

**Interrogating Symbolism in the Rites of Passage among the
Lepchas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong Districts,
West Bengal**

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the

Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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**Interrogating Symbolism in the Rites of Passage among the Lepchas of
Darjeeling and Kalimpong Districts, West Bengal**

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DECLARATION

I, Avishek Biswakarma, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled "Interrogating Symbolism in the Rites of Passage among the Lepchas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong Districts, West Bengal" is an original work carried out by me under the guidance of Dr. Charisma K. Lepcha. The contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/institute. This is submitted to the Sikkim University, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Anthropology.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Cultures around the world have their own set of symbols. These symbols give cultures a sense of unity and fraternity among different individuals and make them feel part of something that is bigger than themselves. Cultural symbolism derives its nature from the varieties of symbolic meanings it confers to them. The symbols include language, geological and environmental morphology, material artefacts and pictorial or scriptural representation. These symbols depict the attributes of the culture and assign meaning to them. These symbols also help in promoting the singularity of the culture which distinguishes them apart from the other similar exhibiting cultures.

Symbolic anthropology involves a holistic study on how people create meaning out of their experiences or construct their own concept of reality through the use of shared cultural symbols, such as myths or body language. A culture's unique combination of cultural symbols — and their meanings and how it creates meaning for the individual, which in turn prompts that individual to react in culturally specific ways to symbolic behavior and communication. Symbols, such as a raised eyebrow, may be shared by different cultures but have different meanings or elicit distinct responses within each culture.

According to Geertz, man is in need of symbolic "sources of illumination" (Geertz 1973a:45) to orient himself with respect to the system of meaning that is any particular culture. Turner states that symbols initiate social action and are "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (1967:36).

Symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units (Turner 1967:19). Rituals, religious beliefs, and symbols are in Turner's

perspective essentially related. He expressed this well in another definition; ritual is "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence supernatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (1977:183). Rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community (1968:2). Not only do symbols reveal crucial social and religious values; they are transformative for human attitudes and behavior. The handling of symbols in ritual exposes their powers to act upon and change the persons involved in ritual performance. Conclusively, Turner's definition of ritual refers to ritual performances involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs. He defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers" (1967:19). Likewise, a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is a "storage unit" filled with a vast amount of information (1968a:1-2).

Symbolism lies in the language, material constituents and the geographical topography. With the variety of entities present throughout the environment, the culture has chosen a specific set of elements which they suppose display the required metaphor. With the passage of time, these symbols become a key aspect in the culture while the nature of its origin is rarely known. The only way to find the meaning is to go thorough into the research as thoroughly as possible. For every practice there is always a meaning and every meaning has a reason behind it.

Rites of passage are ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another. Many of the most important and common rites of passage are connected with the biological

crises of life--birth, maturity, reproduction, and death--all of which bring changes in social status and, therefore, in the social relations of the people concerned. Van Gennep saw the rites as means by which individuals are eased, without social disruption through the difficulties of transition from one social role to another. He views the social and psychological significance of rites of passage as, positive value for the individual in relieving stress at times when great rearrangements in life occurs; such as are brought by coming of age, entering marriage, becoming a parent, or at the death of a close relative, and in providing instructions in and approval of his or her new roles.

The Lepchas are one of the oldest inhabitants of the eastern Himalayan region. Lepchas are known to be animists, that is, they worship nature. The traditional Lepcha cosmology is polytheistic in nature and majority of the lore revolve around nature and their environment. Their cosmology revolves around the main deities and the two sides of spirits; that is; the *Rum* (benevolent spirits) and the *Mungs* (malevolent spirits). The Lepchas have their own spiritual mediator in the form of *Muns* and *Bongthings*. *Muns* are usually female mediators who practice communicating with the dead and other spiritual elements of rituals. The *Muns* could be both female and male. The *Bongthing* is male. The *Bongthing* is the religious mediator who officiates the ceremonies and certain rituals. In traditional practice, the *Bongthing* is needed to officiate ceremonies of Birth and Marriage and the *Mun* looks over guiding the spirit to the afterlife. The exaltation of the *Rums* or the alleviation of the *Mungs* are all performed by them.

With the introduction of Buddhism during the 17th century, most of the Lepcha were converted into Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhists started learning and writing

the Lepcha language so as to propagate their religion. The same goes with the Christian missionaries in the late 18th century. In case of the Buddhist influence, Mainwaring in his book *A Grammar of the Rong Language* (1876), says “they collected and destroyed the manuscripts and books of the Lepchas; and translated into Lepcha parts of their own mythological works under the name of *Tashi-Sung*” (1876:xi). Thus most of the studies on Lepcha religion are based on the Buddhist ideas in Lepcha cosmology. Since then, many of the early books written on Lepcha culture are based on Buddhist theologies. At the time of British colonialism, Christianity also seeped into the society and many people converted into Christianity. With the influences of these two major religions, the traditional Lepchaculture broke down into these two major world religions. And with the need to assimilate into the mainstream society, many of the traditional observances went unobserved and with the passage of time, these rituals and their meanings were forgotten. Only the ones which were of major importance were realized while the others perished as they remained undocumented.

There are various works written on the culture of the Lepchas by scholars from around the globe. Yet there are certain aspects of it which hasn't been deeply explored. The symbolic and material representation of their culture is one of them. The scholars have been able to bring out the stories of the major instances, while most of the smaller tidbits of the culture have not been deciphered yet. These tidbits have not been taken into much account mainly due to the changes caused by modern times leading to forgetfulness. Also with the influence of other dominant religions, many of the traditional ceremonies have changed since then.

Statement of the Problem:

Cultures have always been symbolic in nature, and symbols are ways of depicting culture and its meanings. They have greater and deeper meanings that is specific to a certain culture. The religious practices have always held meanings in doing what they do and why they do it. Similarly, the rites of passage among cultures have held meanings of their own which needs critical observation and their meanings explained carefully to understand their true motifs. Researchers have mostly looked into it in a descriptive perspective explaining more on how they do what they do and less upon why they do it. Because of these reasons, most meanings remain undocumented, unexplained and un-understood and eventually lose their true essence.

The Lepcha rites of passage is important to Lepcha culture. But it has undergone major changes due to the influence of other religions and have lost most of its meanings in the process. The meanings are now known only to a few and with the passage of time, these symbolic meanings and culture will gradually disappear. It therefore becomes a key imperative for preserving these from later extinction. These meanings are important in understanding the nature of the ritual and its contribution to the understanding of the culture as a whole. However, there is a dearth of literature in the understanding of Lepcha rituals that necessitates the urgency in trying to understand the same. The rites of passage among cultures hold meanings of their own which needs critical observation and their meanings explained carefully to understand their true motifs. There has been a little emphasis on the symbolism on the Rites of Passage. This study proposes to look into birth, marriage and death rituals among the Lepcha. It will try to decipher, understand and explain the deeper meanings that are hidden in different practices of the Lepchas and therein the changes that have taken up so far. The study would then allow the researcher to speculate upon how much

changes have come to existence since then and of how much prominence these changes have taken up in the spectrum.

Objectives:

- To study the cultural symbols in the rites of passage among Lepchas
- To understand the origin and the meaning of these symbols.
- To explore the changes in the understanding of these symbols of Lepchas

Review of Related Literature:

Symbols play a significant role in depicting the elements of a culture. It is these symbols itself which define the differences between various cultures by associating certain ones to another. Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), talks about the thick and thin description. With the significance to the intricacies of rituals and symbolism, the study of thick description becomes imperative to which Geertz writes "...ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" (1973:9-10). A sign may hold different meanings which lie in the hands of the person interpreting it. Likewise, the meanings can be described differently by different people. The outsider's interpretations can be entirely different from the natives. Speaking about the concept of symbols in not only the cultural perspectives but also in the day to day spheres and in the languages created by humans. Deacon (2011) states that "in the humanities, social sciences, theology, and mythology the term 'symbol' is often reserved for complex, esoteric relationships such as the

meanings implicit in totems or objects incorporated into religious ritual performances” (2011: 394). From the semiotics of symbols to the evolution of language adaptations, the writer shows how the symbols have affected the development of language and influenced the hierarchy and particularity of symbols which encompasses in the diverse human social circle. The distinction between symbolic and non-symbolic lies in the eyes of the people themselves. But for scholars, this must be perceived differently regarding the differences existing between modern and ‘primitive’ societies. For the past 100 years, anthropologists have vigorously debated the issue of the similarities of thought between primitive and modern cultures (Malinowski 1954, Levi Strauss 1966, Levy- Bruhl 1966, Goody 1977). With some notable exceptions, sociologists have accepted the significance of symbolic analyses in the study of religious ritual and myth and in art, but they have not recognized the validity of anthropological methods of analysis in other contexts (Nagendra 1971; Bocock 1974; Duncan 1968, 1969). The underlying meanings in symbols are now recognized by many scholars and have now started to look much deeper into it than they used to earlier. “But meaning and symbol are not dependent as things on context; they are relations, not objects. Ignoring this point, seeing meanings and symbols as things, has allowed cultural analysts to erect a distinction between symbolic structures and concrete structures; to differentiate religion, myth, art-held to be "essentially" symbolic forms-from economics, politics, kinship, or everyday living. This is a position we reject” (Dolgin et al 1977: 22). Geertz explains the sacred symbols as those that, relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality. Their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import. (Geertz 1973:127). Turner (1969) remarked that these rites of

passage negate normal rules and the social hierarchy of society, and emphasize instead the bonds between people which enable society to exist. He called the latter *communitas* -the very negation of social structure which the liminal phase of initiation (and other) rituals draws on for its symbolic power.

Turner also draws a distinction between dominant and instrumental symbols. Dominant symbols appear in many different ritual contexts, but their meaning possesses a high degree of autonomy and consistency throughout the total symbolic system. Instrumental symbols are the means of attaining the specific goals of each ritual performance. Instrumental symbols can be investigated only in terms of the total system of symbols which makes up a particular ritual, since their meaning can be revealed only in relation to other symbols (1967:31-32).

The symbolism in the Lepcha culture is very much influenced by the folklore. The earliest studies on the Lepchas was done by Dr. Archibald Campbell titled “Note on the Lepchas of Sikkim with the vocabulary of their language” (1840). Henceforth, there have been numerous studies on the Lepchas and the researchers have extensively written on the Rites of Passage. In his book *Lepchas of Sikkim*(year), Gorer also describes the rites of Lepcha life. The book displays the Lepcha life in 1930s and points out the rituals observed in their lives. A descriptive narration of the Lepcha life gives an image of the culture which it is. Siiger during 1949-50 had arrived in India and conducted his studies on the Lepchas of Sikkim and Kalimpong. After his research he compiled three monograph volumes. His narrative on his journey is expressed in his article ‘In Awe of so many Mung’ and other articles. He later also published *The Lepchas: Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People* (1967). With influences from prominent scholars and his own past accounts, Siiger wrote an intricate description on the Lepcha. He included various aspects of Lepcha cultures

including medicine and warfare, agricultural and hunting rituals etc. In *The Lepchas of West Bengal* (1978), A.K. Das describes the Lepchas as “simple, amiable, cheerful, helpful, co-operative, careful and lack in spirit of conflict” (Das 1978: 28). The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), Kalimpong, is one of the community associations who started to write and publish articles on the Lepcha culture. In the book *Lepcha Adivsi: Ek Parichay* (2005) it introduces the Lepcha customary law on the rites of passage. The book is written in Hindi and describes the three stages in the rites of passage that is *Tangbong fatt* (birth ritual), *Namko bri* (marriage ritual) and *Amak sa dihrim* (death ritual).

Rites of Passage is “the various rites by means of which societies effect transitions in the life of an individual from one social identity to another [include] celebrations of crises in the life cycle. There is an initial stage of separation in which the individual is divorced from his familiar environment; a transitional stage, in which his old identity is destroyed and a new one created; and a final stage of incorporation in which he is reintegrated into society in his new role” (Berry 1984: 2). These stages are flexible in application but are still useful for considering the way rites of passage change the participant's sense of identity. Rites of passage are universal, and presumptive evidence from archaeology in the form of burial finds strongly suggests that they go back to very early times. The worldwide distribution of these rites long ago attracted the attention of scholars, but the first substantial interpretation of them as a class of phenomena was presented in 1909 by French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who coined the name rites of passage. van Gennep saw the rites as means by which individuals are eased, without social disruption, through the difficulties of transition from one social role to another. Though the most commonly observed rites relate to crises in the life cycle, van Gennep saw the

significance of the ceremonies as being social or cultural, celebrating important events that are primarily sociocultural or man-made rather than biological. Modern scholars in the social sciences characteristically accept the views of van Gennep about the social and psychological significance of rites of passage; that is, passage rites are seen to have positive value for the individual in relieving stress at times when great rearrangements in his life occur, such as are brought by coming of age, entering marriage, becoming a parent, or at the death of a close relative, and in providing instruction in and approval of his new roles. The rites are seen also to be socially supporting in various ways. Such support includes roles of the rites in preventing social disruption by relieving the psychological stress of the individuals concerned; providing clear instruction to all members of societies to continue life in normal fashion with new social alignments. The affirmation they provide of social and moral values expressed and thus sanctioned as part of the ceremonies; and the social unity they foster by joint acts and joint expression of social values. One of the primary functions of rites of passage that is often overlooked by interpreters, perhaps because it appears obvious, is the role of the rites in providing entertainment. Passage rites and other religious events have in the past been the primary socially approved means of participating in pleasurable activities, and religion has been a primary vehicle for art, music, song, dance, and other forms of aesthetics.

Among Lepchas, the Rites of Passage can be divided into three groups that is Birth, Marriage and Death. In *Lepchas and their Heritage* (1990), Chattopadhyay discusses upon the Lepcha culture, economy, territory and mentions the “Rong Life Cycle” too. He includes the three stages of life which is Birth, Marriage and Death. He writes that “when a Lepcha child is born, it is visited by a fairy (*King-chung-darmit*) within the first three days. The fairy writes out its future on its forehead and

fixes its life cycle from which it can have no escape” (1990:47). He also shows the different taboos observed during the pregnancy and after delivery. These taboos are highly observed for the future of a healthy child. Animal sacrifice is practiced so as to avoid complications during childbirth. Extra precautions are taken for the child to develop into a normal boy or a girl. In *Folklore and Customs of the Lap-Chas of Sikkim* (1925), Stocks mentions the Lepcha life cycle. He writes that, after the time of birth the *Rum* are supposed to take care of the child from the demons that may harm them. A.K. Das, mentions that in Darjeeling a ritual known as *Sachakram* is performed for the welfare of the mother and the child. There are cases of adoptions which are much rare. If so, the adopted child is called *Khup-trop*, the father as *Juit-bo*, and the mother as *Juit-mu*. (Das 1974:130).

Likewise Lepchas have their own rules or norms of marriage. Rather than the parents, uncles play a very important role in matchmaking. Before marriage, the couple is to undergo an engagement ceremony or *Nyom chi-taro*. Prior to that, the groom party shows up at the bride’s place and instead of directly asking the parents for the bride’s hand, they put up a “somber and meek expression: we have come with folded hands to seek your permission to pluck a flower from among the beautiful garden...” (1990:52). An elaborate wedding ceremony is undertaken for the bride to fully blend into the groom’s household. Polygamous marriage is non-preferential. Widow re-marriage is practiced but only under sororate and levirate lines. Exogamy is restricted to much extent and marriages usually occur within their own society. There are many considerations to be fulfilled during marriage, one which Das mentions as the astrology of the partners (*Ibid*: 138). Elaborating upon the star signs, there are instances which are seen as auspicious and some which are inauspicious or ill-lucked. Consent plays a vital role in matchmaking and after the socio-religious protocols are

over, the couple moves toward marriage. He then mentions the three phases in marriage which are in Lepcha termed as; *Sigiyang*, *Asek-new*, and *Niyom chum*. Today the girl and the boy find their own partners but in earlier days arranged marriage was much emphasized. Gorer (1987) states that marriages are always arranged through the offices of two *Bek-bus*(mediator). The biological parents are not to do anything with their children's marriage or else their children would die young or the marriage would break up. Divorce cases are rare in the Lepcha community. "Out of every 100 Lapchas of West Bengal about 0.88 percent is divorced or separated" (Das 1978: 158). Tamsang (2012) has written an article on the Lepcha marriage or *Naamko Bree*. In this he included the customary laws which were not seen in many books of Lepcha rituals. With regards to this law, he states that, "the Lepcha women continue to receive the respect, dignity and honor, they so deserve from their Lepcha men even today" (2012: 14). This states that the customary laws are sanctioned so as to keep the respect and status of Lepcha women in the society.

The last event in every Lepchas life is death (Chattopadhyaya 1990). According to them, "death is the negation of all they see and feel" (1990: 55). The *mung* befalls upon the person their cause of death. Therefore the disposition of the body and appeasing the *mung* responsible for it are the first major priority for them. The traditional method of disposal of the Lepcha was burial. In Lepcha, the burial ground is called *kokk-brong-lyang*, the burial stone *kook-boom*, and the memorial is *kokk-dee*. If the deceased follows the Buddhist tradition, on the day of the burial the *Lama* comes for a sacrifice to the dead saying, "You are now dead, and have left this house, do not think of your wife and children, do not think of any animal else they will all die, and we shall know your spirit is here" (Stocks 2001:475). In an article by Lepcha (2016) entitled *Aamaak saa Dihrim*, she describes the death rituals of the

Lepcha folk. According to Lepcha belief, the spirit of the deceased or the *Apil* (soul) leaves for *Poomju* (place of origin). After the advent of Buddhism in the 18th century, the concept of *Poomju* shifted to *Rum-lyang* (heaven) and *Nyo-lyang* (hell), as Gorer writes “the soul is conducted to the *Rum-lyang* (paradise)”(1987:336). *Pildong-mun* has the duty to guide the departed souls to the final resting place or *Poomju*. The *Bongthing* is required to do the initial rituals that is *Lee-rum-faat*, but the *Mun* is the true guide to the departed.

However, Foning (1987) states that certain traditions have changed completely due to the extraneous culture that has taken roots in Lepcha society. Some examples would be the dressed rooster required for performing the *nyom-zogul* (welcome ceremony for the bride),rites have been skipped by Renjyong (Sikkim) Lepchas, particularly the ones living away from the Lepcha environment. In the east of river Rongnyoo, “important items like the *myok-mangkung chee*, the *akut* (bull)meat have been practically forgotten in almost all the regions” (Foning 1987:232). With the influence of Tibetan culture in Sikkim, Foning states, “...we Lepchas take pride in the display of Tibetanised way of doing things. To the *nyom-vet* we have given the glorified name of *Kachyong* and the *Ashake* we term *Nangchyong*” (*Ibid*: .233). He makes a concluding remark by saying that, “...by the time I was mature enough to understand what was what, our marriage customs had become a mixture of Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and our own” (*Ibid*:234). Indeed, the “the slow and gradual forgetfulness of their traditional practices” (Lepcha 2013: 127) has been mentioned by native scholars like Gowloog (1995), Lepcha (2013) etc.

From the above literature, there is one thing similar that all of them have studied the Lepcha culture in a descriptive context but the significance of the symbolic aspect on Lepcha culture has not yet been explored. One can also note that

the mention of the rites of passage has been brief and a thorough study regarding birth, marriage and death has not taken place. There have been major studies been done with respect to the Buddhist context. Likewise, no author has emphasized on studying the symbolic aspects of the culture. Hence this study proposes to do a proper analytics study of symbolism in the rites of passage among the Lepchas of Darjeeling.

Methodology:

The area for the study chosen are Darjeeling and Kalimpong. In Darjeeling, the universe comprised of local youths and the role of Lepcha association in the urban area. In Kalimpong, the universe comprised of Bom Busty, a Lepcha village near Kalimpong town which includes the rural environment and where both *Bongthingism* and *Buddhism* is practiced. The study is qualitative in nature and active participation in Lepcha homes during these rites of passage was recorded. Data was collected through both structured and informal interviews. Interviews focused on the traditional experts of the Lepcha community including the *Muns*, *Bongthings*, and the elderly as they are the knowledgeable people on the topic. Case studies, so as to ask about the people about their experiences on the rites of passage. An attempt has been made to use art as ethnography to depict the burial practices.

Ethnography method was used by going to the field and doing participant observation. Interviews (both formal and informal) were conducted to collect of oral stories, folktales and different folklores. Reviewing past experiences from the village folk was also practiced. Secondary data will be collected through the books, journals, articles, websites and other available resources.

The researcher also used audio-visual method in recording the interviews of the ritual specialists and the knowledgeable elders. Since the authenticity of the

stories are limited to a knowledgeable few, the traditional experts become an integral part in the unraveling of the underlying meanings and give clear definitions to the symbols. Since not all the data can be deciphered into text alone, for better understanding the audio-visual methods will be used so as to materialize the material culture and allow the researcher for further references. An attempt has been made to make illustrations through sketches to give a visual representation of certain phenomenon.

Limitations of the Study:

The research took longer due to the strike in the proposed field area. It was observed by the people in Darjeeling and Kalimpong for 104 days. Due to the strike many marriages could not take place and therefore only interviews with recently wed families were taken. There was a stop in the transportation as well therefore the researcher was unable to go to the field. Telecommunications and internet services were also affected by the strike hence delaying the whole process.

The Lepcha population in Darjeeling is very low. Furthermore, the population is widespread across the town, therefore a particular Lepcha dominated area is not available. Due to the low population, the number of Lepcha ritual specialists are also very low. Most of the ritual specialists tend to come from Kalimpong to perform ceremonies in Darjeeling. Even if the two towns are at close proximity, these two share an entirely different approach. There is very less interaction between the two regions; apart from annual ceremonies, there is not much contact between the two, instead they are more assimilated to the cosmopolitan nature in Darjeeling as compared to Kalimpong.

While most of the interviews could be done in Nepali, the rituals officiated by the ritual specialists were conducted in Lepcha language which were later translated hence much could've been lost in translation.

Organization of Thesis:

The first chapter introduces the concept of Symbols, Symbolism, Rites of Passage and the Rites of Passage among Lepchas. It also explains the statement of the problem on why the research has been conducted and the limitations the researcher had to confront in conducting the study. The objectives of the research is also highlighted in this chapter.

The second chapter explains about the area of study and the community upon which the study is conducted. It gives us a picture of Lepcha people in Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts of West Bengal.

The third chapter focuses on the Rites of Passage among Lepchas. It gives the details on the ritual practices and the observations during the birth, marriage and death and the performance during these ceremonies. It also includes folklores which depicts the origin of certain institutions and their importance on the Lepcha culture.

The fourth chapter focuses on the changes which have come about the practice on the Rites of Passage. It draws upon the influence of modernization and influences of dominant religion and culture.

The fifth chapter gives us the summary and the concluding remarks on how the symbols have changed and how the Lepchas are expressing these changes and reacting to them.

Chapter II

The Lepchas

The Lepchas are known to be the earliest inhabitants in the eastern Himalaya, “the original inhabitants of Eastern Himalayas” (Roy 2014: 7). The language and culture of this old community is still eminent and has flourished even after the due events of modernization. Lepchas are found in Sikkim, western and south western Bhutan, Tibet, the Mechi Zone of eastern Nepal, and in the hills of WestBengal. Today, the Lepcha population is spread all across India an overseas. The origin of the word Lepcha is derived from the Nepali word “Lapce” or “Lapca” which means ‘vile speaker’, which originally had a derogatory connotation. After the advent of the British they started calling the Lepce “Lepchas”. (Tamsang 1998:2). Tamsang writes “the name Lapchey is given to the Lepcha people by the Nepalese. Lapchey means scurrilous speakers, a very contemptuous term referring to the Lepchas and therefore this term needs to be condemned outright because it is most derogatory and unfavorable to the Lepchas....” (Tamsang 1998:2) Today, the term ‘Lepcha’ is widely used without this connotation.

The Lepchas call themselves *MutanchiRongkup Rumkup* which means beloved children of Mother Nature. According to the Lepcha lore, it is believed that *IthuDebuRum* created the first Lepcha man, *Fudongthing*, and the first Lepcha woman, *Nazongnyoo*, from the virgin snow of Mt. Kanchenjunga. After their creation, *IthuDebu Rum* sent *Fudongthing* to live at the top of *TungengNarengChyu* (mountain peak) and *Nazongnyoo* to live next to *NahoNatharDa* (lake). Following *the Rum’s* order, they lived in isolation for many years. But as the time passed on, their desire to see each other grew stronger and stronger until one day *Nazongnyoo* decided to leave

her home and go meet *Fudongthing*. Since they were the first children of the *Itbu Debu Rum*, they were not allowed to have children. Even so the strong bond between the two made it inevitable and gave birth. Since they feared that they were going against the will of *Itbu Debu Rum*, they threw away the children that were born. After they threw away their seven children. These seven children then became malevolent spirits or *Mungs* (Lepcha, 2017).

According to the writings of Aathing K.P. Tamsang, “because of *Phudongthing* and *Nazong nyu’s* ill-conceived actions, *mungs* or devils/demons, started to appear on earth. Among them the most dangerous and the most dreaded *mung* happened to be *Lasso Mung* and was given the title of *Mung Panu*, the King of the devils and demons (Gorer 1987:127). There were a group of brave Lepcha warriors who played their roles in the defeat of the demon king *Laso Mung Pano*. After the defeat of the demon king, the Lepchas were divided into mainly ten clans.

1. Munlaommoo
2. Karvomoo
3. Adenmoo
4. Phyoong Tālimmoo
5. Joriboo
6. Brimoo
7. Lutsaommoo
8. Seemickmoo
9. Sungngootmoo
10. Sungdyangmoo

Clans

The clans play an important role in the Lepcha life. Not only has it given an individual an identity but also in terms of marriage, mainly to avoid incestuous relations. Clans give recognition to lineages and ancestry. Apart from the ten mentioned clans, there have come up other clan groups as well. These new clans have formed due to the communion with other cultures and castes. Today, clans symbolize not only their ancestry but also where they are from.

Lepchas are, now, divided into four political states forming regional identities; however, linguistically and culturally, they remain as one. The four sections of the Lepchas are:

1. Renjyongmoo, who are the Lepchas of Sikkim
2. Damsangmoo are the Lepchas of Dāmsāng, today's Kalimpong district, Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Siliguri areas
3. Ilammoo are the Lepchas of Ilām, east Nepal,
4. Promoo: are the Lepchas of 'Pro' meaning Bhutan in Lepcha.

Family

Lepchas mostly comprise of nuclear families. Once the eldest son gets married, he builds his house in the nearby ancestral land and starts his own family. Unmarried siblings are taken care by the family members and the youngest son usually occupies the main house. The power of the household lies in both the male and the female elder of the house. The bi-lineal lineage system which means that the son takes the father's clan name and the daughter takes her mother's name. This gives us an idea that both male and female hold equal rights and voice in running the family (Lepcha, 2017). A traditional Lepcha house is called *Dookey-moo-lee* or *Kaaden-moo-lee*.

Language

The Lepchas have their own language called *Rongring* and the script is called *Raong Choming* (Das & Das, 2017). Apart from *Rongring*, Lepchas also speak in Nepali, English, Bengali and Hindi. The language belongs to the Tibeto Burman language family. George van Driem (1998, 2006) combined his knowledge of linguistic history of the Tibeto-Burman language family with archaeological evidences and proposed a theoretical model of migration pattern of ancient Tibeto-Burman in which he estimated that the ancestors of the Lepchas may have migrated in the third and fourth millennium B.C. His model states that the Proto-Lepcha form part of the early southerly movement from the Majiayao cultural assemblage. So, these archaeological and linguistic finding point that Lepchas have been residing in the Sikkimese hills from “atleast 5,000 B.C” (Mullard, 2011: 5-9).

Clothing

Traditionally, both Lepcha men and women clothes were made of Nettle fibres or *Kuzoo*. Today these clothes are considered antiques, are much expensive and mostly used only during special ceremonies. The Lepcha female dress is called *dumdem*(fig.2.1). It consists of one large piece of material that is folded over the left shoulder first, and then pinned at the other shoulder and held in place with a waistband known as *Namrek* over which a part of the remaining material known as the *Dumpim* hangs. The *Dumpim* was earlier used as a bag to carry materials. A long-sleeved blouse known as *Tagao* is worn inside the *Dumdem* which acts as a blouse.



Fig 2.1: *Dumdem*



Fig 2.2: *Dumpra*

The traditional male dress consists of a knee-length, multi-colored hand-woven cloth called *dumpra*, which is pinned together at one shoulder and held in place by a *Namrek*. The *dumpra* is usually worn over a shirt known as *Ginjya* and knee-length trousers. The men wear a cap called *Thyaktuk*, a flat round hat with stiff black velvet sides and a softer top of coloured material with a knot in the centre (fig 2). The more traditional version of a hat is made of a specific specie of bamboo with cane strips and is cone-shaped with a narrow brim known as *Tamok*. The dress is then accessorized with *Pathang*, a long knife with a flat tip. (Lepcha, 2017)

Religion

The Lepchas are nature worshippers. Before conversion, the Lepchas were animists and believed that nature is the provider and the protector of the Lepcha folk. The Lepchas believe that *Itbu-Debu Rum*, the Creator, Gods and Goddess, and spirits accept only *Chi* (millet beer) as a prior offering. *Chi* is offered to the various deities of

the Lepchas, Mt Kanchenjunga, and to *Itbu-debu Rum*, Creator, Gods and Goddesses and guardian spirits during the following ceremonies of the Lepchas.

Scholars have given the name of *Munism* and Boongthingism to this animistic practice of Lepchas, yet it does not fully justify the practice. The central religious roles are traditionally occupied by the *mun* and *bongthing*, who both function as shamans and priests. The *Bongthing* is traditionally a male shaman and priest who preside at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals he also heals illness. The *Mun*, often but not necessarily a female shaman, is a healer who exorcises demons, heals illnesses and guides souls to the afterlife. After the eighteenth century, the influx of Buddhism and Christianity led to the conversion of Lepcha population into these major religions. (Lepcha, 2017)

Festivals/ Ceremonies:

The Lepchas are nature worshippers and all the major ceremonies are dedicated to nature. The deities are associated with nature and their ancestors. With respect to their traditional religion, the Lepchas have done well to preserve their cultures and still observesome of their major festivals. These festivals are:

Chyu Rum Faat: In simple understanding *chyu* means mountain, so *Chyu Rum Faat* is a time of prayers and offerings to the mountains; specially Mt. Kanchenjunga.

Lee Rum Faat: It is usually members of certain household/ clan that come together and invoke the blessings of their respective guardian peaks.

Muk zyuk Ding Rum Faat: This is the first ceremony of the Lepcha calendar and is seen as the celebration of nature. It is a way of giving respect to their environment and the surroundings.

Sakyoo Rum Faat: It is a thanksgiving ceremony and prayer to the year's produce and no one is allowed to eat from the new harvest until the rituals are over. It is also an

offering to the seven immortal Lepcha couples of *Mayel Kyong* who is believed to have given them their first seeds of the crops.

Satap Rum Faat: It is the offering to *satap rum*, the god of hail storms. It is performed during winter, around January. During the prayers, *satam rum* is asked not to send storms, natural disasters, hail or flood but accept the offerings instead.

Teesta Rum Faat: It was a sacrifice to avoid natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides.

Tendong Hlo Rum Faat: During the time of the deluge, Lepchas are believed to have climbed Mt. Tendong and fervently prayed to *Ibu-debu-rum* to save them from drowning. In answer to their prayers, the waters subsided and the tribe was saved. For the Lepchas,

Nambum/ Namsoong: The victory over *lasso mung's* death marks the celebration of a new beginning, the New Year for the Lepchas known as *namsoong/nambun*

Food

The staple food of the Lepchas is maize, millet, barley, and rice. Before the introduction of wet rice cultivation, dry paddy was cultivated and consumed. They eat different kinds of fruits, wild plants and tubers. They are non-vegetarian and indulge in different kinds of meat. Their favourite drink is the local *chi*, the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet, which plays an essential part in all spheres of Lepcha life. Traditional ritual specialists use it for rites of passage, and is especially important during a Lepcha marriage ceremony. (Ibid, 2017)

Political Institution

The early Lepcha political institution consisted of Mandalship under the British rule. Prior to that, it is unclear whether Lepchas were ruled by chiefs or kings. Later after independence, the Lepchas formed an association headed by Aathing Sando Tshering Tamsang named Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association in 1925. The main focus on forming the Association was reintroduction of Lepcha language and literature in the school curriculum and official use. The traditional Lepcha political organization comprise of a three tier system; *Kyong-sezoom*, *Thum-sezoom* and *Poom-sezoom*.

Kyong-sezoom is the village level organization;

Thum-sezoom at the sub-divisional level. There are 9 in Darjeeling and 16 in Kalimpong.

Poom-sezoom at the topmost level or the district level.

The main headquarters of the Lepcha association is located in Kalimpong.

Economy

The Lepchas were traditionally a hunter-gatherer society. The Lepcha men used to hunt wild boars and other wild animals, while the Lepcha women used to grow crops. Today, the Lepchas mainly indulge in business, government offices, schools and other non-agricultural occupations. In the outskirts, the people practice agriculture and livestock rearing. Both cash crops and food crops are grown, but cash crops are much greater. Cash crops include Cardamom, Broom Plant, Ginger and Chilies.

Field Area:

Two locations have been used as field area for this present study.



Fig 2.3: Map of Field Area

Darjeeling

Darjeeling is a colonial town developed by the British. But prior to the coming of the British, the place was known by different names by the locals residing there. According to the Tibetans, Darjeeling consists of two words that is *Dorje* or thunderbolt and *ling* or land. But according to Lepchas, it comes from two words, *Darju* and *lyang* which translates to the Land of the Gods. The Lepcha population in Darjeeling is not nucleated but is spread across the whole district. In case of Darjeeling town, the population is very much scattered. Therefore, the area of interest was taken as the association offices located in Chaurasta and Chowk Bazar. Chaurastahas the office of the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (MLLDB) and Chowk Bazarhas the office for the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA).

Kalimpong

The word Kalimpong comes from the Lepcha word *Kaalenpung* which means “our assemblage hillock”. In Kalimpong, the village of Lower Bom Busty is the field area for the researcher as it holds the place of rich cultural knowledge banks. The place has a monastery which is popularly known locally as the *Lepcha Gumba* and has the home of the knowledgeable members of the ILTA. The area also has a hostel for the Lepcha students. A school lies in the heart of the village, named Kumudini Homes. The Lepcha population is concentrated mainly in Kalimpong. Therefore the head office of ILTA is also located in Kalimpong itself. The concentration of the Lepchas in Kalimpong makes the place a center for thriving Lepcha culture. Kalimpong is a newly formed district in northern Bengal. On 14 February 2017, Kalimpong was officiated as a separate district. Located only two and a half kilometers away from Kalimpong town, Bom Busty is a typical village found in dictionary definitions—a group of houses, shops, etc. usually with a church and situated in a country district (Cowie 1992). Bom Busty is a relatively Lepcha dominated area and includes Lepcha households who continue their traditional culture and religion.

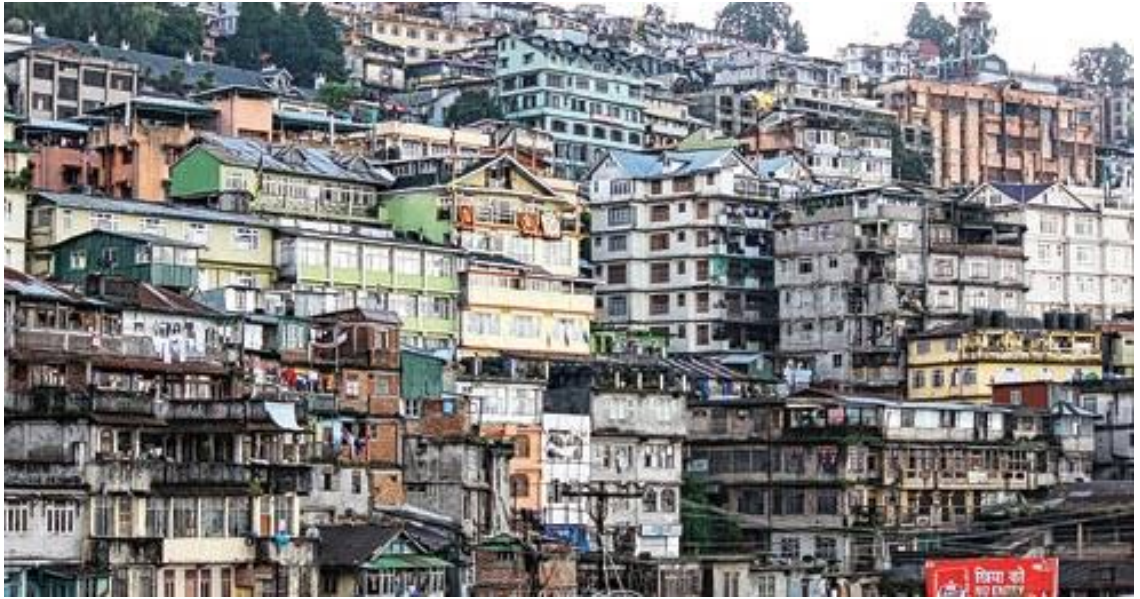


Fig 2.4: The Darjeeling town area.



Fig 2.5: The Lepcha Gumba of Bong Busty.

Chapter III

The Rites of Passage

Rites of passage is a universal ceremony performed in various cultures accordingly. Van Gennep (1960) clarifies the rites of passage as a transition from one stage of life to other of an individual. The rites of passage can be seen in both secular and sacred spheres. The secular spheres include graduation ceremonies, employment parties, etc. Other examples can be, a boy cutting his hair when he joins the army and waiting for deployment. This shows that the boy is ready to take on a new role and the hair cutting shows his will to work in this new position. The sacred spheres include all things religious; that is, birth ceremonies, marriage, death, coming of age ceremonies etc. Its rituals and practices can be seen in almost all different cultures which span across the globe. From the Jewish Bar-Mitzvah to the Brahmin Vardaman, the transitory phase is celebrated in its variety to its uniqueness. The rites of passage are numerous in numbers and nature, but for the topic in hand, we shall focus on the sacred spheres. The rites of passage as we understand marks the major periods during one's lifetime. During this the individual gains new identity or integration to a new group. He or she is then considered as a part of a culture and a member of the community. The rites of passage also seem to show care and concern towards the individual by the family. The rites of passage plays an important role in marking the major events which occur during a person's life. The Lepcha rites of passage can be divided into three ceremonies; the birth ceremony or *Tungbong-faat*, the marriage ceremony or *Namkoo-Bri*, and the death ceremony or *Amak Sa Dihrim*. These rituals are always preceded by the ritual known as the *Lee Rum Faat* or the worship of the household guardians and ancestors. After doing appropriate rituals and preparations, these rituals are practiced accordingly.

However, there are many variations on how these rites of passage are performed. It differs from the location, the village, the clan and even the priest who performs it. The only commonality seen is that the altar of the house in which the ceremony is performed remains untouched or unaltered. There is a Lepcha saying, “100 priests perform ceremonies in 100 different ways, but the altar is to remain unchanged”. This is done to appease the household deities and ancestral guardians, and before the ceremonies the priest chants prayers of forgiveness for the way in which he performs the ritual.

There are many items used in various ceremonies performed by the Lepchas. Among those ingredients the most significant is the *Chi/ Chilok* (fermented millet/ fermented millet, water and butter) followed by *Phogo-rip* (*Oroxylum indicum*). These items are important and key in performing any type of rituals. The *Chi* is used in all the rituals performed by the *muns* and the *bongthings*. *Chi* becomes an identity marker during Lepcha ritual as it is used in all three rites of passage. During *Tungbong fat*, a newborn baby is fed with a few drops of *Chi*, a Bride and a Groom becomes a couple only after drinking and sharing *Chi* from the same cup. During death ceremony, the departed soul is offered *ChiPathayot*, a bamboo or a wooden cylinder, containing *Chi* with the bamboo pipe or straw placed upside down to mark the person is dead (Tamsang 2008). The *Phogo-ripis* considered to be the purest flower and hence it is used in auspicious ceremonies. The reason why these items are considered important is that they have a folklore behind it, which gives a firm meaning behind its importance and use. The flower is blessed by the Creator itself, and hence considered to be fresh, pure and eternal (*Ibid* 2008).



Fig 3.1: *Chilok* (Yellow) and *Chi* (Red)



Fig 3.2: *Totola* or *Oroxylum indicum*

Agekand Tungbong- Faat

The Lepchas give their own meaning to the concept of birth. It is believed that all Lepchas are born from the mountains, made from the snow of mount Kanchenjunga by *Itbu-debu-rum*, thus calling themselves as *Rongkup* or *Rumkup*. There are Lepcha deities which are considered as a child's guardian since their conception. The male child is looked after by *Kathaong fi* and the female child by *Nunglen nyu*. These guardian deities play a significant role in the development of the child and also play a role during the wedding ceremony. During pregnancy, a number of taboos are observed so as to ascertain the proper birth of the child. Until the child is purified in the ceremony of *Tangbong-faat*, the child is considered as a *Talherik* which means that the child is not considered as a human i.e. is not considered as a part of society for the time. After six months into pregnancy, a ceremony called *Mu-samis* observed where one whole pig or bull is sacrificed and the meat is fed to the expecting mother. This is done so to provide adequate nourishment to the mother for the development of the unborn child. There are strict taboos which are to be followed during the pregnancy period. The expecting couple are not to view any eclipses. The reason

being that the rays of the eclipse can cause mental illnesses or instability in the newborn baby. Any form of animal killing or dead bodies are also not to be witnessed by the couple as it is believed that it may cause the child to suffer from paralysis since birth. There are instances where babies were born paralyzed which they believe occurred because they did not follow the taboo. Other taboos include, the expecting father must not tie a knot nor drive a nail. This is believed to cause complications during birth. Both the father and the mother of the child are to observe the rituals for the well development of the child.

Today, the ceremony is observed three or seven days after the child is born. For the male child it is three days and for the female it is seven. In this ceremony, the child enters the world as a human and is no longer considered as a *Talherik*. Then the child is assigned to their respective *Chyu* (Peak), *Dah* (Lake) and *Lep* (Mountain Pass) depending on their *moo* (clan). Traditionally, the son receives his father's *Moo* and the daughter her mother's *Moo*. But in recent days, the daughter taking up her father's *Moo* is in practice. The main ingredient used in the ceremony is *Kaneem Kandang* (egg).

Bri and Namkoo Bri



Fig 3.3: A newlywed couple in their traditional attire.

The story of Lepcha marriage starts with the marriage of *Tarbongmo* and *Naripnaom*. In earlier times, there was no institution of Lepcha marriage as we understand today. People lived independently and many children would never know of their father and were usually raised by their mothers. The story of Lepcha marriage goes as; mother *Te-it-ta-mit-mu* lived with her daughter *Naripnaom* in Pentong, Dzongu. On the other end of Dzongu in *Lumlumtyang* lived a boy *Tarbongmo* with his mother. The boy and his mother were barely making a hand to mouth lifestyle and thus the boy decided to go to the *Sunglok* Mountain to catch a musk deer. With three months' worth of ration he began his hunt. As time went by, he was unable to catch the deer. He also quickly started running out of his ration and started trapping birds for food. In that mountain, while the boy was hunting, a young girl would come there and play with the animals. The girl would remove the birds from the traps and set them free. Since the boy had not met the girl yet, he had not discovered why he could not catch the birds. Without food, the boy was infuriated. He finally decided to look into why he was unable to

trap the birds. Thus he placed a trap and hid nearby. Later he discovered there was a girl setting free the birds. He came out of his hiding with the arrow and pointed at her. He then asked her who she was and where she was from. The girl answered him and the boy slowly lowered down his arrow. The boy was astounded by her beauty said that he would like to take her to his mother as a gift. The girl replied that he cannot take her just like that. He must take permission from her mother and dress her with *Kazi-lasung*(bridal gifts) and take her as a bride. Hesitantly and in a fit, the boy agreed and went back home. The girl, at home coyly asked her mother what would she do if someone took her away? What will the birds think of her when she will be dressed pretty? After finding all the items requested by the girl, the boy along with his family went to *Langzen*. Since there was no institution of marriage, the family members went into discussion on what to name this event. While discussing, one of the elder was fiddling with two twigs. In a moment of comprehension, he realized that two twigs if bound together became much stronger. The elder thus decided to name the event as *Bri*. In Lepcha, the binding of threads is called *Ki-bri*, thus like the thread the bond between the two individuals should be wound together. The twigs the elder was fiddling with was green, which symbolized that the ideal age of marriage is when both the members are young. Legend has it that in place where the event took place, the audience were having *chi* and when the name was approved they placed their mugs on the ground. And today there is a bamboo grove present there, verifying the occurrence of the event. This was considered the first ever marriage to be conducted in Lepcha community and the objects that was used then are considered in use till date. In that, marriage plays an important role in Lepcha community. It is seen as the union of two clans, families and individuals. *Bri* in Lepcha means *to braid* or in this case to combine.

The Lepcha marriage commences with the search for the bride. During the search, a middle man or a *Pibu/Bek bu* is sought after. This role is usually played by the paternal and maternal uncles of the bride and the groom. A *Pibu/Bek bu* is a mediator or a bridge between the families. From the day of searching the spouse till the marriage, the *Pibu/ Bek bu* gives his assistance for the communion of the two families. This role of the *Pibu/Bek bu* is to maintain contact between families and to conduct negotiations for marriage. A *Pibu/Bek bu* must be able to verbally answer the questions of the families, and therefore usually it is upto them whether the marriage is acceptable or not. It is the *Pibu/Bek-bu* who brings the news of eligible mates available for the man. After deducing the lineages and location, the *Pibu/Bek-bu* along with the uncles and other people go to the would-be bride's house.

The Lepchas have their own peculiar way of asking if the woman is available for marriage or not. Meek expressions are made by the *Pibu/ Bek-bu* like, "we have come from (location) looking for flowers and we could not help but look at your garden. You seem to have a really beautiful flower and would it be possible that we can have it?" After this, a series of queries goes down between the two parties which includes the exchange of information regarding the lineage, clan, education and other topics. After the first encounter, if the bride's family is interested, a date is given where the bride's family would meet with the groom's family and discuss upon their marriage. In the second meeting, the two parties fix a date for the engagement ceremony. The engagement ceremony was not as elaborate as it is today. There is an exchange of ring between the bride and the groom. In the earlier days, the ring was made of bamboo and is called *Takviland* the ring is called *Kakyup*. Along with the ring, a *syapto* (5 kg) of *Chi*, adorned by a garland or *Phogo-rip-lyak*. The bride's family must touch the offerings as it symbolizes the acceptance of the marriage

proposal. The Pibu/Bek-bu of both the parties then fix a date for the marriage ceremony. During the time between, the groom's Pibu /Bek-bu requests the bride for coming to shopping. During this, they choose clothes and jewelries.

On the day of the marriage, the groom leaves the house with a collective amount of offerings to the bride's family. Among the many items, some important ones are:

- *Chi* or : One syapto or 5 kgs in a Tungdyong (Bamboo Basket)
- Lepcha Hat
- *Amu-Dumdem* (Dress for the Mother)
- Beef forelimb and hindlimb
- *Zer kat* : 3 Rs for Boku/ Bonew (Maternal Uncle and Aunt), Muzyong/ Munew (Paternal Uncle and Aunt) and Faming (Brother)

The beef limb and the *Chi* which is given as a gift must be consumed by the entire family. It shows the sign of acceptance and even the tiniest amount will do. The offerings are displayed in front of the family and the *Pibu/Bek-bu* offers khada to the respective people.

In Lepcha tradition, the practice of Bride price or *Taya-Kup-Afar/ Nyom-Sa-Afar* or *Myok-Panol* is very much celebrated. The practice of bride price also has its origin in the first marriage that took place between *Tarbongmo* and *Naripnaom* as it was during this wedding that Komsithing, elder brother of *Tarbongmo* approached the hand of *Naripnaom* from her mother with gifts comprising of items that is still exchanged today. This signifies the importance of the girl in a Lepcha society and the respect they hold.

During the marriage ceremony, the *Bongthing* prepares *Chilok* (a mixture of *Chi*, water and butter) to anoint the ceremony and sings the story of Rongnyoo and Rangeet. After this, the *chilok* is given to the bride and groom, they both drink it from the same cup signifying their bond as one. Butter is put on the bride's forehead and *Chi* is offered to family members.

After the ceremony is finished at the bride's house, the groom's family takes the bride to her new home, that is, the groom's house. The bride is accompanied by her uncles and brothers. After reaching the Groom's house, the bride's company receives a boiled rooster and *chi* which is to be taken back, symbolizing the safe journey to the new home. This is termed as *Nyom-zogul*. While going out of the house, it can be noticed that there are gates erected in front of the two houses. The bride's gate opens outwards while the groom's gate opens inwards. This shows the movement of members between the two houses. When the bride reaches the groom's house, the mother is seen awaiting for their arrival. A bundle of sticks is placed beside the house, which is then to be carried by the bride and taken inside the house accompanied by the mother. The wood is then placed in the hearth and fire is lit. This symbolizes the bride as the new member of the family or acceptance into the new family. After three days, the newlyweds go to the bride's family with gifts as a form of kin bonding.

The Lepcha marriage also acts as a social bond that unites clans and families. For the Lepchas, marriage is an eternal bond. There is hardly any divorce which has been noted by the likes of Gorer (1938). Complying with this they have a system of *Angaop*. This means that a widow remarriage is possible if the family allows it. If the bride of the groom dies, he is able to marry the bride's single younger sister or niece. If the groom dies, the bride can marry the groom's single younger brother or nephew.

This is to ensure two things, the happiness of the two families and the economy of the family.

There are certain taboos which are upheld during the marriage ceremony.

- A Lepcha cannot marry someone from within one's own *Agit* or clan. Only after four generations one can again remarry the same *Agit*.
- A family affected with *Daot* (Leprosy).
- A family affected by *Sthong-daot* (attacked by a Tiger).
- A family with a history of suicide and murder.
- A family fighting over water and land disputes.

While there are no restrictions in marrying a non-Lepcha, tribe endogamy is definitely preferred. The Customary Law of Lepcha marriage dictates that in case of a love marriage with a woman outside the community, the parents of the Lepcha son shall act as follows;

“a. In consultation with the village elder and Lepcha Village Association, they shall bestow, confer, grant a suitable appropriate female Lepcha ‘Aagit’, clan, to the newly wedded non-Lepcha bride with due to Lepcha traditional ceremony called ‘Aali Oom’ by a Boongthing/Mun (priest/priestess) or a competent Lepcha elder in order to safeguard the interest of their future offspring, especially girls.

b. A non-Lepcha bride/wife with newly acquired female Lepcha ‘Aagit’, clan however, shall not be entitled to her husband's ancestral land and property. (2011)”

For the girl:

“a. If a Lepcha girl shall marry outside her community with a non-Lepcha, she automatically shall forfeit her claim and right as a Lepcha ancestral land and property. She shall become a non-Lepcha. Her off-spring either male or female shall become non-Lepcha.

b. An illicit off-spring, bastard fathered by a non-Lepcha shall not be entitled to the Lepcha ancestral land and property. (2011)”

Taking into accounts by Das (2017), there are eight different types of marriage, including traditional and modern practice:

- i. Arranged Marriage: in this type of marriage, a boy, reaching marriageable age, seeks out for a bride through the hands of a *Pibu/Bek-bu*. This is one of the oldest practice still favored and well accepted today.
- ii. Marriage by Test: in this type of marriage, the grooms compete against each other and the victor gets to marry the bride.
- iii. Junior Levirate or *Angaop*: in this type of marriage, widow remarriage is practiced. If the groom dies, the bride can marry either the groom’s single younger brother or the single nephew. If the bride dies, the groom can marry either bride’s single younger sister or the single niece.
- iv. Marriage by Service: in this type of marriage, the groom has to offer services or physical labor to the bride’s house. During his stay, he has to gain favor of all the family members, if he fails to do so, he is disqualified for marriage.
- v. Marriage by Mutual Consent and Elopement: in this type of marriage, or *Titbunong Thyum* in Lepcha, a girl elopes with a boy and should not return

as long as their parents' consent is given. When consent is given, fine has to be paid by the boy and is called *Tukmoo-thyum* in Lepcha. Exogamous marriages are most of the cases in this type of marriage.

- vi. Widow Remarriage: if there is no provision of *Angaop*, with proper consent from the elders, a widow can marry a new spouse.
- vii. Love Marriage: this is the present popular type of marriage. Both endogamous and exogamous marriages are entertained.
- viii. Marriage by Exchange: quoting Das (1978, 137); "it is quite common for two siblings from one family marry two siblings of another whether it is two brothers marrying two sisters or an exchange of sisters, each brother or sister of other. Gorer has also observed similar types of exchange among the Lepchas of Sikkim." It is a rare phenomenon, and today this type of marriage is rarely practiced.

Amak and Amak-sa-dihrim

One of the most interesting and elusive part of the Lepchas is their approach to death. They believe that all Lepchas are born from different mountains in the Kanchenjunga range and will return to their mountains at the time of death. *Poom-zu* is the ancestral spirit realm where all the deceased spirits go to rest. *Poom-zu* lies at the peak of Kanchenjunga and it is the *mun*'s duty to guide the departed soul. If a *mun* is unavailable, a *Bongthing* may also conduct the ceremony.

After death, the ceremony starts by cleaning the house. The body of the dead is never to be taken out the front door. This is because the front door signifies the entry of new life, like in marriage so a dead body is avoided in the front door. Instead, a hole is made in the ceiling so that the spirit may fly through, and the body is taken

out through a hole in the wall. Before taking the body out, the *Mun* calls out the *Chy*, *Lep*, and *Dah* of the deceased so as to inform the ancestors of their demise. From the time of death, the deceased's body and soul are both subject to be devoured by demons. *Mu-zom-tek* is the spirit which devours the flesh of the deceased also happens to hunt for the soul as well. To protect the spirit from harm, whilst the *Mun* performs the chanting, pieces of burning charcoal are thrown out of the window so as to scare and ward off the lurking demon.

After the ritual, the body is taken out through the wall. The body is placed in a box which is then taken to the *shing* (private field) and is buried there. The body is cleaned with *Kumtek* or Fig leaves and is buried. There are numerous burial types but among them the most popular ones are *Chyok-boom*, *Chyok-deir* and *Chyok Blee*. There were many types of burials which would signify the clan and the status of the person buried; but later it all came down to these major types.

1. *Chyok-boom*: In this method, the body is placed in an upright position and a spherical mound raised above the ground. A round stone is placed to show the way the body is buried.



Fig 3.4: *Chyok-boom*

2. *Chyok-blee*: In this method the body is placed in a reclined position and a pile of stones or materials are placed on the back so that the body remains upright. The legs are stretched and slightly raised. The stone is placed oblonged.

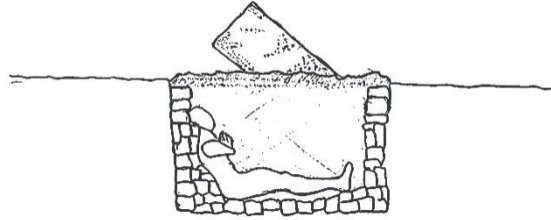


Fig 3.5: *Chyok-blee*

3. *Chyok-deir*: In this method the body is laid horizontally with the feet pointing towards Mt. Kanchenjunga. The stones are placed horizontally. In case of a child, the burial is same except the stone is laid horizontally with the stone placed between two vertically placed blocks.

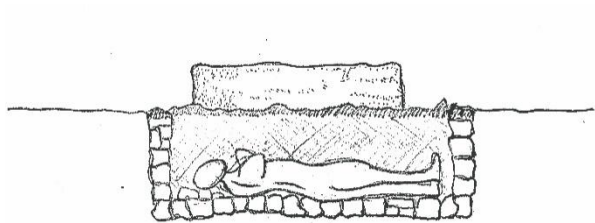


Fig 3.6 : *Chyok-deir*

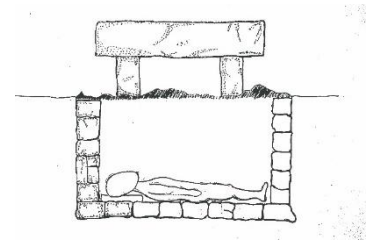


Fig 3.7 : *Chyok-deir* for children

The burial is then observed for three days. Within these three days there are signs which are to be looked after. After three days of burial, the mud on the grave is supposed to have some prints or patterns. If a human footprint is seen, then the spirit has been able to come out safely from the body, if anything else like an animal, the

demon was successful in getting the spirit. The meaning behind this is that weather *Mu-zom-tek* was driven away well or not and the spirit was safe or not.

The Lepcha funeral or *Sunglionis* performed on the third day. In this ceremony the person who performed the burial ceremony gives the authority of the soul to the *Mun*. It is now the duty of the *Mun* to guide the spirits to the afterlife. In Lepcha belief, a human soul has different parts or *sums*. A man has 8 souls and a woman has 9. These souls have to be brought along together so that they can move on to the afterlife. If a person dies early due to an accident or sickness, it is said that the remaining *sums* must be killed and be brought together. When a *sum dies*, a person has a frightful experience with either dangerous encounter or illness. For example: if a person gets really ill and loses his hearing, it is considered that one of his *sums* died. A person fulfils his/ her life after all his/her *sums* die.

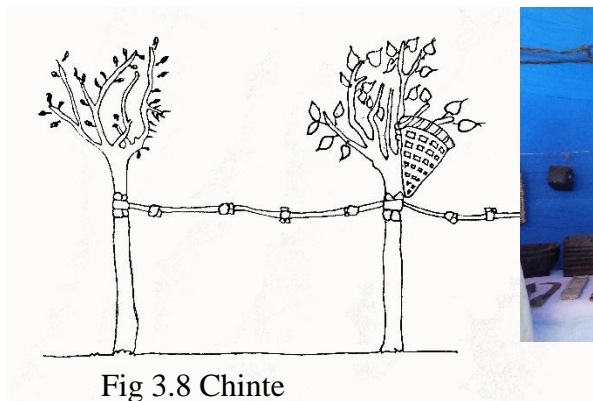


Fig 3.8 Chinte



Fig 3.9: A Thunche

The *Sunglionis* performed outside the house. A *Chinte* (altar) is made of rocks with two branches (*Purmoo* and *Sanga kung*) on each side and a *Thunche* (a small bamboo basket) is hung. A wooden stick is bound between the two branches and a *Choya* (bamboo stripling) is placed (Fig 38). Either a small piglet or a calf is sacrificed. The *Mun* then wears a peacock headdress and calls out to the roaming spirits. She holds

the knot of the *choya* and the *Khurmi*(sickle) in the same hand. She calls out the spirit three times. After she has gathered all the souls, she then takes the spirit to the afterlife and gives custody to the ancestor. There are instances when the spirit tends to linger. The duty of collecting the *sumsis* of the *Mun*. The *Mung* gathers the soul; if the *sums* are alive she must kill it before taking it to the ancestors. In an account related by Ren. S.T. Lepcha, he describes the collecting of *sums* by the *Mun* in the following manner;

In Darjeeling, a person had passed away. A Mun was called out to find the lost Sums. One Sum was caught at Mahakal Dara where he had fell down. One was found at Malda where he had gone to attend College. Another in Malda when he had fell from her bed. After several tries the Mun was finally able to collect all his sums and amidst the family started the ceremony. She rubbed a chicken and Amliso (Broom Plant) to all the family members present so that their sums may not be taken by the deceased's sum. The mun then takes the sums to their ancestor and tells them that it is their son. The ancestors rejects him and tells her it's not their kin. Later the Munfound out that the deceased ancestors were not Lepcha but of other community.

The next incident is as follows,

An unidentified man had passed away in Tarkhola. Thinking so, the locals called upon the Mung to perform his last rites. The Mun started her ritual and called upon the spirit of the deceased upon herself. The spirit was of a Forest ranger who used to work there in the forest office. The spirit started to speak in Bengali and English. He said that he had lost a file and requested to bring

him the file, giving its file number. The people then found the lost file.

(Fieldwork 2017)

Conclusively, we can say that the Lepcha rites of passage follows an elaborate proceedings in conducting the rituals. Each of the items hold their own meaning and the rituals themselves show the uniqueness of the Lepcha culture. Today many of the rituals have changed with the passage of time, nevertheless, some of the important rituals mentioned above are still practiced. The practice of these rituals show us that Lepchas still observe their traditions and the literature written preserves itself for the future generations.

Chapter IV

Changes in the Lepcha Rites of Passage

With the passage of time through the advent of modernization, there is bound to be changes in the traditional value and ritual system. Either because of external influences or due to lack of resources, these ideals tend to change with conforming to much plausible to the present times. There are practices which were banned due to moral implications or simply because of the lack of proper material requirements. The changes show us a sign of the changing world and how humans adapt to them.

The Lepcha community have also seen changes in their practices in various ritual performances. One of the main reason is their acceptance of new religions and being assimilated to Buddhism and later into Christianity. The conversion into Buddhism started with the arrival of the Bhutias in Sikkim and Christianity with the arrival of missionaries from Europe. In the 16th Century, Sikkim crowned its first Chogyal, Phuntsog Namgyal in Yuksom and thus established the Namgyal dynasty that brought Tibetan Buddhism along with them. With the Sikkimese kingdom, the Lepchas slowly accepted and assimilated into Buddhism. Lepchas accepted Buddhism without much opposition but also continued with their traditional religion 'without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two mutually contradictory religions' (Gorer 2005: 181). Since then, Lepchas are found to be practicing both Buddhism and their traditional religion, creating a 'double-layered religious system' (Torri 2010: 149) where the lamas and the *bongthings* perform side by side and the religious practices are characterized by syncretism. 'The lama and the shaman do not contradict each other but co-exist as religious specialists due to a division of labor in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity (Arora 2006: 64).

And today, most of the Lepchas in both Darjeeling-Kalimpong region are either Buddhists or Christians. The conversion has changed the practices so much that some of the traditional Lepcha rites of passage can rarely be observed in its original form. The Buddhist rituals are seen much quicker and easier and the people sense it as “lesser hassle” as they have incorporated both rituals in their practices today. The practices have also been much influenced by the areas they reside in; Darjeeling is an upcoming cosmopolitan town which much influence by modernity and cross-cultural nature and Kalimpong, a semi-urban area with strong roots for traditional practices. The practices have taken up bits and pieces from the residing communities and have developed a region wise unique practice.

The changes observed in Darjeeling are multifaceted because of the location of the place and the cosmopolitan nature of Darjeeling. Darjeeling has now become a hub for modern ideas and cultural amalgamation. With people more influenced by economy and multi-cultural environment, people tend to take less interest in what is traditional. With reference to the main town, the traditional Lepcha practice of the rites of passage can be rarely seen because Lepchas live in a heterogeneous environment where the Lepchas in Darjeeling have both embraced Buddhism and Christianity so the traditional rites of passage is almost nonexistent. The Lepcha population itself is quite less as compared to Kalimpong and the population is much scattered rather than concentrated. The number of *Muns* and *Bongthings* are also very low compared to the Lepchas living in Kalimpong. Due to their low numbers, people usually call them from Sikkim or Kalimpong, when their assistance is required. In search of *Muns* and *Bongthings*, there were only two *Bongthings* and one *Mun* available in Darjeeling. According to them, Lepcha households prefer the *Lamas* as it is much preferable. Apart from social events like the *Chyu-Rum-Faat*, most ritual

specialists never get together. With the sparse population of Lepcha people divided into Buddhists and Christians, the use of *Muns* and *Bongthings* becomes much obsolete and therefore most of the traditional Lepcha practices are not conducted. In Darjeeling, the researcher found it very difficult to find Lepcha ritual specialists. According to the ritual specialists, most of them have converted into Christians and young people eligible for becoming a ritual specialist have no interest. The people prefer the Buddhist way as the *Lamas* are very much readily available, and searching for a *Bongthing* or a *Mun* is very much time consuming. The ritual specialists are very much busy as they have to move around Lepcha houses from one place to another and getting to meet them becomes very much difficult. The ritual specialists in Darjeeling cover the entire of Darjeeling district, and also at times Sikkim and Kalimpong. Finding ritual specialists becomes more difficult as one has to snowball their way to finding other people.

In Kalimpong, the Lepcha population is quite significant as compared to Darjeeling. Because of the population, the culture was not affected as much as in Darjeeling. Darjeeling also has branches of these governing associations. Kalimpong shares its culture with Darjeeling and Sikkim, therefore it has its traditional practices along with the modern ones.

Changes in Birth Rites

In Darjeeling, the *Tungbong Faat* is rarely done. During fieldwork, it was observed that many of the Lepcha population did not conduct this ritual or had no knowledge of this ritual at all. Instead they observed the Buddhist rituals where a *Lama* is called upon to perform the name giving ceremony of the baby in most Buddhist households. This can be evident from the names of the Lepchas who go by

Buddhist names. In some cases, a Hindu name, which is mainly due to the tribe exogamous marriage. Apart from the old people, most Lepchas have not had the *Tangbong Faat* ceremony performed during their birth, and most of the older generation have forgotten how the ritual is practiced. And without prior familiarity it is observed that *Tangbong Faat* in Darjeeling is a dying practice with little or no knowledge about its origins and the reason behind its performance.

In Kalimpong, the *Tungbong-faat*, rituals were mainly performed by the Lamas. The traditional ceremony had not been performed in recent times therefore people had lost touch with the proceedings of the rituals as well. In the birth ceremony, Lamas would perform rituals on the 3rd and the 7th day after the birth of the child, with 3rd day for the female child and 7th day for the male child. For the ritual, the placenta of the child is enveloped by the *Kumtek* (*ficus ficus*) leaves and buried in the *Nali*(stream) by the *Lamas*. Looking at the astrological signs, the child is given the name and the *Agit*, the *Chyu*, *Da*, *Lep* respectively. This is done so that the child is given an identity and there is the continuation of the clan system. It is also very much important as it also plays a major role in the next two rites of passage. In both cases there is conspicuous absence of *bongthings* -the traditional Lepcha specialists who officiate this ritual.

The concept of a *Talherik* is not observed with respect to the traditional belief. Rather a child is not a part of society until his/her naming ceremony is performed. When an unborn child dies, it is buried, rather than cremated and the ceremony is executed by the *Lamas*. If a ritual specialists is available, they are called so that they can detach the attachments with their parents. The deity *Kingchum darmit* is still believed in, apart from the Christians. Pregnancy taboos are still observed but not as rigorously. Some important ones like not watching eclipse, tying knots, witnessing

killings and driving nails are still observed. These taboos hold much importance since the people want a healthy child.

Changes in Marriage

In Darjeeling, the Buddhist influence is strong and many people have married according to the Buddhist tradition. For certain rituals a *Bongthing* is called upon from other places. The same *Pibu/Bek-buis* used by different families because the middleman should be well versed in replying the questions asked by the families. The proficiency itself is sought after for the proper practice of the marriage. So the role of role traditionally played by the paternal and maternal uncles of the bride and the groom is non in practice today. Apart from the traditional practices, other minor practices have also come about in marriage. The engagement ceremony has become much more elaborate. The *Takvil* has been replaced by gold or silver rings. Items such as a whole pig, *Chi*, *khada*, rice, *amu dumdem*, bronze plate and vase, beef etc. are taken. If a couple has eloped, the groom has to give a fine. The practice of marriage by Service also no longer exists, but tribe exogamy marriage is very much well accepted. Because of this, most of the elaborate Lepcha rituals, such as *Myok Panol*, *Nyom lee haron* and *Nyom zogul* are not practiced.

In Kalimpong, several changes can be observed. Firstly, marriages between Lepchas of Kalimpong and Sikkim are very much prevalent. The *Pibu/Bek-bu* are very much important and all the duties are thoroughly practiced. The *Pibu/Bek-bu* are supposed to go to the bride's house along with the uncles and cousins. The duty of a *Pibu/Bek-bu* is considered as an important job and hence only the ones with good oration and experience are chosen. Kalimpong has the most sought after *Pibu/Bek-bu* that they even go to Darjeeling and Sikkim when they are called for. In Kalimpong,

the *Lamas* and the *Bongthings* perform an equal role during the ceremony. While the *Lamas* conduct the Buddhist rituals, the *Bongthing* performs the *Lee-rum-faat* and other rituals regarding the appeasement of the ancestral/ household deities. The story of *Rongnyoo-Rangeet* is always recited as it is an important story in the Lepcha culture and it symbolizes the holy matrimony of two individuals. *Chi* is one of the most important ingredients hence even if just a little, it must be consumed by the couple as well as the family. Marriage by elopement is very much accepted but not sought after. If it is practiced, mainly during tribe exogamy with the boy being a non-Lepcha, all the rituals are bypassed. In case of a non-Lepcha girl, a ceremony called *Aali Oom* is performed where the girl is assigned into the new clan.

Discussed below is a case as described by Lagen Lepcha (Fieldwork 2017); the bride price, if the couple had eloped is Rs. 501/- and the bride's family is to be notified by the *Pibu/Bek-bu*. If the couple has practiced engagement, the gifts remain as *Chi bu* (40 kgs), Bronze Plate and *Lota*, (Vessel) Rum or Beer (1 Case), Rice, and a whole Pig. The Bride Price asked is usually returned back to the groom. The Groom's party was asked for an "Entrance Fee" which is placed by the Bride's family. If the Groom's family is supposed to overcompensate the given fee or else is to pay it through a punishment. The punishment is usually getting beaten by nettle leaves, dowsed in flour and oil and anything which makes the guests uncomfortable. The *Bri* is done in both the Groom's and the Bride's house. Both the traditional and Buddhist marriage ceremonies are performed. If the traditional ritual has already been performed in the Bride's house, then the ritual need not be conducted at the Groom's house. The *Phogo-rip-lyakhas* changed into *Khadas* and the *Chi* into *Alcohol*.

Changes in Death

In Darjeeling, the event of *Amak*, the traditional practice is rarely seen. Either to lack of resources or the change in religion, people prefer the Buddhist way of cremation. There are three events during the *Amak-sa-dihrim* which takes place on the first, third and the forty-ninth day respectively. On the first day, the day of passing, the *Lamas* perform a ritual and look for the appropriate time for the cremation. Usually on the third day the body is taken for cremation after the people have given their final respects. On the forty-ninth day, a ceremony is practiced which shows that the soul has finally left towards the afterlife. This ceremony is performed by *Lamas* mainly. The body is cremated according to Buddhist tradition. Some of them even gave reasons like the lack of land for burial. Those who already own land may bury but mostly people prefer cremation. The ashes are generally buried at the cremation ground or put into the rivers. Traditional *Sunglion* is rarely performed since there is an absence/unavailability of ritual specialists and/or lack of adequate preparation time.

Therefore, it is seen that since people in Darjeeling are very much influenced by their own religions, the traditional rituals are rarely practiced. The readily availability of *Lamas* makes it much easier to perform death rituals in Buddhist ways rather than search for *Muns/ Bongthings* who are often unavailable.

In Kalimpong, the initial ritual of the death ceremony is conducted by the *Bongthing*. After this, the *Lamas* called upon will perform the remaining rituals. The *Lamas* read the *Chyo* (Buddhist text) and perform other rituals. The body is usually placed in an upright position with crossed legs and encased in a wooden box. The body is taken from the back door along with the box itself. In that they still adhere to the traditional belief of not taking out the front door but instead of making a hole in the ceiling, the back door is used. The body is then cremated along with the box and

the remaining ashes buried in the clan burial ground. If available a *Mun* is called upon. If unavailable, a *Bongthing* is called upon to guide the soul towards its *Chyu, Da and Lep*.

A *Mun* or a *Bongthing* is supposed to be buried rather than cremated. Therefore even if others are cremated, ritual specialists are buried. Since there are no specific ritual specialist burial ground, they are buried in their own *shing*. Since most of the ritual specialists come from a rural area, so there is no problem for a burial ground. Since cremation has become a major fashion of disposition, it becomes easy for the people who do not own land for burial. There are instances where the ashes are either buried into small areas or are flown into the river. Before the funeral, people gather to pay final respects to the deceased by offering *khadas* and incense sticks. People also give items to the deceased's family in the form of money, or useful items such as sugar or milk etc.

In both cases, Buddhism and Christianity have heavily influenced the ways in which the rituals have changed and is now followed. With both religions having their own set of rituals and its specialists (the *Lamas* and the Pastors), there is no need for traditional ritual specialists. In many instances, we can see the *Bongthing* and the *Lamas* working together although more prominence is given to the *lamas*. There have also been instances where *Muns* have converted into *Matas* which shows their interest in entertaining the other larger group of people. In other instances, the symptoms of someone getting their "calling" are considered as mentally unhealthy and taken as ill. While the traditional rituals required animal sacrifices, people have stopped these traditional animal sacrifices for various reasons. Many traditional ritual specialists now avoid performing animal sacrifices and have substituted it into fruits and

vegetables. There are families who have substituted *Chi* with milk or other non-alcoholic beverages and others who have changed into bottled alcohol.

One of the major substitution which can be seen in Darjeeling is the usage of the *Kumtek* (fig) leaf to *Titepati* (mug wort) leaves.



Fig 4.1: *Kumtek* leaf



Fig 4.2: *Titepati* bush

The substitution comes as a result of lack of fig trees around and the easy availability of mugwort plants. It also tells us that even if the item has changed, the meaning and the purpose of the leaves in the particular ritual remains intact. Looking at this, we can say that many of the original items have been substituted during the long passage of time, but we do not know when and how. It also shows us that how an item can change if there is no availability of the original one. The adaptation of the culture is important when there is a decrease in the practice of the ritual and this change becomes imperative for the survival of the culture. The unavailability of the necessary item makes it necessary for the change and vital for the performance and the continuity of the ceremony.

Darjeeling town and the newly found Kalimpong districts being the upcoming hubs of culture and development has very much modernized and traditional practices can rarely be seen. The people themselves have been influenced by a lot of external

factors and yet are unable to keep up with their traditional methods. Even so people yet try to keep their traditional practices, even if a little. With the growth of education and the awareness of the diminishing culture, the Lepcha population are now trying to revive the old ways. This revival becomes important so as to preserve culture and to leave their legacy for the upcoming generations. The observation of the *Pano Gaeboo Achyok* festival, *Tendong-Hlo-Rum-Faat* and the *Chyu-Rum-Faat* festivals are the examples of cultural awareness festivals amongst the Lepchas. These festivals are performed around Darjeeling and Kalimpong District, and people from all around are invited to celebrate. It is actually the visibility of these communities that has become key in asserting their unique and distinct practices. One of the interesting turn for these rituals to be practiced and revived is the sense of identity it invokes as Lepcha weddings, burials and other religious ceremonies are often decorated with Lepcha flags symbolizing the Lepcha nationalism to some extent.



Fig4.3: Traditional rituals beings practiced in the backdrop of Mt. Kanchenjunga with the Lepcha flags in their worship place

Chapter V

Summary and Conclusion

The Lepcha rites of passage is rich and laden with numerous symbolism. Nearly everything they practice and use have a meaning. Because of this vast array of symbolism, tracing back to the meaning of each and every item or practice is very much difficult. Because of the passage of time, cultures tend to mix and merge with the influences they come in contact with. Due to the influences, the tracing of the original meanings and practices become very much difficult. Their sheer number and the lack of proper written material makes finding each and every one a herculean task.

Not only time, but the geographical location also influences culture. The culture tends to change with the change in the environment. Even if there is a close proximity between the two field areas, they are separate mainly due to the nature of the towns themselves. Kalimpong has a rural and a more homogenous setting while Darjeeling is very much a cosmopolitan with a mixture of various cultures and religions coming together. The cultural interaction between the two areas are very less apart from the major social events. It can be seen as two neighboring houses having their own ways of life. Even if they share the same economy and religion, their house follow their own customs. There are numerous symbolism which can be seen in the Lepcha culture. We can observe these meanings in three segments:

Birth

- The deity *Kingchum Darmit* and her blessing: The deity is considered as the one who writes the destiny of the child and also as the guardian until it is born. She is very much celebrated in the Lepcha community and her importance is also very much looked up. The deity symbolizes that the child may have a good fortune in

life and whatever a person experiences in life has been already written down by the deity and must live accordingly.

- The two deities *Kathong fi* and *Nunglen nyu* play an important role in the lives of Lepcha people. Not only are they of importance during birth but also during the marriage. They are important as they look after the child until they grow old and during the marriage, the girl's guardian deity is also to be taken in by the groom's family. These two deities symbolize the astral guardians which protect the individuals during their life.
- A child is considered as a *Talherik* and referred to as "it" before the *Tangbong Faat*. The reason being that the child has not much attachment to the world and has no identity nor a part of the society. This symbolizes that a newborn has to be assigned its identity and before that it is neither a human nor an animal but simply a living organism.
- The taboos represent the do's and don'ts of the birth ritual as people believe it could lead to a child born with defects. They are observed strictly for the fear of illness. This symbolizes that people do not want to bring defected children to the world and want them to be healthy and lead a good life.
- The *Chyu, Dah, Lyep* is important as it symbolizes the address/ origin of the individual. Later on, during *amak* the soul is sent back to its original place, where the *Chyu, Dah, Lyep* plays an important role in identifying the location. This symbolizes that whatever comes to existence, returns back to its original place.

Marriage

- The concept of *Bri* itself holds a great symbol in itself. The name itself means braiding or tying of two families. A *Bri* is made of two green twigs which also

symbolizes that the ideal age of marriage is when both the individuals are young and the bond which they hold remains strong.

- The system of *Angaop* -meaning widow remarriage is possible if the family allows it. This symbolizes that marriage is a never ending institution. Even if one of the spouse passes away, the family ties must remain strong.
- The bride price or the *Taaya-kup-afar* or *Nyom-sa-afaar* signifies the value and respect for the Lepcha woman.
- The items gifted to the Bride's family by the groom each has its own significance. All the gifts given symbolize the respect towards the bride's family and accepting the gift means that the bride's family also acknowledge them and reciprocate accordingly.
- The *Pibu/ Bek-bu* is important because they act as a link between the families and according to the norms the parents are not supposed to meet each other alone. The *Pibu/ Bek-bu* acting as a mediator symbolizes that both the families have respect for each other and the *Pibu/ Bek-bu* being well versed in the marriage system allows the marriage to run smoothly and to display the interests of the families in utmost respect.
- The *Rongnyoo-Rangeet* story and the *Chi-lok*. The *Rongnyoo-Rangeet* story symbolizes the holy matrimony of the two rivers and the wedding life is to be as pure and blissful as the two rivers.
- The *Nyom-Zogul* or when the Bride enters the new house. This ceremony symbolizes the entry of a girl to a new family. The uncles and cousins who have accompanied her are given a rooster to show that the bride has reached the new home perfectly fine. It also shows that the new household have

accepted the new member and will be treated as a part of the family, equally and unconditionally.

Death

- Death is seen as the return of a soul to its ancestors. Like the Lepcha belief, all souls must return back to their place of origin. In Lepcha culture there is no concept of afterlife hence death itself signifies the return of the soul back to its origin.
- The concept of *Sums* is very much peculiar to the Lepcha culture. The true death of a person is when all of her *sums* die. It is symbolic as no other culture in Darjeeling or Kalimpong region has this concept. The story of its origin is very much difficult to find hence not much can be said about the concept itself.
- The process of death and burial is very symbolic in itself. The body is taken out of the walls or the back door since the front door is considered only for the living. The warding off of the demons in itself is symbolic since the Lepchas consider that the soul must reach safely into the *Pumzoo*. With the absence of an afterlife, there are demons wandering around in search of souls and the *Mun/ Bongthing*'s duty is to safely guide their way.
- The practice of Burial and *Sunglion* after 3 days is also much significant. Each and every burial method signifies a story about their deaths. The stones erected above the graves tells us how the bodies are buried. The *Sunglion* performed is to take the soul back to its place of origin.
- The gathering of *Sums* by the *Mun* during *Sunglion* is important as one cannot reach *Pumzoo* if all of their *sums* are not together or are alive. The eight/nine

knots in the *choya* itself signify the *sums* and a place to gather the wandering *sums*.

- The burial of a *Mun / Bongthing* is important because it is believed that if their body is cremated, the souls lose their power and are unable to pass it on towards the upcoming generations. The power skips a generation and vests upon the next one. If a girl is a *Mun*, after she passes away, the power passes on to her granddaughter. Hence the ritual specialists are rarely cremated and are buried.
- The lingering of the souls is a well-known phenomenon in the Lepcha culture. If such a soul is found to exist, a *Mun/ Bongthing* is called upon to learn about the deceased and take appropriate actions to safely guide the soul to the *Pumzoo* or the afterlife.

External factors influence cultures in a significant way. These external factors may include the dominant culture, economy or the politics. The meanings and symbols given are usually adopted by different cultures as a whole so that people may understand it as universally as possible. For example, the *Khada* has replaced the *Phogo-rip-lyak* and the flower garland. Today the *Khada* is seen as a symbol of respect and is used in almost all rituals and occasions. The *Khada* is used as a non-perishable item and is readily available all around, while a *Phogo-rip-lyak* or a flower garland is mostly used during marriage and not during death rites symbolizing its usage for specific occasions.

With the advent of modernization and globalization, people are much more inclined into adopting the western ways of life. Education and competition are much

more emphasized than the traditional ways of life. Because of this there has been a decline in the number of ritual specialists. The modern generation tend to focus on their professional careers and tend to overlook the traditional practices. This makes it inevitable for the decline in the number of the ritual specialists, and mainly in Darjeeling. Among those of the few who are left they are seen to be embracing the more popular religious group catering to a more popular group. Interviewing the ritual specialists, they described that certain *Muns* have now become *Matas*.

There are certain instances where the callings for *Bongthings* and *Muns* have been taken as mental illness. The fortunate ones were found by the ritual specialists and now lead a normal life embracing their calling, while the ones who were unable to meet the proper ritual specialists are now either dead or are regarded mentally disturbed and avoided by society in general.

With the movement of the Lepcha population across the territories, there are times where certain raw materials are unavailable. A Lepcha ritual is a highly ingredient focused practice and unavailability of the ingredients leads to a grave predicament. To avoid this obstacle, people change the ingredients to perform the rituals. What this shows us is that even if there is a change in the ingredient, the meaning remains the same. An example can be seen as the use of Mugwort leaves for *Kumtek* leaves.

With the passage in time and insufficient recorded data, people have forgotten how the rituals have been practiced. Since it has been a long time that the rituals were observed and with the introduction of the Buddhism and Christianity, the people who have observed these rituals are usually the elderly people. And since it was performed a very long time back, the elders have forgotten about the details of the ritual. Only bits and pieces of the memory remains. And only a few people have actually practiced

this ritual in their original form. These few people are difficult to find and those who the researcher has found, have forgotten about the structure and details of the rituals.

This realization of the dwindling practice of the Lepcha rituals is highly prevalent as there is a growing awareness of the failure of practicing the traditional rites of passage and people are now more inclined to revive their “old ways” of practicing culture. There are social events observed to promote Lepcha heritage and to grow awareness towards the youths. There is a rise in the number of Lepcha scholars who work to conserve the Lepcha culture. The government has also given funds and boards to safeguard the interests of the Lepcha community.

The change has started but the fruits are yet to nurture.

Fieldwork Frames



Fig 6.1: Interviewing with Mr. Ongdup Lepcha, *Lama*. Darjeeling.



Fig 6.2: Interview with Mr. Norbu Tshering Lepcha. Kalimpong.



Fig 6.3: Interview with Padmashree Ren Lapon Sonam Tshering Lepcha. Kalimpong.



Fig 6.4: Informant and *Mun* Mrs. Passangkit Lepcha performing rituals. Darjeeling.



Fig 6.5: *Daom*, where a dead body carried on.



Fig 6.6: *Sibow*, is held in front of the funeral procession



Fig 6.7: *Phogo-rip-lyak* used to decorate an oil lamp.

Glossary:

Aagit:clan

Aathing: lord/master (title)

Adenmoo: Lepcha clan

Agek:birth

Aali Oom:ritual for the welfare of the bride and her offspring

Amak sa dihrim: death ceremony

Amu dumdem:gift given to the mother during marriage

Angaop:junior levirate

Apil:soul

Ashake: bride gift

Boku:paternal uncle

Bongthing:male ritual specialist

Bongthingism:traditional Lepcha religion

Bonyo:Paternal aunt

Bri: tobraid/marriage

Brimoo:Lepcha clan

Chi lok:container holdingchi with water and butter

Chi:fermented millet

Chinte:altar

Choya:bamboo stripling

Chu-rum-faat:worship of Mt. Kanchenjunga

Chyok blee: reclined burial

Chyok Boom:upright burial with folded legs

Chyok deir:horizontal burial

Chyu:mountain peak

Da: Lake

Damsangmoo:Lepchas of Kalimpong

Daot: leprosy

Darju lyang:Darjeeling in Lepcha or Land of the gods

Dookey-moo-lee / Kaaden-moo-lee:traditional Lepcha house

Dorje:thunderbolt

Dumdem:traditional Lepcha women dress

Dumpim:fold in a Lepcha women traditional dress

Dumpra:Traditional Lepcha men dress

Faming: brother or cousin brother

Fudongthing:first Lepcha male

Ginjya: male traditional shirt

Gumba:monastery

Illamoo:Lepchas from Nepal

Itbu-debu-rum:Creator god

Joriboo: Lepcha clan

Juit-bo:Step father

Juit-mu: Step Mother

Kachyong:nyom –vet

Kakyup:ring

Kalenpung:Lepcha name for Kalimpong

Kaneem Kandang:egg used for *Tangbong Faat*

Karbimoo:Lepcha clan

Kathong-fi:guardian deity for Lepcha male

Kazilasung: type of gift for the bride

<i>Khada</i> :silk scarf used in Himalayan region during ceremonies	<i>Mu-san</i> :bull fed during pregnancy
<i>Khup-trop</i> :adopted child	<i>Mutanchi Rongkup Rumkup</i> :The Lepchas
<i>Khurmi</i> :small sickle like blade	<i>Muzomtek</i> :soul eating demon
<i>Kibri</i> :braided thread	<i>Muzyong</i> :maternal uncle
<i>Kingchum Darmit</i> :Lepcha deity of fortune	<i>Myok mangkung</i> :a type of <i>chi</i> used for ceremonies
<i>Kok-brong-lyang</i> : burial area	<i>Myok panol</i> : present for the bride's family
<i>Kokkboom</i> :burial ground	<i>NahoNatharDa</i> : Lake
<i>Komsithing</i> :Elder brother of <i>Tarbongmo</i>	<i>Nambun/Namsong</i> :Lepcha New Year
<i>Kul</i> :household ancestry	<i>Namko Bri</i> : marriage ceremony
<i>Kumtek</i> : <i>ficus ficus</i> or fig leaves	<i>Namrok</i> :end of the year
<i>Kuzoo</i> :nettle	<i>Namthar</i> :Lepcha holy documents
<i>Kyong sezoom</i> :Village level political organization	<i>Nangchyong</i> : <i>ashake</i>
<i>Lapce/Lapca</i> : name given by the British to the Lepchas	<i>Naripnaom</i> :the first Lepcha woman to get married
<i>Lapchey</i> : name given by Nepali	<i>Nazongnyoo</i> :first Lepcha woman
<i>Laso Mung Pano</i> :Demon lord	<i>Nunglennyu</i> :guardian deity who looks after females
<i>Lee-rum-faat</i> :worship of house deities	<i>Nyolyang</i> :the place deep beneath the earth's surface
<i>Lep</i> :mountain pass	<i>Nyom Chitaro</i> :engagement ceremony
<i>Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board</i> :	<i>Nyom zogul</i> :final
<i>Moo</i> : clan	<i>Nyom-vet</i> : <i>kachyong</i>
<i>Muk zyuk Ding Rum Faat</i> :worship of nature	<i>Pathang</i> :a Lepcha long knife
<i>Mun</i> :Lepcha shaman	<i>Pathayot</i> :wooden cylinder used to serve <i>chi</i>
<i>Mung</i> :demon	<i>Phogo-rip</i> : <i>Oroxylum Indicum</i>
<i>Munism</i> :Name given to the Lepcha religion	<i>Phogo-rip-lyak</i> :a garland made of <i>Phogo rip</i>
<i>Munlaommoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans	<i>Phyongtalimoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans
<i>Munyoo</i> :Maternal aunt	

<i>Pibu/ Bek-bu</i> :the middle man or mediator in marriage	<i>Syapto</i> :8 kilograms
<i>Poom sezoom</i> :district level political organization	<i>Tago</i> : blouse
<i>Promoo</i> :The Lepchas of Bhutan	<i>Takvil</i> :bamboo ornaments
<i>Ptso</i> :clan	<i>Talherik</i> :a new born child before the naming ceremony
<i>Purmoo Kung</i> : a small tree used in various Lepcha rituals especially in death rituals	<i>Tamok</i> :Lepcha male hat
<i>Pumzoo</i> : ancestral resting place	<i>Tangbong faat</i> :the birth ceremony
<i>Raong Choming</i> :Lepcha script	<i>Tarbongmoo</i> :first man to marry
<i>Renjyongmoo</i> :Lepchas from Sikkim	<i>Taya-kup-afar/Nyom-sa-afar</i> :bride figt
<i>Rongring</i> :Lepcha language	<i>Teesta Rum Faat</i> :worship of Teesta River
<i>Rumlyang</i> :the place where Gods live	<i>Te-it-ta-mit-mu</i> :one of the Lepcha clans
<i>Rongnyoo-Rangeet</i> : Teesta and Rangit River	<i>Tendong-hlo-rum-faat</i> :worship of mount Tendong
<i>Sachakram</i> :child ceremony	<i>Thum sezoom</i> :sub-divisional level political organization
<i>Sakyoo-rum-faat</i> : worship of food, crops and fertility of land	<i>Thunchey</i> :bamboo basket woven with no pores
<i>Sanga Kung</i> : a tree	<i>Thyaktek</i> :hat
<i>Satap Rum Faat</i> :worship of hailstorms	<i>Titbunong Thyum</i> : elopement
<i>Shing</i> :household field	<i>TungengNarengChyu</i> :a mountain peak
<i>Simikmoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans	<i>Tungdyong</i> :bamboo basket
<i>Sthong Daot</i> :tiger attack	<i>Zeer-kaat</i> : 3 rupees.
<i>Siudo</i> :forehead	
<i>Sungdyangmoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans	
<i>Sunglion</i> :the death rites	
<i>Sunglok</i> : a mountain	
<i>Sungngootmoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans	
<i>Sutsoaomoo</i> :one of the Lepcha clans	

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