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Cultural Astronomy with Reference to the Mishing Community of Assam

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Abstract. For humans, the sky has always been enigmatic and embedded with riddles. Cultural Astronomy offers an interdisciplinary approach which facilitates the understanding of the beliefs and practices concerning the sky and the celestial bodies and the way people use their understanding of the sky. This paper presents the folk expressions, narratives and oral traditions of the Mishing community of Assam which suggest that this community believes the celestial bodies, mainly the Sun and the Moon, have immense importance in their social and religious life and perceptions of the cosmos.

Introduction: what is cultural astronomy?

Towards the 1990s a gradual shift was witnessed in understanding astronomy as a discipline. In particular, the previously accepted status of astronomy, in common with other natural sciences, as something universal and culturally neutral was questioned.¹ Knowledge and perceptions regarding the sky widely varies across cultures as Chamberlain and Young show.² An Igbo proverb goes like this, ‘If the eyes do not look at the sky, what else they would look at?’ Every eye is bound to see the sky, but every eye sees it in its own way.³ The cultural embeddedness of the astronomical

¹ Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders, ‘The Study of Cultural Astronomy’, in Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders, ed. *Astronomies and Cultures* (NiwotCA: University of Colorado Press, 1993), pp. 1-31.

² Von del Chamberlain, John B. Carlson and M. Jane Young, *Songs from the Sky: Indigenous Astronomical and Cosmological Traditions of the World* (Bognor Regis: Ocarina Books in cooperation with the Centre for Archaeoastronomy, 2005).

³ Damian U. Opat, ‘Cultural Astronomy in the Lore and Literature of Africa’, in Jarita Holbrook, Rodney Medupe and Johnson Urama (eds.), *African Cultural Astronomy: Current Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy Research in Africa*,

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observer and his/her knowledge about the sky has led to the rise of astronomical pluralism. Even what is commonly known as '(scientific) astronomy' has been gradually interrogated and its cultural specificity gradually explored. Hence, the shift from 'astronomy' towards 'astronomies' or 'cultural astronomy' was due.

Jarita Holbrook, in discussing the methodology and scope of cultural astronomy, states that cultural astronomy combines knowledge and methods from the fields of astronomy, anthropology and history in order to study the practices and traditions of lay experts and non-experts who relate, in the broadest sense, to the sky in a specific culture.⁴ Champion defines cultural astronomy as the use of astronomical knowledge, beliefs or theories to inspire, inform or influence social forms and ideologies or any aspect of human behaviour. Cultural astronomy also includes the modern disciplines of ethnoastronomy and archaeoastronomy.⁵

In this paper, I will try to explore how traditional astronomical knowledge and beliefs of the Mishing (sometimes Mising) community of Assam shapes the behaviour of the community members in the cultural and religious domains.

Folk expressions and narratives relating to astronomical beliefs

The Mishings are a riverine community primarily inhabiting the banks of the Subansiri and the Brahmaputra rivers in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India.⁶ The migration memories of the

(Amsterdam: Springer Verlag, Astrophysics and Space Science Proceedings, 2008), pp. 217-29 (p. 217).

⁴ Jarita Holbrook, 'Chasing the Shadow of the Moon: The 2006 Ghana Eclipse Conference, in *African Cultural Astronomy: Current Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy Research in Africa*, ed. Jarita Holbrook, Rodney Medupe and Johnson Urama, (Amsterdam: Springer Verlag, Astrophysics and Space Science Proceedings, 2008), pp. 1-19.

⁵ Nicholas Champion, 'Editorial', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 1 no 1, Spring/Summer 1997, pp. 1-2.

⁶ For background see, M.C. Behera, *Tribal Religion: Change and Continuity* (Kolkata: Gyan Publishing House, 2000); Ganesh Pegu, *Mising Janasanskritir Aahe Aahe* (Dhemaji: Dhemaji Book Stall, 2004), Khargeswar Pegu, *Asomor Jati Gatanat Mising Janagosthi Aru Nadipariya Mising Samaj* (Dhemaji:

Mishings still cherish the event of their migration from the hills to the plains they presently inhabit on the banks of the aforementioned rivers.

Given that the dwelling spaces of the Mishing community are in close proximity to rivers, everyday life is closely connected with rivers, fishing and water navigation being significant parts of their life. The landscape that the Mishing eye casts upon from dawn till dusk is the wide river, with its banks of sand and green lushness depending on the vegetative capacity of the locale concerned. One prominent traditional practice among the Mishing elders is to sit after dusk on the balcony of the *chang-ghor* (the traditional raised hut of the Mishings) sipping the traditional brew *aapong* (traditional rice beer) and engaging in unceasing chat with guests who often happen to be neighbours or relatives. What is significant here from a cultural astronomical vantage point is that in such chats the sky constantly remains a site to extend the *conversational gaze*: echoing the Foucauldian sense of gaze, I use the term to denote the *gaze* extended through ordinary conversation to reflect and to draw an analogy with mundane happenings.⁷ The following is a folk note, collected from an informant, which talks about drawing inspiration from the brightness of the stars and the Moon to realise the potential of *Mishing regam*, or Mishing society.

Takar karka:m pé
Polo karka:m pé
Mishing homaz ka:rra dulai
Kaze dara:pto rérépé daro:pto
Polo kéra pé rérépé gélai
Ledupé koryo ka
Dakéire suyokai
Régam a polo takar pé karmana dulai.

Dhemaji Book Stall, 2003); Sarthak Sengupta, , *Tribes of North-East India* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1994) and Devendra Thakur and D.N. Thakur, *Tribal life In India* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1994).

⁷ For Foucault see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1976 [1963]).

Let's shine like the stars
Let's shine like the Moon
Let's make Mishing society shine
Wake up
Let's go to the Moon
Don't regret later
Let's all keep shining like the Moon and the stars

It is natural that both the river and the sky figure prominently in Mishing folkloric expressions since the river and the sky are two prime examples of what Bruno Latour defines as *actants* which are constitutive of the Mishing landscape.⁸ As Latour argues, the visualised perception of the surrounding landscape of a people acts as a dynamic force in shaping the social mores of a group. Constance Classen, on the other hand, has emphasised the need of displacing the hegemony of 'visualism' and considering the import of other senses such as sound and touch in perceiving the worldview of an individual or a group.⁹ In the Mishing soundscape, like the landscape, the sound of the flow of water in the nearby river takes a prominent place. Similarly, the frog appears in many Mishing folk narratives, including genealogical ones, as a character with significant agentive function. This is perhaps because in the Mishing dwelling spaces, which are generally low-lands and close to water-bodies, frogs are found aplenty, and croaking of the frogs, particularly at night, characterises the soundscape. One prominent Mishing etiological tale depicting the origin of the stars has it that it was a frog that created the stars and brought the celestial bodies into 'order'. The tale was narrated by one of my informants:

Once upon a time there were two Suns. They were brothers. Each of them took it in turn to shine for twelve hours, so it was day all the time. But one day a frog shot one of the Suns with an arrow and killed the

⁸ Bruno Latour, *Resembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹ Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

fire that was in it, so now it has no warmth. It shines as the Moon shines at night. And the splinters made by the arrow became stars.

The placing of the sky and celestial bodies above the earth is narrated and conceptualised in the traditional Mishing worldview through another folk narrative. The distinguished writer Tarun Chandra Pamegam, who endeavoured to record Mishing oral tradition, collected the tale *Akaxkhan okho hol kenekoi*:

In the ancient days, the sky was like a roof with the chang-ghor hanging just above the head. People could touch the stars with their hands and the Moon shone brighter. People could survive the scorching heat of the Sun because at that time they wore thick bark. Over time, people learnt how to cultivate paddy, and along with that they also invented the mortar to pulverise the grains. One day, a very old lady started to thrash the paddy grains in her mortar. The pestle of the mortar often hit the sky hanging just above her head. Irritated by this, she told her husband to make a longer pestle. With the new pestle, she pushed the sky above. This is how the sky became placed up above as we see today.¹⁰

The tale both narrates how the sky acquired its elliptical shape to the observer's eye and also of human agency in *shaping* (or *seeing*) it so. A parabolic reading of this tale also opens the scope for another interpretation: that is, the ways of seeing the sky as the celestial space containing the stars, Moon and the Sun are of human construction rather than the sky or the celestial space being something existing 'out there' independent of human knowledge and consciousness. Just as the old lady of the tale pushed the sky high above and turned it into an elliptically shaped object, so has modern man discursively 'constructed', with his observation and

¹⁰ Tarun Chandra Pamegam, *Tarun Chandra Pamegam Rachanawali* (Guwahati: Banalata, 1984), p. 282.

knowledge, the particular category ‘sky’ denoting the *visible* open space up above the earth’s surface.

Donyi-Polo religion: enacting astronomical knowledge

The Mishing animist faith (today also known as the *Donyi-Polo* faith) visualises life on earth as surrounded by a great company of good and evil spirits above whom rises the majestic figure of the Sun/Moon – Donyi-Polo. Similarly, other spirits, both evil and benevolent, are also symbolised by celestial bodies. At the head of a large and varied pantheon of spirits is found the august figure of the Sun-goddess. With her is often bracketed *Si*, the Earth-god. Donyi, the Sun, lives in the sky and sees all things. *Si* lives in the earth. Together they protect man and care for him. Donyi is the wife of *Si*, but they live so far apart that they can never come together.¹¹

While praying to the mystical enigmatic power of creation, the Mishings fold their hands together towards the sky and offer prayer. According to one informant, since the all-seeing, all-knowing, care-giving Sun lives in the sky, the prayer is directed towards the sky. Furthermore, the spaces designated for worshipping the Donyi-Polo is decorated with figurative paintings of the Sun.

Celestial symbols and art

Mishing traditional cloths and wares like the *galuk* (a male garment) and handbags are ornamented with woven figures of the Moon, the Sun and stars. Among the celestial bodies, the Sun figures prominently in traditional arts and handloom designs. The Sun, in Mishing symbolism, is said to stand for the feminine, receptive source of energy responsible for creation. The Sun also symbolises truth, faith and brightness. The religious spaces used for Donyi-Polo worship are decorated with paintings of a bright, radiant and developing red Sun. This, as one informant in the Ghunasuti village said, represents the ever-increasing power of the

¹¹ Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East frontier of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1999), pp. 31-2.

Sun which has been sustaining mankind on the earth since the days of yore.



Fig. 1: A Galuk, decorated with the Sun above the Yoksa (the cross mark)



Fig. 2: A Donyi-Polo temple



Fig. 3: A Flag of the Donyi-Polo Religion, decorated with the Sun in the centre

Conclusion

The intellectual shift in the 1990s started interrogating the epistemological basis of astronomy and laid out the existence of multiple culturally varied understandings of the celestial space and order, and hence ‘astronomies’: all astronomies have their own historically specific cultural contexts of emergence. Therefore, all astronomies are cultural astronomies, including the Mishing variant.