

# A Story of Survival and Revival

## For the Lepchas of Sikkim, music is vital to culture

By Andra Leo

In northeastern India lies the small state of Sikkim. Formerly one of four 'kingdoms beyond the clouds', along with its neighbours Nepal, Mustang and Bhutan, it was absorbed into India in 1975. Today only Bhutan remains a kingdom. Two thirds of Sikkim is a lush emerald green by virtue of its forest-covered mountainsides and deep fertile valleys. The northern third consists of the high-altitude areas of a once-impregnable chain of mountains known as the Himalayas. The Lepcha, Sikkim's original people, have lived for millennia in the shadow of the world's third highest mountain – Kanchenjunga. A peaceful people who consider aggression unnatural and dangerous, they interpret envy as an affliction sent by the devil. Competition therefore is non-existent. These enviable characteristics, however, have meant that others have dominated them throughout the centuries – among them Tibetans, Bhutanese and the British, while today their country is ruled from India. Over the past decades there has been considerable immigration, especially of Nepalese, so today the Lepcha comprise less than 10 percent of their home country's population. As far back as 1937 anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer called them a dying race, a view echoed 50 years later by AR Foning, a Lepcha himself, who wrote about his 'vanishing tribe'. Despite such dire predictions Lepcha culture and traditions are making a comeback, thanks to the efforts of the Lepcha themselves and to government support.

Physically the Lepcha are rather stocky in build, fair and with Mongoloid features. (The name 'Lepcha' is apparently derived from a derogatory Nepali term, *lap-che*, which means 'nonsense-talkers'. The Lepchas call themselves 'Rong', which comes from *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup*, meaning 'Mother's Loved Ones, Children of the Snowy Peaks'.) The Lepcha story of origin states that the first couple, *Tukbothing* and *Nazong Nuy* (their Adam and Eve) was created by *Itbu Mu* (the Mother Creator) from the fresh snows of Kanchenjunga's summit. As Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca write in *The Sacred Summit*, 'the umbilical cord of the Lepcha community is linked to the mountain and its presence permeates every aspect of the Lepcha life-style'. Thus most Lepcha villages have Kanchenjunga within sight. Every Lepcha folk song or dance begins with the leader announcing *Chu Rong O! Bi Rong O!* (Oh, snowy peaks - oh, snow mountains!). Even their greeting *Aachuley!* is a salutation to the mountains, with Kanchenjunga reigning supreme. The rich Lepcha folklore reiterates the belief that the Lepchas are born of this land.

The name 'Kanchenjunga' translates as 'the Big Stone'. Upright stones have special importance in Lepcha rituals. The original shamanistic *Mun* faith decreed that corpses be buried facing the mountain from which all life originates. In the 17th century, when Buddhism was introduced to Sikkim, the Lepchas incorporated a form of it – Lamaism – into their belief system, simultaneously practising two mutually contradictory religions without feeling any theoretical conflict. Today most Lepchas are Buddhist although some have converted to Christianity. Their ancient practices have not died out, however, and even today the rituals of the old and the new exist amiably side-by-side.

Although scattered throughout Sikkim, most Lepchas are concentrated in central Sikkim. A small number live in reserves, first mooted by the British in the 19th century as a way of safeguarding the tribal culture. In the early 1960s, the last Chogyal (king) of Sikkim established Dzongu Reserve in northern Sikkim for their use. This remote, almost virgin territory, a land of dense jungle groves, pristine glacial streams, waterfalls and hot springs, is surrounded



Left: Sonam Tshering plays the flute. He is a preserver of tribal culture and the curator of a small museum in Kalimpong; photo by Andra Leo

Background: Kanchenjunga, sacred mountain of the Lepcha people of Sikkim, as seen from Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve; photo by Gyatso Lepcha

by formidable peaks that reach skyward. Once closed to outsiders, it is now a tourist destination. The Lepcha, skilled hunters who practised slash-and-burn agriculture, today raise a variety of crops – maize, rice, cardamom and garden vegetables – and keep goats, cattle and pigs. Their current lifestyle in Dzongu is being recorded on film by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, the capital. This institute also sponsors workshops on animation and a short film based on the Lepcha tale of paradise (*Nye Mayel Kyong*) is being produced. This mythical paradisaical village, believed to be the home of their ancestors, is said to be located somewhere in an inaccessible part of Kanchenjunga.

Not only is the Lepcha way of life being preserved on film, but Lepcha culture is beginning to reach a wider audience. A gap year programme called *Asia Venture* recruits teenagers from Europe who teach English in Lepcha villages and in return they are taught Lepcha music and dance.

One dedicated man, Sonam Tshering Lepcha, now in his 80s and known to his admirers as *Rong Lupon* (the Lepcha Master) is credited with the revival of interest in Lepcha culture. While still in his 20s, he began roaming Sikkim's villages, collecting songs, ancient musical instruments, artefacts and manuscripts. He taught himself to play the instruments and made history in 1960 by being the first Lepcha to be heard on All India Radio. In fact, during the 1960s, young people in the villages treated him like a pop star, singing his song that translates as *Waving round and round the silken handkerchief given by sister Kanchi* and emulating the way he danced. Sonam has won numerous awards for his music. For his contributions to the preservation of Lepcha culture, in 2007 he received the *Padma Shri*, India's highest and most prestigious civilian award for distinguished service. Sonam says that his life's work was motivated by the belief that a man without a culture is a man without a backbone.

Today, Sonam lives quietly in Kalimpong where he runs a small, private museum that displays his collection of curious musical instruments and artefacts. He greets visitors with a song played on a 300-year-old bamboo flute, its two stems glued together with honey. The song includes short, shrill bursts of sound that seem to cry 'Welcome! Welcome!' He later demonstrates a special flute used to imitate birdcalls and also plays the violin-like *satsang* to accompany a surprisingly rollicking and jolly love song about separated lovers. Finally, true to the Lepcha tradition of deifying Kanchenjunga, he plays a soulful, haunting song dedicated to the worship of the sacred mountain.

In addition to rare musical instruments such as the banjo-like *tumbok*, the museum contains traditional Lepcha items such as a coiled rope ladder for reaching beehives and honey, a contraption that fired heated clay 'bullets', a bow that shot two arrows simultaneously, and a very broad sword rather like a gigantic spatula that looked more useful for spanking than slashing an enemy.

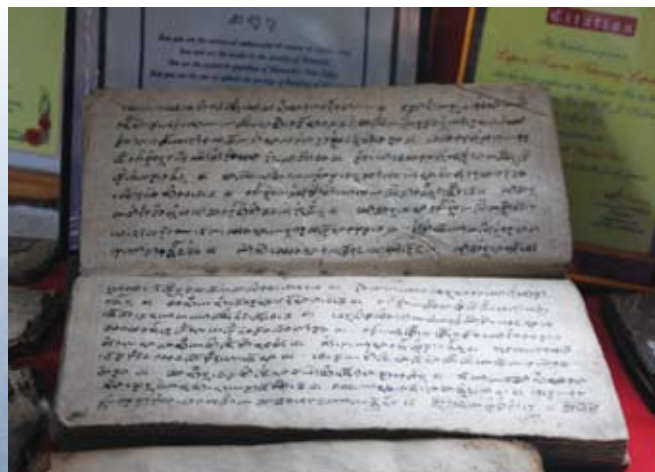
In one corner of the museum he has a number of rather dilapidated manuscripts. Sonam reads from the texts so mellifluously that it sounds like singing. In fact, impromptu singing in verse (*Aprya-Vam*) has a long tradition among the Lepcha. A common language unites all ethnic groups. Today Lepcha is widely spoken and is taught in Sikkim's schools.

Despite the dire predictions, the Lepcha are neither a dying race nor has their culture disappeared. In a world of rapid change this is a great achievement.

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Top: Ancient Lepcha manuscript; photo by Andra Leo  
Bottom: A variety of Lepcha handmade traditional musical instruments; photo by Sue Ellen Kelso

