

MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH FOOD HISTORY AND ITS ORIGIN AMONG THE NYISHIS OF EAST KAMENG IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Maram Bagang¹

Among the Nyishis, one of the major tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, myths are rich in poetic and rhapsodic ideas, an expression that can hardly be defined but recognized as an established tradition for representing an account of past events of the tribesmen. Among them, there are a number of myths related to their culture, food history, and origin. The present paper gives an insight into the myths associated with food consumption, its history, and origin among the Nyishis of East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, which is mainly related to a mythological character of *Aabhu Thanyi*, the ancestor of not only the Nyishis but the entire *Thanyi* tribe.

Keywords: Nyishi, myths, Aabhu Thanyi, Ayo Denger, cultivation, food history, East Khemang, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

All living beings need food to survive. Historical and archaeological evidence shows that there has been a change in the pattern of human food consumption from the earliest trend of consuming raw food to roasted food and finally to cooked food. Further, humans started to use the land for cultivation during the Neolithic period, which permitted the Neolithic communities to maintain a high level of social order where the necessity of humankind was non-existent from the natural order (Sahlins, 1972). This changing trend in food eating patterns is seen across history and culture and is reflected in evidence of the evolution of different forms of artifacts across

¹ *Maram Bagang* is a Research Scholar at the Department of History, Rajiv Gandhi University, India. Correspondence regarding this article must be directed to: bagangmaram@gmail.com

human societies. For instance, the Sohgaora copper plate found at Sohgaora, in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, traced its origin to the Mauryan period, i.e., the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. In medieval Indian history, Alauddin Khilji introduced market reforms in which he fixed the prices of goods, including food grains. During the Vijayanagar empire, agricultural land and canals were inside the fort to ensure food security during warfare. Akbar, the great Mughal ruler, realized the political significance of feasts, so he ordered his nobles to organize special feasts on their birthdays. He called such feasts the *Ashi-Hayat* (the feasts of life). In fact, many more historical examples reflect the important role of food in history and culture.

Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by several tribes. Each tribe has a distinct culture, traditions, customs, faith and belief system, and social and economic patterns. The Nyishi community is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, mainly inhabited in the districts of Kurung Kumey, Kra Daadi, Papum Pare, parts of Lower Subansiri and Upper Subansiri, Kamle, East Kameng, Pakke Kessang and some pockets of Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts in Assam. The Nyishi population is around 3,00,000, which makes them the largest tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. In Nyishi, their traditional language, *Nyi* means “a human,” and *shi* means “a being,” which, combined, refers to a human being. Genealogically, the Nyishi believed that they were the descendants of *Aabhu Thanyi*. The Nyishi tribes belong to Mongoloid stocks and speak the language of the Tibeto-Burman group. The Nyishi society is neither based on a caste system nor classified into classes; however, it maintains a loose clan distinction determined by birth, not occupation (Nakha Hina, 2012). The food habit of a tribe depends upon factors like place of habitation, topography, climate, nature of land and cultivation, accessibility of flora and fauna, and other associated phenomena. The Nyishi Traditional foods are seasonal and organic. They gathered seasonal leafy vegetables and fruits from the forest. Their sources of food are agriculture, animal husbandry, and forest products. Their usual foods are boiled rice, leafy vegetables, meat, and *oppo* (local drink). The rice is the staple food of the Nyishi. The Nyishi are fond of eating meat, especially *svbe* (*Bos frontalis*). However, some meat and certain portions are restricted or considered taboo. The other food items are maize, millet, yam, cassava, wild roots and shoots, and other cereals. One of the tribe’s favorite ingredients is bamboo shoots. The local drinks *oppo*, mostly prepared from rice, millet, and maize, was considered another main item of daily food habits. Rituals, social functions, and community works are impossible without drinking *oppo* (Showren, 2009). The *oppo* is offered to guests as a sign of hospitality and was an important part of the socio-religious

celebrations. *Tasse*, a food produced from the wild sago palm tree, is generally used as a substitute for rice during the scarcity of food.

The present paper highlights the origin and food history of the Nyishi tribe of East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh. This paper will also discuss related myths (variants of myth versions) to food consumption, viz., rice, meat, fish, etc.

Understanding Myth

In the past, there was no written tradition in Nyishi society. Therefore, we have to explore and take recourse to oral traditions to reshape the ‘historical reconstruction’ of the tribe (Showren, 2009). An oral tradition refers to the verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation (Vansina, 1985). It makes it clear that all oral sources must be transmitted by word of mouth over at least a generation about the past. To a great extent, oral sources are embedded and embellished in the form of myths. The myths have been devoted to the history of pre-literate society. According to eminent mythologist Kirk (1970), “myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal or non-urban cultures, which makes them one of the main objects of anthropologist interest, but also because of men’s endearing insistence on carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into a supposedly scientific age.” Tonkin (1990) stated, “myth is a representation of the past which historians recognize, but generally as an alternative to proper history”. Elwin (1993) in his book mentioned, “myth is the history of its authors, not of its subjects; it records the lives, not of superhuman heroes, but of poetic nations.”

Review of Literature

Despite the paucity of literature, some books, articles, and Ph.D. theses embody food history content and provide valuable information. Super (2002), in his article, regarded food as a cultural symbol. In this article, the author has reviewed many essays related to food history and tried to understand the dynamic role of food history in human life. The article mainly discusses themes like diffusion, cuisine, and nutrition; these themes are analyzed and provide blueprints for interpreting food and society. It also acknowledges that food historians bring a sense of freshness from traditional disciplinary boundaries. Another work by Dusseliar (2009) discussed some articles related to food as culture, relating food to memory and identity formation, and how this thinking led to the emergence of Asian American culinary memoirs as a new literary genre that became a new area of food studies. The article also

Bagang, M.

discussed “Monsoon Diary” by Shoba Narayan (2004) and “Daughter of Heaven” by Leslie Li (2005), in which food is given as an important idea of processes of formation of identity or identity builders. The main focus area of the article is how food builds collective identities. Likewise, in her article, Elias (2012) stated that food helps answer questions about how cultures change over time and how people define their cultures.

Some works focus on particular places based on food history and culture; the article by Freeman (2006) exemplified the importance of the kitchen. The article gives an example of the kitchen of Zumbagua, which is a particular place of early socialization. It also mentioned that kitchens are traditionally run by women, but women’s entry into the labor force in modernizing nations affects much of home cooking. It has mentioned many regional books about ordinary people and their collective foodways. These articles help to understand more about food history and culture. Likewise, Ferris (2015), in her article, wrote that food is history, place, power, and disempowerment. The article mainly examined the history of food in the American South. The article mentions that the southern food of America is very diverse because of its cultural, historical, and demographic complexity; the Southerners somehow recognize the southern food when they see it because they share a common culinary language from their long southern history. The article mentions that Southern food is the product of many cultures, and it started to become global when there was contact between the Europeans and Southern Indians in the 1500s. The author further says that Southern food reflects not only the richness of Southern culture but also shows the dark side of slavery and racial disenfranchisement. Therefore, the author considers American southern food to have the power to capture history, memory, and place.

Some books directly dealt with the history of Arunachal Pradesh and provided a comprehensive understanding. Bose (1997) vividly explained the history of Arunachal Pradesh from the British annexation of Assam in 1826 to post-independence developments, leading to the development of the North-East Frontier to the creation of the Arunachal Pradesh. Regarding food habits, it gives a concise description that the staple food of the people in the North-East Frontier consists of rice, wheat, and millet, supplemented by vegetables and forest produce. The book also mentions that fish and meat are consumed by all the tribes. Likewise, Pandey (2006) tried to provide an overall history of Arunachal Pradesh and gave a few descriptions of the food habits of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The book mentions that the food habits of these tribes are almost the same, with some local variations, such

as the local beer called by different names by different tribes, which forms an essential part of the diet of the people. Domestic animals are regarded as special items of meal on occasion. The book also mentions the taboos related to food items among different tribes. These books, undoubtedly, provide details on the history of Arunachal Pradesh, but they have given very little information on the food history and culture of the tribes. Dhar and Coomar (2016) briefly discussed the indigenous food consumption pattern (for most of the tribes, rice is the staple food) among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The book mentions that every tribe has a specialty and is an expert in food preparation. During festivals, while preparing food, the only difference is in quantity. Though the book does not provide a detailed discussion of the food habits of the tribe, particularly Nyishi, it gives some ideas that will be helpful for this proposed research.

Some authentic books particularly dealt with the tribe of Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh. Tara (2005) tried to explain all the aspects of Nyishi's life, including their food habits. It mentioned the early days of Nyishi when they brought salt and kind of roots called *Nyenge Ringkey* (*Coptis teeta*), a medicinal plant especially used for stomach pain, from China and had a foremost business with the people of Assam (*Nyepa*); this business process was called *Pudung Rungnam*. During food scarcity, the Nyishi people depended on various wild foods. The book also mentions the names of birds and animals that are eaten and considered taboo. Nakha Hina (2012) attempted to illuminate the customs and customary laws of the Nyishi tribes with different types of *Nyele* (village council) and rituals amongst the Nyishi tribe, including some brief information on the changes in the economic activities of the Nyishi and mentions their agricultural products, Nyishi seasonal food cycles, their mutual exchange system, fishing and hunting, and what they consume in brief. Showren (2012) studied Nyishi's sociocultural, political, and traditional economic base and shed light on Nyishi's relations with the people of the plains and the British. The book mentions that the Nyishi tribe was practically based on shifting methods of agriculture locally called *Rongngo* and rice as their staple food. Seasonal leafy vegetables and fruits are gathered from the forest. In short, it mentions the basic means of Nyishi's dietary system. However, despite being a good source, all the mentioned studies are undoubtedly sincere works; they give a broader understanding of the research but need an in-depth survey of the proposed research.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To study the myths associated with the origin of food
- ii. To trace the sequence of the paddy cultivation process according to myths
- iii. To apprehend the myths related to food consumption

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through interviews with elderly persons of reasonably good knowledge of their traditions and culture. The conversation during the interview was recorded through audio. Secondary information and data from published books, journals, and research articles were carefully consulted for the proposed study.

Discussion

Myths of the Nyishi are rich in ideas of ‘poetic and rhapsodic’, an expression that can rarely be defined but is acknowledged as a tradition for representing the past events of their community (Showren, 2009). In Nyishi, there is a famous saying:

*“Netting sangtungam tabin peema
Harming sangbeeham tapum peema”*

It means that past historical references, once cited, will always remain and be remembered by the people. Based on this famous saying in Nyishi, the origin of the customs, usages, and laws are found in myths and legends (Nakha Hina, 2012). Likewise, there are many stories with variations in the form of myths associated with the origin of food.

According to a myth, it is believed that in the beginning, every living thing, like animals and trees, can communicate. Likewise, the first human being, according to Nyishi tradition, ‘*Aabhu Thanyi*,’ can communicate with all living things, even with the *Kipung* (Dog). So, from the very beginning, *Kipung* stays with *Aabhu Thanyi*. They survived by eating fruits and other edible things from the jungle (as, till then, he was unaware of paddy cultivation). Once, *Aabhu Thanyi* took *Kipung* to the jungle where the *Kipung* found *Dampung* (Deer), who had plenty of eatable things, seeing this he became friends with *Dampung*, and they built a good friendship over time. Whenever *Kipung* visited *Dampung*, he was well treated with

plenty of varieties of jungle fruits. When Dampung once visited *Kipung*, it was the opposite because *Kipung* had to stay at the mercy of *Aabhu Thanyi*, as *Kipung* was offered only the remains or stale food of *Aabhu Thanyi*. One day, when *Kipung* took *Dampung* to his place (the house of *Aabhu Thanyi*), they were looking for food from *Aabhu Thanyi* as *Kipung* depended entirely on *Aabhu Thanyi*. Hence, while *Aabhu Thanyi* had food, in the process, *Kipung* desperately looked up and down at every bite of *Aabhu Thanyi* (like still dog does the same); this made *Dampung* hilarious, and she laughed loudly, seeing *Kipung* bark at *Dampung* (but in actually he wanted to ask why she was laughing, but it comes out in the form of bark which is a natural behavior for dogs) due to which *Dampung* got frightened by hearing the sounds of barked of *Kipung* and she just ran away. While running, *Pefa-taya* in *udung* (fermented soya bean in bamboo tube) fell off her feet, some fell down, and some portion got stuck in her feet, but she kept running fast. However, because of the smell of *Pefa-taya*, it was easy for *Dampung* to follow her, so it is said that from the moment *Pefa-taya* got stuck in her feet, the feet of deer started to smell, so it is believed that till now, the deer has a smell in their feet because of this particular incident. In the jungle, if a person has a dog while hunting, the dog can easily follow deer due to its smell on the feet of deer. While following *Dampung* continuously, at last, *Kipung* reached *Delu Rangthe* (a kind of plain area), and at *Delu Rangthe*, he stopped because, for the first time, he saw a large paddy field, he got mesmerized; taking advantage of it, *Kipung* ran away towards under the *Delu Rangthe*.

Meanwhile, *Aabhu Thanyi* realized that *Kipung* was not there for a long time, so he called *Kipung* by keeping his head under the mortar, which was a way to connect the *Kipung* if he was not seen anywhere in and around for a very long time, hence, by doing this he connected to the *Dampung* to come back to him to which *Kipung* responded. After returning, he informed *Aabhu Thanyii* about the paddy field in the *Delu Rangthe*. Knowing this, *Aabhu Thanyi* instantly asked *Kipung* to bring some rice seeds from the *Delu Rangthe*. Thus, *Kipung* went back to *Delu Rangthe* and brought some seeds of rice from there, but while crossing the river, all his seeds drowned away by the river except one piece of seed, which was left in his ear wh, which he gave to *Aabhu Thanyi*. But *Aabhu Thanyi* had no idea at all about the process of cultivating rice. He randomly threw seeds into the digging ground of *Sapik sayir* (Porcupine), but the process was unsuccessful. This disheartened *Aabhu Thanyi*, who saw *Ayo Dengar* (the cultivation deity) come and ask him the reason behind his disappointment, to which *Aabhu Thanyi* explained

everything to her. Then, *Ayo Dengar* asked him to look at her hair scalp from one side from where she took out varieties of seeds of rice, namely, *ningcho am*, *tening am*, *rakte am*, *tungku masang*, and so on. Then she taught *Aabhuh Thanyi* about every step of the cultivation of rice very beautifully in the form of folksong called *Riigdam*². The folk song goes like this:

Ane geo yar he ja ...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe chopo bingdo so... Ane ge oyar heja
Debe nyemo moyena...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe pii bingdoso... Ane ge oyar heja
Debe tiksi tik ye na ...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe papuk bingdo so...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe pahnuk paye na...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe deru chada so...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe ame riye na ...Ane ge oyar heja
Dero derii chado so...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe rikrii riye na...Ane ge oyar heja
Debe pingchang bingdoso...Ane ge oyar heja
Charme lilung liye na ...Ane ge oyar heja
Taku tayu bingdo so...Ane ge oyar heja

Its meaning, in brief, in the season of the chirping of *the Chopo* bird, start dreaming and thinking about cultivation; in the season of the chirping of *the Pii* bird, begin clearing the small grass; in the season of the chirping of *the Papuk* birds cut the big trees, In the season of *Deru* (hot summer), burnt the dry grass, in the season between summer and spring, clean the ashes, in the season of chirping of *Pingchang*, sow the seeds, in the season of chirping of *Taku-tayu* bird, clear the weed around crops, in the season of monsoon, the crops grow and bend because of its own weight which is followed by harvesting, and then it is kept in the *nassung* (godown) while performing rituals³. In a nutshell, it was *Ayo Dengar* (deity of cultivation) who

² *Riigdam* referred the whole process and steps of the Jhum cultivation in various months and ultimately, it has been brought in godown with rituals

³ Extracted from the interview with Pai Dawe, aged about 48 years, former President of Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture and present Secretary of Donyi Polo Cultural and Charitable Trust (which runs Gurukul in the State), is a

taught *Aabhu Thanyi* the whole process of cultivation by the occurrence of nature according to the season which he followed, and that's how the origin of staple food rice and its cultivation has started among Nyishi community.

In another myth, when there was no human being, one mythical character named *Partene* was born out of the earth and the sky at the beginning of the world. It is said that when he came into existence, he was the owner of everything; at that time, *Kipung* (dog) and deer (*Dampung*) were also present; they were friends. It is said that whenever *Kipung* went to meet *Dampung*, there were a lot of eatables that *Dampung* used to offer the *Kipung*; on the other hand, whenever *Dampung* came to meet *Kipung*, it was the opposite. One day, both *Kipung* and *Dampung* decided to run away to the place of *Aabhu Thanyi* by carrying some paddy and millet because they believed that by doing so, they could transform themselves into a human beings, but at that moment, they were in the condition of *lappa-parto* (bind the leg in the heavy wood) by the *Partene* so that they could not easily move and ran away. In the absence of *Partene*, taking advantage of the situation, they tried and made continuous movement and finally released themselves from the wood; while running, the *pefa taya* (fermented soya bean) in the *udung* (bamboo tube), which was kept by *Partene* was fell down due to which some portion of *pefa taya* stuck in the feet of *Dampung*, so from here it is said that the feet of the deer started to smell. While escaping, they carried *am* (paddy) and *Tami* (millet) with them; on the way, they realized that the land route was very long, so they decided to take the river route, which was shorter in the distance. The river was deep, but it didn't bother them, and while playing, they started crossing the river. While crossing the river, all the paddy and millet were drowned away except one piece of paddy, which remained inside *Kipung's* ear, and he gave it to *Aabhu Thanyi*. Hence, *Aabhu Thanyi* cultivates that one piece of paddy in the field, and it is believed that gradually, it multiplied all over the world⁴. This legend tells us that the dog introduced paddy to *Aabhu Thanyi*. *Aabhu Thanyi* multiplied it and introduced it to human beings, and civilization began. Thus, the tribe considered agriculture to be the foundation of their society, which was made possible by the efforts of *Aabhu Thanyi*. In brief, this myth tells us about how

permanent resident of Rang Village under Seppa Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on March 5, 2023, at 5:00 PM.

⁴ Extracted from the interview with Pungni Beyong, aged about 50 years, a permanent resident of Beyond Village under Bameng Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on March 01, 2023, at 4:25 PM

the cultivation of paddy was introduced, which later became the staple food of the Nyishi people.

According to another myth, in the beginning, *Aabhu Thanyi* was created from the *Sachang* (earth), and then *Kipung* (dog) was created. They both had nothing to eat, so they started wandering for food. That's why he is also known as *Jingang Thanyi*, which means poor *Thanyi*. While walking for food, *Kipung* became a friend of *Dampung* (deer). Whenever *Kipung* visited *Dampung*, he was offered all the food in the forest. One day, *Dampung* went to visit *Kipung* at *Aabhu Thanyi's* house; unlike him, *Kipung* did not offer anything to her; instead, staring at *Aabhu Thanyi's* eating (like a still dog whenever humankind is eating something nearby). This made *Dampung* angry as *Kipung* did not offer him anything to eat. Out of anger, the *Dampung* ran away, but he was chased by the *Kipung*, who was barking to stop him. While running, the *Dampung* dropped a *tatak takya yabo* (fermented frog) in the *udung* (bamboo tube) of *Niya Talo* (a mythical character); the smell got stuck in his feet, which helped *Kipung* to stalk *Dampung* by the scent. While running, when they reached the mountain, *Dampung* asked help from the mountain to save him, but *Kipung* warned the mountain that if it would help *Dampung*, he would set the mountain on fire. Hence, the mountain was not able to save *Dampung*. Thus, after continuing chasing, they reached the *slay* (river), where *Dampung* requested the river to save him. Still, again, *Dampung* interrupted and said if the river would do so, he would put *Tamu* (plants used in fish poison for easy catch) into the river. So, *Slay* did not save *Dampung*. While continuing running and chasing, they finally reached *Dalu* (probably Assam's plain), where *Kipung* saw a paddy field for the first time, which fascinated him so much that he decided to go back to tell *Aabhu Thanyi* about it. Meanwhile, *Dampung* escaped in *Dele*. That's why it is said that the number of deer in plain areas is much higher; deer escaped from the dogs and expanded the deer population generation after generation. While returning, *Kipung* informed *Thanyi* about the paddy field and insisted he go to *Dalu*, to which *Thanyi* agreed. Hearing this, his domesticated crops like *mekung* (cucumber) and others started telling *Thanyi* not to go to *Dalu* because they would feel bad if *Thanyi* left them, so they assured him they would provide him with food as per their capacity. Hence, after hearing all this, *Kipung* told *Thanyi* to stay there and asked him to put *aghe* (wood basket) in his leg and ear to carry paddy. Accordingly, *Thanyi* made *aghe* for him, and he was ready to go to *Dalu*.

Before leaving, *Kipung* said to *Thanyi* that if he could not come back within five days, he should call him through mortar (where rice or grain is pounding) by rounding around it, and then *Kipung* went to *Dalu*. Accordingly, after five days, when *Kipung* did not come back, *Aabhu Thanyi* called him by rounding in mortar, but he could not connect with *Kipung*; then once again, he did the same, and this time, he was able to communicate with *Kipung* and called him back. While coming back, the *Kipung* was carrying paddy in his legs, which was carried away when he reached the mountain and rivers; only one paddy seed was left, which he took in his ear and gave to *Aabhu Thanyi* but the irony was that *Aabhu Thanyi* did not have any idea how to sow it properly. Hence, *Aabhu Thanyi* sowed paddy seeds under the loose soil excavated by *Sapik* (porcupines), and the seeds did not sprout. Being suspicious, *Aabhu Thanyi* killed *Saraa* (wild boar) and checked under its stomach but did not get any seed there; then he killed *Svbe* (*Bos frontalis*), but again he did not find the seed there. Finally, he digs out the soil by the woods, where paddy seed remains. This made him very sad because, at that moment, he did not have anything to eat, so he wanted to multiply the paddy, but unfortunately, he did not know about the paddy cultivation process. Frustrated, he was crying and wandering because he had nothing to eat. That's how it is said that *Aabhu Thanyi* also came to be known as *Jingang Thanyi* (means poor *Thanyi*). While wandering, he met an old lady called *Ayo Dengar* (deity of cultivation). She asked him to search *tafek* (lice) from her hair, to which he refused by saying that he had been wandering because he had nothing to eat. But *Ayo Dengar* again insisted on searching for *tafek* in her hair; this time, he agreed, and when he started searching, first, he found *Ningcho* (first from Paddy), the second time he found *Kasu*, *Kani*, *Digli*, and the third time he found *Amte*, *Ampa*, *Pra*, *Jana*, *Parung* and at last he found *Ramak*, *Radang*. All these are varieties of paddy. *Aabhu Thanyi* then asked *Ayo Dengar* how to sow all these grains, to which *Ayo Dengar* answered that he had to follow the process of cultivation according to the sound or chirping of a particular kind of bird. She instructed *Nilang Pingchang* (bird) to make the sound of *pi-pi-aar* and then clean the grass when *Pingchang Tago* made the sound of *go-go* then burnt the grass, and when *Nika Papuk* sounded *pako-tago*, then took *chui* (a kind of wood stick) to lose the soil and *Pyacha* (a type of bag) to carry these paddies and sow it. Accordingly, *Aabhu Thanyi* followed the instructions of *Ayo Dengar*, and these paddy seeds grew beautifully in massive amounts. When it was ready to be harvested, he made a container from bamboo called *Galaq* (small), *Damtaq* (medium), and *Wachi* (large) for the weight and

measurement of rice. That's how the weight and measurement started among the Nyishi people in their tradition. Then *Ayo Dengar* instructed him that he made *Nassung* (grain storage house) while seeing her head. Then she said some lovely lines:

*“Nyango pagare ramnyi
Nyango pagare ram”*

This means that the amount of harvesting would keep increasing year by year. That is how rice cultivation started, and it has also begun to be consumed by humans. Therefore, even now, whenever a priest chants during harvesting, he chants all these stories by recalling them, and that's how, till now, it is preserved in the form of chanting. During *Amte rag*, which is the last paddy harvesting, *Ayo Dengar* is worshiped through *Yalo-boto*, a form of ritual⁵.

In this other version of *Aabhu Thanyi's* myths, crops' seeds are mentioned. According to it, once, the *uyus* (spirits) were not satisfied and further infuriated by defeat after defeat by the *Aabhu Thanyi* in every challenge. Hence, they once again hatched a conspiracy to eliminate *Aabhu Thanyi* and his family. On the other side, his wife *Jangtee Nee*, the younger sister of *Donyi Yaye Chumji*, the daughter of *Anne Donyi* (mother sun), was also determined to safeguard her husband *Thanyi* and their son. Thus, *Jangtee Nee* sent *Thanyi* and their son to the earth as the safest place, far away from the reach of the *uyus*. She gave him the *podung* (bamboo tube container). This *podung* contained seeds of different crops and the souls of various animals. *Jangtee Nee* told *Thanyi* to wait to open the *podung* until they reached the earth. But as always, forced by habit, *Thanyi* opened the *podung* out of curiosity before reaching the earth. Consequently, seeds of crops and the souls of animals escaped the *podung*. It attracted the attention of the *uyus*; subsequently, they collected the seeds of crops and the souls of animals and claimed ownership over them, due to which *Thanyi* could claim very few left over. The *uyus* were relentless after *Thanyi* and his son, even after securing the seeds of crops and the souls of animals. So, *Jangtee Nee* once again intervened to save the *Thanyi* and their son by offering crops and animals in place of her husband and son's life. This is the origin of *peer nyoga tamnam* (offering of crops and animals in the rituals), and it is done through a middleman called *nyub*, which means priest (Nakha Hina, 2012). In brief, this version has mentioned through *Aabhu Thanyi* how

⁵ Extracted from the interview with Lata Hissang (Priest), aged about 68 years, is a permanent resident of Seijosa under Seijosa Administrative Circle, Pakke Kessang District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on March 27, 2023, at 3:16 PM.

the seeds of crops reached the earth, how *uyus* claimed over it, and the offering of crops along with the animals while performing rituals.

Myths Related to Consuming Jungle Animals and Fish

According to mythology, *Aabhu Thanyi* and *Sayi* (a spirit considered the owner of *Myoro* or Jungle) were once a friend; gradually, due to the cleverness of *Aabhu Thanyi*, the differences between the two started. The increasing differences between them were known to *Pinchi* (bat). One day, *Aabhu Thanyi's Lari-adung* (salt in a bamboo tube) was eaten entirely by *Pinchi*, which angered *Aabhu Thanyi*; he was about to kill *Pinchi*, but *Pinchi* requested *Aabhu Thanyi* not to kill him by convincing that in relation wise they were like brothers. Hence, *Aabhu Thanyi* spared his life. But one day, once again, *Pinchi* ate all the meals, including *sayak badang* (dry meat) prepared by *Aabhu Thanyi*. This made *Aabhu Thanyi* impatient, and he finally decided to kill *Pinchi* once and for all. When *Aabhu Thanyi* was about to kill *Pinchi*, *Pinchi* requested him not to kill him with his hand but to let him die by letting fire in his tail so that he would die while flying in the jungle, which was his wish. *Aabhu Thanyi* agreed, and he did the same. While *Pinchi* was flying in the jungle, at that time, all the things in the jungle, like *chado-vado* (rope) and *fanang-fara* (type of bamboo), were burned out due to the fire in his tail. As *Sayi* was the owner of the jungle (*myoro*), he became furious; hence, he captured *Pinchi* and was about to kill him. But *Pinchi* requested not to kill him and clarified that *Aabhu Thanyi* lit the fire on his tail, so it was not his fault at all. This made *Sayi* very angry, and it was confirmed that *Aabhu Thanyi* had always been envious of him and wanted to harm him. So, this time, *Sayi* wanted to take strict action against *Aabhu Thanyi*. Therefore, he called a meeting in which he invited all the *uyus* (spirits) of the jungle, and they decided to kill *Aabhu Thanyi* once and for all. When *Aabhu Thanyi* came to know about this, he ran off and escaped under a *tatung* (a kind of bottle or container). Then all the *Uyus* came to kill *Aabhu Thanyi* and saw that *Aabhu Thanyi* was hiding under the *tatung*, but whenever the *uyus* put their finger or nose under the *tatung* to catch him then, in contrast, they were hit by *Aabhu Thanyi*; hence, they failed to catch him. Then, one *uyu* put his *lachang* (toe), but he was also hit by the *Aabhu Thanyi*. Though all the *uyus* tried hard to catch *Aabhu Thanyi*, they failed; in contrast, they were beaten up by the *Thanyi*. Finally, *Saki* (owner of water and fish) tried to catch *Aabhu Thanyi*, but instead, he was caught by the *Thanyi*. Hence, *Saki* pleaded with *Aabhu Thanyi* to release him by saying that *Sayi* had sent him. *Aabhu Thanyi* refused to accept his plead; however, *Aabhu Thanyi* gave one condition that *Saki* should allow him to catch all the *Rangchi-*

kada (varieties of fish) whenever he would place his fish trap (varieties of fish trap called *Pesuk sorem*, *Aduk*, *Adar*, etc.) for his consumption, then only he would release him. *Saki* accepted all the conditions given by the *Aabhu Thanyi* and agreed to provide all the varieties of fish whenever he would come for fishing. Thus, *Aabhu Thanyi* decided to release him by cutting the rope and releasing *Saki*. At last, *Aabhu Thanyi* warned *Sayi* that he would kill him. This made *Sayi* afraid; hence, he pleaded to *Aabhu Thanyi* to spare him, and in return, whatever he wanted, he may ask from him. In response, *Thanyi* demanded all the *Bingbo-charbo* (animals of the jungle), *Kunglung-tade* (birds), varieties of *Kabung* (rats), *Ketam-Keji Aming* (types of rats), *Taade-Tango* (types of jungle birds) to eat. He also demanded *Fanang-Fra* (types of bamboo) and *Aso* (rope) for the construction of the house; if all these were given to him whenever he needed them, then only he would release them. Thus, *Sayi* agreed to all the conditions *Thanyi* had given. Hence, a verbal agreement was made between the two. After that, *Aabhu Thanyi* released *Sayi* by cutting the tied rope.

After the situation became normal, *Aabhu Thanyi* went fishing, where he got an abundance of fish; all his fish traps, like *Adar*, *Sakyam*, and *Ngo-toku*, were filled with an abundance of fish, which meant that *Saki* fulfilled all his agreements with *Aabhu Thanyi*. After that, *Aabhu Thanyi* went to the jungle to hunt with a trap and placed a trap (*gamdam maake*). In the jungle, he could see many animals like *Sadam* (deer), but he could not catch even a small animal in his trap. He attempted many times but failed. This made *Aabhu Thanyi* very angry, and he thought that *Sayi* had betrayed him, unlike *Saki*. Thus, he decided to kill *Sayi*, so he went to *Sayi's* place, where he escaped under *Nam-nekam* (the stilt of the house), where he tried to listen to *Sayi's* conversation in which *Sayi* was saying that he was fed up with the *Aabhu Thanyi's* continuously complaining against him because it came to him through *Rungyo* (a sound under the ear). He was now not able to take it anymore. *Sayi* said that it was *Aabhu Thanyi* who himself *daru-tala daming ma tala*, *aru-tala aming ma tala*, which means there are certain taboos or restrictions one had to follow while hunting which *Aabhu Thanyi* was not following at all, such as, the hunter had to be kept quiet while placing the hunting trap. He should not directly mention that particular animal in the jungle he was considering catching; such as, he should not directly say that he is going to hunt or trap *Svbe* (*Bos frontalis*), but he should address it in the form of *Kame* (indirect way); for example, for *Svbe*, the hunter should call it as *Myori-Nyi* (human of the jungle) and fowl as *Pare-Nyi* (human of coop) and

while going for hunting, the hunter should not make much sound or noise. Still, hunting should be done silently. When *Aabhu Thanyi* listened to all this, he realized his mistake because he was not following all these procedures; hence, he returned to his place and decided to follow all the procedures that he had learned. The next day, he went to the jungle to hunt while keeping in mind all the instructions; he moved slowly and remained silent by keeping quite while placing a hunting trap to hunt *Kabung* (rat), whom he addressed as *Gamdram* and addressed *Pata* (bird) as *Jarbo* (the one which can fly), which indicated that he was indirectly addressing those animals which he was going to hunt. After following all the procedures, the abundance of animals got trapped, whichever he desired to hunt and eat; hence, this time, *Aabhu Thanyi* was successful in hunting. That's how the humans started to eat jungle animals and fish⁶. According to this myth, humans began to eat meat and fish because of *Aabhu Thanyi's* effort to deal with *Sayi* and *Saki*.

Conclusion

Pre-literate Nyishi has highly developed powers of social memory and handed down the same from generation to generation in the form of *Yullo Barnam* (ritual chanting), *Idh Bengdam* (ceremonial song), *Buya Sonam* (folk dance), *Gamba Banam* (songs), *Nyeme Kabnam* (ceremonial crying), *Bagg Pannam* (rhapsodic), and *Darkumba Darnam* (songs of narration). These traditions are suitable for oral transmission by using sayings, songs, and poems like reciting at important occasions, proverbs, tales, or other formulae for linking the past to the present society (Showren, 2009).

Therefore, while tracing the myths associated with the origin of food amongst the Nyishi tribe of East Kameng District, it has been found that the tribe gives credit to their ancestor, *Aabhu Thanyi*, for introducing paddy cultivation to them with the help of a dog and they highly respect to *Ayo Denger* whom the tribe considered as the deity of cultivation who actually taught the process of cultivation to *Aabhu Thanyi*. That's why, till now, while performing harvesting rituals, the priest has been narrating the story in the form of chanting. Though there are variations in every narration, the central figures are almost identical, such as *Aabhu Thanyi*, dog, deer, *Ayo Denger*, *Saki*, and *Sayi* in each narration of myths.

⁶ Extracted from the interview with Rade Bagang, aged about 50 years, is a permanent resident of Vada Bagang village under Chayang Tajo Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on August 25, 2023, at 4:15 PM.

Bagang, M.

References

- Bose, M.L. (1997). *History of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Concept Publishing Company.
- Dhar, B., & Coomar, P.C. (Eds.). (2004). *Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh*, New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications.
- Dusselier, J. (2009). Understandings of food as culture. *Environmental History*, 14(2), 331–338.
- Elias, M. (2012). Summoning the food ghosts: Food history as public history. *The Public Historian*, 34(2), 13–29.
- Elwin, V. (1993). *Myths of the north-east frontier of India*, Itanagar: Gyan Publishing House.
- Ferris, M.C. (2015). History, place, and power: Studying southern food. *Southern Cultures*, 21(1), 2–7.
- Freeman, S.T. (2006). Culturing food. *Gastronomica*, 6(4), 99–107.
- Kirk, G.S. (1970). *Myth: Its meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures*, Los Angeles: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, L. (2005). *Daughter of heaven: A memoir with earthly recipes*. New York: Arcade Publishing.
- Nakha Hina, N. (2012). *Customary laws of Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh*, New Delhi: Authors press.
- Narayan, S. (2004). *Monsoon diary: Reveries and recipes from south India*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Pandey, D. (2006). *History of Arunachal Pradesh: (Earliest times to 1972 A.D.)*, 2nd ed. Pasighat: Bani Mandir Publications.
- Sahlins, M. (1972). *Stone age economics*, New York: Aldine.
- Samuel, R., & Thompson, P. (Eds.). (1990). *The myths we live by*, London: Routledge.
- Showren, T. (2009). *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An ethnohistorical study*, New Delhi: Regency Publication.

- Super, J.C. (2002). Food and history. *Journal of Social History*, 36(1), 165-178.
- Tara, T.T. (2005). *Nyishi world*. Itanagar: Estern Horizon.
- Tonkin, E. (1990). History and the myth of realism. In R. Samuel & P. Thompson (Eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (pp. 25-35). London: Routledge.
- Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. New York: James Currey.