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MOPIN

(A festival of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh)

Edited and Compiled

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P. C. D.

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MOPIN

Introduction

Against the back-drop of the lofty snow-clad outer range of the eastern Himalayas, the Siang District of the Arunachal Pradesh descends through a succession of hills to the valley of the mighty Brahmaputra in the south. It is the home of a number of communities who are collectively called 'Adi' and have individual names such as Padam, Minyong, Gallong, Pangi, Pasi, Pailibo, Ramo, Shimong, Bori, Bokar etc. Culturally and linguistically these communities may be divided under two broad groups the Galloic and the Padamic. Under the first fall the Gallong, Ramo, Bokar and Pailibo and under the second, the Padam, Minyong, Pasi, Pangi, Shimong, Bori, Ashing and Tangam. The main cultural criteria that distinguish them are the dormitory system and hair and dress styles. The Padamic possess dormitories for bachelors and unmarried girls called 'Moshup' and 'Raseng' respectively. The Galloic do not have these institutions. While the Padamic, both men and women crop hair round the head, the Galloic men either let it grow or cut it to a tepping point on the nape and the women let it grow and secure in a bun behind the head. The Padamic women prefer white skirt with a band of simple design in the centre in black, while the Padamic style is pink or yellow ground with more elaborately patterned band worked in colour thread. The most noticeable point of linguistic difference is the preference of final nasals by the Padamic. In the social sphere the most important difference lies in the marriage system. The Galloic have what has been described as a kind of fraternal polyandry in which all the brothers have sexual rights over their individual wives. This system is not found among the Padamic. While both the groups are democratic in the socio-political organization, the village council, kebang, of the Padamic is much more developed than the similar institution known as 'Dere' or 'byango' among the Galloic. Closely associated with the institutions of 'kebang', 'moshup' and 'raseng' is the oral literature called 'abang' of which the Padamic are accepted by all to be the original source and principal custodian. These abangs are sung by rahposadists is known as 'miri' accompanied by a bevy of girls who belonging to

the *rasengs*, who dance to the rhythm repeating refrains, around the 'Miri'. These 'abangs' are sung and danced during a number of socio-religious celebrations which used to be organized at the village level in the past and have started in recent years to develop into grand festivals transcending the village boundaries and covering entire communities. These festivals occur at particular stages of agriculture and afford escape from the boredom of tiring routine of toils in the field. Particular deities or spirits believed to be in charge of crops and cattle are honoured and worshipped on these occasions.

Mopin

Mopin is one such festival and is the biggest of the Galloic group. It marks the beginning of the annual agricultural cycle and is celebrated in the month of January-February, when the fields have been made ready after the jungles have been cleared and the debris fired and seeds broadcast or dribbled in. There is no fixed day for it in the calendar. Omens are consulted and the day is fixed as they indicate.

The Mopin Myth

Mythological background of the celebration is supplied by the 'Abangs'. The first man Abo Tani (Father Tani) and his brother Taki were born of Sisi (Earth). Taki was extremely jealous of Tani and this jealousy grew into hatred and he planned to kill his brother. Once he managed to persuade Tani to go rowing with him, took him towards a water-fall and shoved him down it. He had already fixed a takom (fish trap) further down stream and the body of Tani as it floated down got caught in it. Taki had thought that none had seen the deed but the deity Jiku Miku had seen it. The god knew that humanity would be born of Tani, and so he decided to bring Tani back to life. He made a *labur* (talisman), tied it to a *jirdi-bodi* (a thin piece of hollow bamboo) with *Kebo yasik* (thread of maroom colour) and stuffed it with feathers of a fawl's legs and addressed the *labur* in these words 'show me, oh *labur*, where the body of Tani lies. Guide me to the place'. With these words he cast it into water. It floated down the stream taking the course Tani's body had taken and stuck to the takom. But in the mean time Taki had been there before and taken the body beyond the line where the sky met the

earth and eaten it. He had saved only the two eyes which he put on the *rapko*, the hanging shelf over the hearth, where fish and meat are smoked and dried. After doing this he came back to the *takom* and rested on the bank.

Jiku Miku up in the sky followed the *labur* but instead of finding the body of Tani he found Taki resting there after his meal. Jiku Miku guessed what had happened and asked Taki point blank if he had eaten Tani. Taki replied that he had not and denied all knowledge about his whereabouts. Thereupon Jiku Miku made a *koni-kama* or dime with a bamboo stick with shavings hanging like tassels at one end and which is split to hold feathers of a fowl's leg. He signed the feathers and the tassels over a fire and blew the smoke towards Taki. This made Taki spring up in spite of himself and proved that he had lied. Had he not, he would have lain as before. Taki confessed his guilt and brought the two eyes from his *rapko*. Jiku Miku took them with him and went to Talo-Tanya in Donyi-Giri, the realm of the sun, to make an image of Tani. Talo Tenya wanted bees wax (*Nipu*) to be found deep in an accessible part of the forest. This was brought by Donyi's daughters. Directed by Talo Tanya, Jiku Miku shaped an image of Tani with it. On it he made a mould of *kamsi kangi* a special type of clay and dried it. When it was dry, the wax was drained out. He then fixed Tani's eyes in the sockets that he had made in the clay image.

By this when the news of this happenings had spread many including gods assembled to see the operation. There was difference of opinion as to the length of the period the cast was to remain unopened. Some thought that five days were enough but the Hitum Jore spirits were positive that 12 days were necessary for Tani's revival. There were many gods and goddesses also in the assembly. Their worry was on another account, lest the process changed the sex of Tani. They assembled at Kargu in heaven and agreed that if Tani came back in his masculine self all of them would bless him with the best boons in their power. They all wanted that Tani should remain a man.

After 12 days Tani ended the divine worry as he came out of the cast as a boy child. Jore the wife of Hitum undertook to nurse him and the happy gods and goddesses departed having bestowed on him all

their boons (*jili-bong*). Donyi (Sun) the god of light assured sunshine for the plants to grow and crops to ripen and domestic animals for propitiation of the spirits and meat for his table. Peka the God of war accoutred him with *tadu* (*Cane helmet*) and *bokom* the insignia of bravery. Bome Bote the lord of weapons gave him a bow and arrows for war and chase and Bute Yapom, the lord of forest, promised sure game in chase. The rest among themselves gave *liji lipin* (precious stone), *hertup herpe* a small fish the symbol of paddy, *kime yime* (mustard seeds) *sunte jugrin* (goard) and *daji dane* (paddy). All these were left in charge of Mopin the deity of wealth, to be given to Tani when he had performed a sacrifice.

Tani grew up into a fine young man ignorant of the good things kept for him. His foster mother advised him to go to the priest (Nyibu) Donyi-Jilo and propitiate the great Mopin. He did as he was told and Mopin was pleased and handed over to him all the gifts of the gods and taught him how to cultivate. And so agriculture began. Since then man the progeny of Tani has continued the celebration at the time of sowing or immediately afterwards and this ensures them rich harvest and plenteous food.

The Festival

In its present form Mopin is propitiated in a grand celebration that lasts for five days some time between January and May. This is the sowing season and if there are reasons to be apprehensive about the success of the crops or if the saplings are weak it is decided to propitiate Mopin. Omens are read on an egg and if indications are favourable preparations are started. A *kebang* (meeting) is held in the 'Dere', the village community hall, to draw up a list of contributors. The principal items of sacrifice are mithuns and pigs. The contribution of these is decided in the 'kebang'. Usually persons who can afford them are selected and they seldom fail. In case there are no individual affluent enough to contribute an animal by himself, a number club to contribute it. Once agreed a time is fixed within which the animals are to be handed over to the elders. The time so allowed is from 10 to 12 days.

In the mean while every household gets busy making its won preparation. Copious quantities of fermented rice is prepared and

abundant fish and meat stored for reception of guest. Rice is ground to powder for smearing faces at the time of celebration. The villages hum with hectic activity and housewives potter about in the houses cooking, grinding and storing. Gay bands of young men, women and children throng the village streets cutting jokes and making smart repartees. The air resounds with light laughers and snatches of songs. The old collect here and there in gossiping groups.

In the morning before the actual festival starts the rite of *dipe nam* is performed. Images of Mopin, the ancestor of doli, the god of rain are made of bamboo, bamboo shavings, twigs and leaves of sacred trees and installed in the site which had been purified with the *lore-lomen—pengam* rites the preceding night, with chanting of hymns and prayers by two priests learned in the religious lore and assisted by two young assistants, all dressed in white turbans, wrappers and large quantities of beads. In the evening the *Yame rutum*, the village leader goes round the houses calling on the men to assemble in the 'dere' the following morning.

The next day is the first of the five days of festival. At the place of worship the priests go on humming their prayers. One man from each family attends the *dere* to help in the storing of rice, fish, meat and rice-beer contributed by the people. The whole night passes in a mighty feast while the priests invoke Mopin to grace the village with their presence.

In the second day each house again contributes food which is collected in the *dere*. Members from each household go to these otherwise evil would befall them. A cow mithun is slaughtered in the ceremony *yudim-lik-nam*. She is tied to a scaffold erected near the Mopin images, her head smeared with rice powder, soaked in rice-beer in the evening before. The priests offer the sacrifice to Mopin with prayers to bless the people with health and wealth. The mithun also is entreated to take the cutting short of her life in good spirit and not to be angry with them but to rejoice that she is going back to her ancestors in the land of shades. Women from each house receives *rili bong* symbolizing the blessing of Mopin and depart. And the men cut up the carcass and take the meat to the *dere*. Rice-beer mixed with her blood is poured on the top of the images and collected in a pit called *Komar* where also flows the blood

of the fowl sacrificed to Mopin. The sacrifices over, the priests lead a party in a dance to the tune of poper-tingum, a rhapsody relating an ancient myth. Others congregated there form separate groups dancing with shouts of 'hey Mopin'. While dancing a girl comes and smears the faces of a priest with rice-powder and then all start applying it to one another's face. Rice powder signify purity of heart and mind, thought and deed. It flies thick and heavy and faces and hands are coated thick in white. Distance of age and status is forgotten only, as the customs enjoins relatives are spared. Funs go on for the whole day and a great community feast is held in the afternoon. The priest followed by the people go to the house of the man whose axe killed the mithun. In the evening house holds entertain their own guests with dainties specially prepared for the occasion. Each family prepares special Mopin cakes.

All the night a priest keeps on singing prayers and the villagers heap food and rice-beer in front of him. The blood and hair of the sacrificed mithun, bristles of the pigs slaughtered at the altar, the feathers of the fowl and bamboo shavings from the *koni koma* are distributed to the people as tokens of the festival and of good luck and prosperity.

On the third day the meat and the Mopin cakes are distributed among all including the guests from outside. At midday there is again a grand feast in which the mithun meat forms the *piece de resistance*. Every house celebrates its own individual parties and vies with each other in the sumptuousness of the fare. The priests receive special shares of the sacrificed animals.

On the fourth day the priest return to their own home with all the food and rice-beer and serves them to all who come. After the mopin cakes have been distributed from the 'dere' and the priests house the leave packets in which they were wrapt are hung on the *dipe* of Mopin as the priests keep up their chants in their sacrificial robes. Feasting and marry-making go on as usual. This day and the previous are particularly dedicated to the manes, a general taboo is observed and nobody goes out of the village. The more affluent of the people offer smaller sacrifices.

The fifth and the last day is passed in the rigga ceremony in which the whole village is thoroughly cleaned of all garbages and litters

which accumulated during the past four days. It is a day of mixed feelings of joy and sorrow-joy, because the people are now sure that cultivation will thrive and they will have enough of food for the year ; sorrow, because they are going to bid good bye to Mopin who brought so much of joy to them. A farewell feast is held. Surfeited with food, drink and prickles (do pak) all go with the priests to the end of the village to see the god off. The festival is over. All go back home and the priests take off their robes of office. The life reverts to the daily routine from the following day.

Mopin Dance

Dance forms a special feature of all Adi festivals and the general pattern is the same—a group of maidens of the same age group, dance in a circle around the *miri*, who is generally a young man, to the tune of the Abangs and the timing kept by the jerking of the sword. Some of the movements of the dances perform during Mopin are—

- (i) The girls form a circle around the *miri* standing shoulder to shoulder and sway their body to the rhythm of the abang and repeat the refrains in chorus and clapping their hands in some of them.
- (ii) In some dances they sway their right foot and clap their hands in front and at the back with stooping of the body. Instead of clapping they also stand akimbo with their left or right arm waving the other in front.
- (iii) Some times they lock their arms with each other's and wave their right foot forward and back with the sway of the hip

The body may also be bent sideways right or left alternately with the right and left feet slightly raised simultaneously.

The legs may also be swang front and back with corresponding movements of the opposite arms timed to synchronize with the change of the feet and arms with the change of lines of the songs.

In others a step may be taken to the right and to the left alternately along with swaying of the hip with the

change. In these there is no change of place but in one there is slow movement to the right as a side step is taken with the right foot and left brought to it followed by another step in that direction which results in an anti-clock wise movement around the *miri*.

Rice-Powder

Profuse use of rice powder is characteristic of Mopin. It is used to make the cakes specially in honour of Mopin and as a powder to smear faces. Both the uses have religious association and in this it has a striking similarity with the religious importance of rice-powder in other parts of India. In the Assam plains rice-powder cakes are a speciality of Bihu. The powder is common in ceremonies in South India and Bengal. Auspicious designs are drawn on the floor, walls and court yards on occasions of folk ceremonies and rituals in Bengal and South India. This common use binds the Adi in a common link with the people of other rice producing parts of India. This ritualistic similarity becomes significant in the larger context of association with agriculture. Besides Solung, Dree, Loku, and festivals of the other groups and communities of Arunachal Pradesh itself and Bhaitheli of the Kocharis and other plains tribal groups bordering on it, the Bihu of Assam, Paush parvan of Bengal and the Pongal and Onam of distant Andhra Pradesh and Kerala respectively are all in honour of agricultural divinities for their blessings on human efforts for subsistence. The Kocharis offer, like the Adis, food and sacrifice to spirits of cultivation. In Assam, almost as at the same time as of the Mopin, is performed the Bihu. Here the prayer for rich harvest is made in presence of a big fire (meji or bhelaghor) to Lakshmi the goddess of wealth. Dr Profulla Datta Goswami has summed the compelling sameness of idea and formed in following words "Bohag Bihu, the spring time festival is itself a symbol of various influences Aryan and Mongoloid, Assamese and pan Indian. It comprises house cleaning, prayer to god or gods, rites for cattle welfare, *huchari* (oral singing), the dances with sex bias and extending from this last, songs of an erotic type which can be used a lover's language. All the plains tribes participate in the Bihu festival and those who are up in the hills perform rites alike to those performed in the plains."

In Madras and Andhra Pradesh a similar festival is performed known as Pongal in the month of January in which offerings are made to the Sun on the second day called Surya Pongal and on the third day called Mattu Pongal, there are rites for the welfare of the cattle.

Onam of Kerala is celebrated in the month of August/September. It is a great occasion for dancing and singing and merry-making as in Mopin. As the Adi believe that Mopin comes down to bless the people at the time of the festival, so the Keralians have a tradition that the Asura king Mohaboli descends to earth to see for himself that his subjects are happy and prosperous.

That Mopin is, therefore, an Adi version of a spirit and performance which are all India in character and essence.