

A GLIMPSE OF SHAMANISM AND RELIGIOUS WORLD VIEW OF APATANI TRIBE

By Gyati Rana

Shamanism, a way of living synchronized life with nature, elements and universe has long been a foundational element of many indigenous societies, influencing their way of life, world views, religious beliefs, ceremonial practices and social systems.



Sri Gyati Tajo,
A Nyibu,
Shaman of
Apatani

Photo Courtesy Dylan Goldby

The Apatani people, who live in Arunachal Pradesh, India, follow a shamanism based on a body of knowledge called **Miji-Miguñ and Niting Hormiñ** which is believed to be mystical and corporal element of Almighty God **Ui**. They practice it under the guidance of **Popi-Sarmiñ**, the learned elder guides and shamans called **Ui Innü** and **Nyibu**. These peoples are the repositories of Oral tradition **Miji-Miguñ** and are elder guides, healers and custodians of Apatani Culture and Tradition.

ORAL TRADITION: MIJI-MIGUÑ

The discourse and narratives of oral tradition **miji-miguñ** encompass the creation of the whole Universe and describe the philosophical, concept, context, values, ethos and religious worldviews of the Apatani tribe. It is not only the source of various hymns, and chanting of rituals and ceremonies, but it also describes the evolution of various rituals and ceremonies, their objectives and procedures.

Shri Gyati Tajo, a prominent *Nyibu* of Hari village, Ziro defines thus: “*Miji-Miguñ, Kolyuñ-Kolo Ho’kü sülo loye pa luka ko ho, Sanü Hülyañ pa du, Ura loda hü abu lusü güma, chirañ pabañ hülyañ do. Ago dalyi ho luliñ lyiku ho Kolo, Pümü, Pyomiñ, Pyotü, Palo, Üpyo, Müdo, hü sanü ha’lo hülyañ miji-miguñ lenda byalyañ rila do.*”

It means, “*Miji-Miguñ,*” is like a tree; the beginning part “*Kolyuñ Ayyu*” is like that of the Trunk of a Tree upon which there is nothing much to tell and discuss, but following chapters, *Kolo Ayyu, Pümü Ayyu, Pyomiñ Ayyu, Pyotü ayyu, Palo ayyu, Üpyo ayyu, Müdo ayyu*, the various epochs of evolution, represents the various chapters of *miji-miguñ* knowledge. They are like branches of a Tree bearing lots of oral literature in the form of sacred verses, ballads and mythological Stories.”

Miguñ is stories and their narrations are in a prose form whereas *Miji* is in a poetic form called *Büşhi* or *Ayu*. *Büşhis* are folk songs chronicles on the themes of *miji-miguñ* and *Yorda Ayyu*, is a descriptive narration on the themes of *miji-miguñ*. On the other hand, traditional *Ayyu* is conversational ballad songs sung during auspicious occasions of various festivals between two people asking and telling each other about themes like myths, mythology, traditions, cultural values, ethos, moralities etc. of different eons.

The *Miji-Miguñ* is broadly divided into two parts the **Gyuchi Ayyu** or **Miji-abañ** and **Gyutü-Ayyu**.

- 1) **Gyuchi-Ayyu/Miji-Abañ:** Literally, it means the elder one or the older chapters of sacred oral tradition which describes the initial epoch of creations *Jimi-Jama* or *Kolyuñ*. It encompasses the initial creation of the Universe, Stars, Earth, elements, formation of various geographical features on Earth, birth and evolution of spirits and demi-Gods, vegetation, animals and birds, hominids, humans etc. followed by *kolo* and up to the epoch of later *Ui*, including all its other branches like *Kolo, Pümü, Pyomiñ, Pyotü, Nyime* and *Palo* etc.
- 2) **Gyutü-Ayyu:** which means the Younger sacred ballad which describes the creation and life proceedings after the epoch of later *Ui*, beginning from the era of *Üpyo, Müdo* and upto *Supuñ*, the present age. It discusses the birth of the first human being, *Abotani*, our forefather and his descendant’s progression in various faculties, the evolution of various cultural and traditional practices, their socio-religious values, mores and ritual ceremonies, migration etc. leading from *Üpyo* to *Müdo* up to *Supuñ*; the present age.

THE GREATER SPIRIT UI.

Gyuchi-Ayyu/Miji-Abañ tells that they identify the *Ui* as Universal directive force of life and creation. It expands to encompass various elements and spiritual entities responsible for shaping the physical and metaphysical realms. They envision the creation of the Universe, celestial bodies of earth, geographical features, vegetation, and living beings as the result of *Ui's* divine efforts.

CREATION OF UNIVERSE

“Kolyuñ Jimi dò, Kolyuñ Jima dò, Kolyuñ ji-rara, arra-gyagya Ui kontü du. Kolyuñ donü mi Jima donü mi, Kolo donü mi Goma, donü mi, Jimi türañ, jima türañ dari la, Ui jidu Hulu, gondü lyayu, hü gori güla, Kolyuñ Lodu ka dutu duri nüñ hü, Añchañ Lodu mi Dutü la, Küdi Lodu mi dutu doh. Kolo Lobiñ ka bero benüñ hü Añdo lobiñ mi beñtü la, Müdo Lobiñ mi bero chado. Ho, Uchēr Hubyañ hò Takēr huliñ, Urē Hubyañ ho Tarsi Huliñ, Jortu Hubyañ hò Danyi, Jorma Hubyañ hò pülo huliñ Lyunsi Hubyañ ho Yashi, Lyimu Hubyañ ho yamu....”



Universe
came into
existence
with
tremendo
us sound
Lodu and
Lobin.

Image credit: Shutterstock

This is the beginning verse of *Miji abañ*; the older oral tradition. It says that in the initial epoch; **Kolyuñ**, it was in a state of Jimi-Jama, except **Ui**, nothing existed. The Universe was created through the conscientiousness of *Ui*. The conscientiousness of *Ui* grew and over time, it burst up with tremendous *lodu* (sound) and *Lobiñ* (vibration) and

fragmented into various celestial elements like celestial water, fire, dust, air, etc. and into different bosoms out of which many more celestial entities and spirits were born. From the bosom of *Uchēr* and *Urē*; the star was born, from the bosom of *Jortu*; *Danyi*, the sun was born, from the bosom of *Jorma*, *Pülo*; the moon was born, from the bosom of *Lyunsi*, *Yashi*; the water was born, from the bosom of *Lyimu*; *Yamu*, the fire was born so on and so forth many celestial bodies, elements and spirits etc. were born from different bosoms and came into existence.

CREATION OF EARTH AND SKY

Hükka küliñ hò, Ui Popi Kolyuñ Popi pa, Ui Sarmiñ Kolyuñ Sarmiñ pa, Ui Pinü Kolyuñ Pinü pa, Ui Siyo Kolyuñ Siyo pa, Duliñ la. Gyotu-radu, Mide-pyara dugyü pa hüla Küddi dola mi sannü ta'kiñ, Müdo Dola mi chañko borkiñ ho ji'liñ.

The above verse is an excerpt from *Miji Abang*, it says that after creating the universe, celestial bodies and elements, *Ui* needed a platform to continue the creation of humans, living beings and vegetation. So, *Ui* manifested itself as *Popi-Sarmiñ* and *Pinü-Siyo* and dough this earth and atmosphere out of celestial dust and water.

BIRTH OF SPIRITS.

The following verses are an excerpt from the Tani Sabre Chapter of *Miji-Miguñ*.

Ho,Pyonü sabēr barpyo yattü, Ui Abañ pa Ui-Tadu, Uruñ abañ pa Uruñ-Tagyañ. Pyonü abañ pa Pyoki-Taji, Unü abañ pa Uma-Pilya. Mikhü abañ pa Mikhü-Karu, Gyalañ abañ pa Gyalañ-Hole, Eyu abañ pa Turü-Tunkēr, Harnyañ abañ pa Gyüt-Pada, Myorü abañ pa Myoto-Radhe, Shü abañ pa Sütto-Radhe, Doji abañ pa Doji-Byoyi, Empēr abañ pa parbo-Talo, Lyakuñ abañ pa Lyakuñ-Byalo, Chutü abañ pa Chunü-Tünü, Kharü abañ pa Kharü-Khape duliñ....”

This verse says that before the birth of humans, the firstborn of different genres of spirits were born Viz *Ui-Tadu*, *Pyoki-Taji*, *Mikhü-Karu*, *Turü-Tunkēr*, *Myoto Radhe*, *Sütto Radhe*, *Doji Byoyi*, *Parbo Talo*, *Lyakun Byalo*, *chunü-tünü*, *Kharü-Khape* so on and so forth. The greater spirit manifested into different genres of *Ui* and took charge of specific domains with specialized attributes and powers.

BIRTH OF THE FIRST HUMAN

“...*Abotani mi sabrē bardu pa, Ui hii chantu kochuñ ho hila abbu sokatii. Aha changi ka Changi Hila solü nüin hii Nigi Tani, Aha chapu ka Chapu hila solü nüin hii Nipu Tani, Aha chalyu ka chalyu hila solü nü hii Nilyu Tani. Hü Nimu-Tani adiñ pa sabrē la, Tani sabrē bardēr lama.*

Aha Charuñ-Charē ka Charuñ-Charē hila solü nüñ hii, Nikiñ-Tani mi here hendo pa, üjañ-hai mi hempa dopa, ngunu ka aba-apa Abotani mi sabrē bartü...”

“...to give birth to the first human being into his likeness; the *Ui*, manifested into different entities like *Aha changi, Aha Chapu, Aha Chalyu* etc. and dropped their semen into the genitals of *Chantu*; the mother Earth. But all those born out of it were *Nigi Tani, Nipu Tani* and *Nilyu Tani* respectively. These Tani’s were imperfect and were not in conformity with the likeness of the Almighty. Abotani, the first human being was born when *Ui* manifested as *Aha Charē-Charuñ*, the god of wisdom and knowledge and dropped his semen into the genitals of *Chantu*; the mother earth. *Abotani* was born with the attribute *Charē-Dorē*, the aptitude of discernment to distinguish light from darkness along with other human abilities.

CREATIONS OF HUMANS

Later, to further continue the creation of human beings *Ui* manifested as *Pinü -Siyö* and continued the creation of humans by implanting the seeds of various faculties viz. knowledge, speech, physical strength etc. called *Tapyu, Tabyo, Arē-Amyo* upon us. *Pinü-Siyö* does not decide our life span and means of death. On the contrary, *Pinü-Siyö* lets us choose our duration of life and means of death by placing us before a bunch of threads called “*Soyü*” i.e. different numbers of knots, each denoting a year of life. The more knots there are, the longer the duration of life of living beings in this world. After that, we are also given the choice of means of death based on various elements and matters placed before us. *Pinü -Siyö*’s creation continues from birth to death even beyond until our soul called *Yazi-Yalo* returns to *Ui*.

Next, we are handed over to *Ayo Danyi* for a blessing called “*Laa*”, the blessings of richness, knowledge, strength etc. After being blessed by *Ayo Danyi*, we are sent to the care of the terrestrial God, *Shu-Myoro, Myorü-shü*. In the early epoch of human evolution during nomadic life, we lived under the shadow of Terrestrial Gods in caves and below big wild

banyan trees at the abode of *Shu-Myoro* and *Myorii-shü*. Later on, when our forefathers started their settled life, Almighty God manifested as household deities, ***Chañtuñ-Byore*** and began residing with us in our dwelling houses to protect and sustain us.

The quantum of love that greater spirits have for us can be felt during our lifespan. We all come out of our homes for our physical requirements, *Ui* encompassing unflinching care for us makes sure that we do not stray into the domain of other spirits and to protect us from physical injuries it resides in our body itself as “***Günü-Pilya***”, the spirit within energizing and vitalizing our body.

DANYI-PÜLO, THE SENTINEL GUARDIANS.



The different genres of **Ui**, manifested from the Greater Spirit **Ui** possess both benevolent and malevolent instincts and characteristics with distinct powers and attributes.

“...*Danyi-Pülo nó Charuñ loma ka hulu pakhu, kanku loma ka sübi bhikhu, Kolyuñ Anü ka nutü nuri, Koló annü ka hatü hanyo, üji kua ka gartü danyi, murta kua ka lütü pülo, üji duiñ ka dupiñ danyi, gambü ta'tü bò, Murta lütü ka lüpiñ pülo, ganda ta'robò, Jampiñ danyi, Karpñ pülo...*”

This verse is an excerpt from the hymns of the Danyi ritual which is a salutation to Danyi-Pülo. It says that amongst the whole genres of **Ui**, Danyi-Pülo is omniscience, omnipotent, omnipresent and embodies benevolence, compassion, nourishing and caring attributes of the Greater Spirit **Ui** and is amongst the top echelon of different genres of **Ui**.

LIFE AND AFTERLIFE

Death in spoken Apatani language is called “***sünüñ***”, which means end of life, but in ethical terms expressed euphemistically as “***Türañ-darnüñ***”, which means transformation. *Miji-Migun* reveals that death is not the end of everything; the eternal creation is continuous

and death is just a part of it. The process of creation in our physical body continues till the soul, a fragment of greater Spirits *Ui* called **Yalo** resides in our body. When the soul leaves the body, the transformation begins with the *Yalo* becoming *Ui* and the physical body transforms and fragments into different elements.

They believe in the existence of two realms where the soul of a person goes after death. One who dies a natural death goes to **Neli**, a realm below where the souls of our forefathers reside. The soul of unnatural deaths goes to **Talü**, another realm above.

“...*Düho bomi düho dümyu, luho bomi luho lumyu du... Bila bomi ala pama, lula bomi agun küma...*”, literally means, wrong doer surely will reap the fruit of his/her action. And one who offers and gives courteously and speaks well is reciprocated in kind. There is no concept of sin as such in the Apatani belief system but as evident from the above sayings Apatanis accept and believe in the commission of good and bad deeds by humans in different degrees and intensities and reap the result of their actions similar to the principle- “*As you sow, so shall you reap*” in this realm itself.



Grave of Apatani Common man

This principle prevails not only in this world (*Neha*) but also in other spiritual realms. Every deed and action committed in a realm is accounted for in that specific realm itself. So, going to a different realm solely depends on the kind of pre-destined death one chooses under the creation by the Goddess *Piniü-Siyö*. Unlike the concept of heaven or hell where one goes to enjoy or suffer as a reward for their acts on earth, these two realms are just a mirror image of our earth.

The kind of life in **Neli** and **Talü** is just a continuation of the same life as one had on the earth (*Neha*). So, one needs to strive for good morals and, an upright and contented life

using discernment power to avoid an immoral life with dissatisfactions, worries and tensions.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

Therefore, Apatanis, believe that everyone must aim at leading a good, moral life on this earth using our discernment power with a discriminatory approach guided by conscience. They strive to live a good and moral life so that they do not have to continue a miserable life again in *Neli* or *Taliü*.

Thus, the motivation to behave ethically does not come from the idea of heaven and hell. It is a collective wisdom earned through experience of discernment approach to life's problems passed on to us by our forefathers in the form of proverbs called *Nitiñ-Hormiñ*. These proverbs are euphemistic, philosophical and idealistic statements of general truth, laced with moral connotations. It is presented in a very concise with a subtle tone and tenor. These sayings and proverbs are ingrained with morality and are the guiding lines which address the conscience and thoughts of the Apatani people leading them to live a responsible, wise and moral life. It is quoted in day-to-day discussions and talks on social, religious, and moral subject matters to guide our actions and behaviours by our elders, Popi-Sarmin.



Apatani Elder women

Apatanis are very close-knit societies having strong community ties. They advocate **Danyi-Shü Lenda** a moral and upright way of living and a kind of '*Communitarian ethics*' which revolves around human welfare as the highest value. And believes in a unique philosophy of '*Sibling Relationship*'. *Miji-Migun says that many animals are descendants of Abo Tani* so, this makes us all siblings. As a result, human beings do not get a superior

position in the world order. On the contrary, they are at par with all other creations in the world with *Charē-Dorē*; an ability of discernment. Therefore, they are not just expected to love and respect the creations around them but have also been entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of them.

ORIGIN OF RITUALS

Apatanis practices two kinds of rituals with two different approaches. One is negotiation with the malevolent spirits by appeasements and offerings called **Chichiñ/Gyunyañ**. Another is propitiation and prayers along with offerings called **Tügo** to both benevolent and malevolent Deities.

There is a long story of Abotani's struggle for survival narrated in the "Tani Büdi" chapter of *Miji-Miguñ*. It says that Uis; the Spirits were the firstborn and more populace. Lone human, Abotani was born later so he had to live with them. Initially, they lived together like siblings yet, while struggling for survival they had to compete. Tani was in an advantageous position with a third eye at the back of his head and powerful spikes on his hands and legs gifted by **Hassañ Buluñ Mikhü**, his brother-in-law. Their competition for survival grew fiercer day by day and many benevolent spirits became malevolent after losing their competition with Abotani.

The spirits, Myotü Pilya, Dingyañ, Shü, Tubo and Lyabo which were earlier benevolent turned malevolent after losing the competition for survival with Abotani. So, they hatched a conspiracy and took away his third eye and spikes making Tani weak and vulnerable. Thereafter, frail Tani often strayed into the domain of other spirits and got his soul captured and suffered.

Seeing this, his sister **Dolyañ Chanjañ**, behold to be the first shaman and ritual expert evolved various **gyunyañ** rituals; the rituals of negotiation and appeasement to release the captured soul of Tani from the captor spirit with appropriate hymns and offerings.

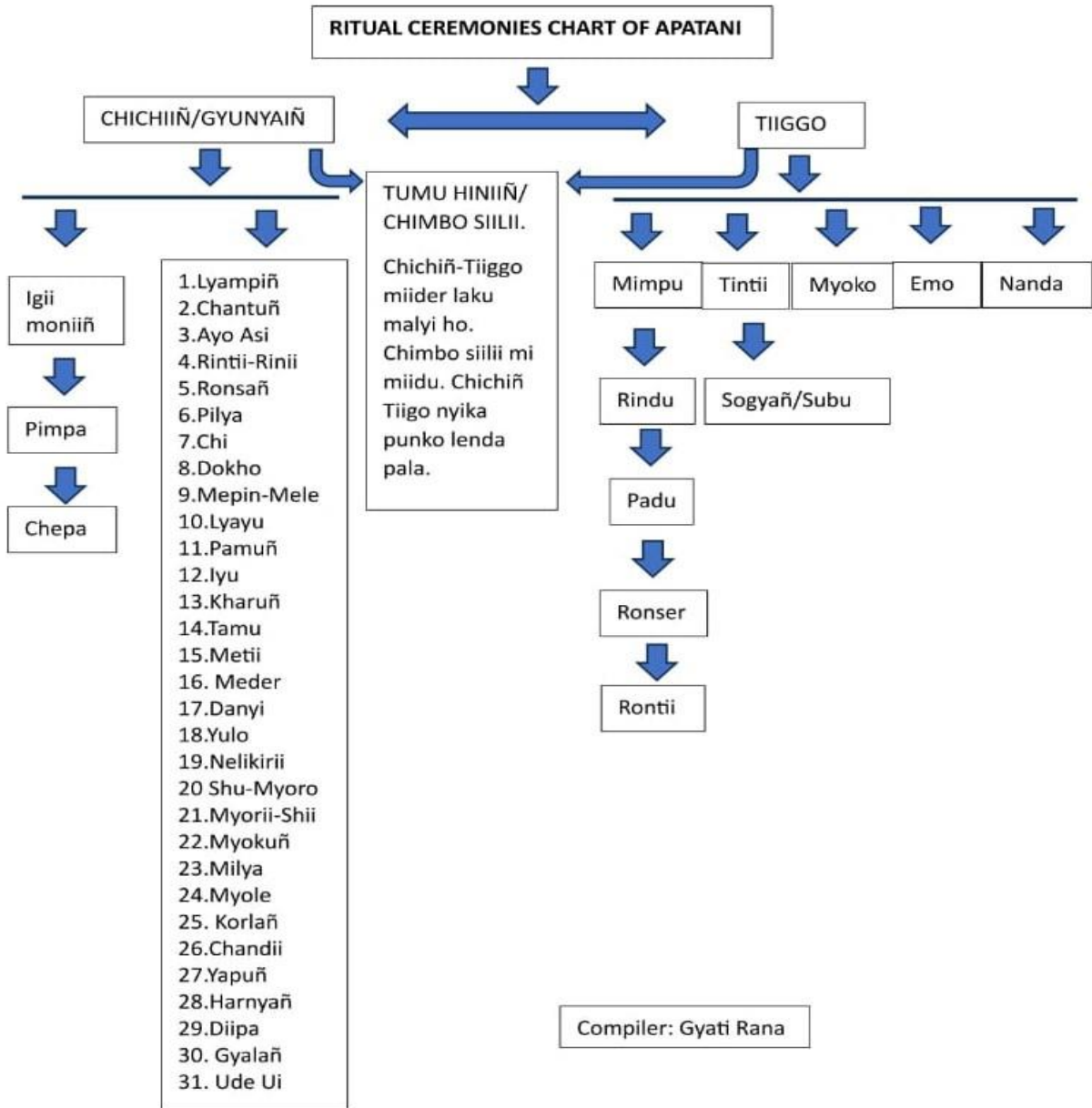
These gyunyañ rituals had certain limitations and could not cure many ailments. So, in the epoch of üpyo, **Ui** manifested itself as **Gyütü-Tatu** with powerful curative energy. The **Tügo Ritual**; the ritual of propitiations and prayers to **Gytü Tatu** as **Gyütü Gyaro/Ui** was started by adding in offerings like ginger, rice powder and salt along with the other offerings offered in the Gyunyañ ritual. It cured them of those critical ailments that were otherwise incurable by Chichiñ/Gyunyañ rites.



Nyibu performing Chichiñ Ritual.



Fully attired Apatani Nyibu performing Tügo Ceremony.



Shamans of Apatni: Ui Innü and Nyibu:

The Shamans of Apatani can be put under two categories, Ui Innü and Nyibu.

- 1) **Ui innü**: They are usually female; they go into a trance when the spirits of benevolent deities or the soul of an earlier dead family member enter into her body. The occupying spirits use her body to heal the people by chanting hymns and blowing water or rice beer upon the ailing person. In some cases, the spirit pursues the captor's spirits to release the soul of the ailing person or suggest performing the necessary rituals to get relief from the ailments. Unlike Nyibu they do not perform rituals.

Everybody cannot become Ui Innü, they are chosen by the spirits themselves to come into their body. However, one has to make herself worthy to be chosen by the benevolent spirit by living an upright and moral life involving deep spiritualism. And the spirit of the members of the family who die immaturely enters the body of a relative sister when her soul is low. It is a painful experience for her.

- 2) **Nyibus** of Apatani are ritual specialists. They act as a mediator between the humans and spirits by exercising and controlling over spirits through various rituals, hymns, chanting derived from Miji-Miguñ. Unlike **Ui Innü** they do not go into trance.

The verse of "Charun Hulu" tells us how this mystic knowledge was transmitted to human faculties; who are the first recipients.

*"... Hulu Charuñ ka, tapyu Charun ka Charuñ hulu paniñ hü. Aguñ büjer jarma pa, Lacho büjer jarma pa, Lücho büjer jarma pa, Cha (Küdi) büjer jarko la, **Kolo Charañ Chañkha Charuñ** mi hulu palü Lyayu palü. Kolo Charuñ ka hulu panü, Aguñ büjer jarko la, Lacho büjer jarko la, Lücho büjer jarko la, Hulu paniñ hü Ato Charuñ mi. **Ato Charuñ** ka hulu paniñ hü, Ato Dotu mi, Achi Penji mi, Jirü Berü mi Tabyu Pechi mi, Abotani mi, Ato Neha mi..."*

Initially, the Miji-Miguñ was in the form of mere feelings in the heart of Charun, the God of knowledge. He transcended many epochs of creation by manifesting as **Aha Charuñ** and **Kolo Charuñ** etc. In the age of Kolo, when he manifested as **Kolo Charun**, he transformed it into signs and speeches. Later, when he manifested as **Aato-Charuñ**, he taught this orally to **Tabyü, Pechi, Jirü-Berü; Ato-Dotu, Achi-Penji, Abotani** and **Ato Neha**. These are the galaxy of wise humans behold as the first batch of **Nyibu**.

It is evident from the above that the core of the Apatani belief system lies in the concept of the Greater Spirit **Ui**, akin to the *Ish* of Upanishads and *El/Al* of the Hebrew Old

Testament. And that the religious concept they follow is innately monotheist though in its approach, perception and practice is polytheist.

This paper is just a glimpse of the intricate tapestry of Apatani shamanism, shedding light on its complex interplay with their religious worldview. Examining their spiritual beliefs, rituals, and ethical foundations, will provide a deeper understanding of their worldview and the profound synergy between the Apatani people and their surrounding environment.

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- 1) **Gyuchi Ayu/Miji Abañ** by Shri Gyati Tajo, Sri Gyati Taming,
- 2) **Tani Büdi**, Sri Hage Halyang,
- 3) **Tani Sabrē** by Gyati Tajo
- 4) **Charuñ Hulu**, By Gyati Tajo,

Recorded through a voice recorder and transcribed by Gyati Rana, however, the translation and some deductions are the Author's.

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Sri Gyati Rana Author is an ardent cultural activist, deeply involved in the preservation, promotion and protection of Indigenous Apatani Culture and Faith for the last two decades. Besides writing books, he is also very active in his cultural activism through social media. He has a Facebook and an Instagram account in the name of Rana Gyati. He is also active in his YouTube channel named "Rana Gyati Apatani Cultural Activism". He has presented many articles and papers on Indigenous Apatani culture and faith at the national and international levels.

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