
Religious Practices and Beliefs: A Study among the Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh

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INTRODUCTION:

The Singphos, a hill tribe is known in China as Jingphow, in India as Singpho, in Burma they are known as Kachin. The meaning of the word 'Singpho' is explained in various ways. In their own dialect the word 'Singpho' means 'man'. Sir Edward Gait in his book 'A History of Assam' traces that the Singphos live intermixed with the Khamtis, the country watered by the Burhi Dehing, the Noa-Dehing and the Tengapani, which formerly belonged to the Ahoms. The real home of the Singphos is in the hilly country between the Chindwin River and the Patkai where they are known as Kakhyens. The name by which they are known to the Assam frontier is simply the tribal word for 'man'. J.F. Needham's report (1889) mentions that the word Chingpaw, Theinbaw, Kachin and Singpho must all refer to the same tribe as all these imply the same meaning, i.e. 'man'. At the same time it may be mentioned that the word Chingpaw (Singpho) means a 'pure Kachin' and since all the pure Kachins claim their origin from the river source, it is only natural to assume that the Singphos are closely related to the 'Kakus' (i.e. Kachin of Burma) a term literally meaning 'a man' or 'a man from the upper stream'. The term Kaku is believed to have been used by the southern Kachins or the Chingpaws while referring to the northerns. Thus Singphos dwelling in the tracts of the Burhi Dehing, Noa-Dehing, Tengapani and Hukwang valley used this name to denote their Kinsman living further up in the north-east. Similarly, the Kakus describe the Singphos as the men of hot country, a term referring to their Kinsmen who lived down streams.

The traditional story of their migration says that they have come from their present habitat across the Frontier wall, the Patkai, through two routes. One is called Chowkang Lam, along the bank of Upper Nao Dehing, and the other, Namjung Lam or Kadak lam, through Pangchu pass. The Khamtis as far as the information goes came through the first route. As they say, they did not come all at a time, but in subsequent batches. Those who came via Chowkang Lam stayed in several places, settling in villages till they finally spread out over the whole area. First they established a village called Khumuga, where they stayed for a long time. From the Kumuga they came to Tufaga, where they stayed for a year or so when finally they came to Penga. At Penga they stayed for a considerable period, and then went batch by batch in different directions and established Miao, Phup, Bisi, Gagam and Luwang villages. The other group, who came via Namjung Lam, did not settle in many places. After crossing the river Namjung, they came to Miao Kung, (Near present Miao village) where they stayed for few years. Then they went to Wakhet Ku from where spread out in different directions and established, Galenja, Bordumsa, Haru Dumsa and few other villages.

METHOD AND AREA OF STUDY:

The data for the present work is collected through intensive field work. In this study both primary and secondary sources have been used. A total of 257 households are surveyed for the present study. The study is conducted amongst the Singpho community of Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. For this study data has been collected from six villages; viz. Bordumsa, Galenja, Giding, Wakhet na, Guzu and Kherem bisa.

HOUSE TYPES:

Singpho houses like other hill people are constructed on raised platform (Chang in Assamese). The dwelling house is called *Imta*, the barn or granary *Mangtum* and field house, *Biwa*. The latter two are also *Chang* type. *Imta* is a long house, with a front and rear door opened in the same line. There is no particular direction, that a household face. But inside the house there are particular places, to keep their various articles. It is very difficult to find out, the front and the rear side of a Singpho house, if a man is not accustomed. But, it is very essential that one should know the sides of a Singpho house as a guest is supposed to enter their houses through the back side and sit in the front side i.e. the front room. A person can enter from both the sides only when he becomes familiar with the family.



Fig-1-A Singpho house(Chang type)



Fig-2-A plastered house but the chang prevails.

MATERIALS FOR CONSTRUCTION OF HOUSES:

The locally available materials are Bamboo, cane and wood with which they construct their houses. They thatched the roof with Tokopat leaves, though Jengpat another kind of leaf used by the Tangsas for the purpose are found in plenty in the whole area. Of the wood they use mainly Chapa (*Lerang fun*), Bhola (*Bi fun*) and Ajar (*Lechai fun*). *Nahar* tree is used only for constructing Buddha temple and the monk's house. The tree is considered as sacred. All the houses are constructed in a co-operative basis; the whole village joins in the work. During the period of construction the owner of the house entertains with rice, beer and meat, for which pigs and buffaloes are killed. The villagers do the major works only minor works are done by the owner himself. Collection of house building materials is the responsibility of the owner. Now a day's plastered houses are seen. And in some the foundation is of brick and cement and others are of bamboo. The tradition *chang* still prevails.

TRADITIONAL DRESS:

The Singphos make their dress themselves and even now with the exception of a very few of them, all use homemade dress. The men's dress consists of a *lungee* woven in checkered with

yarns of various colours a jacket and a turban but now-a-days they wear white turban. The dress of the women consists of a beautiful designed scarf, a waist band and a turban. The women tie their hair in a large knot on the crown and some on the back and cover it with the turban. By custom the Singpho women do not come out before men and particularly before a guest with bare head irrespective of marital status. The Singpho men also wear their hair long and tie it in a knot on the top of the head when they wear the turban. But the younger generation has started cropping their hair. It is only the old people who are keeping their old tradition alive.

Their traditional story says that in the very old days the Singphos do not have any dress but they simply use plantain leaf as under garments. It is only at *Singra Fang Wayang* that they learnt weaving and used wearing the different garments. At that time they put on a coarse lunge called *Lehni Liliyeng Umba* hanging up to the knee joint and a very rough jacket, *Pulong*. The *lungee* that they use now is called *Babu*. The legend connected with the turban they use now is as follows. When they stayed at *Sinngra Fang Wayang*, *Muthum matha* (god) gave one turban (*Totok pungbam*), one jacket (*pulong*) and one *Lungee* (*Babu*) to a man called *Singra Fang Maga*. He also gave one skirt (*Pukong*), one waist band (*Sing kiyet*), one scarf (*Ningwat*) and a turban (*Singlap Pungbam*) to a woman called *Phunglum Thusan*. Since then the Singphos wear the dress which they still use. The white turban of women is called *Pungbam Siphong* and the



Fig-3-An old Singpho couple.



Fig-4-Young Singpho women at their looms.

black one *Singla Pung bam*. The Singphos do not have separate ceremonial dress but in marriage the bride and the groom put on a huge long cloak over their dress decorated with beautiful designs. They do not make it by themselves but purchase from Burma. It is also an item included in their bride price.

HARVESTING FESTIVAL:

The Singphos generally do not perform elaborate festivals in connection with the agricultural activities. But when the paddy is damaged by insects or for any other reasons, they perform a ceremony called *Numsang chote*. It is performed village wise after performing divination and offerings are made to *numsang*, the jungle deity. For this they collect donation of money from the village as well as pigs and chickens. The ceremony lasts for three days and after completion all the village paths are closed for one day to prevent coming of outsiders. Before opening the paths the village priests offer some grains of rice to the jungle deity. The priest

starts the 'puja' with incantation from the night of the first day and continues till 3rd day. On completion of the puja the animals are cut. The hearts and livers of all animals are cooked separately which is then offered to the deity by the priest himself. Individually also some of them perform another ceremony called *soanjo* one or twice in a year after plantation of the seedlings or after harvesting. In this they sacrifice four chickens or one pig. Only the rich people perform this ceremony.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH:

The Singphos believe that a woman become pregnant not only due to sexual contact alone, but also due to the blessings of God almighty. A barren woman is considered as unlucky and referred as not getting the blessings of God. A child takes place in the womb of a mother only due to pouring God's blessings of the women and as such she is considered as lucky. There is not much restriction on the part of pregnant women during the period of pregnancy. She can do all the works as usual till the fifth month, after which she is of course not allowed to do any hard work and lift any heavy articles or load. They indulge in sexual contact till seventh month after which period a husband never approaches his pregnant wife. So far as the food is concerned, there is also not much of restriction, excepting that, after the fifth month, she is not allowed to eat any articles with bitter taste and too much of chilies. Honey is also a restricted item during this period, as well as after childbirth till 7th month. Else there is no restriction in diet, and can freely take any vegetables, fish and meat. During the fifth month of pregnancy a religious ceremony is performed sacrificing a female pig and a male chicken in the name of *Tisam Nat*, a female deity. There are two *Tisam Nats* one is mother and the other daughter. The pig is offered to the mother and the chicken is offered to the daughter. This deity is propitiated for the welfare of the expectant mother as well as the child in the womb. Else the child or the mother or both may die, due to the evil action of the deity.

CHILD BIRTH:

A delivery is conducted by the female members only. No man or children are allowed to go near the expectant mother. When the labour pain starts the woman is made to sit or lie down on a mat with her legs tightly bent. A rope is tied on a post which is to be held by her. Then the expert women help her in the accouchement. If the accouchement is successful everybody feels happy. If however there is much labour it is believed that some spirits (*Nats*) are at work and the priest is informed immediately, who sit down to perform the necessary divination and the remedy there of, which is then performed accordingly. Now-a-days, of course, for difficult delivery the doctor is invited, along with consulting the priest. After the birth has taken place, a sharp bamboo splinter cuts the umbilical cord. The placenta in case of a boy is buried near one of the middle posts and that of a girl near a side post of the house, encircling with a bamboo fence. Then the baby is washed with luke warm water.

A pig is killed on the day of delivery, which is first shot by the father with bow and arrow. All the villagers are invited for a ceremonial health drink and a feast is given. On the next day the woman goes to the water point to clean herself accompanied by her husband, while she goes, she takes a glowing piece of wood and a bamboo torch, and the husband follows her with bow and arrows, playing the bow as they go. After delivery, they observe a period of

uncleanliness till 14th day, during which period the women do not touch any eatable things or food stuff, others also do not take anything from her. She generally confines herself in her own



Fig-5-A ten day old baby with his mother.



Fig-6-The researcher with a three months old baby.

place. On the 7th day the name given ceremony is performed when the baby is named. A chicken is killed in the name of *Natkun* the household deity or guardian Nat, the *Laruwang*, the spirit responsible for name giving. The village priest performs the ceremony. On completion of one month the women can go to the fields and perform all the works as well as usual.

CUSTOMS OF NAMING:

The Singphos have peculiar custom of keeping name of a child. They keep two or three names- of a person, one of which signifies the sex and other of birth in the family. Thus:

n th Child	Male name	Female name
1 st	Gam	Ko
2 nd	Nong	Lu
3 rd	La	Roi
4 th	Du	Thu
5 th	Tang	Kai
6 th	Iyong	Kha
7 th	Kha	Pi
8 th	Siroi	Yun
9 th	King	Tim
10 th	Gam Thang	Kothang

After the ninth issue, they named the child as Thang. Thus, in the case of a male child the naming will be Gamthang Nangthang, Lathang, Duthang and so on, and the female child will be named as Kothang, Luthang, Roithang etc. This name represents the order of birth in the family and the sex. To this name they add the name of the family when it signifies the family to which the person belongs. So the first name which is given sometimes just at the instant of birth. As for example the male child of the Wakheth family, will be name in order of birth as, *Wakheth Gam*, *Wakheth Nong*, *Wakheth Lu*, *Wakheth Roi* and so on.

The name which is kept ceremoniously is the personal name of a person, which is generally not disclosed. This name is kept after the name of some deceased person of the family of the fore fathers names are repeated. The third name is the spirit name that is not known by others excepting the parents and the priest who keep the name. Not all people have this spirit name.

The girls even after their marriage to a separate family do not change the name. for example if *Wakhet ko* is married to *Dumsa Gam*, the girls will remain as *Wakhet Ko* and will not change the family name after the name of her husband's family.

MARRIAGE:

Marriage is the accepted form of union between a man and a woman in Singpho society. The possibility of marriage is determined virtually by the amount of bride price which a man has to pay, and it is very high. They practice all types of marriages and even marriage with the step mother is known to have been practiced by them. It is probably the heavy bride price that has compelled the Singphos to adopt all sorts of marriages. In fact they do not return a girl to her parents for whom the bride price has been paid. The Singpho society is exogamous and it is the fundamental rule that govern the marriage system of the Singphos, where also the family organization and the lineage groups or clans play important parts.

The basic rule is that marriage cannot take place within the same family or in other way within the same clan. Once a girl is given marriage to another family the boys of the bride's family cannot marry any girl from the groom's family in future. For example if a girl of *Wakhet* family is married by a boy of *Dumsa* family, then *Wakhet* family boys cannot marry any girl from *Dumsa*. But subsequent girls of *Wakhet* family can be married by any boy of *Dumsa* family. This is to say after marriage the girl becomes the wife giving family. There is no restriction in coming into the marriage tie between the different families, or the lineage groups, but once the marriage takes place the above rules have to be adhered to.

Though monogamy is the general rule, yet there is no restriction of the part of a man having plural wives. The *Imbogam* of *Imbo* village had five wives of which one died recently. It depends on the wealth of man, as he will have to pay heavy bride price for each wife. But there are also certain causes of having plural wives. Such as if the first wife is barren or if there is no male issue or if the man has got enough cultivable land and want more wives to help in cultivation, these are the basic causes which indulge polygamy.

MARRIAGE RITUALS:

Elaborate rituals are performed by the Singphos only in the case of negotiation. In other forms of marriage no ceremony what so ever is performed. Only payment of bride price signifies the union, where only the parents of both the party joins. A marriage is called *Numladai* which actually means taking of a girl. Negotiation is called *Mutang-Ti-Fidai*. To carry on the negotiation, at first the boy's father accompanied by 2 or 3 elderly persons of the village who knows all the formalities to be observed in such occasions, will go to the girls house and the other party members will go to meet the parents of the girl, to discuss about the marriage. These persons are called *Khumbangs*. The *Khumbangs* will first convey the desire of the boy's fathers in a very tactful manner. The girl's father will also speak out whatever he has got to say to the *Khumbangs* who will then inform the boy's father. When the girl's father will agree in the proposal than a sum of seventy rupees and one Burmese cloth will be presented to the girl's father. Then the *Khumbangs* will decide about the bride price. Then a pig and a chicken from the girl's house will be caught to perform a ceremony called

Kumbang Chun. A bundle of reed called *Kumbanglap* is brought from the jungle. A portion of the open space in front of the house is cleaned and a pit is dug where the bundle of reed is planted. Near it the pig and the chicken is tied. Then the priest will utter some incantation and perform the ceremony. After completion both the pig and the chicken is sacrificed and then only the boy's father will enter the girl's house. Then the meat is cooked and the heads of the pig and the chicken is given to the *Khumbangs*. A feast is arranged to celebrate the negotiation. The father of the girl will bear all the expenses. After the feast the actual marriage day is selected. The girl concerned will not show her face to the party.

DEATH AND DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD BODY:

The Singphos do not attribute the causes of death to the evil actions of any spirits or deities but they consider it as bad luck *marna* and think that the person has no luck to enjoy the earthly happiness anymore and hence died. They believe that man is mortal and is destined to die one day. Death due to old age is called *Pathum disi dai* and in immature death *Pat imam disi dai*. Similarly accidental death is called *Li sai si dai*. When a man dies due to attack of some diseases they call it *Su I si dai* and the death of a still born baby is called *Dang I si dai*. They practice both burial and cremation method of disposal which depends on the nature of death as well as on the result of divination. There are different places of disposal according to the nature of death. There are two places of disposal one for general death cases called *Sang hiyeng* inside the village boundary and the other for abnormal death cases which is called *Immat Lup* and this resides outside the village boundary.

In the case of death due to disease, the dead is kept in the house for two days including the day of demise and on the third day it is disposed off. Similarly, they also treat the dead body of an old person. The cremation ground for such death cases is on the back side of the village and it is called *Sanghiyeng*. A rough coffin called *Tuoo* is made with some soft wood, where the dead is kept first. The villagers carry the coffin to the cremation ground where a *pyrephunrong* is made and the coffin is placed over that. Then fire is set into the pyre by some old men and the dead is allowed to burn completely.

BURIAL:

Burial is done generally in the case of accidental death in the place called *Immat Lup*, outside the village boundary. A pit of about three feet depth with the length of the death, where the corp can safely be kept, without fear of being damaged or taken out by wild animals, is dug, where the dead is disposed off. In the case of premature death or untimely death, the method of disposal depends on the result of divination, which is observed by the priest.

The dead body of a still born child is disposed off in the jungle outside the village boundary and near a big tree in a half burnt condition or as it is wrapping it with a mat. The place is called *Imbiye maling* and the tree *Nimai Phun*. They fear much for such nature of death and are considered as worst. In such cases the persons who go for the disposal put thorns on the way on their return just to ward off the evil spirit. It is disposed off just after birth and not kept inside the house for a long time. Those who go for disposal of a dead body in all kinds of death clean themselves with water after the disposal is completed.

There are no much grave goods offered by the Singphos to the dead. Only the clothings are buried inside a pit near the cremation or burial place, over which a piece of white cloth is hoisted on a bamboo pole. It is called *Majipfa*. They do not observe any uncleanliness period on the death of a person. On the seventh day of death a ceremony called *Po-sa-dai* is performed for the good of the deceased. On this day it is believed, the soul of the deceased come to the house just to take the articles offered in his name. This is performed in all death cases whether natural or unnatural. The person who does the ceremony is called *chere* and he knows all the parafernalias and rules to be followed and observed in this ceremony. He takes such articles as utensils, clothings, umbrella, stick and articles of food, given from the house of the deceased to the Buddhist shrine locally called *Bapu chang* and give to the Buddhist monk (*Mohaguru*), taking the name of almighty for the good of the deceased. On that day a feast is arranged with rice, rice beer and meat of pig and chicken and the whole villagers are entertained. No other ceremony is observed afterwards.

CONCLUSION:

The Singpho culture is rich but only a few are in touch with their traditional beliefs and practices. The new generation are least aware of the traditional practices. This is one of the endangered sub-tribe with a total population of 6442 in Assam according to official source of Margherita Development Block, 2001 census. Now-a- days due to awareness among the parents the children of almost every household goes to school to acquire knowledge. The Singpho dialect is also a threatened one. It's an urgent need to document the tribe before it gets diminished unnoticed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

The work has been completed with the financial support received from Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi.

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