

Long Choks: The Sacred Megalithic Shrines Of The Lepchas

Dr. Shera Pandi Molommu

Assistant Professor, HOD, Department of History, Kurseong College Dowhill Road,
Kurseong- 734203, District: Darjeeling, West Bengal, India.

E mail: serah11@yahoo.com

Abstract: As civilizations began coming up humans began using natural items that they found around them. Stones and boulders were one such item used by all the races around the world. It was durable, came into use for a long period of time and could be shaped into different types of objects. Lepchas too used this natural item found abundantly in nature from the dim past and fashioned different articles of use from this material. Long Choks were one such item and sacred too all the Lepchas in the past, we shall in this article try to take a glimpse at the importance of this monument that the Lepchas built all over their area of habitation.

Keywords: Lepchas, Animist, Old Religion, Stone, Bonism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The upright stones raised by human hands called 'Long Chok's' in Lepcha are ingrained in the culture and customs of the Lepchas. Like the monoliths that the Archaeological Department of the Government of West Bengal reported; of the stones unnaturally standing upright with flat stones balancing on the top of the upright ones in the Rangit valley. For the Lepchas these stones are important events like the marking of graves of the departed souls or making of a treaty, promise or a remembrance of a person which is considered sacred. This ancient culture practiced even before the Birth of Christ, the Buddha and the coming of Prophet Muhammed is deeply ingrained inside the psyche of the natives of Darjeeling and Sikkim even in the 21st century when their old animist religion is on the verge of extinction due to religious conversion. According to Siiger the Lepchas call these places with the shrine "Hla-thu" which is to some degree identical with the Tibetan term "Lha-Tho, Lha-T'o" which prominent Bengali translator of early 20th century Shri. Chandra Das has translated as "heaps of stone erected on mountain passes or on tops of mountains as votive cairns" in English. Rorich in his explorations in Tibet states that the word "lha-tho" was used for a kind of megalithic stone altar erected for worship. Though this structure was somehow different from the Lepcha shrine, the meaning of the word both translated to the same "abode of a Lha or God." Therefore it may be concluded that this stone shrines or Long Choks must date back to the days before Lamaism entered Sikkim, somewhere before 1642 and that these megalithic shrines are a part of the old animist Bon religion practiced by the Lepchas in this area.^[1]

2. OBJECTIVES

- To find out the relevance of Long Choks in ancient Lepcha life.
- How important is it in Lepcha culture nowadays.
- Has its significance been maintained or has it diminished

3. IMPORTANCE OF LONG CHOKS

According to Foning the significance of erecting Long Chok is to pay respect to the mighty Mt. Kanchenjunga "It has emanated from the original 'Big Stone', the Kongchen-Kongchlo or Mount Kanchenjunga, the eternally pure white, awe-inspiring, inexplicable structure that they saw constantly standing before us. Just as with any other primitive people, to the simple minds, this was it. It not only provided us with a tangible shape of conception of God, it provided us with a meaning for life itself. It is He who sends down the rivers from which we collect our food, such as fish and other creatures. It gives us rain for our crops and for the forests to grow where we get fruit, root, creepers and other food, including animal food and thus sustain ourselves. In fact if one probes deeper into the Lepcha life, one finds the whole being, the whole community, and the whole tribe depending upon and revolving around this wondrous object of nature. To us, it acts as the very embodiment of the almighty omnipotent, omniscient; creator herself."^[2] This is the reason why, in all the spheres of Lepcha life this mountain is omnipresent. In all cases this mountain is replicated by boulders of all sizes, normally a few feet high now the size of these Long Chok's are diminishing by the day as people make do with smaller replicas as larger stones and boulders are hard to find and difficult to erect. These Long Chok's are impressions of the original Mt. Kanchenjunga but they evoke a special fatherly respect and tend to service the purpose of physical appeasement and offerings to the revered mountain from a distance. When translated Kongchen Kongchlo means 'the biggest boulder' which according to Lepcha mythology is the first creation of Itboo Deboo Rum (the Supreme Being), thus this mountain the Lepcha believe is their eldest brother and will always be their protector. It is believed that all Lepchas must pay reverence to this mountain as it is from its snows that the first

Lepcha couple were created, so whatever is the function or occasion Long Chok's have to be erected and reverence has to be paid to Mt. Kanchenjunga. Halfdan Siiger has recorded in his survey the importance of Long Chok's in Lepcha life in such a way; "The priest was in charge of a peculiar open-air shrine a few hundred meters above his house. I have never met a similar shrine among the Lepcha, and it struck me as something exceptional both in structure and in function. It consisted of two groups of large natural stones, a bamboo platform, and two poles. The bamboo platform was used for the offerings at the ceremonies and the poles for tying up the sacrificial yak.

At first sight the stones seemed to be lying in disorder, but their arrangement became evident when I was told that they represented mountain peaks. My local Lepcha informant was able to give me the names of some of the bigger stones, representing the most prominent peaks. The stones were arranged in two groups, each having a bigger stone as centre. One centre stone (about 1 meter high) and several smaller stones surrounding it represented Kong-chen and minor summits which were called his followers or soldiers. The other centre stone was Kong-chen's wife, and the smaller stones around her represented her followers. It became clear that the shrine was constructed as an imitation of the mountain panorama and was, so to speak, an artificial replica of the divine and spiritual environments."^[3]

4. THE FIRST LONG CHOK

In the dim past the story goes that a Bhutia chief; Khye Bumsa single-handedly erected the huge pillars of the then under construction monastery at Sakya in Tibet. For this feat of extraordinary strength and for his help, he was able to woo the hand of one of the Sakya king's daughter as the Sakya king wanted the man of extraordinary strength on his side. Khye Bumsa and his new bride were given a territory called Chumbi, a valley between Bhutan and Sikkim. The couple settled there but were troubled by the fact that they had no children, at that time they heard of a Lepcha priest in Sikkim who had spiritual powers and could grant the boon of a child and end their barrenness, hence they travelled to Sikkim to seek his blessings. They are said to have met in and around the Kabi alpine grove in north Sikkim. After receiving spiritual blessings from Thekong Thek (the lepcha priest), the couple returned to Chumbi and were soon blessed with not one but three sons in succession. Khye Bumsa and his wife then decided to pay Thekong Thek another visit to express their gratitude and share their happiness. They also took their sons along with them to be blessed by the priest whom they held in high esteem. It is stated that when Thekong Thek lifted one of the son up coyly, the child's feet touched his forehead. Thekong Thek took this as an ominous sign and saw through his spiritual side that in the future this child and his descendents would rule Sikkim. His concerns grew deep within and he began looking forward for a solution for his people; the simple Lepchas who inhabited Sikkim, for he was not only their priest but the leader upon whom all the Lepchas looked for guidance. His solution for the impending conquest of Sikkim by the Tibetans was to form a brotherhood pact of blood with the Tibetans; so he called on Khye Bumsa to swear blood brotherhood with him as a symbolic acceptance of Bhutias and Lepchas as equals. The blood brotherhood ceremony was consecrated at Kabi Long Chok with the two sitting opposite each other on animal hides and surrounded by blood of sacrificed animals. Mt. Kanchenjunga was invoked as witness to solemnize the undertaking of blood brotherhood by the two communities and Long Chok's were then erected at the spot to mark the event and honour it.^[4] A blood treaty between Thikoong Tek and Khye Bumsa was conducted at 'Ka- We- Long- Chaok', North Sikkim. 'Ka-We-Long-Chaok' in Lepcha literally means 'our blood treaty stone monuments'. It sealed a friendship between the indigenous Lepchas and immigrant Tibetans.^[5] According to Kerry Little "Between Gangtok and Gzongu there is a sacred grove called Kabi Longs Tock, where in the 14th century, a treaty of friendship was signed in blood between the Lepcha and Bhutia chiefs. Nine 'divine' upright stones were erected to mark the place and hold their sacred covenant-Laong Tsaok, meaning the erected standing stone."^[6] These stones stand to this day and prayers by both Buddhist monks and Lepcha's are offered here. On the fifteenth day of the nine month (by the Tibetan calendar) the Lap-cha worship at Karbi, offering Chi, the national drink, rice (zo), Indian corn (ta-fa), fish (gnu), birds (fo), sugar-cane (mut pa-am), and flowers (rip). These offerings are placed on plantain leaves (kur-dong nyom) resting on a bamboo carpet in front of the altar to the north of the nine stones facing the Himalayan Mountains."^[7]

4.1. KHAMDOONG LONG CHOK

This particular Long Chok was originally in Khamdoong, was one of the Long Chok erected by the last king of the Lepchas Gaybu Achuk during the 18th Century to demarcate the territory of Damsang Lyang now commonly known as Kalimpong. Due to construction of the new road in Khamdoong this Lepcha land mark was removed and thrown away in the name of modernisation. The members of ILTA (Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association) shifted this landmark on the 14th August 2008 to Tashiding, 5th mile, Kalimpong and have erected it there.^[8]

4.2. MUNGTHUM LONG CHOK

The Mungthum Long Chok is found in the small Lepcha village of Noom Panang, Lingdong, which has a very rich Lepcha heritage with stories abounding of droughts and floods. Built by ancient Lepchas, this Long Chok was built to commemorate the victory of the Lepchas on the Butanese (Horka's) and it commands a great view of Dzongu

and is commonly known as the view point of Noom Panang, many villages like Lingdoh, Hee-Gyethang, Chadaa, Kuzoor, Sangkalang and Mangan are seen from here. ^[9]

4.3. PALLA LONG CHOK

In Palla, Noom Panang still stands erect the Palla Long Chok, this was also erected by the Lepchas after defeating the invading Bhutanese army (Horka's) in an intense battle, it was erected to mark the place of victory, to let the invaders know that future invasions would be met with even stronger resistance and as a witness for future generations stating the great deeds of earlier generations lepchas. ^[10]

4.4. LONG CHOK'S FOUND BY LEPCHA SCHOLAR FONING

The Archaeological Department of the Government of West Bengal on their survey found large stones, standing unnaturally upright and these stones had large flay stones balancing on the top at Darua Garad in the Rangeet valley. To quote Foning "The tallest man-made upright standing stone is the one in the Rungit valley. It has not yet been touched simply because it is in the preserve of the Government, and also because it is situated in an out-of-the-way spot, and not much wanted as material for construction work such as building roads and bridges." ^[11] He states of another one which he had seen in his sister-in-laws place, a village called Ambitar now in eastern Nepal which was earlier a part of the country inhabited by Lepchas. He says that there was one large Long Chok in the forest which he had seen on one of his visitations. One other reference he gives of these Long Chok's is the dismantling of one such structures in the construction of a motorised road in Lava, a small town on the eastern fringes of Kalimpong. He writes "Very recently, near Lava Bazaar, about 28 kilometers from Kalimpong town, while constructing a road nearby, a number of beautifully chiselled platform-like stone structures were broken up and used for such a purpose." ^[12]

5. LONG CHOK'S ERECTED AT BURIAL GROUNDS:

Every Lepcha household had a burial ground; in these burials are witnessed tall standing upright stone boulders about two to three feet high facing Mt. Kanchenjunga. In retrospect we come to find that these stone Long Chok's were erected for the dead to show him the direction to his final resting place and as a mark for other mortals that this was a sacred place not to be stepped upon or polluted. There are three major types of burial methods practiced by the Lepchas; the first one is called 'Chok Bum' ^[13] in this type of burial a pit is dug, normally a few feet deep which may be spherical or square, in this pit the deceased person who has been pain staking arranged into sitting position in a bamboo basket is lowered with the basket facing Mt. Kanchenjunga along with other paraphernalia required for burial. Over the grave flat stones are used to cover the opening, over these stones the earth which has been dug is then placed to make a raised ground. On top of this raised ground four upright stones are planted firmly and on top of these upright stones two or more flat stones are balanced. This was the most common way of burial. The second form of burial is known as 'Chok Blee' ^[14] in which the body is placed in a reclining position as if the person is sitting on a chair and facing Mt. Kanchenjunga. The pit here too is covered by large flat stones and the top is raised by the earth which has been dug up. The arrangement of the Long Chok's is the same as in the first one and this form is seen practised by some clans of the Lepchas. The third type of burial is known as the 'Chok Day' ^[15] in this form of burial a large long pit is dug and the body is laid down horizontally with the feet facing Mt. Kanchenjunga and the head slightly raised by placing it on stone pillows. Covered in the same fashion as the others, in this type of grave only one upright stone or Long Chok is erected above the head.

6. CONCLUSION:

It is sad but true that as assimilation and urbanisation slowly takes its hold on tribal societies the grand old ways of their ancestors somehow seem out of place. The remedies and answers that the ancestors found from nature and their simple ways of paying reverence suddenly looked dated. The Long Chok's too have become victims to this irresistible and inevitable force from other superior races and religion. Somewhere down the line erecting Long Chok's became unfashionable and meaningless to the Lepchas who had with time started following other superior religions and assimilated with other races. The indigenous Lepcha association in Darjeeling and Sikkim are trying to retrace these lost Long Chok's and restore lost or fallen ones but it does seem like a lost cause. The aura and relevance that these Long Chok's commanded have fallen to the point of beyond repair. These Long Chok's now are merely symbolic rather than serving any purpose

REFERENCES:

1. Siiger, Halfdan. (1955), 'A Cult for the God of Mount Kanchenjunga among the Lepcha of Northern Sikkim. A Himalayan Megalithic Shrine and its Ceremonies', Actes du IVe Congrès International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques 1952, II: I Ethnologica, Vienna, p. 189.

2. Foning, A. R. (1987), Lepcha, my vanishing tribe, New Delhi: Sterling Publications Ltd. Reprinted in 2003, p. 43-44.
3. Siiger, Halfdan. *op. cit.*, p. 186.
4. Wangchuk P. and Zulca M. (2007), Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit. Little Kingdom Pvt. Gangtok, p. 53-54.
5. Tamsang, L. S., (2008), Lepcha Folklore and Folksongs, Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi, p. ii.
6. Little, K., (2008), 'Lepcha narratives of their threatened sacred landscapes', Transforming Cultures, eJournal: 3:1, p. 247.
7. Stocks, C. de Beauvoir, (1927), 'Folklore and customs of the lap-chas of Sikkim', Journal and proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, new series 21, No.4, p. 330-331.
8. S. P. Molommu, (2012) The Lepchas of Eastern India: An Ethno Cultural Study, Unpublished Thesis, Visva Bharati, p. 330.
9. <http://noom-panang.blogspot.in/2010/10well-lepcha-remain-forever.html>
10. *Ibid.*
11. Foning, A. R., *op. cit.*, p. 37.
12. *Ibid.* P. 37.
13. *Ibid.* P. 40.
14. *Ibid.* P. 40.
15. *Ibid.* P. 41.