



HERITAGE OF  
**NUSANTARA**  
International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage

# HERITAGE OF NUSANTARA

International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage

Vol. 4 No. 2 December 2015

ISSN 2303-243X E-ISSN: 2442-9031

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## A REVIEW OF THE LITTLE KNOWN ETHNIC RELIGIOUS ART AND CULTURE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, NORTH-EAST INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Arunachal Pradesh, the north-easternmost state of India is a mountainous terrain inhabited by a number of ethnic communities. Due to its geographical isolation, it is still cut off from mainstream India and has limited interaction with the rest of India. There are as many as 26 major tribes and several hundred sub-tribes. They have their own distinct culture, tradition and religious belief system. Some of the ethnic communities namely, Apatani, Nyishi, Galo, Tagin, Tangsa, Wancho, Mishmi etc. have their indigenous religious practices with well-defined belief system but due to limited research there is a paucity of data which fails to present a clear picture of the culture and tradition of the ethnic communities of the region. In many ways, their indigenous religion plays an important role in influencing the peoples' arts and culture. This paper is an attempt to review the ethnic religious art and culture of the people of Arunachal Pradesh in an effort to highlight and preserve their ethnic cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** *North-East India, Arunachal Pradesh, indigenous, ethnic communities*

### Abstrak

*Arunachal Pradesh, negara utara-timur India adalah daerah pegunungan yang dihuni oleh sejumlah komunitas etnis. Karena isolasi geografis, ia masih terputus dari arus utama India dan telah membatasi interaksi dengan negara India lainnya. Di sana terdapat sebanyak 26 suku besar dan beberapa ratus sub-suku. Mereka memiliki budaya, tradisi dan sistem kepercayaan agama mereka sendiri. Beberapa komunitas etnis tersebut yaitu, Apatani, Nyishi, Galo, Tagin, Tangsa, Wancho, dan Mishmi memiliki praktik keagamaan asli mereka dengan sistem kepercayaan yang didefinisikan dengan baik, namun karena penelitian yang terbatas, terdapat kekurangan data yang gagal untuk menyajikan gambar yang jelas tentang budaya dan tradisi masyarakat etnis daerah. Dalam banyak hal, agama asli mereka memainkan peran penting dalam mempengaruhi seni dan budaya bangsa. Tulisan ini berupaya untuk mereview seni keagamaan etnis dan budaya masyarakat Arunachal Pradesh dalam usaha untuk menyoroti dan melestarikan identitas budaya etnis mereka.*

**Kata Kunci:** *North-East India, Arunachal Pradesh, adat, masyarakat etnis*

### Introduction

The North-East hill region of India comprises of seven states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Arunachal Pradesh is the northeastern most state of India located in the trans-Himalayan region. It is the largest state in North-East India with a total area of 83,743 sq. km. The population density of Arunachal Pradesh is 17 persons per square kilometer (Census 2011) making it the state with the lowest population density in India. It has long international boundaries with Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north-west, Myanmar in the east and the Republic of China in the north and shares the same ecological zone with South East Asia.

### The People

North-East India is inhabited by a large number of ethnic communities who have migrated to the region from different corners at different times. Many ethnic groups for example Lisus are spread over a vast geographical area across the political boundaries. They are found in Arunachal Pradesh, Burma, China and Thailand. It is interesting to note that the Indonesian archipelago, a multi-ethnic country is also home to around 375 ethnic and sub-ethnic group as per 2010 Census. Javanese,

Sundanese, Malay, Batak, Balinese, Acehnese etc. are examples of some of the ethnic groups.

The North-East region of India has rich forest cover so the ethnic communities inhabiting the region are still heavily dependent on forest's resources for their daily needs. Arunachal Pradesh is predominantly a tribal state with 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes.

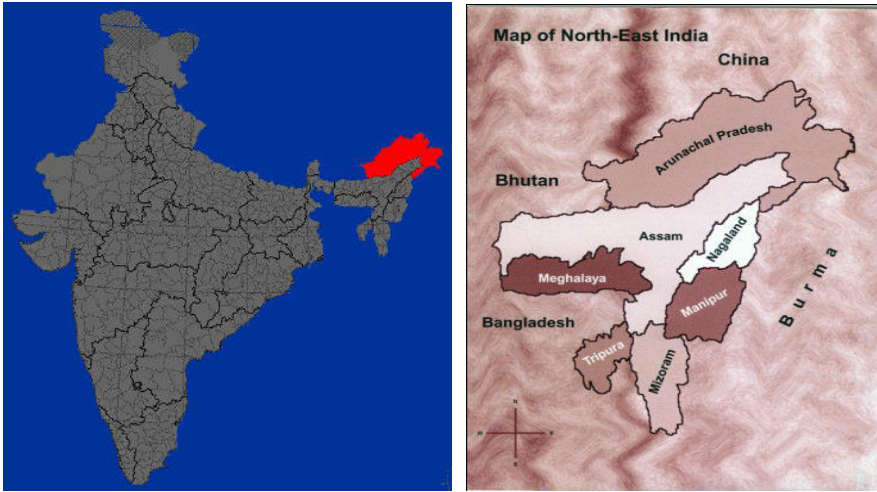


Fig.1.1: Map showing the seven North-eastern states of India

People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) has documented at least 90 languages in Arunachal Pradesh so far making it the most linguistically diverse state in India (The Economic Times, 2013). Due to geographic isolation imposed by mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, deep gorges etc. these ethnic communities have lived in isolation from each other for centuries which helped them to develop their own distinct culture, tradition and their own religious belief system.

The people of Arunachal Pradesh are traditionally agriculturists. They mainly cultivate rice, maize, yams, taro, cassava and grow several local vegetables. Apart from cultivation, hunting, gathering and fishing still plays a significant role in their life as a means of supplementary subsistence. The region being remotely located, very little is known about the indigenous belief practiced by the different ethnic communities.



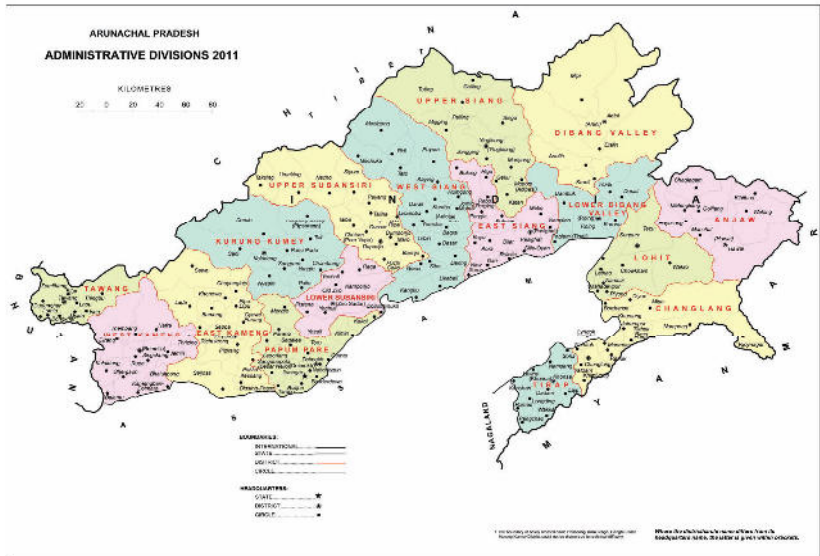


Fig.1.2. District Map of Arunachal Pradesh

Due to limited research in the region, the tribal religion is usually labeled as animism, shamanism or ancestor worship. Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) the English anthropologist who spent a considerable time in Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile NEFA has broadly classified the tribes Arunachal Pradesh under three cultural groups based on their religious beliefs.

### Classification of the Cultural Groups

The first group includes the Monpas and Sherdukpens who inhabit the Tawang and West Kameng districts and practice Tibetan Buddhism. The Membas and Khambas of the West Siang district also follow the same. The Khamptis and the Singphos who inhabit the Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh are followers of Theravada Buddhism.

The second group consists of the Nyishis, Apatanis, Adis, Galos, Tagins etc. who are loosely classified as followers of animistic religion called *Donyi-Poloism*. The third group consists of the Noctes, Tangsas, and Wanchos of Tirap and Changlang districts associated with the practice of headhunting along with their traditional indigenous religion.

Rangfraism which is a modified form the indigenous religion (with definite Hindu influence) is being practiced among the Tangsas.

Like most religions in the world the influence of the indigenous religion of the people of Arunachal Pradesh can be seen in its arts and crafts such as religious sculptures, bamboo crafts, paintings, textile weaving, basket-making, wood-carving etc. The artistic practices of the people are subjected to their religious beliefs. For instance, it is a taboo for men to weave clothes and women to carve masks along with the handling and usage of craft materials among certain ethnic communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Religious practices have an obvious impact on the art and culture of the region.

Research presented in this article is based on the field work and interviews conducted with the target population (craftsmen, artists), village elders, priests and clan leaders. Both primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed. As the state of Arunachal Pradesh is nestled in a mountainous terrain, it is abundant in natural resources which played a very important role in the socio-economic, political, religious and cultural life of the indigenous people. Living in the close proximity of forest for many centuries has helped them to develop a symbiotic relationship with the forest. In many ways, forests are culturally and symbolically valued in tribal societies. The dense wooded forest and the abundant bamboo plantation supply the essential raw materials needed for the local craft production. Through the use of natural resources, mostly bamboo and wood, the communities create a rich variety of art items which fulfill the demands of their daily needs, artistic needs as well as religious fulfillment. Array of the religious objects were either made of bamboo or wood. The communities of Arunachal Pradesh have a long heritage of religious art associated with bamboo and wood culture. In this paper, the religious art and culture of the less known ethnic communities will be highlighted citing certain examples.

Members of Monpa tribe mostly inhabit the Tawang and West Kameng districts which are located in the Western part of Arunachal Pradesh. The Monpa people are spread across Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. Monpas are known for their wood-carving skill which is mainly practiced by the menfolk. In wood-carving, masks play an important

role in the religio-cultural life of the Monpas. The masks are made of single block of wood which is hollowed inside. These masks come in different shapes and sizes. There are masks which appear almost like real faces while other represents birds and animals to drive away evil spirits. These masks are worn during traditional ceremonial dances and pantomimes. The Monpas are known for their popular forms of mask dance. These masks are mostly used during festivals and drama performances like *Ajilamu*, *Thutotdam*, *Pha Cham* (Boar dance), *Lham Toskor*, *Losker Chong*. The Monpa dancers mask themselves representing the different animals and dance to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals as an act of fighting the evil forces. During performance the maskers are believed to be the visible manifestations of unseen spirits who are represented as different animals. The spirits of the concerned deities are invoked through these artistic performances, dancing and singing (Fig.1.3).



Fig.1.3.Ceremonial Pantomime by the Monpas



Fig.1.4. *Thangka* Painting of the Monpas

Each of these folk dances has their own significance and performed on different occasions for different purposes. When not in use these masks are kept inside the monastery and brought out only when the occasion arises. There are several oral traditions associated with these masks. These masks are believed to protect the community from the hidden forces of the evils. Apart from being religious in nature, the dance performances are also an important part of Monpa cultural life. These performances add great vigor to Monpa cultural life. Tawang Festival which is an annual cultural event to promote tourism in the

region draws huge tourists both from India and abroad to this corner of North-East India. Mask dances are the highlight of these events. It is also a way to present Monpa culture to the outside world. Another worth mentioning art of the Monpas is the *thangka* paintings. The Monpa *thangkas* are much influenced by the Tibetan *thangkas* (Fig.1.4). The Monpas are also traditional carpet weavers.

The Khamptis who inhabit the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh are practitioners of Theravada Buddhism. The members of the Khampti community are known for finely wooden carved images of Buddha and various animals. Swords produced by the Khamptis are popular all over the state due to its intricate design.

The Wanchos and Noctes are mostly found in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh and also on the border districts of the state of Nagaland. They are also well-known for their wooden carvings and tattoos. They are traditionally practitioners of indigenous belief system associated with head hunting. Their wood carving is not only famous for its religious importance but also for its aesthetics value. One of the important features of the Wancho wood carving is its frontality and they are invariably free standing and exceptionally attractive (Tag et al. 2008:151). Most of their sculptures are in human and animal forms. These sculpted human figurines are believed to protect against the evil effects. These wooden sculptures are only carved by men and detailing of the head is more elaborate than rest of the body (Fig.1.5). Despite Wancho fascination for the head and its detailing due to their age old practice of head-hunting, the wooden human figurines are proportionate. Wood carving is also related to the ancient practice of the institution of *morung*\*. Heads of human beings and animals in high relief are carved on the *morung*'s exterior wall. The pillars and horizontal beams of the *morungs* are vividly carved with human figures, birds and animals (Fig.1.6). Motifs like human figurines, human heads, horns, elephants, tiger, (hornbill's) peak, lizard, moon and sun are the common themes.



Fig.1.5. Wancho carved figurine courtesy: Khonsa Museum, Ar. P

*\*bachelor dormitory system which was practiced among many tribes in North-East India especially Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. This practice is no more in use*



Fig. 1.6. Interior of a Nocte morung



Fig. 1.7. Wooden head pendants

These sculpted carvings are meant to protect the male dormitory from the unseen evil effects and motifs especially tigers, horns, human heads which are believed to be signs of manhood. Wood carving is also done as symbolic decorations of funerary images erected for warriors and important persons. These erections of effigies of the dead were quite common among the Wanchos. This tradition was also practiced by the Konyak tribes of Nagaland before their conversion to Christianity. Some of these grave effigies are heavily tattooed. The wood carvers' skills are respected in the village. Apart from carving free standing wooden statues and wall carvings, pendants of carved wooden heads are also common among the Wanchos (Fig.1.7).

Among these indigenous people, woods and leaves of certain species are considered auspicious and used for rituals while certain trees are considered as the dwelling place of the spirits (*yapom*). Such trees are usually left untouched and if needed, they are cut down only after making the appropriate offerings.

The Galos who mostly inhabit the West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh are followers of *Donyi-Polo* which is a popular indigenous religion in the region. In Donyi-Poloism, the Sun and Moon are the supreme deities but along with that they also believe in the existence of several spirits. These spirits are believed to guard different spheres in nature like the mountains, hills, streams, rivers, agricultural, sky, etc. These spirits are to be either propitiated or appeased from time to time through rituals. These spirits are represented by images made of raw bamboo designed into different shapes. These bamboo representations of the spirits are example of the highly sophisticated expertise of the Galos in bamboo. These ritual images are called *dwpv* (Fig.1.8). For each ritual, different set of bamboo altars are made representing different spirits. These altars can be both simple as well as highly elaborate. The bamboo altars of the concerned spirits along with its pantheon are prepared by the villagers (Fig.1.9). In the case of a large scale ritual, the whole village participates in preparing the altars before the beginning of the ritual. Bamboo shaving for ritual altars is made only by the male members of the society. It is tabooed for women to make ritual altars. Participating in such endeavor is the only occasion when the youngsters of the village learn this art. Different kinds of

offerings are made such as eggs, chicks or chickens, pigs or piglets which are sacrificed in front of the altars and the blood of the sacrificed animal is smeared all over the bamboo shavings which is symbolic of feeding the spirits concerned. Apart from these objects of art or religious paraphernalia, the ethnic communities of Arunachal Pradesh are known for their textile pattern, fabric design with wonderful choice of colors. Each community has a distinct style of design and motif. The combination of the colors, lines, curves and the elaborate motifs used in weaving have deep embedded meaning. For instance, the Wancho, Mishmi and Adi textile have motifs which has a religious significance as per as the designs and patterns are concerned.



Fig. 1.8. Bamboo Altars of the Galos



Fig.1.9. Bamboo altars prepared by the villagers

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, some of these religious art forms are facing acute challenge regarding its survival due to modern influences. With rapid urbanization, changes in the lifestyles of the people have led to the deterioration of native culture. The younger generations are migrating to urban area to find better jobs for their livelihood. As a result of which a situation has risen where the traditional knowledge remained with the older generation in the villages without it being carried forwarded to the younger generation. An observation of the present religious art and culture scenario in the region will bring to light that in Arunachal Pradesh apart from indigenous and Buddhist culture glimpses of Christian and Hindu elements can also be witnessed that has seriously affected the continuance and originality of the native practices which led to the erosion of native religion, culture and tradition.

In view of the new changing scenario which is threatening the very roots of the cultural continuity of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, it is important that the community members should take concrete measures to preserve their age old traditions. With the passing away of the older generations, the knowledge of the traditional wood carvers, weavers, mask-makers are also fading away. Along with the technical skill, the myths and legends associated with these objects which give meaning to them also die. Therefore, it is important that the communities should be aware of these challenges and attempt to ensure its continuity for the future generations and document these traditions as early as possible. Because these traditions are an integral part of our cultural heritage; our roots and the very symbol of our ethnic identity.

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هريتيج اوف

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مجلة دولية لبحث المؤلفات والتراث الديني  
السنة الرابعة، العدد 2، 2015

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خير الفؤاد يوسف

مدير التحرير:

فخرياتي

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مساعدة هيئة التحرير:

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كوسانتو

الصورة فيالغلا فالأمامي عن بيات تنه جاوى و مأخوذة من

<http://kisahdanbabad.blogspot.co.id/2012/07/awal-terbentukny-pulau-jawa.html>

محور هذه المجلة هو تزويد القراء بمعلومات حول خطة إندونيسية ودولية في تطوير المؤلفات والتراث الديني من خلال نشر المقالات والتقارير البحثية ومراجعات الكتب.

تركزت هريتيج اوفنوسانتارا للبحث في المؤلفات الدينية سواء كانت معاصرة أو قديمة، والتراث الديني الواقع فيجنوبشرقآسيا، وترجمتها من اللغتين والعلماء المتخصصين في هذا المجال.

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هریتیج اوف

# نوسانتارا

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السنة الرابعة، العدد 2، 2015



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**SERTIFIKAT**

Nomor: 707/Akred/P2MI-LIPI/10/2015

## Akreditasi Majalah Ilmiah

Kutipan Keputusan Kepala Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia  
Nomor 1215/E/2015 Tanggal 30 Oktober 2015

Nama Majalah : Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage  
ISSN : 2303-243X  
Redaksi : Center for Research and Development of Religious Literature and Heritage,  
Ministry of Religious Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia,  
Gedung Kementerian Agama RI, Lt. 18, Jl. M.H. Thamrin No. 6, Jakarta Pusat

Ditetapkan sebagai Majalah Ilmiah

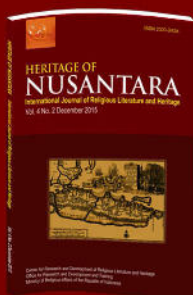
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Akreditasi sebagaimana tersebut di atas  
berlaku mulai Oktober 2015 - Oktober 2018

Cibinong, 30 Oktober 2015

Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia  
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