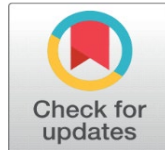


LEPCHAS AND THEIR LANGUISHING CRAFT-DESIGN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The Lepcha, an indigenous tribe in Sikkim, revere nature and adhere to Mun and Bongthing, their traditional polytheistic, animistic, and syncretic belief systems. Their ancestral arts and crafts, like loin loom weaving and bamboo hat-making, face threats from modernization and globalization. This paper aims to chronicle the Lepchas' craftsmanship in Sikkim to conserve their knowledge, techniques, and artisanal abilities. Documenting these crafts will foster understanding and appreciation for their cultural practices and history, providing a valuable reference for researchers, historians, and those interested in the Lepchas' rich craft tradition. The information for this study has been gathered from both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Bamboo Hat, Dumpra, Lepcha, Loin Loom, Traditional Craft

1. INTRODUCTION

The Lepchas are an indigenous group inhabiting the eastern Himalayas of Sikkim, India. They are widely regarded as the original inhabitants of Sikkim, possessing a distinct culture and language that distinguishes them from other communities in the region. With a history stretching back centuries, the Lepchas have maintained a harmonious relationship with nature, evident in their cultural customs and beliefs. They hold a profound reverence for the natural world, believing in the presence of spirits and deities governing various aspects of nature. Renowned for their unique traditional attire, both men and women wore long robe-like garments. Women wore the "dum-dyam," a draped garment similar to a sari, secured at the waist with a belt called "Naamrek." Whereas Lepcha men wear the "dum-praa," which serves dual purposes: as attire during the day and as a blanket

at night. The "dum-praa," which is also known as "Thokroah" bears a striking resemblance to the medieval dress worn by the Romans and Greeks. It features pins that fasten the loose garment at both shoulders, allowing for unrestricted movement of the shoulders and arms. Men often wear headgear known as the Lepcha hat or "SuymokThyaktuk," Thyak i.e. head and "Tuk" means cover. Intricately woven by the Lepchas, these hats are usually made from fine canes from bamboo, while Lepcha women typically cover their heads with a piece of cotton or silk scarf.

In addition to their distinctive attire, the Lepchas' cultural practices and beliefs reflect their deep connection to their environment, making them a significant cultural presence in the Himalayan region. [8]

Lepchas boast a rich cultural heritage that encompasses music, dance, and traditional crafts like weaving and basket-making. They also exhibit proficiency in hunting and fishing, with their diet traditionally consisting of meat, fish, and locally sourced vegetables. Despite encountering various challenges, including displacement from their ancestral lands and the erosion of their cultural heritage, efforts are being made to preserve their way of life. The Lepchas remain vital contributors to the cultural diversity of Sikkim and the broader region. Furthermore, researchers have observed that beyond Sikkim, the Lepchas are present in various other areas such as Western Bhutan, Eastern Nepal, and Darjeeling in West Bengal. Exposure to a variety of cultures from Tibet, Nepal, and some European countries has influenced the evolution of this community over the years. (<https://trci.tripura.gov.in/lepcha>)

It is believed that the Lepchas are nature worshippers, adhering to the traditional polytheistic, animistic, and syncretic religion centered around Mun and Bongthing. Under Tibetan influence, some Lepchas began practicing Buddhism, and later, with the introduction of Christianity by the British, a few converted to Christianity as well.

The Lepchas refer to their ancestral territory, present-day Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills, as "Mayallyang," meaning "hidden land." This region remained concealed beyond the Himalayas until British colonization in 1835, despite the Lepcha people residing here for possibly thousands of years. [10]

The ethnic name 'Lepcha' is said to have been given to them by the Bhutanese, and their language is known as Róng ring and they define themselves as "Rongkup-Rumkup" (Figure1). [1]

They firmly believe that they originated in Sikkim and the evidence of their origin can be traced in the written history of Lepchas. As per the data collected from the locals it is also believed that written documents of their existence had been destroyed by the Tibetans when they captured this area. Oral narratives and folk stories which have been passed down from one generation to another provide a deep understanding of their culture and tradition. Because of their Mongoloid ancestry, some anthropologists believe that the Lepchas originated in Tibet or Mongolia. As per the beliefs of the Lepcha people themselves, their ancestral home, Mayel, is located close to Mount Kanchenjunga, and they have no account of previous migrations.

The early history of the Lepchas is unknown, and their isolation probably prevented them from interacting with outsiders. It was in the fourteenth century AD that the Bhutias commenced their migration into the region from Tibet. Early in the 17th century, internal unrest in Tibet prompted three "Red Hat" lamas (monks) to escape to Sikkim, where they established a Sikkimese Tibetan king and converted the local populace to Buddhism. The Bhutias, the Nepalese, and eventually the British ruled over the Lepchas of Sikkim for the following three centuries. [2]

This community holds historical significance and is widely dispersed across the hills of Sikkim state, the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, the eastern part of Nepal, and the southwestern part of Bhutan. They belong to the Mongoloid ethnic group, with some anthropologists suggesting Mongolian or Tibetan origins. According to authors like Jaya Jaitly, the Lepchas migrated from Assam and Burma (present-day Myanmar). For many years, the Lepcha tribe remained isolated, which also applies to their art and craft.

Figure 1



Figure 1 A group of Lepcha in Darjeeling (1880)

Source <https://www.oldindianphotos.in/2011/06/group-of-Lepchas-darjeeling-c1880.html>

Figure 2



Figure 2 Sisnu (Nettle) Plant

1.1. PURPOSE

The primary objective of this paper is to document the craft culture of the Lepchas of Sikkim and to preserve the knowledge and techniques involved in these crafts, as well as the skills of their artisans. By documenting their textile craft, the knowledge and expertise of the craftspeople can be passed down to future generations, ensuring that the craft is not lost over time. Additionally, documenting the craft will foster greater understanding and appreciation of their craft culture and its history. It will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, historians, and anyone interested in the Lepchas and the significance of their craft. Furthermore, craft documentation will aid in standardizing techniques and ensure that the craft is practiced consistently over time, which is particularly important for crafts tied to cultural traditions.

1.2. METHODOLOGY

The article details the results of a field study in Sikkim, employing a descriptive research design inclusive of field and literature surveys, with methods adapted to the investigative requirements of the stated objective. The study focused on examining and recording the intricate details of the woven crafts within the Lepcha design culture of Sikkim. Insights into the historical and cultural background were obtained through literature review and interviews with Lepcha community members. Before the study commenced, a research permit was secured from the Department of Forest, Environment, and Wildlife Management Office, Government of Sikkim. The researchers designed a structured interview schedule with open-ended questions to collect data on textile craft design and practice. Information on the history and trade patterns of Sikkim's indigenous communities, was also collected and reviewed from resources found in museums and libraries.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. LEPCHA TEXTILE ART AND CRAFT

Textile tradition of Lepchas is unique as they possess extraordinary craftsmanship and dexterity to create things. They also show remarkable artistry by crafting everyday items such as pots, baskets, bows, fish traps, ornaments, and various household articles.

According to mythology, Lepchas are the people who are nature worshipers, it is believed that they were farmers and originated in the uphill's of the Himalayas. Lepchas are animists and worshipers of mother nature, having vast and in-depth knowledge about the locally grown medicinal plants. [6]

To understand the textiles and costumes of the Lepchas, one must delve into history when Sikkim was under the rule of the Chogyal dynasty or monarchy since 1604 CE, prior to its incorporation into India. Lepchas traditionally used yarn spun from locally available nettle plants, known as 'sisnu' or 'sorhing,' to weave textile materials (Figure1). Weavers harvested and extracted fiber from nettle plants (Figure 2) to prepare yarn themselves. Photographic records from the Royal Anthropological Society London depict the usage of nettle fiber in their traditional garments as far back as the 19th century (1890). They heavily relied on this locally sourced material to cover their bodies and protect themselves in extreme cold conditions. Locally, the nettle plant is also referred to as 'kuzu' in Lepcha. Although historians lack precise documentation of the origins of 'sisnu', it is evident that over time, the availability of nettle plants has decreased, primarily due to their prevalence in higher altitudes that are not easily accessible to the common man. Consequently, present-day Lepchas predominantly use sheep wool along with cotton for their fiber needs. [7]

Lepcha women work upon traditional back-strap loin-loom to weave shawls and blankets. While yarn was originally crafted from nettle plants, cotton and wool are now commonly used. The fabrics typically feature white bases adorned with rhythmic stripes in black, red, yellow, and green, embellished with interwoven motifs. Their textiles and costumes include dum-pra/thokro (men's draped garment), Tago (men's shirt), Tomoo (men's pants), aashyuam (women's draped garment), and honju (blouse).

2.2. EXTRACTION OF NETTLE FIBER

Sisnu (nettle) is the natural fiber, native to the Himalayan belt used by the local weavers of the Lepcha community. Sisnu plant grows to the height of about 3 meters with a 5- point leaves, whole plant including stem and leaves are covered with thorns which makes it difficult to pluck or peel with bare hands.(Figure 3).

During field visit to the Directorate of Handloom and Handicraft (DHH) in North Sikkim, the researcher gathered some interesting facts about nettle yarn while interacting with the weavers about the extraction process. According to 59-year-old Ms. Kanchung Lepcha from Lingdong, Dzongu, North Sikkim, who began practicing handloom weaving at the age of 15, nettle fiber has been used by local weavers long before the introduction of silk and cotton. She mentioned that contemporary weavers rarely work with nettle, opting instead for a wide assortment of hand-spun or machine-spun yarns due to their easy availability and less time-consuming nature. Ms. Lepcha also noted that the most suitable time for harvesting sisnu plants is from the end of the monsoon season in August until December when the plants are mature and begin to flower. Additionally, she shared that only thick, mature stems are collected as peeling the bark is easier compared to immature stems.

Ms. Ongkit Lepcha, (Figure 4) a weaver with the Amu Sakchum Self-help Group in Noom, Upper Dzongu, emphasizes the importance of selecting the right nettle plant for fiber extraction and the making process. The stems of mature plants are collected, and leaves and stings are cleaned from the stem with the help of a 'ban' (knife), traditionally carried in the waistband by Lepcha men. Subsequently, the stem is peeled straightaway. Peeled bark is carefully collected, folded, and tied in neat bunches to prevent entanglement. After collection, the barks are left to dry completely under the sun, a process taking around three to four weeks. Once dried, the rough outer cover is removed with the help of an animal rib bone in a process known as shredding. This involves fixing one end of the fiber or a group of bark peels between the toes while the rest is rubbed and stretched tightly in an upward direction with the animal rib bone. Afterward, the fibers are separated with the help of nails and grouped for the spinning process. Spinning is done with the help of a hand tool known as 'kafer' (takli), although spinning wheels are commonly used nowadays. The spun thread is wound around the kafer. The fineness of yarns depends on the spinning skills of the spinner and the quality of the fiber. Once the yarn is ready, it is boiled with wood ash to make it softer, aiding in the final cleaning of the fiber by removing unwanted matter. Later, it is washed with clean cold water in streams and left to dry under the sun.

2.3. LOOM USED FOR WEAVING

Lepcha artisans utilize the backstrap loom, also known as den-thak-thi or the loin loom (Figure 5), to weave their fabrics. These textiles are characterized by a plain weave with additional warp ornamentation. Typically, a loom is equipped with two warp beams. In the case of backstrap looms, which are commonly positioned against the wall of a porch or indoors, the warp stands upward and around the upper warp beam. The breast beam, usually a length of wooden rod split in half lengthwise to grip the cloth, is tied to the weaver's backstrap with cords. The backstrap, iscommonly made of leather but occasionally substituted with woven jute panel or padded fabric, includes wooden dowels at each end. By leaning backward, the weaver maintains warp tension. However, due to government intervention

programs, many weavers have transitioned to using throw shuttle frame looms with jacquard attachments.

2.4. LEPCHA DUM-PRA

The Lepcha dum-pra (Figure 6) is a traditional rectangular fabric of narrow width, woven on a backstrap loom in villages across Sikkim. Traditional designs, incorporating various colors, adorn this fabric, which is primarily used for crafting traditional male garments. However, beyond apparel, the distinctive designs of dum-pra are also showcased in various urban market products such as bedspreads, bags, belts, cushion covers, table mats, napkins, and file folders. Usually around three meters of fabric is woven at a time on a backstrap loom, measuring approximately 120 inches in length and 36 inches in width.

Dum-pra is now frequently worn over high-collared shirt and calf-length drawstring trousers known as "tomoo," typically white in color. Even today, traditional Lepcha textiles are generally woven on a backstrap loom. Nettle fiber is not found in use in most contemporary traditional Lepcha textiles and are found made from other fibers like cotton, acrylic or wool. They also feature a striped pattern in one or more colors without any specific motif (Figure 7)

Historically, yarns were colored using dyes derived from locally available natural sources, such as flowers, bark, and herbs. While wool is still commonly dyed with vegetable dyes, synthetically dyed yarns are more popular today. However, weavers typically do not dye the yarn themselves. Chemically dyed threads offer a more vibrant color range compared to vegetable-dyed threads.

As per the interviews with the government officials at Directorate of Handloom and Handicrafts, and the master weaver Sujata Bhujel at DHH, the customary color palette of traditional Lepcha textiles includes various earthy tones such as browns, greens, and yellows, reflecting the natural hues found in their environment. White, blue, red, black, orange, and green are prominently utilized colors in Lepcha culture, each holding significant cultural importance. According to Academician Tom Tshering Lepcha and Rajender Prasad Gurung, CEO, ECCOS, Gangtok these colours are describe as follows:

- 1) **White:** Traditional Lepcha textiles trace their origins to fabrics woven from bleached nettle fibers, establishing white as the foundational color in Lepcha textile tradition. White symbolizes perfection and purity according to Lepcha beliefs.
- 2) **Blue:** Reportedly, blue was the inaugural pigment introduced into the traditional Lepcha textile color palette. It holds significance as the first color used in Lepcha textiles, alongside white, thus forming the original color scheme. The Lepcha community associates blue with wisdom and progress, likely due to its historical precedence in their textile tradition.
- 3) **Red:** Lepchas attribute vitality and energy to the color red, one of the earliest hues employed in dyeing Lepcha textiles. Occasionally, shades like maroon or magenta are substituted for true red.
- 4) **Black:** Black is intertwined with concepts of nobility and pride in Lepcha culture, representing one of the earliest colors utilized in Lepcha textiles.
- 5) **Orange:** Symbolizing good fortune, orange holds cultural significance among the Lepcha people.
- 6) **Green:** Green, synonymous with nature, embodies harmony and serenity.

While Lepcha weavers may occasionally deviate from this traditional palette to accommodate artistic expression and consumer preferences, such variations are also influenced by governmental initiatives aimed at diversifying product offerings. Nevertheless, many colors favored by Lepcha weavers remain deeply rooted in Lepcha cultural beliefs. [3]

According to the findings, Nettle (sisnu) fiber weaving is an indigenous way of cloth making among the Lepchas and is about to become the thing of past, as hardly any artisan is left who works with this fiber except one or two. To keep the culture of the Lepcha weaving alive, the Government of Sikkim has opened various training centers in all four districts of Sikkim. Although there were few workshops which have been organized in the past years by the Government in order to revive the languishing art but still people tend to go for the newer method of weaving because of easy availability of readymade cotton yarns, which saves their time and efforts.

2.5. MOTIFS AND SIGNIFICANCE

In the past, Lepcha textiles were primarily characterized by simple two or three-color stripes without the use of traditional dum-pra motifs. However, as time progressed, Lepchas were introduced to a variety of motifs, all inspired by nature. These motifs added a new dimension to Lepcha textiles, incorporating vibrant colors and intricate designs. The emergence of these decorations likely coincided with the process of modernization. Among the traditional motifs embraced by the Lepchas are Tungblyok (X-shaped pattern), Tungbrik (Diamond-shaped pattern), Sumok (patterns resembling the Lepcha hat Sumok Thyaaktuk), Tungtoskor (arrow motif), Vajra, and Erungi (Buddhist religious symbol). These motifs hold significance for the Lepcha community and contribute to the rich cultural heritage reflected in their textiles. (Figure 8)

It is widely believed that each of these motifs holds a connection to Lepcha origins, mythology, history, ancestral environment, or other cultural traditions. As a result, these designs often draw inspiration from nature and serve as stylized representations of Lepcha culture and heritage. Typically, within one vertical band of motifs, a variety of conventional designs can be found, repeated throughout the fabric. In addition to traditional motifs, simple and universal patterns such as stripes and dots are also present, alongside there are motifs which are borrowed from cultures beyond traditional Lepcha influences. According to Faulkner & Rama Mohan (2021) the swastika, for instance, has been a part of Lepcha textiles since before Sikkim's annexation. Additionally, decorations in Lepcha textiles sometimes bear resemblance to those found in Bhutanese textiles. This has led to instances where Lepchas seeking traditional Lepcha textiles mistakenly purchase Bhutanese textiles instead.

2.6. LEPCHA HAT

According to Sharma & Karolia (2021) hat making is another popular craft of Lepcha community. These hats are traditionally known as Sumok Thyaktuk and have five layers and each layer is beautifully crafted with the indigenous available materials like bamboo, cane, tuklop (ka-fyer-lop) leaves, and mica sheets. These handcrafted hats are unique and exclusive to Lepcha community. One such hat is sumokthyaktuk. The word sumok is related to war and thyaktuk means hat or a cap, which means a war hat. The material used in the making of these hats makes them strong, durable, and attractive. During the time of Chogyal rule, this hat formed the headgear of the royal soldiers. Later they were known as "Sikkim Guards". Making

this hat takes lot of time and skills of the craftsman. Fine bamboo strings or cane strips are cut and woven into a round shape. A notable feature of this hat is that the topmost layer resembles a spider web. And the various other parts resemble bee eye and an armor design along with a small wooden piece, carved into the shapes of the sun and moon. (Figure 9). [13]

Figure 3

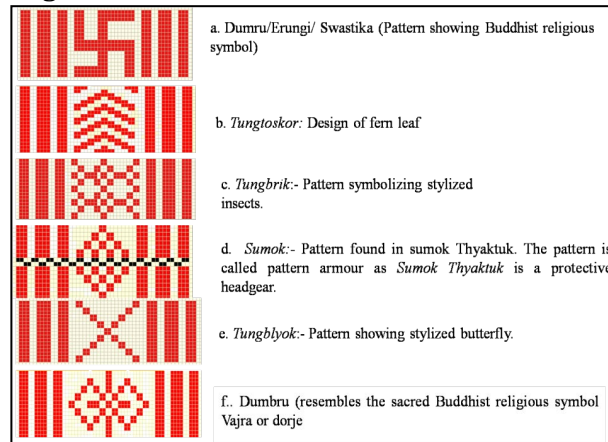


Figure 3 Traditional Motifs Used in Dum-Pra

Traditionally the feather of Racket Tailed Drongo (Figure 10) was used to adorn the hat. They also believe that the symbol of sun and moon avoid the ill effects of the eclipses. Another belief is that the Narok Rum (associated with music) from Himalayas joined the troop of Lepchas singing and gave a tail feather of Racket Tailed Drongo to the Lepcha leader as a sign of love and blessings. (Figure11). Another researcher, Lepcha et al., (2011) who conducted a similar study on the preservation of Lepcha hats, says that these people have been making and using these bamboo artifacts for centuries and that they believe that keeping them in their house keeps away the evil spirits. They are also used as roofing, food, bows, traps, fishing rods, etc. The tribe strongly believes in the concept of sustainable use of bamboo in their environment. [7]

2.7. LEPCHA WEAVE AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH THE NEAR BY CONSTITUENCY

The weaving traditions of Northeast India, Bhutan, China, Tibet, and Burma, along with other distant lands, have deep historical connections that predate current national identities. Before the mid-1600s, parts of eastern Bhutan and regions now situated in India and Tibet (China) were part of a single cultural and political entity. Although the Lepchas are primarily known as the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim, now an Indian state, their settlements extended beyond Sikkim's borders into surrounding territories that were or are part of Bhutan. Lepcha dress and cloth production show strong similarities with the traditions of neighboring indigenous peoples in southern Bhutan. They share ancient clothing patterns and weaving practices, such as the use of nettle fiber, due to their shared geographical environment.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Artisan Tying Dried Nettle Steam

Figure 5



Figure 5 Ongkit Lepcha weaving thokro with sisnu fiber. Picture courtesy: Personal collection of Ongkit Lepcha master weaver, Noom, Upper Dzongu, North Sikkim

Figure 6

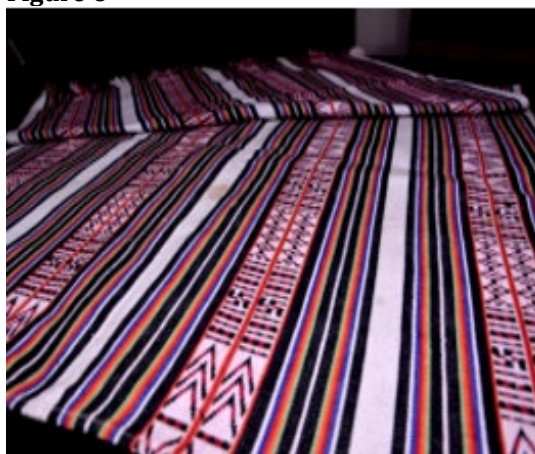


Figure 6 Patterned Lepcha Dum-pra

Figure 7



Figure 7 Striped traditional dum-pra

Figure 8



Figure 8 Lepcha Hat (Suymok Thyaktuk)

Figure 9



Figure 9 Men Adorned in the Traditional Lepcha Hat. Picture Courtesy: Personal Collection of John.Z.Lepcha, Dzongu, North Sikkim.

Figure 10

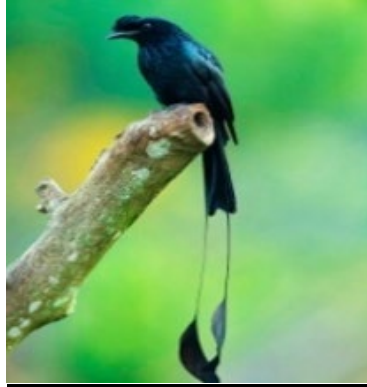


Figure 10 Numbong Ong Fo-Racket Tailed Drongo

Source: <https://pixels.com/featured/greater-racket-tailed-drongo-bird-yogesh-bhandarkar.html>

3. CONCLUSION

Lepcha the vanishing tribe of Sikkim also known as 'Mutanchirong', as described by various authors like Foning (1987) in his book 'My Vanishing Tribe', has many stories to narrate about their connection to their history and existence. The art and craft of the Himalayan settlers are intricately woven into their attire, with the stories of their existence beautifully stitched together in their mythology and traditions, evident in the way they adorn themselves. Skillful craftsmanship is evident in every art form they practice, which has been preserved for years but is now on the verge of extinction. The researcher has endeavored to document these fading arts of the Lepchas for future generations to remember and appreciate this local cultural heritage in India and to provide these crafts with a global market beyond Sikkim. In conclusion, Sikkim boasts a rich history of Lepcha tradition closely intertwined with Buddhist philosophy. Through field visits and interactions with locals, researchers have uncovered that the textile tradition of the Lepcha tribe prominently reflects Buddhist culture. Their tradition is intricately woven into their attire, with the stories of their existence beautifully integrated into their mythology and traditions, evident in the way they adorn themselves. Skillful craftsmanship is evident in every art form they practice as part of their tradition. [4]

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

The general framework and research were done by GS and AK. Understanding the value of Lepcha culture as a component of textiles and traditional heritage and reintroducing them to the populace were major contributions made by GS and AK.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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