

## Youngkuks of Margherita, Assam

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The Youngkuks are a lesser known tribe in Upper Assam mainly inhabiting the valleys of the Tirap river and to some extent the slopes of the continuous range of hills towards south-east separating the Tirap Transferred Area and Tirap Frontier Division in Dibrugarh District. How and when these people came to this area is not fully known and the people themselves have no clear idea about it. Their common belief is that a man and a woman who dropped down from the sky<sup>1</sup> on Michoi Singra<sup>2</sup> due to lightening created the human beings from where they migrated to various places out of necessity.

The *Youngkuks* are scattered in the valley in several villages away from the turmoils of civilization and their settlements are mixed up with *Duania*, *Fakial* and other tribal settlements except in two villages where the entire population are *Youngkuk*. A *Youngkuk* village is a conglomeration of 6 to 15 houses built without proper planning. Sites near rivers or streams with facility for cultivation are preferred provided these are not otherwise found unsuitable by divination. For the purpose of divination, a bamboo stem with joints at the ends is used by a diviner.<sup>3</sup> One end of the bamboo stem is put to fire after pronouncing necessary 'mantras' and a site is selected on measurement from the stop where the bamboo-stem bursts.

The houses are built on traditional pattern in piles or on bamboo posts off the ground with double-sloped jengpat<sup>4</sup> roofs and split bambo walls. The roofs come so low at sides that side walls are hardly visible from outside. Houses are of varying proportions but generally about 30 ft. to 50 ft. in length and 15 ft. to 20 ft. in breadth. Each raised house can be divided into three main parts--an open balcony in the front without any roof or wall in continuation to the portico of the house and is used as a courtyard, a porch at the back where the agricultural implements are kept, and the middle main

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1. Rungwaa
  2. A hill in the eastern India
  3. Tawa
  4. A type of leaf

house. There are doors at ends of the middle main house lengthwise. It is divided into small compartments on one side of the passage from door to door. The walls are decorated with skulls of monkeys, pigs and buffaloes. Each house contains more than one hearth over which bamboo racks are hung to store articles to be dried. Except the doors, there is no other ventilation and the smoke, which mainly escapes through the roofs, preserves the roof for a number of years.

There are certain necessary ceremonies which are followed before construction of a house. A bamboo stem with joints at ends is cut lengthwise into two halves. One half is placed on the site after dusk with the concave side upwards. First half is then divided into squares by drawing lines breadthwise by a piece of burnt fuel according to the number of members of the family and one rice grain each is placed in each square. The rice grains must be freshly taken out by hand from paddy grains. The total number of the rice grains thus put is the same as that of the number of members in the family. Second half of the stem is then covered by first half. The head of the family silently expresses to the Spirits his desire to construct a house on that site and prays to show some signs if the place is the abode of Spirits or is ominous for him to construct a house there. At dawn, the following day, the second half is taken off. If the number of grains remains the same and if the colour of the grains remains unchanged then a house is constructed on that spot. Otherwise a new site is selected in the same manner.

Though some of the Youngkuks have embraced Buddhism in recent years, their religion is based on belief in Spirits. They believe 'Matai' as the Supreme Being whom they propitiate as tutelary divinity and benevolent god for protection of the people, crops and animals, by offerings and sacrifices. They attribute diseases, misery and sorrow to the activities of the malevolent Spirits—the 'Thangs'. They believe that 'Haa-Thang', 'Rung-Thang', 'Chawthang', 'Sangkoi', 'Son' etc. are responsible for diseases and unnatural death. At the time of woes, the Buddhist *Youngkuks* too forget the religion they have embraced and offer prayer and sacrifices to these Spirits whom they used to worship before becoming converts to Buddhism. Sacrifices and offerings are made to Spirits during outbreak of a disease or at the times of woes as per direction of a diviner.

A diviner generally uses a spear for the purpose of calculation. A thread is tied near the pointed end of the spear which is placed on the earth horizontally. The diviner slightly

lifts the pointed end of the spear by holding the thread tightly by his left hand and calls the names of the Spirits after necessary incantations. It is believed that the spear shows some movement when the name of the Spirit responsible for that particular woe is pronounced. Arrangements are then made to propitiate that particular Spirit and the diviner dictates the rituals to be performed—pigs and fowls being the main items of sacrifice. Divination is also practised by legs of fowls particularly to see if a disease is curable or not and also by eggs and Hopayks.<sup>5</sup> The ritual is performed by priests.<sup>6</sup> Priests do not form a separate class. Old men well versed in religious rites act as priests. Sometimes a diviner also acts as a priest.

It is the common belief that 'Rung-Thang' is the cause of pain, headache, boils, eye trouble etc. To overcome the trouble and as directed by a diviner, pigs, goats or fowls are sacrificed and rice is cooked. A small platform about four feet in height is constructed near a particular species of tree fixed by a diviner and cooked rice, pork, mutton or fowl is served to the Spirit on 'Kopat' on that platform. The village people feast on the rest.

If a diviner directs to offer eggs to 'Haa-thang', then a small log is placed perpendicularly on the side of the road. The upper end of the log is divided into four parts by cutting two lines perpendicularly and four eggs are placed—one each on each line. When a fowl is to be offered as per direction of the diviner it is taken near the jungle where it is set free. A cock is offered if the person suffering from diseases is a male and a hen if it is a female. Rice-beer and rice grains are also kept on the roadside on such occasions. Then after coming home, a pig is sacrificed in the name of 'Haa-thang' and a feast follows.

If a woman dies during childbirth or within ten days of childbirth—whatever may be the cause, and if a man dies an unnatural death, 'Chawthang' is propitiated. According to the direction of a diviner, in such a case either an egg or a dog or a fowl is clothed with worn-out clothes. It is then taken to the jungle and broken or killed. Some cooked rice, ricebeer, tobacco leaves, tea-leaves, salt etc. are kept there for the spirit.

'Sangkoi' and 'Son' are propitiated by sacrificing pigs and fowls, as directed by a diviner.

5. Hopa leaves
6. Sinwa
7. A type of leaf

Agriculture is the staple occupation of the *Youngkuks* and they observe several festivals in connection with their agricultural activities. 'Moo' is the greatest of all the festivals they observe and it lasts for seven days. It is performed when the paddy grows to a certain height. A date is fixed for the festival and rice beer is prepared a week before the date. On the first day each household sacrifices a pig or two and feasts on it. On the second day members of each household go to their respective fields with rice and rice beer. Pigs are sacrificed in the field. The villagers eat some quantity of pork with cooked rice in bamboo tubes in the field and drink rice beer brought from their houses. The rest they take home. During the remaining days they eat, drink and dance. The natural irrepressible gaiety finds expression in songs<sup>8</sup> and dances.

'Sam Khaifang' and 'Halitun' are the other two main festivals connected with the agricultural activities. 'Samkhaifang' is celebrated two days before sowing of seeds. On the first day, a woman from each house goes to her field with a fistful of paddy seeds in 'kopat'. Before leaving for field she utters: 'it is time to go to the field; let there be good paddy'. On that day the fistful of paddy seeds are sown. The woman who goes to the field does not take chilli, salt, tea, cigarettes, fish or meat during the day. On the next day, all the villagers go to the field and after sacrificing a pig each in their respective field, feed on it with cooked rice and rice beer taken from home.

'Halitun' festival is observed after the harvest is over and a date is fixed for its celebration. It lasts for a day only. Those who have received produce of more than 100 'tangs'<sup>10</sup> observe it by sacrificing a pig; otherwise a fowl is sacrificed which is followed by a feast.

8. WOSIN Youngsim rungnale rungne llam hai rewang mungtal wnosao Posung Paikhe wangwang lewang wang singwang wang singwang wang mataing whosao Wusung paikhe wangwang le wangwang Siyangyang maintang thangtai wnosao.

[The people feast on the parrots trapped by nets in between narrow hills of Youngsum. We feel joyous when a cloth is woven and taken out from the loom; similarly we are joyous in catching the parrots and make merry and dance].

Kaban mobung moi-ya roireng  
Pangtem Pangsang kolekkuichan  
Pailai atham mol aluenneng  
Rungma manmoi sathokkuichan.

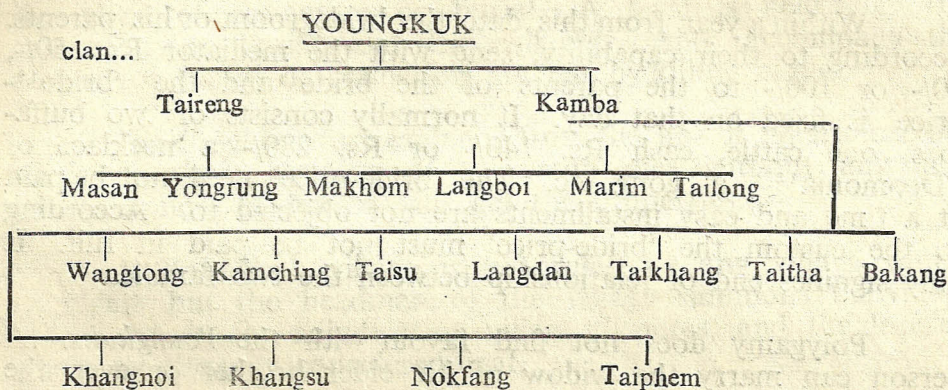
[The people dance in 'Moo' festival and the cane rings on their heads fall down. Similarly a person unaccustomed in business returns only with debts].

9. "Tunghu lo samhu lo mitsusasee khaihang winhang".

10. A measure for rice.

The *Youngkuks* observe another festival known as 'Parong' once in a year villagewise according to the convenience of the villagers, generally few days before the clearance of jungle to prepare lands for cultivation. 'Parong' is believed to be the protector of the village and the festival is performed at the entrance to the village. The villagers collect rice and money from each household several days before the festival. Rice-beer is prepared from the collected rice and pigs and fowls are purchased from the money collected. The men folk cook rice that day at the village entrance and all the villagers take it with meat and rice beer. The following day is considered as a taboo and the villagers are prohibited to go out of the village boundary or to the cultivable fields. No outsider should enter the village where 'Parong' is observed.

The *Youngkuks* are divided into several clans and sub-clans. The main clans and sub-clans are as follows :—



Marriage within a clan is prohibited. For example a boy from a 'Masan' sub-clan within 'Tairang' clan cannot marry a girl of 'Yongrung' sub-clan but can marry a girl belonging to any of the sub-clans of 'Kamba' clan. Marriage is generally negotiated by parents of the parties. A boy generally marries between the age of 25 to 30 and a girl between the age of 18 to 25.

If a young man fancies a girl and if both of them are agreeable for marriage, then the young man requests his parents to send a mediator to the girl's parents. Sometimes the young man arranges a mediator, to speak on his behalf to his and her parents. For negotiation, the parents of the youth send a mediator with Rs. 3/- being wrapped up with two pieces of 'Kopat' to the parents of the girl. If the parents of the girl

are agreeable to consider the proposal, they keep the packet. Afterwards the parents of the girl consult the girl and their relatives and inform the mediator about the decision. The girl is then brought for a night to the house of the youth's parents. Feast is held and the girl is fed with pork, fowl and rice-beer. On the following day relatives of the youth bring the girl to her parents' home with meat and rice-beer. Sometimes instead of meat and rice beer, Rs. 30/- is paid to her parents when the girl is returned. After about a month the mediator goes again to the girl's house with Rs. 30/- or Rs. 50/- and fixes the marriage date. On the date fixed, the bridegroom's mother along with other relatives go to the bride's house. They stay the night at bride's house and the next day bring the girl to the bridegroom's house. The groom does not go to bride's house that day. The parents of the bride send along with her the necessary presents and a dao<sup>11</sup> with sheath, clothe etc. for the bridegroom.

Within a year from this date the bridegroom or his parents, according to their capability, send with the mediator Rs. 50/-, 70/- or 100/- to the parents of the bride and the 'bride<sup>12</sup>-price' is fixed on that day. It normally consists of two buffaloes, one cattle, cash Rs. 140/- or Rs. 280/- a necklace of "Deomon<sup>13</sup>", a gong etc. The 'bride-price' need not be paid at a time and easy installments are not objected to. According to the custom the 'bride-price' must not be paid in full. It only signifies end of relationship between the two families.

Polygamy does not find favour with the *Youngkuks*. A person can marry the widow of his elder brother or even the widow of his younger brother. The latter practice, however, prohibited among the other neighbouring tribes of the area. Marriage between all relations on the paternal side is prohibited. There is no restriction on marriage with relatives on the maternal side.

When a child is born it is not taken out of the house for atleast two days. During this period the villagers, however, are allowed to enter the house but outsiders are prohibited to enter. Within a few days of the birth the child is given a taste of cooked rice by the village elders. On the third day, the women who attended during delivery and on the tenth day,

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11. A big knife
  12. Gadhan
  13. A kind of bead

the villagers, are fed with cooked rice, pork and rice-beer. On the tenth day the child is given a hair shave and his ears are pierced with a pointed bamboo piece.

The Youngkuks cremate the dead but if a person dies an unnatural death, he is buried. In either case burial or cremation does not take place immediately after death. The corpse is kept inside the house for generally two to three days to enable the relatives living far and near to have a last look at the departed. The house is not considered taboo. After the death of a person, the corpse is bathed in cold water by carrying water in a bamboo tube from a river or stream facing the tube downstream, and the corpse is clothed with new garments. The corpse is cremated by placing the head towards the west which is carried in a pyre to the cremation ground. After cremation, a shed is constructed at the place of cremation. An effigy on a wooden post in the shape of a male or female is carved out according to the sex of the deceased and is kept hanging over the place of cremation or burial. A feast is held after the cremation or burial and the villagers who accompany the corpse for burial or cremation are fed by killing a pig.

The daughters are excluded from the line of inheritance but the sons share equally. If a person dies without any male issue the next of kin or kins get the properties.

A Youngkuk village is not ruled by any village council of elders but the headman of the village summons the village elders mainly for adjudicating village disputes, and the decision given by them is considered final.

The Youngkuk is a dying tribe. For the last 45 years Youngkuk population has decreased alarmingly.

Child mortality amongst the tribe is also heavy. To save the tribe from extinction greater medical care and economic security are essential.