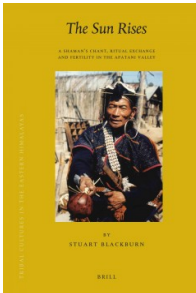


Reviewed by Mark Bender (The Ohio State University)



Blackburn, Stuart H. 2010. *The Sun Rises: A Shaman's Chant, Ritual Exchange and Fertility in the Apatani Valley*. Leiden: Brill. xvii+401. Color and black and white photographs, maps. ISBN: 978-9-0041-7578-5 (hardcover, 97USD).

The Sun Rises is a model study contextualizing an oral narrative tradition in the social and ritual fabric of a remote community in northeast India. In many ways a companion volume to *Himalayan Tribal Tales* (Blackburn 2008), the text presents the first substantial translation of a key ritual text of the Apatani Valley dwellers in Arunachal Pradesh, located on the contested border between China (Tibet) and India. The Apatani speak a Tibeto-Burman language, practice intensive rice agriculture in carefully terraced fields, and number about 35,000. Their clans populate several centuries-old villages. Until recently, they were separated from the lowlands of Assam and surrounded only by peoples practicing various forms of shifting agriculture. The valley dwellers have increasingly encountered modernization over the last few decades, including Indian and global popular culture, and Christianity.

The heart of this book is a chant of nineteen segments performed during the public Murung feast. This feast is a major opportunity for ritual exchange of foodstuffs and other goods in the community, and also involves the slaughter and sharing of large numbers of *mithun*¹ within complex social networks. On the first day

¹ Semi-domestic bovine.

of the three-week event, a *nyibu*² stands on a large wooden platform built by the feast sponsor and from pre-dawn to late in the day chants an oral poem called the Subu Heniin. This chant calls out the sun from the darkness as it charts the birth of the sun from a woman in ancient times, and describes the creation and genealogies of animals, plants, *mithun*, and humans. A major portion of the chant, which is more a pastiche of segments than a linear narrative, guides *mithun* souls across named landscape features to the underworld where they become gifts for inhabitants. The chant then returns to the land of the living. Such guiding of animal and human souls across landscapes to sites of ancestral origins and/ or the world of the spirits has parallels in many other Tibeto-Burman societies (such as in funerals of the Yi of southwest China) in the Southeast Asian massif and even farther afield in Nepal and ethnic minorities in northeast China. As Blackburn argues, the *nyibu* is, for lack of a better term, a sort of shaman, though the *nyibu* does not enter a trance state during the recitation. *Nyibu* are conservative members of Apatani communities who still wear traditional hairstyles, tattoos, and clothing common a few generations ago. Presently about ninety *nyibu* (all male) are active in the valley.

According to the introduction, the book is divided into intersecting portions that relate material on cultural context, the performer of the chant, and the chant itself. Drawing on oral performance theory, folkloristics, and anthropology, Blackburn presents a thorough and detailed treatment of the Murung event and its comparison with feasts of merit from contiguous areas in Southeast Asia, the role of the *nyibu* within the contexts of Apatani beliefs, ritual, and the Murung event itself. This weaving of themes is highly effective and is very much in line with the goals of the performance school of folkloristics and its stress on performers and audiences, performance events, contexts, and ramifications of texts and performances in the community. Aside from the main text, the book also offers several thorough appendices, including an outline of Murung events, a complete transcription of the Subu Heniin chant, a

² A local ritual specialist.

list of shares of sacrifices for spirits and humans, and more information about of feasts of merit in the eastern Himalayas.

Aside from the detailed ethnographic frame of the Subu Heniin ritual text, Blackburn carefully charts what Lauri Honko (2000) calls the 'textualization' process, offering thoughtful disclaimers for the nature of the translation. The text is a somewhat modified version based on recordings made in the home of Mudan Pai, a fifty-five year old *nyibu*. The recording was made by Blackburn's assistant, Hage Komo, who collaborated with Blackburn in rendering the text into an as yet non-standard Apatani Romanization system, and then a somewhat modified English version. The text was tweaked for clarity and readability in places, while preserving as much original content as feasible. The author straightforwardly describes the sort of challenges facing translators of such materials, including: the difficulty of making intelligible recordings (whether in the festival contexts or homes) in the absence of sound-booth conditions; differing ideas of what a 'translation' means to trained professionals and key informants; and locating persons truly familiar with the dense and often obscure ritual idiom and other linguistic barriers. The author provides a readable and well-annotated English text and an accurate Romanized Apatani version (in an appendix) that will serve as a touchstone for both the existing fragments of the rituals recorded by a few earlier ethnographers and any ensuing versions that others might make.

Blackburn discusses textual themes that include fertility, ritual journey, and exchange. The content of the Subu Heniin text begins with the birth of the sun from a woman's body, which Blackburn notes is recurrent throughout the text. Another important motif is a species of fecund bamboo, a piece of which is actually part of the *nyibu*'s headdress. Many segments of the text narrate the origins of other things, such as section eight, which relates the origin of water and includes many details of various river systems' flora and fauna (particularly fish). This section is followed by another on the origins of the sprits and the creatures of which they are ancestors, for instance, "The ancestor of the bee/ is Tayu Kopu" (217). The various catalogs suggest a great intimacy with native wildlife. A section of the texts also deals with the origins and actions of a mythical trickster ancestor known as Abo Tani. In one passage, the figure, who has had

no luck with women, is introduced by his sister to a woman who, while weaving on a porch, is impregnated by semen falling from a bamboo container carried by a flying bird (227). The resulting child's origin is subject to gossip, so a competition is held to determine the real father. As the child was birthed from his mother's vagina (rather than a leg, arm, forehead, etc.), it was acknowledged as Abo Tani's. The child, Ato Neha, became the local people's first human ancestor.

An account of the division between *mithun* and humans follows these events. The text narrates that two *mithun* sisters were born of the same womb, but one became a human, while the other became a *mithun*. The section also deals with the origins of domestic cows, goats, dogs, and pigs. In the latter sections, the *nyibu*, in the midst of his chanting, guides the souls of sacrificed *mithun* to the underworld as gifts to the spirits in hopeful exchange for their favors to the human gift-givers. The symbolic interdependence of humans and *mithun* is related: "Man and *mithun*/ you are joined together/ like necklaces and bracelets" (77).

Blackburn notes affinities in content with ritual feast chants from eastern Indonesia and Hawai'i in his search for parallel chant traditions in the eastern Himalayas. He also indicated parallels with Kachin chants in northern Burma, Zhuang and Lahu creation narratives in southwest China, ritual texts from eastern Nepal, and a text from an Adi group in central Arunachal Pradesh associated with a feast tradition (58-61). The documentation of these latter texts, however, lacks information on performance and cultural context.

As more work emerges on how such chants are related to performance events and social dynamics, a clearer picture of the Subu Heniin and possibly related traditions will emerge from both northeast India and southwest China. More information certainly lies with the study of ethnic groups in southwest China, in particular subgroups of the Yi ethnic group. For instance, the *Hnewo tepyy* 'Book of Origins' of the Nuosu of southern Sichuan is concerned with origins of things, genealogies of a whole range of life forms and clans of various local ethnic groups, and history (similar to the content Blackburn describes in the Subu Heniin) and is performed by either *bimo* priests or skilled folk singers, who often use an antiphonal style, in a variety of ritual/ feast contexts (funerals and weddings in

particular) that involve the killing of large bovines and complex patterns of foodstuff sharing and gifting.

In terms of content, a number of key motifs appear in some form in both texts. Among these is the motif of a mother of a progenitor/ culture-hero who is weaving and becomes impregnated by semen (Subu Heniin) or blood (Nuosu) falling from the sky (interestingly, a similar narrative involving weaving, pregnancy, and the sun has been recorded among the Zuni in North America in a tale called 'The Boy and the Deer,' see Tedlock 2009). Other parallels could be drawn with many fertility motifs found in epics of the Miao of Southeast Guizhou, China, where there are cyclic mass slaughters of water buffaloes and the chanting of origin texts. Like the Apatani Valley, these areas in Guizhou have long been involved in intensive rice production.

The Sun Rises is valuable as a study of ritual texts in the cultural area of the eastern Himalayas and comparable cultures around the globe. It is especially useful in cross-cultural studies among Tibeto-Burman speakers (in particular) and other ethnic communities in southwest China, northeast India, and upland Southeast Asia in terms of the abovementioned soul-guiding texts, origin narratives, and migration accounts.

REFERENCES

- Blackburn, S. 2008. *Himalayan Tribal Tales: Oral Tradition and Culture in the Apatani Valley*. Leiden: Brill.
- Honko, L. 2000. *Textualization of Oral Epics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Tedlock, Dennis. 2009. Transcription Between Languages. *Interval(le)s* II.2-III.1 (Fall 2008/Winter 2009):871-896.