Chapter 1
Introduction

One morning I received a phone call, “hey, we heard that a Christian Lepcha meeting is to take place at Born church today, tell them not to do it.”

This call was from a prominent Lepcha youth leader who is a Christian himself. As dictatorial as he sounded, I could sense his concern about not wanting the meeting to take place because it would look like the Christian Lepchas had separated from the Buddhist Lepchas and were holding their own gatherings. Perhaps the youth leader felt that a separate Christian Lepcha meeting would show the division between the Christian Lepchas and the Buddhist Lepchas and would weaken the united Lepcha front. While the cleavage between Lepchas following these two religions is a known fact, the political developments in Darjeeling hills and the Lepchas demanding their rights as first citizens of the land has brought the two together, affirming what Spencer calls ‘ethnic solidarities are the consequences of political competition’ (2007: 17). Overlooking the religious differences it is only recently that Lepchas are putting aside their religion-based identities and making a conscious effort to forge a pan-Lepcha identity.

This thesis is an ethnography of the Lepchas who live in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Eastern Nepal. They call themselves Rong from the Lepcha words Rongkup or Rumkup meaning the children of snowy peak/ the children of God. Tradition has it that their creator God, Itbumu, created their progenitors Fudongthing and Nazongnyu from the
virgin snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. They have no migration history and claim to have lived in the land of eternal paradise called Mayel Lyang since time perennial. Known to be nature worshipers and initially labelled animists, a deeper examination of the traditional Lepcha religion shows them right in line with Tylor’s (1871) evolution of religion from animism to polytheism to the current stage of monotheism. In due time, they were influenced by the Buddhist, Christian and Hindu religions dividing them into different groups. This thesis looks into the rhetorical triplets of ‘religion, culture and identity’ in the case of Lepchas in order to examine the culture changes after the introduction of different religions and the formation of religion-based identities and what it means to be a Lepcha.

Key Concepts

Religion

In anthropology, the study of ‘religion’ is as old as the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 726). ‘Primitive religion’ was the order of the day as Tylor defined religion to be the ‘belief in spiritual beings’ (1871: 383). But the definition was simple and inadequate as different scholars from various backgrounds made many attempts to come up with an operational definition of religion. Durkheim (1912) distinguished the sacred from the profane, and also said that the sense of sacredness binds a community together, thus creating a collective conscience. It is opined that religion provides core values of a society and tries to make sense of
unanswerable questions about death and the meaning of life, strengthening the norms and creating cultural homogeneity. But Marx said, ‘Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is religion to be the opium of the people’ (Marx 2001: 83). Marx’s definition points to an underlying assumption that ‘religion has a function in society’ (Santucci 2005: 42). It guides the social and moral fabric of society and ‘orders a universe’ (van Beek 1985: 265) facilitating group solidarity. Religion has many interpretations and definitions. Scholars even agree that there is no convincing general theory of religion and in that general stagnation of the anthropological study of religion, Geertz proposes a universal definition of religion as a cultural system. For him, a religion is a system of symbols which acts to ‘establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by’ (2000: 94) ‘formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and’ (2000: 98) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that’ (2000: 109) ‘the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’ (2000: 119). While he was confident about his definition, Talal Asad (2002) criticizes the claim by saying ‘there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes’ (Asad 2002: 116). Given the fact that religion is a Western concept, there is truth in Asad’s voice. Yet, religion manages to stay in the game with its changing dynamics and varied manifestations. It is methodologically and theoretically diverse which allows scholars to find different ways to understand this phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, we take Emile 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' (1976: 47). We look at religion as something that reflects on the collective life while influencing the moral fabric of a society. Often times the variety of religious ideologies creates an unnecessary divide propagating the superiority of one’s religion over other religions. For instance, till the very end of nineteenth century all religions outside the biblical tradition were labelled simply as ‘idolatory’ (Paden 1994: 15). But anthropology has been credited for keeping alive ‘an interest in religion as an important part of the life of man’ (Yinger 1958: 495). Indeed, for anthropologists, it is the focus on ethnography in the classical, empirical, and holistic sense that still proves to be important in the study of religion.

Culture

Culture is the heart of anthropology. It is borrowed from German ‘kultur’ which means “higher” values of enlightenment of society (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Tylor was the first anthropologist to establish the word in English language with its anthropological meaning. And for the longest time, anthropologists relied on his definition of culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (Tylor 1871: 1). Over the years, hundreds of people have tried to define culture. In 1952 A L Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn even cited 164 definitions for
religion in their joint publication. Ranging from ‘learned behaviour’, ‘ideas in the mind’, ‘a logical construct’, ‘a statistical fiction’, ‘a psychic defense mechanism’, they preferred to use the definition of culture as ‘an abstraction from behaviour but is not itself behaviour’. Indeed, culture consists of patterns of behaviours acquired from the society they belong to. It is a way of life of a group of people, which could be taught from one generation to the next. Culture is not inherited but is transmitted. It is seen as the knowledge shared by a particular community. It is constantly changing and evolving. It looks simple but can be very complex. It varies according to the context and there is an endless list of what culture is all about. Out of the many definitions available, the following definition guides this thesis, ‘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). Often times cultures are seen to be at its best when it is uninfluenced by external forces. But change is inevitable, as many traditional cultures have undergone changes to reinvent their cultures today. But what keeps a culture alive? This study will go beyond the clothes they wear and the language they speak. It will look at what gives them a sense of belonging to that particular culture.
Identity

Identity can be understood as a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ (Jenkins 2007: 17). In answering “who am I?” we find our identity. But it does not end there. Identity is always in the making of what we want it to be. Identity studies initially focused on the formation of “self” as an individual. But it is no longer an individual domain; it multiplies ‘across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ (van Meijl 2008: 10). In the last few decades, the focus has shifted from the individual to the collective; with gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class seen as the ‘holy trinity’ (Cerulo 1997: 386). It is the ‘we-ness of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which the group members unite’ (Ibid: 387). It is the historically and culturally rooted self-image of a group of people or community, so those who share the same identity also share the same history. It is also an understanding of who we are and who other people are. It then becomes ‘a matter of distinguishing and distancing myself from you and from that person there. The recognition of ‘us’ hinges mainly upon our not being ‘them’ (Jenkins 2004: 20). In order to know the difference between them, and us ‘they must announce their identities by engaging in social practices that highlight their place in the world’ (Hemanowicz and Morgan 1999: 198). Identity is a process of ‘inclusion and exclusion’ of belongingness and boundaries. ‘Identity is essentially a matter of being and it is this consciousness of belonging to this or that collectivity and of being a member of an imagined community that determines one’s identity’ (Shah 1994: 1133).
Today's world is shaped by religion, culture and identity. If religion is seen to be an integral part of culture, culture gives a sense of identity. The three concepts are universal but each highly contested. Yet they are always intermingling with the other at some level and these three concepts form the basis of this study. It will look at three different religious identities in Lepcha society. A religion can be shaped by a particular culture and a culture can be shaped by a particular religion. What happens then when the religious identity precedes the cultural identity? Can the two identities co-exist? 'Where does religion end and culture begin?' (Bonney 2004: 25). It is in these questions that the concepts have taken shape for this study.

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. This led to an uncalled for divide within the already minority community whose cultural changes have also led to the formation of different identities and divisions 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.
Therefore, the introduction and exposure of three world religions to a single tribal
community and its acceptance and influence are seen as 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.

Objectives

i) To reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha society
and culture 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.

Review of Literature

Publications about the Lepchas started with administrative-cum-ethnological accounts, which were later followed by professional anthropological accounts. In the nineteenth century, colonial administrators started writing about the life and culture of Lepchas. It was a very general description portraying 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) which were published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* and *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* respectively. Besides cultural specifics, he mentioned the printing of four gospels into Lepcha language by a German missionary and mentioned General Mainwaring’s work in compiling a Lepcha dictionary. Colonel George Byres Mainwaring took a keen interest in the language, literature and the people as he collected information on Lepcha narratives, which were included in the “Introduction” to the Lepcha grammar published in 1876. He was also working on a Lepcha dictionary, which was edited and posthumously published by Albert Grünwedel in 1898. Other colonial administrators focused on the politics of the region with brief mention of the Lepchas. J. Claude White, the first political officer of Sikkim (1887-1908), described them as ‘people of mild, quiet and indolent disposition, loving solitude, and their homes
being found in the most inaccessible places' (White 2000:7). This description of White speaks of an image that has been widely shared by other administrators, botanists, travellers, scholars and linguists from the West. In fact, this image of a timid and docile Lepcha was an accepted version of the Lepcha self-perception for a long time. Lepchas are also nature lovers and thought to be good entomologists and botanists with a name for every insect, plant and animal. During the expedition to Sikkim in 1848-49, Dr. Joseph Hooker, the world-famous botanist, used Lepchas as plant collectors for their knowledge of the plants and trees. He later published *Himalayan Journals* (1855), which embodies their local knowledge. Hooker gives a brief account of the tribe and seems to have relished Lepcha company. It was revealed that he chose a Lepcha to keep his accounts who wrote the details of Hooker's daily expenses from 15 December 1848-19 January 1849 in 'fine clear hand' (Sprigg 2005: 61).

Accounting the village life and culture of the Lepchas were Geoffrey Gorer and John Morris who spent three months each in 1937 at Lingthem village of the Lepcha reserve in Dzongu, North Sikkim. Gorer was of the opinion that the Lepchas' religion was complicated as 'they practise simultaneously, and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or possibly three) mutually contradictory religions' (2005: 181). The *mun* (Lepcha priestess) at a death ceremony was an extremely important medium as she was invariably possessed by her guardian spirit and spoke the last wishes of the dead person. Gorer said that the *mun* religion validates Lepcha mythology and theology' (*Ibid*:223), as the origin of everything in the world—visible and invisible, animate and inanimate, and the changes - are told in full details by the *mun*. Lamaistic form of
Buddhism had already made its existence then in Dzongu during as he was able to witness the side by side practice of the two religions. Gorer opines that the Lepchas 'swallowed Lamaism whole, but excreted the irritating portions' (Ibid: 193). Morris was actually denied entry to Nepal and he had tagged along with Gorer but his account proved to be a contribution on the Lepchas nonetheless. He noticed the influence of Buddhism early on and went on to say, 'the purity of their belief was, somewhat perverted by the introduction from Tibet of the Buddhist religion' (1938: 37). While there are discrepancies in his account for calling Itbumu, the creator God as a man, he noticed the parallel practice of a bongthing (Lepcha priest) and a lama (Buddhist priest) as he said, 'I cannot remember attending any ceremony, apart, of course, from purely religious festivals, at which a lama and Mun were not both officiating' (Morris 1938: 122). Another extensive ethnography on Lepchas was carried out by Halfdan Siiger from the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia in the 1940s. Siiger stayed in Tingvong and documented the socio-cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of Lepchas. He also worked on word-to-word translations and analysis of 39 ritual texts that had only existed as oral traditions before. While his research material is of great significance, most of the recordings were based on second person accounts, as he himself did not take part in any rituals. René von Nebesky-Wojkowitz's wrote about the mun and bongthing still being buried as per the traditional custom on the 'Ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas' (1952). He also wrote about 'Hunting and Fishing among the Lepchas' (1953). In his account of the three years in the Himalayas, Nebesky -Wojkowitz (1955) points out that Lepchas were hesitant about accepting
Buddhism. He mentions that, ‘the priests of the old tribal religion offered particular stubborn resistance’ (1955: 121). Examining the ‘Religious Beliefs of the Lepchas in Kalimpong’ (1960) was Corneille Jest who spent time in Tanyang, Kalimpong in 1953. He was impressed by the stories of a mun’s trance and conversations with the dead although he reported that there were no muns in Tanyang. But the presence of a bongthing along with a lama (a Buddhist monk) was seen to supplement each other. While the bongthing protected the village from evil forces, the lama presided over important events of social life. Like Gorer, he says that Lepcha traditions and Tibetan Buddhist beliefs coexist with total disregard for contradictions. Siiger also published articles on ‘Fate in the Religion of the Lepchas’ (1967), and also examined Nazongnyu – the first female creation as the ‘himalayan goddess of procréation’ (1972) and ‘The Gods of the Lepchas of Sikkim’ (1975). Siiger’s contribution to Lepcha literature is commendable.

After mid-nineteenth century, the accounts of Lepchas became more detailed and specific like the work of C. de. Beauvoir Stocks (1975) who focused on writing about folklores, myths, legends and Lepcha customs. Despite providing a detailed collection of Lepcha folktales, the author talks about the obstacles in undertaking a study of this small and scattered tribe of the “Lap-chas”. Stocks’ account is noteworthy as it is an attempt to collect even the different versions of a particular myth or a folk tale. In similar lines, Siiger wrote a paper on ‘The Abominable Snowman’ (1978) throwing light on the hunting god of the Lepchas who became a malicious being because people neglected the hunting rituals and sacrifices and the strained relationship between the hunting god and
humans. In a different light, Klafkowski (1980) wrote about the Athing Joseph Rongong manuscript of Tashe Thing and said that the core of this narrative was ‘Lepcha and not Tibetan’ (1980: 140). The legend of Guru Rinpoche among the Lepchas was included in *The Himalayan Gateway* (1983) by George Kotturan when he discussed the history, culture and people of Sikkim.

Twentieth century saw the dawn of Lepcha research undertaken by a number of Indian scholars, some of them being members of the Lepcha community. Kharpu Tamsang’s *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas* (1982) uncovered various aspects of Lepcha culture, history and religion in detail. He calls Bongthingism and Munism to be ‘prehistoric but a living genuine religion’ (1982:57). The religious divide between Lepcha Buddhists and Lepcha Christians was seen as a sorry development. Arthur Foning worked on an influential book, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* (1987) that has garnered considerable acclaim. It was an honest account of a native Lepcha in the wake of external influences from the Tibetans, the British and the Nepalis through culture, religion and language simultaneously. Foning credits the Buddhist missionaries for translating Buddhist texts into Lepcha with a ‘completely Lepcha aura’ (1987: 154). Digressing from the calligraphy method used by the Buddhist missionaries, he is thankful to Christian missionaries for their contribution in producing and printing the gospels by the modern means of printing press. The traditional institutions of *mun* and *bongthing* were described intensively with first hand encounters and examples from his own family and friends. Rip Roshina Gowloog, also a Lepcha, conducted a diachronic study of Gorer’s ethnography in *Lingthem Revisited* (1995). She
noted the definite spread of lamaism that was already in existence during Gorer’s time which has led to the decline of traditional tribal religion. While there were altogether eight muns during Gorer’s time, there appeared to be a lone mun in the whole village during hers. Yet Lepchas of Lingthem were not particularly bothered about this phenomenon. Paul Lepcha, now a pastor, wrote *A Study of the Scottish Mission Work in Kalimpong Subdivision with Special Reference to the Lepcha Tribe* (1999). When William Macfarlane, a Scottish missionary, came to Kalimpong he thought that Lepchas were the ‘most hopeful people’ (Lepcha 1999: 24) for them in the hills as the establishment of schools and Christian gospel went hand in hand. The increase in Lepcha Christians from his fieldwork showed over 75 percent Lepcha population in different Kalimpong churchés. It is found that Lepcha pastors were instructed to write church reports in Nepali or Hindi language because Lepcha language was too “hard” for the missionaries to learn and understand. He thus questions how far the missionaries helped maintain and preserve Lepcha identity for which he mostly blames Lepcha Christians themselves. *Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas* (2008) by D.T. Tamlong is a recent publication with detailed collection of Lepcha origin, myths, religion, customs, festivals, long forgotten heroes and legends mostly from secondary sources.

Noticing the “unscientific” approaches to studying Lepcha community, Amal Kumar Das, in his *The Lepchas of West Bengal* (1978) introduces Lepchas as ‘true sons of soil who have been exploited through generations and centuries’ (1978:v). Das has outlined Lepcha village and settlement pattern, economic and domestic life, social organization, religious beliefs and practices, myths, tales, songs, proverbs, dances, and
language. Devoting a chapter to religious beliefs and practices, he talks about the absence of the concept of heaven and hell in Lepcha tradition. The Mun and the Bongthing are seen as powerful ‘magicians’ officiating between god and man. In conclusion he makes a point about Lepcha psychology as he says, ‘they think themselves to be inefficient in comparison with others, and their lack of competitive zeal indirectly influences their mentality as a losing community in the struggle for existence’ (1978: 258). Indira Awasty calls Lepchas to be a ‘sinking and shrinking race’ (1978: 36) as the introduction of new religions divorced them from traditional culture. The Buddhist Lepchas, she observes, became second class Buddhists as only a few Lepcha lamas were initiated as lamas. Christianity on the other hand was readily accepted because “it gave them a lot of material advantages with regard to medicines, legal help and morale-raising advices. Generally speaking, Christianity was seen as a ‘mixed blessing’ (Ibid: 43) because while it imparted education and awareness it destroyed their traditional culture. The rapid growth of Christianity among Lepchas meant ‘an irreparable loss’ (Thakur 1988: 85) for the traditional culture. From an anthropological outlook, Tanka Subba’s article ‘Lepchas: From Legends to the Present Day’ (1985) advocates the usage of ‘oldest’ instead of ‘original’ or ‘authochtonous’ (1985: 64) with reference to the Lepchas. His other article ‘Dynamics of a Hill Society: Case Study of the Lepchas’ (1989) mentions the strained relationship between Lepchas and Bhutias while suggesting that ‘Lepchas could perhaps never accept fully the religion of those who plundered their property – cultural as well as material’ (Subba 1989: 126). In 1990, Tapan Chattopadhyay published a travelogue titled Lepchas and Their Heritage with a
detailed picture of the traditions, myths, religion and music. He mentions that ‘it is never considered happy to be a mun’ (1990: 37). In 1998, Jyotirmoy Chakraborty talked about ‘Ethnic Consciousness and Cultural Revivalism among the Lepchas of the Eastern Himalayas’. He mentioned the inclusion of secular trends in the traditional religion with regard to giving the office of the religious heads to ‘anyone who can learn and perform such duties’ (1998: 185) despite it being a hereditary office. Dynamics of Social Formation among the Lepchas (2005) by D.C. Roy examined social formation among Lepchas according to the Marxian ideology of primitive communism. He identifies Lepcha society as an example of social dualism where ‘an imported western capitalism has penetrated into the pre-capitalistic agrarian community’ (2005: viii). In Khanchendzonga: Sacred Summit (2007), there is a chapter where Wangchuk and Zulca discuss the significance of Mt. Kanchenjunga as the eldest brother to the Lepcha people. Dawa Lepcha, a Lepcha filmmaker, has shot three films in collaboration with Anna Balikci –Denzonpa on the Lepcha community of Dzongu—Tingvong—A Lepcha Village (2005), Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem (2007) and Ritual Journeys (2011).

The recent publications on Lepchas talk about the emerging trends of cultural revival among the Lepchas. Bentley (2007) writes about change and cultural revival among Lepchas in general and talks about the different Lepcha associations in Sikkim that has facilitated this trend. One of the main reasons for this revival has to do with the ‘Lepchas and their hydel protest’ (Wangchuk 2007) which documents the entire saga in a detailed manner. Highlighting the Gandhian methods to protest hydro projects in Dzongu, Arora (2008) wrote about ‘Gandhigiri in Sikkim’. Little (2008) also published
on ‘Lepcha narratives and their threatened scared landscapes’ about the protests against
dams in Dzongu. She has been examining the protest movement in great detail and
providing different angles to the story. ‘Deep Ecology, Dams and Dzonguland’ (2009)
and ‘From the village to the cities—the battlegrounds for Lepcha protests’ (2010) have
all contributed to the voice from Dzongu. Following the fight for the safeguarding of
their sacred environment, the survival of Lepchas have a lot to do with the unification of
religious differences which was mentioned by Davide Torri (2010) when he says
‘Lepchas from all backgrounds (Buddhist, Christian and “shamanic”) try to look at each
other mostly without animosity today’ (2010: 161). ‘Ambivalence of Change:
Education, Eroding Culture, and Revival among the Lepcha of Sikkim’ was published
by Jenny Bentley in 2011 with regard to education as an agent that could either erode or
promote Lepcha culture. Her study is based in Sikkim where formal education includes
the Lepcha language in school syllabus. ‘Tales of Lepcha ci, the traditional medicine for
lightheartedness’ by Heleen Plaisier (2011) is a fresh take on the age old ‘curse’ of ci
that Lepchas seem to have suffered. At a time when revivalism is taking place, and ci is
considered a vice, this article talks about the origin of ci, its integral usage and it being a
unifying factor for most Lepchas. ‘Identity Formation among the Lepchas of West
Bengal and Sikkim’ is another article that has explored the renewed relationship
between Buddhist and Christian Lepchas, as Gowloog writes, ‘It is heartening to note at
the end that the divide between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas, which hindered the
emergence of a pan-Lepcha identity in the region for very long, seems to have been
greatly bridged in the past decades or so’ (Gowloog Forthcoming).
Besides these works, the Lepcha associations in Kalimpong and Sikkim have collected and published Lepcha scriptures, mythologies and folk stories. News articles on Lepchas are also found in scattered dates in various national and state newspapers. There is a growing number of Lepcha journalists and writers writing about Lepchas in general in various magazines, newspapers and bulletins.

While the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling have been studied extensively, the 4000 odd Lepchas residing in Ilam, East Nepal have remained almost untouched. There is just one small booklet called *The Lapcha of Nepal* (2000) by a Nepali professor with two anthropologist researchers from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Interestingly, the history of Lepchas in Ilam has baffled both historians and laymen alike. The authors of the book account for the 1826 Kotopa Insurrection when the Lepchas rose against Bhutias in Sikkim. It was then the Lepcha Prime Minister Bholod was murdered and about 800 Lepcha subjects of Sikkim fled to Ontoo in Ilam district of Nepal and settled there. In *The Road to Destiny: Darjeeling Letters 1839* (1986), Fred Pinn also mentions the Ontoo boundary dispute that went in favour of Nepal as the Rajah of Sikkim did not object to it. However, the names of rivers, trees and villages in Ilam owing their origin in the Lepcha language makes one suspect that there might have been Lepchas in Ilam prior to 1826. Collecting these names of places that have Lepcha origin and outlining the general character of the Lepchas of Ilam, Bima Lepcha (2003) published a short booklet in Nepali. A year later, a report on 'A real picture of Lapcha Community in Ilam District' (Roy 2004) was submitted to the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities where Lepchas have been classified under the
endangered group. Besides that, Rai (2007) did his MA thesis on the Lepchas of Ilam district from Tribhuwan University where he shows the main reason for the backwardness of the Lepchas to be education. There have also been occasional news articles and feature pieces in the Nepali newspapers.

The above review of literature on Lepchas show a gradual progression of Lepcha studies from administrative to ethnographic to more specified accounts today. There have been a lot of earlier publications related to their basic political and demographic history, which forms the basis for any study today. The works of earlier ethnographers that contributed to Survival Anthropology on their language, rituals and mythological stories have almost garnered an authority position due to the discontinuation of certain traditions and practices. Most ethnographic monographs in earlier days were based on a single village of Kalimpong or Sikkim. The recent publications show a great deal of what is happening in the Lepcha revival movement but is studied in isolated regions and not as a community together. It is clear from the above summary that no study has been taken up till date to make a comparative study of the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity on the Lepchas as a whole, as is proposed in the present study. It also hopes to contribute to the ongoing trend of examining the revival tendencies, particularly among the youths, in light of the political developments in the eastern Himalayas.
Methodology

Three villages namely Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong were chosen in three major geographical locations of Dzongu in North Sikkim, Kalimpong in Darjeeling district, and Ilam in East Nepal. The year 2010 was mainly devoted to conducting fieldwork 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. The same set of schedules was used for all three locations with specific questions for them. 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.
Representing the 'Other'

Anthropology has always been the study of 'Other Cultures' (Beattie 1999) but the study of one’s own culture is a popular trend in Northeast India. Likewise, mine was a study of my own culture making me a ‘native’ anthropologist, expected to give a more authentic view of the people than the ones provided by non-Lepcha anthropologists.

But how native is a ‘native’ anthropologist? (Narayan 1993) Can someone like me who was raised away from the ancestral village all her life be considered native to that village? With my educational background, and upbringing in residential schools and exposure to the world beyond the village makes it difficult to fit into the “native” glove. In many ways, it becomes what Srinivas said, ‘my study... would enable me better to understand my personal cultural and social roots’ (Srinivas 1976: 5). Likewise, fieldwork among my own community was not only an opportunity to find answers to questions that set the research tone but also to find answers to questions that had been lingering in the back of my head. But in the field, belonging to the same community was not enough to convince the villagers to open up. They needed to know who I was. So it was important to become ‘actively involved in the life of the people, communicate with them, and spend a considerable period of time among them’ (Jones. 1970: 252). In Dzongu, the household census was conducted the same time when the official census was taking place. So I went around the village with a teacher. Later too, I mostly hung out with the women teachers at the village school automatically qualifying me as the new teacher in the eyes of the villagers. Whenever they saw me, they would say,
“Khamree Luponmoo” (Hello Miss). In Bom Busty, my rapport went back four generations because it was my ancestral village. Elderly people were happy to know of my interest and told stories from many moons back because no one talked about it anymore. In Ilam, the situation was different. Lepchas have always lived in fear of strangers there. At one house, the owner took more than half an hour just to tell me his name. He wanted to know if I was from the government, some NGO, or was preaching the gospel, and if none of it then why I was there? In all three places it was easy to approach without the notebook because people got conscious when they realized that something that they had just said was being noted down. So a mental note would be made and the daily activities would be written in the field diary at the end of the day. It was better to join them in what they would be doing and get into questions after the ice was broken. But the camera was a definite icebreaker and villagers enjoyed seeing their pictures and their friends’ pictures. Some would even go for a change of clothes to get their pictures to be taken.

Writing about the “Other” in my case meant writing about my own people. Lepchas have had their fair share of researchers asking questions about their social life. I meet my informants in town sometimes or at gatherings and people start asking, “where is the book?” They want to know what has been written and how it has been written. There is pressure from the community to give an accurate representation of the Lepcha world.
Organization of thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the statement of the problem and looks into the key concepts used in the thesis. It outlines four objectives and gives a review of literature on various works done on the Lepchas. This chapter also discusses the methodology and ends with an outline of the thesis.

Chapter 2 attempts to give an overall picture of the Lepchas. It discusses the nomenclature of the Lepchas and the confusion about using terms like ‘Lapche’, ‘Lapcha’ and ‘Lepcha’. It looks at the mythological origin of the Lepchas and outlines the various social institutions like clan, marriage, kinship, language, food, and dress. It then introduces the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam with specific references to the villages of Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong.

Chapter 3 gives a thorough account of the traditional Lepcha religion by referring to secondary sources and cross checking with elderly Lepchas to verify the same. It examines the Lepcha concept of gods and demons, heaven and hell, and the country of ancestors. It also looks at the different worship patterns and the markers of Lepcha religion. The next part looks into the traditional ritual specialists known as the mun and the bongthing, and the changes taking place in the same. Finally it looks at the veracity of Dzongu as “holy land” in the traditional belief system.
Chapter 4 focuses on the influence of Buddhism among the Lepchas of Dzongu. It argues that Dzongu Lepchas were introduced to Buddhism when Guru Rinpoche passed through Dzongu on his way to Tibet. It also examines the low-key village Buddhism that prevails in Tingvong and affirms the simultaneous use of both a bongthing and a lama even today. The final portion looks at the Bhutia-Lepcha alliance following the increase of Nepali majority for which it was Buddhism that acted as a common denominator to give the Lepchas a hyphenated identity. Finally it touches on the “primitive” identity of Lepchas in Sikkim.

Chapter 5 traces the arrival of missionaries in Kalimpong and the response of Lepchas to the Christian gospel. It looks at the coming of Christianity and the establishment of the oldest church in Kalimpong. Thereafter, it looks at the factors of conversion and the cultural changes that took place in the Lepcha social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, language, food and dress. The third part examines the Christian Lepcha identity and what it means to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both; and whether the religious identity precedes the ethnic identity.

Chapter 6 considers the spread of Hinduism and the possible acceptance of Hindu religion among the Lepchas of Ilam. It looks at the indirect participation of Lepchas in various Hindu festivals as a way of absorbing Hindu culture. Like the previous two chapters, it also examines the cultural changes in various social institutions. The third part of the chapter questions the religious identity of the Lepcha as to whether they are Hindus or Buddhists.
Chapter 7 discusses the direction Lepcha identity is taking in the wake of various socio-political developments in the region. Known to be a community with no political influence, three separate cases of political uprising in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam have been discussed as cross border connections between the Lepchas of these three regions. It also looks at new forms of identity markers that have erased the religious boundary uniting the Lepchas to a common ethnic identity. The final part looks at the role of educated Lepcha youths and the usage of social media to further bridge the territorial and religious boundaries.

Chapter 8 concludes by giving a summary of the main arguments and insights. It looks at the social institutions across Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam and looks at the direction Lepcha identity is taking in the region.