

Ziro Valley: Frozen in Time and Steeped in Tradition

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Received : 19 January 2024 • **Revised :** 16 February 2024 • **Accepted :** 03 March 2024 • **Published :** 29 June 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Tapi Taka & T.S. Suryanarayanan 2024. Ziro Valley: Frozen in Time and Steeped in Tradition. *Journal of Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Studies*, 2: 1, pp. 31-35.

Abstract: The Ziro valley, a picturesque plateau located in the Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh is lush with forests and hills through which the Subansiri river flows. It is inhabited by the Apatani ethnic group of people who have a unique culture marked by different festivals, bamboo crafts and spiritual customs. Unlike the slash-and-burn cultivation practised by other ethnic groups of this region, the Apatanis have been following for generations a wet rice agricultural system. Mixed cropping of rice with millet combined with the culturing of fish in the stagnant rice field water practised by the Apatanis is an example of energy efficiency and sustainable land use. The Apatanis worship Nature and are skilled in using the wildy growing bamboo in the valley for constructing their homes, fences, and furniture. The Ziro Valley represents a successful system of coexistence of humans and environment founded by traditional practices and reverence for nature and is currently in UNESCO's tentative list to be named a world heritage site.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Apatani, Jhum cultivation, Bamboo, Rice cultivation, Indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Ziro Valley is a town in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh and is about a 3-hour drive from Itanagar. The district is named after the Subansiri River, a tributary of Brahmaputra which flows through the district. This major tributary of the Brahmaputra River flows through Tibet, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam (Barman et al., 2020). The picturesque Ziro valley is about 1700 m above sea level and is surrounded by undulating hills covered with emerald green forests interspersed with smoke-like clouds of transpired water released by the trees. The floor of the valley is covered with rice fields. The forests which are of sub-tropical and temperate types are very rich in both animal and plant diversity. Several villages in the Ziro valley are the homes of the Apatani community who have a unique culture and are very different from the other native people of Arunachal Pradesh. It is believed that they

migrated long ago from *Ipyo Supung* to *Mudo Supung* (both in Tibet) and then settled in Ziro Valley (called *Siilo Supung*). Folklores and tales which have been passed on from generations are the primary source of their origin history.

The Apatanis are farmers who practise an ancient method of rice cultivation which is environmentally sound and has been passed down through generations. Unlike many other farmers of North Eastern India who practice slash and burn (*jhum*) cultivation, the Apatanis practice permanent wetland rice cultivation which is a result of ingenious land and other resource utilization and culture preservation. The rice fields are bounded by meandering raised bunds and have bamboo pipes to carry irrigation water. Millet is grown on the bunds and fish (common carp) are reared in the stagnant rice fields thus increasing judiciously the yield potential of the land (Saikia and Das, 2008). Small pits are dug in the paddy field in to which young fish are released. During the monsoon when the field has sufficient water, the fish are free to move around the field; during the dry period, the fish get back into the pits which hold water (Rai, 2005). This highly resourceful agricultural system involving the production of rice, millet and fish is termed *Aji* cultivation (Singh and Gupta, 2002). Only traditional varieties of rice are cultivated and no pesticides, chemical fertilizers, or machinery are used. Small fields (*miding*) are maintained near the main fields which are nurseries from where the rice would be transplanted in the main fields usually during April (<https://arunachallivingheritage.com/people/>). A bamboo species, *Phyllostachys bambusoides* (Japanese timber bamboo, (*Tanii- Bije*) which is restricted to this region is cultivated around the crop fields. It is a runner bamboo with creeping rhizomes growing up to 6 m in height and produces strong, slender, hollow and green stems (Melkania, 2008). The Apatanis use this bamboo for house construction, roofing, water pipes, thatches, making fences, fish nets, religious altars, burial cemeteries, and hunting traps; the tender shoots are consumed as food (Tangjang et al., 2018).

An Apatani home is built on stilts about 3 feet above the ground and is entirely made of wood and bamboo including the floors and the walls (Fig. 1). The central hall is spacious and typically has an open fireplace (*ugu*) over which cooking is done. Above this open fireplace, there is a wooden platform with skewers for roasting meat pieces and storing meat and grains (Fig. 2). The open space below the home is used for breeding pigs. Each family also maintains a small garden (*yorlu*) where many medicinal plants are grown and used for treating stomach pain, headache, and fatigue. Apatanis have a tight settlement pattern where houses (*udeh*) are built very close to one another forming chains of houses. The granaries (*nesu*) are built encircling the settlement area beyond which paddy the field starts. The villages also have sacred grooves where religious rituals are performed. Beyond the paddy fields are the plantation grooves where bamboo and pine trees are grown either separately or together. These groves are considered sacred by the Apatanis and hence, due to their spiritual traditional beliefs, the groves are well preserved and represent a protected unique ecosystem. Furthermore, beyond plantation areas community forests and the reserve forests are present. Ziro Valley represents a successful system of coexistence of humans and the environment founded by traditional practices and reverence for nature.

Apatanis follow patriarchy and speak a language which has no script; they worship the Sun (*Ayo Danyi*) and the moon (*Atoh Piilo*) and celebrate different religious festivals, the most colourful of which is the *Myoko* festival celebrated during March every year. During this, a village acts as host and invites the people of the neighbouring villages for food and rice beer. Chickens, cows and pigs are sacrificed and eaten and there is a lot of music and dance during *Myoko* time. The Apatanis wear very colourful dresses and sport facial tattoos.



Fig. 1: An Apatani Home



Fig. 2: Fireplace in the Hall



Fig. 3: An Apatani Women in Traditional Dress

The traditional dresses of women are typical as seen in Figure-3. The women wear large, circular wooden nose plugs. These nose plugs and facial tattoos running the length of the face served to make women unattractive to enemy tribes; however, tattooing and nose plugs are not common among the young. Although no clear records exist, it is thought that the Apatanis have colonised Ziro Valley which was a swampy wasteland from at least the fifteenth century (UNESCO tentative list, 2020). Presently, a fairy tale land due to generations of industrious Apatani people, the Ziro Valley is in UNESCO's tentative list to be named a world heritage site (UNESCO tentative list, 2020).

Acknowledgements

T.S.S. thanks the Department of Biotechnology, New Delhi for funding a NE-Twinning project (BT/431/NE/TBP/2013) and Swami Dhyanyagamyanda, Secretary, RKM Vidyapith, Chennai for facilities

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