

BASAR RYOPI KINAM

D.K. Bora

Basar Ryopi is a kind of dance, which may also be called the war dance of the Nyishings of Arunachal Pradesh. This dance is performed after the Nyishings kill a tiger. The idea behind performing the ritual and the dance is to drive away the spirit of the dead tiger whom the Nyishings dread most. The tiger, they believe, was once one of two brothers born to a common human mother, but, due to unknown reasons, the eldest of the two brothers turned into a beast.

But before we go on to describe in detail the Basar Ryopi, it would definitely be useful to know about the Nyishings, their life, culture, and beliefs. The Nyishings, along with the Adis, the Apatanis, the Tagins and the Hill Miris, claim a common parenthood in the legendary person of Abo-Tani. And because of this, all of them are clubbed together and commonly known as the 'Tani Group' of people. Incidentally, all members of the Tani Group are neighbours.

The Nyishings are also known as Nyishis. They were, till a few years ago, known by the name Dafla. The Nyishings are hill-dwellers, though a few Nyishing hamlets have spread into the foothills of Lakhimpur and Sonitpur Districts of Assam. They live in the central sector of Arunachal Pradesh, comprising the districts of East Kameng, Papum Pare, Kurung Kume and in the Lower Subansiri.

The life pattern of the Nyishings is conditioned and moulded by geography, environment and available natural resources, as in the case of all other tribals. Theirs is a close-knit traditional society. The basic social unit is still the community, which is so prominent that it can be observed practically in every sphere of their day-to-day activities. The community feeling is prominent not just among the rural masses, but even among those who have come under the influence of an urban life pattern.

Hunting, fishing and agriculture are still considered the mainstay of the Nyishing life. They practise both community hunting as well as individual hunting. Their faith and belief is based on the existence of a large number of spirits, benevolent as well as malevolent. They, like other tribals, believe in corresponding spirits for air, rain, hailstorm, or earthquake – and in spirits for animate as well as inanimate objects.

The legend

According to the Nyishing tradition, there is a state of war between man and tiger dating back to the distant past. The reason for this is revealed in

the following myth: Nima and Niya were two brothers. Nima, the elder, was very fond of his younger brother Niya. He did not allow his brother Niya to work on the fields or go hunting or fishing. Nima himself went hunting frequently, and he brought in the jungle rats that he caught, without their heads. This naturally made Niya curious and he asked his brother why. But Nima curtly replied that it was none of his business, nor should he be curious about it again. One day, Niya secretly followed his brother to find out for himself, and from a safe distance, he saw that his brother converted himself into a tiger and ate the heads of the rats.

That evening, Niya told his brother that he had discovered his secret. Nima then showed Niya how he converted himself into a tiger, but he extracted a promise from Niya that he would not disclose this secret to anyone. If he did, he would be killed by Nima. In return, Nima promised Niya to help him in hunting, and then left to live in the jungle.

This pact between the two brothers was followed faithfully, till one day, at a ripe old age, Niya told his grandchildren the secret. When he finished, Nima appeared in the form of a tiger and pounced on Niya, seized his head and went back into the jungle.

The Ritual

As soon as news of a tiger killing reaches a village, all able-bodied males present at that moment in the village instantly go to the spot in the jungle where the beast lies dead. As the party reaches the place, an accompanying priest customarily enquires about who killed the tiger and why. This is called *gomte tenam*. It is not necessary that a priest alone can do this, sometimes even a villager accompanying the party, with knowledge of Nyishing customs and traditions can act as the priest and he is called the *patekeytor hangbu*.

After the enquiries, the priest or the *patekeytor hangbu* sheds tears for the misfortune of the tiger. He laments the tiger's death, and blames the tiger for its misfortune in having come in the way of humans. Several offences and misdeeds are heaped on the dead animal to establish that it was the tiger's own fault and the human being need not be blamed for killing it.

Misdeeds are counted with the help of a *keytor* and it is considered good to heap as many complaints as possible on the dead beast. The *keytor* is nothing but a thin bamboo stick about six inches in length. The Nyishings use the *keytor* for counting in all activities, including the passage of years. In the absence of a script, the *keytor* is considered safe as it can be preserved for many years.

After thus counting the blames, the *keytor* is thrown away. The act of mourning the tiger continues for about an hour or so, then the eyes of the dead tiger are gouged out. A hole is made at a convenient height in a tree, where the tiger's eyes are placed along with a raw egg. This is then smashed with an arrow. Here *Piir Bamre*, a benevolent spirit, is invoked to destroy the tiger's eyes so that it will not harm human beings. After smashing the eyes, the party returns home with the meat of the beast. On their homeward journey, the priest or a person in the know invokes the spirit again to protect the party till they reach home.

The party carrying the carcass arrives at the hunter's house or, in case of community hunting, at the house of the villager who first shot the tiger. The dead beast is put over a bamboo platform constructed in front of the house. A sacrificial altar, called the *Yogin*, is constructed in the front courtyard. The *Yogin* is decorated with shred bamboo to make turf and tassels, and all this is done under the direction of the priest or someone well experienced in making *Yogin*.

The ritual performed here is called the *Basar Ryopi*. No women will be allowed to join in this ritual. The womenfolk will confine themselves to the preparation of the rice beer, called *apong*. It is prepared during all such community occasions, and is the only traditional drink consumed by both sexes of all ages in the Nyishing community.

The priest who performs Basar Ryopi is called *Ryopi Nyub*. A pig, a goat and a number of fowls are sacrificed. The priest chants numerous *mantras*, usually pertaining to the origins of the universe and man, and the myth regarding the origin of the tiger. He also recites the glorification of Abo-Tani, the legendary father of the tribe.

While the priest recites, the hunter and the other able bodied men of the village dance around the *Yogin* rhythmically with measured steps. While dancing, they utter 'Ho', 'Ho' intermittently. The dancers dress themselves as Nyishi warriors of bygone days. They have tiger skins on their backs; the usual Nyishing long-bladed knives called *dao* in their hands; bows and arrows; javelins; bear skins on their traditional head-gear; the dry skin of methun around their chest and waist, the *setam*, a protective seal against enemy arrows; and a kind of black grass on the forehead, called *tas camang*, which does not hamper sight but at the same time protects the eyes from the sun and dust.

They also have a thick, long, white cloth, called *bump kardung*, around the waist. This, apart from serving as added protection against enemy arrows, may also be useful as shelter in the jungle during the course of an expedition against the enemy. And just below the knee, a band of blue

thread is tied. The whole atmosphere is surcharged with a war-like atmosphere and the imagery is that of a war being waged against enemies.

There is no fixed number as to how many males should dress like this, and the number may vary from one to many. Along with the warriors, there are other males too who may participate in the dance with ordinary clothes. Though it is expected that every male present should dress like a warrior, no one insists, and sometimes even one among the whole lot of participants can be wearing the warrior dress. The only criterion is that at least one of the dancers should wear this dress. The dance continues for hours and sometimes through the night, with dancers intermittently sipping *apong* and eating the boiled meat of the tiger.

The Nyishing women cannot eat the tiger meat. However, old and infirm ladies are allowed to eat it. The dance comes to an end in the early hours of the following day and people disperse to their respective homes, taking with them their share of tiger's meat for their respective families.

After the *Basar Ryopi Kinam* is performed, the villagers follow five days of taboo, during which period they do not venture out of the village nor indulge in any important activity. There are no hard and fast rules as to how many days after the *Basar Ryopi Kinam* the second ritual is required to be performed. However, it is believed that sooner is better, and under no circumstances should the gap be more than six months between the two. The second ritual is called the *Tamo Panam*. Unlike the *Basar Ryopi Kinam*, here omens are read by the priest to identify the exact nature of the sacrifices to be made for the propitiation of the spirit.

In *Tamo Panam*, the *Yogin* is again prepared similarly, as done during the *Basar Ryopi*. The priest's main function during *Tamo Panam* is to bring the spirit of the dead tiger and keep it buried underneath the ladder by which people climb over to the house. Since everyone uses this ladder, the belief is that by stamping the spot where the tiger's spirit is believed to be buried, the spirit will not be able to rise again to inflict harm on any human being or the hunter's family. The priest, on his part, chants *mantras* for the protection of everyone, including the hunter and his family, from the tiger.

During the celebration of *Tamo Panam*, the same dance performed during *Basar Ryopi Kinam* is enacted and here again no females take part. A methun (*Bos Frontalis*) is sacrificed and its meat consumed by males only. The womenfolk prepare *apong* for the assembled males. This ritual is also known as *Ryopi*. *Tamo Panam* is celebrated only during the daytime, though it may continue till late in the evening.

After the ritual, the priest and participants follow some restrictions for a specified period. The priest who performs *Ryopi* is prohibited from performing more than one *Ryopi* in a year. The priest should also be careful while taking food and drinks during the year, and cannot take anything prepared by a woman in her monthly period, which the Nyishings consider impure. He is also not supposed to accept any food and drinks from a householder where a child has just been born and whose customary rituals are yet to be performed. Similar restrictions are observed by the *Ryopi* dancers. Further, none of the *Ryopi* dancers can go hunting for at least three months following the *Ryopi* performance, or take part in more than one *Ryopi* in a year.

The *Ryopi* dance of the Nyishings is as old as the tribe itself. It is intimately woven into the age-old fabric of their culture, which has been coming down through the centuries to the present time. Though in recent years, some sort of erosion of traditional values can be noticed due to the exposure of the tribe to various extraneous agencies, the Nyishing as a whole have been holding fort against all odds by regularly observing rituals and dances such as *Basar Ryopi Kinam*, if not too elaborately, at least symbolically.

D.K.Bora
Director
Directorate of Research
Government of Arunachal Pradesh
Itanagar-791111
Arunachal Pradesh (India)