



The St. Stephen's North-East Society

# ORCHID



EDITION-I

Orchid  
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St. Stephen's North-East Society  
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Illustration of the orchid by Daiyairi Muivah  
Cover Design by Khamrosang Buhril

The St. Stephen's North-East Society Journal Team would like to extend its gratitude to Dr. Valson Thampu, former Principal of St. Stephen's College, under whose guidance the society was launched earlier this year.

It would also like to thank Dr. Sanjay Rao Ayde for his support as the Staff Advisor of the Society, Mr. Sunil Issar for helping the society get in touch with the alumni and Dr. Chinkhanlun Guite for being its motivator.

The team would also like to thank the current Principal, Dr. John Varghese, for this opportunity and allowing us to publish our first edition of the Annual Journal.

Last but not the least, the team would like to thank the various contributors without whom this journal would still have been a distant dream.

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## INTRODUCING ORCHID

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It has been a dream to witness the publishing of a journal in St. Stephen's College on the north-east Indian culture and life, written by Stephanians for the Stephanians and beyond. For that reason, I am thrilled to have been a part of the historical launch of St. Stephen's very own North-East Society and to have met people who shared this dream with me, whose collective support and enthusiasm made room for more ambitions to be met.

The idea had always been there, what was required was a portal through which the journal would be published and even before the society had been formally launched, talks regarding the journal had already been doing rounds and there has been a continuous effort ever since to ensure the first edition of our Annual Journal would be successful, with the hope that every edition will surpass the previous one in quality and impact.

One task that was unique and daunting to the first editorial team of the Annual Journal was the naming of the journal. Aware of how important a responsibility this was, what ensued were days of suggestions and discussions.

What we were certain of from day one was with regards to the language in which the journal was to be named. As much as we would have loved to stick to our roots and not adopt a foreign language, we were very well aware of the linguistic plurality that existed not just between states but within states as well and in order to not alienate any community within this broad region we were convinced that English as a language was to be used to represent the journal.

With respect to its name, at long last we finally came down to one single image in our minds, something that had always fascinated me as well: orchids. After debating over the legitimacy of this particular flower in the light of singularly representing North-East as a whole, which being no easy task, we were convinced of it being an apt representation and hence why our Annual Journal has thus been named ORCHID, for both representative as well as symbolic reasons: Our Journal was to be an orchid unto your hands, an orchid as a token of our love and as a gift from us to you.

For those wondering why this flower is representative of the region as a whole, despite the great diversity that exists, here's a little piece of geographical information for you.

According to the *Indian Journal of Hill Farming*, the North-East Indian region as a whole supports 50% of the total flora of the subcontinent and of the 1331 species of orchids found in India, North-East sustains around 856 of them. Out of these, 34 species are among the threatened plants of India and 85 species are endemic (they are not found anywhere else) to this region and not just to the region but also endemic to the home states where they are found. Orchids are found in all the 8 states of North-East India:

There are around 622 species of orchids found in Arunachal Pradesh alone, the highest number in any state, followed by Sikkim with 543 species and Meghalaya with 389 species. Assam accounts for 290 species, Nagaland for 246, Mizoram for 234, Manipur for 215 and Tripura for 66.

Referring to a study done by Kumaria and Tandon in 2007, the journal also goes on to claim that orchids in fact evolved in North-East India and it is easily the most visible vegetation of the region.

And it is for all these reasons, the Annual Journal of the newly launched North-East Society has been named after this flower.

Here's hoping the journal will live up to its name by being a rare, beautiful creation unique to its home ground and will be treasured by whosoever reads it.

The St. Stephen's North-East Society proudly presents the first edition of its Annual Journal, Orchid.

S. Lina Poumai  
Editor in Chief  
Head of the Literary Department  
St. Stephen's North-East Society

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## AYI AND AWO

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-Jessica Jakoinao, 1<sup>st</sup> Year, B.A. English Honours

It's a sunny and blistering afternoon with a slight breeze which agrees to the weather in my memory of that one fine day. It's the bitter-sweet kind. I remember being pinned with my feet over my head against the wooden walls of our home, facing the backyard. My grandmother had tied my feet together and pulled me up against the rough old wooden wall. I was wailing and pleading with a heavy throat and swallowing painfully against gravity. I gave my grandmother (I called her 'Ayi' in our dialect) a fistful of all my strength on her gut but it only tightened her grip on my ankles, with both her hands, against the wood. Her hands were hard with dried blisters from chopping firewood every morning with an axe that looked old yet sturdy as her. I eventually gave up resisting, trying to control my angry sobs. When the tears cleared from my eyes and trickled down my sun dried forehead, I knew fear for the first time. I feared for my life.

In front of me, in this up-side down world, my grandfather stood without his checkered charcoal flat cap. I was fond of his cap and would grab every opportunity I got to wear it, even for a few seconds, the moment he took it off to air his close cut hair out. He always wore it. We would herd the goats to and back from the hills. I can't point out hills by name anymore but from it you could see the *Shiroi hills*. Our daily routine that day was disturbed. I imagined myself walking uphill through the narrow pine canopied path and downhill past a depressing cemetery, following and looking out for the youngest kid. He didn't have his daily accessory on his head; instead he clenched a spade. I could hardly recognize him with the sun shining into my eyes. Both looked like strangers then. I cried out, 'Awo!' (Grandpa!) But that didn't help. He remained composed, wearing a passive expression on his face and continued to dig a huge pit in the ground. Though, I could swear I sensed a hint of amusement or some sort of dark humour dancing above his wrinkled cheeks as he squinted. Let me take a break now. I have to look for the rock behind a wild cherry stump. I'm close. All that's left is to trek through a trail, an old pal, to my last destination.

I'm beginning to recollect the rest of that day. I was asked the hardest question in the first four years of my early life. I was to choose between being buried alive and being drowned in the little pond in the fields. Every dawn, I'd follow my grandmother down the corn fields to fetch water from the very pond. I can't recall how I settled to being buried but that doesn't really matter. So *Ayi* laid me down in the pit which was about half my height. I just stayed still there while I heard her mumble and laugh to herself. I felt lighter and was relieved to hear her laugh, though it thoroughly confused me, as it opened up a possibility that this was all a grand gag. But all hope was lost when my grandfather began to fill in the dug-up mud around my feet. Once again I couldn't hold back my tears and let it all out. Then suddenly, *Ayi* pulled me out from the dirt and asked me solemnly if I would ever run away again.

I used to attend a neither big enough nor creatively named school called 'Morning School'. I was accompanied daily by my closest companion, Kumon. We were almost inseparable. Sadly, it was only 'almost'. We'd go to that little school together after I was dropped to her house. She and I used to sneak out of our class either through the window or make an excuse to use the 'latrine' from where we'd go to a shop and buy bubble gums and delight in the silliest little things. After we'd had enough fun we wouldn't dare return to class fearing a caning. The one mistake that we made was that we'd return home before school, or shall I say, 'morning' was supposed to end. We hadn't learnt to keep time as yet or had it even been taught, we would've been absent.

*Ayi*, angrily, asked me again. I shook my head, realizing we were after all not as smart as we thought ourselves to be, to indicate I would never. This time she gently pulled me back into the house. She gave me a good scrub and dressed me up in some clean clothes. I hardly spoke a word the whole day. After dinner time we sat by the fire place. *Awo* proffered a sweet shaped like a piece of orange. I took it reluctantly but savoured it till bed-time. Everything came back to normal as I literally got my feet back on the ground.

Evening has fallen now. The trail I've been following has led me to come across a group returning from the paddy fields with empty baskets, 'shopkais'. I'll probably meet some of them tomorrow morning. I shall follow my aunt, uncle and cousins to the fields.

I've finally reached. My dear first home looks like it should. Like an old ruin that's survived three generations. Quite contrary to the way I remembered it, it looks like it has shrunk or perhaps I've grown. The house is shut but not locked. I'll sit down on the porch and wait for *Awo* and *Ayi*. *Awo* will return from his 'afternoon stroll' that extends till evening and *Ayi* from the garden. I still have a lot of time left, lone with my thoughts. I can recall the unfolding events of that significant day. After that ordeal (yes, poor me) the four years old I had gone through, I went to school. Yes, I went to school and didn't run away from there and back home before time. I continued this habit till I left my home town to stay in the 'millennium' city and pursue my education.

My grandparents, *Ayi* especially, will always have my undying gratitude. My grandmother never received any formal schooling but she made sure I had a good education. To grandpa, hats-off! The incident that I have narrated might certainly not appease advocates of child rights but may come across as reasonable to you. Surely, they had unconventional ways but they were effective and left an impact on my perspective and overall attitude towards things. The choice I was given was certainly not much of a choice. It's like being asked in the most hospitable tone, "And what will be your choice of death?" I was caught between the devil and the deep sea which was unfair. But was it? I had the fairest choice to make before I ran off from school.

I had originally come home with the intentions of calling my grandparents to come live in the city but now I think I'm here to stay. I would like to take my last breath here too, in my home town. This place and its people have given me much and I'd like to repay them someday and contribute to its due development. This land has seen much trouble and woes. Like all those who "made it out" I owe a lot to this place too.

Whenever I reminisce about this almost surreal day, I end up extremely amused with the odd and loving couple that had looked after me so well. They were a little too good at giving practical lessons. The pit that my grandfather had dug next to the wall nut tree was never intended to be my grave but was a compost pit. Well played dear *Awo* and *Ayi*.

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## BELOVED CHILDREN OF THE MOUNTAINS

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-Allen Leom Lepcha, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, B.Sc. Mathematics Honours

### Who are the Lepchas?

#### "KHAMRIMO"

The Lepchas are the indigenous race of the Darjeeling District, the newly formed Kalimpong District, Sikkim, and Illam Himalayas. Interestingly, a Lepcha does not generally call oneself as such. Exuding pride they call themselves *Mutanchi RongKup RumKup* which means the 'Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God'. The name 'Lepcha' used today is, perhaps, derived from a Lepcha word "Lapchao", meaning a resting or waiting place on the wayside or a wayside where stones are heaped up as sign post to direct travellers. When the Nepalese first arrived in the Lepcha land and enquired about their identity at such a waiting place, the Rong people not knowing what the Nepalese were enquiring, replied that it is 'Lapchao' guessing that they were asking the name of the place. Unable to pronounce the name correctly, the Nepalese addressed the Rong folk as 'Lapcha' and later as 'Lapche'. It then acquired the meaning "vile speakers" or "inarticulate speech". This was at first a derogatory nickname but no longer has a negative connotation. When the British finally arrived in the Lepcha land, they anglicized it to 'Lepcha'.



*Photograph of a Lepcha c. 1900, wearing the traditional cone-shaped hat*

The Lepchas are nature lovers and worshippers. Their intimate knowledge of flora and fauna found in Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Illam hills is unsurpassable. As a result of living harmoniously with nature over centuries, they have a thorough understanding on the usage pattern of various wild products of the area. This is indicative of them being great traditional ethno-botanical practitioners. They love, respect, and worship Mother Nature in the form of mountains, rivers, clouds, water, stones, earth, soil, trees, rain, sun, etc. Their prayers and invocations are directed towards the mountains, hills, forests and rivers that shelter and sustain them. The Lepcha religion is, thus, a conduit of their affections and respect for the Nature that they hold so dearly to their hearts. *Mun* (also called Munism or Bongthingism) is the traditional polytheistic, animist, shamanistic,

and syncretic religion of the Lepcha people. It predates the seventh century Lepcha conversion to Lamaistic Buddhism, and since that time, the Lepcha have practiced it together with Buddhism. The Lepchas occupy what was earlier a vast old kingdom which was known as '*Nye Mayel Renjyong Lyang*' literally meaning 'Holy, hidden, eternal land of the gentlemen'. Today, it is known as '*Mayel Lyang*' in short. Also, the origin of every Lepcha tradition and custom has a fascinatingly woven tale behind it.

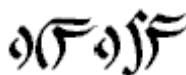


*A Lepcha man with his bow and arrow, wearing what is called a 'thyáktuk' on his head*

Lepchas are divided into many clans or *putsho*, each of them revere its own sacred lake and mountain peak from which the clan derives its name. While most Lepcha can identify their own clan, they do not always know the corresponding lake or mountain peak. Lepcha clan names can be quite formidable, and are often shortened for this reason. For example, *Simíkmú* and *Fonyung Rumsóngmú* may be shortened to *Simik* and *Foning*, respectively. Some of the names of the clans are "*Sada*", "*Rongong*", etc.

There is no history of Lepcha migration - another proof that the Lepchas are the indigenous, primeval race of Mayel Lyang with uniquely distinctive language, literature, culture, tradition, custom, myths, religion, festivals, civilization, and way of life.

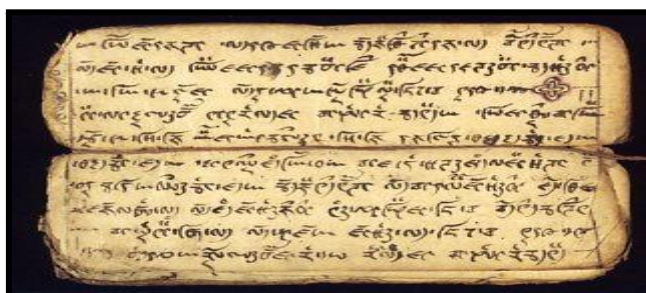
### Lepcha Language, Script and Folklore



One of the oldest and richest languages of the world, the Lepcha language and literature is found to be in a much neglected state today. Lepcha, a Tibeto-Burmese language, is spoken by minorities in the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal, as well as parts of Nepal and Bhutan. Where it is spoken, it is considered to be an aboriginal language, pre-dating the arrival of the Tibetan languages (Sikkimese, Dzongkha, and others) and the more recent Nepali language. Much of its lexicon is composed of monosyllabic elements. Lepcha speakers comprise four distinct communities: the *Renjóngmú* of Sikkim; the *Támsángmú* of Kalimpong, Kurseong, and Mirik; the *ilámmú* of Ilam District, Nepal; and the *Promú* of southwestern Bhutan. However, linguistically and culturally, they



remain as one. Lepcha-speaking groups in India are larger than those in Nepal and Bhutan. Notably, words that are commonly considered obscene or taboo in other languages are not treated as such by native speakers.



*An excerpt from ancient Lepcha manuscript tablets*

The Lepcha script (also known as "Róng") is a syllabic script featuring a variety of special marks and ligatures. Its genealogy is unclear. Early Lepcha manuscripts were written vertically, a sign of Chinese influence. According to Lepcha tradition, the Lepcha script was invented by the Lepcha scholar *Thikúng Men Salóng* during the 17th century. The inventor of the script was probably inspired by Buddhist missionaries. Another theory is that the script developed during the early years of the 18th century. Like all Brahmi-derived scripts, each basic letter in Lepcha in fact represents a syllable that starts with a consonant and ends with an inherent vowel of 'a'. The only exception is the letter for just the sound 'a'.

Today the Lepcha script is used in newspapers, magazines and textbooks, collections of poetry, prose and plays.

The term folklore, traditional stories of a community or nation, has come to mean myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, ballads, songs, rhymes, riddles, etc. whose medium is the spoken word. Folklore is, in fact, a verbal art. The Lepchas have a very rich tradition of folklore. To a Lepcha folklore is not only a means of entertainment but also a means of education. These myths are connected with the origin of the Lepchas and their country, Mayel Lyang.

Following are a couple of songs and poems taken from the pool of ancient, colourful, distinctive, interesting and lively oral folk literature of the Lepchas, and their respective paraphrases in English, the first being a song of revelry, and the second one being an exclamation of combat which showed that they were as adept at combat as much as they loved peace and harmony:

### **Nam Al Aprya Vom**

Ha aey.....!

Zaor sakdam lung ming tam arey ka,  
Jyeng nung da sonyi rey ka,  
Pey sanaom sonyi rey ka,  
Namput nam nnun lao joom,  
Ryoo wong sa sonyi an sonap gum.

In this crystal clear world,  
On this auspicious day,  
On the eve of old and new year's gathering,  
Today is a happy day and a happy night.

Ha aey.....!

Chu Kingtsoom rey aom ngan jong,  
Gee chu kurvaong shyo ka partam  
doo ngan jong,  
Pey rey gee punsan nam apin sa,

Like the ever bright and beautiful Mt. Kanchenjunga,  
Like the brightly coloured hills and dales,  
At the base of the Himalayas,  
It is an auspicious sign of prosperous future,

Tim rey ryoo yum ba young sam sa ding mo. We pray and welcome the Lepcha New Year.

Ha aey.....!

Mutanchi Rong Kup ngoon naong ban,  
Satha nun pobong eet dook kung sa,  
Ar tam pomik dook kung sa,  
Poshyaor bong eet dook kuung sa,  
Rong Kup kayoo eet ma yong shyoo ma o.

We the beloved Children of Mother Nature and God,  
When the bamboos originated in this world,  
When the first bamboo shoots originated in this world,  
When the broom grasses originated in this world,  
The Lepchas, likewise, originated in this world,  
Better you understand,  
The Lepchas, bamboos, and broom grasses are alike!

### Fyen Alaok

Rong Kup sa fyen alaok,  
Chaong Sali bu laok ding mo.

Lepchas' war dance  
With bows and arrows,  
Shouting with cries.

Punjem sa dun ka thi  
Chaong Sali paok bu ding o  
Punjem rem alaom aop  
Kurgu plaong la aop ka o.

Ya...Ya...Ya...

Approaching the enemies  
At close quarters,  
Aiming the arrows,  
Firing at their chests.

Ya...Ya...Ya...

Rong Kup sa fyen alaok  
Ban puyook bu laok ding mo  
Tagri bo kup rey go  
Punjem rem tyu ban saot gat  
Punjem rem alaom tyat  
Athyak pong la tyat ka o.

Ya...Ya...Ya...

Lepcha's war dance  
With Lepcha swords,  
Shouting with war cries

Ya...Ya...Ya...

Ya...Ya...Ya...

I'm the son of my father,  
I must fight and defeat the enemies,  
And sever their heads.

Ya...Ya...Ya...



*A Lepcha high priest, or 'Bongthing' performing a 'Mun' ritual*

## The Endangered Tradition

The Lepcha tradition, language and script, as of now, faces the threat of extinction. Since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, the *Mun* religion and its priesthood are in decline. Conversion to other religions is attributed to economic pressure, as traditional practices are immensely expensive to the ordinary practitioner. It has, however, regained interest among Lepcha as ecological encroachment becomes a growing concern. The environment is so deeply intertwined with *Mun* beliefs that religious leaders have offered direct opposition to development in areas including the Teesta Rivers and rivulets. Furthermore, the last Bongthing died without appointing a successor, and so took many untold secrets of the Lepcha tradition with him to the grave.

The Lepcha language was the Official language of Sikkim until 1911. During the transfer of the Hill territory of Darjeeling to the East Indian Company by the Rajah of Sikkim, the simple, innocent sons of the soil, the Lepchas, were completely ignored. Their thoughts, opinions and fundamental rights were hardly considered and accounted for. The Lepchas of the Darjeeling Hills were transferred and left unacknowledged. It was only through the collective efforts of certain individuals, like Lieutenant General G.B. Mainwaring, Bengal Staff Corps, that the Lepcha essence was preserved.

The Indian census reported 50,000 Lepcha speakers, however the actual number of native Lepcha speakers in India may be close to just 30,000.

Economically very backward Lepchas, living in far-off villages, have no electricity and other secondary amenities. But the aura in these areas exude the Lepcha essence. The elders still continue to tell interesting, entertaining, informative and educative stories of the hills to their children. Thus, the Lepcha traditional Folklore, the art of telling stories, is still alive and well, ironically, owing to their poor economical backwardness and conditions.

Today, many communities have been set up in order to uplift this ancient culture suffering from oblivion. Social media has become the paramount domain for the proliferation of awareness and concern. The Lepcha people have known the sanctity of preservation, and so, with the help of the State Government, are working together so that the Hills are not divested of their old and dear dwellers, the true sons of the soil, *Mutanchi Rongkup*.

*"Aachuley"*

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## Good-News From Beyond the Next Mountain

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Khamrosang Buhril, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, B.A History Honours



This oil painting, created by Moia Hmar of Churachandpur, Manipur, depicts the magnificent green and blue South-Western hills of Manipur upon which a Hmar tribal boy listens to his father's teachings. This painting was featured in 'Beyond the Next Mountain (1987)', a semi biopic of the Late Rev. Dr. Rochunga Pudaite (1927-2015) with the Gospel of John as a theme that transformed the future of a 'head-hunting' tribe.

It tells a story of the Hmar tribe and many other tribal groups settling and settled in the hills of the North-East. Many tribal communities in the North-East including the Hmars and the Nagas were once

practitioners of 'head-hunting' and other practices now seen as barbaric. It was considered especially so through the lenses of Christianity. Its advent in the region led to the abandonment of that peculiar practice of 'head-hunting'.

Rev. Dr. Rochunga Pudaite may be considered one of the pioneers who led the 'Hmars' to modernity. His father, Rev. Chawnga Pudaite was one of the first Christian converts among the tribals living in the South-Western hills of Manipur. The 'Hmars', once a small indigenous tribe of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo(Chikim) group of tribes scattered in present day Manipur, Mizoram, Assam and other parts of the North East Indian states, were first introduced to a modern education system through the Christian missions.

A young Welsh missionary by the name of Watkin R. Roberts shared the Gospel of John with the tribe in spite of the challenges. The fears of the 'Hmars' (or any other community for that matter) concerning the intrusion of their villages, lifestyle, age-old customs and practices could have very well resulted in the demise (perhaps even a beheading) of such an outsider or intimidator.

Nevertheless, it did not stop the missionary from bringing and sharing the 'Light' among these people for he must have known that it would be worth the risk. Since then, the Hmar community and most of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes did not look back. Their societies transformed in both tangible and intangible ways. Within ten decades, their people achieved what would have taken them perhaps ten centuries without the 'agent of transformation' that they embraced. Today, they have become what Rev. Dr. Rochunga called, in one of his interviews, "Head-hunters to heart-hunters".

However, the challenge of carrying forward the light that they had received was theirs to take up. It was this challenge that inspired men like Rev. Dr. Rochunga to become one among the torchbearers of transformation, development, modernity, and the Gospel that changed his own and the lives of his people. Today, for one who is educated and knows its value and has seen it benefitting the generations, it might be easy to understand why one must embrace modern education. However, going back almost a century, for someone whose father was the very first generation to receive modern education at elementary level without anyone else to follow or look up to in the field of education; for someone comfortable with a lifestyle that had been lived for generations by his/her forefathers-the lifestyle of a village man who was self-sufficient, who had enough rice in his barn, who had the luxury of drinking wine and going out for hunting on his own soil occasionally; for someone who had to walk for miles through the forest, in the company of wild animals, every day to the nearest primary school, education did not come easy. That was the case for Dr. Ro. As a ten year old boy, Ro made a 96 mile (150km) journey alone through the jungles each day to attend the nearest (mission) school from his village. Ro went on to earn a Master's degree from Wheaton College and completed the translation of the Bible into the Hmar language for his people in 1962. He also founded Bibles for the World in 1971, whose mission is to share the Good News of God's love in Christ Jesus by ministering to unreached people, to the Church and to Christian leaders in developing nations, with a strong emphasis on India. By 2010, it distributed over 100 million Bibles around the world. In 1951, he intently worked for the recognition of the Hmar tribe as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian constitution. He met with the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi concerning the issue. In his traditional attire, Dr. Ro was an embodiment of progress and preservation of a cultural identity (that did not obstruct the path to progress).

The story of Rev. Dr. Rochunga Pudaite and the case of the Hmar tribe is an example of how the light of modernity and education was passed on to the generations that followed, with Christianity as one of the main agents, towards social transformation and development for most of the tribal communities in Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and other parts of the North-East. Like the painting

above suggests, bearing the torch of this 'good-news' and hope, each generation has moved on 'beyond the next mountain'.

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## THE POLITICS BEHIND FOLKLORE IN NORTH EAST INDIAN

### WRITINGS

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- Ansila M Thomas, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, B.A English Honours

'North-East India' has for long attempted to negotiate what the term means to the people themselves. A blanket term to refer to 8 vastly culturally diverse states and a multitude of tribal communities, the negotiation among the members themselves on this term is an ongoing process. This paper will begin with the question of what it means to be North-East Indian and why there has been a struggle to remain distinct in their identity yet to be part of the imagination of the larger nation state. I shall be studying Naga poet Easterine Kire and focus upon how she uses her distinct tribal tradition in order to make a larger statement about preservation of her culture by bringing focus back to tribal living and her rational defense for the same.

The historical background of the area is of use here. The years immediately following partition and independence of the country were marked by the Nehruvian approach towards the ethnic nationalities of the northeastern region with a policy of minimum interference in their customs, beliefs and their traditional institutions, while at the same time initiating development projects aimed at empowering them. The emphasis was on the need to create conditions whereby the small ethnic communities would be encouraged to grow according to their own genius. Udayon Misra writes that, though this policy did raise a lot of controversy and was seen by many as a continuation of some critical elements of the earlier colonial policy of isolating the tribes, yet in the long run it would appear to have provided dividends for the ethnic communities by protecting their land and culture from inroads from the plains (Misra 3,4). In sharp contrast to the experience of tribal areas in other parts of the country where state programs and corporate interests have combined to displace them from their tribal habitats, in the northeast the different tribal communities which were covered by the Sixth Schedule took full advantage of the constitutional provisions to defend their culture and lifestyle. Under the Sixth Section each of the states from the Northeast that come under it have strict laws aimed at preventing transfer of land to non-tribals. This law provided for a constitutional status to traditional institutions and customary laws.

The emerging tribal middle class signaled the change within the political mindset. They were a new generation of youths who would not only resist the stereotyping of the ethnic communities, but more importantly, demand its rightful share in the nation building process as Indian citizens. For a certain section their alternate nationalism and culture seem to pose a challenge (Misra 6). It became a State driven agenda to portray their struggle to be heard as a fight between the 'secessionist tribal' and the nationalist Indian from the Hindi speaking mainland. What is often forgotten is that most of the hill nationalities were never a part of the 'freedom struggle' and hence their perceptions of freedom were at variance. In the 1970s the cry for the Independent nation of 'Nagalim' became stronger and has proven to be the longest surviving ethnic armed struggle in the subcontinent. The ensuing violence between the Centre and the regions is a tug between recognition of identity and acting on the perceived good of the land led to violence and disturbance in the area from both revolutionary groups as well as from the State apparatus. Tamsula Ao sums this up in her introduction to her short stories where she says : 'Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of nationalism , but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome.'

Throughout the literature of the region there is an awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures (Misra, 8). Whether it is in attempting to record their past, break away from the baggage of their tribal background or by making a conscious effort to represent tribal community life, there has been a great many developments in the literature of the region. It should be noted that the scribal tradition is a recent one amongst the Nagas and before the development of a script for the Naga languages through the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries, literature was confined only to the oral form (Misra, 24). An old Naga folk tale tells of how once the people had a script but that it was eaten up by a dog at one point, and thus the people lost their knowledge of the same. The incorporation of folklore by modern writers is an important manner of documenting the past as it includes a traditional, non-institutionalised part of a culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted by words of mouth or by customary examples (Brundvand).

Angami writer, Easterine Kire writes about her experience of growing up in Nagaland: "Curfews and continued periods of gun-fire were all part of growing up in Nagaland. Yet the new literature that is emerging from Nagaland is not all soaked in blood. The old storytelling tradition, which is common to all oral cultures of indigenous people, has been creatively integrated into modern literary genres to give a distinct identity to the literature of this region." She does exactly this in her role as an artist. Although acutely aware of the scars left behind in her society from years of violence, she chooses to write about Naga society by attempting to study her people for who they are and not who they have become in their interaction with the outside world. As a custodian of culture we see many attempts by her to re-invent understanding while preserving old practices. Kire has been able to translate and make record of close to 200 oral poems from her mother tongue Tenyidie to English, release a CD with recordings of the native poems and songs as well as release an anthology with illustrations by a local artist.

While looking at her poem "Genesis", we are introduced to the ideal hunter figure of Keviselie, a name that doubles in meaning as a reference to an old wise man<sup>1</sup>, who speaks of the utopian past until conflict and war brought death and destruction to his land. In the form of a folk tale, she takes the readers symbolically through the conflict and insurgency in Nagaland (Sebastian 53). All was well with the land and her seven daughters and they lived in *Kelhoukevira* (where life is good/paradise) with plentiful harvest, 'the mountain air in their breath', and their songs filling all the earth. In continuing with the agricultural metaphor, Kire chooses to depict strife in the land as a female traveler in their land, Plague. Depicting Plague as a woman could possibly be traced back to the Angami belief of *Kirhupfümia* – a minority group of women thought to have the powers of maiming, blinding or killing people just by pointing at them with their fingers. Their very presence was considered poisonous in a village and they were not allowed to live within the confines of the village (Kire 244). Kire employs great subtlety in using Plague as it becomes difficult to point out who it is that is being blamed for the plight of the Nagas. This ambiguity lets Kire place the blame on the warring factions and the external powers for what they have done in her land. The disjoint, now felt, between the land and its people due to an amnesia with regard to the past is recorded in the lines "Ah Kelhoukevira  
Keviselie knows you better than you know yourself."

The land itself seems to have forgotten its past and only the songs of that time remain with the people. It is only the custodian of culture, Keviselie who can now hope to return the land to its past

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with their tradition of orality, I managed to interview some of my Naga friends and a large source of my information with regard to folklore is through what they have been able to tell me, as heard by them from the elders in their family as stories. The sources cited are later discoveries of the folk tales in a documented fashion.



glory. In order for that transition to happen, however, there is talk of a purge. The land must rid itself of all its polluting factors before there is a new dawn of Kelhoukevira,  
 “He speaks of another moon  
 When she will be made whole  
 Restored to herself again”

It is interesting for us to note the figure of Keviselie as a guardian of wisdom and Kire’s apparent lack of faith in the people to communicate with the land in the future in order to rekindle a relationship with their past. Nature is personified as a mother and a lover at the same time and it is the estrangement of the Naga people with their own past that Kire attempts to bridge through her works. In her latest novel, *When the River Sleeps*, Villie, a forest dwelling man who is employed by the Forest department owing to his knowledge of the ways of the forest becomes the guardian figure of ancient knowledge and the keeper of the fabled “heart stone”, a mystical stone that gives its owner a supreme understanding of the spirit world as well as success in hunting, prowess in war and cattle. It is interesting to note Kire’s resolute focus upon the world contained within a village with a refusal to give the limelight to ill-effects of the ‘civilizing’ world. Kire is set apart as a writer in this manner. Apart from references to show contact with cultures and institutions away from the Naga Hills (the Forest Department) Kire consciously ensures that her work revolves around the lives of the people in different tribes of Nagaland. In the novel she expounds upon inter-tribe relations, village laws, the intricacies of the spirit world and the life of a wanderer. The antagonists in the story are a group of unethical hunters. While the narrative focuses upon the various beliefs of Villie’s community, it is also a story of reconciliation as Villie manages to bring into the folds of the community, a woman (Ate) once accused of being a *Kirhupfümia*. Kire does not dismiss the practice as a social evil but instead buys into tribal belief and attributes these women with the terrible powers they are rumoured to possess. The entire narrative is therefore built upon tribal knowledge without interruptions from the ‘mainland’ with their attempts to rationalise and deduce the workings of the community while simultaneously trying to rid the people of their ‘barbaric’ ways. The deep magic and mysticism embedded in the novel therefore inks a pact between the readers and Villie- in the course of the novel, all that happens is real and certified by the wise guardian of the forest. In that space, knowledge from mainstream culture is non-functional and therefore readers are compelled to understand tribal laws and customs as they were meant to be seen- as precautionary and necessary measures based upon ancient knowledge and assured reason of a community. It is the denial of her people’s right to tell their story that Kire fights against. In a speech delivered to the International Congress of PEN in Norway, 2004 Kire asserts that ‘the telling of a story is a spiritual exercise that is an integral part of the healing of a people’s psychological wounds...Naga literature is facing a dismissive neo-colonial attitude. Their (publishing houses) expectations from the region are very low indeed. It is a stereotyped expectation that Naga writers are capable only of producing politically charged writing or exotic folk literature in mediocre language.’ She quotes Aboriginal writer Ernie Dingo in talking about the achievement of Naga literature- “It is like the dark side of the moon/For it is there/But so little known.”

The political way in which she uses her traditional folklore to make a commentary on how she is not merely playing into stereotypes but once again reminding people of the reason this culture needs to be preserved by displaying its incredible wealth has been lauded. She deliberately brings the sole focus back to her community and not to the ravages experienced by it in its contact with alien cultures in order to strengthen her case for cultural greatness. The great subtlety employed by her in making references to the pain of a threatened culture is illustrative of high skill and maturity.

According to B. Malinowski, ‘myth expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality;...and contains practical rules for the guidance of the mass.’ It is exactly this function of

folklore that Kire attempts to make the public and her own people aware of by drawing on folkloric traditions in her writing.

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## Featured Photograph

Iliangna Haralu



“This photograph was taken at Khonoma Village in Nagaland. In the picture, the parents are helping their children dress up to look their best for a ceremony that marked the teenagers stepping into adulthood.”

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DARJEELING

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-Anshika Baraily, 1<sup>st</sup> Year, B.A History Honours and Ashwin Chettri, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, B.A English Honours

“Where are you from?”

“Darjeeling.”

“Oh, Nepal?”

“No”

“Sikkim?”

“Well, no.”

“Where is it?”

“Err... West Bengal”

“But how?”

“How...”

Conversations about Darjeeling often run along similar lines.

Darjeeling, “The Queen of the Hills” is an almost deified version of a place which has been juggled time and again in the hands of various states and countries. It is a place whose history has been rife with treaties and frequent change of hands and yet a place which has been loved by its people with a great degree of enthusiasm.

The word Darjeeling has been derived from the Tibetan word ‘Dorje’ meaning ‘thunderbolt’ and ‘ling’, meaning ‘land’, hence The Land of Thunderbolt.

Geographically a part of the Lesser Himalayas, Darjeeling shares its border with three countries namely Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Siliguri Corridor region of the district, also known as the ‘chicken’s neck’ links the entire North East region with mainland India, with Nepal and Bangladesh on its sides.

Darjeeling can safely be called a cultural hotspot. This region is inhabited by diverse ethnic communities such as the Rais, Lepchas, Gurungs, Bhutias, Thapas, Tamangs, Newars and so on, each having their distinct language and cultural heritage.

To understand the History of Darjeeling, it is important for us to take into account the history of its neighbours, mainly Sikkim and Nepal: Darjeeling was originally a part of the kingdom of Sikkim and later was under the Nepalese rule for a significant period of time. The three places have a great degree of ethno linguistic similarities owing to the cultural fluidity which has dappled its history. The Lepcha, Limbu, Bhutia tribes and castes of the so called ‘Nepali race’ are known to have inhabited the hilly tracts of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong long before it was brought under the kingdom of Sikkim in 1600s.

The invasion by the Nepalese army in the 1790s caused a major demographic change to the place which saw an addition to the existing Nepali population in the hills. This event also gave a new political dimension to the place. The kingdom of Nepal had been expanding its north and south frontiers which brought it into conflict with the Chinese and the British. Owing to the territorial disputes which it had been facing with the kingdom of Nepal, the British readily agreed to help

Sikkim win back the lost territories from the Nepalese Army. The British interest in the matter was twofold: firstly, it could expedite its expansion towards the north and secondly, it could establish a trade route with Tibet and check the influence of Russia on Western Tibet under its "Great Game" in Asia. Thus, a stage was set for the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) where the Nepalese army was defeated by the British, resulting in the *Treaty of Sugauli* in 1816 whereby Nepal had to cede around a third of its territory. Darjeeling inevitably was pulled into it.

*Treaty of Titalia* was signed in 1817 between Sikkim and the British according to which the land area between Teesta and Mechi rivers was returned to the Chogyal of Sikkim. Owing to a border dispute between Nepal and Sikkim in 1826, the then Governor General of India, Lord William Bentick sent Captain George Lloyd and W.S. Grant to Darjeeling to resolve the issue. It was then that the idea of a 'Sanatorium' for the British troops to seek respite from the sweltering summers was conceived. Darjeeling was a strategically important location in commanding entrance to Nepal and Bhutan and could function as a British outpost in the Himalayan trade route to Tibet – therefore, the need to hold it under their sway was strongly felt. Also, from its commanding height, whole of Sikkim and its neighboring areas could be observed and protected.

In 1835, *The Deed of Grant* was signed whereby Darjeeling was ceded to the British for a compensation of Rs. 3000 per annum which was later raised to 6000 per annum. In a matter of few years, the relationship between Sikkim and the British tumbled downhill. The relations between the two powers deteriorated so miserably that when Dr. Campbell and the botanist J.D. Hooker went for an expedition to Sikkim, they were captured despite having valid permits and were subjected to severe humiliation. This was used as a pretext by the British to send a punitive army and the entire of Darjeeling along with its adjoining areas was annexed to the British territories under the *Treaty of Tumlong* (1861).

After the defeat of the Bhutanese in the Anglo-Bhutan war, the *Treaty of Sinchulawas* was signed in 1865 and the area of Kalimpong which had been earlier captured from Sikkim was brought under the British rule as well. Kalimpong was formed as a sub division by the name of Damlikote and was attached to western Dooars before being transferred to the District of Darjeeling a year later. In 1891, Kurseong Sub Division was formed and in 1907, Siliguri sub division was formed by splitting the Kurseong sub division. With this, we get a rough picture of Darjeeling District as it exists today.

*To and Fro ...*

Darjeeling has suffered a great degree in the hands of various rulers, being politically grafted on various places and in diverse occasions. In 1850, large areas of the Hilly and Terai tracts of land were annexed by the British rulers. The Terai region, which included Siliguri was placed under Purnea district whereas the hills were given to Darjeeling. However, the majority of populace on both sides that shared cultural and linguistic identities protested. Both were reattached to Darjeeling. A few years later, Darjeeling was included in the 'Rajshahi division' (Present day Bangladesh) as a district but in 1905, the partition of Bengal led to Darjeeling being shifted into the 'Bhagalpur Division' (Present day Bihar).

In 1907, the Hillmen's council sent a memorandum to the Morley-Minto reforms. This petition was aimed at procuring a separate state for the people residing in Darjeeling district. Due to the rearrangement of provinces, Darjeeling was once again shifted into the Rajshahi division. Later, Darjeeling was made into a non-regulatory body (where the rules of the raj were not applicable) on acknowledgement of the fact that Darjeeling District was culturally, historically, ethnically, linguistically and geographically distinct from that of mainland Bengal.

From 1862-1870 Darjeeling was considered a 'Regulated area'. In 1874, it came under 'Scheduled Districts.' Later, its status was changed to 'Backward Tracts.' 1919 saw the government of India Act being enacted and the Bengal legislations council constituted. However, Darjeeling was not required to send any representative to the council. It was not subjected to the vote of the council either. Darjeeling was later declared an 'Excluded area' whereby its administration was directly vested under the Governor in council who had the authority to deny or modify the administration of the district as and when he thought fit.

A century after the Deed of Grant, Darjeeling was labeled as a 'Partially Excluded Area' meaning that it was required to send a representative to the Bengal Legislations Council. It was only in 1935 that Darjeeling was brought under Bengal. Roughly twenty years after Darjeeling was included in the Bengal region, the state of West Bengal was formed. Roughly two decades after Darjeeling's merge with West Bengal, the kingdom of Sikkim merged with India.

The need for an identity of their own has been strongly felt among the people residing in Darjeeling district. One of the chief reasons behind this anxiety may be the presence of a neighboring country with which Indian Gorkhas share many ethno-linguistic similarities owing to which Indian Gorkhas are frequently subjected to racial discrimination and looked down upon as immigrants even after having lived in the area for more than five centuries. This search for an identity of their own was the most important reason behind the demand for a separate state. This sentiment was captured in the course of events which unfolded during the year 1986 when, under the leadership of Subash Ghising, thousands of people joined a mass agitation resulting in a bloodbath where many lost their lives all for the sake of this 'identity'. This agitation is seen by many political analysts as a culmination of the Gorkha anxiety, fueled by the signing of Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) that permits "on a reciprocal basis, the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature", which confused the status of being a 'Nepali in India'.

The anxiety of being classified as the 'other' in one's own country led to the creation of the term 'Indian Gorkhas'. The term 'Indian Gorkha' has been used to denote the residents of the place irrespective of their caste and creed. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014, three days after the Center set into motion the process for the creation of Telangana, Mangal Singh Rajput (father of two), self-immolated himself crying "We want Gorkhaland". He was not a Gorkha by birth but espoused the cause of Gorkhaland. The aspiration of the people of the region for a separate state is not enclosed within the boundaries of race, cast or religion.

Due to the hills being sparsely populated as compared to the rest of Bengal, the aspirations of the people and their grievances are not adequately addressed. West Bengal sends 42 members to the Lok Sabha out of which one precious seat is assigned to Darjeeling. In the West Bengal State Assembly, which has 294 legislatives, Darjeeling sends a mere 3 members. Despite being a small place in terms of area Darjeeling is a melting pot of diverse ethnic identities that have their own language and culture which must be taken into account while assessing the region. Darjeeling District serves as a sanctuary for the existence and fate of multiple minority identities.

The misrule of the place by the state government down the years has led to a general unrest amongst the people who see themselves as having a different cultural, historical, ethnic, linguistic, geographical heritage from that of mainland Bengal. Despite ongoing demands for a separate state for more than a century, the Government has continued to bank on piecemeal alternatives and policy of appeasement towards the local leaders in the form of some "semi-autonomous body" or the other. In recent years, people of the region have

not just suffered general dissatisfaction but have also experienced a considerable degree of alienation from their own country due to the acute identity crisis which plagues them in their own homeland.

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## THE QUEST FOR JEWISH IDENTITY: THE BNEI MENASHE OF

### THE NORTH-EAST

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- Reuben Paulianding Naulak, 1<sup>st</sup> Year, B.A Philosophy Honours

The visit of India's President, Pranab Mukherjee, to Israel on October 2015 was a historic one in the sense that it was the first time the President of the largest democracy visited the only democracy in the Middle East. More inconspicuous but as significant, it was also the first time the Bnei Menashe community of India was publicly acknowledged by an Israeli premier. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his speech, said of the Bnei Menashe:

"There is among us a living bridge; the wonderful Bnei Menashe, whose members have and are making Aliyah from India to Israel. And with their love for Israel and their great humility, and through impressive efforts, they are absorbed into Israeli society. But they also create that living bridge between our two peoples."

#### **THE CHIN-KUKI-MIZO-ZOMI (CHIKIMZO)**

The Bnei Menashe (also known as Chins, Mizos, Kuki and Zomi) are a group of tribes inhabiting Mizoram and Manipur, the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh and the North West region of Myanmar. They are of Mongoloid stock, speak the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and comprise of over 28 sub-tribes with noticeably close cultural, linguistic, historical and territorial affinities. In the late 1890s, Christian missionaries arrived at the region where the CHIKIMZO settled and worked to convert them. Within a few decades, just about the whole CHIKIMZO population accepted Christianity. But in the mid-nineteenth century, a group of people within the CHIKIMZO tribe began a Messianic movement, claiming Jewish origins and correspondingly adopting Jewish customs and practices. In the 1980s and 1990s, they established contacts with other Jewish groups in Israel and some even emigrated to Israel, after completing the required formal conversion to be accepted there as Jews. This was due to the considerable role paid by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, who investigated this group's claim of Jewish descent, making several trips to North East India. At long last, convinced by his finds, he named them as "Bnei Menashe" (Hebrew for 'Sons of Menashe'). Subsequent investigations and research on the CHIKIMZO and their alleged Jewish ancestry involving genetic tests, collating historical accounts and an examination of their vast oral traditions, moved the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic Jews, Shlomo Amar, to formally accept the Bnei Menashe as descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel in April, 2015. This adjudication granted the Bnei Menashe the right to immigrate as Jews to Israel under the country's Law of Return.

Before we delve into the evidences that came forth to justify such a seemingly ludicrous claim, we shall retrace our steps three thousand years back and explore the background of our study as narrated by Biblical and historical accounts.

#### **THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL, ITS FALL AND THE EXILE OF THE ISRAELITES (c.1030 BCE – c.722 BCE)**

Genesis chapter 35 verses 10 to 12 mention how the Israelite God changed Jacob's name to Israel and blessed him and his descendants. Jacob, by two wives and two concubines had twelve sons who became the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The third king of Israel's reign, King Solomon's, (c.970-930) for forty years marked the golden period of the kingdom of Israel. His death was followed by the disintegration of the kingdom into two parts: The southern kingdom, called the House of



Judah, and the northern kingdom, known as the House of Israel. The kingdom of Judah was ruled by King Rehoboam with the allegiance of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and a large portion of the tribe of Levi. The rest of the tribes paid obeisance to King Jeroboam who ruled the kingdom of Israel. In c. 722 BCE, the kingdom of Israel was invaded by the Assyrians under King Shalmanesar (2 Kings 17:6). The city of Samaria was plundered and the Israelites were deported to Assyria. However, the southern kingdom was spared the conquest and the Jews of today primarily descended from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The ten deported tribes intermarried with the local people, their distinct identity eventually disappeared, and their culture was lost to history. Hence, they were called "The Ten Lost Tribes".

### **ORAL HISTORY, SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCES AND CULTURAL LIKENESS**

There has already been a vast body of literature produced on the study undertaken to determine whether the CHIKIMZO have Jewish roots. Author and noted journalist Hillel Halkin have published, after five years of extensive research, an entire book on the subject titled "Across the Sabbath River: In search of a Lost tribe". Plainly, it would be too arduous a task to examine each and every work produced on this subject matter, and would furthermore require copious amount of pages. Therefore, we shall highlight a few but significant discoveries that stood out as compelling evidences backing the Bnei Menashe claim.

The CHIKIMZO did not possess written history but chiefly relied upon their oral traditions to trace their past. According to one account, they emerged from Khul or Chhinlung (Cave) which is believed to be somewhere in and around the stone forest near Kunming in Yunan province, China, others maintain that they first lived in a place called Chiimnuai in the Chin Hills of Burma, from where they dispersed in different directions. There are even narratives among them which posits that they lived in the caves (Khul) to hide themselves from the Chinese emperor Huang Ti (246-219 BCE) who conscripted them as labour force for building the Great Wall of China, but this is entirely the subject of another study. The dichotomy between the theories of the Khul and Chiimnuai origin is extremely subtle, and in fact, they might as well be said to be a part of a larger history of migration and search for settlement. The Bnei Menashe have given an account justifying their claims of Jewish descent by claiming that they have an oral history which describes their escape from slavery in Assyria over 2700 years ago. They arrived at Persia, and from there moved to what is now Afghanistan. From there, they travelled towards Hindu Kush and proceeded to Tibet, then to Kaifeng, reaching the Chinese city around 240 BCE. Though this theory still requires material evidence, if it is taken into account, it astonishingly gives sense to the two theories of the Khul and Chiimnuai origins, which would then be a part and parcel of the long journey of the Bnei Menashe from Assyria across vast stretches of land and into northeast India.

When the Christian missionaries started work among the CHIKIMZO, they were bewildered to find that the tribes worshipped one god, Pathian, and were familiar with many stories of the Bible. This might have contributed to their prompt acceptance of Christianity. When the Bible was translated into the local languages in the 1970s, the people began to study it themselves. They discovered that the stories, customs and practices were peculiarly similar to theirs. For instance, the traditional Hmar harvest festival, Sikpuiroi, has a song called "Sikpui Hla" which narrates the events following the exodus of Israelites from Egypt as found in Exodus 13 and 14. The English translation of the song is as follows:

While we are preparing for the Sikpui feast,  
The big red sea becomes divided  
As we march along fighting our foes,  
We are being led by pillar of cloud by day

And pillar of fire by night.  
 Our enemies, O ye folks, are thick with fury,  
 Come out with your shields and arrows.  
 Fighting our enemies all day long  
 We march forward as cloud-fire goes before us,  
 The enemies we fought all day long.  
 The big sea swallowed them like wild beast,  
 Collect the quails,  
 And draw the water that springs out of the rock.

Similarly, a folksong called "Tuipi san kan la", translated as "The song of crossing the Red Sea", narrates the same event. There are other numerous songs harking back to their 'Israelite' past, like 'Litenten Zion' and many more which contain Hebrew terms like Selah, Yah, Yahweh, etc. Much of their ancient songs invoke an ancestor who they referred to as 'Manmasi'. This progenitor, the Bnei Menashe argued, was the Hebrew Menasheh, the son of Joseph and from whom the Israeli tribe of Menashe was supposed to be descended. Others contended that their common ancestor was Zo or Jo, who they further claimed was the Biblical Joseph himself. Hillel Halkin also discovered among the tribes texts and prayers reminiscent of Jewish liturgy.

To a certain extent, evidences in support of this theory also come from scientific lines. DNA studies at the Central Forensic Institute, Calcutta in 2005 suggested that "while the masculine side of the tribes bear no links to Israel, the feminine side suggests a genetic profile with Middle Eastern people." Bhaswan Maity, a research scholar at the institute who was involved in the DNA study remarked, "It is scientifically impossible to have the same genetic sequence in two populations living so far apart if they did not originate from a common stock who historically inhabited a common space." Another scientific finding based on medical tests suggests that a particular disease, Tay-Sachs and Saitika-Zenghit, a genetic bone disease, which is inherited by the Semitic Jews, is found in the CHIKIMZO tribes. This find is fascinating as this disease is normally found absent in other racial groups."

### **POPULAR CRITICISMS**

It is important to note that though the CHIKIMZO tribes number to around 3.7 million, less than 10,000 people from the community have adopted Judaism. The rest do not identify with the Jewish claim. There is also not a dearth of scholars who disagree with the theory of Jewish descent. In a 2004 study, Dr. Shaiva Weil, a senior researcher and noted anthropologist at Hebrew University said, 'Although there is no documentary evidence linking the tribal peoples in North East India with the myth of the lost Israelites, it appears likely that, as with revivalism, the concept was introduced by the missionaries as part of their millenarian leanings.' Historian Tudor Parfitt further argued that "the Lost Tribes are indeed nothing but a myth", and asserts that this 'myth' was a vital feature of colonial discourse. There are also some, like the social scientist, Lev Grinberg, who cited political motive behind the move to convert people and bring them to Israel. Some critics thought that the government's policy of settling the Bnei Menashe immigrants in the unstable Judea, Samaria, and Gaza strip was part of a recruiting campaign to help boost the Israeli population, while some dismissed them as economic migrants. Even the genetic tests in Calcutta was rendered dubious when Israeli Professor Skorecki pointed out that the geneticists 'did not do a complete genetic sequencing of all the DNA and therefore it is difficult to rely on the conclusions derived from a partial sequencing.' But he also added that, 'after thousands of years it is difficult to identify the traces of the common genetic origin.'

There are still profuse accounts and diverse evidences surrounding this subject, but for Rabbi Aliyahu, historical evidences and genetic links do not determine a person's identity. Speaking against

the genetic researches conducted on the Bnei Menashe, he asserted, "I believe that the origin of this group is in the Jewish people not because of genetic considerations, and in any case Jewish identity is not determined according to genetics, but rather by the way people lead their life and by signs of cultural identity."

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# THE TRUE LOVE STORY OF MEIRIANG AND LUBUANEI

## A Zeliangrong Folk Tale

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-Kanpat Gangmei, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, B.Sc. Chemistry Honours

(With special thanks to Gaikhang Guanmei)

Once upon a time, there lived in a village named Buanruangluang (Tamenglong, Manipur), Meiriang and Lubuannei, whose love story remains one of the best of its kind and is a favourite folklore of the Zeliangrong (Naga) tribe.

Meiriang was an orphan boy who looked after himself from a very young age. Lubuannei too, lost her father when she was a child, but she had her mother to look after her. Right from their childhood, they were fond of each other and Lubuannei's mother treated Meiriang as her own son. They would spend time together while going into the forest to collect firewood while Lubuannei's mother would till the fields.

On one occasion, Meiriang asked Lubuannei whether she wanted to marry someone from their village or from other villages, but when she did not respond, he told her that he would marry her away to someone else. When she heard this, she bit his arm. This made him realise that she might have romantic feelings towards him, just like he did towards her. After several years, Meiriang grew up to be a fine man of good values and was respected in the village. In those days, the strength of a man determined his status in the society. Meiriang was the strongest of all and he excelled in all physical activities and sports. The elders of the village made him the head of the Khangchu, which comprised of the young men in the village. Lubuannei too, turned out to be a lady of good character and moral values and she was widely known for her beauty.

One day, Muliangah, a gentleman from a neighbouring village came for a visit to Buanruangluang. He was also a champion in his village and was comparatively a richer man than Meiriang was. Meiriang and Muliangah decided to test their strength by having an arm wrestling. In the first round, Meiriang lost and in the second, he won. But the visitor was not content with the result and he challenged yet again. After quite a struggle, Meiriang finally won. However it was revealed later that the visitor had a different purpose for his visit, which was to see the beauty of Lubuannei. Shortly after this, the father of Muliangah came to ask for the hand of Lubuannei in marriage for his son. Being a widow who knew about hardships, Lubuannei's mother agreed to marry her daughter off to this young, rich and respectable man.

Lubuannei was not aware of this and had she been so, she would never have agreed to the arrangement. The marriage ceremony was set for the day after harvest. When Muliangah occasionally kept visiting her village, Lubuannei grew suspicious of the situation and when suspicion turned to truth, she furiously confronted her mother. Her mother explained to her that it was for her own good and that if she didn't obey, she would commit suicide. Lubuannei had no other choice than to listen to her mother and she shared her woes with her childhood sweetheart, Meiriang. Meiriang told Lubuannei that fate destined them to separate from each other and also reluctantly gave his best regards for her wedding and departed. While leaving, he wept his heart out, since he promised himself that he would never see his deeply beloved anymore. He would not have anybody to watch the sunset together with, nor would have someone like her to share his thoughts with. Since

Meiriang was an orphan, Lubuannei was the only person he got attached to and there was nobody else who could understand him better. Soon enough he knew that they would be walking on different paths of life. Though he loved her very much, he gave into the idea of marrying Lubuannei off to a richer guy since that would make her suffer less and let her live in the comfort of her husband's wealth.

It was time for harvest and Meiriang finally went to his fields. A few days later, the elders of the neighbouring village came for Lubuannei. She decided to pay Meiriang a final visit but he had not returned yet. Luckily for her, she met a woman who was on her way to the fields and she asked her necklace to be given, as a farewell gift, to Meiriang. However, when the woman reached the fields, she could not find him and she left the gift in the barn and went on her way. Later when Meiriang went to his barn for lunch, he saw it and realized it was Lubuannei's and he ran all the way back to the village, only to find her gone. He then ran along the path all the way to the neighbouring village in the hope of catching up with them but soon realized the futility of his pursuit and called her name loudly, in exasperation. Lubuannei heard her lover's voice echoing in the valley and responded, but in vain. He was too far behind and would never be able to catch up with the gang of men who had her captive.

Theirs was a love story which would begin and end within their own little valley, which was too timid to break from the shackles of the larger mountains that held it close and throttled. Till date, those mountains still shiver with the chilling echoes of the names of the two lost lovers - Meiriang and Lubuannei.

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## THE MEITEIS AND THE ADVENT OF VAISHNAVISM

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- Heikrujam Prasanjeet, Final year, M.Sc. Physics

### INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a tiny landlocked state along the eastern edge of northeast India. It consists of a low-lying valley, called the Imphal valley, surrounded by nine hill ranges. The hills are inhabited by different tribes, while the valley is dominated mostly by the Meiteis, in terms of population. Before the state got its name in the eighteenth century AD, it was known, throughout its history, by more than twenty names – Meitrabak, Meiteileipak, Kangleipak, etc.

According to Manipur Mythology, Kochin Tukthapa Ipu Athoupa Pakhangpa gave birth to the seven yek (clans) of the Meiteis. The earliest documented history of Manipur dates back to first century AD during the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 AD). Though the Meiteis had settled in the valley long before that, there remains no authentic document.

The Meiteis are a group of people who have preserved their own language, culture and tradition. Although the origin of the Meiteis is not altogether clear, the original inhabitants preserved a faith of their own, known as the Meitei religion. According to them, 'Lainingthou Sanamahi' is the creator of all. The Meitei religion, through close association with Bengal Vaishnavism, later evolved into a new synthesis, a conglomeration of the two religions intricately interwoven into each other. In the modern period, many of the lesser Gods of the ancient religion have fallen into oblivion, whereas the central Gods continue to exist.

### THE ADVENT OF VAISHNAVISM

Vaishnavism arrived in Manipur in successive stages. Three different Vaishnava schools were accepted in turn: first, the School of Nimbarka, which introduced the worship of Krishna and Radha, then the School of Ramananda, emphasizing the worship of Rama, Sita and Hanuman, and finally the School of Chaitanya, which involved widespread use of songs and dances revolving around the theme of Krishna and Radha.

The first element of Vaishnavism that came to Manipur was, quite unexpectedly, from the east. In 1470 AD, Kiyamba, the then king of Manipur, and his ally, Coupha Khek Khomba, the king of Pong, in a joint expedition, conquered Kyaang Khambat, a Shan Kingdom in Kabow Valley, and shared its territories. As a part of their celebration of victory, they exchanged presents, and one of the presents received from the Pong King was a small stone image of Lord Vishnu, riding on the back of Garuda. Later, regular worship of Lord Vishnu began in the palace; a Vishnu Temple was also built in the palace at Lamaangdon (present Bishnupur District). Right from the time of King Kiyamba, Hindu Brahmin families began to enter and settle in Manipur. Surprisingly, the king was never initiated into the new faith.

The reign of King Charairongba (1697-1709 AD) is marked, in the history of Manipur, as the transitional phase between Meitei religion and Vaishnavism. He installed many temples dedicated to Meitei Gods and a few dedicated to Hindu Gods. Yet, he was a tolerant ruler and did not impose the new religion on his people.

The role of King Pamheiba (1709-1748 AD) is very significant in this context. Under his patronage, Shri Chaitanya's School of Vaishnavism gradually spread across Manipur. There were, of course, strong oppositions from the supporters of the indigenous religion, but none could withstand the severe religious persecutions by the king. According to *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of Manipur, King Pamheiba was initiated into Vaishnavism by Guru Gopal Das, a Hindu Brahmin, in October, 1717 and was given the name Garibaniwas. In 1925 AD, he took up the Hindu title 'Maharaja'. After Guru Gopal Das left Manipur for his native kingdom, Shantidas Goshai, a Bengal Brahmin who had an insatiable lust for power, high position, liberty and fame, became his religious guru. Under his advice, Garibaniwaz took up strong actions to abolish and completely erase the indigenous faith and beliefs from the kingdom. He ordered the destruction of the temples, the shrines and the images of local gods and goddesses. He dug out the burial grounds of his ancestors and cremated the bones and the remains on the bank of the river Ningthi (Chindwin River in Myanmar), following the Hindu tradition of cremating the dead. It was during his time that the name of the kingdom was changed to 'Manipur', by falsely associating its history with the Mahabharata. The names of many places were also changed to Sanskrit names. The people were to take up Hindu names prefixed or suffixed with 'Sri', 'Srimati', 'Singh' or 'Devi'. 'Gotra' was introduced for the seven yek (clans) of the Meiteis. Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were translated into Meitei language. The language itself absorbed many Hindi and Bengali words. The Meitei script was abandoned and replaced with the Bengali script. Under the order of the Maharaja, the Puya, the traditional Holy Scriptures and books in possession of the local priests and the general public, were burnt to ashes, and the image of Lainingthou Sanamahi in the palace was also broken into pieces. This unfortunate event took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the Meitei lunar month of Mera in 1654 saka (1732 AD) and is remembered even today as 'Puya Mei Thaba' (burning of the Puya).

The influence of Vaishnavism in Manipur reached its zenith during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1749-1798 AD). Unlike Garibaniwaz, Maharaja Bhagyachandra was a pious and benevolent ruler. He propagated Chaitanya's School of Vaishnavism, not by force, but through the use of persuasion and peaceful means, and this proved to be more effective. He is credited with the introduction of Rasa Lila, a new form of religious dance drama based on the traditional Lai Haraoba dance, with graceful modifications. In fact, he dedicated three forms of Rasa Lila to Lord Krishna - Kunja Rasa, Maha Rasa and Basanta Rasa. At the same time, he also promoted the celebration of many traditional festivals such as Hiyang Tanaba (boat race), Cheiraoba (celebrated on the first day of the New Year, based on the Meitei lunar calendar), etc. Under his order, the lost Cheitharol (the royal chronicle) was recompiled. Various religious reforms were implemented, and religious theatres introduced to spread Vaishnavism among the masses.

This trend was continued by the successive rulers. Thus, through the royal patronage of the reigning monarchs, Vaishnava Hinduism became the dominant religion amongst the Meiteis with the adaptation and partial incorporation of the old indigenous pantheon.

## **EFFECTS OF VAISHNAVISM**

The arrival of Vaishnavism in Manipur presents one of the rare examples of sharp religious rivalry and persecution in India's religious history, partly due to political reasons. With its coming, Manipur lost an entire tradition of its rich literature, culture and indigenous religion. The Meitei Hindus began to change their food habit and style of dressing. Albeit a portion of the Puya has been rewritten, it is not in the least possible to fully revive them. Apart from this, Vaishnavism also brought along its evil practices to Manipur; it introduced the caste system in a previously casteless society and initiated the inhuman practice of Sati. The latter was, fortunately, abolished within a few years following its inception.

Quite interestingly, the new religion never made it to the hills of Manipur, thus creating a line of divide between the people of the hills and those of the valley. In a society where a strong notion of equality based on tribalism and egalitarianism existed, a new social concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' emerged. The Meitei Hindus, who were meat-eater-turned-vegetarians, considered themselves 'cleansed', while the tribes of the hills, who were hunters and meat-eaters, were deemed 'polluted'. The Meitei Hindus, therefore, alienated them; the kingdom became weaker as it lost its former support from the tribes.

Though Vaishnavism has brought about much harm to the Manipuri society, one cannot altogether overlook its positive impacts. In addition to the three forms of Rasa Lila dedicated by Maharaja Bhagyachandra, two new forms – Nitya Rasa during Maharaja Chandrakirti's reign (1850-1886 AD) and Diva Rasa during Maharaja Churachand's reign (1891-1941 AD) – were introduced. Vaishnavism has also brought Manipur closer to the Indian society. Today, the people of Manipur celebrate a number of festivals of Hindu origin, such as Yaoshang (Holi), Rath Yatra, Janmashtami, Durga Puja, Diwali, etc., with pomp and enthusiasm no less than that of any Hindu in other parts, but with peculiarities in their observance not found elsewhere in India.

When Vaishnavism arrived in Manipur, many characteristics of the traditional religion were abandoned; but certain aspects of the classical Vaishnavism were never fully accepted. Manipuri Vaishnavism is essentially a complex amalgamation of the old Meitei religion and the 'Indian Vaishnavism'. The present Meiteis still attend to their traditional deities, such as Lainingthou Sanamahi, Ima Leimarel Shidabi, Panthoibi, Nongshaba, etc., alongside the Hindu Gods like Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi and so on. Along with the Hindu festivals, they also celebrate the traditional festivals such as Cheiraoba, Heikru Hidongba, Lai Haraoba, Ningol Chakkouba, etc., with ardent exuberance and unrivalled splendour, and with almost no influence from Vaishnavism. The Cheitharol Kumbaba has been rewritten and translated into English. The original Meitei script is, now, under the process of revival and is gradually replacing the Bengali script in schools; Manipur, at present, has three distinct generations of people – the first generation who can read and write the Bengali script but not the Meitei script, the second generation who have learnt both and finally, the third generation who understand the Meitei script and not the Bengali script.

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## THEY CALL ME NAMES

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-S. Lina Poumai, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, B.A History Honours

Every day I walk to the bus stop, take an auto rickshaw to the metro station that takes about 10 minutes, then the metro ride to Vishwavidyalaya that takes another 25 minutes and the auto ride to college that takes, what, 5 minutes? All this, if there is no traffic.

It is quite a task, especially when repeated almost every morning but one gets used to things when one keeps doing them but without ever really getting used to them.

It was a Tuesday morning when I was secretly raving about how good the weather was, walking the streets of RK Puram with a poker-face on and pretending to ignore the world around me, the cars, the dogs, the parents and their children, the young boys and girls walking to school in the morning.

Could anyone have guessed the effort I put in the morning to apply my gel eye liner by just looking at me?

With one glance at me could anyone have guessed what a hearty meal I had the previous night, the excitement I feel when my father gets pork meat home, how I do not let my mother come near it so that I can cook it with bamboo shoot and the chillies, the potatoes, all that drowning in its own fats, all that and the chillies! A good dinner is always a good end to a day and a good dinner is pork and bamboo shoot and then there are potatoes too and yes the chillies.

To that, could anyone have known?

With one look at me could anyone have known about the torch that has been lit in my heart for somebody and that the fire has been set on the other side too?

And though it has only been a couple of months it still is the freshest part of me  
And though it has already been a couple of months it still is the freshest part of me.

One glance at me: could anyone have known?

Look at me and tell me, could you have known all the pains I took to reach this moment of my life, to sit here and be able to write, to stand here and be able to talk, to lay here and be able to sing?

I have lived to see this day today, to see you today. I lived to this day.

Could you have guessed?

All my cries, sufferings, laughter, joys, memories and even those that I don't remember anymore: My stories I could tell my children and then their children, stories I could tell my friends, stories I could tell someone who needs it more than I do, all of that, could you have fathomed the stories that breathe in me? Could you have guessed what my stories would be like? With just one look at me?

The answer is known. The answer is no.

Walking the streets of RK Puram, raving about how pleasant the morning is, ignoring the world around me, a child screams, "Chinki!" and he laughs.

His friends laugh.

Instantly, my life, my stories, all became worth nothing.

I just became a face with no past whatsoever, only a face that was moulded differently, shaped differently from the 'you', painted differently from the 'you'.

I only remained a face.

My entire existence brought down to the only truth of my life: my face.

Did that make that boy's day?

"Chinki" and you laughed, you all laughed.

What was the joke I wonder, the very word 'Chinki'?

The word is cringe worthy to me.

I can never bring myself to say it loudly, and it is a word I associate with shame.

Is that not how it is?

Chinki.

But for that boy it wasn't. He said it proudly, bravely, tauntingly.

Chinki!

You laugh, you all laugh.

I have eyes that are shaped differently from yours and perhaps I am different from you but is that a weapon for you to use against me? Perhaps you are different from me too but have I ever used that against you?

To me you were just a boy, a child going to school in this lovely part of the city on this lovely morning and I swear I had no intention to hurt you. I swear I still have no intention to hurt you.

"Chinki"

I pray that you'll grow up to be a good man who doesn't mock people for being different, who'll learn kindness and tolerance

"Chinki"

Who will be accepting of all humanity, for humans are real and so is humanity, for there is no superior race, as hard it is to believe it I hope you'll come to believe it.

"Chinki"

I hope you'll grow up to be a man who will make humanity proud and himself proud for the good man you have turned out to be.

"Chinki"

I hope there will be no more "chinki" and no more name calling

"Chinki"

I hope there will be no more mockery and prejudice

"Chinki"

I hope you'll be kind, sensitive and sensible

"Chinki"

I hope you'll get real

"Chinki"

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