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## **EVOLUTION OF MYTHS: A STUDY OF ORAL TRADITIONS OF MISING**

### ***Abstract***

*Every human community /tribe existing on earth has a history behind the beliefs, customs and traditions they follow. It has been found that when our ancestors did not start documenting history in the written form, they adopted the oral medium of transmitting the traditions and customs for the future generation; hence oral literature has been a medium of disseminating popular beliefs. This too stands to be true for the Mising tribe who had migrated to the hills and plains of Assam and have assimilated with other communities inhabiting the land to make up the Assamese community as a whole. However, it is remarkable that the Mising people brought with them a baggage of customs and traditions that are typical of the community and forms a part of their identity as a tribe. The transmission of these traditions to the coming generation is interesting due to the fact that the Mising people have a rich storehouse of oral literature. Most of their oral literature, that is, folksongs and folktales are embedded with myths about the ways of life of the ancestors. The manner in which these myths evolved through the medium of folksongs and folktales of the Mising people and circulated among the younger generation in the form of popular beliefs peculiar to the community holds the concern of this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Myths, folksongs, folktales, popular beliefs, traditions, Mising culture.*

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Assam is a land inhabited by diverse groups of people, with different set of beliefs and customs. When the need of the hour demanded, people from different parts of the world migrated from their place of origin. Assam is also an amalgamation of various ethnic groups that migrated from other places, may be in search of more favourable conditions of living. It is conjectured by folklorists, ethnographers, historians and anthropologists that the population of Assam is a whole that constitutes of several communities. The communities that reside in the land of Assam therefore are influenced by races like the

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Austric, Mediterranean, Tibeto- Burman, Chinese, and Dravidian. These people invaded Assam and some of them came in contact with the local people and began living permanently thereafter. Moreover, there are myths about the Aryan influence on the people of Assam. There is the myth that the Aryan culture has exerted its influence upon the people of Assam when Krishna from Dwarka “carried off” Rukmini, daughter of king Bhisma of Kundin near Sadiya. Bhisma was, however, a non-Aryan king, as found in mythology. “The story is narrated in two Puranas, *Harivamsa* and *Bhagabata*.” (Das 1972: 13) Krishna’s grandson, Anirudha also followed suit. Anirudha too came to take away Usha, daughter of king Bana, of Shonitpur. This story is narrated in the *Bhagabata* and the *Vishnupurana*. “Thus racial and cultural fusion was brought about in those mythological times” (Das 1972: 13). From such myths it can be understood that people who identify as Assamese do not specifically belong to any particular race, group or community, but a harmonious blend of diversities.

Further, Assam has hugely been affected by the rule of the Ahom people. The invasion of the Ahoms has been accurately recorded. The first Ahom king, Sukapha emphasised on keeping written records of their history. But there are tribes in Assam whose histories are not clearly written. Their histories are transmitted from generation to generation orally. In this process of transfusion many myths and legends got created and are handed down in the form of folktales and folksongs.

Among all the tribes that inhabit Assam Mising<sup>1</sup> is one. Into the whole of Assamese, the Mising people contribute a large part. The Mising is considered to be the second largest tribe of Assam, the Bodos being the first. There is no denying the fact that the Misings have a rich oral literature. Most of their literature was oral until recently. This may be owing to the literacy rate among the Mising people. However, there can be no doubt about the fact that they have a very rich cultural heritage. That shows in the folklore prevalent among them.

The reason behind the existence of diverse communities in Assam or any other place is due to the influx of people from other parts of the world. However, the general culture of Assam has been enriched by the particular cultures of multiple communities residing here. So, the culture of a people gets reflected not only in their practices, but also in their literature. Although literature is of two types- oral and written, yet it cannot be denied that before literacy literature was basically oral:

The identity of such a group consists of their symbolic use of aspects of culture. The emblems used for this identity is their folklore with its generic categories including narrative...

This way of life has been determined by a code with distinct symbols which in the tribal milieu manifests itself in religion, customs and

other genres of folklore with oral literature; particularly narratives, as explanations. Rituals are manifestations and periodical re-enactment of faith in this code, myths explain why the re-enactment and sustains the process. The literary genres are at times the embodiments of the cultural heritage (the other name for identity) left by the forefathers who had no other tangible forms of expression to tell history. (Sen 1997: 55)

Although oral literature includes riddles, proverbs, jokes, chants, tongue-twisters, folksongs, folktales and so on, yet the concern of this paper is focused around folksongs and folktales of the Mising people.

### **Objective(s)**

This paper aims at exploring that the myths that are prevalent among the Mising people in fact serve as a medium in communicating the Mising culture among the members of the community. The myths are circulated through folksongs and folktales. As folktales and folksongs have a certain kind of fluidity it can be transmitted orally (in the form of a story). Therefore, here an attempt is made to focus on the verity that through oral literature the culture of the Mising people is passed on from generation to generation.

### **Methodology**

The theoretical tools that has helped in cultivating the argument of this paper are insights from relevant texts on folklore studies like Richard Dorson's *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, *Folk Literature of the Misings* by Jawahar Jyoti Kuli, Birendranath Datta's *Folksongs of the Misings* and Peter Hammond's *An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Some of the myths discussed in this paper are taken from Kuli's books on the Mising people. Besides, Bhrigumoni Kagyung's *Mising Sanskritir Alekhya* affirm the cultural significance of the primary sources (the myths) that are found in the folktales and folksongs found in the texts mentioned. As myths also reflect on the history of the community, Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* has served as a guide in gathering information about the various communities of Assam including the Misings.

Oral literature is one of the four broad divisions of folklore pointed out by Richard Dorson (1916-1981). He has pointed out that folklore can be divided into- i) oral literature, ii) material culture, iii) social folk customs, and iv) performing folk arts. Nevertheless, the oral literature helps us greatly to get an overview of the culture of any given people. Therefore, here is an attempt to understand how the myths found in the folksongs and folktales have found a space in the minds of the Mising people and taken the shape of popular beliefs in due course of time.

'Folktales' is a term that is considered to be an equivalent of the German

word *Marchen*, according to Thompson (1885-1976) and many other folklorists. However, folktales are traditional stories that narrate some ancient history. Generally, folktales are divided according to their types. There are seven types of folktales recognised as- a) Tales of the supernatural or wondrous tales or romantic tales, b) Etiological tales, c) Animal tales, d) Jokes or humorous tales, e) Trickster tales, f) Cumulative tales, and g) Tales of folk history. Ganesh Pegu has shown elaborately in *Mising Jana-Sahitya* how such variety of folktales exists among the Mising people as well. From this it can be perceived that the Misings have a rich oral literature that reflects how their culture has evolved. Unfortunately, this oral tradition was not explored till recent times.

On tracing the genealogy, it is found that the Mising people belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. They speak a Sino-Tibetan variety of language. The Mising people are therefore considered to have been a Mongoloid ethnic group. May be in times immemorial the Mising people migrated from Tibet or Burma to Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, the Misings are said to be the descendants of the Adis, Abors and the Akas of Arunachal Pradesh – who also belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. Therefore, the Mising people happen to share some beliefs, customs and traditions with these tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The oral literature of these tribes, especially the Adis, is same or similar to the Misings. Among the Adis there was a group of singers who sung the ballads that narrate myths as well. This group of folk singers was called *Miris*. Many historians like Edward Gait (1863-1950) has pointed out that the Mising people served as a communicating link between the hills-men (from where they have migrated) and the people of the plains. The origin of the word ‘Miri’ has yet not been traced accurately. Gait said that, as the Mising people were “go between” between the Abors, Adis, and Akas and the people of Assam they came to be called ‘Miri’ among the people of the plains. But the Mising people of Assam prefer to call themselves ‘Mising’:

Ethnically they belong to the same stock as the Adis, the Nishis, the Apatanis and the Hill Miris (all of them sometimes collectively referred to as the Tani group of communities) of the Siyang and Subansiri regions of Arunachal Pradesh and must have once lived in close proximity to these groups. This is borne out by the fact that there is a persistent and widely prevalent tradition among the Misings to the effect that they were once hill- men (Datta 1980: I)

Myths are considered to have been traditional stories that involve some supernatural elements and also speak of early history. Myths are believed to be “partly true and partly fictitious”. The origin of the word ‘myth’ is traced in the Greek word ‘muthos’ and Latin ‘mythicus’ – which basically mean fiction. In this context Cuddon says, “Nowadays a myth tends to signify a fiction, but a fiction which conveys a psychological truth.” (Cuddon 1977: 526)

There are many legends and myths about the migration of the Mising people – from the hills to the plains of Assam. In this connection Jawahar Jyoti Kuli said,

This tribe, that's the Mishings, has a rich folk literature which reflects their sentiments and feelings, social norms and values, historical events associated with their migration from the hills to plains as well as socio-political events experienced in their life. Their folk literature can be described under the broad headings (A) FOLKSONG and (B) FOLKTALE [sic] (1992: 2).

It is believed that the Mising people came to settle in Assam probably in the eleventh century. The migration of the Misings and the circumstances leading to that has been beautifully articulated in some of the folktales and folksongs. The Mising people address the folktales as "Leke Do: ying". 'Leke' means 'traditional' and 'Do: ying' means 'folktale'. There are folktales and folksongs that depict the myths related to the Mising people.

Folktales about the migration of the Misings from the hills to the plains are found in different versions. However, the folktale Yakko-Kobe's Heroic Story can be brought into discussion in this regard. This folktale is about two brothers- Yakko and Kobe. They lived peacefully with their families in their habitat in the mountains. Due to some reason(s) they entered into many quarrels with the Padams. The conflicts took the form of feud. To escape the drastic situation that might be created by the war, Yakko and Kobe built a boat and kept it safely ready beside the Siyang river.

Both the brothers had three wives in common. They dried and powdered chilies. On the day commenced Yakko, Kobe and their wives were ready with their weapons and one kept the fire burning to burn the chili powder on time.

When the Padams came to fight at Yakko-Kobe's place, their wives threw chili powder at their enemy. The Padams could not retaliate due to the effect of the chili powder on them. Taking advantage of the situation Yakko-Kobe killed their enemies. After the feud was over, Yakko-Kobe led their family in the boat through the Siyang river to the plains to ensure the family's safety.

Such folktales depicting the migration of the Mising people imply that in some distant past they came down to the plains and had inhabited the Brahmaputra valley since. Such folktales and folksongs about migration form a part of the popular beliefs of the people.

Some of the myths prevalent among the Misings have allusions to the Hindu myths found in the two epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, also the *Bhagabata*, the *Puranas*, and the *Vedas*. Such is due to the fact that, after migrating to the plains of Assam the Misings took up Hinduism. Myth about the conversion of the Mising people into Vaishnavism is also found in their folktales. The story that is popular among the Misings regarding their

conversion is that once on observing the *Nora-Loga* festival the young people could not find a pig with large teeth. When their efforts got exhausted, they prepared to sacrifice a barren she-pig. A god-like man arrived at the village and prohibited the killing of the pig. This man said that the villagers were adopting a wrong notion about the pig. He even predicted that the pig will bear piglets within six months.

In order to get a proof of the man's prediction they released the pig. To their surprise, the pig did bear two piglets after six months. The villagers came to believe that this man possessed more power than their "Deodhais" (priest). Assuming that the man had godly qualities the villagers showed great respect. Many of the Mising people were initiated into Vaishnavism by this man and from then on they have been following those preachings. Moreover, the mention of the term 'Miri'<sup>2</sup> by Srimanta Sankaredeva (1449-1568) in his writing shows the contact between the saint and the Misings. In this way many of the Mising people embraced the Vaishnava religion.

Mising folksongs are called Ni: tom. Ni: tom is of different types – religious songs are called *A: bang*, nursery rhymes are known as *Moman*, *Oi ni: tom* are the love songs in

Mising, lullabies are prevalent as *Ko: Ni Nam* and songs of lamentation are called *Kaban*. This shows that the Mising people sing different folksongs according to the occasion.

In the Mising community a 'Mibu' occupies a very reverent position. He is the priest or the means of communication between the gods and the human beings. Most of the *A: bang* are sung by the Mibus. Through the recitation of these songs the Mibus try to appease the gods to bless the people. There are many *A: bang* in which Do: nyi, Polo, Sedi, Melo and other gods are invoked. As folktales myths are also depicted through the Ni: tom, especially the *A: bang*. Prafulla Datta Goswami (1919-1994) says, "Some mibu a: bangs have creation myths and genealogical legends as their content." (1980: III)

Creation myths are also common among the Misings. *Keyum-Kero* is a folktale popular among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. A similar folktale is also present in Mising oral literature. This tale says that out of "emptiness" gradually evolved Sedi and Melo. Sedi is believed to have turned into the sky and Melo into the earth. Further, the Mising people believe that Sedi and Melo got united by the bond of marriage. It is from Sedi and Melo's union that the various other gods and human beings are born. Abutani and Abatarak are the children of Sedi and Melo. They in their turn, bore Robo and Nibo. Robo is considered to have become devilish and began living in Hell. The Mising people hold that Nibo raised human beings and Robo created the devils or ghosts.

Again, there is the myth dominant among the Mising people that the

souls of the ancestors sometimes get angry at the living. It is also believed that the children or even the adults of a household get sick when the ancestors are annoyed with them. In order to protect themselves from the wrath of the ancestors the Mising people make offerings. They sacrifice animals to appease the ancestors whenever someone falls ill in the family.

These beliefs of the Mising people have been transmitted orally that is, through folktales and folksongs. In the folktale *The Hungry Soul*, the myth of ancestor-worship is narrated. This folktale tells the story of a rich man who in his desire to get richer did not drink the milk of the buffaloes he owned. But disaster befell him when all of his buffaloes died one after another. And with this his desire to drink milk remained unfulfilled. When a priest heard the cooing of a dove –which was a transformation of the man’s soul – he wanted to know the reason behind its incessant cooing. At this the priest got the answer that the man sleeping under the tree has the wish to drink milk. The man woke up from his sleep after sometime. Then the priest asked the man about the things he wanted to eat. When the man expressed his desire to have chicken and milk, the priest fed the former to his heart’s content. This myth has taken the form of beliefs and is practiced as a custom among the Mising people. Moreover, there are festivals like Amrag and Urom Po: sum when fowls and pigs are sacrificed and food is offered out of the harvested crops to gratify the souls of the ancestors. Such practices of worshipping the ancestors are followed by many tribes in different parts of the world. In this reference we may quote:

The spirits of ancestors are usually regarded as still being members of the kin group, with personalities like those they possessed in life, retaining a keen interest in family affairs and a strong sense of responsibility for family welfare. If properly taken care of ceremonially, ancestral spirits may serve their descendants as protectors and as guides. If angered, usually by their descendant’s failure to live by the rules they have set, the punishing wrath of ancestral spirits can be terrible. They can disrupt their living kinsmen affairs, cause them serious accidents, make them sick, and even kill them. (Hammond 1971: 265)

As the Mising people were hills-men prior to their migration into the plains of Assam, they had the tradition of hunting animals. A mythical folktale about this hunting tradition carries a belief of the Misings. *Grandfather Ampolung* is a folktale that tells the story of a “great hunter”. Grandfather Ampolung is considered to be an ancestor of the Kuli clan of the Misings. He was a brave hunter who went for hunting even in the thick jungles.

One day, he went out to shoot a kind of bird that could be found at certain times of the day. He shot many birds. But a couple of spirits were watching him hunt and they thought of getting the birds from Grandfather Ampolung. As the spirits are believed to be able to change their forms, the

male spirit took some shape and tried to get the birds from Ampolung. However, the latter was strong enough to not let go. He tried to strike the spirit with his *dao* (a kind of weapon). Suddenly an idea came to Ampolung's mind. He seized the bag the male spirit was carrying – that contained all the power. Thus, the spirit became Ampolung's captive and then the wife of the spirit begged him to set her husband free. At this, Ampolung put forward the condition that they would never bother him again. The spirits promised that their race would neither disturb Ampolung nor anyone who uttered Ampolung's name. So,:

Till today, they have kept their promise and even now anyone going out alone at night or across lonely places will utter "Grandfather Ampolung". This keeps away all kinds of evil spirits and harmful beings. The belief continues till today. (Kuli 1992: 85)

The primary source of occupation of the Mising people is agriculture. They raise their crops and manage their living. Myths about the observance of festivals like Po: rag and Ali-aye-ligang are famous among the Misings. The sowing festival that is organised by the Mising people is called Ali-aye-ligang – 'ali' means 'seeds', 'ai' means 'fruits' and 'ligang' means 'sowing'. On the other hand, Po: rag is the harvesting festival that is celebrated very pompously by the entire Mising community. The celebration of these two festivals has become a tradition of the Misings. There are myths even about the reasons behind Po: rag and Ali-aye-ligang being the major festivals of the Misings.

Do: nyi and Polo are the chief goddess and god of the Mising people. On every occasion they pay their tributes to Do: nyi and Polo. Do: nyi is the sun, who is given the status of the Mother and Polo is the moon, who is the Father for the Misings. The Mising people believe that all other gods are the children of Do: nyi and Polo. Many folktales and folksongs are prevalent in

Mising oral literature about Do: nyi and Polo. There is the belief among the Misings that the invocation of Do: nyi and Polo brings them fortune. During Po: rag and Ali-aye-ligang, sacrifices are also made in the name of Do: nyi and Polo. The cultural relevance of Do: nyi and Polo lies in the fact that they are considered to be at the top of the hierarchy of gods and goddesses. Due to this it is believed by the Mising people that festivals like Ali-aye-ligang and Po:rag should be celebrated and offerings be made to them. By making sacrifices in the name of Do: nyi and Polo the Mising people pray for prosperity and happiness.

Myth(s) on how Po: rag came to be celebrated is also popular. As per the beliefs of the Mising people, when Abutani married Do: nyi's daughter, Yashi there was a scarcity of food on earth. To find a way out of this situation Abutani went to visit his mother-in-law with a cock. On his way he visited Ka: jeu (Lakshmi) and told her about the situation. Hearing from Abutani his plight, Ka: jeu gave him some seeds of crops and advised him to sow those. Ka: jeu said that if the seeds bore fruit, a festival has to be held in Her honour.



As directed, Abutani sowed the seeds and went back after five days. When he got to the fields, he saw that the grains have been eaten up by a dove. Disheartened Abutani began to cry. One of the gods, Seukari heard him crying and came out of the forest. He asked Abutani the reason behind his sobs and Abutani told him about the dove's doing. Then Seukari shot with his arrow at the dove's throat. When the grains came out of the dove's throat Abutani began sowing them again. In this way crops came to be raised. As a mark of respect to the words of Ka: jeu Ali-aye-ligang is being celebrated with great festivity.

Seukari, on the other hand, asked Abutani to organise a prayer and feast for the gods along with him by sacrificing one pig for each god after the harvest. Since then, to satisfy the gods, the Po: rag festival is celebrated among the Mising people.

Myths on the elements are also found in the folktales of the Misings. There is a myth about the thunder and lightning. The folktale that carries this myth tells of a man who had a daughter named Panoi and a son named Panbar. To help in the preparations of a marriage at their maternal uncle's house, they went a few days earlier. On their way they came across a pond. Without thinking about the depth of the pond Panoi rushed into the water. When Panbar saw her stretching her 'mekhela' (an Assamese dress, looks like a skirt/wrapper) and getting into the water he got attracted differently towards her. Somehow he forgot that Panoi was his sister.

After a few days, Panoi returned and could not find Panbar at home. At last their mother found him in the granary. When their mother asked what he wanted, he said that he would die out of hunger if he was not allowed to marry Panoi. Both their mother and father tried to make him change his mind. Hearing of this adamant desire of her brother Panoi went to the riverside and transformed herself into a bird and flew away. Then Panbar also followed her to the riverside and climbing a tree called the bird. But the bird did not pay any attention to his calls. At this Panbar too took the form of a bird and chased Panoi. Panoi then hid amidst the clouds and became lightning. On his turn, Panbar became thunder and kept on chasing her, growling in anger. But to his utter dismay, he has not been able to meet her. The Mising people believe that in this way lightning and thunder came into being.

The origin of the insects is also told in a folktale titled *Abu-Tunturung*. The tale tells of two young boys in a village. They were disliked by their stepmother. One day they went into the forest to collect leaves along with their parents. Somehow they got misdirected and got lost in the forest. They were calling their parents. But Abu-Tunturung responded to their call and asked them not to get frightened by his physical features. This monster, Abu-Tunturung said to the brothers that they could spend the night at his house. They too went to Abu-Tunturung's place.

At night one of the brothers woke up to hear the discussion between the monster and his wife about roasting the two brothers. Then the one, who heard the conversation between Abu-Tunturung and his wife, woke up the other and they escaped. When Abu-Tunturung came to know of their escape, he chased them. As they saw the monster chasing them, they applied many tricks to prevent him. On the way, when Abu-Tunturung was trying to cross a bridge, it broke down and he met his death. The bridge broke down because the boys requested a wood-pecker to weaken the bridge with its beak.

Out of grief Abu-Tunturung's wife gathered the remains of her husband turned, them into leeches, mosquitoes and scorpions to suck human blood. It is believed by the Mising people that the blood sucking insects came to exist from Abu-Tunturung's mortal remains.

### **Findings**

From the discussion of the myths of the Mising people it can be ascertained that those myths not just bear cultural significance to the community. The myths too have historical importance because in the face of not having a written history of the Mising community those remain substantial in delineating the past/history that the people. The myths of the Mising people to a great extent serve the purpose of history (though oral). Although myths do not provide factual history, yet when the culture of the Mising people is analysed the historical forbearance of those cannot be denied. Somehow the culture of the people has evolved and been transmitted through this fluid medium, that is myth.

### **Conclusion**

Besides the myths mentioned above, there are various other myths that has taken the form of popular beliefs among the Mising people. It has been observed that those beliefs have been practiced by the Mising people in the form of rituals and traditions till date. In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that as oral literature is transmitted verbally, there can be different versions of the folktales. To enhance the effect upon the listeners the story-teller may add his/her own imagination into the folktales and folksongs he/she inherited from the elders. Moreover, myths are created by the forefathers to ensure that the culture of the community does not get adulterated or endangered by the changes in time. This proposition can be justified by what Cuddon has said: "Classical writers had a 'ready-made mythology. Others have not been so fortunate and some have felt a great need to invent or somehow contrive a mythology which shall be the vehicle of their beliefs." (Cuddon 526) In order to assert their distinct cultural identity the Mising people too created certain myths that would keep their customs and traditions alive throughout generations. Thus, the Mising people have some archetypal myths and legends that depict their customs, traditions and beliefs that would be preserved for and by the generations to come.

### **Notes**

1. In the article "Mising, Mishing and Miching" Tabu Taid has said, "Our mother tongue, as it is spoken today, has only one sibilant sound, which is generally represented in English by the letter 's', not by 'sh': the sound represented by the letters 'sh' in English does not occur in our tongue.
2. In the *Bhagabata* the saint, Srimanta Sankardeva mentioned the term 'Miri'. The line that makes the mention is: Kirat Kachari Khasi Garo Miri Jawan kongka gowal. (Payeng 68)

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