Number 1 and 2 2007

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO LEPCHA STUDIES**

CONTENTS

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA Editorial introduction	7
CHARISMA K. LEPCHA When Nurkit returns	11
HELEEN PLAISIER In awe of so many <i>múng</i> : Halfdan Siiger in the Sikkim Himalayas	15
PEMA WANGCHUK Lepchas and their hydel protest	33
JENNY BENTLEY Change and cultural revival in a mountain community of Sikkim	59
KERRY LITTLE Lepcha hunters' narratives of their hidden landscapes	81
 <i>Book review</i>	
BRIGITTE STEINMANN <i>Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit</i> . Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca	99
 <i>Obituaries</i>	
Dzongsar Ngari Chödje Thingo Rinpoche (1945-2008)	
In English by SUSANNE VON DER HEIDE	103
In Tibetan by KUNGA YONTEN HOCHOTSANG	111
 <i>Notes on contributors</i>	 117

## CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

*Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture*  
The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim;  
October 1-5, 2008

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, will celebrate its Golden Jubilee in 2008. Since its inauguration by His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet in 1957 and official opening by the then Prime Minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru in 1958, the Institute has been India's leading centre for the study of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist culture. As the centrepiece of the Jubilee celebrations, the NIT will host an international conference in Gangtok from 1-5 October 2008 on the theme of *Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture*. The conference will be officially opened by a distinguished guest and include a programme of cultural events. It will coincide with the presentation of an Atisha relic to the NIT's museum, as well as the release of new publications by the Institute. The conference will also suitably inaugurate the Institute's new library and conference facilities wing, which is scheduled for completion early in 2008.

The conference, which is being organised by the Institute Director Tashi Densapa and the Research Coordinator Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, will bring together around 90 leading scholars, educators, dignitaries and interested persons in the field of Himalayan Buddhist studies (particularly as they relate to Sikkim). While the majority will come from various parts of South Asia, there will also be a number of distinguished scholars attending from Europe, Japan and the United States. Participation is by invitation only, although observers are welcome to attend under their own auspices.

The language of the conference will be English, which is widely spoken in Sikkim, however there will be panels for local scholars which will be held in Sikkimese/Tibetan. The academic programme will include a maximum of 60 papers to be presented by local and foreign participants during the course of the conference.

The conference proceedings will subsequently be published under the editorship of the conference's Academic Convenor, Dr Alex McKay, a historian of the Himalayas and affiliated fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, The Netherlands, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Sikkim.



## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA  
*Research Coordinator*  
*Namgyal Institute of Tibetology*

## THIS ISSUE

The Lepchas have captured the imagination of scholars and travellers since the middle of the nineteenth century, resulting in the publication of a large number of studies on their culture, religion, language, script and literature from the 1840s until today.

From an anthropological perspective, the Lepchas of Sikkim became a classic ethnic group following the publication of Geoffrey Gorer's study of the Lepchas of Lingthem: *Himalayan Village: an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* in 1938. Subsequent monographs that put the Lepchas on the anthropological map were Halfdan Siiger's study of Tingvong, *The Lepchas: Culture and Religion of Himalayan People* (1967) based on fieldwork carried out in Dzongu 1949 and Arthur Foning's *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* published in 1987.

The Lepcha language, script, folklore and literature have continued to motivate scholars over the years, resulting in a number of publications on these subjects, including a *Grammar of Lepcha* (2007) by Heleen Plaisier. However, no major anthropological studies of the Lepchas of Sikkim, based on long-term fieldwork, have been undertaken since Gorer's and Siiger's pioneering works with the exception of some notable contributions such as Nebesky-Wojtkowitz's numerous articles published in the 1950s, Chie Nakane's article *A Plural Society in Sikkim* (1966), Veena Bhasin's *Ecology, Culture, and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas* (1989) and R.R. Gowloong's *Lingthem Revisited: Social Changes in a Lepcha Village of North Sikkim* (1995).

As Research Coordinator at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, in recent years I have had the good fortune to meet a number of students and researchers in Sikkim and have witnessed a resurgence of interest in all aspects of Lepcha life and culture. In addition, the ongoing protest staged by some Lepchas of Dzongu against the construction of hydro-electric projects within the limits of the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu has sparked further interest in this Himalayan community.

While outsiders are showing a renewed appreciation for Lepcha culture, Lepchas themselves are becoming increasingly aware of the



ongoing loss of their traditional Lepcha heritage. This concern is evident in many of the articles published in this issue, particularly those by Charisma Lepcha, Pema Wangchuk, Jenny Bentley and Kerry Little.

The surge of interest in what can be termed Lepcha Studies has inspired me to devote an issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* to the subject, and publish the results of some recent research initiatives and literary writings by students and researchers currently working on subjects relating to the Lepchas. It is also hoped that this surge of interest, particularly among anthropology students, will again result in substantial contributions to Lepcha Studies.

The first article by Charisma Lepcha illustrates the struggle of Lepcha youth with their loss of identity. Although more of a literary essay, Charisma conveys important issues that resonate with some of the subsequent articles. With a recent MA in anthropology from the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, we hope that Charisma will pursue further studies and carry out further research among her own community.

The second article, by Heleen Plaisier, is an excellent introduction to Halfdan Siiger's work on the Lepchas of Sikkim. Having consulted the Siiger archives in Copenhagen, the author first takes us through Siiger's own fieldwork experience of Dzongu in 1949 by quoting directly from Siiger's travel journals. She then presents Siiger's extensive ethnological description of the Lepcha people which appeared in two volumes in 1967 and introduces the third unpublished volume on Lepcha religion which she is currently preparing for publication.

The third article, by Pema Wangchuk, presents a journalistic account of the events surrounding the Lepcha protest staged against the construction of hydro-electric projects in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu, North Sikkim. Although the movement started as early as 2002, it gained considerable momentum and international attention only in 2007. Considering the interest the movement has generated, we thought it important to provide an objective article offering a chronological record in order to facilitate the understanding of this complex historical struggle as it relates to the Lepchas and indeed to Sikkim.

The fourth article by Jenny Bentley is based on data collected for her master's thesis in social anthropology. She explores the notion of 'vanishing' Lepcha and the changes the community have experienced in recent decades, particularly in relation to religion, education and migrant labour. The fear of their culture vanishing has inspired the formation of a number of Lepcha associations that aim to protect and promote Lepcha culture. The author explores the

spread of these associations and associated movements of cultural revival.

The fifth and final article in this issue is an essay by Kerry Little on Lepcha hunters and their hidden landscapes. Former hunter-gatherers, the Lepchas have now abandoned their guns, bows and arrows, and shifting cultivation in order to become settled agriculturalists. Quoting stories recounted to her by former hunters, she introduces us to the erstwhile hunting world of Dzongu. Her descriptions and writing style, although not within the style of anthropology, allow us to enter, feel and explore the world of Lepcha hunters, and the ritual and mythical creatures that live there.

This issue is completed by a book review of Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca's *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* and an obituary of one of the Institute's first students, Dzongsar Ngari Chödje Thingo Rinpoche (1945-2008).

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who, in various ways, contributed in putting this issue together. This issue and its Lepcha theme was initially planned with Brigitte Steinmann who, together with Asen Balikci, Jackie Hiltz and Mark Turin, contributed much-appreciated editorial help. Heleen Plaisier acted as co-editor in the later stages, suggesting additional contributions and editing a number of articles. At the institute, I would like to thank Kesang Choden and Kunga Yonten Hochotsang. Further inspiration for this issue came from our Lepcha friends who never tire of the struggle for the preservation of their Lepcha heritage.

### *Bulletin of Tibetology*

Back issues of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* published between 1964 and 2004 can be freely viewed and downloaded in PDF format through the website of the institute <http://www.tibetology.net/> or directly from the Digital Himalaya project website <http://www.digitalthimalaya.com/collections/journals/bot/>

The contents of recent issues can be viewed on the institute's website and hard copies may be ordered directly from the institute by contacting the Publication Sales In-charge at [nitsikkim@yahoo.co.in](mailto:nitsikkim@yahoo.co.in)



## WHEN NURKIT RETURNS

CHARISMA K. LEPCHA

Nurkit is an amalgamation of two Lepcha words; *nur*, also spelled *noor*, meaning ‘pearl’ and *kit*, often understood to mean ‘attraction’ and used as a suffix with female names.

Nurkit is the name of my six-year-old cousin living in New York. She argues in English. She smooth-talks in Nepali. She is taught Lepcha words at home and learns Spanish in school. She knows Korean phrases from television soaps and dances to Hindi songs from Bollywood movies. She is the embodiment of this century’s multi-lingual generation whose vocabulary makes us wonder if we are speaking the same language.

But if one was to question her who she was, the responses would usually include;

‘I am Indian’

‘I am American’

‘I am Indian American’ or

‘I am Lepcha’, depending on who is asking the question in which context and time.

If the former three responses are familiar to a questioner’s ears, the first one raises quizzical looks for her ‘non-Indian’ features. With straight black hair, slanted eyes and fair skin, she is usually identified with either Chinese or Korean children. But it is the last response ‘I am Lepcha’ that is foreign to all her classmates and teachers. So, that answer is only used when she has to answer relatives visiting the family who question so as to check if she is at least aware of her roots.

For Nurkit, the last response does not necessarily garner further probing. She had answered what the aunt wanted to hear and she could now go out and play with her friends. But the simple phrase ‘I am Lepcha’ has been a haunting identification for many a Lepcha today.

Distributed across four geographical locations in the course of history, the Lepcha population is scattered across Sikkim, Darjeeling hills, South-West Bhutan and Eastern Nepal. Interestingly, the traditional Lepcha boundaries tell of a united *Mayel Lyang* comprising of all these locations where Lepchas resided in their land of eternal

purity. Known to have a close relationship with nature, it was the hills and valleys, the rivers and streams that carried the history and story of the Lepchas. If the mountains spoke for their clan identity, the rivers like Teesta and Rangeet narrated the greatest love story ever told. There seemed to be an intrinsic connection with the existence of even the most miniscule insect or the most insignificant plant around the environment. They spoke a language that was devoid of abuse and harshness. There was a reasoning that surpassed any scientific logic to the systematic arrangement of Lepcha ways of life. Yet, time proved brutal and has since changed and transformed the original ways to an almost lost account of the indigenous inhabitants of the land.

Political history speaks of a time during the thirteenth century when a 'blood treaty' was signed between *Thikung Tek*, a notable Lepcha figure and *Khye Bumsa*, the Tibetan counterpart which paved way for the first foreign dominance over the region. Since then, the Bhutanese control over Kalimpong Lepchas during the eighteenth century and the gifting of Darjeeling to the East India Company during the early nineteenth century only speaks for further dissection and division of the Lepcha land. The British developed the tea industry, bringing Nepalese laborers and settlers who exploited the untouched land and bountiful forests to their advantage. In these developments, the original inhabitants of the region had not only accommodated outsiders into their land but had complacently adjusted their lifestyle to the likes of the Tibetans, Bhutanese and Nepalese influences.

It was the breaking of political boundaries into four separate regions that divided the Lepcha territory. Cultural contact and the need to interact with neighboring communities eventually faded the cultural boundaries too. The Lepcha identity and its distinctiveness gradually diluted in the plethora of cultures thriving in the hills the Lepchas called home.

Still, their different linguistic and traditional traits garnered noticeable acceptance of this group of people in their respective places of residence. In Sikkim, Lepchas are recognised as aboriginals and are even granted the 'primitive tribe' status. In the Darjeeling hills, they are labeled as 'Scheduled Tribe' according to the Indian Constitution, while Nepal acknowledges the Lepchas as a 'minor ethnic group.' Impassively, Bhutan is the only country which included Lepchas under a general category with the Nepalese population.

The territorial categorisations with these different designations further weakened the Lepcha identity. The various borders have divided the Lepchas even within the nation state of India. The Lepchas

of Sikkim are a privileged lot, with the government recognising Lepcha festivals and calling for state holidays. On the other hand, the Lepchas of Darjeeling hills embody a neglected and ignored sentiment as the Lepcha language has yet to find a place even in the primary school syllabus. There, uneasiness creeps in when we are to respond to the question, 'Who are you?'

Responses may vary depending on context, but our foremost answer to the above question is usually our name. In this case, Nurkit is a good example of an unquestionable Lepcha name. But for someone like me, my name is no indicator of my Lepcha identity. I have had respectable government officials mock and question my Lepcha-ness because my name is not Lepcha.

True enough, our generation of Lepcha citizens grow up in Lepcha households with either Buddhist or Biblical names. We attend missionary institutions and converse fluently in both English and Nepali, with Nepali being the *lingua franca* of our present surroundings. Some of us can hardly recognise the Lepcha script and the usage of Lepcha vocabulary is limited to meal times with *zo* (rice) and *ung* (water), words we learned when we were kids. After school finals, we are ready to venture out. Our parents work hard to provide for our academic quest as metro cities or somewhere abroad become easy attractions for interested students. While away from home, we find new joy in the unlimited information on the World Wide Web. Believe it or not, we have Google alerts on anything Lepcha-related and have joined every networking community to do with Lepchas. We even sign our emails with the infamous *aachuley* slogan.

Indeed, we are proud Rongcup. We are the emerging force of our community, wired and connected to the world of information and technology. We stay connected with news from home because it gives us a sense of belongingness when in foreign land.

We applaud at Paril Lepcha's archery feat. We are anxious about Dawa and Tenzing's fast against the hydel projects in Dzongu. We feel the need to do something for our people. We want to be a part of happenings in the hills. We show solidarity by raising funds for Paril's archery equipment or send encouraging messages to the hunger strikers through the internet. But we do not always find peace in their undertakings. We have failed to understand why our busy cousins are fighting for Gorkhaland in our own motherland. 'How dare? It's ridiculous!' are some common phrases that pop up on internet chats regarding the movement.

Our grandmothers told us of tearful incidents from the Bhutanese invasion and the atrocities they committed. Our fathers told us of British dominion by providing education only till a certain level. We got angry. It was injustice. But what could we do? We are often discarded as the simple and docile people. But nobody understood our silent rage.

Today, a new generation of Lepchas have sprung up. We have felt the right to regain what is lost. We want to reaffirm our identity. We want to believe in our *Mayel Lyang*. But it is unclear if we have done anything significantly different than our forefathers. We shook heads when we heard stories of our grandfathers giving a large piece of land in exchange for a knife. We gasped at tales about granduncles who gave away free lands. Unfortunately we seem to be doing the same for our future generations to be shocked at our feat.

Recent events are witness to some Lepchas who remained numb while others fasted till bone-dry for the preservation of Dzongu reserve. Some have found solace in fighting for a Gorkhaland in their own homeland while others cannot digest the invasion and are staying put. The present-day crisis is cunningly clever as our identity with our land is being snatched away from under our noses. History is as crude as ever and even today the Lepchas seem to be on the losing side. It not just divided the one beautiful place into four separate regions, but has further divided an identity into different ideas and ideologies.

At this juncture, the demand for a separate state in the Darjeeling hills makes us wonder if perhaps there is light at the end of the tunnel. But the name 'Gorkhaland' for a state in the Lepcha hills deceives its exclusive characteristics. It ignores the heartbeat of the people whose history is embedded in the land and its features. So it is hoped that the demand for a state with a name of Lepcha origin might find its place on the map of India. It is a prayer that the sun decides to shine on the rainy hills.

It is hoped that when Nurkit decides to return to the hills, she will be glad that the hills are welcoming her home. It is desired that Nurkit's final response- 'I am Lepcha' will be a valid answer even to the ears of her classmates and teachers at school.

IN AWE OF SO MANY *MÚNG*:  
HALFDAN SIIGER IN THE SIKKIM HIMALAYAS

HELEEN PLAISIER  
*Leiden University*

*Introduction*

As a member of the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia, Halfdan Siiger (1911-1999) worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sikkim and India from 1947 to 1950. During the expedition Siiger studied the culture and religion of the Kalasha, Lepcha and Boro people and collected artefacts for the collection of the National Museum of Denmark, where he was employed as a curator. In 1960, ten years after the expedition, Siiger was appointed Professor in the History of Religions at the University of Århus. This article describes Siiger's work on the Lepchas of Sikkim and introduces several significant unpublished documents in Siiger's archives.

When Siiger conducted his fieldwork, the Lepcha people had already received attention in the literature. Most of the early works in which the Lepchas were mentioned are introductory scholarly articles or personal reflections of early travellers in the Himalayan region (M. Avery 1878, J. Avery 1885, Campbell 1840 and 1869, Das 1896, Donaldson 1900, Drouin 1901, Feer 1898, Hodgson 1847, Hooker 1855, Roy 1916, Schott 1855). Several people had devoted substantial efforts in describing specific linguistic or cultural aspects of the Lepcha tribe, notably George Byres Mainwaring, Albert Grünwedel, Laurence Augustine Waddell, Cheridah Annie de Beauvoir Stocks, John Morris and Geoffrey Gorer, listed below. These writings generally paint the picture of a group of people who are timid and happy to be left alone, though at the same time friendly, trustworthy and more easy-going than some other tribes in the Sikkim Himalayas.

Siiger's writings on the Lepcha people and their religion are characterised by his descriptive approach, which may be called analytical, but never theoretical. Siiger always credits his sources and assistants and in most cases gives the original Lepcha expressions or texts for the reader to refer back to, as well as mentioning the origin of his sources. This is important because there are significant differences between the language and culture of Lepchas from Sikkim and for



example the area around Kalimpong. Most of Siiger's fieldwork was done in the Dzongu area of Sikkim, where the Lepchas lived in fairly isolated surroundings, but Siiger also recognised the existence of old Lepcha traditions among the Lepchas of the Kalimpong district and did some research there.

### *Fieldwork experiences*

Halfdan Siiger spent several months in Sikkim and Kalimpong in 1949 and 1950. Among Siiger's unpublished papers there are two travel journals of his fieldwork in Sikkim, one written in English and the other written in Danish. In published materials Siiger also devoted several pages to a description of his fieldwork and his assistants, but the original journals are of a more spontaneous nature and offer us a fresh insight into his experiences, which are outlined in an account of his fieldwork below. Siiger's travel journals are in the care of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen.

Siiger was in Gangtok when he first received permission to visit the Dzongu area in February 1949, but he was only permitted to visit the area during daytime. Siiger visited Dzongu between February 16 and 21, having to spend the nights in the *dāk* bungalows of Dikchu and Singhik. About this first visit, Siiger wrote in his travel notes:

These two excursions in Jongu had given me the impression that a thorough scientific study in this area would be very valuable and important. But a permission to make my permanent camp inside the area itself was absolutely necessary, as about half of each day was spent in coming and going from and to the eastern side of Teesta (Siiger 1949: Introduction).

Siiger applied for a more extensive permit to visit Dzongu and was granted permission by the Maharaja of Sikkim on 21 March 1949:

Reference your letter dated the 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1949, on the above subject, you are hereby informed that His Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim has been pleased to grant you permission to camp at Jongu for a couple of months, as a very special case, for your scientific studies, on the condition that you will not go west of Ringyong and Rangli Chu (Siiger 1949: Introduction).

Pollo Tshering Lepcha, who was just twenty years old at the time, accompanied Siiger to Dzongu and worked as his assistant and

interpreter. Pollo Tshering was recommended to Siiger by various people and turned out to be very capable and pleasant to work with. In the team that set off to Dzongu there were also the Sherpa Angdawa, who was to work as a cook and servant for the team, and twelve bearers who carried luggage and equipment, helped by three ponies. They travelled from Gangtok to Dikchu on April 9, 1949 and on to Mangan and Singhik the next day, crossing the Teesta river by the bridge leading from Mangan into Dzongu on April 10, 1949. Upon arrival in Tingvong, Siiger wrote in his journal:

About 4.30 p.m. we reached at Tingbung. We made our camping-ground on a grass field belonging to a peasant. Both our two tents were fortunately erected before the rain started, about 7.00 p.m. We have been very lucky that we since our start from Gangtok have not had rain until we had raised our tents in Tingbung. The coolies put up one of my big canvases on a bamboo-stand and in this made themselves a shelter (Siiger 1949: April 10).

Then I went to bed and was happy because I now was in the Lepcha area, and we were ready for starting our work (Siiger 1949: April 10).

The next day, Siiger woke up to a rainy day, which was largely spent rearranging their camp, but Siiger managed to start work as early as April 12.

About 8.00 a.m. arrived a Lepcha by name Rapgyur. He told us about gods and devils. Later on arrived his father called Gyapon Rigzing who recited some festival songs to us. After lunch we continued with the young man and worked with sports, games and plays. After tea we visited the house of the old man (Siiger 1949: April 12).

On April 12, Siiger also wrote:

In the evening the rain had stopped. The full moon was high on the sky. The mountains were black, only Narsingh lay wonderfully as floating in the air, bathed in the rays from the moon. It is the most supernatural view I have ever seen (Siiger 1949: April 12).

Siiger stayed in Tingvong from April 11 until June 26, 1949. Siiger interviewed many different people, who would usually come to visit him in Tingvong, although Siiger and Pollo Tshering also went to visit people at their own homes. Siiger's travel notes suggest that he spent a productive two months in Tingvong, collecting old Lepcha texts and

stories and information about rituals and customs, acquiring artefacts and taking photographs.

In the morning and forenoon Tsering and I worked with names of persons, designations on the members of the family, and the rules for inheritance. In the afternoon, I sent Tsering to call someone. We got Norden. He told us about his father's big family. Later on the headman himself arrived and we questioned him about the festival-calendar and other religious problems. When Kha'lak turned up we were quite a party, and naturally, there was now a good opportunity for more free conversation. We got some proverbs and the old man told an animal narrative (Siiger 1949: April 19).

From Siiger's notes it clearly emerges that he was frustrated when people who had promised to come and work with him cancelled for unclear reasons. Often enough he managed to turn such occasions to his advantage to work with Pollo Tshering on field notes, as he did on April 21.

Sun and rain changing during the day. None of our appointments turned up. We therefore had to work alone. In the morning we worked with Lepcha-texts, went them over, corrected them, and made several fair copies. In the afternoon Tsering made a fair copy of the story of the fox, told by the old headman. And together we made a list of names of body-parts, colours, landscape and sicknesses (Siiger 1949: April 21).

Although he had permission to stay in Dzongu until July 25, with the imminent arrival of the monsoon the weather got so bad that Siiger decided to leave on June 27. This was also convenient because the cook Angdawa had been having some health problems.

For some time it has been damp, and my clothes have often been clammy. But it was to me a sign that now we had better soon leave, as the weather will be constantly more rain and foggy. I talked it over with Tsering, and we decided to make arrangements with Rigzing. At first I proposed that we could leave on Tuesday. But Tsering told me it was an unlucky day, and it seemed to get Rigzing's agreement. It was therefore decided that we should start early Monday morning. This arrangement was also good, because Angdawa then, if necessary, can get proper treatment in Mangan (Siiger 1949: June 24).

In general, Siiger was very concerned about the health of the people around him. At the start of his stay in Tingvong he had taken great care

to try and cure a woman who was quite ill, treating her with some medicines he brought for himself, writing to doctors in Mangan for advice as to how to treat her and finally arranging for her to be sent off to hospital when she wouldn't get better.

In the morning, the woman's wound began bleeding. Now it was not a little, which had happened before, but rather much. Tsering and I did not know what to do and as we were not sure that it would not happen again, or how much it would be next time, I decided to let her carry to Mangan Dispensary. I ordered two coolies besides her husband, and I told them to make a stretcher on which they could carry her. It could easily be done by bamboo-canes and bamboo-strings. But the headman who was one of the coolies declared that because of the difficult route they could not carry her on a stretcher. Instead they of bamboo made a sort of hand-barrow. Then they would, by turn, carry her on their backs. I was not completely satisfied with this arrangement, but my protest was in vain. About 11 a.m. they went off, the woman, her husband, the headman and another local man. They said they would be able to reach Mangan before evening. I gave the woman and her husband 12 R. which they eventually could use for a pony from Mangan to Gangtok. I also wrote a letter for the chief of the Dispensary in Mangan. Now I hope that she will arrive in safety at Mangan. I don't know what else I could have done for her. The whole time she has been here, we have treated her as best we could. I have also written to the Medical Officer in Gangtok for advice as to her treatment, but I have got no reply (Siiger 1949: April 27).

On June 27, 1949, Siiger, Pollo Tshering, Angdawa and a group of new bearers left Tingvong and travelled to Mangan:

About 8.20 a.m. the whole caravan started. It was really a difficult route because the jungle had grown much bigger and thicker since our arrival and because of all the water that the steadily rain had brought. About 11 a.m. we crossed the bamboo bridge below Nampruk, and now it went through the low jungle. It was still more dense and closed, and the temperature was almost as in a hothouse. Near Mangan-bridge we rested for some time in a Rest house. The Mangan bridge had been repaired and was all right (Siiger 1949: June 27).

They travelled on to the *dāk* bungalow in Singhik, where Siiger and Pollo Tshering were to stay for slightly over a month. After a few days of settling in, Siiger went back to work.

During the forenoon we got the Lepcha chowkidar of the Bungalow to tell us something on the villages here in the neighbourhood and their inhabitants. In the evening his son told us a Lepcha story. Except for that I prepared some official letters. But fortunately, it seems rather possible that we shall be able to collect some good materials here (Siiger 1949: July 1).

And indeed, from his diary it is clear Siiger managed to get quite a lot of work done during his time in Singhik:

Good weather most of the day, a little rain in the evening. During the morning Tsering and I worked with the text on weddings. It is a long and difficult one. It is good it has been finished. In the evening Djukne turned up and we proceeded with the story of Gjaebu king. It is very exciting and Tsering and I enjoy it (Siiger 1949: July 9).

Being in a less remote area than Dzongu, Siiger's social life picked up and his notes mention meeting and visiting several people who lived nearby. Through Siiger's and Pollo Tshering's local contacts, some people were recommended and sent to work with him, for example Adir Lepcha who arrived with the following letter of introduction, kept in the Siiger archives at the University of Århus at Moesgård:

Dear Sir, this is the man who knows eight Lepcha tales. He knows very well Lepcha mun and bongthing. Mun is the real Lepcha priest & Bongthing too is a priest who makes medication to the spirits of Patriarch. This man can tell you frankly about its creation [Signed Palden Tenzing, 17/7/49].

Indeed, in Siiger's travel notes we read numerous entries about Adir, who worked closely with Siiger and Pollo Tshering for almost two weeks, from July 17 till 29.

Siiger was very keen to visit Lachen and Lachung, but his journal shows there were several initial setbacks.

Tsering went to the Missionary House above Mangan to visit Miss Vitants who is normally staying in Lachen, has been there for many years, and could tell us if there would be any work for us to do at Lachen. He returned in the afternoon with many kind regards and a letter. Miss Vitants had told him that during the summer months almost nobody was in Lachen, all people had gone away, either to Tibet or to their fields and cattle houses up in the mountains. Presumably we in

Lachen would only meet the Chowkidar of the Dak Bungalow. Now I must consider the whole matter (Siiger 1949: June 29).

In the afternoon the overseer (road inspector) Mr Bannerjee, returned from Yumtang. He told [us] that the road to Lachen, on a long distance had been completely washed away, and that it was very dangerous to go there. We spent the morning in his company and he was our guest at dinner (Siiger 1949: July 13).

Nevertheless, when he received permission to go on August 1, 1949, Siiger, Angdawa and Pollo Tshering set off as soon as they could. Siiger very much enjoyed his trip of about two weeks to that part of Sikkim and apart from sightseeing, he was able to work on his final report of the Lepcha fieldwork. He and Pollo Tshering also took many photos and bought several Bhutia objects for the National Museum of Denmark. Siiger's travel notes during this part of his stay in Sikkim suggest that he was much more relaxed than before, possibly because this excursion into a new part of the country was like a holiday for him and the main part of his fieldwork was now behind him.

We bought several pieces of clothes of the Lachen-Lachung type. I continued my work. In the evening we had invited the schoolmaster and his family for dinner. They arrived: schoolmaster himself, his wife, his son and his daughter-in-law, and the young couple's small daughter. After dinner I showed them my photos of my family and some books. Later on Tsering played his violin, and they started dancing. Two girls from the village turned up and joined the dance. It was very gay (Siiger 1949: August 10).

At 6.00 p.m. we were guests at dinner in the schoolmaster's house. We got tea, champa, eggs, boiled meat, wheat-bread, potatoes, chang and a little wine before we took leave at 10.00 p.m. After dinner a lot of people collected, Tsering played the violin, I sang a Danish song, and the young folks entertaine us with songs and dances. At last they made some antiphones. Before we took leave the dancers were presented with some bakshish and expressed their thanks in a blessing-song. An amusing evening (Siiger 1949: August 13).

Siiger, Angdawa and Pollo Tshering returned to Singhik on August 17, 1949 and stayed there for two more weeks. During this part of this stay, Siiger was able to take anthropometrical measurements of Lepchas in Mangan, arranged by Palden Tenzing. He also finished work on some Lepcha texts and the final fieldwork report.

Siiger, Angdawa and Tshering left Singhik to return to Gangtok on August 31, 1949, and with this Siiger's fieldwork in Sikkim had come to an end. The journal ends rather matter-of-factly, without any reflection on his experiences, but later Siiger wrote:

I think that any one living among the Lepchas for any length of time will have the same experience as I had and come to grow as fond of them as I did. Their way of life is peaceful, they are by nature extremely kind, and when they lose their immediate fear of a stranger and gain confidence in him, they meet one with a lovely smile, and an open mind and, above all, with friendliness. I enjoyed my frequent visits to their homes, they received me hospitably, invited me to sit with them around the hearth or in the altar room, and altogether they made me feel at home while a bamboo bottle of local beer or a cup of tea was served. After the initial customary greetings they soon began chatting with me, they showed me whatever I wanted to see, and usually they answered gladly all my innumerable questions.

I have observed the Lepchas working in their fields, at their meals, and at festivities in their homes; I have listened to their prayers and songs, and have attended several of their religious functions and festivals. They were usually willing to talk of their customs, lives, and thoughts, and if my question was too odd, it would simply provoke a faint smile; when they discovered that I did not resent that, they would frequently burst out in a gay laughter in which we then all joined (Siiger 1967a: 38-39).

Siiger stayed at the *ḍāk* bungalow in Gangtok till 19 September 1949 when he travelled to Kalimpong.

Siiger enjoyed staying at the Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, originally the family home of David Macdonald. When Siiger was in Kalimpong, he met the London-based phonetician Richard Keith Sprigg, who was spending some time there on a research visit. In February 1950, Siiger and Sprigg visited Git, a Lepcha village to the east of Kalimpong. The visit was arranged by Father Jean Marie Brahier, a Swiss Catholic missionary who worked in the area and who was able to persuade the local Lepcha priest to perform a ritual that could be attended and recorded by the two interested scholars. This visit reportedly kindled Keith Sprigg's enduring interest in the Lepcha language. Siiger returned to Denmark in March 1950.

After Siiger's return to Denmark he kept in touch with Sprigg and visited him in the United Kingdom in 1952, when Sprigg had arranged for Khárpú Támsáng from Kalimpong to spend some time at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Támsáng was able to address some

unresolved questions that had arisen since Siiger's return, such as the translation of several Lepcha text fragments.

### *Fieldwork results*

Siiger's work amongst the Lepchas resulted in an impressive number of publications, which are listed in the bibliography below. Siiger's *magnum opus* on the Lepchas is the extensive ethnological description of the Lepcha people which appeared in two volumes in 1967.

The first volume of the monograph opens with a description of the natural features of Sikkim, a survey of investigations on the Lepchas, a historical overview of the Lepcha tribe and an ample description of his own fieldwork. We move on to a general overview of the Tingvong area and a description of all houses and families in the different villages of the area, such as Tingvong itself, Payer, Kesong, Nampruk and Nung. Siiger also indicates which items of clothing were acquired for the National Museum of Denmark during his stay and describes the individual items, which he will also do for other articles of material culture elsewhere in the book. What follows is a description of the annual ceremony of the village of Tingvong and a general description of Lepcha houses, as well as a discussion of certain ceremonies to be observed when building a house. Now stepping into the field of agriculture, Siiger gives details on the Lepcha calendar, some particularities of the crops grown by the Lepchas and goes into the general agricultural routine of the Lepcha people. This is followed by an account of several agricultural ceremonies and rituals. The section on agriculture is complemented by some remarks on animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. The next part of the book deals with society, and Siiger first gives some details on the positions of the blacksmith and the carpenter. Before discussing other aspects of Lepcha society, such as other important officials and family ceremonies, Siiger briefly digresses to provide the reader with some interesting information about Lepcha traditions to do with food, nutrition and meals. The book moves on to describe several important events and customs in Lepcha life such as birth, marriage, illness, death and funerals, and to priests and priestesses, tales of creation and origin of the Lepcha people and a few related topics. Finally, Siiger describes several important religious ceremonies at length, such as the new year ceremony and the *kongchen* ceremony. The first part of the monograph concludes with an English



translation of several legends and traditional stories, for example the story of *gyebu* and the story of the orphan boy.

The second part of the monograph gives a description of Lepcha phonology written by Jørgen Rischel. Part II also contains the original texts of the stories, rituals and prayers that are referred to in Part I, given in Lepcha in transliteration with an interlinear word for word translation, together with an English translation and comments. Evidently the inclusion of the original Lepcha texts of stories, prayers and rituals and the fact that these texts are fully comprehensible because of a careful explanation of the linguistic transcription, adds considerable value to the wealth of ethnological data Siiger disclosed.

In the monograph it is mentioned that Siiger had planned to publish a third volume, which would give an analysis of the religion of the Lepchas. To the careful reader of Siiger's work on the Lepchas it is clear that in the two published parts, Siiger laid out the necessary descriptive groundwork to prepare the reader for an analysis and discussion of the Lepcha religion in Part III. Siiger included an epilogue to Part I in which he explains his approach:

Contemplating what I have written on previous pages about the results of my field work I think it will be useful to emphasise once more that I have confined myself to giving facts, i.e. what I saw and heard, what was taken down by my interpreters, and what I collected of items from the material culture. When my own opinions appear in some sentence or other it is only because I have considered these necessary in the context. It has, at all events, been my intention to present a publication of facts about the Lepchas. Such an intention is, of course, an ideal, especially when one has only a rather limited knowledge of the language and had to rely on interpreters in most respects.

The reader may have found inconsistencies here and there, and may consequently have wondered that I did not try to solve them immediately (one could mention, for instance, the various names of the supernatural being *na zong* / *na zong nyo* / *na zong mu nyu*; the supernatural being Sakvok appears twice in the enumeration of names associated with the second group of stones of the *hla thu* place). Concentrating on the factual information I received, I have considered it, however, most appropriate to reserve all discussions of such problems to Part III. The same reservation applies also to the legends and stories, and their position in the culture and religion of the Lepchas.

Although much new information may be collected by future investigators, I think, nevertheless, that what we know at present will suffice to give by means of an analytical study the main outlines of the

structure and function of the religion of the Lepchas. Part III of this book will be devoted to this purpose (Siiger 1967a: 235).

Unfortunately, the third volume never appeared. From the papers he left behind we now know that Siiger had largely finished the third volume in typescript. These papers are currently being sorted and prepared for publication by the present author.

Although Siiger touches upon many aspects of the Lepcha religion in his published papers, in the as yet unpublished third volume the religious beliefs of the Lepcha people are dealt with in much more detail. In the third part of the monograph, Siiger ventures to outline the fundamental basis, the functional framework and the spiritual perspectives of the Lepcha religion. Siiger sees the Lepcha religion as an interplay between three fundamental elements; the *rum*, the *múng* and human beings, and he discusses the Lepcha religion from this viewpoint. In Siiger's understanding, the Lepcha religion consists of a number of 'religious complexes', which he defines as follows:

There is the great goddess of procreation, the mother of human beings, with the traditional ceremonies of human life around her; there are the *mă yel* beings and the agricultural ceremonies; there is the god of the wild animals with the hunters and their ceremonies, now almost obsolete; and there are the numerous evil demons and the counteracting ceremonies of the people (Siiger 1981: 202).

In the third volume, Siiger embarks upon a discussion of ceremonial activities and the role they play in the life of the Lepchas in order to illustrate the spiritual attitude of the Lepcha people towards ritual ceremonies and supernatural beings. The role and activities of the different Lepcha priests are also described. Apart from the prominent supernatural beings that form the heart of the above-mentioned religious complexes, many other gods and goddesses are discussed and characterised, such as the special gods for the blacksmith and the warrior, the gods of family lineages and the deities of houses and domestic animals. In all his writings, Siiger attempts to consider certain aspects of the original Lepcha religion before it was influenced by Buddhism, leaving out those religious activities and texts which he sees as predominantly Buddhist. In the third part of the monograph, Siiger does point to various significant influences on the Lepcha religion as he explores the history of several Lepcha religious beliefs.

*Lepcha religion*

In Part III of the monograph, Siiger labels his own approach and research interests as ‘ethno-religious’. Siiger was clearly fascinated by the supernatural world of the Lepchas, which consists of a number of *rum* ‘gods, benevolent creatures’ and *múng* ‘demons, evil spirits, devils, malevolent spirits’.<sup>1</sup> The religious concepts of the Lepchas are closely connected to their natural surroundings, the mountains and forests in which they live.

From Siiger’s writings, we learn that in the Lepcha mythology the great primordial creator is ʔItmú, who resides at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga. She created the whole world, including several other gods. At the top of Mount Kanchenjunga lives the guardian and warrior god Kongchen, a family member of ʔItmú. The name *kongchen* is also used to refer to Mount Kanchenjunga itself. Half way up the giant mountain Kanchenjunga live the *mayel* beings, who are small and hairy mythical creatures, neither *rum* nor *múng*. The *mayel* beings have very fertile land with productive crops, which they passed on to the Lepchas and for which they are still revered by some Lepchas. It is also believed by some Lepchas that the souls of the deceased dwell in the fertile land of the *mayel* beings. The creator ʔItmú gave birth to Nazóngnyo, the goddess of procreation, who married her own brother Fodrónghing. There are many other names that refer to Nazóngnyo’s husband Fodrónghing, such as Pudungthíng, Kamsithíng, Takbothíng and Tashethíng, depending on the context of the story or the origin of the storyteller. The goddess of procreation Nazóngnyo gave birth to a great number of children, but was not able to look after all of them and a whole group of her children were neglected. The children she cared for are seen as the ancestors of human beings. The neglected children were desperately jealous of their cared-for siblings and out of spite they turned into *múng* (Siiger 1972, 1981).

Ever since this time, human beings have been subject to the hostility and ill-treatment of the *múng*. Some benevolent spirits or gods are able to intervene in the strong evil influence of the *múng*, but only ever up to a certain extent. In an attempt to protect the human beings, Nazóngnyo instituted priests and priestesses, who try to ward off the attacks of the demons by means of offerings and prayers.

---

<sup>1</sup> These two particular Lepcha words are transcribed by Siiger as *rúm* and *mung* respectively. Throughout this article Lepcha words are given in the transliteration favoured by the present author, which is described elsewhere (Plaisier 2007: 38-44), except in direct quotes, where the original transcription of the quoted author is maintained.

In one of his articles on the Lepcha religion, Siiger mentions ‘the tragic drama of Lepcha religion’ (Siiger 1972: 244). Here Siiger refers to the tragic paradox of the abundant fertility of the creator goddess Nazóngnyo and the resulting negligence of many of Nazóngnyo’s offspring, culminating in the destructive powers of the *múng*. The ceremonial life of the Lepcha people is deeply concerned with invoking the blessings of the *rum* and with averting the malignant influence of the *múng*. It is not just the evil powers that have to be satisfied to prevent harm from being done, the benevolence of the divine powers of the *rum* also need to be secured. The *rum* are mainly benevolent beings, but they can suffer from temporary ill-will if ceremonial sacrifices have been neglected. Since the number of *múng* in the Lepcha mythological universe is much greater than the number of *rum*, Siiger sees the Lepcha religion as being dominated by the fear of the evil *múng* (Siiger 1955: 188).

In the description of his fieldwork experiences, Siiger points out that the initial hesitance some Lepchas seemed to have towards him could be explained with regard to the ‘innate fear of the *mung* who are supposed to follow every person’ (Siiger 1967a: 38). Siiger also points out that the Lepcha conception of their natural surroundings is dominated by their supernatural horizon:

As seen above the apparently peaceful Lepcha village and its surroundings have their dangerous places, e.g. strange rocks, big old trees, swamps and marshes, impenetrable patches of jungle where the *mung* dwell, and which are teeming with evil powers. As soon as one leaves the village area, the influence of the *mung* increases, and nobody is ever safe from their uncanny persecution. The virgin forest, never cleared and cultivated and therefore uncontrolled, is the actual domicile of the *mung*, where they go on forays by day and night. Obviously the Lepchas feel insecure when moving about in the jungle, defenceless against the unexpected assaults of the *mung* (Siiger 1967a:177).

When Siiger describes the background of his interpreter Pollo Tsering, he puts it even more strongly:

... he could not fall asleep for fear of wild animals and the malignant devils (*mung*) that always lie in wait for human beings in order to devour their flesh and suck their blood (Siiger 1967a: 37).

Perhaps the best summary of Siiger’s understanding of the role the malevolent creatures play in the Lepcha world is given when he writes:

For the Lepchas, human life is miserable and dangerous, owing to the activities of the many evil demons who constantly inflict diseases, disaster and death upon them (Siiger 1976: 96).

The life of the Lepcha is, so to say, a permanent hand-to-hand fight with the mungs, and his only weapon is his never ceasing attempt to satisfy them through sanguinary sacrifices (Siiger 1955: 188).

### *Concluding remarks*

It can hardly be said that Siiger's notions agree with the conventional image of the Lepchas as a happy-go-lucky group of people, a stereotype which was suggested by various people, for example Kali Kumar Das: "being thoughtless of the future, the Lepchas wander merrily about the forests inhaling health, and plucking wild fruits during almost all the seasons" and Mary Avery: "They are a merry, free-hearted, careless race, with but little thought of the morrow. They may be seen at any time in and around Darjeeling, racing, scampering and playing like children." (Das 1896: 1, Avery 1878: 69)

Up to some extent, the pivotal role of evil spirits in Lepcha beliefs was pointed out before Siiger's time, for example: "Worship is rendered almost exclusively to the bad spirits and not to the good. For, say the Lepchas, the good spirits never do us any harm; it is only the malignant spirits which we have to fear." (Waddell 1899: 7-8) The works on Lepcha religious texts by Grünwedel, Feer and Drouin provide translations of traditional Lepcha texts and do not involve a discussion of the religious background. In the separate accounts of their joint stay in Dzongu in 1937, John Morris and Geoffrey Gorer offer some interesting observations of Lepcha religious beliefs, but both books more often than not read as curious reminiscences on an exotic tribe. Corneille Jest's paper on the religious traditions of the Lepcha people is a constructive introduction to the subject. The various publications on Lepcha religion by Halfdan Siiger and René von Nebesky-Wojkowitz are of a serious scholarly nature, with little or no typecasting, providing balanced and accurate analyses and many interesting details.

Currently, many old Lepcha traditions and religious ceremonies are at risk of falling into oblivion. Siiger was able to collect old prayers and descriptions of various rituals, for example of dry rice cultivation and hunting, which have since changed or disappeared altogether. The

information collected by Halfdan Siiger in 1949 and 1950, described at length in his writings deserves not only to be cherished but studied in detail by anyone interested in the Lepcha religious tapestry.

Although it is regrettable that the publication of the third volume of his monograph on the Lepchas did not materialise during Siiger's lifetime, it is hoped that with the discovery of the relevant papers in his archives the wealth of information he left behind will soon be published, so that both the unique materials and Siiger's enlightened view into the Lepcha world may be available in full detail to us all.

### *Acknowledgements*

This short article is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Jørgen Rischel. The author would like to thank the late Jørgen Rischel for his support and for first arranging for her to consult the Siiger archives in Copenhagen. The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Svend Castenfeldt for his tireless efforts to make the relevant contents of the Siiger archives available to her. Thanks are also due to Bodil Valentiner, Espen Waehle, Jesper Kurt-Nielsen, staff of the Ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, staff of the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Århus at Moesgård and Frederik Kortlandt of Leiden University.

### REFERENCES

- Avery, John. 1885. 'On the language of the Lepchas in Sikkim', *Proceedings of the American Oriental Society*, 77-78.
- Avery, Mary. 1878. *Up in the clouds, or Darjeeling and its surroundings, historical and descriptive*, Calcutta: Newman.
- Campbell, Archibald. 1840. 'Note on the Lepchas of Sikkim, with a vocabulary of their language', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IX, 379-393.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1869. 'On the Lepchas', *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, new series 1: 2, 143-157.
- Das, Kali Kumar. 1896. 'The Lepcha people and their notions of heaven and hell', *Journal of the Buddhist Text Society* IV, Appendix, 1-5.
- Drouin, Emile. 1901. 'Spécimen de textes lepcha', *Journal Asiatique* 9:17, 558-563.
- Feer, Léon. 1898. 'Spécimen de la langue Lepcha (ou rong)', *Journal Asiatique* 9:12, 177-188.
- Donaldson, Florence. 1900. *Lepcha Land, or six weeks in the Sikkim Himalayas*, London: Sampson Low Marston & Company.

- Gorer, Geoffrey. 1938. *Himalayan Village. An account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, London: Michael Joseph Ltd.
- Grünwedel, Albert. 1892. 'A Róng-English Glossary', *T'oung Pao* III, 238-309.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1896a. 'Drei Leptscha Texte, mit Auszügen aus dem Padma-than-yig und Glossar', *T'oung Pao* VII, 522-561.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1896b. 'Ein Kapitel des Ta-she-Sung', *Festschrift für Adolf Bastian*, Berlin.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1897. 'Leptscha-Text mit Übersetzung', *Veröffentlichungen aus dem Königlichen Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin* IV (Buddhistische Studien I), 118-126.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1898. 'Padmasambhava und Mandarava. Leptscha Übersetzung des Mandarava-legende', *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 52, 447-461.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1913. 'Padmasambhava und verwandtes', *Büssler-Archiv*, Band 3, 1-37.
- Hodgson, Brian Houghton. 1847. 'On the aborigines of the Sub-Himalayas. With comparative vocabularies of Tibetan, Sérpá, Bhútani, Lepcha, Limbu, Kiránti, Murmi, Nêwár, Gúrúng, Magar and Súnwar', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XVII, 73-83.
- Hooker, Joseph Dalton. 1855. *Himalayan Journals. Notes of a naturalist in Bengal, the Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas, The Khasia Mountains, &c*, London: John Murray.
- Jest, Corneille. 1960. 'Religious belief of the Lepcha in the Kalimpong district (West Bengal)', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 124-134.
- Mainwaring, George Byres. 1876. *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language as it Exists in the Dorjeling and Sikim Hills*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1898. *Dictionary of the Lepcha Language*, revised and completed by Albert Grünwedel, Berlin: Unger.
- Morris, John. 1938. *Living with Lepchas. A Book about the Sikkim Himalayas*, London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René von. 1952a. 'Hochzeitslieder der Lepchas', *Asiatische Studien* (Bern) VI, 30-40.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René von. 1952b. 'Ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas', *Eastern Anthropologist* (Lucknow) 5: 1, 27-39.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1953a. 'Die Legende vom Turmbau der Lepcha', *Anthropos* 48, 889-897.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1953b. 'Hunting and Fishing among the Lepchas', *Ethnos* (Stockholm), 21-30.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1953c. 'The religion of the Lepchas', *The Aryan Path* (Bombay), 24.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1955. *Wo Berge Götter sind*, Stuttgart; Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1956. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, The Hague: Mouton.
- Plaisier, Heleen. 2007. *A Grammar of Lepcha*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library: Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region 5, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill N.V.
- Roy, Sarat Chandra. 1916. 'A Lepcha funeral', *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* 2, 475-480.
- Schott, Wilhelm. 1881. 'Über die Sprache des Volkes Rong oder Leptscha in Sikkim', *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin*, Phil. Hist. Klasse 5.

- Siiger, Halfdan. 1949. *Diary. Travels, stays and studies in Lepcha area of Sikkim State from April the 8<sup>th</sup> to August the 30<sup>th</sup> 1949*, Unpublished travel journal, Ethnological Department, National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1955. 'A Cult for the God of Mount Kanchenjunga among the Lepcha of Northern Sikkim. A Himalayan Megalithic Shrine and its Ceremonies', *Actes du IVe Congrès International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques 1952*, II: I Ethnologica, Vienna, 185-189.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1956. 'Ethnological Field Research in Chitral, Sikkim, and Assam. Preliminary Report. From the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia', *Historisk-filosofiske Meddelelser udg. af Det kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*, 36: 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1957. 'Lepchaerne i Himalaya og deres bjergreligion', *Menneskets mangfoldighed*, ed. Kaj Birket-Smith, 158-173.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1967a. 'The Lepchas. Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People. Part I. Results of Anthropological Field Work in Sikkim, Kalimpong, and Git.' *Publications of the National Museum. Ethnographical Series*, XI: 1.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1967c. 'Fate in the Religion of the Lepchas', *Fatalistic beliefs in religion, folklore and literature. Papers read at the Symposium on Fatalistic Beliefs held at Åbo on the 7th-9th of September, 1964. Edited by Helmer Ringgren. Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis II*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 150-157.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1971. 'Himalayan Mountain Cults', *Proceedings of the VIIIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences 1968*, Vol. II, Tokyo, 277-279.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1972. 'A Himalayan Goddess of Procreation. From the Lepchas of Sikkim', *Ex Orbe Religionum, Studia Geo Widengren, Pars altera*, Leiden, 236-245.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. 'The Gods of the Lepchas of Sikkim', *Proceedings of the XIIth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions 1970. Studies in the History of Religions. (Supplements to Numen) XXXI*, Leiden, pp. 298-304.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1976. 'Two Indigenous Peoples of the Hindukush-Himalayan Regions', *Temenos* 12, Helsinki, 93-99.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1978a. 'The Abominable Snowman: Himalayan Religion and Folklore from the Lepchas of Sikkim', *Himalayan Anthropology. The Indo-Tibetan Interface*. Ed. James F. Fisher. The Hague, Paris, 421-430.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1978b. 'Myte og kult. Fra Lepchaerne i Sikkim, Himalaya', *Venner af Prins Peter*, Copenhagen, 125-131.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1981. 'The Lepcha Semi-divine Beings of Agricultural Fertility, from the Sikkim Himalayas', *Folk* 23, Copenhagen, 197-203.
- Siiger, Halfdan and J. Balslev Jørgensen. 1966. 'Anthropological Investigations of the Lepchas and the Boros. From the 3rd Danish Expedition to Central Asia', *Anthropological Researches from the 3rd Danish Expedition to Central Asia. Historisk-filologiske Skrifter udg. af Det kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab* 4 (4) 57-76.
- Siiger, Halfdan and Jørgen Rischel. 1967b. 'The Lepchas. Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People. Part II. Lepcha Ritual Texts and Commentary by Halfdan Siiger. Phonetic Transcriptions of Lepcha Ritual Texts with Introduction by Jørgen Rischel.', *Publications of the National Museum. Ethnological Series*, XI: II.



- Stocks, Cheridah Annie de Beauvoir. 1925. 'Folklore and customs of the lap-chas of Sikkim', *Journal and proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, new series 21, 325-505.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1926. 'A Rong-Folk Tobacco Story', *Folklore* 37, 193-195.
- Waddell, Lawrence Augustine. 1895. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, London: W.H. Allen.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1899. 'The Lepchas or Rong and their songs', *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* 12, 41-57.

LEPCHAS AND THEIR HYDEL PROTEST<sup>1</sup>

PEMA WANGCHUK

If making history is to do the unlikely, then history is being made in Sikkim even as you read this. Equally, if history, as Karl Marx put it, is made by people in circumstances beyond their choosing, then people also are making history in Sikkim. A section of the Lepchas of Sikkim completed one year of a relay hunger strike on June 20, 2008, interspersed with two extended sessions of indefinite fasting by the more resilient among them, to protest against hydro-electric projects proposed for the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in North Sikkim. Stereotyped as a docile tribe, the community has turned this notion on its head and claimed credentials as having groomed youth who can stay the course even in a protracted confrontation hemmed by mounting odds. At the same time, a government in power with 31 of the possible 32 elected members of the Legislative Assembly wearing its colours and enjoying majority support on the hydel debate among the affected people, is showing signs of 'listening' to the voices of protest even if they speak in minority and has already scrapped four of the five hydel projects initially announced for Dzongu.

When the first doubts were expressed against the hydel plans, the protestors had probably not schemed for their observations to snowball into a movement of such intense attrition. Similarly, when the government in power introduced hydel as an option to pull Sikkim out of its economic dependence on grants and loans, there had been no voices suggesting otherwise. Plans, however, rarely stay true to projections, and the situation has disintegrated to a level where the protestors have shored up their arguments too strongly to pull out and the Government has invested too much into hydel development to roll back. On a positive note though, what appeared to have stagnated into an irresolvable confrontation six months back, is now showing signs of discovering middle ground through negotiations.

All this in the year 2008, four years since a clutch of concerned citizens of areas to be affected by hydel projects proposed on the Teesta

---

<sup>1</sup> The dates and incidents mentioned in the essay have been taken from reportage carried in NOW!, a Gangtok-based daily. The opinions and inferences, of course, are the writer's own.

river came together to form an ad hoc committee under the banner of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) on July 18, 2004. At that time, the ‘affected citizens’ were concerned with hydel projects already announced - the Stage III [at Chungthang in North Sikkim] and Stage IV [further downstream at Singhik, near the North district headquarters of Mangan] Teesta Hydro-Electric Projects (HEP). ACT itself was a progression of the Joint Action Committee formed by the same group to protest Teesta Stage V HEP in the year 2002. Stage V was commissioned in May 2008 and temporarily shut down within a month when flash floods on the Teesta and its tributaries sliced away the protection walls of the reservoir and deposited more silt into the reservoir than was safe for it to contain.

Developmental debates, especially when both sides are convinced about and committed to the righteousness of their analysis, have a history of disintegrating into aggressive confrontations. The Teesta hydel protest is no different. The movement has ebbed and risen from periods of extended lulls to frenetic activity to considerable time lost to stubborn posturing. The protest, however, is finding its balance now and what had started as a consolidation of people opposed to the very concept of harnessing the Teesta for hydro-electric generation, has shifted focus and is now concentrated as a movement of the Lepchas of Dzongu and their bid to keep Teesta’s tributaries, Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu, snaking through Dzongu, free of hydel projects and their attendant perils.

### *Testing the Waters*

To start at the beginning though, shortly after its formation in July 2004, ACT started collecting documents and researching hydel prospects and threats. Its members remained active behind the scenes and made their presence felt publicly for the first time during the Public Hearing for Teesta Stage III held at Chungthang in North Sikkim on June 8, 2006. ACT office bearers spoke at the public hearing, but their protest was a minority voice with 80% of those present speaking in favour of the project. ACT had questioned the very findings and recommendations of the ‘Environment Impact Assessment’ report and the ‘Environment Management Plan’ prepared for Stage III. Its members also protested the manner in which the public hearing was hosted by the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB), Sikkim, involving a strong presence of elected leaders and government officials, a

presence ACT saw as engineered to intimidate dissent. On the day, the only complaint of consequence voiced by the majority was the one which also had backing of the Chungthang Panchayats—that the project be started only after a proper cadastral survey had established land ownership so that compensation could be handed over accordingly. The project got cleared and ACT moved the National Environmental Appellate Authority in New Delhi against the public hearing and its verdict. Deciding on the matter a year later, the appellate authority dismissed the ACT appeal. Although the verdict came as a setback, it was of only limited consequence because by then ACT had marshalled its arguments with only hydel projects proposed for inside the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in its sights. Stage III was technically outside Dzongu.

ACT must have realised that it enjoyed the strongest support from inside Dzongu when it recorded its first major success as a pressure group while standing up against the 300 MW Panan Hydro-Electric Project proposed for construction on the confluence of the Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu inside Dzongu. Until then, ACT's ideological distrust of hydel projects played second fiddle to remonstrations by affected people who were not opposed to the projects per se, but had specific demands and conditions they wanted met before green flagging the hydel projects. For Stage III, the major demand was for a cadastral re-survey and for Stage IV [which is being protested by ACT since part of it falls inside Dzongu], the negotiations were over land compensation rates. ACT's protest was not so easily quantifiable, based as it was on their fear that development that required such a massive influx of people [labourers] and machinery would impact the protected cultural reserve as well as the conserved biosphere that was Dzongu.

Until September 4, 2006, ACT was seen as an elitist group of educated Lepcha youth with a romanticised idea of development and culture which was out of sync with the more immediate aspirations for development of the people. On that day, ACT established that it also had support among the lay people when it managed to mobilise a 100-strong group of protesters to lay siege on the Sankalang bridge over Teesta, the only access to Dzongu from North Sikkim, and refuse access to a joint-inspection team of district officials from entering the Lepcha reserve to survey the lands which was needed for the Panan hydel project. The team made it through after 10 preventive detentions were made and police escort provided. Matters were coming to a head because the public hearing for Panan HEP was scheduled for September 18, later the same month. On September 11 again, residents

of Passindang in Upper Dzongu, where the power station for Panan HEP is scheduled to come up, refused to allow inspection of their lands. Apart from protesting the project itself, the residents were also demanding a resurvey of private and forest lands in the area to ensure no one was denied their rightful share of compensation when land was acquired. Official land records in Dzongu, the residents claim, are inaccurate but have not been a cause for worry because thus far no one from outside Dzongu could buy land there. As far as the residents are concerned, they are familiar with the traditional land holdings and thus never felt the need to get the official records 'adjusted.' Things changed with the arrival of project developers and their requirement for land through transactions that would require more official documentation than just social contracts. The protest gathered momentum and soon, ACT was questioning the credentials of the project developers, Himagiri Hydro Energy Pvt. Ltd. and even the validity of the Sikkim Power Development Corporation. Even as these arguments surfaced in the public domain, on September 13, 2006, the joint inspection team set up to survey the land required for the project completed its study stretching from Passingdang in lower Dzongu [the site for power generation unit] to Lingzya village in upper Dzongu [the site for the dam on the confluence of Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu]. While doing so, they had also collected 'No Objection Certificates' from 74 of the 99 families whose lands would be acquired for the project.

ACT was not the only group uncomfortable with the development of hydel projects in Dzongu. The residents too had their fears since the Lepcha reserve had never seen a project of this magnitude commissioned in their midst. Even Sikkimese people not from Dzongu are required to obtain a permit to visit the reserve. Hydel projects are very ugly undertakings as works in progress and also very labour intensive. Further, Dzongu had a ringside view of these aspects with the Teesta Stage V HEP developed outside its southeast border at Dikchu in East Sikkim. A temperamental Teesta and engineering oversights had seen some villages on the Dzongu bank of the Teesta suffer because of the work on Stage V. One such group, not aligned with ACT, but made up of Lepchas of Dzongu called on the Chief Minister a few days ahead of the public hearing for Panan and submitted a memorandum detailing their concerns and tabling their demands. The demands sought resurvey of landholdings, better compensation rates and enhanced relief and rehabilitation considerations. Also included was a demand that the 'cultural

exclusivity' of Dzongu not be infringed in any way by the project developers or labourers on their payroll.

And then it was time for the public hearing. No one expected the public hearing to go smoothly; and it didn't.

### *A Protest Takes the Plunge*

Despite the universally shared reservations about hydel projects, people at the public hearing were clearly divided among those who were willing to grant conditional approval and those who were unwilling to allow the project under any condition. More than 900 people, including officials and elected representatives, attended the public hearing. Dzongu has a population of little over 7,000. Intense arguments were presented for and against the Panan hydel project. The anti-project lobby assembled by ACT was in minority, but made up for their disadvantage in numbers by being the more vociferous group in the public hearing. So much so, that some of its younger members had to be taken away from the venue and kept under police watch on the sidelines. Interestingly, even though the Dzongu residents at the public hearing were divided on whether or not to allow the project, both sides harboured the same fears. The environmental impact of a hydel project commissioned on a budget of Rs. 1,730 crores (over 40.5 million dollars) was obvious, as was the socio-cultural impact of the massive labour force that the project would bring into Dzongu and keep there while work was underway. Even Lepchas from elsewhere in Sikkim are not allowed to settle in Dzongu. The proximity to the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve and the historically significant Tholung Monastery above the dam site were the other concerns. ACT was also not convinced with the Environment Impact Assessment report prepared by Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain & Hill Environment (CISMHE) and had thus also thumbed down the Environment Management Plan based on this report. Underlying these concerns is the reality of backwardness that sequestration as a Lepcha reserve has bequeathed Dzongu. Untouched by the tourism boom that has reached other parts of Sikkim, Dzongu has poor infrastructure and low literacy. Of late, its economy, sustained thus far by its large cardamom plantations, has taken a severe hit in the hands of reduced produce and declining market value. For many, the hydel project offered a chance to secure many times the going market rate for their lands while others saw opportunities and development riding in on the

improved infrastructure that would have to precede the project development. Then there would be those discomfited by the idea of opposing the Government, because that is how many saw any argument against hydel projects. It was obvious that a section inside Dzongu was willing to make some sacrifices. ACT supporters, on the other hand, remained convinced that hydel offered no development prospects. Also, the debate was not just about Panan; four more hydel projects had been proposed for the Lepcha reserve.

The public hearing ended with a majority willing to give the go-ahead to the project subject to their demands [tabled earlier with the Chief Minister] being granted. ACT and its supporters refused even conditional support, demanding instead that the entire process, starting from environmental impact assessment to hydrological studies, be undertaken afresh. Although the Panan hydel project managed to pass the public hearing muster, ACT had made its strongest presence yet. Although its involvement in protesting other hydel projects along the Teesta continued for some more time, the group, made up almost entirely of Lepchas with most of them from Dzongu itself, started focussing more on challenging the hydel projects proposed for the Lepcha reserve.

### *Strength in Homogeneity*

Sikkim has developed on very cosmopolitan lines. Its small size and infrastructural limitations have led to a random mix of populations. Although pockets with stronger presence of individual communities, and thus common lifestyles, exist, larger territorial segments contain a mix of peoples and a range of social groupings. In such a situation, priorities differ and aspirations vary, leading to a scenario where demands and stands are prompted by different reasons even for localised events. This makes cohesion difficult to achieve even for protests against very obvious targets like a hydel project. Dzongu's segregated status of centuries gave it a homogeneity which helped tide over the melting-pot incoherence that ACT's interventions in other parts of North Sikkim suffered from.

Dzongu has traditionally been a Lepcha stronghold. Its steep ravines must have made it unappealing to the Bhutia community who were essentially herders and sought out pastures; its remoteness and harsh terrain made it unfavourable for agriculture which was the specialisation of the Nepalese community. The Limboos, recognised as

the autochthons of Sikkim alongside the Lepchas and Bhutias, were concentrated more towards south and west Sikkim, leaving Dzongu free through history for the Lepchas. In the nineteenth century, the king of Sikkim gave the Dzongu tract in dowry to his wife and this ensured even more exclusivity for the region. Eventually, in 1958, the exclusive claim of Dzongu Lepchas on this land was formalised by a royal proclamation. In the North district of Sikkim, of which Dzongu is a part, as per data reflected in the 'State Socio-Economic Census 2006' conducted by the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation, Government of Sikkim, the Lepchas constitute the single-largest community, comprising 37.47% [14,370] of the 38,352-strong population of the district. More than half of the Lepchas of North Sikkim reside in Dzongu.

When the Panan hydel project came along, as already mentioned, the people of Dzongu harboured the same concerns—fears that the influx of imported manpower would not only leave behind a socio-cultural footprint, but also put the environment under stress. It was in how this situation could be resolved that the people differed. A majority commits in public that adequate checks and balances would suffice, but ACT and its supporters remain adamant that too much is being put at risk. The line dividing Dzongu on the hydel debate is very clear but on both sides are people voicing the same concerns, only offering varying solutions.

Following the public hearing on the Panan hydel project in September, ACT got busy with securing more information, networking with other protest groups and exploring legal options. Meanwhile, those who believed hydel projects would deliver development were getting restive when land acquisition and other matters took longer than anticipated. In fact, on December 3, 2006, a section of the affected land-owners of Teesta Stage III and Panan hydel projects, wrote to the Chief Minister complaining that the hydel developers were 'dragging their feet' on deciding about the demand for negotiated rates for land acquisition. The land had been identified and the landowners were willing, but the rates had not been decided yet, they wrote, demanding that this process be completed within the month. This deadline would be missed because the Dzongu hydel debate was moving into a higher gear. A day before the affected land-owners wrote the letter demanding that the hydel projects be expedited, on December 2, a new association was formed—the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS), an association that would play a major role in the hydel protests in the ensuing months. The organisation stated that it was formed after a



meeting of 'educated' members of the community realised that important issues faced the community. CLOS announced that it would 'fight against' all ongoing and proposed hydel projects in Lepcha-dominated areas, protest the delimitation decided for the Dzongu territorial constituency, 'purify' the 'pollution of the Lepchas from the socio-cultural existence that has been affected due to the wrong policies of the authorities and the so-called Lepcha associations/ organisations in Sikkim,' and 'make the people aware about the sanctity of the glorious Kabi-Lungstok Convention of the thirteenth century' [which marks the blood brotherhood treaty undertaken between the Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim].

The hydel protest was now coalescing into a Dzongu-specific, Lepcha-driven stand. Shortly after this, ACT announced its decision to stage a protest rally in Gangtok, scheduled for December 12, 2006. CLOS communicated support for the rally and decided to participate in it. The direct confrontation mode that the protest was now entering into sat uncomfortably on many shoulders and the All India Lepcha Students Development Organisation could not arrive at a consensus on what stand to take and decided to stay away. The date for the rally had been carefully picked; it coincided with the 12th anniversary of the present State Government. The obvious idea was to embarrass the government on this important date. On the eve, nearly 400 ACT supporters had arrived in Gangtok to participate in the rally scheduled for the next day. Eventually, the rally did not take place. An evening before the rally, the State Government offered talks and after ACT deferred its rally, a delegation was invited to meet with the Chief Minister. At the meeting, the Chief Minister agreed to review 'all aspects' of hydel projects in North Sikkim. ACT had already been petitioned by several Lepcha organisations to explore the option of talks before launching into confrontation mode.

Things slowed down for some months. At the end of February, the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, granted the environmental clearance for Panan hydel project with a rider that no labour colonies be allowed to come up inside Dzongu. Although ACT remained opposed to the hydel project, it welcomed this clause, stating that it attested Dzongu's status as an exclusively protected area for the Lepchas. There were political distractions also with the State preparing for rural body polls. In the meanwhile, the process of land acquisition began for Teesta Stage III HEP, and ACT got involved in protesting it. A series of petitions, press releases and memorandums followed. ACT demanded that a resurvey be conducted before land was acquired. It

argued that the land surveys conducted in 1958 and 1977-78 could not be relied on and that many private holdings had not been recorded as such at that time. While this demand moved from office to office, it was already May 2007, and no moves had been made officially by the State Government to deliver the complete reviewal of North Sikkim hydel projects. ACT was perhaps already planning to resume its public protests against the hydel projects. Just as CLOS was formed ahead of the rally proposed for December 12, on May 10, Buddhist monks representing monasteries in Dzongu gathered at Passingdang village in Upper Dzongu and formed the 'Sangha of Dzongu' (SOD) and announced their resolve to oppose hydel projects proposed for North Sikkim. A little over a month later, ACT again entered the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, with its hydel protest.

### *The Protest Reaches the Capital*

On June 20, 2007, ACT, supported by CLOS and SOD, began a hunger strike at Bhutia-Lepcha House on Tibet Road, a short walk above the town's main thoroughfare. ACT general secretary Dawa Lepcha and CLOS member Tenzing Lepcha sat on indefinite hunger strike while Dzongu resident OT Lepcha joined them on the first day to launch a parallel relay hunger strike. The hunger strikers announced that their protest would continue till all hydel projects proposed for Dzongu were scrapped and others in North Sikkim reviewed. What ACT lacked in planning - there was no advance notice even to media persons on the hunger strike - it tried to make up with timing. The December 12 rally was planned to coincide with the Government Formation Day anniversary, and the hunger strike began two days ahead of the Sampurna Kranti Diwas ['Complete Revolution Day'] celebrated by the ruling party of Sikkim to mark events of June 22, 1993, the day when its supporters had taken to the streets of Sikkim to take on the then State Government which had become suffocatingly dictatorial. ACT began its latest round of protests in a non-violent and non-confrontational tone, and this found resonance with many. The 'Letters to the Editor' columns in local newspapers are thinly contributed to in Sikkim, but lengthy responses featured in newspapers here the following day. Affected people, even those supporting the hydel projects, visited the fasting ACT members. Non-Lepcha youth, uninitiated in either politics or protests, were so moved by the resolve of Dawa and Tenzing that they hosted and maintained a web-log

[[www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com](http://www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com)] to keep a cyber-track of their protest. The blogspot became very popular, received several hits and documented extensive feedback from the world over. It was an embarrassing denouncement of the State's policies and even got branded as a weapon of 'cyber-war' at one time by the powers-that-be. It was even pulled off the net by the creators at one time, but was hosted again and continues 'blogging' to this day.

But such engagement from laypeople was scant and mostly cloaked in anonymity; the majority stayed away, remaining distant and uninvolved. This was unfortunate because even if people remained unconvinced about the validity of the demands, the protest still commanded respect, but not enough of it was expressed by the lay people in the public domain. The few who commented, however, wanted only one thing—talks between the protestors and the State Government. And talks were offered on the second day of the hunger strike itself when the Political Secretary to the Chief Minister called on ACT members at BL House and invited them to a meeting with senior State officials. Opposition political parties also visited the protestors and expressed support, and issued strong condemnations against the State Government. Social organisations fronted by political leaders also conveyed support and even offered to join the hunger strike. ACT excused itself away from these offers, insisting that it did not want any direct political involvement.

At the other end, back in Dzongu, a delegation of some 86 of the 90-odd Panan HEP-affected families called on the Dzongu representative in the State Legislative Assembly and submitted a memorandum marked for the Chief Minister clarifying that they were not part of the ACT protest and reiterating that the No Objection Certificates issued by them for the project still held good if their demands for better compensation rates and other safeguards were granted. They were careful not to pass any comments on ACT or its protest, at least not in statements released to the Press, and limited their communication to explaining their own stand. ACT's response to this development was uncharacteristically abrasive and was the beginning of a process, which, over the coming months would split Dzongu into camps that distrusted everything that the other side attempted or proposed. In a Press statement issued a day after the Dzongu landowners had distanced themselves from the ACT protest, ACT accused them of being 'encroachers' who had occupied government land and were now wishing to sell it to the power developers. The statement also alleged that the landowners had been 'coerced' into issuing the NOCs

by ‘subjugation and administrative intimidation.’ Thus far, the fears and concerns were shared by both the opposing and supporting groups. With ACT’s response, a line started being drawn to demarcate a stricter division that many were not comfortable with inside Dzongu.

Against this background, talks began between ACT and State Government representatives headed by the Acting Chief Minister and including the head of the executive, the Chief Secretary. The Chief Minister was away on a foreign tour at the time. A succession of talks were held and even though these remained inconclusive, both sides issued optimistic updates on the progress and exuded politeness. Things back in Dzongu were not going as well though, and the increasing number of visits and comments by Opposition leaders was being circulated as evidence that ACT was a political movement opposed to the developmental plans of the State Government. A process born out of socio-environmental concerns was now being pushed on political lines and choices were being forced on the people for reasons that had very little to do with the issue at hand. Affected land-owners even convened a meet-the-press event in Dzongu to underline that their support for the hydel project was not made under duress.

A fortnight into the hunger strike, the initial euphoria over the talks started ebbing. The State Government team at the talks remained insistent that for the talks to progress to the next level, ACT would have to withdraw its hunger strike and create an ‘amiable environment’ for negotiations to continue; ACT remained insistent on the demand that hydel projects in Dzongu would have to be scrapped before it stepped back. With the hydel protest being powered by Lepcha youth from Dzongu, it started getting identified as a Lepcha and Dzongu issue more and more. This impression gained credence once expressions of support started coming in from outside Sikkim; the support was almost all from Lepcha associations from the neighbouring parts of West Bengal. In Sikkim, with ACT consciously keeping political outfits at an arm’s length, social organisations headed by political leaders came together to form an umbrella organisation by the name of SAFE (Sikkim Associations for Environment) to support the ACT-led protest. Talks between ACT and the State Government were not heading anywhere and in the stalemate transpired incidents which created even more ill-will and distrust.

On July 11, 2007, Lepcha youth from the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, led by the Rong Ong Prongzom (Lepcha Youth Organisation) descended on Sikkim’s sole lifeline to the rest of the country—National Highway 31A—and staged a protest there which

held up traffic for nearly two hours. The protest was staged on the West Bengal side of the national highway just beyond the South Sikkim border. The only traffic that was affected was to and from Sikkim. The protestors from Darjeeling were clear that their support was only for the hydel projects proposed for Dzongu, which they saw as the last bastion of Lepcha culture. For Sikkim, connectivity with the rest of the nation has always been at mercy of the weather of the neighbouring state's hill politics with landslides and strikes forcing frequent disruptions. The blockading of the highway, even if it was only for a few hours, offended many lay Sikkimese and even the State Government did not take very well to what it saw as non-Sikkimese involvement and pressure on State matters. ACT also started focussing more on invoking Lepcha sentiments by highlighting that while some members of the community remained detached from the protest in Sikkim, others were putting their lives on the line. The reference was obviously to Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha who had already made many rounds to the hospital, their health failing as they continued their hunger strike.

#### *Talks Peak and Collapse*

The Dzongu hydel debate has been hounded by mood swings throughout and sure enough, just when the attrition levels were getting abrasive, cordiality returned with the Chief Minister, who was now back in Sikkim. He convened a high-level meeting with his officials, stressing that Dzongu's sanctity had to be maintained 'at all costs.' He sympathised with the concerns expressed by ACT and directed a 'High Powered Committee on Power' to open fresh negotiations with ACT which welcomed the gesture. But even as ACT members were conferring with the high-powered committee, CLOS opened a new front. They brought down 21 affected land-owners, most of them from Sakyong village where the dam is proposed to come up. A series of allegations were levelled and CLOS even challenged the moral authority of the older generation to sign away lands which would have been inherited by their children. Addressing the press conference on July 18, CLOS hinted that the situation in Dzongu was so tense that even blood could spill. Meanwhile, the State Government offered ACT a time-bound assurance to address all its concerns and fears within one month of it calling off its hunger strike. Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha's health was now on the brink. Lepcha Associations and bodies also

exerted pressure on ACT to withdraw its protest. In another development, on July 21, 2007, a 500-strong delegation of Lepchas from Dzongu drove into Gangtok to call on the Chief Minister to reiterate their support for the Panan hydel project. Representatives who addressed the meeting, spoke affectionately of Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha, but breathed fire on others whom they saw as exploiting the situation and obstructing resolution. At the meeting, the Chief Minister announced that no labour camps would be allowed inside Dzongu for Panan HEP, promised a higher compensation and the assurance that unused land acquired for the project would be returned to the original landowners after 35 years.

The moral pressure exerted by the continuing hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing was fraying nerves to desperation levels in both camps. The displays of strength and public proclamations aside, concern over the deteriorating health of the two hunger strikers was palpable. This time, the State Government blinked first. Early on July 25, the 36<sup>th</sup> day of Dawa and Tenzing on hunger strike, a letter reached ACT at Bhutia-Lepcha House, signed by the Chief Secretary of Sikkim. The letter communicated that the State Government, as per ACT's demand, would form a review committee to look into its demands. This review committee's recommendations, the letter added, would be binding on the Government and would be submitted within one month of its formation. The understanding was that ACT would withdraw its hunger strike on receipt of the letter and then sit down with representatives from the State Government and decide on the composition of this review committee.

That, however, was not to be.

Just when observers felt that the protest and the negotiations that followed would enter the next level, everything collapsed after having come so close to resolution. ACT replied to the offer with a fresh set of conditions. It demanded that the Review Committee be headed by an independent person well versed in social, religious, environmental and technical aspects of hydel projects; that 50% of the Review Committee be nominated by ACT and that the Review Committee be notified 'immediately' to 'enable' ACT to lift its hunger strike. This communication was issued after office-hours and caught the other side off-guard; they were led to believe that this part of the negotiations would take place after the hunger strike had been called off. There must have been some confusion in the ACT camp too, since the letter listing its new demands issued to the State Government was under a letter head that read 'Affected Citizens of Sikkim.' A meeting late in the

evening between members of the High Powered Committee and a strong ACT-led delegation ended inconclusively. The State's representatives argued that the Review Committee should be representative of all affected people and not balanced unduly in favour of ACT. They also stressed that Government Notifications were important documents and could not be issued on such short notice. A day that had begun on the most optimistic note since the ACT protest was launched closed on the sourest note. As things stood at that time, the bridges had been burnt.

The next day, the Chief Secretary issued a letter to ACT stressing that the State Government was now convinced that ACT 'was not interested' in resolving the issue. The letter also alleged that ACT had been 'infiltrated' by forces 'inimical' to Sikkim. It did not help calm the situation that on that day even political outfits from outside Sikkim had conveyed support for ACT. The letter added that if ACT did not wind up its hunger strike within 24 hours, the 'State Government would be left with no alternative but to take necessary action as per law.' Even as Dawa and Tenzing had weakened to an extent that they could not even speak coherently anymore, the negotiations had collapsed to a degree from where it appeared there was no hope of resolution. When the 24-hour deadline expired, rumours started making rounds that the hunger strikers would be forcibly evicted. Extra police presence at the police station below the venue of the hunger strike only lent further credence to the rumours. The use of force was however not deployed, but that was small comfort given that the only hope for resolution—talks—had collapsed.

ACT responded to the last missive by expressing surprise over the tone of finality. The letter conveyed that ACT was still willing to continue with the talks, but the tone had changed. Both the government representatives and the ACT members were now exchanging allegations. Politics joined the fray too. Opposition parties in the State formed a Joint Action Committee to address issues pertaining to the ACT-led protest. Lepcha organisations from outside Sikkim progressed from expressions of support to proactive action in the form of rallies and relay hunger strikes in Kalimpong and Darjeeling towns in the neighbouring state of West Bengal. Although ACT distanced itself from other organisations and political parties by maintaining that it could not control how others reacted to the shared issue, such clarifications did little to ease suspicions that too many politically motivated voices were joining the chorus. With politics came rhetoric and strong allegations issued from all sides. On August 4, matters came

to a head when supporters aligned with the Congress [I] party burnt an effigy of the Governor, condemning what they saw as the non-involvement of the Constitutional head in resolving the issue. Soon, even politicians from outside Sikkim were passing judgement on Sikkim's handling of the affair, and the protest against hydel projects was teetering on the brink of getting swamped by political one-upmanship. Although still not explicitly announced as such, the ACT-led protest had now become an almost exclusively Lepcha protest. But just as was the case with Dzongu, opinions even among the Lepcha associations from outside Sikkim were split. The Darjeeling and Kalimpong Lepcha associations had already sided with the protest but the All India Lepcha Association, the Gyakar Jumbuling Rong Shezum, in a statement issued on August 7, 2007, while upholding the right of ACT supporters to protest the hydel project, put on record that its two-day 'fact-finding visit' to Dzongu revealed that residents there 'did not appear too unduly worried about the impact of the project.' It advised the two sides—the pro and anti-hydel lobbies in Dzongu—to sit together and formalise a workable solution which 'ushered development while also ensuring preservation.' Unfortunately, a deadlock had set in and no advice was being taken at face value by either side, with each side suspicious of any comment that conflicted with their stand.

Interestingly, both, the State Government and ACT drew Dawa and Tenzing into their arguments, each blaming the other side of putting their lives at risk because of irrational stubbornness. Meanwhile, after 42 days of fasting, Dawa and Tenzing were on the brink of organ failure and government doctors attending to them put them on nasal feed. Since they were not feeding themselves, their protest continued.

By mid-August 2007, the impasse appeared entrenched, and in a flurry of activity, the State tried everything from appeals to challenges to appeasement to break the impasse. The festival of Tendong Lho Rum Faat is the only Lepcha festival that gets a state-level celebration in the capital. Addressing a big gathering of Lepchas on the day August 8, 2007], the Chief Minister offered to personally intervene and get all of ACT's concerns addressed should they withdraw their hunger strike. The hunger strike was not withdrawn, but ACT, which, after the collapse of talks on June 25 had announced that it would not talk with anyone anymore and would continue with its protest till all the hydel projects in North Sikkim were scrapped, communicated that it was willing to return to the negotiating table. In an almost parallel development, the State Government finalised the land acquisition rates



for the Panan hydel project. The rate offered was at par with the highest that the State had fixed for any project anywhere in the State. Where the land acquisition rate was being discussed at Rs. 4 to 5 per square feet at one time, it was fixed at Rs. 18 per square foot for cardamom and paddy fields and Rs. 16 per square foot for barren lands, plus a 30% solatium. The market rate for land in Dzongu hovers at as low as Rs. 2 per square foot. Panan HEP requires 35.8850 hectares. The quantum of the liquidity that the project would inject into Dzongu was difficult for the residents to ignore. And aggression returned with the Chief Minister's uncharacteristic outburst against the ACT-led protest in his Independence Day address to the State on August 15. With a section of landowners petitioning the State Government to expedite the land acquisition process, many suspected that the confrontation was now headed for a collision. Land acquisition for Panan hydel project had been put on hold the moment talks had begun first in June and the suspension was perhaps stretching for longer than anticipated. On August 16, the first round of land compensation for the project began inside Dzongu. In the first phase, Rs. 7.97 crores (1.86 million dollars) were to be disbursed. At the rates offered, a total of Rs. 9.97 crores (2.33 million dollars) was to be handed over to the 91 affected families.

With the State pushing ahead with the hydel project, the pressure was on ACT to devise a way out of the stalemate and keep the movement relevant. Just as the land acquisition move was sudden, the following days kept everyone even more confused. On the evening of the first day of compensation distribution, Rongyong Chu, the river in Dzongu over which the Panan HEP was to be commissioned, broke its banks. The flash flood caused extensive damage and claimed the lives of four labourers working on Panan HEP-related work. ACT saw this as proof of the inadvisability of developing a hydel project on such a temperamental river, and its support groups took the timing of the flash-flood further by presenting it as divine retribution. This allusion might have been innocent of any concealed comment, but many of the Dzongu residents were offended by what they saw as an implied hint that they were being 'punished' for their 'greed.' Already accused of being land-grabbers in the past, such statements pushed them further away. The tension was palpable and when, the next day in Gangtok, a vehicle hired by the project developers was targeted with arson, suspicion immediately fell on ACT supporters even though subsequent investigation discounted such aspersions.

This was perhaps the lowest ebb that the issue has dredged; divisions were strong and the sides entrenched in stubborn refusals to

notice that the equation had changed. After all work on the project was resuming and irrespective of which camp one belonged to, Dzongu still had concerns which had not been adequately addressed. Staying true to the unexpected swings that the issue has been prone to, a sudden change arrived within days of bare-teeth confrontation. In a communiqué conveyed from New Delhi where he was on an official visit, the Chief Minister reiterated his appeal to ACT to withdraw its hunger strike and return to the negotiating table. It was the 63<sup>rd</sup> day of the hunger strike for Dawa and Tenzing, now admitted to the Emergency Ward of the Gangtok hospital where they were under constant watch and surviving on a liquid diet distributed by nasal tubes. ACT decided to reciprocate the Chief Minister's appeal by withdrawing the duo from their indefinite hunger strike while continuing the relay hunger strike. The hope of talks and eventual resolution were however short-lived: the Government turning lukewarm again; it welcomed the withdrawal of Dawa and Tenzing but expressed hope that even the relay hunger strike would be withdrawn soon. And so the matter remained and the ACT-protest in the form of relay hunger strikes at Gangtok completed 100 days. 208 volunteers had taken turns to sustain the hunger strike. Talks did not materialise and ACT and its support groups from Sikkim and Darjeeling took their protest to New Delhi. It was here that the focus zeroed in completely on Dzongu. The rallies and meetings in New Delhi wore a completely Lepcha flavour and the memorandums spoke only of Dzongu, its importance and concerns. Soon, ACT came on record and explained that even though it was ideologically opposed to hydel projects, its protest was aimed only against hydel projects in Dzongu.

Dzongu's importance to Lepchas as a community has never been doubt, but it has never explicitly been presented as a holy land of the Lepchas. But a 'Holy Land' is how the support groups outside Sikkim had been presenting Dzongu, and once the protest in Sikkim narrowed its field of involvement to the Lepcha reserve, the Holy Land argument started getting circulated more aggressively here too. This claim has been contested by the State Government and the pro-hydel lobby as being inaccurate and criticised as an attempt to paint the issue as a communal confrontation. On the other side, ACT, its Lepcha support groups in Sikkim and Lepchas organisations from Kalimpong came together and formed a 'Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee' to protest hydel projects in Dzongu. This confrontation was to become acute later.

*The Fabric Tears at the Wrong End*

Meanwhile, on September 4, 2007, the State Government constituted the Review Committee promised on June 25. The Chief Secretary, Government of Sikkim, was nominated to head the Committee to review issues and demands raised by ACT and other project-affected people of Dzongu. The State Government proposed to include the Additional Chief Secretary, Secretaries of the Forest and Power Departments, the ACT president, a resident of Dzongu and an environmentalist. The State also decided to suspend all project-related activities in Dzongu until the review committee, which was given 100 days to complete its study, submitted its report. The decision was communicated to ACT, which dismissed it as an 'eyewash' and decided not to allow its president to be part of it. The Review Committee was not only headed by a State Government official, but also had the majority representation of government officials, who were seen by ACT as pro-hydel. It thumbed down the Review Committee and announced again that nothing short of scrapping of all projects proposed for Dzongu would be acceptable. ACT had already taken a stand on the composition of the Review Committee and was perhaps left with no option but to boycott it in its proposed form, but it should have probably not cut it away completely. Had a member from ACT been in the Committee, it would have been able to get more of its arguments included 'on record' in the report that was eventually tabled. ACT presence would have also given it a chance to direct the Committee to arguments it might have otherwise ignored. ACT could have still rejected the final recommendation of the Committee but by being part of the process, its objections would have to be officially recorded in the final document.

In the meanwhile, the environment of distrust and mutual suspicion thickened. It peaked on October 2, 2007, when a joint rally of CLOS and Sangha of Dzongu members attempted to arrive uninvited at the State-level observance of Gandhi Jayanti [the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi] in Gangtok. Police detachments were on standby and met the CLOS-SOD wave a short distance from the venue of the Gandhi Jayanti celebrations and stopped them. The rallyists were instigated to break the police cordon, and they tried. The police cordon held. After some preventive detentions and shouting matches, the rallyists were allowed through in 'manageable' batches to walk to the Gandhi bust and offer prayers—but only after the official function had

ended. ACT had always professed commitment to non-confrontational, non-violent protest, but the protest had already stretched out for more than four months. Since it was made up of mostly young supporters, the mood was getting restive.

A fortnight later, there was another flicker of hope.

On October 16, 2007, an official delegation of the Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee met the Chief Minister of Sikkim with their demands. This was significant since the hydel protestors and the Chief Minister had not met since the hunger strike had begun. The meeting witnessed an honest exchange, and although nothing concrete emerged, the ice had been broken again. The delegation highlighted the cultural and emotional significance of Dzongu and the Chief Minister reiterated the Government's commitment to ensure that the proposed projects did not compromise these aspects. The representatives wanted the projects scrapped, and the Chief Minister invited ACT again to join the review committee and help find a way to fulfil the wishes of the Lepcha people without having to face legal and other complications later. For the Panan project, not only had a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) been signed with private developers, all the processes required by law also had been completed. In addition, there was a sizeable lobby inside Dzongu which actually desired the hydel project.

Priorities in Sikkim changed for some time with dates announced for rural body (panchayat) elections and the administration busy with preparations for this massive exercise. The ruling party announced that a final decision on the hydel projects in Dzongu would be taken in consultation with the village-level people's representatives elected in the polls scheduled for the end of October. This was a reiteration of the State's contention that ACT had no *locus standi* and that the right to negotiate on the people's behalf should rest with the representatives elected by the people. With this decision, the ruling party, at least as far as Dzongu was concerned, made hydel projects an election issue. On the day of voting, the North district, of which Dzongu is a part, recorded the highest voter turnout with an average of 95%. Five gram panchayat wards [the smallest units of rural bodies] in North Sikkim recorded 100% voter turnout. All five were in Dzongu. Part of the reason for the impressive turnout in North Sikkim was its small size - North Sikkim marks the largest geographical footprint, but holds the lowest in population of all districts in Sikkim. What cannot be ignored, however, is that only the North district had a real election issue—hydel projects. There were no burning political issues in the other districts to

draw the people out to the polling stations and record their stand. This must have been an important factor contributing to the near complete turnout of voters because the closest contests were seen in Dzongu. In fact, for the Laven gram panchayat ward, the victor was decided by the toss of a coin after both the contestants polled the same number of votes—27 each! In the case of two other panchayat wards, the margin of victory was a thin 3 votes. The results also reflected the position of each side on the hydel debate. Dzongu recorded the highest number of wins by Independent candidates [winning against ruling party candidates] in the North district. After the results, there were eight Independent candidates among the 41 gram panchayat wards in Dzongu. Ruling party candidates occupied the rest of the berths.

With the completion of the panchayat polls process, the Review Committee, formed on September 4, held its first meeting on November 28. It had been given 100 days to complete its study and with the halfway mark already crossed, it had only begun meeting. Its term would eventually be extended twice. In December the Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee was back in New Delhi with its protest. Although the protest had bouts of disorganisation in Sikkim, it had done well in networking with similar protest groups and organisations outside Sikkim, and a good number of environmental activists participated in the Delhi visit. There was a sit-in protest at Delhi's Jantar-Mantar and visits to Central Government ministers and leaders. Hydel development, however, remains a State matter in the increasing federal evolution of national politics, and a solution to the issue will have to be found inside Sikkim. The Delhi visit did however succeed in getting the protest noticed and bring it into the loop of similar protests stretching across the country. This networking proved helpful in getting the word out on the protest to a larger audience. In January the relay hunger strike completed 200 days, and the milestone was marked with a grand gathering of ACT, its support groups and Lepcha representatives from outside Sikkim. Strong anti-hydel stands were expressed and the need to protect Dzongu reiterated. ACT even released its official flag on the day, and meetings were held to decide on the future course of action. The invoking of Dzongu as a Holy Land must have been an earnest move on the part of Lepcha organisations from outside Sikkim, but the assertive involvement of these groups in the affairs of the Lepcha reserve was not received too well inside Dzongu. They saw it as a talking down which offended many sensibilities. The first signs of this attrition manifested immediately after the 200-day anniversary of the ACT-led protest. A group of 42

Lepchas from the neighbouring Darjeeling district of West Bengal were hounded out of Dzongu by the pro-hydel lobby. No one was injured, but the rupture between pro and anti-hydel lobbies inside Dzongu had split wider. Politics was dragged into the picture and probably had a role to play, but the principal characters were the Lepchas and their differing points of views on how development could be brought into the backward area. Interestingly, even though the protest was becoming Panan-centric, the first violence was recorded when four labourers engaged with Stage IV related work on the Dzongu bank of the Teesta were assaulted on January 18, 2008. Three Lepcha youth from Dzongu were booked for the assault and arrested. ACT claimed that they had been falsely implicated and feted them with khadas upon their release on bail. Ironically, the day that recorded the first case of direct violence also recorded the official scrapping of a Dzongu hydel project. The State Cabinet, on January 18, 2008, withdrew the Letter of Intent issued to SSNR Super Power Pvt. Ltd. to develop the 99 MW Lingzya hydel project on Tholung Chu in Dzongu.

On the 250<sup>th</sup> day of the hunger strike, ACT announced that Lepchas from Darjeeling and elsewhere would be undertaking a 'pilgrimage march' from Melli in West Bengal to Dzongu in North Sikkim. Next came the resumption of the indefinite hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha on March 10. They were joined by 19-year-old Gaybu Lepcha. The timing was significant again. Sikkim was expecting the Deputy Chairman, National Planning Commission, who arrived in Gangtok on March 14 to inaugurate the State's much-promoted International Florishow. The Planning Commission has been a major supporter of Sikkim's hydel aspirations. With the resumption of the indefinite hunger strike, ACT also started issuing a series of press releases explaining reasons why Dzongu had a rightful claim as Holy Land for the Lepchas. Significantly, the opposing arguments have not contested this claim on record, but have only highlighted that Dzongu has never been introduced as a Holy Land in the past. To this, ACT has argued that the need had never arisen since Dzongu had never been under 'threat' in the past. The debate continues.

As the 'pilgrimage to Dzongu', announced for mid-April approached, activities intensified on both sides. Pre-empting the march by those opposing the project, a 225-strong car rally of hydel supporters from Dzongu drove down to Gangtok to call on the Chief Minister again. The car rally flaunted banners and posters condemning ACT and demanding that the administration take 'appropriate action' to evict the protestors. In all appearances, the gloves had come off. A

memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister also urged that work on the hydel projects proposed for North Sikkim be expedited. A major announcement was made at this meeting of April 5 when the Chief Minister shared that only hydel projects for which MoUs had been signed would be taken up and the rest, including those for which only letters of intent (LoI) had been issued, would be scrapped. As far as Dzongu was concerned, an MoU had been signed only for Panan hydel project and of the remaining five, the LoI for Lingzya had already been withdrawn. With the announcement, only Panan HEP remained.

While this was definitely a major victory for ACT and provided an opportunity for it to change track and realign its movement, it ignored the chance. Perhaps, the opportunity was passed over because too much planning had already been invested into the 'pilgrimage' announced for Dzongu. The march began on April 14, 2008 and became embroiled in a disturbing series of confrontations from the moment it stepped into Sikkim at Rangpo that day. In a move to ensure that the march was not directly associated with the hydel protest, ACT members stayed away, but its support groups were at Rangpo to receive the 700-odd marchers. Although the marchers insisted that they had no intentions but a pilgrimage, some members of the support groups circulated handbills explaining the reasons why hydel projects in Dzongu should be opposed. It was becoming difficult to keep the politics away. At Singtam, about 14 kms from Rangpo where the marchers were scheduled to halt for the night, the situation turned ugly. The entire town downed shutters in an overtly hostile move and even the Dharamsala (a community hall) booked to house the marchers for their overnight halt, was locked out. The marchers were left stranded, and a tense evening fell on the town. Eventually, the host group broke the lock and brought the marchers in. But the hostility was far from over and peaked the next day when the marchers reached Dickhu from where they were scheduled to enter Dzongu. On the Dzongu side of the bridge there, a counter rally of about 500 Lepchas from Dzongu had gathered, intent on refusing access to the touring group claiming that the visitors were on a 'disruptive' mission intent on corrupting a developmental debate into an ethnic issue. The marchers decided against a confrontation, offered prayers from the far bank of the Teesta and turned back.

While this situation was playing out, the ACT protest at BL House received its most eminent visitor to date, Medha Patkar, the respected social activist of the Narmada Bachao Aandolan, who called on the hunger strikers and lashed out severely against the State Government

for what she saw as its continuing blindsiding of the protest and refusal to engage the protestors in negotiations. A major achievement of having secured the support of the country's most recognisable name in hydel protests was dampened to some extent by the unfortunate turn of events in Dzongu. The ensuing days were devoted to a string of allegations and counter allegations over what had transpired at Singtam and Dikchu and what Medha Patkar had said. So much so that when the 20-page Report of the Review Committee was tabled and accepted by the State Cabinet on April 24, 2008, it went largely ignored even though it had made some strong recommendations. Even the State Government did very little to publicise the recommendations of the Review Committee.

### *Hope Flickers*

The issue continued in its uncommunicative trajectory for another month, until an attempt to break the deadlock was made by an unlikely agency, the Panchayats from Chungthang, who called on the Chief Minister and urged him to 'personally intervene' to resolve the issue, save the Lepcha society from fragmenting further and save the lives of Dawa and Tenzing who had started developing severe complications in their second bout with the indefinite hunger strike. Accordingly, on June 12, 2008, the Secretary, Power & Energy Department, wrote to the ACT president informing him that the State Government had decided to scrap four hydel projects proposed for Dzongu, leaving only Panan HEP inside Dzongu and Teesta Stage IV on its border. This was the first official admission of scrapping the hydel projects, and ACT reciprocated by withdrawing Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha from the hunger strike on the 93<sup>rd</sup> day. They had lost more than 10 kilos each, but still put up a brave, optimistic front, stating that they welcomed the latest development and looked forward to the re-initiation of talks.

Although the issue has seen many false starts towards reconciliation, the latest development holds the most hope. ACT has displayed a new resolve not to get distracted or fall for emotional reactions which might distract from the issue they pursue. It has been close to two months since Dawa and Tenzing withdrew from their indefinite hunger strike and the level of animosity scaled down. Since the State Government was approached on ACT's behalf by elected members of the ruling party itself, the political shades that the protest had attracted have also faded. What is more, ACT office bearers



explain that the delay in resuming talks is not because any side is dithering, but because ACT wants to first consult with the elected panchayat representatives of Dzongu and more people of the affected areas, take them into confidence, explain ACT's position and then arrive at the negotiating table. This is a well intentioned move which should, even if it does not build consensus on the hydel issue, go a long way in washing away the bad blood created between the pro and anti-hydel lobbies inside Dzongu. That alone should score as a major victory because irrespective of how the conflict plays out, should the differences remain unaddressed, it could end up wreaking more damage on the Lepcha social fabric of Dzongu than the hydel project itself. These deliberations should also help ACT moderate its stand and decide on the level of compromise it is willing to make. [The first round of preliminary talks were held between an ACT delegations and officials from the State Power & Energy Department on August 6, 2008]

As for which direction the talks should go, a good place to begin would be the recommendations of the Review Committee. Although ACT had dismissed the Committee as 'eye wash' and even though the Committee does not recommend the scrapping of Panan HEP, it is still a powerful collection of recommendations.

The Review Committee has endorsed the Panan HEP as 'feasible' for the 'sustainable development' of Dzongu, but recommended that no more hydel projects be taken up for the time being. What is more important though is that it has recommended the setting up of a Monitoring Committee with 'adequate enforcing power' to 'monitor the compliance effectiveness and initiate corrective action as may be needed' for Panan. What is even more significant is that it has recommended that the powers of this Monitoring Committee be kept dynamic in the sense that it be allowed to review the Environment Management Plan and its implementation, and suggest additional safeguards 'as may be required from time to time.'

On the composition of this Monitoring Committee, the study recommends that members include 'geologists, environmental experts, forest experts, sociocultural experts from representatives of local NGO and PCE cum Secretary, Energy & Power.' The Report emphasises the need to protect the socio-cultural uniqueness of the area and warns that if the safeguards are not implemented and monitored, the project may lead to major economic and environmental impact. Stressing that the Environmental Management Plan (EMP) approved by the Ministry of Environment & Forests be 'implemented judiciously' and adequate

resources be committed towards this implementation, it recommends that the use of these funds be subjected to independent verification, periodical review and subjected to 'strengthening' based on ground experience.

The concerns highlighted are the same as those that have gripped Dzongu all along; what is new is that the recommendations provide for a stronger, more effective monitoring committee than has ever been attempted in the past. The recommendations, however, run the risk of getting handicapped by the same compromises that have undermined similar, if less powerful, monitoring committees constituted for other projects. What has to be accepted is that no matter how explicitly the powers and responsibilities of a monitoring committee are articulated, its effectiveness is decided by its composition. Given that the powers and involvement of the monitoring committee have been kept dynamic and open to expansion as work on the project progresses and unforeseen issues come up, if the project is to be undertaken at all, then the composition on this committee should be given the most importance. It would be advisable to prioritise experts and representatives from the affected people in it and keep government representation limited to administrative support. If the only remaining hydel project inside Dzongu is to get commissioned, ACT should also perhaps approach the talks keeping open an option of securing a berth in supervising the implementation process if it cannot stall the project. Even though its final aim has not been achieved yet, ACT has scored some major victories in the year since it has launched protests against hydel projects. Stumbles, too, have happened, from both sides, and there were many factors that played a role in it. What is important is that many policy decisions have been rolled back, some refined, others moderated, and as things stand, the biggest damage—that of cleaving the residents of Dzongu into enraged camps—is also being corrected. A conclusion is still awaited, but at least, the process has begun and after many false starts, appears to be heading in that direction.



## 'VANISHING LEPCHA'

CHANGE AND CULTURAL REVIVAL IN A MOUNTAIN  
COMMUNITY OF SIKKIM<sup>1</sup>JENNY BENTLEY  
*University of Zürich*

Earlier the Lepcha used to have such magical powers, now they are weak and vanishing.

Statements similar to this one, which was made by my research assistant whilst we were conducting research in North Sikkim in 2006, are commonly heard and read in Sikkim today. The idea of the vanishing Lepcha or *Mutanchi rong*,<sup>2</sup> an ethnic community living on the southern side of the Himalayas in India (Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal), Nepal (Ilam) and south-western Bhutan, has become widespread. In written sources, the Lepcha people were first described as a 'dying race' by colonial writers such as for example Mainwaring, and since the publication of Arthur Foning's influential book *Lepcha, my Vanishing Tribe* in 1987, a large number of people consider the Lepcha people to be disappearing. Usually, the term 'vanishing' applies both to Lepcha culture as well as to the ethnic

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on data collected in Sikkim between March and September 2006 during ethnographic research for an MA-thesis in social anthropology at the University of Zürich in Switzerland. I was affiliated to the Delhi School of Economics, Department of Sociology, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim. During this time, field work and interviews were conducted in Lingthem and Nampatan, two villages in North Sikkim. Lingthem lies in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu and is famous among Lepcha scholars as the village where Geoffrey Gorer carried out his research in 1937. It lies to the northwest of Mangan, the district headquarters of North Sikkim, and is accessible by road. Nampatan lies outside the Lepcha reserve area, approximately a half hours walk to the southeast of Mangan.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the term Lepcha will be used because it is common in the public, political and administrative spheres of Sikkim. As many ethnic groups in the world, the Lepcha are known under two sets of names: (1) Lepcha is the exoethnonym given by neighbouring people and most commonly known to outsiders and (2) *mutanchi rongkup rumkup*, which means 'sons of snowy peak or sons of god' (Tamsang 1983: 1), which is the endoethnonym - the name used by the ethnic group themselves. They also refer to themselves as *mutanchi rong*, 'the people who wait for the blessings of Mother' (Thakur/ Lepcha 1981: 222).

community as a whole. The notion of the vanishing of Lepcha culture or even of the entire Lepcha tribe is expressed by every member of Lepcha society: urban and rural, male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated. For all of them losing Lepcha culture has become an integral part of describing Lepcha culture.

Confronted with the notion of a vanishing Lepcha culture, two questions arise: which changes in Sikkim influence the Lepcha community and create the notion of a disappearing culture, or even its actual disappearance? How does the Lepcha community deal with these changes and have any movements arisen to want to prevent the vanishing of Lepcha culture?

In the first section of this article various changes that have taken place in Sikkim in the recent decades and centuries as well as their consequences for the Lepcha community are discussed. Since many aspects of Sikkim have been deeply altered, the focus here lies on three points: religion, migrant labourers, and education. Firstly, the introduction of Buddhism among the Lepcha and the more recent advance of Christianity into North Sikkim are presented, with a focus on the effects on the indigenous belief system and the social life of the Lepcha. Secondly, the demographic changes due to the settlement of immigrant labourers are discussed. In other areas of Sikkim, these demographic changes occurred over a century ago, but in the North District they are fairly recent. In this discussion, I elaborate on the influence these intercommunity relations have on Lepcha culture and everyday life. Thirdly, the consequences of the spread of the educational system on the Lepcha youth, their culture, and their modes of upbringing are discussed.

The fear that their own culture is vanishing has inspired and moved a certain section of the Lepcha community, which has resulted in the mushrooming of many associations in Sikkim that aim to protect and promote the Lepcha cultural heritage. In the second section of this article, the spread of Lepcha associations and the cultural revival movement are explored. Special reference is given to the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (Lepcha New Way Organisation), a Lepcha association which is active in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim.

CHANGES IN SIKKIM AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON LEPCHA CULTURE AND  
COMMUNITY

When reviewing the history of Sikkim, it quickly becomes apparent that many religious, political, economic and demographic changes have taken place in the areas inhabited by the Lepcha. The former Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim is now a part of India, the world's biggest democracy. This status resulted in the introduction of a completely new political and administrative system to Sikkim. Nowadays, roads connect nearly every inhabited corner of the state and most houses have electrical coverage, which brings national and international radio and TV-shows into the rural houses. Further infrastructural and developmental programs are being implemented. Sikkimese people are leaving their mountain state for other places in India and the world, whereas people from other parts are searching for a place to live and work in this lush and fertile region. Even the remote Lepcha villages in North Sikkim are connected to a global economic market, mainly because of their cardamom cash crop.

Since the changes that have been occurring in Sikkim are diverse and far-reaching, the factors which cause the core elements of Lepcha identity and culture to be vanishing are complex and a full analysis of these factors lies beyond the scope of this study. The main focus of this article will be on the influence of religious conversion, labour immigration and education on the Lepcha community in North Sikkim.

*Buddhist and Christian Religion in the Lepcha Community*

Both Buddhism and Christianity have influenced and continue to affect the Lepcha and their belief system.

The introduction of Buddhism in Sikkim can be traced to the activities of Lhatsun Namka Jigme (1597–1650), a lama of the Nyingma Buddhist order. He helped establish the Namgyal dynasty and was the main protagonist in the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhism has a long history of coexistence with the Lepcha indigenous belief system and is strongly rooted in the village communities of North Sikkim. Still today, Lepcha ritual specialists and

---

<sup>3</sup> Balikci 2002: 28.

lamas live and practice side by side in Sikkimese villages. The Lepcha villagers define themselves as Buddhists and participate in Buddhist rituals alongside their own older ritual traditions. Gorer already emphasised this in the mid-1930s, stating that the villagers follow these two, sometimes contradictory beliefs simultaneously without any feelings of distress.<sup>4</sup> Two reasons for this coexistence can be given. First of all, there is the characteristic of Sikkimese Buddhism that many features of the pre-Buddhist Lepcha belief system have been included to create a unique form of Buddhism. For example, features of Lepcha sacred landscapes are incorporated into the Buddhist interpretation of the sacred geographical surroundings. Mount Kanchendzonga, praised as a place of natural resources by the Lepcha, was transformed into a warrior and the guardian of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom.<sup>5</sup> A second reason lies in the nature of the Sikkimese kingdom, which was never centralistic or strong enough to extend its influence into the far-flung and dispersed villages and suppress all threats to the spiritual rule of the Chogyal.<sup>6</sup>

However, over the past fifty years the integration of the indigenous religious practices of the Lepcha into Buddhism has been facing challenges. After the Chinese invasion in Tibet, many Tibetan Nyingmapa and Kagyüpa, among them knowledgeable lamas, came into Sikkim as refugees and influenced the interpretation and implementation of the Buddhist religion. Various spiritual Buddhist leaders, such as the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, have since targeted aspects of traditional Lepcha beliefs, such as animal sacrifices, and have tried to eradicate them.<sup>7</sup> In Nampatan and Lingthem villages animal sacrifices are still performed in annual ceremonies and healing rituals, even though there is an awareness that this contradicts Buddhist beliefs. This can be illustrated by an incident that took place in the village Lingthem. The ritual specialist (*bongthing*) of Lower Lingthem was also a lama of the local monastery and therefore never included animal sacrifices in his rituals. If the healing ceremony made it necessary to have a blood sacrifice, he would get another ritual specialist to conduct the ritual. The annual ceremonies which required animal sacrifices were also conducted by the other expert. When the other ritual specialist died, the village community decided that the *bongthing*, being the only knowledgeable person, should perform the annual ceremonies. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Gorer 1984: 181.

<sup>5</sup> Steinmann 1996: 121.

<sup>6</sup> Balikci 2002: 28, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Balikci 2002: 61, 64.

*bongthing* could not combine the position of being a lama with the performing of animal sacrifices, as he felt these two contradicted each other. Therefore, he left the Buddhist monastery and gave up his position as a lama in order to be able to perform his duty to the Lepcha community as *bongthing*. Nonetheless, most inhabitants of Nampatan and Lower Lingthem villages do not see much of a contradiction between being a Buddhist and practising different elements of the indigenous Lepcha beliefs. In Nampatan, for example, only one of the 23 Buddhist Lepcha families felt that the consulting of a Lepcha ritual specialist during illness would be incompatible with the Buddhist religion, and in Lingthem there were none who felt there was a contradiction.

Even though most Lepcha villagers consider the Buddhist religion to be an important element of their religious identity, there are voiced concerns that Buddhism is eroding aspects of the Lepcha cultural heritage. The number of Lepcha ritual specialists (*mun* and *bongthing*) is decreasing, and there is a strong belief among the community that this is connected to Buddhist beliefs, for example in the case of funeral rites. Gorer, who emphasised the harmonious nature of the relations between the Lepcha ritual specialists and the lamas, found that the area where traditions and convictions clash and contradict each other most deeply is in the beliefs and ceremonies surrounding death. Both Buddhism and native Lepcha beliefs agree that after death the soul wanders and is lost in a dangerous place, but the direction, length, and characteristics of the wandering of the soul differ. Buddhist beliefs see that the soul wanders for 49 days and is eventually reincarnated. For the Lepcha ritual specialists the soul is seen as being guided to the Land of the Gods (*Rum lyang*), where it is reborn and lives an eternal life similar to the one on earth. In the mid-1930s, both the lama and the *mun* conducted burial ceremonies and Lepcha ritual specialists were buried in the traditional ways.<sup>8</sup> However, this has changed over the last fifty years. The majority of funerals in the villages of North Sikkim are now predominantly Buddhist and the *mun* plays a minor role, if any. The bodies are burnt during Buddhist funeral rites and no longer buried according to the traditional Lepcha ways. This is seen as one of the reasons why fewer Lepcha become possessed by the spirits of the *mun* or *bongthing* in order to receive the knowledge to perform the various rituals. It is believed that after death the body of the *mun* or *bongthing* should not be burnt, because only the burying of the body in the

---

<sup>8</sup> Gorer 1984: 346.



traditional way enables the spirit to come back and possess a different person in the lineage of the deceased. Now, ritual specialists are starting to demand burials again in order to enable the survival of their profession and the Lepcha beliefs.

While the Lepcha in North Sikkim are predominantly Buddhist, Christianity is common among the Lepcha in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal and the South District of Sikkim.<sup>9</sup> The Christian religion is slowly spreading northwards; protestant and catholic churches have now been built as far north as the district headquarters of Mangan. From there, Christian missionaries make trips into the villages of the surrounding areas, but have so far not been very successful in North Sikkim. In Dzongu itself, some entire villages have been converted to Christianity, but the majority of the population are not affected. In my experience, missionary work is disliked in the Lepcha villages where I stayed. The Lingthem hamlet known as Passingdang lies on the main road connecting the northern part of Dzongu to the district headquarters of Mangan. The villagers in Passingdang have had more experience with missionaries than villages in more remote areas of the Lepcha reserve. There, the attempts to evangelise the Lepcha community have in the past caused outrage and resentment. Whilst I was staying in Dzongu, the Lepcha community of Lower Lingthem and Passingdang became enraged and upset about the activities of Protestant Christian missionaries in their village. Members of a local church in Mangan came to Passingdang on Sundays and, without the permission of the school or the parents, summoned the children from the school hostel to preach to them. As a consequence of the arrogance of some missionaries, Lepcha villagers in Dzongu are starting to generalise their dislike towards the entire Christian community and even towards Lepcha who have been converted to Christianity. A Buddhist Lepcha villager of Nampatan stated: "They call us Satan. This causes tension. They do not accept different beliefs."<sup>10</sup>

The Buddhist villagers of Nampatan and Lower Lingthem all agree that the main reason for the conversion to Christian religion lies in economic considerations. Buddhist ceremonies such as marriages and funerals are very expensive and can cause a family to be indebted for years. Christian missionaries promise economic benefits and good schooling for the children of those families who convert to Christian beliefs. Another possible reason for conversion to Christianity could be the similarities between certain commonly known Lepcha myths and

---

<sup>9</sup> Thakur 1988: 94, White 1971: 41, 42; Gorer 1984: 38, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Interview in Nampatan, March 2006.

biblical stories. These similarities are used by the missionaries as a means to explain their message to the Lepcha villagers. However, the only Christian villager in my research area had a different reason for his conversion, which was deeply grounded in the shamanistic worldview of the Lepcha community. He told me that there was a time when he was very ill constantly. He went to seek help from various lamas and Lepcha ritual specialists, but they could not cure him. As he explained, he then had no other option but to convert to Christianity and has never had such a severe illness again. The shamanic logic that worship is connected with the physical condition of the body and can directly cure illness was extended to Christianity.

Even though missionary work is generally disliked, Christian Lepcha are usually accepted within the village community, as can be seen in the village of Nampatan. The Christian household in Nampatan takes on responsibilities in the village and the wife of the household is very active in the village women's group. However, their life is mainly centred around Mangan, where the children go to school and where their church community is concentrated. The family attends festivities in the village, such as marriages, funerals, and *Namsung*, the Lepcha New Year, but do so mainly because of the social aspects involved. They do not attend other annual ceremonies conducted by the lamas or ritual specialists that have a more religious meaning, nor do they consult the Lepcha ritual specialists in case of illness.

There is a fear that Christianity will cause a rift in the Lepcha community, because it introduces the converted Lepcha into an entirely new community with different values and social gatherings. Furthermore, it causes the converted Lepcha to break with the Lepcha traditional beliefs, in a way village Buddhism generally does not require. Christian Lepcha do not attend religious ceremonies conducted by the Lepcha ritual specialists or the lama, nor do they search their help during illness. Furthermore, the Christian church and community do not accept Christian Lepcha who perform the duties of ritual specialists. An informant with a Christian background from Kalimpong recounted that when he was learning to be a *bongthing*, he encountered many difficulties and an absolute lack of understanding from other Christians around him. In this way, Christianity creates a greater distance to important aspects of Lepcha cultural life than Buddhism. An incident in January 2007 underlines this. A group of Lepcha youth from Kalimpong made a pilgrimage to Dzongu, intending to visit the place they consider to be their homeland and in search of their roots. During the trip five of them rescinded their Christian beliefs by washing

themselves in a river and renaming themselves with traditional Lepcha names. They gave up their Christian beliefs in order to regain access to Lepcha culture.

*Immigrant Labourers: Interaction and Change*

In the Darjeeling hills and later in Sikkim, the British colonial government has initiated a drastic process of demographic and economic transformations. The immigration and settlement of people from Nepal and other parts of India was encouraged, so as to provide manpower for the agricultural sector with the newly established tea plantations and for the expanding infrastructural projects such as road construction. In Dzongu and the areas surrounding Mangan in North Sikkim, only recently agricultural labourers started coming in larger numbers. The Lepcha villagers of the region were relatively poor, self-sufficient farmers, until they started to cultivate cardamom as a cash crop for export to India and other places in the world. In the 1930s, the income from cardamom was relatively small and flowed only slowly into the Lepcha community, but in the following ten years it became much larger.<sup>11</sup> With this growing wealth came the opportunity for Lepcha farmers to employ labourers from Nepal to work on the land, especially on the cardamom fields, as well as to provide their own children with an education by sending them to school.

Today the primary interaction between Lepcha and Nepalese villagers is on an economic level; this structures their relationship and the distribution of power between them. Both villages where I stayed are considered to be Lepcha villages, where all land belongs to the Lepcha community, except in Nampatan where one plot is owned by a Bhutia living in Mangan. This ownership mainly results from the land law in Sikkim, which prevents the sale of Lepcha or Bhutia land to anyone not belonging to these tribal groups (Land Revenue Order No. 1, 1917). The majority of Nepalese have taken Lepcha-owned land on lease in one of the two traditional systems: *kut* or *adhiya*. In the *kut* system, which is the more common of the two, a certain amount of

---

<sup>11</sup> Gorer 1984: 47, 85; Siiger 1967: 84. With the development of the cardamom trade different problems entered the Lepcha community. Many villagers became indebted to the cardamom buyers, who were mainly Marwari traders. They bought products on credit in anticipation of the income from the cardamom harvest, but in reality often received less than the official market price because they usually lacked the knowledge to crosscheck. Consequently their debts grew (Gorer 1984: 113ff.).

money or produce is fixed and paid to the landowner every year. In the *adhiya* system, the produce of the land is shared equally between the tenant and owner of the land. Some people are employed to work on the fields on a salary basis. As landowners and legally recognised local inhabitants, the Lepcha villagers have complete control over the making of political decisions in their villages. The majority of Nepalese tenants or labourers in both villages are foreigners without Indian citizenship and therefore without political rights. They are considered as seasonal inhabitants of the villages, who are expected to return to their homes eventually, although they participate in many community activities, they are not seen as permanent members of the village community. This sense of impermanence is visible in the conditions of the village houses. Most of the Lepcha families own solid houses with proper sanitation facilities and electricity, whereas many of the Nepalese tenants live in makeshift huts without electricity or sanitation, or look after the house of an absentee landowner. In reality the migration patterns of the Nepalese labourers are more complex and many do indeed settle in Sikkimese villages permanently. In Nampatan there is a wide spectrum of migration histories. In 2006, of sixteen Nepalese households, three have lived in the village for less than one year. In contrast, four Nepalese families have been settled there for between twenty and forty years. In 2006, half of the Nepalese families did not return to their homes between the harvest and the sowing season. Of these families about one third stopped returning due to the political unrest in Nepal. In Lingthem, the legal situation is different because it lies within Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve. The Nepalese labourers there require seasonal work permits, which they can only receive upon invitation from a resident Lepcha. The work permits have to be renewed every year. Despite the legal restrictions, the Nepalese tenants in Lower Lingthem have been settled in Dzongu for a long time. Of the four Nepalese households in Lower Lingthem, one family has lived there all their lives and two have been settled for over twenty years. None of them have returned to their homes in Nepal since they arrived in Lingthem.

The spatial proximity of the Lepcha and Nepalese communities in the villages results in many forms of social interaction. During the daily routine, the Lepcha and Nepalese villagers work long hours side by side, eat their food together, and relax over a bamboo beer after a hard days work. A Nepalese villager who is carrying heavy items from the market will normally be offered refreshments by Lepcha households on his way home. In the case of illness, a Lepcha will seek help from a

Nepalese ritual specialist if so required and vice versa. These mutual interactions occur frequently and are integral parts of village life. They are not topics of discussion or ever seen as problematic. Many of the social events of the Lepcha and Nepalese communities are shared with each other. Marriage ceremonies and funerals of the other community are attended. Villagers of Nampatan regularly describe the interaction between the two communities as an exchange—the Lepcha invite the Nepalese and vice versa. Other forms of assistance across community boundaries can also be observed. In both Nampatan and Lower Lingthem, Nepalese children have been taken into Lepcha households. In two cases orphaned Nepalese children have been officially adopted by Lepcha families and have taken on the Lepcha surname of the new family. In another case in Lower Lingthem, two children of a Nepalese tenant family live in a Lepcha household. The Lepcha family took the children in because the Nepalese family could not manage to feed all of their own children adequately. The Lepcha family also pays for the costs of the children's upbringing, including school fees.

Despite these close interactions in everyday life, there is a constant fear among the Lepcha villagers that the closeness to the Nepalese community slowly dilutes the Lepcha cultural heritage. When people talk about marriages between the two communities, an apparent scepticism enfolds. Even though Lepcha villagers often emphasise that to stop young people from getting married to members of a different community, does not lie in the power of the community, such marriages are not welcomed. In the rural areas of North Sikkim, marriages between the Lepcha and Nepalese communities are a recent phenomenon. In Lower Lingthem such intercommunity marriages are still quite rare, and have occurred only with two of the twentyfour village households. In Nampatan, outside the Lepcha reserve, intercommunity marriage are found in a quarter of the households, all but one of these marriages are among people who are younger than 30 years of age; among the older generation intercommunity marriages hardly ever happened. The main concerns related to intercommunity marriages as stated by the Lepcha villagers are centred round the loss of Lepcha culture and the difficulty of getting the other person settled into the new household and different community. Especially the influence on the Lepcha language is a cause for concern, because in households with a Nepalese parent, Lepcha is not spoken as frequently as in households where both parents are Lepcha. Interestingly, little concern is voiced about the possible Hindu beliefs of a Nepalese

parent. Hinduism seems to have little influence on the belief systems in the Lepcha community.

Whether the person who gets married to a person in another community is a man or a woman, makes a considerable difference. If a Lepcha woman gets married to a man of another community, it is much more sensitive and presents more potential conflict than if a Lepcha man gets married to a woman of another community. This is because in both communities, religion, group affiliation, and citizenship are generally defined through the husband. It is considered especially problematic if a Lepcha woman gets married to a Nepalese citizen, because in doing so she loses her membership of the Lepcha and Sikkimese community as well as her Indian citizenship. Furthermore, their children will also be Nepalese by law.

Recently, North Sikkim has been swept away by another wave of change, which has once more caused a demographic shift in the area. The large cardamom plants in the whole of Sikkim have been affected by various diseases. A new fungus, *Colletotrichum sp.*, is a special cause for concern. In the villages of North Sikkim the yield decreased drastically over the past decade. According to local estimates, most households in Nampatan used to harvest between two and six maunds,<sup>12</sup> a fair number of households even obtained ten maunds. At the time of my fieldwork in 2006, more than half of the households did not have any cardamom yield from their fields. In Lower Lingthem the situation is equally problematic. Previously, an average Lower Lingthem household used to harvest between four and ten maunds, now the average yield is around two maunds. In addition, the quality of the cardamom is affected to such an extent that the harvest can only be sold for half the price it would get five years ago.<sup>13</sup> Due to subsequent severe financial losses, the villagers are suffering under economic pressure and live in fear of the future. In Nampatan the villagers have started to grow ginger, a less lucrative cash crop, in an attempt to try to compensate for the loss of income. Because of the higher altitude, the growing of ginger is not possible in Lower Lingthem where the lack of income from cardamom has completely changed the demographic and economic organisation of the village. In the past, over half the cardamom fields were leased out to Nepalese families that had either

---

<sup>12</sup> One maund is approximately equivalent to 40kg.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Spices Board of India, the cardamom yield could be sold at 187.92 rupees per kilogram in Sikkim and 201.71 Rs./kg in Siliguri (West Bengal) in 2001. Only five years later, in 2006, the market price had dropped down to 86.22 Rs./kg in Sikkim and 99.76 Rs./kg in Siliguri.

settled in the village or on the fields. Now, only one household has been able to keep Nepalese people on contract. Consequently, many Nepalese have left either because they could no longer live off the cardamom yield produced by the land they leased or because their Lepcha employers could not pay them anymore. Lepcha families now tend their own fields with help from the local Lepcha community and a few employed Nepalese. However, in many Lepcha households, some members have government jobs and work in Mangan, and their children are in school all day. Without the itinerant labourers there are no extra hands to cultivate the fields and the Lepcha community feels economically dependent on the Nepalese community, which is a feeling most Lepcha dislike. The problem of the cardamom disease strengthens the bond between the Lepcha villagers, but widens the distance to the Nepalese community. It is felt that the Lepcha face this problem together, whilst the Nepalese will just leave, because this area is not their home.

*Education and the Generation Gap: The Impact of Changing Values and Interests*

Since Sikkim became a part of India there has been intensive investments in its development, especially in the field of education, which is due to the vast economic changes and the requirement of the Sikkimese government for educated employees. The literacy rate in Sikkim has improved tremendously in the last 30 years, growing from 17.74 % in 1971 to 69.68 % in 2001. Since 1991, the percentage of literate people in Sikkim has been a little above the Indian average. However, according to the 2001 Census data, the North District of Sikkim has a literacy rate slightly below the Sikkimese average. In that area, most of the literate people are found in the urban area of Mangan. Furthermore, on average men are more literate than women.<sup>14</sup>

Education is perceived with mixed feelings and is even a cause for concern. Most Lepcha in the villages of Sikkim would agree that education is one of the most important requirements to survive in the modern Sikkimese society and that it is absolutely essential to attain a certain level of education. In line with this view, a central concern in Lepcha village communities is the question how to provide the best

---

<sup>14</sup> Government of Sikkim 2004-2005: 7.

possible education for their children.<sup>15</sup> At the same time the changes introduced by education are feared and criticised by many villages. In both of the villages studied here, the children are sent to school in relatively nearby places such as Mangan or Hee Gyathang, but also to schools that are further away in urban areas such as Gangtok. The Lepcha community views the sending of children away from the village for the purposes of education in an ambivalent way. One villager from Lingthem stated that it is an important advantage for the Lepcha community to be able to send children to schools elsewhere because it is the only way for village children to receive a higher education and become involved in spheres that are also important for village life. Those children can benefit the village community by obtaining jobs in government service. Other villagers are more cautious about the situation and observe that many Lepcha children who were educated elsewhere never permanently return to their villages, because the employment possibilities in rural areas are limited, forcing many of them to settle in Mangan and Gangtok. The villagers are also concerned that many of the children who spend most of their life in hostels in semi-urban or urban areas, away from their families and communities, do not grow up in a Lepcha environment and do not learn Lepcha traditions and lifestyle as part of their daily routine. In those cases, the Lepcha language is not spoken often anymore, oral traditions are no longer heard, and there is no opportunity for children who study and live elsewhere to learn the traditional daily agricultural customs. A

---

<sup>15</sup> Many constraints to education can be identified in the village community. The first major influence is the educational background of the parents. Some parents do not attach any importance to education or consider it incompatible with daily life. If the parents themselves have an education, the encouragement is much greater and other possible constraints and difficulties providing education for the children are more easily accepted. Low socio-economic background of the households is the second major constraint. Elder siblings are often kept at home to look after younger children so that the parents can go to work. Higher education is not available close to the village. For example, schooling up to class 12 is available in Mangan or Hee Gyathang, but for college, students have to go to Gangtok. Boarding, schooling, and other necessities have to be paid for. The socio-economic conditions of the families have to allow for the extra amount of money that has to be invested in the child and the lack of labour force or assistance in the house. Lepcha children do not work in the fields, but they help with odd jobs in the house and collect grass and food for the animals. In the past, there was comparatively more wealth in Lingthem than in Nampatan because of the money coming from the cardamom fields. This enabled young adults to go and study in Gangtok or even further away. For other constraints and a detailed analysis see Datta 1991.



woman from Dzongu, who grew up in a hostel in Gangtok, describes the situation as being quite drastic:

It is a problem nowadays for the Lepcha community that the children grow up in hostels and in that way do not learn the language and culture and do not know anything anymore. Lepcha people are being emptied from cultural content. We don't know our stories anymore. The people ask me about the Lepcha culture and stories and I am ashamed, because I cannot tell them anything, because I do not know anything, because I grew up in a hostel.<sup>16</sup>

Another development and cause for concern in the villages is that education changes the interests of the younger generation. Education is thought of as being linked to a modern lifestyle and is seen as the opposite of culture and tradition. The children who move out of the village are seen by the villagers as prone to losing themselves and their interest in the Lepcha cultural heritage. The children will return home for vacations and help out with numerous tasks, but they will not have the same routine as village children and will also bring in different ideas and interests. The main worry of Lepcha villagers is that essential elements of Lepcha culture will slowly be eroded, because young people are no longer interested in keeping the Lepcha culture alive. As an example, the youth have become sceptical about aspects of traditional beliefs such as evil spirits (*mung*) and their impact on human health. They are drawn to modern medical explanations of illnesses and are having to find their own way to deal with contradictions between traditional beliefs and modern medicine. A fair number of young Lepcha are more interested in watching movies or football on television than listening to their elders telling traditional stories next to the kitchen fire whilst sipping local beer. The lack of interest among the young more educated generation is perceived to be the main reason for the vanishing of the Lepcha culture, as was for example stated by the same woman from Dzongu:

And the grandparents for some reason sometime just stopped telling the stories. And also because the young generation is not interested anymore and there is no one there to tell the stories to. That is why nowadays no one knows them anymore and the old people have forgotten. And again Lepcha has become an emptied word.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview in 5<sup>th</sup> Mile, May 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Interview in 5<sup>th</sup> Mile, May 2006.

## PROMOTING CULTURE: LEPCHA ASSOCIATIONS IN SIKKIM

Despite all the concerns voiced above, education also has had a different impact. Some educated Lepcha have become more aware of their vanishing culture and are now engaged in activities to protect and revive their culture, and attempt to boost Lepcha identity. In recent years, many Lepcha associations were founded in Sikkim. Most Lepcha associations have their headquarters in the urban capital of Gangtok. Many of the executive members of these associations belong to the educated strata, partly because education gives them the means and human capital to articulate the needs of their community in a more public way. Gangtok, with its access to the media and political decision-makers, is the most efficient base for their activities. In this way, the Lepcha associations help to bridge the gap between the mainly rural Lepcha community and the decision-makers of Sikkim and India. The associations offer channels to represent the Lepcha and their cause to the outside world.

In 2006 the most active associations were:

- *Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum* (RMRT, the main Sikkim Lepcha Association),
- *Renjong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shezum* (RMROS, Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association),
- *Lepcha Students Association* and
- *Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum* (MLAS, the only Lepcha association in Dzongu at the time).

The Renchong Mutanchi Ringring Kurzum (Sikkim Lepcha Literacy Association) supported the other Lepcha associations in Gangtok, but was not active at the time. Other associations were previously established, but have since ceased to exist, whereas new ones have been founded since 2006. The large number of associations demonstrates their importance for the community, but the continual fluctuations of associations, factions and committees are also signs of their weakness.<sup>18</sup>

These different Lepcha associations are all involved in activities to try and enhance the social and economic conditions of the Lepcha of Sikkim. Additionally, they preserve, promote, and modify Lepcha

---

<sup>18</sup> Datta 1997: 44.

culture. The RMRT and the RMROS are strongly active in preserving the various political rights the Lepcha have been granted in the past century and in requesting new protection, such as the Primitive Tribal Status and fifty percent of the BL reservations.<sup>19</sup> They are also engaged in organising Lepcha ritual ceremonies (*rum fat*), such as *Tendong lho rum fat*. Together with the RMRKL, they promote Lepcha language and literature as well as education for Lepcha people. The latter aim is also central to the Lepcha Students Association. The MLAS, the Lepcha association from Dzongu, has a slightly different perspective to the Lepcha associations in Gangtok. The organisation started out by supporting projects to enhance Lepcha culture, such as organising the annual Lepcha New Year festival (*Namsung*) and promoting traditional handicrafts, but has now broadened its focus and introduced programs for livelihood development, health, and education. The idea behind the change is to create a Lepcha community that is ‘healthy’ in every respect.

Although the different associations are generally valued by the Lepcha people in rural areas and their activities are deemed vital for the survival of the Lepcha community and its culture, the relations between the villagers and the associations are not always without tension, as will be elaborated further in this section. Of the Lepcha associations with headquarters in Gangtok, none were particularly active in the villages I stayed in, which is mainly due to the distance from Gangtok and the strength of the MLAS in Dzongu. For this reason I will focus on the activities of the latter in the following section.

#### *Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum—The ‘NGO’ in Dzongu*

Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS) was the only association embedded in Lingthem village and the Lepcha community of Dzongu at the time of my fieldwork. It is often simply called ‘the NGO’. In Nampatan, the villagers consider the MLAS an association only for Lepcha of Dzongu, so Nampatan villagers do not have any affiliations

---

<sup>19</sup> BL is the abbreviation for the Lepcha and Bhutia communities in Sikkim. To safeguard their rights, these two communities jointly have reserved seats in the legislative assembly of Sikkim. In addition, the preferential quotas are also followed in administrative posts, certain economic facilities and further state sponsored activities (see Sinha 1975: 28ff.). The joint action committee of the RMRT and RMROS are now asking for 50% of these protective quotas to be reserved solely for the Lepcha community, arguing that the Bhutia community is economically stronger.

with Lepcha associations. In North Sikkim, the members of the MLAS are regarded as culturally knowledgeable people because of their activities. Their authority in cultural matters runs parallel to that of elders and ritual specialists. They are frequently asked for advice and have been very active in the documentation of oral traditions and the preservation of material culture (similar to what the RMRT are doing). Therefore the MLAS has a strong influence on what is perceived to be Lepcha culture—preserving and creating it through their activities.

The Lepcha community in Dzongu embraces most activities of the MLAS, because they combine cultural enhancement projects with programs for livelihood generation and health improvement. Women groups are being targeted by the MLAS to improve the wellbeing of Lepcha families and society. The Woman's Self Help Group (SHG) scheme of the Indian government is a good example of the impact of the MLAS on the village community. In this scheme, groups get together voluntarily to engage in various activities and collect savings to secure credit. Nearly every village in Dzongu has one or more SHGs. In Lingthem itself there are eight: three in Passingdang, two in Lower Lingthem, two in Upper Lingthem, and one in Sangklong. Many of the SHG in Sikkim are not functioning properly, because the women do not have the appropriate knowledge and skill. The MLAS is therefore providing the women's groups with training in different topics such as money management. This is slowly paying off and now about 20 to 30 SHGs are starting to function well. The MLAS combines this scheme with the promotion of Lepcha culture. For example, an executive member of the MLAS in Lower Lingthem arranged traditional handloom and handicraft classes in the community centre of Lingthem village. Older women with the skill of weaving Lepcha bags and belts for traditional Lepcha dress were invited to teach younger women the traditional motives and weaving techniques. The women now meet under the auspices of the SHG and produce traditional bags, hats and belts, which are sold at cultural shows and other events. One women's group from Passingdang sells their products on a regular basis to the Directorate of Handicraft and Handlooms in Gangtok, a government centre that aspires to preserve skills of traditional arts and crafts. In this way, traditional handicrafts such as weaving, which twenty years ago had practically ceased to be practised,<sup>20</sup> is now turning into a solid source of income.

---

<sup>20</sup> Gowloog 1995: 62, 63

However, the association has also earned criticism from certain sections of the Lepcha village community because it has become a driving force behind social and cultural change in the villages. Culture and traditions are perceived in different ways and there is an ongoing debate as to who has the authority to make decisions that influence social changes and define culture and identity. Examples that can be given in this respect are the efforts to cut down on expenses of life cycle rituals such as marriage and death, which are made by educated sections of the Lepcha community in Lingthem, many of whom are members of the MLAS. Many families have encountered financial difficulties in conducting marriage ceremonies or funerals because of the lavish spending on food, especially meat, bride price, and alcohol during such occasions. A villager of Lower Lingthem describes how attempts were made to put a stop to the custom of donating local beer (*chi*) to the monasteries. Traditionally, in every lunar month beer is to be donated to the monastery on four different occasions. The households of Lingthem sponsor these religious rituals in turns. These donations have a deep impact on the economic condition of the households and a certain section of the Lepcha village community considered the custom to be an unnecessary financial burden and recommended that the donation of beer be stopped. This attempt should also be seen in the larger context of the general recent criticism on the consumption of large amounts of beer, which is often described as a major hindrance to the Lepcha community and Sikkimese society in general. Especially the older members of the community and the lamas of the village protested, because they did not want the tradition to change. In this light, educated people were accused of making decisions which were for their own benefit, but not for the wellbeing of the entire Lepcha community.

The educated Lepchas and the associations such as the MLAS have become both the keepers of traditions and culture and the promoters of change and modernity. Through their activities they show that education and economic betterment do not necessarily go hand in hand with the vanishing of cultural identity. One of the main achievements of the associations has been to demonstrate to the Lepcha community that change does not inevitably cause the vanishing of their unique culture, but that change instead can be used to ensure cultural survival.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Culture builds on shared history and traditions, but has always adapted to changing contexts, incorporated new elements, and altered previous ones. Culture is bound into a process of change and remembrance, of novelties and traditions. Younger generations are prone to include 'modern' aspects into their lifestyle, which today may be blue jeans and rock music, whereas more conservative forces in a community try to preserve traditional elements—sometimes despite strong criticism from within their own community.

The changes in the Lepcha community over the past centuries have left their traces on Lepcha culture. Buddhism and more recently the Christian religion introduced new values and beliefs, shaking the very foundations of the Lepcha community. Modern education is needed, but at the same time feared, because it brings new ideas and values and forces people to leave the villages in search of higher education and employment, thereby causing a loss of access to traditional local culture and with this a loss of a sense of belonging. The spatial closeness to the Nepalese community is feared to impact Lepcha culture and intercommunity marriages are changing family life. In Sikkim, Nepali has already become a commonly spoken language and there is concern that the coming Lepcha generation will not learn their mother tongue properly, especially if the mother is of Nepalese descent.

However, despite the fear that their culture is vanishing, a creative potential for dealing with changes and for sustaining their own lifestyle can be observed in the Lepcha community. The Lepcha traditional beliefs coexist successfully with Buddhism. The Lepcha and the Nepalese communities in the villages have built up a mutual cultural respect and a system of economic interdependence, providing many benefits to the Lepcha community. Education contributes as the main force behind the movement of Lepcha cultural revival, as it is mainly the educated Lepcha who are active in the promotion of Lepcha culture. Interestingly, local development in terms of modern infrastructure—a device of change in itself—could also help to preserve culture. The lack of good schooling and job opportunities for educated people in the rural areas is forcing Lepcha people to leave their villages, often with a resultant loss of connection to their culture. Locally embedded jobs for educated people and good schooling sensitive to their cultural surroundings would prevent the emigration of young Lepcha to urban areas. As discussed here, changes introduced in a community do not inevitably cause the vanishing of cultural traditions. Two things seem

vital to halt the disappearance of a culture: the interest of the community itself and the legal means to protect the culture.

Many Lepcha in the villages are aware of the fact that no one can be blamed for the loss of Lepcha culture other than themselves and that it is in the hands of the Lepcha community to keep their language, oral tradition, ritual, and material culture alive. The growth of Lepcha associations in the urban areas and their increasing activities are evidence of the fact that certain sections of the community are making an effort to revive their culture and save it from vanishing. This process is not without tension; different sections of the Lepcha community have different ideas about how their culture should be preserved or changed to adapt to its changed surroundings. This negotiation in cultural meanings shows that the culture is still alive and has not been reduced to static conservation.

A supportive legal framework helps to enable people to keep to their own cultural lifestyle. In Sikkim, there are laws to protect the rights of the Lepcha community and help maintain the Lepcha culture, provided they are correctly implemented. By law, Lepcha language is taught in government schools; religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution of India; the land of the Lepcha and Bhutia is protected from sale to other communities and the Lepcha community has a part of Sikkim reserved for them (the area of Dzongu). The importance of these protective legal structures for the Lepcha people can be seen in the success of Dzongu. The Lepcha reserve has been protected for approximately a century and a number of engaged people as well as the MLAS have been promoting Lepcha culture there for nearly two decades. Therefore, Dzongu takes up a special place in the discussion of Lepcha culture and preservation. Lepcha from outside Dzongu, as I experienced in Nampatan, refer to Dzongu as the only place in Sikkim where there are still 'real Lepcha'. To Nampatan villagers, the ritual specialists in Dzongu are more powerful and the Lepcha more knowledgeable about their own culture in terms of oral traditions and ritual practices. Dzongu is *Mayel Lyang*, the home of their people and culture, the only protected and preserved place.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balikci, A. 2002. *Buddhism and Shamanism in Village Sikkim*, unpublished PhD Thesis, London: SOAS (published in 2008 as *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim*, Leiden: Brill).
- Bhasin, V. 1989. *Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of the Sikkim Himalayas*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications.
- Datta, A. 1991. *Sikkim since Independence: a Study of Impact of Education and Emerging Class Structure*. Delhi: Mittal.
- Datta, K. 1997. *Inter-Ethnic Relations in Sikkim from Historical Perspective*. Occasional Paper No. 11. NBU.
- Foning, A. 1987. *Lepcha, my Vanishing Tribe*. New Delhi: Sterling Publications.
- Gorer, G. 1984 [1938]. *The Lepchas of Sikkim*. Delhi: Cultural Publishing House. First published in 1938 under the title: *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*.
- Government of Sikkim. 2004-2005. *Sikkim: Statistical Profile 2004-2005*. Gangtok: Directorate of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation.
- Gowloog, R. R. 1995. *Lingthem Revisited: Social Changes in a Lepcha Village in North Sikkim*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications.
- Gowloog, R. R. 1990. Religion and Ethnicity among the Lepchas. *Himalayan Miscellany* 4, Mar: 34-39.
- Mainwaring, G. B. 1876. *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language, as it Exists in the Dorjeling and Sikkim hills*. Calcutta: C. B. Lewis. Reprint under the title: *A Grammar of Lepcha language*. New Delhi: Manjusri Publishing House.
- Risley, H. H. 1894. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- Roy, D. C. 2005. *Dynamics of Social Formation Among the Lepchas*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- Siiger, H. 1967. *The Lepchas. Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People. Ethnographical Series XI (I)*. Copenhagen: The National Museum.
- Steinmann, B. 1996. Mountain deities: the Invisible Body of Society: a Comparative Study of the Representations of Mountains by the Tamang and the Thami of Nepal, the Lepcha and Bothia of Sikkim. In: Blondeau, A./ E. Steinkellner (eds.). *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: 179-218.
- Subba, T. B. 1988. Migration and Ethnic Relations in Darjeeling and Sikkim. In: Chakravarty, S. B. (ed.) *Social Science and Social Concern*. Delhi: Mittal.
- Tamsang, K. P. 1983. *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*. Hong Kong: Luen Sun Offset.
- Thakur, R. 1988. *Himalayan Lepchas*. New Delhi: Archives Publishers, Distributors.
- Thakur, R./ S. W. Lepcha. 1981. Who are the Lepcha? *The Eastern Anthropologist* 34 (3), Jul-Sept: 221-226.
- Waddel, L. A. 1978 [1899]. *Among the Himalayas*. Delhi: Mittal.
- White, J. C. 1971 [1909]. *Sikkim and Bhutan*. New York, London: Longmans, Green, Arnold.





LEPCHA HUNTERS' NARRATIVES OF THEIR HIDDEN  
LANDSCAPES

KERRY LITTLE  
*University of Technology  
 Sydney, Australia*

*Introduction*

In ancient times, the Mutanchi Rong<sup>1</sup> Kups [beloved children of Mother Nature] had no proper homes or clans. Wherever wild fruits grew in abundance they gathered together and lived in one group, eating the fruits. At that time, they wandered about in a place called, Na-ho Na-hu, in their sacred motherland, Ney Mayel Lyang. There lived an old Rong, an expert in hunting in the innermost corners of the dense jungle, who used to roam around with his wife and children, and lived by hunting and catching the fish in the rivers and eating them. He was a man who spoke only Rong Ring (Lepcha language); a Rong hunter whose home was inside the dense jungle, small but sufficient for shelter. Living there, he used to go out for hunting and in a very short while would return with a kill with which he provided for his wife and children to consume. Such was his life which he spent blissfully.<sup>2</sup>

I first became interested in the stories of the Lepcha hunters while sitting on a dry stone wall in Lingthem in Upper Dzongu, North Sikkim watching two retired hunters doting over an orphaned fawn. They had rescued her from the jungle and brought her home where she seemed perfectly at ease, eating grains from their hands and socialising with the dog. When I mentioned the unorthodoxy of hunters rescuing prey, the hunters, Gora Lepcha and Tashi Tsering Lepcha, laughed and promised never to kill her. Then we went inside, where over a cup of tea they told me stories of earlier lives, when they were hunters.

I had come to Dzongu to hear the folktales of the Lepchas told in the language they were created in, translated by the younger generation they were created for. I have since heard many Lepcha stories but it is

---

<sup>1</sup> Rongkup is the traditional name for the people now known as Lepchas.

<sup>2</sup> Extract from *Rong-Kup-Lung-Ten Ah-Bong-Chyo-Kung-Sen (Legends of the origin of some customs and rituals of the Rong-Kups (Lepchas))*, 2001, The Mutanchi Rong Shezoom, P.T. Lepcha, Kalimpong, p.3.

the hunting stories that remained with me. Those I heard from the Lingthem hunters were contemporary, personal anecdotes. However, they evoked the time when just Lepchas inhabited Sikkim. They spoke of rituals still observed that existed long before the colonisation of the Lepchas by other races.

Gora and Tashi Tsering related stories of how they hunted and why they stopped; stories of hardship, ritual and superstition. Tashi Tsering observed: “our race has been hunting for a long time for we are one of the hunting tribes. We used to hunt the deer for generation and generation but change comes with the modern age. Who knows, car will come, road will come, food will come.” At that time, April 2006, it was hard to imagine a road to Lingthem, for the path is high and steep; almost vertical and cut so close to the jungle that walking up there is like travelling to a forgotten land, a place that holds secrets hidden in the spaces that the hunters share with nature; secrets that have been passed from fathers to sons for centuries.

The hunting has stopped, for it is now illegal and a road is planned to service the construction of a hydro-electric project in Dzongu. These former hunters, who hold the memories of their ancestors and of their own experience, are the last generation who will have their own hunting stories to tell.

This paper shares stories of the hunters; their beliefs, rituals and lifestyle, gathered in interviews I conducted between April 2006 and April 2008. The stories place the hunters in what I see as the ‘hidden landscape’ of Dzongu; a place that few people have seen. However for the Lepchas that know of these hidden lands and the animals, spirits and legends that have gathered there, they are sacred places.

### *Mayel Kyong*

...They met a man from one of those houses and enquired from him. But he instead asked them ‘How have you two come into our land? Here, where no living humans can ever reach. There are only seven families of us living in these seven houses left behind a long time ago by Sage Mensaling.’...On that night, all the young men of the seven houses brought the two of them food, milk, fruits, mangoes, oranges. They ate to their full satisfaction and as they talked, gathered that these persons had been living there from ages ago. In this land, they did not know starvation or famine; on this land there were plenty of greens, fruits and nuts and all kinds of crops could be grown here. In their

houses, food, clothing and salt never finished or ran short... (narrated by Lawrence Sitling Rongkup).

Lepchas talk of a secret place in Dzongu called Mayel Kyong where seven Lepcha families live a traditional Lepcha life. They have all the food they could ever eat for everything grows all year round in Mayel Kyong; there is no disease, no famine, and the Mayel Kyong villagers have the gift of eternal life. During the day they are young and strong yet they grow old each evening with the setting sun. Mayel Kyong is believed to be located just near the base of Mount Kanchenjunga. To get there you must trek for several days through the jungle until you find an entrance that is sealed by a huge stone. Only a pure Lepcha, one who has only Lepcha ancestry, speaks the Lepcha language and follows the Lepcha traditions can move the stone by placing his left hand on it. However, if he enters Mayel Kyong and later leaves it, he will never be able to find it again.

A hunter heard that to get to Mayel Kyong, you must cross a black river, so he followed the black river, deep into the forest and when he crossed it he found a gate which led him to a different world. Everyone was young, beautiful, everyone was singing, dancing, they had enough food. Everyone was happy, nobody was sad and their lives were very good. They asked him 'from where did you come?' He told them he was married and they said, 'don't go back, if you go back you won't have this life.'

But he felt for his wife, his family in Puntong and he thought 'I'll go and I'll bring my family here' so he had a very good idea; he came out of Mayel Kyong and first he took off some clothing and put it in one place so he would find it, then he took off more clothing and put it somewhere else, using his clothes to mark a trail.

When he came back with his family, he looked for his clothes but nothing was there. It looked like a different place. He just saw hills; he didn't see his clothes (narrated by Sherap Lepcha).

The Lepcha writer Arthur Foning wrote about the Lepchas' hidden land in his book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*. He wrote that Mayel Kyong was once a large country at the base of the mountains where the Lepchas were placed by their creators but 'on account of our human failings, this utopia has been defiled and has shrunk to a limited size, only fit for a few souls to live in, only the pure and the unsullied ones finding an abode there.' He also believed Mayel Kyong is impossible to find.

An oft-repeated saying, illustrates this belief: *Alyu arong linba, Long nun paruk dongba; Mayel Kyong ka thisyong re*. This means, 'When cats grow horns, and the rocks sprout shoots, we will reach Mayel County'; in other words, it is impossible to reach the Mayel County...some natural obstacle, or barrier, such as heavy rain, a hail storm, sleet or a landslide, will prevent us, and drive us away...it is also said that formerly they used to meet us humans. But, alas, because of the degradation caused by our unworthy behaviour, they now shun us, and never appear before us, but confine themselves to the sacred place among the gods in the mountains (Foning: 2003).<sup>3</sup>

It is unlikely that the mythical Mayel Kyong will host a Lepcha hunter in the future for the current generation of young men, the 'would be' hunters are also the 'first educated generation'<sup>4</sup> who, unlike their parents have been 'out' of Dzongu, were educated in nearby Mangan or in the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok. Some were educated at boarding schools in Kalimpong or Darjeeling in nearby West Bengal. Others pursued tertiary studies or worked in larger Indian cities, and experienced an urban lifestyle; a different ecology to the one in which they were born. However, unlike many young Lepchas born outside Dzongu whose first language is Nepali, the Dzongu youth know their language and have childhood experiences of a time when to be a hunter brought a person respect from the community and when stories of the jungle were told firsthand by those who experienced them.

### *Hunting Life*

To hunt a deer it takes three days. The first day is to see whether there is deer or not in this area in the jungle. We know this because there are some deer droppings where they are staying. The second day to track the footprints and then the third day we take the dogs, a large number of dogs, so dogs surround the area so the deer can't escape. So the dogs will go inside that area and the deer can't escape, then we kill them (narrated by Gora Lepcha).

---

<sup>3</sup> Foning A.R (2003 [1987]), *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong, p.50-52.

<sup>4</sup> Lepchas from Dzongu aged between 20 and 36 described themselves to me as the first educated generation. They are the children of parents who rarely left Dzongu. Many of the Lepcha youth I met were educated at Tashi Namgyal Academy in Gangtok.

Hunting life was tough. A hunter could go into the jungle for days and come home empty handed. “Sometimes we don’t get the animal,” said Ongdu Lepcha, a former hunter from Tingvong. “Always our wife is looking for us to come back with an animal.” Ongdu was taught to hunt when he was 18. He would follow his father and grandfather into the jungle and practise until he could hunt himself. In 1937, when Geoffrey Gorer was in Lingthem, he noted that a young man must not eat the first animal he kills, nor eat the first one hundred animals he kills with his bow. If he did so, he would develop sores and leprosy (Gorer: 1967).<sup>5</sup> For Ongdu, decades later, there was no special initiation, just learning from his elders. However, in his father’s and grandfather’s time a hunter would not eat what he killed but would bring it back for others and instead eat their prey.

Before the arrival of guns, weapons for hunting birds were rudimentary and included a catapult made from a forked stick which was used to stone small birds which were later strangled; a pellet-bow made of bamboo and string that was used with clay pellets to shoot birds; an ordinary bamboo bow which used arrows with cylindrical bamboo tube instead of a tip used to stone birds and a bird trap consisting of four small bundles of thin strings with loops used to snare small jungle fowl.<sup>6</sup> Catching small birds in snares was not considered hunting, it was more an activity for small boys (Gorer: 1967).<sup>7</sup>

For larger prey such as deer or bear, the hunters used a bamboo bow with pointed arrows, a spear with an iron arrow head, or trapped their prey. According to Siiger, Lepchas hunted by themselves or in groups, where one group was used to disturb the prey and push it toward the other (Siiger: 1967).<sup>8</sup> They also used a stone and a stick; the stone to stun the animal, the stick to beat it to death. By the time of Siiger’s stay in Tingvong in 1949, hunters had started using guns.

The well-known hunter from Tingvong, Aphock Lepcha, is featured in the film, *Tingvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim*.<sup>9</sup> He is shown in his house with his collection of poison arrows. “Once hit by a poison arrow

---

<sup>5</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Siiger, H. *The Lepchas, Part 1*, (1967) the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Gorer, G. (1967) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Siiger, H, *The Lepchas, Part 1*, (1967) the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Tingvong: a Lepcha Village in Sikkim*, (2005), Sikkim Ritual Video Archive Project, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok.

an animal can't go any further than the bamboo grove down there." He holds a bow and resting against it, rocks back and forth. "I tasted it once, just a little bit. I was sick for the whole day."

He says that they first saw guns about 50 years ago. "There were no guns before that. We only had bows and arrows." He then mimics releasing a poison arrow. "Mountain goats, deer; some could even bring down a deer in flight."

The poison comes from the root of a plant found in the jungle above Tingvong. It is also found at lower and higher altitude, and according to Ongdu, so strong that within a minute any kind of animal it penetrates will die. "The place on the animal where the arrow hits should be cut out within a minute so that the poison doesn't spread. And it must be cut out very carefully."

Dupden Lepcha, a former hunter from Lingthem, recalled his early hunting lessons, many which were with Gora Lepcha who guided him. "First time, many times I missed, after three, four times I missed for the deer ran so fast, then my grandfather said, you cannot miss more than you hit, or you cannot be a hunter." Dupden's grandfather suggested he practise on a football so he learnt to shoot by bouncing a ball and shooting it as it bounced up and down on the ground, miming the movement of a deer running through the woods. "The first time I shot a deer Gora asked me 'why do you use the gun?' Gora uses just a stick and a stone; he throws a stone at the animal then beats it with a stick. In my grandfather's time they used a bow and arrow, they did not have guns, but in our time, we cannot use this bow and arrow."

Gora and his father threw stones or rocks at an animal's head or body to stun it, then beat it with a stick to kill it: "my hunting life has been very tough, in those times we didn't have any guns; we just chased the deer with stones, rocks and killed them to feed my child." His ancestors used bow and arrows to fell their prey.

From ancient times our great-grandfathers used a bow and arrow to hunt. My great-grandfather used a poison arrow. When an animal is shot it doesn't die straight away, the poison will go through the body and will take a long time. So the deer doesn't die on the spot, it may walk two or three or more metres and collapse. Then later the time of stones and sticks came. Later [with guns] it became easier (narrated by Gora Lepcha).

Gora and Tashi Tsering both stopped hunting when they received what they thought to be a 'sign' from the hunting god that they must stop. Gora was hunting with a friend and four dogs but the dogs were killed.

“A deer killed the dogs, maybe there was more than one deer but I believe that from the day I shouldn’t hunt animals because the dogs died. From that day I gave up hunting.”

Tashi Tsering stopped hunting when he killed a deer that represented one hundred animals.

One day I killed two animals, which is quite hard to do in a day. I killed a deer and a porcupine in Lingni which is a long way from here at the base of the mountain. The most amazing thing is when I killed the deer, I found its horn was shaped like a flower.

The elder owners told me that a deer with a flower shaped horn was a sign of killing one hundred animals. The elders said: if you kill a deer, or any animal, with that shaped horn, it’s a sign that you have killed one hundred animals so you mustn’t kill any more (narrated by Tashi Tsering Lepcha).

Gora and Tashi Tsering stopped hunting because they felt the hunting deity had sent them each a sign that it was time to stop. Their generation is the last that hunted actively, for the tradition dwindled over decades with the change in the Lepchas’ lifestyle and economic circumstances. In the 1940s the Lepchas moved away from slash-and-burn dry rice cultivation and became agriculturalists, building paddy terraces into the surrounding hills and sowing cardamom crops, creating a new economy and lessening the need for the food provided by the hunters. Earlier, in 1937, Gorer noted that in Lingthem, Lepchas relied less on hunting as they cultivated their own food and were also able to purchase grains.<sup>10</sup> The influence of Buddhism (which excludes the killing of animals) in Dzongu was gaining strength around Gorer’s time in Lingthem and increased during the next few decades. State education has also played a significant role in the shift away from the hunting tradition, with the opening of schools in the villages in Dzongu. The children were in school and not in the forests or pastures, which changed the division of labour in families (Gowloog: 2001).<sup>11</sup> In 1975, when Sikkim joined the Indian Union, Sikkim came under India’s 1972 Wildlife Protection Act,<sup>12</sup> which prohibited hunting of certain wild animals. In 1980 the Sikkim Forest Conservation Act was

---

<sup>10</sup> Gorer, G. (1967) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Gowloog, R. (2001) Social Organisation and Change Among the Lepchas of Sikkim, in *Tribes of the Eastern Himalayas*, ed. S. Sengupta, Mittal Publications, New Delhi p.49.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.helpline.law.com/docs/wildlife/01.php> (accessed 23/6/08)



implemented, making it mandatory to acquire permission from the government for any activities in the forest area, including hunting.<sup>13</sup> As recently as 2006, the Government of Sikkim declared certain areas in Upper Dzongu near Tholung as conservation zones in order to stop movement of pack animals and irresponsible tourism and to assist the protection of wildlife such as the Musk Deer, Himalayan Thar, certain alpine birds and endangered medicinal plants.<sup>14</sup> While hunting wasn't specifically mentioned in the order (it was already illegal), the group conducting the habitat survey found a bag of snares in a cave which they speculated may have been used to kill musk deer.

The tradition of hunting flourished longer in Dzongu than in many other parts of Sikkim. The remoteness and difficult terrain of Dzongu and its status as a Lepcha Reserve made it inaccessible and inhospitable to outsiders for many years. While its remoteness must have meant that the Lepchas did not get many of the opportunities which were offered elsewhere as early as others did, such as infrastructure, education and health services, this situation also allowed the hunters to continue their traditions longer than would otherwise have been possible. The remoteness and reserve status of Dzongu extended the hunting lives of the Lepchas, and the rituals to respect *Pong Rum*, the hunting deity, are still observed today.

### *Hunting rituals*

Whenever we do our hunting, the first thing we do is offer a certain part of the meat and offer it to God. We have to place it in a certain place in the forest, maybe on a hill (narrated by Tashi Tsering Lepcha).

An important aspect of hunting life are the rituals which are performed before and after a hunt and the signs that a hunter receives telling him when and where to hunt. If a hunter dreams of the place where they will find prey, the next morning he will cancel whatever other plans he may have had, gather his dogs and his gun, and go to that place. He will see if he can achieve the target he saw the night before in his dream. At the start of the hunt he will perform a ritual to the hunting god to ask for an animal to be sent to him. Tashi Tsering noted hunting is not easy and a Lepcha cannot go hunting on his own whim. "You have to get

---

<sup>13</sup> Sikkim Human Development Report, 2001, Government of Sikkim, Social Science Press, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Sikkim Government Gazette, No. 401, 15/12/06.

permission from the elder hunters. First I do a hunting *puja* to get permission. I also have to wait for the right day.”

Sonam Rinchen Lepcha remembered his elder brother’s hunting days. “My brother, he would have a dream and the next day he would say: ‘forget about all plans we have made today, we have to go hunting.’ Once I went with him, he said ‘I have to go’ and I knew he had a dream. We went five kilometres, two and a half kilometres straight up...I’ve never done this hunting but he will trace them [animals] and he has dogs. He can smell it, he can sense it.”

After the hunt, the hunter performs another ritual to the hunting deity as soon as the animal is killed.

Big leaves are cut and put on the ground and then the animal is divided up and the head is put in the front with a foreleg and hind leg on either side and singed intestines in the middle. This is all ‘offered’ to *Pong Rum* and the hunter crouches behind and speaking very slowly and softly, gently throws the burnt intestines bit by bit over the animal’s head. On his return to the village great care must be taken that no woman sees the animal’s head; if she did the hunter would have no success in future.<sup>15</sup>

Dupden Lepcha took three months to shoot his first deer and was very successful afterwards. Like other hunters, he had dreams about hunting. If in his dreams he saw his ancestors’ food, a *buk*, a yam-like tuber that is foraged from inside the soil in the forest, it was a sign to go hunting; a guarantee that he would get something from the jungle. His hunting life finished when his father, who did not like him to hunt, asked him to stop.

He explained the ritual he performed after each hunt to respect the hunting god and ask for an animal the next time they go hunting.

After we kill the deer, we cut its leg, near the hoof, its ear and its tongue. Then we put it inside a piece of leather. We take out internal organs, the kidney and heart and put these inside the leather and wrap it. Then we drink some of the warm blood of the deer. Then we start the *puja* and offer the meat in the leather. We say, I will give you this body, these things are yours, don’t miss our hunting next time (narrated by Dupden Lepcha).

---

<sup>15</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 244-245.

The ritual is also performed to ensure that the beast cannot come back to life, for it is believed that the Yeti can restore an animal and take it back into the jungle.

### *The Yeti*

Our ancestor had gone for hunting and after they killed one deer, they heard a man shouting in the hills. They wondered who he was and gradually the sound came nearer and nearer and then stopped. Our ancestor couldn't see him but heard him; crying, shouting and staying in that one place, where the deer had come to. Then our ancestor saw him, this man looked like a Yeti, the owner of all the deers and any animal and who looks after them. The Yeti came down and collected the fern and said some words, like a mantra and the deer came back to life. The Yeti then took the deer away into the hills. Some say our ancestor took note of that mantra. That's why we cut bits off, one part of the hand [foreleg near hoof], one leg, one part of the ear, maybe tongue. We do this to make an incomplete body so it can't recover (narrated by Loden Lepcha).

The Yeti is a recurring character in the stories of the Lepcha hunters. Known as *Chu Mung* (Glacier Spirit) the Yeti is worshipped by Lepchas as the god of hunting and lord of all forest beasts (Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956).<sup>16</sup>

There are many beliefs relating to hunters and the Yeti. Hunters think if they keep a dead animal in the forest overnight, the animal's deity<sup>17</sup> will come and take it back to the forest. In order to prevent this from happening, a hunter must cut one foreleg and one hind leg on opposite sides of the animal's body so the body is no longer whole and cannot therefore be 'put back together' by the Yeti. Ongdu related a story about a beast killed by his friend, an inexperienced hunter.

One time, a few years back my friend shot the animal, saw it was dead and then came back to get me. We went back to the place but the animal had already gone to the forest. My friend was a new hunter, a Nepalese, and didn't know the tradition to cut the opposite hind leg and

---

<sup>16</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. (1956) *Where the Gods are Mountains*, Reynal and Company Inc., New York, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> In one story I heard the animal's deity, Mung-long-mung would take the animal back. In another that the Yeti would take the animal back. Some hunters view Mung-long-mung and the Yeti as the same deity, others as separate deities. The hunting deity worshipped in formal rituals is known as *Pong Rum*.

foreleg. I saw the place where he killed the animal, there was a lot of blood and the grass still had the animal's impression but there were no footprints or drag marks. The animal just disappeared from that place (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

Some stories concern the Yeti and how it appears as small children. Sherap Lepcha related a story about an uncle who found a baby in the jungle and took it home to his family, where it grew very quickly. "They were shocked you know. What to do? They did a *puja* and he took the baby back to where he found it and when he reached that place the baby said; 'what do you want as a reward' and my uncle said, 'make me a hunter'. That's why my father and uncles when they went hunting, they always got animals - because of that blessing."

Ongdu told two stories of small children with Yeti powers.

In Payel village, above Tingvong, my great-great-grandfather went hunting at Langham-chu where, by a small stream he made a trap. When he returned he saw a human baby inside his trap. He didn't have a child so he put it inside his *Thokro-dum*<sup>18</sup> pressing it to his chest and brought it to his home. But the baby wouldn't eat. After two days he hadn't eaten anything and after three days the hunter was worried that as the baby was eating nothing, he would die. He decided to take him back to where he found him and he returned to Langham-chu. After reaching the place by the stream where his trap was set, the baby suddenly disappeared into the wind and my grandfather realised the baby was a Yeti with special powers (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

A grandfather in Leek Village, a hunter, went hunting and despite trying all day, he caught nothing. After a few days he saw a child wearing the *Thokro-dum* caught in his trap. He thought it might be a child who had been overpowered by the hunting god and become abnormal. The hunter took the child from the trap and upon seeing he was dead, and knowing that if you put a Yeti child in a clean place, it would get up and run away, he took the child out from the trap and cleaned up around the trap. The child in the trap was a signal from the Yeti so the hunter killed it by cutting its head and throwing it to the jungle. After that incident, because of the spirit of that Yeti, there is suffering to that hunter's clan. The descendents of that family always and still suffer (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

There have been many recorded sightings and encounters with the Yeti outside the frame of folklore. However, the Lepchas have always

---

<sup>18</sup> *Thokro-dum* is the traditional Lepcha tunic worn by males.

navigated their fear of the Yeti by avoiding contact. As it is a nocturnal spirit, villagers would ensure they were home from the fields by nightfall, locking doors to keep the Yeti spirit out.<sup>19</sup>

Many hunters talk of the Yeti and believe it exists today however, Ongdu told a story of its demise.

The Yeti beings used to come into houses and act like a human beings, but they would take cows from their owners. One day, determined to stop the Yeti from stealing their cows, the owners brought a wild fruit, which is oily and capable of igniting. When the Yeti, pretending to be human, reached that place, the man gave him a plate of butter. The Yeti took the fruit and the butter but a tic in his body ignited the fruit and the Yeti's body caught fire. He ran up and down in the forest and friends were asking, "who did that thing to you?" and he said, "I did it myself, no one else, it was done by myself" he said as he kept running around the forest. Now the Lepcha who owned the cow knew if a human being had done that he would have to go down to the river to wash it off but the Yeti went up to the mountain and the mountain caught fire, finishing off the Yeti. After that there was no more Yeti (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

Ongdu's story about the death of the Yeti is not universally understood and there are people who continue to consider the presence of the Yeti in Dzongu. A Lepcha elder from a hunting clan told me that he had been deep into the jungle, to places no one knows how to find and while he had never seen a Yeti, he had heard it; a loud whistle, accompanied by shaking ground. "You will run when you hear it," he said and confessed that it made him shake with fear.

### *Taboos*

When the Bongthing finished making the offering, two perhaps three deer came in to where they were. It was as though they had sacrificed themselves. They seemed tired, or wounded. The Bongthing said, "they have been offered by the hunter deity but you can only take one." Then after the Bongthing had performed that annual ritual the hunter has to depend on his dreams to know when it's time to hunt (narrated by Sonam Rinchen Lepcha).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Wangchuk and Zulca, (2007), *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, Little Kingdom, Gangtok. p. 371.

<sup>20</sup> Sonam Rinchen Lepcha was relating a story told to him by his father and brother.

In Lepcha society there are many taboos connected to beliefs that act to conserve wildlife and the environment. The hunters observed several taboos, for example, a hunter would only take one deer, but would pray and give an offering for another for the next hunt. A hunter must not come into contact with, or pass a pregnant woman before his hunt and women are not allowed to be present during a ritual to the hunting god. Lepcha women must never touch hunting weapons. This form of taboo is explained by Foning who wrote:

The belief is that this particular god cannot stand the sight of women. This is the reason why this worship always takes place away from the house in a remote place where, even by chance, females do not appear. Besides, they themselves know this and thus scrupulously avoid coming anywhere near the place where this worship is going on.<sup>21</sup>

The aforementioned custom that young hunters do not eat their first one hundred prey in order to avoid leprosy is a taboo that, according to Gorer, applies only to those animals killed with a bow and arrow. “Animals killed with a gun do not count, they can always be eaten” (Gorer: 1967).<sup>22</sup>

There are also many habitat taboos in Dzongu which are off-limits to hunters and fishermen. One occurs at a small lake in Lower Dzongu called *Tung Kyong Duo* that is the habitat for fish which are believed to be the ancestors of the Lepcha clan, Hee Youngmingmoo. The clan’s creation story involves an angel who lives in the lake and who Hee Youngmingmoo falls in love with.

...That evening she didn’t appear; nor the following morning. Kumzer Agyen and Hee Youngmingmoo visited the lake every day and worked to make it even more beautiful to attract her to appear. Finally, she came out of the lake and Kumzer Agyen told her that the future of the human race depended on her marrying Hee Youngmingmoo. When she saw Hee Youngmingmoo she decided to leave the lake but before she left forever she took some louse from her hair and threw it into the water. Gnu Kyongmu watched the louse turn into small fish, called Deng Gnu Leek which were no larger than her little finger and she hoped that her children and their children would multiply and grow,

---

<sup>21</sup> Foning A.R (2003 [1987]), *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong, p. 241.

<sup>22</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

just like the *Deng Gnu Leek*. She said: “this Hee Youngmingmoo clan should never eat this fish for if they eat it then they will become sick and they will have blisters and sores on the head... (narrated by Sonam Rinchen Lepcha).

*Tung Kyong Duo* is a small pond, no more than 40 metres long by 15 metres wide. Large rocks, fit for climbing on, and gentler trees, ferns and flowers surround it, reflecting on its surface, creating an illusion of an identical world under the lake. Several rows of prayer flags, tied to the trunks of trees, extend from side to side and silk *khadas* hang from branches, welcoming visitors and respecting the spirits in this sacred grove. It is easy to imagine Kumzer Agyen and Hee Youngmingmoo visiting each day to make it more beautiful in order to lure the angel from its waters. The rare fish that lives in the lake, *Deng Gnu Leek*, can be easily seen from the bank for the water is shallow and clear. The small, silvery fish is never eaten by Lepchas. On the other side of the road there is a small man-made pond filled with carp. “The forestry department put these large fish in our small lake and they started to eat the *Deng Gnu Leek*. They had to move them to this other small pond to breed them,” my guide informed me.

There is a difference between the Dzongu the Lepchas know and the Dzongu others, in this case the authorities, see. In the case of *Tung Kyong Duo*, the authorities see a lake which they can use to breed the carp (however, they either didn’t consider or mind that the larger fish would eat the smaller fish). The Lepchas see an ancestral home and never catch the fish from this lake.

### *Conclusion*

The science and nature writer, Barry Lopez, recently observed that over several decades of travel, he had often met people who were profoundly intimate with the places in which they lived.

Usually they were hunters, hunter-gatherers, subsistence farmers, or pastoralists, people who had to know precisely where they were, physically, all the particulars of it, if they were going to keep their preferred way of life intact...my guess would be that someone someday will trace the roots of modern human loneliness to a loss of intimacy with place, to our many breaks with the physical Earth.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Lopez B, (2007), Coldscapes, *National Geographic Magazine*, Dec 07 – NGM.com (accessed 9 June 08).

The Lepchas' intimacy with place is evident in Dzongu for it is nature that guides them. The documentary filmmaker, Dawa Lepcha who has recorded Lepcha culture in his films has a deep knowledge of the traditions of his people and their closeness to nature. "When a certain plant starts to flower you know it's time for the fish to go upstream so you get ready for trapping and when the leaves drop from the trees, you know the fish will come downstream so then you set a trap. There is a tree where the leaves change from green to red and that is the time, the Yeti, or some kind of big ape, it is the time for them to come. So in the village, high up in the hills, when these leaves are red, it's time for these things to move around. That's how we the Lepchas are connected to nature and in that way there are so many things."

Loden Lepcha, who lives in Passingdang, has never hunted. He jokes that when he was young he was an 'assistant hunter' to his father and grandfather but as a Lepcha from a hunting clan, *Zamyongthing*, he observes the traditions of his elders. His clan came to Dzongu with a hunter from West Sikkim.

Our clan came from West Sikkim with two Lepcha hunters, *Zamyongthing* and *Agenthing*. Both were friends and both very strong. They were also powerful hunters, which is what brought them to Dzongu. They came to hunt the *Serow*, a small, cat-like animal. *Agenthing* killed only the male animal and *Zamyongthing* killed only the female but the male *Serow* contained something precious inside his body, on the right side, something very valuable and *Zamyongthing* became jealous of his friend and this jealousy grew and grew until one day he shot *Agenthing*, all over his chest with his bow and arrows. *Agenthing*, took the arrows out of his chest and threw them back where they landed in exactly the same spot in *Zamyongthing's* chest. *Agenthing* then entered a big hill, near Bey, and disappeared. *Zamyongthing* didn't die from his wounds for he was very powerful. He entered a rock at Myong, therefore staying in Dzongu and starting our clan (narrated by Yangthan and Loden Lepcha).<sup>24</sup>

The Lepchas from the hunting clans who no longer practise the work they were born to do, connect with their traditions once a year when the male members of their family go to a high place to perform a ritual to the hunting deity, *Pong Rum*. They go in October, rising early, gathering their hunting implements; stones, sticks, bows, arrows and guns. They also take offerings for the hunting deity, including live

---



hens, dead birds, eggs, wild yams, flowers, dried or fresh fish, *chi* (millet beer), butter, ginger, beaten rice and *chi bup* (rice drink). They travel into the jungle and when they arrive, they light a fire, kill and cook the hens and offer a ritual; recapturing their intimacy with their traditional hunting groves.

Loden explained that these rituals are extremely important because they no longer hunt and therefore, are not regularly performing rituals to their god. “We are saying, we still think of you, even though we are not hunting.”

He believes if they stop this annual ritual then they, and their families, will get sick.

Morris told of a similar version of this ritual however said there was no ceremony, “the hunter merely taking all these articles and depositing them in some place in the forest where the god will see them” (Morris: 1938).<sup>25</sup> However, Morris was in Lingthem in 1937, when hunting was commonplace and rituals offered regularly. The rituals performed now, which accompany the offerings, may have evolved to meet the needs of a clan whose traditions have changed over time.

I hear that some Lepchas occasionally still hunt. They go deep into the jungle where they follow their traditions, not because they need to provide food for their family for modernity long ago removed that need. The few that hunt do so because they were born to; the instincts passed to them by their ancestors lead them back into the jungle, and when they come back to the village they resume their modern life, possibly working in a government job, growing cardamom or tending to their orchard.

For the majority of Lepchas, those who have stopped hunting, the tradition of their ancestors who once roamed the jungle barefoot, with stones, rocks and guns, working under the guidance of their hunting deity has finished, but in the absence of the hunt, they continue to respect *Pong Rum*.

---

<sup>25</sup> Morris, J. (1938), *Living with Lepchas*, Heinemann, London, p. 193.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges the assistance of those who generously shared and translated stories of their experiences, those of their family members and their ancestors.

Dzongu: Dawa Lepcha, Dupden Lepcha, Gora Lepcha, Loden Lepcha, Ongdu Lepcha, Pema Lepcha, Sherap Lepcha, Sonam Rinchen Lepcha, Tashi Tsering Lepcha, Yangthan Lepcha.

Kalimpong: Lawrence Sitling Rongkup.

Thank you also to the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association in Kalimpong whose commitment to publishing Lepcha literature greatly enhances understanding of Lepcha history and culture.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Foning, A.R. (2003 [1987]), *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong.
- Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]), *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London.
- Gowloog, R. (2001), Social Organisation and Change among the Lepchas of Sikkim, in *Tribes of the Eastern Himalayas*, ed. S. Sengupta, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
- Lopez, B. (2007), Coldscapes, *National Geographic Magazine*, Dec 07 – NGM.com
- Morris, J. (1938), *Living with Lepchas*, Heinemann, London.
- Rong-Kup-Lung-Ten Ah-Bong-Chyo-Kung-Sen* (Legends of the origin of some customs and rituals of the Rong-Kups (Lepchas)), 2001, The Mutanchi Rong Shezoom, PT Lepcha, Kalimpong.
- Roy Burman, J.J. (2001), Ethnicity and Revivalism among the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim, in *Tribes of the Eastern Himalayas*, ed. S. Sengupta, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
- Siiger, H. (1967), *The Lepchas, Part 1*, the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.
- Sikkim Human Development Report, 2001, Government of Sikkim, Social Science Press.
- Wangchuk P. and M. Zulca, (2007), *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, Little Kingdom, Gangtok.
- [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-12/03/content\\_7192927.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-12/03/content_7192927.htm)



## BOOK REVIEW

BRIGITTE STEINMANN  
*University of Lille*

*Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* by Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca  
 Little Kingdom, Gangtok, Sikkim, 2007, 372 pp.

Pema Wangchuk is the talented editor of *NOW!*, the English-language daily published in Gangtok and focused on the politics and social life of Sikkim. Together with Mita Zulca, an equally skilled journalist and award-winning filmmaker, he has co-authored *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, a magnificent work that I discovered on my last trip to Gangtok. Enticed by its lavish illustrations and encyclopedic documentation, I could not resist the impulse to immediately devour the book. Through this collection of narratives, historical documents, ethnographic details, drawings, and photographs, Wangchuk and Zulca have succeeded in painting a very special portrait of Khangchendzonga, the peak feared, worshipped, and revered by ‘the people living in its shadows,’ gazing at its snows, and venturing upon its slopes.

The diversity of people touched by Khangchendzonga—indigenous communities, surveyors, botanists, explorers, mountaineers, artists, and travelers—are all represented in the pages of this comprehensive book divided into sixteen chapters. While Khangchendzonga abuts Sikkim, Nepal, and Darjeeling, the authors have wisely chosen to narrow their scope by exploring the mountain’s historical, religious, political and cultural connections with Sikkim.

The first three chapters focus on the relationship between Khangchendzonga and three of the oldest communities associated with Sikkim—the Lepchas, the Limbus, and the Bhutias. With rich, though not first-hand, detail, these descriptions are perfect orientation for further exploration of Khangchendzonga. The first chapter, ‘The Original Big Stone,’ harks back to the mythical origins of Khangchendzonga and its association with the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepchas. To the Lepchas, the mountain is Kongchen Konglo, the ‘Big Stone,’ as well as eldest brother, the first creation of their Mother Creator. Dzongu, an area of north Sikkim reserved for the Lepchas, is the valley of the first permanent Lepcha settlement and offers the finest views of Khangchendzonga. “Dzongu is obviously not

a reservation carved out on a whim,” observe the authors (p. 37). The Lepcha tie to Khangchendzonga resounds in ancient songs still sung, though sadly less frequently; some underscore the centuries-old bond between the Sikkimese king and the Lepcha people. In this chapter, the well-known Danish ethnographer, Halfdan Siiger, is remembered for his research in Dzongu in 1947 and his collections and translations of oral poetry praising the mountain. Several impressive photographs, including a portrait of the last Khangchendzonga Bongthing (Lepcha priest), complement the chapter narrative.

Chapter two, ‘Fount of Wisdom,’ and three, ‘Protector of the Faith,’ respectively deal with the relationship between Khangchendzonga and the Sikkimese Limbus and the Bhutias, who also worship the mountain. For those alpine climbers who have experienced the absolute physical power of the mountain, a view of the mountain as ‘protector of faith’ is particularly germane.

According to Buddhist tradition, the great warrior-god Dzonga, guardian deity of Sikkim, resides in the mountain and, together with his dark acolyte, Yabdu, must be obeyed and appeased, or tragedy—illness, landslides, earthquakes—will strike. The unique dance ritual, Pangtoed Cham, was performed by laypeople in homage of and gratitude to the mountain deity.

The following three chapters narrate in fresh, though not exhaustive, ways, the early British and Indian explorers and local guides, and their ‘own battles of heights.’ Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the accomplished botanist, is profiled and his work illustrated with amazing engravings (1868) from his private collections. Other wonderful black and white photographs of people, monasteries, and misty landscapes artfully displayed with informative captions, conjure up fantasies of a bygone era. “Pundits who spied, surveyed, and explored” for the British include: in the early 1860s, Captain Montgomerie; in 1879, Babu Sarat Chandra Das, the “headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling” (p. 145); and the amazing Kintup, a Sikkimese Lepcha living in Darjeeling, captured in the only photograph ever taken of him, in Simla in 1913-14. There, he was rewarded for “his services rendered to the Survey Office of India through four years of slavery and penury in Tibet between 1879-83” (p. 151). We also learn about the bravery of other Sikkimese who guided foreign expeditions and usually led the way to success. Rinzin Namgyal, the Malling Kazi of Mangan, was “the first person to make a complete circuit of Khangchendzonga and produced the first authentic map of the valley and ridges in the region” (p. 154). Other fabulous

photographs in this chapter include Vittorio Sella's 'Sunset over Khangchendzonga' (p. 161), Benjamin Simpson's 1860 portrait of female porters resting at the end of a cane bridge (p. 185), and Dr. Alexander Mitchell Kellas's 1911 portrait of two 'roped up Sherpas looking at home' below a formidable ice fall (p. 191).

Chapter seven, 'Formidable Antagonists,' is one of five chapters that chronicles the dangers and challenges of climbing Khangchendzonga. One British mountaineer, Frank Smythe, survived the unsuccessful expedition of 1930 by luck and his wits. He pitched his camp in the only safe place in the cirque and spent the night under the "hanging glaciers clinging precariously to the hollow of precipices." He wrote in his diary, "Were one of these catastrophic ice avalanches—the collapse of hanging glacier—such are common among the Himalayas, to take place, we would be brushed like a speck of dust from the earth" (p. 206).

As I read about these expeditions, I could not help but recall my 1981 experience as a lucky survivor (and researcher) of an expedition to the Nepalese side of the mountain on the way to Walungchung gola. Our leader, Jean-Jacques Ricouard, was a 29-year-old French mountain guide from Chamonix. Together with Michel Parmentier, he reached the summit, but, tragically, died on the descent. Michel returned alone to the slope in search of his friend and discovered Jean-Jacques' body 2000 meters below the spot where he fell. Two years later, Michel disappeared while climbing Mount Everest.

Over the years, many climbers have scaled Khangchendzonga or stopped just short of the top out of respect for the Sikkimese belief that summiting the peak defiles it. The first successful ascent of the mountain, described in 'No Summit More Sacred,' was the 1955 British expedition led by Charles Evans. The team turned back just before reaching the top—out of deference to the orders of the Chogyal, Sir Tashi Namgyal. Fifty years later, the Government of Sikkim presented the surviving members of the British expedition with an award honoring the respect they showed to local sentiment by leaving Khangchendzonga the 'untrodden peak.'

'Final Challenge' chronicles the Indian Army expedition of 1977 led by Colonel Narinder Kumar. The elite female climbers are described in 'Lady Killers.' "The mountain has been especially harsh on women," recalls author Zulca, who is well acquainted with female censorship. In the 1980s, Wanda Rutkiewicz, a Polish alpine climber, was legendary for her fearlessness and bravery. She had summited seven peaks over 8000 meters but died in a 1992 attempt on

Khangchendzonga. Her male counterparts would do well to meditate upon her words of mountain wisdom: “What you can’t do is dominate the mountain. Mountains never forgive mistakes, which is why I keep dialogue with them...You don’t have to be icy cool and fearless, but you have to control your fears and get in direct contact with Nature or God’s creation.”

The peak has also inspired poets, philosophers, and artists whose musings and paintings are the subject of chapters fourteen and fifteen. Among several fascinating narratives, portraits and illustrations, we can appreciate Edward Lear’s ‘Kinchinjunga from Darjeeling,’ Mark Twain’s travels through the region, and Nicholas Roerich’s ‘spiritual secrets.’

This well-constructed and absorbing overview of Khangchendzonga’s treasures and resources deserves a place in the library of every Khangchendzonga devotee. Wangchuk and Zulca’s homage to the ‘sacred mountain’ offers much food for thought. Would not NOW be the right time to think deeply about global warming, environmental destruction and disasters triggered by short-sighted development schemes? Many such plans have resoundingly failed in other countries and now threaten Sikkim, especially its northern reaches. We must devise new models of development to protect sacred places like Khangchendzonga.

*Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* can be ordered directly from the author Pema Wangchuk at [nowbooks@gmail.com](mailto:nowbooks@gmail.com) for India and [astill.tony@googlemail.com](mailto:astill.tony@googlemail.com) for elsewhere.

DZONGSAR NGARI CHÖDJE THINGO RINPOCHE (1945-2008)  
A SHORT OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

SUSANNE VON DER HEIDE

Our beloved Ven. Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Thingo Rinpoche passed away very peacefully on the morning of May 20, 2008 at Cologne. Ngari Tulku has been a great scholar, radiating happiness and kindness wherever he went. He helped many in this world to achieve true Dharma and become better human beings.

Late Ven. Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Thingo Tulku was recognised at the age of one and a half as the 17<sup>th</sup> in line of Ngari Choedje of the monastery of Derge Dzongsar Tashi Lhatse in Kham, eastern Tibet, now part of the Chinese province of Sichuan. He was the Abbot and Throne-Holder of the Dzongsar Monastery until he passed away on the day of Saga Dawa. His 'shegu', or 49<sup>th</sup> day after his passing away, fell on July 8, the anniversary of his late great master H.E. Vajradhara Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe (1894-1959), who had recognized Ngari Rinpoche as the incarnation of his predecessor Champa Kunsang Sherab Tulku (1877-1942), the 16<sup>th</sup> in line of Ngari Choedje.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Ngari Choedje Rinpoche was born in Terlung, district of Me-shod in Derge, Kham, on January 10, 1945, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Rabjung Wood Bird year. His father, Tsering Dhondup, was from the Thingo Tsang family and his mother, Kalsang Tso, was originally from the Galu Tsang family. Ngari Rinpoche's Dharma name, given by H.E. Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe was Tsering Tashi, and his Dharma name, given by Ven. Ngor Khangsar Khenchen Ngawang Khyentse Thupten Nyingpo, was Shenphen Thinley Norbu Nyingpo. His Dharma name bestowed upon him by H.H. late 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Kharmapa was Karma Tenzing Khedrup Gyamtso.

Until the age of twelve, Ven. Ngari Tulku received his classic Buddhist education—consisting of liturgy, literature and philosophy—at the Dzongsar Monastery as one its three throne-holders where he also mastered the Buddhist ritual practices and learnt about pre-Buddhist traditions and Tibetan Medicine.

The Dzongsar Monastery was founded in 1275 by Ven. Drogon Choegyal Phakpa (1235-1280) on his way back from China. The complex comprises of 23 large and small temples with more than 300 rooms. Choegyal Phagpa was one of the five great masters of the Sakya school to which the Dzongsar Monastery belongs. Ngari Rinpoche was



educated in the Ngor Sakya tradition, founded at Dzongsar Monastery by the Ven. Ngor Khenchen Palden Chogyong (1702-1758) where H.E. Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe had been Ngari Rinpoche's main spiritual teacher. At the time, he also received, among others, teachings in Shamatha meditation from H.H. Dilgo Khyentse. In 1957, Ngari Rinpoche accompanied Dzongsar Khyentse to Gangtok's Palace Monastery where they had been invited to stay by the Chogyal of Sikkim. At the age of 13, Ngari Rinpoche went for further teachings to Central Tibet at the Ngor Monastery where he received ordination as well as the Sutra, Tripitaka and Tantric teachings from H.E. Khangsar Khenchen Ngawang Khyentse Thupten Nyingpo and Buddhist logic teachings together with Ven. Khando Tulku and Ven. Khenpo Dawa Tsering from Khenchen Dosib Thubten Gyaltzen. From Ven. Khenchen Appey Rinpoche he obtained several important teachings including Shantideva's Way of the Bodhisattva. Ngari Rinpoche knew this text by heart and could give a commentary on any section of it at any moment.

He then visited Lhasa and the Sakya Monastery of H.H. Sakya Trizin, with whom, together with his spouse Gyalyum Chenmo, he kept a close relation until his last days. He traveled to the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo in the Tibetan province of Tsang for further education but was eventually compelled to return to Sikkim following the deteriorating situation in Tibet. Ngari Rinpoche could never again revisit his home country and only re-met his brother forty three years later in Kathmandu.

When his root master Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe passed away in 1959 in Sikkim, Ngari Tulku went to Kalimpong with his General Secretary Jamyang Zangpo to study with H.H. late Dudjom Rinpoche for some time, who also became one of his root masters. He obtained the Rinchen Terdzod teaching from him before returning to Sikkim. He then again studied with H.H. late Dilgo Khyentse, one of his main revered root teachers, who introduced him further to the practice of Dzogchen, as Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche later did.

Ngari Tulku was then invited by the Gyalyum or Queen Mother of Sikkim to study at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok with the Director, Prof. Nirmal C. Sinha. He studied at the NIT as a scholarship holder under the Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, Govt. of India. He was one of the first students of the Institute where together with Ven. Mynak R. Tulku and Ven. Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, he studied Sanskrit, Hindi and English. They obtained their Buddhist philosophy teachings from Ven. Khenpo

Lodroe Sangpo, the founder abbot of the Sakya Sa-Ngor Monastery near Gangtok, where Ngari Rinpoche became one of the founding members and trustees of the Sakya-Ngor Choetzog. Until recently, Rinpoche would perform Long Life initiation rituals and give special talks on Dharma at the monastery at the request of the Derge Mani Dündrup Association when visiting Sikkim.

In those early days in Gangtok, Ngari Tulku also studied grammar, poetry and astrology with Prof. Barshi Kungmo from Tibet and was one of the founding members of the Sikkim Manjusri Trust for Himalayan Cultural and Religious Heritage.

Ngari Tulku received important initiations and teachings from H.H. the late 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa at Rumtek Monastery. It was H.H. the Karmapa together with the Chogyal of Sikkim who, in 1965, sent Ngari Rinpoche to England to help Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Ven. Akong Rinpoche establish a Buddhist centre there as well as to look after the young Sikkimese princes who were then studying in the UK. During this period, Ngari Rinpoche worked together with Prof. David Snellgrove, Hugh Richardson and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf on the translation of Tibetan texts at Oxford and London. Some of his early students at that time were Michael and Anthony Aris as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, the later pro-democratic leader of Myanmar, who wanted to learn Tibetan language with him.

Invited by Mark Oppitz, Ngari Rinpoche visited Germany for the first time in the winter of 1965 to work together with him at the Institute of Ethnology in Cologne where Rinpoche became a member of the institute's research team lead by Prof. F.-W. Funke. The team studied Sherpa culture in the Khumbu-Himal area of Nepal, a project involving several scientists over a number of years. During this period, Rinpoche helped F.-W. Funke publish a book on the religious life of the Sherpa, and together with Marlies Schmidt-Thome, wrote a comprehensive book—the most fundamental work so far—on the material culture of the Sherpa.

From 1966, Ngari Thingo Rinpoche was invited to give lectures at the University of Toronto on Buddhism and Buddhist Art where Rinpoche studied restoration techniques and became a specialist in the conservation of paintings and thangkas. At that time, he gave many teachings to the students of Ven. Ananda Bodhi in Canada. One event that late Rinpoche always used to recall with joy was his memorable meeting with the great composer and conductor Igor Strawinsky in Toronto, who introduced him to western classical music. Rinpoche became a great admirer of Strawinsky and from then on loved to listen

to classical music. Being surrounded by artists who wanted to learn about Buddhist art and thangka painting, Rinpoche developed a love for painting. Inspired by western expressive styles, he started painting in a more figurative way and even had an exhibition in Toronto. Back again in Germany, Ngari Thingo Rinpoche met with well known artists such as Sigmar Polke and even worked for some time with Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf.

Another interest of Rinpoche was the promotion of Tibetan Medicine in the West which he worked on with personalities such as Prof. Marlene Putscher, Director of the Institute for the History of Medicine in Cologne and with well known Theologian Pater Cyrill von Corvin-Krasinski at the German Benedictine Monastery of Maria Laach.

In 1974-75, together with Prof. Roger Goepper, the Director of the Museum of East Asian Art, Rinpoche wrote a catalogue and developed the exhibition for one of the first Tibetan Buddhist collections in Europe—the Collection Schulemann. Rinpoche was then invited to give teachings, initiations and transmissions by different Buddhist centres in Europe and gave lectures on Buddhism, Buddhist art history and Himalayan anthropology at various universities in Europe and the United States. He organised a number of exhibitions on Buddhist art at various European museums as he had chosen this as his medium to bring western audiences to understand Buddhist and Indo-Himalayan art and culture. He wrote a number of Buddhist art catalogues and publications such as the catalogue 'Leeidrad bij de Meditatie over de Sarvavid' in Antwerp in 1980, and did so in different languages since he was fluent in nine including Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Sikkimese, English, German and French.

Rinpoche helped organise the early visits of H.H. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to Germany and Switzerland, and it is still remembered that he arranged an official meeting with H.H. the Dalai Lama and the then Ministerpresident of the District of Rheinland-Pfalz, Dr. Helmut Kohl, which in those days was an important gesture from a politician. However, just before the scheduled meeting in October 1982, Dr. Kohl was unexpectedly elected in an overthrow of the old German Government as the new Chancellor of Germany, and in this new function was no longer able to meet with His Holiness, in order not to offend the Chinese. In this rather awkward situation, Ngari Rinpoche instead organised a meeting with the Archbishop Cardinal of Cologne. At the invitation of Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the City of Cologne H.H. the Dalai Lama visited the city again in 1989 to grace the

exhibition 'Götter des Himalaya' with his presence. This exhibition was under the patronage of His Holiness, who had requested Ngari Thingo Tulku to help Gerd Wolfgang Essen to compile one of the most important collections of Buddhist art and prepare a publication, which became a double volume catalogue, published by late Rinpoche and G.-W. Essen. This important Buddhist art exhibition traveled to many museums in Europe and second catalogue on the life of the great Master Padmasambhava was later published in this context by late Rinpoche and G.-W. Essen. Moreover, His Holiness had wished that Ngari Rinpoche should work on the collection of statues of H.H. the Dalai Lama at the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives in Dharamsala, but unfortunately his life was too short to complete that project.

Among the many retreats late Rinpoche conducted in his life, a very memorable one was the Vajrakila retreat he carried out in Gangtok at his General Secretary's house for six months in 1991. In the following years, Ngari Thingo was involved in the preparation of various documentaries on Tibetan Buddhism and the Himalayan area for ZDF, ARTE and ARD, and worked in this regard with different well known film producers, including Theo Baltz and Sabine Christiansen. He introduced them to H.H. the Dalai Lama in 1993 and helped them develop a film and a book on Tibetan history. At that time he has been appointed as the Vice-Chairman of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, German Chapter.

In 1995, Rinpoche settled in Paris where was appointed as an adviser to UNESCO. In order to conclude the World Decade of Cultural Development, he was requested together with Susanne von der Heide to publish a catalogue and prepare an exhibition on 'Changing Faces of Nepal—The Glory of Asia's Past' at the UNESCO headquarters, Paris, in 1997.

In 1997, Rinpoche moved to Kathmandu where together with Susanne von der Heide, he founded the HimalAsia Cultural Heritage and Educational Foundation and Institute, whose Chairman he was until his last days. The HimalAsia Foundation promotes and develops social projects such as schools, Amchi clinics and income generating programs for women, but also supports preservation of the cultural and natural heritage in certain areas of the Himalaya. Ngari Tulku was particularly keen to initiate schools for young nuns and monks, in order to extend good education to children, in particular girls, thus helping revive the Buddhist Dharma in remote areas of the Himalaya.

Ngari Thingo Rinpoche always supported activities to safeguard the threatened biodiversity of the Himalayas and therefore supported projects for the protection and preservation of threatened medicinal plants. The HimalAsia Foundation was involved from 2003 until recently in a bio-prospecting project in collaboration with the Botany Department and RECAST Institute of the Tribhuvan University in Nepal and the VW- Foundation Germany, to discover, collect and taxonomically identify plants in selected regions of Nepal, and to determine their ethno-medical use, in order to identify and document them. Under the patronage of Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche, the first International Amchi Conference in Nepal took place at the HimalAsia Institute at Durga Bhawan in January 2004.

Around that time, Rinpoche established the Tibeto-Himalayan Herbal Medicine Remedy Institute at the Dzongsar Khyentse Mentsal Monastery in Gyalshing, West Sikkim, a place in the mountains where he liked to perform his retreats and give teachings, since Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Thupten Choekyi Gyantso, the reincarnation of his first spiritual guide and root master, spent his early years at this place.

Ngari Rinpoche was involved with the HimalAsia Foundation in various restoration and documentation projects with UNESCO and other institutions, as for example the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the German Foreign Office. A restoration project was launched in 2001/2 to protect the Ku-Tsab-Ter-Nga Monastery in Mustang where the great Indian master Padmasambhava had supposedly stayed on his journey to Tibet. Another memorable event was the documentation 'The Kathmandu Valley—Then and Now', marking the UNESCO International Safeguarding Campaign 1977-2001, which HimalAsia carried out in collaboration with UNESCO in 2001 and 2002 at different places in the Kathmandu Valley.

There was also the 14 days workshop held in 2005 for restoration specialists from museums and monasteries in India, Bhutan and Nepal on the 'Restoration and Conservation of Thangkas', under the patronage of late Rinpoche, organised by HimalAsia in collaboration with UNESCO and conducted at the Shechen Monastery in Bodhnath, which will remain in our memories. Unforgettable are his lectures on the history of Tibetan Buddhist art and the evolution of different styles of paintings that Ngari Thingo Rinpoche held every morning during the workshop, and the kind advice and explanations he gave concerning restoration. Fortunately, UNESCO produced a film of this workshop to promote the monastic heritage of the Himalayas.

Rinpoche has been working together with Susanne von der Heide on two books: the first on the 'Development of Early Buddhist Art in Mustang' following their discovery of several ancient cave-temples in that area, and another on the 'Achievements and Challenges of Himalayan Medicine in Nepal'. Moreover, he had composed in recent years several significant Buddhist texts in Tibetan language and gave transmissions and teachings, for example, on the practice of Buddha Shakyamuni and the ritual of Chimey Pamey Nyingtik from the Khyentse/Dzongsar tradition.

Ngari Tulku was married and has one son. In Germany he had just established a new Dzongsar Ngari Dharma Mati Centre near Detmold in a beautiful forest area, where he wanted to conduct his retreats, give teachings on his traditional Rimed path and carry out further scientific studies. We hope that his reincarnation will use this special place in the future and we look forward to a swift rebirth of our beloved Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Rinpoche.

He was a living example of the enlightened path of Bodhicitta.

I would like to especially thank Mr. Jamyang Zangpo, General Secretary of Dzongsar Ngari Labrang and Lodroe Phuntsok, General Secretary of the Dzongsar Monastery in Tibet as well as Dzongsar Khenpo Khyenrab Wangchuk, Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, Prof. Mark Oppitz, Lotsawa Andreas Kretschmar and Matthew Akester for their comments and support while writing this obituary.



༄༅། རྫོང་སར་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་གཞན་ཕན་ཕྱིན་ལས་ཞོར་བུ་སྤྱིང་པོ་ནི།  
ཐར་མདོར་བསྟུགས།

KUNGA YONTEN HOCHOTSANG

༤ རྫོང་སར་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་གཞན་ཕན་ཕྱིན་ལས་ཞོར་བུ་སྤྱིང་པོ་ནི། རབ་བྱུང་ ༡༦ པའི་  
ཤིང་མོ་བུ་ལོར་ཡབ་དོན་གྲུབ་ཞོར་བུ་དང་ཡུམ་སྐལ་བཟང་འཚོ་གཉིས་ཀྱི་སྲས་སུ་མདོ་སྐད་སྡེ་དགེ་མི་  
ཤོད་རྫོང་ཁྱུལ་གཏེར་ལྷུང་དེའི་མགོ་ཚང་གི་ནང་དུ་ངོ་མཚར་བའི་ལྷ་ས་དུ་མ་དང་བཅས་ཏེ་སྤྱོད་འབྲུངས།  
ལྷུངས་གཞིས་དེར་མ་བྱེན་བཅུ་དབང་པོ་དང་ཀ་ཐོག་སི་ཏུ་སྤྱོད་ཞིག་གི་ཡབ་ཚང་ཡང་ཡིན་པ།  
རིགས་བཟང་ལ་དམ་པའི་ཚོས་སྤྱོད་པ་དཀར་བའི་བྱིས་ཚང་ཞིག་ཡིན་པ་མངོན།

སྡེ་དགེ་རྫོང་སར་དགོན་པ་ནི་སྡེ་དུས་རབས་བཅུ་གསུམ་པར་བོད་ཚོའི་ཁ་གསུམ་གཅིག་དུ་  
བསྒྲིལ་ཏེ་དབང་དུ་བསྐྱུར་བ་པོ་འགོ་མགོན་ཚོས་རྒྱལ་འཕགས་པ་རྒྱ་ནག་ནས་ཕེབས་ཞོར་གསར་བསྐྱེད་  
གནང་བའི་སྡེ་དགེའི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ནང་གི་ས་དགོན་དམིགས་བསལ་གཅིག་ཡིན་ལ། རྫོང་སར་བཀྲིས་  
ལྷ་ཅེ་ཞེས་པའི་མཚན་ཡང་འགོ་མགོན་ཉིད་ནས་བསྐྱུལ། རྫོང་སར་བཀྲིས་ལྷ་ཅེ་ནི་སྤྱིར་དཔལ་ལྷན་  
ས་སྤྱི་ཚོས་བརྒྱུད་འཛིན་པ་དང་ཁྱུང་པར་དུ་ངོར་ལུགས་ཐུན་མོང་མ་ཡིན་པའི་རྫོང་སུ་འཇུག་པ། ལྷ་  
ས་ཡང་ལོ་རྟལ་ཟམ་མ་ཆད་པར་གཙང་ཨོ་ལྷོ་ཚོས་ལྷན་དུ་ཕེབས་སྲོལ་ཡོད་བཞིན་པ་རེད། མངའ་  
རིའི་ལྷ་རབས་ཐོག་མ་དེ་རབ་འབྲུམ་ས་རྒྱལ་བྱིས་མེད་ཟེར་ལུ་བ་དེ་ཡིན་ལ། ཁོང་ནི་རྫོང་སར་བཀྲིས་  
ལྷ་ཅེར་ས་སྤྱོད་མེད་བཏང་གནང་བའི་ལྷ་བསྐྱོས་ཐོག་མ་དེ་ཡིན། ཁོང་གིས་མངའ་རི་ལྷ་བྱང་  
ཆགས་བཏབ།

ལྷ་རབས་ ༡༥ པ་མངའ་རི་ཀུན་དགའ་འཇམ་དབྱངས་ནི་སློབ་དཔོན་མི་ཐུབ་ལྷ་བའི་སྤྱོད་སྡེ་  
ཡིན་པ་འགོ་བའི་དགོན་པོ་མ་བྱེན་བཅུ་དབང་པོས་ངོས་འཛིན་གནང་བ་དང་མཚན་ལའང་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་  
ཇི་ཞེས་གསལ། ཚོས་ཇི་དེ་ཉིད་ནི་མདོ་སྐད་སུ་ལྷ་ས་དང་བཅས་པར་མཁས་ཤིང་སྤྱོད་བ་བསྐྱེད་  
པའི་སློབ་ཤིང་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ། ཚོས་ཇི་དེ་ཉིད་ཀྱིས་དཔལ་ས་སྤྱིའི་གསེར་ཚོས་དྲི་མ་མེད་པ་ལམ་འབྲས་



བྱ་དང་བཅས་པའི་སྒོམ་དག་ཚོགས་པ་ཤད་དང་སྒོམ་པ་ཤད། རྒྱུད་སྡེ་ཀུན་བརྟུས། རྒྱུད་ཐབས་  
 ཀུན་འདུས་སོགས་བསྟན་པ་དང་སེམས་ཅན་ལ་ཕན་པའི་ཚོས་འཁོར་རྒྱ་ཆེར་བསྐྱོར་བ་དང་། ཁོང་ལ་  
 མཁས་རྒྱུ་བ་གཉིས་ལྡན་གྱིས་ཞལ་སྒོམ་མང་དུ་ཡོད་པའི་གཙོ་བོ་ཞི་སྟན་བླགས་ཀྱི་བ་དན་སྒོགས་བཅུར་  
 རྩུབ་པ་སྐྱེ་དག་དབང་ཡིགས་པ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་སོགས་ཡིན་པ་མངོན། མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་ཀུན་དགའ་འཇམ་  
 དབྱངས་ཀྱི་དཔལ་ས་སྐྱའི་ལམ་འབྲས་སྲོ་བརྒྱུད་ཁོངས་སུ་བཞུགས་པའི་སྟན་བླགས་དང་བསྟན་འགྲོལ་  
 བཀྱིན་ཆེ་བ་གཞན་སྐྱེ་མ་མཚེས་པ་ཞིག་ལྟར། ཁོང་དགའ་བྲངས་ ༦༦ ཐོག་གཞན་དོན་དགོངས་  
 པ་ཚོས་དབྱིངས་སུ་ཕྱིན། ཁོང་གི་རྣམ་ཐར་རྒྱས་པ་ལམ་འབྲས་སྲོ་བརྒྱུད་སོགས་ཡིག་ཆ་གཞན་  
 ལས་ཤེས་པར་བྱ།

མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་སྐྱེ་ཐོག་བཅུ་དྲུག་པ་བྱམས་པ་ཀུན་བཟང་ཤེས་རབ་ཡང་ཤིན་ཏུ་མཁས་ཤིང་  
 འདུལ་བ་ལ་བཅུན་པ་བསྟན་འགྲོའི་དོན་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ་བསྐྱེད། མཁའི་རྟོགས་རྣམས་པ་སྐྱེལ་དུ་བྱུང་བ།  
 གཞན་བར་ཆད་ལས་བསྐྱོད་ཆེད་སྤྱད་འབེབས་གནང་བ་སོགས་བྱུང་སྟོན་ལྡན་པ། ལས་དག་པས་  
 ཚིབས་པའི་སྤྱིང་དུ་བྱུག་ཅམ་བར་སྤྱང་དུ་བཞུགས་ནས་ཕྱི་ལོ་ལ་མཇུག་པ་ལྟར་དུ་ཡོད་པ་སོགས་ངོ་འཚར་  
 བའི་གཏམ་དུ་མ་བརྗོད་དུ་ཡོད། དེའང་སྐབས་ཞིག་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་བྱམས་པ་ཀུན་བཟང་ཤེས་རབ་  
 དང་། ཇོགས་ཆེན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་སྟོན་འཁོར་སྒོགས་ཕན་ཚུན་ནས་ཕྱི་ལོ་ལ་སྐབས། ཇོགས་ཆེན་  
 རིན་པོ་ཆེ་སྟོན་དུ་ཚིབས་པ་ནས་འབེབས་ཏེ་ཞབས་འབྲིང་རྣམས་ལ་མངའ་རི་སྐྱེ་མ་ཚིབས་ཐོག་ལ་གྱུ་  
 གང་ཅམ་འཕར་ནས་ཕྱི་ལོ་ལ་ཞུང་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་མཇུག་སོང་ངམ་ཞེས་གསུངས་པ་སོགས་ཀྱི་རྣམ་ཐར་  
 བརྗོད་པ་དགའ་བ་ལགས་སོ།

མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་སྐྱེ་ཐོག་ ༡༧ པ་གཞན་ཕན་ཕྱིན་ལས་ཞོར་བུ་སྤྱིང་པོ་ཞི། ཀུན་གཟིགས་  
 འཇམ་དབྱངས་མཁའི་བཅུ་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སྟོན་གྱིས་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་བྱམས་པ་ཀུན་བཟང་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཡང་  
 སྤྱིང་དུ་འཕུལ་བུལ་ངོས་འཛིན་བྱུང་བ་དང་། དགའ་བྲངས་གསུམ་པའི་ཐོག་ཇོང་སར་བཀྱིས་སྐྱ་ཕྱི་  
 དགའ་འདུན་འདུས་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ་དང་སྡེ་དགའ་ལོ་ཚོས་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་པོའི་སྐྱེ་ཆབ་སོགས་ཚོགས་པའི་དབུས་སུ་དོ་  
 འཚར་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སྟོན་གྱིས་མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་སྐྱེ་ཐོག་བཅུ་བདུན་པའི་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སྤྱི་ལ་མངའ་བ་གསོལ་ཟབ་  
 རྒྱས་གནང། ཡང་སྤྱིང་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་དེ་ཉིད་རྒྱུད་དུ་འདུས་ནས་མངའ་རི་སྐྱེ་མའི་མདུན་ནས་ཡིག་དགར་  
 རག་འབྲི་སྟོན་སོགས་དང་དགོན་པའི་ཚོགས་སྤྱད་ཡོན། ཚོས་སྟོན། གནས་ཚོགས་བསྐྱེད་གསོ།  
 ཀུན་རིག་གི་དོན། སུར་པ་སོགས་ཀྱི་ཞལ་འདོན། དབྱངས་གདངས། ར་འོལ་དགྲོལ་

གསུམ་བཅས་ངལ་བ་མེད་པར་བྱགས་སུ་ལེགས་པར་རྒྱུད། ཡི་དམ་འབྲུང་པོ་འདུལ་བྱེད། ཚོ་  
སྐྱུབ། འཇམ་དབྱུངས། ཀུན་རིག་སོགས་ཀྱི་བསྐྱེད་མཚམས་བཞུགས། མདོ་སྲིབ་མཁམ་པོ་  
ཡོན་ཏན་རིན་ཆེན་ཡོངས་འཛིན་གནང་སྟེ་རིག་གནས་དང་གཞུང་ཆེན་ཁག་གསུམ། སྐྱབས་རྗེ་དོན་  
འཚང་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སློབ་གྲོས་མདུན་ནས་བཀའ་ལུང་དབང་གསུམ་གསུམ་པ་དང་། དཔལ་ས་སྐྱའི་ལྷན་  
མགོན་ལོ་མ་ལུན་པོ་བདག་ཆེན་ཀུན་དགའ་བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱི་མདུན་ནས་ལམ་འབྲས་ཚོགས་བཤད་  
ཚར་གཅིག་དང་གཞན་ཡང་བཀའ་ཚོས་མང་དུ་གསུམ།

དེ་ནས་དགུང་གྲངས་བཅུ་གསུམ་པེབས་སྐབས་སྐྱེ་བུ་ལྷན་བསྐྱེས་བཅས་དོར་ཨེ་ལྷོ་ཚོས་ལྷན་  
དུ་དཔལ་ས་སྐྱའི་ལྷན་མོང་མ་ཡིན་པའི་ཟབ་ཚོས་ལམ་འབྲས་སུ་དང་བཅས་པའི་སྲོམ་དག་སྐྱེན་བརྒྱུད་  
གསུམ་པར་པེབས། དོར་ཆེན་རྒྱལ་བའི་རྒྱལ་ཚབ་ཁང་གསུམ་མཁམ་ཆེན་དག་དབང་ཡོན་ཏན་རྒྱ་  
མཚོའི་མདུན་ནས་ལམ་འབྲས་ཚོགས་བཤད་དང་། སོར་བྱང་སྐབས་གསུམ་ཀྱི་སྲོམ་པ་ཡོངས་སུ་  
རྗོགས་པ་གསུམ་བཞེས་གནང་། སྐབས་དེར་དོར་ཨེ་ལྷོ་ཚོས་ལྷན་དུ་མདོ་སྲིབ་མཁམ་ཆེན་ལྷན་བསྐྱེན་  
མདུན་ནས་ཀྱང་ཚོས་ཚན་ཁག་གསུམ།

དེ་ནས་རྒྱ་གར་དུ་རྫོང་སར་མཁམ་བཅུ་དོན་འཚང་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སློབ་གྲོས་ཞབས་སུ་བཅར། ཟླ་  
ཤས་རྗེས་དོན་འཚང་གི་བཀའ་བཀོད་བཞིན་དོར་ཨེ་ལྷོ་ཚོས་ལྷན་དུ་མཁམ་ཆེན་ཨེ་ལྷོ་པད་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་  
མདུན་དུ་སྐྱེ་ལོན་གསུམ་བཞེས་ཆེད་དུ་བོད་ལ་སྲིབ་པེབས། འོན་ཀྱང་བོད་དུ་ལྷན་གྲྭ་གསུམ་སྐྱེའི་དུག་  
རྒྱངས་མདོན་དུ་གཡོས་པར་བརྟེན་ ༡༩༡༩ ལོར་སྐར་ཡང་ལ་ཆེན་བརྒྱུད་སྐབས་གནས་འབྲས་མོ་ལྷོངས་  
སུ་པེབས། སྐབས་དེར་དོན་འཚང་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སློབ་གྲོས་སྐྱེ་བུ་བའི་རྒྱལ་སྐྱོན་པར་ཞབས་རིམ་ཉིན་  
མཚན་ལྟོས་མེད་བསྐྱབས། མཐར་དགོངས་པ་གཞན་དོན་དུ་གཤེགས་པའི་དགོངས་རྗོགས་དང་བྲག་  
དཀར་བགྱིས་ལྷིང་དུ་སྐྱེ་བའུ་ལྷན་ལྷན་དང་ཆེན་སྐྱེ་མདུང་མཚོད་ཆེན་བཞེངས་པ་སོགས་བསྐྱེན་འགྲོའི་  
ཞལ་འདེབས་དང་། དེ་ནས་དབེན་ཅན་བོད་ཡིད་སློབ་དགོ་མཁམ་དབང་སྐྱེ་བར་ཞི་མདུན་ནས་རིག་  
གནས་སྐྱེན་དག་སུམ་རྟགས་སྐྱེ་སོགས་གསུམ་བཞེས་དང་དོན་འཚང་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སློབ་གྲོས་ཀྱི་དུང་ཡིག་ཚོ་  
རིང་ལགས་ཀྱི་མདུན་ནས་ཡིག་དཀར་ནག་གི་བྲིས་གཟུགས་སྐྱུངས་གནང་མཛད། དཔལ་ས་སྐྱའི་  
ལོ་མ་ལུན་པོ་ལྷན་ཆེན་དང་དོར་ཨུ་ཆེན་ཐར་ཅེ་དང་སྐྱེ་བའི་དོན་འཚང་། མཁམ་པོ་ཨེ་ལྷོ་སོགས་  
ལས་བཀའ་ལུང་གསུམ་བཞེས་གནང་། དེ་ནས་ཀ་སྐྱེ་བའི་མདོ་དཔལ་རིམ་སྐྱེ་འགྲུར་བསྐྱེན་

པའི་སློབ་ཤིང་ཡསྐབས་རྗེ་བདུན་འཛེམས་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་མདུན་ནས་རྒྱལ་བའི་བཀའ་འགྲུང་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་  
ལྷན་པས་ལུང་གསན།

སྤྱི་ལོ་ ༡༩༦༢ ནས་ལོ་གསུམ་རིང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་བོད་ཀྱི་ཤེས་རིག་ཉམས་ཞིབ་ཁང་དུ་དབུས་རྒྱ་  
གར་གཞུང་གི་མཐུན་འགྲུར་ལོག་ལེགས་སྐྱར་སྤྲོད། ཉིན་དེ། དབྱིན་ཇི་སོགས་སློབ་སྦྱོང་མཛད།  
༡༩༦༡ ལོར་ངོ་མཁན་ཆེན་གྱི་ལྷན་པོ་རྗེ་འཆང་དབུས་ངོ་མཁན་ལོ། ངོ་མཁན་སྤྱི་ཚབ། དཔལ་  
ས་སྐུ་ལའི་ཆེན་སློབ་མ་པོ་བྱང་གི་སྐུ་ཚབ་ཆེན་མོ་སོགས་སྐྱང་ཏོག་ཏུ་ཆེད་ཕེབས་གནང་སྟེ་ད་ལྟའི་དཔལ་  
ས་ངོ་མཁན་ཆོགས་བཞེངས་གནང་སྐབས་ཀྱི་ཚུ་བའི་ཆོགས་མི་གནང་། ལོ་བདུན་ཙམ་གྱི་རིང་སྤེ་  
དགོ་ཁྲི་ཆོ་མཁན་ཆེན་སློབ་གྲོས་བཟང་པོའི་མདུན་ནས། སྤྱོད་འཇུག་ཚད་མ། དབུ་མ།  
ཤེས་ལྷན། འདུལ་བ་སོགས་ཀྱི་གཞུང་ཆེན་ཁག་ལ་གསན་བསམ་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ་མཛད། འབྲས་  
ལྗོངས་སུ་བཞུགས་རིང་དད་སྤྱི་རྣམས་ལ་སྤྲོད་པའི་དབང་ལུང་དང་། གོགས་བར་སེལ་བའི་ཆེད་  
ཞབས་རིམ་གནང་དུ་སྤྲོད་པ་སོགས་བསྟན་དང་འགྲོ་ལ་ཕན་པའི་མཛད་པ་བཀྱིན་བསྐྱེད་ས།

དེ་ནས་སྐབས་བརྒྱུད་བསྟན་པའི་སློབ་ཤིང་ཡསྐབས་དབང་ཀམ་པ་བཅུ་དྲུག་རང་བྱུང་རིག་པའི་དོན་རྗེ་  
མཚོ་གཞན་དམིགས་བསམ་ལ་དབྱིན་ཇི་སློབ་སྦྱོང་གནང་ཆེད་དབྱིན་ཡུལ་ཨོ་ག་སི་པོ་གི་ཞེས་པའི་གཙུག་  
ལག་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆེན་མོར་བཏང་གནང་བཞིན་སློབ་གཉེར་གནང་། སྐབས་དེར་རུབ་འཇར་མན་གོ་ལན་  
གཙུག་ལག་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆེན་མོར་བོད་ཀྱི་ནང་ཆོས་མཁས་དབང་ཞིག་དགོས་པར་ཆོས་རྗེ་དེ་ཉིད་གཙུག་ལག་  
སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆེན་མོའི་མཁས་དབང་གི་ཕྱག་ལས་གནང་བཞེས་མཛད། གནས་དུས་དབང་གིས་གསང་  
ཡུམ་བཞེས་ནས་སྐུ་གཅིག་འཇུངས། རུབ་སློབ་ལུལ་གྱི་གང་སར་ཞབས་སོར་འཁོད་དེ་གང་ལ་  
གང་འཚམ་པའི་དགོ་བསྐྱེད། སྤྱི་སློབ་དང་དགོ་བའི་དོ་སྤྱོད། ལས་འབྲས་ལམ་སྟོན་མཛད།  
རིན་པོ་ཆེ་རང་ཉིད་ཀྱིས་ཀྱང་སྤྱི་འཛིན་རིག་ གཞན་ལ་སྤྲོད་པའི་ཤེས་བྱ་ཡོན་ཏན་གཟིགས་ཞིབ་སྦྱོང་  
བརྩོན་དང་།

སྤྱི་ལོ་ ༡༩༩༠ ཙམ་ལ་དུས་བོད་ཀྱི་དཔེ་མཛོད་ཁང་དང་པོ་བྱང་བཅས་ཀྱི་སྐུ་རྟེན་བྱིན་ཅན་  
སྤྱིང་དགོན་དག་ལ་ཞིབ་འཇུག་དང་འབྲེལ་དེ་དག་གི་འབྲེལ་བཤད་དཀར་ཆག་ལ་སྤྱི་ལོར་ཡོད་མ་ཆེན་  
པོའི་བཀའ་དགོངས་བཞིན་སྤྱི་རབས་ལ་ཕན་པའི་ཕྱག་ལས་སྐྱེད་ལ་གནང་། ཆོས་རྗེ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་གསུང་  
རྩོམ་དེབ་གསུམ་ཙམ་འཇར་མན་སྐད་དུ་ཡོད་པ་དང་། དབྱིན་སྐད་དུ་འདྲ་རྩོམ་གྱིས། གསུང་

བཤད་དང་། རུབ་ཕྱོགས་ཡུལ་གྱི་ཁག་ཏུ་ཕེབས་བཞུགས་ཀྱི་མཛད་རྣམ་དབྱིན་ཡིག་ཐོག་ནས་མཁྱེན་  
རྟོགས་ཐུབ་སྟབས་འདིར་མ་བཤད།

རིམ་པས་རུབ་ཕྱོགས་ཡུལ་གྱི་ཁག་དང་བལ་ཡུལ། འབྲས་ལྗོངས་གནས་ནང་བཅས་སུ་  
ཕེབས་ཞུ་མཛད་ནས་བསྟན་འགྲོལ་ཕན་པའི་ཕྱག་ལས་གནང་། བྱུང་པར་དུ་བལ་ཡུལ་གྲོ་ཡུལ་དུ་  
ཡོད་པའི་དགོན་སྡེ་འབའ་ཞིག་ལ་ཤེས་ཡོན་གོང་འཕེལ་གཏོང་ཆེད་རོགས་མགོན་མཐུན་རྐྱེན་དང་།  
འབྲས་ལྗོངས་གནས་ནང་དུ་མཁྱེན་བརྩེ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་འཇམ་དབྱངས་ཐུབ་བསྟན་ཚོས་ཀྱི་རྒྱ་མཚོ་མཚོག་གི་  
བཀའ་དགོངས་བཞེན་སྦྱབ་ཁང་ཉམས་གསོ་དང་གསོ་རིག་སྒྲུབ་ཅུ་འདེབས་སྤེལ་སོགས་གཞན་ལ་ཕན་  
པའི་མཛད་པ་བསྐྱེད་སྤོངས། དེ་དག་གི་ཆེད་དུ་ཨོ་ཤེ་ཡའི་གཞི་རྩའི་ཚོགས་པ་གསར་འཛུགས་གནང་བ་  
དང་དེའི་ཚོགས་གཙོའི་མཛད་འགན་བཞེས། ཚོས་ཇི་ཉིད་ཀྱི་སྐྱེ་ཉེ་ལས་ཀྱི་བྱེད་པོ་གཙོ་བོ་ནི། མི་  
ཤོད་མཚོ་ཁོ་ཚང་འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཟང་པོ་འམ་གཅེས་མིང་ཨ་ལུག་ལགས་ཀྱིས་རྒྱུད་དུས་ནས་ཞབས་  
ཞུས་དང་རྗེས་སུ་ཕྱག་མཛོད་ཀྱི་ལས་འགན་བྱེད་ནས་ཚོས་ཇི་དབྱའི་ལག་ཏུ་མ་ཤོར་བར་རྒྱ་གར་དུ་གདན་  
ཞུ་ཐུབ་པ་སོགས་བཀྱིན་ཆེ། མངའ་རི་ཚོས་ཇི་སྐྱེ་ཐོག་བཅུ་བདུན་པ་གཞན་ཕན་ཕྱིན་ལས་རོར་བུའི་  
སྒྲིང་པོ་མཚོག་ ཕྱི་ལོ་ ༢༠༠༥ ཟླ་བ་ ༥ ཚེས་ ༢༠ སངས་རྒྱལ་སྐྱེ་བཞུགས་པའི་དུས་ཚེན་ཉིན་  
རུབ་ཕྱོགས་འཇར་མན་ཡུལ་དུ་དགུང་གངས་ ༦༩ ཕེབས་པ་དང་དགོངས་པ་ཚོས་དབྱིངས་སུ་གཤེགས་  
སོ།།



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CHARISMA K. LEPCHA has recently completed her master's degree in anthropology from the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya. She is originally from Bom Busty, Kalimpong and did her bachelor of arts in journalism from Temple University, Philadelphia. Upon graduation, she interned at the U.N. headquarters in New York as a correspondent for United Press International. She freelanced before returning to university for graduate studies. Writing and photography are her primary interests, but she hopes to further pursue her academic interest in anthropology. Her articles have been published in *The Washington Times*, *South Asian Insider*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *Hills and Mountain Today* and the *NEHU Journal*.

HELEEN PLAISIER (PhD, Leiden 2006) is an expert on Lepcha language, literature and culture based in the Netherlands. Her thesis, *A Grammar of Lepcha*, was based on extensive linguistic fieldwork in Darjeeling and Sikkim as part of the Himalayan Languages Project at the Department of Comparative Linguistics, University of Leiden. She is currently compiling a Lepcha dictionary based on manuscript sources from the 1890s.

JENNY BENTLEY is a doctorate student in cultural anthropology at the University of Zürich. Her present research centres on the Lepcha community rituals, their meaning in constructing collective identity and their adaptations to the changing Sikkimese context. She previously studied the cultural revival among the Sikkimese Lepcha during her master's degree program at the University of Zürich and the University of Delhi, where she was admitted as a casual student.

PEMA WANGCHUK DORJEE is a Gangtok-based journalist and has been reporting on Sikkim for the past 14 years. He is the editor of *NOW!* daily and has worked in the past with *Himal* (Kathmandu), *Sikkim Observer* and *Weekend Review*. *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, a book co-authored by him with Mita Zulca was released in March 2007.

KERRY LITTLE is an Australian writer who is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Inquiry at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Her work involves recording traditional and contemporary

Lepcha stories and examining how modernity and globalisation has impacted on Lepchas' connection to their traditions. Her PhD is non-traditional, enabling her to present her narrative-based work within the framework of creative non-fiction.

BRIGITTE STEINMANN is Professor at the University of Lille (France) and research fellow at the Clersé (Laboratory affiliated to the National Centre for Scientific Research, Lille). Since 1979, she has travelled extensively in the Himalayas (mainly Nepal), working among the Tamang populations, and in Sikkim since 1993. She has published, in addition to numerous articles on the anthropology of Nepal and the Himalayas, four volumes about the Tamang and Bhutia populations and political anthropology in Nepal; the last one being: *Le Maoïsme au Népal: Lectures d'une Révolution*, Paris, CNRS 2006. She is presently collecting and publishing essays on the rituals of the Nyingmapa Tamangs of Nepal.

KUNGA YONTEN HOCHOTSANG comes from the Hochotsang family of Derge (Kham), eastern Tibet. He received his early education from private tutors and later studied at Derge Gonchen and Ngor Ewam monasteries in Tibet. He was attached to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology at Gangtok from 1961 to 1996, initially as a student and later served as Research Assistant, Research Officer and Deputy Director of the same Institute. He was English Language Teacher at Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingmapa Studies; Senior Tibetan Teacher at Tashi Namgyal Academy and Member of the Tibetan Parliament in-Exile. He is presently the Director, and a founder-member of the Sa-Ngor Chotshog Centre, Gangtok.