

The Ethnographical Study of the Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, provides a systematic approach to understanding the social organization, cultural practices, and lived experiences of communities. Given the rich cultural diversity and high concentration of tribal populations in Northeast India, the region offers a fertile ground for ethnographic research. Studying minority tribes such as the Meyor is particularly significant for documenting and preserving their cultural heritage.

The present paper focuses on an ethnographic study of the Meyor tribe, with emphasis on their historical background, religious beliefs, festivals, traditional jewellery, and attire. The Meyor constitute a small indigenous community residing primarily in the Walong and Kibithoo circles of Anjaw district in Arunachal Pradesh. Through this study, an attempt is made to highlight the distinctive cultural identity of the Meyor and contribute to the broader understanding of tribal societies in the eastern Himalayan region.

Keywords: Ethnography, Anjaw, Walong, Tibetan Buddhism, Traditional dress

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INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh, land of rising sun consists of more than 26 indigenous tribes and 100 plus sub tribes. The Anjaw district became a district in Arunachal Pradesh after splitting off from Lohit district in February 2004. The Lohit district name derived from the river itself named as lohit, originating from Zayu county, Tibet and entering India via Kibithu area of the district.

Ethnography offers a particularly suitable methodological framework for examining such a community because it emphasizes close engagement with everyday life, social relationships, symbolic practices, and locally understood meanings. Rather than limiting inquiry to descriptive facts, ethnographic research seeks to interpret how cultural practices function within the lived reality of a community. This is especially important in the case of smaller tribal groups where oral tradition, ritual memory, and inherited customs remain central to collective identity.

The Meyor tribe, also referred to as Zakhing in earlier records (such as the Census of India 1961 and later tribal population classifications, mention the tribe under the name Zakhing, indicating their

presence in the Walong and Kibithoo circles of Arunachal Pradesh), is a numerically small community settled in the Walong and Kibithoo circles of the Anjaw district. Their migration from the Zayul district of Tibet to the Dri Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, driven by harsh climatic conditions and socio-political pressures, highlights their resilience.

The Meyor tribe follows Tibetan Buddhism, enriched with animistic and shamanistic practices, as reflected in their rituals performed by the Rintochoy (village priest) and their crafting of wooden Buddha images (Aiyadurai 2011). Their primary deity, Yong, is venerated alongside nature spirits associated with hills and water bodies. Religious practices also involve rituals performed by the Rintochoy (village priest) and the crafting of wooden images of Buddha, which reflect their spiritual beliefs and artistic heritage.

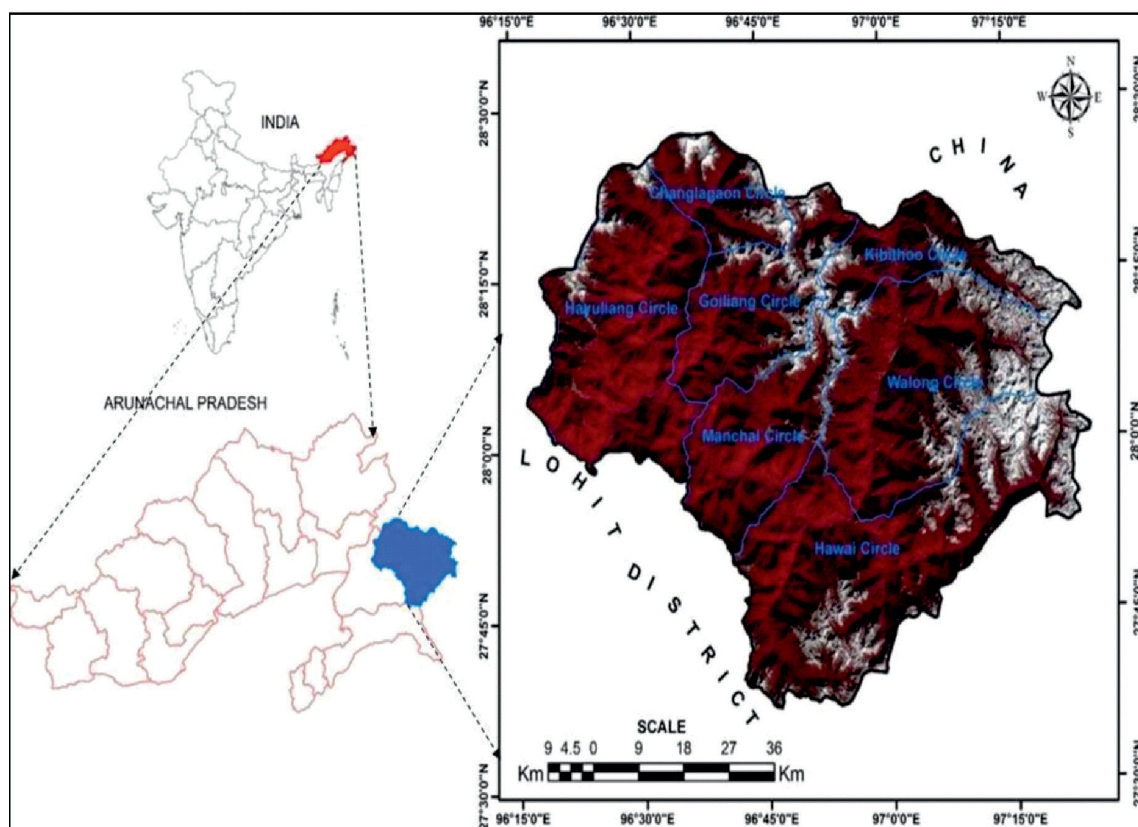


Figure 1: Map of Lohit district

Source: Perme, Nabo, and Nishamani Kar

The present study examines selected aspects of Meyor life through an ethnographic perspective, focusing on their historical background, settlement pattern, religious beliefs, festivals, traditional attire, and ornaments.

ORIGIN AND MIGRATION

Different scholars have tried to decode their migration but no proper evidence has been found for their origin. The Meyors say that they have migrated from a far eastern place called 'Mei' (Perme 2024). According to their own legend, they believed that due to heavy flooding the whole earth was wiped out. But only a brother, sister and a dog survived the flood. They cried for help for days and then a

large snake appeared in front of them. They begged him to help and he created a path from the water towards the south. After the water went down, they both became husband and wife to move the human race forward (Perme 2024).

In 1906–07, a considerable number of migrants crossed the Indo-Tibetan border and entered the Dri Valley with the intention of establishing new settlements. Adverse environmental and social conditions forced them to continue their movement southward. During this difficult journey, many lost their lives because of severe cold and repeated attacks by the Mishmis, who reportedly used bows and arrows, while the migrants attempted to defend themselves with firearms. Out of the original group, only about ninety individuals survived and eventually reached Mayu, where they temporarily settled. Some of those captured during the journey were reportedly enslaved by the Mishmis and later sold to the Adis. Over time, the surviving migrants moved further south and ultimately established themselves in the Walong region (Choudhury 1978).

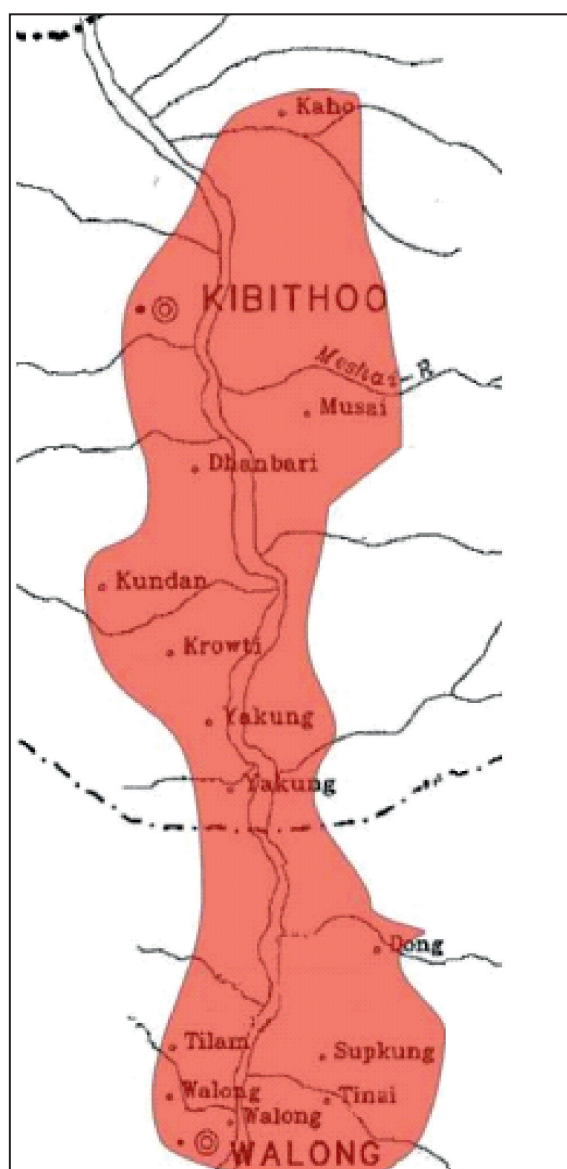


Figure 3: Meyor speaking villages

Source: Blench, Roger., Post, Mark W., 2015

These migrant groups later came to be identified as the Meyors and Zakhriings. Present-day Meyors possess only limited collective memory regarding their exact place of origin; their oral traditions mainly preserve the memory of migration and settlement in the Walong–Kibithoo area. According to Mishmi oral accounts, the Meyors are believed to have migrated from the Zayul district of Tibet in order to escape taxation imposed by the Dzongpon of Rima and to avoid the oppressive policies of Tibetan administrative authorities (Choudhury 1978).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND RITUAL PRACTICES

The Meyors have local beliefs and also follow Mahayana Buddhism. The Meyors deeply revere Buddhist spiritual leaders and perform their religious worship in the Gompa, where images of Buddha, Dalai Lama, and other important disciples are placed. In addition to collective worship in the Gompa, almost every Meyor household maintains a small prayer space or domestic shrine in which a portrait of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is respectfully placed (Perme 2024).

Among the Meyors, the local priest is known as the *Kahu*, who is believed to possess the ability to invoke spirits and communicate with supernatural forces. The *Kahu* performs various rites and rituals intended to appease both benevolent and malevolent spirits associated with the village community. The benevolent spirits are *Sungma*, *Gassing*, *Yawdak*, *Chising* And Malevolent Spirits are *Lamkho*, *Yarge*, *Chan*, *Koprikoni* And *Ceari*. He is also regarded as a diviner and healer, entrusted with identifying the causes of illness, disease, and other misfortunes through traditional methods such as examining chicken liver, eggs, rice, and measuring the hand. Once the source of affliction is determined, he recites ritual chants and prescribes appropriate sacrifices to the spirit considered responsible, with the aim of securing recovery and restoring well-being (Perme 2024: 41).

Animal sacrifice forms an important part of these ritual practices, with offerings commonly including cattle, pigs, and fowls to propitiate deities and spirits. In certain situations, particularly when economic conditions are difficult, promised offerings may be postponed and fulfilled later according to the circumstances and capacity of the concerned household. This flexibility in ritual obligation makes the practice socially adaptable and particularly suitable for economically weaker villagers (Perme 2024: 42).

FESTIVALS AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

There are three festivals celebrated by the Meyors named Lha-Chuth, Losar and Shngau/Sung-ghu. The main festival celebrated by them is Lha-chuth.

A. *Lha-chuth* : The term *Lha-chuth* in the Meyor language signifies “offering to the gods,” where *Lha* denotes “god” and *Chuth* means “to offer.” This ritual is observed on *Chepo-chenga*, the fifteenth lunar day, which coincides with the eve of the full moon and is considered especially sacred for its performance. It is generally conducted during the months of January or February (Dabi and Darang 2018).

Lha-chuth is primarily a pre-agricultural ritual performed to appease the guardian spirits associated with land, mountains, and forests. In Meyor belief, *Lhu* is regarded as the protector of the land, *Yabdak* as the spirit of the mountains, and *Yikri* as the guardian of forests and wild animals. As part of the ritual observance, a cock and a hen are sacrificed to propitiate these spiritual forces. The ceremony is undertaken for the collective welfare of the village community, with the expectation of securing abundant harvests, protection from illness and disease, and safeguarding against misfortunes and unforeseen calamities (Dabi and Darang 2018).

The ritual is conducted by two shamans locally known as *Lamchut*. Assisting them is an attendant who tends the *songtong* (ritual bonfire) and sits opposite the shamans, facing them throughout the ceremony. This assistant is also responsible for handling the *Teng* (conchs), placed near the fire, which are blown at regular intervals as part of the invocation of spirits.

For the organization and supervision of the ritual, the village community collectively appoints one male and one female representative known as *Dingpun*. Their primary responsibility is to oversee the proper management of the *Lha-chuth* ceremony. In addition to supervising the ritual proceedings, the *Dingpun* are required to provide the sacrificial birds—a cock and a hen—and to host the *Lamchuts* during the observance. They also collect rice, vegetables, maize, and other contributions from each household to arrange the communal feast associated with the ritual.

Women of the village prepare rice beer, locally known as *Rungku* or *Bommak*, using the rice contributed by the community. The *Dingpun* further prepare a list of invitees from neighbouring villages and sent formal invitations for participation in the event. Since the successful performance of *Lha-chuth* depends entirely on the *Lamchuts*, the *Dingpun* also bear the responsibility of persuading and ensuring their availability for conducting the ritual.

On the day preceding the *Lha-chuth* ritual, the village community undertakes the cleaning of the area surrounding the *Yonyi* (altar). The *Yonyi* is a ritual structure constructed by vertically arranging flat, oval-shaped stones in a stacked formation. At the household level, each family cleans its dwelling and decorates the walls with rice-paste motifs depicting livestock, fowls, paddy, the sun, maize, and *Yindung* (swastika), among other symbolic images. These representations reflect the belief that desired blessings and aspirations must be visually expressed so that the spirits may grant them.



Figure 4: Yonyi

Meanwhile, the men collect firewood and other ritual materials required for preparing the *Songtong* (bonfire), which must remain continuously burning throughout the ceremony. The bonfire is prepared using *Chosa* (pine leaves) along with locally available plants such as *Shingkar*, *Shindan*, and *Lumishing*. During the ritual, a mixture of rice, water, and butter is sprinkled into the *Songtong* at regular intervals as an offering.



Figure 5: Lamchut putting Turmo (mashed boiled rice) on Yonyi
(Source: Dabi, Kaling and Darang, Kombong)



Figure 6: Shingkar jam holding Shingkar



Figure 7: Incantation after the meal

(Source: Dabi, Kaling and Darang, Kombong)

B. Sung-ghu: Among the important seasonal observances of the Meyor community, *Sung-ghu* occupies a significant place as a domestic harvest festival associated with the arrival of newly harvested food grains. It is generally observed during the months of September and October, marking the beginning of the agricultural harvest cycle. Unlike collective village festivals, *Sung-ghu* is celebrated separately by each household within its own domestic space. Preparations for the festival begin approximately one week before the main harvest, when a small portion of the paddy field is harvested in advance. The newly collected grain is processed into rice, which forms the central ritual offering and food for the celebration (Perme 2024).

On the eve of the festival, household members thoroughly clean the house and surrounding compound. Temporary cooking arrangements are made outside the dwelling, with separate spaces designated for preparing rice and meat, since cooking inside the house is avoided on the day of ritual observance. The indoor hearth assumes ritual importance during this period, as sacred leaves such as *coco*, *chin dan*, *sikarand*, and *ulu miring* are burnt there to produce fragrant smoke. This smoke is believed to purify both the interior of the house and its immediate surroundings (Perme 2024).

On the day of celebration, family members decorate the walls and interior spaces with rice-powder designs, often in zigzag or other symbolic patterns. Freshly boiled fish caught from nearby streams, together with rice prepared from the new harvest, are offered to the earth deity *Yawdak* and the goddess of wealth *Memmekuru*. These ritual offerings are placed on a domestic altar called *Thapdung*, located above the hearth on the interior wall. Simultaneously, the preparation of local beer, meat, and other food items begins so that the feast may be ready before invited guests and relatives arrive for the occasion (Perme 2024).

TRADITIONAL DRESS AND JEWELLERY

The socio-cultural life of the Meyors is distinctive and finds visible expression in their traditional attire and ornaments. Within the Meyor community, a variety of ornaments are worn by both men and women.

These ornaments and items of jewellery are crafted from gold (*sien*), silver (*ngih*), and other metals, as well as from different kinds of stones and beads. Common adornments include earrings, rings, bangles, and necklaces. A significant number of Meyor ornaments show strong cultural influence from Tibet, as many such items were traditionally procured through trade with Tibetan regions. In recent times, however, beads and metal ornaments have become readily available in local markets, enabling the Meyors to produce necklaces and other decorative items independently (Rumi 2018).

The traditional attire and ornaments of the Meyor community represent a significant aspect of their material culture and provide important insights into their social identity, environmental adaptation, and historical cultural exchanges. Residing in the high-altitude Walong and Kibithoo region of Arunachal Pradesh, the Meyors traditionally developed clothing suited to the cold climatic conditions of the eastern Himalayan frontier. Earlier, the most distinctive garment was *Zaiki* or *Mije*, a long cloak-like dress woven from sheep wool and fibres extracted from wild plants. This garment was worn by both men and women and reflected indigenous weaving knowledge, including the preparation of thread from natural materials and the use of local vegetable dyes. Over time, however, the use of *Zaiki* declined because of the laborious weaving process and reduced availability of raw materials (Rumi 2018).

At present, Meyor dress patterns reveal strong Tibetan influence. Men commonly wear *Khenjao*, a loose shirt worn beneath *Longkhrab*, a long black cloak-like outer garment fastened at the side, along with *Kat*, a brightly woven waist cloth, and *Yogar*, a traditional hat often made of leather. Women's dress consists of *Brei*, a loose blouse, *Khise*, a sleeveless long gown decorated with woven patterns, and *Pode*, an apron generally worn by married women. These garments are often made of silk, wool, or cotton and display striped or floral patterns that reflect aesthetic refinement and cultural symbolism (Rumi 2018).

Ornaments constitute another important marker of Meyor identity. Traditional jewellery includes necklaces, rings, bangles, and pendants made from gold, silver, brass, beads, pearls, and coloured stones. Prominent ornaments include *Kuh*, a silver necklace with a square pendant; *Jithuk*, made of yellow beads; *Suruh*, a black-bead necklace with coloured inserts; and *Pema lugah*, a silver ring set



Figure 8: Pode (Apron)



Figure 9: Khise (Long Gown)



Figure 10: Khenjao (Shirt)

with red stone. A particularly valued ornament is *Lungskur suni*, a brass medallion engraved with zodiac symbols and believed to possess protective qualities, especially for children. Historically, many ornaments were procured through trade with Tibet, but today market availability has enabled the Meyors to produce and assemble several ornaments locally. Although modern clothing has become common in everyday life, traditional dress and ornaments continue to be worn during festivals, rituals, and marriage ceremonies, thereby preserving an important dimension of Meyor cultural heritage (Rumi 2018).



Figure 11: Lungkur Suni
(Brass locket for child)



Figure 12: Ring

(Source: Deuri, Rumi.)



Figure 13: Kuh

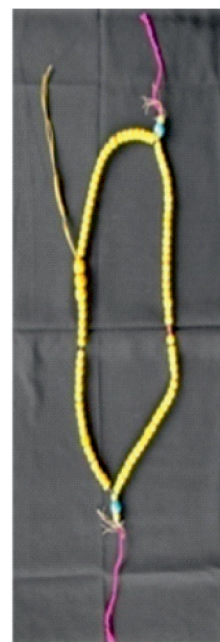


Figure 14: Jithuk

(Source: Deuri, Rumi.)

CONCLUSION

The ethnographical study of the Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh reveals a community whose cultural life is deeply rooted in tradition, ritual practice, and ecological adaptation. Although numerically small, the Meyors possess a distinctive socio-cultural system shaped by historical migration, geographical

isolation, and sustained interaction with neighbouring indigenous communities. Their religious beliefs demonstrate a unique synthesis of Buddhist practices and indigenous ritual traditions, where institutional worship in the Gompa coexists with local spirit propitiation conducted through ritual specialists such as the *Kahu* and *Lamchut*. Festivals such as *Lha-chuth* and *Sung-ghu* further illustrate the intimate relationship between spiritual life, agricultural cycles, and communal well-being.

The study of Meyor material culture, particularly traditional attire and ornaments, highlights both indigenous craftsmanship and cultural exchange. Garments, jewellery, and ritual objects not only fulfil functional needs but also serve as visible markers of identity, social continuity, and inherited aesthetic values. Similarly, household rituals, symbolic decorations, and food practices reflect a worldview in which domestic life, nature, and spirituality remain closely interconnected.

At present, however, processes of modernization, market penetration, and changing lifestyles are gradually transforming many aspects of traditional Meyor life. While adaptation to contemporary socio-economic realities is evident, important elements of intangible cultural heritage continue to survive through ritual observance, oral tradition, and ceremonial practices. Therefore, ethnographic documentation of the Meyors remains essential not only for academic understanding but also for safeguarding the cultural memory of a vulnerable tribal community whose heritage constitutes an important part of Arunachal Pradesh's cultural diversity.

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