Chapter V

Religion

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the religion(s) of simple societies has received inadequate attention of the scholars working on such societies. Because of this and the possible bias of earlier the Europeans and later the Indian anthropologists the understanding of the religion of tribal and peripheral societies has not been satisfactory. Indigenous scholarship has not developed everywhere and wherever it has developed it is also influenced heavily by the scholarship of non-indigeneous writers.

Of the very few attempts to explain the intricacies of the religion of simple societies, Gorer's is perhaps one of the most successful. He is aware of his limitations but the insight which he shares with Morris is really valuable. It is quite natural that one often encounters traces of their bias towards the Lepcha religion but these do not belittle the value of their works on this subject.

Gorer writes that "(t)he discussion on the Lepchas' religion is rendered extremely difficult by the fact that they practise simultaneously, and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or probably three) mutually contradictory religions ..." (p. 181). This contradiction shows only when a scholar tries to delineate the fundamentals of a religion from those of another. But the way the Lepchas look at their religion(s) is as a means to various ends, such as prosperity, health, fertility, productivity, peace, etc. To them, the means are not really as important as the ends they want to achieve.

This is not to impress that the Lepcha view of religion is purely utilitarian. They do have a system of beliefs and faith which cannot always be explained in terms of their social, economic or material needs. In fact, they worship many gods and goddesses without being able to explain why they do so. They are but clear about the results if they do and if they do not worship them. More often than not, it is the fear of some ill-consequence rather than the prospect of a brighter future that makes them worship this or that god or goddess.

Gorer has divided his discussion on the Lepcha religion into three parts: the first is dominated by lamaism, the second by the Mun and the third by the worship of the "people of Mayel". Morris has made no such classification but has discussed lamaism separately in Chapter V and the latter two under "Exorcism and other Magical Practices" in Chapter VII.

In this chapter, I have little choice in sticking to the classification made by Gorer but I have chosen to reverse the order of discussion. While Gorer discusses the above three aspects of the Lepcha religion progressively in Chapters VII, VIII and IX I shall like to discuss lamaism towards the end instead of in the beginning as Gorer and Morris have done. This modification is desired because from the Lepcha point of view lamaism is a later addition to their religious order.

Before proceeding further it should be pointed out that there is a problematic here, which is the difficulty in treating the three divisions of the Lepcha religion as three different aspects of the Lepcha religion. Because, in many ways, they represent three different stages of the religion

of the Lepchas. But taking them as three stages would not only suffer from the problem related to the evolutionary model of social change but also not properly be authenticated by the situation in the village. All the three divisions of the Lepcha religion are still observed to be very much alive.

As a solution to this, I have kept in mind the historicity of the introduction of these religions in the Lepcha society. But I have felt it more meaningful to treat them as different aspects of the Lepcha religion, no matter how contradictory they may otherwise appear between themselves.

Ancestor Worship

Gorer has discussed ancestor worship under the heading "The People of Mayel" in Chapter IX. This is because the Lepchas considered themselves to have originated from the "land of Mayel" or, in other words, they treated the "people of Mayel" as their ancestors. The worshipping took place mainly at the time of harvest and hunting. This worshipping, although made by the Muns and Bongthings, was different from the religious order

associated with Mun and Bongthing. According to Gorer:

> The most outstanding differences with other Mun ritual, and indeed with ordinary Lepcha life, is, first, a discrimination against women, secondly, an insistence on virginity for some of the celebrants, and thirdly a suggestion of the danger of menstruating women. Women may perform the sacrifice to the people of Mayel, but if they do so the ceremony is curtailed and fewer objects employed; they not only cannot sacrifice to Pongrum but must not even be aware when the sacrifice takes place; and the popped corn and chi which are employed in it, if not made by a man, which is preferable, must be made by a virgin girl. The chief offerings to the people of Mayel are the lafet sacrifice and sakyoufaat; the small bird for the lafet must be killed by a virgin boy, and the strained chi poured into the buttered cup by a virgin girl (p. 235).

This is the gist of the religious order associated with the "people of Mayel". According to Gorer, the insistence on virginity was there but usually

young children were deputed to perform the acts hoping that they were virgins (p. 236).

Let me now briefly describe the character of their ancestors as described by Gorer on pages 236 and 237. The narration is made here in the past tense though the belief in the "people of Mayel" is still a part of the present. Only a few Lepchas took the vocation of monkhood and knew how to read and write in Tibetan but the story of the Mayel people was kept alive. Not every living Lepcha today can recount the story of the Mayel people properly. There are also a number of sceptics, as there were in 1937 too, but such people do not threaten the existing belief system of the villagers.

The ancestors of the Lepchas were seven brothers, each being the guardian-deity of some crop. They lived in seven separate huts. They were immortal: they were babies in the morning, youths during the day and old in the evening. They had each a huge goitre, wore traditional Lepcha clothes made of nettle fibre and hats made of bamboo strips. On the road to Mayel, there were three brothers as guardian-spirits. Their names were Mayel Yookrum (or Pongrum to the hunters), Mi-tik and Tom-tik.

The younger two brothers were cruel deities.

The dry-rice, maize and millet were believed to have originated from the "land of Mayel". Birds called Mayelfo were sent to them by their ancestors to indicate the seasons for various agricultural works.

The people of Mayel had no wives except the oldest two. Their wives were two sisters called Talyeu-Nimu and Sangvo-Nimu. These two women were worshipped as spirits of the earth because their bellies were taken as cultivable lands on which the seeds of rice, millet and maize sown by their husbands got fertilized and bore fruits.

This in short is the description of the people of Mayel, their ancestors or progenitors. Though none of the Lepchas living in Lingthem today has ever seen them nor been to the land of Mayel most believe that it is located somewhere near Mount Kanchanjangha.

Let me now describe the various ceremonies related to the people of Mayel on the basis of Gorer's account given on pages 238 to 246. Here the details have been cut short and only the salient features have been retained.

The "people of Mayel" were worshipped exclusively in connection with dry-rice, millet, and maize, while crops like barley, wheat, buck-wheat and wet-rice were not considered to be directly connected with them and thus no important ceremonies took place for those crops. Everybody worshipped them on two occasions, after sowing and after harvesting the dry-rice (p. 238).

The offerings at the time of sowing consisted of lafet and sakyou faat. The former sacrifice contained of food arranged in three lines, the central being for the "people of Mayel", the right line for men's patron-gods and the left for women's patron-gods. The lafet food contained the flesh of a tiny bird killed by a virgin boy. If the bird was big or the boy not virgin, the gods would refuse the food and there would be bad harvest. Before the ceremony began, a song was sung in honour of the Mayel people and then a Mun offered sakyou faat to them. A virgin girl would stand by to constantly fill the buttered cup with chi which was finally drunk by the Mun in the name of the "people of Mayel".

The harvesting ceremony was more complicated. It was necessary to keep the spleen (tafoot in Lepcha) of a pig, smoked and ready along with chi made of ripe new dry-rice. These were taken to the field on the day of reaping along with two burning brands and placed on where the crop was heaped or at zo-lam. Then an old and experienced man but not related to the owner would be chosen to represent a man of Mayel and offer the gifts laid on the heap of rice.

In that ceremony, a woman not directly related to the owner of the land would be chosen to represent Talyeu Nimu who helped the Mayel-bu or the man chosen to represent a man of Mayel in carrying out rest of the ceremony which included dancing round the zo-lam, opening the baskets of rice, etc. After the ceremony was over the charcoal and tafoot would would be taken away and the measuring of grains would start. And eating of the new rice would thus begin.

Until everybody in the neighbourhood finished performing the sacrifice, the rice could not be dried in the sun. If they did so the "people of Mayel" would see and get angry. They could also

not see the rice being dried in the sun for if they did so that would bring ill-luck to them too.

The Lepchas outside Dzongu were reported not to be very serious about observing the above prohibition but in Dzongu it was very much observed.

The annual sacrifice for the Pongrum required popped corn and chi prepared either by a man or a virgin girl but if possible all the ingredients for this sacrifice were prepared by a man and no woman witnessed the sacrifice. Whenever an animal was killed in the forest it would be cut up and sacrificed to the Pongrum. Learning this was not arbitrary: the novice required to take chi, a ceremonial scarf and a rupee to the person from whom he wanted to learn this. Then followed a number of instructions which needed to be carefully observed by the learner.

This in brief was the Lepcha religion associated with the "people of Mayel". From the above account it is difficult to understand why they worshipped the people of Mayel. Did they worship them because of the tribal obsession with ancestor worship? Was it the uncertainty of harvest that made them do it? Or was it because they really believed in the power

of their ancestors to rescue or ruin them? There can probably be no definite answer about these questions. The most reasonable answer is that because of the impossibility of acquiring food from outside when no one produced surplus, when there was no market for the distribution of surplus food, and when there was no infrastructure to facilitate the same, they were entirely dependent on their environmental resources. Under the circumstances they would be ready to propitiate any god or goddess. But when they had a living belief in their 'living' ancestors it was only natural that they received the veneration of their descendants.

The belief in the "people of Mayel" has not eroded much but due to the changes in their agricultural crops discussed in Chapter III the patron-deities of those crops which are not sown any more are not worshipped either. Here a special mention must be made of the dry-rice which is no longer cultivated but which occupied the most important place in the religious order discussed in this section. With the introduction of wet-rice cultivation the ceremonies associated with the dry-rice

such as lafet and sakyou faat have become virtually extinct. There are a few rituals associated with wet-rice but these are simple and can be carried out by the householder only.

Similarly, Pongrum has lost its relevance after hunting became only a pastime. This deity is worshipped once in a while when someone in the village suffers from acute chest pain and the Mun or Bongthing diagnoses the reason to be an attack by the Pongrum. In such a case, preferably a red cock is sacrificed to please this god of hunters.

It should be added that the worshipping of the "people of Mayel" has on the whole lost its valour. While maize and millet are still cultivated they are (and were) never as important as the rice. Furthermore, the cardamom has assumed such an important place in their economy that other agricultural crops have lost their economic value considerably. And with the entire agricultural sector in the hands of the immigrant labourers from Nepal the "people of Mayel" do not seem to matter as much today as they did in and before 1937.

Mun-Bongthingism

At the very outset it may be pointed out that Mun and Bongthing are considered as priest and priestess only outside Dzongu. In Dzongu, the difference between Mun and Bongthing never seems to be drawn though the word Padem (Padim by Morris) for a lesser Mun is common. As a matter of fact, the word Bongthing is rarely used inside Dzongu. This is clear from the following words of Gorer:

> Both men and women can be Mun, but only men can be Padem (or Bumthing as they are called outside Zongu); these are both pure Lepcha spirits and are essentially similar, save that the Padem are far less powerful, and that instruction by an already qualified Padem is optional, whereas for Mun a three year course of instruction is obligatory. Padem are weaker than Mun and capable of exorcising far fewer devils; they cannot prophesy nor perform the death ceremony. For many men Padem is the first step to becoming Mun (p. 215).

This was also true of Tingvoong as illustrated by Siiger:

> It was the custom in Tingbung to use the word mun for both priests and priestesses, sometimes

> supplemented by the word "male" or "female"; but the word bongthing for the male mun also occurred, although only rarely (p. 161).

The Padem is considered by Gorer to be a lesser Mun but according to Morris:

> The difference between the two is not at all clear, nor are their powers strictly defined; but whereas both men and women may become Mun, it is impossible for a woman to be a Padim (p. 115).

Gorer has also mentioned about Yaba (Yama for women) and Pau (Nandjemu for women). The former is supposed to be possessed by Limbu spirits and the latter by Bhutia spirits (p. 216).

The above citations do not provide a very clear picture of the Lepcha priest or priestess. If the Lepchas of Dzongu had different words for male and female priests and priestesses like Yaba and Yama or Pau and Nandjemu it is difficult to understand why the word 'Mun' was used to refer to both priest and priestess. It is quite likely that the male-female difference about Yaba-Yama and Pau-Nandjemu has been retained by the Lepcha society of

Dzongu because these offices were later introduced in their society. But the contact with the Limbus on the west and the Bhutias on the north is rather old. Despite this, the importations of these offices by the Lepchas may have taken after the offices of Mun or Bongthing were well established. In any case, the actual Lepcha priest and priestess are considered to be Mun and Bongthing only. The other priests are not much known to have existed outside Dzongu and even in Tingvoong Siiger could not find any.

Inspite of the confusions inherent in the definitions of various Lepcha priests and priestesses I have chosen to use Mun for priestess and Bongthing for priest. Hence the subheading "Mun Bongthingism". This is the most acceptable name in the Lepcha society as a whole and even in Dzongu this seems fairly acceptable. However, in the context of Lingthem in 1937, I have not stressed to show if a Mun was a male or a female.

Having laid the premise it is in the fitness of things now to show the difference between "Mun Bongthingism" and lamaism. In this regard, the following words of Gorer are illuminating:

> As opposed to lamaism the Mun religion carries with it no social organization; the Mun and their parallel priests are simply individuals who, through their possession by a spirit, have certain gifts and duties; unlike the lamas and the civil officers their position carries with it no sort of title in ordinary life (p. 215).

This opposition was however not reflected in the way the two orders existed in the village. By 1937, a number of the functions of Mun were taken over by the lamas but, according to Morris, the two worked "side by side in perfect amity" and there was "not the slightest rivalry between them" (p. 116).

Let me now briefly describe the office of Mun. The spirit of Mun was attached to family lines and was often hereditary. In other words, it descended from the grandfather to the grandson and from grandmother to the granddaughter though it could also pass on to any man and sex. After a Mun died the spirit would not necessarily choose another person immediately and could wait for a number of years also (p. 215).

In Lingthem, there were as many as 8 Muns of which 4 were men and 4 women. 3 of the men were actually Padem only. Of those who would be possessed by non-Lepcha spirits there was only one case, which was a Nandjemu (Gorer, pp. 215-16).

The Muns were believed to be of two types: benevolent called Tang-li-Mun and malevolent called Mun-mook-Mun. The difference between the two was similar to the difference between black and white magicians (Gorer, p. 216).

On the possession and functions of the Mun, Gorer has not provided any general description but has cited the case of Gongyop, the most highly rated Mun in the village, in great detail covering six pages from 217 to 222. From this case, it appears that the initial possession took place with the help of another Mun who would identify a person to be ready for being possessed. For some days such possessed persons would fall sick and behave like a mad man. Then training under a senior Mun of the same or different sex would begin until the novice received the loong or ceremonial qualification.

Once a person was qualified as a Mun, he or she could not touch a human corpse. Such a person

would have the power to see devils, communicate with supernaturals, etc. (p. 222).

The chief supernaturals of the Mun were Itpomu (Itpumu by Morris) and Narzong-nyou. Before discussing why and how they were worshipped the confusion about the sex of these supernaturals may be cleared first. Itpomu is considered by Gorer as a female deity but Morris has mentioned it to be a male (p. 63). Komsithing, on the other hand, has been mentioned as a woman by him but Gorer and others (for instance, Kotturan 1983: 38) have identified it as a man. It does not seem to matter much to the Lepchas whether a deity was a male or female but all other works on the Lepchas and my own fieldwork show that Itpomu is a female and Komsithing a male deity.

Narzong-nyou, according to Gorer, was the most important Lepcha goddess who was responsible for the geography, flora and fauna of the Lepchas. Komsithing, her husband, was also an important deity but not usually worshipped for he was considered as a foreigner. Another important supernatural was Tak-bo-thing, who was confused with Tasheything or Guru Rimpoche after their conversion into lamaism (p. 225).

Most of the Mun ceremonies were performed for the benefit of individuals, households or neighbourhood. The Cherim ceremony, held twice in a year, for instance, was observed for protecting the community from illness. This ceremony included three separate rituals out of which the first two were performed by the Mun and the last by a lama. At least one individuals from each household had to be present and each household had to contribute some grains. The first ceremony was performed to propitiate the devils, the second to please the gods of Kanchanjangha and the plains, and the third to mollify the ghost-devil called Dayom (Gorer, pp. 228-29).

The services of Mun would be required by every Lepcha family at the time of birth, marriage, and particularly death. In this context, Gorer writes:

> Throughout life they are necessary for cleansing from supernatural danger, for blessing and solemnising different undertakings, and, above all, for expelling devils (p. 230).

Gorer has made a commendable attempt to delineate the major functions of the Mun in Lepcha society.

According to him, they are the following three:

1. "to get rid of Sor moong (violent death) or Apang moong (genito-urinary diseases)";
2. "to drive away the ghost of a dead child, called Num-een moong, which kills young children by infantile diarrhoea"; and
3. "to get rid of Chyom moong (that is the devil who causes people to die by falling from a tree or cliff) or Rot moong (that is the devil who causes people to commit suicide" (pp. 232-34).

These three functions may now be briefly elaborated. In the first, the Mun asked all the members of the afflicted family to touch a rope with three knots, which was used to tether a goat to be sacrificed consequently. The Mun called upon the devils to be contented with the blood of the sacrifice and not harm the sick. Then the goat would be killed and elaborate offerings with rice, a rupee, ceremonial scarf, chi and the sick person's clothes or ornaments, were made by the Mun.

With regard to the second function, the ceremony took place near a stream. The Mun held a bundle of rashberries, nettles and other thorny or prickly plants in both hands, dipped them in

water and sprinkled on the sick child several times. Then offerings of chi, blood and meat of the sacrificed animal and some rice would be allowed to flow on the stream through a gate made of elephant grasses. This would be followed by the release of the bunches of thorny plants. Such gates were made in two more places, one above and another below the original one.

Finally, the third ceremony was performed if someone in the family committed suicide or met with an accidental death. In this ceremony, a dead goat was skinned upto its knees and was laid on its back facing opposite to the bowman. A ditch would be dug ready and above that a shelter of bamboo thatched with reeds. The dead goat's heart would be hung a little away, with the blood dripping on the banana flower placed below. Then the Mun would start shivering uncontrollably and summon the devil. Meanwhile, some insect would climb up the pole towards the heart. The bowman would shoot at the insect before it reached the heart. Once the insect was killed the goat would be chopped and buried along with the insect into the ditch kept ready.

From the above account of Gorer on the traditional Lepcha religion epitomized by Mun and Bongthing it appears that around 1937 they had almost an absolute control not only over the religious sphere of the Lepchas of Lingthem but also over their social and cultural activities. It is also clear that the lamas had a secondary position vis-a-vis the Muns or Bongthings. The Lepchas could do without a lama but it was impossible without the former. The monastery was very much there and so were some officiating lamas but the villagers still turned towards the Muns rather than the lamas.

If one admits that the picture given above by Gorer is true, some of the changes that have taken place in the last fifty years have been quite drastic. The basic principles of acquiring Munhood or Bongthinghood have not changed. The way they get possessed or their expected functions have not changed either. But almost all Muns seem to have eventually died along with their spirits. Because, as expected, the spirits did not choose new persons even after so many years now.

There is only one Mun in Lingthem today. Though referred to as a Padem, Tagyap, aged 58 years and belonging to the Paki p'tsho, is the only living sample of the traditional Lepcha priest. But he, despite being the only priest, is not much in demand and is rarely invited by the villagers. He depends on the income from the 3 acres of his cardamom field which is leased out to a Nepalese labourer on sharecropping. But he seems to earn enough for the unlimited amount of country liquor and chi that he takes every day.

The disappearance of Muns and Bongthings not only from Lingthem but also from the surrounding villages and elsewhere is a well known fact today. But the Lepchas do not seem to be much bothered about this phenomenon. It is only recently that some Lepchas have begun to speak favourably and nostalgically of what they term as "our original lamas". But they understand it well that being a Mun or Bongthing is not under their control. He or she must show signs of becoming so such as trembling vigorously, behaving in rather abnormal ways and other such symtoms.

According to the lay Lepchas of Lingthem and outside the explanations for the disappearance of Muns and Bongthings are like this. The Muns were required basically for driving out the devils but due to the denudation of forest and the increase of human population all over the area the devils have "run away". The devils, as also gods and goddesses, lived in the forests and grooves but with the clearing of such habitats the supernatural beings have disappeared too. Therefore, the Muns and Bongthings, who served as the link persons between the lay and the supernaturals, disappeared.

The spirit of lamaism is not generally accepted as a factor for this. Though today we see that most of the functions of the Mun have been taken over by the lamas, the latter are not held responsible for this. They are correct to a large extent because the spread of lamaism in the village was more than hundred years, the monastery being established there in 1855 itself. But there were, as seen above, quite a large number of Muns till 1937. Why did they disappear in the last fifty years when they could withhold the spell of lamaism for almost eighty years before that?

This is the most important question that is always asked about the traditional Lepcha religion in Sikkim and the surrounding hill areas. But there is a problem in trying to answer this question, that is, whether there can be secular, rationalist answers to a supernatural phenomenon. Or whether there is adequate understanding of this phenomenon so as to enable someone to term it as secular or supernatural.

It appears that under the Buddhist regime of the Chogyals in Sikkim a strong pro-lamaist, if not anti-Mun, discourse was prevailing there for a very long time. This discourse was translated in various forms. One of the common instances of this was that the legendary story about the test of supremacy between a Mun and a lama from Tibet identified as Guru Rimpoche or Padmasambhava, in which the latter had emerged victorious, had spread among the Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim and Darjeeling for a very long time. This story is recounted by them even today.

Another aspect of this discourse was the spread of the belief that the Muns or Bongthings of later years were not as powerful as their predecessors. They often told that the later Muns were of no use as their "power" had diminished.

Such a discourse was supported by various developments that took place after 1940s. For instance, the spread of education ran directly counter to the interest of the traditional priests. Some educated youths began to ask for explanations to many of the acts of such priests but there could be no satisfactory answer to them. As a result, they began to dissociate themselves more and more from this order of their religion.

The eradication of blood dysentry, veneral diseases and gradual improvement of the health of infants due to immunization and other medical cares, was a major bolt to the authority of the Muns and Bongthings. They worshipped a number of deities and devils so that infant mortality, which was high, could be avoided and they did not suffer from sterility, dysentry and other such diseases. But when the villagers stopped suffering from such diseases the need to go for a Mun or Bongthing was not there any more.

The uncertainty of harvest in particular has also been seen above as an important factor behind the popularity of the Mun-Bongthingism. But with the gradual settling of the Nepalese in Dzongu

after 1950s there were significant changes in the above relationship. With the terracing of the fields, introduction of wet-rice cultivation and with the spread of cardamom cultivation apart from the high yielding variety seeds and chemical fertilizers there were far-reaching consequences. The dependence on the supernaturals for an assured harvest was no longer there. Even if the harvest failed they could easily get the supply of food stuff from Mangan and still later within the village itself. If any deity or devil associated with agricultural crops need to be propitiated the Nepalese cultivators would take care of that with the help of their Jhankris and Bijuwas, which are the Nepalese counterparts of the Muns and Bongthings.

With the growing monetization of the village economy after 1950s the domestic animals proved to be an important source of cash instead of remaining simply as objects of sacrifice. Making sacrifices was also a part of lamaism, as we shall see in the next section. But this change in the value of the domesticated animals seems to have affected their traditional religious order more than the lamaist system.

One of the most important developments that boosted lamaism in Sikkim and relegated the traditional order to further oblivion was the coming of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. His coming to India has been acknowledged by all observers to be responsible for the rejuvenation of the lamaist order, not only in Sikkim but in the whole of India (Ling 1991). The lamas who were not very different from the Muns and Bongthings until then began to receive more respect and attention.

The introduction of the panchayati raj further contributed to the obliteration of the Mun-Bongthingism. The panchayat leaders, though officially Buddhists, were not against their traditional religion but they were certainly keen to bring about certain reforms in their socio-cultural system. They wanted to, for instance, stop the use of liquor and malt, which they thought was a major factor behind their backwardness. They tried to ban this but could not succeed. However, they succeeded in reducing the standard size of the bamboo container for malt as early as 1967-68. And by 1982 the sacrifice of animals on the death of a person was stopped. (The details of these shall be given in Chapter VI.)

These reforms directly affected their traditional religious order which was unthinkable without chi and animal sacrifices. Though chi is still prepared in most houses the villagers buy meat from outside for sacrificial purpose.

There was, according to many informants, also a major indigenous reason behind the disappearance of the Muns and Bongthings. Such people believed that they should not pass on their knowledge of the mantras to any one otherwise their power would be affected. In other words, the traditional Lepcha knowledge of communicating with the supernaturals was not a cultural or community resource but the privilege of a handful of individuals who guarded them as secretly as possible. As a result when the individuals possessing such special knowledge expired no one could inherit such knowledge.

As a result of all this, the Lepchas have almost completely lost a religion about which there are a lot of misgivings without adequate scientific understanding. Instead of acquiring knowledge about this religion the scienticism has proved to be anti-thetical to the Mun-Bongthingism.

Today, some elderly persons in the village have assumed the pseudo role of Muns and Bongthings but all indications are there for its total extinction even from Dzongu.

Lamaism

If any Lepcha today is asked about his or her religion the answer is either Buddhist or, rarely at least in Sikkim, Christian. Christian Lepchas are indeed very few in Sikkim and still fewer in Dzongu. There are only two Christian Lepchas in Lingthem, namely, S. B. Lepcha and Jewel Lepcha, but both of them are outsiders who have settled there because of their profession as teachers in Passingdang High School. Both of them have married local women and acquired some land through their wives. But they do not visit any church, nor is it possible to do so because of the absence of any church in the vicinity. That they are Christians was also not reported by themselves but discovered in the process of investigation. They do not bear any Christian names and except for the faith they are very much like the rest of the villagers.

Besides these two persons every other Lepcha in the village is a Buddhist. But there are strong reasons for entitling this section as "lamaism" and not as Buddhism. The first and foremost reason for not taking the latter title is that both Gorer and Morris have used the term "lamaism" and not "Buddhism". The former expression is probably more appropriate because of the following reasons. One, the particular form of Buddhism they worship, consciously or unconsciously, is Mahayana Buddhism of Nyingmapa Sect and not Hinayana or Vajrayana. Two, whatever connection they have with Buddhism is through the Mahayana Buddhist texts. And finally, the lamaism they have has been considered as "un-Buddhistic" by L. A. Waddell (1934).

The expression "lamaism" is considered as derogatory by many Buddhist scholars. It was not probably so when Gorer and Morris wrote. I have also written "lamaism" not because I was bound to do it but because of the ecological and ethnic adaptation that Buddhism has taken in Lingthem or Dzongu as a whole. This adaptation is such that it calls for a qualification, failing which, it would amount fo denigrating the religion called Buddhism. Thus "lamaism" is used here to represent

that special breed of Buddhism nurtured in Dzongu and not to insult the Buddhists. The chief characteristics of lamaism, according to Gorer, are thus:

> In lamaism ... priesthood and sanctity are acquired by learning and not by inspiration; the sacrifice of animals is a heinous sin; the future can be learned by calculations from the holy books and not by inspiration; the soul of the dead wanders for a short time in a sort of purgatory, before being reincarnated either in another form on this earth, or going to some heaven or hell, as different as imagination can make them from anything experienced on earth. Most important of all, lamaist ethics are founded on a belief in individual destiny and a sense of sin, lamaism contains a long, explicit and detailed list of sins which can be performed by human beings, and which are visited on the evil-doer, first by feelings of remorse and secondly by punishment either in this life or in future reincarnations (p. 182).

The Lepchas had a word for sin (<u>layo</u>), which was borrowed from the Tibetan. But the only act which

was sinful to them was the killing of animals. Excepting a few who had accepted lamaism, others did not use this term but used Nam-toak which meant actions not approved by the supernatural sanctions. Some such actions did not even affect the evil-doer (Gorer, pp. 182-83).

In certain respects lamaism did not differ from Mun-Bongthingism. For instance, in both religions the supernaturals were either benevolent, neutral or malevolent. In both religions again the same gods would be benevolent when pleased and malevolent when angry. Moreover, both the religions differed on the causes of dreams but both considered these to be meaningful and prophetic (Gorer, p. 183). Both Gorer and Morris discuss elaborately on what dreams mean to the Lepchas but I will not go into those details here. Even mythologically, the patron-saint of lamas, Tasheything, was considered as the husband of the Mun (Gorer, p. 188). But Gorer rightly doubts that this mythology itself was a part of the lamaist discourse mentioned in the beginning of this section. It was on this basis that the lamaist deity was considered stronger but the Mun does have her husband in Padem or Bongthing and

as far as the Lepcha metaphysics was concerned the male deities, whether as husbands, father or brother, were less powerful than their female counterparts (Gorer, p. 188).

Lamaism is believed to have been introduced in Sikkim around 1641 but the exact date of the Lepchas' conversion into it is not known. There are indications to show that many Lepchas were converted into lamaism by the beginning of the eighteenth century but Gorer writes that even around 1937 the Lepchas or non-Bhutias were not accepted for training as lamas. Since the lay persons had no place in lamaism the Lepchas' conversion into it was, according to Gorer, "a sort of voluntary tax" (pp. 188-89).

No matter when the Lepchas were converted they had "sterilised and ignored those aspects of the alien religion which were sharply opposed to their major existing attitudes" (Gorer, p. 193). Lamaism had in fact quite a few traits familiar with the Lepchas. For instance, the mythology, the idea of priesthood, the belief in dreams and horoscopes, the power of mystic contemplation, etc. were all there in the Lepcha religious system (p. 193). What was alien to them was the social

organization of the lamas but even this was internalised by the Lepchas by equating it with the family and thereby treating sexual relationships between senior and junior lamas as incestuous (p. 193).

The emergence of a number of lamas in their society meant some new titles like Umzet, Dorje Lapoon, and Chitembu, and a new appearance but that was all. Only death gave them a distinction for while the laymen were usually buried they were always cremated (Gorer, p. 194).

It has also been pointed out that the Lepchas accepted most aspects of lamaism but not its individualist ethics. The Lepcha ethic was always social or communal. They also could not accept the lamaist idea of reincarnation based on personal deeds: it was to be decided by the horoscopes and the time of birth and death. Similarly, the lamaist idea of sin and the merit of asceticism were not fully acceptable even to the accomplished Lepcha lamas (Gorer, p. 194). Thus Gorer suggests the following axiom:

> Fully integrated cultures will only accept in an imported complex those elements which are congruent to the existing major attitudes, or which are felt to fill a want; those elements which are violently opposed to existing attitudes will either be excluded or so modified as to bring them into congruence with existing attitudes (p. 195).

It was the horoscope cast on the third day after birth that determined whether or not a child would become a lama though in practice all the eldest sons of the lamas would automatically become lamas. Hence, the horoscope was mainly for the children of the lay. Such destined children would be presented with a yellow sash and taken to the monastery ceremonies for familiarizing them with the same. A teacher would be chosen between the age of ten and fifteen but one's own biological father could never be the teacher. The teacher once selected would be presented with a huge pig, a load of chi, a ceremonial scarf and a rupee. The child would live with the teacher for three years, serving him during the day and receiving instruction in the evening. Such a child was allowed to visit his home from time to time (Gorer, pp. 195-96).

The child was taught to read in the beginning though he was occasionally taught also to say prayers and play instruments. The first degree that he received was called Chapti-bu. After that there were six more grades which he could achieve by increasing his knowledge and validating feasts. Each higher grade was given after three years and with feasts accompanied by prayers and readings from the scriptures. The different grades of lamas are presented below in a hierarchical order:

1. Dorje Lapoon
2. Omzet
3. Chitem-bu
4. Chene
5. Kane
6. Tongpeum-bu
7. Chapti-bu

(Gorer, pp. 196-200)

The duties and privileges of each office mentioned above were clearly laid down by the tradition and so were the formalities to be completed for acquiring a higher office.

In 1937, there were 20 lamas attached to the monastery of Lingthem out of whom 11 lived permanently in the village, 2 were semi-permanent

and the remaining 7 lived in the neighbouring villages. There also were 4 boys studying to become lamas (Gorer, p. 199).

The nuns (inebu) also had a hierarchy corresponding to the hierarchy of lamas. The titles were similar but they could not "conduct ceremonies or perform exorcisms". There was no compulsion nor the need for appropriate horoscope for a woman to become a nun. Out of 9 nuns in Lingthem in 1937, 6 were wives or daughters of lamas, which showed that taking to nunnery depended on the father or the husband. A woman could choose to be a nun any time between marriage and old age and choose as a teacher either a lama or an accomplished nun. Even their literacy was not insisted upon (Gorer, pp. 199-200).

The nuns were to spend three days every month at the monastery and observe strict prohibitions such as fasting in the evening during the monastery visit, avoiding meat and chi and copulation with their husbands. Most of the nuns were incidentally old women (Gorer, p. 200).

The lamas had primarily three duties and devotions, namely, personal devotions, monthly

and calendrical services, and minstering to the sick. The details of these duties and devotions are given by Gorer on pages 201 to 204. I have not felt it necessary to reproduce the details here because such devotions and duties are described as they are expected of the lamas and not as they are observed of them.

The employment of lamas by the common Lepchas depended on the "personal inclination and beliefs of the layman in question" (Gorer, p. 211). Most of the lamaist ceremonies were less expensive than the ceremonies by nun. But if any Lepcha erected a lamaist altar in his house with lamaist scriptures in it, the scriptures needed to be taken out at least four times a year and read by the lamas. Thus, the expenses on hiring, feeding and paying fees to the lamas at least four times in a year would come to quite a lot (Gorer, p. 211).

This is an extremely condensed version of lamaism as it was practised in 1937. Gorer himself has confined himself to what he calls "a generalised account of the impact of lamaism on the Lepchas of Zongu" (p. 181) and has not given the details, which he hoped to publish with Morris in a separate

volume. It is clear, however, that lamaism has received a much wider coverage in their books than the other two forms of Lepcha religion.

With regard to lamaism in particular and religion in general I have reconstructed the picture of 1937 almost entirely from Gorer's book. This was done not only because I found Gorer more accurate than Morris but also because of his more academic narrative style. It was also thought redundant to refer to Morris frequently because the contents, and even the sequence of presentation, are largely same as Gorer's. The language is different and the proper nouns are often spelt differently but the cases described are same and the aspects explored are often very much identical. On can also feel a greater air of confidence in the writings of Gorer but Morris' is certainly more smooth to read.

In fact, it would be interesting to study how the two British scholars have spelt the Lepcha words differently in view of the fact that their informants were same and the notings were made together. But this is outside the scope of the present study.

After this brief digression, let me now discuss the changes that have come about in the ways the Lepchas practise lamaism in Lingthem today. The change that has been taking shape in the last fifty years or so is indeed interesting and even paradoxical in certain senses. With ancestor worship and Mun-Bongthingism losing their functionality in the changed Lepcha society, one would certainly expect that lamaism is having its sway over the Lepchas. But it will be seen in the course of discussion here that despite the apparent popularity of this religion the vertical spread has not been as expected.

Let me now begin the discussion on continuity and change about lamaism. Elementary statistical figures on the lamas show certain interesting features. For instance, in 1937, there were 6 nuns but in 1987, there was none. The percentage of lamas to the total population of the village was 6.3 if taken only the permanent lamas and 7.4 if the semi-permanent lamas were also included. But in 1987, the percentage of lamas to the total population of the village had gone down to 4.4. The total number of hereditary lamas in 1987 was

9 out of 32 in total. The age distribution of these 32 lamas may be presented in the following table.

Table 3: Age distribution of the lamas of Lingthem, 1987

Age-group	No. of lamas
5 - 15	15
15 - 25	1
25 - 35	1
35 - 45	4
45 +	11
Total	32

Source: Fieldwork

The above table shows that a greater number of lamas are either below 15 or above 45 years. No conclusive explanation to this picture can perhaps be provided. It appears however that the vocation of a lama was not followed for the last couple of decades and only very recently there is a revival of interest in lamaism. The lack of interest for a couple of decades, as indicated by the above table seems to have a lot

to do with the vitiated image of the head lamas in the village during 60s and 70s. The reform measures initiated by some Lepcha youths of the village described in the course of this discussion below will provide a plausible answer to why only few lamas were recruited for a couple of decades.

Contrary to the picture provided by the statistical figures above it is observed that Buddhism has spread considerably in the village. I could notice an altar or choesum (which is a Tibetan word) in almost every house. A small idol of Gautam Buddha with a ceremonial scarf called khadah (which is also a Tibetan import) on it is seen in almost every house. The well-off Lepchas are seen to have kept such idols in a glass case with a row of silver or brass cups filled with water in front of it. One of the villagers, namely, Kinga Lepcha, had the photograph of the XIVth Dalai Lama also placed on the altar. This was however possibly because his wife was a Bhutia though the Dalai Lama is considered by most Buddhists to be a living god.

It is also interesting to recall that the houses of Chuket and Nyermo had Tashi-Delek written

in Tibetan script on the main door. Tashi-Delek is a typical Tibetan term for salutation which is not commonly used by the Lepchas. The Lepchas traditionally have no custom of salutation but the Lepcha word for this is khamrimo, which could have been a later development. Similar examples are known to have existed among other tribal societies of the Nepal Himalayas.

The various rules and regulations governing the monkhood, their duties, and their ritual relationships with the lay Lepchas have shown considerable stability. As a matter of fact, the dependence on the lamas has considerably increased due to the disappearance of the Muns and Bongthings. In short, the functional value of lamaism has risen considerably in the last fifty years or so. There is as yet no sign of resistence or resentment against the spread of lamaism.

But the lay Lepchas particularly those who are educated and who are holding responsible positions in their society such as Y. T. Lepcha, Athup Lepcha, Nyezi Lepcha and C. D. Lepcha have rebelled against the lamas though not against lamaism as such. They are however unhappy about

the teaching of lamaism in the Tibetan language and script. This indicates a growing consciousness about their separate identity from the Buddhist Bhutias.

These educated youths started mobilizing the villagers for various reforms related to the monastery and the monks heading it from as early as 1968. But they could achieve success only after about ten years of struggle with the powerful lamas of the village. Their main argument was directed against unwanted expenses related to the monastery.

In any feast at the monastery, every household of the village had to contribute a fixed amount of grain or chi and the entire responsibility of organizing the feast used to be vested on one family. The contribution of each family, no matter how poor, was 3 to 4 basketful of chi as minimum. As a result, the monastery had assumed the image of a monster that sapped the life out of the common Lepchas.

This practice was finally stopped. Now the villagers can contribute according to their wish and ability. The responsibility of organizing the

feast is now given to any two houses in a cyclical order. Further, the feasts earlier used to continue for three to four days or until the stock was exhausted but nowadays it hardly continues for more than 24 hours.

It was also reported that earlier oxen used to be sacrificed within the premises of the monastery in every feast. The sacrificing act could not be stopped immediately but the leaders were successful in shifting the site of sacrifice a little farther from the monastery. They could ban the sacrifice of animals for religious purposes only in 1976-77.

Y. T. Lepcha, one of the leaders there, seems to have taken the most enthusiastic step towards stopping the sacrifice of animals on the premises of the monastery. People still recount the dramatic act of this leader in this regard. He had tied his father's (Chanang's) hands with a rope and dragged him upto the monastery, which was symbolic of an animal, and challenged the Khanang Lama to accept his father as a sacrifice. This did the trick but the trick would not have worked had it not been Chanang acting as the animal to be sacrificed. He was one of the most enlightened

and widely travelled Lepchas as evident from his case history described in Chapter III.

The leaders also eventually succeeded in reducing the size of patyoot or the bamboo container for malt by half. This was strongly resented by the lamas but there were many villagers who supported it. As a compromise, the patyoot of the head lama was left to its original size. The samples of reduced bamboo container for the lay were distributed to all the villagers and a strict sanction was levied on any household not complying with it.

The same leaders also raised the question of the alleged misuse of the Gumba (monastery) fund which used to be about Rs.500 annually. The head lama was in charge of the collection but the accounts of the same were never made public. As a result of their movement a bank account was opened and the credit-debit accounts read out in the annual meetings. They were also not happy about the sanction of Rs.11 lakhs for the rejuvenation of the village monastery. But Nachyo, the present head lama, seems to have convinced the leaders about it because in my last visit in 1990

the construction had already begun. I am not clear about the reason behind their reservation against the sanctioning of the money by the government. The only reason I can think of is possibly the fact that these leaders being strong supporters of the Congress(I) and opponents of the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (the ruling party in the State) found it as a slap on their face. Otherwise, they should have no reason why they should grumble about it.

The reforms narrated above apparently do not show any resentment against lamaism. The expressed views of the leaders initiating those reforms are in fact such that they wanted a purer form of lamaism, free from the sin of killing animals and corruption. In other words, they wanted to clean up the dirt gathered around the lamaist institution.

But a closer reading of their actions indicates a sub-conscious rebellion against lamaism itself. It has been pointed out above that lamaism as a system of belief did not matter to the Lepchas. It was the lamas with whom they were concerned and in their view the lamas were not much different from their traditional Muns or Bongthings. This being so, differentiating between the lamas and the

lamaism would perhaps be more conceptual than real. In other words, to conclude that they fought against the lamas and not their institution would perhaps be not too realistic.

Such a development may have taken place as a result of the changes outside the village. The value of education was being increasingly appreciated all over Sikkim and lamaism as a vocation had not proved lucrative even to the highest order lamas. Nor being a lama gave a person any special prestige. Being a lama was only one of the identities of a person and this identity was seldom dominant except in the cases of Omzet and Dorje Lapoon.

It was reported during my fieldwork that lot of boys joined the vocation of a lama but they eventually gave up. The cases of drop-out novices were reportedly many because no boy took up this vocation out of his own choice. The sending of the eldest son for monkhood is no longer compulsory even for a lama's family and a boy would be normally sent for training as a lama only when his parents had promised to do so before he was born or when he had fallen ill at his infancy.

Conclusion

The challenge by the forces of Hinduism and Christianity has not been effective at all in Dzongu because of its reserved status. Lot of Hindus do enter into this reserved area every year but their low status in the village makes them unable to influence their landlords. It is also true that the Lepchas of Dzongu, whether male or female, are found drinking chi most of the free time when they could be preached and converted to some other religion.

Thus lamaism in a way has found a safe niche in the reserved area of Dzongu. There are strong chances of this religion further prospering if the basic scriptures are translated into the Lepcha language. Because Buddhism is by all means much more respectable-sounding than their Mun-Bongthingism.