

The Consumption of Pone (a traditional rice beer) and Its Importance Amongst the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

¹Maram Bagang

Abstract

This study investigates the significance of locally brewed rice beer called Oppo among the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Oppo, made from rice (pone) or millet (poling), is not merely a beverage but an integral part of the tribe's social, cultural, and religious life. Traditionally, no social function, ritual, or community work could be organized without it, signifying its deep-rooted cultural importance. The research, based on fieldwork and interviews with elderly Nyishi villagers in the East Kameng District, details the traditional brewing process, exclusively carried out by women, using rice, millet, and yeast (Apop). It also explores the cultural beliefs and taboos associated with Apop, highlighting the gendered division of labor and the spiritual significance attached to the brewing process. The study reveals the cultural importance of Oppo in various rituals and ceremonies, where it was believed to stimulate knowledge, facilitate communication, and foster social bonding. However, in recent times, the consumption of Oppo has shifted towards entertainment, leading to a loss of its traditional significance and a change in societal perception towards the beverage. The research emphasizes the need to preserve the traditional knowledge associated with Oppo by passing it down to future generations and documenting it. It also highlights the need for further research on this topic to fully understand its cultural and historical importance, particularly in the context of evolving social dynamics and changing attitudes towards traditional practices.

Keywords:

Nyishi, Oppo, Rice, Millet, Fermented, Apop.

1. Introduction

Historically, rice beer has been an important aspect of the cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Northeast India. It has been known by diverse nomenclatures among the different communities. Mixed with yeast it used to be from fermented rice, millet, maize, etc. There was a variety of rice beer among the indigenous communities of northeast India, such as, in pre-colonial Mizo society, were zu pui, zu fang,

1. Research Scholar of the History Department, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh. Email: bagangmaram@gmail.com

and rak zu. All these were not made or drunk every time. The first, for instance, was the most common drink and was consumed especially on the occasion of popular festivals. Zu fang was a beer consumed within the family while rak zu was an elite drink and the prerogative of the chiefs and village elders (Dawar, 2023, p.4).

The tradition of drinking rice beer amongst the various communities of northeast India was strongly shaped by their customs and traditions. It was central to tribal agricultural practices, feasting, and ritual identity. The rice beer had been served at all personal and social functions. A festival and feast were unthinkable without rice-beer (Haimendorf, 1939, p.48). It played a significant role in various rites and rituals. An eminent anthropologist, M Dietler argued that rice beer is a special form of food with psychoactive effects, and has a particularly salient role in ritual because of its transformative properties (Dietler, 1990, p.352-406). Apong is the most popular cereal-based fermented alcoholic beverage prepared from rice and consumed by almost all tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The preparation method of apong is almost similar in all tribes with minor variations.

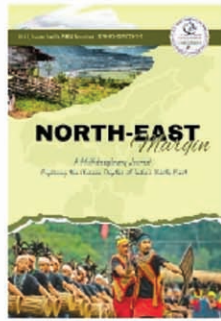
2. Materials and Methods

The research paper derives from my ongoing doctoral work at Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar. The data is composed of both primary as well as secondary sources. To collect primary data, fieldwork was undertaken in remote Nyishi villages of East Kameng District, and interviews with the elderly people, who are experts in their respective traditions and culture, were done using audio recording and note-making. The sources for the secondary data include reviews of relevant books and published research articles.

3. Result and Discussion

Like other ethnic group societies, the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is also fond of Oppo, a locally brewed wine of the Nyishi tribe. According to the tribe, "Sex is only for procreation, eating known is to live, and drinking is for rich man's blood." So, we can well understand the significance attached to Oppo. It was not only a drink but an integral part of the social, cultural, and religious life of the Nyishi community. It is important to observe that without drinking Oppo any social functions, rituals, and community works are impossible to organize. Hence, Oppo has an essence in social ceremonies and religious functions among the Nyishi. In Nyishi traditions, no tea is used. When any guest or visitor comes, the Oppo is served invariably. It is the custom of the Nyishi that not water, but at least a mug of Oppo must be offered to the visitors (Showren, 2021, p.91-92). It was a common beverage that was produced in day-to-day life mainly for consumption.

There are mainly two types of Oppo in Nyishi society, pone which is made of rice, and poling which is made of millet. Traditionally, Nyishi had their way of making Oppo. The main materials required to prepare Oppo are ambing (rice) for pone, tamii (millets) for poling, and apop (yeast) (Sangdo, 2020, p.121). Every typical household has its style of brewing rice beer, although we'll discuss the most common



method in detail.

3.1 Preparation of Rice to make Pone (rice beer)

First of all, they would collect some leaves, locally known as Yado in their traditional conical-shaped bamboo basket, locally known as ege, though some different varieties of leaves can be used for the preparation of Pone. The second process is the pounding of rice grain through traditional mortar and pestle known as changpar and fangyi made of wood. Generally, the pestle is heavy so that it can crush the grain properly. Before pounding the rice, four to five cone shape baskets called Apio, its borders made from the strong rope (from the mountain) known as Aso, would be collected which is placed around the mortar on the ground so that the rice while pounding would drop on Apio which prevent the wastage of grain. Earlier there was no mill machine so pounding of rice was done through changpar and fangyi so that it could uncover the husk of rice. The task of pounding is done in varies, sometimes one person and sometimes more than one at a time. As pounding rice is a painstaking task, it needs lots of energy. That's why two people pounding together was more beneficial or reduced the work than one because these activities need a lot of muscle power, the more people involved in this task, the more work will be done in a shorter period. Generally, this task was done by womenfolk as men generally worked outside like hunting and fishing. The process of pounding rice in changpar-fangyi is known as Dafu. After the pounding part is done, the rice grain would be placed on Apio and another Apio would be used as a winnowing basket and then winnowing grain from the chaff while removing dirt and dust. Winnowing is the method in which heavier components of the mixture are separated from the lighter substances with the help of wind. This method is used for separating grains from husk after the process of threshing (the process of separating grain from the chaff). Then, the women would do the process of winnowing known as Dajum in which the basket is then lifted and shaken which separates the husk and grain. The unhusk grain will come in front of the basket while the husk rice will be in the bottom. The front rice will be placed in another basket and the remaining husk rice will pound again; they put the rice accordingly.

Figure 1. The traditional method of pounding rice in changpar-fangyi.



3.2 Cultural history associated with the taboos of Apop (yeast) in certain situations

It is pertinent to mention that the whole process of extraction is the exclusive job of women. The entire preparation process of Apop and Oppo is the exclusive domain

of women. According to the traditions, the task of mixing Apop with rice should be done only by the womenfolk, it was strictly prohibited for the menfolk because of their traditional belief system. According to the traditions, if a man does the task of mixing Apop with rice, then the snake would bite him. The second belief, if the husband went hunting then the wife should not mix Apop with rice, millet, or maize to make wine. Otherwise, the man will not be able to hunt the animal and in his trap, no animal would get trapped. Third belief, if the husband went fishing, the wife was not supposed to touch Apop or make wine otherwise the man would not be able to catch fish. These three traditional beliefs have been followed by people from time immemorial and it is still followed especially in rural areas.

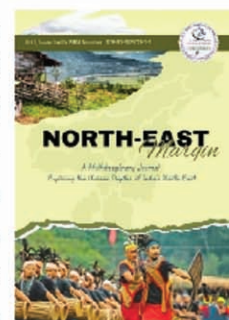
3.3 The process of preparing Pone (rice beer)

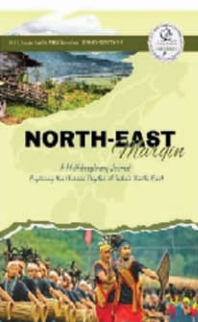
Firstly, a substantial quantity of rice is washed and then boiled in a large clean aluminium vessel/pot (pachang) with a wide bottom to facilitate the proper spreading of the boiled rice on fire. Rice should be steamed slowly to the right texture and not overcooked or soggy. Generally, they prefer a bit dry and avoid too much moisture. After cooking, the rice would be steamed with limited fire for some time. Then, it is evenly spread by using a strong long bamboo spoon on the large-sized handmade bamboo mat known as Apiya to cool down, and after that yeast locally known as Apop is mixed with rice in appropriate quantities to ferment. The yeast will made powder so that it can get mixed with rice properly. Before mixing Apop it is made sure that the rice cools down properly otherwise after fermentation the taste of Oppo will get sour or not so good in the taste. It is said that in summer the requirement of quantity of apop mixed in rice is lesser in comparison to winter.

Figure 2. Cooked rice to make Pone (rice beer)



Figure 3. A Nyishli woman (Roy Bagang) spreading cooked rice to cool down at Apiyo





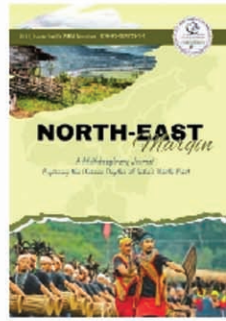
Next step, the leaves will be placed in the whole of a bamboo box basket known as Apo-pawa from bottom to top. Then the rice mixed with Apop would keep on Apo-pawa properly covered by the leaves so that the gas could not come out and it could get fully fermented. Within twenty-four hours, when it gets fermented, the rice will be shifted from Apo-pawa to a big steel utensil (pachang) because when it gets mature there will be a formation of liquid and it may leak from Apo-pawa so shift is needed. In utensils, it will keep for almost one week or sometimes before a week, it gets mature enough to drink. In some cases, after mixing Apop with rice, it is placed in the apom (large bottle gourd) or other utensils for fermentation. It has been observed that it took 4-6 days in summer and 7-9 days in winter to become pone. When the fermented stock starts emitting a strong alcoholic smell, it is considered ready for use (Tiwari, 2007, p.108). After the fermentation period is over, sometimes it is transferred into the massive vessel, and sometimes not, and the liquid is squeezed out from it by pressing tightly over the fermented rice. This fermented material is mixed with hot boiling water, then filtration with muslin cloth by pressing from a spoon, and then finally poured into bamboo shoots to drink. Traditionally, it is drunk out of bamboo shoots (Pandey, p.60) and bamboo mugs. Sometimes, they took out some quantity and mixed it with boiling water from a dried bottle gourd known as Ajuk and directly drank without filtration, this made their stomach full to some extent. After making Pone the used rice is given to reared pigs.

Figure 4. Rice mixed with Apop shifted to Apo-pawa covered with Yado leaves to get fermented.



Figure 5. Pone mixed with hot boiling water preparing to drink.





3.4 Apop (yeast), the fermenting agent

The success of a good beer depends to a great extent on the quality of the fermenting agent called yeast locally known as Apop. The yeast contains a mold that converts starch to sugar and yeast converts the sugar to alcohol. It is prepared through a laborious process of dry-grinding rice into fine powder. A portion of prepared, powdered old yeast is then mixed into this dry mixture and shaped into discs that vary in size from the normal biscuit to flat, larger pancakes. The biscuit-shaped yeast is then carefully placed to dry out completely either in the attic above the fireplace of traditional homes, or left in a cool, dry place for 3-4 days, after which it is stored for use (Dai, 2005, p.49).

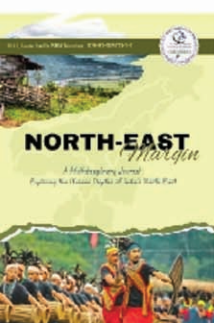
Figure 6. Half used locally made traditional Apop.



3.5 Significant role of Oppo in the Socio-religious life of Nyishi tribe

While chanting the priest narrates the two intentions behind the drinking of Oppo. First, if the person drinks Oppo only for fun or entertainment then it will turn into a quarrel or fight (yallung-saching). It is known as Pyobam-tangmu. Secondly, if the person is drinking Oppo with good intentions then it works like Amrit or sacred syrup. That's why in marriage (nyada) Oppo is served to everyone so that it signifies that the person's soul is in harmony.

The Oppo was mainly offered on occasion like marriage (nyada), rituals (yullo), house-warming (namo-nama), and harvesting. All these were considered auspicious because while drinking Oppo on these occasions the people recited and exchanged their knowledge of traditions and culture because it stimulated the person's knowledge and ability to speak with more confidence so that the person could speak more with less hesitation or with more confidence in these kinds of important meeting and gathering. So, for these purposes, the Oppo was drinking. Therefore, in every ritual, it is said that the Oppo should be used mainly for two things, for holy rituals and another is for reciting knowledge in important meetings or gatherings rather than for fights or quarrels. Hence, the people who didn't know how to drink or drunkenness were called Pyobam-tangmu. Though they drink varieties of wine made from rice, millet, and maize yet on every special occasion, especially in rituals the rice beer was mainly used. While performing the ritual (yullo) in the past, pieces of bamboo were placed at the altar known as kamjo where some water will also be there which is considered holy where people pray and ask for the blessings of their needs like a



child, son, wealth, etc. as per their requirements and they would drink Oppo as part of a ritual. Traditionally, the Oppo was associated with holy rituals and practices. Hence, as per the traditions, the actual or main purpose of drinking Oppo was very auspicious.

4. Conclusion

Without any doubt, traditionally Oppo is an important part of Nyishi community in their socio-economic and religious life. It is used in every important occasion such as harvesting, rituals, marriage, housewarming, and festivals. It was a cultural identity of the Nyishi tribe. In the past, Oppo was mostly associated with holy rituals so there was less drunkenness because people knew and understood the real importance of Oppo because they mainly drank for strength and offering. It was not for fun or entertainment. As per traditions, in every ritual, the person's name was called and the person had to hold a mug of Oppo to show his or her compulsory presence and it had to be drunk by the person. But, in the present context, the people are unaware of this knowledge and at the same time, these rituals are also not much practiced. That's why the Oppo is consumed nowadays only for entertainment. Hence, out of three categories of Oppo that is for rituals, strength, and entertainment, out of which entertainment is considered as the least important or sometimes considered as third class is now the most popular one. That's the reason, why now the drinking of Oppo is not considered as good but rather considered as bad. Now in society, drinking Oppo is no longer considered auspicious, unlike in the past. However, traditionally, the purpose of drinking Oppo was considered auspicious. Therefore, as per the observation and changing society, the traditional knowledge of the use of Oppo needs to be preserved through passing traditional knowledge to upcoming generations and documenting it before it goes extinct. Furthermore, the researcher is open to any feedback and suggestions from the traditional expert from the Nyishi community as this topic has a much wider area for detailed study.

5. Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to all the informants for their participation and for sharing their knowledge and experience. My special thanks to Yapa Bagang for his photography, videography, and translation, and of course for being part of the informants.

6. References

List of Scheduled Interview

1. Rade Bagang, aged about 50 years, a permanent resident of Vada Village under Chayang Tajo Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on August 25, 2023, at 4:15 pm.
2. Yapa Bagang, aged about 26 years, a permanent resident of Kasse Village under Chayang Tajo Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on October 3, 2023, at 3:08 pm.

3. Soge Bagang, aged about 66 years, a permanent resident of Vada Village under Chayang Tajo Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on October 3, 2023, at 6:09 pm.
4. Roy Bagang, aged about 62 years, a permanent resident of Vada Village under Chayang Tajo Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on October 4, 2023, at 9:36 am.
5. Pome Bagang, aged about 48 years, a permanent resident of Goloso Village under Seijosa Administrative Circle, Pakke Kessang District, held a scheduled interview on September 06, 2023, at 3:00 pm.

Pai Dawe, former President of Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture, and present Secretary of Donyi Polo Cultural and Charitable Trust (which runs Gurukul in the State), aged about 48 years, a permanent resident of Rang Village under Seppa Administrative Circle, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on October 27, 2023, at 3:26 pm. (Hereafter, the interviewee will be referred to as PDI).

References

1. Dai, Mamang, (2005). Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh, Anwesha.
2. Dawar, Jagdish Lal, (2023). Emerging Food Habits and Social Transition in NorthEast India Since the Nineteenth Century, North East India History Association, Forty-Second Session.
3. Dietler, M., (1990) Driven by drink: The role of drinking in the political economy and the case of Early Iron Age France, Journal of Anthropological Archaeology, vol.9.
4. Haimendorf, C.V. Furer, (1939). The Naked Nagas, Methuen, London.
5. Pandey, Anshumali, History of Indian Food, www.notionpress.com, p.60.
6. Sangdo, Tade, (2020). Traditional Food Habits of the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: Change Over the Time in Shodh Sanchar Bulletin, Vol.10.
7. Showren, Tana, (2021). The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An Ethnohistorical Study, Regency Publication, New Delhi.
8. Suman, Apong-Local brewed wine of the Nyishi Tribe, (2018). La Vida Travel Magazine.
9. Tiwari, S.C. and Mahanta, Debajit, (2007). Ethnological observations on fermented food products of certain tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, Vol.6(1).

