

Munism – A Traditional Face of Lepcha Religion **A Study on Preservation of Cultural Heritage**

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Abstract

Religion is a social phenomenon, set in cultural matrix of all the societies, by believing in supernatural powers. The use of the performance of rituals like, prayer and sacrifice is a means of controlling the supernatural, while the divination helps as a means of discovering occult knowledge, and the use of magic as a means of influencing the outcome of various events through a supernatural agency. The Lepcha being the inhabitants of rugged, arduous mountain terrain and extreme climatic condition is experiencing with diverse environmental set-up. In course of interaction with hazardous environment since long past, a sense of divinity sprouts up among themselves over the years. The Lepcha profess Munism under the doctrine of monotheistic belief centres around 'animism' as a traditional face of religion. Munism here depicts a curious blending of the Tibetan Bon religious attributes with 'animism', deeply associated with the concept of Supernatural.

In Munism the divine power is working in a unique way to bring out the beautiful and the good. Munism is basically based on belief of God, demons and spirits. In their religious cognition, all these divinities have specific functions to gain the potential strength through performance of rituals. It helps them to overcome difficulties, miseries and anxieties which are inhospitable to their daily life. To them, the religious manifestation depends on faith in Supernatural power, whose displeasure cause harm to their society. An attempt is made in the foregoing pages to highlight the details of Munism and its importance; how it becomes gradually faded is also the prime concern of this, which is not at all desirable to them. Further they always wish to be remaining in vogue in its pristine form.

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Introduction:

Religion is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings. Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the universe. In other words, they provide a sense of order in what might otherwise be seen as a chaotic existence. Religion fulfills psychological and social needs; help to relieve peoples' fears and anxieties about the unknown. Religion also helps ease the stress during personal life crises like, birth, marriage, serious illness and death. By reinforcing group norms, religion help bring about social homogeneity, can provide a basis for common purpose and values that can help maintain social solidarity. The hallmark of religion is a belief in supernatural beings and forces, which can be of various forms – animatism, animism, ancestral spirits, gods and goddesses and minor supernatural beings. Religious belief helps to bind people together and reinforces group identity. It is not mere belief but behaviour; nor mere conviction but conduct; not mere faith but functioning. In religion, the whole of human being's personality is involved.

William James conceptualized 'religion' as 'the feeling, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (James, 1902: 32). In other word religion is the consciousness of our practical relation to an invisible spiritual order. Religion is viewed as 'the hunger of the soul for the impossible, the unattainable, and the inconceivable' (Stace, 1952: 3). In his work Durkheim opined that 'religion' is a system of ideas by means of which individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members and the obscure, but intimate relations they have with it' (Durkheim, 1954: 479) and that's why the religious faith has its origin in society, then upon psychology. Being a member of the human society, men follow religion, when they are not capable to answer against those external supernatural forces, which control their life. Clifford Greetz critically opined that 'religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive and long-lasting moods and motivation in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence...' (Greetz, 1983: 33). One aspect from the above

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discussions becomes pertinent that the source of religion is belief to supernatural. A belief in one god is referred to as *monotheism* and in contrast to that belief in more than one god is known as *polytheism*. When there are many gods in a religion, they are typically ranked relative to each other in terms of their powers and their interests. There is hardly any human society which does not follow the religious conviction. In India, religious practices influence the social and political life of the people. Religion gives the keynote to most of the great changes that have occurred in the history of the races inhabiting this country from the earliest ages to the present day.

In the philosophy of religion God is traditionally described as a being that possesses at least three necessary properties: *omniscience* (all knowing), *omnipotence* (all powerful) and *omnipresence* (present everywhere). God knows everything, has the power to do anything and is present where He wishes. According to the theological concept the religion in general have categories – monotheism (believe in one God), polytheism (believe in more than one gods or goddesses) and pantheism (believe as God is itself the natural universe). The Lepcha religion falls under the third category. To them, ‘God, locally termed as *Rum* is the world and the world is God’. By uttering this they want to mean the vastness of the Universe, where God resides. On the other hand, the existence of malevolent spirits, demon, generically termed as *moong*, prevalent in the nature; whose displeasure may cause misery, unhappiness, fatal injuries, illness and sometimes even death. Many of the earlier scholars had mentioned that the Lepchas did not have any religion rather they believed in *atheism*. In reality, for the God fearing Lepchas, prayers, supplication and worship through the *Mun* and *Boongthing* are no superstition. According to their belief, prayers and chanting spring out from the core of their hearts. They also believed that prayer is an unfailing means to achieve the purity of heart. The *Boongthing* and *Mun* play the role of mediator between God and the people. The existence of God, to them, is *Rum* and to Him they offer their prayers and thanksgivings. The first fruit of the season are always offered to God.

According to their religion, it is a system of beliefs and faiths usually involving the worship of supernatural forces and beings by the performances of rites and rituals.

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Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the Universe. Religion also provides understanding and meaning for inexplicable events such as a loved one being killed in an earthquake or some other unpredictable forces of nature. The purity of their belief towards nature is diverted with Tibetan Lamaism, which was introduced into Sikkim three centuries ago and is regarded now as the official religion. It is difficult to determine the extent Buddhist influence has had on Lepcha psychology, but it is clear that the pre-Buddhist religion is not entirely dead.

Area and People:

Living on the western flank of the Eastern Himalaya, Sikkim, one of the smallest states in India is flavoured with floral bounty and land-locked terrain. It is located between 27°05' - 28°09' N latitude and 87°57' - 88°56' E longitude, having an area of around 7096 sq.kms., and is known as the paradise of nature lover. The state is bounded by Nepal in the West, Bhutan in the east, Tibet in the north and north-east and West Bengal in the south. The Chola range separated the state from Tibet and Bhutan, while Singalila range separated it from Nepal (Gazetteer, 1931). Historical information revealed that before 1641 the area was ruled by the Lepcha Kings and between 1641 and prior to 1975 Sikkim was ruled by the Bhutia Kingdom. In 1975 the Sikkim became an independent sovereign state (Sharma, 1983; p.18). A number of mountain passes, like, Nather La (4392 m.), Gelep La (4388 m.), Donkia La (5520 m.), Kongra La (4809 m.) along the ranges have sustained a two way traffic of traders, pilgrims and adventurers from Tibet and central Asia. About 36.3 per cent (2656 sq. kms.) of the total area of the state is under forest coverage.

The topography of Sikkim is quite varied. The elevation ranges from 1250 meter to 8558 meter, with almost no flat piece of land anywhere. The snow-clad mountains, the lower hills covered with dense evergreen forests, many rivers and rivulets cascading down from the rocky heights and rippling through the green expanse of the valleys constitute a magnificent and eye inspiring panorama. Mt. Khangchendzonga (8598 meter), the world's third highest mountain is treated as 'sacred mountain' to the Sikkimese as their

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guardian deity and considered as the holiest of the holy. The present study had been undertaken in the hamlets of west and north districts of Sikkim, as Dzongu is one and only isolated dominating habitation of the Lepchas situated in the north district.

Once the ruling race, the Lepchas are the earliest settlers of Sikkim profoundly proclaimed as '*Rong*' (the son of the snowy peak) '*motanchi*' (term for intra-community identity) nowadays concentrated on the lap of Kangchendzonga ('mayel lyang' – the land of hidden delightful paradise).

The derogatory word 'Lepcha' is derived from the Nepalese term *Lepchey*, which means scurrilous speakers. Originally, the term *Lepchey* was anglicized by the British people and coined the present term 'Lepcha', who proclaimed themselves as *Rong*, means 'snowy peak'. History of the state revealed that the Lepchas are the oldest inhabitant of Sikkim. They had kings and kingdom. They had their own script (*rongring*). It was believed that at one time the Lepcha dominantly ruled out the whole of north-eastern states including Sikkim. During the reign of Gaeboo Achok, the area of his kingdom extended in the highest unit. But the reign of whole Lepcha kingdom was ruined within a very short period and the condition of the Lepcha was gradually fallen poor.

The Lepchas were living mostly through hunting and gathering from the forests and since later phase of last century they took initiative in terrace farming and subsequently adopted the system of cash crop plantation, like cardamom and ginger. The Lepcha raise maize, paddy, buckwheat, barley and millet in their terrace agricultural field. The maize is the most important staple food and millet is commonly used for making local beer '*Chi*'. Fish is taken occasionally but meat – both fresh and dried are taken regularly. They do not have any inhibition in consuming beef, pork, rabbit, porcupine, monkey, deer etc.

The Lepchas are kin based community and sub-divided into a number of patrilineal clans, which are locally known as *ptso*. Each *ptso* is considered to have a common supernatural or legendary ancestor. The chief function of *ptso* is the regulation of marriage alliance and the prevention of incest. The Lepchas do not have any centralized authority. In older

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times, during the reign of kingdom, there were two division or social classes existed; i.e., (i) *Rongboo* (patricians), (ii) *Mangboo* (plebeians). According to them, the *Rangboo* Lepcha belonged to the mobility classes (Roy Burman, 2003; p.35), who were appointed by the king as priests; while the *Mangboo* class of Lepcha consists of farmers, potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers etc. At the time of marriage alliance, if it is arranged marriage, are Lepcha has to enquire about the caste or clan of the bride and the groom, because they strictly follow the rule of *ptso* (clan). It is observed that the settlement pattern of the Lepchas is also usually clan centered. That is why, the clan – *Sandyanmoo*, *Lutsomoo* and *Hee-moo* is prevalent in Lethang, Ramgyathang and Khecheopalri bustee. It is in their belief that these clans are conferred from the 108 main snowy peaks of Sikkim Himalayas. In his writings, K.P. Tamsang (1983; P.40) mentioned that a kind of social order was embodied where both the father and the mother are the head of the family at a time and therefore, the male children or sons belongs to the father's clan and the female children or daughters belong to the mother's clan. The girls or daughters inherit her mother's clan from generation to generation till eternity; and as such a daughter or daughters have no right whatsoever over her father's any moveable or immovable properties.

In Lepcha society, the extended family is an operative group, which renders possible identification with the community. It is their opinion that the extended family imparts positive training to the child and teaches a strong control over behavior. While describing the society, the Lepcha men often stated that they have no class, creed and ranking among themselves. No one is big, no one is small, and there is no gradation as such.

It was evident that among the Lepchas of Dzongu, a system of self-rule is still functioning in the form of an informal council of the elders, which they termed as '*Lyang-ganbu*'. In spite of the existence of the Panchayat, it is very important to settle-up various disputes regarding marriage alliance, fixing up of bride-price, cultivation of crops, land holding disputes, crimes, disputes within the family members etc. are settled by this self-rule system and difficulties of the member within the community.

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According to their belief, any kind of quarrel is the result of the evil action of three spirits or devils, i.e. – *Soo-moong* (enmity of speech), *Ge-moong* (enmity of thought), and *Jhor-moong* (enmity of action).

The Lepcha certainly had evolved a strong cultural base. Their folklores, mores, myths and legends, dance, songs have yet cherished and transmitted to the younger generation. The Lepcha have their own ancient religion, named as *Boongthing-ism* and *Mun-ism*. They believe in the existence of God called 'Rum' and to Him they offer their prayers and thanks giving. They also have strong belief in evil spirits, who cause illness and misfortune.

Many of the earlier scholars had mentioned that the Lepchas did not have any religion rather they believed in atheism. But in reality, for the God fearing Lepchas; prayers, supplication and worship through the medium of *Boongthing* and *Mun* are no superstition. They believe prayers and chanting spring out from the core of their hearts. They also believe that prayer is an unfailing means to achieve the purity of heart. The *Boongthing* and the *Mun* plays the role of mediator between God and the people.

Other than the ancient religion; during recent time, the majority of the Lepchas are converted into Buddhism and few of them are converted into Christianity. It was informed that the people have accepted the ritual, the validating mythology, and the organization of Lamaism. Like other 'high religious' Lamaism is individualistic; it holds that a person's chief concern should be with his own spiritual welfare.

Thus, the key-concept of Lamaism, was and is an alien attitude to disapproved of acts is social, and not individuals, it is the society and not the evil-doer, which bears the burnt of wicked acts (Gorer, 2005; p.135).

The Lepcha language as dubbed by many scholars as a 'mystery' language, because it is not related to any other language, prevalent in this region. Some have a belief that the language belongs to the Tibeto – Burman family, while others have found its root in the

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Austro-Asiatic family. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee had mentioned that the Lepcha language belongs to the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family (Thakur, 1988).

Being a man of the forests and having a perfect harmony with nature, the Lepchas have developed an intuitive relationship with surrounding environment. They have extremely rich knowledge for variety of plants, beasts, insects and flowers and some of them who, even today, live in the mountainous forest patches have the capacity to identify the species which are beneficial for them.

Lepcha Religion: A belief in supernatural

The discussion of the Lepchas' religion is rendered extremely complicated by the fact that they practice simultaneously and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort. The older Lepcha religion is contradictory and nameless, but on the analogy of Lamaism, it is better termed as '*Mun*' religion (after the title of the priests); the worship of the people of *Mayel*, which was possibly originally separate, forms nowadays a part of the *Mun* religion; and this religion is in all its major beliefs opposed to Lamaism.

The '*Mun*' religion principally supports the manifestation of a supernatural spirit which is attached to a family line, so that there can never be more than one simultaneously in each group (there may be two in one biological family, one spirit descending from the father's group and one from the mother's). The chief function of the *Mun* is to ward off the misfortunes and illness caused by devils, which is done, partly by sacrifices, especially animal sacrifices, and partly by direct communication with the supernatural. On certain occasions the *Mun* become possessed by their guardian spirit and prophesy; at death ceremonies they summon the soul of the dead man to speak his last wishes through their mouth, and then conduct it into the *rum lyang* – the place of the Gods, where the God is reborn as an infant, and grows up to an eternal life similar to the life here on earth.

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On the contrary of it, in Lamaism priesthood and sanctity are acquired by learning, not by inspiration. Theory of religion reveals that Lamaism or *Mahayana Buddhism* is a subject of the greatest complexity. Its organization is as elaborate as that of the medieval Catholic Church, its hagiology, demonology and ritual are infinitely more complicated, and it is split into nearly as many sub-sects as contemporary Christianity. Among the Lepchas of Dzongu the practice of Lamaism officiate in a more varied way with high intensity of orthodoxy simultaneously performed with the *munism* side by side. The bulk of the material involved with Lamaism would be out of all proportion to its place in the social and religious life of the Lepchas. The rituals and the fabrication of ritual objects are extremely elaborate with the affiliation of mythology and folklore in both religions. In Lamaism 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. The 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. Lepchas have a word for sin, because they have borrowed the Tibetan word, but they have no idea of sin; and the only act to which the word is commonly applied is to the killing of animals; few of them who have accepted Lamaism it is also applied to envy or slander, expressed in thought, word or deed. Sin (*la-yo*) has the connection with individual behaviour; the supernatural sanctions which punish disapproved of actions are expressed as *nam-doak*, a year of disaster which affects the whole community. Even for acts less violently disapproved of, which incur supernatural dangers, it is not the wrong-doer alone who is involved, but the whole of his family group; punishment is seen if members of a person's family die or suffer, even though the evil-doer survives him. Indeed according to Lepcha ethics it could be said that anti-social acts are graded according to the number of people they may affect; only for acts of minor importance is there personal and individual punishment which falls on the evil-doer.

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Both the religious supernatural is divided into three categories, e.g. mostly benevolent, neutral and mostly malevolent. The supernatural which are mostly benevolent are called gods (*Rum*), those mostly malevolent devils (*moong*). Both the agent agrees that if the gods are displeased they take on a terrifying and threatening aspect and that the best way to deal with devils is to flatter them temporarily by treating them as gods; and whether gods or devils are prayed to the ceremony always ends by begging them vehemently to go away. The Lepcha believed that the supernatural beings are potentially dangerous. The ambivalent supernaturals – *thyak-dum* or *Hlamen Djeme* (a lama supernatural equated with the *Mun* spirit), are called either *moong* or *rum* according to the personal dealings. They also believe that if the supernatural being is displeased by any action, He may then show his activities through the dream.

Both the Lamas and Mun agreed the meaningful and prophetic characters of the dreams, which are significant to those who have the knowledge to interpret them. The Lepchas can understand few incidents by seeing the certain objects which have some symbolical significance. The causation and interpretation of dreams is however different in the two religions. As Mun depicted that the dreams are sent by the supernatural, while the Lamas outlook about the dreams are the experiences of the soul released from the body by sleep; unbound by space or time the soul has experiences with the souls of other people, supernatural and objects, and, on its return, informs the body it inhabits. When the lamas give importance to the soul, the Mun said it as a vague concept, practically only having an independent existence after the death of the body.

As an illustration the people informed that when a person is feeling unwell with a stomach upset followed by a headache, the dreamer or the Mun is hired to show a dream. The lama performs almost the same performance in the monastery by beating up the musical instrument. The doors of the monastery opened outwards instead of inwards and put some dried buckwheat beside the patient. In this way the dreamer or Mun also saw an illusionary image of the patient and perform the job of curing the patient. The demonology and, to a lesser extent, the hagiology of Lamaism and the Mun religion are unified by a system of cross-identification in the two mythologies. Devils, and to a lesser

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extent god, in one mythology are equated with different supernatural with similar attributes in the other. In the Lepcha society the names of the supernatural are impermanent and without significance: the most popular lamaist god, Sakya Muni, Guru Rimpuche (beloved teacher) or Tashey-*thing* has been equated with Tak-bo-*thing* (the first man and the first hero), the grandson of *Itpomu* (believed as the creative mother).

Theoretically, though there is no theological differences between the two religions but a latent rivalry always exist among the priests of two religious groups. The lamas accuse the Mun for using their supernatural powers and Mun accuse the lamas for being more sensual than the average man, in both the cases the charges have to be paid by both the priests. These charges are never made openly or by one priest to another; in public they are quite amicable, though they usually affect to ignore the other's presence and performance.

The justification for this amity between the two religions is that the patron spirits are husband and wife: the lamaist Tashey-*thing* is the husband, and the Mun (always a female) is the wife. Therefore, the people analyzed that the lamas are stronger and have especially have more influence with the gods; the Mun on the other hand are perhaps more competent to deal with the devils. In Mun mythology it is revealed that the female supernatural are almost always more important, so Mun is more powerful.

The Mun Religion

It is a kind of shamanic religion based on traditional belief systems whose emerging manifestation is being observed. It is a living tradition consists of a collection of simple techniques for assessing energy, power, vision, healing and creativity. Theory revealed that the shamanic journey helps the people forge powerful relationships with the world around us, rediscover our links with ancestral energies and helping spirits. Owing the pre-religious, pre-political and pre-philosophical in nature, shamanism is a way of life, or living in harmony, respect and oneness with all life forms.

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Shamanism has three views – (a) ‘psychological view’- argues as phase of trance (or ecstasy); (b) ‘religious view’- regards the trance as originating from a phenomenon of possession by the sacred contact with the spirit; (c) ‘trance-possession view’- regards the possession of spiritual power to communicate with supernatural beings, including spirits. It is one of the earliest and farthest-reaching magical and religious traditions, vestiges of which still underlie the major religious faiths of the modern world (Basilov, V.N., 1999: 17-39). The function of the shaman is to show his or her people the unseen powers behind the mere appearances of nature, as experienced through intuition, in trance states or during ecstatic mystical visions. The manifestation of trends of shamanic elements could be observed through the performances of Mun in Lepcha society.

The early form of polytheistic practice, shamanism in the form of *munism* emerged in the period when the Lepcha’s economy was supporting by means of hunting and gathering. In the idealistic character of the Lepcha shamanic world view the most important are the beliefs towards – (i) all the surrounding world is animated, inhabited by the spirits who can influence man’s life; (ii) there are general and reciprocal interconnections in nature (human beings included); (iii) human beings are not superior but equal to other forms of life; (iv) human society is closely connected with the cosmos; (v) it is possible for a human being to acquire some qualities of a spirit and visit the other worlds; (vi) the aim of religious activity is to defend and make prosperous a small groups of kinsmen.

On the contrary to Lamaism the Mun religion has a good impact on the Lepcha theology; the Mun and their parallel priests are simply individuals who, through their possession by a spirit, have certain gifts and duties. Other than Mun three other types of priesthood by possession are recognized, like – (i) the *Padem*, (ii) the *Yaba* and (iii) the *Pau*. The Mun spirit is a female spirit, while the other three are male spirit. They are attached to family lines and are roughly hereditary; they often descend from grandfather to grandson or from grandmother to granddaughter. But there is no regularity about this and a man may inherit a possessing spirit from a woman, and *vice versa*.

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The manifestation of the spirit (live immortal beyond Khangchendzonga) may choose anybody for its effect, with one exception; none of the spirits will enter a lama or his own children, though they may enter his family. Both men and women can be Mun, but only men can be *Padem* (or *Bum-thing* as they are called outside Dzongu); these are also the Lepcha spirits and are less powerful, capable of exorcising far fewer devils; they cannot prophesy nor perform the death ceremony. A Mun have to gather three year course of instruction. The other two categories – the *Yaba* and the *Pau* are different from Mun and *Padem* as they neither can do not make sacrifices nor perform exorcism, but can merely get possessed by supernatural. Both wear special clothes for their performances: the *Yaba* wear bandoliers of tinkling bells and have their clothes fringed with bells; they hold a metal plate and beat it as they dance. *Pau* wears elaborate wool head-dresses and dance with a skull-drum in one hand and a bell in the other. Both *Yaba* and *Pau* are and has been very rare because the possessing spirits are not Lepcha but have been introduced through inter-marriage with foreign women, the *Yaba* spirit comes from Limbu women and the *Pau* from Sikkimese-Tibetans.

In the Lepcha tradition the Mun is hierarchically classified as per their status –

(a) **Pilden Mun** – considered to be the most superior as they can communicate with the soul of the dead, (b) **Mun-mook-mun** – this type of muns are thought to be evil doers who cause hardship to the people, (c) **Mun-jyum-mun** – they are quite like as Pilden mun but they cannot communicate with the souls of the departed. They can cure the sick with the help of herbal medicine, (d) **Tangli mun** – considered to be the specialist physician who has very good knowledge about herbal medicine and considered to be the custodian of Lepcha cultural tradition by reciting folklore, legends, myths etc. Amongst them it is believed that *Tang-li Mun* is a good group owing the benevolent spirit and a bad group called *Mun-mook Mun* owes the malevolent spirit, like the white and black magicians. Mun-mook Mun are like thieves: they think and do evil and are possessed by devils which they employ for their own selfish ends; they alone can send devils (the term used for sorcery). They are believed to have an influence like the evil eye. The Lepcha

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have a belief that the *Tang-li Mun* sacrifice with benevolence towards them and their houses, which they are summoned. They depend on the type of Mun as his or her teacher and not on the possessing spirit. One Mun, *Gnadok*, of Gyathang *bustee* described his spiritual life. According to him the whole invocation is extremely rapid but falls into the sing-song rhythm, often saying the same thing twice or four times in different words. Mun generally uses onomatopoeic words, many of his own invention and from his prodigious memory; once started goes continuously. If it breaks down in the mid-way he cannot recall the sequence for elaboration. *Gnadok Mun* has a great demand in the village; officiating nearly all the ceremonies except the household rituals. When sacrificing him falls into what is almost a very light trance; his eyes become glazed and unfocussed as he intones his rhythmic chants. *Gnadok Mun* has nervousness and suffers from giddiness, experienced with frequent unpleasant dreams of falling down or flying down. According to the Lepchas Mun usually have such a type of nervousness, giddiness and instability of mind.

At the time of the onset of the illness which showed the possession of Padem. There is no need of a teacher for the work of Padem; the spirit will instruct before each ceremony as to what is needed in the way of sacrifices by means of dreams in which the spirit will be represented by the Kings of Sikkim. When anybody becomes ill the Mun and lamas exorcised unavailingly; but finally a lama recognized that the ill person was troubled by the Mun god. The lamas then divined, and to perform the ceremony of *Rum keuk* (recognizing the god) and decided upon an old female Mun who lived some way away. She came and a sacrifice was prepared consisting of a tray covered with offerings of dried fish, dried bird, ginger, pop corn, rice and other crops and various sorts of *chi* (country liquor); this she offered to the gods saying in *tang-bor* (circumlocutions) that she was making these offerings for the invalid and would the gods please accept both them and him. An ox was then killed and she took away the intestines, the head and two legs; she was also given some rupees but she gave them back and only took them for herself. When the Mun had made her sacrifice she fed the *chi* to the ill person by hand; put a silver rupee in the hand of ill person and a ceremonial scarf is rounded on his neck

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and said that from that day the *rum* will be with the ill-man, who must learn all the work of the Mun.

When a person intend to being a Mun, he or she has to learn minimum three years complete rigorous training of meditation and become a *loong*. During that period the trainee is capable to know the history of every evil doer, the process of exorcism and as well as the story of creation and the birth of *Tak-bo-thing* and many things more. During training period the trainee is abstain from eating pork or goat or chicken or hen's egg. At the end of training, when one trainee got his or her degree of *loong*, Mun has boiled all the forbidden foods and put in a basket and then after she has given *chi* and butter to drink and a ceremonial scarf. From that day the trainee acquire the power over all the devils. When a trainee was given a *loong* degree a second ox is being sacrificed. In such a traditional religion there is no quarrel between the Padem rum and Mun rum; as the Lepcha believed that they are husband and wife respectively and are pleased to inhabit the same body. They do so however comparatively rarely as no woman can be Padem though she may be Mun and a man can be Padem without being Mun and *vice versa*. The spirits are not permanently present in their dwelling; they come down from their home, which is reached from a passage beyond Khangchendzonga, when they are summoned. The Mun only takes full possession twice a year, once in the hot season and other in the wet season. A Mun must on no account touch a human corpse; should he do so the god will depart and he will be very ill for two months and lamas have to perform ceremonies to cure him. This is the only occasion on which the spirit will leave a Mun. After his death, the soul of the Mun has to be conducted to the *rum-lyang* (place of the gods) in the normal course. A Mun admitted that at the time of her trance she ordered to sacrifice many animals; this sin is not borne by them but to appease the devils that make the sacrifice necessary.

It is noteworthy to mention that except for the bi-annual prophecies the Mun do not possess supernatural powers as the Lepchas understand them, and they differ in degree rather than in kind from the laymen; they can always see devils, whereas only some

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laymen can see them and that only on some occasions; they can always communicate with supernatural.

The Mun religion has a very copious validating mythology and theology. The origin of everything in the world, visible and invisible, animate and inanimate and the changes they have undergone to bring them to their present state are told in a great number of stories of varying emotional importance. The most important stories are about 'creation', which is only known in its full details by the Mun. The world is an ocean; under that ocean there is an earth of twelve super-imposed stories, and under that there lives *Itpomu*, the Creative Mother, and her husband *Debu*. Their first children were *Tak-seu* and *Tak-from*, who are also called *Nar-zong-nyou* and *Komsithing*. Afterwards there were *Mlum Mukyam*, *Sakyeun-faat-it*, *Saba-faat-chaum*, *Suk-dum-lung-ming* and *Chi-lel*, all of whom are the present earth; Palyou and Pakyam who are gladness and joy; then *Ta-lyang*, *Ta-kook* and *Ta-kok* who are the blue sky without ornament: then *Bru-nong* and *Jil-vong*, *Long-mu* and *Tso-kor* who are the forest in the sky where the stars live: then *Tak-bru-num* and *Jit-it* who are the stars. The ocean between the two worlds is called *Lyang-tak-voor oong*, *tagum-lyang-shin-mu oong* and is the home of *Tal-i-nau* and her husband *San-go*. Under the second earth there are two huge copper vessels beside *Itpomu*, full of water, and under them is a fire; this is the reason why the earth becomes warm and wet. Then was born *Panjer-roong* and *Pantsong-roong*, which is actually the Rangit River. The origin of hot streams, *Kum-zer roong* may cure all ills while *Num-ri* and *Num-ra* begat the thunder bird *sadher-moo*.

The Cherim: performance of Mun

Cherim Ceremony:- In the *cherim* ceremony, which is held twice in a year - once at the beginning of the rains and second at the beginning of winter respectively to ward off epidemic diseases like malaria. Three separate rituals are performed for this; two by *Mun* and the one by the Lamas. In such communal sacrifice at least one individual from each household has to be present and each household contributes a little amount of grain and *Mun*'s participation is necessary.

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The first part of the ceremony consists of offering to the devil spirits. This ceremony is called *rum* after the name given to the chief article of sacrifice. In a large basket filled with earth and covered with a banana leaf into which are kept a number of eight pieces of each article manifesting 'demon's walking stick' consisting of decorated bamboos with flowers inserted in holes, water in a container, milk, tea and *chi* (country liquor); pieces of mica; stems of warm wood decorated with threads, fresh eggs, heaps of grain and dried bird, dried fish and ginger. The offering articles also includes two *ta-ming* which consists of long sticks to which are attached and wrapped in leaves samples of every sort of food and drink. When the offerings have to be made, the *Mun*, sitting opposite to the people, intones a long chant to invoke the gods (*rum*) and then takes the eggs and touches them to his forehead while keeping his eyes shut; the line which he envisages inside the eggs foretells the future health of the community.

The second ceremony – '*Tsandong*' is also performed by *Mun*, consists of offerings to the Gods of Khangchendzonga and the plains. The offerings consist of rice, butter, *chimi* (a variety of wild fruit), a rupee and eight eggs. The offering is made in two parts; first grain and strained *chi* (traditional liquor) are thrown out by the *Mun* and her assistant and later a goat is dedicated and then sacrificed. These two ceremonies together take about four hours time. At least one member from each household has to attend this ceremony. Usually the male members attended the ceremony. In this ceremony prayers are also attributed to the God of mountains (*SungmuI*) from the protection from snow, hailstorm and blizzard. The people present in this ceremony are busy in cooking, eating, gossiping and watching the preparation.

The third ceremony is performed by the Lamas with the preparation of a very elaborate ceremonial object. The chief of these are the '*deu*', the 'nine – storied palace', consisting of elaborate regular polyhedral in different colour threads supported on bamboo splinters through a central bamboo. This 'palace', which took over four hours to complete is made to mollify the demons or ghost of an old king of Tibet called *Dayom*. In his lifetime this palace and monasteries were destroyed so that he had nowhere to live. In revenge his spirit roams about harming people. The palace is offered to beg his pardon and to

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persuade him to return home without hurting the people in the neighbourhood. The foreground of the structure was occupied by an elaborate representation of the female demon *Mamoo Moong*, portrayed as a snake-haired female riding on a tiger and surrounded by hundreds of lesser objects. The demon was principally made out of buckwheat powder and it was impressed on the onlookers. According to the sacred books, when the whole object has been made, the invocation and readings from the Holy Scriptures begin with the accompaniment of musical instrument. An offering of boiled rice and fresh buckwheat bread is cleared and *cherkem* is offered to the demons. The *Mamoo Moong* herself is summoned and gratified with the offerings of copper pots and clothes. When the demon *Mamoo Moong* is presumed to be in a good mood or temper, her image is taken – off the temporarily erected altar and handed over to all present during the observance to wave out the malevolent action. Lastly the image is carried out with a procession and immersed into the junction of three streams. It is a perception that if any animal has not devoured within three days, it is a sign that there will be serious sickness in the coming season. Before taking out the image a *Mun* sang a song alone for thanking the god for coming and blessing them and now to go back. On these occasions, *Mun* always sang more or less sacred songs.

The services of the *Mun* are continuously necessary in the every sphere of Lepcha life. During the time of every passages of life (birth, marriage and death) the *Mun* must always be present as essential priests, while at the death their role is of more emotional importance than the lama. The *Mun* are necessary for cleansing from supernatural danger, for blessing and solemnizing different undertakings and, above all for expelling devils. At the time of ceremonial cleansing the *Mun* waved certain objects from the actual or potential sufferer. In Lepcha cognition both the parents are *pek* in the fifth month of pregnancy with a bunch of elephant grass to insure an easy delivery – if the labour time is difficult the mother in child birth is *pek* with a live chicken, and, if she or her husband have neglected a pre-natal precaution, with the object which has been wrongly handled or finished. In the same way, after an abortion or still born the child has been thrown into the river, a *Mun* will *pek* the carriers with a bunch of stinging and thorny plants and the parents will be *pek* with a live animal which will later be sacrificed, in order to prevent

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the devil which has caused one death causing more. *Pek-ing* is the nearest approach in Lepcha life to ritual cleansing and is employed in number of circumstances, sometimes alone and sometimes as part of exorcism. Though it is not essential but Mun's blessings are invoked and solemnized by a ritual, *sakyou faat*, where the pouring or drinking of strained *chi* with butter is necessary. This ritual is performed to solemnize a marriage, to set up the *ing-zong* relationship, to mark the formal swearing of an oath or before starting any unusual undertaking, sometimes alone or sometimes with the *lafet* sacrifice. This ritual is always made privately by the member of each household after the sowing of a field. It is recognized as the most solemn sacrament in Lepcha life.

It is their opinion that when a Mun is called to exorcise a specific devil that he has been divined, the Mun spends a night in his own home – *munthen-ing* for summoning and communing with the possessing spirit. The question of causation is bound up with the conception of *tamtoom* – the necessary consequence of an earlier act; often this act was not committed by the sufferer, but by fairly remote ancestors. The Mun worship two supernatural, Hit-rum and De-rum, who are considered to be ancestral gods who look after all dead Lepchas. When a Mun has discovered as much as possible about the supernatural and immediate causes of the illness he indicates the necessary objects of sacrifice. These are almost always animals, but on occasion other objects are needed as well or instead. Sometimes these objects are valuables, which are just displayed to gratify the supernatural; sometimes other edibles – crops, chi, dried bird, dried fish, and ginger. According to the ceremony these are either abandoned to be eaten by wild animals, or consumed, as part of the ritual, by all present except the Mun himself.

When animals are sacrificed they are first offered alive to all the supernaturals; then they are slaughtered and divided up. Parts of intestines – the lungs, liver and heart – called *sha-fot* are cooked with rice and chopped up and thrown for the devils; the head, one fore-leg, and one hind-leg (these portions are called *gazook*) are laid out and dedicated to the devil specially involved. After the dedication the meat is eaten up by the members. It is often the Mun's fee but he does not always take it all. The Mun intones prayers both before and after the animal is killed; the praying may take four hours, and is usually not

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attended to by the other people present. In daylight ceremonies, when the weather is fine, the Mun often withdraws a little distance from the house in order to pray without disturbing or disturbance. This relatively simple sacrifice is usually performed when there is a parallel exorcism being performed at the same time by lamas; for some other devils, particularly those with which lamas cannot deal in any way, much more elaborate ceremonies are necessary. It is impossible to generalize about these exorcisms as one can about the lamaist ones, for they have no apparent common principle. I have therefore selected three 'prescriptions' out of the considerable number I have witnessed or heard about, as samples; in their different aspects they embody the greater number of motives in elaborate Mun ritual.

Mun regulated rituals -

1. **Sor moong (violent death) or Apang moong (genitor-urinary diseases)** - To get rid of genito-urinary disease or violent death, a goat is put in a snare having three knots tied in its length, first of all, all the members of the afflicted household must touch the knots and then the *Mun* would call on all the devils to be contended with the blood of the sacrifice and not to take the patient, after which he throws the rope into the air. If the rope falls end outwards (i.e. the end away from the goat falls towards the door), it means that the devil is satisfied and if it falls towards the house the prognosis is bad. After this the animal is killed and the *gazook* and *sha-fot* offered to the devil/demon with a plate and a pot filled with rice, a rupee and a ceremonial scarf (*Khada*), together with some of the invalid's ornaments and clothing and also a cup of *chi* with different grains in it. Then the *Mun* constructs a phallus out of wood, which is called in its guardian function *moong long tik*. This phallus is set up between two stones leaning slightly forward, somewhere in the forest, and anointed with the blood of the slain animal and *chi*, which will keep the devil/demon away from the area and household.
2. **The ghost of a dead child, called Num-een moong** - The young children death caused by infantile diarrhea, which is believed to be caused by a demon named *Num-een moong*. To drive away that demon (*moong*) the Lepcha people sacrifice a goat or a sheep. Even after the sacrifice of an animal if the person continues to

be troubled by the *moong*. Then the troubled person stands on the right side of the stream and the *Mun* on the left of it. Then a 'gateway' is made over the stream of two bundles of elephant grass and brambles, while the *Mun* holds in each hand a bundle made out of wild raspberries, nettles and some other thorny and prickly plants. These bundles are dipped in water and peek over the sufferer several times. A bamboo *chi* (beer) holder filled with blood and *chi* and shut up at both ends and a leaf filled with fried rice, meat and blood are peek over the patient and thrown through the gateway for the demon. The branches of thorny plants are thrown through the gateway and finally the gateway is filled up with thorny plants, so that it looks like a tree. The *Mun* does this at two other places; one is some way apart on the streams and the other is either above or below the first one. After completing the *Mun* must return straight to his own house without meeting anybody. If he meets people *Num-een moong* will start haunting him.

It was told that *Num-een moong* is the demon released by the death of young children. Older people who die do not let loose a devil/demon. The *Num-een moong* persists for about three years after the child's death.

3. **Chyom moong or Rot moong** – This ceremony is called Moong Sot, killing the devil, and should be performed by the surviving members of the family in which one member has either died violently or committed suicide. It should be performed every three years, but it is sufficient if the ceremony is done after the violent death and at the birth of each new member of the household. If the ceremony is not performed the devil will return and claim another victim. A dead goat is skinned except for its legs below the joint and is laid on its back with its hind quarters towards the bowman. Beside it is a hole already dug and above it is made a small shelter of bamboos thatched with reeds. Beyond that is set up a red head of banana flower stuck into the ground and against it a post on top of which is attached the goat's heart, in such a manner that the blood drips on the banana flower.

In a line with this stands a bowman with an arrow in his bow ready to shoot. The Mun is at one side not looking at the post. The other men who are present are all armed with knives.

After a time, the Mun starts shivering uncontrollably and summons the devil in a loud voice. As he calls some insect or other will climb up the pole towards the heart, and the bowman must shoot it with his arrow before it reaches it. As soon as he has shot he must call to the Mun to say whether he has hit or missed the insect; if he has missed the Mun must recall it. When the insect is killed it and the goat are chopped to pieces by the bystanders with their knives and buried in the prepared hole; stones and earth are rammed on top of the sacrifice to fill up the hole, and then a second time to make a little mound.

The Mun religion has a very copious validating connection with the belief system of the Lepcha and that is why it occupies a stronghold position in the Lepcha society. Theory reveals that Munism is combined with demonology and rituals which are complicated in nature. According to the Lepcha ethics the disapproved actions of the supernatural, *nam-toak* causes a year of disaster which affects the whole community. Therefore, Mun religion is practiced for the protection of self and the community as a whole. The exorcisms and apotropaic rites performed by a Mun for the benefit of individuals is even more numerous and varied than the calendrical rites.

At the beginning of the service the devil figure is always erected facing the traditional altar; when the ceremony is finished the model with its stand is turned round to face the house-door; a double line of white mark is traced from the devil to the door as the route it must take to go out, and the image on its board is then carried away either into the forest or to the place where four roads meet. On the other hand for some exorcism those who carry the devil have to go through some ritual or be ceremonially purified before they are readmitted into the house.

Observation:

The Lepcha being the inhabitants of rugged, arduous mountain terrain and extreme climatic condition is experiencing with diverse environmental set-up. In course of interaction with hazardous environment since long past, a sense of divinity sprouts up among themselves over the years. The Lepcha profess *munism* under the doctrine of monotheistic belief centres around 'animism' as a traditional face of religion. *Munism* here depicts a curious blending of the Tibetan Bon religious attributes with 'animism', deeply associated with the concept of Supernatural. In *munism* the divine power is working in a unique way to bring out the beautiful and the good. *Munism* is basically based on belief of God, demons and spirits. In their religious cognition, all these divinities have specific functions to gain the potential strength through performance of rituals. It helps them to overcome difficulties, miseries and anxieties which are inhospitable to their daily life.

As a religion the practice of Munism is deeply rooted with Lepcha's own culture. To them, the religious manifestation depends on faith in Supernatural power, whose displeasure cause harm to their society. With the advent of Lamaism, where lesser tradition of Buddhism mixed up with the Bon religion of Tibet by Padmasambhava the area got influenced and superimposed on the Munism. Thus the practice becomes faded and moreover the existence of real *Mun* (practitioner) becomes less in number, the villagers have to cross a long distance through a rugged terrain. By the influence of modernization and impact of globalization the coming up generation become advance with taking education and modern culture and do not show much interest to believe in the existence of such knowledge. Quite opposite scenario prevailed among the age-old and middle-aged population. They are strong enough to retain that cultural heritage and argued reluctantly that the culture binds the people together; it is the identity of oneself. Hence it should be preserved with all efforts; even any kind of sacrifice would be negotiable for the protection of its extinction. As a general practice they cross over a long distance to consult with a *Mun* to get rid of any misfortune, miseries and unhappiness.

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