

# The Mystery of the *buru*: From Indigenous Ontology to Post-modern Fairy Tale

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## Abstract

This article offers an overview of the pantheon and religion of one of the most distinctive indigenous populations of Arunachal Pradesh in North-Eastern India: the Apatani. In particular, through an ethnographical field study on the distinctive culture of this ethnic group, the study aims to explain the symbolisms and functions inherent in the mythical figure of the *buru*, a kind of animal-chimaera, which plays a key role in the myth of the origins of the Apatani. At the same time, this study proposes a critical analysis of the results of Ralph Izzard's exploratory expedition shortly after WWII, which discounted any possibility of investigating a cosmogonic myth, but strove to trace a legendary extinct saurian. The misinterpretation of the British expedition in the 1950s gave rise to a series of beliefs that in contemporary times (mostly in the West) have aimed to prove the real existence of the *buru*, extrapolating it from the folklore record. For this reason today the *buru* has become a sort of post-modern legend, or better a classical figure of cryptozoology, understood as pseudoscience and sub-cultural product. This essay tries to explore the issue through a religious and anthropological investigative approach.

**Keywords:** India, Himalaya, Apatani, Ziro, *buru*, Izzard, Stonor, Cryptozoology

The length of a *buru* was about three and a half to four meters, and it was “long shaped”. The head was about fifty centimeters long, and was elongated in to a great snout, flattened at the tip. The eyes were behind the snout. The teeth were “flat like those of a man”, except for a pair in the up and lower jaws, which were large and pointed “like those of a tiger or a boar”. The neck was rather under a meter in length, and could be stretched out or drawn in (this was vividly explained by pantomime). The body was roundish. [...] The tail was rounded and tapering, and about one and half meters in length. It was fringed “from where the animal excreted” with broad and deeply fringed lobes which run the whole length on either side, and sprang from the dorsal surface of the tail. (Izzard 2001: 23)

The *buru* lived entirely in the water, and never came to land. They were not often seen as they lived in water deeper than the height of a man. They used to put their necks up out of the water and make a hoarse bellowing noise. Sometimes they were seen nosing in the muddy banks of the lake, and when doing so they weaved their head and neck from one side to side. (ibid.: 24)

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## The extraordinary environment of the northeastern border

The complex system of the three thousand kilometres composing the Himalayan ridge originated from a massive tectonic collision that is assumed to have occurred forty or fifty million years ago. The energy developed by the majestic meeting between India and Eurasia was of such magnitude that it helped create many of the most distinctive geographical features of Asia, such as the Tibetan plateau, the highest on our planet (Rowley 1996: 1–13). The ridge that today is commonly referred to as the Eastern Himalayas crosses Nepal, Bhutan, the northern section of Bengal and the mountainous states of Northeast India, such as Sikkim, Assam and all of Arunachal Pradesh, ending with the slopes in the extreme north of Myanmar (Burma). This region forms a sort of wall that separates the humid plain of the Indian subcontinent from the dry plateau of Tibet. The climatic variability and a wide range of altimetric gradation have led to the formation of an incredible region: a corner of nature that includes the highest peaks in the world, deep gorges, subtropical jungles, temperate forests with tall trees, savannahs and prairies (Roy et al. 2015: 182–89, Chatterji et al. 2006: 27–33).

Different forms of knowledge and religion such as Hinduism, Buddhism (and, only recently, Christianity) have arisen over the centuries alongside the indigenous traditions of the different ethnic groups of the area, which still today boast their own distinctive culture, in many cases with distinct shamanistic traits. Many of these communities that the Indian Government today defines as “tribal” have lived for centuries in a condition of relative isolation, with their lifestyles, traditions and customs, as well as livelihoods, fundamentally based on the surrounding environment. The social substratum of the multiple villages, the sort of connective cultural fabric that seems in some ways to assimilate ethnic communities even at a distance from one another within the Eastern Himalayas, is still today deeply dependent on the natural resources of the region (Beggiora 2014c: 180–81). This wealth – including a great abundance of water, an aspect of enormous strategic importance also from a contemporary geopolitical perspective – is the source of livelihood for all those who inhabit the foothills overlooking the plains of the Indian subcontinent.

Considering flora and fauna, it is adequate to say that this region is one of the world’s most biologically rich areas, a world-class biodiversity reserve inasmuch as very few places on earth can match the manifestations of its majestic nature. The most interesting territory in this respect is the state of Arunachal Pradesh, nestled between the plains of Assam and the borders of the states of Bhutan, China and even Burma. Under the long shadow cast by the overhanging mountains, here the northernmost rainforests of the world contain an

extreme landscape that may boast almost half of the flowers and species of birds known in India (Ministry of Environment 2016: 12–18, 72ff). It is believed that this ecological niche may host globally endangered species or even as yet undiscovered plants and animals, including mammals, reptiles and amphibians, some of which could probably also benefit from the status of “at-risk species”, but which have not yet been surveyed by science. In a world in which, through the new means offered by technology, there is the ephemeral belief that there is nothing left to discover, no more of the earth’s surface yet to be explored, it is extremely interesting to note how many poorly known grey areas still exist. Testimony to this are the WWF reports that from 1998 to 2008 – later extended to 2015 – highlighting the discovery of 353 new species, including 242 plants, 16 amphibians, 16 reptiles, 14 fish, 2 birds, 2 mammals and over 60 invertebrates (WWF 2015: 7–43).

In addition to these novelties from the perspective of biology, Arunachal Pradesh presents considerable surprises in the fields of anthropology and human sciences, as well. In fact, not only is the culture of the numerous indigenous communities poorly studied, at least in comparison with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, but also many ethnic minorities and subgroups – with diverse traditions, lineages and languages – in many cases do not appear in the governmental cataloguing of the Census of India (Briand 2010, Morrison 2010). This has occurred because of an anthropic geography that is actually very complex: several indigenous communities have sometimes been summarily and mistakenly merged with others in the census operations. This means that if some micro-ethnic communities have never been registered, at least legally, they would seem not to exist.<sup>1</sup>

All of this is of great importance, since in contemporary times there is a general tendency to re-evaluate traditional indigenous knowledge as an unwritten heritage of national culture (Ramakrishnan et al. 2012). The so-called “indigenous knowledge on the forest”, an expression perhaps abused today, contains in itself precious and unique information, not always known to science, often including knowledge of plants and medicinal herbs unfamiliar to conventional medicine, whose potentially synthesisable and patentable principles are of great interest to pharmaceutical companies. Similarly, unknown, seemingly fantastic animals, as described in the tales of indigenous people, have always aroused the fascination of outsiders, leading over time to the morbid fashion for perversely exploiting local fauna through hunting trips in order to gain unique and somewhat exotic trophies. Moreover, during the colonial pe-

1 The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification) Order of 1956, as inserted by “Act 69” of 1986, explicitly catalogued twelve tribes, asserting however that this list was not exhaustive as all the tribes of the state (twenty-six major groups and over one hundred sub-groups including those on the list) should have been part of the Scheduled Tribes (Census 2001).

riod, myths and tales arose about legendary animals, fantastic creatures deeply rooted in local folklore – and today relegated to the sphere of cryptozoology.

This happened and happens because these animals, an expression of a parallel universe intersecting with the human dimension, have always played a fundamental role in indigenous religiosity. The sublimated or symbolic animal form is one of the main elements of South-Asian animism and shamanism (taking into account that only certain aspects of Arunachal Pradesh religions can be considered shamanistic in the strictest sense); manifesting and revealing itself in the cosmogonic myth, this form also configures the spirit world through appearances and colours. Contextually these visions are inspired by the shaman's traditional knowledge and direct experience of the forest, but in most cases they must be analysed in light of the function that they play in the religiosity of the indigenous culture. This sometimes produces misunderstandings, due essentially to a literal interpretation of individual fragments of local folklore, generally extrapolated from their context; thus, even in recent years there have been reported sightings of fantastic creatures, precisely in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the yeti, the wild man or something else. Once again, the perspective of scientism in contemporary thought has imposed a pragmatic and empirical interpretation upon phenomena that, instead, to be fully understood should be contextualised in the religiosity and culture of the people who have always lived in the Eastern Himalayas. Such modern misinterpretations arise in an extraordinary environment that has helped to nourish the romantic and decadent fantasy of fascinating adventures in exotic and mysterious places.

Towards the end of World War II, then, in addition to the already known testimonies concerning the yeti and other lesser-known Himalayan mysteries, the story of the *buru*, or rather of a gigantic reptile of an unknown species, hit the headlines, ostensibly witnessed by the tribes of the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh (including, among others, the Apatani). Ralph William Burdick Izzard (1910–1992), British agent of the Naval Intelligence Division during the war and the *Daily Mail's* foreign correspondent, managed to get funding to organise an exploratory expedition in pursuit of this mysterious creature. Decisive in the organisation of the enterprise was the report of a zoologist-naturalist named Charles Stonor, who claimed to have collected cross-testimonies of the sightings of the animal and related myths in the oral tradition of the Apatani (the description in the epigraph of the present essay is perhaps one of the most detailed testimonies, even if there are some variations in the reported sources).

It is interesting to note that for the British, at the time of World War II, the Apatani area was familiar, as it hosted a government outpost, but many of the surrounding areas were partially unexplored. Following these rumours of a discovery in Arunachal Pradesh, the idea spread of the survival from historical times of a mythical, perhaps even prehistoric, reptile. The contemporary taste

for the sensational clearly encouraged the approval of the Izzard mission (a possible analogy with the famous Loch Ness monster was certainly a factor). But the adventure was in many ways unsuccessful and ended up leaving many questions unexplained and uncertain, both as to the existence and the meaning of the *buru* myth. Despite this, on 5 May 1947, the *Hindustan Standard* of Kolkata, trying to cope with the scarcity of news trickling in from the expedition, published:

From our Shillong office: A Dinotherium, a member of a race of huge mammals, till now believed to be totally extinct, has been seen perambulating in the Southern side of Himalayan Range bordering on Assam, according to reports reaching here. Tribal people of the frontier tract of Balipara recently came across this moving mountain of flesh wandering majestically and happily plucking the tops of huge, ancient trees. (Izzard 2001: 168)

After the several decades of silence following the unsuccessful conclusion of the expedition, during which only a few scholars tried in retrospect at least to hypothesise a taxonomic position for the mystery of the *buru*, I noticed how this story has recently come back into vogue as a driving motif in cryptozoology. Having personally had the opportunity to undertake field research<sup>2</sup> in the same area where the expedition of Stonor and Izzard took place and having had the opportunity to collect interviews and insights on this topic, in this study I intend to propose certain considerations of the case. In particular I will try to illustrate how any attempt at scientific interpretation has thus far led to poor results, whereas instead the solution of the mystery resides in the religious symbolism of the indigenous communities of the Eastern Himalayas.

## The shaman, the dragon and the lost valley

The heart of the Lower Subhansiri district, in the central section of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, is the abode of the Apatani, one of the many ethnic minorities that populate the region. Probably thanks to a comparatively accessible environment, in contrast to the dense, impassable surrounding jungles, this small group is considered one of the most culturally distinctive and well known in the region. According to the censuses of the 1980s the Apatani population slightly exceeded 16,000 persons, whereas the data previously collected by Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the first anthropologists to carry out research in the area, indicated only a few thousand residents in the period after the Second World War. The Census of India today reports a demographic boom that has brought the population to over 43,000 (Census 2011). The largest settlements are about a dozen in all: these are villages along a forest

2 In particular, in the period 2002–2003, two research missions in Arunachal Pradesh.

belt known as the Apatani Valley (or Ziro Valley from the main town in the area) that climbs up the slopes of the eastern Himalayas. Here, as a consequence of the heavy rainfall during the monsoon season, the territory is densely covered by jungle and crossed by streams flowing from the slopes of the surrounding mountains. The maximum altitude is 1600 metres. There is also a waterway, which locals call Kele (today Tabyu Kiile) that descends in the direction of Ziro, and which plays a fundamental role in our case study.

According to the sources in the field,<sup>3</sup> the legends and cosmogonic myths that the Apatani have handed down from generation to generation tell of an ancient ancestor, Abo Tani, who gave rise to three lineages that followed different directions, migrating from the northwest or from Tibet and subsequently settling in India. One of the most interesting aspects of this myth is that it is shared by related indigenous groups in the region, the so-called Tani groups – the Nishi, the Mikir, the Hill Miri, the Adi, the Sulung and the Tagin. These groups thus share a sort of meta-narrative about the time of their origins, feeling related to each other and united by an ancestral bond to the territory in which they live.



Figure 1: Apatani woman, Ziro valley (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)

3 Informants in the Hang community were, in detail: Tabin, Hoda and Dolian, *nyibus* of the Hibu clan, of the lineage of Tai, Tabu and Taran. The shaman Nabin and only secondarily Tabin and Tajo were informants about the Kago clan. For other information, interviews with the Tapi Tabo and Pugno Narunichi groups were very important.



Figure 2: Apatani house, Hang (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)

These populations still maintain their own language, articulated through different local dialects, yet all originally of Tibetan-Burman stock; the idea, therefore, of a hypothetical origin from the north, through ancient migrations, is therefore plausible, even if not immediately evident. Moreover, the shamans of the tribes, the *nyibus* in the Apatani language,<sup>4</sup> are the custodians of a secret knowledge that is called *miji migung*: literally “singing” and “prose”, two genres that through the (also sung) narrative constitute the epic cycle of the history of the tribe, handed down orally from generation to generation. It is interesting in this regard to note that to define shamanic power, the Apatani

4 Tibetan-Burman stock, ISO 639-3 (Apa), Ethnologue classification: *apt*. Language considered endangered (see Ethnologue Languages of the World, <https://www.ethnologue.com/>).

do not place particular emphasis on the thaumaturgical abilities of the *nyibu*, but on the knowledge of the foundational myths through the recitation of the *miji migung*. Several rituals, celebrated both privately in the hut that houses the family unit, and collectively on the *lapang*, a stilted platform where the assemblies of village leaders are held, include the recitation of cosmogonies or legendary events depicting the time of origin. The narrative here thus assumes a cultural value that on the one hand is a guarantee of the renewal of the world, as well as the maintenance of its equilibrium, and on the other hand, when shared, serves also as a meeting point for the group identity of the different local communities (Singh 1995: 141–50).

This background to the Stonor report is necessary because the mystery of the *buru* is rooted in this context. According to the *miji migung*, the first descendants of Abo Tani came into conflict with the *burus* and were only able to live in and cultivate their new land after having won it from the monsters in some kind of cosmic battle. Thus, first and foremost, the *buru* functions here as a miracle, or a symbol taking on the role of *monstrum* in the Latin sense of the term – this is regardless of the fact that its external appearance could have been inspired by a creature that actually existed. Secondly, it is clear that at the time the British did not take this aspect into consideration, but discarded it a priori, as we will see.

There were not many among the English scholars, agents or explorers who first travelled the area during the first half of the last century who did not soon in a certain sense idealise the heart of Arunachal Pradesh. The gentle and luxuriant territory occupied by the Apatani contrasted with the intricate and untamed expanse of the impenetrable surrounding jungle, barely crossed by difficult and forbidding paths. The idea of the isolation of the Hang basin, the main settlement, and of the neighbouring villages, had contributed in the colonial era to the creation of the romantic myth of a lost valley, identified with the mythical Shangri-La (Graham Bower 1953: 28–38). A. P. F. Hamilton, of the Indian Forestry Service, was to say to Izzard himself: “Now down in Shillong there’s a fellow named Stonor who claims to have discovered a ‘Lost Valley’ up in Northern Assam” (Izzard 2001: 10).

On the other hand it must be considered that the “Western” discovery of the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), dating back only a few decades earlier (1910), was followed by a period of frenzied collecting of varanids, especially from the Indonesian area. European travellers, explorers, missionaries, ethnologists and colonisers often competed for the hoarding of museum relics, over which there was certainly considerable speculation at the time. A dynamic haggling over specimens was driven not only by science, but also by the industrious urge to solve, through the search for the modern dragon, some of the mysteries about stories and legends of sea and terrestrial monsters (Eberhart 2002: 77, Coleman 2003). “Conan Doyle sort of stuff,” Hamilton

writes in his correspondence with Izzard, before adding: “[...] there may be a Saurian there, which buries itself in the mud during the winter and emerges when the summer monsoon comes [...] good fellow Stonor, reliable sort of chap” (Izzard 2001: 10). This seems to be the mood at the rise of Indian Independence, so dearly bought, after the horrors of an unprecedented world war, yet still imbued with a romantic exoticism and a colonial flavour. A mood that remains unashamed, thanks to the peculiar environment of the frontier, of dreaming despite everything of a lost valley inhabited by prehistoric saurians.

## The Stonor & Mills report

The first, at least indirect, reference to the existence of the *buru* dates back to the period 1944–1945 when Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, professor of anthropology at Osmania University in Hyderabad, conducted his first survey of the indigenous populations of the Assamese and Burmese border, with a special focus on the Apatani group (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962). Although his discoveries were still unpublished at the time, he shared his notes with two English explorers: zoologist Charles Stonor and James P. Mills (1890–1960), an anthropologist and administrator who was District Commissioner in some tribal areas of the Northeast. Stonor and Mills in turn visited the Apatani territory in the late 1945 and 1946, gathering interviews and testimonies in the villages about the local traditions and the existence of the creature in the surrounding lake and marshy areas. They finally made a report that was published only in 1951 along with the results of the subsequent expedition.<sup>5</sup> Stonor’s analysis, more than simply providing a motivation for the challenge, offered some kind of scientific basis for the project, so much so that the journalist from the *Daily Mail* reported it in full. The essay actually has an academic structure, which provides preliminary data on the territory, ethnographic data on the Apatani, the case study with the interviews and a conclusive discussion section.

On the mythical function of the *buru* narrative, however, Stonor seems immediately contradictory. In fact, he recognises that the version reported by Fürer-Haimendorf refers to a foundational myth: the Apatani, arriving in the Eastern Himalayas after a long migration, at some time immemorial, settled on today’s site, but found it initially swampy, unhealthy and inhabited by snakes and monsters. The anthropologist made no direct mention of the name of the mysterious creature, but Stonor later became aware of the fact that he had translated the term *buru* as “monster”, without however giving a more detailed description of it. The origin myth was then also confirmed in a leg-

<sup>5</sup> J. P. Mills / C. R. S. Stonor: “A Traditional Account of the Survival within Historic Times of a Large Aquatic Reptile in the Outer Himalayas of Assam” (Izzard 2001: 19–43).

end, reported by Stonor and Mills, about the area, which was initially a swampy expanse in which the *burus* roamed. The “cosmic” battle between the first men and the monsters, with the consequent defeat of the latter, would have coincided with the attempt to reclaim the area and the subsequent birth of agriculture. The Apatani would have tried to divert the course of the river, which Stonor calls Kal, in order to lower the water level in the swamp and reduce the habitat of the *burus* by forcing them out to fight. The water thus channelled would then be used for irrigation for the submersion of the rice fields in the area. Despite this logical explanation (and other recurrent elements during the investigation) the zoologist, perhaps influenced to a greater extent by his discipline, seems to discount this data, letting himself instead be seduced by the hypothesis of some existing or extinct beast wandering through those marshlands.

If Furer-Haimendorf is considered an accredited source by virtue of long service in the field, Verrier Elwin, who was an authority in India regarding studies on the *ādivāsī*, as the indigenous populations of the Subcontinent are called (Carrin / Guzy 2012: 1–18), is strangely never mentioned. After Indian Independence, in 1947 to be precise, Jawaharlal Nehru himself invited Elwin to collaborate in the attempt to find a solution to the problems that emerged in relation to the indigenous peoples, especially in the Northeast.<sup>6</sup> He therefore became a government agent and anthropological adviser for Arunachal Pradesh in particular, which at the time was called NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency). With Furer-Haimendorf, Elwin always had an excellent relationship: in his autobiography he expresses words of friendship and esteem for his colleague and his wife, although it should be recognised that it was above all thanks to the actions of Elwin that Furer-Haimendorf was saved from an embarrassing diplomatic situation and was appointed Special Officer and Assistant Political Officer for the NEFA during the difficult war years (Elwin 1998: 175, 318).<sup>7</sup>

From an anthropological perspective, the data collected by Furer-Haimendorf and Elwin were disclosed after Izzard’s publication. Elwin wrote the famous and monumental *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, consisting of an archive of about four hundred myths, legends, fairy tales and stories gathered in abundance from the indigenous traditions of Arunachal Pradesh.

6 The first decade and a half of Indian policy for the northeastern region is conventionally called Nehru-Elwin policy, according to which rapid administration expansion was pursued in conjunction with a revivalist-protectionist approach to the development of tribes in hilly areas (Elwin 1960).

7 Furer-Haimendorf was Austrian in origin and was arrested by the colonial authorities in 1938 as a possessor of a passport of the Third Reich. Confined in Hyderabad, he managed to be released by virtue of his studies, through the intercession of colleagues and government officers who acted as guarantors, and for having shown that he had no sympathy for Nazism. The fact that he was then designated as a government officer in a particularly hot border zone, which was part of the Japanese directive and in the path of the Indian National Army invading India from Burma across the Northeast, clearly reveals the importance of the role he played in those years.

The book was published in 1958, not long after the report of Izzard's mission, which is only fleetingly mentioned. The only myth reported concerning the *buru* is related to the Apatani: although the roles and functions of the narration are respected, the appearance of the monster is radically different. It is worth taking an excursus:

When the Apa Tanis first came to their country they found it all mud and water and surrounded by forest. We cut the forest and guided the water into channels and drained the swamp, so that we were able to make our fields there. When we were doing this three burus came out of the swamp. They were like enormous pigs and their bodies were covered with white stripes. We killed them and buried them. They were not animals but Wiyus.<sup>8</sup> (Elwin 1993: 478)

It is interesting how this variant of the story transposes the species from reptile to mammal (but not the *genus* of the creature, which is still vague).<sup>9</sup> The animal described here is radically different. But analysing all the variations on the subject shows that even in the first reports there were many different descriptions. Stonor again depicts the *buru* as a water snake or eel, enormous in size, digging into the muddy bottom of the swamp. The bifurcated tongue of the animal is a rather indicative detail (Izzard 2001: 27). At other times the animal is described as something large, majestic, that emerges puffing from the murky water with a head provided with horns (ibid.: 45–46). The theme of the horns, more frequent than the reptile crest and the black-and-white colour, often returns in the collected testimonies, so that the juxtaposition of the *buru* with a completely different animal like the *mithun*, the majestic semi-tamed bison of these Himalayan regions, is at least plausible.

The *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) is considered in some ways related to the *gaur* (*Bos gaurus*), the largest wild bovine of India and Southeast Asia, now almost extinct. Although most of the time they are left free to roam the forest, the possession of these beasts is the yardstick of wealth for families in many tribes of the Eastern Himalayas. They are not used to produce milk or dairy products, but are slaughtered for their meat. This always happens in a ritual context; the sacrifice of the *mithun* – which here in some manner replaces the buffalo (*Bubalus aquaticus*) sacrifice in India – is a sumptuous celebration that represents the highest religious and shamanic celebration (Beggiora 2003: 120ff). Among the Apatani the sacrifice of this beast is an offering to the gods and is at the same time the fulcrum of funeral ceremonies (*kirikilo*) in which it is believed that the soul of the *mithun* accompanies the deceased in the afterlife. For all these reasons and for the symbolic and cultural value of the animal in the traditions of the local populations, today it is in fact the emblem of the State of Arunachal Pradesh.

8 With this anglicised transcription the author clearly refers to the Apatani word *ui*, or spirits. The story says clearly that they were not animals, but spirits.

9 The witnesses say that the *buru* do not lay eggs like most of the reptiles, but that they give birth to living whelps. This data, if taken literally, would further circumscribe the previous taxonomic assumption.

Given such a vast range of testimonies, it is not possible now to show that the *buru* was actually a wild bison, but the hypothesis of the saurian/reptile seems uncertain as well, given the puzzle of elements that implies a sort of chimaera or composite animal. Nonetheless, the religious dynamics of the sacrifice of the *mithun*, according to which the beast is tracked in the forest, harnessed, captured and brought back to the village to be killed, certainly recalls a kind of primordial sacrifice. Perhaps it is a question of enacting a kind of hunting with a cosmogonic value.

Another important element reported by Elwin and Stonor is that originally the *buru* were three, defeated three times by the Apatani thanks to the help of a magic weapon known as the *mamla* (or *myamya*), or a sort of disk. Stonor claims that this heavy brass disk was kept as a sacred relic in a secret place and that no foreigner was allowed to see it (Izzard 2001: 25, 28).<sup>10</sup> In contemporary times Stuart Blackburn of SOAS in London managed however to photograph the relic in Kalung in 2002 (Blackburn 2008: 294, figure 12).

## The ecosystem of the *uis* and the *burus* within the indigenous ontology

As seen above, the religiosity and cults practiced by the great majority of the indigenous communities of these regions are basically animistic or shamanic – if the vast Buddhist or Hindu cultural background has not already incorporated these local realities. The forest is therefore the home of deities and ancestral spirits, while the cosmos in its entirety is imagined to be bipartite between the world of the living and that of the dead. The subsoil, a sort of dimension turned upside down compared to the surface, as if it were an image reflected in a stretch of water, is called *Neli*, the kingdom of the dead for the Apatani, within which the souls of the deceased are destined to become ancestors and tutelary entities of the tribe. The offerings for the dead and the memory of the ancestors constitute the backbone of ritual life, which despite its varied phenomenology, is found quite commonly in the cult of the ancestors of many *ādivāsī* communities of India, from the southern regions to the Himalayan chain. The destiny of the soul in the *post mortem*, the chthonic path to the afterlife, the “rebirth” of the soul in the realm of the ancestors, the entire funeral ritualism – ranging from cremation to the memorial erection of megaliths<sup>11</sup> – as well as the sacrifices of animals, exorcism and healing rituals to

10 One or more, kept in different villages as part of ancestral history or in relation to the killing places of each of the three monsters.

11 An archaic use in this region (Fürer-Haimendorf 1939: 215–22) still practiced in some cases by individual *ādivāsī* groups also in the subcontinent (Beggiora 2003: 108–133).

restore a troubled order, confirm the fervid flow in these cultures of ancient and yet still living elements in constant transformation and adaptation.

Concerning the Apatani eschatology, we can see that all those who have experienced a good death, namely one that is both natural and timely, and who are also able to receive the special ritual in their honour, will naturally be destined to migrate to Neli where they will begin a new life. Those who are victims of bad, sudden, violent, accidental, but above all premature death – especially if the corpse cannot be found in order for the mourning ceremony to be performed – will be destined to wander like souls in pain on earth. These spectra, ghosts, remains of gross or psychic elements that are no more than the evanescent appearance of what they were alive, rise into the atmosphere, remaining imprisoned in the intermediate layer of sky called Tali. This is a peculiar idea of local populations: however heavenly, Tali should not be imagined as a celestial dimension, but is more properly an atmospheric space set between the earth's surface and the sky. It is not an otherworldly dimension, though inaccessible to the common man, but is part of the empirical world, with which it maintains a certain permeability. Such troubled souls naturally tend toward the earth's surface, seeking consolation or revenge in the community of the living. For this reason the shaman's task is to pacify these entities by redirecting them from Tali to Neli. In other words it is a process of normalisation that transforms the "memory" (Vitebsky 1993: 223–24) of a deceased into a guardian-ancestor. The group's relations with the Neli community are much more relaxed. As stated above, the first funeral ritual is inaugurated with the sacrifice of the *mithun*, the psychopomp animal, the "pass" to the afterlife, a material inheritance for a world that seems to be gradually more immaterial. This is another topic of great interest: in the cult of the ancestors there is often the idea that the abundant offerings of plants, animals and libations are somehow a sort of nourishment for the progenitors of the clans. They, in exchange, will provide protection to the village against demons and evil entities, but above all, as guardians of the territory, they will guarantee abundance for future generations.

In fact, if the forest and the wild territory that delimit the borders of the villages are the dimension of the spirits of nature and the forces that preside over its cyclical manifestations, then the fields and rice terraces, as well as all the places assigned to agricultural work, are considered under the protection of the ancestors of the clans. For the Apatani, the boundary between the village and the forest is guarded by a series of fetishes made of grass, straw and bamboo, representing precisely the ancestors of the place. Stylised with anthropomorphic features, they often display the relics of the sacrifices, or they are adorned with a set of miniature objects, made of vegetable fibre, which represent assets and attributes of the past, essentially identifying them. *Ude-mik* is the name of these artefacts; made in large numbers and placed next to

each other almost like an army of silent sentinels, they rise just outside the villages, preserving the area from malign external influences.



Figure 3: A *buru*, an apotropaic woven-straw fetish, Ziro Valley (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

On the eschatological level, the second life *post mortem* is destined sooner or later to be exhausted, as an authentic reflection of real life. The term of this cycle generally coincides with the dissolving of the remembrance of the deceased in the memory of his or her descendants. It would therefore consist of a generation or two, except in the case of legendary leaders, important personalities, etc. About the fate of the soul (*yalo*) of the dead after the second *post mortem*, the local informers were generally vague, reflecting the fact that the shamanism of these people does not simply follow a doctrinal outline but is based on a cosmology that does not concern itself with attempting to transcend the physical world. The *nyibus* said, however, that the soul, having lost its identity, would face a process of rarefaction, losing all of its distinctive elements until it vanishes into the subsoil. Like a butterfly, once it returns to the surface world, it transmigrates into the body of an animal. Following further questions on this subject, these animals were generally described as wild prey (and not predators) such as deer, wild boar, some bird species, reptiles and rodents.

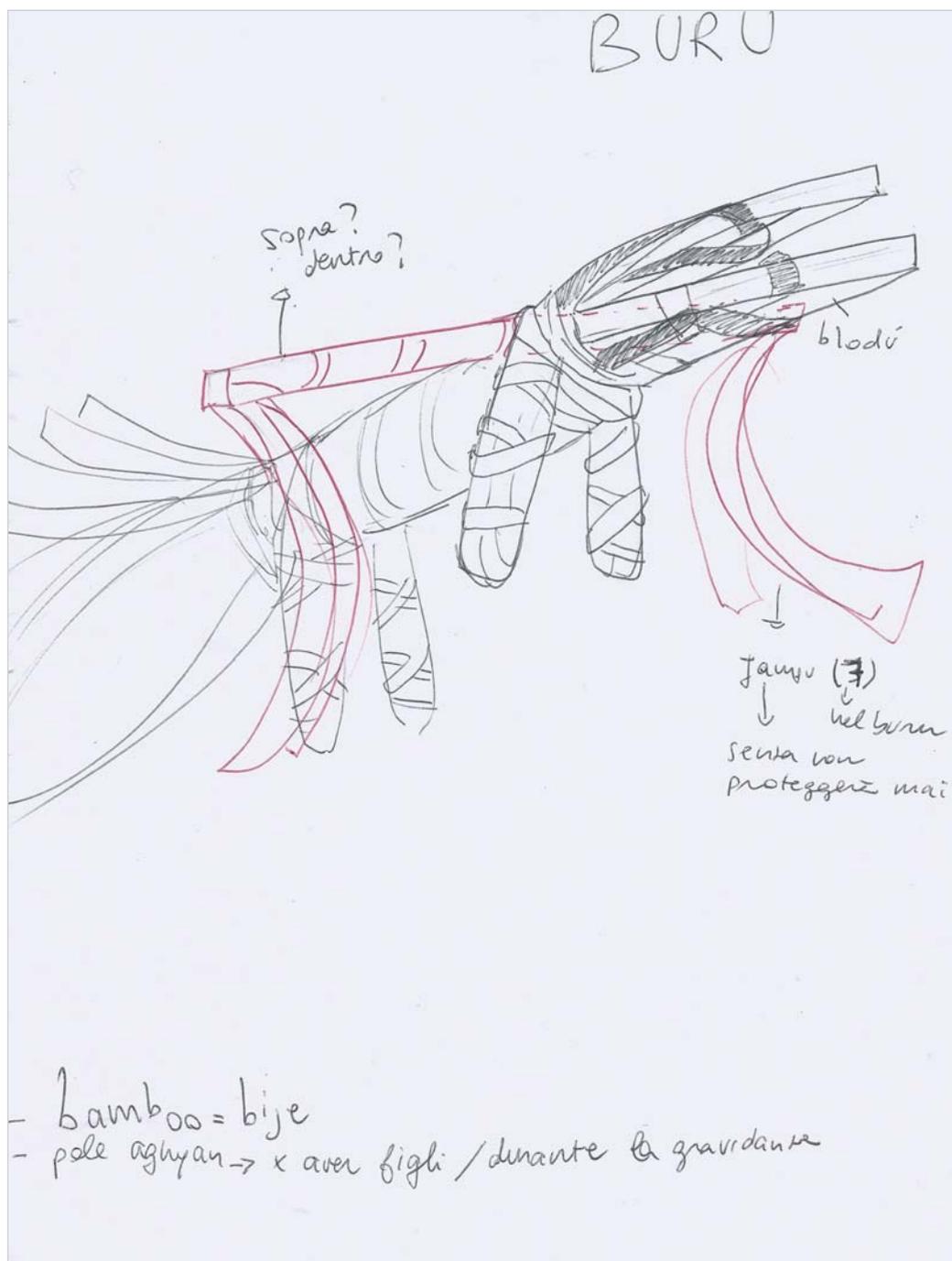


Figure 4: Making of a *buru* fetish, taken from the field notebook, Ziro Valley (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

This concept is interesting because it introduces the theme of rebirth, somewhat common in the religions of India. But the idea of a possible return to an ancestral level linked to the theme of hunting is also very intriguing. When the cycle of transformation of the ancestors is completed, there is something of them that remains in the territory and will make it rich. The ancient theme of hunting over time becomes agricultural, i.e. the abundance of crops, but the link with ancestors is a crucial dynamic for the sustenance of the future community.

A second cosmological element is extremely interesting: just as the aerial dimension of Tali exists in the surface world, so too in Neli, the overturned world of the deceased, there is a hanging and rarefied space, in turn upside down. This is the Pinulemba or the village of the so-called *pinus*, the primaeval spirits of every race and species of men, animals and plants to have been born on earth. Some shamans said that the Pinulemba was a sort of village-forge, a kind of limbo in which the souls of those who are not yet born would be waiting to take shape.

This is a truly complex cosmology, made up of numerous superimposed and opposed worlds in a sort of very precise geometry. The space is therefore divided vertically and horizontally where everything, like the jungle itself, seems to be in precarious balance and constant movement and transformation. The sky of the Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo) is imagined as two opposing hemispheres, acting as celestial vaults that contain this cosmos and constantly revolve around its continual metamorphosis.

But on the level of horizontal terrestrial representation, the worlds of the people and the surrounding forest seem to reproduce a sort of antinomy between order and chaos, whose balance is guaranteed by the careful custody of the shamans and the tutelary gods; nevertheless, also in this case the two dimensions are not completely impermeable. Counterposed against the *udemik*, in the jungle, far from the inhabited centres, there is the territory of the natural spirits and the deities that in the Apatani language are called *ui (uhi)*. These may display a benevolent or, more frequently, a hostile attitude towards man; thus the shamans celebrate rites in their honour to appease their anger or to secure their protection. *Uis* may be the supernatural cause of negative events affecting the community, for which reason animals, usually domestic livestock such as chickens, pigs, etc., are offered as substitute victims.

When a man is ill and loses consciousness, his soul or Yalo may leave his body and stray to Neli [the Underworld]. A shaman priest, called to minister to the sick man, may trace the errant soul to the house of one of the many gods and spirits who dwell in Neli and are ever avid to draw unsuspecting souls to their sphere. Once the shaman has located the Yalo, he offers to ransom it with the sacrifice of an animal; if the spirit accepts the ransom, the Yalo returns to its earthly body, and the patient regains consciousness. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962: 147)

Based on the field interviews, some names of major entities that occur more frequently in the Apatani pantheon will be mentioned below, with a focus on the documented rituals of the area around Ziro. Probably the most striking aspect is how these spirits are linked to a concept of liminality also with regard to relationships with other human and non-human entities. This can also be interpreted according to the theory of liminality of Arnold van Gennep (1981), as the spirits interact or are themselves catalysts of those rites of passage that determine the change of the individual from one socio-cultural status to another, as during the shamanic initiation, as well as the metamorphosis in the entire cycle of the life of being, of which earthly death is only a stage. Also the liminality of the *uis* should be understood as a relationship of relevance to the territory, a mapping of space and sacred geography and a continuous negotiation of its borders with the entities that populate it.

A guardian deity that lives alongside the entrance to the villages is Hilopiot. Also called Hillo (*Yullo-Pyotii*), if revered it can warn the community about imminent dangers or natural disasters. Hinu on the other hand is a spirit of the woods, but, while being able to take on a benevolent attitude, its manifestation is somewhat terrifying: like a *vetāla* of the Hindu tradition, assuming vampire-like attributes, it is believed that it can attack travellers, causing cardiovascular problems, headaches, epistaxis and haemorrhages in general.

The Doji spirit is considered the very essence of the forest, a deity that presides over the manifestations of nature. In a benevolent form it takes the name of the deity Miole, while in its irate manifestation it is known as Mioin. Jivuka (the “black”) is considered an incarnate form of the deity Doji: it is considered to take control of a large feline, such as the tiger or leopard. It is believed that these animals never naturally attack human beings, so if this were to happen the incident would be interpreted as the punishment for the violation of a taboo or even an attack of an angry deity. Therefore if Jivuka, having assumed the form of a tiger, attacks a village, this can be technically explained as a case of possession in which the controller is an ancestral spirit and the controlled body is a non-human animal: in this case a predator, a feline, like the leopard, the tiger, etc. (Beggiora 2013: 93–107).

Miglia, on the other hand, is the spirit of the wind: wandering through the hills it manifests itself with strong gusts or drafts: it is a benign entity, that if it took residence in the home – almost like the air flow that makes the fire flare up – it would become the protector of the house. Another entity associated with the custody of borders – the limited area between the settlements and the thick forest – is known as Ponku. This spirit too is intended to manifest a double character: as Ponku it can induce violent death and tragic accidents to travellers; in the form of Mioku, however, it guarantees the wellbeing of the villages, so that a special ceremony is celebrated annually in its honour.

But the spirit most feared of all the Apatani magic-religious tradition is Gandai, or the entity that presides over the crossroads. It is well known that the crossroads are a magical place in all cultures: symbolically the passage between lands, it is understood as a point of access to different dimensions and worlds. In this liminality of human space, the extra-human is plausibly explicated and all the manifestations intended as a projection of the subtle world are materialised with greater predisposition. Apart from the specific regional characteristics, therefore, Gandai embodies the concept of an evil spirit widespread in many traditions of Asia and the Subcontinent in particular (Buddhist, Hindu, *ādivāsī*, popular folklore in general). This malign entity embodies the collective psychic carcass of the souls in pain, or the revenants: those who have suffered a violent death and who are precluded from the normal passage to the world of the dead, remaining suspended and imprisoned in a sort of liminal space between the worlds. The crossroads, therefore, are in some way connected to the Tali dimension, a dangerous place because it is universally understood as the place of passage of *bhūta*, *preta* and *piśāca*:<sup>12</sup> larvae, ghosts and other frightening spiritual presences.

Ultimately, the boundaries of the world – even a sort of non-place where day meets night – are the territory of the Yachchu deity, who presides over madness and mental disorders in general. Apparently similar to the shaman's initiatory spirits, Yachchu seduces its victims by assuming the characteristics of the opposite sex and tormenting them during sleep through dreamlike visions and recurring dreams. There is a strong erotic component in the manifestation of this demon that can lead men and women to madness, interpreted as a real phenomenon of possession, if not adequately appeased by the shamans (Beggiora 2014b: 207–226).

This cosmology demonstrates that Apatani religion is a complex, articulated system, which for the depth of its elements can at least be compared to other religious systems of India and not a jumble of beliefs and superstitions, as so much literature of the colonial period attempted to demonstrate. However, from this picture it also emerges that the survival of the group is fundamentally based on the assumption of a ferocious Nature, which almost seems to be against human beings. Even if in some cases almost benevolent, the *uis* are always a menacing force, constantly ready to prey on people, or to claim their space. On the other hand, the struggle of the *nyibus* against the spirits, though replete with possible successes, seems to result in a state of constant tension, which is the dimension of a battle that can never be definitively won. Philippe Ramirez emphasised a certain ambivalence about this, observing the principle according to which men hunt animals as *uis* hunt men. He writes: “By essence, no spirit is strictly malevolent or benevolent. Of course, the spir-

12 These categories are clearly Hindu, but they are adopted in the common language of the tribes (in particular the term *bhūta*, used in a generic sense).

its of the wild world are more feared than those residing near or within settlements” (Ramirez 2005: 6). So we are far from that fantasy that indigenous peoples are the keepers of harmony and peace with nature and the surrounding environment, as assumed to a certain extent for example in the discussion of animism by Graham Harvey (2005).

In this complex negotiation with the supernatural, made up of checks and balances in the scrupulous control of the dynamics of liminality, water seems to have enormous importance. Moreover, here as elsewhere, water is the symbol of purity and life, essential for subsistence, but in the social and religious sphere it marks that liminality on which the whole Apatani cosmology hinges. As we mentioned earlier, the sacred geography that distinguishes the territories is structured around the waterways; the ablution with water sanctions all the rites of passage; the vision of the afterlife seems in a certain sense the reflection of the world on a mirror of water. In a series of comparative studies (Tripathy 2005: 249, Saraswati 1995: 70–74) it emerges that the religious symbolism of water is strongly shared between Hindu traditions and indigenous cosmologies. One of the most recurrent elements in many other religious systems is the theme of the flood. The deluge is essentially a moment of transition from a previous, ancient era to the present age of current humanity. Just as in Hinduism there exist the different *pralayas*, or dissolutions, which divide one *yuga* from the other, or one temporal cycle from the next in the manifestation of the cosmos, likewise the deluge is also frequent in the Indian tribal world. Water destroys, overwhelms, annihilates a previous state, but it is the generative principle of the next stage (Vitebsky 1993: 234).

In general, in the tribal world, the succession of elements conceptually and alchemically opposed can be traced: water and fire. In shamanism this symbolism alludes to the world of blacksmiths and metallurgy, according to which fire melts and shapes matter, while water cools, quenches and moulds a new subsequent form (Eliade 2005: 499–503, Stutley 2004: 25–27); even in the Himalayas it is possible to find correspondences in this context (Sidky 2008: 42, 76). In the field of eschatology in many religions the theme of ekpyrosis, or destruction by fire – followed by flood – is frequent; these concepts are often reflected in a more or less defined way also in local folklore and indigenous religion (Beggiora 2014a: 128). The sacredness of water in Hinduism consists precisely in this: the passage through water is a sort of passage through time, from one era to another; or, better, beyond time, as in the progression of a saint who approaches the transcendence of the manifested world.

Excessively focused on the search for a prehistoric lizard,<sup>13</sup> the English explorers and the zoologists after them did not take into consideration the mystery

13 From the picture outlined in this anthropological survey, it is interesting to note that if the *buru* is an animal both water-bound and land-bound, it could be considered a creature endowed with a liminality in terms of Levi-Strauss's (1963) analysis.

of the *buru* in the temporal and eschatological dimension of the Apatani myth. The *buru* story has all the characteristics of a cosmogonic myth: the events of Abo Tani and the migration of the primigenial community go back to the “Time of the Origins”, a sort of non-time precisely because it belongs to a before, a previous era. Here the deluge is not explicit, but the new earth discovered by the first men is clearly indicated as an expanse of diluvial and non-habitable waters. Moreover, the peculiarity of a sub-tropical environment, bordered to the south by the alluvial plains of the Brahmaputra, which annually become an impassable expanse of water during the rainy season, renders this mythical scenario concretely conceivable by analogy. The conflict of the first people with the *burus* takes on the value of a cosmic, primordial battle that marks the advent of a new world. The theme of the daily battle with the *uis* is then replicated and sublimated as a primal event that, through the memory of the forefathers, confirms the ancestral right acquired by the Apatani to their territory. In fact, this region was previously an expanse of water and inaccessible mud, while after their advent it became the microcosm of the current complex ecosystem, in which colonial explorers even saw a sort of romantic and exotic Eden.

In confirmation of this theory, Stuart Blackburn noticed that the killing of the monsters is made possible thanks to the magic disk; clearly it is a *cakra*: the influence of Hinduism here is quite clear, and this raises the event to a mythical level (Blackburn 2008: 117–118). Finally, it is interesting to note that the animals used to describe the *buru* or figuratively composing its mysterious chimaera all have the common feature of a strong relationship with water. Although most of the testimonies refer to reptilian animals, the variants are so many that it seems to be rather its environment – the lake or the swamp – that is the backbone of the myth.

Amphibian reptiles and water snakes recall *nāga* and *nāginī*, deities and spirits of the waters of classical Hinduism that consistently find their counterpart in folklore and tribal shamanism. Or perhaps an even better embodiment of a theoretical comparison between Hindu mythology and our case study is to be found in the *makara*, an ophidic creature, the crocodile-fish, which like the chimaera combines in itself attributes of different terrestrial and aquatic animals. The *mithun*, too, as well as the water buffalo, with their shy characters, prefer shady and humid places, where it is possible to immerse themselves in marshy and muddy areas. Finally, also the pig/boar is described as living in an expanse of water, vigorously digging with its snout in the middle of the soft mud of the marsh, as is actually the habit of such beasts.



Figure 5: Hang village (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)



Figure 6: A *nyibu* while performing a rite with sacrifice, Hang (Claudio Mattolin, 2017)



Figure 7: Apatani tomb, Hang (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

As for the field research, two *nyibus* at the village of Hang (Nabin and Tabin of the Kago and Hibu clans) provided some additional information. They confirmed the history of the *buru* by describing it as an *ui*, and placing it temporally in the ancestral myth and spatially in the heart of Apatani territory, though it was at that time a swamp and not yet a village. But they agreed on the concrete existence of the creature: concrete and absolutely real, as real, in the eyes of the *nyibu*, as the other spirits and subtle entities that populate the forest. Moreover, although circumscribed in its mythical function, we will observe however that, precisely by virtue of its liminal function, in certain circumstances, upon the occurrence of particular conditions that determine some crucial moment of collective transformation, the *buru* could return to manifest itself in one of its many forms. One day, perhaps, it will be possible to relate this myth to an actual currently or previously existing animal. But those who do not recognise that this is a cultural product embodying the Apatani religiosity and the relationship of this community with the surrounding environment, will – like Izzard and his companions – continue forever hunting an empty chimaera.

## The expedition disaster

Della stoltezza e semplicità di quelli che insistono nell'affermare che questi animali (marini) si trovino in luoghi così distanti dal mare perché qui trasportati da Diluvio; come della stoltezza di quell'altra setta di ignoranti che affermano la natura o gli astri la causa della loro creazione, dovuta ad influssi celesti [...] (Leonardo da Vinci, Code Leicester, folio 10, recto, in Calvi 1980: 230).<sup>14</sup>

Izzard's mission proved to be a total disaster even before departure. Almost immediately, the initial enthusiasm seemed brutally quashed by a bad horse fall, which forced the correspondent of the *Daily Mail* to re-evaluate the entire mission, as well as casting a dark omen over the project (Izzard 2001: 53). The real failure, however, was both in terms of strategic research programming and on the actual scientific level.

In fact, the project of the expedition originated from the scientific article of Stonor and Mills on their study in the Apatani area. Izzard's text includes a second report by Stonor,<sup>15</sup> much shorter, in which he collected rumours that the *buru* might have been spotted by the neighbouring indigenous community of Daflas.<sup>16</sup> Given the presence of a marsh in the area, detected in the maps of the time, Izzard and Stonor decided to aim directly for the more inaccessible territory of Daflas, ignoring the Apatani area. Instead of starting the investigation from the place where more testimonies had been gathered, where it would have been possible to learn something more about this tradition, they sought a short cut. From a merely zoological perspective, they drew the conclusion that the *buru* was recognised to be a reptile in the flesh and, eager to film the monster as soon as possible and then to sell the result to the world press, they unfortunately went to a comparatively impenetrable area, trusting to rather fragile and as yet unproven testimony. After their arrival in the Dafla area, in fact, the evidence for the *buru* became inconsistent and the mission ended with two clumsy attempts to cross a marshy and muddy area inhabited mostly by mosquitoes. At the end of his text, Izzard himself admits the foolish mistake of failing to listen to the true and unique voice of the local indigenous peoples who could solve the mystery of the *buru* (Izzard 2001: 149–150).

14 "On the folly and simplicity of those who insist on affirming that these (marine) animals are in places so far from the sea because they were transported here by the Deluge; as the folly of that other sect of ignoramuses who attribute to nature of the stars the cause of their creation, due to celestial influences [...]" (translated by Stefano Beggiora).

15 Izzard claims it was in a separate envelope attached to the first report. Without title, Izzard renames it *The Burus of Rilo Valley* (Izzard 2001: 44–48).

16 This is the old denomination for the Nishi groups, adjacent to the Apatani, located in the Lower and Upper Subhansiri districts (Singh 1995: 276–80). They belong to the so-called Tani groups and are considered descendants of the same mythical ancestor. The Nishi territory is, however, much more impenetrable compared to the area of Hang and Ziro, not fully suitable for agricultural activities and substantially much less developed. According to the most recent data (Census 2011), the Nishi today have a population that does not exceed 300,000.

On the scientific level too, the expedition proved to be a disaster in the sense that, even though the search was unsuccessful, it did not fall back onto other types of investigation, failing to bring back any data of scientific importance. Yet the expedition was supported by adequate funding and equipped with optical instruments and cameras, and the participation of renowned scientists guaranteed an academic presence within it. In the second section of the book there is in fact a long ethnographic account of the habits and customs of the Dafla population in the broader context of the Northeast of India, but the whole appears fragmented, not well contextualised and very superficial. The phenomena described remain uninterpreted: there is a reference to religious rituals, but it lacks any comment or search for meaning. The tribal culture is evidently of little interest to Izzard and his companions, serving at most as an exotic scenario that provides a background to the deeds of the British. Izzard seems too focused on himself: he describes his horse fall, the papers, his slow progression sinking into the jungle and his frustration in the face of a once-again unsolved mystery. It is clear that the expedition had clearly failed to grasp the true meaning of what it was going to study. While losing the precious opportunity to produce a good ethnography, the book at the same time seems to aim, with a notable self-celebrating tension, to be a piece of travel writing of a more didactic nature.

The result is a text that, despite having had the potential, is not scientific, or is at most pseudo-scientific. But although the popularity of the travel narrative was still far from exhausted, the certain smug romantic taste for the civilising mission should have been obsolete by now in post-colonial English literature, at least after Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) (Said 1993: 22–31). The awareness of the irreversible socio-anthropological mutation undergone by the “journey” and the “exotic” in modernity had not yet emerged (this was to develop in particular after World War II) but nonetheless, fifty years separate the work of Izzard from the anti-odyssey that constituted Conrad's masterpiece. It is obviously not possible to compare the two genres: Izzard's text remains a journalistic account of an adventurous journey. However, the Conradian premise had in the first place already elaborated a critique of colonialism in general and the mentality that moves it; moreover, by coincidence, the search for the “darkness” in the depths of the jungle (or for a monster, in this case) revealed in turn the Western matrix of the novel. As a third point in Conrad's account, the theme of power, or rather a sort of delusion of omnipotence – which we must presume still held sway among many Britons still in India in the early post-war period – had proved capable of corrupting even the most irreproachable minds, leading them towards a monstrous metamorphosis (“The horror!”).

Izzard's book seems to intersect nearly all these themes almost unconsciously, while remaining anchored to an old vision of the world. The text therefore remains a sort of hybrid, which finds its sense of being perhaps only as a

post-modern fairy tale, or better in the niche of cryptozoology, a discipline that not coincidentally flourished in the 1950s, but which struggles to survive in contemporary times. The story of the *buru* becomes tragically something pseudo-zoological, if not fantastic, and spreads across the world while completely losing its origins and its cultural contextualisation. Its luck, however, is limited by the fact that the *buru* does not have the anthropomorphic appeal of Bigfoot or Yeti and, although falling within the category of saurian cryptids, has less appeal than the Loch Ness monster, which is allegedly much larger. It is no coincidence that Izzard and his companions would later embark on the chase of the so-called “abominable” Himalayan Snowman (Izzard 1955).

An interesting paradox is that Izzard’s expedition was resolved to follow the path of a zoological interpretation of the mystery, setting aside from the beginning a possible mythical interpretation. Stonor, as diligently reported by Izzard, proceeds rigorously to an examination of every interpretative possibility of the object of study, a rigour that ultimately betrays the heavy prejudices, if not the open underlying racism, that marked the colonial age and for a long time also the period that followed. He sensed some relationship of the *buru* with a mythical function in Apatani religiosity: he comes to hypothesise a parallel between the saurian cryptid and the dragon/snake of the traditional symbolism of the East and West, or even with the *nāgas* in India. Nevertheless he a priori discarded this hypothesis, based on the preconception that the indigenous communities of India would not have possessed a culture capable of imagining a myth so rich in symbolism, nor substantially any form of religion:

The dragon is of its very nature a symbol, and not a legendary monster in the real meaning of the term. [...] For a people such as the Apa Tani tribe, with a culture far lower than any people known to possess the dragon, even to know it would be remarkable enough: for them to transform it into a tradition such as that of the *buru* would, in our opinion virtually impossible, and would involve a religious and mythological background comparable with a high civilisation (Izzard 2001: 39).

Not satisfied with such a rough approximation, the zoologist then proposes hyperdiffusionist interpretations, which for the time we can also consider conceivable:

The dragon myth is of very great complexity, and has, in the words of Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, “evolved along with civilisation itself”. It is a myth of civilised people only: and although it occurs in every civilisation of the past in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, there is no known instance of a culturally primitive people practicing a simple form of animistic religion, possessing the myth. The dragon is essentially associated with the myths of peoples of high cultural level. And is altogether out of place in a modern neolithic culture (Izzard 2001: 43).

There are other vague arguments<sup>17</sup> to confirm what Izzard's expedition had already a priori deduced: the Apatani, as well as the neighbouring indigenous populations of the area, were nothing but a band of primitive savages, unable to govern themselves and possessing a minimal system of beliefs and/or ethical/religious traditions. Like children who play with the sand on the shore of the lake they would have found the remains (fossils?) of the skull of an unknown beast and would have built a legend upon it. This vision caused Ralph Izzard some regret: like the British palaeontologist Arthur Tindell Hopwood (1897–1969), who claimed that the Nordic and Germanic legends of the Lindwurm were linked to the ancient discovery of fossil bones of some large extinct animal of proto-historic age – or that the myth was essentially an attempt to rationalise the existence of the evidence rather than a vague memory of the *monstrum* in flesh – by analogy he explained the *buru* among the Apatani. Izzard's conclusion is that it would have been better if they had attempted to find some kind of unknown prehistoric relic and to rejoice at this scientific discovery, rather than throw themselves into the hurried and unconvincing chase of a living fossil.

## Conclusion: The “real monsters”

There is ample literature concerning the study of the indigenous communities of northeast India, and an excursus on this is not possible here for reasons of space. It might be enough for the moment to say that throughout the nineteenth century, British scholars, as well as military or even administrative officers, long raised questions about indigenous culture. There are numerous examples of correspondence on this subject, showing that in the opinion of some it was clear that indigenous people were no more than primitive savages, often compared to beasts, whereas others fought for the recognition of their rights as human beings. With regard to religion there are many comparisons with the Native Americans (Beggiora 2010: 19) who, although experiencing a troubled history of bloody clashes and marginalisation, were allowed the dignity of a religion composed of totems, shamans and healers, prairie spirits, etc. However, this dignity seems almost always to be denied in the Indian subcontinent.

An overview of colonial history in India reveals the idea of a widespread “undergrowth” of intolerance and opposition towards the Raj, precisely on the part of the indigenous peoples. The major movements of insurrection and

17 In short, Fürer-Haimendorf did not explicitly relate the *buru* with a mythical function, but at the same time he did not deny the possibility of such a relationship. Indeed, from all his study the mythological interpretation seems to be plausible, even if this aspect was not sufficiently scrutinised. Moreover, Stonor did not detect any affinities with the myths and legends of the other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh, which is unsurprising, given that these cultures were little known or even unknown at that time.

revolt against the British, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, were born in the heart of the tribal territories (Pati 2010). The Northeast is no exception in this sense: the indigenous peoples, unwilling to submit to external authority even before British rule, under the Ahom dynasty (1228–1826), rendered the border unstable throughout the colonial period. Moreover, the region is still considered a sort of cauldron of separatist organisations and centrifugal movements that leverage local ethnic specificities (Bhagabati 2009: 2–16).

After the shock of the Mutiny in 1857, during which India almost managed to shake off the colonial yoke once and for all, the British arrived in the Northeast, which then still presented itself as wild and partially unexplored. Here they adopted precautionary measures such as the Inner Line (1873), intended to separate the tribal areas from the plantations of the rich Assamese plain. The former were also excluded under the 1935 Act, before all the territory was strategically re-evaluated at the dawn of the Second World War (Singh 1995: 10–19). The colonial impact led to the disintegration of the earlier, more fluid social balance among the tribes of the northeastern border, which was followed by a process of dividing, cataloguing and marginalising the groups. Already in the Second World War the area, close to the Chinese and Burmese borders, fell under the Japanese invasion directive: a comprehensive work of rationalisation and calculation, in addition to control of the local population, would have been of great value (Beggiora 2014c: 157–173).

Stuart Blackburn concludes that Arunachal Pradesh, and in particular the Apatani, were not excluded from the conflicts that dominated the relations between the authorities and the tribes during the colonial period. In particular, he is critical of the conduct of Fürer-Haimendorf himself, more as a British agent than as an anthropologist, and of the pressure generally placed upon the local populations (Blackburn 2003: 335–66). It is interesting to consider that when the British, Fürer-Haimendorf, Stonor, Mills, Major Betts (who was in command as Political Officer) and others pulled up stakes from Apatani territory, a revolt of the tribes against local institutions and military outposts immediately took place (1948). The insurrection was severely suppressed, according to the erstwhile English example, as always with force and retaliation among the villages (Blackburn 2003: 335–66, Baruah 2018: 17–30). But, paradoxically, this serious fact is not mentioned in any of the English writings of the time, not even by those who had the occasion to come back and write about Indian ethnography. As tensions exploded, while a people fought for recognition of their ancestral rights, Izzard instead published his book of exploration.

The presumed superiority of the white man and the arrogance of colonial interests were the basis of a racial prejudice that played an important part in the tribal policies of the time, and which were unfortunately partially inherited by independent India. A detached reading of Izzard's work highlights how

the old mentality still oozes forth in the early post-colonial period (and in a certain way persists even today). So perhaps it can be assumed that Western explorers in search of romantic and exotic clichés were the only “real monsters” to wander around the Himalayas in that period.

As a final note, I recall that in more recent times different researchers have tried to solve the mystery of the *buru* from a biological/zoological perspective, even without the support of any new scientific evidence, but attempting to interpret the past testimonies more coherently. Roy P. Mackal (1925–2013), a biologist from the University of Chicago, hypothesised that it could be an Indian variant of the Komodo dragon (Mackal 1980: 79–98). Bernard Heuvelmans (1916–2001), a Franco-Belgian zoologist who was very involved in cryptozoology, was of much the same opinion (Heuvelmans 1986: 1–26). The creature’s ability to dig in the mud and its most intense activity following the rainy season have given rise in more recent times to the hypothesis of the English scholar Karl Shuker (2007: 237ff) that the *buru* could be a kind of dipnoan, or lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*), of an as yet unknown Himalayan species. Such animals would be able to hibernate in a cocoon of dry mud to survive drought and this would explain the sporadic nature of the appearance. However, the size of these animals would be quite inferior to that of the mythical reptile. These last hypotheses, however, which by virtue of the incredible potential of this territory I can neither deny nor endorse, do not undermine my personal interpretation of this fascinating mystery.

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