

LEPCHA HUNTERS' NARRATIVES OF THEIR HIDDEN  
LANDSCAPES

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*Introduction*

In ancient times, the Mutanchi Rong<sup>1</sup> Kups [beloved children of Mother Nature] had no proper homes or clans. Wherever wild fruits grew in abundance they gathered together and lived in one group, eating the fruits. At that time, they wandered about in a place called, Na-ho Na-hu, in their sacred motherland, Ney Mayel Lyang. There lived an old Rong, an expert in hunting in the innermost corners of the dense jungle, who used to roam around with his wife and children, and lived by hunting and catching the fish in the rivers and eating them. He was a man who spoke only Rong Ring (Lepcha language); a Rong hunter whose home was inside the dense jungle, small but sufficient for shelter. Living there, he used to go out for hunting and in a very short while would return with a kill with which he provided for his wife and children to consume. Such was his life which he spent blissfully.<sup>2</sup>

I first became interested in the stories of the Lepcha hunters while sitting on a dry stone wall in Lingthem in Upper Dzongu, North Sikkim watching two retired hunters doting over an orphaned fawn. They had rescued her from the jungle and brought her home where she seemed perfectly at ease, eating grains from their hands and socialising with the dog. When I mentioned the unorthodoxy of hunters rescuing prey, the hunters, Gora Lepcha and Tashi Tsering Lepcha, laughed and promised never to kill her. Then we went inside, where over a cup of tea they told me stories of earlier lives, when they were hunters.

I had come to Dzongu to hear the folktales of the Lepchas told in the language they were created in, translated by the younger generation they were created for. I have since heard many Lepcha stories but it is

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<sup>1</sup> Rongkup is the traditional name for the people now known as Lepchas.

<sup>2</sup> Extract from *Rong-Kup-Lung-Ten Ah-Bong-Chyo-Kung-Sen (Legends of the origin of some customs and rituals of the Rong-Kups (Lepchas))*, 2001, The Mutanchi Rong Shezoom, P.T. Lepcha, Kalimpong, p.3.

the hunting stories that remained with me. Those I heard from the Lingthem hunters were contemporary, personal anecdotes. However, they evoked the time when just Lepchas inhabited Sikkim. They spoke of rituals still observed that existed long before the colonisation of the Lepchas by other races.

Gora and Tashi Tsering related stories of how they hunted and why they stopped; stories of hardship, ritual and superstition. Tashi Tsering observed: “our race has been hunting for a long time for we are one of the hunting tribes. We used to hunt the deer for generation and generation but change comes with the modern age. Who knows, car will come, road will come, food will come.” At that time, April 2006, it was hard to imagine a road to Lingthem, for the path is high and steep; almost vertical and cut so close to the jungle that walking up there is like travelling to a forgotten land, a place that holds secrets hidden in the spaces that the hunters share with nature; secrets that have been passed from fathers to sons for centuries.

The hunting has stopped, for it is now illegal and a road is planned to service the construction of a hydro-electric project in Dzongu. These former hunters, who hold the memories of their ancestors and of their own experience, are the last generation who will have their own hunting stories to tell.

This paper shares stories of the hunters; their beliefs, rituals and lifestyle, gathered in interviews I conducted between April 2006 and April 2008. The stories place the hunters in what I see as the ‘hidden landscape’ of Dzongu; a place that few people have seen. However for the Lepchas that know of these hidden lands and the animals, spirits and legends that have gathered there, they are sacred places.

### *Mayel Kyong*

...They met a man from one of those houses and enquired from him. But he instead asked them ‘How have you two come into our land? Here, where no living humans can ever reach. There are only seven families of us living in these seven houses left behind a long time ago by Sage Mensaling.’...On that night, all the young men of the seven houses brought the two of them food, milk, fruits, mangoes, oranges. They ate to their full satisfaction and as they talked, gathered that these persons had been living there from ages ago. In this land, they did not know starvation or famine; on this land there were plenty of greens, fruits and nuts and all kinds of crops could be grown here. In their

houses, food, clothing and salt never finished or ran short... (narrated by Lawrence Sitling Rongkup).

Lepchas talk of a secret place in Dzongu called Mayel Kyong where seven Lepcha families live a traditional Lepcha life. They have all the food they could ever eat for everything grows all year round in Mayel Kyong; there is no disease, no famine, and the Mayel Kyong villagers have the gift of eternal life. During the day they are young and strong yet they grow old each evening with the setting sun. Mayel Kyong is believed to be located just near the base of Mount Kanchenjunga. To get there you must trek for several days through the jungle until you find an entrance that is sealed by a huge stone. Only a pure Lepcha, one who has only Lepcha ancestry, speaks the Lepcha language and follows the Lepcha traditions can move the stone by placing his left hand on it. However, if he enters Mayel Kyong and later leaves it, he will never be able to find it again.

A hunter heard that to get to Mayel Kyong, you must cross a black river, so he followed the black river, deep into the forest and when he crossed it he found a gate which led him to a different world. Everyone was young, beautiful, everyone was singing, dancing, they had enough food. Everyone was happy, nobody was sad and their lives were very good. They asked him 'from where did you come?' He told them he was married and they said, 'don't go back, if you go back you won't have this life.'

But he felt for his wife, his family in Puntong and he thought 'I'll go and I'll bring my family here' so he had a very good idea; he came out of Mayel Kyong and first he took off some clothing and put it in one place so he would find it, then he took off more clothing and put it somewhere else, using his clothes to mark a trail.

When he came back with his family, he looked for his clothes but nothing was there. It looked like a different place. He just saw hills; he didn't see his clothes (narrated by Sherap Lepcha).

The Lepcha writer Arthur Foning wrote about the Lepchas' hidden land in his book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*. He wrote that Mayel Kyong was once a large country at the base of the mountains where the Lepchas were placed by their creators but 'on account of our human failings, this utopia has been defiled and has shrunk to a limited size, only fit for a few souls to live in, only the pure and the unsullied ones finding an abode there.' He also believed Mayel Kyong is impossible to find.

An oft-repeated saying, illustrates this belief: *Alyu arong linba, Long nun paruk dongba; Mayel Kyong ka thisyong re*. This means, 'When cats grow horns, and the rocks sprout shoots, we will reach Mayel County'; in other words, it is impossible to reach the Mayel County...some natural obstacle, or barrier, such as heavy rain, a hail storm, sleet or a landslide, will prevent us, and drive us away...it is also said that formerly they used to meet us humans. But, alas, because of the degradation caused by our unworthy behaviour, they now shun us, and never appear before us, but confine themselves to the sacred place among the gods in the mountains (Foning: 2003).<sup>3</sup>

It is unlikely that the mythical Mayel Kyong will host a Lepcha hunter in the future for the current generation of young men, the 'would be' hunters are also the 'first educated generation'<sup>4</sup> who, unlike their parents have been 'out' of Dzongu, were educated in nearby Mangan or in the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok. Some were educated at boarding schools in Kalimpong or Darjeeling in nearby West Bengal. Others pursued tertiary studies or worked in larger Indian cities, and experienced an urban lifestyle; a different ecology to the one in which they were born. However, unlike many young Lepchas born outside Dzongu whose first language is Nepali, the Dzongu youth know their language and have childhood experiences of a time when to be a hunter brought a person respect from the community and when stories of the jungle were told firsthand by those who experienced them.

### *Hunting Life*

To hunt a deer it takes three days. The first day is to see whether there is deer or not in this area in the jungle. We know this because there are some deer droppings where they are staying. The second day to track the footprints and then the third day we take the dogs, a large number of dogs, so dogs surround the area so the deer can't escape. So the dogs will go inside that area and the deer can't escape, then we kill them (narrated by Gora Lepcha).

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<sup>3</sup> Foning A.R (2003 [1987]), *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong, p.50-52.

<sup>4</sup> Lepchas from Dzongu aged between 20 and 36 described themselves to me as the first educated generation. They are the children of parents who rarely left Dzongu. Many of the Lepcha youth I met were educated at Tashi Namgyal Academy in Gangtok.

Hunting life was tough. A hunter could go into the jungle for days and come home empty handed. “Sometimes we don’t get the animal,” said Ongdu Lepcha, a former hunter from Tingvong. “Always our wife is looking for us to come back with an animal.” Ongdu was taught to hunt when he was 18. He would follow his father and grandfather into the jungle and practise until he could hunt himself. In 1937, when Geoffrey Gorer was in Lingthem, he noted that a young man must not eat the first animal he kills, nor eat the first one hundred animals he kills with his bow. If he did so, he would develop sores and leprosy (Gorer: 1967).<sup>5</sup> For Ongdu, decades later, there was no special initiation, just learning from his elders. However, in his father’s and grandfather’s time a hunter would not eat what he killed but would bring it back for others and instead eat their prey.

Before the arrival of guns, weapons for hunting birds were rudimentary and included a catapult made from a forked stick which was used to stone small birds which were later strangled; a pellet-bow made of bamboo and string that was used with clay pellets to shoot birds; an ordinary bamboo bow which used arrows with cylindrical bamboo tube instead of a tip used to stone birds and a bird trap consisting of four small bundles of thin strings with loops used to snare small jungle fowl.<sup>6</sup> Catching small birds in snares was not considered hunting, it was more an activity for small boys (Gorer: 1967).<sup>7</sup>

For larger prey such as deer or bear, the hunters used a bamboo bow with pointed arrows, a spear with an iron arrow head, or trapped their prey. According to Siiger, Lepchas hunted by themselves or in groups, where one group was used to disturb the prey and push it toward the other (Siiger: 1967).<sup>8</sup> They also used a stone and a stick; the stone to stun the animal, the stick to beat it to death. By the time of Siiger’s stay in Tingvong in 1949, hunters had started using guns.

The well-known hunter from Tingvong, Aphock Lepcha, is featured in the film, *Tingvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim*.<sup>9</sup> He is shown in his house with his collection of poison arrows. “Once hit by a poison arrow

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<sup>5</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Siiger, H. *The Lepchas, Part 1*, (1967) the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Gorer, G. (1967) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Siiger, H, *The Lepchas, Part 1*, (1967) the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Tingvong: a Lepcha Village in Sikkim*, (2005), Sikkim Ritual Video Archive Project, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok.

an animal can't go any further than the bamboo grove down there." He holds a bow and resting against it, rocks back and forth. "I tasted it once, just a little bit. I was sick for the whole day."

He says that they first saw guns about 50 years ago. "There were no guns before that. We only had bows and arrows." He then mimics releasing a poison arrow. "Mountain goats, deer; some could even bring down a deer in flight."

The poison comes from the root of a plant found in the jungle above Tingvong. It is also found at lower and higher altitude, and according to Ongdu, so strong that within a minute any kind of animal it penetrates will die. "The place on the animal where the arrow hits should be cut out within a minute so that the poison doesn't spread. And it must be cut out very carefully."

Dupden Lepcha, a former hunter from Lingthem, recalled his early hunting lessons, many which were with Gora Lepcha who guided him. "First time, many times I missed, after three, four times I missed for the deer ran so fast, then my grandfather said, you cannot miss more than you hit, or you cannot be a hunter." Dupden's grandfather suggested he practise on a football so he learnt to shoot by bouncing a ball and shooting it as it bounced up and down on the ground, miming the movement of a deer running through the woods. "The first time I shot a deer Gora asked me 'why do you use the gun?' Gora uses just a stick and a stone; he throws a stone at the animal then beats it with a stick. In my grandfather's time they used a bow and arrow, they did not have guns, but in our time, we cannot use this bow and arrow."

Gora and his father threw stones or rocks at an animal's head or body to stun it, then beat it with a stick to kill it: "my hunting life has been very tough, in those times we didn't have any guns; we just chased the deer with stones, rocks and killed them to feed my child." His ancestors used bow and arrows to fell their prey.

From ancient times our great-grandfathers used a bow and arrow to hunt. My great-grandfather used a poison arrow. When an animal is shot it doesn't die straight away, the poison will go through the body and will take a long time. So the deer doesn't die on the spot, it may walk two or three or more metres and collapse. Then later the time of stones and sticks came. Later [with guns] it became easier (narrated by Gora Lepcha).

Gora and Tashi Tsering both stopped hunting when they received what they thought to be a 'sign' from the hunting god that they must stop. Gora was hunting with a friend and four dogs but the dogs were killed.

“A deer killed the dogs, maybe there was more than one deer but I believe that from the day I shouldn’t hunt animals because the dogs died. From that day I gave up hunting.”

Tashi Tsering stopped hunting when he killed a deer that represented one hundred animals.

One day I killed two animals, which is quite hard to do in a day. I killed a deer and a porcupine in Lingni which is a long way from here at the base of the mountain. The most amazing thing is when I killed the deer, I found its horn was shaped like a flower.

The elder owners told me that a deer with a flower shaped horn was a sign of killing one hundred animals. The elders said: if you kill a deer, or any animal, with that shaped horn, it’s a sign that you have killed one hundred animals so you mustn’t kill any more (narrated by Tashi Tsering Lepcha).

Gora and Tashi Tsering stopped hunting because they felt the hunting deity had sent them each a sign that it was time to stop. Their generation is the last that hunted actively, for the tradition dwindled over decades with the change in the Lepchas’ lifestyle and economic circumstances. In the 1940s the Lepchas moved away from slash-and-burn dry rice cultivation and became agriculturalists, building paddy terraces into the surrounding hills and sowing cardamom crops, creating a new economy and lessening the need for the food provided by the hunters. Earlier, in 1937, Gorer noted that in Lingthem, Lepchas relied less on hunting as they cultivated their own food and were also able to purchase grains.<sup>10</sup> The influence of Buddhism (which excludes the killing of animals) in Dzongu was gaining strength around Gorer’s time in Lingthem and increased during the next few decades. State education has also played a significant role in the shift away from the hunting tradition, with the opening of schools in the villages in Dzongu. The children were in school and not in the forests or pastures, which changed the division of labour in families (Gowloog: 2001).<sup>11</sup> In 1975, when Sikkim joined the Indian Union, Sikkim came under India’s 1972 Wildlife Protection Act,<sup>12</sup> which prohibited hunting of certain wild animals. In 1980 the Sikkim Forest Conservation Act was

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<sup>10</sup> Gorer, G. (1967) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Gowloog, R. (2001) Social Organisation and Change Among the Lepchas of Sikkim, in *Tribes of the Eastern Himalayas*, ed. S. Sengupta, Mittal Publications, New Delhi p.49.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.helpline.law.com/docs/wildlife/01.php> (accessed 23/6/08)

implemented, making it mandatory to acquire permission from the government for any activities in the forest area, including hunting.<sup>13</sup> As recently as 2006, the Government of Sikkim declared certain areas in Upper Dzongu near Tholung as conservation zones in order to stop movement of pack animals and irresponsible tourism and to assist the protection of wildlife such as the Musk Deer, Himalayan Thar, certain alpine birds and endangered medicinal plants.<sup>14</sup> While hunting wasn't specifically mentioned in the order (it was already illegal), the group conducting the habitat survey found a bag of snares in a cave which they speculated may have been used to kill musk deer.

The tradition of hunting flourished longer in Dzongu than in many other parts of Sikkim. The remoteness and difficult terrain of Dzongu and its status as a Lepcha Reserve made it inaccessible and inhospitable to outsiders for many years. While its remoteness must have meant that the Lepchas did not get many of the opportunities which were offered elsewhere as early as others did, such as infrastructure, education and health services, this situation also allowed the hunters to continue their traditions longer than would otherwise have been possible. The remoteness and reserve status of Dzongu extended the hunting lives of the Lepchas, and the rituals to respect *Pong Rum*, the hunting deity, are still observed today.

### *Hunting rituals*

Whenever we do our hunting, the first thing we do is offer a certain part of the meat and offer it to God. We have to place it in a certain place in the forest, maybe on a hill (narrated by Tashi Tsering Lepcha).

An important aspect of hunting life are the rituals which are performed before and after a hunt and the signs that a hunter receives telling him when and where to hunt. If a hunter dreams of the place where they will find prey, the next morning he will cancel whatever other plans he may have had, gather his dogs and his gun, and go to that place. He will see if he can achieve the target he saw the night before in his dream. At the start of the hunt he will perform a ritual to the hunting god to ask for an animal to be sent to him. Tashi Tsering noted hunting is not easy and a Lepcha cannot go hunting on his own whim. "You have to get

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<sup>13</sup> Sikkim Human Development Report, 2001, Government of Sikkim, Social Science Press, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Sikkim Government Gazette, No. 401, 15/12/06.



permission from the elder hunters. First I do a hunting *puja* to get permission. I also have to wait for the right day.”

Sonam Rinchen Lepcha remembered his elder brother’s hunting days. “My brother, he would have a dream and the next day he would say: ‘forget about all plans we have made today, we have to go hunting.’ Once I went with him, he said ‘I have to go’ and I knew he had a dream. We went five kilometres, two and a half kilometres straight up...I’ve never done this hunting but he will trace them [animals] and he has dogs. He can smell it, he can sense it.”

After the hunt, the hunter performs another ritual to the hunting deity as soon as the animal is killed.

Big leaves are cut and put on the ground and then the animal is divided up and the head is put in the front with a foreleg and hind leg on either side and singed intestines in the middle. This is all ‘offered’ to *Pong Rum* and the hunter crouches behind and speaking very slowly and softly, gently throws the burnt intestines bit by bit over the animal’s head. On his return to the village great care must be taken that no woman sees the animal’s head; if she did the hunter would have no success in future.<sup>15</sup>

Dupden Lepcha took three months to shoot his first deer and was very successful afterwards. Like other hunters, he had dreams about hunting. If in his dreams he saw his ancestors’ food, a *buk*, a yam-like tuber that is foraged from inside the soil in the forest, it was a sign to go hunting; a guarantee that he would get something from the jungle. His hunting life finished when his father, who did not like him to hunt, asked him to stop.

He explained the ritual he performed after each hunt to respect the hunting god and ask for an animal the next time they go hunting.

After we kill the deer, we cut its leg, near the hoof, its ear and its tongue. Then we put it inside a piece of leather. We take out internal organs, the kidney and heart and put these inside the leather and wrap it. Then we drink some of the warm blood of the deer. Then we start the *puja* and offer the meat in the leather. We say, I will give you this body, these things are yours, don’t miss our hunting next time (narrated by Dupden Lepcha).

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<sup>15</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 244-245.

The ritual is also performed to ensure that the beast cannot come back to life, for it is believed that the Yeti can restore an animal and take it back into the jungle.

### *The Yeti*

Our ancestor had gone for hunting and after they killed one deer, they heard a man shouting in the hills. They wondered who he was and gradually the sound came nearer and nearer and then stopped. Our ancestor couldn't see him but heard him; crying, shouting and staying in that one place, where the deer had come to. Then our ancestor saw him, this man looked like a Yeti, the owner of all the deers and any animal and who looks after them. The Yeti came down and collected the fern and said some words, like a mantra and the deer came back to life. The Yeti then took the deer away into the hills. Some say our ancestor took note of that mantra. That's why we cut bits off, one part of the hand [foreleg near hoof], one leg, one part of the ear, maybe tongue. We do this to make an incomplete body so it can't recover (narrated by Loden Lepcha).

The Yeti is a recurring character in the stories of the Lepcha hunters. Known as *Chu Mung* (Glacier Spirit) the Yeti is worshipped by Lepchas as the god of hunting and lord of all forest beasts (Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956).<sup>16</sup>

There are many beliefs relating to hunters and the Yeti. Hunters think if they keep a dead animal in the forest overnight, the animal's deity<sup>17</sup> will come and take it back to the forest. In order to prevent this from happening, a hunter must cut one foreleg and one hind leg on opposite sides of the animal's body so the body is no longer whole and cannot therefore be 'put back together' by the Yeti. Ongdu related a story about a beast killed by his friend, an inexperienced hunter.

One time, a few years back my friend shot the animal, saw it was dead and then came back to get me. We went back to the place but the animal had already gone to the forest. My friend was a new hunter, a Nepalese, and didn't know the tradition to cut the opposite hind leg and

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<sup>16</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. (1956) *Where the Gods are Mountains*, Reynal and Company Inc., New York, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> In one story I heard the animal's deity, Mung-long-mung would take the animal back. In another that the Yeti would take the animal back. Some hunters view Mung-long-mung and the Yeti as the same deity, others as separate deities. The hunting deity worshipped in formal rituals is known as *Pong Rum*.

foreleg. I saw the place where he killed the animal, there was a lot of blood and the grass still had the animal's impression but there were no footprints or drag marks. The animal just disappeared from that place (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

Some stories concern the Yeti and how it appears as small children. Sherap Lepcha related a story about an uncle who found a baby in the jungle and took it home to his family, where it grew very quickly. "They were shocked you know. What to do? They did a *puja* and he took the baby back to where he found it and when he reached that place the baby said; 'what do you want as a reward' and my uncle said, 'make me a hunter'. That's why my father and uncles when they went hunting, they always got animals - because of that blessing."

Ongdu told two stories of small children with Yeti powers.

In Payel village, above Tingvong, my great-great-grandfather went hunting at Langham-chu where, by a small stream he made a trap. When he returned he saw a human baby inside his trap. He didn't have a child so he put it inside his *Thokro-dum*<sup>18</sup> pressing it to his chest and brought it to his home. But the baby wouldn't eat. After two days he hadn't eaten anything and after three days the hunter was worried that as the baby was eating nothing, he would die. He decided to take him back to where he found him and he returned to Langham-chu. After reaching the place by the stream where his trap was set, the baby suddenly disappeared into the wind and my grandfather realised the baby was a Yeti with special powers (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

A grandfather in Leek Village, a hunter, went hunting and despite trying all day, he caught nothing. After a few days he saw a child wearing the *Thokro-dum* caught in his trap. He thought it might be a child who had been overpowered by the hunting god and become abnormal. The hunter took the child from the trap and upon seeing he was dead, and knowing that if you put a Yeti child in a clean place, it would get up and run away, he took the child out from the trap and cleaned up around the trap. The child in the trap was a signal from the Yeti so the hunter killed it by cutting its head and throwing it to the jungle. After that incident, because of the spirit of that Yeti, there is suffering to that hunter's clan. The descendents of that family always and still suffer (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

There have been many recorded sightings and encounters with the Yeti outside the frame of folklore. However, the Lepchas have always

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<sup>18</sup> *Thokro-dum* is the traditional Lepcha tunic worn by males.

navigated their fear of the Yeti by avoiding contact. As it is a nocturnal spirit, villagers would ensure they were home from the fields by nightfall, locking doors to keep the Yeti spirit out.<sup>19</sup>

Many hunters talk of the Yeti and believe it exists today however, Ongdu told a story of its demise.

The Yeti beings used to come into houses and act like a human beings, but they would take cows from their owners. One day, determined to stop the Yeti from stealing their cows, the owners brought a wild fruit, which is oily and capable of igniting. When the Yeti, pretending to be human, reached that place, the man gave him a plate of butter. The Yeti took the fruit and the butter but a tic in his body ignited the fruit and the Yeti's body caught fire. He ran up and down in the forest and friends were asking, "who did that thing to you?" and he said, "I did it myself, no one else, it was done by myself" he said as he kept running around the forest. Now the Lepcha who owned the cow knew if a human being had done that he would have to go down to the river to wash it off but the Yeti went up to the mountain and the mountain caught fire, finishing off the Yeti. After that there was no more Yeti (narrated by Ongdu Lepcha).

Ongdu's story about the death of the Yeti is not universally understood and there are people who continue to consider the presence of the Yeti in Dzongu. A Lepcha elder from a hunting clan told me that he had been deep into the jungle, to places no one knows how to find and while he had never seen a Yeti, he had heard it; a loud whistle, accompanied by shaking ground. "You will run when you hear it," he said and confessed that it made him shake with fear.

### *Taboos*

When the Bongthing finished making the offering, two perhaps three deer came in to where they were. It was as though they had sacrificed themselves. They seemed tired, or wounded. The Bongthing said, "they have been offered by the hunter deity but you can only take one." Then after the Bongthing had performed that annual ritual the hunter has to depend on his dreams to know when it's time to hunt (narrated by Sonam Rinchen Lepcha).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wangchuk and Zulca, (2007), *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, Little Kingdom, Gangtok. p. 371.

<sup>20</sup> Sonam Rinchen Lepcha was relating a story told to him by his father and brother.

In Lepcha society there are many taboos connected to beliefs that act to conserve wildlife and the environment. The hunters observed several taboos, for example, a hunter would only take one deer, but would pray and give an offering for another for the next hunt. A hunter must not come into contact with, or pass a pregnant woman before his hunt and women are not allowed to be present during a ritual to the hunting god. Lepcha women must never touch hunting weapons. This form of taboo is explained by Foning who wrote:

The belief is that this particular god cannot stand the sight of women. This is the reason why this worship always takes place away from the house in a remote place where, even by chance, females do not appear. Besides, they themselves know this and thus scrupulously avoid coming anywhere near the place where this worship is going on.<sup>21</sup>

The aforementioned custom that young hunters do not eat their first one hundred prey in order to avoid leprosy is a taboo that, according to Gorer, applies only to those animals killed with a bow and arrow. “Animals killed with a gun do not count, they can always be eaten” (Gorer: 1967).<sup>22</sup>

There are also many habitat taboos in Dzongu which are off-limits to hunters and fishermen. One occurs at a small lake in Lower Dzongu called *Tung Kyong Duo* that is the habitat for fish which are believed to be the ancestors of the Lepcha clan, Hee Youngmingmoo. The clan’s creation story involves an angel who lives in the lake and who Hee Youngmingmoo falls in love with.

...That evening she didn’t appear; nor the following morning. Kumzer Agyen and Hee Youngmingmoo visited the lake every day and worked to make it even more beautiful to attract her to appear. Finally, she came out of the lake and Kumzer Agyen told her that the future of the human race depended on her marrying Hee Youngmingmoo. When she saw Hee Youngmingmoo she decided to leave the lake but before she left forever she took some louse from her hair and threw it into the water. Gnu Kyongmu watched the louse turn into small fish, called Deng Gnu Leek which were no larger than her little finger and she hoped that her children and their children would multiply and grow,

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<sup>21</sup> Foning A.R (2003 [1987]), *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong, p. 241.

<sup>22</sup> Gorer, G. (1967 [1938]) *Himalayan Village, An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, p. 85.

just like the *Deng Gnu Leek*. She said: “this Hee Youngmingmoo clan should never eat this fish for if they eat it then they will become sick and they will have blisters and sores on the head... (narrated by Sonam Rinchen Lepcha).

*Tung Kyong Duo* is a small pond, no more than 40 metres long by 15 metres wide. Large rocks, fit for climbing on, and gentler trees, ferns and flowers surround it, reflecting on its surface, creating an illusion of an identical world under the lake. Several rows of prayer flags, tied to the trunks of trees, extend from side to side and silk *khadas* hang from branches, welcoming visitors and respecting the spirits in this sacred grove. It is easy to imagine Kumzer Agyen and Hee Youngmingmoo visiting each day to make it more beautiful in order to lure the angel from its waters. The rare fish that lives in the lake, *Deng Gnu Leek*, can be easily seen from the bank for the water is shallow and clear. The small, silvery fish is never eaten by Lepchas. On the other side of the road there is a small man-made pond filled with carp. “The forestry department put these large fish in our small lake and they started to eat the *Deng Gnu Leek*. They had to move them to this other small pond to breed them,” my guide informed me.

There is a difference between the Dzongu the Lepchas know and the Dzongu others, in this case the authorities, see. In the case of *Tung Kyong Duo*, the authorities see a lake which they can use to breed the carp (however, they either didn’t consider or mind that the larger fish would eat the smaller fish). The Lepchas see an ancestral home and never catch the fish from this lake.

### *Conclusion*

The science and nature writer, Barry Lopez, recently observed that over several decades of travel, he had often met people who were profoundly intimate with the places in which they lived.

Usually they were hunters, hunter-gatherers, subsistence farmers, or pastoralists, people who had to know precisely where they were, physically, all the particulars of it, if they were going to keep their preferred way of life intact...my guess would be that someone someday will trace the roots of modern human loneliness to a loss of intimacy with place, to our many breaks with the physical Earth.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lopez B, (2007), Coldscapes, *National Geographic Magazine*, Dec 07 – NGM.com (accessed 9 June 08).

The Lepchas' intimacy with place is evident in Dzongu for it is nature that guides them. The documentary filmmaker, Dawa Lepcha who has recorded Lepcha culture in his films has a deep knowledge of the traditions of his people and their closeness to nature. "When a certain plant starts to flower you know it's time for the fish to go upstream so you get ready for trapping and when the leaves drop from the trees, you know the fish will come downstream so then you set a trap. There is a tree where the leaves change from green to red and that is the time, the Yeti, or some kind of big ape, it is the time for them to come. So in the village, high up in the hills, when these leaves are red, it's time for these things to move around. That's how we the Lepchas are connected to nature and in that way there are so many things."

Loden Lepcha, who lives in Passingdang, has never hunted. He jokes that when he was young he was an 'assistant hunter' to his father and grandfather but as a Lepcha from a hunting clan, *Zamyongthing*, he observes the traditions of his elders. His clan came to Dzongu with a hunter from West Sikkim.

Our clan came from West Sikkim with two Lepcha hunters, Zamyongthing and Agenthing. Both were friends and both very strong. They were also powerful hunters, which is what brought them to Dzongu. They came to hunt the *Serow*, a small, cat-like animal. Agenthing killed only the male animal and Zamyongthing killed only the female but the male *Serow* contained something precious inside his body, on the right side, something very valuable and Zamyongthing became jealous of his friend and this jealousy grew and grew until one day he shot Agenthing, all over his chest with his bow and arrows. Agenthing, took the arrows out of his chest and threw them back where they landed in exactly the same spot in Zamyongthing's chest. Agenthing then entered a big hill, near Bey, and disappeared. Zamyongthing didn't die from his wounds for he was very powerful. He entered a rock at Myong, therefore staying in Dzongu and starting our clan (narrated by Yangthan and Loden Lepcha).<sup>24</sup>

The Lepchas from the hunting clans who no longer practise the work they were born to do, connect with their traditions once a year when the male members of their family go to a high place to perform a ritual to the hunting deity, *Pong Rum*. They go in October, rising early, gathering their hunting implements; stones, sticks, bows, arrows and guns. They also take offerings for the hunting deity, including live

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hens, dead birds, eggs, wild yams, flowers, dried or fresh fish, *chi* (millet beer), butter, ginger, beaten rice and *chi bup* (rice drink). They travel into the jungle and when they arrive, they light a fire, kill and cook the hens and offer a ritual; recapturing their intimacy with their traditional hunting groves.

Loden explained that these rituals are extremely important because they no longer hunt and therefore, are not regularly performing rituals to their god. “We are saying, we still think of you, even though we are not hunting.”

He believes if they stop this annual ritual then they, and their families, will get sick.

Morris told of a similar version of this ritual however said there was no ceremony, “the hunter merely taking all these articles and depositing them in some place in the forest where the god will see them” (Morris: 1938).<sup>25</sup> However, Morris was in Lingthem in 1937, when hunting was commonplace and rituals offered regularly. The rituals performed now, which accompany the offerings, may have evolved to meet the needs of a clan whose traditions have changed over time.

I hear that some Lepchas occasionally still hunt. They go deep into the jungle where they follow their traditions, not because they need to provide food for their family for modernity long ago removed that need. The few that hunt do so because they were born to; the instincts passed to them by their ancestors lead them back into the jungle, and when they come back to the village they resume their modern life, possibly working in a government job, growing cardamom or tending to their orchard.

For the majority of Lepchas, those who have stopped hunting, the tradition of their ancestors who once roamed the jungle barefoot, with stones, rocks and guns, working under the guidance of their hunting deity has finished, but in the absence of the hunt, they continue to respect *Pong Rum*.

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<sup>25</sup> Morris, J. (1938), *Living with Lepchas*, Heinemann, London, p. 193.



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