

# An Observation Into the Society, Culture and Religion of the Mishing Tribes in Assam

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Mishings are the second largest tribe in Assam and one of the largest tribal group in North East India. Being the mixture of East Asian as well as the Southeast Asian subrace of the Mongoloid race, they have their unique style of living, religious beliefs, festivals, rituals and sacrifices and the role of Mibu (the Priest) who is the spiritual guide as well as keeping records of oral history and genealogy of the tribe. But, with the advent of time, Mishing religion become mixed with other religious beliefs and lost their original form to a large extent. The present study reflects how far the Mishing people are successful in preserving their age old traditional value.*

**KEYWORDS:** *The Mishings, subrace, Mibu (the Priest), Do-nyi (the Sun) and Polo (the Moon)*

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## I. Introduction

The Mishings belong to a mixture of East Asian as well as Southeast Asian subrace of the Mongoloid race, similar to the mixture of the Mongoloid subraces inside political China as people as people from Southern China may look more like the South East Asian brown-skinned Mongoloids and more towards the Northern China more fair skinned Mongoloids dwell. It's not known exactly where they migrated from, but it is popularly believed that they were the dwellers of the hills of the present day Arunachal Pradesh. This explains the cultural and linguistic similarities they have with the people of the Adi (erstwhile Abor) tribe, and to some extent of the Hill Miri and Dafla tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Somewhere around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they started migrating towards the plains of Assam, most probably in search of fertile land. At present, the Mishings are an ethnic group inhabiting the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam. Nearly 20,000 live in and around Pasighat of East Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are the second largest tribe in Assam and one of the largest tribal group in North-East India.

### Social Life of the Mishings

The Mishings are socially well organized. They obey certain strict rules and regulations in their society as well as in the household. The Mishing people always obeys and rules and regulation in terms of work, like social functions, fishing, merry making etc. the primitive method of social group or polity is prevalent among them. There is democratic set up where members of the society have power to point out any problem of them in their society. For each village there is a '**Dolung Kebang**'. The aged man and head of the family is the member of the *Dolung Kebang*. It has jurisdiction over its own village at micro-level. The Mishings are peace loving people. Both men and women are hard workers. The women are comparatively more hard working than men, they remain engaged in household and agricultural activities and look after cattle breeding (pig and fowl), for extra income. The members within the family follow the advice of the head of the family. Co-operation among the villagers is an important feature of the Mishings. Rikbo-genam and 'dagle ka-ale' k are some of their cooperative activities organized by a family whenever there is a need.

### Religion of Mishing Tribes

Do-nyi, the Sun and Polo, the Moon are the main god and goddess of the Mishing Tribes. Do-nyi is addressed as father and polo as mother. The Mishings believe that the Gods and Goddesses have been divided into two groups, malevolent and benevolent. The main priest of the mishings is known as 'Mibu'. He is the most revered person among the Mishings. It is believed that he has the ability to connect with the gods and goddesses. He chants the 'Abang Mantras' and sings songs about the world, men and women, animals and different powers that exist. During festivals they sacrifice chickens and pigs. They also believe in many folk beliefs such as the existence of 'Soul Epom', Yalo etc.

### **Festivals of Mishing Tribes**

Festival constitutes an important part of the Mishings. 'Ali- ai- ligang' is the main festival celebrated by the Mishings during the month of Phagun before the beginning of cultivation. Mother Earth is worshipped during the festival so that with her blessings there is plenty of production. The villagers during the festival wear 'Ribi-gaseng', 'Mibo-galuk', 'Leke-Ege' and 'Gonro-Ugon.' Another grand festival of the Mishings is the 'Porag' after the crops have been harvested. The Mishings perform their traditional dances during the festive season. These are usually performed either to the tunes of musical instruments or along with their traditional songs. Some of the Mishing dance forms are 'Mibu-dugnam', 'So-man' and 'Ligang – sonam.' They also play different types of musical instruments such as 'Gunggang', 'Dum Dum', 'Le-nang', 'Ejuk Tapung', 'Dendun', 'Tu:tok Tapung', 'Marbang', 'Jekring tapung' etc.

### **Folk Literature of the Mishing Tribes**

The folk life of the Mishing tribes contributes towards the development of their folk literature. The folk literature of the Mishing has been adopted from their 'Luse-lukor' a proverb, 'Solok' a riddle, 'Do-ying' i.e. a fable and 'Nitom' different folk songs. They also have their own language. They make use of Roman scripts for imparting education and producing literature.

### **The Mishing Beliefs**

The Mishing people believes that the human soul is immortal and lives in the other world (*Uie-among*) eternally. It is also believed that the soul does not leave this world immediately or a couple of month after the death of the person. The *Urom* (departed soul) is believed to continue to stay in this world even after performing *Urom-apin*. Until and unless the *Dodgang* is performed, the *Urom* remain in the world. After performing *Dodgang* the soul goes to the other world called *Uie-among*. The worship of ancestral spirits is another important feature of their religious beliefs. They believe that the souls of departed forefathers (*Urom*) are benevolent to the family members and held the responsibility of health and happiness of the family. The Mishings pays homage to the ancestral spirits on all occasions by naming their names.

### **Rituals and Sacrifices**

Rituals and sacrifices have been essential elements of tribal society. Both are complementary in nature because there cannot be a ritual without sacrifices. Ritual is a process of identification and negotiation with aggrieved deity or spirit while sacrifice is final agreement between the two. After establishing the causes of disease and identifying the spirit responsible for it as ascertained by divination; their next step is to propitiate the spirit to leave the patient and take an animal in place of his or her. Their traditional rituals or sacrifices are performed with the domesticated animals. The Mishings performs a number of rituals such as *Do:bur Uie, Taleng Uie, Urom Uie, Dodgang, Gu:min-Soin, Po:rag, Ali\_Aye-Ligang, Yalo-Gognam, Okum Dhangaria, Yumrsng Uie, Asi-Uie, Lakhi-Uie* etc in their life cycle and it can be classified as daily, half yearly, annual and occasional.

### **Role of Mibu (the priest)**

Mibu (the priest) plays an important role in their socio-religious life. He is the mouth piece of the people to communicate their grievances and suffering to the spirits for redress. He has spiritual powers to diagnose the cause of ailment and prescribes the offering to cure the ailment. *Mibu* is a dynamic person and plays multiple roles. When a person falls sick, a *Mibu* is called to detect the cause of sickness, he consults omen by rice eggs and rice beer and determines the kind of sacrifice to be offered. His functions are varied and multifarious, when he performs puja and rituals he is a priest, prescribing medicine, he is a doctor. Further when he is securing the blessing of the Spirits, he is the spiritual guide. Besides, he is maintaining the great responsibility in keeping records of oral history and genealogy of the tribe.

## **II. Conclusion**

Although, the Mishings are maintaining the traditional and cultural patterns including their language and traditional beliefs and practices, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture to some extent. Since, the Mishing migration down to the plains of Assam, they had gone through constant influences of other religious prevalent among the people of Assam. As an outcome of these influences, different sects of Hinduism like *Shaktism, Saivism, Tantricism, Vaisnavism, Satya-Sai Baba, Sat-Sangha and Christianity* emerged in the Mishing society. They did not totally accept it totally in the beginning and gradually incorporated some of their beliefs and practices in their own religious functions. The present Mishing religion is an admixture of Vaishnavism, Tantricism, Buddhism and tribal beliefs. Now, they perform some rituals such as *Satjonia, Najonia, Akisjonia, Jalkai, Pejab Uie, Yumrang Uie, Okum Dhangaria, Aai Uie* etc. and these are non-traditional for the Mishing residing in other parts of the country and are more exposed to western

culture than preserving their own tradition and rich culture. It is to be noted that a large number of Mishings have gave up their age old religions and converted to various form of Hinduism like Vaisnavism, Anukulism, Satya Sai Baba, Donyi-Polo-Yelam and Christianity.

As a result of adopting and practicing new faith they have given up some age old traditional beliefs. Many valuable rites and rituals have already been lost from society. It is apprehended that many new alien elements made its impact on their traditional culture which is still being protected in the lips of the unlettered bards; it will die within a few decades unless active measures are adopted to keep it alive. The penetration of alien religion in their age old practices has affected the socio- economic life. Till today, Mishings are continue to practice some superstitious beliefs without knowing the scientific facts. It is considered to be one of the major causes of the backwardness of Mishing community. The study also reflects that how far the Mishing people are successful in preserving their age old traditional value.

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