

**Internet Folklore and Online-Mediated Identity:
A Netnography Study on Nyishi Community of
Arunachal Pradesh, India**

Ph.D. Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN COMMUNICATION

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August 2023



DECLARATION

I, **Deepika**, hereby declare that this doctoral thesis, titled **“Internet Folklore and Online-Mediated Identity: A Netnography Study on Nyishi Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India.”** submitted by me to the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication, is a record of research done by me under the supervision of Prof. P. Thirumal. This is a bonafide research work and is free from plagiarism. I declare that it has not submitted in part or in full for the award of any degree or diploma at this or any other University or Institution.

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This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Internet Folklore and Online-Mediated Identity: A Netnography Study on Nyishi Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India.**” submitted by **Deepika**, bearing registration number **17SNPC06**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication, to the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India is a bonafide work carried out by her. This thesis is free from plagiarism and has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

In addition, the student has the following Publications, Invited Lecture and Conference Presentations:

Publications:

1. Kashyap, D. (2023). Book Review: The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast. Critical Research on Religion, 0(0)1-2.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032231174214>
2. Kashyap, D. (2020). Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A theoretical approach. Matfyzpress. ISBN: 978-80-7378-413-3.
3. Kashyap, D. (2019). Folklore and the Changing Pattern in Communication: A Study on Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Asian Thinker: A Quarterly Bilingual Refereed Journal for Social Sciences and Humanities, Volume: January-March 2019. ISSN-2582-1296
<https://theasianthinker.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/04.-Folklore-and-Communication.pdf>

4. Kashyap, D. (2019). Folklore and Network Communication: A Study on Gender Performance in Nyishi Community, Arunachal Pradesh. In Folklore and Philosophy and Other Issues. ISBN 978-93-84638-98-6.
5. Kashyap, D. (2017). Divyang and Digital Divide: A Study on Nyishi Tribes in Sagalee Village of Papumpare District, Arunachal Pradesh”, Jan Sanchar Vimarsh- ISSN 2277-3932.

Invited Lecture:

2019: Delivered lecture title “Nyishi Folklore in The Internet Age” in the Lecture Series World and Nations at Estonian National Museum, Tartu, Estonia.

<https://www.erm.ee/et/www.erm.ee/events/nyishi-folkloorist-internetiajastul>

Conference Presentations:

1. 16-17 June 2022: Paper title “Asserting tribal identity with a modern touch: A perfect blend of tech and culture in the Center for Post digital Cultures, theme Technology Justice: The Theories and Practices of Freedom at the Coventry University, UK.
2. 6-8 September 2021: Paper title “Digital Humanities and the way forward for ethnographic research: What we learned from Covid-19?” in the Japanese Association of Digital Humanities (JADH2021) at the University of Tokyo, Japan.
https://www.hi.u-tokyo.ac.jp/JADH/2021/Proceedings_JADH2021.pdf#page=139
3. 19-23 July 2021: Paper title “Digitization of Indigenous Culture: Performing and Preserving the Identity in the Age of Social Media” in The Association of Computer and the Humanities (ACH2021) University of Texas, Austin, U.S.A.
<https://ach2021.ach.org/>
4. 30May-3June 2021: Paper title “Digital Transformation of Indigenous Culture in Covid-19 in Canadian Society of Digital Humanities (CSDH2021) theme Making the Network, Canada. <https://dh-abstracts.library.cmu.edu/authors/10902>

5. 25-27 January 2021: Paper title “Archiving Internet Folklore” in 10th Winter School of the Estonian Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts theme The Digital Condition: Arts and Humanities in the Digital Age, Tallinn University, Estonia.
<https://ktkdk.edu.ee/winterschool2021/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/DeepikaDeepikaabstract.pdf>
6. 5-7 March 2020: Presented paper title “Politics of Space and Identity in Northeast India: Understanding Nyishi and their Lost Glory.” Baltic Alliance for Asian Studies (BAAS2020), Vytautas Magnus University Kaunas, Lithuania.
<https://balticasianstudies.wordpress.com/2020/01/21/preliminary-program-of-the-4th-baas-conference-in-kaunas>
7. 27-28 January 2020: “Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A theoretical approach at Prague Visual History and Digital Humanities Conference 2020 (PraViDCO 2020), Charles University, Czech Republic,
<https://ufal.mff.cuni.cz/pravidco/conference-program>
8. 4-6 December 2019: “Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A Netnography study on Nyishi Community of Arunachal Pradesh, at 7th DH Estonia Conference, Use of Digital Cultural Heritage in Research and Education National Library of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia
<https://dh.org.ee/events/dhe2019/abstracts/presentations/kashyap/>
9. 21-22 September 2019: “Nyishi Folklore in the Age of Internet” Tartu Nefi Autumn School, Tartu, Estonia.
10. 18-20 September 2019: “Production and Circulation of Nyishi Folklore in the Digital Realm”, theme (Ir)relevance of classical folkloristics in the 21st Century, 9th International Conference of Young Folklorist, Vilnius, Lithuania,
<http://www.llti.lt/failai/YoFo%202019%20Abstract.pdf>
11. 5–7 September 2019: “Performing Online: Nyishi Folklore in the Age of Internet”, theme Perception and Performativity in Arts and Culture in the Age of Technological Change, 9th Annual Conference of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia.
<https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2019/performance/abstracts.pdf>
12. 15-17 March 2019: “Folklore and Network Communication: A Study on Gender Performance in Nyishi Community, Arunachal Pradesh” International Conference on

Folklore and Philosophy and Other Issues, T.E Malayalam University, Tirur, Kerala, India.

13. 10th December 2017: “Divyang and Digital Divide” A Study on Nyishi Tribes in Sagalee Village of Papumpare District, Arunachal Pradesh in International Conference, Divyang and Pmg: A Global Media Perspective organized by Indian Institute of Mass Communication and Punerutthan, IIMC, JNU Campus, New Delhi, India.

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of the coursework requirement for Ph.D.:

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2. HVHV.00.002	Introduction to Digital Humanities	3	Pass
3. HVKU.04.012	Internet Folklore	3	Pass

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Head of Department

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*This Dissertation is dedicated to
My beloved Supervisor,
Dr. P. Kennedy, who inspired me
to Imagine a Life without Limits.
Your contribution to this Journey
is beyond words, and I am deeply
Grateful for Your unwavering
Support, Encouragement, Love,
and Care. I firmly believe that
you must be Overjoyed To witness
the completion of The Journey -----*



-----We embarked Together....!!!

Acknowledgements

I am filled with immense gratitude towards every person who has been a part of this journey, directly or indirectly. Their unwavering support and patient companionship have been a constant source of comfort and strength, helping me navigate through thick and thin. As I reach the completion of this journey, witnessing the happiness and spark in everyone's eyes fills me with indescribable emotions of accomplishment.

First and foremost, I owe a great debt of thanks to my supervisor, Prof. P. Thirumal, for his strong support and invaluable guidance throughout the entire journey, especially after the untimely demise of Dr. P Kennedy. His consistent encouragement of critical thinking and support in articulating strong arguments have been invaluable and a driving force for me. Prof. Thirumal's insightful criticism and direction played a pivotal role in bringing out the full potential of my thesis.

Words cannot express the depth of my indebtedness to Prof. Ülo Valk for his extraordinary role as my supervisor during my visiting Ph.D. program at the University of Tartu. Prof. Valk's profound influence on my understanding of folklore is immeasurable, and his guidance has been an invaluable gift that shaped the very core of my knowledge in this field. With utmost gratitude, I acknowledge Prof. Valk's exceptional ability to impart wisdom through his engaging lectures and his unwavering dedication to nurturing my academic growth.

I also extend heartfelt thanks to my esteemed DRC members, Dr. Madhavi and Dr. M. N. Rajesh. Their guidance, support, insightful comments, and suggestions, have profoundly shaped my thesis and academic journey. Thank you, Dr. M.N. Rajesh sir, for your invaluable assistance during the final moments of my thesis submission. I highly appreciate your help and support, and I am truly grateful for your guidance.

This thesis would not have captured the rich ethnographic content without the invaluable support of my parents. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my Parents, Smt. Meena and Shri. Nanak Chand, for accompanying me during my fieldwork in the challenging terrain of Arunachal Pradesh. I am really grateful to my Papa for granting me permission to conduct my ethnographic research in Arunachal Pradesh, and for his tireless efforts in assisting me throughout the fieldwork, walking miles, and capturing photographs of me and my respondents. Thank you, Maa and Papa for your meticulous reading and providing encouraging words before the submission of this work.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to all the Faculty Members of Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad. Thank you, Prof. Vinod, Prof. Usha, Prof. Kanchan, Prof. Vasuki, Dr. Janardhan, Dr. Sathya and Anjali ma'am, for their guidance and support.

Dr. Rachana Gangwar, whose constant motivation and inspiring words have been a driving force in my academic pursuits. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Lisa Gilman for her insightful suggestions on society and technology, which she shared with me through multiple email exchanges. My gratitude extends to Artjoms Šeļa, my DH instructor, for his expert guidance in the field of digital humanities. His mentorship has equipped me with essential skills to effectively utilize digital methods in my research. I am also grateful to Maili Pilt for introducing me to Internet folklore, which enriched my understanding of the field.

Thank you, Prof. Kedilezo Kikhi for supporting me in this journey and providing me recommendation letter at many times. I must express my appreciation to Late Dr. Devesh Kishore for providing me with support and guidance during our multiple research methodological conversations and discussions. I would like to extend my thanks to Mr. Rahul sir, Pramod sir, Manish sir, Dr. Rajesh sir and Dr. Ramshanker sir for their guidance, support and encouragement.

I am deeply thankful to the Estonian National Museum in Tartu for organizing the prestigious lecture “Nyishi Folklore in The Internet Age” in the Lecture Series World and Nations at Estonian National Museum. It was an honor to be invited to deliver this lecture, and I am immensely grateful for the opportunity. Estonia, you have been a beacon of opportunities that have enriched my life and broadened my perspective. I Also, want to express my sincere appreciation to the COST Action for granting me the opportunity to explore and learn in the field of digital humanities. Their support has been invaluable in shaping my academic pursuits and career path.

I express my gratitude to Rambabu, Ramu and Neeradi for their invaluable assistance in navigating all the technical and official procedures within the department. Their support has been immensely helpful and appreciated. Besides that, the university staff, especially Azgar and Panikkar sir, for their humble support.

Thank you, Kinga J. Durczak, from Leiden University for taking the time to read my work and providing valuable suggestions for improvement. Additionally, I want to express my gratitude for informing me about various academic fellowships. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Saba and Kami from EHESS for their humility and for accommodating me during my time in Paris. Saba, your encouragement has meant a lot to me. Our in-depth conversations about my research and your critical approaches have been instrumental in developing this thesis in a more refined manner.

I express my deep gratitude to my Nyishi friends, Techī Apra, Techī Baba, John and Gyamar Max for their invaluable support and assistance during my fieldwork. Apra, your translation of the Nyishi language was instrumental in articulating the essence of Nyishi culture in my thesis. Your tireless efforts in clearing my countless doubts, confusions, and queries, even during late nights and early mornings, were truly exceptional. I am also immensely thankful to Taba Hare for generously donating the holy book Nyetam, and to the members of Nyder Namlo, particularly

Techi Nakap and Techy Anaia, for their unwavering support and cooperation. Thank you Koshi aunty for your love and care. A special thanks goes to Ramesh Bora uncle for providing me with accommodation during my visit to Arunachal Pradesh, and to Techy Soal uncle for his kindness and availability during all emergency situations.

Gratitude fills my heart as I extend my sincere thanks to the wonderful city of Hyderabad and all the dear people I have come to know here. Special thanks to Ram Avtar sir, whom I had the privilege of knowing even before coming to Hyderabad. Thank you for your support and for graciously accommodating me and my mother during the PhD interview at the university. I am also thankful to my wonderful classmates: Jharna, Anila, Sruthy, Aniruddha, and Devina. Jharna, your constant motivation has been a great source of strength for me whenever I felt low during this journey, I found the one and only elder sister in my life. Anila and Sruthy, I appreciate their academic and personal support, care, and love and for bringing me delicious food from Kerala. Hemabindu, you are invaluable during the submission process has been instrumental, and I am deeply grateful to you. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Anil for his kindness and for helping me in various instances. Manas, Nazin, Nisha, Hazeena, Manisha, and Namitha for their academic and personal encouragement.

I am deeply grateful to all my friends for enriching my life in so many ways. Thank you Dr. Prayasee Dutta, Latika Das, Yogesh, Rita, Arif, Wafa, Sabika, Ahmar, Freya, Akash, Kallol, Ritika, Amreen, Samia, Vishal, Geet, Himanshu, Harshwardhan, Venky, Arzaan, Nimmi, Soni and Moni for helping me immensely by just being there, caring for me and by being always concerned about my work.

I deeply appreciate the warm affection and memories of my beloved professor, Dr. P. Kennedy, shared with me by his family members, especially Pradeepa ma'am, Nissi, and Toni. Their kindness and openness have been truly heartwarming.

My Saheb, your enchanting charisma never fails to captivate me. I am always eager to watch your videos, and I find myself constantly asking Uncle Aunty Tuna Tuni to share them with me. The way you play with random objects or delight in eating all the *putti* in your home effortlessly melts away all my stress. Your videos bring immense joy to my life, and I hold it very close to my heart. You are cherished dearly, my child.

You, my Miracle man, expressing my gratitude for your constant support and guidance feels like an impossible task. Your endurance and firm belief in me have been instrumental in shaping this incredible journey. The countless discussions, debates, and talks we have had enriched my understanding in ways I could never have imagined. Admittedly, there were moments when your intellectual rigor and profound critical thinking challenged me to the core. Yes, I must acknowledge that without those challenges, I wouldn't have grown and completed this journey as successfully as I have. Our impassioned debates covering topics ranging from tribe, caste,

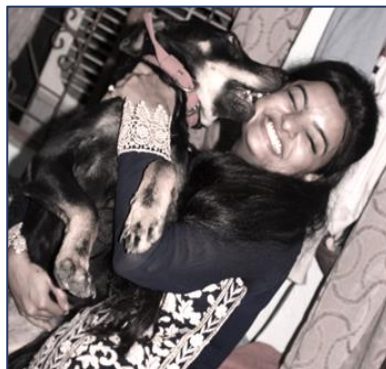
politics, religion, to technology have not only been thought-provoking but also enlightening. The depth of knowledge you've imparted to me fills me with pride, and I am determined to carry it forward in my future endeavours. Your companionship is always cherished and it will remain intact forever...

Finally, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my beloved family for everything. To my beloved ancestors, Shri. Indraman *Perbaba*, Shri. Puran Chand *Baba*, and Smt. Prema Devi & Smt. Sunehri Devi *Dadi*, we can only imagine the immense pride you must feel in heaven as our family joyously celebrates, our cherished granddaughter Divya *Poutari*, achieving the remarkable milestone of becoming the first in our family to earn a doctoral degree. Your presence and blessings continue to guide and inspire us, and I know that you are looking down upon us with immense happiness on this momentous occasion. Your enduring love, care, and support have been the bedrock of my journey.

Maa Papa, your unwavering guidance and encouragement have been a perpetual source of motivation, and I will always be grateful for it. My education owes its existence to your nurturing and staunch support, without which it would not have been possible for me to achieve this goal.

Thank you for being there for me always, Dheeraj my *Big B* and Geetanjali my *Gulaboo*, you have always been close to my heart. Thank you for your love and care, protecting me from all the evils eyes in the world.

Ronnie and Michel, you are my best friends on this journey. Ronnie, your *didi* has successfully finished her PhD, and she misses your hugs on this special occasion.



I hope to meet you again someday and celebrate the completion of this journey with your favorite momos...

Miss you Ronnie..!

Thank You GOD for Granting Me Countless Opportunities...

Deepika..

Welcome to the “Land of Rising Sun”



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Abbreviations

ABVKA- Akhil Bhartiya Vanawasi Kalyan Ashram

ANSU-All Nyishi Students' Union

ANYA-All Nyishi Youth Association

ASVS-Arunachal Siksha Vikas Samiti

AVP-Arunachal Vikas Parishad

CMC-Computer-Mediated Communication

DH-Digital Humanities

DPYK-Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang

IFCSAP-Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh

NACWS Nyishi Art and Culture and Welfare Society

NEFA-NEFA North-East Frontier Agency

NEFT- North-East Frontier Tract

NIFCS-Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society

NIFSC-Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society

NNMR-Nyishi Nyidung Mwnjwng Rallung

NSE-Nyishi Elite Society

RIWATCH-Research Institute of the World's Ancient Traditions, Cultures and Heritage

RSS-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SNS social networking sites

UI-.user interface

VKA-Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram

VKVAPT- Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya Arunachal Pradesh Trust

VKV-Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya

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CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview to the thesis, and its relevance in contemporary time. Plots drawing on the online participation and activities of the Nyishi individuals in the recent past and perceived as reflections of the contemporary Nyishi community, this chapter developed an organic design both from the inside out and the outside in, adding folklore, identity and technology. This chapter provides a starting point for the objectives, approach, case studies and conclusions offered in this thesis.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The “new”¹ online ethnicity produced in the last decade by the Nyishi community of Arunachal Pradesh highlights the complexity of the newly developed online ethnic subject and the way it reflects, constructs or renegotiates with the offline world. With the increasing presence of ICT and the Internet in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh, the Nyishi community, like many other indigenous communities in the state, has been using social media platforms to construct a sense of belonging and commonality that earlier remained inaccessible due to difficult geographical terrain. Present day, the users on the Internet and Social media platforms are engaged with their indigeneity and ethnicity through a range of online practices, asserting their offline cultural heritage and identity on the online platform, mainly on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This new form of representation has enabled the indigenous community to start negotiating the issues pertinent to their identity and existence in society. Besides that, the prevalence of the internet has produced an alternative political and cultural arrangement along with the creation of a wider space for representation and networking² (Frazer and Carlson, 2017; Parker and Song, 2009). Increasingly, the indigenous community forums are having their own social media handle; busy sharing indigenous knowledge and identifying with others. In other words, social media has

¹ The term is borrowed from Stuart Hall’s essay on New Ethnicity. For Hall, New Ethnicity conceptualizes the difference between the hegemonic discourse on ethnicity defined by the mainstream society and the ‘new’ emerging discourse that the marginal voices play in questioning the hegemonic discourse. The ‘new’ ethnicity empowers the ethnicity of the margin by challenging the ‘Eurocentric’ or ‘Englishness’ which was imposed upon the marginal and subaltern people. See Hall, 1996.

² The internet and social media has offered opportunities for subaltern groups, including the indigenous communities and religious minorities—with the most free and less biased platform—to connect with the like-minded people, and changed the contour of public debate. It has led to the explosion of subaltern discourse, including that of indigenous communities from the north-east India. Ethnic consciousness among the indigenous people is mobilized through social media posts and videos, creating a counter-culture movement.

provided an opportunity to create a new image that disrupts and disputes the essentialist³ and negative construction of the indigenous community by the mainstream media (Marotta 2011, p.558). Moreover, social media platforms facilitate a new ethnicity⁴ challenging the dominant and hegemonic form of ethnicity. This changing notion of ethnicity encompasses marginal voices rather than the dominant notion which connects it to nation and race (Hall 1996, p.447). Thus, the increasing participation of the indigenous community on online forums and websites is an intriguing development which requires an understanding of representational practices of indigenous communities in online platforms. So, drawing upon the concept of new ethnicity and representation, this thesis focuses on both the online and offline presence of the Nyishi community. Much research on digital culture assumes that people's interactions online adhere to offline expectations and regulations—often representing and identifying their offline selves on online platforms (Carlson, 2013; Christensen, 2003). However, there is another set of research which claims online forums are disembodied spaces as the ethnic and indigenous subjects no longer rely on physical proximity (Marotta 2011; McCormick and Leonard 2007; Robins 2000; Bell and Kennedy 2000). Contrary to the later premise, the online identities produced by the Nyishi community translate into the domain of offline subjectivity—and, it needs an understanding of both embodied and disembodied experience and expression.

Social media users often flaunt their ethnic and cultural identity that were organized on the offline platform, confirming their participation in the event. As well as, the participants on the online forums are casual acquaintances or family members and friends from offline, bridging the

³ Hall's essay on New Ethnicity highlights the politics of representation and ethnicity. The essentialist approach to the ethnicity often create an oppressive and negative discourse around the marginal group, continuing the regimes of representation. Thus, the new ethnicity is a break from the regimes of representation. Drawing upon Hall's idea Marotta (2011) describes the experience of the marginal group and the politics of representation on the social media forums and websites. See Marotta, 2011.

⁴ Non-coercive ethnicity provides space to the marginal group to represent themselves independently. See Hall, 1996.

social capital and solidifying the varied and dispersed sets of shared interests of the community⁵ (Carlson, 2013; Drushel, 2010; Cooper and Dzara 2010). The use of online forums and websites may well lead to many positive changes, but, the varied opinion on the use of social media by the indigenous community need to be addressed.

Before making any conclusion, it is important to locate the positionality of the Nyishi community and identify the ways it negotiates with the mainstream media. In addition to that, the advance usage of social media among the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh does not suggest there's no digital divide or digital inequality, instead, it highlights the growing interest of the indigenous people towards the possibilities of technology and the online environment⁶ (Carlson & Frazer 2015). Although, the online experience can be recognize as a matter for new interpretations and alternative paradigms, it needs an understanding of embodied and disembodied experience and expression as well as the way it reinforces the mimic representational practice by accommodating the national and regional discourses produced by mainstream media.

In recent times, there's a growing trend of communities adopting online platforms to create virtual spaces where they can freely exercise their agency, practice and preserve their culture and traditions, and assert their identity. This cultural shift has played a crucial role in revitalizing Nyishi folklore, as it embraces the realm of internet technology. The presence of Nyishi folklore on the internet offered individuals an invaluable resource to explore and engage with diverse cultural narratives. To strengthen and reaffirm their cultural roots, the Nyishi have actively

⁵ Social media users or the participants of a closed group or community pages often know each other from their offline world.

⁶ ICT Infrastructure is yet to be developed fully in Arunachal Pradesh. Many parts of the state lack internet connectivity, keeping the regions away from the mainstream society. However, the younger generations from the regions have shown greater interest in the possibilities of the internet and technology. They have been travelling miles to update their social media pages and communicate with the world.

embraced online platforms, particularly Facebook. Through regular updates on their Facebook page, they share Nyishi folktales, legends, stories, customs, and traditions, captivating the interest of both Nyishi and other indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. This new form of representation has enabled the indigenous community to start negotiating the issues pertinent to their identity and existence in society.

Allowing the critics and scholars to analyze the system of representation and online mediated identity, this research foregrounds the cultural and political shift that occurred due to social media (Marotta 2011, p. 551). Thus, the thesis critically engages with the reception of internet and folklore in the Nyishi community, and the connection flanked among Internet folklore, social media, and the emergence of new online identities. This thesis investigates to what extent folklore on social media shaped Nyishi ethnic identity and to what extent the internet and social media fostered the Nyishi collective identity on both offline and online platforms. This thesis addresses the following research questions:

- How the forces of modernity conceptualize folklore and oral traditions across corporeal and virtual contexts, strengthening the folk identities?
- How social networking sites can be used by indigenous communities to showcase their cultural dignity and sovereignty?
- How does the presence of Nyishi folklore on the internet reinforces the sense of collective identity by repeatedly exposing individuals to shared values and ideas?
- How does online mediated identity shape the ethnic identity of the Nyishi community?

Nyishi

The Nyishi is one of the significant tribes which inhabit as many as six districts viz- Papumpare, Upper Subansiri, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, East Kameng and in some parts of west Kameng of Arunachal Pradesh including Sonitpur and North Lakhimpur districts of Assam. As per the census-2011, Nyishi is numerically the largest tribe (around 300,000 lakhs out of 1,382,611 total population) of the state, which is one-third of the total Scheduled Tribe population. Therefore, Nyishi is the single largest tribe in the state⁷. The people basically belong to Paleo-Mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages. They are the descendants of Abo Tani- the mythical forefather of the Tani clan. The Nyishi share a close affinity with the neighbouring tribes such as Galos, Adis, Apatanis, Tagins, and the Mishings of adjoining Assam.

Earlier known as Daflas, Nyishi intellectuals and activists found the word ‘dafla’ derogatory and appealed for the amend of the VIII Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Finally, in 2008 the word ‘dafla’ was changed to ‘nyishi’. Nyishi community find the word ‘nyishi’ more appropriate to their social and cultural identity as the word reads, Nyi means ‘man’ or ‘human race’ that descended from Atu Nyia Tani (son of Abo Tani-the first real man on the earth) and shi (Ishi) means ‘hills’ or ‘highland’. Therefore, the compound word ‘Nyishi’ denotes the descendants of ‘Abo Tani’ or ‘Atu Nyia Tani’ who dwell in the highland. This is the reason they are called highlanders. The evolution of the ‘dafla’ or the Nyishi is quite dramatic. The earlier record shows the dafla as unruly and quarrelsome⁸. Providing a historical account, Elwin writes, “When Raja Udayaditya Singha proposed to punish the Daflas of Subansiri for carrying off a number of

⁷ See Census 2011, Govt. of India. Also, refer to Arunachal Gazette.

⁸ See Philosophy of NEFA by Elwin (1959).

Assamese men, women and children, his Prime Minister declared that the Dafla miscreants can be captured only if an elephant can enter a rat-hole (Elwin 1959, p.2)". Dafla was difficult to bring under administrative control for a long time. Unlike other tribes in the region, the dafla keeps moving from one location to another. One of the main reasons for not having a permanent settlement lies in the basic structure of families and homes. The dafla used to live in a long house along with their extended families, slaves and servants and never were part of village community⁹. As Elwin (1959) writes, because of their aggressive, reserved and suspicious attitude, 'taking human life', and 'cattle-theft' has long been common (Elwin 1959, p.13). However, such a description of Dafla, now Nyishi, is vehemently criticized and opposed by the Nyishi intellectuals. They complained that the cultural history of the indigenous people was distorted or negatively depicted to accomplish the administrative and academic purposes (Showren 2020, p.53). Analysing the anthropological research on the indigenous community of Arunachal Pradesh, Showren appeals for the re-correction of early anthropological and historical work that provide a negative image about the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh (Showren 2020, p.53). However, the Nyishi scholars and intellectuals are well aware of the gap and differences among the people and advocate for harmony and unification. For the Nyishi, a homogenous Nyishi identity is essential to prove its existence and dominance in society. Thus, the Nyishi started organising themselves, and a sense of shared identity was created through the celebration of indigenous faith and belief collectively. After much deliberation, new cultural institutions were established to protect, preserve, and practice the Nyishi indigenous faith. After much deliberation, new cultural institutions were established to protect, preserve, and practice the Nyishi indigenous faith. Cultural institutions like The Nyishi Art and Cultural Society has

⁹ Each long-house is an autonomous, self-sufficient, and independent political unit disconnected from its neighbours (Furer-Haimendorf 1983: 56).

been established in 1984. Later renamed to the Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society (NIFCS) in 1998¹⁰. NIFCS plays an important role in shaping the indigenous identity by creating awareness among the Nyishi against the proselytisation work by the Christian missionaries. Like the Adis, the Nyishi also formalised their indigenous faith and belief by establishing Nyder Namlo (Nyishi prayer hall) on 27 January 2001 at Doimukh. Under state patronage and support from Hindu organisations, both NIFCS and Nyder Namlo flourished in the recent past. Workshops and training were conducted periodically to impart indigenous knowledge to youth. Much emphasis has been given to the preservation and dissemination of folklore and unity and brotherhood among the Nyishis. In the absence of written records, the youth of the Nyishi community find oral literature a powerful source to learn about the Nyishi with historical content. So the thesis critically looks into the rise of Nyishi consciousness through the process of documentation and preservation of the folklore.

Understanding the Folklore

To understand folklore, we need to understand the concept of “folk” and “lore.” The present-day definition of folk is different from the Eurocentric view of folk as a lower stratum of society. According to Alan Dundes, folk is the group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor (Dundes 1987). The informal or unofficial level of cultural understanding is the “folk” level, the level on which cultural knowledge is shared, enacted, and propagated by regular, everyday people (McNeil 2013). Folk group or the folk have both the institutional and non-institutional aspects, and when we tell them folk, it is their unofficial selves. So the folklore is informal, traditional culture. It’s all the cultural stuff— customs, stories, jokes, art—that we learn from each other, by word of mouth or observation, rather than through formal institutions

¹⁰ See Showren (2003).

(McNeil 2013). Formal institutions don't allow one to express his/her unconscious mind, thus, folklore helps people to express themselves categorically. As Dundes writes, "Folklore offers a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety provoking behavior. One can do or say in folkloric form things otherwise interdicted in everyday life (Dundes 2005)."

Folklore as a hidden, forgotten, and backward culture has been prevalent throughout history (Dorson 1978), and has been reinforced by factors, including the historical context in which it has emerged and presented to the society. Over the past few decades, the scholarship around folklore has changed, and locating the origin of folklore in a faded past and "withered" subcultures,¹¹ turn outdated. A different perspective on the folklore—not simply a product of rural communities, but an integral part of every society—that is relevant to present day situation, took the center stage. As Richard Dorson conceived, "folklore is where the action is, not in some idyllic backwater (Dorson 1978, p.23)." Similarly, Alan Dundes (1975) rejects the notion that folklore is 'primitive' and advocates for the evolving nature of folklore—thriving in the age of science and technology—that can be seen as a positive development in the field of folklore studies. However, the traditional folklore still continues to exist in the modern forms. Thus, it is important to understand the interplay between folklore, science and technology.

Folklore in the age of Internet

In the recent past, the internet has been regarded as an integral part of our everyday lives, and that which have transformative effects on the traditional folk society—with the increasing participation of the various folk groups in online platforms, folk culture and traditions has transformed into online culture—as a result, the internet and social media platforms offered new genres and variations of traditional folklore (Kõiva & Vesik 2009, p. 97). Also, the internet has offered incredible amounts of support for folk groups as they actively engaged with the online

¹¹ Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore in the Modern World* (1978).

site, presenting their traditional customs, practices and beliefs. Indeed, the internet has become an important archival site for folklore research as the internet users often shares culturally-rich material as well as their traditional culture in social media, web forums, and other digital platforms. In a way, the internet offers rich folkloric materials, thereby motivating the scholars of culture, communication, folklore, and internet studies to critically look into it.

With the emergence of the internet, folklore has taken new forms and it has been widely circulated in the forms of images, memes and videos. In such a dynamic environment, folklore has been adapted and integrated, which is exemplified with the changing nature of socio-political and cultural stance against the modern–tradition dichotomy. For example, memes, which have solely emerged in a digital platform, contain traditional values and are a popular means to express emotions and ideas nowadays. Hence, the internet has become a crucial platform to study the ongoing cultural transitions in the society.

Nyishi and the Internet

Like many indigenous communities in the world, the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh are also avid users of the internet and social media. Through their social media posts i.e. text, images and videos, Nyishi people have been trying to assert their cultural identity in the face of rapid cultural assimilation in the region. This includes the increasing participation of Nyishi individuals in social media platforms, mainly Facebook, where they have been expressing their cultural values and identities, and propagating their folklore, myths and legends. There have been Facebook pages created by Nyishi individuals dedicated to the Nyishi folklore, culture and traditions, culminating debates and discussions about ethnic identity, and cultural and political assertion in the society. Looking into the recent development in the Nyishi community, and their increasing

presence on the online platforms, this thesis further investigates the role of the internet and social media in shaping Nyishi ethnic identity.

Limitations

- The intensified use of social media among the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh does not suggest there's no digital divide or digital inequality, instead, it highlights the growing interest of the indigenous people towards the possibilities of technology and the online environment.
- The study is focused on Facebook and Folklore. Based on my cultural parameters I have focused only on five Facebook community pages from 2018-2021.
- The research is centered on the collective identity of the Nyishi community, thus individual pages were not examined in the study.
- The thesis didn't include any events or developments occurred on both online and offline platforms after December 2021.

Although the research is based on publicly available data, considerable attention has been given to ethical considerations. In order to protect the privacy and anonymity of Facebook users, this study ensures the removal or alteration of all identifiable information, including names, usernames, age, and gender.

Thesis Outline

Chapter-1

This chapter provides an overview to the thesis, and its relevance in contemporary time. Plots drawing on the online participation and activities of the Nyishi individuals in the recent past and sensed as reflections of the Contemporary Nyishi, this chapter establish a design from the standpoint both inside out and the outside in, in addition to folklore, identity and technology.

This chapter serves as an initial framework for the goals, methodology, case studies, and conclusion offered in this thesis. It provides a concise overview of the research study, outlining its purpose to highlight the significance and pertinence of the investigation.

Chapter-2

This Chapter is an elaborative background on the cultural politics and ongoing cultural transitions in Arunachal Pradesh. The present-day Arunachal Pradesh is embedded in India's political imagination in the frontier region. Also, it is greatly shaped by both colonial and postcolonial administrative policies in the region. The journey from the Northeast Frontier Track (1914) to Arunachal Pradesh (1987) is filled with several political, cultural, administrative and strategic accounts. This chapter argues that the indigenous consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh is deeply embedded in the protection and preservation of folklore, myth, indigenous faith and cultural practices—and, on the other, it has come as a consequence of the longtime assimilation of indigenous ontology.

Chapter-3

This chapter sketched the methodological framework employed in the thesis, discussing Netnography approach and recent research using social media platforms as a research site. I embarked on a 3-year study (2018-2021) to understand digital transformation of Nyishi culture, people, and identity. This chapter discussed how the data collected from my research site and classify the Facebook posts undertaken to conducted an in-depth study. And last of all considerable attention given to ethical considerations undertaking in my research to document the analyzed data.

Chapter-4

This chapter critically examines how folklore is integral to the development of the Nyishi ethnic identity offers a culture footing to the political sense of Nyishi identity that has emerged in the past decades are explored through the historical context. Focusing on the discursive practice of drawing politically desirable links to the past—that serves to legitimize aspirations of indigenous communities and their cultural autonomy, this chapter discuss the politics of culture and history, contributing to the narrative construction of continuities and discontinuities, and community making. This chapter argues that folklore is handmaiden of the political right—and, the development of folklore as part of everyday lives is not fortuitous but an ideological necessity.

Chapter-5

This chapter highlights the transformative influence of the internet and social media on the revitalization of Nyishi folklore, and their cultural heritage. Focusing on Nyishi Facebook pages, it critically examines the opportunities and challenges posed by social media in disseminating folklore—and, on the other, the conscious attempt on the part of the Nyishi individuals to record oral masterpieces derived from a shared aesthetic appreciation. Based on the findings, the chapter argues that the internet and social media provide a unique opportunity of cultural bonding among the Nyishi through folklore.

Chapter-6

This Chapter emphasizing on the ethnic expressions and transformations on online platforms, this chapter examines the intricate relationship between ethnicity, digital spaces, and identity formation within the contemporary Nyishi community. It argues that the new online ethnicity emerged in the recent past isn't a definitive shift, or a substitution of old and essential Nyishi identity. Instead, the new online ethnicity overlap and interweave with the old one, deploying

forms of “strategic essentialism”. Through textual and visual analysis, this chapter shed light on the politics of representation — the construction of ethnic collective consciousness within the realm of social media, and how the online Nyishi assumes new forms of identity.

Chapter-7

Drawing on the research findings presented throughout the thesis, this chapter offers an overall conclusion on how the internet and social media are changing the contours of Nyishi ethnic identity. With the presence and the power of the internet, folklore stands for human cultural production and communication. I argue that the collection and circulation of Nyishi folklore on the internet and social media has contributed towards the growth of indigenous knowledge, resulting in a new ethnic identity online.

Chapter-2

The Dynamics of Cultural Integration and Indigenous Consciousness on Arunachal Pradesh

The increasing penetration of the Internet and the growth of social media in Arunachal Pradesh is deeply embedded in the language of regional development and national integration of the region. Arunachal Pradesh, earlier known as NEFA, has been a great concern for mainland India after its independence from British rule. For the security strategy¹², the region was quite important for the Indian state. To integrate the region into mainland India, the Indian government made and implemented different policies. The hard-and-fast rules of the center kept the press or the mass media at bay and controlled the media coverage of the NEFA. NEFA authorities closely monitor the information available to the people inside and outside the region. The Press Information Bureau¹³ carefully chose and sponsored media personnel to write and publish the government's goodwill toward the people in the newspaper. Analyzing the presence of media in NEFA, Guyot-Récharde write that the authorities from the frontier region invited the press from mainland India to write on government's success in the region¹⁴(Guyot-Récharde 2017. P.152). Mostly, the press was used as a vehicle for the government's hidden agenda in this Northeastern state. The region scarcely appeared in the news. Besides that, the press often undermined the 'human qualities'—

¹² In her book, *Shadow States India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962*, Récharde critically explain the positionality of the Arunachal Pradesh in the Indian state. Her research highlights the vulnerability of the state and how the center and Indian army always consider the border state as an important place to showcase India's strength in front of the globe and protect mainland India.

¹³ Press remained a sensitive affair in the Arunachal Pradesh. The Indian government often control the information in this Northeastern state or the media personnel had restricted entry into the state. For more information, See Récharde (2017. P.152.),

¹⁴ “A modus vivendi of sorts was gradually established between frontier administration and the national press” (Récharde 2017. P.152).

the everyday life of the locals, their culture and tradition, and highlights its physical importance¹⁵.

As a result, the aspiration of the indigenous communities remains neglected for a long time. The indigenous voice remained unheard until the set-up of the first functional radio station in Pasighat Arunachal Pradesh in 1966. Later in the 1980s onward, the newspapers started getting printed in Itanagar and are distributed across the state. Besides that, in the 1990s and 2000s, electronic media also started proliferating under the late Taro Chatung in Arunachal Pradesh. However, the recent development and changes in the field of information and communication are noteworthy. In the last decade, due to the growing political and cultural interest of mainland India, Arunachal Pradesh has received significant attention from the center. Now, ICT has become a more effective tool for integrating the region with mainland India. For example, the launch of DD Arun Prabha on 9th February 2019 by Doordarshan India is the first television channel in Arunachal Pradesh and second for the Northeast. Also, there are an increasing number of telecom services, satellite services, cable and internet services in the state. But, social media has a wider role to play in the shaping of indigenous identity and culture in the region. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have galvanized the process of making a connection, community building and promotion of culture and identity (van Dijck 2013, p.201). Now, there are several social media forums both public and private, dedicated to various causes of social change. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the main social media platforms for the indigenous community to circulate information. The indigenous groups of Arunachal Pradesh are actively taking part in and building their network on the online platform. Thus, this study focuses on the

¹⁵As Réchard writes: The frontier appeared in the news mostly in the wake of inexplicably brutal or sudden events...the space of the frontier was primarily comprehended through its physical rather than human qualities... NEFA's inhabitants were not mentioned at all. But when they were, it was in disembodied terms or, indeed, by stressing the unity of the 'simple and often rugged sons of mountains fastnesses [sic] from the Himalayan ranges' with their environment (Réchard 2017, P.152).

the ongoing cultural and social transition in Arunachal Pradesh. Besides that, it is difficult to ignore the increasing visibility of Arunachal Pradesh in the mainstream media and public sphere. With the advent of the internet and social media, Arunachal Pradesh has garnered a lot of attention from the mainstream media. Earlier comprehended through its physical importance—the region received public and media attention only during the time of the India-China face-offs along the border, or the development project with the vested interest of the centre and mainland India, has replaced with the cultural and emotional integration of the region. In the recent past, the region’s culture, tradition and history is greatly appropriated by the mainstream media. For example, in 2018, Arunachal Pradesh hit the national headlines and all the print, electronics and social media covered the news of the immortal journey of Rukmini from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat in the Madhavpur Mela¹⁶. Although this event had split opinions, the social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter had been filled with videos and stills from the festival.

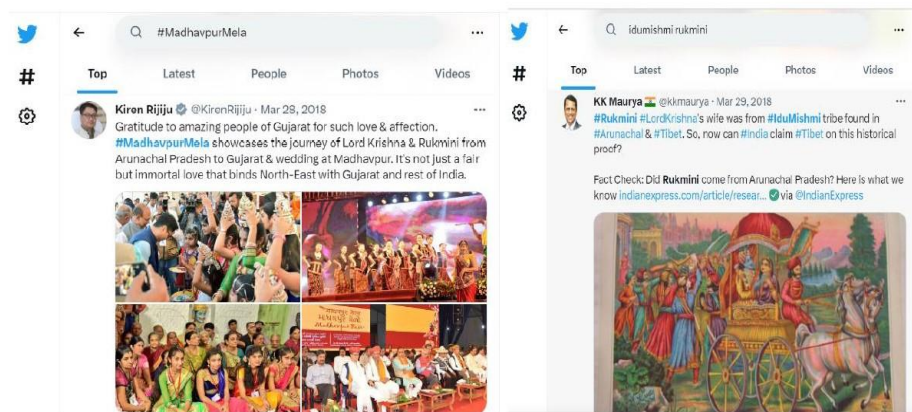


Figure 2.1: Madhavpur Mela, Twitter accessed (2018)

¹⁶ <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=177982>

This extravagant affair of cultural integration raised many questions about the indigenous identity and the vested interest of mainland India. Thus, this study embarks on social media research to understand the cultural transition in Arunachal Pradesh.

Making and Remaking of the State:

Northeast India, notably Arunachal Pradesh, has seen a significant cultural transition in the last decades, as well as the changing of the guard in the region. Regional elites have formed new alliances with the mainland Hindu hegemonic India¹⁷, making the region more conducive to the influx of Indic-centered culture and aesthetics. At the same time, the Union of India and the assertive Hindu organisations made diligent efforts to make inroads in the Northeast. It forged new relations as a result of a myth-making exercise that has confounded many in the Northeast. It reconstituted indigenous folklore based on Hindu mythology and scriptures. Interestingly, through myths or the Puranic texts mainland try to connect with the region. Hence, the epistemological traditions of the Northeast, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, have been ignored or undermined by mainland India. In other words, the growth in national integration or a national revival based on mythmaking stems from the dissolution of epistemological certainties in the Northeast¹⁸. Alongside the sharpened assimilation of indigenous identity and culture, there are numerous activities all over the region attest to the principle of “Akhand Bharat¹⁹” or Bharatvarsh—envisioned by the Hindu nationalists, especially the Sangh Parivar and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in the hope that one day it will achieve Sangh’s

¹⁷ See Thirumal et al., 2018

¹⁸ In order to integrate the Northeast with the mainland India, mythical characters from Hindu epic and puranas are often used. A forceful cosmological union between the mainland India and northeast has been established without giving enough attention to the epistemological tradition in northeast.

¹⁹ Akhand Bharat is an idea developed by the Sangh Parivar which strongly advocates for a Hindu nation. It is believed that the present political map of India is a distortion of the cultural map of Bharat that extend all the way to Southeast and Southwest Asia.

geographical conception of “Akhand Bharat”. The discovery of Hindu pilgrimage sites such as Akashiganga temple, Rukmininagar, Bhismakanagar, Parashuramkund or the Shivalings in Kardo forest in Arunachal Pradesh is a few examples of places which apply to ruminations of history that mainland India, especially the Sangh Parivar, often narrates in their discourse of “Akhand Bharat.” The cultural importance of these places and the way their authority shapes the idea of a Hindu India, spreading from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat and Kashmir to Kanyakumari, trivializes the organic culture and tradition of the indigenous people²⁰. The same is reflected on the Arunachal Tourism Department's website²¹, where only Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage sites are promoted for tourism despite the state being home to twenty-six major tribes and over one hundred subtribes. Why are the indigenous identities suppressed, or assimilated into Hindu tradition? Why is the tribal land named after a Hindu mythic character? Interestingly, toponymic identification is a major site of ideological investment²² for the Hindu nationalists that justifies their work on building a “Hindu Rashtra”. The ongoing project of national integration and the re-inscription of a place into a precolonial textual tradition or the Vedic traditions attempts to lure the regional elites by providing a place in “the great Indian tradition” (Kar 2004, pp.3-4). Similarly, the Sangh and Hindu nationalists argue, it is important to establish some geographical reference points mentioned in the Vedic text before spatially encompassing the region. However, throughout this toponymic exercise, indigenous peoples are excluded. None of the place-names rendered the indigenous name. Although mainland India willed to its unity based on Vedic tradition, at the same time they want to erase the indigenous identity and culture.

²⁰Hindu fundamentalist, mainly the RSS, often work towards the reformation of indigenous cultural practices. For example, the animistic faith and practices among the Nyishi from Arunachal Pradesh is replaced with the worshipping of images, or the consumption of meat by the tribal communities are seen as bad food habits.

²¹ <https://arunachaltourism.com/spiritual-2/>

²² By tracing the genealogy of place names in Arunachal Pradesh through Hindu mythology transformed the space into an object of knowledge, something that could be explored and read (Carter 1987, p.67).

In other words, a reconstitution of the Northeast, especially Arunachal Pradesh, can be the larger image envisioned by the mainland and Hindu missionaries in the region.

The relationship forged by the act of place naming and spatialising history—understanding the Northeast’s geo history that has brought the landscape into knowledge and representation. Now, Arunachal Pradesh can be seen as an integral part of mainland India more than ever before. New relationships have been carved out of the blank space by instilling mythical characters, and an emotional bond has been set up. As Edward Said writes:

“So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here....For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what it close to it and what is far away” (Said 1979, p.55).

To actualize the space carved out in the Northeast, mainland India, especially the Hindu nationalists, often banked on emotional integration, and it is evident from the recent familial bond forged between the East and West during Madhavpur Mela. In 2018, Madhavpur Mela hit the national headlines, not because of its philosophical or epistemological traditions but because of its grandeur and politics. In addition to this, for the first time, the marriage of Lord Krishna and Rukmini was observed as a cosmological union between the mainland and the Northeast. Under the “Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat²³” mission, the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, organised the Madhavpur Mela where the chief ministers of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh were invited. In this *mela*, a new version emerged around the origin story of Rukmini that involved the Idu Mishmi community of Arunachal Pradesh. Along with it, scripted territories of

²³ <https://ekbharat.gov.in/>

ancient tradition were the theme of the *mela*, recuperating the forgotten history of “Akhand Bharat”; as the Union Minister of Culture, Dr Mahesh Sharma explained: - “For the first time ever, the festival will celebrate the immortal journey which Rukmini undertook from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat with Lord Krishna²⁴.” Taking a cue from this fabricated version of Rukmini's story, all other delegates, especially the guests from the Northeast explained the length and breadth of ancient India and its lost glory. Praising Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for this glorious day, Manipur Chief Minister Shri Biren Singh gave a brief speech about the Vedic age where Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur were not the modern nation-states, but rather a large tract of land encompassing the present northeast. He further said that this *mela* has created an opportunity for the Northeast to retain its place in a united India and it shouldn't slip away. However, the religious and patriotic fervour stirred by Biren Singh comes under close scrutiny as the region has witnessed many regional struggles and demands for a separate identity²⁵. While Singh focuses on the oneness of India, Kiren Rijiju evokes the idea of ‘unity in diversity’ and the geographical spread of India²⁶. He blames both the colonial and postcolonial discourse for diminishing the greatness of Bharatvarsh. Although he admits the spatial and temporal differences between the east and west yet, he feels connected through the Krishna-Rukmini marriage.

²⁴ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1526308>

²⁵ <https://thewire.in/politics/ne-dispatch-the-distortion-of-manipurs-history-and-assams-debate-on-citizenship>

²⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arunachal-integral-to-india-no-power-can-separate-it-from-country-rijiju/story-7SkredVPoPb0sIYteumVwN.html>

Whatever the nature of the Krishna-Rukmini story, Pema Khandu, the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, charged up the existential threat of China indirectly²⁷. At the same time, Khandu expressed his gratitude for bringing Arunachal Pradesh into the limelight. But, why does the Northeast, or for that matter Arunachal Pradesh, need a mythologized history and fabricated religious tales? Why can't the region be accepted for its diversity and ethnic identity? It is important to explore whether the Northeast needs a fabricated identity or the Hindu hegemonic world needs it for national integration and to fulfil its dream of Akhand Bharat. At the same time, it is important to understand the aspiration of the nation or how a nation wants to narrate itself (Bhabha 1990). Without understanding the aspiration of the nation and nation-building, it is difficult to comprehend the changes that occurred in the last decades in the Northeast in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular. Madhavpur Mela and the public display of Rukmini being the daughter of Arunachal Pradesh is not an isolated event or can't be read in isolation. For that, it is important to understand the history of Arunachal Pradesh, its cultural and social paradigm with respect to the mainland discourse, and how it is important for India.

Toponymic identification of places in Arunachal Pradesh and mythmaking exercise can't be understood in isolation. It has to be read in the context of nation-building and national integration. Contemporary Arunachal Pradesh is the product of the modern nation-state and postcolonial national discourse, where the nation imagines itself with a distinct, unified national identity. The nation, Bhabha writes, is "a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation" and produced meaning with the partial, overdetermined process

²⁷ "We watch in news channels today that some other country is claiming some part of Northeast. But nobody can change history and ancient history says that Arunachal was not a separate state but the entire Northeast was one. For centuries, we have been with India, mainland India. This is our strength.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/madhavpur-fair-arunachal-part-of-india-since-time-of-krishna-say-northeast-cms-governors-5113750/>

(Bhabha, 1990, pp.1-2). So the nationalistic discourse built around Arunachal Pradesh and the way it has become an integral part of India needs an understanding of its historical past.

Earlier known as the frontier region, the land is primarily inhabited by the tribal groups. Because of its geographical location and difficult mountainous terrain, the area was difficult to govern and remain isolated for long. Historians attribute this isolation to the British divide-and-rule policies, keeping away the region from the growing sense of nationalism and rebellion against British India on the mainland. It is only in 1914 after the creation of the McMahon Line²⁸, this frontier region get recognition as a territorial region in the name of Northeast Frontier Tracts (NEFT), and came to the restrictive administration (Luthra 1971, pp.53-55). British India was never directly associated with the administration of the frontier region. Instead, the charge of the hills was given to the political officers and the tribal council. Slowly, the administration took control of the tribal region and divided it into the Balipara Frontier Tract and Sadiya Frontier Tract in 1919. In 1942, the Tirap Frontier Tract was carved out of the Sadiya Frontier Tract (Elwin 1959, p.3). Finally, under the North-East Frontier (Tracts) (Administration) Regulation 1954²⁹, NEFT was brought under a single administrative unit and re-designated as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). After the independence of India, the frontier region witnessed several administrative and development changes, and directly came within the purview of the Indian

²⁸ McMahon Line is the line or the boundary between British India, Tibet and China drawn in Shimla convention, 1914. However, the Chinese side doesn't agree to it and there's a constant face-off between the Republic of India and China over the line and the adjacent territory.

²⁹ The Arunachal Pradesh Code Volume-1, Regulations in force in the union territory of Arunachal Pradesh.
<http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/4351/1/THE%20ARUNACHAL%20PRADESH%20CODE%20VOL-I-D10211.pdf>

government. To administer the region more effectively, new territorial and bureaucratic structures were set up in NEFA³⁰.

Réchard further mentioned the use of a state apparatus to study the region in detail for better administration. It is worth mentioning the Research Department, founded in 1956, which textualises the everyday life of the tribes, their folklore, culture and tradition, enabling the Indian state to entrench itself across much of NEFA. Schools were opened at a rapid pace and textbooks were developed, glorifying the tribal way of life³¹. Slowly, the Indian government won the confidences of the locals and expand its development projects and tried to secure the region from Chinese advancement in the region. Troops were moved to NEFA and defence establishments were made strengthened to counter the Communist repression in the border region and to accommodate Tibetan refugees (Réchard 2017, p. 189). The heavy deployment of the army greatly contributed to the cultural, social and economic shift in the region. With the arrival of the army in the region, mainland culture and tradition were infused into the tribal way of life³². In fact, the war of 1962³³ turned the NEFA into a cultural melting pot with the assimilation of tribal culture into mainstream culture. At the same time, the Indian government started building an emotional connection with the NEFA. A new form of nationalism developed in the NEFA. Tribal

³⁰Réchard writes: “By instituting an ‘Agency’ under Delhi’s direct control instead of liminal ‘Tracts’; by imposing a single terminology of ‘Frontier Divisions’, endowed with defined boundaries and administrative headquarters; and by establishing POs as the counterparts of District Commissioners in the rest of Assam, the Indian state underscored that NEFA was now an integral part of India (Réchard 2017, P.106).”

³¹ By 1955–1956, 113 primary schools, 13 middle schools, and 3 high schools were established in various parts of NEFA

³² After the arrival of army from the mainland India, temples have been built near to the army camps, and religious festival has been observed and celebrated by the soldiers which eventually influenced the cultural and religious practices of indigenous people in the region.

³³ The war of 1962, also known as Indo-China war is an important historical event for both the Indian state and Arunachal Pradesh. After the 1962 war, Arunachal Pradesh witnessed significant changes in the region because of the increasing presence of the Indian state.

conscience was overshadowed by the newly developed “national conscience”. Cultural and emotional integration is done through the use of propaganda and a sense of patriotism was developed through cinema, art and music (Réchard 2017, p.260). Following are the striking images that depict the aftermath of the 1962 war in a pictorial form³⁴:



Figure 2.2. Images numbered clockwise.

The above-mentioned images are self-explanatory. These images were produced by the Indian authorities in the NEFA after the 1962 war. Although India lost the battle to the Chinese, it didn't give up on the hill people, as Réchard (2017) observed that the Indian press and public intelligentsia started romanticizing the hill people, projecting them as sympathizers and

³⁴ These images are copies from the Arunachal Department of Information and Public Relations (photograph collection from 1962) and retrieved from invisible histories (<https://histecon.fas.harvard.edu/invisible-histories/captions/defeat/index.html> / Bérénice Guyot-Réchard). © Arunachal Department of Information and Public Relations.

supporters of the Indian army. The Indian press manufactured the news, highlighting the role and importance of hill people in the war of 1962³⁵.

The romantic and nationalistic discourse overshadowed the scar of the 1962 war and it is evident from the wartime images mentioned above. The above images depict the importance of the NEFA in protecting the border and nation-building. The first image romanticises the bravery of the hill people and how they keep their land protected from the Chinese invader. The second image depicts the way hill people support Indian army, who fought against the Chinese. The third image sends a very powerful message on cultural assimilation of the NEFA, where the sari-clad woman embraces the tribes of the NEFA. This image talks about the idea of “Mother India”, protecting its children from external threats. The fourth image refers to the idea of “unity in diversity” and the inevitability of the army and Indian administration in the NEFA for its protection and development. Besides the reconstruction of the war memory, the Indian government accelerated the nation-building project through the cultural and emotional integration of the NEFA³⁶.

The use of “repressive state apparatus³⁷” like the research department and other government machinery not only undermined the tribal autonomy in the NEFA but also disturbed the tribal

³⁵ Réchard, in her book, mentioned the news circulated aftermath of the war and writes: “Many had sheltered and helped wounded or retreating soldiers; others had donated money, built airfields, cleared jungles, and knitted clothes for the armed forces. In the northern Subansiri, 2,000 Tagins—the same people the Indian press had characterised as bloodthirsty savages ten years before—had helped the army” (Réchard 2017, p.251).

³⁶ “By the late 1960s, NEFA officials would be so keen ‘to re-establish and strengthen the fact that historically and culturally [tribals] belong to India’ that they would see India everywhere in their lives. Nyishi and Apatani dress styles would be deemed the exact replica of that of Rama and Lakshmana in the Ramayana, and the Noctes of Tirap identified as the lost cousins of South Indian priests—courtesy of a similar hairstyle. The goal of government research became ‘to find out such similarities and try to identify the people, their religion and culture with the rest of the country’. This instrumentalisation would have momentous consequences on NEFA’s religious landscape: Indian authorities would argue that local beliefs and practices needed to be ‘improved’, largely by the means of making them more like Hinduism” (Réchard 217, p.261).

³⁷ The French philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) sees the state as a specialised apparatus that enables the government to control its citizens. State machinery like the army, police and other government institutions has no meaning except as a function of State Power. These state apparatus works as a force of repression of citizens and

ecosystem. It also raises the question of the nation-building process and the positionality of the tribal people. Arguing over the nation-building process, Virginius Xaxa (2016) critically examines the relationships between the tribal and non-tribal people, both from colonial and post-colonial perspectives. He argues that the tribes of India were never really a part of the nation. Instead, they have been exploited for the resources and assimilated into the mainstream culture. To be a part of the nation, tribes have to “assimilate into the sociocultural system of larger India” and learn the culture and language of the non-tribal to identify with them (Xaxa 2016, p.231). The nation-building process completely engulfed the tribal way of life in the NEFA. Along with the cultural and emotional integration of the NEFA, language plays an instrumental role in the perpetuation of a hierarchical structure of power³⁸. Alien language like Hindi was introduced in schools. To control the mental universe of the NEFA, the Indian government focused on the development of Hindi and promoted the education of the tribal youth. The introduction of a foreign language in the NEFA resulted in the disassociation between sensibility and the natural environment³⁹, as the written language of the child is divorced from his spoken language at home. This deliberate form of alienation⁴⁰ of the people from their roots is again reinforced

their voices. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation).” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 142–7, 166–76. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

³⁸ The African post-colonialist author and academic, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains how language perpetuate the colonial attitude and enslave the colonial subject. His critical approach to the colonialist imposition of foreign language on the native later inspired and produced a volume on literature on post-colonial literature. He writes that the imposition of foreign language on the native control the mental universe, reproducing the regimes of representation. Controlling the tools of self-definition in relationship to others, foreign language creates a sense of humiliation toward the native language where it is associated with low status. Further, the imposition of foreign language on the native leads to social imbalance, introducing a new form of power structure between the colonizer and colonial subject. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986).

³⁹ The imposition of foreign language alienates the native from their immediate environment. Imposing a foreign language, and suppressing the native languages through education and administrative process became a ‘cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience—acquired through the natural process in the family and the community. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

through a newly developed curriculum emphasizing on culture and history of mainland India for schoolchildren.

With various social and cultural developments in the NEFA region, the Indian government wanted to create a sense of Indianness/nation in the mind of the local people by erasing the attitude of ethnic/racial inferiority⁴¹. In other words, for many political and strategic reasons, it is important for the Indian government to consolidate its power in this mountainous terrain which was remained untouched by outsiders for centuries. So, it was inevitable to bring the NEFA under a formal administrative control. Here, popular argument of ‘nation-building’ or the ‘state-making’ needs further investigation. As David Ludden writes, the ‘process of empire’ always loomed in the background of ‘nation-building’ in many post-colonial nations (Ludden 2011, p.133), India seeking its consolidated presence in the NEFA repeat the colonial discourse, a continuation of an imperial attitude. This is exactly what Homi K Bhabha (1990) talks about the ‘ambivalence of the nation’ where the postcolonial nations attempt to imagine the modern nation as an immanent subject and object of both colonial and postcolonial narrative. For instance, India’s aspirations in NEFA are largely shaped by an intimate entanglement between the imperial and national (Réchard 2017, p.3).

Interestingly, the imperial tendencies⁴² of India typically translated into a set of goals and measures which are then passed down as ‘nation-building’. With imperialist rigour, the Indian

⁴¹ The influx of non-tribal people, mainly the NEFA officials from mainland India creates a sense of inferiority among the tribes in the region. NEFA officials were regarded as superior, and the tribesmen felt alien amongst the NEFA officials. Describing the experience of a Adi man, Elwin writes: ‘An Adi interpreter who once went to Delhi told me that he had been rebuked there by a leading politician for appearing before him in a loin-cloth. ‘When the great man said this to me,’ he said, ‘I thought I wasn’t a human being at all. I felt that I was a monkey and my proper place was among the me.’ For more details, see Elwin (1959), p. 141.

⁴² For example, the restricted interaction between NEFA and the rest of the country and the existence of the Inner Line in an Independent India reflects the colonial legacy on the land.

administration in NEFA closely controls the everyday life of the tribal populations through various welfare schemes like the establishment of schools, hospitals, and other government institutions. Besides that, cultural engineering—the scrutiny and modification of tribal culture based on the observation and recommendation of NEFA officials helped the Indian state to penetrate deeper into the region.

Many tribal practices and rituals saw major changes with the progress of the Indian administration in the NEFA. For instance, the splendid war dance of Noctes and Wanchos of Tirap valley declined with the coming of the administration and was redirected to symbolise the war against disease and poverty (Elwin, 1959, p.267). Or, the dress, for that matter, has been seen as a great deal for NEFA officials. The use of mill clothes⁴³ is greatly discouraged, whereas traditional weaving was encouraged. Elwin (1959) believes that the use of modern clothes and costumes by tribal boys and girls goes against the discipline of the community and it may lead to moral degradation and political disturbances in the region. He further writes: “A change of dress often means a new psychology, a scorn of the traditions of one's tribe, a sense of being ashamed of it. This leads to a break-down of tribal discipline....” (Elwin 1959, p.123). Unfortunately, the disruption of the tribal ecosystem in NEFA is an imperial legacy of independent India. It is the nation's ambivalence in NEFA that resulted in the “cultural ferment”. The advance of the Indian administration into NEFA fueled the aspiration of the locals, which lead to cultural changes, and locals started imitating the official culture. Besides that, a subtle sense of power is expressed through the official dress. For example, the arrangement of the red coats and blankets for the headmen and interpreters (Elwin 1959, p.122) indirectly created a hierarchy in the community as

⁴³ The tribesmen started choosing mill clothes over the traditional clothes. Mill cloth, small mirrors, berets, felt hats, and Khasi caps were means of displaying one's proximity to the state by means of identification as well as one's greater purchasing powers. See Elwin (1959).

“it creates a feeling of superiority towards India generally⁴⁴”. Slowly, the dress becomes a symbol and identification mark of one’s proximity to the state. People’s desire to identify with NEFA officials reflects the imperial environment where “cultural coded ranks of status, honour and privilege coincide broadly with living standards, respectability and fashion (Ludden 2011, p. 134)”. Another significant mark of Indian imperialism in NEFA reflect in the production, circulation and control of NEFA-related knowledge⁴⁵.

With steady progress into NEFA, the Indian administration dictates and decides every decision in the life of locals. Even they reify the fuzzy boundaries between tribalness and non-tribalness. The Indian vision of tribalness was encouraged in NEFA. Slowly, the representation of NEFA in the public domain becomes an important task for NEFA officials. Textbooks on mythology, games, dances, and art were produced for NEFA schools to instill a sense of nation among the indigenous students⁴⁶ (Réchard 2017, p. 135). Movies were made about NEFA to untie the locals and inculcate the idea of nation and patriotism. For example, NEFA’s first featured film ‘Meri Dharam Meri Maa’ (1976) is an interesting account of Indian hegemony in NEFA, invariably showing its domination over the locals. The movie reflects on the social and cultural transition in NEFA and how this cultural shift is deeply embedded in the national consciousness. The movie featured the Nyishi community, one of the dominant tribes in NEFA. Earlier known as Dafla, they were infamous for their mischievous adventures. Over a period of time, the community is

⁴⁴ The adoption of the foreign dress by the tribesmen imprint a sense of superiority in their psyche. The inferiority complex aroused in close contact with NEFA officials was erased by adopting European dress. In villages European dress symbolise higher culture. Elwin (1959).

⁴⁵ As Réchard mentioned: “The administration is much preferred for outside researchers to use materials from ‘[government] scientists’. From 1957 onwards, external institutions and visitors had to swear not to publish anything without first consulting frontier administration, which would further scrutinise their work prior to publication” (Réchard 2017, p.151).

⁴⁶ “Cultural centres, libraries, and museums were established in each division to ‘present the tribal culture in its dignity and beauty . . . [and] exhibit samples of the best folk art [of] India in order to inspire people” (Réchard 2017, p.135).

brought under civilisation, making them a part of the social welfare scheme initiated by NEFA officials. The movie narrates the story of two brothers, Takar and Talo, and their worldviews in the complex world of tradition and modernity. Takar is portrayed as a sincere and humble person who is rooted in his culture and tradition, whereas Talo represents greed and success offered by modernity. Talo rejects all traditional beliefs and practices and tries to influence and win everyone with the help of money. In opposition to Talo, Takar takes great pleasure and feels proud of his tribal way of life—following traditional practices such as worshipping the sun and moon, believing in the presence of benevolent and malevolent spirits or wearing the traditional costume and decorative like the headgear and dao—a short sword and actively participates in every ritual in his community. But Talo finds the traditional culture redundant, barbaric and uncivilised thus, he moves away from it and embraces the modern way of life, filled with luxury and western civilisation. He tries to convince the locals and his father about the modern way of life and persuade them to embrace it. But both his father and the locals resisted Talo's proposed idea. In frustration, Talo eventually fights with his father, and during the argument, he kills him. Knowing this, Takar and his mother rush to the place and the fight between Takar and Talo leads to the death of their mother. The narrative in the movie is an allegoric and symbolic representation. Takar subconsciously represents the ambivalence of independent India, whereas Talo goes against the very notion of nation and culture. In the movie, the death of the mother is symbolic of the death of Mother India. It subtly sends the message of nationhood and how NEFA is an integral part of Mother India. And, going against the idea of nationhood can cause the death of Mother India. Besides that, the discourse of modernity⁴⁷ built into the movie reflects both the

⁴⁷ In the movie *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*, the notion of modernity is directly linked with the religious conversion of the tribal groups. It indirectly criticise the Christian proselytization in the region. Although the movie appreciates and encouraged the modern technological innovation and its implementation to achieve the economic development, it heavily criticises the cultural and religious changes in the advent of modernity. The movie builds a negative

selective and normative attitudes of mainland India and its notion of tribalness. Whether it's the language, the dress or the religion in NEFA, every aspect of NEFA, by and large, is deeply influenced by the Indian administration. For example, the making of Hindi a lingua franca in NEFA is the result of heavy militarisation as well as the use of Hindi as a second language in schools, or, the use of mill clothes in NEFA can be directly linked to the administrative power where dress become a symbol of one's proximity to the state. In other words, the movie "Mera Dharam Meri Maa" is another form of artistic device to define and assimilate NEFA into the mainland. Along with the administrative reforms in NEFA, a sense of unity⁴⁸ is instilled in different communities through art, music and movies. Also, the tribes from the isolated and difficult geographical region were brought under administration, and harmony⁴⁹ was maintained among the tribes through the interference of NEFA officials. The contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile NEFA, is the outcome of a rigorous administrative process and a fount of cultural ferment, which further shaped the future of Arunachal Pradesh.

In a way, present-day Arunachal Pradesh is embedded in India's political imagination in the frontier region. Also, it is greatly shaped by both colonial and postcolonial administrative policies in the region. The journey from the Northeast Frontier Track (1914) to Arunachal Pradesh (1987) is filled with several political, cultural, administrative and strategic accounts.

Once remained an isolated and remotely governed territory suddenly become a strategically

discourse around the Christian missionaries and its developmental work in the region. Instead, it encourages to practice and preserve the indigenous faith and belief. The movie reflects upon India's anti-Christian prejudices which possibly challenge its hegemony in the NEFA.

⁴⁸ There are various tribe in NEFA and each one is different from one another. None of them were in touch with one another and there was not any sense of unity, before. Under NEFA administration, the tribes were brought under civilization, and connections were made between the tribes and instilled the sense of unity. See Elwin (1959), and Réchard (2017).

⁴⁹ Before the beginning of the administrative system in the NEFA, the tribal groups have quarreled among themselves for generations; there are still old blood-feuds taking their toll of human life and cattle-theft has long been common. They are, however, beginning to change under the NEFA administration.

important point for the Indian government. The war of 1962 literally changed the political and cultural landscape of NEFA which was later dominated by the army and security personnel from mainland India. In 1965, NEFA was directly administered under the Home Ministry of India⁵⁰. Commenting on the Northeast, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, Sanjib Baruah writes: “India’s Home Ministry managed to oversee a parallel political structure in the Northeast, which is both directly controlled from New Delhi and autonomous from the formal democratically-elected governmental structure of the states (Baruah 2003, p.927)”. The autonomy of Arunachal Pradesh as a state always remained a question while the Indian state controlled it through the logic of developmentalism—by improving the socio-economic condition of the locals. Whereas the developmental exercise embodied the idea of “othering” and “sequestering”. The narrative of developmentalism only persuaded and instilled a sense of belonging among the tribals towards the Indian state. Whereas, by and large, the debates around tribalness—tribal identity and agency remained oblivious to many.

In Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA, the construction of tribal identity is a continuance of othering and sequestering, pushing the natives into the margin. Although the state institutions have penetrated deeper into the hills and valleys of the frontier region and have tried to assimilate the locals, they failed to keep their prejudices at bay. The differences and uniqueness of the natives aren’t ever recognised in the true spirit. Instead, the stringent parameters on tribalness are encoded into new official policies, perpetuating social stereotypes⁵¹.

⁵⁰ Later, in 1972 NEFA was renamed Arunachal Pradesh and became a Union Territory. Interestingly, the domination and control of the Home Ministry prevailed even after Arunachal Pradesh’s transformation into a state, in 1987.

⁵¹ In giving an example of such an unflattering and stereotypical action, Réchard (2017) narrates the experience of a native official from Pasighat: “Visiting the hostel of a local school, Ering was disturbed to find fire hearths in the middle of the rooms. Hearths were deemed a crucial feature of tribal habitations, and their inclusion into new buildings had become a matter of policy. Ering appreciated the intention behind it, but he doubted whether the

Such a description again juxtaposes against tribal identity and the ambivalence of the state. NEFA officials' understanding of indigenous practices and lifestyle further raises the question of the success of developmentalism in this hill state. Most importantly, any inconsistency around tribal identity is found in the kinds of arguments that the Indian state promises for the tribal population. Earlier, living as a self-contained unit, tribes were brought under a formal administrative system on the pretext of development and national integration. However, the politics of tribal integration restate mainland hegemony on the tribal populations. According to Nani Bath: '...Arunachal Pradesh still remains guided by the Government of India...Arunachalees have been psychologically made to believe that the state is not in a position to remain in isolation: economically and politically" (Bath 2021, p.208). Although the tribal communities have a traditional self-governing system⁵² where they take decision with a collective consensus rather than imposed, and modified in accordance with constitutional federalism. Analysing the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system in Arunachal Pradesh, Gyati argues that "...the main objective behind the introduction of Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh has been to integrate Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA, with rest of the country by establishing a uniform political practice throughout the state through an integrated political system (Gyati 2011, p. 1019)", and it reflects from the administrative officers' attitude towards the panchayat election in Arunachal Pradesh⁵³. In other words, the integration of the locals is not just the arrogant and callous mimesis of colonial imperialism, it is a part of "cosmetic

choice of the hearth to embody tradition was practicable: it made for congested, dirty, and dangerous rooms; the smoke and ashes were a health hazard; and parents did not seem too fond of them "(Réchard 2017, p.133).

⁵² Many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh follow and practice their Customary Laws to govern themselves.

⁵³ In the absence of 'eligible' panchayat members, village council members and Gaon Buras (village elders) were persuaded by the administrative officers for representation in Panchayati Raj Institution. See Bath (2021).

federalism⁵⁴” which reflects in the power relation between the Indian state and Arunachal Pradesh.

Making of the Tribal Identity:

Besides the making and remaking of the state, the making of the tribal/indigenous identity is an important argument here. How does "the tribal identity" enter the consciousness of the natives of Arunachal Pradesh? The process of nation-building or the deliberate attempts of the Indian state to implant a sense of Indianness in tribes raises the question of whether the tribal could retain their identity or not. The state's implanted shared culture⁵⁵ has fundamentally altered the identity of the locals in Arunachal Pradesh. A new tribal identity—"embodying culturally-loaded notions of primitivism and superiority" is reproduced through territorial and administrative functions (Biswas and Suklabaidya 2008, p.110). Arguing on the tribal identity and how it entered into the consciousness of the indigenous people, Xaxa writes: ".....The identity that was forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community has now been internalised by the people themselves (Xaxa 1999, p. 3589)". In other words, tribal people were selectively kept away or integrated into the development discourse. Mainstream society or the dominant community has its own mode of filtering information about the tribal people, inadvertently widening the gap between the two. It is the self-imposed baggage [reform and integration of tribal] that the mainstream society carries that often becomes a stumbling block for real integration. Through social differentiation, the tribal identity entered the consciousness of the tribal people.

⁵⁴ “Building on the elementary apparatus of state institutions created by the Constitution’s Sixth Schedule became a good way to ensure both the penetration of the state and the creation of local stakeholders in the pan-Indian dispensation” (Baruah 2003, p. 927).

⁵⁵ India’s history and culture was introduced in the schools to develop a commonality between Arunachal Pradesh and mainland India.

In Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile NEFA, tribal identity is deeply embedded in the nation-building and nationalising space. The contemporary identity of tribes is derived from both "othering" and "integration" processes, which are motivated by territorial and administrative functions. Along with the repressive administrative procedure, the toponymic identification of the place or the naming and renaming of the frontier region itself reflects on the making of the tribal identity in Arunachal Pradesh. For instance, the renaming of NEFA to a new Sanskritic name, Arunachal Pradesh (the land of the Dawn-lit mountains), proclaims the region's ties with mainland India. It is surprising to learn that despite a stringent curb⁵⁶ on the work of proselytisation, the Hindu missionaries were able to make much of an inroad into the everyday life of the tribal in Arunachal Pradesh. Although Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA, was a restricted area and missionary activities were not allowed, both Hindu and Christian missionaries of different denominations went on pursuing the agenda of religious conversion. However, the Hindu work of proselytisation rose to prominence through the political patronage of the Indian state. Following the Indo-China war (1962), NEFA became a hotbed of political intrigue and administrative reforms, accelerating special dispensation from the Indian state (Dawar 1994; Baruah 2003; Réchard 2017). With increasing militarisation and state presence, even the unexplored regions were brought under firm control, and a pan-Indian national sense was instilled among the people (Baruah, 2003, p.922). Local inhabitants and their culture were intentionally broadcasted on All India Radio. Textbooks started including the local culture and

⁵⁶ Although the Arunachal Pradesh's Legislative Assembly introduced the Freedom of Religion Bill which subsequently became an Act in 1978, banning any sort of religious conversion or the work of proselytization, the Hindu organization made inroad in the state under the state patronage. The RSS enter the state at the invitation of then governor K.A.A. Raja. See Kanungo (2011).

arts, and educational scholarships were granted to NEFA students⁵⁷. Besides that, the influx of military personnel, government officials and labours from mainland India brought their cultural practices, religious faiths and beliefs to the region, resulting in the proliferation of Hinduism in Arunachal Pradesh. Small temple-like structures were built nearer the military cantonment and labour camp (Chaudhuri 2013, p.273). Compared to other North Eastern states, Arunachal Pradesh became an easy entry point for the Hindu elements. Hindu organisations like Ramakrishna Mission⁵⁸ were invited to set up schools and educate and empower the tribal children in NEFA. Indian state provided favourable conditions for the Hindu missionaries, whereas the Christian missionaries were heavily criticised and accused of eroding the 'cultural heritage' of the tribes, dividing the tribal communities and destroying their social unity (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982, p.97). However, the Christian missionaries helped the tribals to fight against social evils and mainly focused on developmental and social service-oriented work. Besides that, Christianity didn't lead to any sort of assimilation or absorption of tribal culture. The tribals are allowed to follow their tribal way of life yet practice Christianity (Xaxa 2000, p.30). In opposition to Christianity in the tribal areas, Hinduism worked in the direction of absorption into Hindu society "that are far from uniform and identical⁵⁹" (Xaxa, 2000, p.25). Still, the image of the Christian missionaries is constantly tarnished by the Indian state and the Hindu organisations. Hence, there's a strong presence and influence of the Hindu religion and

⁵⁷ Analysing post Indo-China war and the Indian state, Réchard writes: "Nation-building received unprecedented importance. Under a Cultural Integration Scheme, the All India Radio launched expanded daily programmes' purely meant for propaganda purposes among the rural folk of NEFA" (Réchard 2017, p.260).

⁵⁸ Ramakrishna Mission was started at Along, Arunachal Pradesh on 27th July 1966. Later on 25 December 1967 the foundation for the secondary section school building was laid by then Prime Minister Late Smt. Indira Gandhi. See Ramakrishna Mission, Aalo (Along), Arunachal Pradesh, Annual Report 1997-98.

⁵⁹ The transformation of tribes and their absorption into the Hindu society was a long and protracted process. The transformation of tribes in the direction of fusion with the larger society, which invariably entailed loss of the autonomy and identity of the tribal society. For more, see Xaxa (2000).

culture among the tribal population in Arunachal Pradesh. Along with the developmental schemes and administrative interferences, the work of proselytisation has led to many fundamental changes in Arunachal Pradesh. As Sen writes:

“Although the tribesmen of Subansiri appeared to a superficial observer to be dressed and accoutred alike, there were obvious differences in the way they dressed their hair. (...) While the Nishis used to go for the thick roll tied in place with cloth or cane thongs and the Apatanis preferred a plain hair-do, the Hill Miris (who also called themselves Nishis) were one better and plaited their hair even more elaborately and seemed to feel undressed if this crown of glory was not further adorned with bear-skin! As an ultra-conservative I mourn the passing of the old ways of life, but whom to grumble when the local people prefer what the world has to offer them today! (Sen 2006, p.45).”

Because of the increasing presence of the Indian state and the work of proselytisation, the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh underwent change beyond recognition. Despite being home to 26 major tribes and diverse cultural practices filled with innumerable folklore and myths, the increasing dominance of outsiders is a prominent threat to the survival of tribal culture⁶⁰.

Tribal Consciousness and the Politics of Representation:

Tribal consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh is deeply embedded in the protection and preservation of folklore, myth, indigenous faith and cultural practices. Also, it has come as a consequence of the longtime assimilation of tribal ontology. Post-Independence, India's approach towards the frontier region, shaped by a nationalistic discourse, claimed the region and its people as an integral part of India. Thus, the cultural and emotional integration of the local

⁶⁰ Thus, a new generation of school-educated young men started joining the administration and working towards the indigenous understandings that could find a place in official policy (Réchard 2017, p.133), leading to the tribal consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh.

people became a priority for the Indian state. However, the process of nation-building, development projects and work of proselytisation poses a serious threat to the tribal way of life. In other words, the prevalence of mainland cultural hegemony⁶¹ in Arunachal Pradesh represents a serious existential challenge. So the newly educated indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh launched an indigenous identity movement and started building associations and organisations to promote the tribal cultural practices and beliefs (Dawar 1994; Scheid 2017).

The indigenous identity movement in Arunachal Pradesh is more of a cultural and ethnic movement than a political one. For instance, cultural identity—the revival of folklore and folk practices has been paramount in indigenous movement as the tribes derive their inspiration and identity from the rivers, hills, mountains, forests, animals and spirits in the land. Folklore and myth become an important source of knowledge and motivation for tribal unity. Locals started talking with great pleasure and pride about their surroundings. Describing the beauty of Arunachal Pradesh, filmmaker Moji Riba writes:

"The rainbow is a ladder by which a god climbs from earth to meet his wife in the land of the moon. The earth and sky are lovers, and all living beings are born from their union of them. Lightning is a star-maiden running across the sky" (Riba 2005).

This poetic imagination reflects the importance of folklore⁶² in Arunachal Pradesh and how it is a great deal for the tribal identity. There has been multiple folklore around the origin of all living

⁶¹ To integrate the region, the NEFA officials and the policy-makers from mainland India promoted the indigenous faith and belief and created a sense of brotherhood by reducing the gap between the tribal and non-tribal population. However, the process of national integration threatens the autonomy and freedom of the tribe. See, Dawar (1994).

⁶² The folklore of Arunachal Pradesh describes why the tribes doesn't have any written script. Folklore of Arunachal Pradesh explains that "All wisdom was long ago written on pieces of skin and given both to the hill-people and the people of the plains. But the hungry tribesmen cooked and ate their piece of skin, with the result that they have always been ignorant" Elwin, 1999, p.99. According to Noctes folklore- an old man had a deer-skin on which the history of his tribe was written, But it got burnt and he ate it. Since then, the Noctes have not known how to read or write. According to Adi, "A deer lived on the mountains, and it said, 'write on my skin whatever was written on the

beings on the earth, which mentioned their close affinity with nature and the spirit world. It is the rivers, hills and mountains which define the identity of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Also, the shamanistic faith and cultural and spiritual practices play a central role in the everyday life of the tribes; thus, the preservation of traditional and cultural heritage becomes an important part of tribal identity. Culture becomes a unifying force against the work of proselytisation, mainly the Christian missionaries and the development projects [imposition of mainstream political structure over the traditional autonomous socio-political institutions, Hindu cultural hegemony through textbooks, films and other media] envisioned by the Indian state. Textualisation of folklore becomes an inevitable task to create tribal identity. Since most of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh don't have a written script and depend on oral traditions, the educated group felt an utmost need to record their oral traditions⁶³ (Dawar 1999, p. 912). Although the folklore and legends may explain what happened to the written script and wisdom of the tribes, the shamans are the voice of collective memory, "drawing an evolutionary landscape through which the social, ideological and spiritual aspirations of the community were expressed" (Dai 2021). Along with the textualisation of the folklore, legends and myth, the institutionalisation of the indigenous faith and practices accelerated during this time. For example, The Adi Cultural and Literary Society" was formally inaugurated at Aalo, the district headquarters, "with a two-day programme on the 14th and 15th. November 1971. Against the religious conversion of the indigenous people, persistent demand for the protection of indigenous faith and belief led to the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religious Act of 1978.

Adi's share of the liver, and when you need it, I will give it to you. But one day when the people were hunting, they accidentally killed the deer and ate it. This is why Adis can't read and write." According to Mishmi folklore, "all the knowledge was written on a buffalo's hide. But the Mishmi's got hungry and cooked the buffalo's hide and ate it. According to the wanchos, the god piyu wrote all wisdom on skins and gave to the wanchos. But the wanchos roasted and ate the skin." For more See, *Myths of the North East Frontier of India*. See Verrier Elwin (1999)

⁶³ The intellectuals were aware of the fact that their folklores, myths not only important for sustaining their dignity and self-respect but also a great source of their cultural history. See Dawar (1999).

Interestingly, the tribal identity of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is intertwined with their religious and cultural identity. In fact, the activists and intellectuals involved in the indigenous movement often emphasise the assertion of religious identity in their speeches and writings. In other words, tribal consciousness was the antithesis of the Christian worldview. For instance, the tribes were opposed to the Christian missionaries' intervention in the region. Also, Christian missionaries are accused of detribalising the tribal people. Although the detribalisation process⁶⁴ was already there when Christian missionaries entered the state still, the church is blamed for the cultural changes in the region. Thus, the antidote to Christian proselytisation and other disintegrating forces of change was the creation of formal religion - capable of conferring a new meaning and unity in Arunachal Pradesh. Religious identity was forged in 1968, and Donyi Polo Dere (a community hall to worship the sun and moon) was decided to be built so that it could accommodate all the believers of indigenous faith and religion. The recreation or the reassertion of tribal identity is not only to counter the dominant cultural hegemony of mainland India or missionaries' work of Hindus and Christians, but also it emphasises the unification of all the tribes who believe and practice indigenous culture and traditions. Being home to 26 major tribes and over 100 subtribes, Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most diverse places where each tribe have clear distinctions. Each tribe follow distinct tradition and culture. For example, the Monpa and Sherdukpen follow Tibetan Buddhism, whereas the Khamptis and Singphos practice Theravada Buddhism. The tribes from the central belt, who are also considered as major and dominant tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Tani clan, include the Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nyishi, and Tagin follow their indigenous faith and belief. However, as each tribe speak a different language

⁶⁴ Although the detribalisation process began with the entry of NEFA officials, army, merchants, shopkeepers, petty traders, contractors and laborers from the mainland India still Christian missionaries are primarily accused of being detribalizing the tribal people. See Réchard (2017).

and represents distinct things or events, the need for unity was perceived to be essential to counter the mainstream hegemony. So the tribesmen divest themselves of foreign elements in the continuance of indigenous practices and beliefs.

In order to channelise the tribal identity movement, the educated group focused on preserving, promoting, and propagating indigenous belief systems. Thus, the Adi and Galo tribes of Arunachal Pradesh come together for the first time to create a community bound together by shared principles and norms. The establishment of the Donyipolo Dere (community hall) in Aalo in the early 1970s was the first step towards institutionalising of indigenous belief and faith. However, the actual movement got underway in earnest in 1972 when Talom Rukbo⁶⁵ actively joined the indigenous movement. The indigenous movement flourished under Rukbo's firm leadership. Being a Adi, Rukbo specifically organised the Adi community (Dawar 1994; Chaudhuri 2013; Scheid 2015), however, his philosophy and religious teaching are applicable to tribe, who all believe in the indigenous faith. He travelled across the Adi villages explaining the importance of the preservation and practice of indigenous faith and belief for self-representation and tribal identity and the threat from the Christian missionaries. So the Adis strove for structural changes to strengthen their cultural and religious identity (Scheid 2015, p.128). For the first time, on 31 December 1986, under the guidance of Talom Rukbo, the indigenous faith was institutionalised, and Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang (DPYK) was formed. With the formation of DPYK, locals started building prayer houses (gangging in Adi) and systematically followed the rituals. Before that, there wasn't any formal structure of prayer hall or gathering; the people used to go to the house of a priest (miris in Adi) whenever they were sick or ill. DPYK propagated the Donyi-Polo faith and the worship of the Sun and Moon and preached the importance of

⁶⁵ Talom Rukbo conceptualized the Donyi Polo movement in Arunachal Pradesh to counter the rampant religious conversion in the region. He is the founding father of Donyi Polo movement. See, Claire Scheid (2015).

indigenous religion in forming tribal identity. Besides that, DPYK formalised the Donyi-Polo faith by introducing a prayer book. Like other mainstream religions, the Donyi- Polo faith has no written scriptures. Only the shaman can recite, narrate and perform the rituals. The absence of religious text poses a prominent threat to the propagation of the Donyi-Polo faith, as the people find it difficult to practice the religion without proper guidance. So the need to have a proper religious text also began with the formation of DPYK. The formation of DPYK and the institutionalisation and textualisation of the Donyi-Polo faith helps the locals find its proper place and role in religious life. It also revolutionised the ancient belief system and provided a distinct identity to support the tribal assertions. Over a period of time, the Donyi-Polo movement spread across the Tani group and beyond. Similarly, other tribal communities started organizing their indigenous faith and belief movement. The Nyishi started Nyedar Namlo movement; the Apatanis followed Danyi-Piilo movement; Rangfraism by the Tangsa; Intayaism by the Idu Mishmi tribes (Chaudhuri 2013, pp.274-5). So, with the aim of unity among the tribes, the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) was formed on 28 December 1999. The objective of the IFSCAP is to motivate and encourage the promotion and preservation of the indigenous faith and belief. Further, it appeals to the indigenous intellectuals and youth to work united and protect the indigenous culture and practices from disappearing. Along with it, the IFSCAP attempt to use normative principles to create a hegemony over the mind of the locals and persuade them that they should follow the indigenous faith and protect it.

State Patronage:

Accidentally, the indigenous identity of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is conflated with Hindu religious practices (Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013; Scheid 2015). As Kanungo writes, “the Adi KEYUM is equivalent to the Hindu AUM. For the Hindus, AUM implies Vishnu, Brahma,

Shiva; for the Adis, KEYUM implies Kaasi, Siang, Aaabo, Bomuk, Mukseng, Seedi and Meelo (Vishnu, Brahma)” (Kanungo 2011, p.102). Although the intellectuals, activists and volunteers in the indigenous movement in Arunachal Pradesh denied their affiliation or influence of Hinduism and claimed that Donyi-polo is an independent religion⁶⁶ (Scheid 2015, p.129). Yet, the existing scholarship on the rise of indigenous religious movements in Arunachal Pradesh suspects the involvement of Hindu organisations (Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013; Scheid 2015; Longkumer 2021). As Arunachal Pradesh became an integral part of India, the influx of labour, officials and armed forces into the state indirectly brought the mainland culture and religious practices along with them. Statutes of Hindu gods and goddesses were set up near the military camps (Kanungo 2011, p.103). As Scheid writes: “Hindu groups capitalised on the opportunity to appeal to nationalism by promoting Hinduism as an Indian religion” (Scheid 2015, p.131). Analysing the Hindutva forces in Arunachal Pradesh, Kanungo (2011) mentioned that the ‘Hindu fanatic’ from mainland India has greatly influenced the indigenous movement by instigating tribal against the Christian missionaries. By critically examining the role of Col. K. A. A. Raja, the first governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Kanungo writes:

“Raja was reportedly a ‘Hindu fanatic’ and rabidly anti- Christian. He was concerned that Christianity was expanding despite restrictions and it had to be contained. Raja called some student and youth leaders belonging to indigenous communities, ...asked them to come forward to safeguard their indigenous religion and culture from the onslaught of Christianity... student leaders, who also shared similar concerns, became disciples of Raja. Being assured of state support, they vehemently mobilised students and common people and resisted the construction of new churches in a militant way. Thus began an

⁶⁶ “Donyipolo is an independent, complex, and nuanced faith without major similarities to other belief systems, based in the relationship between man and nature as chronicled in oral narratives” (Scheid 2015, p.129).

aggressive anti-Christian mobilisation followed by a series of attacks on Christians and churches” (Kanungo 2011, p. 103-04).

It was Lieutenant Governor Raja who quickly gave his assent to the Freedom of Religion Act 1978, despite Christian protests. The Freedom of Religion Act 1978 indirectly favours the Hindutva agenda⁶⁷.

As Thirumal et al. writes, “the sharpened assimilation and governance of the North East by an assertive Hindu state may be read as an assault” (Thirumal et al. 2019, p.104). The inclusion of Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Nature worship in the ‘Indigenous faith’ is a deliberate move to stop the growing influence of Christianity in the region and bring the region under the Hindu influence. Besides that, the Hindus aligned themselves with Buddhism, Vaishnavism, and Nature worship, favouring the Hindu elements in this Northeastern state. The Hindus believe that indigenous practices are part of Hindu culture because they both worship ‘trees, stones and snakes’ (Longkumer 2021, p.8). Under Raja’s guidance, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)⁶⁸ entered into Arunachal Pradesh. It was Eknath Ranade, who was the chief of Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari open schools in Arunachal Pradesh at the invitation of Lieutenant Governor Raja (Kanungo 2011, p.104). Later, Vivekananda Kendra emerged as a driving force for the indigenous movement and attempted to indoctrinate tribal youth in Hindutva ideology.

The Hindutva campaign against the Christian missionaries motivated the tribal community to fight against the conversion in the region. The period after the Indo-China war (1962) was

⁶⁷ “Indigenous faith” means such religions, beliefs and practices including rites, rituals, festivals. Observances, performances, abstinence, customs as have been found sanctioned, approved, performed by the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh from the time these communities have been known and includes Buddhism as prevalent among the Monpas, Membas, Sherdukpens, Khambas, Khamptis and Singpohs, Vaishnavism as practiced by Noctes, Akas and Nature worships. Including worships of Donyi-Polo, as prevalent among other indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Published in the Arunachal Pradesh Gazette, Extraordinary Part III, Vol II, No. 22 Dated 13th November 1978

⁶⁸ RSS is a Hindu fundamentalist organization that believes in Hindu supremacy and Akhand Bharat.

marked by rapid cultural and emotional integration of this frontier state. New cultural institutions were formed, supporting the Indian state and its cultural apparatus (Thirumal et al., 2019). Many Hindu nationalist organisations like Ramakrishna Mission, Sharada Mission, Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV), Arunachal Siksha Vikas Samiti, Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP), Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), RSS and others have persuaded the locals that they are the saviour of the tribal rights than the Christian missionaries. In 1966, Ramakrishna Mission formally opened the school at Aalo and started working with the tribal, shaping the faith and belief of indigenous people. Slowly, other Hindu organisations also entered the state, in particular by usurping the indigenous faith and belief. Also, the organisations mainly worked in favour of the national integration⁶⁹ of tribes. However, Hindu mission schools play a crucial role in shaping the tribal identity. Children who attended the Hindu mission schools started learning the Hindu way of life by actively participating in Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja etc.; also, they started imitating the body language [do namaste or namaskar with folded hand] against their tribal way of life. Besides that, the schools also impose Hindu elements on children. For example, “Hindu names like Vishal, Ram or Vishnu were mixed into the tribal name⁷⁰.” Besides the Ramakrishna Mission, VKV plays a significant role in shaping the modern tribal intelligentsia in Arunachal Pradesh. Established in 1977, Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya Arunachal Pradesh Trust⁷¹ (VKVAPT) is running 41 Vidyalayas in Arunachal Pradesh to date. Across India, Arunachal Pradesh has the most number of VKV⁷². It has produced a good number

⁶⁹ Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye believed that the situations of the tribal will improve through assimilation into greater Indian society. See Xaxa (2016).

⁷⁰ See Rikam (2005).

⁷¹ <https://www.vkvapt.org/>

⁷² <https://www.vrmvk.org/vivekananda-kendra-vidyalayas>

of bureaucrat, academicians, intellectuals and activists in the region. Along with modern education, VKV motivated the student to work towards the protection, preservation and practice of the traditional culture. Also, the school curriculum carefully accommodates the local culture and tradition, making the school popular among the children and their parents. According to Kanungo, both the John Firth School and VKVs are responsible for rapid religious conversion in the state⁷³ (Kanungo 2011, p.105).

Along with the VKV, Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP), the sister organisation of Akhil Bhartiya Vanawasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA), plays an important role in shaping the indigenous identity in the region. AVP build a strong connection between the Hindu and indigenous belief through various activities like health, education, employment, relief work, gender awareness and preservation of health and belief. However, the main focus of the AVP is to bridge the connection between the locals and the Sangh Parivar. As the motto of the AVP reads in Hindi, “*Tu Main Ek Rakt*”, it is committed to protecting the age-old culture and traditions and impressing the indigenous community. Besides that, it claimed that the indigenous faith and belief aren’t different from the Hindu belief system, which makes them one. Thus, it attracted many influential personalities and the indigenous elite⁷⁴ from Arunachal Pradesh, making the organisation an intermediary between the tribal and mainland India. Also, the students are sponsored by the AVP to study in RSS-run institutions in other parts of India⁷⁵. The gradual manner in which the AVP is exposing the indigenous students to mainland India is vital to the

⁷³ “If John Firth School spread Christianity in Arunachal, VKVs have been instrumental in disseminating Hindutva” (Kanungo 2011, p. 105).

⁷⁴ Talom Rukbo, the architect of the Donyi-Polo movement, was the founding president of the AVP

⁷⁵ Pralay Kanungo’s research on Hindutva in Arunachal Pradesh explains the role of the Hindu organization in shaping the indigenous identity. He has extensively researched on tribal organization sponsored and supported by the Hindu organizations and Indian state. For more, see *Casting Community, Culture and Faith: Hindutva’s Entrenchment in Arunachal Pradesh* by Pralay Kanungo.

views concerning the inculcation of Hindutva among the indigenous group (Kanungo 2011, p.114).

Besides the educational institutions, research and museum institutions also shape the knowledge system of Arunachal Pradesh. It is worth mentioning that the Research Institute of the World's Ancient Traditions, Cultures and Heritage (RIWATCH) has been pivotal in preserving traditional culture. RIWATCH is a “community based research organisation⁷⁶” which promotes the indigenous knowledge system. It offers various scholarly programmes like study exchange with foreign universities and conducts workshops and seminars on indigenous knowledge and practices. But, the RIWATCH museum is the point of attraction for many. According to Vijay Swami, the organisation's secretary, the museum is the single platform to learn about all the tribes and communities of Arunachal Pradesh⁷⁷. He claimed that it's a people's museum and most of the art and artefacts are donated by the locals.

Interestingly, art, artefacts and archaeological remains at the museum not only preserve and protect the tribal culture but also draw its association with ancient India and the Hindu gods and goddesses. For example, by showing the archaeological remains of a broken trident, he claims that the people of Arunachal Pradesh were worshipers of Lord Shiva, the Hindu god⁷⁸. This organisation and its museum is quite a point of attraction for Hindu nationalist. Also, this place is often visited by official dignitaries and ministers.

There is a strong argument for the rise of the tribal identity/consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh. All the indigenous movements, like Donyi-Polo, Rangfra and others, received immense support

⁷⁶ <https://riwatch.in/>

⁷⁷ Interview with Vijay Swami.

⁷⁸ Interview with Vijay Swami.

from the state and Hindu nationalist organisations so that the Hindu fundamentalist could create a strong base there with the help of locals as well assimilate the region. Both the indigenous elite and the Hindu organisations restructured and reimagined the indigenous faith as part of the Hindu culture and practices. Besides that, the state patronage of the locals to win their confidence kept the Christian missionary activities at bay (Chaudhuri 2013, p.261). Under state patronage, Arunachal Pradesh witnessed the strong presence of the Hindu elements. Now, it is an important site for Hindu pilgrims. Places like Parashuram Kund, Shivalinga at Kardo Hills, Akashiganga, and others⁷⁹ attract thousands of devotees from mainland India. Even the locals have started believing in the Hindu god and goddess and incorporating the Hindu elements in their everyday practice, resulting in the induction of iconography into indigenous life. Animist faith and practices are substituted by the worshipping images of deity.

The impact of mainland India, especially the Hindu hegemony⁸⁰, on the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh is a paramount issue and needs critical attention. Since the state is home to 26 major tribes and more than 100 subtribes, it is difficult to give a personal account for each and every community. So the thesis is primarily focused on the Nyishi community, one of the state's dominant indigenous groups. There are multiple factors which shaped the Nyishi identity over a period of time. But the thesis precisely looks into the contemporary development and cultural transition in the Nyishi community and how the Nyishi identity [preservation and promotion of

⁷⁹ <https://arunachaltourism.com/spiritual-2/>

⁸⁰ While mentioning Hindutva influence in Arunachal Pradesh, one can't ignore the Christian proselytization in the state. Both Hindu and Christian are responsible for the changing socio-cultural dynamics in the region, however, the Christian missionaries are solely blamed for the changing cultural practices among the indigenous communities. Hindu organizations and their increasing influence on indigenous communities, are seen as a positive development by both the state and regional elites in the region. Also, the regional elites often dismiss Hindutva influence on their everyday lives despite having a noticeable presence of Hindu elements in their cultural practices, such as the use of incense sticks during the rituals, or the presence of Hindu gods and goddesses along with the indigenous deity in *Nyder Namlo*, weren't a part of indigenous practices. Thus, it is important to critically look into the presence of Hindutva forces in the region.

indigenous faith and the documentation of the oral literature and folklore] is shaped by the ICT and the Internet.

Folklore is an important source to learn about the Nyishi with historical content. The Nyishi has begun to take concrete steps towards identity formation and assertion that led to the formation of Nyishi indigenous faith organization, promoting indigenous rituals and practices; the revival of Nyishi folklore, enhancing its oral narrative culture and history; the use of internet and technology, in part to preserve and disseminate the indigenous knowledge. To revitalize their cultural identity, new platforms and opportunities has been created for the youth to learn about and participate in traditional practices, including the preservation and propagation of folklore. The concept of the people and their culture as the quintessence of indigenous spirit, in which a pure and authentic Nyishi culture had been preserved, led to a significant rise in the educated elites' engagement with folklore. Thus, the ongoing cultural transition in the Nyishi community can be better understood through their involvement in preserving and disseminating folklore.

Chapter-3

Methodology

The digital transformation of human culture is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon worldwide. Individuals have been actively navigating their lives online, where they make sense of their experiences. The online transformation of our offline selves has changed our traditional understanding of social subjects, thereby changing our research approach towards core social elements like culture, tradition, identity, and subjectivity. Researchers have emphasized the interplay of the Internet and society, recognizing the influence of the Internet in reproducing and reinforcing the embodied life in the online realm (Turkle 1995; Castells 2001; Kendall 2002; Sundén 2003; Pink et.al. 2004; Parker & Song 2006; Kozinets 2010; Carlson 2013; Kozinets 2015; Hine 2015). Since our everyday life is saturated with various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and our digital practices embodied the real world, it is important to conduct an indepth study to comprehend the digital realm effectively. And, it can be achieved through ethnographic research. As Christine Hine writes: "...Internet are very interesting cultural phenomena to document, crying out for a detailed ethnographic engagement to work out what they mean and how they shape our contemporary notions of subjectivity, personhood, and sociality" (Hine 2015, p. 13), ethnographic research can offer the opportunity to collect the relevant and appropriate materials/notes/documents from the online world. Besides that, many scholars argue that the social media participation and the online presence of the offline self is inextricably linked to embodied practices — participants embody their identity and cultural engagement rather than disembody it while interacting on the online platforms (Kendall 2002; Christensen 2003; Sundén 2003; Carlson 2013). Such intriguing development in contemporary society has posed considerable challenges to our understanding of social subjects and have called for our methodological agility.

While we are fully aware of the penetration of the Internet and the influence of interactive media in our everyday lives, we struggle to comprehend these transformations pursued by new technologies. Although scholars of the Internet and social media are optimistic about conducting ethnographic research, the problems are manifold — large datasets, accessibility, acceptance, constant emergence of new technologies, and the technical difficulties it posed. Indeed, ethnographic methods help us to understand the interplay between society and new technological form but, in many ways, it poses serious challenges for the researchers. Building upon Geertz's 'thick description', Hine (2015) called for ethnographer's complete immersion in the setting (online/offline) and writes, "... ethnographer's participation becomes a way of getting close to that lived experience of the Internet...an understanding of how it feels to navigate the social textures of everyday life" (Hine 2015, p. 27). However, researchers often face difficulties in actively participating in online environments, especially with a close-knit or community pages, as such participation often requires membership confirmation (Carlson 2013). To address the above-mentioned issue, an offline ethnography is recommended. Besides that, since the online world embodies the offline world, offline ethnography is helpful in comprehending the continuum between the offline and online world. Along with the debate between the online and offline data and discourses, recent questions around 'big data' poses methodological challenges for researchers. For example, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are flooded with a constant influx of texts, images, and videos every day, presenting significant challenges for individuals to collect and analyze the vast amount of data. So, along with the 'thick description' of data, researcher have focused on methodological tools/techniques for collecting or extracting data from the social media platforms.

Research Approach:

Netnography

This study uses netnography to examine Nyishi's participation in social networking sites. Netnography, also known as digital ethnography or online ethnography, is an ethnographic approach to study digital environments. The word netnography is first used by Robert Kozinets in 1995 to explain the networked communications and relationships developed due to the advent of the Internet. Netnography, like digital ethnography, visual ethnography, and online ethnography, use the same method of ethnographic study. In other words, all of the terms have the same meaning except for the epistemic positions.

Based on Castells (2004) theory on 'the network society' and Kozinets's (2010) epistemic stance towards ethnography of the Internet, I have used the word 'netnography' to define the ethnographic research conducted on social media platforms like Facebook. Intentionally or unintentionally, we are all part of the network society. However, the network society are not restricted to online or offline world. Instead, it seamlessly combines offline actions with computer-generated networks. In its' historical forms, existing social structure constitutes a network of social organizations and interaction. We build network and connection for livelihood, resources, and power; making networks as the backbone of societies. Present day society is an advanced form of historical forms of "the network society because of available electronic information and communication technologies that the network society can deploy itself fully, transcending the historical limits of networks as forms of social organization and interaction" (Castells 2004, p. 6). Thus, the term 'netnography' is appropriate to discuss the cultural phenomena born out of social networking sites.

I have used netnography as a methodological approach to study the digital transformation and transmission of Nyishi people and culture. The presence of Nyishi individuals on the web, social media platforms, and microblogging sites are astonishing. Among the Nyishi community, there's a prevalent practice of sharing everyday life — social, political, and cultural practices on social media platforms. Nyishi individuals shows great enthusiasm for the online activities on social media platforms, participating in various online activities ranging from online folklore competitions to fashion competitions. Social media posts in the form of texts, images, and videos representing Nyishi culture and identity greatly facilitate unique way of their indigenous agency and identity politics in digital environments. Images and videos depicting Nyishi cultural practices and festivals like *Nyokum*; dance and songs such as *Rikampada*; traditional attire such as *bopia* (headgear), *dao* (machetes), *tasa* (ornament and male necklace); the myth and folklore like '*Nimey-Nyapaq*', '*Mig Mire and Martung Tam*', '*TaiBida and Mithun*', and story related to their forefather *AboTani* are widely circulated on the social media platforms. The multimedia images, texts, and videos garnered hundreds of comments, shares, and likes making the platform more interactive. Hundreds of users actively comment on the posts, expressing their personal and collective understanding and opinion on Nyishi folklore online mediating their offline identities on the online platform. Thus, the online platform offers an exceptional opportunity to learn and understand the contemporary Nyishi culture and its transition.

As recommended by Christien Hine (2015), ethnography is the best approach for “getting to the heart of the meaning” and understand the online environment. The ideal approach to conducting an ethnographic study is to actively participate in online environments, following the principles of offline ethnography. The researcher is required to immerse himself or herself in online platforms to get the experience and observes the users/participants. Based on these premises, I

embarked on a 3-year study (2018-2021) to understand digital transformation of Nyishi culture, people, and identity. During this period, I was focused on Nyishi online folkloric practices and identity formation. To provide a thick description of my data, I actively participated in social media platforms through my personal Facebook account and regularly liked, shared, and commented on the Nyishi Facebook pages. To understand the viewpoint of the participants, I actively participated in the discussion carried out in the comment sections. Besides that, I personally interacted with the participants through the Facebook message box, seeking to obtain more nuanced idea into their participations and opinions on specific multimedia posts. In the overt situation, I simply observe the participants' behavior by following their actions and reactions to a particular post shared on the Facebook page. As Hine (2015) point out, "there will be times when participants relax or forget about the ethnographer's role, and the ethnographer is able to observe something very like everyday life going on around them" (p.160).

Although online ethnography demands researcher's active participation in the online environment, this can pose challenges for researcher at times. As mentioned by Bronwyn Carlson (2013), accessibility, acceptance, and identity conformity are few criteria to get approval for certain social media pages. The admin of the page often questioned and confirmed researcher identity before allowing him/her to participate in their social media pages. During early stage of my research, it was difficult to gain access to few of the Nyishi Facebook pages. However, after conducting offline ethnography among the Nyishi community, my identity was confirmed and I was allowed by the admin of the page to participate actively. Besides that, offline ethnography also helped me to build a good rapport with the participants in online and offline platforms.

Offline Ethnography

Our online spaces are entwined with the offline spaces. Recent scholars studying identity and technology argued that the digital self is inextricably linked to embodied practises, emphasising the idea that our online identities are an extension of our offline selves. Drawing on online and offline debate, Lori Kendall (2002) and Jenny Sundén's (2003) challenged the notion of disembodiment, emphasizing the significant influence of the physical body on people's experiences within mediated environments. The physical body plays a crucial role in shaping and mediating individuals' interactions and encounters. The term "virtual" does not necessarily imply a lack of embodiment. Instead, our online experiences are inherently influenced by our lived experiences as embodied beings. For Nyishi youth, activists, and scholars, social media is not seen as a separate and virtual realm but is deeply intertwined with various aspects of their embodied lives. Nyishi individuals move seamlessly between mediated (online) and unmediated (offline) environments, and their participation in social media platforms is closely linked to their interactions in real-life settings. Nyishi people participate in these spaces alongside individuals with whom they interact face-to-face. The performances exhibited online are not isolated occurrences, detached from physical settings, but rather intentional actions that depend on a context spanning both mediated and unmediated environments, involving people who are familiar in both realms. The online selves of the Nyishi are closely connected to their offline activities. Thus, this study also focused on the offline ethnography.

Research Site

Facebook

While the methodological approach was set, various social media platforms were monitored to make an initial assessment of potential data related to Nyishi folk culture, traditions, and identity.

Social networking sites, microblogging sites, and other digital platforms including Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were analyzed for preliminary research, and it was decided that the study will focus on Facebook. One main reason behind the choice was the amount of data and number of users available on the Facebook. If we compare to the other social networking sites(SNS) and microblogging platforms, Facebook is quite popular among the Nyishi people because of easy user interface (UI). Given that Facebook users from various parts of the world typically experience a greater sense of comfort when engaging with a user interface that aligns with their cultural norms (Reinecke 2010). Besides that, technology related skills are one of the significant factors which influences users to carefully choose a website or application. Facebook page layout is more interactive in nature. Functions such as post, like, comment, share, and the available chat box enable the users to get a real time experience on the online platform. Users can create their personal account to interact with their peers. Also, the algorithm used in Facebook often recommend a post or a page or a profile that might interest the users and connect with others who belongs to a same geographical location or share similar views and interest. Users can comment on a post and express their approval or disapproval by using emojis. Also, the privacy settings available on Facebook allow the users to choose their friends and communities and selectively post, share, and comment on Facebook.

Before selecting Facebook as my research site, I was particular about my research objectives and elements. I focused on Nyishi folkloric content and Nyishi identity. At the initial stage, I used the filter button to search for elements such as folklore, culture, tradition, identity on various Nyishi Facebook pages. I particular about the folklore because Nyishi people has been widely talking about their folklore and cultural heritage in various mass media outlets such as newspapers, television, and the internet. Given the absence of a written script, thus written

history, folklore is the only avenue to understand Nyishi culture and identity. So, it is important to observe their folklore, oral traditions, myth, legends, festivals, foods, attire on Facebook. In fact, my research revolves around the in-depth exploration of folklore and identity in online platforms which I have described in details in my thematic chapters.

Based on the above criteria, I have selected five Facebook pages for my research purpose. Initially, I focused on three Facebook pages namely Nyishi, Being Nyishi, and Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. All of these pages existed before the commencement of my ethnographic study on them. These pages likely aim to preserve and promote the rich enlightening legacy of the Nyishi Community while also discussing the present socio-political landscape. By sharing cultural history, these pages provide insights into the origins, traditions, and practices of the Nyishi community. So, with the permission from the admin, I joined the group and actively participated in their everyday activities on the Facebook pages. But it was really difficult to keep track or filter the folkloric content from these pages. Nyishi Facebook page named Nyishi has various content ranging from lame jokes to serious debate and discussion on Nyishi culture and society. While Being Nyishi Facebook page is focused on Nyishi traditional attire and its modern blend. Facebook page, Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh often post and share materials on Nyishi folklore, myth, and legend. However, few of these Facebook pages stopped sharing or posting any materials on Nyishi folklore and culture. In the end of 2018, Facebook page Nyishi stopped sharing and posting any materials on its page. Instead, new Nyishi Facebook pages emerged subsequently and gained immense popularity because of their content. While conducting research on Being Nyishi and Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, I came across cross postings and discovered two additional Nyishi Facebook pages namely Nyishi Art and Culture and Welfare Society (NACWS), which stopped sharing any post after December 2020,

and Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society (NIFSC), which was changed to NNMR (Religious organization in January 2021). NACWS and NNMR (Nyishi Nyidung Mwnjwng Rallung) regularly organized folklore competition on their Facebook pages. So, I actively participated on these pages, and closely follow the comments on the Facebook page. Since the competition was organized in Nyishi language, I faced difficulty in understanding it. So, I personally reached out to the participants and users through the message box, requesting them to translate the folklore into Hindi or English for me. Sometime, during my offline ethnography, I requested my Nyishi interlocuter to translate the folklore for me.

Field

Along with the Facebook, I spent a significant time among the Nyishi community in the field, conducting offline ethnography. I have conducted in-depth ethnographic research during the offline study. I choose festivals sites to cross check and validate the online claims made by the Nyishi individuals on the Nyishi Facebook pages. As scholars of the internet and social media studies established that online self is embedded with embodied practices (Kendall 2002; Sundén 2003; Carlson 2013), I focused on festival during my research to understand the digital transformation of Nyishi culture. So, I conducted my expert interviews during my field visit to *Nyokum* or *Nyokum Yullo* in Kharsingsa and Sagalee in Papumpare district, Arunachal Pradesh. *Nyokum* is the main festival of Nyishi community widely celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh. Nyishi people, both who adhere to indigenous faith and believer and those who are Christian believer come together to celebrate this festival. It is a unique moment where one can witness the vibrant culture of Nyishi community; men and women folk wearing their traditional attire and ornaments and dancing to their folk songs; and the *Nyub* (priest) performing their traditional rituals offering Mithun to the *Uyus* (spirits) while chanting Nyishi verse. Since the online Nyishi

Facebook pages claims the folkloric identity, and regularly post, share, debate, and discuss about the indigenous identity on the online platforms, I interviewed Nyishi people who were aware about Nyishi folklore and cultural practices.

Methods, Tools, and Techniques

Online

While doing the ethnographic research, especially on online platforms, it is important to focus on the tools and techniques in addition to online observation, interviews, and content analysis. Thus, I have employed inductive approach where the qualitative data are collected in the first step, and later it is selected, coded, and clustered and generated the theme and relationship. Later, it has used thematic analysis to study the posts and comments on the Facebook page. However, it is time consuming and a lengthy due to the abundance of data on the Internet and social media platforms. Although doing it manually is not impossible, but finding a noble way to deal with big data is often encouraged. To make the ethnography online easy and feasible, scholars has adopted the computational methods (Manovich 2020). The use of computational methods in Humanities and Social Science, also known as Digital Humanities (DH), has been a great help for many scholars who all are dealing with online research and big data.

During the initial days of my research, I have also used traditional methods to collect data every day from Facebook pages. I manually copy and paste the data in word and excel file and went through each comment and post to analyze the data which was trying process. In the year 2019, I was introduced to DH at Tartu University. Thanks to my DH instructor Artjoms Šeļa who guided me through the course and taught me how to use DH in my research. Besides that, the summer school on ‘Digital Methods in Humanities and Social Science’ at Tartu University and the training school on ‘Methods of Digital Scholarships’ at University of Cologne immensely shaped

my knowledge and understanding about DH. Later, in my research I have used DH, where I have employed data mining tools like Voyant Tools, and Facebook data scrapper, Facepager.

Voyant Tools is a software widely used by the DH scholars, and social media and the Internet researchers for text mining purpose. I have used Voyant Tools for mining the large corpus available in Facebook pages. While using the Voyant Tools I frequently used functions like Contexts, Correlations, Summary, Word Tree, Corpus Collocates, Cirrus, and Dreamscape.

- *Contexts*: The Contexts tool is used for getting a comprehensive meaning of paragraphs and passages posted on the Nyishi Facebook pages. Terms like ‘nyishi’, ‘culture’, ‘pride’, ‘identity’, ‘folklore’, ‘indigenous’, and ‘religion’ are used to understand the contexts. It provided me an in-depth knowledge about the posts shared on the Facebook pages.
- *Correlations*: The Correlations tool enabled us to understand the correlation between two terms and its significance. For example, while finding the correlations between the word ‘Nyishi’ with words like ‘AboTani’, ‘Mithun’, ‘Folklore’, ‘Bopai’ and more, posted on the comment box, the coefficient that approaches 1-indicated the positive correlation while -1 indicated the negative or remotely correlated.
- *Summary*: The Summary tool provided a general overview of the corpus, including number of words in the text, number of unique words, frequently used words, remotely used words etc.

- *Word Tree*: Word Tree visualized the data in the form of a tree, branching out the subsidiary words from the main word. In other words, it helped me to understand how the main word is used in different phrases in the text.
- *Corpus Collocates*: It create a table view that shows the three columns,1-Term: this is the keyword (like Nyishi, Nyishi Culture) being searched 2-Collocate: these are the words found in nearness of apiece keyword.3-Count (context): this is the frequency of the collocate occurring in proximity to the keyword of which terms appear more frequently in proximity to keywords across the entire corpus.
- *Dreamscape*: Dreamscape tool explore how texts represented geo-spatially. The tool was used for identifying locations (especially place names) mentioned in texts. For example, the story of *geker sinying* which revolve near Itanagar, the Capital City of Arunachal Pradesh, revealed pattern of recurring connections between locations and the stories. This pattern helped me identifying the regions from which individuals are actively participating in the Online Folklore Competition on the Nyishi Facebook pages. This particular tool also helped me in identifying Nyishi people who are actively participating in circulation and preservation of folklore.
- *Cirrus*: This tool is a used to visualizes word cloud that are the top frequency words of a document (Facebook post). The word cloud situates the words, such as the terms that occur the most frequently are positioned centrally and are sized the largest. As the algorithm goes through the list and continues to attempt and to draw words as close as possible to the center of the visualization of the corpus.

Along with the Voyant Tools, I have used the Facepager to scrap Facebook pages. Facepager is specifically designed for downloading social media data, including likes, comments, and shares from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. I focused on extracting data from the Nyishi Facebook Pages, comprising texts, images, and videos by configuring the tool according to my parameters. To enhance the analysis of the extracted data, I employed the functionality of Facepager to add and organize additional columns in the database. This allowed me to display extended information alongside the existing data. Subsequently, I exported the processed data to a .csv table format for further analysis. Facepager facilitated the extraction of comprehensive data, such as pictures associated with the posts. This feature enabled me to obtain a holistic view of the content available on the Nyishi Facebook Pages. To streamline the data extraction process, I leveraged Facepager's capability to extract posts within a specified time period. By setting the desired timeframe (e.g., 2018-2021), I obtained all relevant posts falling within that range. Additionally, I utilized the tool to extract comments associated with the posts, enabling a comprehensive analysis of user engagement and interactions. Also, the extraction of replies to comments, which provided valuable insights into the discussions and conversations occurring within the Nyishi Facebook Page. This feature enabled me to examine the dynamics of user interactions in a more granular manner. The utilization of Facepager greatly simplified my research process by enabling the extraction and organization of Nyishi Facebook Page data according to my parameters. By employing the tool's functionalities, including the extraction of posts within a specified time period, comments, and replies to comments, I was able to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Offline:

During my offline ethnography, I followed the traditional fieldwork procedure, conducting offline interview and semi-participatory observation. The offline interviews and semi-participatory observation provided me information about the wider socio-cultural context in which the interviewees live. During the *Nyokum* festival in 2018, 2019, & 2021, I captured important ceremonies in the form of videos and images which I analyzed closely to understand the Nyishi culture in the online environment. Besides that, I took field notes, recorded the interview with participants' permission, and wrote my field experience and observations to get a better understanding of my ethnographic research in order to validate the authenticity and accuracy of the text that I have collected.

Ethical Considerations

Considerable attention has given to ethical considerations, even when working with publicly accessible data on Facebook, in Previous research (Hudson and Bruckman, 2004; Ikonomidis Svedmark and Nyberg, 2009) has extensively discuss the issue of the blurred boundaries between publicity and privacy on the Internet. The present study finds itself in a situation where the dissemination of public data through a research publication challenges the boundaries of privacy. The convergence of online and offline networks, as mentioned earlier, is not an exception in this study. Regarding the data collected, I engage in different positions within the audience spectrum. In some cases, I take part as a participatory audience, the inferred audience in others, and occasionally part of the abstruse audience. Since, I was not to the intend recipient of the Nyishi Facebook posts under the examination, it is imperative to uphold the confidentiality of the individuals discussed in the research corpus. To ensure the anonymity of Facebook users, and

to respect their privacy, this study focuses on the use of Facebook among the Nyishi people by removing all identifying information, such as usernames, age, and gender. By making this decision, the primary goal is made to safeguard the privacy of the individuals while still investigating their Facebook usage patterns effectively.



CHAPTER-4

FOLK TRADITION, HISTORY AND THE STORY: NYISHI IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

This chapter critically examines how folklore is integral to the development of the Nyishi ethnic identity—providing a cultural foundation to the political sense of Nyishi identity that has emerged in the past decades—are explained in a historical context. Focusing on the discursive practice of drawing politically desirable links to the past—that serves to legitimize aspirations of indigenous communities and their cultural autonomy, this chapter discuss the politics of culture and history, contributing to the narrative construction of continuities and discontinuities, and community making. This chapter argues that folklore is handmaiden of the political right—and, the development of folklore as part of everyday lives is not fortuitous but an ideological necessity.

Chapter-4

Folk Tradition, History and the Story: Nyishi in the Contemporary Era

The proliferation of Nyishi identity in the recent past has brought out many interesting facts about the community which had not previously been articulated contextually or (re)produced in practice. Many of these changes [socio-cultural, political, and ethnic development] witnessed today emanates from the way the local values, identities, and interests are (re)negotiated with the region's cultural and emotional integration⁸¹ brought about by the mainland India. Looking at the myriad processes of these negotiations and renegotiations in itself can therefore be a meaningful line of enquiry in understanding transition of indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. The process of negotiation can be well extended to both tradition and modernity, and the modernness of representation—where different folk groups use their ethnic identity strategically⁸² for their individual goals, reflecting on their cultural heritage, tradition and folklore. Hence, understanding cultural history of Nyishi community—their folklore, culture and traditions concerning the extent to which folk culture has been used as a counter-act to secure their ethnic identity against the cultural assimilation. At the same time, it is worth examining how modern institutions that are devoted to the preservation and dissemination of folklore that has Nyishi ethnic identity.

The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh have long resisted the influx of foreign culture and states' efforts to assimilate them. This has generally been a losing struggle, with folk groups

⁸¹ Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA, is very well integrated with mainland India through state-making and nation-building endeavor. With the help of state machinery—research institutions, educational institutions, administration and military, tribal people were encouraged to find their connection with mainland India. For example, the students from NEFA were taken on tour to various parts of India such as Lucknow, Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay on the pretext that they can feel proud of being part of it. Also, similarities are drawn between the Hindu mythical figures and tribe in the NEFA. See, Guyot-Réchart 2017.

⁸² To present themselves, subaltern communities, minorities groups or ethnic groups temporarily use stereotyped about themselves to resist the dominance forces and established a counter narrative. See, Spivak 1988.

experiencing socio-cultural integration — involves a total loss of cultural identity (Dawar 1994; Showren 2003; Rikam 2005; Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013; Guyot-Réchar d 2017; Longkumer 2021). However, in the recent past, the community has taken major steps to curb further cultural integration, encouraging the youths to practice and preserve their culture, tradition and folklore. More concrete steps have been taken: the creation of Nyishi indigenous faith organization, promoting indigenous rituals and practices; the revival of Nyishi folklore, enhancing its oral narrative culture and history; the use of internet and technology, in part to preserve and disseminate the indigenous knowledge, for the identity construction. Nyishi youths, intellectuals, and activists have been painstakingly trying to build a greater sense of ethnic identity as well as a collective identity that could negate any dominant or mainstream forces. For example, Online Folklore competitions has been organized (see chapter 6 for details) to revitalize and instill indigenous tradition and knowledge among the Nyishi youth, or schools (Nyubu Nyvgam Yerko⁸³) have been established to teach indigenous culture and languages. Also, like-minded Nyishi youths have been using modern technology to protect and practice their traditional culture—in the form of art and music, and using social media forum like YouTube⁸⁴ to disseminate indigenous knowledge—like the importance of *uyus* (spirits), *nyubu* (priest) and nature, thereby maintaining the tribal identity. Similarly, the Nyishi intellectuals and activists have been organizing seminars, lectures and workshops, and campaigning for the preservation of indigenous languages and practices: fighting against cultural appropriation and assimilation. At

⁸³ <https://arunachal24.in/arunachal-khandu-inaugurates-nyubu-nyvgam-yerko-school/>

⁸⁴ Taba Chake, Chorun Mugli and many have started composing music in Nyishi language glorifying the Nyishi folk culture and tradition. Their videos have been appreciated and widely circulated on both offline and online platforms. <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/ta-ba-chake-brings-nyishi-to-the-indie-scene-singer-songwriter-on-performing-in-an-arunachal-dialect-his-artistic-evolution-9076791.html>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHtc6yai_RI

the same time, the Nyishi has been working towards the institutionalization of its folklore, oral traditions, religion and cultural practices—as they realized that the Nyishi should be brought under one umbrella—and, it can only be possible through their institutional mediums: *Nyder Namlo* (Nyishi prayer house/temple) was established in 2001 where the Nyishi indigenous faith and believers congregate every Sunday to offer prayer; *uyus* (spirits) were replaced with anthropomorphic figure; *Nyetam* (Nyishi religious testament) was written to formalize the religious faith, belief and practices. Consequently, that which was often ignored and considered trivial—like the importance of language, customary laws, religious practices and attire, were brought into their symbolic significances by documenting the old practices and stories as well as collecting the art and artifacts and attributing special cultural value⁸⁵ as a process of revitalization of indigenous knowledge and identity (Anttonen, 2005). For example, the inauguration of The Nyishi Indigenous Art and Cultural Hall⁸⁶ on 12th August 2018 at the state capital of Arunachal Pradesh reflects on the importance of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible culture—that it is a creative response to cultural assimilation, as they no longer succumb to state agents⁸⁷ and instead tribal way of life, including the art and artifacts were highlighted in an organized manner. Also, to resist and refute the cultural assimilation and religious conversion in the community, the educated elites’ started focusing in folklore⁸⁸. This interest eventually led to the formation of

⁸⁵ see, Anttonen 2005, p.58.

⁸⁶ <https://arunachal24.in/itanagar-khandu-inaugurates-nyishi-indigenous-art-and-cultural-hall/>

⁸⁷ There has been continuous effort by the Indian government to integrate the frontier region with mainland India. Thus, the tribal land and its’ people were brought under administrative control, establishing mythical connection between Arunachal Pradesh and mainland India. See. Guyot-Réchard 2017.

⁸⁸ Analysing the rise of indigenous movement in Arunachal Pradesh, Pralay Kanungo observed that the elites and notables from the Nyishi community actively joined the indigenous movement to preserve and promote the indigenous faith and belief of the Nyishis. The community has given utmost priority to foster Nyishi unity and

Nyishi organizations like ANYA (All Nyishi Youth Association) in 1976, ANSU (All Nyishi Students' Union) in 1982, and NSE (Nyishi Elite Society) in 1987, encouraging the Nyishi youth to counter any further integration of tribal culture and establish their indigenous identity in both local and regional level. However, it cultivated indigenous elites: identifying with Nyishi believe system, rituals, and practices. The elites started mobilizing the community by reviving their religious faith and belief in Donyi-Polo. Intertwined with economic and political goals, the Nyishi elite started collecting information about their past that which is regarded as cultural heritage and put on display as representations of Nyishi ethnic identity. As Pertti Anttonen (2005) writes, folklore and oral traditions have been paramount in indigenous identity construction. Besides that, folklore can be used to make the present (Anttonen 2005, p.81). As discussed in Chapter-2 (see chapter-2), since Nyishi community is culturally corrupt⁸⁹, collecting the past cultural information and preserving it becomes meaningful because of their perceived contribution to understand their historical trajectory (Dominguez 1986). Accordingly, in order to build an ideological discourse around Nyishi ethnic identity, the educated elite worked towards the culturally charged elements, such as religious faith and belief—reviving Donyi-Polo, or language—which define Nyishi identity (Bakhtin 1981), are invented through constant negotiation and re-negotiation. This has meant, among other things, the observation, selection and collection of cultural elements that is embedded in the culture and social reality. For example, the selection of a particular kind of Nyishi folklore, myth or legend—the importance of Mithun, or headgear receive their epistemic meaning and value as objects of

brotherhood by educating the youth about the values, culture and social moorings inherited from their ancestors. For more see. Kanungo (2011).

⁸⁹ The proselytisation work by both the Christians and Hindus morally corrupted the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. The elite argued that Christianity has completely displaced the traditional culture overlooking their association with the Hindu organisations in the state. Besides the proselytization, state making and the presence of Indian authorities from the mainland India meant to fully integrate Arunachal Pradesh. See Kanungo, 2011; Guyot-Réchard 2017.

definitive identity through their inclusion and appropriation in their everyday life⁹⁰. How did these materials/stories gained its epistemic meaning and regarded as a folklore or part of cultural heritage?

Although the collected materials (archival materials) might reflect on many important aspects of society or a community, but the process involved in it—especially, the way those materials got to the museum need to be analyzed critically (Anttonen 2005, p.53). Thus, this chapter is an attempt to understand the process of folklorisation and how folklore was politically established as an important part of Nyishi community. Also, it has explored the way in which indigenous faith, culture and tradition is understood.

Today, the Nyishis are one of the prominent tribal communities in the Arunachal Pradesh. They are no longer an unknown community as their importance among the tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh has been recognized and praised in social sphere (Elwin 1959; Blackburn 2008). In the recent past, their contribution to the protection of indigenous culture, tradition and language has influenced many other indigenous communities, particularly Tani clan⁹¹, to come together and build a strong collective identity to check the ongoing cultural assimilation process (Showren 2003; Rikam 2005; Ramya 2018). Further, the Nyishis have been building institutions like *Nyder Namlo* and Nyishi Indigenous Art and Cultural Hall and producing texts based on their folk culture, faith and believe to preserve and propagate Nyishi cultural heritage. At the same time, the intern and social media platforms has been a great medium of teaching Nyishi faith and beliefs and promote understanding of indigenous culture and traditions among the

⁹⁰ “Although I understand that interest in oral tradition usually means interest in the specimens of oral tradition, the scholarly study of oral tradition cannot do without analytical reflection on the theories of tradition and traditionality that are applied in the selection, construction, and representation of such specimens” (Anttonen 2003, pp.116–117).

⁹¹ Tani people comprises Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin, and Mising community from Arunachal Pradesh and few parts of Assam. They all believe that they are the descendant of mythical figure *Abo Tani*. However, each one is distinct to one another. For more, see Showren 2003 and Rikam 2005.

youngsters. Social media platforms, mainly Facebook, has been used in order to connect with each other and build networks of support (see chapter 5 & 6), but also to debate and discuss the issue of changing cultural practices among the Nyishi and other indigenous communities in the state. Interestingly, present day Nyishi (or any indigenous communities) in Arunachal Pradesh is deeply embedded with the both colonial and post-colonial past, thus, an understanding of their historical past and epistemic engagement with the discourses of culture, identity, and representation can be helpful to examine the ongoing socio-cultural struggle in the region.

So, it is important to shed light on the cultural evolution of the Nyishi community, their past and present, and the factors that have contributed to cultural shifts within the community. As discussed above, folklore is an integral part of the Nyishi community—it provides insights into the cultural history and traditions as well as the values, beliefs, and practices that are associated with them. Hence, this chapter revolved around folklore, particularly Nyishi folk practices, and how it has evolved as a strong cultural element that shaped the Nyishi identity; and to counter the assimilation processes.

The Nyishi

The Nyishi constitute the largest population among all tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with the population of around 300,000 lakhs as per 2011 population census by the Government of India. They have substantial impact on the conceptualization of indigenous practices; discourses and practices empowering the indigenous communities. Speaking on the role of indigenous communities, particularly the Nyishi, Pema Khandu, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh has recognized the contribution of Nyishi community towards the preservation of indigenous culture. During the inauguration of the Nyishi Indigenous Art and Cultural Hall at Itanagar in 2018, he had extended his unconditional support for further construction of Nyishi Archives cum

Community Hall at the premises. Meanwhile, the Nyishi has been coordinating and organizing activities related to cultural awareness, and the preservation and propagation of indigenous knowledge which can help them in building a political community. In other words, to counter cultural and political assimilation and resist the presence of Christian and Hindu missionaries; indigenous communities like the Nyishi in Arunachal Pradesh realized the importance of a cohesive identity⁹². Thus, the community appealed and invited people of different indigenous communities under one roof, changing the cultural landscapes of the state. Individuals from different indigenous communities (mainly Tani clan) have been actively participating in various cultural movements in both online and offline platforms, contributing to the rise of ethnic and religious consciousness among the people. However, the activities may converge with strict form of social movement, but it is flexible towards the cultural appropriation. Such behaviors can be linked to the rise of regional and national consciousness during the colonial and post-colonial era. And, the present day Nyishi identity is a byproduct of its constant negations and re-negotiations with historical past (Kanungo 2011; Guyot-Récharde 2017) where Nyishi folklore, myth and legend were greatly appropriated. Through their folklore and cultural heritage, the community found a distinct place in both local and regional sphere. Folklore, as discussed by Pertti Anttonen (2005), function as one of the prominent ways of conceptualizing, historicizing and territorializing the Nyishi identity.

The mythical origin of Nyishi

The mythical origin of Nyishi is well expressed in the ‘Holy text of Nyishi’- *Nyetam*(commandment). This is the first Nyishi religious text, documented in 2001; to preach

⁹² Nyishi indigenous movement is greatly inspired by the initiative of Talom Rukbo, the founding member of Donyipolo movement in Arunachal Pradesh.

Also, see “*Casting Community, Culture and Faith: Hindutva's Entrenchment in Arunachal Pradesh*” by Pralay Kanungo in Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva (2011).

religious practices and instill a sense of collective identity among the indigenous faith and believers. Although there are different stories relating to the origin and evolution of universe and mankind on the earth, the Nyishi popularly believe in *Nyetam*; that Aane Donyi (the creator) created the universe out of nothingness. According to *Nyetam* (2006), Aane Donyi grants **Tanyi** (inheritor and preserver) the divine vision and explains that his humanlike form is the original form of the supreme progenitor of human generations⁹³. However, the attribution of a male figure to Tanyi is a later development, where suffix word *abu* (father) was added (Rikam 2005, p.22).

The Nyishi believe that the *donyi* (sun) and *polo* (moon) were created by the Aane Donyi. After the creation of the major component of the universe, Aane Donyi created the *chet* (earth) and *dot* (space) to accommodate the living things such as streams, rivers, hills and mountains in earth and the celestial bodies in the space/heaven. Later, god of *Chenn* (the creator of life) brought all living things including the human being to the earth. According to Nyishi mythology, the Tanyi was half human and half spirit, having upper hand over the *Uyus* (spirits). So out of jealousy, the *Uyus* tricked and trapped the Tanyi. In utter dismay the Tanyi announced to finish the world through his evil *Oryok* (sword). But at this juncture Tugu and Ryapin persuaded him to change his extreme attitude and enter Aane Donyi's Namlo. Subsequently, the Tanyi married to Jiwt Aane and Nyia Tanyi was born. The Nyishi believe that it was from *Abu Nyia Tanyi* the actual human race started. So, they claimed themselves an immediate descendant of Abu Tanyi.

In Arunachal Pradesh, especially in the Nyishi world, many of the belief systems, faiths and practices are evolved out of struggle between the *Tanyi* and *Uyus*, which eventually shaped the community's identity. In addition to this, the present day indigenous movement is inspired by religious sentiments embedded in the world of *Uyus*.

Nyishi belief system

⁹³ Nyetam, 2006

The Nyishi believes that the entire universe is divided into three worlds i.e. earth, heaven and netherworld. Earth is living place of plants and animals; sky is the abode of gods, goddesses and celestial bodies, while netherworld is meant for the soul after death⁹⁴. All the three places have significant role in understanding Nyishi cultural and belief systems; the relation between life and death and afterward. The relationship between earth, heaven and netherworld often brought into notice during the death rituals. The Nyishi believe death as transformation of life from material world to the spiritual world⁹⁵. Also, *Uyus*—both benevolent and malevolent, that live in jungle, on the lofty hills, on the top of trees, and inside and outside the houses, are worshiped for the benefit of mankind. The benevolent spirits help and look after the mankind whereas the malevolent spirit inflicts pain and suffering in human life, however, both the *Uyus* are offered equal attention, and worshiped whenever needed. It is important to maintain the balance between the mankind and *uyus*; mankind must stay watchful and maintain harmony between the two worlds. If there is any form of imbalance or disrespect for the spirits (both benevolent and malevolent), the spirits can be contended through rituals and sacrifices, or else it will bring disasters and natural calamities in the community. Hence, animal sacrifice is the basic aspects of the Nyishi socio-religious life (Rikam 2005, p.24) where they offer *mithun* to the *uyus*, and pray for the growth and prosperity of the community by keeping the evil spirits at bay.

Nyiub (shaman) is the integral part of the Nyishi belief system, without him no rituals can take place. The *nyiub* is also considered to be the keeper of indigenous knowledge, folklore, rituals etc. from who the younger generation learn about their cultural practices and traditions. Thus, *nyiub* have given special place and respect in every indigenous community including the Nyishi. The *nyiub* works as an emissary of the people to communicate their grievances and sufferings to

⁹⁴ Nyishi World, Tob Tarin Tara 2008

⁹⁵ Emerging Religious Identities in Arunachal Pradesh, Nabam Tadar Rikam 2005, Manohar Publication

the spirits (Riba, 2005). Besides that, the *nyiub* is the practitioner of traditional medicine and healer of all physical and spiritual sufferings. It is widely believed that only the *nyiub* can undo and lift any kind of afflictions since he is born with the divine power. However, these religious practices and beliefs have witnessed significant changes with the rapid institutionalization of indigenous practices. For example, the establishment of Nyubu Nyvgam Yerko⁹⁶ at Seppa on 20th March 2021 is an aberration of the shamanism in Nyishi community, as the kids are formally taught and introduced to the priesthood. Although the indigenous activists and intellectuals justify their stand in the institutionalization of indigenous culture and traditions by the fact that the work of proselytization and modernization of the indigenous community posed both corporeal and spiritual threat for their existence, but the current form of preservation through institutionalization raises questions on the essence and aesthetical practices in a politically and culturally dynamic space.

Religious landscape of the Nyishi

As mentioned above, the Nyishi, mainly the indigenous faith and believers⁹⁷, believe in the existence of *uyus*—and, their control over the nature—which shaped the Nyishi's religious landscape. Historically, the Nyishi worship the nature, sun, moon, and spirits, and there weren't any systematic practices like the present-day like *Donyi Poloism*. And even the religious events and offerings weren't a regular affair in the past, instead, the rituals were performed whenever there was a need for it: when a person fall ill; or there are natural calamities beyond human

⁹⁶ <https://arunachal24.in/arunachal-khandu-inaugurates-nyubu-nyvgam-yerko-school/>

⁹⁷ Presently, the Nyishi have been practicing many religion; few of them are converted to Christianity and Hindu. People who haven't converted to any religion follow their traditional practices, mainly animism.

control. In order to contend and appease the spirits, sacrificial ceremonies are performed based on the demands of the *uyus* themselves. After the offerings to the *uyus*, it is important to carefully observe/follow the restriction pronounced by the *nyibu*. Any kind of negligence or ignorance of the *nyibu*'s is tantamount to disrespecting the *uyus*. Besides that, the supernatural being has all the power to settle all the disputes in the community. For example, an ordeal is a method to determine the guilt or innocence of an accused person. During the process, the priest chants to invoke the almighty to protect the innocent and punish the culprit. Explaining the procedure in more details, Rikam (2005) writes,

Among the Nyishi, Sudung Einam (putting in boiling water) is a common method of ordeal. In this process of ordeal, a stone is placed deep inside the bamboo tube containing boiling water and the accused is asked to take it out from his right hand. If he is innocent, no harm will come to him but if he is guilty, he will be burned or scalded in his hand (Rikam 2005, p. 37).

However, the religious landscape of the Nyishi has gone through several changes under the colonial and post-colonial era (as mentioned in chapter-2). In the past, the state has witnessed to the rigorous process of state-making and the growing entrenchment of mainland India; it has destabilized the indigenous ecosystem and enforced new cultural spaces for the locals. Along with it, the entry of the Hindu and Christian missionaries also deeply affected the indigenous religious belief systems as mentioned in the latter section in this chapter.

Nyishi in Transition: The Construction of Tradition, History, and Heritage

The contemporary Nyishi is shaped by both colonial and post-colonial experiences. Although the colonial rulers didn't regulate the land directly, there were significant restriction on the tribals' movement (Luthra, 1971). To protect the Assam plains and tea cultivation from the hill people,

Britishers drawn the Inner Line. Also, the land is visited by colonial officers and missionaries time to time in various expeditions. But the real changes took place after the independence of India, where the Indian government took serious interest in the frontier region and draft plan and policies to govern the locals. With the emergence of the modern nation-state, there have been efforts to integrate indigenous cultures and traditions, including the Nyishi. Similarly, the influx of outsiders into the state and the proliferation of foreign religions like Christianity and Hinduism has posed serious threat to the indigenous faith and belief. Thus, the Nyishi started working towards a collective identification and started appropriating cultural elements for recognition and building the community (Anttonen 2005, p. 143). Moreover, the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Nyishi require an understanding of historical and political factors that have shaped their identity.

The historical context: Mapping the community in colonial and post-colonial era

Earlier known as Dafla, the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh, has witnessed substantial changes in the colonial and post-colonial era. Following the establishment of the McMahon Line and the Northeast Frontier Tracts (NEFT) in 1914, locals of the north-east⁹⁸ region were placed under restrictive administration (Luthra 1971, pp.53-55). Consequently, the British empire started expanding its administration and penetrated deeper into the eastern Himalayas through their official expeditions⁹⁹, preparing a list of tribal affairs that might help them to give territorial

⁹⁸ Under the British India rule, north-east region, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, remain isolated for long. British authority had shown less interest in administered the frontier region because of its hilly mountains tracts. However, China's increasing influence on India's Himalayan frontier caught attention of India's colonial authorities and spurred colonial authorities to expand in the eastern Himalayas, an end to the official non-interference policy beyond the Inner Line. For more, see Guyot-Réchart 2017.

⁹⁹ British colonial expeditions in the eastern Himalayas began with the 'Abor Expedition'. Although the 'Abor Expedition' was a response to the killing of British officials Williamson, Gregorson and others, it was now

reality to this administrative reorganization (Guyot-Réchar, 2017). Eventually, new outposts were established in Pasighat and Along: expanding administration beyond Inner Line and asserting and legitimizing British possession in foothills of eastern Himalayas¹⁰⁰. The frontier region thereafter witnessed several expeditions and establishment of outposts that has helped the Britishers to expand further and control the locals from any uprising against them. Roads, bridges, telegraph line, and porter tracks were built to support British administration in the region, but after great difficulty¹⁰¹. These outposts became the centers of change that transformed most of the state during the twentieth century: education and literacy, increasing Christianisation and Hinduisation, and, in response to these changes, cultural revival movements (Blackburn 2008, p.12).

The gradual colonial penetration and increasing presence of colonial administration in the frontier region in the beginning of the twentieth century marked a change in indigenous communities, including the Nyishi. After the Miri Mission¹⁰², the Nyishi were formally brought under the British administrative system and officially became a part of British India. British officials started interfering in the villages' affair and were invited to settle disagreements between tribal communities. Following the influence of British officials in the region, indigenous

imperative to explore different parts of the eastern Himalayas. Later, three more separate expeditions were proposed to ascertain the nature and extent of British control in this corner of the Empire. For more, see Blackburn 2008, Guyot-Réchar 2017.

¹⁰⁰ : "Several Assam Rifles outposts had been established very close to the foothills, most notably at Pasighat near the mouth of the Siang, a settlement that would one day become the most important Indian government centre in the eastern Himalayas "(Guyot-Réchar 2017, p.42).

¹⁰¹ Colonial presence in the foothills of eastern Himalayas aroused fierce opposition, and never systematically implemented the colonial rules. In fact, British government removed its officials and withdrawn several outposts in Adi and Mishmis areas.

¹⁰² Unlike the previous expedition, Miri Mission (1911) was designed for a peaceful expedition and less political, intended to occupy itself with a survey of the Kamla-Subansiri region. Unfortunately, the mission turned violent as the attitude of the villages was hostile. See, Angus Hamilton, In Abor Jungles: Being an Account of the Abor Expedition, the Mishmi Mission and the Miri Mission (1912).

practices witnessed significant changes in the foothills of eastern Himalayas. Some of the most obvious changes were clothing, body decoration, and the practice of customary laws which are the integral part of their everyday life, a mark of identity. Like other indigenous communities in the region, the Nyishi started participating in British's political life, absorbing colonial lifestyle that blended both traditional and Western practices. Explaining the colonial influence on the indigenous community in Arunachal Pradesh, Stuart Blackburn writes: - "...Nyishi men began to wear the canvas shoes and khaki shorts, acquired from soldiers, which are still worn today by some older men (Blackburn 2008, p.13)", and the old practices soon became unwanted signs of backwardness.



Figure 4.1: Photograph taken in 1948 by Charles R. Stonor¹⁰³,

¹⁰³ an agricultural officer with the Assam Rifles, in Nyishi settlement near Balipara in Assam. These photographs of a healing ritual provide the closest parallel with the now widely celebrated Nyokum festival.



Figure 4.2: Photograph taken in 2021 by Deepika at Nirjuli, near Itanagar¹⁰⁴.



Figure 4.3: Photograph taken in 1948 by Charles R. Stonor¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ Nyokum is an example of the centralized and community-wide celebrations that have been established, with political support, throughout central Arunachal Pradesh.

¹⁰⁵ Once a minor agriculture rite performed in isolated settlements every few years, in the 1960s Nyokum was redesigned as an annual event and has now become a government recognised holiday celebrated annually on a fixed date in several centralised locations.



Figure 4.4: Photograph taken in 2021 by Deepika at Nirjuli, near Itanagar¹⁰⁶.

The Britishers left the communities with some permanent cultural changes, which were again influenced and altered under the Indian administration. Soon after the Britishers left India, the north-eastern region underwent a period of rapid cultural, political, social, and economic changes as the officials and laborers from mainland India started coming to their land in the pretext of nation-building. With the birth of NEFA the Indian administration shown its interest and commitment to maintaining political and military control over the frontier region. While the Indian government's intention in creating NEFA were ostensibly focused on promoting development, and improving security in the border—heavy presence of soldiers from the mainland India—and, their cultural and religious practices started affecting the locals. The Indian government sought to incorporate the indigenous communities into the Indian nation-state, often

¹⁰⁶ Nyokum has become an extravagant affair in Nyishi community—combining modern elements like the flag, song, dance and speech with tradition: sacrificing mithun and offering rice-beer to the uyus. During the sacrifices, and beforehand, two or three nyiubs (priests) chant, while women pour rice-beer on the altars from gourd ladles. This complex series of chants and rituals, which used to stretch over four or five days, is now condensed into two or < three days.

through policies of forced assimilation and cultural suppression¹⁰⁷. It is interesting to learn that the NEFA officials weren't always stern or their stance towards the locals weren't so severe as the locals can produce opium or consume rice beer freely (ibid). However, the legacy of NEFA officials remain contested even today—many people argue that the policies of assimilation and suppression led by the government of India have had a lasting negative impacts on the cultural and social fabric of Arunachal Pradesh. In other words, the Indian government's efforts to promote welfare and development in the frontier region were often accompanied by policies of cultural engineering aimed at promoting Indian values and identity among local communities¹⁰⁸. For example, “the Nyishi dress style would be deemed the exact replica of that of Rama and Lakshmana in the Ramayana” (Guyot-Réchar d 2017, p. 261). Efforts were made to promote cultural and emotional integration of NEFA region with mainland India. These efforts included initiatives such as cultural exchange programs that involved sending NEFA students to other parts of India to learn about different cultures and traditions, while also promoting a sense of unity and shared identity across the region (ibid). The ‘Bharat Darshan Tour’ organized by the NEFA administration involved taking groups of people from NEFA on a tour of various parts of India, with the aim of exposing them to different parts of the country. By offering people from NEFA an opportunity to connect with the rest of India in this way, the tour was seen as a way of promoting greater understanding and appreciation between different parts of the country (Rikam 2005, pp. 65-66; Guyot-Réchar d 2017, p. 229). Further, Guyot-Réchar d explains Bharat Darshan

¹⁰⁷Writing on India's control on NEFA, Guyot-Réchar d writes: “Post-colonial administration asserted that developmental and cultural welfare strategies should consist in ‘doing away with certain bad things’, and raids and headhunting had henceforth been banned across NEFA. Efforts concentrated on the two areas where both practices were prevalent: the Nyishi country and the Patkai” (Guyot-Réchar d 2017, P.155).

¹⁰⁸Bérénice Guyot-Réchar d. *Shadow States India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962*. Cambridge University Press (2017, p.156).

tours in more details, and writes that the tour became a regular affair and separate fund was allocated towards the cause (Guyot-Réchar, 2017. P.229)¹⁰⁹.

Along with organizing cultural tours for the students, the Indian government also focused on education and research in the region to promote cultural and emotional integration between the NEFA and mainland India. For that, research departments¹¹⁰ were established to study and document the culture, languages, and traditions of the ethnic communities living in NEFA. Besides that, the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities received much attention from the government, and revitalized. But the efforts made by the central government was heavily criticized; many indigenous communities find the government's effort insufficient and coercive as they were often accompanied by policies aimed at suppressing or erasing local cultures and traditions in the name of integration. For example, the introduction of Hindi as a medium of education in NEFA was controversial and met with resistance from locals. This opposition to Hindi as a medium of education reflected broader tensions between the Indian government's efforts to integrate NEFA into the larger Indian society, and the desire of local communities to preserve their own unique cultural heritage and identity. In response to the opposition to Hindi as a medium of education, the Indian government ultimately decided to adopt English as the medium of instruction in NEFA, with Hindi and Assamese being taught as subjects (Rikam 2005, p.59).

Along with the administrative efforts, the proselytization work by Christian and Hindu missionaries in NEFA greatly affected the cultural and religious landscape. Traditionally home

¹⁰⁹ “These Bharat Darshan tours had been tried a few times before, but only haphazardly. Now they were systematic, and no expenses were spared for the purpose. The External Affairs Ministry sanctioned Rs 30,000 to send a group on a whirlwind trip to Guwahati, Lucknow, Delhi, Chandigarh, Simla, Agra, Bombay, and Calcutta” (Guyot-Réchar 2017. P.229).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

to animism and Buddhism, with the arrival of Christian and Hindu in the region led to significant changes in religious beliefs and practices. Christian missionaries, in particular, have been active in NEFA since the colonial period, with the goal of converting indigenous communities to Christianity. Many churches and Christian funded schools and hospitals were established in the region, resulting in widespread conversion—and, the erosion of traditional religious practices and beliefs among indigenous communities. For example, animism or the worship of *uyus* which were once central to the spiritual and cultural lives of many indigenous communities¹¹¹, was replaced with a more structured and organized form of religious practices.

It is important to note that the Nyishi has a long history of connection with Christian missionaries, dating back to the establishment of mission station at North Lakhimpur in the late 19th century. Many people who came in contact with the missionaries at North Lakhimpur gradually embraced Christianity in the subsequent years. Also, the increasing number of churches, mission schools, and hospitals in the region attracted many indigenous people to convert to Christianity. It was Lakhimpur Mission School, which was later named after John Firth¹¹², played a significant role in the spread of missionary activities in the Nyishi villages. The school was established in the late 19th century by the Baptist Missionary Society, with the aim of providing education to the local population. The school quickly became a hub for missionary activities, as it not only provided education but also served as a center for evangelism and social reform. Seeing the growing impact of Christianity in the region, the government of India, which controlled the NEFA region, sought to limit the influence of external forces and maintain strict control over the area, thus, anyone seeking to enter the region, including missionaries, fiercely

¹¹¹Nabam Tadar Rikam. *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh- a study of Nyishi tribe*. Mittal Publications, New Delhi 2005.

¹¹² Reverend John Firth, a British Baptist missionary.

opposed by both administrations and locals. Additionally, the early Nyishi converts, they too were subject to restrictions on their movements within the Nyishi inhabited area¹¹³. In his research on emerging religious identities among Nyishi tribe, Rikam (2005) highlighted the complex dynamics between Christianity and the Nyishi people, and writes on detained of the early Nyishi converts in 1952, “Once in 1952, Kholie Chiji and Kholie Lezee were arrested and put behind the bar at Doimukh at the order of circle officer. The only reason was that they were preaching gospels among the people (Rikam 2005, p. 87).” Although Christian missionaries were restraint from entering the state, the Nyishi students of the John Firth School, who had received an education in Christian teachings, were instrumental in spreading the message of Christianity to their own communities. As a result of their efforts, the first church was established at Talo in undivided Subansiri district in 1962. This was a significant milestone in the spread of Christianity among the Nyishi people and other tribal communities in the region. Despite facing fierce opposition, more churches came into being in subsequent years (Dawar 2004; Rikam 2005; Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013). Today, Christianity is one of the major religions practiced by the Nyishi people and other indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA.

Along with the Christianity, the growing influence of Hinduism in the region can't be ignored. Both, Christianity and Hinduism are equally responsible for the ongoing cultural dilemma and confusion in the region. While the Christian missionaries distinct themselves from the indigenous practices, Hindu practices subtly finds or appropriate the tribal culture and religion (Xaxa, 2000). Hindu organizations such as the Vivekananda Kendra and the Ramakrishna Mission have been an active agent of Hinduism in the frontier region. Like Christian

¹¹³ Pralay Kanungo. Casting Community, Culture and Faith: Hindutva's Entrenchment in Arunachal Pradesh. In Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva: Local Mediations and Forms of Convergence. Eds. Daniela Berti, Nicolas Jaoul, Pralay Kanungo. Routledge. Pp.98-117.

missionaries, these Hindu organizations also have established schools and ashrams in the region, and have worked to promote Hindu teachings and practices. However, this argument is contestable as the indigenous elite and members of these Hindu organizations often deny any influence on indigenous culture and practices. Still one can't ignore the presence of Hindutva elements in indigenous practices. For example, alongside their traditional animistic beliefs individuals from Nyishi community started following Hindu rituals and festivals (Rikam 2005; Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013; Longkumer 2021).

Both the Christian and Hindu missionaries can be perceived as a coercive force, since the indigenous people blamed the missionaries' activities for the religious/cultural deterioration in the region. Unfortunately, only the Christian were made responsible for the socio-cultural transition among the tribal and heavily criticized, while Hindutva forces in the region received state patronage (Kanungo 2011; Rikam 2005). And the reason lies in the religious and political imaginations of mainland India. Hindu fundamentalist, mainly the RSS, plays a significant role in building counter narrative against Christianity and other minorities religion in India which create obstacles in building *Akhand Bharat* (Xaxa 2020; Longkumer 2021). Hence, the regional elites and the members (both tribal and non-tribal) associated with the Hindu organization heavily criticized Christianity for contributing to the detribalization (Xaxa, 2020) and erosion of indigenous culture in the state. Such attitude and behavior of the indigenous faith and believers in the region resulted in a tense environment in many parts of Arunachal Pradesh, including among the Nyishi, where the Christian believers are accused of uprooting the socio-cultural fabric and traditional faith of indigenous communities (Showren 2003; Rikam 2005). So, Nyishi intellectuals and elites formed institutions and organizations that would help them in building Nyishi collective identity, and subvert the process of conversion. Besides that, they focused in

preserving and protecting their indigenous faith and believe, folk culture and traditions through various means.

Hence, this chapter on Nyishi in contemporary era, argue on the importance of folklore, traditional culture and practices to assert their ethnic identity. It argues that even in the 21st century, the importance of folklore and myth cannot be ignored in the making of Nyishi identity. In other words, for cultural revitalization and identity formation the Nyishi indigenous faith and believers, have been using folklore and myth in every sphere of life. They have been actively promoting Nyishi folklore and myth—through social media, books, films, and music, etc., even in school curricula—to instill a sense of pride among Nyishi youth.

Change and Continuity: The construction of Nyishi indigenous identity

In the last decades, there have been significant advancement in the Nyishi community including educating the community about their cultural values and social moorings; honoring and preserving the institution of priesthood; documenting their rich oral literature; discouraging the incursion of other faiths; preserving the art and artifacts; and fostering unity and brotherhood among the Nyishi through service project like weekly prayer in *Nyder Namlo* (Kanungo 2011, p.107). With the support of various Hindu organizations as well as the indigenous movement started by Talom Rukbo, the Nyishi started preserving and promoting the indigenous faith and belief as early as 1990's. But the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Nyishi can be traced back to the 1960s, where the student-led movements play a significant role in socio-cultural and political change. By building various organizations like ANYA (All Nyishi Youth Association) in 1976, ANSU (All Nyishi Students' Union) in 1982, and NSE (Nyishi Elite Society) in 1987, Nyishi students and activists have been trying to mobilize the people to build a collective identity. In addition, in order to curb the rapid conversion among the Nyishi—with the help of

Hindu organizations like R K Mission, Vivekananda Kendra, and Sarada Mission etc., Nyishi youths and intellectuals have been working toward the protection and preservation of traditional culture in Arunachal Pradesh¹¹⁴. Subsequently, under the guidance of the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC), the Nyishi Art and Cultural Society was formed in 1984, later changed to the Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society (NIFCS) in 1999 (Rikam 2005; Kanungo 2011). In the meeting at Arunachal University campus in 1999, NIFSC took a proactive approach in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Nyishi people (ibid). The efforts of NIFSC as well as organizations and individuals—who are committed in promoting the Nyishi culture and tradition—have helped to ensure that the cultural identity of the Nyishi must be valued within the broader society. At last, with lot of efforts by Nyishi indigenous faith and believers, particularly Shri Nabam Atum, *Nyedar Namlo*¹¹⁵ came into being on 27th January 2001¹¹⁶. With the inauguration of first *Nyder Namlo* at Doimukh, Nyishi indigenous faith and cultural movement gained momentum and the revival of indigenous identity took center stage. But the contemporary development in the indigenous practices contradict with the old tradition and belief system as it no longer follow—and, brought significant changes in rituals and religious practices—such as the animism is replaced with the anthropomorphic practices (see Kanungo 2011), spirit worshipping is substituted by the worshipping of a deity and the image of the Nyishi goddess *Aan Donyi* (Kanungo 2011; Chaudhuri 2013). In the following years, the Nyishi elites attempted to revive the institution of priesthood—to preserve and promote the traditional knowledge with the community at large, since the *nyiubu* is the keeper all traditional

¹¹⁴ Tob Tarin Tara. Nyishi World, 2008.

¹¹⁵ Nyishi Prayer House.

¹¹⁶ Nyetam, 2006.

knowledge. Along with it, more *Nayder Namlo* were established in Nyishi villages across Arunachal Pradesh.

In addition, the textual articulation of Nyishi oral tradition and knowledge system—an ontology that was previously limited to the priests and had not been previously articulated, has gained much attention among the Nyishi. For example, the documentation of Nyishi religious beliefs and practices in the written form and its publication as *Nyetam* in 2001 by the Central Nyedat Namlo and executive council reflects on the structural changes in the community. In due course, Nyishi oral traditions and folklore were contextualized and produced in the written form, which also contributed in preserving Nyishi culture. The publication of Nyishi folktales ‘Uiimuk¹¹⁷’ by Jamuna Bini, and ‘Dojang Napong¹¹⁸’ by Pudom Taku and Pumu Taku can be seen as a continuation of indigenous literary movements.

Using folklore as a point of departure, this chapter presents a compelling argument on the importance of folklore in the formation of ethnic identity; how folklore stands for human cultural production and communication. Besides that, here, it critically reflects on how folkloric identity can thrive in the face of ideological and political pressures, highlighting the complex relationship between folklore, cultural identity, and the wider social and political context in which they exist.

Folklore, Identity, and Politics

In the last decades, folklore and other traditional culture has been widely used for legitimizing the demands of indigenous communities to protect and preserve their culture against the process of cultural integration and assimilation. In other words, indigenous communities using their

¹¹⁷ <https://arunachal24.in/bhopal-book-on-nyishi-folktales-titled-uiimok-was-released-at-tribal-literature-festival/>

¹¹⁸ <https://arunachal24.in/itanagar-dojang-napong-collection-of-nyishi-folktales-and-fables-released-by-pema-khandu/>

cultural past to rebuild the present (Anttonen,2005). Such process of traditionalization involves the modification in cultural traditions to serve a specific purpose (ibid.). Many scholars have done extensive research and shared their opinion on the complex and contested nature of tradition as a concept and practice—the ways in which it is constantly being negotiated and redefined in response to changing social, historical, and political contexts (Linnekin 1983; Keesing 1989; Briggs 1996). Similarly, the Finnish folklorist Pertti Anttonen writes: “In order to explain the concept of tradition and the category of the traditional, we must situate its use in particular historically specific discourses – ways of knowing, speaking, conceptualization and representation – in which social acts receive their meanings as traditional (Anttonen 2005, p.12-13).” Explaining the concept of tradition in more details, and its socio-political relevance in the contemporary society, this chapter contextualize the tradition and its use within the discourse of indigenous identity and politics. Further, it explains how folklore is synonym to tradition, and an integral part of indigenous knowledge system.

Throughout the history, folklore has been considered as a hidden, forgotten, and backward culture (Dorson 1978). This perception has been reinforced by a variety of factors, including the historical context in which folklore emerged, the way it has been studied and presented, and the social and cultural biases of those who have analyzed it. However, such claims has become obsolete in a faded past and "withered" subcultures¹¹⁹. Instead, new approached came into being that presents a different perspective on the field—not simply a product of rural or pre-modern communities, but present in both urban and industrial societies — that is relevant to the here and now, rather than as a relic of a bygone era (Anttonen, 2005). Such viewpoint on modernism, as

¹¹⁹ Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore in the Modern World* (1978).

opposed to the tradition, Dorson conceived that the folklore is dynamic¹²⁰ and it can be even found in mainstream society (Dorson 1978, p.23). Looking at the emergent nature of folklore, Alan Dundes (1975) shared a similar perspective as Dorson and emphasizes that the folklore continues to evolve even in the age of technology and can transcend its boundary. He rejected the notion that folklore can only be found in so-called "primitive" societies and argued: folklore is an integral part of every societies and continue to present despite the social and technological advancement. Thus, in order to make sense of the folkloric materials one need to contextualize the object and the cultural attribution associated with it (Bronner 2007, p.3). As Alan Dundes writes that folklore is part of our everyday life which help us to express ourselves without any restriction and limitations¹²¹ (Dundes 2005, p.359). Based on the above premises, folklore studies imply a standpoint that can protect our cultural identity in the face of rapid modernization (Anttonen, 2005).

Throughout the history of its study, folklore has been closely linked to the formation ethnic identities (Dorson 1978; Honko 1998). It often reflects the cultural practices and traditions of a particular community or region, and is often used to reinforce a sense of shared identity and belonging among its members. For example, folktales, folk songs, and folk dances are often associated with specific regions or ethnic groups and are used to express their unique cultural identity. Explaining the notion of shared and/or collective identity, Lauri Honko (1982) emphasizes on the study of folklore and its variations. He argued that folklore is not just a collection of stories, songs, and traditions, but a way for people to express and reinforce their sense of collective/community identity—as individuals from the community often take pride or

¹²⁰ “folklore is where the action is, not in some idyllic backwater “(Dorson 1978, p.23).

¹²¹ “Folklore offers a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety provoking behavior.... otherwise interdicted in everyday life” (Dundes 2005, p.359).

associate themselves with their culture to achieve certain social and political goals (Spivak 1989). Explaining the relationship between folklore and people and its impact on the formation of social and cultural identity, Anttonen writes that folklore brings cohesiveness¹²² among individuals in a community (Anttonen 2005, p.64). In other words, the cohesiveness of a community can be understood through the reception of folklore in the community, as it permeates their world view by providing shared narrative and a common set of values and beliefs. Also, it helps in developing a sense of belonging among the individuals in the community through cultural performances— as festivals and/or rituals brings people together— and, they celebrate it with harmony and peace, taking pride in their cultural practices. Such cohesion within the community may help in maintain the social order without chaos or differences among the members of the community. At the same time, folklore can be considered as a site of contestation, besetting religious beliefs and ideologies within the community—as certain folklore and myth have privileged position over others, depending on who has the power to shape and transmit them. Overall, the relationship between folklore, society, and people is complex and multifaceted, having significant impact on the formation of social and cultural identity. As a marker of a particular socio-cultural identity, discussions around the politics and poetics of representation can be substantiated through the political advocacy of folklore (Anttonen 2005, p. 91). Besides that, scholars have directly linked the politics of representation to the power dynamics, social contexts, and historical legacies—in which traditional cultural practices are reinforced or used in challenging existing power structure, reconfiguring the cultural narratives against the dominant one (Bauman 1972; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Shuman and Briggs 1993; Abrahams 1993). To reconfigure the existing cultural narrative, individual

¹²² : “folklore does not only stand for a positively evaluated element in bringing cohesion between people, but serves to indicate of the cohesiveness of any group that has folklore” (Anttonen 2005, p.64).

from the community often refer to the values and aesthetic qualities as well as rhetorical contexts in which ‘old tradition’ received its meaning and become a hallmark of the community (Anttonen, 2005). This include the rhetorical use of language, culture, art and artifacts to convey meaning and frame cultural representations in particular ways (Briggs 1988; Siikala 2000; Anttonen 2005). In the context of folklore, it is important to understand the ways in which folklore is used to assert cultural identities, overthrowing the mainstream or the dominant power structure; this include the use of folklore against cultural assimilation or erasure, or to assert the values of marginalized communities (Bauman & Briggs 2003; Hopkin 2012; Anttonen 2012). While the question of identity is the dominant concern which is a constitutive element of folklore, yet the political dimensions of identity— which is the larger political and social forces¹²³, haven’t received enough attention while analyzing the folklore of any groups. Thus, this chapter has decontextualized and depoliticized cultural elements, that are believed to be an essential part of any cultural groups and reflect on their identity (Anttonen 2005, p.104).

Nyishi Folklore

*Reekham bo pada ngo, Aaii ngo jha,
 Reenyam bo yami ngo, Aaii ngo jha
 Popi bo nyamay ngo, Aaii ngo jha,
 Pober bo nyamay ngo, Aaii ngo jha
 Reekham bo pada ngo, Aaii ngo jha
 Persee bo pernyii ngo, Aaii ngo jha
 Nyomo bo harden go, Aaii ngo jha
 Reekham bo pada ngo, Aaii ngo jha, ...*

-Reekham Pada, Nyishi folksong

¹²³ When individuals publicly display their identity and demonstrate their loyalty through cultural expressions, they highlight certain aspects while downplaying others. This means that the act of presenting oneself is always an argumentative process. Cultural identity is not limited to the active creation of culturally-influenced images that are appropriate for the situation at hand. Instead, it involves using actions to create images and representations that serve a political purpose in transforming relationships. Therefore, cultural identity is essentially political in nature because it involves establishing, controlling, and contesting the meanings of symbols, exercising power, creating hierarchies, and challenging them. (See Anttonen, 2005).



Figure 4.5 Photograph taken during Nyokum 2021 by Deepika at Nirjuli, near Itanagar

The *Reekham Bo Pada* (men folk) and *Reenyam Bo Yami* (women folk) express their utmost happiness through this song during the festival of *Nyokum*. *Nyokum* is defined by *Nyok* (land) and *Kum* (people). *Nyokum Yullo* is an auspicious occasion celebrated by the Nyishi people of Arunachal Pradesh. During this festival, Nyishi people worship *uyus* for the prosperity of the community. One of the ways in which they express their devotion is through folksongs that tell stories about their culture and traditions. *Nyokum Yulo* is celebrated by the Nyishi in the month of February, typically on the 26th of February, every year. The festival lasts for 3-4 days and involves various rituals and traditions that are deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the Nyishi community. During the *Nyokum* festival, the Nyishi people do not worship any idols, instead, they build a prayer structure using bamboo, which is the main focus of the festival. This prayer structure is known as *yugang*—altar, and it is decorated with various natural objects such as leaves, flowers, and fruits. The Nyishi people believe that the *yugang* represents the abode of the *uyus*, and all the rituals and sacrifices take place around it. The sacrificial animals, which are usually Mithun, are tethered to an altar made with bamboo, known as *Dapo*. The Mithun is considered a sacred animal by the Nyishi people, and it is believed to have spiritual significance. The rituals and sacrifices performed during the *Nyokum* festival are integral part of Nyishi

tradition and have deep spiritual significance for the Nyishi people. Through the festival, Nyishi people reinforce the community's connection to the spiritual world, which can also be considered as an expression of reverence to the *uyus* for their blessings and protecting the community from the natural calamities and disaster.

Like other indigenous communities from the *Tani* clan, the origin of the Nyishi is shrouded in folklore, myth and legend. One of the reason that the story around the mythical origin of the Nyishi sustain even today, can be attributed to the lack of written records or the absence of any archeological evidence to support the origin of the Nyishi. Scholars have tried to make sense of mythical origin of the Nyishi—studying their language, culture, customs and traditions, as well as other material culture—and, its relevance in the contemporary Nyishi community. Thus, Nyishi folklore and oral tradition has gained enough attention among the scholars within and outside the Nyishi community. According to the Nyishi mythology, their ancestors emerged from the earth and were divided into clans. Each clan were led by their respective chief who possessed supernatural powers, and move to different parts on the earth.

The Nyishi believes that they are descendant of *Aabhu Thanyi* or *Abo Tani*; the common ancestor of all *Tani* clan (Showren 2020, p.59). Most of the cultural practices within the Nyishi community are derived from the myth and legend associated with *Abo Tani*, which often passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and folklore. According to Nyishi, *Abo Tani* was a powerful and revered figure who continued to protect the mankind from *uyus*. *Abo Tani* possessed a great knowledge and wisdom that governed the mankind on the earth, thus being the integral part of the Nyishi universe. Besides their mythical origin, the Nyishi believe in the existence of many *uyus*—that influence human lives, bringing happiness and misery at different occasion—thus, seeking their blessing is necessary. Also, most of the ritual takes place

to satisfy the *uyus* and seek their protection from any form of man-made or natural calamities. In addition, the Nyishi believe in the veneration of their ancestors as the spirits of their ancestors continue to live in the spirit world. According to the Nyishi belief system, there are multiple *uyus*—both malevolent and benevolent, exists in the Nyishi world, and each one is designated by a specific name referring to their role, for example: *Zaree uyu* is associated with new life or the *Nyodo uyu* is associated with the rain. To propitiate these *uyus*, one must conduct some ritual whenever needed and sacrifice *mithun* and/or chicken based on the demand of the *uyu*. Interestingly, each *uyu* have their specific demand/s and it must be fulfilled to have a good fortune in life (Tara, 2008).

Along with the *uyus*, animals are an integral part of the Nyishi community and there have been stories associated with different animals and their association with the Nyishi. Mostly, the stories associated with *mithun*—which is symbolic of their culture and economic prosperity, are quite popular and widely circulated. There have been interesting stories about how *mithun* is not a domesticated animal, at the same time it can't be called wild animal. According to a popular story:

Once there was a fight between *Abo Tani* and his wife *Donyi Aane*. So she went off to her mother's place '*Nyodo-kolo*'—sky. After waiting for a long time, *Abo Tani* went to '*Nyodo-kolo*' to bring her back to earth. But he couldn't wait there long and decided to come back without his wife. So, his wife gifted her one *udu* and strictly forbid him to open it unless he reaches the earth. While he was descending from the sky, out of curiosity he opened the *udu* and all the animal started coming out from the *udu*. Seeing all these animals, *Abo Tani* was surprised for a while, and started looking inside the *udu*. He saw that the *mithun* is half inside the *udu* and couldn't able to come out completely,

so he suddenly closed the *udu* and resumed his journey. Accordingly, animals which were able to come out from the *udu* started living in jungle, and those which couldn't come out were domesticated. However, *mithun* was half inside the *udu*, neither it considered wild nor domesticated. - (Uiimok, 2020)

Such interesting folk stories, legends and myth has gained recognition in both within and outside the Nyishi community recently as it started taking the literary form. Scholars have started noting the oral tradition as it offers historical and cultural information about the community. Today, there exist numerous initiative, mainly started by the individuals from the community. Nyishi youth and activist has been tirelessly travelling to Nyishi villages, meeting the *nyiubu*, *gaon bura* and *gaon buri* and collecting traditional wisdom and knowledge from them to preserve it for future generation. However, the preservation and modification of traditional Nyishi identity needs further investigations.

Nyishi Folklore in Transition: From Orality to Virtuality

In the recent past, the Nyishi has experienced a resurgence in indigenous consciousness, objectifying the past—entailed historical construction in the political context of producing present, has received much of its meaning as an object of discovery. This renewed sense of identity has brought significant changes and transformations in the cultural, social, and political life of the Nyishi people. One of the most significant changes brought about by the rise of indigenous consciousness among the Nyishi is the way in which folkloric practices are now perceived and practiced. Recently, they became more conscious of the ways in which political power has been used to shape/reshape their history and the ways in which they have been assimilated, marginalized, or excluded from mainstream social and political discussion. Thus,

through the reconstruction of the past—cultural forms that were once considered unimportant, gained importance—and, helped in affirming/reaffirming their political and territorial claims¹²⁴. Indeed, folklore as an antiquity and the ruins of a lost community¹²⁵, has been used to provide a sense of continuity and historical depth to new collectivities, even if it is not entirely based on historical fact. For example, art and artifacts from the past is often appropriated by the contemporary Nyishi activists, intellectuals, and political to write their history. In addition, different mythical figures, art and artifacts gained much attention from the Nyishi to assert their cultural and political identity. Also, to get recognition and representation in the contemporary political arena, the Nyishi have started reconstructing the ‘traditional’. The traditional practice of spirit worshiping is now being replaced by anthropomorphic practices where they worship the image of *Aan Donyi*. With the influence of Hinduism¹²⁶ and other religions, the Nyishi started practicing their religion in a more structured way which involve weekly prayers and *puya* articles that haven’t been used earlier. Nonetheless, the anthropomorphic shift has been a significant change in the religious beliefs and practices of the Nyishi community. Along with it, there have been other changes: sacrifice of *mithun* and/or other animals decreased in the past few years; animal sacrifice is now only allowed during major festival like *Nyokum Yullo*; and the community has shifted towards a prayer-oriented religious practices, switching the animal sacrifice (Kanungo 2011).

¹²⁴ Pertti Anttonen writes: “...that which was perceived as vanishing came to be valorized, politically established as cultural heritage in a national arena and/or regarded as an embodiment of preferred moral properties. Consequently, that which was initially marginal and trivial for those in the political and intellectual centers of modernity was brought into their symbolic discourses in the center by collecting specimens of marginal cultural forms and attaching to them special, partly nostalgic and partly moral use value, both as a commentary against certain processes of modernization and in the service of certain others” (Anttonen 2005, p.58).

¹²⁵ Pertti Anttonen. Tradition through Modernity Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship, 2005. P.93.

¹²⁶ Pralay Kanungo. Casting Community, Culture and Faith: Hindutva’s Entrenchment in Arunachal Pradesh. In Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva: Local Mediations and Forms of Convergence (eds. Daniela Berti, Nicolas Jaoul, and Pralay Kanungo), 2011, p.91-117.

Along with the shifts in material practices, the epistemic tradition of the Nyishi community has undergone fundamental changes as the oral tradition transformed into a literary form and textualization of Nyishi culture and tradition gained momentum. The act of textualization not only transformed oral communication into written form, but also imbued these written documents with a new cultural significance. Textualization becomes a form of representation where the community members negotiate and re-affirm their cultural stance (Ong 2002; Anttonen 2012). In an initiative to represent themselves, Nyishi people began to document their religious and cultural practices as well as folklore, myth and legend associated with their existence. For example, the publication of *Nyetam* is an act of representation and preservation of Nyishi religious practices that would guide future generation. Under the initiative Shri Nabam Atum and Smt. Nabam Mekha and other Nyishi members, this religious text tries to provide authentic guidance to indigenous faith and believers. It contains traditional hymns which were used by the *nyiub* earlier. But all the verses are written in Roman script and few of them even translated to English. This newly written religious text reflects on the ongoing transition in the Nyishi community and the art of negotiation that continued to develop among the members of the community. For example, language has been a serious matter of concern among the Nyishi, as the young generation often find themselves in a critical situation when they are asked to converse in Nyishi. So, traditional knowledge produced in the modern form help the younger generation to make sense of their past. But it doesn't mean that there hasn't been any effort to preserve the Nyishi language. Along with the culture, language is also given equal importance. Besides that, the Nyishi has been striving for recognition in outside world, and it can be seen in their activities, and participation in producing traditional knowledge and belief system. The recent publication of Nyishi folktales and legends in English and Hindi, as well as its inclusion in

school curricula, has helped in gaining recognition for the community. For example, the inclusion of Nyishi folktales ‘Uiimuk’ in NCERT¹²⁷ Hindi textbooks for upper primary classes is a moment of pride for people from Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the Nyishi. Newly developed literary tradition in the Nyishi community has able to garnered enough attention from both within and outside the community, which ultimately provided an opportunity for the community to negotiate and negate the ongoing cultural assimilation process. However, it is important to understand the power dynamics involved in the creation of text as well as the collection of oral stories that carries political values. According to Anttonen, the process of organizing oral tradition into a literary form involved collection of materials that is shaped by the politics of culture and history, reflecting the discourses and narratives of the society in which they are created (Anttonen, 2012). In other words, the collections of stories, art, and artifacts or any other article which can be considered as cultural heritage hold representational power as the collections has the potential to perpetuate existing power structures and cultural biases—while also contributing to the construction of new narratives and discourses (Anttonen, 2005).

The use of folklore in our everyday life can better understood through the way in which individuals and communities make use of specific communicative means—such as stories, songs, and other cultural expressions, in order to accomplish social goals and maintain social cohesion (Bauman 1989). Folklore is characterized by its nature of adaptability and flexibility as it can be modified or tailored while passing from one person or group to another. In other words, the adaptability qualities of folklore make it relevant to changing cultural contexts. Therefore, it is essential for folklorists to engage with the latest developments in order to understand how folklore is evolving and changing over time. Folklorists should learn to utilize the latest

¹²⁷National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is an autonomous organisation set up in 1961 by the Government of India to assist and advise the Central and State Governments on policies and programmes for qualitative improvement in school education.

technological developments to document and preserve the vanishing lore. As Anttonen emphasizes that technology has sparked a new hope in folklore and traditional culture¹²⁸ (Anttonen 2005). With the rise of mass media and other advanced mode of communication, folklorists have recognized the importance of studying folklore in the context of mass communication and new media technology—as folklore is widely available in the form of stories, songs, meme, and viral images on the digital media platform. It is no longer limited to traditional forms of communication i.e. oral tradition, rituals, or festivals, instead, it has transcended its boundaries and can be found even in digital platforms in different forms¹²⁹. The increasing hybridization of folk culture is an extension of the digital transformation of material culture where individuals and/or groups actively participate and perform their offline selves. As the internet has created a new outlet for social expressions, folklore has also taken a new form. With the intersection of the internet, society and culture, a new form of identity has been developed recently, which needs close attention.

In the recent past, the internet has offered new opportunities and platforms for the Nyishi to express themselves and connect with other members through the social networking sites. Simultaneously, it has offered a noble platform to preserve and promote their traditional customs and practices against modernization and globalization in a responsible and culturally sensitive way. The internet and social media platforms have been used to propagate indigenous culture and tradition among the youth and build a collective identity. For example, Nyishi Facebook group pages have been created in the recent past to express indigenous identity and bring out relevant

¹²⁸ “the debate on folklore’s relation to mass-mediated and commoditized technology kindled new perspectives on the relationship between vernacular processes and the mass media” (Anttonen 2005).

¹²⁹ As Simon J. Bronner writes: “Folklore as an expression of tradition has to be present on the Internet because increasingly e-mail and listservs, often incorporated into the Web, have become the primary way that people message, connect, and link, if not talk, to one another, and hence incorporate the symbolic and projective functions that folklore distinctively provides” (Bronner 2009, p. 25).

debates and discussion among the community members. Besides that, YouTube has several videos which shows the culture and tradition of the Nyishi community. The song *Jajin Ja*, which was posted on YouTube on 26Feb, 2021 has garnered more than millions views over the period of time. The song express reverence to their deities, spirits and ancestors who have been protecting them from evils. It further explains the importance of transmitting cultural heritage and practices to younger generations to preserve the traditional values and identities.

Interestingly, the internet and social media has emerged as an important platform to study Nyishi folklore as more individuals and/or groups from the community sharing and uploading videos, audios, images and texts related to Nyishi history, culture and tradition. The online resources can be considered for further investigation to understand the changing folkloric practices among the Nyishi. Thus, chapter 5 & chapter 6 closely examines the impact of the internet and social media on cultural practices of Nyishi people.

Chapter-5

Internet Folklore and Indigenous Voice: The Power of Online Platforms for Sharing Cultural Narratives

As discussed in the previous chapters (see chapter 2 & 4), the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Nyishi has gone hand in hand with the revitalization of traditional culture—preserving and promoting Nyishi folklore, art, artifacts and other cultural heritage—that has defined their identity and existence in society. Undeniably, folklore has gained enough attention because of its increasing importance in the making of the contemporary Nyishi identity. Also, ‘traditional’ cultural elements have been used to negotiate with the modern cultural element and the construction of ethnic identity in a culturally volatile space (see chapter-4). This process of negotiation has gained momentum with the progress of the science and technology in the region. In the recent past, Arunachal Pradesh has witnessed the increasing presence of ICT in various parts despite its rough terrain. Locals have been using the communication technology for various purpose: to connect with their loved ones; to celebrate their culture; to affirm individual as well as collective identity etc. Thus, it discusses how technological advancement, particularly social media, have been used by the Nyishi to share their cultural narratives.

With the expansion of the internet coverage in Arunachal Pradesh, individuals from various indigenous communities, have been using web forums, microblogging sites, and social media platforms to represent themselves and share their expressions and views on both collective and individual identity. Through their social media handle and/or personal blogs they shared both traditional cultural practices as well as its variation in modern days— in order to create an ethnic consciousness among the members of Nyishi community. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube has been used in the pursuit to build a collective identity and

show their allegiance to community through cultural representation. In other words, social media has offered new platform for the indigenous group to discuss, debate, and represent themselves (Cocq, 2015). Similarly, the internet has been playing a crucial role in revitalizing and empowering indigenous folklore. In the recent past, there have been increasing presence of Nyishi individuals and groups in the social media platforms, mainly Facebook, posting their thoughts in the form of text, images, videos, audios and memes, as well as building a new cultural discourse around the cultural material available on the online platforms. In some respect, as the members of an indigenous community move to the internet for collective identity and networking with others—it accelerate the process of cultural negotiation. Now, members of the community can connect with each other easily and share information on their cultural beliefs and practices through the internet. Indeed, various cultural groups used to have their own folk medium—such as stories, song and dance, which continued even today—to communicate within the community as well as outside, but social media has accelerated this process of communication. Undeniably, social media has offered an advanced form of communication platform where individuals/groups can instantly connect with each other which was previously impossible. The internet has made it easier for the indigenous groups to connect with like-minded individuals—who are culturally and politically aware about their own existence within the community. In addition, engaging in a range of cultural practices online, it helps in cultivating their social and cultural proclivities—as people began to interact and communicate with one another, they start to learn the customs and values of the community. Besides that, in order to assert their ethnic identity users often post culturally identifiable elements that can connect with others from same ethnic group.

Since last decade, there have been an increasing use of the internet and social media among various indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. With the support from both central and state government, initiatives have taken to strengthen the digital infrastructure in the state. For example, projects like BharatNet¹³⁰ has been playing a crucial role in providing high-speed broadband connectivity to remote and rural areas in Arunachal Pradesh that further contribute to the growing number of social media user in the state and the digital transformation of the various cultural objects, stories, folklore, religion etc. Indeed, the role of govt. or the politics of digital sovereignty can't be ignored while studying the digital transformation of the society and/or the online communities, but this chapter is more focused on the interplay between the internet and identity, and how social media platforms as a site of performance encompasses folklore and give voice to indigenous communities (Frank, 2009; Cocq, 2015). Further it explains the way community adapts to technological development in the society and used them for the positive development.

As the internet continues to evolve, it reinforces the possibilities for the indigenous group or individuals to negotiate and nurture their cultural identity, particularly folklore and traditional cultural practices on the online platform. In the form of texts, images, and videos, folklore has been widely circulated among the Facebook users from within and outside the community. As Simon J. Bronner writes, the internet serves as one important source that reflects and reinforces various aspects of our cultural identities, including our connection to folklore and traditional forms of expression (Bronner, 2002). This intriguing development in the field of folklore and technology has attracted many scholarly attention (Becker, 1988; Ben-Amos, 1990; Adorno 1991), and scholars have critically analyzed the interplay between the culture and technology.

¹³⁰ <https://arunachal24.in/7-districts-80-blocks-863-panchayats-covered-under-bharatnet-project-in-arunachal/>
BharatNet or the Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) is the rural broadband connectivity program that aim to connect each village in India through the optical fiber network.

Adding to this extensive research on culture in the age of technological advancement, Rheingold writes:

“Right now, all we have on the Net is folklore, like the Netiquette that old-timers try to teach the flood of new arrivals, and debates about freedom of expression versus nurturance of community. About two dozen social scientists, working for several years, might produce conclusions that would help inform these debates and furnish a basis of validated observation for all the theories flying around. A science of Net behavior is not going to reshape the way people behave online, but knowledge of the dynamics of how people do behave is an important social feedback loop to install if the Net is to be self-governing at any scale” (Rheingold 1993).

Amid the debates and discussions around the internet and culture, scholars have focused on the rise of traditional culture or the folklore which effectively blend into the world of technology (Howard 2005; Bronner 2011). Similarly, Trevor J Blank came in the support of the existence of folklore on the internet and writes that folklore is an integral part of the internet¹³¹ (Blank 2009, p.8). Thus, it is difficult to overlook the existence of folklore on the internet or social media platforms, and to understand the ongoing socio-cultural transition in the contemporary age which is largely technologically driven, one must study culture and technology simultaneously.

Folklore in the Age of Technology:

Although scholars have heavily criticized about the pre-modern attribution to folklore studies (Ben-Amos, 1972; Dundes 1977; Glassie 1995) and defined folklore with the times—there are certain qualities and values which are exclusively used for defining folklore even in the age of technology. It is particularly the genres such as the customs, narratives, beliefs etc. that are

¹³¹ “Folklore continues on the Internet whether we examine it or not, so it is practical to study folklore in an Internet context” (Blank 2009).

essential to folklore. These characteristics of a cultural expression help scholars to identify and analyze traditional folklore that are integrated into the modern forms. For example, a traditional folktale can be found in new forms such as book, movie or song, but what is important here is that the essence of the folktale should be kept intact without compromising with the values and significance it carries for the community it belongs to. And scholars have carefully looked into the modern embodiment of traditional culture on both online and offline platforms by using genres of folklore and how it has evolved in the age of science and technology. As Henry Glassie writes that modern technology or the mechanical reproduction of culture is not against the traditional culture or folklore, instead it offers or provides a new dimension¹³² (Glassie 1988, p. 221),—folklore has continued to evolve as an independent cultural element even after the rapid industrialization and globalization of society. However, it faces backlash in the beginning as it has been seen as being rooted in rural, pre-modern societies (Burke 1992, p. 293; Bendix 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, p. 249; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, p. 300). But with the increasing influence of machine in human life and the mass production of art and culture that supported the commercial culture¹³³, has engulfed cultural elements like folklore, traditional art and artifacts. Additionally, this fundamental shift in our cultural understanding has paved for a more inclusive

¹³² The culture of commerce in its production, say, of automobiles and office buildings is not the antagonist of folk art but its embodiment in new forms. See Glassie 1988

¹³³ The culture industry refers to the mass production and distribution of cultural products, such as movies, music, and literature, which are designed to appeal to the widest possible audience and generate profits. In 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, analyses the role of mass media and culture in shaping modern society. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that culture in capitalist societies has become an industry, producing mass-produced and standardized products that appeal to the lowest common denominator. They suggest that this culture industry perpetuates a false consciousness, in which individuals are conditioned to accept and consume what is presented to them without critical reflection. The authors argue that this process of commodification and standardization homogenizes cultural products and reduces them to mere commodities, leading to the creation of a mass culture that replaces genuine artistic expression. The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry remains an influential and important contribution to the study of culture and society. The concept of the culture industry continues to be relevant in the age of globalised media and the internet, as new forms of mass culture emerge.

and comprehensive understanding of folklore, one that encompasses both traditional and modern forms of cultural expression (Dundes 1977; Bauman 1983; Anttonen 2005). Slowly, folklorists started including various forms of cultural expressions like jokes, urban legend or memes that can be found in both mass media and new media platforms. They started analyzing the emerging form of folk expressions and cultural elements, and extensively published about the changing form cultural expression, attracting new scholars to study it further. In other words, cultural impact of technological changes has gained enough attention within the humanities and social science research field. Referring to the technological advancement in the society, Dan Ben-Amos suggests that tradition can persist and evolve alongside technological advancements instead of erasing it (Ben-Amos 1990, p. viii). Scholars, particularly folklorists, have started recognizing the presence of folklore in modern technology and society (Dundes, 2005)—and, that the it is not only restricted to the oral tradition or the traditional media, instead it can be found in mass media or in a technologically driven world (Anttonen 2005, p.72). Thus, the technological advancement is not antithetical to folklore and other traditional culture, but part of the culture and it need to be used responsibly. Both technology and culture can coexist together, also, the technology can help traditional culture to flourish¹³⁴.

In the recent past, traditional cultural practices have gone through an unprecedented change with the ‘mechanical reproduction of art and culture’ (Benjamin, 1935) and their circulation in the mass media platforms as a form of commodification. Hence, sparked a new debate among the folklore scholars concerning the traditional practices that are often considered as antiquity of the past and the way it has moved beyond tradition in the age of technology. It has also pose

¹³⁴ As Ben-Amos writes, Folklore in the technological world loosens up and sheds some of its archaic, ritualistic and mythical qualities that modernism sought in the primitive and traditional world. It is a post-modernistic folklore in which tradition is not only made self-conscious but often put up for sale. It has acquired new symbolic significances in which the spurious obtains a new genuineness in its new contexts, and the genuine loses its historical significance to become valued for its antiquity, which in term can be faked (Ben-Amos 1990, p. ix).

challenges to the dichotomy of tradition and modernity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996; Anttonen 2005), as the line between the two gets blurred, especially when the technology integrated into our everyday life. As a result, scholars have started taking interest in understating the new cultural phenomenon emerged because of prevalence of technology in society as well as the way modern technology, especially mass media, the internet and social media create new forms of cultural expression that is drawn on traditional forms and themes. This perspective might be helpful to understand that the culture is not static or a matter of antique past instead it can be a part of modernity and can adapt and integrate into the technological world, offering new form of cultural expressions.

Although the cultural impact of technology is undeniable, many scholars, particularly those who maintain a more traditional perspective that solely associates folklore with non-literate and pre-modern cultures, are critical about the technological advancement and its impact on society (Blank 2009, p. 4). The lack of motivation among folklorists to study culture and tradition or the tradition mediated through technology can be attributed to their ideological biases as well as the early definition of folklore that define folklore as a ‘rural and backward peasant’ culture (Dundes, 1977). Definitely, tradition is characterized by certain practices and beliefs as Simon Bronner notes that the folklorists often look for folk groups to study folklore¹³⁵ (Bronner 2011, p. 398)”, but one certainly can’t ignore the changing folkloric practices and the everyday presence of folklore on the internet. At the same time, confusion and conflict around technological advancement has persistently emerged in the academic spheres, especially in folklore and cultural studies discipline, filled with worries that the technological advancement might lead to the dilution or distortion of traditional folk culture, or even the elimination of traditional cultural

¹³⁵ “The folklorist’s tradition signifies cultural production of earthy, artistic expressions from homey proverbs to handwrought pots that are said to be folk because they attach culturally to groups and repeat and vary” (Bronner 2011, p. 398).

practices and expressions altogether (Bronner, 2011). As some folklorists doubt over the traditional cultural elements, like folklore, myth and legend present on the internet and questioned its authenticity as well as the communal and participatory aspects of traditional folk culture, the study of folklore in the age of internet need to emphasize on the traditional aspects of the modernity.

Current study on culture and technology has shown that the technology is an integral part of culture, in other words, technology has helped in forming a new cultural expression in both online and offline platform (Howard, 2008; Bronner, 2009; Blank, 2009; Cocq, 2015). Undeniably, the internet is responsible for the changing cultural practices but it hasn't necessarily erased or abandoned the traditional cultural practices altogether. Instead, the internet and other technological advancement helped in proliferation of folk culture in various ways i.e. wide circulation of folklore and traditional culture among the people as well as the preservation of traditional culture for the future generation. Thus, by recognizing the importance of the internet, folklorists can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between technology and culture, and can contribute to the ongoing process of cultural evolution and adaptation (Roush, 1997). Besides that, this chapter focuses on the rise of indigenous expression on the internet and the way folklore or folk practices evolved around the digital environment as one of the important part of culture.

Internet and Folklore

Modern folklorists have long been recognized the internet as an ideal platform to study folklore because of easy availability of culturally charged elements into a multimedia assemblage (Dundes, 2005; Frank, 2008; Bronner, 2009; Blank, 2009). The internet has been seen as a vehicle for varying cultural expression since its emergence as result the internet has become a

significant resource for preserving and transforming traditional folklore (Kõiva & Vesik 2009, p. 97). In other words, to understand the traditional culture or the folklore available on the online platforms, or the online transformation of folk culture, one must study the internet and its cultural impact carefully. It is important to explore the extent of its influence on traditional folklore. Besides that, it also important to focus on the emergence of new forms of internet-specific folklore, and how this it differs from traditional folklore?

As the internet serve as an online archive (Hansen, 2009), conducting research on the internet can help one to gain a deeper understanding of the intersection between internet culture and traditional folklore. Although the online cultural practices are an extension of our traditional cultural practices, and fulfill the social demands such as the transmission of customs and beliefs from one generation to another, the internet has some unique characteristics that distinguish it from traditional cultural practices (Blank 2009; McNeill 2009; Tucker 2009; Bronner 2011). One of the distinctive features of the internet is that the internet can simultaneously produce and propagate a new culture, in other words, the internet itself can be treated as a part of culture as well as it has the capacity to give birth to a new culture which is distinct from any form of traditional culture. Since the internet have no physical boundaries, cultural practices can develop and spread across vast distances and be adopted by people from different cultures and backgrounds. Or the internet can produce a culture that can only relatable to online space. For example, social media users or the online communities who may know each other only virtually and can debate and discuss only through chatrooms may develop their own customs, rituals, and shared language that are distinct from traditional cultural practices. Also, the online culture/digital born culture, or the culture on the online platforms tend to travel fast as compare to the traditional form of culture. As Bronner writes that the internet offers an open medium to

interact with various folk groups¹³⁶ (Bronner 2011, p. 399). So, studying the internet folklore can help us to understand the ongoing cultural transition due to the advent of the internet and social media.

The internet as a means of cultural transmission (Slevin, 2000) as well as a means of disseminating information has largely contributed to the amount of knowledge available on the online platforms. Because of this individual from various socio-cultural background often visit websites, blogposts, and social media sites to connect with others for cultural knowledge. Besides that, the internet, particularly social media platform like Facebook offers a more interactive space which not only help in transmitting messages but also help the users to interact with each other in an active way just like the physical meetings and conversations. Also, the internet as a ‘decentralized electronic medium’ (Davies, 2003) has offered new forms of communication medium where individuals and groups can freely express their views and expression that wasn’t possible in the traditional communication channels. Similarly, the concept of folklore has also evolved in the last decades—now, traditional cultural practices, beliefs and customs has received modern touch and presented in the form of memes and viral videos.

What makes the internet particularly valuable for folklorists is that along with the traditional folklore, new folklore has emerged solely on the digital platform and it needs a close reading. Besides that, it offers a dynamic environment where folklore can be created, shared, and adapted in response to social, cultural, and political changes. For example, the emergence of meme culture itself is a form of online folk practices that carries certain political, cultural and social significance. Through memes, online participants or the social media users convey their message or shows their reaction towards a person or particular situation. Such new practices solely developed in a digital environment reflects on the technological impact on culture, vice versa, it

¹³⁶ From the perspective of the user, the internet opens access and is an open medium. See Bronner 2011.

shows the continuation of old traditional genres in a new form in the face of technological change.

In the recent past, individuals from different indigenous communities increasingly using the internet and social media sites for various reasons. As I discussed above, one of the reasons in using social media sites is to connect with the community members by evoking shared memories, values and culture. Thus, individuals as well as the groups have been posting culturally-charged material that can develop a sense of belonging in the online communities. Besides that, increasing presence of folk groups on the internet has also led to the internet folklore or the digital born folklore which is solely developed by the online members. To understand the new cultural expression emerged with the advancement of the technology—the rise of internet, one should understand what is internet folklore, and how it is relevant to the current society.

Internet Folklore

The term ‘internet folklore’ conceptualizes the emerging form of folk culture and tradition that has been shaped by the internet and social media. The internet has drastically changed our communication pattern, also, the way we have been expressing ourselves earlier. Now, people can interact with each other through e-mail, phone, or through the social media platforms. But the changing pattern in our everyday interaction and conversation hasn’t really replaced our traditional methods, as Bronner (2009) writes on the presence of folkloric expression in the new and advanced mode of communication—that the email, or even the social media post often

resembles certain cultural elements, which we have been grown up with¹³⁷ ((Bronner 2009, p. 25).

In other words, even after the technological advancement our cultural practices, particularly folklore, still exist but in a different form. In addition, the internet plays a significant role in the propagation of folklore which was not possible or slow before. The presence of stories, legends, myths, jokes, and other forms of folk narratives on the internet led to internet folklore. Internet folklore is mainly characterizing by its reach, speed and popularity, as it travels much faster than the traditional folklore which is always an essential part of folklore. To explain it further, one of the essential characteristics of the folklore is that it must be passed on, if not, folklore is dead. Fulfilling the mentioned characteristic, internet folklore is similar to traditional folklore in many ways, such as even the internet folklore is fluid and constantly evolving in nature. The internet as a fastest mode of communication, folklore quickly get circulated among the online participants and quickly get twisted, for example, creepypasta¹³⁸ i.e. Slender Man which is an urban legend that have become popular online is purely new forms of storytelling that was solely emerged on the online platforms (McClelland 2000; Kibby 2005; Kuipers 2005; Miller 2008; Blank, 2009; McNeill 2009; Bronner 2009; Frank 2009). Besides that, internet folklore is completely relying upon the community participation because most of the stories, and legends are created and shared by users themselves—with the internet serving as a platform for collaboration and

¹³⁷ “When people e-mail or post to a board, they often invoke, and evoke, folklore as a cultural frame of reference for creatively relating experience.... manipulation of images and text to create a play frame in which humor, pathos, and memory were shared among members of a social network” (Bronner 2009, p. 25).

¹³⁸ Creepypasta is a genre of horror-themed stories that originated on internet forums and message boards in the early 2000s. These stories often take the form of first-person narratives or found footage-style videos, and typically involve supernatural or paranormal elements that are designed to scare and unsettle readers. One of the most famous examples of creepypasta folklore is the "Slender Man" mythos, which centers around a tall, faceless figure in a suit who stalks and kidnaps children. The Slender Man mythos originated on the Something Awful forums in 2009, and has since spread to become a widespread and recognizable internet meme.

creativity. Similar participatory aspect can also be evident in the development of Minecraft¹³⁹, which often involve players working together to solve puzzles and uncover hidden information. Although creepypastas and/or the urban legends are digital born folklore, still they share similarities with traditional folklore which is purely based on physical world. Creepypastas such as slender man is purely digital born horror stories which resembles traditional ghost stories, monsters like figure, and haunted spaces that is often mentioned in the offline world. The most important things about the digital born folklore is the adaptive characteristics of these stories that connect to traditional form of folklore in a new environment. Undeniably, Slender Man is the most well-known examples of creepypasta, a genre of online horror stories and urban legends that is originated online and went viral—rapidly spread among the online communities. Slender Man is characterized as a tall, thin, faceless figure wearing a black suit, often depicted lurking in the darkness or haunted place or jungle. As part of a Photoshop contest on the Something Awful¹⁴⁰, Eric Knudsen (under the pseudonym "Victor Surge") has created the character Slender Man. internet forum. There several real life incidents linked to Slender Man. As the story went viral, many internet users found it compulsive and tried depicting in real life too. For example, Wisconsin story related to Slender Man is horrifying. In 2014, a school girl was stabbed 19 times by her classmate because they wanted to appease Slender Man¹⁴¹.

¹³⁹ Minecraft has also become a source of folklore and urban legends, with players sharing stories and rumors about hidden features, glitches, and mysteries within the game. One of the most well-known examples is the "Herobrine" legend, which claims that a ghostly figure with glowing white eyes sometimes appears in the game world, watching and following players.

¹⁴⁰ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/something-awful>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/06/03/the-complete-terrifying-history-of-slender-man-the-internet-meme-that-compelled-two-12-year-olds-to-stab-their-friend/>



Figure 5.1 Slender Man

However, the victim survived in the incident, attackers got arrested and charged with attempted murder. Because of this incident, the internet was heavily criticized for its negative impact on the society as well as for the way participants perceived their real life. While the Slender Man character has been used in numerous works of fiction and has become a staple of internet horror culture, the real-life consequences of this story is horrifying. At the same time, it blurs the line between fantasy and reality. After the murder incident, Slender Man became more popular as Blank and McNeill writes that the story of Slender Man spun into an urban legend and it got massive attention in every household¹⁴² in USA (Blank & McNeill 2018, p. 6).

According to Trevor J Blank and Lynne S McNeill, Slender Man is a modern-day legend that is purely born on digital platform, by the internet users (Blank & McNeill 2018).

¹⁴² “Overnight, Slender Man became the new leading man on the stage of contemporary legend characters, and “creepypasta” became a household term. See. Blank & McNeill 2018.

Besides the physical description or attribution to the character from creepypasta there are other important things which makes the online content more realistic in a folkloric context. It is the ‘mythos’, as described by Blank and McNeill (2018) that give life to Slender Man or any character which emerged on the online platform by the online community¹⁴³.

In fact, modern-day legend which are purely born digital achieve its success through the efforts made by the online communities. Besides that, it is the fans of the online legend who have been giving life to these character through constant modification through collaboration.

¹⁴³ “Mythos” is a concept that is used widely to describe the entirety of a world (often fictional) that exists around a given figure or source. Fans, scholars, and content creators work within the shared mythos of a given show, film, book or book series, game, or character to consume and develop that world further.... The sense that a mythos has or takes on a life of its own helps to blur the line between official information and folkloric information about things like origins and precursors. The Slender Man Mythos incorporates all the creations that focus on him as a subject—the entire fictional, ever-growing world that he inhabits as well as the actual creative processes that have generated information about him” (Blank & McNeill 2018, p. 8).

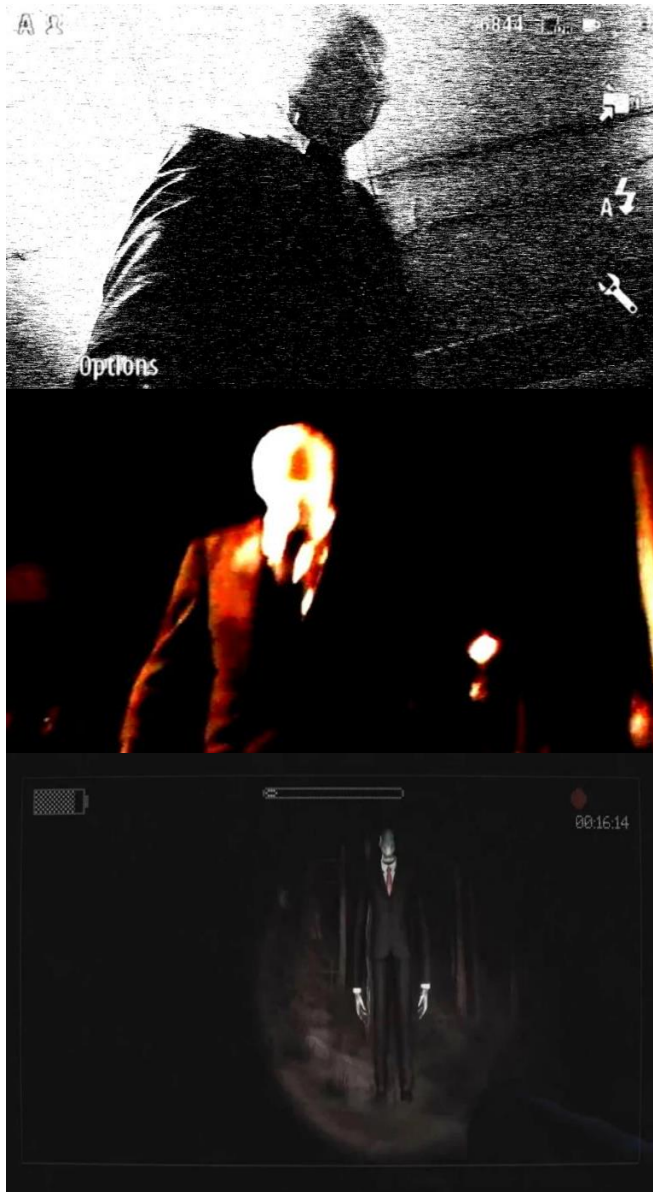


Figure 5.2 User generated visuals of Slender Man

Slender Man¹⁴⁴, is a supernatural creature that has been the subject of much online discussion and media attention. The character was first mentioned in a forum post on Something Awful, where users were encouraged to create paranormal images. Slender Man is typically portrayed as a tall, thin humanoid figure dressed in a black or grey suit with a white shirt and red or black tie. His face is featureless and white, with no visible hair, and his hands are long and bony. Depending on the depiction, he can range in height from 6 to 15 feet tall, although in video footage he is usually around 6 to 7 feet tall.

¹⁴⁴ https://theslenderman.fandom.com/wiki/Slender_Man

After the Slender Man in USA, similar stories kept occurring across the world, and one such similar character can be traced back to the German mythical figure called Der Großmann. In 2014, like the Slender Man, Der Großmann also emerged on the internet. What is interesting about such legend is it is not limited to online space only, it also often emerged offline where people circulate it often in the form of rumor. Indian urban legend like Monkey Man, which emerged in the year 2001 in Delhi, capital city of India can also be seen as the modern-legend. It is a classic example of mass hysteria and the power of storytelling, which later made into a movie called 'Delhi 6' in 2009. The story of Monkey Man can have resemblance with the character *Hanuman* from the Indian epic Ramayana. Definitely the context and environment is completely different from the epic lore where one can get to see completely different picture. According to popular narrative, Monkey Man or *kala bander*, a monkey like figure, a mysterious creature, half-man and half-monkey, only appears at night attacks on people in both public and private places. People often gets panic by seeing the creature and run away. Interestingly, none has an exact description, however, many got arrested linked to this rumor. What is interesting about this rumor is it has all the elements of a classic horror story that has been traditionally circulated. As the rumor got more attention and circulated by various media houses, in newspaper and television, people started believing in the real existence of Monkey Man or the *kala bander*¹⁴⁵. Additionally, people started discussing about it, making their own version of monkey man. The Monkey Man is a classic example of mass hysteria. As it is solely based on rumor, people started believing in it without really confronting or verifying the situation, which ultimately led to the popularity of monkey man, making it real. Besides that, the mass media has played an important role in shaping the monkey man legend and circulating it among the people.

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.indiatvnews.com/crime/news/unsolved-mystery-cases-of-crime-delhi-monkey-man-3502.html>

If we understand this particular phenomenon in a folkloric perspective, it shows the ability of a story, rumor or legend that can shape people's world views, their thoughts and feelings. Legend and stories can easily create fear, anxiety, and panic among people shaping our belief system and perspective about the world.

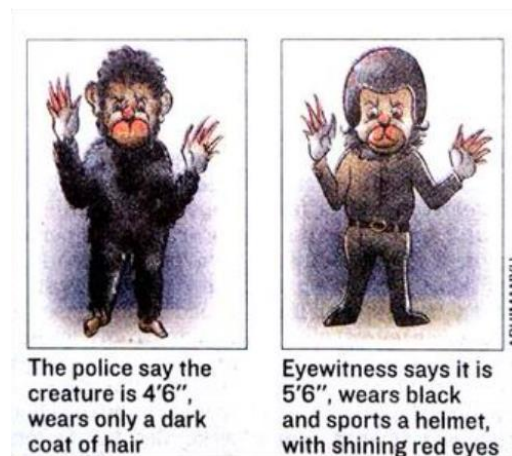


Figure 5.3 Sketch of Monkey Man

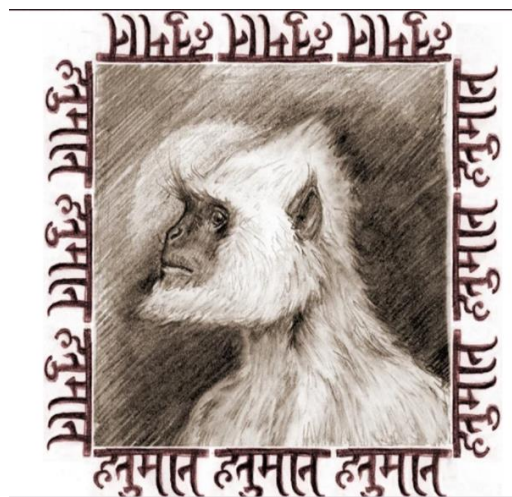


Figure 5.4¹⁴⁶: Depiction of "Kala Bander"

¹⁴⁶ https://cryptidz.fandom.com/wiki/Monkey_Man_of_New_Delhi

INDIA JOURNAL

'Monkey Man' Lurks Among New Delhi's Poor, or at Least in Their Minds

By PAMELA CONSTABLE
Washington Post Foreign Service

His an ape, he's an evil spirit, he's a robot assassin sent by foreign powers. He has glowing red eyes, sharp metal claws that leave deep scratches and a black hairy body, and he can leap from rooftops and vanish.

No one has actually seen him, but persistent reports of a marauding nocturnal creature known as "Monkey Man" have incited mass panic in this vast, impoverished and sweltering metropolis of 14 million people over the past several weeks.

No one can prove victim of an attack, but the urban hysteria has caused one frightened man to leap to his death, several people to die in stampedes and a vigilante mob to attack a late-night van driver. Dozens of other people have been injured trying to flee after someone raised the Monkey Man alarm.

The phenomenon has been fueled by a volatile combination of factors found in such Third World cities as New Delhi: a rural immigrant population steeped in illiteracy and superstition, a modern mass media that instantly flash reports of the latest "sighting," and hot, crowded conditions that feed feverish imaginations.

"The panic . . . is a case of mass delusion. It is an example of 'pseudologica fantastica,'" said Sanal Edamaruku, president of the Indian Rationalist

Shortly after midnight Thursday, a van driver was chased by a mob that believed him to be Monkey Man, dragged out of the vehicle and severely beaten. He was hospitalized with multiple fractures.

Elected officials from panic-stricken neighborhoods have held Hindu ceremonies to ward off the evil spirit, and some New Delhi politicians have called on the central government to deploy a special "rapid action force" to augment police efforts.

Although the hysteria is largely confined to poor and working-class neighborhoods, even middle-class professionals have gotten caught up in the Halloween-like mood of the moment.

On Friday, police arrested a doctor who had terrified his neighbors by throwing a surgical glove, inflated and smeared with brown hair dye, from the balcony of his house, nearly causing a riot. The man confessed to the prank, telling police he had gotten the idea while dyeing his hair.

After investigating dozens of reported attacks, police have attributed most of them to rat or dog bites, hallucinations and injuries sustained in panicked flight. In one case, a man reportedly mauled by Monkey Man while he slept turned out to have been hit with a hammer by a neighbor with whom he was feuding.

Still, the rumors continue to spread. In Mandawali, a working-class east Delhi



BY PAMELA CONSTABLE—THE WASHINGTON POST

Ganga Prasad Pandey, priest at Hindu monkey god temple, says he doesn't believe in Monkey Man but sleeps in the temple as a precaution. The police are not sure the creature exists, but have deployed 3,000 extra officers.



ILLUSTRATION: TONY WEAVER FOR ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sketches of Monkey Man, left, appeared in a newspaper Wednesday, while the police have released computer-generated images of the creature, whose alleged attacks have terrified much of New Delhi.

Figure 5.5 ¹⁴⁷: News Coverage of Monkey Man or Kala Bander

It is common for urban legends and myths to be associated with existing cultural beliefs and legends. Some people suggested that it could be an avatar of the Hindu Deity Hanuman. Hanuman is a popular deity in Hinduism and is often depicted as a monkey or an ape-like creature. However, it is important to note that there is no evidence to support this claim and it is purely speculative. The Monkey Man legend is a fascinating example of urban folklore that gained popularity in New Delhi, India in 2001. The legend tells the story of a strange creature that appeared in the city of Delhi, terrorizing residents and causing widespread panic. Monkey Man was a humanoid creature with the face of a monkey and the body of a human. It was said to have been nocturnal, and would attack people at night, leaving them with scratch marks and bruises. Some reports even claimed that the creature had glowing red eyes.

¹⁴⁷ <https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/the-monkey-man-panic-20-years-later/>

Digital folklore and urban legend like Slender Man or Monkey Man offer a better understanding about the changing nature of folklore in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape that is integrated with digital technologies. While traditional folklore is integral to oral tradition and transmitted through word of mouth as well as specific to culture, people, place and region, digital folklore is boundless and can be found in any society irrespective of cultural or social context, for example, the Slender Man which originally originated online in USA, can be found also in other part of world, like the one in Germany. In other words, the emergence of online legend and/or the urban legend has altered the definition of 'traditional' folklore as well as the way it has been produced, circulated and consumed. In the case of Slender Man, it is a product of the confluence of various cultural and technological factors, that have been responsible for its quick and wide circulation as well as the way it has transformed into a cultural phenomenon. Here, one can't ignore the affordances of digital media and communication technologies that have fundamentally shaped the rise of digital folklore in the contemporary age. Both Slender Man and Monkey Man are the extension of mythology that really existed in the world, and the fans and enthusiasts have recreated these character through fan fiction, artwork, videos, and online games which also reflects on the deep-seated cultural anxieties and desires of human being, as it embodies the uncanny and the unknown, it reflects on human fascination with the supernatural and the unknown (Blank & McNeill, 2018). In addition, the interactive nature of the social media or the digital media has allowed individuals to interact with the character more closely, interpret the character and bring changes through fans work. Similarly, the popularity of Monkey Man also exemplifies the role of traditional media and mass media, in shaping and disseminating the story, which further add to the evolution of folkloric traditions in contemporary age.

However, the born digital folklore as well as the digital media need to study closely for its impact on traditional folkloric practices and values, as well as how it has shaped the idea of cultural specificity and authenticity in the digital era.

Traditional Folklore on Internet:

Traditional folklore on the internet refers to the collection of folklore that is archived or available on the online platforms. Unlike the digital folklore—which is born on online platform, traditional folklore on the internet often carries certain socio-cultural and political agenda, for example, most of the time people shared their folklore to identify themselves with others or assert their cultural identity on the online platform. Recently, the availability of traditional culture, folklore, myth and legend on the websites of regional organizations, tourism agencies, cultural institutions, and research centers has raised significant attention among the folklorists, motivating them to think of new hypotheses and frameworks for interpreting and analyzing folk traditions and cultural heritage in these altered contexts. Along with it, it is necessary to understand the reason behind the circulation of, and in sharing the folklore online. As the internet evolved into a communications facilitator, it provides a platform for individuals to share and disseminate folklore, like they share in the "real world, " at the same time, it has turned into a repository for traditional and contemporary forms of folk expression as more and more people actively participate online and post materials related to their culture and tradition. In a way, the internet offered opportunities to engage in dialogue and exchange ideas about culture and tradition that wasn't always possible in the offline world, while building a virtual community. As Bronner points out, the internet is not simply a tool for the dissemination of mass culture, but rather a complex system that reflects and reinforces various aspects of our cultural identities, including our connection to folklore and traditional forms of expression (Bronner 2011). Besides

that, the ubiquity of digital communication technologies like smartphones has allowed for constant connectivity and access to information, communication, and entertainment that has drastically changed the way people interact with each other. Besides that, the internet plays an important role in bridging the gap between folklore and mass media—as users can create and share content that reflects their own cultural practices and values, and reach a wider audience facilitated by the social media algorithms.

Nyishi Folklore on Internet:

The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has greatly shaped many indigenous communities like the Nyishi by offering new opportunities to preserve and propagate their cultural identity. In the recent past, Nyishi individuals and groups have been using social media platforms, web forums, and microblogging sites to connect with the other members of the community, fostering a collective identity. In other way, the internet and social media plays an important role in fostering a community and their identity. Explaining the crucial features of social media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) point out four important features:

- 1) User-generated content: Social media platforms are characterized by content that is created and shared by users, rather than by professional content creators.
- 2) Social interaction: Social media platforms enable users to interact with each other through various features such as commenting, liking, sharing, and messaging.
- 3) Openness: Social media platforms are typically open to anyone who wants to join and participate.

- 4) Real-time updates: Social media platforms often provide real-time updates of user-generated content.

By acknowledging the potential of technologies, such as social media and other advanced form of communication technology, indigenous group can represent themselves and can connect to a wider mass (Hall, 1973). The internet has been a great facilitator of the indigenous identities (Nathan, 2000) since its inception in 1990s. Indigenous people have been using the internet and social media for various purpose: to strengthen and reaffirm their indigenous identity; to preserve endangered culture and language; to foster the reconnection of fragmented communities (Lindgren & Cocq 2017). In recent time, there has been a noticeable shift in indigenous online participation as the individuals from the community actively participating in social media platforms. This transition is exemplified by initiatives like Nyishi Facebook pages¹⁴⁸ which facilitate connections among Nyishi indigenous individuals and groups in Arunachal Pradesh and outside. Further, the proliferation of Facebook groups, Twitter hashtags, Instagram posts, and Wikipedia articles has substantially strengthened the digital presence of Nyishi culture and tradition recently.

While the digital divide remains a significant challenge for many indigenous communities, there are numerous examples of successful initiatives that have harnessed the power of digital platforms that has helped in the preservation and revitalization of indigenous culture and tradition. It has greatly facilitated in disseminating the indigenous knowledge among the community members. Recently, Nyishi indigenous people have realized the importance of technology in their life. Earlier, living in a digitally secluded area and under the shadow of

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/NNMR-101781071558704>,
<https://www.facebook.com/nyishitribeofarunachalpradesh>

colonial and post-colonial forces, the community couldn't able to express themselves. But, in the recent past, the Nyishi Indigenous people in Arunachal Pradesh are fiercely dealing with both the importance of their cultural heritage as well as the growing influx of digital cultural material that are under scrutiny. Thus, the chapter provides a detailed examination of the way indigenous culture is produced and distributed within Nyishi community from 2018 - 2021. In the last decade, there has been a growing trend among the Nyishi individuals actively participating on the online platforms sharing their culture, tradition and folklore in the form of videos, images or texts. The sharing of culture and tradition in the multimedia form, the Nyishi intend to build a sophisticated digital archive that can serve the purpose of cultural preservation as well as disseminate the Nyishi indigenous knowledge both within and outside the community. Through their social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that focus on Nyishi folk often showcase their traditional cultural practices and call for a constructive debate on the survival of indigenous cultural practices in the face of modernity and technological advancement. Thus, this study focused on the digital endeavour of the Nyishi. By focusing on their cultural performances or the folklore on the internet, I have examined the following Facebook pages that have been created by the Nyishi individuals:

- 1) NNMR¹⁴⁹
- 2) Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh¹⁵⁰
- 3) Being Nyishi¹⁵¹
- 4) NACWS¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/NNMR-101781071558704>

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/nyishitribeofarunachalpradesh>

¹⁵¹ <https://www.facebook.com/beingnyishi>

5) Nyishi Tribe¹⁵³

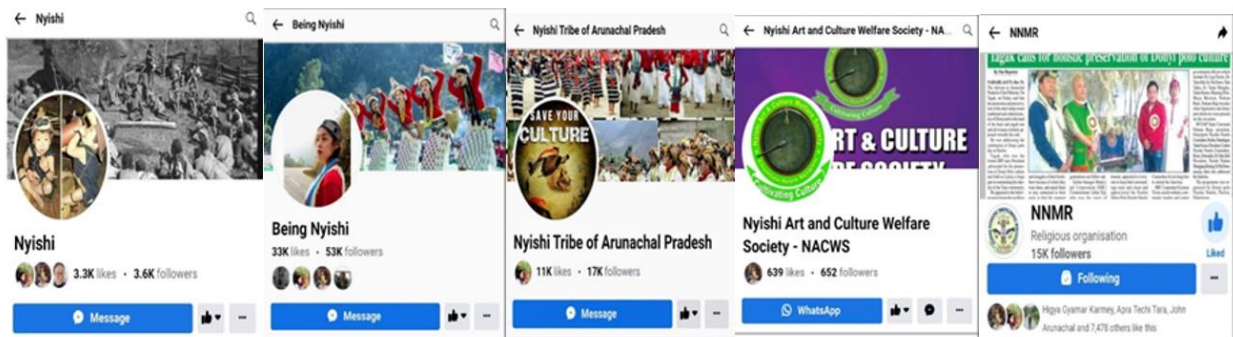


Figure 5.6 Nyishi Facebook Pages

Above mentioned Facebook pages largely debate and discuss about the cultural identity of the Nyishi as well as sheds light on the ongoing cultural transition and politics in Arunachal Pradesh. Most of the Facebook posts often depicts the cultural history of the Nyishi and their folklore, myth and legend, in the form of videos, images and texts. The Nyishi believe that the digital presence of Nyishi folklore, art and artifacts will help the youth to learn about their culture, developing a sense of belongingness towards the community. Folk culture, which encompasses traditional songs, dances, arts, and crafts, plays a vital role in preserving the Nyishi identity often surfaced on these Facebook pages. Besides that, by exploring myths and legends in the Facebook, this chapter provides a better understanding on the Nyishi worldview and belief systems. Most of the Facebook posts, which are stories and folklore, often intend to share valuable moral and spiritual lessons while reflecting on the rich tradition of their ancient past. Besides that, these pages critically looked into the changing cultural practices among the Nyishi and its political effect in the community. Thus, the Facebook users often debate on the political

¹⁵² <https://www.facebook.com/NACWSOfficial>

¹⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/NyishiTribe>

impact of the cultural transition in the society and by reviving their cultural identity they not only want to gain social status in the state but also a political status that will empower their existence and visibility. Thus, this chapter is focused on the role of social media in negotiating indigeneity online and the way it helped in revitalizing the indigeneity among indigenous community. The study focuses on cultural elements available on the above mentioned Facebook pages and analyze it critically. The study aimed to examine how Nyishi Facebook groups contribute to the preservation and circulation of indigenous culture among the Nyishi people. So, this chapter has majorly looked into how the online participation of Nyishi individuals contribute to cultural learning and revitalization of Nyishi culture and tradition. To analyses the cultural elements conveyed on Nyishi Facebook pages, a rigorous evaluation of wall posts, including text, photos, videos, links, and statuses, were critically analyzed. This evaluation encompasses Facebook posts made from 2018 - 2021. Through the help of digital humanities (DH) methods, frequently mentioned cultural elements were collected and categorized for further analysis. Besides that, participants' comments were closely analyzed to understand their cultural behavior.

Considerable attention has been given to ethical considerations, even when working with publicly available data on Facebook. Since the boundary between public and private is blurred due to the ubiquitousness of the internet, many scholars advised for an ethical consideration while carrying any online research (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004; Svedmark & Nyberg, 2009). To ensure the anonymity of Facebook users, and to respect their privacy, this study focuses on the use of Facebook among the Nyishi people by removing all identifying information, such as usernames, age, and gender. By making this decision, the primary goal is to safeguard the privacy of the individuals while still investigating their Facebook usage patterns effectively.

As demonstrated and explored further in the following discussion, the content within the corpus reveals that Facebook categories are utilized to promote cultural preservation and facilitate the formation of identity. The online (re)creation of a traditional identity and the use of culturally charged objects within social media serve as effective tools to uphold and strengthen these objectives. Drawing from both offline and online ethnography, this study identified and categorized a total of 14 cultural elements within the Nyishi Facebook groups as shown in figure:

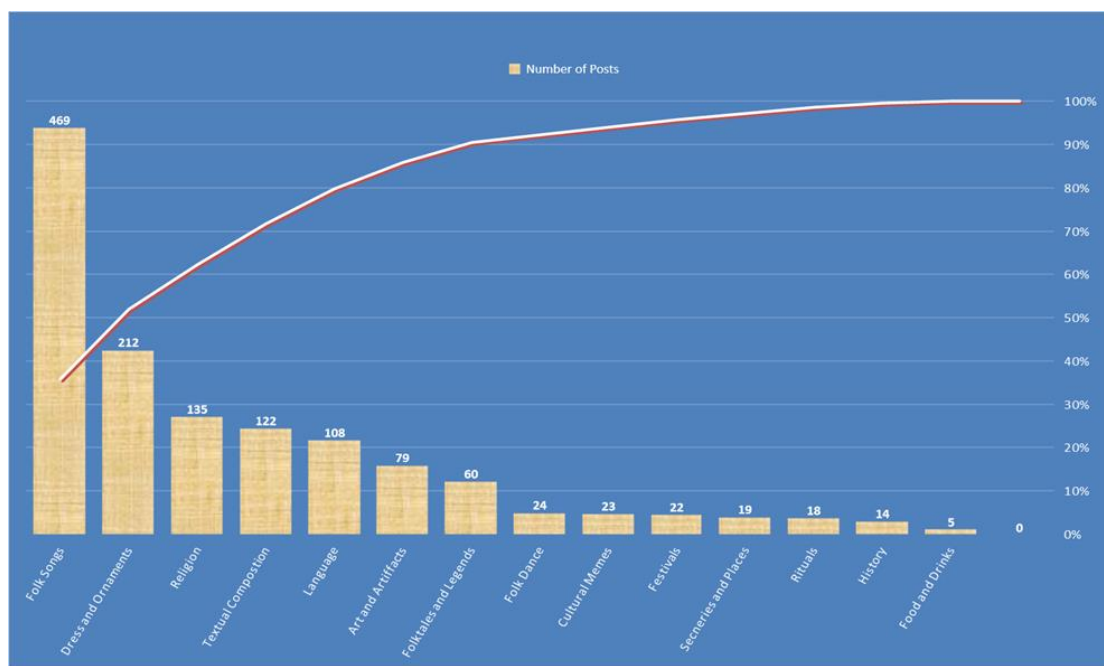


Figure 5.7 Major Cultural Elements found in Nyishi Facebook Pages (2018-2021)

- 1) **Cultural memes:** The study discovered that Nyishi Facebook groups frequently shared personalized media, such as graphics or memes, featuring catchy phrases or mimicry. These media were posted online to portray cultural ideas, concepts, or activities associated with the Nyishi culture. Notably, a significant portion of these memes aimed to foster a sense of fondness and appreciation for the Nyishi culture.

- 2) **Textual compositions:** The study revealed that Nyishi Facebook groups works on composing text related to their tradition and ethnicity. Through the text they often convey their cultural identity and its importance in their everyday life. Besides that, some of the textual composition reflects on their cultural assentation.
- 3) **Language:** Nyishi speakers are utilizing social media platforms to preserve their language by creating dedicated language pages, participating in language learning groups, promoting their native script, developing online language courses, and raising awareness through campaigns. These efforts allow Nyishi individuals to connect, communicate, and actively engage with their language, despite the challenges posed by the digital age. The Nyishi World Dictionary plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nyishi community by documenting the language, capturing culturally significant vocabulary, aiding language revitalization efforts, facilitating cultural transmission, and empowering the community. It serves as a valuable resource for Nyishi individuals, language learners, and researchers interested in understanding and preserving Nyishi culture.
- 4) **Arts and Artifacts:** The study found that Nyishi Facebook groups showcased a wide range of artistic expressions, that is integral to their everyday life. For example, Nyishi women (older generation) can be seen with tattoos in body. These posts highlighted the diverse forms of artwork associated with the Nyishi culture, showcasing their artistic prowess and creativity. The Nyishi community is renowned for their expertise in crafting bamboo items for everyday use. Although markets have emerged in recent decades offering convenient alternatives, many Nyishi villages, especially remote ones, still extensively rely on bamboo-made items for domestic tasks. These items

encompass a variety of basketry products and include locally made essentials such as the nara (local backpack), egge (bamboo basket for females), oping (bamboo carpet), sadar (local beer filter), mura (bamboo stool), and upu (used for removing husk from rice). The Nyishi community takes great pride in their headgear, known as bopia, which is made using bamboo and cane strips. Additionally, it is customary for Nyishi males to carry a machete, with the handle (nalle) crafted from wood, while the iron part is procured separately. The machete cover (bueh) is also typically made from local materials.

- 5) **Rituals:** This category encompasses a series of traditional cultural practices and rituals that are unique, and the belief system in the Nyishi . These practices typically play a significant role in various stages of an individual's life, from birth to death, as well as in the annual community activities. Nyishi rituals often involve animal sacrifices, such as chickens, pigs, and cattle, which are chosen based on the specific ritual type and the guidance of respected elders. Although many traditional rituals have become obsolete, modern community ceremonies still retain certain aspects of the traditional belief practices. Consequently, this category comprises posts related to community gatherings that imply the partial enactment of Nyishi's traditional ceremonies, such as weddings and family reunions in modern touch.

Within the context of death rituals, there are neo-religious practices associated with purification, known as the pahi ritual. The Nyedar Namlo, a holy sect for the Nyishi following the Donyi-Polo cult, have adopted and modified the pahi ritual to be performed solely through oral prayers, without animal sacrifices. Another purification process occurs after burial, where a trip is made to a nearby river or stream to wash away potential contamination or curses called "shormeenam." This journey follows an

unconventional route, while the return journey follows the usual path. Upon returning, people collect firewood (ramkhaewsw) to light a fire near the burial place for protection against evils. Regarding death rituals, Hina further divides the practices (as mentioned in the source). These include the Nyoku kanam ritual, where the nyub chants to ensure a peaceful transition of the soul to the afterlife, preventing any troubles for the living. The Darkha naan ritual is performed at the burial spot to prevent the spread of diseases, and those involved in burial events are purified by the priest through chanting. Seerm angnam is the custom where individuals involved in grave digging are allowed to bathe in nearby water resources before returning home, and Bungu panam involves the sacrifice of animals like (Mithun, Chicken) in the name of the deceased, with the meat distributed accordingly. Additionally, a mourning period (aeer donam) of two to five days is observed in the village, during which no agricultural or hunting activities take place. An interesting custom to express anger and sorrow over the irreparable loss involves cutting down giant trees like banyan or peepal trees or even killing animals and birds, referred to as Sangree tangnam/panam.

- 6) **Dress, ornaments and adorable Items:** This category focuses on posts that exhibit traditional clothing worn by the Nyishi people. Nyishi demonstrate their pride in wearing ethnic attire, which is evident in most Nyishi Facebook posts, mostly during celebrations and special events within their communities. Traditional dresses hold significance as symbol of their ethnic identity, although modern attire has started replacing traditional outfits. Common male attire includes shirts, t-shirts, long and half pants, but some still prefer traditional attire. The upper part of traditional male attire is known as jingejji or kardung, while the lower part includes garments like higing and

kordu. Female dress primarily consists of tops or blouses as upper garments, with gale being used as the lower garment. In certain instances, women use lalle as the upper garment and puru as the lower garment. Young individuals generally prefer modern outfits, but some girls incorporate traditional elements like nyijiraauejjikonam (upper garment) and nyijirakkoejjikonam (lower garment). Some Nyishi individuals continue to use these ornaments and items in their daily lives. Generally, traditional dresses and ornaments are prominently featured during dance performances and special occasions such as Nyokum, indigenous faith day, weddings, Nyishi day, Donyipolo Day, and Boori boot.

- 7) **Folk Dance:** The performance of indigenous dances holds great significance in highlighting the Nyishi identity. It serves as a prominent platform to showcase various cultural elements, including traditional cum modern touch performances, rituals, costumes, indigenous arts, and music. Dance, referred to as "Sonaam" in the Nyishi dialect, is a stylized rhythmic movement of the body that expresses emotions, conveys ideas, and narrates stories. The term "Nash Sonaam" is used to specify dancing, with "Nash" being derived from the Assamese word for dance, which might have been adopted by the Nyishi people through interactions with people from the plains. Traditional Nyishi dances are accompanied by songs, some of which are dedicated to spirits and deities, while others are performed during festive occasions. Among the various Nyishi dances, Reekhampada and Bhuya dance hold popularity, with the former typically performed by women and the latter open to participation by anyone who knows the right words and phrases, excluding the role of the troupe leader.

8) **Folk songs and music:** The survey clearly demonstrates the love for songs and music among the Nyishi community. Old and a new composed Nyishi songs are widely shared and posted on various group walls. This category of posts predominantly consists of locally produced music videos, special covers of songs, and live shots from performances. It is worth noting that modern fusion in Nyishi, songs and music videos often portray traditional settings and practices, highlighting the cultural significance. One notable song in this context is the Rwkham Pada Song, which serves as a prayer to the Almighty. The song narrates the adventurous journey of two brothers, Rish and Mash, as they overcome obstacles and confront evil forces to reach a heavenly place where they can reunite with their loved ones. It captures the essence of their struggle and their connection with the natural world.

9) **Food and Drinks:** The Nyishi cuisine is characterized by its simplicity and limited variety compared to other neighboring cultures, including mainland India. The staple foods of the Nyishi people are rice (Ambin) and maize (Top). A typical daily meal in a Nyishi household consists of rice, boiled green leafy vegetables, and meat or fish cooked with ground chili powder, known as Yumter or Dwter. Bamboo shoot is considered a delicacy among the Nyishi community. It is consumed boiled and raw, and various by-products are made from it through processes like fermentation and drying. Fermented bamboo shoots come in two types: Hehu, which is chopped into small pieces, and Heta/Heech, which is long-shaped and fermented for months under the earth. Dried bamboo shoots are available in small pieces, called Heup, and long shredded pieces, known as Heech. Meat is often included in the main course and is usually boiled with bamboo shoot, either raw or using Hehu or Heech. Meats are also preserved through a

simple smoking technique, where large chunks of meat are smoked. Another preservation method is slicing the meat into long pieces and threading them onto large bamboo skewers, known as Dingkhiyo. No additional ingredients are used, only raw flesh. Smoked meats, especially Dingkhiyo, are considered valuable items and play an important role as gifts or exchange items during marriages and other ceremonies. Fishes are also smoked and preserved in a similar manner. In terms of beverages, the Nyishi people have a traditional drink called 'Opo.' It is prepared by fermenting millet grains, known as Tern Opo', or by fermenting rice, called 'Pona'. In the past, Nyishi people used to offer opo instead of water to visitors or travelers. Nowadays, tea and other modern beverages have become more common, replacing the traditional practice.

- 10) **Festivals:** Cultural-themed festivals are a common occurrence in the Nyishi region and among Igorot communities both locally and abroad. These festivals serve as platforms to showcase various aspects of the culture, including traditional dances performances, sports, and community beliefs practices. Nyishi Facebook groups play a crucial role in providing a space where photos and videos captured and upload these events and shared among community members. Some occasions that are frequently posted and discussed in these groups includes:

- Nyokum: This is one of the most important festivals celebrated by the Nyishi community. It is a harvest festival that involves various rituals, cultural performances, and community gatherings. During Nyokum, people offer prayers to deities and ancestors for a good harvest and prosperity.
- Lungte Yulow: This festival is observed by the Nyishi community and is associated with the practice of shifting cultivation. It is celebrated to seek

blessings for a bountiful harvest and to commemorate the cultural significance of agriculture in the community.

- **Boori Boot:** Boori Boot is a traditional festival celebrated by the Nyishi people to express gratitude to the goddess of wealth and prosperity. It involves prayers, rituals, cultural performances, and feasting. The festival is believed to bring good fortune and prosperity to the community.

11) **Folk tales and legends:** The Nyishi people trace their lineage back to a mythical forefather named Abo Teni or Abo Tani. According to Nyishi folklore, they consider themselves to be the descendants of the first ancestor, Abo Tani, and his exemplary son, Ato Niya. The Nyishi people their culture and beliefs to the teachings of Jwith Aane, who is said to be the daughter of Aane Donyi, the mythological matrilineal mother associated with the sun.

12) **Religion:** The traditional religious belief system of Nyishi based on the worship and appeasement of spirits who have one or other keep control over the nature. The ancient Nyishi had no systematic or structural religious practises like Donyi Poloism; instead, they invoked the spirits or performed rites when needed. However, these practices have changed or no longer in practice due to the modernity and its impact on indigenous lifestyle. Also, the state-making project in this frontier region and growing entrenchment of Indian authorities slowly destabilised the indigenous ecosystem, creating a new religious spaces for the tribal population.

13) **History:** This category includes historical articles specifically related to Arunachal Pradesh, with a particular focus on the Nyishi community. It encompasses articles that provide historical context, information, and insights into the origins of

cultural elements. Additionally, posts featuring captioned historical photos and articles related to significant events, locations, and individuals are included. However, it should be noted that there may be instances where historical photos showing events, places, and people are not properly labeled, which can make it challenging for community members to fully appreciate and understand their significance.

- 14) **Sceneries and places:** The popularity of posts depicting the countless sceneries of Arunachal Pradesh within Nyishi social media groups reflects the awe-inspiring beauty of the region and the pride Nyishi individuals feel for their homeland's natural heritage.

Indigeneity Online: Nyishi Indigenous Voice and Cultural Narratives on the Web

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, provide an important platform for the indigenous communities to express themselves. As the social media pages become popular, it slowly gets integrated into our life. Besides that, it has become one of the important platforms to disseminate one's cultural identity as well as represent and celebrate their identity. The online presence or the online participations of Nyishi individuals shows their resilience, adaptability, and determination to preserve their traditional culture, folklore and cultural heritage. Through the Facebook pages they reclaim their ethnic identity—sharing new cultural narrative and fostering community cohesion, the Nyishi raise their indigenous voice and affirm their cultural identity. Like any other indigenous group in the world (Christensen 2005; Carlson 2013), the Nyishi has also found a new way to negotiate with their cultural identity, and preserve and propagate the markers of cultural identity such as folklore, art and artifacts. So, by examining the Facebook posts, we can gain

some insights about the digital endeavor of the Nyishi and how they celebrate their cultural identity within the online realm.

This study has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the most popular posts on Nyishi Facebook pages, building upon the foundation of the 14 cultural elements previously discussed. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of these posts center around Nyishi ethnic identity, highlighting their rich cultural past and showcasing the vibrant tapestry of Nyishi folklore. Besides that, Nyishi cultural identity is deeply intertwined with their online and offline expressions. Most of the Facebook posts depicts the real life of the Nyishi community, expressing their cultural attachment and association with various objects which are symbol of the Nyishi ethnic identity. For example, below picture shows the importance of *Nyokum* festival in Nyishi community.

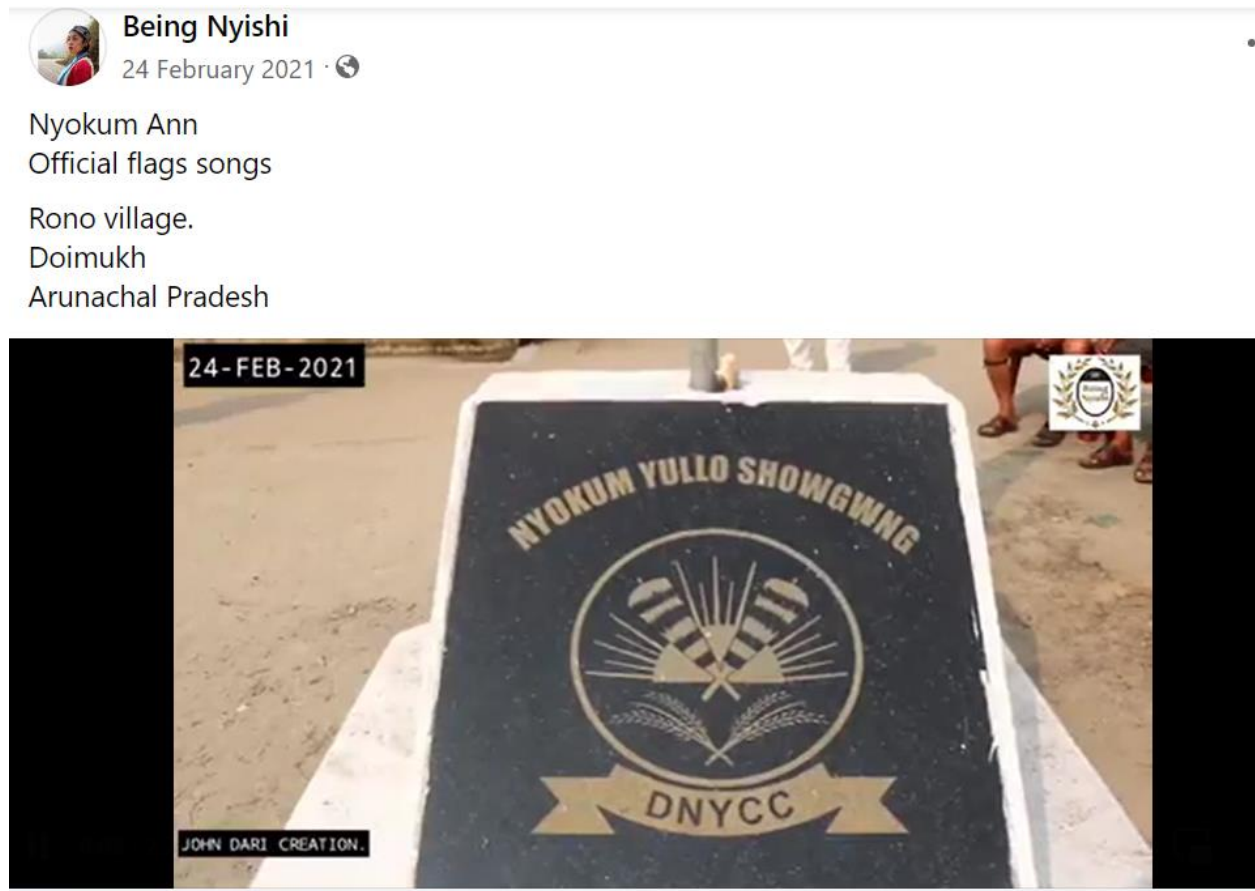


Figure 5.8 Nyokum flag carved on stone plate

By posting the videos on *Nyokum* festival, the Nyishi try to spread their cultural practices that makes them unique and different from others. Besides that, the *Nyokum* flag is a symbolic identity of the Nyishi. In addition, the above-mentioned Facebook post also help in building a Nyishi network society as the people who share the same interest and feel proud of their Nyishi culture they automatically join the group. As more and more people join in the Facebook group, it accelerates the process of propagation and preservation of the culture. In Nyishi Facebook pages, the performance of a Facebook post often elicits positive and encouraging comments about the Nyishi glorifying its culture and tradition. This shows the strong sense of community and cultural pride among the Nyishi.

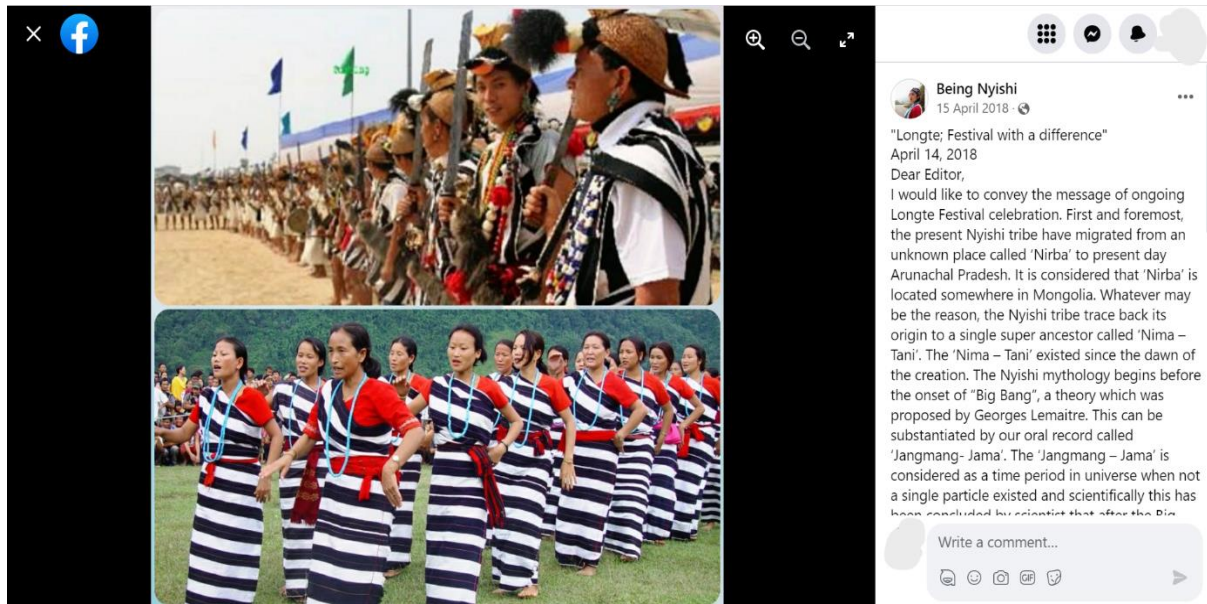


Figure 5.9 Longte Festival 2018

Through their Facebook post, the Nyishi try to reinforce their cultural identity. The above mentioned post is from Longte festivals where men and women dressed in their traditional attire, dancing on their traditional folk songs. These Nyishi costumes shown in the picture are identical mark of the Nyishi which they proudly wear and display. The attire worn by the men and women reflects on the vibrant colors, intricate designs, and distinctive patterns that is identical to Nyishi. Nyishi individuals share images of beaded necklaces, bracelets, and other accessories, showcasing the artistry. Through the Facebook post they only celebrate the beautiful beadwork but also pass down the knowledge and techniques to future generations. In addition, ornaments play a significant role in Nyishi culture, symbolizing social status, cultural identity, and spiritual beliefs. Facebook posts often highlight the various ornaments worn by Nyishi men and women, such as necklaces, earrings, headgears, and bracelets as it carries cultural meanings. However, not all the posts or comments confirm the identity. Some of the posts and comments conflict with

the Facebook post, as we can see in the above-mentioned figure, where the admin of the Facebook page trying to clarify the information about the origin of the Nyishi. Through sharing this information, it contributes to the Nyishi indigenous knowledge, as well as help the youngster to learn about their past origin. Besides that, the Facebook post also contribute the online archive of Nyishi indigenous knowledge.

Along with the representation of their cultural identity, the community also strive for their cultural assertion and resist the ongoing cultural assimilation process in the state. As discussed in chapter-2 & chapter-4, cultural, cultural assimilation is the biggest challenge for contemporary Nyishi community and they have been fighting against it both online and offline. So individuals from the community has been constantly appropriating culturally charged element to negate the cultural assimilation process in the state. For example, as the below picture shows the Nyishi indigenous people rallying carrying their Donyi-Polo flag to protest against the rapid religious changes among the Nyishi in Arunachal Pradesh.

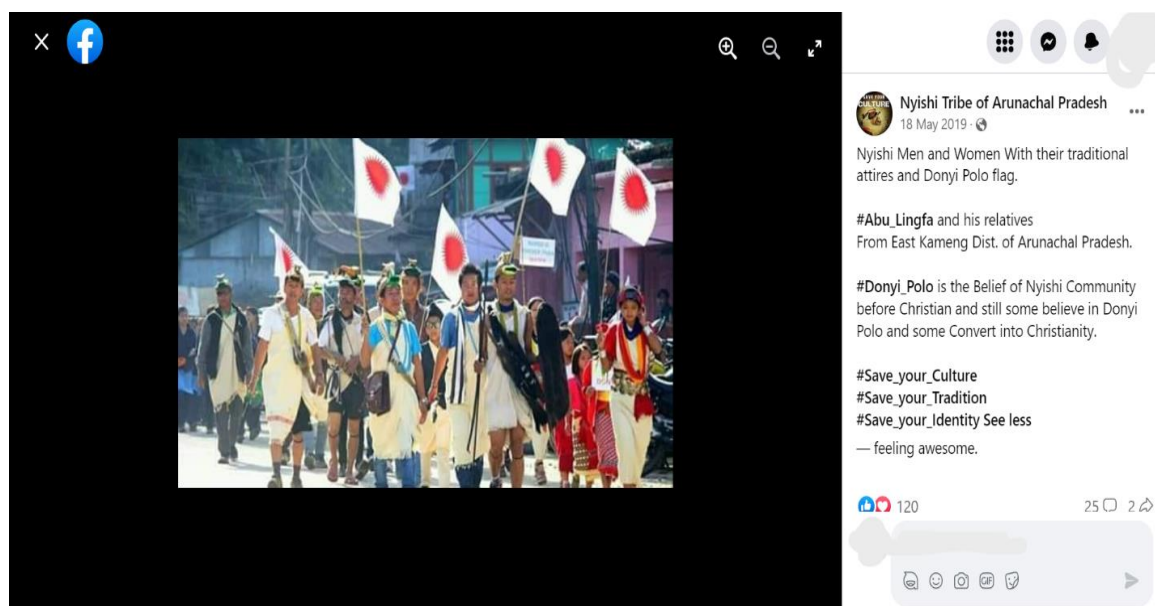


Figure. 5.10 Indigenous Faith Movement shared on Facebook

This post on Nyishi indigenous faith and belief reflects on their religious aspiration in the face of rapid religious conversion in the state. The Nyishi, originally follows animism and worship nature and spirit, has faced religious conversions in the last few decades. Most of the community members have been converted to other religion like Christianity or Hinduism, and very few are left with indigenous practices and belief system. Only recently they have started reviving their indigenous faith and belief system through various ways. The indigenous faith and believers have been trying to propagate their newly established religion Donyi-polo. Through their social media handles as well as through the Facebook page they have trying to bring awareness about the indigenous faith and belief system which is largely based in worshipping *uyus* and nature.

In addition, the Facebook post often revolves around their mythical forefather *Abo Tani* as well as *Mithun*. Mithun, also known as the Gayal (scientifically known as *bos frontalis*), holds a special place in Nyishi community. In a way Mithun is integral part of cultural and spiritual fabric of Nyishi community. Stories and images of Mithun has been widely circulated on the Facebook pages, narrating its significance in Nyishi community. These posts not only serve as a means of educating the community about the Mithun but also reinforce the Nyishi people's bond with Mithun—as it reflects as a symbol of prosperity and wealth. Also, Facebook serves as a platform for sharing cultural and spiritual beliefs associated with Mithun—since Mithun is considered as a sacred animal—and, the sacrifice of Mithun during religious ceremonies or rituals often considered auspicious. By sharing photos and stories about Mithun on Facebook pages, individuals or the group affirm its importance in Nyishi community.

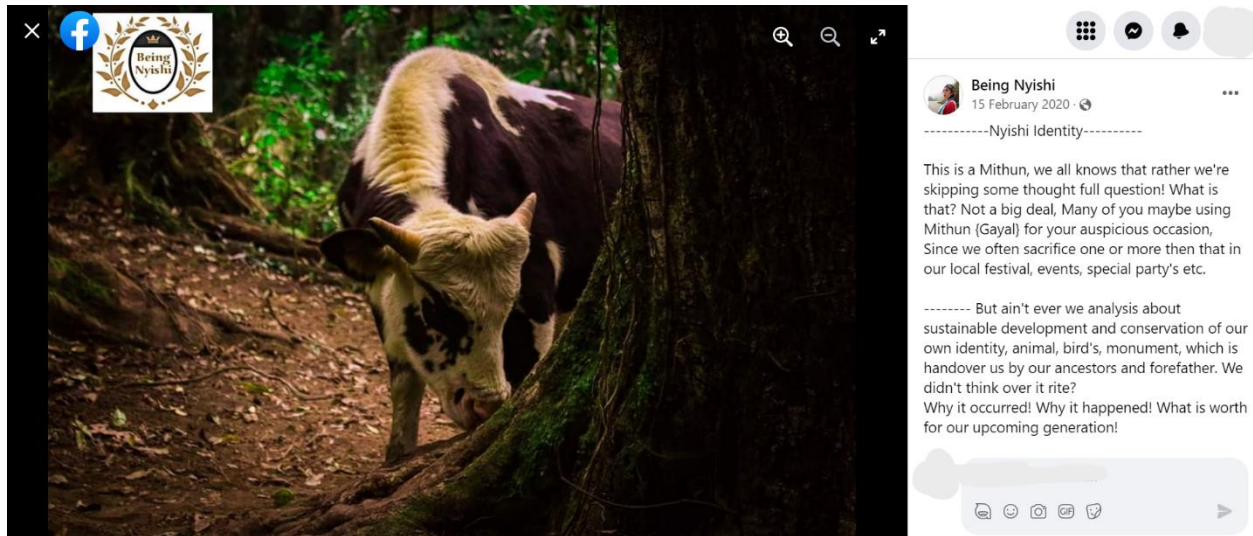


Figure 5.11 Importance Mithun discussed on Facebook

The Facebook post not only committed to cultural significance or cultural identity, but also discuss about the economic development of the community, environment issue etc. As one can clearly show, the above-mentioned post call for a sustainable development, and how Mithun can be protected for the future generation too. As the post says, Mithun is always considered for its cultural significance and sacrificed in every auspicious occasion which might led to a complex situation as Mithun is not only regarded as important animal for religious purpose but also it is considered or signifies the wealth and prosperity of the community.

The most important element which bind all the Nyishi members despite their different ideological association is that they are the descendant of *Abo Tani*. The story of *Abo Tani* is the most widely circulated folklore on the Nyishi Facebook pages. All the Nyishi agrees to the fact that *Abo Tani* is the first human being on the earth, and all the man and women are originated from him. The Facebook post on *Abo Tani* narrate the origin of Nyishi on earth and other legend

associated with *Abo Tani*. The legend of *Abo Tani* serves as a unifying force within the Nyishi community—as it fosters a sense of shared history and identity.



Figure 5.12 Forefather of Nyishi

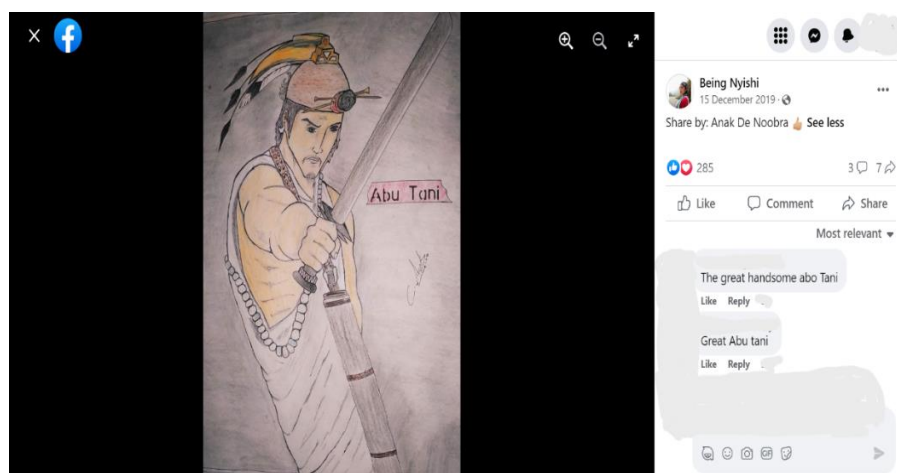


Figure. 5.13 Drawing of Abotani in Facebook

Most of post related to *Abo Tani* is captivating in nature, as the legend provide many interesting and exciting incident—accompanied by imagery or artistic representations that is more interactive in nature. The legend of *Abo Tani* also reflects on Nyishi belief system as well as provide a better understanding of their ancient past that is deeply embedded with *uyus*. Besides that, the Facebook post provide opportunities to discuss and debate on issues pertaining to cultural identity, strengthening the collective consciousness and pride among the Nyishi people. Also, by sharing the cultural elements and stories related to Abo Tani, Mithun, Donyi-polo or the dress, ornaments, beads etc. the Nyishi counter any form of cultural assimilation or potential erosion of cultural heritage.

The analysis of popular Facebook posts on Nyishi pages help us to understand the interplay between the technology and identity. It is evident that the community has used social media to fulfill their cultural mission at the same time social media platforms has provided them a more liberated space where they can freely exercise their agency and ethnic identity by performing and preserving traditional cultural element, cultural history, and folklore. Facebook has helped them to assert their ethnic identity as well as helped in building a collective identity. As the Nyishi community continues to navigate the digital landscape, their cultural narratives on Facebook pages play a crucial role in shaping Nyishi ethnic identity, strengthening the bond among the Nyishi individuals and groups.



CHAPTER-6

ONLINE MEDIATED IDENTITY: EXPLORING THE ONLINE ETHNIC SUBJECTIVITY OF THE NYISHI COMMUNITY IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

By emphasizing on the ethnic expressions and transformations on online platforms, this chapter examines the intricate relationship between ethnicity, digital spaces, and identity formation within the contemporary Nyishi community. It argues that the new online ethnicity emerged in the recent past isn't a definitive shift, or a substitution of old and essential Nyishi identity. Instead, the new online ethnicity overlap and interweave with the old one, deploying forms of "strategic essentialism". Through textual and visual analysis, this chapter shed light on the politics of representation — the construction of ethnic collective consciousness within the realm of social media, and how the online Nyishi assumes new forms of identity.

Chapter-6

Online Mediated Identity: Exploring the Online Ethnic Subjectivity of the Nyishi Community in Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

This chapter on the ethnic expressions and transformations on online platforms, this chapter examines the intricate relationship between ethnicity, digital spaces, and identity formation within the contemporary Nyishi community. It argues that the new online ethnicity emerged in the recent past isn't a definitive shift, or a substitution of old and essential Nyishi identity. Instead, the new online ethnicity overlap and interweave with the old one, deploying forms of "strategic essentialism". Through textual and visual analysis, this chapter shed light on the politics of representation — the construction of ethnic collective consciousness within the realm of social media, and how the online Nyishi assumes new forms of identity. Social media sites, mainly Facebook, has helped Nyishi community to practice, preserve, and propagate their folklore and other indigenous practices reflects a broader perspective of social media as a powerful tool for cultural preservation, community engagement, and the emergence of new ethnicities online. By actively participating online, Nyishi individuals and groups constantly negotiate their cultural identity on the online platform. Moreover, with the rise of social media, the Indigenous community is tasked with confirming claims of Indigeneity online. In other words, the indigenous community are having their own social media handle; busy sharing Indigenous knowledge and practices, identifying with others. Hence, the exploration of emerging adaptations of new media technologies and platforms presents a profound opportunity to evaluate their fundamental roles in the construction of individual/community identity and the intricate pattern of social structures.

Making Identity Online: The Digital Transformation of the Offline Subjects

Recent studies have delved into the ways in which Internet usage integrates with everyday social relationships, highlighting how it reshapes existing forms of association rather than replacing them (Howard and Jones, 2004; Bakardjieva, 2005). According to scholars such as Barry Wellman and his colleagues, the advent of the Internet has not completely replaced the concept of community or identity but rather redefined it (Wellman, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003). This is primarily due to the Internet's ability to bridge geographical gaps and facilitate connections among individuals. In a way, online interactions involve looser connections compared to traditional offline communities, but they still play a significant role in fostering social connectedness. Moreover, the Internet provides novel opportunities for community formation and engagement, offering new avenues for people to come together and interact. In the context of social media spaces, the interplay between identity and social formations is seen as mutually constitutive rather than separate processes. Existing literature on Internet and identity emphasises that the construction and expression of identities are relational and contingent upon social relationships and contexts (Castells 2001; Barney 2004; Parker & Song 2006; Carlson 2013). Simultaneously, social formations emerge from specific identities and the sense of belonging they engender. Adopting 'the social shaping of technology'¹⁵⁴ (SST) scholars have explored the intricate dynamics of how and why social or cultural groups engage with technology—social media platforms to construct, sustain, or modify identities and social relationships (Williams & Edge 1996; Mackenzie & Wajcman 1999; Baym 2015). This theoretical framework has explored how meanings and uses of social media arise from social practices. While users of social media

¹⁵⁴ 'The social shaping of technology' or the STS examines the interplay between science, technology, and society, recognizing that technological development does not occur in a vacuum but is shaped by and shapes social and economic contexts. It was first defined by Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) to explore the trajectory of technological change due to social circumstances, including economic factors, cultural values, political frameworks, and social dynamics.

possess agency, their engagement with these platforms is also influenced by social and personal circumstances (Bakardjieva & Smith 2001) and the capabilities and limitations of the media platforms themselves (Lorenzana 2016). In other words, online interactions contribute to social connectedness and offer new avenues for community formation and engagement (Parker & Song 2006).

The scholarly discourse on the intersection of technology, particularly the Internet, and identity has been a topic of great importance and extensive research in recent years. Scholars from different disciplines, such as sociology, communication studies, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy, have explored the multifaceted relationship between technology and identity. Various theoretical and methodological perspectives have been employed to explore different dimensions of identity in relation to technology. For example, Balsamo's groundbreaking work in 1995 offered valuable insights into the complex interplay between gender, identity, and technology. Similarly, Castells' influential publication in 2004 drew attention towards the network society that has been shaped by the internet technologies and the way it helps in the formation of a new identity. Building upon these ideas, Clippinger's contributions in 2007 provided a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics within virtual communities and their significant influence on the construction of identity. Similarly, Haraway (1991) in her essay on "Cyborg Manifesto", uses cyborg as a conceptual framework to explore blurred boundaries between humans and machines, challenging conventional notions of identity. Together, these works have contributed significantly to the body of literature exploring the relationship between the internet, technology, and society.

Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) is considered a seminal piece in this field. Haraway envisioned a future where technology would blur the boundaries between human and

machine, giving rise to new forms of identity and challenging existing power structures. She argued that the cyborg existence would disrupt traditional notions of identity politics by complicating the relationship between embodiment and identity. While Haraway's ideas sparked extensive discussion and analysis, the envisioned utopian future she described did not materialize in the way she envisioned. One aspect that has been observed is that even in online environments where individuals have the opportunity to construct and present themselves in various ways, they often reproduce their embodied experiences. Berman and Bruckman (2001) noted that people tend to carry forward their existing identities and experiences into online spaces, even when attempting to be deceptive or adopt different personas. This suggests that while technology provides new avenues for self-expression and identity exploration, it does not necessarily lead to a complete detachment from one's embodied self. The intersection of technology and identity remains a complex and evolving field of study. Scholars continue to explore how technology shapes and is shaped by identities, the impact of digital platforms on self-presentation and identity formation, and the ways in which power dynamics are negotiated and reproduced in online spaces. The discourse is characterized by ongoing debates and new perspectives as technology continues to advance and shape our understanding of identity in a digital age.

Over the past decade, indigenous communities around the world, including the Nyishi community, have increasingly engaged with digital platforms. However, the extent of their participation and experiences on online platforms, particularly on social media like Facebook, has not been adequately documented. After spending a significant amount of time among the Nyishi people, both online and offline world, I have observed their transition in the digital age and interactions with social media. While the internet provides a platform for the exploration of indigenous identity online (Christensen 2003; Fraser and Dutta 2008; Carlson 2013; Duarte

2017), little is documented on indigenous engagement with the internet in the northeastern region of India. Indigenous people, particularly Nyishi from north-eastern India, have recently been endeavored into the digital discourse, especially for the ways that technology has reinforced their cultural heritage, history, and community identity in technologically mediated world.

While technology has the capacity to provide new avenues for self-expression and identity exploration for the Nyishi, it's crucial to approach the subject with nuance, especially when considering the indigenous peoples' perspectives and experiences. Although the early proponents of technology advocate that the advancement of technology can transcend the restriction posed by corporeal body (Stone 1995; Turkle 1995), the reality is far more nuanced and contradictory. Critics argue that rather than erasing the concept of embodied identity, technology has, in fact, reinforced and reshaped it in multifaceted ways. Despite the promises of virtual reality and online spaces to offer freedom from physical constraints, individuals remain tethered to their physical bodies, which continue to shape their experiences and interactions with the world. The notion of disembodiment, once hailed as a hallmark of technological progress, has been replaced by a recognition of the complex entanglement of the physical and the digital realms. For example, Turkle's (1995) work on technology and identity provides a nuance argument on the technologically mediated identity. She argues that the fragmentation of identity facilitated by technology introduces new challenges and complexities to the process of identity formation, taking the concept of identity to a new level. It is important to note that Turkle's analysis revolves around the notion of identity simulation, wherein individuals engage in online activities as a means of exploring and experimenting with different facets of their identity. She suggests that these online interactions are separate from physical interactions, implying a distinction between the digital and physical realms (Turtle 1995). While Turtle's work has been influential

and has sparked important discussions about the impact of technology on identity, it is essential to acknowledge that the field of technology and identity has evolved significantly after emergence of social media networks. Scholars continue to explore and critique various aspects of the relationship between technology and identity, considering factors such as social media, online communities, virtual reality, and the blurring of online and offline experiences.

The digital transformation of offline subjects has been an important area of investigation, with researchers and scholars focusing on understanding how individuals interact and present themselves in online and virtual communities. In contrast to early scholars who perceived the self on the internet as disembodied, recent scholars studying identity and technology argue that the digital self is inextricably linked to embodied practises, emphasising the idea that our online identities are an extension of our offline selves. Drawing on online and offline debate, Lori Kendall (2002) sheds light on how social constructs, such as gender, were reproduced and reinforced in the online realm. In a similar vein, Jenny Sundén's (2003) research also challenged the notion of disembodiment, emphasizing the significant influence of the physical body on people's experiences within mediated environments. Her research on online or the virtual communities highlight how the physical body plays a crucial role in shaping and mediating individuals' interactions and encounters. Sundén focused on a specific type of online community called a MUD (Multi-User Domain or Multi-User Dungeon). In the MUD environment, participants engaged in text-based interactions and had to continuously create and describe the virtual world they inhabited. They were responsible for generating the details of the environment. Sundén emphasises that users had to actively and consistently "type oneself into being" to exist and be visible online. This means that participants had to continually engage in textual production to establish their presence and identity within the digital space (Sundén 2003).

Such experiences and expressions are different in an unmediated-offline environment. The presence and importance of bodies and the roles they represent in the offline environment are frequently disregarded or assumed without much thought. The mere physical existence of a body in a particular place and moment serves as a definitive indicator of one's being. However, in the online realm, the traditional concept of a physical body is absent, and individuals are typically represented by impersonal IP addresses. The term "virtual" does not necessarily imply a lack of embodiment. Instead, our online experiences are inherently influenced by our lived experiences as embodied beings.

Conversely, for Nyishi youth, activists, and scholars, social media is not seen as a separate and virtual realm but is deeply intertwined with various aspects of their embodied lives. Nyishi individuals move seamlessly between mediated (online) and unmediated (offline) environments, and their participation in social media platforms is closely linked to their interactions in real-life settings. Nyishi people participate in these spaces alongside individuals with whom they interact face-to-face. The performances exhibited online are not isolated occurrences, detached from physical settings, but rather intentional actions that depend on a context spanning both mediated and unmediated environments, involving people who are familiar in both realms. The online selves of the Nyishis is closely connected to their offline activities. While some argue that online identity work involves the creation of fictional characters (Turkle 1995) that are detached from embodied reality, my observations indicate that this practice is not common. In the case of Nyishi youth who are part of the indigenous faith movement and adhere to indigenous practices, I have noticed that their online self-presentations are often tied to their actual lived experiences. Rather than creating entirely fictional personas, they tend to depict an idealised version of themselves or highlight specific aspects of their identity that they also exhibit in public spaces.

The primary motivation behind these self-representations is to portray themselves in the most positive light possible. They seek to curate an online presence that aligns with their values, beliefs, and interests, while still maintaining a connection to their everyday lived experiences.

The online transformation of offline selves has opened up new avenues for indigenous tribes, including the Nyishi, to represent their embodied selves in virtual environments. Through their own social media pages, they have been actively expressing their identities in these virtual spaces. To authentically portray their embodied selves in the digital realm, the Nyishi community has been organizing events and competitions that showcase and reflect their indigenous identity. Notable examples include the Online Folklore Competition in the NNMR Facebook page (see figure 1) or the rise of indigenous faith consciousness on other Nyishi Facebook community pages (see figure 2) reflects on the embodied practices of the Nyishi people which has been mediated through online platform.

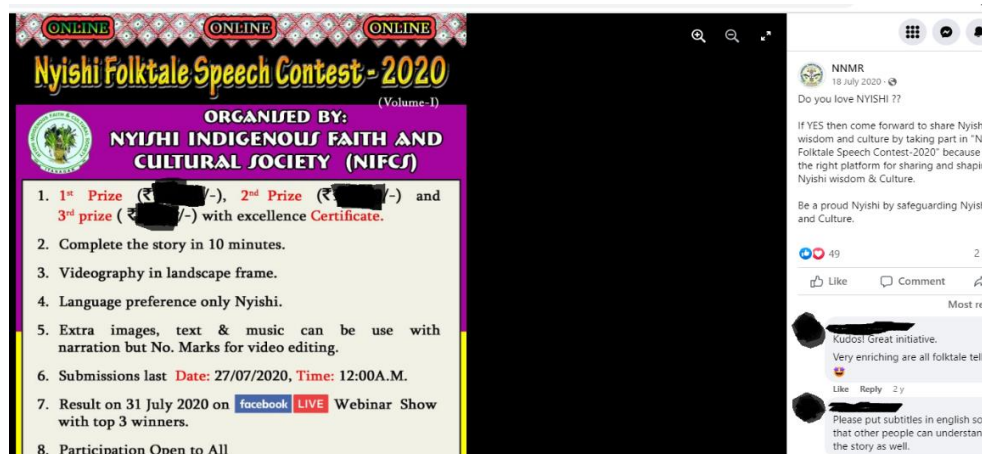


Figure 6.1. Facebook post related to Online Nyishi folklore competition.

By organizing the online folklore competition (see fig.1), the Nyishi people aim to not only preserve and collect their cultural heritage but also foster a connection between the younger generation and their rich cultural past. Additionally, the competition serves as a platform for

promoting ancestral knowledge, traditions, and identity among the Nyishi community. Similarly, the question raised on Facebook about Donyi-Polo (see fig.2) highlights the concern regarding the diminishing indigenous faith and culture among the Nyishi community. It brings attention to the proliferation of foreign religions and cultures within the indigenous lands. This Facebook post highlights the need to preserve and protect the traditional beliefs and practices of Donyi-Polo and the Nyishi culture, as they face the challenges posed by external influences.

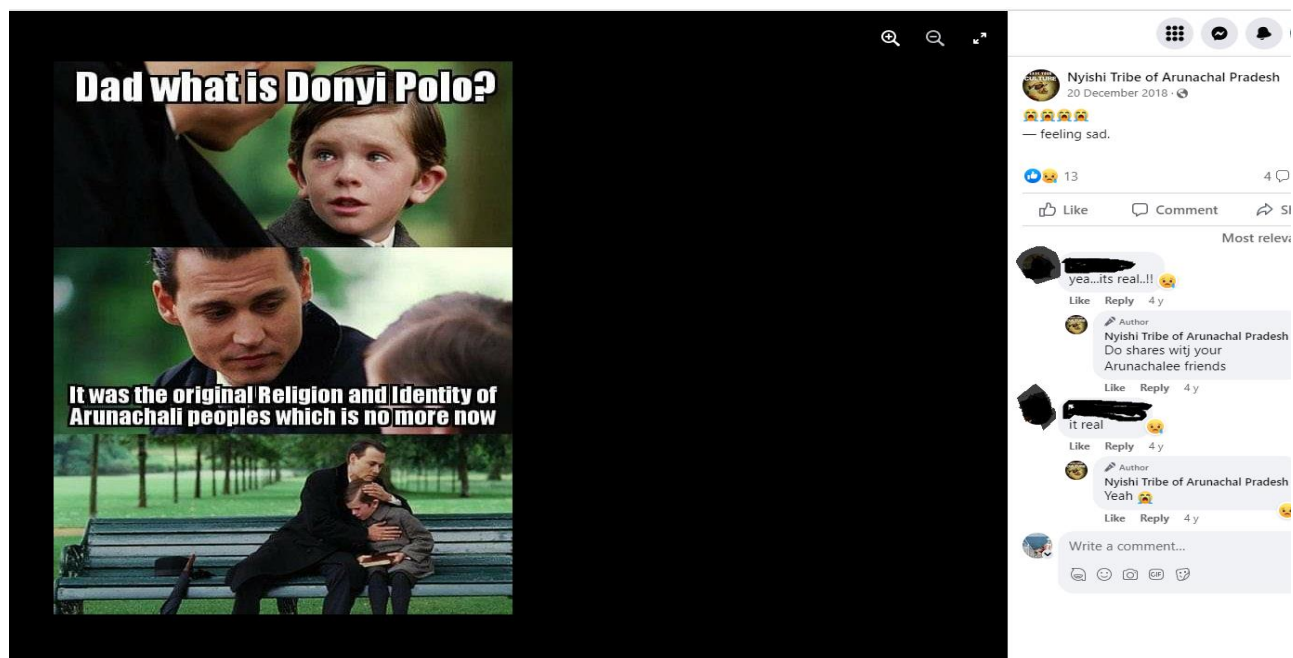


Figure 6.2 Facebook post related to indigenous faith and belief.

These initiatives bridge the gap between the physical and virtual worlds, allowing Nyishi participants to showcase their traditional practices and behaviors. For instance, folklore related to the origin of the Nyishi community or stories revolving around *Mithun-Bos frontalis*, which hold deep cultural and symbolic significance, are now being widely shared and circulated on online platforms (see fig.3). The Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh community Facebook page shared a post about the Nyishi folktale on Tai Bida which garnered more than one thousand likes, 354 comments, and shared 792 times. The story revolves around Tai Bida and *Mithun*:

During one of his hunting trips, Tai Bida ventured into the forest and came across an untamed *Mithun* in the mountainous region. Intrigued by the creature, he decided to domesticate it. The *Mithun* brought him fortune by bearing numerous offspring. However, when Tai Bida planned to sacrifice the mother *Mithun*, she escaped and led her babies towards *Gekar Sinyi* (lake). Tai Bida followed their footprints but failed to find them. Disheartened, he rested on a rock called *Budum Langne* (home of snakes), where he recounted his story. Surprisingly, snakes appeared from a hole in the rock and comforted him. Later, strange occurrences befell Tai Bida and his family. Tai Bida, after building a trap called *Seppe* to catch fish, discovered a deer ensnared in his trap instead. Initially dismissing it as a mere coincidence, Bida decided to bring the deer home for sustenance. To his surprise, the very next day, yet another deer found itself caught in *Seppe*'s clutches, triggering a sense of unease within him. Bida becomes increasingly worried as it is believed that strange occurrences precede tragedy. Eventually, a devastating flood sweeps through the village, causing the disappearance of Bida and his entire community.

The folktale shared on the Facebook community page serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, it imparts valuable insights into the importance of Nyishi culture, illuminating its significance within the community. Secondly, it acts as a mirror reflecting the embodied practices deeply rooted in the Nyishi community. These include indigenous techniques for hunting and capturing animals, the community's food habits, and their practices of living in harmony with nature. The folktale reflects the deep connection and reliance of the Nyishi people on nature. They believe that nature has provided them with everything necessary for survival, and thus, they hold a strong belief in spirits and worship them for blessings. Besides that, the *Mithun* holds great importance in the Nyishi community, both culturally and religiously. It is considered a symbol of

prestige and wealth among the Nyishi people. It is highly revered and holds a special place in Nyishi traditions and rituals. It is often involved in important ceremonies, such as weddings, where it is offered as a symbol of prosperity and blessings. The ownership of *Mithun* is considered a status symbol and signifies the wealth and social standing of a family. Additionally, *Mithun* is also used in traditional festivals and communal feasts, where they are sacrificed and their meat is shared among the community members, strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of unity.

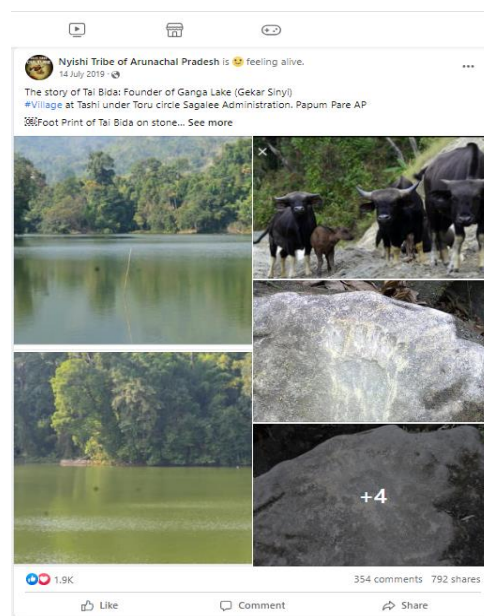


Figure 6.3 The story of Tai Bida

Through the online events, competitions, and posts the Nyishi community connects their embodied selves and the virtual world. In this context, a critical examination of how embodiment influences online interactions and self-presentation becomes crucial. Despite the lack of physical bodies in the online space, individuals still carry their bodily experiences and social identities into this digital realm. The choices individuals make regarding their digital appearances, interactions, and communication styles are deeply influenced by their perception of themselves as physical beings with specific characteristics and social attributes (Christensen, 2003; Parker

and Song, 2006; Carlson, 2013). By acknowledging the continued relevance of embodiment in the digital world, one can better understand and analyze the ways in which individuals/community shape their online identity.

Online Mediated Identity: Indigenous Practices on Facebook

From the standpoint of identity, online presence and participations of Nyishi people produces new narrative in the context of mediated identity as the digital environments inflects everyday practices in new ways. As Alessandra Micalizzi writes that the technological algorithm used in social media sites or the technological interface enables the user to regulate their presence on online platforms, carrying out various activities based on the situations (Micalizzi, 2014). In this context, social media platforms are an extension of physical world where the participants constantly produce and reproduce their identity. However, the identity produced on the online platform is a “matter of constant becomings” (Kennedy 2014, p. 31), and “increasingly fragmented and fractured” (Hall 1996, p. 4). Identities are constantly in flux, subject to historical and contextual influences, and undergoing continual change and transformation. According to Hall, identification refers to the temporary attachments individuals form with subject positions constructed by discursive practices. It is a more fluid and contingent concept compared to the fixed nature of identity. Hall emphasizes that identification is characterised by its openness and the potential for multiple and intersecting subject positions. While early discussions celebrated the potential for identity experimentation in virtual networked environments, empirical research has highlighted a more complex relationship between online and offline identity. The interplay between the two is dynamic and intertwined, with individuals selectively presenting aspects of their identity and experiencing shifts or fragmentation online. It offers new perspectives on the concept of identity, as the virtual networked environments offered opportunities for identity experimentation. Besides that, it is important to understand how the Internet and social media

platforms, particularly Facebook, provides a variety of digital capabilities and opportunities, referred to as digital affordances, which greatly influence how individuals interact, communicate, and engage with others on the platform. Scholars have critically examined the social media affordance and its cultural impact in the contemporary age as the social media sites has transcended the physical boundary that was there before its proliferation (Wellman, 2001; Sundar, 2008; Ellison et al. 2011; boyd, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Vitak & Ellison, 2013; Carlson, 2013; Carlson and Frazer, 2018). These affordances highlight the ability of social media platforms to make content visible to others, the persistence of content over time, the ease of editing and modifying content, and the ability to associate and connect with others. By studying social media affordance, one can understand the way social media platforms shape communication, information dissemination, and social activism. Understanding social media affordances enhances our understanding of how social media is utilized and its impact on different societal aspects.

Facebook and Mediated Identity

As my project unfolded, I focused on the deployment of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, by the Nyishi community to uphold their traditionally unmediated practices, thereby examining the phenomenon of online mediated identity among indigenous communities. Facebook has been increasingly employed by Nyishis to inform and educate themselves and their networks about the indigenous practices, faith, and beliefs. As Athique (2013) writes, Facebook encourages users to present themselves in ways that not only showcase their social status but also highlight their social activities and connections, including the display of friendships. This emphasis on social interaction and connectivity in shaping one's Facebook identity aligns with the concept of relational personhood, where identity is influenced by social connections and

interactions. I discovered that Nyishi individuals are motivated to participate on Facebook to connect with their peers and express their personal opinions. The practitioner of indigenous believe and faith, mainly the elite Nyishi started showing their displeasure against the converted Nyishi (mainly the Christian believers) and widely debate and discuss on the protection and preservation of Nyishi traditional culture and identity through the Facebook pages i.e. the *NNMR*, *Being Nyishi*, *Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh*, *NACWS*, and *Nyishi*. Nyishi youngsters, activists, and intellectuals employed the forum to discuss and debate the cultural assimilation process and to more thoroughly highlights the negative impacts of religious conversion among the indigenous communities. These pages were also used by other indigenous communities, mostly Tani clan, to circulate petitions calling on government and civil societies to protect indigenous culture and traditions.

As I have previously described, the emergence of indigenous consciousness among the Nyishi is not a new phenomenon. However, the current momentum it has garnered because of the rise of the internet and usage of interactive media that has astonished many. The topics discussed, debated and shared on the Facebook groups is largely revolve around the everyday life and struggles of the Nyishi community. By actively participating on the Facebook, the participants are merely reproducing their embodied experiences online (Berman and Bruckman 2001). For example, the online performances that are shown in figure. 4, appealed for a unified indigenous identity which is deeply rooted in an embodied setting. It is a conscious act that rely on the everyday religious faith and believes of the Nyishi community. For example, the 'Doni-Polo day' observation signifies the importance of cultural and religious identity which also helps in building Nyishi collective identity. By publicly celebrating and asserting their indigenous faith, the Nyishi reclaim their cultural heritage and challenge dominant narratives that have

marginalized their identities. This collective commemoration helps strengthen the power of identity and reinforces the resilience of indigenous communities in the face of challenges such as religious conversion and cultural assimilation.



Figure 6.4 Donyi-polo Day

Similarly, fig. 5 appealed for the preservation of indigenous knowledge and culture. It shows the way the Nyishi community cultivating a sense of belonging, allowing individuals to connect, share, and preserve their cultural heritage. The post emphasises how Nyishi are trying to build their sense of belonging by unveiling their past, embracing their present, and envisioning a promising future that foster intergenerational dialogue, and promote collective progress. Facebook page dedicated to the Nyishi community served as a powerful catalyst for cultivating a sense of belonging, unlocking the potential of digital platforms to connect, engage, and empower community members. By leveraging social media, they have amplified their message, reached wider audiences, and challenged dominant narratives in their pursuit of cultural preservation.

Besides that, they received considerable prominence because of their active involvement on online platforms such as web forums, microblogging sites, social media sites etc. Similarly, online platforms such as Facebook, has facilitated the Nyishi ethnic identity and enabled them to assert their existence in both online and offline worlds.



Figure 6.5 Cultivating sense of belonging

Facebook provided a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between online and offline identity. It has become evident that the relationship between online and offline identities is multifaceted and interconnected. Rather than perceiving online and offline identities as separate entities, internet scholars and researchers found that both online and offline platforms often inform and influence one another (Kendall 2002; Sundén 2003). Online identities can be seen as extensions or reflections of offline identities, with individuals selectively presenting aspects of their identity in different contexts. Early studies have shown that users often experienced identity shifts or fragmentation online, presenting different facets of their identity in various virtual spaces or online communities. This fragmentation can be attributed to the diverse social contexts

and interactions facilitated by online platforms, where individuals adopt different roles or personas based on the specific online community or environment they are engaging with.

Performing Identity on Facebook

As I discussed above, the identity formed through Facebook is influenced by embodied experiences. However, it is crucial to recognise that the identities mediated through Facebook are not fixed or unchanging. As Rob Cover writes that the social media sites offer an alternative space to perform one's offline identity (Cover, 2014)¹⁵⁵.

That is, even the online identity is an ongoing process of becoming, as Butler (1990) suggest that our identity is not fixed or predetermined but rather constructed through repeated actions and behaviors. Butler's theories of identity performativity offer valuable insights for studying social networking and shed light on the multifaceted nature of identity construction within digital spaces. By considering social networking as a performative matrix of actions, we can deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in online identity formation and communication (Cover 2014). Judith Butler's theory of identity performativity, influenced by poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, can significantly enhance our understanding of people's engagement with social networking and their investment in its maintenance, contact, and communication functions¹⁵⁶.

As I demonstrated in fig. 6 and 7, Facebook allows the users to seamlessly transition between offline and online world while offering them the opportunities to perform their bodily selves on

¹⁵⁵ "...social networking sites operate as a space for the continued, ongoing construction of subjectivity—neither a site for identity play nor for static representation of the self, but as an ongoing reflexive performance and articulation of selfhood that utilizes the full range of tools made available through common social networking sites such as ... and Facebook." See Rob Cover, 2014. In *Identity Technologies; Constructing the Self Online*.

¹⁵⁶ According to Butler, identity and subjectivity are ongoing processes of becoming rather than fixed states of being. Identity is constituted through a series of performative acts that retroactively shape one's sense of self. These acts align with socially constructed knowledge and create the illusion of an inner identity core through repetition. Butler's theories extend the concept of performance from offline bodily and experiential realms to the realm of online behavior, including social networking.

social media sites. The participation of Nyishi folks in the Online Nyishi Folktale Competition in NNMR Facebook page is as performative as actions in "real life" and imply the existence of a stable inner self behind one's online profile. In fig. 6, the female participant is an epitome of Nyishi woman. The traditional dresses and ornaments worn by her serve as markers of her ethnic identity. The *Tashi* (beads) around her neck is considered an important ornament for traditional Nyishi women. It holds significance as it represents their womanhood and wealth. While modern attire has replaced traditional attire and ornaments in many cases, this female participant reaffirms her Nyishi woman identity through repetitive performative actions. Besides that, her Nyishi folktale on '*Nimey-Nyapaq*'- the story of two sisters has garnered more than 4000 like, 590 comments and has been shared 552 times on online platforms. These likes, comments and share on the Facebook page is a signal of acceptance in the online mediated world. Through her performances the participant confirmed/mediated her Nyishi identity in the social media platforms. But such acceptance is difficult to gain since the online world is prone to bullying (Wolak et.al., 2007; Carlson 2013). Participants often get both negative and positive feedback from the Facebook users. One user commented on the Facebook post (fig. 6):

Perfect niyishi language and very clear voice. Sister u deserve to first prize.

Above mentioned comment shows how language is intrinsically tied to a sense of self, and functions as a symbol of identity. In contemporary Nyishi discourse, language plays an important role in shaping indigenous consciousness and ethnic identity among the individuals and groups. However, due to various reasons—mainly the presence of the military and other officials from mainland India as well as the modern aspiration of the youth (see chapter 2 & 4), has posed serious threat to the existence of Nyishi language. Most young people in Arunachal Pradesh, including the Nyishi, are unable to converse in their mother tongue. During the field work, I

observed that most of the Nyishi young people speak ‘Arunachalee Hindi’¹⁵⁷ and lack considerable knowledge in their mother tongue. When I enquired them about the Facebook post (fig. 6) on ‘*Nimey-Nyapaq*’ and sought their help to understand the story, few of my respondents struggled to explain the story because of their unfamiliarity with their mother tongue. The deterioration of indigenous languages in Arunachal Pradesh can be attributed to several factors, among which the process of state formation stands out as a significant contributor, as discussed in the previous chapter¹⁵⁸. However, in the recent times, nyishi youths, activists, and intellectuals have actively engaged in the revitalization of the Nyishi language, with the Internet and social media assuming a crucial role in this endeavor. As Outakoski et. al (2018) and Cocq (2015) in their research on indigenous languages in the age of digital technology finds that the social media can be an avenue of language acquisition (Outakoski et. al, 2018; Cocq, 2015). The Nyishi youths and activists are actively using social media platforms like Facebook to promote and preserve indigenous language and encouraging the youngsters who otherwise have very little contact with Nyishi language (see fig. 1). Thus, the participants are often judged based on their proficiency and command of the Nyishi language. In other words, participants performed their indigenous identity online through language.

The online Nyishi identity, like the identity of any indigenous community, is influenced by a range of factors beyond just language. Indigenous knowledge — myths, legends, cultural practices, and traditions play a significant role in shaping the online Nyishi identity and

¹⁵⁷ The term ‘Arunachalee Hindi’ refers to the Hindi spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. According to Prof. Lisa Lomdak when Arunachalees speak Hindi, they typically opt for a language variant that lacks gender differentiations. This choice stems from the fact that the tribal languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, do not differentiate between male and female. Conversely, Hindi, which is widely used in the region, does make such distinctions. <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2018/06/03/are-tribal-languages-in-arunachal-dying/>

¹⁵⁸ The increasing dominance of Hindi and disregard for the local tribal languages can be attributed to the growing influence of the central government and the extensive militarization of the region following the Indo-China war (1962). These developments have had a profound impact on the linguistic landscape of the state, leading to a decline in the usage and preservation of indigenous languages.

contribute to a sense of community and shared heritage among its participants. Appreciating the participants' knowledge about the Nyishi myth and legends, another user comments on Facebook post (fig.6):

Very much perfect everything, narration of story was just amazing given good exemplary of today's youth. You will deserve to be winner.

Positive comments on Facebook post often confirms the Nyishi identity of the participant whereas negative comments often questioned ones' indigenous identity, and demanded of confirmation of participants' Nyishi identity. Like, one user commented on the Facebook post (fig.6):

Not clear concept.u are just copy from some knowledge person by purposed of used in this contest.

Negative comments on social media confirm the transformative and subversive impact of online subjectivity, even as participants strive to validate their Nyishi identity through their performances.



Figure 6.6 Online Nyishi Folktales Competition

Similarly, fig. 7 depicts an ideal Nyishi man with his *bopia* (headgear), *dao* (machetes), *tasa* (ornament and male necklace). Like the previous post, this post also garnered more than 3000+ likes, 253 comments and has been shared 719 times on the social media platforms. Here, the participant tries to prove his Nyishi identity by narrating the story of ‘*Mig Mire and Martung Tam*’ in Nyishi language. The participant showcases his knowledge by skillfully narrating the ancient Nyishi story of *Mig Mire*-invisible men or *wiyus* and *Martung Tam*-a monster like creature.

According to Nyishi folklore, there existed a mountain called *Taji Tarak*, where a remarkable family of invisible men known as *Mig-Mire* resided. Within their hidden abode, they skillfully cultivated enchanted fruits and vegetables, including the esteemed *Nyari-Yokka* and the practical Uppum-Ujuk, a special gourd used for carrying water or local brew. In a tragic turn of events, darkness befell the land as the mighty *Martung Tam*, an invisible dragon of immense power, consumed the sun, casting the world into a solar eclipse known as *Tam Dimik Naam*. Fueled by righteous fury, the *Mig-Mire* took decisive action, launching an arrow that found its mark in the dragon's heart. Through this heroic act, the sun was liberated, banishing the shadows and restoring radiant light to the world once more.

Through this story, the participant performs his community/collective identity on the online platform. In the indigenous communities, particularly among the Nyishi people in Arunachal Pradesh, the concept of *wiyus* or spirits is deeply ingrained. These spirits are believed to possess both benevolent and malevolent qualities, playing a significant role in their practices. This tale showcases the Nyishi people's belief in the power of their ancestors and their ability to overcome challenges. It reflects their understanding of natural phenomena, such as solar eclipses, through a

mythical lens. Like many folktales, this story likely carries symbolic meaning, emphasizing the triumph of light over darkness and the restoration of harmony in the world.

What holds significance in this context is that indigenous individuals shape their online identities through performative expressions. As Carlson (2013) writes, mere assertions of indigenous identity are not sufficient; active participation and the enactment of indigeneity are crucial for their position to be acknowledged and for their cultural identity to be genuinely recognized. The performative aspect of online indigenous identity holds immense significance for the Nyishi people, as it entails continuous self-presentation that relies on cultural knowledge and access to the discursive components that shape indigeneity. These elements encompass proficiency in the language, involvement with indigenous traditions and practices, sharing recognizable indigenous iconography and imagery, and demonstrating familiarity with community structures and practices. As we can see in fig. 7, the participant is very particular about his Nyishi attire — *bopia* (headgear), *dao* (machetes), and *tasa* (ornament and male necklace) which are symbolic identity of Nyishi man. Besides that, it is important to get validation from the Facebook community to confirm his identity.

Brother your Nyishi history is nice enough and it is related to your own place so it was appreciable but here I'm completely convinced to appreciate your way of expressing or telling the whole story with gracious delight so 🍷 for you.

Such validation empowers the online identity of the participants making the online community stronger. The primary objective of having a Facebook page is to attract attention from others, with the anticipation that they will visit the user's page, share common interests by "liking" similar things, and participate in interactions through comments and discussions. Facebook

functions as a platform where social validation and recognition are sought after, as users strive for engagement and affirmation from their network of friends and connections.



Figure 6.7 Online Nyishi Folktale Competition

Online indigenous identity is not a fixed state but rather a dynamic and performative process shaped by regulatory practices. The performative dimension holds significant importance for indigenous individuals in obtaining recognition and validating their cultural identity in the online realm. Active engagement with cultural elements, demonstration of cultural capital, and utilization of diverse expressive practices are vital in conveying and affirming their indigeneity. Sharing visual content like images, videos, or music on a Facebook page can serve as a means to assert or validate one's identity and signify association with a specific interest group. These posts play a crucial role in acknowledging and affirming an individual's indigenous identity, acting as a form of recognition.

Based on my research, I have discovered that expressing indigenous identity on Facebook necessitates consistent attention and active effort to sustain public recognition and attain

endorsement of one's indigenous status. It is an ongoing and dynamic process, as the construction and display of identity are constantly evolving. The act of "doing" indigeneity on Facebook entails actively involving oneself with cultural elements, engaging in community participation, and presenting oneself in manners that align with indigenous cultural practices and values.

Nyishi, Facebook and New Online Ethnic Subjectivity

Indigenous communities have effectively utilized social media to resist cultural assimilation and envision new possibilities for their future (Carlson 2013, Wilson et al., 2017). Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have become a popular means for indigenous individuals to construct, exhibit, and perform their indigenous identities (Lumby 2010). Many indigenous Facebook users consider it a crucial tool for self-representation, allowing them to convey their indigenous identity to other users within online communities. During my ethnographic fieldwork among the Nyishi community, both online and offline, I observed a prevalent practice of sharing various aspects of everyday life, ranging from cultural matters to political issues, on Facebook. Research participants enthusiastically posted images and news about their personal or community achievements, presenting a diverse range of representations that encompassed both positive and negative portrayals, as covered by regional and national mainstream media. Facebook, in this context, serves as an environment where indigenous identities are tested, accepted, and fostered, facilitating the establishment of connections between individual and collective identities. Understanding the circumstances under which indigenous individuals desire to be identified and openly express their indigenous identity online is of particular interest. Recognition from other individuals, especially fellow indigenous people, plays a pivotal role in

the online manifestation of indigenous identities, similar to the demands for recognition encountered in offline contexts. Being recognized as indigenous online necessitates validation from others, highlighting the importance of affirmation within the indigenous community. By actively asserting and sharing their indigenous identity online, indigenous individuals contribute to the collective preservation and celebration of their cultures.

Through online/offline ethnographic examples, it becomes evident that mediated identity plays a constitutive role in shaping the Nyishi identity and their social formations within the community. The identity of an individual, as well as their connections through social media, is actively created and sustained in relation to others. In this chapter, I delve into the analysis of Internet activity that focuses on the experiences of indigenous people on Facebook. I argue for the lasting significance of ethnic collective consciousness within the realm of social media.

The Nyishi community serves as an appropriate case study to illustrate the concept of mediated collective identity. There is an ongoing discussion about the difficulties encountered by individuals connected through digital networks in forming a shared identity. While some contend that these difficulties are present, others argue that online platforms actually offer chances for participants in social movements to cultivate distinctive collective identities (Ayers 2003; Coretti and Pica 2015; Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012; Khazraee and Novak 2018). By examining how the Nyishi community established a new collective identity, we can shed light on the roles played by online platform administrators. In the case of the Nyishi community, ICTs — the Internet and social media enabled Nyishi people to perform crucial tasks that shaped the group's collective identity. These tasks include revitalization of language, culture, tradition and solidarity promotion, as discussed by Melucci (1995). Online platforms provided a space to establish and reinforce the boundaries of the Nyishi collective identity. Through the use of shared symbols,

narratives, and values, they defined who belonged to the community and promoted a sense of unity among its members. Additionally, social media users playing a pivotal role in promoting solidarity within the Nyishi community, by facilitating communication and organizing collective actions, they fostered a shared sense of purpose and mobilized individuals around common goals. Through these online interactions, a collective identity emerged that was shaped by both traditional social movement factors and the affordances of social media.

Social media, particularly Facebook, has gained widespread popularity because they effectively address the cultural demand for coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability of the self. By providing tools for identity construction and social interaction, these platforms offer individuals a means to navigate the complexities of contemporary life, while also satisfying their desire for stability and recognition in an increasingly interconnected and fluid world. As we transitioned from the text-based online environment to the more interactive and expressive realm of the internet i.e. social media sites, web forums, and microblogging sites, it becomes evident that online platforms are more expressive. As Rob Cover emphasizes that the online participation reflects on the longstanding cultural expectation that compels us to make sense of ourselves and our actions, seeking coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability in the process (Cover 2014, pp. 55-56). Social media platforms like Facebook have gained immense popularity by addressing the cultural demand for intelligibility and recognizability of the self, along with contemporary anxieties surrounding these aspects. These platforms enable individuals to construct and present a coherent and recognizable identity, allowing them to navigate and engage with the social landscape. Features like profiles, updates, tagging, and networking facilitate connection formation, visibility, and self-expression. By actively participating in social media, people can shape their online presence and create a narrative that aligns with societal norms. This process

offers stability, control, and recognition in a world where identities are increasingly fragmented. Furthermore, social media provides validation and social affirmation through likes, comments, shares, and follower counts, fulfilling individuals' need for recognition.

Nyishi and New Online Ethnic Subjectivity

Social media has brought about a significant and transformative effect on the interactions and connections (Aziz, 2022) of Indigenous peoples, both within and outside the community. Social media sites like Facebook greatly supported the interaction, enabling users to maintain relationships across vast distances and time zones, resulting in enhanced social and political connectivity (Wilson, Carlson and Sciascia, 2017). The pervasive nature of social media allows users to transcend limitations of time and space. However, it produces the embedded practices or connect communities of practice. The widespread use of social media platforms among the Nyishi community in Arunachal Pradesh has given rise to a new form of virtual ethnicity. This online ethnicity has facilitated social, cultural, and political interactions among Indigenous peoples and groups, creating a unique space for their engagement. Additionally, the rise of social media has created a complex web of connections that spans across all aspects of human life, resulting in the formation of a perpetually interconnected global community (ibid.).

Recent studies have revealed the intricate involvement of Indigenous peoples with social media, showcasing their use for various purposes such as shaping their identities, preserving traditional cultural practices, seeking and providing help, and engaging in political activism (Christen 2003; Kral, 2011; Carlson 2013; Frazer & Carlson 2017; Wilson et. al., 2017; Carlson & Dreher, 2018). Building upon the previous research available on indigenous practice of social media, I argued that social media sites has substantial influenced Nyishi community of Arunachal Pradesh. After conducting comprehensive online observation and engaging in ethnographic

research among the Nyishi community for a period of over three years, I strongly argued that the youth within the Nyishi community display a similar level of enthusiasm towards technology and social media platforms as young people in other parts of the world. While it is true that the digital infrastructure in the north-eastern states is not fully developed, it would be incorrect to assume that the indigenous people in these states have little interest in social media and the Internet. Although there is a recognized digital divide and the absence of reliable national survey data regarding the patterns of Internet use among the indigenous communities, it is important to acknowledge that indigenous communities should not be underestimated in terms of their interest in technology and the online environment.

The Nyishi youth are enthusiastic users of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, employing it for a multitude of purposes. Through online engagement and the exchange of opinions, diverse voices and perspectives thrive within the Nyishi community. This active participation in the digital realm plays a crucial role in developing a stronger collective identity, highlighting the richness and uniqueness of their indigenous heritage. Consequently, the digital involvement aids in fostering a broader comprehension and recognition of the Nyishi people, their cultural traditions, and valuable contributions to society.

The five Facebook community pages mentioned above are designed as entry points into the online ethnic world. These Facebook pages provide directories and listings showcasing various aspects of Nyishi art, culture, religion, music, food, and more. With the help of social media, youngsters from Nyishi community have been actively participating in recreating their cultural past, which also provides them visibility in society. Such endeavor resulted in developing a new online ethnic subjectivity among the Nyishi. At the same time, it got integrated into our everyday life facilitating a new mode of communication. Most importantly, it has given a voice to

individuals who have been historically underrepresented or unheard (Carlson 2013). For example, the indigenous communities in various part of the world (Christensen, 2005; Carlson 2013,) has been able to negotiate and affirm their rights (Duarte, 2017; Srinivasan, 2017). As Duarte writes the social media platform has democratized the space and provided a liberated space to the indigenous communities to share their culture, traditions, beliefs, political and economic view point. As we can see in fig. 8, it reads: ‘*Our tradition & Identity, We preserve & Revived*’. Now, indigenous communities from Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Nyishi, can represent themselves independently and perform their identity and agency which wasn’t possible before.



Figure 6.8 Nyishi women with traditional costumes

For a long time, many indigenous communities, including the Nyishi, in Arunachal Pradesh lacked power and agency to voice their concerns. The region was subjected to rigorous surveillance due to political and security considerations. Indigenous communities suffered significant consequences as cultural appropriation and assimilation pervaded their lives, leading to hardships and the loss of their cultural identity. Additionally, the indigenous people's original

faith and beliefs were further eroded through religious conversions. Besides that, schools and research institutions were established to bring out the sense of India among the indigenous communities in NEFA¹⁵⁹. This instrumentalization and institutionalization of Indigenous culture have adversely affected the cultural, social, political, ethnic, and religious landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. Local beliefs and practices underwent a process of Hinduization in the name of development and empowerment (ibid). Over the period of time, indigenous communities, including the Nyishi in Arunachal Pradesh faces grave challenges and undergoes serious transformations. During my offline ethnographic research, I discovered a growing divide between the younger and older generations. This gap primarily manifests in the realm of language proficiency and familiarity with indigenous cultural elements, such as folktales, songs, rituals, and other traditional practices. The younger generation appears to exhibit a significant gap in their knowledge and understanding of these vital aspects of their indigenous culture when compared to their older counterparts. During a face-to-face meeting with one of my respondents, I requested her to translate folktale that I collected from the Nyishi Facebook pages, she herself was an active participant and user. To my surprise, she responded in her Arunachalee Hindi slang:

Respondent: *humko thik se nahi maloom hai, hum apna dadi se puskar batayega*. (I can't explain clearly, I will ask my grandma and tell you).

Me: *arey aisa kya?* (Oh, is that so!).

Respondent: *arey ha toh ye toh pura khatarnaak nyishi bol raha hai, hum kese bta sakega tumko*. (Oh yes, she is speaking the traditional Nyishi, how can I tell you).

¹⁵⁹ Explaining the process of emotional integration between the then NEFA and mainland India, as well as the establishment of research institutions, writes: "The goal of government research became 'to find out such similarities and try to identify the people, their religion and culture with the rest of the country'" (Guyot-Réchart 2017, p. 261).

Me: *Arey? Tum Nyishing nai janta kya thora bhi?* (Oh! Don't you speak in Nyishi?).

Respondent: *Thora thora. Kese janega tum bolo toh...! basti mai hum raha he nai thora bhi, pura schooling boarding school mai kia.. vaha sab hindi mai baat krta tha, aur ab PG krne ke lie BHU mai par raha hai.* (I can speak but not fluently. I have studied in a boarding school and there I learnt Hindi. Everybody there in school speak Hindi. Now, I am pursuing my PG in Banaras Hindu University, Banaras).

She further mentioned that they often communicate in Hindi within their household, and most of her siblings and cousins speak to each other in Hindi. This gap can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the increasing influx of individuals from mainland India and other external regions into the community, and secondly, the government's initiative to promote integration among the indigenous communities in the state with mainland India, fostering a sense of Indianness within the state. This effort has been exemplified by initiatives such as providing scholarships to indigenous youth for studying in mainland India and organizing cultural tours like Bharat Darshan¹⁶⁰, which expose them to diverse cultures and people across India.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the phenomenon of cultural erosion is prevalent, as younger generations, like in many other communities worldwide, are drifting away from their cultural heritage. However, there are a few passionate individuals who are striving to reconnect with their cultural roots and actively work towards preserving and practicing them. These young individuals are engaged in the collection of cultural and ancient resources, such as folktales, rituals, and legends, from the elderly members (popularly known as *gaonbura* and *gaonburi*) of their community. They are then showcasing these valuable elements on various online platforms, serving as a means to represent and preserve their cultural identity. In the words of Stuart Hall (1996),

¹⁶⁰ “Annual tours took NEFA students across India ‘so that they could realise that they are part and parcel of the great Indian nation and should take pride in its rich heritage, civilisation and culture’ Guyot-Réchard 2017.

Indigenous consciousness as a means to acknowledge the individual/collective experience of marginalization in Arunachal Pradesh, highlighting the pervasive decline and assimilation of indigenous art, culture, and traditions. Thus, the young Nyishi people have been utilizing social media platforms to raise awareness about their culture and identity, as depicted in Figure 9, which conveys a compelling message.



Figure 6.9 Being Nyishi

As we can see in Fig. 9, it directly reflects the existing cultural threat within the community as the slogan as the slogan '*Loss of culture is a loss of identity*' has sparked widespread interest and become a source of contention and debate among the indigenous people, including the Nyishi in Arunachal Pradesh. Given the significant changes that have occurred in the lifestyle of indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh over the past few decades, many individuals are inclined to question their cultural, customary, and religious identities.

In Arunachal Pradesh, there is a noticeable change in the way the Nyishi indigenous identity is expressed in the public sphere. This change is evident in the manner in which Nyishi youth are

actively asserting their indigenous identity through various means, including their choice of clothing, use of language, gestures, visual symbols, and their involvement in the creation of multimedia films and music. The emergence of the Nyishi identity on the online platform cannot be dismissed as a mere coincidence, but rather as a deliberate outcome of particular political and cultural practices that have regulated, governed, and enforced the representation and discourse within mainstream society (Hall, 1996). This critical perspective sheds light on the intentional construction and positioning of the Nyishi identity, highlighting the power dynamics and control mechanisms that have influenced its presence in digital spaces. The online/offline cultural politics aimed at challenging, resisting, and transforming dominant regimes of representation within the Nyishi community can be understood through the lens of two key principles: *access* and *contestation*. Stuart Hall (1996), in his influential essay on Black identity in Britain in ‘New Ethnicities’, highlights these principles as essential in redefining marginalized identities and narratives. By applying these principles to the Nyishi community's struggle for representation, we can better understand the motivations behind their cultural politics. The principle of *access* underscores the need for the Nyishi community to have equal opportunities to shape and control their own representation. Historically, dominant regimes of representation have often excluded or distorted the narratives and experiences of indigenous and marginalized groups¹⁶¹. By gaining *access* to various forms of representation, including textual and virtual platforms, the Nyishi community can reclaim agency and present their perspectives in their own terms. This *access* allows for a more authentic and nuanced portrayal of their cultural identity, challenging the dominant narratives that have historically suppressed their voices. Second, the principle of *contestation* recognizes that challenging dominant regimes of representation requires active

¹⁶¹ Guyot-Réchar (2017) writes, that Indian press had portrayed the indigenous communities from Arunachal Pradesh as bloodthirsty savages. Additionally, the majority of newspapers limited their content to government communiqués and reports.

engagement and resistance. The Nyishi community's cultural politics involve contesting and questioning the existing representations and discourses that have shaped their identity. Through acts of resistance, they aim to disrupt the hegemonic power structures that have marginalized them and challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and inequalities. By contesting the existing representations, the Nyishi community seeks to transform the way their culture is perceived and understood, creating space for alternative narratives and counter-narratives to emerge.

In light of the Hall's 'New Ethnicities' (1996), the Nyishi people have entered a new phase marked by a proactive pursuit and affirmation of their cultural rights, freedom, and agency. This might be best described as the manifestation of indigenous consciousness within the context of the digital age, backed by digital platforms and technological affordance. As we see in fig. 10 & 11, serve as exemplary representations of the Nyishi community, showcasing their splendid nature and profound attachment to their cultural roots. The image of *Bhopia*-headgear in fig. 10, is an important symbol in the Nyishi culture. It signifies the social status, achievements, and cultural heritage of the wearer. The visual representation of the Nyishi headgear on Facebook page affirm Nyishi people's connection to their ancestral roots, history, and unique customs. By wearing this intricately crafted headdress during festivals and significant events, the Nyishi community showcases their commitment to preserving and celebrating their cultural heritage. It serves as a symbol of their identity, social standing, and cultural pride, ensuring the continuity of their traditions for generations to come.



Figure 6.10. Bhopia/Nyishi headgear

Additionally, Nyishi people take immense pride in celebrating their traditional festival called *Nyokum Yullo*, as the Facebook post in fig. 11 reads ‘Celebarte Nyishi ROOTS’. The festival is a way for the Nyishi people to offer prayers and seek blessings from the gods for a prosperous and fruitful year ahead. The word "*Nyokum*" translates to "land and people," and "*Yullo*" means "festival" in the Nyishi language. *Nyokum Yullo* is an important occasion for the Nyishi community to showcase their rich cultural heritage and traditions. It not only strengthens the bonds within the community but also allows outsiders to witness and appreciate the unique customs and rituals of the Nyishi people. Along with it, the picture depicts the traditional Nyishi costumes which is the marker of the Nyishi identity.

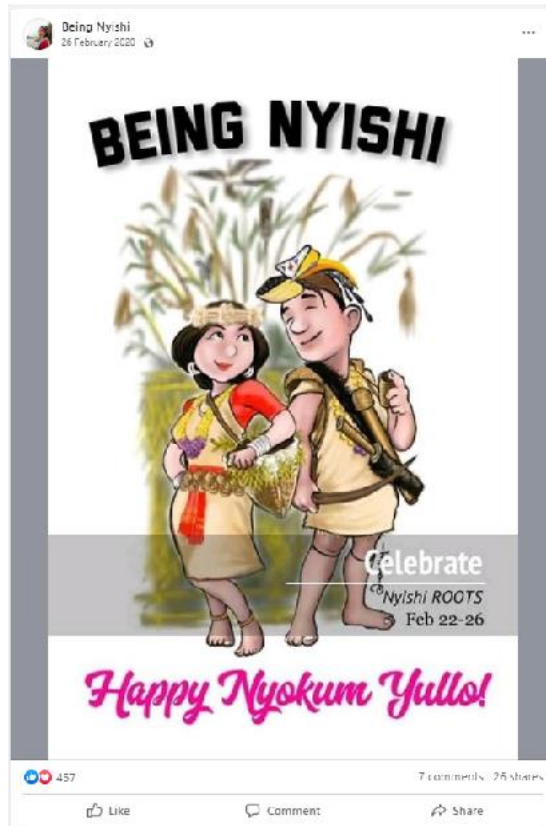


Figure 6.11 Happy Nyokum Yullo

Through the power of social media and online platforms, the Nyishi community leverages the digital sphere to share posts and information related to their cherished Nyokum Yullo festival. This active participation in the digital realm enables them to reach a wider audience, transcending geographical boundaries and cultural barriers. By utilizing social media platforms and online channels, they bridge the gap between the digital and the traditional, presenting their identity and ethnicity to the world with pride.

However, this new phase in the life of the Nyishi community does not fundamentally change or introduce any new elements to their existing embodied practices, except for the shift in the mode of communication and the adoption of online-mediated identity. Drawing upon Hall's concept of 'New Ethnicities', I presented the argument that the new phase in Nyishi community doesn't substitute the old or the essentialist nature of indigenous identities. Instead, the struggle for a

new identity took a new form as the community try to resist the cultural assimilation process (Hall 1996, p. 443).” At the same time, the focus has shifted from merely analyzing the current power dynamics in representation to actively engaging in shaping and questioning these dynamics (ibid). Now, the concept of representation can be understood in two ways: as a mirror of an external reality or as a complete departure from such a mimetic perspective. According to Hall, although events and structures have existence outside of language and communication, their interpretation and significance are heavily influenced by the realm of discourse. The significance of cultural and ideological factors in influencing how representations are formed cannot be understated. These representations, in turn, exert a powerful influence on the way individuals perceive themselves, their sense of identity, and their social, cultural, and political perspectives. It is important to recognize that representation goes beyond being a simple tool of expression; rather, it plays a fundamental role in shaping the complex interplay of social and political forces. The representation of Nyishi identity on social media platforms goes beyond simple expression and takes on a more significant role as a tool for negotiating and reconstructing identity within the digital realm. These platforms provide individuals with opportunities to share their experiences, perspectives, and cultural practices, thereby influencing the portrayal and comprehension of Nyishi identity.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

“All wisdom was long ago written on pieces of skin and given both to the hill-people and the people of the plains. But the hungry tribesmen cooked and ate their piece of skin, with the result that they have always been ignorant.”

-Verrier Elwin (1999, p.99)

Folklore has been an integral part of Nyishi community. In the recent time, folklore was established as cultural heritage and embodiment of moral or symbolic properties (Anttonen 2005, p. 58) in Nyishi community by theregional elites and indigenous faith and believer. Also, folklore has been used to reproduce and renegotiate indigenous consciousness and identity. Nyishi people have been widely using folklore for conceptualizing, historicizing, and territorializing their identity. The younger generation have taken over responsibility for preserving the folklore: collecting the folklore, myth, legend etc. from the elderly people (*gaon bura*, *gaon buri*, *niyub*) in the form of audios, videos, and texts, at the same time they responsibly preserve and propagate these elements on social media sites. Seeing the enthusiasm of younger generations, and the politics around the folklore, this thesis present a compelling argument on how folklore shaped Nyishi identity, and also responsible for human cultural production and communication. Besides that, it represents a critical analysis and reflection on how folkloric identity can thrive in the face of ideological and political pressures, highlighting the complex relationship between folklore, cultural identity, and the wider social and political context in which they exist.

The use of folklore in participatory media, such as social media, microblogging sites, and web forums has created new ways to mediate and reproduce indigenous knowledge and identity,

while preserving the cultural expressions and traditions. Nyishi youngsters, activists, and intellectuals have been using social media platforms to revitalize the folklore. They have been organizing meetings, workshops, webinars, special talks, and competitions on Nyishi folklore and cultural heritage on Facebook pages to educate the community on indigenous identity and its relevance in the contemporary society. In this sense, the presence of Nyishi folklore on the social media platforms like Facebook, is an interesting blend of tradition and technology. Now, the internet and social media reinforces various aspects of our cultural identities, including our connection to folklore and traditional forms of expression (Bronner 2002), making the word ‘internet folklore’ more relevant to the study of folklore in the digital age¹⁶².

While the internet and social media facilitated the Nyishi community to practice, preserve, and propagate their folklore, it also shaped their indigenous identity. The active participation and engagement of Nyishi people on the Facebook pages led to the emergence of a new ethnicity online, shedding light on the complexities within the Nyishi community.

The collection and preservation of folklore that have shaped Nyishi identity are indeed a welcoming step. Entire Nyishi community is proud of this initiative and contributing to the formation of their indigenous identity. People from different ideological, political, and religious background are actively participating in online Nyishi folklore competitions, webinars, and workshops to show their solidarity towards the community. During an online interview about the online Nyishi folktale competitions on Facebook page, I discovered that the Nyishi participants from both the indigenous faith (Donyi polo) and Christian faith have equally participated in the

¹⁶² As Trevor J Blank writes: “Folklore continues on the Internet whether we examine it or not, so it is practical to study folklore in an Internet context” (Blank 2009, p. 8).

competition, contributing to the indigenous knowledge. The finding shows that the Nyishi people from different religious denomination feel proud of their ethnic identity, and continue to carry forward their Nyishi identity — in their costumes, food, and festivals, and gracefully represents the community in front of the world.



Figure. 7. 1 Nyishi women in front of Gotopu Baptist Church



Figure. 7.2 Nyishi woman participating in online folktale competition

The traditional dresses and ornaments worn by the women in fig. 1 & 2 serve as markers of their ethnic/indigenous identity. The *tashi* (beads) around the neck is considered an important ornament for traditional Nyishi women. The ornaments and costumes worn by the women represents their womanhood and financial status in the community. Both the images are identical: displaying a sense of kinship and belonging to the community. However, the idea of kinship and ethnicity is subtly questioned by many regional elites because of religious disparities. The same attitude is reflected on both online and offline platforms by many indigenous faith believers from the Nyishi community. In my research, I have observed that the rise in indigenous consciousness, and preservation of folklore and cultural heritage has been used as a reactionary tool by the regional elites to counter the Christians forces within the state, particularly in the Nyishi community. To achieve the goal, Nyishi elites used the internet and social media platforms as an outlet for indigenous collective consciousness.

While the Facebook pages helped the Nyishi people in building an online indigenous community, it raises serious questions on their collective identity as Nyishi. During the research, I observed that the Nyishi people from Christian denomination are heavily criticized and accused of eroding the cultural heritage and tradition. However, my finding tells a different story. The above mentioned figures taken during the research (fig. 1 was collected during the offline ethnography while fig. 2 was collected from the NNMR Facebook page) are identical and negates the claim of regional indigenous elites. Although the women standing in front of Gotopu Baptist Church in Papumpare district (see fig. 1), are Christian believer, they uphold the same values and traditions as the woman in fig. 2, who is supposedly indigenous faith believer. But there's a widening gap between the Christians and Indigenous faith believers within the Nyishi community, and the

resulting damage was considerable. Contemporary Nyishi indigenous identity is inextricably intertwined with the religious identity, resulting in a fragmented society.

However, the deterioration of indigenous culture and language can't be attributable solely to the Christianity in the region. Definitely, Christianity has brought significant change in the region, fighting against social evils, and promoting developmental and social service-oriented work; it didn't assimilate or absorb the tribal culture (Xaxa, 2000). Instead, the assimilation and integration of the indigenous culture in Arunachal Pradesh began during the postcolonial era. For example, deterioration of the indigenous languages can be directly attributable to the proliferation/imposition of Hindi language in the region. The heavy influx of army and security personnel from mainland India from 1962 onwards has changed the landscape and demographic composition of Arunachal Pradesh (Réchard 2017; Longkumer 2020). Besides that, introduction of Hindi as a second language in schools and medium of instruction in Arunachal Pradesh by the Indian government controlled the mental universe of the indigenous students (Réchard 2017). This was a deliberate form of alienation of the people from their roots as the written language of the child is divorced from his spoken language at home. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, many youngsters from the Nyishi community struggle to converse and understand Nyishi language as they learn and speak Hindi in school and home since their early years. Along with the language, there's rampant modification and alteration in indigenous life styles. Cultural assimilation is at its peak and people are divided based on an emphasis on Indic-centered aesthetics consciousness. Unlike the Nyishi Christian believer, followers of Nyishi indigenous faith and believe aligned themselves with the hegemonic practices of mainland Hinduism. As we can see in Fig.3, one Facebook user has pointed out the inclusion of images portraying Hindu gods and goddesses within indigenous religious practices. Although the intellectuals, activists and volunteers in the indigenous movement in

Arunachal Pradesh denied their affiliation or influence of Hinduism on indigenous faith and believe, one can't ignore the involvement of Hindu organizations.



Figure. 7.3 'Essence of Indigenous Faith'

The presence of Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Ganesh, Krishna, Jagannatha, along with the image of Donyi-polo, in the above-mentioned picture suspects the role of Hindutva forces in Arunachal Pradesh and raises questions on the indigenous faith campaign. During the campaign, the president of Women-Wing NNMR beautifully explained the 'Essence of Indigenous Faith', preaching the audience about the brotherhood and animistic practices within the community. Contradict to her speech, the animistic practices within the indigenous community have transformed into an anthropomorphic religion (see fig. 3).

The contemporary indigenous faith and believe movement represents a continuation of the post-colonial project that is designed and motivated by both the mainland India and regional elites in Arunachal Pradesh. A new indigenous identity—"embodying culturally-loaded notions of primitivism and superiority" is reproduced in Arunachal Pradesh through territorial and administrative functions (Biswas and Suklabaidya 2008, p.110). In my research, I found that the indigenous movement on both online and offline platforms are supported and sponsored by regionals elites who are either directly and indirectly associated with various Hindu organizations. For examples, the prize money for the Online Folklore Competitions organized by the NNMR Facebook page is often sponsored by the regional elites who has political connection with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV). Also, various indigenous projects initiated during the course of my research were left unexplored due to time constraints, necessitating further investigation into their relevance to indigenous identity.

This thesis on 'Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A Netnography Study on the Nyishi community of Arunachal Pradesh' conclude that the collection and circulation of Nyishi folklore on the internet as well as on the social media sites has contributed towards the growth of indigenous knowledge, resulting in a new ethnic identity online. Also, it emphasizes that in order to understand the community, it is important to understand and follow their folklore and indigenous practices.

Limitations

The thesis limit itself to Nyishi folklore and online mediated identity. Although the political and religious aspects are deeply embedded in indigenous consciousness, and there's a growing debate between Nyishi indigenous faith and Christian faith, the thesis didn't delve into the political and religious angle in details. Besides that, it didn't include any events or developments occurred on both online and offline platforms after December 2021.

Also, the primary research participants are active Facebook user from the Nyishi community who are engaged in online debate and discussions; contributing to the Nyishi online discourse. This research didn't encompass all aspects of folklore but rather focused on the extensively circulated folklore material shared by Nyishi individuals on Facebook pages. For my research purpose, I have selected five Facebook pages based on parameters i.e., folklore, legends, myths, history, culture, identity. Besides that, the thesis emphasized interplay between the internet and Nyishi folklore.

Further Suggestions

Various indigenous projects initiated during the course of my research were left unexplored due to time constraints, necessitating further investigation into their relevance to indigenous identity. Political, social, cultural, and religious organizations: Donyi Polo Cultural & Charitable Trust (DPCCT); Nyubu Nyvgam Yerko — a gurukul system where the children are taught indigenous knowledge and practices from a very young age; Donyi Polo Yelam Kebang (DPYK); Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV); Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP), Nyishi Baptist Church Council (NBCC) and other should be studied thoroughly to comprehend the indigenous consciousness movement and preservation of cultural heritage in Arunachal Pradesh. There are limited research on Arunachal Pradesh, particularly on Nyishi community and their socio-political and religious life. So, thesis opened new scope for the future research while contributing to the available literature on Nyishi community.

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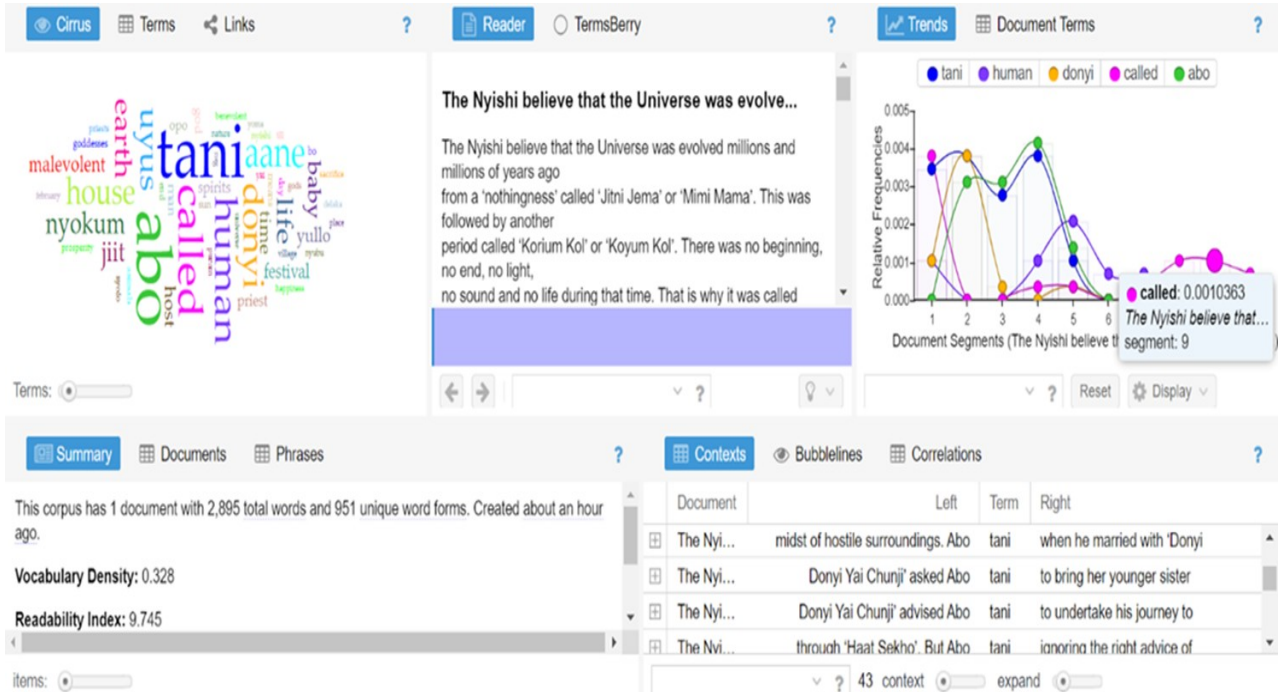
Filmography

Mera Dharam Meri Maa (1976).

ANNEXURE 1

Facebook and Field

(Selected Data and Analysis)



FACEBOOK

Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh · 13 July 2019 · 🌐

PEPSI is a Cold Drink and nothing else.

In Arunachal Pradesh, most of the Nyishi people love to drink PEPSI except Nyishi people of East Kameng side. But it doesn't mean that only Nyishi do love to drink Pepsi. Our brothers and sisters of others tribes of Arunachal Pradesh also do love to drink it. It means most of the Arunachalee do love Pepsi.

👉 Consumption of anything is not bad but Consumption of anything by too much is not good for us.
👉 Even, Consumption of little... [See more](#) — feeling fantastic.

40 · 2 · 1

Like · Comment · Share

Most relevant ▾

Write a comment...

Being Nyishi · 10 June 2019 · 🌐

The Story of our Abo Tani. (In Hindi)

1.1K · 68 · 84K

Like · Comment · Share

Up next

Kangam Kangam | Nyishi | Nyokum...
Being Nyishi
13 weeks ago · 178K view

HORNBILL helped...

Comments

Write a comment...

This photo is from a post. [View Post](#)

Being Nyishi · 2 February 2018 · 🌐

3 · 2

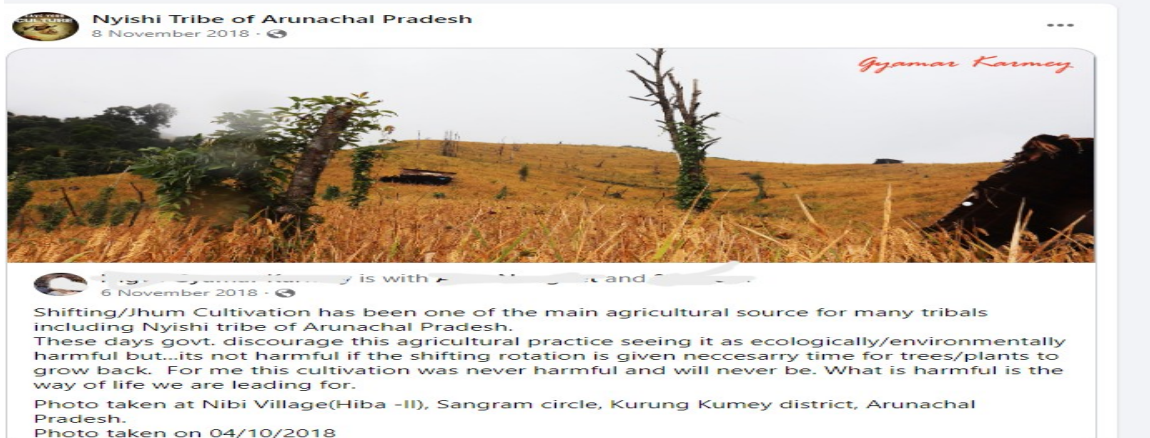
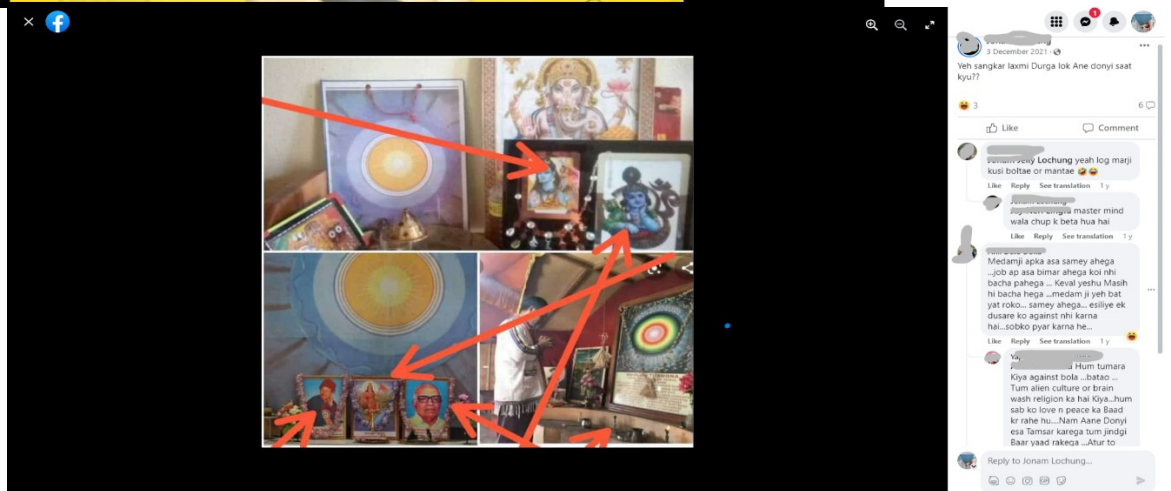
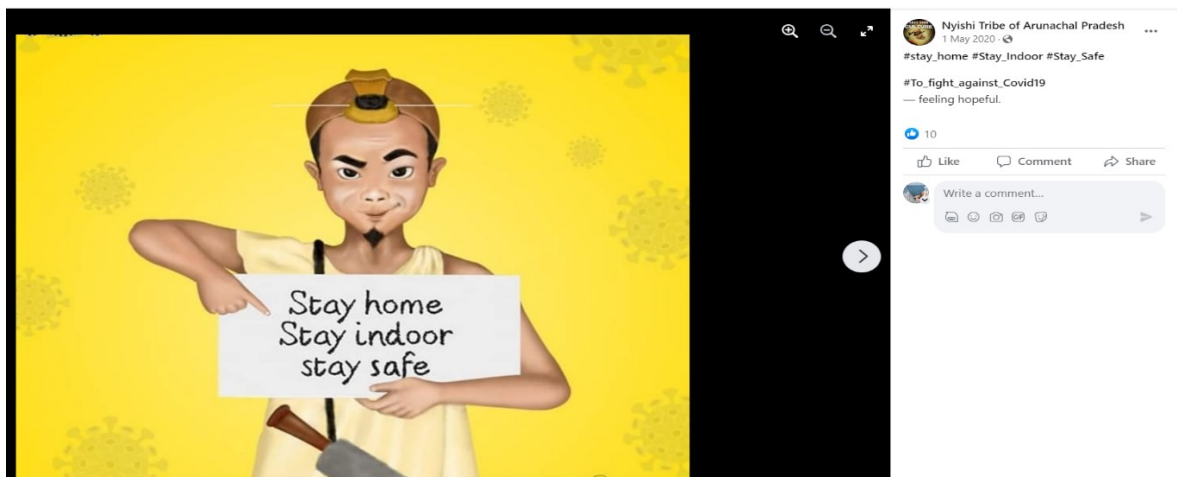
Like · Comment · Share

Most relevant ▾

Black one
Like · Reply

Author
Being Nyishi
Take it 😊

Write a comment...





So today we celebrate the grand arrival of deities/spirits, let's sing jain ja



So today we celebrate this grand arrival of deities/spirits, let's sing jain ja

← → ↻ 📄 🌐 ⭐ 🏠 📱 🗨️

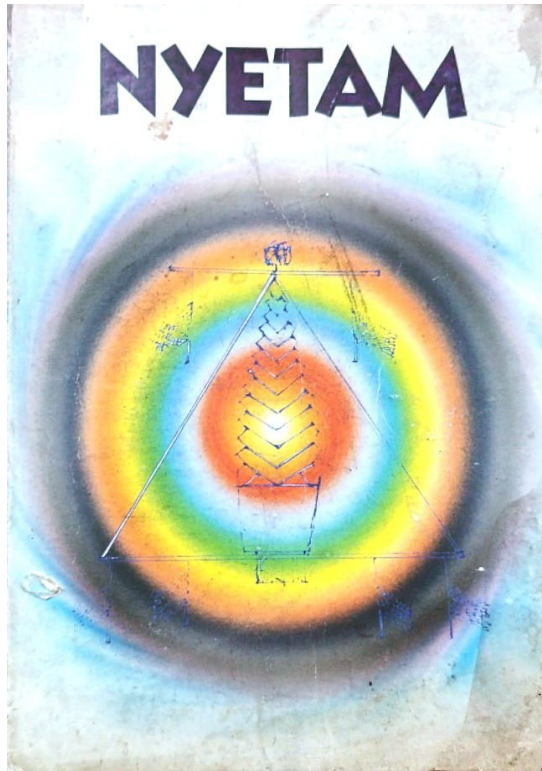
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I About Us

Popularly known as 'Land of the Dawn-lit-Mountains', Arunachal Pradesh is India's remotest state and the first Indian soil to greet the rising sun. Located on the northeastern tip of India with its borders touching China, Bhutan and Burma (Myanmar), this beautiful land is endowed with dazzling array of flora and fauna that is sure to allure any tourist. More than 500 rare species of Orchids are found in the dense jungles of Arunachal Pradesh. The misty hills, sparkling rivers, gurgling waterfalls add charm to the beauty of this incredible land. Arunachal Pradesh finds its mention in the literature of Kalika Purana and the great Hindu Epic Mahabharata. It is believed to be the Prabhu Mountains of the Puranas. According to a Hindu mythological legend, Arunachal Pradesh was the place where sage Parshuram washed away his sin, sage Vyasa meditated, King Bhishmaka founded his kingdom and Lord Krishna married his consort Rukmini. Ruled by many powerful dynasties and kingdoms, Arunachal Pradesh India is dotted with innumerable historical monuments and archeological remains, which bear testimony to its rich cultural heritage.

FIELD



ANNEXURE 2 (Selected Publications and Presentations)



Book Review

Critical Research on Religion
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–2
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Arkotong Longkumer, *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781503613461, 336 pp. \$30 USD pbk.

Reviewed by: Deepika Kashyap , University of Hyderabad, India
DOI: 10.1177/20503032231174214

In the last decade, Northeast India has witnessed a great cultural shift along with the changing of the guard in the region. The regional elites have discovered new alliances and opportunities under the aegis of the Sangh Parivar, acting as a catalyst for the ongoing transition. Alongside sociocultural transition, the increasing presence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the political wing of the Sangh Parivar—has also changed the electoral formula in the region. At long last, the Northeast has received exceptional media coverage and countrywide importance after the rise of the BJP in power. What has led to this ongoing transition in the Northeast? How is the “tribal conscience” overshadowed by the newly developed “Hindu/nationalistic conscience” in the Northeast? How do the Northeast people react to the changing power dynamic and cultural shift in the region? The newly developed equation between the Northeast and Sangh Parivar requires an understanding of the historical past of the Northeast along with the cultural and emotional integration of the Northeast over the decades. In his book *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*, Arkotong Longkumer provides honest and critical descriptions of the historical past of the Northeast alongside the contemporary developments in politics, ethnicity, and religion in the region.

The book is divided into seven chapters and each chapter extensively discusses the ongoing sociocultural transition engineered by the Sangh Parivar with support from the regional elites. Chapter 1 gives a general overview of the Hindutva ideology and the old fervor of the Sangh Parivar, which dreamt of Akhand Bharat or Great India. Here, the author tries to create a different and impartial narrative by overturning the conventional way of criticizing Sangh Parivar. In mainland India, Sangh Parivar is infamous for its violence and there are volumes of text available on the same, whereas in the Northeast the story is different. The author observed that despite their secrecy, Sangh Parivar members/volunteers are highly exposed to violence. In other words, it is dangerous to praise or speak of the Sangh Parivar in public places. Despite all the hostilities, volunteers are committed to

Internet folklore and online mediated identity: A theoretical approach

DEEPIKA KASHYAP, UNIVERSITY OF TARTU, ESTONIA

Introduction

Internet folklore has modified the definition of folklore; now, we can produce the folklore anywhere through the internet. (Blank 2009; McNeill 2013; Wood and Smith 2005) Through the internet and online communication tools (Facebook, YouTube, Google App- Nyishi World App) Nyishi people are taking the initiative to save and spread their culture and identity in the society. In the age of mechanical reproduction of culture, people are actively participating and representing themselves on the internet. The internet has provided a space for every individual in the society which is safe for the person to exercise their agency. (Kennedy 2014) The engagement of every individual in cultural production gives birth to the concept of folklore. Folklore deals with the culture produced by everybody in society instead of the few selected ones. (McNeill 2013) So, it is essential to understand the culture, how it is produced and its reception in society.

Why the folklore has to deal with the informal cultural tradition or informal institutions? What gives a clear knowledge about the society or community? As far as folklore is concerned, it is much expressive than any other form of culture and artistic production. (Toelken 1996) Folklore tells about the absurd social practices and customs, and definitely, it represents the unconscious self of one's own. (Dundes and Bronner 2007) To understand the culture or a community one should closely observe and document the everyday

Folklore and the Changing Pattern in Communication:

A Study On Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

Deepika

Research Scholar, PhD

Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad

Email: deepika.media researcher@gmail.com

Abstract:

Folklore gives us a spectacular glimpse of a particular culture and traditions. Many of the community express their culture and tradition through art, music, festival, paintings, and many more. It is important to study the folklore to know about the unknown and unfamiliar things about the different culture and people. North-East India have a convergence of people, popularly described as a tribal, living in a different stages of under-development and in most cases without a written history of their own. The region provides vast folklore material which if studied systematically and scientifically may help building up history of different social groups residing there. The Nyishi (daflas) are the largest ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh in North-eastern India. Nyishi are proud of their language and culture. This study aimed at finding the pattern of everyday communication among the Nyishi people. It is necessary to understand the governing elements of the community which is responsible for the growth and development of it. There are elements like economy, education, health, gender, politics which are necessary to be addressed. In a broader term the culture and tradition of the community need to be addressed and examine critically. The primary theoretical and methodological framework will be folkloristic, other related theories and methods will be drawn from communication, cultural anthropology, and media anthropology. It will cover the day to day life of Nyishi people as well the influence of

Divyang and Digital Divide: A Study on Nyishi Tribes in Sagalee Village of Papumpare District, Arunachal Pradesh

Deepika Kashyap | PhD Scholar | Department of Communication | University of Hyderabad
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Abstract: *In the recent years, the word “Divyang” floating around the media house and academic discourse, and attracting many criticism and intellectual discussion. Many of the NGOs, activists, lawyers, and intellectuals raised their eyebrows on the word “Divyang”, and it is not only about the terminology. The word “Divyang” transgress the broader concept of ‘disability’ because any form of ‘disability’ and ‘deformity’ create a tough situation in life. Simply changing the terminology does not solve the problem. Many of us understand the word “Divyang” or “disability” as a medical term, but it prevails beyond the medical term. The broader definition for “disability” talks about the defunct society or community, how they are affected by rigid social structure and the government policies. If we closely observe the functionality of the word “disability” we will be able to see how it is closely associated with our social behavior and attitude. Very often we despise the people who all are physically and economically handicapped. Other than that we despise the people on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, religion and region. The unequal distribution of resources often creates the imbalance in the society, and we started despising the less privileged people. By denying the rights and accessibility to the resources we are making the less privileged people disable. And, there are many society and community who all are often denied their rights, and cut off from the main stream society and development projects. Tribes in India are the most affected people because of the disparity in resources. Due to their difficult geographical location they could not able to take advantage of any development projects. It is very surprising that even in the age of information and technology many tribes in India are yet to take advantage of mobile network, television and internet. India is becoming digital but the tribes are still disable! In the age of information, Nyishi tribes in Arunachal Pradesh yet to get proper mobile and internet connectivity. Disruption in TV networks often disappoint them. It is important to bridge the gap created by the information age, improve the accessibility of ICT, or else they will be disabled due to the digital divide.*

LECTURE SERIES WORLD AND PEOPLE: NYISH FOLKLORE IN THE INTERNET AGE

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LECTURE SERIES WORLD AND PEOPLE: NYISH FOLKLORE IN THE INTERNET AGE

3.12.2019 at 18:00

ERM World Film Hall (A-entrance)

Participation is FREE!

The presentation will be made by Deepika Kashyap, visiting doctor of the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the University of Tartu

Nyishis are the largest ethnic group of people in Arunachal Pradesh. There is a belief that they are descendants of powerful ancestors (called Abotans). The word 'Nishi' or 'Nyishi' is an old and native word derived from two words: 'nyi' or 'nyia' and 'shi' or 'shin'. The word 'nyi' means 'man', i.e. the descendant of Aathu/Aatoh Nyia, i.e. the son of Aabhu/Abho Thanyi. The word 'shi' or 'shing' means 'to be'. According to it, nyishi means "to be human".

The Nyish believed that the entire universe was divided into three words - earth, sky and underworld. Earth (sachang) is the abode of living beings, which includes humans, animals and plants. Heaven (Nyedo) is the abode of gods, goddesses and other celestial beings. The Underworld (Weyi/Nel) is where life continues after death. In Nyish beliefs, legends and folktales, there is also an imaginary world called Talang Nyoku, which lies between heaven and earth. It means to the Nyish people their culture and tradition.

WORLD FILM HALL

DECEMBER 03, 2019
AT 18:00
A ENTRANCE





The Association for
Computers and the
Humanities

Association for Computers and the Humanities

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ACH2021 Conference Organizers
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University of Texas at Austin
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27/Apr/2021

To Whom It May Concern

This is to confirm that **Deepika Kashyap** is welcome to participate in **ACH2021 Conference**, to be held in Virtual: July 19 - 23, 2021.

Please note that, for in-person conferences, registration fees, travel, living and accommodation expenses will not be supported by the conference organizers. For all-virtual conferences, conference organizers cannot provide any presenter subvention.

Deepika Kashyap is author/co-author of the following accepted contribution(s):

Digitization of indigenous culture: Performing and preserving the identity in the age of social media

Author(s): Kashyap, Deepika

Presenting Author: Kashyap, Deepika

Submission Type / Conference Track: Individual Paper

We look forward to seeing Deepika Kashyap.

With kind regards

ACH2021 Conference Organizers

Performing Online: Nyishi Folklore in the Age of Internet

Deepika, University of Hyderabad, India

Nyishi folklore from Arunachal Pradesh, India, is gradually getting shaped by the technological wonderland. Folks from the Nyishi community are reinventing themselves in the online sphere through their performances. The online identity and agency are solely based on the functionality and the performativity of the subject. With the penetration of the internet and the widespread use of technology, the trope of performance has been encapsulated in the process of production and control of culture in the world of technology. The understanding of performativity is no longer restricted to the art, music, dance or theatre-based practices. Even a simple image can perform online and have its own agency. For example, the Nyishi folklore on the internet is a collection of multiple images, stories, and lore. The performativity of these images encapsulates the culture of the community. Through these images, the community is gaining visibility in this networked society, where an individual or a community is interconnected in the virtual world. The virtual or the digital world produces its own culture, and the Nyishi community greatly benefits from this. Once an inaccessible land, now it is self-referential, floating around the internet and attracting many visitors and tourists. The Nyishi people are quite active in many social sites such as Facebook and Instagram, and actively

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Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A Netnography Study in Nyishi Community, Arunachal Pradesh

Modern technologies and innovations have transformed the culture and tradition of the Nyishi community. It has created a new identity for Nyishi people through the internet. The penetration of the internet or the WWW (world wide web) allowed the folk to express and represent their "lore" - culture, custom and tradition to a wider mass. The Internet also opened up for a new mode of communication where people can create and circulate the messages easily. With the advancement of technology and internet, a lot of cultures, traditions, and folklore around the world have revived and are reaching out to the people by crossing the geographical barrier as well as the time limit. Nowadays people from many communities are coming online and creating a space of their own and expressing their identity, culture, and agency. Nyishi folklore is also taking pace with the help of internet technology. Internet folklore is becoming a major source of information and

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Production and Circulation of Nyishi Folklore in the Digital Realm

Nyishi community are the major ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Despite having a spectacular culture and tradition, they were less known to the world because of their geographical location. But, the penetration of the internet has transformed the community and culture globally; even places that missed the age of land-line phones are getting cellular-based mobile systems. Now, the concept of identity and culture is closely associated with the interface between technology and society. This advancement in technologies has largely influenced the Nyishi community. Now, they can circulate, recreate, and save their cultures and traditions with the help of the Internet. Being an ethnic group, the Nyishi community have many legends and stories about their evolution and existence, which are now available on the online platform. The penetration of the Internet has provided a space for the Nyishi community to represent and disseminate their folk identity. The Nyishi folklore is now moving through the Internet and, at the same time, the Internet has created new forms of Nyishi folklore because the technology has enabled new kinds of communication to occur. The world is slowly learning about the existence of the Nyishi community and their vibrant folk culture. This paper is going to examine the influence of the Internet

Digital Transformation of Indigenous Culture in Covid-19

Author(s): [Deepika Kashyap \(see profile\)](#)

Date: 2021

Group(s): [CSDH-SCHN 2021: Making the Network](#)

Subject(s): [Digital humanities](#), [Identity \(Psychology\)](#), [Technology](#), [Indigenous peoples](#), [Social media](#)

Item Type: [Conference paper](#)

Conf. Title: [CSDH-SCHN 2021: Making the Network](#)

Conf. Date: 2021

Tag(s): [facebook](#), [Internet technology](#), [online identity](#), [Identity and technology](#)

Permanent URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/q31w-n765>

Abstract: This study will assess the role of social media in the construction of social and community identity. The study is based on the Nyishi community, one of the indigenous communities from Arunachal Pradesh, the North-eastern state of India. I am keenly interested in the participation of Nyishi people on Facebook because most of the people from this community use Facebook and find it user-friendly, unlike Twitter or Instagram. Based on my 2016-17 ethnographic study on the Nyishi community, Facebook or any other social media was not a relevant topic for the Nyishi people. The popularity of Facebook among the Nyishi is a recent phenomenon, and people find it simple and user-friendly. Since more people are participating and using Facebook, I found Facebook is an ideal platform to measure the influence of technology on Nyishi culture and society. The novelty of this research lies in the Nyishi community's transitions due to the influence of social media on them. When the world is grappling with the Covid-19 situations and physical interaction of human beings is prohibited,

Deepika Kashyap "Asserting tribal identity with a modern touch: A perfect blend of tech and culture"

Indigenous and tribal peoples are under constant threat from exploitation, theft, misrepresentation and commodification. For the development and security of the nation-state, tribal peoples are being made the scapegoat. The state snatched their land and livelihood for the greater good while leaving them displaced and in a dilapidated situation. Above all, cultural assimilation is the biggest fear and challenge for many tribal groups. So tribal peoples are using every opportunity and resource to save their tribal culture and identity. This study is focused on the tribal community from the North-Eastern part of India and their engagement with modernity and digital tech. North-Eastern tribes are unique in India because of their distinct physical appearance and cultural practices. In mainland India, they are treated as outsiders; sometimes, people use the derogatory term "chinki" or call them Chinese. Surprisingly many people from mainland India don't even know about the state's existence in the North-Eastern region. Despite all this ignorance and rejection by mainland India, tribes from the North-Eastern region are determined to save their culture and identity with the help of the internet and digital tech. Online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc., have created an independent and accessible space for them to perform and assert their tribal identity. Young artists from the community are using music and digital tech as a tool for cultural assertion and tribal identity. The recent YouTube hit *Jajin ja* by artist Chorun Mugli is a perfect blend of tech and culture where the artist has used high-tech gear to record music yet rooted in its traditional heritage. The song depicts the life, culture and traditions of the Nyishi community from the North-East region. The dramatic end in the song where the father shows his kingdom to his son and passes on the *dao/uryu* to him affirms the continuation of culture. By bringing together the cultural aspects in a modern way, this song appeals to the new younger generations and enhances their traditional and tribal identity. This study will further explore the role of web 2.0 in the production and circulation of tribal identity.

Internet Folklore and Online Mediated Identity: A Netnography Study on Nyishi Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Submission date: 03-Aug-2023 02:23PM (UTC+0530)

Submission ID: 2140768360

File name: Deepika_PhD_Thesis.pdf (3.23M)

Word count: 47328

Character count: 266308

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