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## **Birth Rituals and Associated Taboos among the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

*Rites of passage are rituals or ceremonies signifying an event in a person's life, indicative of a transition from one stage to another, as from adolescence to adulthood. The same can also be explained as ceremonies that mark important transitional periods in a person's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, having children, and finally death. They usually involve ritual activities and teachings designed to strip individuals of their original roles and prepare them for new roles. Rites of passage are ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another.*

*This paper elaborates on the importance of culture and traditions of childbirth among Apatanis and assesses the wealth of rites, customs, and traditions as well as the wish of the people to have large families. This study helps to learn more about the process of childbirth, associated with religious rites of the Apatani people, viewed with the eyes of those that lived it in the last century. The analysis of the goal of this study uses the analysis of secondary data and quality method of data collection through interviews on site, study of various primary and secondary sources of data as well as old publications linked with this study. The findings of this study point out that the Apatanis has rich traditions, rites, practices, customs, and experiences that provide a combination of the typical dresses of the area, diverse cuisine, and songs and dances for moments of joy of childbirth.*

**Keywords : Apatani, Tradition, Childbirth, Religious Faith, Rites of Passage.**

## **The Conceptual Framework**

Birth rituals belong to a class anthropologically identified as rites-de-passage (rites of passage), a French phrase-construct coined by Belgian social scientist Arnold van Gennep in 1909. They share with other rites of passage features discovered through systematic cross-cultural explorations of diverse ritual activities and traditions. Two core features are universality of practice and uniformity of a processual form in three stages: separation (preliminal rites), transitional stage (liminal or threshold rites), and incorporation (postliminal rites), imbued with rich symbols and rites (Van Gennep, 1909/1960).

Some rites of passage occur in contexts of change of political or religious office or annual season changes, whereas life-cycle rituals are associated with individuals' biological life cycles. Whereas physiological processes universally mark an organisms' life span from beginning to end of life, sociocultural research has revealed that characteristically humans experience their life span as transitions ritually marked with structured ceremonial activity.

Cultural transitions are ritualised threshold crossing, in the sense of leaving one world and entering another, which may or may not correspond exactly to biological change. They are conceptualized culturally, ceremonialized universally, and are considered sacred, though not necessarily religious (El Guindi, 2008, p. 27).

Human birth, for example, can be marked at the instant of the physical birth, such as that which occurs in social events surrounding birth in Western culture, illustrated through showers before and birthdays after. In many cultures, however, the exact day of physical birth is unmarked, birthdays are not celebrated, and birthdates are not even remembered. In many societies birth is celebrated after the physical birth.

Childbirth is termed as culmination of pregnancy. It is an intimate and complex transaction affected physically, mentally and spiritually. The experience of birth is different in each time period, in each culture and for each woman. Cultural and social sur-

roundings have impacted differently on every woman giving birth, making each birth experience different (Davudsdóttir, 2012).

### **The Land and the People**

The Apatani is one of the most advanced tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting the Ziro Valley in Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. Lower Subansiri district lies approximately between 26°55' to 28°21'N latitude and 92°40' to 92°21' E longitude. It is bounded by Kra Daadi district in the north, the state of Assam and Papum Pare district in the south-west, and Kamle district in the east. According to the 2011 Census, the population of the Apatani tribe is around 27,792. The economy is agriculture based and they are well known world over for their paddy-cum-pisci-culture system. Apart from rice, they also produce maize, millet, fruits and vegetables. Animal husbandry and handicraft making are other areas in which they take interest and are also a source of their income. The festive season of the Apatanis start in the month of January when the *Murung*, the festival of prosperity is celebrated. It is followed in March by *Myoko*, the festival of wellbeing and friendship. In July every year, the entire Ziro plateau become more vibrant with the celebration of the *Dree*, the agricultural festival of the Apatanis. The community worships a number of spirits who are believed to be responsible for various happenings in their life both good and bad. Most of them follow the Donyi-polo faith, i.e. they worship the sun (*Ayo-Danyi*) and the moon (*Atoh-Piilo*). The Apatani family is patriarchal in nature and the descendants are traced patrilineally. The tribe endogamy and clan exogamy are the traditional marriage rules.

### **Rites of Passage of the Apatanis**

The Apatanis have inherited literary traditions from their forefathers, which are oral as they are passed on by word of mouth in the absence of a script. They have also inherited rites of passage which mark the passage of an individual from one stage of life to the next, from birth to childhood, adolescence to adulthood, to the state of being married, and finally death to afterlife. They perform rites of passage to mark the birth of a child, the arrival of adulthood, the occasion of marriage and death. A ritual performed before the birth of the child is called *Aago Pilya*.

Funeral rites are performed at the death of a person for the final release of the spirit of the dead to travel to 'the land of the spirits.' It can be described as 'a ceremony performed for the benefit of the departed soul'. The performance of these rites is accompanied by chanting of verses, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments.

### **Taboos Associated with Birth Rituals**

The Birth of a child in the Apatani community is a joyous, auspicious and important event in the Apatani culture. The parent joyfully starts making the necessary arrangement of the basic items like pork, prepare rice bears, etc. in advance for the event of the birth of new member. The birth ritual in the Apatani community is associated with the observance of two types of taboos: the pre-delivery taboos and the post-delivery taboos.

#### **Pre-delivery Taboos**

In the Apatani community, once a woman conceives and when pregnancy is confirmed, a small ritual is performed known as *Aago Pilya*, in order to appease the spirit who is responsible for ensuring the delivery of a healthy baby plus gives strength and courage to the expecting mother throughout the pregnancy term. In this ritual, a chicken is sacrificed after which an elderly person from the village with enough of ritual or spiritual experience is made to examine the liver of the chicken which they believe will reveal the gender of the child and also the nature of the child's delivery. Apart from this, the Apatanis believe that the dreams of an expecting mother or a relative could also depict the gender of the child. For instance, if one dreams of materials like *Nyatu-Elyo* (traditional knife/machete), *Leha-Lera* (hunting equipment), then the baby in the womb is a male as these kind of materials are usually associated with the male population of the community, and when one dreams of materials such as *Pinta-Liiha* (traditional bucket carved out of gourd; *Liiha* refers to a small traditional basket made out of cane strips and bamboo), then the baby in the womb is a female as such kind of household materials are usually associated with the female population of the community. Adding to this, it is also said that when the baby movement in the womb is mostly towards the right side, it is a boy and when the movement is towards the left, it is a girl.

Every expecting mother in the world has deep cravings which amounts up to different kind of normal food and could range up to weird stuffs too which is totally normal. Same is the case with the expecting mothers of the Apatani community; they crave for stuffs such as raw millet (*Sarse*), charcoal (*Miiri*), uncooked rice (*Embing*), etc. This kind of craving especially strikes when the expecting mother is in her 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> month of pregnancy period. To one, this kind of cravings might sound weird and unbelievable, but it has its own reasons and role in the community which mainly marks the belief that if an expecting mother does not fulfill her cravings, the baby after being born will drool heavily (*Rei bila*) and it is also a universally known fact that when an expecting mother craves for something, it is actually the baby who is craving.

In the Apatani community, preventive measures (*Nyodu*) are equally important and crucial during the pregnancy period both for the expecting mother and her spouse as well. The couple should prevent especially the following activities:

1. One should not kill any kind of birds and animals. If this taboo is not followed then the child's voice will sound like that of the killed bird or animal after being born.
2. Weaving of any kind of traditional design associated with the community should be avoided. If this taboo is not observed, then the baby will have unusual black pattern like marks in the body once born.
3. If a snake is killed by the expecting parents, then it is said that the movement of the baby's tongue will be like that of a snake.
4. The husband of the expecting lady is prohibited from any kind of chopping work and also is not allowed to attend any kind of work related to pig rearing especially feeding the pig (*Alyidurgu*), due to the belief that if this is not prohibited then the baby will have abnormally torn lips after bring born.
5. Any kind of polythene or plastic materials should not be burned in the hearth (*Ugu*) of the house (*Raji jima*); as such an activity will lead to the baby having ugly black spots on the body. Also, any kind of iron rod or metal should not be heated on the hearth of the house (*Dachangbyama*) as this will lead to the baby having red marks on the body.

6. The expecting mother and her spouse is strictly prohibited from attending any kind of negative incidents such as funeral, accidental cases, suicidal cases, etc. even if such occurrences has anything to do with their relatives as it is believed that if this taboo is not followed then the baby will be squint eyed.

### **Post-Delivery Taboos**

When the expecting woman goes into labour pain (*Iingaakhiichilyo*), the women folk from the neighborhood gathers there for help. When this situation occurs, the male and children are not allowed to stay near the pregnant woman. The pregnant lady in labour pain is taken to one side of the house and the priest is immediately summoned to perform a ritual called '*Aago Pilya*' which is for giving strength to the delivering mother and for the safe keeping of both the mother and the child. During this ritual, a hen is sacrificed for the smooth birthing process of the child. For the natural process of delivery, a rope is tightly tied and secured to two horizontal poles, where the delivering woman hold on to the rope and gives birth to the baby in a kneeling position as it is said to be the most comfortable position for the delivery of the baby. After the child birth, the placenta and the naval cord of the new born baby is disposed into the restroom (traditional or modern) attached to the house. This disposition is done so because there is a belief in the Apatani community that if the placenta or the naval cord is thrown away or disposed off carelessly anywhere including jungles or when buried, the growth of the child will not be smooth and might also lead to abnormality in the child. Besides all these, if there is any problem in the process of delivery of the child, then the priest is summoned to perform another set of ritual known as '*Chepa Du*' which is to appease the devil (*Igii Uii*), who is responsible for the obstacles during child birth, in this ritual a pair of poultry bird both a male and a female each is sacrificed and offered to the bad spirit in order to have a smooth child birth. As soon as the delivery is done, the father of the new born child inserts a stick where the husks fall apart from the rice grains while husking. This is a very age-old process which seems to have almost disappeared with the passing of generation. This was done by the father of the child, especially, to ward away or keep off any kind of negative presence from the baby such as evil spirits, bad omen and even those people with evil aura lurking around the area where the new born

baby arrives. This stick is removed from the husking place exactly after 10 days of the child birth, an indication that the baby will have a smooth growth in a clean and happy blessed environment and that the baby is free from any kind of negative elements. This whole process is known as '*Mying Diilala- Panyekhoyepiinangugung ho khiilii du*'.

After this process comes another crucial part where an expert especially woman cuts the naval cord of the baby (*Khiiniipidu*) by the use of a particular sharpened bamboo which is dried in the hearth of the house and this process of drying is said to be equal to being sterilized. This special traditional bamboo blade is known as '*Yiabing*'. In earlier days, this kind of blades were prepared in advance before the birth of a child, but with the passing of time and the phase of modernization, this traditional blade has been replaced with medically sterilized blades for cutting the naval cord. The cutting of naval cord also has a specific way, the naval cord is tied into four different knots with a clean white thread and the cut is made on the second knot, while doing so a few drops of locally brewed rice beer (*O-ala*) is given to the baby in the belief that the new born baby will have no infection in the tongue. Regular baths are given to the new born baby right from the time of the child's birth. In the earlier days, the bath was given in a special traditional utensil known as *Arre/Niirepiichang* which is made of clay and *Niireyaju*, mug made out of gourd. At present, these kinds of materials are no longer used; it has been replaced with plastic tub, bucket and mug. After the 10<sup>th</sup> bath, a mixed thread kneaded up of black and orange color is tied on particular body parts of the new born baby, one on the waist known as '*Erey Biyang*', a pair each on the wrist known as '*Ala-Laanga*' and one the end of the knee known as '*Ali-Liinga*', this symbolizes the introduction of the new born baby into the realm of the human world.

Also, the father of the new born child plays another crucial part on his own, he ties up few maize leaves on the either side of a medium heighted bamboo pole and places it on the entrance or gate of the home where a new birth takes place. This tradition is known as '*Pussung du*', which is done in order to keep away or prohibit the entrance of people who have attended funerals, done hunting or have faced any negative occur-



rences like accidents, sickness etc. it is said that the entrance of such people would bring misfortune and obstacles in the growth of the baby.

It is to be noted that there is no special ritual or timing for naming the new born baby. The baby is named by the parents or by the elders of the family. It is only when a baby gets restless and keeps whining and crying, then the name of the baby is changed as the Apatani's believe that this behavior of the baby might be because the name is not suitable for him or her.

Adding another basic, yet comforting tradition of this community, is the 'Aping babidu' ritual, which means that the relatives especially from the maternal side visits the new born baby and the mother after the third night of the delivery bearing traditional gifts such as local bred rice, meat (*yoh*), etc. This is a way to show the love and affection of these relatives towards the mother especially. Also, the neighbors visits the new born baby, this visitation is termed as '*Amurdu/Hüjañ Harakanöñ/Töpyakhenöñ*', which means to bless the baby in bounty; a necklace (*Tassang*) kneaded out of thread and attached with four pieces of traditional beads is presented to the baby in the form of a gift as well as best wishes. The maternal relative of the new born baby also bears gifts like the Tibetan bell (*Maji*) for the male child and an intricately designed metal plate (*Tallo*) for the female child. This gifting ritual is mandatory for the first-born child in the family and for the rest of the children; it totally depends on the wish or willingness of the relatives.

Putting an end to the restrictions at home comes on the ninth day from the day when the baby was delivered. It is only on this particular day that the baby is not given a bath and also it is on this day that all the household items which has a lid is un-lidded, for instance the utensils used for cooking meals at home, the traditional mortar (*Yaper*) which usually remains closed. This is done with the belief that the *un-lidding* of all these household items will keep away any kind of breathing related problems from the new born baby.

Finally, the 10<sup>th</sup> day marks the total ending of all kinds of rituals and practices after the birth of the baby. On this day, the bamboo pole tied with maize leaves is removed from the entrance of the house, but the husband and the wife are still not allowed to go out and do any kind of outside or social activities (*Nyigurdu*). Only when the 10<sup>th</sup> day is over, the parents along with the child can go out or attend social activities of the community and the child can start living normally without any restrictions. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day, the parents can chip off the baby's nails or may shave off the child's hair known as *Muyure 'nõñ*. The mother of the child is given complete rest for 10 days called '*Hiiyinyanyodu*' (maternity rest). During these 10 days the mother of the new born baby is not allowed to carry out any kind of household chores especially cooking and serving it to herself, doing so will make the baby have a habit of stealing when the child grows up. During this period of the mother's maternity rest, anyone from the maternal side can take up the household chores. The father of the new born child also has few restrictions along with the mother during the period of maternity rest; he is not allowed to attend to any kind of repairing work, if such taboos are not avoided then it is believed that the baby will have improper growth and might be physically disabled once the child grows up and might also have respiratory problem. The washed linen or clothes of the baby is not dried outside during the period of the mother's maternity rest as the Apatani's believe that the soul of the baby exist in every piece of the cloth which belongs to the baby and hence if it is dried out, it will be harmful for the baby. Further, during this period of maternity rest, the brother of the child's mother cannot take any meat from his sister's home because it is said that by doing so, the brother's health will have adverse effect on his health and that it will also weaken his hunting ethics.

After the taboos end and are observed completely, the elder members especially elder women of the clan/village are invited and then the *Niipo Apiñ* ceremony takes place on a particular day fixed by the couple who had the new born baby where in they are served breakfast, dinner or lunch accordingly as a gesture of their love and happiness towards the elders; plus this ceremony also serves as a way to introduce the new born child to everyone and also in a way the new born baby is blessed by all the elders who visits on this day. At the end of *Niipo Aping* ceremony every person who visits are

presented with assorted pieces of Pork meat and other meat known as “Soyu”, the *Khi-niipinii* (the person responsible for cutting the naval cord of the new born child) is given soyu with larger piece of Pork in particular.

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