

MEDIATING THE SACRED: SHAMANIC VOCAL MUSIC OF *NYIBU* AMONG THE TAGIN TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Nyibu (Shaman) is the main institution of the indigenous belief and faith system among the Tani/Tanyi ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Through their unique Shamanic chants, they mediate between the spiritual and human world and serve as traditional healers. The introduction of the Tagin, from their isolated world to the advanced world outside, has led to rapid modernisation, which has critically impacted this institution. Through micro-ethnography conducted in 2023 with participant observation in a ritual Yarnv-Uyi (ritual for the well-being of a person), along with the interviews of 7 key informants in 2024, and further, musical analysis of the chants, the study aims to document this unexplored tradition. The analysis highlights the improvisational and musically rich nature of their chants. Additionally, it sheds light on the causes of its decline and the preservation efforts being made. The study aims to contribute to cultural preservation by providing insights into this rich, unexplored cultural heritage of the Tagin tribe.

Keywords: *Nyibu, Tagin tribe, Tanyi tribes, Traditional healer, Shamanic music, Shamanism*

Introduction

Shamans are a recurring phenomenon found in various world cultures, who practice divination and healing through rites that include trance-inducing music (Moreno, 1995). Similar to other world cultures, Shamans also exist among the Tagin tribe, a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India, belonging to the *Tani/Tanyi* ethnic group. Shamans are known as *Nyibu*, and for Tagins, *Nyibu* is not merely a healer or diviner but a repository of Traditional knowledge. Unlike many cultures, the shamanic music of *Nyibu* is performed primarily with the voice, without instrumental accompaniment and relies on improvisation, believed to be a divine gift.

Earlier studies, including Riddi's comprehensive work on the institution of *Nyibu*, encapsulating its meaning, eligibility, training, types, and function, have highlighted the significance of *Nyibu* (Riddi, 2003; Krishnatry, 2005). Today, the sudden shift of Tagins from hunter-gatherer to a modern lifestyle has caused a rapid decline of this institution. Moreover, despite its importance, it has yet to receive scholarly attention. The objective of this study is to document this unexplored vocal tradition, additionally reflecting on the cause of its decline, current challenges and preservation efforts. This article is structured as follows: It starts with outlining the methodology. Section 2 reviews the *Nyibu* institution; Section 3 discusses the causes of decline, threats and revival efforts, and Section 5 explores the musical elements and aesthetics of the chants.

Methodology

The research design for this study is primarily qualitative. A micro-ethnography which included participant observation in a ritual known as *Yarnv-Uyi. Uyi Barnam* was chanted by *Nyibu Shri. Gogiam Gumja* and his assistant (*huri*), *Shri. Tagiam Digli Tamin*, which was documented in the form of an audio-visual format in March 2023. Additionally, seven key informants, including regular practitioners, custodians of tradition and scholars in this field, were interviewed with a combination of open-ended, structured and unstructured questions.

Secondary data was collected from books, research papers, articles, audiovisual material on social media, electronic print media and official reports. Recordings were examined using a plugin called *Melodyne*¹ in FL Studio DAW (Digital Audio Workstation). Before using *Melodyne*, to reduce the unwanted noise in the recording, I've used *Fabfilter Pro Q3*² with a low cut at 51.32 Hz with a 12 dB/oct slope, *NS1*³ with knob at 17.8, and *RX spectral de-noise*⁴ threshold set to 0 and reduction to 2.00. Additionally, the *Bhatkhande* notation system is used to denote the notes and rhythm.

1 *Melodyne* is an audio editing software used to manipulate pitch, timing, and formants of individual notes in recorded audio.

2 *Fabfilter Pro Q3* is a high-quality audio equaliser plugin developed by *Fabfilter*.

3 *NS1* is a noise suppressor plugin developed by *Waves*.

4 *RX spectral de-noise* is a background noise removing plugin developed by *Izotope*.

Nyibu: - Paul and Duarah (2008) consider Nyibus to be the core component of Tagin religious belief, which is animistic and encompasses shamanistic practices. Riddi (2003) studied the institution of Nyibu, including its meaning, eligibility, training, types, and functions. He documented four categories of Nyibus in the Tagin society:

(i) Nyikri-Tago-Nyibu(ii) Buchi\ Bhumi-Nyibu(iii) Bute/Buru-Nyibu (iv)Nikiok (p. 227).

Riddi's work on the institution of Nyibu has comprehensively portrayed the significance of Nyibu, and according to him, the Indigenous religious beliefs and faith of the Tani/Tanyi tribes are dependent on the Nyibu, as he asserts:

"If the institution of the Nyibu falls, the indigenous religion and cultural of the Tani tribes would be under the debris of the Nyibu" (Riddi, 2008, p. 142).

Krishnatry (2005) describes that Nyibu identifies the specific *uyu*(spirit) which has caused ill or misfortune to a person, family or clan with the process of sacrificing a chicken and judicially determining their livers, thus experimenting with the names of *uyu* in chanting, and according to it, the kind of sacrifice is determined. Chaudhury and Duarah (2004) also briefly described Nyibu. Kodak (2018) also shows how the rituals done by Nyibu promote the ethics of honesty in the Tagin community.

Various studies have highlighted the significance of Nyibu among the Tagin; despite that, Nyibus today are in rapid decline.

The Decline of the Nyibu

Singh (2018) proposes a cultural evolution theory of Shamanism that gives several theories of why it declines, which link to the case of Nyibu amongst the Tagin and *Tanyis* in a broader sense. Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP, 2024) estimates that in the last five years, the number of Shamans declined from 6000 to 250. It is a unique case of rapid decline, which I associate with the sudden shift from hunter-gatherer to a modern lifestyle.

The Tagin were once hunter-gatherers who lived in their isolated world with no contact with the world outside except for the *Nyime* (Tibetans). In their isolated world, the institution of the Nyibu emerged and flourished. From the 19th century and the start of the 20th century British Indian Government launched various expeditions to the Tagin area, followed by the Indian Officials post-independence. With this, the Tagins were introduced to the Indian civilisation. This introduction uplifted the Tagin in healthcare, education, and many aspects; however, it also introduced several alien cultures, leading to assimilation. Tagin have been in barter with the *Nyime* (Tibetans) for a long time, leading to the adoption of Tibetan-made clothes, tools and also some folk tunes (Krishnatry, 1997; Krishnatry, 2005). Despite this, it was not an assimilation of the Tagins with the *Nyime*, unlike the case of Nah Tagins (Hiri, 2016). The waves of modernisation introduced various alien cultures, which started spreading since the 1950s and significantly impacted the institution of Nyibu. Riddi (2003) writes:

The challenge of maintaining a tribal ritual tradition in a modern, secular and technological age is a major problem. However, problem of maintaining indigenous traditional religion among the Tagin is much ridden with difficulties faced as it is to sudden exposure to rapid modernisation process. Until its exposure to the outside world, the indigenous faith and practice was the only religion among the Tagins. However, the recent influx of various religious forces in the Tagin territory along with the presence of Para military forces [CRPF], skill and unskilled employees in 'Border Road Task Force', outsiders employed in State and Central services are being perceived as a threat to the indigenous religion of the Tagins. Therefore; spread of the modern education and infrastructure has infused ideas of the alien religions in the minds of the Tagins" (p. 232).

Religious conversion to Christianity led people to abandon their rituals. The propagation of Indian mass media led to people preferring other cultures over the indigenous culture. Modern morals and values started to disgust newer generations of rituals, as they include animal sacrifice. Contemporary knowledge of medical science has made newer generations lose their faith in the Nyibu. Urbanisation led to the abandonment of the environment where the knowledge of Nyibu was transmitted. Social media today has westernised Tagin youths. Now, alien culture and religion are flourishing and dominating over the Tagins.

Preservation efforts have also been made, by the Government bodies like the Directorate of Research under the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, which includes publications of various books on Tagin like "*Border Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh*" by SM Krishnatry, "*Customary Laws of the Tagins Arunachal Pradesh*", and also "*Oral Literature of the Tagins on creation of universe Arunachal Pradesh*" by N Mitkong et al, this study transcribed and translated chants into English. It documents various chants, which are based on the concept of the origin of various beings, rituals, ceremonies, and the universe (Mitkong et al., 2006). Tagin Apex Body, the Tagin Cultural Society have also been actively making efforts for the preservation. The Government of Arunachal also provides honorarium to the Nyibus now. These efforts may help in the preservation, but the process of making the newer generation become Nyibu seems to be overlooked.

Riddi (2003) documented the eligibility to become a Nyibu; he described it as neither hereditary nor elective, and the person is pre-determined by the Almighty. The prospective Nyibu develops special aptitude in forecasting and periodically falls into a

trance during childhood. He/she has to follow certain taboos, like not eating chicken liver, porcupine, eagle, intestine, etc. and especially sacrificed meat and also abstain from taking food from the house of a deceased family for a month. If the person fails to observe this taboo, the *Niki Jilo* and *Yirne-Gone* would take back their gifted power to become a Nyibu. Riddi also highlights the informal, non-institutionalised way of learning amongst Tagin, which includes the mock performance amongst peers, where elders and Nyibu encourage prospective Nyibu to sing spiritual and classical songs called *Jilo-Nitin*. These complicated criteria for becoming a Nyibu seem very hard for one to achieve, especially for the newer generation. Today, the Tagins have mostly migrated to urban areas for better education and other facilities, and this has made them abandon their village, which was the environment where the knowledge of Nyibu was transmitted. There have been efforts of institutionalisation, educational institutions like *Nyubu Nyvgam Yerko*¹, *Nilung Tungko*², *Menjwk Menkok Rwgu*³ have emerged, which aim to propagate Indigenous knowledge along with the modern secular education. To me, this is the most likely way of transmission in today's era. However, there may still be withstand from traditionalists.

Vocal Chants of the Nyibu

Types of vocal chants of Nyibu

Some rituals are practised for the well-being, healing; likewise, they can be done for reasons like avenging someone, and according to it, the chant varies. Chants also vary according to the ceremonies, like the making of a house, *Nayap* (welcoming the bride), festival, and incidents, like an accident, when someone is lost, someone dies, someone kills someone, someone kills a rare animal, etc., and also as per the spirit involved.

Types of chants

- Uyi-Barnam/Bvnam: It's the most common chant; in this, the Nyibu narrates the myths and legends in classical language. It is a trial-and-error method in identifying the spirit that has caused illness or misfortune.
- Yal Gognam: - Chant for naming the newborn child.
- Ro-Koknam and Pwpw-Chinam: Chant for diagnosing ailments by reading the omen of the chicken liver and chicken egg.
- Namtu Benam/Bvnam: - Chant for choosing the right place for the construction of the house.
- Huru Tame: - Chant performed when someone avenges the enemy for murder.
- Payi Yvnam: -Chant to appease the spirit of a dead person (orom).
- Sotu-Eraft: - Chant for evoking the evil spirit to bring punishment to the enemy.
- Riokdir- Taja-banam, Nyiuyi-gamnam: These chants are performed as a part of customary laws.
- Pwkia: - Chant for invoking the benevolent spirit for his guidance and protection.
- Nanu Gognam: - Chant for the peace and prosperity of a family.
- Hilo chanam: - Chant for the prosperity of the family, clan or community. It is chanted in big rituals like the Ryalo or the Si-Donyi Hilo.

5.2 Musical elements in the vocal chants of Nyibu

a) Melodic structure and notes

Uyi bvnam/barnam of prominent Nyibu Shri Gogiam Gumja and Assistant Nyibu (*Buri*) Shri Tagiam Digli was recorded from the field in March 2023, performing *Yarnv Uyi*, from which a different set of melodies was extracted. The chant is visualised in a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) called FL Studio, with the help of plugins.

Scale of the chants: -

The scale is not predetermined or fixed. In a typical chanting session, the Nyibu changes scale approximately 2-6 times; it may vary according to the situation. Usually, the Nyibu changes the scales with the change in the melody, lyrics, or with his

1 Nyubu Nyvgam Yerko is an institution which teaches indigenous culture of Nyishi tribe while providing the secular modern education.

2 Nilung Tungko is a gurukul exclusively for Adi tribe ran by Donyi polo cultural & Charitable Trust (DPCCT), Itanagar. The school teaches students about their tribal culture heritage along with the NCERT subjects.

3 Menjwk Menkok Rwgu is an indigenous school ran by Galo Indigenous Faith and cultural council (GIFCC) which teaches traditional culture along with the CBSE subjects.

preference. There is no protocol in choosing of scale or pitch, and it is not fixed to a standard tuning system; it is usually derived from the natural vocal range of Nyibu and the context of the chant.

Notation of the chant

The following are the notations of repetitive melodies in the chant of *Uyi Bynam*.

Melody 1

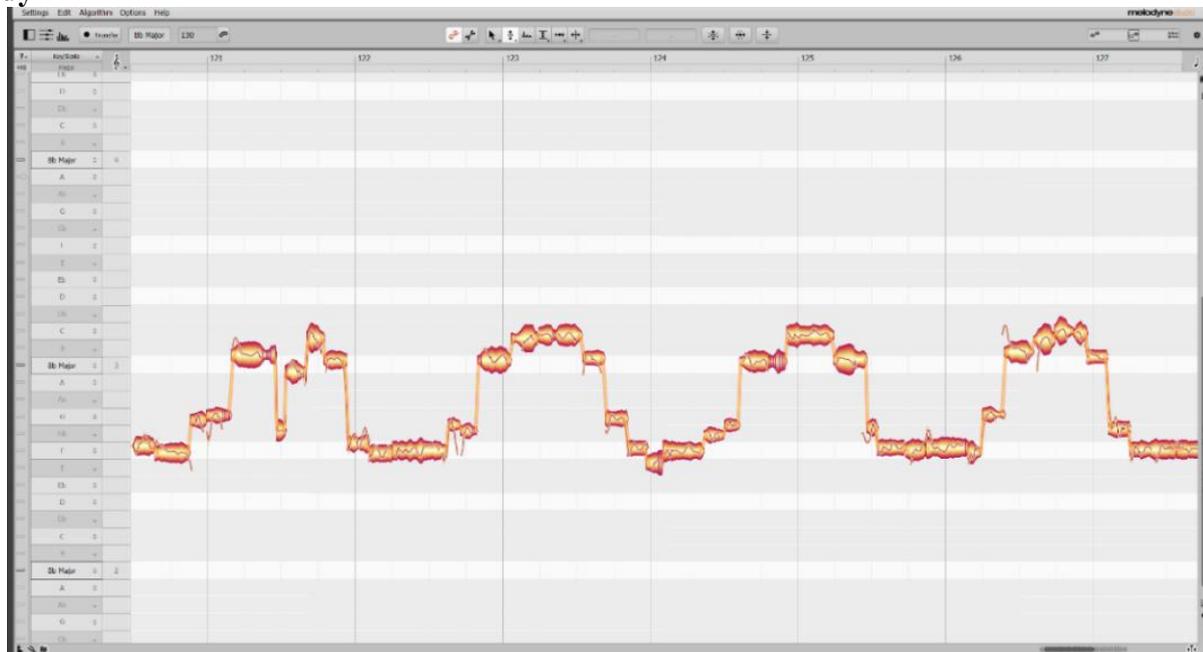


Figure 1
 Pitch detection of the first melody in Melodyne

In this melody of chant, we can determine that the notes used here are

FF GGA# GA#C A#DF

FF GGA# CCC A#DF

FF GGA# CCC A#DF

FF GGA# CCC A#DF

The scale of this chanting is A# or Bb

Same melody in Bhatkhande Hindustani Classical notation, taking A# or Bb as S (Sadaj)

᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚

᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚

᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚

᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚ ᳚᳚᳚

Melody 2

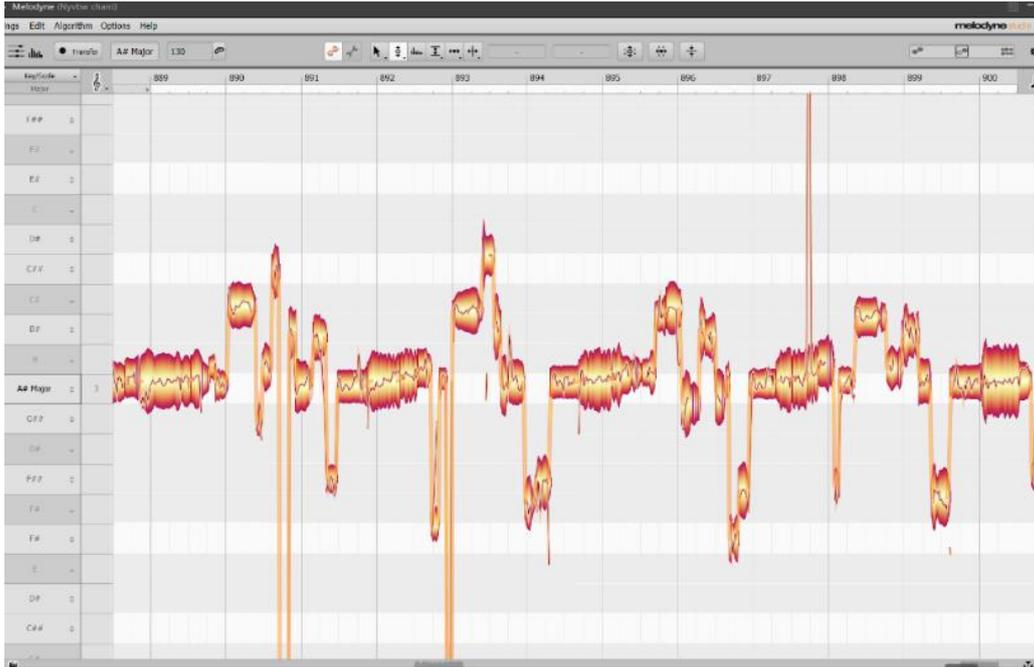


Figure 2
 Pitch detection of the second melody in Melodyne

A#... A#A#C A#DCA#C GA#
 A#... F A#C D CA# GGA#
 A#... A#A#C A#CA# F GA#
 A#... G A#C A#CA# FGA#

Similarly, in the Bhatkhande Hindustani notation system

S SSR SGRSR ḊS
 S ṖSR GRS ḊDS
 S SSR SRS ṖDS
 S ḊSR SRS ṖDS

Melody 3

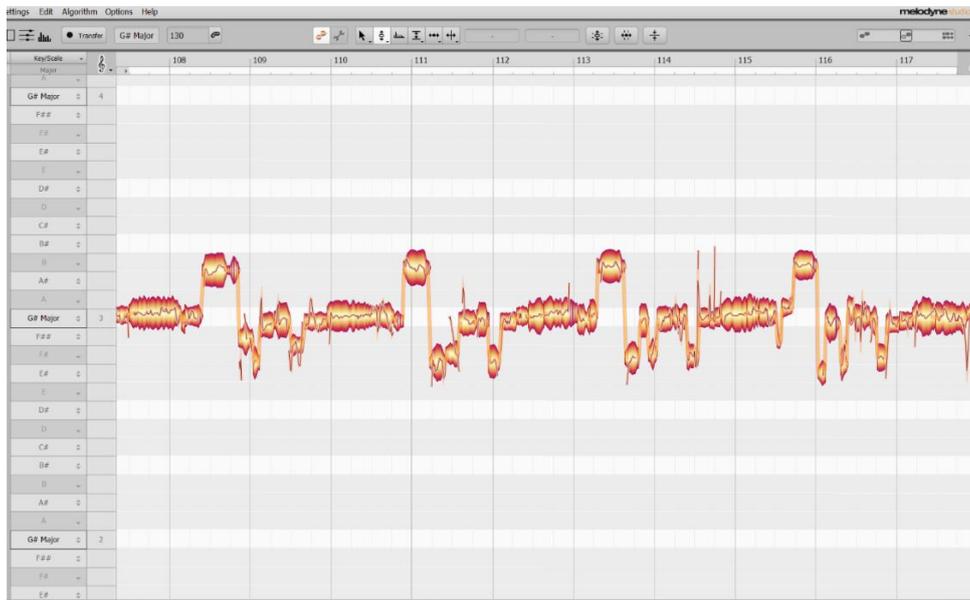


Figure 3
 Pitch detection of the third melody in Melodyne

The scale of this melody is G#

Notes

G# G#G#B F#F G#G# FG# G#G#

G# G#G#B FF G#G# FG# G#G#

G# G#G#B F G#F G#G# FG#G#

G# F#G#B FG# FG# G#G# FG#

In Bhatkhande Hindustani Classical notation, taking G# as S (Sadaj).

S SSG NN SS NS SS

S SSG NN SS NS SS

S SSG N SN SS NSS

S NSG NS NS SS NS

In these melodies of *Uyi Bvnam*, we can identify that the melody starts and ends with the same note. The chanting moves stepwise in motion, both ascending and descending. The melody usually consists of 4 or 5 notes, making it tetra-tonic or Pentatonic. The melody of chanting varies from Nyibu to Nyibu and the type of chant (G. Raji, personal communication, May 24, 2024). In some chants like *Pwpw-chinam* and *Ro-Konam*, not many musical notes are used; it is chanted rhythmically like rap in a modern context.

Tonal patterns

The *Uyi bvnam* chant usually follows a call and response structure, where the Nyibu leads the chanting *Buri* follows. It varies according to the melody and context, and the type of chanting.

Following is the tonal pattern with Bhatkhande notation of the *Uyi bvnam* recorded from the field.

Melody 1

Call by the Buri (Assistant Nyibu)

PP DDS

Response by the Nyibu

DSR SDP

Call by the Buri

PP DDS

Response by the Nyibu

RRR SDP

Melody 2

Together (Both Nyibu and Buri)

S....

Call by the Buri

SSR

Response by the Nyibu

SGRSR DS

Together

S....

Call by the Buri

PSR

Response by the Nyibu

GRS DDS

The repetitive motifs and variation of patterns help in maintaining the chant's continuity. They also chant together in starting of the melody with syllables like 'vv' or 'hv', it sounds beautiful like a harmony within a unison.

b) Rhythm: -

Tempo/ Laya: -

The tempo/Laya of the chanting is highly variable and context-dependent. Usually, the Nyibu starts the chanting at a slow pace and gradually increases it, but in some instances, the Nyibu slows down the pace of chanting according to the context or his will.

In trance, when Nyibu senses danger in the spiritual world, the pace of the chant is sped up (A. Riddi, personal communication, May 29, 2024).

Rhythmic patterns: -

There is no rhythmic accompaniment in the chanting. However, we can determine the rhythmic sense in some chants of Nyibu, which is cyclic with specific melodies or motifs repeating throughout the chant. It usually follows a 4/4 pattern.

The following are rhythmic patterns of chants recorded from the field. The rhythm of the chant is perceived in 8 beats with a 2/2/2/2 division (*Bhibhag*) with Hindustani notation.

Melody 1

$\underbrace{P\bar{P}} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{D\bar{D}} \quad \underbrace{S} \quad | \quad \underbrace{D\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{R} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{D}} \quad \underbrace{P} \quad |$
 $\underbrace{P\bar{P}} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{D\bar{D}} \quad \underbrace{S} \quad | \quad \underbrace{R\bar{R}} \quad \underbrace{R} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{D}} \quad \underbrace{P} \quad |$

Melody 2

$\underbrace{S} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{R} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{G}} \quad \underbrace{R\bar{S}} \quad | \quad \underbrace{R} \quad \underbrace{D\bar{S}} \quad |$
 $\underbrace{S} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{P\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{R} \quad | \quad \underbrace{G\bar{R}} \quad \underbrace{S} \quad | \quad \underbrace{D\bar{D}} \quad \underbrace{S} \quad |$

Melody 3

$\underbrace{S} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{G} \quad | \quad \underbrace{N\bar{N}} \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad | \quad \underbrace{N\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad |$
 $\underbrace{S} \quad \underbrace{\quad} \quad | \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{G} \quad | \quad \underbrace{N\bar{N}} \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad | \quad \underbrace{N\bar{S}} \quad \underbrace{S\bar{S}} \quad |$

In the above example, no. of beats is marked with “ $\underbrace{\quad}$ ” while the “|” denotes the division.

c) Lyrics

Lyrics in the chant of Nyibu are the core element of the ritual. Their lyrics possess various myths, tales, folklores, genealogies, and every aspect of oral literature. It is improvised on the spot by the Nyibu and Tagins believe that the almighty blesses the Nyibu with the ability to chant endless lyrics (G. Raji, personal communication, May 24, 2024).

The following is a chant chanted by prominent Nyibu Shri Tanem Nungnu of Taliha circle, assisted by Shri Raw Kamdak of Daporijo, and the story was narrated by Shri Taji Rai, a prominent Nyibu from Nacho circle. the chanting was audio recorded and later transcribed and translated (Mitkong et al., 2006).

Chant

Title: - Creation of plants, mountains & water

Transcription: -

E-e -e-e-e-e-e

A Sichinga nido - a genjila

Sichinga gampum lila

Nido - a gampum lila

A - miro Siching diri go bokline

A - miro Nido diri go bokline

Lani - i -i-i-i-i..... (p. 25).

Translation: -

The *SICHING GE CHINGE* and *NIDO GE DOGE* (The earth and sky) married. After their marriage, mountains were born, followed by the emergence of water from the mountains. At the same time, *TACHI* (Fern plants), Tabe *HAMDU*, *KIAMJI* (Plant leaves with which Tagins pack the rice), *NAI* (a small variety of bamboo), *TADUR*, *TALI*, *TABUM*, *TAKA* and other varieties of plants began to grow first time on the earth after the emergence of water.

Themes in the Chanting: -

The chant usually consists of the invocations of the spiritual deities. With the invocation, the Nyibu seeks guidance, blessing, and protection. Usually, before any ritual performance, the Nyibu invokes the benevolent spirits known as *Yarnv-Gonv*, who guard and protect them in the spiritual world. This process of Invoking is known as *Galw pvkia* (G. Raji, personal communication, May 24, 2024).

The chant lyrics usually consist of myths like the creation of the earth, the universe, the origin of humans, spirits, plants, animals, rituals, etc. Additionally, it carries the negotiation for the spirits. The primary aim of a Nyibu is to negotiate and exchange the soul of a sacrificed animal with the soul of an ill person (*Yiji-yal*), which the spirit has captured (Riddi, 2008).

The lyrical content of the chant varies according to the ritual; each ritual requires a different use of words. The chants vary based on the person-to-person; according to the person for whom it's chanted, the Nyibu varies the genealogy and the names of places where the ancestors settled or migrated (T. Bayor, personal communication, May 20, 2024).

The lyrical content of the chant is a crucial part of the tribe's heritage, as it possesses the history, myths, legends, genealogy, etc., which are passed down from generation to generation orally (Riddi, 2008).

The lyrical content of the chant possesses the linguistic heritage of the Tagin Tribe, and the phonetic qualities of the language are preserved in the chant (G. Raji, personal communication, May 24, 2024).

d) Musical Ornaments and Timbre of the Chants: -

The chants of Nyibu possess several unique musical ornaments and timbre variations. There is no particular name or anything assigned to these; the Tagin believes these come naturally in the trance. An ornament similar to *Khatka* or *Gamak* in Hindustani classical music is the most commonly used. The use of *Meendh* can be identified in some parts of chanting. However, it depends on the Nyibu; some Nyibu use it predominantly, some use it from time to time; moreover, it is used based on the type of Chant. The timbre variations, like harsh, soft, or resonant, are used based on the context of the parts of the chanting. Chants like *Pwkia* use harsh, loud timbre as per the need, and in chants like *Hilo*, a soft and smooth texture of timbre is used (A. Riddi, personal communication, May 29, 2024).

Conclusion

The shamanic music performed by Nyibu is not just an invocation and negotiation; it is a skilled performing art that includes improvisation of lyrics, rhythm, ornamentation, and so on. Moreover, it is the repository of indigenous knowledge, which carries the cultural heritage.

The sudden shift from hunter-gatherer to the modern lifestyle has significantly disrupted the institution of Nyibu. Today, it is uncertain if the newer generations will be able to become one. Tagins believe Nyibu is chosen by the almighty; however, as the newer generation has become so modernised and westernised, with this dilution in them, will the *Yarnv-Gonv* and *Niki-Jilo* bless them with this ability? Transmission through formalisation and institutionalisation seems to be the best possible way today.

This study is an effort to understand this tradition at its breadth; however, this study is limited in terms of participants, analysis of a few chants and a delimited area. Despite these limitations, it seeks to contribute to the preservation. Tagin Cultural Society, Government of Arunachal Pradesh and India, which have the same intentions, for them, this study can serve as a guide in understanding this unique tradition.

In future, with more extensive field work involving more Nyibu, practitioners and knowledgeable elders, additionally, analysing different forms and variations of this vocal tradition and also exploring other aspects, such as the therapeutic, linguistic, historical, and psychological, etc., would be novel and contribute significantly to the preservation and comprehensive understanding of the shamanic vocal music of the Nyibu.

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