A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LEPCHA ORTHOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE

HELEEN PLAISIER

Leiden University

Introduction

The Lepcha people are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim. The Lepcha language is spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling district in West Bengal in India, in Ilām district in Nepal, and in a few villages of Samtsi district in south-western Bhutan. The tribal homeland of the Lepcha people is referred to as ne máyel 'hidden paradise' or ne máyel málúk 'land of eternal purity'. Most of the areas in which Lepcha is spoken today were once Sikkimese territory, as the kingdom of Sikkim used to comprise all of present-day Sikkim and most of Darjeeling district.

Today the Lepcha people constitute a minority of the population of modern Sikkim, which has been flooded by immigrants from Nepal. Although many Lepcha people estimate their number of speakers to be over 50,000, the total number of Lepcha speakers is likely to be much smaller. According to the 1991 Census of India, the most recent statistical profile for which the data have been disaggregated, the total number of mother tongue Lepcha speakers across the nation is 29,854. While their distribution is largely in Sikkim and the northern districts of West Bengal, there are no reliable speaker numbers for the Darjeeling district, where there are many Lepcha villages particularly in the area surrounding the small town of Kalimpong. There are reportedly roughly a hundred Lepcha households in Ilām, mainly in the villages Nāmsāliṅ, Phikkal, Kolbuṅ, Paṅcānyā, Kanyām, Śrī Antu and Cisopānī, and approximately a thousand Lepcha speakers in Samtsi District, in Denchukha north of the 'Amochu in Bhutan (van Driem 2001: 819). Although Lepcha is unmistakably a Tibeto-Burman language, its exact position within the Tibeto-Burman language family is still unclear.

The English name ‘Lepcha’ derives from Nepali lāpe or lāpcā, which originally had the derogatory connotation of ‘inarticulate speech’. Nowadays, the term ‘Lepcha’ is widely used without this connotation. The Lepcha call themselves mūtuncī rōṅkup rūmkup ‘children of the Róng and of God’, or simply
rongkup ‘children of the Róng’. Alternatively, the Lepcha people may call themselves ᶞ ᶜ g rong ḋágít ‘the Róng tribe’. The Lepcha word for ‘language’ is ᶜ g ḋáring, and the Lepcha call their own language ᶜ g róngring.

The Lepcha divide themselves into four main groups according to the region they inhabit. The Lepcha from Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik and Darjeeling are known as ᶞ ᶛ támšám, the Lepcha from Sikkim are called ᶞ ᶛ renjóngmú. The smaller group of Lepcha living in the Ilām district of eastern Nepal are known as ᶞ ᶛ ñilámm, and the Lepcha who live in ᶞ prolyáŋ ‘Bhutan’ are referred to as ᶞ promú. The Lepcha of Kalimpong, though formerly part of Bhutanese territory, are Támsángmú and not Promú. There is some debate over whether the Lepcha from Kurseong, Darjeeling and Mirik should belong to the Renjóngmú or the Támsángmú Lepcha, as some people use the name Támsángmú strictly for Lepcha living in and around Kalimpong.

The four groups do not represent four different dialects; although there are regional differences between the Lepcha spoken in different areas, these differences are largely lexical. The Lepcha spoken by the Renjóngmú is generally more influenced by Denjongkay, the language spoken by the Bhutia people of Sikkim, than the Lepcha spoken by the Támsángmú, which in itself is more influenced by Nepali than the Lepcha spoken by the Renjóngmú. Since there is a lot of mobility between Sikkim and Darjeeling district, with children going to school or college or finding jobs in areas different from where their parents live, the regional influences are not always straightforward. However, the sense of regional identity is strong enough, buttressed by a number of real cultural differences, between the Renjóngmú and the Támsángmú to make the distinction between these major groups within the Lepcha speaking community a vital one.

In Sikkim, Lepcha is one of eleven official languages. Lepcha is taught in schools, there is a textbook department that develops official learning materials, there is a Lepcha edition of a government newspaper, the Sikkim Herald, and the government radio station broadcasts news bulletins and cultural programmes in the Lepcha language. A special area in North Sikkim holds the ᵁ Dzongú [zónggú] Lepcha reserve, a Lepcha conservation area where but few outsiders have been allowed to settle. In the Darjeeling district, the Lepcha have had to struggle to get official status in order to receive special benefits and to be able to have air time on the official radio stations. The Lepcha Association, which is a social and cultural
organisation with several different branches and chapters in which many Lepcha people have organised themselves, coordinates evening classes in the Lepcha language and other social and cultural initiatives, such as festivals and archery competitions.

The Lepcha are divided into various clans or families known as པི་ཤེས་ putsho and each clan has its own རྡ་ dâ ‘lake’ and ལྕ་ cû ‘mountain peak’. The cû are regularly honoured in རུལ་ rumfât ‘mountain worship’ ceremonies. In the Kalimpong area, the origin of the clan names is traditionally explained as follows: when the evil king གཞལ་ lhäsö múng ‘Lhasa Devil’ was killed by གང་ tâmsâng thîng ‘Lord Tâmsâng’, then Lord Tâmsâng expressed his gratitude to 108 men by bestowing upon each of them an honorary title, as well as placing each of them under the protection of a specific lake and mountain peak. The honorary titles developed into clan names, such as བིསོ སོམ། lûksömmû, ལཱེང སོམ། simîkmû, ཁྲ སོམ། sadámû. Although most Lepcha know to which putsho they belong, they do not always know the corresponding dâ and cû. Today the full clan name may be shortened, e.g. Simik from བིསོ simîkmû, anglicised and shortened, e.g. Foning from མོ། fông rumsóngmû, or the clan name may be substituted by the generic epithet ‘Lepcha’, e.g. Dorji Tshering Lepcha.

The central religious roles in the Lepcha community are traditionally occupied by the གཟུབ བོང་ bôngthing, who both function as shamans. The bôngthing is traditionally a male shaman who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals and may heal acute illness. The mun, often but not necessarily a female shaman, is a healer who exorcises demons, helps to heal illness and guides souls to the afterlife. It is possible for a bôngthing to develop into a mun, in Sikkim such healers are known as གཞས padem. In the eighteenth century, the Lepcha people were converted to Buddhism, although indigenous Lepcha shamanism managed to coexist with Buddhist customs and beliefs. Both Buddhist lamas and Lepcha bôngthings preside at many important ceremonies in Lepcha life, each to perform their own rituals. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, in the Darjeeling district a significant number of Lepcha people have converted to Christianity. Many Christian Lepcha people have lost their language and have distanced themselves from the old shamanistic rituals and beliefs. This stance occasionally gives rise to tension between Buddhist and Christian Lepcha.
History of Studies on the Lepcha Language

Archibald Campbell published a short list of Lepcha words in 1840 and a short introduction on Lepcha in 1869. In 1842, the independent clergyman William Start brought more than twenty German missionaries to Darjeeling in order to start a Christian mission post there. Although the initiative was not a lasting success, William Start and his colleague Karl Gottlieb Niebel did run a school for Lepcha children in Tukvär, near Darjeeling, for some time and translated parts of the Bible into Lepcha (Start and Niebel 1849, 1872). When Start returned to England in 1852, Niebel continued his missionary work in the area. A commemorative plaque in St. Columba’s Church in Darjeeling reads: ‘1865. Karl G. Niebel, 23 years translator with the Lepcha, died’ (Perry 1997: 31). Some of the other missionaries that Start had brought over settled in the region and started up various businesses.

At around the same time that William Start became interested in the Darjeeling area, Colonel George Byres Mainwaring of the Bengal Staff Corps made his first visit to Darjeeling. The Lepcha customs and way of life had a great impact on Mainwaring, who saw all the traits of Lepcha culture he so admired reflected in their language. He was the first to write a grammar of Lepcha, which was published in 1876. Mainwaring worked on a Lepcha dictionary as well, the manuscript of which was edited and published in 1898 by Albert Grünwedel after Mainwaring’s death. Mainwaring’s work has been of pivotal importance for the survival of the Lepcha language, although it has also been criticised because of its strong latinate bias.

Apart from editing Mainwaring’s dictionary, Albert Grünwedel published translations of Lepcha texts based on Tibetan sources. Lawrence Waddell published an article with remarks on a number of Lepcha place names in 1892, and in an article in 1899 he translated and explained nine Lepcha songs. In his account of Tibetan Buddhism, Waddell (1895) also described Lepcha religious practices. These works were followed by different short accounts of the Lepcha language by Schott (1881), Drouin (1901) and Feer (1898).

Several studies on Lepcha culture or aspects thereof have been published, such as those by Stocks (1925), Morris (1938), Gorer (1938), Hermanns (1954) and later Klafkowsi (1980, 1983), Thakur (1988) and Chattopadhyay (1990). The Austrian tibetologist René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz published extensively on the religion of the Lepcha until his early death in 1959. The most important
anthropological study of the Lepcha people and their culture remains the monumental work by Halfdan Siiger and Jørgen Rischel, published in 1967.


The Lepcha Textbook Officers in the Department of Human Resource Development (formerly the Department of Education) of the Government of Sikkim and the various Lepcha Associations of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim have been publishing periodicals, books, plays and collections of poetry in Lepcha for decades. The Lepcha author Arthur Foning published his influential book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* in 1987, and the book was reprinted in 2003. Two other outstanding Lepcha scholars, Khárpú Támsáng and Dóngtshen Luksóm, have both published grammars of Lepcha written in Lepcha, i.e. Támsáng (1978), Luksóm (1981), as well as other studies.

Several dictionaries of the Lepcha language have been compiled (Cemjong 1970, Grünwedel 1898a, Kumar 1978). Khárpú Támsáng’s magnificent *Lepcha English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, published in 1980, is indispensable to anyone working on Lepcha. In 1983, a *Lepcha Hindi English Dictionary* was compiled by Dóngtshen Luksóm. In 1996, an *English to Lepcha Dictionary* was published by the eminent Lepcha authors Ugen Shipmú, Karma Lode Rigimú, Nakú Tshering Likmú and OdRij Vwaid kNuC Dorji Wángdi Kunchúdyangmú.

Ever since its first issue in 1997, the quarterly Lepcha bilingual news magazine *Aachuley [áčúle]* published by the Lepcha Literary Organisation in Kalimpong and edited by Lyángsóng Támsáng, has proven to be an important forum for contributions on Lepcha language and culture written by authors from all over the world.
The Lepcha Script

The Lepcha have their own indigenous script which dates back to the 18th century. The Lepcha script is written from left to right, with spaces between words. In Lepcha, no distinction is made between capital and lower-case letters. Punctuation marks are similar to the ones used in the Tibetan orthography, although nowadays full stops, commas and question marks from the Roman alphabet are also used. The ‘alphabet’ or ‘syllabary’ is referred to in the Lepcha language as abus kakha ‘ABC’, abus choming ‘written letters’ and abus mingzat ‘treasure of letters’. The native Lepcha orthography is systematically treated in the text abus lazong, the book on the Lepcha alphabet, which is traditionally used to teach Lepcha orthography (Plaisier 2003: 31-32).

The order of the Lepcha alphabet as given in the abus lazong is different to the order in which the Lepcha alphabet is taught and read out today. The original Lepcha syllabary was built out of five units, as given below in Diagram 1 below, the first units running from abus ?a to abus ma, and the second unit running from abus ha to abus tha, etc. Although most abus lazong books use the same order, occasionally there is some variation in the order of the units. A similar conclusion was pointed to by R. K. Sprigg in his article ‘Original and sophisticated features of the Lepcha and Limbu scripts’ (1998). The order of the consonant symbols within the five units may vary slightly between different versions of the abus lazong, between the introductory summary of the alphabet in the opening part of abus lazong and the actual listing of all possible syllables in abus lazong books. However, the differences are minor and most of them are apparently oversights of the copyists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>?a</th>
<th>ka</th>
<th>ga</th>
<th>pa</th>
<th>fa</th>
<th>ba</th>
<th>ma</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>ta</td>
<td>tha</td>
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<td>ya</td>
<td>sha</td>
<td>cha</td>
<td>tsha</td>
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</table>

Diagram 1: Original order of the syllabary
In the བོད་ལྷ་གོང་, all the orthographic symbols and combinations of symbols are treated in a specific order, building from simple consonant or vowel signs to more complex syllables. Apart from a few paragraphs which introduce the different sections making up the book, the བོད་ལྷ་གོང་ does not contain running text as such. The traditional method of instruction is for the teacher to recite sections of the བོད་ལྷ་གོང་ in a set melody and for the students to read and chant along with the teacher, until the students have memorised the values of the letters and the syllables and are able to read and to recite by themselves. Although most people nowadays learn to read and write Lepcha through primers and textbooks based on different methods, the traditional method based on recitation of the བོད་ལྷ་གོང་ is still practised. The list of possible syllables in Lepcha given by Mainwaring in his grammar (1876: 12-18), is clearly based on the བོད་ལྷ་གོང་. The order of the syllabary that is mostly used in primers and textbooks today, clearly influenced by the order of the devanāgarī alphabet, is given in Diagram 2 below, starting with अ a, ए ka, ग kha, गङ ga, र nga, and ending with एbla, एmla, एhla.

The 36 consonant symbols अक्षिका chom ing ṭāmo or अक्षिकाः अक्षिका ṭāmū ṭāmīng ‘consonants, mother letters’ are given below with a Roman transliteration of each symbol. When the consonant is not marked by any vowel sign, the inherent vowel of the consonant is the vowel transliterated as a.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>अ</th>
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Diagram 2: Consonant letters
Vowel diacritics may be added to the consonant symbols. The vowel diacritics are traditionally known as ( características 'vowel signs, child letters, small letters’ and características ‘diacritical vowel signs’.

Any Lepcha consonant may occur at the beginning of a syllable. Although all Lepcha vowels may be found at the end of a syllable, only a limited number of consonants can occur syllable-finally. The consonants found at the end of syllables are: -k, -t, -n, -p, -m, -r, -l and -ng. The características ‘final consonant signs’ are given in Diagram 4 below.

The características sign, i.e. ‘ang’, is used to indicate a final velar nasal when no specific vowel sign is indicated, as in características. The características sign, i.e. ‘’, is used to indicate a final velar nasal in combination with diacritical vowel signs, as in the syllables características, características, and características. The distinction between the características sign and the características sign is not always made when people discuss orthography, often the características is used as a general term for a written final velar nasal.

For those consonant clusters in which the initial consonant is followed by one of the post-consonantal glides -y, -r or -l, the term características ‘conjunct consonants, affixed consonants’ is used. The características series includes the consonant symbols características, características, características, and características, which are also sometimes referred to as the características ‘l-cluster’, literally ‘l-affix’. The orthography also has special symbols for post-consonantal -y and -r, i.e. the characteristics ‘y-affix’ and the characteristics ‘r-affix’. The characteristics and characteristics symbols can be used in combination with each other, as for example in characteristics ‘suspect’. The characteristics and characteristics symbols may also be used in combination with the características series, as in characteristics ‘lukewarm, tepid’, in which case the characteristics always follows either the characteristics or the characteristics. The characteristics and characteristics may not be combined with each other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>symbol</th>
<th>transliteration</th>
<th>name of symbol</th>
<th>examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-k</td>
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<td>-m</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-l</td>
<td>ஆலாம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-n</td>
<td>ஆண்மாளம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-p</td>
<td>ஆன்மாளம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-r</td>
<td>ஆலாம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-t</td>
<td>ஆண்மாளம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-ng</td>
<td>ஆன்மாளம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-ang</td>
<td>ஆலாம்</td>
<td>பொன்</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For retroflex sounds, which occur mainly in loanwords from Denjongkay, the clusters க்யா, ஹ்ரா and யா னா are used, e.g. த்ரோம் ‘town, market’, and ட்ரோக் சி ‘thank you’. The retroflex sounds are usually marked by a dot written below the graph, so as to distinguish these sounds from the unmarked non-retroflex sounds க்யா, ஹ்ரா and யா னா, which occur widely in Lepcha, e.g. க்ரு ?்ரு ‘hunger’, and ஹ்ரா னா ‘come up, arrive’. This useful diacritic was introduced by Mainwaring (1876: 10-11), and is known as Mainwaring’s dot. Mainwaring suggests that the dot was also used with the letters ன னா and ன னா, but this particular usage is no longer found (Mainwaring 1876: 10-11).
Although not all Lepcha writers favour the orthographic innovation, Mainwaring’s dot is still widely used to indicate retroflex sounds.

Diagram 6: Retroflex consonants

The ꞏ rān ‘circumflex’ sign is a diacritic flourish written over a consonant sign or over a vowel sign ‘ä’, as in ꞏ rān, ꞏ ë or ꞏ ũ. Although the original function of the ꞏ rān sign is still unclear, it is often present in closed syllables, in which case the circumflex sign should be written above the final consonant sign. It has been suggested that the function of the ꞏ rān is to indicate stress or pitch, in order to distinguish stressable syllables from syllables that never appear in a stressed position, and this hypothesis may well be correct (Plaisier 2003: 28-29, Sprigg 1983: 316). However, because the function of the ꞏ rān sign is unclear to most writers, nowadays the sign is used by the Lepcha in a variety of ways, and opinions vary strongly as to which is the correct usage.

Although many Lepcha believe that a literary tradition existed among the Lepcha before the arrival of Buddhism in the area, thus far no evidence has been found to corroborate this claim. It seems more likely that the invention of the Lepcha alphabet was motivated by the religious activities of Buddhist missionaries. The Buddhist monks were keen to communicate with the Lepcha people in their own language, and as so often happens when the influence of a new religion spreads, religious texts were translated into the local language of the area, in this case Lepcha, for which an alphabet had yet to be created (Plaisier 2003: 20-23, Risley 1894: 13, Sprigg 1983, 1996).

The Lepcha script is understood to have been devised during the reign of the third chogyal of Sikkim, བཞིབ་ཆོས་དཔའ་ཆོས་དབྱིབས་ Chogyal Chador Namgyal (imperabat 1700 - 1716). According to Lepcha tradition, the native Lepcha orthography was created by the Lepcha scholar གཤོ་ཆེན་བྲིས་ Thikung Mensalóng, who is believed to have been a contemporary of ཁྲི། སྒྲོ་ཉར་ Lhatsun Chenpo, i.e. ཁྲི། སྒྲོ་ཉར་ Namkha Jigme (1597 - 1654), the patron saint of Sikkim, who played a definitive part in the Sikkimese conversion to Buddhism. Since sources mention that ཁྲི། སྒྲོ་ཉར་ Mensalóng and Lhatsun
Chenpo met each other (Foning 1987: 152), it might well have been the case that they worked together on the Lepcha orthography, which would account for a Tibetan tradition which ascribes the introduction of the Lepcha script to Lhatsun Chenpo. The Lepcha tradition that credits Mensalóng with the invention of the Lepcha script seems even more plausible when we realise that during the reign of Chador Namgyal not just the Lepcha script, but also the Limbu or Kiranti script was developed, not by Chador Namgyal himself, but by the Limbu monk Śirijāṅgā (van Driem 2001: 674-675).

Lepcha literature has hardly been studied at all, yet it is generally believed that an indigenous Lepcha literature does not exist. This view is based on the fact that many written Lepcha texts are translations, or rather adaptations, of Tibetan Buddhist works. Since the Lepcha script was probably introduced to write down Lepcha translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts, and keeping in mind that the original Lepcha stories were passed on orally, from generation to generation, and were traditionally not written down, it is not surprising that most Lepcha texts are indeed of a Buddhist nature. However, despite the large amount of books that show a strong Tibetan influence, there are also many books with a native Lepcha character. Many tales clearly reflect values and beliefs of the indigenous shamanistic Lepcha religion. In this respect, Piotr Klafkowski makes the important point that the Tibetan influence on Lepcha literature has been much overemphasised (1980: 112, 1983: 172). Apart from the indigenous Lepcha shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism, other religions and folkloristic traditions from Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal may also have influenced Lepcha literature and Lepcha oral traditions. The precise nature of the influence of all of these traditions on Lepcha literature is yet to be studied in detail.

The entire complex of Lepcha myths, legends, fables and fairy-tales that has been orally transmitted throughout the centuries is known as གུང་ལུང་སུང་‘mythology, legends’. Traditional Lepcha narratives contain views and statements on fundamental matters of life and are aimed at the survival of the traditional values of the Lepcha community that they reflect. Some of these accounts deal with universal issues like the origin and destiny of the human world or with matters of life, death and the afterlife. Many myths contain religious truths or explain different aspects of religious teachings, such as the functions and tasks of gods and goddesses. These narratives are sometimes closely related to religious rituals, but not all myths are of a religious nature. Some myths may attempt to explain the history of the
Lepcha community, their ethics and moral philosophy, their places of pilgrimage and traditional Lepcha customs, such as family laws, marriage customs, hunting techniques and dietary proscriptions.

In the titles of Lepcha texts we often find an indication of genre, such as भुंग ‘story, narrative’, चो ‘book, learning, doctrine, dharma, religion’, ऋण ‘prayer, blessing’, or नाम ‘legend, biography’. A book referred to as चो typically conveys a canonical message, whereas a ऋण is usually a prayerbook of some kind. A नाम is generally a text containing a sacred legend, some chapter of native lore or a hagiography about the life of a saint or miracle-worker. The term भुंग ‘story, narrative’ is used specifically for traditional stories that were originally not written down, but transmitted orally. In a broader sense, भुंग refers to narratives or stories in general. We find the term ‘भुंग’ in the titles of many well-known Lepcha texts, such as the text entitled भुंग ‘The story of Lord Tashe’. The latter text can be considered to be the pivotal masterpiece of Lepcha literature, and it has been transmitted in many different versions, oral as well as written. The title भुंग भुंग is also used for fragments of the complete story of Lord Tashe. In fact, the genre names are not always used in a consistent fashion by the Lepcha. For example, the text भुंग भुंग is also referred to as भुंग नाम भुंग, भुंग चो, भुंग चो, and भुंग चो.

present author has published a catalogue describing the unique collection of Lepcha manuscripts kept in Leiden, the world’s largest collection of Lepcha texts (Plaisier 2003). This catalogue also contains an introduction to Lepcha literary history and a survey of the smaller collections of Lepcha manuscripts in London, Gangtok and Vienna.

Whereas the literary language used in books such as བསྟེ་འབྲི་སྟོན་ is laced with Buddhist terminology and loans from Tibetan, the language used in Lepcha folk songs — of which there are many — is usually less influenced by Buddhist vocabulary. Lepcha songs are discussed in some detail in the publications of Waddell (1899), Das (1978: 233-234) and Chattophadhyay (1990: 68-102). Several Lepcha song books have been published, e.g. by ཤོན་ཀྲོང་ ཕྲོ་གྲོ་ Sonám Tshering Támsáng (1986). René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz collected some wedding songs during his stay with the Lepcha people, which he later published and discussed (1952). Lyángsóng Támsáng (1998) devoted an informative article to the highly specific genre of the ལྷག་པར་བོད་ ‘hymn, classical song’.

From this brief introductory article, it will be clear that further research into Lepcha literature would benefit from careful translations and analyses of important traditional Lepcha texts as well as from written versions of indigenous songs, myths and stories that are as yet to be committed to paper.

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