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THE MEYOR: A LEAST STUDIED FRONTIER TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, NORTHEAST INDIA

Introduction

Frontier regions often hamper academic research and administrative intervention because of limited accessibility and lack of anthropological enquiry. In Northeast India, several regions inhabited by hill tribes would qualify as being 'least known' who are not only numerically insignificant but information about them is scanty in anthropological literature and in the socio-political and economic spheres (Chaudhuri 2003). Status of tribes living on the international borders is often ambiguous who are at times treated as either migrants or just refugees (Sarkar 1996). This paper focuses on Meyor tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, one of the understudied tribal groups of India and provides preliminary observations in addition to the secondary literature available about the Meyor till date. The geographic location of Meyor in the frontier region restricts visitors and researchers, thus diminishing academic interests. Except the Gazetteers of Lohit district (Choudhury 1978) and People of India series (Singh, 1995), there is very little further information about them. Two other recent publications deserve mentioning here, one by Victor Landi (2005) on Meyor language and other on Meyor marriage system by Manyu (2006).

Meyors are Buddhists (Mahayana sect) living in Walong and Kibithoo circles of Anjaw district, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh (Fig 1). I visited Walong and Kibithoo circles of Anjaw district during January 2006, August 2007 and July 2009 to study wildlife hunting practices of Miju Mishmi group. The information provided in this paper is mainly based on published and unpublished literature, archival records and my interactions and observations with the Meyor people during these field visits. Anjaw region was part of the Lohit district till 2004 when it was made to a new district (Fig 1 & 2). Anjaw district is in the north-eastern extremity of the state bordering Tibet and Burma. The location of Meyor villages is the frontier region not only from the Indian side but also from the Chinese side resulting in inadequate ethnographic work. Most of the district is hilly and rugged. Other than a metalled road till Kibithoo, Hawaii and Hayuliang the rest of Anjaw is difficult to access by

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vehicles. Frequent land slides and lack of proper roads and public transportation are major hurdles in reaching large parts of the region and most of the time, marching by foot and crossing the foot suspension bridges are the only way to reach the villages. There are seven administrative circles namely, Hayuliang, Hawai, Walong, Kibithoo, Chaglagam, Manchal and Goilliong with its headquarters in Hawai. The vegetation of Anjaw district are classified pine, temperate and alpine forests (Kaul and Haridasan, 1987).

Meyor group in the archival literature was often referred to as Lama, Zakhring, *Jakring* or just Tibetans and these terms were interchangeably used in the past. There was a lot of ambiguity in their names leading to confusion to their identity. Barua (1995) reported they call themselves as 'Charumba'. According to the colonial records, *Miju* Mishmi called them 'Meiyo' or 'Meiye' and Digaru Mishmi called them 'Jakrin Lama' and do not understand Tibetan from Lhasa (Mainprice, 1945). The Mishmi made distinction between the Meyor and *Jakrin* based on the geographical separation along the Tibetan border. Williams (1944) stated that they are 'not Tibetans proper' and have a language of their own which is a mixture of Miju and Tibetan which Driem (2007) confirms that Meyor have a dialect 'Zaiwa' which is a close relative of the *Miju* Mishmi dialect. Bailey (1945) makes a distinction between true Tibetans and the half-breeds who probably were the Meyors. Bailey (1945) writes:

'the true tibetans does not willingly live below about nine thousand feet, and these savages¹ cannot live above five thousand. The result of this is that there is belt of country between these two heights quite uninhabited, though occasionally some half-breed Tibetans like those at Rima² and Kahap³ fill the gap.

In this paper, I use 'Meyor' because during my visits, 'Meyor' was used by the neighbouring Mishmi and Meyor themselves. They are believed to have migrated in 1906-07 from across Indo-Tibet border to evade taxes imposed on them by the Tibetan officials (Singh 1995; Barua 1995; Choudhury, 1978; Osik, 1999). Williams (1944) observed Meyor to be a poor and heavily depressed tribe of Tibetans living in southern Zayul. Mishmi opposed the arrival of Meyor and raided their villages but later allowed Meyor to settle in Walong area and gave them protection with an agreement that Meyor would pay annual tributes to Mishmi and become herdsmen of the Mishmi (Choudhury, 1978).

Meyor reside only in eleven villages (around 500 persons) belonging to the Lamaistic sect or Tibetan form of Mahayana Buddhism (Barua 1995; Dutta and Tripathy, 2008) which Singh (1995) calls it a peculiar blend of Buddhism and pre-Buddhist tribal religious belief.

Meyor population

In the Gazetteer of Lohit district (1978), Meyor and Zakhring are referred as separate groups. Census data (Government of Arunachal Pradesh) provides population separately for Meyor and Zakhring. In 1971 and 1981

censuses, Meyor were reported to have increased from 100 to 238 persons whereas Zakhring decreased from 23 to 14. In 1988 the Meyors were given the status of Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe. In order to get the benefits from the government, Zakhings identified themselves as Meyors which could have contributed to uncertainty in population reported. In some literature they are treated as separate groups (Grewal, 1997) whereas in others, they are clubbed together (Singh, 1995). According to Choudhury (1978), population of Meyor and Zakhring were 98 and 23 respectively during 1970s. In 1981, the total population (both Meyor and Zakhring) was 249 (Singh 1995) and as of 2002, their population is 300.

Meyor in archival records

Historical records of British officials have mentioned Meyor during their exploratory trips towards Tibet. The strategic location of the Mishmi hills was of a major interest to British officials. This region was surveyed to a large extent for building motorable tracks, to open new trade routes to China and to monitor Chinese activity on the border as part of the military operations (Cooper, 1873; Mitchell, 1883; Anonymous, 1910). Explorers like Colonel F.M. Bailey, Major Jenkins, and later by Survey of India made attempts to explore the Mishmi region and further north in Tibet to find out into which of the rivers did the water of Tsangpo (Tibet) eventually flow to (Swinson, 1971; Cox, 2008). In 1862, the Survey of India started collecting information with a purpose to demarcate the frontier (Bailey, 1957). Later, the Mishmi hills were visited by botanist, Kingdon-Ward, who travelled through present day Kibithoo and Walong areas and beyond with Tibetan guides (Meyor) in early 20th century. Tibetans in the region were preferred to Mishmi as guides but Mishmi were good porters for these explorations. Father Krick and Father Bourry (Missionaries from France) visited Mishmi Hills with the mission to reach Tibet to spread Christianity and were murdered on their way back in 1854 by a Mishmi headman. This chilling incident is repeated in all subsequent writings about Mishmi (Hamilton 1912; Heriot 1979). After 1826, intense fighting among the Mishmi prevented visitors from outside the region for around five years (Hamilton 1912). Griffith, a botanist, failed to proceed further due to uncooperative behaviour of the *Miju* Mishmi. Bailey (1945) in his writings referred Mishmi as 'troublesome and unpleasant'. This impression of 'fearsome' and 'blood thirsty' tribe was further made apparent especially after the murder of the French missionaries in Sama village in the Zayul valley in 1854 (Heriot, 1979). These impressions of 'unpleasant' tribes hindered trips by explorers and probably led to sparse representation of Meyor in the literature.

Trade

Meyor made frequent trips to Sadiya⁴ to sell mainly wool and take back cloths, cigarettes and matches which fetched them good price in China

(Mainprice, 1945; Anonymous 1928). Mishmi and Meyor bartered musk, pig's bristles, Tibetan silver coins. At Therolyang village in Lohit, a register was maintained to record Tibetan travellers who across the frontiers. Mishmi also bought the Yunnan Chinese silver dollars which the women made coin necklaces which can be still seen being used by Mishmi women. Mishmi found the Indian quarter rupees not favourable for necklaces but are used on the shoulder belt of their bags. Meyor bartered opium for Mishmi *teeta* (*Coptis teeta*), whose roots are made into a tonic and febrifuge and valued in Tibet and India (Williamson, 1909). Mishmi *teeta* is still used as medicine and sold in many villages but the extent of trade is not known. Mishmi bought cattle at Rima in exchange of Assam silk cloths for about Rupees 30. The cattle are locally called by Mishmi *Chula*, the Tibetan name being *dzo* or *dzu*. These cattle⁵ were mainly bought for sacrificial purposes and skulls of *Chula* can be seen arranged in Mishmi houses. These cattle are not found in the Mishmi hills at present after the movement cross the border was stopped.

Meyor-Mishmi relations

Mainprice on his visit to Chaglagam circle in 1943 saw Meyor traveling to Glai Pass each year to the Upper Delei valley (Chaglagam circle) where they bought musk deer, deer hides and give Mishmi a credit. Mishmi then followed them to Glaipu and Latsapu and bought cattle, yak, half-breeds, salt, brassware, Tibetan swords and yak tails to attach to their daos. Meyor accepted Indian currencies which they used during their trading expeditions to Sadiya. No taxes were taken from Mishmi who traded at Glaipu. Meyor came up to Tho Chu in Dav valley (Goilliong) to hunt musk deer.

Friendly relations existed between Upper Delei Mishmi (Digaru Mishmi) and Meyor not only in terms of trading exchanges and socio-economic relations but also inter-marriages existed since time immemorial (Singh 1995). Mishmi used to stay in Meyor houses and pay Rs. 2-3 for food and lodging usually for a couple of weeks. Glaipu route to Tibet was frequently used and it is reported that around 200⁶ Mishmi used to take this route to go to Tibe; similarly 80-100 Mishmi used to annually go to Tibet using Tho Chu pass. This must have been mainly from the Delei valley. But later, this number declined as Sadiya became a strong trading centre and as Mainprice explains that the 'traffic with Tibet is dwindling and the pull of Sadiya and Assam increasing greatly' (Mainprice 1945).

British officials were concerned about Meyor because of the payment of 'begar' made by the Tibetans to Rima officials. Each Meyor household used to pay this revenue in the form of grains, money, musk, dyes, hides or any other products (Mainprice 1945). The estimations were made based on the parties that returned from Sadiya. The value was between 21 Tibetan rupees or 18 Indian rupees per household which was paid either in kind or in cash.

Meyor not only paid tax to Rima officials but paid some kind of tribute even to Mishmi whose cattle they kept. In 1943, Mainprice reported that there were four Tibetan villages south of the Macmohan line, Walong had 1 house, Tinai with 1 house, Dong with 2 houses, Kahao with 1 house. All these four villages paid 'begar' (tax) to Rima officials like the rest of the villagers across the border but Meyor paid some kind of a tribute to Miju Mishmi too whose cattle they kept. Like Mishmi, Meyor did not milk or use these cattle for any other use other than for ploughing. Cattle for Miju Mishmi are important for sacrificial ceremonies, so they were given to Meyor for taking care of them and asked for it whenever they required. Each village had 25-30 cattle belonging to different Miju Mishmi villages of the leading Pul clan of *Miju* Mishmi. The British took sympathetic view to this as Mainprice writes in his report:

However advantageous this arrangement of Meyor keeping cattle for the Miju Mishmi and paying in Tibetan salt for their use as plough animals has been in the past, it does not in the present seem a good thing that our four villages should be entirely dependent on Mishmi for their only means of cultivation and their very livelihood..... while the Mishmi nowadays get a better salt more cheaply from Sadiya. Mishmi ask for their cattle when they have to celebrate a 'puja' with little regard for the Tibetans cultivation needs.

Agriculture

Terrace farming continues to be the main form of agriculture among the Meyor. Rice and buckwheat are the main crops grown and they also consume maize, millet, buckwheat and barley. Paddy cultivation is carried out in permanent cultivation and plough their field with bullocks. Though Meyor and Mishmi share the same landscape and climatic conditions, the agriculture practices are entirely different. While Mishmi are traditionally swidden farmers with settled agriculture being adopted in villages close to Tezu only in the recent past, Meyor practise only terrace cultivation. Meyor seem to have co-evolved with the surrounding Mishmi neighbours as communities. Meyor use bullocks to plough their fields irrigated by the channels from the rivers which is considered to an advanced farming system compared to Mishmi's swidden farming. Meyor employ a unique method to scare away birds especially when the crops are ready to be harvested. A rope is tied from one end of the farm to the other end. A series of metal tins hung along this rope gives out a loud metallic noise that scare away the birds when pulled from one end. A very efficient method in large fields where the rope can be spread distant corners of the farm.

Wildlife Hunting

Apart from practising farming, Meyors also hunt and travel to remote areas of the high altitude regions for hunting musk deer (*Moschus* sp.), takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*) and black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) and reported selling

musk pod, bear gall bladder and other animal skins in towns in the neighboring state of Assam (Aiyadurai 2007). Bailey has in detail written about his passion for takin hunting in his book *Tibet-Assam-China* (1945) in the Di Chu valley and the hot springs a few kilometres from Kahao. Tibetan matchlocks were used for hunting in addition to numerous snares planted around the water where takin come down the valley (Kaulback 1934). G.T. Allen (1946) who was the Assistant Political Officer of Lohit valley made a trip in 1946 via Hayuliang stayed in Walong which had just 3 houses and reported about the plenty of wild animals found in the region. Guns are mainly used at present and hunters shoot takin near the preferred Di Chu valley close to hot springs. In 2007, I saw two fresh takin skulls with skin and hair mounted on the entrance of a Meyor house in Kahao. I met a villager who said had killed five takins last year. In Kraoti village, in one of the houses the varendah had a good display for skulls of barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), serow (*Capricornis thar*) and a fresh musk skin and wing feather and remains of a stork. Unlike the uniform display of skulls in Mishmi house, here the display was random. The skulls were not applied with animal blood as the Mishmis do. In another Meyor village, a 4-day old skin of a Malayan Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) was being sun-dried. The skin was stretched to fit in to the bamboo frame so that the skin is preserved without any folds. The under side of the skin had patches of dried blood and was shot by a gun near the farm. Hunting brings in additional income to the villagers. Though the region is remote without major markets, the wild animal products like skins and skulls are occasionally bartered and sold to the army officials who form the bulk of the outside population in Walong and Kibithoo. The villagers usually travel to Tezu or to Parshuram Fair which is held every year in January to sell musk pods and other animal products to *marwaris* (traders from Rajasthan). These days the expanding markets in Hayuliang, the functional headquarters of Anjaw is where the wildlife products are sold. At present, they are mostly cultivators though recently a few of them have taken to business activities, running shops and government jobs. They also take up contract jobs from civil administration to repair bridges and roads.

Walong has a permanent army base at present. Since the 1962 Indo-China war, the military focus of the Indian government on this region increased that led to a large number of troops stationed on the border and now Walong and Kibithoo has permanent army units, because of which the infrastructure in the region, like roads, electricity, shops and communications has vastly improved. Walong and Kibithoo are well connected now with a metalled road which the Indian army vehicles frequently use, the road is maintained and the road blocks following landslides are quickly dealt with. A recent infrastructural advancement is the Bailey bridge in Musai and the road that is being constructed till the last village of Kahao. The socio-economic situation of Meyor will drastically change in the coming decades as a consequence of habitat modifications, changes in human demography locally and influence of markets.

Figure 1: Map of Arunachal Pradesh showing Anjaw district

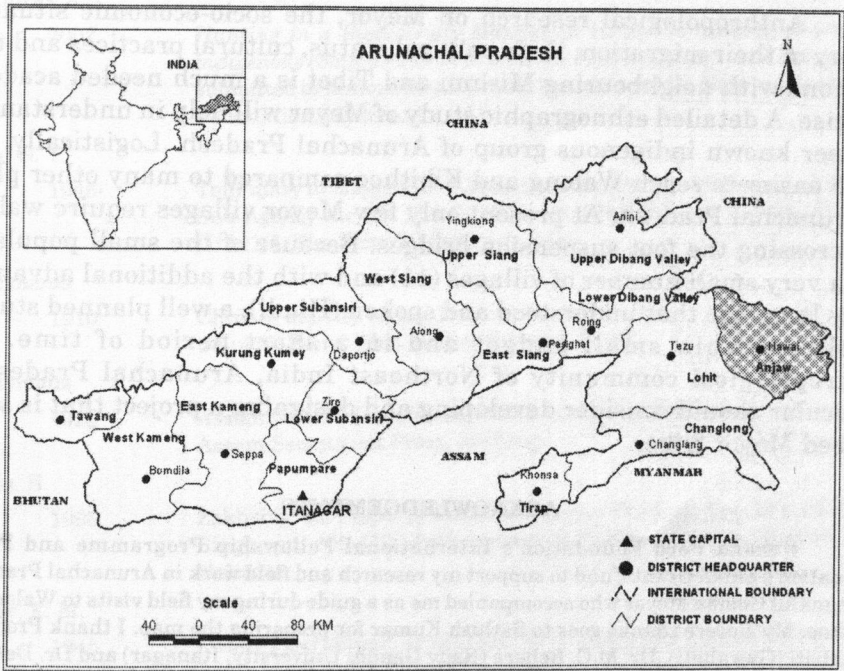
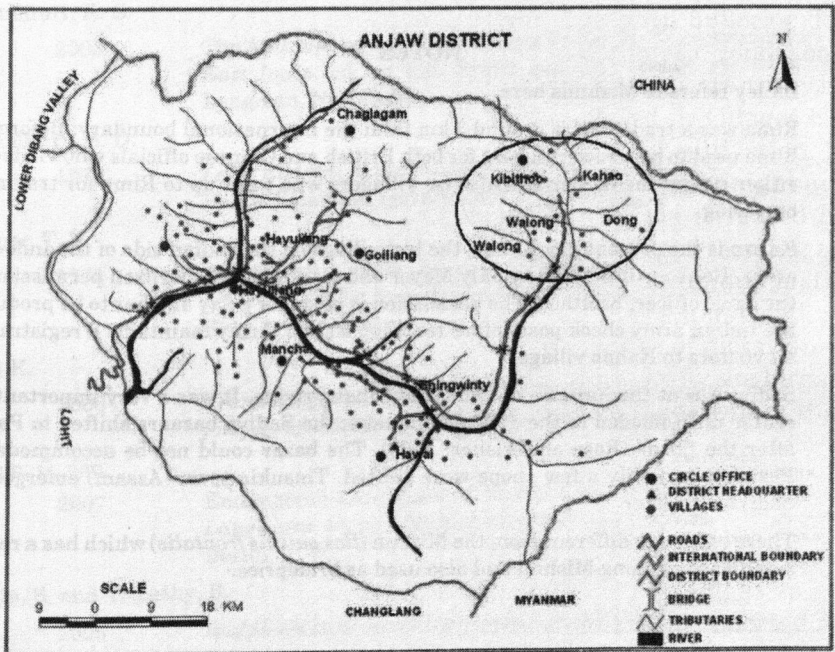


Figure 2: Map of Anjaw district. Meyer inhabit Walong and Kibithoo circles



Future research

Anthropological research on Meyor, the socio-economic situation, history of their migration, their political status, cultural practices and their relations with neighbouring Mishmi and Tibet is a much needed academic exercise. A detailed ethnographic study of Meyor will help in understanding a lesser known indigenous group of Arunachal Pradesh. Logistically, it is much easier to reach Walong and Kibithoo compared to many other places in Arunachal Pradesh. At present only few Meyor villages require walking and crossing the foot suspension bridges. Because of the small population and a very small number of villages (11) and with the additional advantage of the language that understood and spoken (Hindi), a well planned study is possible within small budget and in a short period of time. The anthropological community of Northeast India, Arunachal Pradesh in particular should consider developing and designing a project that is solely focused Meyor tribe.

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NOTES

1. Bailey refers to Mishmis here.
2. Rima was a trade centre around 3 km from the international boundary. Before 1947, Rima used to be a powerful base for both British and Chinese officials who visited from either side of the border and also for villagers who went up to Rima for trading and bartering.
3. Kahap is the present day Kahao, the last village on the Indian side of the Indo-China order. Kahao is inhabited by only Meyor and visitors need a written permission from the circle officer, Kibithoo. The permission is given for a day and has to be produced at the Indian army check post before reaching Kahao. Army maintains a registration of all visitors to Kahao village.
4. Sadiya lies at the junction of Lohit and Dibang rivers. It was a very important trade center until flooded in the 1950 earthquake, the Sadiya bazaars shifted to Pasighat after the floods (Rose and Fisher, 1965). The bazar could not be accommodated at Pasighat and only a few shops were shifted. Tinsukia town (Assam) emerged after Sadiya's disaster.
5. These cattle are different from the Mithun (*Bos gaurus frontalis*) which has a religious significance among Mishmi and also used as brideprice.

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