

Apong and the Adi Tribe: Exploring the Cultural and Social Essence of Arunachal Pradesh's Traditional Beverage

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ABSTRACT: Indigenous people across the globe have different knowledge of food production and consumption. These are unique knowledge passes down across the generation having cultural and tradition significances. Among tribal people food is more than just sustenance; it is a complex system of symbolic communication that conveys meaning and significance in various social contexts. Arunachal Pradesh is a home for 26 major tribes with more than 100 sub-tribes. The Adis are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and hold rich knowledge on traditional fermented rice beer called *Apong*. The *Apong* is not merely a food commodity among the Adi, but it is an integral part of intangible cultural heritage preserved for ages. Grounded in the ethnographic method, we argue that *Apong* is deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural aspects of life among the Adi tribe, and it also facilitates social bonding and a sense of belongingness within the community.

KEY WORDS: Apong, Fermented Food, Indigenous People, Adi Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

Food is treated as a nutritional substance that people primarily consume to provide their body with energy and essential nutrients for overall well-being and health. However, among tribal people food is more than just sustenance; it is a complex system of symbolic communication that conveys meaning and significance in various social contexts. The ways in which the food is produced, prepared, and consumed are imbued with cultural values, social norms, and cultural identity. Food can convey symbolic meanings in several ways; through its ingredients and preparation methods, food can signify cultural heritage and tradition. The consumption of certain foods can be associated with specific community and cultural groups (Lee, S. 2025).

The knowledge of food production, consumption, and sharing and the worldview attached to food differ from culture to culture and place to place. The community having the same pattern of food consumption identify themselves as belonging to one group. (Douglas, 1997). The pattern of eating food is a cultural behavior that is similar to other actions that support life. People don't eat everything, everywhere, with everyone, and in every setting in any civilization. Most cultures have a distinct cuisine, which includes a distinctive set of cooking traditions, preferences, and practices. Almost every type of life, whether it's a plant or an animal, has been eaten by one or more human societies at some point in the past or present for sustenance or rituals. The choice of cuisine is a cultural decision. People don't think that everything is safe to eat; they make choices. Culture encodes potential nutrition into palatable food (Levi-Strauss 1966). Rules and usages, which overlap at various levels of symbolism, control the people's pattern of food consumption. These symbols describe the social setting and grouping in which food is eaten and make it illegal or taboo to eat their food (Q. Marak, 2014).

In the northeastern region of India, various tribal communities possess distinct knowledge regarding food production and consumption. One particular food that is common among all is the practice of fermented rice beer. The fermented drinks, which are commonly known as rice beer, are an integral part of their food practices and play a symbolic role in their socio-cultural life. Tongba of Sikkim, Yu of Manipur, Peyazu of Nagaland, U-Phandieng of Meghalaya, Poro and Nogin Apong of Assam, and Apong, Opo, and Jumin of Arunachal Pradesh are some of the fermented beverages of the tribes of Northeast India. The fermented beverages, especially the rice beer, occupy a significant status in the animistic tribal world. Rice beer is not only a household drink that is served to everyone irrespective of age and gender in feasts and social events but also has socio-religious and ritualistic importance. The Meites of Manipur use Yu (distilled product of rice beer) as a medicine, for recreation, and for offerings. The Limbu community of Nepal and Sikkim and Darjeeling in India offer Tongba (millet beer) as a part of their culture to show respect and to honor their guests. Opo—the rice beer plays a significant role among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the tribes, i.e., *Adi*, *Galo*, *Nyshi*, and *Apatani*, that belong to the Abo-Tani clan. The Adis sought the hand of the bride by offering Apong. It is used for feasts



and housewarming ceremonies and even rituals. During the housewarming ceremony, i.e., *Pone*, the strongest and the first brewed *Apong*, is kept at the roof of the house for the deities of the house. Among the *Apatanis*, the white rice beer and millet beer have the same role. They call it *Ooh*. *Ooh* is used in every ritual, feast, and occasion. *Apatanis* also consider it as an agent of purification. In the *Myoko* festival, the axe used to slaughter the sacrificial animal is dipped into a bowl of millet beer to purify it. The notes prepare *Ju* (white rice beer), and the liquor extracted is called *Jumin*. The *Noctes* chant some incantations and oral narratives associated with it and sprinkle droplets of *Jumin* as a share for the spirits before drinking. They used it during marriages, rituals, and in their everyday life. The *Monpas* prepare distilled liquor called *Aara* and *Baag-Chaang*. Due to the cold weather conditions, *Aara* is consumed to keep the body warm. The *Monpas* prepare a unique drink, which is a mixture of raw egg, butter, and *Aara* (Dabi, Kaling, 2017). Understanding food habits of indigenous communities is an important subject and a matter of investigation in social sciences, particularly in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. The indigenous knowledge of different food cuisines and beverages, ingredients, processes of cooking, tools and implements used for making food, cultural values, belief systems or oral narratives, and rituals associated with the food items are all an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of a particular place or community that is orally passed from generations.

This present study deals with *Apong*—the fermented rice beer made of cooked rice mixed with yeast starter cakes. *Apong* plays a significant role in the socio-cultural life of the *Adi* of Arunachal Pradesh. It's embedded in the daily food practices and also served during festivals, agricultural rituals, life cycle ceremonies, and religious practices. In spite of the socio-cultural significance of *Apong* in the *Adi* society, so far, no detailed study on the socio-cultural aspect of *Apong* has been done. The present research is an elaborate study of the genesis of *Apong*, dealing with its socio-cultural significance among the *Adi* in the primordial and present context. The study is also an effort to preserve the indigenous knowledge of the preparation and brewing of *Apong* for the use of future generations.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature; ethnographic methods were employed for data collection. The ethnographic method helped the researcher immerse themselves in the natural environment of the *Adi* Tribe, enabling a deep contextualized understanding of social and cultural phenomena. Researchers participate in the activities, observe behaviors, and interact directly with study groups in specific contexts in the study area, resulting in comprehensive and nuanced insights. The study duration lasted for two months, i.e., November 2024 to December 2024. This month of the year was purposively selected for field visits, as most activities concerned with the interest of the study take place in these months of the year.

The present study is a case study of *Kerang* village. This village comes under *Kaying* Circle, District Siang, Arunachal Pradesh, India. It is a tribal village inhabited by the *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The village is the second largest village, constituting 105 households. *Kerang* village is rural, with 95% of the households engaged in agriculture practices. The given villages do not have motorable road connections; the distance of the nearest urban center is approximately 15 to 20 kilometres from the village. Purposive sampling design method was administered for collection of data by the researcher. The respondents equipped with the research interest were selected. Observation, focus group discussion employing an open-ended interview schedule, and field notes were used as tools for data collection. Thematic data analysis method was employed in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the qualitative data from field notes, open-ended questionnaires, and observations.

Limitations:

The native researchers belong to the tribe under study. Therefore, we were well aware of potential subjectivity and personal bias; hence, utmost diligence was taken to ensure methodological consistency and ethical integrity to uphold the objectivity during the collection of data. Further, due to time constraints, the researcher spent two months, i.e., November 2024 to December 2024, in the field; the data were collected within this time period. Therefore, the finding of the study tends to be context-specific.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Apong Monam (Preparation of *Apong*)

The *Adi* consumes two types of traditional beverages: *Noggin* and *Apong*. *Noggin*, which is white in colour, is normally for household consumption. It is not involved in ritual and cultural practices. It is largely consumed in leisure time without any cultural



significance among the members. Whereas, *Apong* which is blackish and brownish in colour holds more cultural significance; it is used in every ritual, festival, and ceremony among the Adi tribe.

Preparation of Adi *Apong* requires planning and resource management. Resources such as *Ekkam* leaves (*Phrynium pubinerve*), *Ampe* (paddy-rice husk), and *Sengeng* (yeast cake) are kept handy before the process of making *Apong* begins. Initially, *Ampe* is burned till it gets black in thin plates. After completion of the *Ampe* burning procedure, it is spread on the bamboo mats to make it cold. Meanwhile, cooked rice is also spread in the *Appu* (bamboo mats) evenly and kept for some time to make it cold and be ready for subsequent stages.

The next step is to mix the rice and burned husk thoroughly. It is done by kneading with both hands. After a proper mixing of rice and husk is given, powdered *Sengeng* is sprinkled all over it evenly, and again the process of mixing with both hands is administered. The next steps involve an incubation period; in this stage the mixture is packed and stored for the fermentation process. Traditionally it is packed in *Apong Appe*, a handwoven bamboo basket sealed from the inside with the *ekkam* leaves. The mixture is packed in the bamboo basket wherein the upper opening of the basket is covered with *ekkam* leaves and tightened with cordages to ensure no leakages of gases from inside the basket. The basket is then left undisturbed for fermentation for 10 to 15 days, depending on the temperature. Within this time period a regular check is performed to examine fermentation or prevent *Apong* from getting sour.

Apong Tonnam (Brewing Process)

Traditionally, the brewing of *Apong* is assigned to the women folk called *Apong Ane*. The menfolk can assist the *Apong Ane* in certain tasks that demand more physical labour, like transferring boiled water from the fireplace to the *Apong Ane* to be poured in *Borjung*. Normally during major festivals or social occasions like marriages, when *Apong* is brewed in large quantities, it demands collaborative effort from both men and women. In such a situation, men and women are equally involved in the process of brewing *Apong*. But there is a strict division of work between the two. Menfolk can only assist in boiling the water, transferring boiling water, etc. The primary roles such as brewing and collecting extracted *Apong* and storing are executed by women.

Brewing of *Apong* begins with the transferring of fermented *Ponyok* (fermented rice) to a conical apparatus called *Borjung*. The *Borjung* is made by splitting the bamboo tube and weaving it with cordage to give it a conical shape. Transferring the fermented *Ponyok* from the *Apong* basket to the *Borjung* required skills; the *Apong Ane* meticulously ensured that the right amount of pressure was applied while filling the *Borjung* with fermented rice, and also the filling needed to be perfectly balanced. If one side of the apparatus is filled with more fermented rice than the other side, the test of the *pong* will be affected. The *Borjung* is covered with *ekkam* leaves from the inside to prevent any leakage during the process of brewing. It is kept in an upright position, hanging in midair, keeping 1 or 1.5 feet of height at the bottom. The given gap is required for the vessel or bucket to be placed below to collect *Apong* extract. At the bottom of the *Borjung* is the tapering end, through which *Apong* extract drips out. At the bottom, just above the tapering end, shredded *ekkam* leaves are packed, which works as a sieve, filtering the extract flowing down to the cone.

After setting up *Borjung*, hot boiled water is gradually poured in a circular direction, beginning from the corner of the apparatus and moving towards the center by *Apong Ane*. The extracted *Apong* is stored in *Paki* (vessels) sealed with *ekkam* leaves. After collecting a decent amount, *Apong* is served for the test among the brewing group by the *Apong Ane* in a bamboo knot, and the rest is stored for festivals or occasions.

Test of Apong

According to their belief, the taste of *Apong* depends on the skill of the brewer. The brewing of *Apong* demands rigorous patience and precision from the brewer. The patience and precision are required for pouring the right amount of boiled water in the right direction into the *Borjung* (apparatus). The slower water is poured, the better *Apong* will taste. For a major festival like *Solung* and *Uying*, the size of the *Borjung* is also bigger. Normally, it takes 6-7 hours to brew a large *Apong Borjung*. The task of pouring water into the *Borjung* kept changing among the *Apong Ane*. The *Apong Ane* because of their knowledge and experiences in brewing holds high regard in the community.

Apong and Social Taboos

Apong is not only a food item that is meant for consumption alone, but it also has deep, intricate roots embedded in cultural beliefs and practices. Among Adi tribe, the procedure of *Apong* preparation is exclusively executed by womenfolk. The woman (s) who execute the *Apong* preparation avoid consuming citrus or fruits that are sour in taste. They believe that, consuming of citrus fruit before *Apong* preparation would affect the fermentation process and spoil the test of *Apong*.



Menfolk are also involved to a certain extent, as discussed above, but govern by social taboos the core exercises, like mixing cooked rice with burned husk and sprinkling and mixing yeast cake with the rice and husk, are performed only by women. Men are not allowed to touch yeast cake and do other exercises that involve direct contact with the yeast cake. It is believed that if a man touches the yeast cake, he would lose his intelligent abilities/potency, hunting skills, and orator skills. There is a popular saying in Adi: if a man behaves irrationally and deviantly, people exclaim, “Has he eaten *Siyeng* (Yest)?” Which means, yeast has the damaging latent force that can coerce men to act irrational or deviant from normal behaviour if not avoided contact with yeast.

Socio-Cultural Significance of Apong

The knowledge and usage of alcohol is an age-old tradition among the tribal communities. The integration of alcohol in rituals and festivals has been in practice since the beginning of human civilization; alcohol is so deeply ingrained into the cultural practices that it is considered a societal and cultural ‘artefact’ (Mandelbaum, 1965, p. 281). The Adi tribe of *Kerang* Village celebrates 26 different festivals in a year. The festivals are collectively celebrated by the villagers adhering to the traditional protocols passed down across generation. The beliefs system of Adi of *Kerang* is based on animism. They exhibit deep reverence and respect for the nature which manifest during the rituals in festivals. The sacrifice of Animals such as *Eyek* (Pig), *Eso* (Bos frontalis) and *Perok* (Chicken) in rituals are performed as an act of appeasement and reverence to the nature God. Similarly, sprinkling of *Apong* at stilt alters and bestowing *Apong* to the spiritual being during festivals are rituals practice manifesting the cultural symbolic significance of *Apong* among the Adi.

Without integrating *Apong*, festivals and rituals are incomplete. Hence, to make certain that every household is prepared with *Apong* for the festivals, the community announcement is practiced in the village. For example, *Unying*, a major agriculture festival among the Adi, is celebrated in the 1st week of February and *Apong* is also very central to the celebration. Therefore, an announcement for *Apong* preparation will be done 15 to 20 days prior to the date of celebration. An announcement is made by a senior member in consultation with Gaun Bura and other senior members of the community. Normally, the announcement is delivered in the evening when members of the village are back home from work. The announcer would walk across the village and loudly announce, ‘Roro takamme *Apong* molangke, *Unying* Gidie legang pe’ (It is an announcement for all to prepare *Apong* for coming *Unying* festivals from tomorrow). Every household prepares *Apong* in the next couple of days after the announcement. A general announcement is made in the village to ensure that the *Apong* is ready at each household for the rituals held during the festivals. In fact, a festival like *Aagam* (an Adi festival celebrated to appease the nature god for a good harvest) marks its commencement only after the first extracted, untouched *Apong* is offered to the nature god.

Social Reciprocity and Social Bonds

Apong is not only used for offering or to appease deities but also consumed by the community members. It is shared and consumed collectively by the members of the community. The sharing and collective consuming of *Apong* reinforce community identity and foster transmission of cultural values. *Apong* served as a medium for communication and a tool for fostering relationships and social cohesion among the Adi tribe. During the festival, each household would prepare an *Apong* to host their respective neighbour and other members of the community. The act of sharing is seen as a moral obligation that strengthens social relationships. *Apong* is served to everyone who visits the house during festivals. During the festivals it is a common phenomenon where members of the community walk across the village holding an *Apong* glass, paying a visit to alternate houses. People would sit together, listening to stories from the elders and traditional knowledge holders about the rituals and festivals. The act of offering *Apong* is socially obligatory to acknowledge for the person who is offered. The social bonding of two families depends on how they reciprocate each other in terms of acknowledging the *Apong* offering and vice versa. This very practice of sharing and reciprocating of *Apong* among the community member shape the social relationships and strengthens the community bonds among them.

CONCLUSIONS

Food is more than just sustenance; it is a complex system of symbolic communication that conveys meaning and significance in various social contexts. It occupies a central place in rituals and festivals among the Adi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. It has a cultural symbolic meaning that completed the essence of rituals and celebrations. It is significant and not limited to ritual and festivals but also holds important space in the daily social affairs. Social occasions such as marriage ceremonies cannot be completed without incorporating *Apong* into them. Moreover, *Apong* also plays a significant role in fostering social bonding and deepening the sense of community feeling through the practice of sharing and collective consuming among the members of the community.



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