

Nepal, India (Sikkim, Darjeeling District of West Bengal), and Bhutan, have a rich and diverse oral tradition which is sadly being told less and less. Several myths, legends, songs, and parables have been collected in various publications in the past and present. Today some elders, interested younger members of the community, and ritual specialists still have knowledge of Lepcha oral tradition. In Lepcha the word *lúngten sung* (ལུང་ཏེན་སུང་) is used for a vast amount of myths arranged around the creation story. *Lúngten* can be translated as ‘tradition’ and describes the activity of handing down statements, beliefs, legends, or customs from generation to generation. *Sung* is the Lepcha word for ‘story’ or ‘narrative’. It can be used for fiction or real life narratives, for myths, legends, or historical epics. The concept *lúngten sung* is not used for the entire corpus of Lepcha oral tradition but for mythological stories explaining the origin of the world, humans, animal characteristics, and other important elements of Lepcha culture. Arthur Foning, a Lepcha author, describes the meaning of *lúngten sung* for his personal life and for the Lepcha community as follows:

My grandfather, my father, and uncles all used to keep us youngsters spell-bound with the wonderful narrations of events, and stories which were most absorbing. Occasionally, they also used to tell us our Lungten Sung, or stories from our ancient mythology, legends, and other folk-lore which included stories of animals, birds, insects and the like, and fairy tails.

Among other stories, Lungten Sung takes up a place exclusively its own. Looking, deeper, I now find that these absorbing stories acted as the vehicle and the medium to fashion and shape the very behaviour and attitude of our Rong Tribal society as a whole. In fact, they were a veritable treasure house of our Lepcha culture (Foning 1987: 87).

The *lúngten sung* of the Lepcha can be described as a set of stories vibrant with local versions and different narrative strands that all intertwine to a vehicle of transmitting culture and tradition. When recounting, at every crossroad the storyteller can take a different turn depending on which aspect of Lepcha culture he or she wants to highlight. They also have to choose a starting and a finishing point in a seemingly never-ending web of stories. Often enough the narration will be influenced and spiced up with local specialities relating to stones, sacred groves, or other landscape markers to be found just outside the front door.

The oral tradition discussed in this article is the story of *Láso múng* (ལཱོ་སུང་མུང་), one of the most ferocious demons in Lepcha mythology. Some narrators describe him as a king who rules over all other evil

spirits and in Dzongu the Lepcha ritual specialists (*bóngthíngs*)⁴ tend to compare *Láso múnng* with a bird (see also Gorer 1996: 55; Kotturan 1989). One informant describes the demon as a birdlike black creature with wings and eyes of fire (Tempa Lepcha, Solophok, July 2009). In Lepcha *láso* (ལ་སོ) is a verb and means ‘to change’, ‘to alter appearance’; *múnng* (མུམ) is translated as ‘demon’, ‘evil spirit’. Therefore, *Láso múnng* is a demon that alters its appearance.⁵ The narrative of *Láso múnng* is well known in Lepcha areas today and also seems to have been in the past then Gorer who did his fieldwork in Lingthem Dzongu, in 1937, describes it as an “oft-repeated etymological myth” (Gorer 1996: 55). The main narrative strand in all versions discussed is that this vicious demon terrorises and slaughters Lepcha people, until with a lot of effort and the help of supernatural beings the Lepcha fight and manage to kill it.

The versions of the *Láso múnng* narrative presented in this article have been told and written down at different times in various localities in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District with varying objectives, intentions, purposes, and methods. I recorded and translated the story from senior ritual specialists, villagers, and members of the Lepcha associations in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in North, South and West Sikkim and Kalimpong in 2006, 2008 and 2009. Other versions of the story were written in local newspapers on the occasion of Lepcha New Year by members of the Sikkim Lepcha Association.⁶ Some are published by Lepcha writers and scholars from Kalimpong such as K.P. Tamsang, Lyangsang Tamsang, Sonam Tshering Tamsang, P.T.

⁴ In the Lepcha community there are two different types of ritual specialists, the *bóngthíng* and the *mun*. In Dzongu and some parts of East Sikkim the *bóngthíng* are called *padhim* and all three words are often used interchangeably. A *bóngthíng* usually performs the clan, house, healing, and community rituals. He uses plants and flowers in his rituals. The *mun* can also do these ceremonies, but she is mainly a medium, she gets possessed by spirits of ancestors or deities and in this way makes prophesies. Further only a *mun* can guide the dead spirit to the after world. Usually *mun* are women, but men can also be, whereas only men can become *bóngthíng*. Still a lot more research has to be done on this topic (see works of Siiger, Jest, Nebesky-Wojkowitz).

⁵ De Beauvoir Stocks calls *Láso múnng* the cloud demon (Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28), I am not sure why this name is used, none of the *bóngthíng*, village elders, members of Lepcha associations I have talked to, nor any other publication mention this name for the evil spirit.

⁶ Karma Loday Lepcha 1999: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3.

Simick, and Arthur Foning⁷ while others were collected by anthropologists who have previously worked among the Lepcha such as de Beauvoir Stocks, Gorer, Siiger, Jest, Chakrabarty, Kotturan.⁸ One version reproduced is an English translation of a Lepcha book that was written in 1886 in the region of Kalimpong. This is the oldest written reference to the *Láso múng* story found so far. A different name (*Jhylum pahu pani*)⁹ is used for the evil spirit but the narrative is comparably similar.¹⁰ The oldest versions written in English language were collected by de Beauvoir Stocks in Lang-dang in North Sikkim and Pakyong in East Sikkim, close to Gangtok, in 1925. Gorer and Siiger mainly did their research in Dzongu, in the villages of Lingthem and Tingvong. Gorer conducted his fieldwork in 1937 and Siiger ten years later in 1949-50. Siiger has published two versions of the *Láso múng* story in his ethnography published in 1967, one from the villager of Tingvong, and another one from an informant from Kalimpong, and another summary in an article from 1972. Jest collected his material in 1953 in Tanyang, a village near Kalimpong.

STORY OF ORIGIN: PLACING *LÁSO MÚNG* IN A MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Where does a narrative start? In Lepcha mythology all *lúngten sung* is a part of the story of origin. Therefore, some storytellers when recounting the myth of *Láso múng* start with the creation of the world, mankind, and the Lepcha people. In this article I will not discuss the creation myth in its detail, but I would like to give a short summary and show where the storytellers branch off into the story of *Láso múng*. After *Ítbú*

⁷ Foning 1987: 127-129; Simick 2001; K.P. Tamsang 1998: 5, 38-40, 44, 64; Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 5-8, 9,10, 14, 15; Sonam Tshering Tamsang 1999: 29-35.

⁸ Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28, 29, 176; Gorer 1996: 55; Siiger 1967: 112-114, 175; Siiger 1972: 241; Jest 1960: 126, 127; Chakrabarty 1985: 215, 216; Kotturan 1989: 20-28, 58.

⁹ *Jhylum pahu pani* is described as the ultimate evil spirit. When *Ítbú debú rum* created the humans, they could not survive because this malevolent being with powers as strong as the creator god was killing all the human beings. For this reason the creator god bestowed the first Lepcha ritual specialists with supernatural powers. They succeeded in finding ways to appease the evil spirits (P.T. Simick, Ngasey, August 2009).

¹⁰ Nyu-lik Nyusong Translation 1992. The original Lepcha book was written in 1886 by Moong Shyel Simick-mu from Ngasey village near Kalimpong. It was then copied again by his decendent Passang Simick in 1961. This copy is the book translated by the Indigenous Lepcha Association of Kalimpong.

child with mother milk and raises it as the first human being.¹⁵ The children neglected by Fadróng thín and Nazóng nyú turn into evil spirits. Taken from here the creation myth can branch of into various storylines – one of them being the tale of Lásó múng.¹⁶ People narrating the creation myth often do not refer to Lásó múng. Sometimes a person will mention the demon's birth by the divine couple when telling the Lásó múng story, but does not do so when recounting the creation myth in a different context. It does not seem relevant or even feasible to mention all the aspects of a narration, but to focus on one main strand of action. Depending on what the storyteller wants to highlight alternative names of demons born are given. Lásó múng is described as the eldest of the children that were deserted and turned into evil spirits. He is the fiercest demon of them all.

The seven sons who had been thrown away into the dense forest had taken the forms of demons and evil spirits. They created lots of trouble to the Lepcha tribe regularly. The eldest had taken the form of a demon. He was the strongest among all brothers and was called *Lasho-Mung-Punu* which literally means *Lasho* the demon King (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 17; see also Foning 1987: 127).

Lásó múng is jealous of the children who were loved by his parents and of all their offspring – the Lepcha people. He convenes his siblings, the other evil spirits, and gets them to join in on a mission to take revenge. This is the reason why he goes out to attack and kill the Lepcha people.

As these demons grew older they felt jealous of their brothers and sisters who had been brought up by their parents instead of cast aside like themselves and began to take revenge by troubling them. They were led by Lasomoong Punu, who was the eldest among the thrown away babies (Karma Loday Lepcha 1999: 3; see also Kotturan 1989: 20; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3).

¹⁵ As mentioned, in Lepcha belief supernatural beings often appear in pairs. The same can be said for the first human being. In different versions of the creation story there are either one or two children. The name used is the same, the first human child will be called Ralbusingu (see Gorer 1996: 224; Morris 1938: 63) or it is a twin pair called Ralbu and Singbu. Certain qualities are attached to them. The former is described as a god, the latter as an evil spirit. In this way the creation story explains the dualism between good and evil as well as of life and death (discussed later on in this article) (see Gorer 1996; Morris 1938; Beauvoir Stocks 1975; Charkabarty 1985).

¹⁶ For printed versions of the Lepcha creation story see Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 19ff; Gorer 1996: 223ff; Foning 1987: 88ff.; Kotturan 1989: 17ff.; Siiger 1967: 172ff; Lyangsang Tamsang 2008: 3, 4.

Sometimes, the revenge of the Láso múng is told close to the mythological time when Fadróng thín and Nazóng nyú are still on earth. Láso múng and his entourage go and kill the first human child of Nazóng nyú (*bongthín* of Pentong, December 2008; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3; Chakrabarty 1985: 216). With the murder of Ralbu Singbu, the first human twin children, the Láso múng narrative explains the existence of life and death. Ralbu is described as human or even as a god. He is the good side of the child-pair whereas Singbu is considered a *múng* and malevolent. After the evil spirits kill them, Nazóng nyú pleads Ítbú rum for help. She sends down two birds, one with the water of life and one with the water of death.¹⁷ The former is supposed to be given to Ralbu and the latter to Singbu. But the birds confuse the substance and give it the other way round. Since then there is death and birth among human beings while the evil spirits exist eternally – no new ones are born, but none die (Netuk, *bongthín* of Lingthem, April 2006; Siiger 1972: 240).

This storyline remains the exception. In most versions the revenge happens in an undefined time when many Lepcha people have already populated the earth. The Lepcha book *Ahbong chyokung sung* places the event of Láso múng's tortures and the final salvation in a time of agricultural change. It is to be found within the story of an old hunter and his encounter with a supernatural being who gives him the seeds for agriculture. The old hunter starts planting and soon other Lepcha people follow his lead. Láso múng was in the jungles beforehand but now became more dangerous because he attacked people while working in their fields. Therefore, they decided to kill him (Simick 2001: 15, 16).

PROTAGONISTS IN THE BATTLE

The supernatural protagonists who take on a prominent role in fighting and defeating Láso múng vary depending on the narrator. A number of sources do not name a personified individual, but just call it the struggle of the Lepcha people against the evil spirit (Foning 1987: 127; Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28, 29; Siiger 1967: 113; Simick 2001: 18). Three different supernatural beings or deities (Jor búngthín, Támsáng thín, Kumyâ kumshi rum) are mentioned in different regions of Sikkim and Kalimpong.

In versions printed or narrated by members of the Sikkim Lepcha Association and also found in the East, South and West districts of

¹⁷ In some versions it is also just called the god water and the devil water.

Sikkim as well as the Darjeeling District, Jor bǒngthǐng (ཇོར་བོང་ཐིང་) is sent to earth by the creator deity Ítbú debú rum to free the Lepcha people from Lásó múng.

The Lepchas had no alternative but to pray and seek help from Itbu Rum to save themselves from the demon. It is believed that Itbu Rum on hearing the prayers, sent Jor Bongthing bestowed with full of supernatural power to Ney Mayel Lyang (Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3; see also Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Karma Loday Lepcha 1999: 3; T.T. Lepcha, President Literarcy Association, Gangtok, January 2009; Tempa Lepcha, Solophok, July 2009; Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18).¹⁸

Jor bǒngthǐng is described as one of the most powerful ritual specialists (*bǒngthǐng*) of the Lepcha. He is the first to be bestowed with the supernatural powers of appeasing evil spirits by Ítbú rum. But not much else is known or told about this figure. None of the older sources such as Siiger, Gorer or de Beauvoir Stocks talk about Jor bǒngthǐng. In Dzongu, where Gorer and Siiger both did their research, Jor bǒngthǐng does not seem to be known or at least does not play a part in this narrative. One of the senior ritual specialists, Mirik, *bongthǐng* of Linko in Tingvong, vehemently tells me that there is no such *bǒngthǐng*. A Lepcha book on the first Lepcha *mun*, Nyolík nyosong, written in 1886 in the region of Kalimpong, also mentions Jor bǒngthǐng as her companion in killing the most vicious demon:

This story begins with the creation of the universe, its humans, animals, beasts and birds. How because of the demon, Jhylum-Pahu Pani, that is, the embodiment of evil, disasters and death occurred all over the earth and so, the sending down by the gods, the godlike Bongthing Nyu-Lik Nyusung, with his companion, Jhor Bongthing, to subdue these evils (Nyu-Lik Nyusong, Translation 1992: 1).

Here Jor bǒngthǐng is portrayed as a deity who was bestowed with the powers of a *bǒngthǐng* when the god Lagyek “caught hold of the leaves of the broom bush and other kinds of weeds and leaves in the forests, and, looking hither and thither, started to shake and became very well known as the wisest who could exorcise the evils of mankind, the

¹⁸ The published version of the Lásó múng story in the Sikkim Study Series does not mention Jor bǒngthǐng (Gurung/Lama 2004: 117-120) but names Tǎmsǎng thǐng as the main protagonist. This part has been completely rewritten by the Sikkim Lepcha Association to highlight the version more common in Sikkim. Tǎmsǎng thǐng is now merely referred to in one sentence (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 19).

animals and living creatures on this earth” (Nyu-Lik Nyusong, Translation 1992: 8).

In Kalimpong usually a different supernatural being is recorded as protagonist battling Lásó múng:

When the Lepchas were suffering under the severe oppression of the demon king, Laso Moong Pano, they prayed to God to save them from the demon king. God felt pity on the Lepchas and as such He again came down on the summit of Pundim and created Tamsangthing which means ‘the saviour’ from the pure, virgin snows of Pundim peak and sent him down to Mayel Lyang to kill the demon king and his followers and deliver the Lepchas from misery. Before sending him down to Mayel Lyang, God said to him, ‘you are my best creation and therefore my most beloved one’ and then God bestowed upon him with supernatural powers to subdue the demons (K.P. Tamsang 1998: 64; see also Lyangsang Tamsang 2008: 6).

Támsáng thing (ཨ་ལཱ་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ་) is a supernatural being created from the snows of Mount Pandim in Sikkim by Ítbú debú rum to save the Lepcha people from Lásó múng. The origin of his name is not clear. In a footnote Lyangsang Tamsang clarifies that Támsáng thing is not connected directly or indirectly with the Lepcha clan Támsángmo or Támsáng/Dámsáng lyáng (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 10). Támsáng/Dámsáng lyáng is the Lepcha name for the area around Kalimpong. It is interesting to note that this supernatural being is only known and commonly referred to in exactly this region. Some members of the Lepcha community in Kalimpong also tell the Lásó múng story with Jor bóngthing as a protagonist. In other Lepcha areas Támsáng thing is not mentioned at all. Some narrators name both protagonists. In these versions Támsáng thing does not fight Lásó múng himself, but creates the first Lepcha *bóngthing* (Jor bóngthing) and the first Lepcha *mun* (Nyolík nyosong) to fight or assist the Lepcha people in fighting the demon:

Lepcha traditions says that when Lord Tamsangthing arrived at Tarkaol Tam-E-Tam from Pundim Cho (Mt. Pandim) to deliver the Lepchas from the clutches of the demon king, Laso Moong Pano, what he found was that the Lepchas were so much degraded by the excessive harassment of the demons, particularly of Laso Mung Pano, and not to speak of fighting with them. So in order to rejuvenate their morale, Lord Tamsangthing wished to give the supernatural powers to a chaste man and chaste woman and made them bring back the lost morale philosophy of the Lepchas. Thus the first consecrated Boongthing was Thikoong Azoar Boongthing and the first consecrated Mun was

Nyookoong Nyoolik Mun (K.P. Tamsang 1998: 44; see also Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 6).

Sonam Tshering Tamsang, a renowned Lepcha poet and scholar from Kalimpong, wrote a short text in Lepcha language on Nyolík nyosong and Jor bǒngthín in the *King Gaeboo Achyok Birth Anniversary* of 1999 which was translated by Lyangsong Tamsang, President of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association of Kalimpong. Here it is described how Támsáng thín gives the divine powers to a selected human from Dzongu in North Sikkim:

Tamsang Thing felt that Nyolik-Nyosong Mun alone was not sufficient and effective to fight back the evil elements in the future and restore peace and tranquillity in the Lepcha land, therefore, he found a young, pure Lepcha lad living in a cave named ‘Dub-Dr’, above ‘Puntaong’, Zaongu. Tamsang Thing, again, consecrated this young man with three shoots from ‘Pashyor’, elephant grass, and gave him supernatural powers at a lake named ‘Azaor’ or ‘Da Yaong Chaok’, Saa Kyung, upper Zaongu, hence, his name ‘Azaor Boongthing’. In Lepcha ‘azoar’ means crystal clear (Sonam Tshering Tamsang, translation by Lyangsong Tamsang 1999: 35).

In the Kalimpong versions the Lepcha ritual specialists are not given their powers by Ítbú debú rum itself, but Támsáng thín is responsible for this task. He takes in the place between the creator god and the first Lepcha ritual specialists.

Almost all the versions collected in Dzongu from senior ritual specialists in 2006, 2008 and 2009 name Kumshi rum or Kumyâ kumshi rum (ཨྲཱེ ཨྲཱེ རྩཱེ) as the main god or gods chasing Láso múng. Netuk, the *bǒngthín* from Lingthem village, describes it as follows:

All the gods of knowledge (Kumyâ kumshi rum) are meeting to discuss how to destroy Láso múng. [...] All this time the Kumyâ kumshi rum were chasing Láso múng. [...] And still the Kumyâ kumshi rum were behind Láso múng and thinking about how to kill him. [...] (Netuk, *bǒngthín* of Lingthem, October 2008).

In Gorer’s version of the story that was collected in the late 1930s and most likely also from villagers of Lingthem the same gods also play an important role, but in the end they seek for a supernatural being to chase and kill the demon. The names of the gods vary slightly, but this is almost certainly a problem of transcription from Lepcha language.

This devil was a man-eater; he used to capture people all through the neighbourhood and take them away to Tibet where he would kill and eat them. Therefore the Gods Kansi *thing* (lord), Kom-yo *thing* and

Saktsum *thing*¹⁹ consulted together as how they could kill this demon. [...] Then the three gods sent for Rum-nam (a mythological hero) to kill the demon, and wherever the demon went Rum-nam followed (Gorer 1996: 55; see also Kotturan 1989: 58).

Kumyâ kumshi (ཨྲྱེ ཨྲྱེ) is explained as ‘trickery’ or “the use of tricks and habitual deception, has esp. opprobrious connotations” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 227) in K.P. Tamsang’s Dictionary, *kumyâ* alone means ‘magic’ or ‘cleverness’. In the dictionary published by the Lepcha Language Development Organisation *kumyâ kumshi* (ཨྲྱེ ཨྲྱེ) is translated as ‘knowledge’, which is probably the connotation of the word used in combination with deities (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 40). *Kumyâ kumshi thing* (ཨྲྱེ ཨྲྱེ རྩེ) is “the deity who instituted marriage of human beings” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 227). In the creation story told in North Sikkim *Kumshi rum* has a prominent position. He is the god who summons all the other gods and deities to meetings when a problem arises such as when *Fadróng thing* and *Nazóng nyú* are found breaking the incest taboo. He is also sent by *Ítbú debú rum* to help the Lepcha when malevolent beings were uncontrolled and killing people. Then he calls together all the gods who make an agreement with the evil spirits. The malevolent beings assent not to harm the Lepcha people as long as they are satisfied with offerings (Pemchedar, *bóngthing* of Nampatan, April 2006; Gorer 1996: 224). This part of the creation myth of the Lepcha ritual specialists is often told without specifically mentioning *Láso múng*. *Kumshi rum* also gives instructions of where to find important ritual items with powers of healing and appeasing malevolent beings (Netuk, *bóngthing* of Lingthem, December 2008) and is addressed in the annual ritual the *bóngthing* holds in honour of his own protector god (Sagi lyót tyet rum fát,²⁰ *Dawa, bóngthing* of Lingdem, January 2009). This deity is therefore strongly connected with the traditional Lepcha ritual specialists who still today have the duty to protect the Lepcha from evil spirits.

¹⁹ *Sáktsum thing* (ཨྲྱེ རྩེ) is the god of ambition, “a deity or God who created the thoughts of man and his ability to think” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 976). This god is not mentioned separately by the ritual specialists in Dzongu today.

²⁰ *Sagi* (ཨྲྱེ) ‘power’, *lyót* (ལྷོ) ‘set free’, *tyet* or *tet* (ཨྲྱེ རྩེ) ‘touch, come into contact with’, *rum* (རྩེ) ‘god’, *fát* (ཨྲྱེ) ‘worship’. In this ritual the *bóngthing* sets his supernatural powers free and then brings them back again on the third day of the ritual.

Even though the protagonists vary in the different local versions of the Láso múng story, they all have characteristics and traits in common. Kumyâ kumshi rum is the main god to call a meeting and make a pact with the evil spirits. In this way he creates the profession and defines the responsibilities of the Lepcha ritual specialists. Támsáng thing is the creator of the first Lepcha *mun* and *bóngthíng* whereas Jor bóngthíng is considered the first *bóngthíng* sent to earth, the first mediator between the Lepcha and the evil spirits. The names of the protagonists differ, but their functions, powers, abilities and positions in Lepcha mythology are similar. They are intermediates between the common people and the evil spirits – supernatural beings specialised in appeasing malevolent spirits.

THE PURSUIT OF LÁSO MÚNG

Resting place of Láso múng: Sanyól kúng (འཇུ) – cú (འུ)

Some of the storytellers, predominantly those from Dzongu²¹, describe the place where Láso múng dwelled before he rampaged through Lepcha land killing people.

Láso múng stayed in Sanyól cú in a big tree called after the mountain, Sanyól kúng. So he lived on top of this tree. From there, from the top of the Sanyól cú, he could see the entire world, also Máyel lyáng, he observed and killed human lives (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008; same also from Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho; Dawa, *bóngthíng* of Lingdem, and *bóngthíng* of Pentong; Siiger 1967: 113).

When describing the dwelling place of Láso múng, Sanyól kúng (འཇུའུ) and Sanyól cú (འཇུའུ) are often named simultaneously. The evil spirit rests in the top of a tree which is mythologically completely intertwined with the mountain. Gorer's version of the Láso múng story shows this entanglement. At first the tree is not mentioned:

On any clear day there is visible from Lingthem a large gendarme of black rock rising from the mountain Siniolchi, or, as it is called in Lepcha, Sanyol-koong. On the gendarme there lived once upon a time a devil called Lasso-fo *moong* (Lasso bird devil) (Gorer 1996: 55).

The habitat of the demon is described as a gendarme or a hillock. This is interesting because the Lepcha word *kung* (འཇུ), pronounced slightly

²¹ In Kalimpong PT Simick (Ngasey, August 2009), Beauvoir Stocks 1975, Foning 1987 and the Lepcha book *Ahbong Chyo Kung Sung* (Simick 2001) also mention Láso múng dwelling in the Sanyól kúng.

differently, actually means ‘small hill’. But just a few sentences later the gods try and cut down a tree. Gorer himself puts a footnote mentioning a “verbal confusion” (Gorer 1996: 55) between the meanings of the Lepcha word *kung* or *kúng*. This cannot be the only explanation as the tree takes on an important role in the narrative and is also used interchangeably with the word *cú* (ꠘ). Siiger’s informant from Tingvong tells him that after the tree vanishes or is cut down, the mountain emerges from this place (Siiger 1967: 175). The way that ‘mountain’, ‘hill’ and ‘tree’ are used to describe the same or a similar seat of evil spirits or gods without any feeling of contradiction suggests that they are related in a mythological way making the words interchangeable in their usage.

Sanyól kúng is a “sago palm tree of the family *Palmaeae*, that grows tall, large, unbranched surmounted by a crown of large, pinnate or palmately cleft leaves” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 952). It grows frequently in Sikkim and West Bengal and is often cut down because it is said to attract flies (Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28). The mythological origin of this tree can be found in the creation story. Fadróng thín and Nazóng nyú were sent to earth and spent the first night at a lake (ꠘ; dâ) called Náho náthár dâ (ꠘꠘꠘ ꠘꠘꠘ ꠘ). There they broke the incest taboo.

Nazóng nyú’s hand holds Fadróng thín, but something is hurting Fadróng thín. He says, ‘your bracelet is paining me, please take off your bracelet’. So she takes it off and wants to keep it on her pillow side, but it falls down into the Nahol dâ. Now the bracelet grows into the Sanyól kúng (Namgyal, ex-President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS; a Lepcha association based in Dzongu), Passingdang, January 2009).

Láso múng is hiding in this tree so the various deities or the Lepcha people decide to cut it down and kill the demon. This is not an easy task. The Kumyâ kumshi rum spends all day chopping the tree trunk, but over night the wood regenerates itself. After several failed attempts they look for someone with the special ability to fell down this tree. Patyók bu (ꠘꠘꠘ ꠘ), a caterpillar,²² speaks to the gods:

‘In future you give me the Sungru kúng²³ as a reward for my eating and shelter then I will cut down the Sanyól kúng for you.’ The Kumyâ

²² “the hairy caterpillar the worm like lava of a butterfly or a moth one who preys on others extortioner” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 590).

²³ Sungru kúng (ꠘꠘꠘꠘꠘꠘꠘ) is “a large tree of middle hill forest but often extending higher than 6,000ft. stem very cylindrical, tall, grows very rapidly, wood

kumshi rum agree and so now today when you cut that tree you will see the caterpillar (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008).

The gods then cut the tree during the day and at night the caterpillar keeps eating. The senior ritual specialists in Dzongu integrate another episode before the tree falls over. The Kumyâ kumshi rum are suddenly facing a new problem they had not considered beforehand. They have to decide on which direction the huge tree should fall down in. They think of the different possibilities: the tree could fall to the east (Bhutan (ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་, *pro lyáng*), the north (Tibet, ལྷ་ལྷ་, *pât*; China, ལྷ་ལྷ་, *gyánók*), west (Nepal), or south (India). They fear that the huge tree would block the paths, make the trading routes inaccessible, and cut communication with these places.

So then they look at the way to the Kangchendzonga. This way is used by the *bóngthíng* and *mun* to guide the dead souls through the hills.²⁴ After so many people have died, maybe the devils will come out. So it could be best to block this way with the tree. They decide to do that. When the tree falls down, Lásó múng starts flying towards Máyel lyáng or Renjong lyáng²⁵ (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem; see also Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho; Siiger 1967: 175; Simick 2001: 17).

The Lepcha book *Ahbong Chyo Kung Sung* states that from this day the Lepcha people could not go and meet the dead souls of their relatives anymore, as the way was blocked (Simick 2001: 17).

Sanyól kúng/cú – and through this element also the story of Lásó múng – is related to a ritual performed at the end of winter in Dzongu. Sátáp rum fát is an offering to Sátáp rum, the god of hailstorms. It is dedicated to Kárnit Kursong dâ (a lake) and the Sanyól cú as the guardians of hailstorm, rain, and wind. In Dzongu it is performed once a year by a *bóngthíng* in nearly every village. In this ritual the god of hail and the guardians are requested not to send destructive storms into

greyish, soft, light. It is called *utis* in Nepali, botanical name: *Alnus nepalensis* D. Don (Betulaceae)” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 999).

²⁴ In Lepcha this path is called Muk nyám lóm (ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་ ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་), *muk nyám* means “the shade of the dead or departed; the spirits of the dead collectively” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 656) and *lóm* is “road. n. an open way for passage or travel” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 865). It can be translated as the way of the spirits of the dead.

²⁵ In a different version told by the same *bóngthíng*, but two years earlier, Lásó múng came into existence because he escaped the spirit world from this path when they chopped down the tree: “So all the gods decided to fell the tree towards Muk nyám lóm. So they did this. While the tree fell towards Muk nyám lóm, from that way Lásó múng came out” (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, April 2006).

their land and to keep the offerings instead.²⁶ Sanyól kúng/cú is where hail and snow comes from. Siiger's informant gives an explanation for the association between Sanyól kúng/cú and the origin of hailstorms and therefore Sátáp rum fát:

While the big tree was on the earth, its flowers were snow and its fruit were hailstones. When it disappeared a big peak appeared on the same spot. It is brown as brass and is called Sa Nyol Kung Bung. Now the snow and the hailstorm came from this peak (Siiger 1967: 175; see also Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28).

Sanyól kúng with its snow-flowers and hailstone-fruit becomes Sanyól cú making the mountain the guardian of hail and snow (Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho, January 2009). When I ask Namgyal Lepcha, the ex-President of MLAS, to explain the connection, he recounts it as follows:

We perform Sátáp rum fát because during the war between Lásó múng and the Lepcha all the rum declare to cut down the Sanyól kúng. But then they are confused and wonder: 'If we completely cut down this tree, maybe we cannot get the rain, snow, and wind in future. We will have troubles growing plants on our fields.' So that's why they leave a little bit of the tree to grow again. For this reason the Sanyól kúng/ cú is the guardian of Sátáp rum and harvest and rain. [...] When we perform Sátáp rum fat, the Sanyól kúng or the guardians offer rain, wind, and anything suitable for the growing of the crops and vegetables. That's why Sátáp rum fat is always performed in the month of February and March, Lepcha months Thon or Sám²⁷ (Namgyal Lepcha, Passingdang, January 2009).

Two senior *bóngthíngs* of Dzongu (Netuk of Lingthem and Merik of Linko) as well as Siiger's informant describe the mythological place of this ritual is Sanyól bóng on a mountain in front of the Kangchendzonga (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, May 2006; Merik, *bóngthíng* of Linko, May 2006). The Lepcha word *bóng* (འཇ) means 'tree stump'. So, the main place referred to in the ritual is the mythological tree-stump of Sanyól kúng which they say can still be found on Sanyól cú, a mountain in the range of the Kangchendzonga.

²⁶ The general secretary of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association and a *bóngthíng* himself explains that in Kalimpong the offerings to Sátáp rum are given during two other rituals (Lyáng rum fát and Múkjekdíng rum fát). For this reason no separate ritual needs to be performed (P.T. Simick, Ngasey, July 2006).

²⁷ Thon corresponds to the months of March and April, Sám falls in the months of April and May.

Dzongu Version – the destructive flight of a bird

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, elders and ritual specialists in Dzongu also call the evil spirit *fo* (𑄧) which means bird in Lepcha (Gorer 1996: 55; Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, August 2006; *bóngthíng* of Pentong, December 2008; Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho, January 2009; Siiger 1967: 175). All senior *bóngthíngs* and elders interviewed in Dzongu as well as Gorer tell the main narrative strand of the *Láso múng* story similarly. After flying away from *Sanyól kúng* the evil spirit rampages through Dzongu killing Lepcha people wherever he goes while the gods are chasing him. It is often described as a flight during which the demon is gliding from one side of the valley to the other.

During his stay in Dzongu Siiger recorded two versions of the *Láso múng* that differ from the others. Therefore, I will relate these before getting into the details of the flight. In one account *Láso múng* gets severely injured when *Sanyól kúng* falls down and then gets killed by the Lepcha people. There is no flight. The second version has some similar elements with the other *Láso múng* stories told in Dzongu, but the flight is completely different:

When the tree disappeared, the bird became startled and flew away. As it was flying through the air, all the wild animals and the birds became startled, too. Among the animals was *tyáng mo*, [...] a huge elephant (one of its tusks is in the house of the priest of *kong chen*). It ran away into the jungle but on the way it had an accident and broke its leg. Then all the other animals gathered to find out what was the cause of their distress. At last they realised that it was the bird, but the bird pointed to the big serpent that had destroyed the tree.

Then the wild birds killed the serpent and took out the bones of its body. These bones they used to restore the leg of the elephant.

Meanwhile the bird was flying in the air being unable to find any place to dwell. One day it discovered the son-in-law of *sím bryong* [...], Saknon Gin. The bird killed the son-in-law and ate the flesh (Siiger 1967: 175).

In all other versions told in Dzongu *Láso múng* flies from the Himalayan mountain range, from *Sanyól cú*, towards the lower valley areas.²⁸ The first place he reaches is Sakyong, the Lepcha village the closest to the uninhabited mountains. Gorer says Sakyong got its name

²⁸ The places change depending on the storyteller, here I have given a version as complete as possible.

because Lásó múng kills Tág kyong ká at this place (Gorer 1996: 55).²⁹ Another source says Lásó múng looks into every corner, takes the people out, and kills them. In Lepcha *tung kyóng* (ཨ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) means ‘corner’ or ‘angle’. This Lepcha word was then corrupted to the present village name (Netuk, *bóngthing* of Lingthem, April 2006, October 2008). The *bóngthing* from Sapho says that a bird called Kahryo fo³⁰ already tries to kill Lásó múng in Sakyong by making a trap with a lot of arrows, but he then has to run away from the evil spirit towards Pentong (Dichen, *bóngthing* of Sapho, January 2009). So, the Lásó múng flies to where at present the village of Pentong lies. Here he collects the people together into bundles and eats them. The Lepcha word *pen* (པེན་) means to ‘take like a bundle’ and *thóng* (ཐོང་) ‘to drink’³¹ (Netuk, *bóngthing* of Lingthem, April 2006, October 2008). All this time the gods are chasing him. Lásó múng then comes to a place now known as Vol. There he kills people by carrying (*vól* (འོ་), ‘to carry something over the shoulder’) (Netuk, *bóngthing* of Lingthem, April 2006). Afterwards he arrives in Lingya where he slaughters the inhabitants in a very disgusting way. In Lepcha it should actually mean *gil yol*.³² As a next destination Gorer mentions the locality of Thongto but neither does he recount how Lásó múng kills nor does he give the origin of its name (Gorer 1996: 55). In Laven there are two versions of how the evil spirit murders. He might execute the people by throwing them away (*vyel*, བྱེལ་, ‘wave’³³) or he asks them questions about who they are and what they are doing before he takes their lives (*vyet*, བྱེལ་, ‘question, inquire’) (Netuk, *bóngthing* of Lingthem, April 2006, October 2008). The gods chase Lásó múng further to Tingvong where he kills the people by rotating them (*vúng*, འུམ་, ‘rotate, turn, revolve’). He continues his flight to where the village of Lingdem can now be found. The name comes from the Lepcha word *duma duma*, which

²⁹ Gorer does not give any further information to who this person or supernatural being is supposed to be. So far no further references or additional information could be found.

³⁰ This bird also takes on an important role in killing Lásó múng in the Dzongu version, see later on in this article.

³¹ *Tong* (ཐོང་) also means ‘to gather, extinct, vanish’. The Lepcha word *pen* is translated by Kachyo Lepcha from Lingthem village.

³² Translated by Kachyo Lepcha from Lingthem village.

³³ The word *vyel* ‘wave’ illustrates the way Lásó múng is throwing the people. He is flying in the air and making a waving movement with his hands. During this action he drops his victims and kills them (Kachyo Lepcha, Gangtok, July 2009).

means as much as everyone (*du*, འ), to gather, collect) (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 89). Here the demon goes wild and massacres everyone, even children (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008; Gorer 1996: 55). The next place the evil spirit flies to according to Gorer is Adong, but again no further information is given. Then he carries on to the present-day village Lingthem. There are different versions of how the Lepchas are killed at this specific spot. He either tortures them by chasing them up and down, the Lepcha word *líng* (ལྷོ) meaning upwards³⁴ and *them* (ཚོ) meaning downwards³⁵ (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008). Or he kills them by squashing them together into his stomach (*tem*, ཚོ, “to fill or cram ones stomach with food, [...] to fill by forcing something into it” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 449, Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, April 2006), or by eating them each in turn, *tem-la*, *tem-la*, *taa*³⁶ (Gorer 1996: 55). All this time the gods are still chasing the evil spirit. Láso múng flies to Lik on the other side of the valley. This name is derived from the Lepcha word *lik* (ལྷོ) ‘to cry or call’. The people are calling out from there when he comes to kill them (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008; Gorer 1996: 55).³⁷ Then Láso múng continues southeast towards Lingdong where he darts and catches people with quick and sudden movements (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008), or he has to look for the people first because they are hiding (*dóng* (འཇོ) ‘seek, search’) (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, April 2006).³⁸ Then Láso múng flies on to Hee Gyathang.

³⁴ This translation is given by Kachyo Lepcha from Lingthem. *Lingla* (ལྷོ ལྷོ) can be translated as “sloping. *adv.* in a sloping manner, slantingly” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 852).

³⁵ This translation is given by Kachyo Lepcha from Lingthem. In the dictionaries the word *them* (ཚོ) is translated as ‘double’. In combination the words *líng them* (ལྷོ ཚོ) would mean ‘two times in a sloping manner’. Láso múng chases them two times on a slope, he chases them up and down.

³⁶ This saying is also derived from the Lepcha word *tem*, it is used twice to emphasise that the person is stuffing himself and eating non-stop (Kachyo Lepcha, Gangtok, July 2009).

³⁷ At this point Gorer stops mentioning the villages with the remark that all village names seem to be derived from this story so there is no point in mentioning more (Gorer 1996: 55).

³⁸ *Líng* (ལྷོ) means ‘unbalanced, not even, sloping’, the word can also be used to describe a sudden, flowing movement as when water suddenly flushes down a hill (Kachyo Lepcha, Gangtok, July 2009). The last part of the village name could be derived from the Lepcha word *du* (འ) ‘to gather, collect’ (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 89).

This village name comes from the Lepcha word *gyathang*, which means own self.³⁹ Here he himself decides randomly who will live and who will die (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008). Another explanation is that he kills the people there by collecting and destroying them (*tong*, འཇུག, gather, extinct (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 72, Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, April 2006). The next place he reaches got named Suklur because there he makes fluid out of the slaughtered people (*klur*, ལྷོ, ‘to mix, make liquid’).⁴⁰ Then Lásó múng carries on to Tariang in Lower Dzongu where he kills the people by making the sound of a crow. In Lepcha the word *ryáng* (རྟམུ) means crow (Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008). Some narrators also mention other village names like Mangan, Dikchu or Nampok (Dawa, *bóngthíng* of Lingdem, January 2009).

The Cycle of Animals: Lepcha Year

In versions of the Lásó múng story mainly collected from or published by members of Sikkimese Lepcha associations a different version of the pursuit of Lásó múng is given. Jor *bóngthíng* chases Lásó múng for a time period of twelve years, while the evil spirit uses his magical powers to change his appearance. This also gives an explanation for the actual name of the evil spirit – the one who changes his appearance:

God sent *Jor Bongthing*, bestowing upon him, full supernatural powers. He waged a long war with the King *Lasho Mung Punu* for twelve years. The demon King had the power to create illusion by changing himself into the form of different animals. Each year he took the form of an animal. He changed into the forms of mouse, ox, tiger, eagle, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, bird, dog and pig in the period of twelve years.⁴¹ This is how, this system of counting the years

In this case it would mean that Lásó múng is collecting his victims in fast and sudden movements.

³⁹ Translation by Kachyo Lepcha from Lingthem village (Kachyo Lepcha, Gangtok, July 2009).

⁴⁰ Translation by Ingchung Lepcha, Lingthem village, 2006, confirmed by Kachyo Lepcha, Lingthem village (Kachyo Lepcha, Gangtok, July 2009).

⁴¹ In Lepcha the years are called *kalók nám* (ཇུལྷོ, mouse); *lóng nám* (ལུལྷོ, ox); *sathóng nám* (ལུལྷོ, tiger); *kumthyóng nám* (ཇུལྷོ, eagle, kite); *sader nám* (ལུལྷོ, thunder, as in Tibetan it is also translated as ‘dragon’ (Kachyo, telephone, July 2009; Karma, Gangtok, July 2009)); *bu nám* (ལུལྷོ, snake); *ún nám* (ཇུལྷོ, horse (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 30); *luk nám* (ལུལྷོ, sheep); *sahu nám* (ལུལྷོ, monkey); *hik nám* (ཇུལྷོ, domestic fowl, hen, rooster, the actual word used is not *fo* (ཇུལྷོ) bird, but hen. This could stem

or age of a person in terms of the names of these animals, reckoned chronologically in cycles, each cycle of twelve years, came into practice (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18; see also Karma Loday 1999: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3).

The Lepcha calendar therefore has a cycle of twelve years (*nám kor*, འཇམ་མཚོ་), each year being named after animals. With one exception the sequence of animal names is the same as in the Tibetan calendar⁴². The fourth year in the cycle is called *kumthyóng nám* (ཕྱི་ལོ་འཇམ་མཚོ་) in Lepcha, the eagle year, but the hare year in the Tibetan version. In Siiger's ethnography the fifth year is not called dragon year as in Tibetan, but "*sá dyār nam*" (Siiger 1967: 80). Siiger translates this as the thunderbolt year, but the Lepcha word *sader* (ལྷ་མཚོ་) actually means 'thunder' as well as 'dragon'. Similarly, the Tibetan word '*brug*' has the same double meaning (Saul Mullard July 2009).

In other narrations the evil spirit changes his form, but without a chronology. Consequently no reference is made to the Lepcha calendar. In the Lepcha book *Ahbong chyokung sung* Lásó múng lives disguised as different animals and hides in the Sanyól kúng after killing Lepcha people (Simick 2001: 16). Foning mentions additional animals such as insects:

In the course of retreat, with the help of his occult powers, he kept changing his form from that of one creature to another. Sometimes he became a bird, then took the form of an insect, then again changed himself into a wild boar and so on (Foning 1987: 128).

In Kotturan's narration Lásó múng turns into different animals so he can use their abilities to kill Támsáng thínɡ. He transforms into a tiger to rip the supernatural being into pieces, then he turns into a horse to hit him with his hooves, and at last he becomes an eagle to fly away (Kotturan 1989: 23). In this version he is killed in the form of a bird

from the Tibetan usage of the word *bya*. It means bird, but is commonly used for chicken (Discussion Saul Mullard July 2009); *kajú nám* (ཕྱི་ལོ་འཇམ་མཚོ་), dog); *món nám* (ཕྱི་ལོ་འཇམ་མཚོ་), pig).

⁴² The Tibetan calendar does not only have a twelve year cycle like the Lepcha one, but a 60-year cycle (*rab byung*) which contains twelve animal names in combination with five elements (fire, earth, iron, water, wood). The animal signs are as follows: *byi* (mouse), *glang* (ox), *stag* (tiger), *wos* (hare), '*brug* (dragon or thunder), *sbrul* (snake), *rta* (horse), *lug* (sheep), *sprel* (monkey), *bya* (bird), *khyi* (dog), *phag* (pig) (Saul Mullard July 2009). Interestingly, the five elements correspond with the Lepcha names for the week as will be shown later on in this article.

whereas in most others it is in form of a pig – as the pig year is the last one in the twelve-year cycle.

Tom Tshering Lepcha combines the transformation of Láso múng into different kinds of animals with the Dzongu version of the pursuit. According to him this part of the story happened when the evil spirit was in the form of an eagle. This is an interesting suggestion to integrate the two parts of the chase with each other as in Dzongu Láso múng is often called a bird.

Laso Mung Punu during the physical appearance of an eagle having [been, J.B.] wounded by arrow of Jor Bongthing flew painfully and randomly over upper Dzongu of North Sikkim. It is learnt from venerated persons that the names of places like Lungthem (Lingthem), Lungdom (Lingdem), Laven, Tungvung (Tinvong), Leek, etc. originated during the war with Jor Bongthing and Laso Mung Punu in Eagle form (Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3).

Scattering Lepchas – the flight of the people

Before and while the gods or protagonists are chasing Láso múng, the Lepcha people are running and hiding from the evil spirit. In two versions printed in Kalimpong the flight of the Lepcha people from the demon is combined with a story of emigration. The Lepcha people originate from the slopes of the Kangchendzonga and populate other parts of northeast India and Tibet when running away from this demon.

Since the 17th Century each and every one who writes something about the Lepchas, harps the same old tune that the Lepchas may have migrated from either east, west, north or south, but have they ever thought of this that in the dim past, it was the Lepchas that had migrated from Sikkim to the north and from thence to the east and south east Asian countries? The Lepcha's traditions says that in the beginning, when Lasomoong Pano, the demon King and his followers gave unbearable trouble to the Lepchas, they had no other way to save themselves but to run away from the country. And as such, thousands and thousands of Lepchas had fled towards Tibet crossing the Himalayas. It is said that they followed up the river course of Rungfi river, that springs out of from Syisyoong lake and when they arrived at the confluence of Ranfi river and U-Ung river, they then followed up the course of the U-Ung river and then arrived at Taloong glaciers, from thence, they crossed Taloong glaciers, Kisyoong Hlo, Jyakthaong, Taela and Hlonaok mountains, and then entered into Tibet and fled eastwards following the border land of Tibet and the Himalayas. And while fleeing in panic, many went eastward and settled down in China and many entered into Assam following the Brahmaputra river course

and settled down there and many more moved further southwards to Tipura, Chittagong and thence entered into Burma. It is said by the aged Lepchas that the Nagas, Khasis, Mizos, Mugs are the very descendants of those migrated Lepchas that fled from Sikkim to Assam in the dim past and therefore, many Nagas, and other tribal spoken words, numbers, customs, dress, culture and features are much similar like that of the Lepchas. This Lepcha version intimates clearly that the Lepchas have not migrated from the east to Sikkim but it is the Lepchas that had migrated from Sikkim to the northeast India and to the south, east Asian countries. Also, in this flight, many Lepchas had fled southwards following the river course of Romom river that springs out from Tanotangseng lake. In Lepcha language, the meaning of Romom river is the frightened river, that is the Lepchas were thrown into great panic by the demon king and therefore, they fled southwards following this Romom river's course and came to the plain land of Daramden in the Western Sikkim and settled down there, where later on, it is those very Lepchas who built up the Lepcha's earthen tower to go to heaven at Tallaompartam (K.P. Tamsang 1998: 5,6; see also Sonam Tshering Tamsang, translation by Lyangsong Tamsang 1999: 33).

This mythological explanation has to be seen in the context of the discussion of origin, migration, and indigeneity. Anthropologists, linguists, and historians have discussed the origin of the Lepcha people and suggest immigration waves into the Sub-Himalayan region from various directions. Historical and ethno-linguistic data give evidence that the Lepcha have been settled in the region at least since the twelfth or thirteenth century, but no clear date of immigration can be given. Due to linguistic and cultural similarities of the Lepcha, the Kiranti and the ethnic groups in northeast India some researchers assume that the Lepcha migrated from the East together with these other groups (Mackean 1920: 511; Siiger 1967: 27; Sprigg 1982: 16-31). Other researchers hypothesise that the Lepcha are early immigrants from Tibet (Risley 1972: i; Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 7). The myth of Láso múng is used to describe a different migration movement – the emigration of the Lepcha people out of their home area – to explain the similarities between different tribal groups and validate indigeneity to the present area.

DEATH OF LÁSO MÚNG

The last part of the *lúngten sung* describes the killing, mutilation, and death of Láso múng. Again there are narrative strands with slight variations and emphasis on different elements, some of which can also

be found combined with each other. The gods or the supernatural being chase Láso múng either to Láso lyáng (version of the *bóngthíngs* in Dzongu) or to Sukvyer purtám⁴³ (Karma Loday 1999: 3; Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18; Tom Tshering 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3; Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 9). Sources says the plain is somewhere near Sakyong Pentong (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18). This location seems strange because during the pursuit the evil spirit is flying from north to south, but also coincides with a version from Dzongu in which an attempt is made to kill Láso múng at Sakyong (Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho, January 2009). Other narrators think it is more likely to be in the south, towards the plains. In South Sikkim the pursuit of Láso múng has left traces in the landscape. In Lachenthang in South Sikkim the evil spirit hid behind a boulder and Jor *bóngthíng* is said to have smashed it apart. The two halves of the boulder with foot- and handprints on them can still be seen there (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18).⁴⁴ In Gorer's version Láso múng is killed in the valley of the Teesta, to the west of Dzongu, and a huge rock formation can still be seen where his body turned into stone (Gorer 1996: 55).

Destroying the body 1: weekdays

After the supernatural being, in this narrative strand of the story it is usually Jor *bóngthíng*, has killed the demon, the Lepcha go to see if Láso múng is actually dead. To make sure the evil spirit cannot resurrect, they mutilate his body. Every day someone uses different methods to check on the body or to further destroy it. This procedure continues for seven days and the various materials used give the names for the Lepcha weekdays.

Seeing their dreaded foe dying, no one ventured to go near him as the Lepchas had seen the black magic of the demon. They all had seen his different forms into which he had changed during the long battle. After some time one brave Lepcha went slowly towards their fallen enemy to make sure about his death. He first threw stones at the body of the demon lying on the ground. As the demon did not get up he went close to the body and found that his body was still warm and the pulse was still beating faintly. He came back towards his friend and told them

⁴³ *Sukvyer* (ལུ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) means 'mud' in Lepcha and *purtám* (པུར་ཐམ་) 'plain ground'. Lyangsong Tamsang (2008: 9) and K.P. Tamsang call the place 'the valley of death'.

⁴⁴ Today there is no village or place heard of in South Sikkim called Lachenthang and the boulder is unknown.

about what he actually saw and felt. They waited for a long time but the demon did not get up. Next day, another man went towards the demon and beat the demon with a wooden stick. He felt the pulse of the demon and found it still beating. So he took out the eyes of the demon. The following day another man went and cut down the parts of the body with the help of weapons made of iron. As it was evident that the demon was dead by now, people went and covered the body parts with earth. On the fifth day, the people decided that they should destroy the parts of the body further and burnt them, with fire, to ashes. On the sixth day, they threw the ashes into the air. On the seventh day, they washed the ashes that had remained on the ground with water. This is how the seven days of a week were named according to the materials or weapons used for the destruction of the demon i.e., *Long* (stone) *Sayak*, *Kung* (wood) *Sayak*, *Punzeng* (iron) *Sayak*, *Fat* (earth) *Sayak*, *Mee* (fire) *Sayak*, *Sukmut* (air) *Sayak* and *Ung* (water) *Sayak* (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 9⁴⁵; see Karma Loday Lepcha 1999: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3).

According to Karma Loday Lepcha, General Secretary of the Sikkim Lepcha Association, the Lepcha week starts on Friday, the stone day. Namgyal Lepcha, ex-President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS), names the same materials as weekdays, but starts with iron and ends with wood, slightly altering the narrative. In his version the Lepcha people poke Láso múng with iron arrowheads. Then on the second day he falls down to the ground, after being fatally wounded by the arrow, this is the reason why the second day is named earth day. Fire and air day are described exactly the same as in the quote. On the fifth day the water is not used to wash away the ashes from the ground, but to wash it off the hands and bodies of the gods who burnt and distributed the ashes of the evil spirit. On the sixth day stones are thrown everywhere and the evil spirit asked not to come back, and on the seventh day the procedure is repeated with sticks. This is why these days are called the stone and wood day respectively (Namgyal Lepcha, ex-President MLAS, Passingdang 2009). Siiger mentions that in Tingvong in Dzongu the villagers use different week names which is probably due to Tibetan influence. These names have nothing to do with the story of Láso múng but are attributed to celestial bodies as in Tibetan: “*za nyi ma* (Sunday) [is ascribed] to the sun, *za da o* (Monday) to the moon, *mik mar* (Tuesday) to Mars, *hlak bo* (Wednesday) to

⁴⁵ In the published version of the Láso múng story (Gurung/Lama 2004: 112, 113) the names of the weekdays are not mentioned. It solely describes the creation of Lepcha clans due to the slaughtering of the evil spirit.

Mercury, a deity blessing by his hands, *phur bo* (Thursday) to Jupiter, the deity of the thunderbolt, *pa sang* (Friday) to Venus, the deity of peace and happiness, and *phem bo* (Saturday) to Saturn, the deity of mercy.” (Siiger 1967: 77). Today, these names are not commonly used; even the Lepcha names are heard less and less frequently. In everyday usage days are named either in English or Nepali language.

Destroying the body 2: Rongkati and Lepcha clans

In this narrative branch of the death of Láso múng the first ten Lepcha clans come into existence. They are derived from the activities whilst fighting and killing the evil spirit. It is commonly told in the Kalimpong area and active members of the Lepcha community in South and West Sikkim. In its basic pattern the process of the mutilation is similar to the branch of the story explaining the names of the weekdays.

Among those who had come to slay the demon, the bravest plucked up courage and creeping forward, examined the heart beat and the breathing. Coming back to his companions who were standing some distance away, he reported the condition of the *mung* to them. Then another ventured forth. Finding the body of the *mung* still warm, he thought he might come back to life again, so, even if it had happened, he thought by destroying his eyes he would be handicapped badly. Thinking thus, taking his spear, he punctured his two eye balls. Then the third came forward, and apprehending danger from the ogre’s magical powers, set about dismembering his limbs from the trunk. He also chopped off his head with his ‘ban-pok’. Then came another, who, finding the dismembered limbs twitching, proceeded to slice out the muscles from the bones and started crushing the bones on rocks and boulders. After seeing these things being done, everybody came and, cutting up the flesh into small and minute bits, they flung them all around (Foning 1987: 128; see Lyangsong Tamsang 2008 and Kotturan 1989 for similar versions).

So again the breathing is checked, the eyes are taken out, the body is cut apart, and then thrown away through the air. In this branch the actions do not explain time, but one of the main elements of social organisation – the existence of clans (putsho, རྩུལ་ལོ་ལྔ་ལྔ་).⁴⁶ Tamsang thing gives the ten different people (or groups of people) who kill the demon

⁴⁶ The suffix *-mú* (འུ་) is used to indicate a clan or the origin from a certain place. The same word also means mother.

different titles according to their participation. The *róng kati* (ᠷᠣᠩᠠᠵᠢ)⁴⁷ are made leaders of ten different lineages. These are today considered the first ten Lepcha clans and every clan should be able to trace its ancestry back to one of them. Moreover, the direct descendents of those involved in killing the evil spirit are supposed to have honoured position in the Lepcha community (Siiger 1972: 241). In his newest publication Lyangsong Tamsang gives a list of the actions and clan names, sometimes explaining why the specific Lepcha word is used:⁴⁸

1. The Lepchas who prayed, remembered Itboo-Deboo, the Creator, and requested Him to deliver the Lepchas from the clutches of the devil, Lāso Mung Pano, were given the title of ‘Munlaonmmoo’.⁴⁹

2. Those Lepchas who made and prepared weapons like swords, Banmaok, etc. to fight against the devil, they were called ‘Karvomoo’.⁵⁰

3. Those Lepchas who served Tāmsāngthing, Nyolik Nysong Mun, Azaor Bongthing, and Lepcha leaders during the battle against the devil were given the title of ‘Adenmoo’.⁵¹

4. Those Lepchas who helped to make bows and arrows to fight Lāso Mung Pano were called ‘Phyoong Tālimmoo’.

5. Water, rations and food suppliers were given the title of ‘Joriboo’.⁵²

⁴⁷ *Róng* is the short form of the endonym for Lepcha, *kati* means ‘ten’. In K.P. Tamsang’s Dictionary the *róng kati* are explained as followed “ten Lepchas. *n.* the ten Lepcha patriarchs the earlier Lepcha personages regarded as the fathers of human race, comprising those from Fodong Thing to Tamsang Thing and those between the Deluge and the birth of Thikoong Tek. After conquering Laso Moong Panoo, Tamsang Thing created the ten Lepcha patriarchs, from whom descended the ten male head of a tribal line. The ten elders or leading older members of the ten Lepcha tribes who advise and help the Lepcha king to rule the land” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 788).

⁴⁸ When Lyangsong Tamsang does not give explanations, I will add them in footnotes so that the reason for the Lepcha names given to the clans is clear.

⁴⁹ *Mun* (ᠮᠤᠨ) is a type of Lepcha ritual specialist; *lóm* (ᠯᠣᠮ) ‘way’ or ‘path’. This means they are taking the way of the Lepcha priest, i.e. they are praying. The suffix -*mú* (ᠮᠤ) relates to clan or place.

⁵⁰ *Kárvo* (ᠵᠠᠷᠪᠣ) ‘smith’, ‘someone who works with metal’.

⁵¹ I am not sure why the leaders are called Adenmú. The Lepcha word *áden* (ᠠᠳᠢᠨ) is translated as ‘fledging, having the wings developed for flight’. This could indicated that they were the most able to follow the flying evil spirit and therefore became leaders. Kachyo says, the same word *áden* (ᠠᠳᠢᠨ) is also used for the verb ‘to lead’ (Kachyo, Gangtok, July 2009), but this translation cannot be found in the two dictionaries available.

⁵² *Zo* (ᠵᠣ) is Lepcha for ‘rice’ and *ribú* (ᠷᠢᠪᠤ) for ‘distributor’ (see also Foning 1987: 128).

6. Those Lepchas who constructed and made bridges, roads, ropes and bow-strings were called ‘Brimoo’.⁵³

7. The Lepcha who dared to check if Lāso Mung Pano’s heart was beating and he was breathing was given the title of ‘Lutsaom moo’. In Lepcha ‘Ālut’ means heart and ‘Āsaom’ means breath and if you remove the two common prefixes ‘Ā’, it becomes ‘Lutsaom’.

8. The person who broke the eyes and blinded the devil was called ‘Seemickmoo’.⁵⁴

9. The Lepcha who separated Lāso Mung Pano’s head and legs with his ‘Banmaok’ was called ‘Sungngootmoo’.⁵⁵

10. The Lepcha who beat up, crushed the body of Lāso Mung Pano into dust and blown them into thin air from a hill top was given the title of ‘Sungdyāngmoo’⁵⁶ (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 9, 10).

Other versions are similar, but most are not as detailed (Foning 1987; Koturran 1989; Beauvoir Stocks 1975; Jest 1960). Foning only names seven clans and explains Adenmú and Manlommú differently. The people named Adenmú are those who make the seats for the celebration after the death of the evil spirit because *den* in Lepcha means ‘carpet seat’, and Manlommú are those people who offer thanks to Ítbú debú rum at the end, and not those who ask for help in the beginning (Foning 1987: 128). Jest’s version gives certain different activities containing more details of the mutilation and clan names:

The first hunter split open his skull, wherefore his family took the name *só-t’a-mo*. The second hunter struck him in the eyes and his family was called *so-mik-mo*. The third hunter tore out the tongue, and his family was called *fok-li-mo*. The next one cut off the demon’s buttocks and his descendants were called *so(m)-bur-mo*. Another hunter cut off the beard and his family was called *só-mot-mo*. Other hunters who had only the limbs to hack received no family names. Those who remained at home discussing the affair, received the name of *nan-tsö-mo*. Those who had constructed a cane bridge in the course of the hunt were called *sóm-pũ-mo*⁵⁷ (Jest 1960: 126, 127).

⁵³ *Brí* (འབྲེག) means ‘to combine’ in Lepcha.

⁵⁴ The Lepcha word *mík* (འཇོམ་) is ‘eye’.

⁵⁵ *Ngút* (འཇུག) can be translated as ‘to cut or to sever, divide by a knife’ (see also Foning 1987: 128).

⁵⁶ *Dyáng* (འཇམ་) is translated as ‘to pound or crush fine’ (see also Foning 1987: 128).

⁵⁷ “It is possible to interpret most of these names with reasonable plausibility: *só-t’a-mo*, killing-skull-folk; *so-mik-mo*, killing-eye-folk; *fok-li-mo*, tearing-tongue-folk;

Siiger collects a version from a certain Sadam Tsering from Kalimpong of which the basic idea is the same, but the clan names are different and again a more exhaustive mutilation of the body is described. Further, the clan names are not given by the supernatural being, but by the evil spirit itself, or in the end by the king:

Immediately the people rushed at the *mung*, and tore him into pieces. Some of them took his eyes, some his hair, some an ear, some the nose and so on.

The man who collected the people to fight against the *mung* became the ancestor of Adinmo *pũ tsho*. This name was given to him by the *mung* before he died.

The *mung* told those who took an eye that their *pũ tsho* should be called Samik *pũ tsho*. [...] From this time this *pũ tsho* came into being. [...]

The *mung* told those who took an ear got the *pũ tsho* called Gormu. Those who took the hair got the *pũ tsho* called Sadamu. Those who took the nose got the *pũ tsho* called Fo Gramu. Those who took the tongue got the *pũ tsho* called Fi Glimu. Those who weighed [sic!] the body of the *mung* got the *pũ tsho* called Fo Ning Ramsongmu. Those who cut off the fingers of the *mung* got the *pũ tsho* called Sadingmu. Those who cut off the toes of the *mung* got the *pũ tsho* called Sangdyangmo. And many other people got their *pũ tsho* names in this way.

There was also an astrologer who divined by his books in which manner they must kill the *mung*. The *mung* therefore gave him the *pũ tsho* called Namtsumo. [...]

There were, however, some who obtained no *pũ tsho*. They went to the Maharajah and asked for a *pũ tsho*, and he gave each of them a *pũ tsho*. Those who presented some vegetables to the Maharaja were given the *pũ tsho* called Pache Shanga. Those who presented a small bird called Kohum [...] secured the *pũ tsho* called Kakum Shanga (Siiger 1967: 113, 114).⁵⁸

K.P. Tamsang does not give each clan in detail, but says Tamsang thing gave title and honour to 108 Lepcha warriors and at the same time assigned each of them a mountain peak as a guardian (K.P. Tamsang 1998: 39). Here an important concept of clan is addressed. In the Lepcha community every clan is linked to a mountain peak (*cú*, འུ་), a lake (*dâ*, རྩ་) and an entry point (*lep*, ལེཔ་). The mountain peak is referred to as the male component and the lake as the female one. The entry

só-māt-mo, killing-beard-folk; *nan-tsó-mo*, inside-discussing-folk ; *só(m)-pũ-mo*, bridge folk” (Jest 1960: 127).

⁵⁸ For another version of the mutilation see Simick 2001: 18, 19.

point is where the soul comes from and is guided back to by the *mun* after a person dies.

Again combinations of the different narrative strands exist. Tom Tshering Lepcha and Namgyal Lepcha both mention the *róng kati* as the main people helping Jor bǒngthǐng slay Láso múng, however then do not recount the formation of clans from the activities, but explain the names of the weekdays (Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3; Namgyal Lepcha, ex-President MLAS, October 2008). In the revised Sikkim Study Series both branches are told shortened but combined (Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 10, 11).

Poisonous lake – the Dzongu version

The elders and ritual specialists in Dzongu have their own storyline on the killing of Láso múng. The gods chase the evil spirit to a place called Láso lyáng and then discuss how he can be killed. They resolve that the evil spirit is obviously attracted by human blood so they decide to make a trap for the evil spirit. They create a lake out of blood (*vi*, བེ), mix poison (*nyung*, རྩུང) into it and place upright arrows and spears in it that just reach until under the surface. The trap is set, but Láso múng does not come. The gods are just contemplating how they could lure the demon when a small bird offers its help, the Kahryo fo (ཨལའོ་ཅེ).⁵⁹

There is a bird called Kahryo fo. He addresses the gods: ‘Give me a white cover on my head and I will make Láso múng jump into the blood and poison lake.’ Now today the head of this bird is still white as the gods granted his wish.

The bird flies over the lake, sits on the top of one of the spearheads, and starts hopping around, singing and dancing. Then he challenges Láso múng, mocking him, telling him, he is so strong and has such a huge body, but still is afraid of entering the lake and do what a little bird can do. ‘I am jumping on the tip of the arrow, and you have so much strength and power and still you are such a coward’. Láso múng gets angry because a small bird is challenging him like this. So he jumps and all the spears and arrows pierce his body. In this way Láso múng is killed and all the human beings are finally at peace (Netuk, *bǒngthǐng* of Lingthem, October 2008; see also Netuk, *bǒngthǐng* of Lingthem, April 2006; Dichen, *bǒngthǐng* of Sapho, January 2009;

⁵⁹ Kahryo fo (ཨལའོ་ཅེ) is “the white crested laughing thrush bird. n. a passerine bird belonging to the family *Turdidae*, gifted as songster, *Gerrulax leucopolus*” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 162).

Dawa, *bóngthíng* of Lingdem, January 2009; Merik, *bóngthíng* of Linko, December 2009).

Again within the narrative a characteristic of an animal is explained as a gift given by the gods for a deed the specific animal did.⁶⁰ The Kahryo fo is still very important for the Lepcha community. Gorer mentions this bird in his account on Lásó múng, but in a different way. In his narration also collected in Lingthem, this little predatory bird is one of the animals that develop out of the flesh and bones of the demon (Gorer 1996: 55).

REJOICING – LEPCHA NEW YEAR (NÁMSÚNG OR NÁMBUN)

Lásó múng, the most vicious evil spirit, tortures and murders Lepcha people for a long time and at the event of his death they gather to celebrate the victory and liberation. The festivities last for seven days, just as long as it took to dispose the body of the demon. For this purpose they gather at a place called Tárkól tám i tám.⁶¹ This mythological celebration is considered the first New Year celebration – yet again the story of Lásó múng explains the concept of time. After killing the evil spirit a new life, a new year, can begin⁶² (see Foning 1987: 128; Kotturan 1989: 28; Karma Loday Lepcha 1999: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2003: 3; Tom Tshering Lepcha 2004: 3). Even though the ritual specialists from Dzongu do not mention the transformation of Lásó múng and the twelve-year cycle, nor the mutilation of the demon's body and the names of the weekdays, some of them relate the narration of Lásó múng to the celebration of Námsung (such as Netuk, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem, October 2008 and Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho,

⁶⁰ In many Lepcha stories the existence of animals or certain characteristics of animals are explained, sometimes as main protagonists, sometimes also just in a sentence on the side. In some versions of the Lásó múng story the leftovers of the mutilated body that are thrown away into the wind turn into evil blood sucking insects such as leeches or mosquitoes (see Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 29; Gorer 1996: 55; Kotturan 1989: 26, 58; Foning 1987: 128) or even new forms of evil spirits (Jest 1960: 127).

⁶¹ The Lepcha word *tár* (ᄏ) means 'to deliver, set free, liberate or save' (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 419), or 'to progress, advance' (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 71). K.P. Tamsang translates Tárkól tám i tám (ᄏᄏᄏ ᄏᄏ ᄏᄏ ᄏ) as 'the valley of deliverance'. It is also a name for the place in northeastern Sikkim where Tamsang thing kills Lásó múng (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 419).

⁶² The Lepcha word *nám* (ᄏᄏ) means 'year', *súng* (ᄏᄏᄏ) is 'to celebrate or commemorate' whereas *bun* (ᄏᄏ) is the past participle of 'carry'. Translated *námsúng* is 'to celebrate the year' and *námbun* would mean 'a year has been carried'.

January 2009), saying the Lepcha rejoiced after the death of the demon. Others strictly decline this connection when asked (*bóngthíng* of Pentong, December 2008, Merik, *bóngthíng* of Linko, October 2008).

The New Year's festivity starts on the last night of the old year with the celebration of *Már nyóm tyángrígóng sonáp* 'black night in the last month of the year'.⁶³ On this evening the Lepcha ritual specialists or in some cases the head of the family will perform a ritual to cleanse the people and drive out the evil of the past year. It is done individually by each household or sometimes by a group of households. In Dzongu the *bóngthíng* addresses various gods to protect the people of the house or the village from different kinds of evil, such as jealousy, and to bring luck, prosperity, and happiness into their lives in the coming year. The most important ritual item is a bundle made out of leaves of the broom plant, called *pashór* (ཁྲུ་མེ)⁶⁴ in Lepcha. After the short ritual the members of the household are cleansed with it. The *bóngthíng* will run it along the body of the person while murmuring prayers. It is also on this night that the effigy of *Láso múng* is burnt in the villages. The effigy can be made of different material (rice, millet, or straw) and often looks like a mixture of a human, a snake, and a dragon. Sometimes small replicas of the twelve animals of the Lepcha calendar are put at the demon's feet. After the cleansing ceremony performed by the Lepcha ritual specialist, the youth of the village will run from house to house, wake the people, get offerings, and drink local millet beer. At exactly midnight, the starting of the New Year, the collected items are offered in a short ceremony and the effigy of the evil spirit is burned down under enthusiastic shouting of the youth. This ritual is more officially called *Láso múng tyút sonáp*,⁶⁵ literally meaning the night *Láso múng* is burnt. The villagers shorten it *Láso múng sonáp*, or jokingly call it *Cí kón sonáp*,⁶⁶ 'the night the local beer is sampled'. This part of the ritual is only done in some villages in Dzongu and was not performed at all until the end of the 1990s when members of the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association introduced it. They were inspired by a visit to Kalimpong where it is still regularly performed. The *Námsúng*

⁶³ *Már nyóm* (མའ་ལྷོ་མཚེན་ལོ་) is the name of the twelfth month in the Lepcha calendar, *tyángrígóng* (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) means 'pitch black' and *sonáp* (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) 'night'.

⁶⁴ "elephant grass, which is used by Lepcha priests and priestesses in exorcising evil spirits and in cleansing and purification ceremonies. Its flowers are used for making brooms *Seckarrum* of genus *Cramineal*." (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 537).

⁶⁵ *Tyút* (ལྷོ་) means 'to burn or to scar', *sonáp* (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) is translated as 'night'.

⁶⁶ *Cí* (ལྷོ་) is the local millet beer, *kón* (ལྷོ་) means 'to taste, to try'.

celebrations last for one week. On the first day more cleansing ceremonies are performed and the family members stay in the houses. The following days friends and relatives visit each other and groups of young people move through the villages singing traditional songs and performing dances, shouting *ácúle* (མཁུ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ)⁶⁷ on the way. This activity is actually called *láso* (ལཱ་ལྷོ) in Lepcha. Community picnics will be organised. Nowadays big functions are organised with games, traditional food stalls, dance performances, speeches, and other entertainment.

LINKS TO OTHER TRADITIONAL LEPCHA STORIES

Creation of cí

I heard from Namgyal Lepcha, former president of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS) in Dzongu, that the traditional narration of *Láso múng* is also connected with the origin of marriage. I did not get the chance to collect this branch of the story from him, but found a Kalimpong version of this respective narrative strand in a recent publication of Lyangsong Tamsang, the president of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 5-8). He mentions the fight against *Láso múng* when recounting the traditional Lepcha story of the origin of *cí*, the locally brewed millet beer, the origin of which is usually narrated in the story of the first marriage between *Tárbóng* and *Narip* (see for example Foning 1987: 93-98; Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 25-28; Plaisier forthcoming 2009).

Ítbú debú rum realises the distress of the Lepcha and sees that their morals are too low to win the battle with *Láso múng*. Therefore, she creates *Támsáng thín* and bestows him with supernatural powers to help the Lepcha free themselves from the powerful evil spirit. *Támsáng thín* realises that the Lepcha do not have the self-esteem to fight anymore after years of battle. He then chooses *Nyolík nyosong* to be the first Lepcha *mun* and gives her all supernatural powers in the repertoire of these Lepcha priests. She is supposed to give the Lepcha their confidence back and after facing problems she sends volunteers to get *but* (བུ) (ferment) for making *cí*. This alcoholic beverage should encourage them and give them strength. Eventually with the effect of *cí* they succeed in killing *Láso múng* (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 5-8; see

⁶⁷ *Ácúle* (མཁུ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ) can vaguely be translated as ‘praise to the mountains’, it is used as an expression of welcome, joy, or admiration.

also Sonam Tshering Tamsang, translation by Lyangsong Tamsang 1999: 34, 35).

In the Lepcha book on Nyolík nyosong *cí* or nectar, as it is called in the book, is also seen as a means to subdue the most vicious evil spirit which in this case is called Jhyum Pahu Pani:

Then from this time onwards, the deity, Jhor Bongthing began to search the earth for the nectar, Lyam-chi Dyam-chi, to offer it as a consecrated food, that is, to obtain triumph over the demon (Nyu-lik Nyusong, Translation 1992: 12).

Another occurrence also suggests a closer connection between the invention of *cí* and the myth of Lásó múng. When reciting the ritual at Lásó múng sonáp Dichen, the performing ritual specialist from Sapho, gives the first offerings to the guardian of yeast and the cockroach who according to the myth was able to steal the yeast to make *cí* (Dichen, *bóngthíng* of Sapho, January 2009).

The tower of Dharamdin

Another Lepcha myth connected with the wrathful killings of Lásó múng is the legendary story of a pot tower built on a plain field near Dharamdin,⁶⁸ often called the stairway or tower to heaven (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 14, 15; Sonam Tshering Tamsang, translation by Lyangsong Tamsang 1999: 33). In the Lepcha myth the place is called Tá lóm purtám (ཨ(ལ(ལྷེ),⁶⁹ meaning ‘the plains where the people went up’ (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 14). Briefly summarised in this legend a group of Lepcha people start building a tower to the sky, made out of clay pots. When the tower is high enough the person on top asks for a hook to fix the tower on the firmament but the people on the ground understand that they should smash down the tower. This miscommunication is repeated a few times and eventually the people at the bottom destroy the tower. In past this legend has been ridiculed and certain sections of the Lepcha community have felt embarrassed by this story. Foning describes this feeling well:

⁶⁸ Lyangsong Tamsang explains the name Dharamdin as follows: “‘Da’ in Lepcha means a lake; ‘Raom-dyen’ means to be demolished. To build the Earthen Tower at Tal Loam Purtam, the Lepchas of yore demolished the lake and used the mud, clay of the lake to go to heaven and thus, the name ‘Da Raom-dyen’ in Lepcha. It is erroneously pronounced as ‘Darumdin’ by the non-Lepchas today” (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 14, see also Foning 1987: 91).

⁶⁹ Tá (ཨ(‘up, towards’, lóm (ལ(‘path, way’, purtám (ལྷེ) ‘plains’ (N.T. Tamsang 2005: 106).

Now, we of the present time, considering the acts of our progenitors as an act of foolishness, give the appellation of “Na-ong” to a person who shows lack of intelligence and common sense (Foning 1987: 91).

Therefore, because it could give a justification for the ‘foolish act’, the reason why the tower was built becomes important. The most common reason given is that the Lepcha were trying to reach heaven.⁷⁰ Within the Lepcha religious context this explanation seems difficult to understand because the Lepcha traditionally do not have the notion of a heaven in the sky. The closest to heaven would be Rum lyáng, or Púm lyáng,⁷¹ the realm of gods and the place of ancestors where the deceased go. Souls do not enter this place by elevating to the sky, but through places recognised as *lep* (ལེཔ), entry points. These are usually caves or other areas leading into the Himalayan mountains, the seat of gods and ancestors. Which *lep* a soul will use to enter the realm of afterlife depends on the clan of the deceased. T.T. Lepcha, the president of the Sikkim Lepcha Literacy Association, along with other members of the Lepcha community, have thought about this contradiction and find an explanation for it. The Lepcha concept of Máyel lyáng, the holy hidden land where the supernatural people of Mayel live and all prosperity of Lepcha land comes from, is often translated into English as paradise or heaven. In most Lepcha rituals offerings to the mountains and Máyel lyáng are given. During this performance the Lepcha ritual specialist faces the Kangchendzonga mountain range. Now the area where the tower was built is a flat plain in the southwestern part of Sikkim from where the mountains cannot be seen. T.T. Lepcha’s explanation is that the tower was built to be able to see Máyel lyáng and the mountains and in this way address the gods directly in the rituals. They built a tower to see their heaven, their Máyel lyáng, and be nearer to the gods they were worshipping. (T.T. Lepcha, Gangtok, January 2009).

The central idea behind the explanation is that the tower was to be used as an observation tower for the gods or for evil spirits. Tamsang suggests that the tower might have been built to be close to the creator deity whom the people were calling on for protection against Lásó

⁷⁰ In his book on *Folktales of Sikkim* Kotturan gives a completely different reason: some wise Lepcha men are debating how far the distance is between earth and sky and decide to build the tower to find out (Kotturan 1989: 69-71).

⁷¹ *Púm* (པུམ) can be translated as ‘origin’, *púmthín* (པུམ་ཐིན) is an ‘ancestor’ and *lyáng* (ལམ་ལོང) means ‘land’.

múng, but it could also have been built to observe the movements of the evil spirit (Lyangsong Tamsang 2008: 15).

Another version of the story of the earthen pots collected in South Sikkim is even more connected to Láso múng. The Lepcha from Sakyong and Pentong fled the demon as they knew he would kill all of them. They followed the rivers⁷² and came all the way south to Dharamdin. There they settle, but still do not feel safe and fear the demon will find them. Therefore, they decide to build a tower to a place, outside of the earth, where they can live without fear (Phur Tshering Lepcha, Namthang, July 2009).

ORAL TRADITION AS REFLEXION OF CULTURE: CREATING TIME, MAPPING SPACE AND EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION IN THE MYTH OF LÁSO MÚNG

With its many narrative strands and localised versions the myth of Láso múng maps Lepcha land, time, and aspects of religion as well as social organisation. The story is linked to many important Lepcha myths such as the story of creation, of the origin of *cí*, and of the pot tower near Dharamdin, as well as to two community rituals, *Sátáp rum fat* and *Námsúng*, the New Year celebration. It explains fundamental elements of Lepcha belief, such as the existence of evil spirits in the world. In Dzongu the pursuit and the killing of Láso múng explain the names of the villages, moulding the mythology into the landscape and everyday life of the Lepcha. The chase of Láso múng explains the twelve-year cycle of the Lepcha calendar and his death gives sense to the Lepcha week as well as clan origin and names. Further characteristics of animals, trees, and mountains peaks and their origin are described. In the following I will give a brief thematic summary.

Creation of humans and evil spirits

The figure of Láso múng is embedded in the main Lepcha *lúngten sung*, the creation story, and explains a core religious concept of Lepcha belief – the existence of evil spirits and human beings. The belief in malevolent beings is one of the main aspects of Lepcha traditional religious practice. Evil spirits cause illness, natural disaster, and death. A deceased person, deprived of human life, can turn into a

⁷² The names of the rivers they come along are derived from the incident. One river is called Roma, *ro* (ལྷ) means ‘fear’ and *ma* (མཐོ) is ‘to hide’; the second river is Lódoma, *ló* (ལྷ) means ‘again’ and *ma* (མཐོ) ‘to hide’.

demon and cause harm if not correctly guided into the land of afterlife. The Lásó múng myth is bound back to the story of creation, of man, of evil spirits, of life and death. It is one of the myths which directly explains how evil came into the world. In some cases Lásó múng is described as the ultimate form of evil. Fadróng thǎng and Nazóng nyú, the Lepcha progenitors, first give birth to evil spirits of which Lásó múng is the oldest and the most vicious. When they were caste away by their parents, the children turn into malevolent beings because they have been deprived of their right to become human. The Lásó múng story also shows that the gods give the Lepcha people means of dealing with the evil spirits. It is linked to the creation of the first Lepcha ritual specialists who are bestowed with powers to appease evil spirits by giving offerings. Different deities or supernatural beings fight Lásó múng. The main characteristic they have in common is that in various ways they are all in charge of appeasing evil spirits. Kumyâ kumshirum summons the malevolent beings to the meeting during which they decide that they will accept offerings as food and leave the Lepcha people alone. Tâmsáng thǎng creates the first Lepcha ritual specialists, and Jor bongthǎng himself is the first ritual specialist.

Summarised, the myth describes how evil came into existence, how the Lepcha people were killed and tormented, but then also how the evil could be combated and at least controlled. It outlines the religious order of the world, divided into gods, evil spirits and humans, with ritual specialists to mediate between the humans and the benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings. This also explains why the myth of Lásó múng can be told in combination with the myth of retrieving ferment and the local millet beer. *Cí* is one of the main elements of sacrifice to the deities as well as the evil spirits. No ritual can be held without it.

Time – weeks, years and life

In the various narrative strands of the Lásó múng myth the cultural measurement of time is explained. The story gives a mythological explanation of the core time units of the Lepcha calendar: the week, year and the twelve-year cycle. Lásó múng is chased by a supernatural being for more than a decade and changes its appearance twelve times. This gives the explanation for the twelve-year cycle in the Lepcha calendar and the name of every year. The mutilation of the demon's body lasts seven days, and the materials and activities give the names of weekdays. The killing of Lásó múng demarks the end of an old age and the beginning of a year, and gives reason for the first New Year

celebration. Further is explains time in a more cultural-biological sense – the span between birth and death. In one version Láso múng and his brothers kill the first human twins. In consequence of this human beings are born and die whereas evil spirits live for eternity.

Mapping the landscape

Different versions of the Láso múng narrative explain village and river names as well as elements of the landscape such as boulders in Sikkim and Kalimpong. Most prominently it can be found in the version told by the ritual specialists of Dzongu. The evil spirit flies through the area of Dzongu killing people in various brutal ways while the gods are chasing him. Thus the village names are derived from the different methods the demon uses to murder the people in the specific places. During this flight the area of Dzongu is delimited. The Láso múng narrative gives a sense of space, binds the origin of all the village names back to one common event and thereby creates a mythological map of Dzongu. This branch of the story is only found in Dzongu and confined to village names in this specific area. Historically the reserve area does not exist as a specific entity with own regulations and sense of identity since more than one hundred years.

In other versions landscape characteristics are explained. Lyangsong Tamsang as an example shows how the people running away from the evil spirit went along streams hiding, thereby giving the places their respective names.⁷³ In K.P. Tamsang and Sonam Tshering Tamsang's account the myth explains a forced emigration of the Lepcha people from their place of origin and home. They are using it to counteract discussions in anthropology, linguistics, and history that the Lepcha might have immigrated from eastern or northern areas. In their narrations the myth maps an area of socio-cultural and linguistic similarities to the Lepcha people and gives a reason as to why the Lepcha people should have been forced to leave their Máyel lyáng. This narrative branch shows a response to research published in the last hundred years and can be seen as a reaction to a discussion on indigenous rights and immigration laws which has become important in politics in the region in the last century.

⁷³ See also boulder mentioned in Gorer 1996: 55 and in Gurung/Lama 2004, revised RMRT 2005: 18. River and place names are also given by Phur Tshering Lepcha of Namthang (July 2009).

Róng kati – the creation of the first Lepcha clans

In Kalimpong the narrative of Lásó múng is the main myth used to explain the origin of clan structure in Lepcha society. Before the slaying of Lásó múng the Lepcha community had no distinction into different lineages, then Támsáng thing gives the people involved in the killing various titles. It is said that ten titles were distributed. These ten people or groups rewarded after the killing are known as *rong kati*, the ten Lepchas. The titles were given on to the descendents and in this way the successful mutilation of the evil spirit introduces a segmentary system of social organisation. There are hints that this story also explains a more hierarchical structure of social organisation, as the descendents of those who participated in the slaying of Lásó múng seem to have a higher social standing. The designation *rong kati* is also used to describe the political structure of the village. In certain Lepcha areas there was a council of ten elders or leading older members of the community who would act as advisors.

Conclusion

The myth of Lásó múng portrays important aspects of Lepcha culture and religion; it has been shaped by local surroundings and can be described as reflexion of Lepcha culture on itself. In this article the various narrative strands and localised versions found in the collected versions of the Lásó múng story were laid out. Each one of them emphasises and explains certain aspects of Lepcha culture and religion. The interconnected but sometimes contradicting storylines of the Lásó múng story link various important myths and rituals and explain time, space, as well as core concepts of social and religious organisation among the Lepcha of Sikkim and Kalimpong.

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