CHAPTER FIVE

RITUAL TEXTS

INTRODUCTION

Ritual texts are the core of Apatani oral tradition. They are distinguished from the stories in the previous two chapters (tales, myths and histories) by language, performer and intent, but not necessarily by content. The same story may be told as a prose tale (migung) or chanted as a ritual text (miji). Most ritual texts are chanted by male priests in order to ensure prosperity (Ritual Text 1), heal a specific illness or protect someone from danger (Ritual Text 6). Exceptions are the funeral chant (Ritual Text 5), which may be performed by women, and ayus (Ritual Texts 2, 3 & 4), which are performed by men who are not necessarily priests and which do not always summon spirits. All ritual texts, however, are delivered in a special speech through which Apatanis communicate with the spirit world.¹

RITUAL SPEECH

Apatani ritual speech (miji agung [‘miji language’] or nyibu agung [‘priest language’]) differs markedly from everyday speech. As with other varieties of oral poetry, from the Hebrew Bible to hunter-gatherer songs, it uses a special vocabulary, allusions and metaphors to build dense clusters of meaning and association. Also, like other examples across the world, its defining feature is parallelism.²

Parallelism in Apatani ritual speech, however, has a distinctive form: not the usual two-line couplets but linked nouns, or what I call ‘noun-pairs.’³ We have already come across prominent examples,
such as miji-migung & donyi-polo. While not all nouns are paired, many place-names, personal names (priests, spirits, sacrificial animals and ancestors) and words for ritual objects occur exclusively as noun-pairs. The two elements of a pair occur in various patterns—side-by-side, separated by a few words or by several lines—and a skilful performer must know how to arrange hundreds of these pairs within the steady flow of chanted words.

That knowledge is the distinguishing mark of a nyibu. With few exceptions, other Apatanis can neither chant nor understand ritual speech. Although its verbs forms are similar to those in conversation, the predominance of noun-pairs, plus concision and allusions to events, places and characters in the spirit world, make ritual speech incomprehensible to almost anyone who is not a nyibu.

Translation from this specialist speech, first into ordinary Apatani and then into English, required a great deal of time and collaboration; and even now I cannot be sure that all the lines below are accurate. Occasionally, even priests were unable to explain ritual speech in conversational Apatani, saying that the ‘words did not exist.’ In these (fortunately few) cases, the translation into English is an approximation. In other cases, the healing chant (Ritual Text 6) for example, the full text was not performed. I also suspect that lines of others texts were held back, for instance, during the section in which the soul is guided to the land of the dead (Ritual Text 5). On the other hand, obscurity is sometimes intentional, as in the verbal duelling in ayu texts (Ritual Text 2). Finally, although I have made omissions of my own by cutting out repeated lines and lists of names, I have retained some of these features to give readers a sense of the original texture.

Ritual specialists

Ritual specialists in Apatani culture are nyibus. They are the men who conduct rituals and chant verses that contact spirits in order to heal illness, ensure prosperity, provide strength, prevent fire accidents, recover lost animals and guide souls of the dead, as well as souls of sacrificial mithuns and cows, to the land of the dead. The only major ritual tasks not performed by nyibus are the killing of large animals—they are slain by a clansman selected by divination—and the digging of graves, which used to be done by one family in each village but today is done by Indian labourers hired for that purpose. Men other than nyibus often help in interpreting divinations, and they sometimes conduct