

Myoko Festival Among the Apatanis: Oral Tradition, Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Continuity

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Abstract—The Myoko festival is one of the most significant traditional festivals celebrated by the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Observed annually from March to April, the festival embodies the rich cultural heritage, oral traditions, indigenous belief systems, and social values of the Apatani community. The present study explores the origin myths, ritual practices, oral narratives, and cultural significance associated with the Myoko festival. The study further examines the role of the festival in preserving indigenous knowledge and ensuring cultural continuity among the Apatanis. The paper is qualitative and descriptive in nature and is based on oral narratives, interaction with community elders, and secondary sources related to Apatani culture and traditions. The findings reveal that the festival is deeply rooted in the oral traditions of the Apatanis, particularly the narratives associated with Abotani, Kiiri-Kilo, and the coexistence of humans and spirits. Various rituals, ceremonial practices, sacrifices, and collective participation associated with the festival function as important mediums for the transmission of traditional knowledge, social values, and cultural identity from one generation to another. The study highlights that the Myoko festival serves not only as a religious and cultural institution but also as an important medium for strengthening social cohesion, preserving indigenous heritage, and sustaining the collective identity of the Apatani community. Despite the growing influence of modernization and socio-cultural transformation, the festival continues to play a vital role in maintaining the cultural continuity of the Apatanis. The paper emphasizes the need for proper documentation and preservation of such indigenous cultural traditions for future generations.

Index Terms—Apatani Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, Cultural Continuity, Indigenous Knowledge, Myoko Festival, Oral Tradition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous festivals occupy an important place in tribal societies as they reflect the cultural identity, belief systems, ecological knowledge, and collective memory of indigenous communities. Such festivals are not merely an occasion of celebrations, but also deeply connected with agriculture, seasonal cycles, ancestral worship, nature, and social relationships, which is passed through one generation to another. (Sarma, 2012; Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013).

And these traditions are passed down through the tribal oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems, which form the foundation of cultural continuity within indigenous societies. Oral narratives, myths, folklore, ritual chants, songs, proverbs, and ceremonial practices can be categorised as the mediums for preserving historical consciousness, ecological understanding, ethical values, and social organization among tribal communities. Indigenous knowledge is generally transmitted through informal modes of learning such as storytelling, observation, participation in rituals, and interaction with elders and community members. Such systems of knowledge can encompass in many fields, like - traditional medicine, agricultural practices, environmental conservation, food systems, craftsmanship, and spiritual beliefs developed through centuries of interaction with nature (Bhuyan, 2015; Rajendra, 2024; Rani, 2025).

As mentioned earlier, festivals can be one of the informal educational institutions where younger generations learn traditional values, ritual procedures, indigenous beliefs, ecological ethics, and social responsibilities through active participation and observation. They can participate and observe all these ritual practices, dances, songs, feasting, sacrifices, and ceremonial gatherings, which will help them to

understand and preserve the local traditions and it will improve the cultural memory within the community. (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013; John et al., 2022).

Like any other tribal communities, the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh also represents one of the most culturally rich indigenous communities of North-East India. They are primarily inhabited at Ziro Valley of Lower Subansiri district, and they are mostly known for their advanced wet-rice cultivation system, sustainable ecological practices, rich oral traditions, and strong cultural identity. The community follows the indigenous Donyi-Polo belief system and maintains a close relationship with nature through traditional agricultural practices, forest conservation, ritual systems, and community-based social organization. Their cultural life is deeply reflected in festivals, myths, ritual chants, oral narratives, traditional attire, food systems, and indigenous medicinal practices (Kacha, 2018; Kala, 2005).

So, among the various traditional festivals of the Apatani tribe, the Myoko festival holds a central place in preserving oral tradition, ritual knowledge, social harmony, and cultural continuity. Celebrated annually from March to April among different villages of the Ziro Valley, Myoko symbolizes friendship, prosperity, fertility, protection, and collective well-being of the netizens. The festival is deeply associated with mythological narratives concerning Abotani (believed to be the first human) and Kiiri-Kilo (Spirits) and includes elaborate rituals, sacrifices, ceremonial chants, community feasting, and collective participation.

However, it is important to note that every clan and village has a few traditional practices specific to that clan or village. Therefore, this paper primarily focuses on the ritual ceremonies, and sacrificial rites that are common or general across the various clans and villages of the Apatani community in connection with the celebration of the Myoko festival.

1.1 Rationale of the study

Most of the tribal festivals are linked with the agriculture and cultivation, however, the Myoko festival occupies a unique and significant place in the socio-cultural life of the Apatanis as it symbolizes friendship, prosperity, ritual protection, and collective identity within the community.

There are several studies conducted on the tribal festivals, indigenous knowledge systems, oral

traditions, and Apatani cultural practices (Sarma, 2012; Kacha, 2018; Dutta et al., 2017; Rajendra, 2024). Similarly, studies by Kumar (2024), Kumar and Baudh (2021), and John et al. (2022) highlighted the role of tribal festivals in preserving social cohesion, customary practices, and cultural continuity among indigenous societies. Despite the socio-cultural importance of Myoko festival, very limited studies are conducted which can truly justify its significance and relevance even in this changing world.

In the context of modernization, globalization, religious transformation, and changing lifestyles, many indigenous oral traditions and ritual practices are slowly and gradually becoming vulnerable to cultural erosion. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore the Myoko festival as an important repository of oral tradition, indigenous knowledge, and cultural continuity among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The study also attempts to contribute towards the documentation and preservation of indigenous cultural heritage for future generations.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To explore the origin and oral traditions associated with the Myoko festival among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
2. To highlight the mythological narratives related to Abotani, Kiiri-Kilo and other spirits, and the coexistence of humans and spirits in the context of the Myoko festival.
3. To explain the common ritual practices, ceremonial activities, and animal sacrifices associated with the celebration of the Myoko festival.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Several studies have highlighted the significance of tribal festivals, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural continuity among indigenous communities. Sarma (2012) has observed that tribal festivals of Arunachal Pradesh function as one of the important informal institutions for preserving oral traditions, ritual practices, social values, and collective identity. Similarly, Kumar (2024) and Kumar and Baudh (2021) emphasized that tribal festivals are closely associated with agriculture, spirituality, social solidarity, and intergenerational transmission of

cultural traditions within tribal societies, which are a part of preserving one's culture and traditions.

Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) explained that festivals can strengthen the collective identity, bring social cohesion, and develop a feeling of oneness and belongingness through communal participation, ritual performances, and cultural expressions. John et al. (2022), in their study on the Ronghoan festival of the Nocte tribe, highlighted that tribal festivals help in preserving indigenous belief systems, customary practices, and oral traditions.

Studies by Bhuyan (2015), Rajendra (2024), and Rani (2025) emphasized the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which can be preserved through oral narratives, rituals, ecological practices, and interaction with elders. Annigeri (2025) further observed that indigenous knowledge continues to possess contemporary relevance in sustainable development and community-based practices as well. Kacha (2018) highlighted the cultural significance of Apatani festivals and its sustainable agricultural practices, while Kala (2005) documented in detail about the ethnomedicinal knowledge preserved through oral transmission. Dutta et al. (2017) examined the relationship between sacred groves, ritual practices, and ecological conservation among the Apatanis. Similarly, Mize et al. (2016) observed that increasing ecotourism and modernization are greatly influencing traditional cultural systems and indigenous lifestyles in Ziro Valley.

Other studies by Kacholia (2023), Tage and Sarkar (2026), and Muni et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of preserving tribal cultural heritage, i.e. tangible and intangible cultural, through traditional attire, oral traditions, and indigenous ecological practices amidst the rapid socio-cultural transformation.

The reviewed literature indicates that tribal festivals play important roles in preserving oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, social relationships, and cultural identity. However, limited studies have specifically examined the Myoko festival as a medium of oral tradition, indigenous knowledge transmission, and cultural continuity among the Apatanis. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this gap by exploring the socio-cultural significance of the Myoko Festival in the context of indigenous heritage and cultural continuity.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to explore the Myoko festival among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The study was conducted in the Ziro Valley of Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh, where the Apatani tribe predominantly resides. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for the study. Primary data were collected through informal interviews, personal interaction with elders and community members, and participant observation of ritual practices and cultural activities associated with the festival. Oral narratives, myths, and indigenous beliefs related to Myoko were also documented during the field study.

Secondary data were collected from journals, research articles, reports, and other scholarly sources related to tribal festivals, indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and Apatani culture.

IV. DISCUSSION

MYOKO festival - origin and mythological narratives
Myoko Festival and Iipyo Lembya/Lembyan: The Myoko Festival is celebrated by the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh from 20th March till the mid or the end of April month, depends on the requirements. It is one of the most important traditional festivals of the Apatani community and is believed to have been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions and ritual practices. Myoko, initially believed to be celebrated at Iipyo Lembya/Lembyan marking or symbolizing the friendship, prosperity, protection, ritual purification, and social harmony within the community.

Coexistence of Humans and Spirits: According to Apatani oral tradition, there was once a time when humans and spirits coexisted peacefully and lived together. They interacted freely and shared close relationships with one another. Abotani, regarded as the first human (as per the Apatani Mythology) and the legendary ancestor of the Tani tribes, married his first wife, Bulung Biinyi, who was a spirit. Her parents (the parents of Bulung Biinyi) gifted him special supernatural powers like - Koga Miri, an eye at the back of his head, and Liidi Piimi, power in his feet (legs) so that he could protect himself from any danger.

Misuse of Power and Conflict with Spirits: However, Abotani (was overjoyed with the power) felt the power and misused it by killing two leaders belonging to different spirit clans, i.e. Piyon Hakhe and Oun Halle. As obvious, the deaths of these two spirit leaders enraged the spirit clans, and they decided to punish and execute Abotani by hanging him on Tabbyung Tochi (Pole). This plan to murder Abotani was overheard by Dolyang Chanjang, the first priestess and (the sister of Abotani), who immediately went to Kiiri (one of the powerful spirits) and requested him to save Abotani's life. So, the negotiation was ended with a mutual agreement that the spirits could take away powers of Koga Miiri and Liidi Piimin from Abotani.

Intervention of Kiiri, Kilo, Siki, Alo, Lyago Sha etc. (Powerful Spirits): After that, these powerful spirits had discussions with other spirits who wanted to punish Abotani. They came up with a conclusion that Abotani is the only human being alive and his life should be spared. So, instead of killing or punishing Abotani, they decided to take back his gifted powers. This oral narrative explains after that incident; humans no longer can see the spirits' world and no more normal relationships with them.

Origin of Animal Sacrifices in Myoko: After being saved, Abotani expressed his gratitude to Kiiri and other spirits for saving his life and was willing to repay the favour. So, Kiiri instructed him how he can offer sacrifices and perform certain rituals, in order to maintain cordial relation with the spirit world again. And later it became the sole ritual practices of the Myoko festival. Thus, following ritual sacrifices are performed to honour Kiiri and the other powerful spirits - a pig (Alyi), a dog, and two chickens. These are sacrificed in the Myoko Altar, which is called as Yugyang. He also instructed sacrifice of a Siibi (Monkey), which is hunted in the month of October as the mark of the beginning of the Myoko festival.

Construction of Lapang, Babo and Nago: He further instructed the construction of Lapang, Babo, and Nago. Lapang, is believed to be symbolizing a resting place and considered to be a male and Babo, a tower made from a large log of wood, believed to be symbolizing female of the spirit world, in remembrance of female folks of the spirit world. Nago is a small hut attached to Lapang which symbolizes another resting place for the spirits.

Reason for celebrating Myoko in March: The celebration of Myoko during the month of March is

somehow associated with indigenous ecological beliefs. As per the belief of Apatanis, the month of March is considered to be the beginning of a new year with the blooming of peach flowers known as Takung Apu/Takuñ_Apu. According to oral narratives, Takung Apu reminds of the spirits who saved and considered the life of Abotani. Thus, the flowering of peach blossoms became symbolically connected with the celebration of Myoko and remembrance of Kiiri and the other powerful spirits.

V. COMMON RITUAL PRACTICES AND CEREMONIAL SEQUENCE OF MYOKO

Beginning of the Festival

The ceremonial sequence of Myoko/Myokuñ begins on the evening of 20th March with invocation chanting performed by the Myoko priest. The first ritual is known as Samma Pidu/Shama_pinwñ, during which the spirits of Kiiri-Kilo and other Myoko spirits are invited through ceremonial chants and ritual observances by shaman-Nyibu. After the performance of this ritual, the community members are restricted from performing agricultural activities, like cleaning of weeds, clearing jungles, and gardens. It is also important to note that the celebration of Myoko follows a rotational pattern within the Apatani Villages. Hari, Bulla and Tajang constitute of one group; Hija, Dutta, Mudang-Tage, Bamin-Michi and Diibo the second group; while Hong, the largest Apatani Village, forms the third group.

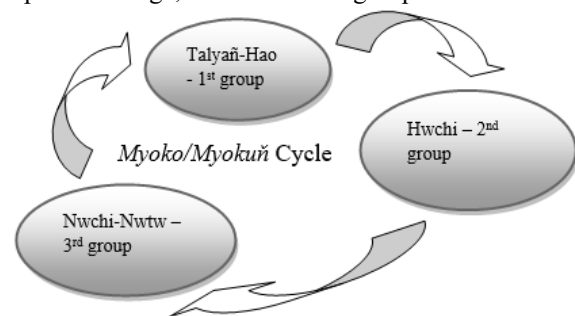


Figure: Myoko Cycle

Rituals and practices in the month of March

21st and 22nd March - Visit of Guests and Buniing Ajing/Biine Ajiñ: On those days, ancestral friends called Buniing Ajing, from different villages visits the village where the Myoko celebration is taking place. However, each family has its own Buniing Ajing from other villages, and they visit to those ancestral family

friends' house during that time and grace the occasion while enjoying drinks and foods.

22nd March - Tiiper Liidu: On the evening of 22nd March, every male member of the community, from every age group participates in Tiiper Liidu, a ritual procession carrying wild leaves known as Tiiper Anii. This ritual is done in order to invite the Myoko spirits to the Myoko Celebration. During the procession, participants stop and circle at every Lapang of different clans in the village, and proceed towards Nago (a small hut attached to each Lapang which is also a resting place for the spirits) of their own clan, where they place the Tiiper Anii as part of Myoko Ritual.

23rd March - Animal Sacrifices: On 23rd March early in the morning, Alyi Laloni ritual is performed in honour of Kiiri-Kilo in the Yugyang (Myoko Altar), the sacrifices include a pig (Alyi), a dog, and two chickens as mentioned earlier. The process of ritual starts with the chanting by the priest, and the women sprinkle Yatan (rice powder mixed with ginger and salt) and pour O Ala (rice/millet wine/beer) on their respective Alyi first, and then to others' Alyi as well. After performing the ritual ceremony in the Yugyang, women, specially from the family who sacrifices Alyi (because all the family doesn't sacrifice Alyi), distributes Yatan and O Ala on her way back home, whoever she meets on the way. And in the Yugyang, after the end of chanting, the chickens are mandatorily to be sacrificed there. In the case of the dog sacrifice, the priest checks through egg, where the dog need to be sacrificed, whether in the Lapang or in the Shu Myoro (spirit) Altar. In the case of Alyi sacrifice, when the chanting is over, Alyi is brought back to its respective house owners, where finally Alyi is sacrificed.

24th and 25th March - Invitation of Buniing Ajin: On 24th and 25th March, the community invites their Buniing Ajin (ancestral family friends) and serves them several kinds of local delicacies, along with O Ala (local wine/beer). At the end of the day, they are given Pona, Yoh Asho (bacon), Tapyo (traditional salt), and modern salt as part of ceremonial hospitality and ritual exchange.

26th March- Starting of Ude Tinniing: It is another important part of Myoko rituals which is compulsory for the family who did Alyi Lalo (Pig Sacrifice), however, it can be done by any family if there is a need. This ritual involves chanting and some sacrifices

like eggs and chickens. It is usually done in order to receive blessing from the Myoko spirits for getting healed from illness, good health of the family members and for overall welfare of the family.

28th March- Agyang Pala: On this day adult male members of the respective clans go to the jungle and collect Kiira Halo (a small branch of a wild tree called Kiira) also called as (Kiira Agyang) for each male members of their respective families. And that Kiira Halo will be put in the Pamung Agyang (Altar).

29th March - Pamung Pedu: On this day, male members of the clan will take their respective Kiira Halo and put it in the Pamung Agyang. At night all the adult male members of the clan will take part in a procession called Pamung Pedu which is another important ritual of Myoko festival. During this ritual, adult male members of the clan participate in a ceremonial procession moving back and forth between Yugyang and Pamung Agyang whole night without resting.

Rituals and practices in the month of April

Myoko Khiilodu: On the 4th day of April, Myoko Khiilodu takes place in the house of Yugyang Ato (Care take of Yugyang). This ritual marks the ceremonial farewell to the spirits invoked during Samma Pidu. It is kind of sending back those spirits back to their realms. This ritual also marks the end of the restrictions put on the community to perform agricultural activities. And the community members can carry on with their daily agricultural activities as per their needs.

Takho Bedu: Another important ritual is Takho Beniing. It is done in the evening of Khiilonii i.e. 4th April. It involves the construction of a bamboo fences in the respective houses, and it is believed that these fences will prevent and protect the houses from the re-entry of those guest spirits. Because those spirits might disturb the house members in different forms/ways.

Konchi Aji Eha: On next day, early in the morning, i.e. 5th of April, Konchi Aji Eha takes place where the female head of the family goes alone or accompanied by one female family member to their respective paddy field and offers Myoko Kaji (rice cooked in broth of pork), Yoh Alo (bones of chicken) and Sarse Pona (mixture of millet and rice made for local wine) to the paddy field as a symbol of gratitude to the spirits who takes care of their paddy field.

Bije Eha: On the same day of 5th April, adult male members of the clans go to their personal bamboo groove (Bije) where they offer things like Yatan mixed with salt, and O Ala which is put specifically on Nijji Anii (wild leaf) and Alyi Ali (pig's leg), Hulyi (pieces of bacon), which are basically offered in even numbers or pairs, and this process is called Bije Eha. By offering all these items, they show their gratitude towards the spirits who takes care of their bamboo groove.

Morey Eha: After Bije Eha, on next day i.e. on 6th April, male members go to their respective jungle/forest to perform Morey Eha where they offer the same things as they offered during Bije Eha. After, individuals' Morey Eha, they go to their community/clan forests to offer the same things which is also called as Morey Eha.

Alo Aji Eha: 30th day from the starting of Myoko festival, on 18th of April, another round of offerings is given to ones' paddy field which is called Alo Aji Eha. On this day ladies they invite their relatives and friends to accompany her for Alo Aji Eha. Here, same things are offered as offered in Konchi Aji Eha to the paddy field. On this day, the owner of respective paddy field, spends longer period of time in the field compared to the Konchi Aji Eha, by cleaning and doing minimal activities needed, after that they eat Myoko Kaji in their paddy field. And by 12 noon they go back to their houses, distributing remaining Myoko Kaji to the people whomsoever they meet on their way.

Empi Koniing: On 19th April, this is the final ritual related to the Myoko festival. Empi Koniing is performed in the houses who has participated in Alyi Lalo (Pig Sacrifice). Priest will perform the chanting and the house owner will prepare Empi (roasted/pupped rice mixed with ginger and salt). After the chanting process is completed, the house members especially the husband and wife who participated in Alyi Lalo are asked to eat that Empi to break the restriction that had been put on them for intaking food items. Because after the Alyi Lalo (Pig Sacrifice), the husband and wife were restricted to eat certain food items, throughout the Myoko festival.

So, as per the Apatani tradition, the Myoko celebration starts with these lines (additional information) -

“Ashang Yandi mi Kiri-Kilo mi baro bogyang.

Aha yangko yari yalo mi nyahii giibyang lyiso.

Miyu sandi ho giilyang sodupa pumum lyiso, myohii sangko taker sodupa pumum lyiso.

No garsang nenchang ho garsang garbyang la, pusang nenchang ho pusang pubyang pa puriisiila.

Tani moji mi diyu moji mi morii siila, toro siipa – myohii siipa, parii siilyi so.”

VI. CONCLUSION

The Myoko festival of the Apatani tribe represents an important informal institution of oral tradition, indigenous knowledge, ritual practice, and cultural continuity in Arunachal Pradesh. The festival reflects the deep relationship the bond of ancestral friendships, and also highlight the relationship between the Apatanis with nature, ancestral spirits, social organization, and indigenous belief systems. Through mythological narratives associated with Abotani and Kiri-Kilo, ceremonial performances, ritual chants, sacrifices, and communal participation, Myoko has hugely contributed in preserving the collective memory and cultural identity of the community.

The study reveals that the festival functions not merely as a religious celebration but also as a medium for transmitting indigenous ecological knowledge, social values, customary practices and sacrifices involved, and spiritual understanding across generations. Oral traditions and ritual practices associated with the festival serve as important mechanisms for preserving indigenous knowledge systems, which is very relevant in the present scenario. Even NEP 2020 is encouraging Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). The participation of elders, priests, youth, and community members shows continuity of traditional practices and reinforces collective belongingness and cultural resilience.

At the same time, the study highlights that modernization, globalization, tourism, changing lifestyles, religious transformation, and weakening oral transmission systems pose significant challenges to the preservation of traditional festivals and indigenous cultural heritage. And the researcher suggests that a proper documentation of those rituals, chants, sacrifices, etc. can be documented through audio or video recording for the future references. And more detailed and extensive level of research can be conducted further; it will help in safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems and sustaining the rich cultural heritage of the Apatani tribe for future generations.

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