

**Traditional Lepcha Faith and Lamaism: A Study of Syncretism in Sikkim**

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***Abstract:** Widely held to be the land's original settlers, the Lepchas today form a minority in Sikkim. This is seen in their declining population and dwindling traditional ancient Lepcha culture. This has been the result of a long process of interaction and assimilation with other cultural groups in the region. The distinct ancient traditional culture of the Lepchas faced a setback with the mass conversion of Lepchas into Buddhism that started with the advent of Tibetans during the seventeenth century. For the smooth functioning of their rule, the newly instated ruler first brought all the subjects under the same religious faith, making Sikkim a theocratic kingdom with Lamaism as the state religion. Over centuries since the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim, the ancient Lepcha traditions have been so intimately intertwined with Tibetan ideals and rituals that it is now extremely impossible to distinguish between the two groups. The formation of this perfect syncretic religion came with a cost for the Lepchas. The rich heritage of culture and traditions, in some way or another, was hampered when a new alien religion in their homeland prospered. The influence of Buddhism brought from Tibet is mainly responsible for what we know now about the Lepchas, as their original authentic practices vanished into history.*

***Keywords:** Bongthing, Culture, Lamaism, Lepchas, Syncretism,*

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## Introduction

According to the 2011 Census, with only 6.1 lakh people and an area of 7096 square kilometres, Sikkim is the second-smallest state of the Indian Union. Geographically, the 22nd state of India is situated in the lap of the Eastern Himalayan range and borders Nepal in the west, Tibet Autonomous Region in the north and northeast, Bhutan in the southeast and the Indian state, West Bengal in the south. The population is composed mainly of three ethnic groups- the Lepchas, considered to be the original inhabitants of the land as their presence in the region dates back to at least 5000 BCE<sup>1</sup>; the Bhutias, believed to have migrated to Sikkim in different phases from Tibet and Bhutan from the 9th century onwards; and the Nepali community, which forms the umbrella term for various other communities of Sikkim. According to the first official Census of 1891, the Nepalis comprised about 56 per cent and constituted the majority, followed by the Lepchas, who comprised 19 per cent, and the Bhutias, who formed 16 per cent of the population.

Regarding the true origin of the Lepcha race, despite the efforts of numerous historians and anthropologists, there appears to be no written historical documentation. According to Lepcha folklore traditions, Kanchenjunga and its surrounding areas are the Lepchas' place of origin, indicating that they are Sikkim's autochthones. Despite differing ideas proposed by various scholars, the people themselves believe they have no traditions of previous migrations and believe their ancestors' home was somewhere around Mt. Kanchenjunga. The early history of the Lepchas is unknown, and their geographical isolation likely prevented them from interacting much with outsiders. Since little is known about Sikkim's early history, the Lepchas remained undiscovered for a long time. Only with the advent of the Europeans into the region did the world come to know of Sikkim as a Himalayan kingdom located in the Eastern Himalayan range.

Therefore, due to their prolonged isolation from other cultures, the Lepchas developed a distinct culture of their own. This development encompassed their language, religion, ceremonies, rituals, funeral ceremonies, and traditions. The Lepchas are the sum total of their religious practices, dogmas, history, language, literature, customs, manners, etiquette, traditions, songs, dances, music, and the geographical and economic conditions of the country.<sup>2</sup> However, when the Bhutias and Nepalese arrived in Sikkim, they encountered two distinct cultures. The Bhutias carried aspects of Tibetan cultural life, such as language, religion, and their unique economic structure. The Nepalese, on the other hand, carried with

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them aspects of Nepal's cultural life, such as the Nepali language, Hinduism, and, in some instances, their indigenous religion, as well as the practice of settled agriculture, particularly terraced cultivation.

## Belief System

A major component of the Lepcha culture happened to be their way of worship, which today is usually referred to as the indigenous way of worship, which is called *Boongthism* or *Munism*. Lepchas revered nature and worshipped the spirits of the mountains, rivers, woods, and the surrounding environment. Because Kanchenjunga is venerated as the womb of their origin in Lepcha legends, as their original progenitors, *Fadongthing* and *Nazaongnyu*, are said to have been created from its virgin snow, all their ceremonies are braided with stories flowing from the peak. Kanchenjunga acts as the principal deity of the land. Even though they revere the natural world, they also believe in a god they refer to as *Itbudebu Rum* (*Rum* in short), which means 'God the creator'. They consider *Rum* to be the one who created the universe, the natural world, mountains, rivers, flora, fauna, and humanity.

The Lepchas view the world as composed of numerous living beings, including benign and maleficent supernatural beings, humans, and animals. They balance their daily activities with the will of these supernatural beings through significant ceremonies, which form the core of their religious life. The supernatural world is divided into two groups: the *Rum*, benevolent supernatural beings, and the *Mung*, malignant supernatural beings. The Lepchas strive to balance their daily activities with the supernatural will through these ceremonies, ensuring harmony in their religious life.<sup>3</sup>

In Lepcha society, the *Bongthing* and the *Mun* are closely associated with the people's religious life. The *Bongthing* is a male shaman who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals and may heal acute illness.<sup>4</sup> *Mun* refers to a priestess who possesses extraordinary abilities to communicate with the beings of the supernatural world.<sup>5</sup> They believe that *Bongthing* and *Mun* were created as conduits between God and humanity. They were given supernatural powers to ward off the evil spirit, or *Mung*, and to perform rituals to appease them and protect the people of *Mayel Lyang*. This gives them a preferential position with the *Rum* and the ability to influence or counteract the *Mung*'s evil work.

## Rites and Rituals

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The Lepchas perform rites and rituals to appease the *Rum* or the *Mung* before beginning any activity because they believe that both benign and malevolent spirits are the source of all that occurs in the material world. In every ritual, the *Bongthing* and the *Mun* recite prayers, offer *chi* (millet beer) and other natural products, and express gratitude to nature and *Rum* for creating it and making it habitable for humans. The various ceremonial acts, which form the core of the Lepchas' religious life, are an attempt to harmonise their daily activities with the will of supernatural beings.

Some traditional rituals performed include the *Muk Zikding Rum Faat*. The word *muk* means grass, and *zikding* means the sprouting of vegetation. The ritual involves prayer to the *Rum* by decorating the altar with all kinds of shrubs, medicinal plants, fruits, flowers and a *longchok* is erected near the altar. This ritual is observed in February, when spring begins. The *Bongthing* offers prayers to *Rum* for timely rains and sunshine, clean air and water, and to save the world from natural calamities. *Sukyo rum faat* is celebrated every year during harvest season, in the months of September-November, to express gratitude to the seven immortal couples of *Mayel Kyong* (mythical village) who provided the Lepchas with various crops, vegetables, fruits, and flowers as a gift. They also believe that these seven couples send birds to *Renjyong* (Sikkim) to tell the Lepchas to sow the seeds at different seasons. *Chirim*, also called *Chyu rum faat*, is a ritual performed in praise of their guardian deity *Kongchen Konglo* (Kanchenjunga) and other smaller summits and holy lakes every year before the rainy season. *Lee rum faat* is the prayer offered to the God of the house. The ritual involves the coming together of members of a household and the invocation of the blessings of their respective guardian peaks. Apart from these rituals, there were numerous others in which deities from every nook and corner of the region were invoked for the well-being of the people and all living beings.

## Winds of Change

Based on shared history and customs, the Lepcha culture has continuously been evolving due to changing situations by incorporating new elements and altering existing ones. Traditional and original Lepcha culture have been changed and influenced by the cultures that became dominant with the influx of new populations in Sikkim. One major landmark for this is the introduction of Buddhism into Sikkim with the influx of the Bhutia population and the establishment of a political dynasty with a lineage to the Buddhist Tibetan state. The rich Lepcha culture faced challenges when the theocratic monarchical government introduced

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Lamaism, which influenced its traditional beliefs. Religion forms a significant part of one's culture and life, as it governs social connections and provides a common basis for a certain group. Therefore, when the Lepchas converted to Buddhism from their traditional belief system, they found common ground with the Tibetans, and soon adopted their cultural traits. This included the dress culture, the language used and the material culture of the Tibetans getting embedded into the Lepcha culture. This went on in such a way that today it is difficult to ascertain which parts of the culture are Lepcha in origin. This acceptance of an alien culture could have been performed willingly to find common ground with the new migrants into the region, or because the ruling class imposed certain cultures on them; e.g., the third *Chogyal* (king) of the Namgyal dynasty made monkhood compulsory for the second child of each household. Rules like these led the Lepchas to join the social institution of monasticism, learning the Tibetan script and language and adopting a considerable part of their culture. The gradual integration of Buddhism into the Lepcha lifestyle extended beyond the religious domain, and the dominant Buddhist Bhutia culture and religion became part of their daily lives.

## **Change in the Belief System**

The Lepchas' belief system underwent significant changes across the country's different phases of administrative change. Initially, the Lepchas were converted to Buddhism under the patronage of the Tibetan rulers. After studying the Lepcha language, religion, and customs, the Namgyal rulers made some alterations to the Lepcha rituals, customs, and traditions to incorporate their culture into the Lepcha culture. Although most Lepchas identify as Buddhists and participate in Buddhist rituals, a syncretic element between their old and new faith can be witnessed as they continue practising their traditional belief system and ritual customs. Today, the Lepcha religion is a blend of their age-old nature-revering belief and Lamaist Buddhist faith, in which Lepcha deities coexist with Buddhist deities. This coexistence is due to the unique form of Sikkimese Buddhism that incorporates features of the pre-Buddhist Lepcha belief system, such as the incorporation of Lepcha sacred landscapes into the Buddhist interpretation of their surroundings. For instance, on recognising the Indigenous group of Sikkim pays respect to nature, especially to Mt. Kanchenjunga, the early rulers of the Namgyal dynasty added renewed emphasis on the Buddhist veneration, thus integrating the sacred landscape of the Lepchas into Sikkim's Buddhist sacred geography. A new ritual, *Pang Lhabsol*, was instituted to become central to Sikkim's

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Buddhist identity in its later days. These developments were part of the construction of a shared Bhutia-Lepcha Buddhist community.

The Lepcha ritual specialists, *Mun* and *Bongthing* and the *Lamas* live and practice their traditions together. In some rituals and ceremonies, a *Bongthing* plays a crucial role; in others, the *Lamas* act as the main priest; on some occasions, both the *Bongthing* and *Lamas* work side by side. However, it is to be noted that the traditional Lepcha religious institutions, including the services of the *Bongthing* and *Mun*, have gradually been replaced by the alien religion of Vajrayana Buddhism, with its monastic tradition. Funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas became predominantly Buddhist in nature. The *Bongthing* and *Mun* have a minor role in the ceremony, like the *Sanglyon*, wherein the *Mun* helps transport the soul of the departed into *Rum-Lyang* (paradise) to meet his/her ancestors. This belief in the transportation of the soul has been passed down to the Lepchas from their long past, and even after their conversion to Buddhism, it remains intact.<sup>6</sup> Buddhist funeral ceremonies opt for cremation rather than the ancient practice of burial, and this is thought to be one of the reasons why fewer Lepchas are possessed by the spirits of the *Mun* and *Bongthing* and gain wisdom to execute various rituals. It is believed that the *Mun* or *Bongthing's* body should not be burned after death because only traditional burial allows the spirit to return and occupy a different person in the deceased's lineage.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it can be stated that the practices of Buddhist death rituals have contributed to the dwindling number of traditional ritual specialists in the Lepcha community.

Thus, only a few Lepcha households call upon the *Mun* and *Bongthing* to perform some prayers according to the Lepcha tradition. At the same time, a majority rely on the *Lamas* for spiritual guidance, with *Lamas* summoned after death to assist the deceased's soul in reaching heaven. While a *Bongthing* is called to utter mantras, the *Lama* prays to God for the soul, consults the religious book, and determines the cremation date. The body may be required to be preserved for the auspicious day and can be kept in the house for one to forty-nine days. Till the forty-ninth day, *thuedol*, a Buddhist prayer to guide the soul, is recited daily. Therefore, the ancient Lepcha custom of recalling the *Muk nyam* or releasing the soul from the control of a demon became unnecessary.

The traditional belief system of the Lepchas stated that only one supernatural world existed, known as the *Rumlyang* and nothing else. However, with the intrusion of Buddhism into Sikkim, they have come to believe in a wider variety of mythological worlds in addition to their own ancient belief in *Rumlyang*. They now believe in *Rumlyang*, *Nyolyang*- hell,

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*Nymsyim Nyolyang*- the human world, *Munglyang*- the world of evil spirits, *Thamchyanglyang* -the animal world and *Muknyamlyang*- the world of the spirits.<sup>8</sup>

## Change in the Ceremonies, Rites and Rituals

Buddhism and its ideals have dominated the rites and rituals of the Lepcha community. The religious life of the Buddhist Lepchas revolves around the *Gumpa* or the monastery, which further extends to the socio-cultural and socio-religious life as well. The landscapes accepted as sacred by the ancient Lepcha tradition have lost their standing to the Buddhist houses of worship. The Lepcha Buddhists frequent the Monastery and its Lamas without any inconvenience, rather than their ritual specialists, the *Mun* and the *Bongthing*. Nature, the most revered element, receded into the background, and the Lepchas, who once had no defined place of worship, went about worshipping and personifying every element of nature. In the long process of acculturation and assimilation with the Tibetan Buddhist culture, found their new *Rum* to reside in a monastic establishment. This started the trend of having *Kyungkur/Tshesum* (prayer rooms) in almost every household. This room, rather than the nature outside, came to be accepted as a sacred place and the residential abode of their *Rum*.

Apart from the handful of traditional Lepcha rituals practised today, regular Buddhist *pujas* are conducted by Lepcha Buddhists in accordance with the Tibetan calendar. The most characteristic feature of these *pujas* is the reading of prayers by the Lamas throughout the period. Six specific days of each month are reserved for worshipping different deities. On the *tshe-gye*, the eighth day of every month, *Menla Deuchen* is celebrated, calling upon prayers for the Medicine Buddha. On the *tshe-chu*, the tenth day of every month, prayers are offered to the Guru Padmasambhava. On the *tshe-cher-nga*, the fifteenth day of every month, *Chernga* is celebrated, wherein the believers of the Buddhist faith animate prayers for the Buddha Amitabha. On the *anger-nga*, the twenty-fifth day of every month, *Khandu Deuchen* is celebrated by offering prayers to *Dakini*, a female goddess. On the *anger-gu*, the twenty-ninth day of every month, *Chyogyong Deuchen* is celebrated by calling upon the Dharmapal deities. On the thirtieth day, called *namgong*, the Buddha Sakyamuni is worshipped.

Similarly, according to the Tibetan calendar, auspicious days and celebrations are marked throughout the year. In the first month of the Tibetan calendar, from the first to the fifteenth day, is regarded as *Choetul Deuchen* to commemorate the Buddha's miraculous feats and preachings. On the fourth month, from the first to the fifteenth day, is celebrated as *Saga*

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*Dawa*. It marks the holiest occasion of Buddhism, which coincides with the days the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and reached Parinirvana, all during the first fifteen days of the month. In the sixth month, the fourth day is celebrated as *Drukpa Tshechi* to commemorate the auspicious day on which the Buddha delivered his first preaching of the four Noble Truths, viz. *Dukha Sataya*, *Samudaya Sataya*, *Nerodh Sataya* and *Marga Sataya* to his five disciples and the tenth day is celebrated as *Drukpa Tshechu* or Guru Rinpoche's *Trungkar Tshechu* to commemorate the birth of Guru Padmasambhava. On the seventh month, the fifteenth day is celebrated as *Pang Lhabsol*, commemorating the blood brotherhood treaty between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. The witnesses to the treaty, namely, Mt. Kanchenjunga, Pauhungri and Da Chomen, are worshipped and prayed upon. A Bongthing from the Lepcha party and a lama from the Bhutia party perform the puja together, asking the deities for a good and healthy life by offering the year's new crops. On the twenty-second day of the ninth month, *Lhabab Deuchen* is celebrated to observe the descent of the Buddha from the *Dev Lok* (heaven) to the Human world. In the tenth month, from the twenty-fifth to the thirtieth, the *Gutor puja* is celebrated with major festivities like the *Kagyed* dance. On the eleventh month, the first six days are celebrated as *Namsoong/Loosong* welcoming the new year. The festival marks the end of the harvest season. During the first three days of the festival, everybody is expected to stay at their respective homes and only come out to make merry during the fourth and fifth days. The *Nyenpo Gudzom* lasts about twelve hours across the sixth and seventh day of *Namsoong* and is considered bad hours, and any auspicious work is avoided by staying home.<sup>9</sup> The festivities continue until the fifteenth day of the month, and all auspicious activities, such as marriages, *Khimtsa Tashi* (home warming), etc., are hurriedly carried out during these days.

These vast amounts of Buddhist rites and rituals occupy the people's time and minds all year long. Collectively, the people celebrate these rituals, and people regularly visit the monastery in lieu of celebrating them. With a major part of the time dedicated to performing *pujas* in the monastery, one can definitely notice the absorption of the Buddhist way of life.

## Conclusion

Since the formation of a feudal theocratic state, the land and its people, the Lepchas in particular, have undergone transformations. The introduction of new traditions and customs into indigenous Lepcha traditions had a tremendous impact on religion, culture, and customs.

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The religion of the region became Buddhism, and the state dynamics shifted from an animist-nature worshipping state to a Buddhist lamaist one under the Tutelage of Tibet. This inflow of new people and value systems had an immense effect on indigenous culture, tradition, customs, and religion, resulting in a considerable cultural transition in the region, with Sikkim's culture becoming somewhat Tibetanised. Many traditional cultural norms of the Lepchas, be it belief systems, rituals, ceremonies, languages, dead rituals, dress, and culture, have today been dominated by Buddhist culture. Beyond material and cultural loss, the Lepchas have lost their traditional wisdom, values, and knowledge over the centuries. However, a full-fledged physical divorce from the ancient traditional culture has not been possible. The Lepchas have created a perfect syncretic blend of alien and traditional cultures by allowing the two to co-exist naturally. Today, the non-Christian Lepcha population, on being asked their religion, nonchalantly reply as 'Buddhism' without making out the difference between their original religion and the alien Buddhist religion. This is so because of the assimilation of the two religions to form a perfect syncretic religion called the Sikkimese Lamaistic Buddhism wherein, the *Muns* and *Bongthings* occupy a similar status to those given to the *Lamas*. Thus, today, the Lepcha religion is a syncretic amalgamation of *Bongthingism* and Lamaic Buddhism.

## Notes and References

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