

IN AWE OF SO MANY *MÚNG*:  
HALFDAN SIIGER IN THE SIKKIM HIMALAYAS

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*Introduction*

As a member of the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia, Halfdan Siiger (1911-1999) worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sikkim and India from 1947 to 1950. During the expedition Siiger studied the culture and religion of the Kalasha, Lepcha and Boro people and collected artefacts for the collection of the National Museum of Denmark, where he was employed as a curator. In 1960, ten years after the expedition, Siiger was appointed Professor in the History of Religions at the University of Århus. This article describes Siiger's work on the Lepchas of Sikkim and introduces several significant unpublished documents in Siiger's archives.

When Siiger conducted his fieldwork, the Lepcha people had already received attention in the literature. Most of the early works in which the Lepchas were mentioned are introductory scholarly articles or personal reflections of early travellers in the Himalayan region (M. Avery 1878, J. Avery 1885, Campbell 1840 and 1869, Das 1896, Donaldson 1900, Drouin 1901, Feer 1898, Hodgson 1847, Hooker 1855, Roy 1916, Schott 1855). Several people had devoted substantial efforts in describing specific linguistic or cultural aspects of the Lepcha tribe, notably George Byres Mainwaring, Albert Grünwedel, Laurence Augustine Waddell, Cheridah Annie de Beauvoir Stocks, John Morris and Geoffrey Gorer, listed below. These writings generally paint the picture of a group of people who are timid and happy to be left alone, though at the same time friendly, trustworthy and more easy-going than some other tribes in the Sikkim Himalayas.

Siiger's writings on the Lepcha people and their religion are characterised by his descriptive approach, which may be called analytical, but never theoretical. Siiger always credits his sources and assistants and in most cases gives the original Lepcha expressions or texts for the reader to refer back to, as well as mentioning the origin of his sources. This is important because there are significant differences between the language and culture of Lepchas from Sikkim and for

example the area around Kalimpong. Most of Siiger's fieldwork was done in the Dzongu area of Sikkim, where the Lepchas lived in fairly isolated surroundings, but Siiger also recognised the existence of old Lepcha traditions among the Lepchas of the Kalimpong district and did some research there.

### *Fieldwork experiences*

Halfdan Siiger spent several months in Sikkim and Kalimpong in 1949 and 1950. Among Siiger's unpublished papers there are two travel journals of his fieldwork in Sikkim, one written in English and the other written in Danish. In published materials Siiger also devoted several pages to a description of his fieldwork and his assistants, but the original journals are of a more spontaneous nature and offer us a fresh insight into his experiences, which are outlined in an account of his fieldwork below. Siiger's travel journals are in the care of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen.

Siiger was in Gangtok when he first received permission to visit the Dzongu area in February 1949, but he was only permitted to visit the area during daytime. Siiger visited Dzongu between February 16 and 21, having to spend the nights in the *dāk* bungalows of Dikchu and Singhik. About this first visit, Siiger wrote in his travel notes:

These two excursions in Jongu had given me the impression that a thorough scientific study in this area would be very valuable and important. But a permission to make my permanent camp inside the area itself was absolutely necessary, as about half of each day was spent in coming and going from and to the eastern side of Teesta (Siiger 1949: Introduction).

Siiger applied for a more extensive permit to visit Dzongu and was granted permission by the Maharaja of Sikkim on 21 March 1949:

Reference your letter dated the 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1949, on the above subject, you are hereby informed that His Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim has been pleased to grant you permission to camp at Jongu for a couple of months, as a very special case, for your scientific studies, on the condition that you will not go west of Ringyong and Rangli Chu (Siiger 1949: Introduction).

Pollo Tshering Lepcha, who was just twenty years old at the time, accompanied Siiger to Dzongu and worked as his assistant and

interpreter. Pollo Tshering was recommended to Siiger by various people and turned out to be very capable and pleasant to work with. In the team that set off to Dzongu there were also the Sherpa Angdawa, who was to work as a cook and servant for the team, and twelve bearers who carried luggage and equipment, helped by three ponies. They travelled from Gangtok to Dikchu on April 9, 1949 and on to Mangan and Singhik the next day, crossing the Teesta river by the bridge leading from Mangan into Dzongu on April 10, 1949. Upon arrival in Tingvong, Siiger wrote in his journal:

About 4.30 p.m. we reached at Tingbung. We made our camping-ground on a grass field belonging to a peasant. Both our two tents were fortunately erected before the rain started, about 7.00 p.m. We have been very lucky that we since our start from Gangtok have not had rain until we had raised our tents in Tingbung. The coolies put up one of my big canvases on a bamboo-stand and in this made themselves a shelter (Siiger 1949: April 10).

Then I went to bed and was happy because I now was in the Lepcha area, and we were ready for starting our work (Siiger 1949: April 10).

The next day, Siiger woke up to a rainy day, which was largely spent rearranging their camp, but Siiger managed to start work as early as April 12.

About 8.00 a.m. arrived a Lepcha by name Rapgyur. He told us about gods and devils. Later on arrived his father called Gyapon Rigzing who recited some festival songs to us. After lunch we continued with the young man and worked with sports, games and plays. After tea we visited the house of the old man (Siiger 1949: April 12).

On April 12, Siiger also wrote:

In the evening the rain had stopped. The full moon was high on the sky. The mountains were black, only Narsingh lay wonderfully as floating in the air, bathed in the rays from the moon. It is the most supernatural view I have ever seen (Siiger 1949: April 12).

Siiger stayed in Tingvong from April 11 until June 26, 1949. Siiger interviewed many different people, who would usually come to visit him in Tingvong, although Siiger and Pollo Tshering also went to visit people at their own homes. Siiger's travel notes suggest that he spent a productive two months in Tingvong, collecting old Lepcha texts and

stories and information about rituals and customs, acquiring artefacts and taking photographs.

In the morning and forenoon Tsering and I worked with names of persons, designations on the members of the family, and the rules for inheritance. In the afternoon, I sent Tsering to call someone. We got Norden. He told us about his father's big family. Later on the headman himself arrived and we questioned him about the festival-calendar and other religious problems. When Kha'lak turned up we were quite a party, and naturally, there was now a good opportunity for more free conversation. We got some proverbs and the old man told an animal narrative (Siiger 1949: April 19).

From Siiger's notes it clearly emerges that he was frustrated when people who had promised to come and work with him cancelled for unclear reasons. Often enough he managed to turn such occasions to his advantage to work with Pollo Tshering on field notes, as he did on April 21.

Sun and rain changing during the day. None of our appointments turned up. We therefore had to work alone. In the morning we worked with Lepcha-texts, went them over, corrected them, and made several fair copies. In the afternoon Tsering made a fair copy of the story of the fox, told by the old headman. And together we made a list of names of body-parts, colours, landscape and sicknesses (Siiger 1949: April 21).

Although he had permission to stay in Dzongu until July 25, with the imminent arrival of the monsoon the weather got so bad that Siiger decided to leave on June 27. This was also convenient because the cook Angdawa had been having some health problems.

For some time it has been damp, and my clothes have often been clammy. But it was to me a sign that now we had better soon leave, as the weather will be constantly more rain and foggy. I talked it over with Tsering, and we decided to make arrangements with Rigzing. At first I proposed that we could leave on Tuesday. But Tsering told me it was an unlucky day, and it seemed to get Rigzing's agreement. It was therefore decided that we should start early Monday morning. This arrangement was also good, because Angdawa then, if necessary, can get proper treatment in Mangan (Siiger 1949: June 24).

In general, Siiger was very concerned about the health of the people around him. At the start of his stay in Tingvong he had taken great care

to try and cure a woman who was quite ill, treating her with some medicines he brought for himself, writing to doctors in Mangan for advice as to how to treat her and finally arranging for her to be sent off to hospital when she wouldn't get better.

In the morning, the woman's wound began bleeding. Now it was not a little, which had happened before, but rather much. Tsering and I did not know what to do and as we were not sure that it would not happen again, or how much it would be next time, I decided to let her carry to Mangan Dispensary. I ordered two coolies besides her husband, and I told them to make a stretcher on which they could carry her. It could easily be done by bamboo-canes and bamboo-strings. But the headman who was one of the coolies declared that because of the difficult route they could not carry her on a stretcher. Instead they of bamboo made a sort of hand-barrow. Then they would, by turn, carry her on their backs. I was not completely satisfied with this arrangement, but my protest was in vain. About 11 a.m. they went off, the woman, her husband, the headman and another local man. They said they would be able to reach Mangan before evening. I gave the woman and her husband 12 R. which they eventually could use for a pony from Mangan to Gangtok. I also wrote a letter for the chief of the Dispensary in Mangan. Now I hope that she will arrive in safety at Mangan. I don't know what else I could have done for her. The whole time she has been here, we have treated her as best we could. I have also written to the Medical Officer in Gangtok for advice as to her treatment, but I have got no reply (Siiger 1949: April 27).

On June 27, 1949, Siiger, Pollo Tshering, Angdawa and a group of new bearers left Tingvong and travelled to Mangan:

About 8.20 a.m. the whole caravan started. It was really a difficult route because the jungle had grown much bigger and thicker since our arrival and because of all the water that the steadily rain had brought. About 11 a.m. we crossed the bamboo bridge below Nampruk, and now it went through the low jungle. It was still more dense and closed, and the temperature was almost as in a hothouse. Near Mangan-bridge we rested for some time in a Rest house. The Mangan bridge had been repaired and was all right (Siiger 1949: June 27).

They travelled on to the *dāk* bungalow in Singhik, where Siiger and Pollo Tshering were to stay for slightly over a month. After a few days of settling in, Siiger went back to work.

During the forenoon we got the Lepcha chowkidar of the Bungalow to tell us something on the villages here in the neighbourhood and their inhabitants. In the evening his son told us a Lepcha story. Except for that I prepared some official letters. But fortunately, it seems rather possible that we shall be able to collect some good materials here (Siiger 1949: July 1).

And indeed, from his diary it is clear Siiger managed to get quite a lot of work done during his time in Singhik:

Good weather most of the day, a little rain in the evening. During the morning Tsering and I worked with the text on weddings. It is a long and difficult one. It is good it has been finished. In the evening Djukne turned up and we proceeded with the story of Gjaebu king. It is very exciting and Tsering and I enjoy it (Siiger 1949: July 9).

Being in a less remote area than Dzongu, Siiger's social life picked up and his notes mention meeting and visiting several people who lived nearby. Through Siiger's and Pollo Tshering's local contacts, some people were recommended and sent to work with him, for example Adir Lepcha who arrived with the following letter of introduction, kept in the Siiger archives at the University of Århus at Moesgård:

Dear Sir, this is the man who knows eight Lepcha tales. He knows very well Lepcha mun and bongthing. Mun is the real Lepcha priest & Bongthing too is a priest who makes medication to the spirits of Patriarch. This man can tell you frankly about its creation [Signed Palden Tenzing, 17/7/49].

Indeed, in Siiger's travel notes we read numerous entries about Adir, who worked closely with Siiger and Pollo Tshering for almost two weeks, from July 17 till 29.

Siiger was very keen to visit Lachen and Lachung, but his journal shows there were several initial setbacks.

Tsering went to the Missionary House above Mangan to visit Miss Vitants who is normally staying in Lachen, has been there for many years, and could tell us if there would be any work for us to do at Lachen. He returned in the afternoon with many kind regards and a letter. Miss Vitants had told him that during the summer months almost nobody was in Lachen, all people had gone away, either to Tibet or to their fields and cattle houses up in the mountains. Presumably we in

Lachen would only meet the Chowkidar of the Dak Bungalow. Now I must consider the whole matter (Siiger 1949: June 29).

In the afternoon the overseer (road inspector) Mr Bannerjee, returned from Yumtang. He told [us] that the road to Lachen, on a long distance had been completely washed away, and that it was very dangerous to go there. We spent the morning in his company and he was our guest at dinner (Siiger 1949: July 13).

Nevertheless, when he received permission to go on August 1, 1949, Siiger, Angdawa and Pollo Tshering set off as soon as they could. Siiger very much enjoyed his trip of about two weeks to that part of Sikkim and apart from sightseeing, he was able to work on his final report of the Lepcha fieldwork. He and Pollo Tshering also took many photos and bought several Bhutia objects for the National Museum of Denmark. Siiger's travel notes during this part of his stay in Sikkim suggest that he was much more relaxed than before, possibly because this excursion into a new part of the country was like a holiday for him and the main part of his fieldwork was now behind him.

We bought several pieces of clothes of the Lachen-Lachung type. I continued my work. In the evening we had invited the schoolmaster and his family for dinner. They arrived: schoolmaster himself, his wife, his son and his daughter-in-law, and the young couple's small daughter. After dinner I showed them my photos of my family and some books. Later on Tsering played his violin, and they started dancing. Two girls from the village turned up and joined the dance. It was very gay (Siiger 1949: August 10).

At 6.00 p.m. we were guests at dinner in the schoolmaster's house. We got tea, champa, eggs, boiled meat, wheat-bread, potatoes, chang and a little wine before we took leave at 10.00 p.m. After dinner a lot of people collected, Tsering played the violin, I sang a Danish song, and the young folks entertaine us with songs and dances. At last they made some antiphones. Before we took leave the dancers were presented with some bakshish and expressed their thanks in a blessing-song. An amusing evening (Siiger 1949: August 13).

Siiger, Angdawa and Pollo Tshering returned to Singhik on August 17, 1949 and stayed there for two more weeks. During this part of this stay, Siiger was able to take anthropometrical measurements of Lepchas in Mangan, arranged by Palden Tenzing. He also finished work on some Lepcha texts and the final fieldwork report.

Siiger, Angdawa and Tshering left Singhik to return to Gangtok on August 31, 1949, and with this Siiger's fieldwork in Sikkim had come to an end. The journal ends rather matter-of-factly, without any reflection on his experiences, but later Siiger wrote:

I think that any one living among the Lepchas for any length of time will have the same experience as I had and come to grow as fond of them as I did. Their way of life is peaceful, they are by nature extremely kind, and when they lose their immediate fear of a stranger and gain confidence in him, they meet one with a lovely smile, and an open mind and, above all, with friendliness. I enjoyed my frequent visits to their homes, they received me hospitably, invited me to sit with them around the hearth or in the altar room, and altogether they made me feel at home while a bamboo bottle of local beer or a cup of tea was served. After the initial customary greetings they soon began chatting with me, they showed me whatever I wanted to see, and usually they answered gladly all my innumerable questions.

I have observed the Lepchas working in their fields, at their meals, and at festivities in their homes; I have listened to their prayers and songs, and have attended several of their religious functions and festivals. They were usually willing to talk of their customs, lives, and thoughts, and if my question was too odd, it would simply provoke a faint smile; when they discovered that I did not resent that, they would frequently burst out in a gay laughter in which we then all joined (Siiger 1967a: 38-39).

Siiger stayed at the *ḍāk* bungalow in Gangtok till 19 September 1949 when he travelled to Kalimpong.

Siiger enjoyed staying at the Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, originally the family home of David Macdonald. When Siiger was in Kalimpong, he met the London-based phonetician Richard Keith Sprigg, who was spending some time there on a research visit. In February 1950, Siiger and Sprigg visited Git, a Lepcha village to the east of Kalimpong. The visit was arranged by Father Jean Marie Brahier, a Swiss Catholic missionary who worked in the area and who was able to persuade the local Lepcha priest to perform a ritual that could be attended and recorded by the two interested scholars. This visit reportedly kindled Keith Sprigg's enduring interest in the Lepcha language. Siiger returned to Denmark in March 1950.

After Siiger's return to Denmark he kept in touch with Sprigg and visited him in the United Kingdom in 1952, when Sprigg had arranged for Khárpú Támsáng from Kalimpong to spend some time at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Támsáng was able to address some



unresolved questions that had arisen since Siiger's return, such as the translation of several Lepcha text fragments.

### *Fieldwork results*

Siiger's work amongst the Lepchas resulted in an impressive number of publications, which are listed in the bibliography below. Siiger's *magnum opus* on the Lepchas is the extensive ethnological description of the Lepcha people which appeared in two volumes in 1967.

The first volume of the monograph opens with a description of the natural features of Sikkim, a survey of investigations on the Lepchas, a historical overview of the Lepcha tribe and an ample description of his own fieldwork. We move on to a general overview of the Tingvong area and a description of all houses and families in the different villages of the area, such as Tingvong itself, Payer, Kesong, Nampruk and Nung. Siiger also indicates which items of clothing were acquired for the National Museum of Denmark during his stay and describes the individual items, which he will also do for other articles of material culture elsewhere in the book. What follows is a description of the annual ceremony of the village of Tingvong and a general description of Lepcha houses, as well as a discussion of certain ceremonies to be observed when building a house. Now stepping into the field of agriculture, Siiger gives details on the Lepcha calendar, some particularities of the crops grown by the Lepchas and goes into the general agricultural routine of the Lepcha people. This is followed by an account of several agricultural ceremonies and rituals. The section on agriculture is complemented by some remarks on animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. The next part of the book deals with society, and Siiger first gives some details on the positions of the blacksmith and the carpenter. Before discussing other aspects of Lepcha society, such as other important officials and family ceremonies, Siiger briefly digresses to provide the reader with some interesting information about Lepcha traditions to do with food, nutrition and meals. The book moves on to describe several important events and customs in Lepcha life such as birth, marriage, illness, death and funerals, and to priests and priestesses, tales of creation and origin of the Lepcha people and a few related topics. Finally, Siiger describes several important religious ceremonies at length, such as the new year ceremony and the *kongchen* ceremony. The first part of the monograph concludes with an English

translation of several legends and traditional stories, for example the story of *gyebu* and the story of the orphan boy.

The second part of the monograph gives a description of Lepcha phonology written by Jørgen Rischel. Part II also contains the original texts of the stories, rituals and prayers that are referred to in Part I, given in Lepcha in transliteration with an interlinear word for word translation, together with an English translation and comments. Evidently the inclusion of the original Lepcha texts of stories, prayers and rituals and the fact that these texts are fully comprehensible because of a careful explanation of the linguistic transcription, adds considerable value to the wealth of ethnological data Siiger disclosed.

In the monograph it is mentioned that Siiger had planned to publish a third volume, which would give an analysis of the religion of the Lepchas. To the careful reader of Siiger's work on the Lepchas it is clear that in the two published parts, Siiger laid out the necessary descriptive groundwork to prepare the reader for an analysis and discussion of the Lepcha religion in Part III. Siiger included an epilogue to Part I in which he explains his approach:

Contemplating what I have written on previous pages about the results of my field work I think it will be useful to emphasise once more that I have confined myself to giving facts, i.e. what I saw and heard, what was taken down by my interpreters, and what I collected of items from the material culture. When my own opinions appear in some sentence or other it is only because I have considered these necessary in the context. It has, at all events, been my intention to present a publication of facts about the Lepchas. Such an intention is, of course, an ideal, especially when one has only a rather limited knowledge of the language and had to rely on interpreters in most respects.

The reader may have found inconsistencies here and there, and may consequently have wondered that I did not try to solve them immediately (one could mention, for instance, the various names of the supernatural being *na zong* / *na zong nyo* / *na zong mu nyu*; the supernatural being Sakvok appears twice in the enumeration of names associated with the second group of stones of the *hla thu* place). Concentrating on the factual information I received, I have considered it, however, most appropriate to reserve all discussions of such problems to Part III. The same reservation applies also to the legends and stories, and their position in the culture and religion of the Lepchas.

Although much new information may be collected by future investigators, I think, nevertheless, that what we know at present will suffice to give by means of an analytical study the main outlines of the

structure and function of the religion of the Lepchas. Part III of this book will be devoted to this purpose (Siiger 1967a: 235).

Unfortunately, the third volume never appeared. From the papers he left behind we now know that Siiger had largely finished the third volume in typescript. These papers are currently being sorted and prepared for publication by the present author.

Although Siiger touches upon many aspects of the Lepcha religion in his published papers, in the as yet unpublished third volume the religious beliefs of the Lepcha people are dealt with in much more detail. In the third part of the monograph, Siiger ventures to outline the fundamental basis, the functional framework and the spiritual perspectives of the Lepcha religion. Siiger sees the Lepcha religion as an interplay between three fundamental elements; the *rum*, the *múng* and human beings, and he discusses the Lepcha religion from this viewpoint. In Siiger's understanding, the Lepcha religion consists of a number of 'religious complexes', which he defines as follows:

There is the great goddess of procreation, the mother of human beings, with the traditional ceremonies of human life around her; there are the *mă yel* beings and the agricultural ceremonies; there is the god of the wild animals with the hunters and their ceremonies, now almost obsolete; and there are the numerous evil demons and the counteracting ceremonies of the people (Siiger 1981: 202).

In the third volume, Siiger embarks upon a discussion of ceremonial activities and the role they play in the life of the Lepchas in order to illustrate the spiritual attitude of the Lepcha people towards ritual ceremonies and supernatural beings. The role and activities of the different Lepcha priests are also described. Apart from the prominent supernatural beings that form the heart of the above-mentioned religious complexes, many other gods and goddesses are discussed and characterised, such as the special gods for the blacksmith and the warrior, the gods of family lineages and the deities of houses and domestic animals. In all his writings, Siiger attempts to consider certain aspects of the original Lepcha religion before it was influenced by Buddhism, leaving out those religious activities and texts which he sees as predominantly Buddhist. In the third part of the monograph, Siiger does point to various significant influences on the Lepcha religion as he explores the history of several Lepcha religious beliefs.

*Lepcha religion*

In Part III of the monograph, Siiger labels his own approach and research interests as ‘ethno-religious’. Siiger was clearly fascinated by the supernatural world of the Lepchas, which consists of a number of *rum* ‘gods, benevolent creatures’ and *múng* ‘demons, evil spirits, devils, malevolent spirits’.<sup>1</sup> The religious concepts of the Lepchas are closely connected to their natural surroundings, the mountains and forests in which they live.

From Siiger’s writings, we learn that in the Lepcha mythology the great primordial creator is ʔItmú, who resides at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga. She created the whole world, including several other gods. At the top of Mount Kanchenjunga lives the guardian and warrior god Kongchen, a family member of ʔItmú. The name *kongchen* is also used to refer to Mount Kanchenjunga itself. Half way up the giant mountain Kanchenjunga live the *mayel* beings, who are small and hairy mythical creatures, neither *rum* nor *múng*. The *mayel* beings have very fertile land with productive crops, which they passed on to the Lepchas and for which they are still revered by some Lepchas. It is also believed by some Lepchas that the souls of the deceased dwell in the fertile land of the *mayel* beings. The creator ʔItmú gave birth to Nazóngnyo, the goddess of procreation, who married her own brother Fodrónghing. There are many other names that refer to Nazóngnyo’s husband Fodrónghing, such as Pudungthíng, Kamsithíng, Takbothíng and Tashethíng, depending on the context of the story or the origin of the storyteller. The goddess of procreation Nazóngnyo gave birth to a great number of children, but was not able to look after all of them and a whole group of her children were neglected. The children she cared for are seen as the ancestors of human beings. The neglected children were desperately jealous of their cared-for siblings and out of spite they turned into *múng* (Siiger 1972, 1981).

Ever since this time, human beings have been subject to the hostility and ill-treatment of the *múng*. Some benevolent spirits or gods are able to intervene in the strong evil influence of the *múng*, but only ever up to a certain extent. In an attempt to protect the human beings, Nazóngnyo instituted priests and priestesses, who try to ward off the attacks of the demons by means of offerings and prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> These two particular Lepcha words are transcribed by Siiger as *rúm* and *mung* respectively. Throughout this article Lepcha words are given in the transliteration favoured by the present author, which is described elsewhere (Plaisier 2007: 38-44), except in direct quotes, where the original transcription of the quoted author is maintained.

In one of his articles on the Lepcha religion, Siiger mentions ‘the tragic drama of Lepcha religion’ (Siiger 1972: 244). Here Siiger refers to the tragic paradox of the abundant fertility of the creator goddess Nazóngnyo and the resulting negligence of many of Nazóngnyo’s offspring, culminating in the destructive powers of the *múng*. The ceremonial life of the Lepcha people is deeply concerned with invoking the blessings of the *rum* and with averting the malignant influence of the *múng*. It is not just the evil powers that have to be satisfied to prevent harm from being done, the benevolence of the divine powers of the *rum* also need to be secured. The *rum* are mainly benevolent beings, but they can suffer from temporary ill-will if ceremonial sacrifices have been neglected. Since the number of *múng* in the Lepcha mythological universe is much greater than the number of *rum*, Siiger sees the Lepcha religion as being dominated by the fear of the evil *múng* (Siiger 1955: 188).

In the description of his fieldwork experiences, Siiger points out that the initial hesitance some Lepchas seemed to have towards him could be explained with regard to the ‘innate fear of the *mung* who are supposed to follow every person’ (Siiger 1967a: 38). Siiger also points out that the Lepcha conception of their natural surroundings is dominated by their supernatural horizon:

As seen above the apparently peaceful Lepcha village and its surroundings have their dangerous places, e.g. strange rocks, big old trees, swamps and marshes, impenetrable patches of jungle where the *mung* dwell, and which are teeming with evil powers. As soon as one leaves the village area, the influence of the *mung* increases, and nobody is ever safe from their uncanny persecution. The virgin forest, never cleared and cultivated and therefore uncontrolled, is the actual domicile of the *mung*, where they go on forays by day and night. Obviously the Lepchas feel insecure when moving about in the jungle, defenceless against the unexpected assaults of the *mung* (Siiger 1967a:177).

When Siiger describes the background of his interpreter Pollo Tsering, he puts it even more strongly:

... he could not fall asleep for fear of wild animals and the malignant devils (*mung*) that always lie in wait for human beings in order to devour their flesh and suck their blood (Siiger 1967a: 37).

Perhaps the best summary of Siiger’s understanding of the role the malevolent creatures play in the Lepcha world is given when he writes:

For the Lepchas, human life is miserable and dangerous, owing to the activities of the many evil demons who constantly inflict diseases, disaster and death upon them (Siiger 1976: 96).

The life of the Lepcha is, so to say, a permanent hand-to-hand fight with the mungs, and his only weapon is his never ceasing attempt to satisfy them through sanguinary sacrifices (Siiger 1955: 188).

### *Concluding remarks*

It can hardly be said that Siiger's notions agree with the conventional image of the Lepchas as a happy-go-lucky group of people, a stereotype which was suggested by various people, for example Kali Kumar Das: "being thoughtless of the future, the Lepchas wander merrily about the forests inhaling health, and plucking wild fruits during almost all the seasons" and Mary Avery: "They are a merry, free-hearted, careless race, with but little thought of the morrow. They may be seen at any time in and around Darjeeling, racing, scampering and playing like children." (Das 1896: 1, Avery 1878: 69)

Up to some extent, the pivotal role of evil spirits in Lepcha beliefs was pointed out before Siiger's time, for example: "Worship is rendered almost exclusively to the bad spirits and not to the good. For, say the Lepchas, the good spirits never do us any harm; it is only the malignant spirits which we have to fear." (Waddell 1899: 7-8) The works on Lepcha religious texts by Grünwedel, Feer and Drouin provide translations of traditional Lepcha texts and do not involve a discussion of the religious background. In the separate accounts of their joint stay in Dzongu in 1937, John Morris and Geoffrey Gorer offer some interesting observations of Lepcha religious beliefs, but both books more often than not read as curious reminiscences on an exotic tribe. Corneille Jest's paper on the religious traditions of the Lepcha people is a constructive introduction to the subject. The various publications on Lepcha religion by Halfdan Siiger and René von Nebesky-Wojkowitz are of a serious scholarly nature, with little or no typecasting, providing balanced and accurate analyses and many interesting details.

Currently, many old Lepcha traditions and religious ceremonies are at risk of falling into oblivion. Siiger was able to collect old prayers and descriptions of various rituals, for example of dry rice cultivation and hunting, which have since changed or disappeared altogether. The

information collected by Halfdan Siiger in 1949 and 1950, described at length in his writings deserves not only to be cherished but studied in detail by anyone interested in the Lepcha religious tapestry.

Although it is regrettable that the publication of the third volume of his monograph on the Lepchas did not materialise during Siiger's lifetime, it is hoped that with the discovery of the relevant papers in his archives the wealth of information he left behind will soon be published, so that both the unique materials and Siiger's enlightened view into the Lepcha world may be available in full detail to us all.

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