

Artwork

# Remembering Teesta and the Water Dragon: An Illustrated Folk Narrative of the Lepchas

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## Introduction

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In this illustrated folk narrative, a *muun*, a traditional female shaman of the Lepcha tribe, takes us on a journey of the tribe's origins, its connection to the ancestors, mother earth, and the sacred waters through the *muun*'s vision of the water dragon. The story is based on several interviews with the shamans and elders of the Lepcha tribe. It is important to understand that the *muun*, the local rivers and the water dragon are essentially all the same. Their voices alternate throughout the narrative. The *muun* is simply a vessel who helps us connect to the many realities and realms. The confluence of rivers help the *muun* reconnecting to her lineage, mother earth, herself and to the water dragon. The water dragon is simultaneously journeying with the rivers and is also emerging from the *muun*'s heart to channel the messages that are needed to be shared. In this multi-layered story, the storyteller(s) tell(s) us about birth, marriage, life, and death as practiced facts. The story is intended to convey information about different ceremonies and rites of passage. The essence of the story, its language and visuals have been made keeping in mind the ways in which oral storytelling is shared locally among members of the Lepcha tribe. It is written in such a way as leave much for readers to interpret or imagine for themselves. Visual hints should help to guide readers to make and understand the connections. The spirit of the story lies in our remembrance and reconnection to all that we have forgotten. It is a humble voice for the river Teesta and water bodies of the world and their current bondage and death. Especially at a crucial time like ours, when mother earth and her kingdom are disintegrating rapidly, and our survival is at stake.

## Keywords

folk narrative; oral tradition; sacred water; ancestor worship; Lepcha

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GREETINGS TO YOU

MY NAME MEANS 'THE SHOOT OF A PLANT'  
I AM A MIUN, A FEMALE SHAMAN, OF THE LEPCHA TRIBE  
FROM THE FOOTHILLS OF KONGCHEN CHYU BEE\*



CAN I SHARE A STORY OF THE WORLDS WE LIVE IN?

FROM A DEEP WHIRLPOOL WITHIN,  
A WATER DRAGON RISES, STEADILY  
REACHING IN, EMERGING GENTLY, FLOWING  
I HOPE YOU WILL SEE  
AND FEEL THE DRAGONS AS I DO



FOR TEN YEARS NOW,  
THE WATER DRAGON HAS SPOKEN TO ME  
I PAID NO HEED... DIDN'T LISTEN  
I STILL DO NOT UNDERSTAND  
BUT I FEEL READY NOW


SHE FLOWS LOVINGLY  
WITH IMMENSE STRENGTH AND WISDOM  
CARRYING TENDERNESS, LOVE  
AND NOURISHMENT  
AND COUNTLESS LIFETIMES  
OF EXPERIENCES AND STORIES

\* Kongchen Konghlo or Mount  
Kanchendzonga and its surrounding  
mountains in the Kongchen Chyu  
Bee (Chyu Bee: Hill/Mountain)

# Remembering

## TEESTA AND THE WATER DRAGON

story/ alyen foning  
images/ girish



SHE ASKS ME TO LET HER LOVE AND HEAL ME  
AND HELP HER TELL THE STORIES SHE CARRIES WITHIN HER  
SHE ENCOURAGES ME TO SPEAK  
AND ASKS US ALL TO CONNECT WITH HER AGAIN

MAY WE INVOKE AND REMEMBER HER ONCE MORE  
MAY WE SURRENDER AND ACCEPT HER WISDOM AND NOURISHMENT  
MAY WE LET HER LOVE US  
SO IT IS.

THE WATER DRAGON IS ONE WITH KONGCHEN CHYU BEE AND THE RIVERS THAT FLOW FROM IT. SHE IS A CHILD OF ITBU DEBU RUHM, THE MOTHER CREATOR OF THE LEPCHAS. RONGNYU IS THE MOTHER RIVER OF ALL LEPCHAS, FLOWING FROM THE MOUNTAINS UNTO THE SEA, AND BACK TO THE MOUNTAINS AGAIN THROUGH THE MAGIC OF THE SKIES AND THE SUN.

SHE HAS BEEN JOURNEYING WITH RONGNYU AS FAR AS SHE CAN REMEMBER. SHE CARRIES ALL THE STORIES AND MEMORIES SHE HAS HEARD, SEEN AND BEEN PART OF EVER SINCE SHE WAS BORN OUT OF THE PURE WHITE HIMALAYAN SNOWS. SHE IS CONCEIVED BY THE GUARDIAN SPIRIT OF THE WATERS THAT FLOW AROUND MAYEL L'YANG'.

\* The hidden paradise of Lepcha folklore; the regions that we recognize today as Sikkim, parts of West Bengal and parts of Nepal and Bhutan.

IN KONGCHEN CHYU BEE, THE PEAKS EMBODY THE MASCULINE ENERGIES WHILE THE LAKES CARRY THE FEMININE ESSENCE. AS THE SNOW MELTS, THE PRIMORDIAL MOTHER AND FATHER DESCEND FROM THE MOUNTAINS, TAKING THE FORM OF THE TWO RIVERS RONGNYU AND RONG'EET. RONGNYU LITERALLY MEANS 'AN HONORED RONG LADY' AND RONG'EET MEANS 'FROM WHERE THE RONGS ORIGINATE'.

# Ice ORIGIN

FUDONGTHING AND NAZONG NYU - THE FIRST HUMANS - WERE CREATED FROM THE SAME PURE WHITE SNOWS. THE MOUNTAIN CAVES HOLD THE ORIGIN OF ALL THE LEPCHA CLANS - KNOWN AS THE RONG OR THE MUTANCHI RONG KUP - THE BELOVED CHILDREN OF MOTHER CREATOR. EACH CLAN HAS A SACRED PEAK, LAKE AND CAVE THAT THEY REVERE AND WORSHIP.

WE ARE BORN OF THE KONGCHEN CHYU BEE AND AFTER DEATH, WE REJOIN OUR ANCESTORS WHO DWELL THERE. THUS, THE CIRCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH OF THE LEPCHAS BEGINS AND ENDS WITH THE KONGCHEN CHYU BEE.

# Flowing water BIRTH



I VISIT THE WATER DRAGON AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO RIVERS. I AM TOLD THEY LOVE WHITE FLOWERS, I CARRY SOME AS AN OFFERING, A ROCK FROM MY ANCESTRAL HOME AND ANOTHER WHICH MY COUSIN GAVE ME, FOR PROTECTION.

BOWING DOWN IN PRAYER, I FEEL MY ANCESTORS. THEY INTRODUCE ME TO THE WATER DRAGON AND THE TWO RIVERS. THEY HELP ME EXPERIENCE AND CONNECT WITH THESE GREAT PRIMAL BEINGS.



THE RIVERS ASK ME TO TRUST, HONOUR AND SURRENDER TO THEM. THEY SHOW ME MY FEARS AND STRUGGLES.

IT IS TIME FOR ME TO FACE MY MEMORIES AND EMOTIONS AND ALLOW IN LOVE AND HEALING.



LATER, I VISIT WITH A BOONGTHING, A MALE LEPCHA SHAMAN, TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE RIVERS AND OUR CONNECTION TO THEM. HE TELLS ME THAT IF ONE LISTENS CAREFULLY, THE RIVERS ASK FOR THE OFFERINGS THEY WANT. HE TELLS ME THEIR STORY.

THE FATHER RIVER RONG-EET WAS GUIDED BY A BIRD CALLED TUT-FO WHILE THE MOTHER RONGNYU WAS GUIDED BY A SNAKE CALLED PUMOLBUUM ON THEIR DOWNHILL JOURNEYS FROM THE KONGCHEN CHYU BEE.



AS TUT-FO WAS FASTER AND TOOK A MORE DIRECT ROUTE THAN PUMOLBUUM, RONG-EET REACHED THE PLACE THEY HAD AGREED TO MEET AT, MUCH BEFORE RONGNYU. THE WAIT MADE RONG-EET FURIOUS, AND HE TURNED AROUND IN ANGER TO GO BACK TO THE MOUNTAINS, RESULTING IN THE OONG VUUM, OR THE GREAT FLOOD.

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, A BIRD CALLED POHOM-FO WARNED THE RONG FOLK ABOUT THE IMPENDING DISASTER AND GUIDED THEM TO THE SAFETY OF MOUNT TUNDONG.

MEANWHILE, RONG-EET FINALLY CALMED DOWN AND RETURNED TO THE RENDEZVOUS POINT. WHEN HE BEGAN MERGING INTO RONGNYU, SHE ASKED HER PARTNER, 'THEE SA THA?' - 'WHEN DID YOU ARRIVE?'. HER QUESTION BEGETTING THE MODERN NAME FOR THEIR UNION - THE TEESTA.



AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO RIVERS, YOU MAY FEEL THERE IS A WHIRLPOOL AT THE EXACT POINT WHERE THEY MEET. THE WATER DRAGON RECOUNTS HOW WE USED TO COME TO THE CONFLUENCE WITH OUR BOONGTINGS AND MIUNS WHEN WE WERE BORN, AND HOW WE WERE CEREMONIALLY INTRODUCED TO HER AND THE RIVERS.

THEY KNEW EACH ONE OF US BY NAME, AND BLESSED US WITH ALL THEIR HEARTS. THEY KNEW EACH PEAK, LAKE AND CAVE WE CAME FROM, AND CARRIED MEMORIES, PRAYERS AND BLESSINGS FROM OUR ANCESTORS AND THE MOTHER CREATOR. THEY HELPED US CONNECT BY WHISPERING STORIES AND SONGS AT OUR BIRTH RITES.

SHE WAS HIDDEN BECAUSE WE WERE  
FORGETTING HER. WE MADE NO TIME  
TO VISIT THE SACRED WATERS.

SHE IS EMERGING NOW  
FROM THE HEAVENLY WOMB  
OF THE MOTHER CREATOR.

SHE PRAYS FOR OUR STORIES AND SONGS TO BE WHISPERED AGAIN,  
SO WE RECONNECT AND REMEMBER ALL THAT WE NEED TO.  
THAT WE MAY SEE AND FEEL WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN EXPERIENCING.  
THAT WE MAY REMEMBER THAT WE ARE ONE,  
BORN OF THE SAME PURE WHITE SNOW.

THE WATER DRAGON TELLS ME THAT WE USED TO VISIT HER AND THE TWO RIVERS WHEN WE GOT MARRIED. FOR THE CONFLUENCE IS WHERE THE MASCULINE AND THE FEMININE MERGE AFTER TRAVELLING INDIVIDUALLY FROM THE HEAVENLY WOMB OF THE MOTHER. THUS, THIS SACRED LOCATION WAS CHOSEN TO SANCTIFY MARRIAGES.

THE SHAMANS WOULD INFORM THE PARENT RIVERS OF OUR UNION AND SEEK THEIR BLESSINGS, THE BLESSINGS OF OUR ANCESTORS AND THE MOTHER CREATOR, SO THAT NEW COUPLES WOULD UNITE LIKE THEM IN LOVE BEFORE MERGING INTO THE SEAS OF LIFE AND DEATH.

# Whirlpool UNION

THE WHIRLPOOL AT THE CONFLUENCE SIGNIFIES THE DANCE BETWEEN THE MASCULINE AND FEMININE THAT CHURNS, CLEANSSES AND STRENGTHENS. THROUGH THIS CHURNING THEY LEARN EVERYTHING ABOUT THE OTHER - LOVING, OPPOSING, ACCEPTING AND SUPPORTING EACH OTHER - BEFORE EMERGING AS ONE AFTER SIFTING THROUGH ALL THAT IS NOT NEEDED.

THEREON, WITH ALL THEY HAVE LIVED THROUGH AND COLLECTED, THEY MOVE FORWARD STRONGER AS ONE, FORGING NEW PATHS AHEAD.



# Reflective water LIFE JOURNEY

THE WATER DRAGON, RONG-EET AND RONGNYU ORIGINATE FROM THE SOURCE. ALONG THE WAY, THEY MEET MORTALS AND SPIRITS OF ALL KINDS FROM MAYEL LYANG - ENTITIES THAT HELP EACH OTHER IN NOURISHING AND SUPPORTING THE CIRCLE OF LIFE. AS THE WATER DRAGON AND THE SACRED WATERS FOLLOW THEIR PATHS ON TO THE SEA, NUMEROUS BEINGS AND SPIRITS SHARE THEIR LIVES AND STORIES WITH THEM.

THE WATER DRAGON TELLS ME THAT WE USED TO VISIT THE RIVERS WITH OUR SHAMANS TO CEREMONIALLY SHARE THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES. SHE SAYS IT WAS BEAUTIFUL FOR THEM TO FEEL AND HEAR OUR EXPERIENCES, AND TO SEE HOW WE GREW.

THESE MEMORIES AND STORIES, SHE CARRIES WITHIN HER  
OF HOW THINGS WERE  
HOW THEY ARE MEANT TO BE  
MEMORIES OF LIFE IN FLOW

ALL THIS SHE FEELS AND HIDDEN, SHE FEELS DEEPER THAN  
BEFORE  
THE FRACTURED EARTH  
THE LOSS OF OUR ANCIENT STORIES  
THE DAMMING OF HER WATERS

SHE CAN HEAR THE SILENT PRAYERS, THE QUIET PLEAS FOR HELP  
CALLING HER OUT FROM WITHIN  
TO RETELL THE STORIES WE HAVE FORGOTTEN  
SO WE MAY REMEMBER.

WHEN THE WATERS WITHIN US STOP FLOWING, WE ARE READY TO RETURN TO THE SOURCE. THE SHAMANS MANIFEST THE BRIDGE TO THE OTHER SIDE OF LIFE AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO RIVERS, SO OUR SPIRITS MAY PEACEFULLY CROSS OVER INTO DEATH. THE MOMENT THIS HAPPENS, THE BRIDGES MUST BE IMMEDIATELY BROKEN, SO THAT THE DECEASED SPIRIT MAY NOT RETURN TO THIS WORLD, AND THAT NO ONE ELSE COMES OVER FROM THE OTHER SIDE.

## Still water

### BRIDGES TO DEATH

AFTER CROSSING THE FIRST BRIDGE, MANY OF US NEED TO BE CONVINCED THAT WE HAVE NOW LEFT THE WORLD OF THE LIVING. THE SHAMAN ASKS US TO LOOK FOR OUR REFLECTION IN THE RIVER, WHICH WE DO NOT FIND. WE ARE ALSO ASKED TO WALK ON HER BANKS TO MAKE FOOTPRINTS, WHICH WE CANNOT. THROUGH MANY SUCH ACTS OF COAXING AND CONVINCING BY THE SHAMAN, WE FINALLY BECOME READY TO ACCEPT DEATH.

THEN, WE ARE CEREMONIALLY CLEANSED, PURIFIED AND BLESSED BY THE WATERS OF THE RONGNYU, AND TAKEN TO THE SECOND BRIDGE IN KONGCHEN CHYU BEE. HERE, OUR CLANS ARE VERIFIED BEFORE WE ARE ALLOWED TO REJOIN OUR RIGHTFUL ANCESTORS.

EVEN IN DEATH WE ARE CONNECTED TO THE SACRED RIVERS.



# Raindrops

NOURISHMENT

THROUGH ALL THIS, THE WATER DRAGON AND TEESTA CONTINUE THE JOURNEY UNTO THE SEA. THE SNOW, THE SOIL, THE WINDS AND THE RAINS ALSO CARRY MEMORIES TO THEM.

THEY REMEMBER STORIES OF SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS FORMING OF A SEED GROWING INTO A TREE OF FORESTS EMERGING OF THE BIRDS THAT PLANTED THE SEEDS OF WATERS THAT NOURISHED THE SEEDS OF FLOWERS THAT GAVE THE BEES HONEY AND THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES AND OUR EMOTIONS FROM THE TIME OF OUR BIRTH. THEY REMEMBER.

THEY MEET THE SEA AND EVENTUALLY THE OCEANS. VAPOUR, MIST, RAIN AND SNOWFALL BRING THEM BACK THROUGH THE MAGIC OF THE SKIES AND THE SUN. BACK TO KONGCHEN CHYU BEE. TO MERGE ONCE MORE INTO THE HEAVENLY WOMB OF THE MOTHER CREATOR.

EVERY CYCLE, KONGCHEN CHYU BEE HOLDS THE STORIES AND MEMORIES FOR SAFEKEEPING, SHARING THEM WITH US WHEN WE ARE READY.




*Vapour  
and mist*  
COMPLETING THE CYCLE

THE WATER DRAGON AND TEESTA DO NOT KNOW WHAT LIES AHEAD. THEY REPOSE THEIR TRUST IN THE LOVING HANDS OF THE MOTHER CREATOR.

THEREON, THE CYCLE CONTINUES AND ONCE AGAIN THEY DESCEND FROM THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS WITH MORE MEMORIES TO BE MADE, FOUND AND COLLECTED.

# Ice

WISDOM AND  
REBIRTH



I VISIT THE CONFLUENCE AGAIN AND OFFER FLOWERS, INCENSE, LEAVES, AND PINE AND JUNIPER. I SIT IN MEDIATION AND PRAY FOR THE TWO RIVERS, THE WATER DRAGON, THE FOUR SACRED DIRECTIONS, OUR ANCESTORS AND THE MOTHER CREATOR - SEEKING THEIR GUIDANCE, PROTECTION AND BLESSINGS. THEY HOLD ME LOVINGLY, AND HELP ME CONNECT, RECEIVE CLARITY AND FACE MY STRUGGLES.

THOUGH I CANNOT ALWAYS CONNECT TO THE WATER DRAGON AND THE RIVERS, I AM LEARNING TO LISTEN TO THEM.

SHE IS THE SPIRIT AND VOICE OF WATERS THAT FLOW  
BORN OF THE PURE WHITE SNOW OF KONGCHEN CHYU BEE  
ONE WITH RONGNYU AND RONG-EET, BECOME ONE AS TEESTA  
NOW SHE IS IN THE WOMB, WAITING  
EMERGING GENTLY, TO BE WITH US  
SHE CARRIES WITH HER STORIES AND MEMORIES  
OF LIFETIMES

SHE REMEMBERS US  
FOR WE COME FROM THE SAME WHITE SNOWS  
SHE ALWAYS CARRIES US WITHIN HERSELF  
AND SHE KNOWS THAT DEEP WITHIN US, WE CARRY HER TOO

SHE ASKS OF US  
TO HELP HER RE-EMERGE  
THAT WE MAKE SPACE FOR PRAYER  
FOR SACRED WATERS TO FLOW FREELY  
SO SHE AND THE RIVERS MAY HEAL AND NOURISH US AGAIN  
WITH HER STORIES AND SONGS TO REMEMBER THE ONENESS

MAY WE CONNECT WITH THEM  
MAY WE OPEN OUR HEARTS  
AND RECEIVE THEIR STORIES WITH LOVE

MAY WE LIVE IN HARMONY WITH THE LAWS OF NATURE  
AND HONOUR THE SACRED CIRCLE OF LIFE  
SO IT IS.

OUR WATER DRAGONS ARE CALLING US  
THEY REMEMBER US  
DO WE REMEMBER THEM?