

An Anthropological Peep into the Ali-Aye-Lrigang Festival of the Misings of Assam

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Abstract

Festivals form an important part of the cultural milieu of a community or in the broader aspect a country or nation which plays a conspicuous role in establishing a sense of belongingness and emotional integration among the members of the group concerned. Apart from having social, religious and economic importance, festivals contribute to the enrichment and revival of the cultural heritage of the society. The present paper based on empirical study conducted in Borpomua, a Mishing village of Jengraimukh in the Majuli district of Assam, attempts to evaluate various aspects of Ali-Aye-Ligang, the principal social festival of the Mishing tribe of Assam related to agriculture with an insight into the conspicuous changes brought about in its traditional manner of celebration in the wake of modernity.

Introduction

The socio-cultural life of every ethnic community is marked by the observance of different festivals which are special events and regarded as social phenomena. Festivals are generally celebrated by a community to uphold their ideologies, values, identity and continuity. Stoeltje (1992) holds the view that festivals are types of cultural performances and as such are special observances. Sarma (2009) opines that modern festivals emanated from the beliefs and magical rituals of the ancient community. Festivals form an essential aspect of a culture. The rituals or festivals initially were exclusively religious. The scope of festivals has been extended in modern times to a number of secular commemorations including

celebration of Independence Day of a nation and specific form of entertainment such as song, dance, drama, music and community feast. In general, the festivals can be classified as seasonal, agricultural, calendar-oriented, sacramental and of limited participation type. The seasonal festivals are the products of people's desire to escape from monotonous mundane tasks and to live a tension free life.

Mitra (1983) points out that every festival whether folk or traditional or secular has a particular aim or theme for which it is observed. Propitiation of spirits and deities for success, to prevent certain diseases and snake bite, to avert untoward happenings, welfare of the members of the family, good harvest, girls to get good husband, etc., are some of the aims from the viewpoint of propitiation. To welcome the new and the particular season, to commemorate the ancestors, to take food of the first crop, etc. reveal another kind of themes. Aspiring for salvation, ensuring a permanent stay in heaven, bringing about divine blessings for health and happiness are the third category of purposes. From various dimensions festivals can be regarded as the focal point of a community's social and cultural life. Lyngdoh (1991) mentions that in a festival the entire community feels emotionally involved and all their activities during the period centre around the festivals. In the meaning and contents of the festival the community discovers itself, its feelings and its way of life and all the members get an opportunity of coming together, exclusive of others. In tribal societies festivals play a key role in their social life. The tribal way of life, their norms and values are reflected in their festivals. Tribal festivals give a picture of their cultural adjustment to the ecological and social conditions in which they live in that are centered around and determined by natural phenomena and important events of life like births, marriages and deaths. North East India, the homeland of a large number of tribal communities presents a panoramic collection of tribal festivals most of which largely revolve around their agricultural operations which are observed either before the sowing season or after the harvesting is over. Dancing, singing, community feasting and drinking home-made rice beer are the hallmarks of most of the tribal festivals contributing towards the corporate feeling of group solidarity among the members of the community.

The Mising Community at a Glance

India is a country comprising of 705 tribes as per the records of 2011 census of the Government of India constituting 8.6% of the total population of the country. The Mising are one of the prominent tribes of the state of Assam scheduled in the plains tribal category under the Indian Constitution occupying the second position in the state in terms of population which according to the 2011 census record is 6,80,424 individuals mainly domiciled in the eight districts of Upper Assam, *viz.*, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Jorhat, North Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Sonitpur and Tinsukia as well as the newly created district of Majuli. They are a Mongoloid group of people belonging to the great Tibeto-Burman speakers of the greater Sino-Tibetan groups (Chatterji, 1974). In the accounts of the Ahom chronicles, religious scriptures compiled by the great Vaishnavite saint Shrimanta Sankardeva and his chief disciple Shri Madhavdeva and the various ethnographic accounts and administrative records by the Britishers, the Mishing along with a host of other tribes were referred to as the Miri. It is pertinent to note here that the term Miri which was used indiscriminately in the past is no longer used to refer to the study group. It was Needham (1886) who had shed light on the fact that the group of people known as Miris who reside on the banks of the Brahmaputra, Dihong and Dibong rivers, in the neighbourhood of Sadiya, call themselves Mishing. Doley (2010) observes that morphologically the term Mishing is made up of the final syllables of such two different words as *ami* (man) and *ansing* (cold or peace loving) which equates to Mising (a man of quiet nature or peace-loving character) or *ami* (man) and *yasing* (white, fair) equivalent to Mishing (a man of fair complexion).

The area of original homeland of the Sino-Tibetan Mongoloid groups is often referred to have been North-western China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-tse Kiang rivers (Chatterjee, 1974). Most of the tribal communities of North East India belonging to the Mongoloid group like the Garo, Hmar, Kuki, numerous Mizo and Naga group of tribes, Apatani and Tangsa to name a few have migrated to this part of the Indian mainland from the East and Southeast Asian regions at different periods and settled in different parts of the region. Doley (2010) observed that the Mishings as well as their cognate tribes like the Padam,

Galong, Minyong, Apatani, Bokar, Bori, Pailibo, etc., who regard themselves as the offshoots of Abo Tani (father of humankind) are believed to have migrated from western China through Tibet following the courses of the rivers flowing down from Tibet and to have advanced towards eastern part of the hilly ranges of the sub-Himalayan mountains till they reached the Siyang and Dibang valleys of the present Arunachal Pradesh where they settled for some period of time. The hills constituting this region still continue to be the abode for a number of tribes related to the Mishings. But there are no exact records to provide evidences as to why and when did the Mishings come down to the plains of Assam from their original hilly habitats. However, as pointed out by Bhuyan (1932) the first reference to the Miri (Mishings) ever found in the Assam history is included in the Deodhai Asom Buranji where the record refers to the adoption of a Miri boy (Mishing boy) by the Ahom king Suhungmung better known as Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 A.D.). Doley (2010) sheds light on the fact that even the great Neo-Vaishnavite propounder of Assam Shrimanta Shankardeva refers to the Miris in the holy text of the *Shrimadbhagawat Geeta* (v. 478) and his chief disciple Shri Shri Madhavdeva also mentioned of them. In the *Namghosa* the free translation of Madhavadeva's verse is as follows:

There can be no hard and fast rules laid down for praying to
God; salvation can be achieved by mere uttering the word Ram
(God) irrespective of Miri, Ahom or Kachari (v. 501).

When the Ahoms set their foot in the upper part of the Brahmaputra valley, then known as Saumara in 1228 A.D., the region was under the rule of the Chutiya monarchs. Taking cognizance of the aforementioned facts it is proposed by Doley that the Mishings can be assumed to have started their downward migration to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley during the 12th century A.D. and certain records do support that their sporadic migration continued till the early part of the 19th century. Their migratory nature led them to establish their habitation found scattered all over the riverine areas of upper Assam only as they did not move down-stream beyond the confluence of the river Brahmaputra and its main tributary Subansiri.

The Mishing society is patriarchal in nature where descent, inheritance, authority, succession and residence after marriage all follow the male line. They have a monogamous marriage system although polygamy is not entirely restricted. Being a riverine tribe facing the perennial problem of flood every monsoon they construct pile dwellings with bamboo or wooden posts of 4 to 6 feet that support the raised platforms of the house made of bamboo itself. Their mainstay is agriculture where they follow the wet paddy cultivation. Fishing and domestication of pig, fowls, cattle and goats include their other economic activities. At present many of them are engaged in petty trades and wage earning activities while few mostly having educational degrees have taken up jobs in both government and non-government sectors. The Mishing as opined by Pegu (2011) believe in the supreme heavenly power of *Sedi-babu* (father Sedi) and *Melo-nane* (mother Melo) that according to them were the creator of all the animate and inanimate objects of this world. Traditionally they are the worshippers of *Donyi-Polo* (Sun-Moon) who are believed to have sprang from *Sedi-Melowhere Donyiis* regarded as the mother sun and *Poloas* the father moon who are till now invoked before beginning any kind of solemn ritual and function. They believe in a number of benevolent and malevolent spirits (*uie*) whom they propitiate through offerings, sacrifices and elaborate rituals during life crises periods as well when afflicted with disease and other misfortunes. The *mibu* is the priest who plays a dynamic role in their socio-religious life, and acts as a medicine man with the help of his expertise in local medicinal practices as well as with the application of his spiritualistic knowledge. The influence of the caste Assamese population surrounding the Mishing habitations is clearly visible in their socio-religious life.

At present a sizeable proportion of the Mishing population have come under the fold of other religious faiths like Christianity, various sects of Hinduism and mainly Assam's Vaishnavism which is a parochial cult propounded by the great saint Srimanta Sankaradeva and his chief disciple Madhavadeva where Lord Vishnu and his full incarnation of Lord Krishna is principally worshipped. It is to be mentioned here that in Assam's Vaishnavism there is no idol worship where the *satra* or the Vaishnavite monastery forms the pivotal worshipping place for the entire community and the *namghar* as observed by Zaman (2015) constitutes the village prayer

house bearing affiliation to the *satra*. The Mishing people primarily consume rice, meat, fish and a variety of leafy vegetables. In almost all of their socio-religious festivals pork, chicken and *apong* (home-made rice beer) are used for offering as well as feasting purpose. Every Mishing female are adept in weaving artistically designed traditional dresses for both the sexes in their handloom. Traditionally, in every Mishing village there is a self-governing council called *kebang* headed by the *ga:m* looking after the entire village affairs right from socio-religious matters to settling of disputes and delivering of judgment in cases of criminal acts. There is also a self-governing institution for the village youths called *mimbir-ya:me*. Doley (2010) in this regard mentioned of the acculturative influences from the neighbouring Assamese caste population whereby Assamese terms like *deka bora* (head of the unmarried young boys) and *tiri: bora* (head of the unmarried young girls) are used among them. The Mishing observe a number of their traditional socio-religious festivals like the ali-aye-Irigang, po:rag, dobur or dobir ui which mostly bear relation to their way of life. It deserves mention here that the Mishing are now in a state of transition with respect to their religious belief system.

Pegu (2012) have observed that since the 15th century when Srimanta Sankaradeva preached the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, the Mishing like many other tribal groups of the region gradually came under its influence. It led to the emergence of the *bhakatiya* cult among them which is an admixture of Mishing religious practices involving sacrificial worship, extensive use of country liquor and propitiation of a number of spirits along with practices integral to Neo-Vaishnavism and Tantricism. The religious preceptors called *gosains* of the *satras* or Vaishnavite monasteries played a significant role in initiating a number of elderly Misings into their fold and imparting them the knowledge of *kirtana* (Vaishnava hymns) and *bhakti* (devotion to Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna) which now form an essential element of the Mishing religious universe. In this system the *bhakats* and *satolas* who were experts in *nam-kirtana* (elements of Vaishnavism) formed the new group of priests responsible for carrying out every religious functions of the Mishing people except the *dobur uie* replacing the traditional role of the *mibu* (Mishing priest).

Now, in place of their traditional religion a syncretistic religion is found among the Mishing commonly known as *kewalia*, *kalsanghati* or *nisamalia* which contains elements of tribal rituals like animal sacrifices, Tantric rituals like use of liquor, meat, raw fish, cooked food and Vaishnavism. Another remarkable trend observed among the Mishing is the acceptance of Christianity which started gaining foothold among them at a much later stage (third decade of the 20th century) than that of the other hill tribes of Northeast India. It was during 1983-84 that the first church in Majuli that is the Bethel Baptist Church, Jengraimukh was established. Subsequently the Roman Catholic Church and the Believers' Church of India were also established in the Borpomua village. Of late, a sizeable portion of the Mishing inhabitants of Borpomua have come under the fold of Christianity. In the present times it has been found that those who have accepted Vaishnavism and Christianity observe a good number of festivals integral to the adopted religions as well.

Micro Field of the Study

This study was conducted in the Borpomua village inhabited by the Mishing community in Jengraimukh police-outpost of the Majuli district of Assam. The empirical data was collected during February, 2016 where the researchers got the opportunity to camp amidst the community and carry out an in-depth study. Majuli on the river Brahmaputra is the largest river island in the world (as per Guinness Book of World Records) and was recently (September, 2016) made the first river island district of India by carving out from the northern parts of Jorhat. Majuli is the epitome of cultural and natural heritage of Assam which is presently under the consideration of the UNESCO world heritage site for its preservation and protection. Majuli is the chief abode of the Assamese Vaishnavite culture as propounded by the great Vaishnavite saint and reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568), which is thriving in the numerous Vaishnavite monasteries locally known as *satra*.

The Majuli island is predominantly inhabited by Mising, Deori and Sonowal Kachari tribes while a sizeable proportion of the population also includes Ahom, Assamese caste group of Kalita and the Chutias. Borpomua, the largest Mishing village of Assam, is located at a distance of about 30

kilometers from Kamalabari, a small town of Majuli. Borpomua has six wards under the Jengraimukh village panchayat with a population of 5,624 individuals distributed in 988 households.

For the present study standard survey schedules were used to obtain demographic data. A total of 180 households were randomly covered (30 households from each of the six wards) with a population of 1,018 individuals. 22 per cent and 66.21 per cent of the villagers have agriculture as their primary and secondary occupation respectively. Other areas of livelihood among them include government service, driving public vehicles, daily wage earning, business (grocery shops, selling rice-beer, etc.), weaving, carpentry, pensioners and so forth.

The Mishing of Assam in general and of Borpomua village in particular have been observing a good number of socio-religious festivals integral to their community life since time immemorial. Being an agrarian community, most of the festivals celebrated by them bear a relation to their agricultural practices. In the village or community level, Ali-Aye-Lrigang is the most significant agricultural festival observed by the Mishings every year on the first Wednesday of the month of *phagun* (the eleventh month in the Assamese calendar) which generally falls during late February or first week of March. Po:rag is essentially a harvest festival usually observed by the *mimbi-yame* or the self-governing institution of the village youths but it incorporates a good amount of religious evidences with the active involvement of the *mibu* or the village priest performing prayer-dance and taking the lead of the occasion. As this festival involves an elaborate preparation and huge expenditure it is generally celebrated at an interval of 5 to 10 years by the village preferably in the month of *magha* or *phagun* (the tenth or eleventh month in the Assamese calendar) that coincides with the last part of January or first week of February.

Dobur or *Dobirui* is another important religious function observed by the Mishings in the village as well as family or individual household level which is marked by the observance of much rigidity. It is observed on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of *jestha* that is the period between May – June but there might be variations in the day of its observance

keeping in view the taboo related to menstruation of women and childbirth which are regarded as periods of pollution or impurity by the entire community. It is of three types – *burte dabur* observed by a single family or collectively by several families in the event of bloodshed and moral turpitude of a serious nature. *Arig dobur* or *mopun dobur* is performed by individual family to ward off the attack of pests in their paddy fields when the paddy starts flowering. *Dolung dobur* is collectively observed by the village with the view to remove any kind of ills or offence from every household of the village. This ritual demands the sacrifice of a number of animals including pigs and fowls in the name of their supreme *donyi-polo*, their dead ancestors as well as the other deities of their religious pantheon. The Mishings like their counterparts of the plain Assamese people also celebrate Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu and Kati Bihu, all of which are celebrated to welcome seasonal variations as well to mark the different stages of their agricultural practices. The worshipping of deities belonging to the greater Hindu pantheon with much funfair like *Saraswati puja*, *Kali puja* (Diwali), *Janmashthami* (commemoration of the birth of Lord Krishna), *Sankaradeva tithi*, *Madhavadeva tithi* (birth anniversaries of the Vaishnava saints) and the like are observed by the local people. Also the Christian Mishings celebrate the significant Christian festivals like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Palm Sunday and so forth. Being a single ethnic entity divided by only different religious belief systems which is a recent development has not made them remain confined to water-tight compartments which is proved by the fact that they observe a good amount inter-mingling in terms of participation in each other's festivals although certain restrictions are adhered to in such cases.

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative one based on descriptive analysis employing both primary and secondary data. For the purpose of collecting empirical data standard anthropological methods have been used like non-participant observation, structured and un-structured interview, case study and genealogical methods. In-depth interviews with selective informants involving both individual and group discussions have been conducted as well. Secondary data has been collected from the integral published books, research journals, and un-published documents.

Dimensions of the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* festival

The different ethnic communities of Northeast India both in the plains and hills basically have agriculture as their mainstay. In the hills they principally practice the shifting or slash-and-burn (*jhum*) cultivation as well as the terrace cultivation while in the plains they perform the wet paddy cultivation. Several festivals are celebrated by these groups which are intimately connected with their agricultural practices like the *Agalmaka* and *Wangala* of the Garos, *Pi-Okua* of the Tai-Phakes, *Sikpui Ruoi* of the Hmars, *Mopin* of the Adis, *Kherai* of the Bodo Kacharis, *Busu Dima* of the Dimasa Kacharis, and so on. The Mishings celebrate the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang*, which has a symbolic significance as it marks the first sowing of seeds or the onset of the agricultural season of sowing and harvesting of crops. Literally, *Ali* refers to seeds, *Aye* means fruits and *Lrigang* stands for the commencement of the sowing. Regarding the folk belief behind the celebration of *Ali-Aye-Lrigang*, Doley (2010,) observes the association of this festival with the fertility of the virgin earth.

The Mishing opine that they have been performing this festival since time immemorial where prayer for bountiful harvest is accompanied by merriment in the form of dancing, singing and feasting. Earlier, the date of celebration of *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* was not a fixed one and it varied depending on the convenience, habitat, social and geographical conditions, etc., of the people. In 1956 the *Ba:ne Kebang* which is the leading socio-political organization of the Mishings that unite all of them throughout Assam undertook an unanimous decision to celebrate the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* every year on the first Wednesday of the Assamese calendrical month of *phagun* believed by them to be an auspicious day when the head of every household marks the sowing of seeds in their respective agricultural fields symbolizing the start of paddy cultivation. It falls sometime in the period between late February and early March known as *ginmur polo* in the Mishing language.

Early in the morning on the decided day all the Mishing people of the village irrespective of their age, sex and socio-economic standing come out dressed in their colourful traditional attires to witness the ritual ceremony that takes place. The head of the family with the help of a *yokpa*

(small dagger) clears a small patch of land in the easternmost corner of the agricultural field which is hoed and leveled and *pi:ro* or reeds are pitched on the four corners of the patch. A circular pattern of decoration is made on the reads by using *si:pag* (cotton) and *si:pag onno* (cotton threads). Then certain items like *po:ro apong* (traditional rice-beer), *purang* or *purang aapin* which is steamed rice wrapped in *tora* leaves (*Alpinia nigra*) into sizeable packets, *take* (ginger) and *si:pag* (cotton) are placed in appropriate places within the decorated patch of land. Then the elderly person of each family scatters seeds over the area, specifically the *ahu* and *bao* variety of rice and while doing so they invoke and chant the names of *A' ne' Do:nyi* (mother sun) and *A' bu' Po:lo* (father moon), their forefathers, the worldly bodies and spirits to bear testimony to their crop sowing ceremony and bless them with an early germination of the seeds, abundant growth of crops and a rich harvest. They also take oath to share the fruit of their harvest among the benefactors and needy people of their society. The person performing the main ritual observes a fast till the ritual is over and then can consume the food items like rice-beer, steamed rice packed in *tora* leaves, dried fish, and roasted pork. Sometimes the person is assisted by his wife in performing the ritual activities. Certain restrictions during this period is observed like refraining from cutting trees and bamboos, digging soil or land, consuming eggs, roasted chicken, catching fish, burning forests, ploughing, etc.

On completion of the ritual by forenoon everyone return back to their respective homes which mark the onset of the festivity with community feasting, singing and dancing that continues for three to five days. *Po:ro apong* and *no:gin apong* (dark and white varieties of rice-beer beer), *purang*, *a'eg yektag* (roasted pork), *allum oying* (curry of pulses mixed with pork or chicken), fish curry/roast, etc. are the main items of feast. In the evening the youths perform the *gumrag so:man* in the courtyard of every household which is a combination of dance following the rhythmical tunes of the beats of drums and cymbals. The menfolk play on the musical instruments while the females with their fine movements enact the paddy transplantation and harvesting which are accompanied by appropriate songs. They conclude the performance by showering blessings on the host family who treat them with a feast as well as the offering of a pair of betel nut and leaf and of late some money is also offered to the performing group. This

dance-song called *paksong-moman* which usually lasts whole night is regarded to evoke the germination of the newly sown seeds and hence it can be taken as a kind of fertility cult where every villager irrespective of age and gender can participate freely. The varied self-woven colourful traditional attires worn by them with intricate thread works add a charm to the entire atmosphere. The entire festivity concludes within a span of three to five days with variations from group to group in the village which concludes with a community feast *dopan-ti:pan*.

Change is an inevitable phenomenon and every trait in a cultural system undergoes modification and transformation in the course of its progress and the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* is also not an exception to this fact. The investigators in the course of their data collection had the opportunity to be a part of the festival and have an insight on the manner of its observation among the Mishings of Borpomua village. Interactions with elderly and aged village folks have revealed certain significant changing aspects of the festival in the present context. In the days of yore there was no fixed date for celebrating the festival which varied from village to village as per the convenience of the people but gradually the concern of ethnic identity and unification of all the Mishings lead to the growth of a number of socio-political bodies which have taken the initiative to fix a single date for the observance of *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* by all the Mishings in the pan-India level. A similar case is observed by Medhi and Goswami (2013, 2014) among the Hmar tribe of Assam where the community has fixed December 5 as the day for observing their traditional harvest festival of Sikpui Ruoi which in the bygone days was celebrated for a fortnight and even longer in the post-harvest time period. Perhaps such modifications can be viewed as a way of uniting all the members of the community concerned irrespective of geographic and economic conditions which play a significant role in maintaining group solidarity and fellow-feeling as well as projecting the same in the wider social environment.

The present study has also highlighted the recent trend of the symbolic observation of the ceremonial rituals in the courtyard of the household by most of the villagers in lieu of their agricultural fields which according to them entails minimum economic and time consumption.

Further, due to the same reason it has also been found that in big villages like the one under consideration the feasting and performance of the *gumrag so:man* is arranged hamlet wise where all the households belonging to a particular hamlet jointly observe the activities related to the festival and the old practice of visiting individual households by the youths for performing the *gumrag so:man* is discontinued. A new trend is the practising of organizing the festival in a single platform (the village community ground or field) for the entire village people which involves the participation of Mishings as well as non-Mishings from neighbouring areas. Stalwart personalities from political and socio-cultural arenas are invited as chief guests to grace the occasion. Members of the youth bodies and students' organization, village council, local political parties as well as well-known figures of the village take active part in the entire affair. A unique system of unfurling the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* flag (a traditional hand-woven Mishing cloth) by the chief guest is practised followed by lectures on the importance of the festival by the dignitaries before the formal beginning of the cultural items of song, dance and various competitions like local games, traditional attire contest and the general public feast which continues till late evening. Performance of non-Mishing cultural items (Assamese, Hindi, etc.) by individual participants as well as professional troupes is also an added new trait. The researchers observed the coverage of the event by the local media channels which points to the attempt of popularizing the ideology of the festival among the general mass and hence contributing to the preservation of the identity and rich cultural heritage of the Mishing community. Moreover, Mising people who are living in urban areas away from their native village organize themselves to observe the festival in a symbolic manner either in private grounds or public halls to showcase their unique culture as well as adhering to the community sentiment of their fellow mates in their native lands.

Coming to the issue of religious conversion, among the Mishing the acceptance of Christianity is a recent development which dates back to the 1980s unlike most of the other tribal communities of Northeast India among whom evangelization started in the early 1900s. Christianity had a far reaching impact on the life ways of the numerous ethnic communities who were proselytized in terms of their belief system, food habits, observance of

socio-cultural festivals and so forth. The adoption of Christianity in most of the tribal societies like the Hmars, Garos, Khasis, Kukis and so on has led to the abolition of their traditional religious belief system, created a divide between the Christian and non-Christian members of the same community, introduction of Christian festivals, replacement of the traditional youth dormitories by youth clubs and Sunday schools, ban on using of homemade rice-beer in rituals as well as for drinking purpose and has even profoundly modified most of their traditional festivals. But during the course of the study it was found that in terms of the observance of the Ali-Aye-Lrigang in Borpomua village, both the Christian as well as non-Christian Mishings observe it unitedly with no major changes in its traditional features.

It is true that using of homemade rice-beer (*apong*) in rituals as well as for drinking goes against the tenets of Christianity, but in the present scenario a good number of the convert Mishings were found to be adhering to their pre-Christian traditional norms of extensively using rice-beer. Again, it was interesting to find the pastor of a church as well as a number of Christianized families performing the ritual ceremony in the courtyard of their house without the use of *apong*, thus upholding the values of their new religion. While sowing the seeds symbolically they invoke the name of Jesus Christ along with their traditional deities of *Donyi-Polo* (sun-moon) to protect their paddy from evil forces and damage leading to a bountiful harvest. Also the converts observe a prayer gathering in their respective church by reciting verses from the Bible and lighting candles. In the hamlet-wise celebration of the *gumrag so:man* church fathers of Mission schools of the area belonging to different ethnic communities are invited who are seen to actively participate in the merry-making wearing the traditional hand-woven Mishing male jacket (*mibu galuk*) on top of their clergy robes with the localities and even consume rice-beer and other traditional delicacies. It is also interesting to note that during the festival, the Mishing pastors of the village wear *mibu galuk* wherein along with their traditional motifs, and those of the Holy Cross and the Bible are also woven artistically with colourful threads.

Conclusion

What comes to revelation from the study is the blending or syncretistic co-existence of both the traditional Mishing traits as well as the newly introduced Christian elements in the universe of the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* festival of the Mishing. The impact of modern education, growing sense of ethnic identity consciousness among the natives as well as numerous contact with outside forces and agencies have led to certain changes in the manner of its celebration in the present day context. A kind of fusion involving reciprocal transformation in certain traits of the festival is observed. The study shows that in spite of the acceptance of Christianity, an alien religion, the Mishing have not abandoned their traditional cultural values which get reflected in the observance of their traditional festivals as the *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* where most of the traditional features have been retained like the symbolic sowing of seeds, performance of traditional songs and dances in traditional attires with the accompaniment of indigenous musical instruments as well as use of locally brewed rice-beer. Today, in most of the traditional societies the sense of growing revivalism and ethnic assertion is very much prominent and the Mishing are not an exception to this phenomenon. Nevertheless, in spite of the onslaught of modernity and religious conversion the Mishing are prudently holding on to the ethos of their pristine culture by observing this significant festival every year with much traditional fanfare and gaiety.

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