

THE STORY OF THE MUUN

—

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I have found a gentle whisper,
A whisper, that drowns in all the noise sometimes.
When I stay quiet and listen carefully,
I hear the remnants of a song.

I don't know the song.
Though, I vaguely remember hearing it before.
It beats in my heart very loud sometimes.

What is it trying to tell me?
I don't fully know yet.
It is telling me to follow.
Connect to the source of all its sounds.

There is a deep need within,
A calling, it tells me to dig deeper.

It tells me to share my story, the story of my people.
I know deep within, it is connected to Mother Earth,
To her kingdom,
My ancestors and the lives they have lived,
To us, who have lost our connection to something much larger than
we can ever imagine.

The beckoning asks me to stop and look
At the signs,
At the little dots and connectors.
That has been and is part of one's story.

To remember all that is forgotten and almost lost.
So that I may truly see, feel and speak all that is needed.
To find the courage and humbly stand in my truth.

May Mother Earth, My ancestors, Kongchen Konglo (Kanchenjunga),
Chyu-Pandim (Mt. Pandim), Da-Lingmo (Lake Lingmo), Teesta and
the Divine guide me and show me the way.
So it is.



MADNESS: A DOORWAY



The meaning of my name is ‘the shoot of a plant’ and I come from a lineage of female shamans. My grandfather gave me this name; he wrote it in a book long before I was born. I had not known that it would define the essence of my life.

I have always been fascinated by stories of magic. But I had never expected or imagined being a part of one of them. I will not be able to tell you about everything that happened and all I saw, experienced and felt, but I will share with you the defining moments of my journey and how I got to this point.

In many shamanisms, it is said that madness is a doorway and an opening to unseen worlds. As I began to read through writings on this subject and interviewed some Elders and Shamans of my tribe, I became aware that, in various practices of Shamanism around the world, this experience is known as the Shaman’s sickness. It is one of the ways in which a shaman may be initiated.

In this madness, the boundaries of dream/waking, inner/outer world, self/other and conscious/unconscious mind are known to get blurred and dissolve. This process of spiritual awakening is said



to melt one's sense of who one is and begin to fully disintegrate it. As one's inner constitution is rewritten it can appear as a nervous or a psychotic breakdown. It is the beginning of the dissolution of old structures of the psyche, a process in which the Shaman drops down to the darkness of the unconscious underworld and comes to terms with darker and repressed parts of themselves. The Shaman also begins to go into altered states of consciousness and connect to other realms. Many times it is known to be induced by trauma or intense near death sickness. This madness helps one connect to deeper parts of oneself and see the illusory separation of the self. It helps give rise to a truer sense of who one is and helps one slowly realise one's deep interconnection and interdependence with each other and all living beings. It assists in bringing all dissociated parts back together into a more integrated synthesis. This is just a small but important aspect of the awakening of a Shaman. The experience of each shaman is unique



and most of the times cannot be expressed in words or be categorised as the norm. The result of this process is not instant; it is just the beginning of a new and long journey ahead.

For me, it began long before I could even register it, but there came a point in my life when I had lost myself completely. I had managed to break my heart, my body and finally, I shattered my mind. My soul was weak, but it seemed to flickering in the deepest darkest place I have been in my whole life.

I lived in Goa at this point in my life and had managed to isolate myself from anyone who cared for me.

During this time, a friend had told me that people from Kalimpong had opened a restaurant at walking distance from my shop. Since I was homesick, I went there hoping to find some connection and comfort. I found out that it belonged to distant relatives of mine, who I had never met before. Mimi, my aunt who ran the restaurant lived with her

mother, niece and son in Goa. Mimi came to my shop and checked on me every day in the evenings. One evening she looked straight into my eyes and told me that I was not doing alright, that I should pack up and stay with her. I promptly agreed, and on the very same night, I lost my sanity in her house.

I began mumbling things, going into trances, seeing visions, feeling every kind of pain, and I began drifting in and out of sanity. At times, there would be points in the day when I would find something to whip myself with. I began talking to my reflection in the mirror or to other things that people could not see. I would also wake up many times in the middle of the night and mumble things. My iris had become misaligned; both were facing two extreme ends of the eyes. I was always shivering with fear, even at the slightest sound or movement.

During that time, I remember her telling me that I was a shaman of my tribe, known as a Muun and that I was going through what was known as 'the breaking of the pot'. It is a point in the life of a Muun when an awakening happens. The vessel ideally has to be balanced in mind, body and soul on awakening. Since I was far from that state, it caused me to go insane. It is believed that many Muuns meditate, pray, eat specific food and so on for many years to prepare for such a state. During the awakening, a senior Muun helps the awakening one to recover from that state and help prepare for the journey ahead.

My aunt who I had recently met is also a Muun from my tribe. She helped me heal by cleansing my energy, grounding me every day and keeping me safe during such a vulnerable time in my life.

It is amazing how she took me into her home when I was completely crazy knowing that she had an elderly mother and a five year old son at home. She tells me today that she did so because she saw my light flickering in the dark quicksand that I was stuck in. She was instructed to help me through my awakening and on my journey. She told me that I would take a week to get out of the madness.

This madness as I can remember was very overwhelming. I could see, hear and feel everything; and I could make sense of it too, but nothing seemed to be in my control. My mind was not mine, neither was my body or heart; they seemed to function on their own.

The last experience of the madness that I remember vividly before fully healing was waking up in the middle of the night and looking at my reflection in the mirror and speaking to myself. I was suddenly out of my body, approximately eight feet above ground level, and I could see myself staring at the mirror mumbling to myself; I could not believe how completely crazy I had become. I thought to myself 'who is this person?', 'could it really be me?'. On realizing it was me, I decided I would never ever let myself be in that state or situation ever again. At this exact moment, I suddenly came back into my body, and I could feel pulsating energy pouring out of my feet and hands. I then went off to sleep and woke up feeling like a new person. I felt my ancestors with me and wore my white traditional Lepcha dress with my grandfather's belt that day. I thanked Mother Earth and my ancestors for helping me return to myself.

This was the beginning of a new change and a long new journey for me. It has taken me over three years to be stronger and more grounded. I still struggle with many things but praying, meditation and the training my aunt has given me has helped me every single day. This awakening has helped me connect to other worlds, channel messages and instructions; and it has helped me tune in to energies and healing too. It has helped me connect to myself, other sentient beings, to my ancestors and to Mother Earth.



I have lived, trained and practiced with Mimi for over a year and a half, and she still guides me when I am lost or struggling.

Before meeting Mimi, there were many incidents where people and other energies attacked me or tried to take my life force. There were instances I would suddenly have bite marks on my legs or practitioners of the dark arts fed me food that was cursed or tried to drain my energy through various spells and chants.

I have realised that when one's energy or life force is low, there are people and forces that come to feed off one or try to take the life force away. But there were also many incidents that, along with meeting people of many shamanic and indigenous cultures and visiting energised ancient sacred places on this journey, helped me heal, grow stronger, give support, nourish, nurture and help build a united collective. These incidents and experiences help restore one's faith and make one realise that all kinds of magic in the whole world are connected and constantly supporting each other. There are many stories of light, dark and greys I have experienced in my life that I hope to recall and express someday.

Once this world of magic opened up to me, I was aware of many events, incidents and sensations that I had not really understood before. I still have to process and recall all that I have gone through in my existence. Just before my whole world crashed, I recall going into a trance, crying intensely and praying deeply for help and surrendering myself to Mother Earth. And help did come when I was least expecting it. I still don't know how to walk on this path and how to serve the greater good. I still face my own demons and shadows and get lost, lose faith and waver easily.

But this has chosen me, and I choose and intend to walk humbly on this path that has been laid out by ancestors and Mother Creator Earth.

THE STORY OF THE MUUN

I have learnt the basics from my aunt, but I'm back home now to connect with myself, my roots, my ancestors, Mother Earth and to search for, understand, practice and document the story of the Muun.

It is important for me to state that this is my process of questioning and searching. All that you will read is information, stories and experiences I have assimilated through my own experiences and from elders of the tribe, practicing Muuns and Boongthings and translations from Lepcha scriptures.



LEPCHA CREATION STORY



The Lepchas are the indigenous tribe of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, parts of Nepal and Bhutan. They were originally animists and worshipped many Gods and Goddesses, Itbu Debu Ruhm (Mother Creator) and most important of which were their ancestors from the land of Mayel Lyang. Mayel Lyang, which means the land of hidden paradise, is a mythical place of origin and is believed to be located at the foothills of Mount Kanchenjunga. The Lepchas believe that their ancestors live within them. They are known as Mutanchi Rong Kup which means 'The Beloved Children of Mother Earth'.

They are known to be happy, simple and hospitable people who do not like confrontations and disharmony. They prefer to live away from crowds and are content living in/with Nature. Their ritual specialists are called Muun (female shaman) and Boongthing (male shaman), who mediated between common Lepcha people, the natural world and the world of supernatural beings. Boongthing- (Abong-Mouth, Athing-Senior one) is the one who is a carrier and senior in spoken wisdom/knowledge. To follow the story of the Muun, one has to first

understand the Lepcha creation story and how it plays an integral part in explaining our connection to Itbu Debu Ruhm (Mother Creator).

In the Lepcha creation story- In the beginning there was no universe. The creator created this Earth, as well as other stars and planets and skies, like the moon. The creator then deliberated how to create humans, animals, birds, beasts, insects and creatures of water. With the counsel of other Gods and Goddesses, they created humans, animals, living creatures, beasts and others from the dust of the Earth. Dust was used to make flesh, while bone, ribs and spines were prepared from rocks and trees. The breath of life was taken from the puff of wind, and the lifelong heat of the body was taken from the Sun God.

When all living creatures on Earth grow old and die, their flesh will again turn to dust, and their bones and ribs will all return to rocks and trees. The heat of their bodies will return to the Sun and the Moon. Their blood will revisit the waters, and their breath will again turn into the wind mingling back with the storms where it was born.



THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST MUUN AND BOONGTHING



There was a time when all beings co-existed in peace, including evil spirits and demon like souls. But when evil spirits learned a variety of charms, mantras and various arts, they used this knowledge to eat living creatures and animals that inhabit the Earth. This left very little breath of life for all, and this left the rest of the population in a nervous and frightened state. The most vicious of them was the demon Jyum Poohoo Panyee who intended to finish feasting upon the remaining living beings. On seeing the state of the world and in order to save humans, animals and living creatures, Tungle Tungaong, the Holy Creator and God of Truth who resides above the Earth, returned to the Earth. Many prayers were offered, and the deities of the Earth and the four directions gave their advice to the scripture readers and fortune tellers. Accordingly scripture rituals began to be performed, and the fortune tellers began to see what was in store.

Within the divine revelations, magic beings in the form of a Muun and Boongthing must be sent by the deities of the four directions and by the deity Samblee Sambaan. The priestess was to be named Nyolik Nyaosaong Muun, and the priest was to be named Zoar Boongthing. Through the power of the deities' work and mantras, the Muun would be able to save the Earth's living creatures. It would be through



her sorcery that these creatures are removed from the mouth of the demon. Such a forecast was truly seen.

The Muun and the Boongthing were granted the power to exorcise evil spirits and they came to understand the innermost thoughts of human kind, whether evil or holy. Their spirits were created in place of deities, and after making vows and oaths, they were then left on Earth



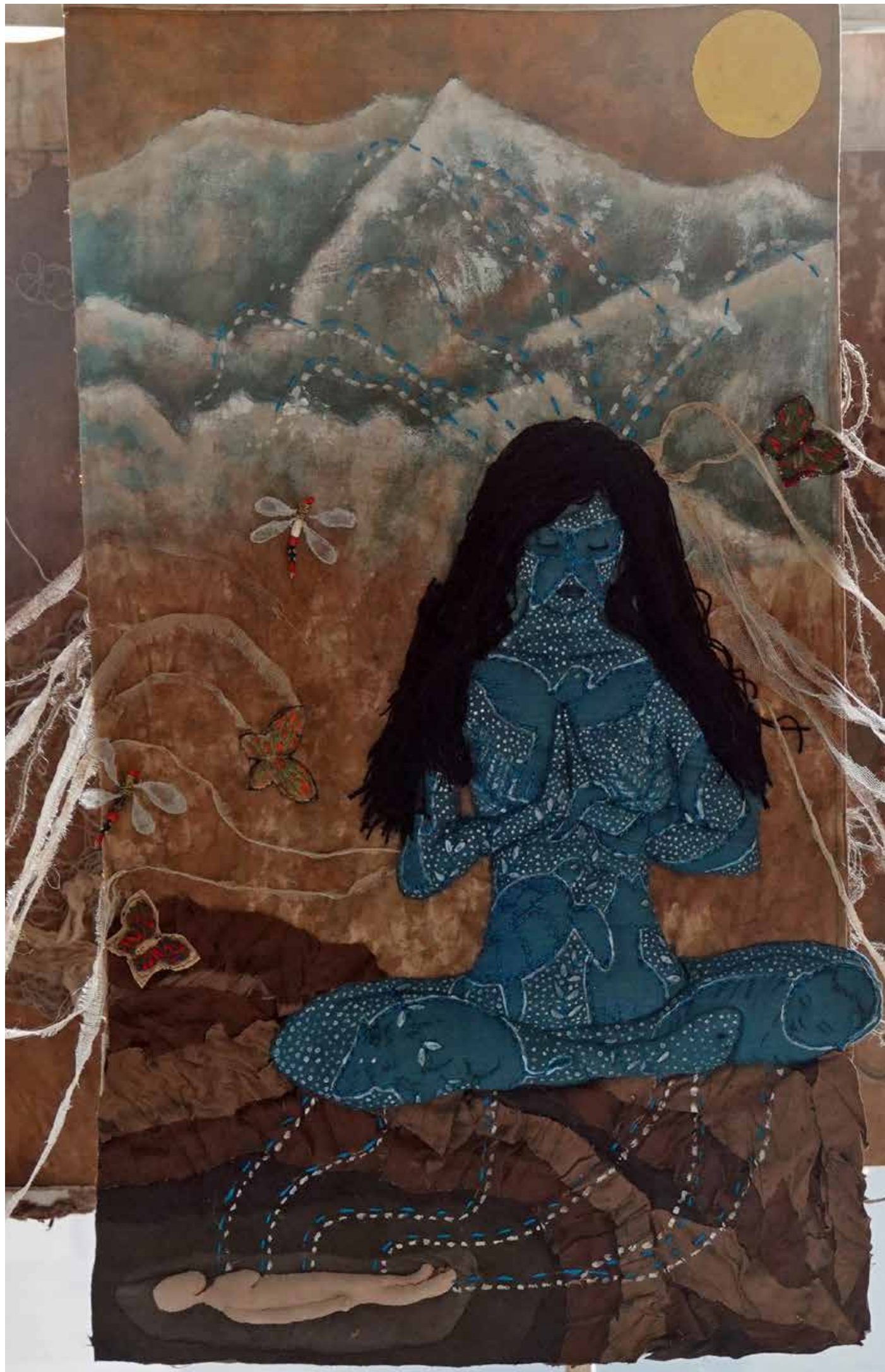
to continue their duties. But to do so, they had to adopt these spiritual powers with truth and holiness.

So the Gods granted birth to the first Muun and Boongthing as supernatural beings to perform spiritual rituals and defeat the demon Jyum Poohoo Panyee.

A mountain of jewels, a globe of fortune, auspicious and beautiful, is the story of the triumph over the evil spirits. Through the holy blossoming flowers and golden orchids in Maayel, the smell and curse of Jyum Poohoo Panyee has expired in this age of beauty.

Nyolik Nyaosaong Muun offered religious rites and prayers, in melodious sounds that were like flutes, mouth harps, reeds, bird songs, roars of elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, clashes of thunder and lightning and insect sounds. Nyolik Nyaosaong Muun offered a necklace made out of the bones and body parts of living creatures that had been eaten alive by the demon. She respectfully pleaded to the deities in heaven, under the Earth, in Earth's waters and various Guardian Spirits, asking to be shown how mankind and the animals should offer spiritual rites and devotions for appeasement. Then standing still with her hands folded and the edge of her tongue lifted, she began to offer prayers. Day and night she offered prayers to Earth's deities and Guardian Spirits, including deities of great disasters such as Earthquakes, famines, droughts and Celestial Beings in the rainbow. Each of these deities, with their possessed powers, helped her obtain power and strength to perform all her tasks.

The Muun and Boongthing use a fermented brew with burning incense, offerings and prayers in their spiritual rituals. She also offers the spirituous nectar to the guardian of darkness in the navel of the Earth who is the creator of each and every lord and master of the waters and soil. She also offers the medicine to the protectors of newborns, beseeching help for obtaining strength and knowledge of the scriptures. These rituals help her dig out all the charms, mantras and magic spells of the Earth demon and uproot and shatter his evil trickeries.



THE WAYS OF THE MUUN



The Muun rituals performed regenerate the human body, land, the ancestral connection of the Lepchas and their indigenous identity. She is known to bring out to the outer world even the innermost secrets of the netherworld.

Muun the female shaman holds histories and stories of the Lepcha people and their landscape as she invokes the spirits of the land and their ancestors. She is the medium between the spirit world, Mother Creator and humans. Muuns hold the role of healer, spiritual guide, diviner and ritual specialist. She is viewed as a mediator between worlds. The Muuns sought and received guidance and knowledge from the spiritual realm in order to solve problems and overcome conflicts found within human society. She is able to enter specific altered states of consciousness with the intent to access the spirit world and successfully return with whatever they were seeking—a healing method, a solution to a problem, knowledge, the whereabouts of someone/something, a song, an answer to questions, guidance and so on.

They are known to go into trances and see visions, feel emotions, feel pain in their bodies corresponding to the pain another person might be feeling, see sickness in different body parts of a person, say prayers/chants, deliver messages, sing songs, provide solutions, see ill fate, see healing methods/procedures, solve trauma of previous lives or heal ancestral traumas, remove blockages, heal souls and guide people that are lost and so on. She also aids in protecting Mother Earth and her kingdom.

She performs naming ceremonies (which could also be done by a Boongthing).

In the Saagi ceremony, a ceremony in which the shamans give gratitude to their teachers, guides and protectors, the Muuns offer prayers, fruits, flowers, alcohol and other ceremonial artefacts and worship all night. It is observed that they dance on burning embers of coal, and the next day, people come to collect it considering them to be blessed. She is also known to dance on a Talyong (a flat basket that is used to clean rice, pulses or vegetables.)

She can make a pact and make offerings to one of the protectors of the land called the Ami Ruhm. There are stories of thieves of fruits or anything else on or off the land, feeling extreme pain in their hands or body after stealing. Sometimes the hands would also get very disfigured or misaligned. To undo this situation, the thief would have to ask the owner of the land or the Muun for forgiveness. On touching the person and praying, the thief's body would heal and return back to normal.

The Muun offers prayers and sacrifices to Mother Earth, Soil, Guardian Deities, Kongchen Konglo (Kanchenjunga), Mt. Tendong, Mayel Kyong (Our home in the Himalayas) and the seven immortal Lepcha couples that live there, Mountain peaks, Rivers, Forest spirits, Malevolent energies. The Muun offers prayers and makes offerings to the malevolent energies to appease them and prevent them from doing any harm. She usually performs the ceremonies on an empty stomach. The Muun prays and makes offerings for prosperity, protection, good crop, guidance, success in hunting, prevention of calamities and natural

disasters, gratitude to Mother Earth, seasons and all that are helping us in the realm of the living. She performs exorcisms and heals sickness. She makes prophecies and helps people by protecting them, warning them of ill fate or by solving the situations that create problems.

The Muun is known to wear animal bones, feathers and other animal parts as her accessories. These accessories are not used for decorative purposes but are of spiritual significance. She finds these elements on her journeys, or they are gifted to her. They are not collected from animals that have been killed or hunted, but from the ones who have died a natural death. While doing Spirit work, she invokes the spirit of the animal whose remains she wears, to perform tasks for her and help her in her work. For example, the animal spirits may be used to retrieve parts of the soul that may be hiding. Each animal spirit possesses different strengths and is an expert within the various realms of natural elements. Based on their abilities, the Muun invokes them to perform tasks in order to assist her in navigating her duties. The Muuns cannot wear any random animal remain she fancies and use them; they have to be given to her through the Divine plan. If she misuses this gift to harm, she is severely punished.

There are various kinds of Muuns; they all perform similar basic duties as mentioned above, but are differentiated by various aspects. Some Muuns can diagnose a problem, and the Boongthing does the required work after, whereas some Muuns identify and resolve a problem from the start to the end.

- ~ Nyaolick Nyaosaong Muun is very closely linked to the original Muun created to save living beings from the treachery of the demon Jyum Poohoo Panyee. She performs most duties with ease and expertise.
- ~ Avor Muun is known to sit in one spot and performs her duties. Her role is also to gather five to seven Muuns for ceremonies or give out the call for gatherings and assemble them. It is believed if such a Muun is treated badly or hurt by somebody, a curse befalls that person.

- ~ Lapok Lyenen Muun is the Muun whose main role is to perform chants or prayers known as Khalen.
- ~ Tutyuk Muun is known by the frog croak sounding chants she performs.
- ~ Pomik Putong is differentiated by her chants that sound like the wind humming in bamboo groves.
- ~ Enjio Muun is a Muun who is differentiated by the necklace she wears and the drumming she uses in her Spirit work. This kind of Muun is one whose work is infused with Buddhist Lamaism practices.
- ~ Pavo Muun is similar to the Enjio Muun, the only difference being that she performs her work in a sitting position.
- ~ Anag Muun is a Muun who tells tales and deciphers dreams.
- ~ Pildon Muun is one of the most powerful Muuns. Other than all other duties, she is solely responsible for death ceremonies. In the Lepcha tribe, each person is believed to have many souls. Women are known to have nine souls and men have eight. It is believed that man gave one of his souls to create a woman.

It is believed that sometimes trauma causes the number of souls within to be lost. It is the responsibility of a Muun to retrieve the lost parts of the soul. It is mostly done at the funeral of a person though it is known to be done whilst a person is still living too. The Muun collects all the lost parts of the soul and traps it in a rock face called Danok Ungkyong, which is situated in Kali Jhora. Sometimes when she is unable to track the lost soul, she sends out her animal guide/protector to retrieve it. The animals may vary for different Muuns depending on their connection to different animals.

It is not necessary that a Muun always travels physically to these places or the others she visits with the soul. She makes a spiritual journey with the soul of the deceased person.

From there, she carries the soul of the deceased person on her back or inside her or ties them to her little finger all the way back to the person's home. On reaching there, she acts as a medium for

the deceased to speak to their loved ones and say all the things left unsaid and speak of and perform all other important matters that are unresolved. After this, the deceased person's soul is coaxed to Dzongu where they are taken through many places to convince them that they have left the world of the living.

They are taken to Panang Khola and asked to walk on the shore. They are shown that they do not have any footprints, hence proving that they are not alive anymore.

Then they are taken to Pashingtang and asked to stand on the bamboo; they are shown that the bamboo does not break even though they are standing on it.

The next place they are taken is a river in Dzongu where the deceased is asked to look at their reflection. On failing to see their own reflection, the deceased begin to realise that that are not alive anymore. They are taken to many places and asked to perform many tasks to prove that they are dead. Before they are taken to their final destination, they are taken to Lingzyam where they take a bath and are cleansed by the Muun. They are then led to their ancestral Chyu (Mountain Peak) which represents the male gene/masculine energies, or the Da (Lake) which represents the female gene/female energies. Depending on their sex, the males are reunited with their Patriarchal ancestors and the females with their Matrilineal ancestors. There are



two doors from which they can enter either the Sangmarku or the Unmarku. The Muun then finally delivers them to the lap of their ancestors (mainly their grandparents).

The Muun begins to knot bamboo cords as she begins the journey of the deceased person back to their ancestors. Throughout the journey, she continues to chant prayers which are known as Khalen. At the end of the journey, she will have made seven knots.

The ceremony could take half an hour or sometimes even as long as twelve hours or more. This happens if the soul is stubborn or not convinced of being dead. He/she might need longer to be shown that he/she is not part of the living world anymore. Also, sometimes, the souls of other deceased people enter the Muun's body asking for things to be resolved.

There was an incident where a Muun went to perform the funeral rites in a village, and the soul of an infant entered her. The Muun began crying profusely and asked to be fed mother's milk. It was discovered that the soul of the infant had died hungry. To resolve this interruption, a woman who was lactating was sought in the village and fed the Muun who was still acting as a medium for the deceased infant. On being fed milk, the infant left the Muun's body.

As soon as the infant left, another soul took over the Muun's body. He was a driver from the same village that that just died in a car accident. He needed to give his wife some money he had collected. The widow of the driver was then sought out and given the money that he wished to give her. On doing so, the soul of the man left the Muun's body. Finally, after these interruptions, the Muun could do the final rituals for the person she was actually summoned for.

There have been instances where the deceased's soul refuses to leave a Muun's body. In such a situation, after much struggle, if the Muun is powerful enough, she removes the stubborn soul herself. If it is an inexperienced Muun, and she fails to do so, a more powerful senior Muun either accompanies her or is summoned to help extract the unwanted soul from the junior Muun. This experience leaves the

Muun whose body has been forcefully occupied very drained and exhausted.

Muuns are known to use eggs to make prophecies and readings. They place the raw egg on their third eye and pray or chant. They then break the egg in a bowl and slowly pour it out. They then read the egg in the bowl and predict issues or give answers or solutions related to topics like health, accidents, theft, events in the future or answers to questions asked and so on.

The tools she is known to use are:

- ~ Numfeng Numdyoo Phut- alcohol or spirituous liquor
- ~ Sader Long- lightning stones
- ~ Yoktak Sim- the tail of a Yak
- ~ Banhur (Combi)- a knife that is shaped like a sickle but is only 6 inches long
- ~ Tangdaar - a drum
- ~ Talyong- Flat basket that is used to clean rice, pulses or vegetables
- ~ Talu (Mandro)- A woven floor mat
- ~ Mangyong Takseem- feather of a peacock
- ~ Lyang Duk Lungzee Lungdyong- referring to trees which are one of the protectors of the land
- ~ Setheen Chyo- porcupine quill
- ~ Kumthyong Sa Takseem- feather of an eagle
- ~ King Khur- altar
- ~ Sakyoa Long- stone from the confluence of the rivers Rangeet and Teesta
- ~ Chyong Ta-eep- a dried gourd that is used as a container for rituals
- ~ Zyer Chee Lop- wooden cup or bowl used for storing liquor for offerings (originally any piece of wood cut from a tree that had the ability to hold liquid was used, there was no specific shape required)
- ~ Chong Se Lee Sulu- bow and arrow

- ~ Bang Payuk- sword
- ~ Zyer Patung- a long wooden/bamboo stick
- ~ Pyong Mani Lyak- Rudraksh (On acquiring this the Muun opts for a vegetarian diet)
- ~ Longchok (menhirs/megaliths/monolith or standing stones of various sizes)
- ~ Cowries
- ~ Incense
- ~ She would also have a pouch filled with medicinal herbs, barks, roots and so on.

The Muun is known to use different leaves for different rituals while making offerings. Each ritual has specific leaves she needs to use; for example the leaves offered in a death ceremony are never used for other rituals. There are different stories and instructions for the leaves that are to be used. Originally goat's blood offerings were made but today chicken sacrifice is widely used. It is important for a Muun to know the deities of all the areas, names of mountain peaks, rivers and the rituals she needs to follow. Some Muuns do not consume garlic.

She is known to wear white traditional attire known as the Dum Dyaam and wears headgear made of bird feathers. The Muun did not originally wear headgear; after decades of mixing with other cultures, she now wears one. She wears white as it symbolises purity and light. Today, she also wears Rudraksh and crystal necklaces.

A new Muun is born when the older one dies. The Muun is meant to be buried not burnt. It is believed that if she is burnt another Muun would not be born in her place. Objects like a ladder, coal, some of the artefacts she uses, Rong Chock (a large stone or monolith) are placed on top of her grave. Her body is placed in an upright sitting posture, and stones are used to cover her body.

It is not necessary that a Muun is born in the same lineage. It is observed that Muun/Boongthings may be reborn in the same family lineage too. Though, sometimes it is known to skip generations. The Muun's reincarnation is believed to enter a soul that is pure of heart.

It is said that it is only where the soil of the soul is fertile that the seed grows.

It is believed that many Muuns go through a violent spiritual awakening; if she is not balanced in mind, heart, body and spirit, she is known to become mad. It is essential for a trainer and guide to help her through this transformation. Many who discover the signs earlier in the transformation prepare for such an occurrence through prayer, meditation and other practices.

The most common sign of a Muun awakening is madness. Sometimes some Muuns' tongues stick out for long periods of time. If such a person is discovered, she/he is taken to a senior Muun and tested to check if the person is truly a Muun or just someone who has become mad.

Such tests and rituals are performed by the Ith Muun/Boongthing. The new Muun has to make a small portion of millet alcohol in her home. The senior Muun or Boongthing does the same. This is usually done ten days before the full moon. The alcohol is offered to Mother Earth and other deities. The senior Muun or Bonthing through this ceremony and readings can estimate and make sure if the Muun is authentic. On confirming if the Muun has the gift, sometimes artefacts of the older Muun whose reincarnation she is, are given to her.

Some people believe the most powerful Muuns have their awakening at age 20–21, though it is not always the case.

The Muuns that have the gift but have to be taught rituals are known as Daan Muun, and the ones that have been selected by the Divine and are guided by the Spirit are known as Ith Muun. The trainee Muun is called Lutuk and the senior Muun is called Muun Ha.

Different Muuns have their own territories of practice. It is known that there may be rivalry between some Muuns. Out of respect the Muuns do not interfere in matters that are not in their area of practice. Some Muuns may disturb the activities of another Muun; for example, they may interrupt certain ceremonies or may make it difficult for a Muun to perform her rituals. This is believed to be done

at a supernatural level and not a physical one. It is said that it is done in order to challenge each other: to see how adept a Muun is and to gauge the extent of her power. Some stories of Muuns that were challenging each other state that they threw fire at each other even though they were at distant places at the time of those battles. There are also stories of hailstones being created and sent to the rival's territory.

The strongest Muuns were known to be able to manipulate weather. They were also known to create or stop hailstorms or send them to whichever place they wanted. They could make large boulders explode with the power of their minds. They could also create lightning and harness its power at will. Some of the most powerful Muuns were said to do the ceremonies of the deceased at midnight.

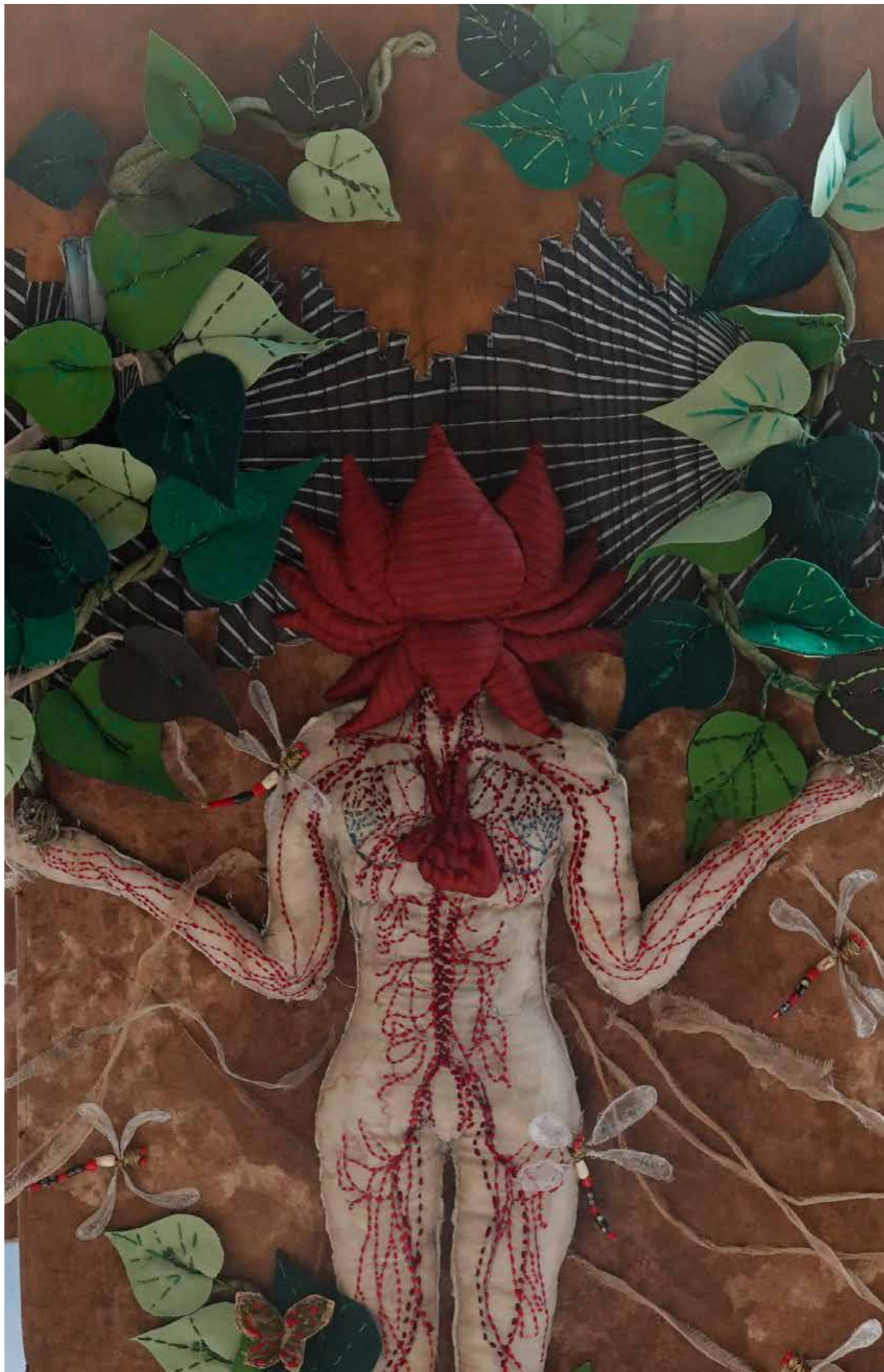
A Muun is never allowed to kill or inflict harm. They are not allowed to play with the forces of nature or disturb the balance of Nature without valid reason or instructions from the Divine. The Muun believes Nature should be left pure and untouched as it would affect the balance of life.

Today this practice of shamanism and the existence of Muuns is declining due to the loss of passing down of knowledge and the wisdom of these ancient traditions.

It is also declining due to the seeping in of different religions in the region, which were adopted by the Lepchas over time.

With modernization, the younger Lepcha generations have become disconnected and have no knowledge of these ancient practices and do not wish to walk on this path even if they have the gift of the Muun. Additionally, due to the different religions that their families have been following, many potential Muuns do not accept their gifts and practice shamanism as it is taboo to do so. Some young people who have been discovered to have the gift are being taken to monasteries and other shamans to bind their gifts and stop them from practicing. It is disheartening to learn that there have been many cases of suicides among this generation of shamans as they are often ostracized by society and don't know what to do with their gifts.

But there are still a few Muuns and Boongthings living in isolation in remote areas in Sikkim that still practice the purer form of Lepcha Shamanism. There are also new Muuns and Boongthings that are being discovered and trained regularly. Even though the practices have become hybrids and not followed as conventionally as before, they still exist and are emerging in a new way.



THE MUUN AWAY FROM HOME



Mimi is a Muun born in the Sitling lineage, a lineage of female shamans. She states that one of her great grandmothers was a very powerful Muun. This is a lineage that she and I have in common. One of her great grandfathers also had premonitions and made prophecies and another great grand uncle used to practice plant medicine.

As a child Mimi would have premonitions and her predictions would come true. She says she would just feel the need to say something, and it would happen. There were no inner or outer voices, just a knowing of things. She remembers dreaming of question papers a night before exams, they would be as she had dreamt. Many times she would sense the presence of energies around her and also pick up people's physical pain, sadness and other emotions.

She is a Muun who is traditional at her core but practices methods that are unconventional. She has no formal training in Shamanism. She is currently digging into Lepcha shamanic practices and other indigenous shamanic paths. She recalls being born in many ancient Shamanic traditions- some of which are Korean, Chinese, English/ Irish, Aztec and Mayan. She has very vivid memories of practicing

shamanism in these cultures. She believes that the magic and core is the same in many indigenous cultures and that we are all connected in this circle of life.

She believes ancestral wisdom and the wisdom of Mother Nature has always been within us, but we have forgotten how to access it. We want everything to be provided to us as soon as possible like fast food. But one has to look for answers within, as the universe is within us. Only in silence can we actually hear the wisdom within us.

She can read or see visions of people's energies, family histories, energies of places, karmic blockages, other blockages people might have, unresolved issues, illnesses and so on. She can do this on meeting them in person, speaking to them on the phone, chatting on the internet, even looking at photographs. Sometimes she can see a person, their location and their ailments or problems even if she has never met them before.

She practices shamanic journeying, in which the Shaman travels to various places, dimensions without physically having to travel. She does so during her own meditations where she receives visions or clues about people she is working with. She also travels with a person's soul to their past and the underworld to heal wounded/traumatized/repressed parts of them. She helps them collect back fragmented and broken parts of their soul. Most of which she says in modern day terms is called the inner child healing and soul retrieval. She also helps one solve unhealed parts, blockages and problems in ones past life and other aspects like karmic contracts. She helps identify and heal spiritual and physical blockages and ailments in a person.

She also performs what is known as shadow work in which she helps merge the shadow aspects or repressed aspects of one's soul. These repressed aspects of the soul are usually in the underworld. She travels with the person to the underworld and helps them to face and accept shadow parts of their soul. Such a journey can be made only with an experienced practitioner; once a person travels there, coming back is usually tough.

She helps protect people, the Natural environment from malevolent energies and also sends healing energies to Mother Earth. She helps connect the pillars of light all across the world (powerful carriers of light, awakened people in the path of service of the greater good).

She also helps heal the land, rivers, forests and figure out the purpose and will of that land. She believes that each part of land speaks and states what the land needs.

She takes people through meditative journeys and helps them connect to their higher beings and their soul's purpose. Many times she channels messages or firm reminders which she delivers to people.

Though through the years, she has understood that her work is mainly to help people who on the shamanic path or people with gifts who have gone astray, these people usually find their way to her when it is needed, as I did. She helps them heal, collect scattered parts of their soul, connect to the source and also remember the wisdom within.

During my training with her, I have personally been part of many healings she has performed and the many messages she has delivered. She accurately diagnoses the past, problems and blockages and helps people resolve them. During these channelling sessions, many times her facial structures change and the iris of the eyes change shape or colour. She usually uses natural incenses to cleanse the space and stay grounded. She states that energies pass from Mother Earth to Father Sky and vice versa. She tunes into various frequencies and becomes a vessel to serve the greater good.

Mimi says she did not have a violent awakening. For her it was something that she always had. As she keeps meditating, praying, journeying, practicing and growing in experience, her gifts, connection and core get stronger.

She states that she has many protectors, some of which are a Dragon, a lone Wolf, Phoenix and a grizzly bear. She has been recognised by some as the reincarnated Goddess who sits on a lotus.

Her advice to walk on the path is:

- ~ To accept one's calling whole heartedly, with full faith and surrender.
- ~ All one does is part of the Divine plan, and one is loved, protected, provided and taken care of.
- ~ To be empathetic but have a detached approach to things.
- ~ To always keep an open mind.
- ~ To be genuine in all actions, thoughts and words.
- ~ To be mindful and to live in the now.
- ~ To look for answers within oneself and to use one's heart for guidance.
- ~ To be non judgemental and not compare oneself or situations to anything.
- ~ To surrender one's ego; when one does not need justification and approval one will be honest in all one does.
- ~ To be in balance and work in harmony within and without.
- ~ She says with great power comes great responsibility, when one uses ones gifts to serve and help. One has to be careful how one uses their gifts as it has the power to change lives, and one has to do so without changing the balance of things.
- ~ Sometimes one has to refrain from working with some people or situations as it may be beyond one's capabilities; or it may not be one's responsibility to help that particular person, not all can be or need be healed or saved.

She states that she does not believe in giving answers or solutions to people; instead her role is to guide them to different options and directions, make them ask the right questions and help them learn and navigate using their own wisdom and free will.

She says that just as the coming out of a butterfly from its cocoon is painful, one does not help it by pulling it out. This only damages the butterfly's wings, but instead one must be present and give support and love for it to come out in its own time and on its own. This will make the butterfly stronger for it is Nature's way of growth.



THE PILDON MUUN IN TU-GONG



Bebina Tamsangmoo is a Pildon Muun who resides in Tu-gong, a small village near Gitdabling. She is the third generation of shamans of her family line. Her grandfather was a renowned Boongthing; her father was also a Boongthing who progressed to become a Muun and her own brother also followed Boongthing practices. There are also male Muuns, they are practitioners that are in tune with feminine energies. The newest member of her Shamanic heritage is her nephew who has also been discovered to be a Boongthing.

She has memories of herself as a young girl who could feel the presence of Mother Earth and her ancestors. Their presence made her feel fearless, and she remembers running along the edge of a cliff at full speed knowing that she would not fall over.

She says very early on in her life she always knew she had the gift as she saw visions and made prophecies. Her shamanic lineage helped her recognize the signs and practices and made her more aware of being a Muun.

She was not ready to take on the responsibility of being a Muun due to the fear of not being able to balance family life. She says she was

naive at that point in her life and did not have faith in Mother Creator. Her family tried to divert her gifts and delay it for sometime by offering prayers and sacrifices. It is believed if one has the gift it can be delayed but not stopped, as it is the will of the Creator.

By the time her first full awakening happened she was nineteen years old, and she fell gravely ill. During Guru Puja, she began shivering for seven whole days. She was already married and had a child of her own too. She recounts almost dying with no cure to be found for her illness. Not knowing what to do, she visited a Shaman (Mata) from the Pradhan culture who resided in 12th mile. The Pradhan Mata told her that she had the gift, and that she would have to follow her own tribe's Shamanism. She was also told that she would heal from this ordeal with either the help of a dog or something sour.



On her way back she picked up Mallero (sour Indian olive) from a tree and put it in her pocket to give her child. She believes that this unintended act of carrying something sour in her pocket helped her heal just as the Mata had predicted. She healed after that day and regained full strength. She had not accepted the gift of the Muun at this point in her life.

The second big sign of awakening was when she shivered due to the channelling of energies from Mother Earth to Father Sky and vice versa; this happened throughout her second childbirth. She states that even if one is carrying a child or has had sex it does not taint or contaminate a Muun vessel, and that the vessel is still pure and can

perform all duties. But she now wanted more than ever to remove this calling and gift from her life, as she was already married and had a children. On seeing her suffering, her brother, who was a Boongthing, made an offering of a duck, a dove and a pig at the converging point of the rivers Teesta and Rangit. He attempted something that is literally translated as 'cutting the path', which meant that he was trying to prevent his sister from receiving the full extent of her gifts. He stated to her that this was a dangerous act and that the outcome of this would be either his death or hers, as they were interfering with Mother Creator's will. Just as he had predicted, as his protectors were weaker than her's, he passed away forty-nine days after he performed the ceremony.

After this incident, she finally accepted her path and began practicing Shamanism. She was instructed by the Divine to train under a very powerful Boongthing, and after her training there, she trained with a Male Muun in Pedong. She now has her own sacred space with an altar and training space for new Muuns and Boongthings. She currently has eight students (Lutuk) training under her guidance. There is one trainee from the Buddhist/Yaba form of Lepcha Shamanism, two Avor Muuns, one Enjio Muun, one Anang Muun and three Jer Boongthings. She trains her students there and also visits them in their own homes to teach.

She told me that in her practice of being a Muun, she chooses to not perform animal sacrifices. It is her belief that the practice in Lepcha Shamanism that involves the killing of animals has led to the downfall of the gifts that one receives. She states that there are fewer powerful Muuns and Boongthings born as a repercussion of the hurt we have caused other living beings in order to heal ourselves and for our selfish purposes. She will offer eggs if she really needs to and is also a vegetarian by choice. She also stated that sometimes a dead animal is found at the exact time a sacrifice offering is required, or that she can bring back life into a dead animal and use it for offering purposes.

Bebina is a Pildon Muun and is responsible for collecting the scattered souls of the deceased and taking them back to their ancestors. She also makes prophecies and can heal sickness. She helps

heal the land and also can channel in Yaba Yama (language used in the Buddhist Lamaism form of Lepcha shamanism), Lepcha, Chinese and Tibetan. She says she has never learnt any of these languages, but that the Divine speak through her. She states that dreams (Monka) are very important and that many of our instructions and prophecies come in dreams. She travels extensively to perform her duties but also states that she does not need to travel to places to see them and be there. During her trances, she visits places, and can heal and perform her duties even if she is not physically present there.

She recalls an incident in which she dreamt of a sacred worship place in Sanchay. In her dream, she was beckoned to heal the place as it was abandoned, not respected and was in shambles. She managed to go there after a year of seeing the dream. It was on top of a mountain, and the only way up was to climb a small path in the mountain face. All the people who had gone with her to visit the place could not manage to climb and thought it was very challenging to get there. She recalls going into a trance, and the moment she was out of her trance, she had already reached the sacred spot. She stated that the Divine beings and ancestors helped her reach where she needed to. She then performed the needed spiritual rituals and returned home.

If one has the gift of the Muun or Boongthing, the awakening can be delayed a bit, but it can never be denied. It may change form and be pushed into coming later, but the more one pushes it away, it comes with more severity and intensity. She says it is tough being a woman and a Muun, as she has to balance her family life and her practice. But she believes that Itbu Debu Ruhm (Mother Creator) takes care of her, and all that she has to do is always provided for.



AN OLD NEW WORLD



This project has left me trying to make sense of my life and all that has happened, again. I have been lost, spaced out and stressed to figure it all out. I don't think I will be able to figure out everything in this lifetime.

This experience and opening has changed my life completely. I don't know who I am anymore. The known world around me confuses me. It feels like a burden sometimes. But I realise this calling is not something I can deny. It is telling me to dig deeper, face my limitations and my past, to stand in my truth.

At this point, the lesson for me is to connect with myself, to see things for what they are. I know there are larger things to connect to, but I feel it is from within that I will find that. I see glimpses of it. I feel it in its purity and clarity in my meditation sometimes. I believe the wisdom of my ancestors will guide me. I underestimate the search within and try and give it a grand meaning. I am here now, and there is no right or wrong way to go about this.

This is my story and my process, and this is what I would like to share. The process may seem linear and simple, but I have realised it to be far from that. To reach here, my inner and outer worlds have constantly been in turmoil. It has taken a lot of doing and undoing, unlearning and acceptance to get to this point.

Being in this human vessel and struggling to balance and understand this life is a natural part of being alive. It is very easy to get overwhelmed with life and its twists and turns. There is already so much conditioning, ego, selfishness, doubts and numbness that has seeped very deep within us. I often forget how far I have come, but I am here now, and all I can think about is the presence of love.

At this point in my life, along with everything else that I struggle with, I am reminded of love. In my meditations, I feel the love of Mother Earth, Her Kingdom, my Ancestors and so many Divine Beings; it always overwhelms me and moves me to tears. We are here for a reason, and I think that mine is to remind us of that love. It is also to remind us to find within us the magic that helps us protect and heal ourselves, each other, the Earth.

This calling is now stronger than ever, as we have become selfish, have forgotten and got lost in our own illusions, and we are increasingly causing harm in all ways. We have forgotten how to live in harmony with each other and especially Mother Earth. We forget that she nurtures us and that we are alive because of her. All the harm we do to her is the harm we are doing to ourselves. Even though we make her bleed, she still loves us and takes care of us.

- ~ She is asking us to wake up and remember her love.
- ~ She is asking us to look within ourselves and see all that we have been doing to ourselves.
- ~ She is asking us to remember that we are her children and that we are beautiful, that we have the power to love, heal and transform everything into beauty.
- ~ She is asking us to reconnect with our hearts and our souls and remember our soul song. She is within us and she will guide us on our journey.



- ~ But for that we have to make time to remember her, speak to her, feel her love and listen to her whispers and songs.
- ~ We have to make time to remember our true joy and bliss, not the ones that are driven by the paradigms of this new world and its created illusions.
- ~ She does not blame us for our state but asks us gently to really question everything and to have faith in love, in magic, in ourselves.
- ~ She reminds us to always be gentle with ourselves and trust in the flow of things.
- ~ She laughs lovingly and tells us that we don't know how powerful we are.

This is an opening
An opening of our hearts.
It is a glimpse of a world,
Lost and forgotten in the seasons of time.

What does it mean to stand here?
Trying to justify each action, each word and each expression

Of our broken souls.
The cloth that covered us
Veils us, no more.

We stand bare naked,
With all our wounds.
They match the scars of Mother Moon.

For eons we have died
So many rivers we have cried
All the suffering and disconnection we have endured.

Hear our voices
Take a look at our souls
We bleed like our Mother
The one who nourishes us all.

Why is it we need to prove our worth?
Why is it we need to bare our world?
Why is it we need to hold our ground?

This ground is sacred.
As sacred as all living beings.
As sacred, as the wind blowing in the trees.

Will you hold our hands?
Will you support us in your embrace?
Will you love us tenderly and with grace?

We are weary,
But we have not given up yet.

We never will.

This body will die.
The new age will come.
The voices will begin to fade.

In every new age,
Many voices will rise
And sing long forgotten tunes.

We are here to remember the sounds,
To recall each tale.
To remind us, of how far we have come.

The voices continue
In every birth
Not breaking the cycle of the songs.

So hear our song
The song of life
A song passed on from Mother to her child.

We are here to remind you
And we hope the tune ignites you
To find the sound that hums inside you.

We pray that the songs find a place in your heart.
May you find the courage to sing your own song.
A song that syncs to the beat of Mother Earth's heart.
So it is.

The way of the Muun is not another label and box to fit into. It is a way of seeing, living and being. It is inclusive and embraces all that surrounds her, not needing to be cut up and defined. We are each singing in our own song, unique, indefinable yet connected. May we embrace our own brilliant individual voice and tune.

The Lepcha people and many other indigenous cultures knew all this and are struggling to survive and remind us of the same. It is this connection to everything which we find by manoeuvring within our own selves and reconnecting to the Source. It is not about being masters and understanding everything, but the small conscious actions one takes in one's daily lives.

The Lepchas are an ancient tribe that believed that they are the children of Mother Earth. With time and so called development and progress, the seeping in of other religions and cultures, we have lost our way and forgotten all that is important. Many today think that Muuns are crazy or are disillusioned and are living in a backward and imagined world.

The beauty lies in the fact that Muuns do exist to this day even though practices might have changed or been modified or become hybrids. There are more and more Muuns and Boongthings being



discovered and trained. The Muuns are here to remind us of this deep connection and of the immense faith one has to have in the power of the Divine, Mother Earth and our Ancestors. They are here to selflessly serve the greater good, help maintain balance, help us find our way and to help heal all. They are here to challenge our beliefs and walk this path that is a difficult, lonely and misunderstood one. They remind us that magic exists for those who choose to believe. The magic is a gift and a choice for those who have the faith and courage to see through the illusions and live a life that is not dictated by society.

We have all come into this world from a womb, and we are born from the body of Mother Earth. Her elements make our physical life possible and remind us of a deep connection to the natural world. Mother Earth is at the heart of Lepcha Shamanism and all forms of Shamanic spirituality.

In the Earth's embrace, energies dance together for the continuance of the circle of life. New generations of human beings and others are born from this dance. Each new being is then nurtured by the Earth's air, her fire, her water, her plants and her animals.

When our physical life is over, we return again to her body. Our flesh will again turn to dust and our bones and ribs will all return to



rocks and trees. The heat of our bodies will return to the Sun and the Moon. Our blood will revisit the waters, and our breath will again turn into the wind mingling back into the storms where it was born.

Itbu Debu Ruhm (Mother Creator) is pivotal for the sacred circle of existence.

May we here on Earth, have faith in our hearts, the ways of our ancestors, the power and love of Mother Earth.

May we recognise our potential.

May we have the courage to sing our songs.

May we Heal, Serve, Love and find Magic and Wisdom again.

May we remember!

So it is.

INTERVIEWS

Bebina Tamsangmoo (A practicing Pildon Muun from Tugong), in discussion with the author.

Mimi (A practicing Muun currently living in Mumbai), in discussion with the author.

Azuk Lepcha (A practicing Boongthing from Kalimpong), in discussion with the author.

Gyabu Lepcha (A practicing Ithh Boongthing from Nassey, Kalimpong), in discussion with the author.

P.T Simick (A practicing Boongthing from Gnasey, Kalimpong, also the Language and Cultural Head at the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Kalimpong), in discussion with the author.

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