

## Institution of Priesthood Amongst Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** Among the major ethnic groups of the state, Mishmis occupy an important place for their unique Socio-Cultural, Political and Economic heritage. In India Mishmis are divided into two and they are the Digaru Mishmis or the Taroan Mishmis often also called Kaman or the Miju Mishmis respectively. This tribe is sparsely scattered in two districts of Arunachal Pradesh namely Lohit and Anjaw Districts. This research paper will highlight the origin, essence and role played by the priest in the society. It will also deal with their entitlements and dress code in various socio-religious ceremonies. Besides, the paper will also reflect the changes and its continuity due to various agents of change.)

**Keywords:** Mishmis, Tulang, Miju/Kaman, Digaru/Taroan Mishmis



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### Introduction:

L. P Vidyarthi developed the concept of sacred complex and studied the religion life of Gayawal, a priestly community of Gaya in terms of three analytical concept i.e. sacred centers, sacred performances and sacred specialist. The sacred specialist whom Vidyarthi came across during the course of studies was of several types. This specialist depends wholly or partially for their livelihood on their sacred services.

The entire tribal group has a priest or group of priest who are limited to few in numbers. They are called by different name in different tribal communities. The Ho's of Bihar call them Pakon, Gonds of Madhya Pradesh call them Baiga and among Kanikkars and Uralies of Kerala, they are known as Planthies. The Maler of Chotanagpur, there are three sacerdotal functionaries at the Village level viz., the Kando-Majhe (Head Priest of the village), Kotwar (Assistant to Head Priest) and Chaewe (Assistant to the Kotwar). Among the Kharias, the head man in each village that performs the religious functions are Kalo, Duhere or Pahan. Among the Mundas religious head is also called Pahan and is responsible for religions matter in which he has great influence and prestige and his assistant is known as Pujar or Panghara or Nack, who is also assisted by a co-priest known as Kadam Nack for whom special duty is prescribed. The Saoras have four kinds of religious functionary viz., Buyya (village priest), Kurnamavavan (the shaman) Idaimayan (an acolyte who assist Shaman) and Siggamavan (who performs funeral rites). Among the south Indian tribes, all of them have a Pujari (priest), a Matravadi (magician) and a Kaviyan

(astrologer). In some exceptional case female priest are also noticed. Among the Kavi Kandhas of Orissa, There are female priests assisted by a number of female priests to propitiate the deities. The Saoras too, have female priests like Shamanic and Idaiboi who may perform rituals independently.

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have their own priest and their associates. They have a very important role in the life of all the tribes. His advice is sought before making a long journey, building houses, sowing of seeds in the field, going out on hunting expedition and matters related to the conduct of rituals concerning life cycle. His function is so diverse that he is a priest, a doctor and a spiritual guide. During the healing ritual they act as an intermediate between supernatural powers and the mankind.

The Theravada Buddhist tribe of the state, Singphos and Khamptis has their own Buddhist priest called Chow-Mum and Punguya respectively. Besides, they have the indigenous priest called Chere among Khamptis and Dumsa among Singphos. The Mahayana Buddhist tribes of Mompas and Sherdukpens also have a class of priest in their society along with the Buddhist Lamas. The indigenous priests of Mompas are called Bun or Phamein and shamans known as Yu-Min who prophesize while in trance. Both women and men are eligible to become Yu-Min. In Sherdukpen society, the priests are known as Jijis, who are capable of counteracting evil spirits. He offers sacrifices and presides over the festivals celebrated in honour of spirits and act as a diviner and a magician .The Wanchu priest or diviner is called Motsho–Mikpa (Male Priest) and Motsho-Miknu (Women Priest). In Tangsa society, the priest is called Tingwa or Dingwa and the healer is known as Talwa or Patei .In Adi society priest is called Nyibo or Nyibu or Miri. The Tagins also denote priest as Nyibu and among Nyishis, there are three categories of priests called Nyik, Nube, But Nube, Nyoki Nube

Amongst the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh priesthood is not hereditary and women are also permitted to become religious functionaries. These person have been called as Shaman, Medicine Man, Curer, Magician, Diviner and so on .The full time specialists denotes themselves to the duties of explaining, feuding off and copping with the beings forces, powers, spirits and duties that are believed to inhabit the non-human world. The part time specialist tend to select themselves for their work , often by youthful displays of special personal aptitude and skills believed by members of a culture to be regard for dealing successfully with non–human world. In the beginning, part time specialist learns about the symbols and ritual behavior forms that are required when dealing with the non–human world. It is to be understood that the status of part time sacred specialist is important in a society as they also deals with non–human world, derives mainly from their display of personal skills in use of shamanistic arts. In contrast the status of full time specialist is based on power and privileges associated with the office held in a formal ecclesiastical organization.

### **Origin of Priest:**

There is no sacred tradition of Mishmis that reveals about the origin of the priest. The topic needs in depth research to ascertain the absolute facts relating to its origin. However, they have a general belief that the supreme deity called Amik Matai is responsible for creation of the priest. Hence, the priest offers every tip part of the sacrificed fowl in honour of supreme deity. A myth reveals that an insult in any form to supreme deity by a priest leads to dare consequences. Mishmis relates that a priest from Tulang Clan named Tulang Opoh while invoking the supreme deity felt neglected when she did not responded his appeasement ritual. Being humiliated, the priest assaulted the supreme deity. The reciprocation of the assault was that the supreme deity devoid peoples from Tulang Clan to become a priest of highest category. Therefore, till date no one from the Tulang Clan could become the priest of highest category. Accordingly as and when a priest from this clan reaches the highest category of priest, he faces pre-matured death. But these are

numbers of priest in lower category amongst the said clan. Therefore, the spirits and deities are to be given due honour and respect in ordaining priest knowledge and wisdom.

### **Priesthood and their Importance:**

The Miju/Kaman and Digaru/Taroan Mishmis are ethnographically similar to each other. Their socio-religious rituals, dances, beliefs and faiths, social structure and political structures are same. Surprisingly they speak different dialect and have different nomenclature for their rites and rituals but the nature and mode of performance are same. Therefore, a Digaru and Miju priest can perform the rites and rituals of each other and vice-versa irrespective of few differences. However, during major socio-religious ceremonies most of the rites and rituals are performed in Digaru Mishmi dialect. But in every ritual irrespective of dialect the counting of eight numbers being the part of ritual hymns are always chanted in Miju Mishmi dialect. It is believed that a renowned priest automatically grasp the language of both the Mishmi communities by the blessings of spiritual powers. Perhaps, if many be the reason why both the Mishmis socially sanction the matrimonial alliance amongst them.

The priest among the Mishmis is called Gwaks by Taroan and Kambreng by the Kamans. The highest category of the priest is called Kambreng or Gwak Drang. The second category of priest is called Khatwat or Gwak. The third category of priest is called Madeo or Shihak Kanjal or Tarang Prehya and the lowest category of the priest is called Kanjal or Taragong.

The Kambreng (highest category of Priest) is envisaged with lot of supernatural power to intermediate with spirits and deities. The categorization of priest is based on their capability to perform various rituals based on hierarchies. The spiritual qualities of the priests are ordained by the spirits and deities. These divinities can't be inculcated by means training.

Besides, the four categories of actual priest, there are another few other categories of assistant priest. These categories are subordinate to the actual above mentioned priests because they do not possess any spiritual powers but helps the priest in constructions of altar and other related activities. They are called as Kayuts, Kachek Kattam, Mandong Kattam, Kanan Kanggal and Khlap Kathah. Every socio-religious ceremonies cannot be accomplished without their assistance and help.

The Kayut (assistant priest) assist the main priest (Kambreng) by following the hymns incantation during the rituals. The motive of following the chanting of hymns is resorted to mislead the spirits and deities from identifying the actual priest. The Kachak Kattam (assistance priest) beats the drum (dolak), Mandong Kattam (assistant priest) beats the gong (brass plate), Kanan Kanggal prepares food for deceased and Khlap Kattoh prepares cloth for the deceased during mortuary rituals like Thung and Tulu. They also assist the priest in fixing of altar at the sacred centers. It is due to such important role that they are considered to be the integral part of four above mentioned categories of priest. Therefore, the priest and his assistant remains as team till the completion of the rituals.

In the Mishmi society priesthood is not hereditary. The qualities of priest are inborn qualities which are manifested by the supreme deities. There is no formal institution for training the priest. However, a priest can become more efficient and gets elevated to higher ranking by practicing and assisting the renowned priest and experienced elders. Generally, the indication of obtaining spiritual knowledge to become a priest is revealed through dreams and by periodically falling into trance. Amongst the religion of the world, the priesthood institution is dominated by the male. Similarly, the hierarchy of priesthood Mishmis society is dominated by the male. However, in the lowest category of priesthood is Kanjal, females are also eligible provided she exhibit enormous knowledge of spiritual power but the notice of female priest are very rare.

### **Priests and their entitlements:**

The entitlement of a priest in various rituals depends on the magnitude of the ritual based on the importance and expenditure incurred. All the priest categories have different shares and entitlements in the rituals. The priest of highest categories receives the maximum and the lowest priest receives the minimum entitlements. These entitlements are usually given in kinds. But on the advent of modernization, it is commuted into both cash and kind payments. The entitlement of priest in the process of ritual is called Kran or Kambreng Kran. These entitlements are given with the help two kind measurement baskets. The priest is also entitled to receive large share of sacrificial meats. Besides, they are given opium, tobacco and wines etc. according to their consumption habits. The quantity and quality of these entitlements varies according to the social, economic and political status of the solemnizer. These entitlements are not periodically given but given on the performance of rituals. Basically these are given to them for their selfless services in accomplishments of rituals for redressing the sufferings of the solemnizer. The other reason of giving of entitlements could be the non-engagement of priest in any agriculture activities for self-sustaining due to pre-occupied schedule of the rituals to be performed in the society.

They enjoy high and respectable position in the society due to their divine power to communicate and mediate with spirits and deities for good cause of the society. However, they do not enjoy special privileges in the political affairs because an expertise priest may not necessarily be a good arbitrator in for settlement of disputes. But when the disputes are not settled through arbitration in political arbitration, it is subjected for seeking supernatural justice. At this moment, the role of priest becomes prominent because it is the sacred specialist who solemnise the complete process of the oath and ordeal ceremony.

Due to lack of script, the records for performing of rituals at different houses of the society are maintained by tying knots on the invitation threads known as Khrap. These threads are usually 6 to 12 inch long, which can maintain records for 7 to 40 days. After completion of knot in the thread, it is replaced by new thread .The tying of knots at different intervals of thread signifies the different rituals to be performed. Accordingly, the priest spares time for performing the ritual.

### **Priests and their Attire:**

The priestly dresses and ornaments are important part of religious traits. For Mishmis, these articles are believed to be gifted by a deity called Zee that govern and manipulate these arts. It is believed that these dresses and ornaments are not procured from the manufactures but are directly gifted by Zee deity. Accordingly, the aspiring priest finds it collected at his store room automatically by the will of the deity. This myth is hard to be believed as Mishmis women are expertise in weaving all categories of priestly dress. The ornaments must have been procured from neighboring territories especially from the Lamas (Tibetan) who are excellent workers of smithy. The priestly attires worn by priest during socio-religious ceremonies enhanced their spiritual knowledge, wisdom and powers in solemnization of the rituals. Hence, it becomes mandatory for the priest to put on these dress and ornaments to successfully accomplish the ritual. The priestly dresses ornaments and costumes of Mishmis priest comprise of following items:

1. Lan-Map/Tabra: It is a cloth decorated by shells, which is worn around the waist. The end of this cloth is tied with knot which is also decorated with small bells that makes sound on their movements.
2. Gulkhana/Tingkado: A Mishmis jacket worm while performing the ritual. Bangshowl/wha: A colorful Mishmis shawl, which is wrapped on the chest portion.
3. Pushie/Alai: A sash lined with teeth of Tiger and Bear worn across the shoulder.
4. Th-Tio: A bunch of bells made of brass.

5. Akku: A head gear made of peacock feathers attached to the band embedded with shells.
6. Tayap/Tayeung: A hand fan made of animal hide and feathers.
7. Sutjo/Taraja: A sword worn across the left shoulder.
8. Chickrok/Reya: A mini drum used in ritual
9. Mh-Poong/Majaro: A horn of cattle for blowing sound.
10. Kh-Rai: A small piece of cuboidal wood or halved bamboo piece used for seating of priest during rituals.
11. Khchang/Garaie: A ritual drum
12. Mandong /Duo: The gong made of Brass

### **Conclusion:**

The Mishmi priest has a wide range of functions in his life towards his community. The priest selflessly renders their service without prejudice towards the community. They have very hectic schedules in attending the sick person during epidemics and natural calamities. They intermeditate with the spirits and deities for healing, diagnostic, mortuary and welfare rituals. Besides, they also impart religious knowledge to the aspirant priest by actively associating them during the rituals. Apart from these they also perform rites relating to divination, agricultural activities, oath and ordeal and interpretation of the dreams. If they have an additional knowledge of arbitration, their contribution in settlement of dispute is highly solicited in political affairs.

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