



Institution Of *Nyibu*: Types, Roles, And Religious Authority Among The Tagin.

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Abstract:

The institution of *Nyibu* constitutes the core of religious authority and ritual life among the Tagin community of Arunachal Pradesh. *Nyibus* function as priest-shamans who mediate between humans and the spirit world, ensuring cosmological balance through ritual performances, divination, healing, and sacrificial rites. This paper examines the institution of *Nyibu* by analysing its types, roles, and sources of religious authority within Tagin society. It identifies different categories of *Nyibu* based on ritual specialization, spiritual competence, and modes of knowledge transmission, including apprenticeship, hereditary succession, and spiritual calling. The study further explores the multifaceted roles of *Nyibu* in life-cycle ceremonies, agricultural rituals, conflict resolution, and community well-being. Religious authority among *Nyibus* is legitimized through ritual expertise, mastery of sacred chants, adherence to taboos, and collective recognition by the community. By situating the *Nyibu* institution within the broader Tagin cosmological framework, the paper contributes to the anthropological understanding of indigenous priesthood and shamanic traditions in Northeast India, highlighting their continued relevance amid socio-cultural change.

Keywords: *Nyibu*, role, preserver, knowledge, healer.

I. Introduction

The socio-religious system of Tagin culture is characterised by the central role of the *Nyibu*. Among the Tagin tribe, the roles of priest and healer are not institutionally differentiated; a single individual performs both functions. The *Nyibu* conducts ritual ceremonies while simultaneously serving as a healer, addressing both spiritual and physical afflictions. He performs a wide range of calendric and non-calendric rituals and occupies a pivotal position as a mediator between the human and spiritual realms, a spiritual authority, and a custodian of traditional knowledge. The guidance and services of *Nyibu* are sought on all important occasions, such as marriage ceremonies, childbirth, selecting a house site, long journeys, before going hunting, at times of death, etc. He is revered for his extraordinary abilities.

The *Nyibu* possess spiritual powers and knowledge, enabling them to communicate with the supernatural world. He performs rituals and ceremonies to appease the gods and goddesses, ensuring community well-being and promoting fertility, prosperity, and good fortune. Also provides spiritual guidance and advice to community members, helping them navigate life's challenges and make informed decisions. In all of these capacities, Tagin's traditional priests serve as the cornerstones of their communities, influencing issues not

just of faith but also of society, upholding peace, conserving culture, and offering direction in various areas. Their responsibilities are intricately linked to the community they serve's overall well-being and bind them to be the religious authority. From a Weberian perspective, the *Nyibu's* religious authority may be understood as charismatic, derived from demonstrated ritual efficacy and sustained community recognition rather than formal office. Through this charisma, the *Nyibu* influences not only religious practice but also social order and cultural continuity within Tagin society.

There are countable of publications addressing the socio-political and cultural life of the Tagin of Arunachal Pradesh; however, systematic and critical studies of their traditional institutions and cultural practices remain limited. Much of the existing literature by anthropologists, Indigenous writers, social scientists, historians, and colonial administrators mentions the Tagin only briefly in travel accounts, administrative notes, or monographs, resulting in a fragmented and inadequate historical record. Ashan Riddi's *The Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study of Continuity and Change* (2006) represents the first focused attempt to document the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural life of the Tagin, though it does not constitute an exhaustive analysis. Tagio Kodak's *Political Socialization of the Tagin Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh* (2018) provides valuable insights into traditional political structures but requires further critical evaluation. N. Mitkong's *Customary Laws of the Tagins* (2006) and *Oral Literature of the Tagins on Creation of the Universe* (2006) contribute important documentation of customary practices and oral traditions, including translated shamanic chants, though certain interpretations invite scrutiny. *Culture and Language of Upper Subansiri* (2012) by Arak Megu et al. offers a multidisciplinary overview of Tagin culture and language, while *Gender Triumphs Unarmed in the Hostile Gorges* (1997), edited by B.B. Pandey, provides an ethnographically rich account of border Tagin society based on first-hand expedition diaries. Verrier Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA* (2006) and *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (2012) mentioned Tagin within broader tribal and mythological traditions of Arunachal Pradesh. Despite these contributions, critical and focused studies on Tagin religious institutions—particularly the *Nyibu* remain insufficient, underscoring the need for the present research.

II. Objective of the Study

The present paper has the following objectives:

- a. To examine the position of the *Nyibu* within the socio-religious structure of Tagin society, emphasising their combined functions as spiritual mediators, healers, and priests.
- b. To identify and classify the different categories of *Nyibu* according to modes of ritual specialisation, spiritual competence, and knowledge acquisition.
- c. To investigate the sources and dissemination of traditional knowledge and religious authority among the *Nyibu*, focusing on community recognition, ritual proficiency, and apprenticeship.

III. Materials and Methods

The study is empirical. Both primary and secondary sources were used to write this paper. However, primary data received greater attention for writing this article. Primary data was gathered through the use of audio-visual recording and tape recordings with consent, as well as structured and unstructured in-person interviews with knowledgeable informants such as village women, traditional women weavers, shamans, Gams or Head Gams (heads of the village council), and members of the general knowledgeable public who are well versed in traditional knowledge. To gather data, both scheduled and unscheduled interviews were conducted using questionnaires. In addition to the interview approach, an ethnohistorical approach was used to participate in and observe the weaving processes. For the current work, secondary sources were consulted through published and unpublished source materials, including books, articles, and research papers.

IV. Results and Discussion

The position of ritual specialist of the Tagin depends upon their proficiency in rites and ritual knowledge. Based on their power, healing ability, and capabilities, the Tagin categorized their ritual specialists into three categories: *Butte/Lehtu*, *Tago/Lamma*, and *Buchi/Bumi Nyibu*. It is believed that *Nyibu's* power cannot be measured fully. However, the Tagin often measure their power through their ability to perform large and complicated rituals, such as *Si-donyi uyi* (annual ritual festival), *Rialo uyi* (a big ritual conducted for a family or clan), *Nyeda uyi* (a marriage ritual), and *Dekio-lagin uyi* (a death ritual).¹ Besides these, several other rituals are complex and dangerous rites, through which the Tagin measure *Nyibu's* capabilities. Unlike modern physicians in the hospital, the priest does not have a specific specialisation in healing. It is believed that his spirituality can heal almost any kind of disease inflicted by spirits. The *Nyibu* draw their magical and spiritual abilities from the tutelary spirit *Doring*.

At the top of the Tagin priestly hierarchy is the *Butte Nyibu*, also known as *Lehtu* and *Buru Nyibu*. They are believed to be very powerful and capable of doing all forms of rites and rituals. They are considered to be the great priest who has mastery over curing all kinds of diseases. The *Butte /Lehtu/Buru Nyibu* are described as strong, determined, and sincere in executing their work and decisions.² The tradition compares their personalities with stone. It is said that they are like stone, immovable, rigid, and unwavering in their convictions. *Butte/Lehtu* are capable of doing both small and large rituals where the degree of animal sacrifice ranges from fowl to Mithun (*Bos frontalis*). The second most potent *Nyibu* is considered to be the *Tago Nyibu*. *Tago Nyibu* can be defined as a powerful ritual specialist often associated with the 'tantric' form. Due to his characteristic acquaintance with *Pinji or Lamma* (a bat), he is also called *Lamma or Pinji Lamma Nyibu*.³ According to tradition, he has the power to fly. He can also perform various magical chants. *Tago or lamma nyibu* is believed to have bat-like abilities, enabling them to see even in darkness. In addition to performing standard healing rituals, these *Nyibu* are also believed to be skilled in sorcery and magic. They heal disease through their sorcery and magical power. As per the narrators, the people do not prepare much for them due to their unpredictable character and their association with sorcery. Their population is smaller in number compared to other categories of *Nyibu* in the Tagin society. Consequently, their roles and functions, compared to *Butte* and *Bumi Nyibus* are restricted. The third position is held by the *Buchi Nyibu*, also known as the *Bumi Nyibu*, and is regarded as the lowest in the priestly hierarchy. They are believed to have less power than the other two categories. It is believed that they can heal the patients through smaller-scale ceremonies and sacrifices. They can incur and perform a ritual where the highest degree of animal sacrifices measures up to goat and pig. Apart from these three major categories of *Nyibu*, there are other individuals called *Nyikiok*, which do not fall into the categories of *Nyibu* despite being a component of the Tagin religion. He is unable to carry out and lead ritual sacrifices. He can only read the omens in the chicken liver and perform divinations using chicken and egg. They are solely capable of divination; they are not capable of treating any illnesses. Usually, they are called upon to help the priest build the *Ngugi* (altar) during ceremonial events. Another important religious component of the Tagin is the *Bo*, who plays as an assistant to the high priest during big ritual performances such as *Rylo* and *Nyida*. The *Bo* is also called *Buri* or *Niri*. In terms of spirituality, the *Bo* don't have spiritual power; they do not inherit the power to heal people. *Bo* can be any ordinary person who has good vocal and knows the archaic language of the *Nyibu*. During big rituals, they assist *Butte Nyibu*.

Role of *Nyibu*

The role of *Nyibu* is multifaceted; besides his religious and spiritual role, the *Nyibu* also plays an important role as an advisor in community socio-political decisions, preserver of traditional knowledge, and mediator in socio-cultural events such as marriage ceremonies, administration of justice, economic and political pursuits, clan feuds, hunting expeditions, funerary rites, childbirth, house constructions, etc. He is considered and revered as unique in Tagin society because of his extraordinary role, which confers social distinction and authority based on the idea that he can speak with spirits. One of the most important roles of *Nyibu* is to be a bridge between the human and spiritual worlds. Various mythological tales are found in

the Tagin oral literature, depicting the assignment of *Nyibu* as mediator between *Abotani* and the *Uyi* by *Doring*. Before the advent of modern medical facilities in the Tagin society, all types of diseases were cured by the spiritual power of the *Nyibu*. He used to be the sole healer in the Tagin community. He cures all kinds of diseases, ranging from a minor headache to deadly diseases like smallpox. With the help of the divine divination method, a priest will diagnose the disease. Once the disease is diagnosed, he will do an incantation and appease the spirits. After that, animal and bird sacrifices will be conducted according to the spirits' demands. With such ritual methods, priests used to cure the disease. The spiritual role of *Nyibu* is not limited to healing and religious performance; his role is important during calamities and pandemic periods. They act as armour to the people and the village. Traditionally, the *Nyibu* helps to control calamities and pandemics. They used to perform a ritual called *Potor uyi* or *Dapo uyi*, to control the waves and germs of evil spirits. It is said that during the 2019 covid pandemic period, each village and town under the district performed *Dapo uyi* by engaging *Nyibu* to mitigate the wave of the pandemic.⁴ It is believed that due to this prompt act of the community and *Nyibu*, many of the villages were saved from the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Nyeda is a formal marriage ceremony of the Tagin. It involves sequential actions in which *Nyibu* are assigned to execute rituals. The *Nyeda* ceremony is considered a sacred ceremony where two souls get solemnized through a holy ritualistic ceremony. The *Nyibu* is assigned to do a sacred ritual so that the couples can get blessings from the deities. The Tagin marriage ceremony has more complex and elaborate rituals than other life events. From the official engagement to initial discussions, the *Nyibu's* involvement is apparent at every stage of the *Nyeda* ceremony. During a marriage ceremony, an important ritual performed by the *Nyibu* is called *Dui Chanam*.⁵ It is for a happy and prosperous married life in which *Nyibu* invokes elaborate chantings. He calls both the clan's ancestral spirits and all the benevolent deities and appeases them to bless the newlywed couples.

Beyond their roles in rituals, *Nyibu* also wields influence in traditional village councils. They are prominent members of the village council and play significant roles in the tribal political and judicial system of the Tagin. The Tagins had an informal traditional village council named *Dopam*, consisting of wise and experienced male elders of the village. These elders were recognized for their well-versed customary laws, influential personalities, and good oratory. Both civil and criminal cases were mainly referred to *Dopam* when they cannot be solved within individual families or clans. Most disputes were solved by *Gindung* through *Dopam*. However, there were some cases in which the village council could not reach a conclusion or solution; in such instances, Tagin would opt for an alternative way to obtain justice. It is by resorting to a *Nyibu* for a solution. The problem arises before the *Dopam* when the claimant has no proof against the accused. At the same time accused defies the blame and refuses to accept responsibility. In such circumstances, *Dopam* adopts their traditional way of oath and the ordeal method. For such initiation, the engagement of the *Nyibu* can happen when either of the two parties does not agree with the final verdict. To find the culprit, the priests do divination. Through this method, priests detect the person who has committed a crime. The first method to detect the crime was *Pipeh-ruh Koknam* (egg and chicken liver divination). Generally, people approve of these divination methods as the ultimate solution. However, in some cases, when people are not satisfied with the outcome of *Pep-Ruh* divination. Then they resort to other extreme oaths and ordeal methods. The extreme oath and ordeal methods were *Riokdar*, *Taja*, *Sedu Ebok*, *Raj Tonam*, *Nyiyui-Gamnam*, and *Yel-Tumnam*. These methods were usually not promoted by the Tagin because of their life-threatening nature. However, only in situations where both the convict and victim parties are not satisfied with the divination results, and both strongly stand by their words. Then, with due approval from both parties, the *Nyibu* carry out these extreme methods to detect the culprit of the crime.

A *Nyibu*'s roles are also found in the economic sphere of the Tagin community. The Tagin seek *Nyibu*'s help for their economic and overall livelihood prosperity. According to tradition, the Tagin seek *Nyibu*'s spiritual confirmation before they start cultivation in the selected field. Since Jhum cultivation is the main source of their income, the Tagins wisely and cautiously choose the land for cultivation. Before starting cultivation, they conduct a preliminary survey of the land and then engage a *Nyibu* to do divination. Then *Nyibu*, through his divinatory method, confirms whether the land is suitable for cultivation or not. If the identified land is not suitable for cultivation, and the person can't find another land for agriculture. In such situation, the *Moyin* ritual is performed with the help of *Nyibu* to ward off evil spirits present in the land and make the land cultivable. The role of *Nyibu* can also be traced in other livelihood activities of the Tagin, such as trade and hunting expeditions. Carrying out trade in the past was risky; it involved a long and strenuous journey. To protect themselves from these difficulties, they seek blessings and protection from *Guchi* and *Galeh uyis* and conduct trade rituals called *Guchi Galeh uyi* with the help of a *Nyibu* (priest). Through such conduct, they seek prosperity and well-being from these twin deities during their long journey. Hunting was another livelihood activity of the Tagins, which required great strength, mindfulness, alertness, and bravery. Before they conduct a hunting expedition, they first resort to *Nyikiok* for an omen examination. After the omen examination, they will perform a ritual prescribed by the *Nyibu*. *Nyibu*'s involvement can also be seen in the house shifting. When a person wants to construct a new house in a new place, the first step they take is to invite a *Nyibu* for omen examination and perform a ritual prescribed by the *Nyibu*.

The Tagin perform purification rituals after the death of a person. They perform two types of funeral rites; they are *Paii henam/hedar* and *Dokiok legin*. In *Paii henam/hedar*, *Nyibu* purifies the house and gives a holy farewell to the deceased soul. During *Paii*, he uses *Tajar*, *kampu* leaf (Kind of plant leaves), *pasar* (kind of plant leaves), *henu* leaf (bamboo leaf), and *chicken* as a purifying instrument. After burying the deceased body, a *Nyibu* finishes his incantation and will sprinkle holy water through *Tajar*, *kampu*, and *henu* leaves on the people who have attended the funeral. The Tagin conduct *Dokiok legin* rite after 10 days of the death of a person. It is believed to be the final ritual to bid farewell to the deceased. It is bigger than *Paii Henam*. An animal, such as a mithun or pig, is sacrificed during *Dokiok legin*. This ritual is done by a powerful *Nyibu*, either by *Butte* and *Bumi*, while for the *Paii Henam* ritual, a *Nyikiok* can also be engaged.

Tagin places a high value on childbearing, fertilization, and childcare procedures. The conception and delivery of a child is considered one of the most significant life transitions. The Tagin believe that the twin creator *Yarne-gone* controls human existence and fate. To get blessings and protection from *Yarne-gone*, they observe two forms of ritual with the help of the *Nyibu*. The first is when pregnancy is announced. Once a woman is pregnant, her in-laws invite a priest to do customary rituals called *Niddeh nepen yerne uyi* for the safety of the child in the womb and the mother. In this ritual, they pray for the protection of the child and mother from human evil eyes and spirits. This is conducted before the birth of a child. Another customary ritual is *Nalum danam* (birth celebration), which is observed after the birth of a child. A priest is invited to bless and protect the child from evil spirits. However, during the time of *Nalum danam*, they did not conduct an elaborate ritual.

In the past, conflicts, wars, kidnappings, raids, murders, and feuds were common in the Tagin society. It is stated that the territorial land boundary and bride kidnapping were two of the most common causes of discontentment among the numerous causes of the conflict and feuds in the Tagin society. The Tagin used to take pride in defending their bride and territory. The entire clan comes together to save it if either of these two is teased. It is said that, before starting a battle, the Tagins used to do a chicken liver and egg omen examination. Following the result of the omen examination, they conduct a ritual called *Mepo uyi* and *Piirai uyi*, consecutively. These rituals were conducted before and after the war started.

V. Conclusion

This study has shown that the institution of *Nyibu* forms the core through which religious authority, social regulation, and cosmological order are maintained in Tagin society. The *Nyibu* is not a specialized religious official in the institutional sense but a composite authority whose roles span ritual performance, healing, divination, conflict resolution, and economic decision-making. This integration reflects a holistic worldview in which the sacred and the secular are inseparable, resonating with Durkheim's conception of religion as a social fact embedded in collective life. The categorization of *Nyibu* into *Butte/Lehtu*, *Tago/Lamma*, and *Buchi/Bumi* reveals an indigenous hierarchy grounded in ritual efficacy and spiritual competence rather than formal office. Authority is situational and performance-based, aligning with Weber's notion of charismatic authority, wherein legitimacy derives from demonstrated power and community recognition. Ritual practices and life-cycle ceremonies further function as sites of social cohesion and transformation, echoing Turner's emphasis on ritual as a mechanism for maintaining social continuity. Despite the presence of modern medical, administrative, and legal institutions, the *Nyibu* continues to occupy a central position in contemporary Tagin society. This persistence underscores the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and the enduring relevance of non-institutional religious authority. The study contributes to broader anthropological discussions on shamanism and indigenous priesthood in South Asia, emphasizing the need to document and preserve such traditions amid rapid socio-cultural change.

VI. Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. Interview with Keme Soki, aged about 70 years, Traditional Knowledgeable person of Sippi village under Upper Subansiri District held a Scheduled Interview on September 24, 2024 at Sippi village. (Hereinafter referred to as *KSI*) (Keke Soki Interview).
2. Interview with Keke Dagiam, aged about 63 years, priest of Dagiam village under Upper Subansiri District held a Scheduled Interview on December 24, 2023 at Dagiam village. (Hereinafter referred to as *KDI*) (Keke Dagiam Interview).
3. Interview with Jekar Gusar, aged about 45 years, priest of Lida village under Upper Subansiri District held a Scheduled Interview on October 26, 2023 at Daporijo. (Hereinafter referred to as *JGI*) (Jekar Gusar Interview).
4. Interview with Taji Dadi, aged about 45 years, priest of Dadi village under Upper Subansiri District held a Scheduled Interview on October 24, 2023 at Daporijo. (Hereinafter referred to as *TDI*) (Taji Dadi Interview).
5. Interview with Taji Lingsa, aged about 55 years, priest of Nilling village under Upper Subansiri District held a Unscheduled Interview on October November, 2025 at Radhing village, Daporijo. (Hereinafter referred to as *TLI*) (Taji Lingsa Interview).

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