

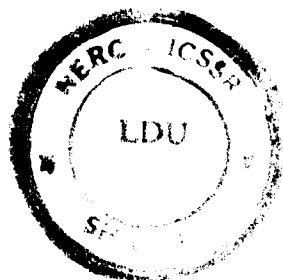
The SULUNGS



R.K.DEURI

954.163
DEU
002044
ICSSR

THE PEOPLE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH



THE
SULUNGS

R. K. DEURI, M.A.

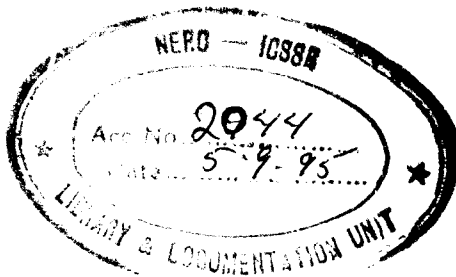
District Research Officer
Lohit District
Arunachal Pradesh

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
GOVERNMENT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH
SHILLONG
1982

Published by Dr. P. C. Dutta, Director of Research — for and on behalf of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

Cover design by — Shri Uma Chakravarty

Price: Rs. 45.00



Printed by
N. K. Gossain & Co. Pvt. Ltd.,
13/7, Ariff Road,
Calcutta-700 067.



002044

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	.. ..	iii
PREFACE	.. ..	iii
1. <i>CHAPTER ONE : The Land and the People.</i>		
I. Origin of Name	.. ..	1
II. The Country, (a) Boundary, (b) Topography, (c) River, (d) Flora, (e) Fauna, (f) Climate	.. ..	2
III. Physical Characteristics	.. ..	5
IV. Character	.. ..	6
V. Migration and Present Distribution	.. ..	6
VI. Relation with the Bangnis, Mijis and the outside world	.. ..	7
VII. Occupation	.. ..	8
VIII. Trade-Route, Trade and Currency	.. ..	8
IX. Language	.. ..	9
2. <i>CHAPTER TWO : Domestic life</i>		
I. The Village	.. ..	10
II. The House	.. ..	11
III. Dress and Ornaments	.. ..	14
IV. Tattooing and Decoration	.. ..	17
V. Handicrafts : Weaving, Bamboo, Cane, Metal, Wood, Pottery, and Leather works	.. ..	18
VI. Agriculture and Ceremonies connected with it	.. ..	21
VII. Food-gathering, Food habits, Food taboo, Drinks and preparations	.. ..	26
VIII. Livestock	.. ..	34
IX. Honey Collection	.. ..	36
X. Hunting	.. ..	37
XI. Fishing	.. ..	39
XII. Fire-Making	.. ..	41
XIII. Music and Dance	.. ..	41
XIV. Weapons of War and Chase	.. ..	42
XV. Articles of Household use and Utensils	.. ..	43

3. CHAPTER THREE : *Social Life*

(a) *Structure of Society*

I. Man and Nature	..	..	46
II. The Tribe	..	..	46
III. The Clans	..	..	47
IV. The Family	..	..	48
V. The Kinship System	..	..	49
VI. The Position of Men and Women in the Society	..	..	52
VII. The Social Bond	..	..	53
VIII. The Division of Labour in the Society	..	..	53
IX. Organization and Pattern of the Society	..	..	54
X. Work and Wealth	..	..	54
XI. The Slave System	..	..	55

(b) *Social Institution*

I. Marriage	..	..	58
(i) Types of Marriage	..	..	59
(ii) Marriage Forms	..	..	59
(a) By Negotiation	..	..	59
(b) Levirate	..	..	60
(c) Sororate	..	..	61
(d) Elopement	..	..	61
(e) Marriage by Capture	..	..	61
(f) Love Marriage	..	..	62
(g) Marriage by Service	..	..	62
(h) Bride-Price	..	..	63
(i) Marriage-Gifts	..	..	63
(j) Incest Taboo	..	..	64
(k) Marriage Procedure	..	..	64
II. Divorce	..	..	65
III. Early Childhood and Training	..	..	65
IV. Life Cycle	..	..	66
(a) Daily Routine	..	..	66
(b) Pregnancy	..	..	67
(c) Parturition	..	..	67
(d) Name-Giving Ceremony	..	..	68
(e) Puberty	..	..	68
(f) Marital Life	..	..	69
V. Later Life	..	..	69

4. *CHAPTER FOUR : Political Life*

I. Customary Law and Justice	..	..	70
II. Law of Inheritance	..	..	72
III. Ordeal	..	..	74
IV. Settlement of Disputes	..	..	76
V. The Village Council	..	..	76
VI. The Chief of the Village	..	..	77
VII. Inter-Village and Inter-Village Meetings	..	..	77

5. *CHAPTER FIVE : Religion and Ceremonies*

I. General Character of Popular Beliefs	..	..	78
II. Public and Private Ceremonies	..	..	79
III. Spirits, Deities and Magic	..	..	80
IV. Sickness and Cure	..	..	81
V. Death and Disposal of the Dead	..	..	85
EPILOGUE	..	..	90
GLOSSARY	..	..	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY	..	..	105

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

I. ORIGIN OF NAME:

Sulung is a common term given to a small group of tribal people mainly inhabiting in the north-eastern hills of East Kameng District although a few are found in the north-western hills of Lower Subansiri District. From the obvious difference of the language of the Sulungs from that of the Bangnis of East Kameng District and of the Nishis of Lower Subansiri District it may with a great deal of probability be inferred that the Sulungs do not belong to that group of tribesmen who claim to have descended from Abo-Tani, the primeval ancestor of the Bangnis, Nishis and Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. Rather, they would appear to have a common origin with the Buguns (Khowas) of West Kameng District as indeed their languages seem to have a certain degree of affinity. Whatever be the origin of the word Sulung, the appellation is not applied by the Sulungs to themselves.

In his note, C. R. Stonor suggests that the Sulungs of East Kameng District and the Buguns of West Kameng District were once the same tribe and the Buguns came to their present country from the north-eastern part of East Kameng District. According to the Khowas, they once lived themselves together in a place named Moffi which they say was in heaven and from Moffi they came down to earth and began to settle in a place called Sakmakhang which might be somewhere to the north of the present Chayengtajo Administrative Circle of East Kameng District. In course of time, they dispersed to and eventually arrived in their present habitation. A Sulung legend tales that the tribe originated from Khorngkhiya, their ancestor in heaven and from heaven they directly came down to earth and began to settle in a place where the wild sago-plams (Bey-muwang) grew in plenty and from there gradually dispersed in course of time to other parts of the country. The Bangnis on the other hand, claim the Sulungs as their offsprings. According to them, one day a Bangni man who was out hunting met an unknown girl in the jungle named konekongin and from their union the Sulungs came into being. The Sulungs, of course reject this claim as unfounded.

According to the Sulungs, in remote past the Bangnis did not have easy access to their country and at that time they were completely independent. As years passed on, however, the Bangnis somehow entered their area and made friendship with them and brought them into close contact by persuasion and by offering salt, beads, clothings, daos, local-beer etc. Gradually, they made the Sulungs work in their agricultural fields and thus, by and by, the Bangnis exploited the Sulungs and brought them under their full control. Since then, the Sulungs have had a number of obligations to the Bangnis and in fact till recent years were virtual serfs of the Bangnis.

The exact population of the tribe is hard to determine. Their habitations are widely dispersed among the hills and very difficult of access. Moreover, their villages are very thinly populated. Sometimes one house makes one village for instance, Kungsa village where in 1968 there was only one house with three people. By force of circumstances, the Sulungs have remained among the most backward and one of the smaller tribes of the District. In the early part of 1968 I personally enumerated 39 villages whose total population came up to 1,587 only.

II. THE COUNTRY

(a) *Boundary:*

By and large, the Sulungs are dispersed very widely over the inaccessible, unexplored and rugged hills in the north-eastern region of East Kameng District and apart from that their villages are interspersed among the Bangni and Miji villages too. Their main habitation is bounded on the north by the McMohan line towards Tibet, on the south by the Bangni territory, on the east by the Lower Subansiri District and on the west by the Miji country. Linchup is the remotest village towards the McMohan Line. The area north of Linchup is covered by snow for most part of the year.

(b) *Topography:*

The country inhabited by the Sulungs is much broken up by a series of spurs of the mountains. The northern part is particularly mountainous. In the east of the country there are subsidiary ranges running from north to south making a network of hills. There are, of course, no valleys but there are some ravines elsewhere which are covered by thick evergreen trees and these ravines are abounds in wild animals,

Moreover, their villages are not visible from one village to another as such the villages are covered by dense forests.

The area on the right bank of the Kameng river near Sario. Saria. Dau. Linchup, Bingfuwa. Waram. Parte Sulung villages has many inaccessible steep mountains. The northern high ranges remain snow covered for a large part of the year. Besides rivers and rivulets, there are innumerable streams in their country, some of which are not perennial.

(c) *River*:

The country abounds in rivers and streams. Rivers and streams are in such a large number that after one stream is covered another comes ahead. The main river of the region is the Kameng from which the District takes its name. The river Kameng is known as Bhoroli in the foot-hills area and in the Assam plains before it joins the mighty Brahmaputra. This river is not navigable because of strong current and innumerable rapids through out the course. In the Sulung country this river has many tributaries, namely Pake, Pakesa, Kasam Kasar, Kaya, Pasuk and Kanya. Besides these, there are numerous streams which directly fall either into the Kameng river or into its tributaries. These streams are Kli, Wabeng, Behilang, Sewgen, Kasaipo, Wanchi, Macha, Wari Sabui, Rapi, Kebi, Kamso, Lomu, Wachang, Sama, Kaja, Kabung, Waram, Bisen Wayek, Wareng, Waple, Wagiong, Wachung, Khyonja, Wagya, Wabung, Tafochi, Seram-ramte and Seram-rame. Apart from these streams there are several other streams and streamlets whose names are not known. Near the Sario village there is a narrow water course falling from a steep hill which looks like a small waterfall and its name is known to them as Wakhya.

(d) *Flora*:

The hills of the Sulung country are almost covered by dense forests. There is great variety of the flora in the area owing to difference in altitude and climate starting from bushes to large trees. Luxuriant growth of grass and undergrowth in the area often impede passage from one village to another. The village paths are inaccessible during the rainy seasons due to the thick undergrowth. Dense jungles with tall and stout trees festooned with creepers are found everywhere specially at lower altitudes. Bamboo and cane are to be found in plenty in almost all the jungles. Rhododendron trees are found here and there. Wild bayleaf trees are also available in the high ranges. At higher altitude the

bamboos are in thick clusters and most of those bamboos have peculiar characteristic features i.e., every node has spike-like growths around it. Various wild fruit trees are also there. Occasionally, walnut trees can be seen. Orchids of various kinds are also available in their country. Rarely Himalayan conifers are also there in the high hills. Besides, near the villages wild sago is also found from which their staple food is extracted. Wild bananas, wild berries, mushrooms, ferns, mosses, mucors are also in abundance in the forests. The Sulungs do little shifting cultivation of their own, so the hills are not largely deforested as in areas inhabited by other tribes of the District. Valuable timber trees like Hulung (*Dipterocarpus-macrocarpus*), Hollock (*Terminalia-myriocarpus*) are also found in thick forests. Landslides are not so frequent in their country due to the thick cover of trees.

(e) *Fauna*:

The thick evergreen forests and ravines of their country are the home of the tiger (Nere), wild boar (Merek), barking-deer (Maiya), bear (Setom), otter (Serom), deer (Ache), blackgibbon (Tasow), wild cat (Sogow), squirrel (Sakik), monkey (Mejei), hornbill (Palai), etc. Elephants are not found and musk deers are found only in the snow ranges to the north of the country. Since the Sulungs are keen hunters, the above animals are not found in the jungles near the villages. Porcupines and Pangolins are also found but among birds may be mentioned woodpeckers, woodpigeons, doves, owls, hawks, crows, which break the silence of the slumbering forests. Butterflies of various kinds are also found in open places. Among various crawling creatures may be named the python, kraits, cobras, and vipers. The fox (Tabok) is rarely found in their areas as such this is found mostly in foothills area. In the locality, among insects special mention may be made of Damdims the leaders which are a continuous menace to human beings. On the whole, the wild life of the region is rich and varied. The mithun (*bos-frontalis*) which is a semi-domesticated animal is not found in their areas as the rearing of this animal by them is not allowed by their Bagni and Miji neighbours. Fishes of different varieties are found in the rivers and streams. Bees laboriously build up their hives in the branches of trees and on hill cliffs where alone they may elude the tenacious Sulung honey hunters.

(f) *Climate*:

As the topography changes in parts of their country, so the climatic

conditions tends to change within short distances. There are no appreciable valleys in their country.

The pre-monsoon showers begin towards the beginning of March, the monsoon proper setting in about May and lasting well into September. During this period the climate in most of the areas is very damp. Though the winter rains are not altogether about wet yet, rainfall of this season is not a regular feature of the region. April to August are the wettest months. The sub-Himalayan climate with scanty sunshine and moderate rainfall makes the country comparatively suitable for the growth of tall trees with dense foliage as the number of deciduous trees are very few. Though the climate is salubrious, yet the climatic and topographical factors are not conducive for large scale cultivation: the hills are markedly undulating and hard to climb from the bases. The altitude of the area ranges from 5000 ft. to 11000 ft. above sea-level. The terrain is not parched and most of the hills are not so rocky and sandy like the hills of the northwest and southwest parts of the West Kameng District. The area, towards the north of their country is mostly covered with evergreen trees and snowfall occurs in the winter season.

III. PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:

Mongolian characteristics are found among the Sulungs. They are physically of medium statured with a well-built body, and not small statured as mentioned by C. R. Stonor in his report "The Sulung tribe of the Assam Himalayan". Their epicanthic fold is prominent. The usual height varies from five to six feet in the case of men and four to five feet in the case of women. Dark complexioned people are not seen amongst them. In fact, the majority of them are of fair complexion. They have flat noses, but without depression and conspicuous cheek bones. Their hair is black and the colour of the eyes varies from a pale to blue. They have scanty hair on the face and body. Very weak straggling moustaches and beards may be noticed in the case of some of the menfolk. Though it is emphasised by Dr. C. Von Fürer-Haimendorf and C. R. Stonor that the Sulungs have a tendency to prognathism, yet it is by no means universal as one can see a number of people having small rounded jaws. There is no tendency whatever to woolly or curly hair. Physically both the sexes are strong and hardy. They are more handsome than the neighbouring tribesmen, the Bangnis and Mijis. This author has never seen any baldness in the case of menfolk.

IV. CHARACTER :

Characterisation of a people is not an easy task. In this connection we are to give a subjective picture that depends more on the temperament, attitude and approach of the observer. From this view point mention may be made that the Sulungs are very unassuming, quiet and unobtrusive among strangers in marked contrast to the swaggering Bangnis. It is also noticed that their intelligence is not inferior to some of other tribal groups of the territory. They are hospitable, sincere, faithful, honest, affectionate and not suspicious to others but they are very shy with outsiders. As a rule they have little contact with any outside people other than their Bangni and Miji neighbours.

V. MIGRATION AND PRESENT DISTRIBUTION :

Migration :

The Sulungs have a tradition that originally they were in heaven but long ago they descended to earth and began to settle in a place where wild sago-palms were abundantly available and that place may be Sakmakhang, but according to the Buguns with whom they may have affinity, the place might be somewhere towards the north of present Chayengtajo in East Kameng District where the Sulungs and Khowas traditionally lived together. According to them they were the original inhabitants of north-eastern part of East Kameng District. When there was shortage of land for habitation due to the increase in the population then the Khowas and Sulungs migrated together from there towards the southeast in search of fertile land for cultivation and habitation. While coming down they settled together in a place named Sikhranrai. Though there is no written record about the route and time of their migration from their original place to Sikhranrai, the author has been told by the Buguns that they migrated to Sikhranrai about a thousand years ago along with the Sulungs. Sikhranrai, their first place of settlement in a new country was nearby the present Tenga valley area of West Kameng District. At Sikhranrai, the Buguns found the Sulungs a happy-go-lucky community and planned to get rid of the latter. With a view to avoiding the Sulungs, the Khowas offered some pop-corns to the Sulungs for sowing. Later the humble Sulungs sowed those pop-corns in their fields, but after some months when no offshoots came out from those pop-corns, the Sulungs became very angry at the failure of their crops and went back to Sakmakhang thinking that Sikhranrai was not a suitable place for their settlement. Since then

they have been inhabiting the northeastern part of this district. A few of them in time migrated to Lower Subansiri District.

Present distribution:

However, there were sixty eight Sulung villages in East Kameng District, distributed in a scattered way but most of their villages were confined to the northern part of the district and situated mostly in the slopes or on the top of the undulating hills in the north-east and south-east of the Chayengtajo Administrative Circle as well as north of Waii area and northeast of Pipu Administrative Circle. Now some of their villages are scattered around Seppa, the district headquarters of East Kameng District. Apart from these, some of their villages are situated in the midst of Bangni and Miji villages too, but these are homogeneous in population. Recently the scheme for regrouping of their villages has been taken up by the Government and accordingly some of their villages have been regrouped at Sanchu, Yakili, Saria, Laching, Nissangjong, Lezai-Leprai, Poube, Karamlang, Tapin, Pordung, Walong and Reblowpu.

Since the tribe is scattered over some hundred square miles, it is difficult to give more than a rough guess as to their strength; but from such information as is available, I would not put their population at more than a very few thousand, perhaps three thousand excluding the allied Khowas.

VI RELATION WITH BANGNIS, MIJIS AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD:

The Tribe was in effect rediscovered by Dr. C. Von Fürer Haimendorf in 1944-45 in the northeastern Bangni country of East Kameng District. The country was next visited by C. R. Stonor in 1945 and 1948. After that two successive expeditions were organized to their country by the then NEFA Administration. The first expedition was launched in the early part of 1966, and the other in the early part of 1968, wherein the author was one of the members of the team. At that time we could hardly cover thirty of their villages most of which had never been visited by any outsiders before our visit.

Since time immemorial the Sulungs have been the virtual serfs (Bekrau) of the Bangnis and Mijis of this district. The Sulungs address their own Bangni masters as Atto and to their Miji masters as Tau. When field investigation was first conducted we did not see the Sulungs in a free state in their country. They had very little contact with the

outside world as they are not allowed by their masters to mix freely with outsiders lest they might somehow lose their control over them. The reason for this may be attributed to the Bangnis' constant effort to maintain their supremacy over them. This was a more potent cause of absence of contact between them and the Administration. Today, so far as livelihood is concerned they are not fully fed by their masters and, in fact, for most other needs they do not entirely depend upon their masters. They carry on their own pursuits and help their Bangni and Miji masters only when necessity arises.

VII. OCCUPATION:

It has already been mentioned that the Sulungs are virtually slaves of the Bangnis and Mijis of East Kameng District. They are mainly hunters, trappers and food-gatherers but apart from such occupations they are to help their masters in shifting cultivation by way of jungle cutting, burning, sowing and harvesting. For themselves they prepare wild sago which they may sometimes share with their masters. For such manual labour they are given one dao each annually by their masters.

VIII. TRADE ROUTE, TRADE AND CURRENCY:

There are no definite trade routes from the Sulung country to any place outside. On the other hand, their economy does not depend to any considerable extent on the external supply of such requirements or luxuries as are procured through trade and barter. They are neither businessmen nor do they have any idea about trade. Until the advent of the then NEFA Administration the people of Pakesa village used to visit the Mago area of Tawang Sub-Division occasionally for collection of salt from Monpa people. It was a four days' march on foot for them to Mago and in exchange for salt they offered chillies, musk and hides of wild animals. Their Bangni masters in turn took salt from them to exchange for daos and rice.

In the past the people of Linchup and its surrounding villages used to go to Tibet for collection of salt, spears, beads and other necessities. Occasionally they also came down to markets in the plains of Assam such as Itakhuli and Charduar of Darrang District as porters of their Bangni masters.

Currency:

In primitive societies any article can be regarded as true money

provided it acts as a definite and common medium of exchange as a convenient means of obtaining one type of goods for another. In the Sulung area, it can hardly be said that they possessed any indigenous currency. That is why, all the articles of domestic use and all domestic animals and the skins of wild animals are regarded as money and with these articles exchange with other articles can be made. It is, however, difficult to relate the value of these bartered goods to that of present day currency. Metal utensils are not available amongst them except a few pans of aluminium and iron.

IX. LANGUAGE:

It is not as yet possible to make any definite statement about the Sulung language. The language is quite different from those of other neighbouring tribes such as the Bangnis, Mijis and Akas though it has apparently some similarity with the language of the Khowas of West Kameng District. However, there are no available linguistic data about their language so far. It can only be stated that their language is not understandable even to the people of their master tribes. This would support the suggestion made by Haimendorf and Stonor that they had been in the country before the other tribes of the area migrated in.