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## The Journey of the Soul:

### Notes on Funeral Rituals and Oral Texts in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Stuart Blackburn

#### I. Introduction

The complexity and sophistication of the scholarship on death rituals is nearly equal to the time-consuming and elaborate things that people do when someone dies. Whatever else they may disagree about when writing about funerals, most scholars seem to agree that it is the ambiguities inherent in death—the dead person is here but not here; death is a full-stop for an individual, but the living continue as a group—which call forth such complicated ideas and actions, in an effort to resolve them. Those resolutions vary widely and in fascinating detail: the pyramids with ships in the sand; burying, cremating or dismembering the corpse; rituals that continue for ten or fifteen days and then resume after a year or more; theologies of the soul; multiple afterworlds and so on. Analyses of funeral rituals, however, are less multifarious and have focused primarily on the restoration of the social order, although the specific argument may latch onto

different notions--political authority, the fate of the soul or fertility. This legacy of Durkheim and Hertz might be unkindly seen as a crude form of functionalism, but the arguments are (for the most part) original, persuasive, and based on good data.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this dominant sociological analysis of funeral rituals, deriving from the shared intellectual tradition of social anthropology, has limitations.

One element of funeral rituals that deserves more attention is oral texts. Most researchers mention and some describe these texts, which include mourning songs, speeches and chants, but few have placed them at the centre of their arguments (for exceptions, see Davies 1997; Danforth 1982.)<sup>2</sup> And even when such texts are taken into account, they are often translated into sociological notions: we are told that the emotions of mourning, for example, are socially constructed. This is probably true, but what about the specific contents of those texts? What do they actually say? To whom? Is the chanting simply background music, or does it express something important to our understanding of funeral rituals?

In discussing the significance of oral texts in funerals, this paper will focus on ritual journeys, and more specifically on the 'journey of the soul' to the land of the dead. Most cultures have some notion of this journey, and in many it is essential to the transformation of the living into the dead: it is a spatial movement that represents a conceptual shift. But the nature of this journey of the soul is as varied as other cultural expressions. Most journeys are relatively short in geographical space and brief in ritual time, often represented only as fording a river, scaling a mountain or crossing a bridge (sometimes actually formed by a chain of mourners during the funeral),

whereas in the examples I discuss here the journey is described in detail and requires many hours of chanting.

The journey of the soul discussed in this paper is also different from the post-mortem journeys so well-known in Asian religions, such as the Hindu-Buddhist transmigration of the soul or the Tibetan experiences in the *bar do*; these are cyclical transformations of consciousness, but the journey I will discuss is a unilinear, spatial movement across external geography. Nor is this journey of soul the same as the flight undertaken by shamans to retrieve fugitive souls, since in the latter the shaman brings back the soul from the world of the dead, and in the first he escorts it there. Nevertheless, these two journeys are closely linked in that the illness that requires the soul's retrieval is only a less serious form of the final illness from which there is no return--or should be no return, for, in some cultures, the soul is only escorted to the land of the dead *after* it has wandered back to haunt the living. Despite the symmetry between these two journeys, I will describe only the path of the soul to the land of the dead; indeed, I will suggest, in conclusion, that its importance lies precisely in the desire to prevent the reverse movement.

The journey of the soul of the dead, and ritual journeys more generally, have been reported from many cultural regions (native North America, Polynesia, island Southeast Asia),<sup>3</sup> but it appears to be most prominent in central and north Asia and in the Tibeto-Burman-speaking cultures stretching along the Himalayas, from Nepal to southwest China.<sup>4</sup> A quarter of a century ago, Nicholas Allen identified the 'ritual journey' as a fundamental ritual pattern in these cultures in Nepal, and his observation has

been confirmed and expanded first by András Höfer (1999) and more recently by Martin Gaenzle, who concluded that ritual journeys are 'a special phenomenon of the indigenous religions of the Himalayas' and 'one of the most unique characteristics of the hill region's "tribal religions"' (Gaenzle 2002:122). But it was Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf who first drew attention to the prominence, in this region, of the specific journey of the soul to the land of the dead when he wrote: 'The most characteristic feature of the eschatological beliefs of most of these tribes [in Arunachal Pradesh] is a very detailed picture of the Land of the Dead, including the often tortuous path by which it is reached' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1953:42).

My data also comes largely from Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India, with parallels from other Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes, mainly in eastern Nepal and Yunnan in southwest China.<sup>5</sup> Within Arunachal, I will focus on the tribes from the centre of the state and exclude those who practice a form of Tibetan Buddhism or Burmese Buddhism. In particular, I will describe funeral rituals and texts among two groups: Apatanis and Idu Mishmis. Finally, much of the material on Idus and Apatanis is from recent fieldwork and still 'raw', so this essay is a preliminary exploration of this material.

## II. Profile of funeral rites in central Arunachal Pradesh

No matter how important the journey of the soul might be, it is only part of a larger complex of funeral rites and beliefs, which we should first establish. For the sake of brevity, the key features are:<sup>6</sup>

1. burial. Tribes in central Arunachal do not practice cremation or cutting. Graves are uniform, especially the protective cavity, screened off by bamboo, in which the body is placed. Valuables are buried with the body, and some tribes (see Idu Mishmis below) construct a small room, complete with bed and shelving, etc. Structures are usually built over the grave, and vary from earth mounds to large bamboo towers. Taboos on eating and movement are common, especially that anyone who has entered the house of the dead person's family should not enter the house of anyone who is performing a ritual. No 'secondary treatment' of the body is reported.

2. animal sacrifice. A mithun, or cow, is sacrificed near the grave in order that it may be taken by the soul to the land of the dead, as a gift to his relatives whom he will meet there. Indeed the souls of the mithuns sacrificed in funerals (and festivals) are also guided to land of the dead through chanting.

3. land of dead. Descriptions of the land of the dead are detailed and remarkably uniform in presenting the afterlife as a prosperous mirror-image of this world. The dead enjoy fertile fields, many mithuns and a happy family life; one can even remarry in the afterlife. Most tribes have two and some three afterworlds to which the soul will go, depending on the nature of the death and the gender of the person.

4. journey to the land of dead. 'The tortuous path' is not well-reported in published literature, but certain features stand out and are confirmed by my fieldwork. First, the journey is a series of

specific, named and often known geographical locations; second, it is long, difficult and dangerous. Long because it takes hours of chanting and covers miles of geography; difficult because obstacles, deep rivers or high mountains, block the path; dangerous because one may lose one's way. A frequent obstacle is a huge mythic creature, which lies in a river and 'stretches from earth to sky'.<sup>7</sup> A few tribes (Hill Miri, Nyishi) have a guardian of the afterworld who questions newcomers and may or may not assist their passage.<sup>8</sup>

#### 5. chants/songs.

Funerals among tribes in central Arunachal typically include two types of oral texts. The first is usually sung or recited by friends and relatives, mostly women, inside the house, beside the corpse; the second is chanted by a ritual specialist, almost always a man, either inside or outside the house, but never beside the corpse. This second text often continues at the grave site, after the burial. Despite these differences in timing, place and gender, the language of the two kinds of texts is similar, and both use esoteric words and phrases. Both texts are also considered efficacious in actually guiding the soul to the land of the dead: some tribes ascribe that role to the first kind of text (which for convenience I will call 'mourning song'); other tribes ascribe it to the second kind of text ('specialist chant').

### III. Two funerals and oral texts

#### A. Apatani

To put some flesh on these bare bones, we can consider funeral rituals and texts among the Apatanis and Idu Mishmis. For the Apatanis, 30,000 of whom live in a fertile rice-growing plateau at 5000 ft., funerals are not ritually elaborate; compared with other Apatani ceremonies, which display wealth and prestige and involve long chants and costly animal sacrifices, the burial of the dead is a relatively simple event. After the corpse has been washed, family and friends come to the house, bringing items later to be buried in the grave. Soon a small number of mourners, mostly female relatives, gather at the side of the body and sing a mourning song, called 'Mourning the Dead' (*Siima Kheniin*) or 'Going down to Neli' (*Neli Toniin*); Neli is the Apatani land of the dead, for anyone who dies a natural death. An example of this mourning song is given in Appendix 1 and discussed below.<sup>9</sup> After the priest (*nyibu*) arrives, and typically after the mourning song has been sung, he performs a brief ritual, sacrifices a chicken and chants a few lines, calling on various spirits (*wi*) to protect and strengthen the soul during its journey. If the dead is an old and respected man, however, the priest conducts a more elaborate ritual, called *dokho pilya*; he constructs a small, bamboo structure, sacrifices several chickens (hens and cocks) and a dog, and then chants a text (also called *dokho pilya*).<sup>10</sup> In addition, a small structure (constructed from 2-4 inch long pieces of bamboo) is placed on the top of a tall bamboo structure erected above the grave.

When this ritual is complete, the body is carried on a bier to a graveyard, a short distance from the village; the procession is not large, a few family members, mostly men. At the grave, items of importance to the

dead person—such as a favourite sword, clothes, food (but not valuable items)--are buried with the corpse, while a priest chants briefly and a mithun or cow is killed. Finally, a dirt mound and a small bamboo fence are built over the grave, and then a tall bamboo structure, displaying the skulls of the sacrificed mithuns, is erected.<sup>11</sup> If the deceased is a person of little status or wealth, however, no rituals are conducted at the grave and no structures built: only a mangy cow is killed by men in tracksuits. Sometimes, another ritual is performed a few days later, in order to prevent the return of the dead.

The Apatani mourning song translated in Appendix 1 was recorded in 2004, but not at an actual funeral because such recordings are virtually impossible. People in central Arunachal were not enthusiastic to speak about funerals, graves or anything else related to death; they expressed a fear that the dead might return and cause harm if such topics were discussed, especially inside a house. If the chant is recited incorrectly, if one of the many 'paths' is missed, the priest might not be able to return from the land of the dead. Persuading anyone to sing a funeral song or chant for my recorder was therefore not easy.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, I was assured by local people that the *neli toniin* dirge translated here is representative; certainly it reveals many of the features identified as characteristic of funerals in this region, especially the journey of the soul. As the text shows, the Apatani land of the dead is a happy and prosperous place; the only problem is getting the dead there and keeping it there.

As we can see from the text, the path down to *neli* is defined as a sequence of 'resting places', that leads from one mountain or forest to the

next. The dead person's soul, and those of the sacrificial mithun and/or cow, are guided by a priest, but dangers and obstacles appear. First they must cross a river and the huge monster that lies within it. Then come the dangerous paths (ten *hombi* and five *honto*) where anyone can get lost. Notice that the first-person speaker in the text, who appears to be the priest-guide, is later merged with the singer, the widow of the dead man, which helps to explain why people were so reluctant to sing such songs: since the singer becomes the priest-guide, she may herself get lost or come to harm on the journey. Once these obstacles are crossed, however, the danger is passed and you come to a second stream, where you wash and meet your relatives in the sunny afterworld.

When the priest-guide has tied the mithuns at the right posts and prepares to depart, we see that the living want a separation between themselves and the dead. The ropes do not belong in the afterworld; they must be taken back; the priest cannot stay in *neli*; he must build a mound and fence above the grave; he must return to the safety of his village. The same emphasis is also found in the Apatani specialist chant (*dokho pilya*), in which the priest warns the dead person's soul: 'Do not disturb our lives; do not come back to our world. Do not upset our ceremonies; do not harm our land and crops. Your life is now in Neli, so do not disturb our feasts and festivals. Live your life in Neli and be happy there.'<sup>13</sup>

I would say that this desire to separate the dead from the living is the central theme of the text and the funeral ceremony as a whole. The song is structured by a series of movements between danger and safety: the journey downward is dangerous, but *neli* is a place of contentment; similarly, the

dead are left behind, but the return journey is arduous and requires the protection of powerful spirits. We also notice that this return journey is marked by ever-increasing proximity to home and the safety of interior spaces. As the singer approaches closer and closer to her village, she names the spirits of the forests near her village, the clans of her village, then a tiny stream where her clan erects bamboo altars during rituals. Finally, she enters the house, asking for protection and health from the spirits, and retreats to the ritual corner of the house (*dokho*) and into the basket (*diichi diru*) where the souls of her family are placed for safe-keeping.

### B. Idu Mishmi.

Idu Mishmis are quite different to Apatanis--in material culture, language and ritual practices, and crucially in environment: they mostly live in scattered hamlets in narrow valleys and on the steep slopes of rugged mountains, where they practice shifting agriculture and hunt. In terms of funerary practices and beliefs, Idus (again unlike Apatanis) recognise only one afterworld, which is not described in much detail, but the journey there has three separate phases and is rich in geographical specificity. And their funerals are far more complex.

#### 1. funerals

Idus conduct four types of funerals, depending on the status and wealth of the person.<sup>14</sup> All four require a priest (*igu*) and a mourning song by relatives and friends, but the most elaborate funeral, known as *yah*, includes animal sacrifice (sometimes more than a hundred mithuns) and lasts for

three or four days, during which the priest chants for approximately two days and performs a special dance with musical accompaniment. The same dance by the same priest with the same accompaniment is also performed at large public ceremonial feasts, but the *yah* is the most important event in Idu culture: indeed, the reputation of a priest is reckoned by the number of *yah* funerals he has conducted (124, in one instance).

When an Idu dies, the priest is immediately called and the family begins to observe food restrictions for ten days. The body is then washed, dressed in new clothes and a few coins placed in the palm since it is believed that the soul will need to buy water on the way to land of dead. Once the corpse is placed in a back room, the mourning song by friends and relatives begins and continues until the burial, perhaps one or two days later. Known as *anja*, the mourning song is a specialised verbal art, whose intensity was noted by the first western visitors in the Idu region from the mid-nineteenth century onward;<sup>15</sup> although in principle anyone may perform the *anja*, not all know the phrases, formulas and stories used. The mourners, mostly but not exclusively women, chant in small groups (2-5 persons), who rotate in order that the wailing remains continuous. The content is vast and varied, but in general the singers retell the life of the dead person and warn him that his place is not here: 'You were 10 months in your mother's womb; now you have lived your last days here. Now you must find your way to the land of the dead; you must ask others the way.'

The arrival of the priest (which may be as many as 24 hours after the death, since he may have to travel on foot across steep ravines) is marked by placing a bush in the steps to the house; once inside, he begins a chant

(*laroti*) telling the dead not to return and disturb the family, not even to appear in dreams; in other words, the same sentiments as in the Apatani funeral. Meanwhile mithuns are killed, and food and drink are prepared for the guests, who start to arrive, often from distant villages. Also the grave will now have been dug and furnished according to the wishes of the dead person and the resources of the family; some graves are completely furnished, with beds, shelving and a full kitchen of cooking implements.

Next the corpse is carried on a litter in a small procession, led by a man carrying a weaving shuttle for a dead woman or a sword for a man. On the way to the grave the mourning is loud and intense, although the priest remains in the house and continues to chant. When the burial is complete, the priest comes to the grave and offers rice, rice-beer and meat in a small bamboo container hung on a fence in front of the grave. Rapping his sword on the fence to get the dead person's attention, the priest addresses the soul and prepares it for the journey to the land of the dead. During this chant (*laron maba*), a special kind of leaves (*evena*) are stuck in the ground to serve as an exit from the grave; the dead person also speaks to the priest, complaining, for instance, that certain items were not put in her grave. The soul is first guided north and then back to the grave, where he is told to take his last meal and listen to further instructions from the priest about his final journey to the west.

When the soul has departed for the west, the priest returns to the house, where a structure (*amungo*) made of *evena* leaves stuck on a bamboo frame has been placed on an inside wall. The priest hurls a broom at the structure, which is thought to symbolise sending the soul away. When the

guests depart (and when leaving the grave as well), the priest uses the *evena* leaves to sweep away any taint of death that might cling to them. With this ritual (*alu thru*, 'sweeping up'), the funeral is over.

## 2. Idu texts.

a. mourning song (*anja*). The mourning song given in Appendix 2 was not recorded at a funeral because, as mentioned earlier, such chanting is dangerous as well as necessary. The man whom I recorded, himself a priest, said he would not chant in his or anyone's house because it might 'bring harm', so the text was recorded in a circuit house. He chanted for about 25 minutes, after which he stopped and said, 'I can't do anymore; it's too difficult' and then explained that he would have to go to a more senior priest for a ritual (*aaya-bito*) to remove the 'danger of death' from him.<sup>16</sup>

The mourning song recorded that day fell into two parts. The first turned out to be an unusual account of the coming of death to Idus. Myths of the origin of death fall roughly into two types: natural rejuvenation and human miscommunication/error.<sup>17</sup> In our Idu text, however, death comes from neither rejuvenation nor human error but from a curse by unnamed 'enemies,' who wanted to harm the Idus because they had 'mocked death' by performing funerals for rats. In other words, death was not shown respect, and the Idus were admonished to hold a proper ceremony, in which the 'windows and doors must be kept open all day.' Given this attitude that death requires respect, it is not surprising that Idu funerals are ritually complex ceremonies, lasting two to five days, with long mourning songs and specialist chants.

The second half of the Idu mourning song (in Appendix 2) explains another origin: following the first death, the practices of mourning and burial and chanting are established. This part of the text centres on the first priest and culture-hero of Idus, a man named Sineru, who is the foundation of most social institutions. In local myth, he was the first to mourn (although in our text Sineru asks a child to mourn) and the first to successfully guide a soul, his own mother's, to the land of dead by chanting. Here is a brief version of his story:

When Sineru's mother died, her soul took many different forms and kept coming back to their house, again and again. One day it came in the form of a bird. While Sineru's wife was weaving, the bird-soul flew in through the window. His wife struck at it with her shuttle to drive it away. Finally, Sineru sent his brother, Imeru Milli, to perform *anja* [over their mother's body]. But it was not successful and Sineru was forced to go himself to Athu Popu He [where soul guided his mother's soul to Athu Popu He], an area beyond, and there. While he wept, his tears stained a large stone, and the gemstone, made by his tears are still visible on that stone today.<sup>18</sup>

Athu Popu is not a mythic place, nor is the tear-stained stone imaginary. Both are found at the Keyala Pass, at about 12,000 ft. in the Himalayas, on the border between India and China/Tibet, on a major trading route linking Tibet, Arunachal and Assam. In the year 2000, an expedition of Idus reached the Keyala Pass and found a large rock, which was photographed and reproduced in local publications.<sup>19</sup> From the rock water

drips, and this has been claimed as Sineru's tears. But Athu Popu is not the end of the soul's journey, merely an important junction, marking the passage into Tibet, as the priest's chant reveals.

b. specialist chant (*maba*). In myth Sineru was the first to mourn for the dead, but in practice the 'wailing' is not done by priests for it does not transport the soul to the land of the dead. That journey is only made possible by the chanting of a ritual specialist, the Igu priest. He is accompanied by three others: two of them, like the head priest, strike a small drum (*ripung*) with an attached stick, while the third assistant, who does not chant, plays a slender, two-headed cylindrical drum (*ambu*).<sup>20</sup> The chanting, which takes 10-12 hours, describes the soul's journey in three sections. Although I have not yet recorded a full version, here is a summary description of the journey.<sup>21</sup>

i. the soul goes north. Standing at the grave, the priest says to the dead person, 'From Atiyakong ['outside the house'] you have to start the journey; you have to take everything you need with you; you have to make the journey alone, but I will guide you. When you were alive, you were nursed by sunshine and by wind, but now there is no sun and you must travel by the wind alone. You are dead, so you must not stay here among the living; you must go to Lomo Loko.' This first leg of the journey, the northern route, goes through 64 named places, of which Athu Popu is only the eighth; so most of the journey is in Tibet/China. The final two places are Inilo Ichiru, where items presented during mourning and buried with body are kept, and Lomo Loko, from where the soul returns 'using the wind as transport.'

The priest also explains the cause of death to the soul and instructs it 'not to live on any hill or in any river, but to go beyond the clouds. You might get lost, so I will guide you.' On this journey, the priest's soul accompanies the dead person's soul, and each mountain they cross is divided in two: the left side is for the dead, the right for the priest.

ii. return journey south, back to place of death. After reaching Lomo Loko, the soul is guided back to Atiyakong ('outside the house') and to the grave, where the priest feeds the soul to prevent hunger on the final leg of the long journey. The priest draws his sword and strikes the bamboo fence (constructed in front of the grave) and warns the soul not to return, that he must eat this last meal and depart. Then the soul is sent away to the west, where the sun sets.

iii. journey to the west. This final section again starts from Atiyakong ('outside the house') and goes west through 59 named places. The final place is Asi Akhrika, which the priest explained to me is 'where the door to the soul's place is closed, so I cannot say anymore.'

## Conclusions

The geography of the journey of the soul among the Idu Mishmis stands out for its details and complexity, but it conforms to a general pattern found among other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh (and other Tibeto-Burman groups in the Himalayas, northern Burma and southwest China). What can

explain this particular kind of elaboration in funerary ritual and oral text? One explanation for the prominence of ritual journeys (including the journey of the soul) among Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes in Nepal is that they derive from historical experiences, such as trading, portering, military service, processions and pilgrimages, especially those linked to the sacred geography of Tibet.<sup>22</sup> It is true that journeys of the soul often retrace the routes of migration from an imagined homeland, but I do not think that history provides a sufficient explanation for their prominence in funerals. Another way of trying to explain the journey of the soul is to see it as a language for thinking and speaking about death; not as a consequence of history but as an idiom favoured by some cultures for resolving the ambiguities presented when someone dies.

We would all probably agree that funerals, like kinship, language and house architecture and so on, are a culture-specific response to a universal need. I also believe that funerals, like these other cultural expressions, fall into distinct patterns, in this case patterns composed of rituals, beliefs, built structures, objects and performed texts; further, and although their precise nature and distribution are not yet clear, it appears that in each pattern one element is emblematic of the whole.<sup>23</sup> For instance, a ritual act--secondary treatment of the dead--is characteristic of some cultures in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere); a ritual specialist—the shaman as escort for the dead—is the defining element in central and north Asian funerals; and a belief—the cyclical transformation of the soul—is central to Hindu and Buddhist funerals in South Asia.<sup>24</sup> The pattern for Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes along the Himalayas resembles that of central and north Asia and might best be understood in contrast to the South Asian pattern.<sup>25</sup>

Hindu funerals in India are said to be characterised by the rhetoric of return and the symbols of rejuvenation: 'death regenerates life,' in Parry's pithy phrase.<sup>26</sup> It appears that this pattern is dominated by a desire to keep the dead close to the living, to feed them, to memorialise them, to worship them, to talk to them. For example, my earlier fieldwork taught me that south Indian Hindus wish to remain (not without ambivalence, of course) in contact with the dead, in order to summon and utilise the power of death, a point which Piers Vitebsky's remarkable ethnography of 'dialogues with the dead' extends to the (partially Hinduised) Sora tribe in central India.

Funerals in central Arunachal Pradesh, on the other hand, are characterised by a desire to maintain a separation between the living and the dead. This desire is not altogether absent in South Asian funerals, but it is not as prominent as it is in tribal northeast India. As we have seen, both the Apatani and Idu texts emphasise the barriers that must be erected between the land of the living and the land of the dead. 'Here we must part. I must build a bund between us,' says the Apatani priest/singer to the soul taken to the underworld. At the grave, the Idu priest instructs the dead: 'You are dead, so you must not stay here among the living.' There is no cyclical return, nor any symbolism of rejuvenation and no sign that 'death is a source of life.' The souls of those who die an unnatural death do sometimes return and cause trouble among the living, and (as in Hindu India) this must be guarded against, but such revenants are not common.

Significantly, there is in central Arunachal Pradesh no deification of the dead and little evidence of ancestor worship or of a desire to stay in

contact with them; and this, I would suggest, is why the journey of the soul is such a prominent feature of funerals in this region.<sup>27</sup> The journey is long, difficult and dangerous precisely in order to make sure the dead stay dead; and the obstacles and length make a return journey unlikely. If the road to the land of dead were straightforward, souls of the dead might come back more easily. By the same cultural logic, although the journey is dangerous, the land of the dead must be prosperous and happy--after all, if the afterworld were dark and gloomy, that would be most unfortunate, because its inhabitants are not going anywhere else.

## Appendix 1

**Neli Toniin ('Going Down to the Land of the Dead' )**, an Apatani mourning song by Hage Biinyi, female, 70 years, Hari village, 2003. Translation prepared with the assistance of Hage Komo.

1.  
In the beginning long ago, the great ancestors,  
    grandfather Kiilyi and grandfather Kiilo  
Made the journey to Neli,  
    the land of the dead,  
    along the khempu path.<sup>1</sup>
  
2.  
Mother Nyani of Siichan,  
    passed along the Siichan route;  
Father Nyabo of Myodi,  
    moved along the Myodi path.
  
3.  
The worms dug holes into the earth,  
    the monkeys cleared the path  
    the birds prepared the way,  
They knew the way to Neli,  
    along the khempu path.
  
4.  
On the way to Neli, we come to Hiising<sup>2</sup>,  
    to the resting place at Sindo,  
Here, let us praise our manly skills  
    let us celebrate our achievements.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'khempu path' leads to Neli, the land of the dead; khempu is the name of a ritual platform (*lapang*) in Neli.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hiising' is the first stopping place on the recognised route to Neli.

Let us now open our pouches  
and eat well.

5.

Further along the khempu path  
on the route to Neli,  
We come to the Chayen River.  
But beware of dangers here!  
There are ten hombi and five honto<sup>3</sup>  
where you can lose your way!

6.

Deep in the Chayen river lies Chango Sotii,<sup>4</sup>  
that huge animal, Dogo Soro,  
Stretching between earth and sky!

7.

His upper body is dense with hair  
tangled like birds' nests,  
His lower body lies beneath the surface  
stirring strong currents.

8.

Come now, cross this Chayen river,  
and do not fear.  
We'll walk on the chest of Chango Sotii  
Carefully and slowly we step.  
Come mithuns, come cows, too.<sup>5</sup>  
Let us all cross this river without fear.

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<sup>3</sup> In some versions of this chant, the singer enumerates a long list of these dangerous paths.

<sup>4</sup> Chango Sotii is a mythical animal (likened in some recitations to an elephant or a mithun) believed by some to cause earthquakes (see Singh 1986/87).

<sup>5</sup> The soul of the dead leads mithuns and cows to Neli, as gifts to his relatives there.

9.

We have walked over on the chest of the Chango Sotii;  
by stepping across at the middle point  
We have crossed the deep waters of Chayen.

10.

Now we come to the Adii Ayen stream,  
Where we'll wash our clothes and bodies.<sup>6</sup>

11.

In Neli, the land of our grandmothers,  
at the khempu lapang,<sup>7</sup>  
we tie the mithuns to the gyadi posts  
In Neli, the land of our grandfathers,  
at the itan lapang,  
we tie the cows to the gyada posts.  
We tie them tightly with ropes.

12.

All the animals are tied  
at the gyadi posts in Neli,  
And now I shall return,  
to the land of my people.  
You [spirits in Neli] should protect me  
with blessings as numerous as mithun hair.  
I want to take back my belongings  
and return safely  
to the land of the living.

13.

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<sup>6</sup> When the soul crosses the Adii Ayen stream, he is received by his relatives and friends already in Neli.

<sup>7</sup> Khempu and itan are names of ritual platforms (*lapang*).

I untie all the mithuns--  
the tache, tah and mar ropes  
the pandu, bipa and manii ropes.  
I take them all back  
for they do not belong in Neli.  
I put them in my cane bag  
for holding birds and rats  
slung over my shoulder.  
I take them back to the living.

14.

I have taken you to Neli,  
and shown you the house of Neli.  
But where shall I go now?  
I cannot eat the food here in Neli,  
from these fertile lands of tall crops  
where the cocks crow and birds sing.  
Here we must part.  
I close the wall between us,  
a bund of mud and clay,  
A fence of split bamboo.<sup>8</sup>

15.

Following the route of Talyin Hiitti-Hiichi,  
the ancestors who made the first journey to Neli,  
I must now climb back to the world,  
up the steep mountain path  
Where the wild bamboo grows.

16.

Following the path of the ancestors,  
and the souls that went before,  
I climb up toward the world of the living,

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<sup>8</sup> A small mound of earth is formed on top of the grave, and a low fence of split bamboo is built around it.

up the Pinku-jorku mountain path,  
through the thick bamboo groves.  
Spirits! Make my soul strong.

17.

The young bears and young boars  
blazed the path through the thick jungle.  
The little monkeys  
cleared the brush and made the paths.  
I follow their paths through the dense forests

18.

I return to the world of our people,  
to the land of the living,  
I need help to safeguard my soul  
to protect the souls of my family,  
The souls of our mithuns,  
our chickens and pigs.

19.

I follow the path of the monkey  
to whom I give thanks,  
Travelling toward Iijan Hai gambii,  
the place of sun and water  
where live bears and boars;  
Through the paths of wild bamboo  
to a deep pool,  
And here I must beware.

20.

In this place of sun and water,  
at the edge of that pool  
I drank to quench my thirst,  
careful not to drown.

21.

From the place of sun and water  
I travelled the pantii path,  
the path of our mothers,  
And along the letii path  
the path of our fathers,  
Closer and closer to our village.

22.

Leaving the land of sun and water,  
I followed the pantii path,  
The path of our mothers  
to the rantii forest behind our village.  
And along the path of our fathers  
to the piige field before our village  
Where the su spirits reside.<sup>9</sup>

23.

Let the mothers of rantii path safeguard us  
Let the fathers of piige path protect us all.  
We have crossed the mountain paths  
Now the su wis must guard us safely.

24.

I come to the shrine<sup>10</sup> of our ancestors  
Mitan Libya and Doging Loda  
Chiging Mipu, Tamen Milo and Turu Kago.<sup>11</sup>

25.

I come back to the village of our ancestors,  
Koji and Pilya, Tai Gyati,

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<sup>9</sup> Su spirits are a class of powerful and potentially dangerous spirits.

<sup>10</sup> 'Shrine' translates *nago*, a small hut with a round roof, used for rituals during a spring festival.

<sup>11</sup> These are ancestors of the clans in Hari village, where the singer lives.

Marpu and Ekha.<sup>12</sup>  
I come back to our houses  
to our prosperous village  
to crowing cocks and barking dogs.  
I come back to my children.

26.  
I come to my husband's house,  
the house of my children.  
Let the spirits of this house  
protect and strengthen us all.

27.  
Spirits of the lapang and babo poles,<sup>13</sup>  
protect us.  
I ask the su spirits of sigan sangha,  
and of bukhen talyang<sup>14</sup>  
To make us strong.

28.  
I, Rinyo, wife of Tamen,<sup>15</sup>  
ask the su spirits of chogio abya  
To protect and keep us strong.  
Let me remain here,  
and not wander afar.  
Let me stay safe and sound  
in the doko corner  
Like Tibetan bells and brass plates.

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<sup>12</sup> These are the names of sub-groups in the clan in Hari to which the singer belongs.

<sup>13</sup> Babo poles (40 or 50 metres high) are erected during the Spring festival.

<sup>14</sup> Sigang sangha is a small stream that runs near the singer's house and where altars are built to the powerful and dangerous su spirits (*wis*); bukhen talyang is an altar constructed during the Spring festival. Chogio abya (in the next verse) is another location where *su* spirits are worshipped.

<sup>15</sup> Here the singer gives the narrator of the chant and her husband personal names.

29.

Inside our house,  
in the righthand corner at the back  
Let our souls reside  
safe inside the basket<sup>16</sup>  
Protected by Lyapin Chantun.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In the back right hand corner (the *dokho*) of an Apatani house hangs a basket (*dinchi diru* or *yadin*), in which valuables are kept, such as metal bells, brass plates and old shawls. It is also believed that this is where souls should be placed for safekeeping.

<sup>17</sup> Lyapin Chantun is an important female spirit who protects the house, especially the *dokho* corner and the contents of the basket there. She is invoked for protection during a ritual once a year and on special occasions, for example when a child is born or a new bride enters the house.

## Appendix 2

**Anja** ('Wailing'), an Idu Mishmi mourning song, by Amboko Mega, priest, male, 45, Hunli town, 2004. Translation prepared with the assistance of Rajiv Miso.

1. Earlier we [Idus] were not dying and we were not performing anja.
2. Earlier we were immortal but now we die.
3. Our enemies have done this to us.
4. We are on the verge of destruction.
5. The enemies are spreading death among us
6. Death is now occurring everyday.
7. Now we are burying bodies everyday, as has been said long ago.
8. This is the result of the curse by our enemies.
9. Because of that curse we are suffering.
10. We are therefore taking revenge ('returning the curse') on our enemies, as has been said long ago.
11. We have cursed our enemies with death.
12. It is our wish to see dead bodies in their places, too.
13. Before this, we never died, yet we used to perform funerals for dead rats, by washing them
14. Our enemies used to say, 'If you sincerely want to mourn the dead, then when the sun rises, open the windows and keep them open all day.' [= 'Show us that you are actually doing a funeral']

15. 'And keep the door open all day, too.'
16. Our enemies got angry because we mocked death by performing funerals for rats, and so they cursed us to die.
17. This is why we were cursed, as was said long ago.
18. And now, because of this curse, we have begun to die.
19. Because of this curse, we are doomed to face darkness.
20. This is what our people have said from long ago.
21. Now we see that people are dying every year, every month.
22. Our great ancestress, Maselo Ginu, was distressed to see her people dying all the time.
23. When she saw her people dying, she gave birth to a child, so that he could perform anja.
24. When that child's mother died, Sineru [first Igu priest] asked the child to weep.
25. The one who does the weeping tells the soul which things should be buried with the body, as was said long ago.
26. When a man dies, the person who weeps tells him that the things he used during his life will be buried with him.
27. 'When a man dies, he must be buried,' said Sineru, the first priest.
28. When a person dies, he will never come back no matter how much people may cry.
29. If the soul returns, we must drive it away from the window, as was said long ago.
30. Sineru declared, 'Even if the soul comes back in the form of a fly, I will drive it away with my chanting.'

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Huntington and Metcalf 1979 for a critique of Parry and Bloch's alleged functionalism.

<sup>2</sup> Davies 1997 is useful in underscoring the importance of language in funerals, but his key argument that such language are 'words against death'

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(pp. 1-2) and that funerals are intended to overcome death, viewed as a loss of self-consciousness, is not persuasive: funerals are not only or even primarily a war against death.

<sup>3</sup> The international motif-index gives examples under 'Journey to Other World' (F 0) and 'Journey to Lower World' (F 80).

<sup>4</sup> On the prominence of the journey of the soul in central Asia, see Chadwick 1940:105-06; in central and north Asia, see Hölmberg 1927, pp. 27ff, 484ff; Eliade 1964: 200ff; in Polynesia, see Chadwick 1940: 272-7; in native North America, see Radin 1990 [1916], Radin and Lamere 1911; in Nepal, see Höfer 1981, 1994, 1999; Gaenszle 1999, 2002; Pettigrew 1999; and the essays in the journal *Kailash* 1982, 9 (4); in Yunnan, see Rock 1955; McKhann 1998, pp. 29-30; Oppitz 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The Arunachal material, when not from fieldwork, comes from Fürer-Haimendorf 1953, 1980, 1982; Takhe Kani 1993, 1996; Kumar 1979; Natung 1998; Roy 1997 [1960]; Sukla 1959; Srivastava 1988; Stonor 1957. See also Bordoloi's description (1982) of the funeral ceremony among the Karbi, a Tibeto-Burman tribe living in the hills of Assam.

<sup>6</sup> Although all the tribes of central Arunachal have a multiple notion of the soul, such distinctions are rarely clearly articulated; for that reason I have not included this feature in the profile (see Fürer-Haimendorf 1953: 43-44 and Jackson 1979: 244 on three types of souls among the Konyak Nagas and Na-khi, respectively).

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<sup>7</sup> See Singh 1986-87, who relies heavily on Elwin 1958.

<sup>8</sup> However, Fürer- Haimendorf (1953:45) considers the guardian to be characteristic of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Garo, a Tibeto-Burman tribe, in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, the soul faces similar obstacles and landmarks during the journey to the land of the dead (see Maaker, forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> A version of this text (*neli toniin*) is chanted also during large, public festivals, as a way of insuring that the souls of the animals to be sacrificed are safely taken away into the land of the dead before the animals are killed.

<sup>10</sup> *Dokho* is the name of the safe corner of the house, and *pilya* is the name of the spirit who protects souls and valuables held in that corner (see the translation in Appendix 1).

<sup>11</sup> The size and shape of the bamboo structure vary according to three categories: priest/old men; younger men; women. Other details on Apatani funerals are found in Fürer-Haimendorf 1953; Fürer-Haimendorf 1980:172-79; Fürer-Haimendorf 1982:134-37.

<sup>12</sup> For example, before the Idu Mishmi priest agreed to chant the text in Appendix 2, he explained that he would have to undergo an exorcism after the recording.

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<sup>13</sup> From a recording (again not at an actual funeral) by Mudan Pai in May 2004.

<sup>14</sup> 1. *yah* (see below); 2. *bro-cha*, a slightly reduced version of the *yah* for ordinary persons; 3. *aluthru* (the last stage of *yah*) done for the poor and paid by collective contribution; 4. *bro-phri*, or second burial: within one year of the first funeral, a second grave is dug so that, if too few or the wrong items were buried the first time, more or different items can be stored. A second grave is also dug when a person dies away from her natal village.

<sup>15</sup> Dalton 1872 (based on Fr. Krick's description in 1851); Cooper 1873; Mainprice 1945. All three are brief but often vivid descriptions of funerals among the Digaru/Taran Mishmis (not the Idu Mishmis).

<sup>16</sup> My research assistant had to undergo a similar ritual to 'protect and strengthen' his soul from death; one night, in the middle of many days of recording interviews and texts about death, visiting graves, etc, he woke up with a stiff arm and his mother said, 'That's because you're going around doing all this stuff related to death. I'll call the *igu* [priest] and have him perform an *ayi* ritual.'

<sup>17</sup> The 'Rejuvenation' story includes Frazer's 'stone and banana type', 'serpent and cast skin type' (see Anell 1964 on this type in Oceania.) and 'waxing and waning moon type'. The 'Human error or miscommunication' story includes Frazer's 'two messengers type' (see Abrahamsson 1951 on African examples). Tribes in central Arunachal explain the coming of death in two ways. The first falls under the 'rejuvenation' category and tells how

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many suns caused excessive heat on earth, until they are shot down by men; the sole surviving sun then demands that it be given dead bodies, as compensation for her return to a now-frozen earth. The second Arunachal story, which involves human error, describes how the great ancestor Abo Tani hears a sweet bird song, which turns out to be a mother grieving over death of her children; Abo Tani asks for the song, but the mother bird warns him that it is sorrowful. Abo Tani persists so the bird gives him a 'tear', which becomes the seed of death among humans.

<sup>18</sup> Recorded in Hunli from Amboko Mega, a young Idu priest, on 27.01.04.

<sup>19</sup> See Pettigrew 1999 for a similar expedition, which explored the geographical route taken by dead souls among the Tamu/Gurung in eastern Nepal; as in the Idu Mishmi case, this expedition had to stop at the international border, although the ritual journey continues far into China.

<sup>20</sup> Some Idu priests are women, and some have been highly regarded, but today almost all senior priests are men.

<sup>21</sup> Recorded in Roing from Mola Milli, a young Idu priest, on 6.02.04.

<sup>22</sup> Allen 1974: 18-19; Höfer 1994: 30 & fn. 19; Höfer 1999: 230.

<sup>23</sup> James Woodburn (1982) has suggested that a pattern, defined by an 'immediate-return' mentality, is characteristic of four hunter-gatherer societies in Africa and Asia.

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<sup>24</sup> Tibetan funerary practices are outside the scope of this essay, but they seem to represent a pre-Buddhist layer (similar in some aspects to practices found today among Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes in the Himalayas, such as burial and animal sacrifice) overlain by a Buddhist eschatology (rebirth and ethical reckoning) (Cuevas 2003: 29, 69, *passim*; Kvaerne 1985). Rock (1955) found a similar overlay in the most important Na-Khi funeral text.

<sup>25</sup> In particular, the practices among Altaic societies (described in Hölmberg 1927:, 484ff; Eliade 1964:207-08) are similar to those in central Arunachal Pradesh.

<sup>26</sup> Parry 1982: 81

<sup>27</sup> An interesting counter-example to my argument is that the Winnebago have both an elaborate journey of the dead soul and a belief in reincarnation (Radin 1990 [1916], pp. 91-105, 266-68).