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The Scottish Mission in Kalimpong and the Changing Dynamics of Lepcha Society

Abstract “The Lepchas seem to be the most hopeful people for us in the hills,” wrote Rev. William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland in his end of year report to his superiors. Compared to the Bhutias and the Nepalis, he found that the indigenous Lepchas were the most responsive to the Gospel. Macfarlane’s arrival and the establishment of the Scottish Mission initiated missionary work in Kalimpong. This was the beginning of the Lepchas’ cultural contact with the colonial power; these interactions set in motion the major socio-cultural changes that the Lepchas underwent after accepting Christianity. It has been argued that Christianity promoted “cultural dynamism” among Lepchas, but it is important to note that Christianity also divorced them from many traditional practices. Their newfound religion facilitated their reception of new ideas and new practices. These were easily accepted and often imitated without fully understanding the consequences. Accepting these new ideas resulted in the creation of a new identity.

Introduction

“When a Lepcha becomes a Christian, he becomes a saab.”

In Lepcha circles this is an oft-repeated joke, which speaks of an indigenous population’s cultural contact with people who introduced a new religion and helped set in motion the concomitant cultural changes that led to the formation of a new Lepcha identity. Christianity offered indigenous populations a “modern identity” (Bal 2000, 155) and equipped them with education and a link to the Western world. Missionaries introduced Lepchas to a new religion, which exposed them to a different worldview and divorced them from their traditional beliefs, because accepting Christianity initiated changes in lifestyle and also in attitudes toward things ranging from marriage to food. Their newly found religion paved the way for the reception of new ideas that people seemed ready to accept and often imitated without really understanding what the consequences might be. Reflecting on this problem, Arthur Foning, a Lepcha Christian himself, writes:

Forgetting our own age-old customs and ways of life, the beginnings of which are lost in antiquity, now among our Christian kinsmen there is a definite trend to display with pride, like the proverbial peacock, the plumes of Western culture in almost everything that is displayable. Moving outside more often than not, suit, hat and tie proclaim that the person is a Christian convert (Foning 1987, 294).

While the wave of imitation that hit Christian converts had some negative consequences, it cannot be denied that along with Christianity came education. This proved to be the most powerful agent in facilitating the change and dynamism that transformed the tribe. Education empowered their way of thinking, triggered social mobility, and allowed them to hope they could attain a better lifestyle. Adopting Christianity and embracing education from early on “gave them status and position” (Thakur 1988, 98) in society. Lepcha students grew up to become teachers, church leaders, and civil servants, occupying a respectable position in society. Armed with the benefits of modern education, it is likely that they considered themselves superior and looked down on their non-Christian neighbours. It is this “exclusivist” (Longkumer 2010, 85) tendency among Christians, the tendency to believe that Christianity is the one true religion, that separated them from the larger community. Interestingly, the openness of Lepcha society is also held responsible for the easy acceptance of the newfound religion as they aped, adopted, and gradually adapted Christian culture.

For most Lepchas of Kalimpong today, Christian culture is all they have ever known. We can find fourth- and fifth-generation Christian Lepchas whose forefathers gave up the traditional practices and ways of life, leaving the current generation devoid of their culture’s knowledge and wisdom. Their upbringing in the church environment and schooling in

Christian educational institutions exposed them to stories from the Bible, but ignored the rich oral history of their legendary past. Often, these educated young people migrate to urban centres for further education and job opportunities, which distances them even more from traditional ways of life. Unless their grandparents or parents tell these fifth-generation Lepcha Christians about Lepcha history, they have little to claim to the knowledge of their own culture. Their cultural framework is built on Lepcha legends, biblical beliefs, Nepali narratives, and scientific worldviews, and comes from their interactions with the elderly, the church, their neighbours, and the educational system. This cultural framework has become a dynamic mixture of elements; it uses the dominant Nepali language in order to negotiate the dilemmas of identity and integrate their Lepcha and Christian identities. Lepcha Christians are themselves aware of this predicament; as Peter Karthak, a fifth-generation Christian Lepcha author writes: "Christian Lepchas did not care for their own Lepcha ethos because they were happy within their Christian ghettos. They would have to pay dearly for their unworldly dowdiness once the British left Darjeeling" (Karthak 2009, 9).

In this essay, I examine the Lepchas' cultural contact with Christianity, which began with the advent of the religion in the region. To do so, I shall focus on the role of Scottish missionaries in establishing the church and school in my ancestral village of Middle Bom Busty. I will also look at how the native oral tradition of conversion developed, and the cultural changes that have taken place since the arrival of Christianity among the Lepchas of Kalimpong. Finally, I shall analyse Christian Lepcha identity and what it means to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both, and I will ask whether religious identity took precedence over ethnic identity. That is, are people Christian Lepchas or Lepcha Christians?

Cultural contact and its complexities

Missionary work in Kalimpong started in earnest in the nineteenth century when the Reverend William Macfarlane arrived in Kalimpong in 1870. An important feature of this cultural contact was the very close relationship between education, the effort to make converts, and local responses to the advent of Christianity. That is, the missionaries emphasized education as a necessary prerequisite for further missionising. Therefore, they started schools and a teacher training institute and trained Lepcha catechists who went out and established churches and schools, including the church and school in Bom Busty. This section will examine the work of the missionaries and their Lepcha catechists, and the complexities of their flock's responses to this work, which are evident in the ways in which they made sense of conversion. These complexities included some capacity to integrate Christianity into local life without completely discarding all traditional practices, but also the changes wrought by cultural contact and a developing awareness of the transformation that the advent of Christianity set in motion.

The advent of Christianity: the missionaries, the Church, and conversion

Over there is a place for planting another branch of the mission to operate chiefly among the Lepchas, I reach a spot at the place called Kalimpong, about four miles from the Teesta, that will do admirably for a mission station. There are many Lepcha villages in the neighbourhood, and we could from there visit all the countries round about, as well as cross the Teesta river to visit the Lepcha country on the other side—William Macfarlane (Perry 1997).

After visiting the Lepchas of Kalimpong in 1870, Reverend William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland “desired” (Perry 1997, 41) to move to Kalimpong even though he began his missionary work in Darjeeling in June 1870. Compared to the Bhutias and the Nepalis, he found Lepchas were the most responsive to the Gospel, and wrote in the end of year report to his mission, “The Lepchas seem to be the most hopeful people for us in the hills” (Perry 1997, 42). Although Macfarlane was the first missionary to enter Kalimpong, Christianity had already made its mark among Lepchas when Reverend William Start, a former Church of England clergyman who became an independent Baptist missionary, went to Darjeeling in 1841 and decided to establish a self-supporting mission. Although his missionary work was not very successful, he became interested in the local Lepcha language and started a school for Lepchas in Tukvar (Dewan 1991, 81). Having learned Lepcha, he went on to translate a few books of the Bible from English to Lepcha and published them at his own expense. His interest in their mother tongue aided in translating the Bible into their language and nurturing the tribe’s identity. The first book of the Bible that William Start translated was the Gospel according to Matthew, which he finished in 1845. This was followed by a translation of Genesis and part of Exodus into Lepcha (Sprigg 2005, 53). These were published in 1849. That same year the Gospel according to John¹ was also printed along with a revised version of Matthew. The Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta printed the translations. These were the first books to be published in the Lepcha language with the help of modern technology, i.e. the movable printing press. Linguist R. K. Sprigg sees these publications as a linguistic feat and a source of pride for Lepchas: “Lepchas everywhere will be able to take pride in the distinction of having had their language in print for (more than) 150 years; and Christian Lepchas, in particular, will have the added satisfaction of knowing that it was some Books of The Bible that were the first to be printed in Lepcha” (Sprigg 2005, 53).

These contributions to bringing the books of the Bible to the Lepchas in their native language laid a foundation that helped other missions to

1 A copy of the Gospel according to John, which was reprinted in 1872 is available at the Carey Library and Research Centre, Serampore.

spread Christianity among the Lepchas in Kalimpong. In 1841, the Reverend J. C. Page, a British-educated Anglo-Indian, was appointed as a missionary in India by the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), which was very keen on evangelizing the local people. A Lepcha convert is reported to have assisted him with his missionary work. But Page soon retired and there was no one to carry on the work, because the BMS ended their missionary work in Darjeeling.

Macfarlane's arrival and the founding of the Scottish Mission in Darjeeling paved the way for the first missionary work in neighbouring Kalimpong. Macfarlane was known as a "zealous" (Perry 1997, 32) preacher who set ambitious goals, hoping that a mission in the Darjeeling hills would become "a mission to the great independent states of Nepaul, Sikkim, and Bhootan" (Perry 1997, 33). Thus, Kalimpong became a strategic location for training "native catechists and missionaries" (Neylan 1994, 48) who would be able to enter the closed lands of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan for religious exchange. These countries were closed to foreigners and British missionaries would not be allowed to enter them. Thus the hills were a contact zone "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991, 34). Lepchas were trained to teach Christianity not just to their people but to their neighbours too. Under the influence of these missionaries, several young Lepchas were motivated "to go beyond Darjeeling-Kalimpong" to evangelize (Perry 1997, 60). Indeed, "Lepcha missionaries" went to Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, carrying the Gospel as it was taught by the Scottish missionaries, with an emphasis on education, which the missionaries thought was an essential prerequisite for their missionary work: "If they cannot read, of what use will it be to send Bibles and tracts among them? We therefore think that it is the duty of the missionaries, in subordination to the great work of preaching, to do their utmost to establish such schools wherever they can be set up" (Perry 1997, 73).

Soon after arriving in Kalimpong Macfarlane started a school to train local teachers. With the growing importance of the Nepali language and an increasing Nepali population in the hills, even the Lepchas and Bhutias were beginning to learn and speak Nepali. By 1873, there were twenty-five primary schools throughout Darjeeling (Perry 1997, 40) where the Gospels and the school went hand in hand. The establishment of schools alongside churches was seen as a mixed blessing, because education exposed the natives to a wide new world of knowledge and ideas while the church meant the acceptance of a new religion and beliefs that often were at odds with the traditional ways of life: "The church and the school have gone together in the hill region of Darjeeling district ever since the advent of the missionaries, who had chosen the pen rather than the sword in proselytizing and in disseminating education" (Dewan 1991, 40).

Indeed, the school and the church likewise started simultaneously in late nineteenth century in Bom Busty. The church-school has been the

starting point for almost every educated professional from Bom Busty. It started as a night school and soon became a regular six-day educational centre, while the seventh day brought everybody to church. At the time of its inception, the church hall had a thatch roof and Bom Church is actually the oldest church of Kalimpong. It is seven years older than the landmark Macfarlane church of Kalimpong.

The person responsible for introducing Christianity to Bom Busty Lepchas was Sukhman Limbu, a Hindu convert from Darjeeling who was one of Macfarlane's first three catechists. Macfarlane's other two catechists, Namthak Rongong and Dyongshi Sada, were both Lepcha converts. But it was a Limbu convert who helped start the Bom Church in 1882. The fact that native missionaries had been trained to preach and teach was one of the main reasons why the Lepcha population of Kalimpong readily accepted Christianity. Under Sukhman Limbu's leadership, four of the first five converts in Bom Busty were Lepchas. Unfortunately, Sukhman Limbu died of the dysentery that gripped the hills, but his brother Mekbar Singh Limbu took charge of church affairs for the next thirty-nine years (1884–1923). Mekbar Singh married the daughter of a Lepcha *bongthing* (male shaman) who was on her way to becoming a *mun* (female shaman). British religious authorities might have disapproved of his marriage but we notice that the rules of Christianity were not as rigid among the Christians of Bom Busty. It is important to note that British missionaries were not directly involved with missionary work in Bom Busty, so people there did not completely sever ties with old customs and practices.

Bom Self-Supporting Church

For many years after the church in Bom Busty was established, the majority of church leaders were not Lepchas. Teaching and preaching the Bible might have been conducted in Nepali, which the Lepcha congregation did not necessarily completely understand. One can see the shifting language dynamics, because religious knowledge production in Bom Busty was being done in a foreign language. One pastor is remembered to have preached in both English and Nepali, but otherwise Nepali—the emerging *lingua franca* of the region—took over in church matters, too. Church leaders were required to submit their mission reports in Nepali and the service was usually conducted in that language. In this context, one can question whether people understood and accepted Christianity fully, because majority of the villagers did not really understand Nepali since Lepcha was the spoken language at home and in the village. But going to church on Sundays had become a routine task as they obediently followed the leaders and attended church. Soon they were singing hymns in Nepali and learning verses of the Bible in Nepali too. Nepali had become the language of the church and though the majority of church members were Lepchas, they adopted the Nepali tongue on Sundays.

At that time, the church readily accommodated itself to the lifestyle of the people. During the sowing season, the congregation would spend Sunday mornings in the field and only attend church in the evening. They had their own times and ways of doing things. Bom Church is also famous for an incident in which a church service ended abruptly because of an airplane hovering in the sky. People recall that a service was going on but the noise of the aircraft outside prompted the preacher to stop his sermon as he urged everyone "let us all go out and watch the plane now," (field-work, 2010) and he ended the service. Christmas usually meant archery, cockfights, mini marathon races, plenty to eat, and a hefty intake of the local *ci* (millet beer). Elders recall a time when carollers sang in front of a pigsty because they were heavily intoxicated with *ci*. Likewise, funerals meant an ox or goat was slaughtered and the villagers were fed before the corpse was taken care of. This continued the traditional way of honouring the dead, because Lepchas traditionally slaughtered an ox at the time of someone's death.

Christianity and education were fortunately moving along parallel paths as the church encouraged young people to pursue higher education. There are individuals today who remember their pastor writing notes of reference to a Lepcha *kaiiya* (Marwari shopkeepers who were fluent in the Lepcha language) to borrow money for their college education. The changing demographics now included Marwari traders; the Lepchas were on the receiving end in this encounter between themselves and businessmen who had migrated to these hills when Kalimpong became a commercial space. The amount that had been borrowed would be returned after they received their tribal stipend. This allowed many young people of their generation to complete graduate and post-graduate studies and apply for government jobs. The church school became the first school attended by almost all of the professionals from Bom Busty. In a 2010 report submitted by a church elder to the governing body, Bom Church recorded forty-one graduates and twenty-six post-graduate Lepchas, out of whom fifty-one were government employees and the others were in the private and self-employed sectors. In educating the citizens of Bom Busty, the church became an important avenue of social mobility because its citizens achieved positions of influence and respect both inside and outside of their own community (Caplan 1980, 667).

Education provided young people with better employment opportunities, but it also paved way for a new generation of convinced Christians to take over the church leadership. Gone were the days when drinking *ci* for Christmas was an accepted feature of the holiday celebrations. Today's Bom Christians claim to be Christians with strong conviction. They have studied the Bible and know what it means to be a Christian. They seem more assured of their faith and, as Christians, they have their own set of dos and don'ts. An "internal conversion" (Geertz 2000) has taken place. This internal conversion is very similar to Gellner's (2005) characterization of the acceptance of a modern interpretation of Buddhism among the

Newars: a radical change of perspective takes place after which someone who has undergone an internal conversion now views his or her former life as morally wrong.

Interestingly, Bom Church is not exclusively a Lepcha domain, but it is the only church in the area to hold services in both the Lepcha language and Nepali. On January 3, 2010, a few Lepcha members of Bom Church started to gather for the Lepcha service at 10:00am before the Sunday service at 11:00am. They sang Lepcha choruses, prayed, and listened to the sermon in Lepcha. While the service was open to anyone who might be interested, the members of Bom Church were the only ones who attended and the service has continued since. This recent development in the history of Lepcha Christians resonates very much with the contribution of Christianity through education and the awareness about their cultural identity that education eventually created.

Conversion

The Lepcha process of conversion was multi-causal and influenced by both internal and external factors. One of the main reasons why people chose to convert was the idea of *Rum* (God), who could deliver them from the evil *mungs* (spirits). In a society where household *mungs* ran rampant and could cause sickness and death by fighting among themselves, deliverance from malevolent spirits and the promise of eternal life was good news. While we do not hear of conversions motivated by direct material gains, there could have been an indirect “economic motivation” (Yoko 2004, 262) for those who found Christianity to be less expensive than their traditional religion or Buddhism. Christianity also offered the possibility of an altered lifestyle through education, a particular set of moral values, and a “Protestant ethic” (Weber 1958) that in the long run proved attractive and fulfilling. Interestingly, the stories of Lepcha Christian converts were unlike those we hear across the Indian nation-state. Lepcha converts to Christianity were neither cast out nor persecuted, and Christian Lepchas did not necessarily sever ties with their neighbours, kinsmen, and other members of the community. They remained very much a part of the wider community, although their Sundays were occupied with church activities.

Anthropologist Andrew Buckser has pointed out that “Conversion to a religion is an irreducibly social act; one does not merely join a faith, but one enters into a set of new relationships with members of a religious community. Conversion, therefore, changes not only the individual, but also the groups that must assimilate or give up the convert” (Buckser 2003, 69). For Bom Busty Lepchas, conversion was more of a community affair than an individual matter as families converted around the same time and there was not much resistance or opposition to conversion. In cases of individual conversion, there were instances of the rest of the family converting in due time. Conversions also occurred during or after marriage if one of the

spouses was a non-Christian. Conversion in Bom Busty started almost a century ago and today most Christian Lepchas are the descendants of the first converts of the village. There are not that many new Lepcha converts today, because grandfathers or great-grandfathers converted to Christianity, creating generations of Christian Lepchas to follow their path. Today, most Lepchas here are fourth- or fifth-generation Christians who are not aware of the reasons why their ancestors became Christians. However, people in Bom Busty also recount an incident that triggered many conversions. It was the death of Sethang Chemjong, (the son of Mekbar Singh Limbu and his Lepcha wife) and the unbelievable story of how this man rose from the dead. This story has a folklore-ish appeal to the Bom population, and one of the oldest women in the village narrated this story with such gusto it was as if she herself had died and returned from heaven. Her grandfather, who was at the wake when the deceased returned to life, told her the story that follows.

The man who died and came back to life

Sethang Chemjong died around 2:00pm in the afternoon and came back to life at 8:00am on the following morning. Known as a tall fellow who almost had to stoop, everybody called him Hungrayo. As he reached the door of death, it was dark and he found it very difficult to enter. The only thing he could hear himself say was "I am a Christian" as the door opened and he went inside. There seemed to be a lot of commotion and he boarded a train that had stopped nearby. Interestingly, the train was not going anywhere. It was just going around and around on the same track, making stops every now and then for passengers to get off. So he got off too, but since there was nowhere to go, he got back on the train and it went on, round and round for eighteen years (which according to him was equivalent to one night on earth).

As he looked around, he saw a *lama* spinning his prayer wheels and he said, "O *lama*, do you know the way?" to which the *lama* replied, "I myself have not been able to find the way and I have been roaming around for the last eighteen years." Then Sethang stepped out of the train and came to a dangerously steep slope where only the eerie wind could be felt. Then he again said, "I am a Christian." But a man came and pushed him from behind and he thought, "Oho! I am dead now," but he landed on a very dusty road. As he looked up, he saw *sadhus*, *jhakris* and *lamas* running around and they all seemed to despise him because he was a Christian. He then went a little further and found a desert-like area, but as he waited, the group that mocked him was swept up, not by water or fire, but they disappeared in front of his eyes.

He managed however to cross the sandy desert and was walking uphill when he met people like Dr. Graham, his own grandfather, and his father—and he recalled that his father was a little on the selfish side. They

were all going downhill, but he was climbing up. It was a small path and as he ascended, he found Ram seated on a deerskin and asked, "They treat you as God in the world, but why are you sitting here?" Ram replied, "The world didn't know and mistook me for God while I was only teaching them the good things so now I have to sit here till his second coming." Sethang then said, "Where is Laxman then?" and Ram pointed to Laxman, who was also sitting on a deerskin nearby. He looked around and found all the gods of the earth wandering around.

Suddenly he got really hungry and started looking for something to eat, and found a cottage. Without knowing why, he was punished for some misdeed on earth and was turned into a cat, which was distressing because how could he get to heaven now? But as he looked into the cottage from the window, he saw some curd, went inside, and ate it all. The next day he also went to eat the curd, but the owner of the cottage found him and beat him to death. He was thrown out—interestingly, he died as a cat but was reincarnated as a man. But his punishment had not ended, so he now became the hard root of a bamboo. Since the dried parts of a bamboo root are good for firewood, some travellers used the root to make a fire and it turned into scattered embers, but it soon reassembled and he became a man again.

However, saying "Christian" was like a medicine when such trials came. He walked further on and met a naked giant who was roasting and eating humans from a huge pot. The giant held a bow and arrow and was carrying a baby on its back. It then aimed an arrow at Sethang who said, "I am a Christian," and the giant with his huge arms shook his fist at Sethang and said, "You shall return again." Sethang proceeded further, only to come in contact with a huge black figure on a horse who wanted to slice him into two with a sword. But Sethang used his remedy, "I am a Christian," and he was spared.

He then found himself following a straight road with heavenly scents, and reached a garden where fruits from all twelve seasons were growing and had ripened. From there he saw a city and went towards it, but he ran into an angel on the platform, who asked him, "Where are you going?" Sethang replied, "I want to go to heaven." "Have you had communion?" asked the angel "No, I have not," replied Sethang, to which the angel said, "Then you cannot enter heaven." Sethang was surprised, so the two of them wrestled for a while, and Sethang was feeling a little low when they heard a voice say, "Maanoheem," at which the angel let him loose; he got to his knees and said, "Yes Lord." "What are you doing there?" God asked. "This man has not had communion but wants to come to heaven," replied the angel. Then God said, "If he didn't deserve to come to heaven, would he have gotten this far? It is all your fault. You are now transferred!"

On hearing that, the angel stood up, flapped its wings, which were as huge as could be, covering the whole earth, and flew away. Sethang went off to the east and climbed the stairs and found a library that was supposed to contain the book of life, but he could not find it. There was however the book of *karma*. Then he climbed further up and searched more

but with little success, so he felt depressed and went back down. He was wondering what to do next when he found God standing on a pulpit. As soon as he saw God, he bowed down and God said, "Your time is not over yet, you have to return to Earth and do some more work."

Then Sethang told God that he wanted to see the nail wounds on his palm from when he died on the cross. God showed him the scars and as Sethang tried to touch them it was as if they were an illusion because he could not touch them. Then God said, "You have to return to Earth, be my witness and save souls for heaven. You must go back." So he agreed and as he walked down the stairs, he found himself sneezing out loud, which woke him from under the white sheets that had covered him since his death. At that time, there were two women beside his body who ran out of the room as the men returned who had gone to the bathroom, and one of the men said, "Oh, you have risen from the dead?" and he said, "Yes, bring a piece of paper and a pencil and close the door." Then he related his story, one which has now been told and retold in Bom and its neighbouring surroundings about the man who died and came back to life.

This narrative is quite popular in the village and everyone has heard one version of the story or another. While it tells us about the kind of Christianity that was pervasive in the village, it also reveals the importance of native oral traditions of conversion for understanding the "historical impact and the continuing legacy of Christianity" (Neylan 1994, 7). Sparing the details, which were told fervently by one of the oldest living persons in the village, it is commonly understood that Sethang did not get to enter heaven because he had not yet taken communion. Since then, taking communion to get to heaven has become an important doctrine in the church in Bom. Until recently, church leaders would visit dying members in hospital and give the ailing person communion before they breathed their last, expecting that this was the dying person's ticket to heaven, regardless of the life they had led while on Earth. It showed the changing beliefs of a people who did not believe in heaven or hell after death. Lepchas believe their souls are supposed to return to their clan peaks when they die, but Christianity gave the soul a new destination and the promise of eternal life. It can be argued that Sethang's story made more of an impact because his uncle was the missionary who brought Christianity to Bom Busty, and his father was also a pastor who had married a Lepcha wife (the daughter of a *bongthing*). So the congregation took heed of his words, considering them almost equal to the word of God. People remember that members of his family were themselves humbled in many ways and even people who did not go to church became sincere and God-fearing.

Interestingly, this oral tradition of conversion story speaks of the prevailing cross-cultural connections and the power plays of the colonial narrative. If we analyse the incident, we find the emphasis is on the superiority of the Christianity that the Scottish missionaries introduced. Sethang's statement that, "I am a Christian" invokes the Christian identity, which apparently even proved to be a "medicine" when he was in trouble with

the giant and the dark man on a horse. It thus became important to identify oneself as a Christian. Secondly, meeting a lost *lama* and the sudden disappearance of godly men like the *sadhus* (Hindu ascetics) and *jhakris* (witch doctors) from other religions suggests the negligible role of leaders from other religions in the Christian cosmology. Likewise, Sethang's conversation with Ram as he waited for the second coming of Jesus, and his pointing to the misunderstanding of thinking of him as God undermines the God-status Ram held on Earth.

Another interesting aspect of this narrative is the concept of reincarnation, because Sethang takes on different forms of life for some misdeed on Earth before becoming a man once again. The belief in rebirth after death is very much a Buddhist tradition, as is the idea of *karma*, which shows up when he starts looking for the book of *karma*. Such details in this narrative are a typical case of Pratt's contact zone in which historically different people and cultures clash and negotiate their beliefs in order to affirm their existence. This story might seem like just another story to outsiders, but the fact that everybody in Bom Busty knows it and has even related it to friends and relatives outside the village means it had and continues to have a certain significance. At one point, the woman narrating the story says that the angel had to be transferred, so we see that there is room for the modern jargon of "job transfers" in the story of angels and gods.

Cultural changes brought about by Christianity

In addition to the cultural contact set in motion by the encounter with European missionaries, conversion is also a "cultural passage" (Austin-Broos 2003, 2). Going through this cultural passage, people change direction, turn away from old practices and align themselves with new institutions, new rules, and new social expectations. Conversion requires that priorities be reoriented and the convert "negotiates a place in the world" (Austin-Broos 2003, 2). The discussion that follows will examine various social institutions that were both in conflict and experienced continuity as Lepcha communities went through the cultural passage of conversion. It will look at the changes that took place and examine how those changes are currently understood in the community.

FAMILY

Families in Bom Busty are relatively small and nuclear in nature. An average family consists of a father, a mother, and two children. Most fathers have government jobs either in Kalimpong town or in nearby villages, while the mothers stay at home and look after the house. After completing twelfth grade, most children leave Kalimpong for further studies or employment. Extended families usually consist of a surviving grandparent (mostly grandmothers who live with their children) and the families of

siblings living together. In order to avoid conflict between brothers, especially after they are married, the eldest son usually moves out of the parents' home and builds another house on nearby ancestral land, while the younger son stays with the parents. In cases of conflict, they usually ignore each other to avoid confrontations. The people live in modern houses and there are no traditional Lepcha houses in the village.

MARRIAGE

The church is an important place for young people to meet potential marriage partners and get married. However, the church is not an exclusively Lepcha domain, so intermarriage between Lepcha and non-Lepcha neighbours is a common practice in Bom Busty. Christian Lepchas have no ethnic reservations when it comes to finding spouses, as long as their wife or husband is Christian. Often when a Lepcha brings home a non-Lepcha wife, it is likely that the new bride will introduce her culture and lifestyle to her new family, thus diluting a Lepcha family's ethnic boundaries. Lepchas are well aware that intermarriage is responsible for the decline of Lepcha culture, but there is no stopping the trend as love marriages are more popular than arranged marriages today. "Of course we wish for Lepcha-Lepcha marriages, but we don't have any restrictions today," said an elderly gentleman. But Christian Lepchas are cautious and adhere to rules about clan differences, avoiding marriage to members of the same clan. In some cases, arranged marriages take place and the traditional practice of a *peebu* (middleman) is still used as the main interlocutor between the bride's family and the groom's. In a Christian Lepcha marriage, extensive traditional rules are discarded, although those that are not in conflict with Christianity are chosen and practiced on a selective basis. Instead of the wedding gown and the suit, brides can also be seen wearing the *gada* (traditional female dress) in white and grooms sometimes mix a modern suit with the *dumpra* (traditional male dress). Marriage often becomes the only time when families from far and near, both Christian and non-Christian, come together and get to know each other.

KINSHIP

Lepchas still follow the clan system, although the practice of parallel descent ceased to exist after the acceptance of Christianity. Christianity complicated the traditional practice since the wife took the husband's last name after marriage, and the daughter was unable to take her mother's last name because her mother had already changed her last name to her father's clan name. This practice has been criticized as it disrupts the clan system and ignores the Lepcha tradition of each spouse having an equal share in passing on the family lineage. However, there are cases in which both the son and the daughter take their mother's clan name in the absence of their father. For example, this happened during

the Indo-Chinese war when Chinese men married Lepcha women but left their wives behind with the children. The children of these unions took their mother's clan name and faithfully observed the clan rules. Even now, these families are strict about not marrying within the clan, although technically the children of those Chinese-Lepcha marriages never belonged to that particular clan. Indeed, clan endogamy is still taboo, and they strictly adhere to the rules. In that way, kinship ties have remained unchanged, although the terminology is slowly being replaced by Nepali kinship terms. For example, *daju* for elder brother is used in place of *anum*, or *mama* for uncle in place of *azyong*.

LANGUAGE

There was a time when Lepcha was the official language of the region. In 1835, when the Deed of Grant of Darjeeling was given to the British by the Rajah of Sikkim, this document was written in Lepcha. But eventually the Lepcha language became "unfashionable" (Foning 1987, 160) and contact with the growing Nepali population meant that Nepali soon took over as the *lingua franca* of the region. There was a linguistic shift from the native tongue to the dominant language because Lepchas were mocked when they could not pronounce Nepali words correctly. "There was a feeling of shame that we weren't speaking the right way," said a Bom resident who remembers his classmates and teachers making fun of him speaking Nepali.

In the beginning, it was difficult for Lepcha students to speak one language at home and another at school, but they made a conscious effort to master the Nepali language and today almost all Lepchas in Bom Busty speak Nepali. They are fluent in Nepali and can (and do) read and write in Nepali, rather than in Lepcha, which is a result of the education system where instruction is often given in Nepali (unless they go to English language schools). Most parents have realized that Lepcha has ceased to be spoken, even at home, while their children have taken Nepali as their spoken and written language at school and in the village. The use of the Lepcha language has thus become limited to a few words at the dinner table or in conversation when there is a visitor. Otherwise, everyday conversation takes place in Nepali. But different Lepcha organizations are working to promote fluency in and use of the Lepcha language and Bom Busty hosted the tenth-anniversary celebrations for the Lepcha Conversation Course (LCC) in January 2012. The LCC is a mobile language program started by like-minded Lepcha individuals, which is held annually in different Lepcha villages. Bom Busty also hosted the fifth LCC, which gave birth to regular Lepcha classes in Bom School for Lepcha students. Following the tenth-anniversary celebrations, the Lepcha language class has also been opened to villagers and other language enthusiasts. Since the class was a later addition to the school syllabus, a few Lepcha families from the village contribute in order to pay the teacher's salary.

FOOD

The Lepchas of Bom Busty remember when food was gathered from the bountiful forests. There was a time when the village residents would harvest dry paddy, which was not far from their houses. Men and women would go to particular spots where the women would start gathering fruit and plants while the men would weave the cane mats that were used to carry the food that was gathered. Maize and millet were other popular crops amongst the Lepchas. If there was excess food, they would dig holes and store it in layers, with the grains placed at the bottom. This would be their granary, a storehouse that could be used when they needed more food.

While different kinds of yams and sweet potatoes were readily available in the forest, fishing in the Relli River usually yielded a good catch. The fish would then be cooked inside a length of bamboo and shared with everyone present. Today, young people visit the Relli River for riverside picnics. Although there are some young men from the village who still fish, most meat and fish products are readily available at the market. One of the important changes in dietary habits is a reduction in the intake of *ci*, the Lepcha alcoholic beverage, which is usually made of millet, and which plays an essential part in all the rites of passage in Lepcha life. Contact with Christianity meant a divorce from *ci* because of its alcoholic nature. A line was drawn between those who consumed it and those who did not, with Christian Lepchas in the latter category. Although the Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty have fond memories of drinking *ci* on various occasions, it has become a religious boundary marker today. An interesting food influence is the custom of making *sel roti*, a round Nepali rice donut which is prepared during Hindu festivals. Christian Lepchas have picked up this custom and now they prepare it at Christmas. Sometimes *sel roti* is also served during weddings.

DRESS

Up until about fifty years ago, *dumpra* and *gada* was the dress code for most residents in the village. There was a time when thorns from orange trees were used as safety pins to hold female attire together. Today, traditional attire is only worn on special occasions. The recent trend among men has been to coordinate a tailored suit and a *dumpra*, transforming the traditional attire into a modern, contemporary look as a direct result of cultural contact. Women are also seen wearing their *gadas* to church on Sundays, especially during the winter. Political developments in the Darjeeling hills, when the leader of the Gorkhaland movement demanded that everyone wear traditional Nepali dress, could be credited with starting the trend to (re)embrace traditional dress: Lepchas rejected the imposition of traditional Nepali attire, and vowed to wear their own traditional garments instead. Since their cultural identity, which was connected with what they wore, was threatened, this demand was a wake-up call for the Lepchas. Now there was even more reason to wear traditional clothing.

Christian Lepcha identity

Becoming Christian is not a simple process of replacing an old set of local practices with a new set of universal practices, nor is the local Christianity to be understood as some kind of quasi-Christianity as a result of the transformations and compromises that have occurred in the adoption process (Yoko 2004, 291).

The construction of Christian Lepcha identity means combining a Christian identity and a Lepcha identity. Each has its own separate space. But what makes someone a Christian? What are the boundaries that separate a Christian Lepcha from a non-Christian Lepcha? In order to examine Christian identity, it is first important to understand what it means to be a Christian. In this essay, I look at “being Christian as a social rather than intellectual or spiritual phenomena” (Bal 2000, 132). Christianity has its own universal ideals and rituals but there is no single, overarching “Christian identity,” because Christian identities are also contextualized through time and space.

“A Christian identity does not mean that all Christians share a common set of beliefs and values” (Tanner 1997, 124). Despite Christianity’s invocation of universality, not all Christians everywhere believe in the same things. Historically, to be a Christian meant to be a follower of Christ, but things are not so easy and simple. Many layers of practices and beliefs make up a Christian identity today. There are no “sharp cultural boundaries that give Christians (as a whole) group specificity” (Stamps 2009, 1). This is likewise true of the Lepchas of Bom Busty. There are Bom Lepchas who belong to Catholic and Protestant denominations and hold to different doctrines, but they are known to others simply as Christians. It is interesting that in the area, the Middle Bom Busty Lepchas are assumed to be Christians. True enough, if you are a Lepcha from Middle Bom Busty, it is quite likely that you might be a Christian. With only two Buddhist households in the village and most of the Buddhist population living in Lower Bom Busty, Lepchas of Middle Bom Busty are Christians by default. But what separates Christian Lepchas from their Buddhist counterparts across the field or Christian Lepchas from Christian non-Lepchas?

Identity markers

In accordance with what the Bible teaches, Christian Lepchas reject the polytheistic array of many gods and devils in the Lepcha cosmology by following the one true God who created them and promised them eternal life. They believe in the Bible as the word of God and are associated with the local Bom Church (or another church), attending it for Sunday services and other church activities throughout the year. Affiliation with a church officially indicates that an individual is a Christian and it can be

cited as a way to identify oneself as a Christian when asked for his or her religion in the government census or at places of employment. Members are expected to participate in church activities and the church is expected to look after its members by baptising and dedicating babies, marrying couples, and burying the dead. Traditionally, a Lepcha *bongthing* would be required for these rites of passage, but when almost the entire Lepcha population of the village has embraced Christianity, the traditional Lepcha practices are omitted and the rites of passage become tasks for the church. A Christian Lepcha does not believe in *mun* and *bongthings* and stays away from the various *rum faats* (festivals) that take place in neighbouring Lepcha houses. Instead, Lepcha homes host the various cottage meetings and prayers that are part of Christian tradition.

Members are expected to get married in church, and monogamy is the order of the day. For weddings, Lepcha members are now making an extra effort to amalgamate both Lepcha and Christian traditions in their attire and rituals. While the church wedding is still conducted according to Christian tradition, certain Lepcha rituals like the bridal price and using the services of a *peebu* have been observed. Certain gifts like *ci* are replaced by milk, clearly indicating that this is a Christian Lepcha marriage. Alcohol is strictly prohibited in church, although there are instances of its consumption in a few homes during the after-party.

When a child is born, the parents, grandparents, or friends of the baby's parents name the child and there is no special day for this occasion. Growing children are sent to Sunday school to learn Bible stories; most of them also start their educational careers in the Bom School itself, their "natal denomination" (Caplan 1980, 656), before transferring to other mission institutions or government schools. Education has been one of the impressive markers of Christian Lepcha identity in Bom Busty. Even when Christianity first came to the village, education went hand in hand with religion to create an environment that encouraged people to study, and the trend continues today. Because of easy access to education through the church, Christian Lepchas have always been well educated and exposed to the world, but they have ignored and missed out on knowledge of Lepcha culture. In that way, Christianity failed to contextualize its cultural package for the Lepchas. For a very long time, it failed to "find Jesus in Lepcha culture" (Limboo 2009) because although the two identities were moving in the same direction, in favour of progress, they were on different sides of the road. There was no amalgamation of Lepcha culture and Christianity because Christianity overtook the traditional culture, creating a significant boundary between those inside and those outside the faith (Farhadian 2003).

Comparing narratives

“Rongs (Lepchas) are much closer to the biblical tradition.”

This is something Christian Lepcha pastors/ preachers can be heard preaching to a Lepcha congregation. Today, Lepcha Christians draw parallels between Lepcha myths and Bible stories, starting with parallels between Lepcha myths and the description in Genesis of what happened before the world was created, when “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Lepchas also believe that in the beginning, “the world was all water, and there were no living creatures” (Stocks 1975, 32). The presence of water since the beginning of the existence of this planet is a recurring feature of many tribal tales and scientific speculations, and is one of many similarities between Lepcha narratives and those in the Bible.

The Creation Story: in Lepcha mythology, the creator god *Itbumu* is believed to have created the heavens and the earth before she picked up some fresh snow from Mt. Kanchenjunga and created *Fudongthing*, the first man on earth. But the creator was not satisfied and decided to give him a companion by taking a bit of ‘*a-yong*, which is literally translated as “marrow” (Doma 2010, 2) from *Fudongthing*'s bones, and from that she created *Nazongnyu*, his sister. They were blessed with supernatural powers and instructed to live separately. *Fudongthing* was supposed to live on top of a mountain named *Nareng Nangsheng Chyu*, and *Nazongnyu* was to live in a lake below the mountain called *Naho-Nahar Daa*. But they could not stay away from each other and started meeting in between the mountain and the lake. Soon they gave birth to their first child but they threw it away. This continued until the birth of their seventh child, when what they were doing was finally discovered. *Itbumu* was disappointed in *Fudongthing* and *Nazongnyu* for disobeying her orders. She cursed them and banished them from her presence. “You will leave immediately and live in the foothills of Kongchen Kongchlo as ordinary humans and suffer for your sins” (Doma 2010, 4). This narrative is very similar to the creation story in the Bible where God created Adam from the dust of the ground and took one of his ribs to create Eve to be a helper for him. Unlike *Fudongthing* and *Nazongnyu*'s living arrangements, Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, but were instructed not to eat from the tree of life. Unfortunately, they could not restrain themselves and they were also banished from the garden as God cursed them both for disobeying his orders.

The Flood Story: the flood story is the story of *Rongnyoo* and *Rangeet*, two rivers of Sikkim. They were lovers who planned to meet at Pesok and travel towards the plains. They each had a bird and a snake to guide them. But the girl, *Rongnyoo*, guided by the snake, arrived before the boy and that upset his male ego. When he reached the meeting place, he asked her *Thee-satha?*, which means “when did you arrive?” (The name of the river has been anglicised to Teesta and has remained so ever since.) Because

Rangeet was ashamed of arriving later, instead of travelling on he decided to return to his place of origin. When the river flowed backwards it caused a turbulence as the waters rose and flooded the land. During the time of the flood, Lepchas were believed to have sought refuge in Mt. Tendong and were saved from drowning. Likewise, the biblical flood occurred when the earth was full of evil and God wanted to destroy it. But in Noah he found a righteous man and wanted to save him and his family, along with other living creatures of this earth. So he told him to build a wooden ark and when it flooded, those inside the boat were saved. In both cases, we see a select group of people saved from drowning when the earth was flooded with water.

The tower of Babel: the Bible talks about a time when everyone spoke the same language and said, "Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches heaven" (Genesis 11:4). But God was not pleased with the developments so he confused their language and they could not work on building the tower together. In the Lepcha myth, the people were tortured by *lasso mung pano* (the king of evil spirits) and wanted to communicate with God in heaven about their problem. So they created a stairway of earthen pots to reach heaven. Soon they were piling up pot after pot to get there. But a miscommunication between those at the top and those at the bottom caused the earthen pot tower to be smashed and come crashing down. Here too, we see similar aspirations among the Lepcha people and the people of the Bible to reach heaven, which remained unfulfilled in both cases as a result of language problems.

In all three narratives, the stories and their themes are so similar that we wonder if one was inspired by the other through some contact with the other culture. But these stories have existed in isolation from each other and in all three cases there is no question of the authenticity of each culture's story. However, the similarities between Lepcha mythology and biblical stories have an added advantage for today's Christian Lepchas, who are increasingly interested in both affirming their Christian faith and becoming more grounded in Lepcha culture. Limboo (2009) compares the "peace loving, generous, sincere, faithful, hospitable, self-giving and self-sacrificing nature" of the Lepchas to the Christian concept of agape (Limboo 2009). And since there are many parallels between biblical stories and Lepcha myths, Christian Lepchas can now embrace the history of the traditional culture they once ignored. But can "an ethnic *cum* religious identification" (Yoko 2004, 285) exist for today's Lepchas? The above narratives are examples of how Christian identity and Lepcha identity could possibly co-exist and produce a shared identity.

Christian Lepcha vs. Lepcha Christian

"I personally feel that it is best for us simple people to adopt Christianity" (Foning 1987, 295).

In this shared identity, it is very likely that one side might become dominant and the other dormant in certain contexts. The question of whether the religious identity takes precedence over the ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian will always be there, because there was a time when the "exclusivist attitude" (Longkumer 2010, 85) of Christianity prevented Lepchas from continuing many of their long held cultural practices. Christian Lepchas were blamed for ignoring Lepcha culture, forgetting the Lepcha language, and considering themselves too "advanced" to interact with their Buddhist counterparts. On the other hand, Buddhist Lepchas managed to syncretize Lepcha culture with Buddhism and maintain traditional practices. As a result, Christian Lepchas have not always felt secure about their ethnic identity because Buddhist Lepchas often questioned their loyalty and involvement in Lepcha cultural affairs. Today, Christian Lepchas have come to realize that their religious identity has not been sufficient to serve as their ethnic identity. They are now making a conscious effort to acknowledge and reaffirm their ethnic identity, and Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty are actively participating in community affairs both within and outside their religious spheres. An educated Christian elite who is outspoken and prominent in projecting its Lepcha Christian identity, referring to Bible verses like "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage" (Psalms 33: 12), has also emerged. Now Lepcha Christians cite the Bible on behalf of their community, surer of both their religious and cultural identities. There is an acceptance of Christianity's ignorance of the traditional culture and they are willing to connect with traditional Lepcha culture and create avenues for affirming their Lepcha identities to meet the demands of ethnic politics today. Being largely involved in church affairs, there was a time when Christian Lepchas' Christian identity overshadowed their Lepcha identity, but Christian Lepchas today seem positive about their role in the preservation and promotion of both their identities. When asked around the village if they were Lepcha Christians or Christian Lepchas, the wordplay was only a distraction as everyone agreed, "We are Lepchas first."

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