

# Negotiating Nature, Spirit and Society: An Ethno-Historical Study of *Nyishi*'s Beliefs, Myths, Taboos and Ritualistic Festival

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## Abstract

The Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh possesses a rich tradition of myths, legends and religious practices that highlight their role in shaping the community's cultural and religious worldview. Myths and legends preserved through oral tradition serve as foundational narratives that explain the origin of the universe, the emergence of humankind and the functioning of natural phenomena. Far from being mere imaginative tales, these narratives embody symbolic truths and reflect the Nyishi people's attempt to understand and negotiate their relationship with nature and the supernatural realm. Central to their belief system is the existence of benevolent and malevolent spiritual forces, as well as the reverence for supreme cosmic entities symbolised by the sun and the moon. Rituals and sacrifices performed under the guidance of the *Nyib* (priest) serve as essential mechanisms for maintaining harmony among humans, spirits, and the environment. The observance of taboos and the celebration of festivals such as Boori-Boot Yullo further reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity. Overall, the study underscores the integral connection between myth, religion and ecological adaptation in Nyishi society.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Cosmology, Belief System, Ritual Practices, Nyishi Ethnography

## Introduction

Myths and legends are integral to human societies, serving as key mediums through which communities interpret the origins of the universe, human existence and the relationship between natural and supernatural worlds. The term myth, derived from the Greek word *mythos*, refers to narratives explaining cosmic creation, divine actions and fundamental truths. Rather than being mere fiction, myths are now understood as symbolic expressions of cultural knowledge and collective experience. Legends, on the other hand, are traditional narratives linked to specific people, places or events and are often viewed as semi-historical accounts that reinforce social memory and identity.

Indigenous societies like those in Arunachal Pradesh rely on myths and legends to preserve culture and pass down beliefs. The *Nyishi* tribe maintains a rich oral tradition, where stories explain creation, human origins and natural forces, reflecting a worldview rooted in nature

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and spirituality. Their belief system emphasizes harmony between humans, nature and the spiritual world which are maintained through rituals, sacrifices and taboos led by the *Nyib* (priest). Festivals such as *Boori-Boot Yullo* strengthen social unity and cultural identity. Studying *Nyishi* myths reveals the deep connection between culture, environment and religion in sustaining indigenous knowledge and traditions.

### **Myths and Legends as Reflections of *Nyishi* Society**

The word “myth” is derived from the Greek term *mythos*, meaning a story about gods or superhuman beings. Although myths are often considered imaginary or unreal, they hold deep importance in religious and historical contexts. Rather than mere fiction, myths represent early human efforts to understand the supernatural and explain the origins of life, nature and the universe. They reflect meaningful encounters with forces beyond ordinary human experience and form a vital part of major religions. In contrast, legends are traditional stories associated with specific people, events or places. While they may include supernatural elements, legends are usually linked to historical reality and are often presented as believable accounts.

Similarly, like other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the *Nyishi* people of Kamle possess a rich body of myths and legends concerning the creation of the world, flora and fauna, the origin of humankind, as well as their religion and festivals. Living in the rugged terrains of Arunachal Pradesh, they have continuously adapted to their natural environment in order to live in harmony and avoid disease, suffering and misfortune. Despite this, many natural phenomena remained mysterious to them. Their deep curiosity about the origins of the world gave rise to numerous myths and legends explaining the existence of plants and animals, the arrival of humans on earth and the foundations of their cultural and religious practices.

### **Mythical versions of the *Nyishi* about the creation of the world.**

According to *Nyishi* mythology, the entire cosmos was once silent and empty, which is known as *Kurum Jiimi Kool Jaama*. The exact time period of origin, creation and evolution of the universe is unknown, dating back several million years. It was several millions of centuries ago, which is termed as *Kurum Kool*, the first object called *Himb*, a semi-fluid-like structure, was formed in that space (*Kurum Jiimi Kool Jaama*). From *Himb*, slowly and gradually all heavenly bodies were created, which included stars and planets whom the *Nyishi* popularly called *Takar* (stars), *Ejii* or *Donyi* (sun), *Hingo Phol* (moon), *Siichi* (earth) and other heavenly bodies. Of those heavenly bodies, the *Siichi*, also called *Chiit* (Earth) and *Doot* (Sky, Space and celestial bodies), were in close contact, which were essential for procreation and proliferation of life on earth. The earth, sky and celestial bodies were separated and held apart with the help of an unseen force known as *Siichi-Nyido Giil-Daal*, viz., the gravitational forces that held together Earth and the celestial objects of our cosmos. After the separation of Earth and Sky, including the celestial bodies such as Moon and Stars, the space between the Earth and Sky was filled with *Duri* (Air), *Ejii* or *YiyuDonyi* (The ancient Sun, primaeval fire source), *Hei* (The Water Bodies) and *Hingo* or *Mama-Phol* (The

Moon). Thus, the configuration of the celestial objects of the universe was completed<sup>1</sup>.

### Myths of the *Nyishi* about the creation of man.

After the creation of the sun, moon, earth and configuration of all the celestial bodies, the first living creature born on earth was *Biir-Biima*. The *Biir-Biima* gave birth to *Yiikum-Temii*, and *Yiikum-Temii* gave birth to *Opo-Ane*, and *Opo-Ane* gave birth to several supernatural spirits in two phases. In the first phase, she (*Opo-Ane*) gave birth to all benevolent Gods and spirits and in the second phase, she gave birth to all malevolent spirits. As per the traditional spiritual classification made by the *Nyishi*, there are two types of divine spiritual forces that exist in the Cosmos. First is the conglomerates of the Benevolent Gods, Goddesses and Spirits, which are called as *Lagbek Wui*, that means, the Right-Hand Side Gods, Goddesses and Spirits, and the second is the conglomerates of Malevolent Gods, Goddesses and Spirits, which are called as *Lakchi Wui*, that means, the Left-Hand Side Gods, Goddesses and Spirits<sup>2</sup>.

After *Biir-Biima*, the next living creature to come into existence on earth was the *Chiitu Aane*, who gave birth to *Tuni* (also known as *Chiituge Tuni* or *Kurum Teen*), the first *Aab-Tani*. According to *Nyishi* legends, there were several forms of *Aab-Tani* that evolved in successive evolutionary periods, one after another. The first semi-human form of *Tani* was *Kurum Tani* or *Nyima Tani*. The second last form of *Aab-Tani* was called *Nyiyii Tani*. From *Nyiyii Tani*, two sons were born. The first son was *Poi (Wui) Tani*, who loves darkness and as a result, remains active during nighttime. Some supernatural spirits were born from *Poi Tani* to maintain the balance of nature, and are under the strict command and control of the fountainhead God and Goddess (*Yullo Wui*). The second son was *Nyai Tani*, who loves daylight. It is the *Nyai Tani* who represents humankind and remains active during the daytime. So, the *Nyishis* believe that the present-day *Nyishi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh have evolved from the *Nyai Tani*. In addition to these, the *Nyishi* possess a wide range of myths and legends that explain the origins of natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, and earthquakes, as well as the creation of birds, animals and reptiles. These narratives also encompass the discovery of fire, the evolution of religious beliefs and other aspects of their cultural worldview<sup>3</sup>.

### Between Spirit and Society: Exploring the Beliefs and Practices of the *Nyishi* People

The religion of the *Nyishi* people is primarily an oral tradition, as their beliefs and practices have not been recorded in written form. Instead, they are transmitted from one generation to another through word of mouth. Because of this, their religion is flexible, diverse and non-dogmatic. In *Nyishi* society, religion is not separate from daily life but is closely connected with social, cultural and environmental practices. The origin of their religious beliefs, like those of many indigenous communities, is rooted in myths and traditions that are as old as the tribe itself. These are preserved in traditional ballads known as *Nyib-Agoms*. Through such

<sup>1</sup> Pamphlet of Central Boori Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar: Version-2.4, Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, dated 01/01/2023, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pamphlet of Central Boori Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar: Version-2.4, Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, dated 01/01/2023, 6-7.

narratives, they tried to explain the origin and control of natural phenomena and sought ways to live peacefully and avoid suffering.

A central aspect of *Nyishi* belief is the existence of two categories of spiritual forces known as *Wui*, which govern the spiritual realm. These are broadly divided into benevolent and malevolent spirits. The benevolent spirits are known as *Lagbek Wui*, or the “Right-Hand Side Spirits.” These spirits are considered gentle, peaceful, tolerant and wise, embodying higher cosmic knowledge. They are protectors of humanity and are associated with prosperity, health and harmony. On the other hand, the malevolent spirits are known as *Lakchi Wui*, or the “Left-Hand Side Spirits.” These are believed to be aggressive, impulsive, powerful and often responsible for bringing suffering, misfortune and disease.

The *Nyishi* people do not practice ancestor worship, which is a distinguishing feature compared to many other tribal communities. Instead, the spirits of deceased family members are believed to become *Orom*, which are potentially harmful entities. These *Orom* spirits must be appeased through rituals to prevent them from causing tragedies or misfortune within the family. This belief reflects the *Nyishi* understanding that even familiar spirits can become dangerous if not properly managed.

Another important feature of *Nyishi* cosmology is the belief that the entire natural world is inhabited by spirits. Every element of nature—such as mountains, rivers, forests, trees, stones and animals is considered an abode of spiritual beings. This animistic worldview fosters a deep sense of respect for the environment. The *Nyishi* people believe that human actions, particularly those that harm nature, can disturb these spirits and lead to disastrous consequences. The benevolent *Wui* play a crucial role in ensuring the welfare of individuals, families, and the community as a whole. These spirits are worshipped and propitiated through regular rituals and sacrifices to seek blessings for good harvests, health, prosperity and harmony. Some important benevolent spirits include *Geli Paka*, *Chutum Bhot* and *Nyode Wui*. There are also specialised deities associated with different aspects of life, such as *El Wui*, the goddess of crops; *Pirth Wui*, the goddess of granaries; *Chijum Boo Wui*, the goddess of the hearth; *Namra Wui*, the goddess of the house; and *Moian Wui*, the goddess of harvest. These deities are invoked regularly throughout the year, and offerings are made to ensure their continued blessings.

However, the *Nyishi* believe that even benevolent spirits can become indifferent or allow harm to occur if they are not properly appeased. This highlights the importance of continuous ritual practices and the maintenance of a respectful relationship with the spiritual world. In contrast, the malevolent spirits are considered the primary cause of suffering and misfortune. These spirits are believed to bring diseases, natural calamities and various forms of hardship. Events such as floods, droughts, landslides, famine and epidemics are often attributed to the anger or actions of these spirits. Malevolent spirits are thought to inhabit places like forests, rivers, ponds, large trees and stones. They are believed to possess immense power, capable of affecting human beings both in life and after death. Several specific malevolent spirits are recognised in *Nyishi* belief. For example, *Yapom Wui* is believed to reside in dark and dense forests and is known for causing people, especially hunters and children, to go missing. Another feared spirit is *Iichi Duel Wui*, associated with epidemics. To prevent the spread of

disease caused by this spirit, the community may erect barricades and perform elaborate rituals. There is also the belief in *Opo Wui*, referring to individuals possessed by evil spirits, often due to enmity or inherited spiritual conditions. Additionally, some people are believed to be born with *Tuyum Wui*, an evil force in their eyes or tongue, capable of harming others through sight or speech. An important aspect of *Nyishi* belief is that even benevolent spirits can turn malevolent if provoked by human actions. Spirits such as *Nyido Kolo Wui* (sky spirit) and *Nyiko Wui* (earth spirit) may become angered by environmental destruction, such as deforestation, pollution, or careless use of fire. Such disturbances are believed to result in natural disasters like storms, heavy rains, and strong winds. This reflects an ecological consciousness in *Nyishi* belief, emphasising the need for sustainable interaction with nature. To deal with both benevolent and malevolent spirits, the *Nyishi* rely heavily on rituals and sacrifices. These practices are central to their religious life and are performed during important occasions such as festivals, marriages and times of crisis. Sacrifices are offered to appease spirits, seek blessings and restore balance in the spiritual and natural world.

Overall, the *Nyishi* belief system emphasises the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between humans, nature and the spiritual world. Misfortunes, diseases and disasters are seen as consequences of disrupting this balance, often due to human negligence or disrespect toward nature and spirits. Through rituals, sacrifices and the guidance of the *Nyib*, the *Nyishi* strive to restore harmony and ensure the well-being of their community.

### **Traditional Rituals and Sacrificial Customs of the *Nyishi* People**

Rituals and sacrifices are the vital components of the tribal society. As ritual cannot exist without sacrifice and vice versa, both are complementary. Simply stated, ritual is the act of recognising and mediating with the offended deity and spirit, while sacrifice is the ultimate agreement between the two<sup>4</sup>. Every ritual includes components of invocation, argumentation, and contemplation, which are followed by the offering of sacrifices. Using divination, the priest performs them in many ways. Depending on the requirements and preferences of the relevant deity or spirit, sacrifices of all kinds are offered in the form of domesticated animals, such as Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*), cows, pigs, goats, poultry, dogs, eggs, etc.

The *Nyishis* have a strong sense of the unseen world, which they believe to be filled with an immense variety of gods, spirits and demons and into which they themselves expect to enter after death. They strongly believe in their powers to harm or help humanity. To mediate between the powers of the unseen world and mankind, the priests are born. It is through sacrifices and rituals conducted by the priest that all the unseen powers can be appeased. All these sacrifices and rituals are performed as per the needs of a person. The foremost purpose for offering sacrifice is to cure the disease of a person, which is thought to be brought on by the malevolent *Wuis*. After identifying the malevolent *Wui* responsible for the disease, the next step is to propitiate the *Wui*, which is ascertained by means of divination. The sacrifices are to be done exactly in the same manner as revealed in the divination. Divinations are done by the priests either through examination of a chicken's liver or the yolk of an egg to figure out the type of sacrifices that are necessary. Animal sacrifice plays a

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<sup>4</sup> As narrated by Taylor Murtem, *Nyib* (Priest), during Field Study by Author, Jigi Village, Arunachal Pradesh, 17-10-2025.

pivotal role in all ritualistic ceremonies. The *Nyib* invokes the *Wuis* to accept the sacrificed animals and fowls instead of the patient's *Yal* (soul) that was in their captivity. If a patient starts improving, it is presumed that the *Wui* has accepted the offering<sup>5</sup>.

Sacrifice of animals and fowls is also done to appease the benevolent *Wui* on different occasions, such as at the time of peace and prosperity. Sacrifices are offered to the *Donyi Phol* and the benevolent *Wuis* to achieve material prosperity and good health for a person, his family and clan members as a whole. Sometimes offerings are also made to the *Donyi Phol* and the Benevolent *Wuis*, so that the *Yal* of a dead person may reach them and live in their safe custody. According to their beliefs, after death, a person's *Yal* travels to another world (*Wui Mok*).<sup>6</sup>

They also perform sacrificial rituals to avenge the enemy in retaliation and to get the help and blessings of the supernatural power for this purpose. Such a sacrificial ritual is called as *Sotung Erapt*. The *Wuis* are invoked to punish the enemy. Further, other sacrifices are made to prevent any sort of natural calamities. The sacrifices are performed to drive off the evils *Wuis* from harming the village dwellers. Such sacrificial rituals are called as *Potor*, *MokoYulu*, etc. In such rituals, Mithun and other animals are sacrificed to appease the evil spirits. The presence of unusual things or the occurrence of any unusual events also calls for the performance of sacrifices for the *Nyishi* people. As such, when they come across any abnormally shaped trees or wild creepers while clearing the jungle for cultivation, sacrifices are conducted because they believe that these unusual things are the work of the *Yapom* (*Wui* of the jungle). Even the killing of deformed or mutilated animals like boar, tiger, leopard, bear, etc., is considered a bad omen. As a result, people undertake sacrifices to ensure that the soul of that animal does not harm the perpetrator or his family members.<sup>7</sup>

The *Wui Riigi* is constructed with bamboo and leaves of particular wild trees and plants as instructed by the *Nyib*. They are abundantly decorated with fine bamboo shavings. The sacrificial altar is constructed in such a way that it represents different spirits. All the animals and fowls that are to be sacrificed are tied to it, and chanting is done by the *Nyib* before they are killed. Some parts of the sacrificed animals, especially of mithun and pig, are considered sacred, such as blood, mouth, tongue and heart. These sacrificed items are shared only among the clan members because of their sacredness, which, on the other hand, promotes the feeling of oneness and unity among the clan members. Different methods are adopted to kill the sacrificial animal or fowl for the rituals such as *Porok* (chicken) is killed by cutting from the lower part of the neck by *Habo Rikchik* (small knife); *Iik* (Dog) is killed by striking on head by stick; *Siben* (goat) is killed by striking on the upper part of neck with *Orok* (Dao); *Erek* (pig) is killed by piercing through the chest by *tombh* (Sharp bamboo stick) and lastly *Sob* (Mithun) is killed by striking on the lower part of the head with *Hiigi* (Axe)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> As narrated by Tayor Murtem, *Nyib* (Priest), during Field Study by Author, Jigi Village, Arunachal Pradesh, 17-10-2025.

<sup>6</sup> As narrated by Tiikir Yitor, *Nyib* (Priest), during Field Study by Author, Yitor Village, Arunachal Pradesh, 11-02-2026.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> As narrated by Tiikir Yitor, *Nyib* (Priest), during Field Study by Author, Yitor Village, Arunachal Pradesh, 11-02-2026.

Figure 1: Sacrifice of Animals during Boori- Boot Yullo Festival.



Source: Photo taken by Author while witnessing Boori-Boot Yullo Festival Celebration.

Thus, the *Nyishi* people propitiate and pacify both benevolent and malignant spirits in order to have a happy, fruitful and meaningful existence. The *Nyib* directs the purpose and procedure of the entire sacrificial process based on omens and all necessary preparations are made accordingly. It is very fascinating to comprehend that it is the *Wui* which communicates to the *Nyib* regarding what items should be sacrificed in the rituals such as the colour, sex, age or quantity of animals and fowls. They have little choice but to make arrangements in line with the spirit's demands; otherwise, the *Wui* may become enraged and cause adversities to them. In *Wui Riigi*, the spiritual deities are accurately represented in different symbols to which sacrifices are offered. A generous amount of the blood of a sacrificial animal or bird is applied against the symbol of each spiritual deity, supposedly as an indication of sacrifice. Finally, the *Nyib* concludes every ritual and sacrifice by outlining the rules of conduct for each individual, family and the community at large. Maintaining restrictions is not only a must but also necessary because of coming into agreement between mankind and the spirit through *Nyib* as a mediator. Any deviation from the terms of the agreement will be regarded as a breach, leading to the recurrence of all problems and hardships.

### **The System of Taboos in *Nyishi* Society**

The concept of taboo, broadly understood as a set of prohibitions governed by social and religious norms, plays a significant role in many traditional societies. Among the *Nyishi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, taboos locally known as *Err-Donam* form an essential part of their cultural and religious life. These taboos are not merely restrictions but are deeply embedded in their worldview, functioning as protective mechanisms against misfortune, illness and supernatural harm. They regulate human behaviour, reinforce social discipline and maintain harmony between humans and the spiritual realm.

In general terms, a taboo refers to anything forbidden, whether it involves actions, objects, individuals or even sensory contact such as seeing, touching or consuming certain things. Such prohibitions are often believed to guard against harmful forces, including malevolent spirits and supernatural entities. For the *Nyishi*, taboos permeate almost every aspect of life and act as constant checks on both physical and mental impulses. Violating these taboos is

thought to invite the wrath of spirits and result in adverse consequences such as sickness, bad luck, or even death. The *Nyishi* system of taboos is closely tied to their religious beliefs and ritual practices. Observance of *Err-Donam* is considered indispensable, especially after performing sacrificial rituals. These taboos are prescribed by the *Nyib*, who determines their nature and duration based on the specific problem faced by an individual or community and the type of ritual performed. While the entire family, clan, or even village may be required to observe these restrictions, they are often most stringent for the affected individual, particularly if the ritual is performed for healing purposes.

The origin of these taboos can be traced to *Nyishi* mythology. According to their belief system, *Aab-Tani*, the mythical ancestor of the *Nyishi* people, once coexisted with *Wuis* (spirits). *Aab-Tani* possessed extraordinary powers, which made the spirits envious. This jealousy led to continuous conflict between them. Eventually, to resolve these disputes, the natural world was divided: fertile and habitable lands were allocated to *Aab-Tani* and his descendants, while barren and inhospitable areas were assigned to the *Wuis*. Despite this separation, the spirits are believed to interfere in human affairs, and taboos serve as a means to avoid such interference and maintain a safe distance from the supernatural domain<sup>9</sup>. Following ritual ceremonies, the *Nyishi* observe three primary types of taboos. The first is the restriction on movement. Individuals involved in the ritual, especially the patient and their family members, are required to remain confined within their homes for a specified period. The duration varies depending on the scale of the ritual, ranging from a few days to as long as ten days or even a month in the case of major sacrifices. This confinement is believed to protect them from external contamination and spiritual harm. The second type of taboo involves restrictions on certain activities. Immediately after a ritual, people are prohibited from engaging in tasks such as cutting large trees, digging the earth, hunting, or fishing. These activities are believed to disturb the spiritual balance and may provoke the spirits. By abstaining from such work, the community ensures that the effects of the ritual are not negated. The third category pertains to food restrictions. During the period of *Err-Donam*, the patient and participating family members must avoid consuming specific foods, including certain vegetables, fruits, and animal products. Commonly restricted items include pumpkin (*Taph*), cucumber (*Muku*), green chilli (*Yuluk*), and other foods considered “itchy” or unsuitable. The choice of restricted foods depends on the nature of the ritual and the perceived cause of the problem. These dietary limitations are believed to aid in recovery and prevent further complications.

Apart from ritual contexts, taboos are also observed during significant life events. For instance, during the advanced stages of a woman’s pregnancy, her husband must adhere to strict prohibitions. He is forbidden from killing animals, birds, insects, or snakes, as well as from cutting certain plants such as cane (*Takek Siin*) and wild banana (*Kopo Kol*). He is also not allowed to attend funerals. Any violation of these taboos is believed to negatively affect the unborn child, potentially leading to miscarriage or deformity. Death is another occasion that necessitates the observance of taboos. In cases of burial, particularly involving unnatural deaths such as suicide or murder, women and minors are often restricted from participating.

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<sup>9</sup> As narrated by Binye Mite (Head Gaon Bura) during field study by the Author, Ade Village, Arunachal Pradesh, 22-12-2025.

Those who take part in burial rituals must undergo a purification ceremony known as *Pai Hekak* before re-entering their homes, as they are considered spiritually contaminated. Similarly, in cases of snakebite which is viewed as an ominous sign, special rituals like *Potor Dignam* are performed, during which the consumption of certain foods, especially fermented soybean (*Peyak*) and itchy edibles, is strictly prohibited. Women also observe taboos during menstruation and childbirth. During menstruation, a woman is prohibited from engaging in sexual relations with her husband, as it is believed to cause impurity and misfortune. Such restrictions highlight the cultural perception of these biological processes as periods of vulnerability requiring careful regulation.

### **Nyishi Festival: Celebrations of Nature and Culture**

Festivals are celebrated on diverse occasions as moments of joy, feasting, entertainment and ritual observances. While some festivals are marked by individuals or families, others bring together the entire community in collective celebration. Each festival is unique, reflecting regional customs, cultural practices and traditional values. These celebrations often carry deep historical roots or meaningful narratives that shape their significance. The rituals and festivities associated with each festival are largely influenced by this rich heritage, preserving cultural identity and passing traditions from one generation to another. Most of the festivals of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh are connected with agriculture. Every tribe have their own festival, through which its religious beliefs and practices, tradition and culture, hopes and aspirations, joys and excitements of life find light and expressions. Besides these, festivals for them are also an expressive strategy to glorify culture, heritage and traditions. It is crucial for establishing connections with family and friends and thereby establishing social relations. It also provides diversion to them from their everyday exhausting routines of life and thereby gives them time to relax and rejuvenate (Haimendorf, 1984, 85). Festivals also strive to pass on knowledge, heritage, and traditions to forthcoming generations.

The main festival of the *Nyishi* of Kamle is *Boori-Boot Yullo*, which is a socio-religious festival celebrated by the whole community since time immemorial. Initially, *Boori-Boot Yullo* was performed as *Boori Wui or Boot Wui* at the village level in the earlier days without any fixed dates to seek the divine blessings and protection from the almighty during outbreaks of epidemics and to express gratitude to benevolent Mother Nature and almighty Gods and Goddesses for bestowing different forms of divine blessings to mankind. It was in 1967, under the initiative of NEFA administration, that the terms *Boori- Wui or Boot Wui* were written as *Boori Boot* and got recognition as a socio-religious festival of the *Nyishi* people of Kamle. With its changed identity, the *Boori-Boot Yullo* was celebrated with mass participation of the community members at a central place located in Raga from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1968, wherein late Shri Dying Ering, the then Deputy Union Minister of food and agriculture, Government of India, attended the festival as the Chief Guest<sup>10</sup>.

Hence, from the year 1968 onwards, this festival has been popularly celebrated annually in mass scale among the Kamle *Nyishi* of Arunachal Pradesh with traditional fervor and gaiety. Again in 1974, the date of celebration of *Boori-Boot* was rescheduled which commenced

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<sup>10</sup> Pamphlet on The Mythology of Boori-Boot Yullo, Version-2,4 (Brief), Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, Published by Central Boori-Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, 5.

from 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> February. This date of celebration of *Boori-Boot* was chosen because it coincides with the *Nyishi* New Year month called *Rajo Phol*. It is believed that during these winter months, the gods and spirits of heaven have the warmest disposition towards earth and mankind, and are ready to fulfil the good wishes of their wonderful creations. These age-old traditional faiths and beliefs, which have been orally passed down from generation to generation since time immemorial, have a direct or indirect influence on the social and economic condition of the *Nyishi*. This traditional faith and belief system, though shrouded in the mysteries of rites and ceremonies, finds constant expression in the daily lives of the *Nyishis* living in different bio-cultural landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh, thereby consolidating its relevance to the truth of the metaphysics of the universe<sup>11</sup>.

As per the spiritual concept of the *Nyishi*, the etymology of the terms '*Boori*' and '*Boot*' refers to the community, whereas '*Yullo*' refers to all forms of spiritual and divine forces which are believed to control the universal activities of mankind and the entire forces of the cosmos. Therefore, the terms *Boori-Boot* refer to community deities. Whereas the term '*Yullo Wui*' refers to the highest order of the community deities, which is the fountain head of God and Goddess, the master of all spirits who have the ultimate divine power and have direct control over their subordinate ranks of spirits, which are further classified into several categories. The malevolent and benevolent spirits (*Wui*) exist, operate and sustain under the guidance, command and control of '*Yullo Wui*', which is essential to fulfil the cycle of nature.

#### **Mythological origin of performing *Boori-Boot Yullo*.**

The time *Aab-Tani* was born, the groundwork of the Almighty for the creation of the universe was already completed. Now, the universe was left to develop itself by the actions of its constituents. Accordingly, it went on smoothly on Earth for a long time. However, in due course of time, the earthly thoughts and feelings, desires and contempt gradually overpowered the consciousness and wisdom of both supernatural spirits and mankind. With the emergence of these gross confusions and conflicts over ownership and ascendancy over limited earthly resources, *Aab-Tani*, being lonely human being and having been gifted with the intelligence to reason and foresee the future event, was the target of evil plots of jealous supernatural spirits, who were large in number. Legends say that *Aab-Tani* had one extra eye on the back side of his head to foresee the present and future events of the whole world and the universe, which he had lost in one such wicked plot of the evil spirits. With no divine forecasting power left with him, the life of *Aab-Tani* grew harder and harder due to the villainous conduct of the supernatural evil spirits, who were large in number. Ultimately, *Aab-Tani* decided to destroy the *Siichi- Nyido Giil Daal*, which is believed to be the unseen gravitational forces, in order to create chaos and havoc in the whole world. So, one day, he set out with the decision to destroy the *Siichi- Nyido Giil Daal*, the unseen gravitational forces that held together Earth, planets, and Sun in this cosmos and regulate their movement on a fixed path around the sun. Because of the destruction of the *Siichi- Nyido Giil Daal*, the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

*Chiwt and Doot* would collapse, and everything, including life in between them, would vanish due to accidents of the planetary system in space<sup>12</sup>.

This drastic decision of *Aab-Tani* sent a shockwave across the kingdoms of both supernatural spirits and Gods in heaven. Everyone, including the evil spirits who were responsible for the miseries of *Aab-Tani*, wished that *Aab-Tani* be immediately pacified and the living creatures of the world be saved from impending chaos and destruction. Out of panic, the Gods and supernatural *Wui* invoked the divine intervention of the Almighty, the fountain head of Gods and Goddesses (*Yullo Wui*), to pacify *Aab-Tani* to save the whole world. Then the *Sii-Bo* (*Sii-Abo*), the authority of the whole world and chief negotiator of the conflict, along with *Durii-Chijji with Moro Chin, Pumin Pote Chin, Giida Giit Chin and Chiitum Aei Niwt Bote Chin* as representatives of *Yullo Wui* ultimately came together and pacified the anger of the *Aab-Tani* by offering the divine power and alternative survival strategies for mankind. The *Aab-Tani* acknowledged the gravity of the *Sii-Bo*'s advice and was ready to follow his divine instructions. To resolve the conflict and to deliver justice to *Aab-Tani* and all the supernatural spirits, *Sii-Bo* summoned a mega convention. All the benevolent and malevolent Gods, Goddesses, supernatural spirits of different orders, *Aab-Tani* and every creation of the Almighty were party to that convention. In that historic convention of Gods and Spirits, which is popularly known as *Boorii-Duyii*, the *Sii-Bo* preached a sermon on the unity, and he ultimately propounded the universal law of existence. He brought out in detail the destinations and limitations of every creation of nature, the ways and means of existence, the law of survival and continuance of all the creations. After the convention was concluded, *Sii-Bo* advised *Aab-Tani* to recall the *Boorii- Duyii* wherever confusions and conflicts between the supernatural spirits and mankind arise or when in need of the Almighty's divine interventions and blessings<sup>13</sup>. So, in accordance with the sermon of the *Sii-Bo*, the great grandfather of knowledge and wisdom who controls the activity of the whole world, *Aab-Tani* and his descendants till now commemorate that great occasion of *Boorii Duyii* in the form of *Boori Wui or Boot Wui*, which is popularly solemnized in the name of *Boori-Boot Yullo*<sup>14</sup>.

As such, *Boori-Boot Yullo* is a mega socio- religious and cultural event which is celebrated in the form of a community festival accompanied by a few days of customary rites and ritualistic ceremonies. *Boori-Boot Yullo Wui* is also performed to acknowledge the contributions of divine forces of *Donyi Phol*, the Almighty, for maintaining peaceful co-existence between the human community and supernatural spiritual world, protection of human lives from epidemic diseases, promotion of social harmony, protection of crops from pests and diseases, for bumper harvest of crops, proliferation of livestock population and successful completion of nature's cycle.

The traditional ritualistic ceremonies are performed by continuous chanting of ritual hymns for 3 to 4 days by the spiritually ordained *Nyib* (priest), who is assisted by *Boh* (Assistant

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<sup>12</sup> Pamphlet on The Mythology of Boori-Boot Yullo, Version-2,4 (Brief), Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, Published by Central Boori-Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Pamphlet on The Mythology of Boori-Boot Yullo, Version-2,4 (Brief), Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, Published by Central Boori-Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

priest). Reared animals like *Sob* (mithun), *Sibin* (goat), *Erek* (pig), *Soa* (cow), *Porok* (fowl) and *Pip* (chicken egg), etc., are sacrificed in the *Wui Riigi* (sacrificial altar) to offer them to the divine spirit, *Boori Boot Yullo Wui*. Along with reared animals, other items such as *Etti* (rice powder), *Tek* (paste of ginger) and a matured and highly concentrated form of millet wine called *Opo Ponya* are also offered to the *Boori Boot Yullo Wui* and different orders of spirits as a token of gifts to seek their divine blessings for mankind. *Riigi Enam* is a grand ritual procession that happens right after the animals are sacrificed. During this grand procession, *Etti* (rice powder) mixed with *Tek* and soaked with water and a few drops of *Opo Ponya*, which are considered sacred, are abundantly sprinkled around *Riigi* by women folks, because rice represents the divine will and happiness of the Almighty God to sustain the human race on earth, and the use of rice powder indicates the abundance of that divine will. Hence, the evil spirits who are conscious of this divine implication of the Almighty keep themselves away from the *Etti* and *Tek*. *Etti* and *Tek* are also sprinkled on each other's faces by the people, and also sprinkled on the *Riigi* and on the sacrificed animals to ward off the evil spirits and to purify the souls of humans and animals. It is also believed by them that those souls who listen to the chanting of *Boori-Boot Yullo* hymns from the utterance of a spiritually ordained *Nyib* (priest) and those who part take in *Durum* and *Riigi Enam* ceremony during final day of *Boori-Boot Yullo* celebration, with clean heart and mind, with cleansed body and dresses are the fortunate ones who undoubtedly would receive the divine blessings of the *Boori-Boot Wui*, the spiritual and divine manifestation of the *Ejji*, the sun God and all the wishes of the participants are bound to fulfill soon anytime<sup>15</sup>. On the final day of the *Boori-Boot Yullo* celebration, the ritualistic ceremonies are followed by a colourful display of traditional dances, melodious folksongs, community feasting and merry making among the community members. Several traditional dances, such as *Boori-Jajen*, *Boori-Moj*, *Boori-Durum*, *Ponu*, etc., are performed by them.

So, the *Boori-Boot Yullo* festival is an age-old cultural tradition of the *Nyishi* community in Kamle District, rooted in ancestral knowledge believed to be gifted by divine forces. It serves as a powerful unifying force, fostering peace, harmony, and cultural coexistence in contemporary *Nyishi* society. As a living remnant of ancient human traditions, it has survived across generations, preserving the community's heritage. Celebrated annually, the festival promotes social cohesion and unity among community members. It also educates the younger generation about the ethical values, moral principles, and philosophical teachings embedded in the *Aab-Tani* traditional faith, ensuring that the wisdom of their ancestors continues to guide and inspire the community.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion highlights that the myths, legends, and religious practices of the *Nyishi* tribe constitute a comprehensive cosmological framework that explains the origin of the universe, the emergence of humankind, and the functioning of natural and supernatural forces. Contrary to the common perception of myths as fictitious narratives, within the *Nyishi* context, they serve as repositories of sacred knowledge and cultural truth, providing insight

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<sup>15</sup> Pamphlet on The Mythology of Boori-Boot Yullo, Version-2,4 (Brief), Edited by Prof. Hui Tag, Published by Central Boori-Boot Yullo Committee, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, 8.

into existential questions and the moral order of society. A central feature of *Nyishi* belief is the inseparable relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. The belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits (*Wui*), alongside the reverence for supreme entities such as *Donyi* and *Phol*, reflects a dualistic yet balanced worldview. Rituals, sacrifices, and taboos function as regulatory mechanisms to maintain harmony and equilibrium, ensuring protection from misfortune and the continuity of life. The role of the *Nyib* (priest) as an intermediary further underscores the structured nature of spiritual communication and ritual practice. Festivals such as *Boori-Boot Yullo* exemplify the integration of religious belief with social organisation. These communal celebrations reinforce collective identity, transmit traditional knowledge, and strengthen intergenerational continuity. They also embody ethical principles of cooperation, respect, and coexistence, which are fundamental to *Nyishi* society. In the context of rapid modernisation and cultural change, the *Nyishi* belief system offers valuable perspectives on sustainable living, environmental ethics, and cultural resilience. Thus, the preservation and study of *Nyishi* myths and religious practices are not only significant for understanding their cultural heritage but also for appreciating the broader diversity of human knowledge systems.

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