



# Rituals And Taboos Associated With Traditional Trade Activities: A Case Study Of Nyishi Of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh formerly known as northeast frontier Agency (NEFA) is situated in Northeastern part of Indian Territory. Arunachal Pradesh Located in between 26 degree 30' North latitude and 91 degree 30' and 97 degree 30' East Longitude, Covering an area about 83,743 Sq Km. It is Bounded by Bhutan in the west, China in the north and northeast and Myanmar in the east Arunachal Pradesh is home land of many tribes and sub tribes with total population 13.84 lakhs according to 2011 census. The State had a common boundary with Nagaland in the east and south east and Assam in the south.

Arunachal Pradesh is homeland for twenty-six major tribes and 100 sub-tribes. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial stock and speak different dialects which are broadly classified under the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

**KEYWORDS:** Nyishi, , Rituals , Taboos, Omen, Nyibu, Hymns, Wiyus,

## Introduction

The Nyishis are the one of the major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. They inhabit in seven districts of the state namely , Lower Subansiri, Kurung kumey, Papum pare ,kra Daadi,Kamle, Pakke Kesang and East kameng and some pockets of Sonitpur and North Lakhimpur Districts in Assam , the area is surrounded by China(Tibet) in north, Assam in the south , Upper subansiri districts in the east and west kameng districts in the West. The term Nyishi derived from two terms and 'Nyi' and 'ishi'. 'Nyi' meaning a man or human race that had descended from Aathu nyia(son of Abotani)a first complete human earth and Ishi meaning upside of the river or the source of rivers. They belong to mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burma group of language. The total population of the Nyishis are above 3.45 lakh as per 2011 census. The first mention of Nyishis is found in the Ahom Buranjis in 1562(Bose. P 19)).Due to

geographical barriers there were not much social intercourse amongst the tribe and such there were variations in Pronunciation of the some of the Nyishi dialect . There entire habitat region comprised of hilly and mountainous, dense forest, low laying foot hill and the valley with rivers and streams. The area is gifted with abundance of flora and fauna, the natural vegetation of the region, are varied in nature with the elevations of the region, the forest and the vegetation of the area is characterized as tropical evergreen forest, tropical semi-evergreen forest, sub-tropical forest ,alpine forest and temperature forest with numerous kinds of flora and fauna. Among the trees species khonkan, hallock, betals, simul and wild banana are commonly found. Cane and bamboos of various types in abundance in the area. The fauna in the region is widely diverse both varieties of carnivores and herbivores animals like tiger, leopard jackel, deer, elephant, bear, wild cats, monkey, rats and squirrel etc are found. Around 500 bird species inhabit in the area such as hornbill, eagle, owl, woodpecker and snake bird etc. Reptiles and amphibians of the different kinds are abundant in the Nyishi hills. The climatic condition of the region varies from place to place; the climate is largely influenced by the nature of terrain depending upon the altitude of the place. In the high altitude area winter is very cold while summer pleasant. In the low altitude areas winter is moderate and summer is hot. The average rainfall of the region is 250 cm approximately. The Nyishi society is patriarchal,patrilocal and patrilineal the eldest male member is the head of the family. The Nyishi family is composed of the man,his wife ,married and unmarried children who live in the same roof,generally they have joint family system. Monogamy and polygamy practices are prevalent in the Nyishi society. The primary occupation of Nyishi is agriculture,hunting and fishing and domestication of animals and fowls such as mithun (sebeh),goat (sebing),pig(erik),hen(puruk) etc. Nyishi people mostly practice shifting cultivation by slash and burnt method(Rongongo) jhum and wet paddy cultivation. In jhum cultivation they used to grow variety of crops based on mixed cropping pattern. The important crops include rice,maize,millet and varieties of vegetables etc.

Nyokum Yullo,Boori Boot Yullo and Longte Yullo are the major festivals of the Nyishis .These festivals perpetuate worshiping of gods and goddesses to ensure good harvest ,protection of humankind from epidemic,natural calamity like flood and drought ,bless them with prosperity happiness and serenity.These festivals involve sacrificing of mithun ,pig and fowls etc.

## Objective of the Study

1. To understand the importance of rituals taboos in trade activities.
2. To document and the types of taboos rituals associated with traditional trade activities.

## Methodology

Study is empirical both primary and secondary sources were used. for collecting primary sources, the state archives of government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, will be consulted. For the oral sources interviews will be conducted with intellectuals, village headman and people of the area. The secondary sources including such as published books, monographs, research articles and general articles of academic interest etc, with specification to trade and trade routes in the state. Libraries like Itanagar museum library, state research library Itanagar and Rajiv Gandhi university library, Doimukh, District library of upper subansiri, East kameng and lower subansiri, will be consulted to collect materials.

## RITUALS AND TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH TRADITIONAL TRADE

Ritual is the performance of ceremonial arts, or ritual prescribed by traditional or by sacerdotal decree is a specific observable mode of behavior exhibited by all known societies and ritual behavior established or fixed by traditional rules has been observed all over the world and throughout history. According to Durkheim ritual is a determined mode of action, the references, or object, of ritual is the belief system of a society, which is constituted by a classification of everything into the realms of the sacred and the profane. (Rao p.414).

Rituals are used by humans to build a special type of relation between themselves and remote and unseen spirits, gods, beings or powers believed to be part of the non-human world, rituals include a very wide range of human activity, including prayer, sacrifice, offerings, singing and dancing. And it is closely related to ceremonies or social events. The dictionary meaning of the Taboos means “A cultural or religious customs that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing.” (Oxford dictionary p.1560).

The word Taboo has been applied to those rituals that concern something to be avoided or forbidden. Taboos in simple terms mean prohibition or restriction for Safety and Protection. The taboos prohibited saying or doing a certain thing, or something bad would happen if they ignored it. The Taboos meant for personal safety and preventing bad luck.

Rituals and Taboos are the essential and important elements of the tribal society in Arunachal Pradesh. In almost every phase in their activities there are appropriate taboos, for the movement from one place to another there is often a strong ritual attachment and the breach of some taboos, ritual and taboos had a part and the parcel of the tribal society in Arunachal Pradesh, which is encompassed with numerous belief systems, faith and practices. It is performed and observed from the birth of a child and till the death. Varrier Elwin describes that there are, in all parts of the tribal world, special taboos adopted by different tribes and clans. (Elwin p.79) The Nyishis had unshakable faith in the rituals; the tribe followed the rituals and divination before undertaking any work and activity. Rituals played an important role in the life cycle of an individual in the Nyishi societies, it is an important aspect of their culture. Their belief on various rites and rituals is distinct in itself that is inherited from the ancestor.

To execute the traditional trade activities a great preparation was made for it. Interview with the priest (NYIBU who act as intermediaries between human beings and the world of gods and spirits) revealed that the journey for trade to Nyime (Tibet) was dangerous, for they had to travel through forests with wild animals and terrain with hills, for overcome all these dangers they had to perform rituals. Omen being performed and rituals are observed before starting the journey to see the weather trade mission would be successful or not and face any danger from the enemies and deities and they overcome all these dangers and obstacles. For these omens and divination are resorted to an egg or the liver of a chicken is used. Generally there are two types of divination, the first one divination is reading or examining the liver of a chicken called RO- KOKNAM or ROKSIN-KANAM the Priest (locally called as NYIBU by Nyishis) holding a chick in his hands recites incantations. After finishing his chanting, the Priest cuts the chicken with a knife by the neck side; its liver is then taken out and examined by the experts. When the liver is

found to be plain without any red dots, it is considered as good, and if liver is found to be rough and has coloured spots then it is considered as unfavourable. Another one divination by egg known as PIPE-CHENAM, the priest takes an egg and chants the hymns after chanting hymns put it in to a earth pot with water and places in the fire, when it is boiled peeled off the cover and it is cut in to two pieces and an expert examines it and find out the result, if all these test prognosticates favorably the proposed task is either cancelled or postponed. If it indicates a positive result. A special rituals is performed for the safety and successful journey before proceeding for trade. A Riyator and Potor wiyu ritual was perform for an all round success, for avoiding any mischief in the course of journey and also clear obstacle and hindrance in the path of journey. The riyator and potor is small ritual for protection and misfortune. In this riyator wiyu ritual they pray ACHE MATE (god) for peace, prosperity and protection from epidemic and evil things. The riyator is performed in small altar unlike other big rituals or yullo, a red cock was sacrificed, the leg of cock is cleaned before sacrifice and placed in altar, the priest chanted throughout the day and the next day the cock was sacrificed. The women , young boys and girls are restricted to eat the meat of sacrificed chicken only the male member of same family can take the meat of sacrificed chicken. Mainly they performed Turney Dene riyator by Nyishis. The Priest ( Nyibu) pray the wiyus that on their way to the trade journey there should not be any obstacle from anywhere, there should not be any evil accompany in their trading activities, please help them and bless them to for their successful trade mission. After coming back from the trade journey, again some ritual performed by them known as Pahihenam , Maji Pahi and liker kirnam . Pahihenamya ritual is performed after coming back from the trade because they have believed that during course of journey people were accompanied with diseases, epidemics, evil spirits and so on. For these they have to perform Priya ritual for the purification of soul. Maji pahi ritual was performed, for valuable and costly articles like Maji , talu/tal , beads,sword and ornaments which are brought by them from the trade, all the valuable articles which brought by them were shown to all village people and elder persons and paste some ithi- takeh (rice powder mixed with ginger)<sup>1</sup>. The other reason for performing is to ensure safety and security of the property and protection and preservation of ornaments and valuable items. Liker kirnam ritual was performed for the protection of human souls and valuable items from any trouble and hazards. For this ritual, a small altar is constructed facing towards sunrise in the east, bamboo and sacred trees, leaves, steam and branches were used for the construction of altar and a small chicken was sacrificed in the altar (yugu)Taboos locally called as ARH by Nyishis, the Nyishis had long list of taboos they used it in every purpose and it is the integral part of every ritual. From child birth to funeral, marriage to sickness, friendship to revenge, agriculture to raid and in all the other walks of life there are number of taboos are observed. They followed complicated taboos, and believed that the people were faced dilemma either of breaking the taboos, which they regard as very dangerous things to do. They also believed that taboos are observed to avoid bad luck, sickness, epidemic or anger of the spirits, nobody dares to violate taboos, almost in their every activity there are appropriate taboos. A taboo is believed to be enforced by supernatural forces, that is those who believe in the taboo believe that anyone who breaks it is bound to suffer from either illness

or some other misfortune or faces deaths. And taboos are restriction imposed either on a person or an object or an action.

In the Nyishi society taboos are relating to all the aspect of their life such as social, economic, political and religious. The following were the e.g. of the taboos related to social, political, religious and economic life, the taboos related to social life that is the birth, marriages, death and social relation e.g. like the taboos related to child birth, a husband is restricted to killed animal, bird and snake when his wife is advanced stage of pregnancy, he also restricted to attend a funeral service and in the child birth, the women assist in the delivery of child, its believed that such things may cause sick to new born baby. The e.g. of the political life, there is set of taboos for disputes , the quarrel between two people on any issue both of them declare publicly that they will not enter each other house and don't even share drink and food. The taboos related to economic e.g. hunting and fishing, while going for hunting and fishing the men folk don't take food prepared by the menstruation women, at the same way people often abstain from physical contact with their wives it believed that such act would cause failure in their mission Another e.g. there is strict taboos also related on weaving and handicraft , only women folk are allowed to weave the cloth if the men weave the cloth it believed that there is possibility of pre-mature death of his wives and in the same way women are not allowed to made a baskets and other handicrafts items.

Like all these, the strict taboos also associated to the trade and exchange activities. While journey for trade there is a strict taboo to be followed, everyone who went for trade should maintained a taboo strictly. Before outing for trade they did not take foods prepared by the women in menstruation in the same way people often abstain from Physical contact with their wives and also restricted to eat Hugyik (leafy vegetables) they believed that such act would cause failure in their trade mission. Most frequent mention taboos during journey for trade were the don't look, don't shout and don't touch. As per their believed there are certain trees, animals, rivers, streams, lake deities and spirits. So they followed some taboos such as don't looked back as per my informants he narrates that when, they had journey for trade, their elders were restricted them to seeing YABIKNHI SINIK(lake near indo-china border), YABEG SINIK and MISA LUMKIK (natural lake) and soon , they believe that if anyone violate these taboos they may suffer misfortune or even face deaths and sickness.<sup>2</sup>

There are certain places where they are expected to keep silence while reaching on the high mountain terrain no one should make any noise and don't shout loudly, if they might come across strange things, they must go silently and also calling of individual name is prohibited. And they had taboos on don't cut cane and bamboo with knotted structure. And also there is a taboos don't looked on the particular, river, lake, mountain, stone, tree and soon, even don't drink a water from the particular lake, streams and eat while walking, people used to follow the footprints. So that no one could have lost the way in a vast and dense jungle.

The story of DEMIN RINKE is an example of a girl who was obstinate in going with her brother to trade with Nyime (Tibet) but didn't come back because she had not followed the instruction given by the elder brother and didn't followed the certain taboos. There are instances where the girls who

stayed back sometimes got devoured by APPA-PILLI (the man monster or stone man)<sup>3</sup>. valuable and costly items such as adam, tall, maji, pakeh and talyur brought them were not touched by the young boys and girls and women in menstruation.

## CONCLUSION

Rituals and Taboos are the important aspect of the religious activity of the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh, almost every tribe of Arunachal Pradesh followed a rituals and strict taboos. In case of Nyishi rituals and taboos played an important role in the socio - religious life of the tribes, for every activity of life they have supposed to perform certain rituals and observe specific taboos. Also for trade activity they performed special rituals and followed strict taboos.

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