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THE RELIGION OF THE LEPCHAS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR BOONGTHING-MUN CULTURE IN SIKKIM

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Sikkim is known for serenity and pristine beauty. It has a “unique culture caused by the diffusion of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animistic rituals of different religious faith.”(Gulia, 2005:13)¹ Lepcha, the ancient settlers of Sikkim are recognized as the Primitive Tribe by the state government. They have their own ancient religion and cultural tradition of Mun and Boongthing which are hardly practiced nowadays. Their encounter with various ethnic groups has greatly endangered their traditional culture. Today they mostly follow Buddhism (henceforth Lamaism) and Christianity.

The Lepchas and their Religion: The Lepchas belonging to the mongoloid stock having linguistic affiliation to Tibeto-Burman family are the “real autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas” (Mainwaring, 1876; Risley, 1928; Banerjee et al, 1980).” They call themselves ‘Rongpa’(Risley, 1928:1) or ‘Raongkup or Rumkup’(Tamsang, 2009: 652)² and their country “Mayel Lyang”, meaning the “land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode.” The Lepchas from time immemorial were nature worshippers who worshipped mount Kanchanjunga. The mount is revered as the womb of their origin and their rituals are interwoven with stories emanating from the mount. Though they are nature worshippers and animists, they also believe in God whom they call *Itdeburum* or *Rum*.³ He is believed to have created the Lepcha’s original-progenitors- *Fadongthing* and *Najyongnyu*,⁴ from the virgin snow of Kanchenjunga. They were ordered not to copulate, but *Najyongnyu* enticed *Fadongthing* to sexual act and beget several children. Remorse filled them when they realised that they had transgressed the command of *Itdeburum*. For penitence *Fadongthing*- the father, disowned the children, and the eldest among them turned into a symbol of malevolence and became *Mung*.⁵ The malevolent one terrorized the ever increasing offspring of the Lepchas. They countered him with all their resources, but were unable to vanquish the evil one. In desperation they called their *Rum*, who readily accepted their call and announced his desire to deliver them *Tamsangthing*, the great warrior with supernatural power. This is how the notion of evil and victory over evil evolved in the belief and cultural space of the Lepchas. Lepchas believe that the Boongthing and *tjmlhe* Mun were created to keep the evil spirit or *Mung* at bay and to perform various rituals. They are regarded as a medium between the God and the human. Many Lepchas respond their religion to be *Boongthingism* and *Munism* but in reality their traditional mores are at the verge of extinction.

According to the Socio-Economic Survey carried out by the DESME, Government of Sikkim in 2006, 85.14 percent Lepchas are Buddhist, 12.76 percent Christian and 2.10 percent are Hindu. This suggests that they are mostly converted to other religion. Many things have changed in Lepcha way of life but surprisingly, a few practices have been found coexisting with the newly accepted religions. For instance the tradition and practice of *Boongthing* and *Mun* coexist with Buddhism, while the Christian Lepchas still follow clan structure.

Boongthing and Mun: The Lepchas own the institution of *Mun* and *Boongthing*. The *Boongthing* basically is a male medicine man and *Mun* female priestess whose main purpose is to transport the departed soul to the *Rumtyang*, (Rum=God, Lyang=Place) or the heavenly abode. *Mun* basically is a

female priestess and even today many traditions cannot be solemnized in her absence (Roy.D.C.:2011). This suggests that even women are given a respectable position in the religious sphere in Lepcha society.

The word *Boongthing* is derivative of the two words, *abong* and *athing*. *Abong* means 'the trunk', 'the main', or 'the original', and *Athing* means 'honourable and the highly respected one' (Foning,2003:62). The *Boongthing* and *Mun* are regarded as the main custodian of Lepcha culture and religion. The practice of *Boongthing* and *Mun* are not attained through teaching or learning. This, as the Lepchas believe, is a supernatural phenomenon which is difficult to attain when the cultural roots are wobbled. They are considered as mediators between God and human, and are known for their healing powers. One cannot attain the state of a *Mun* or a *Boongthing*. The 'spirit' will manifest itself. It has been found to 'possess, only those of certain families who have *Mun* and *Boongthing* right down the generations. It is a set, invariable pattern, maybe sometimes in the succeeding generation, as from father to son, mother to daughter. Sometimes, the 'spirit' might even manifest itself after a lapse of three or four generations (Foning,2003:74).

The function of *Boongthing* is almost parallel to that of the traditional priests of other religions. He is commissioned to perform various functions. He is endowed with healing powers and can ward off sickness through enchanting and offerings to god and many times to evil spirits. He is also assigned to dispense wedding vows by invoking gods and goddess such as *Kongchen konghlo* (Kanchenjunga), peaks and hills, lakes and rivers of Sikkim. *Boongthing* is responsible for keeping *Lungten* or the story of genesis alive. He narrates the '*Lungten Sung*' or the story of evolution and the same is passed on to next generation verbally. Foning (2003:82) says that a *Boongthing* is a psychiatrist, medicine man, spiritualist, preacher and a priest all rolled into one. Therefore, there is greater need for him than for the *Mun*. Nevertheless, the function of *Mun* is equally indispensable. The most important and the most impressive function of *Mun* is the transportation of the soul of the departed into *Rum-Lyang*, the place of the gods, where it is supposed to meet with the souls of his/her ancestors. The ceremony after death is called *sanglyon* which is solely presided by *Mun*. The idea/belief of transportation of the soul to *Rum-Lyang* has come down to the Lepchas from long past. This notion is strongly ingrained in the collective memory of the folk. Even after their conversion to Buddhism, which started some four hundred years back, it is still found to be unshaken. Today, alongside the rites and ceremonies for the departed soul according to Buddhist creed, their own traditional way of dealing with it is very much in evidence (Foning, 2003: 82). The *Mun* and the *Boongthing* worship spirits and are highly accepted by the folks for their power to heal people and exorcise the harmful spirits. (Tsewang.1998:8) But the influence grew much in the later half of 20th century which may be regarded as a phase of cultural amnesia. Foning (2003:XI) argues that such situation "evolved partly by military conquest and partly by the amalgamation of Lepchas with such populations as Tibetans, Nepalis and Bhutanese ." This resulted in the decline of Lepcha culture. With a few exceptions the huge wealth of knowledge about ethno-medicine is lost. In some cases *Muns* and *Boongthings* are found to "prescribe the wearing of charms and amulets, the making of these being the province of the Lamas (Morris,1938:121)."

Apart from the original *Mun Boongthing*, (Foning:83-84) there are other types of these "god-men and god-women who, by virtue of the advent of extraneous cultures, have imperceptibly crept into Lepcha society, and the tribe. In the process of integration with Lepcha *Mun Boongthing* cult, they have metamorphosed into something appearing as their (Lepcha) own. Among these, mention may be made of the *Yaba* and *Yama*, the *Pawo* and the *Nyenjyomu*. A *Yaba* is a male spirit and a *Yama*, being the counterpart, is a female spirit. (Foning:85-86)." It may be noted that the Limbu's *Yaba - Yama* cult, also

called *Phedangma*, got mixed up with the *Mun Boongthing* tradition especially in the western Sikkim which borders Nepal. On the other hand, in regions where the Tibetan and the Bhutanese held sway, the Tibetan cult of *Pawo- Nyenjomu* made its appearance. (Foning:85)

Conclusion: This culture is dying so fast that the '*Mun*' tradition in a distant future will become a thing of the past unless something is done to save the withering tradition. In the greater world of Lepcha culture the *Mun-Boongthing* institution has become a fading memory. These practices are very rare and a very few claim to be *Boongthing* or *Mun* today. If some grieved family wish to perform rituals like that of death they have to travel miles in quest of *Muns*.⁶ *Boongthing* and *Mun*, the two pillars of Lepcha religion are indispensable to the survival of the culture. The only solace that this community can get is to hope such practices stay alive in some of the remote and inaccessible areas of Dzongu and in some parts of western Sikkim, where it co-exists with Lamaistic rituals. The acute shortage of *Mun* and *Boongthing* could also be the reasons for Lepcha inclinations towards other religions.

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4. In Lepcha language *Fadongthing* means 'the most powerful' and *Najyongnyu* means 'ever fortunate.'
5. *Rum* in Lepcha means God and *Mung* means evil.
6. Information given by Jyorbu Lepcha, Language Teacher of Hee Gyathang School, Dzongu, North Sikkim during field survey carried out in the month of Sept. 2009.
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