

## NAVIGATING TRADITION AND MODERNITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE NYISHI FUNERAL TRADITIONS

Tarh Ramya, Asin Charu, Kano Taboh and Goda Mepung

---

**Abstract:** The funeral traditions of the Nyishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh represent a profound manifestation of their cultural identity and indigenous knowledge systems. These rituals, which unfold across distinct pre-funeral, funeral, and post-funeral phases, are rich with symbolic meaning and serve as crucial mechanisms for community cohesion. This study documents these practices in detail, capturing both their historical significance and contemporary transformations. As globalization accelerates, these practices face unprecedented challenges. Religious conversions, particularly to Christianity, have introduced competing belief systems that sometimes conflict with ancestral practices. Urbanization and migration have dispersed communities, making it difficult to gather extended families for prolonged ceremonies. Economic shifts have called into question resource-intensive funeral practices that once demonstrated family prestige. Despite these challenges, many Nyishi people demonstrate remarkable adaptability. Hybrid ceremonies incorporating both traditional elements and modern practicalities have emerged. This research, conducted through immersive fieldwork, oral history collection, and visual documentation, contributes to broader academic discourses on indigenous knowledge systems and cultural continuity. By examining how the Nyishi negotiate between preservation and adaptation, this study illuminates larger patterns of cultural resilience in Indigenous communities, offering insights into how traditional practices maintain relevance amid rapid social change.

**Keywords:** Nyishi tribe, Burial tradition, Funeral rite, Belief system, Arunachal Pradesh.

### Introduction

To a layman, death may seem like just the end of life. But it is much more than that—it is a social event shaped by rituals, beliefs, and collective mourning. Sociologists like Hertz and Gennep have shown that death isn't just about the individual; it's about how the living make sense of loss and maintain social order. In Nyishi literature pertaining to death, we come across the word '*Dwrnam*' which means disintegrating or breaking down into smaller units, turning into dust or smoke, disappearing with air and water, and losing its physical form. As such, when a living organism ceases to function, its physical body begins to break down, eventually returning to dust or smoke and merging with air, water, and earth. Thus, life or the living soul vanishes from the physical body on the earth. The living soul is called *Yaji Yall*, and it goes away from the body in the form of *Oram*. This phenomenon is called *Dwrnam* or, in other words, *Sinam* (Death) (Tata, n.d., 5).

---

Tarh Ramya, Assistant Professor, Department of Tribal Studies, Arunachal Pradesh University, Pasighat; E-mail: [taramya@apupsg.ac.in](mailto:taramya@apupsg.ac.in); Asin Charu, Research Assistant, Department of Tribal Studies, Arunachal Pradesh University, Pasighat; Kano Taboh and Goda Mepung, Field Investigators, Department of Tribal Studies, Arunachal Pradesh University, Pasighat.

When examining the traditional funeral rites and rituals of the Nyishi, it is crucial to delve into the sociocultural origins that shape these customs. Central to these traditions is the community's understanding of death—a phenomenon that has been interpreted through various narratives. These stories not only seek to explain the origins of death but also provide a framework for the spiritual and ritualistic practices surrounding it. The community recounts many versions, one being that of the Great Barbet's Cry; in short, the story goes: "One day, as animals built shelters for their young, a violent storm swept through the land. When it passed, the smaller creatures found their nests and burrows unharmed, but *Pung*, the Great Barbet, had lost everything—her mighty tree had been struck by lightning, shattering her nest and family. Her cries of grief echoed through the forest and reached *Abotani*, who mistook them for a song. Enchanted, he begged for her voice. Despite *Changtum Ane's* warning, he refused to listen, and the *Pung* reluctantly gave in. Furious, *Changtum Ane* cursed humanity with mortality, and from that day on, death became an inescapable part of life" (Bora, 1995, 1-2).

In this light, another narrative unfolds where *Abotani* defies the laws of existence. The Nyishi, like other *Tani* tribes, trace their origins to *Abotani*. It is believed that it was his defiance of the natural order—his refusal to accept mortality—that led his mother, *Changtum Ane* ('*Changtum*' roughly translates to: "One that emerged/generated from the Earth" and '*Ane*' literally translates to 'mother, best articulated as--- the embodiment/the personified form of the Earth or the Mother Earth herself'), to establish the laws of life and death. It is she who is believed to have introduced the phenomenon of death itself, setting into motion the very laws and rituals the Nyishi continue to follow to this day and age. Bringing in these folkloric elements offers a way to make sense of funeral practices—not just in terms of what they are, but why they exist in the form they do, and why an entire community has collectively consented to uphold them across generations.

There is a reason certain nuances in Nyishi funerary practices can't be ignored; for instance, the placement of the dead body, the structure of the grave, and the practice of garment cutting before burial all have their roots in oral and written traditions. Figures like *Changtum Ane*, *Abotani*, and the animistic elements of Nyishi cosmology are impossible to overlook when discussing death in their cultural context. Even something as specific as the directional alignment of the dead is tied to the reverence for the Sun. It is a known fact by now that the Nyishi, like other *Tani* tribes, also revere *Donyi-Polo* - the Sun-Moon God embodying justice and truth (Elwin, 2006). Such beliefs influence death rituals, serving as affirmations of cosmic balance. The *Tani* clans, after all, have long followed an animistic tradition centred on the Sun and Moon deities, a belief system that persists both in oral narratives and written records.

Funeral rites are more than just customs; they reflect how a society understands death, the afterlife, and the transition in between. Robert Hertz (1960) studied how different cultures structure death rituals to help both the deceased and the living navigate this transition. Likewise, in Nyishi funerals, death marks the beginning of a new chapter for both the departed and their family. When someone dies, strict food and behavioural restrictions are imposed on the family and those who handled the body, with specific rules to follow before returning to normalcy. Their burial practices also carry symbolic meaning— the positioning of the body, the construction of altars, and ritual offerings all reflect the Nyishi worldview on death and the afterlife. The mourning process is deeply emotional, involving collective weeping by clan members, relatives, and family members. Offerings of food and drink are placed at the grave, as it is believed the soul sustains itself during its journey to *Nill Nyok* (the other world). The *Nyub* (Shaman) then performs the last rites, chanting to ensure the deceased does not return to the family and to guide the soul safely to *Nill Nyok* (Mebi, 2005).

The ritual-filled tribal world is one of mysticism, which is unrivalled and often remains obscure from the glare of the outside world. For these people, life goes on in a cycle, and rituals follow in this cyclic life-cycle phenomenon. From the point of life to death, rituals are seemingly or unseemingly attached to tribal life (Mao, 2011, 13). Arnold Van Gennep (1960) introduced the idea of Rites of Passage, explaining how funerals mark a transition, not just for the deceased but for the mourners as well. Victor Turner (1969) took this further, showing how rituals bring communities together and give meaning to loss. We see the relevance of these concepts in Nyishi funerals, where death is treated as a rite of passage. The deceased are honoured and given a proper farewell, and rituals are performed to ensure their well-being in the afterlife, where they are believed to reside. Here, death is not an end but the beginning of a new chapter- a transition into a different form of existence. Bronisław Malinowski (1948) focused on why these traditions matter, seeing them as a way for people to process grief and make sense of death.

Regarding the afterlife, it has been documented that the Nyishi have no clear idea of reincarnation (Shukla, 1959, 43). However, certain expressions used by Tani clans, such as the Adi phrase “*Lekon Sisangdelo pap itonampe*”—meaning “*In my past life, I must have committed sins*”—bear striking resemblance to the Hindu notion of karma, as seen in “*Dusura Jon-om mey pap kiya hoga*” (Danggen, 2007, p. 33). This similarity suggests a degree of cultural and religious assimilation over time. Danggen, however, notes that the *Donyi-Polo* doctrine does not specifically state anything about birth or rebirth and that the phrase may just be a casual imitation of the Hindu version. Tribal religions, while diverse, share rituals, spiritualism, and enduring cosmologies that emphasize human-nature harmony (Das, 2018). While *Donyi-Polo*, the Indigenous faith of the Tani clans, remains largely animistic, its

modern revival movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced elements that paralleled Hinduism, such as the construction of temples, organized prayers, and priestly structures. This blending of traditions highlights how religious boundaries, especially in oral cultures, can shift through historical interactions and external influences. In the Nyishi belief system, the afterlife is conceptualized as a continuation of existence beyond the physical realm, with distinctions made based on the nature of death. These beliefs reflect a complex interplay of cosmology, spiritual agency, and the cultural understanding of life and death within the Nyishi community. The afterlife is not viewed as an absolute end but as a transition to another dimension/world. These beliefs, however, should be understood as part of the community's worldview while acknowledging that the true nature of the afterlife remains vague.

All of the previous literature mentioned helps us understand why funeral rituals are so important—not just as traditions but as ways to navigate one of life's most difficult moments. As Davies claims: "Death is first understood through the loss of others, a distant concept until grief becomes personal. When it does, it reshapes life in ways that cannot be anticipated, marking a profound shift in experience and awareness" (Davies, 2005, 15-16). This highlights how funeral customs are not merely ceremonial but serve as vital mechanisms for processing loss, reaffirming social bonds, and finding meaning in the face of mortality.

The work on Nyishi's death by Shukla contains a striking detail now almost lost to time. He recorded the practice of assigning a wooden coffin to an infant if the child died within a fortnight of birth—a nuance that did not appear in any of the recent fieldwork or the broader literature reviewed (Shukla, 1959). This omission makes it clear that we urgently need to document the full range of death rites and rituals within the Nyishi worldview. While much of this cultural data might already be lost, it is crucial to record what remains—both the practices we can observe today and those preserved in unwritten tradition.

The Nyishi people are spread across several districts, which naturally introduces minor regional variations. It is known that funerals in central Arunachal Pradesh, where most Tani clans are primarily concentrated, are characterised by a desire to maintain a separation between the living and the dead. This desire is not altogether absent in South Asian funerals, but it is not as prominent as it is in tribal northeast India. Significantly, there is in central Arunachal Pradesh no deification of the dead and little evidence of ancestor worship or of a desire to stay in contact with them; and this would suggest why the journey of the soul is such a prominent feature of funerals in this region (Blackburn, 2005, 18-19).

This study predominantly examines the funeral practices of the Nyishi community in the Kurung Kumey district, mainly focusing on Koloriang and its surrounding villages. To provide a more comprehensive perspective, customs from

Kra Daadi and Papum Pare Nyishis have also been incorporated. It is important to note that these practices exhibit regional variations. Discussions with elders have highlighted minor differences, such as the positioning of the deceased, which remain undocumented due to the absence of written records and a lack of consensus due to regional variations. The aim is to document these nuances within a unified framework, preserving the Nyishi understanding of death and the afterlife for future generations. Given the preliminary nature of the data, which will be presented here, certain details, like the identification of native plants used in funeral contexts, have been compromised and are yet to be finalized. Although the research team has endeavoured to identify the closest specimens or genera, the classifications may still be imprecise.

### **Methodology**

This study employs an ethnographic research design, integrating qualitative methods to document and analyse the funeral rites and rituals of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The ethnographic approach was chosen to provide immersion in cultural settings, ensuring an authentic understanding of funeral practices. Purposeful and snowball sampling was utilized to identify key informants, including elders, religious leaders, and community participants, ensuring a representative and in-depth exploration of funeral customs. Data collection involved participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions, oral history documentation, and archival research. Extended periods of immersive fieldwork allowed for the direct observation and recording of rituals, supported by visual documentation through photography and videography.

The findings presented here have been categorized into two main sections: Natural Death and Unnatural Death. Within both categories, the funeral rites have been further divided into three chronological stages: Pre-Funeral, encompassing the preparations, rites and rituals conducted before the funeral; Intra-Funeral, focusing on the practices, ceremonies, rites and rituals carried out during the funeral itself; Post-Funeral, encompassing the customs, practices, rites and rituals observed after the funeral.

### **Funeral Traditions in the Case of Natural Death**

#### ***Pre-Funeral Traditions***

Among the Nyishi, death from old age is considered the most revered and ideal way to pass, symbolizing a life well-lived. Pre-funeral practices focus on preparing the body and selecting a burial site, ensuring the deceased is honoured and guided to the afterlife. In cases of natural death, the body is placed in the *Nyosu/Nyosi*

(space designated for guests) area of the household. Select individuals, typically *Nyijik* (priests) and *Nyub* (shamans), are known to foresee death through a spiritual awareness called *Nyiqri Kaanam* (Visions before death) or through a method called *Ruksin Kaanam* (chicken liver examination), which involves analysing liver markings as omens.

For *Hwngfu Nywlo* (elders) who die with closed palms, the *Nyub* (Shaman) prays for the soul to leave its fortune behind. If accepted, the palms open; if not, they remain closed, indicating unresolved issues or some sort of dissatisfaction from their waking life. The elder son assumes responsibility for all major funeral proceedings. He also performs sacrificial rites, offering a *Sebe* (*Bos frontalis*) in the deceased's name, with meat portions shared among attendees.

Before burial, the body weight of the corpse may fluctuate, signifying the spirit's reluctance toward a specific carrier. Traditionally, the eldest son carries the upper body, while another male family member handles the lower body. If the deceased has no sons, the responsibility falls to the next male kin. The body, then, is positioned in a side-sitting fetal posture and wrapped in a beige cloth called *Letum Iji*.

### ***Pre-Funeral Rites and Rituals***

*Simi Danam*: A pre-funeral gathering, usually observed for the elderly or terminally ill whose passing is imminent. This ritual honours the individual's life, and a Mithun is sacrificed at the *Sogang* (sacrificial altar).

- (i) *Animal Sacrifice*: A *Sebe* (*Bos frontalis*) is sacrificed, and its head is believed to be immediately taken to the *Oui Nyoku* (Abode of Spirits) to ensure the soul's safe passage. Eggs and chicks are also offered to ward off malevolent spirits that could bring further deaths to the family. Among these offerings, the *Sebe* holds the highest reverence.
- (ii) *Aram Kinnam* (Ensuring Safe Passage): A funerary rite where the *Nyub* guides the soul to its ancestral spirit home, accompanied by a mithun and other sacrificial offerings like chicken.
- (iii) *Daring Peelingnam* (Nail Trimming Rite): To safeguard wealth, a *Nyub* (shaman) or *Nyijik* (priest) trims a nail from any finger of the deceased's right hand and places it at the *Nyodwng* (space opposite to the *Kodah* (corridor)), following which, a rooster is sacrificed, and the hearth is kept burning throughout the night.
- (iv) *Sihi Rinam* (Expression of Grief): A deeply personal mourning practice where close family members cradle the deceased, expressing love and sorrow through intimate, heartfelt chants, distinct from the structured prayers of the *Nyub* (shaman).

### ***Pre-Funeral Burial Practices***

The Nyishi traditionally bury their dead near their homes (Pertin, 2014, p. 64; Singh, 1995, p. 279). The burial site is chosen based on the deceased's last wish, known as *Sihing Bingpe Nam* or marked by an elder before digging, known as *Debi Biinam* (Tara, 2005, p. 22). Before burial, all ornaments are removed. Men's loincloths (*Auq Gvnam*) and women's adornments made of fibres of a native plant, tied around legs and hands (later replaced by black wool), are cut loose, as they are believed to transform into snakes.

The grave is not a vertical pit but a horizontally excavated chamber with an additional cavity on the left designated for the body's rest. Before digging, the site is tested using a specially crafted stick known as *Sangda*—if it penetrates fertile ground, the site is approved. To craft the grave, digging begins with the creation of a rectangular entrance, which transitions into a gradual, sloping descent. This slope reflects the natural incline of the terrain and leads to a deeper square-shaped chamber at the base with smooth walls and subtly rounded corners. Above the grave, a *Nyubyung* (Death Altar), is erected. While grave digging takes 2-3 hours, constructing the altar may take an additional 3-5 hours.

### ***Burying and Positioning of the Deceased***

Before noon, the body is moved from the house's backside (*Botu*) to the burial ground where the body is placed in a side-sitting fetal posture, with legs bent, drawing the thighs toward the chest, and the arms folded inward. This positional arrangement of the body is known as *Sayma Tumnam* (Tara, 2005, p. 22). The body is then placed within a smaller cavity on the left side of the main burial chamber, following which the chamber is sealed with wooden planks, and soil is refilled, leaving the sloping entrance unlevelled. Infants who die within a fortnight of birth are placed in hollowed-out logs, sealed with clay. In some villages, the coffin is tied to the house or placed on forked posts, reflecting a grieving mother's attachment (Shukla, 1959, pp. 114-115).

Elderly individuals are buried with their heads facing east, symbolizing birth and sunrise, while their backs face west, representing closure and sunset, signifying the completion of the life cycle. In contrast, younger individuals, whose lives were prematurely interrupted, are buried at a slight northward tilt, deliberately denying them a direct view of the sunrise.

As for belongings, most remain within the household. Apparently, in the past, valuables like beads and other precious traditional ornaments were also interred with the deceased, but this practice was later abandoned due to the belief that malevolent spirits in the vicinity would claim them. At the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) mounted on top of the grave, a small portion of cooked rice—less than a handful—is wrapped

in a banana leaf and secured as a tiffin. Along with this, alcohol is placed in the grave as a symbolic meal to sustain the departed.

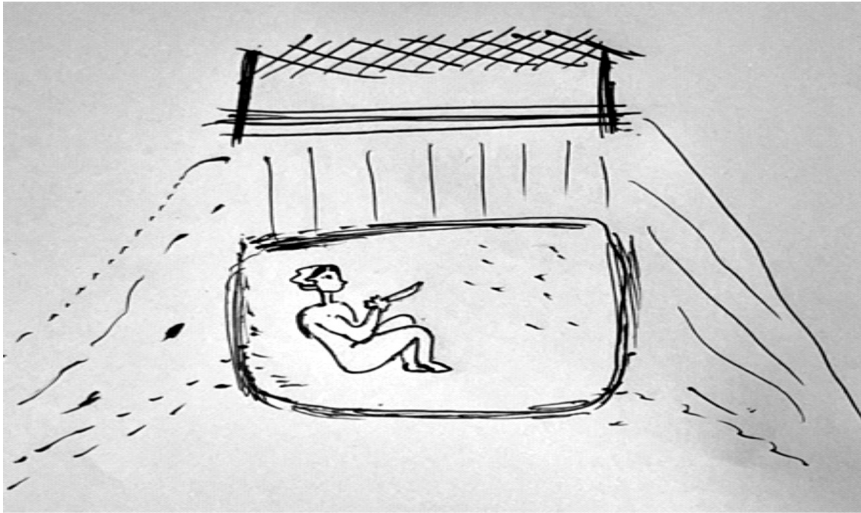


Fig. 1: Illustration Depicting the Positioning of the Dead Body.

### ***Intra-Funeral Rites and Rituals***

- i) *Ryatar Tarchanam/Yubu* (Pathway Guiding and Protection): A *Nyub* (shaman) escorts the deceased's spirit into the afterlife using three bamboo sticks woven with mesh made from bamboo shavings in a criss-cross pattern with *nane* (leaves) of *Kura* (*Costanopsis sp.*) *sangne* (tree). Positioned at the grave, these implements deter the spirit from returning and disturbing its surviving family members.
- ii) *Challo Ryatar/Khasw Bwtunam* (Legacy and Strength): Performed for prominent and socially revered individuals, this ritual invokes *Ane-Donyi* (Sun Goddess) to ensure the deceased's legacy continues and strengthens their family (Tata, n.d., p.7).
- iii) *Changlang Bikhaq* (Burial Site Purification): A *Nyub* (Shaman) or *Nyijik* (Priests) casts aside a handful of soil from the grave to remove spiritual impurities. A machete is provided for the rite, performed immediately for unnatural deaths and the next day of death for natural ones.
- iv) *Darlang-Darkio* (Earthworm Purging): A ritual carried out by burning bamboo or firewood; believed to purify the burial cavity, preventing earthworms from consuming the deceased's eyes and mouth. This task is undertaken by one of the dead-body handlers.

- v) *Pahi Hinam* (Comprehensive Cleansing): A *Nyub* (Shaman) purifies the household and its attendees with a water-soaked bundle composed of leaves of *eay* (*Bambusa Balcooa*), *baasar* (*Carex* sp.), and leaves of *Kura* tree (*Costanopsis* sp.). Additionally, a chicken is incorporated into the ritual, serving to facilitate the deceased's peaceful transition into the afterlife.
- vi) *Animal Sacrifice*: Following the Comprehensive Cleansing ritual, two roosters are sacrificed. This act serves to further purify the spirit of the deceased and cleanse the surrounding environment. Traditionally, dogs and pigs were also offered as spirit guides: dogs were beheaded to accompany the departed, while pigs specifically were rendered unconscious with a wooden bat and placed near the *Sogang* (sacrificial altar) beside the *Nyubyung* (death altar). Notably, some elders still request a dog for companionship in the afterlife.



Fig. 2: *Ungbung* (Grave) on the Left and *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) on the Right.  
[Photo Credit: Gokia Ranjit]

### ***Post-Funeral Traditions***

The post-funeral period both facilitates the deceased's transition and safeguards the living. Within the first three days, spirits may return to reclaim belongings—a phenomenon marked by eerie disturbances. Moreover, sleep is discouraged, since the souls of the people present might inadvertently be claimed by the dead. For 5 days, those who handle the body are prohibited from cutting bamboo or wood; and for an entire month, activities such as climbing trees, approaching burrows, or constructing houses are forbidden. Additionally, body handlers must sleep on their sides and avoid witnessing the moments of sunrise and sunset for 10–15 days.

### ***Post-Funeral Rites and Rituals***

- i) *Sarmwh/Saram Angnam*: 2 days after burial, body handlers and participants cleanse themselves in a stream, facing downstream to wash away impurities. Others stand guard with a *uryuk* (machete). They use a *tafi* (comb) to cleanse their hair, and funeral clothes are washed and dried at the *batung* (veranda). Returning home, they sit at the *Kodah* (A transitional space/corridor from the outside to the inside of a traditional Nyishi house, which is also multi-purposely and designated for carrying out kitchen and other household chores) for 30–60 minutes before resuming daily activities. A portion of food is offered to the deceased's spirit for 10–15 days by the stream-goers. This practice persists in the subsequent ritual--- *Darte-Darlu*.
- ii) *Darte-Darlu*: 4 days after burial, the same group undergoes a final purification, this time at the river.
- iii) *Aram Angnam* (Preventing the Soul's Return): If a deceased mother longs for her child, it may manifest as an illness. To pacify her spirit, the *Nyub* (Shaman) performs sacrifices, offering *Sebe* (*Bos frontalis*), *Aryak* (pig), and ornaments.
- iv) *Simih Chinam*: Food is offered at the burial site to sustain the spirit.
- v) *Mengia Gyalingnam* (Spirit Purgings): The night after burial, family members wave arrows and flaming bamboo at the ceiling to ward off malevolent spirits.
- vi) *Biby Binam*: In Nyishi's belief, the *Aram* (departed soul) leaves the earthly realm 3–5 days after death. To bid farewell and purify the home, the *Biby Binam* ritual is performed on the fifth day, restoring the bereaved family's well-being (Tata, n.d., p.8).
- vii) *Ramah Haanam* (Maintaining Fire): Fire is lit and maintained near the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) at the gravesite and indoors generally for 2-3 nights to ward off evil spirits. The period may be extended depending on the wishes of the kith and kin.
- viii) *Kumya*: A ritual that protects the deceased's soul from the vengeful spirits of animals they hunted. It is believed that the spirits of all animals hunted by an individual in their lifetime band together, rising as a collective force to seek revenge. These spirits, unified in their intent, converge upon the deceased to exact their vengeance.
- ix) *Animal Sacrifices*: Conducted during post-funeral to provide symbolic support, such as an eagle for assisting in hunting, a monkey or gathering jungle fruits, and fish to ensure sustenance.

## Funeral Traditions in the Case of Unnatural Death

### *Pre-Funeral Traditions*

Funerals for such deaths are often avoided due to their perceived contagion. Pregnant women are advised against making eye contact with the corpse, as it is believed to draw the spirit. Unnatural deaths necessitate distinct rites and rituals to restore balance and protect the living, with offerings and restrictions used to appease the spirit and ward off malevolent forces. These deaths require additional intervention, as specific rites and rituals are to be observed to ensure the spirit's departure, preventing it from lingering.

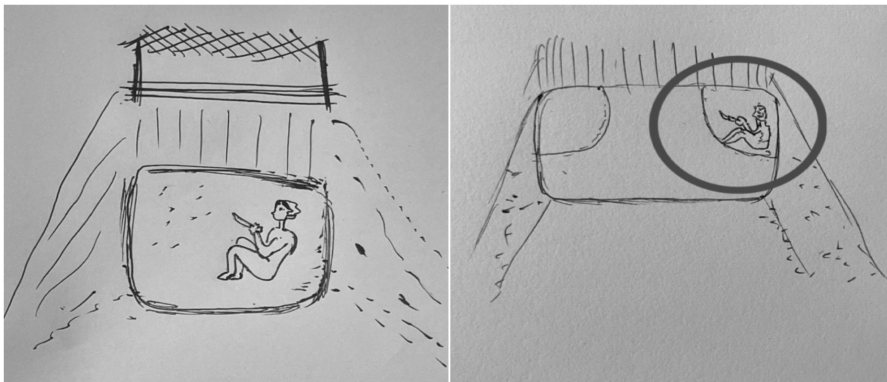


Fig. 3: Illustration Depicting the Grave Structure for Unnatural Deaths.

Upon death, the body is wrapped in *Letum Iji* (a traditionally woven light beige cloth). Unnatural deaths carry unique beliefs and practices. In cases of murder, if a victim has multiple brothers, they all carry the body, and the one who finds it lightest is believed to be chosen for burial and vengeance. For unnatural deaths like suicide, drowning, fire, or accidents, the body is positioned at the *Kodah* (corridor) with the right arm and leg touching the ground, head opposite the entrance, and back away from the hearth. Murder victims are rarely brought into the house but may be placed at the *Kodah* or *Nyosu/Nyosi* (guest space in a traditional Nyishi household), depending on the family's wishes. Victims of snake or bee bites are never brought inside and are buried in the jungle with their belongings discarded.

Excluding murder, for other forms of unnatural deaths, generally, two people handle the body: one holds the upper half and the other the lower half. In murder cases, however, although the body is positioned in the same fetal posture with arms and legs folded inward like in natural deaths, the main distinguishing factor is a reverse piggybacking technique. The deceased is secured with a long rope looped



Fig. 4: An Altar for *Sunyu* (Suicide)



Fig. 5: An Altar for Gwr (Accidental Death)

over the carrier's head and lower back. Adding to this technique is a wooden plank placed horizontally on the rope at the carrier's back. This plank acts as a support, allowing the lower torso of the deceased to rest against it. By distributing the load evenly, the plank reduces strain on the carrier and aids in maintaining balance during transport. The deceased's hands are folded over the chest, secured with their clothing, and a knife is placed in their hands. However, rigor mortis, which begins within 2–6 hours, peaks at 12 hours, and fades after 24–48 hours, can complicate positioning, though how this challenge is addressed remains unclear.

Graves for unnatural deaths mirror those of natural deaths, but with key differences. The additional cavity is dug on the right side of the main chamber instead of the left. Unlike natural burials, which employ the *Nyubying* (Death Altar), unnatural graves have a simple wooden marker above them. Wooden planks are then placed vertically over the additional chamber before filling the grave with mud. Burial sites for unnatural deaths are always distant, about 1–2 km from the house.

Murder victims specifically receive a distinct burial structure, resembling a hanging chair or a weaverbird's nest. The body is placed in a more pronounced fetal position compared to the posture maintained in natural and other forms of unnatural deaths. Here, the corpse is positioned seated on wooden planks laid over logs, facing outward. Thin bamboo shavings, the size of toothpicks, are placed on the eyes to keep them open, ensuring the spirit of the deceased stays alarmed against malevolent spirits. A knife is placed with the body for protection. Finally, individual wooden planks are meticulously placed vertically to form a secure and protective barrier, on top of which the mud is filled.

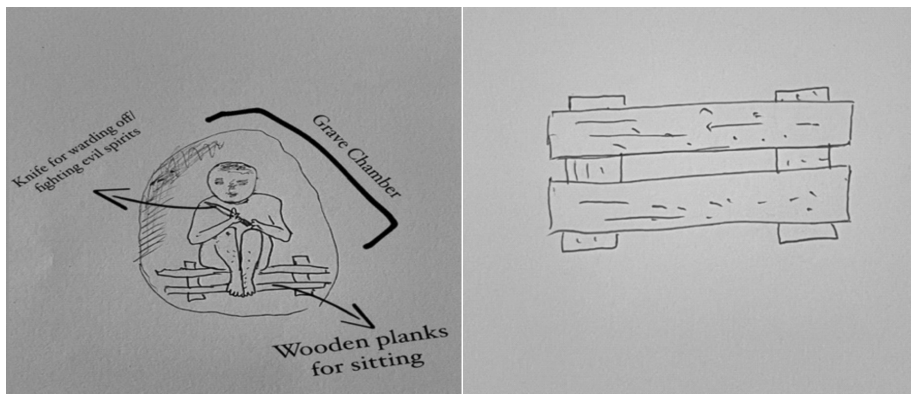


Fig. 6: Illustration Depicting the Positioning of a Murder Victim.

A ritual called *Pattum* is conducted by a *Nyub* (shaman) away from the deceased's residence, to sever ties with any misfortune believed to be associated

with death. A specific tree is cut, and its log forms the base of the *Sogang* (sacrificial altar). Chickens are sacrificed for the young deceased, while adults receive pig or goat offerings.

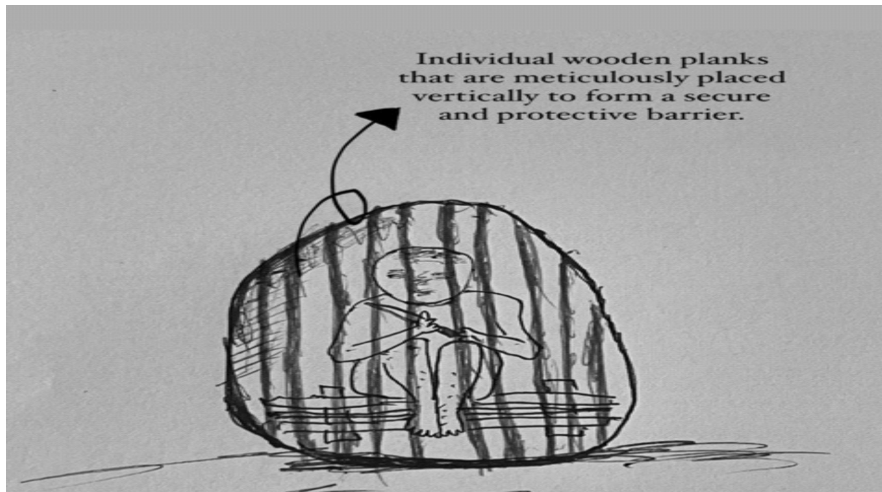


Fig. 7: Illustration Depicting Sealing of a Burial Chamber for Murder Victims.

### ***Intra-Funeral Traditions***

Unlike natural deaths, where burials are carried out before noon, unnatural deaths are buried at any convenient time. The deceased is positioned in a side-sitting posture, head facing east, back aligned west, but tilted northward, denying them a direct view of the sunrise—symbolizing an interrupted life. The grave is sealed with wooden planks, and the excavated soil is carefully refilled, leaving the sloped entrance unlevelled as in natural deaths. Similar to the practice in natural deaths, a small portion of cooked rice is wrapped in a banana leaf, and alcohol is placed in carved bamboo cups. A small knife is also included to ward off evil spirits.

A ritual named *Tamm Barnam* is performed by a *Nyub* (Shaman). This ritual guides the deceased's spirit (*Yaj Yallu/Gwr Sunyu*) to its heavenly abode (*Sengkhu Tallwng Nyok*), ensuring its peaceful transition away from the earthly realm (Tata, n.d., p.7).

### ***Post-Funeral Traditions***

Unnatural deaths impose strict work and food restrictions. For one month, climbing trees, lingering near burrows, and house construction are forbidden. Those who handle the body must sleep on their sides for 10–15 days and avoid witnessing sunrises or sunsets. Immediate family members and dead body handlers face dietary

taboos, avoiding *pata* (birds), *sibi* (monkey), *yabing* (goat), *engying* (tuber), *tapey* (pumpkin), *peering* (beans), and specific animal parts such as the intestine, head and limbs. Those who handled the deceased's head observe these restrictions for up to 5 months, as violations are believed to cause ailments. Pregnant women are especially forbidden from consuming *akih* (intestines) to prevent stillbirths or congenital disabilities. Deaths by snake bites or bee stings are considered highly impure and bar the deceased's family from visiting others' homes with food restrictions on Pumpkin, chilli, corn, alcohol, and *apap* (yeast) balls. These taboos last about 3 days. Fire-related deaths impose a 3-to-5-month ban on consuming animal intestines.

### ***Post-Funeral Rites and Rituals***

- i) *Cleansing Rituals*: The cleansing rites of *Sarmwh/Saram Angnam* and *Darte-Darlu*, observed in natural deaths, are also performed for unnatural deaths.
- ii) *Patar Panam (Rite of the Restless Spirit)*: When an unnatural death leaves the spirit unsettled, the *Nyub* (Shaman) performs a ritual using eggs and chicks to appease it. A stone is placed at the entrance of the household as a protective barrier, while a bamboo variant known as *Talum* in the local dialect is tied to the same to prevent the spirit's return.
- iii) *Langli Barnam (Rite of the Avenging Spirit)*: Performed to determine if a murder victim's spirit will seek vengeance. A red thread is threaded through the vertebral column of the corpse and extended above the earth. A bamboo nest, made with leaves of the *Kura* tree (*Costanopsis sp*), leaves made to resemble a nest, holds a chicken that is first skinned and beheaded, with its head again placed back onto its body. The chicken is then positioned in the nest as though incubating eggs. If an eagle snatches the chicken within a week, revenge is imminent; if it circles without taking it, revenge is delayed. There are other variations of the same ritual:
  - (a) *Fire-Based Method*: Fire is lit at the base of a bamboo structure. If the flames ignite the *Kura* leaves, it signifies vengeance.
  - (b) *Footstep and Sound Method*: The red thread is tied to the corpse's toe, finger, or hair and extended above the earth. If human-like murmurs or footprints appear near the grave, revenge is expected.
- iv) *Pahi Hinam (Comprehensive Cleansing Ritual)*: This cleansing ritual involves a bamboo mesh interwoven with the leaves of *ey* (*Bambusa balcooa*). A chick is sacrificed and attached to the mesh, which is then soaked in water. The infused water is sprinkled throughout the house and on funeral attendees to dispel lingering misfortune.

- v) *Sangrik Tangnam/Panam (Felling of Banyan Trees)*: As an act of retribution, family members may cut down banyan trees (Hina, 2017, p.164 ).

### Artistic Expressions in Funeral Traditions

The *Nyubying* (Death Altar) is a key element of Nyishi funerary rites, embodying both craftsmanship and spiritual significance. Constructed primarily from bamboo, sacred leaves, and wood, it reflects the Nyishi people's mastery of natural materials. The Tani tribes, including the Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, Adi, Galo, and Mising, are particularly renowned for their exceptional skills in cane and bamboo craftsmanship (Pertin, 2014, 2-4). That said, in the unlikely event of death, the Nyishi showcase their artistic expressions and craftsmanship, particularly through the construction of altars. These altars, which are central to their funeral customs, are crafted from and decorated with natural materials, with sacrificial animals tethered beside them.

For natural deaths, the *Nyubying* (Death Altar) is constructed. It is an elaborate, multi-tiered structure, typically consisting of four to six steps. The first step represents the deceased's resting place in the afterlife, while the higher steps symbolize their life achievements and accumulated wealth. The structure is adorned with *Gaksar* (bundles of bamboo leaves hung upside down), *Jamtam* (criss-cross bamboo netting), and *Duph* (bamboo shavings), which enhance both its artistic and symbolic value. A bundle of *Nene Gyadung* leaves is placed at the topmost segment, alongside a decorative bamboo design featuring interlocking loops forming a chain. At ground level, a *Puryaf* (bamboo fence) encloses the altar to prevent animals from entering the burial ground. Formerly, stacked wooden logs were used for this purpose, but finely carved bamboo fencing is now preferred. If a *Sebe* (Bos Frontalis) is sacrificed, the altar's framework becomes even more intricate with additional steps, poles and aesthetics.



The uppermost segment of a *Nyubying*



*Jamtam* (elaborate mesh-like bamboo netting)



*Duph* (Decorative bamboo shavings)

*Tage* (Interlocking/overlapping loops)

Fig. 8: Artistic Elements in Funeral Traditions of the Nyishi.

For unnatural deaths, the construction of the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) varies significantly based on the circumstances. In cases of suicide (*Sunyu Sibu*), a single wooden marker is placed instead of a full-fledged altar. A long, carved wooden piece with its tip pointing west is positioned from the ground up. Similarly, for murder (*Talang Sibu*) and accidental deaths (*Gere Sibu*)—which include falling from mountains, drowning, snake bites, or fire—a single wooden marker is used, but in this case, the carved wooden piece points east. If the deceased’s family wishes to determine whether the soul seeks vengeance, additional ritual elements, such as the leaves of the *Kura* tree (*Castanopsis sp.*) and a chicken sacrifice, may be included.

Regardless of the manner of death, *Sogang* (sacrificial altars) are built at the burial site to accompany the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar). These simple wooden structures, consisting of three wooden posts adorned with *Duph* (bamboo shavings), serve as dedicated spaces for animal sacrifices.

The *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) represents the Nyishi community’s sophisticated understanding of symbolism, aesthetics, material culture, and architectural precision. The altar is not only a resting place for the dead but also a testament to the craftsmanship and deep-rooted spiritual beliefs that define Nyishi mortuary practices.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The funerary practices of the Nyishi are not merely rites of passage but function as complex socio-spiritual mechanisms that structure the relationship between the living and the dead. Traditionally, these customs were transmitted orally through communal participation, reinforcing both indigenous knowledge and

social cohesion. A 1997 study on the impact of urbanization in Arunachal Pradesh highlights shifts in ceremonies and festivals under the segment “*Religion and Ceremonies*”, emphasizing how the coexistence of multiple communities has led to cultural assimilation, blending indigenous and non-tribal traditions (Bora, Duarah, & Paul, 1997, 52-53). While fostering inclusivity, this assimilation challenge can also be applied to the preservation of traditional death rituals, reshaping indigenous beliefs and practices.



Fig. 9: A Modern Nyishi Grave with Decorative Traditional Ornaments on Top.

The three-stage structure of Nyishi funerary rites—pre-funeral, intra-funeral, and post-funeral—remains intact, but its execution has undergone notable shifts. In the pre-funeral stage, the deceased’s body was systematically placed in specific areas within Nyishi households; however, with the transition to cemented houses featuring modern interior and exterior structures, these customs have declined.

The intra-funeral stage, where the burial takes place, has seen certain shifts, such as the traditional practice of burying the body in a fetal position largely declining. Instead, the deceased are now laid flat on their backs. Similarly, the grave structure, once dug horizontally to create a chamber-like cavity, has also transitioned to a simplified vertical pit, resembling Western burial traditions. Although the traditional structure of the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) has largely survived, modern elements such as light bulbs for night-time illumination, decorative artificial flowers, framed photos of the deceased, and lit candles are now commonly added. For unnatural deaths, the specific altars once assigned based on the nature of death have largely disappeared. Unlike earlier times, when the *Nyubyung* (Death Altar) was left to decay naturally, it is now, for instance, for the Christian counterpart often kept intact for several weeks until a permanent cemented or tiled grave, complete with epitaphs and Bible verses, is constructed.

The shift from indigenous materials to modern construction in funeral altars reflects broader cultural adaptations, balancing traditional symbolism with contemporary practicality. Some traditional funeral practices have survived but have merged with newer customs, leading to hybrid rituals such as a Christian service following the traditional mourning period. Certain beliefs persist, including the idea that souls return to claim their belongings, the singing of mourning songs, and the offering of food to the deceased. However, animal sacrifices are no longer mandatory. While the Nyishi traditionally did not practice cremation, there are no exceptions these days, such as the cremation of a suicide victim, which the team learned via an interview with a respondent.



Fig. 10: A Christianized Nyishi Funeral.

Finally, the post-funeral stage, which focused on purification and spirit-banishing rites, has been shortened and relaxed, with digital mourning practices and virtual condolences emerging as new forms of commemoration. Many traditional rites, such as purification rituals ensuring the soul's safe passage to the afterlife, are no longer strictly observed. Funeral practices have also become more flexible, adapting to modern obligations and changing lifestyles. Younger generations favour streamlined rituals that balance tradition with contemporary lifestyles. Time constraints and financial considerations have further simplified funeral rites to the point of condensing multi-day ceremonies.

### *Acknowledgement*

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for providing financial support for this research. The generous funding and support from ICSSR have been instrumental in facilitating fieldwork, data collection, and analysis, ultimately contributing to the successful completion of this study.

### *References*

- Blackburn, Stuart (2005). The journey of the soul: Notes on funeral rituals and oral texts in Arunachal Pradesh, India. In J. Assmann & F. Michaels (Eds.), *Der abschied Von den Totem. Trauerrituale im kulturvergleich*, pp. 1-35. Gottingen: Wallstein.
- Bora, D.K. (1995). *Myths and tales of the Nishings of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Bora, D.K., Duarah, D.K., & Paul, B. (1997). *Impact of urbanisation in Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Himalayan Publishers.
- Danggen, Bani (2007). *A comparative study of Bon religion of Ancient Tibet with Donyi Polo Faith of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Pretty Publishers & Distributors.
- Das, N.K. (2018). Cosmology, world view and ecology among North-East Indian tribes: A critique. *South Asian Anthropologist* 18(2): 189-201.
- Davies, Douglas J. (2005). *A brief history of death*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Elwin, Verrier (2006). *A philosophy for NEFA* (5<sup>th</sup> Reprint Edition). Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Hertz, Robert (1960). *A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death*. Paris: L'Année Sociologique.
- Hina, Nabam Nakha (2017). Nyishi rituals: A study. In S.K. Singh & Ashan Riddi (Eds.), *Pre-colonial history and traditions of Arunachal Pradesh*, pp. 156-169. Guwahati: DVS Publishers.
- Mao, Nipuni K. (2011). *Rites of passage in North East India*. Shillong: DBCIC Publications.
- Mebi, Joram (2005). *Life cycle rites of the Nyishi: A case study of Joram village*. Master's dissertation, AITS, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh.
- Pertin, Batem (2014). *Ethnic communities of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Shukla, Brahma Kumar (1959). *The Daflas of the Subansiri Region*. Shillong: North-East Frontier Agency.
- Singh, K.S. (1995). *People of India: Arunachal Pradesh* (Volume XIV). Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India/Seagull Books.
- Tara, Tob Tarin (2005). *Nyishi World*. Itanagar: Eastern Horizon Offset Printer & Publishers.
- Tata, Nabam (n.d.). *Nyetam (Dwrnam): A book of hymns on death ritual (ceremony)*. Doimukh: Central Nyedar Namlo Executive Council.
- Turner, Victor (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Van Gennep, Arnold (1960). *The rites of passage*. [Translated by Monika B. Vizedom & Gabrielle L. Caffee]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.