

# Traditional Religious Belief System And Practices of Monsang (Sirti) Nagas Of Manipur

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the traditional religious beliefs and practices of lesser-known communities named Monsang (Sirti) Nagas. The Monsang (Sirti) Nagas is a minority tribe even among the Naga fold, and is designated as one of the endangered communities of Manipur. The earth and its natural inhabitants are considered part of the sacred world in Monsang cosmology and its social topography. Their close relationship with the natural environment occupies an important space in their traditional belief systems. Certain specific forests, mountains, hills, hillocks, streams, springs, rivers, lakes, and brooks, within the Monsang country/region were considered the abodes of spirits and deities. The appeal to such landscape-associated spirits and deities was central to the larger well-being of the traditional Monsang community. The traditional practices of burning forests for dry rice cultivation, harvest rites, belief in life-after-death, and the feast-of-death occupy important religious aspects of pre-Christian Monsang Naga society. The traditional village priest/shaman known as 'Etthim' before conversion to Christianity holds important religious position. Due to the paucity of research on the community, the pre-Christian religious historicity of Monsang society has not been adequately studied from a secular or theological perspective. The Monsang community is arguably one of the least studied by scholars and academics by virtue of its small population. In a nutshell, this paper attempts to study the pre-Christian Monsang Naga society in relation to their cosmology, God, spirits, rites, rituals, and feasts, by using an ethno-historical research

strategy. This research method involves correlating oral traditions with historical sources (colonial and post- colonial periods). The use of oral tradition as a tool to reconstruct the history of people without written accounts is also very pertinent in the context of Monsang Nagas.

**Keywords:** Monsang, Sirti, Etthim, Khur, Khurpu, Thangnhang, Conversion, Chandel.

### SITUATING MONSANG (SIRTI) NAGA

The Monsang (Sirti) Nagas are one of the indigenous Naga tribes settled in present Chandel district of Manipur bordering Myanmar. The Monsang community indigenous name is ‘Sirti’. It is derived from the word ‘Ati’ meaning ‘South’ implying that the ancestors of the community might have originated from the south direction during their migratory period in the remote past. The other theory opines that ‘Sirti’ literally means ‘Innginseer’ in vernacular language with a strong sense of extolled embodied as far as its etymological meaning and connotation was/is concerned. Among the sibling tribes in Chandel district, the Anal, Moyon and Lamkang Nagas used ‘Sirti’ or ‘Sorte’ while addressing or identifying the ‘Monsang’ people or community. The Monsang speak ‘Sirti ttong’ which is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in northeast India. The Monsang got recognition as one of the scheduled tribes of Manipur by the Government of India in Ministry of Home Affairs Notification No. Src 2477, dated 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1956.<sup>39</sup> The population of the Monsang tribe according to 1971 and 1981 census was 930 and 1224 as per Govt. census data. According to the latest census collected from Monsang villages, the population is little above three thousand only. The scanty population of the Monsang Naga are settled at Liwa-Changning, Changnhe, New-Meeleen (Liwa-Khullen), Liwa-Sarei, Ttrangvetha, Khoriibung, Japhou Bazar, Japhou, Kapha, Chiifuwr, Penthakhuwpuw (Monsang Pantha), Roshanguwng village in mainland Chandel district. Almost all the above village settlement sites are strategically located on Chandel-Imphal district highway and are accessible to education, transportation and other modern normal amenities. This in

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39 W. Somie Monsang, ‘The Monsang Nagas of Manipur: An Ethno-Historical Study of their Landscape, Culture & Past’ M. Phil Dissertation, Delhi University, 2007, p.15

some ways provides an additional advantage as far as education and literacy rate of the community which is above 80% in present time.<sup>40</sup>

### MONSANG (SIRTI) ORIGIN MYTHS

The Monsang (Sirti) perception of their origin myth argues that their ancestors emerged from the subterranean world known as 'Khur' in Sirti language. According to legend, the survival in the subterranean world was extremely difficult because of a cruel ruler who can fathom from human to animal and vice-versa. Under such condition, the survival of mankind was in jeopardy because of the oppressive and inhuman nature of the despot ruler. The difficult situation compelled the ancestor to emerge from the subterranean world cave. The movement was led by a person named SapaThumpungpa from the Shimpuwti clan. As Sapa Thumpungpa and his men started emerging from 'Khur', a ferocious tiger known as 'Rhiimpuw' was waiting for its prey on the humans. The ferocious tiger killed many of the ancestors who tried to escape. In order to save his people from the tiger, Sapa Thumpungpa devises a plan. He negotiated with the birds of the air namely 'Berii' (weaver bird) and 'Puwraang' (hornbill) to assist him by diverting the attention of the tiger and shall be rewarded. The birds agreed to the proposal. And accordingly, the weaver bird began to beat the wooden drum known as 'Khuwng'. And the hornbill began to dance above the tiger. The tiger was enchanted by this mesmerizing performance and started diverting its attention from humans to birds. During such stratagem, Sapa Thumpungpa and his men charged and overwhelmed the ferocious tiger with arrows and spears. The tiger was finally killed and people could emerge from the cave. The emergence of the Monsang ancestors from cave and the killing of the tiger were ingrained in their origin folksongs like the one given below:

*"Khurna Keshupenebe  
Samang oh hrang lii liiko  
Khevenakhinsavesinkebesu ae"*

Free Translation:

While coming out from the hole  
The ferocious tiger was waiting for its prey

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40 W. Somie Monsang, 'Monsang Nagas Across Time and Space, Souvenir, STS General Conference, Liwa- Sarei, Chandel 2020, p. 7

The tiger was overpowered and killed.<sup>41</sup>

Since the Monsang (Sirti) ancestors are believed to have emerged from 'Khur' they are known as 'Khurmi' which literally means 'Cave-Man'. And the folktale related historical birds like 'Berii' (weaver bird) and 'Puwraang' (hornbill) are very much behold in Monsang society. Roland Shimmi in his work "*Comparative History of the Nagas From Ancient Period Till 1826*" clearly asserts how legends also tell that the ancestors of the Anal, Monsang and other Naga tribes, were among the primitive Nagas who came out of the cave or earth hole situated in the north-east beyond the Naga Hills.<sup>42</sup> The Sirti people were called 'Monsang' after the name of their leader 'Moshang' in Rungputung, an ancient Sirti village.

### TRADITIONAL SHIFTING CULTIVATION: RITES & RITUALS

Since the remote past, the Monsang Nagas practiced shifting cultivation, locally known as *Raamthingliih*. The agricultural calendar of shifting cultivation commences by the end of *Thatuwrhuw*, i.e. January. During this period, the villagers selected a particular forest site and cut trees with the help of *hrii* (axe) and *chimpu* (*dao* or big machete). The felled trees are kept for few weeks to dry up for burning. The burning of trees and branches to mark the beginning of slash and burn cultivation in Monsang (Sirti) society was known as *Hmitu*.<sup>43</sup> The entire jhum cultivation preparation was led by a traditional agriculturist priest called *Khurpu*. *Khurpu* basically was a chosen leader from the village to perform agricultural rituals to appease the agricultural spirits believed to reside in different landscapes such as forests, lakes, streams, rivers, hillocks, etc. The selection of the post of *Khurpu* was for a particular year or so. According to Monsang pre-Christian religious belief, *Khurpu* was to undergo a number of rituals to appease the spirits and deities. The first rite was called *Shachii Inshi*,<sup>44</sup> in which some quantity of local rice-beer and meat were offered to the supernatural spirits or

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41 Egbert Khartu, *Glimpses of Monsang Culture and History*, Monsang Historical and Research Committee, Liwa Changning 1978, p.10

42 Y.L. Roland Shimmi, *Comparative History of the Nagas: From Ancient Period till 1826*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1988, p. 64 (Italic mine)

43 Egbert Khartu, *Glimpses of Monsang Culture and History*, Monsang Historical and Research Committee, Liwa Changning 1978, p.11

44 Th. Oliver Monsang, 'Monsangs: A Social and Political Study', M.A Dissertation, JNU, Imphal Branch, 1982, p. 32

deities. Then, the village *Khurpu* would decide the date, time and the hills that were to be taken up for jhum cultivation for that year. The other rites were *Wang Incha* and *Khohrong Itha*, i.e. harvesting rites and post-harvest cleaning of the village. Apart from all these rituals, the village *Khurpu* was to undergo taboos which included restrictions on taking of certain food. He was supposed to avoid eating stale meat, dried fish and animals killed with poisoned arrows, until the crop was harvested. All these taboos, if not maintained, were believed to defile his ritual purity and the season's good harvest would thereby be destroyed. The family of the *Khurpu* should be freed from all conceived notions of pollution or defilement of the time. If there was any case of child-birth or the presence of a pregnant woman, the person was not allowed to do the task. All these were part of the rituals the village *Khurpu* had to undergo till the harvest was completed. The offering of wine, food, meat etc, was to appease the spirits and persuade them not to harm or destroy the crops. It was basically done out of fear so that the ambition to get rich harvest is not jeopardized.

The above practices among the Monsang society were traditionally associated with their ancient belief system which was very much nature centric in the sense that these gods and deities control their immediate environ and need constant appeasement out of fear than reverence.<sup>45</sup> The belief in the supreme-being known as 'Thangnhang' who was though benevolent was seldom approach in the pre-Christian Monsang society. The reason seems apparently no different from what E.G Gait argues in the context of Naga belief system in which he mentions that "there was a general belief in the existence of a high God who ruled the universe and who, though kind and benevolent, was vaguely understood and as such rarely approached as knowledge about this 'high God' was limited. Then come a number of evil spirits, who are ill disposed towards human beings and to whose malevolent interference, are ascribed all the woes which afflict mankind. To these, therefore, sacrifices must be offered. These malevolent spirits are sylvan deities, spirits of the tress, the rocks and streams, and sometimes also of the tribal ancestors."<sup>46</sup> This similar perception

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45 Ng. Molarhring Monsang, 'History of Christianity Among Monsang Naga Tribe of Manipur: A Critical Study of the Dubious Understanding of their Conversion', M.Div Thesis, Rock Theological Seminary, Andhra Pradesh, 2003, p. 78

46 E.G. Gait, Census of India, Vol, I, Assam, pp. 91-93

was echoed by Richard Eaton in his studies of the Naga conversion to Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when he mentions that the 'Naga traditional cosmology' consisting of two-tiered scheme, the supreme deity (benevolent but hardly approached) and the lower-tier consisting of a host of minor spirits which are generally malevolent in nature.<sup>47</sup> The Monsang Naga traditional cosmology revolves around this two-tiered scheme belief system in which 'Thangnhang' (the benevolent creator) the supreme-being was rarely approached while a host of minor spirits and deities were given enormous importance because they tend to control their immediate problems such as disease, crops, rain, famine, death, etc. And because of this, the local spirits were given far more important attention. The malevolent spirits were and are also known by different names according to the sites or hillocks they are believed to reside. In certain cases, these spirits were believed to be the souls of the dead who had died in an unnatural way. They are believed to wander from place to place, in an attempt to communicate with the living. In the process, they caused fear, sickness and destruction of vegetables and crops.<sup>48</sup> Because of the negative attitudes associated with these spirits, people propitiate them by offering animals, food and drink. This required the services of village priest-shaman to act as a mediator and offered sacrifices in order to avoid bringing havoc to the village crops or any other possible destruction in the village.

#### THE ROLE OF ETHIIM (TRADITIONAL VILLAGE PRIEST OR SHAMAN)

In the pre-Christian Monsang society, the village priest namely 'Ethiim' occupies a very important social and religious position. He was a traditional village priest and acts as a mediator between the spirits and the villagers. It was believed that 'Ethiim' can communicate with the spirits and whatever the spirits wanted from the villagers was made known to him.<sup>49</sup> As a result, if any type of sickness or illness occurs in the village, the 'Ethiim' was consulted. And accordingly, 'Ethiim' will perform the necessary rites and rituals to appease the spirits. Because of his intermediary role between the God (spirits) and humans, the village 'Ethiim' was a highly respected figure in

47 Richard Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, 1984, pp. 5-6

48 Th. Rockson Monsang, 'The Impacts of Christianity on Monsang Nagas', B.Th. Thesis, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, 2004, p. 40

49 Interview with K. Koti, aged 82 years of Japhou village dated 24.02. 2006

the pre-literate Monsang society. However, after conversion to Christianity, the status of 'Ethiim' had gradually declined. The early missionaries and the converts did not encourage the local people to rely on 'Ethiim'. In other words, the advent of Christianity, education, modern science and medicine has superseded the early dependent on village 'Ethiim' and other traditional methods. Over the last few decades, the church has also strongly denounced and opposed to such traditional practices in Monsang villages irrespective of religious denominations or affiliations.

### TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF DEATH

Prior to Christianization, the Monsang Nagas classified death into two distinct categories based on location and circumstances. A death occurring within the home was considered natural regardless of cause, and the deceased was honored with an overnight vigil before burial in the family's communal burial pit. Conversely, deaths outside the village—whether from accidents, animal attacks, drowning, or violence—were deemed *Shar* (unnatural), attributed to malevolent spirits. Such cases prohibited bringing the body home or interment in communal pits. Pregnant or childless women who died received distinctive treatment, being buried face-down to neutralize perceived spiritual curses. These *Shar* burials occurred in isolated locations outside village boundaries, and no *Bar-Enthii* (Feast of the Dead) rituals were performed, as these deaths were feared to invite further misfortune. These practices persisted until the early 20th century but were abandoned following Christian conversion in the 1920s–1930s, which introduced uniform burial customs irrespective of death's nature or location.

### TRADITIONAL COMMON BURIAL PRACTICES

Historically, each Monsang sub-clan maintained its own communal burial pits, where deceased members were interred to reinforce lineage solidarity—a practice that persisted until the early 20th century. Burial sites were ritually selected, with pits dug to accommodate multiple individuals and grave goods. During interment, prior skeletal remains were moved to the pit's periphery to clear space for the new burial. The corpse was inserted through a small opening, which was then sealed with a stone slab. Grave offerings included tools (spears, bows, arrows), wine, cloth, and ritual foods like rice (*tare bu*), a dog's leg, and fowl meat, presided over by the village *Ethiim*. The dog sacrifice held particular significance, as its

leg was believed to guide the deceased's soul to *ethii-lepa* (the land of the dead). With Christian conversion, these practices waned; missionaries discouraged traditional rites, replacing them with Christian burials in village cemeteries. Modern Monsang graves now feature inscribed birth/death dates and Bible verses on memorial stones, reflecting the community's religious transition.

## CONCEPT OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

The forefathers of the Monsang Nagas believed in the concept of life after death. This was perhaps the reason why the dead body was buried along with some food, rice, meats along with the goods of the deceased persons for his/her use in the land of the dead called 'Ethiilepa' in Monsang language.<sup>50</sup> According to early Monsang belief, the wrong-doers in the present world (such as stealing, killing, debtors, adulterous etc) would meet with fatal punishment in the after-world called '*Ttasuwngbung*'. The literally meaning of this word is something like 'hill of the dead'. It was believed to be something like a forest where the ruler of the dead resides. The ruler of the dead was not known for certainty. '*Ttasuwngbung*' was believed to be located somewhere in the west, i.e. the direction of the setting sun. According to Monsang ancient belief, a person who successfully performed feast like 'Ekam' (feast-of-merit) for the entire village in his lifetime would lead a nice life in the after-world. However, people who stole someone's paddy, cow, pig and fowls were believed to lead a very difficult life in the after-world. This was also believed of those who did not repay debts in their lifetime and someone who died as unnatural death like murder, felling or drowning in river, etc.

## BAR-ENTHII (FEAST OF THE DEAD)

The literal meaning of *Bar-Enthii* in Monsang dialect means 'feast of the dead' or 'send-off ceremony' of the dead. According to customary belief, after death, the soul of the dead person was believed to dwell in the house of the bereaved family till the time *Bar-Enthii* was performed. In the pre-Christian period, for one entire year, the deceased's family was forbidden to perform or celebrate any festival. After the completion of one year, the family was to perform 'Bar Enthii', which was generally performed in the

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50 Interview with Th. Beti aged 88 years of Changnhe/Heibunglok village, dated 16.01.2006



month of March according to the traditional calendar.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, till the time of 'Bar-Enthii' the spirit or soul of the deceased person was believed to dwell in the family. As such, an offering of whatever the family consumed was reserved for the spirit or soul that remained unseen. It is only after the performance of *Bar-Enthii* that the spirit or soul of the deceased person was believed to leave the family to 'Ethiilepa' or the 'land of the dead'.

## RITUALS REGARDING VILLAGE SETTLEMENT

According to Monsang oral tradition, selecting a village settlement site and constructing houses in the past involved multiple stages and rituals. Settlement shifts within ancestral territories occurred due to factors such as water scarcity, epidemics, warfare, leadership conflicts, or declining soil fertility. Before finalizing a site, specific rituals determined its suitability.

### SITE SELECTION RITUALS

**Egg Divination:** A fresh egg was placed on heated charcoal. If the yolk or fluid flowed eastward (symbolizing growth and prosperity), the site was deemed favorable. Any other direction led to abandonment.

**Pig Intestine Examination:** A pig was slaughtered, and its intestines were inspected. Clean intestines indicated a suitable site.

**Community Work Allocation:** Different sub-clans performed assigned tasks:

- The *Rohin* sub-clan (Rinnheti lineage) dug house foundations.
- The *Ngiriiti* sub-clan (Shimpuwti lineage) searched for water sources.
- The *Hongam* sub-clan (Shimpuwti lineage) prepared rice.
- The *Khartu* sub-clan (Rinnheti lineage) observed whether a hen crowed. If all tests succeeded, the site was approved; otherwise, a new location was sought.

### HOUSE CONSTRUCTION RITUALS

After village settlement approval, family house construction required further rituals:

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51 Sh. Alani Monsang, 'The Impact of Christianity on the Monsang Naga Tribe of Manipur in the Twentieth Century', B.Th Thesis, Gospel for Asia Biblical Seminary, Tiruvalla, 2004, p. 33

- Rice grains (matching the family size) were placed overnight on the dug site. Undisturbed grains signaled a favorable location, while displaced or eaten grains were considered ill omens, leading to abandonment.

## TRANSITION TO CHRISTIANITY

These traditional practices, rooted in oral narratives, were gradually abandoned after Christian conversion. Today, village or house sites are consecrated through Christian dedication prayers led by pastors or church leaders. Animal sacrifices, once central, now depend on economic capacity and community consensus.

## CONCLUSION

The advent of Christianity and conversion to this religion in the 1920s and 30s among the Monsang society brought forth a transformation of a wide variety of changes in almost all aspects of life. Education and literature were the main tools to bring about this change. It may be mentioned that the social outlook and the life style of the Monsang society since conversion to Christianity underwent changes at an accelerated pace. In the religious sphere, the local spirits came to be given less importance. Rituals, offerings and sacrifices of fowl and animals to the local spirits which were quite dominant in the pre-Christian period were gradually given up. Having said this, the belief in the existence of spirits in the village hillocks, streams or river seems to continue even to this day. However, sacrificing or offering of vegetables, crops and fowls to appease these spirits underwent a radical shift. The advent of modern science, education, medicine and the growth of church among the Monsang Baptist and Catholic villages have all contributed in diminishing the past traditional belief and practices. Christianity in that sense has contributed in liberating the converts from many traditional belief system and practices. Despite the many positive contributions of Christianity to Monsang Naga society, it has at the same time overlooked and perhaps dismantled some of the rich cultural historicity and its practices such as the existence of 'Dormitory system', Ekam festival (feast of merit), 'Buwhrin Esha' (harvest festival) 'Jaka Laam' etc consciously or otherwise. It was discouraged by the early missionaries because of its association with traditional rituals and rice beer drinking that was central to most of the traditional feast and festivals among the Monsang Naga society.

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