

A NOTE ON 'CHI' OF THE RONG OR LEPCHA OF SIKKIM

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Intoxicating drinks play an important role in all sacrificial ceremonies and rituals observed by the Lepchas. One such drink is the 'Chi' or 'Chiang' which is prepared from millet and is looked upon as female. Another such drink is 'Dyo', an alcoholic drink which is made from medicinal roots, herbs or other fermentable plants and is regarded as a male.

The origin of Chi can be traced to an old tradition. According to the tradition of the Lepchas, Chi is of heavenly origin. Tradition has it that at the very outset the ferment used in the preparation of the millet brew Chi was brought to mankind from the other world in a cunning manner by a special messenger. The Lepchas link up immortality with this drink. It is believed that just after the mythological 'deluge', the quail performed the Chi sacrifice, thereby heralding the beginning of a new world. Two birds are believed to have fetched this drink of immortality from the land of the gods. Chi is protected by a deity named Don-dyo-chi-log who is accorded the same homage as the supreme god of the Lepchas, Rum.

Chi is obtained from the small millet. For three days the ripened grains are dried in the sun and afterwards cooked in an earthen pot kept covered with a bamboo mat and a larger barrel is inverted over it. After the cooking, the ferment is added to cause fermentation. The fermented liquor is left in the sun for some days and finally the grains are squeezed, and the Chi-brew is thus obtained.

According to Lepcha texts and rituals the Chi Sacrifice is indissolubly bound up with all auspicious occasions. The sacrificial cup containing Chi has its rim decorated with three little lumps of butter called 'San-dyo', and the ceremony is performed on the head of a bull.

The drink has deleterious effects on snakes and demons, but for the gods it is a refreshing drink. It is said that through its sacrifice their rage is calmed. On ceremonial days, the Lepcha magicians work themselves into frenzy by partaking of Chi in order to attain the state of ecstasy. The myth of the Chi moves around an enchanting love story.

Long ago, the story goes, the universe was composed of several worlds, one peopled by human beings, the other by gods and yet another by demons and so on. At that time the humans and the gods fraternised with each other and pooled their resources to fight the periodical onslaughts from the world of demons.

A boy fell in love with a girl. He was told that unless he performed the Chi sacrifice he could not get the hand of the girl in marriage. Where to find Chi? Millet was abundant but no ferment! The plight of the love-lorn boy moved the humans and the gods alike to engineer the theft of the ferment from an old woman living in some other world. In retaliation the old woman cursed the ferment.

After Chi was prepared, men and gods assembled at a special ceremony but dared not taste it for fear of evil effects of the curse.

The snakes were summoned to test the reaction of Chi on them. The first snake-the 'Pa-vin-bu' drank a little and became mad and retired into a cave. Another black snake, the 'Pa-mol-pu' drank Chi and also became mad and went into a cave. Then the poisonous snake volunteered. He drank the Chi and went away vomiting.

Next came the horned snake with a red head and a black body. She drank a little and ran away drunken.

Lastly, yet another snake-the 'Pa-zyob-bu' arrived from the hills. This snake tasted the brew and apparently felt happy and after drinking some more merrily sauntered out into the hills. This convinced everybody that the brew was now safe, and ever since it is relished.

The Chi sacrifice has an entirely original and individual character and is closely bound up with the life and the ritual of the Lepchas.

