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**COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE INDIGENOUS DANCES OF THE NYISHI COMMUNITY:  
NYEDA BHUYA AND BANGRU PAJOK****Chera Esther**Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong, Meghalaya-793022**ABSTRACT**

*Indigenous dance is a living archive of cosmology, history, identity, and interpersonal relationships. It is a human creation designed to build relationships and foster cultural identity. Each dance has its own uniqueness and importance to the tribe, along with the knowledge passed down from generation to generation. In this paper, a comparative study has been given between two dances named Nyeda Bhuya and Bangru Pajok. These two dance forms are performed during the marriage ceremony and belong to the Nyishi community of Arunachal Pradesh. Even this dance form has been recognised by the tribe, but there are differences in costumes, song content, gender aspects, participants, and the steps of the dances. It has been found that Nyeda Bhuya uses simple dance movements, and anyone can participate in this dance form, unlike Bangru Pajok. Among these two dance forms, Nyeda Bhuya is much more popular in the community. The paper will analyse both the Nyeda Bhuya and Bangru Pajok dance forms in terms of their dance styles, costumes, and performances. This paper provides insights into two indigenous dances: the Nyeda Bhuya, performed by the entire Nyishi community, and the Bangru Pajok, performed by a Nyishi sub-tribe, the Bangrus. The study will also highlight the similarities and the continued practice of these dance forms by the community.*

**Keywords:** Comparative analysis, Indigenous dance, Nyeda Bhuya, Bangru Pajok, folk tradition

**INTRODUCTION**

Dance invokes knowledge that has been induced in the movements and gestures, which is partaken in by the performer. It is a motor of culture that “results from creative processes which manipulate human bodies in time and space” (Kaepler, 1978, p. 32). The human soul is expressed through dance, with rhythmic and bodily movements, and through the adaptation of rhythm in a certain space and time (Reski & Astuti, 2023). It is a language that gives a visual link in its rhythmic form, which are “culturally influenced sequences of body movements that are selected in much way that a person choose sequences of verbal language” (Hanna, 2001, p. 41). Dance is a tool for expressing emotions within, and it is also a form of redirection, with bodily movement substituting for thought. Dance serves as a form of communication in which the human body's motion conveys content and a visual message (Bläsing & Zimmerman, 2021). It communicates through physical movements, which is an important factor of human communication, as it is “not reliant on vocal elements or linguistics” (Rounds, 2016, p. 1).

When we talk about Indian dance, it speaks to history, mythology, and the incorporation of religious meaning, which are revealed through body language. The Indian dance, “being referred as form of nonverbal communication, has a great impact on society and plays an important role in human interactions” (Khafizou, 2016, p. 2). Its traditional forms are expressive and artistic, reflecting rich traditions and heritage, and are also deeply rooted in religion and spirituality (Ghosh, 2023).

The evolution of dance has its roots in the indigenous communities, where it has “gain acceptance as independent per-formative art” (p. 70) as a strong tool of communication (Chielotam, 2012). In the tribal community, “Dance and music are one of the core parts of their life” (C, 2024, p. 1), like performing during the wedding, festivals, the birth of a child or any other social activities (C, 2024). Each traditional dance has its own uniqueness, specific to its ethnicity or region, and has evolved according to “their respective local traditions and have been passed down from generation to generation” (Ghosh, 2023, p. 88).

The Nyishi people believe in brotherhood, and dancing and singing are important parts of their festivals. It builds a “powerful means of community and clan integration, which helps them to strengthen “the social solidarity among the members of the village” (Showren, 2021, p. 89). The Nyishis are one of the largest tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, and the changes have been occurring with the “onslaught from urbanization, modernization and influence of other culture on their traditional folk media practices”, but still they are practising their age-old traditions in different aspects of their lives. The Nyishi dance forms are “of pristine origin” (Showren, 2021, p. 90), indicating that the richness of the Nyishi community's traditional values still lies in its folk dances.

*Nyeda Bhuya* and *Bangru Pajok* are prominent among the Nyishis and perform at marriage ceremonies; differences can be seen in costumes, song content, gender aspects, participants, and dance steps. The paper will explore the elements of similarity and dissimilarity between these two dances practised by the Nyishis. It will also evoke the cultural identity associated with this dance form.

### **Origins: The indigenous marriage dance**

*Bhuya/buya* is one of the prominent dance forms that has been performed for generations. It is a “ceremonial dance of Nyishi tribe and it is very popular among the community people” (Tadi, 2020, p. 9). The *bhuya* dance has various variations, and its significance varies according to the event. The classification of the *Bhuya* dance is *Nama Bhuya* (house-warming), *Nyeda Bhuya* (marriage dance), *Maji Bhuya* (part of the marriage dance, when the groom fetches an ornament, a Tibetan tongueless bell), and *Yulow/Yullo Bhuya* (the festival dance) (Tadi, 2020). This dance form comprises both a song and a dance, featuring rhythmic bodily movements, with the dancers joining hands. (Tadi & Khan, 2021).

The *Nyeda Bhuya* is performed during the marriage ceremony and is an ancient tradition (Tara, 2008). The significance of this dance is the expression of an idea that is being communicated through the “performing song and dance; where phrases of the song can be composed right there” (Tadi, 2020, p. 109) while the people are performing. This dance is a vibrant traditional expression of emotions, performed in a lyrical way, in which two clans or families engage in poetic song and dance. These performances involve meaningful, rational questions and answers exchanged between the families, fostering a more harmonious relationship characterised by deep engagement through the song and dance. (Tadi, 2020).

The *Bangru* people have a different language from the other Nyishi, and in their language, they call *Bangru Gongbye* (Ramya, 2011), but now it is “popularly known as *Bangru Pajok* in the Nyishi belt of Kurung Kumey district” (Esther & Donoghue, 2025, p. 64). The *Bangru Pajok* is another dance performed during the marriage ceremony by the Nyishi sub-tribe. This dance is not much more popular than the *Nyeda Bhuya*, and the other Nyishi have little knowledge of it. The reason for it is confined to the *Bangrus* and is mainly carried out by their clans, such as the *Sape* and *Pisa* clans. It is found to be performed in the Kurung Kumey districts of Arunachal Pradesh and in areas such as *Sarli Circle* and *Polosang Circle*.

### **Comparison between Nyeda Bhuya and Bangru Pajok**

A traditional dance performed by the entire Nyishi community, where the song and dance involve “rhythmic body movement with dancing member holding hands and moving in a big circular form” (p. 254), is called *Bhuya* (Tadi & Khan, 2021). *Nyeda Bhuya* is one of its variations, performed during the marriage ceremony. The dancers form a line, each holding the hands of the dancers next to them, and they shift either left or right, predominantly leaning to the right. They extend their hands forward, then swiftly bring the left foot next to the right while swinging their hands back. With each step, the dancer gracefully bends their knees (Sarkar, 1993). This dance is performed by both families, followed by a melodious song-and-dance, which creates healthy competition and merriment. The adult members and children perform it, and they “learn how the steps are taken during dancing” (Showren, 2021, p. 90). Those present at the wedding ceremony can be part of this dance form.

The *Bangru* people reside in the Kurung Kumey district and consist of clans like “*Pisa*, *Milli*, *Sape*, *Mallo* (*Mullo*), *Tagang*, and other minor clans” (Ramya, 2011, p. 41). The *Sape* and *Pisa* clans mainly perform the *Bangru Pajok*, and it is believed to have been introduced by the *Sape* clan. The *Bangru Pajok* dance is complex, lasting up to two hours, with “dancers incorporating numerous steps that reflect events connected to nature, making it physically demanding for the participants” (Esther & Donoghue, 2025, p. 65). Each dancer carries a sword in their right hand, and a small bell hung from the sword makes a sound, imitating animal movements such as drinking water and a cockfight. The movements are rough with small jumps as both feet move in a rhythmic pattern created by the hand movements on the bell sound. The dancers must be trained by the former performer and should be aware of the knowledge embedded in the steps, such as rhythmic footwork and jumps. Mainly, the *Sape* and *Pisa* clans perform this dance, and it must be performed in pairs under the guidance of the priest, as certain rituals are carried out to select those who will perform.

The major difference between the *Nyeda Bhuya* and *Bangru Pajok* dances is that the *Bangru Pajok* dance has more steps and more complex movements and requires training to become familiar with them. In contrast, the *Nyeda Bhuya* has simpler movements and doesn't require training to learn them.

### **Participants**

During the marriage ceremony, both dances are performed with their distinct qualities and the knowledge passed down from generation to generation. The participants regulate the idea of belonging and merriment. The *Nyeda Bhuya* is performed by both families, and anyone can join in. In this dance, the bridegroom's party

performs on one side and the bride's party on the other. Turn by turn, each party gears up and stands in a "big circle form, every one holding each other's hands and begins" by bending their knees up and down (Tadi, 2020, p. 111).

But the Bangru Pajok dance has lots of restrictions. This dance has ritualistic beliefs, and each performer must undergo a selection process, as it is believed that the Bangru Pajok dance carries "both blessings and curses and is accompanied by strict taboos that selected performers must observe" (Esther & Donoghue, 2025, p. 64). The *Nyibu* (priest) plays a vital role, as he selects the performers by examining the chicken liver (looking for an auspicious sign) to determine whether they can perform. In Nyeda Bhuya, there are no restrictions on the number of performers, and "anybody can participate as dancing member by holding hands" (Tadi, 2020, p. 10), but in the Bangru Pajok dance, there is a criterion for performing only in pairs, and the pairs can be in any number. As mentioned above, the Pajok dance observes certain taboos, such as the selection of performers, and another is that females don't participate in this dance form; only male performers take part. But in Nyeda Bhuya, anyone can take part, both genders, male and female, and even children, and there are no such taboos that need to be observed.

In both dances, a gender aspect stands out, and their looks differ. The Nyeda Bhuya speaks to the equal space for both genders, whereas in the Bangru Pajok dance, there is no space for women; this is where the worldview comes into play through its norms. Even in participation, the Nyeda Bhuya can be performed with odd or even numbers, and no specific number is required. But in Bangru Pajok, performers must be in even numbers and perform in pairs.

Both dance forms share a similarity in that dancers from both sides come together to perform. In Nyeda Bhuya, dancers from both families participate; similarly, in Bangru Pajok, one pair comes from the bridegroom's side, and another pair comes from the bride's side.

### Costumes

In the Nyeda Bhuya dance, the dancers wear traditional attire. The men wear a woven cane cap surmounted by the crest of a hornbill's beak known as *Bopia/Byopa* on their heads. The clothing is either black-and-white striped, thick cotton cloth called *Pomo Jeda* (Goel et al., 2012) or a plain creamy cloth called *Leying*. They also wear different kinds of ornaments, like "beads in jewelry known as *tasang*" (Goel et al., 2012, p. 46), and a large number of cane rings encircled the waist, along with a *Uryuk* (sword) and a leather pouch hanging from the shoulder, and metal wristlets (Sarkar, 1993). The woman wears a full- or half-sleeve red blouse with a plain cream-coloured cloth tucked tightly over the breast and enveloping the body from the armpits to the centre of the calves, on top of the red blouse. A red cloth is then tied at the waist like a ribbon (Pangya, n.d.). Along with the red cloth at the waist, it is studded with *Hufyi* (metal discs belt), *Koji* (bangles), earrings, and multicoloured bead necklaces (Goel et al., 2012).

In the Bangru Pajok dance, performers wear a black-and-white striped cloth called a *Pomo*, along with a red-and-black striped cloth tied around their waists. Their ornaments include large white beads, known as *Sangte*, which are adorned with small bells, as well as a red-and-white beaded ornament with black stripes called *Sanglang*. Each performer also carries a sword, on which a small bell called *Leymeh Chungpe* is hung.

This dance mimics the movements of birds, and to represent feathers, performers wear a backcloth known as *Reja*. In the Nyeda Bhuya dance, men wear *Bopia*, but in the Bangru Pajok dance, performers showcase elaborate headgear. This headgear incorporates hair-like strands made from the stem of *Tassej* (the sugar palm tree), hornbill beaks positioned at both the front and the back, a red-dyed white chicken feather placed at the top, and a big mouse skin wrapped around the middle of the head.

### Song content

The Nyeda Bhuya dance steps are simple with no complex movements, while there is richness in the song's content, as this dance form is performed for a healthy competition between the two families, "having logical, questions and answers from each other to binds them in a more congenial relation with utmost understanding among themselves" (Tara, 2008, p. 267). It begins with a verse dedicated to god and spirits, and it tells about the wedding and singing about how all the gods and goddesses have arrived here to enjoy the songs and dance, followed by the verse "of personal query enquired by bride's clan and vice-versa" (Tadi, 2020, p.110). Through the song's content, they express their happiness and share knowledge with people.

Conversely, the Bangru Pajok dance is not accompanied by song. The dancer performs to the sound they themselves produce as they move. There is a small bell hung on their sword, so when they move their hand holding the sword, it produces a rhythmic sound; with that rhythm, they perform and enact all the dance steps.

The significance of the bells, we see that they are used for religious and secular purposes, with “ancient roots and is found throughout the world” (Kovačič, 2006, p. 106). Bells have been associated with religious ceremonies, thereby conferring religious significance (Coleman, 1928). In Hindu worship, sound plays a vital role in spaces such as homes, temples or community halls (Prasad & Rajavel, 2013). So, the ringing of the bell while chanting “has the potential to lead the mind towards spirituality”, and it creates an attachment to “the rhythm of the bell and feels peace” (Jayalakshmi, 2020, p. 20) and even to “frighten evil spirits” (Doherty, 1891, p. 45). In Buddhism, ringing a bell is considered to help the mediator “keep his mind calm and prepare for the meditation or any other spiritual practice” (Zambare et al., 2025, p. 169), and the sound of the bell is associated with the Buddha's voice (Aamir et al., 2017). Each bell sound has its own symbolic ideas that are represented and preserved, like in the Nyishi community, where there are a few traditional musical instruments, and the important instruments used by the priest while chanting prayers are the *Reenyu* (a small metallic ball) and *Junghang* (a conical vessel with a tongue) that create a sound (Tadi, 2020). Here in the Bangru Pajok dance, the use of the bell is to create a rhythmic sound that helps the performers move, as “all primitive peoples employ the jangling sound of metal for musical effects” (Coleman, 1928, p. 149). And this dance is performed in pairs, so both partners must be in sync and in the same rhythm.

## CONCLUSION

A tribal dance serves as a medium for symbolic movements, encompassing not only physical movements and emotional expression but also deep-rooted cultural and social ties within the community (Bhale, 2014). These two dance forms belong to the larger Nyishi community, but each carries its own way of transmitting knowledge, and the continuity of the dances remains exciting. Some changes can be seen as the Nyishis are “undergoing the process of modernisation, acculturation, and urbanization, and the impact of these factors is resulting in erosion of their traditional life and culture” (Ramya & Ramjuk, 2018, p. 620). The changes can be seen, whether in the dance costumes or in the addition of music; for example, in Nyeda Bhuya, the traditional attire is becoming more modern: men are wearing traditional design-pattern jackets or coats with pants, and women are wearing modern design-pattern gales (wraparound). In the Bangru Pajok, some dance costumes have been modified. For example, the black cloth which they wear in the back, called *Reja*, has changed to normal black cloth, cotton balls are used instead of white chicken feathers, white bandages replace big mouse skins, and synthetic red dye is used instead of natural plant colours. As mentioned above, the Bangru Pajok is performed without musical instruments, and the sound is produced by a small bell that they themselves make. Now, they have added rhythmic music (a soundtrack) and are performing to it. Currently, the Bangru Pajok has been shifted from a wedding dance to performing at the *Longte-Yullo*, a festival that emphasises fertility by “the invocation of benevolent spirits for peace, prosperity and wellbeing of humankind” (Ramya, 2012, p. 13) and is celebrated with “the advent of spring season in the month of April (*Lachar-Polu*)” (Ramya, 2011, p. 89), as well as other special events. Earlier, this dance was performed in *Dahte Nyeda* (big marriage), but due to the rarity of big marriage ceremonies, it has somehow had less visibility, and it was on the verge of extinction. So, the Bangru people began performing the Bangru Pajok dance at the Longte festival, and this festival has been an “effort to preserve and promote the unique tradition of the Bangru community for generations to come” (Ramya, 2011, p. 93). Recently, they performed at the XIV<sup>th</sup> Nyishi Elite Society Conference in November 2025, comprising two pairs of Bangru Pajok performers, which underscores the visibility and effort required to sustain this dance form. Though changes have occurred as “Folk forms evolved along with the evolution of man” (Dharmalingam et al., 2017, p. 71), its essence remains the same, and the Nyishi people continue to follow the traditional way of performing.

Each dance form has its own origin with its “distinctive rhythm and dance style” (Bhale, 2014, p. 5); likewise, these dance forms belong to the same community, but they differ in many ways, each with its own meaning and understanding. These dance forms carry their own worldview, and “it commits individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community” (Chielotam, 2012, p. 69), and the performers reflect those ideas through their performances.

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