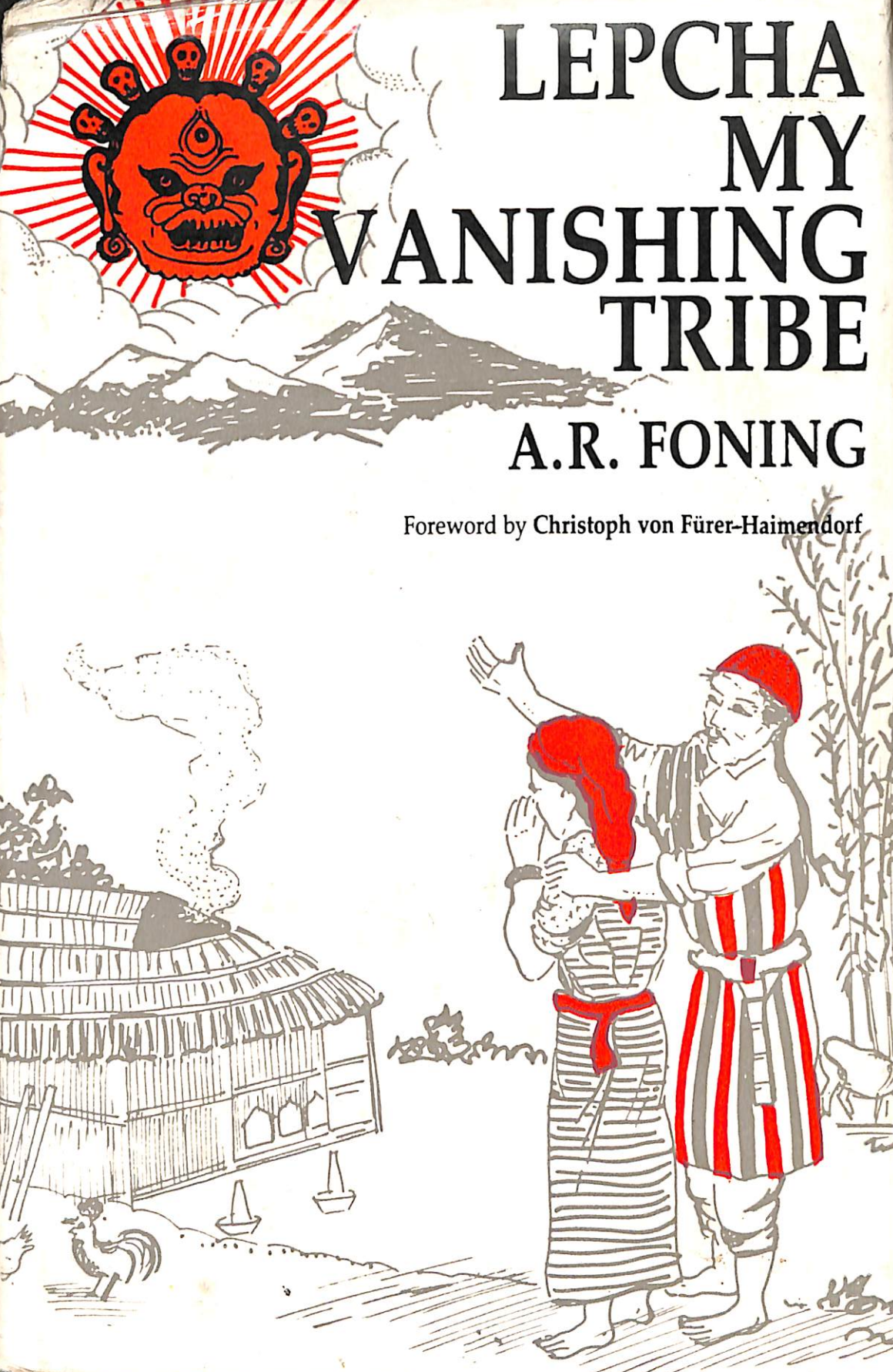


LEPCHA MY VANISHING TRIBE

A.R. FONING

Foreword by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf



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Preamble

As long as my father was living, besides schooling, I was spending most of my time in hunting, fishing and playing games; I had never taken life seriously. At the time of his death, although I had already become a father of two children, I was more or less leading a care-free life. This, now I understand, was mainly due to the fact that I was brought up in a typical Lepcha home and atmosphere, where, in spite of modern trends, our old-time traditions are still valued and cared. It was a sort of a normal life that I was leading. Among us, the father or the head of the family is considered an absolute master, and among other duties it is his responsibility to feed the whole household and to see to their welfare and well-being. The utmost the juniors are expected to do is to assist him in whatever he does, but not to the extent of considering it to be a duty. This of course does not mean that we do not work hard. We do, and do so to our maximum, but we tend to confine the limits of our efforts upto 'what the old man wants'. That is all, nothing much beyond. Working within this limit, I find we do not have any appreciable incentive for using our own initiative which is needed so much for one's individual advancement. This handicap bestowed by an age-old tradition has proved to be one of the major causes for the stagnation of my tribe.

When my father passed away, he left behind his two wives, nine sons and three daughters, besides a number of dependants. I being the eldest son, the mantle of responsibility fell abruptly on my inexperienced shoulders. This was the reason why, in 1938, the year that my father passed away, I had to take up service with the Government of West Bengal in an ordinary cadre. Therefore, leaving behind my two mothers and half of the family, of whom the majority were below the age of ten,

I moved from Kalimpong to the town of Darjeeling where I reported for duty. In the course of my few years' stay in this town, I came across a number of poor, wretchedly living folks of my own tribe, struggling for existence in this glamorous bewitching world, completely in contrast to our own simple, artless ways of living. I was touched, and this abruptly jerked me into the realisation that, besides my own immediate family, as an educated man of the tribe, my moral responsibility lay in at least understanding the conditions of my own kith and kin, the 'Mutanchi Rong-kup'. That time onwards, never looking back, I tried to do something for this unfortunate tribe of mine. I must admit that against heavy odds, I could do very little indeed. After some time, partly because of my own domestic problems, and partly because I knew that a good majority of our folks were still living within the Kalimpong sub-division in the district of Darjeeling, I made up my mind to come back to my hometown of Kalimpong. Therefore, resigning from the prestigious Government service, I came back in 1942 and accepted a post in a private European-run educational institution.

Coming back to Kalimpong, besides carrying on my work, I started helping in the Mutanchi Rong Shezum, known to outsiders as "The General Lepcha Association". The Shezum is a voluntary organisation run by a group of our educated elders, whose aim and object is to educate, protect and help in the amelioration of the condition of our neglected tribal brothers. By then the urge to do something for my blood-brothers had become an obsession with me. I tried my best to help our elders, but the result was not sufficiently encouraging. Soon I found out, without going deep into the causes of our backwardness, that it was impossible to treat the ailment. So, in order to study the problem thoroughly and in depth, I started working on a plan to go across to Sikkim, a country where the bulk of our tribesmen were still found to be living. Therefore, submitting my resignation from service for the second time, I went across and accepted a post under the Sikkim Government. It may be mentioned here that about a century ago, one of my ancestors, Ajoyo Nakphe, had similarly crossed over and taken up service with the then king. His great-

grand children are still there, serving the present Government of Sikkim.

The authorities in Sikkim were pleased to get the services of an educated man, a native of the land at that. A post was virtually created to recruit me. My assignment was to propagate education on modern lines among the masses of the kingdom, and particularly, among the aboriginal Lepchas who, as compared to the people of other ethnic groups, were found to be living in a miserable and a backward state. My work in Sikkim entailed regular touring in the course of which I traversed the whole length and breadth of the country. In these tours, I got the rare and valuable opportunity of studying my tribal brothers from all angles. During my conversation, or while staying with them or passing through their areas, I had the benefit of knowing their versions of our folk tales, ways of life and customs as they observed them in their own localities and regions, and many similar features common to the tribe.

After three years' stay in Sikkim, perhaps due to my restless nature, or that of chasing my favourite 'will o' the wisp', the study of my own tribe, I went back to Kalimpong my hometown once again. This was in the beginning of 1949. Here, once again, I found myself assisting our elders in the task of running the General Lepcha Association. This time, I was directly and actively involved as the Joint Secretary, under Rev. Gyen Tshering Sitling, the founder of the organisation. Then, after over twenty-five years of serving the cause, when the Reverend retired, the Association was taken over by Anyu Azem Rebecca, also known as Mrs. David Mohan. During her time, we, who were serving under her, were constantly kept on our toes and some tangible results started showing up. After the demise of Anyu Azem Rebecca in 1958, after the passing away of the two stalwarts of the Association I found myself concentrating more and more on the cultural side of the activities. Later, as the General Secretary of the Shezum, in 1967, I established the 'Lungten Chok Lee', the Lepcha culture centre at Kalimpong thereby translating one of my dreams to reality. This was made possible, largely because of the munificent grant-in-aid given to us by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Department of the Government of West Bengal. Then, towards the beginning of 1973 I had to retire from active participation in our Shezum

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My Ancestors

When I look back into the past, in my family, I invariably find someone taking special interest in the literature of my tribe. The reason for this may be that in our clan, particularly in my family, we have 'mun' and 'bongthing', equivalent of the 'shaman' of an age gone by, both on my mother's and, particularly, on my father's side. Normally, due to the requirements and the demands of the profession, these 'mun' and 'bongthing' are the ones who know how to read and write our 'Rong', or Lepcha script. It may be pointed out here that these 'mun' and 'bongthing', due to their avocations, invariably turn out to be, and are acknowledged as leaders of the community. Having been used to their divinations and utterances, which are supposed to have come from unseen powers above, our simple, backward and primitive people readily take in whatever they say or do. In normal life also 'mun' and 'bongthing', are looked upon with awe and respect. Even today, even in this atomic age, their position is the same. Literature has been one of the powerful means which has given them a position more important than that of other members of the community.

Whatever I have been able to find out about my family and clan has been from the time-honoured pride, prejudices and usages passed down from generation to generation by my seniors and elders. But I collected most of it from papers, records and books of my youngest uncle, Dagi Pyong, known also as Rabdensing, and his uncle Nakphey, or Noorsing of Pakyong, in Sikkim. It has been mentioned that, from the third generation down from the patriarch Rengay, *i.e.*, seven generations up from my own

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line from Ajyo Kayzong's time, we have been taking interest in the written script of the language of our tribe.

During his time, Ajyo Nakphey was acknowledged as the master literateur in the whole realm. He was so well known that the ninth Chogyal, our priest king, Sir Thutob Namgyal requisitioned his services to keep him as tutor to his son and heir, Sidkyong Tulku, and his younger brother Tashi. Tashi eventually ascended the throne as Sir Tashi Namgyal, the eleventh consecrated ruler of the Lepcha country of Sikkim. When Prince Sidkyong returned from Oxford in 1908, and when he took charge of the education section of the administration, Nakphey was appointed as the head of Lepcha teaching in the first of the schools established on modern lines at Gangtok, the capital. I have a number of books in grandpa Nakphey's own handwriting, along with the ones copied from him and from others by my youngest uncle, Rabdensing.

In the genealogical sequence, the earliest we have been able to trace back and know is, Ajyo Rengay, the patriarch. He is said to have come down south from the Rumtek-Song area of Renjyong, or present-day Sikkim. Before him, as everybody in my tribe believes, we had come down from the original Ney Mayel country, a land of plenty, a paradise and a garden of Eden, created by Itbu-mo, the mother-creator herself, for her pet and the chosen people, the Rongfolk. This place is supposed to be somewhere near Mount Kanchenjunga, the guardian deity of our tribe, and our country.

What prompted patriarch Rengay to leave his hearth and home is not very clear, but there definitely must have been some strong reasons, fairly important and compelling, that made him decide to take this step. From his name we could guess fairly accurately that there must have been some objections or views against this exodus of his. As with all the Lepcha names, there is some definite significance attached to his name. The word 'Ren' in our language means, 'honourable' or 'an honoured senior' and 'Gay' means, won or succeeded. His name, Ren-Gay, could thus be interpreted as "the honoured senior who won or succeeded."

Passing through hills and dales, rivers and rivulets, along with his household and a few head of cattle he headed down straight for the south, forging ahead in search of an ideal place

for permanent residence for himself and his progeny. He took weeks and months before he hit upon a spot which satisfied him. He found the spot which seemed ideal because, besides other things, from there he could view the Kongchen-Konghlo, a constant source of inspiration, and for the protection it afforded. Going uphill, about half-a-kilometre from there, from Rangkenbong Hill (what is now known as Ringkingpong), he could get a panoramic view of the vast expanse of the Zolashee plains about which he had heard so much. This was in the Terai-Duars plains of the foothills in the Gangetic Plain, which stretches some thousands of miles east to west of the Indian sub-continent. The place where patriarch Rengay settled down is now known as Chibo Kyong, or village, in the Kalimpong subdivision of the district of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal in India. I would place the approximate time of his exodus at around the middle of the seventeenth century. When he arrived, it seemed that there was hardly anyone in occupation of the area. Here, patriarch Rengay, with his two sons, Kazibu and Chyazongbu, along with wives and grand-children, found ample room for hunting and fishing and our traditional way of living.

Later, when Chyazongbu the younger came of age, he with his infant son Anak and two daughters, moved further down the valley, clearing the jungle around and settled down there. This place later came to be called Ngassay. And still later on, in the third generation Doruk, the eldest, and Songfel, the youngest son of Kazibu (the eldest son of Rengay the patriarch), seeing the place fairly level, with plenty of room for expansion, and the river Rongnyu (nowadays called Teesta by others), being close-by, went and joined uncle Chyazongbu with their wives and children. It is said that Doruk the eldest left home because even though past two score years, he was not able to take charge and assume full responsibility for managing and running 'home' affairs—his father happened to be still living. Hence, taking the youngest brother Songfel and their families, they went out in search of new pastures. The father, knowing full well that there would still be one son left at home, had the least objection. This place, Ngassay, is to the west of the present-day sixth-mile bridge on the Kalimpong-Tibet road. Even now, after a lapse of over three centuries I still find quite a number of my distantly related kinsmen there.

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In the meantime, Rengay's eldest son Kazibo, and after him his grandson Kayzong, and later his great-grandson Jido, continued looking after the ancestral home at Chyobo Kyong. Of the two sons of Jido, Longu the younger, proved to be more aggressive and more intelligent, and thus became the old man's favourite. Hence, the elder son Wachung, maybe feeling hurt, moved across to the adjoining area to the north-east. There, near the first shed which he put up to house his little family, a few fan-making palm trees, we call 'parvong' happened to be growing. So his other relations from Chyobo and Ngassay villages started calling him 'Parvong Anum' or Parvong brother. Ultimately, this village of which he was the pioneer, came to be called Parvong Kyong. This village is to the west of present-day St. Augustine's School, and the St. Joseph's Convent of the present-day Kalimpong town. Here also, we still find a few families of our clan.

Longu, the younger brother of Wachung, who had been left behind and who had taken charge of the ancestral hearth and home, had only one son, Anto. Anto had four sons, Nobo, Pasang, Samten and Samruk. Nobo, the eldest, had three sons, Yongkha, Yando and Atang. Nobo died when his father was still living. Pasang, the second son, let his father know of his intentions of going back to Renjyong and started making preparations to go back to where his ancestors had come from. But it was not till the time of his son Nakphe, the literateur of whom I have spoken before, that he went and settled down at Chalumthong of the Pakyong area in Renjyong or Sikkim. Nakphe's connection with the royal family as tutor greatly helped his changeover of residence. His descendants are still thriving there. Thus, the third son of Ajyo Anto, and the youngest, Samruk, held on to the ancestral assets at Chyobo. Samruk died fairly young. He left behind a son, Tingbo. My grandfather Taktshering was Samten's only son.

Speaking nostalgically about our old-time abode in Renjyong, our older folks very often used to tell us stories of whatever they had heard from their seniors. They used to speak of places like the 'mara tam', the plain of epilepsy. This plain of epilepsy, they said, was enclosed within three fairly steep slopes forming a sort of a valley down below with innumerable small ponds. In our language 'mara' means epilepsy, and 'tam' means a flat

piece of land. They said that epilepsy dropped down from the sky during the night and settled down in these ponds, and hence it was a place to be dreaded and avoided. According to our primitive belief, these 'mara mung' or devils of epilepsy dropped down straight from the stars high above. When we were young, our grandfathers and grandmothers used to tell us the same things, and occasionally drew our attention during cold wintry nights, to white fleeting things rushing down towards the earth. We used to be scared of these supposedly 'mara mungs'. Now, of course, I know as an educated man, that these white things coming down were nothing but shooting stars, the meteorites. Among other reminiscences, they made mention of the big bear hunting expeditions among the 'chanden kung pazoke,' a forest of criptomaria trees. They just took one, rather long thick, Y-shaped stick with them; they would have the inevitable 'banpok', a thick all-purpose Lepcha chopper with each one of them. These hunts, strangely, turned out to be individual affairs where man fought beast in a duel-like fashion. These big bears could not climb trees. They were supposed to charge at their enemies standing on their hind legs, with their necks slightly twisted to make their nozzle turn on one side. They placed the Y-stick on the ground at an angle, with the two prongs of the Y-stick on top to receive the huge creatures' neck in the wedge. Then, with the blunt side of the banpok, they hit the readily and conveniently placed nose. The beast would invariably slump down. They said that these expeditions were organised just to obtain the 'Khibu', the gallbladder with the bile inside. This Khibu was supposed to be a panacea, an all-purpose medicine for all types of human diseases. They of course would bring home the by-product, the meat. Apparently these were the things missed by the emigrants, my ancestors in the new surroundings where they had come and settled down.

My Clan

We Rongfolk, like the people of Scotland and similar places are divided into clans or sub-tribes. Originally and normally we derive and acquire our clan names from the village or locality where our ancestors had originally lived—such as Sadam-moo, Namchu-moo, Kalhet-ram-moo, etc. The first part being the name of the village or locality, and the second part 'moo'

meaning 'dweller of.' Therefore, originally coming from Rumtek-Song areas of Renjyong or Sikkim, we were known as Rumtek-Song-moo, 'the folks from Rumtek.' After a lapse of time, and I suppose for convenience, the word Tek was gradually omitted and we were simply known as Rumsong-moo. Alongside, up to the time of my great grandfather Samten, and even up to a little later, our family was occasionally referred to as Foodongmoo also, *i.e.*, the people of the fort or the palace. Foodong means fort or the palace. This of course is understandable; our ancestors Kayzong, Jido, Longu, Anto, right down up to great-grandfather Samten were employed as the representatives of the Damsang Fort authorities.

Damsang Fort was the outpost and the sub-divisional headquarters, directly under Dalim Fort the main headquarters for the westernmost part of the kingdom of Bhutan. Then, later, possibly after taking up jobs with the Government of Bhutan, we find the prefix 'Fonyung' added on to our clan name, and we came to be known as Fonyung-Ramsongmoo, the name by which we are known now among our tribesmen. A little analysis of the word 'Fonyung', just as any other pure Lepcha word, throws light on the matter. Fo or Afo means teeth, and Nyung or Anyung means deep. Now the whole word 'Fonyung' means 'deep fanged', and this, in our 'tangbor' language obliquely means stubborn or tenacious. The reason for assigning this rather socially unwelcome quality to us, may be due to the occasional, rather tougher, seemingly un-Lepcha attitude which, as administrators, our ancestors had to take up with the other members of the tribe. It is very likely that this nickname was given to one or two of our elder folks, and ultimately it stuck to the clan as a whole. I may say that I notice this marked characteristic among members of my family and relations, as well as among my clansmen even now.

At present, in the composite society in which we have been forced to live, we are by necessity compelled to use our clan names. This is to avoid confusion and mix-up in our dealings with the government administration, and while registering our names in schools and other institutions. All our so-called civilised names given by the Lamas after consulting horoscopes and working on other calculations, always tend to be identical. The ones born on a Sunday, invariably will be called Nima, the:

ones seeing the light of day on a Monday, Dawa, if on a Tuesday, Mikma and so on. To these will be added Tshering. The same is the case with our Christian brothers who will have common baptism names such as Peter, Mathew, Frederick and so on. So, in order to distinguish one from the other, our clan names have to be added on. To make matters worse, when the British came, Western influence started affecting us all, and the normal Sadam-moo, became Sada, Samyuk-moo became Simick, Yang-moo became Young. Consequently, my clan Fonyung-Rumsong-moo took up the Anglicised name and style of calling ourselves Foning, the name by which I and my so-called educated clansmen are known now.

Class, Category and Authority

My clan and family left the mainland of Renjyong or Sikkim more than ten generations back settling down in Lepcha land but later this part of our Mayel country came under the direct rule of the Drukpas, or the Bhutanese people. Therefore, to get a better insight of the times when my ancestors happened to be living, a short account of the set up of our society as well as of the system of government prevailing then would help.

Contrary to the general belief, and what has been said and written about us by foreigners and others, we Lepchas have no class, creed and ranking among ourselves. No one is big, and no one is small, there is no gradation as such. In our dealings with our fellow beings, it is only the seniority of age that is considered. Whatever our seniors utter or do is sacrosanct to us. The word 'putcho', meaning clan or sub-tribe, used freely in Sikkim and the Illam side of Nepal is not a Lepcha word at all. Similarly, the term 'Aden putcho' and 'Berfong putcho', the so-called 'plebians' and 'patricians' are late innovations, they came in with the advent of foreign influence and culture among us. This is particularly so after the introduction of feudalism by our Tibetan rulers. The term "property" has a very vague connotation for us; basically, and originally, everything is 'ours' and not 'mine' alone.

The set up of our society is such that ranking and gradation is completely out of place; and it could be said with emphasis that there never has been any acknowledgement of authority save those of the seniors in our tribe. Contrary to what is

written by foreigners it could be asserted with equal emphasis that we Lepchas never had any king amongst us. Whatever king or kings we had and we know of, were the Namgyal kings of the later evolved country of Renjyong or Sikkim carved out within our 'sanctum sanctorum', Ney Mayel Lyang. The ancestors of these kings were installed in 1642 at Yoksam with our consent. This too was done because a few generations earlier, patriarch Thekung Tek, who was a 'bongthing' but never a chief as has been made-out, was coaxed into ceremoniously swearing eternal friendship of brotherhood with the Tibetans who were gradually infiltrating into our land. The person responsible for this vital task was Khye-Bumsa, the far-sighted and brilliant ancestor of the later kings. Eventually, as a result of this friendship pact, we agreed innocently to accept kings among us and we as a tribe have upheld them ever since. Again, mention has been made by foreign writers like Mainwaring and others of the supposedly fifteenth century kings, Turvey, Turyek, Tursong and a few others. These are nothing but figments of imagination; they may be nothing more than dramatising of some legendary figures by some of our own tribesmen, and given out to the eager and enthusiastic foreigners. There has never been any historical or other kind of proof supporting this belief. Take the case of the rebel A-chyuk of Doling Amdothang in the south-eastern part of Lepcha land sometime during the early part of the eighteenth century. Building a number of big and small forts he had defied his own king, and although he is referred to as Gaybu A-chyuk, or A-chyuk the victor and given the appellation of king by the Lepchas of the Tamsang region, the region to the east of the river Teesta, the way he is presented is definitely not true. Of course there is little doubt that he was a good leader of men and, urged on and encouraged by his politically minded Bhutanese mentors, he could show his prowess. He found the guileless and simple brother Lepchas a ready tool for his own personal gain and advancement. Ultimately, as could be expected, he met his end at the hands of his mentors through a treacherous assassination. This man, A-chyuk, could never have been a Lepcha, as understood in the real sense. At most, he was a half-breed, cultured, moulded and fashioned in the style of the rulers themselves.

Government and Administration

As has already been stated, under the Bhutanese regime, my ancestors were representatives and incharge of the western side of the present Kalimpong sub-division, the area under the jurisdiction of the old-time Damsang Fort Administration. The Government of Bhutan or, to be exact, the Bhutanese power and authority, without much contact with the subject people, projected their influence through local leadership, and through religious institutions—the monasteries called Gompas. For the immediate subjugation of the people, and to keep them under control, they employed local leaders and gave them rank and authority, such as those given to my ancestors. They were given the rank of Ramzams, the nobles of the lowest cadre among the Bhutanese. Normally these Ramzams happened to be writers or secretaries to the Dzongpens or governors of big forts and, as such, they wielded some power and authority. For their long-term mental and cultural integration, youngsters were sent for religious training to monasteries in Bhutan. These two methods paid rich dividends. As a result, when the British came and took over, we Lepchas had already become pseudo-Bhutanese ourselves.

Triggered off by the succession trouble after the death of Tensung Namgyal, the second king, Bhutan had taken charge of the whole of Sikkim in 1700 A.D. The third Chyogyal, Chador Namgyal, who had been spirited away as a boy to the Dalai Lama in Tibet, returned after a stay of seven years there, and diplomatically and otherwise, succeeded in expelling the Bhutanese from his kingdom. But, in the south-east, *i.e.*, the present Kalimpong sub-division, Ha valley in Bhutan, and parts of the Jalpaiguri Duars, A-chyuk, his own man, proved a stumbling block in his way. Taking charge of the area with the help of the Bhutanese, he resisted successfully and Chador was unable to retrieve this portion of the kingdom. After the assassination of A-chyuk, this huge tract of the Lepcha land remained with the Bhutanese. Later, the Kalimpong and the Duars section came into the hands of the British. This was in the year 1865, after the Bhutan War.

During their unquestioned mastery over the land, the Bhutanese had evolved a strong administrative machinery to rule the country and the colonies. The Dzongs or the huge fortified

monasteries, like those of Paro, Tongsa, Wangdifudong and others, were originally constructed by them to withstand attacks emanating from the clash of ideology and creed between the Gyalukpa, the orthodox Yellow sect, and Nyingmapa the not-so-orthodox Red sect. In their own country, Tibet, the Yellow sect had the better of it, and so, the hierarchs of the Red sect, along with their followers and disciples had fled down south towards Bhutan and Sikkim. Later, these fugitive lamas, who had fled Tibet from persecution, consolidated their positions in these two countries and started ruling. In time they saw and found out that the temporal management of the country was also as necessary as catering to the spiritual needs of the people. Therefore, these original men of religion evolved a dual system of running the country of their adoption. The head of the church was supreme in the kingdom and was later known as Dharma Raja. While confining himself to the spiritual side of the work, assisted by a Jey Khempo or Head Abbot, civil power was vested in a high officer known as Druk Desi or as later called, Deb Raja. In civil administration, Dzongpens were the governors of dzongs or forts, with their own local, distinctive administrative jurisdictions, a prototype of the barons of old England during William the Conqueror's time. From among the Dzongpens, the powerful ones were chosen and designated as the Penlop, equivalent of viceroys. They had a good number of Dzongpens under them. Normally they had three Penlops, one for the east, one for the west and one for the midlands. The most powerful one among them was chosen as the Deb Desi. Later, with the waning of the power of the Dharma Rajas, they ultimately became the rulers of the kingdom.

The ancestor of the present king of Bhutan, who was recognised as the first king with the title of Druk Gyalpo by the laity, the church, and the British Government in 1907, was the powerful Penlop of Tongsa. The big dzongs, by necessity developed into a sort of a combined headquarters for religion, administration and for the army. Then, under and within the jurisdiction of these big dzongs, there were smaller 'dees' or fortifications, the likes of Jongsa, Damsang, Sombay and others. These smaller 'dees' were mainly used as administrative headquarters for the sub-districts, and maintained only a limited number of soldiers. The main function of this militia was

supposedly to keep law and order but, for the most part, it was employed for the collection of revenue which came in the form of grain. The revenue thus collected went towards the upkeep and maintenance of the garrison. When occasion arose, they could requisition anything, including free labour from the populace. In the occupied areas of the Lepcha country, they found out that to keep the docile and simple natives under control, they did not require any big contingent. It may be noted here that after the British takeover, the remnants of those left behind, settled down around these 'dees' and forts. By now, after a lapse of little over a hundred years one can get to see exclusively Bhutanese villages there. Sakyong and Dimikchen villages around the Damsang fort, near Pedong are good examples of this development.

When the British first set foot on the Kalimpong area which was under Bhutan for well over one-and-a half centuries, along with them came Tibetans and the Nepalese. Before that time, before the Autochthones, the Rongs or the Lepchas, there was a small population of a non-fighting, cattle-breeding Bhutanese tribe called Moosaymoo or Museps. They had come from the low-lying valleys which were originally part of the Lepcha land in western Bhutan; later they proved themselves useful as milk suppliers and as butchers in the upcoming towns.

My Ancestors as Officials of the Government

As officials and representatives of the fort authorities, my ancestors, besides holding the responsibilities for law and order (which was no problem among our docile folks) were given the assignment of reporting any intrusion, or even the appearance, of any individual from outside. Dr. Rennie mentions in his book, *Bhutan and the Doogar War*, that just before the British takeover, when Mr. Eden, the envoy, wanted to go across to the Kalimpong side, then under Bhutan, the Nepalese porters refused to go across the river Teesta to that side. They were scared. From this fact one can get an idea of how strictly vigilance was maintained.

During the dry season, particularly after the harvest, officials of the Damsang fort, along with the higher authority, the Dzongpen from the fort at Dalimkote, used to come and camp on the higher grounds on the Ringkingpong Hill, immediately

to enjoy themselves immensely from these escapades. Thus in the whole of our Lepcha land, these events could be taken as the first "organised sports" in the modern sense of the term. The ridge where these camps were set up and the games organised, the people around here and those coming to pay tribute came to be called KA-LEM-PUNG, Ka meaning 'we' or 'our,' Lem-'play,' Pung-'ridge,' *i.e.*, 'The ridge where we play.' In the years that followed, this ridge became a sort of landmark, and the locality and the surrounding area became famous by this name. This is how the present town, situated on the saddle of the old-time KALEMPUNG ridge, got its Anglicised name of Kalimpong. The region which was once ruled from Dalim and the Damsang forts was also named the Kalimpong sub-division with its headquarters given the same name. As in every other case, the clever and resourceful Tibetans gave their own interpretation and said that it was Kalon 'minister of a king' 'Pong' a stockade.' It may be pointed out here that at no stage in the history of the land was there any stockade erected nor, for that matter, was there a minister stationed here.

The Dzongpens and other high officials would normally leave within a week or ten days of their stay. They would leave behind one or two junior officers and a few soldiers to complete the work such as that of organising porters to take back to the fort the grain collected as revenue and for carrying the tents back. It is said that those soldiers who were left behind were always more demanding and troublesome. Before they left, they would come out to the villages collecting chicken, goats and pigs, getting them slaughtered to take back with them. But once they went away, everything would be back to normal and the people would be left to lead their own way of life. This type of life continued till the time of Ajyo Anto, my father's great grandfather.

Towards the closing years of his life, although Kalimpong was still under the Bhutanese, their system of keeping in touch with the colonies through local representatives wore out gradually. The annual official visits became rarer; they started neglecting and leaving the areas on their own. The reason for this was that the powerful Penlops, had by then become *de facto* rulers of Bhutan, and they were in confrontation with each other. There was conflict between two of the most powerful warlords,

grandmother was a highly attained Mun. Later, when she found that she was getting on in age, she, according to our tribal usage and custom, brought her own very much younger niece, brother's daughter, Zyer Mit as his second wife. Through her also, my grandfather had four daughters and one son, Dagi-pyong also called Rapdensing. Through this uncle I picked up most of our family jottings. Then, again, when my grandfather Tak Tshering died in 1918, Sangklong Indi, my senior grandmother, now well advanced in age was given over to my grandfather's nephew Dodo, the fourth son of the literateur Nakphey of Pakyong in Sikkim. Thus, my grandmother was married officially to the members of the same family of three generations.

This tradition of taking charge of the widows by the younger members of the family, and supplying substitute wives to the widowers, as also of giving younger girls as second wives is called 'Angop thap'. It may be pointed out here that if a woman loses her husband, or vice-versa, he or she has to be supplied with a life-partner. In our society, this is obligatory. Should the elders of the man or the woman who has lost a partner, want him or her to be released from this compulsion and obligation, they will have to do so with an appropriate ceremony in front of the elders of both the concerned families. The ceremony has to be conducted preferably by a 'bongthing'. In his absence, by an unconnected and respected senior man known to both the families. This is seldom done, because, we consider the 'release' ceremony as very shameful; we particularly do not approve of those seeking release. For the whole clan of the family, it is taken as a sign of degradation, as showing impotence.

Besides my grandmother's case, I give two more examples. My aunty, Chyo Nom, Ajyo Nakphey's eldest daughter was married to Sangay, the eldest son of Akhay Tshering, the village headman. When he died fairly young, his very much younger brother, Norbu Tshering took charge of the sister-in-law, along with the two children from his brother, who later bore three more children. When she felt and found the disparity of age between herself and her second husband Norbu Tshering to be too great, he brought her own niece, Nazyam, as second wife to her husband. Nazyam was the eldest daughter of her own brother Achee, the third son of Nakphey, the literateur. Another example

In the Darjeeling and the Kurseong areas, our shy and timid people could not be coaxed to come out of their jungle homes to work as labourers in the newly opened tea gardens, roads and other building projects. This was mainly due to the indolent and unconcerned way of life, bred through centuries of such upbringing. These regimented foreign projects did not suit us at all. Here, in the Kalimpong area also, the same thing happened. The attraction was more towards forests, jungles and rivers, rather than towards the green lush paddy and corn fields. To make matters worse, these lively and energetic hill folk from another clime, felled trees and cleared our luxuriant life-giving forests to make room for agricultural lands. Gone were the colourful orchids and other blooms, palatable items for us. Along with the felling of trees, fruits, roots, creepers stopped coming to our kitchen. Birds flew away and animals simply disappeared. Destruction of forests touched off hundreds of small and big landslides, resulting in erosion of river and stream beds. It is pathetic to note that our children have not seen ngu Zur, ngu Chal, ngu Zee, ngu Yeng of the piscine world. Civilisation had caught up with us, and such became our fate.

Unrestricted immigration of the more lively and energetic people from the west had a profound effect on the easy-going, simple, aboriginal inhabitants. The Rongfolk were affected adversely. The process of disintegration started, the same as up north in our heartland of Renjyong when the Tibetans had appeared, more than three centuries earlier. This was mainly due to the adoption and absorption of an alien culture, aided greatly by inter-marriages with the newcomers. Today, there is hardly any family that has not been touched. The normal process that any primitive tribe passes through, my unfortunate tribe also passed through. Therefore, I would say that we were more a victim of circumstance than victims of our brothers from the west.

Taking charge of the unattractive lands and forests at first, they made room for modest little crofts. Later, 'the dervish and the camel' method proved effective on the simple and guileless folks. We, the children of nature, like the birds of the sky, the beasts of the forests, wanted a free life. Instead of learning from our teachers the art of agriculture, for which purpose they had originally been brought, we preferred to roam the forest, as also

to enjoy the fresh invigorating breeze of the streams and the rivers. We did not hesitate to leave our hearth and home to embrace mother nature. The case of my grandfather Tak Tshering is a good example of this spirit. He was born and he lived in the same big 'Dukaymoo' house constructed by his grandfather Anto, on the same spot where many generations of his ancestors had passed their time. His is a typical example of what the people of my tribe had to suffer, and are still suffering, on account of this so-called modern civilisation.

The Exile

Prior to the advent of the British, when the Bhutanese were the masters of this cut-up part of our Renjyong country of the south-east where they ruled for over one and a half centuries, I suppose, according to the needs of the time, no proper administrative arrangements were necessary. But, no sooner had the British set foot on the land, they began to demarcate the lands as found under each individual's possession. Naturally enough, my great grandfather Samten whose family had been in occupation of the area for generations took as much land as was thought necessary for the maintenance of his family. So, during Tak Tshering's time, he was a small landlord by present-day standards. He had inherited a huge Dukeymoo house, many heads of cattle, lots of goats, and riding and load-carrying horses.

By the time Tak Tshering had taken charge of the household affairs, Christian missionaries, backed by the Government, had established themselves on the land, and were expanding fast. My grandfather, who was a 'bongthing' of some standard, and his wife Sangklong Indi, a renowned Mun of the area, were coaxed and wheedled to accept this new creed. They could not be convinced at all. Now, when they did not succeed in this, the missionaries brought and planted a Lepcha convert within the community. He was a teacher-preacher of this new religion on the land. After staying in different places in the village for some time, he approached Tak Tshering with the requisite presents of chee, a carcass of a full grown pig and other items, and requested him to let him have a small portion of his unused fallow land. He was granted his request; the big double-storeyed house built by him on the spot given to him is still standing

pouring in. For the wandering Tibetans, Kalimpong became a haven, many came and established themselves as traders and merchants. The shy and timid sons of the soil, leaving the din and bustle of the town, receded more and more into the interior; civilisation and the modern age had come.

During such times as this, Tak Tshering fell into a snare of so-called modernism. He was coaxed into the job of supplying timber from the forest for building houses and bridges for the up-coming place, his beloved Kalimpong. His Lepcha 'Christian' brother would get his Nepali friend to lend him the initial capital needed for this lucrative business. This Nepali friend, being educated, had been appointed as the secretary of the newly formed cooperative credit society of the village. It was a project wholly sponsored and backed by the Government. It was meant and intended to improve the economic condition of the hopelessly backward and 'uncivilised' Lepchas. But, as it is seen from the results later, fostering of these apparently benevolent schemes and forcing them upon the simple, guileless and ignorant folk, whose creed of cooperation is inborn, without understanding the principle and motivation, proved to be disastrous in effect. It accelerated the process by which outsiders started taking over the landed property. Within less than a few decades, the prosperous Lepcha hamlet, dotted with picturesque pillared Dukaymoo houses, turned into a cosmopolitan and multi-racial village.

Tak Tshering was told that he would be rich; and that meant that he would be in a position to handle the 'Company' money much more than he was doing now. It was his father Samten who first had seen the East India Company's silver coins. At that time, neither he nor his son Tak Tshering had much use for this new-styled barter medium. But now the story was different. Tak Tshering had found out that possessing this thing was more important than possessing goats and cows. Besides, by stringing them he could make jewelry for his wives and daughters. He took a step forward towards civilisation. He started employing the easily available labourers from among the newcomers on payment of money. They felled trees and sawed timber for him. This 'Christian' brother, who was educated, kept accounts for him. One year passed, two years went and a few more years lapsed, and now, at this time, the account for the whole transaction

was unfolded. According to Tak Tshering, he was down by six hundred Queen Victoria coins, but they insisted that, calculating the interest, it came to rupees three thousand, an enormous amount in those days. They demanded the money back. Tak Tshering had paid the workers, the sawyers, from the easy money lent out to him. Ultimately, the newly established law courts of the new rulers, the British, got a case. He was summoned to the court on two occasions but, due to his timidity, an inherent trait in a Lepcha, he failed to appear. Then suddenly one day, some Government officials, accompanied by our 'Christian' brother appeared at Tak Tshering's place. The banker, maybe on account of a prick of conscience or some other reason, was conspicuous by his absence. In front of the officials and others, he pleaded his inability to pay his debt. Therefore, according to the Government regulation, the official started auctioning his landed property, including the house. And who would be the ones to bid? Sure enough, our 'Christian' brother, and the agent of his banker friend. Between the two of them, they shared the lovely extensive paddy and dry field, the grazing grounds, bamboo groves, a small forest for fuels, along with the huge Dukaymoo house, a heirloom from his ancestors.

The court decreed that the debtor would hand over his entire immovable property to them. As a little 'gesture of goodwill and consideration' by the officials, Tak Tshering was officially declared a 'bankrupt'. It was explained to him that, in future, anybody may give a loan of money to him, but if he failed to pay back, the law court would not take any action from the Government side. Further, he was asked to vacate the house built by his grandfather Anto, where he was born, his father was born and all his seven children were born. For this, fifteen day's time was given. In the meantime, the banker friend had sent word through his agent that, in his share of the property, if Tak Tshering liked, he could still stay on the land, building a small hutment, as his tenant on half-crop system, *i.e.*, at harvest time annually, half the crop produced had to be handed over to the new owner of the land, himself keeping the other half. Realising his helplessness, and the pathetic condition and circumstance he was in, many well-wishers and others taking pity on him, advised Tak Tshering to accept the generous offer. To this he is supposed to have told the people standing around that he had

never been taught to do such a thing by his forefathers and, after death, when he went back 'home', he would not have the heart to face them. This was his belief, the same as the belief among the members of his tribe, that after a person dies, his or her soul is directed back by the Mun, our priestess, to the place where he or she will have the reunion with the souls of his ancestors in 'Rum-Lyang', a place where the gods live. Further, he told them that he had been swindled and cheated, and made to leave his hearth and home; he was innocent and the great Kongchen stood as witness to it. He would definitely return one day, and through some reason or other if he failed in this, his children and grandchildren would still be there to endure and stand as living proof of his innocence. This is another of our tribal beliefs that the sins of our forefathers would descend upon the progeny.

As a pattern of our social system and set up, we Rongfolk have a sort of primitive communism among us. If someone's house gets burnt down, everybody comes and helps him to set up a new one. Should one of the sons, with the advice or consent of the father, decide to separate and set up an establishment of his own, the whole village manpower, including women and children come and help him to clear the forest, and build a house for him. Similarly, in other difficulties or where, according to custom, a multitude has to be fed, as in weddings and death ceremonies, people who come to attend them invariably bring with them millet for making our tribal beer, rice, maize or whatever they consider necessary. But the normal practice is that it is sent in a day or two before the actual ceremony, or even a few days earlier. It is their contribution towards helping out the person concerned for the colossal expense he is required to incur. Thus, the whole thing becomes a community affair. So, when Tak Tshering was vacating the house to go into exile, everyone came and helped him. He first moved his livestock and belongings to the house of his brother-in-law down the valley in Pashyor village. There he kept his wives and children also for some time. Instead of the permitted fifteen days, with the help of his neighbour and others, he vacated the place and shifted within nine days.

Tak Tshering, with some of his relations and dependants now started roaming the vast forest area, looking for a suitable place

for his future abode. Exactly after five days, selecting what he considered to be an ideal spot for a house, and a good place for the little cultivation he intended doing, he erected a temporary shed and came back to Pashyor for his family and some of his livestock. He cut down trees and cleared the jungle and after building a better house, settled down. Later, referring to him, people started calling this place 'Sait-Dang', meaning, 'the valley of the wiped-out' because Tak Tshering's once prosperous family, living on the land for generations together, had virtually been wiped-out. It may be noted that throughout the Lepcha land, be it in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim or the Darjeeling District, the names of places invariably have a meaning attached to them. Sananda—'bear's den', Kurseong, originally Kursong, is the star Venus or a variety of orchid, which is more likely because this white orchid is found in abundance in that area; Lebong in Darjeeling, famous for the smallest race-course in the world, was originally Lee-bong, which means a pear tree. Sait Dang is a low-lying valley, about twenty-two kilometres on the way to Kalimpong town, across the river Teesta, and exactly opposite the base station of present-day Samco, the Sumthar Multi-purpose Co-operative Society ropeway, an admirable venture, started by the Swiss Catholic Mission aimed at the improvement of the condition of the Rongfolk of Tanyang, Sumthar, Yangmakum and other outlying areas.

At the time of Tak Tshering's banishment he had with him, besides his two wives, three unmarried daughters and his youngest son Dagipyong in his mother's lap. The elder daughter, was living with her husband in their own place. Of the two bigger sons, the elder Talyo, who was somewhat of a care-free nature at the time, was living separately with his wife, and although he did not join his father in exile, he maintained a liaison between his father and the outside world.

Talem or Lensing, the second son, my father, was at that time in Patna in Bihar State, undergoing medical training to become a doctor. He was among the few to be selected and sent by the Government, as a stipendiary student. This, evidently, was the Government's plan to combat the local traditional medicine-men, the 'Bongthings'. Their *modus operandi* was to use charms, incantations, incense-burning, and sacrificing of domestic birds and animals. The Government saw that it had

the mongbree seeds, and its cultivation, is necessitated by the fact that, in our offering to the gods and the appeasement to the demons and the devils, it forms an important item. Besides while entertaining our guests, as also at parties, this 'chee' forms the most important means of entertainment, so much so that, when a child is born, it is a must. When he or she is big enough to get life-partners, in the presents that are taken to the in-laws, the 'chee' forms the main item. Again, when a person dies, in the grave, along with other things, this 'chee' must find a place besides the corpse. And lastly, when the 'mun' is transporting the soul of the dead person to the 'Rum-Lyang', in the menu, which is supposedly offered for the journey, this 'chee' must be there.

Tak Tshering, with the help of his relations and others started cutting down trees and clearing the forest. In time, a sizeable field was prepared for cultivation. He built an ordinary house there complete with cattle-shed and all other things, and started living a new life becoming once again 'the monarch of all he surveyed'. In the meantime, his second Son Talem returned from Patna as a full-fledged and qualified doctor. He had been posted to the town of Darjeeling and other towns which by now had sprung up. Then, at the beginning of World War I, after volunteering for military service, he had left for overseas with the regiment to which he was attached. Then, from the money coming in as Military Family Allotment, together with other emoluments, his wife, my mother, bought about ten acres of land in the same village. There she constructed a two-storied modern type of house. As instructed by the husband she then brought back her father-in-law to live together as in the days before the exile.

Tak Tshering was away from the beginning of the winter in 1909 till the end of 1915, when he returned to celebrate our 'Nambun', our New Year's Day, as well as to be present for the 'Lee-Sho', the house warming ceremony. His daughter-in-law, my mother, had specially coordinated and fixed this up for him for two vital reasons: firstly, to seek his blessings upon the new house, and upon the future generation that would be living there, and secondly, to accord him, a glorious home-coming welcome in the presence of the whole village community. This actually happened when practically the whole village was present

Of allied interest

THE SHERPAS TRANSFORMED: Social Change in a Buddhist Society of Nepal

—*Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf*

The Sherpas, a people of Tibetan language and culture, dwelling in the high valleys of the Mount Everest region, are best known for their role in many of the great Himalayan mountaineering ventures. Yet their skill as intrepid climbers and high altitude porters is not their most important accomplishment. More remarkable is their achievement of having developed a pattern of life rich in social, aesthetic and spiritual values, irrespective of the harshness of their habitat close to the world's highest mountains.

This book, which represents a sequence to the author's earlier study *The Sherpas of Nepal*, describes the changes in the Sherpas' life-style which resulted from the sudden disruption of their trade with Tibet and the subsequent impact of tourism. Work for western mountaineers and tourists has now replaced some of the traditional occupations, and this process has affected the rhythm of social life. Despite the influence of modern ideas and values, Buddhism remains the firm basis of the Sherpas' world view and the monasteries have in recent years grown in strength and prestige.

Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf was born in Austria and studied anthropology in the universities of Vienna and London. In 1936 he came to India and began his long career of field-research with a study of one of the Naga tribes. Subsequently he extended his research to the tribal populations of Hyderabad State, Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh. Several standard works of the Indian anthropological literature, such as *The Chenchus*, *The Reddis of the Bison Hills*, *The Raj Gonds of Adilabad* and *The Apa Tanis and Their Neighbours*, resulted from his research. In 1944 and 1945 he served the Government of India in the North East Frontier Agency and later he held the position of Adviser for Tribes and Backward Classes to the Nizam's Government. In 1951 he was appointed to the Chair of Asian Anthropology in the University of London and there established the Department of Anthropology in the School of Oriental and African Studies. From 1953 until 1983 he concentrated on the study of the hill people of Nepal and his books *The Sherpas of Nepal*, *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon* and *Himalayan Traders* laid the foundation for the anthropological exploration of Nepal. Since his retirement in 1976 he has restudied several tribal groups of India and Nepal and most recently the Sherpas, whom he observed over a period of thirty years.

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