CHAPTER THREE

THE SUBU HENIIN TEXT

The Subu Heniin (‘Mithun Chant’ or ‘Chanting to the Mithun’) does not easily fit into conventional genres or textual categories. It does not tell a story, like a folktale or legend, and it is not spoken in everyday speech. Closest to myth, it is also more than sacred narrative. It is oral poetry yet unlike most forms of oral epic or praise poetry. Although delivered in the ambiguities of ritual speech, it has a coherence created by its underlying themes, repeated imagery and fixed texts, such as long lists of names. Before describing these features of the Subu Heniin text, however, let us consider it alongside other lengthy ritual recitations.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

CHANT AS GENRE

If the Subu Heniin is more cosmology than narrative and does not match standard genres, it largely eludes comparative analysis, as well. This is so partly because few similar texts have been documented, translated and published. Still, the Subu Heniin does have parallels that help us to identify the significance of this Apatani text. Unexpectedly, those parallels are found mostly in Austronesia rather than the extended eastern Himalayas.

European labels applied to non-European oral genres are notoriously imprecise, and ‘chant’ is no exception. For example, two oral genres among the Melpa in Papua New Guinea are locally distinguished by the intended direction of the speech (‘up’ versus ‘down’), yet the ethnographer calls them ‘chant’ and ‘spell.’

1 Broadly speaking, however, the use of ‘chant’ to describe oral genres in Asia and Africa is consistent with European criteria. From Latin and Old French roots,

1 Strathern 1995: 223.
'chant' carries connotations of song, or at least music, that is typically religious, monotonous and solemn. It is not narrative, and its main intention is to contact non-human powers rather than entertain an audience.

For these reasons, most chants are not performed in everyday speech. Although the language of chants has been variously described (‘sung,’ ‘enhanced,’ ‘heightened’), the crucial point is that it is different to ordinary language. Not just in intonation, pitch and rhythm, but typically in vocabulary, too. In brief, chant is a genre identified not by content but by language, intent and context. It falls on one side of a distinction, made in many Asian and African oral traditions, between genres that use everyday speech to entertain in informal settings and those that use special speech to address spirits in ritual contexts.

Apatani categories

Apatani oral tradition is a case in point. Apatanis speak of two kinds of oral texts, *migung* and *miji*, whose compound (*miji migung*) means ‘oral tradition’ and ‘traditional knowledge.’ The principal difference between these categories is that *miji* is performed in ‘ritual speech’ (*miji agung*, or *nyibu agung*), whereas *migung* is spoken in ordinary speech. Some stories and episodes may be performed in either form of speech, but myth and cosmology dominate *miji* texts.

Apatanis recognise three types of *miji* texts, which I call ‘ritual texts.’ They are differentiated by their intention, which in turn determines the type of spirits they address. The *ayu* is the odd one out since it is a type of verbal duelling performed by knowledgeable older men (including *nyibus*) during festivals to entertain rather than to summon spirits. A second genre is *wi benii*, which consists of healing chants that summon mostly harmful spirits. The third genre is *wi barnii*, which primarily addresses benevolent spirits at a major ritual in order to bring prosperity and protect against danger. In principle, the Subu Heniin is a *wi barnii* text because it uses ritual speech to invite protective spirits

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2 ‘Chanted tales’ in parts of the highlands of Papua New Guinea, for example, have ‘special intonational and/or rhythmic patterns’ (Rumsey 2005: 41).
3 See, for example, Lewis 1988b: 253.
4 See chapter 5 and Blackburn 2008 for more details on Apatani oral genres.
5 Another important *wi barnii* text is the funeral chant that leads the dead person’s soul to the land of the dead.