THE TANI®
JOURNALISM OF KNOWLEDGE
An online refereed/peer reviewed multidisciplinary, scholarly, academic hybrid open access journal.
VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 WWW.THETANI.COM YEAR 2026 AUGUST

Abutani to the Brahmaputra: The Living Myths of the Misings

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The Mising community forms an integral part of the greater Assamese society, both historically and culturally, while retaining a distinct identity shaped by geography, language, belief and ritual. Primarily inhabiting the banks of the Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries in upper Assam, the Misings have evolved in intimate proximity to rivers, forests and floodplains, landscapes that have profoundly influenced their worldview. Earlier known in colonial and early literary sources as "Miri", the community has long been visible in Assamese historical memory. One of the earliest textual references appears in the devotional poetry of Mahapurusha Sankaradeva, particularly in the second skanda of his Bhagawat, where the term is used to denote a distinct group living along the riverine tracts. Colonial scholars later attempted to explain the origin of the term "Miri" through administrative and linguistic lenses. Sir Edward Gait suggested that the name emerged from the role played by the community as interpreters or intermediaries between the British administration and the hill tribes of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, a view earlier echoed by Alexander Mackenzie in his History of the North East Frontier of Bengal. Indian scholars added further nuance to this debate. Dr Lakhi Devi argued that "Miri" derived from the Assamese expression Major manuh, meaning a go-between, while Dr Kundilya traced it to Tibetan linguistic roots, combining "Mi" for man and "ri" for mountain. Yet, despite these external labels, the community has always identified itself as Mising, a name

recorded as early as 1886 by Needham and deeply embedded in their self-understanding.

The etymology of "Mising" itself reflects the community's moral and social imagination. Several scholars and folklorists have proposed interpretations rooted in the Mising language and oral tradition. Some suggest that it comes from "Mi", meaning man or human, and "Ansing", implying peace-loving nature, a view associated with writers such as Tarun Chandra Pamegam and Indreswar Pegu. Others, including folklorists like Nahendra Padun and Kalinath Borang, argue that the term is formed from "Mi" meaning man and "tosíng" meaning relative, signifying a people bound by shared blood, ancestry and kinship. These interpretations reveal how identity among the Misings is not merely ethnic but ethical, emphasising harmony, relationality and collective belonging. Anthropologically, the Misings are considered a fragment of the broader Mongoloid population inhabiting the hills and valleys of northeastern India. Sir George Grierson categorically placed them within the Tibeto-Mongoloid group, while linguistic research by scholars such as Suniti Kumar Chatterji classified the Mising language under the Tibeto-Burman branch of the greater Sino-Tibetan family, excluding only groups like the Khasi and Jaintia who follow different linguistic lineages. Language, thus, becomes both a marker of origin and a carrier of cosmology

At the heart of Mising culture lies a deeply animistic worldview that perceives the universe as alive with spirits, forces and ancestral presences. For the Misings, the natural world is not an inert backdrop to human activity but a living system in which rivers, forests, animals and even inanimate objects possess spiritual essence. This belief system emphasises interconnectedness, asserting that humans are not separate from nature but embedded within it. Every action, particularly those involving cultivation, hunting or habitation, carries moral consequences that must be ritually negotiated. The custodians of this spiritual balance are the Miri-Mibu, ritual specialists who communicate with spirits, chant sacred hymns known as A:bang, and perform ceremonies to restore harmony between humans, ancestors and nature. Within this cosmological framework, mythical creatures occupy a central position. They are not mere figments of imagination but symbolic beings that explain natural phenomena, encode ethical values, and mediate between the visible and invisible worlds.

Among the most significant of these beings is Bírí bíag, also known as Bírí boté, often described as a twin snake or paired reptilian entity resembling a horned dragon. Believed to inhabit rivers, canals, ponds and dense forests, Bírí bíag embodies fertility, purification and regenerative power. Constructed ritually from bamboo and wild fern and often depicted with raw eggs placed in its mouth, this creature symbolises both the generative forces of nature and the cyclical renewal of life. In Mising belief, Bírí bíag holds authority over aquatic phenomena, particularly rainfall, making it directly linked to agricultural prosperity. At the same time, it is revered as a forest deity, reflecting the community's recognition of the moral weight of environmental transformation. Traditional shifting cultivation involved clearing and burning forest land, a process that inevitably led to the destruction of trees and the death of animals. Rather than viewing this as a neutral act, the Misings conceptualised it as a moral transgression against nature, requiring ritual apology and appeasement.

This ethical dimension is vividly illustrated in the Abutani myth, a foundational narrative shared by several Tani-speaking communities, including the Misings. According to this myth, the Misings are descendants of Do:nyi-Po:lo, the Sun and

Moon, born of the great ancestor Abutani. As Abutani's family expanded, hunting and gathering proved insufficient to meet their needs, prompting him to seek paddy seeds from Koje Yanggo, the goddess of wealth who resided in heaven. After clearing a plot of land and sowing the seeds, Abutani faced misfortune when a dove consumed the crop. Distraught, he was aided by a hunter named Seukari, who killed the dove, retrieved the seeds and instructed Abutani in ritual procedures to protect future harvests. These included planting wild reeds at the four corners of the field and offering prayers to forest deities, explicitly naming and seeking forgiveness from all beings unintentionally killed during cultivation. Abutani also vowed to organise post-harvest rituals, embedding ecological responsibility within agricultural practice. This myth underscores the role of Bírí bíag as a guardian of natural balance and a moral reminder of humanity's obligations to the environment.

Another powerful mythical figure in Mising culture is Mosondori, a composite being described as a fish-dragon with the trunk of an elephant, often associated with the carp. Dwelling in the depths of seas, rivers and lakes, Mosondori symbolises power, perseverance, unity and transformation. The choice of the carp is particularly significant, as the fish is known for swimming upstream against strong currents to reach spawning grounds, making it a natural emblem of courage, progress and resilience. In Mising society, fish dragons are associated with marital harmony, fertility and reproduction, as fish multiply rapidly and often move in pairs. Symbolically, Mosondori occupies a prominent place at the entrance of the Murong, the traditional socio-cultural and religious institution of the village. Once a bachelor dormitory and a centre for warfare training and village defence, the Murong later evolved into a hub for ritual and cultural life. Mising attire, such as the Mibu galug and Mibu dumér, often bears motifs inspired by Mosondori, particularly carp scales known as ngosíg. Even the number of scales follows symbolic rules, with odd numbers considered auspicious and even numbers associated with misfortune. In dream interpretation, visions of carp or fish dragons are regarded as omens of impending good fortune, reflecting the creature's positive moral valence.

The ritual life surrounding Mosondori finds its fullest expression in the Po:rag festival, one of the most significant harvesting ceremonies among the Misings. Organised at intervals of approximately five years, Po:rag is a collective village event that reinforces social cohesion, ancestral memory and cosmological order. Conducted at the Murong under the guidance of the Mibu, the festival involves elaborate rituals, chanting of A:bang hymns for the well-being of the community, and the sacrifice of pigs and chickens to appease ancestral spirits, Mother Earth and rain deities. A distinctive feature of Po:rag is the invitation extended to married daughters of the village, reaffirming kinship ties that transcend marital relocation. Cultural troupes from neighbouring villages participate, and communal feasting becomes an expression of abundance and shared identity. Through Mosondori, Po:rag symbolically celebrates agricultural success, social unity and the triumph of collective effort over adversity.

Equally significant in Mising mythology is Késung, the tortoise-like creature revered as a symbol of stability, longevity, courage and ancestral continuity. The tortoise is believed to represent the souls of departed ancestors who continue to maintain relationships with their descendants across generations. In family rituals known as Urom ui, Késung plays a central role, particularly in contexts of illness, misfortune or infertility. When a family member suffers from prolonged disease, the Mibu constructs a bamboo effigy of a tortoise and performs rituals invoking

ancestral souls extending nine generations or more, seeking protection and healing. Similar rituals are conducted to bless childless couples with progeny. The belief that placing a bamboo tortoise structure in the home can ward off evil spirits, prevent accidents and ensure sound judgement reflects the deep association between Késung and moral stability. The tortoise's long lifespan and steady movement make it an ideal symbol for endurance and balance within the family and the wider clan.

The pig-like mythical creature Eyeg occupies perhaps the most ubiquitous place in Mising ritual life. Associated with the symbol Yékpur, a bamboo structure representing the creature, Eyeg appears in almost all major rituals and festivals. Pigs hold a sacred status in Mising cosmology, being regarded as offspring of the animal deity Dadi boté and close companions of Abutani in the early stages of human evolution. In Mising evolutionary songs, pigs are celebrated for their truthfulness and contribution to agricultural life. Their prolific breeding makes them powerful symbols of fertility, prosperity and the propagation of clan lineage. Ritual pig sacrifice is not viewed as mere offering but as a reciprocal exchange with ancestral spirits and deities, ensuring the continuity of life and abundance. Through Eyeg, the Misings articulate a worldview in which sustenance, sacrifice and spiritual obligation are inseparably linked.

Collectively, these mythical creatures reveal the ethical and philosophical foundations of Mising society. Snake, carp, tortoise and pig are not random symbols but carefully chosen embodiments of transformation, unity, longevity and fertility. The snake Bírí bíag, associated with the Dobur purification ritual, represents cleansing, rebirth and the cyclical nature of life, reinforced by the biological phenomenon of ecdysis or skin shedding. This natural process becomes a moral metaphor for the shedding of sin, enmity and past wrongs, allowing new relationships and brotherhood to emerge. The carp Mosondori signifies progress through struggle and collective harmony, while the tortoise Késung anchors the community in ancestral wisdom and temporal continuity. The pig Eyeg, finally, affirms the importance of reproduction, sustenance and clan survival. These beings function as mediators between the human and the supernatural, explaining the unexplained, warning against moral transgression, and offering hope in times of uncertainty.

In a broader anthropological sense, Mising mythology exemplifies how indigenous belief systems integrate ecology, economy and ethics into a coherent cosmology. Rather than dominating nature, the Misings negotiate with it through ritual, myth and moral restraint. Their animistic beliefs recognise the agency of non-human entities, attributing to them both benevolence and power. Myths such as that of Abutani encode environmental consciousness long before the advent of modern ecological discourse, reminding humans of their responsibility towards all forms of life. In an era of rapid social and environmental change, these traditions continue to offer valuable insights into sustainable coexistence and cultural resilience. The mythical creatures of the Misings are thus not relics of a fading past but living symbols that continue to shape identity, ritual practice and ethical imagination within one of Assam's most vibrant indigenous communities.

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