

A brief ethnozoological profile of the *Nyishi* tribe of Kamle district, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is biologically rich as well as ethnically diverse too. The present study reports the ethnozoological knowledge of the *Nyishi* tribe inhabiting the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. Survey was done in 7 villages of the district using pre-designed questionnaires. Uses of 26 animal species and their parts have been recorded during this study which comprises of 14 mammals, 5 birds, 2 amphibians and 5 insects. The highest usage among local inhabitants was found to be for food followed by decoration, magical and religious practices and for medicinal proposes. The importance of documentation of ethnozoological knowledge from the perspectives of its disappearance and dilution over time and conservation of the threatened animals for future needs as well as ecosystem functioning is discussed.

Keywords: Animal parts, Conservation, Ritual, Raga, Traditional knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh is the easternmost state of India and lies approximately in between 26°28' to 29°30' North Latitude and 91°30' to 97°30' East Longitude (Tsering et al., 2017). It constitutes a major part of the Eastern Himalaya, a global biodiversity hotspot region and is characterized by uneven topography and diversity in vegetation from tropical to alpine types (Kaul and Haridasan, 1987). The state is blessed with immense diversity of flora and fauna owing to its unique geographical position coupled with diverse climatic conditions and wide array of habitats. The vast natural resources, particularly forests of the state also sustain about 26 major tribes like *Nyishi*, *Apatani*, *Adi*, *Galo*, *Tagin*, *Khamti*, *Wancho*, *Mishmi*, *Monpa*, *Nocte*, *Bugun*, *Hrusso*, *Singpho*, *Sherdukpen*, *Yobin*, *Khamba*, *Memba*, etc. and more than 110 sub-tribes; each being distinct from the other in their cultures and traditions (Dollo and Choudhury, 2006). Thus, the state is biologically rich as well as ethnically diverse. These ethnic

communities live in harmony with nature and over the ages developed a knowledge pool of sustainable co-existence. But most of this knowledge still exists in non-codified form (Chutia, 2006).

The interaction between human and animal dates back to thousands of years, and cultures all over the world have developed unique way of interaction with their regional fauna over time. (Alves and Souto, 2015). The ethnozoological knowledge of communities ranges from medicinal, edible and therapeutic use (Kato and Gopi, 2009).. Ethnozoological studies are necessary in order to document the un-codified knowledge and to find new medication for human and animal health. Use of animal and animal products by the indigenous tribes in different parts of the world including India for different purposes have been well documented. Mahawar and Jarali (2008) found that out of a total 109 animals species used by different ethnic communities of India, 70 % are included in International Union for Conservation of

Nature (IUCN) Red data list and 33 % animal species are listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) appendix I, II, and III.

Quite a good number of ethnozoological studies on the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have also been done over the years. During socio-culture and magical religious occasions of *Nyishi* people, animal meat is used as protein supplement in their diet and in traditional medicine. The Tiger and Himalayan black bear have been equally used in therapeutic activities of *Nyishis* (Solanki et al., 2005). A total of 12 species belonging to order Hymenoptera and Hemiptera were found to be consumed by *Galo*, *Adi*, *Memba* and *Khamba* people of the state (Kato and Gopi, 2009). Insects are commonly used by different traditional healers of Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast, India (Hussain and Tynsong, 2021). The *Nyishis* and *Galos* of Arunachal Pradesh uses many animals and their parts including 36 vertebrate species as food and for treatment of different ailments and diseases. The most commonly treated diseases by using animal parts include malaria, fever, typhoid, dysentery and diarrhea (Chakravorty et al., 2011). Animal species used as food, medicinal,

therapeutic purpose and in socio-culture practices by *Monpas* of Arunachal Pradesh was studied by Solanki and Chutia (2004).

It is apparent from scrutiny of existing literature that virtually nothing is known about the ethnozoological knowledge of the *Nyishis* inhabiting the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. The increasing relevance of ethnozoological knowledge across the globe and on the other hand, the risk of dilution of this information before it can be properly documented has driven the present study. The rationale of the study is to understand to what extent members of the *Nyishi* tribe inhabiting Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh make use of animals and their parts in their ritual activities, traditions and day-to-day activities.

STUDY AREA

The present study has been undertaken in the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. Raga is the headquarter of this newly created district (Figure 1) which is located at an altitude of 1182 m above sea level (27°47'36" N and 94°04'15" E). Kamle, the name of the district has been derived from its major river Kamle which enter the district from Kra Daadi district and finally join the Brahmaputra at Assam as Subansiri river.



Figure 1: Panoramic view of Raga, the headquarter of Kamle district

The district is inhabited by the *Nyishis* which is the largest tribal group of Arunachal Pradesh with an approximate population of around three lakhs. The word ‘*Nyishi*’ literally translates to a ‘civilized’ human being’. They are originally forest dweller and remain dependent on the forest and forest products for social and cultural activities. *Nyokum* festival is celebrated annually by the *Nyishi* in order to appease their gods. The rituals of the festival also include praying to ancestries as well as praying for a good harvest., In addition to Kamle district, the *Nyishis* also inhabit Papumpare, Kurung Kumey, East Kameng and Lower and Upper Subansiri, Kra Daadi and Pakke Kesang districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Chutia, 2006).

MATERIALS & METHODS

The present work is based on information gathered through interview using questionnaires. Survey was conducted during February to March 2021 in the different study areas. The survey was done in seven villages of Kamle district i.e. Raga, Yada, Dokum, Pel-Milli, Put-Milli, Tamen and Boasimla. A total of 21 persons were interviewed. Preference was given to the person who was considered to be the oldest, the principal hunter supposed to know more concerning the culture and tradition of the community in relation to the wildlife, the traditional healers and similar other learned persons. The interviewee were then asked simple question in order to obtain information on name of animal, local name, ornamental use, medicinal use, part of the animal used, etc. The name of animal and their parts used were documented using the questionnaire and datasheet. Photographs of animal species and parts were taken with the help of a mobile phone which is reported from the area as communication stimuli for conforming their local presence. Horns, skins,

and skulls etc. used in traditional medicine, extracted species and ornamental objects, were recorded and identified with the help of village people. Species were identified with the help of local name and vernacular name of animals provided by the villagers and later their identity was confirmed with the help of existing scientific literature.

RESULTS

During the present study, 26 animal species that includes 14 mammals, 5 birds, 2 amphibians and 5 insects were recorded to be used by the *Nyishi* people for different activities. The *Nyishi* people of Kamle district practices the gathering system to utilize the animal resources for different purposes like medicinal, socio-culture, magical and religious use and also to fulfill their customary needs. The details of different animal species utilized for different purposes by the *Nyishi* tribe of Kamle district are given below and summarized in table 1.

ENUMERATION

Mammals

1. Mithun (*Bos frontalis*)

Local Name: *Sob*

The use of Mithun in magical and religious practices of the Raga people was documented during this study. They sacrifice Mithun during traditional ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, rituals (Yullo Puja) and in the main festivals like the *Boori Boot Yullo* and *Nyokum Yullo*; considered to be the supreme in matter of harvest and crop yield. Gall bladder is used in the traditional medicine to cure dysentery, coughs and fever. Horns are used for decorative purpose and sometimes tail is used as broom. Many people sell Mithun to fund the higher education of their children. Mithun is an inherent ingredient of *Nyishi* life.

2. **Himalayan Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus*)**

Local Name: Sutum

Kamle people use Black Bear dry skin for making headgear of a *Nyishi* tribal man called *Boper* or *Byopa* to protect from rain, decoration for headgear and for making bags. Earlier people used dry skin for sword and arrow cover. Bear skull are hung on the walls of the house for decorative purpose and their gall bladder is used to treat malaria, diarrhea, fever, stomach upsets, and other common disease. As per the local people, *Sutum* is rarely found now.

3. **Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*)**

Local Name: Sudum

This animal is hunted mostly for meat consumption. The horn and skull of Deer are hung on the wall of house for decorative purpose. According to the local people, Barking deer is the most abundant animal found in the Raga area.

4. **Leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)**

Local Name: Apa Tas

Leopard cat are mainly used for meat. Skin is used for decoration on the walls of the house, for making mats. It is of medicinal value for domestic animal which is used to protect them from any kind of viral epidemic.

5. **Chinese Pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*)**

Local Name: Syicchiq

Data collected from Yada village reflected that Pangolin is mostly hunted for its scale and claws. Kamle people used the scale of Pangolin for piercing boils which are assumed to be of antiseptic property, their claws and scales are also worn as necklace for oligomenorrhoea disease and to control the epidemic.

6. **Himalayan Serow (*Capricornis thar*)**

Local Name: Sib

Serow is hunted mostly for its meat and their horns are used for decorative purposes.

7. **Capped Langur (*Trachypithecus pileatus*)**

Local Name: Sabi/Sabe

The skin of monkey is used in the decorative part of the 'Dao' cover. The skull is hung above the entrance door of the house to prevent the entry of evil spirit. The *Nyishi* people sacrifice monkey for the departure of soul of the dead people. It is believed that the animal so sacrificed would be a permanent companion to the departed soul in his journey to the eternal world.

8. **Human (*Homo sapiens*)**

Local Name: Nyi

Human in *Nyishi* dialect is called as 'Nyi'. Human urine is believed to be of medicinal value and is used for curing eye infection.

9. **Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)**

Local Name: Sihi

Porcupine is used for its meat and quills are used in traditional medicine to free from any epidemic. The Kamle people also use quills to decorate the headgear.

10. **Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)**

Local Name: Sor

Wild Boar meat is consumed and their skull and teeth are used as decoration on the wall of house.

11. **Red fox (*Vulpes sp.*)**

Local Name: Sucha

The teeth of fox are used in the decoration of 'Dao belt' and the meat of the animal is also consumed.

12. **Dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*)**

Local Name: Ik

People of Pel-Milli village sacrifice the dog while burying the dead body of humans. It is believed that dog will help to guide the soul whenever necessary in its eternal journey. Dog skin is also used to make traditional bag.

13. **Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)**

Local Name: Takar/Pate

In earlier times, the teeth of Tiger were used in the decoration of *Dao* belt' especially by local *Nyishi* priests. It is believed to provide good luck and protective power to those who wear them. Skins are used in making mats which is also used by the priest. In earlier times, people used the skin as protective gear during war operation.

14. **Indian Squirrel** (*Funambulus palmarum*)

Local Name: *Tak*

Squirrel tail is used as a key chain. Kamle people sacrifice squirrel and bury (*debii binmam*) it with the body of the death person. It is a common belief among the '*Tani*' group that the animal sacrificed would be a permanent companion of the departed soul in his journey to the other world.

Birds

15. **Great Hornbill** (*Buceros bicornis*)

Local Name: *Poe/Paga*

Hornbill feathers are used in decoration of the headgear. It was mostly hunted for its beak, which was used to make the traditional headgear of the *Nyishi* tribe of Kamle district and also for their meat.

16. **Eagle** (*Spilornis cheela*)

Local Name: *Kyokam/Peem*

The eagle tail feathers are used to make local hand fan called '*Mayap*' which is used specially by priests during rituals. It is also known as status symbol of the priest. The claws of the eagle are used as decorative item of the headgear and it is believed that it keeps the bad spirit away.

17. **Racket Tailed Drongo** (*Dicrurus paradiseus*)

Local Name: *Tell Gele/Laing Gele*

Tail feathers are used as decorative item of headgear.

18. **Crow** (*Corvus splendens*)

Local Name: *Pa*

Feathers of crow are used as a traditional medicine to cure stomach disorder.

19. **Jungle fowl** (*Gallus gallus*)

Local Name: *Preak*

This bird is mostly used for meats and has some medicinal value as well against stomach upsets.

Amphibians

20. **Sucker frog** (*Amolops* sp.)

Local Name: *Jeer Tatak*

The Sucker frog is used mainly for consumption.

21. **Green Tree Frog** (*Zhangixalus* sp.)

Local Name: *Tagji Tatak*

This frog's meat is only used for consumption.

Insects

The insects collected by the Raga people are being consumed raw, roasted or cooked. Earlier, the community collected insects for self-consumption only. However, in recent past, selling in local markets has been started.

22. **Honey bee** (*Apis* sp.)

Local Name: *Ganiya/Gonia*

It is mostly used as food and medicinally used for cough and cold.

23. **Stink Bug** (*Coridius nepalensis*)

Local Name: *Tari/Gandhi puk*

Sting bugs are used as food and condiment. In Kamle district, stink bug is found in Tamen and Raga area.

24. **Praying Mantis** (*Mantodea* sp.)

Local Name: *Yapum Sicko*

Used for consumption.

25. **Prawn** (*Macrobrachium* sp.)

Local Name: *Tasum*

Used for food only.

26. **Bush cricket** (*Elimaea* sp.)

Local Name: *Aat rgin*

This insect is used as food.

DISCUSSION

Arunachal Pradesh has a great diversity of flora and fauna as well as cultural diversity with many ethnic communities who are primarily dependent on the forest for meeting their day-to-day requirements. The present study reveals that different animal and their parts are used in various ways by the *Nyishi* people of Kamle district. These includes 14 mammals, 5 birds, 2 amphibians and 5 insect species. Collection of detail ethno-zoological information on these animals provided insights on uses of animal parts among tribal inhabitants of this area. This study about use of animal as food, in medicine, in cultural festivals (death, ceremonies of traditional rulers), decorations by indigenous people is in accordance with the investigations of Angelici et al. (1999) and Rao and McGowan (2002) who studied the hunting and wild meat consumption in African rainforests and Asian tropical forest areas respectively. Most of the interviewed people believe that the magical power of special healing acts of traditional healers is attached with the use of wild animal parts and/ by-products.

Documentation of ethnozoological knowledge is important for understanding the use of animals in the tradition and culture by rest of the members of the respective tribes. Indigenous communities believe in sustainable use of resources but the involvement of modern man in consumption of animal medicine have led to large scale killing of some rare and endangered wildlife species threatening their population. Among many animal species recorded in this study like Mithun, Himalayan Black Bear, Barking Deer, etc., are under severe threat. Great Indian Hornbill feather utilization in headgear decoration was documented and is the most threatened species due to hunting. In other Asian countries also the cultural use of

hornbill and other animals is common (Bennet et al., 1997). Mithun is possessed and valued highly by the people of *Nyishi* people of Kamle district. This animal is scarified at the altar during the main festival, the *Nyokum Yullo*, which is considered as supreme in matter of harvest and crop yield. This is parallel to the *Murung* and *Mykoh* festivals of the *Apatani* tribe.

People of Kamle district use Stink bug (*Coridius nepalensis*) locally called as *Tari* for self-consumption and selling in local markets as compared to *Adi* people of Arunachal Pradesh where they use it for the treatment of malaria patients after mixing with some local plants like Bangko (*Solanium spirale*) etc. (Chinlapianga et al., 2013). Animal parts like Porcupine quills are used for protection from diseases like common cold and also used as Headgear item. Similarly, in *Adi* tribe, quills have been used for making tattoos, other than acupuncture therapy. Medicinal usage of gall bladder of Mithun, Quills of Porcupine, Urine of Human being, claws and scale of Chinese Pangolin and gall bladder of Himalayan Black Bear has been recorded in the present study. The findings of the present study will help in understanding the importance of wild animal species in traditional medicine, socio-culture activities etc. The interaction is not only utilitarian like hunting for food, making cloth, floral and faunal derived medicines but other kinds of uses such as magical handling and spiritual too. This study was an attempt to record and document the animals and their various uses before they get declined or extinct from the area, thereby affecting the tradition and culture of the communities. Documentation of information on animals in the light of ethnozoological studies is also important for the understanding of indigenous knowledge for sustainable utilization and also for conservation aspect.

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Table 1: Animals and their usage by the Nyishi tribe of Kamle district, Arunachal Pradesh

S N	Zoological name	Local name	Common name	CS	Part used	Uses
MAMMALS						
1.	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	Takar/ Pate	Tiger	EN	Teeth, skin	Decoration of Dao belt & for making mats.
2.	<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>	Sutum	Himalayan Black Bear	VU	Skin, skull, claws, gall bladder	Treatment of malaria, diarrhea, fever and stomach upsets. Skin used for bags and headgear.
3.	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Sudum	Barking Deer	LC	Horns, skull, skin	Decoration & for meat.
4.	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i>	Apa-Tas	Leopard Cat	LC	Skin	Decoration of house and meat
5.	<i>Manis pentadactyla</i>	Syicchiq	Chinese Pangolin	CE	Scales, claws	Decoration; scales and claws used for medicinal use against oligomenorrhea.
6.	<i>Capricornis thar</i>	Sib	Himalayan Serow	VU	Horns	Meat and decoration
7.	<i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	Sab /sebe	Capped Langur	VU	Skull, skin	Skin used for decoration of Dao cover and decoration of house
8.	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Nyi	Human	LC	Urine	Treatment of pathogenic eye infection.
9.	<i>Hystrix indica</i>	Sihi	Porcupine	LC	Quills	Decoration of headgear, as meat and for medicinal value.
10.	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Sor	Wild Boar	LC	Teeth, skull	Decoration of wall and as meat
11.	<i>Vulpes sp.</i>	Sucha	Red Fox	NA	Teeth	Decoration of Dao belt. Whole body is consumed as meat.
12.	<i>Canis lupus familiaris</i>	Ik	Dog	LC	Skin	Skin is used for bags.
13.	<i>Bos frontalis</i>	Sob	Mithun	VU	Whole body, gall bladder	Sacrificed mostly for ritual purpose. Gall bladder used against fever, coughs, dysentery etc.
14.	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Tak	Indian Squirrel	LC	Tail	Whole body is consumed but tail is used as key chain.
BIRDS						
15.	<i>Buceros bicornis</i>	Poe/ Paga	Great Hornbill	VU	Beak, feather	Decoration of headgear & meat for consumption
16.	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	Kyokam/ Peem	Eagle	LC	Feather, tail feather	Hand fan (Mayap), decoration of walls and meat for consumption
17.	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>	Tell Gele /laing gele	Racket Tail Drongo	LC	Tail feather	Decoration for headgear.
18.	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Pa /Pak	Crow	LC	Feather	Medicinal use against stomach disorder.
19.	<i>Gallus gallus</i>	Preak	Jungle Fowl	LC	Feather	Medicinal use against stomach upset.

AMPHIBIANS						
20.	<i>Amolops sp.</i>	<i>Jeer Tatak</i>	Sucker Frog	NA	Whole body	Meat for consumption
21.	<i>Zhangixalus sp.</i>	<i>Tagji Tatak</i>	Green Tree Frog	NA	Whole body	Meat for consumption
INSECTS						
22.	<i>Apis sp.</i>	<i>Goniya / Gonia</i>	Honey Bee	NA	Whole body	Meat for consumption
23.	<i>Coridius nepalensis</i>	<i>Tari/ Gandhi Puk</i>	Stink Bug	NE	Whole body	Meat for consumption
24.	<i>Mantodea sp.</i>	<i>Yapum Sicko</i>	Praying Mantis	NA	Whole body	Meat for consumption
25.	<i>Macrobrachium sp.</i>	<i>Tasum</i>	Prawn	NA	Whole body	Meat for consumption
26.	<i>Elimaea sp.</i>	<i>Aat Rgin</i>	Bush Cricket	NA	Whole body	Meat as food

[CS: Conservation status, IUCN 3.1]

Photo plate – 1



Horn of Barking Deer, Raga



Skull of Wild Boar, Raga



Skull of Himalayan Black Bear, Yada



Horns of Mithun, Raga



Teeth of Himalayan Black Bear, Raga



Teeth of Red Fox, Pel-Milli

Photo plate – 2



Gall bladder of Himalayan Black Bear, Yada

Skull of Red Fox, Pel-Milli



Toes of Himalayan Black Bear, Yada

Teeth of Tiger, Pel-Milli



Skin of Capped Langur used in Dao cover, Raga

Bag made of Dog skin, Pel- Milli

Photo plate – 3



Stuffed skin of Pangolin, Yada



Claw of Pangolin used in necklace



Scale of Pangolin



Local Priest with parts of different wild Animals, Raga



Feathers of Great Indian Hornbill and tail feathers of Rocket tailed Drongo in headgear, Raga

Photo plate – 4



Tarsus and Claw of Eagle used in Headgear, Raga



Tail feathers of Eagle used in Fan (Mayap), Raga



Quills of Porcupine and skin of Himalayan Black Bear used in Headgear, Yada



Skin of Himalayan Black Bear used in Dao cover, Dokum



Skins of Leopard Cat, Put- Milli



Tail of Squirrel used in key chain

Photo plate – 5



Zhangixalus sp., Tamen



Amolops sp., Tamen



Bush Cricket, Tamen



Praying Mantis, Raga



Sting Bugs / Gandhi Puk, Tamen



Sting Bugs / Gandhi Puk, Raga