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Material Signs, Ritual Performance, and Indigenous Communication: Re-reading Nyishi Folk Media through Semiotics

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Abstract

Indigenous folk media are not merely forms of entertainment; they are culturally embedded systems through which communities communicate values, regulate social relations, and preserve collective memory. Among the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh, symbolic statures, ritual objects, marriage practices, burial structures, dress, ornaments, and gestures operate as communicative signs within every day and ceremonial life.

Objective: This article examines how symbolic statures and gestures function as traditional media of communication, with particular attention to marriage, ritual, burial, and social conduct.

Methods: The study approach is qualitative, using ethnographic description, interview-based interpretation, participant observation, and documentary synthesis.

Results: The findings show that the *Yugang* altar, Dapo treaty post, *Nyubyung* grave structure, *Maji* ornament, Sebbe *Dapo*, *Bopia headgear, Jenjap* marital ornament, and ritual materials such as *Dup, Gai, Tal Mayab, Ewtw,* and *Tori* communicate relationships among humans, deities, ancestors, affines, and the moral community. Marriage practices such as *Yalo Raadh, Gumtw/Potam, Nyeda, Ud/Bajam, Nyeda Bhuya,* and gift exchange create a public grammar of alliance, prestige, reciprocity, and obligation. Mortuary symbolism in *Nyubyung* communicates the transition of the deceased soul and reorganizes village solidarity through mourning. Gestures such as *Pudum Paykha*, *Dum Payhanam*, drawing a sword, biting a sword or curled index finger, and hooking index fingers operate as nonverbal acts of protest, oath-taking, insult, moral judgment, and social sanction.

Conclusion: Nyishi folk media constitute a sophisticated cultural communication system in which objects, bodies, performances, and spatial arrangements function as signs. The article contributes to indigenous communication theory by showing how material culture and embodied action create a community-based semiotic infrastructure.

Keywords: Nyishi tribe, folk media, symbolic communication, indigenous semiotics, ritual performance, non-verbal communication, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction:

Folk media are often defined as traditional, community-based forms of communication that transmit knowledge, memory, norms, and values through oral, performative, visual, and material forms. In

indigenous societies, such folk media frequently precede writing and mass communication technologies, yet they perform many of the same social functions: informing, persuading, educating, entertaining, legitimizing authority, and binding people into a recognizable community. The Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh provide a compelling case because their indigenous media include not only songs and dances but also ritual statures, dress, ornaments, grave structures, symbolic posts, agricultural signs, marriage processions, gestures, and forms of public negotiation.

In Nyishi, folklore is understood as *Ab-apag nyicw mwcw*, meaning the "forefathers' way of act and thought" (Choya, 2009). This expression is important because it frames folklore not as a static archive but as a mode of acting, thinking, and communicating. The source chapter emphasizes that Nyishi folk media have historically fulfilled the community's need for communication by giving people familiar means to express thoughts, emotions, warnings, obligations, kinship bonds, spiritual dependence, and moral expectations. This article builds from that premise and focuses on one less explored dimension: the communicative function of traditional symbolic statures and gestures.

Often folk media has been prioritized on song, dance, oral narrative, this case shows that communication also occurs through objects and bodily action. A bamboo altar can invoke divine presence; a post can mark a treaty; a grave structure can guide the departed soul; a marriage procession can publicly announce alliance and status; an ornament can mark marital identity; a hand sign can accuse a person of miserliness; and cutting one's hair can become a public statement of anger or protest. These practices require interpretation because their meanings are culturally coded. A person outside the culture may see bamboo, leaves, hair, cloth, and weapons as ordinary materials, but within Nyishi semiotic life they become signifiers of kinship, spirituality, honour, reciprocity, masculinity, femininity, grief, oath, danger, and social order.

Objective of the study:

The article is guided by three research questions.

1. What traditional symbolic statures, objects, and gestures are practiced as communicative media among the Nyishi?
2. What social, ritual, and moral meanings do these forms communicate in marriage, burial, ritual, and everyday interaction?
3. How can these findings strengthen theoretical and practical understandings of indigenous folk media?

Theoretically, the article combines semiotics, performance theory, and nonverbal communication. Semiotics helps explain how objects and actions stand for meanings beyond themselves. Peirce's triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant is useful because Nyishi symbolic media are understood only through shared cultural interpretation (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Performance theory, especially Victor Turner's work on ritual and communitas, helps interpret ceremonies such as *Nyeda, Yullow Bhuya*, and mortuary gatherings as public enactments of social order (Turner, 1969, 1982). Nonverbal communication theory helps explain why gestures, posture, weapons, hair, and bodily signs can communicate anger, oath, accusation, protest, and respect without verbal explanation (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1973). Together, these perspectives allow us to read Nyishi folk media as a material and embodied communication system.

This approach also has practical relevance. The Nyishi, like many indigenous communities, are negotiating modern schooling, digital media, religion, migration, urbanization, and changing youth engagement. Documentation of symbolic statures and gestures is therefore not merely descriptive; it is a cultural

preservation task. It can support curriculum design, community museums, digital archives, cultural tourism, intercultural education, and development communication that respects local meaning systems. The article argues that the preservation of Nyishi folk media should include not only song and dance but also the symbolic grammar of bamboo structures, ornaments, processions, gestures, and ritual spaces.

Methods:

This article draws on the author's doctoral research on Nyishi folk media, based on interviews, participant observation, and cultural documentation (Tadi, 2020). The informants included elders, priests, folk performers, artisans, social activists, prominent individuals, farmers, craftsmen, and other community members. The broader study area included Nyishi-inhabited parts of Papum Pare district, including the capital region, Doimukh, Gumto, and Sagalee circles, and selected areas of Keyi Panyor district, particularly, Deed and Yazali circles. Erstwhile Keyi Panyor was part of Lower Subansiri district, and was kwon as called as Ziro-II, before being bifurcated in to a separate district in 1st March 2024.

The scope of the study is limited to symbolic statures and gestures, with the aim of identifying objects, spaces, and actions that perform communicative functions. The analytical categories include marriage communication, ritual statures and sacred objects, burial symbolism, legal and territorial symbols, dress and ornament symbolism, and gestures. Each category is interpreted according to its context, material composition, ritual use, and stated meaning in the source chapter.

Results:

Folk Media and Nyishi Communication Ecology:

The first major finding is that Nyishi folk media operate as a communication ecology; the network of people, symbols, objects, places, rituals, gestures, and media through which meaning is created and shared, rather than as isolated art forms. The Nyishi folk media act as instruments through which the community expresses emotion, transmits norms, sustains ritual life, marks identity, and maintains continuity with ancestors. This ecology includes performance forms such as *Bhuya* and *Rwkham Pada*, but it also includes artefacts, ornaments, signs, spaces, and gestures. In this sense, folk media should be understood as a distributed system: meaning circulates through songs, bodies, bamboo, leaves, weapons, ornaments, food, animal sacrifice, and public movement.

This is especially visible in ceremonies. In *Nyeda* marriage, for instance, the message is not carried by words alone. Communication occurs through messengers, processions, songs, gifts, clothes, ornaments, weapons, sacrificial animals, and ritual posts. In *Yullow* ritual, communication with spirits is organized through the *Yugang* (altar), sacred chants, offerings, bamboo decorations, priestly gestures, and sacrificial practices. In death, the *Nyubyung* (grave) communicates both the status of the deceased and the pathway of the soul. Thus, Nyishi communication is multisensory and multimodal. It is seen, heard, carried, worn, touched, performed, and remembered.

Marriage and Symbolic Communication:

Nyishi marriage is one of the most important contexts where folk media function as social communication. There is no single abstract term for marriage equivalent to modern legal usage; rather, terms such as *Nyeda*, *Nyem Nanam*, *Ham Tonam*, or *Niil Tonam* describe the practical process of forming a matrimonial relationship. This linguistic detail is significant because it shows that marriage is understood as action, negotiation, alliance, movement, and exchange.

Communication begins before the ceremony through designated intermediaries. *Yalo Raadh* is the messenger who carries the marriage proposal to the girl's family. Such a person is not randomly chosen; he is expected to be judicious, skilled in *Bwree* or negotiation, verbally competent, diplomatic, and socially trusted. When the bride's family responds, a corresponding messenger known as *Gumtw* or *Potam* communicates consent or further instructions to the groom's family. These messenger roles show that Nyishi marriage communication is institutionalized. Proposal and consent are not private messages alone; they are socially mediated speech acts carried by persons whose credibility affects the outcome.

The marriage procession, *Nyeda*, is even more symbolic. The groom's relatives move in a single column toward the bride's house, wearing their best traditional attire and carrying gifts, food, ornaments, meat, wine, and valued items. Women carry wine in bamboo containers and baskets, white cloth, and special food or drink. Men carry smoked meat, swords, decorated pig cadavers, and other items. The procession itself becomes a public text. It announces that an alliance is being formed, displays the groom's family's capacity, and communicates respect toward the bride's family.

The symbolic power of *Nyeda* lies in its visibility. A procession moving through the village communicates without needing a written notice or formal invitation. The number of participants, quality of dress, quantity of gifts, and presence of *Sebbe* (Bos Frontalis) all speak publicly. The display is not merely economic; it is semiotic. It communicates family honour, seriousness of intention, social prestige, and readiness to enter reciprocal obligation.

During the marriage discussion, *Nyeda Bwree,* both the families appoint a *Hwki*, refers to a negotiator, arbiter, or customary advocate appointed. A *Hwki* is usually a respected person who is well-versed in traditional marriage laws, customs, clan relations, and previous disputes or obligations between the families. If there are old grievances between the clans, the *Hwki* helps pacify or rectify them through negotiation, often involving mithun, ornaments, or other valued items.

Music and song deepen this communicative process. *Ud* and *Bajam* are sung during marriage to express feelings, intentions, blessings, and expectations. The groom's side praises *Tugung Riyapin* and seeks blessings for prosperity, while also expressing hope that the bride's family will offer ornaments such as *Tashang* (Beads), *Maji* (Tongueless Tibetan Bell), and *Taal* in exchange for *Sebbe* and *Opo* (Millet wine). *Nyem Khabnam*, often described as woman's weeping, allows the bride's mother or close female relatives to express emotion and advice during farewell. Thus, marriage communication includes negotiation, public announcement, ritual invocation, poetic exchange, emotional release, and social instruction.

Material symbols are equally important. *Maji* ornament, is treated as a valuable object with history, prestige, and relational meaning. It is used in marriage exchange, dispute settlement, debt payment, and compensation for serious offences. Every *Maji* may carry a name and history, moving across families and clans through exchange. Its communicative value therefore exceeds its material form. It speaks of lineage, wealth, alliance, memory, and trust.

The *Sebbe Dapo* is another key symbol. *Dapo* means post or pillar, and in marriage the decorated post associated with *Sebbe* functions as a pact of agreement between parties. When the *Nyeda* party reaches the bride's house, the *Sebbe Dapo* is erected near the house and the *Sebbe* is tied and sacrificed. This act transforms the proposed relationship into a public and ritualized alliance. It communicates that the marriage is not simply a private union between two individuals but a bond between families.

Yugang and Symbolic Statures:

The most sacred symbolic stature of the Nyishi people is the *Yugang*, the ritual altar. It is erected during

important *Yullow* rituals and functions as a connector between human beings and *Oui*, the divine or spirit realm. The *Yugang* is made from natural materials, especially bamboo, and contains multiple components that communicate distinct meanings.

Dup, the tuft of shaved bamboo fibre, decorates ritual objects and offerings. It beautifies the altar and attracts spirits, but it also marks an object as ritually prepared. *Donyi*, associated with the sun, invokes life-giving cosmic force. *Donyi Papu* and *Bodum* ornament the top of the structure and create a visual focus for sacred attention. *Tal Mayab*, a triangular bamboo motif, represents creativity, development, and spiritual vision. *Eeleeng*, the net-like bamboo braid, binds and decorates the altar, communicating consecration and connectedness. *Sale Papor* protects against evil, while *Kheryap* or *Rudo* binds leaves and components around the altar. *Tori*, carried in procession and later added to the Yugang, communicates collective participation. *Ewtw*, rice powder, marks purity and sanctification.

Several other altar-related objects deepen the communicative system. *Kamju Socho* serves as a split bamboo vessel for offering millet wine, symbolizing libation and receptivity to blessings. *Ringdung* is used in omen-like interpretation when grains are dropped into wine, suggesting that divine messages can be read through ritual action. *Gai*, a chain of small bamboo rings, links people, spirits, and purification. *Paw*, a decorated vertical log with branches, communicates unity, aspiration, and social strength. *Hwleen*, twisted bamboo fibre rope, binds ritual materials and metaphorically communicates interconnection.

The *Yugang* therefore functions as a semiotic structure. It is not only a place where offerings are made; it is a symbolic architecture that arranges the Nyishi cosmos. Humans, deities, spirits, ancestors, animals, plants, and ritual specialists are brought into relation through its form. Its bamboo components are signs, and their arrangement is a ritual grammar. The altar communicates upward to the divine, outward to the community, and inward to participants' sense of cultural identity.

Dipr Nyibu and Social Entertainment:

The figure of *Dipr Nyibu* represents an embodied symbol. During festivals or important occasions, a person disguises himself as an evil spirit called *Dirr Erri*. He dresses hideously, roams through the village, carries a bamboo basket, and symbolically steals household items. Children and villagers chase and mock him. On the surface the act may appear humorous, but its communicative function is serious: it dramatizes the presence and removal of evil.

This performance externalizes misfortune into a visible figure. By chasing, laughing at, and rejecting the disguised figure, the community collectively enacts purification. The ritual communicates that evil is recognized, contained, and expelled. It also transforms fear into play, making the removal of misfortune a participatory event. In performance-theory terms, *Dipr Nyibu* is a liminal figure: partly human, partly spirit, partly comic, partly dangerous. Through him, the community performs its own resilience.

Dapo as Social Agreement:

Dapo is one of the most important legal-symbolic statures in Nyishi society. *Dapo* is a wooden log post erected to materialize a pact, agreement, or social bond. Beyond marriage, *Dapo* represents treaties, agreements, peace settlements, clan-feud resolutions, ceremonial friendships, territory demarcations, and ornament-exchange pacts. Its communicative force lies in its public visibility and durability. Once erected, it stands as a material witness to an agreement.

In societies where oral tradition and customary law are central, such objects become crucial records. A *Dapo* does what a written contract might do in bureaucratic society; it materializes consent. Yet it is not

merely administrative. It is sacral, relational, and reputational. Violating what *Dapo* represents is not just breaking a deal; it risks dishonour, conflict, and spiritual imbalance. The *Dapo* therefore functions as a legal sign, moral reminder, and communicative monument.

Nyubyung (Grave) and Symbols:

The *Nyubyung* (grave) structure shows how mortuary practice communicates ideas about death, soul journey, status, and community solidarity. Traditionally, Nyishi people bury the deceased near the house rather than in a common burial ground. After burial, a large bamboo structure, often 15 to 20 meters high, is erected above the ground. It is decorated with bamboo, *Kora* (chestnut leaves), *Dup*, *Gai*, *Tal Mayab*, and other symbolic elements.

The structure itself is communicative. Its height makes it visible from a distance, marking death as a public event. Its bamboo poles, tiers, leaves, and decorations are not random. The long chain of *Gai* stretching from the top toward the ground is believed to help the soul climb upward, while the bamboo slabs serve as resting places for the departed soul before final departure. The upper part decorated with *Tal Mayab*, *Donyi Papu*, *Eree* (Pig), *Eree Gumree* (Pig House), and *Dup* becomes a prayer for eternal peace from *Ane Donyi*, the Mother Sun Goddess.

The grave also reorganizes social interaction. Fires are set around the grave to protect the body from animals, and mourning lasts for several days. During this period, villagers gather in the evenings at the house of the deceased. These gatherings become communicative spaces where people mourn, remember, discuss daily issues, and reaffirm social ties. Thus, death does not silence communication; it intensifies it. The *Nyubyung* communicates to the soul, the family, the village, and future observers.

Dress, Ornaments, and the Body as Symbolic Medium:

Nyishi dress and ornaments transform the body into a communicative surface. *Bopia*, the traditional male headgear, is especially significant. It is crafted from bamboo and cane and traditionally decorated with hornbill beak, eagle feather, and eagle claw. It symbolizes a man's activeness and readiness to tackle problems in society. The long hair knot or *Poodoom* once served as an anchor for the headgear. Components such as *Dumso*, *Dumko*, and *Sutum Dumnyiap* combine utility, protection, and symbolism.

The *Bopia* communicates masculinity, identity and cultural belonging. At the same time, the recent adoption of artificial hornbill beaks made of wood or fiberglass, shows that symbols can adapt ethically to conservation concerns. This is important theoretically because it shows that folk media are not frozen relics; they can change material form while retaining cultural meaning.

For women, *Jenjap* has become a symbol of marital status. Traditionally a smaller ornament with circular metal pieces and spiral curves, it has in recent years been collectively accepted by the Nyishi as an identity marker for married women, often produced in gold or silver. This reform demonstrates conscious cultural adaptation: an older ornament is reinterpreted to meet contemporary needs for socially acceptable marital symbolism.

Other ornaments such as *Tashang*, *Hukhi*, *Tama*, *Layee*, *Lekang*, and *Lurum* also communicate gender, status, protection, mobility, and beauty. The body, therefore, becomes a moving sign system. During ceremonies, dress and ornaments do not merely decorate participants; they communicate who they are, what relation they hold, and what social meanings they carry.

Gestures as Nonverbal Communication:

Other than symbolic statures, communication is also enacted through bodily signs and gestures. These gestures carry strong social and emotional meanings. During quarrels, accusations, or serious disputes, a man may cut off the bunch of hair (*Doom*) tied on his forehead, known as *Pudoom Paykha Nam*. This act expresses protest, anger, or retaliation against an accusation. For women, similar cutting of hair is known as *Doom Payhanam*. Hair here is not merely personal appearance; it is symbolic substance. Cutting it publicly dramatizes injury, anger, and moral seriousness.

Other acts of cutting household objects or domestic animals similarly express anger against accusation. The use of spear, bow, arrow, or the breaking of one's own sword also communicates self-directed rage or protest. These acts show how objects connected with honour, household, masculinity, and livelihood become channels of emotional expression.

Oryoh (Sword) gestures are especially meaningful. Slightly drawing an *oryoh* from its *Bukhia* (Scabbard), is considered disrespectful and may attract social penalty. This implies that weapons are embedded in a code of restraint. The *Oryoh* communicates not only threat but also honour, respect, and the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable conduct.

The *Dingr* (Oath) gestures are equally powerful. When a person must make a serious promise or swear to take action, he or she may bite hard on a sword or a curled index finger. The body and weapon together become a medium of truth-claiming. The oath is not just spoken; it is embodied through pain, pressure, and risk.

The hooked-finger gesture for a stingy person, *Kheech*, shows how moral judgment can be communicated without extended speech. By hooking both index fingers and lightly pulling them in opposite directions, a person labels another as miserly. This gesture condenses social criticism into a simple sign. It demonstrates that Nyishi nonverbal communication includes emotion, oath, insult, warning, and moral evaluation.

Discussion:

The findings show that symbolic statures and gestures of Nyishi community function as an integrated communication system. Theoretically, this system can be understood as indigenous semiotic infrastructure. Rather than relying primarily on written records, it organizes meaning through visible, audible, material, and embodied signs. A *Yugang* (altar) communicates cosmology; a *Dapo* communicates agreement; a *Nyubyung* communicates death and afterlife; a *Nyeda* procession communicates alliance; a *Bopia* communicates male identity; a *Jenjap* communicates marital status; and a gesture communicates anger, oath, or moral judgment.

This article contributes to folk media in three ways. First, it expands the category of folk media beyond performance. Traditional media studies often emphasize songs, dance, drama, storytelling, puppetry, and oral genres. Whereas, the folk media of Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh shows that bamboo structures, ornaments, ritual posts, grave architecture, and gestures are equally communicative. Second, it also demonstrates that indigenous communication is not informal or unstructured. The roles of *Yalo Raadh, Gumtw/Potam, Nyub, Hwki*, and ritual specialists show that communication is socially organized and institutionally recognized. Third, it shows that material signs and bodily acts are not symbolic in a vague sense; they perform specific communicative functions in defined contexts.

The findings also strengthen the connection between communication theory and anthropology. From a semiotic perspective, each Nyishi symbolic item operates through shared interpretation. Without cultural

knowledge, *Dup* may appear as a bamboo tuft, but within ritual it signifies consecration, attraction of spirits, and sacred preparation. Without local knowledge, *Nyubyung* may appear as an elaborate grave marker, but within Nyishi belief it guides the soul and organizes mourning. For some, *Pudum Paykha* might appear impulsive, but within its social context it is a public protest against accusation.

The practical implications of the folk media are significant. First, cultural preservation projects should document symbolic statures and gestures alongside songs and dances. Visual archives should include annotated photographs, ritual contexts, and oral histories of objects. Second, school curricula in Nyishi-inhabited areas can use these symbols to teach local history and language. Third, museums and cultural centres should avoid presenting objects as isolated artefacts; they should interpret them as communication media embedded in ritual action. Fourth, development communication can use folk media respectfully by collaborating with local priests, elders, artists, and youth. Contemporary messages on Health, environment, disaster preparedness, or conflict-resolution messages could be framed through familiar communicative forms, provided sacred forms are not underestimated.

There are also ethical implications. Some symbols involve sacred knowledge, animal sacrifice, death, or conflict. Documentation should therefore follow community consent and restrictions. Not every ritual object should be digitized without context; not every gesture should be performed outside its setting. Indigenous communication research must protect cultural dignity, avoid exoticization, and ensure that community members remain interpreters of their own symbols.

The study has limitations only general aspect of the tribe has been studies here. There are many more aspect of Nyishi culture such as different kind of *Yugang*, for different occasions, hunting rituals, musical instrument, games, traditional dresses, ornament, etc., which could not be taken under this study. Future research should cover that aspects as well and explore how digital media are transforming traditional symbolic communication.

Conclusion:

Nyishi traditional symbolic statures and gestures are not decorative survivals of the past. They are active media of communication through which the community expresses alliance, honour, grief, spirituality, protest, oath, identity, and moral judgment. The *Yugang* (altar) connects humans with spirits; *Dapo* materializes agreements; *Nyubyung* guides the departed soul and gathers mourners; *Nyeda* publicly performs marriage alliance; *Maji, Taal* and *Sebbe* communicate value and reciprocity; *Bopia* and *Jenjap* mark gendered identity and status; and gestures such as *Pudum Paykha*, sword biting, and hooked fingers communicate anger, oath, and social criticism.

By interpreting these forms through semiotics, performance theory, and nonverbal communication, the article demonstrates that Nyishi folk media constitute a sophisticated indigenous communication system. The theoretical contribution lies in showing how material culture and bodily practice work as signs within a community's moral universe. The practical contribution lies in offering a framework for documentation, education, cultural preservation, and development communication that respects local symbolic knowledge.

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