

# ***MAASI, THE LIVING HUSBAND AND AYADROH, THE SPIRITUAL CONSORT OF THE SARTANG TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH***

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## **Abstract**

The Sartang tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is a less known minor tribe formerly clubbed under the category of Monpa. The people observes an annual calendar ritual to ward off evil spirits from harm and dismay of the people and their village. A boy called Maasi is selected by a priest from among a group of teenage boys who is considered to be the spouse of a female evil spirit. The data was collected by interviewing key informants. The researcher also employed observation of the ritual event and recording using research tools such as audio and camera. The analysis of the data was done using ethnographic methods. The paper describes the power, role and different stages of the *Maasi* in the annual calendar ritual. The rites and ceremonies practised by the Sartang people are believed to atone for one's misdeeds, bring good fortune and longevity and avoid malicious gossip to keep harmonious relationships in the community.

**Keywords:** Phallus, Rituals, Malevolent Spirit, Community, Maasi, Sartang, Bropu, Raji Lama.

## **Introduction**

Ritual plays a very important role in tribal society (Roshan J.J. 2012). Like any other community of India, the rituals of tribal people originated through different beliefs and practices. Some rituals have religious origin while the others originated due to different natural phenomena, like harvesting, calamities, diseases, plague, etc, which are apotropaic or dedicated to deities who are believed to have a direct impact on the daily life and the prosperity of a family or community (Pommaret, 2006). So, like any other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Sartang tribe also practices different rituals

which are practiced with great enthusiasm according to their belief system. All their rituals have their own explanation of origin. Originally and traditionally, the origin of festivals and rituals in Sartang tribe has come up due to animism (belief in soul) and nature or deities worship (*Phu Manjang* and *Phu Mani*, i.e. mountain gods; “*phu*” represents mountain, and *Sukho-Sunung*, i.e. water gods). It is found that in almost every tribe, the festivals and the rituals which they observe are directly or indirectly related to the appeasement of the malevolent spirit or evil power that has the tendency to harm the individuals, the village or the community. Likewise, the rituals and the rites practiced by the Sartang people are connected with the casting away of the malevolent spirit, and seeking of protection of an individual, family, village or the community from the evil power for a prosperous life.

The Sartang tribe inhabits in the four villages of the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh; they are Rahung, Salari, Jerigaon and Khoina. There are different rites and rituals followed by these people for worshipping their local deities (*phu Manjang- phu Mani*, both mountain gods, *Namkhalarje*, a house for rituals and *Sukho-Sunung*, both water gods). The worship of these local deities through appropriate rituals constitute an essential part of the indigenous religious life of the Sartang. The deities of the Sartang people are believed to have a volatile temperament, i.e. if pleased, they can grant prosperity, health, good harvest and abundant cattle; if angered, they will retaliate against the people by sending calamities, misery or misfortunes. The little variations amongst the Sartang inhabited villages in their belief and practices of rituals are due to the particular historical circumstances or situations and geographical variations. Likewise, the making of *Maasi* (an adolescent boy who wears a hanging a wooden phallus) is a ritual practiced by the Sartang tribe of Rahung village, who is believed to be married to a malevolent spirit and is supposed to act as a dumb person, and can speak or communicate with others just by using sign language for certain days till the entire rituals and the festival gets over.

The present paper attempts to answer some of the significant questions such as, ‘what are the roles and functions of the members of the rites and ceremony?’ ‘How the people perceives the ritual?’ ‘Are the wooden phallus still believe to protect from the evil spirits?’

### **Rituals for making *Maasi***

The Sartang tribe has an amazing variety of rituals and festivals to ward off evil spirits and to please their local deities. Many of them bear similarities with those neighboring tribes in the area, may be due to close proximity. So, the *Losaemo* of the Sartang tribe

is one of the festivals, which is observed with pomp and gaiety to appease the local deities and to ward off evil spirits.

The *Losaemo* festival, which is considered to be the most important festival of the Sartang people, is celebrated for a week long for every year in the month of January or February as per the prophecy made by the priest of the respective villages inhabited by these people. It is during this festival that the rituals of selecting or making *Maasi* takes place, and this ritual for the selection of *Maasi* has been practiced by the Sartang people since time immemorial along with the *Losaemo* festival for the prosperity and warding off evil spirit from the village.

On the fourth day of the *Losaemo*, the rituals of making or selecting '*Maasi*' is observed, who acts as a dumb person and is considered to be married to a female evil spirit. The ritual of the *Maasi* in the festival is very important as it is believed that if they do so, they will keep away the volatile evil spirit from bringing any kind of misfortune or any kind of misery or harm to the village at any cost. It is considered that without the role and part of making a *Maasi*, the celebration of the *Losaemo* festival will be of no use, because most of the traditional activities are involved around the role and formation of *Maasi*.



Fig. 1: The *Maasi* along with the *Chaaming*

The *Maasi* will be selected from among the *Chaaming* (a group of 4-5 adolescent boys) by a lottery system. It is a belief that the *Maasi* and the *Chaaming* have to be the adolescent boys who are naïve and are not yet involved in any sexual activity. It is believed that the *Maasi* and the *Chaaming* have to be in the stage of chastity and has

to be pure from the heart. Before doing the lottery, all the *Chaaming* will be asked to gather together from among whom the *Maasi* is to be selected. At first, two *Chaaming* will be called and made them to sit in front of the public. Then the *Raji Lama* (the head priest) will take two pieces of stick called “*Gazinkho*” (‘*Gazin*’ is a plant name out of which, ‘*Kho*’, i.e, two pieces of lottery is made) for the lottery. The two *Gazinkho* will be in the symbol of a male as well as female, i.e. both the stick will reflect female and male genital respectively. Then the *Raji Lama* (the head priest of the village), without facing or seeing the *Chaaming* will throw those two pieces of *Gazinkho* towards the two *Chaamin* who are seated to be chosen for the *Maasi*. *Raji Lama* will do it for three times. In this process of throwing three times, the male symbol *Gazinkho* has to fall twice on a *Chaaming* who will be declared as *Maasi*, and *Gazinkho* of female symbol once. If these criteria are fulfilled, then only the *Maasi* will be chosen. And suppose, if it doesn’t happen during the first two *Chaaming*’s lottery, then the same procedure will be taking place in the next two *Chaaming*’s turn. Suppose, even in this case, if both of them get draw, then water will be poured on the entire bodies of the first two *Chaaming*, then once again the same procedure of the lottery will start like earlier. The reason for pouring of water on them is because, it is believed that they will be purified by doing so, as they believe that *Gazinkho* will not come to the impure body. So, after being poured water on them, then only the lottery procedure will continue. Again, by any chance, if there is draw in between them, then the next two *Chaaming* will also follow the same process like the previous one. The same previous procedure will be continued till the finding of the *Maasi* out of those *Chaaming*. When they finally finds him, the village people have a belief that he is being married to a female malevolent spirit, named *Ayadroh*, who is considered to have volatile temperament and possess power that could bring dismay, misfortune or misery among the villagers if she is not pleased or does not get married. So, once the ritual of choosing the *Maasi* is completed, it is believed that he is married to that spirit, *Ayadroh*, and she is finally being appeased by the Sartang people. This ritual and belief of *Maasi* for being into the wedlock with the malevolent spirit protects the village from facing any calamity, harm or misery.

After the *Maasi* has been selected, then the *Gomin* (a person who is appointed as a watchman or policing of the village) will put a cap on *Maasi*’s head and will tie a phallus made of wood on his crotch, and will hand over a stick to him. After the completion of the procedures of rituals for making a *Maasi*, an adult man of the village, who is considered as jester will start dancing nakedly. The tradition of celebration by dancing naked has been followed by the ancestors and the Sartang people since time immemorial like any other rituals. Whenever the rituals of selecting *Maasi* is over, then a person proposed and assigned for that dance has to dance in that way, entirely

naked. It is believed that by doing this, they ward off the evil spirit and call all the wild animals of the jungle to the *Lubrang* (a house built on a hill or mountain in the village during the fourth day of the *Losaemo* festival) in a spirit form or tiny form. It is considered that when these wild animals come to the *Lubrang*, then the people inside it, viz the *Bropu* (priest), the *Maasi*, the *Chaaming* and the *Gomin* will catch them. Most of the villagers are not allowed inside the *Lubrang*, only the specific people like priests, *Maasi*, *Chaaming*, *Gomin* and some of the important people related to the rituals are allowed inside the *Lubrang* to come. It is believed that if they catch those spirits or the tiny form of those animals during the ritual, then in reality, those wild animals will be captured or hunt by them if they had set up any kind of trap in the jungle.

When a *Chaaming* becomes the *Maasi*, by the virtue of the priest, he is bestowed with the rights or the power to do anything in the village. For instance, he can snatch money from the people those who are gambling and playing dice or play cards. He can pick up anything from any household or from any person (in case of female, the snatched or the picked up item has to be returned after his role as a *Maasi* gets over), and he can also beat any person if he desires to do so. And suppose, if there is a quarrel or fight in between the people, he along with his group of *Chaaming* can beat them or control them. In those specific days, he has more power than any person of the village. He is also entitled with the power to misbehave with the girls of the village. The *Maasi* could be in a way considered as jester. He is bestowed with those specific powers for four days till he remains the *Maasi* in the *Losaemo* festival.

The main role and responsibilities of a *Maasi* and his group of *Chaaming* is to collect and prepare all the offering items like *khaji* (root chutney), *Lopaani* (local alcohol), *frum* (cheese), *poetaang* (incense stick), popcorn, fish, etc. that will be offered by the priest to the spirit or the god that the Sartang people worships. The plants, woods and grasses that are to be used in the altars of the festival are also supposed to be procured by the *Maasi* and the *Chaaming*. Every rite or ritual related to the celebration of the festival is directly or indirectly linked with the *Maasi* and *Chaaming*. The *Maasi* also collects *frum* (cheese) from every household of the village and then cut it for the priests to eat.

Apart from the rights and power being bestowed on the *Maasi* and the *Chaaming*, they have to avoid certain restrictions on food items, especially the *Maasi*. Food items like egg, chicken, pork, onion, garlic, beef, mutton or other non-vegetarian are restricted to the *Raji Lama*, *Maasi* and *chaaming* during the *Losaemo* festival. The people perceive such foods as impure during the festival. They are restricted from all these food items

until they perform *Maasinjothuebo*. Perhaps this may be in keeping the sanctity of the different 'persona' that the people assume, a concept similar to the great tradition of the Hindus. And this *Maasinjothuebo* is believed to be performed in the spring season. And this *Maasinjothuebo* is believed to be performed in the spring season. It is a ritual in which *Maasi* and *Chaaming* acknowledge and thanksgiving to *Raji Lama* and *Bropus* (priests) for selecting the *Maasi* as well as for sheltering the *Maasi* and *Chaaming* in their house. The *Maasi* and the *Chaaming* stays and sleeps in the *Raji Lama*'s house for those four days till the time the *Maasi* is released and set free from his required duties or responsibilities from the festival. In case, if the *Maasi* consumes any foods that are restricted for him till the completion of the ritual, he can be punished by the priest of the festival in any form of cash or kind, because it is believed that, a person after becoming a *Maasi* possess some power within him, and by doing so, he might lose those power that is required in the festival. It is believed that if the *Maasi* consumes the restricted food intentionally and secretly, he might suffer from misfortune or misery in near future. Thus, he takes the maximum precautions for not consuming any restricted food, except the food items made from maize or wheat.

The eighth day or the last day of the *Losaemo* festival is called *Khunungsekso*, meaning, the rituals related to the last day of friendship, i.e. the last day of the friendship of the *Maasi* and *Chaaming*. The *Maasi* is taken to the *Yaamdok*, which is considered as the home of three particular priests (*Bropu Khano*, *Bropu Enchen* and *Bropu Gachao*). In *Yaamdok*, the *Maasi*, who was earlier believed to be married to the malevolent spirit, *Ayadroh*, will be divorced from her by the priest, which means he will be set free from the bondage of that spirit. The priest will burn *Sukpa* (the incense stick) by chanting hymns, and will circle the *Maasi* with it. After completing all the necessary rituals with the *Maasi*, the priest will ask *Ayadroh* (the female malevolent spirit) to separate herself from the *Maasi*'s body as she was earlier married to him. The priest will remove the wooden phallus of the *Maasi* from the crotch by chanting hymns, and finally he will be released and freed from his role and responsibilities related to all the rituals in the festival.

The *Khunung Sekso* ritual is also performed by the *Raji Lama* in his house and *Bropu Khaano* in *Yaamdok*. Along with the ritual of *Maasi*, the *Khunung Sekso* ritual is also followed so that there is a kind of belief that if any kind of malevolent spirit still stays in the village, they are being asked to leave or chased out.

## The *Maasi* and the wooden phallus

Genitalia of both male and female has always been used symbolically in art and cultural representation, but it's the male genitalia, the phallus, which have always been heavily represented either in art form or culture across time and space (Choden, 2014). It's the phallic figure which continues to find space in various art exhibitions and even at the house or in giant walls. For instance, in Bhutan, walls are painted with phalluses to ward off evil (Kinga, 2005). The denizens also wear them as lockets and put them right above their main doors to ward off the evil eye. In the same way, the ubiquity of the wooden phalluses can be witnessed in every household of the Sartang people. They can be seen carved in the wood, installed or decorated above doorways and under the eaves to ward off evil, including one of its most insidious human forms, gossip. The Sartang people even considers that the wooden phalluses hanging at their houses protect them from the evil eye or any kind of curse from the enemy and it won't let any malevolent spirit to enter in their houses. They also believe that the hanging of the wooden phallus at their house forbids the new baby to be born as a transgender. Though these people don't wear it as a locket or pendant, but they consider it as an amulet that acts as the protector for them as well as their houses.

The origin of the belief or the traditional practices of the Sartang tribe related to the phallus is not traceable. It seems like the beliefs, rites and rituals connected with the tradition of phallus among them have been assimilated from the other side of Bhutan or Tibet because of the sharing of the border and proximity of the culture. In Bhutan, phalluses are drawn on the outside walls on each side of entrance doors or modelled in wood and hung at the corners of houses, planted in the fields, and held as an attribute by the jesters at religious festivals (Pommaret & Tobgay, 2011). The tradition of the phallus painted on homes or carved in wood and installed above doorways in Bhutan has been widely traced to one lama (Buddhist religious priest), Drukpa Kunley, who spread the tenets of Buddhism through Bhutan in the 15th and 16th centuries (Myers, 2017). In the case of the Sartang tribe, unlike Bhutan, they do not give any attribute or credit to any *lama* or any priest for the belief and tradition, and there are no paintings or images of phallus drawn on the walls in their villages; however, it is hung at the entrance of the house and is sometimes held as an attribute by some adult man as the jesters.



*Fig. 2: Wooden Phallus hanging above the entrance (source: Fieldwork)*

The *Maasi* wears a wooden phallus during the rituals put on by the priest in the festival. The *Maasi* starts playing important role during the entire procedures of the festival till the time he is set free from his role and responsibilities. The wooden phallus to the *Maasi* is given by the priest with some chanting of hymns so that both the *Maasi* and the phallus could perform their required responsibilities together till the rituals and the festival is over. The *Maasi* with the phallus keeps the female malevolent spirit happy by getting married to her. With such appeasement she prevents from bringing any calamity or misery to the village. It is also believed that the *Maasi* and the phallus ensures all the priests who perform their rites and rituals in the ritual observation do not face any problem, physically or mentally, and the *Maasi* and the phallus also forbids any kind of malevolent spirits to cause any hindrance to them. It is believed that they ensure proper passage or route for the priest to perform their rites and rituals safely. Apart from warding off evils during the festival and rituals, the *Maasi* along with the wooden phallus is considered as boon because they believed that the phallus can bring happiness and prosperity to the people who participate in the festival and the community as a whole.



Although the Sartang people believe and perceive the wooden phallus as a sacred symbol, there is no activity related to its worshipping, unlike the famous Japanese ‘**Kamara Matsuri**’ (the festival of the Steel Phallus). This tradition is part of the Shinto religion held annually, and the ‘**Bourani**’ festival of Greece, where people pray and parade around the phallic-shaped figures for fertility (Jha, 2018), there is no practice or any such practice among the Sartang people. Apart from the belief that hanging a wooden phallus at the house forbids the bearing of the transgender baby in the family, there is no belief, worship or prayer related to fertility.

## Discussion

The rites and rituals practised by the Sartang people are believed to atone for one’s misdeeds, bring good fortune and longevity, and avoid malicious gossip to maintain harmonious relationships in the community. Hence, it can be assumed that the common purpose of all the rites and rituals related to the festival and the wooden phalluses is to ward off evil influences on the Sartang community and bring them prosperity by pleasing local deities and appeasing the malevolent spirits. It can also be considered that the wooden phalluses find a vital role in the sociocultural beliefs and practices of the Sartang community. Mary Beth Mills mentions a very similar cultural practice. She reported that 200 households in Bani Naa Sakae village in rural Northern Thailand were decorated with wooden phalluses to ward off a malevolent ‘widow ghost’ who roamed to have sex with men in their sleep (Mills, 2005 cited from Barbara Miller, 2011). The people believed that if a (young) man dies in sleep, the ghost widow caused it. In order to protect the men from the roaming ghost widow, the wooden penises are decoys to satisfy the widow ghost so that men are unharmed by her (op.cit.). The origin of such cultural similarities between the two countries, Thailand and India, cannot be revealed. However, the two Mongoloid ethnic groups are both followers of Buddhism and being closely located with each other, the chances of diffusion are very much likely.

## Conclusion

Although the *Maasi* plays a vital role during the main festival of the Sartang people of Rahung village, Arunachal Pradesh, the wooden phallus has a pivotal role in influencing the sociocultural beliefs of the entire community. The *Maasi* and the wooden phallus are believed to be the apotropaic by the Sartang community of Arunachal Pradesh. He is considered the most important person apart from the village priests during the festival and the rituals, as he has maximum roles and responsibilities during the entire period of the rituals and the festival. The beliefs, roles and responsibilities related to

the *Maasi* are considered only in the *Losaemo* festival and its ritual. However, the belief and the role related to the wooden phallus remained the same throughout the years and life of the Sartang people.

Despite rapid modern development, frequent changes in lifestyle and globalization, the Sartang people still take a keen interest in their local history, tradition, customs and culture, including the rituals related to the *Maasi* and the wooden phalluses. It is pretty amazing to see that whatever the religious denominations of the people in the village, they tend to practice those rituals very lively and consider it an indispensable role and duty for the welfare of the Sartang community. Though it may be considered superstitious or orthodox by any other cultures, the rites and ceremonies among the villagers are perceived and practised in awe, rue and reverence and thus still function for the fulfilment of socio-psychological well-being of the people.

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