

# Knowing the *Nyishi* Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: Attire and Ornaments

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**Abstract**—In early India, people handcrafted jewellery out of natural materials found in abundance all over the country. Seeds, feathers, leaves, berries, fruits, flowers, animal bones, claws and teeth; everything from nature was affectionately gathered and artistically transformed into fine body jewellery. Even today such jewellery is used by the different tribal societies in India.[1] This paper attempts to explain the diversity and beauty of the attires and ornaments of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh in great detail.

**Keywords:** Nyishi Tribe, Jewellery, ornaments, culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh is a land of exotic cultures and traditions. It has a distinct socio-cultural life style. Most of the people wear shawls, skirts that are striped, or skirt wraps. Though the most favourite are the lungis. There are 26 tribes in this region, and more than 100 sub-tribes. Each has its own unique tradition and customs. It Arunachal Pradesh is a treat for those interested in a glimpse of cultural diversity. Ornaments are very popular in the state and hence, jewelry making is a cottage industry by itself [4.]The Nyishi are the largest ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh in north-eastern India. Small groups of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians also exist among the Nyishis. These mountain people have certain perceptions that differ largely from the rest of the city dwellers but simplicity in their lifestyle can be measured from their efforts to uphold their traditions. They are pious supporters of their age-old traditions and they endeavour to pass on their beliefs from one generation to the next. Even under Nyishi tribe there are still many more sub categories according to the geographical location. Here we will mainly focus on the Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh which lies in the upper area of the map. Nyishis are known for their peculiar,

beautiful and artistic dressing sense. This article is an attempt to document the traditional knowledge about the attires and ornaments used by the people of this tribe.

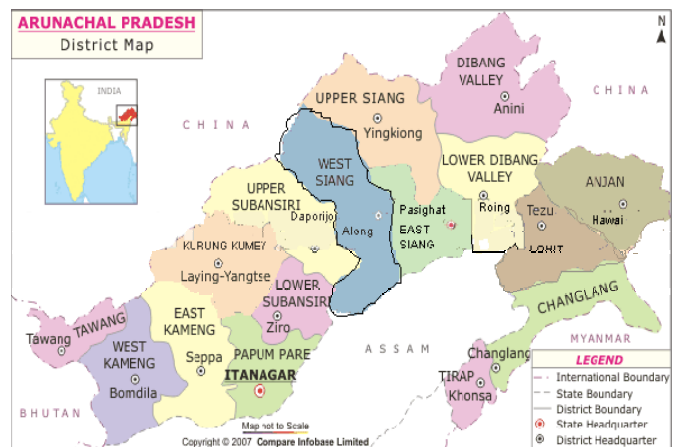


Figure 1: Map of Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh

### 1.1. Why Nyishi ?

This tribe carries indigenous importance and ethno-botanical knowledge which could contribute to urban life as most of this people depend upon forest plant like bamboo, canes, toko patta, for their daily life. Though they use the forest resources, they do so at an eco-friendly level. Nyishi tribe is famous for its handicraft at which they are an expert like working on cane and bamboo, carpentry products and weaving of baskets and mats. Their utensils are made up of bamboo (bamboo glass is called Udung, plate of leaves such as banana leaves is called Ukkam) .Maximum of their clothes are self - weaved and their ornaments are handmade by the local people, those who are specialized in making it. This is an area which needs to be explored and understood as no proper research has been done on this [6].

### 1.2. History

In earlier days, people of this tribe used to travel across to different countries like China and Tibet to get the ornaments which were made out of elephant teeth. Local handicraft person and the blacksmiths of these places were the specialized personnel who made this ornaments for the local people. It is believed that the way to those places were extremely dangerous. There's a myth telling the story about a sister and her brothers where the sister turns into a stone due to the circumstances while travelling to places. This story also tells about the difficulties a person might face while travelling across the road. They used barter system to get the ornaments or any other stuff they wanted in exchange of wild animal's body parts though it is a long gone tradition now. As every female of any society would love jewels, the females of this tribe loved those handmade ornaments too [3]. Males of this tribe had their own preferences like decorating the cover of their sword with the hide of wild animals and also with the teeth of tigers. They also loved designs on their sword but maintained the sleekness and the sharpness of the sword simultaneously.

## 2. KINDS OF ORNAMENTS

The Nyishi tribe members usually like beads in jewelry known as *tasang*. They also like to use bells of different kinds, known as *Maji* .The ornament that women generally wear on their head is called as a dumping. There are other special ornaments as Rungbing and belling which are used as ear rings. They also adorn themselves with a belt that is made up of round discs,

known as Hufyi or Takding. The women often wear a variety of bangles *Kojii* (bangles) while men resort to accessories as a sword or knife *aroyak*, or as pear known as *Nangkio*. When the child is young his ear lobes are pierced by using bamboo plugs. When the child grows these bamboo insertions are removed and rings made of brass or silver are worn. When the women grow up then their ears are often stretched till their shoulders. [5].

### 2.1. Tasang

They are beaded ornaments that are made up of elephant teeth or ivory. As a whole they are called Lakte. They come in all colours, shapes and sizes. According to their rarity and the age, they are priced. The more ancient it becomes, the more valuable it is. So, some people use different methods to manipulate the age of tasangs like burying it under the soil or to let a person wear it regularly. Tasangs are more valuable than gold in these local areas. Tasangs are also a definer of wealth in the Nyishi tribe; the more a person owns the wealthier a person is. There are various types of tasang, it would take a lot of time to name them all but some of them are mentioned in the table on the left :-

**TABLE 1: List of Tasangs**

S no .	Names	Colour	Shape	Size	Gender	Purpose
1	Sangte	White	Spherical with flat ends	Big	Unisex	Decoration and indicator of wealth
2	Sangri	Green	Spherical with flat ends	Standard	Female	Beautification
3	Nyakta	Black with white dots	Spherical with flat ends	Standard	Female	Decoration, especially on festivals
4	Sanglang	Red	Spherical with flat ends	Standard	Male	Decoration and indicator of wealth
5	Sangtung	White	Spherical with flat ends	Small	Female	Decoration
6	Dugli	Mustard yellow	Spherical with flat ends	Small	Male	Beautification especially on festivals,
7	Sangni	Green	Flat	Standard	Female	Decoration, especially on festivals
8	Keri	Black with white circular design	Flat and elongated	Big	Male	Decoration and indicator of wealth

## 2.2. Hufyi

It is a belt like ornament consisting of many disc like objects which makes it very heavy. The disc like object is actually termed as Hufyi. It is made up of brass, steel, aluminium, silver, steel and copper. There is a spiral motif in the disc that is the biggest. This spiral represents the wheel of life. So this has so much significance for life, hence it is placed in the centre while the discs are placed according to their reducing sizes. All women wear this ornament on their waist when they are young girls till they give birth to their first child.

## 2.3. Takding

It is also a belt like ornament worn after the Hufyi. It consists of circular metallic coin-sized ornament and tasang. Female groups of the tribal society make Takding according to their own preferences using different metallic objects and beads.

## 2.4. Gagi

It is an ear piece. The materials used for these ornaments are silver and steel. Only female of the *Nyishi* tribe wears Gagi. Gagi is thick and heavy which makes the wearer of the ear piece's ear piercing larger, hence the old ladies of the *Nyishi* tribe can be seen with large ear piercings. Gagi has circular carvings on the ring of the ear piece. It doesn't have a closing hook therefore, it is open ended but due to the weight of the earring it doesn't fall off. It also has some tasang like beads on it for beautification.

## 2.5. Koji

They are the traditional bangles. It is also made up of brass and silver. They have beautiful designs on it. Both male and female wear the Koji but usually male prefer plain Koji whereas the female group prefer it with design.

## 2.6. Dumping

The females of this tribe wear Dumping on their head. It is a type of head gear. The dumping consists of rectangular metallic objects and beads (tasang). The rectangular objects are made up of brass, silver and steel. They have holes through it which is then joined with the beads with the help of threads.

## 2.7. Lerum and Larum

They are just black threads which are worn on the leg and arms of the local people. Lerum is referred to the black thread that is worn on the leg and Larum is referred to the black thread that is worn on the arms. The tribal people believe that by wearing Lerum and

Larum they are safe from the eyes of the evil. They also make the babies wear this including a thread in the stomach too that is called *Okh*.

## 2.8. Bopa

It is the head gear for the male group of the society. It consists of many small parts in it. The main body of Bopa; the cap part of the head gear is made up of cane, usually handmade. On the cap, the beaks of hornbills are used which is also known as *Bolo*. Because of their enormous size and the beauty of the beak of hornbills they provide great ornamentation. In front of the Bopa there's a bundle of red strings which is called as *Chalang/Chajik/Chakte*. There's a metallic stick pierced across the Chalang, which is called as *Dumlo/Dumkyo*. The Dumlo is made up of different metals according to the preferences of the people. They mainly use brass, steel, and aluminium, copper and silver like metals. They are usually made by the local blacksmith of the tribal area. On top of the Bopa, to complete the look they use feathers of birds like kite, hornbill and many more. Those feathers are called *Mayak/Palap* by the tribal people.

## 2.9. Uryuk/Dhao

The traditional sword used by the male of the society is referred as Uryuk. As mentioned previously the males of this tribe love designing their sword, but not just the blade but also the cover of the Dhao. They use animal skin as their cover for the sword. The tribals call it *Bohgyun/Bofyi*. It protects plus gives charm to the sword. The animals that are used for their hide are monkey, bear, tiger etc. Furthermore they also decorate their strap of Dhao. They use the teeth of tigers as ornamentation. The teeth of tigers are also called *Karhi*. They are very valuable.

## 3. MATERIALS USED IN ORNAMENTS

Fascinating design patterns, using glass beads, reeds, wild seeds, cane and bamboo are weaved by the *Nyishis* for making earrings, necklaces, bangles and other jewelry. Natural dyes, extracted from trees, barks, flowers and seeds, are extensively used. Earrings and silver rings are intricately designed with bamboo bits and are embellished with beads and turquoises [1]. Heavy metals are also extensively used for making ornaments like bangles (Koji).

### 3.1 Why do they wear ornaments?

It shows a person's wealth and also signifies a person's financial status since antiquity. Not just wealth but

ornaments are also worn for beautification as they are not just attractive but also hold their own distinct rustic and earthly charm to them. During a festival, the amount of *tasang* and ornamentation on a person's body symbolizes their pride as a tribal. In early ages a person's economic background was not judged by the amount of money he had, instead the society considered a person with lots of domestic animals and ornaments as a rich person [2]. *The tribals* believe that their jewelry provides them physical and spiritual protection. Amulets and many other ornaments are thought to have mystical powers that can increase fertility, femininity, masculinity, bravery, wisdom, vitality, health, crops etc [1].

### 3.2 Contemporary difficulties in using ornaments

These tribal people used to exchange ornaments with animals and eatable items and vice versa. It seems from research that the cost of domestic animals was higher than that of ornaments and eatable items. But today the cost of ornaments is much higher than that of animals. For example, the cost of one string of *Taduk Takding* is minimum one lakh and there is no maximum limit to it. On the other hand the cost of domestic animals like *sabbe* is fifteen thousand to seventy thousand at the most. The sudden inflation of ornaments has alienated the majority of the people from their own traditional ornaments and only a few Nyishis who are well off have control over them. There is another serious problem added to it which is the problems of imitation of traditional ornaments which are manufactured and made available in the market. Thus the indigenous flavor of these ornaments is lost.

## 4. 4 OTHER ACCESSORIES

### 4.1. Aegge/Arah

Females of this tribe used a conical shaped bag with a strap. These bags were made up of canes. They carried firewood and grains in it. They carried the Aegge on their back with the strap on their forehead and both hands holding the strap to support the Aegge.

### 4.2. Chungcha

It is also a bag carried by women of this tribe. But it is smaller in size and the females of the Nyishi tribe carried it on their waist. Chungcha worked more as a pocket. It is also made up of canes.

### 4.3. Nara

Nara is the bag that the males of the tribe carried. Naras were also made out of canes. The males of the Nyishi

tribe used to carry all of their belongings in the Nara during journey.

### 4.4. Aerhi and Upuk

Those are the tribal names of arrow and bow respectively. These were used for hunting and sports during their festival and obviously were handmade.

### 4.5. Maji

They are bell like object that is made up of brass, steel and silver like materials. Small sized Maji can only be worn by married females of the tribal group but it is not a compulsion. The larger Maji are used as gifts or pride as they cost much and is therefore very valuable.

### 4.6. Tallu

Big Hufyi like disc were called as Tallu. Tallus are almost the size of a plate. They are very precious and are only taken out on big occasion such as marriage for gift exchanges. Tallus are made up of brass mainly. They are said to be as costly as a Mithun (state animal of Arunachal Pradesh).

### 4.7. Duph

These are decorative items made out of bamboos by making frills of bamboo using knife. They are used as any other decorative items are used but only that Duph are mainly used in tribal festivals.

## 5. ATTIRE

Generally a man wears a neatly woven cane cap surmounted by the crest of a 'Hornbill' beak known as 'Bopia'. Nyishi men keep their hair long and tie the hair in a tight knot just above the forehead which is called 'Padum'. The clothing of the men consists of sleeveless shirts made from thick cotton cloth, striped gaily with black and white. The beads are sewen together in the form of long strings. These strings vary in the sizes of their beads as well as their colors. These strings were worn primarily to show the status of the person wearing them and for decoration too. They also carry cane baskets on their back known as 'Nara' which is similar to a back pack, and put on cane bands around their waists. One can also see a Nyishi man carrying a smoking pipe in his mouth and a *dhao* (short sword) and a knife (*Ryukchak*) in a bamboo sheath that are mostly covered with animal furs. Like men, a Nyishi lady usually carries a neatly woven cane basket for multipurpose use on her back called 'Egin'. The women of Nyishi tribe like to wear a striped shirt that is sleeveless. The shirts are carefully tucked over the upper chest region. A ribbon is tied at

the waist. A girdle consisting of metal disks and cane garters is worn at the waist. Their hair is parted in the middle, plaited and tied into a chignon just above the nape. Their armament consists of spear with iron-head, a large sword (dhao), and a bow and arrows which are tipped with poison (*umiyu*). When there is war, the tribal members cover themselves with these shields made up of sbbe buffalo hide. Generally when there is war, both the chest and back are covered very well. The hide from a buffalo is used to cover the back and they lay over this another layer of black cloak made of a specific fiber. [8].

### 5.1. Pomo

Pomo is the traditional word used by the tribal people for their cloth. It is of black and white strips. The male refer to their Pomo as *Pomo Jeda* and female refer to their Pomo as *Pomo Gale*. But the basic designs are the same.

### 5.2. Jumum Gale

This gale is mainly worn by women of the *Nyishi* tribe during their festival Longte, which is celebrated for the safety of crop from the animals (mainly signifying the boundary which keeps away the animals from harming their crops). It has larger area of white than it is for Pomo Gale.

### 5.3. Hegging

The males in the tribal group used clothes as tongs to which they named Hegging.

### 5.4. Pus

It is a scarf like cloth piece which is used by both female and male of the *Nyishi* tribe to tie it on their waist. The Pus is of red in colour. The clothes of the *Nyishi* tribe were weaved on their own. They have their own unique method of weaving. They used many different sizes and shapes of sticks to weave their cloth. Rubung, Rukyo, Taph, Gagar and Mimm are few of the names of the sticks used for weaving. Usually they wear just one big piece of cloth that is enough to wrap a person's body. As the report goes you might have noticed that the people of this tribe are really simple and singular in their economic and their day to day life.

## 6. COMPARISON WITH MODERN TIMES

The historical processes of making these tribal ornaments are nowhere to be found as they were imported from other neighbouring countries. But in today's modernised era, all the ornaments are made through machines losing the antique touch to them.

However, the tribal people still try to maintain that rustiness by burying the ornaments under the soil or make a person wear it on a regular basis to make it look ancient[7]. Even the clothes are made from machines now as it is much easier and convenient. Not just this but the designs also keep changing according to individuals' own tastes and preferences. For example, now men prefer to wear either the striped pomo gale or a plain white cloth (or even both) according to their preference [2].

## 7. CONCLUSION

It is clearly evident from this research paper that Arunachal Pradesh has a vast treasure of traditional ornaments and beautiful attires and it not only consists of the *Nyishi* tribe but a plethora of other tribes too which means a huge diversity of ornaments that yet lie unexplored. People must visit Arunachal Pradesh to explore the antique jewelry of the tribes and also experience their attires as a visual treat. Thus, if one is seeking to step into a world of extraordinary beauty and discover experiences found nowhere else on earth, Arunachal Pradesh is the right place.

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**Figure 2 and 3: Bopa (headgear worn by men)**



**Figure 4: Dumping (headgear worn by women)**



**Figure 12 and 13: Hufyi (belt worn by women)**





Figure 14 AND 15: Pomo gale (attire)



Figure 16: Koji (bangles)



Figure 17: Dhao (sword)



Figure 18: Ornaments worn by women



Figure 19: People wearing mixed attires (evolution of clothing)



**Figure 20: Men wearing pomo gale and women wearing jumum gale**



**Figure 21: Men wearing plain white cloth (evolution of clothing)**



**FIGURE 22: People of the nyishi tribe waering pomo gale**