CHAPTER - 3
THE FIVE TRIBES UNDER STUDY

The five selected tribes which, we have studied are the Misings, the Deuris, the Tiwas, the Karbis and the Rabhas. We are now giving below the general account of each of the tribes.

The Mising (Miri):

The Mising is one of the major tribes in Assam. They are spread over a number of districts, especially in upper and central Assam. The districts with considerable Mising concentration are Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Sonitpur. Inhabiting the riverine tracts along the banks of the rivers Subansiri, Siyang, Dihing, Dibong, Dhansiri, Bhoroli and Buroi as well as the mighty Brahmaputra. Integration and assimilation of the Misings have been consistently at work in the making of composite Assamese culture.

The Misings, who are popularly known as Miri, until recent times were listed as a plains tribe of the state. There are controversies regarding their name and origin. Tracing back into antiquity, no mention of a land or people singularly known as 'Miri' or 'Mising' could be identified. The word Miri had its first appearance in all probability in the devotional writings of Sri Shankardeva and Sri Madhavadeva - the two great Neo-Vaishnavite savants of the 15th-16th century Assam. For example:
"Kirata, Kachari, Khasi, Garo, Miri

Yavana, Kanka Gowala". (Sankardava, Bhagavata, Canto II).

Although the original home of the Misings is not definitely known, yet it is agreed by all that the Misings had been inhabitants of the hills prior to their migration to the plains. As with their original habitat, there is much controversy about the name of the tribe itself, i.e., Miri as well as Mising. Some of the much known interpretations are as follows:

(a) According to one interpretation the Misings introduce themselves as miri which means "We are good people, (mi = human being, yasing = fair/good) and non-Misings as Mipak meaning bad people (kipag = bad/not good like us). (Kagyung 1970).

(b) Another view suggests that the term Miri has come from Miru or Miri meaning priest who played a significant role in their society (Pegu, 1981).

(c) The word mirgo (a hunt) was suggested as the origin of the term Miri. There is no doubt that they were good hunters and used to supplement their diet with rich games of hunt. But the assumption that the term Miri derived from Mirgo appears to be an imagination stretched too far and hence it received little attention.

(d) E.A. Gait, the noted British historian, suggests that Miri means 'go-between'. He seems to evolve the idea from A. Mackenzie.

(e) Apart from these, C.V. Furer Haimendorf also gave his views regarding the origin of the term Mising as well as their original habitat, from his field data. In his Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh he wrote, "According to R.C.R. Cumming, there are
within the Minyong tribe two social classes known as Mishings and Mipak. The origin and nature of these classes is not at all clear and neither my own field notes nor the account of other observers provide any real clue. A myth which I recorded in the village of Roting and which describes the two divisions runs as follows:

When the Minyongs first came out of the earth they strangled a huge mithan called Khosung. After they had cut up the mithan they sat down in a circle, each clan in its own place and shared out the meat. All clan received shares, except the clans of Dupak, Gao and Messar, for whom no meat was left. Therefore, these clans were called mipak. In the old times Misings and Mipak did not inter-marry, for if a Mising consorted with a Mipak he (or she) as well as any children from the union became Mipak."

Ethnically the Misings belong to the same stock as the Adis, the Nishis, the Apatanis and Hill Miris of Siyang and Subansiri regions of Arunachal Pradesh and must have once lived in close proximity to these groups. All of them are collectively referred to as the Tani group of communities. There is a persistent and widely prevalent tradition among the Misings, which proves that they were once hill-men. Quite a number of legends and folklore material current among them are concerned with why and how they had come down to the plains at different times in successive hordes.

The language of the Misings is identical to that of the Adis of the Siyang valley of Arunachal. According to the *Linguistic Survey of India*, the Mising-Adi languages belong in general to the North Assam group
of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. The Misings and the Adis have no alphabet to their own. A story is told about their loss of alphabet. God gave alphabets to mankind in the beginning of the world and the Mising had their alphabet written on a deer skin. As time passed, due to frequent internecine feud and change of habitation, their ancestors became worried about the safety of the alphabet and they decided to consume it in order to protect it. Later on they realized and repented for the deed.

The Mising-Adi language has the characteristics of some special vowels sounds. Another interesting feature of Mising-Adi language is the dropping of the first syllable in forming compound word from two words having two syllables. Though the Mising-Adi language has no script of their own, it abounds in oral literature. They have a special kind of oral tradition called *abang*; - it has come down from generation to generation to tell the history of their remote past.

The Misings have several sub-groups, which are apparently indistinguishable, like Pagro, Delu, Shyang, Dambuk, Oyan, Moying, Samuguria, Tamar, Somua and Bihia. Of all these, the Pagro forms the largest single group, the Moying probably coming next to them. The Bankual and Tirang do not truly constitute groups by themselves, as they are very small in numbers.

The social structure of the Misings in many respect resemble that of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. The Kebang, a committee of village elders, generally with one member from each family was the supreme body within their social structure and played a significant role in their traditional set up. Complaint regarding anything, social or otherwise, were brought to the notice of the village Kebang. The Kebang delivered judgment and punish
the offenders depending upon the nature of the offences. The punishments ranged from simple reprimand, imposition of fine in cash or kind to bodily thrashing and excommunication. If controversy arose between two villages, the matter was brought to the notice of the Kebang of several villages that took part in deliberations, but the final judgment was delivered always by a jury consisting of several elders selected for the purpose. The meetings of the Kebang were held in the public hall called murong. Traditionally each village has got a murong which is primarily the youth dormitory and is also used as public meeting place.

Another important institution of Mising society is Meimber-Yame, a committee of the young men and women. It is primarily an organization of the unmarried girls after attaining puberty and young men-married or otherwise within the age group of 15 to 25 years. For proper running of the institution some members are selected as leaders - they are called-Bora, Dekabora, Tiribora etc. the Bora or the Chief is selected from among the able and smart young men or otherwise having a good parentage. The Meimber Yame renders help to the villagers through various services in constructing a house, weeding out paddy fields, clearing jungle or harvesting.

As in all other societies, among the Misings also family is the smallest social unit. The family consists of, as a rule, the husband and the wife, their children and the old dependent parents. They have patrilocal residence and practice patrilineal descent and inheritance. The properties inherited are managed by the father, or the eldest son in the absence of his father, as long as all the brothers remain in a joint family. The property as a rule is divided into equal shares for all the brothers. Usually the parents
reside with the youngest son and therefore he gets an extra share which is meant for the parents.

The kinship terms of reference and terms of address of various relatives give a clear picture of their kinship system. As for instance, the term Kakiu is used to denote mother's brother, father's sisters husband, and father of both husband and wife. This reflects that cross-cousin marriage is a preferential type among the Misings. Similarly, the kinship system gives the idea about their consideration regarding various kinsmen, for instances those whom they consider as close kin or for how many generations they consider their relatives as close kins.

In the Mising kinship system, Aprin or Apin plays a very important and significant role. The term 'clan'; which is used to designate the Hindu Gotra system can be considered as equivalent to Apin or Aprin. Of course, the exact English or Assamese equivalent of the term Apin is yet to be determined. Although a large section of the Mising population have adopted Hinduism, however, they have retained their traditional clan system. Like Hindu Gotra, where the name of the Gotra is associated with the name of Rishi or hermit, among the Misings also the Aprin is named after a deity of their traditional lore and all the members of a particular Aprin believe that they are descendents of that deity and therefore they are related by blood and like brothers and sisters.

The Misings believe that there is one creator of the whole universe and therefore in calculating the Aprin they try to trace from the creator of the universe upto their Aprin. In the long past they traces several generations within one's own Aprin but now-a-days they can trace at least fourteenth generation as it is compulsory for various rituals especially at the time of observing death rites of the parents.
There are some sub-groups also within an apron. Sometimes difference between an Aprin (clan), a sub clan, a lineage get mixed up and give a confusing picture. Therefore exogamy is the only reliable parameter to determine a aprin or clan as well as sub-clan. Clan exogamy is especially maintained through marriage. A boy of a particular clan cannot marry a girl of the same clan bearing a similar surname. However, they tend to be endogamous as regards to groups. A boy of a particular group generally limits his selection of bride amongst a marriageable clans belonging to his own group, though marriage between clans of different groups are not prohibited.

As we have mentioned earlier cross-cousin marriage is prevalent among the Misings and it is prescribed by the society. As a rule, the Misings are monogamous, but polygamy or having more than one wife is not treated as sacrilege and branch of social law provided that he could afford the luxury of such big family.

Men having two wives are not uncommon, but having more than two wives is rare.

The Misings can get married in three different ways, but only the ceremonial wedding is credited as Midang. The other two forms are referred to as - (i) Dugla-lanam or marriage by elopement, (ii) Kumna-Sola-Lanam or marriage by informal negotiation. Divorce is not so common among the Misings. Instances of junior levirate and sorrorate are found and accepted by the society.

As we have already mentioned, it is needless to say that the culture and the beliefs of the Misings are closely related to that of the Adis of Siyang valley most fundamentals of their beliefs are identical and can be traced back to the early day of human evolution. To understand and
appreciate the religious attitude of the Misings, it is found profitable to go for their myths of creation.

According to one of their myths, Sedi-Babu (Father Sedi) and Melo Nane (Mother Melo) were the creator of all animate and inanimate objects of the world. Sedi and Melo are conceived by the Misings as the earliest worldly beings representing male and female principles.

Keyum is considered to be the prime mover of creation. S. Roy summarizes Keyum as a curious mixture of paradoxical concepts of existence and non-existence as approximation of nothingness.

To some Donyi and Polo, the twin sons of Pedong, are those to whom the luminous eyes of Irnymbote were grafted. But the Misings believe that Donyi and Polo sprang directly from Sedi and Melo along with Doying-Babu and remained aloof as the custodian of law and truth and traditions respectively.

Misings refer to Donyi as Ane-Donyi, a female cosmic principle and Polo as Abu Polo-a male cosmic principle in the scheme of the universe. As the custodian of law and truth and blessings of Donyi and Polo is invoked in the beginning of all Kebangs and other solemn functions. The Misings take pride in introducing themselves as the descendants in the line of Donyi and Polo and believe that nothing can be concealed from the luminous eyes of Donyi and Polo and he who ever tries to do so will sure to meet his doom.

Tani or Abotani (Father Tani) is conceived as the first 'man' by them. A Abotaro (Father Taro) was his brother. The Misings and the Adis called themselves as Tani meaning 'man'.
Apart from principal dual deities like Sedi-Melo, Dony Polo, the other deities like Mukling - Taleng (thunder and lightning), among (earth), Asi (water), Meruk or Emi (fire), Esar (air) are considered to be peopled with number of spiritual being possessing power much greater than man. However, they are benevolent to human being, protect their farms and families from damages and diseases. And as such, they have to be kept appeased by occasional offerings called - Taleng Ui, Rokpudone etc.

Dobur Ui is one of the important ritual functions marked by its peculiar principle carried out with much rigidity.

Ancestor worship is a common feature of their annual function usually after the harvest. Departed forefathers Urom-Posum are also held responsible for health and happiness of the family and incurring displeasure to them may result in an accident or some uncommon occurrence.

The festivals of the Misings can be divided into social and religious groups. Of social festivals most important is the Ali ai-li-gang and Porang. The derivated meaning of the Ali-ai-li-gang is sowing of roots and fruits. Whether jhuming or ploughing was employed, Ahu paddy was their principal product, and as such the oncoming of ahu season is marked with the celebration of Ali-ai-iligang. This is a festival of prayers, dance and drinks when the ceremonial implementation of a handful ahu seed into womb of mother earth is performed. The first Wednesday of the Assamese month of Phagun (February-March) is considered the auspicious day for the purpose and simultaneously celebrated with much enthusiasm and marry-making. The closing of the harvest is marked by another celebration called Po-rag. It is a festival of prayers and feast and executed with elaborate programme spread over 3 days. The Meimber Yame or the organization of the young adult take
the responsibility of organizing the festival. Because of its expensive elaborate arrangements the Po-rag is celebrated after an interval of 2 to 5 years.

There is a saying: “Mising girls can dance before the, can walk and can weave before the weavers wear any apparels”. The Misings are well known for their colourful, attractive dresses. The traditional male attire consist of a galuk or miboo galuk - a shirt with open front and short sleeve with stripes of coloured design over the back and waist, ugon-a long white piece of cloth used like a dhoti to cover up the lower part of the body from waist downward; dumer - a piece of narrow cloth with designs on both ends used as a head gear; and tongali or tanrek - is a piece of cloth akin to dumer but little longer and wider.

Dress of an unmarried girl differs with that of a married one. The very young ones use only an ege to cover the lower part of the body from waist downwards. A piece of cloth sufficient to cover the front of chest and back (kupop) is added during adolescence. After attaining puberty, the kupop is replaced by ribi. Ribi and gaseng are hand woven cloths with preponderance of red and black stripes over white drops about 6/7 ft. in length and worn by unmarried girls wrapped round the body while ege covers the lower part of the body. These ribi and gaseng are replaced by gero potali or sekrek.

Mising use both gold and silver ornaments along with beads of different colours. Golpata, madoli, sondrong are some of the commonly used necklaces and are usually made of gold and beads. Mising women were earings of various sizes and designs. Konge, gamkharu etc. made of silver are common bracelets.
The Misings belong to agrarian economy. After migrating from the hills and settling in the fertile land of Brahmaputra valley, they concentrated on the *ahu* cultivation, which occupies a very significant place in their socio-cultural life.

*Jhuming* was the main stay in the past, which tells about their hill background. Today, though ploughing is the principal means of cultivation, however, *jhuming* was extensively practised when there was abundant wasteland. Originally *Aahu*, mustard seeds, different kinds of *taro*, sweet potato, yam, ginger, pulse, cotton were the main items of cultivation. But now-a-days more emphasis is given in the cultivation of *sali* crop, which yields relatively greater return.

The staple diet of the Misings is rice along with different kinds of roots and tares, patatoes, leafy vegetables and hales. Fish and meat are also common food which are consumed either fresh or smoked. An important item of their food habit pattern is *apong* - their traditional beverage. The *apong* is of two varieties differing in taste, colour and the method of preparation - *nogin apong* and *poro apong*.

The Misings are pile dwellers. The villages are usually found in the bank of the rivers. A typical Mising village *dolong* consists of some 20 to 30 houses built on bamboo platform raised about 5 ft. above the ground supported by rows of wooden posts. A typical Mising house has no complete inner partition but with several fireplace or *meram* separated only by half partitions. The spacious verandah in front is called *tungeng* where the alien guests are entertained. A small verandah in the backyard is left for exclusive use of the house wives. There are two main doors *yabgo*, one in the front and the other in the back *yapkur* with only one or two outlets in the sides.
The given description provides us with a brief ethnographic profile which can be considered as more or less the 'ideal form' of the Mising culture. But it cannot be said that the Mising way of life as it obtains today conform to this 'ideal form'. Changes have taken place in almost every sphere which demands adaptation. Thus a series of changes are found in different aspects like the economic, socio-cultural life, religious beliefs and practices, language and literary and other art forms, festivals and ceremonies etc. We will like to cite few illustrations in support of the above statement.

Originally, the Misings were jhum cultivators and produced horticultural products mainly. But to-day they are mainly wet cultivators and rice is the most common item of production. This change has a series of implications in various aspects; like in the food habit pattern, rice is considered now-a-days as their staple food while yam and different kinds of taros served the purpose in the earlier set up.

Similarly changes have touched the other fields which are either directly or indirectly involved with the economic life. Same is the case with the dress pattern, house type and many other items of material culture.

An important change has come in their religious life also. Due to contact with the neighbouring caste Assamese Hindu society, the Misings have been greatly influenced by Assam Vaishnavism with its Satra system. This influence of Vaishnavism as well as contact with the Hindu fold as a whole has its impact on their various rituals, ceremonies and festivals.

Again in the case of language and literature also the influence of Assamese language and literature have played a dominant role. Now-a-days Misings are bilingual. They use Assamese almost as a second mother
tongue. In fact, some Mising groups have given up the Mising language and adapted Assamese for all purposes.

In this way a number of changes are clearly discernable in today's Mising society as a whole.

The Deuris:

The Deuris are a branch of the Chutiyas, which belong to the Bodo race. They speak the Chutiya language which also belongs to the Bodo group. W.B. Brown in his *An outline Grammar of the Deuri Chutiya Language* said that the Chutiya language belongs to the Bodo group; and not only the Deuris even the Chutiyas belongs to the Bodo race.

The Deuris are one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas who reigned eastern Assam prior to the advent of the Ahoms. The Deuris were the priests of the Chutiyas though at present the Chutiya and its four divisions have acquired self identifying features. The four divisions of Chutiya of which Deuri is one, are as follows - (1) Hindu Chutiyas, (2) Ahom Chutiyas, (3) Deuri Chutiyas (the priest clan), (4) Borahi Chutiyas. But the Deuris themselves think that they were an independent community and never a part of the Chutiya community. The Chutiya rulers who established their kingdom in the areas inhabited by the Deuris appointed some of the latter as the priest, of the former. Thus the Deuris came to be known as Deuri-Chutiyas. In fact, the term "Deuri" refers to a person who is good enough in performing the role of a priest.

The original abode of the Deuris was on the banks of the river Dibong, Tengapani and Patarsal which now fall within the jurisdiction of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and Chepakhoa sub-division of Tinisukia district. Their present habitations are spread in the riverine areas of
Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Tinisukia, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Deuris are one of the Scheduled Tribes (Plains) communities of Assam.

The Deuris are divided into four groups, such as the Dibongiya, the Tengapaniya, the Borgoya and Patarganya. The last one is no longer traceable. The families of this group believed to have merged with the Dibongiyas. Each of this division has its own set of clans. The Deuris have their own language with its grammar and phonetic characteristics. With regard to their language, S. Endle stated that in all likelihood the language of the Deuris-Chutiyas, gave the purest and most archaic form of the Bodo speech, and that there could be little doubt that in earlier times the same had been the dominant language of eastern Assam. But except the Dibongia group, the other groups have given up their language and adopted Assamese as their mother tongue. Of course the Dibongia are bi-lingual and speak both Assamese and their own language. Deuris are peace-loving people. They are amiable and maintain cordial relation with the non-tribal people of surrounding villages. The Deuris are very laborious. Both men and women are hardworking and self-reliant people. Extend co-operation and help among them is a conspicuous characteristic of Deuri social life.

Each of the divisions or khels of the Deuris is composed of a number of exogamous clans called Bangshas (Takus). Thus the Bangshas of Dibongia are Sundariya (Bordeuri), Patriya (Saru Deuri), Airio (Bharali), Sariyo (Bora), Chitikayo (Bhog Randhani), Komtayo; Lagachyo, Kaliyachukoyo etc. There are altogether 14 number of Takus among the Dibongias. The Bangshas of Tengapania are Machiatika (Bor Deuri) Bikramiyatika. (Saru Deuri), Khutiayotika (Bharali) Sakacharutika, Pagimegeratika, Phapariyayolika,
Chemabarujatika, etc. The Borgonya division too has clans viz. Ikucharu (Bardeuri), Chimucharu (Saru Deuri), Hizaru (Bharali), Barsaru (Baliokatia), Lafaru (Bora) and Gosaru. It may be noted that members of the last clan though find mention in old records, are no longer traceable. Each clan is exogamous. Thus marriage with the clan is not permissible.

As the Deuris are patrilineal in descent they count their relationship through the male line. Children take the clan of the father. After the death of a father, his sons become the rightful owner of his properties, which are equally divided among his sons.

The Deuris generally practice monogamy. But there is no bar against marrying a second wife after the death of the first one. Widow remarriage is permissible. The Deuri marriage is based on the principle of Patriarchy, as such, the bride goes to the bride groom's family and starts living there as a member of her husbands Parents' family. The children take the clan name of their father. Neither levirate nor sororate is practiced by the Deuris. Deuris have broadly three different forms of marriage. Such as bor biya, maju biya, bhakat rupiya or soru biya. Marriage which is arranged by the parents and performed in grand ceremonious manner for three days is called 'Bor-biya, maju-biya is also arranged by the parents but performed with less pomp and show. The third type is performed and completed in a day and expenditure is restricted to minimum. In addition to these types, marriage by elopement is also widely prevalent among the Deuris.

The essential items of a Deuri marriage constitute dried fish, pork Suze and betel leaves and nuts. The Pathoria or a mediator plays important role in a Deuri marriage. Both the families, i.e., families of bride and groom appoint Pathorias. On the wedding day he wears a special dress
and helps in the settlement of bride price and other details in a marriage. He must have good command over local folklore and other marriage formalities.

The system of bride price is prevalent among the Deuris. They also give dowry as a token of love, money-value of which may be many times higher than the bride price. Dowry includes mainly bell-metal and wooden utensils and boxes, garments and ornaments, betel nuts and leaves, etc.

The Deuris have the long tradition of living in joint family. It is a matter of disgrace for young couples to live separately from parents' family immediately after marriage; rather they prefer to live together with their parents, and other members in the same household as a well knit of family.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Deuris. The staple food is rice and traditional common beverage is rice-bear. Thus, they cultivate primarily rice. They also grow mustard seeds, black pulses and potatoes as cash crops. The Deuris also rear chicken, ducks, pigs, goats and cattle for domestic use as well as for earning cash income. Some of the families keep elephants and buffaloes for the same purpose. They are wet cultivators. They relish ahu rice and therefore ahu paddy is widely grown.

The Deuri villages are generally found in the riverine areas having fertile arable land. Usually the village consists of thirty or more households. The houses are built on a bamboo platform raised about five feet above the ground. The length of the house varies according to the size of the family. A typical Deuri house can accommodate more than 40 members. The floor of the house is made of flattened bamboos or timbers
and is raised from the ground on wooden posts. The Deuris have partitions in the house. The houses are constructed length-wise from east to west and the doors always open to the east. The front portion of the house is called misso which is kept open on three sides and visitors are entertained here. This portion of the house is also used as a sleeping apartment for the unmarried youths.

A fireplace situated in the first room of the house serves for ordinary cooking. This is also the place where relatives and respectable persons are entertained. The fire place kept at the rear room of the house is considered as sacred and outsiders and visitors are not allowed to enter this place.

All the divisions of Deuris are still maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. The common place of worship among the Borgonya and Tengaporia sections is known as than while the Dibangias call it midiku. They identify their chief deities with Lord Siva and Parvati. The Dibangias call their supreme deities as Kundi Mama. Other names of this chief deity are Gira-Girasi, Pisa Dema or Bolia Baba and Pisasi Dema or Kesakhati. The son and daughter of Gira-Girasi are two other important deities of the Deuris. They also worship, Gailurung Kundi as Ganesh and Kunwar Kund as Kartik. The puja paraphernalia include flower, sacrificial chopper or dao, piece of sandal wood, copper utensils, bell, trident, conch, basket made of brass, copper utensils, canopy, etc. Each Deuri village has a than, a house of worship which is erected at a distance of a few metre away from the site of the village. Religious functions are performed for the welfare of the village community are held at the than. Goats, ducks, fowls and pigeons of same colour are sacrificed in such religious functions. The Deuris have
their own priests and functionaries for conducting their religious function. The chief functionary is called the Bor-Deuri (the priest), Bor Bharali (chief store keeper), Saru Bharali (junior store keeper) and other functionaries, like Kelua Bora, Barik and Randhani or Ladani. These office bearers are essential in all the than pujas and their offices are hereditary.

Wednesday is the most auspicious day for the Deuris. All kinds of community rituals are performed on Wednesday. Annual socio-religious festivals are started by performing rituals at the than ghar on Wednesday only. Therefore, Deuri annual festivals invariably commence on Wednesday, irrespective of the actual day of such festivals.

Besides the major deities, the Deuris worship a number of household deities. Some of the household deities are Bakanmak, Muruchi, Dua chitere, Bura Dangaria etc. These deities are regularly worshipped, as they are believed to be responsible for welfare as well as destruction of life and property. Sacrifices are offered to these deities also.

The Deuris observe two major annual festivals such as Bohagiya Bisu (Bohag Bihu) and Mangiya Bisu (Magh Bihu) which are also observed by other Assamese communities. The Bohaguja is observed for a week or so and the Magiya Bisu for two days. But unlike the other Assamese communities the Deuris start these festivals only on the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag or Magh.

The Bohagiya Bihu is observed by bathing cows and buffaloes in ponds or rivers on the first day and by performing husaris - a kind of group dancing and singing by young boys and girls in front of each and every household. The elderly persons visit the households of the village as gesture of good wishes and enjoy drinking rice-bear as a part of the celebration.
These performances and merry makings are preceded by some ritualistic performances at the village than. In the forenoon of the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag i.e. the month of April, the head of each household offers prayers before the household deities for the welfare of the family members. In the afternoon all the villagers irrespective of age and sex gather at the than where the Bor Deuri the chief priest and his assistants perform rituals for well-being of the entire village community. As soon as the performance of ritual is over the villagers gathering at the than get themselves purified by the sacred water prepared by the office bearer of the than in a copper container. After the function of purification the male-folk partake the offerings towards the deities including rice, vegetables and meat. Women are not allowed to take part in such priest. After the end of the religious ceremony at the than, husari parties consisting of young boys and girls visit and entertain each and every household by dancing and singing and also to bless for welfare of the household for the New year. After completing its visit to each and every house which takes almost a week, a feast is arranged to conclude the celebration. The Deodhani dance forms an essential part of Bihu celebration.

On the occasion of the Magiya Bisu a grand feast is arranged on the first Wednesday of the month of Magh (January) in a big open house attached to the Than. The Bor-Deuri offers sacrifices and prayers to their traditional deities, On the next day the elderly persons visit the household of each other and enjoys drinking rice bear.

The Deuris have two types of village administrative system- secular and religious. In the former category the Goanbura reigns supreme who is the head in all socio-political activities. He, with the assistance of
the village elders settles disputes or gives judgment to other problems. On the other hand for the smooth functioning of their religious activities the nine office bearers have been assigned to specific duties.

The Deuris generally cremate their dead bodies. But in the case of children, pregnant women and epidemic cases they are buried. The traditional custom of laying layers of wood in pyres for a man or woman was seven layers and five layers respectively. The dead bodies are bathed with water and new clothes are wrapped over the bodies. In the case of priests the layers of wood are raised to nine, cooked food, rice bear and fire are carried to the cremation ground. After returning from the cremation ground all are purified in the courtyard of the household of the deceased. A ceremony is held on the fourth day. Chicken curry is prepared and selected elderly members offer rice bear and chicken curry and request the soul of the deceased to give up all connections with the inmate of the deceased.

The final purificatory ceremony may be held at any time of the year. As it is an expensive affair the villagers observe this ceremony when they can afford. Generally it is held after a year. This occasion is shared not only by the consanguinal and affinal kins but by all the villagers, irrespective of age and sex.

The Karbis (Mikirs) :

The Karbis are said to be one of the few most ancient races of Assam. Racially they belong to the Mongoloid group and linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. As there is no written documents and other evidences like archaeological remains etc. it is very difficult to trace back the history of early settlement of Karbis. According to Lyall and Stack, the original abode of the Karbis was the eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills bordering on the Kopili river.
Studying their folklore some scholars are of the opinion that during the long past the Karbis used to live on the banks of the rivers the Kalang and the Kapili and the entire Kaziranga, the famous National Park of Assam, was within their habitation. During the reigns of Kachari kings they were driven to the hills and some of them entered into Jaintiapur. While a section of the Karbis remained in the Jaintia Kingdom, others moved towards north-east by crossing the river Barapani, a tributary of the Kapili and entered into the Rongkhong Ranges. There they established their capital at a place called Socheng The Karbis later on had shifted their capital to Niz Pongkhong from Socheng. Niz Rongkhong is situated about 16 k.m. south of Hamren in the Karbi Anglong hill district which is the present set of the traditional Karbi king called Linglokpo. The Lingdokpo or Recho is democratically elected and still exercises his traditional authority in respect of socio-religious matters.

From the point of view of habitation, the Karbis can be divided equally between the Plains and the Hill areas of Assam. Again a number of divisions are made following the area of concentration like Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. Those who live in the plains are called Dumrali. In this connection it may be said that the Hill Karbis inhabit the two Autonomous Hill Districts viz. Karbi Anglong (large concentration) and N.C. Hills only. However those who live in the plains are not treated as belonging to a Scheduled Tribe.

Broadly speaking, the Karbis practice two types of agriculture - one is shifting cultivation or jhuming and the other is wet cultivation or settled agriculture. Shifting cultivation is prevalent among the hill Karbis, particularly those who inhabit the hilly terrain of Karbi Anglong, North
Cachar, East Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills districts. It is also practised to a limited extent in lower hill slopes in the Digaru, Sonapur and Dimoria areas.

Jhum cultivation begins from the middle of February or the beginning of March by cutting down jungles of the hills followed by burning of dry leaves and trees. After that a complete clearing of the area as well as preparation of the soil are done with the help of hoe. Then seeds of cereals are broadcast. This is done during April-May when the monsoon starts. The staple item of production is rice along with other jhum crops like maize, cotton, taro, a number of pulses are also grown in the same field. When the seedling attain some height the process of weeding is done. Crops are nurtured and protected from wild animals. Paddy is harvested generally during the period of September-October and the other crops at different times.

Some cash crops such as sesame is also grown which has great demand in the plains.

Paddy cultivation with the help of plough is also extensively carried out along the narrow and isolated foothill plains bordering the hills of Nilip Rong Khang, Duar Amla, Dimoria, Sonapur-Digaru, Panbari-Chandrapur, eastern Guwahati, etc. A large number of Karbis inhabit these pockets, and the narrow foothill plains provide ideal paddy fields for them. Some of these plains dwellers raise paddy crops even three seasons a year.

Horticulture occupies a very important position under the permanent system of agriculture.

Orange orchards have been raised by the plains Karbis of Dimoria - Sonapur area. In the hills also horticultural productions are gaining popularity. Most of the Karbi families are found to have reared bufalloes.
Handloom industry is very much common among all the Karbi families. All Karbi women are expert weavers and most of the clothes for domestic use are produced in their family looms. Rearing of Endi is an important cottage industry of the Karbis.

The Karbis have five clans called kur. These are Terang, Teron, Englee, Ingti and Timung. Each of the five clans has a number of sub-clans. Terang and Teron have six sub-clans each, Englee and Timung have thirty sub-clans each, and the remaining clan Ingti has only four sub-clans. These clans are completely exogamous. Although all the five clans are socially equal in status. Ingti being a priestly clan was supposed to have a higher status in former times.

Marriage between sub-clans falling under the same principal clan is not allowed. But they can marry any one from any sub-clan belonging to the rest four principal clans.

Cross-cousin marriage i.e. marrying ones mother's brothers daughter is the most preferred one. Window marriage is prevalent among the Karbis. A man also can marry the widow of his elder brother, but not that of his younger brother.

Monogamy is the common type of marriage. Although polygamy is allowed socially, however it is of very rare in occurrence. There is no bar in marrying a girl from other community or religion, but in such a case the girl has to be formally converted into Karbi fold after performing a ritual. She will be adopted as daughter by an elderly couple usually the maternal uncle of the boy and she is formally accepted by the society as one of its members.
After marriage, the wife continues to use the surname of her father, but the children assume the title of their father. Marriage rules and regulations are almost the same among the Karbis of plains. Divorce is rather rare in the Karbi society.

The Karbis follow the patriarchal system of family structure and as such the father is the head of the family and his authority as such is undisputed. The line of descent is traced through the male members only. Usually the head of the family, his wife, their children, the unmarried brothers and sisters constitute the family. Joint family system is still prevalent to a very limited extent.

At the death of the father, his sons inherit the moveable as well as immovable properties and not by his daughters.

The traditional administrative system among the Karbis to-day, exists only in a few areas. The Karbis of Rongkhang, Chinthong and Amri areas still follow their own traditional systems of administration. In the plains only the Dimoria-Sonapur area is known to have its administrative system which is a bit different from that existent in the hills.

The Karbis follow a crude form of democracy believed to have been founded by their king Sot Pecho in long ago. It is not known what system of administration or government they followed prior to him. The king, ministers and all officers are selected by taking majority verbal opinion of support of the representatives of the people. There is, however, no definite tenure of their offices. When a functionary, the king for instance is dead or removed from the post, the person who will be selected to hold that post must be unanimously chosen by all other representatives. Lingdokpo or the king holds the highest post in the hierarchy of administrators. According
to the custom, he must belong to the Ronghang clan. Kathar Bura the royal priest, occupies the second position. Other important posts are - Dili, Bor-Pator, Bor-Miji, Rongphu, Pheranke and Rongling-Pherangke, Himtok Rongpi-teron Dongpi, Timung Dangpiar etc. All the people have to pay revenue in kind to the king after the harvest.

The plains Karbis, particularly the Karbis of Dimoria area, had their administrative system. Their administrative system is not similar to that of Rongkhang, nor is very clearly known. The entire area is broadly divided into part under Barua, who is like governor under the king, presently seated near Sonapur in south-eastern Kamrup district. The village headmen who are under the king are called Bangthai Riso Bangthai is the assistant and in charge of the youth activities.

Bisarpo is another officer who has to look after the property and smoothness of the social and public activities that are performed in the village. Karkoon is the officer who has to arrange and supply articles that may be needed for any social function. Kathar is the priest, a religious man who performs the rights and rituals in public worship. 'Deuri' is the assistant, but sometimes 'Kathar' is also called as Deuri.

From the point of view of religion the Karbis can be regarded as animists. 'Arnam Sansar Recho' or God Almighty is considered to be the creator of this universe. Among the innumerable deities some are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a providing deity. Hemphu and Mukrang are two benevolent household gods. The Karbis observe many religious rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of pigs and birds and use of rice beer are indispensable.
On the basis of the purpose of worship the Karbi gods can be divided into the following group.

1. *Hem Angtar* (household god)
2. *Rongker* (village god) and *Dengja* (regional god)

Of course all these gods and goddesses are not worshipped in all the localities and some known by different names in different areas. For example, Arnam who is considered and identified with Lord Siva in the hills is known as Burha Gosain in the plains.

In the hills there are a few types of Rongker or community worship all meant for the welfare of a village or a group of villagers. They are Pirda Rongkher, Ajo Rongkher, Vophong Rongkher and Dengja Rongher. These are performed every three or four years.

In the plains similarly, there are certain community worships such as Dehal Puja, Mal Puja.

The bachelor's dormitory which is known as well as 'Jirkedam' is one of the most important social organization of Hill Karbis. Such dormitories are not found in the plains but youth club or 'Risomar' serves more or less the same purpose although the functionaries are different.

The Karbis of hills, particularly inhabiting the Karbi Anglong district, has a very interesting traditional institution i.e., a grain bank (Kerung Amci) based on fellow feeling and mutual co-operation.

Among the festivals observed by the Karbis, mention may be made of the Rangker and Hacha. While the former is a socio-religious one, the latter is a social one.
Rongker is performed at the beginning of the New Year by propitiating the different gods and goddesses for the well being of the entire village.

The Karbis perform another festival called 'Hacha' after the harvest. The Karbis have their traditional dresses artistically designed. The male dress consists of a beautifully designed shirt, a loincloth and a turban is called Poho. The women folk use a piece of cloth tied around the waist (usually in black), a piece of artistic cloth to cover the upper part of their body, and a waist band.

The plains Karbi people use dress like the neighbouring caste Assamese people, keeping distinctiveness in the patterns used.

As with all other tribes of Assam, the staple food of the Karbis is rice. Different kinds of vegetables grown in jhum fields roots and tubers, herbs, edible leaves collected from the forests are taken with rice. Dry fish, pork and chicken are favourite delicacy. Rice-beer is the favourite beverage, which is required in all kinds of socio-religious rituals.

The typical Karbi house is a raised one. It is built on a bamboo platform using timber post. The house is divided into two lengthwise - the front part with the hearth at the center is called 'kam' or guest room and the inner part is 'kut' i.e. the living room for the family members. A wooden or bamboo ladder is used as an approach to the front veranda.

In the plains, they have completely abandoned the traditional housetype and construct mud-plinth houses like the caste-Assamese or other non-Karbi neighbours.

The birth of a child is always an occasion of joy in the family because they believe in rebirth of the dead person in the same family.
Death in the family, on the other hand, is considered to be the most tragic incident in the family. The Karbis perform a funeral ceremony at the time of the cremation of the deceased. Nevertheless, for the eternal peace of the deceased, they perform a death ceremony called 'Chomangkan' at a later date. It is the most elaborate and expensive socio-religious ceremony of the Karbis that continues for four days and nights.

**The Tiwa (Lalulng):**

Formerly the term Lalung was commonly used by all. But not the Lalungs prefer to call themselves as Tiwa. According to the Tiwa (Lalung) language ti means water and wa means superior. The name Lalung according to them was given by the non-Lalungs. Although Tibet region is believed to be the original homeland, yet their details of migration to the plains is not properly known. After coming to the plains following the course of the river Brahmaputra, they introduced themselves as Tiwa.

The Tiwas are mainly a plains tribe of Assam. Tiwa concentrations are mainly found in the district of Nagaon and Morigaon districts of Assam. They are spread in Kapili, Mayong, Dhurbandha, Kathiatali and Kampur areas of Nagaon and Morigaon districts, Khetri -Sonapur area of Kamrup district of Assam and Nartiang Elaka of Jaintia district of Meghalaya. Besides, there are small population in the Titabor area of Jorhat and Dhemaji areas of Dhemaji District. Again the Tiwa villages of Karbi Anglong district are situated either in the hilly areas or in the foothills.

Although there is no clear cut date about the migration of the Tiwas to the plains of Assam, yet it can be assumed that they had migrated to the plains sometime in the middle of 17th century A.D.
On linguistic evidence, the Lalungs have been classified with the Bodos on the Kacharis of Assam. The language of the Tiwas is more closely connected with the Dimasa branch of the Bodo people. According to Dr. Grierson in his "Linguistic Survey of India" in 1891, there were forty thousand Tiwa speakers in Nagaon, Kamrup and Khasi and Jaintia Hills. In Nagaon they have a tradition that their ancestors came from the Jaintia hills, in the reign of Jaintia Raja U-Mon Gohain. Another account also says that the Tiwas were the autochthones of the Jaintia Hills (Grierson 1903:49 as quoted in Shyamchowdhury and Das, 1973).

Lyall mentions that the Tiwas were living in the contiguous areas of the Mikirs.

The Tiwas belong to the great Bodo race into which tribes like Boro-Kaschari, Chutiya, Rabha, Deori, Mech, Tippera, Tipra, Garo etc. belong.

They have the characteristic features of the Mongoloids As Tiwas are found both in the plains and the hills topography and ecology, the topography and ecology of both the areas have influenced the Tiwas considerably. Some aspects of socio-cultural life of the Hill Tiwas became distinct from that of the plains Tiwas.

The tribals of North-Eastern Region, particularly those living in the hills practise jhum system of cultivation. As mentioned earlier, the Tiwas were living in the Jaintia hills for a considerable period of time and they adopted shifting cultivation while staying in the hills. But coming down to the plain they practised wet paddy cultivation. Today sali paddy is the major crop among the plains Tiwas which they cultivate. Almu and bao paddies are also grown in a limited scale. Apart from paddy, they also grow some
sesame, mustard, pulses, arum, turmeric, ginger, chilies etc. Thus in the villages situated in foot hills a kind of mixed cultivation is practiced. In the plains, the Tiwas share the common economy of settled cultivation with the non-tribal community. Certain religious ceremonies like *Dhanar Muthi Lowa* is observed by the Tiwas in connection with starting of agricultural operations. The Barghar (place of traditional worship) is the venue for such ceremony and the Gharbura (the religious hench) presides over the function. Similarly certain socio-religious ceremonies are observed in connection with harvesting of paddy.

Hunting and fishing were integral part of the Tiwa life. Although fishing is still prevalent, hunting is fast disappearing, particularly the community hunting. Fishing is much more popular and very frequently practised in the winter season. People go out for fishing either in groups or individually.

Rice is the staple food of the Lalungs. Their two major meals consist of rice and vegetables. Meat, fish and eggs are relished by the Tiwas, fowl and pork are their delicacies. As pork and chicken are essential items in their socio-religious ceremonies, pigs and fowls are reared by almost all the Tiwas. Rice beer is an essential item of most of religious ceremonies as well as social life. Along with rice, boiled vegetables and roots and creepers are also taken.

The plains Tiwas construct houses on plinth. The Hill Tiwas construct their houses in traditional pattern on plinths. Thatch is used for roofing. Walls are made of reeds and bamboos. Generally bamboo posts are used in their houses but the well to -do sections use wooden posts. The plinth of the cooking house Barghar is raised about 2/3 feet above the ground.
in order to distinguish it from other apartments or cottages. Choraghar, an out house, is constructed a few yards away from the main house where guests are entertained and unmarried young boys sleep at night. In between Charagahar and Barghar there is a Majghar which is used for sleeping purposes. The Majghar may have two or three rooms. The Barghar also has two rooms - one meant for the household deity and the other for cooking purposes. Generally the room towards west is used for the household deity. Certain rules are to be maintained while constructing the Barghar. The main post of the Barghar is erected after completion of the construction of the house. Except priestly officials such as Gharbura, Zela and Hari Kunwari, others are not allowed to go near the Thunakhuta. People belonging to Mikir, Kachari and Koch only are allowed to enter the Borghar.

The granary is constructed towards east. Those who do not possess granaries a corner of the living room or Choraghar is used for this purpose. There is a courtyard in front of a Tiwa house. It is used for drying paddies, threshing, and such other activities.

Every clan has its Barghar (place of community worship). It is a hall type room constructed in the Campus of a respectable clan member. Besides the Barghar which is related to particular clan or family there are than or shrines for the entire community.

The Tiwas had a proud tradition of well managed youth dormitory called Chamadi. This institution acts as the training ground of various arts and crafts and music of the traditional lore. It is also the venue for various village administrative gatherings. It is a big hall without wall on the sides. There is a big fireplace in the center of the hall with logs of wood all around for sitting purposes. The main post and the beam towards
entrance are decorated with motifs. Musical instruments of the community are kept inside the *Chamadi*.

The Plains Tiwa women wear dresses similar to those worn by other rural Assamese women. The dress constitutes one *mekhela* one *chadar* and one *riha*. On various festive occasions, they war *singhkhap mekhela*, *sondiakapor*, *thenas* (*chadar*), *seleng*, *froke* (blouse). Tiwa women are expert weavers. They weave *mankapor* and *borkapor* for special occasion besides weaving all the cloths for family requirement. The dresses of the menfolk are similar to those of other Assamese menfolk. However the dress of the Hill Tiwas are different from those of the plains. They put a narrow strip of cloth called *lentii*. The male Tiwas wear a shirt prepared locally. Turbans are worn by the elderly men. The womenfolk of hills use *mekhela* over the breasts, which extend a few inches below the knees, a 'chadar' is also used over the body.

The Tiwa kings (chiefs) have their traditional dresses which they ear on special occasions. The dres of the Raja constitutes a *muga dhoti*, a *muga sola*, one *muga phaguri*, one cotton *chadar*, one silver necklace, two *gamkharu* (bracelets) and two earrings.

The Tiwa express their artistic talents in their textile designs. They are also experts in bamboo and cane works. They make canoes, spinning wheel by cutting wood pieces. During various festivals the people use varieties of masks made of bamboo slices and clothes. Carvings of animals and birds are seen in the entrance beam of the *chamadi*. In the past, the Tiwas might have excelled in smithery of iron. In a village near Jagiroad, Cannons and swords were made for the Rajas.
They love music and dance. There are varieties of drums locally called karams, khrambah, pisukhnam etc. Flutes made of bamboos are used along with drums. kali (pipe), thandrang (indigenous violin), thogani (a string instrument) are other musical instruments.

A Tiwa family usually consists of father, mother and their unmarried children. Of course joint families are also found in the Tiwa society. The Tiwas are divided into a number of exogamous clans. It is found that in the past the Tiwa clans were divided territorially. They are divided into five divisions in the hills viz. Mukro, Rongkhoi, Amsi, Marjon and Amsuoi. In each division, there are a number of clans which are usually not concentrated in any particular village. These divisions have come to be known by the name of the principal or the dominant village in their territory. In the plains, such groupings of clans into bigger territorial divisions are not found but they are clustered into groups. Two kinds of clan clusterings are found among the Tiwas. One of them is based on the belief of a common descent from an original mother. The other divisions are organized on territorial groupings under the leadership of chiefs or dolois of big villages. In the territorial divisions, there are clans which are grouped into smaller clusters of consanguinous clans.

Originally they had only twelve clans but later on these main clans have been sub-divided into a number of sub-clans.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Sub-clan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Macharang</td>
<td>Machereng, Magor</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Madur</td>
<td>Ladur, Puru, Sagara</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Maloi</td>
<td>Fangsong, Pumbe (Puma)</td>
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<td>4. Dafor</td>
<td>Mithi, Lomfoi</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5. Sukai  
6. Amfli  
7. Lasa  
8. Chalang  
9. Amsong  
10. Kakhor  
11. Darnong  
12. Lorom

They have a *khuta* system of social grouping which can also be called extension of a family. Following the genealogy, each family of a certain clan forms a social grouping called *bangsha* or *khuta*. A *khel* (clan) consists of several such *khutas*. Every family in a village must itself be affiliated to a *khuta*. Whether solemnizing a marriage ceremony or observing a death rite, the *khuta* plays an important role in the family.

A Tiwa *khel* selects a *giyati* (priest) to preside over the socio-religious occasions like 'karam' and allied ceremonies. The *zela* (an expert in the tribal folklore and religion) plays a major role in a Lalung village and he must be selected by a *khel*.

They also maintain a clan superiority but it does not create any social imbalance or vertical mobility among the people of various clans. Some Lalung clans are totemic while others trace their origin to certain characteristics of ancestors or natural objects.

To indicate social hierarchy in earlier days they used a number of titles - such as Deo Raja, Deka Raja, Pator, Senapati, Konwar, Bordoloi, Doloi-Kakati, Manta, Deori, Bharali etc.
For the administrative and socio-religious purposes the Lalung society is stratified into various categories. The lowest administrative knit is a *buni* constituting more than one village. For the smooth running of the *bunis* there are different office bearers namely Lorok, Forongai, Changmaji, Koroimaji, Deori, Hatari and Randhani. In fact the social organization of the Lalungs can be divide into two categories - one is secular that is headed by the Gaonbura and assisted by an official called Barika. To run the administration of chamadi, there are four categories of officers namely Changdoloi, Changmaji, Hurnma and Khuramol. There may be two persons each in the later two categories. The non-secular organization or religious organization is run by three-office bearers viz. Gharbura, Zela and Harikunwari. Besides, there is a Deuri to preside over the worship at than.

Broadly the Tiwas have four forms of marriage - they are *borbiya, gobhia rakha, joron biya and poluai ana*. Boys usually marry between the ages of 20 to 25 and girls between 16 to 22. Clan exogamy is strictly observed. Monogamy is the socially recognized type of marriage although cases of polygamy cannot be ruled out. Preferential marriage including cross-cousin marriage are found. Levirate is not practised while sororate is socially approved. Widow remarriage is permitted. Cases of divorce are rare. Borbiya is preferred by the well to do families because it entails huge expenditure and long drawn formalities. In this type of marriage which continues for three days the guardians take the initiative and the *zela*'s play an important role. Gobhia Rakha marriage can be called as marriage by service. At present the Lalungs particularly of the plains, are patriarchal people but a very thin link of old matriarchal system is traced which is reflected in the *gobhia rakha* system of marriage. Not much ritual
formalities are observed in this type of marriage. Joron biya is also an arranged marriage without the details of a bor biya. Poluaw ana biya or marriage by elopement is widely prevalent among the Lalungs. However some formalities are observed to recognize this type of union by the society. Bride price is present among the Tiwas though it is very nominal.

The Tiwa religion is like that of the Bodo-Kacharis. They too follow the cult of polydomonism. Their principal God is Pha which means father. They believe and interpret this Pha to be none but Lord Siva. As Lord Siva or Pha Mahadeo is their supreme God, all worships begin with a prayer to Him. The officials entrusted to perform religions ceremonies are Loro, Deuri and Changmaji. The ghanbura not only presides over the pujas held in Barghars he also offers oblations to the ancestors of a khuta.

Than or Thanghar and Barghar and more recently Namghars are the places of community worship. Pujas are held in the Barghars where Gharbura and Harikunwari play major roles.

The Lalung deities should be regularly propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. Mahadeo, Ganesh, Parmeswar, Badarmaji, Baolakong, and Kuber are their benevolent male deities while Aai Gosani', Lakhimi, Padumi, Kalika, Kamakhya, Saru Aai, Bor Aai, Aakari, Jogatjiri, Kani Andheli are the important female deities.

Thans are established for each village or a group of villages. Again the villagers of a particular area may affiliate themselves with thans of different areas. There may be separate Thans for different deities. Thus Thans are found in the names of Mahadeo, Kesaikhati, Bhagawati, Seni, Malthakur, etc.
Now-a-days influence of Mahapurushia Vaisnava cult is gaining ground among a certain section of the plains Lalungs. Thus in some cases there are two broad religious divisions viz. the traditionalists and the Vaisnavites.

Besides the above mentioned pujas, the Lalungs observe Deo sewa, Kalika puja, Bhakat sewa, Ai Bhagawati, Tangkang Puja, Hogora Puja, Mal Puja, Pati Sewa, Maral Puja etc. during a year.

The Tiwas have elaborate festivals, which are closely linked with worship of different deities. Important festivals are the Bihu or Bisu, Barat, Sagra Misawa, Wansua or Wanzua, etc.

During the birth of a child, they generally grant the child a bow; in case of a male child the archer's bow and in the case of a female, a bow for teasing cotton.

For disposal of dead both cremation and burial are practised. Previously dead bodies of wealthy and respectable persons only were cremated but now-a-days cremation is the general rule. However, the dead bodies of majors, accident cases etc. are buried. The Hill Tiwa prefer burial which they call Sepat Thowa.

During the period of bereavement the family of the deceased has to observe certain taboos. The khel directs the members of the bereaved family about the use of kharmas (non-veg meal). On the 3rd or 7th day a small feast is arranged where 'Zelas' are invited. This is the first part of purificatory, ceremony. The final death ceremony i.e., karam is solemnized jointly by a Bangsha and this may be kept pending for five or six years as it is an expensive affair.
The Rabha:

The Rabha is one of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam. Different views have been expressed by different scholars regarding the origin and affinity with other tribes. Major Playfair had tried to trace the origin of the Rabhas in the Tibetan region and said that the migration had taken place in the Garo Hills area (now in Meghalaya) and then distributed in Assam plains. He had also found linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabhas and the Garos. Some other scholars like Hodson are of the opinion that the Rabhas constitute a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group. Similarly according to Lt. Col. Waddel - the Rabhas were a branch of the Kacharis and had become almost Hinduised. Another scholars Dr. Grierson held his view that the Rabha was a Hindu name of the Kacharis and many of the Rabhas were actually Kacharis. E.A. Gait found them as a distinct tribe. Prof. B.M. Das studied that tribe scientifically and established that Rabhas were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo group. According to his view, the Mongoloid people who came in successive waves from the North and North-eastern region, have partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austroloid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo, etc. (Das, 1960).

The Rabhas are widely scattered. But the most concentrated area of Rabhas is the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Beyond Assam, their distribution is also found in Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal, and Manipur.

The Rabhas are divided into several groups having individual language and customs. These divisions are Pati, Rongdani, Maitori, Kocha, Bitoliya, Dahuri, Totla, Chonga, Hana etc. However, the Rabha society mainly
consists of the first three divisions i.e., Pati, Rongdani and Maitori. According to the scholars like Prof. B.M. Das except the Rangdaniya, Maitori and Pati, the other divisions of the Rabhas have almost lost their identities.

The Pati section is now completely Hinduised and acculturated. They are found in large numbers in the southern bank stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi, Numerically the Rangdanis are well represented in Western Goalpara. The Maitoris are having relatively lesser number in Assam than the Rangdanis. Some other lesser represented sub groups of the tribe are - Dahuri and Totla in Assam plains. The Dahuri is to be found in north Goalpara and the Totlas in north Kamrup area and in the northern belt of Darrang district.

The Rabha villages are generally situated in the plains and are basically similar to the non-tribal villages of Assam. The villages are neat and clean and each household occupies a big compound and as such a village covers a large area. Formerly, there were some factors guiding the Rabha people in selecting the village site. For example, nearness to a river or lake providing a dependable supply of drinking water, washing and fishing; secondly a secured location from natural disasters, and availability of the suitable cultivable land, etc. However, today, due to population increase such factors are no longer considered. The houses have mud plinth, thatched roof, and mud plastered walls. They are in general rectangular in shape. Each household contains a broad courtyard for various domestic and socio-religious activities. Each house consists of several rooms such as separate bedrooms and five places for the sons and daughter in-laws, as well as parents, sleeping room for the adult children, store room for keeping rice, store room for keeping the rice-beer soaked, kitchen, store room for firewood, room
for poultry, room for pigs, goats etc. and finally a room for the worship of household deity. A room is also kept empty for the guests. For domestic use various utensils made of different materials are used, for instance bamboo utensils, earthen utensils, gourd utensils as well as metal utensils.

The Rabha female dress consist of Riphan or Ruphan, Patani or Lenphotar, Kambung or Kambang and Khadabang or Khakha. The Ruphan is tied around the waist and hangs down to the knees. It is like the Assamese mekhela without stitching. Patani is tied around the breast. Kambeng is a scarf type cloth wrapped to cover the breast.

The male dress consists of pajal or gamsa, khachne or khapang and buk-chil or buk chali. Pajal is like a dhoti, the size varies according to the age of the person. Some of the common dresses used by both male and female are pachar or pachra i.e., endi, wrapper used in winter season, chenka-nen or phali a kind of waist belt decorated with floral designs.

The Rabha women are very fond of ornaments. They prefer gold and silver ornaments although use of brass and copper ornaments are also common.

Rice is the staple food of the Rabhas. Vegetables, fish, meat are taken normally. But during festivals and ceremonies special items are prepared such as pork, mutton, chicken duck meat and special vegetables along with flat rice, curds etc. Dry fish is one of the most favourite articles of food for the Rabhas. They prepare a special dish called sidal from the dry fish. Preparation of bamboo shoots is also a delicacy of the Rabhas.

The rice-beer called chako is their main drink. A good quantity of rice-beer is consumed during the social activities.
As in all other communities family consisting of parents and their children is the basic unit of the Rabha society. A Rabha family centers round the father through whom descent is traced and who exercises supreme authority in the family. Formerly a married son used to live with these parents for sometime, but now-a-days in most of the cases, after the marriage, a son builds a separate house for himself. Both the parents have authority over their children. A father's first duty is to provide them with food, clothing, etc. He has the right and duty of disciplining his children. The father gives training to his sons in different subsistence activities and the mother generally trains her daughters in domestic duties.

After the death of the father his property is generally inherited in equal shares by the sons. Though the daughters have no right over the paternal property, the maternal property is inherited in equal shares by the daughters.

Each of the Rabha groups has several clans called Baray or Husuk. The 'baray' is matrilineal. Children take their 'baray' name after the mother. Marriage within a baray is strictly prohibited. Husuks are sub-divided into sub-Husuks among the kocha group. Marriage within these sub-Husuks is also prohibited. Baray system is found among the Rangdani, Maitaor and Dahuri groups. The Pati group has almost lost its Baray system. But they have a vague notion that they had some barays in the past. Similarly, these are not found among the Bitalia, Totla and Hana groups.

There are some Barays which consider some other Barays as their kin or friends. This system is called huru or suru.

Each Baray or Huri has some magico-religious association.
Again the Rabhas have some customs associated with Baray-Mahari. 'Mahari' means the female line of some baray or husuk. It has some matrilineal rights in the society. If a widower intends to marry again after his wife's death he must take legal permission from the Baray-Mahari of his deceased wife. This legal permission taking process is called Khum. If the wife of a man lies without issue, then all the movable and immovable property of the deceased wife has to be handed over to the Baray Muhari. Even, when the wife is alive and the husband physically torture her or in an intoxicated mood breaks her weaving implements etc. then the Baray-Mahari can control him.

The customary laws of the Rabhas are an institution which enforces faithful observance of the rules of conduct approved by the society. Some of these laws are meant for maintenance of social order and harmony. These customs can be divided as matrimonial custom. Divorce laws, laws for widow and widower, Birth customs, Death customs, socio-religious customs, adoption, village council: its formation and laws, social offences, miscellaneous offences. Child birth is considered as an occasion for joy. Immediately, after the birth of the baby, a string is tied round the umbilical cord in two places and then the chord is cut with a sharp bamboo strip.

Usually the purificatory ceremony is of two types-provisional and final in the case of Pati and Bitalia group. The provisional continued for 4/5 days and the final purificatory is to be observed after a month. Similarly the Hana and Totla groups observe the purificatory ceremony three times. The first ceremony is observed after five days, second is observed after sixteen days and the third one is solemnized after a moth, the Dahuri group observe on the data of birth and finally after a month. Rangdani and
Maitori do not observe such purificatory ceremonies but now-a-days under influence of Hinduism and of other groups of the neighbourhood some people of these groups have also started observing purificatory rites.

In the Rabha society generally parents select the bride for marriage of a boy. The marital age of the boys varies from twenty to twenty-five and that of the girls from sixteen to twenty. The Rabhas follow the patrilocal rule of residence after marriage. But, the matrilocal rule of residence is also followed in cases where the son-in-law decides to move into the household of the bride. The groups follow different types of marriage and marriage rules and customs. Some of the important of types of marriages that have been practised in different groups are marriage by negotiation, saja biya, gharjai biya, dhup-chaul biya, nok dhankay marriage, kay-bikay marriage, tangaydhankay marriage, kransi marriage, bani chekay marriage etc.

The basic customary rules governing the marital relationship amongst the Rabhas are as follows:

1. No marriage can take place between the same 'Baray'.
2. A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother but the reverse cannot happen. Similarly one can marry the younger sister of one's wife but not the elder one.
3. Cross-cousin marriage is permissible, but it is limited only to marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle.
4. The system of parallel cousin marriage is totally absent.

Since Pati Rabhas are the most predominant among all other groups, reference here will only be made to the marital rites and ceremonies
as practised by them. An important aspect of a Pati Rabha marriage is that in comparison with the Rangdanis and the Maitoris, it is solemnized in a very simple way though it requires to pass through several preliminary stages before the actual marriage rites are performed.

The first stage is called Pan-Tamul Kala i.e. a few ladies of the village set out to the house of the prospective bride with the intention of conveying the choice for the girl. The general acceptance of the proposal is marked by the occasion called goto-tamul khuowa and it is the most significant part of the entire proceeding. The next step is called pan-cheni (joron). On this day a sufficiently large groom party accompanied by drummers and musicians arrive at the bride’s house with bags of pounded rice and banana. The stage appears to be now ready for the marriage except formal payment of the bride-price and this is done on an appointed date - the day being known as Malancha. The actual marriage takes place on an auspicious day ascertained on the verdict of the village priest or as per dictum of the Assamese calendar. The usual practice on this day is to fetch the bride to the groom’s house for holding the marriage rites; the groom’s party accompanied by singers and drummers take large amount of betel-nuts and leaves, pounded rice and banana. As soon as the bride arrives, she is made to stand just beneath the entrance. Sarakoya is performed. Then she is, led to the Borghar and finally to the Mandap or alter. Here again a series of rites are performed. The tying knot of bride-groom i.e., Lagna-ganthi is followed by Dhup-Chaul-Chatioya, Usanga, Pasa. Finally the bride-groom bow before the assembly and the entire assembly blesses the couple with 'Haridhani'. Marriage rituals beingover the couple is led to the Barghar and who bows down in reverence first to the Ghor-gosani and then to the
individual family members who command respects by virtue of age or relationship. Finally, all the members present in the occasion are entertained in a big feast.

Now-a-days a tendency has been growing among the enlightened section of the community to perform marriage according to Hindu customs, including 'Hom yagjna' before the sacred fire. However, it is to be noted that whatever be the form of marriage, it is customary to propitiate 'Pisi-Sore' - the deity of family welfare by sacrificing a cock and a hen before the formal union of the groom and the bride.

Though not very common, divorce is recognized by the Rabha society. A party desiring divorce is to take approval of the village council. If the council is satisfied with the grounds of divorce may order the action of formal separation by tearing betel leaf, the system known as 'Pan chira'.

Cremation and burial are the general rule of the Rabha society for those who die of natural causes. But in the case of a person died of some epidemic or unnatural death like suicide, the dead body of the deceased person is buried and not burnt. It is customary for the whole village not to take any food till the dead body is removed to the cremation ground. The members attaining the cremation are required to take bath before entering the house of the dead and inhale the smoke which comes out of the ritually burnt cotton-strand, leaves, etc.

The final death rites usually performed on the seventh day. It is customary not to take fish and meat till the completion of all the death rites. The offerings are made in the name of the deceased.

The funeral ceremony of the Pati Rabhas is marked by recitation from the Mahabharata and Ramayana and other sacred scriptures.
of the Hindus. Death ceremonies of Pati Rabhas is less expensive and shorter when compared with Rangdonis and Maitoris.

Like all other tribal communities, the Rabhas live on agriculture. So it is the main occupation. The Rabhas practice wet cultivation. However, practice of jhum cultivation in the long past can also be traced.

Rice is the staple item. Apart from rice; sugarcane, tobacco, jute, chilies, pulses, sesame, mustard, ginger, turmeric, and potato are also cultivated. The other horticultural products viz., pine-apple, lemon, orange, jack-fruit, mango, litchi, jujube, tamarind, betel nut, coconut, banana, papaya, guava, beans and various kinds of gourds are also raised by them. Sometimes they produce on commercial basis.

Fishing and hunting are common practices of the Rabhas. Pigs, goats, cattle, dogs, cats, buffaloes are the major domestic animals. Earlier these were reared for fulfilling domestic needs and consumption. But now-a-days poultry farms, piggery are established on commercial basis.

Weaving is a part of life of the Rabha women. Now most of the Rabha women weave their essential cloths in fly shuttle looms, but still women living in the interior places weave with kaum-shimprang (a loin loom) fitting on their waist. Thus the loom is an essential female property of their matrilineal clans. They know, spinning of endi, muga and cotton. They fulfill the family requirements for clothing.

The basic religious philosophy of the Rabhas is based on animism. The influence of Hinduism among Pati Rabhas have led to a considerable assimilation of that society. They have identified their traditional deities with Lord Siva and Mother Goddess. From this point of view, this section of the tribe may be described as the followers of both Saktism and
Saivism over and above their adherence to the traditional faith in animism. In recent years the influence of neo-vaishnava sect has made great impact on the Rabha socio-religious life.

Yet another development in the field of religion is the adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe.

All the groups of the Rabha community perform different rituals, pujas and rites at different times of the year. Some of the important celebrations are as follows:

The Rangdani and Maitori groups celebrate Baikho or Khoksi Puja festival with the intention of propitiating Baikho the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. It is celebrated in the month of Bohag (mid April to mid May). Another important celebration of the Rangdanis is the 'Hachang puja'.

The Langa Puja of the Pati Rabhas is another important occasion. As they identify Langa their primary deity, with Lord Siva, thus it is the propitiation of Muhadeva. Besides Langa Dhan-kuber, Thakurani, Dudhkumar-Ohul and Goddess Baikho or Khoksi are also worshipped. Generally this puja is observed in the month of Bohag (mid April to mid May) either in a forest area or on the bank of a nearby river. Linga is propitiated with two fold objects - to have profuse yield of crop as well as to get rid of all the evil influences.

Along with Pati Rabhas, the 'Langapriya' is observed by the Rangdanis also.

Another religious festival of the tribe is connected with the propitiation of 'kechai'khaiti' - the deity presumed to be the protector of all humanity. This puja is held simultaneously with the 'Langpuja'. This puja is also known as 'Dingapuja' as a 'Dinga' (boat) is prepared out of the trunk
of plantain tree to place the offerings along with a duck or a goat and is allowed to float as a symbol of sacrifice.

The Pati Rabhas of south-east Goalpara and south-west Kamrup perform Marepuja, or Marraipuja to propitiate Goddess Monasa or Bishahari (the goddess of serpents). It is regarded as the most important occasion from both socio-religious and socio-cultural point of view. The propitiation is done through the performance of Deodhani and Ojapali dances accompanied by traditional folk songs based on the legend of Goddess Monasa and Chando-Sadagar. Maraipuja is observed primarily seeking blessings against fall and fatal diseases, natural calamities and also to allay fears from serpents during the year ahead. Though it is a community festival, it is sometimes observed privately for fulfilment of any particular desire or wish. Besides Goddess Monasa two other deities are also worshipped in this puja, they are - Sitala and Dharma Devota. In this puja a special type of structure made of pith is erected. It is known as maju where the story of Behula-Lakhinder is depicted through painting.

Note:

The ethnographic information in respect of the five selected tribes incorporated in this chapter has been called from the books and monographs listed below. Whenever possible, such information has been verified during fieldwork.
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