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## THE MARRIAGE PRACTICE AMONG THE MOSSANGS TRIBES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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**ABSTRACT:** The Mossang's are one of the sub-tribes of the Tangsa tribe, inhabiting in the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh in India. They are mostly populated in Changlang District and are said to be migrated from Myanmar (Burma). The traditional custom, culture, conventional practices of the Mossangs have not been studied systemically due to numerous reasons like lack of written history, location and knowledge etc. Using the oral, observation and interview as tool, the present study attempt to understand the changes and continuity in the traditional marriage practices among Mossang tribes.

**Key words-** Mossang, kamwaa, bride price, kholriisai, khapho, tradition, custom, tribes

**INTRODUCTION:** - The Tangsas are one of the major tribes of Changlang district, in the easternmost part of Arunachal Pradesh. It has an area of 4662 sq.km with a total population of 1,48,226 persons as per 2011 census. The Tangsa Tribe comprised of various sub-tribes viz. Hallang, Havi, Hakhun, Jugli, Kimsing, longri, Lungchang, Lungphi, Langching, Mossang, Moklum, Ngaimong, Ronrang, Sangwal, Sankey, Tikhak, Yongkuk etc. There are around forty sub-tribes with distinct dialect, culture, tradition and custom.

The Mossangs, like many, are one of the sub-tribes of the Tangsa tribe. In fact, they are one of the largest groups with a total population of around 7500 as per 2011 census. They are a distinct tribe with their own tradition, culture, custom and beliefs. They speak Mossang dialect which is linguistically different from other sub-tribes, but are comprehensible to each other. The Mossangs, further are comprised of various clans; Chithan, Jogka, Jungkhung, Kelim, Kedap Lungtu, Rangwang, Rankhak, Ranshung, Thamphang, Thekhang and Wangrai. Like the many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, they are ethnically a Tibeto-Mongoloid race. Tracing their origin and migration, mostly through oral history, it is believed that the Mossangs have migrated from Lingwokhuk, located in present day Myanmar. The main objective of this paper is to illustrate the changes and continuity of traditional culture of the Mossangs particularly the practice of their traditional marriage system and customary law related to marriage.

In absence of the availability of the written document about the tribe, most of the data and information are collected through oral interview or oral history from the elderly people of the tribe. Secondary data like books and researched papers written by some of the scholars also helped me to bring this piece of work into fruition.

### TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE PRACTICES:-

Marriage is a momentous occasion in a person's life. Marriage is an institution or complex of social norms that sanction the relationship of man and woman, and bind them in a system of mutual obligation and rights, which are essential to the functioning of a family. It is one of the universal institutions. Marriage is a "rite of Passage" whereby an unrelated man and woman begin their own families for procreation. Its purposes, function and form may differ from society to society, but it is present everywhere as an institution. (1) T. Zomi Ginzamang (2014) An introduction to sociology. Educare Publisher, Imphal p-117.

The Mossang society are indulgent of free mixing of young men and women, however, they insist and strictly maintain the rules of clan exogamy in their amours. The tribes as whole practices endogamy but marriage outside the tribe is also known and are accepted. Clan exogamy is the fundamental rule. Intra-clan marriages are considered as incest and hence, are never allowed. Marriage is negotiated and settled as per traditional custom and follow a strict matrimonial lineage. The Mossangs are a patriarchal society. Cross-cousin marriage is a known practice. Hence, mother's brother's daughter is considered as potential bride/wife. In absence of any maternal uncle's daughter, the man may marry from other clan. There are two types of marriage and rituals associated with it. Betrothal through negotiation and agreement between the parents or an Arranged marriage and Marriage by elopement.

**ARRANGED MARRIAGE:-**

The process of marriage begins when the son attains maturity or reaches a marriageable age. Though there is no fixed age limit for marriage, but they should be able to sustain at their own or must be able to take the responsibility of the family. An arranged marriage or negotiation between the parents is the normal procedure to procure a bride/wife for the son. Such betrothal takes precedence to a series of rituals and ceremonies leading to a marriage, which may not be observed in the levirate and elopement. When a settlement of marriage is negotiated between the parents, the consent of the boy and girl is also taken into consideration. Forced marriage and child marriage is unknown among the tribe. A girl is betrothed, only if she reaches a certain age. While seeking for a suitable wife, a man must take into consideration, the daughter of his maternal uncle, which is the norm to enhance the kinship. Cross-cousin marriage strengthens the kinship with his maternal uncles and their clan. However, an exchanged marriage is not accepted. The Mossangs strictly adhere to matrilineal line, when it comes to seeking a wife. A man cannot marry the daughter of his paternal aunt, uncle and maternal aunt. If a person marries other than certain clans or within the same clan, he is looked down upon and even at times, excommunicated from family and village.

**MARRIAGE BY ELOPEMENT:-**

Among the Mossangs, marriage by elopement is socially permissible. Elopement occurs when two young people have agreed to start their own family but certain reason obviates them. Unlike in an arranged marriage, no negotiation or settlement takes place before marriage. However, after the elopement, marriage ceremony and rituals will be conformed though in a simpler manner with family and clan only. Marriage by elopement takes place mostly due to 3 (three) reasons.

Firstly, the economic status of the family. If the economic condition of either of the family is not good, then a marriage by elopement is preferred. In such case, marriage celebrated with minimal expenditure, inviting only the relatives.

The second reason for marriage by elopement is when the consent of the parents is withheld. If the parents of the young lovers do not agree with their son or daughter's choice, then they opt to elopement. But, once they have eloped and started to live together, then the parents have to relent to it, and organize a marriage party for social recognition.

The third reason for elopement is social binding; when the bride and groom are from the same clan or from an unmarriageable clan, but fall in love. In that case also, they resort to elopement. But this type of marriages rarely takes place, because when a man marries from an unmarriageable clan or from the same clan, they are sent excommunicated or exiled from the village.

**THE PROCESS OF MARRIAGE:-**

The most suitable kind of marriage is by negotiation between the parents, which is settled with the consent of the bride and groom as well. Such union is deemed befitting and has a regular procedure, with rituals and ceremonies which are not observed in levirate and elopement. The general term for marriage is '*milam*' and that for the negotiation or settlement and celebration of the union of the two families is called '*kholrii-sai*'. In an arranged marriage, a prospective bride is sought by the groom's parents. The process of marriage among Mossang begins the day when the son and daughter openly speak to their parents about their love relationship and request them to arrange marriage ceremony. If the parent approved their relationship, the boy family will look out an elderly person preferably lady to enquire about the girl and her family. After proper enquiry and making sure about her nature, behavior and character of the girl and her family background to see, if the family was not from criminal background or unclean spirit (*ngamkhii*), "*Ngamkhii*" literary means unclean spirit in the blood of the family. It was believed that there were some family which carries such spirit in the blood or by hereditary the lady, if satisfied with the girl's personality overall, then lady will approach the girl with the marriage proposal on behalf of the groom and his family. If the girl consents, only then the lady will inform the groom and his parents. The groom's family will then send a formal marriage proposal to the girl's parents. The groom and his relatives will make at least three visits before the actual marriage ceremony. During the first visit, a formal marriage proposal is made. The groom and his family members along with one witness-cum-negotiator called (KAMWAA) will go to the bride's house carrying rice beer in a bamboo jug (*khampak*'). The role of "*kamwaa*" is very important and influential as the acceptance from the girl's parents depends on how he negotiates with them. In the evening, the KAMWAA will inform the girl's parents about the purpose of their visit and their decision will be witnessed by the girl's relatives and other villagers invited. The consent of the girl is also considered by her parents. If only, the girl consents to it, that the marriage negotiation will proceed further. If the girl accepts the proposal, then the boy (groom-to-be) will give some amount of money to the girl (bride-to-be) as a mark/deed of acceptance of marriage proposal. And after that, everyone will drink the rice beer brought by the KAMWAA together which is symbolic of an acceptance of marriage proposal by the girl and her parents. If the girl or her parents refuses the marriage proposal then, they will not drink the rice beer and will return on the same day or the next morning depending upon the distance. And if the marriage proposal is accepted, then "*kamwaa*" will propose the tentative date and month to make a second visit to negotiate and fix the date of marriage. During the second visit, Kamwaa will lead a team of family members and relatives to the girl's house to finalise the date of marriage. They will choose the most suitable month and date to hold the marriage ceremony. Generally, all marriages are fixed during the winter season, marriages are held rarely in the summer season due to monsoon and other factor like busy sowing season. Any dates available except on 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of the lunar months are suitable. If the girl's parents also agree with the date fixed, then accordingly, they will start preparation for marriage ceremony. Generally, both the parent chooses suitable day/date for marriage ceremony according to the traditional calendar. Once the date is finalised by both the families, preparations will begin and messenger will be sent to invite neighbours and other relatives from other villages.

When the wedding day approaches, the groom and his family members along with KAMWAA and other relatives will go to the bride's house. There they will discuss and negotiate, the items and the amount of bride price to be paid to the girl's parents and her maternal uncle on next visit after marriage ceremony. The next day, the girl accompanied by some friends and relatives goes to the groom's house. The girl's parents and her brothers or any male members of the clan will not accompany the bride or attend the marriage ceremony in the groom's house until the bride price is paid. It is considered a social taboo to attend a daughter or sister's wedding ceremony. However, the female members of the clan are not restricted from taking part in the celebration. The bride on arrival will not enter the groom's house before certain rituals are performed as a part of marriage ceremony. If the girl is from a distant village, then she will halt the night at the groom's relatives' house. The next day

celebration will begin, rituals and rites will be initiated in the name of the bride and groom; to prosper and to procreate, domestic animals will be sacrificed to appease the spirits, the whole community will join the feast, food and drinks will be served to all the guests. The bride and groom will eat meal in one plate, which symbolise their union as one, it is a totem of marriage vows made before the god and the community. They will now be a husband and wife.

Next day after the wedding celebration, the newlywed couple along with the witness-cum-mediator (KAMWAA) will go to the jungle to collect a basket of firewood to mark their journey together. The bride and groom, till the third day of their marriage will remain at home, which is a period of observing taboo.

The bride's return to her parents' house, literally and figuratively is called '*kham-ji-jiing*'. The bride and groom, along with other relatives will be welcomed by the bride's parents. Further, they will arrange a reception party by sacrificing domestic animal for the newlywed couple, where all the villagers and relatives will take part in the celebration. After their arrival, "*kamwaa*" will hand over the 'bride price' to the bride's parents in the presence of the village elders. The bride price, when paid will break the taboo, and thereafter, the bride's parents and male members of the clan can visit the groom's house.

The bride's parents will also sacrifice animals, prayers will be offered to appease the spirits, rites and ritual will be initiated in the name of the bride and groom that they may prosper and procreate, and live a healthy and long life. Food and local drinks (rice beer) will be served to all the guests. The father of the bride will bless the bride and groom and he will tie a sacred thread with a red bead called '*reibaan*' on the wrist of the groom's left hand and other members of the clan. This ritual signifies the momentous union of the families. The thread is sacred to the Mossangs and is collected from the jungle; a bark of a particular trees not any tree. By tying the sacred thread, the father will invoke the spirits and offer prayers for the bride and groom, asking the spirits to protect them from sickness and disease, enemies and other dangers. After this ritual, the parents will gift the bride ornaments, live chicken (only hen), paddy and any kinds of seeds for sowing and cultivation. Members of the groom's family and "*kamwaa*" will also be presented with gifts. The newlywed couple may return to their house on the same day or the next morning depending upon the distance of the village.

The initiation of rituals in marriage by elopement is also same as that of the arranged marriage, except for the formal marriage proposal, but is celebrated in a simpler manner instead of a grand celebration. The reception ceremony, however, will be organized after a month or within a year of elopement. The parents and brothers of the girl will not visit her at her in-laws until her parents bestow their blessings and give her a reception party, where they too will perform the marriage rituals and send her off formally, after accepting the bride price.

#### BRIDE PRICE:-

Among the Mossang's, the bride price is paid in cash and kind. It comprised of the following item.

1. Chakpao :- Rs 500.00 (Rupees Five hundred only)
2. Waakrok: - 5 (Five) live pigs.
3. Ngakaa: - 1 (one) live Buffalo, measuring more than 1 cubit length (Size of the buffalo are measure by length of the horn) as asked by the bride's parents.
4. Nyamjung: - 1 (one) large Gong (Musical instrument) made of bronze measuring more than 7 (Seven) handsbreath.
5. Chokkhul: - 1 (One) set of three medium size bronze bells, a musical instrument played during festivals.
6. Kadii: - Rs. 300.00(Rupees Three Hundred only). This is paid only when a girl marries into a new clan thus establishing a new relationship between the clans. If a girl marrying into that clan already have brides and wives from the girl's clan then 'kadii' will not be paid.
7. Gek-krei: - "*Gek*" means nephew and niece "*krei*" means price. Gek-krei are to paid by the sons and daughter of the couple. 1(one) buffalo to be paid by sons in common and 1 live pig by the daughter individually when they got married. To be paid to the bride's maternal uncle.
8. Khu-roh: - Rs. 700.00 (Rupees seven hundred Only) .It literally means the price of one's head. This is paid only after one's death. It is paid by the woman's children or grandchildren (only a son or a grandson) to her brothers. This is a wind up of the bride price signifying the end of affinities between the two clans.  
However, the bride price paid in cash have changed overtime keeping in mind the price of commodities and domesticated animal.

The bride price is paid in an installment. The payment of bride price in installment eases the financial strains on the groom's family as well as to have upper hand over them.

The bride's parents in return gifts the newlywed couple and "*kamwaa*" the following items.

1. 1(One) Sword and a Chicken (live) to kamwaa.
2. To the newlywed couple:-
  - 1(one) Sword
  - 1 (One) blanket
  - 1(one) Spear
  - 1 (One) lead Bangle

In addition to the above-mentioned items, the bride's parents also give a sufficient quantity of paddy, maize, millet etc. for sowing and cultivation. A piglet and a live hen will be given to the couple to breed, that they may flourish and prosper as a family.

### CUSTOMARY LAW RELATING TO MARRIAGE:-

The Mossangs follow a strict customary law relating to marriage or other related issues. Customary laws are an intrinsic part of their existence in the society; it is constituted as a way of life. Monogamy is the norm among the tribe and divorce also is very rare. Divorce may be obtained by a man with a payment of fine, and on approved grounds such as adultery and barrenness. The wife may also divorce her husband on the same grounds. Any dispute, if it arises in the village, is settled by the council of headman and elders of the village. This settlement of dispute is called "KHA-PHO". Cases of divorce like any other disputes will be settled by the village council of head and elders. The council will hear the plea of both the husband and wife, and divorce will be granted accordingly, the one at fault will be fined. If it involves the children, the custody of the children will go to any parent, who is not at fault. The decision of the council will be unanimous. If the accused do not adhere to the verdict of the village council, then he/she will be excommunicated or exile from the village.

The objective of present study is to investigate that the marriage practice still continue to exist among Mossang tribes. But with the spread of modern education and the advent of Christianity, the change is also taking place in the traditional custom and practices, when we closely looked into it.

Traditionally, the couple was excommunicate or exile from society or village for violating laid down social norms. But, after the advent of Christianity and spread of education, the marriage is a matter of love and choice. The parent's and the society has to accept it and there is no hard and fast rule as per traditional customary law. Inter-tribe marriage is also taking place.

With the spread of Christianity, the used of rice beer is replace by with tea and snacks. The main component of bride price were buffalo, pig, bronze Gong, bronze bell and other items were being replace with cash or in monetary term. The amount of money that are being paid are mere symbolic and not exactly equal to the market price or cost best on mutual consent and understanding between the two parties. In traditional system of marriage, the parents of the groom perform marriage rites and rituals at the groom house. But nowadays, marriage ceremonies are performed in church as per Christian culture by the priest of pastor. Thus with the spread of education and Christianity, the marriage practice among Mossang's tribe underwent many changes.

### CONCLUSION

The Mossang's tribes have been observing their traditional and customary practices relating to the marriage from time immemorial. They still attach great importance to social and customary norms. With the spread of education and Christianity, the change in the traditional and customary norms is inevitable. But for the traditional customary practice to survive it is desirable to initiate a dialogue between traditional values and modern way of life. Among Mossang's tribe though they embrace Christianity, but the marriage ceremony is perform with the combination of both traditional and Christian culture.

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