CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND THE FUTURE

When a nyibu stands on the lapang and chants the Subu Heniin during a Murung festival, the unspectacular and calm ambience belies the complexity and importance of what is happening. Taking that scene as a focal point, this book has tried to unravel its several strands—chant, feast, ritual specialist, his performance and his speech—and to understand their significance. In this final chapter, I first draw together the observations made about these individual topics in order to highlight the conclusions of the book as a whole. Then I summarise the changes taking place in the Murung and reflect on its possible future.

Conclusions

At the outset, we saw that the physical setting of the Apatani valley has influenced more than one aspect of local life. Adapting to the limitations of a landscape eight kilometres long and four across, 30,000 Apatanis devote nearly every piece of level land to paddy fields and gardens, build narrow houses in crowded villages and live in nuclear families. At an elevation of 1,500 metres, the valley has also played a role in the relative isolation of Apatanis, limiting contact with Assam and slowing the process of colonialism. In addition, we found that Apatani ethnic categories and cosmology are mapped onto local topography: the valley and its surrounding mountains define insiders and outsiders, as well as the realms in which ancestors reside.

These initial observations contain indications of the social cohesion that emerges as the main conclusion of the book as a whole. The enclosed landscape fosters a strong sense of identity among Apatanis; indeed, they are the only tribe in the region whose autonym is also their ethnonym. The densely populated valley also makes possible the social interaction required for the exchange practices and ceremonial friendships in a Murung, some of which involve the entire Apatani population. This close relationship between Apatanis and their valley, their intensive and constant nurturing of the land, often the same
fields, gardens and groves throughout their lives, contributes to the
stability that underlies much of what this book describes.

Fertility, another striking feature of the Apatani valley, is also a
recurring theme of this book. In an early chapter, for instance, we saw
that the colonial narrative of the valley as a prosperous land matches
local perceptions and expectations. More than that, a Murung itself
requires a fertile landscape in order to supply the large amounts of
rice, meat and beer consumed or exchanged during the festival, espe-
cially the rice donations and meat distribution that involve the whole
valley. That same prosperity is displayed in the women’s tableau on
the first day and the pouring of rice beer into nursery beds on two
occasions. Finally, as the nyibu repeatedly declares in his chant, the
goal of a Murung is to increase the prosperity of the sponsor and
his clan.

Fertility, and its manifestations of birth, growth and maturation,
suffuse the Subu Henini chant, too. It appears in a variety of images,
including the rising sun, dividing female body, converging rivers and
the expanding bamboo that leads the nyibu through the horizontal cos-
mology. That irrepressible bamboo also reaches out beyond the text.
The nyibu holds several pieces in his hand when addressing the animals
tied to the lapang, and he wears a small piece in his headdress. Later he
takes that small piece home and places it on a wall, next to a row of
similar pieces, each representing a past Subu Henini performance.

Another conclusion of the book as a whole is the close link between
a Murung and the land of the dead. This point was made in a com-
parative study of feasts of merit in the 1970s and has been confirmed
by recent studies of these rituals in upland Southeast Asia. In most of
these feasts, a double-layered cosmology facilitates reciprocity between
the living and the dead. In a Murung, this parallel world is explicit
since exchange with spirits on earth is mirrored by exchange in the
land of the dead. In addition, a considerable part of the Subu Henini
chant, almost the final third, is chanted at a funeral. The words that
lead the soul of a dead man to the underworld are also the words that
guide the souls of the sacrificial animals there. During his performance
on the lapang, the nyibu frequently gestures toward the animals, warn-
ing them not to lose their way on the dangerous journey and not to
blame him for their death. A Murung is, in part, a mithun funeral.

A related conclusion is that separation of the living from the dead is
a core idea in Apatani culture. During a funeral, for instance, Apatanis
build a small fence above the grave to keep the dead from returning,