

**INTERIM REPORT**

**Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) Associated with Murung and Dree  
Festivals of the Apatani Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh**

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## Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by more than twenty five tribal communities, and thus presents an interesting cultural mosaic. Though there is a blending of cultures, yet the tribal communities have preserved their distinct knowledge systems, oral and performing traditions, language, customs and practices, fairs and festivals, arts and crafts etc. This rich cultural heritage has always drawn scholars from various parts of the world to Arunachal. But still many aspects of such intangible cultural heritage remain undocumented and researched scientifically.



The Apatanis are one of the major indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh domiciled in Ziro Valley. The Apatani tribe belongs to the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and they worship *Donyi-Polo* - the Sun and Moon. They are traditionally engaged in wet land paddy cultivation and are popularly known for their integrated paddy-cum-fish cultivation whereas the other tribes practice shifting cultivation. A number of rituals, performances, narratives, festivals, customs, practices and beliefs are associated with paddy agriculture among Apatanis. Murung, Dree and Myoko are some of the major traditional festivals/rituals of the Apatani. Murung is celebrated every year in the month of January; The Myoko festival is celebrated each year in the month of March; Dree festival is celebrated in the month of July of every year. The significance of these festivals are

mainly to ensure better cultivation, protection of the grains from hailstone, storms, insects and wild animals and well being of villagers and their livestock.

Ritual performances in the form of festivals are seen all over the world. Most societies periodically set aside portions of time for traditional celebrations. These celebrations are moments of special significance for the group or community. These recurring moments of special significance, with the celebrations that fill them, are what constitute festivals, and ritual performances. However festivals cannot be defined as a particular kind of behaviour, rather it is a set of traditional behaviours, and it is often the context for other genres of folklore. The Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) associated with festivals encompasses myths, narratives, gods and goddess, rituals, beliefs, customs, practices, fairs, festivals, dance, music, crafts, textiles/dress, architectural designs etc. These TCEs are inherited from the predecessors and passed on to the successors, and transmitted orally or by aurally. This valuable intangible cultural heritage are collectively created and preserved by community, given an identity, forms the sense of belongingness to a community, a tradition or a way of life and considered important to preserve for posterity. These traditional cultural expressions are disappearing or changing at an alarming rate due to factors such as religious conversion, modern education, migration, market forces, globalization etc. Thus it becomes necessary that such cultural expressions are to be properly documented and studied before it changed. This project intends to document the Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) with Murung, Myoko and Dree festivals of the Apatanis.

## **Objectives**

1. To document the Traditional Cultural Expressions i.e. rituals, performances, narratives, customs, beliefs, practices, gods and goddess, dress and ornaments associated with festivals.
2. To understand the changes occurring in the traditional cultural expressions during the modern socio-cultural context.

## **Methodology**

This research is multidisciplinary in nature and is being carried out through extensive field research among the Apatani tribe domiciled in Ziro valley of Arunachal Pradesh. The first hand empirical data are collected through extensive fieldwork by following the triangulation research methodology i.e. interview, observation and audio-visual documentation. Secondary sources are also consulted to enrich the research.

## **EXCERPTS OF THE DOCUMENTATION CARRIED OUT DURING THE FIRST PHASE OF FIELDWORK**

### ***MURUNG FESTIVAL***

Murung is one of the important traditional festivals of Apatani which is celebrated in the month of January. In fact, Murung is the greatest rite performed by an individual and it is believed that at least every Apatani should perform Murung once in the life time. The celebration of Murung consists of supernatural spirits, rituals, performances, clan, vows, offerings, sacrifice, community participation etc.

There are two types of Murung, i.e., Rontil and Ronser. This classification is based on the size of the celebration. Ronser is small in nature and an individual can perform this rite with one cow or one mithun and therefore the expenditure is very less. But Rontil is big in size and involves huge expenditure. Generally it involves several mithuns, cows, and pigs. However the selection of the rite to be performed is decided by Nybu - the traditional shaman. The shaman, after incantation over a chicken, the chicken liver is carefully taken out and read in order to know the wish of the spirits. Accordingly he suggests to the person which kind of Murung is to be celebrated.



The main reason for celebrating Murung is to appease the supernatural spirits in order to get good health and wealth. It is believed that chronic deceases will be healed if Murung is performed by the person. Rich people celebrate Murung to show their wealth and the number of mithuns sacrificed during Murung reflects the wealth of the person. Some times when a person faces problems like financial crunch, health issues, barrenness or some bad signs like growth of mushroom inside the house, he consults the shaman and asks for remedy, and accordingly Murung will be celebrated by him in order to get rid of the problems.

Murung is a month long celebration and the preparations like collection of firewood, bamboo and cane for basket making and ritual altars, pounding of rice, preparation of *tasser* – the ropes to tie the mithuns, begins at least a month and the core rituals are performed during the last seven days.

The following are some of the important rituals of the festival:

### *Construction of Subu Siikha (Ritual altar)*



Ritual altar plays a significant role in Murung festivals. On the back side of the house, the shaman selects an appropriate place to erect the altar and gives all the necessary instructions for the preparation of the altar. A group of men folk are engaged in the preparation of the altar. Bamboo takes a prominent place in the altars. Bamboo shaves occupy the central portion of the altar and small decorative bamboo baskets are used to decorate the altar. It takes more than a day to prepare the altar. All the core rituals are performed at this altar.



### *Pounding of rice*

Rice plays an important role in the celebration of Murung. The women folk pound huge quantity of rice and store it in baskets which are to be distributed to the village people on the day of sacrifice.



### *Taje*

A day before sacrificing the animals, the shaman prepares *taje* i.e., preparation of ginger to be offered to the super natural spirits through mithuns.



Ginger is cut into small pieces and stuck into thin bamboo sticks and the number of sticks is equivalent to the number of mithuns to be sacrificed. This preparation is known as *taje*. Ginger is considered pure, hence offered to the spirits.

### *Subu Hinii*

During this ritual all the mithuns which are to be sacrificed are brought to the *lapang* - the community platform and the shaman chants throughout the night over the animals. This chanting is known as *Subu Hinni* and during this chantings the shaman says that “We are going to sacrifice you for the gods and goddesses, and not for us” and also he directs the animals where it should go after it is sacrificed.



### *Purification of Mithuns*





After chanting, the family members with their traditional dress carry rice powder and rice beer and assemble near the platform and smear the mithuns with rice flour mixing with local rice beer which is called *Oh*. 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*



After smearing the mithuns with rice powder and *Oh*, women belonging to that family distribute the rice powder and rice beer to all the people in that region and it is considered sacred.

### *Blood Sacrifice*



The core ritual of the festival is the sacrifice of mithuns. It takes place in front of the altars and a number of hens, pigs, eggs and dogs are also sacrificed by the priest together with chanting. The sacrificed blood is applied on the altar and the sacrificed hen and eggs are placed on the altar. All the rituals related to the altar are done by the men folk and the altar will remain there till it gets destroyed naturally.

### *Donation of Rice*



Donation of rice to the family who performs Murung is an important component of the festival. Women folk from all the Apatani villages carry rice in a basket and reach the house early in the morning and donate the rice. The host family serves them good feast on that day and the amount of donations are carefully recorded. The closest relatives donate more rice in the biggest baskets which are known as *yakhang* and *paroeg* is the mid-size basket in which rice is given by relatives who count themselves close to the family; and *poyeg* is the smallest basket in which rice is given by people who are the farthest relatives. Money is also given in lieu of rice by some.

### *Hirii -Ceremonial dance*

After sacrificing the animals, men and women from the clan forms different groups and visit the house that is performing Murung and perform a ceremonial dance which is

called Hirii. This dance is performed in order to bless the family. The host family members also join together and they perform *talo* – the Tibetan Brass plate. For all the visitors, the host serve them rice, meat and rice beer.

### *Distribution of Meat*



The meat of the sacrificed mithuns and cows are distributed to all the Apatani households in the valley. Meat is kept in the baskets and distributed. A team of persons are engaged to do this job and in return they will get some portions of meat.

### *Penii*

*Penii* is a long ceremonial procession performed by the clan who perform the Murung festival. It starts from the house of the Murung giver and goes to all the villages in the valley and returns to the house in the evening. During the procession the village people offer them different kinds of refreshment, rice beer etc.





### *Offerings to the paddy field and forest*

After all the core rituals, the husband and the wife goes to the paddy field in the early morning and offers a special food which is called *kaji* to the god of agricultural in order to yield good crops. Similarly, food and meat are offered to the forest gods and goddesses.

During Murung, the members of the family should observe certain restrictions. They should not eat anything other than rice, meat and wine. After the festival, they caught fishes from the river and boiled in an earthen pot and eaten by all the family members who perform Murung. It signifies the end of the fasting.

### **Other Festivals**

The documentation of Myoko festival has been carried out in the month of March and transcription of data is underway. The documentation of Dree festival will be carried out during July 2016. All the collected data will be transcribed and translated and necessary captions will be prepared for all the photo documents. A detailed illustrative monograph will be submitted at the end of the project along with some video clips.