

Murung as a Ritual of Healing: Understanding the Rituals of the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Rituals are symbolic in nature and it is related to tradition, supernatural spirits, belief systems, life cycle ceremonies, festivals, narratives, agriculture and healing. Many healing practices are performed in the form of ritual celebrations among the traditional societies and the shaman plays a significant role in it. He acts as a ritual master, diagnoser, councilor and healer. Murung is one of the major ritual celebrations among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the primary function of this ritual celebration is to appease the supernatural spirits in order to get good health, wealth and prosperity. This paper documents the various components of Murung ritual celebration and tries to understand how it serves as a medium of healing, brings social status to the performer and it's inter relation with other narratives and rituals.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional knowledge of health care and healing practices is remarkable in India. It is vernacular and culture specific. In traditional societies, health and healing is mostly related with supernatural spirits, belief systems, food, rituals, customs and practices etc. The knowledge of illness, diagnosis and treatment are preserved in the form of traditional lores, rituals and practices in every society which determines the health culture of the society. The World Health Organization (2010) define traditional medicine as the “sum total of the knowledge, skill, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the

prevention , diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness”.

As stated by Murdock (1980), there are natural and supernatural causes of illness. Natural causation refers to any theory, scientific or popular, which accounts for the impairment of health as a physiological consequence of some experience of the victims in a manner that would appear reasonable to modern science. The supernatural causation deals with mystical situations and the reasons for illness are related to supernatural spirits, sorcery, exorcism, witchcraft etc. Further, Michael Winkleman (2009) stated that the concept of culture is fundamental to understanding health and medicine because personal health behaviour and professional practices of medicine are deeply influenced by culture. Culture involves the learned patterns of shared group behaviour which includes health behaviours, particularly intergroup differences in health behaviour and beliefs. Culture is a principal determinant of health conditions, particularly in exposing to or protecting us from diseases through structuring our interactions with the physical and social environments.

Many healing practices are performed in the form of ritual celebrations among traditional societies. Ritual celebrations in the form of festivals play a vital role in the socio cultural life of indigenous communities, particularly among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. These celebrations are special moments and directly associated with supernatural spirits, rituals, healing, beliefs, social status, offerings, sacrifices, vows, performances, feasts and community participation. They also serve as a medium of constructing social identity, sharing of collective oral history and common ancestry, and promotion of the feeling of oneness among members of the tribe. With this brief background, this paper attempts to study the socio-cultural significance of Murung – a ritual celebration of the Apatani tribe domiciled in Ziro valley of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The primary data for this paper were collected through extensive fieldwork in Reru village in Ziro valley during the natural context of the Murung celebration during the month of January, 2014.



Fig.1,2 &3: The Apatanis

Apatani is one of the indigenous tribal communities domiciled in Ziro valley in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh at an altitude of 5,754 feet and surrounded by hill ranges in all directions. They are settled in seven different villages namely Hong, Hija, Dutta, Mudang Tage, Hari, Bulla and Bamin-Michi. The total population of the Apatani is 42,352 as per 2011 census record. Apatani tribe is popularly known for their indigenous knowledge system of paddy cum fish cultivation. A traditional belief among Apatanis tells that their ancestors came from a country to the North or north east situated near two rivers known as Supupad-Pudpumi (Furer-Haimendorf, 1962). However, the Apatanis or anyone else is likely to identify this legendary country of origin. All Apatanis agree that at one stage in their migration they crossed the Subansiri River from north to south and reached to the present

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place. Apatanis regard Tibet as their place of origin (Blackburn, 2008). The oral history of Apatanis reflects that their ancestors assimilated Tibetan culture by wearing local necklaces – an important source of wealth and a marker of identity. The origin of many objects acquired by indirect trade is often imbued with prestige. The Tibetan beads, swords, metal bells and plates obtained by Apatanis were not locally; these were Tibetan in origin.

The religion of Apatani is animistic and they perform various rituals to heal and protect themselves from the evil spirits and diseases. Every year, they celebrate three major festivals namely Murung, Myoko and Dree. Among these, Murung and Myoko are more religion-based, Murung celebration is initiated by individuals for various reasons and participated by the whole community and Myoko is performed by a cluster of village(s), while Dree is an agricultural festival.

MURUNG AS A RITUAL CELEBRATION

Murung, celebrated in the month of January, is the greatest rite performed by an individual and it is expected that every Apatani man should perform Murung at least once in his life time. There are two types of Murung i.e. Rontii and Ronser. This classification is primarily based on the size of the celebration. Ronser is smaller in scale and an individual can perform this ritual with a sacrifice of one cow or mithun (*Bos frontalis*) and therefore the expenditure is comparatively less. Rontii is larger in scale and involves huge expenditure; it involves sacrifice of several mithuns, cows and pigs.

Murung is a month long celebration and the pre-preparations like collection of firewood, bamboo and cane for basket making and ritual altars, pounding of rice, preparation of *tasser* (ropes to tie mithuns) and rice beer begin at least a month prior to the core rituals performed during the last seven days. Celebration of Murung involves the whole Apatani community and it requires much manpower to execute. The division of work and labour is well managed among them, and all components of the Murung celebration are worked out well before it is performed.

There are various rituals comprising of the Murung celebration. Some of them are discussed below.

Reading Omens



Fig.4: Omen reading by the Shamans

The main reason for celebrating Murung is to appease supernatural spirits in order to get good health, wealth and prosperity. It is strongly believed that chronic diseases will be healed if Murung is performed. Certain occurrences, such as sudden sprout of mushrooms all around the house, are considered inauspicious and a bad sign. When a family member suffers from chronic illness or has inauspicious signs crop up, one decides to consult the *nyibu* (shaman) and seek remedies. *Nyibu* is considered the most knowledgeable person in the society and respected by all the community members. He is invited to the house and offered rice beer and a meal of cooked rice and meat, along with other elders. Thereafter, the shaman chants and reads omen with the help of chicken liver and / or eggs. This is known as *Murung Pahiin konii*. It is believed that after due consultation with the supernatural spirits, the shaman suggests the type of Murung to be performed. Generally those who are wealthy perform Rontii, and those who are not able to afford the expenditure perform Ronser. Usually, omen reading is performed in the month of November.

Collection of Firewood



Fig.5: Storage of Firewood

Since Murung is celebrated as a month-long event during extreme winter season, huge quantity of firewood is required to fulfill various needs. Therefore the host family collects firewood at least a month prior; this collection of firewood is locally known as *Yasang Panii*. Generally it is collected from their own garden or from the community jungle. Traditionally, pine wood is preferred, but in cases of unavailability, wood from other trees are also collected. As a custom, at least one pine tree is felled from the host's garden; this event is called *Piichii Nanii*. The Apatani people believe that the spirit called Puno-Sirro Uyi is associated with bamboo groves, forests, trees, leaves, cane, ferns and other plants. Therefore, before any tree is felled, they seek permission from this spirit; they seek forgiveness, and inform that the tree is needed to various deities, and not for any personal reasons. Men belonging to the family and / or clan go together for firewood collection. Apart from firewood, they also collect cane and wild leaves. After completion of the task, the men drink rice beer and partake a cooked meal before departing to their respective houses.

Construction of Ritual Altar

The altar known as *subu siikha* plays a significant role in Murung. The shaman selects an appropriate place outside the host's house to erect the altar and gives all necessary instructions



Fig.6&7: The Ritual Altar

to a group of men for its preparation. The altar is made up of bamboo; bamboo shaves occupy the central portion, while small decorative bamboo ornaments are used to decorate the altar. It usually takes more than a day to construct the altar. At the front (of the altar), thick bamboo pegs are erected to which later mithuns will be tied and sacrificed. All the core rituals like chanting, offerings and sacrificing of mithuns, dogs, eggs, hens etc. are performed by the shaman at this altar. The sacrificed blood is applied on the altar and the sacrificed hens and eggs are hung up on the altar. All these rituals at the altar are conducted by men. Once the event is over, the altar continues to remain till it gets destroyed naturally.

Preparation of Rice Powder

Rice plays an important role in the celebration of Murung. Rice powder (*yatang*) is offered to the mithun (that is to be sacrificed) and then distributed to all clan members. Therefore, a large quantity of rice powder is required to perform these rituals. Few days before the main rituals, the women of the family and clan voluntarily come forward and help in the preparation of rice powder – they pound it in the large wooden mortars and store it in baskets. On the day of the sacrifice, this rice powder is distributed to the clan members.

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Fig.8&9: Pounding of Rice and Storage of Rice Powder

Preparation of *Tajjer*



Fig.10: Preparation of *Tajjer* by the Shaman

A day before the sacrifice of animals, the shaman prepares ginger which is to be offered to the supernatural spirits through the sacrificed mithuns. This preparation is carried out by the shaman and his assistants and it begins late in the evening in the house of the host of Murung. The shaman sits in a corner of the house which is meant for keeping all the sacred objects and performs chanting as he cuts the ginger into small pieces; these are then placed in rows on a

bamboo stick. Each stick contains four pieces of ginger and the number of sticks is equivalent to the number of mithuns to be sacrificed. This preparation is known as *tajjer*. Ginger is considered pure and hence offered to the mithuns in order to purify them.

Chanting of *Subu Hinii*

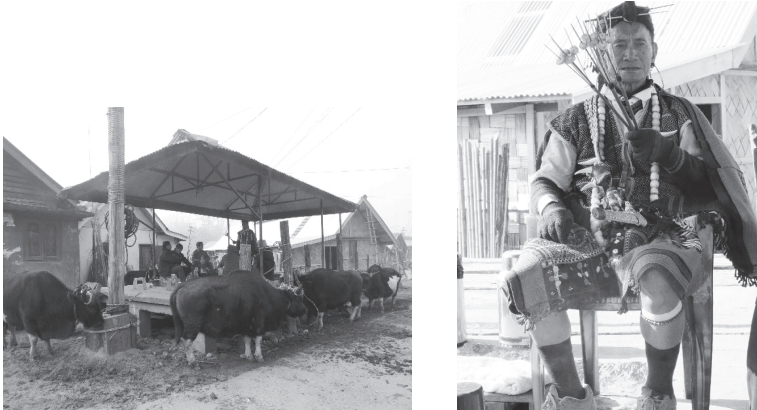


Fig.11&12: Chanting of *Subu Hinii* by the Shaman

Subu Hinii (*subu* = mithun, *hinii* = chanting) is an integral part of the overall ritual. Mithun plays a vital role in the rituals of Murung celebration. The core ritual of Murung is the sacrifice of mithuns to the supernatural spirits. The number of mithuns to be sacrificed depends upon the economic status of the person who hosts the Murung. All the mithuns to be sacrificed are brought to the *lapang* (community platform) and the shaman chants over the mithuns throughout the night; and this chanting is known as *Subu Hinii*. During this chanting the shaman holds the ginger sticks in hand and addresses the mithuns thus: “We are going to sacrifice you to appease the spirits and not for us”. He further directs the animals where they should go after sacrifice. The shaman supposedly possesses the knowledge of which part/organ (of the mithun) is meant for which spirit, and therefore he directs these organs through ritual chanting.

Purification of Mithuns



Fig 13&14: Display of rice powder, Rice beer and purification of Mithuns

As the *Subu Hinii* chanting goes on, the men and women belonging to the host family, dressed in traditional attires, carry rice powder and rice beer in bamboo baskets and assemble near the platform (*lapang*). They smear the mithuns with rice flour mixed with rice beer (*O*). It is believed that the smearing of rice flour over the mithuns will purify the animals before sacrifice.

Distribution of Rice Powder and Rice Beer



Fig.15: Distribution of Rice powder and Rice Beer

After smearing the mithuns (with rice powder and *O*), young men and women belonging to the clan distribute the rice powder and rice beer to all the people residing in the region. Men,

women and children living along the same street all stand outside of their house or in the portico, witness the event and receive rice powder and *O* offered by the Murung performer. Consumption of rice powder and *O* is considered sacred.

Sacrifice of Mithuns



Fig.16: Sacrifice of Mithun

The core ritual of the festival is the sacrifice of mithuns. It takes place in front of the altar made at the back side of the house. Hundreds of men, women and children from the village and neighboring villages assemble in front of the altar to witness the sacrifice of mithuns. These are brought one after another from the *lapang* to the altar and tied at the specific bamboo stick(s) in front of the altar. A man, specifically assigned to sacrifice the mithun, first purifies his axe with rice powder and rice beer, and then cuts exactly at the neck of the mithun at the first sway. After the slaughter, groups of men jump upon the mithun and put *yatang* (rice powder) in the mouth of the mithun in order to prevent the sound of the animal because it is believed as a bad omen if the sacrificed animal makes any kind noise while dying. This ritual is called *Subu Panii*. The sacrificed mithuns are immediately taken away to a nearby place and the meat is systematically cut up into pieces and stored for distribution.

Donation of Rice



Fig.17&18: Women folk carrying rice baskets and donating rice

Donation of rice to the family who performs Murung is an important component of the ritual. This is referred to as *Pukung Ambing*. Women from every household of the entire valley bring rice in a basket and donate to the Murung performer. This event begins early in the morning (of the final day) and continues the whole day. The host family engages a team of young men and women to carefully record the amount of donations. The closest relatives donate rice in a larger basket (*yakhang*), those who are further off in relation donate rice in a mid-size basket (*paroeg*), and those who are furthest donate rice in a small basket (*poyeg*). Sometimes, money is also offered in lieu of rice. In return, the host family offers a piece of dried meat in the basket along with *tapyo* (traditional black salt) and serves them good food and drink on that day. The donated rice is stored in the granary of the host family.

Ceremonial Dance

After sacrificing the animals, men and women from the host's clan form different groups and visit the house of the host and perform a ceremonial dance called *Hirii khannii*. This dance is performed in order to praise and bless the family. During this dance, they sing a song which generally praises the Murung performer. The host family members also join the dance and they perform music by beating the *talo* (Tibetan brass plate). For all the dancers, the host serves



Fig.19: The Host of the Murung performs Music

rice, meat and rice beer. Several groups visit the house and perform dance and it continues the whole night.

Distribution of Meat



Fig.20: A Basket of Meat kept ready for Distribution

Distribution of the sacrificed meat is an important act of the Murung celebration and it is a custom that the meat should be given to each and every Apatani household in the valley. The ceremony of meat distribution is called *Dulu*. The meat of the sacrificed mithuns and cows are cut into small pieces, counted and kept in baskets for distribution to all Apatani households in the valley. The distribution begins early in the morning and completes by evening. A team

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of men are engaged to do this distribution and in return they get some portion of meat. The head of the sacrificed mithun is very significant. The biggest head of the mithun is given to piinya who is the closest friend of the Murung performer from any of the Apatani clans. All the remaining heads is given to the eldest clan members and later they return the horns to the Murung performer.

Ceremonial Procession



Fig.21: The Ceremonial Procession

Penii refers to a long ceremonial procession performed by the clan of the Murung performer. Men, women and children belonging to the particular clan arrive at the host's house early in the morning (of the final day of Murung) for procession. All of them wear the traditional attires and ornaments and the men carry traditional sword with them. The elderly men and the shaman lead the procession and the procession goes in a systematic way. It starts from the host's house and goes to all the villages in the valley and returns to the house in the evening. During the procession, they enter other villages, and people from those villages welcome them and offer different kinds of refreshment, rice beer etc. In some villages they sacrifice mithun and host them with a grand feast, depending on the relationship or friendship between the host and others.

Offerings to the Paddy Field and Forest

After all the core rituals are done, the Murung performer and his wife goes to the paddy field in the early morning and offer a special food called *kaji* to the supernatural spirits for good crops in subsequent harvests. Similarly, food and meat are also offered to the spirits meant for forest. It is also believed that during the entire Murung celebrations, the members of the family should not eat anything other than rice, meat and wine. After the festival, fish is caught from the river, boiled in an earthen pot, and consumed by all the family members who performed Murung. It signifies the end of the celebration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Murung is celebrated both as a preventive and diagnostic ritual – preventive, so that once the spirits are appeased, the ritual performer and his family, including his wide kin network, will be free from all ailments for years to come. On the other hand, it is also diagnostic in nature since the *nyibu* (shaman) advices for the celebration of Murung when there are chronic diseases in the family.

Apatanis believe that certain illnesses like barrenness/infertility, mental disorders, chronic fever, stomach aches and other chronic problems in the family are all associated with evil eyes and supernatural spirits. They believe that the diseases are caused by angry malevolent spirits and therefore, whenever someone in the family falls ill or is facing chronic problems, they consult the *nyibu* and ask for remedies. It is to be noted that the shamans are culture-specific and he is considered as master of all supernatural spirits who knows the remedies of all illnesses. Accordingly, the *nyibu* reads omens through various means and suggests performing certain rituals, including Murung.

The primary function of the ritual of animal sacrifice and offering of blood during the Murung celebration is to appease the malevolent supernatural spirits in order to get good health and prosperity. The different organs of the sacrificed animals are symbolically sent to the different supernatural spirits through the medium of chanting by the *nyibu*. It is believed

that by offering blood and meat, the malevolent spirits will become benevolent, heal and protect the community. It is also believed that the consumption of the sacrificed meat, rice powder and rice beer by the community members will bring them good health and prosperity and therefore, the sacrificed meat are distributed to all Apatani households in the region. These practices reflect the perception of health and healing of the Apatanis and how rituals are symbolically performed for the well-being of the community.

The animal mithun and altars made of bamboo plays a significant role in the Murung celebrations. All the core rituals are centered on the sacrifice of mithuns in front of the sacred bamboo altar – these two components of the ritual are great value in their worldview. According to local lore it is that after the creation of humanity the Apatani population was not as large as it is today. The sons of Doni and Libo, Mipu and Hape, were important personalities at that time. Once Mipu fell seriously ill and everybody was nervous not knowing what was to be done to cure him. The *nyibu* read the omens and states that he was suffering from the displeasure of bad spirits and he would not be cured till the worship of *uyi* (spirit) was done. He suggested that *uyi* should be worshipped in the month of *murung pulo* (The month of January is termed as *murung pulo*, Murung refers the festival and *pulo* refers month) items required would be - long wide leaves of the tree named *riiji*, the tree named *tali piissa* (pine) and the plants *tajjer* and *taki*, which were to be collected from the jungle and long ropes made to tie up the mithun. To please Donyi (the sun god), the *nyibu* then directed the people to bring branches of the *kra* tree to make the *siikha* (altar) and bamboos from which to shave tassels for decoration.

The importance of mithun is reiterated in many of their folklores; however, the origin myth bears importance in understanding its value. The following lore is adapted from Elwin (1970:144). It is said that there once was a *uyi* (spirit) in human form. Just as a man would do, he cleared the forest, burnt the wood to ashes and prepared a field. The day after he had finished, he noticed that a fine creeper had sprung up and was astonished at its growth in one night. He then built a little fence and put two poles to support it, but it was soon much taller than the poles. One day a butterfly settled on it and after a few minutes flew away. Soon

there was a flower and then a single fruit. The fruit grew and grew and one day the *uyi* heard a strange noise coming from inside it. He picked it and broke it in half and a large worm, without face or legs or tail, came out. The *uyi* decided to make something of it. He gave it four bits of wood as legs and used another bit as a head. He put leaves for the eyes and ears and bamboo shoots as horns. For a tail he gave it the soft inside of a plantain, for teeth bits of the plantain flower, for entrails a creeper, for hair the skin of a hairy caterpillar. When he had finished, it was a mithun, the father of all mithuns.

These narratives are expressed, not only in symbolic words, but also enacted in symbolic acts like rituals and rites amongst them. Myths are tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters (Bascom, 1965). Myths are narrated and seen enacted in rituals (Van der Leeuw, 1938). Myths often justify rituals, while rituals transmit the myth and provide a way of taking part in it. Generally myths belong to a particular socio-cultural-geographical boundary and the interaction between myth and ritual is complex and diverse, and cannot be reduced to any simple universal pattern except by a selective use of evidence. In some



Fig.22&23: The Funeral Altars

cases myth influences ritual, in other cases ritual influences myth, in still others they develop together or separately (Kluckhohn, 1942). However, myth and ritual are intimately associated, not because either is derived from the other, but because both are based on particular beliefs about the cosmic order (De Waal Malefijt, 1968). Thus, it is clear that the origin narratives of mithun and bamboo are considered sacred by the Apatanis and it justifies the rituals performed in the celebration.

For them, celebration of Murung is an important social identity for the clan and personal identity for the person who celebrates Murung. The person who celebrates Murung at least once in his life time get more social status than others and if a person celebrates more than one Murung in his life, he achieves higher status in the society. This achieved social status is reflected not only in life, but even in death. The burial ground is known as *bukhiin* and whenever a person dies, it is a traditional custom to erect bamboo altars. The higher social status achieved by the person who performed Murung in his life time will be symbolically reflected in the funeral altar. There are three kinds of funeral altars – *dui soja*, *rinyi gyadu* and *yallo soja*. *Dui soja* is conical in shape and erected where common men lay buried. The height of the altar signifies the age of the deceased person. People erect taller funeral altars when a person of fifty years or more dies; and a shorter altar for those below fifty years. Generally they make three horizontal platforms in the bamboo altars for all deceased; however, if the deceased performed Murung in his life time they erect more horizontal platforms depending upon how many Murung he had celebrated in his life time. *Rinyi gyadu* altar is slanting in shape and it is specifically meant for shamans. *Yallo soja* is made only when a rich and prominent person dies and who achieved the highest social status which is locally known as *ekhang* in his life time. There are four number of horizontal platforms in this altar and has certain symbolic significance. The first platform is for *sango*, the second one for *haago*, the third for *miji*, and fourth one for *migung*. *Sango* and *haago* signifies the person's status in the society, his social role in the clan/village, his wisdom, leadership quality and other such attributes. If a person celebrated Murung several times in his life time also gets this status. On the other hand, *miji*

signifies his traditional knowledge about the origin, history and traditional practices, while *migung* signifies his knowledge of divinity, the deities, spirits and other religious wisdom.

Thus, Murung, one of the biggest rituals performed by the Apatanis, is meant for healing and prosperity not only for the family of the performer but also for the whole community. Just as its performance will bring good health, wealth and status to the ritual performer, but this benevolence of the spirits will overflow to all his kith and kin from the village and beyond. Therefore, in its celebration we see not only social exchange (gifting of rice and sacrifice of animals), but also group solidarity and community participation. The status once achieved through its performance, remains with the ritual performer throughout his life and continues in death too.

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