

N. PEGU'S

The MIRIS



OR

THE MISHINGS OF THE
BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

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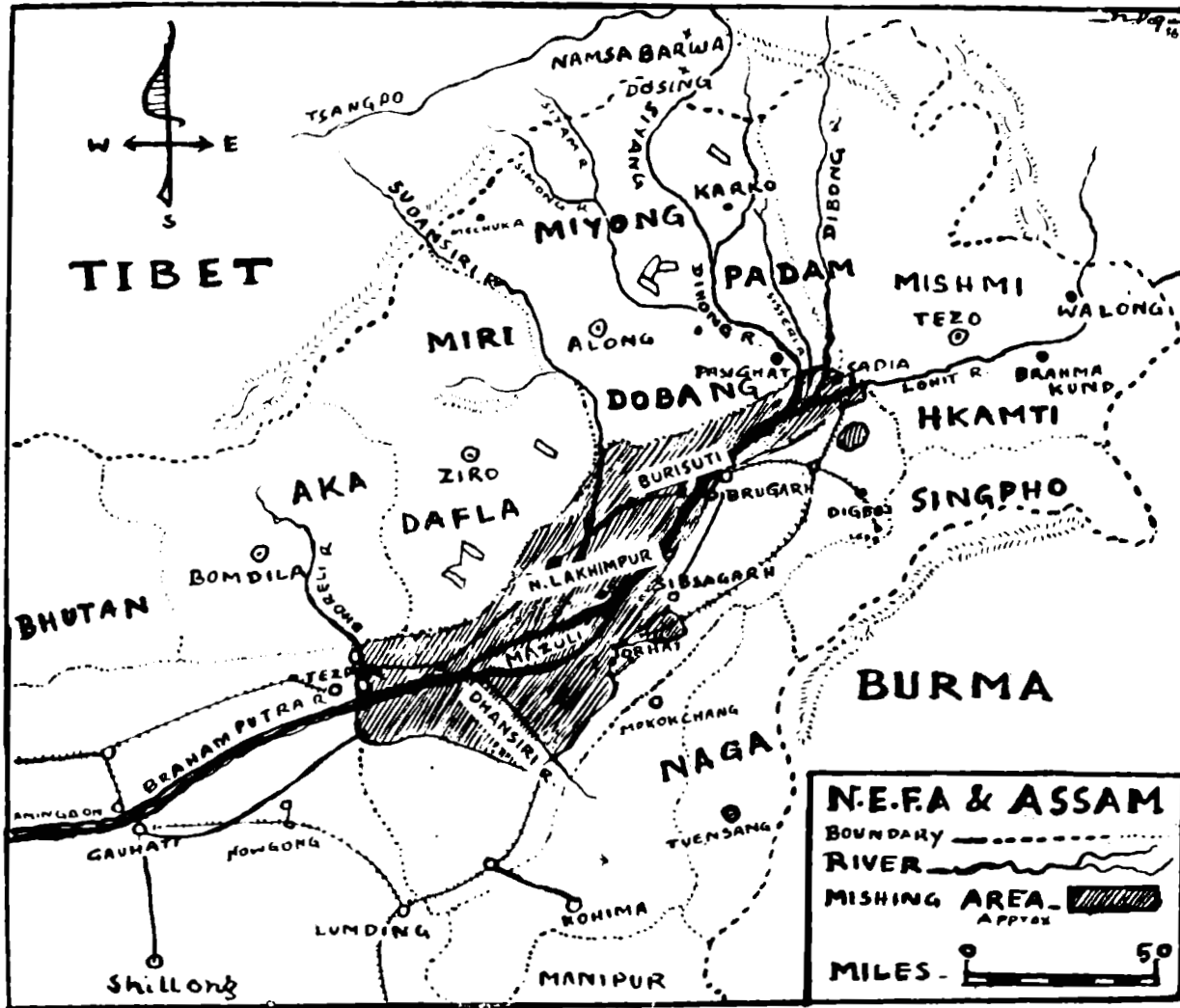
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THE MIRIS
OR
THE MISHINGS OF THE
BRAHMAPUTRA-VALLEY

Dr. NOMAL C. PEGU,
M. B., B. S.

Dedicated
to
MY PARENTS



Map showing the Miri area (shaded) and its adjoining hills inhabited by the Padams, Miyong, Dobang etc of N.E.F.A.

PREFACE

A few centuries back a nomadic section of a hill tribe armed with bow and poisoned arrow went out hunting and, after years of eventful journey they landed one day on the vast expanse of the Brahmaputra Valley. They could never find, perhaps a better home than this fertile green valley to thrive, which with its generous abundance provided them with all the necessities of life; and, thus their culture began to flourish under an organised new social order.

But after long years of sojourn in this plentiful land these tribal population who happened to be 'the Miris', acquired an air of complacency and took to excess of drinking and idle talks, for they were rewarded with rich harvest to their nominal labour. As an old saying goes—"a careless watch invites the vigilant foe"—they thus prepared a manured ground for poverty and disease to grow.

The rivers so dearly adored began to visit them with devastating floods and perennial erosion leaving behind epidemics of disease; and lack of proper irrigation and manure their vast paddy fields began to yield very little or no products at all. To the furtherance of this malady the alien ruler introduced among them, the use of opium and the number of the devotees of this fell-habit grew in leaps and bounds and thus within a very short period it rose to a strikingly high figure. (In spite of the popular belief of total eradication of opium from Assam since 1939 the number of addicts among the Miris is still very high).

It was not that some of them were not aware of these social evils that undermined their economic holding, but they were groping in the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance. By that time efforts were on sail to impart education via media of Assamese

language. But it proved often futile as Assamese itself regained just then its lost position and was gasping for fresh air. The Baptist missionaries who did a remarkable service of resuscitating Assamese language, attempted to bring the Miri-Abor language to light in Roman script. But refusal to accept Christianity as their faith turned them least enthusiastic about the move.

However, the Miri people gathered a certain momentum and were credited to a couple of graduates as far back the late twenties of this century. The memories of these pioneers namely late Charu Ch. Doley, B.A., and late Mohi Chandra Miri, B.Sc., are woven such into the hearts of the people that time cannot deface. And thus, late Sonaram Payang, inspite of his limitations, endeavoured to compile the controversial booklet, "Miri Jatir Buranji"—as far back as mid-thirties. "Kamala Miri, an illiterate member of the Miri tribe, gave his life in the prison" for joining '42 movement. But as their mass literacy movement has so long been rather retrogressive, they could add only 19 graduates till we go to Press, thus bringing the literacy percentage to 3.3 only).

The expansive influence of education kindled in them by this social renovation the long forgotten tribe began to feel the urgency of settling themselves permanently somewhere who, for sheer ignorance, lived a nomadic life for centuries in the banks and isles of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri. But their need, aggravated tenfolds by the last great Earthquake of 1950 (which brought for them untold miseries at the cost of 675 of their dear lives) is still bristling with many-sided irritants that cry out for a solution.

Then came Independence bringing new hopes to the downtrodden millions of India. Thanks to the unique Constitution of India that guarantees right to freedom and equality to all citizens. Further by its sixth schedule and directives to the States (Artl. 275) laudable provisions have been sanctioned for upliftment of the crores of Scheduled Tribes and other backwards people of India. But, inspite of all these the Miris (themselves being a member community of Scheduled Tribes) have not yet been able to improve their lots, at least, for no fault of their own alone.

Many voluminous books and exhaustive accounts on various tribes of India have been prepared with great pain and care. Unfortunately, I should say, not even a comprehensive reference has been made of the above Miris—hills or plains. Thus till these days of national renaissance, the life and history, joys and sorrows of the Miris have never been known beyond the land of their rumbling rivers and green paddy fields.

For this, and hundred and one more reasons the urgency of compiling an account of the Miris has keenly been felt for long. But money and materials did not offer us the opportunity earlier.

The following text is an honest attempt to meet the long felt want. To present an account of a tribe is no doubt a hard task ; harder still when a tribe less known but more fancied like the Miris is concerned. And I confess, there is nothing scholarly in it. To be sure, it is only a sign-post displayed in plain English pointing to the vast tract of Miri country full of sub-tropical jungles, numerous rivers and rumbling rivulets with slotheful serpents and some lakhs of primitive tribes to live in !

History is a subject for continual discourse. As opinions vary the legends recorded here are open to discussion. However, no pain has been spared to make it authentic and, at least technically agreeable. In spite of all these, much have been left to be desired not only in the context, but also in the physical contour of the book. And the 'printers'-devil' has at places put things bad to worse. I tender my apology to the readers at large for whom it is essentially intended. Further, suggestions and relevant informations concerning any point are cordially welcome herewith for future rectification.

In compiling this book I have consulted the works of various authors and placed few excerpts thereof for ready reference. Further I have been greatly helped by Sri J. C. Doley, M. C. Pegu, M.A. Ll.B., L. N. Doley, M.A., B.L., Dr. L. R. Pegu, L. K. Doley, B.A., Sri B. C. Borah, M.A., S. Sarmah and B. Bhattacharyya in various ways. I acknowledge my gratitude to them all.

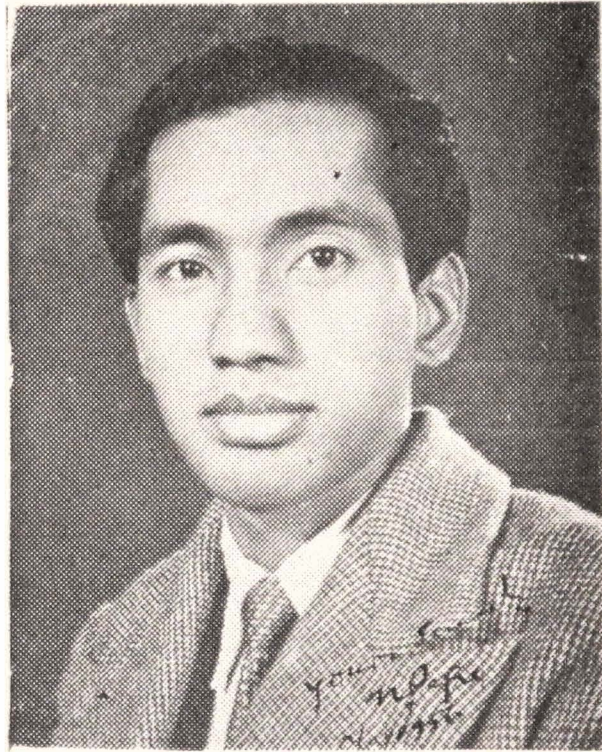
Above all I must thank Sri Dasiram Pegu of Majuli for his outstanding generosity who has taken up the responsibility of publishing this book at great cost, and the members of the 'Mishing Kristi-Kebang' for their kind approval of the context in toto, but for whom this book would have not seen light for many years to come.

In fine, I thank the Printer and Staff of the Tribune Press for being very co-operative in bringing out this book.

NOMAL C. PEGU.

Dibrugarh, Assam.

October, 1956.



THE AUTHOR



THE PUBLISHER
(Sri Dasiram Pegu)



Sri Mal Chandra Pegu, M.A.,L.I.B.
One of the two representative to
the State Assembly from the
Miri Community (1952-56).



Sri Bisnuram Medhi, Chief Minister of Assam, seen addressing an assembly of Miri people wearing Mishing 'Dumer' Galuk and Tongali.

(10-4-56 : Dewrightat)



A group of Miri youngmen and girls photographed with Shri Nehru—Prime Minister of India—while the former participated in the Republic Day celebration in Delhi—1954.

[With acknowledgement to Prof. Chitrakar, Delhi]

THE MIRIS

Or

The Mishings of the
Brahmaputra Valley

CHAPTER I.

“ATO TONGUNGE GUMIN BULLA
NOLU KO-LO DENGE YENGE KANE ?
AJO OMUM BULU CHILO DC-LO MIKSE
REZIN DUNKU !”**

Introductory

WHO are the Miris and where is the Miri Hills ? These questions often baffle many inquisitive minds in and outside Assam. To the people of Assam the Miris are a “docile tribal population” living somewhere in the Subansiri Tract who once produced a kind of cotton-rug called ‘Miri-Jim’ ; to outsiders they

** Oh forefathers ! Where are you now ? Your descendants are shedding tears in the wilderness to-day.

are a ferocious primitive tribe of the North East Frontier of India living beyond the land of the head-hunters. None is too wrong nor too exact ; they are a tribe who prefer interim to the extent that some British historian interpreted the term Miri tentatively as — ‘go between’.

In spite of these varied and fanciful thinkings the importance of studying the Miris and other cognate tribes living elsewhere in India and their primitive law and customs, has been felt in the spirit of the Indian Constitution, by many fore-sighted leaders of India to-day.

In fact, never a tribe singularly known as ‘Miri’ existed before. But to-day whether for a curse or a blessing, the word Miri has come to stay representing Constitutionally the Mishings — a tribal population of distinctive character living in the Brahmaputra Valley as a member community of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam.

But the history of the Miris is essentially the history of the Mishings, Miyong, Pasi-Padams and any other Hill Tribes, who profess the cult of Mirui, worship Donyi (Sun) Polo (Moon) as their principal deities and call themselves — Ami or Tani meaning ‘man’. And the vast tract of Hills and Plains lying to the north of this great Brahmaputra river, extending from the confluence of the Dihong and the Lohit river near Sadiya to the Bhoroli river — a few miles east of the Tezpur town, including the island of Majuli, intersected by rivers and rivulets, with considerable rainfall which causes semi-tropical vegetation to flourish, may be described as the Miri Country.

Efforts to bring their life and culture to light have never been attempted; their traditions remain unfolded. With the solitary exception of 'Miri-Jiori'—an Assamese novel by late Rojoni Kanta Bardoloi who with an air of gifted eloquence depicted few aspects of these "Little Known Neighbours", they are left to oblivion. But they have been, in their little way, striving hard for a life in the light of the day.

More often than not, the hilly tract of the Subansiri basin lying between the Aka-Dufla and the Abor Hills, has been found referred as 'Miri-Hills' and the tribal people living in the area as 'Hill-Miris'.* This context not infrequently leads to confusion and gives the immediate impression that the Mishings or so called 'Plain-Miris' are the direct descendents of these tribes and had come down to the green valley along the Subansiri river course. The area in question is inhabited mostly by the Gasi, Chareks, Panibotia, Tanbotia etc., who no doubt possess a good deal of affinities with the Mishings. But the Mishings or so-called Plain Miris exhibit a closer approximation to the Pasi-Miyongs and the Padams of the Siyang Frontier Division who claim to have definite superiority over the Gasis, Chareks etc. in mood and morale of tribal life.

Truely enough, the subsequent writings and the linguistic and cultural likeness exhibited by them, inspite of all the wears and tears of time and separation, offer an authentic evidence that Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley and tribal population of Abor

* (1) Himalayan Barbary—C. F. Haimen Dorf.

° (2) Hidden Land—Ursula Graham Bower.

Hills, the Pasi-Miyong and the Padams in particular, sprang from one original stock.

How and why the Mishings have got the name 'Miri' has hitherto been an open question. Doubtless that it was originated by the Plains people. As a matter of fact, most of the tribes have been known outside by a name unfamiliar to the tribes while they identify themselves with a name generally meaning "MAN" — *i.e.* Garo-Achik, Mikir-Arleng etc.

An article in Assamese "Miri Sobdor Parichay" (introduction to the word Miri) was published in the 'Dainik Osomiya'—an Assamese daily, on 7th December, 1947, and the same was broadcasted from the Assamese Section of the All-India Radio, Calcutta in the same year. The views expressed in different writings as regards the possible origin of the word Miri had been discussed thread-bare. The proposition that the word Miri is derived from the improper intonation of the word 'Mirui'—an ambiguous term denoting the socio-religious functions prevalent among the Pasi-Miyongs, the Padams, the Galongs of the Abor Hills, and the Mishings of the plains is generally agreed upon to be genuine.

The word 'Mirui' has never been properly pronounced by the foreigners. The sound represented here by 'ui' is difficult to describe. To follow the tune of Mr. J. D. Anderson it is "something like the 'U' in "ugh" or vulgar pronunciation of girl as 'gurl' or perhaps a still nearer approximation is the Englishmen's 'Er' when he pauses in making an after dinner speech". **

** S. Endle's "The Kacharis"—Appendix II.

The 'Mirui' with its different forms is generally led by the "Mirui-Aboo" or Miboo or Niboo. This 'Miboo', besides being the priest, acts as the chronicler of the above tribes. As time eventually rolled on they were bound to come in contact with the plains people of the Brahmaputra Valley who began to refer their abode as Miri Hills—the homeland of the 'Miruis'. This probably occurred earlier than six hundred years hence, as evidenced by the fact that Mahapurusha Sankardev and Madhavdev—two great Vaishnavite teachers and reformers of 15th century had referred to the word Miri in their devotional writings.*

The Miri Hills such referred by the Plains people, to be precise, covered the whole territory to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Upper Assam, roughly the area stretching from the gorge of the Subansiri river to the Dihong river in the east. Incidentally this Dihong river (Siyang to the Miris and Abors) is the continuation of the Tsangpo river of Tibet which enters the Indian Territory near Namcha Barwa Peak (24,445 ft.). The accompanying map and the writing on the Ward-Cawdor Expedition (1924-25) allow no room for any doubt, and clear away the misconceived speculation of linking up the Lohit which enters the plains at Parasuram Kund or Brahmakund 46 miles east of Sadiya, with the Tsangpo river of Tibet.

But on later date the Mishings—one of the inhabitants of the Miri Hills began to migrate down to the Brahmaputra Valley from an area upstream of the

* Hori Buli Tore, Miri, Asom, Kachari.

Dihong river. The Pasi-Miyong and the Padams did not migrate, but frequented with surprised attack in the Ahom border. Because of their obstinate nature, the people of the plain used to refer them as 'Abor' and their abode as Abor Hills. But the term Miri in its real sense lives through as a common denominator of the tribes living in the entire territory referred above the Mishings inclusive, even though they migrated down to the Plain.

It was the British people, in fact, who recorded with fairly good authority the existence of the 'Miri Hill' in the Subansiri basin in between the Dufla and Abor Hills. But then, their colonial grip on Assam was of late occurrence, control on Assam being handed over to them only in the Yandabu Treaty of 1826 A.D. Notwithstanding they had to admit later on that—"the Hill Miris inhabit the Subansiri Valley as far as the Plain. They must in no way be confounded with the Miris of the Plains of Assam who have in time past left hills and settled in the plains and have become a distinct community. **

CHAPTER II.

HISTORY : References.

Where was the original abode of the Mishings and when they migrated down the valley of Dihong river? History is silent on the question.

There can be no denying the fact that the Mishings alias Miris represented here belong in general to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid group — a multitude of people that followed the Austro-Asiatic Races to India. But in absence of anything that can be regarded as authentic, the origin of the Miris is still a matter of inferences and conjectures. Never a scientific approach has been attempted on the subject before, save occasional passing-mention in certain history and account of Assam.

Thus, it is not surprising when one fails to find the word Miri in the voluminous work of Sri R. M. Nath's "Background of Assamese Culture". However Sri Nagendra Nath Basu has noted that — "in spite of the differences that now exist among them, the Abors, the Dufilas and the Miris must have sprang from the same stock".** In a comprehensive account of the State of Assam published recently it has been put thus:

The Mongolian belonged in general to the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese group; the

** Social History of Kamrup.

Kacharis, the Ravas, the Meches, the Miris, the Lalungs, the Garos, the Nagas, the Kukis etc. are the members of the early Mongoloid group that migrated to this country. ***

These references and the general appearances of the Miris which show distinct approximation to the Mongoloid type of people *i.e.* "square set face, prominent cheek bone, scanty beard and moustache with almond shaped eye"—seem to point that they must have had their origin somewhere in the Tibet-Chinese border of North-East Frontier of India. But their migration to the Brahmaputra Valley has been presumed from sporadic references and traditions, to be an event of few centuries only, and much later than that of the BODO race who migrated to the north east border of Assam and Bengal in remote past** resulting ultimately in formation of the Kacharis, the Ravas, the Meches, the Dimashas, the Chutias etc. of to-day.

Ethnologically tracing far back, however, the Mishings or the Miris of the plain may be said to have had their original abode homologous to that of the Bodos ; but to be accurate, they are a nomadic section of the hill tribes having a homogeneous origin with the Pasi-Miyong and the Padams of Abor Hills who have come down to the Brahmaputra Valley not long ago. The sporadic records and the popular legends available at present point out that they actually set foot on the plain not too long before the British

*** The Red River and the Blue Hill—Hem Barua.

** "15th Century B.C."—R. M. Nath's "Background of Assamese Culture".

took over the control of Assam, most probably just prior to the disruption of Chutia rule at Sadiya. The Miris also had the bitter experiences of the Burmese oppression the last stroke of which broke the camel's back and has gone down to the history as 'Doomsday' of Assam.

Evidently, the Miris still enjoy the centuries-old mood and morale of the primitive tribal life though the influence of certain social behaviour of the plains has become unavoidable. But then, their primitive ways of living and thinking have proved a handicap on the path of their progress and as such, they have been lagging behind the other member of the Scheduled Tribes of the plains, particularly in economic and educational sphere. Therefore, it is imperative to note here that any approach — social or political being attempted for their upliftment, the psychology of this context would have to be borne in mind.

It would not be out of point to mention the expression shown in certain writing that the "Miris of plain had their origin in the Miri Hills situated in the foot of the Sonagiri Hills."** The formation and the existence of the Miri Hills have been discussed in the foregoing chapter. But the location of the Sonagiri Hills is more confusing and seems to be mythical. Late K. L. Barua referred from Deodhai Buranji that "Birapala alias Birbal who belonged to the line of Bhisimak, was a petty king ruling at Sonagiri."*** S. Endle writing on the origin of Chutias referred that

** Banhi Vol. 14. No. 5.

*** Early History of Kamrup.

“Biharos” (Virapala ?) who is said to have his home on Golden Hills (Suvarna-Giri) in the mountains to the north of modern Sadiya.*

If Sonagiri and Suvarnagiri are same and have analogous origin with Suvarnashri or Subansiri, it seems probable that the Sonagiri Hills was situated somewhere in the Subansiri Basin to which the popular lores of the Mishings hardly make any mention as their abode. Therefore this view on their probable origin seems paradoxical and poses itself a subject for further scrutiny.

HISTORY : Legendary.

“OMUMM AJO KALI BULLA !
 NOLU MELO KEMDANGEM GETOLANKA :
 NGO CHEDI - BABUKE PINAM - YOMNAM
 DOYINGKO KILEN DUNE !**

Needless to say, however, that the history of the Mishings is closely related to the Siyang valley and would never be complete without due attention being paid to the legends that grew around it. Late Sonaram Payang collected a good number of them and compiled in his “Miri Jatir Buranji” published two decades back. The legends wreathed into this volume though irrelevant at places have been critically visualised and

* The Kacharis—Appendix I.

** Oh, darlings of the soil ! Hear me with rapt attention. I will unfold today the history how Chedi-Babu created us.

attempts have been made to co-relate the events that occurred at times without a recorded date.

'Kiling-Kange'—one of the legends says, was the original abode of the Mishings from which they came down later on to Regi-Regam (? Riga) and spread downward since. On their way down, it is said, they were confronted with a rapid (Jili) with extremely steep banks on its either sides. Their efforts to cross the stream being failed, they began to worship the Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo)—their generators. Then one day, they found two huge creepers of golden yellow colour (Maying and Mankong) growing by the bank, which on cutting, abridged across the stream snugly. To these creepers they usually refer as two golden ladders by which their forefathers came down from Heaven (Kiling-Kange).

Chedi Babu (father Chedi) according to them, is the creator of all animate and inanimate. His predecessor "Pudolondo"—the divine one, emerged out of Infinity. (Tapapumang). Chedi Babu first created 'Melo-Nane' (mother Melo). It is said :

MI KAMANGAI MIMANG KAMANGAI ; DONYI KAMANGAI ; POLO KAMAGAI ; AMONGE KAMANGAI, ACHCHE KAMANGAI. **

But Chedi Babu and Melo-Nane created them all. Out of their conjugal effort Ditem (the earth) was born followed by Adi-Ditem (the mountain), Nei-Nengan (the trees with green leaves), Rukji-merang

**No man was there, no matter was there. Neither the sun was there, nor the moon was there. There was no soil, no water.

(the ants and insects), Peyi-Pettang (the birds with different feathers), and they gave them their respective sounds—(bikke gombugem buklen moto). At the same time they created the Sun (donyi), the Moon (polo), the wind (echar), the water (asi), the fire (emi), the wood (esing) and the like, and last of all they gave birth to 'Doying-Babu'—the Father of Knowledge who differentiated man and animal : gave language and culture to all men of this world.

Thus the Mishings who claim to have the line of Solar and Lunar dynasty sprang from Chedi's creation Diling. Diling was survived by Litung, Litung by Tuye, Tuye by Yepe and Yepe by Pedong. Pedong-Ane (mother Pedong) it is said, gave birth to Dopang, Domi, Doshing and many others. The son of Dopang was Padam and his offsprings had become the Padams to-day. The son of Domi was Miyong and his descendents have become the Miyongs. And so, Mishing, the son of Doshing, gave birth to the Mishings of to-day.** Needless to say that the present bulk of the Miri population is not exclusively constituted of the offsprings of Mishing nor they came down at the same period. At different times, people from different groups (of offsprings of Pedong-Ane) had migrated down the valley and formed the present Miri community of Assam.

** This legend narrating the origin of the Padams, the Mishings and the Miyongs from one stock, was strongly supported by late Apak Jamu—the head interpreter of Abor Hills during the British regime, and his opinion was published on the page of 'Lolad'. 1948 — author.

Moreover, it appears from the traditions current among certain families that some of the Miris must have sprang from the main trunk Pedong-Ane independently. For instance, the Pegu family claims to have originated directly from Pedong-Ane and recites their geneology, thus :—

Pedong Aneke Onam Kondar :

Kondarke Darkop, Darkopke Koppe :

Koppeke Pegu, Peguke Gutung :

Gutungke Tusik, Tusikke Matsik :—etc.***

Of course, it is a moot point and cannot be emphasised without anticipating scrutiny.

In remote past the offsprings of the Pedong-Ane spread up centrifugally to cover all the mountains right from the banks of Subansiri to the Dibong river in the east, the Padams occupying mostly the area between the Dihong and the Dibong river, the Pasi-Miyong dominating the area north of the Dihong and the east of the Dikari river, and the Dobang or Galongs in the rest of the area towards the Subansiri Valley. The progenies of Mishing occupied the area upstream of the Dihong river down and around the Dosing pass (see map) ; but soon they took adventurous journey down the Dihong valley. This downward trend was augmented by the constant conflicts that grew up amongst the tribes mainly for cultivable land, most of the hills in this area being rather rocky and steep for "Jhum" cultivation.

*** Pedong-Ane gave birth to Kondar, he was survived by Darkop, Darkop by Koppe, Koppe by Pegu, Pegu by Gutung, Gutung by Tusik, Tusik by Matsik and so on.

Reaching the plains the Mishings first pitched their camps on the northern bank of the Dihong river where it rushes to meet the Lohit-Brahmaputra from the east, which camps later came to be known as Doyit Pumi or 'land of the Doyits'. The word Doyit has its origin, it is believed, from the irksome term—'Doyit-Dokot' (unquenched in matters of food and land). But there are some Miris who believe that the word 'Doyit' had its origin from 'Doitya or Doityakul' a term used in the epic of the Mahabharata to denote a section of non-Aryan, and they take pride in claiming themselves to be the descendents of Rukma—brother of Rukmini and son of Bhismaka of Doitya dynasty.

During the days of internecine feud, it is said, a war broke out between the tribes living in the northern bank of the Dihong and those living in the southern bank as a result of the treacherous murder of one Matbang of the southerners. To avenge the northerner of their mischievous act, a powerful force of the southerners, led by a tribal chief of the Pegu family Gutung by name dashed across the river and overthrew the enemy completely. They were jubilant over the victory, and took to excess of drinking; but on their return journey the tribal chief was drowned in the midstream of the Dihong. To commemorate this tragic event, they began to call the Dihong as Siyang-abung (Siyang—drowned; Abung—river) which has been known by the name still.

On their way down the Siyang valley, it is said, they met a man (Ranu) at a place called "Kuklek Lalek" (Karko?). After a few tricky contest the Mishings, pleased with the ingenuity of the new find, proposed

the hand of marriageable daughter of Ranu to one of their eligible bachelor, and duly ceremonised with great enthusiasm. Since then they established a family-tie for days to come. A peculiar custom still prevalent, of putting the root-end of the wooden cross-beam in front-house east-ward by some allied groups of families and the just the reverse by few other allied groups, signifying the down-ward trend of the former and upwards trend of the latter, is said to be one of the conditions agreed upon on the Ranu episode. This custom being deep-rooted a Padam from Abor Hills can find out his next of kin without much difficulty by the mere position of the wooden cross-beam displayed in the front house.

At Doyit-Pumi, they came in close contact with the Chutias who had a kingdom around Sadiya. But later their kingdom was invaded by the Ahoms—a Shan tribe who founded a kingdom in Upper Assam under the able leadership of Sukapha as far back as 1228 A.D. The Chutias lost the battle to the overwhelming military power of the Ahoms; and “to escape the disgrace of falling into the hands of the enemies, Nityapal — the Chutia king with his principal queen Sadhoni imoleted themselves by jumping from the summit of Chandangiri Hills into the deep gorge below.”

During the days of the disruption of the Chutia kingdom, it is said, a few Chutia nobles with their families took shelter in the Mishing villages and displayed feigned identity as Mishing to escape the disgrace of being molested by the Ahoms. In course of time, they, knowing their hosts to be good-natured and their

own kits and kins being deposed of their ranks and placed all over Assam by the Ahoms to blot out the possibility of future uprising, offered the hands of their young daughters to the eligible bachelors of the Mishings on marriage.**

After the cessation of the Chutia rule, the area came under the administrative grasp of the Sadiya-Khowa-Gohain—a representative of the Ahom king of Sibsagar, who, it is said, after a few sporadic conflict, persuaded the Mishings to come to an agreement. According to that unwritten treaty the Mishings promised to help the Ahoms in resisting the other tribes who frequented with surprised night attacks on the Ahom border. To that effect 12 chiefs or 'Gam's were appointed from some big villages and 10 chiefs from other villages. The Gams thus appointed, it was promised in the treaty, would draw few hundred pieces of silver per annum from the Royal treasury. It was the Ahoms, it is emphasised, who propagated the word Miri and Abor in the plains and conveniently used the terms of Baro-Gam (of 12 chief) and Doh-Gam (of 10 chief) occasionally heard of the Miri society; but it has no implications as regards to social position whatsoever.

But it was found difficult, inspite of their combined effort, to subdue the Pasi-Miyong and the Padams who at times became the terror of the north

** Some families of the Miris still offer annual homage (jal-pinda) to some 'Chutia Mine'—Chutia grand mother and thus provide us with some evidence of this incident.—Author.

east border of Ahom kingdom, mainly due to the advantageous position they occupied in the inaccessible hilly tract. Disgusted with their obstinancy, the people of the plain began to call them as 'Abor' meaning 'Unsubmissive' and their abode as Abor Hills. These Abors—remained free and obstinate till the British expedition of 1911.*

The downward move of the Mishings, henceforth called—the 'Plain Miri' or Miris, from the Doyit Pumi, it is said, was initiated by the repugnant relation that grew between the Pasi-Miyong and the Miri. It was the Miris, who once secretly chiselled out some boats for the Padams to get across the turbulent current of the Siyang river and greatly contributed to the joyous victory over the Pasi-Miyongs in the war that had been lingering for years between the Padams and the Pasi-Miyong. Since then the Pasi-Miyong became offensive in their dealing with the Miris, and to avenge of their partiality they began to carry away the best of the clothes, utensils, eatables etc.—stealthily when the Miris were away at fields. Disgusted with these repulsive neighbours all the Miris of the Doyit Pumi one day set out on some big boats saying "neither we desire the kinship of the Pasi, nor we like the taste of the ginger and pepper." (Pasi Mitur Moge

* 'The murder of Mr. Williamson and Dr. Gregorson by the Miyong Abor in 1911, made necessary an expedition to the Dihong valley of Abor country on N.E. Frontier. A force of 25,000 and about 400 military police was employed from October, 1911, to April, 1912, in subduing the tribes. After two or three small actions the murderers were delivered up. The cost of the expedition was Rs. 21,60,000/- (India Year Book, 1928).

mang, Take-Mirsi Dogemang) and "until the front part of the boat (Kudum) breaks off we shall not stop sailing down the stream". So they did.

Bereaved at their sudden departure the Padams who were greatly benefited by their alliance accused the Pasi-Miyong of their misbehavior, and set out to bring them back. But all the Miris did not go back nor, returned to their original abode whoever did too. Instead, they began to dwell along the banks of the Brahmaputra from Saidya to the confluence of the Bhoroli river, and upto the foot of the hill along the course of the Subonsiri river. The present site of the Dibrugarh town was inhabited by a few Miri villages till the British built their fort by the bank of the Dibru river which eventually led to the formation of Dibrugarh Town. The presence of Miri Pothar near the Dibrugarh Town bears testimony of it to this day. Many a folk songs have been heard to have referred to the obnoxious feeling of the local people when the disruption and internal decay of the ruling power and free movement of the foreign intruders reached its zenith.

By this time the different clans namely Moying, Chayang, Oyan, Dambuk, Delu, Mirang, Tayu-Taye, who had come down in groups by different routes, began to occupy the banks of the Disang, the Dikhow, the Dhansiri, the Bhoroli, the Ranganodi, etc. and thus within a short period a major part of the districts of Darrang, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur in Upper Assam had come to be occupied by the Miris. The people of the other clans when came down, finding the Miris of the Doyit Pumi in close contact with the Chutia and

HISTORY

other Assamese people (Mipag), began to grin at them as "Pagro" (mixed with Mipag), taking themselves pure. Truly enough, these former clans have much of the original customs of the Mishings of the hills and the Delus (who are so called for they came down along the Delu river)* have distinguished themselves as the melody-makers of the exchanging OI-NITOM. Miri folk-song and the exponent of the rapturous Miri dance.

A few words are needed to clear off the speculation as regards the etymology of the word 'Chutia Miri' shown in certain writings. It is admitted that it has a certain bearing upon the social intercourse of the Chutias and the Miris; but no reliance should be placed on the proposition that they are the offsprings of the Chutia born of the Miri mothers who were captured during a war between the Miris and the Chutias. The patrilineal pattern of the Miris strictly follows the father's line disregarding their mothers' origin. (On the other hand any Miri woman having an alliance with a Mipang (Chutia or any foreigner) is liable to be expelled from the community, and if as a result of their alliance a child is born, the child is bound to follow the father's line bearing his title as a pointer to his exogenous origin. Therefore it seems more likely, should they have any ties of blood whatsoever, as the traditions referred to above lend strong support, that the Miris must have married some Chutia brides who took shelter during the disruption of the Chutia kingdom. Furthermore the legendary history of the Miris never tells of a war between the Miris and Chutias and nor any defeat thereof.

* Telu to Mishimis i.e. Lohit-Brahmaputra.

HISTORY : Random Assessments.

Many unwritten episodes are said to have had occurred during the dark days of Burmese atrocity when Death loomed around the Brahmaputra Valley. In all likelihood the Miris were then a newcomer to this fertile valley, fresh in body and mind with all awareness of encountering dangers from any corner.

One incident linked up with the formation of the name Murkong-Selek gives an interesting reading. A few Miri villages living in the north bank of the Brahmaputra fell victim to an imminent attack of the Burmese invaders (popularly known as Maan). Taking for granted that the strength of the Maan was overwhelming they resorted to play a trick and kept strict vigilance on their movement. They offered no resistance and allowed the enemy to enter the village parlour. All the able-bodied men and women armed with bow and arrow, went on ambush save some courageous women who pretended to be husking paddy at ease. Hardly the Burmese commander could think of ordering his followers to set out looting, thinking that the Miris were taken unaware, gushes of powdered pepper thrown out favourably with the strong wind. The powdered pepper entering into the unguarded eyes of the enemies caused irritation and profuse lacrimation which almost blinded their sights. The signal was given and the ambushed Miris rushed out and completely thwarted the Burmese. Two-third of the army were killed in the spot while a few met watery grave in trying to get across the Brahmaputra, and a few were enslaved.

It was found later, it is said, that the valuables that had been collected by the enemies from different

Assamese villages were lying scattered in the battle ground, and people used to come across many silver coins in later years. Thereafter the area had come to be known as Murkong Selek (Murkong-silver : Selek-field). This Murkong-Selek area where the Assam Saw and Timber Company was situated became the industrial centre in the far corner of the country, and the people from different corners of Assam working as engineers, muhurrers, or labourers found it really worth the name, the Miris in particular who have elephants to carry *hollock* wood for the company. (The company is now defunct since the earthquake of 1950 and has shifted its site to Namsai).

Another incident has been said to have occurred concurrently in some other villages where a pretty good number of the intruders were beheaded.

The Burmese invaders, it is said, were invited to a community feast arranged in a Murong and offered enough of the drink—Apong and meat as a sign of submission. The invaders overconfident of their strength accepted the drinks gladly and feasted themselves to their heart's content. But, when they were well under the influence of the Apong, the ambushed Miris reinforced by some Pasi-Miyongs of the hills embarked on a surprised attack and chopped off their heads exempting none.**

Exerting such tricky resistances effectively to the dreadful onslaught of the Burmese which “destroyed considerable bulk of the country’s population”, the Miris were able, on the other hand, to enlarge their

** There is still a strong belief current among the Miris that a sacrificial knife has been kept hidden by the Burmese to avenge the Miris when chance would be available.

meagre population to a great extent by a process of assimilation of the refugees that took shelter in their villages from different Assamese communities. These families eventually identified themselves with the joys and sorrows, sentiments and psychology of the Miris adopting appropriate titles with reasonable pride ; yet some of the titles like Changmai, Konwer, Buruk Chutia, Bihias etc. can be found elsewhere.

Besides, their population have been greatly increased' by the frequent arrival of the run aways usually of the families from Abor Hills and some "slaves" (Pagbo) who were sold to the rich Miris by their own tribe man of the hills. The trade of selling slaves was in full swing untill the British declared it illegal to sell or buy slave, and freed all the slaves that spent their life in bondage. All of these 'slave families' thus freed did not go back to their original home, but remained contented to live as close associates of the families whom they served for generations as their masters.

"The plain Miris have a distinct place in the Ahom history. Some of them held important military post as 'Miri Handique'—says Hem Barua of 'The Red River and Blue Hills'. To add another feather to their caps, the "Baruah Pegu" of Dibrugarh area may be pointed out. Besides, the Ahoms giving recognition to the proficiency in displaying the bow and arrow, recruited many Miris for their battalion of 'Karhis' or 'archers'. The Karhis played a magnificent part in the military operations of the Ahom kings. Some Miri families living down stream of the Brahmaputra who originally belong to the Pegu family, still bear the credit title of 'Karhi-Pegu'.

CHAPTER III.

MOOD AND MORALE.

Clans :

As a race the Mishings comprise of several distinct clans namely Pagro, Delu, Dambuk,, Moying, Oyan, Chayang, Tayu-Taye, Mirang, Samuguria and a few families of different hill tribes recently migrated down from the neighbouring hills of Subansiri Tract.

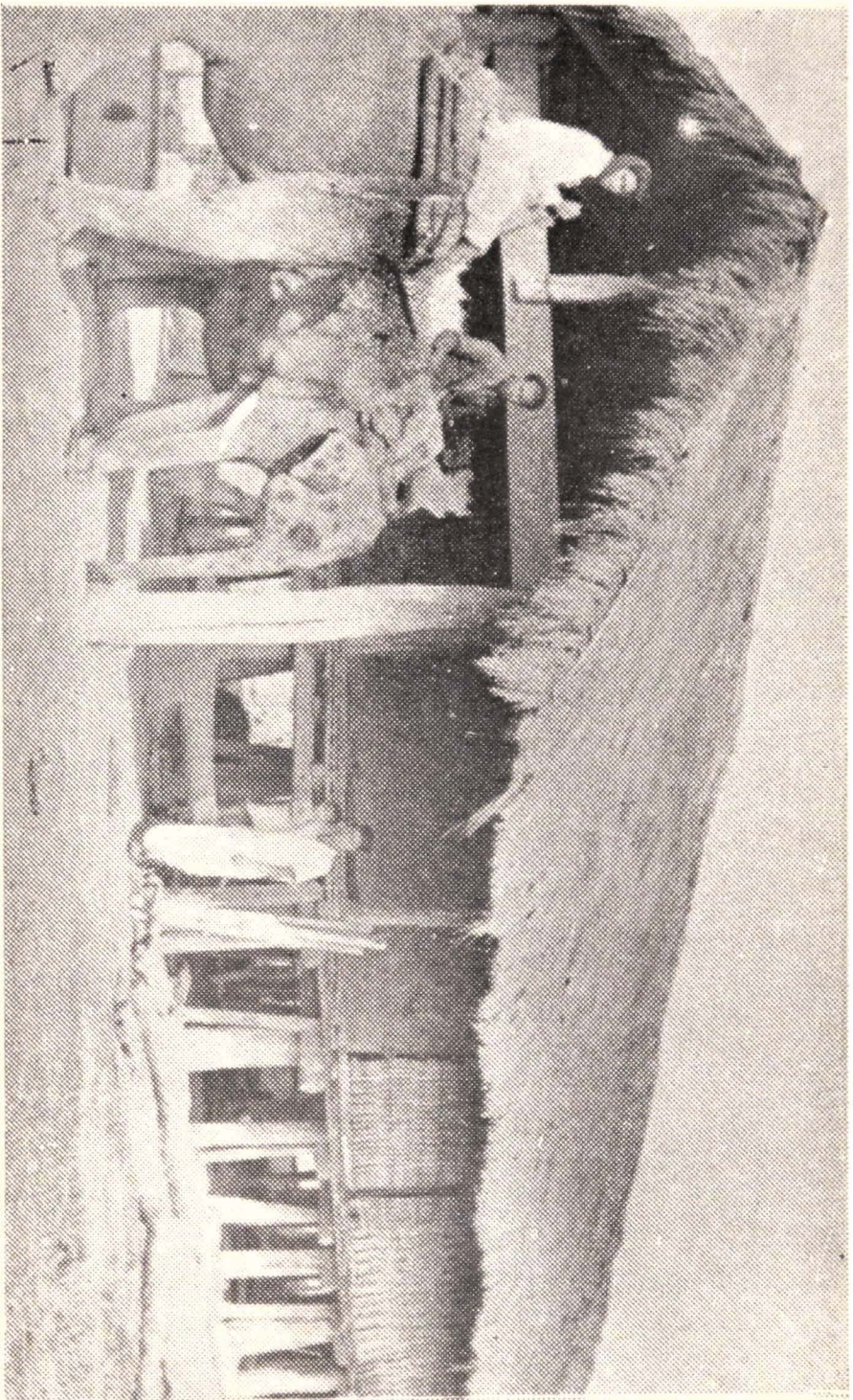
Each clan again consists of several sub-clans (Opin) more correctly, families of closest blood relation bearing identical surnames. These surnames cannot certainly be adopted as congenial nor are indicative of any service they hold as was adopted by other communities elsewhere, e.g., Choudhury (revenue collector), Phookan (commander); but they signify the lineage of particular clan.

Titles are inherited and they are many. Some of them are Mili, Kuli, Kardong, Patir, Kumbang, Kutum, Doley, Pertin, Permo, Pegu, Pait, Taye, Taid, Pame, Bori, Noroh, Chintey, Payeng, Panging, Darik, Payang, Basing, Regon. Saro, etc. Many of these titles such as Bori, Patir, Kumbang, Darik etc. are common among the Pasi-Padams of the Abor Hills.

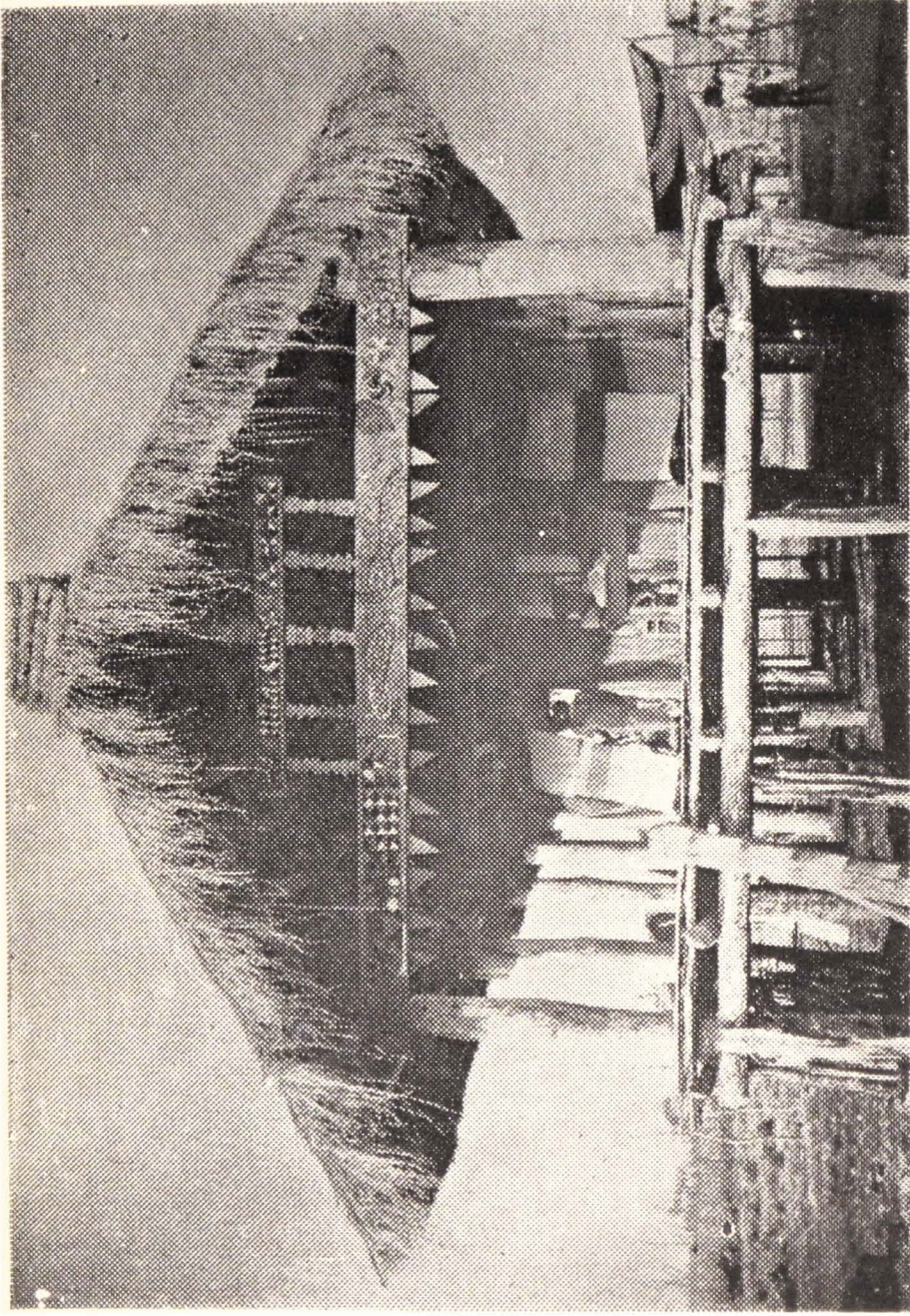
But unlike the Hindu caste system, they never indulge in caste distinction but adhere to their original maxim "all Miris are born equal" and so-

cial disparity never gained a ground in the Miri society.

The Miris of the plain number nearly 150,000 souls. Because of their peculiar liking, for easy water supply, or perhaps, for their life and culture being centered round the rivers since time immemorial, they prefer to reside by the banks of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Not unlike the Bodos the Miris seem to possess a clannish character; for though nothing has kept them off from living freely together, a particular clan prefers to live together in a village or locality exclusively of themselves. But of late their free movements have changed the feature altogether, and made any comprehensive description of the habitation clanwise difficult. Nevertheless, it may be roughly said that the Pagros occupy the most of northern bank of the Brahmaputra right from Sadiya to the Gamirighat in the down stream, including the island of Majuli plus some villages on the bank of the Subansiri and the Dhansiri river. The Moyings dwell mostly in the bank of the Bhoroli river in the Darrang district though many other villages have been seen in the banks of Ranganodi in the North Lakhimpur Sub-division. The banks of the Disang and the Dikhow river in the Sibsagar District are mostly occupied by Delus. The Chayang village have been widely distributed. Namsing Gadum by the bank of the Dibong river, Alimore in the confluence of the Subansiri and its tributary Ghunasuti of "Miri-Jiori" fame — are some of the Chayang villages. The 'Oyan gaon' near Pasighat town, Batua, Tapit in the Lakhimpur District can be named as some of the Oyan villages. The Mirang and the Samuguria, — which comprised of Chaburu-



Front view of a typical Miri House with elephants standing in the portico.



The Murong (front view)—a Public Hall where Po-rag and Kebang are held.

ganya, Tamarganya and Bihias live widely spread up and their villages are seen in the banks of the Dhan-siri, the Dikrong, the Ranganodi and some other areas of the Sibsagar District.

Dwelling :

To describe a typical Miri village (Dolung) it cannot be improved upon in first instance, what have been written of a Dewri village. "It consists of some thirty houses built on bamboo platform, raised about five feet above the ground. A single house will often contain a family of forty persons living in one great room without any compartment though with separate fire places with a varandah in front where guests are entertained."*

The fire place (Meram or Gulung) is looked upon with much reverence and besides cooking, certain offerings are also performed in the corners of the Meram. It forms a favourite seat in cold weather ; if one is fortunate, he finds some elderly people seated comfortably by the side of the Meram placidly telling his passionate listeners who gather round the fire place, the stories of remote past.

As a rule all families build their houses perpendicular to the river flow perhaps to provide all the families, rich or poor with equal comfort of living by the river side. The houses built on platforms (chang) though looked inelegant pay them a good dividend in the longrun, for their villages are subjected to the perennial floods which, inspite of its devastating affect

* The Kacharis.

at times accreditably provide them with a cleansing effect of their otherwise unhygienic habitations. The number and the length of their houses are variable; it is somewhat between 10 to 100 in number, and 50 ft. to 500 ft. in length respectively. Bhekelimukh and Jengrai-Pamua in Majuli and Alimore in the Subansiri area are some of the big villages which consist of more than 100 houses.

Thatch, split bamboo, cane and wooden post are used as the housing materials; thatch and bamboo grow abundantly in the alluvial banks of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri.

By far the most interesting is the fascimile of the housing of the Miris with the Dewris more than any other plain tribes of Assam, though the latter are said to have originated from the Chutias, the term Dewri being used to designate the Ministers of religion. However they speak a dialect not anyway similar to that of the Miris.

Cultivation :

The Miris are essentially agriculturists though they had to, at times under different circumstances, show their vigilance and supremacy in the warfront. But when the time was ripe for peace-living they soon cast off their age-old poisoned-arrow and nomadic habit and launched on 'Ahu' cultivation which occupies a significant place in their cultural life.

Though they have taken ploughing as the principal means of cultivation 'Jhuming' is far from extinct. The ingenious method of Jhumming is vividly described as thus :

“It consists in felling a piece of jungle and when it is completely dried setting fire to it. The ground is thus cleared and manured by the ashes at the same time. The timber which is not entirely burnt is dragged to the side of the plot and made a rough fencing to keep the deer out. The surface of the ‘Jhum’ is lightly hoed over and there is nothing to be done till the gathering clouds warn the cultivators that rain is about to break . . . and the whole family proceed slowly upwards dibbling shallow holes with their daos and dropping into each a few seeds.”**

Their farms are usually located beyond half a mile distance from the village compound gradually clearing up the jungles centrifugally. As theft and misdoings had been almost unknown in their villages they use to built their granaries near the farms enclosed in a fencing to keep the deer and the cattle out, and the farming implements are left at their respective places with least apprehension of being stolen away, to be worked with next day. Lately of course, they have come to realise that all the people of the plains are not what their simple souls have taken to be and they try to be more particular of their properties.

If the weather is favourable the farms promise them a good harvest and when their green treasury turns golden-yellow the farmers’ joy know no bounds. The paddy fields become the centre of activity once again ; the young boys and girls come to the fields before the day breaks to keep the birds and cattle away. Youngmen and girls in groups work hard with

** Lt. Colonel I. Shakespear’s “the Lushai-Kuki clans.”

gleeful enthusiasm and pleasant excitement humming all melody. It is a sight pleasing to be seen and heard.

Besides Ahu they cultivate mustard seed, sweet potatoes, pulse, cotton, maize, different species of aloes, bannanas, sugarcane etc. and now they have been adopted themselves to Sali paddy cultivation in such a way that most of the green paddy fields and golden yellow flowering fields of mustard seed by the banks of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri are proudly owned by them.

But their farm products are hardly placed in the market save the paddy, mustard seed and pluse, thousands of maunds of which use to feed numbers of rice and oil mills of the southern towns, which are purchased at a strickingly low price from the local agents to much deprivation of their real value.

Diet :

To them food generally means rice, and they live on rice, leafy vegetables, edible roots and fish which constitute their staple diet. Their great delicacies are fowl and pork to which Ngo-san (dried-fish) may be added. This Ngo-san is dried over the hearth of a fire-place on a bamboo shelves (Perap), and when fresh and properly prepared this Ngo-san far from being repulsive, emits an appetising odour and is much in demand for entertaining guests.

Flesh of mithuns (Oso) and rhinoceros (Chorok) is much prized but beef is scrupulously avoided. They are very generous in using pepper but spice usually

available in the market is sparingly added to their dishes.

It is worthwhile to mention that a few hill tribes of the Subansiri tract are very liberal in matter of food, and refuse almost none including beef and dogs. Because of their indiscriminating behaviour in matter of food, they are looked down upon to some extent by the Pasi-Miyong and Padams of the Abor Hills as well as the Miris of the plain, and they refuse to dine with them.

Like any other hill tribe of Assam the Miris have a great weakness for 'Apong' (rice-beer)—their national beverage. It has a peculiar mawkish smell and sweetish taste. This Miri Apong is of two varieties which differ slightly in taste, colour and method of preparation. The Nogin Apong—'the rice beer proper' is whitish in colour and fermented from pure boiled rice; but the Poro-Apong which is almost unknown to other tribes, has a dark green colour due to its alkaline preservative base added to the boiled rice. The 'Nogin-Apong' is much more valued and possesses a low percentage of alcohol but contains vitamins of much nutritive value.** The 'Poro-Apong' is not supposed to contain much of the above nutritive ingredi-

** Dr. B. S. Guha, Director of Anthropology, Govt. of India gives us the following datas on Nogin-Apong.

"We have analysed many samples of their fermented drink 'Apong' and found that its alcoholic content does not exceed 4%, but its nutritive value mostly in vitamins is of highest importance. It supplies 10% calories, 5.5% of protein, 5.3% of calcium, 11% phosphorus, 29% of iron and 8% of niacin. (Assam Tribune, 15th August, 1954).

ents, but it has a definite advantage over the other for it can be preserved weeks longer. Such, Apong is quite harmless when taken in moderation, and except on certain occasion when large quantities are prepared and taken, they seldom get drunk. This is a big thing to offer their guests and refusal at times was considered as an act of negligence.

Most of the Miris possess elephants and herd of cattle ; almost every house breeds fowl ; pigs at different stages of growth are seen in any Miri village. But it is interesting to note that inspite of this abundance they, save on occassions, sparingly used milk, egg, and mustard oil as food-stuff. Of course, the use of these substantial food has been coming up and the women-folk have been learning the different method of preparing delicious dishes out of them for their sons and husbands ; but majority of the women-folk still dislike the idea of its consumption.

Social Holidays and Festivals :

Hunting (Apta-ginam) and fishing (Ongo-niknam) are two good holidays for the Miris, and different species of fish, deer, wild pig etc. are good addition to their daily meal. The liberal consumption of such protein-diet might be greatly accounted for their magnificent physique well fitted to bear up the physical hardship called for their livelihood. Apart from occasional shooting and trapings, regular hunting parties are organised during the summer season when the water level goes above the brim and the unfortunate deer and wild pigs are bound to take shelter in some high land or ant-hills. Some twenty small light boats with 2—3

smart persons in each, enclose a considerable extent of jungle in which good number of the victims used to be present. The flesh of deer or wild pigs killed in such operation are usually distributed (Tarong-Enam) among all the families in the village. Fire-arms is a recent addition to their hunting implements, but when the flood level goes higher, they reap a better harvest without it.**

When the villagers sustain a considerable loss from tigers hunting parties are organised, and the parties work steadily by beating drums incessantly (Kiruk-ruknam) towards the appointed corner, to which the victim is supposed to find an easy passage. Several selected men with fire-arms keep a keen eye-watch with the hope of bringing the victim's life to an end. And if they succeed they usually observe a general holiday in the following day.

Fish-catching is much more popular and more frequently expediated in the winter season. This operation is generally planned a week in advance, and is much the same that of the Kacharis. But the Miri women-folk unlike the Kacharis seldom used Zakoi; instead, they prefer Zurki (polo) and Chaloni. Moreover, the Miri women effectively employ a free-hand-method when the water is shallow, in which they try to grasp the fish in the water blind-folded. Though it seems very clumsy and unreliable, their hands trained to its use from early childhood, bring out very good

** It was my pleasant oppotune to find that in one operation some 25 victims were killed with spears alone in a village in Majuli. The flood level was high of course.—Author.

result. S. Endle speaks highly of the scenic beauty of fishing operation in his characteristic language.*

Besides the Zurki and Chaloni, several other fishing instruments are used by the men-folk in different season. "Dirdang" and "Porang"—two fishing implements made of strong split bamboo are commonly used during the onset of the monsoon in small streams. Ei-Jamborok—a cross-bow device, the arrow having five smaller spear-heads attached to the main made of light bamboo or khagri (a kind of reed) is an useful addition to their fishing implements. The "Di-bung" is another device usually meant for the experts. It is made of a long bamboo, measuring 15-20 ft. with a pointed metallic spear-head. It has often been seen how a sportive Miri placidly playing with his Di-bung paddling slowly a tiny boat sometime on a late summer day, displays the human endurance and perseverance for his food and taste ! Lately, other fishing implements available in the market such as 'Borosi' 'Jaal' (Eisap) have been added to their means of fish-catching.

Ali-ligang and Po-rag :

Apart from the aforesaid holidays, the festivals of the Miris are many, most important of them are Ali-ligang and Po-rag. The onset of the monsoon is marked by the universal celebration of Aliyai-ligang

* The whole scene is a very merry one accompanies with much laughter and pleasing excitement ; and more particularly as the two parties of the fish catchers approach each other and the fish make frantic efforts to escape their doom, the fun become fast and furious — 'The Kacharis'.



A group of Miri youngmen and girls attired colourfully for their ceremonial dance-sequence 'Pakso-monam'.



Miri girls dancing to the rhythmic music of 'Dhool'—an indigenous Assamese musical tool.

or Ali-ligang — a spring dance festival of cultural significance and national importance. This virile tribe since time immemorial has been taken to agriculture and the Ahu paddy being the main product of their cultivation, the day of implanting the first handful of Ahu seed on the manured soil of Mother Earth, has been celebrated with due enthusiasm and merry-making. If winter is just round the corner they know that the monsoon cannot be far behind and they keep themselves ready for the occasions that would follow. They clear off the jungles for Jhumming, manure the last year's plot, erect new fencing or construct new Tongi (watch-house for looking after the farms). Nothing more to be done till the auspicious day of Aliyai-ligang comes.

On the eve of the Ali-ligang, the whole community is infested with pleasant excitement and solemnly apprehend as if Mother Earth were going to deliver 'life' to live with. They collect all the necessities for the following days. The Wednesday of the month of Falgun of Indian calender, (an adaption after coming in closer contact with the Aryan influence of late) is taken to be the auspicious day for the celebration. The day breaks off with humming of solemn pledge and brisk preparation of food and drink. After noon-tide the heads of the families implant a handful of Ahu-seed on their respective fields chanting some prayers for plentitude return with the pledge that much would be dedicated to the cause of the Master.

Instituting another prayer, offering few drops of Apong in the four corners of the Meram (fire-place) they then feast themselves with the food and drink. Purang-apin (packed boiled rice) and Apong are free-

ly taken and villagers are invited to join the feast. The whole village goes festive ; their merry-making run riots. Young and old irrespective of sex and social position join in a community dance known as Pakso-monam highlighted by the rythmic beating of the drums and the graceful movements of the hands and feet imitating the movements of the green leaves of the Ahu paddy at different stage of growth, moving in a circle to depict the eternal repetition of the different seasons. This dance sequence is performed, it is believed to appease the Divine-power (Nature) who is held responsible for the well-being of their life-giving green treasury. Young boys and girls collect themselves, go door to door asking Purang to be kept stored for the following days. They observe generally five days' holiday following the Ali-ligang abstaining themselves from all sort of works. This spring festival of dance and drink has long been relieved of its religious colour and given a cultural value of high order.*

Having such a ceremonial start they prepare mentally and physically for the hazardous days of the monsoon. Aply tiding over the days of feverish expectations they look ahead for the harvest to come. The closing of the harvest is marked by another celebration called Po-rag-a festival of feast and it is executed with more elaborate programme of feast, prayers and funster.

The Mimbir-Yame—an organisation of the young adults, bear all the drudgery of making the festival a

* Govt. of Assam has kindly declared a local holiday for enabling the Miris to celebrate the Ali-ligang.

success. The Murong is newly erected each time for the purpose where, besides Po-rag, all other public gathering such as Kebang are held. It would not be out of point to mention that the word 'Murong' which has been by now widely used to denote the dormitory so commonly seen among the tribal population, is originally a Miri word for the public hall referred above which served the same purpose accredited to other tribes not long ago.

The Murong having a bamboo platform of 5/6 feet high above the ground but without walls round it, is built in a centrally placed open meadow with its long axis parallel to the river flow. The posts and the beams are decorated with wood-carving of primitive designs. Since the closure of their harvest the Mimbiryame busy themselves with brisk preparation of food and drinks. A Miboo is appointed for leading the prayers and invitation is extended to other Mimbiryame of the neighbouring villages (Minom-goknam). The function starts with some offerings dedicated to the Creator—Chedi-Melo, and Donyi (sun), Polo (moon) etc. with Poro-Apong procured by allowing water to drip through a meticulously prepared bamboo-cage (Pobor) full of the fermented materials. 4/5 pigs without a blemish and brought up specially for the occasion are sacrificed, and the days follow with prayers, feast and funster and the nights with 'Prayer-dance' (Nitom-sumnam) led by the Miboo, dancing round in hops tightened to each other by clothe, singing :

REMIO REMIA, REMIKAKI REMIA,

PEKAMAI KAMDANGAI KOLOPI, KOLOPI

KAMDANGAI TO LITUNGAI, KOLOPI, ERR ROI OI OI ETC.

The whole village goes festive once again; Colourfully costumed with best of the clothes Egge, Garo, Ribi, Gaseng, Yambo etc. with ornaments like Dokne, Tadok, Aien, Doksiri etc. the women-folk easily dominate the scene. The drums are beaten as if never to be ceased. Dances in different graces capture the keen interest of the on-lookers. After three days of mirthful moments the celebration comes to an end with the concluding series of Prayer-dance known as 'Ponu-nunam' !

“KURYABATI KURYA ;
MAMO PONU NUNGKA KUJE, KURYABATI
KURYA.” ETC.

Of late, there have been lots of variation in the mood of execution and some do not call a Miboo to lead the prayers, but go through the traditional ways of prayers themselves with much more of the feast and fun.

Social Structure :

The Miris have a democratic social structure in common with their next of kin the Abors i.e. Pasi-Miyong, and Padam. The Kebang (Panchayet) consisting of village elders, is supreme in all matters within a village, and complaints regarding anything—social or religious are brought to the notice of it which delivers judgments and punishes the offenders. Punishments depending upon the nature of offence range from imposition of fine in money or kind i.e. Apong, to bodily thrashing, including ex-communic-

tion. Adultery or any such immoral act was dealt with utmost severity i.e. throwing the couple concerned to the running stream from hillock enclosed in a bamboo cage—'Dirdang' ! If controversy arises between two villages, the matter is brought to the notice of the bigger Kebang or Bane-Kebang where members of several villages assemble and take part in the settlement. The Gam or of late the Gaon-burrah, as a rule, act as the chairman, but the final judgement is always delivered by a jury or several selected elderly men. The women-folk are debarred from attending 'Kebang' save on business, i.e. as complainant, accused or as witness, though the position of the wives and mothers in the society is far from being degraded one. The Kebang is held in the Murong (Mushup to the Abors)—a public hall erected almost in all villages.

In earlier days it is said, the adolescent and the unmarried young men used to sleep in the Murong and kept the village guarded. It was the institution where training in social and other duties were given. Some authors think it to be the relic of the hunting stage of human evolution. But these traditions have passed away long since.

Besides Kebang there are few other organisations. 'Mimbir-Yame' literary meaning 'young woman and man' is a body of the members of the younger age-group. Unmarried girls and boys above the age of 12-13 years become the active members of the body, and have their part to play. Discipline and tribal etiquette are taught here, and the discipline is maintained by some specially elected officers. The Chairman or the 'Bora' requires

a "happy and living parenthood" as an essential qualification besides being able and handsome himself. This 'Mimbir-Yame' renders help to any villager in need i.e. erecting house, weeding paddy etc. in exchange of nominal remuneration. By the money or kind such collected, they celebrate the Po-rag festival after the ingathering of their harvest. The Murong is newly erected and decorated for the occasion.

Rikbo-ginam and Daglik-alik are some of their co-operative activities organised by a family in need for a day's work, and the family such helped entertains them with light refreshment which invariably includes Apong.

But it is painful to say today that after coming in contact with the so-called civilised society, much of these down-to-earth social system have been fast disappearing and almost forgotten by some, and the deterioration of character sometimes leads to many a sad illustrations.

Marriage :

The Miris are, as a rule, endogamous with regards to clan ; for though the members of the different clans i.e. Delu, Pagro, Moying, Chayang etc. eat and drink freely together, intermarriage among them is taken to be a luxury. Of course, since the advent of education and closer social contact, such attitude has been fast loosing ground. On the contrary, they are strictly exogamous with regards to sub-clan. Such marriage within a sub-clan, i.e. families of identical surname, cannot be made effective even if "the sun rises in the west". This motto postulated in remote past is

scrupulously followed till today. Moreover marriage within an allied group of families—(they may bear different surnames — Pegu, Patir, Pait, Lagachu etc.) is not permitted, but little deviation of this tradition is not dealt with the same severity.

Miri marriage law is a very selective one ; and flirting or making any suggestive joke is strictly limited to the members of the marriageable families (which are fixed) and it is one's first duty to identify her sub-clan at their first meeting. But they allow marriage between cross-cousins (father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter). According to their patrilineal system, once a girl is married, she belongs to her husband's family, and the children born of their marriage, in all cases, bear their father's surname. For an instance, if a Pegu girl is married to a Doley boy she becomes a part and parcel of the Doley family (unless divorced or otherwise) and the daughter born of their conjugal life is Doley by all means as such there cannot be any objection to her marrying a cross-cousin of the marriageable Pegu family.

They are, as a rule, monogamous ; but having more than one wife is not treated as a breach of social law provided he can afford to maintain such a big family. Men having four wives have come to our knowledge, and it is told of some Gams having as many as 8 wives not long before. In such cases, however, only the first wife enjoys the luxury of a formal wedding (Midang) and naturally occupies a favourable position among her fellow-sisters. But to become one's second wife or to become an object of psycholo-

gical subordination is usually accounted as a misfortune of the Miri woman community.

The Miri marriage is an expensive affair. It is usually planned and arranged by the parents. Though they seem at present to profess Hinduism, a Brahmin is never called for solemnisation of their marriage. Instead, a pig which need to be without blemish is sacrificed (Makho-Basak), and the bride and the bridegroom are allowed to dine in the same dish surrounded by 2 base-women and base-men. Finally the couple bow down before an assembly of elderly men and women who pray for their happy conjugal life. Drummers especially appointed for the occasion accompany them throughout, and they beat the drum in ceremonial-ways. Specially invited guests, usually 100—200 in number, are entertained with Apong and 'Ngosan' and they return presents according to their abilities. But young boys and girls from neighbouring villages, disregard of formal invitation, throng to witness the nuptial ceremony, join in the merry-making, and at occasions volunteer to help the parties concerned. Perhaps, it is an expression of their fellow-feeling and reflection of their free and frank minds—so universal among the tribal population. In earlier days a mythun or its equivalent of Rs. 100/- or so was charged as bride-price (Alig) payable to bride's parents, but lately the amount has come to much variation and some have totally abolished the custom.

The other form of marriage that is in vogue among them can be described as 'Gandharba-vivaha' (Dugla-Lanam) where, the young people concerned

take the initiative move. Young men and girls working together in the fields, and dancing their ways in the Porag and Aliligang—find an easy way for their childhood love to flourish, and if lucky enough their parents arrange for their final engagement. But if one of the parties disapproves the idea of their alliance or express inability to bear the expense of a formal wedding, the boy by help of his friends, takes away the girl on an appointed time and the bride is received in a little ceremony. The girl's parent is immediately informed and the matter is settled in a gathering known as 'Orai-Binam'. In such cases a higher bride-price is usually demanded though the total expenditure incurred in this system is usually less than in a Midang, and seems to be favoured by a considerable bulk of the population. Infant betrothal is known to be prevalent but marriageable age is taken to be 18-25 for boys and 15-20 for girls. Polyandry is quite unknown though divorce and widow-marriage can be made effective if they so desire. The widow can carry the younger brother of the deceased, but the elder one is taken in the light of her father, and the principle holds good in case of a widower also.

Character :

Perhaps they do not possess the sharp acumen of a Hindu-Brahmin, nor they show the stubbornness of the Pasi-Miyongs of the Abor Hills, yet they are adaptable to anything that circumstances demand. And apparently in mental and intellectual power, they appear below the other educated brethren of the plain, that is due to illiteracy in good majority of cases. But,

the distinguished traits of character are their simplicity, straightforwardness, and what can be ascribed as 'firmness' on their decision. Once they resolve to do anything, they stick to it with much tenacity. Late Rojoni Kanta Bordoloi commented that the "Miri might resolve round the universe only to come back in the end where they started first". Lately, there is a general tendency to be reasonable and amenable to the influences of civilization. But they still remain a subject of most controversial remarks as 'docile' and 'unruly'. It is often heard being said :

"TIRI MIRI BHATOU KOWA,
EI TINI CHARIR ASOY NUPUWA."

(Woman, Miri, parrot and crow can never be taken too easily).

This obnoxious proverb appears quite paradoxical to the simple nature of their souls. Whether treachery, bitterness or simple euphony necessitated its formation, no body has ever cared to look back. It is quite likely when the prophecy of a 'Mirui' is concerned, but nothing would be more injurious to take the entire community into its words. With least prejudice it is pleasing to be able to say that they are scrupulously frank to their friends. Of course, they have a power of quick comprehension at the time of adversity and can rise to any occasion when hostile opponents are dealt with. Another proverb is current among the Assamese people which goes a long way illustrate the trait of their character.

MIRIT MIL, DAAT SIL.

(Have friendliness with Miri and have stone for Dao).

Majority of them cannot read and write, but they claim to have potentiality. Perhaps this potentiality was advantageously exploited by the Ahoms and the British by employing them as interpreter (Kotoki), Gam, etc. and kept their diplomatic relation with the neighbouring hill tribes unfailing ; and perhaps their proficiency in buffering the hostilities of the hill tribes on the border area tempted Sir E. A. Gait to conclude that Miri means "go between."*

Though they are very particular in allowing a foreigner to enter their 'Chang-ghor' they take pride in entertaining as many guests as possible ; their free and frank minds are reflected upon the cups of 'Apong' and the delightful laugh which they offer to their guests readily. At first sight they seem a sullen and unsocial tribes living in the midst of the dense jungles intersected by rivers and rivulets ; but, one who tries to know them intimately, laughs and dances with them, and ends in liking them.

* History of Assam.

CHAPTER IV.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE.

Dialect :

It has been pointed out else where that the improper intonation of the word Mirui lead to the formation of 'Miri' some six hundred years back. The Miboo, the abbreviated form of 'Mirui Aboo' was the exclusive custodian of the Mirui, with the different facets of deliverance i.e. Ait-Mirui, Eitor-Mirui, Choman Mirui etc: These Miruis, after long years of separation, underwent certain transformation and had become the Miboo-Dagnam, Nitom-Sumnam, Oi-Nitom etc. of the plain Miris; but the basis of the Miruis remained essentially the same. The Mirui-Lunam or Miboo-Abang (elegies) used by the Miboo tell us the history of the Miris, and the geneology of the different clans.

The language of the Miris and Abors is identical pointing to the unanimity of their being of homogeneous origin. The Miri-Abor dialect belongs in general to the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese group, and is understood to a considerable extent by many other tribes of the Sub-Himalayan ranges of N.E.F.A. Their language has the characteristic of having two special vowels (E as in Kebang, UI in Mirui) addition of which gives a peculiar sound, a tongue-twister for any foreigner.

The Miri-Abor language does not show any tangible likeness to that of the Dewris, though most peo-

ple are prone to believe theirs as the typical of Tibeto-Burman group of Languages.

The Miri-Abors have no alphabet of their own. A story is told on their lost alphabet. Doying-Babu—'the father of knowledge', it is said, gave the progenies of Pedong the alphabets written on a deer-skin as he did unto other. The Kebang, who were much concerned about the security of the alphabets, decided, after long discussion, to divide and consume it so that no thief or enemy could do any harm to their alphabet. They kept their word, but found later themselves to be simpletons by doing what they thought to be most sensible. Now they repent mournfully of their past, saying :

CHEDI BABUKE MENYI NAMDE

MELO DEZUDE YUTGEMANG.

(The will of ChediBabu, good or bad, never goes in vain).

Since then their history has come down mouth to mouth, from generation to generation in forms of Doying (legends), Miboo-Abang (elegies) Oi-Nitom (folk songs) etc. perhaps, in absence of any written document to tell the history of their remote past.

The Christian Missonaries made a sensible effort to bring the Miri-Abor language to book in Roman script as much as they translated the Bible, prepared Padam-Abor Primer and compiled a grammer on that. But the refusal to accept Christianity as their faith, turned the Missonaries less enthusiastic about the move.*

*Just prior to the present administrative setup of N.E.F.A., another futile efforts were attempted to develop the language in Assamese script. Introduction of Hindi script is being reported of late in the Abor Hills area.

The Miris, as they advanced and came closer to the Assamese people, were bound to be influenced by the social climate of the plain, and influx of a few local words was inevitable. The language spoken in the plain has thus become florid, pronunciation somewhat elongated with much of local modulation. But the language spoken in the hills is rather sonorous but very impressive.

The Miboos referred above are thought to be gifted individuals with different sanctitic refuge who develop a quality of rare eloquence and power of observation since their childhood. It is believed that they attain a state of spiritual-embodiment (Paro-Anam), and when called for diagnosis and treatment of the sick, they narrate the suffering of the sick before the Creator and fore-fathers and pray for their mercy. The different Miboos have different deities (Eirne-Pine) to recall, failing which, it is said, they would never attain their state of spiritual-embodiment. Such "Sirkie Nane, Nane Botta"—recall the disciples of Sirkie—a river goddess which well compares with mythical Saraswati of Triveni Sangama. "Dongke Lebinge, Lebi Pitta"—recite the disciples of Dongke Lebing—a stone god. A Padam Miboo will call for his deity in similar way.

The event of the "Miboo Dagnam" or Miboo-Sumnam is carried out by narrating some Abang or 'slokas' full of poetic beauties and musical rhythm. For instances, when the soul (Yalo) of the sick, as it is believed, goes away to the above of death (Uii-among) the Miboo reminds the soul of the inviting Nature's grandeur :

“DERMI SITUNGE TIRMEKO TIRMANGA
KOMBONG APPUNE RIYIPKO REYوبا.”

(The offshoots of the Dermi trees are bowing : the flowers of Kombong trees are yielding to the breeze that is coming).

At other occasion he expresses the longings of the imprisoned soul :

‘PEYINGE PETTANG EMAYA
SIYANGE BERKONG EMAYA”.

(Oh, the birds, I wish I could fly across the river like you) etc.

These ‘abangs’, full of rhetoric beauties, have been sung by one and all, but now understood by a few only and have become the classic of the Miri-Abor language.

Folk-Songs :

Since time immemorial their life and culture being centred round the rivers they crave to dwell by the banks, and call them with a name usually beginning with Si as Siyang, Sisseri, Siyom, Sigong Simen, Sissi, etc. Asi being the word for water in the Miri-Abor language. These rivers, despite of the occasional outrages of overflowing floods and its perennial affects, provide them with daily necessities i.e. food and water. Truly enough the alluvial banks of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri, enriched by deposition of new manure, carried along the rivers annually, yield better products. Further, these rivers provide them with cheap transport facilities along the rivers course and their unsophisticated souls find a vent of expres-

sion of their feelings in melodious Oi-Nitom as they paddle leisurely down the streams. He sings :

(i)

Komje Odokke Reiyō Dokkebong
Oi-nom Kalikka Melik Sunamai.

(Since the moment of consciousness awoke in me,
I love thee, Oh dearest !)

(ii)

Oiya Kerenge, Ane Kerenge
Oinom Kerenge Retit Tobone.

(On the great turns of the mighty river ! you
have screened off the place where my beloved dwells.)

(iii)

Nokke Dolung Kekonde
Ngokke Dolung Kekonse
Siyange Asi Dungkomna
Kali Dakgom Kapama.

(Your village is on the other bank and mine is
on the other ; separated by this Siyang river, the thirst
of seeing you has never been quenched.)

This Oi-Nitom, which has an antique origin, is the outburst of their inner-most-longings, a vent to appreciate the beauties of Nature in abundance and thus it covers every activity throughout their life, brings forth every conceivable references where absorbing similes blossom forth and unfold the throbbing story of their joys and sorrows.



A Mirui-aboo or Miboo seen with his proud-possession
Yoksa (sword).



Miri woman spinning Endi for their 'Tapum-Gas



Some of their colourful cotton products. Photo showing (from left)---Ribi, Egge, Gero, Egge, Yambo and Gero.



Miri women spinning cotton for their proud-product
"Gadoo" (Miri-Jim).

Among the animate objects, the dove (Peki) occupies a significant place in their Oi-Nitom ; and she is regarded as a messenger of Love and of the departed souls. It is believed that when their forefathers are unhappy or annoyed, the dove falls upon the ceiling and delivers the message by cooing. It is sung :

Ato Gumin Genyila
Sine Mobo Kanyila
Peki Tanki Mariye Ringa Bidune,

(Perhaps our forefathers being unhappy or departed souls being displeased, the dove has come to deliver the message of the annoyed souls.)

But for the young men and girls the dove is the messenger of Love. They sing :

Kankin Sumilo, Tatkin Sumilo,
Peki Mari Ritedo
Ngokke Yatlom Kayepe.

(If you know how to see, if you know how to hear, you will see my image where the dove alighted and cooed.)

At times they long to become free and flying like a dove in the great expanse of the blue sky. They regret :

Peki Tomane, Petta Tomane
Alap Tomane Labla Tomane.
Oinom Kalingko Kala Tomane.

(As I could not be a dove, nor I possessed the wings ; neither I could fly, nor I could see my beloved).

Besides, the Miris accept the bird as a symbol of the independent spirit. Such, when a bird cries in a mid-summer day seated lonely on a dried-up branch of a tree, it penetrates deeper into their sentiment and their disturbed souls look out for an answer.

Pettangesin Kabdubong—Etulasin Ebokla,
Ngokke Asinang Odubong Rankitlasin Royitla.

(What for the bird is crying? What for my heart is yearning?).

They too experience the clamouring of the soul because of some incompleteness, some distant call perhaps the call of Infinity; but for them the definition is lacking. The Oi-Nitom thus have a melancholic expression, an air of dejection blended into its melody; and has been rightly ascribed as 'Kaban-Bannam' meaning 'lamentation.' But Oi-Nitom in its other form has exhilarating rhythm with youthful vigour and delicious composition usually related to their love-making, sung in accompaniment of the drums and dances. They sing after a good harvest :

Amro Arik Elangka, Mema Sangmape Dolanka
Dolu Mimbir Yatlanka, Yume Rowyem Kalanka.

(Do cultivate Ahu paddy and eat and drink for the rest of the year. Do love a country belle and have her glimpse morning and evening as you feel like.)

The village belle in her most desirable state of womanhood tauntingly replies :

Chagi Gilai Kapiyen, Miksi Dilai Kapiyen,
Menam Oime Pamamilo Turra Dulai Kapiyen.

(What for this sighing, what for this torrent of tears ; what for this life if you cannot have the girl you are yearning for !)

Sometimes the simile used in the Oi-Nitom is far-fetching and at times, it reveals their power of penetration deep into the wordly truth :

(i)

Adi Jili Jilika, Miksi Jili Jiliko
Adi Jili Pinyepe, Miksi Jili Pinpeming

(The torrent of my tears compares with the torrent of the hilly tract ; the hilly torrent has a chance to dry up, but mine has no chance ; it is perpetual.)

(ii)

Mepak Namme Rigado Oko Einge-Chamane,
Mepaknamme Konedede Oko Agom Lumane.

(What plant on the earth would not grow in a deserted land ; to what extent a deserted woman cannot ill-use her tongue !)

But their entire philosophy of life and death, soul and salvation may be expressed as simple as in the following stanza :

Chapori Oi Chapori
Chopan Sula Romdaggom
Oi Ngonyik Mikkide
Yipum Suyepe, Oi Oiya.

(We may be burried or burnt in islands located in distant land. But the smoke or the souls would

surely unite above, beyond the reach of the worldly being.)

Besides these fragmentary serenades Oi-Nitom, some narrative folk-songs based on some tragic events or on life of some deserted lovers have been prevalent and sung precisely in the style of 'Behula-Lakhinder' or 'Moniram Dewanar Git'—so popular among the rural Assamese folk. The series of Oi-Nitom composed on the event-ful life of Sri Gela and the contemptous end-story of some promising young girls (Perkati and Pisiring) so popular among the Miris are examples of these narrative folk-songs.

Gela, it is sung, thumped down gallantly a group of non-Miris who attempted usurpation of his dearly loved paddy field; but he succumbed to the fateful hand of the law and underwent life-long transportation in 'Kala-Pani'.

These narrative songs are the common feature of the 'Soman-Mirui' of the Abors. The leader who exhibits a natural talent would compose on anything that comes to his sight. They sing :

Noigero, Nenem Nenem

Donyi Polo Nolu, Nenem Nenem

Ayang Kapalanka, Nenem Nenem, etc.

In fact 'Soman Mirui' is the counterpart of the plain Miri. Here they sing :

Pekamai Kamdangai, Kolopi, Kolopi

Kamdangai Litungai, Kolopi, Kolopi, etc.

Folk-Dance Etc.

Dances of different graces and movement accompany their 'Oi-Nitom'. The popular 'Miri-dance' often displayed in platform is a prolific variety of their pagan dance, allied in spirit and deliverance to the Bihu-dance of the plain people; the archaic and pure form of Miri-dance are seen only in the Pagso-Monam of Aliligang and Nitom-Sumnam of Porag festival. Their dance have least musical instruments to accord; but the most striking features of their dance are the simplicity, suppleness of movement and the accent on the perfection of mimicing Nature in different state. The girls constumed in colourful Ribhi, Egge, and glittering ornaments, waving their arms in the air, flutter like butterflies; and their exhilarating rythms and exuberant expression of joy easily evoke gleeful enthusiasm even of the indifferent on-lookers. Besides the Aliligang and the Porag festivals when they observe a general holiday, the Miri girls who bear a great part of the drudgery of helping their men in the field, preparing food and weaving clothes for themselves and for the family, after the days' hard work, dance their way till late at night on the sandy shores of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri. Perhaps, the vigour and rythm of their body movement ease their mental tension and make them fit for the next day's heavy work.

The 'Dhol and Tal'—two indigenous Assamese musical instrument believed to be of Austric origin have now become indispensable for their merry-making of any grade; thus is the "Husori-Bihu"—a spring dance festival of the Assamese people.

But it was not so some hundred years back. 'Dendun' and 'Tapungs' were the primitive musical tools, the former being made out of some reed (*Tonga*—Assamese) cut into equal length. In spite of its shortlived and seasonal character it enjoyed enormous popularity before Dhol and Tal came to stay. Tapung is of three principal variety :—Derki-Tapung, Ejuk-Tapung and Mutki-Tapung. In construction and delivery the Derki Tapung is exactly same that of 'Chifung' of the Bodo people being used mostly to render the Oi-Nitom more sober by its melodious tune. Ejuk Tapung and Mutki Tapung (*Lao-Banhi*—Assamese) are intricate products of bamboo and a kind of wild gourd which well compares with those used by the snake-charmers. The use of these Ejuk and Mutki-Tapung have been especially connected with the ceremonial procession leading the bride to pluck the 'Yamne Appoon'—(virgin-flower) on the eve of the nuptial ceremony. Plucking "the virgin-flower"—Yamne-Appoon—had been designed to prove the virginity of the bride and it is believed that successful ones are bestowed with all good luck but the others meet with ill-consequences. The Ejuk is believed to sing all melody :

Mamo Kampong Chapoyoka, Kereli Kereli
Banji Kobang Pamadaso, Kereli Kereli.

But these ceremonies are hardly seen now-a-days and almost forgotten by many. Gungang (*Gogona*) a delicate bamboo product is another hot favourite of the Miri girls for speaking what-in-mind to her lovers in tranquility by its vibrating melody. 'Pepa' is another recent addition to their musical tools for the
• boys.

The Miri women are, in general, more labourious than their men. Rowing and swimming are their favourite pastime. Their busy day starts off with the indispensable practice of husking paddy in the early morning and ends in feeding their sons and husbands at dusk after a day's hard work with their men in the field. Weaving is in their blood; and in spite of the heavy programme they find time for weaving colourful Ribi, Gaseng, Egge, Gero, Yamboo etc. for themselves and Ugon, Dumer, Galuk for their men. The Miri women combine a delicate sensitivity with an impeccable taste for design and colour, and weave poems on their looms. When the dinner is over they devote their leisure time till late at night in spinning cotton collected from their own farm 'Pagrig' for their pride product—Mirijim or 'Gadu'. Women unskilled in weaving are discredited, and it was a custom till recently that the bride must weave her wedding costume, failing which there was every chance of the marriage being held up. Rearing Endi cocoon and weaving 'Tapung Gasor' out of it, is a special enterprise of the Miri women though the warmth of the Endi product is actually enjoyed by the menfolk. Thus to have a wife expert in weaving is a special asset and dream of many young aspirants; and none, perhaps, has failed having their dreams fulfilled they on the latter years took pride in introducing their wives as 'my old woman' (Ngok-Mine) to a new-comer, not without affection even they are young enough for the adjective.

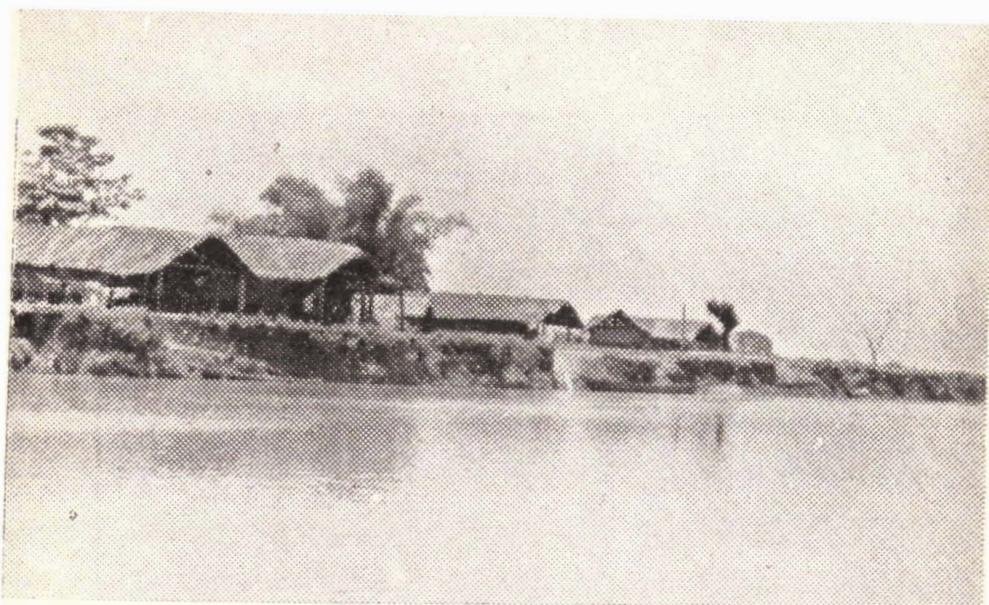
CHAPTER V.

RELIGION :

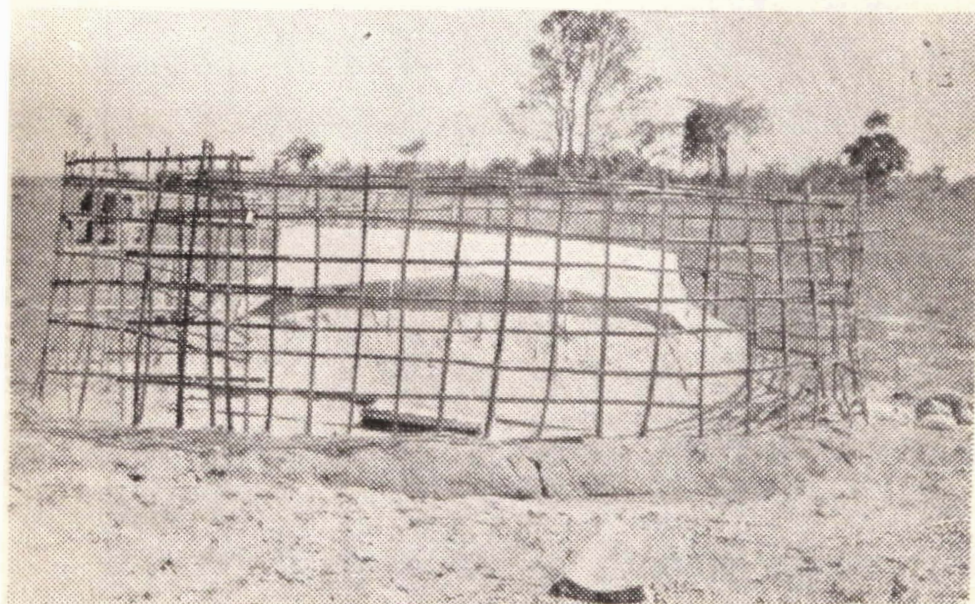
Old belief dies hard ; for though the Miris had occasions to expose themselves to the influences of various religious faith, they still maintain much of the primitive belief (the belief of present Abors) what is commonly known as 'Animisim' ; and good luck and misfortune, health and illness are attributed to some spirits or 'Uii'.

The thunder and lighting (Mukling-Taleng) Earth and Water (Among-Asi), Air and Fire (Esar-Emi) alike are peopled with a number of spiritual being possessing power greater than those of man. They are benificent to human being, protect their farms and families from damages and misfortune,, though they have to be kept appeased with occasional offerings called 'Taleng-Uii' and 'Rokpu-Done' (eater of white cock) etc.

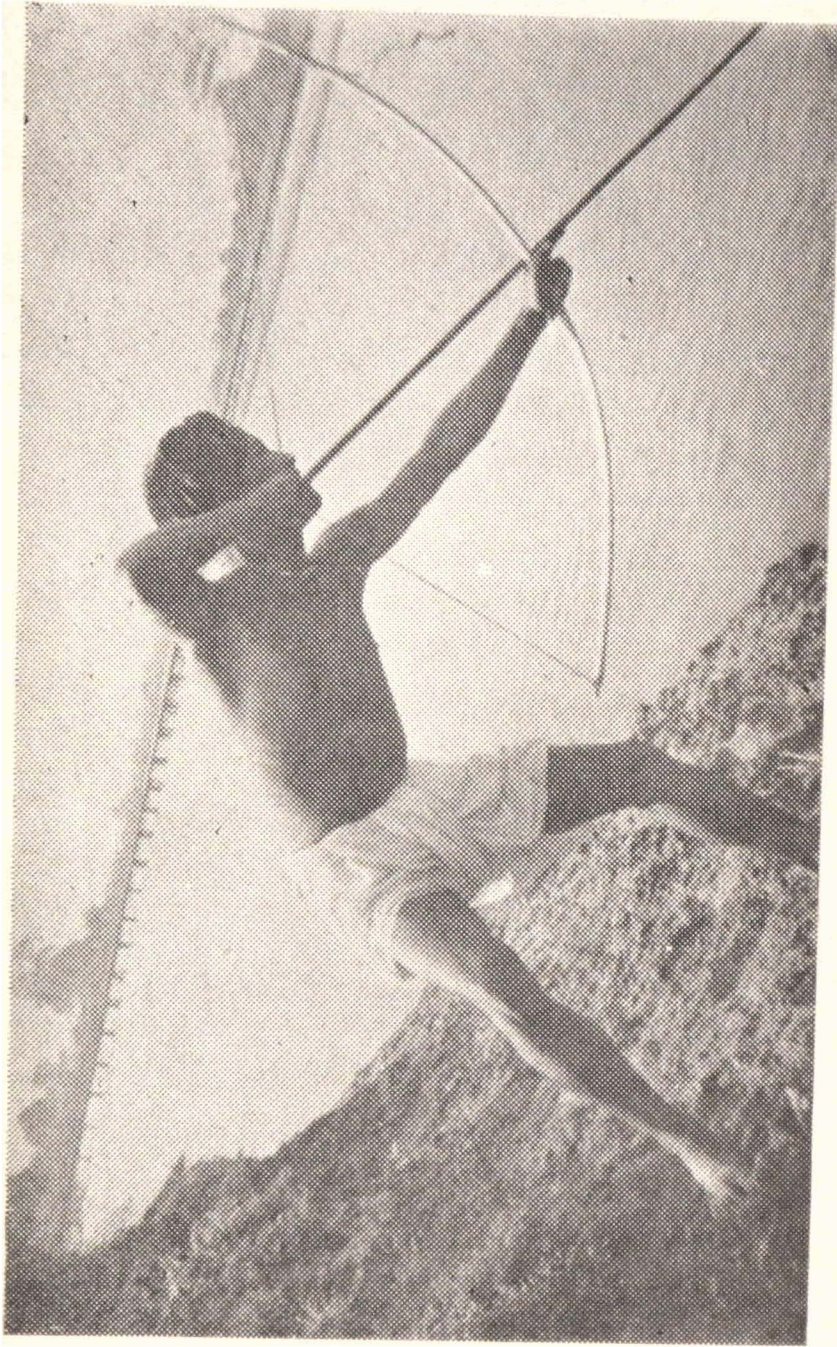
But far more important to average Miris and Abors are the numerous evil spirits—Uii loominy around the streams (Asi-Uii) the mountains (Adi-Uii) the forest (Yumrang-Uii) etc. to whom every illness or misfortune is attributed. The Miboo is supposed to know the Uii responsible for the trouble and the form of worship that will appease them. The Miboo or village expert, for instance, has often been found offering chickens in the name of "Dopum-Dorum"— a demon having 3 heads, to evade the attack of tetanic or infan-



A Miri village by the bank of Disang river.

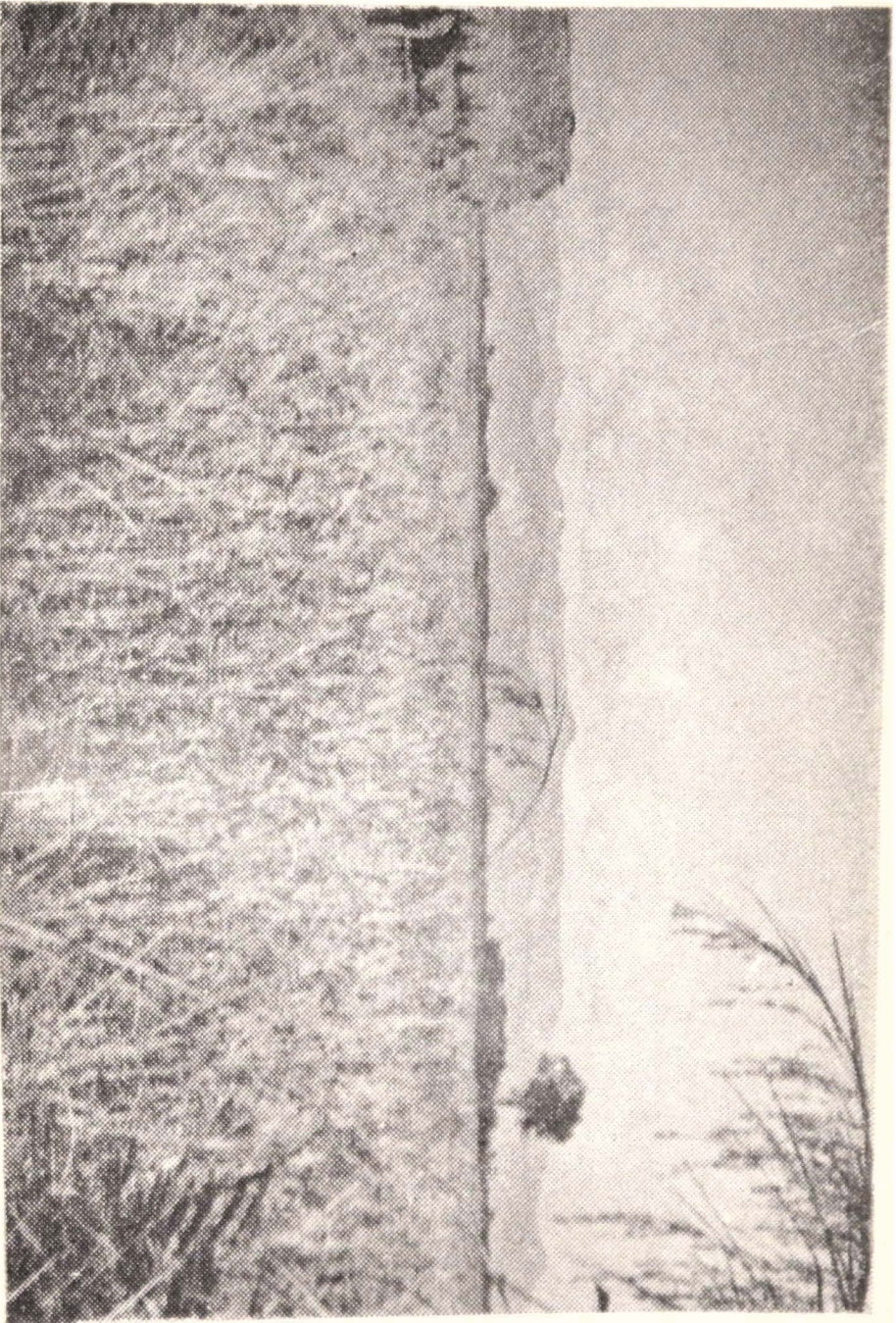


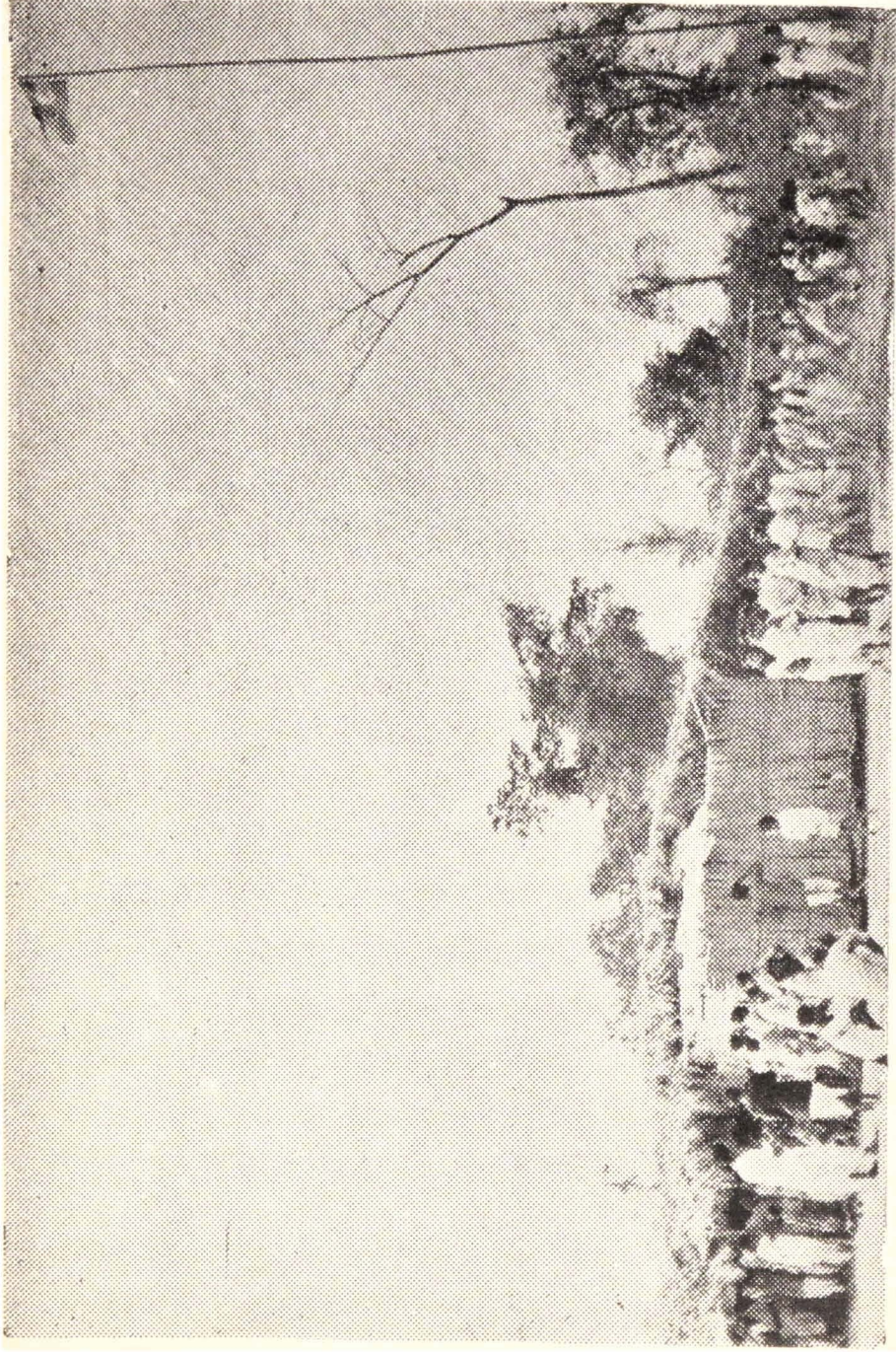
Everything is destined to decay and the mortal remains of Miris find shelter in the grave.



Miri man fishing with one of their special device-Ei-Jambook.

Ahu-paddy field





An assembly of Miri people under the Indian tri-colour.

tile convulsion and at times the spirit is threatened with heated iron-rod and burning pepper. These malevolent motives of the evil spirit (Aiman-Uii) causing bodily-illness or misfortune have to be brought off by offering pig, fowl, plaintains, Apong etc. in ways prescribed by the 'Miboo' and the expert.

The Dobur-Uii is one of the important ritual performances of the Miris marked by its peculiar principles carried out with much rigidity. Women are debarred from attending it; and the occasion of parturition and menstruation—two things related to woman are taken to be most unauspicious, and they have to move away from the village compound before the day breaks. Traffic and business transaction with the neighbouring villages are held up completely for the day, and to that end significant sign-posts are pitched on the main gate-ways of the village compound. Trespassing or misdemeanour are death with temporary confinement or retention of valuables till the performance is over.

In the morning, they approach each house demanding dues 'Ajeng' and the family reciprocates by offering Apong, fowl, pig and rice which they collect in a place in the outskirts of the village. Two idols simulating snake swallowing an egg, are prepared from some fern (Ruktak) and split bamboo, and placed in the alter facing the rising sun. Pig and fowls are sacrificed uttering some prayers meaning "Oh mother Sun, father Moon, Oh Divine Self, be pleased with these offerings and bless us with health and happiness', etc.

The queries on the origin and indication of these idols have been answered in most unqualified way. But it is the widely shared belief that the snake represents the Earth as an eternal source of life while the egg represents 'life' itself with the potential power of manifestation. It reminds us of the snake pillar found in some ruins and reinstalled in the Political Officer's bungalow at Sadiya and the faint reference made in a legends wherein the Pasi-Miyong have been alleged to have pleaded for the mercy of the Padams who plundered their homestead in a war, to spare at least the snake-image. Though nothing could be taken as conclusive, it may be safely said that it had its origin in remote past and have come down since, the details being lost in its antiquity.

Ancestor-worship is a common feature of their annual functions. The ancestors (Urom-posum) are held responsible for the health and happiness of the family members, and incurring displeasure to them may result in accident or some uncommon occurrence. To keep them pleased at their abode (Uii-Among) pigs and fowls are sacrificed after the ingathering of their crops. The Miris believe that the departed souls reside at Sine-mobo (abode of dead) from where they use to visit their near and dear ones ; but their visits, instead of being beneficent usually result in a catastrophe, most malicious of them being those who met unnatural death. They have no clear idea, however, of the soul being reborn, but it is often heard to have said that 'so and so' has been reborn when they find some similarity between departed one and a new born babe.

They never burn their dead but dig a grave (Ago). The demise of one who has gained honour is announced by ringing a bell 'Lenong' and the villagers within the range suspend their work for the day, and throng to pay a last visit to the departed one and sympathise the bereaved family.

The corpse is bathed, clothed with his favourite and placed in a log-coffin (Rungkung) after being wrapped in "Empoo" (*Nagadhari*—Assamese). A new roadway is cleared off leading to the grave, and in a procession of the relatives and neighbours the dead body is carried to the cemetery (A-go Golung) located in the out-skirt of the village usually away from the river-side. 5 Cubits of land has to be bought for the sake of the dead by his relatives, a custom maintained till to-day with much reverence. A symbolic house is built over the coffin before being covered with soil and the area is fenced round with bamboo trellis-work.

But today inspite of their primitive belief going strong in one side, one usually finds an elderly Miri nonchalantly but not without pride introducing himself as a 'Bhakat'. The fact is that their forefathers after having migrated down to the Brahmaputra Valley, were subjected to the influence of the Gosains of the Sessa, Nomati, Jokai, Budhbari, Khowamora Satras etc. The Gosains of these Satras, not long ago, published a bulletin claiming, in reply to the allegation often filed against them by the enlightened section of the Miri people, that they profess the creed of "Kalasanghati"—one of the tetra-rotate doctrines of Vaishnavism, other three being Brahma Sanghati,

Purusha Sanghati, Nika Sanghati** propogated by Sri Sankardev, Madhavadev and his disciple Bhowanipuria Gopal Ata, six centuries back.

A convert is an elderly Miri, male or female, as a rule of the other side of fifties, and is popularly known as Bhakat as opposed to 'Kenchā' (raw or non-convert). These 'Bhakats' have different grades, and the seniors may be a Satula, Sadasar, or a Medhi. Above them are the Sadhus who are entitled to collect converts. Thus, his position is next to the Satradhikara who reigns supreme.

The Sadhus and Bhakats who often call themselves 'Kewolia Bhakat' attend almost all the ritual functions performed by the Miris today except the Dobur-Uii, and feast themselves with the pigs, fowls and Apong offered to them by the host. Besides, they use to gather in a 'Namghar' (Prayers place) at night to perform "Bor-Sewa"—the highest form of their worship. 'Apong' of the white variety has to be specially prepared for this occasion. At the dead of night they perform "Biharo" with some devotional lines to appease "Siva-Sankara" as they say. But the whole procedure has been kept within the four walls of the Namghar as a religious secret, and it is warned that an unqualified person who peeps or witnesses, is doomed to death or madness. But what has been heard of their behaviour from eye-witness who risked death and madness, is astonishing, and closely simulate what is heard and written about the "Rati-Khowa Samprodai (the sect of nocturnal enjoyment), existence

of which has been connected with the corrupted form of Buddhist-Tantrism that visited Assam in its declining phase :

“Already a hot-bed of Saivism, Saktatism, and Buddhist Tantrism the field was ready for this debased form of religion to germinate the seed of what are now the secret societies of “Ratikhowa”—“Tamul Nokhowa” and Gopidhara.**

This close-door creed has its better days few decades back when the Gosains used to reap a good harvest by enrolling new converts and collect annual dues (Guru Kor) from their Keesh (disciples) travelling village to village usually by riverways pitching temporary camps at places. This Guru Kor or Guru-Dokshina consisted of a few seers of 1st grade rice, a few seers of pulse and mustard seed, and cash anything from eight annas upwards. It was originally supposed to be voluntary donation out of spiritual obligation; but it has been seen that non-payment or paying less than the fixture due to genuine poverty or failure of crops, has been accused of blasphemy and the “keesh” is cursed in a way that has often been vulnerable to the enlightened minds.

To add more to their confusion “Bhagowotia” and “Nirgunia”—two sects propagated by some non-specific ‘Guru’ have been prevalent of late among the Miri people. The teachings and the process of worship of Bhagowotia seem to be more akin to the Vaishnavism, for they believe in one God “Vishnu”; they never sacrifice a pig or fowl for the amelioration of their illness but organise ‘Hori-Kirtana’.

** ‘Background of Assamese Culture’—R. M. Nath.

There is no gainsaying that one religion is better than the other. But if this spiritual hubbub has been critically analysed and dug into its root cause, one easily finds a tangible turmoil within the rudimentary minds of the illiterate Miri people that cry out for a salutary solution which would certainly be in conformity with their path of social progress. Of Course, one way or other the spiritual force of Sri Sankardev and Madhavdev so deep rooted and the epic story of the Maha-Bharata and the Ramayana have been so familiar among the people, no religion other than Hinduism can germinate and flourish in the soil of their spiritual concourse. This was one of the foremost cause, perhaps, of the refusal to accept Christianity as their faith, the influential force of which visited Miri country in the latter part of the last century. The account of their failure has been put in a most significant way :

“He (Mr. Paul) had been designed to work among the Miris, a hill tribe. It has been reported by a teaplanter that the Miris were open to Gospel, and if a missionary were sent amongst them many would be Christians. It was upon this glowing reports that Mr. Patrick pleaded with the conference for a missionary for the Miris, the conference in turn made the appeal to the Board with the result that Mr. Paul was sent out to fill this need. A compound was subsequently purchased at Pathalipam and a bungalow was built. Mr. Paul soon found, however that the field was far from promising and in April 1898 he wrote the Board that ‘a great mistake has been made in placing a bungalow at

Pathalipam' and suggested locating at another station.**

Fully acquainted with the high percentage of literate persons among the tribes who came under the influences of the missionaries, one cannot, at any rate, display a forged vanity today that the Miris, who cut a miserable figure of literate persons, had a better choice by adopting a religion which can be well ascribed as an orphan of dubious parents. But repentance is no remedy for the past deficiency nor regret a compensation for the loss.; but these are rare occasions to be profited by men of qualities for future progress.

However, after long years of sojourn in the plain, the Miris, inspite of their orthodox outlook particularly in matters of language and religion, have been changing, yielding place to new ideas and beneficial influences of civilisation, and by a process of assimilation and inhalation the Miri culture and society have been gaining a shape which adds to the plentitude of Indian culture. And, one would not be totally mistaken in saying that these forgotten Miris would not fail to prove their worth in all spheres should they be given a chance. Hail, such days be coming soon !

END

APPENDIX

MIRI—ABOR VOCABULARY TO SHOW THE
HOMOGENESITY OF THE LANGUAGE.

English	Miri	Abor
Sun.	Donyi.	Donyi.
Moon.	Po-Lo.	Po-Lo.
Cloud.	Domuk, Mukkang	Domuk, Mukkang.
Cloudy Weather.	Domum.	Domum.
Fine Weather.	Doreng.	Doreng.
Day.	Longe.	Longe.
Night.	Yume.	Yume.
To-day.	Silo.	Silo.
To-morrow.	Yampo.	Nyampo.
Yesterday.	Melo.	Melo.
Last year.	Menying.	Menying.
Now.	Supak.	Supak.
Then.	Odo.	Delo.
When.	Edilo.	Edilo.
River.	Ane, Abung.	Ane.
Stream.	Jili, Bungke.	Jili, Korong.
Water.	Asi.	Asi.
Deep.	O-ring.	O-ring.
Shallow.	Etet.	Etet, Otet.
Wave.	Silung.	Silung.
Pond.	Pa'tang.	Pa'tang.
Mountain.	Adi.	Adi.
Tree.	Esing.	Esing.
Stone.	Eling.	Eling.
Man.	Mi, Ami, Tani.	Mi, Ami, Tani.
Woman.	Neng, Mime.	Mime.

English	Miri	Abor
Boy.	Ko.	Milo-Ko.
Girl.	Ko-neng.	Mime-Ko.
Damsel.	Mimbir, Miyum.	Mimum.
Young man.	Yame, Mebo.	Yame.
Old man.	Mijing.	Mijing.
Son-in-law.	Makbo.	Makbo.
Daughter-in-law.	Yameng.	Nyameng.
Father-in-law.	Ato.	Ato.
Mother-in-law.	Ayo.	Ayo.
Father.	Abuo, Ba'bu.	Abu, Yayi.
Mother.	Ane, O,'Nane.	Ane, Mami.
Brother.	Biro.	Biro.
Sister.	Birme.	Birme.
Daughter.	Ome.	Ome.
Son.	Awo.	Awo, O.
Village.	Dolung.	Dolung.
House.	Ekum.	Ekum.
Granary.	Kumsung.	Kumsung.
Public Hall or Murong.	Murong.	Musup, Dere.
Assembly or Panchayet.	Kebang.	Kebang.
Learned.	Kinne-pane	Kinne-pane.
Fool.	Monbang, Yao.	Mide, Yao.
Smart.	Arda, Lardak.	Arda.
Brave, Peerless.	Migang	Migang, Midukne
Fear.	Peso.	Peso.
Food.	Apin, Donam, Tinam.	Apin, Donam- Tinam.
Rice. (Unboiled).	Ambin.	Ambin.

English	Miri	Abor
Paddy.	Am.	Am
Aloe.	Enge.	Enge.
Fruit.	Aye, Appaye.	Aye, Appaye.
Jack fruit.	Belang.	Belang.
Bamboo.	Dibang, Ewa.	Eng, Dibang.
Cane.	Jeying.	Jeying.
Fern.	Okang.	Takang.
Tiger.	Simyo.	Simyo.
Beer.	Situm.	Situm.
Monkey.	Sibe.	Sibe.
Deer.	Dumsung.	Dumsung.
Boar.	Sira.	Sira.
Fish.	Ongo.	Engo.
Dry-fish.	Ngosan.	Ngosan.
Bird	Pettang	Pettang
Frog	Tatik	Tatik
Animal	Simin	Simon
Snake	Tabi	Tabi
Crocodile	Sormon.	Sormon
Tortoise	Kesung	Kesung
Gun	abbuk	abbuk
Spear	Gidding	Ngiding (Miyong) Ginning (Padam)
Bow	Ei	Ei
Arrow	Epuk	Epuk
Sword	Yoksa	Yoksa
Poison	Yokmo	Yokmo
War	Mimag	Mimak
Name	Amin	Amin

English	Miri	Abor
Title, Lineage	Opin	Opin
True	Aro	Aro
False	Menam	Menam
Front	Kerang	Kerang
Back	Lamku, Melam	Melam
Voice	Gomuk	Gomuk
Word	Gompir	Gompil
Language	Agom	Agom
I	Ngo	Ngo
We	Ngolu	Ngolu
You (Singular)	No	No
You (Plural)	Nolu	Nolu
He, She	Bi	Bi
They	Bulu	Bulu
Creator	Chedi-melo Rune-pine,	
God	Uii	Uyu
Boat	Etkung, Otlung	Etkung, Ellung
Good	Ainam	Ainam
Bad	Aimang	Aimang
Sweet	Tinam	Tinam
Bitter	Konam	Kosang
Beautiful	Kapo, Kankane	Kapo, Kampo
Happy	Mepo	Mepo
The End	Edebong	Debong