

**MISING WOMEN'S ROLE IN PRESERVING APONG: ITS VISIBILITY, LIVE
EXPERIENCE, AND ECOLOGICAL SECURITY**

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Abstract

The rich and unique culture of the different tribes makes a remarkable contribution to the formation of the colourful cultural identity in Assam. The richness of the cultural heritage of Assam is mostly compiled from the contributions of the unique cultures of different ethnic/tribal groups. The Mising tribe is one of those tribal groups with a distinct and rich cultural heritage, which elevates Assam's cultural heritage. "*Apong*" is a Mising community's culture that is commonly used in all Mising tribe ceremonies. It is generally known as "Rice Beer" and is prepared at home, mostly by the female members of the family. The sustainability of "*Apong*" depends on the Mising women, because without their contribution, "*Apong*" would not be able to sustain itself and produce properly. Concerning the significance of the women's role in producing "*Apong*", this study seeks to evaluate the women's lived experience, visibility, and the issues of ecological security in the Mising society.

(Keywords: Apong, Women's visibility, Live Experience, Culture, Mising.)

Introduction

The cultural landscape of Assam is dependent on the assimilation of the different ethnic or tribal cultures of the land. Particularly, Assamese identity is multidimensional, which means that encompassing all socio-cultural identities of different ethnic or tribal groups has been a determining factor in making

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Assamese cultural identity rich. The Mising is known as the second-largest tribe in Assam and, culturally, has a rich and unique identity that glorifies the colourful Assamese identity. In ancient times, the Mising people migrated from the hilly regions to the plains region of Assam, as mentioned in various chronicles. The Misings are people of Mongolian descent, and the way they used to talk is similar to that of the Burmese-speaking

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group in Tibet. Therefore, some historians refer to them in various places as the Burmese descent of Tibet. From time immemorial, they were happy to consider themselves part of the Mising tribe. However, when we analyse the literal meaning of "Mising," we find that "Mi" means man and "sing" means bright or polite. Mising thus means a bright or polite man. At present, the Mising people are found to be permanently living in different districts of Assam, especially Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivsagar, Darang, and Tezpur, as well as in the East Chiang district of Arunachal Pradesh and Subansiri. Do:nyi (Sun) and Po:lo are trusted as the ancestral mother and father of the Mising community, respectively. And they thought that Do:nyi and Po:lo are the hereditary God of their community (Sarma 2004; Borang 2007).

Mising women have been playing a significant role in defining the socio-economic and cultural identity of the Mising tribe. In addition, women are symbolised as the focal point of attraction in their domestic, social, and religious cultural ceremonies and they are also seen to be contributing equally to men. The Mising tribe has a rich culture of producing "*Apong*" (rice beer), and it plays an indispensable role in the socio-cultural life of the tribe. However, since ancient times, the social life of India has been governed by a patriarchal system, so the Mising society is no exception to it. As a result, the contributions of all the Mising women are seen remaining as worthless and unrecognised. This is the fact that Mising society has not been able to come out of the grips of the gender binary. As a result, an attempt has been made through this study to explore the contribution of Mising women in producing and preserving *Apong* (rice beer), and a systematic discussion has been made to present how women's roles are marginalised by their male counterparts in society. This is the reason to study the proposed topical issue and evaluate the women's lived experience, visibility, and the issues of ecological security in producing *Apong*.

Demarcation of the study

The proposed study is demarcated into the following points;

1. This study has demarcated only the Mising tribe of Assam.
2. This study has demarcated in the study of the role of Mising women in producing and preserving "*Apong*".

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3. This has been demarcated in the study of the live experience of Mising women and ecological security.

Methodology

In this proposed study descriptive and analytical methods have been used to meet the objectives of the study and are based on secondary data and published articles in different books, journals, and newspapers as well as the internet.

Objectives

This study is proposed to find out the following objectives with the help of systematic study;

1. To study the systematic procedure of preparing "*Apong*" in Mising society.
2. To evaluate the contribution of Mising women in preserving and producing "*Apong*" (rice beer).
3. To analyse the live experience of Mising women and ecological security.

Discussion

In parallel with the role played by women in various fields of society, women have an inviolable role to play in preserving their own culture. "*Apong*" is a beverage that is used in different ritual ceremonies of the Mising Tribe. It would not be wrong to say that without "*Apong*", no social, cultural, or religious ceremonies have run smoothly in Mising society. This is because it is used as an essential beverage in every program. All Mising women play a significant role in producing such unique beverages. Preparing *Apong*, *Epob* (a medicine made by combining rice powder and 101 green leaves) is a necessary element because *Apong* cannot be made without it. Mising women search for one hundred and one different green herb leaves in the nearby forest and other habitats to prepare *Epob*. *Epob*, which is the medicine to use in "*Apong*", becomes usable only when it is mixed with rice powder and 101 herb leaves along with a little water. It has to be completely dry to be usable. So, it takes a minimum of 15-20 days, depending on the condition of the weather. For the convenience of the reader, it is fruitful to mention here that "*Apong*" has two forms.

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That one is *Nokjin Apong*, which is known as white rice beer, and the other one is *Po:ro Apong*, which is called black rice beer. *Nokjin Apong* is produced by mixing epob with the meal (cooked rice), but the process of producing *Po:ro Apong* is a little bit different from that of producing Nokjin Apong. In *Po:ro Apong*, they have to partially burn straws and mix the partially burned straws with *epob* and meal (cooked rice). After that, they store the so-called *Apong* in a secure location where no water is connected. In this way, from the collection of herb leaves to burning straw and cooking rice, all these activities are carried out by the Mising women. They thought these are their usual duty, so they without question continued to work normally. Therefore, it can be deduced from this discussion that the role of Mising women in preserving the cultural heritage of Mising can never be underestimated. That means it is vague to discuss the cultural heritage of the Mising tribe without acknowledging the contributions of women to their society. In like manner, without the cooperation and participation of women in Mising society, their socio-economic and cultural programmes will be incomplete.

In recent times, Mising women have been used "*Apong*" as an important source of income. It is not uncommon for a large number of women to incur their expenses by preparing "*Apong*", which has resulted in a significant increase in the economic self-sufficiency of the women, which cannot be underestimated. Most of the women from the lower-middle-class families of the Mising tribe are found to be handicapped without a proper income source in their families, so they need to sell "*Apong*" (rice beer) at home, and with that money they can be seen incurring the cost of education in addition to their living expenses. Since *Apong* is an alcoholic beverage, if some scientific basis is discovered to test it scientifically and store it for a long time, then the Mising society will become an economically self-sufficient tribe. If they can capture the world market in this way, many Mising women will become economically self-reliant, and *Apong* will gain a distinct identity in the world market. This requires proper studies and more research works to be developed scientifically and turn *Apong* into a brand to showcase it as one of the ways to make the Mising tribe economically self-reliant.

So, a proper study and research are a must, and since it is made naturally with forest herbs, its proper and regular use has the potential to be somewhat beneficial to health as well. *Po:ro Apong* is thought to be especially effective in treating jaundice, and Nokjin Apong is also useful for people with low blood pressure because, by consuming *Nokjin Apong*, blood

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circulation in the body is increased. If special attention is paid to producing "*Apong*" in a scientific manner, the economic aspect of the Mising society as a whole is likely to improve.

The ecological balance is a must to preserve the culture like "*Apong*" in Mising society. Hence, forests will definitely be needed to sustain the *Apong* culture in the future. This is because the leaves of 101 herbal medicinal plants are essential to preparing the medicine called *Epob* needed to make *Apong*. Therefore, in order to preserve the *Apong* culture in the future, the Mising tribe must maintain the environmental balance; otherwise, they will be unable to produce *Apong* due to the lack of the required herbs in the forest. Therefore, the concept of ecological security is closely related to *Apong* culture, as the future of *Apong* depends on ecological balance. In recent times, due to the environmental degradation of the world, the balance of ecology has drastically changed. Therefore, it is imperative for the Mising tribe to play a significant role in conserving the natural environment for the preservation of *Apong* culture, as it is on the verge of extinction in the future. Because *Apong* is produced via the mixture of *Epob* and meal (cooked rice), 101 herb leaves are important in making *Epob*, and these herb leaves are found only in the so called *Jangal* (forest), the Mising tribe needs to keep a close connection with the conservation of the natural environment. It can be assumed that the sustainability of the natural environment will have an impact on the sustainability of biodiversity. Therefore, the need for the development of *Apong* can be considered an important aspect from the perspective of conservation of the natural environment because without natural resources like different green herbs, *Apong* culture would not be preserved.

The Mising community uses *Apong* as a culture, as it has been observed that *Apong* is used in every festival of theirs. Therefore, from the perspective of the emic, there are no restrictions on the use of *Apong* in their society; *Apong* is being taken by Mising people together with parents just like tea is taken by non-tribal people. The national organisations of Mising have been conducting many discussions and public talks on the use of *Apong* with great awareness. They have been organising huge public meetings to raise awareness among the Mising tribe about the possible problems and challenges to children's studies due to the rampant use of *Apong*. That's why the leaders of the national organisations have been urging for the use of *Apong* in a frugal manner and placing emphasis on preserving the traditions of the society forever.

The influence of patriarchy in Indian society cannot be ignored; the thoughts, actions, and experiences of men are given more importance in society. As a result, women's experiences, work, and values are given less importance in society, and in many cases, women are considered second-class

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citizens, i.e., housewives. Similarly, the Mising migrated from the mountainous regions and integrated into the Indian society of the plains, especially the Assamese society. Therefore, the influence of patriarchy in Mising society cannot be denied to a greater or lesser extent, although there is no clear division of labour between men and women or a gender divide in Mising society. Mising women perform household or public works on an equal basis with men in the Mising society, but in fact, Mising women are undervalued by men in terms of decision- making power. The decisions are taken by the elderly men of society as a whole, and the eldest son plays a special and significant role in the absence of the father in family matters. Therefore, when we review these aspects, we see that although Mising women contribute a lot to the Mising society, in reality their contributions are not given proper value and their work is underestimated by the male dominated society. Their work is considered casual, and most of it is considered unpaid. This led to the birth of a Mising women's organisation called Takam Mising Mime Kebang and the launch of a collective movement against the rights and exploitation of Mising women with representatives of national organizations. The Mising women are involved in various programmes to become self-reliant through these women's organizations, and the Mising women are involved in national decision making by participating as a representative of this organisation. Therefore, it can be said that although women's rights were suppressed to some extent in Mising society in the past, these have almost disappeared due to the advent of modern education and different awareness programmes organised by national organisations. Although Mising women's work is not socially recognised or valued, they are more socially aware than the previous Mising society now a day they have become economically self-sufficient through the production of *Apong* for commercial purposes as well as other income-generating sources.

Conclusion

Apong is an indispensable beverage that is used in different rituals, cultural events, and marriage ceremonies of the Mising tribe. Without the contribution of Mising women as such an insurmountable component of Mising tribal culture, its continuation can't be imagined. This is the woman who plays the outstanding role in producing *Apong*, and credit should be given to the

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woman for preserving the culture of *Apong* in Mising society. Therefore, the Mising National Organization and governmental administration, particularly the *Mising Autonomous Council, Takam Mising Porin Kebang* (All Mising Students' Union), *Mising Mimag Kebang* and *Takam Mising Mime Kebang* (All Mising Women's Organization), should have paid more attention to preserving the Mising civilisation's cultural heritage, and initiate various awareness programmes and workshops to make Mising society aware so that they live a self-conscious life. It is necessary to emphasise the importance of keeping the cultural civilisation alive by encouraging women to take part of the modern education. This article evaluated the inexhaustible contribution of women to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Mising community, especially "*Apong*" and showed how "*Apong*" plays a significant role in the day-to-day life of Mising society. As a result, more discussion and examination of *Apong* would be required so that it can be explored in the global market as an indigenous beverage of Assam, contributing to the strengthening of the Mising tribe's economic background.

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