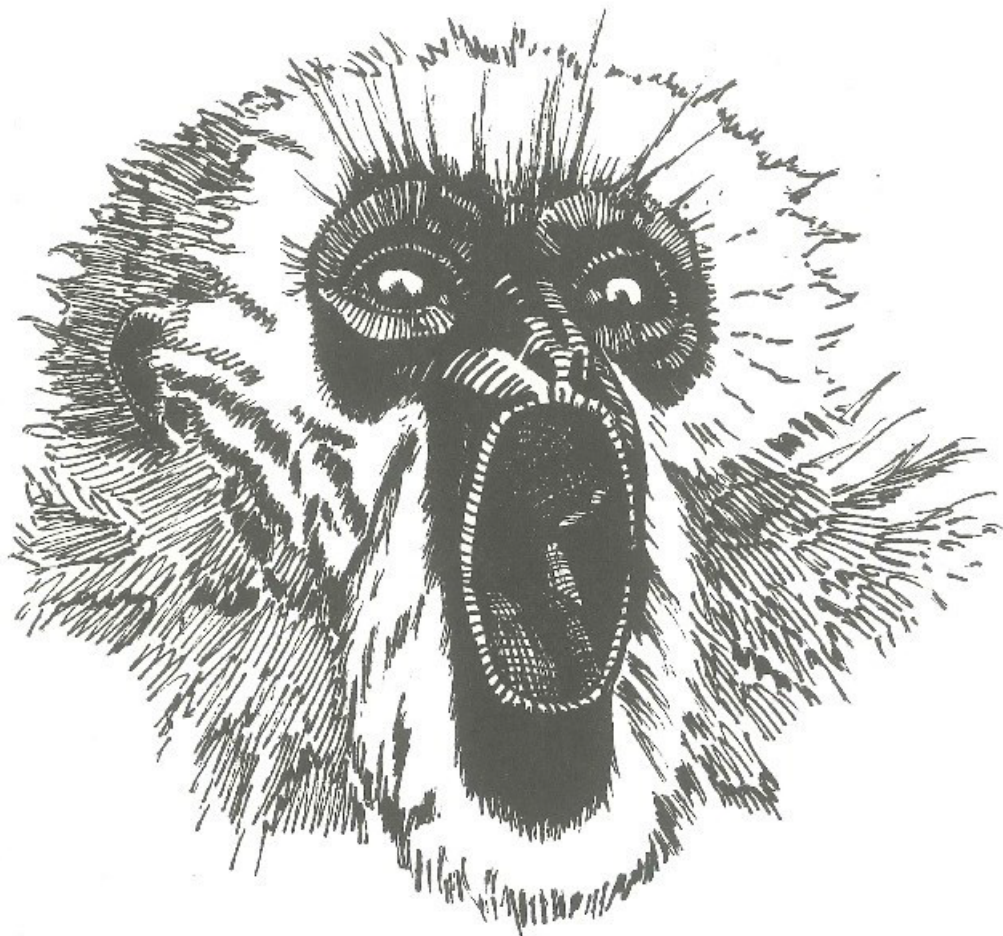


GIBBON STORIES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS FROM INDIA

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We present these stories, myths and legends to highlight the cultural importance of gibbons in habitat countries. We must start with a clear statement that consuming any part of a gibbon has **no medicinal value** and that gibbons must **not be kept as a pet** (it is illegal everywhere). So please do enjoy these stories, but remember they are just stories.

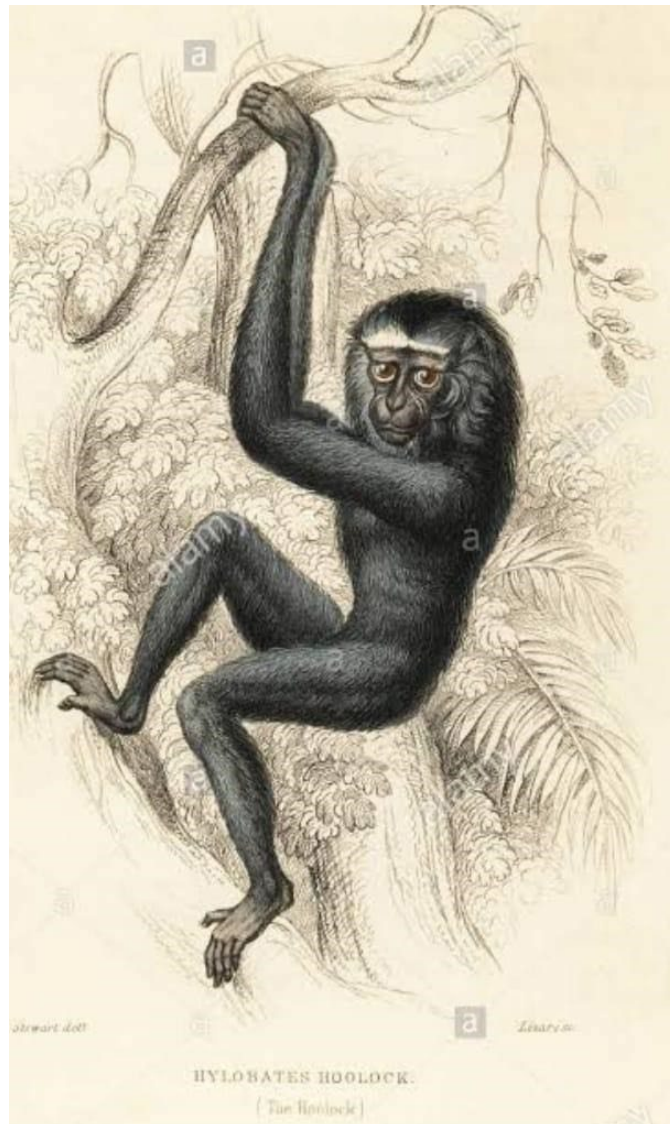


INDIA (Source Narayan Sharma in (Daniel et al. 2007))

- In Rinsangri, the villagers in a small village in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, believe that Hoolock Gibbons give a vigorous call if there is some festival or other ceremony in the village, but they become silent if somebody dies. This strong faith is quite evident here, resulting in a strong affection towards the Hoolock Gibbon. Though the children kill birds and other animals with the help of a catapult, Hoolock Gibbons never become the target of this mindless act. Gibbon call acts as a weather predictor! People adjacent to Rani and Gorbhanga Reserve Forest, Assom have a belief that Hoolock Gibbon call can forecast weather i.e., if Hoolock Gibbons call on a particular day, it can be predicted, according to some villagers, that the next day will be a rainy day.
- Some women in Ngopa village adjacent to Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary, Mizoram wear Gibbon bone on their feet tied with a thread. It is believed that the bone could cure gout and other inflammatory problems and make their feet stronger to sustain hardships of hill life!
- It is believed in Mizoram and Meghalaya that a Hoolock Gibbons call is dependent on the moon cycle!! ... people believe that if it is full moon, Hoolock Gibbon call regularly and more frequently during day time. The frequency reduces as the moon changes its shape and during New Moon they rarely call. Field Biologists have also observed this in the wild but it needs further research.
- In Dampa Tiger Reserve, people used to kill Hoolock Gibbons to drink the blood hot as they believed this would kill the malarial parasite.
- In Selbalgri, another village adjacent to Rinsangri there was a tradition of sacrificing Hoolock Gibbons and offering its head to please the forest deity. The small village forest is still present, but Hoolock Gibbons are not sacrificed anymore.

INDIA (From Florian Magne)

Villages in West Garo Hills, called "villages sacred Forest" believe that gibbon's calls are a good omen for the village. If the call is very near the village, it is interpreted as a sign of prosperity for the community. It is also believed that the gibbons remain silent when somebody dies. For this reason, the elders from these villages, including Ramwalkangre, where HURO Programme has its gibbon release site, will never hurt gibbons, and are very friendly towards gibbons. It is not true anymore for the younger generations though.



INDIA

Belief of Mishmi Community and Hoolock gibbon (Source: Dilip Chetry & Rekha Chetry)

Conservation of biodiversity is a holistic approach and needs both strong scientific basis as well as maximum community participation. Cultural background of local communities can play key role in the conservation of nature. Tribal communities in different corners of the earth are conserving biodiversity of their respective areas by following certain age old social ethos. The state of Arunachal Pradesh in India exhibits an amazing ethnic diversity with 26 tribes, and which is the highest ethnic diversity in the region. The Mishmi is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Mishmis again there are three groups-the **Idu Mishmi**, the **Digaru Mishmi** and the **Miju Mishmi**. Each of these three groups practices their own customs and rituals.

They are traditionally inhabitants of Mishmi hills which fall in the distribution range of Eastern Hoolock gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*). By far hunting has been recognized as a major threat for Hoolock gibbon and other wildlife in entire northeast India. Interestingly Mishmis are prohibiting themselves from hunting gibbons for generations by virtue of their adherence to a strong traditional belief system. And in accordance with this unique practice of the Mishmis largest population of eastern Hoolock gibbon has been reported from this particular area. This reflects that Mishmis are playing an important role in the conservation of eastern Hoolock gibbon in their areas.

It is very interesting to note the mythological stories about the Hoolock gibbon from Mishmi community of Mishmi Hills of Arunachal Pradesh, India.

A. IDU MISHMI :HOOLOCK GIBBON

The Idu Mishmi community in their local dialect call the gibbon as “ Ammeh-pah”.The Idu- Mishmis believe that “Awelimili” the mythological Idu goddess gave birth to twins – “Asojao” (Ancestor of Human) and “Enjao”(Ancestor of macaque, langur and apes). The story goes like this,

Asojao wanted to prepare “Yu-anghii” (an locally made intoxicating rice beer), strong enough to heavily intoxicate his enemy. He wanted a fermenting agent called “Paa”. The

Spider “Philomela” brought this fermenting agent from “Kandio enioyo” i.e. the sky. The “Yu-anghii”

was then prepared. Now, Asojao wanted to test the effectivity of Yu-anghii’s intoxicating

power. The question was how and on whom it should be tested?

The “Pahon” (frog) volunteered first to test the drink. The frog drank it and lost its’ teeth once for all. Thus the frog has no teeth. Then the Hoolock gibbon volunteered, he drank it and started howling and dancing like a mad. Since then the gibbons continue to howl and dance.

Since then Idus believe the hunting, killing, eating its flesh, or even touching the Hoolock gibbon is an evil. The Idu people therefore strictly avoid killing of Hoolock gibbons. Even if by mistake also, if an Idu happens to kill the Hoolock gibbon, he has to perform “traditional bamuni (Pooja) to prevent befalling of misfortune. A five days “genna” is observed by the killer. It is a sort of ritualistic taboo of not entering in house and forbidden to consume food prepared by females.

The Idus believe that the killing of Hoolock gibbon leads to epilepsy. It is said that “Maumo”- the mythological Idu devil killed Hoolock gibbon and suffered from epilepsy. Since then the Idus never kill the Hoolock gibbon. But killing of other primates have no such evil affects.

Idu Mishmis further belief that if by chance Hoolock gibbon defecates on the head/body of a person then it is an indication of “would be happening of some misfortune to the family.”

During 1989-90 Mr. Jene Lingi of Abango village in the district of lower Dibang Valley killed a Hoolock Gibbon and threw away the dead body . Neither he performed “genna” nor did he disclose the matter. But later on after two years, his daughter suffered from epilepsy and died. Another member of his family become abnormal and behaved like Hoolock gibbon making calls and even eating fruit from the trees. Then believing all this happening in the family as the affect of killing Hoolock gibbon he disclosed the matter to the villagers and subsequently performed “genna”.

During 1998-99 in Inzanao village, an Idu- lhalingi by name burned the roosting trees of Hoolock gibbona. After one year he became abnormal and died within 6 months.

B. DIGARU MISHMI AND HOOLOCK GIBBON

Like the Idus, Digaru Mishmis to have their own belief regarding Hoolock gibbon. According

to a mythology, “Jabmalu” the mother goddess of Digarus gave birth to Hulu Bandar and tiger.

Digaru Mishmis also consider Hoolock gibbon as inauspicious. Long back a group of digaru people went for hunting. They fixed tall pointed bamboo spears inside the forest as tarps. One Hoolock gibbon got killed by those pointed traps. Some people of the group wanted to taste the gibbon’s meat while some wanted to leave the dead body there only. Finally, one person of group tasted the Hoolock gibbon’s meat and surprisingly he died. After 5 days of this particular incidence, one by one all his family members became abnormal and started to behave like Hoolock gibbon. They even howled and ate fruits. According to the villagers, the spirit of the dead Hoolock gibbon killed the man and his family. To avoid the curse and to drive away the spirit, the Digaru Mishmis like Idus organize “Tanuya” – kind a special prayer (puja). The “ Gokhan” i.e. the priest performs the “Tanuya”. The ritual of Tanuya continues for 2-5 days and all the villagers join there.

C. MIJU MISHMI AND HOOLOCK GIBBON

Like the Idus and Digarus, Miju Mishmis also consider killing of Hoolock gibbon as a crime and hence the killer of Hoolck gibbon has to arrange “Ngaitamat” – a kind of puja at his home. “Kambring” –the priest perform the rituals of “Ngaitamat”. According to the belief, if some Miju Mishmi kills a Hoolock gibbon and does not arrange the “Ngaitamat” afterward then misfortune follows him and his family; within 6-12 months the killer gets a disease called “nangai”. The affected person then started to behave like Hoolock gibbon and finally dies. If eight people of a single family die like this then a big puja is to be performed.

“Kambring” traditionally wears black dress and put some white colour on the eyebrows. Thus he resembles a Hoolock gibbon and because of this resemblance Miju Mishmi

people respect Hoolock gibbon.

Viewing the significance of traditional knowledge in different fronts of natural resource management and conservation, it has been widely accepted that for ideological reasons or instrumental ones, the involvement of the local community living in and around protected areas is critical to the success of conservation efforts. In the current scenario when bio-diversity is depleting rapidly at global as well as local level such type of conservation friendly traditional customs should be highlighted and appreciated. Hence, we strongly feel that the age old conservation friendly practice of the Mishmi should be duly acknowledged and they should be considered as one of the primary stakeholder of conservation and management programme of Hoolock gibbon to be initiated in future.

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