

'VANISHING LEPCHA'

CHANGE AND CULTURAL REVIVAL IN A MOUNTAIN
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Earlier the Lepcha used to have such magical powers, now they are weak and vanishing.

Statements similar to this one, which was made by my research assistant whilst we were conducting research in North Sikkim in 2006, are commonly heard and read in Sikkim today. The idea of the vanishing Lepcha or *Mutanchi rong*,² an ethnic community living on the southern side of the Himalayas in India (Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal), Nepal (Ilam) and south-western Bhutan, has become widespread. In written sources, the Lepcha people were first described as a 'dying race' by colonial writers such as for example Mainwaring, and since the publication of Arthur Foning's influential book *Lepcha, my Vanishing Tribe* in 1987, a large number of people consider the Lepcha people to be disappearing. Usually, the term 'vanishing' applies both to Lepcha culture as well as to the ethnic

¹ The article is based on data collected in Sikkim between March and September 2006 during ethnographic research for an MA-thesis in social anthropology at the University of Zürich in Switzerland. I was affiliated to the Delhi School of Economics, Department of Sociology, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim. During this time, field work and interviews were conducted in Lingthem and Nampatan, two villages in North Sikkim. Lingthem lies in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu and is famous among Lepcha scholars as the village where Geoffrey Gorer carried out his research in 1937. It lies to the northwest of Mangan, the district headquarters of North Sikkim, and is accessible by road. Nampatan lies outside the Lepcha reserve area, approximately a half hours walk to the southeast of Mangan.

² In this article, the term Lepcha will be used because it is common in the public, political and administrative spheres of Sikkim. As many ethnic groups in the world, the Lepcha are known under two sets of names: (1) Lepcha is the exoethnonym given by neighbouring people and most commonly known to outsiders and (2) *mutanchi rongkup rumkup*, which means 'sons of snowy peak or sons of god' (Tamsang 1983: 1), which is the endoethnonym - the name used by the ethnic group themselves. They also refer to themselves as *mutanchi rong*, 'the people who wait for the blessings of Mother' (Thakur/ Lepcha 1981: 222).

community as a whole. The notion of the vanishing of Lepcha culture or even of the entire Lepcha tribe is expressed by every member of Lepcha society: urban and rural, male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated. For all of them losing Lepcha culture has become an integral part of describing Lepcha culture.

Confronted with the notion of a vanishing Lepcha culture, two questions arise: which changes in Sikkim influence the Lepcha community and create the notion of a disappearing culture, or even its actual disappearance? How does the Lepcha community deal with these changes and have any movements arisen to want to prevent the vanishing of Lepcha culture?

In the first section of this article various changes that have taken place in Sikkim in the recent decades and centuries as well as their consequences for the Lepcha community are discussed. Since many aspects of Sikkim have been deeply altered, the focus here lies on three points: religion, migrant labourers, and education. Firstly, the introduction of Buddhism among the Lepcha and the more recent advance of Christianity into North Sikkim are presented, with a focus on the effects on the indigenous belief system and the social life of the Lepcha. Secondly, the demographic changes due to the settlement of immigrant labourers are discussed. In other areas of Sikkim, these demographic changes occurred over a century ago, but in the North District they are fairly recent. In this discussion, I elaborate on the influence these intercommunity relations have on Lepcha culture and everyday life. Thirdly, the consequences of the spread of the educational system on the Lepcha youth, their culture, and their modes of upbringing are discussed.

The fear that their own culture is vanishing has inspired and moved a certain section of the Lepcha community, which has resulted in the mushrooming of many associations in Sikkim that aim to protect and promote the Lepcha cultural heritage. In the second section of this article, the spread of Lepcha associations and the cultural revival movement are explored. Special reference is given to the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (Lepcha New Way Organisation), a Lepcha association which is active in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim.

CHANGES IN SIKKIM AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON LEPCHA CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

When reviewing the history of Sikkim, it quickly becomes apparent that many religious, political, economic and demographic changes have taken place in the areas inhabited by the Lepcha. The former Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim is now a part of India, the world's biggest democracy. This status resulted in the introduction of a completely new political and administrative system to Sikkim. Nowadays, roads connect nearly every inhabited corner of the state and most houses have electrical coverage, which brings national and international radio and TV-shows into the rural houses. Further infrastructural and developmental programs are being implemented. Sikkimese people are leaving their mountain state for other places in India and the world, whereas people from other parts are searching for a place to live and work in this lush and fertile region. Even the remote Lepcha villages in North Sikkim are connected to a global economic market, mainly because of their cardamom cash crop.

Since the changes that have been occurring in Sikkim are diverse and far-reaching, the factors which cause the core elements of Lepcha identity and culture to be vanishing are complex and a full analysis of these factors lies beyond the scope of this study. The main focus of this article will be on the influence of religious conversion, labour immigration and education on the Lepcha community in North Sikkim.

Buddhist and Christian Religion in the Lepcha Community

Both Buddhism and Christianity have influenced and continue to affect the Lepcha and their belief system.

The introduction of Buddhism in Sikkim can be traced to the activities of Lhatsun Namka Jigme (1597–1650), a lama of the Nyingma Buddhist order. He helped establish the Namgyal dynasty and was the main protagonist in the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim.³

Buddhism has a long history of coexistence with the Lepcha indigenous belief system and is strongly rooted in the village communities of North Sikkim. Still today, Lepcha ritual specialists and

³ Balikci 2002: 28.

lamas live and practice side by side in Sikkimese villages. The Lepcha villagers define themselves as Buddhists and participate in Buddhist rituals alongside their own older ritual traditions. Gorer already emphasised this in the mid-1930s, stating that the villagers follow these two, sometimes contradictory beliefs simultaneously without any feelings of distress.⁴ Two reasons for this coexistence can be given. First of all, there is the characteristic of Sikkimese Buddhism that many features of the pre-Buddhist Lepcha belief system have been included to create a unique form of Buddhism. For example, features of Lepcha sacred landscapes are incorporated into the Buddhist interpretation of the sacred geographical surroundings. Mount Kanchendzonga, praised as a place of natural resources by the Lepcha, was transformed into a warrior and the guardian of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom.⁵ A second reason lies in the nature of the Sikkimese kingdom, which was never centralistic or strong enough to extend its influence into the far-flung and dispersed villages and suppress all threats to the spiritual rule of the Chogyal.⁶

However, over the past fifty years the integration of the indigenous religious practices of the Lepcha into Buddhism has been facing challenges. After the Chinese invasion in Tibet, many Tibetan Nyingmapa and Kagyüpa, among them knowledgeable lamas, came into Sikkim as refugees and influenced the interpretation and implementation of the Buddhist religion. Various spiritual Buddhist leaders, such as the 16th Karmapa, have since targeted aspects of traditional Lepcha beliefs, such as animal sacrifices, and have tried to eradicate them.⁷ In Nampatan and Lingthem villages animal sacrifices are still performed in annual ceremonies and healing rituals, even though there is an awareness that this contradicts Buddhist beliefs. This can be illustrated by an incident that took place in the village Lingthem. The ritual specialist (*bongthing*) of Lower Lingthem was also a lama of the local monastery and therefore never included animal sacrifices in his rituals. If the healing ceremony made it necessary to have a blood sacrifice, he would get another ritual specialist to conduct the ritual. The annual ceremonies which required animal sacrifices were also conducted by the other expert. When the other ritual specialist died, the village community decided that the *bongthing*, being the only knowledgeable person, should perform the annual ceremonies. The

⁴ Gorer 1984: 181.

⁵ Steinmann 1996: 121.

⁶ Balikci 2002: 28, 62.

⁷ Balikci 2002: 61, 64.

bongthing could not combine the position of being a lama with the performing of animal sacrifices, as he felt these two contradicted each other. Therefore, he left the Buddhist monastery and gave up his position as a lama in order to be able to perform his duty to the Lepcha community as *bongthing*. Nonetheless, most inhabitants of Nampatan and Lower Lingthem villages do not see much of a contradiction between being a Buddhist and practising different elements of the indigenous Lepcha beliefs. In Nampatan, for example, only one of the 23 Buddhist Lepcha families felt that the consulting of a Lepcha ritual specialist during illness would be incompatible with the Buddhist religion, and in Lingthem there were none who felt there was a contradiction.

Even though most Lepcha villagers consider the Buddhist religion to be an important element of their religious identity, there are voiced concerns that Buddhism is eroding aspects of the Lepcha cultural heritage. The number of Lepcha ritual specialists (*mun* and *bongthing*) is decreasing, and there is a strong belief among the community that this is connected to Buddhist beliefs, for example in the case of funeral rites. Gorer, who emphasised the harmonious nature of the relations between the Lepcha ritual specialists and the lamas, found that the area where traditions and convictions clash and contradict each other most deeply is in the beliefs and ceremonies surrounding death. Both Buddhism and native Lepcha beliefs agree that after death the soul wanders and is lost in a dangerous place, but the direction, length, and characteristics of the wandering of the soul differ. Buddhist beliefs see that the soul wanders for 49 days and is eventually reincarnated. For the Lepcha ritual specialists the soul is seen as being guided to the Land of the Gods (*Rum lyang*), where it is reborn and lives an eternal life similar to the one on earth. In the mid-1930s, both the lama and the *mun* conducted burial ceremonies and Lepcha ritual specialists were buried in the traditional ways.⁸ However, this has changed over the last fifty years. The majority of funerals in the villages of North Sikkim are now predominantly Buddhist and the *mun* plays a minor role, if any. The bodies are burnt during Buddhist funeral rites and no longer buried according to the traditional Lepcha ways. This is seen as one of the reasons why fewer Lepcha become possessed by the spirits of the *mun* or *bongthing* in order to receive the knowledge to perform the various rituals. It is believed that after death the body of the *mun* or *bongthing* should not be burnt, because only the burying of the body in the

⁸ Gorer 1984: 346.

traditional way enables the spirit to come back and possess a different person in the lineage of the deceased. Now, ritual specialists are starting to demand burials again in order to enable the survival of their profession and the Lepcha beliefs.

While the Lepcha in North Sikkim are predominantly Buddhist, Christianity is common among the Lepcha in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal and the South District of Sikkim.⁹ The Christian religion is slowly spreading northwards; protestant and catholic churches have now been built as far north as the district headquarters of Mangan. From there, Christian missionaries make trips into the villages of the surrounding areas, but have so far not been very successful in North Sikkim. In Dzongu itself, some entire villages have been converted to Christianity, but the majority of the population are not affected. In my experience, missionary work is disliked in the Lepcha villages where I stayed. The Lingthem hamlet known as Passingdang lies on the main road connecting the northern part of Dzongu to the district headquarters of Mangan. The villagers in Passingdang have had more experience with missionaries than villages in more remote areas of the Lepcha reserve. There, the attempts to evangelise the Lepcha community have in the past caused outrage and resentment. Whilst I was staying in Dzongu, the Lepcha community of Lower Lingthem and Passingdang became enraged and upset about the activities of Protestant Christian missionaries in their village. Members of a local church in Mangan came to Passingdang on Sundays and, without the permission of the school or the parents, summoned the children from the school hostel to preach to them. As a consequence of the arrogance of some missionaries, Lepcha villagers in Dzongu are starting to generalise their dislike towards the entire Christian community and even towards Lepcha who have been converted to Christianity. A Buddhist Lepcha villager of Nampatan stated: "They call us Satan. This causes tension. They do not accept different beliefs."¹⁰

The Buddhist villagers of Nampatan and Lower Lingthem all agree that the main reason for the conversion to Christian religion lies in economic considerations. Buddhist ceremonies such as marriages and funerals are very expensive and can cause a family to be indebted for years. Christian missionaries promise economic benefits and good schooling for the children of those families who convert to Christian beliefs. Another possible reason for conversion to Christianity could be the similarities between certain commonly known Lepcha myths and

⁹ Thakur 1988: 94, White 1971: 41, 42; Gorer 1984: 38, 42.

¹⁰ Interview in Nampatan, March 2006.

biblical stories. These similarities are used by the missionaries as a means to explain their message to the Lepcha villagers. However, the only Christian villager in my research area had a different reason for his conversion, which was deeply grounded in the shamanistic worldview of the Lepcha community. He told me that there was a time when he was very ill constantly. He went to seek help from various lamas and Lepcha ritual specialists, but they could not cure him. As he explained, he then had no other option but to convert to Christianity and has never had such a severe illness again. The shamanic logic that worship is connected with the physical condition of the body and can directly cure illness was extended to Christianity.

Even though missionary work is generally disliked, Christian Lepcha are usually accepted within the village community, as can be seen in the village of Nampatan. The Christian household in Nampatan takes on responsibilities in the village and the wife of the household is very active in the village women's group. However, their life is mainly centred around Mangan, where the children go to school and where their church community is concentrated. The family attends festivities in the village, such as marriages, funerals, and *Namsung*, the Lepcha New Year, but do so mainly because of the social aspects involved. They do not attend other annual ceremonies conducted by the lamas or ritual specialists that have a more religious meaning, nor do they consult the Lepcha ritual specialists in case of illness.

There is a fear that Christianity will cause a rift in the Lepcha community, because it introduces the converted Lepcha into an entirely new community with different values and social gatherings. Furthermore, it causes the converted Lepcha to break with the Lepcha traditional beliefs, in a way village Buddhism generally does not require. Christian Lepcha do not attend religious ceremonies conducted by the Lepcha ritual specialists or the lama, nor do they search their help during illness. Furthermore, the Christian church and community do not accept Christian Lepcha who perform the duties of ritual specialists. An informant with a Christian background from Kalimpong recounted that when he was learning to be a *bongthing*, he encountered many difficulties and an absolute lack of understanding from other Christians around him. In this way, Christianity creates a greater distance to important aspects of Lepcha cultural life than Buddhism. An incident in January 2007 underlines this. A group of Lepcha youth from Kalimpong made a pilgrimage to Dzongu, intending to visit the place they consider to be their homeland and in search of their roots. During the trip five of them rescinded their Christian beliefs by washing

themselves in a river and renaming themselves with traditional Lepcha names. They gave up their Christian beliefs in order to regain access to Lepcha culture.

Immigrant Labourers: Interaction and Change

In the Darjeeling hills and later in Sikkim, the British colonial government has initiated a drastic process of demographic and economic transformations. The immigration and settlement of people from Nepal and other parts of India was encouraged, so as to provide manpower for the agricultural sector with the newly established tea plantations and for the expanding infrastructural projects such as road construction. In Dzongu and the areas surrounding Mangan in North Sikkim, only recently agricultural labourers started coming in larger numbers. The Lepcha villagers of the region were relatively poor, self-sufficient farmers, until they started to cultivate cardamom as a cash crop for export to India and other places in the world. In the 1930s, the income from cardamom was relatively small and flowed only slowly into the Lepcha community, but in the following ten years it became much larger.¹¹ With this growing wealth came the opportunity for Lepcha farmers to employ labourers from Nepal to work on the land, especially on the cardamom fields, as well as to provide their own children with an education by sending them to school.

Today the primary interaction between Lepcha and Nepalese villagers is on an economic level; this structures their relationship and the distribution of power between them. Both villages where I stayed are considered to be Lepcha villages, where all land belongs to the Lepcha community, except in Nampatan where one plot is owned by a Bhutia living in Mangan. This ownership mainly results from the land law in Sikkim, which prevents the sale of Lepcha or Bhutia land to anyone not belonging to these tribal groups (Land Revenue Order No. 1, 1917). The majority of Nepalese have taken Lepcha-owned land on lease in one of the two traditional systems: *kut* or *adhiya*. In the *kut* system, which is the more common of the two, a certain amount of

¹¹ Gorer 1984: 47, 85; Siiger 1967: 84. With the development of the cardamom trade different problems entered the Lepcha community. Many villagers became indebted to the cardamom buyers, who were mainly Marwari traders. They bought products on credit in anticipation of the income from the cardamom harvest, but in reality often received less than the official market price because they usually lacked the knowledge to crosscheck. Consequently their debts grew (Gorer 1984: 113ff.).

money or produce is fixed and paid to the landowner every year. In the *adhiya* system, the produce of the land is shared equally between the tenant and owner of the land. Some people are employed to work on the fields on a salary basis. As landowners and legally recognised local inhabitants, the Lepcha villagers have complete control over the making of political decisions in their villages. The majority of Nepalese tenants or labourers in both villages are foreigners without Indian citizenship and therefore without political rights. They are considered as seasonal inhabitants of the villages, who are expected to return to their homes eventually, although they participate in many community activities, they are not seen as permanent members of the village community. This sense of impermanence is visible in the conditions of the village houses. Most of the Lepcha families own solid houses with proper sanitation facilities and electricity, whereas many of the Nepalese tenants live in makeshift huts without electricity or sanitation, or look after the house of an absentee landowner. In reality the migration patterns of the Nepalese labourers are more complex and many do indeed settle in Sikkimese villages permanently. In Nampatan there is a wide spectrum of migration histories. In 2006, of sixteen Nepalese households, three have lived in the village for less than one year. In contrast, four Nepalese families have been settled there for between twenty and forty years. In 2006, half of the Nepalese families did not return to their homes between the harvest and the sowing season. Of these families about one third stopped returning due to the political unrest in Nepal. In Lingthem, the legal situation is different because it lies within Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve. The Nepalese labourers there require seasonal work permits, which they can only receive upon invitation from a resident Lepcha. The work permits have to be renewed every year. Despite the legal restrictions, the Nepalese tenants in Lower Lingthem have been settled in Dzongu for a long time. Of the four Nepalese households in Lower Lingthem, one family has lived there all their lives and two have been settled for over twenty years. None of them have returned to their homes in Nepal since they arrived in Lingthem.

The spatial proximity of the Lepcha and Nepalese communities in the villages results in many forms of social interaction. During the daily routine, the Lepcha and Nepalese villagers work long hours side by side, eat their food together, and relax over a bamboo beer after a hard days work. A Nepalese villager who is carrying heavy items from the market will normally be offered refreshments by Lepcha households on his way home. In the case of illness, a Lepcha will seek help from a

Nepalese ritual specialist if so required and vice versa. These mutual interactions occur frequently and are integral parts of village life. They are not topics of discussion or ever seen as problematic. Many of the social events of the Lepcha and Nepalese communities are shared with each other. Marriage ceremonies and funerals of the other community are attended. Villagers of Nampatan regularly describe the interaction between the two communities as an exchange—the Lepcha invite the Nepalese and vice versa. Other forms of assistance across community boundaries can also be observed. In both Nampatan and Lower Lingthem, Nepalese children have been taken into Lepcha households. In two cases orphaned Nepalese children have been officially adopted by Lepcha families and have taken on the Lepcha surname of the new family. In another case in Lower Lingthem, two children of a Nepalese tenant family live in a Lepcha household. The Lepcha family took the children in because the Nepalese family could not manage to feed all of their own children adequately. The Lepcha family also pays for the costs of the children's upbringing, including school fees.

Despite these close interactions in everyday life, there is a constant fear among the Lepcha villagers that the closeness to the Nepalese community slowly dilutes the Lepcha cultural heritage. When people talk about marriages between the two communities, an apparent scepticism enfolds. Even though Lepcha villagers often emphasise that to stop young people from getting married to members of a different community, does not lie in the power of the community, such marriages are not welcomed. In the rural areas of North Sikkim, marriages between the Lepcha and Nepalese communities are a recent phenomenon. In Lower Lingthem such intercommunity marriages are still quite rare, and have occurred only with two of the twentyfour village households. In Nampatan, outside the Lepcha reserve, intercommunity marriage are found in a quarter of the households, all but one of these marriages are among people who are younger than 30 years of age; among the older generation intercommunity marriages hardly ever happened. The main concerns related to intercommunity marriages as stated by the Lepcha villagers are centred round the loss of Lepcha culture and the difficulty of getting the other person settled into the new household and different community. Especially the influence on the Lepcha language is a cause for concern, because in households with a Nepalese parent, Lepcha is not spoken as frequently as in households where both parents are Lepcha. Interestingly, little concern is voiced about the possible Hindu beliefs of a Nepalese

parent. Hinduism seems to have little influence on the belief systems in the Lepcha community.

Whether the person who gets married to a person in another community is a man or a woman, makes a considerable difference. If a Lepcha woman gets married to a man of another community, it is much more sensitive and presents more potential conflict than if a Lepcha man gets married to a woman of another community. This is because in both communities, religion, group affiliation, and citizenship are generally defined through the husband. It is considered especially problematic if a Lepcha woman gets married to a Nepalese citizen, because in doing so she loses her membership of the Lepcha and Sikkimese community as well as her Indian citizenship. Furthermore, their children will also be Nepalese by law.

Recently, North Sikkim has been swept away by another wave of change, which has once more caused a demographic shift in the area. The large cardamom plants in the whole of Sikkim have been affected by various diseases. A new fungus, *Colletotrichum sp.*, is a special cause for concern. In the villages of North Sikkim the yield decreased drastically over the past decade. According to local estimates, most households in Nampatan used to harvest between two and six maunds,¹² a fair number of households even obtained ten maunds. At the time of my fieldwork in 2006, more than half of the households did not have any cardamom yield from their fields. In Lower Lingthem the situation is equally problematic. Previously, an average Lower Lingthem household used to harvest between four and ten maunds, now the average yield is around two maunds. In addition, the quality of the cardamom is affected to such an extent that the harvest can only be sold for half the price it would get five years ago.¹³ Due to subsequent severe financial losses, the villagers are suffering under economic pressure and live in fear of the future. In Nampatan the villagers have started to grow ginger, a less lucrative cash crop, in an attempt to try to compensate for the loss of income. Because of the higher altitude, the growing of ginger is not possible in Lower Lingthem where the lack of income from cardamom has completely changed the demographic and economic organisation of the village. In the past, over half the cardamom fields were leased out to Nepalese families that had either

¹² One maund is approximately equivalent to 40kg.

¹³ According to the Spices Board of India, the cardamom yield could be sold at 187.92 rupees per kilogram in Sikkim and 201.71 Rs./kg in Siliguri (West Bengal) in 2001. Only five years later, in 2006, the market price had dropped down to 86.22 Rs./kg in Sikkim and 99.76 Rs./kg in Siliguri.

settled in the village or on the fields. Now, only one household has been able to keep Nepalese people on contract. Consequently, many Nepalese have left either because they could no longer live off the cardamom yield produced by the land they leased or because their Lepcha employers could not pay them anymore. Lepcha families now tend their own fields with help from the local Lepcha community and a few employed Nepalese. However, in many Lepcha households, some members have government jobs and work in Mangan, and their children are in school all day. Without the itinerant labourers there are no extra hands to cultivate the fields and the Lepcha community feels economically dependent on the Nepalese community, which is a feeling most Lepcha dislike. The problem of the cardamom disease strengthens the bond between the Lepcha villagers, but widens the distance to the Nepalese community. It is felt that the Lepcha face this problem together, whilst the Nepalese will just leave, because this area is not their home.

Education and the Generation Gap: The Impact of Changing Values and Interests

Since Sikkim became a part of India there has been intensive investments in its development, especially in the field of education, which is due to the vast economic changes and the requirement of the Sikkimese government for educated employees. The literacy rate in Sikkim has improved tremendously in the last 30 years, growing from 17.74 % in 1971 to 69.68 % in 2001. Since 1991, the percentage of literate people in Sikkim has been a little above the Indian average. However, according to the 2001 Census data, the North District of Sikkim has a literacy rate slightly below the Sikkimese average. In that area, most of the literate people are found in the urban area of Mangan. Furthermore, on average men are more literate than women.¹⁴

Education is perceived with mixed feelings and is even a cause for concern. Most Lepcha in the villages of Sikkim would agree that education is one of the most important requirements to survive in the modern Sikkimese society and that it is absolutely essential to attain a certain level of education. In line with this view, a central concern in Lepcha village communities is the question how to provide the best

¹⁴ Government of Sikkim 2004-2005: 7.

possible education for their children.¹⁵ At the same time the changes introduced by education are feared and criticised by many villages. In both of the villages studied here, the children are sent to school in relatively nearby places such as Mangan or Hee Gyathang, but also to schools that are further away in urban areas such as Gangtok. The Lepcha community views the sending of children away from the village for the purposes of education in an ambivalent way. One villager from Lingthem stated that it is an important advantage for the Lepcha community to be able to send children to schools elsewhere because it is the only way for village children to receive a higher education and become involved in spheres that are also important for village life. Those children can benefit the village community by obtaining jobs in government service. Other villagers are more cautious about the situation and observe that many Lepcha children who were educated elsewhere never permanently return to their villages, because the employment possibilities in rural areas are limited, forcing many of them to settle in Mangan and Gangtok. The villagers are also concerned that many of the children who spend most of their life in hostels in semi-urban or urban areas, away from their families and communities, do not grow up in a Lepcha environment and do not learn Lepcha traditions and lifestyle as part of their daily routine. In those cases, the Lepcha language is not spoken often anymore, oral traditions are no longer heard, and there is no opportunity for children who study and live elsewhere to learn the traditional daily agricultural customs. A

¹⁵ Many constraints to education can be identified in the village community. The first major influence is the educational background of the parents. Some parents do not attach any importance to education or consider it incompatible with daily life. If the parents themselves have an education, the encouragement is much greater and other possible constraints and difficulties providing education for the children are more easily accepted. Low socio-economic background of the households is the second major constraint. Elder siblings are often kept at home to look after younger children so that the parents can go to work. Higher education is not available close to the village. For example, schooling up to class 12 is available in Mangan or Hee Gyathang, but for college, students have to go to Gangtok. Boarding, schooling, and other necessities have to be paid for. The socio-economic conditions of the families have to allow for the extra amount of money that has to be invested in the child and the lack of labour force or assistance in the house. Lepcha children do not work in the fields, but they help with odd jobs in the house and collect grass and food for the animals. In the past, there was comparatively more wealth in Lingthem than in Nampatan because of the money coming from the cardamom fields. This enabled young adults to go and study in Gangtok or even further away. For other constraints and a detailed analysis see Datta 1991.

woman from Dzongu, who grew up in a hostel in Gangtok, describes the situation as being quite drastic:

It is a problem nowadays for the Lepcha community that the children grow up in hostels and in that way do not learn the language and culture and do not know anything anymore. Lepcha people are being emptied from cultural content. We don't know our stories anymore. The people ask me about the Lepcha culture and stories and I am ashamed, because I cannot tell them anything, because I do not know anything, because I grew up in a hostel.¹⁶

Another development and cause for concern in the villages is that education changes the interests of the younger generation. Education is thought of as being linked to a modern lifestyle and is seen as the opposite of culture and tradition. The children who move out of the village are seen by the villagers as prone to losing themselves and their interest in the Lepcha cultural heritage. The children will return home for vacations and help out with numerous tasks, but they will not have the same routine as village children and will also bring in different ideas and interests. The main worry of Lepcha villagers is that essential elements of Lepcha culture will slowly be eroded, because young people are no longer interested in keeping the Lepcha culture alive. As an example, the youth have become sceptical about aspects of traditional beliefs such as evil spirits (*mung*) and their impact on human health. They are drawn to modern medical explanations of illnesses and are having to find their own way to deal with contradictions between traditional beliefs and modern medicine. A fair number of young Lepcha are more interested in watching movies or football on television than listening to their elders telling traditional stories next to the kitchen fire whilst sipping local beer. The lack of interest among the young more educated generation is perceived to be the main reason for the vanishing of the Lepcha culture, as was for example stated by the same woman from Dzongu:

And the grandparents for some reason sometime just stopped telling the stories. And also because the young generation is not interested anymore and there is no one there to tell the stories to. That is why nowadays no one knows them anymore and the old people have forgotten. And again Lepcha has become an emptied word.¹⁷

¹⁶ Interview in 5th Mile, May 2006.

¹⁷ Interview in 5th Mile, May 2006.

PROMOTING CULTURE: LEPCHA ASSOCIATIONS IN SIKKIM

Despite all the concerns voiced above, education also has had a different impact. Some educated Lepcha have become more aware of their vanishing culture and are now engaged in activities to protect and revive their culture, and attempt to boost Lepcha identity. In recent years, many Lepcha associations were founded in Sikkim. Most Lepcha associations have their headquarters in the urban capital of Gangtok. Many of the executive members of these associations belong to the educated strata, partly because education gives them the means and human capital to articulate the needs of their community in a more public way. Gangtok, with its access to the media and political decision-makers, is the most efficient base for their activities. In this way, the Lepcha associations help to bridge the gap between the mainly rural Lepcha community and the decision-makers of Sikkim and India. The associations offer channels to represent the Lepcha and their cause to the outside world.

In 2006 the most active associations were:

- *Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum* (RMRT, the main Sikkim Lepcha Association),
- *Renjong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shezum* (RMROS, Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association),
- *Lepcha Students Association* and
- *Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum* (MLAS, the only Lepcha association in Dzongu at the time).

The Renchong Mutanchi Ringring Kurzum (Sikkim Lepcha Literacy Association) supported the other Lepcha associations in Gangtok, but was not active at the time. Other associations were previously established, but have since ceased to exist, whereas new ones have been founded since 2006. The large number of associations demonstrates their importance for the community, but the continual fluctuations of associations, factions and committees are also signs of their weakness.¹⁸

These different Lepcha associations are all involved in activities to try and enhance the social and economic conditions of the Lepcha of Sikkim. Additionally, they preserve, promote, and modify Lepcha

¹⁸ Datta 1997: 44.

culture. The RMRT and the RMROS are strongly active in preserving the various political rights the Lepcha have been granted in the past century and in requesting new protection, such as the Primitive Tribal Status and fifty percent of the BL reservations.¹⁹ They are also engaged in organising Lepcha ritual ceremonies (*rum fat*), such as *Tendong lho rum fat*. Together with the RMRKL, they promote Lepcha language and literature as well as education for Lepcha people. The latter aim is also central to the Lepcha Students Association. The MLAS, the Lepcha association from Dzongu, has a slightly different perspective to the Lepcha associations in Gangtok. The organisation started out by supporting projects to enhance Lepcha culture, such as organising the annual Lepcha New Year festival (*Namsung*) and promoting traditional handicrafts, but has now broadened its focus and introduced programs for livelihood development, health, and education. The idea behind the change is to create a Lepcha community that is ‘healthy’ in every respect.

Although the different associations are generally valued by the Lepcha people in rural areas and their activities are deemed vital for the survival of the Lepcha community and its culture, the relations between the villagers and the associations are not always without tension, as will be elaborated further in this section. Of the Lepcha associations with headquarters in Gangtok, none were particularly active in the villages I stayed in, which is mainly due to the distance from Gangtok and the strength of the MLAS in Dzongu. For this reason I will focus on the activities of the latter in the following section.

Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum—The ‘NGO’ in Dzongu

Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS) was the only association embedded in Lingthem village and the Lepcha community of Dzongu at the time of my fieldwork. It is often simply called ‘the NGO’. In Nampatan, the villagers consider the MLAS an association only for Lepcha of Dzongu, so Nampatan villagers do not have any affiliations

¹⁹ BL is the abbreviation for the Lepcha and Bhutia communities in Sikkim. To safeguard their rights, these two communities jointly have reserved seats in the legislative assembly of Sikkim. In addition, the preferential quotas are also followed in administrative posts, certain economic facilities and further state sponsored activities (see Sinha 1975: 28ff.). The joint action committee of the RMRT and RMROS are now asking for 50% of these protective quotas to be reserved solely for the Lepcha community, arguing that the Bhutia community is economically stronger.

with Lepcha associations. In North Sikkim, the members of the MLAS are regarded as culturally knowledgeable people because of their activities. Their authority in cultural matters runs parallel to that of elders and ritual specialists. They are frequently asked for advice and have been very active in the documentation of oral traditions and the preservation of material culture (similar to what the RMRT are doing). Therefore the MLAS has a strong influence on what is perceived to be Lepcha culture—preserving and creating it through their activities.

The Lepcha community in Dzongu embraces most activities of the MLAS, because they combine cultural enhancement projects with programs for livelihood generation and health improvement. Women groups are being targeted by the MLAS to improve the wellbeing of Lepcha families and society. The Woman's Self Help Group (SHG) scheme of the Indian government is a good example of the impact of the MLAS on the village community. In this scheme, groups get together voluntarily to engage in various activities and collect savings to secure credit. Nearly every village in Dzongu has one or more SHGs. In Lingthem itself there are eight: three in Passingdang, two in Lower Lingthem, two in Upper Lingthem, and one in Sangklong. Many of the SHG in Sikkim are not functioning properly, because the women do not have the appropriate knowledge and skill. The MLAS is therefore providing the women's groups with training in different topics such as money management. This is slowly paying off and now about 20 to 30 SHGs are starting to function well. The MLAS combines this scheme with the promotion of Lepcha culture. For example, an executive member of the MLAS in Lower Lingthem arranged traditional handloom and handicraft classes in the community centre of Lingthem village. Older women with the skill of weaving Lepcha bags and belts for traditional Lepcha dress were invited to teach younger women the traditional motives and weaving techniques. The women now meet under the auspices of the SHG and produce traditional bags, hats and belts, which are sold at cultural shows and other events. One women's group from Passingdang sells their products on a regular basis to the Directorate of Handicraft and Handlooms in Gangtok, a government centre that aspires to preserve skills of traditional arts and crafts. In this way, traditional handicrafts such as weaving, which twenty years ago had practically ceased to be practised,²⁰ is now turning into a solid source of income.

²⁰ Gowloog 1995: 62, 63

However, the association has also earned criticism from certain sections of the Lepcha village community because it has become a driving force behind social and cultural change in the villages. Culture and traditions are perceived in different ways and there is an ongoing debate as to who has the authority to make decisions that influence social changes and define culture and identity. Examples that can be given in this respect are the efforts to cut down on expenses of life cycle rituals such as marriage and death, which are made by educated sections of the Lepcha community in Lingthem, many of whom are members of the MLAS. Many families have encountered financial difficulties in conducting marriage ceremonies or funerals because of the lavish spending on food, especially meat, bride price, and alcohol during such occasions. A villager of Lower Lingthem describes how attempts were made to put a stop to the custom of donating local beer (*chi*) to the monasteries. Traditionally, in every lunar month beer is to be donated to the monastery on four different occasions. The households of Lingthem sponsor these religious rituals in turns. These donations have a deep impact on the economic condition of the households and a certain section of the Lepcha village community considered the custom to be an unnecessary financial burden and recommended that the donation of beer be stopped. This attempt should also be seen in the larger context of the general recent criticism on the consumption of large amounts of beer, which is often described as a major hindrance to the Lepcha community and Sikkimese society in general. Especially the older members of the community and the lamas of the village protested, because they did not want the tradition to change. In this light, educated people were accused of making decisions which were for their own benefit, but not for the wellbeing of the entire Lepcha community.

The educated Lepchas and the associations such as the MLAS have become both the keepers of traditions and culture and the promoters of change and modernity. Through their activities they show that education and economic betterment do not necessarily go hand in hand with the vanishing of cultural identity. One of the main achievements of the associations has been to demonstrate to the Lepcha community that change does not inevitably cause the vanishing of their unique culture, but that change instead can be used to ensure cultural survival.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Culture builds on shared history and traditions, but has always adapted to changing contexts, incorporated new elements, and altered previous ones. Culture is bound into a process of change and remembrance, of novelties and traditions. Younger generations are prone to include 'modern' aspects into their lifestyle, which today may be blue jeans and rock music, whereas more conservative forces in a community try to preserve traditional elements—sometimes despite strong criticism from within their own community.

The changes in the Lepcha community over the past centuries have left their traces on Lepcha culture. Buddhism and more recently the Christian religion introduced new values and beliefs, shaking the very foundations of the Lepcha community. Modern education is needed, but at the same time feared, because it brings new ideas and values and forces people to leave the villages in search of higher education and employment, thereby causing a loss of access to traditional local culture and with this a loss of a sense of belonging. The spatial closeness to the Nepalese community is feared to impact Lepcha culture and intercommunity marriages are changing family life. In Sikkim, Nepali has already become a commonly spoken language and there is concern that the coming Lepcha generation will not learn their mother tongue properly, especially if the mother is of Nepalese descent.

However, despite the fear that their culture is vanishing, a creative potential for dealing with changes and for sustaining their own lifestyle can be observed in the Lepcha community. The Lepcha traditional beliefs coexist successfully with Buddhism. The Lepcha and the Nepalese communities in the villages have built up a mutual cultural respect and a system of economic interdependence, providing many benefits to the Lepcha community. Education contributes as the main force behind the movement of Lepcha cultural revival, as it is mainly the educated Lepcha who are active in the promotion of Lepcha culture. Interestingly, local development in terms of modern infrastructure—a device of change in itself—could also help to preserve culture. The lack of good schooling and job opportunities for educated people in the rural areas is forcing Lepcha people to leave their villages, often with a resultant loss of connection to their culture. Locally embedded jobs for educated people and good schooling sensitive to their cultural surroundings would prevent the emigration of young Lepcha to urban areas. As discussed here, changes introduced in a community do not inevitably cause the vanishing of cultural traditions. Two things seem

vital to halt the disappearance of a culture: the interest of the community itself and the legal means to protect the culture.

Many Lepcha in the villages are aware of the fact that no one can be blamed for the loss of Lepcha culture other than themselves and that it is in the hands of the Lepcha community to keep their language, oral tradition, ritual, and material culture alive. The growth of Lepcha associations in the urban areas and their increasing activities are evidence of the fact that certain sections of the community are making an effort to revive their culture and save it from vanishing. This process is not without tension; different sections of the Lepcha community have different ideas about how their culture should be preserved or changed to adapt to its changed surroundings. This negotiation in cultural meanings shows that the culture is still alive and has not been reduced to static conservation.

A supportive legal framework helps to enable people to keep to their own cultural lifestyle. In Sikkim, there are laws to protect the rights of the Lepcha community and help maintain the Lepcha culture, provided they are correctly implemented. By law, Lepcha language is taught in government schools; religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution of India; the land of the Lepcha and Bhutia is protected from sale to other communities and the Lepcha community has a part of Sikkim reserved for them (the area of Dzongu). The importance of these protective legal structures for the Lepcha people can be seen in the success of Dzongu. The Lepcha reserve has been protected for approximately a century and a number of engaged people as well as the MLAS have been promoting Lepcha culture there for nearly two decades. Therefore, Dzongu takes up a special place in the discussion of Lepcha culture and preservation. Lepcha from outside Dzongu, as I experienced in Nampatan, refer to Dzongu as the only place in Sikkim where there are still 'real Lepcha'. To Nampatan villagers, the ritual specialists in Dzongu are more powerful and the Lepcha more knowledgeable about their own culture in terms of oral traditions and ritual practices. Dzongu is *Mayel Lyang*, the home of their people and culture, the only protected and preserved place.

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