

A Grammar of Lepcha



BY

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LANGUAGES OF THE GREATER HIMALAYAN REGION



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of the extensive collection of old
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nineteenth-century Lepcha dictionary.

THE LEPCHA LANGUAGE HAS BEEN shrouded in a veil of tantalising mystique ever since Colonel George Mainwaring in the 1870s disseminated the myth that Lepcha was the most perfect of tongues and represented the primordial language of men and fairies. The present book is the first ever comprehensive reference grammar of this language, spoken by the indigenous tribal people of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Kalimpong. Some popular lore about Lepcha has a firm basis in fact, however. Lepcha represents a branch unto itself within the Tibeto-Burman languages. Lepcha is written in its own unique script. This highly readable grammar explains the structure of the language, its sound system and salient features, and includes a lexicon and cultural history. With financial support of the International Institute for Asian Studies (www.iias.nl).

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

This is the first sound analytical grammar of the Lepcha language to be published ever since Mainwaring's pioneering work in the mid-nineteenth century first sparked scholarly and popular interest in this language and at the same time shrouded Lepcha in a veil of mystique. With the present grammar Heleen Plaisier has lifted this veil and lucidly explains the fascinating details of Lepcha grammar in the language's own terms. In producing this grammar and her other publications on Lepcha language and culture, the author gives back many precious gifts to the Lepcha community in return for the hospitality and friendship which she has received from so many Lepchas. Since her very first sojourn amongst the Lepchas, the author has maintained cordial ties and warm friendships with many people from different strata of the socio-economically, politically and religiously highly diverse Lepcha community. Her interest and love for the Lepcha language, history and native cultural traditions leap from the pages of her writings. All who are fond of Lepcha owe a debt to Heleen Plaisier.

George van Driem
Kathmandu, 16 July 2006

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ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ABL	ablative suffix
adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
AST	assertive particle
AUTH	authorative particle
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
CMP	completive auxiliary
CRT	certainty particle
D	dual
DAT	dative suffix
DEF	definite article
DSC	discovery particle
DUB	dubitative particle
ed.	editor
eds.	editors
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and the rest
EXH	exhaustive auxiliary
FCT	factitive marker
GEN	genitive suffix
GER	gerund marker
IFR	inferential particle
IND	individuative suffix
INF	infinitival marker
LOC	locative suffix
n.	noun
NEG	negative marker
NPR	non-preterite tense marker
num.	numeral
OBL	oblique form

P	plural
pf.	prefix
PL.H	human plural suffix
PL.NH	non-human plural suffix
PRF	perfect auxiliary
PRG	progressive tense marker
pron.	pronoun
PSB	possibility particle
PTC	participle
Q	interrogative particle
REP	reported speech particle
REQ	request particle
RES	resultative auxiliary
S	singular
sal.	salutation
sf.	suffix
v.	verb
viz.	<i>videlicet</i> , or by substitution
vs.	versus
[]	phonetic transcription; analytical note
//	phonological transcription
< >	morphological transcription
<i>italics</i>	transliteration
~	alternates (allomorphs, allophones)
–	word-internal morpheme boundary or boundary between a word and an affix in glosses
·	syllable boundary in phonetic transcription
-	syllable boundary in transliteration
⊙	consonant sign in Lepcha orthography

Nepali is transliterated from the devanāgarī script conventionally in accordance with Indological tradition:

	a		ā	
	i		ī	
	u		ū	
		ṛ		
	e		ai	
	o		au	
	ṁ		ḥ	
k	kh	g	gh	ṅ
c	ch	j	jh	ñ
ṭ	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh	ṇ
t	th	d	dh	n
p	ph	b	bh	m
	y	r	l	v
	ś	ṣ	s	
		h		

The modern pronunciations of Dzongkha and Dränjoke are given in Roman Dzongkha, the official system for the phonological representation of Dzongkha, described in van Driem 1998.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Lepcha is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling district in West Bengal in India, in Ilām district in Nepal, and in a few villages of Samtsi district in south-western Bhutan. The tribal homeland of the Lepcha people is referred to as ལྷོ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *ne máyel lyáng* ‘hidden paradise’ or ལྷོ་མཚོ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *ne máyel málúk lyáng* ‘land of eternal purity’. Most of the areas in which Lepcha is spoken today were once Sikkimese territory. The kingdom of Sikkim used to comprise all of present-day Sikkim and most of Darjeeling district. Kalimpong, now in Darjeeling district, used to be part of Bhutan, but was lost to the British and became ‘British Bhutan’ before being incorporated into Darjeeling district. The Lepcha are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim.

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

The English name ‘Lepcha’ derives from Nepali *lāpce* or *lāpcā*, which originally had the derogatory connotation of ‘inarticulate speech’. Nowadays, the term ‘Lepcha’ is widely used without this

connotation. The Lepcha call themselves རྩུ་མཚོ་ལྷ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *mútuncí róngkup rumkup* ‘children of the Róng and of God’, or simply རྩུ་མཚོ་ *róngkup* ‘children of the Róng’. Alternatively, the Lepcha people may call themselves རྩུ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *róng ?ágít* ‘the Róng tribe’. The Lepcha word for ‘language’ is རྩུ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *?áring*, and the Lepcha call their own language རྩུ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *róngring*.

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

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

In Sikkim, Lepcha is one of eleven official languages. Lepcha is taught in schools, there is a textbook department that develops official learning materials, there is a Lepcha edition of a government newspaper, the Sikkim Herald, and the government radio station broadcasts news bulletins and cultural programmes in the Lepcha language. A special area in North Sikkim holds the རྩུ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ *Dzongú [zónggú]* Lepcha reserve, a Lepcha conservation area where but few outsiders have been allowed to settle. In the Darjeeling district, the Lepcha have had

to struggle to get official status in order to receive special benefits and to be able to have air time on the official radio stations. The Lepcha Association, which is a social and cultural organisation with several different branches and chapters in which Lepchas have organised themselves, coordinates evening classes in the Lepcha language and other social and cultural initiatives, such as festivals and archery competitions.

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

The native Lepcha female dress, རྱྱྱྱྱྱྱ *dumdem*, also spelt རྱྱྱྱྱྱྱྱ *dumdyám*, is usually made of smooth cotton or silk and consists of one large piece of material that is folded over one shoulder, pinned at the other shoulder and held in place with a waistband over which part of the remaining material hangs. The ankle-length *dumdem* is worn over a long-sleeved blouse, which may be of a contrasting colour. The native male dress is knee-length and consists of a multicoloured hand-woven cloth called རྱྱྱྱྱྱྱྱ *dumprá* 'male dress', which is pinned together at one shoulder and held in place by a waistband. The *dumprá* is usually worn over a simple white shirt and knee-length trousers. The men wear the རྱྱྱྱྱྱྱྱ *thyáktuk* 'cap', a flat round hat with stiff black velvet sides and a softer top of coloured material with a knot in the centre. The more traditional hat, now rarely seen, is made of bamboo and rattan strips and is cone-shaped with a narrow brim.

The Lepcha are known to be excellent weavers and they weave the ཨྱྱ *dum* ‘cloth’ for the *dumprá* themselves. The Lepcha are also famous for their unique knowledge of the medicinal properties of local plants. Bamboo, འཕྱ *po*, plays an important role in Lepcha life and the Lepcha sometimes refer to themselves as the ‘brothers of the bamboo’, because of their skilful use of various kinds of bamboo and rattan in building houses, weaving baskets, constructing bridges, rafts, fences and making bows, arrows and all sorts of household utensils.

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

The entire complex of Lepcha myths, legends, fables and fairytales that has been orally transmitted throughout the centuries is known as འཕྱྱ འཕྱྱ *lúngten sung* ‘mythology, legends’. The Lepcha have their own indigenous script which dates back to the 18th century, explained in the next chapter. Although many written Lepcha texts are adaptations of Tibetan Buddhist literature, they clearly display a Lepcha character. Further research is required in order to determine the precise nature of the influence of Lepcha oral traditions, regional folkloristic influences and Tibetan Buddhism on Lepcha literature (Klafkowski 1983: 172, Plaisier 2003b).

Archibald Campbell published a short list of Lepcha words in 1840. In 1842, the independent clergyman William Start brought more than twenty German missionaries to Darjeeling in order to start

a Christian mission post there. Although the initiative was not a lasting success, William Start and his colleague Karl Gottlieb Niebel did run a school for Lepcha children in Tukvár, near Darjeeling, for some time and translated parts of the Bible into Lepcha (Start and Niebel 1849, 1872). When Start returned to England in 1852, Niebel continued his missionary work in the area. A commemorative plaque in St. Columba's Church in Darjeeling reads: '1865. Karl G. Niebel, 23 years translator with the Lepcha, died' (Perry 1997: 31). Some of the other missionaries that Start had brought over settled in the region and started up various businesses. Joachim Stölke, for example, became a tea planter, as did his sons John and William Stölke, who together wrote an as yet unpublished extensive Lepcha-English dictionary around 1900.

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

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

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

nent Lepcha authors ཡུ་ཤིལ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ Úgen Shipmú, ཨེ་ལོ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ Karma Lode Righimú, ལཱུ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ Nakú Tshering Likmú and ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ Dorji Wángdi Kunchúdyangmú.

Ever since its first issue in 1997, the quarterly Lepcha bilingual news magazine ལཱུ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ *Aachuley* [ácu] published by the Lepcha Literary Organisation in Kalimpong and edited by ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ལྷུ་ Lyáng-sóng Támsáng, has proved to be an important forum for contributions on Lepcha language and culture written by authors from all over the world.

The present book is a descriptive study of the Lepcha language. The data for this study were collected during several pleasant sojourns amongst the cheerful Lepcha people in Kalimpong and Sikkim between 1994 and 1998. During my research, I also investigated the history and origins of old Lepcha texts. The results of this investigation have appeared in the form of a catalogue describing the unique collection of Lepcha manuscripts kept in Leiden, the world's largest collection of Lepcha texts (Plaisier 2003b). This catalogue also contains an introduction to Lepcha literary history and a survey of the smaller collections of Lepcha manuscripts in London, Gangtok and Vienna.