



LEPCHAS: THE BROTHERS OF THE BAMBOO

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Abstract

All over eastern India many varieties of bamboos are found, in Sikkim and Darjeeling where the indigenous Lepchas have resided from an early age bamboo has been one of their most important natural plants. Bamboo played a very important part in every answer to their problems, so the amenities that they developed were to enhance these activities. Herein we find that the Lepchas were dexterous users of various species of bamboos found in their environment. Along the Himalayas bamboos are found varying from size and strength and most of these species were used extensively by the Lepchas. We shall in this article try to bring forth the importance of bamboo in their day to day lives.

Keywords: Lepchas, Bamboo, Indigenous, Sikkim, Darjeeling.

Introduction

All the Lepcha people residing in Sikkim and Darjeeling say that the Lepchas originated together with bamboo on this earth. Therefore, different species of bamboos have been used in their livelihood; throughout their life in cultural and religious ceremony as in birth and death. Bamboos fulfil all the necessities to make livelihood comfortable as kitchen products, agricultural tools, construction materials, and weapons such as bows and arrows. According to Nebesky "At the same time as he made the primal couple, Tasheting also created bamboo, for he knew that the Lepchas could not live without it. They use it for building their houses; they make weapons, household gear, pots, mats, ropes and flutes from it; from pressed bamboo shoots they prepare sakritbi, a tasty food. For this reason the Lepchas say they are 'the brothers of the bamboo'.¹ Sir Richard Temple has admired the craftsmanship of the Lepchas and Bamboo in such a way, "The Lepchas, being most skilful woodsmen, will in a very short time build themselves a hut of bamboos, much after the Burmese fashion, which is watertight and, for a Lepcha, sufficiently warm."² According to K. P. Tamsang, "Bamboo is the most important product and an integral element in Lepcha day to day life, even the Lepcha maxim says like this, 'Pomik Potong Ayit sa dookkung mo', which means God had actually created the bamboos along with the Lepchas, for it helps to build houses, rafts, bridges, handicrafts, bows, arrows. Spears, fishing rods, traps and contrivances, furniture's, utensils, baskets, mats, water jugs, fences, props, ropes, sticks, firewood, flutes, jew harps, poles, stakes and what naught that can be made out of it for the use of mankind. Its young shoots are eaten as vegetable; its pulps give strength in wrapping and stationary".³ The young shoots and the flowers of this plant is also not wasted, according to Hooker "The young shoots of several are eaten, and the seeds of one are made into a fermented drink and into bread in times of scarcity."⁴ L.A.Waddel, has translated a song that gives us an idea of how important Bamboo was to the Lepchas "The words of these idyllic songs refer not only to the primitive passion of love, but even to the inscrutable mystery of the origin and destiny of man. And in this last respect it is pathetic to notice how these Lepchas or Rongs specially associate themselves with their ubiquitous bamboo, whose stout stem supplies them with huts for shelter, with fuel, bows and arrows; its larger joints afford water-jugs, cooking-pots and pans; its smaller joints bestow bottles, smoking-pipes and flutes: its branches make a springy couch; its bark supplies ropes to span their raging torrents, also baskets and umbrellas; and its tender young shoots are eaten as food. Indeed, the Lepchas believe they could not exist without their beloved bamboos, and no wonder they glory in having been 'born of equal age with the bamboos'.

O Joy! In the olden time the head-Father-Spirit made the earth,

(He) the Sky-Existing-One made this earth,

He clothed the stony bosom of this tearful earth with fertile fields.

When the men were made and the jointed bamboos and the trees,
At that same time were we, the sons of the (one) mother-flesh jolly Rongs.⁵

Various Bamboo Varieties That the Lepchas Use

1. Poly Po (Nepali name: Choya Bans, Botanical name: Dendrocalamus Hamiltonii)

Lepcha people or Rong folk believe that they originated along with this bamboo. They say that it this bamboo can survive up to one thousand years if cared for properly. They usually compare this bamboo with Sal wood (*Shorea robusta*) for the longevity and service that it provide the user. The bark of young bamboo of this variety is used to make strands of thin thick binding materials and ropes. Various bamboo crafts are made with this bamboo such as Thyakka (contraption used to carry loads on head) and Rakpo (strong ropes used to tighten cattle to sheds). Other household appliances are also crafted from this bamboo including: Tangjyang and Tangar (large and small backpacks used to carry loads), Tangfyuk and Bagong (woven baskets used to keep food grains and others), Jhhak (medium sized woven basket used to store potatoes and yams, mostly underground), Mangkyong (used to keep small baby while the mother does her daily chores: a cradle), Takshyor (used traditionally to extract the oil of mustard and other oily grains), Shyor (bamboo sieve used to filter beer from the grains), for drinking Chi, fermented millet, Talu (bamboo mat used to dry food grains), Talyung (husk clearing bamboo board for food grains). In addition, it is also used to make Tak (waterproof bamboo spread used as Raincoat or umbrella) and Tunjuk (bamboo woven contraption used to catch fishes in small rivers). Buds of Choya Bans are used as a medicine for Pneumonia. There is a special technique to cut this bud. Firstly, it should be cut bottom-up with sharp knife then top-down. It must be cut with these two actions otherwise it will not have medicinal an effect. After this then ground and administered orally.⁶ Gorer writes “During the summer months a mat called ‘tuk’ is worn over the head as a protection against sun and rain; it is made of a double layer of finely woven bamboo filled with big leaves and has a rope in the centre to fasten it round the neck; it measures about three to four feet”.⁷ The fresh shoots of this bamboo is also used as a vegetable that is known as Tama (fermented bamboo shoots), only this bamboo is used to make Tama. According to Gorer “Finally the young bamboo shoots are good to eat and the leaves are fed to temporarily restrained domestic animals, such as oxen when they are needed for ploughing”.⁸ This bamboo is further useful to make the frame to support 108 lanterns for all ritual purpose.

2. Pugrong Po (Nepali name: Bhalu Bans, Botanical name: Dendrocalamus sikkimensis)

This bamboo has had many uses in the Lapcha community ever since the time of their ancestors. A bamboo container made by hollowing nodes of this bamboo and used to fetch water known as

Podam; it's another job is as a vessel used to churn butter from cream and it is also used as storage for various food grains; as the big long hollow allowed the user to store a significant amount of items necessary for cooking purposes. Hence, this container is commonly used for domestic chores. Moreover, a single node bamboo is also used for drinking of Chi (pathyut), a fermented drink made by millet. Drinking of Chi is very common in the Lapcha community and is mandatory for cultural, ritual and religious ceremony. This vessel (pathyut) is also used to store milk while the cow is being milked. This bamboo is also used as a construction material for building wood huts and houses. It is basically used as pillars and beams; planks for flooring, trusses to support a roof and roofing the houses especially kitchen. Green bamboo is also useful to cook rice, fish and meat as the moisture in the bamboo with a little water steams and cooks the food slowly. If this bamboo is cared for and preserved properly, a single piece can be used for a very long time.

3. Payong Po (Nepali name: Gope Bans, Botanical name: *Schizostachyum capitatum*)

This bamboo has one important function in Lepcha birthing ceremony. The sharp edge of this bamboo skin is used as a blade to cut the umbilical cord adjoining a mother and her baby. It is also used to make musical instruments such as Palit Keng and Pantong Palit (flutes). Lapcha people use flutes with five holes known as Palit Keng which produces a shrill sharp tone. They make these holes with the help of fire. Generally, Pantong Palit has seven holes and produces a lower tone. These instruments are very important in all Lepcha social and religious ceremonies. According to Hooker "Along bamboo flute, with four or six burnt holes far below the mouth hole, is the only musical instrument I have seen in use among them."⁹

4. Matlu Po (Nepali name: Malla Bans, Botanical name: *Bambusa Nutans*)

This bamboo being strong and straight finds a lot of use in Lepcha livelihood. It is used in construction as pillars, beams and rafters. Other load bearing structures such as household ladders, bed posts and sitting tools are also made from this bamboo. It is very useful for making local bridges as this durable long bamboo does not rot away easily and gives service for many years. Nails, needles and knitting sticks which needed to be thin strong and durable are also made from this bamboo. Kitchenware is made of this Bamboo as well, such as Tali (spatula) to make rice and gruel (Monjo; indigenous foods made of millet flour) Kyok (serving spoon) for serving vegetables. Malla Bans are useful for making Sali (Bow and Arrow) and Thoabbo (catapult); traditional weapons used for hunting birds and mammals. It is also used to make the handles of agricultural implements such as spades. This bamboo is also used for making walking sticks. Gorer states that " Pins and brooches are made from bamboo; bows and arrows, the Lepcha's only hunting weapons, quivers and scabbards, all are made from different sorts of bamboo".¹⁰

5. Pachel Po (Nepali name: Chillae Bans, Botanical name: Dendrocalamus Species):

This bamboo is mostly used in construction of houses as support i.e. pillar, to make partition walls etc. and other works which is temporary as this bamboo lasts only a few years. In addition, this is a good bamboo to make pots for drinking of Chi (Lepcha beer) in Lepcha social ceremonies etc, marriage and discarded later. This bamboo is also useful for making hangers to support plants and other vegetable plants that are climbers which are annuals. To sum up, this bamboo is used as a temporary fix or a substitute when other species of bamboos are not available as it is neither durable nor strong.

6. Pagjiok Po (Nepali name: Nibha Bans, Botanical name: Ampelocalamus Patellaris)

Thyakka (ropes), Rakpo (cattle binding ropes), Tangjyang (woven bamboo carrier) and Bagong (basket for small food grains) are made from this Bamboo. Low quality flutes can also be made from this Bamboo as it does not carry the same resonance as Pugrong Po.

7. Prong Po (Neplai name: Paryang Bans, Botanical name: Sinarundinaria Hookeriana):

Bamboo mats are made from this species of Bamboos, which is used for partitions between rooms and as a boundary wall in some houses. It is also used to make roofing of houses on a temporary basis. Chattopadhyay states that “The cattle shed are constructed a few yards away from the dwelling-house for the reason of hygiene. The roof of the shed is made of bamboo mat or thatch and is supported by wooden beams”¹¹ Not very durable and small in size it is used whole as rough boundary in cattle sheds or vegetable gardens. According to Das “In front of a Lepcha house is a field fenced in with bamboo – it is called the garden (sing), and in it are raised vegetables, flowers etc.”¹²

Items made from Bamboo

Listed below are some of the items made from bamboo by the Lepchas, from the table below we can get a good notion as to how important the bamboo plant is to the Lepcha people. Most of the utensils, containers, backpacks large or small, all sorts of binding materials and hunting gear were made from genus of grass. It can truly been seen why they call themselves brothers of bamboo.

Sl.No.	Lepcha Name	Nepali Name	Description in English
1	Tangjyang	Doko	Woven bamboo carrier.
2.	Thyakka	Namlo	Strong rope used to carry heavy loads
3.	Tangar	Thumchey	Woven bamboo carrier to carry food grains
4.	Bagong	Dalo	Basket for small food grains
5.	Talyung	Nanglo	Husk clearing bamboo board
6.	Taffu	Mana	Rice measuring scale
7.	Tangfi	Pathi	Paddy measuring scale
8.	Nopsong	Taraju	Measuring scale
9.	Tunjuk	Macha Bokney	Fish Carrier
10.	Tapkyo	Sarang	Long bamboo basket used as dryer and dirt filter.
11.	Taful	Sothey	Blower
12.	Tangdyong	Tokri	Big Basket
13	Fintuk	Syaptu	Chi (Beer) fermenting bamboo basket.
14.	Talu	Mandro	Bamboo carpet
15.	Takcham	Okhali	Hollow wooden crusher
16.	Kyok	Daru	Serving spoon
17.	Podam	Dhiri	Water carrier
18.	Pali	Choya	Bamboo rope
19.	Rafu	Kila	Spike
20.	Kyokdang	Dhungro	Butter making bamboo
21.	Subri	Mandanay	Butter making strong pole
22.	Jyomu	Dunero	Bamboo bucket used in milking cows
23.	Takshyor	Pecha	Oil straining basket
24.	Shyor	Chapani	Strainer
25.	Tangfyuk	Tokri	Small Basket
26.	Mangkyong	Kokro	Cradle
27.	Bongkyor	Molo	Bamboo cup uned to cover mouths of animals
28	Takchim	Mug, Pela	Cup and saucer
29.	Tali	Panew	Spatula
30.	Tangjit	Dalo	Basket
31.	Tangrhyam	Perungo	
32.	Thurmu	Chamach	Spoon
33.	Panfet	Chimta	Tongs
34.	Tak	Ghum	Umbrella
35.	Thoabbo	Katish	Catapult
36.	Sali	Dhanu-Kar	Bow and Arrow
37.	Thyaaktuk	Topi	Head gear
38.	Tako	Mug	Mug
39.	Ban-hyam	Daap	Scabbard
40.	Tendung	Sheri	Ladder
41.	Tanku	Furlung	Small elongated hanging basket
42	Pathyut	Dhungro	Container of bamboo for shipping Chi
43	Tangrong	Sidee	Bamboo staircase

Sources: Field Surveys.

Use of Bamboo in Lepcha House

The Lepcha house is a marvel of ingenious architecture, it is a strong and sturdy accommodation and unlike houses of other mountain dwellers. The foundation of the 'Li' or place of residence is made by erecting huge, strong and sturdy trunks of undressed trees on top of huge slabs of boulders which have a flat top, these pillars usually number nine in number, three in a row in equal spacing but depending on the size some were found with only four pillars. These pillars are notched at three to four feet roughly, in these notches horizontal beams comprising of solid tress are secured, this forms the floor of the house, the flooring varies from wooden planks to bamboos usually splits of Pugrong Po, these planks are usually fastened by stout pieces of mature bamboos hammered to the plates of horizontal beams through the planks, these floorings were though few in numbers, often the floors were solid mature Matlu Po bamboos fastened to the horizontal plates by strong sinews got from Poly Po bamboos. The plates at the top was fastened in the same way the floor plates are fastened, the notches are the same and in almost all cases the plates are trees interlocked into these notches, though there were a few where the trees were replaced by Matlu Po bamboos. Often the height at the edge of the rooms was not more than seven feet, with the centre poles holding the rafters at a height of around nine feet. There is extensive use of bamboo; the walls are usually made from split Matlu Po bamboos intertwined through sturdy mature split horizontal Matlu Po bamboo and plastered with clay, the windows are usually open rectangular spaces normally at a height of about three to four feet, the roof usually has a gentle gradient of a few feet interlaced by strong Matlu Po bamboo poles strung together to the roof plates by bamboo sinews of Poly Po, on these bamboos the Lepchas meticulously place bundles of straws, once the straws are locked satisfactorily it is fastened to the rafters using long splits of Matlu Po bamboos running the length of the roof at certain intervals throughout the roof, the thick thatched roof is a natural insulator trapping heat for the cold nights and keeping the rooms cool at daytime. The houses were normally devoid of any partition earlier with one portion of the room usually serving as the kitchen. According to the Ethnographic details of Sikkim "The kitchen is made of three stones over which pot is placed for cooking. The twigs gathered from jungle serve as firewood. The salt is kept in a bamboo container. The big spoons made of wood are used in preparing food. The ladle is made out of a fruit of a creeper plant, whose outer cover is hard and the bulbed shaped end rendered hollow. The food plate is made out of tree trunk or the bark of a tree. The roots gathered for food are grinded in a flat stone with a help of a grinding stone to make gruel or bread. The corn and millet grains are grinded in a stone grinder to prepare bread and gruel from them."¹³ The soot and smoke is almost always emanating from this cooking place, the soot usually covers almost the whole house and gives everything a black appearance. On top of the cooking place hangs a bamboo smoking place, it is usually fastened to the roof by strong binding ropes of Poly

Po bamboo and serves as a firewood stockpile and a smoking place for meat. The house is spacious but sparse, crying out the difficulties of life in these regions. A few silver pots and pans dangle from the wall along with some utensils, a soot covered kettle on the everlasting fire is something that meets your eye in each and every household, and in it a concoction of homemade black tea boils ready to greet anyone who passes by or visits the house. In the overhangs of soot covered various species of bamboos crisscrossing the house are seen dangling corns of maize bound together to be used as food and to be sown the coming season. The granary is normally a wooden box, rudimentary but purposeful or a huge woven Poly Po bamboo basket stocked with almost everything, a few yams, tender shoots of ferns and a few potatoes, squash and pumpkins are seen lying around. In a corner a horizontally hollowed out apparatus of Pugrong Po bamboo holds some sickles, a banphok and spades used to till the land. Wooden stools and bamboo stools made from sturdy thin, strong splits of Matlu Po covered by the skins of game and domesticated animals are often strewn around. In some corner one often finds a mattress made from hay, this is usually expertly woven normally five feet in length and two to two and a half feet wide. They roll this mattress out and sleep on it during night. Some houses are partitioned by bamboo splits and the rooms number four or five, the door normally opens into a room which serves as a sitting room or lounge area where guests are entertained, a few stools serve the purpose here, this room opens up to other rooms through door frameworks, one serves as the bed room which has a rudimentary bed made from wood or Matlu Po bamboo framework and small Prong Po bamboo fastened on the framework, the other is usually the prayer room which in some cases doubles up as a granary, this room is normally dark even in the daytime, one corner houses the altar with some deities, some offerings and a dim oil light lamp, various things occupy this room recently harvested grains, corns left to dry out to be used as seeds to various vegetables and roots. The last room of the house is the kitchen which also serves as the dining room; one corner has an earthen fireplace, above it a smoking bamboo flat bed which doubles up as a firewood storage. A small veranda of bamboo, few feet in width normally runs around the house barring the side opening or resting on the slope. The Lepchas in the time being came in contact with the Nepalese and borrowed some of their architecture, the use of stone is very much evident hereafter, the ground floor were mostly made of stone laid layer upon layer held together by mortar of mud and straw, these unusually thick walls are then plastered by fine clay. The upper floor of this type of house is normally wooden or of bamboo, both the floors house members of the family and the animals find accommodation elsewhere. Fred Pinn has given a vivid description of the Dokemoli, "The house of this (Pudumtam) village are few in number and scattered; those of the Dingpun, where we were, were a fair sample of the rest, which are all superior in construction to those commonly met with in the plains. The framework is of timber, having one end of the flooring beams resting on the hill,

and the other supported on posts from twelve to fourteen feet in height; the roof, floor and walls are made of split bamboo, the roof being lined with large leaves of a tree abounding in the forest, and which, under the influence of the smoke, assumes a highly polished appearance; at the side, looking out towards the valley for a space of about a foot and a half above the floor, the bamboos are placed at some distance from each other so as to form a kind of window the whole length of the house. The roof projects some distance over the walls protecting them from the rain, and forming a sort of veranda all round the buildings. The room is sealed with crushed bamboo through about three fourths of its breadth at a level with the base of the gable, forming a sort of upper room or attic used as a store room to which the ascent is by a large bamboo, notched so as to form a rude stair; a square frame of bamboo in one corner of the room confines a fire-place of mud about eight inches in thickness, five stones in the centre forming resting places for the cooking pots, before which presided the mistress of the domicile from morning to night labouring in her vocation. The sloping enclosure underneath the floor is appropriated to the accommodation of pigs, goats, etc. ¹⁴L. A. Waddel, in his book *Among the Himalayas*, has given a description of the Dokemoli in such a way, "The house, with the exception of the log framework, is built almost entirely of bamboo. The floor, the walls, the roof and the thatch are all of bamboo, as well as the vessels and cooking utensils. On the ground floor, in the angular space between the sloping hillside and the platform or floor of the hut, are housed the pigs, fowls and other live stock; and I have rather unpleasant recollections of nights spent in such huts over the squealing pigs; for the Lepchas treat this animal quite as one of the family. There is no division into rooms, as the family sleep altogether, untroubled by the Western scruples on such matters; and they never think of undressing when they retire to rest, probably from the need of remaining ever ready to defend themselves and their cattle from wild beasts. At one end is an open fireplace formed of a few stones and baked mud. Beside it are a few bamboo vessels, and leaves for plates; above it hangs a frame for smoking meat, though, considering that the room is constantly filled more or less with smoke, this contrivance seems superfluous. There is also a primitive loom and spindle; but no table and no beds, for the inmates dine and sleep on the floor. At the other end is the granary, containing a few baskets of grain, with a large collection of Murwa millet and yeast for brewing beer; yams and miscellaneous roots, berries, tender shoots of ferns and other forest produce. For their ordinary food consists mainly of roots which they dig up in the forest, supplemented by berries, fungi, and spinach of boiled leaves, with occasional game; but even frogs are not refused. There is scarcely a plant too tough for them to chew, from which they do not abstract some nourishment. Salt is the only article they need which they do not find ready to hand; and this they get by barter not by money. They never depend on their few scanty crops, so that famine, from which the Indians every now and then suffer so terribly, is to them practically unknown. Amongst

the rafters and on bamboo brackets on the wall are stored away some bright golden heads of maize as seed for next year's crop; one or two spare garments, a bamboo smoking-pipe, a bamboo flute and harp and a few nick-nacks-including charms against devils. There are also some bows and arrows, and some aconite root to make a deadly paste for poisoning their arrows when used in war or against tigers and other big game.¹⁵

Lepcha Cane Bridge (Ru - soam)

The basin of two rivers the Rangit and the Teesta is basically the land of the Lepchas. This land abounds with mountains and valleys through which a number of brooks, streams and rivers find their way down. These natural hazards were a major obstacle for the Lepchas in their day to day life for which they found their own ingenious answer 'The Lepcha Cane Bridge'. This bridge is built almost entirely from Bamboo and the construction method applied is pretty elementary. Lepcha men assemble both sides at a predetermined site where the river is narrow and the banks have strong trees or boulders, after this a long strand of rope made from Poly Po is fastened to an arrow and shot at to the other bank, this strand of bamboo rope is long enough to stretch over both banks, at one end of this rope a strong cable made up of many strands of rope is attached and pulled over to the other side, two such cables are strung and fixed roughly at a parallel distance of 4 to 6 feet, in Lepcha these cables are known as "Saomgyang" and fixed to some strong objects like trees, boulders or manmade pillars known in Lepcha as "Saomngur". These cables are very strong and are fastened very securely as they are supposed to withstand the elements and the weight of men and the load they are carrying for a few years. Along the length of this cable loops of cable of the same nature are fastened to both the main cables at an approximate height of three feet and a distance of a metre, commonly known in Lepcha as "Ahoor". On these loops solid Matli Po bamboos numbering from one to four is placed and fastened to the cables by strands of rope, at a distance of about 10 feet a rod of bamboo is passed transversely under the platform from both ends of which cables of cane and split bamboo are attached to main cable, this keeps the two main cables from joining, thus the bridge is ready, the bamboo placed for the travellers to walk is known as the "Saomblook". One crosses the bridge walking on the bamboo floor and balancing by holding on to the main cable. It is important to note here that the bridge is built at a height of above 100 feet so as to let the flood waters in the monsoons do not damage it. Hooker has called this type of bridge 'the works of art'.¹⁶ The creaking, the shaking and narrow flooring coupled with the slippery nature of the bamboos laid out may not inspire confidence to most townsmen but it does the purpose for the villagers with heavy load to carry in inaccessible places. This bridge makes a lot of sense in places where these rivulets have cut steep gorges where going down and coming up on the other side at 100 feet is a nightmare, it saves the villagers a lot of time and energy, thus

the building of such bridges is a community affair and one and all participate with much enthusiasm and at its completion much gaiety follows. In the small rivers in and around Dzongu these cane bridges are found almost everywhere.

Lepcha Bamboo Raft

In case, the Lepchas do not find any suitable place to construct a cane bridge, the deep broad river is crossed by a bamboo raft.¹⁷ The raft is made of a rectangular size and fastened together tightly with cane strips and bamboo strips of Poly Po, light hollow bamboo mostly Pugrong Po, Pachel Po and Poly Po are cut just below the nodes in equal size, the hollow nodes in between traps the air and provides good floating, bound by strong cane strips and bamboo strips. A long narrow and strong piece of cane is used to manoeuvre this raft. This bamboo raft is quite strong and the rapids of these torrents normally do not break this raft.

Thyaktuk

This word is used to describe the head gear of the Lepcha. Intricately woven by the Lepcha themselves these hats are a work of art. In earlier times the craftsman uttered mantra while weaving for good luck to be bestowed to the person for whom the hat was being prepared. Nowadays five different types of hats are normally seen in use, the Papri Thyaktuk, Anok Thyaktuk and the Seyraboo Thyaktuk, Sumok Thyaktuk and Soring Thyaktuk. These hats are normally made from fine canes from bamboos, straws and leaves apart from Anok Thakyuk which is made from velvet cloth.

The Papri Thyaktuk is a finely woven bamboo hat with a spider web like design at the top; this hat is normally has some porcupine spikes and peacock feathers to ward off evil spirits. The Seyraboo Thyaktuk is the hunter's hat and when seen first it looks like an inverted pot on one's head it has intricate tight circular designs ending in a small hole at the top. It is made from bamboo and straw and sits very tightly on the head, it is rarely seen nowadays. Soring Thyaktuk is a sun shading hat made out of straws and bamboo resembling a small umbrella, it is flat and wide used while working in the field. Sumok Thyaktuk is an intricately woven hat with many varieties of bamboo, kafer lop (*Maranta aruginacea*) is used and coated with mica plates from inside and has seven different stages in the process of making, basically there are three different patterns in the hat, the base of the hats pattern is a reflection of a wild orchid, the middle part is designed liked the eyes of a small mountain bee which produces medicinal honey, the top part is designed like the web of a spider which is the trademark of most Lepcha hats, this hat is adorned with plumes of feathers of mountain birds. The wearer is distinguished as a man of immense knowledge in Lepcha culture and traditions. In the old days, it was worn by a male Lepcha 'Mun' a priest.¹⁸ When two

wearers of this hat come across they usually try to test each other's Lepcha knowledge cultural, social, linguistical etc. "The Sumok thyaktuk or Lepcha traditional hat is an oldest form of craft, unique and exclusive to the Lepcha tribe living in the Dzongu Tribal Reserve Area of Sikkim. The hat is intricately woven with the Ru or cane, and Po-young local bamboo. Each part of the hat and its artistic design hold its own traditional meaning and significance. Wearing the head gear in marriage ceremony, worships and other festivals is mandatory in the tribe" ¹⁹

Lepcha Umbrella or Tak

The umbrella consists of a large hood, much like the ancient boat called a coracle, which being placed over the head reaches to the thighs behind. It is made of platted bamboo, enclosing broad leaves of Phrynium plant. It is known as the 'Tak' and is an effective solution to an age old problem, made from small strands from the Poly Po bamboo, beautiful patterns are woven and the ends are fastened by these strands in the most artistic fashion. "A group of Lepchas with these on, running along in the pelting rain is a sight to behold; they look like turtles with shells on their backs." ²⁰

Sali

This is a bow and the quiver containing arrows. The Lepchas supplemented their diet with meat from the forest dwelling animals and the 'Sali' formed an integral part of Lepcha day to day life. The bow is usually made from split Matli Po bamboo dried and hardened from being kept in the smoking area for seasons, bamboo though strong can be bent into a bow and the ends of which are held together by strong strings procured from various creepers from the forests. These strings are secured firmly to notches at either ends and the bow is ready, the flat split bamboo is usually broad in the middle to withstand the tension from the bend and tapers towards both ends. Arrows too are made from mature dry split bamboos of Porong Po bamboo or from elephant grass reeds; the strong canes prepared for the purpose are tipped with iron arrowheads and on the other side feathers are fastened on opposite sides of the cane. These arrows are usually poisoned at the tip by poison procured from various poisonous plants from the forests. The quiver too is made from bamboo of Pugrong Po, the hollow between the nodes of the bamboo hold the arrows.

Importance of Bamboo in religious beliefs

When a Lepcha person passes away a Mun (Lepcha priestess) is called upon to guide the departed soul to its final resting place. While performing her functions the Mun uses a "tangar", a bamboo basket, which contain all the dear things of the departed soul like his clothes and things he cherished the most. This is used as a medium of approach for the contact with the departed soul. On contact before going into a trance the Mun is seen holding a 'palee' or a flat bamboo string

knotted at seven places. This she is seen holding all along in her left hand, along with the sickle in her right hand. This string is attached to a few small blood spattered Long Choks or upright stones of the altar.²¹ According to Das “In Kurseong area, formerly bier made of bamboo was used for carrying the dead but nowadays wooden boxes are used for the purpose”²² After death on the twenty-first day or the forty ninth day death rites known as “Sanglion Mat Gachio” is performed the mun prepares an offering table purely of bamboo and places a leg of beef on the table, she then sits on a plantain leaf. She holds bamboo leaf (pasong) and holds a sword (banpook) on the other and does not get up from her seat till she has finished her rites. After finishing her contact with the departed soul; the next morning the mun cut the bamboo leaf (pasong) with the sword and finishes her rites.²³ Thread crosses are used purely for religious purposes by the priests for trapping the mung or demon; therefore often called mung-li or demon-houses. These are of three types: square, cruci-form, and octagonal. When a Buddhist Lepcha dies a Bongthing of Lepcha shamanist is invited to the house. He makes such thread crosses on bamboo splits to prevent the devil from causing another death. These are fixed against the skull of the dead.²⁴ The practice of using bamboo and cane for the household artifacts is as old as the tribe exists in the foot hills of Himalaya. They believe that keeping the cane and bamboo artifacts at their home keep them away from ill effects of evil spirit.²⁵ It has been said by many elders and Lepcha scholars that the rhythmic tone of the bamboo when it strikes against one another when the wind blows has been used by the ancient priests and priestesses to chant the naamthars and this tone is known as Pomic Potong Nyumjyo.²⁶

Conclusion

As we have seen bamboo is very important foliage in Lepcha life, without it Lepcha life is almost empty. Every social, cultural and religious event of the Lepchas revolves around some kind of bamboo as the plant is sacred to them. Bamboo use in day to day life is on the decline as metal, plastic and ceramic pots and utensils have replaced bamboo articles nowadays. But when it comes to ceremonies it is almost impossible to carry on without bamboo. In Lepcha villages where animal rearing and agriculture is the main source of livelihood bamboo still very important, Tangjyang (Doko) bamboo baskets are used to carry fodder's, Tangar (Thumchey) very closely knitted basket is used to carry food grains, Bagong (Dalo) rectangular closely knit basket is still used to transfer small food grains from the store room to the kitchen, Talyung (Nanglo) is used in almost all households to separate the husk from the grains, this is so as no other item can replace it as it is light, durable and mend able and plastic materials are no good. In almost all of the

religious ceremonies the altar set up for offerings to the Gods (Rum) or evil entities (mungs) is made up of bamboo. The sacred Chi (drink) prepared for offering is always made up of freshly cut bamboo. The place chosen for the prayers by the Mun/Boongthing is shrouded by the sacred bamboo stems and leaves. In one corner of their land the Lepcha almost certainly have a bamboo field, this field is situated where no other crops are grown and almost always in some steep slope or a corner which is of less use. They believe that the bamboo is not to be destroyed as their proverb says – Lepchas will not become extinct as long as bamboo is there in their country.

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