

# The Idu of Arunachal Pradesh and the world of the spirits



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This printout: Roing, November 6, 2018

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. The environment of Northern Arunachal Pradesh</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3. Idu society</b>	<b>2</b>
3.1 Ethnography	2
3.2 Language	4
<b>4. A vertical hierarchy</b>	<b>4</b>
4.1 Overview	4
4.2 Ecozonal deities	5
4.3 The assault on heaven	7
<b>5. The <i>khānyū</i></b>	<b>7</b>
5.1 Guardian spirits	7
5.2 Malevolent environmental spirits	8
5.3 Disease spirits	9
<b>6. The four underworlds of the Idu</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7. The diversity of spirits as environmental metaphor</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>8. Why do these beliefs persist?</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>12</b>

## TABLES

Table 1. Categories of <i>khānyū</i> among the Idu.....	4
Table 2. Ecozonal deities among the Idu .....	5
Table 3. Malevolent environmental spirits among the Idu.....	8

## FIGURES

Figure 1. The vertical domains of the land deities .....	5
Figure 2. The destinations of the soul after death .....	11

## MAPS

Map 1. Arunachal Pradesh within India.....	1
Map 2. Idu territory in India and Tibet.....	3

## ABSTRACT

The paper describes the religious belief system of the Idu, a people in Northern Arunachal Pradesh, NE India. The Idu worldview is dominated by a great variety of named spirits. The most important are those which control the different ecozones in which the Idu live. However, those which have most impact on daily life are the malevolent environmental spirits, such as those which control landslides, floods, disease and other risks. The must be placated, or the effects when an individual dies managed through a complex series of rituals which are performed by the *īgū*, shamans. Apart from these there are beneficent spirits which guard the village, its plants and animals, and what are here termed folklore spirits, similar to poltergeists, which pose threats in daily life. A proposed interpretation is that the Idu have classified environmental risk and essentialised it through the naming of spirits. It is suggested that Idu have largely resisted the spread of global religions precisely because they remain ambiguous about the reality of these spirits, but insistent on the correct performance of placatory ceremonies.

Keywords; Idu; religion; environmental risk; Arunachal Pradesh

## 1. Introduction

Studies of religion in SE Asia have tended to concentrate strongly on the world religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, together with the less prevalent Islam and Christianity. The spiritual world of the isolated minority peoples who remain less affected by them has had limited attention in recent years. Scott (2009) has helped focus on their political resistance to the impositions of the state, and their religious practices might well be considered part of this opposition. Nonetheless, the nature of these beliefs has been little described in recent literature.

Although globalisation has made a major impact in SE Asia, among the minorities of Arunachal Pradesh, NE India, highly local religions still flourish. The difficulties of travel, the need for permits even for Indian citizens and the closure of the border with neighbouring countries have acted to protect local belief systems by comparison with the more accessible states in SE Asia. As a consequence, these beliefs remain far more vibrant than elsewhere in the region.

Earlier in the twentieth century, anthropologists seem to have been perplexed by the diversity of supernatural entities, and unable to fit them into any system. Summaries of religion of the ‘hill-tribes’ often refer to the innumerable *nats* which have to be placated. [further review of literature]. One publication which bears directly on the situation in Arunachal Pradesh is Aisher (2007) which describes the vertical arrangement of deities among the Nyishi, a Tani group in the area of Seppa.

A people who have maintained the traditional structures of belief very strongly in the face of external pressures are the Idu of the Roing area. There is no doubt that this has been aided by their isolation and dispersed community structures, as well as a highly individualist social culture. But this paper will argue it is also maintained by two very idiosyncratic factors which underlie Idu religion. These first is, paradoxically, an indifference to the empirical reality of the supernatural, in favour of the correct performance of ritual by specialists. The second is that despite its rich biota, the Idu live in a highly risky environment, with landslides, earthquakes, floods and epidemics a continuous threat. These risks are equated with an array of largely malevolent spirits. Whether these are ‘real’ or simply metaphors for potentially catastrophic events can be debated, but modern infrastructure has yet to make a significant impact on these risks.

The purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to describe the belief system of the Idu in relation to their conceptualisation of the spirit world, together with the system of propitiation and sacrifices required to counter its threat to societal stability. The paper describes the physical environment of Arunachal Pradesh in more detail, together with the environmental risks in the Idu area. It characterises the panoply of spirits the Idu attribute to the unseen world and their relation to the experienced world. The Idu identify four underworlds to which souls travel and relate these to the types of death individuals suffer. The rather detailed classification of potential sources of fatal accidents suggests that the spirits which cause them can be interpreted as environmental metaphors, and that these reflect the risk Idu people experience on a daily basis. Comparison with earlier accounts confirm that the Idu remain quite conservative in their beliefs; nonetheless they have been compelled to come to terms with modernity and it is probable that the structure of Idu relations with the supernatural allow

**Map 1. Arunachal Pradesh within India**



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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork on which this paper is based was undertaken in Arunachal Pradesh in February-March 2015, December-January 2015-2016, January-February 2017, January-February and October 2018. I am most grateful for Dr. Mite Linggi and the Idu Language Development Committee for working with me on transcriptions and interviews. A large number of interviews were synthesised into the descriptions in this paper. I would like to thank all the individuals for their views and information.

them to do this rather effectively.

## 2. The environment of Northern Arunachal Pradesh

To understand Idu interpretations of their environment, a brief summary of its main parameters is given here. Arunachal Pradesh is shaped like a hook, curling around the valley of the Brahmaputra, and it is marked throughout by sharply dissected terrain, falling rapidly from the Tibetan Plateau to the river basin (Map 1). The snowmelt from the Plateau has carved a series of deep river valleys, which are dry and filled with rocks for most of the year. Floods tend to come very suddenly, often carrying away even quite strongly built bridges.

The dissection of the terrain is reflected in its geomorphological instability, since the Himalayas, the result of the friction of two continental plates, are continuing to form. Earthquakes are a regular occurrence throughout this region. Records of highly destructive earthquakes go back at least to 1548 (Reddy & Nagabhushanam 2009) and in 1950 thousands were killed when the Idu area was struck by one of an 8.6 magnitude, known as the Assam–Tibet or Medog earthquake. It was the tenth largest earthquake of the 20th century and the largest known earthquake not to have been caused by an oceanic subduction. A combination of this earthquake, the subsequent flood and the creation of the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary has caused a shift in population to the plains and lower levels. The evidence of landslides marks the steep cliffs throughout the region, but these are not caused by deforestation as elsewhere. In northern Arunachal Pradesh the mountainsides are thickly covered with undisturbed forest.

The fauna and flora are extremely diverse, and largely undescribed. There is no reliable guide to the vegetation of the area, and the animals are covered in regional overviews. Mammals are better known, but still there are unconfirmed reports of large antelope species, yet to be described (Choudhury 2013; Menon 2014; ). Snakes and other reptiles have to be identified from Assam guides (Ahmed et al. 2009; Purkayastha 2013), and fish and insects remain largely unknown.

This biodiversity is attractive and it has had two consequences, the evolution of an elaborate hunting culture among the indigenous peoples, and the declaration of large wildlife reserves. These are not well policed, but their inaccessibility and in particular the problems of logging such steep terrain, has ensured they remain little exploited. In addition, the closure of the border with Tibet has restricted Chinese buyers of wildlife remedies, which is a major problem in countries like Laos (ref).

An additional intriguing event which occurs on very long cycles, perhaps once every fifty years are simultaneous flowerings of the bamboo *Schizostachyum arunachalensis*. The abundance of large seeds produced stimulates a catastrophic growth in rodent populations, which in turn devastates crops and stored food. The consequence is disease, hunger and consequent migration. These events are described by Nag (1999) or Huber (2012) for Mizo and Na, but there is no doubt they also affect the Idu.

The overall picture is of a rich environment, but one which is highly risky for humans. Earthquakes, landslides, floods and consequent epidemics make living here a continuing problem. The low population density is a clear reflection of this high level of risk. Indeed, after particularly large earthquake in 1950, whole river valleys were deserted and the populations relocated to the plains below, with a consequent massive change in lifestyle and subsistence strategy. Unsurprisingly, the peoples who live here have a religious belief system which reflects this degree of environmental risk. Different calamities are associated with corresponding supernatural entities, and the overall ecozonal system is stratified according to a hierarchy of deities.

## 3. Idu society

### 3.1 Ethnography

The earliest discussion of Idu social life is the brief section in Dalton (1872) which covers their social organisation, religion and ‘warlike propensities’. Two short monographs describe the social and material life of the Idu, Baruah (1960) and Bhattarcharjee (1983) both of which reflect long residence in the Dibang area. Baruah is of particular interest, since although it was researched in the period after the earthquake of 1950, it

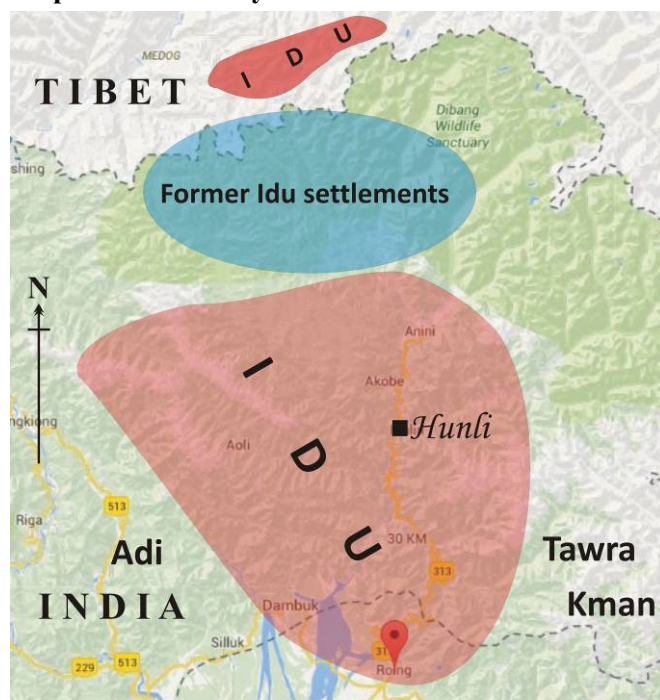
reflects a period when the Idu still had very little interaction with the outside world. Both describe Idu relations to the world of the spirits in some detail, although there are a number of errors. It may be assumed that the data in this paper has cross-checked against both of these sources and represents the findings of recent fieldwork.

Needless to say, things have moved along since these descriptions; Baruah in particular reflects the situation more than sixty years ago. Idu have increasingly moved to the plains, and have encountered other lifestyles. The proximity of the administrative centres and more recently the Border Roads Organisation workcamps have brought a mixture of Bengalis, Assamese and others to the area. Roing was also chosen for Nepali resettlement and many Idu now speak some Nepali. Idu lifestyle has been much affected by these experiences. The longhouses are gradually disappearing in favour of modern cement-block houses, and modern dress has displaced traditional dress except for festivals. Only the older generation are seen with the straight fringe haircut seen in earlier monographs, a distinctive style responsible for one of the earlier names for the Idu, Chulikata. Despite this, there is a strong argument that Idu have remained quite conservative in terms of social culture and religious adherence.

The Idu are subsistence farmers, and depend on vegetative crops such as taro, bananas and yams, as well as cereals including foxtail and finger millets, sorghum and Job's tears. Rice is now an important part of the diet but this is relatively recent. The richness of the wild environment ensures that a significant proportion of protein still comes from wild resources and large and small mammals and fish are regularly consumed.

A social anthropologist writing in the 1930s would certainly have characterised Idu as a segmentary lineage society. Strongly acephalous, they are divided into paired clans, and these were the basis for residence and warfare far into the colonial era. Marital partners were formerly from preferred clans, although these rules have largely broken down in favour of free choice. Polygyny was common in the past, and was realised in a longhouse system, where wives were provided with individual hearths and family space strung along communal corridors. Cooper (1873: 189-190) described this system quite accurately and it has not changed markedly in the past century and a half. These structures remain widespread in rural areas.

**Map 2. Idu territory in India and Tibet**



**Key:** INDIA Nation State  
 Adi Ethnic group  
 ■ Idu settlement  
 - - - - - International boundary  
 Idu villages

The aspect of Idu culture which persists and could accurately be described as the social glue which keeps their society coherent, is a strong respect for the practice of shamanistic religion. World religions<sup>2</sup>, typically Christianity and Buddhism, still have few adherents in this area. Both for healing and the performance of the complex rituals involved propitiating *khānyū* spirits, easing the passage of the soul after death and healing the sick, requires the ministrations of the *īgū*, ritual specialists. There is no evidence that the importance of these is diminishing, or that new individuals are not continuing the tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Hinduism has a strong presence among migrants and also government support since the centrally-funded Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has constructed Hindu shrines in many places. But Idu converts are few.

The process of becoming an *īgū* is called *àlòmò*, a state of madness which can occur at anytime. Some become *īgū* without undergoing *alomo*. *Alomo* comes on without warning and the person behaves like a madman. This lasts for a few months, but occasionally a few days only. He will start sleeping in trees, he goes round to open-air toilets, picking up faeces and claims they are *yu*, rice-beer. He returns to normal behaviour in patches. It can happen that even children of only 6-7 years, that they begin to perform the easier parts of the *īgū* ceremonies, without *alomo*. They being to assist at ceremonies and gradually pick up the *īgū*. Only when you perform (à)Yā or Rêgù (Rê *īgū*) are you considered as a real *īgū*. It is possible, though not common, for women to be *īgū* as well as men. Female *īgū* are considered more powerful than men. They do not work as hard as men.

### 3.2 Language

The Idu language is poorly known. The earliest reference is in Brown (1837). The only significant publications on Idu from the Indian side are the pre-linguistic Talukdar (1962), Jaten Pulu (1978) and Jimi Pulu (2002a,b). Idu has also been described from the Chinese side [under the name Lhoba], notably in Ouyang (1985), Sun et al. (1991), Sun (1999). A new phonology has been prepared in consultation with the Idu language committee project for a practical orthography<sup>3</sup>. In the transcriptions in this paper, phonetic characters have their IPA values, except;

j	is written as	y
h	following any consonant	aspiration
/ə/	is retracted schwa	ɘ
long vowels	are written as	doubled vowel

Idu has three level tones, marked as follows;

High-	´
Mid	-
Low	`

A macron (¯) over a vowel is thus mid-tone and not length. Nasalisation is common in Idu and marked over the vowel in combination with tone.

## 4. A vertical hierarchy

### 4.1 Overview

The general Idu term for spirits or other supernatural beings is *khānyū*. The *khānyū* can be broadly classified into five main categories (Table 1);

**Table 1. Categories of *khānyū* among the Idu**

Category	Features			
Ecozonal deities	Unseen, abstract deities associated with landscapes	Abstract	↓	↓
Malevolent environmental spirits	Unseen spirits associated with death and danger in the environment		↓	
Disease spirits	Unseen spirits causing disease		↓	
Guardian spirits	Abstract spirits looking after people and living things, wild and domestic		↓	
Folklore spirits	Visible spirits interacting with people	Concrete	↓	

Idu would not subclassify *khānyū* in this way or indeed at all, nor does it seem surprising to them that some spirits have rich accretions of folklore while others seem to be featureless. Nonetheless if we are to make sense of their interactions, order must be introduced into the riot.

<sup>3</sup> This was presented in Roing on the 27th December, 2015, and was followed by lengthy discussion. Several documents outlining details of the phonology are available on my academia.edu pages.

Baruah (1960) recounts an Idu origin myth which seems to draw on the widespread Eurasian concept of conflict between brothers and suggests another level of creator deities. According to this, the universe was created out of water at the command of a supreme deity, Īnyī, Sun. The work of ordering the world was in the hands of Ànà, who manages human affairs. However, the younger brother of Īnyī, Ēlā. Moon, burnt human beings with unnatural warmth, and because of this, Īnyī threw him in a mud-pool, where he remains. However, according to the Idu, this is a just-so story for children, explaining why there are smudges on the face of the moon and these supposed deities are not included in the religious hierarchy.

#### 4.2 Ecozonal deities

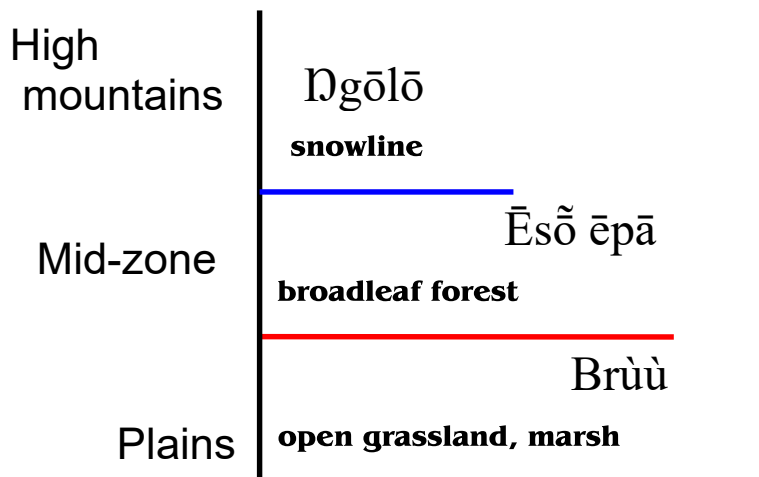
An aspect of the environmental risks discussed in §2. is the diversity of ecozones the Idu experience. Idu territory stretches from tropical rainforest to snowy peaks and the way between them is steep, quite literally a narrow road to the deep north. The different altitudes reflect both vegetation and faunal biotas and these are assigned responsible deities, as shown in Table 2;

**Table 2. Ecozonal deities among the Idu**

Deity	Responsibility
Ŋgōlō	Highlands, usually above the snowline
Ēsō ēpā	Middle levels, broadleaf forest
Brùù	Rivers and lakes, effectively plains, although also lakes in other zones

Figure 1 represents this information as a graphic, showing the importance of vertical hierarchy.

**Figure 1. The vertical domains of the land deities**



Versions of this idea have a wide currency in Arunachal Pradesh, and the Tawra and Kman, neighbours to the east of the Idu subscribe to similar ecozonal banding although their deities have different names. Further west, Idu beliefs show remarkable parallels with the Nyishi, as described by Aisher (2007), both in terms of ecological stratification and malevolent spirits, *uyu* for the Nyishi. Strikingly, the deity which controls rivers and streams among the Nyishi is known as *Buru*, cognate to the Idu *Brùù* and indeed *B.rūū* of the Kman. Further afield, the spirit mediums of Tibet documented in Belleza (2005) attribute similar deities to mountain peaks and lakes, although the nature of the plateau excludes lower altitude environments.

Ecozonal deities in Idu are peculiarly characterless, almost abstract identities, quite unlike the malicious sprites which interact with human beings on a daily basis. They are not approached directly but via the sacrifices made for the wellbeing of the household. However, they are indirectly important because of the influence they have on hunting practice. Few people live above the snowline today, except for the Lhoba villages in Tibet. However, these remain important because significant large mammals such as the takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*) and the musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*) are hunted there. The snowy areas were

equally important because the main arrow poison of the Idu, aconite (*Aconitum ferox*), grows there and prior to the spread of guns, gathering aconite was essential to subsistence.

Of more direct significance is the division of animals into prohibited categories, since these are under the care of Ɖgōlō, the deity of the upper altitudes, which ‘looks after’ certain species, and which must not be killed. This concept of forbidden species is known as *mísū*. Not all *mísū* species are owned by a deity; the king cobra is owned by Brùù and the other snakes are outside the system. At least three animals in the list have semi-mythical characteristics, the snakes *bwèkà* and *mànù* and the bird *āmrā kūtūlūū*. An oddity of this is that the animals are not necessarily characteristic of the region of permanent snow. They include the following species shown in Table 3;

**Table 3. Forbidden, *mísū*, species recognised by Idu**

English	Latin	Ídū
<b>Mammals</b>		
marble cat	<i>Pardofelis marmorata</i>	ācāṅgú
Bengal slow loris	<i>Loris lydekkerianus</i>	álíkòpā
hoolock	<i>Hoolock leuconedys</i>	àmē ló, àmē pá
tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	āmrā
civet, Himalayan palm	<i>Paguma larvata</i>	èphá mitsī
? common palm civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	èphá nōgōrō
<b>Snakes</b>		
king cobra	<i>Ophiophagus hannah</i>	bwèkà
monocled cobra	<i>Naja kaouthia</i>	àjū
Indian cobra	<i>Naja naja</i>	èkáyí
McLelland’s coral snake	<i>Sinomicrurus maclellandi</i>	àprū àlá
banded krait	<i>Bungarus fasciatus</i>	àprū krú
snake sp.	Not identifiable	mànù
<b>Birds</b>		
bird sp.	ascribed characters suggest this bird is mythological	āmrā kūtūlūū
lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	prā lí
spot-bellied eagle owl	<i>Bubo nipalensis</i>	ìcītú
spotted owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>	èphōlǒ
tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	èkōlò

Mammal identifications from Choudhury (2013) and Menon (2014). Snake identifications from Purkayastha (2013). Idu bird identifications from Grewal et al. (2017).

Anyone killing a *mísū* species brings not only himself but his household and possibly his entire clan into danger. The ritual *mísū àyũ* must be performed by the *īgū*. Curiously, however, not all species are equally threatening. In the case of the accidental killing of the snakes *bwèkà*, *àjū* and *mànù*, a ritual called *yúróbà* is performed, which involves the scattering of *bà*, the yeast used in fermentation of local beer. However, if one of the *àprū* species is killed, it is enough to throw it in the jungle. Killing *mísū* birds is not regarded as equally serious, although it can bring bad luck to the household, and the carcasses must be thrown into the jungle. Similarly the deities among the Nyishi are said to ‘rear’ certain animal species which it is thus forbidden to kill, a concept similar to *mísū* in Idu and *ḡāy* in Kman.

A curious aspect of the *mísū* prohibitions is that they are about public acts. If you are known to have transgressed, then performance of the purifying ceremonies is essential. However, it seems that you can ‘get away’ with ignoring these obligations if no-one else knows. For example, a hunter who kills a tiger by



accident<sup>4</sup>, has to undergo the time-consuming and expensive *tāmāmà* ceremony. However, if no-one else knows about it, he can spend five days in the forest and if it remains a secret, the dangers inherent in its *mísū* status will be eliminated. Even animals which are not *mísū* such as the takin are still problematic, and after killing one, a complex six-stage ritual must be undertaken.

Similarly, if a woman has a miscarriage or a still-born baby, in theory the household should undergo purification rituals. However, if it happens that no-one except the household knows of this, which can occur in isolated homesteads, then by staying at home for five days and no admitting visitors, the danger is deemed to be past. Again there is the structural similarity to Chinese religious practice where spirits can be misled by what seem to be rather childish devices, such as the burning of ghost money' instead of real banknotes.

### 4.3 The assault on heaven

Ngolo is usually quiet, but transgression against the taboos can sometimes result in a violent response. The elders of Elopo village, northwest of Hunli, recount a little-known episode of colonial history, when a British military group spotted what seemed to them a light, flashing symbols near the peak of xx. They sent up a squad of twenty soldiers to investigate, together with a guide from Hunli. After nothing was heard from them, the villagers investigated, and found their own villager cut to pieces as with a spear and the jungle showing signs of a great battle. The British soldiers were never heard from again. Needless to say, this episode has failed to pass into colonial records, presumably because it was covered up.

More significantly, the peak was the site of a major confrontation between the *igu*, Pai Misu, and Ngolo. Pai Misu sent his brothers into Ngolo's zone one by one and each was found dead. So Pai Misu prayed to acquire reinforced powers and took the battle to Ngolo. He was able to blast large rocks with an explosive force, which accounts for the shape of the mountain today. Ngolo is described as having iron spears, and a force of soldiers (or 'security' to use a more familiar Indian metaphor) with iron helmets. The brothers had been dismembered and were found in a boiling lake. Meanwhile, the confrontation caused a landslide, which can still be seen today.

The power of the *igu* was in use far more recently, as an *igu* was suborned to make trouble for the village, in 1989. There was a massive landslide, and the village was engulfed, after which the administrative centre was moved to Hunli. The Idu have observed dynamite blasting with interest, as it is clearly similar to the power of the *igu*, though less effective. More recently, access to Asian fantasy films leads them to compare their *igu* with the CGI enhanced activities in these films.

## 5. The *khānyū*

### 5.1 Guardian spirits

Among the *khānyū* there is a sharp division between rather concrete spirits which have a direct impact on human affairs and more abstract beings, similar to the ecozonal deities, which do not require direct sacrifice but which are said to 'benefit' from sacrifices to other deities. *Mītūsi pà* is a benevolent spirit which is the guardian of all wild animals. The land is in the care of *Āpī mísū*, who ensures fertility and good harvests. Specific productive activities are ascribed to a set of benevolent guardians known as *ēpá*. There are five of these, named as follows;

Ēpá mītū	mithun
Ēpá dōndō	pigs
Ēpá àrù	crops
Ēpá ìrù	hunters
Ēpá màkū	people

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<sup>4</sup> It might be asked how you could kill a tiger 'by accident', but until recently, Idu hunters set spiked pit-traps to catch large animals such as the takin. This has largely stopped because of the danger to people, but such devices could also trap tigers.

The functional role of these entities is very reduced almost to the point of being a conceptual map of the subsistence and productive activities important to the Idu. An additional *khānyū* seems to represent more of a pious hope than a functional assistance to people is *Àsú àndrō*, the spirit which is the protector of the house spirit and which bestows wealth and wellbeing. People don't sacrifice to it, but whenever any ceremony is performed in the home, *Àsú àndrō* is considered to benefit from it. Nonetheless, they may need to be appeased by the *īgū* if someone breaks a taboo, *àngó cō*.

## 5.2 Malevolent environmental spirits

The Idu environment is full of uncertainty and environmental risk, as described in §2. This is reflected in the large number of malevolent environmental spirits, *khānyū*, believed to be seeking opportunities to cause trouble or fatal accidents for human beings. *Khānyū* in general are rather abstract, not seen directly by humans, and having no physical characteristics or social attributes. However, one subset of *khānyū* are highly visible and are the subject of many anecdotes and stories of sightings. I am calling these 'folklore' spirits as they do indeed seem to rise up from the pages of those dictionaries of folklore beloved of a certain type of scholar. One of these, now described as 'something like a yeti' is the *khèpā* ~ *èpā*, a creature which looks something like a human and lives in deep forests, gorges, caves. It has a hairy body, reversed feet and makes a horrible scream. People who have seen it describe it moving above the ground with a sort of springy movement. It can kidnap children or even kill people and a typical narrative describes how individuals have 'escaped' the *khèpā*. Interestingly, the Idu are not its only victims; Bangla Deshi migrant tangerine-pickers have also encountered *khèpā*. Related to the *khèpā* is the *àsā*, a spirit which lives in the tops of trees and kidnaps children. In one encounter a lost child was nearly abducted by two *àsā* who descended from the crown of a tall tree 'as if in a lift'.

In European folklore a wide variety of impish spirits interact with humans on a daily basis, causing minor harm, often with a jokey subtext. Goblins, imps, poltergeists and others hang around the house, turning the milk sour or causing the goodwife's cakes to burn. It is hard to know how serious such beliefs are, appearing as metaphors for the minor disasters that can befall anyone in daily life. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Idu should also be plagued by such spirits. The most well-known of these is the *àsásū*, which is described as a very short spirit or goblin that lives nearby the house. It is very active like a monkey and can disturb you when you sleep, causing sleep apnoea. When the *àsásū* harasses you repeatedly this is a sign something is going to happen to your family. You know that *àsásū* has visited the house because there is a pungent smell because it has roasted a grasshopper and eaten it. When you get up in the morning and your body is aching, this is because the *àsásū* has beaten you. The belief is that the *àsásū* is weaving a basket during the night and that every time you change sleeping posture the basket becomes unravelled. When it is dawn, the *àsásū* has to leave and because it has been unable to finish the basket it gives you a punch.

*Àsásū* is often described with humour and it is hard to know whether this type of belief is serious, or is simply a metaphor for an inability to get a good night's sleep. The fact that it is the most well-described of the Idu spirits, suggests an accretion of associated stories. Nonetheless, the folklore spirits respond to a need to visualise both the uncertainties of the forest and the irritations of daily life. To that extent they are more 'real' than the distant *Ŋgōlō*. A partial listing of these malevolent environmental spirits is given in Bhattacharjee (1983) but that given in Table 4 is more complete.

**Table 4. Malevolent environmental spirits among the Idu**

Name	Characteristics
Ābrīlī	A spirit which controls lightning
Ālī	A spirit which guards the household and ensures wealth
Āmrācō	A malevolent spirit which lives in the highlands which can cause people to fall off the mountain or to be struck by flying stones
Āmrājī	A similar spirit which also causes landslides
Ārūyā, àrūsūdū	A spirit which controls the wind and can cause house damage and devastation in the fields by speeding up fires. When there is a storm, someone should stay in the house and burn <i>īphrībrā</i> , a kind of aromatic nut which protects the house.
Àsā	A spirit which lives on the top of trees and kidnaps children. There are many



āpōmō is something everyone has within them. Your own āpōmō is usually benevolent. However, if your āpōmō affects either you or another person, the process is called *ōō* ‘to shoot’.

The rituals performed by the *igu* are named for simple CV verbs as follows;

- dō to extract
- tā to block
- tō̇ to prevent
- bə̇ to defend

## 6. The four underworlds of the Idu

The most characteristic feature of the eschatological beliefs of most of these tribes [in Arunachal Pradesh] is a very detailed picture of the Land of the Dead, including the often tortuous path by which it is reached'

(Fürer-Haimendorf 1953:42).

Many of the spirits encountered in §5.2 and §5.3 are the causes of death and these in turn are linked to the fate of the soul. The Idu describe four underworlds, situated in some alternate plane of reality. When a person dies, their soul, *màrà*, becomes a dead soul, *mēgrá* [*àhū thró* in shaman register], sometimes corresponding to a ghost. After death, the soul first arrives at *ādē*, the doorway in the middle of the house that opens on the corridor which connects the separate hearths<sup>5</sup>.

Before reaching the underworld, the soul stays around the house awaiting the performance of a complex sequence of mortuary rituals which take place over five days. If the rituals are not performed then the soul will not reach *mēgrá mrā* and soul wanders around the abode of the living. As an example of the problems this causes a case from Dambuk, west of Roing, which happened in 2005. A wife was converted to Christianity and thus failed to perform the appropriate rituals. After a few months the *mēgrá* returned and disturbed the house, like a poltergeist, throwing utensils about and making strange noises. So an *īgū* was called to perform the rituals correctly, the *mēgrá* was apparently satisfied and ceased troubling the household.

One of the many rituals after death is *ìlì àmbrē*, where a pig is killed. The first nourishment of the soul is when then *mēgrá* appears in the form of a housefly. The houseowner feeds the pig and the fly and feasts on the food droppings. The ritual is performed at the time of taking food. Another ritual *àthūyā àthà* is performed when the body is buried. The *īgū* places a packet of food on the fence erected over the grave. At the end of the ritual the *īgū* cuts off the packet, the *mēgrá* in human form will eat the food, which will be its last meal before leaving this world.

When the dead person has died of any unnatural death, the style of dance will be different in the *brōcā nà*, the dance over the grave. The other ritual dances such as *lómī nà*, *āmra nà* and *àyè nà*. No special dance for *ēpò* people *īgū* prevents people with good character from passing *étáđí èprāpà*.

Six or more months after the corpse is buried, the ritual *brōphrə̇* is held. The *īgū* calls back the *mēgrá* for this. At this ritual the personal possessions of the dead person are buried for them to use in the next world. Interestingly, Dalton (1872) seems to have witnessed this ritual as he describes it without naming it. He interpreted it as simply a memorial, but the idea that the grave goods are for use seems very strong.

*Mēgrá* do appear to the living in dreams. This is a sign that the *īgū* has not performed the ritual properly. To protect the household the ritual *ètōnāsà* or alternatively *āmrasè* is performed and the *mēgrá* then disappears. *Ètōnāsà* is performed for killing *misu* animals and murder, or manslaughter.

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<sup>5</sup> Idu is a longhouse society, where polygynous husbands keep separate hearths for each wife in a series of rooms accessible from an internal corridor.

These are;

*mēgrá mrá*. lit. ghostly fields. All *mēgrás* eventually reach this place, a sort of Eden where the temperature is good, the fields bountiful and family life tranquil. People who have died in the normal course of events are sent here directly. There is some disagreement about whether this is furnished with modern technology such as cars and mobile phones or remains in a prelapsarian state. Certainly the modern practice of burying the deceased's mobile phone in the *brōphrē* ritual suggests they will be useful. Hence it is indeed possible that the underworld is equipped with some kind of network coverage.

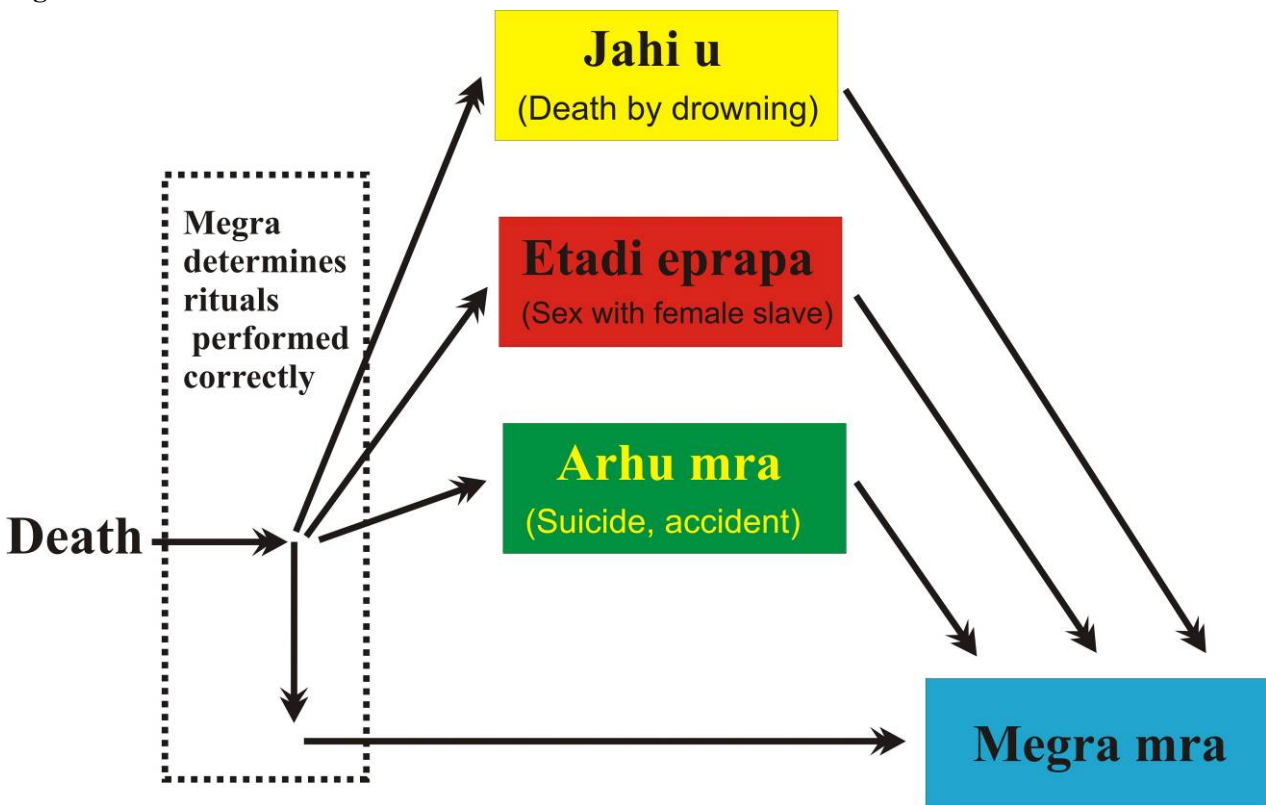
*àrù mrā*. Those who commit suicide, are murdered or suffer accidental death (*ìjì àrù bā* unnatural death) such as falling from a cliff will be sent here. A very hot place where there is much sand and little vegetation. The following plants are found here; *dìpū* a palm species, *ìgū pwā*, the flower of *ìgūmbō* plant, *àpāpū* the flower of banana, *àrúsi* small wild plant sp. food for *mēgrá*. Crops are poor and people subsist on wild roots and leaves. People have to stay for 3-6 years before passing to *mēgrá mrá*. *ìjì*. Possibly the same as *ìníshā*.

*jāhí.ú* is on the bank of a water body and people who die of drowning will be sent here. There is little food here and souls are always hungry. The mustard plant *tú.shì ~ tú.ná*, *èkà* [buckwheat] and *ābrā* grow here. A cold wind constantly blows. Souls try to cook food on the shells of eggs but the wind keeps putting out the fire. Souls must subsist on wild roots and tubers. People have to stay for 3-6 years before passing to *mēgrá mrá*.

*étādì èprāpà*. bird + cliff. People who (formerly) had sex with a female slave were sent here. The vegetation consists of exotic plants such as grow in marshy areas; a plant called *àyìntīnā* grows here. Wild places, not frequented by people. When someone whose family was formerly a slave dies they have to drink water from a place called *èpò àcikò* [slave + water + place].

Figure 2 represents schematically the destinations of the soul after death;

Figure 2. The destinations of the soul after death



Everyone has an individual guardian spirit, *ndró*, but only the *īgū* recognise their *ndró* and make sacrifices to it. If you stop sacrificing to them the *ndró* will make trouble for you. It disappears when you die. Some people call it *ālā*, which means ‘shield’. Individual clans belong in groups to *āsī* which are origin clusters. So an *īgū* will get to know about you by knowing your *āsī*. He can then identify your *ndró*.

### 7. The diversity of spirits as environmental metaphor

The descriptions of *khānyū* point to a broadly threefold division, between the rather abstract figures who control the different ecozones, the malevolent spirits who cause death by mishap and the visible ogres and imps who frighten and annoy humans. The malevolent spirits correspond almost schematically to the major risks faced by Idu, both in terms of landslides, drowning and disease. The different underworlds which await the soul are strikingly populated by highly specific ecologies, with the wild plants and crops as well as the environment being described. Moreover, the underworlds which await those who have undergone accidental death clearly reflect a memory of a previous state closer to a forager subsistence strategy, where only primitive crops or none at all were available and hunger was prevalent.

### 8. Why do these beliefs persist?

At first sight, there could hardly be a greater separation between the maintenance of an ordered hierarchical state advocated by Confucius, and the anarchic individualism of the Idu. Yet the two share a common worldview in several important ways. When Confucius was asked about the gods, he evaded the question, while emphasising at every opportunity the importance of correctly performing the ancestral rites. The Idu similarly remain ambiguous about the reality of the spirits to which they attribute the activities described. Dalton (1872) bluntly described them as atheists. This seems rather extreme, but despite the immense ritual elaboration they have developed both around transgression and protection there is an important sense in which performance has overtaken empiricism.

This should provide a clue to the persistence of belief in a world of the internet and mobile phones. The *khānyū* are social spirits, who guarantee the nexus of *īgū* and society. Idu society, fragmented geographically and socially, is underwritten by the shared complexity of the ritual system. What counts is that these rituals are seen to be performed, not whether the narrative that necessitates them is ‘true’. The rather blank identities of the upper-level spirits reflect the geomorphology of Idu country, and the malicious spirits the environmental risk they experience. None of these have disappeared with selective adoption of modern technologies, hence their persistence in a world where globalised religion is spreading rapidly, even among their immediate neighbours.

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