

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEPCHA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND SONGS

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Abstract

This paper presents a preliminary sketch of some of the musical instruments and song traditions of the Lepcha people of Sikkim, a small Himalayan state in northeastern India. The music of the Lepchas is fairly unique in the Himalayan region given that most of the world's Lepcha population is found in Sikkim and the foothills of West Bengal.¹ The study draws mainly from ten days that I spent in Sikkim's capital of Gangtok, and in Kalimpong, a hill town in West Bengal. It also draws from previous research, from information available online, and from CDs and DVDs obtained in Gangtok.² This paper is the result of my brief experience in the region, and is not meant to be conclusive or definitive.

Introduction

On my first day in Gangtok, Sikkim, I woke up to the sound of deep drums beating in the distance. Then, there was the unmistakable low rumble of the *radung* (long bass horn). It was the beginning of November and it was frigid at this time of day. I stepped out of my room, which was a studio apartment rented to researchers by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.³ It is located on a hill just below the Institute and slightly above the Ropeway, a cable car that provides

¹ Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics lists the Lepcha population of Nepal as 3660 as of 2001 (Statistical Yearbook of Nepal 2009). In contrast, the Census of India lists the Lepcha population of Sikkim as 40,568 and that of West Bengal as 32,377 (2001). To get a sense of the Lepcha population of Bhutan, George van Driem lists 2,000 speakers of the Lepcha language in his paper *Language Policy in Bhutan* (1994).

² The most comprehensive music research done in Sikkim that I found was that of Fredric Lieberman and Michael Moore, undertaken in 1970.

³ The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was established in 1958 as an institute to study Mahayana Buddhism, and more recently it has also become a 'hub for Sikkim-centric research and studies' (Tashi, 2008 p. 7). See <<http://www.tibetology.net>> for more information.

panoramic views of Gangtok and, on clear days, of the mountains beyond.

I made my way down the hill to find a place to have breakfast. The sounds of drums and horns were now replaced by those of traffic on the busy national highway. I ended up at Porky's, the restaurant at one of the dozens of hotels lining the streets of Gangtok. Porky's had the radio tuned to the local branch of 'Red FM,' which plays the top hits of Sikkim every morning.⁴ 'Good morning, you're listening to Red FM, it's rocking,' stated the radio jockey. The songs were all the latest hits in the Nepali, Indian and American pop world, such as those by Nepali singer Leezum Bhutia, American pop star Kelly Clarkson, and songs from recent Bollywood films.

Later in the day, as I walked up an outdoor stairway flanked on both sides with shops, I passed by several stores selling CDs, competing for sound-space with a mix of music similar to that played on 'Red FM' in the morning. I asked the shopkeepers if they had any CDs of local music. They all had a few, but I never heard this local music played on their shop stereos during the several times that I passed by. I later bought as many of these CDs as I could, and ended up with a collection of Lepcha and Bhutia rock, modern renditions of Bhutia folk songs, Gurung pop, a melodic rendition of the Tibetan Buddhist mantra, 'Om Mani Padme Hum,' and a compilation, 'Folk Music of Himalaya,' that included three tracks, one each of Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia instrumental music.

The mix of commercialized Western, Indian, and Nepali pop music served as the soundtrack throughout much of my time in Sikkim. I never heard a Lepcha or Bhutia song played on the radio, in bars or other public spaces, such as by shopkeepers streaming music into the streets or taxi drivers blaring songs from their car stereos.⁵ Instead, most of the music found in such spaces was the product of Western/global, Indian, and Nepali cultures. When viewed through the paradigm suggested by Mark Slobin in his 'Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West,' these three dominating 'mainstream' cultures are musical supercultures. In contrast, less visible music (i.e. encountered much less often), such as music of the Lepcha and Bhutia

⁴ <http://www.redfm.in/gangtok/index.asp> is the website for Red FM's Gangtok's branch.

⁵ My criteria for whether a song is 'Lepcha' or 'Bhutia' is whether it is defined as such by either the musician or the community. I am not considering Nepali pop songs sung by Lepcha or Bhutia people, as these are effectively 'Nepali songs.'

groups, Buddhist ritual music, or Nepali music outside of the mainstream, are ‘micromusics.’⁶

Some of the micromusics in Sikkim were more readily encountered than others. I chanced upon both Buddhist ritual music and Nepali folk music without any special effort, albeit less frequently than mass-produced pop music. Since Tibetan Buddhism is widely practiced in Sikkim, it is not surprising that the ritual music is relatively abundant. The existence and sustainability of ritual music depends upon how well the associated beliefs are upheld (Zhang Boyu, 2010). As for Nepali folk music, as the Nepalese constitute a majority of the population in Sikkim, one would expect to hear such music proportionally more often than the micromusics of other Sikkimese groups. In comparison, in order to hear Lepcha folk music, I had to find a musician through the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department of the Government of Sikkim.⁷ I also had to make a special trip to the Lepcha Museum of Kalimpong to meet a Lepcha musical legend.

With this as a backdrop, I will introduce several Lepcha musical instruments and singing traditions in the following section.

LEPCHA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND SONGS

This section provides a glimpse into the traditional Lepcha musical world through an overview of stringed instruments, wind instruments, percussion instruments, and singing styles. Most of the information was gathered from interviews with Mickma Lepcha in Gangtok (he comes from the village of Tashiding in West Sikkim) in person on November 2, 2011 and again on the phone on December 8, 2011, and Sonam Tshering Lepcha at the Lepcha Museum in Kalimpong, West Bengal on November 08, 2011.

Mickma is a young musician who is interested in all music and whose favorite band is the Beatles. He has been studying a variety of Lepcha instruments with Hildamit Lepcha, the wife of Sonam Tshering Lepcha. Hildamit Lepcha, in turn, studied primarily from her husband. Sonam Tshering Lepcha is a legendary figure in his community, and is known as ‘Lapon,’ meaning guru (Tamsang, 2008, p. 83). He is now in his mid 80s and he has been playing and promoting Lepcha music for more than half a century. In 1995, he received the Sangeet Natak

⁶ In the first sentence of his ‘Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West,’ Mark Slobin defines micromusics as ‘...the small units within big music cultures’ (1993, p. 11).

⁷ See <<http://www.sikkim-culture.gov.in/Home/Index.aspx>> for more information.

Academi award in their traditional and folk music category. This award is the highest recognition for a performing artist in India, and is given by the Sangeet Natak Academi, India's national academy for music, dance, and drama, located in Delhi.

I. Stringed instruments

A. Tumbok/Tungbuk: Plucked string instrument

This instrument is made of a carved single piece of wood, approximately two feet in length. Goat leather is stretched over a hollowed out sound box, and three holes are bored into the leather. A bridge sits on the leather surface. There are three strings attached to three tuning pegs and stretched across the bridge. The three strings are normally tuned to sol-do-sol, suitable for a pentatonic scale. However, the instrument can theoretically be tuned in any number of ways and can also play in major and minor scales. The *tumbok*, such as the one played by Sonam Tshering Lepcha, can also have four strings, and four corresponding tuning pegs. The strings are currently made of nylon, but Mickma mentioned that they were traditionally made from numerous materials, including nettle fiber. A cloth band is attached to the instrument so that it may be hung around the player's neck. It is plucked with a bamboo plectrum, but Mickma uses a guitar plectrum, because he prefers the sound it produces.

The *tumbok* is used to accompany singing. Mickma Lepcha played *Zonyot Kala* (In the Paddy Field), a song about a man wooing a woman while working on a dry paddy field. The meter had a compound duple feel, with two strong beats, each divided into three pulses. The following is a notation of the *tumbok* accompaniment:





Sonam Tshering Lepcha playing the *tumbok* with four strings

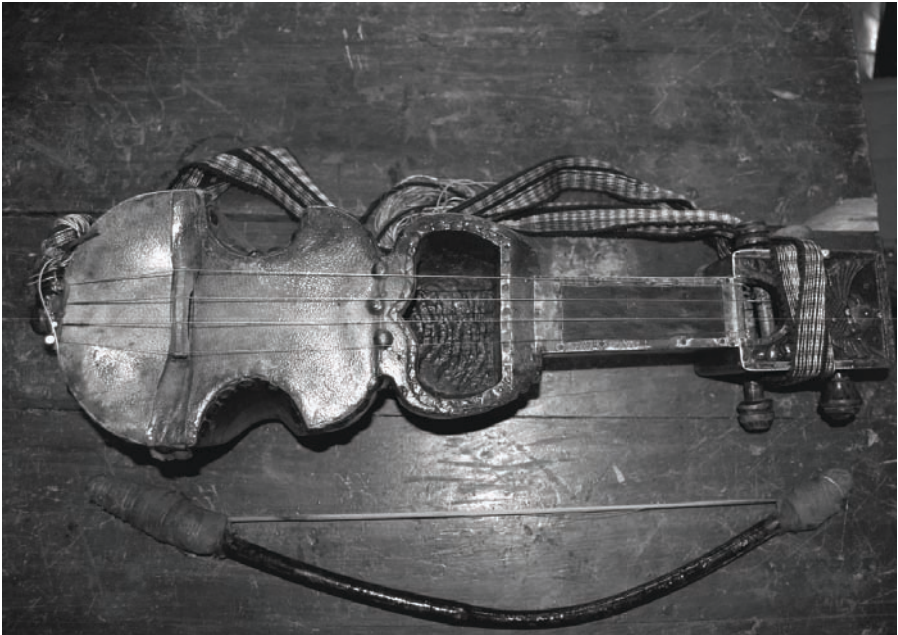


The *tumbok* played by Mickma Lepcha, with three strings

B. Sutsang: Bowed fretless string instrument

The *sutsang* (also *satsang*) is a bowed instrument similar to the Nepali *sarangi*. However, unlike the *sarangi*, the strings are not raised on the fingerboard. The player bows with the right hand and Mickma explained that he presses the strings with the flesh of the fingers of his left hand to produce notes. The *sutsang* is made of a single piece of lightweight wood. The soundbox is hollowed out and covered with a piece of leather. A bridge sits on the soundbox. There are four strings,

made of nylon or steel, with four corresponding tuning pegs. The bow is traditionally made of horsehair and is treated with resin before use.



The *sutsang*

II Wind instruments

A. Pungtung Plith: Bamboo flute

The Lepchas consider the *pungtung plith* to be the father of all flutes. Mickma Lepcha explained that it can be made from two types of bamboo growing in high-altitude. It has five holes: one for the mouthpiece and four for the fingers. The *pungtung plith* that Mickma played for me produced the following scale: C (all finger holes closed), D# (top three finger holes closed), F (top two finger holes closed), G (top one finger hole closed), and B (all finger holes open). Although there is no standard length for this flute, the ones I saw were approximately 16-18 inches long. It is held either to the left or right of the player and Mickma said that it is played as a solo instrument. The melodies are either passed down from older generations, or are improvised, making this instrument a vehicle for emotional expression.



Two *pungtung plith* flutes

Different stories revolve around the origin of the *pungtung plith*. According to a story that has been passed down in Mickma's family, and which his father retold to him, the flute was a gift from the god of music, Narok Rum, to an orphaned boy:

Once there was an orphaned boy who herded cattle. He lived with his uncle, who mistreated him. The boy only found solace with the animals he looked after and spent as much time with them as he could. Narok Rum was very touched by this boy and his love for the animals. He decided to pay the boy a visit, disguised as an ordinary man. Narok Rum chatted with the boy and told him he would give him a gift because of the boy's love for the animals. He then gave the boy the *pungtung plith*. From that day on, the boy played the flute often, using it as an emotional outlet.

One day when the boy was resting under a tree, a crow came and stole the flute. The crow flew to the land of the serpent god. The serpent god tried to kill the crow and the two duelled. The crow lost and gave up the flute.

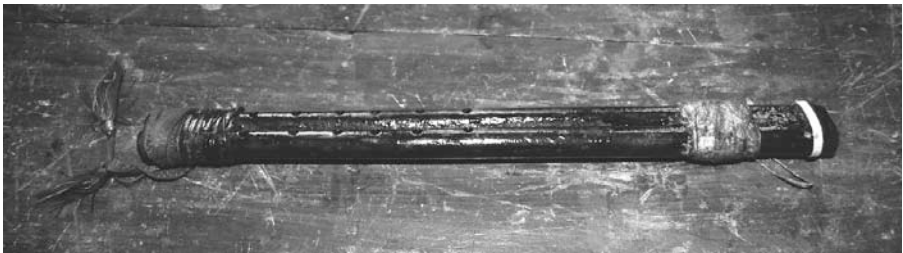
Meanwhile, the boy missed his flute and travelled everywhere looking for it. He finally arrived in the land of the serpent god and discovered that it was there. He asked the serpent god to return it, but the serpent god refused, saying that

he had won this flute in a competition against the crow. He could not simply give the flute back. The only way the boy could have the flute back was by competing for it. The boy agreed to the challenge because he was longing for his flute so much. He asked the serpent god if he could use the flute for the competition, and the serpent god agreed. Once he had the flute, the boy began to play. The melody was so beautiful that the serpent god told the boy that not only could he take the flute back, but also that whenever he played the flute in times of sadness, the serpent god and other deities would come to the boy's aid.

This is why there is a belief that if you play this flute, especially early in the morning, the gods will come and help you.

B. Nimbryok (joined) Plith: end-blown double pipe flute

This flute consists of two end-blown bamboo flutes joined side by side, and produces one tone. Each flute has six holes and is approximately one foot in length. It is held vertically and fingers from both hands are used to cover the finger holes. Sonam Tshering Lepcha played a melody sung by a *mun* (Lepcha female shaman [Balicki, p. 163]) when diagnosing patients. He adapted it to play on this flute.



The *nimbryok plith*

The following is an excerpt from the melody. The nuances of the rhythm, which was very free, are only approximated:





Sonam Tshering Lepcha playing the *nymbryok plith*

C. Gyom (right) plith: Low-pitched bamboo flute

The *gyom plith* is a bamboo flute that is lower in pitch and longer than the *pungtung plith*. Like the *pungtung plith*, it has five holes—four for the fingers and one mouthpiece. It is held to a person's right, at a 60-degree angle away from the body pointing in the two o'clock direction. The end above the mouthpiece is closed. When Sonam Tshering Lepcha demonstrated it to me, he sang (without lyrics) as he blew into the mouthpiece, so that the sound of his voice doubled the melody of the flute.



The *gyom plith*



Close-up of the mouth piece on the *gyom plith*



The closed end of the *gyom plith*

D. Bumpothyut: Bamboo bird whistles

These short bamboo pipe instruments imitate the sounds of birds. They are used in music as sound effects. Sonam Tshering Lepcha believes these instruments to be the mother and father of musical instruments. Different tones are produced by inserting one's finger into the pipes, opening and closing the end hole with one's palm, or blowing at different intensities. They can be blown from the end, similar to blowing into a glass bottle, or into the hole that acts as a mouthpiece. A vibrato-like effect is created by drumming the body of the pipe with one's fingers while blowing.



Bumpothyut (bird whistles) of various sizes

III Percussion instruments

A. Tungdar bong: Barrel bass drum

This drum is made from a hollowed piece of wood. Both ends are usually covered with deer leather, or sometimes with goat leather. Leather straps tie the two leather heads to the body of the drum, and wooden pegs are placed beneath the straps to tighten the heads. It is not tuned to a particular pitch. Mickma Lepcha described this drum as an accompanying instrument that keeps the tempo.



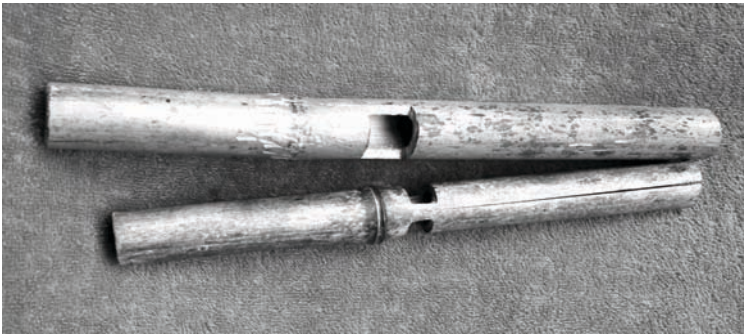
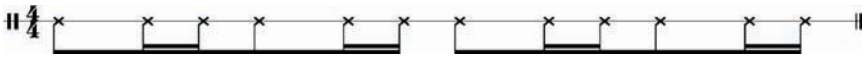
A tungdar bong made by Mickma Lepcha's father



Mickma Lepcha playing the tungdar bong

B. Poposong (bigger) and popotek (smaller): Split bamboo percussion instrument

Lepchas traditionally used these bamboo instruments to scare away birds and animals from the fields. Originally sound was created by a string attached to the bamboo stick, which when pulled caused the two sides of the bamboo stick to strike against each other. Now, it is used as an accompanying percussion instrument. It is often played held in one hand and struck against the thumb and pinky fingers of the other hand. A typical rhythm, as Sonam Tshering Lepcha demonstrated to me, is as follows:



Poposong (top) and *popotek* (bottom)



View of the
poposong from top

C. Zanga: Kettledrum

This kettledrum has a body made of copper, has a leather head, and is struck with a pair of sticks. Generally, there are two drums, one male and the other female, played by two people. They are used in Buddhist monastic ensembles. For instance, in the recording of a *cham* in the village of Lingthem produced by the Namgyal Institute

of Tibetology, the pair of *zanga* drums is part of an ensemble consisting of two *gyaling* (shawm), two *ragdung* (long horns), two conch shells, and a small gong (2007). The origin of the *zanga* is debated, but some believe it was a Lepcha instrument that was incorporated into Buddhist monastic music. Although the *zanga* was not used during the Guru Tsengyed Cham that I watched at Sangha Yangtse monastery in Rinchenpong, it can be used in *cham* music ensembles, as shown in the Lingthem village *cham* recording mentioned above.⁸



A *zanga* of the Sangha Yangtse monastery in Rinchenpong

IV Singing

A. *Apryavom* (classical folk song):

An *apryavom* is a type of Lepcha folk song that is traditionally sung without instrumental accompaniment or a fixed beat. However, Sonam Tshering Lepcha likes to add a fixed beat to make the songs more appealing. *Apryavom* songs usually consist of a repeated melodic line, with improvised lyrics, although the lyrics of many *apryavom* songs have been written and there are song collections in the Lepcha museum in Kalimpong, directed by Sonam Tshering

⁸ This drum is similar, if not the same as the *tungda* kettledrum in the Lepcha band ensemble recorded by Lieberman during his visit in 1970. He writes the following in his liner notes: 'These two kettledrums...have copper bodies and leather heads, attached with thong lacing.' They are also played in the same way: '...they are suspended from a frame fashioned of live saplings...The players use two wooden drumsticks, striking the head near the center.' The ensemble he records consists of two kettledrums, a shawm, and a small cymbal. In the DVD recording produced by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology of the two *zanga* drums played in Lingthem in 2007, the drums are also suspended from a frame.

Lepcha.⁹ There are different types of *apryavom* songs, categorized as prayer songs, joyous songs, sad songs and patriotic songs (Tamsang, 2008, p. 63-64). The song that Sonam Tshering Lepcha sang for me is about a girl who gets married to someone other than her lover. It uses two melodic lines, one of three beats and the other of four, repeated throughout the song with slight ornamental variations. Each beat is subdivided into three smaller beats, so that the three-beat melodic line has nine pulses, and the four-beat melodic line has twelve pulses. A variation of the three-beat melodic line is played at the end of every stanza, followed by a slight breath pause. In this way, the first stanza consists of four lines arranged as A (three-beat melodic line)+A (three-beat melodic line)+B (four-beat melodic line)+A' (variation of three-beat melodic line):

B. Folk songs:

Unlike *apryavom* songs, folk songs can have musical accompaniment. Sonam Tshering Lepcha demonstrated one song about ‘Satim Puno,’ the porcupine king. This song also appears on his album, *Lepcha Folk Songs*, with musical instrument accompaniment under the title ‘Chya-nya-nya’ (no date). The lyrics, which are sung in Lepcha, describe the life of the porcupine saying such things as, ‘When it rains, I go under a rock, and when it’s sunny I come out. I forage for food on the jungle floor’ (Sonam Tshering Lepcha, Nov 8, 2011). In the version of the song on Youtube,¹⁰ the lyrics are translated as follows:

Chya nya-nya,
I, Sthim Puno, King of the Porcupines,

⁹ In the recording of a woman singing a historical narrative made by Fredric Lieberman in Sikkim in 1970, she uses ‘a freely repeated melodic formula which may be employed for many different stories.’ When I played this recording for Sonam Tshering Lepcha, he stated that it was an *apryavom* song.

¹⁰ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWc_Ef0wANY

Roaming the high and low lands,
 I, Sthim Puno, King of the Porcupines,
 Foraging and eating,
 Fruits of the highland,
 Wild yam of the lowland.

Like other Lepcha songs transcribed above, this song's beats were each subdivided into three pulses. Although the meter had a compound duple or quadruple feel, I chose to transcribe it in a 3/8 meter, since there was an odd number of beats and no obvious pickup measure. A transcription of the first stanza, as it is on the recording Sonam Tshering Lepcha passed to me, is as follows:

The musical score is titled "Sthim Puno" and is written in 3/8 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of three systems of staves. The first system includes a Voice line with lyrics "Chya nya nya - - sa tim -", a Tumbok line, a Sutsang line, a Bass Drum line, and a Hand Clap line. The second system includes a Voice line with lyrics "pu - no - to da dang ri - - ko pa no m pu -", a Tumbok line, a Sutsang line, a Bass Drum line, and a Hand Clap line. The third system includes a Voice line with lyrics "- - sa tim - pu - no - - - sa tim - pu - no - -", a Tumbok line, a Sutsang line, a Bass Drum line, and a Hand Clap line. The score uses various musical notations including rests, eighth notes, and quarter notes.

Conclusion

Wherever you go in the world, you might hear Kelly Clarkson crooning on the radio. Go anywhere in South Asia and you're bound to have Bollywood hits blasting from all directions. Go anywhere that uses Nepali as a primary language and you're going to hear Nepali pop, as well as Kollywood (the 'Bollywood of Kathmandu') hits. It is not surprising, therefore, that the musical products of these three supercultures seem to dominate Sikkim's musical landscape. However, they do not yet make up the entirety of the musical fabric. While in Sikkim, you might also hear Tibetan ritual music, Lepcha folk music, or a wandering Nepali *gaine* minstrel. These are the musics, or 'micromusics' that people from outside are less likely to know about, the musics that are less likely to be played on the radio.

Lepcha folk music is rare, at least in the areas I visited. I cannot claim this is true for all of Sikkim, since I spent most of my time in Gangtok. In order to hear the music at all, I had to seek out musicians in Gangtok and Kalimpong. However hard it might be to encounter though, it still exists, and it would be interesting to explore what factors keep it going. Some young Lepchas are learning traditional instruments, and creating their own music, such as those of the 'Lepcha rock fusion band,' Wvaoth, of which Mickma Lepcha is a member (Sikkim NOW! Retrieved August 08, 2012). Also, Sonam Tashi Gyaltzen of Echostream, a design studio in Gangtok, told me that the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department of the Government of Sikkim has commissioned them to document the musical instruments of Sikkim (Sept 12 2012, personal communication).

What I have written about is only a sketch of the music of the Lepcha people. Nevertheless, I hope that this will provide valuable information to anyone interested in music in Sikkim, and in particular, Lepcha music. Furthermore, I hope it will contribute to future research that will shed light on the diversity of the music and peoples, and on the cross-cultural interactions that take place in this part of the Himalayas.

Acknowledgements

There are a few people whose help and guidance were instrumental in making this research happen. These are Professor Zhang Boyu of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and staff at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, especially Anna Balikci-Denjongpa (research coordinator), Tashi Densapa (director), and Tenzin Samphel (general librarian). Last but not least, I thank Fredric Lieberman (UC Santa Cruz) for sharing his experiences and the LP record of music he recorded in Sikkim. Any errors in this paper are mine alone.

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