

FOLK CULTURE AND TRADITION OF THE MISING COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY IN ASSAM

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Abstract

The Mising are the second largest tribal group of Assam. The colourful life of the people, their traditional customs, festivals and dances are some of the components of the rich cultural diversity of India as well as its north-eastern region including Assam. The Mising are one of the communities of Assam still maintaining their cultural tradition including their language. The society is changing not only in the aspect of socio-economic and political areas but also in religious beliefs. Different forms of plain culture such as Hinduism and other religions have been penetrated into their culture. Although Mising still maintain their traditional belief about supernatural power and customary practice related to births and death. With the above background, an attempt has been made to study and analyze the traditional and cultural practices among the Mising Tribe of Assam.

Keywords: Mising Community, Assam, Culture, Tradition, Uie.

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Introduction

The Misings, belonging to Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and formerly known as the Miris, which constitute the second largest scheduled tribe (Plains) group in Assam, have been playing a significant role in the culture and economy of the greater Assamese society in general and tribal society in particular. According to E.A. Gait, terminological meaning of “Miri” is “Go between” or middle man. But to them “Miri” or “Mising” means noble man. Mising derives from the two words Mi and Toshing/Anshing. “Mi” means man while Anshing/Toshing means worthiness or cool. So Mising means man of worthiness. The word ‘Miri’ had its first mention in the Assamese devotional writings of Srimanta Sankardeva’s Kirtan Ghosā which was composed around 1516-1568 A.D. Dutta(1998) stated that Srimanta Sankardeva mentions the contemporary communities living in his time in Assam with the following words;

“Kirāto Kachāri, Khasi, Garo, Miri
Javana Konko Guwālo etc.”

Thereafter reference to the word ‘Miri’ have also been found in Sri Madhavdeva’s Namghosā/510. It mentions thus, “Hari buli tore Miri Asom Kachāri...” meaning people belonging to communities like Miri (Mising), Asom (Ahom) and Kachari get salvation only by chanting the name of Hari.

The Mising are the second largest tribal group of Assam with 5,87,310 population as recorded in 2001 census report. Originally, they were hill dweller, dwelt in the eastern parts especially Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, migrated to the plain of Assam around the 13th century A.D. Historically, culturally and even in term of language, the Mising have a close affinity with the neighbouring tribes such as Adis, Nyishis, Apatanis, Pasi-Padam, Minyong, Tagin etc. of Arunachal Pradesh. Like other tribes, the Mising believes that they are also descendant of Abo-Tani. All these groups are known as Tani group of tribes. The Mising are residing mostly along the river banks of Brahmaputra and its tributaries. So, they are called *riverine people*. Presently, they inhabit in eight districts of Upper Assam. They with 5.9 lakh population (17.8 per cent of the state’s total tribal people) as per 2001 Census are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. It is worth mentioning that Dhemaji district alone constitutes 31.7% of the total Misings in the state, followed by Lakhimpur (28.2%) and Jorhat (15.7%) districts. Moreover, agriculture

being their main occupation, as high as 85.6 % of main workers is engaged as cultivators in the state, which is the highest among all the tribes of Assam.

The majority of the Mising people are still living in the flood affected and isolated areas with old age traditions, and modern civilization has practically left them almost untouched in many aspects. This colourful ethnic group living amidst the fellow non-tribal Assamese people for many centuries has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits un-impaired in spite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-politico-religious life of Assam (Bordoloi *et al*, 1987). Having the tradition of living along the banks of rivers, the habitats of Misings have been constantly exposed to floods and erosion, for which they have to often shift from one place to another (Doley, 2008). Although majority of them are still living in rural areas, it is noticed that for better socio-economic conditions, employment opportunities, accessibility, etc rural to urban migration either temporarily or permanently is gaining ground among the Misings in recent times, which have resulted in adoption of new urban culture sometimes at the cost of age-old cultural traditions. In respect of Mising societies, although the Misings are maintaining the traditional customs, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture which are affecting the core of their culture. The spread of modern education, science and technology, etc. has also brought about drastic changes in the religious beliefs and socio-economic life of the Misings. The Misings are undergoing the process of modernisation, acculturation and urbanization, and the impact of these factors on them is resulting in erosion of their traditional life and folk culture.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are to analyze the folk culture and tradition of the Mising community and to identify the religious beliefs and rituals of the Mising people of Assam.

Methodology of the Study

The present study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the sample through questionnaires and interview schedules. Different documents have also been analyzed. On the other hand secondary sources like books, journals, magazines and e-resources have also used by the researcher for the study. The field work was based on various districts of Assam where Mising people comprised a large group. Researcher has selected Majuli (Jorhat), Sonitpur, Dhemaji (Jonai), and Lakhimpur (Dhakuakhana) for the study. During the field work researcher has tried to locate the cultural and historical connection in the Mising society. From the field it was find out that after migrating to Assam considerable changes have

taken place in their language, dress and ecology, pattern of adaptation, cultivation and house construction.

Findings of the Study

The Mising community has their own identity for their own indigenous folk culture. They have their own folk songs, folk dances, traditional dresses, ornaments, religion, food habits and drinks which made them unique among the different tribes. They live in Changghar i.e. bamboo made house. They have a traditional dormitory place known as Murang where different cultural, religious and ritualistic functions and discussions are held. The Mising community has another important organisation known as Kebang to settle any kind of dispute with the help of Gam (the village headman). Each and everybody must be obeying the decision that declared by the Gam. The Kebang is a village level democratic and social institution of every Mising villagers where every person has the right to speak and forward their suggestion.

Festivals and Rituals of the Mising Community

Mising people celebrate various festivals, though, the two chief traditional festivals of the Misings are the **Ali-Aye-Ligang** and the **Po:rag**, both connected with their agricultural cycle. Besides these they perform the three Assamese bihus namely Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu and Kati Bihu. By faith the Mising peoples are the worshippers of 'Dony'(The Sun) and 'Polo' (The Moon). They claim themselves as the sons of nature. They perform number of religious practices in their life. The practices are comprised of various rites and rituals with prayer, offerings and sacrifices. They believe that after death of human beings their spirits which they call 'Uie' roam invisibly around them and these Uies are always hostile to human beings. There are several types of 'Uies' like Dobur Uie, Urom Uie, Taleng Uie, Gumin Uie etc and each type of 'Uies' is believed to cause particular type of problem. Dobur Uie causes all natural calamities like flood, erosion, drought, death etc. and therefore Dobur Uie is observed for getting rid of all these calamities. The types of ritual and offering are determined according to the nature of the spirits or 'Uie'. Generally the spirits causing the troubles are diagnosed by the 'Mibu' (Mising priest). To pacify the spirits the Misings perform different rituals by offering drinks (Apong- a kind of rice beer) and animals like chickens and pigs. Apong is inseparably associated with Mising culture. Without Apong no any ritual can be observed.

Apart from the practices mentioned above every year most of the Mising people perform Bor-Sewa. This is done collectively by the villagers in the village Namghar (a kind of community hall constructed mainly for the purpose of holding collective prayers by reciting devotional prayers). After the introduction of Bor-Sewa system many Mising villages established Namghars which were never a part of their traditional system of worship. Besides these rituals, many more religious beliefs and practices have come into existence among Misings ever since their settlement in Assam. After coming in the influence of Vaisnavism they perform many rituals to worship Hindu God and Goddess. These rituals are *Satjonia*, *Pachjonia*, *Najonia*, *Akaisjonia*, *Pomsu*, *Rista*, *Aai Uie*, *Ghar Dangoria*, *Amia Bhakaty* etc. Although these rituals are borrowed from the Hinduism but they perform it in traditional ways. The Mising never believe the existence of one God. Moreover, they have not tried to institutionalize their religion by establishing temples. All the traditional rituals are performed in the outskirts of House like bank of river, inside the jungle, cultivated field etc. But the rituals borrowed from Vaisnavism are performed inside the house.

Ali Aye Ligang

Ali-aye Ligang, a five-day festival. The words Ali Aye Ligang means Ali= roots and shoots, Aye=Fruit, Ligang= beginning. Thus the words mean the beginning of sowing of seeds. Ali-Aye-Ligang, is celebrated in the first Wednesday of Fagun month (Assamese Calendar), this date falls in the February month of English calendar. The Festival marks the beginning of the sowing season. The people of this community are mainly agrarian, so the festival of Ali Aye Ligang marks the beginning of a new agricultural calendar for them. The celebrations start on a Wednesday, which is considered an auspicious day by the Misings, with the heads of families sowing ceremonially rice paddy seeds in a corner of their respective rice fields in the morning hours and praying for a good crop during the year as well as for general plenty and wellbeing. Young men and women celebrate the occasion by singing and dancing at night in the courtyard of every household in the village to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals and a gong. The gong is not used on any festive occasion other than the Ali-Aye Ligang. Similarly, the drums have specific beats for this festival. The troupe accepts from each household offer of rice beer, fowls, and/or cash. After the singing and dancing in this way is over, the youths hold a feast on the third day. The fourth is a day of taboos: activities like cutting trees, using agricultural implements in

any way, using fire in agricultural fields, eating eggs, fruit (especially sour ones), frying items of food etc. must not be done on this day. The taboos are over on the fifth day, and the festival concludes with eating and drinking in the evening. A kind of sticky rice, packed in leaves of wild cardamom and boiled, is a special item of food on such festive occasions.

Po:rag

It is the post-harvest festival of the Misings. Harvesting of paddy rice in autumn is very common now amongst the Misings and so a Po:rag is usually observed now sometime in early winter or early spring. But there was a time when a harvest in summer too was very common amongst them and so Po:rag was celebrated earlier in the months of August or September also. It is a very expensive three-day festival (reduced to two days or even one these days, depending on the extent of preparation on the part of the organizers in terms of items of food and drinks) and so held once in two-to-three years or so. Entertainment during the celebrations is open to everyone, young and old, of the village, and invitations are also extended formally to many guests, including some people of neighbouring villages, to join the celebrations. More significantly, it is customary on this occasion to invite the women who hail from the village but have been married to men of other villages and places, far and near. This makes Po:rag a grand festival of reunion. Moreover, apart from the husbands of the women so invited, a group of young men and women, who can sing and dance, is expected to accompany each of them. No formal singing, dancing and drumming contests are organized, but the congregation of many singers, dancers and drummers from different villages, in addition to the ones in the village, turns the festival into some kind of a friendly music and dance tournament, as it were. This has an amplifying effect on the air of joy that the festival exudes. The sole responsibility for organizing the festival is vested in a body of young men and women, called Meembiur-yahmey (literally, 'young women-young men'). The organization is run with a good degree of discipline, following the provisions of an unwritten but well-respected code of conduct.

In addition to the traditional festivals, the Misings adopted in the valley the three Assamese seasonal festivals *viz.* the Bohag Bihu, the spring festival of gaiety and mirth, observed in mid-April, The Magh Bihu, the post-harvest festival, marked by plenty of feasting, observed in mid-January, and the Kati Bihu, which is bereft of any merry-making or feasting pleasures, observed in mid-October. Particularly, the Bohag Bihu, with all its gaiety, involving singing and dancing

for several days in gay abandon, and the Magh Bihu have been observed by the Misings almost like native festivals. Some of the features of Bihu dances in recent times, boys and girls dancing together, for instance, may have been borrowed from the Misings.

Another occasion, called **Dobur Uie**, is an animistic rite performed occasionally by the village community by sacrificing a sow and some hens for different purposes, such as to avert a likely crop failure and ensure general well being of the community, or to avert the evil effects of a wrong-doing on the part of a member of the community, etc. The form of observance of Dobur varies according to the purpose. In the most common form, the younger male members of a village beat the walls of every house in the village from one end to the other with big sticks to drive away the ghosts and goblins hiding in nook and corner and perform the sacrificial rite at some distance away from the village, and hold a feast there. Anyone passing unwittingly through the venue of the rite has to stop in the place till evening or pay a fine.

On the other hand, **Taleng uie** also identifies religious culture of the Misings of Assam. The word Taleng means above and Uie means heavenly bodies with the somatic qualities. The Misings, the offspring's of Se:di-Melo worship solemnly the heavenly bodies offering/sacrificing pig, chicken and apong(white and black colour rice beer) adding there with the specified items of vegetables and the aromatic and pungent vegetable substance according to their size, colour and action they observed during their moving from place to place to save them from accidents, attack of animal barriers, dangers, difficulties, natural calamities and untimely death praying them to bless with god crops, garments, sound mind in a sound body, wealth and happy life with their families in the days to come by virtue of their own myths and legends about the creation of man and the universe as well as about supernatural beings since time immemorial under the nature which is called is Taleng Uie. But it has been observed that the observation of Taleg Uie is very rare in Mising villages with the passage of time.

One another beliefs popular among the Mising community is **Tagir Ka:nam (Augur)**. Human being is curious by birth. Everyone have a tendency to know about their future and everyone tries to make their future better. Mising people are no exception to this. Tagir Ka:nam (augur) is the practice prevailing among the Mising community to know about the future and it is the impact of the Indian Astrology. The different methods of Tagir Ka:nam are-

- i. Ago Asin Aio: Ka:nam

- ii. Ambrin Yoka:la Ka:nam
- iii. Aki Upokala Ka:nam
- iv. Mibur Maying Tagir
- v. Mibo Dagla Ka:nam
- vi. Augury with black rice beer and leafs of Tora grass.

The Mising society was earlier based on co-operation and inter-dependence. Whenever a family was in need of manpower to construct a new house, for agricultural work or to conduct a feast in festive occasions like marriage, death ceremonies etc. than the villagers gathered to help the concerned family. This was called **Rikbo Bo:nām**. In return the family offer thanks giving to the people by offering Apong (rice beer) and other eatables, preferably rice with meat. Now-a-days money is also paid which is spent for feast or deposits them for other community purpose.

Folk Songs and Dances of the Mising Community

Mising community is very rich in the field of folk songs and dances. The various categories folk songs of this particular community are-

- A:bang(Classical song): These songs are of two types i.e. spontaneous and Mibu A:bang. The Mibu is the shaman of the Mising tribe and he knows about the tribe, clan and divine matters. The Mibu acquires divine power by singing A:bang songs and makes contact with the gods who help him in giving remedies to all types of illness. These songs are related to dance. These songs are composed keeping in mind the rhythm of the dance associated with it.
- Kaban (Lamentation): Kaban songs are melancholic expressions. They blend the themes of dejection into a melody. Generally, the Kaban songs are sung recollecting the sweet memories of the past. They express how the sweet memories of the past still touch the heart deeply.
- Do:ying Ni:tom (Ballad): As in other communities ballads are also prevalent in the Mising society. In Mising society it is known as Do:ying Ni:tom. They are narrative songs based on tragic events of some deserted lovers. These songs are based on stories after the style of Moniram Dewanor Geet and Beula Lakhindar Geet in Assamese folk music.
- Ko Ni:nam or Bvni Ni:nam (Lullaby): These are the lullabies sung by the mother or young attendants of babies. Mothers usually remain busy with their day to day work. The

new born are either carried on their backs when they go to the field or they left with some female attendants. Thus Ko Ni:nam or Bvni Ni:nam are sung to console the babies.

- Midang Ni:tom (Marriage Song): Midang Ni:tom are sung during a wedding ceremony. These songs have a melancholic tune and generally express the bride's feelings on reminiscing her past days. Unlike Assamese wedding songs, Midang songs do not express the union of the couple. Instead with a sweet touch of humour they express the charm of the bride, her dress and beauty.
- Moman Nitom (Nursery Rhymes): Moman is a rhyme, a characteristic feature of which is the accompaniment of dance. These songs are sung in groups and express happiness. Some of these songs are competitive in nature and are sung between two groups of boys and girls. They are sometimes sung and danced in open fields and sometimes in the courtyard.
- Lupo ni:tom or Modum ni:tom (Colloquial Songs): Lupo ni:tom or Modum ni:tom means expression of ideas in the form of songs between a boy and a girl. These songs are mostly in the form of questions relating to relationships between boys and girls. Tebo Tekang or Do:bo Dongkung, Selloya songs are also included within Lupo songs. Once the male offers a theme his female counterpart continues. It is an ideal way of expressing their youthful joys and laughter, hopes and despair.
- Bv:rvg(Sessional Song): These songs are sung only during particular seasons or festivals. The jubilant smile of the Mising youth, mother earth's eternal charm, the inhustling of trees, the wind are some of the themes accompanying the Bv:rvg ni:tom.
- Roila-Ni:tom(Marry Making Song): The Roila-Ni:tom song and the accompanying dance are one of the notable items of the Mising during the Bohag Bihu festival. The bamboo clapper is the common instrument for this. The song starts in a high tone and is repeated by youth.
- Oi-Ni:tom (Expression Song): These songs are the most popular songs of the Mising people. These songs are popular and sung by all sections of the society. These songs have supplied imagery to express one's feelings and thoughts. These songs have been passed on from one generation to another. Oi means love and affection, Ni means to console or lull and Tom means who is consoled or lulled. These songs reflect many socio-cultural

aspects of the community. The intellectual capability of the Mising youth is reflected in these songs.

The Mising peoples have colourful folk dances. In any Mising festivals, both girls and boys engage with their colourful traditional dresses. Oi-Ni:tom has played a vital role in such type of dance and marry making ceremonies. The instruments used with Mising songs and dances are dum dum(dhul), tal, dendum, tapungs(pepa), sungan etc. Both boys and girls sing but boys prefer to play musical instruments and girls with dances. The Mising songs and dances are playing an important role in Assamese culture also.

Food Habit of the Mising Community

Food is the symbol of identity of a culture. The Misings follow a typical ethnic diet of boiled or steamed food. Fish, pork and chicken are either roasted or cooked as curries with minimal use of spices. Small fishes, when caught abundantly, are either dried in the sunlight or smoked in the perap- a bamboo shelf placed above the hearth or meram. These small but dried fishes are often grounded into powder called Namsing and preserved in hollow bamboos for consumption in the future. Besides, the Misings are very much fond of their native beverages called Nogin Apong and Poro Apong. In the festivals like Ali-Aye-Legang, Po-rag etc. Different delicious food and beverages like purang-apin(steamed/boiled sticky rice enveloped in wild cardamom leaves), ambug(fried rice powder), fish and pork curries made with leafy greens, noggin apong and poro apong etc. are prepared.

Marriage System of the Mising Community

India is still by and large a traditional society with rigid caste system. Caste plays a very important role in the selection of mates in marriages. To most Indians, it is difficult to think of marriage beyond the own caste. To think of marriages between different castes and different religions is a difficult and socially unacceptable proposition. Recently the process of modernization, democratization and development has brought lot of positive changes in Indian society. Similarly, among the Misings of Assam, a marriage within the same community is the norm of the Mising society. But it is being observed that the traditional binding of the community in marriage selection is gradually loosening over time. It is observed that about ten per cent of the marriages among the Misings is inter-community (with non-tribal communities), inter-tribe and inter-religion. This change in the marriage pattern among the community is a very

recent phenomenon due to the impact of modernization, socio-cultural interaction, socio-economic development and globalization. Various socio-economic and demographic factors also affect the pattern of inter-community marriages among them. There is however significant spatial variation in the pattern of inter-community, inter-tribe and inter-religion marriages. There seems to be higher rate of such marriages in socio-economically advanced urban people. It is expected that the incidence of such marriages will increase with the increase in the degree of modernization and socio-economic development. Marriages amongst the Misings take place in four ways: (i) Dā:ro Midāng (formal marriages through negotiation) (ii) Duglā Lā:nām (marriage by elopement) (iii) Kumbosunam (marriage through a very simple ceremony), and (iv) Kumnā Solā Lā:nām (marriage by force). The last one, in which a man makes a woman his wife against her will by whisking her away from some place and starting to live together, is no longer in practice. Extreme poverty or inconvenience force families to arrange a marriage of the third kind, in which a few elders, invited to the house of the groom, bless the would-be couple over a few bowls of rice beer – and the wedding is over. The most common form of marriage in rural areas even today is the one by elopement. When a boy is in love with a girl and intends to marry her, but cannot afford the cost of a formal marriage, or expects some opposition to the marriage from some quarter, or would like to start a conjugal life without delay, he chooses elopement with the girl as the best option. More often than not, marriages by elopement are followed by due social recognition through simple formalities. Formal marriages are arranged through two or three stages of negotiation, but although arranged by parents or guardians, the marriage of a boy and a girl totally unknown to each other, would be very rare. Formal marriages amongst them appear to have been influenced to a great extent by the practice of such marriages amongst their neighbours in the valley. It is now common for the educated and the well-to-do parents to perform the marriages of their children in the formal way.

Funeral and Funerary Rites of Mising Community

Just like the Christian community, the Misings follow the age-old tradition of burying the dead. The Misings wash the dead bodies, put fresh cloths, wrap in mats and place the dead body in coffins. Then they go in procession to the burial place, and bury the dead in about seven feet of land. Misings basically observe three post-death rituals namely-tiloni, urom-apin and dodgang. The first is observed on the third day though there is no hard and fast rule for fasting in those three days. The urom-apin is performed as a post death ritual within a period of approximately

10-40 days depending on the peculiar tradition of the area and locality concerned. The last ritual of dodgang is a very expensive affair. Hence, it can be delayed for years together.

Conclusion

The Mising are one of the communities of Assam still maintaining their cultural tradition including their language. The society is changing not only in the aspect of socio-economic and political areas but also in religious beliefs. Different forms of plain culture such as Hinduism and other religions have been penetrated into their culture. Since their migration to the plain of Assam, the Mising have passed a course of assimilation and always facing a pressure of religion prevalent among the local peoples. One of the conspicuous outcomes the influences is the emergence of a new form of Hindu religion. Although Mising still maintain their traditional belief about supernatural power and customary practice related to births and death.

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