

Sacred Altars and Ritual Practices: Spiritual Landscapes of the Nyishi Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Altars occupy a central role in the cultural and spiritual practices of the Nyishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, serving as sacred sites for religious ceremonies. This study explores the structural and functional diversity of ritual altars, focusing on three primary types-funeral, marriage, and festival altars - to elucidate their significance within the socio-religious context. Drawing on research conducted in *Yaglung* and *Sakiang* villages of Kra Daadi and Papum Pare district respectively, using ethnographic methods, this study investigates how ritual altars embody Nyishi cosmology and identity, acting as religious tools and cultural markers and illustrate how modernization and socio-economic changes are transforming these traditional heritage practices.

1. Introduction

An altar is a symbolic representation of culture and often used for religious rituals. The word “altar” derives from Latin word *altarium* which means ‘high’ and *adolere* which means ‘to ritually burn or sacrifice’ (Vocabulary.com, n.d.). Britannica Concise Encyclopedia (2006: 53) describes altar as ‘a raised structure or place used for sacrifice, worship, or prayer. Altars originated from the belief that objects were inhabited by deities’ worthy of prayers. Sacrifice required a structure for killing victims and channeling blood or burning flesh (Britannica 2006). Rosemary Ellen Guiley (2008: 6)

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defines an altar as ‘an elevated place where religious ceremonies are conducted and offerings made to deities, associated with the Goddess and Mother Earth’ (Guiley 2008). Altars, as defined by De la Torre 2020, cited in Seferiades Prece MA thesis, are material assemblages composed of selected objects that provoke or evoke a sacred or transcendent relationship, creating spatial and temporal conditions that enable ritual practice and personal religious experience (Prece 2021).

A religious altar is a spiritually significant structure, often elevated, used for ritual practices and communication with the divine. Historically emerging as a site for sacrifices and worship, altars are material assemblages that reflect a community’s religious worldview and evoke transcendent presence through spatial arrangements.

Ritual altars are central to cultural practices globally, serving as spiritual and community activities. They reflect beliefs and values, connecting people with supernatural beings. Altars are practiced across religions including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, African religions, and emerging spiritualities. This multicultural tradition enables comparison of religious materiality and rituals across different traditions (Castellanos 2021). The importance of altars goes beyond the religious significance and functions. They often serve to unite people, fostering closer ties to the community and a sense of collective identity (Rodov 2022; Nelson 2008).

In both Mexican and Venezuelan context, the creation of altars, whether as collective commemoration structure for Día de Muertos (Arredondo & Casillas 2019) or as household shrines used to cope with loneliness and sustain familial and spiritual ties (Davila 2022), serves to shape individual and group identities through personalized arrangements of meaning objects, a feature particularly evident among Mexican American communities where such items express deep cultural symbolism and familial heritage (Jacobs 2005; Gutiérrez, et al. 1997).

Ritual altars, which have evolved from simple arrangements into intricate forms expressing religious ideals across cultures, range from pre-Columbian Mexican structures that became syncretic with Catholic symbolism after Christianization (Arredondo & Casillas 2019; Gutiérrez, et al. 1997), to Japanese *Butsudan* that transformed from modest wooden frames into increasingly elaborate installation influenced by architectural aesthetic, commercialized sacred objects, and later by digital and contemporary design innovations (Perez 2009; Nelson 2008; Gould, et al., 2018), while in the Caribbean and Venezuela, they reflect the fusion of European, indigenous and African traditions (Davila 2022; Bettelheim 2005). In Papua, they function as Christian household altars that sustain ties through locally inflected ritual practices (Labobar 2023) and among the Muisca community of Suba in Colombia, they serve as a means of cultural revitalisation through the incorporation of medicinal plants and traditional knowledge (Castiblanco 2022).

This paper argues that Nyishi ritual altars, while historically anchored in animistic cosmology, are undergoing significant transformation under the influence of Christianity, formal education, economic change and shifting worldviews. By analysing funeral, marriage and festival altars, the study demonstrates how material religious practices become a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

2. The context

Ritual altars in India embody long-standing cultural traditions and reinforce the resilience of tribal identities. They sustain collective life through practices linked to agricultural festivals, healing rites, and seasonal festivities (Midha & Singh 2023); (Ravula, et al. 2022). These structures mediate relationships with supernatural forces through offerings and prayers for health and prosperity (Pandey 2024) and remain central to ancestor and spirit veneration. Altar form varies across tribes: ancient ritual used square brick altars reflecting mathematical and symbolic knowledge (Knudsen 2002); the Chothe tribe of Manipur maintains personal, family, and community altars (Yuhlung 2014); and Odisha's tribal communities use local plant species for altar construction and decoration (Mohanty, et al. 2011). Festivals such as *Sarhul* and *Baha* among the Munda tribe further highlight ecological value and agricultural cycles (Ravula, et al. 2022). Research shows that rituals performed at altars reduces stress and anxiety, strengthen resilience and provide emotional support, thereby enhancing community cohesion (Snodgrass, et al. 2017; Midha & Singh 2023).

In North-East India, especially Arunachal Pradesh, ritual altars are fundamental to shamanic traditions, highlighting the interaction between spirituality, community, and nature (Mene & John 2025). Each tribe maintains distinct altar traditions and architectural forms that embody spiritual beliefs, cultural identity, and ecological harmony. Among the Tai-Khamtis, altar practices blend pre-Buddhistic rituals with Theravada Buddhist beliefs, while the Apatanis link their altars to festivals that honour nature and ancestors (Mantche 2020; Chaudhuri 2022). In Aka society, life cycle rituals involve constructing of altars with forest materials before sacrificing animals (Nimachow, 2008). Similarly, among the Adi tribe, altars anchor rituals that promote ecological harmony and reaffirm communal identity and ancestral ties (Ajantha & Arunadevi 2024).

Across cultures, ritual altars serve shared spiritual, social, and cultural purposes, extending beyond physical structures. In Arunachal Pradesh, they remained central to indigenous traditions, yet scholarship on them is limited with notable exceptions such as, Mene and John (2025), Mantche (2020), Chaudhuri (2022), Mepung (2023), Ajantha & Arunadevi (2024), Nimachow (2008), J. Mebi (2005) and Behera (2015). Given this research gap, documenting these age-old practices is crucial as they face pressure from globalisation, religious conversions, and environmental degradation, all of which threaten the continuity of these cultural traditions.

This paper studies the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India, who maintain a rich cultural heritage rooted in spiritual practices, with ritual altars central to their religious ceremonies. These sacred structures embody Nyishi cosmology, beliefs and traditions. The study examines the structural and functional aspects of three types of Nyishi ritual altars: funeral, marriage, and festival altars, elucidating their significance within the socio-religious context and evolving features in the Nyishi community.

3. Methodology

The present study is qualitative and descriptive in nature and employs ethnographic methods like interview, observation, and audio-visual recordings. Secondary resources were also accessed from published book, articles available related to the topic. The

fieldwork was conducted in between January 19 to February 26, 2024. For the present study, participants, including shamans and rituals specialists, were taken from two sample village, i.e., *Yaglung* village under Palin circle of Kra Daadi District and Sakian village under Mengio circle of Papum Pare district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The study involved in-depth interviews with 14 participants—8 *Shamans* or ritual specialists and 10 elder persons) and informal conversations with an additional 12 community members. Participant observation was conducted during one funeral ceremony, one marriage ceremony, and the 2024 Nyokum festival. These accounts informed the interpretations presented in this paper. As the first author represents the Nyishi tribe and the other authors with prior exposure to indigenous ritual systems, their positionality influenced both access and interpretation.

4. Altars of the Nyishi tribe

The Nyishis, meaning ‘people of the land’ or the ‘human being’ in their language, are a borderland community, primarily inhabit the Papumpare, East Kameng, Kamle, Kra Daadi, Kurung Kumey, Keyi Panyor, Lower Subansiri, Pakke-Kessang, and Itanagar Capital Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. With a population of 3,00,000, they are a major state tribe. They are Mongoloid and speak Tibeto-Burman. Their society is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal, following unilateral descent, with nuclear and extended family types. They practice clan exogamy and tribal endogamy, allowing polygyny. Their religious world is largely animistic and they believe in several spirits called *Uie*. Their daily activities revolve around agriculture, hunting, and gathering, fishing, horticulture, handloom, and handicraft works. The traditional system of administration of justice called *Nyele* still exists and functions as per the age-old traditions and customs. Like any other society, they celebrate several festivals every year. These festivals are family, clan, kin, or tribe- based, involving rites and rituals marked by animal sacrifice. Various ritual performances through ritual altars are invoked to seek blessings from the supernatural powers and benevolent spirits.

Nyishi altars, made from bamboo, wood, leaves, and natural materials, are created in homes, villages, sacred places, fields, graveyards, or forests based on ritual purposes. These altars, dedicated to deities, spirits, and ancestors, reflect animistic traditions. Rituals involve offerings of rice, meat, eggs, and beverages to seek blessings and protection. The altar structure varies with belief systems, ritual purpose and materials used. These altars symbolize supernatural presence. Below is a discussion on three major types of altars for funeral, marriage, and festival rituals.

5. Funeral altars (*Nyibiung*)

In the Nyishi community, the concept of death is interpreted through religious perspective. They believe the cause of death is set by *Chene Penam* or *Aayi Chene Penam* (creators) or because of *Uie* (spirit) which governs an individual’s lifespan, and dictates the timing of death. Simultaneously, they hold that *Lochang*, fluidlike substance found in the bone marrow, is the life-giving element in human being. If this substance is absent from the bone, the death of the individual is considered inevitable. This belief is particularly emphasized in the cases of unnatural death.

Death is inevitable, yet emotional attachments and beliefs in an afterlife often obscure this reality. People perform rituals to ensure protection, peaceful passage of souls, and prevent disturbances like illnesses that might be attributed to deceased spirits. It is also considered thoughtful if the individual, before passing, expresses their wishes regarding their final resting place. The family members honor this wish through ritual known as *Seiying-Bengpe-Nam/Seiying-Bing-Naam*. Each component of the Nyishi altars, from bamboo structures to sacrificial offerings, serves specific symbolic functions, reflecting broader themes of life, death, and renewal.

The altars near Nyishi graves (see figure 1) symbolize the community's reverence for the afterlife and its spiritual significance. The carvings show souls journeying through the underworld guided by deities. In Nyishi culture, death is seen as both biological and spiritual. While death from old age is accepted naturally, premature death is viewed as unfortunate and potentially caused by malevolent spirits. The community performs mortuary rituals within 24 hours, though bodies may be kept for 2-3 days, waiting for family members to gather for funerary rites.

a. Funeral altars of natural death (*Yunu Sibü*)

The Nyishi community approaches burials with a great deal of care and organization, respectfully placing the deceased near their home. In instances of natural death, the rituals involved are kept to a minimum. The grave is thoughtfully dug near the house, honoring the individual's last wish to be laid to rest there. The dimensions of the grave are carefully considered, based on the person's height, typically measuring between 2½ to 3 meters in length and approximately 1½ to 2 meter in width. The process of digging the grave usually takes about 2 to 3 hours, while the completion of the altar generally requires an additional 3 to 5 hours. In this altar, compartments are crafted in accordance with the socio-economic status of the individual. It is beautifully adorned with leaves, bamboo shavings, the horns of sacrificed animals, and their neck band ropes. When the deceased is buried, a small altar, known as *Sogang*, is constructed nearby the grave for the purpose of animal sacrifice. This altar consists of three wooden posts which are adorned with bamboo shavings crafted into artificial bamboo flowers called *Dekpu*.

In cases of natural death, they arrange the body in a systematic manner and cover it with white silk cloths known as *Tapum Eji* or *Lehtum Eji* with no restriction regarding the burial site. The head of the deceased is positioned facing the direction of the sunrise, symbolizing renewal or the continuity of life. In the unfortunate event of an infant's death, the decoration of altar near the graves is often considered less significant. Similarly, in cases of unnatural death, altars are typically more modest in form usually comprising only one or two wooden posts instead of the customary four.

The lower level of the structure is designated as a resting place for the deceased. This area is enclosed by a bamboo fence known as *Puriaf*, which serves the purpose of preventing animals from entering the sacred space (see figure 2). The upper level serves as a gathering space for family and mourners to honor the departed. This two-tiered structure symbolically connects the earthly and spiritual realms, representing ancestor veneration and the bond between living and dead.



Figure 1: Funeral Altar (*Nyubiung*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung



Figure 2: Ground Floor (*Puriap*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The hanging piece, referred to as the *Gaksar* (see figure 3), is traditionally displayed on the altar when the deceased had the privilege of possessing valuable ornaments during their lifetime. These decorative elements are intricately crafted from bamboo leaves, bamboo shavings, and bamboo netting (*Jamtam*). The first compartment of the altar serves as a symbolic resting place for the souls of those who have previously passed away (*Uram*). *Nene Gyadung*, involving the careful placement of bamboo leaves on the top of the structure, symbolizes a humble invocation for blessings and the alleviation of socio-economic hardships. *Pusup* marks the conclusion or final component of the altar's structure. Figure 4 illustrates both *Nene Gyadung* and *Pusup*.



Figure 3: Hanging piece (*Gaksar*)
and bamboo net (*Jamtam*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung



Figure 4: Bamboo leaves (*Nene Gyadung*)
and end of the altar (*Pusup*).
Photograph by Goda Mepung

In the absence of a Mithun or *Gayal* (Scientific name: *Bosfrontalis*) sacrifice, the altar is constructed using only a bamboo fence known as *Puriap*, without incorporating compartmental divisions. The compartmentalized structure is specifically reserved for occasions involving the sacrifice of a Mithun, highlighting the animals' cultural and

ritual in Nyishi culture. The figures 5 and 6 depict the initial phase of constructing the *Puriaf*, a stage referred to as *Gumpa Payum*.

b. Funeral altars of unnatural death



Figure 5: Bamboo Fence (*Puriaf*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung



Figure 6: *Gumpa Payum*
Photograph by Goda Mepung

c. Suicide death (*Sunyiü Sibü*)

Suicide is categorized as an unnatural death in Nyishi society and is referred to as *Sunyiü Sibü*. It is considered as the most disgraceful form of death. In such cases, the body is buried without the construction of a ritual altar, and instead, a single piece of wood is placed to mark the grave as a symbolic gesture.



Figure 7: Suicide Altar (*Sunyiü sibü*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The deceased is not allowed to be buried near the house. Instead, the burial site is located away from the residence, reflecting the social and ritual separation associated with this form of death. In an interview, Toku Hania, a native informant, explained that the *Nyibu*, the community shaman, performs prayers for the deceased, guiding their soul to its designated realm called *Uram Kenaam*. These prayers create a boundary between the deceased's spirit and living family members. However, contemporary practice often involves only simple prayer for suicide victims. Malevolent spirits are believed to linger in the human world, harming the living (see figure 7).

d. Death by murder (*Talang Sibü*)

The term *Talang Sibü* is used to describe a death resulting from murder, which is regarded as occurring under particularly unfortunate and inauspicious circumstances. In such cases, an altar is constructed, and sacred leaves from *Castanopsis sp.* locally known as *Kura Naneh* are used. These sacred leaves serve as ritual markers indicating the unnatural death (*Talang Sibü*). It is further believed that if the soul of the deceased, referred to as *Sunyu Pekne*, wishes to seek revenge, it may be considered as murder. After the burial, which is typically conducted at night, family members and others remain vigilant, staying awake and listening attentively for any unusual sounds emanating from the grave. According to Nyishi belief, such sound is interpreted as a sign that the deceased may be seeking retribution.

e. Accidental death (*Gere Sibü*)

Accidental death, referred to as *Gere Sibü*, is categorized as a form of unnatural death. In such instances, the body is respectfully placed near the corridor of the house, allowing family members the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings. Once they have had the chance to share their words, the body is taken for burial (figure 8).



Figure 8: Accidental Altar (*Gere Sibü*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

6. Funeral rituals

While death rituals among the Nyishi are generally performed in a similar manner, in the case of an accidental death, additional rituals are observed. The core structure of the rituals remains largely uniform across different types of death, certain variations exist depending on the circumstances.

Prior to burial, the *Nyubu* (shaman) holds sacred leaves in his hand and takes a small amount of soil from the burial site. He then offers a prayer and throws the soil far from his hand. This ritual is known as *Changlang Pahi Bekak*. This gesture symbolically distances the deceased from malevolent influences. Following burial, campfire rituals are conducted for three days. Fires lit on eastern and western sides of the ritual altar cleanse the deceased of evil spirits - a practice rooted in ancestral tradition that remains culturally significant in Nyishi society. Below are some important death rituals:

Changlang Pahi: In this ritual, the *Nyubu* (shaman) holds sacred leaves and sprinkles a mix of water and blood of a hen onto participants. This ritual act is known as *Nedar Darkak*, which translates to ‘blessing water.’ It is intended to confer spiritual protection and cleanse individuals who have been involved in burial process.

Kachu Pahi: The primary purpose of this ritual is to purify all the participants of the burial ceremony, ensuring that they do not carry the spiritual burden or cause of death back to their own home. It serves as a communal act of spiritual detachment from the deceased.

Yachi Pahi: This ritual is considered a minor ritual typically associated with children. During this ritual, gifts such as ornaments or hens, are given to participants who have contributed to the construction of the funeral altar. It is a gesture of appreciation and recognition in the society.

Nyangpo Pahi: This ritual is observed in cases where a pregnant woman has died. During the ceremony, members of the deceased’s household offer gifts to visitors, which may include items such as *Hughi* (waist belt), *Tasang* (beads) and *Beylang*, etc. the objective of this ritual is to ensure that visitors do not carry the spirit or emotions of the death back to their homes.

7. Role of sacrificial animals and associated belief system

The sacrifice of animals during funeral rituals depends both on the economic capacity of the household and the intensions of the family members. Each type of animal offered holds specific symbolic significance, often linked to belief about the afterlife (*Uie Nyoku*), where the deceased are thought to dwell in a parallel world resembling earthly life. The following types of sacrificial animals are commonly used:

Mithun: The Mithun, a symbolic wealth and prestige, is sacrificed to provide the deceased with status and resource in the afterlife. It is believed that in *Uie Nyoku*, the deceased will have land to cultivate, animals to tend, and a home to reside in. The Mithun ensures that they enter this world with dignity and social standing.

Cow and Pig: These animals are also sacrificed as representation of wealth. Similar to Mithun, their offering is intended to equip the deceased with material provisions in the afterlife, reinforcing the idea that life continues in another realm.

Dog: A dog is sacrificed in a unique ritual where it is tied with a neck band and held by the deceased during the ceremony. This act is based on the belief that the dog will guide the soul on its journey to the afterlife, serving as a spiritual navigator through unknown terrain.

Hen: The hen is sacrificed with the belief that it will wake the deceased each morning in the afterlife, much like an alarm clock. This reflects the perception of the afterlife as a continuation of earthly routine; where daily activities and rhythms persist.

In Nyishi belief, burial materials can only be collected once by a person, with repeated collection prohibited. Young boys cannot dig mud as it may invite spirits' wrath and threaten their lifespan. Burial activities have timing restrictions - digging is not allowed before sunrise, as sunset symbolizes darkness and evil. As such, burying the deceased after sunset is considered dangerous, as it is believed that the evil spirit *Up-Uie-Almamay* claims the lives of those who participate in such delayed burial.

8. Funeral taboo and restriction

Immediately following the burial ceremony, those who have dug the grave proceed to cleanse themselves in a stream or river. Upon returning, they enter the house through the *Batung*, a rarely used entrance located at the opposite end of the dwelling. Seated on a small piece of wood (*Mutung*) near the corridor, they are handed a jug (*Ujuk*), which they break and discard as part of the purification ritual. Only after this ritual act, food is served to them. This practice is believed to prevent the spirit of the deceased from returning back into lives.

The village observes restrictions against leaving or drying clothes in the sun, as part of their death taboo. It is believed that violating this taboo may unleash the *Uram*, a malevolent spirit that can bring disaster upon the community by destroying crops such as maize, millet, and paddy. The *Uram* is thought to manifest through crop diseases, insect infestations, or even by killing livestock. In some cases, the *Uram* is believed to directly affect the transgressor, causing illness. This taboo is strictly observed and applied uniformly to all members of the community.

However, the immediate family members of the deceased remain confined to their home for at least three days, observing a series of additional ritual restrictions. These include refraining from combing their hair (*Tehi-Tukma*), avoiding the use of stairs (*Naka-Chama*), not drying clothes in the sun (*Iji-Loma*), and abstaining from carrying the traditional cane conical bag (*Abar-bakma*), among other prohibitions. Dietary restrictions for a month include avoiding wild animal, intestines, and wild vegetables. For unnatural deaths, restrictions may last a year.

Violation of these taboos is believed to result in severe consequences similar to those attributed to the release of *Uram*, including harm to crops, livestock, and even personal health. These taboos serve a protective function to prevent unnatural deaths recurring in families. If not observed, the misfortune may be transmitted to others.

These detailed structures reveal how the Nyishi conceptualise death, afterlife and social order. The following section analyses how these meanings shift as Christianity and biomedical explanations increasingly reshape beliefs about mortality.

9. Marriage altar (*Nyeda*)

The marriage altar holds profound cultural and symbolic significance in Nyishi communities. This sacred structure serves as a central space for wedding rituals, representing not only the union of two individuals of opposite genders but also the coming together of their families. Commonly referred to as *Nyeda*, the altar is often decorated with intricate carvings, vibrant fabrics, and traditional ornaments that reflect the rich heritage of Nyishi people.

Although the term *Nyeda*, lacks a precise etymological definition, it is generally understood to denote the process of marriage. In the context of the Nyishi community, the institution of marriage is referred to as *Hama Tungpe* meaning ‘accepting a wife.’ Broadly speaking, it is viewed as an act of a *Nyiga* (man) accepting a *Nyeme* (wife) to assist him in *Rehngo* (agriculture work), *Eil-Amuu* (family reproduction), and *Sangeh-Dageh-Mehdub* (family wellbeing). Thus, marriage is not merely a social contract but a holistic partnership grounded in the economic, reproductive, and emotional spheres of life.

The marriage altar (figure 9) is a symbol of joy, and a key ritual element is the inclusion of *Phrynium Pubinerve* leaves (*Kukam Uku*) which are considered indispensable to the altar setting (figure 10).



Figure 9: Marriage Altar (*Sogang*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

Moreover, the altar serves as the site where the bride's family specifies the expected bridewealth, traditionally counted in terms of Mithuns, a culturally valued bovine species. Small wooden sticks placed on the altar represents each Mithun expected. Although it is not compulsory to provide actual animals, the symbolic value can be fulfilled through monetary equivalents. This practice reflects the integration of traditional values with contemporary socio-economic adaptation.

This marriage altar is symbolically regarded as a bride and it is decorated with bamboo shaving (*Dhekpu*), *Phryniumpubinerve* leaves (*Kukam Uku*), Mithun tail (*Sabu Aangee*) and bamboo structure. The *Bodum* is essential component, crafted from bamboo shavings and tied with leaves. Additionally, the *Pokik* consists of three small wooden pieces

At this altar, the Mithun is respectfully offered as part of the marriage ritual. It is also observed that when two Mithuns are offered, it is customary to construct two separate altars, each representing one of the offerings.



Figure 10: *Phryniumpubinerve* Leaves (*Kukam Uku*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

10. Marriage rituals

Changtum Pahi

This ritual is performed when the bride arrives at her marital home for the first time, marking the occasion with the ceremonial renaming of the bride. An altar called *Nyugang* is prepared by the participant. In the *Nyodang*, which is the section of the wall adjacent to the sleeping area of the groom's parents, a *Puruk* (hen) is sacrificed. The *Nyubu* (shaman) chants to the *Puruk*, invoking the household deities to welcome the bride as a new member of the family and seek their blessings for her well-being and integrate her into the new household.

Following the shaman's chants, the bride is required to sacrifice a *Puruk* from the neck (*Langpo*) and release the bird to move freely until it dies. It is believed that the final resting place of the *Puruk* is interpreted as an omen' if it dies at the *Kohda* (the

side of the floor opposite the bed), it is taken as a sign that the bride may not stay in the family for an extended period with the family. Conversely, if it dies in the *Nyodang* (the area besides the bed), it is believed that the bride may not enjoy a long and prosperous life with her husband and his family.

Riksing Kineng

This ritual is performed with the consent of the bride's family. Female pigs are used both for reproductive purposes and as a source of meat offered to the bride's family as part of the marital alliance.

Pehpeh Chika and Pachungor Ru-Kuka Laa

These rituals are undertaken to determine the most suitable bride for a particular family. They involve divinatory practices using chicken liver and are typically conducted without the consent of the prospective bride or her parents. In these rituals, an egg (*Pehpeh*) and a chick (*Pachung*) are used, primarily due to their affordability and accessibility for ritual performance.

Materials used for the rituals

Bamboo (*Tabu*)

Phrynium Pubinerve Leaves (*Kukam Uku*)

Wood (*Sangda*)

Local Rope (*Ehsso*)

Sacrifice: Mithun, Pig, Chickens etc.

The marriage altar illustrates continuity rather than rapture, showing that some rituals remain resistant to change even as other domains undergo transformation.

11. Festival altar (Nyokum)

The Nyokum altar serves as the central focus of spiritual devotion during the festival, symbolizing the profound connection between people and their ancestral deities. Adorned with traditional symbols and ritual offerings, the altar is meticulously constructed and maintained through the celebration, functioning as a sacred space for prayers, rituals, and communal gatherings.

Nyokum is the most significant festival of Nyishi community. The term Nyokum is derived from two words in Nyishi language: *Nyok* meaning 'land' or 'earth' and *Kum*, meaning 'collectiveness' or 'togetherness of people.' The festival is celebrated to invoke blessings for a bountiful harvest and overall well-being of humanity. It reflects the Nyishi people's deep seated symbiotic relationship with nature, which is vividly expressed through the festival held annually on February 26. During Nyokum, community collectively seeks the favour of all celestial forces, with particular reverence given to Goddess Nyokum, the principal deity of the celebration.

12. Festival rituals

The Nyokum altar, known as *Yugang*, is constructed primarily from bamboo and serves as the sacred site for offering prayers and sacrifices during the festival (see figure

11). At this altar, mithun, cow, goats and chickens are ritually sacrificed, with chickens often suspended from the bamboo poles as part of the rituals. The *Nyubu* leads the main rituals, chanting ritual hymns passed down through generations.

Among the Nyishis, the sacred hymns chanted by the *Nyubu* are not written down, nor is it memorized, or formally taught. Rather the ability to recite these sacred chants is considered an innate gift, naturally occurring at birth. During the festival, the sacred hymns are intended to invoke rain, particularly on the day of the celebration. Rainfall on this day is regarded as a favorable omen, indicating that the spirits have accepted the rituals and are pleased with the community's offerings. It is also seen as that the *Nyubu* has performed his duty in accordance with spiritual expectation.

On the eve of the festival, shamans gather in the Nyokum Namlo, chanting hymns to invoke the festival Goddess and spirits for community blessings. On the final day, rituals extend across the region, driving away malevolent forces and ensuring spiritual harmony.

The arrival of the *Nyubu*, accompanied by his attendants, marks the commencement of the main rituals. The event is accompanied by singing and dancing with guests warmly welcomed using rice paste powder applied to the face and served *opo*, a traditional drink made from millet, using ladles crafted from dried gourd. Folk songs and dance are performed by men and women, who hold hands and form a circular formation as they move rhythmically. One of the commonly sung refrains is, “*Nyokum~bow~twpa~debv, Yollu~ bow~twpa~debv.*” Shamans participate in the ceremony by dancing around the altar while creating rhythmic sounds from a brass plate. On the main day, women offer water or millet beer at the altar to feed the Goddess and spirits, affirming the community's connection with the spiritual realm.

Materials used

Bamboo

Wood

Castanopissp Sacred leaves (*kura-nane*)

Phrynium pubinerve leaves (*kukam-uku*)

Sacrifice of Mithun, Hen, Cow etc.



Figure 11: Festival Altar (*Yugang*)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The Nyokum festival altar is decorated with elements symbolizing nature's spirits. The villagers collectively construct and prepare the altar over two days, assembling it once all components are ready. A significant structural element of the altar is known *Dumtam*, which refers to two pieces of wood placed in a row along a horizontal axis (see figure 12). These serves as foundation supports for the main posts of the altar. Smaller wooden pieces are also used to reinforce the base, ensuring a strong and stable structure.



Figure 12: *Dumtam*
Photograph by Goda Mepung

During the sacrificial ritual, the head of the Mithunis tied to a cross-wood structure, locally known as *Riako* (see figure 13). The animal is then slaughtered by severing the neck, and its blood is carefully collected in bamboo vessels. The blood and meat of the sacrificed Mithun are distributed among villagers, symbolizing shared blessings and communal prosperity. This sharing practice reinforces social cohesion, preserves cultural traditions, and strengthens community bonds.



Figure 13: *Riako*, as wooden support to tie the Mithun
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The *Yullo Alang* is intricately decorated with bamboo shavings, *phrynium pubinerve* leaves, and rice power (see figure 14). These decorations are not merely aesthetic; they function as spiritual offering intended to attract and appease benevolent spirits. The elaborate adornment is believed to transform the space into sacred site, thereby inviting energies and divine blessings into the *Yullo Alang*.

The use of natural materials such as bamboo shavings and *phrynium pubinerve* leaves reflects the community's deep ecological consciousness and spiritual philosophy rooted in harmony with nature. These elements symbolize the interdependence between humans and the environment, reinforcing the cultural belief that nature and the spiritual world are intricately linked in sustaining the well-being of the community.



Figure 14: *Yullo Alang*
Photograph by Goda Mepung

On the main day of the festival, bamboo is split into two pieces to create a ritual implement known as *Kamju Shacho* (see figure 15). Women actively participate in the ceremony by offering millet wine at the altar, using the *Kamju Shacho* as a vessel. This implement holds profound ritual significance, symbolizing the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Women play a vital role through their millet wine offerings, which connect the community with deities. This tradition preserves ritual customs while highlighting gender roles and farming practices, reaffirming both spiritual and social values in the community.



Figure 15: *Kamju Sacho*
Photograph by Goda Mepung

In the ritual setting, rice powder (*Aatang*) is offered at the altar using *Phrynium pubinerve* leaves (see figure 16). These leaves are carefully folded and arranged to create a sacred receptacle for the offering. This ritual act of placing rice powder in these natural containers is believed to bring blessings and prosperity for the entire community.

The use of *Phrynium pubinerve* leaves in this context reflects the deep connection between local flora and traditional religious practices. This tradition illustrates how the material culture of ritual is deeply embedded in the surrounding environment, demonstrating a sustainable reverence for nature as an active participant in spiritual life.



Figure 16: Offering Rice Powder to Altar
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The *Yarang Yugang* and *Paki Yugang* altars represent subpar spirits, locally referred to as *Uie* (see figure 17). These spirits are believed to reside the altars and function as intermediaries between the human world and the spiritual realm. As such, these altars hold significant ritual importance, playing a crucial role in maintaining cosmic harmony and ensuring the well-being of the community.



Figure 17: *Yarang Yugang* (in left) and *Paki Yugang* (in right)
Photograph by Goda Mepung

A hen is offered at these altars as a ritual gesture of respect and gratitude towards the spirits, reinforcing the connection between the living and the supernatural forces that govern their lives. The *Dapo Uie* altar is constructed as a protective shrine intended to ward off diseases and restore social harmony in the event of conflicts or misunderstanding within the community, when such disputes arise, fines or compensation are imposed by the villagers as part of the reconciliation process. A Mithun is ritually sacrificed at this altar as an offering to the spirit, symbolizing purification and restoration of balance.

Within the broader Nyokum altar complex, three highest-ranking spiritual entities are believed to reside. They are *Donyi Uie*, *Sei Uie* and *Paming Uie*. Among them, *Donyi Uie* representing the sun, is regarded as the supreme spirit, followed by *Sei Uie* and then comes the *Paming Uie*. These three altars are crafted from bamboo and are distinguished by unique ornamental designs, reflecting the hierarchical status and spiritual significance of each deity. The manifestation in the ritual space is visually represented in figure 18.



Figure 18: Three Spirits *Donyi Uie*, *Sei Uie* and *Paming Uie* decorated on Bamboo
Photograph by Goda Mepung

The decoration is made exclusive for the powerful spirits and is carried out through a specific ritual process known as *Yullo Riatak* (see figure 19). It is believed that if the decoration is not properly completed, the spirit (*Uie*) may become offended. The Nyokum altar thus becomes a site where tradition and contemporary influences are actively negotiated, making it central to understanding cultural resilience among the Nyishi tribe.



Figure 19: *Yullo Riatak*
Photograph by Goda Mepung

13. Changing aspects

No significant changes were observed in the marriage ceremony altar structure or function. However, substantial changes occurred in funeral practices, particularly in altar design. The festival altar underwent only minor decorative and sacrificial modifications while maintaining its form. Given the Nyishi tribe's wide distribution, regional variations exist in altar design and rituals.

The concept of death and the structure of the funeral altar have undergone significant transformation in contemporary times, particularly among the young generation. Traditionally, death was attributed to the action of *Uie* (spirit), who were believed to take a person's life. In contrast, contemporary explanations increasingly attribute death to biomedical causes, including diseases like cancer and diabetes.

The transformation of funeral altar practices began with the introduction of Christianity to the Nyishi community. In the past, the deceased were buried by elder or younger brothers, or by close relatives. Today, influenced by Christianity, the responsibility of burial is no longer confined to specific kinship role, any community member may carry out the burial.

Some traditional belief persists, such as the idea that dog guide the soul of the deceased and hens awaken them in the afterlife. However, the ritual sacrifice of dog has largely been discontinued. Hens continue to be sacrificed, though their role in the funerary context has shifted and is now often interpreted differently than in earlier traditions.

The structure of the funeral altar among the Nyishi tribe has undergone significant transformations over time. Traditionally, the altar was constructed as a rectangular wooden stair known as *Gumpa Payum*. However, following the introduction of Christianity among the Nyishi tribe, this wooden structure was gradually discontinued. By the 1950s, altars made with bamboo fencing become increasingly common, and in contemporary practices. The Christian cross is often incorporated into the altar design. Despite these changes, the *Sooja* style (step-shaped design) has remained consistent.

In the case of unnatural deaths, the structure of the funeral altar has also evolved. Previously, only two wooden posts were erected, but modern practice now includes the addition of the Christian cross and floral decorations. Traditional rituals such as *Changlang Pahi*, *Yachi Pahi*, and *Kachu Pahi* are largely no longer observed. Instead of these rituals, Christian prayers are offered, and religious roles formerly fulfilled by traditional shamans are now assumed by Church preachers and Fathers.

These changes reflect the broader socio-cultural transformation occurring among the Nyishi tribe. As the tribe continues to modernize and adopt new religious identities, corresponding shifts are evident in mortuary practices. For example, it has become customary to construct tombs and commemorate the first death anniversary, a practice that was not traditionally observed.



Figure 20: Modern Death Altars
Photograph by Goda Mepung

Modernisation has influenced Nyishi altar practices through increased participation in Christianity, the decline of traditional shamanism, the introduction of cemented tombs (see figure 20), and a shift towards biomedical explanations of illness and death. However, these changes do not imply a linear decline; instead, they illustrate a dynamic process of selective adaptation, in which certain ritual elements, such as a hen sacrifice or bamboo structures, persist while others are replaced or reinterpreted.

14. Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to elucidate the structural and functional aspects of the altar and the associated belief system of the Nyishi tribe. The study documents and analyzes the various types of altars, highlighting their integral role in the community's rich cultural and religious heritage. Altars serve as a sacred space where offerings and sacrifices are made to deities, spirits, or ancestors to seek blessings, appease them, or express gratitude to supernatural forces. They are central to the performance of key rites and rituals, including those related to births, marriages, deaths, harvests, and festivals that mark significant life events and seasonal transitions.

Symbolically, altars represent a vital connection between the physical and supernatural realms, serving as focal points through which believers engage with higher

powers. Beyond their ritual significance, altars also serve as tangible expressions of the Nyishi community's cultural and religious identity, playing a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of traditional beliefs and values across generations. Moreover, during important communal events, altars often become sites of social congregation, reinforcing collective solidarity and a shared sense of belonging among community members.

This study examines three types of Nyishi altars: funeral, marriage, and festival altars. The festival altar, adorned with natural materials like bamboo and leaves, serves as the center of communal celebration. Deities, especially the Nyokum Goddess as principal deity, are invited through rituals to protect the community and ensure agricultural prosperity.

This study shows that Nyishi altars function not only as ritual structures but also as material sites where cosmology, identity, and social change intersect. While some elements remain remarkably resilient, others show clear signs of transformation driven by Christianity, education, and new moral frameworks. The persistence of altar practices amid these shifts demonstrates the community's active negotiation of tradition rather than passive loss.

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