different religions and the formation of religion-based identities and what it means to the Lepcha identity as a whole. Like language, religion and culture construct identity for their members, 'share common sets of collective symbols and ritual objects such as cross, sacred sites, collective rituals' (Lotha 2011:1) and creates group solidarity. Religion and culture both have that 'common uniting element' (Oommen 2009: 4) which generates 'group cohesion' (van Beek 1985: 265). For the purpose of this thesis, we take Durkheim's definition of religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (1995: 44). The emphasis is therefore on religion as a binding force that gives a sense of collective consciousness. But religion cannot be studied in the absence of the culture of the community since religion is the seen to be the core of culture. Therefore, the study of religion and culture goes hand in hand as we look at culture to be 'the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts' (UNESCO 1989). In the case of Lepchas, these forms of culture have greatly changed after they became Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, resulting in the formation of different identities and cleavages based on such identities. It may be noted that identity studies initially focused on the formation of 'self' as an individual. But in the last few decades the focus has
shifted from the individual to the collective; as it is the 'we-ness of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which the group members unite' (Cerulo 1997: 387).

Buddhism was officially introduced to the Lepchas of Sikkim from the seventeenth century onwards. It was a gradual imposition by the Tibetan migrant-rulers from the north who translated many Buddhist texts into Lepcha language to bring the Lepchas under the Buddhist fold. 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). Christianity made its mark when Reverend William Start, former Church of England clergyman turned independent Baptist started a school for Lepchas (Dewan 1991: 104) in 1841. He learned the local vernacular and translated few books of the Bible from English to Lepcha and published Matthew in 1845 followed by Genesis, Exodus, and John in 1849. Interest in the mother tongue nurtured the identity of the tribe and translating Bible into their language was a revolutionary step (Oommen 2007: 12). But an established mission in Kalimpong, one of the subdivisions of Darjeeling district, started only with the arrival of Reverend Macfarlane and the Church of Scotland in 1882. Lepchas easily accepted Christianity but the 'exclusivist attitude' (Longkumer 2010: 85) of Christianity prevented them from continuing many of their old cultural practices for which the Christian Lepchas received a lot of flak and are blamed even today. In Ilam, the easternmost district of Nepal, Lepchas received Hindu influence from early nineteenth century as there were hardly any other religions competing with Hinduism. Lepchas never professed
Hinduism as their religion but the Hindu-tribal contact played an important role in the transmission of cultural elements from the dominant religion. They claim to be 99% Buddhists but their religio-cultural patterns show a fair share of Hinduism, Buddhism and the traditional religion.

Statement of the problem

'To change one’s religion is to change one’s world' (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xi). Among Lepchas, it was not one but three religions that influenced the change in their traditional religion and culture. The acceptance of these alien religions led to an uncalled divide within the already minority community whose cultural changes have also led to the formation of different identities and division based on such identities. Thus, while in Durkheim’s definition it is religion that enhances social solidarity and ‘group longevity’ (Sosis and Alcorta 2003: 266); in the case of Lepchas, it has both united and divided the community at different levels and contexts. The Lepcha community is fragmented, and the factions are specially built around religious differences with one group claiming to be superior to the other, and the other group claiming to be more Lepcha than the other. Indeed, when cultures have more than one religion, they have problems claiming one cultural identity (Pohlong 2004:111). Therefore, the introduction and exposure of three world religions to a single tribal community and its acceptance and influence has proved to be a threat to the ethnic Lepcha identity. But in recent days, Lepchas have come to a realization that division along religious lines will only lead to an annihilation of their
culture. They are making conscious efforts to find common ground and forge a shared identity acceptable to Lepchas from all religious backgrounds. This thesis therefore sets out to explore what they are articulating as shared attributes of Lepchas and whether or not such articulation is uniform across the Buddhist, Christian and Hindu Lepchas.

**Brief Review of Literature**

The earliest historical records on Lepchas are Tibetan texts. In the nineteenth century, colonial administrators started writing about the life and culture of Lepchas. Describing the eating habits, dress code, marriage system, death rites, agricultural practice and housing pattern, Archibald Campbell wrote ‘Notes on the Lepchas of Sikkim’ (1840) and ‘On the Lepchas’ (1869) while Colonel George Byres Mainwaring published a Lepcha grammar in 1876. Dr. Joseph Hooker published *Himalayan Journals* in 1855 and C. de. Beauvoir Stocks’ (1975) focused on writing about folklores, myths, legends and Lepcha customs. In 1938, Geoffrey Gorer and John Morris published an account of the village life and culture of the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim. This was followed by Halfdan Siiger’s documentation of the socio-cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of Lepchas in the 1940s. Twentieth century saw the dawn of Lepcha researchers with Kharpu Tamsang (1982), Arthur Foning (1987), Rip Roshina Gwoloog (1995), Paul Lepcha (1999) and very recently D.T. Tamlong (2008) writing from the native’s perspective. Around the same time, other Indian scholars also started showing interest on the Lepcha village, settlement pattern, economic and domestic life, social organization, religious
beliefs and practices, myths, tales, songs, proverbs, dances, and language with Amal Kumar Das (1978), Indira Awasty (1978), Rudranand Thakur (1988), Tapan Chattopadhyay (1990) and Dulal Chandra Roy (2005) at the forefront of Lepcha research. The most recent published materials on Lepchas have been that of Jenny Bentley (2011), Charisma K. Lepcha (2011) and Heleen Plaisier (2011) examining the changes and continuities of Lepcha culture in education, village life and the traditional drink respectively. The above literature reveals that no work had been taken to make a comparative study of the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity on the Lepchas as a whole, as this thesis set out to examine the relationship between the three and provide an analysis of the changing face of Lepcha culture through religion.

**Objectives**

i) To reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha religion on the basis of published literature and ethnographic data collected from the Lepchas who still practise their traditional religion.

ii) To examine the influence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity on Lepcha social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, language, food, and dress.

iii) To understand how the various socio-political and demographic factors like their numerical status, political voice, language recognition, and commissioning of hydel projects in their sacred areas are responsible for the emergence of a common Lepcha identity.
iv) To understand the role of educated Lepcha youths in redefining Lepcha society, culture and identity.

Methodology

Three villages namely Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong were chosen in three major geographical locations of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. The year 2010 was mainly devoted to being in the field although shorter visits took place in 2009 and 2011 as well. The traditional ethnographic method of participant observation, both of daily life and special occasions was conducted along with many formal and informal interviews with villagers and key informants of which two of the elderly people have already died by the time of writing this thesis. The collected data was analysed using the comparative method deemed necessary not just to juxtapose one religion with another but to understand the 'continuities and differences' (Paden 1994: 3) of the three religions. I also used photography, both to document events, and to serve as a conversation starter when travelling between villages/ regions because Lepchas from Kalimpong were interested in knowing how Lepchas from Dzongu or Ilam looked like or how different they were for that matter which eventually resulted to discussing about Lepcha identity as well. Video recordings also resulted similar outcomes when shown to a family or a friend, which again yielded discussions about Lepchas in general. This usage of audio-visual tool actually proved to be an effective methodology in my multi-sited work. Photographs taken during the field have also been used in the thesis to illustrate the text.
Findings

The main findings of the thesis have been discussed below. But first a brief note on their traditional religion.

Traditional Lepcha Religion

Often times, the religion of the Lepchas is seen to be confusing, contradictory, difficult, atheistic, and 'nothing spiritual' (Morris 1938: 287) about it. It is an ardent task to reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha traditional religion since much of it has been modified, altered and is no more in practice. Stocks (1975) opine that a clear idea of what can be called the original Lepcha religion will probably only be possible with an exhaustive study of all the tales, as this chapter examined the myths and legends while cross checking with the elderly to re-create the basic understanding of Lepcha belief system. The existence of gods and demons in Lepcha cosmology is abundant. There is a country of gods known as Rumlyang (Stocks 1975: 19) often referred to as heaven but there is no hell, although there exists a country of ancestors known as Mayel Kyong. The muns and bongthings, or priestesses and priests respectively are the ritual specialists who act as mediators between gods, humans and spirits. They are regarded as custodians of Lepcha culture and officiate various rituals from birth to death. Most of their prayers are directed to the mountains, trees, rivers, streams, plants and nature in all its forms, clearly indicating an eco-centric cosmology.
Naamthars are the religious books, which also covers different aspects of culture, history and philosophy of the Lepcha ethos. Longtsoaks on the other hand are upright stones erected to commemorate a sacred event or occasion. An important change in the traditional religion has been the inclusion of Dzongu as their holy land. The coming of hydroelectric projects in Dzongu has triggered the traditionalists to reconnect most of the mythological stories to the Dzongu landscape. From the creation of their progenitors to the consecration of the first couple and the establishment of customary laws, the place has been promoted as a hallowed ground today. Their love for Dzongu as holy land is also being expressed in stories and songs (Little 2008: 253). Scholars are even comparing Dzongu’s holy land status to that of Benares for Hindus, Gaya for Buddhists, Mecca for Muslims and Jerusalem for Christians (Roy 2009: 51). While Dzongu always existed as their homeland, the realization of Dzongu as their holy land has received a constant flow of Lepchas making pilgrimages to Dzongu (Anderson 2006: 54). They are bypassing their religious barriers formed after the acceptance of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism as they integrate Dzongu into their belief system. This kind of religious revival with relation to the sacred landscape also ‘valorises their identity as forest-dwellers, affirms their indigeneity, and transforms them into primordial environmentalists’ (Arora 2006: 57) of the region.
Influence of Buddhism on the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim

The introduction of Buddhism and its incorporation into the Lepcha landscape was the key to an easy acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. For instance, Mt. Kanchenjunga, the mythical place of Lepcha origin was incorporated into Buddhist belief and transformed into the guardian deity of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom. Since then, Lepchas are found to be practising 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 labour in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity (Arora 2006: 64).’ But there is an unspoken tension between the intertwined religions as Ortner emphasizes that ‘conflict between Buddhism and shamanism is not new to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition’ (1995: 357). Lepchas have also realized that they have accommodated Buddhism into their traditional religion, and the various Buddhist festivals and rituals are actually on its way to 'erode Lepcha identity' (Bentley 2007: 99). For instance, the villagers today blame the Buddhist practice of the cremation of the dead for the dwindling number of Lepcha ritual specialists. It is believed that the body of the mun or the bongthing should be buried according to Lepcha tradition as it enables the spirit to come back and possess someone from the lineage of the deceased mun or bongthing to continue the line. Lepchas also complain how Lepcha lamas never attain the top most level in monastic hierarchy and feel that they would never be the head lama despite years of dedication in the Buddhist order. Nonetheless,
Buddhism was the common denominator for the Lepchas and Bhutias to form an alliance against the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society. With the growing Nepali population, the Bhutias and the Lepchas came together to stand up against the majority although the two have not always been on friendly terms. The Bhutia-Lepcha (B-L) alliance is not natural but a product of 'negative solidarity' (Subba 1988: 169) that has worked for their advantage at certain levels providing reservations in education, politics and other spheres of Sikkim society. For now, the two tribes share a hyphenated identity although Lepchas have recently been granted the 'primitive tribe' status confusing them as to what this new identity holds for the future of the Lepchas in Sikkim.

Christianity and the Lepchas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling District

'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) with the introduction of education and a link to the outside world. The process of conversion among Lepchas was multi-causal which included factors like personal conviction, economic development, social status, and marital relations. But conversion to Christianity required lifestyle changes that divorced Christian Lepchas from the traditional ways of life. Conversion then became a communal issue as it not only implied 'change in one's self-identification but also the ratification and recognition of change by the wider community' (Buckser 2003: 72), which in the case of
Lepchas was met with much disapproval. The non-Christian Lepchas were blaming them for ignoring Lepcha culture, forgetting Lepcha language and 'considering themselves too advanced to interact with their Buddhist counterparts' (Gowloog: Forthcoming). The Lepchas in Kalimpong appeared to be split and the boundaries between who a 'pure Lepcha' was, was being questioned. Christian Lepchas could not always feel secure about their ethnic identity because the Buddhist Lepchas would always question their loyalty and involvement in community affairs. There came a time when a Christian Lepcha had to think 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. True enough, Christian Lepchas have come to a realization that their religious identity has not been able to suffice for their ethnic identity. In recent times, a resurgence is taking place to compensate for the loss; even the Bom Church has restarted the Sunday service in Lepcha language and church members are seen to be wearing their traditional attires during Christmas, Easter, weddings and other occasions. There is a conscious effort to acknowledge and reaffirm one's ethnic identity and Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty are showing active participation in community affairs both within and outside their religious spheres. It is this union with their Buddhist brethren who are more aware of Lepcha culture and them as the highly educated, government employees that have proven successful in the formation of a group relentlessly pressing and demanding the rights of Lepchas that has yielded positive results.
The Lepchas of Ilam were most influenced by Hinduism because that was the majority religious tradition. Hinduism was the state promoted religion of the high-caste Hindus who wanted it to be the 'the national culture of Nepal' to create a homogenous nation of 'Nepali speakers who followed Hinduism' (Hangen 2005: 50). Although Lepchas never converted to Hinduism, the country's idea of purity and pollution had a serious impact in the way Lepchas perceived themselves. In Jilbong, one Bhujel man remarked, 'since Lepchas are without caste, they are lower than the lowest caste.' Bhujels were the immediate neighbours of the Lepcha residents there and themselves belonged to a lower caste group. It is only possible that their interacting with low caste people make them feel even smaller than the Bhujels. There was a definite feeling of inferiority but Lepchas were not making any effort to climb the social ladder either. 'They did not rise in revolt even when they were relegated to a lowly position within Hindu society' (Bose 1996: 175). Yet, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture visibly through the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. The role of a Brahmin priest during the naming of a child is one example of how Jilbong Lepchas have had a 'direct infiltration' (Ibid: 177) of Hindu culture in their tribal life resulting from 'a conscious plan of Hindu society to dominate and absorb a tribal group within its economic and social framework' (Ibid: 173). They absorbed Hindu traits and ways of living but that did not mean they gave up on their own deities and practices although there was a mixture of Buddhist elements as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) reports show Lepchas to be 99% Buddhists. Indeed, the oldest
monastery in Ilam has a Lepcha head lama, yet he is quick to say, ‘Buddhism is a later addition to our culture.’ So we question, are the Lepchas of Ilam Buddhists or Hindus? After the fieldwork, the question is not appropriate anymore because we are not able to club them as either Hindus or Buddhists because their religion has already become a syncretic one, combining both of Hindu and Buddhist practices and further mixed with the traditional mun-bongthing religion.

Comparing the Cultural Changes

Of the three places influenced by three religions, findings on Lepcha social institutions mentioned in the objectives are briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Family: Lepcha families are relatively small and organized by clan. Membership to the clan in Ilam is inherited patrilineally for men and matrilineally for women, although it has been out of practice in Dzongu and Kalimpong but Ilam Lepchas still followed this rule. Lepchas believe that each clan is connected to a peak in the Kanchenjunga range so all clans have their own peaks to return to when they die, hence members are expected to know the name of their peaks but again it was only the Ilam Lepchas who seemed to know the names of their clan peaks.

Marriage: Marriage is still tribe endogamous and clan exogamous although intermarriage between regions is also in practice. Intermarriage between Dzongu and Kalimpong Lepchas is more popular than between Dzongu and Ilam, and Ilam and Kalimpong Lepchas. Inter-community marriage has also become popular with the growing
interaction between their neighbours. Dzongu Lepchas were more likely to form marital alliances with Bhutias while Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas with the Nepalis although the first preference while searching for a bride/groom is usually from one’s own community. Trends of late marriage were quite common in Ilam because of the small Lepcha population and the strict clan system, which limited choices about marriageable partners.

Kinship: Kinship terminologies are slowly being replaced by the usage of Bhutia and Nepali terms instead. Lepcha kinship terminology conforms to the Eskimo kinship pattern, where the emphasis is on the nuclear family directly identifying the father, mother, brother and sister. There is no distinction in the usage of terms between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives as the same terms like uncle, aunt are used for both sides in all the three field sites.

Language: In Dzongu everybody spoke the Lepcha language. Lepchas of Sikkim were at a privileged end to find the school system recognizing the Lepcha language up till graduate level. Kalimpong Lepchas are optimistic with the Government of West Bengal announcing the introduction of Lepcha language in the school system. Most villagers however spoke the Nepali language in both Kalimpong and Ilam. For Jilbong residents, there are no governmental facilities to safeguard the Lepcha language although a local Lepcha teacher conducts night schools in Lepcha.

Education: Between Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam, Kalimpong Lepchas were higher educated with graduates, post graduates, engineers, and many government employees scattered all over the country. The reason mainly has to do with the church and school
going hand in hand and exposing the Kalimpong Lepchas to the perks of modern education. Dzongu Lepchas were usually educated till tenth grade but they did not always study further than that and went back to the fields. Ilam Lepchas lagged far behind with high number of school dropouts and many illiterate people in the village.

Food: The staple food of the Lepchas is maize, millet, barley, and rice. They eat different kinds of wild plants and tubers. They are non-vegetarians and indulge in different kinds of meat. They have no reservations on food but some Buddhist Lepchas are found to observe vegetarianism for religious reasons. One of the religious boundary markers when it comes to food has been the consumption of ci, 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 – birth, marriage and death and other occasions too. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, which puts the Christian Lepchas in the latter category automatically divorcing them from a key aspect of Lepcha culture.

Dress: The traditional dress for the Lepcha women is called gada or dumvun, and it is called dumpra for men. In Dzongu, most women wore bakhu (Tibetan dress for women) replacing the dumvun, which was only worn during weddings and special occasions. The Kalimpong Lepchas have seen a resurgence of traditional dress ever since the Gorkhaland movement demanded everyone to wear the Nepali dress and Lepchas rejected the imposition and vowed to wear their own attires. They are also finding new ways to improvise the dresses to give a modern look. Lepchas from Ilam usually come to
Kalimpong and Sikkim to buy the traditional materials since they have no cottage industries to promote the traditional weaving.

**Politics:** There was a time when Lepchas were perceived as a demographic group whose vote did not matter, ‘No political party can count upon their votes because they are numerically small and politically insignificant’ (Thakur 1988: xii). Their numerical status is also a reason why they have been clubbed under ‘primitive’, ‘scheduled tribe’ and ‘endangered’ groups in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. But times have changed. Lepchas are now demanding their right as the first citizens of the land in all three regions. 2007 saw the initiation of the first ever hunger strike by the Lepcha duo against dams in Dzongu. The movement garnered worldwide attention and also united Lepchas into a single fight. The result was the scrapping of four of the six hydel projects. Likewise Kalimpong Lepchas have been persistent in their demands as the government recently granted the Lepcha Development Council. In Ilam, their voice is weakest since they are only about 3000 Lepchas, but the Maoist movement awakened the people from their complacent selves and they have also been able to elect two individuals as Members of Parliament from the Lepcha community.

**The Lepcha Youth**

The opening narrative of this paper gives a peek into the role of Lepcha youth as rising decision makers today. It was a phone conversation between two Lepcha youths—‘educated, urban based, and usually Christian’ (Shah 2010: 15) trying to interfere in the elders’ say. Indeed, these youths are making changes and choices that were unheard of
yesterday. During the time of dam protests, some non-Dzongu Lepcha youths visiting the area were so overwhelmed with the feeling of belongingness to Dzongu that they decided to revoke their Buddhist and Christian beliefs and rechristened themselves with Lepcha names by getting ‘baptized’ in a nearby waterfall. They called themselves ‘born-again’ Lepchas, ironically from the Christian tradition, and felt it necessary to take the step so as to regain access to Lepcha culture. Today, Lepcha youths are connecting, through social network sites, across religious and regional boundaries to work together and assert their ethnic distinctiveness. The youth wings of Lepcha organizations in Sikkim, Kalimpong and Ilam have all been working at both village and city levels by visiting homes and social networking on the Internet respectively. Earlier times, Sikkim Lepchas would organize an event and expect Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas to attend, but they are now organizing events together and the performances are somehow designed to increase the ‘visibility’ (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:1) of the tribe. Shneiderman uses the term ‘feedback loop’ (2009: 116) to describe this process of cross-border communication and exchange of ideologies in operation in the cultural production of a shared identity which seems to work in the case of Lepchas in these three regions too.

Conclusion

Religion and culture are both dynamic configurations of the world today. They are continually interacting with changes and reshaping themselves accordingly (Paden 1994: 56). There is no way that the traditional Lepcha religion and culture can be preserved in
some untainted form because change is inevitable. In the case of Lepchas, the influence of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism have altered the lifestyle, worldview and the identity of the tribe. The result has been both positive and negative. There have however been many confrontations and compromises in recent days to project a united front. Besides the shared history of the mythological origin in Mt. Kanchenjunga, and the basic identity markers mentioned in the objectives, Lepchas are also hoisting the Lepcha flag, singing the Lepcha national anthem and organizing cultural shows to bind them together. The goal however is not just the preservation, promotion and production of Lepcha culture but who should 'control the pace, the direction and the process of change' (Guneratne 2007: 104). Lepchas have realized that to maintain their distinct identity, the responsibility lies in their own hands. There was a time when Lepchas were thought to be a 'dying race' (Gorer 2005: 69), a 'sinking and shrinking race' (Awasty 1978: 36) and more popularly a 'vanishing tribe' (Foning 1987) – the term popularized by a Lepcha scholar in his magnum opus, which had become the basis of Lepcha self-perception about their demographic and political status. Today, none of the Lepchas in any of the three-field areas nurtures such a self-perception. They prefer to use the word 'flourishing' instead of 'vanishing' as they are in the same bandwagon to safeguard the Lepcha culture. They have realized that the 'loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves' (Roy 2009: 27). They are making conscious attempts to consolidate their ethnic distinctiveness and produce a pan-Lepcha identity. We can therefore see the emergence of a new-shared Lepcha identity overlooking the religious boundaries consciously fashioned in a way that strengthens the
social and political position of their fight for survival. There has been a conscious effort to keep the differences between these three religions aside and work with each other in the production of a shared culture and identity.
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