



# Social Stigma and the Mising Society

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## Abstract:

A community has a varied nature of culture. Culture reflects the entire life of the people living in a society. Development in culture means a society having a healthy lifestyle, custom well observed, a prosperous economic system and after all a society of rank. The religious beliefs and practices of the Misings reflect a major part of their way of life. Whereas mibu or mirí (shaman) represents the religious part, the Ali A:ye Língang represents the socio-economic condition of the community. Mibu or mirí is an extinct cultural heritage of the Misings. Every now and then the importance of the mibu is felt and uttered. But as it is believed that initiation to be a mirí involves supernatural powers, the people cannot revive it at their wish. Recently, the Do:nyi-Po:loism is trying to revive the term by using it as the priest of their practice; but without vigour and glamour associated with it. On the other hand, the Ali A:ye Língang is the sowing festival of the community. It was observed within the month of Falguna at the convenience of the people. But the Mising Ba:né Kébang resolved to observe the same on the first Wednesday of Falgun month and it is in practice till today. But regarding the demand for state holiday for this festival, the govt. policy of divide and rule coercively worked and the Misings as a whole are not happy over the matter. The student organization of the community extends support to the govt. declaration as restricted holiday in ten Mising dominated districts. But the Misings outside these ten districts raised demand for state holiday. The issue still remains unresolved. Whereas the Misings other than the aforesaid ten districts pursues the matter, the student organization says that these unorganized effort is a waste of time and energy. It clearly shows the social bifurcation.

Keyword- Social stigma, Missing society, tribal community

## Introduction

Assam is a living place of some about one hundred and fifty ethnic groups of varied number of population and considered a hotspot for anthropological studies. Each of these groups possesses distinct culture and language. They use to come up with their cultural celebrations in different parts of the state in different times. All these cultural elements and heritage make the state colourful in every nook and corner.

The Misings are the second largest tribal community in Assam in terms of population. They are believed to be of Kirata origin. They have been living in the plains of Assam since time immemorial. Classics like Mahabharata and Periplus of the Erythrean Sea place them to the north of river Brahmaputra. The Misings are believed to be migrating from the present day Arunachal Pradesh down to the plains of Assam in search of arable lands or some other reasons. The time of their migration is not ascertained as of now. Whereas some others are of the view that they migrated down to the plains in the seventh-eighth century AD, the mention of the Kiratas in the Mahabharata and other classical literatures of India speak another story of their sojourn in the plains. Whatsoever the matter, they have been undergoing a long process of acculturation since they have been in the plains with the surrounding people. As a result, some of their cultural traits have gone into oblivion and some have been newly adopted for smooth living. The mibu or mirí (shaman) and the Ali A:ye Língang are two types of such cultural elements through which the Misings have been known to its surrounding societies.

## Objectives –

The objectives of this paper are -

- a. To look into the cultural aspects of the Mising community,
- b. To cast a peep into the shaman tradition of the community,
- c. To know the nature and practice of the Ali A:ye Ligang by the community,
- d. To know the rule of culture in promoting a community in a society, and
- e. To assess the role of organized effort for uplifting the status of a community.

## Methodology –

In this paper, both Observation and analytical methods have been employed for developing this paper. The role played by the organized body for the upliftment of the community is carefully observed and the data obtained from the observation have been analyzed for attaining in the conclusion.

## Discussion-

Shaman is a term associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the Misings; traditionally known as mibu or mirí. He is believed to be possessing power to heal the sick and to communicate with the world of spirit. The term is primarily applied to the religious beliefs and practices of the communities of the greater Abotani family of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

‘The term Shamanism comes from the Manchu-Tungus word saman. The noun is formed from the verb sa (‘to know’); thus shaman literally means ‘he who knows’. Various other terms are used by other peoples among whom shamanism exists’<sup>1</sup>. The shaman is believed to be able to foretell the future of a person or to predict the weather etc. which are generally beyond ability of a common man. So he is treated with much esteem in the society he is belonged to.

The word mibu may be derived from two words, viz. ‘mi’ means ‘man’ and ‘bu’ means ‘father’; thus, father of the mankind. Mibus are the ‘priests who have preserved the creation and genealogical myths of the Misings in chants, hymns, etc. and who, being credited with inborn abilities of communion with supernatural beings, help perform animistic rites of propitiation of such beings, when necessary; the medicine men amongst the Misings’<sup>2</sup>. He looks after the religious affairs of the community. He performs the rites of propitiating the deities in a family as and when invited. On the other hand, mirís are also considered as priests with a few minor difference from the mibus. ‘In the first place, when the mibu starts a function, he utters the names of the deities right from Kéyum to Pédong including the origin and genesis of human being; the mirí sings the songs or hymns of praise of his guardian deities. Secondly, a mibu can arrange a function either day or night hours but the mirí can perform mirídagnam or mirísumnam only during night hours. Thirdly, a mibu does not fall into trance while uttering the hymns; but it is considered indispensable in case of a mirí. Finally a mibu may or may not be a medicine man but a mirí is always a medicine man’<sup>3</sup>. Besides these two, there are various types of mirís available amongst the peoples of greater Abotani family. ‘The mibu as the guardian of the socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe has got five basic functions to play which may be categorized as under: a) To sing the holy song of creation/origin (Cosmogony, Gods, Goddesses and Mankind); b) To recount the strenuous migration story of the community; c) To sing the fertility hymns; d) To recount the genealogical line of a particular family; and e) To diagnose and drive out the evils affecting a family. The mibu, thus, strives to perpetuate the rich cultural tradition of the Misings by playing pivotal and multifarious roles in the socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe’<sup>4</sup>. He is the preserver of the cultural tradition as well as religious heritage of the community and he is the connecting thread amongst the people as a whole.

A person requires certain unique qualities to become a mibu. Actually these qualities are believed to be inborn and reveals without the knowledge of the self as the child grows up. He just simultaneously goes on observing the formalities. There are various folktales about the attainment of priesthood or mibu in the Mising community. Budheswar Dole says that such latent qualities start revealing when the would-be-mibu starts growing in his

mother's womb. During pregnancy, the mother does not wish to consume melon, fern, eel fish, etc. These materials remind the mibu about the creation of universe<sup>5</sup>. Sailen Pegu also speaks the same<sup>6</sup>. 'After birth, the boy uses to submerge in deep thoughts every now and then; abstain from games and sports; always keeps himself away from quarrel; very cautious in eating and drinking and uses to sigh deeply'<sup>7</sup>. It is said that the selected boy is abducted by époms at their convenience. During the abducted period, the époms initiate the boy into mibu by giving him a ceremonial bath in poms. Only then he is taught the a:bangs or the hymns or chants. Through a:bangs, a mibu becomes able to understand the interrelations of various lives and materials of the cosmic world. Further, it is also believed that the époms take the forms of the relatives of the family so that the selected one does not get afraid of. According to Nahendra Padun, attainment of priesthood is a supernatural phenomenon. The characteristic features of a mibu starts revealing in the selected one since its early childhood. On observing some formalities, the selected one reveals some supernatural powers and acquiring the texts of a:bangs, he may become a matured priest in due course of time. So priesthood is not a hereditary right or power<sup>8</sup>. Thus mibu is a pre-determined supernatural process in which there is no human share at all. 'On attainment of youth, BaluramDa:ng, one of the selected ones, feels the characteristics in a marked way. While he clears jungle for jhum in the forest, he hears a sorrowful tune not to fell the trees. While he is about to operate the hoe, a female tune obstruct him from doing so. When he is abducted, he feels as if going through a beautiful landscape. He does not know where he is going towards east, but spontaneously follows an enchanted call. At last he is received at a peak of snow with much benign tone. But the deity does not appear in any visible form to him. He is persuaded of the vocation and is taught a few a:bangs and at last promises him that on his call by singing the a:bangs the deity would come to him'<sup>9</sup>. The deity that abducts him can be termed as guardian deity or spirit as it is believed that every formality is carried on by him. 'The shamans had particular guardian spirits ..... The initiation ceremony often included a marriage ceremony, uniting the shaman and the guardian spirit. The training programs emphasized the developments of intimate relations with the spirits, like a husband-wife, or mother-child relationship'<sup>10</sup>. Both these kinds of relationship between époms and the shamans are observed among the Misings. Kumbang is of the view that there are two kinds of power which are conferred on the candidate by the guardian spirits: one is the épom and the other is the Sirki Na:né. While a mibu, initiated by époms, institutes a mibudagnam, he may be teased by épom young girls. It is well known that some of the épom young girls get married with human being<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, na:né means 'mother'. 'Whenever a mibu institutes a mibudagnam, some of them use to start praying Sirki Na:né'<sup>12</sup>, which proves the existence of mother-child relationship between the époms and the shaman.

A mibu invokes his guardian spirits by uttering shaman hymns, known as a:bang among the Abotani groups of people. These a:bangs are not written but passing down from generation to generation in oral form. After singing sets of a:bangs, the guardian spirits possesses the body and soul of the shaman, thus falling in trance, and in this stage the shaman tells about the reasons of sufferings or ill luck of the family. These a:bangs are not intelligible to common readers. 'A different type of vocabulary is used in the a:bangs. Brevity of the a:bangs are another aspect of its unintelligibility. For example, there are thirteen steps from Kéyum to Pédong. But it can be abridged as 'KéyumPédongna:néké' when uttered as shaman song. The third reason is the lack of pursuance. The shaman songs are believed to be acquired through inspiration from spirits. Further, these are not uttered without arranging a certain ritual, and thus, are considered an auspicious genre of songs'<sup>13</sup>. Thus, Fairchild concludes: The shamans used special language to hide the meaning of the invocations. And of course, the invocations were family and shaman group secrets<sup>14</sup>.

The shaman and his practices among the Galo (erstwhile Gallongs) are described by Srivastava as under: 'Incantation at the time of invoking the spirits take the form of prayers. These incantations are pronounced at the time of illness, calamity, offering sacrifices, and other occasions. These incantations are very complex and are understood only by the nyibo himself. They contain the name, place and the designation of the spirits invoked, the purpose of invocation, and request for the redress of misfortunes. An announcement of sacrifices to follow is also to be made here'<sup>15</sup>. Of course, he does not put forward any opinion regarding the initiation of the nyibo among the Galo.

Professor Tabu Ram Taid and Professor Nahendra Padun are of the view that there are two types of shaman amongst the Misings; but Diram Kumbang speaks about four types. Dr. Tai Nyori and Sachin Roy say about two types of shaman among the Padam, Minyong and Galo groups of the Adis. On the other hand, Dr. Gindu Borang writes some about eleven types of shaman. The variations in opinion regarding the number, nature and types of shaman shows that it still requires further systematic study and therefore we are not in a position to utter final word in this regard. All these shamans may not possess a sword or yoksa at hand; but they must sing a few hymns to invoke their guardian spirits. These hymns are known as a:bangs. There are various types of a:bangs amongst the Abotani people. ÉkopTaktora:bang, So:lung a:bang, Lí:mír-Lí:bom a:bang, UrakPaknam, Mushub A:bang, Binyat a:bang are some of them. Many of these a:bangs contain description of genealogies of various clans along with other creatures including plants and animals which lead Dr. Kamala Kanta Bori to pinpoint that the shaman recounts the strenuous migration story of the community. Thus the study of the a:bangs may throw ample light on the migration story of the community to a great extent. And so, the study of the shaman song is of utmost importance as a source of history of the Misings.

But it is believed that while the Ahoms first came in contact with the Misings, they enquired their religion and its leaders where the Misings replied that their religious head is known as Mirí. Being unable to correctly pronounce it, the Ahoms have generalized it as Miri. Interestingly they have been enlisted as such in the tribal list of the Constitution of India. As the laymen are not able to beMirí, they feel awkward to be so addressed.

C/The next one is Ali A:ye Lígang, the sowing festival. It is regarded as the oldest known agricultural festival of the state. The Misings have been celebrating Ali A:ye Lígang since long past. Earlier there was not a certain day to celebrate it. Every Mising village celebrated it in their village as and when convenient to them within the month of Falguna. But it is now a common fact that the special session of MisingBa:néKébang (the apex socio-cultural body of the Misings) held at Gejera under the then Majuli sub-division, in 1955, unanimously decided to observe the festival on the first Wednesday of Falguna. There was local variation in celebrating the occasion. If the people of lower part of the state use ginger to ward off the evil spirits from the paddy field, the people of the upper part put forward another interpretation for the same. It was the need of the hour to make it uniform. Observing all these in the field the MisingBa:néKébang framed rules and regulations for observing the occasion with a view to establish similarity of observation throughout the Misings beyond any boundary after it had organized a symposium at Dhemaji on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2019. Though the cooperation of the Misings to this declaration was not markedly seen, there was no denial either.

But the matter took a new twist while the ruling state government declared restricted holiday in ten Mising populated districts. There was much hue and cry in the social media over the matter. Whereas the TMPK (Student organization of the Misings) extends support to this declaration and still demanding state holiday, the other Mising people retorted to a great extent. Especially the Misings of Guwahati city reacted actively by organizing road demonstration to the govt. declaration saying that the Misings of the other places than the ten districts have been deprived to observe their community-level festival. Their demonstration was condemned and physically thrashed down by some TMPK activists saying that there is no organization in the Mising society as Sachetan Mising Somaj (Conscious Mising Society) and they (the TMPK activists) cannot allow other people to speak up about the problems of the Misings.

TMPK is the dynamic force of the community and each and every Mising man wishes that this be remaining free of any political influence. Instead of it, the govt. declaration regarding Ali A:ye Lígang has shown to all that they are cooperating with the divide and rule policy of the govt. which is simply not acceptable to the whole community. The community feeling of the Misings rendering govt. services at various capacities and various parts of the state could have been honoured by amicably talking with each other for eking out an acceptable solution. The handling of the matter under reference shows that this dynamic force is not intellectually competent enough to lead the whole community for its welfare.

**Results–**

It is seen from the above discussion that though the shaman is a significant figure in the community, it is now an extinct culture and the Misings at present are trying to revive it by introducing Do:nyi-Po:lo cult in a new form.

Ali A:ye Ligang is still in vogue. MisingBa:néKébang is framing new rules and regulations for observing the occasion and it is seen that the people are following these rules.

**Conclusion –**

It is said that culture is a dynamic element and the common mass is its driving force. A conscious and well-planned effort may help pulling forward the whole community up to a great height. A divergent thought cannot be put to action for a targeted goal. For attaining in the goal, people of all walks of life need to put their heads together. Only serious and threadbare discussion may show a fruitful way.

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