

Importance of Beads in Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: In Changing Cultural Scenario

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Abstract: The Nyishi tribe is one among the major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Genealogically the Nyishi are descendants of the great ancestor Aabhu Thanyi/Abo Tani. They are divided into three major clans namely Dopum, Dodum and Dollu. They inhabit the Eight districts of Arunachal Pradesh, namely Papum pare, Keyi Panyor, Upper Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, East Kameng, Kra Dadi, Kamle, Pakke-Kessang and some other parts of the state of Assam. Nyokum Yullo, Boori Boot Yullo, Longtey Yullo and Yullo Uyu Uanam are the main festival celebrated by the Nyishi's. Beads is an important part of traditional dress of Nyishi women as well as Men. Beads are even part of the Oral tradition of every tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Beads talk about their historic linkages across the political and cultural boundaries through trade; economic status of an individual in a society, as well as medium of exchange. It also constitutes an important element in bride price or marriage gifts. Beads even represent social hierarchy in the tribe. Beads play a pivotal role in Socio economic aspect of Nyishi people. At the present time due to greater exposure to various forces of modernization and to some extent 'Globalization'. This has resulted in significant changes in the overall social structure, cultural systems, and social relationships. This has made the so called 'pure' or 'authentic' beads highly valued individual or family possession, symbolizing their high socio-economic status. Such a transition has led to new realities; Beads have gradually been accumulated by some rich families and has impacted the Nyishi society.

Keywords: Nyishi, Abo Tani, Tasang/Tesi, Nyeme Pudung Rongnaam, Seetur/Sangtar, Tadok.

Introduction: -

Arunachal Pradesh is situated on the extreme North eastern part of India. It is situated in the Trans-Himalayan region between the latitude 26 degree 28' and 91 degree 31' and 97 degree 30' east. It is bounded by the Republic of China on the north, the state of Assam on the south, Myanmar and state of Nagaland on the east and the royal kingdom of Bhutan in the west. The length of its international boundary is 1928 kms, 157 kms with Bhutan, 1030 kms with China and 441 kms Myanmar. The length of the inner line or political boundary with Assam and Nagaland is 618.5km and 58.6 km (approximately). The name Arunachal Pradesh was formally given on 20 January 1972 at Ziro headquarters of the then Subansiri district (presently under lower Subansiri district) by the then prime minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Infact it was the remaining of the hitherto known area as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which was organized in 1954. Along with this new name, the territory was upgraded to a union territory as per the north east state organization Act 1971. The union territory was later on elevated to a full-fledge state on 20 February 1987, and it became the 24th state of the Indian Republic. The area of

the state is 83,743 sqs kms, characterized by lofty mountains terrain crisscrossed by a number of turbulent rivers and rivulets. The areas of the state can be divided roughly into three regions. They are plain region and alpine region with snowcapped mountains. The state is gifted with many rivers and valley which sustain good human habitation. It is one of the biodiversity hotspots in the world and a home to many flora and fauna including many medicinal plants. Its hydro- potential is unparalleled in India which makes it a power house of energy.

The Nyishi tribe is one among the major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Genealogically the Nyishi are descendants of the great ancestor Aabhu Thanyi/Abo Tani. They are divided into three major clans namely Dopum, Dodum and Dollu. They inhabit the Eight districts of Arunachal Pradesh, namely Papum pare, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, East Kameng, Kra Dadi, Kamle, Pakke-Kessang and some other parts of the state of Assam. They traditionally practices shifting cultivation, but these days both terrace rice cultivation (TRC) and wet rice cultivation (WRC) are practiced. In this community, the joint family system is more prevalent than that of nuclear family. Nyokum Yulow, Boori Boot Yulow, Longtey Yulow and Yullo Uyus Uanam are the main festival celebrated by the Nyishi's.

Beads have been amongst the most ancient and widespread of Human ornaments have multiple implications and functional values. They are deeply rooted in their aesthetic sensibility, cultural codes, trade mechanism, economic structure, social status, and gender specificity displaying the essential elements of their traditional as well as cultural identity. Beads continue to be an important part of traditional dress of Nyishi women as well as Men. Beads are even part of the Oral tradition of every tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Beads talk about their historic linkages across the political and cultural boundaries through trade; economic status of an individual in a society, as well as medium of exchange. It also constitutes an important element in bride price or marriage gifts. Beads even represent social hierarchy in the tribe. Beads play a pivotal role in Socio economic aspect of Nyishi people. In the present historical context due to greater postcolonial administrative reforms, Reorganization of the State, and exposure to various forces of modernization and to some extent 'Globalization'. This has resulted in significant changes in the overall social structure, cultural systems, and intra-ethnic as well as inter-ethnic social relationships. This has made the so called 'pure' or 'authentic' beads highly valued individual or family possession, symbolizing their high socio-economic status. Such a transition has led to new realities; Beads have gradually been accumulated by some rich families. It has impact the Nyishi society.

Objective of the study:

This study is a humble attempt to enrich the knowledge about the beads of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and will help us to look into the socio-economic importance of beads amongst them. How are beads related with tradition and culture, as well as ritualistic significance of Nyishi people? What is its importance with changing scenario and especially with young and educated generation of Nyishi's?

The Sources:

The present study is purely based on field study and personal interview with knowledgeable person of Nyishi community. Also, interview has been taken from various traders dealing with beads, especially of Nyishi community and also some traders of Assam, dealing with Beads business. Secondary sources like books, articles, magazines and journals were consulted for the same.

Origin of beads amongst the Nyishi Tribe:

The tales of origin of beads amongst the Nyishi is being narrated that there was a tree called Gumj Sangney. Different types of birds (Pane Mane) came to enjoy the fruits of the tree. Among them was a special bird called Hir Tama. A man called Laakung Laadung guarded the trees from the birds. Due to constant looking upwards, his neck permanently got fixed in that position. It is

believed that the lucky man, Hingtay Nikum Tugung, was the first one to get beads from different rivers or places as follows:

Tago beads were found from Heere Sogo.

Tadok beads were found from the Lodu.

Dukli beads were found from Loli.

Sangtar beads were found from Lotar.

Since time immemorial, when Kurium Ane, the creator of the universe, gave birth to sachang (earth) and Nido (sky), a tree laden with beads called sip, existed. Nima, son of Abo Tani and Dutu Tami, cut the tree down and the beads, detached from the tree, spread to different directions and were collected by the people. It has been told that a priest used to make beads from charcoal. But such expert priests exist no more. The brass metal plates, brass bells and sword are said to be gifted to the Nyishi's by Aab Loma. It is believed that Aab Loma had the knowledge of making these articles. Although, not for sure but Aab Loma in reference could be the Tibetan Lamas or Monks.

Although, these Beads (Tasang/Tesi) of the Nyishi's are mostly glass beads and few are of semi-precious stones like carnelian beads are treasured by the people and are, therefore, highly priced. The price depends upon the age and size of the bead. The more the age, the higher the price. Of course, price also depends on the cultural specificity. As such, newly crafted beads that one gets easily in the north Lakhimpur market in Assam or other shops within Arunachal are cheaper than those of Tibetan origin. Size is another factor for determining the cost. Bigger beads cost more. A single seetur/Sangtar bead, the biggest of all, found among the Nyishi is priced at Rs 1,00,000 to 1,50,000, the cost of a mithun (*Bos frontalis*). The prices of beads are very fluid and changes very frequently.

Most of the so-called original beads in circulation among the Nyishi people were traded with people from bordering southern Tibet with rice, millet, and maize; and jungle product like cane and animal skin, and so on. These trades were carried out mostly by men as it involved serious risks. This active trading in between Nyishi and Tibetan is locally called as Nyeme Pudung Rongnaam. Beads procured from Tibet were used in acquiring necessary items of daily life such as rice, millet, pig and so on. These beads were also exchanged for services rendered by priests in conducting rituals. In the distant past Nyishi people had historical contacts, access and interacted with Tibetan plateau in the north and the Ahom state and later the British regime in the South. Nyishi people are known to have maintained trade relations with Tibetan counterpart and also Assam since pre-colonial time. The contacts were followed by network of exchanges leading to procuring of beads like Sangte, Sangter, Sangmi etc.....and also brass bell and plates.

the tribal situation of Arunachal Pradesh has undergone considerable changes. These were due to greater postcolonial administrative reforms, reorganization of the state, and exposure to various forces of modernization and to some extent 'globalization'. This has resulted in significant changes in overall social structure, cultural systems, and intra-ethnic as well as inter-ethnic social relationship. This has made the so called 'pure' or 'authentic' beads highly valued individual or family possession, symbolizing their high socio-economic status besides, becoming a core component of their group identity markers. Such a transition has led to new realities. Beads have gradually been accumulated by some rich families. At the same time those have also come to the market as a commodity. In urban centers we can find small shops where people of Arunachal, mostly women, sell beads along with other traditional ornaments and costumes.

Significance of beads is so deeply rooted in the value system of Nyishi's that people still buy beads to fulfill their desire to beautify the body and fulfill cultural and ritual values. This has also given rise to several bead merchants who run their business in the bordering areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They now trade in several varieties of beads which have good demand among the tribes. The study shows that these traders have excellent understanding of the bead

tradition of Arunachal tribes. Today beads reach the Tribals of Arunachal through them. During festivals, especially in urban or semi-urban areas, we find that public and political figures, local administrators, or top bureaucrats attend programmes wearing large number of traditional beads necklaces as a status symbol. They have inherited or might have accumulated for several years. Such dominant trends redefine the meaning and relevance of traditional costumes and beads in this newly invented cultural space, resulting from the advent of globalization.

Various Types of Beads and Ornaments:

Beads necklace for women- Nyishi women wear many types of beads necklaces and other ornaments. Some of the bead's necklaces are as follow: -

1. **SEETUR** (Sangtar) is the costliest bead worn by women. This bead comes in four different types.

i. **BEHI SEETUR** (Sangtar) is blue in colour and round in shape. It is worn during special occasion such as marriages and festivals. One single bead cost not less than Rs 80,000.

ii. **ROPY SEETUR** (Sangtar) is white in colour and round in shape. It is worn in special occasions such as marriages and festivals. One single bead cost not less than Rs 70,000.

iii. **SEET SEETUR** (Sangtar) is white in colour, round in shape and has some patches. This is also worn especially during festive occasion such as marriage or festivals. One single bead cost Rs 60,000.

iv. **TORBU SEETUR** (Sangtar) is blue in colour and round and flat in shape with a black line in it. It is considered to be the costliest among all seetur beads. One single bead of torbu Sangtar cost not less than Rs 1,40,000.

v. **SEEP** (SANGTAR) is the second most valued bead after seetur. It is round in shape and comparatively smaller than the latter. It is blue in colour. One single bead of seep cost not less than Rs 50,000

2. **NAGIR** is round in shape and blue in colour. One single nagir bead costs Rs 2000 and above. It is basically worn during Nyokum festival by the women performing Rikam-pada.

3. **SIBO** (SIBUK) has a distinctive feature. It is dirty dark blue colour with varying thickness and underline marks all over the surface. Incomplete underlines are also found in many beads. Some SIBO in blue and white variants are also found occasionally. These are called SIBO BUKHA and SIBO ROPPU respectively.

4. **BUGRIN** is a barrel shaped bead with sky blue shade.

5. **PEBER** has circular shape, medium size, and blue in colour.

6. **SIMIN** is a smaller than Peber and has got slightly spherical look. Apart from this both are similar.

7. **JANA** is blue in colour and almost resembles Peber and Simin. These are almost indistinguishable to a layman. However, it has got a slightly flattish feature.

8. **YELI** is cylindrical and hexagonally shaped with dark brown colour.

9. **LILUM** is a spherical in shape and dark brown in colour.

10. **KOMTEK** is the smallest bead found among the Nyishi's. It is blue in colour and roughly circular shaped.

11. **MINLE** too is a small bead with a slightly circular feature; it has red shades too.

Beads for Men: - Men usually wear yellow beads. One can, however, find a few dark brown or white beads, too.

- i. **CHUNGRI:** is the costliest bead for males. It is yellow in colour and round and flat in shape. One chungri bead costs Rs 1,00,000 and above. This is also the costliest beads amongst all the beads of the Nyishi tribe. It is worn during marriages and Nyokum. It displays the wearer's high financial status.
- ii. **Tadok:** it is yellow beads round and flat in shape. It is the most valued bead after chungri. One single Tadok cost Rs 20,000 and above. It is worn during marriages and Nyokum festival.
- iii. **DUKLI:** is smaller than Tadok and chungri. It is yellow in colour and round and flat in shape. One single Dukli cost Rs 10,000 and above. It is worn during marriages and festivals.
- iv. **DOKMING:** is yellow in colour and smaller in size, and round and flat in shape. One single dukming costs Rs 3000 and above. It is worn during marriages and festivals.
- v. **SUE:** is a white and round bead. It costs Rs 2000 per bead. It is also worn during marriages and festivals.
- vi. **KHODA:** is dark brown coloured and is flat and cylindrical in shape. It is put along with other beads to add colour and beauty to string of beads.
- vii. **GAGHEE:** is a copper earring for men. This round ornament has designs under it. It is worn during marriages only.

These beads are strand together and most of the beadworks are done by the womenfolk. They follow certain pattern wise as well as in the arrangements of the beads.

Inheritance of Beads:

In Nyishi's generally beads are inherited by the female members of the family. Usually, beads are given to girl by their mothers at the time of their marriage. The eldest daughter inherits the beads. However, the new trend is to divide the beads equally among the daughters. In the absence of daughter, it is generally passed on to the eldest son's wife. In the absence of both son and daughter, the beads are generally passed on to the nearest kin. Also, Beads are given to the closest and loved Relatives to strengthen the tie of family and blood.

FUNCTION AND IMPORTANCE OF BEADS:

Beads as a status symbol and identity:

Beads do elevate the status and identity of a family. For, instance after the marriage Brides brings Tadoks from their parental home and it becomes the property of husband families, thus elevating the family status. During marriages, these beads play an important role in the dress code of both the groom and the bride. They are fully decorated with bead necklaces. In addition, relatives who have had a share of the marriage gift, that is consuming meat of mithun, present beads to the bride. In marriage ceremony Groom family gives Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) and in exchange Bride family offers beads of value to the groom's family. Beads are worn to mark the wearer's social and cultural status during festivals, cultural event and even at the reception of important person. Possession of original beads is considered as a matter of higher status as they value their ancestral property.

Ritualistic significance of beads:

Beads do have a ritualistic importance in Nyishi Society. The nyibuu (priest) is when called upon to perform certain task of cleansing bad Omen or curing disease on completion of his/her task they are given 10 number of pure beads and it is tied to their front hair knot in the head. It is said that the spirit will come upon this bead and will help in success of the rituals. Also, a week after birth, beads are tied around the neck of the baby to protect it from the wrath of the evil eye. Relatives also contribute beads during rituals as a gift to the child. On death sometimes one or two pieces of beads are kept in the graveyard of the deceased, if the kin of the diseased so choose. There is no hard and fast rule on such practices. Nyishi's sometimes conduct rituals for the prosperity of the family. During these rituals, the entire possession of the family including

beads is kept close to the ritual's altar. The owner of the beads takes care to see that rice powder is not sprinkled on these. Such an event is believed to bring bad luck to the family. The kith and kin of a dead person do not wear beads when they come to pay their homage during the last rites.

Beads as a commodity:

Beads are sometime sold off when money is needed urgently. There however has been a decrease in the number of original beads. Fires could be one of the reasons for this. Theft is another cause for the diminishing number of beads in the village. Beads are stolen from houses and sold off at faraway places to conceal the identity of the thieves. It needs to be understood that Christianity has become dominant in Arunachal tribes leaving aside the Buddhist tribe. So, the rituals values of beads do not make any sense to believers in Christian faith of various denominations. In the process such material elements lose importance among various tribes. Christian convert hardly participates in festivals where priest or shamans have an importance role to play, or where the rituals sacrifice of animals, birds, etc. take place. In the process they become detached spectators of their own cultural festivities or traditional performances. Naturally, use of beads or ornaments during festival become irrelevant for these huge sections as their new faith hardly provides space for cultural values which obviously have sacred relevance. The prices of beads depend upon their age and size. The more the age and size, the higher the price. Often the beads are graded into different classes such as first, second and third. The first class consisting of the oldest beads, is the costliest and is highly regarded by the people. Next in line is the second class then the third, and it continues with the beads of the most recent origin costing the least. This has generated a rat race among the rich to amass these beads. The so-called original beads, thus accumulates in the hands of a few rich individuals. They invariably display them during religious or cultural events. Sometimes these are sold by people for urgent and important financial requirements, including treatment of diseases or education.

The way younger generation discern:

Young people in rural areas consider articles important and valuable, as those are symbols of richness and parts of their life. But people living in semi-urban or urban areas are nearly detached from this culture. For them beads neither have any value in monetary terms nor do they make ornaments suitable for wearing. But interestingly, educated and urban dwellers holding high offices or having comfortable life are very interested in acquiring these articles. In fact, the phenomenal rise of the price of these articles is due to this class of people as they could afford to pay high price to acquire such culturally valued items. It seems people in tender age do not value beads or ornaments. But their outlook changes as they grow older. Today most of the highly educated Nyishi's with a large number of beads are middle aged.

Young and educated Nyishi's have less idea on the different types of beads used by different community members. They are unaware of the ornamental value attached to beads. College going girls have developed an attraction to ornaments made of gold, silver, pearl and other ornaments found in the market. However, of late they are trying to acquire knowledge about these items. They also try to use these during the festivals and other social occasions. The rural youth, however, are more familiar with beads.

It is found that politicians keep buying as much beads as possible because of their traditional value. They flaunt these during Nyokum Yullo and Boori boot Yullo festivals, much to the admiration of the general public. Even bureaucrats do not lag behind in displaying such items of social status. Overall, even though several people have a penchant for beads, their utility as item of day-to-day dress code is slowly decreasing. However, certain new forms of uses are coming into fashion. Beads are stitched onto blouses and shirts, which is a new concept. Beads as a medium of monetary exchange are no more relevant, except for some very stray cases in interior villages. But it must be pointed out that the cultural value of beads is still very important for the people. These days, beads are used as bribes. Some said that beads are used for bailing out persons or even mortgaged to get bank loans. Original beads are slowly becoming rare in the

society. Also, concentration of beads with a few affluent individuals across the tribes has resulted in their non-accessibility to the society. Beads are treasured by the people and are, therefore, highly priced. The price depends upon age and size of the beads. The more the age, the higher the price it fetches. Newly crafted beads available easily in the North Lakhimpur (ASSAM) market are much cheaper than the one of Tibetan origin. The price of beads is very fluid as it changes very frequently.

Distinguishing between original and duplicate beads is almost impossible even for natives unfamiliar with beads. But for traders and experienced locals, the distinguishing features are noticeable. They are of the view that original version is attractive; smooth looks heavy and have an unclean exterior when compared to the shining and lighter duplicates. Further, there are marked differences between inner and outer surfaces in original beads. Since differentiating between the two is difficult, many villagers get cheat while purchasing beads. Old members of Nyishi society can distinguish between original and duplicate beads by their holes, edges, softness, weight and colour. Some other can identify by touching the beads. Especially the distinguishing the original from Duplicate beads are done by the women folks, they pass their knowledge of differentiating to their daughters.

Bead trade among Nyishi tribe:

Today beads are collected from Lakhimpur or Harmutty markets. People go to Lakhimpur to purchase beads. There are many beads' shops at Lakhimpur in Assam from where tribal communities of neighboring states buy beads for business. These shops store beads of different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur. Most of the shops have bead production units where they do the cutting and polishing as well as give finishing touches. Buyers from Arunachal are mainly tribal women. Some buy these for domestic use while several others buy these for business. These women buy these at wholesale prices and sell to customers with a margin from their shops within or around the prime markets. Sometimes they procure them from trader visiting the villages. Apart from own people, these traders belong to tribes like Tagin, Missing, Apatani and Galo. Beads are also sold at various market areas in Itanagar and Naharlagun. Mostly women are involved in these trades. Regular customers mostly consist of Nyishi, Apatani, and Adi women. There are also some non-Tribals who sell beads in Harmutty weekly huts or other places. Beads have same prices in different shops at Lakhimpur, but are costlier in Arunachal. Quality, finishing, colour and labour charges are reason for increased costs. Stone beads are even costlier. Italian stones are obviously costlier than Indian Ones.

Trade in beads is becoming a fast-growing business among the women of Itanagar. There are more than 50 small and big beads shops in the twin towns of Itanagar and Naharlagun, mostly run by middle aged tribal women. Their earning ranges from Rs 1000-Rs 5000 per day. The beads they sell are not original. They procure those from Harmutty or Lakhimpur. Some women sell beads on the footpaths of the market along with clothes. Some women in the Naharlagun market sell beads with other product including food items. These bead shops did not exist in the capital city 20 or 25 years ago. Lakhimpur market is quite old. These ladies even have contacts with shops in the Tibetan refugee camp of Majnu Ka Tilla and Tibetan Market in New Delhi from where they bring beads to sale in higher prices.

Beads are, however, losing their importance in day-to-day life amongst Nyishi's, especially for those who live in urban or semi-urban localities. Among people of younger generations going to schools, colleges, or universities in or out the state, one can hardly locate use of ornaments with beads except festive occasions. Similarly, trend is noticed among the service class people irrespective of sex and age. Even working tribal women are more inclined towards modern ornaments. They have started preferring attraction and comfort to tradition. But this does not mean that they are completely disjointed from traditional beads or ornaments. Most of them possess such items. They wear those during festivals. They wear traditional dress and ornaments very meticulously reflecting their tribal identity. It is interesting to note that several educated and well exposed women acquire traditional dresses and ornaments attributed to other tribal

communities. They also unhesitatingly celebrate their festivals cutting across cultural or community boundaries.

Conclusion:

Thus, there is a strong perception of original and fake beads among the Nyishi's. There are people who can distinguish between the two. This is important as it has direct relation with their pricing. The originals are old beads which the community acquired through trade with the Tibetans known as Nyeme Pudung Rongnaam. Such trades with other countries came to halt with change in the political climate and due to relocating the political boundaries in the post-colonial Northeast. This means no original beads can now be obtained, so, the available beads circulate among families or between generations through marital relations or kinship bonds. With the increase in population and strong cultural value of beads, tribal people have no option but to purchase these from bead markets or shops. This has given rise to several new bead shops by way of which local tribal women try to earn some income. In spite of Christianity which has surfaced new faith and new value systems, large number of tribal populations still believe that traditional dress or costume in general and beads or traditional ornaments in particular, and their respective languages are the prime markers of tribal identity. Beads also symbolically represent their shared cultural history. Because of high social value of beads, political elites, public leaders, and the rich try to accumulate these. Thus, these beads get concentrated in some families leading to growing inequality and social differentiation.

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Although, the price of the beads and ornaments may vary according to seller and buyer. Cost and price mentioned are Approx.

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