

THE OLDEST DATED DOCUMENTS OF THE LEPCHAS

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1. The source of the manuscripts

It was through the thoughtfulness of Dr. M. Aris, the distinguished historian of the Himalayas and author of Bhutan (1979), that the old Lepcha documents that I am introducing to you in this article came to light. While making a search on his own account in the National Archive in Delhi he happened on three strange-looking manuscripts; and, thinking that they looked like Lepcha, he sent photocopies to me. Two of them I at once recognized as Lepcha; the third I was soon able to identify as Manipuri. The Lepcha documents were pages 'J' and 'M' of item 190 of the archive in Foreign Department, Persian; the date of accession is given as 14th April, 1828; so, though there may be older Lepcha books and documents in existence, I would claim that these are the oldest Lepcha documents that can be given a date: some time between the 14th April, 1828, the date when they entered the Foreign Department archive, and some date earlier in the same year, when they were written in response to a request by J. W. Grant, Commercial Resident in Malda, and Capt. G.W.A. Lloyd for eye-witness accounts of the murder of the Prime Minister Bholod, a Lepcha.

II. The Gazetteer of Sikkim's account of the murder

My source for 1826 as the date of the murder is The Gazetteer of Sikkim (1894/1972), which gives the following background information: 'In 1819 a serious quarrel arose between the [7th] Raja [gtsugphud rnam-rgyal, 1790-1861] and his minister, his own uncle Bho-Lod, but was patched up and an agreement made. Another agreement was made the following year, and a third in 1824, but about that time his wife and child (the former seems to have been friendly to the minister) died, and the Raja, freed from all restraint, seemed determined to make away with his relative: so finally in 1826 Bho-lod was treacherously murdered near Tumlong [the then capital of Sikkim] by Tung-yik Menchoo, father of Dunya Namgye, better known as the Pagla Dewan. Bho-lod's cousin, Yuk-Lhat Grup alias tkra-thup, fearing a similar fate, fled from Sikkim and took refuge at Unthoo in Nepal with some 800 of his Lepcha tribesmen' (19) (for the effect of this calamitous dispute on the fortunes of the Lepchas of Sikkim see my article '1826: the end of an era in the social and political history of Sikkim', 1997).

III. Facsimiles of documents 'J' and 'M'

One of the two documents, 'J' bears the title 'tsong tsang-thung sa shu-suk gum', 'It is Tsong Tsang-Thung's testimony', the other, 'M', is entitled 'gya-mu-nun shu', 'submitted by Gyamu' (in romanizing the Lepcha text I have followed the earliest of the various systems, Gen. G.B. Mainwaring in his book, A Grammar of the Rong (Lepchas) Language (Calcutta, 1876), but with minor modifications. They have been reproduced in facsimile below, after which I have given a translation of each of them into English.

An elegant translation of the two texts has been sent to me by Norden Sangdyanmoo, Textbook Officer, Lepcha Section, Education Department, Government of Sikkim; but the originals seem to me to be more like police reports in style, hastily written, and with no claim to literary merit; so I have attempted a translation that I feel to be more in keeping with the style of the originals. From the facsimiles readers will be able to see for themselves the evidence of haste in several corrections and crossings out.

A. Document J

I. Lepcha text

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2. English translation

'It is Tsong Tsang-thung's testimony'

Testified that, the sahib having demanded 'who are eye-witnesses to the killing of the Honorable Prime Minister' the words submitted to the Sahib by Tsong-thung were: over there, from the King's side, sending soldiers, three or four score soldiers commanded by an officer, Lhachoo, surrounded him for one day; but the Prime Minister, father and sons, four of them, getting out through the space under the house, staying for one day in the forest, coming back, after having reached the palace, even though there was the King's order to them, the soldiers, 'you who have come having been serving the king, do not kill me' the Honorable Prime Minister having entreated the soldier who had come, clasping

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their feet, giving them silver Rupees, bullocks, and rice, together with beer, they having said 'that being the case we shall not take out (our weapons)', having informed the Honorable Prime Minister 'we shall ourselves bear the responsibility', they, the soldiers that had come up, having deceived him, having made the request 'go into the presence of the king', the Honorable Prime Minister having been induced to go in front of them, as soon as the Palace was out of sight, the soldiers seized their muskets and fired them. Reported that, having hit the Prime Minister himself in the body with five musket shots, they killed him. Thereupon his wife having entreated the soldiers with folded hands 'there is no action whatever that we have taken; please do not you do work like this; but having said 'are you too looking for this', it is testified that having chopped at her with a sword she died in five days. Testified that the two male children, fleeing to the forest, entered, and were seated in, a pit; but having come and discovered them, after having pierced them with a wooden spear and pulled it out, with taunts, they killed them. Testified that the children said 'do not kill us too'; even though they spoke to the 'Lakmo', without any advantage the killing took place. Testified that, as for one of them, it is a fact that they followed him into the forest and kill him. As for the 'Lakmo', Tsharing Rukgye is one. Trhinle Zongbo is a second. Ruk Namgye is number three. Shangda Dorzhe's son Trhiten is number four. There are two or three more; but not knowing their personal names I have not submitted them. As for property, not having been able to calculate it I have not testified. I Tsangthung testify that these are my words.

B. Document M

I. Lepcha text

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2. English translation

Testified by Gyamu

By the daughter Gyamu. I am submitting an account, an account of what I saw with my own eyes when they killed the Honorable Prime Minister, the Sahib having told me to. From the direction of the King, on the other side, four score soldiers commanded by an officer, the

Steward Lhachoo, coming in sufficient numbers, when the clear light of early morning was arriving, surrounding the Prime Minister's house fired their muskets; but the Prime Minister, uncovering the planks of the space beneath the house, getting out of the space beneath the house, fleeing to the forest, stayed there the whole day; after that, returning, after the Prime Minister had said to the soldiers 'do not kill us', he gave them, the soldiers, silver rupees, bullocks, together with food and drink. After that they, the soldiers, having said 'we shall not, now, kill you', having said 'go to the king's place, on the other side'. Speaking to the Prime Minister, taking him out with them, on reaching open ground they, the soldiers, fired their muskets. The five musket shots struck the Prime Minister's body. On this his wife was going to say 'do not do that'; but his wife too Saring Rukgye chopped right through her shoulder with a 'baan'. Afterwards the three male children fled to the forest; they, following, without making them return, Trhinle Zongbo together with Ruk Anggye, the soldiers killed three male children. After that, we, doing it gladly, cherished and looked after our mother; but, not being able to care for her, in five days she went and died. After that, for those now remaining two boys and three girls were left. One of the boys, acting as Phensong Lama, was there. I testify that three girls and a boy are with their grandmother. After that I too, a girl, having gone down, and not having known how things were being done, do not testify to anything further.

Handwritten Lepcha script in vertical columns on the right margin.

