



An Ethnographic Profile of the Monsang Tribe

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethnographic profile of the Monsang tribe, one of the lesser known Naga tribes in the Chandel district of Manipur, a northeastern state of India. The objective of the paper is to make a systematic ethnographic compilation of Monsang history, society, culture and tradition and religious beliefs which are not much available yet. The rich oral traditions in the form of folksongs and folklores serve as a rich source for understanding their history, culture and tradition. The data were collected using an ethnographic technique, viz., observation, informal interviews and in-depth interviews with select elders of one Monsang village (Monsang Pantha) as key informants for the study. The study will certainly benefit younger generations to get a better knowledge of their history, culture and traditional practices in a written form and also serve as an account for those interested to know about the Monsang community in the region.

Introduction

Manipur, one of the north-eastern states of India, is a home to various ethnic communities speaking different languages, having different cultures and traditions that distinguished their identity from another ethnic communities. The Monsang belong to one of these ethnic communities with a distinct tradition, culture and language which are preserved in their folksongs, folktales, etc. The main objective of this paper is to make a systematic ethnographic compilation of Monsang society and culture. We attempt to provide their origin, society, culture and tradition, religious beliefs, etc. So that it is handed down to the younger generation a better knowledge of their history, culture and tradition in written form. The Monsang do not have much of written accounts of their history, but they have rich oral traditions in the form of folksongs and folklores which serves as a rich source for understanding their history and culture.

Methodology

The paper is an ethnographic in nature with a descriptive approach. The data were collected using an ethnographic technique, viz., observation, informal interviews and in-depth interviews with select elders of Monsang Pantha village who have better knowledge of Monsang history, traditions and culture as key informants for the study. The reason for the choice was because they are knowledgeable, and

because they were also convenient for the first author to regularly meet them. In addition to this, the first author's identity as a Monsang and his lived experience in the community gave us a better opportunity in the collection of data as well as in making the study more objective. The data were collected in two field trips conducted in June, 2018 and December-January, 2018-2019. Additional data were collected from Souvenirs, booklets on the Monsang which circulated locally, and other relevant books.

The people

The Monsangs bear Mongoloid features, and probably, they are of Mongolian origin. Physically, they are medium in height, generally with a fair, yellowish complexion, straight black hairs, and dark brown eyes. Men are strong, active, hill climbers and hard working. Women have a fair complexion of a yellowish colour and they are beautiful and charming. The Monsang are simple, friendly and hospitable in nature.

The legend of origin

The history of the Monsang is shrouded in mystery. However, the oral tradition handed down by their forefathers from generations to the present day say that, in the hoary past, the ancestors believed in the existence of two worlds. One is the present world and the other is the underworld, known to them as Turiih. The legend goes on saying that the ancestors lived for many generations in the underworld, believed to be ruled by a fierce and powerful Ogre, a shift-shaper of great supernatural powers. Due to his repressive, inhuman and savage rule, the ancestors wanted to escape from his powerful clutch. The ancestors also believed that these two worlds were linked by a narrow zig-zag path leading to a Cave. As they moved in search of a better place where they would live a better life, they found this narrow zig-zag path leading to a Cave (Research on Monsang (Sirti) tribe development in partnership with Sirti Upa Ruh (Monsang Tribe Union) 1).

The ancestors came out from a Cave (*khor*¹ in Monsang) from a southern direction. Hence, they called themselves Sirti meaning 'southerners'. The Cave was sealed with a huge stone, therefore they tried to move aside the huge stone in order to make passage to go out of the Cave, but a ferocious tiger (*rhimpuw* in Monsang) started lurking for the human prey that came out of the cave mouth and ate them. A Monsang folksong describes this confrontation with the tiger as follows:

*Asen ne asen ne
Rhimpuupa no asen ne
Asen na oum maa go
Mingkhiing bourna asen ne.*

(Free English Rendering) The tiger sharpened his teeth with the intention to devour human beings and animals. The enraged tiger struck his nails into the soil, at the foot of the ushoi tree (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 14).

The legend also says that one day a courageous man named Thumpungpa worked out a plan to untackle the situation. The ancestors also believed that the Supreme Being, Thangnhang² had pity on them and came to their rescue by sending a large number of hornbills (*puwraang* in Monsang) followed

1 Khor is a Monsang word for hole. Here, it stands for cave.

2 Thangnhang is a Monsang word for God. The forefathers of the Monsangs had a belief in the existence of One Supreme Being, whom they considered to be the Creator of the Universe and Source of all life. Today, after converting to Christianity, the concept of this Being is attributed to the Christian God, and they call Him with the same name, Thangnhang.

by a huge number of warblers (beriih in Monsang) (Research on Monsang (Sirti) tribe development in partnership with Sirti Upa Ruh (Monsang Tribe Union), 1). Thumpungpa called upon the warblers to beat the drum around the Cave. The hornbills were called upon to stage a dance in the tempo of the drum-beating of the warblers (Khartu & Singh, 2011:14). This superb performance of the warblers enchanted the tiger and his attention was diverted towards the dance of the hornbills and the warblers (Souvenir Golden Jubilee cum *Ekam* Celebration, Monsang Pantha village 1952-2003, May 13th – 14th 2003, 26). Taking this advantage, Thumpungpa and his men gathered strength and charged at the tiger with arrows and spears and killed the beast. This episode is also narrated in their folksong which runs as:

*Ruungmin thiipa no,
Tounlham akhaam eh,
Akhiu lhamtha ettha oh,
Tunoung lhamlha ettha eh,
Jopa thiisam oh thiironge thiisaronge.*

(Free English Rendering) The crooked tiger who obstructed our way was slain by our benevolent forefathers.

Hence, the ancestors believed that after living many generations in the underworld, they began to settle in this present world. It is not possible to figure out the geographical location of their mythical origin. However, some elders say that the Cave might be located somewhere in the southern part of China.³ This suggests that they might have migrated from the southern part of China towards south-eastern part of Manipur through Burma (now Myanmar).

Another legend says that after their emergence from the Cave, many dispersed in different directions and but the ancestors moved eastward from Heikaching (Centre of dispersal of different tribes, probably Anal, Lamkang, Monsang, Moyon, Tarao, etc.). However, in the course of the journey, the ancestors might have move westward to the south-eastern part of Manipur through Myanmar. It is said that while they entered Manipur, they passed through Ttashuwng bung (which in Manipuri is known as Houbi ching), which is believed to be one of the hill ranges somewhere in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.

Early places of settlements of the Monsangs

Today, the elders narrate that the ancestors camped in different areas in their long journey that took them years and years. However, they made their first settlement at a place which they called Tungphejur (tung 'arrive', phe 'plain' and jur 'bottom, last', which can be roughly translated as at last we have arrived at a fertile land for settlement). Tungphejur is the first Monsang settlement after they entered Manipur. Any settlement prior to this settlement at Tungphejur is not known. Monsang folksong mentions the settlement at Tungphejur.

*Eh aa eh kelinbung naba,
Tungphejur indang eh,
Chechin aa,
Tungphejur chechin eh.*

3 Ng. Benou. (2019, January 9). Personal Interview.

(Free English Rendering) *A peep from kelinbung catches the sight of the abandoned settlement of Tungphejur (A song sung by a person who happened to be a resident of Kelinbung) (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 16).*

After this, they settled in Ttattejur, Kelinbung, Rungpuwtung, Tanglin and Sampun, Linbelang, Penthalin, Samnungthar, Thechangkung, Thiirkung, Tangva and Runong, Kursuw and Hmotte, Terengkung and Chiivasuw and Pentha-Khuwpuw (Souvenir Golden Jubilee Cum *Ekam* Celebrations, Monsang Pantha village 1952-2003, May 13th – 14th 2003, 30-32). Some elders say that probably Tungphejur, Ttattejur and Kelinbung were located somewhere in the Churachandpur district while the rest of the settlements are in the Chandel district in Manipur.⁴

Today, the Monsangs are found in six villages close to each other, viz; Monsang Pantha (Pentha Khuwpuw), Japhou, Liwa Sarei, Liwa Khullen, Changnhe and Liwachangning in Chandel district of Manipur, India. Monsang Pantha (Pentha Khuwpuw) and Japhou are close to the Chandel district headquarter, while Liwa Sarei, Liwa Khullen, Changnhe and Liwachangning are settled along the sides of the Chandel-Pallel (towards Imphal) road.

The etymology of 'Sirti'

The Monsangs call themselves Sirti. According to their legends, after the emergence from the cave and the dispersal at Heikaching, Thumpungpa led his people in search of a suitable place for settlement where they would also find abundance of water. After travelling for days and nights and still could not find water sufficient for settlement, they believed that through the guidance of the Supreme Being, Thangnhang, they saw a bird called Jiingraang perched on a huge rock. The bird began to 'chirp' at them. Later, the bird flew down re-sounding 'chirp-chirp'. When they followed the bird, they reached a place where they found plenty of water flowing down from the hill top and they settled around the area. This settlement would probably refer to their first settlement at Tungphejur.⁵

They believed that the word *chii* 'water' (in Monsang) was derived from the 'chirp' of the bird. The chirping of the bird 'chirp, chirp', apart from the bird natural way of producing sound, could be interpreted as the bird's communication to the ancestor that there was water. Hence, when the ancestor followed the bird, they found abundance of water available to them. Since, then they understood that the bird was actually signaling them that there was water.

The ancestor always recalled that they had come from *ati* 'south'. This means they are southerners. Now that they had abundance of water to survive in a beautiful location, they might have expressed their joy and contentment, with the word *chiiti*, which is formed by the combination of two words i.e., *chii* 'water' and *ati* 'south' (Research on Monsang (Sirti) tribe development in partnership with Sirti Upa Ruh (Monsang Tribe Union), 2). This *chiiti* could be interpreted as 'the southerner's water' or 'southerners have water'. In course of time, the word *chiiti* might have been pronounced as *sirti*. Thus, the people led by Thumpungpa called themselves as Sirti.

The origin of the term 'Monsang'

The Monsangs call themselves Sirti. The genesis of the present name is that once upon a time when

4 Ng. Benou. (2019, January 9). Personal Interview.

5 Ng. Benou. (2019, January 9). Personal Interview.

they were settled at Rungpuwtung (which was the 4th Monsang settlement), there was a popular leader of the community named Mosang. He was also the Khulaa, the head of the village at that time. He and his people had regular contact with people in the surrounding areas. Eventually, Rungpuwtung village was referred to as Mosang's village. Later, the word Mosang was distorted to Monsang (Khartu & Singh, 2011:13). In this way, the Sirti came to be known as Monsang by others.

Monsang as a tribe

The Monsangs identified themselves as one of the Naga tribes in Manipur. The Monsang are also one of the thirty-three recognized Schedule Tribes⁶ in Manipur; they were recognized as a Schedule tribe by Government of India in 1956, vide order no. 18/1956 Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India Notification No. SRO.2477, dated 29th October, 1956 (Oliver, 2010). Despite few in population, the Monsang were recognized very early as a Schedule tribe, through their hard work to keep their culture, tradition, language and identity unique to themselves.

Demographic profile

As mentioned earlier, the Monsang are found in six villages close to each other, viz; Monsang Pantha, Japhou, Liwa Sarei, Liwa Khullen, Changnhe and Liwachangning in the Chandel district of Manipur, India. Hence, Monsang is spoken in the Chandel district of Manipur. According to the Census of India, 2011, Monsang speakers were only 2,427 only. The male population is recorded as 1179, while female population is 1248.

Society

The structure of Monsang society is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature, marked by the husband (father) as the head of the family and the wife (mother) and children dependent on him. Children take their father's title (Sungkhor in Monsang) and the inheritance is through the youngest son in the family.

Clan system

The Monsang, from the time they came out of the Cave, had two moieties or clans: the Simpuwti and the Rinheti. Both the Simpuwti and Rinheti moieties have seven sub-clans (Sungkhor) each, named after their forefathers. The sub-clans of the Simpuwti moiety are - i. Ngoruw (~ Ngjirii), ii. Thumhli, iii. Kiirii and iv. Chalha, v. Rhanglum, vi. Eenlha Bungjeer and vii. Sherbum, whereas the sub-clans of the Rinheti moiety are - i. Rohin, ii. Wanglar, iii. Tthesong, iv. Hongam, v. Shongsir, vi. Khartu and vii. Bingpi (now extinct) (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 36; *The Regulation of the Monsang Tribe Customs and Usages*, 2013:2).

Marriage system

In olden days, marriage was confined only within their community. Marriage was also exogamous, i.e., between two intermarrying groups, namely, the Simpuwti and the Rinheti moieties. Hence, marriage among the different sub-clans of the same moiety, be it Simpuwti or Rinheti moiety were

⁶ Cf: Department of Tribal Affairs and Hills, Government of Manipur. Retrieved from <<http://tahmanipur.gov.in/Pages/schedule%20tribes.aspx>> (Last accessed on 22-01-2019).

never permitted.⁷

The traditional Monsang marriage was through the *Imah-itu* (marriage by service). The *Imah-itu* was a service rendered to the father-in-law for marrying his daughter. According to Monsang traditional customary practice, after the *Juhtii* (engagement), the boy would go and stay at the girl's house and start living with her and render his service to his father-in-law for three years, till the final feast of marriage was performed (The Regulation of the Monsang Tribe Customs and Usages, 2013:4). During his residence at his father-in-law's house, the boy's parents had to pay the bride price by offering meat and rice beer (home brewed wine) in three installments: *Chalha*, *Thungphan* and *Min-itu*. The first two installments would consist of two jars of rice beer, one pig and a quantity of sticky rice, and on the top of the hip of sticky rice an egg would be placed. Then, during the *Min-itu*, which is the final installment, the offering consisted of metal gong⁸, one pig of five wais⁹ or one cow, an unprepared but boiled hen and a basket of boiled sticky rice. On the eve of the *Min-itu*, prior to taking anything, the metal gong, rice beer pot and meat would be placed in the middle of the house. The boy's family and relatives would be seated on the right side and the girl's family and relatives on the left side and the couple would be seated somewhere in the middle. They would sing the *Riikhii lha* (marriage song) and consumed the items set before them. The following morning, the boiled sticky rice which would be wrapped in palm leaves and would be kept just above the fire place on the previous night, would be taken down and consumed by girls belonging to the girl's *Sungkhor*, as they enjoy the song of the *Min* (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 38-39). After the *Min*, there would be a customary send-off programme wherein the couple with their children if they have some, together with the parents and dear ones, leave the girl's house and go to the husband's house. Thus, this marked the completion of the boy's customary obligation of three years of *Min-Itu*.¹⁰

In the recent past, the Monsang Tribe Union (MTU) on mutual agreement had passed a resolution and amended the marriage rule, thereby, allowing marriage between different *Sungkhors* within the same moiety (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 42; The Regulation of the Monsang Tribe Customs and Usages, 2013:2-3). Furthermore, having embraced Christianity, the Monsangs have abandoned the age-old traditional customary way of entering into marriage. Nowadays, once the boy and the girl's families agreed upon the marriage, they fixed a day for a customary *Juhtii* feast. According to the Custom, the boy's family has to throw a customary *Juhtii* feast to confirm the engagement to the society. Buffalos and pigs are butchered for this feast. In this feast, some portion of the meat will go to the girl's *Sungkhor*, while the remaining parts of the meat are distributed to all who are present for the feast. This is a purely customary engagement feast of the Monsang society (The Regulation of the Monsang Tribe Customs and Usages, 2013:6). With this *Juhtii* feast, the boy and the girl are finally engaged and accepted by the Monsang society. It is a final stage in the Monsang Customary process of marriage and the boy and girl can start living a conjugal life. However, being all Christians now, the Monsangs prefer to get married in the Church to receive a Holy Marriage. In such case, it is flexible; some people performed the *Juhtii* feast a few days ahead of the Holy Marriage day, while some people combined the *Juhtii* feast and the Holy Marriage on the same day. The religious ceremony of the Holy Marriage is usually performed in the Church or other favourable place where people could gather together. The boy and the girl would exchange their marriage vows in the name of God and in the presence of a Priest or Reverend or Pastor and before the community.

7 Ng. Benou. (2018, June 28). Personal Interview.

8 It is round and flat in shape with big protrusion in the center. It is used for musical instrument on festivals and also for announcing death. It was considered an item of great wealth. In Monsang it is called *Daar* (also called *Minjandaar* or *Daarkung*).

9 It is a common local measurement which is equivalent to the length covered by two fists when held together.

10 Kh. Loveson. (2018, June 10). Personal Interview.

In case of elopement, the boy's family must immediately inform the girl's family and seek for the girl's parents' consent. This is called *Aminthang* (post elopement marriage proposal) in Monsang. There have been cases, when the girl's family refused in the beginning, but later they consented to it. In such cases too, the boy's family must perform a traditional Customary *Juhtii*.¹¹

Culture and tradition

Many of the cultural and traditional practices of the Monsang are deeply rooted with their daily life and centre on agricultural activities. Some of the cultural and traditional practices of the Monsangs are discussed below in brief:

Birth ceremony

The birth of a child is a blessing and the child is received with much joy and happiness by the family and dear ones. When a pregnant woman starts her labour, all necessary arrangements for delivery are made to ensure the safety of the child and the mother. Delivery is usually performed in a close room with the help of a midwife and few elderly women who assist her in giving birth to a child. In olden days, if the labour pain goes on and the woman has a difficult delivery, then, there is a ritual of untying of all knots, opening of doors, loosening of garments for speedy and safe delivery. Soon after the birth of a child, the umbilical cord is usually cut by one of the attendants with a bamboo blade known as *Menaang* in Monsang, and the placenta is packed and buried in the compound by the father of the child, or by any of the elders in the family. The mother would drop few drops of her breast milk on the navel of the child, so that it dries up quickly.¹²

The Name-giving ceremony

The name of the new born child is given either on the day the child is born or on any day after the child is born. However, on the seventh day of the birth of a new baby in a family, the name-giving ceremony (*rombing ephuw* in Monsang) is performed. Monsangs have the tradition of naming their children after their parents or grandparents. Either full name or part of the syllables of their parent's or grandparent's name would be added to the name given to the child. This is one way of remembering their origin or ancestors.¹³ Pigs or chickens are slaughtered for a great feast. There is no ritual associated with this ceremony. However, the Monsang being all Christians, a Priest or Reverent or Pastor are also called to pray for the good health of the child, the mother and the family.

The Ear piercing ceremony

The ear piercing ceremony (*Ina iviib* in Monsang) of a child is another important occasion of celebration. There is no fix day or month or year for ear piercing. The parents of the child decide the opportune time for the ear piercing. The child's ear is usually pierced by the child's maternal uncle (mother's father or mother's brothers). Pigs or chickens would be killed for the feast. Home brewed wine is also served to some elders attending.¹⁴

11 Ng. Benou. (2018, June 28). Personal Interview.

12 Kh. Tonithar. (2018, June 25). Personal Interview.

13 Ng. Benou. (2018, June 25). Personal Interview.

14 Ng. Benou. (2018, June 25). Personal Interview.

The death and burial ceremony

The Monsang recognized two kinds of death, namely, unnatural death and natural death. In olden days, the burying of the dead body depended on the nature of the death.

a) Unnatural death

Death caused by accidents, drowning, stabbing, or any unnatural death is categorized as *Saar* in Monsang. In the olden days, when such unnatural death occurred outside the person's house, the dead bodies were not brought to the house, and were not buried in the common burial ground. Instead, they were buried where the death occurred. In case such death occurred within the village, the dead bodies were buried at some distance from the common burial ground. The burial ceremonies were performed by the brothers-in-law of the deceased. After returning from the burial, the *Ethiim* (traditional priest) would offer prayers for god's blessing upon the departed soul at the deceased house. Then, the following day, the villagers would observe a genna (taboo, *Bor ethaang* in Monsang), on which outsiders were not allowed to enter the village and villagers were not allowed to go out of the village (Khartu & Singh, 2011:46). However, this practice has been abandoned now.

b) Natural death

When a person dies of sickness or old age, it was considered a natural death. In case of natural death, the Monsangs bury the corpse in a village burial ground. Earlier, the Monsangs had a burial ground for every lineage. But now, after converting to Christianity, they have a common cemetery for the village. The dead body is given a final bath, dressed and covered with traditional costumes. The dead body is also kept for a night so that the family and relatives from far and near may come and have a last glance and pay homage to the departed soul. The village observed that day as genna and villagers take a day off from their normal work as a mark of respect for the deceased person till the funeral is over.

The Monsangs are all Christians now. Nowadays, the burial is conducted according to Christian norms. The Reverend or Pastor or Priest leads the people for the funeral service. The near and dear ones and the villagers would assemble at the deceased house and the Reverend or Pastor or Priest would lead them in prayers for the departed soul and they would proceed to the village cemetery and bury the dead. The Catholics take the coffin to the Church for a funeral Mass or a funeral service without Mass, before they proceed to the cemetery.

Attires

Monsang has rich traditional attires. The traditional shawls which are worn by both men and women are called *piin* in Monsang. There are two traditional *piin*: *Rangam piin* (see Figure 1) and *Ruwngsin piin* (see Figure 2). They are rectangular in shape, around 2.5 meters long and 1.05 meter wide, and woven with different colours which reflect their unique history and culture. The *Raangam piin* has alternating narrow blue and black stripes throughout its length. Across the breadth at both the ends there are three spear-type linings white in colour, which in Monsang are known as *Moka*, also bordered by two dotted white linings. The *Ruwngsin piin* also has the same size and pattern. but it has alternating narrow red and black stripes throughout its length. Both the *Rangam piin* and *Ruwngsin piin* sometimes also sporting white dotted stars on the body of the shawl. They are designed and woven by women.

a) Men's attires

Men's traditional attire includes the *luwkhum* (headwear with a traditional man's scarf which is tied with a knot above the forehead), the *piinlheb* (a half of the unstitched shawl worn from the waist down to the knee by tying on the waist), another smaller *piinlheb* (worn across the body from right shoulder down to the left hip) and the half sleeve white shirt¹⁵ (see Figure 3 and Figure 4 for men's attire).

b) Women's attires

Women's traditional wrapper is called *Enhiih* and there are different types, such as, the *echang enhiih* (used in traditional dance), the *eduung enhiih* (used in marriage), the *savang enhiih* (used in all occasions, except death), the *ethii enhiih* (used during death), etc. (see Figures 5 to 9 for some Monsang traditional women's wrappers).

While performing a traditional dance, women are more decorated with traditional attires, which include the followings: an *Echang enhiih* (traditional wrapper), an *Enhiihhta* (green and white lining smaller wrapper with red linings at the border worn underneath the *Echang enhiih*, see Figure 10), a *Luwkhum* (orange-coloured scarf, which is worn as a headwear during the *Ekam* festival), a *Luwkhumpa* (a headwear made of bamboo sticks decorated with feathers of hornbill, peacocks, fowls, etc. worn during a traditional dance), a half sleeve white shirt, the *Naarhuw* (earrings), the *ruwthii* (necklace), a *Lusen* (a red bead necklace worn along with *Ruwthii*), a *Roka* (a long white bead necklace worn across the body, from right shoulder down to the left hip, at the end of which it hangs a big sea shell known as *Kebuwr*), a *Pentha* (bangle, worn on the wrist), a *haar* and a *kolencho* (a *haar* is a silver coated arm ring and a *kolencho* is a gold coated arm ring, both worn on both arms)¹⁶ (for the women's dance dress, see Figure 10 and also refer Figure 3 and 4).

Traditional dance

The Monsang have various traditional dances pertaining to various events and festivals. Traditional dances are performed with traditional attires. Traditional dances are accompanied by folksongs sung generally in chorus, relative to the festivals or occasions. The Monsang traditional dances are given below in brief:

- i. ***Ekam laam (Ekam dance)*** – *Ekam laam* includes the following dances performed during the *Ekam* festival. They are –
 - a. *Eniisuw laam (sunrise dance)* – is the first dance performed on the second day of the *Ekam*. The dance is staged around the *Shiling* (a horn shaped wooden pillar), erected in front attached to the *Khuwngkung*¹⁷ *echu* (*Khuwngkung* pillar, see Figure 11) to which a Mithun to be sacrificed is tied with a rope, after a loud cry of victory over the killing of a ferocious tiger during the emergence from the cave led by Thumpungpa, the legendary hero, is sounded (Souvenir *Ekam* Madeen Cultural Festival of Monsang, Monsang Pantha, 28th-30th April, 2011:3). When this dance is performed, a traditional song known as *Eniisuw shiling verna lha* (song sung at sunrise around the *Shiling*) is sung, and people seated round the *Khuwngkung* witness the great event.
 - b. *Khuwngkung laam* (dance around the *Khuwngkung*) – is a dance performed around the erected *Khuwngkung* to express jubilation over the *Ekam* festival on the second day of

15 Kh. Tonithar. (2018, December 23). Personal Interview.

16 Kh. Tonithar. (2018, December 23). Personal Interview.

17 *Khuwngkung* is a raised wooden stage on which singers and musicians stand and performed the *Ekam* songs.

the *Ekam* celebration. When this dance is performed a *Khuwngkung verna lha* (song sung around the *Khuwngkung*) is sung.

- ii. *Rhimpuw laam* (tiger dance) – is a Monsang traditional dance enacting the killing of a ferocious tiger during emergence from the cave.
- iii. *Jaakha laam* (Jaakha dance) – is a merry-making dance performed on a feast thrown by a rich person to express gratitude for the bountiful gift of wealth and happiness.
- iv. *Een verna laam* (dance around the house) – is a ritual dance performed during a house dedication. This dance is also performed during the *Ekam* festival (Souvenir *Ekam* Madeen Cultural Festival of Monsang, Monsang Pantha, 28th-30th April, 2011:3-4).

Folksongs

Monsang folksongs are a rich source to understand Monsang history and culture. Every festival is celebrated with different folksongs and traditional dances. The context in which a song is sung is important. Some of the folksongs of the Monsang are mentioned below, with the different occasions in which they are sung:

- i. *Eniisuw Shiling vernal lha* – sung at sunrise around the Shiling at *Ekam* festival.
- ii. *Een verna lha* – sung during the inauguration of a new house.
- iii. *Serii lha* – sung around the Shiling just before the Mithun is killed at the *Ekam* festival.
- iv. *Khuwngkhung verna lha* – sung while a dance is performed around the *Khuwngkhung* at the *Ekam* festival.
- v. *Eniitaa lha* – sung at sunset at the *Ekam* festival. It is a symbolic expression of happiness over the celebration of the *Ekam* festival.
- vi. *Jaakha lha* – sung at the Jaakha festival. It means merry-making. the Jaakha festival is usually offered by a rich individual to thank God for the gift of his wealth and rich harvest.
- vii. *Kolee lha* – sung when guests are made to dance to entertain the host at *Ekam* festival.
- viii. *Ema lha* – sung when the male-in-laws of the host are made to dance at a marriage.

(Souvenir *Ekam* Madeen Cultural Festival of Monsang, Monsang Pantha, 28th-30th April, 2011:3-4).

Folktales

The Monsangs have rich folktales which in the past were handed down from the elders to the present generation. It is one of the ways by which traditional, cultural, social and religious ideas and values are imparted to the young generation. The Monsang folktales tell us about some men and women of wisdom, courage as well as humour. The folktales are not just tales but a source of creative inspiration, moral uprightness, courage, honesty, wisdom, practices and beliefs, etc. It also has a lesson against wickedness, dishonesty, etc. It is also a source of entertainment with their imaginary characters and with their either happy or sad ending. Some of the Monsang folktales are – *Tonglangching* (story of an orphan boy who tried to marry a princess), *Jurapa and Juranu* (story of a hard working couple who constantly engaged in chasing monkeys for destroying their crops. The story narrates how they tried to lock the monkeys in their hut at field and hit them mercilessly. From this story, it is believed that monkeys' buttocks are reddened because Jurapa hit them), *Buling* (story of an orphan boy and how he became a rich and wealthy man), *Hemon and Hesing* (about two brothers: the elder was clever but wicked and the younger simple, but foolish), *Juung themhin* (Monkey story: about how monkeys

evolved from humans).¹⁸

Musical instruments

Music is an important component while folk songs and folk dances are performed on various occasions. The dances are accompanied by traditional musical instruments, such as, the *khuung* (leather drum), the *pengkum* (trumpet), the *ruwseem* (a wind instrument), the *siirtah riikii* (*mithun* horn), and the *daar* (metal gong), the *tamphu* (bamboo flute), the *sananta* (traditional violin), etc.

Festivals

Monsang festivals are generally related to agricultural activities like seed sowing and harvesting. They are the *Sachii nsi* (the seed sowing festival), the *Buurhin esa* (the harvesting feast), the *Waang ncheh* (the closing of the harvesting season) and the *Ekam* (a feast of merit). Through these festivals, they express their distinctness and beauty of their dress and dance. They are described below in brief:

a) the *Sachii nsi* (the seed sowing festival)

In the olden days the, Monsangs were practically *jhum* field cultivators. *Jhum* cultivation, also known as the slash and burn agriculture, usually starts in the month of February. After the selected sites for *jhum* cultivation were cleared off by cutting down trees and shrubs, setting the fallen branches afire and making the ground ready for sowing, people gathered for the *Sachii nsi* in the field. Prior to this, villagers would contribute a jar of home brewed wine to the *Khurpu*. The *Khurpu* is a village elder cum priest. Agriculture-related ceremonies are carried out by him. On the day of the *Sachii nsi*, all the villagers would gather in the field and the *Khurpu* would first sow some seeds, after which all the villagers would start sowing in their fields with shouts of joy. On behalf of the people, the *Khurpu* would pray God for good crops at the season's end, and for the well-being of the people. After the sowing, the villagers would assemble at the house of the *Khurpu* and enjoy food and drinks.¹⁹ However, this festive event is not celebrated any longer as in the olden days.

b) the *Buurhin esa* (the harvesting feast)

This festival is about the feast of the newly harvested rice. Once they have harvested their new crops, they would gather together for a feast in which they enjoy the newly harvested rice. Today, this festival is celebrated on 23rd October, every year. The celebration is also modernized in the sense that there is a great common meal for the villagers. Buffaloes and pigs are slaughtered and prepared for the common meal. Every family would bring their cooked rice and share the commonly prepared curry marking the joy of the good harvest.

c) the *Waang ncheh* (the closing of the harvesting season)

The *Waang ncheh* is a feast which marks the end of the harvesting season. In the olden days, millets (*niimmbaa* in Monsang) were harvested after paddy. So, it refers to the last day of the harvesting of millets. According to Monsang Custom, only certain *Sungkhors* (sub-clans) like *Tihesong*, *Hongam*, *Shongsir* and *Rohin* of *Rinheti* moiety can be the herald of the end of the harvesting season. The last person whose field is to be harvested was guarded by the youths who were armed with spears and

18 Kh. Peno. (2018, June 20). Personal Interview.

19 Ng. Benou. (2018, June 25). Personal Interview.

daos. A feast is also arranged by him in the field. At the end, the *Ethiim* would be the last to leave the field. He would recite the names of all lineages of the Monsang and shout aloud so that no souls of the villagers would be left behind in the field; all souls should return to the village (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 32). This is also no longer in practice.

d) the *Ekam* (feast of merit)

The *Ekam* festival is the biggest and richest Monsang cultural feast of merit celebrated over a bumper harvest with a series of ceremonial rituals. In the olden days, the *Ekam* festival was generally hosted during the *Tthaar Kumkhuw* (spring season) in the month of *Khosaam Mhotte* (March) or *Ttepuw* (April) by a rich man or well-off family for three consecutive days (sometimes lasting even up to 5-7 days) to express their deepest gratitude to *Thangnhang* (Almighty God) for his bountiful gift of life and wealth. The whole village would join him and his family in jubilation. In such celebration, a *Siirta* (*Mithun*) was offered as a sacrifice to Thangnhang and as food for men; a monolith and shiling (a horn shaped wooden pillar) were erected as a sign that God is happy and pleased with men and to bring prosperity to the whole community. The *Ekam* festival has four phases, which are to be celebrated in different years. They are as follows:

- i. *Zuhdung* – In *Zuhdung* no shiling or monument is erected.
- ii. *Laamlhu* – In *Laamlhu* one shiling and one monolith is erected.
- iii. *Shabe* – In *Shabe* two Monoliths with a shiling are erected.
- iv. *Madeen* – *Madeen* is the last and final *Ekam* in which the third monument with a shiling is erected to commemorate the end of the festival (Souvenir *Ekam* Madeen Cultural Festival of Monsang, Monsang Pantha, 28th-30th April, 2011:3).

The *Ethiim* (a traditional priest) would preside over the rituals such as sacrifices, killings, and oblation of rice beer etc. During the celebration, meat, wine and food were generously served to all. The purpose of the *Ekam* is to rejoice before the Lord who provides economic prosperity. For the Monsangs, it is an opportunity for thanksgiving to Thangnhang and an occasion for feasting, dancing and singing. The *Ekam* also reflects the generosity, spirit of oneness and sharing of the Monsang Community.

However, in the course of time, it has become difficult for an individual to host a *Ekam* because of the huge expenses a person has to incur. Therefore, in the recent past the festival has been confined to the village or tribe level. The four phases of the Monsang *Ekam* celebration, namely, *Zuhdung*, *Laamlhuw*, *Shabe* and *Madeen* have also been clubbed in order adapt to changing times. However, three consecutive days of celebration are still observed. The last *Ekam* celebration was during, “The First Monsang Cultural Exhibition 2016, Showcasing The Richest Monsang Naga *Ekam* Festival”, organized by the Sirti Upa Ruh (the Monsang Tribe Union), the apex body of the Monsang Naga people, under the theme “Our Culture For Posterity” on 15th January, 2016, at Monsang Pantha (Pentha Khuwpuw) village, Chandel District, Manipur.

As Monsang are all Christians now, celebration of Christmas, New Year’s Day and Easter have become important festivals of celebration. These festivals are celebrated with religious spirit as well as with community feasting.

Food habits

Rice is the staple food of the Monsangs. Besides rice, they take maize, millet, tapioca, potato,

pumpkin, etc. The Monsangs are fond of meat such as beef, chicken, pork, fish, wild animals like deer, boar, monkeys, etc. They relish different forms of rice beer which form a prominent place in their social and cultural life. They also take vegetables like cabbage, mustard leaf, beans, gourd, cucumber, yam, etc. which they cultivate in their *jhum* fields as well as at home. At home they also plant fruit bearing trees such as guava, mango and banana, etc.

Hunting

Hunting has been practiced since time immemorial. It is basically for food. There are two types of hunting: Individual hunting and Group hunting.

When an individual hunter kills an animal, the rear right hind leg is given to the hunter's sister (if he has two or more sisters, then to the eldest sister and in subsequent huntings, he might give it to his second sister, and later to the third sister), the ear with the neck portion without bones, called *Sána* (animal's ear) is given to his mother's brother (if he has two or more maternal uncles, then to the eldest maternal uncle as long as he is alive, and in case, if his first maternal uncle is dead, he will give it to his second maternal uncle), and the rear quarter portion of the killed animal, which is called *Sakuung* (hind quarter portion), is given to his *Lhupa* (bosom friend). Some portion of the meat is cooked and eaten together with relatives on that evening. It indicates the joy and success of the hunter. If someone happened to join the hunter either before or after the hunter has killed the animal, and helps him carry it till home, he is given a share, which is called *Enang-sa* (reached-in-time meat).²⁰ In case, the weapon with which the hunter killed the animal is borrowed from a friend, one front leg is given to the owner of the weapon.

When a hunter kills an animal during a group hunting, the head portion and abdominal parts are received by the hunter who killed it, while the remaining portions are equally distributed among the co-hunters (Khartu & Singh, 2011: 54). Some of the weapons used during hunting include spears, knives, bows and arrows, traps, guns, etc.

Religion

Before the advent of Christianity, the Monsangs believe in the existence of two main spirits: the good spirit and evil one. The good spirit is the Supreme Being whom they called *Thanghang*. All the good things, the beautiful world here below and the sky above and life are attributed to this Supreme Being, while the evil spirit is called *Umlé Puwrhang*, all sicknesses and misfortunes are believed to be caused by him.²¹

However, they did not have any idol, they did not construct any place of worship and they did not have any established form of worship. They prayed *Thanghang* for blessings, good health and prosperity, and for protection against evil spirits. The religious rituals and ceremonies are performed by the *Ethiim*. The *Ethiim* was a shaman cum medicine man. He was able to contact the good and evil spirits and cure people of their illness with his natural medicines of jungle herbs and roots. His primary duty was to offer sacrifice on behalf of the possessed person to the spirits and to propitiate the spirits and ward off the sufferings and torments caused by them. The *Ethiim* was also the mediator between man and the spirit or divine. It was believed that he can see, talk and please the spirits.

20 Ng. Belockson. (2019, January 9). Personal Interview.

21 Ng. Phamner. (2019, January 9). Personal Interview.

Their ancestors also believed in the existence of a soul within a person. The Monsang word for soul is 'chipi'.²² They believed that the *chipi* comes from Thangnhang who is the source of all life. They also believed that there is life after death. This is based in their belief in the immortality of the *chipi*. When a person is dead, the *chipi* leaves the dead body to live in the world of the dead. But the *chipi* is judged by Thangnhang, according to the life a person lived on earth and the nature of one's death. If the *chipi* is found good and virtuous it goes to its destiny called 'Rhingven' - where the *chipi* is rewarded for his good works with a happy life. Whereas, the bad *chipi* is sent down to 'Longkong', to live an unhappy life because a person did not live a good life while on earth.²³ The Monsang concept of *Rhingven* - a place where good souls are rewarded for their virtuous life and *Longkong* - a place where bad souls dwell is very much similar to the Christian understanding of virtuous souls going to heaven and immoral souls going to hell after death.

Today, the Monsangs are all Christians belonging to the Baptist and Catholic denominations. The first conversion to Christianity took place in the year 1925, when some of them were converted to the Baptist faith and slowly many more got converted. Then in the year 1956, some people also received baptism in the Catholic Church, and gradually many turned to this faith. As they have all embraced Christianity, most of the traditional beliefs and religious practices like the function of traditional priest *Ethiim* have disappeared. But concepts that are similar to Christianity are being carried out like the beliefs in *Rhingven* and *Longkong* as connected to heaven and hell in Christian terminology. There is also similarity between the traditional belief in one Supreme Being, whom they called *Thangnhang* and Christian teaching of one God. Hence, after embracing the Christian faith the traits of this Being is attributed to the Christian God, and they call Him with the same name *Thangnhang*.

Occupation

The main occupation of Monsangs is cultivation. They do *jhum* and wet cultivation. Only few people own wet fields. The *jhum* field cultivation is a shifting cultivation. The main crop is rice, but other crops, like millets, maize, pumpkin, ash gourd, sweet potato, yam, ginger, cucumber, chilies, turmeric, etc. are also grown. Fishing and hunting are part time occupations as well as an important part in the economic life of the Monsangs. Today with the coming of education, the Monsangs have made much progress; some have got jobs, some do business, some work in private firms and only few continue to work in *jhum* cultivation. Most of the people are also skilled craftsmen. Some of the secondary occupations include basket-weaving and carpentry for men, and weaving, embroidery, collection of firewood and fishing for women. They also rear buffaloes, cows, pigs, dogs and chickens.

Education and literacy

The advent of Christianity and education in Monsang areas, right from 1924 up till today, has led to the gradual upliftment and progress of the Monsangs in their social, cultural, religious and educational sphere. The coming of Chandel district headquarter in their area, in 1983, is another blessing as they strive for their socio-economic and educational development. The existence of the Maha Union Government Higher Secondary School, Japhou, the United College Chandel in the district headquarter and other private schools in and around the Chandel district headquarter has given greater opportunities for schooling their children. As mentioned above, the Monsang population is

22 The *chipi* is believed to be immortal. When a person is dead, the *chipi* does not die. The *chipi* then goes to its abode.

23 Kh. Loveson. (2018, June 17). Personal Interview.

just 2,427 only (Census of India, 2011). The Census of India (2011) also mentions 1,657 as the total number of literates in Monsang; out of which 872 are males and 785 are females. This means 68.2 % of the populations are literate and the males outnumber the females in terms of literacy percentage. Indeed, they have also made much progress in various fields, such as, education, medicine, politics and religion. They are few in number but marching ahead and striving to scale new heights of progress.

Language

Monsang is an ethnolinguistic term that stands for both the name of the language as well as the name of the tribe. In Monsang, the language is known as *Sirti ttong* (Monsang language). The Monsang do not have its own written form, and Monsang orthography is written in Latin script. Though the people identify themselves as 'Naga', the language is classified as one of the North-Western Kuki-Chin languages of the Tibeto-Burman family (see DeLancey et al. 2015; Simons & Charles, 2017). The Monsang do not have written grammars, a dictionary or text books, etc. Literature remains oral till date. Thus, Monsang with its few speakers is one of the critically endangered languages in northeastern India.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study on the Monsang is a humble attempt to highlight their history, society, culture, tradition and their religious beliefs. The Monsang is one of the tribes in Northeast India which claim their origin from a Cave. Some of the other tribes, which share the same belief are, the Anal, the Lamkang, the Moyon, the Tarao, the Kharam (see Bareh, 2001), the Thadou (Ginzatuang, 1973), and the Mizo (Lalruanga, 1984). While the advent of (conversion to) Christianity along with education has helped the Monsang to adapt their socio-economic life to changing times, and are highly commendable, it have also caused changes, making them lose their traditional practices. The changes are notable especially during their cultural festivals which are no more celebrated as in the past. As Christians, their celebration of Christmas, New Year's Day and Easter and other Christian related celebrations have overtaken their cultural festivals, which were once community celebrations. In short, the Monsangs do not have festivals celebrated annually, except for the *Buurhin esa* (the harvesting feast) which is observed on 23rd October, every year. The *Ekam* festival is also rare to witness now, as it involves huge expenses to organise. So, unless it is celebrated as a village level or tribe level, it is a rare festival. Converted to Christianity, the role of the *Ethim* has been replaced by the role of a Priest or Reverent or Pastor for religious ceremonies.

Their origin, migration, society, culture and tradition and religious beliefs, etc. have been described, in brief, yet they are significant because their history, culture and tradition need to be preserved and well documented when some elders, traditional knowledge keepers, are still alive. In a changing world they might even lose the very way of life that was once integral part of their very existence. Hence, the study will certainly benefit the younger generation to get a better knowledge of their history, culture and traditional practices handed down from their forefathers. The study will also further benefit future scholar for a deeper and further research on various other topics like their traditional medicinal knowledge, art, handicraft, folksongs, etc. while the Monsangs are marching ahead and striving for better heights in various fields.

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Images



Figure 1 (above). Raangam piin.



Figure 2 (to the right). Ruwngsin piin.



Figure 3 (to the left). Mens dance dress at Ekam festival.

Figure 4 (to the right). Monsang traditional dance troupe



Figure 5 (to the left). Echang enhiih.



Figure 6 (to the right). Eduung enhiih.



Figure 7 (to the left). Savang enhiih.

Figure 8 (to the right). Ethii enhiih.



Figure 9 (Above). Ethii enhiih scarf.



Figure 10 (to the right) Monsang woman attire.

Figure 11 (below). Khuwngkung.

