

Nyishi Exchange Relations with the Plains of Assam: Trade Routes, Posa and the Transformation of a Frontier Economy

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Abstract

This article examines the historical development of exchange relations between the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh and the plains of Assam. It argues that this relationship was not a simple transition from a subsistence economy to a monetised market economy, but a gradual transformation in which barter, reciprocity, commodity exchange and monetary transactions coexisted. Particular attention is given to the *duars*, frontier markets and *posa* as important institutions connecting the hill and plains economies. Drawing on archival records, colonial administrative proceedings, trade reports, historical scholarship, and field-based evidence, the study traces the movement of commodities, people, and payments across the frontier. It examines the colonial recording and monetary valuation of *posa*, the regulation of movement through the Inner Line, the development of frontier trade registration and the continued presence of barter alongside monetary exchange. The study demonstrates that colonial rule did not create Nyishi–plains exchange but progressively regulated, recorded and reorganised existing networks of economic and political interaction. The article therefore views the Nyishi–Assam relationship as a layered frontier economy shaped by geography, customary institutions and changing colonial structures.

Keywords: Nyishi, exchange, Assam plains, frontier economy, *duars*, *posa*, barter, colonialism, monetisation.

Introduction

The Nyishi are one of the major indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, and their historical economic life was closely connected with agriculture, forest resources, livestock, and customary exchange. Their traditional economy was predominantly oriented towards subsistence production, but subsistence did not imply complete economic isolation. Goods and services circulated through reciprocal relationships within families, clans and villages, as well as through contacts with neighbouring communities. Tana Showren characterises the traditional Nyishi economy as essentially “non-monetary,” in which goods and services circulated through forms of exchange other than a fully developed monetary market (Showren, 2009: 151).

Traditional exchange among the Nyishi involved agricultural products, domestic animals, forest products, handicrafts, ornaments, food items and other locally available commodities. Labour and services could also be exchanged. Such exchanges were generally embedded in interpersonal and community relationships rather than being conducted through an impersonal market. The value of a commodity was not necessarily fixed and could vary according to its availability, locality, season and the relationship

between the persons involved. Although the Nyishi economy was predominantly subsistence-oriented, the community maintained contacts with neighbouring hill groups and with the plains of Assam. The geographical location of the Nyishi territory, immediately north of the Brahmaputra valley, enabled interaction through a number of routes and frontier passages. These routes connected the hills with the *duars*, markets and trading centres of Assam. Through these networks, goods such as salt, rice, cloth and metal articles moved towards the hills, while agricultural, forest and livestock products moved towards the plains.

These exchange relations became more significant during the colonial period. After the British established rule in Assam, the colonial administration increasingly tried to regulate the frontier and expand commercial contact between the hills and plains. Markets and trade centres developed along the foothills, while officials began recording and regulating frontier transactions. Monetary exchange became increasingly visible in dealings with the plains, although older systems of barter and reciprocity continued within and between Nyishi communities. An important institution in understanding these relations is *posa*. Historically, *posa* was connected with the political and customary relationship between the plains and the hill communities. During the colonial period, the British administration increasingly recorded and assigned monetary values to *posa*. The archival records therefore provide evidence of a process through which a customary institution became increasingly incorporated into a bureaucratic and monetary framework.

This article examines the historical development of Nyishi exchange relations with the plains of Assam. It focuses particularly on the traditional foundations of exchange, the role of frontier routes and *duars*, the institution of *posa*, the development of markets, colonial trade registration, the regulation of movement and the gradual coexistence of barter and monetary exchange.

Objectives and Methodology

The principal objective of this study is to examine the historical development of exchange relations between the Nyishi and the plains of Assam and to understand the changes that occurred in these relations during the colonial period.

The study has three specific objectives:

1. To examine the traditional foundations of Nyishi exchange and the community's economic relations with neighbouring peoples and the Assam plains.
2. To analyse the role of frontier routes, *duars*, markets and *posa* in connecting the Nyishi hills with the plains of Assam.
3. To examine the effects of colonial administration on barter, commodity exchange, monetary transactions and the regulation of frontier trade.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political Proceedings, *posa* registers, annual reports on trans-frontier trade, tour diaries and other archival records preserved in the Assam State Archives, Guwahati, and the State Archives of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar. Secondary sources include historical and ethno-historical studies of Arunachal Pradesh and the Nyishi community. Oral information has also been used to supplement documentary evidence. The combination of archival and oral sources allows the study to examine both institutional developments and the continuing significance of customary forms of exchange.

Traditional Exchange and the Nyishi Economy

The traditional Nyishi economy was primarily based on agriculture, forest resources and livestock. Agricultural production provided the principal means of subsistence, while the surrounding forests supplied a variety of materials and food resources. Domestic animals, particularly *mithun*, pigs and other livestock, also had considerable economic and social importance. The existence of a subsistence economy did not eliminate exchange. Instead, exchange was an important mechanism through which households and communities obtained goods that were unavailable or insufficiently produced locally. Traditional exchanges could take place within families, between clans, between villages and with neighbouring communities.

Goods-to-goods exchange was an important form of traditional economic interaction. Agricultural produce, forest products, domestic animals, ornaments, handicrafts and food and drink could circulate through such transactions. Labour and services were also exchanged. Reciprocal labour could involve house construction, agricultural activities, building pathways and bridges, and participation in ritual activities. The value of an exchange was not necessarily determined by a fixed market price. Value could depend on commodity availability, season, locality, and the relationship between the participants. Consequently, exchanges did not always maintain an exact balance between the material value of the goods involved. Reciprocity could extend beyond an immediate transaction and could be maintained through continuing social relationships.

This feature matters because it shows that traditional Nyishi exchange cannot be reduced to commodity exchange. Economic relations were embedded in wider social relationships. The exchange of labour, food, livestock and material objects could simultaneously reinforce relations between families, clans and villages. Traditional exchange was also not restricted to the Nyishi community. Relations existed with neighbouring tribes and with communities connected to the Assam plains. N. L. Bor records an example of the circulation of valuable goods across the frontier. During his tour, Bor recorded that Hajari, the Gaonburah of Veo village, possessed a Tibetan silver crown which he had obtained from the Akas in exchange for two *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) (Bor, 1933). Although the transaction involved another hill community, it shows wider networks through which livestock and valuable objects circulated across the frontier.

Thus, the traditional Nyishi economy should not be characterised as an isolated economic system. It was primarily subsistence-oriented but also connected to wider networks of reciprocal exchange, inter-community relations, and frontier interaction.

Nyishi–Assam Exchange and the Frontier Routes

Geography was fundamental to the development of economic relations between the Nyishi and the plains of Assam. The hills north of the Brahmaputra valley were connected with the plains through various routes and frontier passages. The *duars* provided important channels through which people, commodities and information moved between the two ecological zones.

The significance of these routes was not limited to their geographical function. They also provided access to markets and *golas* where the Nyishi could obtain commodities that were either unavailable or difficult to produce in the hills. Historical evidence identifies frontier exchange centres such as Charduar, Balipara, Lokhra and Itakhola among the important locations along the northern margin of Assam (Jha, 1985: 1). The commodities moving through these routes reflected the complementary nature of the two economic zones. Salt was particularly important because its availability in the hills was limited. Rice, cloth, and

other everyday articles were also obtained from the plains. In return, products originating in the agricultural, forest and pastoral economy of the hills entered the exchange networks. The frontier routes therefore connected different ecological economies. The hills supplied products available locally but less accessible in the plains, while the plains supplied manufactured and agricultural commodities that were harder to obtain in the hills.

These routes also facilitated movement. Seasonal movement between the hills and plains was a regular feature of frontier life. Colonial records, although produced mainly for administrative and security purposes, provide evidence of such movements. An 1897 report concerning the alleged abduction of labourers from the Dikrai Tea Garden refers to the seasonal movement of hill people towards the plains, particularly after the middle of January (Assam Secretariat Proceedings, 1897: 15–16). Such records need to be read critically because they reflect the colonial government's administrative concerns. Nevertheless, they indicate that the frontier was a space of mobility rather than a completely fixed territorial boundary. The *duars* therefore had economic as well as social and political significance. They were routes through which goods and people moved, but they also became increasingly important to the colonial administration as spaces of surveillance, regulation and territorial control.

Development of Markets in the Assam Plains

The development of markets along the foothills gave Nyishi communities new opportunities to participate in wider commercial exchange. The available evidence identifies several markets and trade centres that served different sections of the Nyishi frontier. Nyishi communities in the Kameng region maintained connections with places such as Charduar, Balipara, Lokhra, Itakhola, Udalguri, and other frontier centres. Communities in the Subansiri region connected with places such as Dolungmukh, Pthalipam, North Lakhimpur, Dijoo, and Naharbari.

These markets enabled Nyishi traders to bring agricultural and forest products from the hills and obtain commodities from the plains. The range of commodities available through the markets expanded the material possibilities of the traditional economy. The colonial administration also encouraged the development of markets and trade fairs near the foothills. Pandey and Tripathy identify several trade-fair centres associated with the frontier and note the importance of Sadiya as a major centre for hill–plains exchange (Pandey and Tripathy, 1997: 159–160).

The development of these markets marked an important change in the history of Nyishi exchange. Transactions in the plains increasingly involved monetary payment, while traditional barter continued in local and inter-community exchanges. The result was not an immediate replacement of one system by another but the coexistence of different forms of exchange.

Posa and the Institutionalisation of Frontier Exchange

The institution of *posa* occupies an important place in the history of relations between the hill communities and the Assam plains. Its significance extended beyond the simple transfer of goods or money. It formed part of the customary and political relationship between the frontier communities and authorities in the plains. During the Ahom period, relations between the plains state and hill communities included conflict, negotiation and accommodation. With the establishment of British rule, the colonial administration inherited an already existing frontier system and sought to regulate it through administrative mechanisms. The Assam Secretariat Proceedings of 1882 concerning “Posa Allowance to the Hill Tribes of Lakhimpur” provide important evidence concerning the material and monetary dimensions of *posa*. The record

includes items such as *eria* cloth, cotton *gamcha*, *saloo* and salt along with specified monetary values (Assam Secretariat Proceedings, 1882: 3–5). The document records, for example, monetary equivalents for *eria* cloth, *saloo*, salt and monetary *posa*. This evidence demonstrates that *posa* could exist in both material and monetary forms. It also shows the colonial administration's attempt to translate customary obligations into measurable financial categories.

The significance of this process becomes clearer in relation to the administrative registers. A register compiled in the nineteenth century recorded individual recipients of *posa*, their areas and corresponding monetary values. Such documentation transformed a customary relationship into an object of bureaucratic enumeration. The March 1904 “Registers of Posa” provide further evidence of the geographical organisation of the institution. The records mention Banskata and Choiduaria and identify several *mahals* and frontier areas associated with them, including Nakrang, Boranga, Bor, Kandhurhat, Dolahat, Molohat and Ohat (Assam Secretariat, 1904: 6).

The administrative geography of *posa* demonstrates that the institution was closely associated with the organisation of the frontier. The *duars*, *mahals* and frontier stations were not simply administrative categories. They were spaces where economic and political relationships between the hills and plains were organised. The registers also show that *posa* was not necessarily collected in a uniform manner. Some recipients did not claim it in particular years, while others subsequently claimed larger amounts. This variation suggests that customary claims, administrative recognition and actual collection did not always correspond.

The colonial administration therefore sought to standardise the institution, but the documentary evidence demonstrates that its implementation remained historically variable. *Posa* consequently illustrates a process of adaptation rather than simple institutional replacement.

Colonial Regulation of Frontier Trade

The expansion of colonial administration brought increasing regulation of trade between the hills and plains. Initially, trade records were maintained by local administrative officers. In Darrang, Mauzadars maintained trade records, while police officials performed similar functions in Lakhimpur. Trade was generally concentrated during particular seasons, especially between November and April or May.

Forest products were separately recorded by forest officials. Products such as timber, bamboo, cane and caoutchouc were included in the records of trans-frontier exchange (Strong, 1910). A major administrative change occurred on 1 April 1909, when registrars were appointed to maintain frontier trade records. These registrars were placed under the control of the Director of Agriculture and were required to submit regular reports. Inspectors were also appointed to examine the accuracy of the records. This development indicates the increasing administrative visibility of frontier commerce. Transactions that had previously taken place through customary and local arrangements were increasingly converted into statistical information.

The process was not without difficulties. The colonial administration found inaccuracies in the trade reports submitted by registrars and instructed them to improve the accuracy of future records. These administrative concerns show that the statistical representation of frontier trade was itself a developing process. The Annual Report on Trans-Frontier Trade for 1909–10 records total imports of Rs. 3,11,225 and exports of Rs. 1,69,351 for the wider frontier region. These figures cannot be treated as the value of Nyishi trade alone because they represent a broader geographical area. Their importance lies in demonstrating the scale of the commercial environment within which Nyishi–plains exchange operated.

Similarly, a Political Proceedings file from 1922 estimates the Nyishi frontier for 1921, recording imports of approximately Rs. 15,000 and exports of approximately Rs. 25,000 (Political Proceedings, 1922). These figures indicate that Nyishi-related frontier exchange had become sufficiently significant to be represented through official monetary estimates.

Monetisation and the Persistence of Barter

The growing use of money in frontier markets represents an important change in Nyishi exchange during the colonial period. Transactions with plains traders increasingly involved monetary payments, and the colonial administration increasingly represented exchange through monetary values. However, monetisation did not immediately eliminate barter. Traditional exchanges continued within Nyishi society and in relations with neighbouring communities. Commodity exchange remained important where social relationships and local availability determined the nature of the transaction.

The evidence concerning *posa* demonstrates this coexistence particularly clearly. Salt and cloth continued to feature in customary payments even when their monetary equivalents were recorded. The presence of both forms within the same institutional framework indicates that monetisation was cumulative rather than abrupt. Recent historical scholarship on Nyishi trade has similarly identified a gradual shift from traditional barter towards monetary exchange, while recognising the continuing importance of earlier forms of exchange (Tok, 2025: 679–681). The historical transformation can therefore be understood as the development of a layered economic system. Barter, reciprocity, commodity payments and monetary transactions operated simultaneously. Their relative significance varied by the geographical location of exchange, the nature of the commodity, and the social relationship between participants.

The process also illustrates that the introduction of money did not simply alter the medium of exchange. It changed the way transactions could be recorded, compared and administered. Once commodities and customary payments were assigned monetary values, they became more easily incorporated into bureaucratic systems.

Movement, Settlement and the Inner Line

Economic exchange cannot be separated from the movement of people across the frontier. The British administration increasingly sought to regulate such movement through territorial boundaries and passes. An 1886 report from the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur refers to restrictions on settlement beyond the Inner Line and the requirement for passes to cross the line. The case of individuals who settled beyond the designated boundary illustrates the practical difficulties the colonial government faced in enforcing territorial distinctions (Assam Secretariat Proceedings, 1886).

The Inner Line therefore represented more than an administrative boundary. It affected the routes through which people and commodities moved. Existing patterns of mobility increasingly became subject to colonial supervision. At the same time, the frontier remained socially and economically interconnected. The records of seasonal movement and settlement indicate that the territorial boundary did not completely prevent interaction between the hills and plains. Instead, it transformed the conditions under which that interaction occurred.

The colonial administration consequently attempted to convert a relatively fluid frontier into a more regulated territorial space. This process affected trade, settlement, labour movement and access to resources.

Economic Exchange and Political Relations

Nyishi exchange with the plains also had an important political dimension. Trade was not always free from conflict. Disputes could arise over prices, alleged cheating, access to natural resources and the collection of forest products. The colonial administration frequently attempted to settle such disputes and maintain the continuity of trade. The importance attached to trade was therefore connected with the broader colonial objective of managing frontier relations.

The establishment of markets created regular opportunities for interaction between Nyishi traders and plains traders. Although conflicts occurred, commercial exchange also provided a mechanism to maintain contact. Trade should therefore be understood as part of a wider frontier relationship. It involved not only the transfer of commodities but also negotiation, customary obligations, administrative control and political accommodation. The colonial government had its own economic and political interests in developing and regulating frontier trade. At the same time, Nyishi participation in markets offered opportunities to sell local products and obtain goods not readily available in the hills.

The resulting relationship was consequently neither entirely imposed nor entirely autonomous. It developed through the interaction of colonial policies, existing customary institutions, geographical conditions and Nyishi participation in frontier markets.

Historical Transformation of the Frontier Economy

The history of Nyishi exchange with the Assam plains demonstrates a gradual transformation of an already existing frontier economy. The British did not create the initial networks through which the Nyishi interacted with the plains. Rather, they encountered established routes, customary institutions and patterns of exchange and subsequently attempted to regulate them. The *duars* continued to function as routes connecting the hills and plains, but their economic role increasingly became connected with colonial territorial administration. Markets provided new opportunities for commercial transactions, while *posa* was incorporated into a system of administrative recording and monetary valuation. The introduction of monetary transactions represented an important development, but it did not eliminate older forms of exchange. Traditional barter and reciprocal exchange continued because they remained embedded in local social relationships.

The frontier economy therefore developed through institutional layering. Existing forms of exchange continued while new commercial and administrative mechanisms were added. Rather than completely replacing the traditional economy, the colonial period produced a more complex economic environment in which customary and market-oriented practices coexisted.

Conclusion

The historical development of Nyishi exchange relations with the plains of Assam reveals a complex and gradual process of economic, social and political transformation. The traditional Nyishi economy was predominantly subsistence-oriented, but it was not isolated. Goods and services circulated through family, clan, village and inter-community relationships, while wider exchange networks connected the Nyishi with neighbouring hill communities and the plains of Assam. The *duars* and frontier routes were fundamental to this relationship. They connected the hill and plains economies and facilitated the movement of commodities and people. Salt, rice, cloth and metal goods moved towards the hills, while agricultural, forest and livestock products moved towards the plains. The institution of *posa* demonstrates the close relationship between economic exchange and political relations. During the colonial period,

customary obligations were increasingly recorded, quantified and assigned monetary values. The colonial administration thereby incorporated an existing frontier institution into a more systematic bureaucratic framework.

The development of frontier markets and the registration of trade further increased the administrative visibility of Nyishi economic activities. Monetary exchange expanded, but barter and reciprocal exchange continued. The evidence therefore does not indicate a straightforward replacement of traditional exchange by the market economy. Instead, the colonial period witnessed the coexistence of several forms of exchange. Barter, reciprocity, commodity payments and monetary transactions operated simultaneously within different social and geographical contexts. The resulting economy was therefore layered rather than uniform.

The history of Nyishi–Assam exchange should consequently be understood as a gradual transformation of an existing frontier economy. Colonial rule did not create the economic relationship between the Nyishi and the plains. It increasingly regulated, recorded, monetised and territorially reorganised networks that had developed through geography, customary institutions and inter-community interaction. The significance of Nyishi exchange with the Assam plains therefore extends beyond the history of trade. It provides an important perspective on how indigenous economic systems interacted with expanding colonial institutions without immediately abandoning their earlier forms. The frontier became a space where traditional reciprocity, barter, commodity exchange, markets, monetary transactions and political obligations operated together and gradually reshaped one another.

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