

Nyokum Yulow and Religious Outlook of the Nyishi: A note on familiarity and Emic-Etic Rationality

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The present paper draws on my reflection on 'actual' and 'real' when I encountered situations different from what I considered to be 'mine'. The reflection therefore is influenced by theoretical grounding and empirical experiences. I have tried to argue my points with reference to Nyokum Yulow, an important annual festival of the Nyishi community living in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India.

The Nyishi is the largest tribe in terms of population and in terms of territorial occupation. The total population of the tribe, as per the information provided by Nyishi Elite Society, Itanagar is more than 2 lakhs out of about 13 lakhs population of more than 30 tribal groups in the state. They mostly inhabit the districts of Kurung Kumey, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Papumpare and East Kameng. Besides, the Nyishi are also found in few pockets of Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. There are some sections of the Nyishi in other districts also. The Nyishis belong to Tani group of the tribes, others being Adi, Apatani, Galo and Tagin, but differ in terms of socio-cultural institutions. They have their own belief system and rituals, which differ from other Tani groups of tribe in terms of name and ritual practices. Rituals are celebrated both at individual and community levels. The tribe usually appeases various deities for health and prosperity. So, they perform rituals to cure diseases, harvest good crops, raise good livestock's and also on occasions of birth, marriage and death. While performing rituals, they also engage in merry-making and feasting on many occasions. These manifest sacred and secular life² of the people having been interwoven into the social reality of a community identity.

One of the important celebrations of the Nyishi is Nyokum Yulow which they celebrate for five days from 24th to 28th February every year. The day 26th of February is declared as a holiday by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh in the list of local holidays. I had the opportunity of participating in it during 1996. I learnt from the speeches of the organizers that it is celebrated for the good health, peace and prosperity of the humankind. The purpose so told seemed to me too superficial. I wondered how it

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² For the concept of sacred-secular continuum see Saraswati, 1975.

could be for the welfare of the humankind when a particular community celebrates it in its own way. There are sacrifice of animals and ritualistic performances by Nyishi priests. The mithun (*bos frontalis*), the prized and most important animal of sacrifice, does not carry any significance - symbolic or otherwise- for the people of other cultures except some communities in the state. I was not some how impressed with the spelt out objectives of the celebration which seemed to me mere braggadocioes. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the feast and merry-making but did not bother for the objectives which seemed too high sounding for my understanding and appreciation.

In these years after my first participation in Nyokum Yulow at Arunachal University campus in 1996, I have had also opportunities to attend the celebration at different places like Doimukh, Mani, Nirjuli and Yazali. As a result I have got an understanding of the practices which probably I could not appreciate first time because of my own cultural bias and/or lack of proper insight into them³. In this paper I have made an attempt to understand the evolving ideas associated with Nyishi religious outlook through the practices in the Nyokum Yulow.

Expanding horizon

The world view (cf. Redfield,1953 & 1962 and Adhikary:1984 & 1991) of a people is not static. The term worldview in simple terms refers to the perception of interrelationship between human, nature and supernature. It is an ideological understanding of the interaction and interrelationship between the three. There are many internal and external dynamics which contribute to a change in the understanding of such interrelationship through the expansion of the horizon of knowledge. An example in this regard can be cited for clarification of the point. Ancient Hindu scriptures and the Bible of the Christians⁴ recorded the Earth to be the centre of the Universe and the Sun moving around it. Today, the belief no more holds in the world view of the Hindu or the Christian scholars. Similarly, crossing of the sea has no more been a prohibition in the Hindu worldview.

³ This concern could be appreciated with reference to emic-etic debate. See Mibang & Behera, 2004:7. The debate is extensively presented by Basar, 2011 in her dissertation.

⁴ In Hindu scriptures it is mentioned that the Sun God moves from *Udyachal* to *Astachal* in his chariot drawn by seven horses. Of course, the path of his journey does not point to the fact that the earth is round. Western Christian biblical references [Psalm 93:1](#), [Psalm 96:10](#), and [1 Chronicles 16:30](#) include (depending on translation) text stating that "the world is firmly established, it cannot be moved." In the same tradition, [Psalm 104:5](#) says, "the LORD set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved." Further, [Ecclesiastes 1:5](#) states that "And the sun rises and sets and returns to its place" etc. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_Galilei).

Coming to my understanding of Nyokum Yulow of the Nyishi I am no more as puzzled as I used to be earlier on learning that Nyokum Yulow is celebrated for the welfare of humankind. From very early days, Nyokum Yulow is being celebrated at clan and village levels as a measure to ward off diseases and to reduce the effects of prevent or calamities on human, domestic animals and crops. On occasions, only Yulow is celebrated at clan and village levels also. (Begi, 1997; Rikam, 2001; Showren, 2009:94 and Tara, 2005).

Nyokum Yulow or only Yulow is being celebrated at village level on occasions of the threat of epidemics, natural calamities or when mithuns suffer from foot and mouth diseases. Whether it would be a Yulow or Nyokum Yulow depends on the number of Wiyus responsible for the happenings. Similarly, when the members of a household frequently suffer from diseases or there happens to be frequent occurrences of death or some accident, the household performs the Yulow ritual to propitiate the Yulow Wiyu responsible for the happening. (ibid., Also see Showren,2009 Sangdo,2007-08). Hence it does not take place on a fixed day of the year. In 2004, R.T. Tara of Doimukh had performed a Yulow ritual in his house to propitiate Ropi Yulow in which I had the opportunity of participation.

In Nyokum Yulow of traditional nature the clan or village community participate in its organisation. Even when an individual household celebrates Yulow, it is not the members of the household only whose welfare concern is kept in view, the clan members are also blessed in it. That is why clan members voluntarily take part in it. Besides the Yulow and Nyokum Yulow of traditional nature, the Nyishi celebrate another Nyokum Yulow at community level in recent years. It began in 1967 from Joram village of the Nyishi in Lower Subansiri district. Since then it is celebrated by the community regularly from 24th to 28th February every year. (Begi, 1997; Rikam, 2001 and Showren, 2009:94). The celebration of Yulow ritual and Nyokum Yulow has thus got institutionalised at the community level contrary to need based traditional practices of decentralised celebration. In this context mention may be made that before Nyokum was institutionalised at community level, there were households in which a member could not see rituals for Yulow during his/her life time in the house.

It is difficult to place Nyokum Yulow into either festival or ritual category. Nyokum is derived from Nyok, meaning earth or place and kum, meaning a gathering. Yulow has different meaning though it is used to mean festival by some Nyishi scholars like Joram Jegi, N.Tadar Rikam and Tob T.Tara. (ibid.). My understanding of the term Yulow does not corroborate to its use as festival. Yulow has different uses. Reference such as Yulow Wiyu gives an understanding of the Wiyu which is invoked during

Yulow ritual. Tob T.Tara has mentioned of a number of Wiyus which are called Ropi Wiyu. These are Boji, Boram, Boror, Bopin, Bodai and Yulow. It is to be mentioned that Yulow Ropi is the last in the sequence of the Wiyus in the group. It is to be understood that Yulow is a Wiyu of the highest order and thus is Supreme in a particular group of Wiyus. Evidently, there are a number of Wiyus corresponding to diverse manifestation of the Nature. Therefore, references are made to Donyi Wiyu, Pamthe Wiyu, Renthe Wiyu, Ampeer Wiyu, Nyoin Wiyu, Ganda Wiyu, etc. A Yulow is celebrated in the name of a Wiyu depending on his/her involvement in a happening. (Tara, op.cit.).

It is to be mentioned that the ritual for Yulow is a highest order ritual involving mithun sacrifice and therefore is expensive. That is why in curing practices, the ritual of lower order begins which subsequently ascends in order in case there is no result⁵. So to cure stomach pain the priest begins with depa benam and in case there is no mark of recovery, he goes up to the performance of Yulow ritual at last. But in Nyokum Yulow different Yulow Wiyus are invoked as the purpose of celebration is to seek blessings for the welfare of the humankind in different aspects of life. It is to be mentioned further that mithun is not sacrificed for all the Wiyus placed in the Yugang (Nyokum altar); it is sacrificed for the Nyokum Yulow, the symbolic representation of the goddess of prosperity, after omen examination. Of course, animals like pig and poultry birds are sacrificed in the name of other Wiyus. Moreover, at the altar constructed for Nyokum Yulow, the custom demand the sacrifice of a single mithun; other mithuns if sacrificed (killed) are meant for the feast⁶.

Yulow is believed by the Nyishi to be a benevolent Wiyu who usually does not harm people directly. When performing rituals for lesser Wiyus to cure diseases, if the priest finds it necessary then he prescribes for Yulow (ritual) on the basis of the indications read in omen examinations. Besides being a Wiyu, the term Yulow is used in the sense of good luck, benevolence and kind disposition of a person. There are references like yulow ngoy so pala, meaning that the person is reared by Yulow. This is an honorific remark while appreciating a good and benevolent person. Similarly, when a person is survived from an accident, people remark, yulow ngoy yiepa laak, which means, 'you are protected by Yulow'⁷.

Understandably, Yulow is a Wiyu in Nyishi worldview. Therefore, Nyokum Yulow can be simply translated as a gathering place for Yulow Wiyus.

⁵ Interview with Dr.Tana Showren on 26/2/2004 during Nyokum celebration in RGU campus.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Perhaps, Nyokum Yulow, which could be literally understood as the 'gathering of all Wiyus' during the Yulow (ritual) has been the nomenclature of the celebration. The term Yulow Wiyus is used to refer to the Wiyus who are invited to the Yulow for appeasement or propitiation.

Further, Yulow is a Wiyu in Nyishi worldview. Since Yulows are benevolent and protectors of human beings, since they are propitiated for peace and prosperity of the people, domestic animals and for good harvests, the phrase Nyokum Yulow has become synonymous with the ritual of peace and prosperity.

Nyokum Yullo is no more restricted to traditional ritualistic performances only. Along with rituals are associated community feasts, dances, songs, sports and other forms of merry-making. In other words, Nyokum Yulow has been donning a festive look. The rituals once meant for individual, clan and village welfare are now celebrated regularly for the community at large. It is to be mentioned that the Nyishi community is no longer an isolated group. Of course, the group had relations with adjacent people and recognised the existence of other people. In Nyishi worldview, Nyishis are the people living between Nyem and Nyepak. While Nyem refers to Tibetans, Nyepak refers to the people of the plains. Showren, 2009: Chapters1-2). However, it is after the development interventions that the intensity of its interaction has extended beyond community and state boundary. At the same time the knowledge base has extended far beyond due to exposure to external world. An educated Nyishi is quite conversant with the ideology of both oriental and occidental civilisations and has quite understood the universality of human values like peace, fellow feelings and also the significance of own culture. S/he has understood the dynamics of the culture and the fact that no culture is superior and no one is inferior. S/he has further understood the importance of the changing outlook of the community and thus the urge to think and understand the faiths and beliefs in the line of new knowledge. Herein lies the growth of the culture and the people; the community progresses with change and continuity. It is found that where there is a need to change the society, keeping in view the demand of the changing time, reforms have been initiated. Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati Vivekananda, etc., are remembered as great reformers in Hindu community. There are also instances where reform movements have established a new religion like Buddhism or Jainism, however drawing on the essence of the old one.

In response to the need of changes in the society the cases of conversion also occur. Those who only change the religions do not establish a religious community like Buddhism or Sikhism, nor do they get

absorbed into any culture. This section of converted people always remain in the fringe of two cultures- one is their own in which they lived and the other is the adopted one in which they often pretend to live. Under such a situation a sense of inferiority complex develops which makes them defensive, aggressive and fanatic in their outlook. They fail to appreciate the 'other' and thus are very conservative and narrow minded as far as religious understanding is concerned.

Without going into details of the characteristics of different types of changes in religious spheres, it is to be mentioned in this context that the Nyishi religious outlook has widened. Their concern for welfare of family members at the time of need has extended to include the members of the community as a whole while celebrating Nyokum Yulow. That is why the celebration is organised for the community as a whole once in a year though traditional practices of individual and village celebrations still continue⁸. The central celebration is not an aftermath need based exercise to cure diseases, but a regular reminder of the importance of the peace and material progress of the community, a marker of community consciousness.

Study of religious scriptures and evolving interpretations of beliefs and practices in various religions give us an understanding of the dynamic nature of the religion. The tangible manifestation of beliefs and practices of a faith evolve into philosophical representations over time (see Rukbo, 2000 and Ering, 1998). An understanding of a religion by its followers is not what it used to be in bye-gone days. In the passing of time, it transcends the narrow boundary of the group or community. That is why all the religions speak of the salvation of humankind, though in many traditions the religious heads narrow down the universe of humankind to include only the believers⁹.

The Nyishi religious mind is not an exception to the universal nature of expansion of religious understanding from a tangible representation to a philosophical interpretation. What I presume is that the process is gradually getting momentum. Those who remain in the process do experience the expansion of the reality. (See Showren, 2003). It logically follows that those who stay away are refugees to the process of self-realisation in two ways- one by not allowing oneself to the emerging experience of the expansion of self and second, by cutting off from the past of the accumulated-self.

⁸ It is to be mentioned that Nyishi students studying at Delhi, Chennai and in other places in the county have started celebrating Nyokum in a grand way.

⁹ No doubt, there are words like pagans, *kafers*, etc. for non-believers in the religious tradition.

It is to be mentioned that it is not the Nyishi people alone who participate in Nyokum Yullow. Any body from any faith can participate in it unlike in the rituals of many so called great religions. Undoubtedly therefore, the Nyishi concept of the welfare of humankind is not restricted to the members of Nyishi community alone. It extends to all of us as the Nyishi people have understood the humanity in its right perspective without dividing artificial boundaries of the religions. Like many conventional religions they do not restrict the blessings from ritualistic celebrations to believers only. The notion of welfare has been inclusive of the humanity beyond the community. Perhaps with the expansion of outlook due to internal and external dynamics of change through development interventions the Nyishis believe themselves as one of the community of beings¹⁰ in the human society. They are not the only one and the only chosen one by the Nyishi Supreme Creator to be the blessed people. In this sense, they also do not restrict the universal character of the God. They do not limit the omnipresent, all powerful and omniscient God within the narrow boundary of their religious outlook. Hence, it is to be mentioned that the Nyishi do not believe in their welfare alone ignoring others whom they know, nor do they impose their ideology on other in order that they can be eligible to share the blessings during the Nyokum Yullow.

The extension of the notion to the welfare of humankind by including all human beings is an understanding of 'live and let live', of fellow feeling and of living together by appreciating the existence of one another. It is the reflection of the ideal that the whole universe is one family, vasudhaiva kutumbakam.

Faith and Belief, Sacrifice and Rationality

I am a non-vegetarian; but I can not stand the killing of animals. My non-vegetarian habit however does not go against the killing of animals in principle, though in a corner of my heart I do not like killing. It is apparently a contradiction, illogical to explain; but I live in it.

As I confess, I do not like killing of animals, but take non-vegetarian food items and live in apparent contradictions. Can I have the same feeling when I see an animal being sacrificed by sacred specialists before village goddesses or by a tribal priest in their rituals? The self-asked question is not so easy for me to provide a direct short cut answer. My own experience and gathered experience from observing the

¹⁰ For an understanding of this concept See Gadgil and Guha,1992:18-19.

expressed attitude of a cross section people on the issue on various occasions in different parts of the country however, provide me input to attempt at an answer to the above question.

In early 1980s when I saw sacrificing of pigs and mithuns in Arunachal Pradesh, I did not appreciate the practice. Many of my non-Arunachalee friends also could not tolerate it. Interestingly, I did not have the same strong resentment when I saw goat sacrifices in my village, in Kamakshya temple and in the villages of some of my friends. For us, killing the goat before goddess was not a mere killing; it happened to be a sacrifice. Ironically, the sacrifice of mithun (which did not belong to my cultural practices of which I am familiar) was viewed as killing and thus was not appreciated. Over two and half decades of my stay in Arunachal Pradesh I have developed empathy for tribal culture. I do not see the sacrifice of a mithun as a mere killing; it is as much a sacrifice as a goat before a goddess.

The moot point that emerges is the difference in the perception of the phenomenon in two different cultures with two different levels of understanding. Associated with it is the notion of familiarity with the phenomenon. I belong to a culture in which I do not feel strange to the phenomenon of killing a goat as a sacrifice animal, and since I am a non-vegetarian, I do not feel unfamiliar to the killing of a goat for mutton. But I can not stand the killing of a cow for both the above purposes as I am not familiar with such a practice in my culture. However, there are people of my culture, whom I know, can take beef and are not so averse to the sight of butchering a cow as I am.

The familiarity with a phenomenon or ideology develops either through practices or through nearness to it physically or mentally. Of course, mental nearness is more effective. For example, a Hindu child learns that s/he is different from say a Muslim in his/her cultural behaviour. This learning develops a mindset of nearness to a Hindu and distance from a Muslim in him/her. When the child grows up s/he feels nearer to a Hindu than a Muslim if found in a company of the two. A wrong teaching/training creates a mind set that sees and interprets things wrongly. It is a weapon by mischievous interests to fulfil selfish ends. For example, Hitler used this technique to create hatred in the mind of the Nazis towards Jews which resulted in the carnage of Jew population. He believed in the principle that a lie told hundreds of times becomes a truth¹¹. Such instances are not rare in our time to misguide youths to the path of violence or to alienate them from own people and culture.

¹¹ See Hitler, 2009.

How a wrong idea makes a difference can be understood from our own daily life. A person loves his mother and regards her as goddesses. But when he sees her through patriarchal eyes he considers her to be an inferior entity. It is the familiarity with patriarchal ideology that justifies his second behaviour.

Now let me come to the point which I want to make. Intolerance and disliking to a phenomenon comes from unfamiliarity to it due to either actual or mental distance from it. This could be the reason why children studying in a different environment do not like their life style which their parents lead. I have seen many youths who study in towns and stay in hostels, they prefer to sleep in non-traditional houses of friends when they visit their family during vacations¹². It is therefore familiarity with the phenomenon that breeds liking. Familiarity develops through involvement. Elaboration in rituals ensures involvement in many ways and strengthens the sense of belonging. It would not be out of place to remark that the marriage solemnised through elaborate rituals lasts long. This could be the reason why divorce is rare in traditional tribal and Hindu societies¹³. The marriage, which is solemnised without ritualistic elaboration breaks easily as in western countries.

The point that I want to make is that familiarity has a strong role in creating liking and belonging. If simple empathy could change my perception of sacrifice and created a sense of appreciation, it would not be difficult to guess how much strong bondage is created to maintain the social solidarity by elaborations in rituals. In present days due to modern education and exposure to life beyond one's culture, the bondage is diluted. The members of a culture therefore develop familiarity with other cultures more than their own. Associated with the exposure goes the tendency of acceptance to the new forces. Obviously, one becomes cultural outsider to the community.¹⁴

In rituals there are practices which change over time, either replaced or modified. There was the earlier practice of sacrificing buffalo during Durga Puja. In many places people sacrifice a gourd in place of buffalo and in some other cases the sacrifice is interpreted in terms of sacrificing the evils in man. With change in outlook the tangible behaviour enters into the domain of philosophical abstraction and as a result the society upholds its value system, though experiences a change with continuity. Who knows, the significance of the sacrifice of the mithun during Nyokum may one day enter into the domain of a symbolic representation and philosophical explanation.

¹² Based on my field experience.

¹³ For its explanation see Mibang and Behera,2006:xxxv.

¹⁴ The issue can be appreciated with reference to the term *diku* of the Santhals see (Mahapatra,1980

In western countries, sacrifice has been stopped in religious altars, but killing of animals has increased to meet food requirements. It would be quite illogical for them to speak of violence to animals while sacrifices are made in rituals, for this would reflect ignorance on their part to appreciate the understanding of the others. It is not necessary that all will think in the same way as the westerners' think. For them if killing an animal for food is justified why not the killing for purposes other than the food which people consider important for them could not be justified? Any objection to sacrifice during rituals in the name of violence to animals has meaning if those who object do not kill animals for one purpose or the other. If they do so it is an attempt in putting rationality in a narrow domain according to their worldview. This contradictory behaviour may be viewed and explained within familiar and non-familiar dichotomy.

The sacrifice of mithun has a cultural content and is not indiscriminate as there are so many chanting that show the concern for the mithun that is to be sacrificed. The Nyishis feel the value of the life of the mithun which one does not feel while killing animals for meat. The Nyubu makes reference to human animal relationship, the reason of separation between the two, the responsibility of human towards the mithun and vice versa. The objection to sacrifice therefore would amount to show the disliking for the cultural emotion of the people, and when we believe in respecting cultural rights of the people such an attitude would amount to an attempt at violation of human rights. The people who practise the sacrifice have their own logic based on their own worldview. When they will feel its irrelevance they may go for an alternative, as it has happened in case of buffalo sacrifice to Goddess Durga.

Do I prescribe for the sacrifice? The answer is definitely No. Do I then oppose its practice? The answer is again a No. If I do any of the two it would amount to the imposition of my personal and cultural bias. It is the people who would decide what to do and not to do. My opposition would reflect upon only my intolerance to their culture. As I live in my own culture others have the right to live with their culture. As I would not allow others to despise my culture I should also do not do it for the other's culture as all cultures have their own significance for their respective followers.

Then, is there any rationality behind the sacrifice? The question of rationality in its interpretation of objective reality of a phenomenon operates only within an outlined framework ignoring many others outside it. To understand a cultural phenomenon within the set rationality frame outlined outside the cultural understanding would be an exercise of an outsider's view on the issue. The world of phenomena is not the manifestation of rational behaviour in terms of logical necessity. Many of our behaviours are

dictated by our emotions without any logical base. But all are activities guided by our cultural rationality and this defines an identity for us. However, the cultural rationality changes over time but the identity maintains continuity with the change. When a people follow a practice, our intolerance or lack of appreciation for it simply reveals our attitude of fundamentalism.

The celebration of Nyokum Yulow is not a disorderly occurrence of some practices. It is a logical arrangement of practices followed within the Nyishi worldview. One step follows the other and the cause-effect relationship related to a phenomenon is well defined within the worldview. This is clearly marked, for example, from the practice of entry of the Yulow Nyubu from the Byag (front door) and the Galii Nyubu from the Byatu (back door). While the former type of entry is considered auspicious, the latter one is considered un-auspicious. Associated with it is the belief that the Nyokum Nyubu would deal with benevolent Wiyus to ensure welfare directly and the Galii Nyubu on the other hand would drive the malevolent Wiyus away and stop them from creating problems¹⁵.

I belong to a culture in which the ideal that the universe is a family is held supreme. But when I encountered some practices like mithun sacrifice which I was not familiar with, I felt uncomfortable. It is not that I had not encountered sacrifices earlier; it is probably in some corner I had the unconscious feeling of superiority inspite of my liberal attitude. Coupled with it was the unfamiliarity with the practice. To me, all sorts of dislikings or disapprovals to a cultural practice by a member of another culture are nothing but a reflection of his/her unfamiliarity-bred attitude of intolerance or ignorance. My participation in Nyokum Yulow put my theoretical understanding that all religions are equal into practice which was found shaky initially. My rationality therefore lies not in disliking the practice, but in understanding it in terms of Nyishi worldview.

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¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Showren, op.cit.

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