

Research Communication

The indigenous Lepcha story of Divine Creators, Animism and Shamanism practices in protecting the mountain environment of Darjeeling Himalaya

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Abstract

This research communication describes the indigenous Lepcha story of divine creators, animism, and shamanism practiced in the mountain environment of Darjeeling Himalaya. Lepchas are the ancient tribes of the Eastern Himalaya, dependent on traditional agricultural and livestock farming for their livelihood. They also practice traditional arts and crafts. This study was conducted based on field observations and interviews with the heads of households of Lepcha tribes living in the Darjeeling Himalaya. It reveals that Lepcha tribes are rich in culture and cultural heritage, and they preserve their culture and customs traditionally. However, they are economically poor people. Meanwhile, they continue to preserve their traditionally practiced arts and crafts, which are their unique feature.

Keyword: Indigenous Lepcha; Animism; Mountain environment; Darjeeling Himalaya.

Introduction

The Lepchas, one of the ancient mountain tribes of the Eastern Himalayan region, have distinct cultural practices, like most other indigenous groups of this region. Their way of living is centered around nature and natural entities and believed to be protected by the divine creators. Though Lepcha religious practices are different from animistic beliefs, certain rituals, customs and narrations depict similar forms of animism. Lepcha Shamans, often termed as Mun and Bongthing, are the spiritual practitioners and healers who are graced with special powers to communicate with the outer world of human territory, good and evil spirits, as well as non-human elements of nature. Present-day Lepchas are influenced by syncretism under Lamaism and converted to Christianity. Still Lepcha priests, often regarded as Shamans' presence hold importance from birth to death till date in Lepcha society. This form of belief, where rituals, ceremonies are performed by Shamans, is a way of harnessing balance between man and nature while protecting the mountain environment of Darjeeling Himalaya (Figure 1).

The study aims to understand the notions of creator deities and its relation to animism and shamanism. The work is based on a conceptual framework while doing fieldwork in the Darjeeling Himalaya and acquiring knowledge about various practices performed by a mountain tribe of the Eastern Himalaya, the Lepchas.

How do we see Animism and Shamanism?

The term animism is believed to have been coined by the Western mind and matter. Tylor (1913) initially distinguished animism from religion and considered animism as the foundation of religious beliefs. Later, animism as philosophy and religion has been shown under different lights. It is believed that all South East Asian diversity, like ethnicities, religions, livelihoods, cultural practices, and all forms of alterity, coexist with the animistic beliefs. Animism is believed to be present in indigenous communities across the globe. The very knowledge of our surroundings has an interrelation between the environment and other forms of beings, like animals, plants, natural and geographical entities, and even unexplainable supernatural beings. Animistic beliefs thus maintain an ecological understanding by preserving, protecting, and respecting natural elements.



Figure 1. A Lepcha lady is offering thanksgiving to the guardian deity Mt. Khangchendzonga, for the monsoon crops (by offering the first crop of the field to the deity, such as banana, pineapple, corn, cardamom, and bamboo). Photo by Pem Kit Lepcha.

Shamanism has been seen in all human societies, including in primitive societies. Eliade (1964) famously reviewed ethnographic descriptions of shamans around the world, documenting similarities in practice and mythology between Siberian shamanism on the one hand and practitioners in Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, on the other hand. In general, shamanism is a form of practice evolved through cross-cultural inclusivity. A shaman is an individual who makes people believe that he or she can exchange and communicate with invisible forces beyond mankind who control all unpredictable, extraordinary events on earth and beyond. Shamanism is a combined effect of individuals' claims of having special powers of interacting with other worlds or invisible agents and a cultural interpretation of the trance state of one's being.

The Lepcha's different approach to animistic beliefs in the Eastern Himalayan Region

Along with its geographical diversity, India has its deep-rooted cultural diversity reflected through cultural practices spread across the majestic Himalayan region, the lustrous Western Ghats, and to the secluded islands of Andaman and Nicobar. However, it is found that animism is present in indigenous communities profoundly, in the form of showing gratitude towards natural entities, referred to as guardian deities protecting humans, settlements, and livelihoods. Across the Himalayan region from west to east, there are all forms of entities, including rivers, forests, lakes, and peaks, which are worshipped by communities as they are intertwined with human lives and form a single whole identity. Indigenous communities of Eastern Himalaya have a transformative relationship between their landscape and associated traditional practices, which are formed with animism and persist with shamanism. Lepchas are such indigenous group who are referred to as *Rongkup* or *Rongpa*, meaning "children of God," inhabit the Eastern Himalaya and are distributed mainly across Sikkim and the northern parts of West Bengal. They considered themselves the children of the snowy peaks of Mt. Khangchendzonga, and their folk narratives revolve around elements of nature, reflected in their nature-based practices. Their socio-cultural setup is influenced by animistic beliefs and practices, which are primitive in nature.

In the Darjeeling Himalayas, there is an active participation and continuous involvement of local people in practicing rituals, which are reflected through their festivals (Figure 2). The Lepchas are often known for their indigenous ecological knowledge present in the form of divine creators, animism, and are often more sustainable, resilient in environmentally fragile regions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Pedong. However, it is interesting to know how they are precariously trying to maintain this belief system as the words of Mr. G. Gorer who wrote 'Himalayan Village' and Indira Awasthy amplified the fact that 'to present the kind of original Lepcha culture after the influence of Lamaism, the predominance of Nepalis and the inroads that Christianity has made on the Lepchas, is enormous'. From historical evidence, undoubtedly Lepcha beliefs are severely influenced by Lamaistic Buddhism, which has travelled from Kham province of Tibet, and animistic practices modified by such intrusion. The original religion of the Lepchas is Animism, performed by Lepcha female and male priests called '*Mun*' and '*Bongthing*', and also sometimes called "*Mun-bongthingism*" has a resemblance to Zoroastrian monotheism. It is a shamanistic form of worshipping supernatural powers. It has other names, such as the Bong cult and Mun religion.



Figure 2. The Namsoong folk dance performance is to welcome the new agricultural year (Lepcha Calendar) and honour the harmonious relationship with nature. Photo by Pem Kit Lepcha

The Divine Creators

It is believed that the Lepcha clan originated from *Itbo-mu*, the ancient mother, and her husband *Debu*, who is believed to have created the first Lepcha man and woman from the snows of Mt. Kanchandzonga (Figure 3), and they started living in the sacred land called Mayel Lyang and gave birth to their progenitor, believed to be the Lepcha god Tak-bo-thing. *Kongchen* is the presiding deity, and from its snow sacred rivers, *Rongit* and *Rongnyu* were created. The place above the sky is called Rum-Lyang, where Rum or God resides, and beneath that is said to be a place of water, fire, and wind. Even the existence of many malevolent spirits, demons, and devils is considered, who reside in trees, rocks, mountains, etc. As the Lepchas are firm believers of the supreme God and concurrently the presence of evils, they believed the special powers of Mun and Bongthing, who are the medium of communication between Rum, human beings, and spirits.



Figure 3. A replica of guardian deity Mt. Mt. Khangchendzonga which has similarity with Hindu deity 'Lord Shiva' and the 'Trishul (Trident)' signifies it. Photo by Author

Role of Shamans in performing rituals

Rong beliefs are mythological and philosophical at the same time. Their beliefs have different facets centered around offerings, sacrifices, fairy tales, performing ceremonies governed by the spirits, evil, and good. Lepchas or *Rongs*, being one of the oldest primitive people of *Mayel Lyang*, possess primordial beliefs often similar to Taoism but not often categorised as a religion where rituals hold a significant place to narrate philosophical and social ethos. This has made them a distinctive indigenous group of the Darjeeling Himalaya, where more than eleven other communities share cultural and geographical spaces. Lepcha Mun and Bongthings are practices by acquiring a priesthood through the possession of supernatural power. They are the Shamans who interact with the supreme God as well as evil spirits, along with the common people. *Mun*, together with *bongthing*, often called *padem* in Nepali, mostly perform with the belief in the presence of spirits in natural objects like trees, streams, mountains, and lakes. To eradicate the sufferings from one's life and render relief,

these shamans or priests perform ceremonies to ward off evil spirits, often called malevolent or black magic or *mung sek mun*. But there is another form, which is benevolent or white magic or *tuang ti mun*. Muns are often found to practice various rituals to deal with harmful evil spirits, which cause calamities, illness, and also, they perform rituals to connect with good spirits who are responsible for good harvest, curing illness, and bringing prosperity. In all the vital moments of life, from birth to marriage to last rites, the presence of muns is mandatory in the Lepcha tradition. Muns are mostly female (Figure 4), but it's gender-neutral, as male priests are often termed mun in the Lepchas Mun religion, if it is considered as a religion. They use *sadaer logs or sadaer long*, black thunder stones to cure labour pain as a talismanic power of magic can be compared with the faith of burning tree trunks in Celtic, German, and Slavic culture in Pagan belief to bring good luck, or like Hinduism, often worshipped as a sacred form of deity. However, Lepcha healing and curing medical ailments are completely dependent on the existence of supernatural power. Locally found specific plants, leaves, tree trunks, flowers, bark, and roots are respected by Lepchas as they have properties of curing people from diseases and acute illnesses. Shamans like Mun and Bongthings become healers while diagnosing and curing people by providing ethno medicines. Traditionally, these Muns and Bongthings possess the traditional knowledge of the uses of medicinal plants as well as healing procedures. They are often called to address any form of illness, which is different from their religious practices. So, there is always a dubious connotation of Shamanistic practices while referring to Lepcha society and traditions.



Figure 4. The author is interviewing Lepcha Mun (Shaman), Bibina Lepcha.

Lepcha Munism and Lamaism

Lamaism entered the Khangchendzonga landscape in the 17th century, and Lamaistic fanaticism was intertwined with Lepcha, a traditional animistic form of religious beliefs. Immigration of 'Khamba' and Tibetans drives the religious conversion of Lepchas to

Buddhism by Tibetan monks. They destroyed Rong scripts as well as their written form of practices. Rong mythology and philosophy got a new shape and format, and a symbiotic relationship formed between muns, lamas, rums, and moongs. Lepcha scripts were replaced; Tibetan religious books and scripts were converted to Lepcha scripts to propagate Lamaism. Lamaism is also practiced by priests, but it is also mixed with tantrism, which is considered an impure form of Buddhism. These Red Hats, who are followers of old tantric beliefs and modes of dress, and had a denial of change in beliefs, had incorporated into mun religion. Even the priest craft is learnt in Lamaism, which fundamentally lacks intellectuality. The same belief system of the presence of good, evil, mixture of good and evil, is followed by lamas like muns. Lamas and muns have become fortune tellers, predictors who have dreams of futuristic events, and they can foretell future events. Gorer described typical dreams like gathering sand, collecting wood, are symbols of a good harvest, often called lucky, whereas dreaming of a sick person lying on a bed means a bad harvest, drinking wine means heavy rains are signs of unlucky dreams. However, Munism or Bongthism revolves around Lepcha traditional beliefs of supernatural powers in the form of God, evil, and good spirits who have the power to create and destroy Lepcha society. Till today, Lepchas follow this belief system but are influenced by the Lamaistic practices (Figure 5), which are complicated. The importance of the Shamanistic practices of *Mun* and *Bongthing* has reduced, and they have only remained as traditional healers.



Figure 5. Pang Lhabsol, a festival to pay homage to Mt. Khangchendzonga as the guardian deity, which is also associated with Lamaism in this region. Photo by Pem Kit Lepcha

Protecting Mountain Environment

In the Darjeeling Himalayan region, Lepchas are mostly found in secluded villages, except few modernised city dwellers. They are not socially well organised, and the functioning of the Lepcha social organisations is also influenced by multiple factors. However, traditional environmental practices of the Lepchas are well ingrained in their folklore and reflected through their ceremonies and festivals. Nowadays, Lepchas in the Kalimpong Darjeeling region are under Christian missionaries, and the practices of the old Mun religion are restricted

to a few. The nature-centric Mun-Bongthing religion also consists of scientific values in its indigenous knowledge system and practice of medicinal plants to cure diseases and illnesses (Figure 6). For centuries, these practices protected the fragile environment and distinguished the identity of this indigenous community. Such beliefs help in protecting the natural entities in the form of worshipping them. Integration of these knowledge systems can be useful in the conservation of biodiversity and local ecology. However, these practices are slowly losing importance with the dominance of other communities. Losing their cultural environmental practices is a threat to their survival and the mountain environment.



Figure 6. Crofton Weed (*Ageratina adenophora*) Plant is used by Muns (Lepcha priests and healers) to heal wounds. Photo by Surajit Banerjee

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