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## A Textual Analysis of Nyeda Buya of the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh

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### Abstract

*The traditional dance form Buya, prevalent among the Nyishi community, is a unique combination of singing and dancing, often performed during significant ceremonies such as marriages and the Yullo festival. While earlier scholars like Sarkar (1974) emphasized its physical and rhythmic aspects, later studies have highlighted its oral and participatory dimensions. Among the different types of Buya, Nyeda Buya stands out for its dialogic and competitive nature, where two opposing parties, typically from the bride and groom's sides, engage in a singing contest. This performance is marked by uniform body movements, chorus-based singing, and ritualistic elements like Gor, a symbolic chant that frames the beginning and end of the performance. Nyeda Buya includes all community members—men, women, and children—and is not just an artistic expression but a vital cultural practice that fosters collective memory, social bonding, and oral tradition. This paper explores the structure, function, and cultural significance of Nyeda Buya as both performative and communicative tradition within Nyishi society.*

**Key Words:** Buya, Nyeda Buya, Nyishi community, Traditional dance, Folk performance, Oral tradition, Arunachal Pradesh, Marriage ceremonies

### Introduction

*Buya* in its most basic definition is a dance form accompanied by a song. Sarkar (1974) writes about *Buya* as a form of dance performed in the marriage and the *Yullo* ceremony for merriment. Tara (2005) describes it more descriptively as a performance where song and dance follows simultaneously. He further elaborates that the body movement of the participants would be uniform and depends on the lyrical rhythm. Indeed, *Buya* is a form of entertainment where the participants sing and dance simultaneously. A brief description of *Buya* by Sarkar (1974) was such –

The dancers stand in a line, one beside another in the passage of the house holding the hands of the dancers on either side. A few of the dancers play gongs to the accompaniment of the dance. The movement may be either to the left or to the right. In the left side movement, the dancers take one step with the left foot and immediately bring the right foot beside the left one and with this same movement, they continue the dance. They gracefully flex the knees at each step. They

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start the singing out in chorus 'hir-ri! hoh! hoh! hoh! for some time. Then the dancers of one half of the line sing one line of a song followed by the other dancers of the other half singing another line. After singing these two lines alternately for some time, they switch on to another set of two lines.

This is a good description of what the dance form is but completely excludes the oral part which is more important. *Nyeda Buya* as it is a contest of singing between two opposing parties, the performers or participants can be anyone – men, women and children. Showren (2009) also writes that 'the most significant characteristic of the Nyishi *Buya* dance is that it is generally performed by men and women together as well as the children'. However, Sarkar (1974) contradictorily states that 'only men, generally youths and adults take part in this dance' (pp.115).

In today's time, *Nyeda Buya* is performed the most among all other *Buyas*. Unlike other *Buyas*, *Nyeda Buya* is a contest. It is a dialogue form of singing and consists of two opposing parties competing to win. Each party would have their own participants. Usually, the groom's party would start with a verse and then the next verse would be sung by the bride's party. If a party asks a question (in singing form) then the other party would have to reply to it in the next verse. Both the parties would keep singing their respective verses alternately. There is no limitation to the number of verses and can continue as long as the participants wish. *Buya* is performed on the first day in the evening when the groom's family enters the bride's house.

Every *Buya* begins with *Gor* and also ends with it. To *Gor* is to shout uniformly *Ha-H... Ho-H... Ha-H... Ho-H...*, as if the sound is coming from deep in the throat, and repeating it for some time. After a while it ends with a final long cry of *Ho...O...O...* in a single breath. The *Gor* acts like an announcement to the humans as well as to the spirits around. After the *Gor*, the *Buya* singing (with dancing) begins. While performing *Buya*, it requires participants or performers to sing and dance at the same time. The song differs according to the type of *Buya* but the dance or movement of the body remains the same. All the participants hold hands together in the way that a man would hold hands by the palm of the other two men on his either side. Only the men on the two extreme sides would hold the hand of a single person either on his right or left. These men then would move in a circular motion usually from the left, but not necessarily as it can be done from the right as well. As they move, they would throw their hands slowly rhythmically to the front without letting go of hands that are held. As they throw hands, they move to the left, slightly bending the knee. These movements would be repeated until they finished singing. The participants would be divided into two groups – the first half would sing the first line and the second half would sing the second line, thus, completing a stanza. There has to be two leading singers who will decide what to sing. The first singer would lead the first half and the second singer would lead the second half. In this way, the stanza would be repeated for some time with participants singing alternate lines. After some time, they would move to the next stanza and sing it in the same pattern and in this way, they would finish a verse.

### Transcription and Translation of *Nyeda Buya*

Transcription of each stanza is followed by a free translation. Some translations might be inadequate but it does say more or less something around it. Below the free translation, a symbolic explanation is given about the stanza. Every alternate line is sung by a half of the *Buya* performing circle.

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There are three verses each sung by both the parties. The beginning and end of each verse has been marked. In this transcription, the Nyishi phonetic alphabets (using Roman alphabet) are being used here.

A description of Nyishi corresponding sounds are given below:

Vowels (symbols)	o	a	i	U	e	w	v
Nyishi Vowels (sounds)	o	aa	ii	Oo	ae	ue	ea

In *Nyeda Buya*<sup>1</sup>, three rounds of alternate singing are performed. In the first round, the groom's party begins the first verse of the *Buya*. The singing begins with this uniform making of the sound of 'Ho(H) Ha(H)...' and then 'Ho o...' as a cry indicating the beginning.

**Round – 1:**

*Ho(H) Ha(H) Ho(H) Ha(H)...*  
*Ho o...*

Here onwards, every two sentences work as a pair where each alternate line is sung by one half of the group and the other half sings the other line out of the paired sentences.

*Tugu Bo Tapa Dabv*  
*Yogam Bo Kapa Dabv*  
*Dulw Kormv Tapa Dabv*  
*Mindw Kordw Kapa Dabv*

*Yepin Yagar Tapa Dabv*  
*Arki Aro Kapa Dabv*  
*Nyidw Rindw Pejkw Dabv*  
*Gomdu Radw Paka Dabv*

*Holw Lo Jotam Ngunywm*  
*Holw Lo Jotam Ngunywm*  
*Donyi Khitey Khijey Pabo*  
*Si Yamtey Yamjey Pabo*

**Translation:**

The above verse is the invocation of benevolent *Uyis* (the spirits). These *Uyis* are believed to be guardians and caretakers of mankind. The singers invoke *Uyis*, namely Tugu, Yepin and sing as 'Let Tugu, Yepin hear it! Let Mindw, Kordw see it'. Further, they sing that gods such as Donyi and Si have blessed the families of bride and groom and the universe has brought them together.

After this, Bride's side begins their first verse.

*Hoh Hvh Hoh Hvh*  
*Tugu Bo Tapa Dabv*  
*Yogam Bo Kapa Dabv*  
*Yepin Boje Jeje Dabv*

<sup>1</sup> The actual *Nyeda Buya* is very long, consisting of numerous lines. In this study, the beginning parts of each round i.e., 1, 2 and 3 are only given.

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*Yagar Boye Yeje Dabv*  
*Mindu Kordv Tapa Dabv*  
*Arki Aro Kapa Dabv*  
*Dulw Kormv Tapa Dabv*  
*Yepin Yagar Kapa Daba*  
*Jotam Lo Holw Ngunyvm*  
*Jotam Lo Holw Ngunyvm*  
*Donyi Khitey Khijey Pabo*  
*Si Jamtey Jamjey Pabo*

**Round – 2:**

Similarly, like the first round Groom's party begins their verse

*Ho...O...O...*  
*Holw Lo Gumtv Nguna*  
*Holw Lo Yalo Nguna*  
*Dimpa Mwma Mwga Yine Hirne Mwgwmo Yine*  
*Yimpu Mwma Mwga Yine Lomane Mwgwmo Yine*

**Translation:**

The *Gumtv* and *Yalo* of Hol have brought meat and clothes remembering Abu Loma.

**Symbolic meaning and interpretation:**

Remembering Abu Loma, the maker of *Maj*, symbolizes the singers expecting *Maj* (Tibetan bell) from the brides' family.

*Holw Lo Gumtv Nguna*  
*Holw Lo Yalo Nguna*  
*Dayi Se Yigey Yikv*  
*Dasa Se Lanyang Yikv...*

End of second verse for bride's party and thus the end of round – 2.

**Round – 3:**

The third round begins. Groom's party's turn for the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse.

*Jotam Lo Aath Tvnga*  
*Jotam Lo Aay Tvnga*  
*Gonyi Arvn Tugu Boga Ungko Bolo*  
*Gutv Arin Yogam Boga Ungko Balo*  
*Tugu Dvrma Dvrkha Pejo*  
*Yogvm Dvrma Dvrkha Pejo*

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### Translation:

The evil spirits that exist around the *Maj*, *Tal* are washed away by the blessings of *Tugu*, *Yogam*.

### Symbolic meaning and interpretation:

It is believed that a lot of bad vibes exist in certain *Maj*, *Tal*. So, if there are bad spirits around it, then let the benevolent spirits clean it.

*Jotam Lo Aath Tvnga*  
*Jotam Lo Aay Tvnga*  
*Tvtw Se Hvdwk Yoju*  
*Yayi Se Hvchi Mabju...*

End of third verse for the bride's side and thus the end of third and final round. It is also the end of *Buya* for that event.

### Analysis of *Buya* text

The narrative of *Buya* begins with '*Donyi Khitey Khijey Pabo, Si Yamtey Yamjei Pabo*' which translates to 'The universe has brought the couple together'. After this stanza, the groom's party announces their arrival in the stanza '*Kute Mena Toto Berya Benchayine, Kada Mena Yoyo Berya Benchayine*'. *Kute* and *Kada* mean *Koham* leaf and cane rope respectively, considered sacred and here, they are used symbolically to represent the traditional system of *Nyeda*. To perform the traditional marriage, the groom's party comes and holds the talks and thus, the narrative begins. After this, there is a connotation of '*Pei Sose-Pako Sole*' which means 'rope is given' but here it indicates the straight line. The *Nyeda* goers move in a straight line one after another, and so it is connoted by a rope. The asking of permission by the groom's party ends the first verse. It is now the bride's party's turn to respond. The beginning remains the same with invocation of spirits and how the universe has brought them together. After singing it, they respond to the groom's verse. They sing that they were not aware of their arrival and were sleeping or lying down by the fire (of course, they are not sleeping but it is a dramatization of events). Listening to this part gives an imagery of an old couple sitting by the fire. The couple will not chase away the groom's family and are allowed to enter. The beginning of the narrative is completed now.

The second verse would be the negotiation and slowly it would become the centre of the narrative. The centre of the narrative is all about negotiation. From the first stanza onwards, the groom's party is referred to as *Gumtw* and *Yalo* says that they have brought clothes and meat thinking of *Loma*. *Loma* or *Abu Loma* is a mythic character considered as the maker of *Maj* (a Tibetan bell). The negotiation has begun. Generally, a discourse of *Buya* should be slower with proper arrangement of order of the stanzas (which would make the narration more detailed), than the way it has been done here. One of the correspondents said that in her region they do it very properly. But nevertheless, a lot of correspondents were quite satisfied with the quality of this particular *Buya* under study. The negotiation continues with several stanzas which all have similar meanings attached to them. A lot of literary devices are used in this part. For e.g. '*Dayi Si Yigey Yika, Dasa Si Lanyang Yika*' means that 'the trees are dried up'. Here, it is used as a metaphor; the trees *Dayi* and *Dasa* signify the family of the groom (performing the *Nyeda*) and

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‘drying up’ refers to the ‘several earlier efforts of *Nyeda* that have been already done’. ‘Drying up’ can also mean ‘drying up of resources’ but, in all probability; possibly not. There is another stanza which says ‘*Nyodi Sicho-Soto Pera*’, referring to the names of different animals. *Soto pera* has to do with fish (which is not very clear and understood here but a correspondent remarked that these animals have never been seen by her or others). There are several instances in *Buya* (and in overall Nyishi orature) which refer to animals that are mostly imaginary and do not exist in reality. It has been noted earlier by Bora (2004), who writes ‘...a kind of wild rat, has shining back...a kind of fish, has also a shining tail... No one has even seen... and they live only in imagination’. Another stanza such as ‘*Hwna Hvra Odu Popv Lejky Yika, Honku Khamre Oku Chipv Lvnga Yika*’ tells about the earlier efforts that have been made already. It says that a lot of bamboo glass has been cut out of bamboo and a lot of plates have been made out of *hokam* leaf. It symbolizes ‘an occasion’ and tells that there had been such occasions earlier also. A very interesting metaphor is used in a stanza which says ‘*Gomchi Yamin Semin Ungam Kanw Yibo*’. Here, it says that the groom’s party wants to see a rat kind of animal living inside the hole. Earlier, the Nyishi people kept the beads in a bamboo box and in this line; the box has been referred to as ‘the hole’ and the animal inside are ‘the beads’. The rest of the verse continues in a similar manner reiterating that a lot has been done earlier which implies that a lot has been given and now they expect gifts in return.

The last stanza from the second verse of the groom’s party goes like this, ‘*Doyi Kvrmyv Poo Tvrey Vbkha Yiney, Hvchw Nguyvm Licha Terey Koohv Yiney*’. It produces a brilliant imagery saying that, ‘the star has been shot by an arrow’, the *Hvch* (fish) has been hit by the stones.’ It also means the same that a lot has been done, but here what remarkable about this verse is how it is being said. The second verse of the bride’s party begins with their announcement that they are hosting the night and expecting more gifts. The next stanza is about requesting the groom’s party to have a peaceful negotiation. After that, they respond to what the groom’s party had sung earlier. They sing that ‘the trees are not dried up’ which is to say that ‘you have not done enough’. It means that they want more and expect more. Again, they respond that ‘the glass (bamboo tube) has not been cut enough out of bamboo and the leaves have not been cut out of its stem enough’. And therefore, ‘will not get to see the mole living inside the hole’. ‘Have not shot the arrow to the star yet and have not killed the fish yet’. The bride then asks whether the groom would be able to make a legendary deal. They, then, request the groom not to talk bad behind their back. Often, people talk badly against the other person when they are not happy with them and even in *Nyeda* it happens, so the bride requests not to indulge in such talks. In this way, the second verse of the bride ends. The narrative has reached the centre of the discourse. The talks have begun and both sides have put forward their demands. The groom’s party says that they have given enough and now are expecting the return gifts. The bride’s party says that they want more.

The third verse of the groom begins with a prayer that the evil spirits be washed away by the blessings of *Tugu* and *Yogam*. Then, they request the bride’s family to maintain a strong bond between the two families in several stanzas using symbols and metaphors. There is a stanza that says ‘*Budey Se Rumtwng Mabey, Tahey Se Hvtwng Mabey*’. It is a request to the bride’s family saying that ‘let our relationship not be a tight bamboo, let it not be a cane rope with too many nodes’. The tight bamboo and too many nodes in a cane rope symbolize ‘uselessness of it’. It is a metaphor saying that the relationship should be useful. The groom’s family also responds to the bride’s queries that they ask in the previous verse. The singers reply in affirmation that they indeed are the ones who make record breaking exchanges. They, then, proclaim their helpfulness with a famous proverb – ‘*Dumb Lutu Hapa Bey Belin*



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*Liney, Bep Layam Sibe Bey Belin Yine*’ which means that ‘if needed, they will carry the lame deer to the plains and the paralyzed (hand) monkey to the tree’. It means to say ‘if needed support, will be provided’. Another interpretation of this particular proverb has been made elsewhere, where it has been given as ‘*Doombu Laya Bhu Ham Changtam Bangcha Beepu Lakya Bhu Ham Sangbhee Bangding*’. It has been translated as ‘Matrimonial relations are to help and protect the weaker’ (Pereira, Changmi, Ramya, & Azu, 2017). The groom’s family then, upon several stanzas, ask the bride’s family to be genuine and show their qualities. One stanza goes like this, ‘*Pvta Ko Ngam Nusun Tabey, Hokam Ko Ngam Nyvryw Tabey*’. It means ‘make a nest for the bird’s child, let the eagle’s child have those shades in the feather’. The groom’s family is telling the bride’s family to be genuine and show their strength. Showing strength can also imply that the family gives gifts with an open heart. In this way, the narrative ends from the groom’s side and they declare that ‘if they have to sleep, then they can sleep peacefully’ implying that the negotiation went well.

The bride’s party then begins their third verse. They tease the groom’s party that they are not coming forward but going backward. They enquire about the quality of gifts that they have brought. It can be an inquiry on the Mithuns, clothes, wine, meat, etc. The groom’s party referred to a certain tree and a certain animal in the previous verse and the bride’s party now put it in their verse and use it to show their strength. The groom asked previously ‘if you are the *Doji* tree, then have that bud with you, and if you are *Buru* (mythical crocodile), then have that slipperiness on you’. It was an inquiry on their genuineness and was asking them to show their strength. The bride’s party responds here that indeed they are *Doji* and *Buru*. The *Doji* tree is so big that the wood from it will keep burning. No matter how much you put inside *Buru*’s stomach, it won’t get filled. The response seems to be saying that the bride’s party is ready to take out more gifts if needed as they have more than enough. The bride’s party is quite confident. Here the imagery, metaphor, symbols, connotation, etc., revolve around nature. A great deal can be understood of the Nyishi man–nature relationship from *Buya* itself. A brilliant imagery is produced when it says ‘*Yitv Pwv Yisey Jakam Swkhey Pvkkey Rayye Yaram, Svtv Isv Tosv Jakam Lwngv Pvkkey Rayye Yaram*’. It means that ‘even if a storm comes, this tree will not shake, even if the current of the river increases, this stone will not move’. It symbolizes the strength of the bride’s family. A few more enquiries are done on the status of the grooms’ family and the quality of their gifts. After this, the narrative moves from the centre to the end.

The bride’s party then sing, ‘*Wjw Bwnyin Hogu Sorv Chirgum Kunv, Hvyw Bwnyin Hogu Sorv Chirgum Kunv*’. Through this line, the bride’s party is asking, ‘what will you give to the sun’s daughter, what will you give to the water’s daughter?’ Here, the bride is referred to as the daughter of the sun and water. Similarly, they compare their daughter to elements and things that are considered sacred such as the earth, sky, important trees and leaves, etc., and ask what they shall give for the daughter of the sun and water. Then, they announce that they have beautified or dressed up their daughter like how the earth and sky’s daughter dress up, implying that they would be giving valuable gifts in abundance. The narrative ends with the final stanza of the verse which says that they are happy with negotiation and can sleep peacefully if they like.

If the grooms’ party had wanted it, the *Buya* could have gone on for a long time. They could have responded to the brides’ party in the third verse. But in this *Buya*, they chose not to, which is also fine

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since the brides' party also ended their verse saying that they are satisfied. Both the parties ended their verses with satisfaction and so it can be considered as a fine ending of the *Buya*.

### Sound and Rhythm of *Nyeda Buya*

Although this study is not devoted to a linguistic analysis (in true sense), the rhyming structure of the language in the *Buya* can be studied, at least on a surface level. The brevity of this song form is another area that can be appreciated.

Throughout the *Buya*, the two alternate lines, which always mean or signify a similar 'idea, image', will have rhyming words at the exact place within the order of the sentence. For e.g. in the sentence '*Donyi Khitey Khijey Pabo, Si Yamtey Yamjey Pabo*'; the words '*Khitey Khijey*' will rhyme with '*Yamtey Yamjey*'. There are words that one can come across in texts of *Buya*, *Oodh*, etc., such as '*Khijey*', '*Jeje*', '*Pejka*', which all mean the same thing, 'blessings or has been given support'. These are all synonymous words which have their own pair of rhyming words such as, if, in a sentence '*Jeje*' is used, then the alternate sentence would have '*Yeje*'. '*Pejka*' will have '*Paka*'. '*Khitey*' will have '*Yamtey*' and so on.

Another example of the rhyming structure is '*Kute Mena Toto Berya Benchayine, Kada Mena Yoyo Berya Benchayine*'. Here *Kute* and *Kada* are two different words but the words that succeed these two, not only rhymes but also signify the same thing. The words *Toto Berya* and *Yoyo Berya* are used together and mean 'the talks'. The Nyishi language comprises a lot of pairs of words that mean a single idea which often are 'encompassing ideas' or highlights the extremeness of something. For example, the words *Tosup-Tayap* mean 'the noises' that are disturbing or *Jim-Jama* means the silence or emptiness' which is there in a place. This pair of words highlights the extremeness of something, and it is precisely the use of two words which point to the extremeness. Several languages have these kinds of similar word usages. What it means is that the rhythmic nature of Nyishi words helps it better rhyme in song forms. There are several word pairs in alternate lines that rhyme or are made to rhyme. A few of these would be such as '*Odu Popa-Oku Chipa, Simi Bachitar-Um Bapatar*', etc. There would be many instances where these words are modified to rhyme or a word is added, which might not have a meaning on its own, for the purpose of not disrupting the tune of the *Buya*. Stuart Blackburn termed these two words and often rhymed as 'Noun pair.' He writes that many place names, personal names of priests, spirits, sacrificial animals and ancestors and words for ritual objects occur exclusively as noun pairs. The two elements of a pair occur in various patterns- side by side, separated by a few words or by several lines- and a skilful performer must know how to arrange hundreds of these pairs within the flow of chanted words' (Blackburn, 2008).

The rhyming structure is the same throughout the three verses of this *Buya*. The last word, a verb, of every alternate sentence in a stanza remains the same. Since, the sentences of the first verse comprises mainly four words, it is relatively easy to sing even by someone who doesn't have a hold of the language. From the second verse onwards, the sentences get longer. The second verse functions as the centre of narrative where the singers convey something using literary devices and requires longer explanation. The third verse is also like the second verse with long lines. It has also a longer stanza where the two lines are sung at once, '*Doji Hobu Rutv Dvnn, Dasey Kumro Kumlv Jakvm Kungv Tata Menv Ngunv*'. This is the only instance where the rhyming structure slightly differs from the usual four-word scheme. Otherwise,



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throughout the three verses, it remains the same which would be called probably ‘aabb’ rhyming structure.

The transcription of the text has been done with an aim to bring out the words clearly which the singers sing. In actual singing, the singers, sometimes, mispronounce and use synonymous words during repetition of the same word in a sentence. Sometimes, the singers would add words such as ‘aa’, ‘anga’ which doesn’t have any meaning on its own but works in maintaining the melody.

The tune is a melancholic slow melody. The words are sung slowly and often a word is stretched to bring it to the tune. The singers try to maintain the tune through repetitions throughout the verses.

### Conclusion

The narrative of the *Nyeda Buya* begins with the invocation of gods followed by the announcement of arrival by the groom’s party. This is followed by the bride’s party who would also invoke the gods and welcome them singing particularly that ‘they were not expecting them’. The rest of the text of the *Buya* can be different across different *Nyedas* even though the narrative remains same. Most of the text here is either in literary devices such as allegory, metaphors, etc., or direct speech and is about the negotiations. The negotiations mostly involve the gifts that are being exchanged.

The language of *Buya* or *Oodh* is different from everyday Nyishi. It does not, however, mean that the singing involves only the usage of that language. It is used along with the usual Nyishi. The construction of a sentence usually involves the use of nouns and the verbs in the usual Nyishi.

It is, however, not very clear that the sentences having different literary devices that are being used in the *Buya* form the large reserve of sayings, proverbs, riddles, etc. If so then probably these sayings are twisted or fitted into the narrative of a *Buya*. Whether or not but certainly there exist numerous sentences that can be used in *Buya* and every *Buya* would only contain a fraction of it.

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