

Omen Prediction System of the Nyishi: With Special Reference to Chicken Liver.

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Abstract

The Nyishi are one of the major indigenous communities that are mainly inhabitants of and found in the Arunachal Pradesh of Northeast India. They are predominantly found in the Papum Pare, Subansiri, East Kameng, West Kameng, and Kurung Kumey districts in Arunachal Pradesh. Along with Arunachal Pradesh, the Nyishi are also found in some parts of the adjoining district of plain Assam, particularly in Sonitpur, Biswanath and some parts of the Lakhimpur district. The Nyishi are renowned for their unique and vibrant traditional culture; they practice a distinctive omen prediction system using especially chicken liver, which plays a crucial role in their socio-cultural and religious life. In this research paper, it has been tried to explore the significance of the chicken liver omen prediction systems and examine its application and importance in various rituals and ceremonies among the Nyishi. The paper also gives a special focus on the importance of chicken liver prediction systems, such as the construction of new houses, marriage ceremonies, death rituals, and customary laws of the Nyishi tribes. Through the analytical approach, the study highlights how this traditional knowledge system reinforces community values and guides the Nyishi people for their decision-making processes.

Keywords: Omen, Prediction, Nyishi, Chicken, Liver.

INTRODUCTION

The Nyishi are one of the most prominent indigenous tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. Arunachal Pradesh is the state in the northeastern region of India known for its rich tapestry of culture and ethnic diversity. In Arunachal Pradesh they are mostly concentrated in the districts of East Kameng, West Kameng, Papum Pare, Kurung Kumey and Subansiri with the most dominated populations. Along with Arunachal Pradesh, some significant populations of the Nyishi people also resided in the neighbouring districts of Assam, namely Sonitpur, Biswanath and North Lakhimpur district. The Nyishi have been called by different names through history. Some of the major names which they are referred to by different western as well as neighboring researchers are 'Dafala', 'Dampila', 'Nyishing', 'Bangni', etc. Whatever they may be called, since 2008 they have been recognised as 'Nyishi' by the constitution of India, and now they identify themselves as Nyishi (Tarin, 2008). Linguistically, they belong to the Mongoloid ethnic groups. In this regard, N.L. Bor, one of the famous historians, forwarded a statement: "The foothills of the Himalaya in Assam between the Bhoralli (Kamin) and the Khru (Kurung) rivers are inhabited by a race of hill people known as Daphlas (Nyishi). The origin of this name is shrouded in mystery, and they invariably refer to themselves as Bangni (Nyishi). As far as it is known, this tribe extends northwards to the foothills of the lofty snow-covered mountains known as the Se-La Range (Bor, 1936). Again, introducing the Nyishi, one of the renowned

British travellers and explorers mentioned, "We have been in the habit of using the names Pachim Daphla, Tagin Daphla, and Abor Daphla, but the best authority agreed that there is still no difference between the people so called" (Dun, 1987). During the time of British rule in NEFA, most of the British officers and bureaucrats mention in their field reports that the Nyishi are semi-wild, savage, and barbaric people that live in the foothills of the Himalaya range. In this regard, L.A. Weddel mentioned, "This wild and little-known tribe inhabits the mountains on the north side of the Brahmaputra between the Miris and the Akas to the north of where the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts are adjacent each other" (Waddel, 1986). But concluding all of this controversy regarding the term 'Nyishi', Tana Showren, one of the renowned researchers among the Nyishi, provides a very meaningful and acceptable explanation of the meaning of the term 'Nyishi'. According to him, "the word 'Nyishi' derived from two Nyishi words: 'Nyi' or 'Nyia' and 'Shing' or 'Ashing'. Here he narrates that the word 'Nyi' implies a human descendant of 'Athu Nyia', while another word, 'Shing' or 'Ashing', means a higher region or highland. Accordingly, the word 'Nyishi' stands for human being or people living at the highland region" (Showren, 2021).

What may be the meaning of the term 'Nyishi', but it can be mentioned that the Nyishi is a community that has deep rooted traditions with unique cultural identities characterised by a vibrant array of rituals, customs, and belief systems that have been passed down through generations. Among the many dimensions of the Nyishi traditions, the practices of omen prediction through the use of chicken liver have a particular significance. This ancient practice is not merely a ritualistic act of the Nyishi people but forms an integral component of the community that influences a wide spectrum of social, religious and legal activities. The belief in the power of omens, interpreted through the physical characteristics of a chicken liver, guides the community in making decisions related to important rituals and communal undertakings. There are different ways of omen prediction among the Nyishi community, but the prediction system by using chicken liver is intricately woven into the fabric of the Nyishi people. The prediction using chicken liver during the construction of a new house, the solemnisation of marriages, the observance of death rituals, and the interpretation of customary laws by the Nyishi people reaffirm their connection to ancestral wisdom and the spiritual world, seeking guidance and approval before embarking on significant ventures. The process of omen prediction typically involves a ritual sacrifice, followed by a detail examination of the chicken liver by experience elders or priests. The interpretation of liver's colour, texture, shape and marking are believed to reveal warnings, blessings or instructions from different spirits. These interpretations of chicken liver are then to decide whether to proceed or to postpone the whole activity to maintain the harmony with the spiritual forces and communal well-being. Through this research article, it tries to contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous knowledge systems and their role in shaping the cultural landscapes of the Nyishi people. By focusing on the Nyishi's omen prediction system, it highlights the resilience and adaptability of traditional beliefs and their continued relevance in guiding both individual choices and collective destinies. The practice of omen prediction through chicken liver among the Nyishi community and their traditional values can be analysed with the following heads.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aims and objectives of this research paper can be headed as:

To find out the cultural and ritual significance of the chicken liver omen prediction system that prevails among the Nyishi community.

To explore the ways in which this traditional knowledge system reinforces community values and social cohesion.

To understand the role of traditional omen prediction in shaping social, religious and legal practices within the Nyishi community.

To analyse the application of this omen prediction system in key rituals such as new house construction, marriage ceremonies, and death rituals of the Nyishi.

Methodology

The descriptive and analytical method has been utilised by the researcher to prepare the present research article. Along with this, the analytical methods are also utilised by the researcher for the identification of patterns, relationships and underlying factors relevant to the research article. To prepare this research paper, the researcher does extensive fieldwork across some specific locations that are located in bordering Nyishi villages of Arunachal Pradesh. To make the study more reliable, various data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through direct engagement or through interviews with the local Nyishi community. The researcher also used some secondary data, among which different books, magazines, journals, and periodicals are the main sources of the data collection.

Omen prediction During House Construction

‘Nam’ is the term used for ‘house’ by the Nyishi people. Traditionally, the Nyishi community has two types of house, the ‘Namda Nam’, which means a big house, and the ‘Namtu Nam’ signifies a modest house. Generally, wealthy people or socially influential people along with extensive families traditionally construct the *namda* house. It is found that within a *namda* house, sometimes 30 to 50 individuals reside with 5 to 10 hearths.

To determine the suitability of the site for construction of a new house, there is a tradition among the Nyishi community that the family firstly consults with a priest, which is called "nyub" in the Nyishi language. In this situation, the priest inspects the selected plot by examining the liver of a chicken. It is believed that whether the location will be suitable or not is predicted through the indication of the chicken liver. If the omen from the chicken liver indicates it is favorable for the construction of a new house, then only the priest fixes an auspicious date for the commencement of the house construction. Again, during the appointed day for the construction of the new house, the priest is again called upon to inspect chicken eggs, especially before the excavation of the hole for the main house post. If the priest's interpretation is favorable, then only the process of construction of the new house proceeds.

Omen Prediction on Marriage Ceremony

The traditional marriage system of the Nyishi, which is known as "*Nyeda*" or "*Nyida*" in the Nyishi language, is an intricate tapestry woven from cultural customs, social obligations, and enduring ancestral beliefs. The marriage ceremonies, or *Nyeda*, embody far more than the union of two individuals but serve as a public proclamation of their commitment, a heartfelt appeal for the blessings of family and community, and a sacred rite of passage that ushers the couple into a new chapter of life. In its solemn rituals and communal celebration, the marriage ceremony reflects the profound values and collective spirit of the Nyishi people. In the traditional marriage system of the Nyishi, the negotiator, which is called 'potem,' acts as a skilled negotiator and intermediary between the families of the bride and groom

(Tarin, 2008).

Before the formal negotiation and finalization of the ceremony, a critical ritual of omen reading or omen prediction is performed to guide the forthcoming engagement by the family with the help of a priest. This ritual connecting the marriage ceremony is known as *Puchu Kokanam* or *Peep Chekanam* in the Nyishi language. This ritual is performed by the family seeking divine guidance and approval, not only for the prospective union between the bride and groom but also for the harmonious alliances for their respective families. It is believed that the outcome of this ritual determines whether the engagement and subsequent marriage negotiations may proceed. That is why, before actual marriage negotiations begin, the parents of both the bride and groom separately consult with a priest or someone who is very knowledgeable and experienced to perform an omen reading with the help of chicken liver. Generally, the priest performs this omen reading on the request or invitation of the family. It is one of the traditions that the marriage proposal proceeds only if the omens are favorable. On the other hand, if the omen reading shows negative signals, the marriage proposal is generally called off, unless both families wish to maintain a longstanding relationship. In such a special case, additional rituals are performed to counteract any negative influences.

After the positive signals of the omen prediction through chicken liver, the groom's family visits the bride's house, bringing dried or fresh meat and rice beer, which they call *oppo*, as a part of the marriage proposal. In that case, if the bride's family accepts, a final omen reading with the help of chicken liver is conducted to confirm the auspiciousness for the forthcoming ceremony. Upon getting another positive sign, both the families agree on the details for fixing date of actual ceremony, time, type, etc.

Omen Prediction on Death Rituals

Rituals and beliefs connecting the death among the Nyishi community are one of the notable traditions. At the time of burial of the dead body, the priest chants continuously while tying a small chicken to leave in the graveyard. The priest generally purifies both the chicken and the area selected for burying the deceased by sprinkling holy water. It is believed by the Nyishi people that by doing such, it protects the funeral attendees from misfortune or impurity. The priest then sacrifices the chicken and examines its liver. It is believed that the healthy liver or unspotted liver of the chicken signifies that the soul of the deceased person has safely departed for the spiritual realm. These rituals of the Nyishi community connected to the dead person carry a deep symbolic and spiritual meaning among the community.

Prediction on Religious Rituals

'*Nyokum*' is the most vibrant and significant festival of the Nyishi community. It is dedicated to *Nyokum Ane*, the benevolent goddess and protector of crops along with nature, for which *Nyokum* is celebrated to seek blessings for abundant harvests, protection from floods, pests and other calamities, as well as for community happiness and prosperity (Showren, 2021). Sacrifices of *mithun*, fowls, goats, etc., are one of the primary rituals of the rituals. To make the ritual a grand success, priests perform omen readings by using chicken liver to determine how and when the festival rituals should be conducted. It is one of the traditions among the Nyishi that the condition and pattern of the chicken liver guide the community for offerings, sacrifices, and overall activities of the festival. The Nyishi people also honoured benevolent and malevolent spirits, as well as their ancestors, believing that ancestral spirits continue to protect the living. Generally, the priest plays a very crucial role in ensuring the ritual's success through these traditional rites and divinations.

Conclusion

Omen prediction systems among the Nyishi community hold a deeply rooted and multifaceted significance in the cultural life. Whether it concerned the construction of houses, the solemnisation of marriages, the observance of death rituals, or the celebration of major religious festivals like Nyokum, the practice of omen reading, especially through the examination of the chicken liver, serves as a vital tool for seeking divine guidance and ensuring communal harmony. This ritual reflects not only the Nyishi people's reverence for spiritual forces and ancestral wisdom but also their collective aspirations for prosperity, happiness and well-being. By upholding these age-old traditions, the Nyishi community continues to preserve its unique identity, transmit its values across generations and maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, the spirit world and society as a whole.

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