

The Philosophy of the Lepcha Religion: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The Lepcha community by the very nature of its existence explains the presence of God in their life. Religion plays a very important role in the lives of the Lepchas, so much so that there is no life separated from their religion. From birth to the tomb and to the Heavenly abode, religion plays an important role in the life of the Lepchas. The Lepchas, call themselves as the Rong-kup or Rum-Kup; meaning they are the very 'Children of God'. The Lepchas pray together with Bongthing or with Mun, and they are the mediator between God and the only liberator of the Lepchas souls after death. According to the religion of the Lepchas, the life of human being is characterised by danger, agony and suffering. This permanent miserable state of human beings, characterised by hopelessness, weakness and innumerable sufferings has its origin in the supernatural world, and consequently it can only be remedied by action on the part of the same supernatural world. Therefore, the Lepchas approach the benevolent supernatural beings and invoke the protective gods during the cultic performances. Though many thinkers and researchers have termed the Lepcha religion as an animistic religion, in reality, the Lepcha religion is like any other, one that recognises the creator in the creation.

Keywords: Lepcha, Religion, Animism, Philosophy, Bongthing, Mun

“Is there a religion called a Lepcha religion?” The question put to me once made me dumbfounded for a moment. I looked at myself. Was I coming across to the people as someone having no religion? Do I behave like a person who does not believe in the existence of God? These and various other questions and queries made me take a fresh look at the way of life of the Lepchas, as I am a Lepcha myself.

Religion, as commonly understood is a method of expression of love, the homage and worship of the human being to the Divine Being. The existence of every creature completely depends on the existence of the Divine Being. The Infinite Being is the cause of the existence of the finite beings. This reality has been quite understood by way of practicing the religion. The very presence of religion is the proof of the presence of a Superior Being.

The Lepcha community by its very nature explains the presence of God and therefore the Lepcha community has its religion. The religion of the Lepchas is interwoven with various other aspects and faces. The Lepcha religion is as old as the Lepchas themselves. The religion of the Lepchas forms the very part of their living. It is the way of life of the Lepchas. Religion plays a very important role in the lives of the

Lepchas, so much so that there is no life apart from the religion of the Lepchas. From birth to the tomb and to the Heavenly abode this religion plays an important role in the life of the Lepchas.

This paper intends to address, among other things, a very brief history of the Lepcha religion, the concept of the religion as the Lepchas comprehend it, the philosophy behind their religion, the concept of *Boonthingism* and *Munism*, and the concept of the Heaven and the world according to the Lepcha religion.

History of the Lepcha Religion

The history of the Lepcha religion goes back to the origin of the Lepcha themselves. The Lepchas, call themselves as the *Rong-kup* or *Rum-Kup*; meaning they are the very Children of God. The Lepchas believe that God himself has created them. Lepchas believe that in the beginning of the world God created human being. God in his own plan of creation took pure snow from the Mount *Kingchumzoambu* (Mt. Kanchenjunga) in his right hand created Man and in a similar manner, with his left hand created Woman.

God the creator is called as *Etboo-Deboorum*. God called man *Foodongthing* and woman as *Nazanonnyo*. These two were sent out to the valley called *Mayel lyang*. The Lepchas call themselves as *Rongkups* or *Rumkup* or in short *Rong* which means "the son of the snowy peak, the son of God."¹ Christians too believe in a similar version of the creation of human being. God created man and woman and name them as Adam and Eve, and God send them to the garden of joy and happiness.²

It is believed that the Lepchas are very ancient people, and as old as the human race. Tamsang argues that, "the Lepcha ancient religion *Bongthingism* and *Munism*, it was lord *Tamsangthing* who had first founded the ancient religion. The Lepcha *Bongthing* and the *Mun* is the Lepcha mediator between God and the only liberator of the Lepchas souls after death."³ The Lepchas pray together with *Bongthing* or either with *Mun*. In fact, the Lepchas do not require any permanent place for worship as they could gather anywhere and pray. The Lepchas are one with nature, and the nature is addressed as Mother God. The Lepchas completely depend on their power of prayers. "The Lepchas do not care for Churches, Temples, Mosques or Monasteries, but follow their own voice, that is the voice of their own soul which is the truth, and that is God. They assemble at a certain place, either at home or in the open place under the bright sun led by their spiritual *Bongthing* or *Mun*."⁴

1 K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas* (Second Edition), Kalimpong, Lyangsong Tamsang, 1998, p. 1.

2 Cfr. *The Bible*, Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse, 26-28.

3 K. P. Tamsang, op. cit., p. 56.

4 *Ibid.*

The Lepcha Conception of Religion

According to the religion of the Lepchas the life of human being is characterised by danger, agony and suffering—this is obvious from their myths and prayers. This unhappy state is a consequence of the behaviour of the goddess of procreation who could not care for all her children. Her neglected children then turned into cruel *Mung*, constantly attacking the human children, causing them diseases and death. The psychology of the *Mung* is quite simple: the experience of neglect, carelessness and indifference gives rise to revengeful jealousy creating a hostility obsessed with innate cruelty against mankind. On the other hand, the human beings are completely unable to defend themselves. This permanent miserable state of human beings, characterised by hopelessness, weakness and innumerable sufferings has its origin in the supernatural world, and consequently it can only be remedied by action on the part of the same supernatural world. Therefore, the Lepchas approach the benevolent supernatural beings and invoke the protective gods during the cultic performances. Protection is the predominant recurring request of the rituals.

With the Lepchas, though, we do not find a creed in the meaning of a formula of religious belief, but we do find a traditional totality of religious belief which can be extracted from their cults, cult-prayers, myths, legends, etc. In the beginning of time, the creator God – *Etboo Rum* – created everything in the world, including a number of other gods, among whom the gods of the high mountain peaks are prominent.

Sonam Wangdi Lepcha argues that there are two types of spirits that the Lepchas believe in—a benevolent spirit who are responsible for the well-being of individual, household, cattle, and crops. But most prominent and numerous are those who cause enmity, jealousy, diseases, illness, death, epidemics, loss of property, failure of crops and other hazards etc. Whenever any misfortunes or bad luck occurs people attribute it to the demons, spirits they call *Moongs*. To the good they pay no heed; “why should we”, they ask, “the good spirits do us no harm; the evil spirits, who dwell in rock, mountain, are constantly at mischief and to them we must pray, for they hurt us”. It shows their simplicity. They acknowledge the existence of one supreme God and other gods and goddesses.⁵

The life after death meant an eternal life with *Etboo Rum* the Master creator. All the Lepchas long to enter in to the kingdom of God as Lepcha term as *Rum Lyang*. According to the Lepcha belief, the way to reach *Rum-Lyang* is through the worship performed by the Bongthings and the Muns. All the Lepchas, after death, should go back to the Mountain Kanchenjunga place from where all the Lepchas were created. This work is invariably performed by the Bongthing and the Mun. All the souls of the dead persons are taken to *chyu*, to Kanchenjunga, otherwise themselves are unable to go to *Rum Lyang*, the heaven.

5 J. D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals*, London, Ward, Lock & Co., 1855, p. 92.

The Philosophy of the Lepcha Religion

The philosophy of the Lepcha religion is very simple. Generally, the Lepcha religion is called as an animistic religion. In Lepcha religion, importance is given to all the created things; the phenomenology is an important element. The main promoters of this religion are Bongthing and Mun. When these great persons perform worship they take all the names of the animals, make sound of the animals, chanting of the birds, flowing of rivers, and the blowing of the wind. It is to show that along with all these creations, the Lepchas worship *Etboo Rum*. Tamsang says that, "as the Lepchas are the lovers of nature, these Muns chant their hymns and prayers in the tune of birds, in the sound of winds, water-falls, rivers etc. which are very melodious and very pleasing to the ears, very soothing to the soul and gladdening of the heart. Therefore, in the Lepcha language, the meaning of Mun is not only a Lepcha priestess but she is the liberator of the souls of the dead persons to heaven and as such, Munism is the Lepcha's ancient religion or philosophy of the souls."⁶ The Lepcha religion, as understood by many, as simple animism is not correct altogether because this religion is something more than the simple concept of nature and natural objects. Further he says "*Bongthingsim* and *Munism* teach or advocate the doctrine of one ultimate substance or principle, as soul or something that is neither mind nor matter, but are ground of both, the position that the reality is one. In *Bongthing* or *Munism*, the *Bongthing* and the *Mun*, do not say their prayers and sermons by reading out from any written scriptures or prepared text as of other religions, but they chant their prayers and sermons orally, which flow out freely from within their hearts of heart."⁷

The Religiosity of the Lepcha Religion

To understand the religiosity of the Lepcha religion, we need a deeper understanding of religion itself. For, the Lepcha religion is not mere a worship of God who is unknown, impersonal, a god who resides in a far distant place where no living being can reach. For the Lepchas, God is omnipresent. God is present in animals, in plants, in objects, in water, land and in ether. All of the creation represent God and need to be worshiped. In other words, Lepchas believe in pantheism. Lepchas are very religious in nature, simple and prayerful. They give respect to every creatures, plants, rocks and mountains. Lepchas do not find difficult to find God in everything; in fact everything reveals the presence of God. The essence of Lepcha religiosity is a semblance to their moral and ethical conduct. The fact that they call themselves as the 'beloved sons of god' makes them a race most gentle, sober and peace-loving. But the Lepcha were and still are 'fetish' worshipers. Some would argue that the Lepchas have no real religion of their own. J.C. White writes:

they originally worshipped the Spirits of the mountains, rivers and forests, a natural outcome of their surroundings. Leading a solitary, isolated lives, everyone would tend to

⁶ Cfr. K. P. Tamsang, op.cit., p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*

foster such beliefs in a country where the mighty snow appear immortal, the raging torrents irresistible as though impelled by some unseen avenging spirit, combined with the curious shapes taken by everything when veiled in grey mist and ghost like and awesome forms to be met in the shadows of the damp dripping forests full phosphorescent stumps of old trees scattered round in strange contortions, with the accompaniment of the weird sound of the wind, as it moans round some projecting crag or through some giants trees, and where even the melancholy cry of the birds is pitched in a minor key, all must encourage such beliefs and leave a deep impression on the character of the people who live amidst it.⁸

The Concept of Bongthingsm and the Munism

The *Bongthing* and the *Mun* are the male and female priest and priestess of the Lepcha. The positions are hereditary but any interested person can become *Bongthing* and *Mun* if he/she undergoes proper training from such professionals. The concept of Bongthingism and Munism are central to the Lepcha religion. There is no meaning to the religion without the presence of Bongthing and the Mun. As we know, there is no written scripture regarding the rituals and the ceremonies in the Lepcha religion, it is because of these Bongthings and the Muns the religion survived the odds of its life. Down the ages this religion survived all the attacks of the newly and highly composite religion of the world. The Lepcha religion did not lose its beauty and importance, and all the credit of saving this age old religion goes to *Bongthings* and the *Muns*. They are the very life of the Lepcha religion. There are various kinds of *Muns* according to their powers and performance. They are a) Avor Mun, 2) Pildon Mun, 3) Aagnan Mun, 4) Tungli Mun, 5) Munjyum Mun, 6) Mun-Mook Mun and 7) Lyang-Eet Mun. The sole liberator of the souls of the Lepcha is the *Bongthing* and the *Mun*.

The Concept of Heaven and the World

The concept of heaven and the world according the Lepcha belief are simple and straight. God created the first Lepcha parents and from there the Lepcha society was born, and will all go back to God and reside there. The abode of God is the homeland for every human being. For the Lepchas, they are *chyu*, *Dah* and the *lep*. The story of the Earthen Tower of the Lepchas will throw some light regarding their concept of heaven. Generally, the Lepchas are experts in making various types of earthen vessels; they are skilled in making strong earthen pots, pans, cups, plates, jars and all kinds of domestic appliances.

Tamsang narrates that “this Earthen Tower at Tallom Partam was actually raised up by the ancient Lepchas to go to Heaven”,⁹ because the Lepchas always sought God in the high mountains. They wanted to observe Him, experience Him. The Lepcha *Myths* say that the *Narock Rum*, the God of Lepcha music appeared among the Lepcha

8 Cfr. J. C. White, *Sikkim and Bhutan: 21 Years on the North East Frontier (1887-1908)*, London, Longmans, Green, 1909.

9 *Ibid.*, 81.

dancers and danced with them. In the Lepcha book of *Tusey Sung*, it is written that the Lepchas *Tusey Thing*, the Omnipotent God, lifted Himself up into the sky and rising up higher and higher in to the sky until the Lepcha saw Him disappear behind the clouds or seen and lost among the clouds. In the Lepcha book of *Naamyuk*, which means the book of revelation, it is written that this book *Naamyuk*, was dropped down to the Lepchas straight from the sky by God and they also heard the voice of God saying to them, "You read the contents of this book which *I have dropped it down for the good of you all, and live it.*" In the Lepcha legend, it is said, the *Nazaongnyoo*, the female primogenitor of the Lepchas had travelled up from her abode, *Nahonathar* lake to *Tungseng Nareng Peak*, the abode of *Fodongthing*, the male primogenitor of the Lepchas by climbing upon a golden ladder to meet *Fodongthing*, just like the Jacob's ladder that leads up to heaven which Jacob saw in his dream. Also the Lepcha tradition tells that God appeared on the pinnacle of *Kintsoomzaonghoo chyu* and created *Fodongthing* and *Nazaongnyoo* from the pure virgin snow of Kanchenjunga's peak and also created Lord *Tamsangthing* from the pure, virgin snow of mount Pandim's peak. Further, it says that God appeared at the top of Tundong mountain in the guise of *Kohom Fo*, which means partridge bird and sprinkled *Chi*, the national drink of the Lepchas and then miraculously, the flood water gradually subsided down and saved the Lepchas from drowning.

All the Lepcha souls will invariably be led to the *chyu* through lep by the Mun with their prayers and chanting, and that is Heaven for the Lepchas. The world is created by God and God resides there too. Every created object reveals God, as they are gods. World itself reveals the presence of God. The Lepchas believe that the world will cease when the human beings cease to exist. They are not eternal as the soul of the human being. They reflect God's creative power and worship them too; therefore many thinkers and researchers have termed the Lepcha religion falsely as an animistic religion, a religion that limits itself with the phenomenology. In reality, the Lepcha religion is not only non-animistic, but rather with all its grounded experiences of divinity, a religion that recognises the creator in the creation.