



Shamanic Practice in a Hidden Himalayan Valley

By Jenny Bentley

Mount Kangchendzonga from Lingthem Village, Dzongu

Formerly a kingdom, Sikkim is a small Indian state nestled in the southern hills of the Himalayas between Nepal, Tibet (China) and Bhutan. The Lepcha are an ethnic group speaking a Tibeto-Burman language and refer to themselves as *Mútunci róng kup rum kup*, usually loosely translated as ‘the children of mother nature and god’. They are accepted as the oldest known inhabitants of this forested region, called *Máyel lyáng* in their own language, and practise a form of shamanism strongly embodied in the local landscape. After the establishment of the Sikkimese kingdom in 1642, they were gradually converted to Tibetan Buddhism, but retained their own beliefs. Many elements from indigenous Lepcha thought and practice were integrated into Sikkimese Tibetan Buddhism – for example the worship of Mount Kangchendzonga while Lepcha shamanism, as it is practised today, incorporates elements of Tibetan Buddhism.

Dzongu, in northern Sikkim, is a region carved out specifically for the Lepcha people. During the time of the kingdom, these tracts of land belonged to the royal family. More precisely, they were given to the respective *gyalmo* (queen). So far, no historical records can be traced, but oral tradition has it that Gyalmo Yeshey Dolma (1867-1910), the wife of the 9th king, Chogyal Thutob Namgyal (1860-1914), decided that this land was to be reserved for the Lepcha and no other people would be allowed to settle within its boundaries. A royal proclamation in 1956 reinforced this decision and the reservation has been preserved ever since. With this more than century-long protection in place, the Lepcha of Dzongu have a distinct sense of belonging to their region as well as a unique feeling of commonality,



The last *Kóngchen bǒngthing*



Lepcha people

reproduced in their annual collective rituals. The ritual cycle provides hints at the history of the indigenous people’s integration into Sikkim’s Buddhist kingdom and implies mutual respect as well as the subtle power of the subaltern.

At present, the village communities of Dzongu come together for and contribute to *Sátáp rum fát* and *Cirim*, the two main collective rituals performed by the religious specialists of the Lepcha religious tradition, referred to as *bǒngthing* or *mun*. The former ritual is performed to prevent hail (*sátáp* in Lepcha) from destroying the crops, but there is a deeper meaning – regulating the amount of rainfall so it results in a good harvest. *Sátáp rum fát* takes place in the Lepcha month of *Kursóng* (January-February) or *Thón* (February-March). *Cirim* is held shortly afterwards, before the onset of the monsoon rains, in the Lepcha month of *Sâm* (March-April) or *Num tsán* (April-May). In the recent past, the ritual’s date was shifted from late summer. It is performed to protect the people and the land from diseases or other kinds of harm. The word *Cirim* does not derive from the Lepcha language, but has its roots in the Tibetan word *spyi rim*, meaning ‘common ritual’. This name was most likely adopted along with the growing Buddhist influence over the region and the indigenous ritual’s integration into the Sikkimese kingdom’s



Performing Cirim in Tingzong, Dzongu



Egg predictions during Cirim in Pentong

rituals. A Buddhist preventive ritual also called *Cirim* is celebrated all over Sikkim as well as in Dzongu. Both *Sátáp rum fát* and *Cirim* are held in every village of Dzongu. Each household contributes various grains and in most places a chicken or an egg. The contributions are offered to *Kóngchen cú* (Kangchendzonga), the main protective mountain deity who is requested to ward off all evil. The *bóngthíng* also propitiates the local guardian deities, called *lungji langnóng*, which are different in each village and are personified in the surrounding hills, rivers, rocks, bamboo groves and other prominent landscape markers. The ritual thus reveals the boundaries of the sacred village space as well as the sphere of influence of the *bóngthíng*. Each *bóngthíng* performs the ritual and seeks protection only for his own village.

According to the origin story of *Cirim*, it seems the ritual integration of the Dzongu people into the kingdom of Sikkim occurred during a war between Sikkim and either the Gorkhas (Nepal) or the Promu (Paro, Bhutan). Local sources are unclear about the adversary and therefore the account and the date still need to be verified. According to the legend as told by Netuk Lepcha, *bóngthíng* of Lingthem village in Dzongu, the *chogyal* (king) requested soldiers from Dzongu. There were no warriors among them, so the Lepcha performed an offering asking their protective deity *Kóngchen cú* for help. He is said to have sent three insects that turned into fatal diseases after being brought to the battlefield. All the enemies died and Sikkim won the war, but then local people also started dying. Therefore, the *chogyal* again sent a message to the people of Dzongu asking them to stop the diseases from spreading. A specific *bóngthíng* of the Garkum *tsum ptso* (clan) went to the royal palace and performed a ritual to *Kóngchen cú* requesting him to withdraw his soldiers (ergo the diseases).

This ritual is said to have been the first *Cirim* and demarcates the integration of the ancient Lepcha worship of Mount Kangchendzonga into the calendar of royally funded state rituals. The specific clan was chosen for a reason. Every Lepcha clan is related to a mountain (*cú*), a lake (*dâ*) and a specific place where the souls of the deceased enter the ancestral lands (*lep*). The Garkum *tsum* clan's mountain peak is the mighty *Kóngchen cú* itself. Therefore, this clan and the specific lineage of *bóngthíngs* were given the responsibility of carrying out the ritual at the royal palace mentioned in the mythology on *Cirim*. Thenceforth they also performed the *Kóngchen rum fát*, a royally funded ritual performed simultaneously with *Cirim* and *Sátáp rum fát* until the kingdom's demise in 1975.

During this ritual, the *Kóngchen bóngthíng* went to the royal palace, received a yak as the sacrificial animal from the

chogyal, performed a short recitation and returned to Dzongu. There, an elaborate ritual was held during which the main protective deity of the Lepcha was requested to protect the royal family and also Sikkim. The ritual was held just before *Pang Lhabsol*, the annual state ritual for the Buddhist deity Kangchendzonga. Therefore, even though it was kept a quiet affair, the *chogyal* requested protection from the Lepcha deity *Kóngchen cú* before propitiating its Buddhist manifestation. This can be interpreted as a political move to integrate the indigenous people into the kingdom. However, it also shows the respect given to or even the fear of local religious beliefs. Thus, the subordinate people and their deities had power – at least ritual power – over the prosperity of the Sikkimese royal family and kingdom.



The Kangchendzonga Range from Pentong Village, Dzongu

The *Kóngchen* ritual is not performed any more and the senior *Kóngchen bóngthíng* died in October 2011. Along with him, the knowledge of the royally sponsored tradition also died. The Lepcha and their culture are often described as vanishing. However, at the same time as the lineage of the *Kóngchen bóngthíng* used to conduct the rituals to protect the entire population of Sikkim and the royal dynasty, the religious specialists of Dzongu performed the rituals to protect their respective village areas. These local counterparts of the *Kóngchen* ritual – *Cirim* and *Sátáp rum fát* – are still held annually and are part of the rich and vibrant religious and cultural heritage in Dzongu today.

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