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The Dress Pattern of Indigenous Ethnic Group of Northeast India with Special Reference to Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

Dr. Robin Hissang

Associate Professor cum Principal

Govt. College Seppa

East Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract:

This paper attempts to describe and analyse about the traditional dress pattern wears by women ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh of northeast India with special reference to Nyishi women during different occasion. There are various types of dress pattern used in social, religious and casual as formal and informal dress dresses which signifies their values and identity. The important roles dress and its values for any society reflects the cultural identity of any tribe so as Nyishi too. The paper discusses how Nyishi women plays significant roles in building the society with different dress pattern in Nyishi society of Arunachal India.

Keywords:

Traditional, Dress, Women, Pattern, Cultural, Formal, Informal, Arunachal Pradesh, Value, Identity, Society.

Brief Ethnography of Nyishi Tribe

The Nyishi, a principal tribe of Arunachal Pradesh have its own faith and belief system which regulate everyday life since time immemorial. The name of religion of the Nyishi tribe is known as *Donyipoloism* in which beliefs both *Donyi* and *Polo* play vital roles. The Nyishi considers *Donyi*(Sun) as *Ane Donyi* (mother Sun) and *Polo*(Moon) as *Abo Polo*(Father moon). The Nyishis is the largest groups (in terms of number as per 2011 census) There are 4, 42,000 population based on 2024 census. They inhabit in 8 districts namely East Kameng, Papumpare, Kurungkumey, Kra Dadi, Kamle, Pakkekessang, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, West Kameng, some parts of Sonitpur and North Lakhimpur district of Assam. Some scholars perceive Nyishi as individualistic in nature; it might be after observing their complete independent oriented behaviors. In actual, they are freedom lovers people, not submitted their independents characters and freedom before any rulers so easily, so no colonizers, even *Ahoms* and *British*, could not succeeded to rule over them (*Nyishi*) under their colonialism. Their men folk wear hair long and tie it in a knot just above the forehead. They wear cane bands around the waist. They believe that after death the spirit of a dead travels to the village of the ancestors. The basic unit of the *Nyishi* is the household which comprises of a number of related families in a clan. Each clan consists of a few lineages or groups of men and women tracing or claiming descent in the patrilineal line from a common ancestor because of its patriarchy society. The member of the same clan considers themselves as brothers and sisters

by following rule of clan exogamy. They are divided into innumerable clans, who maintains among themselves an oligarchic form of government and each accepts the authority of its own clan's head which sometimes comprise as much as thirty or forty in a single clan. His loyalties, at most, extend to his own clan. The bondage of kinship holds clan solidarity and is the basis of their cohesion and unity.

The nomenclature Nyishi is derived from two words “Nyi+Shi”, Nyi means “*man or human being*” and “Shi” means “*being*” or “*higher region*” or “*highlands*”. The other meaning of Nyi is originated from Nyi word from Tanyi means descendant of Tanyi. The Tanyi is the ancestral father of Nyishi. So, Nyishi means the descendant of Abo Tanyi. It is also define as ‘*Human Being*’ or people living at highland regions. The Nyihsi name for northern region or its people is ‘*Nyema*’ and the plain region or their plains neighbors are called ‘*Nyepak*’. So, Nyishi means inhabitants between the *Nyema* and *Nyepak*”. The Nyishi tribe is belongs to Mongoloid stock and Tibeto-Burman speaker.

The Nyishi tribe inhabits in eight districts of Arunachal Pradesh having population of around four lakhs twenty thousand (4, 20,000) only. The Nyishi speaks Tibeto-Burman language group and belong to Tibeto-Mongoloid racial stock.

Genesis of Textiles and Cloths Weaving in Nyishi

Every community have deep rooted civilization with specific technology for specific task thereby society moves forward. In Nyishi society too, it has own indigenous culture and faith having traditional knowledge system to regulate own community growth which has been passed down to the next generation by ancestors. In this way, the community have own system of every knowledge to develop every idea and technique to maintain well established social system. The Nyishi religion name is *Donyipolosim*; the *Donyipoloism* is comprised of two words i.e. *Donyi* and *Polo*, the *Donyi* means sun the supreme goddess and *Polo* means moon (the moon is considered for time and calendar in religion). The *Ane Donyi* (mother sun) have three spiritual incarnation forms viz. *Jengta Donyi* (spiritual and supreme one), the *Nyikam Donyi* (physical or celestial form as sun) who gives energy through sunrays to the universe and last one is *Donyi Bijine/Jwt Ane* (human form as lady) who later became wife *Abo Tanyi* and guided him about way of life, culture, faith, discipline, customs, codes, traditions, etc.

In Nyishi society, the cloth making knowledge system is practicing since immemorial which originated during *abo Tanyi* period. The *abo Tanyi* is considered as first human being on the earth as per the Nyishi's indigenous culture and faith. There are phases of evolution of *abo Tanyi* whom Nyishi society is considered as ancestral father. Even many scholars and writer mentioned about the traditional knowledge system of cloth making in their academic works. *Professor Christopher Von Furer Haimendrf* in his book “*The Tribes of Subansiri Region in 1940s (Ethnographic Notes on Subansiri Area) Published by Hydrabad Deccan, August 1946*”, described that the Nyishi, “*bought cloth, salt and iron rank for remotest import from plains area whereas all Nyishi of*

interior parts weave their own cloth, either of cotton or bark fiber (locally known as pudu). He derived the weaving culture of Nyishi tribe from village elders”.

Verrier Elwin mentioned, in his book, “*A Philosophy For NEFA*” published in 1957 by department of Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, “*they weave work through bark fiber of plants*” in where he explicitly mentioned about the weaving knowledge system of Nyishi in his research works. The outsider scholar during his filed visit interacted and observed the weaving technology of Nyishi.

During Tanyi stage, two persons named *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* also born who were considered as semi human form and was expert in weaving in textiles making and spinning. The Abo Tanyi during that stage was roaming in poor and naked condition, he covered his private from *oko*(canna lily leaf) the botanical name of canna lily is *curcuma longa*. So, he being half naked man was desperately need of cloths and searched for comfortable cloth for good life in jungle during evolutionary *Changhi namchang*(semi human form of ancestral father living period). After many months of searching food and cloths. At last, he encountered two semi human form namely *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako*. When he noticed both have skill of making weaving for cloths than he requested both of them to give cloths with sharing of indigenous knowledge for making weaving of textiles for cloths but *Abo Tanyi* did not have anything to give in return of cloths. So, both did not give him cloths rather offered useless and invaluable cloths to him. Meanwhile in contemporary of *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* in those periods, coupled named *Aji Yersi Bijine* and *Aji Yerlo Nyopo/Ralobo* procreated young, pretty, smart and beautiful lady named *Donyi Bijine* whom Nyishi community belief that she was incarnation of *Ajang Jangte Ane*(supreme goddess sun) as human form in woman. She was beautiful, discipline and hardworking lady. So, she was taught about knowledge of weaving and spinning of cloths by her mother *Aji Yersi Bijine*. Both experts named *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* were contemporary of *Aji Yerlo Nyopo/Ralobo* and *Aji Yersi Bijine*. So, both have learnt skill and technique of weaving and cloth making from *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako*. So, *Donyi Bijine/Jwt Ane* also had knowledge of cloth making and her hobby was weaving of clothes in her parent house’s front place called *Ajji Jyaling Ga Paaing* means household court yard of parent. Since, she was human form of *Ane Donyi* (supreme goddess sun) but she did not realize she is reincarnated. The *Abo Tanyi* liked her style of weaving and her varieties of cloths spinning and weaving skill so much and committed to marry her. Because, she learnt various styles of cloths weaving from her parents. Moreover, she was considered as prettiest lady in those days. Later on, *Abo Tanyi* married to *Donyi Bijine* by adopting unique wicked technique. Since onwards, *ane Donyi Bijine* started weaving cloths for her husband and the problem of cloths for *abo*(father) *Tanyi* solved for permanently and so still *Nyishi* have traditional knowledge of cloth weaving. So, the *Nyishi* tribe have received knowledge of weaving, textiles knowledge and cloths making. The *Nyishi* tribe narrates that the descendants of *Abo Tanyi* namely *Niha Tanyi* had progenited *Haring*, *Hagung*, *Hato* and *Hari*. From *Haring*, one son progenited namely *Ringdo*, again from *Ringdo*, three sons born namely *Dopum*, *Dodum* and *Dolo*. From *Hari*, four sons progenited viz. *Bingdung*, *Bengle*, *Nguri* and *Ngoha*. In this way, all descendants of *Abo*

Tanyi started migration from place name *Narba* and *Sakka/Cheka Namchang*(inhabited place/village located somewhere in Tibet/China) and crossed Himalayan mountain than followed route of important rivers named *Supung/Siang*(Bramputra), *Seham*(Siyum), and *Sinyik*(Sunbansiri). After crossing Trans-Himalayan range, they gradually scattered to the river basin of *Kumey*(Kamla), *Kurung*(Khru), *Kming*(Kameng), *Panor*(Ranganadi) and *Pare*(Dikrong). So, today, the *Nyishi tribe* is inhabited in eight districts of Arunachal Pradesh namely East Kameng, Papumpare, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, Kra Dadi, Kamle, Pakke Kessang, Upper Subasiri with population of total four lakhs as per the census of 2024.

Material and Process of Cloths Making

In Nyishi society traditional knowledge system, the *Nara Sangney*(*Kapok tree*) is most popular choice tree for making textiles weaving and cloths making. The botanical name of *Nara Sangne* is *Ceiba pentrana tree* and this is tall tree which their bark is use for cloths making specially its bark. The long bark of this tree is used for fiber making by the Nyishi tribe so that they can make cloths in olden days. In the month of *Perwa*(September) during *Dwro Polo* means during autumn season, soon after the harvesting of paddy field. The Nyishi people keeps time slot for harvesting of fiber for cloths making. The survey part to select the location of tree in forests is second steps for fiber making. After long survey, the third customs is selection the type of tree for fiber making based on ancestral faith and belief system by calculating the seasonal tree as per their traditional knowledge system followed since time immemorial by ancestors. After final choosing the particular tree, the fourth steps is to perform ritual known as *Moying Hingnam* in where the *Nyubus*(priests) is formally invites to perform ritual chanting as formal permission seeking to *Ato Sehi* and *Ayo Moro* (custodian deities of trees and river) to enter in to the forest with permission to do only fiber making activities for human clothing without destroying others natural resources with proper discipline with honour to *Yernebo*(god or mother nature). The fifth steps is to cutting the particular tree namely *Pudu Sangne*(jute green mallow plants) and the botanical name is *Corchorus-genus*, it is shrub plant species. It is erect herbaceous plant family branched and grows about 1.5 meter high even grown up to four meter height.

The *Pudu Sangne* is most popular choice tree for fiber making for textiles and weaving by the Nyishi people. After cutting down *Pudu Sangne*, the bark is taking out by using the local *Gechi*(traditional knife for cutting grass and bushes) than accumulate all tree's bark and keep in one place. After that, collected bark is put inside the big pot mixing with *Mubu*(fired kitchen burnt powder) than keep pot on heat boiling water for almost two hours. After proper boiled, the bark is taken out from pot than bark becomes softer than the soft bark is cleans proper by fresh water with rubbing it nicely. After rubbing it nicely than keeps it at open place for sun heat so that it can dry and after three hours sun heat dried, the *Sadang* (wooden hammer) heats over the dried bark. After hammered softly, it become very soft like thread than make it as worn or thread. The women are engaging for worn making after all raw material works completed by men folk than womenfolk spinning for final part of worn making. After all final process finished the gunny cloths making

begin known as *Lungjey Chamna* (manual cloths making) performed by using all cloths weaving tools of Nyishi community which are given in table no.1.

Table no.1:
Nyishi Cloths Weaving Tools

Sl.no.	Nyishi Name Weaving Tools	English name
1.	Rhbung Rhko	1st big size bamboo pipe tool made from bamboo
2.	Lomey	2 nd main big tool made from bamboo
3.	Naping	Small stick for balancing yarn
4.	Gangar	Kind
5.	Nawar	Thread spinning wheel
6.	Taapue	Flat tool for making yarn/cloths straight or flat
7.	Tanho	Thread/yarn
8.	Saadang	Hammer for worn making
9.	Nhni	Straight stick for making cloths proper line

Types Cloths in Nyishi

In Nyishi society, there are three types of cloths which are being carried down from ancestors to present days. They are use in different important occasions as per the fixed customs. They are as follows: -

1. Pudu Ajey,
 2. Pomo Ajey,
 3. Jeka ajey
1. Pudu Ajey: The Pudu ajey is also known as Pari ajey and it is basically white in colour with small red colour strip below the *pudu ajey* cloth which is made from *Pudu Sangne*(Pudu tree). This ajey(cloths) is basically puts wears during highly valued social occasion specially during highest form of ritual time viz. *Nyokum Yullo* (grandest/highest ritual festival) and *Nyeda*(marriage procession). In olden days, this Pudu ajey(ritual dress) was permissible puts during highest ritual activities occasion only viz. *Nyokum Yullo*, *Khyasang Yullo*, *Gungpo Yullo*, *Gungna uyus*, *Changtam* ritual, harvesting ritual and *Nyeda* ritual only. So, it is also considered as ritual dress of Nyishi community since time immemorial. The reasons is that, when *Ane Donyi Bijine/Jwt ane* was making cloths in her *Aji Jyaling Ga Pajing*(her parents' house court yard) than abo Tanyi humbly requested her for giving him this cloths than she explained the meaning and background of Pudu Ajey cloths in human being life. She told to abo Tanyi that “this cloth is not for ordinary people like you. This is exclusively for special purpose even you can ask to *Changtu Bwno* and

Deka Tako who discovered the formula and first made all types of cloths”. *Abo Tanyi* went to *Changtu Namchang*(dwelling place and asked *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* about the value of *Pudu ajey*, both also explained the same reasons that, “*Tanyi, ato Sehi* and *ayo Moro* asked both of us to inform to use these cloths only to wears the time of seeking blessing from deities”. The poor *Tanyi*’s ego hurts and he decided to marry her; at last, by applying wicked tactics he married to *Ane Bijine/Jwt Ane*. Henceforth, the white *Pudu* or *Pari ajey* is considered as ritual cloths in *Nyishi* society.

2. *Pomo Ajey*: The *Pomo ajey* is second cloth discovered and first made by *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* in *Changtu namchang* stage of *Nyishi*’s *abo Tanyi*’s *Nyishi* civilization discourse on the earth. It is covered with mixed of black and white strips in whole cloths and it look like exact zebra animal’s colour. This dress is also wears during ritual time and it is basically used for *Nyishi* muffler name *Byachi* and modern *Nyishi* coat.
3. *Jeka Ajey*: This is completely black colour cloths made by *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako*. This black cloths dress is meant for casual wearing. The black dress is basically to use for casual physical works and informal wears. This dress is not compulsory to wears during formal event but other two are compulsory to wears during highly social value event. The *Jeka Ajey* is ears during agricultural activities, physical works, informal and casual activities etc.

All three cloths were handed over to holy lady named *ayo Yaming*(first lady who taken the cloths from *Changtu Bwno*, *Deka Tako* and *Ane Donyi Bijine*) for preserved, promote and protect for custodian to carry forward the knowledge to next generation of human being. Later on, she passed it to *ato Gungtey* and *Ayo Gumro*(father and mother custodian of all *Nyishi*’s valuable properties). So, till today, *Nyishi* community pray *Ane Donyi*, *ayo Yaming*, *ato Gungtey* and *ayo Gumro* in every important ritual’s activity in form of priestly chanting during the individual family and community festival as part of acknowledgement to them with pray for showering of abundance blessing for more ornaments and property in days to come for peace, prosperity and happiness of human being on the earth. Presently, there are various form of new various types of dresses made from three *ajey*(cloths) in *Nyishi* community. In table no.2, the various types or design for *Nyishi* dress made of *Pudu Ajey*, *Pomo ajey* and *Jeka ajey* are given.

Table no.2 Design of Nyishi dress made from three forms

Sl.no.	Type of Nyishi Dress	English Explanation
1.	Byachi/Tunam	Mafler made from Pomo ajey
2.	Galey	Lady formal dress from Pudu and Pomo ajey
3.	Lalleq	Shirt/Sleeve
4.	Haging	Inner Wear made from Jeka ajey
5.	Jeka Ajey	Casual Black dress
6.	Nara Ajey	Traditional common dress
7.	Phoba	Half shawl

8.	Phusu	Cloth belt for tied
9.	Pomo Dress	One variety of Nyishi dress
10.	Rabya ajey	Style of dress knot tied on shoulder
11.	Yekdho	Cloths knot tied on both shoulder
12.	Zatam	Coat
13.	Zokyo	Half coat

Change and Continuity

The concept of weaving, spinning and textiles activities is age old practices and an important socio-economic part of Nyishi culture which still carry forward by ancestors' father as per technology taught by *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* than learnt and adopted Abo Tanyi by passed down by old generation to the next generation. The pristine form of all three dresses is still preserved and promotes by various Nyishi community and its organizations but due to modernization the various fashionable and new designs dresses enters into indigenous dress style. Moreover, though all three original dresses form is well preserved and continue but the ritual dress i.e. *Pudu ajey* one is unable to preserved for ritual activities as earlier due to influences of various outsiders culture and faith by wears indigenous dress and ornaments to maintain the camouflage tribal identity but distorted the indigenous *Pudu ajey's* sanctity meant for indigenous ritual which is major challenges to maintain its core socio-religious values of indigenous Nyishi's cloths.

Conclusion

The change is law of nature but the pristine form of any civilization values of any material culture need to preserved and protected originated meant for its actual purposes. In modern parlance, *Changtu Bwno* and *Deka Tako* were actual scientists who discovered and produced cloths in Nyishi civilization life than passed it to *ayo Yaming* the preserver of Nyishi cloths after produced by both. The objective of producing different form of cloths for different purposes need to well-maintained without distortion in uses and proper further social legalization of traditional ritual dresses need to be enacted so that the social ritual important of dress and cloths can place properly with clarity for averting future misunderstanding of next generation.

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