

Mih-Lam: Marriage Practices among the Mossang Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: In any society, marriage is perceived as an important part of an individual's social life, as it legitimises the union that is formed and the family that is created. Marriages are always governed by certain norms and rules, whether under a modern legal framework or customary law. In the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh, social life, including marital relationships, is largely governed and regulated by long-standing customary norms and practices. The Mossangs are one such sub-tribe of Arunachal Pradesh with their own distinct culture and traditions. Marriage among the Mossangs is closely linked to tradition, custom, and community life, which together provide social recognition and legitimacy to the marital union. However, very few studies have been conducted on the marriage system of the Mossangs, and it remains largely undocumented. Hence, the present study attempts to examine the traditional practices and patterns of marriage among the Mossangs, the rituals and types of marriage, and the gradual transformations taking place in the context of contemporary society.

Keywords: Mossang, Marriage, Customary, Bride Price, Family, Riiwa, Mih-lam

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most significant social institutions in human society. It is through this institution that two individuals form a union and begin a family. While marriage exists in all societies, it varies widely in its form, meaning, and norms, and is shaped by social, economic, political, and religious factors. In many tribal societies, marriage is not viewed as an individual affair but as a collective arrangement involving families, kinship groups, and community approval (Chekki, 1996).

Arunachal Pradesh is home to approximately 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, each characterised by distinct customs and traditions. Despite this diversity, Studies on tribal societies emphasise that marriage is deeply embedded in customary practices, kinship relations, and community life rather than individual choice (Sinha, 2004).

The Mossangs, a sub-tribe of the Tangsa community, reside in the easternmost region of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in the Changlang district along the Indo–Myanmar border. They are regarded as one of the larger sub-tribes, with an approximate population of around 7,500 as per the 2011 Census.

The Mossangs comprise various clans such as Chithan, Kedap, Kelim, Jogka, Ranka, Rankhak, Thamphang, among others. Mossang social and cultural life is largely regulated by lived customary laws and practices, which remain largely uncodified and are transmitted orally across generations.

Among the Mossangs, marriage constitutes a central aspect of social and cultural life and is governed by customary norms, beginning from the selection of the bride to the negotiation of bride price, exchange of gifts, and the solemnization of marriage. The marriage ceremony involves traditional rituals, feasts, and the collective participation of families, relatives, village elders, and members of the community. Such participation is crucial in legitimising the union and ensuring social acceptance, reflecting the cultural practices of the Mossang community. Any disputes related to marriage are traditionally resolved through the indigenous institution known as the Khaphorong, the village council.

Despite the centrality of marriage in Mossang society, customary marriage practices among the Mossangs remain inadequately documented in academic literature, and very few scholarly works focus on this community. Moreover, the customary laws regulating Mossang socio-cultural life continue to be orally transmitted and largely uncodified. Against this background, the present study examines the traditional practices and patterns of marriage among the Mossangs, the rituals and types of marriage, and the gradual transformations taking place in the context of contemporary society.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach. Considering the limited scholarly work and academic documentation on the Mossangs, especially concerning their customary marriage system, the study primarily relies on oral narratives, informal interviews, group discussions, and personal observation. Village elders and community members with in-depth knowledge of Mossang customary law serve as key informants. Secondary sources such as books, edited volumes, and journal articles on tribal society and marriage practices in Northeast India and Arunachal Pradesh are also consulted for the purpose of the study.

3. MIH-LAM: Marriage Practices among the Mossang Tribe

Marriage is one of the most significant social institutions in human society, through which two individuals form a union and begin a family. In tribal societies like the Mossang tribe, marriage—known as Mih-Lam—is an important aspect of social life. It is essential for social recognition, acceptance, and legitimacy within the community. Marriage plays a significant role in strengthening bonds between families and clans through which the alliance is established. It also marks the transition of an individual into adulthood and symbolises social responsibility within Mossang society.

For the Mossangs, marriage is never perceived merely as the union of two individuals; rather, it is viewed as an alliance between two families, two clans, or even two tribes. Hence, decisions related to marriage are taken collectively by the family, including parents and paternal uncles. When a boy reaches marriageable age, the family takes responsibility for finding a prospective bride. Traditionally, first preference is often given to girls from the maternal uncle's family, as it is believed that marriage between cross-cousins strengthens familial relations. If this is not possible, a bride is

sought from clans with whom marriage alliances are permitted under customary norms, as certain clans can only give their daughters to specific clans and cannot marry in the opposite direction.

3.1 Types of Marriage Practices

3.1.1 Arranged Marriage: Among the Mossang, the most common and respectable form of marriage is arranged marriage. In this system, the groom's family sends a team comprising the groom's father, paternal uncle(s), and relatives to the girl's house. One among them is appointed as Kamwa (mediator), who becomes the main person in charge of conveying the purpose of the visit and formally seeking the girl's hand in marriage. In an arranged marriage, proper rituals and ceremonies are followed strictly according to customary practices and traditions, and bride price is sought. In total, five steps of marriage ceremonial rituals are performed:

- I. Mi-wii-wang – going to ask for the girl's hand
- II. Rangkham-wang – fixing the date of marriage
- III. Mih-shaal wang – ritual of coming to fetch the bride
- IV. Mih-lam – marriage ceremony at the groom's place
- V. Kham-ji-jiing – returning of the bride with the groom for the main marriage ritual at her parents' home

3.1.2 Love Marriage

Among the Mossang, love marriage is also allowed. In this form of marriage, the boy and the girl who are in love inform their respective parents. The boy's family then introspects the nature and character of the girl, and after accepting her, they send their representatives along with the Kamwa to the girl's house to seek her hand and obtain parental approval.

The procedure and rituals followed in love marriage are similar to those of arranged marriage.

3.1.3 Elopement

Marriage by elopement is also practiced among the Mossang. There are two categories of elopement:

(I) Gau-wiih

In this type of elopement, the boy and the girl elope after informing and taking due permission from the girl's maternal uncle or grandfather. This usually happens when the boy is not in a position to bear the ceremonial expenditure and bride price involved in a proper marriage. In such cases, the fines imposed are lighter.

(II) Gau-nyak

This form of elopement occurs when the boy elopes with the girl without informing or seeking permission from her relatives. In such cases, heavy fines are imposed.

3.1.4 Levirate Marriage

Levirate marriage is allowed among the Mossang tribe. In the event of a husband's death, the brother of the deceased husband may marry the widow (Manti-nyu). However, the consent of the widow is mandatory. This practice is followed mainly on moral grounds and is neither compulsory nor prohibited.

In such marriages, no formal marriage rituals are performed. The families of both sides discuss and arrange the marriage informally. After six months or a year, when the couple visits the wife's parental home, her parents may perform a simple ritual to extend their blessings.

However, this practice is increasingly rejected by the younger generation, as a sister-in-law is often regarded as a mother figure.

3.1.5 Sororate Marriage

In Mossang society, when a wife dies at an early age leaving behind young children, her sister is given the first preference for marriage with the deceased sister's husband. This is based on the belief that she would care for the children better, as they are her sister's children.

Similar to levirate marriage, the consent of both parties is required, and if they agree, the marriage is solemnized in the presence of the two families without any formal rituals. However, this practice is almost non-existent today, as the younger generation objects to such marriages.

3.2 Marriage Rituals and Ceremonies

Marriage ceremonies among the Mossang begin with initiation from the groom's side. Relatives—usually paternal uncles, their wives, and clan members—visit the prospective bride's home to seek her as a bride. Among the Mossang, four main steps are involved in marriage ceremonies.

3.2.1 Mih-wi-wang (going to ask for the girl's hand)

This is the first phase of the marriage ceremony. Members of the groom's family, collectively known as Phuwa, along with the main initiator called Kamwa, visit the girl's parental home. An important feature of this stage is that the boy does not visit the girl's house from Mi-wi-wang till Mi-shaal wang.

A gathering is convened at the girl's home where close family members and relatives participate, mainly the maternal uncle (Aagu), paternal uncle and his wife (Asai-wang), village elders, and others. The Kam-wa informs the purpose of the visit and seeks the girl's hand on behalf of the groom's family.

The girl's consent is sought by her parents in the presence of the gathering. If the girl refuses, reasons may be discussed, and she may be asked whether any younger sister is willing to become the bride. If the proposal is accepted, the marriage proceeds. If it is declined, a fine called Aapak (Rs. 300) is paid by the girl's parents as a mark of respect and apology for the trouble taken by the groom's party. At this stage, the groom's party comes empty-handed.

3.2.2 Rangkham-wang (Fixing the Date)

Rangkham-wang refers to the fixing of the marriage date. The groom's side (Nyaamchi), comprising the father, paternal uncles, and relatives, visits the bride's house. One among them is appointed as Riiwa, whose role is crucial. He negotiates marriage rituals, ceremonies, and bride price with the bride's side.

During this ritual, Riiwa carries traditional wine (Chol-pii) in a basket along with Kaini. No money is offered at this stage. The marriage date is fixed by the groom's family according to their convenience and the lunar calendar. After finalizing the date, the gathering eats and drinks the items brought by the groom's side.

At this stage, the bride price (Jun-rei or Mi-kehrei) and gifts to be exchanged are discussed. As per Mossang customary law, Jaa-ba-nga Junrei (five categories of bride price) is demanded, which includes: 1 Nгаа (buffalo), Wangrok (traditionally 10 live pigs), Nyamkham (gong of 7 hand-breadth and 8 hand-breadth) and Chokkhul (bronze bell of 8 hand-breadth)

3.2.3 Mih-shaal wang (To bring the bride)

Mih-shaal wang is the ritual to bring the bride. Riiwa, along with members of the groom's family—especially paternal uncles and aunts—comes to bring the bride. The groom and young girls are not allowed to participate.

No gifts are brought, and no grand celebration is held. Only a simple gathering of villagers and relatives takes place. A blessing ritual called Riim-riim is performed by the bride's father or uncle.

As the bride leaves her parental home, Riiwa walks first, symbolizing guidance. Rii-waa carries the Chol-pii (Traditional rice beer) offered by the bride's parents. He is followed by Kaa-jaan-chi (bride's front guard), usually her sister or a clan woman (not a widow, as it is considered a bad omen), then the bride, followed by Jii-hup (back guard), her sisters, friends, cousins, and other young people. Elders follow at a short distance. The bride is accompanied by her sisters and relatives, but not by her parents or brothers.

3.2.4 Mih-laam at the Groom's Place

The next ritual takes place at the groom's home. If the ceremony is on the same day, the bride is taken directly to the groom's house; otherwise, she stays at a relative's house.

A new fireplace called Saaman-tab is set up on the left side of the room, symbolizing a new beginning. Food prepared for the bride and groom is served on a single plate, signifying their union. The following day, known as Langki-pher, is a resting day on which early morning the bride, groom, and Riiwa collect firewood marked earlier for this purpose. Using this firewood, the bride cooks at the new fireplace and serves food to the elders. The fire is kept burning for three days and is extinguished by the mother-in-law (Aagai-peh) on the third day, marking the completion of the ritual.

3.2.5 Kham-ji-jiing

Kham-ji-jiing symbolizes the return of the bride to her parental home, accompanied by the groom for the first time. During this ritual, the bride price and gifts finalized during Rangkhaw-wang are paid either fully or partially, as bride price can be paid in installments, even by the groom's sons in later years.

A grand marriage ceremony called Khol-rii-sai, is organized by the bride's family. Animals are sacrificed for the celebration, and family members, relatives and villagers are invited to partake in the ceremony. Before the feast, Riim-riim (prayer) is performed, and a thread is tied on the groom's wrist by the bride's father or uncle. After feasting, the Aathak-aawal ritual is conducted, during which bride price and shares to relatives are distributed.

4. Bride Price System among the Mossang

Bride price constitutes a central element of the Mossang marriage institution and symbolizes social recognition, alliance-building between families, and the validation of marital ties. The bride price may be paid either fully at once or in installments, depending on the economic capacity of the groom. In some cases, the obligation may be fulfilled later by the groom's sons, reflecting the collective responsibility of the lineage.

4.1 Components of Bride Price

The principal 5 items (Jaa-ba-Nga) constituting the bride price are as follows:

4.1.1 Ngaa (Buffalo): One (1) buffalo is included as a compulsory component of the bride price. This is called Rekhu-loi.

4.1.2 Wangrok (Live Pigs): Ten (10) live pigs are traditionally demanded as bride price. However, depending on the financial condition of the groom and mutual understanding between the families, the number may be reduced to five (5) or three (3) pigs.

4.1.3 Nyamkhaam Techat (Gong): 1 large gong of eight hand-breadth (Khaam-tehchat)

4.1.4 Nyamkham mashii: 1 gong of seven hand-breadth (Khaam-mashii)

4.1.5 Chokkhul (Bronze Bells): One set of three (3) medium-sized bronze bells is included. These bells function as musical instruments during festivals and ceremonial occasions.

4.2 Bride's Relatives' Shares

In addition to the principal bride price, the groom is required to pay customary and symbolic shares to the bride's relatives. These payments are ritualistic in nature and are governed by Mossang customary law and practice.

4.2.1 Categories of Bride's Relatives' Shares

- I. **Aangai-sai** (Bride's Father's Sister's Share)- Rs. 100
- II. **Aasei-sai** (Bride's Mother's Sister's Share)- Rs. 100
- III. **Aaya-sai** (Bride's Elder Sister's Share)-Rs. 100
- IV. **Aagu-chakphal** (Bride's Maternal Uncle's Share)- Rs. 500, or alternatively one (1) live pig or one thigh of a slaughtered pig. This share is also known as Gek-khrei, meaning niece-bride price.
- V. **Kaadii** - Rs. 500 is paid when the marriage takes place between two clans with no prior marital affiliation. If an established marriage alliance exists between the clans, this payment is not required.
- VI. **Chakpoh** - Rs. 500 is paid as a fine by the groom in cases of elopement only.

4.3 Groom's Relatives' Shares

Reciprocal exchanges form an integral part of the Mossang marriage system. Accordingly, the bride's family provides customary shares to the groom and his relatives as a sign of respect and alliance formation.

4.3.1 Categories of Groom's Relatives' Shares

- I. **Two (2) swords** are given: one to the Riiwa (the person who leads the groom side during the marriage day to the brides place) and one to the groom
- II. **Wubor(chicken in the basket)** : One to the Riiwa and one to the groom
- III. **Khaithoom (Blanket)**: Two (2) One to the Riiwa and one to the groom
- IV. **Chehh-roh**: Rs. 100 is given to the groom. Chehh refers to a lead bangle traditionally meant for the groom; in its absence, the monetary equivalent is paid.
- V. **Nyuwa-jung-sai** (Elders' Share): The amount of Rs 100 given to the elders of the groom clan
- VI. **Phuwa-khu-sai**: The amount of Rs. 100 given to the eldest of the brothers of the groom
- VII. **Ashaal-asa-sai**: This amount of Rs. 100 is given to the sisters of the groom

5. Role of Family, Elders, and Customary Norms

Among the Mossangs, marriage is not viewed as a personal matter or a decision solely of the boy and the girl. Rather, it is regarded as a collective concern of the two families and the wider community. Hence, marriage involves extensive participation of family members. Parents and relatives from both the paternal and maternal sides play a central role in decision-making, beginning from the initiation of the marriage proposal, negotiation, and finally the approval of the marriage alliance. Matters related to marriage are consulted and discussed collectively within the family.

For instance, when seeking a bride, it is the family members—usually the father or paternal uncles along with other relatives—who visit the girl's parental home. Similarly, when the groom's party arrives, the girl's parents call her paternal uncles and aunts (Aasai-Wang) as well as the maternal uncle (Aagu) to be present during the discussion. In Mossang marriage, almost everything is determined by the families. The boy does not personally come to seek the bride; he is informed of the decision and his approval is sought, but the rest of the process is collectively decided by the two families.

Village elders (Gashung-Milang), though not directly involved in negotiations, act as important validators of the alliance between the two families. They ensure that marriage alliances and rituals are carried out in accordance with Mossang customary laws and traditions. Their involvement and participation give legitimacy to the entire marriage process, reflecting their authority as custodians of customary knowledge and traditions. Mossang society has functioned according to uncodified customary laws and practices from time immemorial, and these traditions form the backbone of Mossang social life.

Marriages are fixed, negotiated, and solemnized on the basis of customary law, which provides the framework within which marriages are conducted, recognised, and legitimised. Bride price and the exchange of gifts between the two families are also governed strictly by customary norms and practices. Hence, marriage among the Mossangs is considered a collective institution, and the approval of family members, relatives, and village elders (Gashung-Walang) is crucial for providing social recognition and acceptance of marriage within Mossang society.

Some important customary norms and traditions related to marriage include the following:

- I. Mossang customary norms permit inter-tribal and inter-clan marriages.
- II. Marriage between persons belonging to the same clan or bearing the same title is strictly prohibited.
- III. The Mossangs follow a unilateral marriage alliance system, whereby marriage is allowed only in one direction between two clans; a specific clan may marry women from a particular clan, while marriage in the opposite direction is restricted.
- IV. The Mossangs follow a patrilocal system of residence, wherein the wife moves to the husband's home after marriage.
- V. Monogamy is the most widespread and respected form of marriage among the Mossang. Polygamy is not allowed traditionally.

These practices reflect that marriage among the Mossangs is strictly regulated by customary rules that determine the eligibility and social acceptance of marriage.

6. Handling of Marital Disputes

Among the Mossangs, divorce rarely takes place. It may be initiated by either spouse on grounds such as barrenness or adultery. Usually, separation (Rah-Thar) does not occur in cases of barrenness, as a barren woman may arrange for another wife for her husband or request her sister to become the wife and bear children. In such cases, the barren woman continues to live in the husband's home along with them, and technically no divorce takes place. However, such practice has existed only in the past.

However, if adultery is committed and either spouse desires separation, divorce proceedings are initiated and the matter is brought before the village council (Kha-Pho-Rung). Both parties are allowed to present their cases, and the council attempts to reason with the husband and wife, encouraging reconciliation rather than separation. Divorce is believed to affect the sentiments and relationships of both clans. Only when reconciliation is not possible and both parties insist on separation is divorce granted. In such cases, fines in the form of money are imposed on the guilty party.

7. Changing Trends in Marriage Practices

With time, changes have been witnessed in the way marriages take place among the Mossangs and in the norms that were traditionally practised by the tribe. Significant changes have been observed following the advent of Christianity in Mossang society. In many villages where Christianity has been adopted, customary practices regulating marriage—especially those involving rice beer and animal sacrifices—have been abandoned, as these are associated with non-Christian life. Marriages are now conducted in churches and solemnised by pastors. Earlier, when the groom's party came to seek the bride's hand or fix the marriage date, rice beer was brought as per custom; today, this is replaced by tea, milk, biscuits, and similar items. The ritual of tying thread on the wrists of the bride and groom has also been replaced by the exchange of rings and the administration of vows by the pastor.

Exposure to education and modernity has also influenced marriage practices among the Mossangs. Sections of the younger generation, under increased exposure to urban lifestyles, have developed

changing attitudes and perspectives toward partner choice and marriage. Younger individuals now have a higher level of preference than in the past. Earlier, a boy or a girl would simply consent to marry the person chosen by their parents and had little say in the matter. However, in many aspects of marriage today, they have greater liberty to express their opinions and make decisions. This has also resulted in a gradual shift in the age of marriage, with many choosing to marry at a later stage of life. Many youths today adopt legal marriage registration alongside customary recognition. They also tend to disapprove of practices such as sororate and levirate marriage and oppose cross-cousin marriage.

However, although some customary norms and practices have been changed, simplified, or replaced, the core significance of marriage and certain customary elements continue to be preserved. For instance, the practice of bride price, the exchange of gifts between the bride's and groom's families, and the custom of the bride's parents and brother not accompanying her to the groom's home are still maintained.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, marriage customs and practices among the Mossang reflect a deep-rooted cultural heritage that prioritises family unity, tradition, and social harmony. In the Mossang community marriage occupies an important position in the social and cultural life of individuals and is regarded as a collective institution rather than a private matter. Decisions related to marriage are shaped by the involvement and approval of family members, relatives, and the community, which together provide social recognition and acceptance of the marital union.

Marriage (Mih-lam) among the Mossang is governed and regulated by long-established customary rules and practices that guide the conduct of rituals, norms of bride price system, gift exchange, and the overall marriage process. These customary norms also play an important role in addressing marital disputes, which are largely resolved through customary mechanisms with the intervention of village elders, who are collectively known as Kha-pho-Rung, reflecting the continued relevance of indigenous institutions in maintaining social order.

However, with gradual exposure to education, modern life, and the adoption of new religious beliefs, certain changes and adaptations have emerged in the pattern and practice of marriage within the Mossang community. Despite these changes, many core customary practices and norms continue to be preserved and practiced indicating an effort by the Mossangs in maintaining their cultural identity while adjusting to changing social conditions.

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