

## **Cultural Values in the Light of Modernity: An Anthropological Observations among the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

People and culture are inseparable since there is no denying the fact that what makes any human society is its culture; a Latin word which was derived from “colore” meaning to practice or cherish. For a society to be societal, it must be cultural, therefore, society and culture are also intertwined. The culture of any society is the way of life of its members; the collection of their ideas and habits which they learn, share, and transmit from one generation to the other. In fact, culture is a blueprint for living held by members of a particular society. Tribals are grossly endowed with rich and unprecedented cultural values with which harmony, solidarity, orderliness, sanctity and sanity are ensured within their community. Despite the fact that there were no trained and armed security officers in the olden days as we have today, yet their communities were void of chaos. In view of this, this paper is set to examine some of these tribal cultural values and how the force of modernity has influenced its observance with a particular reference to the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. An attempt also will be made to discuss the concept of modernity and equally on how tribal cultural values were enforced in the traditional societies. In conclusion, recommendations will be made on the need to revive the tribal cultural values as a panacea to the high level of moral decadence in the contemporary tribal societies.

**KEYWORDS:** Nyishi, Tribal Culture, Anthropological, Cultural Values, Modernity.

### **1. Introduction**

What distinguishes human beings from all the other animals is their capacity to create cultural institutions that are designed to serve their social needs. According to Benson (2000), a culture is born when human beings acquire social and religious ideas for better possibilities of life. As in all societies of the world, tribal peoples recognize social order and peace as essential and sacred, since this can only call for harmony and oneness of this community. Also, it is a fact that all human beings have individual differences, needs and values; some of which may not be necessarily accepted by everybody in the community. And in order to shun disintegration and destruction of society, it is a matter of necessity that solidarity of the community should be maintained. In Nyishi traditional society, it is generally believed that a person's character or behaviour does not affect him or her alone. It also affects the cooperate society either positively or negatively. In order, therefore, to ensure harmonious co-existence and for smooth running of every community, the elders and leaders of tribal societies designed codes of conduct, laws, set forms of behaviour, regulation and rules, which everybody within the given community must adhere to. Anybody who cannot abide to the prescribed norms of the society would be regarded

as a person of defiant behaviour. The totalities of the set codes of conduct of each community make up the cultural values of that community.

However, it is an established fact that the tribal cultural values have been greatly affected by the modern trends. Great change has taken place in strict observance of the traditional cultural values. Some of the taboos in tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh have been greatly affected by modern trends, urbanization, drift from rural to urban areas, and mostly by the introduction of new and modern religions. Thus, the effort will be made in this paper, to examine the position of tribal cultural values in the light of modernity with particular reference to the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

It is not our task in this paper to articulate all the cultural values of the tribal people but only the dominant ones as we attempt to assess their status against the current tide of modernization sweeping across the state.

### *The Concept of Modernity*

Modernity is the state or quantity of being modern. Therefore, modern, according to Webster's Dictionary (1978), is coined from the Latin 'Modus' which means to 'measure'. It is a state of or characteristic of the present or recent times; not ancient: often used to designate certain contemporary tendencies and schools of art, music, literature, etc. It connotes up-to-date; not old-fashioned, antiquated or obsolete.

Blankenship (2005) defined the concept of modernity as the idea of a modern world brought into existence by science leading to an ideology of materialistic beliefs. The two major concepts of modernity, according to Blankenship, are humanity and progress. Humanity by itself is not sufficient; with it comes the need of progress. In order for people to see the meaning of humanity, they need a sense of progression towards a better life. This becomes the ideology of modernity. In his own view, Aylward (1978) opined that change in modernity is both structural and organizational. By organizational we mean a change in the scale of social relationships.

Modernity is a term that very simply speaking, refers to the modern era. Modernity means different things to different people. Some schools of thought hold that modernity ended in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, replaced by post-modernity, while others would extend modernity to cover the developments denoted by post-modernity and into the present. The term modern period or modern era (sometimes also modern times) is the period of history that succeeds the Middle Ages. The 1500s is usually taken as an approximate starting period for the modern era. Many major events caused the Western world to change around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: from the Fall of Constantinople (1453), the fall of Muslim Spain, and Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas (both 1492), to the Protestant Reformation begun with Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses (1517). Modern history may contain references to the history of Early modern Europe from the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, but generally refers to the history of the world since the advent of the Age of Reason and the Age of Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The concepts and ideas developed since then are part of the modern era. This terminology is a historical periodization that is applied primarily to Western history. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics,

modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than the past (Giddens, 1990).

Modernity of all things involves positive attitude towards change and attempts to make progress in technology, economics and military power. It is a positive attitude towards experimentation with new forms of government, including democracy or that of a republic, combined with a realistic attitude towards extant institutions, such as that of monarchies, assessing their strengths and weaknesses based on their record of accomplishments and failures.

## 2. Objectives

This study is set: (i) to examine some of these tribal cultural values and how the force of modernity has influenced its observance with a particular reference to the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh; and (ii) to discuss the concept of modernity and equally on how tribal cultural values were enforced in the traditional societies.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The study used a case study design whereby both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed in data collection and analysis. Qualitative approach was used for the issues that demanded opinions and views while quantitative approach was useful in information that required numbers and statistics. The study sample consists of the population of all ages, old and young alike.

## 4. Study Area and Population

The present study was conducted among Nyishis of Kurung Kumey district in central Arunachal Pradesh. The district was chosen because of the fact that the district has huge concentration Nyishi population and is located at the heart of the Nyishi-inhabited central zone of the state.

The Nyishi, belong to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, which constitute the largest scheduled tribe group in Arunachal Pradesh, with little above 3.45 lakh population (25% per cent of the state's total population) as per 2011 Census are mainly concentrated in 8 districts of Arunachal Pradesh viz. East Kameng, Pake-Kessang, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kamle, Kurung Kumey, Kra Daadi, and Upper Subansiri and some parts of North Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of neighbouring Assam (Ramya & Ramjuk, 2018, p. 619).

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Derivation of Tribal Cultural Values

The scholars of Traditional Religion have divergent views on the sources of cultural values. On the final analysis, common ground is established. In his own view, Oloruntele (2002) asserted that morality is both naturally acquired and developed in humankind. He further stressed that morality in a particular locality may be immorality in another one. However, fundamentally, cultural values are the fruits or offspring of religion and not just human inventions. To them, from the very beginning, God has put His law in human's heart, and has endowed human with the sense of right and wrong. Such things which are forbidden and must be done are *arrh* (taboos). In the context of Africa, Nabofa (2000) pointed out that the elders and leaders of African societies came about the code of conducts through life's experience. This was borne out of meticulous studies and observations of family members from which they know what should be done and what should be done and

what should be avoided by the family members. These taboos became registered permanently into their sub-consciousness, which are later transmitted from one generation to the. Idowu (1962), equally and strongly postulated that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent on it. He did not welcome the views of the school of thoughts which hold that morality is of anthropological origin. He also opposed those who opined that what we call morality is little more than a product of common sense. These two schools of thoughts did not see any connection at bottom between religion and morality.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that tribal cultural values are religiously based. With the Nyishi, what have been named '*arrh*' took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were culturally approved or disapproved by the deities.

### **5.2 Religion as Part of Culture**

This section discusses the relationship between religion and culture. Religion and culture exist side by side in any given society. While culture is the whole social way of life, religion is a product of culture, an outgrowth of human's activity, as a culture-bearing creature (Onyeidu, 2001).

Religious beliefs and practices are possible because human beings have been able to develop the artefacts of culture through which individuals interact and internalize social values. Among the institutions or artefacts of culture, religion stands out as a way of acquiring and transmitting social values from one generation to the other. Yinger (1990) says that 'seen culturally, religion is part of the complex of prescriptions and proscriptions that guides the interactions of men in all societies. It furnishes major definitions of the meaning of ultimate things and interpretations of experience'.

Religion derives its customs, taboos, rituals, cult-objects, myths, language of worship and symbols from the surrounding culture. Traditionally, the gods of religion and the items used for sacrifice to them are the products of culture. That is to say that the community which produces cultures stipulates the gods to be worshipped and the sacrificial system to be adopted (Ugwu, 2002).

Naturally, it is what you can produce or acquire from the immediate culture (environment) that you give to the gods of religion. Indeed, the influence of culture on religion is so far-reaching that Banton (1966) defines religion as an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings. Thus, there is no known religion without a culture that sustains it. Culture contains not only the 'raw materials' and the 'guidelines' on which the existing religion can be practiced, but also the primary principles by which a new can be interpreted, reconciled and accepted with a traditional worldview. In a nutshell, religion is a part of culture, while culture is the total way of life. To understand religion, therefore, it is important to know something of its cultural background. Furthermore, culture can introduce some changes in a given religion, whereas religion on its part can refine and leaven a crude culture. It is through this healthy interaction that society is kept as an ongoing concern. To quote Dawson (2008): "The whole history of culture shows that man has a natural tendency to seek a religious foundation for his social way of life and that when culture loses its spiritual basis, it becomes unstable".

### 5.3 Enforcement of Cultural Values in Nyishi Traditional Society

In order to be able to make meaningful suggestions for the enforcement of cultural values in the modern society, it is important that we should have some idea about how cultural values were enforced in traditional Nyishi society.

In the olden days, there was no policemen and no need of them; the gods or deities were, more or less, considered as the policemen. In the light of the above, and from my discoveries out of interactions with some Nyishi elders purposely for this study, the enforcement of ethical values is enshrined on two major classifications: the religious factor and the social factor.

#### 5.3.1 Religious Factor

As pointed earlier, it is worth emphasized that “the customs and traditional ways of life sanctioned by the spirit-ancestors and the gods provided the frame work of the Nyishi cultural code”. Similar statements were echoed again and again by many Nyishi elders interviewed. In Nyishi traditional society, promise and expectation, fulfilment, blessing, protections and security, warding-off of natural disasters are benefits enjoyed from the *Ane-Donyi* (Supreme Being), deities, spirits, and ancestors who keep the cultural values whereas violators attract the wraths and punishment by the spirit-powers. Belief in the existence of supernatural powers is almost universal. Day-to-day unexplainable experiences have led the villagers into believing in other than the material visible world i.e. in the invisible spiritual world or supernatural power (Ramya, 2012, p. 16). This kept people doing what was right and avoiding what was wrong. Thus, divinity is thought by the Nyishi to be closely connected morality. So, rewards and punishments are believed to come from the Supreme Being in reaction to human behaviour. The Nyishi will say of a person: “*Nam donyine he karinepe*” – “Your character here on earth will pass judgments on you”. In other words, it is the character of man that deity judges.

The Nyishi among other Tani groups of Arunachal Pradesh walk in the consciousness of the fact that, nothing is hidden before the All-seeing eyes of *Ane-Donyi*, the supernatural Goddess. One of Her attitudes is: ‘*Ane-Donyikamangamkryum dune*’, that is, Goddess is having eyes full all over Her body. That is why they say, “*Ayukanerangdakkamduchobunam Donyine he kadunala*” – “You who steal in the cover of night, know for sure that if the earthly king does not see you, the heavenly queen (Goddess) does”. In traditional Nyishi society, this enhances the people compliances to the cultural values whether in the open or secret.

Equally, the peoples’ beliefs about the various deities were invoked to enforce cultural values in traditional society. Among Nyishi, it is futile to wish to commit a crime in secret, for no violation of cultural values (whether publicly or in secret) can escape the divine justice. Cultural values in Nyishi are not the creation or the invention of the society, rather, the expressions of the transcendental moral order which is beyond man and to which both man and the society must conform. According to the informants, there are some anti-wickedness divinities who punish cultural offenders on behalf of the supreme deity among the Nyishi in particular and other tribes across Tani belt in general.

A good example is the divinity of *talang-sunyu* (accident or unnatural death). If there is any case of theft, the wrath of the deity can be invoked on the unknown criminal. Also, *Heemi* divinity can be invoked to punish criminals who refuse to confess his/her bad deeds. These constantly show man the need to be culturally upright and be of good conduct to avoid the wrath of deities.

### 5.3.2 Social Factor

The discussion in this section will not be complete if the factor of social sanction as an agent of ensuring compliance to cultural values among the Nyishi is not discussed. Among the Nyishi like other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, there are numerous social sanctions which are both positive and negative. The positive sanctions are set to encourage and give incentive to good life while the negative ones set to discourage immoral.

#### *Honouring Chastity*

Among the traditional Nyishi people, chastity (virginity) is highly valued and appreciated. Gifts and social prestige are accorded the lady and her family for keeping her virginity till the time of marriage. A lady who kept herself intact till the first night in her husband house brought great honour to herself and her entire family. The family of the husband would present gift items like a gourd filled with palm-wine and a full match's box. This implied that their daughter was met full. What a great joy and honour! But reverse is the case for any lady who has broken her virginity before marriage. Such lady would not only ashamed, but also be despised, and her family becomes object of ridicule and reproach in the community. In the light of this, the ladies in, traditional society was extra-careful to avoid pre-marital sex.

#### *Family/Clan Renunciation*

The consequences of bad character are not only on the individual who committed the offence, but the entire family share out of it. The same applies to good character. The penalties are in degrees depending on the offences committed. E.g. family or individual can be disinherited, ostracized, publicly disgraced. it could go as far as execution. These help greatly to curb un-ethical deeds among the Nyishi traditional society.

It must be pointed out also that there are proverbs and wise-saying which serve as warning to defiant behaviours. For example, the Nyishi people do say “*yachungnyemenge, yallungnyemenge*” which means “A married woman who has lost good character, brings misfortune for husband's family. This implied that for a married woman to enjoy her matrimonial home, she must be of good character. Also, they said, “*nyemenge ale, nyinge ale*”. That is, it is the good character that determine man's fortune, not any medicine. These are the ingredients employed in traditional Nyishi society to ensure compliance to cultural values.

### 5.4 Anthropological Observation of Nyishi Cultural Values versus Modernity

So far, we have attempted to assess the fact that the Nyishi man in his traditional life holds certain things to be of great value; these include: Chastity before marriage, hospitality, respect for elders, unselfishness, kindness, truthfulness, keeping of covenant, condemning stealing, falsehood and hypocrisy, avoidance of incest and taking away of another man's wife. However, it is observed that great changes have taken place in the observance of these cultural values. The cause is not farfetched; it is as a result of the modern trends and its attendant evils. This has brought about the reversal of traditional values and few obvious ones are examined in this work.

#### *5.4.1 Impact of Urbanization on Tribal Families*

Gutkind (1964) rightly asserted that among all the problems which are alleged to have their etiology in urbanization and urbanism, frequent reference is made to the breakdown of tribal kingship and family life in towns. The obvious consequence is a

gradual, but inevitable damage to Nyishi traditional cultural values. For Nyishi tribe, that is a tragic reversal of values since tribal families are close-knit. Since Nyishi traditional religion has no written literature; beliefs, practices, and formulations are taught orally to their descendants who also pass them on to posterity. It may be pointed out that town life has brought great moral laxity and neglect of cultural morality. People are far removed from security of village, and such traditional values are being eroded. The few elders who are custodians of the cultural values are left in remote villages; hence, Nyishi traditional cultural values are dwindled into limbo of dead memories.

#### *5.4.2 Impact of Western Culture*

People gradually becoming cultureless as a result of acculturation. Abioye (1998) strengthened the view that people are fast losing faith in the old sanctions today. Likewise, many of the old customs in Nyishi society are disappearing. Although, the old beliefs and practices served useful purposes, they can in no way stand the strain of modern life. One can notice surprise the falling standard of morality among the youths of today. Alien cultures have forced changes upon Nyishi traditional values. As a result of modernity through contact with the external world via modern technology-Computer Internet, Television, Radio, and written materials, traditional regulations and taboos are no longer highly respected. The response of the modern-day youngsters interacted with in course of this work on chastity revealed that it is no more a popular pursuit. They all termed it: "old school saga".

#### *5.4.3 Impact of Modernity on Language*

It is disheartening today that most of our youngsters can no more express themselves in their mother's tongue. The foreign languages have taken over, hence, rich Nyishi medium of greeting at different occasions and periods of the day are disappearing. Pithy saying, proverbs, adages, epigrams, riddles, and otherwise saying which are vehicles through which Nyishi cultural values are conveyed have been submerged in the ocean of modernity. For example, proverbs are used to settle quarrels, to teach people, to warn implicitly or to explicitly against evil conduct or an impending doom, or to encourage people, etc. This can no longer be found among the Nyishi people. In the rural areas, people found to speak only Nyishi language at home. Contrarily in the urban areas, although Nyishi language is spoken at home, the influence of other languages, particularly the Hindi and Assamese, is evidently visible. Hence, the Nyishi residing in urban areas practice bilingualism or multilingualism in respect of languages like Assamese, Hindi, and English (Ramya & Ramjuk, 2018, p. 623).

From the above explanation, it can be said with some degree of authenticity that modernity has done much harm than good on Nyishi cultural values.

## **6. Recommendations and Conclusion**

Nyishis' success in its struggle for self-realization and self-identity will depend on its ability to subject foreign values to the traditional ones, hence, the following recommendations:

- i. There is urgent need for tribal leaders, the Nyishi in particular to embark on the revival of our traditional values vis-a-vis the educational institutions. Nyishi culture and value should be made compulsory at all levels of education.
- ii. The parents should assist this dying traditional heritage from total extinction.
- iii. The mass-media should be encouraged to herald the good news of traditional cultural values.

iv. Finally, proper scrutinization of both home and foreign films should be carried out before selling into the market.

Thus, the relevance of religion could be seen in cultural development. Religion helps in transforming the society by introducing new cultural elements. Religious doctrines, laws, organizations, modes of dressing, dogma, buildings, patterns of marriages, training of children, burying the dead, and many other items of culture are influenced through religion. Morality is used to give meaning and purpose to the cultural behaviour. When in the culture deviates from the real religious meaning, then it has to be checked, so that there is a balanced relationship between the cultural elements and religious ideology. There is no doubt that Nyishi cultural values are unique in spite of the influence of modernity.

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