

# Indigenous Process of Cooking Foods Amongst the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

Traditional foods of the Nyishis were largely dependent on agricultural products and natural resources found in their jungle and rivers like wild animals, birds, fishes, crabs, fruits, leafy vegetables, etc. They had their own traditional methods of cooking rice, vegetables, meat and fishes. All types of foods had been prepared with the help of firewood. Gradually, the traditional food habits of the Nyishi have been changing due to the growth of modernisation. There is no place for a firewood kitchen in modern building houses and moreover, gas stove, electric cookers and modern utensils have been replaced in the Nyishi kitchen. Modern utensils, edible oils, spices items are available in markets which largely replaced the traditional system. My personal interview with local Nyishis and my observations have helped me with a lot of interesting information about the study area. Therefore, my present paper is intended to bring out the traditional food items and its methods to cook and also highlight its decline and replacement in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Nyishi, Traditional, Food, Method, Cook.

## INTRODUCTION

The Nyishi is one of the major tribes having their settlements over the central part of the Arunachal Pradesh comprising eight districts- Kurung Kumey, Kra-Dadi, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kamle, Kayepanyor, Pake-Kessang and East Kameng districts. They are also settled in a few pockets of Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts of Assam (Hina, 2012, P.14). During Ahom's rule, the Nyishis were mistakenly or without justification termed as "Dafla" or "Dumpla". Later on, the British government continued to use the same nomenclature for Nyishi and it was continued even in the constitution of the independent India (Rikam, 2003, pp.8-9). But according to the myths and legends, they call themselves Nyeshang, Nishi or more appropriately as Nyishi since the time immemorial (Showren, 2009, pp.58-59). The Constitution of India by its (Scheduled Tribes) Amendment Act, 2008 has changed the term 'Dafla' to 'Nyishi'. The Nyishis belonged to the ancestor called Abo Tani. They have uniform social, cultural, religious, economic and political life. In the process of migration, they had settled in different locations of hills areas of present Arunachal Pradesh and plains areas of present Assam. They organised to settle the village on the basis of clan, family or close relatives and every villager claimed ownership of the jungle and rivers of nearby villages. Natural resources of rivers and jungle could be common for all and everyone can fishing, hunting and collecting other natural resources but agriculture land where divided amongst the villagers. They had identified some items which were found in their surroundings as foods. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to present the traditional food habits of the Nyishis and its decline in the modern era.

## Review of Literature

There are few works done by the scholars related to the area of study which are considered as sources for the paper. The work of Nabam Tadar Rikam on Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh: A Case Study of Nyishi Tribe, 2005 is viewed as a rich source for the study of the Nyishi social, cultural and religious 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. Nabam Nakha Hina's work on Customary Laws of Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, 2012 also deals with the Nyishi political and legal system but none of them has worked on traditional foods of the Nyishi. Few research articles on Nyishi published in the NEIHA Proceedings volumes throw some light on the topic discussed. S. Panda's 'Anglo-Dafla Unrest: A Cause and Factor Analysis', Proceedings of North East India History Association (NEIHA), Ninth Session, Guwahati, 1988 deals only with raids and outrages of the Nyishis in the British territory. Both Tana Showren and Pill Moni, in their article 'The Role of Kotoki among the Nyishi: A Preliminary Study', proceedings in North East India History Association, (NEIHA), Thirty Third Session, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, 2012 discuss only about the Kotakis. But the information regarding the traditional food habits of the Nyishis has not appeared in their papers. My paper mainly focuses on all traditional foods items of the Nyishis, methods to prepare foods, declining of traditional food habits and replacement of modern foods.

As a matter of fact, the above scholars presented different dimensions of Nyishi tribe and their social, culture, economic, religion and political life but no one has done exclusively on the indigenous process of cooking food amongst the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The interviews with the local Nyishis are giving a lot of information and develop a new area of research which no one has covered so far. Therefore, my study area is new and original research.

In order to prepare a systematic analysis and interpretation of the paper, both primary and secondary sources are used. Few relevant books are use as secondary sources but primary sources mostly personal interviews of the local Nyishis and my observations have come to great help to develop this paper.

## Indigenous Food Items

Traditionally, the Nyishi people had limited access to the outside world for their day-to-day use commodities. They only depended upon their own produce from agriculture and forest resources naturally growing in the jungle. Nyishis were self-sufficient in view of their limited wants in their life. Moreover, the situation of inter-clannish or inter-ethnic confrontation compelled them to content themselves with their own means and mode of production (Das, 2005, p.23). The surplus productions were mutually exchanged with close relatives and friends but modern trade systems like markets and money transactions did not exist.

Rice has been the staple food of Nyishi and followed by maize, millets and other cereals. Other food items were green leafy vegetables, wild-roots, shoots, herbs, fishes and meat. Almost all staple foods like rice, millets, maize, and vegetables had sown in the agriculture field but the main purpose of agriculture was to cultivate paddy. Because others items could be obtained through kitchen gardening and some of them could naturally be found in the jungle.

Different types of green leafy vegetables were available in jungle which has been accepted as edible since the time of immemorial. Local named of vegetable were Joko, Rari, Halab, Haji, Kuye, Papi, papi-ato, oyak, etc. These vegetables were naturally available in their jungle but some vegetables like Yanka, Lappa, Pane, Mekun, meba, Giyang, etc. had sown in their kitchen garden (Balong). The different types

of aquatic animals and insects had also accepted as foods of Nyishis since the time of immemorial. Almost all insects and animals found in the river were edible for Nyishi like Tasam (Prawn), Tache (crab), Tagi (type of Diplectrona), Tagap (type of Cheumatopsyche), Ngyi (Fishes), etc. The edible insects found other than rivers were Takam (grasshopper), Tapom (larva), Tari (Hemiptera: Dinidoridae) etc (Interview with Longdo, 12/02/2019). Edible Takam found in agriculture field, Tapom found in trunk of big tree and bamboo and Tari flying occasionally during winter season. Nyishis identified different types of edible fruits naturally found in the jungle and their local names are Pachin, Sangchar, Takok, Bike, Hingchi, etc. They also eat different types of birds found in the jungle.

Generally, rice has been cooked in a single pot (Pachang) for the entire family but different types of vegetables including meat and fishes could be cooked in the same pot or separated pot. As per suitability, they mixed different types of ingredients with meat or fish in the same pot to cook. Normally, vegetables, meat and fishes were cooked in plain water with common salt. But some time, they add hiku (bamboo Shoot), hisap (dried bamboo shoot), ginger Takhe (ginger), Yamdak (chilies) to make it delicious (interview with Hissang, 14.02.2019). Today, these natural vegetables are available in modern markets and the traditional process to prepare vegetables is also changing with adding edible oils and different types of spices.

### **Processes of cooking foods**

Traditionally, Nyishi used to prepared their utensils from natural things found in their surrounding areas like semi-liquid clays used to make Pachang (clay pot) for cooking foods, trunk of tree made into Pawnchi (wooden plate), Ako-kakam (leaves) used as plate, bamboo made as glasses or mugs (Adung), bottle gourds used as glass or buckets, Ajug (small size of bottle gourds) used as glass while Apum (big size of bottle gourds) used as buckets and big bamboo used to store water (Interview with Dawe, 16.02.2019). Today, the modern utensils which are made up of aluminium, brass, steel, copper, etc. have replaced the traditional utensils in the Nyishi kitchen.

#### **A. Cooking in the pots**

Traditionally, the Nyishi used to prepare foods in the pots which were made of semi-liquid clays and the local name of the pots was known as Dekam Pachang. There were separate pots for rice and vegetables. These traditional clay pots were replaced by modern utensils made of brass, steel and aluminium which are available in the modern markets. But food prepared in clay pots were quite delicious in comparison to that of brass, steel and aluminium utensils.

Gradually, the traditional clay pots are disappearing in the Nyishi kitchen for various reasons; firstly, all skilful or expertise to make earthen pots are no more in the Nyishi society because children and grandchildren are not inherited to this profession. Secondly, to make clay pots requires lots of time and labour. Thirdly, the readymade utensils made up of steel, brass and aluminium are available in the markets. Moreover, several such markets were opened near their house. Fourthly, with the emergence of modernisation, people want to go with modern made utensils whereas clay pots look primitives.

Generally, the educated elites, businessmen and women settle in town prefer sophisticated cooking vessels like electric cooking, pressure cooker, saucepan, thermos-flask and electric oven. The modern cooking system emerged due to the coming of electricity and gas in urban as well as rural areas which are time saving, convenient, hygienic, and less laborious. With the replacement of utensils, the varieties of food items also added which change the taste of the food like garlic, onion, soya sauce, refined flour, tomato ketchup, baking powder, lime juice, vanilla, cocoa powder, etc. However, some people still love

to appreciate the food of earthen pots and its taste.

### **B. Smoked**

The smoke dry meat and fish is another important method of consumption pattern of Nyishi foods. The fish and meat is cut into pieces and serially put into the bamboo spikes to be smoked above the fire for a few days (Hosing) till it loses all its moisture to be stored in the bamboo tray (patter). This process was adopted because fresh meat and fishes were not always obtainable and moreover, it was the best process to keep for long run use. Generally, meat was available when big rituals were performed in the village where different types of domestic animals are sacrificed and also hunting wild animals. Similarly, fish were obtained when they went to rivers for fishing. The various processes of hunting wild animals like Kama-mana, Dindo-pigna, Soruk-rukna, etc. Similarly, different processes to collect fishes like Sabopena, Sakamgana, Akarwana, Asapwana, etc.

Gradually, this smoke meat and fishes are declining with various reasons like availability of fresh meats and fishes in the markets and using refrigerators for preserving the fresh meat and fishes for a few days (Landi, 2013, p.80). Growing markets, poultry farms, and fish ponds in the modern age brought a lot of change in the food habits of Nyishis. Different types of fresh wild animals and domestic animals are available in markets as commercial purposes. Meat and fishes are prepared with different vegetable oil added with all required ingredients and spices items which make tastier. Therefore, the food habits of Nyishis have changed little but still many people prefer to have smoke or dry meat and fishes. They appreciated the taste of traditional methods of preserved meat and fishes. Thus, smoked meat and fishes are also available in modern markets due growing demand of the people.

### **C. Roasting and Burning**

Famna(Roasting) and Bana (Burning) are other methods of consuming meat and fishes. The Process of roasting is to put fresh meat or fish into the bamboo spikes vertically or horizontally, and then keep it very close to the fire and leave to be cooked slowly till it is ready to eat. Another process was burning, fresh meat or fishes are put into the burning charcoal and until it is cooked. These processes were largely used when there were no available cooking utensils. Moreover, it is less time consuming for preparation of the food. The meat, fishes, maize and roots were popularly prepared in this method which was very tasty. Still people prefer to have this method and appreciate it tasty. But the process has been gradually minimized due to the availability of modern gas stove and utensils in every household. Moreover, traditional firewood kitchens are not suitable for building houses.

### **D. Food Prepared in Bamboo Tube**

Adung-Pangna (process to prepare foods in bamboo tubes) is a popular method in the traditional Nyishi food habits. Rice, fish, meat and vegetables were prepared in bamboo tubes (Adung) which give different tastes. Generally, this type of food preparation was done in the jungle or away from home where utensils were not available. However, on a few special occasions like festivals, picnics and other ceremonies, it was also prepared in the home. This system is still practised because people want tasty food and food prepared in bamboo tubes is tastier as compared to food made in the utensils. The traditional habit of food consumption, preparation and food items are gradually declining with the emergence of modern technologies and skills. Especially the young educated who are settling in the towns are preferred to modern process of food preparation with adding oils and spices items in food (Interview with Sangdo, 18.02.2019).

### **E. Apo (rice beers)**

Traditionally, Nyishi had their own way to make wine which is known as Apo (Wine). The main

materials required to prepare Apo are Ambing (rice), Tamii (millets) and Apop (yeast). Rice or millets were cooked and then mixed with yeasts. Thereafter, they keep it in the Apom (large bottle gourd) or other utensils for a few days for fermentation. This fermented material is mixed with hot water and filter water transformed into rice beer (Interview with Pizi, 20.02.2019).

This system is also gradually declining due to the availability of different types of readymade wine and beers in the markets. Traditional process was taking a long time to prepare rice beer and also needed hard labour to prepare it but modern market wines are available without any hard labour. Thus, people prefer an easy way of getting wine.

## Conclusion

Traditionally, the Nyishi used to eat almost all wild animals, aquatics animals and insects, birds, leafy vegetables, wild fruits and roots found in their deep jungle and rivers but there are few items of fruits, leaves, animals and insects are not consumed due to their own belief and traditional practices since the time of immemorial. Nyishi believed that animals, insects and birds found in deep jungle and rivers are pure and considered as good food. The process to consume these items is both cooked and raw. Most of Fruits and roots are consumed in raw forms but meat, fishes, rice, millets, and vegetables are necessary to cook. Traditional methods of cooking foods were mostly used by firewood because in those days gas stove and electric cookers were not available in the Nyishi world. Hence, firewood was the only way to prepare foods. There were different methods of preparing foods like drying in smoke, roasting, burning, boiling forms, etc to get different tastes. Due to rapid growth of modernisations, the traditional methods of cooking foods have been declining and replacing by modern process of cooking like, foods are cooked in gas stove or electric cookers and different spices items like meat-masala, turmeric, ginger, onion, edible oils, etc are also added in the vegetables to make it more delicious. But traditional methods of cooking foods are not fully declined. Still many people are demanding traditional foods and hence, smoked dry meat and fishes are available in the markets for sale. Similarly, people love to prepare foods in bamboo, roasting, burning and having local beers in every special occasion like festivals, picnics and other celebrations.

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