



Mro community festival in Bandarban

In search of holy book

A winter festival is now the only carrier of fading cultural heritage of one of the world's most ancient communities, known as Mros, in the southeastern part of Bandarban.

Trekking up the hills, one would be surprised to find the Mros inhabiting the most remote pockets of land, on the steps of mountains or the summit of small hills, and sometimes near streams.

Bright examples of their traditions can be seen in their religious faith. *Chiyachot*, a winter festival celebrated with the slaughter of cows and *plai* (dance), has been a religious practice of the Mros.

Curiously, the Mros believe God created different religions for different societies, and the responsibility to bring their religion was given to a cow. They believe the cow, exhausted from a long trek, became hungry and ate their holy book, leaving them without any holy book. The cow is to blame.

The leader of the Mros called

his people and told them that the cow must face the cruellest of punishments for its crime and the tradition of cow-slaughter came from his order.

The leader ruled that the slaughter would take place annually and should be joined by all the members of the community, regardless of gender.

The Mros celebrated *Chiyachot* on March 9 -- the latest -- in Basanta Nowapara village in Bandarban.

Situated 25 kilometres off Bandarban town, a secluded Nowapara came alive with kerosene bamboo-top lamps crowning hilltops and bright moonlight in the sky. Dancing Mro women in traditional attire added glamour to the happy ambience.

A dance of tribeswomen went on around a bamboo-stage set up on a small hilltop plain, where two cows stood terrified.

The stage was surrounded by exotic pitchers full of locally-made alcohol. The revellers drank alcohol in copious amounts.



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As the end of the night approached, two Mro men attacked the two cows, striking countless blows with spears, and the front half of each dying cow's tongue was severed to be hung on a bamboo stick near the stage. "This is a symbol of sacrifice to God," said Ranglai Mro, the union chairman of Showalok, a village located in Bandarban's central upazila.

A splinter of the Mro community had stopped cow-slaughter in 1983 because of its cruelty, which is why supporters of the festival sprinkle water over the participants for absolution.

Ranglai said these divergent views of the opposing Mro groups did not end up in hostile conflict.

The Mro community of nearly 22 thousand people is on the verge of extinction because of neglect by the government. They are deprived of adequate healthcare, education and employment.

German anthropologist Lorenz Loffler, researching on the region since the 1960s, declared the

Mro community one of the most ancient in the world.

Another German ethnographer Claus-Dieter Brauns, who worked on the area surrounding the Matamuhuri Valley during the 1960s and 1970s, subscribed to Loffler's views.

The Mro community lost its kingdom after a decade-long war against the neighbouring Khumi indigenous community.

According to a book titled "Deinga owadi aredong fong", written in the local Arakanese language, the war was fought in late 15th century.

Sing Young Mro, a researcher, said the Mros ruled the area before 2666 BC.

During the rule of Peing Peo, other indigenous groups such as the Pankho and Khumi, attacked the Mro community and looted their houses and the kingdom of the Mros was derisively called *Moger Mulluk*.

Sing Young also told The Daily Star that the Mro habitats are dispersed around Lama, Thanchi, Ruma and Naikhangchhari to ensure their

livelihood amid the inaccessible terrain of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Ranglai Mro complained that the agriculture and hunter-based Mros have become almost destitute. The chairman added, "Some Mros have abandoned their traditional way of life under the spell of urban lifestyle."

"The majority of Mros are unemployed, and the child-marriage rate is still alarming." More alarming, he said, is health situation, saying since they are deprived of traditional food-habit, the women and children remain malnourished and suffer from multiple diseases.

Ranglai said the Mros do not feel interested in education, as it is not carried out in their mother language.

Story: MONIRUL ALAM
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

