

Marriage System of the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a sacred social institution whose sanctity is recognised by every Indian society. It is perceived as a system where the union of a man and a woman has been given social sanction as husband and wife. Mutual fidelity and devotion to partner are still considered to be the essence of marriage for all mankind. Every society has its own unique and different types of marriage system. So are the Nyishi people of Arunachal Pradesh who are not exceptional. They too have their own peculiar ways of acquiring their soul mates. So, this research paper talks in detail about different types of marriages conducted among the Nyishis. The Nyishi society is organised in such way that a considerable freedom is enjoyed by its members. The society is based on democratic principles and every member has equal and unrestricted right to air their own views. In matters of sex or marriage they are free and frank. To talk about sex openly is not considered in many literate societies. But not for the Nyishis who are very voluble and enthusiastic about discussing sex in gathering. The parents too allow enough freedom in matter of sex or selection of soul mate to their sons and daughters. The data's collected for the paper was based on both primary and secondary sources of information. Research tools especially interview, participant observation and questionnaire were extensively used for the collection of primary data. Further, fieldworks were carried out in few Nyishi villages of Kamle District, where interviews were conducted with Nyibus (Priest), Gaonburas, Gaonburis and village elders of both sexes. Questionnaires were presented to the educated members' in order to get diverse viewpoints on the selected topic. Different questionnaires were of immense help to compare the contrast opinions given by different individuals and deduce appropriate answer and knowledge on the topic. Secondary data were collected largely from voluminous books of reputed authors. Besides, reading materials from State Museum, Research and Statistical department of Govt. Of Arunachal Pradesh were also consulted.

1. Introduction

Marriage is a socially recognised institution in every society. It plays an important role in maintaining the unbroken line of family descent. Everyone is anxious to perpetuate his name after he is dead. An English writer, **E. Westermarck** in his book entitled, "*The History of Human Marriage*", (1921) has defined marriage as 'a relation of one or more men and women which is recognized by custom or law and involves certain rights and duties both in case of the parties entering the union and in the case of children born of it'.

This definition of Marriage is also applicable to the Nyishi of Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides, conduction of Marriage has got various other purposes for them:

- In order to prevent the family property from going to someone else marriage is conducted to produce an heir to the property.
- Marriage is considered necessary to maintain the numerical strength of the clan. They believe that one is always at an advantageous position when one is a member of a bigger clan. A clan having a large number of members is economically, politically and socially in a stronger position. Though it is relatively less important factor necessitating a marriage, nevertheless it cannot be ignored.

- The desire of the Nyishi men to get sexual gratification, to fulfil a physical needs, a psychological urge, to get a companion and a women who can look after him and the family are the most important and pressing reasons for entering into the institution of marriage.

2. Types of marriage

As like other social groups, even among the Nyishis of Kamle, there exist different types of marriage:-

- CHILD MARRIAGE:** Among the Nyishi there is no prescribed age of marriage. As a result Child Marriage was largely practiced in the earlier days. No age bar, led to the arrangement of marriage between immature husband and nubile wife or immature wife and adult husband. There was no objection from either of the families to such arrangement if the decision has been taken by both the parents. In case a small girl who has been married off before she has experienced her first menstrual flow continues to live in her father's house even after marriage. The husband visits her occasionally and brings her to his house only when she is matured and had her menstrual begin to flow. During his occasional visit to in-law's house he cannot come empty hands, so brings *EDIN DINKO* (dried/smoked meat) of either *SOB, SOA, EREK*

or any hunted animals and dried fish. He may also render help in cultivation of his own to the girl's parents though no demand is made. In such marriage the time between betrothal and going to the bridegroom's house vary from a few months to several years, depending on the readiness of the bride and her family. Since, the Nyishi family is patriarchal in nature, the female in the household except the mother has no distinct voice in the marital affairs. In this case after the consent of the father and brothers of the girl, a marital bond is established. Passive role is played from the side of the girl. However, Child Marriage is fast diminishing from the Nyishi society due to spread of education, broadening of mental and social outlook of the people and finally complying with the marriageable age prescribed by the Government of India.

- b) **PRE-BIRTH BETROTHAL:** Apart from marriage between immature boys and girls, there were also provisions of marriage between unborn children of the respective family. Economic consideration was the topmost priority which tempted the Nyishis to conduct such pre-birth and post-birth betrothals of their children. However, apart from economic consideration, pre-birth betrothals were also evident whenever there was deep intimacy between two friends and in their anxious to perpetuate their attachment and to become closer, they establish affinity through matrimonial alliance between their children. But in case after giving words if both of them don't possess any children or one of them is issueless it remains a secret obligation for their next generation to comply with and fulfil the word of honour. At time pre-birth betrothals also took place when a person was not able to pay his own bride price. Such a person enters into a contract with another person pledging that he would give his prospective daughter to become the wife of his son if he agrees to pay his settled bride price. In that case he receives the bride price for his daughter though she is yet to be born.
- c) **MATE SELECTIONS:** Besides, these conventional types of marriage, it is interesting to know that the Nyishis have numerous unconventional ways of acquiring their respective life partners in a socially acceptable manner. Some of a specific ways of selecting life partners among Nyishis are:
- Nyim Kognam** (Arranged / Negotiated Marriage)
 - Nyim Kegnam** (Marriage by elope)
 - Nyim Renam** (Marriage by purchase)
 - Likko-Sinam Nyim** (Marriage by exchange)
 - Nyira-Benam Nyim** (Marriage by service)
 - Nyim Senam** (Marriage by Capture/forced Marriage)
 - Dob-Rig-Sonam** (Levirate Marriage)
 - Rigne Sonam** (Sororate Marriage)

In **Nyim Kognam**, the initiative for marriage comes generally from the parents of the boy. There are different situations under which such marriage takes place among the Nyishi. When the parents of a boy consider their son to have

grown old enough and fit for marriage and if they possess the resource for payment of the bride price suiting their status, they are on look for a suitable girl. On finding the one who is suitable to be their daughter-in-law, a hint is given to the boy to ascertain his wishes and consent for the girl of their choice. If the boy agrees, the matter is pursued further. Apart from this, arranged marriages also take place when a boy tells his family about his willingness to marry a particular girl of his choice. In this case it becomes the responsibility of the father to negotiate with the girl's parents. However, the family members of the boy carefully observe the activities of their son and to be daughter-in-law as well as discuss the line of descent of the father and the mother of the girl and prevailing status of the relatives and parents of the girl. If all the conditions satisfy the boy's parents and the relatives, they decide to contact the girl's parents for marriage proposal. This is the most respected way of tying the two. Next is the reading of omen on chicken's eggs (*Pip Chika*) and chicken's liver (*Porok Rokchin Kanam*) by the *Nyibu* (Priest) in the groom's house to find out whether the marriage between the two is workable. If it is favourable the father, mother, *lump* (Mediator) along with the groom and kins if willing goes to the girl's house with formal marriage proposal. This procedure is called *Nyim Kognam*. For the proposal they usually carry one *Arek Regma* (burned pig), one part of *Sole Sohar* (mithun thigh) and two to three *Opo Agle* (cane baskets of unprepared millet beer) to the girl's house. If the girl's parents decline the proposal they don't accept the offer but if they agree they make a return offers of either *Maji* (Brass bell) *Tal* (Brass Plate) or *Bet* (Brass bowl) and *Topum Ejji* (Eri chador/shawl) etc. After the return from girl's house another Omen is read by the *Nyibu* as initiated by the boy's parents and kins to fix the date and type of *Nyida* ceremony which is a unique and special marriage ceremony of the Nyishi. After the fixation of date, the *Nyida* ceremony follows. Among the Nyishi there are different *Nyidas'* (marriage ceremonies), such as *Daat Nyida*, *Jirkum Nyida*, *Tado Nyida*, *Dukur Nyida* and *Tado Halley* depending on the socio-economic status of the individual.

In case of **NYIM KEGNAM**, the romance plays the prominent part. Marriage by elopement though rare is in vogue in the Nyishi society. When the parents of both the boy and the girl don't approve of the match because of numerous reasons, such as boy's parent's inability to pay the bride price or bad morality of either the boy or the girl, non-affinal groups and so on, but the couple adamant to marry elope to some other village and live there till the matter subsides. But they can't remain isolated from the society for a long time. Further, unless their marriage is socially approved, they are not considered husband and wife and their children are considered illegitimate. So after sometime when the wrath of the parents subsides they come back to their village. Out of compulsion their marriage is agreed upon and the usual marriage procedure follows depending on the individual capability in order to legalise their marriage.

NYIM-RENAM is another type of marriage where usually the *Nyim Hacho/Haat* (Eldest wife) purchase another wives for her husband to help in the household chores, to work in the field and also to give birth to more male children. Further, if a man cannot repay the loan owned by him either in cash or kind

used to sell off his daughter or daughters to the loaner to clear the debt. These sold daughters have no choice but to become the wife of the loaner.

Among the Nyishi, **LIKKO-SINAM** marriage takes place when the parent's of the boy is not in a position to manage the bride price for the marriage. In this case, they negotiate to give their daughters in exchange to their sons. In such marriage, the question of bride price does not arise but if the status of any one of them deserves a little better consideration than very nominal payment is made. Besides, sons and daughters even unmarried sisters and brothers are married off by exchange in the Nyishi society.

NYIRA –BENAM form of marriage takes place when a boy is unable to pay the bride price as demanded by the father of the girl whom he loves and want to marry, then he may seek the permission of his parent's to offer service to his father-in-law in lieu of the bride price. If the girl's father agrees, he goes to live in the house of his father-in-law with the girl who is going to be his wife. Such marriage is known as **NYIRA-BENAM** (Marriage by Service) and the person who renders service is called *Nyira*. Henceforth, he serves him by tilling his *Nongo* (field), hunting, fishing and doing other domestic duties. However, in most cases his stay is only temporary because as soon as he manage to pay the bride price as demanded, he returns to his own home with his wife and children. Further, there are special cases where the father of the girl who finds himself handicapped in doing the necessary work in the field due to no male issue may invite his *Magbo* (son-in-law) to live with him and look after him and his property and thus ultimately become his heir. Here the *Magbo* without being *Nyira* is rather known as son because it is not due to his will but the will and request of his *Ato* (Father-in-law) that he stays in his wife's house. But such cases are very rare among the Nyishi because their society is patriarchal in nature and inspite of mutual understanding between the *Ato* and *Magbo*, it is considered derogatory for a boy to live in his father-in-law's house.

NYIM-SENAM: In the Nyishi society there were cases where a man married the women of the captured clan in the clan warfare, locally called as *Nyimak Panam*. Such wife's were called *Nyimak Nyim*. Further forced or abduct marriage were also prevalent in their society. There were cases where a boy forcefully took away the girl of his likeness without her consent with the help of his kin members or friends to a jungle or some distance village. But when traced, the girl's parents out of compulsion allow the boy to marry their daughter by asking the boy's parents or the boy himself to pay the bride price. So, ultimately a suitable settlement is made and consent of marriage is accorded formally between both the parties. However, this is the case if the girl is not engaged or child married to another person. But unfortunately if the girl happens to be already engaged or child married to someone else than the boy has to make the payment of the bride price already paid to the first husband plus the fresh bride price to the girl's parents. Such wife is called *Nyengo Nyim*.

DOB-RIG SONAM: There are also instances of man inheriting wife under some special circumstances apart from acquiring her by paying bride price and going through certain

ceremonies. The most common form of inheritance is levirate, which is locally termed as **DOB-RIG SONAM**. After the death of the husband it becomes compulsion on the widow to live with any of her deceased husband's unmarried brother as his wife. Since the family has paid the bride price, no one else but the brothers of the deceased has a right over the widow. If the deceased has no brother, the next Kin has the right to inherit the widow. If the bride price of the widow is half paid by the deceased husband then the brother inheriting her takes over the responsibility of future payment after he has inherited the widow and kept her as his wife. The main reason for the Nyishi to remarry the widow to the deceased husband's brother or relatives is to keep the widow within their family and also to provide protection and help to the widow and her children.

RIGNE SONAM: Among the Nyishi people there are also instances of man re-marrying for the sake of procreation. If the present wife is barren or has no male issue or died accidentally, he marries his wife's sister as his co-wife with or without the permission of the family members. Such marriage is not forceful. If the wife's sister and her parents are reluctant to such marriage, the husband can't force them. But, if they agree then a new marriage with proper bride price, though lighter is arranged. Such form of marriage is known as *Rigne-Sonam* (Sororate Marriage).

3. Rules of marriage

a) Tribe endogamous and Clan exogamous: They are largely tribe endogamous but clan exogamous. Strictly speaking marriage outside the Nyishi community is not preferred and is looked with disfavour. These are largely due to domestic reasons. They feel that marriage outside will create complication in marriage exchanges, ceremonies and also adjustment problem. However, if such marriage takes place and if the boy is Nyishi then the ceremonies and payments are according to the Nyishi custom. But not in case if the girl is Nyishi and the boy is from other tribe such Galo, Tagin, Adi etc. Besides, marriages conducted between the members of same clan and family is considered as great sin and the couples are ex-communicated from the village and are looked down by the villagers. No one goes to their house nor receives anything from such couple. Further, they are debarred from participating any social occasions in the family or in the village. This type of socially unrecognised and unacceptable marriage is locally termed as *Kena-Nenam*.

b) Polygyny: Among the Nyishis polygamy was very much prevalent in the earlier days. A man used to keep four to five wives at a time and sometimes even more than that. In those days marrying more wives were considered as great glory and fame for an individual because they believe that only a rich man could afford to have as many wives as possible by paying the bride price. Apart from this, polygyny was practiced because of bareness or need of more helping hands in case a person has vast land. However with the passage of time the practice of polygyny or polygamy is fast decreasing and most of the present generation prefer monogamy for peace

and prosperity of the family. So monogamy have become the general rule of marriage among the Nyishi.

- c) Polyandry:** Among the Nyishi polyandry was also practiced in earlier days but rarely found among the present generation. The main reasons for such practice in earlier days were due to joint family system, considerate nature of the brother-in-laws and long absence of husband due to warfare or hunting activities.

4. Adultery

In the Nyishi society adultery is considered as a heinous crime. If the adultery is committed by wife it greatly hurt the husband's ego. He considers it as a severe blow to his dignity and manliness. He hates for being bullied by his fellow villagers. Therefore out of shame he initially does not leak out the adulterous act of his wife but if she continues with her act inspite of the repeated warnings then the husband has no other option but to make the matter public. Once it is made public the matter is discussed before the elders of the village in the *Kebang* (Village Council). A huge fine in the form of *Sobs* (Mithun) whose number varies from 1 to 5 to be paid to the husband by the man involved. However, this is the case if the man with whom the wife is involved is single. There are also cases where the wife has an affair with another married man and vice-versa. In such complicated cases, the partner of the opposite pair raises fingers at one another instead of being harsh to their respective partners involved. The family and the clan members of the adulterer feel ashamed and angry at the disgrace being brought upon them by such heinous crime. In spite of all these they try their best to help him to fight out the case and also contributes towards the adulterer if he can't pay the compensation for the shameful act. Here too the fine varies from 1 to 2 *Sobs*. Among the Nyishis, the child born out of an adulterous union belongs to the legal husband of the adulteress. The child is considered as legitimate as if it were born by the legal husband himself. However, if such child is of good moral and expert in all things no one talk about his past but in case if the child is naughty and develop bad habits and moral then he is condemned and tortured by the family and clan members with the exception of the mother.

Thus, the Nyishis firmly believes that Adultery is such a crime which always leaves its imprint. Even after the affair is settled there arises quarrel in the families of the adulterer and the adulteress. They become suspicious at slightest incident. Either of them who were involved is always nagged and insulted at the smallest mistake done by them. There are also instances where even after settlement the wife and husband may live under same roof but they have no physical relation with each other.

5. APAK-SINAM (Separation/Divorce):

As in other societies even among the Nyishi couples there comes a time when they are left with no other option but to get separation which is locally known as *Apak-Sinam*. Numerous reasons are taken under consideration for the separation between the husband and the wife. The foremost reason is the act of adultery. If the adulterer and adulteress are adamant to their affair then the only alternative is the separation of former

husband and wife. However, the children are left behind under the care of the legal husband if the wife is married to another single man. But in case if the wife is married to another married man then the former wife of the married man may either live with him or may live independently along with her children but the husband will take custodian of the children by providing all the requirements. Apart from adultery, adjustment problem with in-laws also leads to separation between the couple. Such cases of separation are very rare and many a time they are just temporary. Ill treatment and torture by husband repeatedly in drunken state and also for no reason are also cause of divorce among the couples. If the treatment is twice or thrice the wife tolerates but if it continues all the year round, it becomes unbearable for the wife and to get freedom from such tortures, she ultimately leaves her husband with the help of her father and brothers. Lastly, impotency is another cause of divorce among the couple in the Nyishi society. If the wife is impotent, the husband remarries though exceptional cases are there where the husband wishes to live with his wife inspite of no children. Such couple adopt and raise either their brother or clan member's children. But if the husband remarries, the wife may or may not live under the same roof and also there are cases where the wife due to unloved, uncared and neglected attitude shown by her husband goes back to her parent's house. If the husband is impotent, there is less chance of wife remarrying another man with few exception cases. Rather she continues to live with her husband and may bear a child from her husband's brothers or kinsmen with the approval of the husband and his family members. But this is not compulsory but just a suitable option. In spite of no offspring there are couples who remain loyal to each other till death.

6. Conclusion

Thus, for the Nyishi people, marriage is a socially recognised institution. It is considered as must for them because it helps in maintaining the unbroken line of family descent and also generates more working hands in the family which in turn betters the economic conditions of the family. They are tribe endogamy and clan exogamy. After marriage they have a patrilocal form of residence because their society is largely a patriarchal society. In the earlier days, the core aspect of marriage was the payment of the bride price. It was agreed by the elder members of the society that the bride price had to be paid to the parent's of the girl, for they not only gave birth to the girl but also nurtured her and fulfilled all her requirements. So bride price was considered a valid compensation for such a long period of rearing the girl. But this argument and belief are unacceptable in the present scenario. Nowadays, greater portions of educated Nyishis with broader mental outlook do not prefer bride price for their daughters rather they prefer throwing large reception parties in their honour. Thus, the Nyishi society is in transition due to interaction with the people of other cultures and societies. A the same time it is the responsibilities of the present generation of the society to be on their guard against the onslaught of modernization, so that their rich culture, heritage and value system could be preserved without much damage.

Glossary

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| 1. <i>Ato</i> | : | <i>Father-in-law</i> |
| 2. <i>Bet</i> | : | <i>Brass Bowl</i> |

3. <i>Ebar</i>	:	<i>Cane basket</i>	16. <i>Nyimak Panam</i>	:	Clan warfare
4. <i>Edin Dinko</i>	:	<i>Smoked meat</i>	17. <i>Opo</i>	:	Millet and Rice beer
5. <i>Erek</i>	:	<i>Pig</i>	18. <i>Pip Chikanam</i>	:	Examination of
6. <i>Erek Regma</i>	:	Full grown smoked Pig	Omen on yolk of chicken's egg		
7. <i>Kebang</i>	:	Traditional village council	19. <i>Porok</i>	:	Hen
8. <i>Lump/Potem</i>	:	Mediator	20. <i>Porok Rokchin Kanam</i>	:	Examination of Omen on
9. <i>Magbo</i>	:	Son-in-law	chicken's liver		
10. <i>Maji</i>	:	Brass bell	21. <i>Soa</i>	:	Cow
11. <i>Nongo</i>	:	Cultivable field	22. <i>Sob</i>	:	Mithun (<i>Bos Fontalis</i>)
12. <i>Nyibu</i>	:	Priest	23. <i>Sole Sohar</i>	:	One thigh of Mithun
13. <i>Nyida</i>	:	Marriage ceremony	24. <i>Tal</i>	:	Brass Plate
14. <i>Nyira</i>	:	Servant	25. <i>Topum Ejji/Zera</i>	:	Eri Shawl
15. <i>Nyim Hacho/Haat</i>	:	Eldest wife			

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