

Legends of the
LEPCHAS

Folk Tales from Sikkim



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Yishey Doma

illustrations by
Pankaj Thapa

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TRANQUEBAR

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Children of the Snowy Peaks

In the beginning, when there was nothing but vast emptiness on earth and in the sky, Itbu-moo, Mother Creator, set out to execute a great plan. She first shaped Kongchen Kongchlo,¹ his wives, Samo Gayzong and Paki Chyu, his brothers, Pawo Hungree and Bagok Chyu, and other mountains or *chyu bee*. As complements to the mountains she created *daa*, the lakes and *roong*, the rivers.

She thought she was done, but something appeared to be missing. She surveyed her handiwork. Why did her creation feel empty? Taking a ball of fresh snow from the summit of Kongchen Kongchlo, Itbu-moo created the first man, Fudongthing,² the most-powerful one. Mother



Creator remained unsatisfied. She decided to give Fudongthing, her pet creation, a companion. So she took a bit of *a-yong*³ from Fudongthing's bones and created the first woman, Nazong Nyu, the ever-fortunate one, as his sister. Later, both became chief deities of the Rongs⁴ or Lepchas.

Having created the first man and first woman, brother and sister, Itbu-moo called them and said, 'You are the most beloved of all my creations. I have blessed both of you with supernatural powers. But both of you should live separately as true brother and sister. You can never live together.' Both promised they would follow her decree. She then sent Fudongthing to live on top of a mountain called Nareng-Nangsheng Chyu and Nazong Nyu to Naho-Nathor Daa, a lake located just below the mountain. Itbu-moo also warned them that if they disobeyed her, she would not hesitate to send them down to the foothills to live in the realm of misery.

Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu lived happily enough for some time but one thought began to plague their minds—they were living solitary lives. Nazong Nyu had grown up into a beautiful young woman. She felt life without anyone to share it with was terribly lonely and monotonous. As there was no one else, she thought a lot about Fudongthing, who had grown up into a handsome man. But she remembered Itbu-moo's warning and kept away from him.

Everything was well with their world. As long as Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu behaved in a manner befitting their celestial lineage, they prospered and never suffered any real grief. Their lives in the territory of the Gods were filled with happiness.

But they were not content with happiness alone. And like all humans, they were capable of both good and evil. They soon tired of following the dictates of Mother Creator. Failing to resist temptation, Nazong Nyu constructed a golden ladder and climbed up Nareng-Nangsheng Chyu to meet Fudongthing.

Fudongthing too did not pay heed to Itbu-moo's warning. They began to secretly meet at Tarkol-Partam, a flat piece of meadowland between the mountain and the lake.

One day they decided to meet at Sugyum Sugbling, another lake near Naho-Nathor Daa. Nazong Nyu removed her bangle and kept it near her pillow, as she found it uncomfortable while sleeping. The bangle fell into the lake and from there sprouted *suneol kung*, a mountain palm tree, which later became the abode of Lasso Mung Puno, the demon king.

So absorbed were Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu in their own company that they forgot Itbu-moo and her divine decree and started living together. As a result of this forbidden union, soon a monster-child was born to them. On the birth of the child they remembered Itbu-moo's decree. Both were afraid that Mother Creator would come to know what mischief they had been up to. 'This is an unholy child. We cannot keep him under our roof,' said Fudongthing and threw the child away in the forest. Year after year, a monster-child was born to the couple. And each time they threw the baby away—they would simply leave the babies in cliffs, crags or caves. In this way, seven children were lost.



Many years passed. Itbu-moo came to know that Nazong Nyu had given birth to children but had thrown them away. She wanted to find out how Nazong Nyu was capable of doing such a thing. But no one dared tell her the truth. At last, Kuhlbu, a dog guarding Nazong Nyu's doorway, spoke up. 'I am Nazong Nyu's doorkeeper and have been guarding her place for many years, O Mother Creator,' the dog said. 'I have seen Fudongthing often meet Nazong Nyu. He is the father of all Nazong Nyu's children.'

Enraged because they had broken their promise to her, Itbu-moo, in a voice as loud as a thunderclap, summoned Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu and pronounced her judgement right away. 'Both of you have disobeyed my orders. You have committed a great sin and have fallen from my grace. I cannot allow you to live in this sacred realm any longer. You will leave immediately and live in the foothills of Kongchen Kongchlo as ordinary humans and suffer for your sins.'

Mortified, Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu left and started living at the foot of Kongchen Kongchlo as husband and wife. Finally, a human child was born to them. Nazong Nyu could not bear to throw away her baby yet again. 'Itbu-moo's curse cannot be washed away,' Nazong Nyu told Fudongthing. 'We are cursed and we have to bear the consequences. This innocent baby has done no evil. Why should this child be punished for our sins? Let us not sin anymore by abandoning this child too.'

And this is how the first Lepcha children were born—Nunglennyu and Kothongfi, the first female and male child, and Numshimnyu and Numbomthing, the second female and male child.

Nazong Nyu while seeing her children grow up realised her past mistakes and turned to Itbu-moo. 'O Mother Creator! O God, giver and keeper of life,' she beseeched her. 'Please forgive us for our past sins. Please come down and bless my family.'

Itbu-moo, who had watched Nazong Nyu labour hard to make her world, understood Nazong Nyu's yearning to get her children blessed. She decided to visit Nazong Nyu's household. Sure that Mother Creator would listen to her prayers, Nazong Nyu began cleaning her house and prepared offerings. And before Itbu-moo arrived, Nazong Nyu hid her first children, Nunglennyu and Kothongfi, inside a cave, for she was embarrassed to present dirty children before Mother Creator.

As expected, Itbu-moo came and blessed the family. Soon

after Mother Creator left, Nazong Nyu called for her children to come out of the cave. But lo! They were not to be found inside the cave. When, eventually, Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu realised their first-born were missing, they began to weep.

Nazong Nyu turned to the benevolence of Itbu-moo again. 'O Mother Creator, we are doomed,' Nazong Nyu cried out. 'We have lost two of our children. Please help us.' Hearing her cries, Mother Creator came down again and enquired about the incident. The couple narrated the entire story. To console them, Itbu-moo showed Nunglennyu and Kothongfi in their spirit form and proclaimed: 'Henceforth, Nunglennyu and Kothongfi will remain as guardian spirits of birth and life of all male and female Lepchas respectively. Besides, they will be the guiding force for the spread of your offspring.' These two deities are still invoked by shamans, especially during Tungbaong Faat or Ingrum Faat,⁵ for good health, long life and prosperity of a newborn child.

Everything was well. Numshimnyu and Numbomthing were now brought up as humans in the foothills of the great mountain. However, as the years passed, Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu began to quarrel, often bitterly. Eventually, Fudongthing left and made his palace on the snowy peak seen from Lingthem in Dzongu, the present-day Lepcha reserve in north Sikkim. Nazong Nyu was left alone to manage the earth.

Nazong Nyu lived her life without her companion, but the loss made her very sad. One night, several months after Fudongthing had abandoned her, she made up her mind to go in search of him. Leaving her children behind, she followed Fudongthing's footsteps till she reached the mountain where he had made his abode. The mountain was steep, and Nazong Nyu could not climb it.

But she did not give up. She decided to build a staircase with her necklace to reach the top of the snowy peak to persuade Fudongthing to come back and live with her. As she

built each step of the ladder, she sought help from insects like grasshoppers, locusts and daddy longlegs. All these creatures were supposed to be her children. She asked them to hold the ladder firmly as she climbed. The grasshoppers and locusts fled with some of the precious stones. Only daddy longlegs remained to help Nazong Nyu up the ladder. This is why Lepchas believe grasshoppers and locusts die after a few months while daddy longlegs live for a long time, and that their long legs are a result of supporting the staircase for a long time.

On finally reaching the top, Nazong Nyu wept tears of joy for she could see Fudongthing. But to her dismay, Fudongthing ignored her. Nonetheless, she was determined to be near him. So she built her own palace nearby and did not leave his side. The Lepchas believe Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu still live on the mountain facing Lingthem, and every year make offerings to the first man and first woman.



Time flew by. Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu's children grew up and married. They had many children and all of them lived on the foothills of Kongchen Kongchlo in great numbers. They christened their land Mayel Lyang.⁶

Naturally, Itbu-moo was delighted to see the children grow up and prosper. She was particularly delighted to see how they worked at reshaping the world into a pleasant land, giving life to trees and beautiful flowers and planting seeds of different kinds. The prosperity and love in the animal kingdom also caused her much happiness.

Amidst all that plenty and peace, the great Mother Creator, after days of careful deliberation, decided to come to earth and bestow something special on all her creations, including the animals, so that all living beings could live in the world without fearing each other.

'Listen, my children. I am indeed content and pleased to see you so powerful and accomplished. You have done wonders here on earth. You have turned barren lands into a pleasant place of peace and plenty. So happy am I that I want to give one special power to each of you as a gift,' said Itbu-moo. 'But before you ask for that special power, consult among yourselves about your needs. Those of you who have similar needs can form groups and then come together with your wish.'

All the animals and creatures gathered around to discuss what they wanted. Slowly, different groups began to form. Animals like buffaloes, bulls, cows, deer and stag came in a group and asked for a gift which would protect them from others when they were alone. Without uttering a word, Itbu-moo gave them horns. They were very happy and left flaunting their sharp horns.

Next was a group of ferocious-looking creatures—lions, tigers, leopards. Bowing before Itbu-moo, the leader from the group said, 'Great Mother, we would get nowhere without fighting. We would be grateful to you if we can protect ourselves when fighting.' Mother Creator thought for a while and with a wry smile gifted them sharp claws.

As Mother Creator was busy distributing powers to the rather disorderly groups of animals, she sensed one particular creature, a lonely man, standing quietly on one side, patiently waiting his turn while the others jostled to get to the head of the line. Just when Itbu-moo thought she would ask the man what he wanted, a group of birds—vultures, kites, crows—alighted near her and said, 'O Great Mother, we want something that will free us from the creatures of the earth. We think they would be too troublesome to allow us to make a good living.' Itbu-moo smiled and said, 'You are blessed with powerful wings to float and fly in the sky.' The birds instantly took wing and left.

Another group of creatures then took its turn. 'O Mother, the land and the sky are overcrowded. We would be happy to occupy the seas, rivers and oceans,' they pleaded. 'Great Mother, please grant us this gift.' Itbu-moo said, 'You shall have special lungs, fins, tails and some of you will have coats of fur.' At once, the creatures dived into the water and started sporting around happily.

Myriads of her creatures came and Itbu-moo granted all their wishes. It took a long, long time. Finally, when it looked like every one of her creations had been granted its wish, she looked around and saw the man, still standing quietly in the same place. He had not moved or made any demand. This touched her. She signalled him to come closer.

'What would you like to receive?' she asked the man.

The man did not speak. She posed the question again. But still he made no demand. He could not think of anything. Every power had been taken away by those ahead of him.

Touched by the man's generosity towards other beings, Itbu-moo held his hands lovingly, and said, 'I am pleased with you. You showed patience and understanding while there was much disorder among other beings during the distribution of my gifts. For that reason, I would like to personally select a special power for you, the best of the best, far better than what all the other creatures have been given. I will bestow on you such a gift that you will always stand out as superior in comparison. I will bless you with a-yong. And by virtue of this unique asset, you shall lord it over all creatures—on land, sea and sky. You shall till the land, populate the wilderness and govern and be king of all creation.'

Delighted, the man bowed before Mother Creator and returned to his abode in smiles.

True to this blessing, human beings then started building comfortable, cosy and warm dwelling places. They fashioned bows and spears and devised ways and means to tackle the

beasts with horns. Those creatures who thought they were free because they had wings to fly high in the sky were also brought down by man's bows and arrows, and pellets. Man made hooks, wove nets and devised rods to capture creatures inhabiting the seas and rivers to eat them as food.

As decreed by the great Itbu-moo, Lepchas believe that humans lord over all other creatures on earth by virtue of that one special gift.

References

1. Kongchen Kongchlo or Mount Khangchendzonga, the third-highest mountain in the world, is regarded by Lepchas as the 'original big stone' and their guardian deity. They believe they have originated from this mountain, which is why a dead body always faces this mountain. As Kongchen Kongchlo was Itbu-moo's first creation, the Lepchas also refer to it as their elder brother. It is also known as Kingtsoom Zaongboo Chyu, the auspicious forehead peak, the highest veil of snow beyond which the spirits of their ancestors dwell in Rum Lyang, the country of the Gods.
2. Also known as Tukbothing.
3. Literally, marrow in the Lepcha language. Here, inference is also to intelligence or wisdom.
4. The Lepchas call themselves Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup, encapsulating the Lepcha story of genesis. It translates as 'Mother's loved ones, children of the snowy peaks, children of God' (*Mu* is Itbu-moo, *Rong* is snowy peak, *Kup* is children and *Rum* is God). Rong Kup Rum Kup or Rong is the shortened version. The English name, Lepcha, is said to have originated from a Nepali word, *lapce* or *lapca*, meaning 'inarticulate speech', which originally had a derogatory connotation.
5. Naming and cleansing ceremony of a newborn baby.
6. Literally, mythical paradise. Also referred to as ancient Sikkim by the Lepchas.