

FESTIVALS OF SUBANSIRI

By

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Government of Arunachal Pradesh
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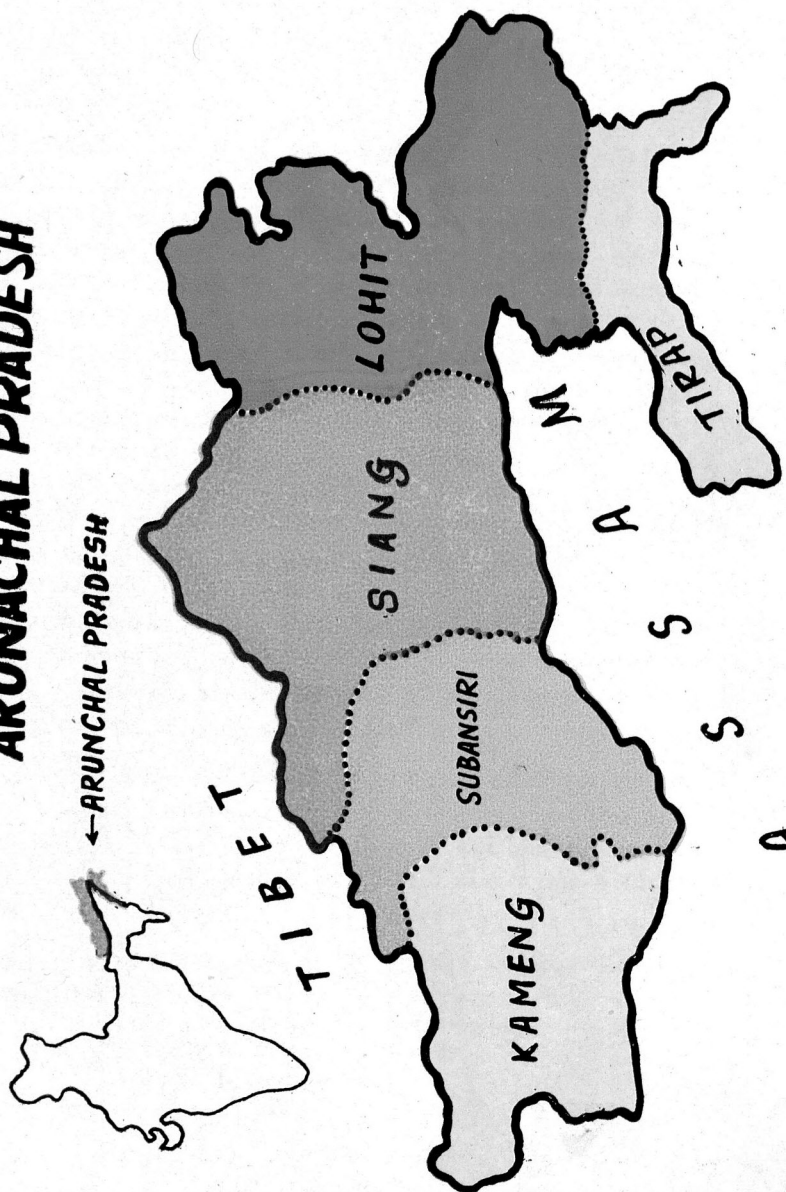
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FESTIVALS OF SUBANSIRI

ARUNACHAL PRADESH



TO
MRS. ELIZABETH
Von
FÜRER HAIMENDORF

PREFACE

Festivals are in many respects the focal points of a people's social and cultural life, and the account of the rituals and ceremonies of the tribes of the Subansiri District contained in the present book serves to illustrate the wealth and complexity of the traditional civilization of this Himalayan region.

Until a generation ago the Subansiri tribes lived in small communities isolated from the outside world and often also from each other. Frequent intervillage feuds and the hazards of travel in regions where no generally accepted authority provided security for anyone venturing beyond the confines of his own community prevented the growth of a sense of tribal solidarity. Except for the Apatanis, who were concentrated in a single densely populated valley and thus developed a feeling of identity and social cohesion, all tribes of the district were dispersed too widely to combine for either political action or cultural activities.

Indeed, it can be said with some justification that until recent years tribes such as the Nishis did not have any celebrations which could be described as "festivals" involving all members of a whole community in common activities. The performance of rites in the service of gods and spirits was generally a domestic affair concerning only the members of a single long house and such ritual experts as had been called in mediators between the donor of a sacrificial feast and the supernatural powers whose help and protection were solicited.

(ii)

In sharp contrast to these individualistic celebrations are the great annual festivals of the Apatanis which involve not only all the members of village-communities in ritual observances extending over many weeks but activate also a network of reciprocal obligations linking all Apatanis in a system of give and take and traditionally laid down visits from house to house and village to village.

In recent years efforts have been made to provide also such tribes as Nishis and Hill Miris with festive occasions when the people of wide areas could come together and participate in common religious observances and social exchanges. The Mnyokum festival celebrated by the Nishis of the region of the Panior River and its tributaries is typical as an expression of a new sense of solidarity gradually developing among people who had previously been characterised by their extreme individualism and their inability to combine for any concerted action, be it in the political or religious sphere.

Very similar in function and general nature is the Lengte Pule of the Nishis of the Koloriang, Sarli and Huri areas performed in annual rotation in one of those localities and bringing together thousands of tribesmen. A far-sighted administration is giving material and moral support to the organizers of such festivals but it is significant that the initiative for their establishment has usually come from the educated elite among tribesmen who see in such festivals the visible expression of a newly developed sense of tribal solidarity.

Shri B. B. Pandey has collected the data for the present account of ritual performances in the course of painstaking field-work over a number of years, and readers will be grateful for his sympathetic treatment of the elaborate and often confusing rituals through which the ideology and religious concepts of the tribesman manifest themselves in their traditional form.

Christoph Von Fürer-Haimendorf
Ziro, April-1978.

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Sarbashri Nguri Tem, Tabatat, Koj Murte, Gyati Taka, late Gyati Tedo, Paddy Lailiang, C. Rohelata, now Extra Assistant Commissioner, Lod Kokji, Circle Officer, Chokth

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B. B. PANDEY

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SUBANSIRI DISTRICT

The Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh covers an area of 14,797 km sq. with the exception of the Apatani Valley (about 20 square miles) most of it is a vast tangle of hills and forest.* Before independence, few explorers ventured to enter this *terra incognita*. The tribesmen were suspicious of all outsiders and among themselves, they were given to raids and capture of men and women. Blood feuds, once they began, continued through generations. Captives could be ransomed or also made into slaves and sold. When the Administration established its District headquarters at Ziro in 1952, the entire area with the exception of the Apatani Valley was a hot bed of internecine strife, but the work of expanding law and order had begun. Gradually, the officers of the Administration explored the territory visited the remotest villages, cultivated friendship, explained the mission of the Government and finally opened outposts in far-flung areas. These outposts continue to serve not merely as stations from which law and order is maintained, but also vital agencies of social change. The tribesmen soon realized the value of peace, and once their suspicions ended they began to cooperate in the development activities that were initiated a few years later.

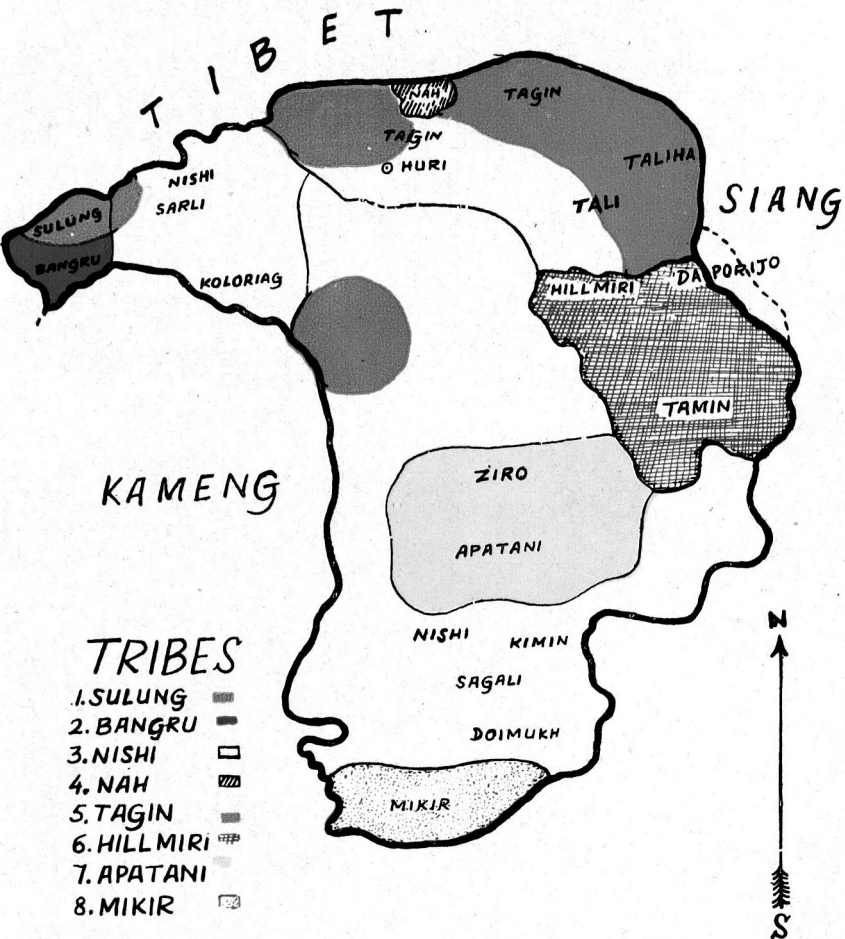
This District is the home of several tribes. According to the Census of 1971 the tribal population of the District is 103752 (approx) as shown in the following table.¹

Name of the tribe	Circle/Area inhabited by the tribes	Total Population
Nishi :	Palin, Ziro, Nyapin, Koloriang Huri, Tali, Doimukh, Sagali, Kimin and Itanagar.	51832
Apatani :	Ziro	12859
Hill Miri :	Raga. Tamen, Daporijo	8161
Sulung :	Sarli, Huri, Koloriang, Tasi	1480
Bangru :	Sarli	710
Tagin :	Taliha, siyom, Nacho, Daporijo.	20194
Mikir :	Balijan, Doimukh	1286
Gallong :	Daporijo	6727
Other Tribes :		503
In the District.	Total :	103752

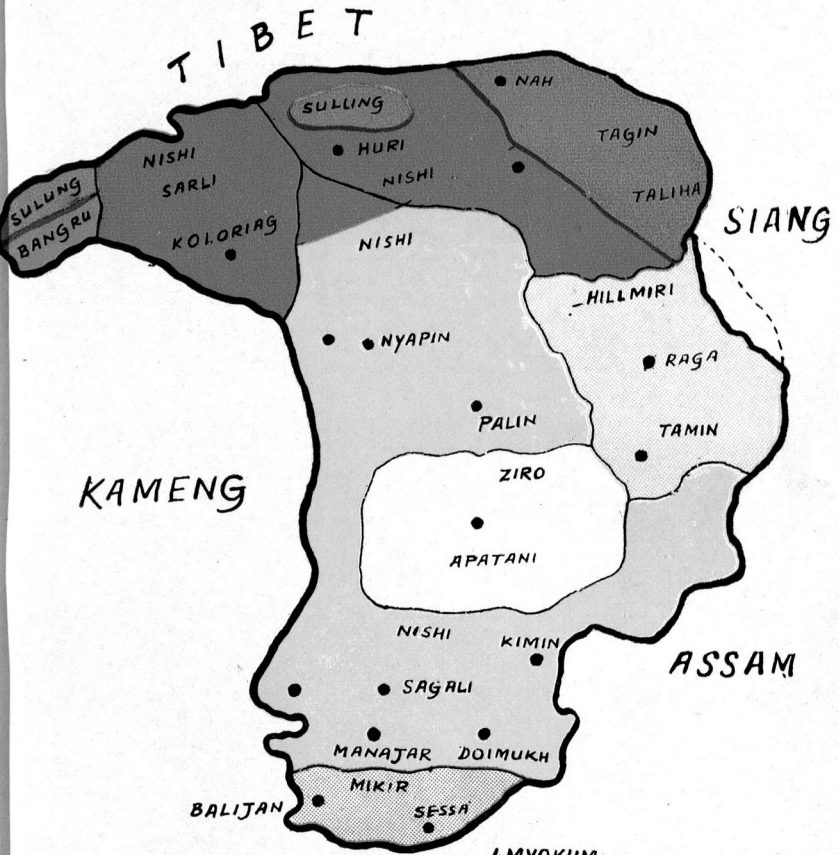
According to the criteria of economy, social and political patterns, these tribal groups can conveniently be divided into two categories. In the first category, fall such tribes as the Nishis (who were numerically the largest tribe of the district), Hill Miris, Bangrus, Sulungs and Tagins. All of these tribes practise the slash-and-burn agriculture and are good at rearing, *mithun*, and other cattle, but have a loose social and political organisation.

In the second category, fall the Apa Tanis who are a settled agricultural people and whose social economy is highly integrated with their community life. There are also half a thousand Mikirs, who have come from the plains of Assam and settled in the forest villages of the foothills. Their concentration is mainly in the Balijan-Doimukh area. It will be apt to describe briefly the economy and social and political organisation of some of these tribes.

SUBANSIRI DISTRICT

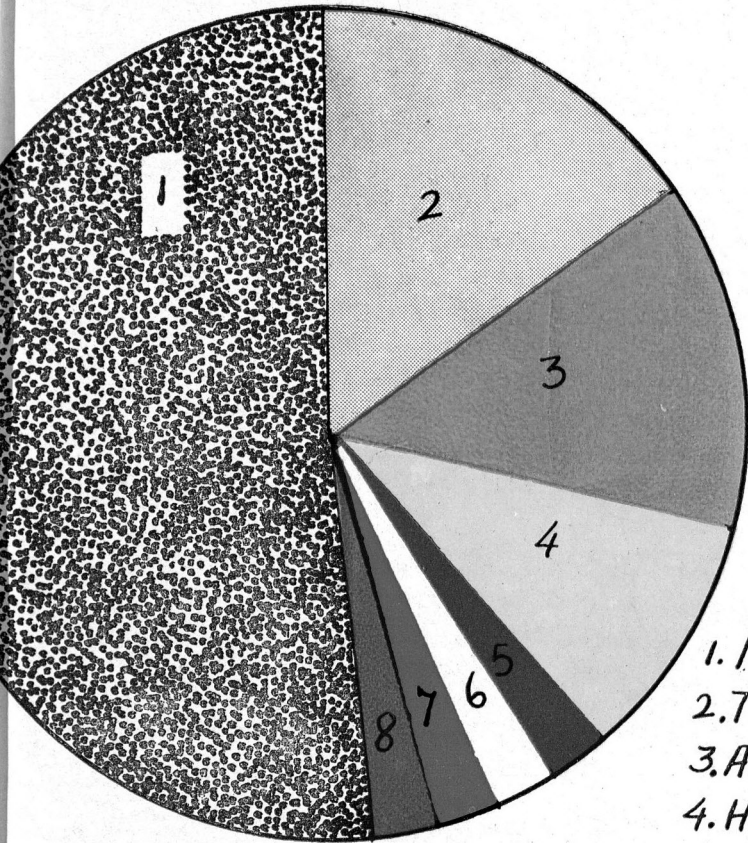


SUBANSIRI DISTRICT



1. MYOKUM
2. BORI
3. BORIBOOT
4. MYOKO, MURUNG, DREE
5. BIHU, PANMASMI
6. LONGTE
7. SULUNG
8. SHIDONI

POPULATION



1. NISHI.
2. TAGIN.
3. APATAN
4. HILL MIR
5. BANGRU
6. SULUNG
7. MIKIR.
8. OTHERS

THE NISHI

The Nishi, known earlier as Dafla or Bangni form the bulk of the population of the Subansiri District. "All Nishis trace their descent from one legendary ancestor, whose three sons are believed to have been the forefathers of three groups of clans known respectively as Dopum, Dodum and Dol. Each of these main groups is subdivided into phratries and exogamous clans ; there are areas which are exclusively the habitat of one clan, and others where, all three main groups live side by side."²

Nishi economy is based on agriculture and animal husbandry, and the principal method of tillage is slash and burn cultivation, necessitating a periodic shifting of fields. Dry rice, millet and maize are the main crops. The breeding of livestock is everywhere important: mithun, pigs goats, and fowls are kept and cows are even imported in fairly large numbers these days.

The size of their settlements range from three or four small homesteads to thirty substantial houses. Most dwellings are long houses with as many as twenty hearths and rooms for as many families. A Nishi settlements of ten houses may thus have a population of nearly 300. The houses are dispersed over the hill sides, each house or group of two or three houses standing on a different level. The village is not a closely knit social and political unit.

Families may join or leave at will, and in some areas there is a slow but continuous movement of people from one

village to an other. Feuds were usually not between village and village but between the head of one long house and the leader of a comparable group of closely allied families. It was not unusual for one or two houses in a village to be raided and burnt, while the inhabitants of the other households remained unscathed.

The primary social unit is the household comprising several elementary families and in some cases as many as sixty or seventy members. Such a long house is virtually autonomous and self contained. The members of each such household submit to the authority of the head of the household. In every village there are one or two influential men to whom the people of the village may approach for help in disputes. Such people are called *nyats* and in their role as intermediaries they are referred to as *boot* or *gingdung*. Inter-village disputes are settled by *nyats* and *gingdungs*.

The Nishi are basically individualistic in outlook. The only basis of cohesion among them is their feeling of oneness in respect of clan and kingroup. The sharing of similar pattern of life lends to the Nishi a sense of unity. Wrongs are considered to be personal rather than social matters, and disputing parties are often left to themselves without interference from society.

This theoretical anarchy is, in the absence of a council of elders, mitigated by two factors. Firstly, the co-existence of several clans in the same area compels them to conform to a certain peaceful standard ; secondly, the services of go-betweens are universally recognised and accepted. These *gingdung* or intermediaries have no political or judicial power, nor can they enforce their decisions. Their success lies in arranging the meeting of the two parties and their influential supporters, discussing the dispute and reaching unanimous agreement of decision. What is reasonable and just is usually accepted. Such assemblies sometimes call for many days of debate

and the penalties decided, are eventually paid by the offender. Nishi customary law prescribes standardized compensations for various offences.

Now-a-days, most of the *nyats* have been recognised by the Government as *Gaonburah* and take a leading role in the settlement of disputes. In important cases they are usually called from a number of villages of the area to sit in a council.

THE HILL MIRI

The economic and social life of the Hill Miri is similar to that of the Nishi and the distinction between the two tribes is arbitrary. There are, of course, certain regional differences. For example, the Hill Miri houses have only three to four hearths, their head dress are more elaborate, their women are segregated during menstruation and they claim a closer association with the Miris of the plains.

THE APATANI

The fertile soil of the Apa Tani valley has enabled the Apa Tanis to develop an intensive type of agriculture which is based on irrigation. The paddy fields stretch as far as the eye can see with thousands of crisscross dykes. Their vegetable and bamboo gardens and their pine plantations present ample evidents of their agricultural skills. They are largely self-sufficient people and grow enough food even for barter to neighbours.

They live in fairly large villages which are permanent, although during recent years they have been persuaded to disperse to avoid damage by fire. Each village has several clans and each clan has one or two assembly platforms which are the centres of their ritual life. The clans, each a distinct entity, are mutually linked by numerous kinship, ritual and friendship ties. Among themselves these people are highly co-operative and have a well-organised machinery of authority and control.

Each of the exogamous and localized clans is represented by one or two *buliang*, men of character and ability, who are appointed either from among the members of a family of high status and wealth or on account of their personal popularity. They are the arbiters of tribal law and the upholders of tribal justice, but the individual *buliangs* are primarily the spokesmen of their own clan or group of clans, and not village headmen wielding, absolute authority.

Councils of *buliang* formerly decided almost all cases that were reported to them. If a person did not submit to

the decision of the council—the destruction of his bamboo garden or field, the council could coerce him into submission. The community recognised the *buliang* ritually during the festivals, and in spite of the fact that there were, at times, even *gambu* or regulated armed conflicts, the *buliang* settled practically, all the cases before they endangered the peace of the whole community.

There is also a large grouping of the *buliang* recognised by custom and tradition. The Apa Tani *buliang* are divided into two groups, Dibo Aso and Tini Aso. The Dibo Aso comprises the *buliang* of Mudantage, Michi-Bamin, Hari, Kalong and Duta villages. The *buliang* of Hija, Reru, Tajan and Hang are collectively called Tini Aso. In the past there had been a group alignment of villages during war (*Gambu*). *Hari*, *Kalong* and *Duta* formed one group and *Hong*, *Tajang*, *Reru*, *Hiza* another. *Lisudu* competition of mithun sacrifice was a common issue during major conflicts.

Other Tribes.

Other tribes of the district are the Bangrus, Sulungs and the Mikirs. The people of the Tali circle have returned themselves as Tagins but they fall into the Dol group of the Nihsi and are not different from them. The Bangrus speak a different language and their method of agriculture, clan structure and political organisation is similar to that of the Nishis.

The Mikirs living in the forest villages of the foothills practise wet-rice cultivation and are economically better off than their neighbours. During recent years they have taken to Hinduism and in each Mikir village there is a *namghar* where they assemble for worship. They have stopped sacrificing animals. Each village has a headman and disputes in the village are settled by the village panchayat.

The Administration aims at an overall development of the people and the sphere and magnitude of the activities of its different departments are constantly increasing. The Department of Agriculture, for instance has succeeded upto 1962-63 in bringing over 790 acres of land under wet-rice cultivation. It has encouraged green-manuring and distributed improved tools and implements. The spraying of insecticides during this year in the area of Huri alone has saved the people from famine. Modern medicine has brought relief to thousands of suffering people and there are now several Health Units in different places of the District.

There are now 7 community Development Blocks with their headquarters at Ziro, Palin, Sagalee, Doimukh, Raga, Tali, and Koloriang. Under different C. D. Blocks. Hundreds of thousands of people have been, participating directly and indirectly in the work of development. Roads and tracks have been improved or built ; many villages have been given piped water supply and every effort is being made to develop tribal mobility and increase the food supply. Communications have progressed so well that today one can drive from the plains of Assam up to the remotest areas of the District. The opening of communications has meant an inflow of cash for local works and greater contacts with people from different parts of the country. People from the remote areas now make frequent trips to the markets of the plains for the purchases of cows, daos, cloth and other supplies. This has meant better clothes, better utensils and even changing values of social life. Many of the local people have become successful traders and some of them own even their own vehicles.

A sense of national consciousness has been awakened among the people and sense of oneness with the rest of the country is felt today more intensely than some years ago. After the Chinese aggression many of the tribesman joined the Army. Home Guard training has been started and a majority of the able bodied persons have been given training

in different camps and thus experienced a new life of discipline. Some of the selected trainees have also successfully completed training at Haflong Training Centre. Publicity work is being done throughout the district with a view to enlightening our people on the danger that threatens our frontier.

To further the spirit of national consciousness the role of education is very vital. The Department of Education has already opened schools of various standards in all important villages of the district.

One of the important elements in the Administration's policy is to promote the social and democratic institutions of the people. There can be little doubt that in this District the conditions for forming tribal councils vary from tribe to tribe. Earlier we have divided the tribes according to their socio-economic and socio-political character. The Apa Tanis are the only tribe who have a unified system of political authority. To lessen the dependence on Government officials in setting their cases, and with a view to promoting the village Panchayats the then Political Officer of this District took the important step of recognising certain Apa Tanis as *buliang* within the provisions of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation 1 of 1945. The power and functions of these *buliang* have been defined in the orders, issued by the Political Officer.

The Hill Miris have organized themselves into three *bangos* Pei, Peri and Teli, Tedum, each of which is composed of a number of clans. Each clan elects its own representative to sit in the *bango* council. Each *bango* has its own meeting place, and settles the cases of the people of its jurisdiction: when there are disputes between the villages of different *bangos* the members of both *bangos* sit together to settle the dispute. The intervillage dispute which cannot be settled by the two *bangos* is settled by a joint sitting of the three *bangos* with members of the third *bango* acting as mediators. Such a joint sitting of the *bangos* is called *bugum-Bokang*.

With the rapid growth of education and material progress the socio-religious aspect of society demanded certain modifications that would bring it in line with the new modes of thought developing among the educated younger generation. In order to protect tribal society from outside foreign socio-religious aggression the Arunachal Government has taken steps aimed at guiding and helping the people to revitalize their traditional festivals, rites and ceremonies. Certain festivals have, with financial assistance from Government, been organized as communal rites designed to take place at appointed places and on fixed dates. Such orientation is intended not only to promote better understanding between different groups of one community but to foster a respect for their own tribal tradition. The modernization of traditional rites has been in line with the thinking of the young educated generation who have been in contact with populations in other parts of India.

In the book I shall discuss some of the important traditional festivals observed by the ethnic groups of Subansiri District, as well as those which have been adapted to the new style.

SUBANSIRI DISTRICT

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