

Nyokum Festival of the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: Change over the Time

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are attached to a society's manifestation of culture, religion, rites, and rituals. They used to emotionally integrate the people living with the same clan and culture. Festivals are too core to different societies of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The Nyishis, a major tribe of the state are too associated with celebrating festivals with different rituals abreast. There are legends behind the celebration of rituals during festivals in which it is believed that *Abo Tani* (ancestor of the Nyishi) defeated Ayus (spirits) and their enmities began. There was some basis that compelled a family or village to celebrate festivals and performing rituals. It was believed, the anger of spirits showing through unusual or unnatural things happened with the village or any particular family. Hence, festivals among the Nyishis are celebrated to ward off the evil effects of the spirits and also for better productivity, prosperity, and happiness of human beings.

Longte Yullo, Boori Boot, and Nyokum are the major festivals of the Nyishis. Among them the Nyokum is one of the major and important festivals of the Nyishis celebrated in the month of February. The Nyokum festival may be interpreted as the summoning of all gods and goddesses of the earth at the place of celebration. Though it is still celebrated at the family and village level but in due course of time, its mode of celebration has changed over time. The present paper is developed to deal with various changes taken place over time in the celebration of the Nyokum.

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Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the extreme north-eastern part of India which is bounded by Assam in the south, China in the north, Bhutan in the west and Myanmar in the east. There are several tribes and sub-tribes in the state. Among them, the Nyishi is one of the major tribe and having their settlements over seven districts-Kurung Kumey, Kra-Dadi, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kamley, East Kameng and Pake-Kessang which lies within the central part of the state. They are also settled in few pockets of Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. During the Ahom's rule, the Nyishis were mistakenly or without justification termed as "Dafla" or "Dumpla" Bangni "Hill-Miri". Later, the British government also continued to use the same nomenclature for Nyishi and it was continued even in the constitution of independent India. But according to the myths and legends, they call themselves Nyeshang, Nishi, or more appropriately as Nyishi since the time immemorial.ⁱ The Constitution of India by its (Scheduled Tribes) Amendment Act, 2008 has changed the term 'Dafla' to 'Nyishi'.

Nyishi perform their own festivals and rituals on many occasions to appease both malevolent and benevolent spirits. Longte Yullo, Boori-Boot, and

Nyokum are important festivals of the Nyishi since the time of immemorial.ⁱⁱ Among them, the Nyokum is major festival and every sections of Nyishi perform it. Festivals and rituals are interrelated aspects of Nyishi Socio-cultural system. Traditionally, a full of rituals were attached to the Nyishi festivals. Nyishi believed that *uyus* (spirits) are both benevolent and malevolent forms. They also believed that human beings can live a life of peace and prosperity on the earth only when perfect harmony could maintain between humans, god, and nature. Therefore, peace and prosperities come to human life when god and nature are pleased and misery, hardship, and natural calamities like famine, flood, drought, earthquake, epidemic, warfare, accidental death, etc. occurred due to the displeasure and wrath of gods and goddesses of nature. Hence, Nyishi performs Festivals and rituals to propitiate the benevolent spirits or god and goddesses to protect, bring peace and prosperities and the same time to ward off the malevolent spirits to disturbing the life and properties.ⁱⁱⁱ

Review of Literature

There are few works done by the Indian scholars related to the area of study which are considered as sources for the paper. D.K Duarah (2004) in his

paper entitle “ *Fairs and Festivals of Arunachal Pradesh with special reference to festival of Nyishis*” has discussed the traditional forms of Nyokum and Longte Yullo festivals of the Nyishi. In another work *Aspects of the Culture and Customs of Arunachal Pradesh*, P. C. Dutta and D.K. Duarah (1990) has also presented the importance of the Nyokum festival. *Festival of Subansiri* by B.B. Pandey (1981) has discussed about the traditional Nyokum celebration among the Nyishis of Subansiri regions. Tamo Mibang and S. K. Choudhary (2004) in their work *Understanding Tribal Religion* have highlighted the beliefs and faiths of Arunachal tribes including the Nyishi. *Women in a Tribal Community: A Study of Arunachal Pradesh*, by K. Mishra (1991) has discussed about the role of women in different dimensions of tribal culture and similarly, B.B. Pandey (1997) also discussed about the role of women in the tribal culture in his book *Status of Women in Tribal Society of Arunachal Pradesh*.

Apart from this, some of the exclusive works by the local scholars highlight also various dimensions of festival and culture of the Nyishi. The work of Nabam Tadar Rikam on *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh: A Case Study of Nyishi Tribe*, 2005 is viewed a rich source for the study of the Nyishi social, cultural and religion life. Similarly, *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An Ethnohistorical Study*, 2009 by Tana Showren too is good source to refer to while dealing broadly the Nyishi life and culture. Nabam Nakha Hina’s work on *Customary Laws of Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh*, 2012 also deals with the Nyishi political and legal system. The paper entitled “Faith and philosophy of the Nyishi” by N.T. Rikam had discussed the worldview of the Nyishi with special reference to myths and legends. “Nyokum Souvenir” 2005, published by Central Nyokum Committee, Itanagar, has highlighted various rituals associated with Nyokum and its meaning as well as mode of celebration. But the information regarding the entire important components of Nyokum festival has not been appeared in the paper. Every researcher highlighted the traditional forms of Nyokum celebration but no one has covered entirely on origin and legend, reasons behind the celebration of the festival, traditional mode of Nyokum celebration and changes occur in the festival and its impact on the society.

The main objective of the paper is to deal with origin, legend, reasons to celebrate the festival, traditional forms of Nyokum and changes occur over the time and its impacts. The Nyishi believes that the traditional oral narrated legend for the origin of Nyokum festival and rituals attachment in the festival. They also understand that there are different reasons to celebrate the festival as per their belief and faiths. Initially, the rituals ceremony was main part of the festival but today lots of changes have occurred. The traditional form of the festival is being changes in many ways in this modern society. Hence, present paper is trying to cover up entire forms of Nyokum festival from traditional to modern.

In order to prepare a systematic analysis and interpretation of the Nyokum festival and its changes over the time, both primary and secondary sources are used. Few relevant books are used as secondary sources but primary sources mostly personal interviews of the Nyishi priests and intellectuals have come to great help to develop this paper.

Legends of Rituals in the Festivals

The rituals performed in the festivals had been originated at the time of *Abo-Tani* (legendary ancestor of the Nyishi). According to Nyishi myth, the *Jiit Aane* or *Jangtene Aane* (beautiful lady inform of the sun) was the most beautiful Lady in the Universe. Her charm and beauty attracted everyone but no one succeeded in marrying her. *Abo-Tani* applied a trick and succeeded in conceiving a baby in the womb of *Jiit Aane* or *Jangtene Aane* (Sun) without physical contact.

It is believed that one day while she was weaving, Tani came there in the guise of a small beautiful bird named *Jorjoply*. She held the bird to her bosom. *Abo-Tani* in the form of a bird passed on semen to impregnate her. When the news was spread that *Jangtene Aane* was pregnant, all the powerful *Uyus* (spirits) claimed to be the father of that baby but she could not choose any one of them. Therefore, a series of competitions were resorted to amongst the claimants to prove the actual father of the baby.^{iv} In all the competition *Abo-Tani* defeated the *Uyus* but *Jangtene Aane* could not believe in the success of Tani as the father of the baby. Moreover, he was the weakest and poorest amongst all competitors. Therefore, she decided to finalize the father by indication of the baby. Finally, the baby also recognized *Abo-*

Tani as a father and rejected all the *Uyus*. Finally, *Jangtene Aane* had to accept him as her husband and relations between *Abo-Tani* and *Uyus* had worsened. The *Uyus* continued to plot against *Abo-Tani* to finish him and his son once and for all. Being aware of the fact that the life of *Abo-Tani* and his future generations were in danger, *Jangtene Aane* secretly sends *Abo-Tani* to earth along with his son and domestic animals to make the human race there. She directed him not to open *Pobom* (vessel from bottle gourd) where all animal's souls were kept for the journey but he was habituated of neglects and open *Pobom* in mid of the journey, as a result, *Uyus* understand his escaped due to mooing sound of *Mithun* (Bos Frontalis). Hence, *Uyus* (spirits) also reached on the earth and wanted to finish the human generation. Lastly, *Jangtene Aane* settled the problem between *Tani* and *Uyus* and convinced *Abo-Tani* to offer *Mithun's* (Bos frontalis), *Aareck*(pig), *Sabing*(goat), *Prok*(chicken), and *Akee*(dog), etc. to appease *Uyus*.^v The existence of *Abo-Tani* was thus saved by such offerings. Therefore, the descendants of *Abo-Tani* perform animal's sacrifice as and when human life is in danger.

The sacrifice is also resorted to when there are natural calamities caused by *Uyus* (spirits). While performing rituals the *Nyobu* (Priests) invites all *Uyus* and appeases them by offerings animals. The benevolent *Uyus* are offered animals sacrifice through the priest for saving human life and taking care of humankind.^{vi} Thus, the *Nyokum* celebration of *Nyishi's* had begun for future security, peace, prosperity of human being, and their properties.

Reasons for performs Rituals and Festivals

Traditionally, the *Nyishi* used to performs their rituals and festivals at family, clan, or village levels with certain reasons. Different way of indicate by nature which is not common in the human life. The *Nyishi* believed that it is the anger of god and goddesses to harm the human life and their livestock but today, without such reasons the *Nyokum* is celebrate in every year with fixed date. Reasons to celebrate the rituals and festivals are discussed below:

Firstly, *Nyishi* believe that whatever seen in *Nyomo* (dream) was the indications of the imminent incident or unfortunate happenings in real life. There were two types of dreams, *Nyomo-mopo* (good dream) and *Nyomo-moninah* (bad

dream). The bad dream was believed to be the anger of spirits which may cause harm to the human life and their livestock and agricultural fields. Therefore, a particular family or villagers perform *Nyokum* to appease spirits before incidents happen to the family or villagers.

Secondly, they believe that the unnatural or unusual circumstances or incidents like the entry of wild animals into the home or middle of the village, cock roost at midnight, killing of deformed animals or fishes, etc. were indications of unfortunate eventuality on the family or village. Under such circumstances, they also perform the *Nyokum*.

Thirdly, the *Nyokum* also performs when incidents like fire, drought, pandemic, etc. happen to village. The *Nyishi* believed that such incident happen due to anger of *Uyus* (spirits). Therefore, the *Nyokum* is required to please them to stop further harms and gave bless to villagers.

Fourthly, the *Nyokum* festival also performed when a family or village were blessed with prosperity and happiness in form of a good harvest, progress in livestock, and good health.^{vii} In such a case, Priest please the spirits for continuous bless on the family or village.

Therefore, the *Nyokum* had celebrated at any time whenever some bad indication to the human life which was considered as a anger of *uyus* (spirits). Sometimes, they performed *Nyokum* for thanks giving to god and goddesses for huge bless of their family or village and also please for continuous bless them.

Meaning of the Nyokum

The word *Nyokum* has been derived from the words 'Nyok' which means the entire landmass of the earth and 'Kum' mean putting things together or collectiveness.^{viii} Therefore, the *Nyokum* festival may be interpreted as inviting of all existing spirits on earth at a particular place called *Nyokum Lapang* where rituals ceremony had to be done. These spirits are worshipped for better productivity, prosperity, and happiness of Human beings.

Traditional forms of the Nyokum Celebration

Traditional forms of the *Nyokum* had celebrated at the family or village level for their peace and prosperity. The role of *Nyokum Nyobu* (priest) was very important in performing rituals at the Festival.^{ix} They only negotiated with *Uyus* (spirits) and conveyed them to bless humankind. In case of *Nyokum* at family level, the *Nyobu*

(priest) used to please *Uyus*(spirits) to protect and prosperities of particular family members and their properties. Similarly, in the case of Nyokum at village level, the *Nyobu* (priest) pleases for peace and prosperities of entire villagers. The Nyokum *Nyobu* (Priest) was please to *uyus* (spirits) for protect from an unwanted incident like fire, floods, pandemic, Natural calamities, etc to the village.^x

Traditionally, the different names of common rituals and feasts were organised in the Nyishi villages like *Goya Uyus*, *Yullo*, *Yearkum-nam*, *Nyokum*, and so on but today, it is commonly known as Nyokum.^{xi} There was no fixed date to be celebrated the Nyokum festival at village. Generally, the date of celebration was fixed as per the indication of the omen test undertaken by the *Nyobu* (priest). The requirements for rituals in the festivals like Mithun (Bos Frontalis), *Aareck*(pig), *Sabing* (goat), *Proag*(hen), etc and other feasts requirements like *Ambing/Aping* (rice), *Apo* (local beer), *Yugang/Nyagang*(altar), etc^{xii} are collectively managed by the villagers for Nyokum at village level but in case of Nyokum at a family level, all expenditures were being bore by a particular family and few closed families of the village assisted them. All villagers used to enjoy all activities of the festival like dances, songs, sports, a narration of stories, etc. at the celebration place.

At the very beginning of the Nyokum, a suitable priest was searched through omen examination by the chicken liver or egg yolk. As per omen indication, the most suitable priest was selected and called him to become a Nyokum *Nyobu* (Priest). After finalized the priest, the one or two *Buo* (helpers) are also appointed. They started chanting and continuous until the animals' sacrifices. Very beginning, the priest chants to get invoke power to guide them to reached *Uyus* (spirits) home and help them to successfully negotiate and conveyed them. They continuous the singing of traditional lore and chanting of hymns and calling all responsible *Uyus* (spirits) to be present and to received their offering and prayers.^{xiii} Thereafter, the priest leads a procession followed by *Bou* and village elders to visit every individual houses and finally, go towards the commonplace of celebration called *Nyokum Lapang*, and thus celebration begins. They had been chanting 4 or 5 days till animal's sacrifices at Nyokum Lapang.^{xiv} Villagers used to keep visiting

them and enjoy different activities in Lapang. Every morning and evening the foods for *Nyobu* (priest) and *buo* (helpers) were arranged by villagers as per rotations.

On the day of sacrifice, all villagers come with their traditional dress and ornaments viz. *Tassan* (local beads), *koji* (Bangle), *chege* (Dao), *Gari* (traditional basket), *Attang* (rice powder), *Pari Ajey* (tradition loincloths), *Bopia* (Tradition cane cap of Nyishi), etc. to show their honour, happiness, and thankfulness to the Nyokum gods and goddesses. On that day different types of altars were prepared and erected which were the symbolic representation of different gods, goddesses, and spirits. A Mithun used to sacrifice at the largest altar which was considered as the principal altars whereas small animals like pig, goat, chicken, dog, etc. are sacrifice in the small alter.^{xv} There are different rituals to be performed in the festival. Each ritual has its own meaning and legends and also each *Uyus* demands different animals. The priest starts procession followed by *Bou* and common people towards alters. Women come with *Geri* (traditional basket) and *Attang* (rice powder) which they sprinkle on the Altar. The man selected through omen examination of chicken liver or egg yolk comes with bow and arrow and inaugurates the celebration with the sacrifice of Mithun by shooting an arrow which is called as *Sheri-Apnam* (inaugurate the sacrifice). Thereafter, continuous sacrifices the small animals as per the direction of the priest. After completed the sacrifice ceremonies, villagers used to enjoyed feasting and songs, dances, dramas, and sports go on till late at night. The women serve *Apo* (wines), *soding/adding* (meat), *aping/aching* (rice), etc to all present in the Nyokum.^{xvi}

The next day onwards they observe the taboos of Nyokum for 5 days or one month as per the direction of the priest. They are restricted to eat ball-shaped items like brinjal, pumpkin, traditionally cultivated potato, etc.^{xvii} and there is also taboo on movement like a crossing of the big river, entering into the deep jungle, restriction of guests entering the village, etc.

Changes over the time

However, the mode of Nyokum celebration has been changing with time due to the rapid growth of population, new economic avenues, education, modernization of society, conversion of religion,

and so on.^{xviii} Celebrations at the family and village level are continuing and at the same time, Nyokum is also celebrated at the community level with larger participation. The community-level celebration was started at Joram village presently under Lower Subansiri district of Aruachal Pradesh in July 1967. A few Nyishi eminent figures e.g. Shri Choku Talar, Shri Tao Pekhi, Late Tadar Tang had played a significant role in this first celebration. Late B.B.Pandey the then-District Research Officer and late R.S.Nag the then Deputy Commissioner of Subansiri district also participated. The second celebration was held at Yazali circle of Lower Subansiri district in 1978 under the active participation of Late Tomo Riba the then circle officer, Late B.B.Pandey, the then District Research Officer, B.S.Dangal, the then Deputy Commissioner of subansiri district. Late Daying Ering the then Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Government of India was inaugurated the second celebration.^{xix} The traditional model of celebration and rituals were strictly followed during the initial celebration at the community level but gradually, modern ways of celebration appear in the community level Nyokum and some changes evolved in the festival year after years. Today, the Nyokum is being celebrated at the community level in the state capital Itanagar, Nyishi dominated districts, Sub-Divisional headquarter, EAC headquarter, etc. The Nyishi students who study in Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati, Shillong, etc were also organizing the Nyokum festival in their respective locations.^{xx}

However, the mode of celebration began to change gradually with the incorporation of some of the modern elements like constitute of a committee for celebration of festival, cash and kind management, wearing recently designed Nyishi coats, jackets, gale, muffler etc. and they also using wines, plates, glass, invitation cards, inviting chief guest, guest of honour and special invitees, modern songs, dances, and sports by using modern elements like P.A system, volley ball, football, etc. In some places the Nyokum festival is celebrating without priest, Altars, bow and arrow, basket bags, rice powders which was mandatory in the traditional Nyokum.^{xxi}

Nyokum committees are being constituted in various places for smooth organising of the festival at the state capital e.g. Itanagar, Nirjuli, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, etc. A committee is also constituted in each district,

areas, educational institutions, etc. wherever Nyishi people reside. The member of the committees distributes the responsibilities of management among themselves for proper celebration within the fixed date from 24th to 26th Feb every year.^{xxii}

A Christian missionary activity in the Nyishi area was propagated by the British Government and converted few Nyishis^{xxiii} but today, large numbers of Nyishis are already converted into Christian and adopting western ceremonies which complying with bibles. Some of them are denounced to perform the traditional forms of the Nyokum where the rituals and animal sacrifices are being included. According to their opinion, rituals performing and animals' sacrifices to appease spirits is against their bible preaching. Hence, they want to celebrate Nyokum without priests and rituals sacrifices. The Nyokum celebration in metropolitan cities, education institutions, and Christian dominance areas are celebration Nyokum without a priest.

Few intellectuals of the Nyishi community had lead to preserve and promote the traditional forms of rituals and festivals. They form an organization to perform traditional ways of culture and custom in the Nyishi society which was known as Nyedar Namlo (Donyi-Poloism). It is a modern form of religious prayer center where the traditional Nyishi customs and cultures are fully displaying. They used to call Attur Toh Ane Donyi (prayer for blessed from the Ane Donyi as god).^{xxiv} They are strictly advocating for traditional forms of Nyokum where rituals and animal sacrifices should be following.

Impact of change

Participations were confined within the members of village in case of Nyokum celebrated at the family or village level. Therefore, social interaction was limited. Celebration at the community level has widened the scope of social interaction among the Nyishis. Today it plays as an agent of unity for the whole community. The Nyokum festival is also celebrated outside of the state like Guwahati, Delhi, etc. wherever Nyishis staying. People of other community also visiting the festival for witnessing the programme and enjoy the festival. During the festival, they come together irrespective of status and religion, and interaction among themselves.

Nowadays, Nyokum is not only a ritual performance and appeasing God but it has become

an occasion for a display of their own culture and traditional practices. The community people come in their traditional attire, traditional ornaments, and other important cultural items to make their own cultural identity. The festival is considered as the mirror of the community. The festival is connected with the identity of the community.

The Nyokum is celebrated in an organized way with proper coordination among the organizing committees. They distribute the responsibilities of all management among themselves.

CONCLUSION

Though the festival has a close link with the cultivation but the Nyokum goddess is invoked for the production of livestock and the peaceful life of entire mankind. The festival has become the uniting force for the community and a platform for displaying the identity of the Nyishi community. In the world of dynamism and identity crisis, the festival is playing a pivotal role in the unification of the community. There are so many challenges for the continuity of the festival due to the emergence of many other aliens' religious festivals but still, Nyokum is relevant to maintain the identity of the Nyishi tribe. Despite so many shortcomings and challenges for the continuity of the festival, it continues to be a major event for the community. The Nyokum has multi-dimensional roles with certain changes as per the need of the hour in the modern context. However, the mode of Nyokum celebration has been changing with time due to the rapid growth of population, new economic avenues, education, modernization of society, conversion of religion, and so on. Nyokum celebrates in the family and the village level is declining and community level celebration is increasing with fixed date i.e. 24th to 26th Feb. in every year. It is also celebrated in every Nyishi dominated district, areas, education institutions, with modern types of equipment like Mike, P.A system, plastic glass, plates, cloths, etc. thus, many changes occur in the mode of Nyokum celebration as per demand of situations

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