



# Discovering The Lepcha Culture: Delving Into Their Myths And Folktales

Anindita Saha

Research Scholar

Department of English

Sister Nivedita University, Newtown, Kolkata, India

**Abstract:** Folklore permeates our lives. We encounter it daily. Riddles, jokes, games, dancing, and song all contain it. Historical, linguistic, literary, and ethnographic studies of human life must include folklore. Local folklorists have long worked to preserve and document their history. Folklore has historically been associated with the poor, ignorant, and uncivilised, unlike classical arts. Scholars have long believed folklore is passed down orally through informal means. Folklore is largely verbal; thus, it can vary greatly from one communication to the next, they believe. Folktales embrace diversity. Tribal mythology always integrates man and nature. It links live and dead, past and present. Stories from different civilisations will illuminate another culture's values, beliefs, history, rituals, and customs in this chapter.

This chapter explores North Bengal's Lepcha folktales, beliefs, myths, and culture. Among other things, it will examine tribes through indigenous queer narratives. Folktales and myths will also be used to show how they help uncover a civilisation's history and improve its culture. From mainstream masculinity to effeminate will also be evident, according to the chapter.

## **Index Terms - Folklore, folktales, Lepcha folktales, beliefs, Lepcha tribes of North Bengal**

*The earliest known inhabitants of the Darjeeling district and Sikkim were the Lepchas or Rong the "ravine folk", as they style themselves. Their origin is obscure but they are of pronounced Mongolian type and some authorities state that they probably migrated in very early times from Assam or Burn. At the present they number only some six or seven thousand and are gradually growing less, owing to their being ousted from their native forest by the more pushful Nepalese cultivator who is immigrating from Nepal into Sikkim in ever increasing numbers... A peculiar trait of the Nepali is that they can ever resist felling a tree, wherever it may be, if excuse offers. The Lepchas are of a shy and retiring nature preferring to live in out of the way jungles and forts. They are improvident, and greatly addicted to strong liquor, which, like other hill-tribes, they brew from locally grown millets.*

*Every Lepcha is a born naturalist and living as they do in the forests; they know the habits of every bird and beast and make first rate collectors. They have a name for every living thing, including plants which is found in their country... though outwardly professing Buddhism; they are at heart confirmed animists, worshipping the spirits of mountain, forest and river. Small in stature and seemingly not robust yet they have immense powers of endurance and a tireless on the march.*

*David McDonald, Touring in Sikkim and Tibet, Kalimpong 1930 (1999, p.7)*

Folklore encompasses nearly every aspect of our lives. It is present in our everyday lives. We can't deny its presence in discourse, such as riddles and jokes; it's also in our games, dance, and song. Folklore cannot be ignored in any study of human life, including ethnography, history, linguistics, and literature. Folklorists have always sought to gather, preserve, and document their region's past. In contrast to the lofty classical arts, which are regarded as privileged, folklore has long been linked with lowly, uneducated, and uncivilised people. Scholars have long thought that folklore is passed down orally through informal channels. They also believe that because folklore is mostly verbal, it can vary dramatically from one instance of communication to the next. Folktales, by definition, celebrate diversity. It is always the case that the folklore of tribal cultures connects man and nature in an integrated world view. It unites the animate with the inanimate, the past with

the present, and dead beings with the living. This chapter will reveal significant insights about another culture's values, beliefs, history, practices, and customs by encountering stories from different civilizations. As a result, folklore is in a constant state of flux and is intrinsically dynamic. Folklore has a tendency to be inconsistent. Folklore upholds fixed and standard cultural values. Folklore is defined as the study, communication, and transmission of any society or group that may or may not have regional or national characteristics. It includes all knowledge that is passed down through word of mouth, as well as all arts and practises that are passed down from generation to generation. Folklore studies are now a very important discipline. This chapter will delve into the various folktales, beliefs, myths and culture of North Bengal's indigenous tribe, the Lepchas. It will also look at the tribes through the lens of distinct indigenous queer narratives, among other things. It will also be demonstrated, via the use of numerous folktales and myths, how folktales and myths aid in the discovery of a culture's history and the enhancement of the cultural backdrop. According to the chapter, the transition from so-called mainstream masculinity to a category that could be defined as effeminate will also appear clear.

The fact that they are regarded through the conventional binary of savage lenses, tribal people are typically depicted as martial figures with corporeal skills and, as a result, are devoid of any other delicate endowments. The ultimate goal of this endeavour is to destereoty the 'tabooed' perspective through a gender flexible outlook that permits the effeminate/emasculated side of tribal men to be observed.

The oeuvre of indigenous feminist imagining explicates that the concept of tribal folktales perceived through the lens of gender fluidity encompasses the socio-cultural system rather than being limited. The concept of gender and feminism has been expanded by various authors in various ways introducing new dimensions of thinking about it, and also pondered the question, of whether the so-called 'animalistic' tribe has violated the ethos of the mainstream and whether they can be studied under the concept of gender fluidity.

The chapter endeavours to demystify the politics behind such vindictive propagation to sensitize the queerphobic mainstream about the essential endogenous presence of the queer in the aboriginal spaces.

Lepchas are identified by many who have had dealings with them as a gentle, unselfish people, who are extremely shy in their dealings with strangers. They are peaceful in nature, and every effort is made to prevent or stop personal quarrels, which are seen as unsocial behaviour (Lodrick NA). Folktales are used as an instrument to bring in certain changes and help the community to move forward to rediscover themselves.

There are a handful of documentation on the culture and regional life of the Lepchas but there is no such interpretation or analysis on the area of folktales. Hence, this paper will attempt to analyse the folktales.

There are books that have profusely dealt with the various myths that have later taken the shape of folktales. Let us now plunge into these folktales under the motif of gender fluidity and in the process let's know about the aboriginal tribe and their cultural past.

The Lepchas call themselves *Mutanchi Rong*<sup>1</sup> *Kup Rum Kup* meaning the "Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God" in Lepcha (Lepcha 12). "Oral tradition can be understood as a 'culture's reflexion on itself' ...Oral tradition therefore exists in reciprocity – it reflects culture and is formed by the same" (Blackburn 4-6).

A folktale is to be known and read by all. The Lepcha folktales remain alive through the art of telling stories by the elders to their children.

"The Original Big stone" harks back to the mythical origins of *Khangchendzonga*<sup>2</sup> and its association with the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepchas (Wangchuk, Zulca NA). To the Lepchas, the mountain is *Kongchen Konglo*, the 'big stone', as well as eldest brother, the first creation of their Mother Creator *Itbu-mu* (NA).

<sup>1</sup> The Lepchas also called themselves Rong. Rongup is the traditional name for the people now known as Lepchas.

<sup>2</sup> Kangchenjunga, also spelled Kanchenjunga, is the third highest mountain in the world.

Tamsang in his book 'Lepcha Folklore and Folksongs', has tried to portray the ancient, colourful and lively oral folk literature of the Lepchas. He mentioned that the Lepchas believed that God created *Fadongthing*, the first Lepcha male, meaning 'most powerful' in Lepcha and *Nuzaongnyoo*, the first Lepcha female, meaning 'ever fortunate' from the pure and virgin snows of Mt Kanchanjunga's pinnacle (Tamsang 4). Later because of committing a sin they were sent to the foothills of the mountain and there they gave birth to several children and therefore both *Fadongthing* and *Nuzaongnyoo* are called *Poomthing*, meaning the first ancestors of the Lepcha race by the Lepchas (4). The similar story is also narrated in Yishey Doma's "Legends of the Lepchas" in the folktale *Children of the Snowy Peaks*. It is believed by the Lepchas that the first Lepcha man and woman reside in the snowy peaks and therefore every year they offer prayers and seek for blessings (Doma 6). The various Lepcha myths that are connected with the origin of the Lepchas take the form of folktales to be passed from one generation to the other, orally. They believe that the foothills of the mountain where the Lepchas live are the land of the hidden eternal country. Mount Kanchanjunga is said to be the 'Guardian deity' of the Lepchas. The soils, smell of the indigenous Lepchas who have been living at the foothills of Mt Kanchanjunga from time immemorial. The Lepchas are, therefore, also known as the Children of Mt Kanchanjunga (Tamsang 4). It is also evident in Tamsang's book about how Lepchas prayed to God for a harmonious and peaceful existence amongst the different castes and creeds (Tamsang 22) and how the folktales are not only entertaining but also guide children and others towards a better path and life. (Tamsang x) The Lepchas are seen highly deep rooted to their past myths and cultures. These myths have taken shapes of various folktales as these were passed down generations after generations in the form of narrations. These cultural myths are not so martial or hyper masculine, despite that, the myths have become more resourceful and fortunate compared to other beliefs. So our stereotype notion on the tribes, that they are masculine, is being negated here with the help of gender fluidity as the tribes plunge in their deep rooted cultural myths. Believing in myths and showing inclination towards culture and ancient beliefs is also a mode of empowerment for the unheroic. The Lepcha folktales have often given evidences of moving away from the patriarchal mainstream and violating the dominant ethos of the 'mainstream' (Chakraborty 1252).

The Lepchas, who are also referred to as Rongs, are a small indigenous tribal population that calls the valleys and ravines of the Kanchanjunga basin their home. Due to the fact that very little written documentation has been preserved over the course of time, their history is shrouded in mystery. It is through the religious scripts of Buddhism that they practiced following the arrival of the Tibetans that we have a limited amount of information. Additionally, it appears that their older animist religious scripts have also been altered by the ardent Tibetan monks. As soon as the British established their presence in Darjeeling, the language gradually lost its significance, and Nepali, which was the language spoken by the tea garden labourers, became the dominant language. The majority of Lepchas converted to Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, which resulted in the gradual disappearance of allrites from their way of life as modern celebrations took over. This was a blow to the old Lepchas customs and traditions.

The Lepcha Association, which still maintains its headquarters in Kalimpong, was initially founded in 1925 as a non-political organisation. Subsequently, on March 8, 2004, the organisation changed its name to the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association from its previous one. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) is the sole and exclusive registered organisation of the Lepcha people. Its Registration Number is S/1L/20431 of 2003-2004 which indicates that it was established in 2003. Registration and affiliation with the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad, which is part of the Government of India, are both held by this organisation.

This small democratic body was established with the sole purpose of maintaining, conserving, and defending the culture, traditions, and customs of the Lepcha people. It serves as the only mediator between the average Lepcha and the government. "MUTANCHI RONG SHEZOOM" is the name of the association written in Lepcha, which may also be translated as "INDIGENOUS LEPCHA TRIBAL ASSOCIATION."

Lower Bom Bustee, Kalimpong is the location of the Lepcha Boys' Hostel-cum-Museum-cum-Culture Centre, which serves as the Registered Office of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. Only Rs 120 is required for a Lepcha household to become a member of the Association on an annual basis, and Rs One Thousand is required for a lifelong membership in the Association. The Keyong Shezoom, the Thoom Shezoom, and the Poom Shezoom are the three components that make up the association based on its organisational structure. Each of these components operates independently, yet they are connected to one another. The Poom Shezoom is the highest level of organisation among the Lepchas, while the Keyong Shezoom is the organisation that operates at the village level. The Thoom Shezoom is the organisation that operates at the sub divisional level. There is a functional and organisational connection between each of the

three layers working together. The members of the Executive of each body are chosen through a democratic process from among all of the residents of the community themselves.

In ancient times, the Mutanchi Rong<sup>3</sup> Kups [beloved children of Mother Nature] had no proper homes or clans. Wherever wild fruits grew in abundance they gathered together and lived in one group, eating the fruits. At that time, they wandered about in a place called, Na-ho Na-hu, in their sacred motherland, Ney Mayel Lyang. There lived an old Rong, an expert in hunting in the innermost corners of the dense jungle, who used to roam around with his wife and children, and lived by hunting and catching the fish in the rivers and eating them. He was a man who spoke only Rong Ring (Lepcha language); a Rong hunter whose home was inside the dense jungle, small but sufficient for shelter. Living there, he used to go out for hunting and in a very short while would return with a kill with which he provided for his wife and children to consume. Such was his life which he spent blissfully.<sup>4</sup>

My initial fascination with the tales of the Lepchas began when I travelled to Murmah Tea estate, a remote village in Mirik and met Mr. Duk Tshering Lepcha and Mr. Buddha Tshering Lepcha in order to listen to the Lepcha folktales being recounted in the language in which they were first written, translating them into the language of the younger generation for whom they were written. After that, I have been told a lot of Lepcha stories, but it is still the anecdotes that I have retained in my memory. There were personal accounts that were told to me by them. These were contemporary stories. Nevertheless, they conjured up memories of a time when Sikkim was occupied solely by Lepchas. During their conversation, they discussed traditions that were still practiced by the Lepcha people long before other races began to colonise their land. The stories that they shared included tales of adversity, ceremony, and superstition. They also discussed how they hunted and the reasons why they stopped. In light of the fact that we are one of the hunting tribes, Tsering made the observation that our race has been hunting for a very long period. The practice of hunting deer has been passed down from generation to generation, yet the rise of modernity has brought about a change. Who knows, a car will arrive, a road will arrive, and food will arrive eventually. The path to Lingthem is high and steep; it is almost vertical and cut so close to the jungle that walking up there is like travelling to a forgotten land. It is a place that holds secrets hidden in the spaces that the hunters share with nature; secrets that have been passed down from fathers to sons for centuries. At that time, April 2006, it was difficult to consider the possibility of a road leading to Lingthem. These stories were acquired through interviews that I did between April 2024-May 2024.

There are seven Lepcha households that practice a traditional Lepcha lifestyle in a hidden location in Dzongu known as Mayel Kyong, according to the Lepcha ethnic group. There is no disease, there is no famine, and the people of Mayel Kyong have the gift of endless life. They have all the food they could ever want to consume because everything grows all year round in Mayel Kyong. Although they appear to be young and robust throughout the day, they are actually getting older with each passing day once the sun goes down. A location known as Mayel Kyong is thought to be situated in close proximity to the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga. In order to reach that location, you will need to travel through the jungle for a number of days until you come across an entrance that is blocked off by a massive stone. An individual who is a pure Lepcha, meaning that they have solely Lepcha lineage, speak the Lepcha language, and adhere to the Lepcha traditions, is the only person who is able to move the stone by laying his left hand on it. When he leaves Mayel Kyong after entering it, however, he will never be able to locate it again. This is because he will have left it. Author Arthur Fonning, who was a member of the Lepcha tribe, produced a book titled "Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe" in which he discussed the Lepchas' secret country. "On account of our human failings, this utopia has been defiled and has shrunk to a limited size, only fit for a few souls to live in, only the pure and the unsullied ones finding an abode there," he wrote. Mayel Kyong was once a large country at the base of the mountains, where the Lepchas were placed by their creators. Additionally, he was of the opinion that Mayel Kyong was not attainable. The Yeti is a character that appears in multiple legends that are told about the Lepcha hunters. The Yeti, sometimes referred to as Chu Mung (Glacier Spirit), is revered by individuals. As the deity of hunting and the king of all the critters that live in the forest, Lepchas (Nebesky- To quote Wojkowitz: 1956)

<sup>3</sup> Rongkup is the traditional name for the people now known as Lepchas.

<sup>4</sup> Extract from *Rong-Kup-Lung-Ten Ah-Bong-Chyo-Kung-Sen (Legends of the origin of some customs and rituals of the Rong-Kups (Lepchas))*, 2001, The Mutanchi Rong Shezoom, P.T. Lepcha, Kalimpong, p.3.

The Yeti and hunters are the subject of a great number of different beliefs. Those who hunt consider the possibility that if they leave a dead animal in the woods for the night, the animal's will be brought back to the jungle by deity when they arrive. In order to avoid things like this the hunter is required to cut one of the forelegs and one of the hind legs of the animal. sides of the animal's body that are opposite one another, resulting in the body being incomplete and because of this, the Yeti is unable to "put back together" the structure. The concept of Pong Rum refers to a hunting deity that is worshipped in formal rites.

A number of tales revolve around the Yeti and how it manifests itself as young children. One of the stories that Mr. Duk Lepcha told was about an uncle who discovered a baby in the jungle, and then brought it back to his family, where it flourished in a short amount of time. They performed a pooja, and returned the infant to the location where he had discovered it, and when he arrived at that location, the infant asked, "what would you like to receive as a reward?" and the uncle responded, to create a hunter out of him. As a result of that blessing that uncle and his family members, were always successful in their hunting endeavours. There are two important tales about young children who possessed the abilities of Yetis. There was an old man who travelled to Payel hamlet, which is located just above Tingvong. While he was hunting in Langham-chu, he set up a trap by a small brook.

When he came back, he saw a human infant trapped inside his trap. He did not possess a child, so he stuffed it inside his Thokro-dum<sup>5</sup>, pressed it to his chest, and then set it down. transported it to his residence. However, the infant refused to consume any food. The infant will perish because he was not consuming any food. His decision was to take him to the place where he had discovered him, and then he went back to Langham-chu. After that, when he finally arrived at the location near the stream where he had laid his trap, the infant unexpectedly vanished into the breeze, and the old man became aware of the circumstances. The baby was a Yeti who possessed unique abilities, according to the narration. In spite of the fact that he was a hunter, a grandfather from Leek Village went out hunting. He spent the entire day trying, but he was unsuccessful. He spotted a youngster after a few days had passed in the Thokro-dum that was caught in his trap while wearing it. In his mind, it may have been a youngster who had been defeated by the god of hunting and had become out of the ordinary. When the hunter saw the youngster, he removed it from the trap and took it with him. As he realised that the youngster would get up and flee, he removed the child from the trap and cleaned up the area around the trap. There was a sign from the child that was caught in the trap. There are several reports of sightings and interactions with the Yeti that have been documented outside the confines of standard folklore. Lepchas, on the other hand, have continually managed to overcome their dread of the Yeti by avoiding interaction with them. Given that it is a nighttime spirit, the peasants would come back from the fields to make sure they were home by at dark, shutting doors in order to prevent the Yeti spirit from entering.<sup>6</sup> There are a lot of hunters who talk about the Yeti and believe that it is still around today. Yeti beings were known to enter homes and behave in a manner that was similar to that of humans. However, they would steal cows from the people who owned them. One day the proprietors brought a wild fruit in an effort to prevent the Yeti from snatching their cows. The Yeti beings used to come into houses and act like a human being, but they would take cows from their owners. One day, determined to stop the Yeti from stealing their cows, the owners brought a wild fruit, which is oily and capable of igniting. When the Yeti, pretending to be human, reached that place, the man gave him a plate of butter. The Yeti took the fruit and the butter but a tic in his body ignited the fruit and the Yeti's body caught fire. He ran up and down in the forest and friends were asking, "who did that thing to you?" and he said, "I did it myself, no one else, it was done by myself" he said as he kept running around the forest. Now the Lepcha who owned the cow knew if a human being had done that he would have to go down to the river to wash it off but the Yeti went up to the mountain and the mountain caught fire, finishing off the Yeti. After that there was no more Yeti in the surrounding woodland. There are a great number of taboos in Lepcha society that are tied to beliefs whose purpose is to keep the ecosystem and the fauna in good balance. Women who are Lepcha are not allowed to handle hunting firearms. This particular type of taboo according to Foning, who wrote the following:

According to the popular belief, this particular god is unable to tolerate the presence of females. This is the reason why this worship service is always held in a location that is apart from the residence located in a remote area where, even if it were by chance, there would be no ladies present. Lepchas never consume any fish that is tiny and silvery in colour.

<sup>5</sup> Thokro-dum is the traditional Lepcha tunic worn by males.

<sup>6</sup> Wangchuk and Zulca, (2007), *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit, Little Kingdom, Gangtok*. p. 371.

Yishey Doma in his book mentions about another folktale which even Mr. Lepcha from Mirik busty narrated to me when I went for an interview. The story is about "The Stairway to Heaven".

A very long time ago the Lepchas lived under the benign presence of Mount Kanchenjunga in the land where the sun shown all year round. Food was plentiful amidst the valleys and in the streams that flowed from the hills. Everyone led a contented and prosperous life. One autumn when the sky was blue and the sun was more brilliant than usual a group of men had a sudden earning to meet their God used so they put together a plan to go up to Heaven where they believe their Gods resided. "Let us make a ladder to heaven and meet our god", said one of them another said, "let's make urgent pot and put them one on top of the other to make a column." "When the pillar of pots is high enough, you will climb it to reach the heavens and meet our gods". "That will be excellent!" the other said. So, they started looking for suitable site. After days of travelling, they found a particular, a perfect flat piece of land situated to the south of the river Romam. They named this place Thallom Purtam or a flat land leading upward. So, all the potters got busy. Some started shaping the clay, others busied themselves collecting wood for lighting the fire in which they can start baking as fast as possible and can start making the ladder to heaven.

The Stairway to Heaven first rose above the roofs, then it went above the treetops and started to touch the clouds. When it almost touched the sky, the people climbing it could hardly hear each other speak. Some of the Lepcha men in the group, adept in making bamboo crafts and instruments, devised a *passongthop*<sup>7</sup>. When the string holding the instrument was pulled, it would make a certain noise, conveying a message over a considerable distance. They also invented the *blingthop*<sup>8</sup>, to summon potters to work and to tell them when the day's work was over.

When they were almost done there was a serious breakdown of communication between the Artist working at the top and the one at the bottom of the earth. The man right on top wanted to know how much further Heaven was. So, he asked for a hook. He looked down and shouted to send up the hooked stick. The message got passed along down the column worker who could not hear properly and asked again but the man above him, the other worker heard smashed down although the artisans at the top kept yelling not to do so. But by the time the message got through the bottom the workers thought to smash it and below they all got very busy. They took their axes and began to hit the pot, smashing them to pieces. "What's happening?" called the man at the top then there was a noise like thunder the pots fell down upon each other and upon the men. The Stairway to Heaven crumbled to the ground piece by piece and so did the men. The men's aspiration to meet their Gods remained a dream. This is how the plan came to be known as Ka Daa Raom Dyen now called Daramdin a place in West Sikkim, which means "we ourselves smashed it down".

Then there is the story of Teesta and the Rangeet rivers and myth is still followed where the bridegroom and bride are always taken to the rivers and people wish the newlywed couple a happy and prosperous life like the two river spirits. There are many such tales describing the gods and goddesses, people, animals, and nature in a cohesive world where one cannot do without the other. Barry Lopez, a writer who specialises in science and nature, has made the observation that after travelling for several decades, he frequently came across individuals who were individuals who were deeply connected to the communities in which they resided. The majority of the time, they were either hunters, hunter-gatherers, farmers who subsisted, or individuals who were required to be aware of their specific location, such as pastoralists.

In the next paragraphs, a particular narrative of the Lepcha oral tradition will be dissected, along with its many branches and the several versions that are different from one another. I am going to demonstrate how it reflects, clarifies, and examines the fundamental ideas that are central to Lepcha culture and ideology. In the words of Blackburn (2008), "culture's reflexion on itself," oral tradition might be seen as a "reflection on itself." As a result of the fact that it is insider fiction, it is an insider's method of conserving, establishing, and reinforcing local conceptions as well as social, religious, and cultural values. Narratives are passed down through the generations, yet they are never static since they are moulded by the shifting aspects of the local environment, social norms, and cultural ideas. It is consequently the case that oral tradition exists in a reciprocal relationship; it is a reflection of culture and it is generated by culture (Blackburn 2008: 4-6). The Lepcha, also known as the Mütunci róngkup rum kup are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group that resides in the southern highlands of the Himalayas in China.

Mr. Duk Tshering Lepcha and Mr. Buddha Tshering Lepcha from Mirik Busty introduced me to Lepcha people and language, and enriched my work with discussions. It will be indicated whenever the two dictionaries have different translations of the same word.

<sup>7</sup> A bamboo instrument split on both sides, held together with bamboo ropes.

<sup>8</sup> A smaller version of passongthop.

The notion of mother nature is referred to by the Lepcha word mútunci, which can be defined as “the universe, with all its phenomens, whom the Lepchas respect as the mother of all mothers” (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 662). For the sake of this discussion, the word “róng” is typically rendered as “Lepcha,” and it is considered to be the abbreviated form of the endonym of the ethnic group. “Kup” can be translated as “son” or, to be more gender neutral, “child,” and “rum” is the Lepcha word for “deity.” In a literal sense, the name might be translated as “children of mother nature and god,” or it could even be interpreted as “the kingly children of mother nature and god.” The emphasis that this translation would place on a sense of superiority would be similar to what K.P. Tamsang does (K.P. Tamsang 1980: 773). There is another possible translation of this phrase, which is “children worthy of mother nature and god.”

The oral traditions of Nepal, India (Sikkim, Darjeeling District of West Bengal), and Bhutan are extraordinarily diverse and rich, but unfortunately, they are being passed down from generation to generation. Over the course of history and until the present day, numerous myths, stories, songs, and parables have been compiled and published in a variety of media. Even in modern times, there are still some elders, younger members of the community who are interested in the Lepcha oral heritage, and ritual professionals who are knowledgeable about it. Within the Lepcha language, the term “lúngten sung” is employed to refer to a broad assortment of myths that revolve around the creation tale. Lúngten, which can be translated as “tradition,” is a term that represents the process of passing down assertions, beliefs, tales, or practices from one generation to the next. “Story” or “narrative” is what the Lepcha language means when it is sung. It is possible to utilise it for storylines that are based on real life or fiction, as well as for myths, legends, or historical epics. The concept of lúngten sang is not utilised for the entirety of the Lepcha oral tradition; rather, it is employed for mythological tales that provide explanations regarding the origin of the world, humans, animal features, and other significant aspects of Lepcha society. Arthur Foning, an author who writes in the Lepcha language, provides a detailed explanation of the significance of lúngten sung in his personal life as well as for the Lepcha community.

When we were younger, my grandfather, my father, and my uncles would all captivate us with their captivating stories and great narrations of events. When we were younger, we were completely captivated by their stories. Occasionally, parents would also tell us our Lungten Sung, which are tales from our old mythology, legends, and other forms of folklore. These tales included tales of animals, birds, insects, and other similar creatures, as well as tales of fairy tales. Additionally, Lungten Sung occupies a position that is solely its own, in addition to other stories. As I delve further, I have come to the realisation that these captivating tales served as both the vehicle and the medium for fashioning and shaping the very behaviour and attitude of our Rong Tribal community as a whole. As a matter of fact, they were a true treasure trove of our Lepcha culture (Foning 1987: 87). The lúngten sung of the Lepcha can be characterised as a collection of stories that are dynamic with local variants and varied narrative strands that all combine to form a vehicle for the transmission of culture and tradition. In the process of recounting, the storyteller has the ability to take a different path at each and every intersection, depending on the facet of Lepcha culture they wish to emphasise with their narrative. In addition to this, they are required to select a beginning and an ending point within a web of stories that appears to have no end in sight. Most of the time, the story will be affected and spiced up with local specialties that are associated with stones, sacred groves, or other landscape markers that may be located right outside the front door.

Within the scope of this article, the oral tradition that is being explored is the tale of Láso móng, a demon that is considered to be among the fiercest in Lepcha mythology. Some narrators describe him as a king who lords over all other evil spirits and in Dzongu the Lepcha ritual specialists (bóngthíngs) tend to compare Láso móng with a bird (see also Gorer 1996: 55; Kotturan 1989). The demon is described as a bird-like black creature with wings and eyes of fire, according to one of the sources (Tempa Lepcha, Solophok, July 2009). In the Lepcha language, the verb láso is used to signify “to change” or “to alter appearance.” On the other hand, the word móng is translated as “demon” or “evil spirit.”

Based on this, Láso móng is a demon that has the ability to change its appearance.

The principal narrative thread that runs across all of the variants that have been studied is that this violent demon terrorises and slaughters the Lepcha people until the Lepcha, with a great deal of effort and the assistance of supernatural entities, are able to fight it off and ultimately kill it.

All of the numerous versions of the Láso móng tale that are described in this page have been told and written down at different times and in different places in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District. These versions have been told and written down with diverse goals, intentions, purposes, and approaches. I was able to capture

and transcribe the account that was told by senior ritual specialists, villagers, and members of the Lepcha organisations.

K.P. Tamsang, Lyangsong Tamsang, Sonam Tshering Tamsang, and P.T. Tamsang are some of the Lepcha authors and intellectuals from Kalimpong who have produced some of these works. Within the Lepcha community, there exist two distinct categories of ritual specialists, namely the bónghthíng and the mun. In Dzongu and certain regions of East Sikkim, the term "bónghthíng" is referred to as "padhim," and it is common practice to employ all three vocabulary terms interchangeably. Bónghthíngs are typically responsible for carrying out rituals related to the clan, house, healing, and community. He performs his rituals with the help of flowers and plants. In addition, the mun is capable of performing these ceremonies; nonetheless, she is primarily a medium. She is possessed by the spirits of ancestors or deities, and as a result, she is able to accurately predict the future. Moreover, the only person who may lead the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife is a mun. Mun are typically females, but men can also be mun. On the other hand, only men have the ability to become bónghthíng. On this subject, there is still a great deal more research that has to be done (for examples, check the works of Siiger, Jest, and Nebesky-Wojkowitz). Lásó móng is referred to as the cloud demon by De Beauvoir Stocks (Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 28). I am uncertain as to the reason for the choice of this term. It is worth noting that none of the bónghthíng, village elders, or members of Lepcha groups that I have come across, nor any other source, have mentioned this particular name for the malevolent spirit. The works of Karma Loday Lepcha (1999: 3), Tom Tshering Lepcha (2003), and Tom Tshering Lepcha (2004) all have three elements. Jenny Bentley Simick and Arthur Foning are the candidates. However, other anthropologists who have worked with the Lepcha in the past, such as de Beauvoir Stocks, Gorer, Siiger, Jest, Chakrabarty, and Kotturan, were responsible for collecting the remaining seven.

This study was aimed at emphasizing how the tribal community manifested through the tribal tales provide alternatives, which violate the dominant ethos of the 'mainstream' (Chakraborty 1252). In context to studying indigenous groups and communities, Malinowski said, "These stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality"

(Barman, 32). Folktales thus reveal the folk culture and the hidden aspects of all the treasured qualities of the ethnic community and their interpersonal relations with the others.

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