"When a Lepcha becomes a Christian, he becomes a saab." This is an oft-repeated joke in Lepcha circles that has both sarcasm and truth in it. Christianity offered a 'modern identity' (Bal 2000: 155) equipped with education and a link to the Western world. Lepchas were introduced to a new religion and worldview, which also exposed them to educational and professional opportunities. The nature-loving and spirit-fearing Lepchas were now questioning the authority of many traditional beliefs as Christianity initiated a change in attitude and lifestyle as well. Their newfound religion paved way for new ideas that were easily accepted and often imitated without fully understanding the consequences of what was to come. Reiterating the starting sentence of this chapter, Foning (1987), a Lepcha Christian himself, writes,

"Forgetting our own age-old customs and ways of life, the beginnings of which are lost in antiquity, now among our Christian kinsmen there is a definite trend to display with pride, like the proverbial peacock, the plumes of Western culture in almost everything that is displayable. Moving outside more often than not, suit, hat and tie proclaim that the person is a Christian convert" (Foning 1987: 294).

While the wave of imitation hit the Christian converts, it cannot be denied that along with Christianity came education which proved to be the most powerful agent in the all round development of the tribe. Education empowered their way of thinking,
triggered ‘mobility’ (Thakur 1988: 103) and gave them hope for a better lifestyle. The adoption of Christianity and embracing education from early on ‘gave them status and position’ (Thakur 1988: 98) in society. Lepcha students grew up to become teachers, church leaders and government jobholders occupying a respectable position in society. Armed with the perks of modern education, it is only likely that they considered themselves superior and looked lowly upon their non-Christian neighbours. It is this ‘exclusivist’ (Longkumer 2010:85) tendency among Christians to profess Christianity as the one true religion, which separated them from the larger community. Interestingly, the openness of Lepcha society is also held responsible for the easy acceptance of the newfound religion as they gradually imitated, adapted and adopted the Christian culture.

For most Lepchas of Kalimpong today, Christian culture is all they have known. We can find fourth and fifth generation Christian Lepchas whose forefathers gave up the traditional practices and ways of life, leaving the current generation devoid of the knowledge and wisdom of their culture. Their upbringing in the church environment and being educated in Christian institutions have exposed them to stories from the Bible but have often ignored the richness of their traditional past. Often times, these educated young people migrate to urban centres for better job opportunities further distancing them from their traditional ways of life. Unless, their grandparents or parents tell the present generation Lepcha Christians about the Lepcha stories, they have little to claim to know about their own culture. True enough, Lepcha Christians themselves have realized this predicament as Peter Karthak, a fifth generation Christian Lepcha author writes,
'Christian Lepchas did not care for their own Lepcha ethos because they were happy within their Christian ghettos. They would have to pay dearly for their unworldly dowdiness once the British left Darjeeling' (Karthak 2009: 9).

Advent of Christianity

In this chapter, we shall look into the advent of Christianity and the role of missionaries in the establishment of the church and school in Bom Busty. It will also examine the process of conversion and the culture changes that took place among the Lepchas of Kalimpong. Finally it shall analyze the Christian Lepcha identity, what it meant to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both, and whether the religious identity preceded the ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian.

The Missionaries

'Over there is a place for planting another branch of the mission to operate chiefly among the Lepchas, I reach a spot at the place called Kalimpong, about four miles from the Teesta, that will do admirably for a mission station. There are many Lepcha villages in the neighbourhood, and we could from there visit all the countries round about, as well as cross the Teesta river to visit the Lepcha country on the other side'—William Macfarlane (Manuel, D.G 1914).
Having visited the Lepchas of Kalimpong in 1870, Reverend William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland ‘desired’ to move to Kalimpong even though he initially started his missionary work in Darjeeling in June 1870. Compared to the Bhutias and the Nepalis, he found Lepchas to be the most responsive to the gospel as he wrote in the year-end report to his mission, ‘The Lepchas seem to be the most hopeful people for us in the hills’ (Perry 1997: 42). Though Macfarlane was the first missionary to enter Kalimpong, Christianity had already made its mark among the Lepchas when Reverend William Start, former Church of England clergyman turned independent Baptist, went to Darjeeling (in 1841) and decided to establish a self-supporting mission. Although his mission work was not very successful, he showed interest in the local vernacular and started a school for Lepchas in Tukvar (Dewan 1991: 81). He also learned the local language with a limited collection of Lepcha words and went on to translate a few books of the Bible from English to Lepcha and published at his own expense (Wylie 1854). Interest in the mother tongue nurtured the identity of the tribe and translating the Bible into their language was a revolutionary step (Oommen 2007: 12). The earliest gospel translation was of St. Matthew’s in 1845, followed by the Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepcha’ (Sprigg 2005: 53) published in 1849. That same year in 1849 - the St. John’s Gospel was also printed along with a revised version of St. Matthew’s Gospel. These publications were printed at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta. These were the first books to be printed and published in Lepcha language

---

10 A copy of St. John’s Gospel reprinted in 1872 is available at the Carey Library and Research Centre, Serampore.
with the help of modern technology, i.e., the movable printing press. Sprigg sees these publications as a historical feat,

‘Lepchas everywhere will be able to take pride in the distinction of having had their language in print for (more than) 150 years; and Christian Lepchas, in particular, will have the added satisfaction of knowing that it was some Books of The Bible that were the first to be printed in Lepcha’ (Sprigg 2005: 53).

It was these contributions in the translation of the books of the Bible that laid foundation for other missions with the spread of Christianity in Darjeeling hills. In 1841, Revered J.C. Page, a British educated Anglo-Indian, was appointed missionary in India with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). He was very keen on evangelizing the local people and a Lepcha convert is reported to have assisted him with his missionary work. But he soon retired and there was no one to carry on the work as BMS closed their Darjeeling mission work. Thereafter it was the arrival of Macfarlane and the Scottish Mission in Darjeeling, which also paved way for the first missionary work in neighbouring Kalimpong. Macfarlane was known to be a ‘zealous’ (Perry 1997: 32) preacher who set goals and hoped that a mission in Darjeeling would mean ‘a mission to the great independent states of Nepaul, Sikkim, and Bhootan (Ibid: 33)’. Darjeeling was the prime location at that time as these countries were closed to foreigners and the British missionaries would not be allowed to enter the same. So it was only fitting to convert the local people and under the influence of these missionaries several young people were motivated ‘to go beyond Darjeeling-Kalimpong’ (Perry 1997: 60). Among them a few Lepcha names to carry the gospel to Nepal include Robert Karthak, Rajendra
Rongong, Jermit Rongong and their daughter Sharon Rongong in 1956. They went to Nepal as teachers, as we can see the missionaries’ emphasis on education with Macfarlene advocating school to be the most necessary to start missionary work.

‘If they cannot read, of what use will it be to send Bibles and tracts among them? We therefore think that it is the duty of the missionaries, in subordination to the great work of preaching, to do their utmost to establish such schools wherever they can be setup’ (Perry 1997: 40).

Soon enough, Macfarlane started a teachers’ training school along with the Bible as part of their coursework to train the Lepcha and Nepali teachers. With the growing importance of the Nepali language with an increasing Nepali population in the hills, even the Lepchas and Bhutias were beginning to learn and speak the same. By 1873, there were 25 primary schools with 650 boys and girls in all over Darjeeling (Perry 1997: 40) as the gospel and the school went hand in hand. The establishment of schools alongside the churches was seen as a ‘mixed blessing’ as education exposed the natives to a new world of knowledge and ideas while church meant the acceptance of a new religion and belief that often contradicted with the traditional ways of life.

‘The church and the school have gone together in the hill region of Darjeeling district ever since the advent of the missionaries, who had chosen the pen rather than the sword in proselytizing and in disseminating education’ (Dewan 1991: 40).

Indeed, the school and the church started simultaneously in Bom Busty too. The church-school has been the foundation for almost all educated professionals emerging
out of Bom Busty. It started as a night school and soon became a regular six-day schooling centre as the seventh day brought everybody to church. At that time, the church hall had a thatch roof and Bom Church is actually the oldest church of Kalimpong. It is seven years older than the landmark Macfarlane Church of Kalimpong.

The person responsible for introducing Christianity to Bom Busty Lepchas was Sukhman Limbu, a Hindu convert from Darjeeling who was one of the first three ‘catechists’ (Perry 1997: 43) of Macfarlane. The other two catechists of Macfarlane were both Lepcha converts namely Namthak Rongong and Dyongshi Sada. But it was a Limbu convert who helped start the Bom Church in 1882. The training of local people as missionaries was one of the main reasons for an easy acceptance of Christianity by the Lepcha population of Kalimpong. Under the leadership of Sukhman Limbu four of the first five converts in Bom Busty were Lepchas. They were Aakhon Simick, Dazyo
Simick, Langkham Sandyang, and Tachon Karthak (Born Church 125 anniversary souvenir). Unfortunately, Sukhman Limbu died of the widespread dysentery that had gripped the hills then and his brother Mekbar Singh Limbu took charge of the church affairs for the next 39 years (1884-1923). Mekbar Singh married the daughter of a Lepcha bongthing who was on her way to become a mun. While this move might have been opposed by higher religious orders, we notice that the rules of Christianity were not rigid among the Christians of Born Busty. The direct involvement of the British missionary activity was absent in Born Busty. So people did not completely sever ties with old customs and practices.

Bom Self-Supporting Church

For many years since its inception, majority of the church leaders were non-Lepcha individuals. It is possible that the teachings and preachings of the Bible were conducted in Nepali language which was not necessarily understood by the congregation at all times. One pastor is remembered to have preached in both English and Nepali but otherwise Nepali - the becoming lingua franca of the region had taken over church matters too. Church leaders were required to submit their mission reports in Nepali and the service was usually conducted in Nepali language. In this context, it can be questioned whether people had fully understood and accepted Christianity as majority of the villagers did not really understand Nepali language since Lepcha was the spoken language at home and around the village. But going to church on Sundays had become a
routine task as they obediently followed the leaders and attended the same. Soon they were singing hymns and learning bible verses in Nepali. Nepali had become the church language and despite the majority Lepcha population at church, they adopted the Nepali tongue on Sundays. At that time, the church readily accommodated to the simple lifestyle of the people. During the sowing season, the congregation would spend their entire Sunday mornings in the field and only attend church in the evenings. They had their own time and way of doing things. Born Church is also famous for the one incident about an abrupt end to the church service because of a hovering airplane in the sky. It is recalled that the church was in session and the noise of the aircraft outside prompted the preacher to stop his sermon as he urged everyone, ‘let us all go out and watch the plane now,’ and he ended the service. Christmas usually meant archery, cockfights, mini-marathons, plenty to eat and a hefty intake of the local ci. Elders recall a time when the Christmas carollers sang in front of a pigsty because they were so heavily intoxicated with ci. Likewise, funerals meant the slaughter of an ox or a goat and feeding the villagers before finally taking care of the corpse. This was perhaps a continuation of the traditional way of honouring the dead as Lepchas traditionally killed animals on this occasion. Luckily, Christianity and education walked in parallel paths as the church encouraged the youth for higher education. There are individuals today who remember their pastor writing notes of reference to a Lepcha kaiiya (Marwari shopkeepers who were fluent in Lepcha language) to borrow money for college education. The amount would be returned after they received their tribal stipend in due time. This allowed many of their generation to complete graduate and post graduate studies and apply for
government jobs. In many ways, the church-school became the first school attended by almost all professionals from Bom Busty. In a 2010 report submitted by a church elder to the governing body, Bom church recorded 41 graduates and 26 post-graduate Lepchas, out of which 51 were government employees and others in private and self-employed sectors. Church had educated the people of Bom Busty. It became an important avenue of ‘social mobility’ as they had achieved positions of influence and respect in their own community too (Caplan 1980: 667).

Education provided better opportunities but it also paved way for a new generation of “committed” Christians to take over the church leadership. Gone were the days when drinking ci for Christmas was an accepted feature. Today’s Bom Christians claim to be convicted Christians. They have studied the Bible and “know” what it means to be a Christian. They seem more assured of their faith and have their own set of do’s and don’ts as a Christian. There is an ‘internal conversion’ (Geertz 1973: 170) that has taken place almost similar to how Gellner talks about the acceptance of modern interpretation of Buddhism among Newars—a compulsive, radical change of perspective after which one’s former life is viewed as morally wrong. Interestingly, Bom Church is not an exclusive Lepcha domain but it is also the only church in the area to hold services in the Lepcha language too. On January 3, 2010 few Lepcha members of Bom Church started gathering for the Lepcha service at 10:00 am before the Sunday service at 11:00 am. They sang Lepcha choruses, prayed and listened to the sermon in Lepcha itself. While the service is open to anyone who might be interested, it has been confined to members of Bom Church only. This recent development in the history of Lepcha
Christians resonates very much with the contribution of Christianity through education and the awareness it created about their cultural identity.

*Conversion*

The Lepcha process of conversion was “multi-causal” including both internal and external factors. One of the main reasons for conversion was the idea of Rum who could deliver them from the evil mungs. In a society where household mungs were rampant and could be used against each other to cause sickness and death, deliverance from malevolent spirits and a promise of eternal life was good news to them. While we do not hear of conversion motivated by direct material gains, there could have been indirect ‘economic motivation’ (Yoko 2004: 262) for those who found Christianity to be less
expensive than their traditional religion or Buddhism. Also Christianity provided the possibility of an altered lifestyle through education, moral values and a ‘protestant ethic’ (Weber 1958) that was attractive and fulfilling in the long run. Interestingly, the Christian convert stories were unlike those we hear in India. They were neither out-cast nor persecuted and Lepchas did not necessarily sever ties with their neighbours, kinsmen and other members of the community. They remained very much a part of the wider community although their Sundays would be occupied with Church activities.

‘Conversion to a religion is an irreducibly social act; one does not merely join a faith, but one enters into a set of new relationships with members of a religious community. Conversion, therefore, changes not only the individual, but also the groups that must assimilate or give up the convert’ (Buckser 2003: 69).

In the case of Bom Busty Lepchas, conversion was more of a community affair as families converted around the same time and there was not much resistance or opposition. In cases of individual conversion, there were instances of the remaining family being converted in due time. Conversions also occurred during or after marriage if the spouse was a non-Christian. Conversion in Bom Busty occurred many decades ago and there are not that many new Lepcha converts, as it was their grandfathers or great-grandfathers who first converted to Christianity. Today, most Lepchas here are fourth–fifth generation Christians who are not aware of the real reasons why they became Christians. However Bom Busty boasts of one interesting but important incident that triggered many converts. It was the death of Sethang Chemjong, son of Mekbar Singh Limbu and his Lepcha wife that had an unbelievable story of the deceased who came
back to life. As unlikely as it sounds, the story has a folklorish appeal to the Bom population as one of the oldest ladies in the village narrated this story with much flavour as if it was she herself who had died and returned from heaven. She was told this story by her grandfather who was awake when the deceased returned to life.

The Man who Died and Came Back to Life

Sethang Chemjong died around 2:00 in the afternoon and came back to life at 8:00 in the morning. Known to be a tall fellow who almost hung down, everybody called him Hungrayo. As he reached the door of death, it was dark and he found it very difficult to enter. The only thing he could hear himself say was, “I am a Christian” as the door opened and he went inside. There seemed to be a lot of commotion and he boarded a train that had stopped nearby. Interestingly, the train was going nowhere but revolving in the same tracks making stops every now and then for passengers to get off. So he got off too, but since there was no where to go, he got back on the train and it went round and round for 18 years (which according to him was equivalent to one night on earth) As he looked around, he saw a lama spinning his prayer wheels and he said, “O lama, do you know the way?” to which the lama replied, “I myself have not been able to find the way and have been roaming around for the last 18 years.” Then Sethang stepped outside the train and reached a dangerous slope from where the ground was far too deep and only the eerie wind could be felt.
Then he again said, "I am a Christian." But a man came and pushed him from behind and he thought, "Oho! I am dead now," but instead he landed on a very dusty road. As he looked up, he saw sadhus, jhakris and lamas running around and they all seemed to despise him because he was a Christian. He then went a little further and found a desert-like area, but as he waited, the group that mocked him was swept up not by water or the fire but they disappeared in front of his eyes. He however managed to cross the sandy desert and was walking uphill when he met many people like Dr. Grahams, his own grandfather and father. He then recalled that his father was a little on the selfish side; and they were all going downhill, but he was climbing up. It was a small path and as he ascended, he found Ram seated on a deerskin and asked, "They treat you as God in the world, but why are you sitting here?" Ram replied, "The world didn't know and mistook me for God while I was only teaching them the good things so now I have to sit here till his second-coming." Sethang then said, "Where is Laxman then?" and Ram pointed him towards Laxman who was also sitting in a deerskin nearby. He looked around and found all the gods of the earth wandering around. Suddenly he got really hungry and started looking for something to eat and found a cottage. Unaware, he was punished for some misdeed on earth and was turned to a cat, which was distressing because how was he able to get to heaven now? But as he looked at the cottage from the window, he saw some curd and ate it all. The next day too, he went to eat the curd but the owner of the cottage found him and beat him to death. He was
thrown out and interestingly, he died as a cat but reincarnated as a man. But his punishment had not ended, as he now became the hard root of a bamboo. Since the dried parts are good for firewood, the travellers used the root as fire and it was scattered to embers but it soon assembled and he became a man again. However saying "Christian" was like a medicine when trials came. He walked further up and met a naked giant roasting and eating humans from a huge pot. The giant held a bow and arrow and was carrying a baby on its back. It then aimed the arrow at Sethang who said, "I am a Christian" and the giant with his huge arms showed a fist to Sethang and said, "You shall return again." Sethang proceeded further only to come in contact with a huge black figure in a horse wanting to slice him with a sword. But Sethang used his remedy, "I am a Christian" and he was spared. He then found himself following a straight road with heavenly scents and reached a garden where fruits from all 12 seasons were ripe. From there he saw a city and went towards it but he ran into an angel in the platform, who asked him, "Where are you going?" Sethang replied, "I want to go to heaven." "Have you had communion?" asked the angel. "No, I have not," replied Sethang to which the angel said, "then you cannot enter heaven." Sethang was surprised so the two of them wrestled for a while and Sethang was feeling a little low when they heard a voice say, "Maanoheem" to which the angel let him loose, got on his knees and said, "Yes Lord". "What are you doing there?," God asked. "This man has not had communion but wants to come to heaven," replied the angel. Then God said, "If he didn't deserve to
come to heaven, would he have reached this far? It is entirely your fault. You are now transferred!” Upon hearing that, the angel stood up, flapped its wings, which were as huge as could cover the whole earth and flew away. Sethang went towards the east and climbed the stairs where he found a library with the book of life and the book of karma. But the book of life was not there. Then he climbed further up and searched more but with little success. So he was depressed and stepped down. He was wondering what next when he found God standing over a pulpit. As soon as he saw God, he bowed down and God said, “your time is not over yet, you have to return to earth and do some more work.” Then Sethang told God that he wanted to see the nail wounds on his palm from when he died on the cross. God showed the scars and as Sethang tried to touch, it was like an illusion because he couldn’t touch it. Then God said, “you have to return to earth, be my witness and save souls for heaven. You go back.” So he agreed and as he stepped down the stairs, he found himself sneezing out loud, which woke him from under the white sheets that had covered him since his death. At that time, there were two women beside his body who ran outside the room as the men who had gone to the bathroom returned and one of the men said, “Ow, you have risen from the dead?” and he said, “Yes, bring a copy and a pencil and close the door.” Then he relayed his story that has now been told and retold in Bom and its surroundings about the man who died and came back to life (Fieldwork: 2010).
This narrative is quite popular in the village, as everyone has heard one version of the story or the other. It is also a narrative that tells us about the kind of Christianity that was pervading in the village. Sparing the details, which were fervently told by one of the oldest living persons in the village, it is commonly understood that Sethang did not get to enter heaven because he had not had communion yet. Since then taking communion to get to heaven had become an important doctrine in Bom church. Until recently, church leaders would even visit dying members in the hospital and give the ailing person communion before they breathed their last, hoping that was the dying person’s ticket to heaven regardless of the life he had led while on earth. It showed the simplicity of people’s belief in a religion that promised eternal life. It can be argued that Sethang’s story made more impact because his uncle was the missionary who brought Christianity to Bom Busty, and his father was also a pastor who had married a Lepcha wife whose father was a bongthing. So the congregation took heed of his word as almost equal to the word of God. It is recalled that members of his family themselves were humbled in many ways and churchgoers became sincere and God fearing. Interestingly, if we look deeply into this narrative there are certain things that emphasize the superiority of Christianity. To begin with, “I am a Christian” speaks for the Christian identity that was emphasized which even proved to be a “medicine” when he was in trouble with the giant and the dark man in a horse. It thus became important to identify oneself as a Christian. Secondly, the meeting of a lost lama and the sudden disappearance of god men from other religions like the sadhus and jhakris somewhat show the negligible role of other religious heads in the Christian cosmology. Likewise
the conversation with Ram as he waited for the second coming of Jesus and him being misunderstood as God undermines the God status held by Ram on earth. Another interesting aspect pointed in this narrative is the concept of reincarnation as Sethang takes different forms of life for some misdeed on earth before he becomes a man once again. The belief of rebirth upon one’s death is very much a Buddhist tradition as is the idea of *karma* when he starts looking for the book of *karma*. In fact, Christinity does not even talk about *karma*. The details of this narrative can seem like just another story but the fact that everybody in Bom Busty knows the story and has relayed it even to their friends and relatives outside the village means it had certain significance at that time that is still held on to today. At one point, it is almost funny that the lady narrating the story tells that the angel had to be transferred. One can also see the language of bureaucracy used as we notice that this narrative intrigued the villagers in a profound way.

**Cultural Changes due to Christianity**

Conversion is also seen as a ‘cultural passage’ (Austin-Broos 2003: 2) changing the direction from old practices and aligning oneself to a new institution with new rules and social expectations. It requires the reorientation of priorities and ‘negotiates a place in the world’ (*Ibid*) as the following paragraphs will look into various social institutions that were both in conflict and in continuity. It will look at the changes and how those changes were recognized in the community.
Family

The families are relatively small and nuclear in nature. An average family consists of father, mother, and two children. Most fathers have government jobs either in Kalimpong town or nearby villages while the mothers stay at home and look after the house. Mothers are also known to be active in gardening and growing flowers for economic purposes. After completing their twelfth grade, most children went out of Kalimpong for further studies or employment. In case of extended families, there are surviving grandparents (mostly grandmothers) and the families of siblings living together. In order to avoid conflict between brothers especially after they are married, the eldest son usually moves out of the parents’ home and builds another house in a nearby ancestral land while the youngest son stays with the parents. In case of misunderstanding, they do not like to argue and ignore each other to avoid confrontations. They live in modern houses and there is no traditional Lepcha house in the village.

Marriage

Church is an important place for young people to meet and get married. However, church is not an exclusive Lepcha domain. So intermarriage between Lepcha and non-Lepcha neighbours is a common practice in Bom Busty. Christian Lepchas have no reservations when it comes to finding spouses given that their other half is Christian. Often times when a Lepcha brings home a non-Lepcha wife, there are high
chances of the new bride introducing her culture and lifestyle to the new family, thus diluting the ethnic boundary of a Lepcha family. This phenomenon of intermarriage has been well noted for the decline of Lepcha culture but there is no stopping to the trend as love marriages are a popular trend today. "Of course we wish for Lepcha-Lepcha marriages but we don’t hold any restrictions today," said an elderly gentleman. But Christian Lepchas are cautious about avoiding marriage to members of the same clan. In some cases arranged marriages take place and the traditional practice of a middleman – peebu - is still used as the main interlocutor between the bride and the groom’s family. In a Christian Lepcha marriage, extensive traditional rules are discarded although those that are not in conflict with Christianity is selectively chosen and practised. Instead of the wedding gown and the suit, the bride can also be seen wearing the traditional gada in white and the groom is seen to mix the modern suit with the dumpra. Those at the wedding are also seen to wear the traditional attires and they use pagu rip (white flower) instead of the khada (white silk scarf) as garlands for the couple. Marriage often becomes the only time when families from far and near, both Christian and non-Christian come together and get to know each other.

Engagement Day  Wedding day with the garland of pagu rip

145
**Kinship**

Lepchas still follow the clan system but the practice of parallel descent ceased to exist following the acceptance of Christianity. It was difficult to follow the traditional practice since the wife took the husband’s last name after marriage and the daughter was unable to take the mother’s last name because her mother had already changed her last name to her father’s clan name. Although there are cases where both the son and the daughter took their mother’s clan name in the absence of the father. During 1960s some Chinese men married Lepcha women but left their wives behind with the children. The children of those unions took their mother’s clan name and stuck to the clan rules. Till today, these families are strict about marriage within the clan although technically they never belonged to that particular clan. Indeed, clan endogamy is still taboo and they strictly adhere to the rules. In that, kinship ties have remained unchanged although the terminologies are slowly being replaced by the usage of Nepali kinship terms instead. Examples like *daju* for elder brother is used in place of *anum or mama* for uncle in place of *azyong*.

**Language**

There was a time when Lepcha was the official language of the region, which is evident from the fact that even the Deed of Grant of Darjeeling was written in Lepcha. But in due time Lepcha language became ‘unfashionable’ (Foning 1987: 160) and the Nepali language took over as the *lingua franca* of the region. Lepchas were mocked at not
being able to pronounce the Nepali words properly. “There was a feeling of shame that we weren’t speaking the right way,” said a Bom resident who remembers his classmates and teachers making fun of him speaking in Nepali. It was tough in the beginning for Lepcha students to speak a different language at home and at school but they made a conscious effort to master the Nepali language as almost all Lepchas in Bom Busty speak Nepali today. They are fluent and can read and write in Nepali rather than in Lepcha, owing also to the education system where Nepali is the medium of instruction (unless they go to English schools). Most parents have realized that Lepcha language has ceased to be spoken even at homes while their children took Nepali as their spoken and written language in school around the village. The usage of Lepcha language thus became limited to a few words in dinner table or when there would be a visitor. But different Lepcha organizations are working to promote the practice of Lepcha language as Bom Busty hosted the decadal celebrations for the Lepcha Conversation Course (LCC) in January 2012. LCC is a mobile language programme started by like-minded Lepcha individuals held annually in different Lepcha villages. Bom Busty also hosted the fifth LCC, which gave birth to regular Lepcha classes in Bom School for Lepcha students. Following the decadal celebrations, the Lepcha class has also been extended to villagers and other language enthusiasts. Since the class was a later addition to school syllabus, the teachers’ salary was being borne by the contribution of a few Lepcha families from the village.
Food

The Lepchas of Bom Busty remember when food used to be gathered from the bountiful forests. There was a time when the village residents would reap dry paddy a little away from their houses. Men and women would go to particular spots where the women would start gathering fruits and plants while the men would weave cane mats which were used to carry the gathered food stuff. Maize and millet were other popular crops amongst Lepchas. In case of excess food, they would dig holes and store the food in layers with the grains placed at the bottom. This would be their granary, a storehouse that could be used when they needed more food. While the different kinds of yams and sweet potatoes were readily available in the forest, fishing in the Relli River usually resulted a good catch. The fish would then be prepared inside a bamboo and shared with everyone present. Today, young people visit the Relli River for riverside picnic activities and although there are some young men from the village who still fish,
majority of meat and fish products are readily available in the market. One of the important changes in the dietary habits has to be the intake of ci, the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet, which plays an essential part in all spheres of Lepcha life. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, putting the Christian Lepchas in the latter category automatically divorcing them from a key aspect of Lepcha culture. Although Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty have fond memories of ci intake on various occasions, it has become a religious boundary marker today. One of the interesting food influences has been the making of sel roti, a Nepali circular shaped rice doughnut prepared during Hindu festivals, which the Christian Lepchas have picked up and prepare during Christmas. It has also been seen served during weddings.

Dress

Until about fifty years ago, dumpra and gada were worn by Lepcha men and women in the village respectively. There was a time when thorns from orange trees were used as safety pins to hold the female attire together. Today, the traditional attires are only worn during special occasions. The recent trend among men has been to coordinate a tailored suit and a dumpra, transforming the traditional attire to a modern contemporary look. Women are also seen to wear their gadas to church on Sundays especially during the winter season. In September 2008, the leader of the Gorkhaland movement demanded everyone in Darjeeling hills to wear the Nepali dress that triggered a new wave of
consciousness among Lepchas. Lepchas rejected the imposition, and vowed to wear their own attires instead. This was a wake up call for the Lepchas since their cultural identity through what they wear was being threatened. It became more of a reason to wear the traditional dress and today’s youth are also promoting the traditional attires with the first ever Himalayan Ethnic Lepcha Fashion Event (HELFE) held in 2012.

**Dumpra** worn with pants and jacket

**Ready made gada** worn during Christmas

**Christian Lepcha Identity**

‘Becoming Christian is not a simple process of replacing an old set of local practices with a new set of universal practices, nor is the local Christianity to be understood as some kind of quasi-Christianity as a result of the transformations and compromises that have occurred in the adoption process’ (Yoko 2004: 291).
A Christian Lepcha identity is a combination of two distinctive identities. A Christian identity and a Lepcha identity constituting its own separate cultures. But what makes one a Christian? What are the boundaries that separate a Christian Lepcha from a non-Christian Lepcha? In order to examine the Christian identity, it is important to understand what it means to be a Christian first. For the purpose of this study we look at ‘being Christian as a social rather than intellectual or spiritual phenomena’ (Bal 2000: 132). The Christian church has its universal ideals and rituals but there is no exclusive “Christian identity” because it is also contextualized through time and space. A Christian identity does not mean that all Christians share a common set of beliefs and values’ (Tanner 1997: 124). Despite its universal appeals, not all Christians everywhere believe in the same things. Historically, to be a Christian meant to be a follower of Christ but things are not so easy and simple. There are many layers of practices and beliefs that make up a Christian identity today. There are no ‘sharp cultural boundaries that give Christians (as a whole) group specificity’ (Stamps 2009: 1) and this could ring true for Lepchas of Bom Busty as well. There are Bom Lepchas who come from Catholic and Protestant denominations following different doctrines but are known to others as Christians. It is interesting that the Middle Bom Busty Lepchas have garnered the Christian tag in the area. True enough, if you are a Lepcha from Middle Bom Busty, there are high chances you might be a Christian. With only two Buddhist households in the village and the Lower Bom Busty comprising most of the Buddhist population, Lepchas of Middle Bom Busty are Christians by default. But what separates the
Christian Lepchas from their Buddhist counterparts across the field or from Christian Lepchas from the Christian non-Lepchas?

Identity Markers

From a Biblical perspective, Christian Lepchas reject the polytheistic array of many Gods and devils in Lepcha cosmology by following the one true God who created them and promised them eternal life. They believe in the Bible as the word of God and are affiliated with the local Bom Church (or other) for Sunday services and other church activities throughout the year. Association with a church officially recognizes the individual as a Christian and can be cited as a place of identification when asked about religion in government census or places of employment. Members are expected to participate in church activities and church is expected to look after the members in baptising and dedicating the baby, during marriage and death. Traditionally, a Lepcha bongthing would be required for these rites of passage but when almost all the Lepcha population of the village has embraced Christianity, the traditional Lepcha practices are emitted from the scene and the church identifies their task in the same. True enough, a Christian Lepcha does not believe in muns and bongthings and stays away from the various rum faats that take place in neighbouring Lepcha houses. Instead, Lepcha homes host the various cottage meetings and prayers in Christian tradition. Members are expected to get married at church and monogamy is the order of the day. In case of marriages, Lepcha members are making an extra effort to amalgamate both Lepcha and
Christian tradition in their attires and rituals. While the church wedding remains as per Christian tradition, certain Lepcha rituals like the bridal price and the usage of *peebu* has been seen in practice. Certain gifts like *ci* is replaced by milk clearly indicating that this is a Christian Lepcha marriage. Alcohol is strictly prohibited in church although there are instances of its usage in negligible homes during the after-party. When a child is born, it is the parents, grandparents or friends of the baby who would name the child and there is no special day for this occasion. The growing children are sent to Sunday Schools to learn about the stories of the Bible and most of them also start their educational careers in Bom School itself, their ‘natal denomination’ (Caplan 1980: 656) before transferring to other mission institutions or government schools. One of the impressive Christian Lepcha identity markers in Bom Busty has been education. From the very onset of Christianity in the village, education went hand in hand to create an environment that encouraged people to study and the trend continues today. Because of easy access to education through church, Christian Lepchas were well educated and exposed to the world, but they ignored and missed out on the knowledge about Lepcha culture. In that, Christianity failed to contextualize its cultural package in the case of the Lepchas. For the longest time, it failed to “find Jesus in Lepcha culture” (Limboo 2009: 89) as the two identities walked towards the same direction of progress but on the different sides of the road. There was no amalgamation of Lepcha culture and Christianity as Christianity overtook the traditional culture creating a significant boundary between those inside and outside the faith (Farhadian 2003).
Comparing Narratives

“Rongs are much closer to the biblical tradition”. This is an oft-repeated phrase in recent days when a pastor/preacher is preaching to the Lepcha crowd. Today, Lepcha Christians are drawing parallel between Lepcha myths and biblical stories starting from before the creation when the Bible talks about ‘the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1:2). Lepchas also believe that in the beginning, ‘the world was all water, and there were no living creatures’ (Stocks 1975: 32). The presence of water since the existence of this planet is a recurring phenomenon across tribal tales and scientific speculations, but this is only the start of similarities of Lepcha narratives sounding like they are from the Bible or vice versa.

The Creation Story: In Lepcha mythology, the creator God Itbumu is believed to have created the heavens and the earth before he picked the fresh snow of Mt. Kanchenjunga and created Fudongthing the first man on earth. But the creator was not satisfied and decided to give him a companion by taking a bit of ‘a-yong, literally translated marrow’ (Doma 2010: 2) from Fudong’s bones and created Nazongnyu, his sister. They were blessed with supernatural powers and instructed to live separately. Fudongthing was to live on top a mountain named Nareng Nangsheng Chyu and Nazongnyu was to live in a lake below the mountain called Naho-Nahar Daa. But they could not stay away from each other and started meeting in between the mountain and the lake. Soon enough they gave birth to their first child but threw it away. This continued till their seventh child when they were ultimately found out. Itbumu was
disappointed at Fudongthing and Nazongnyu for disobeying her orders. She cursed them and banished them from her presence. ‘You will leave immediately and live in the foothills of Kongchen Kongchlo as ordinary humans and suffer for your sins’ (Doma 2010: 4). This narrative is very similar to the creation story in the Bible where God created Adam from the dust of the ground and took one of his ribs to create Eve, a helper for him. Unlike Fudongthing and Nazongnyu’s living arrangements, Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden but were instructed not to eat from the tree of life. Unfortunately, they relented and they were also banished from the garden as he cursed them both for disobeying his orders.

**The Flood Story:** The flood story is the story of Rongyoo and Rangeet, two rivers of Sikkim. They were lovers who were to meet at Pesok and travel towards the plains. They each had a bird and a snake to guide them. But it was the girl—Rongyoo guided by the snake that arrived before the boy and that upset his male ego. When he reached, she asked him *Thee-satha?* meaning “where have you been?” (the name of the river has been anglicized to Teesta and remained so ever since). In that, Rangeet was ashamed of his delayed arrival and instead of travelling forward he decided to return to his place of origin. The opposite flow caused turbulence as the waters rose and flooded the land. During the time of the flood, Lepchas were believed to have sought refuge in Mt. Tendong and was saved from being drowned. Likewise, the biblical flood occurred when the earth was full of evil and God wanted to destroy it. But, he found a righteous man in Noah and wanted to save him and his family along with other living creatures of this earth. So, he told him to build a wooden ark and when it flooded, those inside the
boat were saved. In both cases, we see a select group of people saved from drowning when the earth was flooded with water.

**The tower of Babel:** The Bible talks about a time when everyone spoke the same language and said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches heaven' (Genesis 11:4). But God was not pleased with the developments as he confused their language and they could not work on building the tower together. In case of the Lepchas, they too wanted to build a stairway to heaven (see Chapter 3) and they used earthen pots for that purpose. Soon they were piling pots after pots to get to heaven. But a miscommunication between those at the top and those at the bottom caused the earthen pot tower to be smashed down. Here too, we see similar aspirations of the Lepcha people and the people of the Bible to reach heaven, which remained unfulfilled because of language problems.

In all three narratives, the stories and its themes are so alike that we wonder if one was inspired from the other. However, the similarities of Lepcha mythology to Biblical stories have an added advantage to the developing interest in Christian Lepchas affirming their Christian faith and Lepcha culture today. Limboo compares the 'peace loving, generous, sincere, faithful, hospitable, self giving and self sacrificing nature' of the Lepchas to the Christian concept of agape (Limboo 2009: 118). And with biblical stories running parallel Lepcha myths, Christian Lepchas can now embrace the history of traditional culture they once ignored. But can 'an ethnic cum religious identification' (Yoko 2004: 285) exist in the context of Lepchas? The above narratives are examples of
how Christian identity and Lepcha identity can possibly co-exist and produce a shared
identity.

*Christian Lepcha vs. Lepcha Christian*

'I personally feel that it is best for us simple people to adopt Christianity...' (Foning
1987: 295)

In this shared identity, however, it is very likely that one becomes dominant and the
other dormant in different contexts. The question of whether the religious identity
precedes the ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian will
always be there because there was a time when the 'exclusivist attitude' (Longkumer
2010: 85) of Christianity prevented them from continuing many of their old cultural
practices. Christian Lepchas were blamed for ignoring Lepcha culture, forgetting
Lepcha language and 'considering themselves too advanced to interact with their
Buddhist counterparts' (Gowloog Forthcoming). On the other hand, Buddhist Lepchas
managed to integrate Lepcha culture with Buddhism and kept up with the traditional
practices. In that, Christian Lepchas have not always felt secure about their ethnic
identity because Buddhist Lepchas would always question their loyalty and involvement
in community affairs. Today, Christian Lepchas have come to a realization that their
religious identity has not been able to suffice for their ethnic identity. They are making
conscious effort to acknowledge and reaffirm their ethnic identity and Christian Lepchas
of Bom Busty are showing active participation in community affairs both within and
outside their religious spheres. There has also been an emergence of the educated Christian elite who are outspoken and prominent in projecting their Lepcha Christian identity referring to Bible verses like, ‘Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage’ (Psalms 33: 12). Lepcha Christians are pronouncing worlds of the Bible on behalf of their community, surer of both their religious and cultural identity. There is an acceptance of Christianity’s ignorant role to the traditional culture and are willing to accommodate different ideas. Involved with church affairs, there was a time when Christian identity overshadowed the Lepcha identity but Christian Lepchas are today positive about their role in the preservation and promotion of both their identities. When asked around the village if they were Lepcha Christians or Christian Lepchas, the wordplay was only distraction as everyone agreed, “We are Lepchas first”.

158