Chapter 3

Traditional Lepcha Religion

Often times, the religion of Lepchas is seen to be confusing, contradictory, double-layered (Torri 2010:153), difficult, atheistic (Risley), and ‘nothing spiritual’ (Morris 1938:287) about it. Scholars and administrators usually described the early religion of Lepchas as animists and nature worshippers, but by the time they studied the Lepchas, influences of Buddhism and its practices had already pervaded their everyday life. The search for an unadulterated traditional form of Lepcha religion is therefore an ardent task as the introduction of new ideas and practices made way for the acceptance of a modified or a syncretised version of their original religion. Traditional religion is defined as a religion, which has not spread as the world religions, but has remained in original socio-cultural environment (Bonney 2004), as we have made an attempt to view the Lepcha traditional religion as not just the way things used to be, but as a localized version of it today. This chapter will mostly deal with secondary sources of scholars and anthropologists who collected and recorded many of the mythical stories before changes took place in Lepcha society. Likewise, elderly Lepchas who are able to remember the stories have also been referred to cross check and verify with what has been written by anthropologists. In this light, it should be remembered that the sources are scattered and collected over a span of many years from people with varied backgrounds and might be both biased and limited.
Some anthropologists opine that to understand religion it is the rites rather than beliefs that needs to be focused, but this chapter reiterates Siiger's idea that the totality of the Lepcha religious beliefs can be extracted from their cults, cult-prayers, myths, legends etc. Stocks (1975) also opines 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. Therefore an attempt has been made to examine the myths and legends, which hopefully sheds light on re-creating the traditional Lepcha religion in a modest manner. Interview inputs have also been included along with observations regarding the recent developments in 'original' Lepcha religion. Stocks opines 'a clear idea of what can be called the original Lepcha religion will probably be only possible with an exhaustive study of all the tales' (Stocks 1975: 9). While the tales are on the verge of extinction as the landscape and demography changed with newer narratives replacing the old folklores, this chapter has tried to put together a basic understanding of the belief systems of the Lepchas.

The Lepcha myths are distinct but share many commonalities with the mythological narratives of indigenous people from around the world. 'Oh, we also have an Adam and Eve story, we also have the story of Noah, we also have the story of Babel' (Longkumer 2010: 88). Likewise, Lepchas also have a creation story, a flood story, and the tower story. Interestingly, the local version of all these stories also plays a big role in the Lepcha cosmology. While the differing accounts of the same story in different places create a colourful diversity adding more dimensions to a single story, it often becomes problematic to do a proper comparative study and to have a standard
version of the same story in the formation of a pan-Lepcha identity. One example can be taken of the flood story where Mt. Tendong is believed to be the saviour hill for Lepchas. After the Teesta-Rangeet rendezvous and the waters rose to flood the land, Lepchas are believed to have climbed Mt. Tendong and Manoam Hill to save them from being drowned. Those who climbed Tendong saw in distance that Manoam hill was disappearing under water so they prayed to stay alive and were thus saved, making the hilltop the ultimate place of refuge. Interestingly, Tingvong residents refer to two different peaks found in their vicinity when it comes to the flood story. Langham chyu and Lingee chyu, the highest of the peaks in that area, are believed to have competed to stand taller and not drown when the water level increased. Langham is believed to have folded his legs and sat in an upright position whereas Lingee decided to stretch his body taller so he would not drown. And, when the water rose, Langham drowned but Lingee remained afloat. It is these differing accounts of the same flood story that could be puzzling while dealing with Lepcha myths, as everybody would know about the flood, but not everyone would have similar mountain peaks that drowned or did not drown during the deluge. But the Tendong story is an accepted version with the government of Sikkim declaring 8th August as Tendong Hlo Rum Faat (which will be discussed later) to mark this occasion. In this, we see two competing narratives of the same story in the same community. The localized versions are more authentic to the people from the local area since the stories have been directly passed from their forefathers, but it could pose a challenge to unite the community through local myths as community myths. We can then see a two-tier cosmology of the flood myth, which is impossible to separate
because the local myth is 'bound within a certain locality' (Longkumer 2010: 83) and the general myth is accessible 'to the wider world' (Ibid).

Another problem while trying to understand the Lepcha cosmology is the usage of same name for different deities or the usage of many names for the same deity. Therefore the characters get confusing and difficult to build up a chronology of the series of events involving that deity. For instance, Guru Rinpoche also known as Padmasambhava, the founder of Buddhism in Tibet, is believed to have battled a Lepcha 'protagonist' (Bentley Forthcoming) on his way to Tibet. The possible Lepcha warriors include Thikung Adik, Thikung Munsalong and Zor Bongthing himself. It gets confusing at some point because there is a high possibility of mixing the characters which is noticed by Siiger in 1972 when he remarked that the same names are often referred for the same deity.

But as we attempt to define the religion of the Lepchas, it should be noted that Lepchas do not even have a word for 'religion' per se. Today, the word sang-gyo is often used to mean 'religion' although sang-gyo is actually the shortened version for Buddhism and is today used to refer to other religions as well. In other words, Lepchas never had a religion as we understand today. They believed in spiritual beings (Tylor 1871) that existed in their environment separating the good and the bad spirits, revering and appeasing as necessary. It was not until the coming of other religions and the acceptance and rejection of these systems into their beliefs that makes us question the traditional religion of the Lepchas. While animism could be the simple answer to the
traditional religion of the Lepchas, a deeper look will reveal that they believed in a wide array of gods making them polytheists. In a way, they fall in line with the evolution of religion propounded by Tylor, passing through the three stages of animism, polytheism, and finally monotheism. This chapter will look into the first two stages while the belief in one god shall be discussed in the following chapters.

Concept of God

‘To the Lepchas the supernatural world is divided into two groups, the rum, or the mainly benevolent supernatural beings, and the mung, or the malignant supernatural beings. Any evil occurrence is in the first instance ascribed to the malignant activities of the mung, but it may, under certain conditions, also be due to temporary ill-will on the part of some or other rum’ (Siiger 1967: 152).

Lepchas believed in the existence of gods and demons simultaneously. The gods are called rum and the demons (or evil spirits) are called the mung. The rum is supposed to cause happiness while the mung are the demons that cause sorrow (Stocks 1975: 59). There are numerous gods and an even wider array of spirits that cause illness and misfortune if unhappy and bring health and fortune if properly propitiated. The focus is mostly on pleasing and pampering the mungs (Tamlong 2008: 40), as the fear of the devil was seen to be greater than the fear of god. But as much as the evil spirits needed to be pacified, the rum could also suffer from ‘ill-will’ if the sacrifices were neglected (Plaisier 2007: 27). Hence, it was important to please both the gods and the demons.
although it can be argued that the religion was dominated by the fear of the evil mung
(Siiger 1955: 188).

Who are the gods?

In the beginning there was nothing but God—God Rum, so says the Lepcha folklore and
he created the world out of earth and rock. He decorated the empty sky with countless
stars and the world he filled with plants, animals, and birds. He then created the
Himalayas, the elder brother of all mountains, and many rivers and their tributaries.
(Kotturan 1983: 122)

Lepchas believe in rum, the good spirit to whom they offer their prayers and
thanksgiving. But there is no single rum—that one supreme being they look up to, as the
attention is directed more towards the many gods to be called upon for different
occasions. Rums are believed to answer prayers as local myths narrate different
characters praying to different gods for different things. But it is the creator God, It-bu­
moo who receives an important place in Lepcha cosmology for creating the heavens and
the earth. This supernatural is a female god and is invoked on most occasions as she is
credited to have created the whole world and decorated the skies with the stars. ‘Still the
sky did not show all its beauty, and the Creator ornamented it with clouds so that the
mountains were sometimes shaded, and he saw it was good’ (Stocks 1975: 23). The
creation story is very similar to the Biblical version except that the Lepcha creator is
credited to have created other gods too. According to Stocks (1975) the five original
gods include It-bu-moo, the creator God and her husband Pa-sandi; their children Nazong-nyu and Takbo-thing\(^8\), and Tashey-thing the son of the former. Fudongthing and Nazongnyu were believed to be the first couple equivalent to biblical Adam and Eve hence the progenitors of the Lepcha race. Between the two, Nazongnyu occupies a prominent position among the gods and is also known as the 'goddess of procreation' (Siiger 1972: 238) since she is the mother of mankind associated with childbirth and responsible for both the conception of the child and for its sex. While the goddess and her husband is responsible for giving the soul to a child, the sex of the child depends on the kind of sacrifices and invocations made by the parents to the goddess. The fifth god is listed as Tashe-thing, who is not really the son of the first couple but is actually a Buddhist figure, incorporated into the Lepcha cosmology. (The first few children of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu were actually deemed illegitimate because of their parent's incestuous union) Tashi-thing is actually Guru Rinpoche who introduced Buddhism to Tibet and is believed to have passed through the Lepcha country on his way to Tibet. *En route*, he is believed to have challenged a Lepcha bongthing as the two competed with supernatural powers to settle their dispute. The bongthing is believed to have won (although the win depends on whether the person telling the story is a Buddhist practitioner or not because a Buddhist Lepcha could also tell of Guru Rinpoche’s win) and as Guru Rinpoche left, he had predicted a lama would return to this wild and untamed area, 'subdue the demons and convert the Lepcha people to Buddhism'\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Here we see the problem in Lepcha mythology pointed by Siiger regarding the usage of different names for the same deity or vice-versa. For instance, *Takbo-thing* has been used instead of *Fudongthing* while *Takbo-thing* is often used for *Tashe-thing*. 

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(Kotturan 1983: 17). While it is just legends and local lores that tell of Guru Rinpoche and his antics on the way to Tibet, he has become a part of the folklores and local religious beliefs, revered in Lepcha homes today. It is no wonder Stocks labeled Tashe-thing aka Guru Rinpoche as one of the main gods. However, he is a later addition to the Lepcha religion.

Besides the listed five, an important ‘god’ in the cosmology of the Lepchas is the hunting god known in Lepcha as the Pong-Rum (Siiger 1978: 426)/ Pum-Rum (Das 1978: 68)/ Dju Thing/ Rum-Zong-Pano (Das 1978: 192)/ Chyu Mung (Little 2007: 88)/ Zamfee Mung/ Hlo Mung/ Hlo Rum etc. While the figure is very similar to the mysterious yeti whose footprints have been found in the Himalayan range especially on the way to Mt. Everest, the Pong Rum has appeared to hunters on different occasions and left lasting impacts on Lepchas whose stories fill their homes, especially in Dzongu (See Little 2007). Hunting is a male activity and there are certain beliefs and rituals very closely attached to this event that the hunters are required to observe. For instance, a hunter is to refrain from eating the flesh of the first hundred animals he kills, unless he shoots them with a gun (Morris 1938: 193). It is also required for the hunters to leave a portion of meat usually where the game has been killed so to give back what was taken from the forest. Another belief is such that in case the dead animal needs to be left behind for various reasons (may be the hunter was alone and could not carry it back), he should cut one foreleg and one hind leg on opposite sides of the animal’s body so the animal is no longer whole, because they believe that the yeti will come and take it back to the forest (Little 2007: 88). Interestingly, Pong Rum is also believed to have given the
Lepchas bows, arrows and knives, and taught them how to shoot fish (Das 1978: 192). He is regarded as the king of the jungle – master of all animals, therefore occupying an important place in the hunting complex of Lepcha society. While it is only logical for a hunter-gatherer society to look up to the hunting god, it can be noticed that the character is also referred to as Chyu Mung/ Hlo Mung/ Zamfee Mung. The presence of mung in these names gets confusing whether the hunting god is actually a god or a devil or both. Siiger well explains the transition of the god to a devil with his argument that ‘the powerful hunting rum has turned into a primarily malicious being because the hunters have neglected proper ceremonial sacrifices’ (Siiger 1978: 428). It is believed that the Pong Rum would cause trouble if the hunter stopped offering the sacrifices that is due to the hunting god. One of the most popular antics is the way he pursues with a whistling sound that people automatically account it to their negligence of appeasing the hunting god. It is this disregard to the king of the jungle that has transformed the rum to a mung and has become a feared figure to avoid contact and lock their doors at night to keep the yeti spirit out (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007). People have many stories about the troubles caused by the creature as the following paragraph accounts the way Tingvong residents got rid of the Hlo Mung who had continuously pestered their village surroundings.

There was a time when a group of yetis from Langham chyu would look down toward Kusoong village and re-enact everything the villagers did during the day at night. But the people in the village were frustrated because their fields were damaged and people started disappearing too. They were fed up. So the villagers devised a plan to kill the yetis. One day they prepared cauldrons of ci and acted
like they were feasting while pretending to kill each other with wooden bamfok's they had prepared during the day. As expected, the yetis were watching the incident and repeated the same when they came out at night. Unfortunately, the villagers had replaced the wooden bamfoks with the real bamfoks as they drank ci and slayed each other. It is believed that everyone killed each other and there was only one yeti left who ran away wailing and screaming where nobody could find him. And this is how the Hlo Mung have disappeared from the region (Fieldwork 2010).

Who is the devil?

Mungs are believed to be the abandoned children of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu, the first Lepcha couple who threw away the children because of their illicit relationship. After neglecting the first seven children, the goddess of procreation is believed to have fed milk to the next child and raised it as the first human. Seeing this biasness, the deserted children got jealous and turned to evil spirits. The countless number of evil spirits is feared from a very young age, and the children are threatened with devils whenever they are naughty.

'The childish ghost-devil num-cen moong is feared by all children, and a great number claim to have heard it moaning; other favourite bogies are Tong-ryong moong, who looks like a tiger and runs after and kills people, Mi-toor, the unkillable dog, and other theriomorphic devils' (Gorer 2005: 312).
Indeed, the image of the demon is described as someone who ate flesh, drank blood, and caused droughts. They sound uncontrollable and people are always fearful of them. Humans try different ways to appease them. For instance, in every cardamom field, there is a place for the Mung Li (devil’s house) for a devil called Thyok Dum who is known to destroy cardamom plants. The farmers usually build a Mung Li for this devil in the corner of the field hoping that he will not damage the field (Morris 1938: 186). But it was not just the humans they tortured, even birds had their wings torn off while rats lost their paws and nothing was ever left undestroyed (Stocks 1975: 104).

Among the many mungs, the most dreaded and dangerous is Lasso Mung Pano. In Lepcha, lasso means ‘to change’, mung means ‘devil’ and pano meant ‘king’ so he is the king of the devils. He was believed to be the first born of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu, and was considered the ‘archenemy of mankind’ (Foning 1987: 124). He is hard to please and keeps troubling the humans because he was jealous of his younger siblings who were loved by his parents. So he united the forsaken siblings and started harassing and eating human beings. The Lepchas were fed up of his antics and wanted to kill the troublemaker. But it took a long while for them to kill Lasso Mung as he was believed to have confused his killers by changing his appearance twelve different times.

When he was being chased, he took the form of twelve different animals namely; kolok (rat), long (ox), suthong (tiger), punthyong (eagle), sader (thinder), bu (snake), oon (horse), luk (sheep), sahu (monkey), heek (rooster), kuzyu (dog), and mun (pig) thus marking the twelve-year cycle of the Lepcha calendar. When he was finally killed, the Lepchas celebrated a new beginning—a new start without the troubles of the past year,
which marks the New Year for the Lepchas known as Nambun/ Namsoong. Despite the transformations into animals it is believed that mung in human disguise/form is believed to be the worst (Siiger 1967:152). The existence of so many mungs in the Lepcha cosmology is hard to fathom; even Siiger was in awe of so many mungs (Plaisier 2007: 15);

‘As soon as one leaves the village area, the influence of mung increases, and nobody is ever safe from their uncanny persecution. The virgin forest, never cleared and cultivated and therefore uncontrolled, is the actual domicile of the mung, where they go on forays by day and night. Obviously the Lepchas feel insecure when moving about in the jungle, defenceless against the unexpected assaults of the mung’ (Siiger 1967: 177).

**Concepts of Heaven and Hell**

The idea of heaven and hell is vague among the Lepchas. There is no sure answer although folk tales do tell of a country of gods known as Rumlyang and a country of ancestors known as Mayel Kyong. If the place above the sky is rumlyang, the place beneath the earth is supposed to be ‘water, fire and wind (causing earthquakes)’ (Awasty 1978: 31). Hence, the concept of hell is relatively absent although there is one mention of ‘the country of A-nok’ (Stocks 1975: 73) in a story about the building of a palace by twins. This mention is too minor and not convincing enough to come to a conclusion that hell exists in Lepcha cosmology because A-nok in Lepcha means black and while hell could be associated with black as the darkness that surrounds the devils and the
demons, it is a weak argument. Also, hell is regarded as the place of suffering where the wicked are punished after death. For the Lepchas, they believe in returning to their peaks of origin after they die. So there cannot possibly be a hell for them to go to. To sum it up, Lepchas do not believe in hell but they believe in their ancestral place called Mayel Kyong. There is a strong sense of veneration and worship towards the immortal souls of this country of Mayel that holds a significant place in their traditional belief system.

*Heaven is the Country of Gods*

Lepchas believe in the country of gods known as Rumyang, which is above the sky where everything is at plenty, and people live with fairies there.

'The *Rum* country is flower-like, the people inhabit the calyx during life, while it is on the petals that heaven lies. Time is so long on earth, that a hundred months of our time equals one day. Everyone is good there on the petals, drink is equal to 'chi a-rok,' the Spirit of 'chi' (Stocks 1975: 19).

The *rum* country is a mysterious yet an assuring place to go if they needed refuge. On one occasion, Ati-azyak is believed to have flown up to the *Rum* country, and watched the demon brothers search for him (Stocks 1975: 92). It is also believed that men and animals could fly up to the *Rum* country from the earth without dying (Ibid: 11). While the stories sound outlandish, flying people in Lepcha mythology are very common. Interestingly, Lepchas have not only flown to the *rum* country, but have tried
creating a stairway to heaven as well. Skilled in pottery (Tamsang 1982: 73), they started building a tower of earthen pots to reach Rum yang. They piled the pots and had reached quite high—only a pole away from the heaven when one of them asked for a hook;

The man at the top shouted “kok vim yang tale” *(Hand up the pole with the hook)*, while the men at the bottom heard the words “chek tala” *(cut it down)*. These wondering greatly shouted up to ask the man at the top whether he really meant it. This time they heard the words “ak ak” *(yes yes)*. And at once they cut the tower down... (Stocks 1975: 36)

It was an enterprising and a very eager effort from the Lepchas to build the tower of earthen pots and reach heaven. Though this incident poked fun and ridiculed the Lepchas, the presence of potsherds in Daramdin, West Sikkim stands proof of the Lepcha quest to reach the country of gods. Heaven is probably the same nice place we all imagine it to be and the Lepchas’ attempt to visit the same should not be ignored. But this wonderful country of Rumyang should not be confused with the other enthralling place of Mayel Kyong, the country of Lepcha ancestors.

*The Country of Ancestors*

Located somewhere near Mt. Kanchenjunga lies the country of Mayel known to be the home of their ancestors where food is at plenty and lives are immortal. Foning equates the place with the biblical ‘garden of eden’ (Foning 1987: 51) although it is much closer
to heaven or the ‘paradise myth’ (Eliade 1959:255) found across different societies, where the idea of immortality plays an important factor. It is believed that there are seven Lepcha families in Mayel living a traditional Lepcha life. They have all the food they want and the crops in Mayel grow a hundred times bigger. There is no disease or any famine and the people there are immortal. They are infants in the morning, adults during day and old people by evening.

‘The people of Mayel live in seven huts; they are immortal; each morning they are infants, at midday they are grown men and in the evening they are old... They wear the traditional Lepcha costume of clothes made of nettle cloth and small basket-work hats. They are somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings; they are not gods because they live on earth but they are not human because they do not die’ (Gorer 2005).

These mysterious mythological creatures embody both god-like and human-like characteristics making them ‘semi-divine beings who have access to the domain of the gods’ (Foning 1987: 52). When the creator It-bu-mu made rice, millet and maize; she put the people of Mayel in charge of these crops, and they are believed to have given humans their first seeds of the crops. Lepchas believe that they will never go hungry because the Mayel beings will always provide them with enough to eat. They believe that the people of Mayel will intercede on their behalf with the gods for sufficient rain and fertility of the soil for their crops (Foning 1987: 53). Lepchas also do not believe that they will ever vanish because the people of Mayel are looking out for them and will come to their rescue if tragedy struck. There was a time when the way to Mayel Kyong
was easily accessible and people from Mayel would also come to the earth. They say that the people of Mayel even helped build the palace of Fyung Di near Pemionchi and interacted with ordinary people, but disappeared in a clap of thunder (Gorer 2005: 237). It is believed that only a ‘pure Lepcha’ (Little 2007: 83), one who has Lepcha ancestry, speaks Lepcha language and follows Lepcha tradition is given access to this country. Interestingly, when humans tried to find Mayel Kyong, only a few have found way through the narrow and heavily guarded paths. One incident tells of a hunter from Sakyong who entered their terrain but ran away after some misgivings and he was ‘pelted with snow and hail’ (Gorer 2005: 238) blocking the road ever since. In recent days, one young Lepcha man from Kalimpong recounts his travels in search of Mayel Kyong. The roads were treacherous and hard but he had finally reached the pass where he could place his palm on the rock and could enter. But an overwhelming rush of emotions stopped him from doing that and he decided not to continue further because there would be no coming back. So he never entered the country of Mayel but came back more knowledgeable about Lepcha culture and tradition. He says that he had never read any of the old texts and did not know the mythical stories but after this trip he is well versed in Lepcha folk tales and can even officiate certain rituals as a bongthing.

There is thus a belief of an unfathomable power in the Mayel country. Offerings are made in honour of the people of Mayel every year after the harvest is over. They are believed to look after the Lepchas and save them from famine, drought and any other natural calamities. It is therefore only natural to revere their ‘living ancestors’
(Gowloog 1995: 106) as gods who watched over them and provided for their well being with the production of crops and the maintenance of the same.

Worship Patterns

‘Worship is rendered almost exclusively to the bad spirits and not to the good. For, say the Lepchas, the good spirits never do us any harm; it is only the malignant spirits which we have to fear’ (Waddell 1978: 7-8).

Lepchas do not have a permanent place of worship. So they worship anywhere their mun or bongthing considers appropriate. ‘There is no mention of temples or other places of worship, or of idols, etc’ (Stocks 1975: 14). Sacrifices and offerings known as Rum Faat are made of flowers, fruits, fish, birds, rice and ci. It is the responsibility of the mun or the bongthing to conduct rituals from birth till death. It can be observed that most of their prayers and offerings are directed to the mountains, trees, rivers, streams, plants and nature in all its forms. We can see the priority given to nature in Lepcha cosmology as God is sought through nature, creating an ‘eco-centric approach’ (Lepcha 2009:26). Lepchas call themselves Mutanchi Rongkup, which is understood as the children of the snowy peak. Here too, we can see them identifying themselves as the children of nature in a very candid way. There was a time when the various invocations to nature used to be a highly anticipated community affair. ‘Everybody in our village, including old men, women and children, used to be present; they are now attended by only a skeleton of the population left behind in the village, and at home’ (Foning 1987: 76).
In a couple of decades since, the participation is still scanty and the influence of other organized religions could be blamed for it, but Lepcha elders and shezums are trying their part to continue the different rituals and rum faats that are still being practised and will be discussed below.

**Chyu Rum Faat**

In simple understanding *chyu* means mountain, so *Chyu Rum Faat* is a time of prayers and offerings to the mountains—especially Mt. Kanchenjunga. It is called *Chirim* in Sikkim and is celebrated twice a year there while the Kalimpong Lepchas observe it only in late autumn (Bentley 2007: x). The worship of Kanchenjunga extended beyond the Lepcha realm when Kanchenjunga became the guardian deity of Sikkim and Buddhist beliefs were incorporated into the ritual to commemorate it as *Pang Lhabsol*.

‘They took up our ‘Chyu Rum Fat’ worship of our mountain gods, and gave the glorified name of ‘Pang Labsol’, and incorporated it into the Buddhist mystery plays, and other dances. They made it brilliantly colourful and ceremoniously ritualistic’ (Foning 1987: 286).

Indeed, the celebrations are elaborate with a state holiday marking the occasion. In recent news, the Kanchenjunga bongthing⁹, known to have offered prayers to the mountains since the King’s rule, passed away in 2011 leaving a void in the continuation

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⁹ Samdup Taso, 83 was a resident of Nung, Tingvong village and had been performing the Kanchenjunga rituals for a long time. Known to be a descendant of the first bongthing, he however failed to pass on his knowledge and oral tradition to his son and grandson as the tribe mourned the loss of the last mountain priest.
of the rituals. Interestingly, the Kalimpong Lepchas do not celebrate *Pang Lhabsol* because of its exclusivity as a Sikkimese festival.

*Lyang Rum Faat*

In Lepcha, *lyang* means earth and *Rum* is God. So this ritual is a worship of the land, marked by prayers to the earth. It is celebrated during Spring season and is officiated by the *mun* or the *bongthing*. This ritual is annually observed in Kalimpong while Lepchas in Sikkim are not really aware of it. Because of the nature of this ritual *Lyang Rum Faat* is also called an environmental festival today (Bentley 2007: x).

*Lee Rum Faat*

In Lepcha, *lee* (also *li*) means house, so *Lee Rum Faat* is the prayer to the god of the house. It is usually members of certain household/clan that come together and invoke the blessings of their respective guardian peaks.

*Muk zyuk Ding Rum Faat*

In simpler understanding, *muk-zyuk-ding rum faat* is the worship of the sprouting of grass. In Lepcha, *muk* means grass, *zyuk* is to sprout and *ding* is to stand forth. This is the first ceremony of the Lepcha calendar and is seen as the celebration of nature. It is a
way of giving respect to their environment and the surroundings. The ceremony is conducted by a mun or a bongthing along with members of the community. The opening texts begin by thanking the creator god (It bu moo) for creating perfume and oil giving plants. While the worshipper acknowledges the creator, he/she says that the responsibility of 'moulding and shaping nature' is in the hands of the prime-baby-grass (mukkap). The observance of muk-zyuk-ding rum faat in Kalimpong is an annual event while Sikkim stopped celebrating it till 2002, when under the initiative of the Lepcha associations of Sikkim they made a comeback in Kabi Longstok, the historic place where the blood brotherhood treaty between the Bhutias and Lepchas was commemorated.

Sakyoo Rum Faat

Lepchas observe Sakyoo Rum Faat each year after harvest around October-November. It is a thanksgiving ceremony and prayer to the year’s produce and no one is allowed to eat from the new harvest until the rituals are over. It is also an offering to the seven immortal Lepcha couples of Mayel Kyong who is believed to have given them their first seeds of the crops. They offer their respect and thanks to them for providing not just the seeds, but looking after their crops and protecting them from any disease or natural calamities. Their belief in these immortal couples is such that in case of any natural disasters, it is predicted that these couples will protect and rescue the Lepcha tribe.
Satap Rum Faat

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

Teesta Rum Faat

Following the September 18, 2011 earthquake in Sikkim, the Teesta Rum Faat was observed with a ceremony of prayers and offering held at the confluence of Rongyoo and Rangeet on January 30, 2012. It was a sacrifice to avoid natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides.

Tendong Hlo Rum Faat

During the time of the deluge, Lepchas are believed to have climbed Mt. Tendong and fervently prayed to It-bu-rum to save them from drowning. In answer to their prayers, the waters subsided and the tribe was saved. Located at an altitude of 8,675 feet, Mt. Tendong is the saviour hill for the Lepchas, as Tendong Hlo Rum Faat is celebrated across the region in commemoration to the flood story. Here, Tendong is the name of the hill, Hlo means the Himalayas and Rum Faat is the worship to it. It has also been said that the name of the hill is actually Tungrong meaning ‘the uplifted horn or ladder’
(Tamsang 2004:27) but had been anglicized by the British to Tendong. Since the hill is located in South Sikkim, Lepchas from other places visit Sikkim and climb the Tendong hill as a pilgrimage during this occasion. In Sikkim, *Tendong Hlo Rum Faat* is observed as a state holiday on August 8th since 1997.

**Nambum/ Namsoong**

The victory over *lasso mung*’s death marks the celebration of a new beginning, the New Year for the Lepchas known as *namsoong/ nambun*. It usually falls after Christmas and is actually a weeklong celebration. The festivities begin only after offering thanks to the gods for the past year and bribing the devils to leave the people alone in the coming year. The negative energy from the past year is to be left behind. So on the eve of the new moon, when the moon is in its darkest phase, offerings are made to the evil spirits who are responsible for causing trouble in the past year. This discarding of the unwanted is called *lut-dyan* and requires items like cereals, twigs and leaves, figurines, fruits, miniature bows and arrows, pieces of cloth etc (Foning 1987: 247). There is also a practice of *lasso* playing when young people in the evening visit different Lepcha homes with songs and skits.
Longtsaoks

Longtsaoks are the stones erected to commemorate a special occasion or an event. It is derived from two Lepcha words, long meaning 'stone' and tsaok (Tamsang 1980: 672) meaning hard. These are upright stones found in different parts of Lepcha inhabited areas with a sacred sentiment attached to it. An example can be taken from the widely known Kabi Longtsaok, where the Lepcha chief Thikung Tek and the Tibetan Khye Bhumsa are believed to have signed a blood brotherhood in the 17th century. It is a historic landmark where the stones stood witness to a sacred covenant built between two communities. These stones have withstood time and still stand tall at Kabi, 17 kilometres North of Gangtok thus deriving the name Kabi Longtsaok.

The use of stones in traditional Lepcha burial has also been accounted in detail by Foning (1987) as he mentions the lining of stones when somebody dies in the family.
‘Over the grave, flat stones are used as cover. With the earth around, a low spherical mound is raised, on top of which, normally, four longish flat stones are balanced; this is considered the normal outside arrangements of a grave’ (Foning 1987: 40).

Likewise, Lepchas also use huge stones during the construction of their house. While the focus is usually on the ingenuity of carving the wood and constructing the house without using a single nail, the wooden pillars usually stand on the big rocks at the bottom. It is therefore very important to select the perfect stones that could hold a Lepcha house together. The longs are thus an invaluable item during house building too. Besides the big stones, the smaller celtic stones known as sadaer long also hold a strong belief about its possession. Taken from the Lepcha word sadaer meaning thunder and long as stone, these thunderstones are small in size but when rubbed together with few drops of water, the paste is used as medicine for all kinds of illness. It is supposedly used for pneumonia, mumps, gangrene, gout and any disease under the sun (Foning 1987: 31).

Naamthars

Naamthars are commonly understood as the religious books of the Lepchas—the original manuscripts that hold the stories, histories and philosophies of the Lepcha ethos. It covers the different aspects of Lepcha culture and is believed to coexist as a key guide for their life, right from birth to the death. Naamthar is a word borrowed from Tibetan namtar, which means biography—a text containing a sacred legend, some chapter of
native lore or a hagiography about the life of a saint or miracle worker. True enough, there are some *naamthars* with translated works of Tibetan Buddhist texts to Lepcha, but there also exists original manuscripts that contain original stories purely based on Lepcha subjects, topics and issues (Tamsang, 2009: 9). The manuscripts are divided into two categories depending on Lepcha and Tibetan origin. It is to be noted that Lepchas are using *Naamtho Naamthar* instead of just *Naamthar* as the word *Naamtho* is broken to *naam* meaning year and *thar* meaning the record of incidents and events thus implying the documentation of the Lepcha story. In the Ngasseyy village of Kalimpong, the *Naamtho Naamthar* day is observed every year for reading the ancient Lepcha manuscripts. From the story of creation of Fodongthing and Nazongnyu, the first male and female in Lepcha tradition to the importance of bamboo to a Lepcha; various other folk tales, traditional knowledge about various items and predictions of the future are included in these texts. The seven books read on *Naamtho Naamthar* day were:

1) *Pomic-Potong Njyumjyo*
2) *Fodong-Nazoang Nyumjyo*
3) *Lakok-Lanyen Byumjyo*
4) *Koying-Duren Nyumjyo*
5) *Lafo-Ladong Nyumjyo*
6) *Nyulik-Mundong Nyumjyo*
7) *Shimvonmu Ungtuksot*
Readers are encouraged to use the rhythmic tones that accompanied the narration. Imitating the sound of swinging bamboos to the cicada chirping, there is both an emotional lamentation and an attractive sound commanding attention from the listeners. The emphasis on nature, even when it comes to reading ancient texts, is evident here.

Naamthars being read in Ngassev, Kalimpong.

*Mun and Bongthing*

The traditional Lepcha religion is officiated by *muns* and *bongthings*, or priestesses and priests respectively who act as mediators between God, men and spirits. It is their very titles that derive the name *munism* and *bongthingism* for the traditional Lepcha religion. The *mun* and the *bongthing* are required to officiate various rituals from birth to death. They are seen as powerful magicians and can expel demons and appease gods through sacrifice. But they cannot practice any black magic since their job is to help people ward
off all evil (Das 1978: 193). The mun can be both female and male, while the bongthings are all male and it is impossible for a woman to be a bongthing. The road to being a mun or a bongthing is not by choice, but because of some ‘irresistible compulsion’ (Morris 1938: 116), when the spirit possesses his/ her entire body and guides that person through a shamanistic initiation led by a senior bongthing during the first few times. There are only a certain number of these specialists in every clan, and when one dies, the office should be passed on. While it is possible for a mother and son to both be a mun, it is not hereditary (Morris 1937: 116). If one’s grandfather is a bongthing but the father is not, there are chances of the grandfather’s spirit taking over the person to make him the next in line to be one. During the rituals, mun and bongthing do not say their prayers and sermons by reading out from any written scriptures or notes but get possessed by an unseen force and chant their prayers flowing freely ‘from within their hearts of heart’ (Tamsang 1987: 51). The sacrificial offerings include ci, fruits, egg, fish, flowers, fowl, goat, pig etc. It is believed that the spirits of the mun and the bongthing do not always live in their mediums, but stay in a place called Tiamtan (Das 1978: 195) and only come when they are summoned to take possession of their mediums for the sacrifices.

Who is a Mun?

A mun is usually the priestess or the female shaman mediating between humans and the spirits. She is defined as a ‘vagrant singing priest’ or ‘an exorciser or any experienced person’ (Morris 1937: 115). The function of the mun is to ward off illness and disaster
through sacrifices and communication with the supernatural. But her main task is to
guide the soul of the dead to his peak of origin. It has been suggested that the mun is of
shamanistic origin due to features such as her ecstatic performances, using headgear
during performance, exorcism, and 'spiritual fights' (Das 1978: 196). For ordinary
divinations the mun uses either a necklace or an egg. The egg is placed against the
forehead and the eyes are closed and this helps to concentrate. By means of the egg if
one sees a long straight road, it means illness in near future, if a circular road, it means
serious illness; circular road arranged in the form of knot indicates that several people
will die of dysentery shortly thereafter (Das: 194-195). Interestingly, there are different
kinds of muns with differing powers among which the Nyulik Nyusong Mun is deemed
the most powerful. Her name means 'who can bring out to the outer world, even the
inner most secrets of the nether world' (Tamsang 1982: 48) She was sent to the earth to
save the living creatures from the demons and is refereed in most invocations.

Who is a Bongthing?

A bongthing is a male ritual specialist or the high priest who is regarded as 'a shaman, a
medicine man or an exorciser' (Stocks 1975:12). The word is a derivation of two
Lepcha words, abong and athing. Abong means 'trunk, main, original' while athing
means 'honourable, respected one' so the amalgamation results in 'the original highly
honoured and respected one' (Foning 1987: 61). Indeed, a bongthing is a high priest, a
healer and a knowledgeable figure indispensable to Lepcha society. According to
legends, he was sent to relieve the humans from the tortures of the demons, and to be an intermediary between the gods and the humans. The demons however were too many and widespread, but they agreed to negotiate with the bongthing:

‘On one condition we will do everything you command, when we worry the human beings with disease and illness, we will go away and leave them in peace if, in return, you will give us something; fowls, eggs, pigs, or any other animal’ (Stocks 1975: 24).

The mungs swore to leave the humans at peace if they would be propitiated with offerings. Hence various articles are required during Lepcha rituals. More than a mun, people rely on the bongthings and request his presence for every tiny occasion at their homes. Despite the accessibility of roads and access to health care centres, most villagers first turn to a bongthing for any kind of illness, as a bongthing from Tingvong tells of a busy day in the village because he has to go from one house to another and conduct rituals (Ritual Journeys 2011).

Between the mun and the bongthing, the mun is deemed more powerful than the bongthing. There are different kinds of muns who are divided according to their powers while there is only one kind of bongthing. The one distinct task associated with the mun is guiding the soul of the dead, which the bongthing does not do. The rest of the tasks might sound similar but they both have their own guardian deities and hold sacrifices annually. There is thus a difference in the way of conducting rituals, using different items as offerings and calling upon different deities. For instance, the mun starts her incantations since the beginning of existence while the bongthing usually starts at the
origin of the clan (Bentley 2007: xvi). The problem of names comes up here when we trace the first mun and the first bongthing because we have two contesting pairs are not verified. For some, Nyoolik Nysong and Azaor Bongthing were the first ritual specialists (Tamsang 1982: 47), while others trace Thikung Tek and Nikung Ngal as the first bongthing and mun respectively (Das 1978: 18, Stocks 1975: 3). It is confusing but we can leave the names aside and focus on the indispensable existence of the mun and the bongthing as key players of traditional Lepcha religion and culture as a whole. It is these specialists that hold the history and stories of the Lepcha people and the landscape as they invoke on the spirits of the land and the ancestors. Then they become more than shamans and healers but ‘keepers of this (Lepcha) tradition’ (Torri 2010: 154).

*Bongthings at Tendong Hlo Rum Faat 2010*

Despite the need for traditional ritual specialists, the declining scenario of both the mun and the bongthing is a blow to the traditional Lepcha religion. They have since come a long way and are still under threat from various influences not just about religion but about their roles too. During the Tendong Hlo Rum Faat 2010, bongthings from all over Sikkim had gathered in Mangan (headquarters of North Sikkim), but one could hardly recognize the kinds of performances put up by these ritual specialists. Though it can be argued that the context was different as this event was held in a community hall, it was somewhat surprising to see the bongthings. The following two pictures are shown to examine the outward changes taking place in a Lepcha bongthing.
In the village, *bongthings* are never seen in long white robes like the one seen in the pictures above. The closest influence on their attires could have come from the *phedangmas* of the Limbus as they are known to wear long white robes during their *pujas*. Likewise, the feathers on his head, the cowries, the bell on the beads and the noises made from hitting on the copper plate is a very new look for a minimalist Lepcha *bongthing*. The Lepchas from were also taken aback by the kind of performance that they put up as they agreed that they had never seen *bongthings* in long dresses, or the ones who use drums. Hermanns (1954) mentions that the Lepchas do not use drums and here we could see the *bongthings* banging on the copper plate. Likewise, the second picture shows the *bongthings* from behind giving us an equally baffling picture of the long robed *shamans* with belted bells and fruit-beads usually seen on a Hindu *sadhu*, as the woven coat with Lepcha patterns was the only indicator of them being Lepcha.
specialists. The bongthings usually wear everyday clothes even while conducting rituals except for a special headgear for certain rituals. The dancing was not altogether strange because, when possessed, the bongthings also dance all around the place and the kitchen hearth. But there is fear of the ‘authenticity’ of bongthingism being taken away with these staged performances. The traditionalists have well noted the threat to the traditional religious specialists from all angles and are trying to hold on to what remains and what can be revived. In case of the bongthings, there is some debate about the word origin and usage as abong of the bongthing is today being defined as abong, which also means ‘mouth’. From this, the meaning of bongthing is being adjusted to make it possible to learn to be a bongthing because it is through the mouth that one calls upon the spirits. So, the meaning becomes something that can be learned, and the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) is on a bid to revive the bongthings by organizing trainings to be a bongthing. Sensing a need to fill the lack of bongthings in Lepcha society, they are willing to favour ‘anyone who can learn and perform such duties’ (Chakraborty 1998: 185). They have somewhat broken the age-old myth that bongthingism is destiny-driven as they try to ‘increase the number of bongthings through training so as to disseminate and preserve the traditional culture among the Lepchas’ (Roy 2010). Some still argue that a bongthing cannot be made but has to be destined.
Dzongu: From Homeland to Holyland

For long, Dzongu has been the homeland of Lepchas anywhere in the world. They identify Dzongu as that one place where Lepcha culture is at its ‘purest’ form; since no other community besides the Lepchas can reside in this area leaving the place untouched and unchanged from its traditional self. It was their mini Mayel Lyang, since most of their original boundaries were now a part of one nation state or the other. In recent days, the Lepcha homeland has taken a new avatar as the holy land. The coming of hydroelectric projects (which will be discussed in Chapter 7) in Dzongu meant that the Lepcha homeland was under attack. Hydel projects were creeping into their sacred place and people feared of losing their ancestral land –their mythological land where they believe to have originated from. Traditionalists argue that Dzongu is the place of Lepcha origin. They say that the original Lepcha name for Dzongu is Foakraam Takraam which is an amalgamation of four Lepcha words, faok meaning ‘through or channel’, raam meaning source, tak means to nestle and ‘raam’ again means the source. In short, it could be understood as the source of Lepcha origin and life. Legends boast of how their creator God Itbumu created the first Lepcha man Fudongthing and the first Lepcha woman Nazongnyu from the pure, virgin snow of Mt. Kanchenjunga and were sent to live in Dzongu. The mun and the bongthing use foakraam takraam, indicating Dzongu in their prayers and incantations. Even the origin of the Lepcha clan (moo) is found in the different peaks of Kanchenjunga mountain range. Each clan has its peak (chyu), lake (da) and cave (lep) that is recognized and identified accordingly. It is claimed that the number of clans among the Lepchas is in proportion to the number of peaks, lakes and
caves in the Kanchenjunga range (Roy 2008:36). After death, the soul is believed to return to the original peak for rest. The *mun* and the *bongthing* guide the souls back to their respective *chyu-da-lep*. So, the Lepchas believe that their souls go to Dzongu when they die. Also the consecration of the first *mun* and *bongthing* took place in Dzongu as did the marriage ceremony of Taarbong and Naarip, the first Lepcha couple. It was during this wedding that the system of bridal price took origin where Komsithing, elder brother of Taarbong approached the hand of Naarip from her mother with gifts comprising of items that are still in practice today. Therefore the customary laws for a Lepcha marriage was first made and practised in Dzongu. Likewise the antics of the evil *lasso mung* and the way he killed Lepchas at various places provides an interesting insight into how the villages in Dzongu got their names.

The mythological stories all come alive in the Dzongu landscape as the place becomes sacred and inescapable to a Lepcha mind. Even the ritual specialists in Dzongu are seen to be ‘more powerful and the Lepcha more knowledgeable about their own culture in terms of oral traditions and ritual practices’ (Bentley 2007: 106). There is an unquestionable attachment of deep cultural and traditional heritage to the Lepcha land of Dzongu which has been recognized today as the most spiritual and holy place for Lepchas like Benaras for Hindus, Gaya for Buddhists, Mecca for Muslims and Jerusalem for Christians (Roy 2007:51). While Dzongu always existed as their homeland, the realization and integration of Dzongu as their ‘holy land’ is an imagination that has united Lepchas bypassing the religious barriers formed after the acceptance of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Lepchas from all religious
backgrounds are accepting Dzongu as their holy land because it has become essential to own and integrate Dzongu with the Lepcha cosmology for the establishment of a united Lepcha belief system.