# *The Life of a Semi-Urban Lhopo/Sikkimese Bhutia Family*

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## 1. Introduction

This article is a case study focusing on some aspects of the everyday life of one Lhopo (Sikkimese Bhutia) family living in Lingdum, a village located about 1,400 metres above sea-level on the other side of the valley from Gangtok, the capital city of Sikkim, India. The data were collected mainly through three audio recorded open interviews in February 2014. Two of the interviews were carried out bilingually (Nepali and Lhoke[1]) with Pema Dadul Bhutia[2] (WL[3] *pad ma dgra'dul bho ti ya*) and one monolingually (Lhoke) with his wife Pasang Lhamu[4] (WL *pa sangs lha mo*). In total, the interviews lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes and were followed by clarifying questions the following days. Prior to the interviews I had been living for about seven months as a neighbour to Pema and Lhamu's family. This experience gave me some initial understanding of their everyday life and helped me make the most of the interviews.

My research focus in Sikkim is Lhoke, the language of the Lhopo. Consequently, the subject of language receives the longest treatment of the topics discussed. This article is not a comprehensive view of all aspects of family-life, nor Lhopo life in general. It does, however, open a few windows into the everyday life of the interviewed family. A comprehensive anthropological study on various aspects of the Lhopo life, with a special emphasis on ritual specialists, is available in Anna Balikci's *Lamas, shamans and ancestors: Village religion in Sikkim* (2008), which is based on more than two years of anthropological field-research in Tingchim Village in the 1990s. I begin by giving general background information on Sikkim and its people.

## 2. Background

Sikkim is one of the most rugged terrains in the world. Altitudes range between 250 metres at the bottom of the valleys to more than 8500 metres at the top of the third highest peak in the world, Kangchenjunga (also Kanchendzönga), which is perched on the Indo-Nepal border. Due to wide-ranging climactic conditions, Sikkim falls within one of the world's ten "mega centres" of biodiversity (Turin 2005: 4). Biodiversity in Sikkim is also reflected in its languages. Lhoke, a Tibetic language, has a much richer vocabulary for flora and fauna than related languages on the arid Tibetan plateau. A 60-year-old Lhopo acquaintance in West Sikkim claimed that he could have taken me for a

[1] Lhoke is the language of the Lhopos. The language is also known as Sikkimese, Denjongke and (Sikkimese) Bhutia.
[2] Henceforth referred to as simply Pema.
[3] WL refers to Written Lhoke and WT to Written Tibetan. The latter is used when I am unsure of the former.
[4] Henceforth referred to as simply Lhamu.

tour in the forest and for a couple of days provided me the Lhoke terms for different flora. The Lhopo flora and fauna remain a fertile field for ethno-botanical studies.

The Himalayas are a natural barrier between people and have spawned great linguistic diversity. Despite covering merely 7000 km$^2$, about one sixth the size of Switzerland, Sikkim boasts 11 official languages: Nepali, Lhoke, Lepcha, Tamang, Limbu, Newari, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Sunwar and English.

The earliest known inhabitants of Sikkim are the Lepchas. The Lhopos, also known as Denjongpas or Bhutias, started to move to Sikkim from the nearby valleys of Chumbi (now in China), and Ha (now in Bhutan), and the valleys further in the north from the 13th century onwards (Balikci 2008: 6, 66–68). They are said to have made a blood covenant with the Lepchas in the 17th century that marked an era of rule by Lhopo kings. Later immigration from Nepal gradually led the Nepali-speaking tribes to become a majority in the kingdom. The era of the Lhopo kings came to an end in 1975 when Sikkim became the 22nd state of India.

Nowadays, Lhopos live in all four districts of Sikkim. The northern villages of Lachen and Lachung are home to agro-pastoralist yak-herders, although in recent years tourism from the plains of India has become the most important source of income for many families in these two villages. Lhopos at lower altitudes practise settled agriculture or have become urbanized by moving to towns the most prominent of which is Gangtok, the capital city. Within their ethnic group and when speaking their own language, the people refer to themselves as Lhopo and their language as Lhoke. On the national level in India, the Lhopos are known as Sikkimese Bhutias. The term "Bhutia" is problematic because it may be used for any of the Tibetan-related tribes dwelling in the southern Himalayas (e.g., Humla Bhutias in North-West Nepal). Among other ethnic Tibetan communities, the most readily understood terms referring to the Lhopos and their language are Denjongpa and Denjongke respectively. In Ethnologue (Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig 2013), the language is known as Sikkimese. This is somewhat misleading and politically incorrect because the language is only spoken by a small minority of the inhabitants of Sikkim. I use the endonyms "Lhopo" for the people and "Lhoke" for the language. The Lhoke language is most actively spoken in close-knit Lhopo communities living near old Buddhist monasteries, such as in Tashiding in West Sikkim, Ralang in South Sikkim, and Phodong in North Sikkim. In villages with mixed population, such as Lingdum, the conditions are less conducive to language preservation. I will now introduce the members of the family this article focuses on.

## 3. The Family

Pema (b. 1977) is the oldest son in his family, which belongs to the *Pèncungpas*[5] (WL *ban cung pa*) descent group.[6] His grandfather was the Lingdum *maṇḍal* (Nep.), the

[5] In the phonemic notation [aː] refers to lengthening and [ã] to nasalization of the vowel (e.g. *jhãːkri* "*Nepali shaman*"). [à] marks low tone and [á] high tone. The IPA symbols for the Latin characters are: sh = [ɕ], zh = [ʑ], c = [tɕ], j = [dʑ], ch = [tɕʰ], ng = [ŋ], ' = [ʔ], ö = [ø]. A syllable-final velar nasal [ŋ] is usually phonetically realized as a lengthened nasalized vowel, e.g. *nángchang [nã́ːtɕʰãː]*. An "h" preceding a consonant marks a short period of aspiration/voicelessness at the beginning of the consonant, e.g. *hlengge"'[ɬɛŋgɛʔ]*.

[6] Lhopo in West Sikkim trace their ancestry to 12 clans four of which consider themselves superior to others because they trace their ancestry to Gye Bumsa's (see footnote 7) grandsons

village headman and tax collector. Pema presumes that after his grandfather his father may also have served as a *maṇḍal* until 1973–74, when the *maṇḍal* system in the village was replaced by the Indian panchayat system. His younger brother (b. 1980) is a monk at Phodong Monastery, North Sikkim. He also has two sisters. The older one, Lhamu Choden[7] (WL *lha mo chos ldan*) (b. 1986), works in West Sikkim as a Lhoke language teacher. Since their parents' death in 1993–4, Pema has cared for his youngest sister, Chopel Zangmu (WL *chos 'phel bzang mo*) (b. 1992), who is a student.

Pema is married to Lhamu (b. 1978), a Lepcha[8] from Lingdok Village, north of Gangtok. Their inter-ethnic marriage is indicative of the close relationship between the Lepchas and Lhopos. This relationship is rooted in the blood covenant between the two groups in the 13th century.[9] Although Lhamu is ethnically Lepcha, she cannot speak the Lepcha language. Her mother tongue is Lhoke. The Lhopos consider a marriage to a Lepcha much more acceptable than to the members of groups of Nepali origin. However, while non-Buddhist Nepalis are not considered worthy in-laws, marriages to Buddhist Nepali highlanders, such as Sherpas, are slowly becoming accepted (Balikci 2008: 252).

Pema and Lhamu, who come from families of four and nine children, respectively, have only two children. Nowadays families are much smaller than in the past. Pema and Lhamu's son Karma Kunga (WL *kar ma kun dga'*) (b. 1997) studies in class ten, and their daughter Chumila (WL *'chi med lags*) (b. 2000) is in class 8. Among the Lhopo, the responsibility for caring for aged parents falls to one of the sons in the family. In Pema's view, the choice between the sons is made on the basis of their financial ability rather than birth order. In the future, Pema and Lhamu look to Karma to provide for them in their old age.

Pema's younger sister, Lhamu Choden (WL *lha mo chos ldan*) (b. 1986), works as a teacher and lives separately in West Sikkim. Although she has no obligation to provide for Pema's household, she occasionally helps the children financially. She also works on the farm, especially during the winter holidays from mid-December to mid-February. Pema's youngest sister Chopel Zangmu studies at school in class ten, at the same level as her five years younger nephew. Until recent years, it was common for pupils, especially at lower classes, not to be promoted to the next class level, if they failed at

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(Balikci: 2008, 70). The 12 clans discourage marriages to Lhopos from outside their clan-cluster, who are considered later migrants (Balikci 2008: 71). Certain Lhopos, however, have reacted to the West Sikkim's clans' claims of superiority by asserting that they were, in fact, in Sikkim before the 12 clans arrived (Balikci 2008: 73–74). At present, I am unaware of the exact status of the *Pèncungpas* in relation to other descent groups.

[7] Henceforth referred to simply as Choden.

[8] Lepchas are considered the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim. The Lepcha language is still actively spoken in the Dzongu area in North-Sikkim.

[9] According to tradition, the Lhopo leader, Gye Bumsa (WL: *gyed 'bum bsags*), came with his wife, who was barren, from Chumbi Valley to Sikkim to ask the favour of the Lepcha *bongthing*, Thekongtek, who was rumoured to have powers to cure barrenness. Thekongtek invoked the Lecpha mountain deity Kangchenjunga and other territorial spirits in Sikkim to help Gye Bumsa have children. Later, when Gye Bumsa's wife had given birth to three sons, he returned to Sikkim for a thanksgiving ritual that culminated in swearing blood brotherhood between Gye Bumsa and Thekongtek, and hence between the Lhopos and Lepchas. This blood pact is commemorated in the annual *pang lhabsol* (lit. "offering to the witness deities") ritual in various monasteries in Sikkim. (Balikci 2008: 69.)

crucial tests. Chopel Zangmu's brother Pema attended school for 16 years to pass class ten and Lhamu, Pema's wife, attended for nine years to pass class six. Chopel Zangmu works hard on the farm from early morning and occasionally skips classes at school when her farm labour is earnestly needed.

## 4. Marriage

Pema and Lhamu married in 1996, the year Pema turned 19 and Lhamu 18 years old. The marriage was arranged, as is usual among the Lhopo, by Pema's oldest maternal uncle, or *azhang* (WL *a zhang*), who functioned as the matchmaker, approaching Lhamu's maternal uncle to ask for Lhamu as a bride for Pema. The wedding was arranged in a traditional Lhopo manner. Pema remembers their wedding as consisting of three parts: *khachang* (WL: *kha chang*) or when the matchmaker visits the prospective bride's parents: *nángchang* (WL: *gnang chang*) or engagement party at the girl's house; and the actual wedding ceremony that Pema refers to as *rin* (WL: *rin*), "price". Central to the latter ritual is the groom's family gives the bride's family the requested bride-price. At Pema and Lhamu's wedding, the bride-price was some meat, liquor, and 400–500 INR in cash.

After the wedding, Lhamu left her parent's home in Lingdok and the couple moved to Pema's house in Lingdum. According to an old Lhopo custom, the couple would move to the bride's parents' house for two or three years after the wedding. During this time, the son-in-law would work for his in-laws, and the latter would observe whether he was a good worker and a deserving husband for their daughter (Dokhangba 2014). At the same time the groom's work would be an equivalent of a bride price. Nowadays, however, this arrangement is rare, partly because many grooms, as was the case with Pema, have regular jobs that do not permit lengthy stints in the countryside. As compensation for not contributing to his in-laws in terms of work, the groom must pay for the bride in accordance with the bride's relatives' wishes. This price or equivalent is later returned to the girl in a ceremony called *pàlo'* (WL: *bag log*).

Nowadays, Lhamu typically visits her parents' home once a year during *lòsung* (WL: *lo srung*), the New Year festival of the Lhopo, which is celebrated at the end of December or in the beginning of January. During *lòsung*, Lhamu stays in Lingdok for two to three days. She has five younger sisters and three younger brothers. Because she has brothers, she does not have to bear the main responsibility for taking care of her parents.

Lhamu breast-fed her first born son for 3 years, until their second child was born. The daughter was nursed for two years. The children slept next to their mother until they were five to six years old. When their now 17-year-old son Karma marries, he is expected to bring his wife to his parents' home. If the parents' and their daughter-in-law's relationship is harmonious, this arrangement may become permanent. If they do not get along, the son will have to build another house to live in. As I was chatting with Pema about this, his son was also present. Pema grabbed his 30 cm long traditional Lhopo knife and lifted it up, and joked that if the daughter-in-law was disobedient, he would chase the young couple out.

## 5. Houses

Pema's family lives in two houses, one built by Pema's grandfather in 1947, and a newer two-storey concrete building built in 2010. Both houses were built on a sloping hillside and are about 50 metres apart. The newer house is situated by the side of a road leading to a monastery about 500 metres upslope. Below the houses are the family's terraced fields.

The older house is typical of traditional Lhopo houses. The upper floor is made of wood. The ground floor, however, is concrete rather than stones, the traditional building material. The tin-roofed house has four rooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs. Often the ground floor of a Lhopo house serves as a cattle shed. In Pema's older house, however, goats, cows and hens are kept in separate simple sheds with tin roofs, and the ground-floor room functions as a storeroom. Upstairs the family has four rooms the biggest of which serves both as a guest room and a bedroom for Pema and his wife. There is also a fairly large room with an altar, or *chosham* (WL: *mchod sham*), dedicated to Buddhist rituals. Children typically sleep in a room downstairs. The family often exchanges sleeping places so that when the children sleep in the new house, the parents stay in the old one, and vice versa. In addition to the living quarters, the farm has a separate store house under which there is a shelter for domestic animals and a greenhouse with a plastic roof (but no walls).

The reason for building a new house near the old one was that the old house was becoming dilapidated. While the old house is slightly off the road, the new two-storey house has been built right by the road, with the upper storey at road level. The family uses the upper storey (four rooms) for themselves and rent out the lower 4-room apartment to another family. The upstairs room facing the road functions as a small shop with a sliding metal wall for protection at night.

The family uses both houses actively. In the new house they have a television. Lhamu enjoys watching Hindi and Nepali series (channels broadcast from Nepal can be received in Sikkim). Pema especially likes Hindi news, football (soccer) and American wrestling. However, Pema says he prefers his old house because he was born there. A factor that keeps the family tied to the old house is that only the old house has the ritual room (*chosham*), which requires daily attention – burning incense and butter lamps, and changing water in water-offering cups.

## 6. Land

Pema has about 16 acres of land. Half is forest and the rest is cultivated fields. Farm produce includes the following (sowing/planting and harvesting months in brackets): rice (June, Nov), millet (June, Nov), maize (Feb/March, June), mustard (Dec, Apr), ginger (March/April, October), yams, and sweet potato. Pema estimates that he annually harvests at least 3200 kg of rice. The family earns cash by selling pounded rice (Nep. *tsiuro*), tomatoes and ginger. Ginger is the main cash crop, fetching at least 15 000-20 000 INR (183-244 €[10]) per harvest[11].

The greatest dangers for the crops are hail and strong wind, which often destroy the harvest. Historically, there was a person referred to as *ajo rimpuche* (WL: *a jo rin po che*) in nearby Pathing who was a *se:sung* (WT *ser srung*), weather controller. Farmers

[10] At the time of the interview, 1 Euro was about 82 INR.
[11] In Pema's estimate one harvest is 1000-1200 kg.

brought him gifts at sowing time to ensure good harvests. Pema has heard that such weather controllers still practise in North Sikkim.

In general, men do work that requires physical strength such as ploughing fields, splitting firewood, carrying heavy items and rice straw, digging, and building fences, terraces for rice fields, animal sheds and other structures. The narrow terraced fields on steep slopes make the use of tractors impossible. Pema, Karma or other male relatives plough the family's fields with the help of two bulls that they own.

Sowing and planting are work for women, who are considered more nimble-handed than men in planting rice. Other women's work includes watering the fields, feeding animals, weeding and cooking. Women do not carry large loads of rice straw, but may climb into trees to cut leaves to feed the cows and to carry light loads of leaves and hay for the animals. The family has three goats, two kids, one cow, three bulls, two calves, five hens and a rooster, which was killed, most likely by a stray dog, just before one of the interviews.

Lingdum Village has a neighbour help system called *hngala'/hala'* (WL: *snga lag*). Land-owning neighbours, irrespective of ethnic group (Nepali, Lepcha and Lhopo) alternate in helping each other plant and harvest. The family hosting workers from the neighbourhood offers tea, beer and three meals a day. In Pema's estimation, three people (Pema, his wife and sister) from his family spend at least 15–20 days annually in others' fields. In exchange, they get three people for approximately the same number of days to work in their fields. Help is needed, for instance, during rice, millet and maize planting and harvesting. With neighbourly help, planting and harvesting of each of the crops in Pema's fields is usually finished in one day. Normally Pema does not hire outsiders to work in his fields, which is customary in certain Bhutia villages, such as Tingchim (Balikci 2008: 175–176). However, on millet planting day in 2014, 19 outsiders worked for him, five of whom were day-labourers (for daily wages of 100 INR or 1,20 €). The other 14 were *hngala'/hala'* workers, in whose fields members of Pema's family would be expected to work in return.

## 7. Economy

Pema's family's income consists of Pema's salary, rent from the apartment in their new house, profit from the shop, the sale of farm products like ginger, pounded rice, wood and meat, and occasionally sale of animals. Pema works as a Lower Division Clerk at the Department of Personnel Administrative Training of the Government of Sikkim. He is privileged to have managed to secure a government job, which is considered to combine job security and some future prospects with fairly little accountability. Pema's monthly gross salary is around 24 000 INR (293 €) of which he receives 15 000–16 000 INR (183–195 €) after taxes and pension saving. In addition, the family makes a profit of 2000–3000 INR (24–37 €) a month from the small shop where they sell mostly sweets and liquor. Moreover, the family receives 5000 INR (61 €) per month as rent for the apartment in their new house, and approximately 100 000 (one lakh) INR (1220 €) per annum from selling their agricultural products. If there is an acute need of money, timber is sold from the forest they own (for furniture-making). One 12-foot plank of wood used in furniture-making will fetch 400–700 INR (5-9 €), depending on the type of the wood.

Pema occasionally sells animals, especially goats. Because the Lhopo are not in the habit of eating much mutton, the family's goat raising caters mainly to a demand from

the Nepalis, who come all the way from Gangtok in search of nicely fattened goats. Because of buyer mobility, the family has no need to take animals to a public market. In addition to fattened fully-grown animals, goat kids may also be sold. The family's only full-grown cow was bought from a local Nepali *Bahun* (high caste). Because the seller was an acquaintance, Lhamu felt they had a good bargain by buying the cow for 13 000 INR (159 €), compared to market value of 17 000–18 000 INR (207–220 €).

Pema's family's regular expenses consist of house rent in Gangtok, children's school fees and pocket money, and everyday groceries. The family has rented a room in the capital Gangtok for 2500 INR (30 €) per month for their two children who attend school in Gangtok. Their daughter Chumila's tuition and computer fees amount to about 2500–2600 INR (30–32 €) per month. Karma's tuition is 1000 INR (12 €) per month. In addition, the parents will give the children some money for school-related travel and about 500 INR (6 €) per month pocket money. Karma and Chumila's schools do not provide meals. The children prepare lunches at home and take them to school. The family deposits what is left after expenses in a bank account, from which they plan to finance their children's education and future contingencies. If the children are successful in their studies and are able to enrol in an engineering or medical college, Pema is ready to sell his land to finance his children's studies.

The family buys new clothes in Gangtok at least once a year during *lòsung*, the Sikkimese farmer's New Year festival, and occasionally when there is extra money. They do not visit Siliguri, the closest city in the plains, very often. The last time Pema went to Siliguri was about five years ago, to buy bricks for building the new house. A typical reason for visiting Siliguri is to see relatives who have been admitted to a hospital there. The hospitals in Siliguri are considered better than the ones in Sikkim, although it is only the more well-to-do who can afford treatment in Siliguri. Pema's family eats in a restaurant rarely, because it is considered too expensive.

## 8. Routines

On weekdays, the children (Karma and Chumila) stay in their rented room in Gangtok. They spend weekends and holidays at home, studying and helping parents with farm work.

The family gets up at four-thirty to five every morning. After drinking salty tea and finishing morning rituals in the *chosham* (more on these below), Pema tends the family's cattle. They have one full-grown cow, one home-born calf, one bought calf and three bulls, two of which are of plough-age. The cows and bulls are fed three times a day: in the morning, at mid-day and at dusk. In the morning, Pema boils feed for the cattle in an outside hearth and then washes the cattle and cleans dung from the cowshed. After morning farm chores, he prepares to leave for his office job in Gangtok. The office hours are from ten *a.m.* to four *p.m.* It takes about 15 minutes to walk to the "zero point" from where taxis leave. The 50-minute trip to Gangtok in a shared ten-seater taxi costs 40 rupees each way. Taxis leave when they are full, or full enough for the driver to reasonably expect that he can fill the remaining seats on the way to Gangtok. Usually Pema returns from work around 6 pm. In the evening, he may watch television. Working in the fields has kept him so busy that he has not had the time to learn to play cards, which is the favourite pastime of many Lhopo men. Pema is not actively involved in politics, which he considers a dirty game.

While Pema is at work, Lhamu takes care of farm duties the biggest of which is tending the animals. On the day of Lhamu's interview, a wild animal had just killed the family's rooster and eaten half of it. At first Lhamu presumed that the culprit had been a fox, but a Nepali man from the neighbourhood claimed that because half of the rooster was found close to the house, the predator was not likely a fox, which would have dragged the prey further away in the forest and eaten it there. The cloud of suspicion fell on local stray dogs. Lhamu was upset, complaining that the beasts had killed altogether 15–16 of her hens. In days gone by, she said, one did not have to worry about stray dogs eating one's chickens.

In Lhamu's opinion goats are the easiest animals to raise. In the morning, their dung needs to be swept away and some fodder is given to them. The family's only full-grown cow is treasured for its milk. It produces about one litre a day. Although sometimes cows can be seen grazing even on steep hillsides in Sikkim, Pema and Lhamu's cows are always kept in their shed. Bulls, on the other hand, get some exercise when used for ploughing.

## 9. Language[12]

### 9.1 Lhoke in Education

Before Sikkim became the 22nd state of India in 1975, Classical Tibetan was used as the written language among the Lhopo. After 1975, Lhoke, along with the other official languages, began to be introduced as an elective at schools. For this reason a writing system for Lhoke, based on the Tibetan script,[13] was developed by Norden Tshering Bhutia and schoolbooks were produced, most often by translating from existing Tibetan materials, first by Palden Lachungpa (WD: *dpal ldan la chung pa*), and then extensively by Pema Rinzing Takchungdarpo (WD: *pad ma rig 'dzin stag cung dar po*). In addition, such other written materials as poetry, proverbs, plays and folk stories have been produced by some 30 authors. The first novel in Lhoke, Bhaichung Tsichudarpo's (WD: *bha'i cung tshe bcu dar po*) *Richhi*[14] (WL: *re che*, meaning "hope"), was published in 1996 and continues to be the only novel in Lhoke.

Despite the language development project having started in the late 1970s, in many localities such as Tingchim and Lingdum it was not until the late 1980s that vernacular language classes in Lhoke were introduced in schools (Balikci 2008: 327). It should be noted, however, that the goals of teaching minority languages classes are not necessarily to provide students with spoken language skills in their mother tongue. Rather, the vernacular classes may be seen as a place for transmitting cultural heritage through the mother tongue. The students are "learning belonging" (Turin 2014: 389).

Nowadays, the duty to teach all the official languages applies only to government schools and not the private ones, which are considered more prestigious. Sending

[12] See Sandberg (1888: 1895) for a grammar sketch of Lhoke, referred to as Denjongke. For more recent linguistic studies on the language, see Yliniemi (2014: 2016, 2017 and forthcoming). This anthropological article refers to the language by its most used endonym Lhoke, whereas my linguistic studies refer to the language as Denjongke, which is a more dinstinctive term (the language term Lhoke "southern language" is also associated with other Tibetic languages spoken south of Tibet).

[13] Lhoke innovations to the Tibetan script include word breaks and the use of *tsha lag* above letters on which it does not appear in Tibetan.

[14] Tsechudarpo, Bhaichung 2003 [1996]. *Richhi* (First Bhutia novel). Gangtok: Kwality.

children to prestigious private schools thus means the children will not learn their mother tongue at school. The private schools avoid offering Lhoke as a subject and also often actively encourage the use of English-only on the school premises (pupils breaking the rule may be fined). Moreover, private schools are often located so far from the pupils' homes that they will spend most of their time in hostels, in rented flats/rooms or with relatives. As many Lhopo land-owners are wealthy enough to send their children to prestigious private schools outside Lhoke-speaking community, their children lose contact with their family and the language community for extended periods of time.[15] It is not uncommon for school children to meet their parents only once a year during the winter vacation (from mid-December until mid-February). Private schools, however, are not the only threat to language preservation among the Lhopo. Even in government schools, which offer Lhoke language as an elective subject, many children of even Lhoke language teachers choose, in addition to mandatory Hindi, a language that is seen as powerful and leading to economic advancement – English or Nepali.

## 9.2 The Challenge of Honorifics

One reason for language endangerment that I heard Lhopo comment on is the reluctance of younger, more uncertain speakers, to use the language with their elders because they are afraid of being rebuked for not being able to use honorifics properly. Typical of Tibetic languages, many often-used words have two or even three lexical forms that are to be used in different contexts. For instance, the humilific form of the word "say", *shù* (WL: *zhu*) "say (humilific)", is used in polite speech when the speakers refer to their own speech. The ordinary verb, *làp* (WL: *lab*) "say", on the other hand, is used for equals, and the honourific verb *súng* (WL: *gsung*) "*say* (honourific)" is used for superiors' utterances.

Mastering the politeness code also requires fluency in the choice of the right pronouns (e.g., *chö', rang* and *hlenggɛ'* are used refer to the second person singular, at increasing levels of politeness), and various nominalized constructions involving the verb *náng* (WL: *gnang*) "grant", are also critical (e.g. *zhu:po náng* "would you be so kind as to sit" is considered more polite than the mere *zhu:* "please sit", although the latter form is the polite equivalent of the verb *dö?*, "sit"). It is thus no wonder that many young, uncertain speakers find intricacies of such an elaborate politeness system daunting, particularly if the cost of mistakes is the loss of face. This fear, however, is less serious in the north. The language of the agro-pastoralist villagers of Lachen and Lachung is less rich in terms of politeness. Their language, due to disuse of polite forms, is considered rude by Lhopo from the more southern areas.

## 9.3 Lhoke in Different Environments

Because of the rapid drop in the number of young speakers, Lhoke has been termed "severely endangered" (Turin 2014: 384) and "moribund" (van Driem 2007: 312). With the lack of language competence among younger Lhopo, the concept of "mother

[15]Among the Lhopo, the number of mother tongue speakers has declined since the 1960s, but among the Lepcha, it has remained fairly stable. Turin (2014: 385) suggests that this may be due to the greater wealth, more education and urbanisation of the Lhopos as compared to the more rural Lepchas.

tongue" is being interpreted in the sense of historical and ethnic belonging. The number of Lhopo who claim Lhoke as their mother tongue exceeds the number who claim the ability to speak the language (Turin 2014: 384). At present, however, there are still communities, especially in the countryside, where the language is actively used and where some older Lhoke speakers speak little Nepali or any other language. Moreover, as a result of the close relationship between the Lepcha and Lhopo, some Lepcha, for instance Pema's wife Lhamu, have learnt the Lhoke language while not learning Lepcha. In addition, many Lepcha speakers in the countryside, especially in Dzongu, are also conversant in Lhoke.[16]

In Gangtok and other urban centres, the influence of Nepali, and to some extent English and Hindi, is so strong that many ethnic Lhopo know no Lhoke. In the domain of entertainment (television, music) Hindi is prevalent. Schools favour English,[17] and Nepali is the language for cross-ethnic social interaction. The use of Lhoke is generally restricted to Lhopo home, but, even there, the language is under threat because of the educational choices outlined above.

In Lingdum Village, the influence of Nepali is strong. Consequently, Lhoke is mainly reserved for the domain of the home. Pema and his wife Lhamu speak to each other in Lhoke, when no Nepali speakers are present, and speak mostly in Nepali to their children. The couple also speak Nepali to Pema's youngest sister, Chopel Zangmu, who does not understand Lhoke. Pema's younger sister Choden, on the other hand, teaches the Lhoke language, and thus Lhoke is used in communication with her. With their Lhopo relatives of equal age or older, Pema and Lhamu speak Lhoke, and Nepali with the younger ones. Children and teenagers are in general much more confident in Nepali than in Lhoke, unless they received monastic training with Lhoke speaking schoolmates.[18]

The children of Pema and Lhamu, Karma and Chumila, have grown up to be proficient in spoken Nepali and have learnt English at school. I have never heard them speak Lhoke to their parents, but they seem to understand some simple formulations. Chumila studies in a private school, where Lhoke is not offered as an elective. However, Tibetan and, surprisingly, Lecpha are available. Chumila chose to study Nepali as an elective, leading to proficiency in literary Nepali. Karma, on the other hand, studies in a government school in Gangtok, although a government school is available in his home village. Friends and the teachers' good reputation led him to opt for the school in Gangtok, where he lives with his sister in a rented room. Although Lhoke is offered at the school, Karma has chosen Nepali. The family's house in Lingdum is so close to the children's schools that Karma and Chumila meet their

[16] According to Shri Sonam Gyatso Dokhangba (Joint Director, Ecclesiastical Department, Government of Sikkim), Denjongke speaking Lepchas live in: Kabi, Phensang, Labi, Ringim, Chungtang, Ship, Naga and Lingthem in North Sikkim; Khecheopalri, Yuksom, Sunon, Hungri, Melli and Atsing in West Sikkim; and Gagyang (Yangang), Tingkitam, Bermeok and Lingi in South Sikkim.

[17] School books are in English, but because many teachers lack a good command of spoken English, the *de facto* medium of instruction in the classroom may be Nepali.

[18] Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies in Gangtok, also known as *Sheda*, is believed to produce some of the best Lhoke speakers. The students there are trained in Tibetan but also converse in Lhoke.

parents much more often than many of their schoolmates. They go home almost every weekend.

Both Pema and Lhamu studied Tibetan (but not Lhoke) for a few years at school. In the first half of the 1980s, Lhoke was not yet available as a subject in Lingdum or Lingdok. Pema stated that Lhoke was introduced to his school in Lingdum in 1988 or 1989. Since their school days, neither Pema nor Lhamu have used their ability to read Tibetan script. Pema mainly uses Nepali and occasionally some English and Hindi in the course of his job.

## 10. Rituals

### 10.1 Specialists

Lhopo religion is an intricate mixture of shamanism and Buddhism. Villagers may call upon ritual specialists of differing traditions. A *bongthing*[19] specializes in appeasing local ambivalent supernatural beings with sacrifices and invocations. The *páu* (WL: *dpa' bo*, male) and *néjum* (WT *rnal 'byor ma*, female) are spirit-mediums who use possession and offerings to maintain good relations with the ancestral deities, *pho lha mo lha* (WL: *pho lha mo lha*) "father-god mother-god." Buddhist *lamas* are consulted when Buddhist deities are contacted or a healing mantra needs to be recited.[20] Balikci (2008: 142) sees the high tolerance of Sikkimese Buddhism for shamanistic practices as contrasting with the attitude of learned Tibetan lamas, who are more dogmatic and disapprove of such non-Buddhist practices as killing animals for sacrifice.

In Pema's family, the names of their ancestral deities are forgotten, and there is no one in the family who knows how to perform the appropriate rituals. According to Balikci (2008:145), until the end of the 19th century each patrilineage among the Lhopo had their own *páu* or *néjum*, to whose ritual domain the worship of ancestral deities fell. Nowadays, however, no *páu* or *néjum* is available near Lingdum. Pema told me that the worship of *pho lha mo lha* is the responsibility of ordinary family members whereas other deities are appeased by *páu* and *bongthing*. This is surprising because it suggests that a *páu*'s role is separate from the worship of ancestral deities.

There is no Lhopo *bongthing* available in Lingdum. Pema's family seeks the services of a Lepcha *bongthing* at the sowing time and at harvest. At sowing time, fruit and pork are offered and the *bongthing* invokes the household's territorial guardian deities, *khimsung anyo ana (*WL: *khyim srung anyo ana)* through an invocation, or *khelen* (WL: *khaslen*), to protect the crops and cattle from natural disasters (hail and wind) and thieves. The *khelen* is believed to make a thief ill after they eat stolen products. At harvest time, a thanksgiving ritual for protection is performed. In earlier times a rooster and a hen were sacrificed as offerings, but Pema's family no longer offers animal sacrifices.

Every year in the first month of the Tibetan calendar, Pema invites three to four monks from the local monastery at Lingdum to perform an annual recitation ceremony for the household's well-being. A gift of cash is expected in addition to tea and food. At the time of the interview, Pema was planning to give the monks 1000 INR (12 €) for the

[19] The Lhopo *bongthing*, earlier called *bon ban* (at least in Tingchim), derives its name from the Lepcha ritual specialist of the same name. The practices of the Lhopo and Lecpha *bongthing*, however, are somewhat distinct (Balikci 2008: 11–12).

[20] See Balikci (2008) for extensive discussion of various religious specialists.

forthcoming recital. During the ritual, the monks recite the religious books, or *bum* (WL: *'bum*), stored in a cupboard in the house's *chosham*. The first month of the year also sees the installation of four new prayer/mantra flags, two at each house.

Astrology is central to many Lhopo's way of life. At birth, an astrologist makes a personal chart for the child. This chart called *kika* (WL: *skyed ka*) is later in life compared with the would-be spouse's chart to determine if prospective couple are compatible. In addition to the astrological calculation at birth, many Lhopo arrange a meet with an astrologer on their birthday. Pema and Lhamu, however, have not been actively engaged in astrological calculations. They did not call for an astrologer when their children were born, nor have they arranged for annual astrological predictions. If their children's future spouses' parents require seeing their prospective in-law's *kika*, this can be determined later in life.

## 10.2 Illness

In previous generations, when a member of Pema's family line fell ill, a *páu*, a *bongthing* or a *jhãːkri* (Nepali shaman) was invited to perform rituals. If the rituals failed and the patient was about to die, they were then taken to hospital. Nowadays, however, when somebody in the household becomes ill, they are first taken to hospital for treatment. If such treatment proves ineffective, a *bongthing* and/or *lamas* are called to perform rituals. The *bongthing* divines by performing a *mò* (WL: *mo*) with rice seeds,[21] determining which *nöpa* (WL: *gnod pa)* "harmful spirit", has been offended and thus caused the illness and how to conciliate it by making offerings of its favourite products (e.g., chicken, sweets). Pema prefers monks to a *bongthing* because the latter requires slaughtering of hens and pigs.

As suggested by Pema's family health seeking behaviour when facing illness, the Lhopo increasingly depend on modern medicine. Deep in the countryside, however, a *bongthing* is often the first choice for treatment. A friend from West Sikkim described a family whose ten-year-old daughter had died of a treatable disease because the parents, having first consulted a *bongthing*, failed to bring her to a hospital in time. Lhopo author Bhaichung Tsichudarpo's play *Namto'*[22] (WL: *rnam rtog*) "Superstition" describes a family's dilemma in choosing between traditional and modern medicine. The play attempts to lead the Lhopo away from the influence of *bongthing* and into the spheres of orthodox Buddhism and modern medicine. Resorting to a local *bongthing*, however, may remain a lucrative choice for impoverished families in distant villages, for whom the difficulty of logistics and the high expenses of hospital treatment are prohibitive.

Many Lhopo are afraid of being poisoned, which explains eating outside of the home is uncommon. Balikci (2008: 81) notes that this fear was particularly deep-rooted in Tingchim Village, where she carried out anthropological field-research. One of my acquaintances in Lingdum also associated Tingchim with an increased likelihood of being poisoned. He said that the poison originates from Tibet (in contrast to Balikci's informants in Tingchim, who considered the poison to come from the plains) and that

[21] In Balikci's (2008: 127–128) description, the Lhopo *bongthing* divines by throwing dice but the *páu* by using rosary beads or grains of rice. Pema, however, mentioned rice when describing Lingdum's (Lepcha) *bongthing's* divination.

[22] Tsechudarpo, Bhaichung 2003 [1997]. *Rnam rtog*. Gangtok: Kwality.

poisoners are motivated by the belief that they will obtain the powers of the poisoned person. This fear was so real for my acquaintance that when travelling he always carried a plant considered an antidote for the poison. This plant, which he said is brought from mountains near Lachen and Lachung by yak and sheep herders, can be bought near the main market in Gangtok. When buying the antidote, I was advised to have the seller taste the product to ensure that was indeed antidote and not poison. I was told the antidote works as a reflux agent that helps remove ingested poison through vomiting or diarrhoea. The same acquaintance told me that while there is little likelihood of being poisoned in Lingdum care should be taken with those from three certain houses. Pema, on the other hand, claimed that poisoning is not an issue in Lingdum. He was clearly skeptical about the topic of poisoning. When asked about the motivation of the poisoners, he referred to the belief that the riches of the victim would come to the poisoner.

## 10.3 Other rituals

Pema starts each day with a ritual in the family's ritual room, *chosham.* He sweeps the room, and then changes water in the *ting* (WL: *ting*) "water-offering cups". Lighting the butter lamps and burning of incense follows. The ritual ends with three prostrations. When Pema is absent, other family members take responsibility for the rituals in the *chosham*. In the afternoon around three *p.m.* the butter lamps and the water bowls are washed by the women of the house. In the evening, the ritual is repeated.

In addition to daily rituals in the *chosham,* the family visits the monastery located about 500 metres up the road from their house. Typically, visits are during the New Year celebration *lòsung*, when a mask-dance or *cham* (WL: *'cham*) is performed, and during the empowerment ritual or *õ:* (WL: *dbang*), which is occasionally performed by a visiting *rimpoche*. It is typically the women of the house who attend the rituals at the monastery. Pema considers monastery visits boring, and did not attend the last *lòsung* ceremonies, nor did he plan to attend the empowerment ceremony to be held a few days after our interview.

The *pang lhabsol* (WD *dpang lha gsol*) "offering to the witness god" is a Sikkemese Buddhist ceremony held to worship the patron god of Sikkim, the god of Kanchenjunga Mountain. The ceremony traces back to the ancient blood covenant between the Lhopo and the Lepcha, who invoked the territorial deities of Sikkim (Kanchenjunga being the most important) to witness the covenant and punish those who broke it. During the *pang lhabsol*, a ritual dance[23] is held in praise of the war god Kangchenjunga. It is performed in various monasteries around Sikkim. Pema only occasionally attends *pang lhabsol* festivities in Gangtok.

## 10.4 Funerals

When a Lhopo dies, friends and relatives attend two death-related rituals. The first one is the actual funeral when the body is cremated. When Pema's father died in 1994, his body was cremated at a cremation site near the village school, about a 20-minute walk up the hill from the family's house. The ashes were taken to a ravine. Bones were crushed into powder, mixed with flour, the dough was baked and fed to fish in the river. Pema was unable to explain the background of this tradition.

[23] *Pang tö' cham* (WL: *dpang bstod 'cham*) "praise-dance for witness (god)".

The second death-related ritual is the 49th day observance, or *shègu* (WL: *zhe dgu*) "forty-nine," when the deceased's friends and relatives are invited to the bereaved family's house for a meal. During a *shègu* that I attended with a Lhopo friend, we were first invited inside the house that was full of visitors. After having been offered drinks and snacks, my companion led me outside to sit in the shade of a specially constructed temporary structure of bamboo and linen where we were again offered drinks and snacks. A favourite drink is millet beer prepared by pouring hot water into a wooden container of fermented millet and drunk with a straw. After the second round of snacks and drinks, the main meal was served in another temporary tent-structure and eaten outside sitting on plastic chairs.

The bereaved family receives consolation money from the deceased person's friends and relatives. Each donation is carefully recorded in a notebook for the purpose of reciprocation. In a coming funeral, each family is expected to give the equivalent or preferably more than they themselves earlier received. From Pema's experience, the typical consolation sum varies between 500 and 3000 INR (6-37 €). He estimates that in an average year, they attend two or three funerals, spending four to six days a year at death-related ceremonies.

## 11. Conclusion

This article's title describes Pema Dadul Bhutia's family as "semi-urban" due to the family's economic situation, which combines farming with Pema's government job in Gangtok. The family could also be categorized as midway between the rural and the urban in terms of their language use. As is the case with many of their contemporaries in rural Lhopo communities, Pema and Lhamu have retained conversational competence in Lhoke whereas many Lhopos of their age in Gangtok no longer speak the language. Their children Karma and Chumila, on the other hand, reflect the influence of Gangtok as an ethnic and linguistic melting pot. They are not able, unlike many youngsters of their age in rural Lhopo communities, to speak their parents' mother tongue. Lastly, the shift from rural and traditional to urban and modern is evident in the family's approach to curing illnesses: the modern medical doctor has replaced the *bongthing*.

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