

Margin to Metropolis: Lepchas of India and Igbos of Nigeria

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Abstract

Mainstream master narratives attempt the impossible - writing and re-writing new histories of margin, nonchalantly subsuming grass-root voices, voicing and un-voicing 'primitive' communities at will. Such narratives reveal an amazing presumption; a master gaze - intrusive yet uncomprehending with the right to interpret any and every 'primitive' culture. Such hegemonic power discourses, unsurprisingly, resort to insidious politics, systematically and intentionally 'foregrounding', 'exaggerating', and sometimes even 'ascribing' non-existent negative attributes onto 'othered' societies. The positive elements of such cultures are often overlooked, suppressed or even erased. In our approach, we compare and contrast the indigenous management practices of two tribal cultures, the Lepchas of North East India and the *Igbos* of South East Nigeria. We wish to foreground such unique cultural institutes as the *Igbo Egwugwu*, the traditional reconciliatory courts of justice or these all women grass root *Igbo* organizations, the fast dying Lepcha and religio-cultural institution of *Bongthing/Mun*, comprising the natural leaders of the community as indigenous institutions which have been neatly and intentionally overlooked. We also raise certain questions. In the context of the modern nation state, who decides what should occupy center-stage and why? Why are such democratic, reconciliatory, gender friendly, grass-root, inclusive, indigenous political/socio-cultural traditions and institutions relegated to the periphery? Has the time not come for contemporary nation states to realize that only through the unearthing and re-establishment of certain fast-vanishing indigenous traditions could one create a more equitable, more just world order? Has the time not come to centre-stage the periphery, for the metropolis to learn from the margin?

Keywords: Lepchas, Igbos, Metropolis, Socio-Cultural, Indigenous Management, People

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Introduction

Mainstream master narratives attempt to write and re-write new histories of the margin, voicing and un-voicing the 'primitive' tribal, revealing an amazing master gaze - intrusive yet uncomprehending, nonchalantly interpreting every 'primitive' culture, resorting to insidious linguistic politics, 'foregrounding' and 'exaggerating' negative aspects of 'othered' tribal societies. These hegemonic power discourses ascribe non-existent negative attributes while overlooking, suppressing and erasing the positive elements of tribal societies. The Lepchas are today reduced to the status of 'the dying tribe' in today's India by multiple cross-century extraneous dominations; namely, 13-14th century Tibetan influx, 1700 Bhutanese invasion, 18th century Nepalese onslaught, British colonialism from 1835 onwards, and contemporary consumerism. The Lepchas are thus thrice marginalized through the mainstream India vs tribal society rift, the developed first world vs developing third world divide; and the neo-colonial Euro-America Eco-culturally sensitive India split.

Lepcha socio-cultural traditions are extinct or deeply threatened. Cartographical sport has split the Lepcha Paradise of *Mayel Lyang* across three countries India, Nepal and Bhutan, raising questions about arbitrary nationhoods and border drawing.¹ The 'construction' of Nigeria is equally arbitrary and mercenary. Africa was sliced by the Europeans at the 1884 Berlin Conference. To gain monopoly over the palm oil trade, Britain secured the North and the South protectorates around the River Niger and yoked the tribes of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo to construct a fragile political entity, Nigeria. The colonization of Nigeria imposed an alien super structure on a democratic order. This, along with a heady lure of the white man's money, the power ladder advantage provided by Christianity shredded the Igbo matrix. Now, in 'postcolonial' times, Euro-America-controlled dictators and/or democrats have arrived as colonial heirs to shamelessly rape Nigeria.

Lepcha folklore mentions the reigns of Kings, Turve and his successors reigned from 1400 onwards, perhaps in Southern Sikkim.² Pano Gaeboo Achyok ruled in Kalimpong. *Mayel Lyang* remained mostly kingless. In the 13th century, Khye-Bumsa, an ancestor of the Tibetan Kings of Sikkim, coaxed the 32nd Bongthing (Divine High Priest), ThikungTek, to frame a Blood Brotherhood Covenant, where Lepchas swore

1 D. T. Tamlong, *Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas*, Darjeeling, Amina Tamlong, 2008, p.14.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

eternal friendship with the Tibetan migrants.³ The upright stones at *Kavi Long Chok* (our blood stone planted upright), north of Gangtok, capital of Sikkim, stand witness to this event.⁴ The first Namgyal king, a foreigner, was installed in 1642 in Yoksam in Sikkim with Lepcha consent. Similarly, the democratic Igbo tribe was nurtured on tolerance and forthrightness: "Let the kite perch and let the egret perch too."⁵ British negotiations in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas reveal a lot. Major Lloyd's incredible coaxing forced the Rajah of Sikkim bestow the Darjeeling hills, the Lepcha heartland, to British India in 1835. 'The Darjeeling deed of Grant, 1835' was written in Lepcha with a Hindi translation. This shows that Lepcha was the official language of Darjeeling.⁶ The sophisticated, scientific Lepcha language has an endearing vocabulary for conversing with infants and a language within itself for Gods and Goddesses, namely Tungbaor Ring, has no abusive words, and a distinct script. Yet today it gasps for breath. Recognized as one of the state languages of Sikkim since 1975, it is fast-eroding in West Bengal. Victory has crowned the long struggle of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Kalimpong, with West Bengal deciding to introduce Lepcha as an optional language in schools of Darjeeling Hills from March 2011.⁷

Mother Goddess

Mother Goddesses dominate all patriarchies. The Igbo patriarchy was dominated by Ani, the Earth Mother, and *Idemmiri*, the daughter of *Chukwu*, the Creator God, who desired neither husbands nor consorts. Children were named *Nneka* (mother is supreme). A woman was buried in her motherland with her kinsmen. In good times, a man stayed in his fatherland, but he found refuge and consolation in his motherland at the time of suffering.⁸ The Lepchas call themselves *Mutanchi RongKup Rum Kup* (Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God).⁹ *Mayel Lyang* is the supreme handiwork of *Itboo-Moo* (Mother Creator) as are *Foodongthing* and *Nazongnyu*, the first Lepcha man and woman.¹⁰ Women belonged to the mother's clan while men belonged to the father's clan worshipping respective gods and goddesses and offering appeasement to *Mungs* (devils).

3 K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Hong Kong, Lyangsong Tamsang, 1983, p. 9.

4 Tamlong, *Op. Cit.*, p.65.

5 Achebe Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers Ltd., 1995, pp.17-18.

6 S. Bhattacharji, 'Foregrounding Caliban in Prospero's Narrative: Unearthing Socio-Cultural Gender-Friendly Traditions of Two Tribal Societies: The Lepchas of India and the Igbos of Nigeria' in *Politics of Culture, Identity and Protest in North-East India* (Volume 1), Padam Nepal, and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, (Eds.), New Delhi, Authorspress, 2012, pp.165-174.

7 Article in *The Telegraph*, 'Govt Nod to Lepcha Classes' dated 12.09.2010.

8 C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers Ltd., 1995, pp. 121-122.

9 Tamsang Lyangsong, *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, New Delhi, SahityaAkademi, 2008, p.1.

10 D. T. Tamlong, *Op. Cit.*, p.6.

On the first day of creation *Itboo-Moo* created the institution of *Bongthing/Munto* enable humans to communicate with gods and devils. *Bongthing* and *Mun* are pure Lepcha spirits. The *Bongthing* spirit is male; *Bongthing* priests are male and combine the roles of psychiatrist, medicine-man, spiritualist and preacher. The *Mun* spirit is female; both men and women can be Muns. Bongthings are less powerful than Muns, exorcising fewer devils and being unable to prophesy or perform the death ritual. To be a Mun requires three years of instruction under a qualified *Mun*, it being optional for a *Bongthing*.¹¹ Gorer classified Muns into two, the practitioners of white (*Tang-li Mun*) and black (*Mun-mook Mun*) magic respectively.¹² Recent scholars divide *Mun* into seven categories:

Firstly, *Avor Muns* who are gifted with supernatural powers. Legend has it that an *Avor Mun* named *Sungzom*, by lightning and thunderbolt, dried the Samen Lake to expose the devils hiding at the bottom. The place is called Mirik (burnt by fire).

Secondly, *Pildon Muns* are a specimen for Lepcha soul that wanders for 49 days after death till the officiating *Pildon Mun*, the liberator of souls, locates the soul in a special ceremony and transports it to *Rum Lyang* (Land of the Gods).¹³

Muns from 3 to 7, *Angan Muns*, *Tungli Muns*, *Munjyum Muns*, *Mun Mook Muns*, and *Lyang-Eet Muns*, officiate at rituals and are physicians and narrators of the Lungtentales. Sadly today Bongthings and Muns, the natural leaders are bowing out to priests of alien religions. Padmashree awardee and creator of Lepcha museum, Kalimpong, Shri SonamTsering Lepcha lamented the erosion of this institution in a personal interview. He feels that the *Bongthing* and *Mun* spirits are no more present in this generation, as the last generation of Bongthings and Muns were cremated and no customary burial was accorded. The traditionally animist Lepchas have been religio-culturally thrice marginalized. Ambitious Buddhist Lamas modified their own religion incorporating Lepcha practices to win converts. Today Lamas and Bongthings perform together at Lepcha ceremonies. However, Lamas never penetrated the Lepcha matrix, choosing to negotiate expensive funeral and marriage ceremonies.

British colonialism in 1835 brought Christian missionaries. Unlike the Igbos, the Lepchas never resisted Christianity. More than half the Lepchas in Sikkim and Darjeeling are Christians.¹⁴ Missionary schools, hospitals and cottage industries sprang up in the hills, yet Lepchas remain the "backward" and potentially "dying race". In contrast, mission educated Igbos occupy most powerful positions in colonial and independent

11 Gorer Geoffrey, *The Lepchas of Sikkim*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 1996, pp. 215-220.

12 *Ibid.*, p.216.

13 K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Hong Kong, Lyangsong Tamsang, 1983, pp. 48-50

14 Tamlong, *Op. Cit.*, p. 49.

Nigeria. The British Government permanently stationed a Political Officer at Gangtok from 1889, reducing Raja Thutob Namgyal to a cipher. J. C. White's agenda; the khukri should counterbalance the 'prayer wheel'; encouraged mass migration of Nepalis into Sikkim and Darjeeling.¹⁵ This was the third religio-cultural onslaught on Lepcha animism: "The Tibetans imposed Buddhism... missionaries brought Christianity... Nepalese spread their culture and language...".¹⁶

Governance Pattern

The *Igbo* world was a complex cosmos, a "spiritual commonwealth" of "living blood relatives," "dead relatives" and "gods of the community".¹⁷ *Erima* (solidarity) cemented the tribe together.¹⁸ Lepchas and Igbos both had democratic- classless and creedless orders, totally governed by social consensus and referendum where the extended family formed the political, economic and social nodal centre. The communal ownership of land combined with communal ethics and collective consciousness and succeed to prevent coercive state apparatuses: "...Lepchas'ethics and attitudes which... make a culture are founded on a community of equal citizens ...".¹⁹ Age and merit jointly governed *Igbo* society. Igbos accorded immense power to men and women of exceptional caliber. *Adimora-Ezeigbo* shows men and women chosen on merit constituting the *obufo* (inner council), the most powerful politico-social governing body.²⁰ The authority of the elders remained sacrosanct and unchallenged among the Lepchas: "Old age is considered by the Lepchas to be a desirable quality; the polite term of address to anybody you are not related to is 'old man'...".²¹

Igbo women were economically independent, mostly farmers and petty traders. Those with greater business acumen became "long-distance traders".²² The *Igbo* creation myths and gender ideologies supported a neat gender division of labour and crops. The growth of yam remained the prerogative of men, while cocoyam, cassava, melons, beans, etc. were for women. Markets were run, policed and maintained by women. Lepcha men and women worked together in the fields. Certain tasks were exclusive to women: "... special business of the 'house mother' at harvest time to select

15 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

16 Thakur, qtd. in Tamlong, *Op. Cit.*, p. 134.

17 Afigbo qtd. in Anyanwu, U.D., 'Erima: Towards A Theory of *Igbo* Political Tradition' in Anyanwu, U. D. and Aguwu, J. C. U., (Eds) of *The Igbo and the Tradition of Politics*, The Centre for *Igbo* Studies, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co Ltd., 1993, pp. 31-40.

18 Anyanwu, U.D., 'Erima: Towards A Theory of *Igbo* Political Tradition' in Anyanwu, U. D. and Aguwu, J. C. U., (eds.) *The Igbo and the Tradition of Politics*, The Centre for *Igbo* Studies, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1993, pp. 31-40.

19 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

20 Adimora-Ezeigbo, Akachi, *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria, Vista Books, 1998, p. 9.

21 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 143.

22 Adimora-Ezeigbo, Akachi, *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria, Vista Books, 1998, p. 38.

... grain ... needed for the next year's seed".²³ Spinning was a woman's job while weaving was by men.

Traditional Justice

In the *Igbo* cosmos, merit and wisdom combined to form the awesome body of the masked ancestral spirits, the *egwugwu*, advocating reconciliatory patterns of justice. Colonial administration replaced this system of justice by brutal western law courts and prisons, totally incomprehensible to the *Igbo*: "They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance".²⁴

In Lepcha villages, conflicts were a concern of the entire village. Mutual friends first prepared feasts to resolve the issues. Next, exorcisms were tried against the spirits causing the conflicts. Village officials then became involved as adjudicators. If unsuccessful, they warned the disputants that both would have to pay heavy fines and prepare expensive feasts for the whole village. Since most disputants could not afford such costs, they quickly dropped hostilities. Lepchas believe that quarreling results from the evil actions of three spirits: *Soo-moong* (enmity of speech), *Ge-moong* (enmity of thought), and *Thor-moong* (enmity of action). This evil trinity, the devil *Soo-ge-thor*, was ceremonially destroyed each year. An archer shot an arrow piercing the heart of *Soo-ge-thor*. The people then hacked apart the image and burnt it purging the community of quarreling. The Lepcha society is mentioned in the Encyclopedia of Selected Peaceful Societies for providing feasible alternatives to violence.²⁵

Age Grade or Primitive Communism

Igbo children born within stipulated one-year periods belonged to age groups, demarcated along gender lines.²⁶ These groups cut across political, social and economic compartmentalization and served as remarkable community welfare organizations.²⁷ "Primitive communism" as A.R. Foning terms it, prevailed among the Lepchas; the entire community rallied around individuals during distress and celebration, providing man power and finance.²⁸ "When people know that a house is being built or repaired

23 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 93.

24 Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers Ltd., 1995, p. 158.

25 <http://www.peacefulsocieties.org/Society/Lepchas.html>, accessed on 10.09.2013.

26 G. T. Basden, *Among The Ibos Of Nigeria*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1966, p.72.

27 R.O.E. Maduka, 'Age Grade Factor In *Igbo* Tradition Of Politics' in Anyanwu, U. D. and Aguwu, J. C. U., Eds., *The Igbo and the Tradition of Politics*, The Centre for *Igbo* Studies, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1993, pp 61-70.

28 Foning, A. R., *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, New Delhi & Bangalore, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1987. p. 22.

they come to help spontaneously; they are given no pay . . . except a meal . . . but they know that they . . . will receive help when they need it".²⁹

Gender and Sex

The Igbo cultural matrix separated gender from biological sex. Thus Igbo women aspired to become males, the gender associated with power, authority and affluence. The cultural institute of "female husband" enabled resourceful Igbo women to succeed in business; amassing wealth, titles and social prestige. Such women could pay the "bride price" and buy "wives" to enrich their trade. *Nwambata Aku*, the legendary female husband, was renowned for her "24 wives".³⁰ Husbands appreciated successful wives, though rivalries occurred between successful women and their husbands, though such women did not attract societal stigma.³¹ The cultural institute of "male daughter" could confer male status to married or unmarried daughters. To procreate male progeny for the father's lineage, the daughter of a man without a male heir could opt to stay in her patrilineage, refuse marriage and normative family life, choose a mate of her liking and perpetrate the family tree. Alternatively, as in the case of *Nwajiuba*, a daughter could be recalled from her "marital home" to be conferred "the status of a son" to enable her to "inherit her father's property".³²

A Lepcha man without a male heir could adopt a son, a *Kup-Chop*. A *Kup-Chop* was regarded as a son and discharged loyally the duties of a son. Alternatively, he could marry his daughter to a *Kamok-Myok*, a groom willing to reside at the father-in-law's home. Both *Kup-Chops* and *Kamok-Myoks* were accepted into the clan and worshipped the clan gods of the man whose house they entered.³³ As land could only be owned by men, a woman who became possessor of property had to acquire a male, by marriage or adoption.³⁴

Marriage

Marriage was an important institute in both Igbo and Lepcha communities. The Lepcha marriage had two main stages: *asèk* or betrothal and *bri* or bringing home the bride. *asèk* was the validating ceremony where the groom's family presented formal marriage gifts "the price of the bride" to the bride's family. Once the gifts were accepted, the groom had full access to his bride; children born after the ceremony were legitimate. The

29 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p.72.

30 Amadiume, Ifi, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands, Gender and Sex in an African Society*, London and New Jersey, Zed Books Ltd., 1987, p. 47.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

33 Foning, *Op. Cit.*

34 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106.

bride stayed at her father's place till the marriage feast or *bri* was performed. Between *asèk* and *bri* the son-in-law was virtually the father-in-law's servant; he "has to...work for him whenever...summoned and cannot leave without ...permission; he is in a subordinate position...".³⁵ Earlier, the would-be-groom had to render seven years of manual service at the father-in-law's place. The wedding was preceded by *Mangkung Lyu*, a ritual to raise the groom's fallen personality.³⁶ If the boy and girl felt a strong repulsion for one another after *asèk*, they were "cajoled""bribed""threatened" and even "beaten" to make them like each other. If the repulsion continued, the marriage was called off and the gifts returned, or an alternative spouse was offered.³⁷ Scant regard was paid to disparity in age and the wife could be four or five years older than her husband.³⁸

The *Igbo* ritual *Uri* initiated the would-be-bride's long familiarization visit to her in-laws place. In the final marriage confession rite *Isa-ifi*, the *Umuada* (Association of Daughters) questioned the bride-to-be, in the presence of the clan head, on her sexual integrity from the day of engagement: "How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?"³⁹ The Lepchas had a similar ceremony for receiving the bride. Here the bride's *bek-bu* (between man) in the presence of the bridegroom's party ceremonially instructed her thus: "You have been married into *ptso*; now you are bound to them and if you had any other lovers you must leave them..." The *bek-bu* put a scarf round her bowed neck and a rupee into her joined hands and she was formally received into the family.⁴⁰

The vestal status of a bride was not a pre-requisite for marriage for either *Igbos* or *Lepchas*. In both societies the "bride price" acted as a safety valve allowing married women the right to exercise choice through divorce/ re-marriage. Among *Lepchas* a man who sent his wife away had to pay a hefty fine to his father-in-law and divide all moveable property, animals and children with his wife. If the wife ran away to her parental home, her husband's relatives asked her to return or else claimed back the bride price. If such a woman decided to remarry, her former husband's representative claimed compensation at the marriage.⁴¹ A *Lepcha* man could invite an unmarried younger brother to live with him and share his fields and wife. The co-husband was no longer free to choose his own wife; he had to marry into the same *ptso* as the shared wife. The first husband had advantages in co-opting a second one; an easy way to

35 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

36 Foning, *Op. Cit.*

37 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 157.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 324.

39 Achebe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 120.

40 Gorer, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 336.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

be rid of a wife; an extra adult worker and a care-taker. The position of the second husband had few attractions, making polyandry rare.⁴²

In Lepcha cosmos, levirate and sororate customs of marriage prevailed, though levirate claims were more strongly pressed.⁴³ A Lepcha man could inherit the wives of his elder brothers, and of his paternal and maternal uncles, real or classificatory; the only condition being the uncles should be younger than his parents but not younger than himself; and the younger sisters of his wife, real or classificatory. As Gorer points out, both men and women had sexual rights over these "potentially heritable spouses" during the lifetime of their partners.⁴⁴ A father instructed his sons as to the women they had a right to sleep with, and the women whom, though potentially heritable, they must avoid because their father had slept with them. Similarly, elder brothers gave their younger brothers formal permission to sleep with their wives. Most men received their sexual initiation from a potential levirate spouse, very often at her direct invitation.⁴⁵ The levirate system of marriage prevailed among Igbos. Nkusi custom allowed the younger brother or sometimes the eldest son of a deceased man to inherit his wives.

All Women Organizations

Igbo society boasted of powerful all-women grass root organizations. *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* (Association of Daughters) looked after the interests of daughters. *Alutardi* or *Inyom di* (Association of Wives) monitored the interests of wives. The *InyomNnobi* (Women's Council) stood for all women; the Igbo power hierarchy could take no decision on women related issues without its consent. The organizations could demonstrate or even strike, when women would refuse to cook or have sexual intercourse with their husbands.⁴⁶ These organizations shatter the myth of Euro-America being the progenitor of the women's liberation movement.

Conclusion

Sadly the politics of exclusion and distortion sported by dominant cultures have suppressed these tribal socio-cultural gender-friendly traditions, both in India and in Nigeria. In Nigeria, traditional institutes have been eroded and women stand bereft of their power positions. At *Dzongu*, the Protected Lepcha Reserve, the non-aggressive Lepchas protest against the proposed mega hydel projects within the Reserve through the forum Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT). Through satyagraha, using marches and

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁴⁶ Amadiume, Ifi, *Op. Cit.*, p.65.

fasts, ACT has stalled four of the six proposed hydel projects and the movement to save a traditional way of life continues: "Dzongu is all that is left to us, how can we let them destroy it?"⁴⁷ Perhaps it is not too late to redeem the past, to unearth and mainstream such fast-vanishing democratic, reconciliatory, gender friendly, grass-root tribal traditions. The time has come for contemporary nation states to realize that only through re-establishment of tribal traditions could one create a more equitable, more just world order. Has the time not come to centre-stage the periphery, for the metropolis to learn from the margin.

47 <http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/141/India.html>.(accessed on 03.09.13)