

## Kap Joseph

**Let's begin with when and where you were born.**

I was born Kapzathang Hoinge on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, 1957, in Churachandpur district, in a village near Jiribam [a town in western Manipur on the Assam border] called Henchongpunji. I was the only son. I had two older sisters and a younger one.

**Was that far from the city of Churachandpur?**

Very far. It was on the road to Jiribam, the Silchar road. A few years after I was born, in 1960, we moved to Leisang [a village near Churachandpur]. The villagers were relatives from our own tribe, the Vaipheis. They invited us to come to live there. We moved from Leisang to Tuila in 1963 and then to Thingkiew in 1967. We lived in Thingkiew from 1967 to 1986. That was the longest we lived anywhere.

**Had Christianity already taken root in these places in your childhood?**

Yes. They were quite Christianized by the time I was old enough to know about such things. I'm not sure what church we belonged to. It was enough for us to know that we were Christians.

**Had any of the old customs survived? Do you remember any of them?**

I know a few. Even though Christianity had affected every aspect of our lives, we still followed some of the old traditions. When I was a boy, there were still people who clung to the old ways. They performed sacrifices and drank rice wine, which the Christians didn't allow. There were attempts to convert them that were rebuffed. A Christian pastor once said to an old man in our village, "The end of time is near. Accept Jesus and be saved. He's standing at your doorstep," and the old man answered, "Let him come in. Who's stopping him?" You could say there was a mixture of Christianity and the old religion. Many youngsters were educated in mission schools and brought Christianity back to the village with them.

In the old days, the *thiempu*, the village priest, was an indispensable part of the community. If you were sick, he performed a sacrifice for you. If you built a house, he had to purify it before you could live in it. He would come with a priestly staff made of a jungle plant

called *aipah*. The staff was called a *simitut*, and also an *aron tiengol* or Aaron's staff. The priest took a bowl of water, sprinkled it around, and chanted:

Leave, all you unclean spirits!  
A son of Manmasi will reside in this house.

The chants always begin with "Phui Ya, God of the Above, God of the below!" and then the *thiempu* continued with the rest. He also chose the site for a burial. Then the chant was:

*Leiduppi leithaopi* [land of oil and rich soil] clear the way!  
A son of Manmasi is heading home.

### **You heard these chants in your childhood?**

I heard them from my father. My father wasn't a priest, but he was an elder in the village, the kind of person the chief consulted. There were other chants like them. During an earthquake, people shouted:

We are the children of Manmasi.  
We are alive and well!

That's something I once heard my father shout when there was a tremor. These things survived more in the remote hill villages. In the plains, where people were more educated, they lost their importance. Once, on my way with a group to the paddy fields, there was an eclipse. Everyone spontaneously burst out:

We are alive, we are well,  
The children of Manmasi!

### **Who was Manmasi?**

As a child, I used to think that he was a *thilha*. [An invisible, sometimes friendly, sometimes mischief-making spirit.] When I grew older, I realized he was someone important. I remember my father telling me we were Manmasi's children.

## But who was he?

Back then, we know we were his children but we didn't know who he was. Now, we know that he was the son of Joseph. If someone drowned in a river in the old days, the *thiempu* took the pillows from his bed, went to the river, and said to it, "Oh water, one of our flesh and blood had been claimed by you. You cannot hold him. You cannot hold the one that belongs to Manmasi." Then he threw the pillow into the water to be carried away by the current. The belief was that the body of the drowned person then floated to the surface