

## The Nyishi Folk and Rituals: A perspective

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### Abstract

The Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by several ethnic groups and tribes. Each of them has distinct culture, traditions, faith and belief, customs and customary law, different social and economic pattern. The traditional law is one such institution. The Nyishi tribe is one of tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. Genealogically the Nyishi is descendant of the great ancestor *Aabhu Thanyi*. They are divided into three major clans namely *Dopum*, *Dodum* and *Dollu*. They inhabit in the districts of Arunachal Pradesh viz Papum Pare, Lower subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Kurung Khumey, East Kamang, West Kameng and some parts of the state of Assam. Nyishi have certain mechanism to regulate them. One such legal institution is called *Nyelee* (formal gathering of people) to resolve the *Yallung* (disputes). There are other mechanisms like oaths and ordeals. *Dingdung* and *Sudung enam* (boil water ordeal). There are also omen examinations like *Peepchenam* (boil egg examination) *Pachu Kuknam/RuksingKanam* (chicken liver examination), *Reksing Kanam /keenam* (pig liver examination). The rituals play vital role in the Nyishi society. There are several rituals for separate and specific purpose. They follow oral folk transmitted from one generation to another. The paper is an attempt to classify the Nyishi folk and rituals with and its purpose will also be pointed out. There is no distinction between ritual and the customs. There is ritual in every steps of Nyishi life which is like oxygen to living creatures. The rituals of Nyishi may be grouped as follows:(a) Rituals related to creation (b) Rituals related to agricultural (c) Rituals for immediate healing (d) Rituals for treatment and medication (e) Rituals for inflicting opponent (f) Rituals for purification and reconciliation (g) Rituals related to death of human (h) Rituals for omen (i) Ritual related to oath and ordeals) (j) Ritual related to peace, prosperity and for the protection.

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The Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by several ethnic groups and tribes. Each of them has distinct culture, traditions, faith and belief, customs and customary law, different social and economic pattern. The land was known as a “hidden land’ by earlier writers. The Nyishi tribe is the largest tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Genealogically the Nyishi is descendant of the great ancestor *Aabhu Thanyi*. They are divided into three major clans namely *Dopum*, *Dodum* and *Dollu*. They inhabit in five districts of Arunachal Pradesh viz Papum Pare, Lower subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Kurung Khumey, East Kamang, West Kameng, Kara Dadi and some parts of the state of Assam. The traditional law is one such institution. Nyishi have certain mechanism to regulate them. One such legal institution is called *Nyelee* (formal gathering of people) to resolve the *Yallung* (disputes). There are other mechanisms like oaths and ordeals. *Dingdung* and *Sudung enam* (boil water ordeal). There are also omen examinations like *Peepchenam* (boil egg examination) *Pachu Kuknam/RuksingKanam* (chicken liver examination), *Reksing Kanam /keenam* (pig liver examination). The rituals play vital role in the Nyishi life. There are several rituals for separate and specific purpose. The paper is an attempt to classify the rituals with and its purpose will also be point out. There is no distinction between ritual and the customs. There is ritual in every steps of Nyishi life which is like oxygen to living creatures. The rituals of Nyishi may be grouped as follows:(a) Rituals related to creation (b) Rituals related to agricultural (c) Rituals for immediate healing (d) Rituals for treatment and medication (e) Rituals for inflicting opponent (f) Rituals for purification and reconciliation (g) Rituals related to death of human (h) Rituals for omen (i) Ritual related to oath and ordeals) (j) Ritual related to peace, prosperity and for the protection.

(a) Rituals related to creation: The rituals related to creation may be divided as follows.

(i) *Chene yella paanam*: This ritual is performed by individual who face problems like miscarriage stillborn and those who are childless. They performed this to get blessing from the creator called *chan /chenee*.

(ii) *Ku aming mingnam* (child birth and naming): During the child birth some one has to utter the words *nageke* (its my) to claim the ownership of the child and to prevent the evil spirit from claiming the ownership of child. There is rituals called *ku aming mingnam* (child naming ceremony) which is done in the name of different deities like sun, moon, *changtum-buthe* etc, and blessing is sought from all the god and goddess for the child bright future.

(b) Rituals related to agricultural: The agricultural activity of Nyishi depends on the nature/ seasons. The animals, birds, plant; flowers and orchids are the guide and master of the Nyishi agriculture calendar. It is nature which guides when to start *reetekteeknam / panam/ rangho panam* (clearance of agricultural plot) and when to sow seed. (i) **Accordingly Nyishi goes for omen examination to know compatibility of that particular plot of land.** Generally the *Rongho panam* (clearing of forest) started with *nyoka kanam* (survey and demarcation of plot) in the month of *liib* (October-November months) which continued till *rath/rathe* (December-January month). By this month the *deb/deb chanam* (seasonal birds) started making lot of hum and give indication for agricultural activities. After clearing the forest, they keep the plot for a month or half so that the forest material is dried and ready for burning which is followed by *eime/amea rehnam* (burning), *rekram ram nam* (clearance of left out wood and ashes) and kept in particular spot called *paye* in step wise. The some left out are again set on fire after gathering at a particular spot which is called *maram parnam/maramramnam*. The spreading/sowing of seeds started simultaneously with erection of *sulung* (fencing) in the month of *Leemmi* (February-March) which may continue till *lacher* and *lakhang* months (April- May). They build small hut called *tabiyo* in the *rangho* for taking rest and used as warehouse. It is followed by *uangmanam /rehuhonam* (clearing of weeds). The seeds and crops are protected from birds and animals by vigil it right from the seedling till completion of harvesting, which is called *deer kanam/ deer ruhknam* or *pou patah/seebbe kanam*).

(ii) *Amjedinam/aum denam* (feast on first harvested paddy): The harvesting begins with occasion called *amji denam/ aumdenam*. The feast is organized by individual or jointly. On this occasion, people from village or their relatives are invited. Only harvested rice and wine along with meat are served and no green leaves are used. Any left out or surplus, especially rice is not throwing into the flowing river or streams. Thus, it ended with *Jerpye le eknam* (closing ceremony of harvesting).

(iii) *Cheerm yullu bonam/jarpe leeknam* (rituals to solicit the souls of crops): This is the last ritual to bring last grain into *nasu* (granary) which is celebrated annually. This ritual is to seek blessing from *pert ringt/cherman molo* (god and goddess of food grains). On this occasion, people of village collectivity carry all the equipments from the field to granary/house. If there is any river or stream in between the field and home, to be crossed, *sabbe sahya/ahyea* (cane rope

for tying Bos-frontalis) is passed from one side of river to other side of the river to help the souls of grain to cross the river. If there is any junction on the way, *taki* (ginger) is used to block the unwanted direction to prevent grain souls from follow other paths. The bunch of paddy is brought to the house and preserved at house. This is followed by merry making with *opo* (wine), *adding* (meat), *aching* (rice), *cazi* (meat and rice mixed food). The traditional songs like *gumbabanam*, *Iedebengnam*, *nugung hangman*, *Pagu tonam*, *niting tingnam*, *haarming mengnam*, are parts of the occasion. With this, formal harvesting process comes to an end. The priest invoked the crops souls and god and goddess of crops to bless more and more in future

(c) *Rituals for immediate healing*: The rituals for immediate healing can be divided into following subheadings.

(i) *Oram paknam*: It is chanting to driving away the evil spirit/ ghost. The evil spirit/ghost is satisfied with certain offerings. The *oram paknam* is performed when there is sudden illness of a person due to expose to prey of evil spirit) like (a) *Ramterr oram* (b) *Ramshey oram* (c) *Telang/sunu* (d) *Tapum oram* and (e) *Piji*.

(ii) *Tanying rasang* (spirits of animal/ dwell in the skeleton of animal): Nyishi believes that the spirit called *tinying rasang* creates heart trouble. In order to relieve the suffering person the priests perform this ritual by inquiring and offering to souls of animals.

(iii) *Dapa cheeynam* (rituals for food poison): This ritual is performed when a person is suffering from food poisoning or any other poison. Rituals for treatment and medication: The rituals for treatment and medication are performed by few people in Nyishi community. They are believed to be god gifted one having the knowledge of treatment and medication. Let us discuss them one by one as follows:

(d) *Ritual related to curative purpose*

(i) *Zaree nanam* (repairing of broken parts of body or injury): This *zaree* ritual is performed by the priest using *khokam mayam* (eagle wing). Only the right wing of the eagle is used. The priest chants and invokes the blessing of super nature power through *nyoki heenam* (invocation) for the purpose of repairing the broken parts of human body. When supernatural power listens to the chanting of *nyub*, it comes and releases a drop of its power into the wings of eagle which is in the hand of *nyub*. When that is received, the *nyub* put that gums like drop on the injured body and rube it for some time. The *nyub* may repeat this for three or four times if required. It has been proved that, it is even better treatment than the treatment provided by modern medical science. There are many living examples that have benefited from this treatment. The *nyub* who perform *zaree* ritual is called *nyoke nyub*.

(ii) *Dawab nanam* (cleaning of body): In this *dawab nanam* ritual the *nyub* takes out insects and other foreign bodies from the ailing person body. It is believed that these foreign bodies causes ailment. Thus, when these foreign bodies are destroyed and the suffering person get cured.

(iii) *Doli mingnam* (killing of epidemic): Nyishi believe that *doli* (epidemic) is caused by the evil spirit which affects the human body. The *nyub* has the natural and spiritual power to see and kill the evil spirit which causes epidemics. Thus, a *nyub* can prevent and protect the human being from epidemics.

(vii) *Ache pench neeknam* (curing of women breast pain): When the lady is suffering form breast trouble, a man performs *pench neeknam* ritual. This ritual is done only by a man using *eggik* (quiver) and bow in reverse direction and step in from *bathung* (porch) of the house uttering words like *ache penchee nomacho* and pricks the breast of the women with bow. If the trouble is because *ache penchee* it gets cured.

(e) Rituals for inflicting opponent: Nyishi had the practice of inflicting the opponent or targeted person, family or clan by sending evil spirit to take the life of such an opponent or the targeted person. There are many rituals for this and is divided as follows.

(i) *Sotung tungnam* (black magic): *Sotung* is performed in very rare case to inflict the targeted person, family or clan. If the *sotung* ritual is succeeded, it eliminates the targeted person. The *sotung* can be performed by only few *nyub*. It is performed secretly to avoid opponent's knowledge of it. If it comes to the knowledge of opponent they may also perform same *sotung* to avert or divert the spirit. If the spirit is diverted it may cause injury to family of sender or *nyub* himself. Therefore people perform it rarely.

(ii) *Yallu nonam* (enticing of soul): In this ritual *nyub* entice the soul of a targeted person through invocation. The soul is enticed to enter into an open egg or a blood of animals. When the soul enters the spot *nyub* kills that soul. Thus, the person whose soul is enticed and killed by *nyub* dies shortly. However; this ritual is also performed for good cause like freeing and saving the lives of human from the hand of enemy and *uyus*.

(iii) *Boser sonam/pekhi myanam* (immobilizing the soul of animal or human): This ritual is performed when a human or uncommon animal like Tiger, lion, python and elephants are killed. The purpose of ritual is to immobilize the souls of killed human or animals so that they may not able to avenge the man who killed them. It is led by a *nyub* followed by men with weapon and war dress.

(iv) *Gamtoy tanam/beenam* (cursing by calling the super natural power and evil spirit): This ritual is performed by an individual in order to ventilate the tension or sentiment by way of cursing the other by invoking the different spirits and natural objects and dangerous animals as witness saying that so long I am not wrong I should get justice and those who does wrong must be get punishment. It is believed that person is innocent the targeted person suffered. No priest is required for this ritual.

(v) *Preya peenam* (hypnotizing): This ritual is performed by a priest at the request of needy person to change the mind or attitude of the targeted person. It is believed that *nyub* can control

the soul and mind of a person with the help of spirit. A person is affected by this ritual act according to the wishes of the *nyub* and interested party. For example, in case of elopement the *nyub* performs this ritual to bring backs the eloped person.

(vi) *Riyatar* (for protection and prosperity): The *Riyatar* is performed for the protection, fortune and prosperity of the family and clan etc. The *Riyatar* is performed on different occasions like, house warming, against enemy and for well being of family. A *paruk rokpu tallongbu/langchang buo* (red cock) is sacrifices at small altar, the liver of scarifies cock is examined by the priest and other experts to identify if there is any indication. The women and people from other clan are not allowed to eat the meat of sacrificed cock. However, man of same clan can share and eat the sacrifice meat together which is known as *uyee hang dabam nam* (sharing of blood and heart by clan member).

(vii) *Riyakum peanam* (seeking more strength to defeat opponent): The ritual is performed when the party is having a strong opponent and apprehension of being defeated by opponent. This ritual is for gaining confidence, courage and to get blessings from *Anne Donyi* (mother Sun) and ritual is performed in a secret place.

(f) Rituals related to purification:

(i) *Pahihenam* (Purification): The ritual called *pahi henam* is performed in different occasion for different purpose. This ritual is for purification and sign of reconciliation and mutual agreement. In this ritual, animal is killed and meat is shared among the people.

(ii) *Mochum paanam* (purification of fire spirit): This ritual is performed after a fire accident in order to prevent any further fire accidents. The rituals performed in the river or stream. The blood of scarified animals is spread after blocking the water course. Any person directly or indirectly related to such fire accident is asked to take bath and open the blocking point so that the blood stains on the river bed is washed away. Thus, the fire god is satisfied and evil spirit is averted.

(g) Rituals related to death of human: There are different types of rituals related to death of a human. These rituals are performed after the death of a person and it is divided as follows:

(i) *Nyoku kanam* (send up): This ritual is performed after the death of a person. The *nyub* chants in order to escort the soul of death person to *uyu nyoku* (Nether land) and for peaceful, so that the soul of death person does not hang around and creates trouble to living person.

(ii) *Darkha naam* (purification): This ritual is performed on the burial spot during the burial activities to prevent the spread of any disease. In this ritual all person involved in the burial activities and family members are purified with chanting by priest. This ritual is also performed after any inauspicious activities in any form for purification.



(iii) *Seerm angnam* (bathing/cleaning after burial activity): People who are engaged in burial activities like digging of grave, collections of material for construction of *nyubung* (tomb), etc are to go to water sources for wash themselves before they goes back to dwelling houses.

(iv) *Bungu panam* (sacrifice of animals in the name of dead person): Generally Nyishi people sacrifices animals when they lost their beloved family member. It indicates the degree of emotion and attachment with departed soul. The meat is distributed among the people present. But such meat is not eaten by priest and used separate utensil for cooking such meat.

(v) *Aeer donam* (mourning period): The death of person is treated as inauspicious so people do not goes for work specially agriculture and hunting activities at least for 2 to 5 days in the village where person died. The nearby village may also joined mourn by restricting themselves to few house hold activities.

(vi) *Sangree tangnam/panam* (felling of banyans tree): In certain situation the family member may avenge the death of person by felling banyans tree. They may also kill the certain animals and birds as revenge to death of a person.

(h) Rituals related to omen examination: This ritual is done for all the purpose indiscriminately from smallest to biggest event for ascertaining fortune, peace, justice and prosperity etc. There are different types of ritual related to omen examinations such as *peep cheenam* (boiled egg omen examination), *pachung kuknam/rukseeng kanam* (chicken liver examination), *reekseeng kanam/Keenam* (pig liver examination), *yuma tungnam/ kanam* (mock dream ritual). These rituals are the life line of Nyishi which help to detect past, present and the future of any individual as well as family and clan.

(i) *Dingnam/dingdung* (ritual related to oaths and ordeals): The Nyishi people believe that the highest form of justice can be achieved through the intervention of the supernatural power; therefore, they practice oaths and ordeals. There are different types of oaths and ordeals, such as swearing in the name of *anne donyi* (mother sun), *pathe* (tiger and lion), *sathe* (elephant), *bur-dojang* (crocodile), *tabbe* (poisonous snake). The accused person is asked to bite stone, swords, and remains of tiger, elephant, snake etc. It is believed that anyone who swears falsely is killed by these animals and object. The highest and last stage of getting justice is through an ordeal. There are different types of ordeal practiced among the Nyishi. These ordeals are used in the administration of justice. Some of the important ordeals are *sodung enam* (boiling water ordeals): In this ordeal the suspected person is asked to deep their hand inside the boiling water. Another ordeal is *rukdar gobangnam* (catching of hot iron). In both the cases, if there is any sing of blister in the hand of accused person then that is regard as sign of crime committed. If no sign of injury then the person is declared innocent. In this ordeal, both the parties are represented by priest by invoking the supernatural power to punish the guilty and to protect the innocent. After the ordeal, suitable penalties are handed to the party found guilty.

(j) Ritual related to peace prosperity and for the protection: There are different types of rituals practice among the Nyishi. It is divided as follows.

(i) *Yulow panam*: The *yulow panam/meanam* ritual is celebrated at family, village and clan level for peace, prosperity and protection. This is the highest form of rituals in the individual level in the Nyishi society.

(ii) *Uyu panam*: The *uyu panam* ritual is for the individual who is suffering from illness. It is performed for the protection of life and soul of ailing person.

(iii) *Nyokum yulow, bori yulow and longte yulow*: These are the highest form of rituals celebrated by the Nyishi in common. These rituals are celebrated by the Nyishi annually. These are performed for peace, prosperity, protection, fortune and for bumper agriculture products, better animal's husbandry and for productive hunting and fishing. In all these occasion, merry making is essential parts without discriminating caste, creed, color and religion. In all the rituals, sacrifice of animal is common. If any dispute arises it is settled as per the customary laws.

(h) Rituals Related to marriage

The Nyishi marriage began with omen examination like *peep cheenam* (egg examination), *pachung kuknam* (chicken liver examination), *Reesing Kheenam* (pig liver examination). It is followed by *dapo dingnam* (invocation of god and goddess and nature to witness and stand as unbiased in time of necessity). In the day of actual wedding and reaching grooms house they perform *Chngtun Phahi* (purification ritual) and *changtum Bheenam* (thanks giving rituals) for their success in marrying and getting ornaments and also for future well being.

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